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*Like The New Yorker, Only Readable*

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

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MAR./APR. 2018



## MISERY

WHY IT DOESN'T  
BELONG IN SPACE

## MYSTERY

WHAT IT IS AND  
WHY WE LIKE IT

## MARDI GRAS

WHY IT MAKES US  
BETTER PEOPLE



WE  
KNOW  
ALL OF  
THEIR  
SECRETS

# AFFAIRS OF STATE

THE ONLY  
MAGAZINE



THAT IS  
AGAINST  
DEATH

WISDOM IS NOT TO BE FOUND IN PERIODICALS

UNLESS THEY HAPPEN TO BE THIS ONE

## MAGA ZINE

We would like to assure concerned readers that the MAGA in MAGA-ZINE does not stand for Make America Great Again." We have no desire whatsoever to make America great again.

A conservative writer once scoffed at this publication: "It's as if they think all moral philosophy consists of asking Current Affairs what to do." This was a more astute remark than the gentleman knew. That is precisely what moral philosophy ought to consist of, and it is our position that a life lived according to Current Affairs cannot go wrong.

## MESSAGES CURRENT AFFAIRS HAS RECEIVED ON facebook

Our magazine's inbox on Facebook generally contains messages far briefer and more enigmatic than our Letters to the Editor mailbox. Below, a representative sample.

"What happen today"

"Send me daily important current affairs"

"do you would like read it"

"Subscriptions"

"worlds richest man"

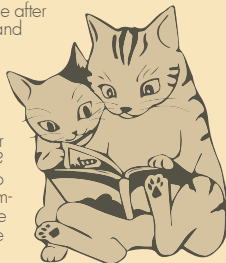
"Current affairs August monther Kobe Ber hobe?"

"Current updates pls"

## THE OTHERS

What is it that sets this noble publication apart from all the other inferior media organizations? In a word: humility. We are not ashamed to admit that we are wrong. For example, we predicted in 2016 that a tumbling Democratic campaign was going to contribute to putting Donald Trump in the White House. This was a mistake. The campaign ultimately turned out to be "epically calamitous" rather than merely fumbling. Naturally we regret the error. Likewise, whenever a typo appears in our print edition, we will gladly issue a note of apology to all affected parties. We do not have to do this, of course. We could double down, and insist that anything printed in Current Affairs cannot possibly be a typo, that the reader must be either hallucinating or imbecilic. But we do not do so. Why? Humility. It is the first quality that sensible readers look for in a magazine after page thickness and pictures of cats.

Fortunately, Current Affairs has all three. Does this make us better than all others? It is not for us to say. We humbly defer to the judgment of the reading public.



Current Affairs would like to thank  
**TODBURN ANTIQUES**  
of Sarasota, Florida

for allowing us to photograph their merchandise for our Jan./Feb. edition.  
We hope they will forgive the belated credit.

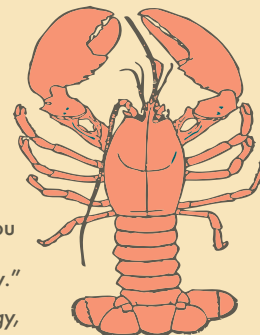
## VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY!

There is an emerging consensus that here in the Trump Era, confidence in media will not be restored until it sheds its liberal bias and embraces a diversity of viewpoints. Strangely, in practice this always seems to involve little more than hiring bloodthirsty reactionaries. But at Current Affairs, we take the value seriously. We are therefore excited to announce that our new lineup of columnists includes: a UFOlogist, Louis Farrakhan, an academic who questions the scholarly consensus on the Holocaust, a man who is convinced he is Napoleon, and a writer who thinks women who get abortions should be hanged. In this way, we believe we shall give a fair hearing to all sides along the wide spectrum of human thought.

## Quotable

"You arrogant, racist son of a bitch  
Pankaj Mishra: How dare you accuse  
me of 'harmlessly romancing the noble  
savage.' ... And you call me a fascist? You  
sanctimonious prick. If you were in my  
room at the moment, I'd slap you happily."

— Jordan B. Peterson, Professor of Psychology,  
University of Toronto, March 19, 2018



## Make Science Boring Again

Because no self-respecting periodical (and if there is one thing this periodical respects, it is itself) should be without a science columnist, we are pleased to announce the appointment of Dr. Henry deGrasse Nye-Heisenberg to head our Science Bureau. He will write under the pseudonym "Dr. Ahal" and will dedicate himself chiefly to explaining why things you thought were interesting and/or wondrous are actually quite boring and mundane. Look out for his first column: "It's All Just Atoms, Actually."

## CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

It was with a mixture of curiosity and pants-shitting terror that we absorbed recent news that the Pentagon is hard at work enhancing "autonomous drone swarm" technology, which is intended, as the name suggests, to allow weaponized drones to fly in lethal swarms without meaningful human control. If you were a cynic, you might call such a program "the dumbest and most suicidal idea yet conceived by human beings." But we are not cynics. We therefore take the moderate and modest position that this program should be "cause for concern" and should be subject to sensible oversight to ensure the resulting deadly chaos is kept to reasonable proportions.



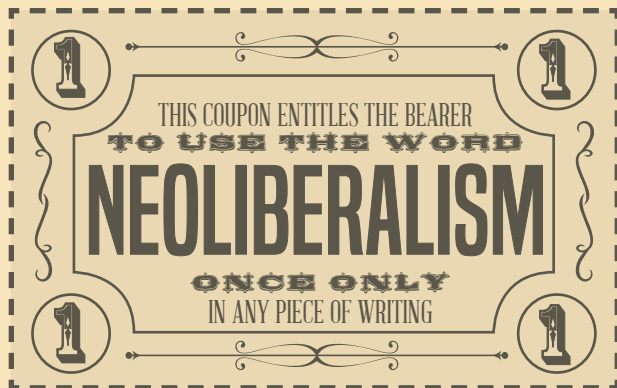
## G R E A T NEW YORK TIMES OP-EDS O F H I S T O R Y

1. "NEGRO COCAINE 'FIENDS' NEW SOUTHERN MENACE," New York Times, Feb. 8, 1914
2. "Herr Hitler At Home In The Clouds," Aug. 20, 1939
3. "Bomb North Korea, Before It's Too Late" Apr. 12, 2013
4. "Pol Pot: Brutal, Yes, But No Mass Murderer" Aug. 17, 1990
5. "Is The Democratic Party Becoming Too Democratic?" Dec. 11, 2017
6. "How Liberals Can Reclaim Nationalism," Mar. 3, 2018
7. "Why Pasta Is The Answer To Trump," Mar. 13, 2018

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## CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA





## SPORTING NEWS

If you have ever tried to explain to a fascist why the Trinidadian fondness for cricket demonstrates the folly of white supremacist ideology, you will know that sport can be a divisive subject. There are sports for gents and sports for ladies, sports with balls and sports without, sports in which the object is to put a thing into another thing and sports where the object is to go round and round a thing more quickly than the next fellow. What's more, every sport is divided into teams, and each team has many players, with each player reacting very differently to requests by a magazine editor to justify the social purpose of sport.

The whole enterprise can be quite confusing to the novice. All of this is by way of responding to persistent reader complaints about the lack of sporting news in our pages. It is not that we do not respect cricket or the other popular forms of physical competitiveness. We do. We are not Trotsky. But the people who enjoy sport enjoy it so much that we worry our comments on it could border on the oblivious or naïve. We will therefore leave the subject untouched.



*"Of course, if John Bolton gets us all killed..."*

## CAKE AND REVOLUTION

Emma Goldman said that if she couldn't dance, it wasn't her revolution. We have never been much for dancing (the Current Affairs Christmas Ball is well-known

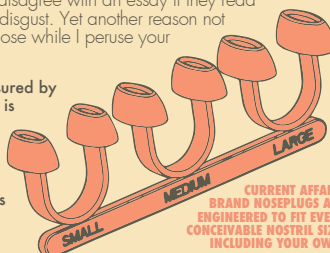
for its awkward and reticent shuffles) but we do appreciate the underlying thesis: the problem with Bolsheviks is that they seem incapable of truly having a good time. We established incontrovertibly in our last edition that Lenin himself was a "bit of a sourpuss." That is no good, so let us make clear: if there is to be socialism, it ought to be suffused with genuine good cheer. There does not need to be dancing, but **cake must be served.**

CUT OUT THIS SQUARE

## ON ODORS

TO THE EDITORS: My first issue is wonderful as expected. At the same time, however, it stinks (literally) to a surprising degree. Is there any way for the printing process to be less smelly? My eyes and brain love it but my nose disagrees. Also, no doubt there is some quasiscientific social science about how people are more likely to disagree with an essay if they read it while wrinkling their noses in disgust. Yet another reason not to assault the passages of my nose while I peruse your passages of prose. —D.M.

Dear Mr. M: We have been assured by our printing house that the fault is not in our inks but in yourself. However, because we aim for reader satisfaction, we are willing to offer complimentary sets of Current Affairs noseplugs to all those afflicted with your condition.



## REST IN POWER

**Stephen Hawking 1942-2018**

"If machines produce everything we need, the outcome will depend on how things are distributed," he wrote. "Everyone can enjoy a life of luxurious leisure if the machine-produced wealth is shared, or most people can end up miserably poor if the machine-owners successfully lobby against wealth redistribution."

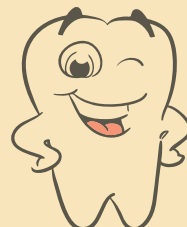
"People who boast about their IQ are losers"

"One of Hawking's regrets in life was not having an opportunity to run over Margaret Thatcher's toes."

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**IN A DENTIST'S OFFICE**  
We hope that your procedure goes painlessly.





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# DEATH

*and the*

# DRUG WAR

*by Brianna Rennix & Nathan J. Robinson*

**I**N 2017, TWO COUNTRIES HIT A MILESTONE. IN MEXICO, there were 29,168 murders, the highest number on record. Across the border in the United States, nearly 70,000 people died from drug overdoses, over three times as many as were dying annually less than two decades ago. More Americans now die every year from overdoses than died in the entire Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq wars.

There is, of course, a link between Mexico's murders and America's overdoses. The murders are rising because of wars between ever-more-brutal drug cartels, who are competing to ship the products on which Americans will overdose. Mexico's murder rate is slightly deceptive, because it varies significantly across the country, and some areas experience far less crime than many other Latin American countries. But in states like Tamaulipas and Baja California, the homicide rates match those of the world's most violent countries. Unsurprisingly, the areas with the highest rates of violent crime tend to be those near major ports or U.S. border crossings, or areas which have some other strategic value for the drug trade. The state of Guerrero, where more than half of Mexico's opium-poppies are grown, has seen its murder rate escalate over the same period that heroin overdoses have

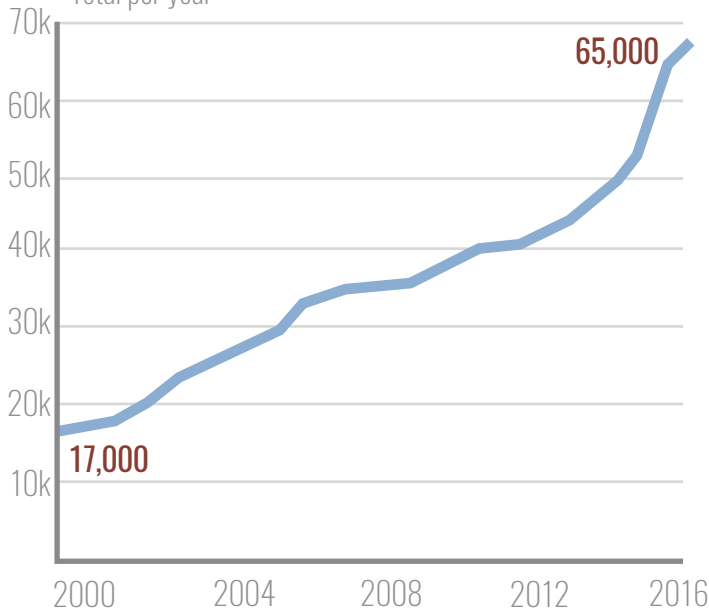
skyrocketed in the U.S. It is strange to think that the deaths of people so far apart geographically—a taxi driver in Acapulco, a struggling addict in Kentucky—could be so intimately connected.

Everyone has heard the gruesome stories about cartel violence in Mexico, which is not just shocking quantitatively but also qualitatively. People beheaded, boiled alive, fed to wild animals: the Mexican *notas rojas* graphically document the depravity and extremity of cartel killings, which terrify rivals and civilians alike. But the lurid spectacle of border state violence is not something Americans should feel comfortably distant from. One big reason for the ferocity of inter-cartel competition is because Mexico, a highly unequal country where nearly half the population lives in poverty, happens to be situated next to a very rich country willing to pay high prices for an illegal product. There is a certain "logic" to drug violence: if there are fortunes to be made from a commodity that can only be provided through criminal enterprise, people will desperately seek those fortunes through whatever means are necessary. There are political, economic, and cultural forces that contribute to a growth in violence, but while the causes are complex, they are not random or inexplicable.



## Drug Overdose Deaths, United States

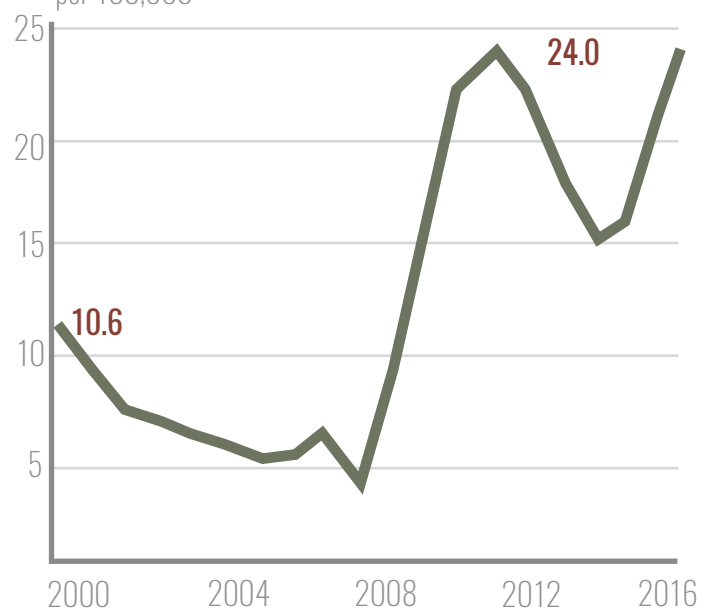
Total per year



Sources: Vox, National Institute on Drug Abuse, The New York Times

## Homicide Rate, Mexico

per 100,000



Source: Mexico Daily News, using data from Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI)

Before trying to analyze those causes, though, we should make sure we truly appreciate the human toll. As always, behind the statistics are lives, and we can take a moment to think about the level of human suffering that stems from the entire process of manufacturing, distributing, and ingesting illegal drugs. Mexican border cities like Reynosa and Juarez have turned from lively border towns into sad, despondent ganglands where fear rules many people's lives. Of course, it's important not to excessively caricature the situation: even cities with high murder rates aren't continuous gun battles 24 hours a day. The residents of these places still go out in public, throw parties, attend school, and so on; a bold tourist may still visit on the right day and have a more or less normal experience. Nevertheless, in the areas they control, the power of cartels is one of the dominant facts of everyday life. Cartels are the final arbiters of most of what appears in print: a journalist who writes the wrong thing can expect to receive a threatening phone call, or even a summary execution. Many Mexican journals have shuttered, or have been reduced to simply putting out carefully-worded catalogs of daily murders. Bodies are left in public places, clearly as a message to someone, though it is often unclear whom. If you fall afoul of the cartel—and you may well do so without even realizing it, or because they've mistaken you for someone else—not only you, but your entire family may be at risk, down to your little children. This past summer—to give just one example—a family of five, including four children aged between 5 and 10, were murdered in Coatzacoalcos because the cartel suspected that the father, an out-of-work taxi driver, had acted as a lookout in an attack by one of their rivals.

All of this is just the suffering that occurs from living alongside criminal trafficking syndicates. Then we have the human consequences of drug use itself, which is felt on both sides of the border. The 70,000 who die annually in the U.S. are people's parents, children, friends. Many are people who struggled hard to free themselves, to avoid a fate they could see coming, but who were unable to escape addiction. It's hard to conceive of what the attempt to free oneself is like, the near impossibility of using sheer willpower to overcome a dependency that is chemical in nature. Journalist Ioan Grillo quotes an addict friend: "Imagine the worst flu and multiply it by ten. Then, know you can make it go away with one more hit." Who could resist a medicine that instantly relieves the

most extreme torment? And for many addicts, it's not simply the physical torment of withdrawal that drugs alleviate: it's the deep psychological trauma of past abuse, of profound depression, of a consuming, self-annihilating sense of failure. Whole American communities have turned into places of death and dependency.

Repairing the lives of addicts, and ending the carnage caused by the drug trade, is a morally urgent issue that requires a humane, careful, and immediate political response. Sometimes, when we think about U.S. drug policy, it's easy to get caught up in abstract arguments about whether the government should have the "right" to regulate individual drug use, or cultural debates about whether the use of certain drugs has net positive or negative impacts for society. It's not that these questions are entirely worthless, but they are, at best, secondary concerns. The overwhelmingly more important question is, what can we do to stop all these deaths from happening? What will actually *work*?

TO CALL THE DRUG TRADE A "BLACK market" doesn't accurately convey its magnitude. The annual revenue from drugs in Mexico is estimated to be \$30 billion. This makes it second only to oil as a source of foreign currency in Mexico. We are talking about production and distribution on the sophisticated scale of a major industry, but all carried out in secret, off the official books. The term "shadow industry" is perhaps the best way to conjure up some sense of the drug trade's scope and complexity.

It is going too far to say that the U.S. is exclusively responsible for "creating" the violence in Mexico, as if there were no powerful players in Mexico with moral agency of their own. But there is no denying that our government's draconian drug policies, coupled with our citizenry's enormous appetite for drugs, have played an outsized role in how Mexico's economy and political landscape have developed over the last few decades. A brief, whirlwind tour of the history of the Mexican drug trade will give us some sense—however oversimplified—of how the present situation came about. As we all know from *Narcos* (those of us who had the stomach to watch it, anyhow), Colombian cartels dominated almost ev-



ery stage of the drug trade in the 1980s. The public hype around cocaine, coupled with its illegality, conspired to make its market price incredibly high. However, when the DEA began concentrating heavy enforcement along the sea routes between Colombia and Florida, the Colombian cartels began outsourcing their transit operations to gangs in Mexico, who could move product across the porous U.S.-Mexico border. Over the next decade, these Mexican couriers grew in power, eventually wresting effective control of the U.S. drug market away from the Colombians. This development had two major effects. One, it resulted in the rise of incredibly violent Mexican drug cartels, who now wage bloody territorial wars for control over major smuggling corridors. Two, the sheer amount of money in the air has served to entangle the Mexican state in the drug trade at virtually every level. The complicity of military and governmental officials was needed to move drugs on a large scale, and the easiest way to ensure this complicity was by promising them a share of the profit. (The threat of assassination, or the kidnapping and torture of one's family members, can also be a powerful motivating force.)

The important thing to understand about the modern drug trade—something which is occasionally lost in mainstream news coverage—is that it is not simply the tale of rogue criminal groups that under-resourced governments struggle to neutralize. It is also the story of institutional capture, the creation of what are effectively “narco states.” Economic and governmental elites in Mexico facilitate, and profit from, the drug trade. This makes the big-picture spectacle of Mexico’s violence difficult to interpret at any given moment. Determining which actors are collaborating with each other, in the absence of conclusive evidence, often boils down to guesswork. Mexican journalists have long speculated that the national government has covertly backed the Sinaloa cartel, for example, as a means of stabilizing and controlling the drug trade. On a more local level, drug cartels, military officials, and state and municipal governments may have complex webs of alliances and rivalries. This sometimes results in jaw-droppingly bold false-flag operations: for example, in 2010, the warden of a state prison in Torreón, Coahuila temporarily released 17 armed prisoners and sent them on a mission to murder civilians in a neighboring state, in order to “bring heat” on the drug cartel that controlled the territory. (This first came to light when the falsely impugned cartel released a video of themselves torturing a confession out of one of the police officers involved, but the warden herself later confirmed the story.) The various players are so intertwined that it is sometimes hard to tell the difference between when the cartels are doing dirty work for government, or the government is doing dirty work for the cartels. The mass kidnapping and suspected massacre of 43 students from a rural teacher training college in Iguala in 2014, for example, defied straightforward explanation and continues to generate a wealth of theories: the students were abducted by a cartel, but the cartel was evidently cooperating with police and acting on the orders of a local mayor, and there is some evidence suggesting that federal military officials may have been involved as well.

The Mexican state thus has duelling incentives with reference to the drug trade. There is pigheaded pressure from the U.S. to crack down hard on drug traffickers: as in many parts of Latin America, the U.S. has extensively deployed stick-and-carrot diplomacy over the past few decades to force combatting narcotraffic to the top of the Mexican government’s agenda. The DEA frequently carries out operations within Mexico. But there are also many actors within the Mexican state who profit from the drug trade and wish to see it continue running in their interest; or who recognize the obvious danger and clear futility of attempting to stamp it out. The public-facing policy of the national government, particularly beginning with the presidency of Felipe Calderón, has been to wage war on the drug cartels, usually by deploying federal troops and police to car-

tel-controlled regions. (As described by journalist John Gibler, Mexicans draw a clear distinction between *la guerra del narco*, the government’s “war on drugs,” characterized by the ostentatious public deployment of troops, and *la narcoguerra*, the “drug war,” the street battles for territorial control among drug cartels and their various allies.) This militarization has only served to cause further problems. There are, on the one hand, the predictable problems that arise during military occupations: extrajudicial executions of suspects, and miscalculations that result in massacres of innocent people. And then there are the problems that arise when military units start collaborating with the cartels and their allies: that’s when you get *deliberate* massacres and assassinations, carried out for some strategic purpose in *la narcoguerra*. The military, too, has proved to be not only an ally, but a fertile recruiting-ground for the cartels. Many soldiers who decide that military life isn’t their *exact* cup of tea transition easily into the ranks of criminal organizations. One of the most infamous cartels, Los Zetas, was originally founded by former members of the Special Forces.

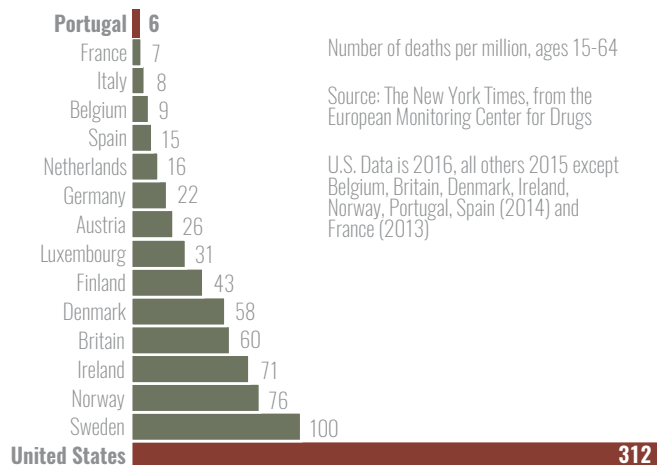
WELL, THEN: IS THE SOLUTION to “clean up” the Mexican government and the Mexican military, weed out the bad apples, and just make everyone start taking the eradication of the cartels seriously? You wouldn’t be stupid for thinking this, inasmuch as generation after generation of American policymakers, nominally well-educated, have thought the exact same thing. But to attribute the situation in Mexico purely to endemic “corruption”—or to characterize “corruption” as an easily understood and simply rectified phenomenon—is a mistake. The massive profit incentives of the drug trade make it inevitable that Mexican citizens will participate in it, especially in areas where the licit economy is depressed or inaccessible to most people. It is equally inevitable that Mexican officials will be tempted—or, if not tempted, threatened—into some level of direct or indirect collaboration. There have been numerous purges of the military and police, to no avail. And even in some wildly improbable alternate universe of superhuman, squeaky-clean government and military officials, vigorously prosecuting the end of the drug trade, the battle would still be a hopeless one. After all, Mexican officials are currently capturing more drugs—and indicting more drug kingpins—than ever before, but this has had no appreciable effect on the amount of drugs making it into the hands of users in the U.S. And it’s only resulted in *more* murders in Mexico.

The problem is what analysts have described as “the balloon effect”: if you push an air bubble down in one place, it will pop up somewhere else. Police the seas around Florida, and the trade moves to the land border. Cut off a smuggling corridor in one municipality, and the cartels will begin fighting over a different municipality. Capture one drug lord, and others will rise to take his place. Destroy more supply, and the price of the surviving product only rises, and the fresh influx of money brings new players into the drug trade’s fold. While demand for drugs in the U.S. continues to increase, and enforcement in both Mexico and the U.S. continues to artificially inflate the market price, the drug trade will remain wildly lucrative, and people will be willing to run considerable risks to get their cut. And in this bewildering climate of violence, all sorts of people will be killed: cartel members, drug dealers, police, and federales, yes, but also journalists, students, migrants, activists, uninvolved bystanders, random community members unlucky enough to have seen the wrong thing, to be related to the wrong person, to be suspected of having given the wrong person a lift, or a haircut, or a hand signal.



## The Scale of Our Problem

### Drug Deaths by Country



**G**IVEN HOW CLOSELY U.S. POLICY AND Mexican violence are intertwined, U.S. ignorance and apathy is a major obstacle to addressing Mexico's problems. People are lazily fascinated by drug lords like El Chapo, either because they find the combination of wealth and ruthlessness to be glamorous, or because of some stupid, childish idolization of violent gangsters as countercultural Robin Hoods fighting The Man. There's considerably less interest in imagining the lives of the other players in El Chapo's story: his victims and his enablers. Mainstream media outlets devote very little space to the Mexican drug war, even though some of the worst violence is occurring directly on the border, a stone's throw from U.S. cities. (As *Current Affairs* has pointed out many times, with great chagrin, the only news outlet that actually reports on violence in Mexico on a daily basis is *Breitbart*.) The Trumpian right is eager to use this violence to incite fear and demonize immigrants, but beyond simply branding Trump a racist, the left has yet to come up with a convincing counter-narrative that actually takes this violence seriously and treats its mitigation through policy as a matter of moral urgency. Many left-leaning U.S. Americans have only the vaguest notion that people are being slaughtered at insane rates in certain parts of Mexico, and that this has anything whatsoever to do with us.

The most sympathetic reason for this lack of interest is that we have been distracted by our own domestic drug problem, which we are only beginning to grapple with. The idea that addiction is a medical and social issue, rather than a criminal one, has taken a long time to gain any kind of public traction, and this inward focus has perhaps prevented us from looking to the broader global context of our own national suffering. That said, there is also considerable reluctance to confront the fact that casual, recreational drug use, just as much as "addictive" drug use, has fueled the drug war, and that a lot of us have, indirectly, been pouring money into the war-chests of some of the world's most violent criminal organizations. Marijuana, for example, continues to represent a huge percentage of the Mexican drug trade, by some estimates accounting for as much as 50% of the cartels' profits. Sure, we can blame our government for causing this whole mess by making drugs illegal, but it still doesn't quite absolve us of blame as individuals. If the government declared pineapples illegal tomorrow, that would be incredibly unjust, but we'd still bear some moral responsibility if we then started paying murderers to smuggle us pineapples.

However we assign the relative portions of blame between consumers, governments, and cartels, the important conclusion is that ending the

drug war is not a mere "personal freedom" issue. It's a matter of life and death for many tens of thousands of people, and as such, it needs to be a major part of any left political platform. At the moment, the Democratic Party's agenda says precious little about drugs beyond the need for increased access to addiction treatment. But it's important to see drug prohibition itself as a serious problem, and to understand addiction not as an isolated phenomenon, but alongside the other corresponding social ills that have resulted from decades of policy choices, from racist policing practices to mass murder across the border. However one personally feels about drug use, the drug war has been immoral, and the left must be committed to ending it. At a time when Donald Trump (who recently proposed implementing the death penalty for all drug dealers) is dragging us back toward the brutal "law and order" approach that has resulted in such catastrophe and bloodshed, it's more important than ever for progressives to put comprehensive drug policy reform at the top of their agenda.

It's depressing to consider just how much harm has been done by the simple-minded effort to ban drugs rather than regulate them. Obviously, banning a commodity often makes the market for it more profitable and more violent. It confers power on the world's least scrupulous people, and uses physical force as a means of dealing with a medical and social problem. And, of course, in a country with racially biased sentencing practices, every increase in enforcement efforts will, continuing the never-ending pattern of American history, come down hardest on people of color.

It's actually not true that prohibition can "never work," if "working" is strictly defined as "reducing drug use" rather than "making a better society than the one where people were using drugs." As criminal penalties increase, some would-be users and dealers will be deterred by the heightened risk, although both drug use and profit-seeking are often compulsive rather than rationally calculated. But prohibition probably could "work" if you built a large enough, brutal enough, and invasive enough police state. It's just that in order to get anywhere close to effectively stamping out drug use through criminal enforcement, one would have to inflict devastating social costs. It's true that there may be less crime if you put everybody in prison, just as your house would have fewer maintenance problems if you burned it to the ground, but the benefits are outweighed by the *somewhat* disproportionate costs.

It's sort of hard to actually picture what this totalitarian prohibition state would even look like, though, because as it is, a long history of vigorous enforcement in the U.S. hasn't even *lowered* rates of drug use, much less eliminated them. Our policies have succeeded in creating a cruel and omnipresent criminal justice regime, but with nothing to show for it. Instead, the problems have gotten exponentially worse, as drug users have been put into the criminal system instead of being given assistance. As their lives deteriorate, and their sense of shame and hopelessness increases, so does their dependency. Their criminal records often keep them out of housing and jobs, and essentially ensure the likelihood that they will turn to small-scale dealing to help fund their continued using.

There are reasons to believe that decriminalization or legalization would actually help most addicts recover. Johann Hari's *Chasing the Scream* provides accounts of pilot programs in Switzerland and government policies in Portugal that appear to show promising results. But even if drug use under legalization remained about the same as the status quo, a clear moral case for legalization can be made in terms of violence reduction alone. As cartels continue to fragment and vie for territorial control—a problem that is actually made *worse* by breaking up cartel leadership with high-profile arrests—the country's violence will not diminish, and might become even more extreme.

To be clear, it would be naive to think that legalizing drugs will solve the problem of violence in Mexico in a single stroke. Existing criminal syndicates are not going to ruefully hang up their assault rifles overnight.



If the drug trade becomes less profitable, cartels will increase their focus on things like labor and sex trafficking, and the smuggling of migrants across the border. (We can alter some of the incentives for those activities by changing our immigration policies, but that's another discussion.) Locally, at least in the short term, it seems likely that criminal groups will rely more heavily on things like kidnapping and extortion—which are already very serious problems in many areas—to sustain themselves. This is the modus operandi of gangs like MS-13 in Central America, for example, which have only a very limited and tenuous involvement in the transnational drug trade. Figuring out how to respond to these developments will be very hard, in the way that handling violence is inherently incredibly hard. There will also, of course, always be some room to make money smuggling drugs: even if drugs were legalized in the U.S., there would be presumably be some level (probably quite high) of government regulation, which always creates openings for black markets.

That said, legalization is an indispensable and urgent piece of any conceivable plan to reduce violence in Mexico. We can imagine the violence in Mexico as a gigantic raging fire, being fed by a steady torrent of gasoline. If we switch off the gasoline, that by itself won't put the fire out: extinguishing the blaze will still require a huge amount of coordination and effort. But if we don't switch off the gasoline, the fire will *never* go out. The idea that we can fight the fire, without addressing the steady stream of fuel that's being continually poured onto it, is absurd. Heavy drug enforcement and high demand for drugs in the U.S. interact to make drugs wildly profitable. Because the trade is illegal, and heavily policed, selling drugs is also dangerous, and the potential for violence is thus inherently very high. We have to make the drug trade both less profitable and less dangerous, in order to alter these incentives in any meaningful way. Increased enforcement does not work; increased enforcement has *never, ever worked, not once in the entire history of the drug trade*. Legalization is

the only plausible option. After that, of course, much more remains to be done. We should seek to reduce the demand for hard drugs in the U.S. by humane, social means that truly address the root causes of addiction. And there is no conceivable long-term solution to violence in Mexico that does not involve addressing factors like poverty, inequality, political disempowerment, lack of decent work, and family separation, all things that U.S. economic, immigration, and foreign policies have contributed to.

IT'S COMMON TO CALL THE WAR ON DRUGS A “FAILURE.” It certainly is that, as attested to by the tens of thousands of bodies piling up each year in the U.S. and Mexico. But more importantly, it's a crime. It's a deliberate policy choice, one now being embraced by the Trump administration, that inflicts needless suffering on some of the world's most vulnerable people. It's important that those of us in the United States recognize that when we talk about this “failed policy,” we are not just talking about the failure to help addicts in our own country, but the countless murders of Mexicans that are occurring because of America's political decisions and consumption habits. There needs to be a greater recognition of the shared fates of the U.S. and Mexico: our deaths and their deaths both matter, and it can no longer be acceptable to pretend that anything that occurs on the other side of the wall has nothing to do with us. Because our country contributes to violence in Mexico, we have a responsibility to help stop it, and if that means pushing for full legalization in order to break the power of cartels, so be it. The drug problem is more than a “problem,” it's a systemic disaster that spans multiple nations. Its costs are not just in overdoses. This is a human rights issue: not merely the right to privacy or bodily autonomy, but the still more urgent right of human beings to live lives free of needless criminal and state violence. ♦









# *Politics and the American* **TRUCKER SONG**

by EMILY BARTLETT HINES

**T**HE 1973 COUNTRY HIT “AWFUL LOT TO LEARN About Truckdrivin’” tells a tale most people who’ve ever held a job can relate to. The song’s narrator, voiced by Red Simpson, starts off thinking he’s chosen the perfect life path:

*“I knew that someday I just had to be a truck driver ‘cause it holds a fascination for me/ To have somebody payin’ you a living wage to travel all over the country.”*

When he shows up to present his application, his naivete becomes clear: “I told the man at the terminal I would work real hard, even 8 or 9 hours a day!” The veteran trucker laughs and offers a response that’s also the chorus of the song: “It’s a heck of a life bein’ married to a diesel, but son, you got an awful lot to learn.”

Awful, indeed. The nature of the American workplace is such that you’re unlikely to get paid a living wage to do something pleasant and engaging for eight hours a day. In trucking, the reality is a bit more extreme. The once-popular trucker music vividly described truckers’ long hours and exhausting lifestyle long before it was national news. A driver in Joe Maphis’ “Ten Days Out, Two Days In” complains that:

*“I’ve had to drive ‘em every night and day just to make enough to pay my bills / Lately I’ve been seein’ two of everything and I ache from my head to my toes.”*

A long-haul trucker in the 1970s could expect to work over 60 hours a week (exact numbers are hard to come by, since drivers rarely record their hours accurately), including time spent driving, loading, unloading, making repairs, and filling out paperwork. He’d usually end his 10-, 12-, or 16-hour day far from home and crawl into bed in a sleeper cab. Hence

Maphis’ complaint that “I kiss my baby and I’m gone again.... My old dog bites me every time I come home.... I came home today, heard my little boy say, ‘well mama, who is that man?’”

Grueling hours and strained relationships aren’t unique to trucking. What’s most remarkable about “Awful Lot to Learn” and its ilk is hearing these realities depicted in a mass-market radio hit. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, popular music has studiously ignored the time its listeners spend working for a paycheck. Even the rawest of country music typically takes place in homes, hollers and honky-tonks. The trucker subgenre stands out as unique for being set in a workplace—the cab of a truck. During the decade and a half that trucker music made its mark on the country-western airwaves, it offered listeners a portrait, albeit romanticized, of the perils, frustrations, and petty triumphs of life on the job.

