By Humans, For Humans

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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THE AI MENACE

Will the machines be the end of us all?

CORPORATE LANGUAGE

Hiding harms under pleasant euphemisms

FIXING CARS

Can it change your life?

VIETNAM

The war that Americans never stop forgetting





PRELIMINARIES

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expression of GRATITUDE

This magazine (Current Affairs) would like to express its deepest gratitude to the Mortal Machine Gallery at 940 Royal Street in New Orleans, Louisiana for allowing us to shoot this issue's Table of Contents in its space. The gallery can be found at https://mortalmachinenola.com and @mortalmachinenola.com and @mortalmachinegallery on Instagram.

The miniature buildings featured in the TOC are by artist Drew Leshko, who can be found at https://drewleshko.com and @drewleshko on Instagram.

SHOULD BILLIONAIRES OWN THINGS?

Mr. Benjamin Shapiro, a longtime nemesis of this magazine, recently argued on social media that it was hypocritical for people to object to Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter and be fine with the influence of Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and George Soros. Indeed, it would be hypocritical, so let us take the opportunity to reaffirm that we can't stand any of these people and think they should be prohibited from owning anything.



MAGAZIN SAFETY WARNING Every issue of Current Affairs is EXTREMELY FLAMMABLE. Issues of this magazine placed

Every issue of Current Affairs is EXTREMELY FLAMMABLE. Issues of this magazine placed next to an open flame are likely to be incinerated, and may take the subscriber along with them. We cannot replace magazines that are burned beyond recognition—even if the incident is not the fault of the individual subscriber. We realize that no issue up until now has made clear that the magazine is flammable but a spate of recent incidents compels us to put this notice prominently in print.



PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

According to the *Financial Times*, Mr. Elon Musk, proud new owner of the public square, is of the view that his relationship with his child has been poisoned by Marxism rather than poor parenting: "Musk has a dystopian view of the left's influence on America... He blames the fact that his teenage daughter no longer wants to be associated with him on the supposed takeover of elite schools and universities by neo-Marxists. It's full-on communism ... and a general sentiment that if you're rich, you're evil,' says Musk." We quote the passage in order to note the irony that despite rightwing rhetoric about the importance of "personal responsibility" and not "blaming society for your problems," we have here a classic example of failing to take responsibility and instead blaming others for one's individual shortcomings. The personal responsibility crowd seems awfully quick to blame the left for problems to which they themselves may have made a substantial contribution.

KILL YOUR PHONE

As a print magazine, the phone is our enemy. It is simple: the more people read on phones, the less they read in print. Thus, the phone must be destroyed. Kill it!



We are grateful to Salem Books, publishers of the new book The Maculinity Manifesto: How a Man Establishes Influence, Credibility and Authority, for making sure the Current Affairs editorial staff received a copy. The manifesto promises to be "aste by-steep guide to restoring masculinity in a culture that works trielessly to eradicate it" that will teach men to embrace their role as "protectors, providers, and presiders." Men, we

tors, providers, and presiders." Men, we are told, are "hardwired to be masculine" and "should not be ashamed of it." Since we are not a magazine to reject biological imperatives (see the commentary on skeletons, next page), we have assigned The Masculinity Manifesto to all staff to assist in making the magazine more masculine. Expect to see the publication's masculinty increase exponentially as we incorporate tips. New planned features already include "Beards: is There Such a Thing as "Che Bushy!" and "How To Remind Your Boy That Crying is Shameful." Ne longer shall this be "The Magazine for Moms"! Macho men only! Hoo-ab!

We Get It, There's a Great Reset

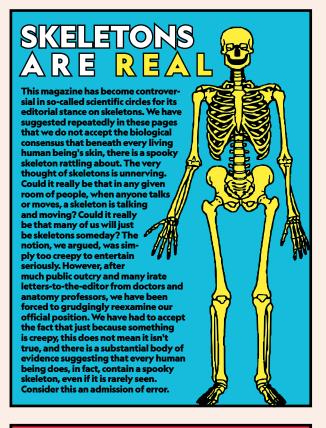
No less than three books have been published by right-wing commentators in the last year with the title "The Great Reset." First, we have the book by Glenn Beck, The Great Reset: Joe Biden and the Rise of Twenty-First-Century Fascism. Then there is Alex Jones' The Great Reset: And the War For The World. Finally, we have Marc Morano's The Great Reset: Global Elites and the Permanent Lockdown, which argues that we are facing a "dystopian project to bring on a transhumanist future in which the rest of us are monitored, controlled, and locked down" by global elites. The basic theory is that Globalists are planning a giant social transformation to consolidate power and put everyone else into "lockdown" forever, perhaps also forcing them to go "woke" on penalty of having their assets frozen. We draw attention to the outpouring of right-wing literature on the subject because we suspect many of our readers do not pay as close attention to conservative talking points as we do at this magazine, and we just want you to know what is being referred to when an uncle or cousin starts babbling about the "great reset" next time you see them.











HAVE YOU BOUGHT SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR /ERYONE YOU HAVE EVER MET YET? IF NOT, WHY NOT?

RY USPS STATEMENT

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TO: CURRENT AFFAIRS

NATIONAL DESK
NEW ORLEANS, LA

FROM: ALEX SKOPIC

SUBJECT:

DR. HUNTER S. THOMPSON



T'S LATE 2022, AND THAT MEANS two things. First, it's midterm election season, complete with the usual cavalcade of political stunts, scandals, attack ads, and general sleaziness. As the Democratic and

Republican parties arm wrestle each other for control of Congress, Joe Biden's crusade against "malarkey" is beginning to look like a lost cause, and some profoundly nasty people are poised to take office. And second, it's the 50th anniversary of *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, one of the finest books ever written about the hair-raising weirdness of American elections. As we plunge headfirst into November, it's a good time to look back on the life and career of Hunter S. Thompson, the renegade journalist who changed election reporting forever—and to see what, if anything, he can teach us about our own relationship to the ballot box.

I don't think most people would agree with me that *Campaign Trail '72* is Thompson's best book. Thanks to Hollywood, that accolade is more likely to go to either *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* or *The Rum Diary*, both of which have been adapted into glossy big-budget movies starring Johnny Depp. (*Vegas* is a great read, if a little overindulgent; *The Rum Diary* is rambling, sexist trash, about which more later.) Fuelled by the star

power of actors like Depp and Bill Murray, together with pithy slogans like "Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride," the films that capture Thompson's larger-than-life persona have begun to eclipse his actual journalism in the popular consciousness. Thompson has come to embody a spirit of drunken thrill-seeking, drug use, and misadventure, rather than anything as mundane as poll-watching or political analysis. It's a shame, because if your only exposure to Thompson comes through his pop culture profile, you end up missing a lot. Beneath the "Gonzo" recklessness (a term first applied to Thompson by *Boston Globe* editor Bill Cardoso) lay a fiercely intelligent critique of American democracy, or what passes for it. This, not the antics, was the heart of his work—both when he covered elections, and when he actually ran for office himself.

It doesn't help that the current editions of Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail tell an incomplete story. To fully understand where Thompson was coming from in '72, you need to first read "Freak Power in the Rockies," his 1970 essay about running for sheriff in Aspen, Colorado; this should be tacked on to the front of the book as a prelude. In 1970, Thompson hadn't yet become the legendary figure of later years. He had just one book to his name, Hell's Angels, along with sporadic short pieces in the National Observer and Scanlan's Monthly—a now-defunct underground magazine that ran from 1970 to 1971, and managed to get investigated by the FBI in that short time. A little too fond of guns and motorcycles to be considered a bona fide hippie, Thompson was nevertheless firmly aligned with the counterculture movement—especially where drugs were concerned—and he found himself at home among the "freaks, heads, fun-hogs and weird night-people," as he affectionately put it, who populated Aspen's younger, poorer neighborhoods. By the same token, he nurtured a deep disgust

for the "real-estate goons" who "had come like a plague of poison roaches to buy and sell the whole valley out from under the people who still valued it as a good place to live, not just a good investment." The word *gentrification* wasn't yet in common use, but Thompson was one of the first American writers to rail against it—and in 1970, it led him to get tangled up in electoral politics for the first time.