Although the figure of the lonely long-haul driver has appeared occasionally in song since the early days of recorded sound, the genre as such got its start with “Six Days on the Road,” a 1963 track by the then-unknown Dave Dudley that made it to #2 on the hot country charts. The time was ripe—with work having begun on the US interstate system seven years earlier, tractor-trailers were replacing railroads as the main avenue for getting goods from point A to point B. “Six Days” is a first-person account of a gear-jammer’s journey home to his sweetheart, and it established many of the tropes of the trucker genre.

The lyrics are a detailed evocation of the things that might frustrate or please a trucker. He’s in control of a fine piece of machinery—“I got my diesel wound up and she’s a-runnin’ like never before”—and has nothing to slow him down—“I don’t



see a cop in sight.” If his highest gear isn’t fast enough, he has “Georgia overdrive”—the practice of coasting downhill in neutral, used (illegally) by truckers to overcome the inherent speed limitations of a 20- to 40-ton vehicle. The danger of getting caught for violating safety regulations is ever-present—“the ICC is checkin’ on down the line” and “my log book’s way behind,” but “I can dodge all the scales.” He misses his girl, but after all, “I’m gonna make it home tonight.” The deep-voiced Dudley’s swaggering vocals suggest the thrill of speed, even as the title suggests the tedium of overwork.

The song struck a chord with its detailed evocation of workplace jargon and routine. Truckers would have recognized the reference to the Interstate Commerce Commission, an agency which, starting in the 1930s, mandated that drivers keep a logbook recording their activities in 15-minute increments. The books were intended to enforce “Hours of Service” regulations, which, at the time, required the worker to take a break after 10 hours of driving. The HOS are meant to keep exhaust-

ed drivers off the road. Given that the driver is “taking little white pills” to stay awake, he’s clearly flouting them.

Another source of the song’s appeal is the figure of the freight-hauler himself: a wily anti-authoritarian who’s nonetheless deeply wholesome. (“I could have a lot of women” while on the road “but I’m not that kind of a guy.”) As the years passed, this version of the trucker would become a pop culture archetype—in the words of a 1978 *Journal of Country Music* article, “the Last American Cowboy, a free spirit, a knight of the road, and the one hero for our time, the ultimate proletarian.”



AS THE HITS PILED UP, SUBJECT MATTER CAME to include “road tragedies, good Samaritan deeds, tall tales and comic happenings” (as Frederick Dankers’ *JCM* article describes it). Tales of self-sacrifice abound. In Red Sovine’s 1967 “Phantom 309,” a hitchhiker encounters the ghost of a driver who deliberately crashed his rig to save “a school bus full of kids.” But light-hearted tales are just as common. The jaunty Red Simpson piano boogie “Country Western Truck Drivin’ Singer,” released in 1972, explores the downside of team-driving. The narrator’s partner, Homer Gooch, has bought a guitar in pursuit of Nashville stardom. “When I’m layin’ in that sleeper trying to rest my bones/ He’s up there trying to sing like George Jones.” The untalented Gooch is finally spotted “driving the Nashville garbage truck.”

Sentimentality is a common thread. In Red Sovine’s 1965 “Giddyup Go,” a trucker finds his long-lost son against all odds when he spots a rig with the same distinctive name as his. Sovine had a string of hits for Starday Records, many exploring the saccharine side of driving trucks. The 1976 #1 hit “Teddy Bear” tells of a paraplegic boy who talks to truckers via CB to ease his loneliness after his father’s fatal wreck. When he tells the narrator of his wish for a ride in a big rig, the man visits his home, only to see “18-wheelers lined up for 3 city blocks.” Sovine narrates these events in a voice that seems to be choking back tears. (In the bizarre answer song “Teddy Bear’s Last Ride,” a family friend describes how the little boy’s condition worsens until he becomes too weak to use the CB and eventually dies. At his funeral, “the sound of 100 engines filled the air” as weeping truckers line up to pay their respects.)

By depicting it in song, this music acknowledges the strong emotions of working life. The protagonist of the Willis Brothers’ 1964 “Give Me 40 Acres” has an emotional meltdown when he gets his unwieldy vehicle stuck in a tight spot and can’t change direction:

*“The tears were streaming down his face, and they all heard him yell/*

*‘Give me 40 stick of dynamite, I’ll blow this rig to [repeat chorus].’*

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Per Danker, the music had traits in common with “the traditional occupational songs of the cowboy, railroader, miner, lumberman.” But despite these songs centering the worker as hero, any political message they offer is ambiguous. Mining songs might blame their woes on management greed and exploitation; trucker songs depict the hardships of the job as inescapable facts of nature.

Workers in many industries risk dying for their employers’ profits, but truckers, imperiled by high speed and exhaustion, die the most overall, with around 750 on-the-job deaths per year. Steve Viscelli’s *The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream* records an interview with a driver, Claudio, who was ordered by his dispatcher to haul a load from Texas to Miami just as Hurricane Katrina was about to make landfall. Directly in the path of the storm, he sheltered from high winds in his truck and barely survived the trip. “And I came back all the way to home, tossed the keys on the table of my dispatcher, and I told him, ‘Next time you want to drive through that, get your license and drive.... No one is going to tell me to risk my life!’”

The risk of on-the-job mortality haunts trucker music, as titles like “Tombstone Every Mile” suggest, but moments of clarity like Claudio’s are rare. The classic “Diesel Smoke, Dangerous Curves” is a first-person account of a disaster in progress:

*I was out last night drinkin’ beer with the guys  
Got an achin’ head and bloodshot eyes  
I ended up with a pretty little dame, I didn’t even know her name.*

The speaker is in bad shape, but must keep on:

*If I deliver this hotshot freight  
I gotta get a-goin’, I’m runnin’ late....  
Can’t stay awake, ain’t had no sleep.*

The final stanza leaves us right at the moment of the inevitable fatal crash:

*I must have closed my eyes for a while  
Cause here I am, I’m runnin’ wild  
I burned my brakes, stripped my gears  
Gonna have to ride her down, I fear...  
I wish I’d left the women alone  
It’s too late now, I think I’m gone.*

First recorded by Doye O’Dell in 1952, the song was memorably revived for the trucker music era by Red Sovine, Bobby Sykes, and others. The drama of the tale is variously enhanced by diesel-horn sound effects, anxious sixteenth-note playing, steel guitar slides to suggest the driver’s uncontrolled descent, and, in one version, a climactic female scream. Its message is one of the dangers of overindulgence. The driver “got myself into this fix” (the “natural” dangers of hilly roads and tempting female bodies are also to blame). Listeners aren’t encouraged to wonder who decided he’s “late,” or designed a schedule that doesn’t allow time to sleep off an occasional hangover.

**H**OW MUCH CAN COMPANIES DEMAND OF THE people they hire to haul freight? One might begin with the 1935 Motor Carrier Act, which sought to end wasteful hypercompetition by creating high barriers to entry. In doing so, it “cartelized” the industry: the relatively small number of carriers could set prices among themselves, keeping profits high. Carriers were required to publicize the rates they paid drivers. That way, if the Teamsters negotiated a higher wage with one company, others would follow. During the midcentury, under the canny leadership of Jimmy Hoffa, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters became the biggest and most powerful union in the nation’s history, and trucking the country’s highest-paid blue-collar job.

The legislation also gave the Interstate Commerce Commission the authority to create rules for trucker hours of service. The ICC originally limited truckers to 15 working hours and 10 driving hours a day. Interestingly, the 8-hour day envisioned by the rookie in “Awful Lot to Learn About Truckdrivin’” was once broached as a serious option. “Representatives of organized labor (including the American Federation of Labor, the Teamsters, and the Machinists) petitioned for a stay of the original regulations.... Labor wanted HOS limits of 8 hours per day and 48 hours per week.”

The ICC responded that although the 8-hour day was “now... generally recognized as the normal standard for workers,” an exception was called for. Unlike “factory operations, generally sustained in character,” truck driving is “generally characterized by frequent stops for refreshments, gas, or rest.... Monotony or nervous and physical strain... is alleviated by these breaks.” This decision still stands. Hours of service have varied over the years, but have never approached a “normal standard.”

The hours of service have also never been consistently obeyed. The problem is that drivers were, and still are, paid by the mile, not the hour. Every hour spent waiting at docks or fixing flats is one not spent doing paid work. As a result, drivers systematically mis-record this “on duty not driving” time as “off-duty.” A trucker today can spend 30 or 40 hours just on this unpaid work, and is likely to record only 60% of their actual work time. Even in the union era, many drivers would have worked much more than the 60 weekly hours the ICC permitted. The situation is deeply para-





doxical. The regulations are meant to limit exhausting workdays, but truckers only get paid for one category of the work that they do. So they falsify their logbooks, work far more than is allowed, and feel that they are gaming the system by doing so.

When drivers voiced discontent, it was often at regulators like the ICC. A recent journal article points out that they saw the “intrusions of state power into their work routines” as a threat to their status as “kings of the open road.” These complaints kicked into high gear in the wake of the 1973 Arab Oil Embargo, when the government lowered the national speed limit to 55 to conserve gas. Fuel costs spiked and the same trip took more time. Livelihoods were threatened.

That year, the trucker magazine *Overdrive* published an interview with University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman, praising his “daring and outspoken” belief that “governmental agencies are far worse than the problem they were created to solve” and that “there is no justification for the ICC whatsoever.” In late 1973 through early 1974, independent truckers engaged in a series of rather chaotic actions, including blockading highways and protesting oil terminals, hoping for relief from the gas crisis. This flurry of activity concluded with an 11-day “strike” that won a small concession from the Nixon administration: a freeze in diesel prices.

These events also led to a surge in popularity of CB radios. Truckers used them to communicate about the newly urgent matter of avoiding speed traps, while the general public was fascinated by the possibilities of a seedy proto-ChatRoulette.

1975’s slickly produced “Convoy” presents these possibilities in overheated fictional form. Using CB dialogue and first-person narration, the song depicts a spontaneous trucker rebellion. A few drivers decide to “put the hammer down.” As more join, they use their strength in numbers to speed through a roadblock and defiantly “tear up their swindle sheets [logbooks].” Coordinating their action through CB, the now-1,000-strong group finally insists “we ain’t gonna pay no toll” and “[crashes] the gate doing ninety-eight,” proving the chorus’s assertion that “ain’t nothing gonna get in our way.” If the 1974 strike failed to accomplish much, “Convoy” is a fantasy of what might have been. It offers a vision of solidarity and cooperation that’s completely ad hoc—no union required.

By the mid-70s, as Shane Hamilton writes in *Trucking Country: The Road to America’s Wal-Mart Economy*, “truckers’ antistatist, antiunion, and antiauthoritarian neopopulist politics” were beginning to gel. More drivers than ever were self-employed, and these non-unionized owner-operators believed they could make more money if they could freely compete with big firms.

1979 saw a repeat of the anti-regulation strikes and blockades. A repeal of the 1935 Motor Carrier Act was inevitable. When the Motor Carrier Act of 1980 passed, undoing the reforms of the 30s, it did so with nearly everyone’s support—mainstream economists, *Overdrive* magazine, even Ralph Nader.

Within a few years things changed dramatically. With barriers to entry lowered, new companies were undercutting existing ones by hiring cheap non-union workers, carriers were going bankrupt, and profits for surviving firms were razor-thin.

The deregulators had gotten their wish: manufacturers were paying much less to ship their goods. Meanwhile, membership in the Teamsters fell to below 10%, and wages per mile for drivers declined by 44%. The already-long hours expanded. Today it’s not uncommon to work 90 or 100 hours a week. Most drivers are unhappy, but they’re quickly replaced. Taxpayers subsidize high turnover through government assistance to industry-run Commercial Drivers’ License schools. In Steve Viscelli’s words, “A class project has transformed trucking from an industry with some of the best-paid workers and one of the strongest unions in American history into one in which unions play almost no role, and workers live for weeks at a time out of the machine they operate, often earn less than minimum wage, and work hours equivalent to two full-time jobs, sometimes more.” Big rigs have become Sweatshops on Wheels.

OF COURSE, BY 1980, THE PUBLIC’S INTEREST IN the romantic trucker figure was already fast waning. The public spotlight moved elsewhere as the dream of independence and high wages quietly died. Country music’s brief moment of class consciousness died too. If the reality of blue-collar work is becoming ever more grim, you’d never know it from anything you hear on the radio. Protagonists of contemporary country music aren’t workers—they’re consumers, either of tequila and Bud or of inspirational bromides. (One recent hit informs the listener that “most people are good” and “every breath’s a gift.”) Some veteran drivers notice what’s changed. On a Youtube upload of “Ten Days Out, Two Days In,” user “1500 Mike” comments: “Someone should make a modern [version] of this. 6 weeks out 2 days in. Thanks deregulation.”

In the end, the song that most insightfully reflects drivers’ woes may be Red Simpson’s “I’m a Truck.” This 1976 hit gives voice to the exploited worker through a striking creative sleight of hand: the narrator is a sentient eighteen-wheeler complaining about his boss, the driver.

“You’ve heard songs about truck drivers, many times their story’s told.... But if you could spare a minute, I’d like to tell you mine.” In the truck’s telling, drivers are a sort of self-involved management class: “Look at him sippin’ coffee and flirting with that waitress. And where do you think he left me? That’s right, next to a cattle truck.” Drivers can make mistakes with no repercussions: “If we’re on time he takes the credit, if we’re late I get the blame.” Meanwhile, the truck’s efforts go unacknowledged: “I take him south and bring him back without a word of thanks... Hadn’t’ve been for me, we’d’ve both wound up in the ditch.”

If the trucks have so little power that their needs are easily disregarded, they can reflect that their obscure, thankless work keeps everything rolling along:

*There’d be no truck drivers if it wasn’t for us trucks  
No double-clutchin’, gear-jammin’, coffee-drinkin’ nuts  
They drive their way to glory  
And they have all the luck  
There’d be no truck drivers if it wasn’t for us trucks. ❖*



# SOCIALISM IS COOL









# MURDER MOST *Genteel*

BY BRIANNA RENNIX

**I** DATE MY INTEREST IN MURDER MYSTERIES BACK TO THE summer before my sixth birthday, just after my family had moved back to the United States from overseas. Between homes, we stayed for a little while with my grandparents in eastern Virginia. My grandpa, a retired Navy captain, was exactly the person you'd have cast to play a white grandfather in a movie: he had a grey beard and wore tweed caps and spent most of his time in his study, which was dimly-lit and filled with old books and leather wingback armchairs. He had been a civil engineer for most of his life, a career he chose out of practicality, but his real passion was writing murder mysteries. This interest was, perhaps, related to the fact that his own father had worked as a homicide detective in the Bronx. My great-grandfather had been a secretive, suspicious kind of man, my grandpa told me. When he left for work in the morning, he would tersely tell his family that he was off to his "business," and so, for much of his childhood, my grandpa had no idea what his father even did. He first discovered the truth, supposedly, when he was buying sweets at the corner store, and spotted his dad's picture in the local paper, spread across some gory story. (I can't independently confirm whether any of this is true—my great-grandfather's name was James Doyle, which makes him a tad hard to find, since this was the name of approximately 70% of the population of New York in the first half of the twentieth century.) In any

case, whatever the reason, my grandpa loved murder mysteries.

Up until this point in my life, I barely had any idea what a murder was, to say nothing of a mystery, but the whole atmosphere of the house suddenly overwhelmed my child-brain with great intensity. I decided at that point that I was going to be a detective, or, failing that, a writer of detective stories. It helped that my grandparents' house—which had a lot of dark wood panelling, and creaked like an old ship—looked like just the sort of place a murder mystery would take place. It was filled with a hodgepodge of strange souvenirs from my grandparents' travels: there was a pair of crossed swords hanging on one wall, and a weird Polynesian harpoon thing on another wall. There was a stand of menacing-looking fire-irons on the hearth, and a deep, murky, slow-moving brown creek out behind the back porch. So many different ways to do away with someone!

I remember that my siblings, who were older than me and very kind, indulged my enthusiasm by one day staging a scavenger hunt through the house with clues for me to follow. I also recall that I asked for, and received, a magnifying-glass for my birthday in September, which I imagined I would use to uncover all manner of misdeeds. Around this time I penned my first-ever short story, a mystery that I enigmatically titled "THE MYS-

*Continues on page 22...*



# Clue®

## "The Only Good Billionaire Is A Dead Billionaire" E D I T I O N

*It's your job to figure out which billionaire died by which means and why each deserved their fate!*

### PREPARATION

You will need a die, plus individual player tokens such as a tiddlywink or the little Monopoly racecar.

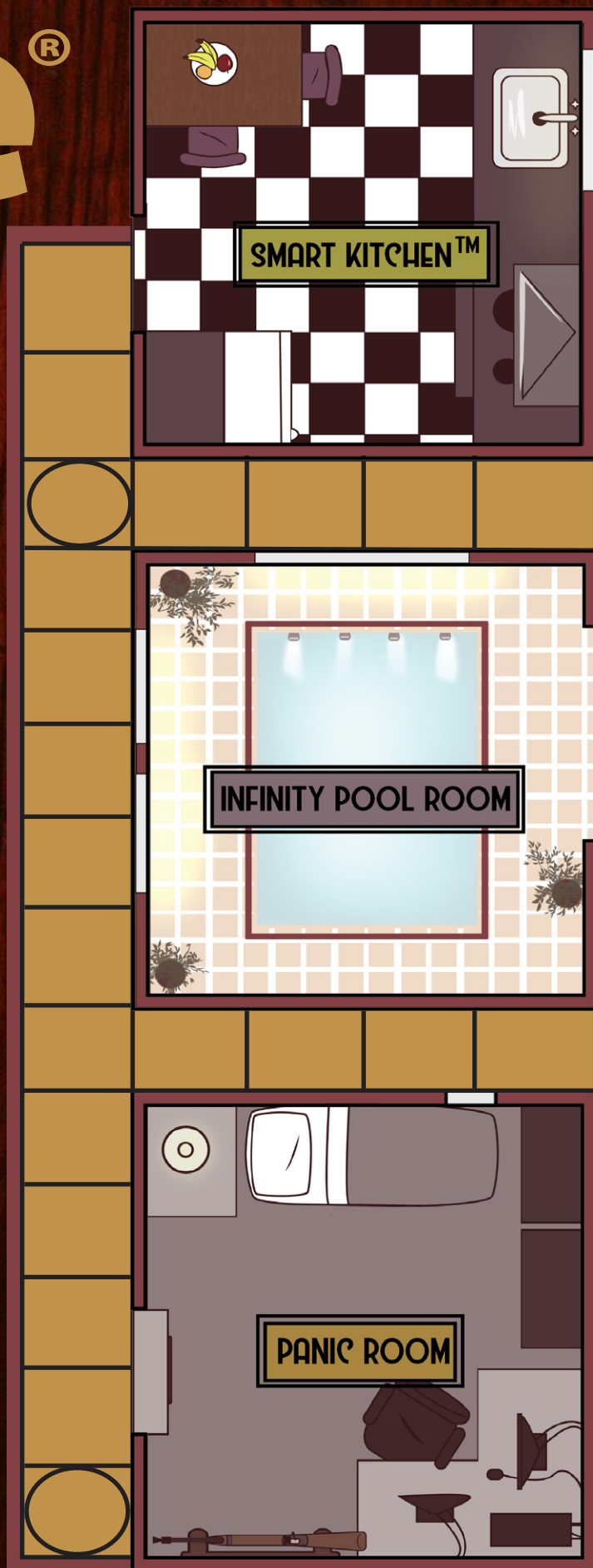
Place your token on one of the spots designated with a circle. On subsequent pages, you will find 9 billionaires, 9 justifications, and 9 means of death. Place a billionaire in each room. Leave the rest of the cards available for players to inspect. A nonplayer must be designated the "Director of Death."

### RULES

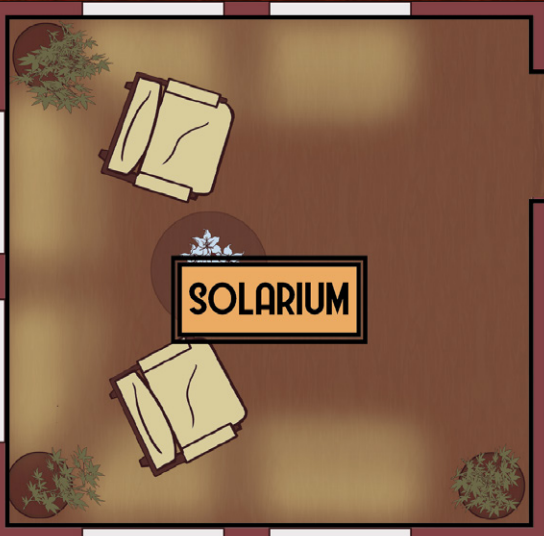
1. Take turns rolling. To enter a room, one must roll the exact number of spaces so that the room is the final space.
2. When a player enters a room, they must try to figure out how the billionaire died and why their death was justified. The Director of Death will check the Answers. If the guess is correct, the player keeps the billionaire card. If the guess is incorrect, the player is expelled from the room.
3. Play lasts until all deceased billionaire cards have been collected. The person with the most wins.

The Fairprince — Jet crash — "Having crashed too many..."  
The NGO CEO — Ebola blankets — "Her company's mission statement..."  
The Post-Human Tech God — Killed by robots — "The press wants to know..."  
God's Own Retailer — Eaten by employees — "This character is best known..."  
The Legitimate Russian Businessman — Poisoned — "There are no questions..."  
The Real Estate Honcho — Chicken fingers — "Literally the world's worst..."  
The Corruption King — Revolution — "Installed by a U.S.-backed coup..."  
The Champagne Heiress — Pills — "A social media star..."  
The Oil Scion — Safari — "Three generations removed..."

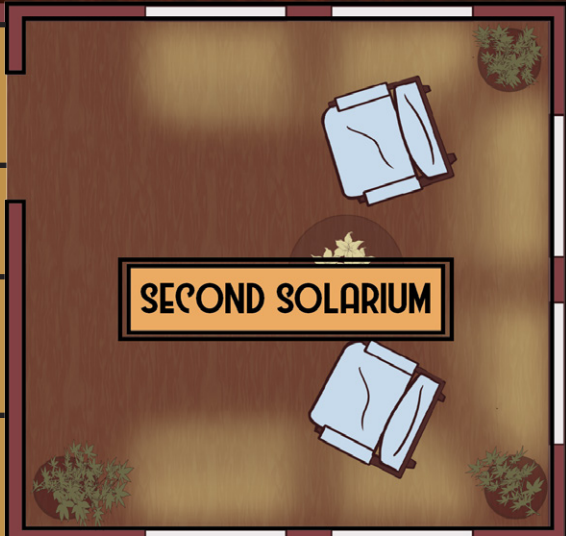
**A N S W E R S**  
Billionaire — Means — Reason







SOLARIUM



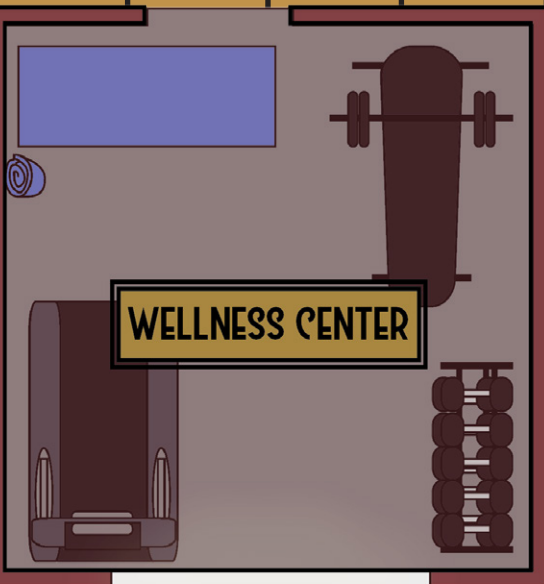
SECOND SOLARIUM



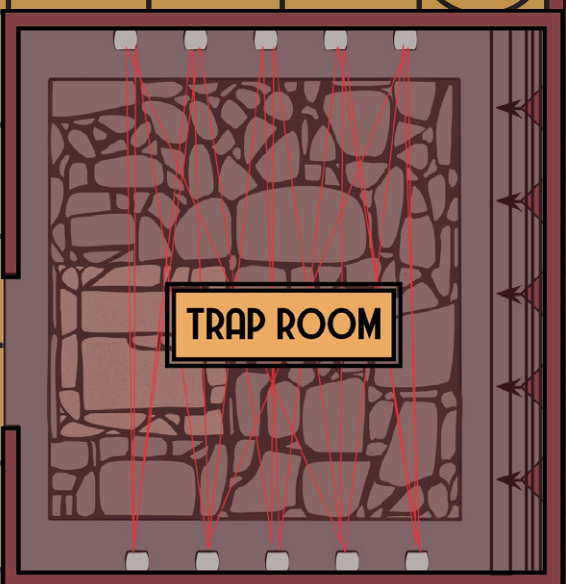
STUDY



INFINITY BILLIARDS ROOM



WELLNESS CENTER



TRAP ROOM

TERY OF THE CASE.” This was, alas, the first and probably only mystery-story that I have ever written from start to finish. The magnifying glass, ultimately, mostly came in handy for cataloguing the bugs in my backyard.

As with all things, the glamour eventually began to wear off the old house. It became simply one of several painted backdrops for my preteen-aged and adolescent angst—and then evaporated entirely, when I learned that my grandparents, when they bought the house, had agreed to a clause that purported to forbid the future sale of the property to any non-white buyer. The fact that my ancestors were cops, too, now feels decidedly uncomfortable: what did James Doyle actually get up to, I wonder, at his “business” in the immigrant slums of New York? Nevertheless, I am still very fond of murder mysteries, and associate them with a deep feeling of comfort and nostalgia. I suspect that this is in some way connected to my specific childhood experiences, but that can’t be the entire explanation, because I have met many people who find murder mysteries comforting in just the same way I do. And this, when one thinks about it, is an odd thing. To get an illicit thrill from tales of violence would make some kind of sense. To find them soothing is decidedly bizarre.

**T**HE MURDER MYSTERY IS RELATIVELY new as a formal literary genre in the English-speaking world, although mysterious murders, and stories about them, have been around forever. In mythology, folksongs, and fairytales, ghosts have been rising from their graves to accuse their murderers since time immemorial. Given this pedigree, it’s no surprise that one of the earliest prototypes of the modern detective story, Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, sprang from the mind of an author typically accustomed to writing horror stories of supernatural revenge. (I have also recently learned that there’s a much earlier tradition of detective fiction from China, dating back as far as the thirteenth century, where ghosts appearing as witnesses is also apparently a common trope.)

The modern detective story, sans supernatural elements, with an emphasis on scientific and deductive methods of “solving” crimes, was an innovation of nineteenth-century England. It’s been plausibly argued, in a very entertaining book called *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher*, that Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens, who were among the first to incorporate mystery plotlines with “detective” characters into their novels, were strongly influenced by a real-life mystery known in the press as the “Road Hill Murder.” This grisly child murder case was one of the first to be prominently investigated by the newly-created “Detective Branch” of Scotland Yard. Since then, the symbiotic relationship between detective fiction and real-life investigative practice has continued: Sherlock Holmes was modelling cutting-edge forensic techniques at the end of the nineteenth century, while present-day commentators are constantly debating whether the influence of shows like *CSI* causes juries to be under- or over-skeptical of forensic evidence. Detective fiction has been wildly popular since its inception, and now has diversified to suit all tastes, whether you are a fan of “true crime”-style fiction about sadistic serial killers, or of the “cozy mystery,” a subgenre which mostly seems to involve middle-aged piemakers solving small-town murders with the help of their aged aunt and/or pet cat.

My own taste in murder mysteries falls somewhere between these two extremes. I am not an omnivorous consumer of detective fiction: I know what I like, and I return to the same things frequently. In general, my preferences do not run towards what you would call “hard-boiled.” I like my murder stories soft-boiled and perched in a dainty little egg-cup, awaiting a rap from the spoon of the lord of the manor, who is currently ensconced

behind his newspaper. The undisputed master of this particular genre, of course, is Agatha Christie. I used to read her novels often when I was a child, but nowadays I’m more likely to simply default to a TV adaptation. Agatha Christie isn’t exactly renowned for the beauty of her prose, so little is lost in the translation from prose to film. After a difficult day, just hearing the saxophone intro to an ITV *Poirot* episode is usually enough to lower my blood pressure a few units.

**B**UT WHAT IS IT ABOUT MURDER mysteries that makes them so curiously relaxing? In the case of Poirot and other “Golden Age” murder mysteries of a similar ilk, some of the appeal may be purely aesthetic. Most of the stories take place in inter-war England, in charming pastoral villages where people do nothing all day but post letters and perturb quail; or in art-deco apartment-buildings teeming with bright young things in smart suits and flapper dresses. But one can easily imagine a book or show that had all of these charming things, without the element of sudden violent death. Would I be interested? Probably not. Something about the *murders* is key to my enjoyment.

But I also can’t attribute my interest in murder mysteries to their abstract ingeniousness, or their profound grappling with the reality of human mortality. All Poirot mysteries, for example, are psychologically shallow and logistically implausible. Poirot is a cranky Belgian dandy with an aversion to dirt, and that is the beginning and end of his personality. Like most private detectives, he has a baffling quantity of disposable wealth, and never seems convincingly worried about money, despite the fact that his entire business model depends on people continuing to stage elaborate murders in his vicinity. Luckily, Poirot doesn’t need to exert any effort to attract clients. People sometimes come to him directly for a consultation, but in nine out of ten cases, a murder just occurs when Poirot happens to be around. Poirot has never boarded a boat, train, or aeroplane on which someone has not immediately been assassinated. If Poirot comes to your card-party, someone will be murdered. If Poirot attends your gallery-opening, someone will be murdered. If Poirot passes through your sleepy country village on the weekend, someone will be murdered. It doesn’t matter whether Poirot is just dropping by the corner store, or if he is visiting an archaeological dig in an uncharted corner of the desert: *someone is getting murdered*. If you invite Poirot into your home, you have just declared open season on yourself and all your loved ones. And yet people *keep fucking inviting him places*.

Once the murder happens, the police inevitably conclude that the murderer was whatever shifty bastard they saw first. Poirot knows better, because A) he is a genius, and B) this has literally happened to him three thousand times. The real murderer is, of course, someone who *appears* ordinary, but is, in reality, a neurotic sociopath who’s clever enough to plan a murder with five built-in double-bluffs, but is somehow too goddamn stupid to just wait for Poirot to leave town before they do it. Somehow, Poirot manages to convince all the suspects to hang around the area, preferably in the same house, while he solves the mystery. On average, this close-proximity arrangement will result 1-5 further murders over the course of the investigation, but since this death toll usefully thins the suspect pool, Poirot keeps insisting on it. Finally, Poirot will force everyone who’s still alive to gather in the drawing-room while he walks them through his deductive process, and will usually (*playfully*) seem to be on the verge of accusing any number of presumably terrified innocents before he finally makes his Big Reveal. Why does the real murderer ever attend this kangaroo court, at which the police are always present, waiting to make their arrest? Why do all the other suspects agree to be there, given the possibility that they’ll be falsely accused,



and the near-certainty that they will suddenly find themselves in the same room as a cornered killer with nothing left to lose? Oh well—why not? Why does anyone do anything? Death is inescapable. At the end, Poirot solves the case, to great acclaim, and then goes home and sticks his head into a herbal tisane, which, for Poirot, serves approximately the same function as morphine and cocaine do for Sherlock Holmes.

One thing about this particular genre of murder mystery is that the crimes are never *sordid*. People rarely kill for the pure pleasure of killing, because they have some intrinsically disordered psychological relationship with violence. The culprit is not going to turn out to be a psychopath who is sexually aroused by decapitating women, or has a secret murder barn where they hang up their victims on meat-hooks and feed their viscera

to pigs. There's also rarely any morally complex socioeconomic backdrop to the killings. Sure, sometimes a person's decision to kill is connected to some vaguely-delineated personal history of abuse or deprivation, but the killers are never portrayed as individuals trapped in some inescapable cycle of violence, where poverty and social exclusion have doomed them to lives of desperation. No, these are always very *genteel* killings, of middle-to-upper-class people by other middle-to-upper-class people. They're usually committed for one of three reasons: 1. Rational self-interest (e.g. to get an inheritance, to cover up a career-ruining scandal, etc.), 2. In an isolated outburst of rage, jealousy, or romantic disappointment, or 3. For revenge (whether petty or high-minded).

That said, the world of the Genteel Murder Mystery seems as if it would

## The Victims



be extremely disorienting to live in. You can *never* tell who's going to turn out a murderer. Literally *anyone you have ever met*, whether they're the new parish vicar or your childhood friend of fifty years' standing, might kill you tomorrow to avoid the banalest of bourgeois inconveniences. Oh, so you want to get married? Good luck with that. Your partner probably introduced themselves to you with the express intention of marrying you, murdering you for your money, and running off with your cousin's mathematics tutor; or maybe they're your supposedly-deceased former spouse in disguise, testing your fidelity under a false identity, and will summarily execute you for allowing your fingers to linger a second too long over a handsome houseguest's when they pass you the butter. Even if the marriage miraculously works out, you'll probably just end up getting murdered by your ugliest granddaughter for refusing to pay for her ballet lessons. The balance of probability is that 90% of the time you have ever spent with your family members, they were all mentally choreographing your demise. You'd think people would rather pray for death to come quickly than endure the emotional agony of trying to figure out whom it was safe to love and trust in such a world.

What's remarkable, therefore, is that everyone in the world of the Genteel Murder Mystery is *remarkably serene*. A sudden killing in a country-house is no big thing. We might expect more of the people in these stories to be having nervous breakdowns, or be shut up in their room for days on end, paralyzed by confusion and grief. But usually, the witnesses are merely A Bit Shaken. Ordered to remain at the scene of the crime, they placidly submit, drink their drinks, vaguely worry about the ongoing presence of the murderer among them, but not about *the murder that just happened*. The question of whodunit, and howtheydunit, is the paramount concern on everyone's minds, which obviates any need for a conspicuous mourning-process. We might recall that Amanda Knox was suspected of murder by the Italian police because she was seen laughing and turning cartwheels shortly after her roommate's murder. By that logic, the entire population of Agatha Christie's England ought to fall under immediate suspicion for the sheer number of glamorous cocktail-parties they manage to attend in the immediate aftermath of a loved one's violent death.

With escapist art forms, it's common to find yourself idly wishing that you could leave behind your ordinary life and go live in the fictional universe of your indulgence. And so, given the choice between the world I live in now, and the world of the Genteel Murder Mystery, where would I choose to live? It's a tough question. The statistical likelihood that I would die violently in the Genteel Murder World is much higher: for the comparison to be fair, of course, we must presume a Rawlsian veil of ignorance, where I do not know if I am going to be a detective, a suspect, a murderer, or a victim. *Anyone*, naturally, would readily choose to be a *detective* in this universe—the fellow who, when he isn't cutting cops down to size, simply loaf around cultivating eccentricities—but we must presume that I am fifty times more likely to be the stupid nincompoop who uses the poisoned salt-shaker, or gets a rock dropped on my head. Well: would it *really* be so bad? We already live in a world where we are all marked for death at an unknown moment. And in our world, the mystery of our being is insoluble. Our hearts cry out WHAT IN GOD'S NAME IS EVEN GOING ON, but we will—at least within the conceivable scope of our temporally-constrained animal existences—get no answer. Many philosophical pedants tell us that the question itself is nonsensical. In the Genteel Murder World, by contrast, everything happens for an articulable reason. No one ever has to *feel* very much. The only real void left behind by a fellow-human's untimely demise is an informational one, very soon to be filled by some reliable intellectual specialist. The puzzle solved, the death troubles its witnesses no further. And *all right*, it wouldn't be very pleasant to be shot or

stabbed or drowned, but my likelihood of being raped or tortured is also near to nil. Those things are *vulgar*, and consequently disallowed. Having eliminated those horrific extremes, is being strangled in a railway-carriage in my prime of life, whilst wearing a dashing hat, so much worse than dying alone in a nursing-home, probably wearing no hat at all? I put it to you, ladies and gentlemen.

WHEN I PONDER WHAT ATTRACTS ME to murder mysteries, then, I think that it must be the domestication of horror. I'm prone to be rather judgmental of people who like watching graphically violent television—but perhaps the Genteel

Murder Mystery fulfills approximately the same function for me. For people who enjoy the simulated spectacle of human suffering, it's all about inuring yourself to the horror of violence by learning to take an idle pleasure in witnessing it. But the Genteel Murder Mystery is about taking something horrific and making it charming, cushioning it in several layers of gauze, blunting all its sharp edges. It's about shielding ourselves psychologically from a spectrum of human experience that, if we were fully conscious of it, would probably poison whatever sense of hope or pleasure we derive from our luckier existences. The fact that human lives can be snuffed out by violence—the idea that human beings prey on each other without pity, and that ordinary people die in confusion and terror, leaving behind their loved ones to a life of nightmarish misery—is so very bad that none of life's feeble goods can possibly make up for it. A part of me knows this to be true, and *I don't want to know it*. The Genteel Murder Mystery is comforting, at least partly, because it transforms the horror of violent death into an anodyne triviality, embedded in a familiar and unthreatening landscape. Murder, in this world, does not unmake the social order, or the human mind. In fact, it rather *passes the time*.

But violent death, of course, is not just a laughable conceit of an improbable fictional universe. It is a reality of many parts of our planet. The stage for a dozen murder mysteries is being set as you are reading this, somewhere in the world, possibly in your city: usually of the poor, the homeless, the helpless, who may have no one to care, no one to look for them, no one to identify them. And then there are the places where disappearances are an epidemic, where people are being abducted and murdered at mind-boggling rates. The *New York Times* recently ran a story about a couple in Veracruz, Mexico who first came together over their separate investigations of the fates of their missing children, both of whom were believed to have been kidnapped by a cartel, and whose bodies still have yet to be discovered. Because Veracruz has run out of money for DNA tests, families of the missing panhandle in the street each day, hoping to raise enough money to pay a lab to analyze the sinister detritus that keeps turning up on their amateur searches: unidentified human remains, ominous buried caches of “baby outfits, women's blouses, worn-out jeans and shoes,” whose owners are unaccounted for. “The entire state is a mass grave,” Veracruz's attorney general has said. The government is no longer excavating clandestine burial sites because they have no more room to store the bodies. The streets are papered with fliers begging for information about missing family members.

One of the most disturbing real-life murder mysteries I have ever read about, which I think about very often, comes from El Salvador. The account was written up by Óscar Martínez, one of the country's most intrepid journalists of gang violence and state corruption. Martínez tells the story of Israel Ticas, the only forensic investigator in the entirety of El Salvador, who is responsible for opening up graves and gathering phys-



ical evidence. In a country the size of Massachusetts, where roughly six people are estimated to be murdered every day, this is a herculean task for one man to undertake: Ticas is dealing with a bodycount that even the great detectives of fiction, those notorious murder-magnets, would have difficulty managing. In 2010, Ticas learned of a well in the countryside where gang members were rumored to have been disposing of their victims. Lowering himself down into the depths of the well on a harness, Ticas' lamp illuminated "socks, clothes, junk, a collection of bones, feet, toes." He knew then that there were at least four bodies in the well, and possibly many more than that. Because the well was fragile, it would have to be excavated at an angle, and for this, Ticas needed a backhoe and two dump trucks. After much delay, the Ministry of Public Works briefly lent

him the equipment he needed, only to take it all suddenly back again. Ticas was reduced to advertising for the vehicles on Facebook. The longer the delay dragged on, the more complicated the operation became. Months and months went by; rains came and went; the well flooded. The excavation proceeded by stops and starts, whenever the weather was favorable, whenever the equipment happened to be available. Donning scuba gear, Ticas immersed himself in the muddy mire of the well. "I feel hopeless," he told Martínez. "Duped. As public prosecutors we've tried everything we could to combat this impunity. There are more than fifteen people down there. I'm sure of it." Because of a seepage of water from below the ground, the bottom of the well kept sinking lower and lower, so that Ticas kept excavating deeper and deeper without ever quite

## The Reasons

There are no questions to be asked about this character. In fact, journalists who ask questions have a striking tendency to disappear, only to be found floating in the river with their hands and feet chopped off. What's did his money come from? What's his connection to his government? What does he have to do with all that trafficked human labor that a certain social media star's family is currently being investigated for? You'd better stop asking if you know what's good for you.

A social media star, this character is famous for buying extremely expensive designer clothes, wearing them once, and setting them on fire over Facebook Live. She's also known for adopting kittens that mysteriously disappear only to be replaced by cuter specimens. When the family business was indicted for using trafficked labor in their supply chains, this character took to Twitter to accuse people of "just being jealous" and "totally not getting the definition of slavery."

Installed by a U.S.-backed coup after the peaceful election of a popular leftist threatened the stability of world capitalism, this character enjoys the finer things in life: gold leaf, imported marble, luxury cars, superyachts, a state media which praises him constantly, and medals, medals. Having opened up labor market to foreign exploitation, this character enjoys a great deal of popularity at Davos, and none whatsoever at home.

Literally the world's worst human being. There is no corruption this character won't stoop to, no vicious stupidity that goes too far. He's well-known for sexually assaulting women and demanding the execution of innocent teens. He appears not to understand the seriousness of nuclear weapons; he appears not to understand the seriousness of anything. While many kind and lovely people die each year of treatable diseases, this character eats greasy fast food at every meal and seems, for the moment, indistructible.

Having crashed too many planes and murdered too many prostitutes, this character was finally summoned home for a stern talking-to. It didn't take. Within weeks he was photographed falling off skis in Switzerland and subsequently beating up his ski instructor. This time, the family kept him home for half a year. But after several "unpleasantnesses" with the staff, his family bought his admission to NYU, where he occasionally attends business classes.

Three generations removed from needing to work, this character believes taxation is theft. When not maintaining a braggadocious social media presence, he wastes daddy's money on investment boondoggles such as 1) high-end, members-only rollercoaster parks 2) an ultimate horse-fighting league and 3) installing a large net over much of south Texas "to catch illegals." This character enjoys unlawful safari hunting and displaying the kills on Instagram "to trigger the libs."

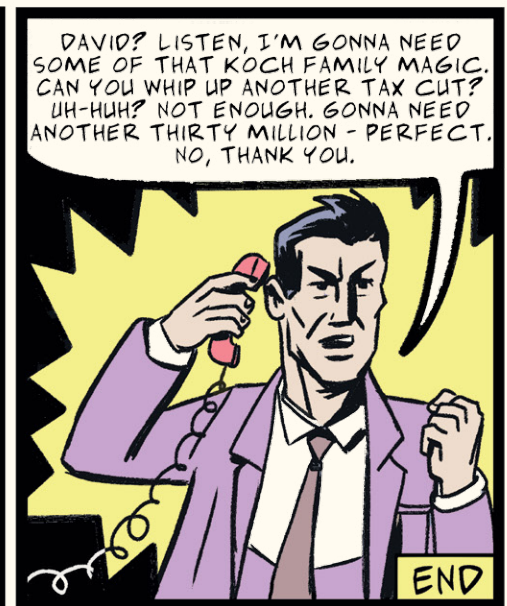
This character is best known for her extravagant makeup, her down-home accent, and her total commitment to paying her workers as little as possible. "I just love my people, we're all one big family, you know? And families take care of each other. That's why I provide all my employees with free coffee and water once a month." This character was recently praised by *Forbes* for innovating away her company's healthcare costs: she replaced employee health insurance with mandatory prayer and jumping jacks.

The press wants to know: will this character save human civilization? It's not clear what the threat to human civilization actually is, unless it's this character himself. While many consumers are ready to sell a kidney to buy the latest gewgaw produced by his company, the workers who actually produce the gewgaws are suffering from kidney problems because they aren't allowed to take bathroom breaks. In the meantime, this character plans to upload his living consciousness to the cloud so he can watch over his employees, forever.

Her company's mission statement is: "Managing people's resources better than they can themselves." When questioned, this character isn't interested in reports of "misuse of funds" or "a pattern of enabling sexual exploitation." "You can't expect the rules to be the same as they are in civilized countries," she explains. "Why don't people focus on the good we do? Why, yesterday we distributed ten iPads to a poor, benighted village suffering from the aftereffects of an epidemic or a civil war or some such thing."



# THE NIGHTVOLE





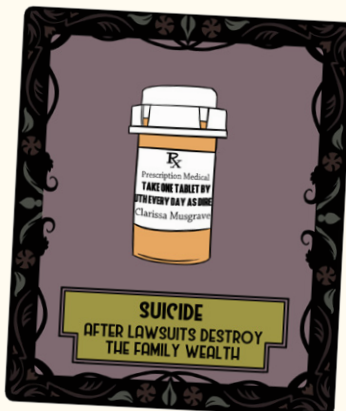
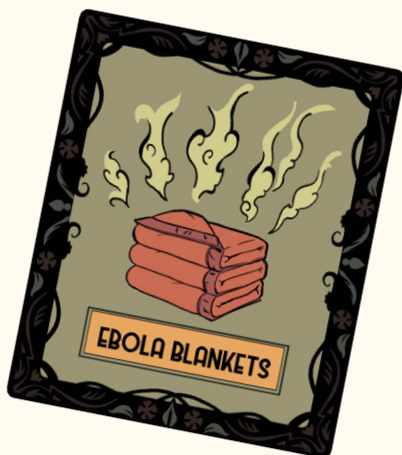
reaching the bodies. 805 days after the excavation first began, Ticas still hadn't hit the bottom of the well, all because he couldn't get the loan of a backhoe and two trucks back when he first needed them. "How many unknown wells are there?" the journalist Martínez wonders. "Nestled into our country's cornfields, how many bodies are turning into compost? And how many bloody stories are hidden in the shadows of the jocote trees?"

Israel Ticas is very different from the dapper investigators of English detective fiction, or even the hard-drinking PIs of noir fiction, or even the humorously morbid forensic specialists on crime TV shows, enthusiastically cutting into cadavers. He, and the Veracruz families, and thousands of others, are simply ordinary people scrabbling madly in the dirt, trying to

pull out the brutalized bodies of the poor before the earth swallows them forever, to give them a name and something of a story. This is what murder mysteries look like in real life. Many of them will never be solved, not because of a lack of detective-savants on hand to crack the case, but for simple reasons of poverty, and logistics, and silences enforced by fear.

These truncated, unfinished narratives, which are somehow both terrifying and mundane, would make for bad fiction. But we have to find ways to understand and care about these stories. I am still not sure myself whether the fictional murder mystery really is a harmless indulgence, or a troubling form of desensitization. Either way, it is clearly not a sufficient way to engage with the problem of violence. There comes a time when we all have to leave the country-house, and face the real world. ❖

## The Means









The background of the page is a photograph of a Mardi Gras parade. In the foreground, a large float is covered in bright orange feathers. To the right, another float is covered in yellow feathers. A man in a pink shirt and blue jeans is walking between the floats. The title 'MARDI GRAS' is overlaid on the top right of the image.

# MARDI GRAS

*In Theory & Practice*

by Nathan J. Robinson

MARDI GRAS DID NOT SEEM LIKE IT WOULD be my kind of holiday. It is characterized, in popular stereotypes, by three things: beads, beer, and breasts. As a teetotaler, I do not drink beer. As a person of taste, I am disinclined to cover myself in plastic beads. And while I am theoretically pro-





breasts, I feel no particular need to see them publicly displayed from second-floor balconies. Making the prospect even less appealing, my apartment is in the heart of the French Quarter, a place with unpleasantly high quantities of debauchery even in the off-season. (A man peed on my house the other week.) Mardi Gras promised to be a loud, messy spectacle, the worst of New Orleans magnified and multiplied. I had friends who were leaving town to escape it. They seemed wise.

I also quickly began to realize what everyone from here knows already: it is not just a single day, “Fat Tuesday.” It is *Carnival Season*, a month-long celebration beginning in early January on Twelfth Night and lasting through Ash Wednesday. We are not talking about an afternoon of unusually heavy drinking by a throng of tourists on Bourbon Street. We are talking about over 50 parades, an influx of visitors that multiplies the city’s population by four, and a *billion dollars* in Mardi Gras related spending. A few weeks before everything descended into chaos, local news reported that the sewage department had extracted 92,000 pounds of leftover Mardi Gras beads from the city’s catch basins. I honestly did not understand how that many pounds of Mardi Gras beads could end up in the drainage system. I would soon understand.

The season started quietly enough. A week into the new year, a small parade by the Krewe de Jeanne d’Arc celebrates Joan of Arc’s liberation of Orléans (the old one) in 1429. This year’s parade featured 10 Joans on horseback, and a special visit by French officials from Orléans itself. Because I was not around to see the Joans pass by, I was temporarily able to maintain the delusion that the city was still operating normally. I went about my days as planned, continuing my usual routine of pretending to be an extremely serious person.

Soon, however, it became impossible not to notice changes. As I was standing in line at the post office, I realized that half the other customers appeared to be mailing king cake boxes. Then I realized that the postal workers themselves were eating king cake.\* A woman with a king cake asked me if I was wearing purple because of Mardi Gras. “But Mardi Gras isn’t for another month,” I replied. (Fat Tuesday was scheduled for Feb. 13th, and this was around January 10th.) “No,” she said. “It’s here.”

It was. Within a day or two, construction crews began to appear on St. Charles Avenue downtown, near the building where *Current Affairs* has its offices. They started erecting bleachers and decorating them in the official Mardi Gras colors of purple, green, and gold. Every day, a new set of bleachers would go up along the sidewalk, to the point where it became impassable to pedestrians. Then, a crew showed up in front of the *Current Affairs* office building itself. An enormous set of bleachers was built, complete with a private entrance door and a built-in bathroom. I asked the building’s landlord what was going on. He told me that when he originally purchased the place in the 1970s, he had deliberately chosen somewhere on the parade route, so that he could always get a good view. Every year, for over 30 years, he had built a viewing stand where friends and family could come and watch. I asked him whether it was worth going to all the trouble of building this thing, at a cost that must have run into tens of thousands of dollars, just to watch Mardi Gras parades. He told me I would need to wait and watch for myself.

I did not need to wait long. A few nights later, the first of the big parades came rolling past the front door of the office.

\* King cake, the festive cinnamon dessert served during the season, is a dish whose appeal had previously mystified me. As cake, it is mediocre, and its only distinctive quality is that it contains a special choking hazard in the form of a tiny plastic baby—which, depending on which of my local friends you ask, is either supposed to represent the Baby Jesus or is solely there because many years ago, a toymaker found himself with too many plastic babies and offloaded them on a local bakery. But by the end of the season, king cake had grown on me, and I was even somewhat sad when the grocery store began to take down King Cake Mountain, its ten-foot-tall arranged display of cake boxes.





Photo p. 28-29 by Erica Frank, photo p. 34 by Derek Bridges, all other photos by Nathan J. Robinson. Thanks to Nolan Lambert for letting me hang out on his gallery.



I HAD KNOWN, IN A BASIC WAY, THAT NEW ORLEANS parades are different from other cities' parades. I have been a number of times to "Mardi Gras World," which is not a Mardi Gras themed amusement park, but a workshop that offers guided tours showing how artists make the elaborate papier-mache and fiberglass sculptures affixed to the floats. At the beginning of the tour, visitors watch a 15-minute video about Mardi Gras. (Because I take everyone who visits me to Mardi Gras World, I have seen this video about nine times.) In it, local commentators boast that New Orleans parades are special because (1) they are very big and (2) the krewes members who ride on the floats throw things at the audience.

These claims had never impressed me very much, although the floats in the workshop and accompanying storage depot were magnificent. For one thing, I have seen big parades. For another, the additional element of "throwing things at people" did not strike me as spectacularly innovative. And the "beads, cups, and other trinkets" that I was told would be thrown at me did not seem like items I would have a special interest in catching. I was keen to see the floats, which are kept locked away in dozens of secret warehouses around the city throughout the year. But I thought I had probably gotten a good 85% of the experience already just by looking at the few of them that are kept on display at Mardi Gras World.

I had not gotten 85% of the experience. I had gotten, at best, about 2% of the experience.

I was still in the office when the parade began to file by around 7p.m. But it was difficult to stay in the office for long: some of the loudest high school marching bands I have ever heard came by at full blast, foreclosing the possibility of getting any further writing done. I went outside onto the viewing structure, and watched as band after band filed by, punctuated by torch-bearers, cheerleaders, and riders on horseback. The floats themselves were gargantuan and elaborate, shaped like food items, animals, celebrities, New Orleans houses, and the head of Cleopatra. There were ships, Greek temples, and jungle scenes. The 10-foot high animals included a zebra, a rabbit, a frog, a pelican, and a flamingo. When I saw the first of the floats gliding into view I finally appreciated what I had read in Lyle Saxon's *Fabulous New Orleans*, when he spoke of what they seemed like to him as a child around 1900: "filling the street as they did, and lumbering over the rough pavement, the great glittering masses seemed as incredible as though the very houses were gliding past." You didn't have to be a child to feel as if you were watching buildings move through the streets. Many of the floats are double-deckers, with staircases and bathrooms, and some have many segments linked together. (In 2012, one of the krewes debuted a 330-foot long float that told the entire history of a bygone local beach.)

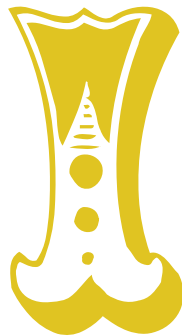
The parade is made of floats, but it's also made of pretty much everything else, and it takes hours for all of it to get down the street. On my first evening, in addition to the dozens of decorated floats, all of the following came streaming along over the course of several hours: approximately 40 marching bands, each with accompanying color guard, what seemed like several thousand baton-twirlers and



cheerleaders, cowboys on horses who tossed roses, convoys of dune buggies, dancing pharaohs on stilts, Elvis impersonators on scooters, zoot-suited washboardists, mermaids, gangs of clowns, women dressed as magnolias, military cadets, 30 or so Marie Antoinettes, Chinese dragons, a jazz pianist, a battalion of flight attendants dancing using those light-sticks you guide in airplanes with, 50's girls in poodle skirts, vintage fire trucks, a conga drummer, and several dozen more things I've forgotten. I did not even know there were that many sousaphones in the world, let alone that they could all fit into one street. The parade seemed as if it must have stretched the entire length of the city, and I kept puzzling over the mystery of how they could possibly line everybody up at the start.

But what I was truly unprepared for was the object-throwing. Each float has a dozen or so masked riders, with huge bags of Mardi Gras beads and other knick-knacks, which they throw to the audience. I did know this, of course, because I had heard it nine times in the video at Mardi Gras World, which says that New Orleans parades are "audience participation events." Yet until the first float actually passed by where I was standing, and the audience started pleading and squealing for throws as beads rained down all around us, I did not quite grasp the projectile-based aspect of the enterprise.

What is surprising, and indescribable, is the sheer scale of it. Each rider is tossing something every couple of seconds, so when a float passes by, dozens of necklaces start flying through the air. It is like being in a hailstorm of Mardi Gras beads. Sometimes they throw huge handfuls of beads, or even bags. And while beads are the most common, plenty of other items are thrown. I saw glow sticks, stuffed sharks, masks, full-sized hula hoops, inflatable baseball bats, light-up fairy wands, novelty eyeglasses, rubber balls, koozies, plastic swords, floppy velvet pimp hats, bracelets, candies, dolls, medallions, sunshades, lightsabers, pom-poms, commemorative cups, and feather boas. The Cleopatras threw glowing headbands that flashed "CLEO." One rider was tossing huge plush ponies.



HAD NOT GONE OUT WITH THE INTENTION of trying to catch anything. As I say, beads don't suit my style. (If they were tossing cravats, that would be another story.) But non-participation is not really an option. First, if you're not wearing beads, the people around you will question you about it. Three times in three days, when I went out to the parades, somebody said to me "Is the lack of beads by choice?" and draped me in a string of beads. But even if you can elude your fellow attendees, there's no escaping the riders.

Within the first ten minutes of the first parade, I got hit in the head fairly hard with a flying clump of beads. By the end of it, I had about a dozen sets of them round my neck. Getting into the Mardi Gras parade spirit is not optional: a child came up to me, handed me a bag, and demanded I start catching whatever I could from the floats. Not for him. For me. He refused to let me be a spectator.

You get caught up in it fast. People are clamoring for the beads with outstretched arms, begging the riders to throw them something, and at first you can't really figure out why. After all, there are plenty of beads to go around. They're all over the place. After a float goes by, all the ones that missed their targets litter the street, and it would be easy to go and pick a few up if you felt naked in your beardlessness. But once a set of beads hits the ground, it's as if it's dead. The point is to catch them, and it quickly becomes a game. They all seem crazy at first, screaming for throws, and many of the objects themselves seem like cheap novelties, if you describe them or see them out of the context of the night. But during the parade, you slowly turn into one of these maniacs yourself. At first you think "What the hell do I want a bunch of beads and a squishy football for?" But then someone near you will get something really cool, a glow-in-the-dark necklace or a decorative shoe, and you, too, will find yourself waving your arms and screaming. And when the guy next to you catches the thing you

## But How Do The **DOGS** Feel?

Most of the Mardi Gras krewe consist of human beings. Not so the Krewe of Barkus. The name is a play on the famous Krewe of Bacchus, and the Barkus parade consists of costumed dogs. Like the other parades, it has designated "royalty." This year, the King was Baker, an English Cream Golden Retriever. The title of Queen went to Luna, a black and white border collie.

Now, I am a sucker for costumed dogs. Nothing is sure to draw an "Awww" out of me like a scottie in a sweater or a pug in a blazer. Even an ugly dog, given a suitably tiny hat and a pair of pince-nez, becomes adorable. An entire parade of dogs in fancy dress, then, was an irresistible prospect.

My excitement, however, soon turned to concern. "But what if the dogs do not like wearing costumes?" I thought. "What if being tarted up and paraded through the French Quarter is not their ideal way of spending a spring afternoon? What if they find the experience of being near hundreds of other dogs, all wearing ridiculous costumes, frightening and humiliating? Are the dogs happy?" These questions troubled me in the days leading up to the parade. If the dogs were not happy, I could not justify being happy myself. One cannot take pleasure in the suffering of others. That is *schadenfreude*,

and it is a disreputable German pastime that should not be emulated.

I went to the dog parade, then, on a mission. I was not to attend in my capacity as a private citizen who likes dog tutus. I was attending as an Investigative Journalist. Current Affairs would get to the bottom of things. I would speak to the dogs, and find out if they were happy.

The parade featured every conceivable type of dog in every conceivable type of costume. Papillon princesses, bichon butterflies, mastiff mermaids, pug pirates, dachshund sausages. There were boxers in boxers and labs in lab coats. They wore pants, they wore headdresses, they wore capes and tunics. Many had custom-designed floats and were color-coordinated with their owners. And there must have been at least 600 dogs. For sheer ludicrous canine pageantry, the event could not be beaten.

But were the dogs happy? I had a pocketful of treats and a forged press pass and was determined to find out. I was able to conduct personal interviews with a number of dogs (see photograph), but perhaps for fear of retaliation, they were reluctant to speak on the record. When they did offer vocal replies, most of their words were unintelligible. I therefore depended heavily on personal observation. Did they look happy?



At the end of the day, I concluded as follows: most of them seemed fine with it. "Chihuahua looks bemused," I have written in my notes. "Beagle in wig seems to be very pleased about wig." A few of the animals were baffled or bewildered, but in general, it seemed as if the humans who brought their dogs to the parade were

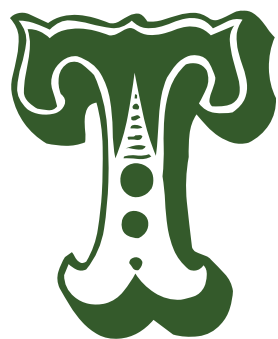
those who knew their dogs would be relatively okay with being paraded. My provisional verdict is that the Barkus Parade does not violate the animals' rights in any serious way, though it may somewhat violate their dignity. But do dogs have a conception of dignity? Does it matter? These debates I shall leave for others. +





wanted, you will be devastated, and you will scream even louder and flap your arms even more wildly when the next float moseys across the intersection spraying beads and cups in every direction.

The city is so committed to this practice, by the way, that extensive measures have been taken to ensure that litigiousness and safety regulations do not interfere to stop it. The Krewe of Zulu has long been known for flinging decorated coconuts from its floats, which have occasionally injured passersby. The possibility of flying coconuts leading to a lawsuit nearly led to the cancellation of the coconut-tossing, until the Louisiana legislature heroically intervened and passed a law immunizing krewes from legal liability for injuries sustained from objects thrown from parade floats. After the law was passed, a woman attempted to sue Zulu, claiming she had nearly lost an eye after being beamed with a coconut. She cited a variety of injuries resulting from the incident, including a “loss of interest in Mardi Gras.” But the Louisiana Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals tossed out the claim, noting that the injured party had made no attempt to catch the coconut or take cover, and rejecting her insistence that she “did not see it coming.” The rule is: be careful.



HE HAILSTORM OF OBJECTS PRODUCES an almighty mess. The whole street is lined with beads that people failed to catch. Nobody who sees it can doubt the story about the 92,000 pounds of beads in the sewers. What’s astonishing is that it was so few. The beads simply take over the city. After the parade, the street is so thick with them in some places that you can’t see the pavement. On my way home, I have to get off my bike and walk

it because I can’t ride through the beads. A police car has to navigate carefully around an impassable pile of them. The Italian restaurant next door put barricades on its plate glass windows to protect them

from flying beads. Some trees get so many of them tangled in the branches that you can no longer see any leaves; they are just bead-trees. (The beads, colorful and whimsical as they are, actually cause serious problems. The Wikipedia article on “environmental impact of Mardi Gras beads” makes for disturbing reading: they cheaply made and contain toxins that get into the water supply and pose risks to both marine life and local children. But nobody seems much concerned by this.)

I leave the first parade stunned. Never have I seen so much effort put into the production of something so fleeting and purposeless, something that exists entirely to provide a temporary burst of joy. So much work is put into constructing floats that will roll only once. Millions of dollars have been spent on an event in honor of—what, exactly? That’s a bad question, though: there’s no “because” to the parade. The parade happens because it happens. That’s how traditions work: they aren’t “justified,” they just evolve. We do what we do on Mardi Gras because it is what we do on Mardi Gras. But my God, what a thing to do.

By the time I cycle home from the office, it is nearing midnight. The parade has finally passed, and the streets are a wreck. Dozens of street-sweepers collect beads and other refuse. A huge vacuum passes down the street slurping up bead-piles. Bags, beer cans, and food waste are everywhere; it looks as if the city garbage collectors have spent a month or two on strike. Aside from the noise of the vacuum, the sweeping, and a few men with leaf blowers, the whole street has gone empty and silent. An hour ago, thousands of people were watching dozens of dancers, bands, and rolling replicas of Egyptian artifacts pass by. Now everyone is gone, with no sign of where they went. When I get home, well away from the parade route, my block is completely empty, save for the Viking sitting on the corner. (But the Viking is always on the corner.) It’s hard to believe that what happened even happened. *What the hell did I witness?*

And that was just the first of the major parades. There were still about a dozen more to come. In the office the next day, a woman who





works in the building asked me what I had thought of the previous night. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” I said. “Oh that? That was just Cleopatra. Wait until you see the rest.” Sure enough, things continued to escalate. The parades got longer, more elaborate. As we got deeper and deeper into Carnival season, it seemed like marching bands were coming past my office window every hour. (Louisiana high schools might not rank particularly well on academic metrics but if they measured schools by “Loudest Marching Band,” this would be the #1 state in the nation.) The weather was not always favorable, but one remarkable aspect of Mardi Gras parades is that they do not get rescheduled if it rains. These parades have been meticulously planned for an entire year, and if a storm comes, there is no backup plan. They will either roll and stay dry or roll and get wet, but either way they will roll.

I should emphasize just how far this principle is carried. One afternoon, there is a major downpour. It is raining so hard that I don’t want to cross the street and get lunch. Yet soon enough, right on schedule, a marching band with 16 sousaphones is standing outside the office building blasting “Sweet Caroline” at thunderous volume in the middle of the storm. I peek outside to see people screaming and dancing in the street. They are drenched. Some of the marchers are wearing ponchos, many aren’t; I keep wondering how they can even play their horns without them filling up with water. I ascend the parade stand with an umbrella, to see the street full of marching bands, dancing girls in skirts, and huge floats, as the roads begin to flood and lightning flashes. Hundreds of people in ponchos are watching and squealing for beads. A passing float instantly tosses me a heart-shaped purple pillow

that has “Happy Mardi Gras” embroidered on it. The pillow is instantly soaked. “Everyone in this city is a lunatic,” I think to myself.

It is partly because my office is on the parade route, but my days begin to be defined by these spectacles. I can’t escape them. Every time I return to my bike after work, someone has inevitably put a string of Mardi Gras beads in the basket. They vary considerably in size. Sometimes they are like tiny curled-up worms. Other times, getting them out is like extracting a reticulated python. One day, I returned to the bike and there were no beads in the basket. There were, however, three commemorative frisbees and a beer-soaked teddy bear. (I took the poor sozzled bear home and thoroughly laundered him. Clean and fresh, he now sits on my desk.) As I was riding home, I heard a clattering noise coming from my spokes. Sure enough, they had a string of turquoise beads tangled in them.

Attempting to work in the evening proved impossible. The shouts from outside made it seem as if something fascinating must be going by, and the fear of missing out kicked in. Usually, something fascinating *was* going by. One night, I popped out and saw: a series of enormous rubber duck floats in a long line, men in bathrobes with pipes riding in motorized armchairs, 100 Prince impersonators wearing Purple Rain trenchcoats, and a series of Lady Godivas on horseback wearing body-suits. Without signaling to the float riders to throw me anything, without *wanting* to get anything, over the course of 20 minutes I was pelted with: a plush “Krewe of Nyx” crown, a huge string of beads, a toy sword, four plastic strawberries containing reusable shopping bags, a bag of feathers, and a flashing headband that says “NYX.” The “super-



krewees” are even more elaborate: one night the office is shaken by a full-volume authentic train whistle, and I go outside to see the entire block filled with a multi-part float designed to look exactly like a steam locomotive with several carriages. Another float is a full-scale model of a steamboat, bobbing along as if St. Charles Avenue is the Mississippi River. An eeriness is added to all of this by the fact that float riders are all wearing masks, as required by law. Being passed by a steamboat is not like seeing a ship of people, then, but a ship of ghosts or goblins. No matter how much you may try to rationally remember that people in masks are just people in masks, seeing someone’s face is so important to recognizing them as fully human that the riders really do seem otherworldly.

On the first few nights, I try to take some pictures. I can’t quite believe what I’m seeing, especially because nobody anywhere else in the country is paying any attention to it. Here I am, watching the most elaborate spectacles I’ve ever seen, and they’re not on the news, and it feels afterwards as if I have dreamt them. With the camera, I try to record as much of it as possible, in order to remind myself of what happened and convince myself it was all true. Yet after photographing the first two parades, I realize that my attempts to document it are completely failing. When I look at the pictures afterwards, they don’t show the event I was at. They show something with flatter colors, smaller crowds, fewer throws, less majestic floats. And that’s not because my memory is romanticizing the events. It’s because the camera is lying; it just can’t pick up the experience of the thing. The sense of the size of a float is conveyed by what it feels like coming towards you, and since a photograph doesn’t record that feeling, it doesn’t show the size of the float. This is a situation in which a picture isn’t worth a thousand words. A picture is worth zilch. A picture is counterproductive, actually, and gives a misleading impression of what occurred. I have a hard time accepting, at first, that there’s no way to share this with anyone outside the city. I don’t want to keep this treasure all to myself, I want to tell people about it. But I can’t, because the moment it crosses out of the city limits, via photo or text, the magic disappears and the carriage turns back into a pumpkin. I realize that every attempt to convey what is occurring to people outside will fail; all the photos will look like the disgusting Bourbon Street Mardi Gras of the popular imagination, and everyone will think I’ve gone raving mad. Try to take Mardi Gras out of New Orleans and it melts in your hands.



ON MARDI GRAS DAY ITSELF, I WAKE UP early. I do not expect to be as excited as I am, but for some reason it feels like Christmas did when I was a kid. I’ve spent the past weeks getting progressively more and more carried away by the Carnival spirit. I’ve started having dreams about the druids and goddesses and knights and aristocrats that ride by my office every night. When I’m lying in bed preparing to go to sleep, I can hear the marching bands, and I feel as

if my thoughts themselves are being translated into that blaring music, hundreds of immaculately uniformed musicians honking on trombones and pounding on bass drums.

I just feel so *good* on Mardi Gras morning. I don’t know what it is, I am peculiarly aglow. Partly, I am enthused by the prospect of potentially seeing Mardi Gras Indians, the African American “tribesmen” who spend a whole year decorating elaborate colorful feathery costumes to parade in on Mardi Gras. Partly, I am just excited to put on my own costume—a British royal guardsman outfit, of the type worn by stone-stiff Buckingham Palace sentries, complete with fuzzy

black bearskin hat and elegant red coat with brass buttons. I had been told that on Mardi Gras, you get to be anything you want to be. Well, this is what I want to be.

Still, I am a bit nervous. Perhaps my costume is inappropriate. It has nothing to do with New Orleans, or Carnival, after all. It is just a ludicrous outfit that I happen to want to wear. People may think I look silly, though. What if I look silly? Looking silly would be mortifying.

Emerging from my front door in full military regalia, I instantly realize I do not look silly. Or, if I do, I am far from the silliest. I am immediately confronted with an elderly couple in yellow clown suits. Walking downriver to meet my friends I ran into princesses, skeletons, dinosaurs, cavemen, pirates, and Blues Brothers. Everywhere there are painted faces, feathers, glitter, wigs, tutus, and flowers. By the time I reach Marigny Street, where we are supposed to start the day’s informal “costume parade” (it is more like an inebriated amble), block after block is occupied by thousands of masked revelers. Men are dressed as women, women as men. A lot of beards have been dyed bright colors and have sparkles in them. I see Vincent Van Gogh, Divine, the entire cast of *The Life Aquatic*. People are dressed as local businesses. (Not brands or mascots. The businesses themselves. A woman passes by who looks like Gene’s Po-Boy shop. I mean she really does look like Gene’s Po-Boy shop.) A man is dressed as a gigantic eyeball, wearing a hat with tiny eyeballs dangling from it, and carrying a long staff with a medium-sized eyeball suspended on the end. Bicycles have been turned into elephants or giant sailboats. A wrestling ring on wheels wanders down the street hosting comical *lucha libre* matches. One group of people is dressed as a shoal of shimmering koi. Another group are in matching pig-suits with bulbous girths. The work that has gone into the costumes is often incred-

## ✦ *List Of Things I Saw* ✦ MARDI GRAS BEADS ✦ ✦ ✦ *On Top Of* ✦ ✦ ✦

- |  |                                 |
|--|---------------------------------|
| ✦ Lampposts  | ✦ My bike                       |
| ✦ The street   | ✦ Other bikes                   |
| ✦ Fences   | ✦ Dogs                          |
| ✦ Railings of balconies                              | ✦ Children                      |
| ✦ The top of a semi truck                            | ✦ The Elderly                   |
| ✦ The doorstep of the Current Affairs Building       | ✦ A courthouse                  |
| ✦ Sleeping homeless people                           | ✦ A policeman                   |
| ✦ The statue of Pope John Paul outside the cathedral | ✦ A police horse                |
| ✦ Branches of trees                                  | ✦ The rear axle of a police van |
|  | ✦ Pretty much everything else   |





ible, with handmade sequined robes and enormous bouffant hairdos that look as if they took hours upon hours to complete. I can't seem to find the ends of the crowd, it just spreads out infinitely in every direction, with more and more people showing up constantly. My friend Tom is shirtless, masked, covered in glitter, wearing gold lamé leggings and carrying a scepter with giant golden orbs on it. He cannot stop dancing, as a result his scepter keeps shedding orbs. He is some kind of space prince. He looks sublime.