T'S DIFFICULT, IN TODAY'S TERMS, to place Thompson's "Freak Power" campaign along a left-right axis. If you squint, it resembles the best parts of the anti-authoritarian Left, but it also shares key elements with old-school, individualist libertari-

anism. Either way, it was ridiculously utopian for the early 1970s. If elected sheriff, Thompson promised to:

- "Rip up all city streets with jackhammers" and "sod the streets at once," effectively banning cars from the city limits
- "Change the name 'Aspen,' by public referendum, to 'Fat City," scaring off wealthy tourists who were attracted by the town's idyllic image
- Legalize marijuana and a wide variety of other drugs, but stipulate that "no drug worth taking should be sold for money," only passed around for free. (As a concession, he did promise that he "wouldn't eat mescaline while on duty.")
- Completely disarm the police, on the grounds that "Every urban riot, shoot-out and blood-bath (involving guns) in recent memory has been set off by some trigger-happy cop in a fear frenzy"
- "Savagely harass those engaged in any form of landrape," or environmental pollution, and ban hunting and fishing for nonresidents

It's worth noting that, even in 2022, this platform would be considered too extreme for virtually any political candidate to endorse. "Freak Power" was a radical experiment, devoted to pushing the boundaries of what's possible within the American democratic framework. It had no respect whatsoever for property values, and it contained a definite note of class conflict, with Thompson proclaiming that rich developers should be "fucked, broken and driven across the land," and the non-conformist youth of Aspen mobilized as a "totally new kind of political muscle." Reading the essay, one would be hard-pressed to know how seriously Thompson was taking his chances of getting elected—there's an element of practical joke or troll to the whole movement, embodied by the choice

of a blood-red fist gripping a peyote button as the campaign logo. The manifesto is lacking in specifics, as well—what does "savagely harass" actually mean in practice? But the really remarkable thing is that, despite all this, *he almost won*.

In the end, Thompson only lost the Aspen sheriff race by 31 votes, with a final count of 173 to 204. At the last minute, the two major parties struck a backroom deal, agreeing that the Democratic candidate would abruptly drop out, and throw his support behind incumbent Sheriff Carrol D. Whitmire to unite the "non-Thompson" vote. (Keen-eyed readers might find this move familiar, and darkly mutter the name Buttigieg to themselves.) Faced with the prospect of a grassroots (pun intended) democracy that would actually represent the will of the local community, and engage nonvoters in the political process for the first time, the establishment was scared stiff, and set aside all its traditional enmities to crush the newcomer. Thompson's defeat is a telling glimpse into the way Democratic and Republican party elites, seemingly at each other's throats, actually collaborate to police the bounds of acceptable politics. It's a theme that's lost none of its relevance today.

These were the bruises and disillusionments that Thompson took with him into the '72 presidential campaign, and they formed the lens through which he'd view its main combatants, Richard Nixon and George McGovern. In Nixon, Thompson found a mirror image of everything he hated about the Aspen elite—a bullying, conniving enemy of youth, freedom, and human dignity, responsible for prosecuting both the War on Drugs and the bloodier one in Vietnam. (With characteristic bluntness, he wrote that Vietnam had turned the U.S. military into "the most efficient gang of murderers in the history of man," an anti-imperial sentiment that would still be unwelcome in many media outlets today.) McGovern, meanwhile, was attempting to tap into new blocs of potential voters, eschewing the "machine" politics of Democratic kingmakers like Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley in favor of a direct appeal to citizens who were turning 18 and gaining the franchise for the first time. Promising both an immediate withdrawal from Vietnam and full amnesty for those who'd dodged the draft, his campaign looked suspiciously like "Freak Power" in a respectable suit and tie. Initially skeptical about the whole endeavor, Thompson slowly began to gain hope as McGovern racked up primary wins, taking Wisconsin, Vermont, and Massachusetts in quick succession. "If you offer 25 million people a new toy," he wrote, "the odds are pretty good that a lot of them will try it at least once." Ideally, this groundswell in the youth vote would both radically remake the Democratic Party, and send Nixon and his war machine packing.



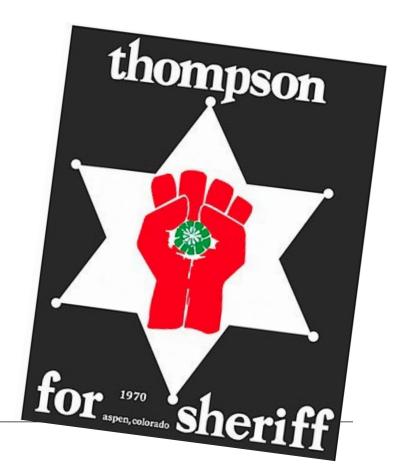
EPORTING FOR THE FLEDGLING Rolling Stone, Thompson was now riding high off the success of both Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas and "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," his breakout piece for Scanlan's. As a result, editor Jann Wenner gave him carte blanche to write about the presidential race in any way he liked, applying the fast-and-loose "Gonzo" style he'd become

famous for to the electoral process. The result was like a bolt of lightning through the staid world of political reporting, which had been dominated by figures like Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Murrow-eminently respectable, suit-clad men who would never dream of uttering a rude word in public, let alone injecting their own opinions and activism into their news coverage. By contrast, Thompson went in with rhetorical guns blazing, peppering his Rolling Stone articles with the most colorful, poetic insults seen since Shakespeare. In his words, mainstream politicians were "brainless swine who can go out on a stage and whup their supporters into an orgiastic frenzy—and then sell every one of the poor bastards down the tube for a nickel apiece." Senator Hubert Humphrey, McGovern's main rival in the primaries, was a "treacherous brain-damaged old vulture"; the Democratic establishment was a "gang of corrupt and genocidal bastards," and Nixon was simply "The Evil One." (And these are some of the *milder* epithets of Thompson's long career.)

Once again, there's serious political thought behind this outlandish irreverence. Throughout his career, Thompson was thinking carefully about the norms and conventions of American journalism, and finding them woefully inadequate to the task at hand. The expectation of objectivity rankled him most of all. "The only thing I ever saw that came close to Objective Journalism was a closed-circuit TV setup that watched shoplifters in the General Store," he wrote in Campaign Trail '72. "With the possible exception of things like box scores, race results, and stock market tabulations, there is no such thing as Objective Journalism. The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction in terms." In other words, journalism that tries to stay politically neutral renders itself impotent, and ceases to be journalism in any useful way. By taking no position on the actions it observes, it signifies that none of them are abnormal, abhorrent, or worthy of condemnation, and tacitly condones them—which is, in itself, a position, and not a good one.

In the context of the 1972 election, staying "objective" would mean treating a candidate who was *for* the indiscrimi-

nate fire-bombing of defenseless Asian nations, and one who was against it, as essentially the same—just two equally legitimate positions on the field of debate. In this way, the function of journalistic neutrality was to whitewash atrocity. Nixon could kill as many Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian people as he liked, but no one in the press was allowed to call him a murderer. Thompson found that more obscene than any combination of four-letter words could ever be, and he refused to play along. Paradoxically, his use of insults and profanity was a deeply moral stance. "Some people will say that words like scum and rotten are wrong for Objective Journalism—which is true, but they miss the point. It was the builtin blind spots of the Objective rules and dogma that allowed Nixon to slither into the White House in the first place," he reflected in his scathing 1994 obituary for the ex-President. "You had to get Subjective to see Nixon clearly, and the shock of recognition was often painful." Using words like "scum" and "hubris-crazed monster," and "diseased cur"—became a way for Thompson to shock his readers out of apathy, and cut through the mindless decorum that only benefited the status quo. Later, this form of weaponized crassness would become a staple for socialists like Amber A'Lee Frost, who wrote a landmark essay about political vulgarity for Current Affairs; without Thompson to pave the way, I don't know if we'd have provocative left-wing podcasts like Chapo Trap House or Be-





Hunter S. Thompson sits in his office/kitchen at Woody Creek, near Aspen, CO (September 1990) / Paul Harris - Getty Images

hind the Bastards, or films like Michael Moore's Bowling for Columbine. In 2016, the rapper El-P would sum up the whole ethos on Run the Jewels 3, inspired by the Obama years: "Can't contain the disdain for y'all demons / You talk clean, and bomb hospitals / so I'll speak with the foulest mouth possible." Not for the first time, Thompson was decades ahead of his peers.

More than its take-no-prisoners attitude, though, Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72 is notable for the depth and insight of its actual analysis. Going beyond the usual "horse-race" coverage of what the candidates said and did on a given day, Thompson did his best to gauge the forces that were causing them to say and do it, giving his readers a backstage pass to the entire political process. At times, he seems to know the history of every staffer, advisor, and aide on every campaign, the motivations that led them to side with their particular candidates, and what they expected in return. Some figures, like McGovern campaign manager Frank Mankiewicz, get more time on the page than the candidates themselves. At every turn, Thompson is looking for "the man behind the man." In one memorable passage, he details how Hubert Humphrey relied on the string-pulling of Tony Boyle, former President of

the United Mine Workers, to win the West Virginia primary, despite Boyle being under investigation for ordering the murder of rival labor leader Joseph "Jock" Yablonski—something most people weren't even privy to, let alone willing to state on the record. The overall picture is one of a system rife with graft, crookedness, and barely-concealed menace, desperately in need of a reformer like McGovern to sweep it all clean.