The whole crowd meanders back up into the French Quarter, dazzling passersby. People play the drums, they fool around, they drink and play and get silly. A thunderstorm was forecast, but it's warm and sunny. "God smiles on Mardi Gras Day," Tom tells me. Perhaps, though I'm sure some years the thunderstorm shows up and everyone dances in it. Thousands of us wander through the city feeling incredible. I keep seeing new costumes I hadn't noticed before, and they only get more elaborate as we approach the "Bourbon Street Awards," a costume contest held next to the gay bars on Dauphine Street. There, men have taken their costumes to the next level: a 15-foot-tall space shuttle, a replica of the Golden Gate Bridge, a King Neptune with aquatic creatures suspended all around him, a towering muscular Hercules. You could name any object, profession, or fictional character and I could find them within a one-mile radius.

My senses feeling somewhat overwhelmed, I am on my way back to my apartment for a break and a bit of lunch when I run into my friend Murphy, a street musician. Murphy and I wish each other a happy

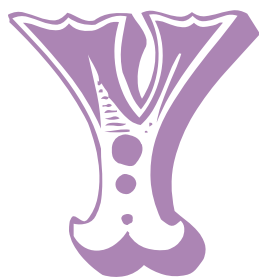
Mardi Gras. He has been out since 4am, playing for tips. He is relieved to see me, because he needs a bathroom break, and asks me if I can watch his guitar and his tip box. I agree, and dutifully stand guard over the tip box as requested. In a few moments, a woman comes up and asks if she can take a selfie with me. Remembering that a Buckingham Palace guard is not supposed to speak, I say nothing. She takes the selfie anyway, and puts a dollar in Murphy's tip box. I realize that I have been mistaken for a street performer.

Naturally, I continued to stand still next to the tip box. More and more tourists came up to me to take pictures. I said nothing and did nothing. They took their pictures, and left some money. Children came up and poked me, trying to get me to move. I remained stone-faced. People tried to crack me up with jokes. I did not laugh. Women took pictures kissing me on the cheek, or even occasionally on the lips. I made every effort to conceal my approval. Eventually, Murphy returned and I informed him that I had made him a bit of money during his time in the lavatory. We decided I should stick around, me posing as a human statue and Murphy playing the guitar, to see how well we could do. The tourists kept approaching, kept snapping pictures, kept leaving money. Occasionally they abused me; a drunk man put a marshmallow in my ear, and one couple saw my tall hat as an opportunity to play a game of ring-toss with Mardi Gras beads. But generally I remained composed, and the dollars kept flowing into the box.

In a few hours, Murphy and I made several hundred dollars together,



and somewhere in the far recesses of Facebook and Instagram, there must be dozens of photos of tourists' selfies with me. I had been told that my Mardi Gras day would be special, that something unexpected always happened to make it extraordinary. I would not have bet that this would involve a stream of women giving me money for the privilege of kissing me on the cheek.



YOU MAY STILL THINK MARDI GRAS sounds terrible. It is crowded, noisy, wasteful, ridiculous, and intoxicated. And, as with everything in New Orleans, there is a dark side as well. On the final day of the season, just as the last parades were passing by, a man was shot and killed a block from the route, and five more people were shot a few miles away in the Lower Ninth Ward. New

Orleans remains one of the most violent cities in the country, and even the good feelings of Mardi Gras don't disrupt the cycle.

You can also choose to be appalled by the wastefulness and aimless pleasure-seeking. Sociologist David Redmon, who has called attention to the labor conditions in the Chinese factories where Mardi Gras beads are manufactured, seems to see the whole holiday as a depressing spectacle of aimless indulgence. In his *Beads, Bodies, and Trash: Public Sex, Global Labor, and the Disposability of Mardi Gras*, he writes:

*I'm sitting on a curb surrounded by broken beads, trash, and puke, looking at the street littered with scraps of paper that read "Made in China" as dangling beads drape the trees above the gutter next to me. The discarded beads are reflections of an element of carnival culture that I've been documenting for several years: the disposable economy of Mardi Gras. Each year, revelers travel to New Orleans to participate in nudity and public sex primarily on Bourbon Street. Like the affirmative pleasures they seek, the plastic trinkets they adorn themselves with are eagerly acquired and readily discarded, abandoned into the streets as the beads transition into the next phase of their journey. Sitting here, amidst the remnants of a disposable economy, I suddenly feel a sense of clairvoyance as my perception shifts, and amidst the trash and confusion, I start to see these plastic beads with a new historical, material, and somatic understanding. All these beads, just hours ago prized for their exchange value, tossed to generate glimpses of flesh and sex, are now worthless, discarded objects stomped on by revelers and left for retrieval by sanitation workers.*

Certainly, thinking about it that way can quickly spoil the fun. Yet I don't think Redmon is as "clairvoyant" as he suggests. For one thing, he seems to have deliberately sought out the most unappealing side of Mardi Gras: the "boobs on Bourbon Street" part of it. Most beads have nothing to do with sex or flashing. They're thrown from parade floats, at family-friendly events. They may be "disposable" but in order to suggest they had "exchange value" one has to ignore the real Mardi Gras, where the fun of the beads is that you *don't* have to do anything for them except try your best to catch them.

Observers like Redmon, who honestly seems like the last person you'd

want to spend Carnival season with ("Hey Dave, isn't this fun?" "I guess if you think disposable commodification built on alienated labor is fun.") are missing the point entirely. What's special about Mardi Gras is precisely how *de*-commodified it is. Yes, there is a lot of waste and garbage. But one reason for this is that people *aren't* thinking in economic terms. They're not trying to calculate value for money, they're just trying to have the best possible time. So the floats are far more elaborate than could ever be rationally justified, and far more beads are thrown than anyone could ever wear, and far more hours are spent making a costume than will ever be spent wearing it, because Carnival is a season to indulge the side of ourselves that isn't rational or sober or restrained. It isn't about profit, it isn't about gain—corporations are forbidden from sponsoring or advertising on floats, and the krewes are all nonprofit voluntary societies. It's just about letting loose, dressing up, and eating cake.

There is also a strong egalitarian spirit to Mardi Gras. The usual social hierarchies are suspended for a day, as everyone plays and dances together without their professional identities visible (Tom, my space prince friend,

is a lawyer, but you would have never known it if you saw him that day). But there's also a satisfying balance of the "individual" and the "collective": every person is dressed differently from every other, yet nobody is superior to anyone else and they are all part of an organic whole. It's a kind of "socialistic individualism," where each individual is unique and yet there are no marks of status or rank. I like it in part because it addresses the question of how egalitarianism is compatible with recognizing individual differences. It shows how being "equal" doesn't mean being "the same"; the right-

wing view that equality means uniformity is a mistake. On Mardi Gras, there is anything but uniformity or sameness, and yet all are valued participants in a collective enterprise.

We can believe then, as I do, that the conditions under which Mardi Gras beads are produced in China shouldn't be ignored, and that all beads need to be non-toxic and biodegradable. But Mardi Gras itself, the real one rather than the one of sociologists' disgusted and contemptuous vision, is a beautiful human phenomenon. It's quite clear, seeing it, that it could only come about through evolution: you can't organize something like this overnight, it exists because it has been gestating in New Orleans for 150 years. The parades are as lavish and long as they are today because krewes have been competing with one another for decades. We are seeing the end result of a tradition, and as so many traditions die out around the globe, this is one that actually seems to get stronger every year.

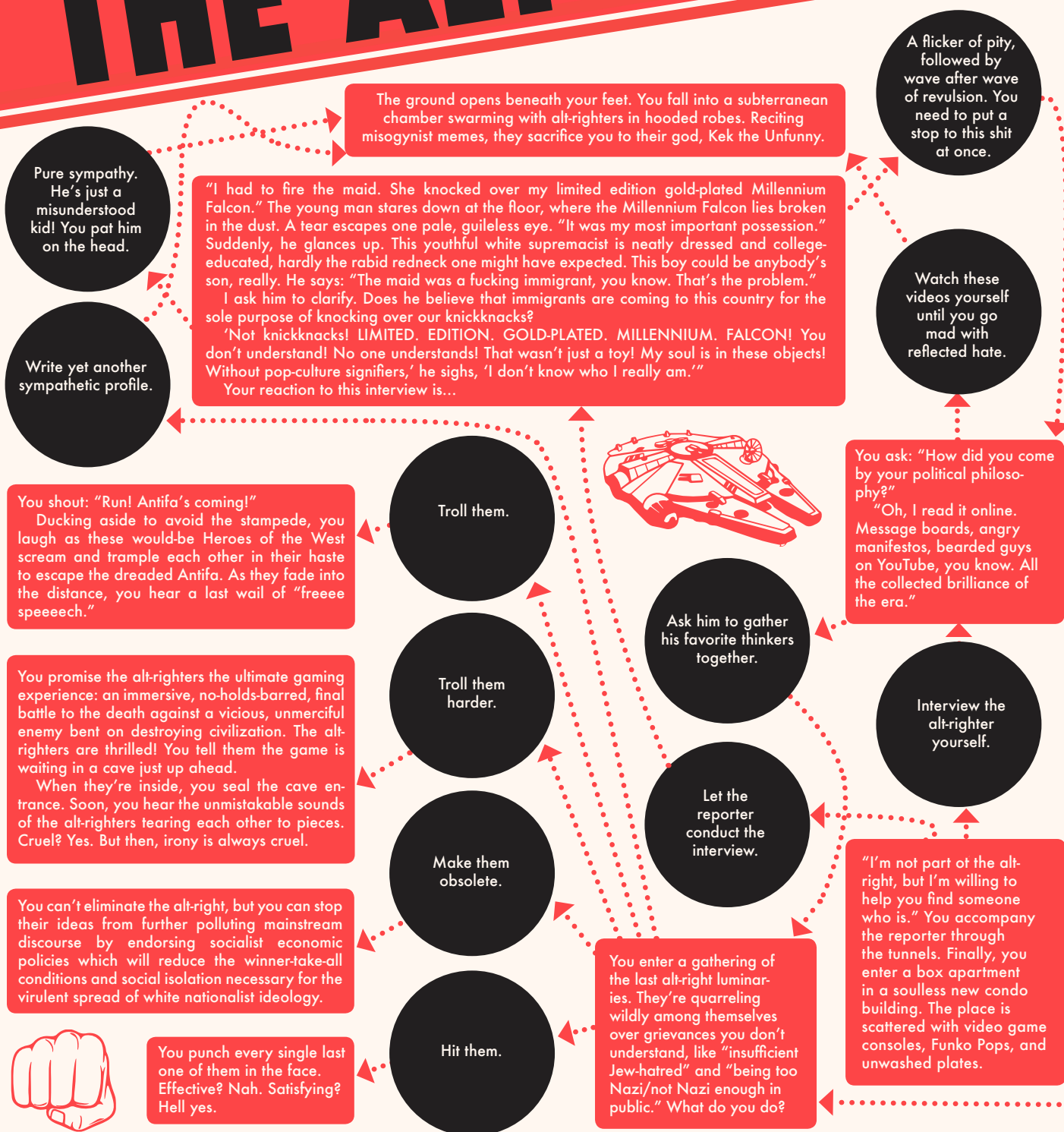
I am not saying that Mardi Gras is any kind of social model to emulate, though I do wish other cities would take the production of joy as seriously as New Orleans does. But it does show some qualities that I think are fundamental to the good life, or at least the kind of life I want to live. The feelings of being amazed by what other people can do, and having fun with strangers, are precious and increasingly rare in a world of competitive individualism and a loss of social cohesion. Mardi Gras, for all its decadence and chaos, shows how a community can celebrate being alive, and reassures us that everyday magic and mystery have not yet disappeared. ✦



*The author is mistaken for an amusement.*



# TROLLING THE ALT-RIGHT





# CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

## BEGIN HERE

**WARNING!!!** You are about to enter the Labyrinth of the Alt-Right. This obnoxious subculture is reportedly on the decline, but many of its adherents still lurk the internet. Are you prepared to face them? The alt-right is extremely fucking irritating and, at times, physically dangerous. You'll have to keep hold of your wits, your courage, and your firm belief in justice and equality. Can you handle it? Are you sure you want to proceed?

You run away and look at cute fennec photos. No one blames you.



What the hell. You enter the Labyrinth of the Alt-Right.

Immediately, you're set upon by sniveling trolls. They look human. In fact, it's their humanity that makes them so monstrous. They're human beings who have dedicated their entire lives to hating other human beings.

Without preamble, one of the trolls whines: "Goooo no further! You cannot proceed until you tell us your haplogroup!" "You shall not pass," snickers another. "That's a meme!"

It doesn't seem like a good idea to engage with these jerks. You're starting to regret entering the labyrinth in the first place. What exactly did you hope to accomplish? These dead-end alt-right trolls are disgusting and deeply stupid.

Don't feed the trolls.

Give up. The fennecs are calling.

Continue on your nightmare journey.



Sigh, and respond.

Uh-oh. Time to bail.

Lie.

Consumed by despair and confusion, you turn a corner and run smack into somebody. By his bland, self-indulgent, self-satisfied demeanor you immediately recognize him as a New York Times reporter. "Hello!" he says. "I'm here to profile the alt-right. Would you consider yourself a member of this tragically endangered subgroup?"

You say: "I can't believe I have to tell you this, but the term 'haplogroup' doesn't have the significance you think it has. In biological terms, race doesn't exist."

The trolls draw back in outrage—then suddenly lunge forward in a Snowflake Attack. "Go back to your safe space!" they howl.

Retreat. Is talking to them even worthwhile? Why did you come here anyway?

Ew. You're covered in nerd brains. Is trolling the alt-right really worth the mess?

"Yeah, uh, I'm a member of the alt-right. I'm not special, I don't have any particular talents, and I feel adrift in a chaotic, hypercompetitive, capitalist system. If I didn't believe in a rigid racial and sexual hierarchy, I would have nothing and be nobody." You're being too obvious. "No, no, no!" cries the NYT reporter. "That's not what my readers want! They want to relate to a bigot without feeling personally implicated in the underlying causes of his bigotry!"

Oops.

Tell the truth.

That wasn't exactly fun, but it was grimly satisfying. You must continue to fight the lingering infection of the alt-right.

"Hey," you say, casually. "Did you hear that Hollywood's rebooting The Matrix?"

The trolls gasp in joy. "With an all-black, all-female cast!" The trolls scream and writhe until they burst apart like angry overripe melons.

Fight back. You've had enough of their bullshit.



Goes well with a...

# BEIGNET

*When you're loafing in a street café,  
sipping your *café au lait* and  
nibbling a "french doughnut,"  
the only company you need is...*





# SECRETS

*A series of diary entries  
from our correspondents in  
Washington, D.C.*

BY  
HORTENSE  
PASCAL

# FROM INSIDE

November 9, 2016

EVERY O., 33. [REDACTED].

"If Obama loved us, truly loved us, he would have called a National Day of Mourning. Then again, if *anyone* loved us—truly loved us—Donald J. Trump wouldn't have been elected President of the United States."

I am mumbling to myself again. This always happens when my anxiety picks up. Thankfully, the metro station is almost deserted. Which, now that I think about it, is rather strange. It's possible, but doubtful, that I simply missed the entire wave of commuters with whom I usually cross paths on our way downtown. There should be more ill-fitting suits and tennis shoes clustered around this *Rhode Island Avenue* sign. No, the

wise bastards stayed home. Fuck it, I should have done the same. A gust of wind  
teases the government  
badge dangling

from my lanyard. On the south end of the platform, a young man in a wool coat gently sways from side to side while staring at his phone. He looks up at me and smiles. Or smirks. I'm not sure of anything anymore. His eyes aren't bloodshot and swollen like mine. Why does he seem fine? *How dare he be fine?* He must be one of *them*.

I compulsively refresh the Office of Personnel Management page. Whenever there's a severe emergency that necessitates the closure of federal office buildings, such as a half-inch of snow, OPM tells us if we can forgo our hellish commute. Snow storms and hurricanes usually qualify—what about black holes? Weather reports say that Black Hole Don, a Category 5 Soul-Crushing Event, is imminent. Refresh, refresh... no dice. Steadily, my fellow federal workers march down our respective avenues—Connecticut, Independence, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York (though *not* the treacherous Pennsylvania)—until we reach our Offices.

Welcome to Day One.

January  
18, 2017

MAGDA T., 67. DEPARTMENT OF  
VETERANS AFFAIRS.

We're putting on our best impression of coping. It's been a slow week of unanswered emails punctuated by more unanswered emails (then additional unanswered emails following up on the first unanswered emails). A comically large American flag hangs in our supervisor's office suite. The nail that held up the upper right corner must have fallen over the weekend. So for the last four or five days, the fabric has been drooping at half-mast. Our supervisor hasn't been seen in days. He says he is in "meetings." I am not sure I believe it.

We huddle over computers and gasp at the news. Funny how quickly we all become experts in American civics and Russian intelligence. We probably shouldn't quit our day jobs quite yet though. None of our contingency plans pan out: not the one about the Electoral College voiding the results, and *definitely* not the one about Hillary emerging from the Chappaqua woods just in time to overthrow the tyranny.

Those who have only ever transitioned between Obama administrations worry. The eldest among us dispense advice where we can. "Things will be alright. We're *unionized*. We've survived past Republican administrations. You will too," I promise the newest hires.

I am lying. They are fucked.

January 20, 2017

ANONYMOUS, 28—DEPARTMENT OF  
[REDACTED].

As on all inaugurations, we get a holiday. A few of us bundle up and join other protesters at Inauguration checkpoints. If all goes according to plan, we won't have to use the phone number for legal help that we hastily scrib-





bled on our forearms.

Donning black from head to toe, we disappear for a few hours. It's not that we enjoy being shoved rudely by riot police dressed for a military coup. But the only way we can counter the despair we feel about our town being taken over by people who hate us is to do *anything* that remotely feels like resistance today. When the day is over, we shrug off the faint smell of pepper spray on our clothes and the glass cuts on our skins. Our eyes peek out between our beanies and bandanas covering our faces, but not enough to stand out of the Bloc. Later, we ask around if anyone's seen So-and-So. We check the jail records. We go home and drink away the adrenaline.

The next day, the streets are packed with a new crowd. First, the thousands of bodies stand around in the cold, immobilized in their mobilizing. Later, they spill from the National Mall into the city, discarding thousands of protest signs in their wake. Between coffee breaks, the crowd high-fives police officers in pink pussy hats. Our eyes roll until they have nowhere else to go.

By Sunday, we feel the strain of marching in our calves and in our shoulders. But this is just the warm-up. When the masses return to their hometowns, it'll just be a few hundreds of us locals, gathering at the Upper Senate Park to chant against the industry hacks filling our agencies.

This is just the beginning, and we're already so tired.

**January 29, 2017**

**KATHERINE D., 31—SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION.**

The purpose of this gathering becomes clear halfway through brunch. Clara is looking for absolution. I stuff my mouth with a waffle to avoid answering the question. Can ICE lawyers still be good people? And the subtext: can we remain friends with Clara? The thought of breaking up wouldn't even have crossed our minds before this brunch. Normally, we'd just share bagels and avoid the topic of work. But now it seems we have no choice but to confront the fact that Clara just became "the resisted."

"Aren't we on the same team?" she asks. We were last week at the Women's March, at the Inauguration March too, and when we all voted for Hillary. We were when ICE answered to President Obama. I nod, though now I wonder: *Should we have been? People called Obama the "deporter-in-chief," so why was I so willing to look the other way then?* But Clara says that it's divisive rhetoric that got us in this mess in the first place. "We're all Americans." I'm supposed to believe that people like Clara can affect change from the inside. That between Clara—the sweet friend who baked me consolation lemon bars when my girlfriend dumped me the week of my birthday—and a soulless Trump hire, I should be thankful it's her doing the job. But I'm skeptical. I try to change the subject, but Clara won't let this go unless she can convince us all of her viewpoint. This is the plague of being friends with lawyers.

The immigration laws are what they are, she says. She didn't create them! She just *enforces* them. In the same breath, she concedes that the so-called Muslim ban is bad. More waffling and backtracking. She objects to being called the C-word—complicit—for advising her agents on how to perform a proper immigration raid. How could she *possibly* have guessed any of her legal research assignments would be turned into this mess?

"Uh, how could you have not?" I ask, unable to stop myself.

Helen chimes in. Having represented a child in not one *but two* pro bono deportation cases (something she brags about to literally anybody who will listen), she knows that "it's better when the lawyer on other side is a good guy." Then again, Helen's day job is busting unions at a white-shoe law firm. *Birds of a fucking feather*, if you ask me. Oh God, did I just say that out loud? (Judging by Helen's narrowed eyes, the answer is yes.)

One of us asks if we even hear ourselves. All too late, we drop the subject. Grab our umbrellas. Tip the waiter. On our way out, take a picture and pretend "we should do this again sometime!"

**February 10, 2017**

**SCOTT H. G., 40—DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION.**

Though we do not see Betsy DeVos, our Heiress-in-Chief, very often, word is that we are the best purchase she's made in years. Another rumor is that she takes a special elevator to her office suite just to avoid us, her grubby peasant underlings. It's hard to feel sorry for her when protesters hijack her visit to a public school with neon signs. News photographs of her being ushered away like the precious cargo of capital that she is, have been making the rounds covertly this morning. How good it feels to laugh again.

To cheer ourselves up, we rewind C-SPAN to catch the parts where the Senators yell at her. Any question about her intent to protect transgender students continues to be met with silence and a constipated smile. Behind the scenes, we try to explain what it's like to be a student who isn't born into enough money to build several underground compounds for the looming revolution. Nothing sticks. We are met with silence and constipated smiles.

In a closed-door meeting, we watch in horror as her political appointee implies that most college women who report rapes are lying for pleasure. We avoid eye contact with each other, lest we should betray our rage. We present our data against charter schools. The more hopeful among us thought the new administration would, in its efforts to be contrarian, abandon Obama's friendliness towards them. Soon, the disappointment settles in—the money will continue to pour in.

We invite a friend we haven't seen in six years for drinks, hoping she's still at the *Post*. Later, we erase searches about leaks from our search engines.

"Any good news?" my friends ask.

I pause to think... "Sorry," I text back. "But let me know if you hear of any openings?"

**April 1, 2017**

**COLTON S., 37—DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR.**

Imagine being lucky enough to spend your childhood hiking up the trails on federal lands and swimming in the lakes around which they meander. That was me, as a kid! Now my job is to make sure that everyone else can enjoy our pristine lands, freely and for free. Or rather, it was. I'm not quite sure what our mission is anymore...

I only know three things about our Secretary, none of which are reassuring. One: that Zinke's a self-parody of a wannabe cowboy with a soft spot for luxury travel on the public's tab. Two: that he has a ferocious appetite for auctioning off our lands to as many of his friends as humanely possible before Trump unceremoniously fires him. And three: that he's never stepped in a forested area without scheming to carbonize it into a money-making crater.

I ignore the latest bizarre email about the hunting video games that have apparently just been installed in the cafeteria. In the bathroom, I whisper to Rob, who is diligently washing his hands in the adjacent sink, that it must be some kind of April Fool's. But then someone in the stall pipes up that no, they're very real: and you get extra points for shooting the red quails. Even more for the ducks. Stall guy tuts. Two years to retirement, with a pension, if he can wait it out. Rob and I sigh like people who'll never get to retire. Like everyone else, I cooperate, however reluctantly. Some of us clear his calendar for teleconferences with the Florida politicians whose coastal properties he will spare from his offshore drilling fantasies. Others reluctantly look up copyrights for coal photographs slated for the website. I ask his young aides for feedback on our research paper but the science bores them. It is more fun to hand us a list of phrases the agency will be "retiring," starting with "climate change." One of them actually uses air quotes. Little does he know that we have heard his fellow appointee talk about *climate change* without the quotes.

Walls are thin here; and so are convictions.

**May 15, 2017**

**ERNESTO Y., 55. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY.**

A few hours into his confirmation hearing, Secretary Perry finally figured out what kind of energy our department deals with. Unfortunately for him, it's not the kind pumped out of Texas oil rigs. Ever since, he keeps asking if that means he can't telework from his home state. Today, we once again remind him that we can't actually tell him what to do. Our supervisor thinks the Secretary will eventually tire of referring to the dance routines he mastered for *Dancing with the Stars* as "the other rocket science," but I'm not so sure. He seems taken with how smart his scientists are—or at least, taken enough to not fire us yet.

I sleep a little better at night knowing that he's probably causing less damage at our agency than he did from the Texas Governor's Mansion. We do not oversee executions here. We are, however,



responsible for the security of the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile. Incompetence does carry some minor risks.

November 21, 2017

**AYESHA L., 34—DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT.**

Welcome to the Department of Comedy of Errors, formerly known as the agency that funds public and subsidized housing along with community development projects. Our Secretary Carson is the fun dad in the neighborhood—a man so adventurous that he accepted a nomination in spite of, by his own admission, knowing nothing about the subject. We don't see him much. Sometimes it's because he's in the room, but so silent that no one notices his presence. Other times, it's because he's stuck in a public housing elevator for twenty minutes and no one notices his absence. When we do see him, his wife and large adult son lurk close behind. I wonder if either has a badge and what the title part could possibly say.

He's a language disruptor, our agency Dad. Or at least, this is the only way I can explain his decision to call slaves "immigrants" in the *prepared* speech he made to us on his first day here. He does have a certain level of chill, which everyone could benefit from. So chill, in fact, that we can't always tell that his eyes are actually open at any given moment until he blinks. (We wish he would blink more.)

On an unrelated note, can I just say how genuinely surprised I am with how well the Thanksgiving potluck is put together this year? If this party is any indication, Eric Trump was lucky to have our potluck planner plan his wedding. Too bad her skills aren't actually transferrable to helping out public housing residents. But *I'm* enjoying it! (That said, I would give up an organ to know just how bad one must screw up to land in Trump's least favorite agency.) We wait until his political appointees are out of earshot to take bets on which

FHA excites him the least, between the Federal Housing Administration and the Fair Housing Act. Who are we kidding? There's not a world in which this man knows the difference. And either way, most of our investigations are stalled for the next four years. Oh well. Guess I'll just twiddle my thumbs and collect my five-figure salary until the next administration lets me get back to work.

November 27, 2017

**TABITHA B., 36—CONSUMER FINANCIAL PROTECTION BUREAU.**

House of Trump has deposed the rightful Interim Queen, Leandra English, and stolen the throne from House of Former Director Richard Cordray. We wake up to a flurry of aggressive email missives urging us to respect the Usurper, and to immediately report any directives from the Interim Queen to the Priesthood formerly known as the Office of General Counsel. Rumors swirl that the Queen is petitioning the Courts, but none of us can say just how soon she will return to undo the dismantling of our seal and mission.

We resist passively, first by collectively unfollowing the agency's Twitter account—now in the hands of the Usurper who has been using it as his personal photo stream. We refuse to touch any of the doughnuts that House of Trump purports to offer us, and make a mental note of the turncoats who dare eat them. We avoid the meet-and-greets for as long as we can. The lack of interest seems mutual. In one email, the Usurper tells us to suck it up if he never learns our names because he's got triplets whose names he can barely bother with. Ha! Ha! This joke probably landed at some kind of Men's Prayer Breakfast one time and now anyone who works for him is condemned to suffer it.

We refuse to open further emails from the Usurper. Most of them are leaked to the presses as soon as they hit our inbox and, in any event, the Usurper makes most of his edicts to the press before he talks to us. It's a new era, he announces

grandly, writing as though House of Trump has given him a lifetime appointment we're unaware of. Our new mission from now on is to protect the Bank of Vampires from consumers, and the Loan Sharks from the little fish. As the Usurper tells us that we will do so with as few resources as humanly possible (unless the vampires and sharks order him otherwise), a little blood trickles from the corner of his mouth.

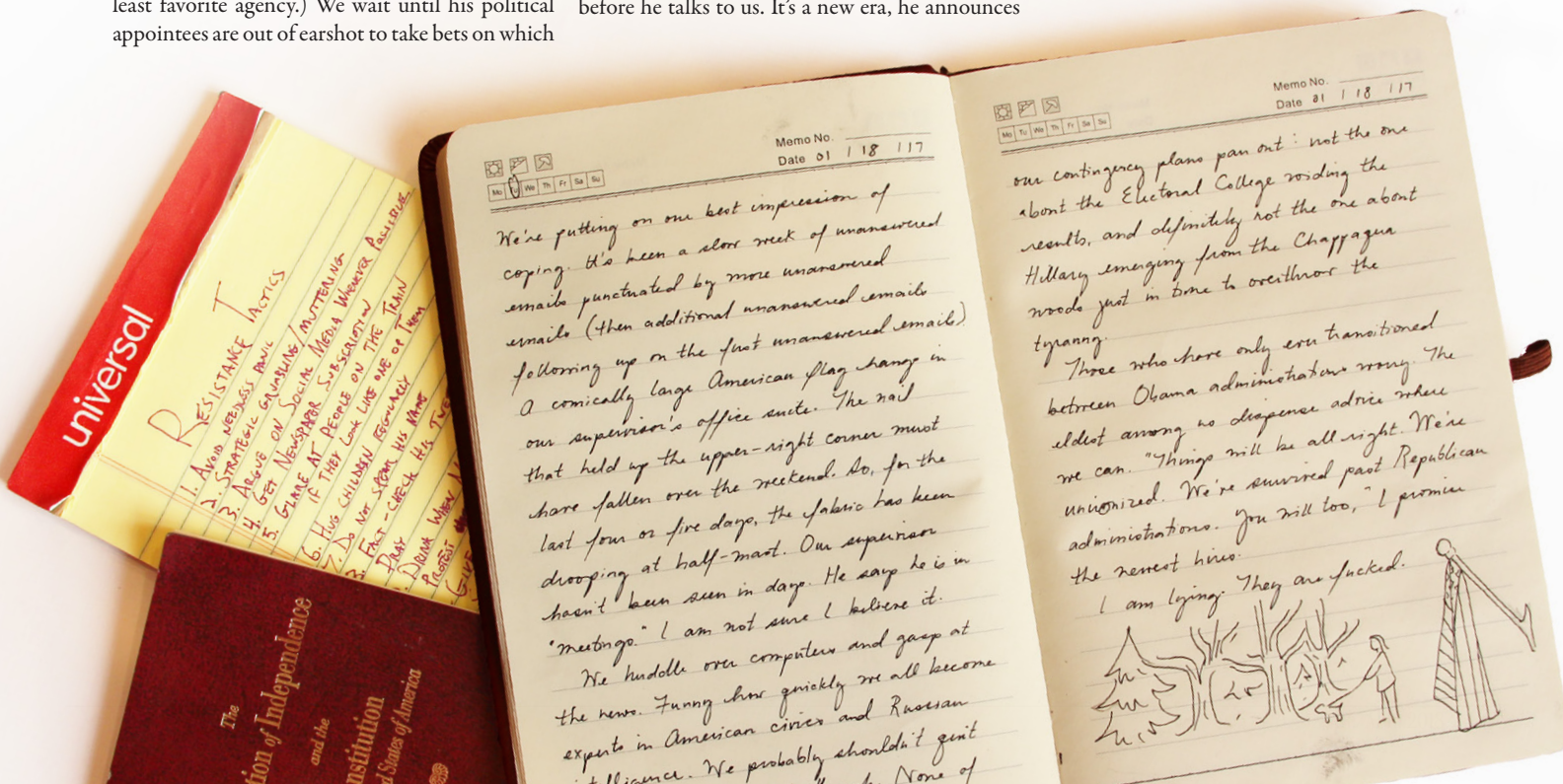
The Chamber of Sharks closes in with demented smiles. The vampire press erupts in cheers. Emboldened, they gather beneath the moon to sharpen with their best fang sharpeners, the ones they haven't pulled out of their coffers since the Great Gorging of 2008. A feast is coming. We'll be watching along with everyone else.

December 29, 2017

**TAYLOR H., 37—OFFICE OF THE AMBASSADOR FOR THE UNITED NATIONS.**

It's an all hands on deck kind of day here, at the Office of the Ambassador for the *United Nations of Us and Pretty Much Just Israel at This Point*. I thought we get away with an uneventful end of year. I made dinner plans with my wife. We got a babysitter. And I even made a therapy appointment for tonight. But news just hit that our Ambassador Nikki Haley was pranked into admitting that Russia intervened in an island that does not exist. Which means that for the next 72 hours, I, a once ambitious double graduate of Columbia, will be applying my law degree towards frantically scouring the internet and the large world map on the second floor for any city, state, or city-state that sounds close to "Bimono." Bonus points if I can conjure up a remote connection to Russian politics. All to save a long-lost face.

I leave the same voicemail with both my therapist and my wife: "Better luck next year, maybe." ❖





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Oh my gosh, you're here! And paying 60k a year! Forgive the rhyme: that's poetry, which we no longer offer. At the 21st Century University, we prefer to focus on inculcating students with lucrative, practical skills such as "learning to code in a programming language, which may or not immediately become obsolete" and "how to brand and sell yourself, and how to remain entirely unaware of the history and connotations of these terms." Sounds great, right?

Totally stressed out, huh? Feeling utterly destroyed by student loans and the shivering uncertainty of your future? Well, pop on down to the Office of Financial Aid and Debt Anxiety (not pictured, you'll have to find it by yourself, lazybones!) and help yourself to a free Xanax lollipop!









# THE DISMAL FRONTIER

or: “Hey Nerds, You Forgot The Socialism!”

BY LYTA GOLD

**I**F YOU'RE NOT A STAR TREK FAN, THE INTENSE affection it inspires in its enthusiasts may seem a bit baffling. Isn't *Star Trek* just, like, dorks in space? What's so charming about science geeks who wear color-coded uniforms and speak in stilted lines about stellar anomalies? The popularity of *Trek* has always been somewhat inexplicable. William Shatner is a terrible actor, the special effects have often been absurd, and the imagined future is an earnest, treacly one where human beings have evolved beyond capitalism and cruelty into egalitarianism, do-goodery, and wide-eyed wonder.

This last part—*Trek's* utopianism—is likely the key to its continuing prominence. Modern media fandom really began with *Star Trek*: in the 60s and 70s, Trekkies, mostly female Trekkies, created fanzines and the first real pop culture conventions. People liked the *Star Trek* universe created by Gene Roddenberry so much that they wanted to live in it, or barring that, talk about it constantly with people who understood why the camaraderie of multicultural nerds in space meant so much to them. The fans fought to keep the original series from being cancelled (and failed); and yet the show remained popular in

syndication, and has since spawned thirteen movies and five more TV shows: *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager*, *Enterprise*—and now, in 2017-2018, *Discovery*, a show so odd, so off-putting, so vicious and violent and militaristic that it seems like an invader from another universe entirely.