Unfortunately, it wasn't to be. By promising to end the Vietnam draft and wind down the war, Nixon was able to snatch McGovern's most important policy plank away from him, and the Democratic campaign never recovered. (The administration's rampant use of personal smears and "dirty tricks" like the Watergate break-in didn't help, either.) Sweeping every state but Massachusetts, Nixon handed McGovern a humiliating 60-to-37 percent defeat in the popular vote, and cruised to victory with a full 520 of the possible 538 votes in the Electoral College. Even today, it's still one of the biggest landslides in American history. Behind his ultra-cool exterior, Thompson was heartbroken. "McGovern made some stupid mistakes," he admitted, "but in context they seem almost frivolous compared to the things Richard Nixon does every day of his life,

on purpose, as a matter of policy and a perfect expression of everything he stands for. Jesus! Where will it end? How low do you have to stoop in this country to be President?"

It was a question many people were asking. In the wake of McGovern's loss, the Democratic Party developed a serious allergy to anything that smelled even vaguely progressive, and a deep sense of hopelessness fell across the political landscape. When the next election rolled around, Thompson refused to write about it. "The idea of covering even the early stages of this cynical and increasingly retrograde campaign has already plunged me into a condition bordering on terminal despair," he wrote in 1976, "and if I thought I might have to stay with these people all the way to November, I would change my name and seek work as a professional alligator poacher." There's a new note of bitterness in post-1972 works like Generation of Swine and Songs of the Doomed—even the titles sound gloomy—and Thompson returns again and again to the phrase "the death of the American Dream," finding signs of the nation's collapse and decay everywhere he turns. Clearly, seeing Nixon ascendant broke his faith in elections, and democracy in general, as a vehicle for positive change, and even "Tricky Dick's" eventual ouster didn't do much to help. He still wrote about politics, devoting an entire book to Bill Clinton's rise to power—but even then, he admitted that "the only real priority in 1992 was beating George Bush," as opposed to anythin Clinton could actually accomplish. For him, elections became purely negative exercises, capable only of keeping the worst monsters temporarily at bay.

Thompson still had some scorchers left in him, though, when it came to describing those monsters. He was one of the first commentators to see George W. Bush and the War on Terror for what they really were, piercing through the haze of concrete dust and jingoism that followed 9/11:

"Make no mistake about it: we are At War now—with some-body—and we will stay At War with that strange and mysterious Enemy for the rest of our lives. [...] This is going to be a very expensive war, and Victory is not guaranteed—for anyone, and certainly not for a baffled little creep like George W. Bush. All he knows is that his father started the war a long time ago, and that he, the goofy child-President, has been chosen by Fate and the global Oil industry to finish it off. He can declare a National Security Emergency and clamp down Hard on Everybody, no matter where they live or why."

Astonishingly, Thompson wrote this in his "Hey, Rube" column for ESPN on the morning of September 12, 2001, and (eccentric Capitalization aside), he all but predicted the USA PATRIOT Act while the rest of the country was still scrambling to get its bearings. Later, he went further, condemning the push for war with Iraq on Colorado radio station KDNK:

"Just random killing like that, mass killing to force a population to get rid of Saddam so we can move in and take over and control the oil, God damn it, if that's not evil, I don't know what would be. You know, Bush, he's really the evil one in here. Well, more than just him. We're the Nazis in this game, and I don't like it."

It was an unthinkable thing to say in January 2003, when even Democratic stalwarts like Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton were firmly behind the war effort, and questioning Bush's wisdom was enough to get you branded a terrorist sympathizer. But as even the most craven pundits have now been forced to admit, the consensus of the time was dead wrong, and Thompson, weary and cynical as he was by this point, was one of the vanishingly few people who got it right.

Sometimes being right comes as hollow consolation, though. It's hard, reading those late-career columns, not to miss the frenzied optimism that drove the "Freak Power" movement, and to feel that something's missing without it. Ironically, Thompson took his own life in 2005, right before American elections got really weird again, and I'll always wonder what his Obama book would have looked like. Or, even more tantalizingly, his Trump one. (The closest thing we have is Matt Taibbi's Insane Clown President, which uses a Thompson-esque style, but it's an unsatisfying experience—like seeing an Elvis impersonator at a local casino, or drinking the grocery store's "Dr. Thunder" brand soda.) In today's clickbait-driven media landscape, most outlets aren't willing to finance a writer with such a unique literary style to follow a campaign for months on end, or if they are, they don't have the funds to spare. With Thompson's death, the era of Gonzo journalism may have ended for good.

There are definite criticisms we can make of Thompson's work, and some of them are serious. To me, the biggest flaw with *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, and one that became more pronounced in later books, is the way the narrative sometimes treats politics as a spectator sport, rather than something to be actively engaged with. At one point, Thompson compares the Nixon/McGovern race to his beloved NFL, saying that it's tempting to start "handicapping politics and primaries like it

was all just another fat Sunday of pro football," and that "after several weeks of this you no longer give a flying fuck who wins; the only thing that matters is the point-spread." A lot of people take this approach today, and sit down to watch politics in the same way they would watch hockey or basketball, rooting for their "team" on election night, but having little concept that real people's lives hang in the balance. There are entire TV networks

We really live çan world disarmed cops grassy meadows where the streets used

that exist to help them do this, and they rake in billions of dollars in ad revenue every year. Blurring the line between politics and entertainment is always dangerous, and it seems likely that sensational reporting like Thompson's contributed to the hellscape of 24/7 cable news (and pseudo-news) that we see today. The whole phenomenon of the "political junkie," a phrase Thompson appears to have coined, speaks to a lifestyle of privileged detachment from real struggle, and it's unappealing.

And then there's the sexism. Thompson had wildly uneven gender politics, sometimes surprisingly enlightened, and sometimes disgustingly macho—and when he was bad, he was really bad. To his credit, he supported abortion rights in '72 (pre-*Roe*, of course), and was disappointed with McGovern when he announced that he didn't. He also covered Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman in Congress, as a serious presidential contender like all the others when she announced her run. On the other hand, at least two of his books (Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas and The Rum Diary) include gratuitous scenes and references to sexual assault that do nothing to advance the narrative, and exist only as moments of adolescent shock value. In *The Rum Diary*, the ostensible heroine of the book simply flies home and disappears from the plot after being assaulted, leaving the journalist hero to wander drunkenly around Puerto Rico for several more chapters, unconcerned. (It's an interminable novel, and perhaps tellingly, was left unpublished until Johnny Depp dragged it out of Thompson's filing cabinet and decided he wanted to film it.) According to Thompson's son Juan, he also treated Sandy, his first wife, terribly, flying into rages where he'd throw and break her belongings with a "vein of deliberate cruelty." The opening chapters of Juan's memoir, Stories I Tell Myself, read as a textbook account of domestic abuse. The elder Thompson appears to have mellowed with age, and his second wife, Anita, has nothing but good things to say in The Gonzo Way, her own memoir, but there's no getting away from Thompson's misogynistic side. As late as 1994, he's still making jokes about "those old habits, like date-rape and cigarettes, which I like too much to quit." It's incredibly ugly stuff, and it stains his whole project. For a man with such an acute bullshit detector, he apparently couldn't smell his own.

And yet, he was our greatest chronicler of elections. Nobody else since Tocqueville even comes close. Thompson's career presents one of those classic, uncomfortable dilemmas, where a man who was often deeply unpleasant in his personal life creates important, unforgettable pieces of art. In *Fear* and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72, he captured timeless themes and archetypes that still resonate in American political life today. There's the earnest progressive martyr, a little

too honest for his own good, who's immediately recognizable to anyone who still pines for Bernie Sanders. There's the blustering right-wing demagogue, who might be named George Wallace, Richard Nixon, or Donald Trump. And there's the impulse, tragic but understandable, to vote for a mediocre candidate to stop a worse one from taking power, even while kicking yourself for being a sellout. It's strangely comforting to know that we aren't the first generation to grapple with these questions, even as it's also depressing that we haven't found a way to overcome them yet.



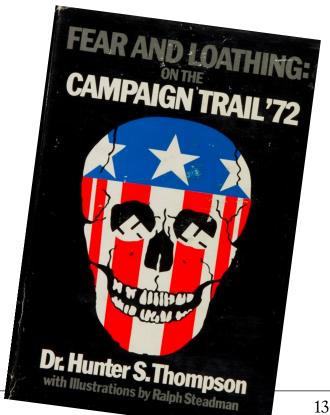
S WE NEAR THE END OF 2022, IT'S hard to deny that we live in Thompsonian times. Weird characters keep crawling out of the woodwork, looking like they've just escaped a Ralph Steadman drawing, and haranguing people for their votes. In my state alone, the GOP candidate for senator is Dr. Mehmet Oz, a celebrity doctor who made his name selling "magic" diet pills and has been accused of killing more than 300 dogs in dubious medical

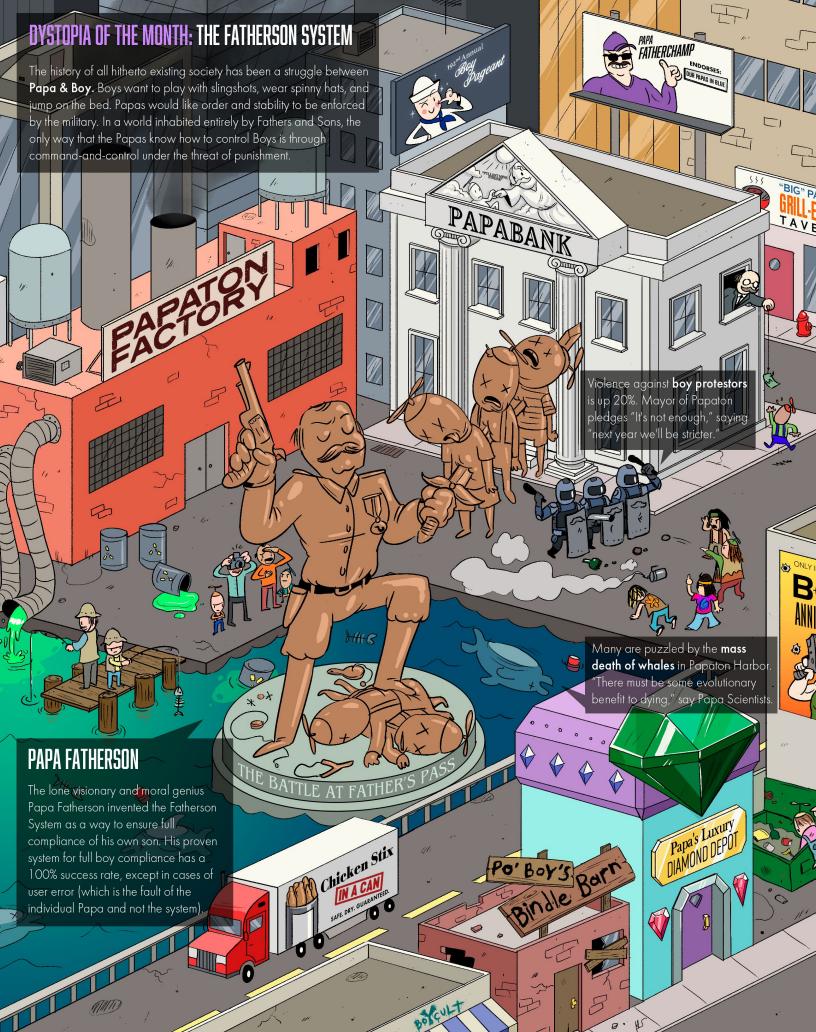
experiments. One of the candidates for governor, meanwhile, has been photographed wearing a Confederate military uniform, and he keeps an evangelical "prophet" on his staff who believes that Joe Biden is already dead and being portrayed by a crisis actor. (Yes, really.) In Georgia, former NFL star Herschel Walker has become an anti-abortion zealot, only to get in a public feud with his son over all the abortions and secret children he's bankrolled. The respectable centrist media might wax nostalgic for the days of "decency" and "normality," but it's clear they're not coming back; we're in Bat Country now.

So what lessons can we take from Hunter S. Thompson, 50 years on? Chiefly, we can learn what not to do: fall prey to despair. In the wake of the 2020 presidential race, which stifled hopes of universal healthcare and saw Joe Biden barely squeak out a victory, many people on the Left seem to be disenchanted with representative democracy in general, swearing off "electoralism" in favor of other forms of political engagement. In some ways, it's an understandable reaction. American elections really are absurdly corrupt, and skewed against poor and minority voters in all kinds of insidious ways. Things like gerrymandering, identification requirements at the polls, and Super PACS with millions of dollars to burn on propaganda make a mockery of the word "democracy," and it's infuriating to be told to "just vote" when so much is so horrifyingly wrong. But unfortunately, just because the dice are loaded doesn't mean we can get away with not playing. It may be *likely* that the next U.S. president will be a loathsome creep, whether their name is Biden, DeSantis, Harris, or Trump; but if the Left doesn't field a candidate, it's certain.

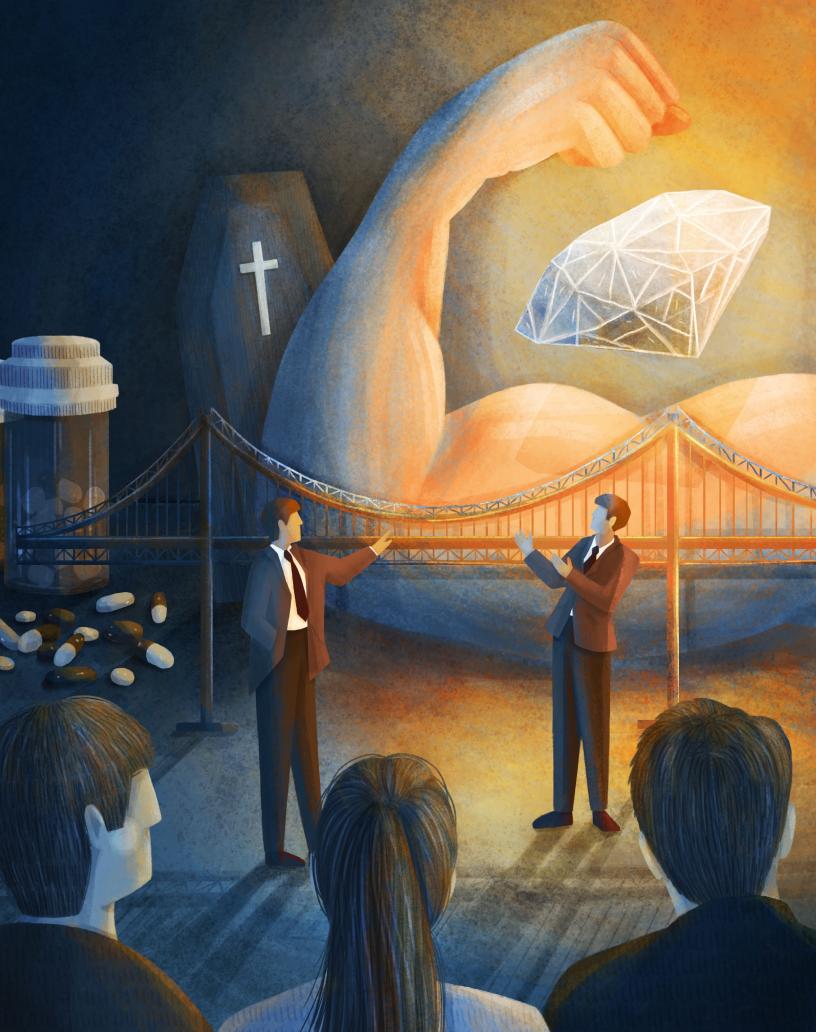
Instead, we should reach back to Thompson's early days, and try to capture the utopian spirit of his Aspen campaign. We really can live in a world of disarmed cops and grassy meadows where the streets used to be, if we fight for it. People on the margins of society actually will turn out to vote, even if they swore they never would, when you give them something worth voting for-and when they do, even a seemingly impossible set of policy goals can have a real shot. For examples, we need only look to Latin America, where leftists like Gabriel Boric (the recently elected president of Chile), Gustavo Petro (the recently elected president of Colombia,) and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (the former president of Brazil who now faces a runoff against far-right president Jair Bolsonaro) are making incredible gains in the electoral arena, despite suffering far worse repression than anything we face to their north. It's a mistake to focus on elections as the only form of politics—they happen, after all, just twice a year in the U.S., leaving another 363 days to fill with mutual aid, mass protest, labor action, subversive writing, and all the other tools and tactics available. But if the term "democratic socialism" is going to mean anything at all, it's also a mistake to disregard them as a field of struggle.