Before I delve into exactly what's so disturbing about this new *Star Trek* series, it's worth talking a little bit about the ethos that characterized the earlier shows. Previous *Trek* narratives, while differing from each other in setting and tone, all share a common dorky exuberance for exploration and cross-cultural understanding. While technically, yes, Starfleet has always been a military organization, its functions have tended to the diplomatic, scientific, humanitarian, and logistical. Except during relatively rare times of defensive warfare, the space station in *Deep Space Nine*, for example, functions more or less like an interstellar DMV, issuing permits, performing inspections, and resolving disputes. In all the various shows, crew members hang up the uniform after work and unwind with decidedly goofy side projects: science experiments, learning to paint (badly), acting in plays (badly), pretending to



be James Bond in the holosuits, trying (and sometimes even liking) alien cuisine. The main characters—human and alien alike—more or less get along, learning to accept (if not always understand) each other's cultural practices and idiosyncrasies, like the Vulcan belief in the primacy of logic, or the often bloody Klingon code of honor. Interspecies tolerance—while frequently rendered in problematic ways—is a critical component of the *Star Trek* philosophy. Reflecting on this underpinning ideology, and why it resonated so much with viewers, Roddenberry said:

*We believed that the often ridiculed mass audience is sick of this world's petty nationalism and all its old ways and old hatreds, and that people are not only willing but anxious to think beyond most petty beliefs that have for so long kept mankind divided... What Star Trek proves, as faulty as individual episodes could be, is that the much-maligned common man and common woman*

Showrunner Bryan Fuller, who wrote for both *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*, promised a show that was true to the philosophy of *Star Trek*, particularly its focus on diplomacy and mutual understanding. Set a decade before the original series, *Discovery* was supposed to chart the development of *Trek's* cheery egalitarian ethos; a growth arc that couldn't be too steep, given that *Enterprise*, set in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century, had already laid the foundations of a diplomatic, socialist Federation.

And at first, it appeared *Discovery* might deliver. The first one and a half episodes are about the relationship between wise, kindly captain Philippa Georgiou (Michelle Yeoh) and her young first officer, Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green). Burnham, a human raised by the hyper-rational Vulcans, is intellectually brilliant but emotionally stunted. Despite being a xenanthropologist, she still harbors a xenophobic dislike of the Klingons, who she holds responsible for

**“FANS HAVE ALWAYS WANTED A VISION OF THE FUTURE WHERE HUMAN BEINGS POSSESS A SOLID STANDARD OF LIVING AND BEHAVE ETHICALLY TOWARD ONE ANOTHER, WHERE THE GALAXY UNFOLDS BEFORE US AS A PLACE OF WONDER AND ADVENTURE...”**

*has an enormous hunger for brotherhood. They are ready for the 23rd century now, and they are light years ahead of their petty governments and their visionless leaders.*

**W**E'RE NOT MUCH CLOSER TO A UNITED brotherhood of mankind than we were in the 60s, yet *Star Trek* remains as popular as ever. All the old *Star Trek* shows are available on Netflix, where *The Next Generation*, *Voyager*, and *Deep Space Nine* enjoy especially high viewing figures. Three movies debuted in the last ten years—and okay, maybe they were pretty stupid, and mostly consisted of Chris Pine twitching handsomely at the camera while planets blew up behind him, but as mindless action movies go, they were kind of fun.

In keeping with *Trek's* enduring appeal, the new show, *Discovery*, was billed as a return to the old *Trek* universe and the old *Trek* thoughtfulness. (The most recent *Star Trek* series before *Discovery*—*Enterprise*—had been a horribly written mess, so fans were understandably eager for a smart, original show.)

the death of her parents. The arc of the show appeared to be obvious: Burnham, under the mentorship of Georgiou, would grow up and learn what it means to be human, and in doing so, come to terms with a species she thought she despised but mostly didn't understand. Burnham's emotional journey would probably mirror that of the Federation itself toward peace, forgiveness, and mutual co-operation.

We don't know what Fuller's intentions were, because he abruptly quit in the middle of filming the first episode. Full showrunning duties then passed to Alex Kurtzman, the relentless mediocrity responsible for witless sci-fi flops such as *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, *Ender's Game*, and the 2017 *Mummy* reboot. By the end of *Discovery's* second episode, Captain Georgiou is dead, and Burnham has single-handedly started a war with the Klingons. The show quickly slides into grimdark chaos, lurching from one hideous crisis to another. A sinister new captain! War! Misery! Despair! A giant alien monster! A crewmember slaughtered by said giant alien monster! The giant alien monster is actually a helpless creature with useful abilities, so the sinister captain orders it hooked up to an instantaneous transport system, even though this causes the alien



considerable pain! Oh no! Then there's torture! Some more torture! Captain Georgiou's corpse gets cannibalized by the Klingons! PTSD! The sinister captain was secretly from the Evil Mirror Universe the whole time! Burnham's boring boyfriend was secretly a Klingon the whole time! Thrills! Chills! Explosions! Impossibly high stakes! If our heroes don't blow up a ship full of people *right fucking now*, it'll be the end of ALL life in ALL the multiverses forever!!!

I suppose *Discovery* is exciting, in the way that watching endless footage of car crashes is exciting—but what it's *not* is *Star Trek*. Roddenberry's cheerful post-scarcity utopia, which is supposed to be just ten years down the road, is nowhere to be seen. Describing the recent history of the Federation, the sinister Captain Lorca says, "The future came, and hunger and need and want disappeared. 'Course, they're making a comeback now." The war with the Klingons has wrecked the Fed-

And on top of that, the *Discovery* writers proudly announced they would showcase the first openly gay characters in *Star Trek* history. Paul Stamets and Hugh Culber are a loving, if entirely neutered couple: Stamets is a brilliant, quirky scientist while his partner Culber is a passive helpmeet, utterly devoid of personality or interiority. Why even bother with gay characters if they're just going to embody the same old heteronormative tropes? Especially the most heteronormative trope of all: the fridged lover. That's right, Culber gets murdered for no particular reason. Every other episode of *Discovery* contains a pointless murder. Women of color are occasionally added to the cast only to be killed off or disappear, as if there can only be one highlander, and it's Burnham. This is a hellishly depressing portrayal of "diversity": a world where everyone, regardless of race, gender, or sexuality, is permitted to embody the same old oppressive roles and has a roughly equal chance of being brutally murdered in space.



eration's socialist economy in a few short months (curiously, this was never an issue during later shows like *The Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine*, even though they also had occasional war plotlines). And along with the socialist economy went the high-minded ethics—suddenly, Starfleet officers are deliberately inflicting pain on other sentient beings in order to accomplish their military goals. We've also lost the most fun and joyful parts of *Trek*: the nerdy shit the characters do after work. Nobody on the starship *Discovery* seems to have any free time, let alone any fun. There's exactly one party scene—in an episode with the groan-inducing title "Magic to Make the Sanest Man Go Mad"—but even that turns into a time-loop nightmare à la *Groundhog Day*, and the party repeatedly ends with the ship exploding in a fireball of death.

Fine, fine, so there's lots of explosions! So the characters live in a terrifying universe of omnipresent violence! But hey, they're a very diverse cast, and isn't that in keeping with the spirit of *Star Trek*? It's true that, in Michael Burnham, *Discovery* features *Trek*'s first black female protagonist (though they didn't make her captain). Philippa Georgiou is the first captain who's a woman of color (though of course, she gets killed off in the second episode).

**T**HIS CONSTANT SLAUGHTER IS NOT ONLY EVIDENCE of *Discovery*'s utterly tedious and conventional fascination with violence, but also of the extent to which it views its characters as disposable plot elements. In a traditional *Trek* show, it's very rare to kill off characters, largely because *Trek* is interested in its characters as people, and not merely as material for Shocking Twists. While the captain has always—arguably—been the protagonist, *Trek* usually favors an ensemble storytelling style, a narrative device that neatly reflects the socialism of the Federation. The original series usually featured the crew as a whole, with occasional episodes devoted to the inner lives of individual characters. All the later shows—until *Discovery*—expanded on this format, allowing every major character a chance to play protagonist at least once per season. One *TNG* episode, for example, follows ship doctor Beverly Crusher as she falls in love with a Scottish space ghost (seriously); the next delves into the lives of junior officers vying for promotions; the next centers Data the android, who suddenly loses his memory. Everyone gets a ridiculous plotline sometimes; even minor characters occasionally get a chance to be important; everyone endures



disorienting and terrifying experiences from time to time. All the characters have importance and interiority. In *Discovery*, by contrast, there are several major cast members who technically have names on IMDB, and, once in a while, even get a line (mostly “Captain! Shields at 50 percent!”), but they have no personalities, known talents, or storylines. (I call my favorites “Machine Chick,” “Face Implant,” and “The One With the Cool Hair.”) *Discovery* is only interested in Burnham and maybe four other characters; everyone else is window dressing, spectators at the feast. This doesn’t read like an egalitarian socialist society; even narratively, a handful of people matter much more than everyone else.

Burnham, the main character, matters most of all. She’s not simply the protagonist, but the axis around which the entire plot revolves. Everyone in *Discovery* agrees: since Burnham killed the Klingon messiah (more on THAT nonsense in a bit), the war is entirely her fault, which is a little bit like saying

laboring heroically. She’ll deliver a line like “in exchange for my crew, I offer you me” with such conviction that you almost don’t realize how idiotic that sounds.

The *Discovery* episode scripts are generally appalling, but the worst lines take the form of Burnham’s xenophobic opinions about the innately vicious nature of Klingons, which are smoothly passed off as facts. To be fair, she isn’t the first *Trek* character who hates Klingons; the movie *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* is about Captain Kirk’s slow realization that he’s been a bigot. One of the best moments in the film comes at a diplomatic dinner party, where Kirk and his crew uncomfortably reveal they know nothing at all about Klingon culture. The Klingons mockingly quote Hamlet at them, adding “You have not experienced Shakespeare until you have read him in the original Klingon.”

But if you’re looking for Shakespeare-quoting Klingons—or the later *TNG* and *DS9* iterations of Klingons as entertaining-



Franz Ferdinand’s assassin is solely responsible for WWI. And because the war is Burnham’s fault, she’s the Only One Who Can Stop It. She’s also the only one who can figure out a puzzle or blow up a ship or swordfight an enemy or whatever else the plot requires this week. It doesn’t matter that she frequently makes bad choices because she’s emotionally overwhelmed; no matter what happens to Burnham, she’s on deck next week for another exhausting mission.

FULLER STATED THAT HE AND KURTZMAN EMPLOYED a gender-blind, race-blind approach to casting, which is fine, except for the fact that they still wrote Burnham like Generic Space Hero #6458. That is to say, she occupies the position of the classic white male sci-fi hero, who’s always the center of the story no matter how many mistakes he makes. In some ways, it’s nice to see a black woman occupying this narrative space; what’s *not* nice is the way Burnham is made to perform intense emotional and physical labor without a break. The generic white male hero usually gets a moment to bask in his awesomeness, but Burnham rarely even gets to nap. Sonequa Martin-Green herself is

ly loud, drunk, music-loving, interstellar Viking types—you’ve come to the wrong show. *Discovery*’s Klingons are hyper-serious religious fanatics. Terrified of Federation incursion and the threat it might pose to their culture and autonomy, the Klingons will go to any lengths to destroy their secular, pluralistic opponent, including torturing captured Federation soldiers and committing suicide bombings. Lest you think these rebooted Klingons are a painfully ham-fisted allegory for modern-day jihadists, Kurtzman’s co-showrunner assures us they’re actually an allegory for *Trump voters* (a statement CBS later denied to avoid blowback). Regardless of whether you buy that claim or not, the fact remains that the Trump voter allegory doesn’t scan in the slightest. The Klingons’ rallying cry isn’t “Make the Klingon Empire Great Again” but “Remain Klingon”: that is, preserve the culture against an encroaching civilization that promises peace but only (according to the Klingons) on oppressive terms. Rather than trying to grapple with this imperialist theme in any nuanced way, however, the *Discovery* writers instead take pains to present the Klingons as a conglomeration of colonialist fantasies: a violent, uncivilized, and cannibalistic Other that must be quelled. At every turn of the plot, Burnham’s xenopho-



bic opinions are confirmed and justified.

In their dealings with the Klingons, the Federation shows that its bar for ethical behavior in wartime is...shockingly low. In the last episode of the season, the Federation secretly decides to blow up the Klingon homeworld with a planet-destroying bomb. This wouldn't end the war—the Klingons have other planets and a huge fleet—but it would be an act of callous murder. Burnham, who still believes that Klingons are basically monsters, arrives at the shocking realization that genocide is Not Good. In fact—brace yourself—murdering billions of civilians is, in fact, Ethically Not Okay. So Burnham single-handedly engineers a regime change via the threat of the planet-destroying bomb (because, as she says, “Klingons respond to strength.”) The mostly identity-less crew backs her; Burnham makes a virtually content-free speech about “values,” and at the end of the season everyone GETS AN ACTUAL FUCKING MEDAL FOR NOT COMMITTING GENOCIDE.

In my article, I diagnosed the problem with contemporary SFF as a failure of imagination, but in the case of *Discovery*, the problem isn't failure as much as a pointed refusal. The *Star Trek* template already exists; utopias, as my colleague Brianna Rennix tells us, are difficult to write, but *Star Trek* is a plug-and-play. Why refuse to engage with Roddenberry's beloved vision, the socialist universe that inspired contemporary fandom? Why not write a future in which people are kind and earnest and genuinely interested in learning about different civilizations, instead of repeating the policies of the last seventy years in outer space with the delusion that somehow, THIS time, they're going to work?

The last scene of *Discovery*'s first season hinted that the crew may finally go on the cool adventures promised by the original series, but I strongly suspect they won't be able to drop the grim-dark cynicism for season two. The *Game of Thrones* template of murder, sex, and unexpected resurrections makes for high ratings and thrilling recaps. Jason Isaacs (whose character is dead—



**O**KAY, OKAY: SO EVEN IF YOU'RE NOT A *STAR TREK* geek who's angry at seeing a unique and beloved fictional universe mutated into a lifeless Prestige TV dystopia, why should *Discovery* make you mad, or at least a little disappointed? In a previous article for *Current Affairs*, I surveyed a number of popular speculative fictions and pointed out how much of contemporary sci-fi and fantasy relies on a “lesser of two evils” narrative. It's not important to really do good, or *be* good; you just have to behave a little better than the other guys, whether they're a horde of ice zombies, Nazi wizards, or plain old psychotic terrorists. This is the ideology of the mainstream Democratic party: stand for nothing, believe in nothing, because after all “have you seen the other guys?” *Star Trek: Discovery* might have been written by the DNC. Burnham's speech about values is full of empty, easy platitudes; her real, bigoted attitude and her willingness to embrace high-handed regime change can be glossed over, because she and the rest of the cast are sufficiently diverse. I've watched and read a lot of science fiction, but this might be the most depressing one I've ever experienced: a future in which the best that can be imagined is American foreign policy repeating itself endlessly, forever.

FOR NOW), said in defense of the show, “We're living in monstrous times, let's not dance around it. Hideous, divisive times...” The times are unlikely to get less monstrous, hideous, and divisive any time soon. The creators of *Discovery* think the fans want grit, so they'll write grit. They think the fans want “realism,” so they'll present a bitter cynical reflection of the status quo.

But I suspect the fans want what they've always wanted: a more justly structured society, a more egalitarian world, a vision of the future where human beings possess a solid standard of living and behave ethically toward one another, and the galaxy unfolds before us as a place of wonder, adventure, and continuous moral development. *Star Trek* was never about space battles, even if space battles occurred; it was always about the ethics of being, how we would look as the best possible versions of ourselves. It was about the theory that human beings aren't mired in our viciousness; we don't just “respond to strength,” and we're capable of cultural evolution. It suggested that in the distant future, we might look back on this era as a regrettable period where humans were childish, tragically wrong about so much, especially capitalism and the necessity of violence.

And then we'll go on dorky space adventures. ❖



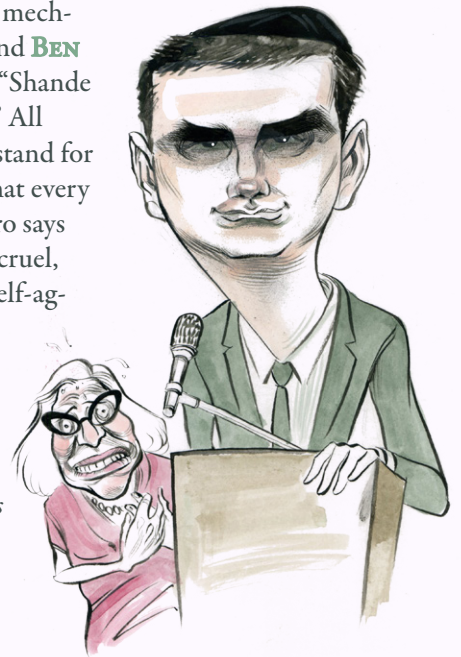
# True Science

100% ACCURATE AND FEELING-FREE FINDINGS

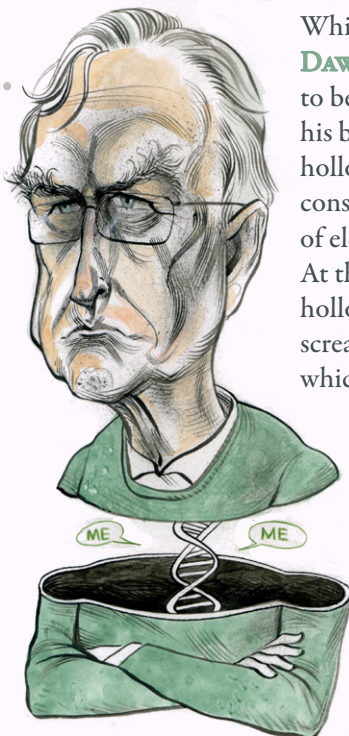
I. The case of **JORDAN PETERSON** has puzzled evolutionary biologists for years. He seems an impossible genetic throwback, possessing the psychological attunement of a lobster (family Nephropidae, Order Decapoda), despite the fact that Homo Sapiens is more closely related to—and has always psychologically resembled—other apes and monkeys (order Primates). It remains unclear how Peterson managed to fall down so many evolutionary levels. At this time, while many ethicists believe that boiling a lobster alive constitutes a morally depraved act, they have not yet determined whether it is acceptable to boil Jordan Peterson.



II. Scientists have yet to explain the mechanism behind **BEN SHAPIRO**'s "Shande Syndrome." All they understand for certain is that every time Shapiro says something cruel, stupid, or self-aggrandizing, a Jewish grandmother somewhere *literally dies* of embarrassment.



III. While **RICHARD DAWKINS** may appear to be an ordinary man, his body is in fact a hollow structure constructed entirely of elongated proteins. At the precise center of his hollow body floats a tiny screaming selfish gene, which has been exiled by all the other genes. Scientific opinion is currently divided on whether or not Dawkins' tiny, screaming, selfish interior is the reason he's constantly getting owned on Twitter.



IV. **NIAL FERGUSON** has gained a great deal of fame as a historian, political commentator, and leading defender of imperialism. But recent studies reveal that he's actually a disguised propaganda officer from an alien empire. By encouraging people to think of empires as inherently good, and imperialism as a natural and even beneficial political formation, the shapeshifter Ferguson has been secretly paving the way for his species' eventual conquest of Earth.





# F A C T S

FROM TODAY'S LATEST ACADEMIC RESEARCH

V.



The behavior of **JULIAN ASSANGE** is typical of Slowly Evolving Fascist Slugs. While Assange may once have seemed like a defender of civil liberties, the creepiness and dampness of his behavior were in fact warning signs of his true persona. Despite having reached the final stage of his evolution, many of Assange's defenders still fail to recognize the clinical signs of his abusive, slimy, fascist nature.

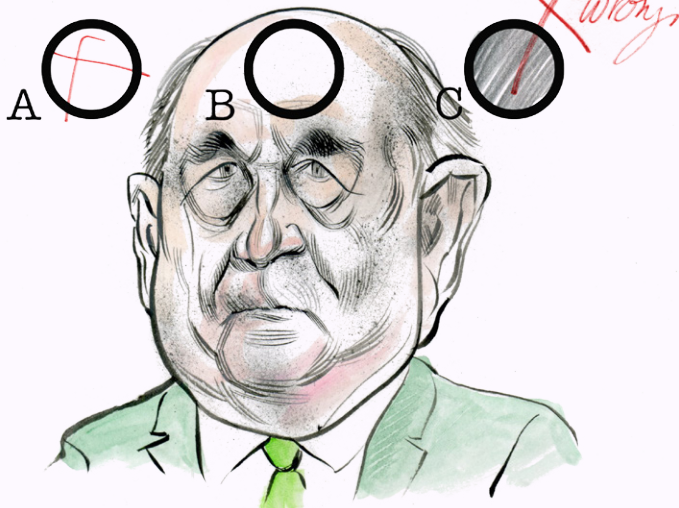
VI.



**BETSY DeVOS'** CPU was designed by the Bad Ideas Factory (Grand Rapids, MI). As an android, DeVos must download regular updates or cease functioning altogether. These updates contain fresh instructions from the Bad Ideas Factory, such as "replace all public school teachers with low-cost, non-union, private prison labor" and "evaluate children by a black box algorithm and execute the lowest performers."

VII.

Somehow, **CHARLES MURRAY** has consistently scored -12 on every IQ test he's ever taken. A negative IQ should be, of course, impossible, and the recurrent score has left experts baffled. In a remarkable case of psychological projection, Murray has become pathologically obsessed with IQ tests, burying his inexplicable failure under a flood of data, praying if he tosses off enough juicy race-bait enough no one will look closely at his own numbers.



VIII.

Everyone knows white supremacy is a psychological poison, but **STEVE BANNON** is the first known human being to have been literally eaten alive by white supremacy. According to prevailing medical opinion, the only possible cure would be for Bannon to utterly renounce his white supremacist ideology and work toward racial equality, but given the rate at which his condition has metastasized and spread globally, his prognosis is doubtful.





# WHAT

# WE

Reckoning with Vietnam,  
50 years after My Lai...

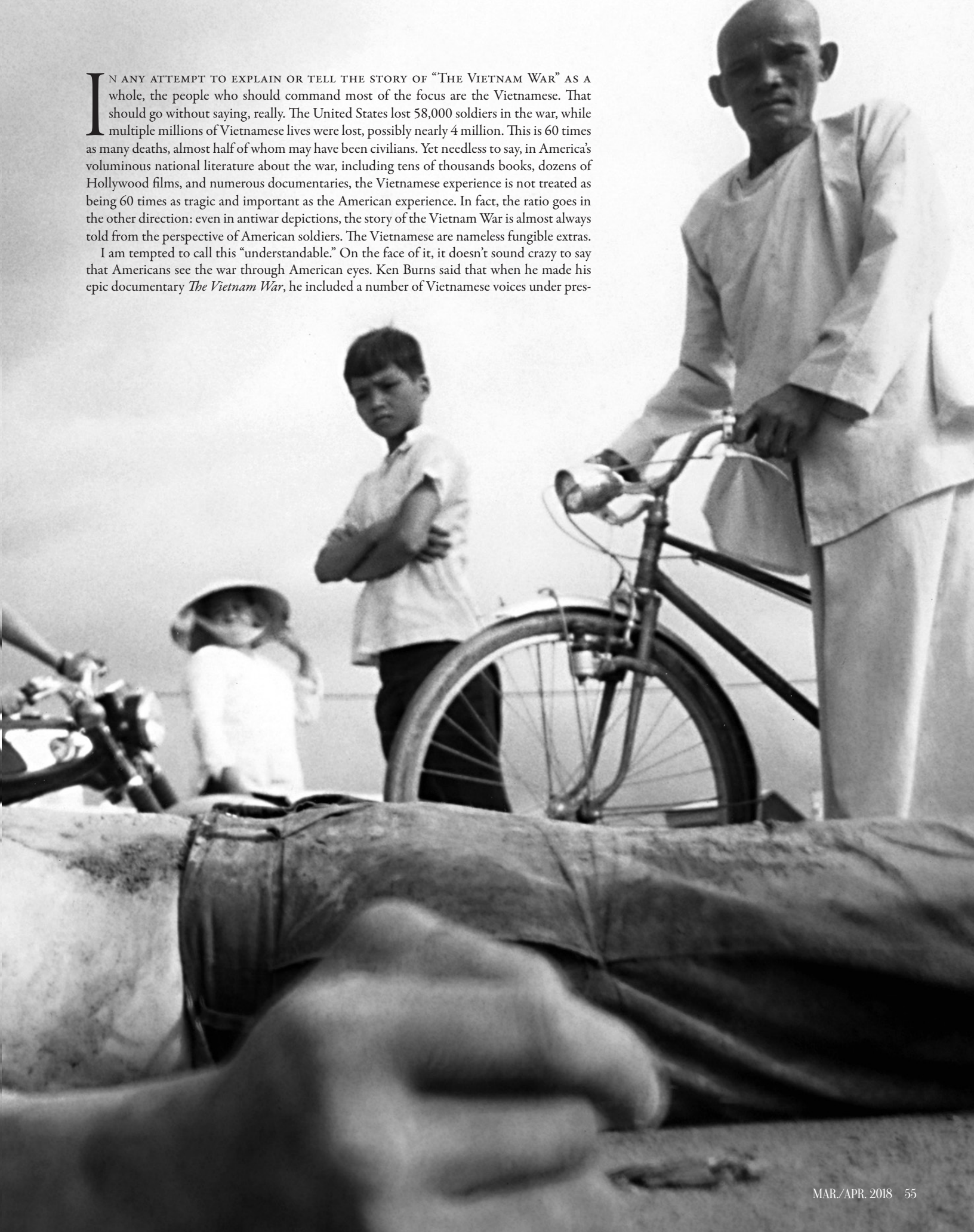
# DID





IN ANY ATTEMPT TO EXPLAIN OR TELL THE STORY OF "THE VIETNAM WAR" AS A whole, the people who should command most of the focus are the Vietnamese. That should go without saying, really. The United States lost 58,000 soldiers in the war, while multiple millions of Vietnamese lives were lost, possibly nearly 4 million. This is 60 times as many deaths, almost half of whom may have been civilians. Yet needless to say, in America's voluminous national literature about the war, including tens of thousands books, dozens of Hollywood films, and numerous documentaries, the Vietnamese experience is not treated as being 60 times as tragic and important as the American experience. In fact, the ratio goes in the other direction: even in antiwar depictions, the story of the Vietnam War is almost always told from the perspective of American soldiers. The Vietnamese are nameless fungible extras.

I am tempted to call this "understandable." On the face of it, it doesn't sound crazy to say that Americans see the war through American eyes. Ken Burns said that when he made his epic documentary *The Vietnam War*, he included a number of Vietnamese voices under pres-





sure but wanted to “pull them back” because he was making an “American film” to honor Vietnam veterans and heal national wounds. If we actually consider what this means, though, it’s not really “understandable” at all, or at least not defensible. A documentary called *The Vietnam War* that isn’t mostly about Vietnamese people isn’t about The Vietnam War and it isn’t really a documentary. It might be a moving collection of anecdotes, but a deliberately “American” film is intentionally excluding most of the people affected by a historical event, solely because of their nationality. (As historian Christian Appy asks: “Is it possible to make a film for one side’s combatants and still remain neutral?”) Yet Burns’ film remains a drastic improvement over previous efforts, in that Vietnamese people do actually show up in it (though they are rarely humanized to the same degree).

There is a standard (infuriating) justification offered for why domestic portrayals of historical events treat other participants as scenery: the audience demands it. People don’t want to watch films about Vietnamese peasants being blown up, they want to watch films about the moral anguish of good-hearted American boys who had to blow up Vietnamese peasants. Oliver Stone made two Vietnam War films about American soldiers, which made \$150 million each and won Oscars. Then he made one about a Vietnamese woman. It flopped, earning \$5 million on a \$33 million budget. 1978’s *The Deer Hunter*, a trashy melodrama in which the Vietnamese exist as sadistic racists who exist to be shot, won five Oscars including Best Picture. But the fact that it’s hard to make Americans care about Vietnamese lives is the opposite of a justification for ignoring those lives. It’s a disturbing caution that we probably have deep-rooted nationalistic and racial biases that will inhibit our ability to understand and empathize with other people’s pain, and which continue to fashion the prism through which we view our history.

The selective attention to suffering can occur unconsciously, without anyone noticing they are doing it. I am sure Ken Burns didn’t even think about the implications of dwelling mostly on U.S. policymakers, troops, their families, and antiwar activists. But this failure to afford equal status to Vietnamese people in accounts of the war has allowed the United States to avoid coming to terms with the full human cost of its actions. Comforting national myths about the Vietnam War as a “noble mistake” have let the country to make peace with what happened, without ever having to seriously probe what the war looked like from the other side. In fact, it can be very difficult to find English-language studies of the Vietnam War that prioritize Vietnamese sources. But when we do try to examine the war fairly and neutrally, and give all lives the same weight, we inevitably come to conclusions that should be highly discomforting for Americans who would like to treat the war as a well-intentioned tragedy rather than a lasting moral stain on the country and a serious challenge to the idea of America as a “force for good.”

**T**HE MAGNITUDE OF DEVASTATION IN VIETNAM IS difficult to comprehend. To watch *The Vietnam War*, you would get the general impression that the war largely consisted of soldiers jumping out of helicopters and tramping through rice paddies and up hills (to the tune of “Green Onions,” “Magic Carpet Ride,” and, of course, “All Along The Watchtower”). But the most damage was inflicted from the skies, in massive aerial bombing campaigns that turned significant parts of the country into moonscapes. Over a seven-year period, U.S. and South Vietnamese aircraft flew 3.4 million combat sorties. From 1965 to 1968, the United States was dropping 32 tons of bombs per hour on North Vietnam. 12 million acres of land were subject to saturation bombing, and 7 million tons of bombs including 400,000 tons of napalm were dropped in Southeast Asia (including Laos and Cambodia) during the conflict. This is more than three times as many tons of bombs than were dropped in all of World War II, and the combined power of the explosives amounted to more than 640 Hiroshimas. In Quang Tri province, “only 11 of the province’s 3,500 villages went unbombed,” and the province’s capital district was “saturated with 3,000 bombs per square kilometer.” When Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay promised to bomb North Vietnam “back into the Stone Age,” he was not bluffing. (Laos, however, had even more ex-

plosives dropped on it, and by the end of the U.S.’s 9 years of aerial attacks it was the most bombed country in the history of the world. And since ⅓ of the bombs failed to explode, 50,000 people were killed or maimed there in the decades after the bombing stopped.) A North Vietnamese soldier described what a U.S. bombing raid felt like from the ground:

*From a kilometer away, the sonic roar of the B-52 explosions tore eardrums, leaving many of the jungle dwellers permanently deaf. From a kilometer, the shockwaves knocked their victims senseless. Any hit within half a kilometer would collapse the walls of an unreinforced bunker, burying alive the people cowering inside. Seen up close, the bomb craters were gigantic—thirty feet across and nearly as deep... The first few times I experienced a B-52 attack it seemed... that I had been caught in the Apocalypse.*

The sheer numbers of bombs dropped may be staggering, but the important fact is that they were dropped on people. Not only were countless civilians killed, but the nonstop bombing created an atmosphere of perpetual terror for large parts of the population, along with the lifelong pain and trauma that comes with being maimed, losing a loved one, or just suffering with the inevitable nightmares produced by year upon year of gigantic explosions.

In exhaustive, multi-decade research on the war ranging from examining military archives to interviewing peasants in remote Vietnamese villages, journalist Nick Turse has produced strong evidence that the Vietnam War was far worse for the country’s inhabitants than most Americans realize. Whole cities were turned to rubble, farms were obliterated, children incinerated. The United States deployed chemical weapons in the form of thousands of tons of CS tear gas. 70 million liters of toxic defoliants and herbicides, including Agent Orange and the lesser-known Agent Blue, were deployed as part of a deliberate strategy of killing Vietnamese farmers’ crops. As is by now well-known, up to 5 million Vietnamese people were sprayed with these toxic chemicals, but the crop destruction strategy itself was perverse and cruel, attempting to starve insurgents by ruining the lands of poor peasant farmers. (As the RAND corporation noted in 1967, “the civilian population seems to carry very nearly the full burden of the results of the crop destruction program.”)

In South Vietnam, the United States often attempted to save peasant villages from a guerrilla insurgency by flattening the villages from the air. Turse quotes two South Vietnamese generals saying that as a result of U.S. firepower, “Many villages were completely obliterated... Houses were reduced to rubble, innocent people were killed, untold numbers became displaced, riceland was abandoned, and as much as one half of the population of the countryside fled.” As early as 1962, villages in certain zones were “subject to random bombardment by artillery and aircraft so as to drive the inhabitants into the safety of the strategic hamlets,” according to pro-war historian Guenter Lewy. “Driving the inhabitants” into “safety” through bombing may seem oxymoronic, but it resulted from a U.S. theory that villagers in Viet Cong dominated areas could be persuaded to relocate to friendly territory if bombing made it in their self-interest to do so. As Turse writes:

*To deprive their Vietnamese enemies of food, recruits, intelligence, and other support, American command policy turned large swathes of those provinces into “free fire zones,” subject to intense bombing and artillery shelling, that was expressly designed to “generate” refugees, driving people from their homes in the name of “pacification.” Houses were set ablaze, whole villages were bulldozed, and people were forced into squalid refugee camps and filthy urban slums short of water, food, and shelter.*

Journalist Neil Sheehan confirms that the destruction of villages in order to intentionally create homeless refugees was policy rather than accident, sanctioned by U.S. commanding general William Westmoreland. Eventually, U.S. evaluators would conclude that “putting the people behind barbed wire against their will is not the first step towards earning their loyalty and support,” but Westmoreland publicly stated that making villagers homeless or putting them in camps would ensure that their villages could not be captured by guerrillas, claiming that “in order to thwart the communists’ designs, it is necessary to eliminate the ‘fish’ from the ‘water,’ or to dry up the ‘water’ so that the ‘fish’ cannot survive.” The “water,” he said were the villagers. By 1967 this policy had produced a million refugees. As









Sheehan explains:

*The Americans called it 'generating refugees'... Driving people from their homes by bombing and shelling. I was out with Westmoreland one day and I asked him, 'General, aren't you disturbed by wounding all these civilians, the bombing and shelling of hamlets?' He said 'Yes, Neil, it's a problem. But it does deprive the enemy of the population, doesn't it? And I thought to myself 'You cold-blooded bastard. You know exactly what you're doing.'*

This is not seriously contested. Guenter Lewy, whose *America in Vietnam* strongly defends the morality of American actions and dismisses antiwar criticisms, reports instances like a brigade that “reported evacuating 8,885 villagers and burning their houses in order to deny the use of these facilities to VC/NVA forces and to discourage the villagers from returning to their homes.” Lewy says that “the extensive use of artillery and air strikes with high explosives and napalm had helped keep down American casualties but had also resulted in large-scale destruction and the deaths of villagers and many refugees.”

**I**N FACT, WHILE LEWY’S WORK IS OSTENSIBLY A STRONG DEFENSE of American policy, it contains shocking evidence about the extent of U.S. destruction of Vietnam. He quotes an American officer’s assessment that “the unparalleled, lavish use of firepower as a substitute for manpower is an outstanding characteristic of U.S. military tactics in the Vietnam war.” (In fact, when Westmoreland was asked how he intended to win the war, he did not reply with an actual military strategy. Instead, he just said “firepower.”) This “lavish use of firepower” was an application of a maxim that Lewy says the U.S. began subscribing to after World War I: “Expend shells, not men.” This meant minimizing U.S. casualties at all costs, by maximizing the amount of destruction inflicted. But while a philosophy of “risk minimization” can

sound benign, it causes horrifying results. Just as a police officer trying to “minimize risk” at all costs will open fire on anyone who could potentially be a threat, “expend shells not men” leads soldiers to blow up villages rather than risk being attacked in them. It abandons any “rules of engagement,” and concern for other lives, in favor of the constant massive use of deadly force. Having a plane drop napalm from the air, for instance, is an easy way to minimize risk to Americans and “expend shells,” but it seriously amplifies the risk of massacring civilians. As Ken Burns and Geoffrey Ward say in *The Vietnam War*’s accompanying book, napalm was “an effective weapon—a single 120-gallon aluminum tank could engulf in flame an area 150 feet long and 50 feet wide, and its use saved untold numbers of American and ARVN lives—but it also killed or disfigured countless Vietnamese civilians.” Lewy says the official Rules of Engagement allowed napalm attacks on villages only in cases where it was “absolutely necessary,” but admits that “in practice this rule does not appear to have restricted the use of such weapons.” Efforts to restrain firepower “ran head on against the mindset of the conventionally-trained officer” who concentrated on “zapping the Cong” and wanted to “minimize casualties among their troops.”