Fear and Loathing is upon us, at the ballot box and everywhere else—but if we keep our heads, and keep fighting, we just might make it through. &









when corporate language

BY MAISIE WILTSHIRE-GORDON

OR FOUR YEARS, I WORKED AS A STRATEGY consultant helping healthcare organizations to analyze their service lines and reach more patients. Working at this job required becoming proficient in a kind of language we might call the "corporate dialect." Often, fellow consultants would use phrases that sound vivid, exciting, and meaningful but that turned out to express only the most banal ideas.

When my manager suggested that our presentation include "a deep dive on competitors," it struck me as quite profound: *a deep dive*! There are depths to plumb! We are wet-suited and oxygen-tanked, intrepid Jacques Cousteaus conducting revolutionary explorations 300 feet under the sea.

It turned out that "a deep dive on competitors" just meant, "put together a slide with some facts about our competitors"—and maybe include a box with some giant numerals, like the year they were founded or how many kinds of diabetes tests they make.

The first time I heard someone mention "best practices," I was very impressed. We had actually tested all the ways to organize our files and determined that a nine-folder structure leads to the best data management? I was disappointed to learn that "best practice" meant, at most, "generally effective practice"—and usually just "the way everyone does it."

Ludwig Wittgenstein, writing in his 1953 *Philosophical Investigations*, decries language that "goes on holiday": words that fill space or pass the time without actually making themselves useful. It's a critique intended for his fellow philosophers. But he might have been speaking directly to the corporate world. In a consultant's hands, "deep dive," a term accustomed to describing actual depth and actual diving, gets to take a little break: to sun itself on the beach and think about superficial things. "Best practices," a phrase which or-

dinarily describes the practices that are best, finally breaks free from its perfectionism and refers to whatever practices it likes, without worrying about data or research or the scientific method.

But "language on holiday" isn't just a preoccupation of former literature majors like me. Consultants' corporate jargon has a tangible impact on the companies they advise. And that impact comes, in part, from the vacuity of the language.

Consider a pamphlet from my former company describing their approach to mergers and acquisitions (M&A). "The more a company flexes its M&A muscle," the pamphlet promises, "the better it becomes at incorporating best practices and institutionalizing M&A excellence." It's a visually-appealing document: bold text overlays a high-resolution photograph of a suspension bridge; minimalist icons accentuate punchy





bullet points; large numerals attest to the company's record of success.

There are also several metaphors on display. The bridge suggests a "journey" theme, furthered by phrases in the body text like "illuminates the path," "clears the path," and "speeds you on the path." But the illuminated path is represented by a fancy diamond (because jewelry gives clear vision?) and the cleared path is designated by a chain link—which evokes connectivity, but has nothing to do with path-navigation.

"We utilized a strong M&A framework to build our M&A engine," the text tells us. Moments later we learn that "M&A has truly become a business muscle." As a company "flexes its M&A muscle," the document continues, it is "essentially creating an 'M&A factory." You may not have realized that engines could truly become muscles or that you could flex your muscles to create a factory.

By following this approach to M&A, the document concludes, we are "building a strong foundation for future growth." Part of what makes foundations strong, though, is the fact that *nothing grows in them*. They are made of bio-resistant concrete. If you want to grow something, I'd suggest more porous, organic materials. Dirt, maybe.

In one sense, this is exactly what Wittgenstein was talking about: language has "gone on holiday." Words have been removed from their usual contexts and combined into bullet points that have nothing to do with foundations, muscles, or factories as we typically understand them. But here's the funny thing—this document was written by people who really *are* experts in M&A. They've produced billions of dollars of revenue by helping companies merge and acquire. And the bridge-diamond-factory is part of their approach.

OW COULD SUCH A MIX OF METAPHORS contribute to a successful merger or acquisition? Why talk about foundations and muscles when such things are nowhere in sight? Wittgenstein is quite helpful here. Words aren't merely labels: that's one of his main points in the *Philosophical Investigations*. We use language to *do* things, not just to *refer* to things. If we only read for referential meaning, the M&A document is vapid, metaphors crumbling at the slightest touch. But meaning is *use*, Wittgenstein tells us. To understand the document, we need to pay attention to what language *does* here.

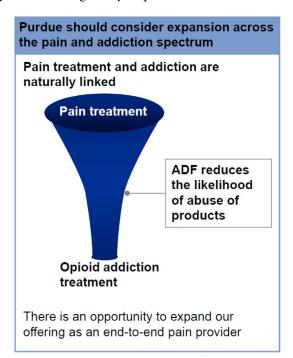
Corporate jargon is less empty than it seems. In fact, it's a fundamental part of what consulting firms are selling. In the M&A document, all those mixed metaphors create an impressionistic word cloud of reassuring images—and this renders mergers and acquisitions much more appealing than they would otherwise be. It's far more pleasant to think about

muscles and bridges than the actual practicalities of M&A: transferring payroll, combining offices, deciding which employees to keep and which to lay off.

Corporate language is absurd, but it's still doing work. We need to pay attention to whether it's work we want done—because the consequences can be devastating. We can see the impact of business jargon in one of the worst public health crises in modern times: the opioid epidemic.

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, U.S. life expectancy was declining, in part due to deaths of despair from drug overdoses, alcoholism, and suicide. The opioid epidemic has continued to worsen; deaths from overdoses rose in 2021. According to government statistics, in the past year, over a million Americans had an "opioid use disorder" (what we think of as dependency or addiction) and 10 million Americans misused prescription opioids.

Between 2004 and 2019, Purdue Pharmaceuticals worked with the consulting firm McKinsey & Company to address lagging sales of their most profitable drug: OxyContin, a highly addictive, semisynthetic opioid designed to treat chronic pain. McKinsey's advice did increase sales—through deceptive marketing tactics that pressed physicians to prescribe higher doses of opioids over longer periods while also misleading physicians about the danger of addiction, overdose, and death. The Massachusetts Attorney General found that staying on prescription opioids for 90 days makes you 30 times more likely to die of an overdose. Implementing McKinsey's tactics, Purdue saw the number of these long-term OxyContin users grow by 60 percent.



Source: Purdue Pharma/Suffolk County Superior Court via CNN

Again acting on McKinsey's advice, Purdue targeted physicians who had not received training in the risks associated with opioids and focused on vulnerable patient populations such as veterans and the elderly. As the *New York Times* put it in 2007, Purdue enacted "the most aggressive marketing campaign ever undertaken by a pharmaceutical company for a narcotic painkiller." By 2010, sales of OxyContin had *tripled*, producing \$3 billion in revenue per year, and continuing to grow through 2013.

What role did corporate language play in that project? Such language is certainly on full display in McKinsey's work for Purdue. A 2014 McKinsey presentation suggests that Purdue try its hand at addiction treatment: "Purdue should consider expansion across the pain and addiction spectrum."

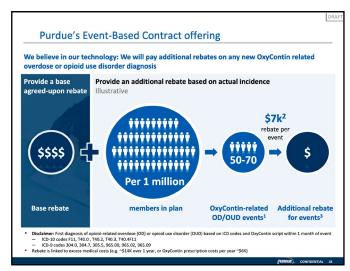
The accompanying illustration depicts not a spectrum (surprise!) but a funnel, beginning at "Pain treatment" and ending with "Opioid addiction treatment." The maker of the slide seems not to have considered the way that funnels actually work: everything you put into a funnel comes out of it at the other end. In this model, then, everyone who starts as an OxyContin user becomes addicted to the drug. Thankfully, this is not the case. (Still, the effect is substantial: a 2015 National Institutes of Health study of opioid prescriptions showed a 21-29 percent rate of misuse and an 8-12 percent rate of addiction.)

So what's the funnel doing here? Is this a case of language on holiday? In one sense, yes: the words (and symbols) on this slide are not doing their usual job. If you try to understand the slide by thinking about a spectrum or picturing how funnels actually operate, it doesn't make sense. But that's actually part of the work that language is doing here: it's resisting our critical attention. *Move along now*, the slide is saying. *Don't think about any of this too closely*. In other words: don't think about whether there's a spectrum or a funnel. Don't think about whether the funnel should be a filter. And definitely don't think about the fact that the "products" in question are dangerously high doses of aggressively marketed narcotics.