Lewy’s work essentially concedes that war crimes were sanctioned. “Training in the Geneva conventions and other provisions of the law of war was often perfunctory,” he says, and an inspection in May-June 1969 revealed that “almost 50 percent of all personnel had not received their required annual training in the Geneva and Hague conventions.” At that time, he says “the pressure for body count and the free use of heavy weapons in populated areas probably made this kind of instruction seem rather academic and irrelevant.” Surely it did: if official policy is to pummel populated villages with artillery shells, what good could it do to learn about the Hague’s prohibition on terrorizing civilians? There were, Lewy says, “severe problems of proper conduct toward the insurgents and the civilian popula-



tions.” Rules largely existed on paper, and the military justice system failed to deal with instances of war crimes, since enlisted men were “not anxious to expose their comrades to legal retribution for having killed Vietnamese civilians who generally were perceived as unfriendly.” Again, this is one of the war’s staunchest *defenders* speaking. In fact, you can often get a sense of just how much is uncontested by looking at the (often understated) admissions made by writers supposedly justifying American actions. A writer for the conservative *Weekly Standard*, for instance, in dismissing certain allegations of widespread atrocities, still says: “make no mistake: Americans committed war crimes in Vietnam, and officers covered them up. General William Westmoreland’s search-and-destroy policies and the profligate use of air and artillery fire put Vietnamese peasants at risk, and far too many died—though not all at our hands.” The same writer goes further elsewhere

*No serious historian of the Vietnam War disputes that the way American forces fought the war contributed to an atmosphere of atrocity. None doubt that command at all levels may have swept allegations under the rug or that incidents went unreported. Few historians argue that [the My Lai massacre], while an aberration in scale, was an aberration in practice.*

This is remarkable. It essentially says “Well of course, everybody knows there was an atmosphere of atrocity in which commanders swept war crimes under the rug, and that the only thing unusual about My Lai was its scale.” That may be the consensus among serious scholars of the war, but it’s not the dominant American perception, and My Lai is often seen as a kind of “exception that proves the rule.” Here, for example, is Sam Harris, talking about My Lai as evidence that American culture has no tolerance for the “murder of innocents,” by contrast with other cultures:

*[My Lai was] about as bad as human beings are capable of behaving. But what distinguishes us from many of our enemies is that this indiscriminate violence appalls us. The massacre at My Lai is remembered as a signature moment of shame for the American military. Even at the time, U.S. soldiers were dumbstruck with horror by the behavior of their comrades. One helicopter pilot who arrived on the scene ordered his subordinates to use their machine guns against their own troops if they would not stop killing villagers. As a culture, we have clearly outgrown our tolerance for the deliberate torture and murder of innocents. We would do well to realize that much of the world has not.*

In fact, the helicopter pilot who intervened to stop the My Lai massacre was widely vilified for turning on his fellow soldiers, and public opinion was resolutely on the side of William Calley, the lieutenant convicted of ordering the massacre. But even more importantly, America has showed an extraordinary capacity to ignore or justify “murder of innocents” that occurred throughout the rest of the war. The evidence is very clear that United States forces committed major atrocities, including the widespread use of chemical weapons on civilians, routine violations of the laws of war and the rules of engagement, and the dehumanization and terrorization of ordinary Vietnamese people. Yet there has been much less national reflection on these outrages than on My Lai, the one event that can be most easily classified as an aberration. Perversely, as Harris’s statement shows, My Lai has actually managed to make Americans feel better about themselves rather than worse, by convincing them that the massacre was the crime rather than the war.

UNDERSTANDING THIS FACT IS CRUCIAL TO understanding the war. Documenting and analyzing atrocities committed in Vietnam is important, but above all else: the war itself was a crime. The United States refused to recognize Vietnamese independence after World War II, supported and then took over the French effort at colonial reconquest, and finally launched a large-scale invasion with 500,000 troops and the unrestrained use of deadly force in order to keep an unpopular, autocratic U.S.-friendly government in power. It was not a war fought out of noble motives; U.S. leaders were fully aware that they were not acting in the interests of the Vietnamese people or defending anything that could reasonably be called “democracy.” It was a war fought because the United States feared the loss of influence and the humiliation of defeat.

This is not the picture of the Vietnam War that has been passed down.

Instead, even liberal critics of the war have seen it as a flawed but well-intended tragedy. As Daniel Ellsberg notes, the received picture of the war has been as a foolhardy American “intervention” in an internal conflict, rather than an aggressive American attempt to subvert a national independence movement:

*It was no more a “civil war” after 1955 or 1960 than it had been during the U.S.-supported French attempt at colonial reconquest. A war in which one side was entirely equipped and paid by a foreign power—which dictated the nature of the local regime in its own interest—was not a civil war. To say that we had “interfered” in what is “really a civil war,” as most American academic writers and even liberal critics of the war do to this day, simply screened a more painful reality... In terms of the UN Charter and of our own avowed ideals, it was a war of foreign aggression, American aggression.*

“War of aggression,” of course, is one of the most severe international offenses, condemned by the Nuremberg Tribunal “the supreme international crime, differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.” Yet many people critical of the war have shied away from this kind of language, searching for softer descriptions that will keep America from having to do the kind of hard moral reflection required of countries that have committed historic crimes. As Ken Burns frames it, the war was “begun in good faith by decent people, out of fateful misunderstandings.” This is false. It was begun in *bad faith* by leaders who simply did not care about the will of the Vietnamese or the suffering they would undergo. As Ellsberg explained, the record shows that every single president lied to the public about Vietnam:

*Truman lied from 1950 on, on the nature and purposes of the French involvement, the colonial re-conquest of Vietnam that we were financing, and encouraging. Eisenhower lied about the reasons for and the nature of our involvement with Diem and the fact that he was in power essentially because of American support and American money and for no other reason. Kennedy lied... about our own combat involvement, and about the recommendations that were being made to him for greater involvement [and] lied about the degree of our participation in the overthrow of Diem. Johnson of course lied and lied and lied; about the provocations against the North Vietnamese prior to and after the Tonkin Gulf incident; about the plans for bombing North Vietnam, and the nature of the buildup of American troops in Vietnam. Nixon as we now know, lied to the American public from the first months of his [term in] office, in terms of the bombing of Cambodia and Laos [and] ground operations in Laos, the reasons for our invasion of Cambodia and of Laos, and the prospects for the mining of Haiphong that finally came about in 1972 but was envisioned as early as 1969.*

Nor did these lies come from good motives. Nixon, of course, sabotaged peace talks in order to get elected president, which stands out as a moral low point even in the career of Richard Nixon. But even Lyndon Johnson, who is often portrayed sympathetically for “agonizing” over the war, was often simply worried about being emasculated and seeming to “back down.” As he described his own fears:

*[If we left Vietnam] there would be Robert Kennedy... telling everyone that I had betrayed John Kennedy’s commitment to South Vietnam... That I was a coward. An unmanly man. A man without a spine... Every night when I fell asleep I would see myself tied to the ground in the middle of a long, open space. In the distance, I could hear the voices of thousands of people. They were all shouting and running toward me: ‘Coward! Traitor! Weakling!’*

Of course, it is too simple to say that millions of Vietnamese people died because Lyndon Johnson was afraid of being called a wuss by imaginary dream-people. But we can see that the psychological roots of U.S. decision-making went deeper than a mere rational concern about communism. Johnson didn’t want to *look bad*. There’s a resemblance here to the words of Reginald Dyer, the British colonel who ordered the Amritsar massacre in India. When asked if it was necessary for him to open fire on the crowd, he said “I think it quite possible that I could have dispersed the crowd without firing but they would have come back again and laughed.” As George Orwell explains in “Shooting an Elephant,” when he says that if he hadn’t shot the elephant the natives would have



thought less of him, the fear of humiliation is a strong internal motivator in imperial powers.

There is another feature that the U.S. occupation of South Vietnam has in common with the ventures of prior empires: racism and the dehumanization of the native population. It is impossible to get around this. Numerous testimonies from Americans who served in Vietnam confirm that from basic training onward, “right away they told us not to call them Vietnamese. Call everybody gooks, dinks.” As for the Viet Cong themselves, “They were like animals. They wouldn’t allow you to talk about them as if they were people... They told us they’re not to be treated with any type of mercy or apprehension.” William Westmoreland, whose strategy of massive firepower and indiscriminate bombing killed countless innocent Vietnamese, was openly racist, suggesting that the “Oriental” mindset meant these killings didn’t matter very much: “The Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is plentiful. Life is cheap in the Orient. As the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important.”

Soliders were taught almost nothing of Vietnamese language or culture, and because the locals all bled together into a mob of “gooks,” distinctions between civilians and combatants were often made haphazardly. Nick Turse explains that the high civilian casualties in Vietnam resulted in part from an informal (sometimes spoken, sometimes not) “mere gook rule”: the rule that if corpses were “mere gooks,” nobody would be held accountable for the killings, even if the dead were civilians and the rules of engagement had been violated. Turse quotes one marine telling another: “Shouldn’t bother you at all, just some more dead gooks. The sooner *they* all die, the sooner *we* go back to the world.” “Nobody cared about the Vietnamese,” one anonymous soldier declared bluntly. Little fuss was made if civilians were killed, because they were often chalked up as enemy dead, with soldiers following the rule “if it’s dead and it’s Vietnamese, it’s VC.” (Note the “it.”) Even Lewy concedes that it is “clear that a steady percentage of those reported as VC dead were in fact villagers not carrying weapons.”

One of the most disturbing aspects of the war is the American military leadership’s strategy of prioritizing “body count” above all. Westmoreland deliberately waged a war of attrition, attempting to weaken the Viet Cong and NVA’s resolve by killing as many of them as possible. Commanders in the field were obsessively pressured to produce as many dead Vietnamese bodies as possible. “Body count was everything,” and the “pressure to kill indiscriminately” was “practically irresistible.” There were “kill count” competitions, with soldiers being rewarded with leave or cases of beer for maximizing their kills. Superior officers would say things like “Jack up that body count or you’re gone, Colonel.” One West Point veteran remembers hearing his commander explain his strategy, which was that “he wanted to begin killing 4,000 of these little bastards a month, and then by the end of the following month wanted to kill 6,000.” Promotion in the officer corps could be dependent on body count, and “many high-level officers established ‘production quotas’ for their units.” As celebrated war memoirist Philip Caputo recounted, it often seemed as if there were no traditional strategic military objectives, such as the capture of territory. The only objective was mass killing:

*Your mission is to kill VC. Period. You’re not here to capture a hill. You’re not here to capture a town. You’re not here to move from Point A to Point B to Point C. You’re here to kill Viet Cong. As many of ‘em as you can... [But] there was also the question of how you distinguish a Viet Cong from a civilian... There were, at times, very convoluted rules of engagement given to us. If we were out on an operation and see saw somebody running, that was somehow prima facie evidence that he, or even she, was the enemy. Presumably. I guess the idea was if they liked us they wouldn’t run, and I remember an officer saying ‘The rule is if he’s dead and Vietnamese, he’s VC.’*

We can see here a chain of logic leading almost inexorably to genocide: take a series of teenagers, hand them M-16s, and put them through a brutal basic training routine in which they are called “maggots” and have their spirits broken, and must learn to obey orders unquestioningly and kill without mercy (even chanting “Kill! Kill! Kill!”). Drop them in a country they know nothing about, and teach them no ways of distin-

guishing between the inhabitants, who are all nameless gooks. (And who do not value life.) Tell them that the country is crawling with the enemy, and that even women and children may be supporters and informers of the guerrillas. Teach them nothing about the laws of war or the rules of engagement. Impose no accountability for abuses. Make them terrified. Then tell them their job is to maximize “enemy body count” and that they will be rewarded for killing and punished for failing to kill. Set them loose with more heavy firepower than any other war ever fought in human history.

Is it any wonder, given this process, that so many Vietnamese civilians died? My Lai instantly ceases to become a mystery when we understand just how the United States went about prosecuting the war. It would be shocking if My Lai *were* an aberration, because it’s hard to see how draftees in this situation could produce anything other than a bloodbath. The combined notions of “killing as success” and “civilians as unimportant” are recipes for mass death. Then add the euphemistic concepts of “free fire zones” (areas that had supposedly—but not actually—been cleared of anyone except the enemy, where one was free to “kill anything that moved”) and “search and destroy missions” (which were supposedly about searching a village and destroying the enemy, but quickly morphed into searching the village and then destroying it). The resulting horror was the unavoidable conclusion that followed from the U.S. military’s premises.

I am not sure how much detail to go into on how this horror unfolded on the ground. Turse’s book can be almost unreadable, because its catalog of atrocities is so stomach-churning that one can’t read more than a few pages at a time without feeling the urge to throw up. A few brief notes on various aspects of it will do. First, Vietnamese women were routinely sexually abused, and Turse cites numerous instances of female villagers being sadistically raped by U.S. soldiers, quoting one who served in the 25th Infantry Division saying that “rape was virtually standard operating procedure” in his unit. (“All three grunts grabbed the gook chick and began dragging her into the hootch... I learned to recognize the sounds of rape at great distance. Over the next two months I would hear this sound on the average of once every third day.”) Prisoners of war were often tortured and killed. This was in part the result of “body count” logic (“Damn it I don’t care about prisoners, I want a body count,” one lieutenant quoted his superior officer as saying) and partly the desire for vengeance that came after U.S. soldiers watched their friends killed by mines and heard reports of torture by North Vietnamese forces. A marine, explaining why his unit never brought in any prisoners, said: “If an enemy soldier fell into our hands he was just one sorry fucker. I don’t know how to explain it that would make sense to anyone who wasn’t there.” In *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War*, specialist Richard Ford of the Army’s 25th Infantry Division sheds some more insight on what this could look like:

(Warning: this passage is incredibly disturbing.)

*So at that time they had this game called Guts. Guts was where they gave the prisoner to a company and everyone would get in line and do something to him... So they took the NVA’s clothes off and tied him to a tree. Everybody in the unit got in line. At least 200 guys. The first guy took a bayonet and plucked his eye out. Put the bayonet in the corner of the eye and popped it. And I was amazed how large your eyeball was. Then he sliced his ear off. And he bit him in the mouth with his .45. Loosened the teeth, pulled them out. Then they sliced his tongue. They cut him all over. And we put that insect repellent all over him. It would just irritate his body, and his skin would turn white.... I don’t know when he died. But most of the time he was alive. He was hollering and cursing. They put water on him and shaking him and bringin’ him back. Finally they tortured him to death.*

IT IS DIFFICULT, AFTER THE FACT, FOR ANYONE TO FIGURE OUT JUST how widespread this kind of behavior was. Certainly, stories of U.S. soldiers cutting off ears recur in Vietnam memoirs, and Turse’s examination of internal U.S. war crime records reveal hundreds of incidents of abuse that went largely unpunished. But Turse’s characterization that war crimes were perpetrated throughout the armed forces has been disputed, and it is not clear how one should proceed from anecdote to data. The anecdotes alone, though, are enough to suggest that the moral





culture of the U.S. armed forces in Vietnam was severely warped.

Specific people and units stand out. Roy Bumgarner, a psychopathic sergeant who killed 1,500 people, was widely known to be a mass murderer but was kept on active duty. The “Tiger Force,” an elite reconnaissance unit, racked up “scores of unarmed victims” including “two blind brothers, an elderly Buddhist monk, women, children, and old people hiding in underground shelters.” The infamous “Phoenix Program,” sponsored by the CIA, tortured and assassinated tens of thousands of people, and seems to have invented the horrendous tactic of “rape with eels.”

The burning of villages was commonplace, and villagers were baffled by the fact that U.S. soldiers would sometimes show up and hand out candy, and sometimes show up to destroy every building in town. One major general said that when troops took casualties, “the instant reaction of the troops [was] to burn the whole hamlet down.” (Many U.S. atrocities seem to have occurred because soldiers were frightened and angry after members of their units were killed.) There were, according to a member of the First Cavalry Regiment, “numerous burnings of villages for no apparent reason.” One marine patrol received the instruction: “Burn the damn gooks out. Burn it. Burn it and they can’t ever come back.” As a soldier described the process:

*The flamethrowers came in and we burnt the hamlet. Burnt up everything. They had a lot of rice. We opened the bags, just throw it all over the street. Look for tunnels. Killing animals. Killing all the livestock. Guys would carry chemicals that they would put in the well. Poison the waster so they couldn’t use it... They killed some more people here. Maybe 12 or 14 or more. Old people and little kids that wouldn’t leave. I guess their grandparents. People that were old in Vietnam couldn’t leave their village.*

Of course, things would go to an even greater extreme at My Lai itself, “where American troops murdered an entire village of 300–500 unarmed South Vietnamese, in addition to raping civilians, killing their livestock, mutilating corpses, burning down houses, and fouling drinking water.”

**W**HAT ARE WE TO MAKE OF THIS CATALOG OF EVILS, 50 years after a date on which U.S. soldiers executed an entire village, and the military covered it up? First, I think it’s important to deal with the “both sides” question. I am sure any list of atrocities committed by the United States in Vietnam can be met with a corresponding list of North Vietnamese atrocities, and the torture suffered by U.S. prisoners of war in North Vietnam is well-documented. A few points should be kept in mind, though. First, what was done by the United States is uniquely morally blameworthy because it was done to civilians. The U.S. civilian population never suffered, and the laws of war rightly single out unarmed people for special protection. Second, there are major differences in scale: the United States was bringing the mightiest fighting force in world history to a country full of rice-growing peasants. The colossal damage inflicted by U.S. bombing campaigns was unmatched by anything done by the other side. Finally, the United States’ objectives in the war were fundamentally indefensible. It could not win, because it did not have popular support in the country, so all it could do was inflict devastation. It is worth thinking about what our attitude would be if the war had occurred in reverse: the Vietnamese had invaded and occupied America, propping up a Vietnam-sympathetic regime and dropping hundreds of thousands of tons of napalm on all of our cities and causing tens of millions of deaths (the U.S. population equivalent to the number of deaths in Vietnam). It would not be possible for us to look at such an occupying power as having made a “tragic but well-intended mistake.” They would rightly be seen as having committed an international crime of the severest magnitude.

I understand why the United States does not want to think of the Vietnam War this way. For one thing, it seems to blame the soldiers themselves, to portray them as monsters and criminals. This seems very unfair,







because we know how much they themselves suffered, and has thus contributed to the idea that the war should be conceived of as honorable. But it is possible to separate the soldiers from the conflict, the same way we do with “child soldiers” generally. (And many who served in Vietnam were essentially children.) It is difficult to keep one’s humanity in such a situation, and to see the war’s consequences as the product of individual depravity on behalf of front-line troops is a serious mistake that exonerates U.S. political and military leadership.

But there are deeper reasons why it’s difficult to acknowledge that the Vietnam War was worse than is admitted. As Christian Appy notes, it challenges American exceptionalism, “the belief that the United States is the greatest nation on earth, unrivaled not only in its wealth and power, but in the quality of its institutions and values, and the character of its people.” If we did commit a terrible crime, our treasured moral authority collapses. Nobody wants to think of themselves as a “bad person,” and no country wants to think of itself as a bad country. Hence the Ken Burns view: Vietnam was an honorable mistake, the kind a good country might reasonably be expected to make from time to time.

If we are to avoid conflicts like this in the future, though, we must understand what this one was like. As we keep hearing rumblings of war with North Korea, we would do well to keep in mind how the lives of the civilians who will be affected by U.S. decision-making can easily be swept from view, and to recommit ourselves to valuing those lives equally. We should remember how simple and benign-sounding euphemisms can mask atrocious realities, and how easily our country can lapse into

unthinkingly adopting policies like “maximizing enemy body count” without considering the murderous catastrophe this might cause. Vietnam offers a series of important lessons, ones that a country that considers itself humane and virtuous must learn. But it is yet to be seen whether we are sincere enough about our stated values to learn them, or whether we will continue to convince ourselves that the war was a sincere failure rather than an irresponsible crime against humanity. ♦

#### A NOTE ON SOURCES

*With over 30,000 books on the Vietnam War in print, unless one is a serious scholar it is impossible to look at anything but a fraction of the material available. The books I drew from the most are: Ken Burns and Geoffrey C. Ward’s “The Vietnam War” (the book adaptation of the television documentary), Guenter Lewy’s “America in Vietnam,” Christian Appy’s “Patriots” and “American Reckoning,” Tim O’Brien’s “If I Die In A Combat Zone,” Karl Marlantes’ “What It Is Like To Go To War,” Michael Herr’s “Dispatches,” Wallace Terry’s “Bloods,” Deborah Nelson’s “The War Behind Me,” the Winter Soldier Report, and Nick Turse’s “Kill Anything That Moves.” These sources offer a variety of perspectives on the legitimacy of the war from Lewy’s defense to Marlantes’ lament to Turse’s harsh criticism. I also recommend Noam Chomsky’s review of Lewy’s book, “On The Aggression of South Vietnamese Peasants Against The United States,” which can be found in his *Towards A New Cold War* and is a good example of how two people can look at the same sources and come to completely different conclusions, with Chomsky seeing barbarism where Lewy sees moral and lawful conduct.*

## Why These Photos?

Often, photos are just decoration. Nobody actually looks at them, or at least not closely. Vietnam was a heavily photographed war, and has its share of highly-recognized images: the monk on fire, the Vietnamese officer shooting the prisoner, the naked girl running from her napalmed village, the My Lai bodies in a drainage ditch. Yet even though all of these are powerful and disturbing, over time they have become almost “iconic.” Anything looked at enough times will cease to have much of an emotional impact.

In presenting Vietnam visually, there is an unconscious inclination to lapse into what has been done before, or what it feels like you “should” do. That partly explains why Ken Burns has the “hits of the 60s” soundtrack: you can’t have a movie about the Vietnam war without the “something’s happening here” song. It means, though, that with Vietnam images, so often we get *The Vietnam Panorama*, which is dominated by soldiers jumping out of helicopters and villagers crying or dying. As I started trying to find visuals for this article, I found myself defaulting unthinkingly to the usual pictures: soldiers traipsing through rice paddies, Lyndon Johnson in consternation, a marine standing over his dead friend, looking up at the jungle canopy with an expression that asks “Why?” These images are important parts of the story of the Vietnam War. But I tried to put together a few pictures that actually convey the point: the Vietnam War is mostly about Vietnamese people, and should be imagined from their point of view.

The photos are all licensed from the Associated

Press. The AP captions are as follows:

*A U.S. 1st Air Cavalry Division soldier throws a rice basket into flames after a peasant woman retrieved it from the burning house in background. American troops destroyed everything of value to the enemy after overrunning the village near Tam Ky, 350 miles northeast of Saigon, during the Vietnam War on Oct. 27, 1967. (AP Photo/Dang Van Phuoc)*

*A Vietnamese mother and her children are framed by the legs of a soldier from the U.S. First Cavalry Division in Bong Son, Vietnam, September 28, 1966. (AP Photo/Henri Huet)*

*Young Vietnamese on motorbikes stop to look at a Viet Cong killed in the western section of Saigon, Cholon, during day-long fighting on May 5, 1968. A group of Viet Cong moved into the area following an mortar barrage on different parts of the city. The fighting which took place in Cholon was near a heavily-hit area during the Tet Offensive. (AP Photo/Eddie Adams)*

*A Vietnamese man carries his lightly wounded wife out of a threatened area in Southern Saigon, Vietnam on May 8, 1968. Daylong fighting in the area erupted at dawn with a daring Viet Cong attack on a police station. As they did during the Tet Offensive, residents abandoned their homes escaping to safer parts of the city. (AP Photo/Eddie Adams)*

*A Vietnamese mother huddles over her youngest child while her other daughter crawls on the ground during a battle between U.S. Marines and Viet Cong snipers in the village of Ngoc Kimh, 25 miles southwest of Danang, April 7, 1966. Civilians, finding themselves in the middle of fighting, took cover in shelters or*

*huddled close to the ground. (AP Photo/George Esper)*

Most of the photos I have selected show ordinary Vietnamese people struggling through the war. They are variously pensive, frightened, confused, and heroic. I particularly value the shot of a husband carrying his wife away from the flames, because I think it very poignantly shows love persisting under incredible pressure. I also think the view of children through the legs of a U.S. soldier is a good reminder of the “child’s eye view” of war.

I think the photograph of the American soldier may be seen as the most controversial choice. I could have presented a picture of an American soldier saving a child from a burning village rather than burning the village. One can complain that this presents a one-sided view of the war. But all selections must be selective. Bad acts are not outweighed or canceled out by good ones, and it is on the bad ones we must dwell. A murderer cannot be exonerated by having saved a life at some other point in time. Those of us who seem to talk about the U.S.’ wrongdoing much more than its virtue are not “America-haters,” but simply want to draw attention to what matters most. Even as I selected pictures designed to draw attention to Vietnamese suffering, though, I also avoided the most disturbing or graphic images. In doing so, I actually reduced exposure to the full consequences of American military force. A realistic and representative look at the human cost of war would be far more upsetting than what I have chosen to present. In fact, photos themselves inherently sanitize and soften war by necessarily portraying it in two dimensions rather than three.

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- W. Nestle
- X. GE
- Y. BP
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B

- A. Bono
- B. Thinkfluencers
- C. VR startups
- D. "Fair-trade" coffee plantations
- E. Pinterest power-users
- F. The Doctor Who fandom community
- G. The New England Patriots
- H. Top Chef winners
- I. Angel investors
- J. The Davos World Economic Forum
- K. The Lands End catalog
- L. Artisanal mayonnaise producers
- M. VICELAND
- N. The sexy green M&M
- O. The brand-new Lexus ZXL 1000©
- P. Colonial Williamsburg
- Q. Actor-activists
- R. Taylor Swift
- S. Racist YouTube stars
- T. The Wizarding World of Harry Potter Theme Park
- U. Microbeer enthusiasts
- V. Teenage entrepreneurs
- W. The cast of This is Us
- X. Pharmaceutical company sales associates
- Y. Kombucha brewers
- Z. The reanimated ghost of Sid Vicious



C

- A. Happiness
- B. Fiscal responsibility
- C. Mindful juice consumption
- D. Shooting flowers from drones
- E. The respect economy
- F. STEM
- G. Police body cameras that gently whisper non-violent messages
- H. Weepy tributes to 9-11
- I. The hero myth
- J. The "future"
- K. Corn subsidies
- L. Detoxing from social media
- M. Smart investing
- N. Smart cities
- O. "Putting health care over politics"
- P. Brain uploading
- Q. Bipartisanship
- R. Self-care
- S. Helping media companies pivot to video
- T. Sponsored content
- U. Increased productivity
- V. The wisdom of the crowd
- W. Merit-based immigration
- X. Data monitoring apps in the classroom
- Y. Cryptocurrency
- Z. "Inspirational" quotes taken out of context from MLK speeches



D

- A. Doing genocide
- B. Denying the Holocaust
- C. Engaging in ironic racism
- D. Engaging in regular racism
- E. Planting landmines
- F. Selling white phosphorus
- G. Shooting puppies into space
- H. Establishing slave-like factory conditions
- I. Privatizing a third world country's rain
- J. Trafficking human beings
- K. Imprisoning refugees
- L. Murdering union leaders
- M. Hiring mercenaries to murder union leaders
- N. Rebooting Mein Kampf for the big screen
- O. Replacing employee healthcare with StaminaCa\$h™
- P. Chopping up the homeless for chicken feed
- Q. Leaking benzenes into the water supply
- R. Covering up years of sexual assault allegations
- S. Producing John Mayer albums
- T. Taking cash from murderous regimes
- U. Giving cash to murderous regimes
- V. Dismissing climate change while secretly making plans to settle on Mars
- W. Torturing both cute and non-cute animals
- X. Bulldozing homeless encampments
- Y. Accidentally blowing up a city
- Z. Taking quotes out of context from MLK speeches







# *a judgment on* JUDGES

BY OREN NIMNI & BRIANNA RENNIX

JUDGES ARE ODD AND UNIQUELY FRUSTRATING creatures. Most have the demeanor of an especially hide-bound DMV attendant, but their power and prestige gives them even more control over our day-to-day lives. Judges are often the last thing between you and imprisonment, deportation, homelessness, poverty, or the loss of your children. Their courts are tiny fiefdoms, and everyone who enters must cater to their whims. For lawyers—especially ones who actually care about their client—it’s almost malpractice not to.

A “good” attorney is forced to spend years learning the weird idiosyncrasies of any particular judge. If your client has been arrested for, say, sleeping in the atrium of a shopping mall, you must carefully calculate whether you will meet with sympathy or derision if you offer, say, an argument that “trespassing” shouldn’t apply in cases where the person was simply looking for a place to pass a cold night. Depending on which “legal values” a judge chooses to prioritize in any given case, you could end up with completely opposite outcomes. A lot is left to the whim of whatever particular judge you happen to be in front of. Perhaps that judge has some opinion about the issue that you’d better know. Or maybe you’ll just be more likely to win if you appear extremely deferential, or if you quote scripture as part of your argument—who knows?

Knowledge of the individual personalities of judges is such an important feature of the legal system that it operates as a skill in a lawyer’s toolkit, one that can be paid for. Supreme Court clerks who choose to go to big law firms after clerking on the court receive massive bonuses, often hundreds of thousands of dollars. The main asset they bring to their new firms is their firsthand knowledge of the intricacies of a particular Supreme Court justice’s mind. Large firms

understand the strategic value of knowing a judge personally—what they like, what they dislike, what considerations will make them most likely to agree with you.

With judges wielding such concentrated and individualized power over cases, courtrooms quickly become stages for bizarre legal farces. Lawyers make arguments they don’t believe, that the judges *know* the lawyers don’t believe, but everyone has to play along. Only the judge has the power to decide when the game will end, and how. Let’s say, for example, that your client lost a case because they didn’t show up for a previous hearing. They likely missed that hearing for some reason that a normal person would find totally understandable: they didn’t have a lawyer at the time, they don’t speak English that well and didn’t understand what the hearing was for, they couldn’t get time off work, the bus got stuck in traffic on the way to the courthouse. But under the applicable statute, it’s likely that none of these perfectly rational and comprehensible explanations are admissible. In this situation, you know, and the judge knows, the *real* reasons the client missed the hearing. But you’ll have to try to make an argument about something totally different, something that this particular judge might *choose to accept*, even though they know that your argument has little to nothing to do with the reality of the situation.

At times, this peculiar trade in niche arguments feels thoroughly demented. If the judge wanted a bribe, that would at least feel *normal*. Everyone wants money. But what judges want is some strange intellectual product. Maybe they want you to cleverly contort the facts into some tiny legal box. Maybe they want to be convinced that doing whatever you’re asking them to do will quickly vanish the case from their docket and free the judge up to go to lunch. Or maybe the judge made up their mind about the case the second they glanced

down at the paperwork, and is now simply idly watching you dance.

The fact that legal arguments are usually completely divorced from reality is partially a function of the law itself, and not solely the judges. That said, nothing prevents judges from acting like rational, normal people instead of playing games with people's lives and making lawyers jump through hoops. Yet they often play these games, especially at the Supreme Court. They will straight-facedly ask lawyers, *for the sake of argument*, to justify things that are clearly insane.

Let's take an example from a recent Supreme Court case: a U.S. border guard, standing on the U.S. side of the U.S.-Mexico border, shot and killed a child who was on the Mexican side of the border. The lawyer for the child's family, in attempting to sue the border agent, argued that U.S. officials, when they kill people from inside the U.S., should be held liable. Now, it's already ridiculous that the lawyer's liability argument had to hinge on which side of the border the officer happened to be standing on, and not on the simple fact that *a child was murdered* and the person who killed him should obviously be responsible for compensating the family (I rest my case!). But it gets nuttier. The Court asked the attorney (paraphrasing), "Well, what about drone pilots who sit in Nevada and murder people in Pakistan? Are you saying we should hold *them* liable?" The lawyer—knowing that no court thinks drone pilots are liable for anything, knowing that if he says, "yes, they should also be liable" his client's case will be lost—felt forced to make an argument that *of course* drone pilots are different, for... for some reason. In reality, of

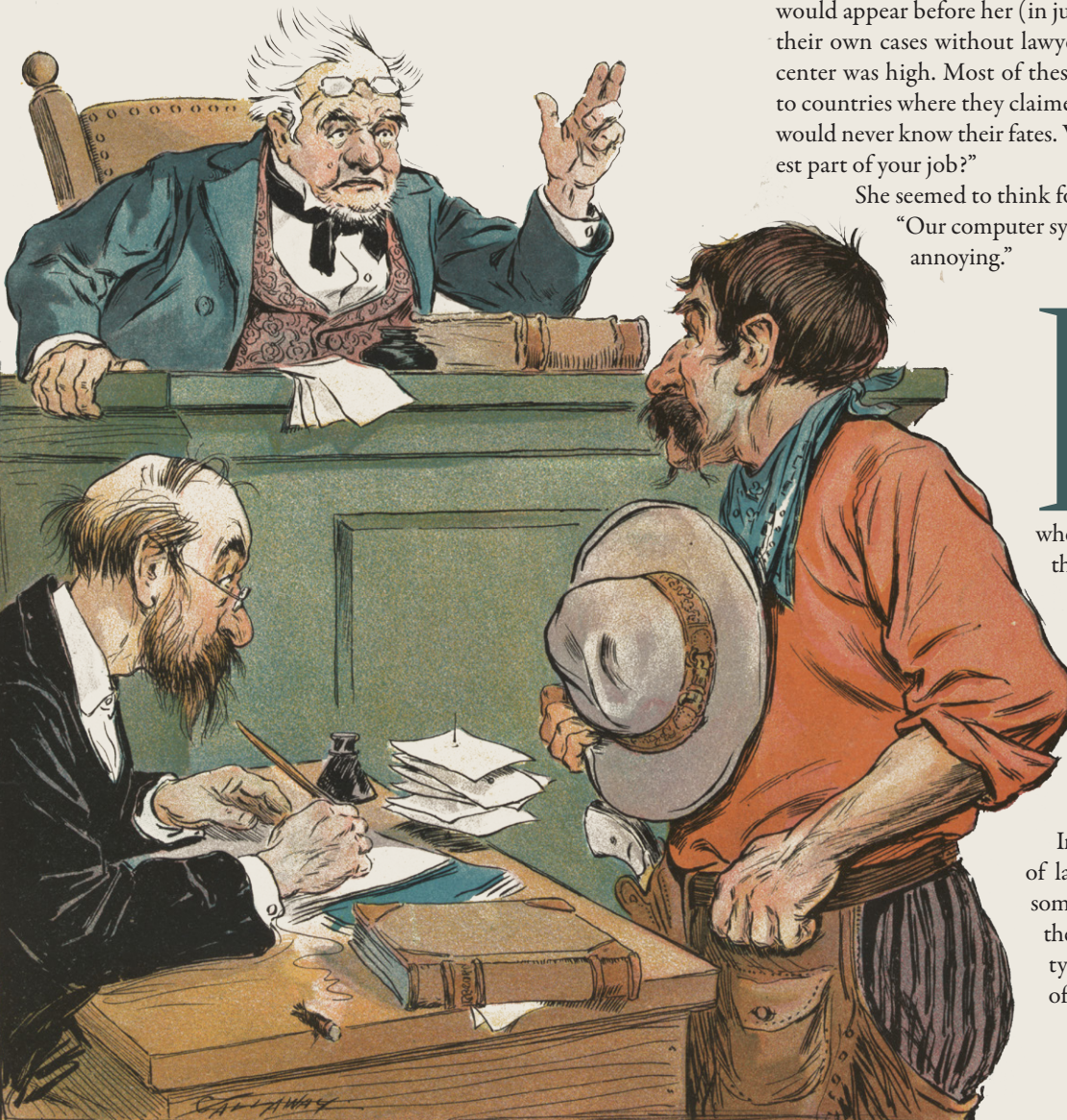
course, there is no substantive difference between a drone pilot who murders people from inside the U.S. and a border guard who murders people from inside the U.S. The lawyer knew this, and the Court likely knew it too. Yet the Court forced the lawyer to go through the exercise of attempting to draw an insincere distinction, making the lawyer look silly and further distancing the Court from the actual important questions.

Now, it's possible you might think that we're being unfair to judges here by expecting them to care about the same things (children being shot to death, poor people having their lives irreparably ruined by filing errors, etc., etc.) that laypeople care about. The law is *complicated*, after all, and judges are legal experts. Isn't it natural that judges would care about abstruse legal arguments that the rest of us can't see the relevance of, because they understand the *larger ramifications* of each individual case for our great legal system? Without this far-seeing vision, wouldn't our entire civilization go down in flames?

To this, we can only say that A) this is a terrible way to run a society, and B) this is not what actually motivates judges in 99% of cases. Judges are just ordinary people like you and me. They do not behave in the strange way they do because they are wise beyond the ken of mere mortals. They behave this way because our legal system has created a climate calculated to warp judges' minds. We once spoke to an immigration judge presiding over a court that was attached to a detention center. Her docket consisted largely of asylum-seekers who had been detained after crossing the border, and would appear before her (in jumpsuits and shackles) to try to argue their own cases without lawyers. The denial rate at this detention center was high. Most of these asylum-seekers would be sent back to countries where they claimed to fear for their lives, and the judge would never know their fates. We asked the judge: "What's the hardest part of your job?"

She seemed to think for a moment.

"Our computer system crashes a lot," she said. "It's really annoying."



**H**OW DID WE GET TO this point? What are judges actually *for*? Historically, judges were basically people who were good at dispute resolution at a time when state enforcement wasn't really a thing. They needed to be able to come up with judgments that parties would actually follow, instead of just, say, murdering each other. This judicial role makes some kind of abstract sense. In less regulated times, judges were probably pretty useful practical agents of community order, and even sometimes of justice.

In the Bible, for example, there's a lot of language about the ideal judge being someone who defends the interests of the weak and downtrodden against the tyranny of the powerful. (The number of verses invoking fire and brimstone



against “unjust judges” who “even rob the widows and fatherless children,” though, tells us that this ideal probably wasn’t *always* borne out in real life.)

But then we come roaring into the present. Here in the U.S., we no longer live in a time where it’s typical for vigilantism and bloodfeuds to break out on a large scale if the judge doesn’t make a decision the parties will willingly accept. (Although in the case of, say, *Bush v. Gore*, that would have perhaps been a preferable outcome). So what function do judges perform now? Rather than just making pronouncements on what would be equitable in a particular dispute, judges are—theoretically—supposed to faithfully apply codified law. We’ve made a policy shift over the years that strongly favors “predictability,” in place of “justice,” as the chief virtue of the legal system. It’s a well-accepted principle of the judicial craft that the important thing is to have *a* rule, rather than to necessarily have the *right* rule. (Having the *right* rule is merely a subsidiary concern, if it’s a concern at all.) We’d much rather have all “similar” cases or issues get decided the same way, instead of different ways, even if this leads to worse practical, real-world results overall for more individual people. Under this system, say, it’s much better if *all* U.S. agents who kill people from inside U.S. territory are deemed categorically ineligible to be sued, because this is *predictable*, and predictability is *fair*. To have a situation where *some* border guards are sueable and others aren’t, by contrast, is *unfair*. People would never know what to expect in a world like that! (Except that there might, you know, occasionally be some consequences for people who slaughter other humans from a distance, but again, what do we know, we’re not judges after all)

But even in a world with “predictability” and “uniformity” as the highest legal values, we still have pretty confused notions about the appropriate role of a judge. Some people believe that judges should apply law “impartially” to the facts and not let personal or political feelings interfere with their interpretation. Other people, who see the judiciary as a tool for social or legal change, believe that judges should be (what’s sometimes pejoratively described as) “activist judges,” who push and twist the law to fit their own political ends. A lot of the public argument around judges revolves around which of these two understandings of the judge’s role is better for democracy, in the abstract and/or for particular policy outcomes.

But this binary between “impartial” and “partisan” judges is actually pretty nonsensical. First, evidence suggests that judges are not capable of being impartial at all. Factors as insidious as racial and class bias, as reasonable as background and knowledge, as mundane as when the judge last ate a meal, and as calculated as the judge’s ambitions for career advancement or political office, all clearly influence their choices. Numerous studies have shown the way many of these factors (not legal standards or arguments) lead to predictable patterns in rulings. And the reality is, most judges, and most people who closely study the activities of judges, *know* they aren’t impartial. When judges exalt impartiality as the highest virtue of legal adjudication, they are usually doing so disingenuously, or with significant psychological blinders raised.

Judges who most vocally pretend to impartiality the most are often those who practice it the least.

Take the late Antonin “Nino” Scalia, who talked all the damn time about how one should just read and apply the “ordinary meaning of the plain text of the law.” As Scalia once wrote: “The good judge must suppress his personal views and must decide each case as the law dictates, not as he would have resolved the matter if he had drafted the law or the constitutional provision at issue.” The reason for this, Scalia continued, is because “when the vocation of a judge is reduced to simply selecting the best rule, remarkable power is placed in the hands of a few persons who are barely accountable for their decisions.” Superficially, this sounds reasonable. But this simple presentation of the issue neatly sidesteps the reality that the “ordinary meaning” of statutes is very often so unclear—both within the statute itself and across different statutes—or so tenuously-connected to the practical question under debate, that a judge can easily come up with several equally plausible interpretations. For Scalia, the supposedly neutral “servant of the law,” the interpretation that best aligned with his socially conservative views almost always turned out to have been the “ordinary meaning of the plain language” all along! Funny how that happens! (This sometimes required Scalia to be pretty creative about what constituted “ordinary meaning”—when he didn’t like the “a well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state” part of the Second Amendment, for example, he simply declared that it was a purely decorative “prefatory clause,” and when he didn’t like the fact the “plain meaning” intended by the Second Amendment’s drafters could not possibly have anticipated the semiautomatic handgun, he adopted a belief in a kind of *evolving* Constitution. And for someone who professed to dislike the idea of unaccountable judges thwarting the popular will, he certainly had



no qualms about invalidating campaign finance reform legislation passed by the democratically-elected legislature.)

All right, so Justice Scalia was a hypocrite whose impartiality was a sham, that's not exactly Breaking News. But even if judges *could* be impartial, in theory, is that something that anyone even wants? Laws are inextricably linked with politics, so even the most neutral application of the law has a political dimension. And when people talk about who they want as a potential Justice it's clear they base their preferences on who shares their opinion on issues like free speech or abortion. We rarely hear a conservative complain about Scalia's judicial activism, or a liberal bemoan that RBG wasn't impartial enough. This is because, deep in our core, we want partiality. Even where we have different conceptions of what "justice" means, we do actually want judges to advance justice rather than merely law.

**T**HE OTHER PROBLEM WITH IMPARTIALITY (besides being near impossible and possibly undesirable) is that a lot of seemingly "impartial" legal standards—like the famous "what would a *reasonable person* do" standard—are inherently subjective, so that it's hard to say what an "impartial" application would even *mean*. The law is full of attempts to determine what "reasonable" behavior would be in a particular situation. It should shock no one (except lawyers) that people often have wildly divergent views of what "reasonableness" means in any given situation. For courts, the "reasonable person" standard has a disturbing tendency to align with whatever best suits the positions of those in power. Think of all of the police officers whose shootings of unarmed black people have been deemed "reasonable"—and then say you want a judicial system run by "reasonable" or "impartial" judges.

Even where judicial discretion isn't explicitly authored into the system, there are vast areas of law where a judge has the choice between several equally plausible legal arguments, each leading to different outcomes. This, in effect, empowers the judge to make whatever decision they want. This view of the judicial decision-making process was expounded by Richard Posner, one of the U.S.'s most well-known jurists, in an interview with *The New York Times* after his sudden retirement in September 2017. In Posner's estimation, it's rarely difficult for judges to do as they wish: his own *modus operandi* was to decide what a "sensible" resolution of the case would be, and then look to see if there was any precedent that explicitly barred him from implementing his preferred solution. "And the answer is that's actually rarely the case... When you have a Supreme Court case or something similar, they're often extremely easy to get around." (In the same interview, Posner characterized his judicial career as "a slumber of 35 years," during which he failed to realize how much poor people without lawyers are screwed over by the legal system. It's unclear why it took Posner 35 years to experience this revelation, but at least he got there eventually.) As an example of what this kind of judicial freedom can look like in practice, take a look at the disparate grant rates for asylum cases in different parts of the country. Immigration judges in New York grant 88% of asylum cases. Immigration judges in Atlanta grant 2%. Both courts are nominally employing the exact same legal standard. The difference is that most judges in New York are looking for reasons to grant cases, and most judges in Atlanta are looking for reasons to deny them. Usually, the judge will find whatever they are looking for.

Given the basic incoherence of the whole concept of "impartiality," then, is the answer that all judges should be "activists"? Would it at least be better for a judge to be honest about what they're doing, rather than hide behind a screen of impartiality? If a heartless but "honest" judge is still doing substantively the same thing they were doing back when they pretended to be "impartial," that might be slightly better, but not by much. (Our current president, after all, is very honest about the terrible things he's doing, and in a lot of cases, this hasn't seemed to make his plans any easier to combat.) But this ignores what people see as the main benefit of an "activist" judge. It's not just that they're more honest about what they're doing, it's that maybe they'll be able to use the law to "save us". This is the other problem that arises when you champion open judicial "activism"—you tend to over-emphasize the extent to which judicial rulings actually result in social change.

Take *Brown v. Board of Education*, which the general public often thinks of as a great victory of legal justice against racist tyranny, and a watershed moment for civil rights. (It's certainly one of the only Supreme Court cases that a lot of non-lawyers could name off the bat.) But it's a very clean, simplistic view of history that thinks "well, at one point there was segregation, and then there was *Brown v. Board of Education*, and suddenly there wasn't." In fact, this isn't true at all. In post-Civil War America, segregation fluctuated and was fought against over decades of social movements. In Louisiana, for example—a few years before the infamous 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision which legally justified segregation—ox-carts were desegregated after a campaign of sustained protest and sit-ins. Social change doesn't happen in the courts: courts just eventually catch up to what's been happening on the ground. If we instead depend on activist judges or lawyers, then social change will never come, and if it does, it will likely not be sustained. Try telling students in Boston's deeply-segregated public school system that segregation in education doesn't exist because of some Supreme Court case. They'll laugh you right out of their crumbling gymnasium.

A very clear example of how legal argumentation *doesn't* drive social change comes from the gay rights context. In 1971, in *Baker v. Nelson*, the highest court in Minnesota ruled that a state law banning gay marriage did not violate the U.S. Constitution. The couple seeking to be married tried to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court at the time was one of the most liberal we've ever had, just on the tail end of the famed Warren Court. The Court denied review of the case, stating that there was no Constitutional issue to review. Fast forward to 2015, when Supreme Court struck down a gay marriage ban in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. What happened in the intervening forty years to make this possible? The Constitution didn't change regarding these rights. The legal arguments didn't change either: if you read the briefs from both parties, the arguments advanced in 1971 and 2015 were pretty interchangeable. And the court in 2015 was *more* conservative, so the deciding factor wasn't some new critical mass of "activist" liberal judges. The *only* thing that explains this landmark shift is that, over the past four decades, both mainstream and radical LGBT rights movements had taken to the streets and created a cultural shift. *Obergefell* is due much more to the activities of ACT-UP and the post-Stonewall gay rights movement than to Anthony Kennedy suddenly being a pro-gay rights "activist judge."



# YOU BE THE JUDGE

## *An Examination of Juridical Aptitude*

**T**HE JUDICIARY IS THE HIGHEST CALLING IN AMERICAN GOVERNMENT. A democracy cannot function without sound judgment, and there can be no judgment without judges. But the life of the contemporary jurist is not always as romantic and exhilarating as one might assume. The resolution of judicial questions requires a lethally sharp analytic mind and an ability to see through a case's moral aspects in order to reach its legal ones. You may think being a judge requires little more than the ability to put on a robe and angrily pound your desk with a tiny hammer. But there is occasionally somewhat more to it than that, and you must also be practiced in the arts of sensible decision-making and reprimanding your lessers. Do you have what it takes to be a judge? Do you? Our comprehensive test will reveal the caliber of your legal mind and your capacity for abstruse reasoning.

**1.** A 16-year-old black child convicted of manslaughter has been given life in prison without the possibility of parole and is being housed in an adult facility. You must issue a judgment on his appeal. How do you respond?

**A.** Oh my God, that's horrifying. Overturn the sentence, order that the child be transferred to a juvenile facility immediately, order that they be given psychological counseling for any trauma that they might have incurred by being victimized during their time housed among much older inmates. Reprimand the prosecutor and order that restitution be made to the child's family.

**B.** The Founding Fathers would have been horrified to see injustice in our criminal justice system, and I find myself disturbed by this situation, which contradicts the core values of our great Constitution. This situation potentially violates the Equal Protection clause, the Due Process clause, and the prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment. We must determine whether the defendant's race was a factor in sentencing, whether the sentence was imposed according to proper due process, and whether all mitigating factors were taken into account. I hereby reverse and remand the case to the lower courts, who are instructed to ascertain the pertinence of these issues. If, after a searching examination, they conclude that defendant's race was not a factor, the sentence was imposed through proper due process, and the mitigating factors were considered, the sentence is constitutional, but if not, this is a scandalous violation of the defendant's basic rights and he must be guaranteed a parole hearing after the first fifty years of incarceration.

**C.** Our task here is to balance the interests of the defendant with the interests of the state, while preserving the integrity of existing precedent. To resolve this case, we may look to the precedent set by the 1632 English case of *Marston v. Rufflepenny*, which established the doctrine of *carceris dolorificum*, holding that "the punishment must be proportionally painful to the crime." *Marston* was, of course, modified by the 1843 *West Alaska Railroad* doctrine, which requires that Latin maxims be given their most arcane possible interpretation, which in this case would lead to the conclusion that imprisonment is a substitute for the pain of ordinary life. Weighing this in a four-factor test against the defendant's interests (the factors being legality, magnanimity, salinity, and dubiousness), one is compelled to rule against the defendant out of both pragmatic and textual considerations.

**D.** Nothing in the text of the Constitution or the laws of the United States prohibits the imposition of this sentence. There is no meaningful legal question here. I hereby uphold the sentence and sanction the child's attorney for wasting the court's time with a frivolous appeal.

**E.** The sentence is unconstitutionally light. Children should be subjected to harsher penalties than adults as a rule—they have many more years left during which they might commit a crime. At the time of our country's founding, serious crimes were dealt with via firing squad. Anything less in this case would be a flagrant violation of the Rule of Law, and would erode the moral fabric of Western Civilization. I hereby vacate the defendant's sentence and remand to the lower court with an instruction to impose nothing less than the most excruciating imaginable death and to require local schoolchildren to witness the execution as a deterrent measure.

**2.** A young woman has fled a small Central American country after being kidnapped and tortured by a violent gang. She had repeatedly refused to join the gang, at great risk to her own life, saying that she believed their way of life was morally wrong. Her asylum application was denied by an immigration judge, who said that as a mere victim of "violent crime," she was not eligible for protection. The immigration judge's decision was affirmed by the Board of Immigration Appeals, who stated that moral opposition to gangs did not qualify as a "political opinion," thus she was not eligible for asylum as she was not considered to be fleeing persecution. You must decide whether to uphold or overturn this decision.

**A.** This decision is overturned, and *no*, I'm not remanding it back to the asshole judge who denied it in the first place, I'm granting her asylum outright. Then I'm going home and hugging my beautiful children, who get to grow up in an environment of peace and safety. Then I'm setting up a scholarship fund for this young woman, who deserves to have something nice in her life for a change. Oh, does

that violate some kind of professional ethics rule? Fuck you. I don't care. If the counsel for the government keeps making that face at me, I'm going to have him air-dropped into a gang warzone. Then I'll watch him shit his pants. Then I'll inform him that soiling yourself doesn't qualify as a political opinion.

**B.** I am sympathetic to this young woman's position, but even more importantly, I am concerned about *administrability* and *predictable standards*. By rejecting the applicant's claim that moral objection to a gang constitutes a "political opinion," the BIA has effectively promulgated a new administrative rule. As such, under the Administrative Procedures Act, the agency must engage in a notice and comment period before the new rule can come into effect. This procedure will allow for consistent and reviewable standards for similarly-situated individuals.

**C.** Our job in this case is evaluate whether or not the applicant's fear was the result of a "protected belief." While I have no doubt that the violence she faced was real and that she suffered greatly, the law simply does not allow "not wanting to join a gang" to qualify as a political opinion. If her position was akin to "I am a Democrat and this is a gang of Republicans that I do not want to join," that would present a different issue. Per circuit precedent, as established in *Gonzalez v. Gonzalez*, only asylum applicants who have personally handed out leaflets clearly spelling out their political views at a fundraising brunch, and subsequently been pistol-whipped by a man wearing the lapel-pin of an opposing candidate, may be deemed to have a "political opinion" under the INA. In this case, we are bound by the law, and cannot consider her moral objection as valid basis for asylum. Further, we cannot find facts beyond those found by the BIA, and therefore must defer to their reasoned and expert judgement under the *Chevron* standard. Judgement affirmed.

**D.** A gang's attempt to coerce a person into joining their criminal enterprise does not constitute "persecution on account of political opinion." There is not enough evidence on the record to show that the applicant's resistance was politically motivated. A fact-finder might easily determine that her resistance stemmed from sheer, indiscriminate stubbornness, which might cause her to refuse to join *any* organization, or perhaps by her desire to reap economic and social benefits that would be barred to her as a gang member. Since the applicant did not produce evidence so compelling that no reasonable factfinder could fail to find the requisite fear of persecution on account of political opinion, the judgment is affirmed.

**E.** This Court has no jurisdiction to hear this appeal. Under longstanding doctrine only juridical "persons" have the ability to petition the Court for appeal. Persons under this definition are only those who reside within the jurisdiction of the Constitution, the U.S. and its territories. The petitioner here has no place of residence and does not fall under the ambit of the Constitution. Thus she is not legally a "person" for purposes of Constitutional application, and may not lawfully challenge her detention. Constitutional rights are not fruits in a garden, to be plucked by any passerby who







happens to be desirous of them. They are sacred charges granted to those who have accepted the social contract of our society. Furthermore, the frivolous petitioning of the Court for a client who clearly has no standing or rights before this body is a breach of the rules of ethics under *Rule 11*. The lawyer bringing this case is hereby sanctioned.

**3.** A prominent tech company has accidentally disclosed all of its customers' personal data to the public, including their entire email inboxes, their web search histories, their medical histories, their chat transcripts, their credit card numbers, and their tastes in unconventional pornography. Countless lives have been ruined, mass chaos has resulted. An employee whistleblower at the company reveals to the press that before the breach, the CEO was frequently heard to shout "Fuck the public! We own the public! The customer is the product!" whenever security concerns were raised. The company immediately fired the whistleblowing employee, and citing a small-print provision of the employment contract, demanded the employee pay back the entirety of the salary earned during the 10-year course of their employment. The contract also specifies that if the employee cannot pay, they become permanently indentured to the company. The employee files a lawsuit contesting the contract and alleging wrongful termination, while the customers enter a class action lawsuit over the data breach. You are the judge. Decide.

**A.** They did *what*? Okay, first, clearly you can't have a contract like that, that's outrageous. No indentured servitude. Jesus, how is it that I even have to say that? Is this some colonial-era nightmare flashback? The company is ordered to restore the employee to her position, compensate her for the time she was "fired," and apologize profusely. Actually, you know what, just turn the management of the company over to the workers. As for the customers, every single one of them needs to be paid fair compensation for their harm. Duh.

**B.** The company's actions are shameful, and were they done by the government, I would be shocked by their brazen unconstitutionality. However, private corporations are not covered by constitutional provisions, which restrain only state actors. In this case, the company did happen to be a private contractor that offered services to the government, which raises the question of whether it counts as operating *on behalf* of the state, thereby incurring state obligations and limitations. The answer is no. The plaintiffs also allege that the contracts they entered into were "unconscionable" and "horrifying," but their contractual claims are barred by a failure to file in the proper venue and the misapplication of "choice of law" by the lower court. I must ruefully dismiss the case.

**C.** The relevant provisions of the law of contracts can be found in ancient Sumerian labor law, which established the provision of    . Of course, this court previously addressed as similar case involving bakers and organ-grinders in *Dalafici v. Pennsylvania*. There, we held that "the contracted vessel is nowhere beyond the party's intent despite clapse." This was elaborated in the famous *Roadmaster General* case, in which a postal worker was shot for dropping a package into U.S. territorial waters during wartime. The same precept applied, without the maritime exceptions, in *Alameda Trucking*, a case that was partly superseded by *Pleniver v. Eustead* but whose caution against putting "the facts before the law without the law before the facts" remains valid as a legal construct and has been cited as recently as *Riddle Magazine v. Vietec Novelty Diskettes* in 1995, though that court used a truncated version of the dictum, altering its connotation to imply that "the facts" and "the law" are functionally inseparable rather than (as is wryly noted in the *Federalist Papers*) "separate despite their function." Scholarly literature on the "erosion" doctrine has implied that this conclusion may no longer hold absolutely, but until such time as this court abandons the classic multi-pronged "non-rights-oriented" approach this case may be settled on the basis of *querens parentes non posterum*. I therefore dismiss the plaintiff's claims.

**D.** The right of the employer and the freedom of contract are sacrosanct in American law. The customers entered a contract with the company allowing it to use their data as it pleased. The

employee entered into a contract with the company adhering to the indenture provision. The fact that neither the customers nor the employer "knew" what they had agreed to is immaterial. Whether one must abide by an agreement does not depend on whether one understands what it is. Furthermore, neither case should be in the court system due to the "private arbitration" provision of the contracts, which requires that any contractual disputes be settled in a fight to the death between the claimant and a large bullmastiff.

**E.** A labor contract transfers ownership rights over the employee to the employer. By engaging in voluntary market transaction with the company, the customers and the workers become company property and can be disposed of as the company's executives see fit. Because the indenture provision fails to compensate the company adequately for its loss, I hereby order that both customers and employees be placed in permanent corporate custody and sent to work down the Bitcoin mines.

**4.** At a political rally, the President of the United States strangled a protester to death with his bare hands. Prosecutors have sought to bring charges, but the president's legal counsel have filed a motion to dismiss the charges on the grounds that the president was acting within the scope of his executive authority. You are the presiding judge in the case. How do you respond?

**A.** What the everloving fuck? The executive authority to murder a person in cold blood? Are you seriously making that argument in my courtroom? Counsel, if you even begin to try that bullshit again in front of me, I am holding your ass in contempt. (Along with the rest of you.) I am having the president taken into custody, since he's not only a flight risk, but is also apparently under the illusion that he's allowed to kill people with impunity. Bail will be set at whatever the value of his real estate portfolio turns out to be.

**B.** This case raises very serious constitutional questions about the separation of powers. I am obviously disturbed by the incident, as one can tell from my proclamation of how disturbed I am. The important question here is whether the president is allowed to take lives under the scope of his *inherent* constitutional authority, or whether there must be prior congressional approval. It is clear from examination of the legislative history of the War Powers Act that Congress has only attempted to limit the president's wartime authority, rather than his civilian peacemaking powers. I remand the case to the lower court for a determination of whether choking an activist to death constitutes "peacemaking" as it has been historically construed.

**C.** Our own laws are silent on the question we face today, thus we must trace the roots of executive authority back to the 1215 *Magna Carta Libertatum* or Great Charter of Liberties. In those exemplifications most faithful to the original, the document constrained the ability of the King to interfere with the property of barons, but afforded little protection to the ordinary peasantry. We may therefore pose two questions: under common law, (1) should life be considered "property," the deprivation of which by the executive is lawfully restrained and (2) are rally attendants properly classified as barons or peasantry? Here, we may turn to the interpretation our own justices have historically given to common law rights against executive power. 1944's *Korematsu v. United States* affirmed the president's power to do as he pleases to anybody at any time, especially if it is racist. It is unclear in this case if the president's actions were racially motivated, but as long as they were, they fall within a long executive tradition justified by considerable legal precedent. *Stare decisis* settles the issue and the case must be dismissed.

**D.** The Constitution contains no provision explicitly prohibiting the president from throttling the life out of a random bystander, and the efforts of my colleagues to imagine such a provision into existence show well how political correctness continues to infiltrate the bench. These charges are an outrage and an insult to the memory of the Framers.

**E.** The president's power is absolute and unquestioned. The immunity doctrine makes this quite clear. The only tragedy of this case is the regrettably low number of lives he took. We should admire his dignity and restraint.

## add up your ANSWERS

**Mostly As:** It is clear that you are an individual of very strong convictions. This is admirable! Law is a noble calling that seeks humane minds. But to be a judge you will need to keep these personal idiosyncrasies in check. It seems you lack the temperament necessary for the profession. Perhaps you should consider a career in legal aid or political advocacy, where your recklessness and partisanship will not hinder your opportunities. Be warned, though, that too much agitation is unhealthy for a democracy, the preservation of which depends on the sober-minded stewardship of deliberative citizens.

**Mostly Bs:** You have an obvious desire for the law to function as a force for good, and you are clearly able to perceive injustice where you find it. However, your clear sympathies for the weak and vulnerable may make your judgments appear biased and unreliable, and your confirmation hearings will be difficult. As long as you are capable of demonstrating that you place the rule of law above your ideology, you may yet have a flourishing career on the bench. But be careful of pushing the envelope too far, and make diligent efforts to convince your fellow judges that your first loyalty is to the United States constitution rather than reason or human decency.

**Mostly Cs:** Your knowledge of legal history and the great jurisprudential traditions is formidable. Your thinking is both deeply grounded in formal doctrine and informed by a pragmatic understanding of real-world outcomes. You should take pride in how well your decisions display moral seriousness without being encumbered by political ideology. With study and diligence, you might be the next Stephen Breyer.

**Mostly Ds:** You have a textualist legal mind of the highest caliber. While in your rougher moments, your strict adherence to constitutional principles might alienate some mushier-minded judicial colleagues, they cannot help but respect your consistency and integrity. While an ignorant and politically biased public may mock you, it is universally acknowledged among serious thinkers that even when your decisions directly result in considerable suffering and loss of life, they have been made out of a sincere and admirable constitutional faith.

**Mostly Es:** Your views are somewhat unorthodox, some would say radical. In a previous era, it might have been necessary for you to modify the language with which you expressed your positions, though certainly not the positions themselves. Fortunately, the standards for being given a role in the upper echelons of American government have lately been evolving, and you are precisely the sort of person one can plausibly imagine soon being appointed to the federal bench. If your time is not yet, it is certainly soon.



**G**IVEN THAT THIS IS THE REALITY OF THE situation, what *should* be the appropriate role of judges in determining the direction of public policy? How much discretion should they have to delay or override actions by the legislature, or the executive? At the moment, it's hard not to cheer when a liberal judge from the Ninth Circuit issues an injunction against Trump's Muslim ban, or pushes back the imminent termination of Dreamers' DACA status. But this, of course, can go either way: in 2015, a conservative judge from a court in the Fifth Circuit was responsible for hamstringing Obama's DAPA program—which was supposed to extend relief from deportation to parents of U.S. citizen and permanent resident children—using the exact same judicial maneuver. If you are mostly indifferent to The Separation Of Powers in the abstract and simply favor whatever set of conditions seem to produce better moral outcomes, it's easy to feel conflicted about judicial power. Perhaps we rather like having a judiciary that, with a colorable legal pretext, can periodically throw a wrench in the governmental works on the theory that it's worth facing occasional legal obstacles to implementing good policies, so long as we retain the ability to sabotage truly egregious policies when they come along. But even this calculus depends on there being some critical mass of judges whom we believe to be our ideological allies (and/or basically decent moral actors) occupying high positions in the judiciary at any given time. This is far from a certain proposition. As with most checks and balances, the judiciary's ability to thwart the other branches of government isn't so much a reliable safeguard against tyranny as a wild-card element that occasionally works out in our favor.

More broadly, the temptation to view judges as potential saviors often seems to sap progressive will for reform efforts through electoral and legislative channels. We currently have a legislature that is chronically unresponsive to genuine public concerns, and an ongoing concentration of de facto governing power in the president and his executive agencies. In this context, it's understandable that people want to think of the judiciary as the last, best hope of American democracy. But even an optimally moral and courageous judiciary can usually only engage in obstructionist tactics, which a sufficiently determined executive will then maneuver around, unless the public finds some other way to make this politically inexpedient. The danger of reposing too much power in the judiciary, too, is amply illustrated by the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision, where the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the exact kinds of reforms that would have made the legislature more beholden to the real interests of the majority of their constituents—and which would thus have reduced the

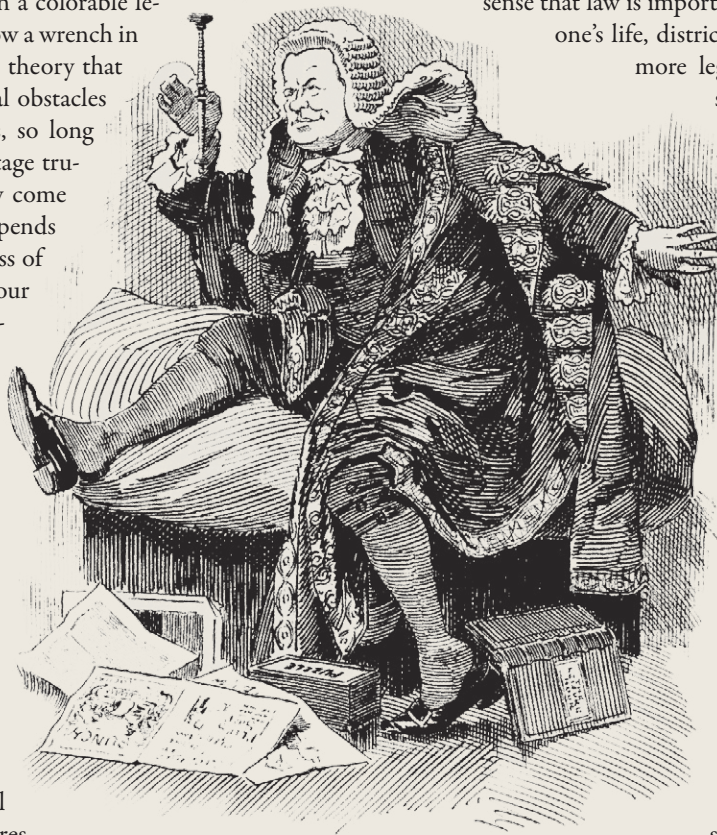
importance of the judicial *deus ex machina*. If we aspire to a form of democracy where there is an actual connection between the organizing efforts of the general public and the subsequent behavior of our elected officials, pushing for reforms to make our elected government more responsive to popular concerns is a better route than relying on distant elites to undo the mistakes of other elites. When you put power in the hands of unaccountable elites, you never know what they will do with it.

**S**O MUCH FOR JUDICIAL IMPACT ON PUBLIC POLICY writ large: what kind of power should judges have to decide the fate of the ordinary people, most of them poor, who come before them with criminal, domestic, housing, and immigration issues? Lower court judges—as opposed to appellate judges, who are often dealing with weird standards of review—have considerable discretion to reach whatever decision they wish to reach. (And in the sense that law is important in the impacts that it creates on

one's life, district and municipal judges have much more legal power than the higher courts since they decide most of the cases). In some sense, we might think this is a good thing: if a plaintiff or defendant's situation is complicated, we could want the adjudicator to have the flexibility to weigh whatever factors seem most relevant, rather than being totally bound by one-size-fits-all rules. (Consider, for example, the disaster of mandatory minimums, which were originally touted as a means of curtailng the improper and inconsistent exercise of judicial discretion in sentencing, or consider risk evaluation metrics that turn peoples' bail determinations into an algorithm in an effort to reduce inconsistency.) But if you have a judge who fundamentally *does not care* about the person in front of her, or grossly misunderstands the actual circumstances of their life, this broad discretionary leeway

will be, at best, useless. At worst, it will empower the judge to make a unusually bad and biased ruling.

Part of the problem, of course, is that judges are separated from poor litigants by class and, often, race. If we want more judges to exercise discretion in an empathetic direction, it seems crucial to diversify the pool of judges, perhaps directly through quotas, or indirectly by reducing social and financial barriers to entry in the legal profession. Also important is changing the dominant ethos of legal education, which overwhelmingly privileges the pet concerns of legal academics and corporate clients over the kinds of issues that affect the vast majority of the people caught up in our courts. But these initiatives by themselves likely wouldn't be sufficient to cure the defects in our judiciary. Just as diversifying the police force hasn't been a silver bullet in eliminating police brutality, we can't simply address *who* is on



the bench and ignore the problem of the *power* that judges have in and of itself. Since there's no good way to actually measure judicial "empathy," you run the risk of simply adding a diversity gloss to a fundamentally unjust system.

This problem does not have a simple solution, but there are perhaps three clarifying ways we can think about the Problem of Judges. One, we should break any habit of looking to the law as a primary source of social change. Sure, we want to eliminate bad laws and enact good ones. But changing the law is usually the middle- or end-point, rather than the starting-point, of on-the-ground changes in human social behavior. Most of the real work will happen not in the courtroom, but in the streets: social justice-minded lawyers play, at best, a bit part or supporting role, formulating legal avenues for the changes already underway to become more solidified in formal practice.

Secondly, when we *do* seek to enact legal change, one of our concerns should be to craft legal standards with an optimum humane baseline, so that the role for judicial discretion, so far as possible, is forced in the direction of mercy. Attempting to make perfect legal rules for all cases is a futile exercise, but we can at least shut off some possibilities for bad exercises of discretion. (Sometimes, the best way to do this is to get rid of the stupid law that would have thrust a person into the back of a police car, and then in front of a judge, in the first place.)

Thirdly, it's naïve to expect judges to be unusually moral people. That said, basic morality remains *the only proper standard* by which to assess whether someone is a "good" judge or not. A good judge is someone who uses whatever discretion and whatever legal tools are at their disposal to reduce human suffering. They actively seek to understand the human impact of the cases in front of them. They are humble enough to admit what they *don't* understand, and to solicit whatever information or advice they think will help improve their understanding, so that they can make a decision that they believe will be really helpful to people. They care about what happens to the parties in the case. Sure, inasmuch as we disagree about what "goodness" is, this standard for assessing judges is squishy. But we'd rather have *that* argument any day of the week than 99% of the arguments lawyers are forced to make in court.