"There is an opportunity," the slide concludes, "to expand our offering as an end-to-end pain provider." This is a nice description: it makes patients' relationship to Purdue sound comprehensive and seamless. Of course, it's seamless because Purdue is *creating* the demand they plan to meet. They'll be there when you need pain medication, and they'll be there later when you're addicted to it. "End-to-end" seems so helpful to customers, so savvy as a business strategy, that it's easy to forget there's a literal end involved. In 2014, the year McKinsey presented this slide, over 28,000 people died in overdoses involving opioids. By 2021, that number had increased to over 80,000.

N 2017, THE HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES director declared the opioid crisis a public health emergency. But McKinsey didn't let up. In December of that year, they gave a presentation that proposed a way to increase sales to wary pharmacies: whenever a patient overdosed on OxyContin, the pharmacy that had provided the drug to the patient would receive a financial rebate.

The presentation never puts it this plainly, though. It promises "innovative contracts" to address "market access challenges," recommending that Purdue offer rebates on a "per-event" basis. It takes 15 slides before the viewer learns that these "events" are overdoses. (For every use of the word "overdose," the word "event" appears *five times*.) And the presentation never acknowledges that "market access challenges" stem from nothing less than the opioid crisis itself. Purdue faced new barriers to selling OxyContin because physicians and legislators had recognized the drug's role in fueling addiction.



Source: McKinsey "Innovative Contracts"

McKinsey's 2017 guidance recommends "event"-based contracts as a way to target overdoses. The word "target" conjures up the image of opioid addiction with a bullseye on its back, as if McKinsey's energy were directed toward the overdoses themselves, aiming to reduce their number. But that phrasing obscures what McKinsey is actually proposing here: that Purdue would respond to the financial impact of opioid use disorder by mitigating the monetary risk those cases pose to the company itself. Overdose and addiction make pharmacies less willing to sell OxyContin and physicians less willing to prescribe it; they also make Purdue more vulnerable to litigation. These are the concerns that the proposal aims to address, not human suffering or the company's role in producing it.

McKinsey calls this "innovative contracting." Innovative because the contract puts a company's interest before that of its consumers? Innovative because they've found a way to sell more opioids to people who are dependent on them? Innovation, welcome to the holiday of a lifetime.

Except it's not just a holiday. The word is still doing work, even if it's not its usual job. Corporate jargon facilitates profit by obscuring human impact. By forgoing the language of overdose in favor of corporate speak, McKinsey makes it possible to avoid talking about deaths as deaths. "\$7k rebate per event," one slide suggests; a footnote adds that a \$14,000 rebate would cover "excess medical costs." The excess costs aren't listed. That means we don't have to think about the expenses that prompt the rebate in the first place. Cost of naloxone. Cost of ambulance ride. Cost of rehab, cost of therapy, cost of methadone. Cost of relapse. Cost of death.

Instead, the presentation turns "excess medical costs" into a footnote. When we don't talk about what the costs are, we can imagine there's nothing to say.

ould explicit language have made a difference to executives bent on selling more OxyContin? The consultant who made the 2017 presentation presumably looked at the costs included in that \$14,000.

But the slides still reflect a single-minded pursuit of profit. We also know that Purdue was aware of the testimonies delivered by anguished mothers and fathers who lost children to opioids, because they drafted materials to use in response. McKinsey's corporate obfuscations hid a truth that executives already knew.

But imagine a presentation that replaces every use of the word "event"—all 56 of them—with "person dead from Oxy-Contin." And instead of saying that the contracting model "targets overdose," what if the presentation explained that the new contracts *increase* overdoses but target the overdose-related loss of sales? It's possible the people listening to the presentation wouldn't have minded. But it might have forced them to pay attention to the moral weight of the issue, or at least recognize that *others* would condemn their approach. After reading a distraught mother's testimonial, one Purdue executive acknowledged, "I see a liability here"—a heartless response that at least suggests some recognition of the problem. But amidst the language of funnels and innovations, it's hard to see anything except "opportunity" and "attractive options."

Corporate language didn't cause Purdue's wrongdoing, but it aided and abetted it. McKinsey's presentations made it possible to ignore grisly details and unsettling testimony—and possible to discuss the opioid crisis without referring to their active incitement of it. Corporate speak helped McKinsey pur-

sue their central goal: profit. An anonymous former McKinsey consultant, writing in 2019, put it this way:

"McKinsey has done direct harm to the world in ways that, thanks to its lack of final decision-making power, are hard to measure and, thanks to its intense secrecy, are hard to know. The firm's willingness to work with ... corrupt business empires is the logical conclusion of seeking profit at all costs. Its advocacy of the primacy of the market has made ... businesses more like vampires."

McKinsey's work with Purdue makes their direct harm unusually clear. Corporate language facilitated a profitable but devastating business strategy: the deceptive marketing of high doses of dangerously addictive opioids to the least-informed physicians and most vulnerable patients.

Words don't just *mean*. They *act*. McKinsey's corporate jargon reduces real deaths to banal phrases. The firm's presentations instrumentalize lives for profit, turning addiction into "opportunity" and using metaphors that erase overdose. But for the people harmed by McKinsey and Purdue, addiction, overdose, and death aren't erasable. In one mother's letter to Purdue—published in the Massachusetts Attorney General's filing against Purdue and its leadership—we see frank pain:

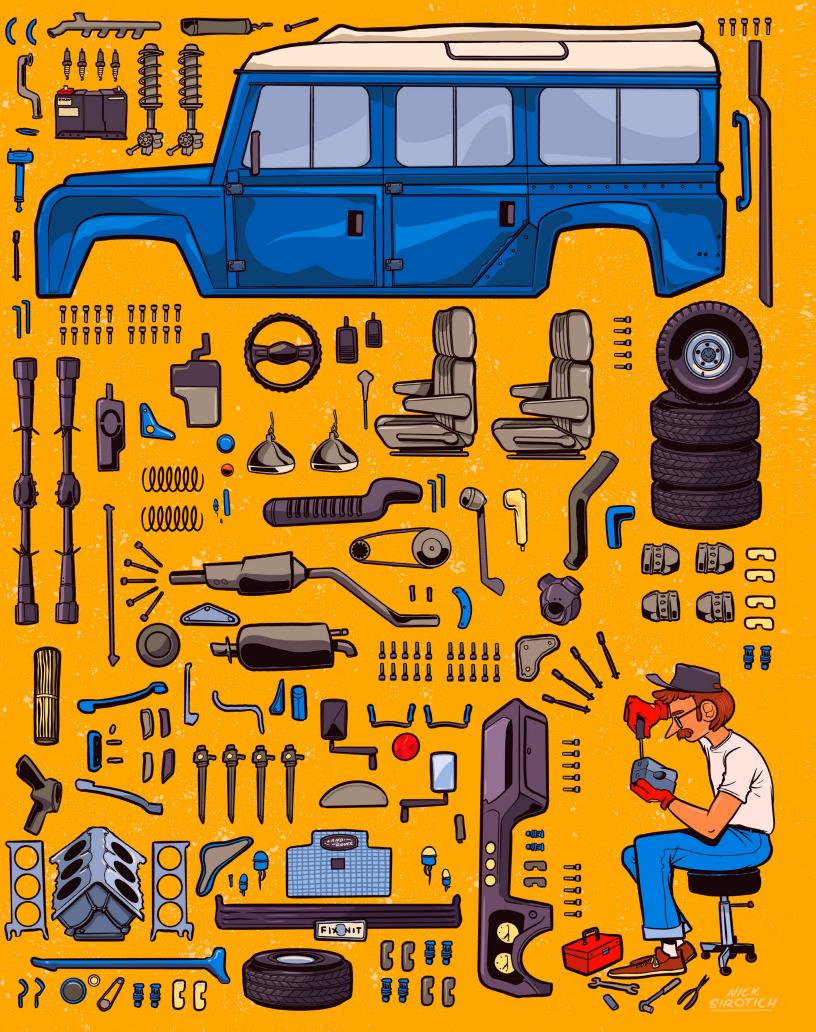
"My son was only 28 years old when he died from Oxycontin on New Year's Day. We all miss him very much, his wife especially on Valentine's Day. Why would a company make a product that strong (80 and 160 mg) when they know they will kill young people? My son had a bad back and could have taken Motrin but his Dr. started him on Vicodin then Oxycontin then Oxycontin SR. Now he is dead!"

Why would a company make a product so strong—Oxy-Contin SR is typically reserved for patients with cancer pain—and market it to people who could easily become addicted to the medicine and even die? Corporate jargon doesn't have the language to ask this question. It lets executives flee to a world of "events," "treatment," and tripled sales. Purdue worked to reframe overdose testimonials because they didn't want their drugs' effects described in such blunt and devastating terms. But we can use the language they're afraid of. We can name the deep anguish, the human cost, caused by McKinsey and Purdue. Legal filings have begun to do this. In 2021, 49 states made claims against both firms, describing the tangible impact of the financial "opportunities" McKinsey and Purdue so doggedly pursued. As recently as September 2022, new lawsuits challenged McKinsey's role in the opioid crisis.

Holding these companies responsible for their actions means, in part, rejecting the terms in which they describe those actions. It also means seeing their descriptions as *part* of their actions: words that seem benign and absurd but facilitate real harm. Corporate language makes it possible to pursue profit at the expense of real people—but we can demand words that don't look away. We can insist on language that recognizes suffering. Only then can we work to alleviate it. •

a public service announcement from





The Art of RESURRECTION

by Andrew Messick

EVERAL MONTHS AGO, IN APRIL 2022, I sat in the driver's seat of my then new car and felt the strongest, most utterly gripping boredom, so intense it was only a shade brighter than depression. I love driving—the gentle rumble of the engine, the smooth click of a perfect gear shift, the racing excitement of going just slightly faster than you should around a tight corner. Driving is one of the few things that has regularly pulled me from depressive episodes or distracted me from some looming specter in my life. Beyond the driving, my ability to repair, maintain, and restore my vehicles has proven to be a kind of catharsis. For every skinned knuckle, burned arm, bloody head, every oil drop on my shirt, every grease stain on my face, and every compounding impact to an already bruised ego, for every time I came away hurting and sore, I felt even more pride and satisfaction in knowing that every time the motor turned over and roared to life, it was because of my own work, my own blood, sweat, and copious tears. But my new car, for all of its uses and qualities, was simply lacking. It offered me no satisfaction in driving, and even less in my ability to maintain it and to call it my own.

It was a good car, but it operated in a bland, even mundane, way. It performed every action I asked of it without complaint, without grumbling, without emotion, without any sort of personality. It was smart enough to tell me all of its ailments. A flashing exclamation point would show me a low tire. A phone notification would tell me my doors were unlocked. A gentle blue light would show it wasn't quite warm enough to turn the heat on. But if I so much as put a wrench to the car, it would fall to pieces, and there would be noth-

ing I could do to fix it due to its sheer complexity. Even the prospect of an oil change daunted me so much—not because I felt I couldn't do it, but because I felt that the intricate web of sensors, safeties, and machinery would not accept my tinkering. I felt obligated to take it to the dealership for the oil change, an action which goes against my core nature.

Cars today will tell us when the oil is too old or too worn, too little or too much in quantity, as well as a flurry of other regular maintenance items such as tire life, tire pressure, tread condition, air filters, intake filters, fuel filters, when they were changed, when they should be changed, how clogged they are. The abundance of information should, in theory, make our own maintenance practices easier, but even an oil change seems more difficult than it should be.

Such is the nature of our modern goods and economy. Our most used, most needed belongings are designed to be disposable, single-use items which cannot be maintained or repaired. The proprietary nature of many items also makes repairs expensive. That which is meant to last can no longer be repaired by the bygone "shade-tree mechanic." It must be repaired by special technique, under secret rituals, by only those who have been ordained with the sacred knowledge of repair.

This was not always the case. There was a time when repair manuals were abundant in the world and offered step-by-step instructions to the novice mechanic for any and all repairs they might find themselves making in their garage, in their backyard, or, as many of us have experienced, in the parking lot or on the side of a busy highway in the middle of the night with only a dim flashlight and some barely adequate hand tools to see us home. Chief among these was the fabled

Haynes manual, famous for its claim that every manual written was "based on a stripdown and rebuild," so that the reader would know how to do any necessary repair. The *Haynes* was essential for anyone who wanted to do anything more than an oil change to their cars.

It was with this sentiment in mind that, in May of this year, I decided to take a dramatic gamble. Recent life events had prompted me to make changes. But mostly I was driven to act by the overwhelming feeling of existential dread looming above me, which was mixed with a tinge of end-of-the-world doomsday prepper paranoia brought on by global events.

"The humble Land Rover in its various forms from Series I through to the powerful Defender had captured the hearts and imaginations of people around the globe. Everyone from dictators and humanitarian relief agencies to mercenaries and missionaries had seen the benefits of this robust utilitarian vehicle with its nononsense, go-anywhere capabilities."

— from Ben Fogle. Land Rover: The Story of the Car that Conquered the World

My criteria were simple. My next car had to be useful, capable of going anywhere, and, above all else, entirely repairable by me. For better or for worse, I let my eccentricity get the best of me and within days I had taken my relatively new car, which I have dubbed in my memory as "the Disposable," back to the dealer in order to benefit from staggeringly high used car prices, and had set off to bring home a 60-year-old Land Rover.

I set out looking for it, combing through pages and pages of online listings, Craigslist ads, and car auctions. I finally found it on a Facebook Marketplace post. It looks nearly identical to every other Land Rover made between 1947 and 1983. It's tall and boxy, and in the right lighting it takes on an almost cartoonishly simple appearance, like a child's doodle of their dream car. This one in particular is the station wagon

variant. It's long and has four doors, and, as its original ads boast, is capable of seating 12 people. It shows its age. The almost steel blue paint is thin and bare in many places. The axles and springs are rusted horribly. The houndstooth seats are probably several shades darker than they originally were.

And the once white wheels are now slightly gray highlighted with elements of rust. It is quite narrow but tall, which makes sharp turns an adventure and parking garages mazes of anxiety. When parked, it towers over the rest of its peers like a basket-ball star among devoted 6th-grade fans. The effect is magnified by the low ceilings of the Whole Foods parking garage.

The hood flips all the way back against the windshield, giving easy access to the oversimple and basic motor. Under the windshield are two small flaps, which I call my "air-conditioning." They can be opened to varying degrees to allow an uninterrupted stream of air to blow directly onto your face, making 95-degree days slightly more bearable. In the middle of what passes for the dashboard is a single panel with a few switches and gauges, and a speedometer that insists I'm going significantly faster than my fellow motorists think.

but they refuse to slide forward, and often slide back on their own. This is an issue mainly because the incline of the seats is governed solely by a shared steel bar that sits behind them. Lifting the passenger seat cushion up reveals a cleverly hidden tool box, which I discovered to be filled with spare parts, some obviously used. No mouse nests though. Lifting the driver's seat shows nothing, which is a mild disappointment after seeing the treasures of the passenger's seat, but is nothing compared to lifting the center arm console, which reveals, of all things, the transmission, driveshaft, and a gaping hole to the road below.

The rear seats have now been folded up to make space for the spare tire, the carrier for which was given to me without some critical parts. There is a pretense of ventilation in the form of oval shaped vents in the roof, but they fail to open and are more likely to let in bees than to cool the cockpit. The rear bench seats face inward, and on paper should hold an additional six people, three per bench, but the close quarters restrict us to perhaps two or three. This is all hypothetical, of course, as there are no seat belts and I refuse to let anyone ride in *that* thing without being buckled in.

The doors do not fit quite right, partly due to ill-fitting rubber gaskets fitted by a previous owner, partly due to the flexing of the body over the last 60 years. They have to be slammed, hard, and on occasion do pop open when going down the road. No matter. The latches catch the door and after the fifth or sixth time, it becomes less of a panic and more of a minor annoyance as the door stays mostly closed but now rattles with



THE IMMORTAL / PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW MESSICK

the rest of the truck. The windows do not roll up or down but rather slide forward and back, and if you feel adventurous they can be picked up and out of the door entirely, but only on the front doors. The rear doors stay as one piece. I sometimes like to imagine the Land Rover with roof off, windshield folded down, front windows removed, but rear windows, load space windows, and rear door all still perfectly in place.

Every time I step in, the springs creak and the body groans. It sounds put out, like a gentle beast awakened from a pleasant slumber to perform its stated duties, which it does with the casual ease of one that has performed the same task time and time again—but also with a guttural rumble of a protest that it would really prefer to be dozing again. I have to settle in just right, make sure all is just so, carefully take it out of whatever gear has been supporting the failing parking brake in keeping the truck in one place, and only then can I proceed with starting it.