The solution may not be clear, but what is apparent is that judges are more concerned with law than justice and that they have far too much power to ruin peoples' lives. Ideally, no one would actually be able to authorize your ouster from your home or the prolonged caging of human beings—so to the extent that we can limit that, we ought to. Beyond that we must strive to make the system and the people within it more just and reduce our dependence on that system for justice and morality in the first place. ♦

## Some More Radical Solutions to the Judge Problem

### 1. No more judges

But how can you have a legal system without judges, you say? Well, in ancient Athens (*immediate chorus of boos*) no, hear me out (*boos continue*)! Look, I'm not proposing ancient Athens as a civilizational ideal, I'm just exploring an alternative institutional design (*boos increase in volume*)! IN ANCIENT ATHENS, judges were essentially administrative functionaries, with no real decision-making power. Cases were decided entirely by enormous juries of 201-501 people, who were assigned to cases by random lottery and received a small fee for their services. A simple majority vote, without deliberation, determined the verdict. In the words of legal historian Adriaan Lanni, "the Athenians made a conscious decision to reject the rule of law in most cases, and they did so because they thought giving juries unlimited discretion to reach verdicts based on the particular circumstances of each case was the most just way to resolve disputes." There were almost no rules of evidence! Juries could heckle witnesses! Defendants frequently brought their adorable children in front of the jury and made them cry on cue! Ancient Athens would have made for excellent Court TV. But honestly, given the choice between going in front of a notoriously harsh judge, or making a freewheeling appeal to a random set of 500 people, the mega-jury doesn't sound like the *worst* gamble. Of course, if you happen to be a minority living in an area where the majority jury pool is especially assholeish, the whole go-with-your-gut, minimal-legal-standards thing might not work out so well. Maybe each side should be allowed up to 300 peremptory juror challenges? We can figure it out!

### 2. Improve the judges

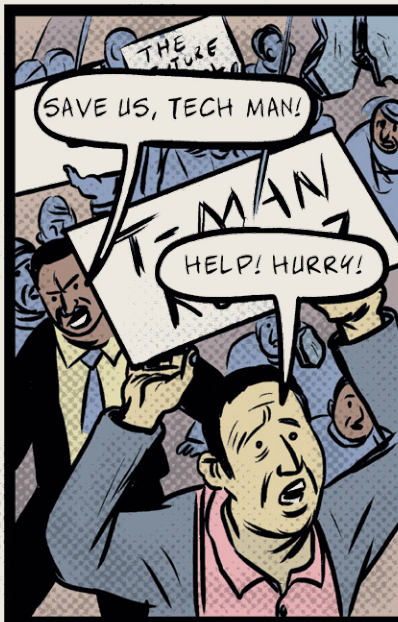
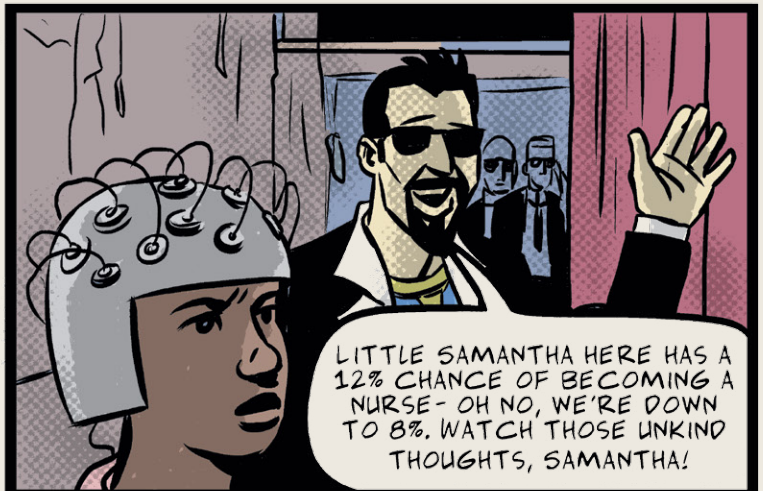
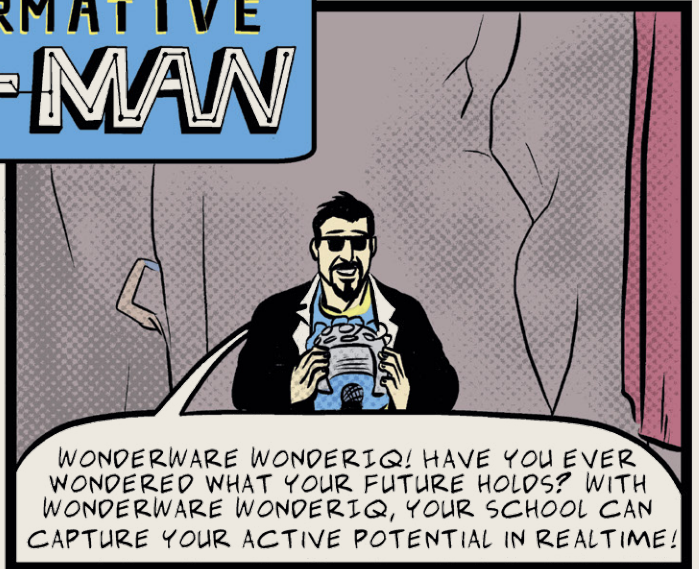
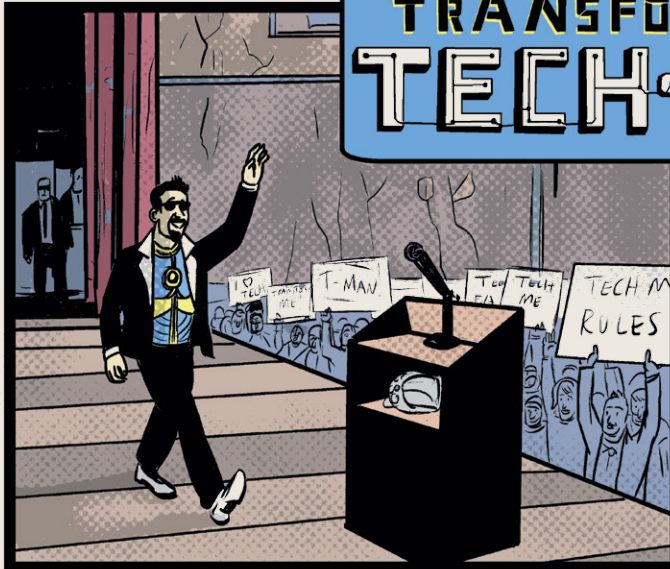
As *Current Affairs* has previously argued with reference to legislators, the surest way to improve (at least marginally) the pool of applicants for a given job is to remove the incentives that would disproportionately cause sociopaths to apply. Anyone who thinks they *deserve* to be a judge—i.e. the individual arbiter of how much state-sanctioned punishment ought to be meted out against total strangers—is inherently bound to be a *little* full of themselves. The qualification process for becoming a judge, therefore, should be one calculated to break down the applicant's pride. Training for a judgeship should be *spiritually grueling*, like training for an elite military unit or an ascetic monastic order. Aspiring judges have to forfeit all their personal wealth and complete a rigorous ten-year public service program, which will involve their being embedded in a variety of different communities throughout the country. They will spend time in nursing homes, prisons, rehab centers, public schools, garbage collection routes, daycare centers, agricultural worksites, emergency rooms, the kitchens of fast food restaurants, and the like. Individuals who complete the training course will be assigned to a random jurisdiction by lottery, where they will live on a comfortable but modest salary. If the judge is widely loathed, they may be ejected from the jurisdiction by popular referendum. If they are ejected from two successive jurisdictions, they are disqualified as judges.

### 3. The same judges, but we respect them less

Maybe we can't improve on our judges, but we can at least change public attitudes towards them. The idea that judging is a profession with any special dignity should be done away with entirely. Outdated markers of hierarchy, like forcing people to stand when the judge enters the courtroom, or address the judge as "Your Honor," should be eliminated. Lawyers and litigants should be provided with gavels, which they can use to call judges to attention when they wander from the issue at hand, or whenever they make remarks deemed inappropriate. Preferably, when hearing cases, the judge will sit at an ordinary table, on the same level as litigants, rather than on an elevated stand. Judges' outfits should be sillier, to bring the U.S. in line with international practice: unsightly wigs and garishly-colored robes should be required across all jurisdictions. These judicial uniforms will be mandatory not only in the courtroom, but at all times when the judge appears in public. Judges who violate the dress code will be detained by law enforcement, followed by an arraignment and the levying of a sizable fine.



# THE TRANSFORMATIVE TECH-MAN









# DISMANTLING THE “WEST”

*by Daniel Walden*

THE ALT-RIGHT MAY DEPART FROM MAINSTREAM conservatism in a number of ways, but one trait they both have in common is an obsession with something known as “Western Civilization.” The term gets waved around a lot by people all across the political right. The near-genocidal Traditionalist Worker Party founder Matthew Heimbach once headed a chapter of the “Youth for Western Civilization,” Stanford pop historian and Kissinger hagiographer Niall Ferguson makes a hierarchical distinction between “the West and the rest,” while noted social-scientific blowhard Jordan Peterson has repeatedly declared that “The West is right.” But what is this mysterious entity called “the West” anyway? Or, to break the question down a bit more, what do they *think* they mean by “the West,” what are they actually signaling by talking about “the West,” and why should anyone care about “the West” at all (since, spoiler alert, it’s largely a fabrication)?

When people on the right talk about “the West,” they almost always do so in glowing terms. It’s the “birthplace of democracy” or the “mother of reason” or the “nursemaid of science” or any number of other natal clichés. The achievement of the West, in their minds, is a kind of origination or invention of various significant cultural institutions that, for better or worse, now shape the experiences of billions of people around the world. (Ferguson nauseatingly calls these great Western institutions “killer apps.”) Setting aside for a moment the fact that modern democracy looks absolutely nothing like the Athenian system, or that Indian scholars began developing multiple systems of formal logic several hundred years before Aristotle was born, this affection is understandable: democracy and reason and science are generally considered good things, and it’s good to want to know how they came about.

But is that really all that’s going on? Some other facets of this fixation suggest not. If one browses the corners of the internet frequented by the far right (and I do not advise doing so without something pleasant at hand

to drink, like overproof whisky or a warm mug of cyanide), one finds a pretty high concentration of jokes and memes centered on the Crusades, which are implied to be a great moment in the clash of civilizations. *Current Affairs* readers, who are noted for their depth of learning and historical savvy, might find this somewhat confusing. After all, the Crusades are famous mostly for their large death toll, their ultimate ineffectiveness, and their having inadvertently caused one of the longest and bitterest religious schisms in history between the Eastern and Western Christian churches. Not exactly a proud civilizational high point. Those same readers might conclude that a West-loving person celebrating the Crusades must have some other facet of them in mind. That facet, to no one’s surprise, turns out to be anti-Arab racism, and the numerous downsides to the Crusades are overlooked in favor of their having been occasions for a bunch of Europeans to kill a lot of Arabs.

I don’t pretend to have uncovered some great secret about the far right. Talking to these people mirrors the experience of talking to someone who’s *just a bit* too interested in German artillery from the First and Second World Wars, though the alt-right’s attempts at dog-whistle Nazi fandom are less like a soft whistle than a fifty-piece military band. The more mainstream right, however, despite its frequent disavowal of racism, upholds these very same visions of European superiority and colonial conquest, and, moreover, does so in terms that an attentive reader cannot help but gloss as racial. Its representatives will say otherwise: their devotion is to the “culture” of the West, or to history, or to “Judeo-Christian values.” But the way in which this culture and these values are represented must occasion serious reflection on what the “values” in question actually are.

The preferred aesthetic modes of this kind of “Western culture” conservatism are classicism and neoclassicism, and this should give us immediate pause. I don’t mean to deride classical and neoclassical art. Classical sculpture and architecture are genuinely beautiful, and while some neoclassical architecture is bland and derivative, it has also given us beautiful public

buildings and spaces that are pleasant to look at and move through. But it's hard to think of monumental edifices of white marble and not suspect that the "white" might bear a heavier load than the marble. Sarah Bond, a historian and archaeologist at the University of Iowa, reminded us of this last year when she published an essay bringing to popular attention what scholars have known for a while now: the plain white marble commonly associated with Greek and Roman antiquity was in fact painted and brightly colored, and that the "idealized" proportions of classical sculpture have a long history of deployment in explicitly racist scientific literature, like medical textbooks describing phrenology. Bond's argument is that we need to be conscious of the ways in which a classicizing aesthetic of white marble forms and European facial features can unintentionally uphold notions of white racial superiority. After making this eminently sensible point, Bond was subjected to coordinated online harassment and death threats from the far right, while mainstream right-wing publications like the *National Review* scoffed at her radical suggestion that we ought to discuss ancient statues as they actually were.

Classicist Donna Zuckerberg has also written against alt-right appropriation of antiquity and has faced similar death threats from the far right and scorn or indifference from the mainstream right. In the desire of these supposed custodians of history to maintain their already-existing conceptions of antiquity even at the price of ignoring what these statues were actually like, we see history actively giving way to other concerns. When a supposedly mainstream conservative publication dismisses expert scholarly opinion and wonders why we can't just keep the statues white, it doesn't take a trained philologist to draw out what's really going on.

Since, however, I actually *am* a trained philologist, I'd like to draw this out a bit further. The notion of a "cultural inheritance" common to "Western" people—a category that is both strikingly modern and shockingly difficult to define—purports to stand for a cohesive "European" achievement. (It also attempts to escape any possible charge of racism, by insisting that race has no bearing on culture, i.e. the problem with Muslims is their faith rather than their ethnicity. This is completely untrue, of course. White supremacy is omnipresent in American and European cultures, and people who are not white consequently experience those cultures very differently from both white people and from one another, depending on where they are and how their race is perceived.) We can see this rhetoric in detail in the Paris Statement, a recent product of the "cultural right" put out by a small but representative group of European conservatives and endorsed by "respectable" conservative journals like the *National Review*. The statement is careful to disavow racism from the very beginning but then posits a crucial dichotomy between a "true Europe" that is vital and productive and strong (but also somehow under threat), and a "false Europe" that is hollow and weak (but also somehow threatens to overwhelm the true Europe). Umberto Eco once identified a particular rhetorical register of fascism in which "by a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak." The constant vacillation between the vitality/vulnerability of "true Europe" and the unreality/unstoppability of "false Europe" fits Eco's criterion exactly. The "true Europe" is also identified repeatedly with particular people as their patrimony or inheritance, which certainly implies ancestry and "roots."

Indeed, the notion of European culture as a kind of patrimony can be traced back to the 19th-century search for the "original" Indo-Europeans, the people who spoke the language from which the Germanic, Celtic, Romance, Slavic, Iranian, and Indic languages, along with many others, all descend. It was by asserting Germans' direct descent from this group that the Nazis asserted a hereditary German right to rule over Europe. Using the same conceptual apparatus smuggles in questions of race, as it were, through the back door.

The Paris Statement also suggests that the primary threat to Europe is too much "openness," particularly to the cultures of Muslim immigrants.

These cultures are, apparently, incompatible with Europe and cannot exist within its borders. This particular strain of argument is drawn straight from Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, which posits a unified "West" identified primarily with Protestant and Catholic Christianity and predicts that the next great conflict will be between "Western" and "Islamic" civilizations. This connection illustrates the strong cross-pollination between European nativism and American neoconservatism, and the ease with which each substitutes "Europe" and "the West" for one another when translating their ideas back and forth.

**W**HAT EXACTLY, THEN, IS THIS "WESTERN culture" that so fascinates and concerns them? What is the common inheritance that modernity has supposedly abandoned? This proves a far more difficult question to answer because the idea of "the West" turns out to be a surprisingly modern way of looking at Europe and the countries formed by European settlement and colonization (principally the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, from 1918, occupies an important place in this. Not only is it one of the favorite texts of the modern alt-right, but it was the text through which a great many Anglophone intellectuals took up the notion of a unified "West" that could be talked about across historical periods. Spengler wasn't the first prominent scholar to speak of it, but he was the most publicized, and his framework was particularly influential on the European political right. Though Spengler did not espouse the same sort of vicious anti-Semitism that would later result in the Holocaust, he did help to cement the notion that the world was divided into distinct "civilizations" along ethno-religious lines, writing in his introduction that "it is self-evident that for the Cultures of the West the existence of Athens, Florence, or Paris is more important than that of Lo-Yang or Paliputra." Lest we mistake his meaning, he writes only a few pages earlier that "We men of Western culture are, with our historical sense, an exception and not a rule. World-history is our world picture and not all mankind's." This is not overt eugenicist superiority, but it clearly searches for the exceptionalism of an internally coherent "West," which lays the intellectual groundwork for the systemic exclusion of Jews, Romani, and others who can be labeled foreign.

Shortly after Spengler published the first volume of *Decline*, American education began a series of reforms that would shape the way that we perceive "the West." Throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the elite universities in the United States stuck to a curriculum centered on the Greek and Latin classics. Toward the century's end, some of those universities, most famously Harvard, began switching to an elective system in which students had far greater choice in what they would study. In partial reaction to this, as well as to the horrors of World War I and the failures of European nationalisms, professors at Columbia and the University of Chicago formed their own curricula grounded in what they considered "great books" of human civilization, the designated classic texts that supposedly comprised the core of worthy human insight.

These courses didn't begin as exclusively "Western," but they quickly became so. The designers aimed to strengthen American democracy and our relationships with European countries by promoting an understanding of American "roots" as well as the common heritage of "Western" countries generally. Historian-turned-biologist Dylan Morris sums up this transition in his Master's dissertation on the subject:

"Since American freedom was founded upon Western roots, [educators] argued, American citizenship required a grounding in the Western tradition. In the context of conflicts with Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, the great books educators argued that opposition to totalitarianism required the sense of universal values their education could provide... Moreover, associating the great books with the West also allowed the great books educators to avoid explicitly



*making the claim that the books were greater than any modern thought or than the works of the emerging 'East,' claims that increasingly risked being seen as 'new medievalism' and 'ethnocentric,' respectively."*

Morris notes that these educators at once attempted to disavow any claims of "Western" supremacy, but also claimed that this education would impart "universal values," claiming the "universal" perspective for the West in the same way that Spengler claimed for "world history."

Of course, capitalism will find a way to monetize anything that comes near it, and "great books" are no exception. The moment of truly explosive popularity for "great books" came in 1952 when Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins, who had been responsible for the curriculum at Chicago, released a set of "Great Books of the Western World" published by Encyclopedia Britannica. It sold very well and found its way into middle-class homes across the country. This, far more than the curricula at a couple of elite universities, shaped popular American perceptions of "Western Civ" and its importance to national identity. But it's instructive to compare Adler and Hutchins's set with another famous "Great Books" collection, the Harvard Classics, put out in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Charles Eliot, the Harvard president responsible for instituting the university's elective system. Both sets of books market themselves as a kind of self-education. By reading and reflecting on these books, privately and in their own home, a person will become better equipped for citizenship in a democratic society. But the earlier Harvard set, even with its sparse selection of Buddhist texts, Indian epic, and excerpts from the Qur'an, is far more inclusive of non-"Western" perspectives than the later Chicago set. In the Chicago set, we can also see the barest gesture toward including Russian literature under the canon of "the West," with a single novel each from Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. As Morris observes, Adler's equation of "Western" with "universal," begun in his curriculum and in the Britannica series's pompously-titled *Syntopicon*, reached its apex with the 2000 publication of his final book, *How to Think About the Great Ideas*, in which he identifies exactly 103 "Great Ideas" that, he claims, sum up all of human thought: "All the Great Ideas are recognizably the same as they were in the ancient world. None of them is a 'modern discovery.' The ancient Greeks had a name for all 103 of them." Leaving aside my severe professional skepticism that the concept of an "Angel" is a universal idea or that fifth-century Athenians had any notion of such a thing, this assertion is remarkable for the bald transparency of both its intellectual parochialism and its sheer snake-oil hucksterism. Here, for the low price of \$34.95, is *every idea worth considering*, all explored in a list of books you already know and respect.

The notion that "Western thought" contained every major human intellectual contribution was not inevitable, and in fact would have been unthinkable a century beforehand. What makes this collapse of perspective noteworthy and alarming is the wildly different attitude that 19<sup>th</sup>-century European intellectuals held toward "the East," by which they meant chiefly Middle Eastern, Chinese, and Indian cultures. Indeed, much of the intellectual life of the later 1800's was marked by a pervasive enthusiasm for the literatures and religions of these regions. Between 1879 and 1910, Oxford University Press put out a fifty-volume series of the *Sacred Books of the East*, overseen by Max Müller, one of the leading Indologists of the era. That a press could undertake such a mammoth series with the expectation that it would sell speaks to the ready appetite of both scholars and the literate public for "Eastern" material. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century also saw a minor literary mania for Edward Fitzgerald's famous English translation of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, which kindled enthusiasm for Persian and Arabic literature among readers of all ages.

We know, of course, that this enthusiasm was also suffused with an Orientalism that effaced the great cultural diversity of Asia and the Middle East, turning them into a unified blob of Eastern exoticism while exploiting the people and resources of those regions. But at the same time, it *did*

get something right: other people in other places had produced art and thought that was different from our own, but no less worthy. That this zeal to learn from other cultures would give way, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century United States, to Adler's bargain-bin parochialism seems to me one of the great tragedies of American intellectual life.

THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY SHIFT IN THE FOCUS OF educational curricula and book series shows that popular notions of "great" literary and cultural achievement, though overwhelmingly focused on Euro-American works, once did attempt to embrace important works outside that sphere. Only later did it become entangled with delimiting "the West" and limiting its selections to that area. But perhaps more importantly, it also demonstrates just how unstable the idea of "the West" was and remains to this day. Nowadays it's hard to find a "Great Books of the West" list that doesn't include major Russian authors, and even many of the self-avowedly "Western" curricula like those at Columbia and UChi-

## "THE NOTION THAT 'WESTERN THOUGHT' CONTAINED EVERY MAJOR HUMAN INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTION WOULD ONCE HAVE BEEN UNTHINKABLE..."

cago have incorporated readings from the Qur'an and from Islamic thinkers like Ibn Rushd, Al-Ghazali and Ibn Sina. The idea of the "West" as a distinct and self-contained set of cultures and works is a deeply modern idea, and the gaps between contemporary articulations of "the West" and those from even the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century show how closely that idea reflects the twists and turns of modernity rather than any kind of unchanging body of historical tradition.

But I don't just mean to jab a finger at the right and lecture them on their ignorance, abundant though it may be. What I mean to expose here is that *there is no stable "Western" tradition at all*. There were other concepts that encompassed Europe, like the medieval and early modern idea of "Christendom," but Christendom was badly damaged by the Wars of Religion and was thoroughly dead after the French Revolution, and in any case, "Christendom" is a very different thing from "the West." The latter is a modern invention, taken up by some elite college professors and then sold door to door for a tidy profit. The right, particularly the "respectable" right, is very keen to claim that it remains faithful to some cultural inheritance that the left has abandoned in favor of contemporary fashionable orthodoxies, but they play the same game that we do—they're just better at selling it. In fact, the most prominent tradition of left-wing scholarship, Marxism, is markedly older than the idea of "the West," since the first volume of *Capital* was published in 1867.

The harm in buying into the right's framing of a venerable and antiquated "Western tradition" goes somewhat beyond being mocked by classicists in academic footnotes. Accepting their terms means accepting, implicitly, that there is a tradition of thought with enough internal coherence that one can decide what falls within it and what doesn't. This is the premise of those conservatives like former education secretary William Bennett, whose report on higher education declares that "our society is the product and we the inheritors of Western civilization," and immediately goes on to identify "Western civilization" with "masterworks of English, American, and European literature." This is a transposition of the Paris Statement into a more intellectual and less geopolitical register, but it sounds all the same notes: a patrimony that belongs to "us" by inheritance; the necessity of maintaining its integrity; the danger that opening it too widely will destroy it; the implicit threat from influences inside it but somehow also foreign. (It's curious that the right, which so loathes "identity politics," embraces the most extreme and dangerous forms of identity politics: the civilizational and the national.)

Framing matters around an "us" and a "them" invites an audience to imagine what these degrading influences are. Some blame leftist Jewish academics like the expatriate Frankfurt School, others blame feminism and suggest that things were better when nobody had to care what women thought. Charles Murray has written that "Europe dominate[s] the narrative of human accomplishment," and that "so does the minority that has become known in recent years as dead white males," implying that any attempt to uncover the histories of women's accomplishment must be distorting fact in the service of politics. (Incidentally, this is demonstrably false. Philosopher Christia Mercer has recently made a very persuasive case that much of René Descartes's most famous philosophical argument was drawn from the writings of the Christian mystic Teresa of Avila.) When the left cedes this ground and allows the right to frame discussion in terms of a very white and male "West," we allow the right to construct a Euro-American past that does not involve Jews or women or people of color, which sets the stage for excluding the ideas of Jews and women and people of color from present consideration.

We also concede the notion that this continuous and identifiable "West" developed primarily through its own powers, with only marginal influence from the "non-Western" peoples. This myth of self-generated vitality is an old one, traceable back to the Athenian myth of the first Athenians springing from the soil of Attica, and finding new and horrifying life in the Third Reich's foundational myth of Germanic aboriginality. But it is well known that European civilization has always engaged in trade and exchange with non-European peoples, and that those peoples have sometimes exercised profound influence on large segments of culture. This is not even something that takes careful exegesis to discover. Throughout medieval scholastic philosophy, for example, the commentaries on Aristotle by the Andalusian Muslim polymath Ibn-Rushd are explicitly quoted either to confirm a point or as an authority sufficiently eminent to demand specific refutation. The whole shape of this most stereotypically European period of thought depends on that influx of Arabic philosophy. Even the very Christianity held so dear by so many avowedly secular right-wing intellectuals is the product of contact between a heretical Jewish sect and the Hellenistic culture that pervaded the Mediterranean in that era. There simply isn't any way to imagine modern Europe without the foundational influence of these and many other distinctly non-European voices.

**O**F COURSE, ACKNOWLEDGING EURO-AMERICAN CULTURAL and intellectual debts is not sufficient. A focus on the cultural integrity of "the West" also elides the ways in which so many European countries built their wealth and cultural production through colonial exploitation and enslavement of non-European people. This can-

not be pushed to the periphery. It was foundational to Euro-American modernity as we know it, and any serious attempt to understand European and American societies must confront it. In a very real sense, focusing on an integrated "West" minimizes and obscures that historical atrocity. It says that the development of European and North American nations came about through the actions and ideas of people unequivocally on the cultural "inside," and relegates the ideas and actions of exploited and enslaved peoples to a footnote. This is the very same "history as therapy" of which the right so often accuses fields like Afro-American Studies and Gender Studies. It tells its intended audience that only the actions of people like them really matter, and that any historical crimes weren't really so bad as to affect the foundations of their culture.

As it happens, I am not at all an opponent of "history as therapy." Quite the contrary, I think that finding our individual and collective selves through the study of history is one of the most rewarding uses of leisure, and that everyone should have the time and resources to do so. But good therapy requires honesty, as any qualified therapist will tell you. Far from being a process of constant affirmation, an effective course of therapy often forces us to confront the parts of ourselves we least want to acknowledge, and to abandon the comfortable illusions that allow us to ignore the harm we do to others and to ourselves. This therapeutic end is precisely what requires us to abandon the notion of an integrated and continuous "West" in our studies of history and culture. By continuing to speak in those terms, we allow our discussion to be shaped by an illusion that obscures millennia of ongoing contact between European nations or settlements and non-European peoples, as well as the many evils perpetrated against those peoples. We allow ourselves to say that only "our" people's deeds and experiences matter, and that other people's deeds and experiences are not really important enough to affect who "we" are.

**S**O WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE OUR VIEW OF LITERATURE OR history or other forms of culture? How are we to structure our conversation and study of these things without a term like "the West" to draw them together? This is a less difficult proposition than it might appear, since these subjects were studied before the invention of "the West" and will continue to be studied in other ways. There are plenty of ways to frame questions of literary and cultural history that don't lie about which people matter, and we certainly shouldn't abandon studying the histories and cultures of Europe and North America. These regions and cultures exercise enormous influence around the world, and understanding them is a worthwhile project. But we have an obligation to do so responsibly, in a way that is faithful both to the material and to our fellow human beings. Virtually no one involved in the culture wars over "Western Civ" in the 90's ever said that the study of Plato or Cervantes or the Thirty Years' War was worthless. They just aren't the only things that matter, and we should delight that there is so much more for us to know that *does* matter and that *can* instruct and delight us. The poet and classical scholar A. E. Housman put it best:

*"Other desires become the occasion of pain through dearth of the material to gratify them, but not the desire of knowledge: the sum of things to be known is inexhaustible, and however long we read we shall never come to the end of our story-book. So long as the mind of man is what it is, it will continue to exult in advancing on the unknown throughout the infinite field of the universe; and the tree of knowledge will remain for ever, as it was in the beginning, a tree to be desired to make one wise."*

The realization that "the West" has not exhausted all worthwhile human endeavor should fill us with wonder at the scope of human possibility. There will always be more to know, more places to see, more people to meet. For those of us on the left who claim to love humanity, I can think of few more powerful visions of our future. ❖



Could you be a

# New York Times

opinion columnist?

Thank you for your interest in contributing to the New York Times opinion page. Before we get started, we just need to run a quick background check. To start, please open your latest Pottery Barn catalog to page 15. If you don't get the Pottery Barn catalog, there's no need to continue filling out this application: you're obviously not a regular reader of the New York Times. If you do have the Pottery Barn catalog, and your complexion falls on the darker side of the "birchbark beige" ottoman featured on page 15, please, please, PLEASE feel free to complete this application. The New York Times is an equal opportunity environment. At our last Shell Oil-sponsored fundraising soiree, we even distributed #blacklivesmatter tote bags! (But when you don't hear from us, please don't take it personally, okay? We're simply swamped with applicants these days. We promise that all applicants of color were totally, briefly considered.)

1. Which of the following statements best exemplifies your current thinking on climate change?

A. Climate change is very real and extremely dangerous. Simply asking corporations to "do better" won't work, because it'll always be more profitable to destroy the environment than to save it. Capitalism got us into this mess; capitalism can't get us out of it. We need to immediately restructure the entire edifice of energy production and consumption.

B. I firmly believe that if Hillary Clinton were president, she would have launched her #greengrab #initiative by now, encouraging corporate takeovers of third world countries to prevent those charmingly backward folks from burning their trash. But instead, we have Tr\*mp. Since no one can do anything about the environment except for the chief executive of the United States government, there's nothing to do except write snarky columns about What Might Have Been and wallow in despair. #shewarnedus #feminism

C. While some critics have claimed that my background in classical philology doesn't entitle me to learned opinions on scientific subjects, I must respectfully disagree. It is indeed correct that I have never read a single paper on the topic of climate change, but I do have a vague notion of the existence of a "controversy." Obviously, universities are secretly quashing all research that contradicts established scientific consensus purely on the grounds of free-speech denialism. I know this because of my pre-existing prejudices, and also my tidy grant from the Koch Foundation.

D. Climate change doesn't exist. It's a myth created by Hollywood to cover up George Soros' cannibalism ring. Every "green activist" is an FBI plant, unless it's the CIA I hate this week.

2. What is your opinion of free speech on our nation's campuses? Do you believe that millennials are hypersensitive snowflakes, gormless grade-grubbers, or dangerous anti-free speech fanatics?

A. Obviously, college students say some silly things sometimes, but in general I believe the panic over college kids and free speech is an overblown conservative rumor. The real threat to free speech on college campuses is the precariousness of adjunct professorships. When you have zero job security, the economic risks of speaking your mind are simply too high. A unionized professorial class, allied with other staff members and students, can do a great deal to improve economic conditions for all.

B. Now, I'm a feminist, but I secretly feel political correctness has gone too far. When I informed a noted black academic that the term "intersectionality" excludes white women, I was forced to quit Facebook and Twitter. In fact, the blowback was so horrific, I had to do a six-week mindfulness course instead of my usual four. Now that I'm back from my digital detox, I'd really like to write a weekly column about how soul-cleansing it is to break up with social media, especially for academics who have gotten SO sensitive these days. (Also, I wish they'd stop dragging me, it really interferes with my self-actualization.)

C. The degradation of the ivory tower cannot be overstated. I've heard that students have walked out of courses such as "Glories of the Classical Canon" just because their professors spoke disparagingly of the "non-literature" of other cultures. Post-modernism has destroyed our respect for tradition. Suddenly, merely teaching Western civilization is tantamount to a war crime. I've considering resigning my honorary Harvard professorship in disgust – I won't, but I could.

D. Marxist Freemasons have teamed up with a race of alien shapeshifting leopard people to indoctrinate our youth. It's obvious. If you study these extreme close-up photos of pillars on college campuses, you'll see what I mean.

3. At the New York Times, we care a great deal about cultural trends. How would you best describe your personal style, and what's your general take on fashion?

A. I wear whatever I want, and I don't give a shit about other people's clothes as long as they seem like they're sincerely trying to express themselves. I'll always laugh at a high fashion failure, but I'll never judge a poor person for wearing an unflattering outfit.

B. If the people in my rapidly gentrifying neighborhood are to be believed, my style can best be described as "basic bitch." Ok, FINE, so you can't always tell me apart from the wallpaper. But I personally consider my look classic; and on that basis, I feel justified in judging other women's clothes. When a young woman looks too comfortable, or an older woman looks too sexy, I take great pleasure in telling them to stop. That's what feminism means to me: constantly obsessing over other women's micro-decisions while men continue to hold nearly all social, political, and economic power.

C. Every day, I dress in a tidy three-piece suit and a bowtie from Earl's of London. That's the outfit of a gentleman. You'll find me wearing it even in 110-degree heat. (The summers have grown hotter...a curious phenomenon. Perhaps it's simply how one feels the heat as one ages.) In any weather and any season, I promise to constantly proffer my opinion of youths in saggy pants.

D. Over my Metal Gear Solid t-shirt, I wear chainmail painted with the Confederate flag. It's...very heavy actually. My take on fashion is that restaurants should have the right to refuse service to anyone, but I shouldn't get kicked out just because my chainmail "smells like rust and unwashed dogs."

4. Last question: are you currently friends with any Nazis?

A. Oh my god, no. Absolutely not. Was that a serious question?

B. Hmmm. Define "friends." Is it "friendship" if all you do is secretly DM each other racist memes?

C. By refusing to be friends with people just because they advocate the mass murder of minorities, perhaps YOU are the true bigot, sir!

D. Nazis were the best men at my wedding! Also, I have three swastika tattoos, only two of which are on my neck.

## ANSWERS

Mostly As: I suppose you're well-read, articulate, and passionate, but you're absolutely the wrong fit for the New York Times. You see, we tried all that anti-capitalist rah-rah back in the 60s, but ultimately we were too self-obsessed, and our anti-authoritarianism was co-opted to sell sodas and t-shirts. Someday, millennial, when you have a vacation house and a retirement fund of your own, you'll understand. Wait, you can't afford your rent, or even a car? Well, that's clearly your own fault. Buck up, buttercup. Life is hard. Also, please stop calling us "out-of-touch sellouts." It makes us feel bad.

Mostly Bs: Finally, a feminist! You might just be the voice of your generation, because you're saying everything we want to hear while not really challenging white supremacy and patriarchal authority. In fact, you never say "patriarchy" without a winsome wink and a joke about how your fellow feminists have gone too far! If you just keep writing loopy solipsistic essays about your personal life and which billionaires you find the most inspirational, well, young lady, you may just be set for life.

Mostly Cs: Finally, a compassionate conservative! You're just the right mix of qualities: we can take you to Upper East Side dinner parties and disagree with you cordially over the cordial. Just make sure you keep the racist dog whistling in the appropriate frequency range. Overt displays of white supremacy make us queasy, and then it's hard to digest our apéritifs.

Mostly Ds: You know, we really appreciate your down-home authenticity. Actually, we'd love to visit you and write a flattering profile that glosses over your outright Nazism, but unfortunately, you're just a little—direct—to be a columnist for

the New York Times. Don't despair: we hear Breitbart

is hiring. In four years, give us a call. We'll

probably enjoy taking you on as an opinion vlogger when we've pivoted even harder to video, and also further to the right.



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