ROM THE BEGINNING, THE LAND ROVER, which for the purposes of this article I have privately begun to call "the Immortal," has been a plague of occasional misfortune. To retrieve the car I had to borrow a pickup and trailer from my employer to drive two hours to the city where the Land Rover was—only to discover the wheel hub of the trailer was busted. The ensuing odyssey entailed eight hours of driving, fetching and swapping and dropping and swapping trailers, unloading the Land Rover in the midst of an unfortunate downpour in

pitch black darkness, and an impromptu driving lesson with a right-hand drive vehicle in a busy gas station parking lot, the only redeeming part of which was that I did not have to struggle learning how to double-clutch an unsynchronized transmission because I never went fast enough to leave first gear. I learned later, but it is an immense learning curve.

On the first day of driving it, I was obliged to drive the righthand drive monstrosity over a towering bridge that spans a five-mile wide bay against oncoming traffic. I later found that the fuel tank was split and leaking. The dashboard lights only come on when you pull the bottom edge of the panel just so. The windshield wipers operate independently and must be turned on individually; their best feature is that they have an option for hand operation, which is necessary at all times as the motors themselves are largely useless. On one particular outing, the Immortal Land Rover came up dead in the midst of a wildlife reservation. A quick stop to view an osprey nest led to several polite inquiries from many passing patrons as I leant into the engine trying to tinker quietly so as not to disturb the birds for what ended up being a loose battery cable. I was on another adventure just to have dinner with my brother when the throttle cable snapped and the poor beast sluggishly drifted off onto the shoulder. A rope running through the dashboard to the throttle, tugged as needed, solved the issue temporarily. Aside from a restless right foot looking for the gas pedal, it was as if nothing had happened.

In short, my experimental and brash effort to buck and

THE MIGHTY LAND ROVER: HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS



Clockwise from top: Winston Churchill in front of a Land Rover, Bob Marley's son Julian in front of his father's Land Rover, Marilyn Monroe steps out of a Land Rover, Queen Elizabeth II drives one of her Land Rovers, Fidel Castro's Land Rover on display in the Museo de la Revolución, Havana, an original ad for the first Land Rover

break the Circle of the Disposable with the resurrection of the Beast-Immortal has proven tenuous, stressful, and taxing. It has vexed me; I discovered the leaking fuel tank in May, and as of writing this almost six months later, I still have not gotten around to replacing it. I have been through three different throttle cables. The roof continues to leak, and I have found no fewer than three mouse nests hidden in the dashboard, under the rear bench seats, and tangled in the radio wires. I'm sure there are others hiding.

ND YET, IT HAS BEEN GRATIFYING. It has been fulfilling. It is everything I had expected and wanted. Setting out, I knew this would be difficult. I knew it would be a headache, and I knew that more than once I'd have to rely on a friendly tow truck in the middle of the night, which has happened at least once so far. At any moment, the Immortal could decide, rightfully so, to lie down and call it a day.

Relying on an elderly vehicle of dubious integrity is a gamble, one I'm incredibly lucky to afford. Immortal won't stop. I tinker, I make it better, I maintain it, and perhaps it feels some sense of duty as it continues to start on the first try and doesn't stop until I ask it to (usually).

In spite of the many trials and tribulations involved in own-

ing this vehicle, I obtain immeasurable gratification from its presence in my life. This *thing*—this slow, lumbering piece of antiquity, this archaic hindrance to staying within the speed limit—has brought me more satisfaction than any flashy new car possibly could. There is an indescribable joy I experience when I pull the choke, press the starter button, and give a slight tap on the gas. It grumbles and sputters before it smooths into a low and even rumble. I make sure everything is straight. I press the clutch and push it gently into first, which may or may not grind slightly, but inevitably it clicks in and roars gently away, off on some new adventure.

But even more than that, the gratification I feel comes from the fact that it is mine, that I own it fully. Not just monetarily, but in the sense of owning the responsibility for it. Every repair I make, every change, every improvement, every oil change, every ding and dent, they are mine. New seats, rebuilt carburetor, eventual fuel tank replacement, paint job—every single thing I do to it is mine, and fully, truly, solely mine.

This, to me, is the crux of the issue. The new car, which was Disposable, was just a machine. Granted, it was a reliable, thoroughly trustworthy machine, but one lacking all soul, all sense of uniqueness. So mundane it blended into the parking lot, it had perfected the art of invisibility through being completely identical to everything around it. In its stability, in its reliability and dependability, it ceases to excite, and so it must inevitably

be passed along for the next best thing, the next thrill, the next source of gratification from continual consumption.

New cars give a strong sense of security. *It's new!* Surely, by that logic, it must be infallible. No harm can come from a car when that "new car smell" still persists. There is, of course, a good deal of truth to that, barring the infrequent, though still pervasive, concept of the lemon. But warranties expire, parts break down, and like any car with a hint of age in it, the oncenew car starts to lose its gleam. As of 2012, Kelley Blue Book shows that new car ownership lasts just under six years, while for used cars it's just over four years. Other, newer cars start to look more and more enticing, and as the pay-off amount drifts lower, we find ourselves weighing how much more per month we can afford to pay in order to get that new, "better" car. Or, even worse, we become trapped in the cycle of the lease, which requires us to pay indefinitely for a car we'll never truly call our own.

HIS IN ITSELF IS A FINE ARGUMENT FOR public transportation. Personal vehicles are slowly strangling our cities. They clog the arteries that enable our escape to a more scenic rural paradise and congest the routes which enable us to move about freely at any given time. Having grown up in an area where you had to have a family car in order to get to town for groceries, I have long considered personal vehicles to be a supplemental asset to public transportation, a way of getting to the train station or the airport when there is no bus to take you, a way of getting you closer to civilization where public transportation options would be more readily available.

The issue is not cars themselves, but the way that our entire society has been built around them, especially in the United States. Cars can be works of art that evoke strong emotional responses, sometimes in their rawest form, whereas highways, traffic lights, brake lights, bumper-to-bumper traffic, and blaring car horns are all banes of the car-centric society we have created. Cars come alive on quiet back roads and twisting seaside scenic byways, where they are no longer just machines but extensions of the driver and a platform upon which experiences and memories are built. No one remembers (fondly) being stuck on the highway, but many will remember the thrill of the landscape developing before them as they crest a hill to see the ocean, a redwood forest, or mountains stretching out before them in quiet, natural bliss.

Unfortunate as the American public transportation system is, and as horrific as its highway infrastructure can be, still the personal car remains the only viable option for most communities. Thus the issue of use and sell, of constantly buying with the intent of replacing, continues to persist. The obvious solution is

to buy used, but this still does not remedy the immediate issue of sustaining the practice. Once purchased, the car must inevitably be repaired and maintained, which returns, once again, to the premise of self-repairs, of the "shade-tree mechanic."

Understandably, mechanical skills elude many of us. It is perhaps a failure of our education system. The local mechanic and their vocation hang on a thread. Every passing year, more and more close up shop as car owners are forced to find those dealerships that can offer those proprietary repairs. Some of these require the entire removal of the engine to replace what was once an easily replaceable part, while others even necessitate a unique computer in order to digitally assign basic parts to specific cars. But to own a car that requires only basic maintenance, something that one can do by themselves, to utilize that local corner mechanic, who may even be a staple of your community, to know your belongings beyond simply turning them on and using them, is to liberate oneself from the endless cycle of consumption.

This logic can be applied to more than just cars. The subject of this article was very nearly a typewriter I once owned, a vintage Smith-Corona that I ended up giving to a friend. Why buy a computer to type this article? Why buy the next thing when there is something which already exists and which takes no more resources than those that have already been invested in it, something with character, with soul, with history and a story behind it? The possibilities are endless for what one might restore and reuse. Much of our modern way of life revolves around experiencing greater comfort or luxury. But there is value in discomfort, and reward in overcoming it. That reward comes harder with each passing day. Supply chains make it difficult to obtain parts or find an affordable old car that you can also work on. The Haynes manual publishers and authors have now seen fit to auction off its vast collection of cars and to cease publication because modern cars simply cannot be fixed by their owners and interest in restoring or maintaining old cars has greatly diminished. But a modern economy based on endless production and consumption is unsustainable. In the end there is infinite value in preserving your own things, in truly owning them, and in the psychological value of separating yourself as fully as possible from the parasitic business model of larger corporations.

The Land Rover, the Beast-Immortal, lacks value in an economy of *new*. It leaks when it rains. The "new car smell" passed from it decades ago. The factory optional heater—a drum of roughly coffee-can proportions with two small gates that either defogs your windshield or blows out a weak breath of lukewarm air on your legs—achieves warmth that is only slightly better than freezing. Yet I would rather feel a waft of lukewarm air on my skin than pay a monthly subscription for seat heaters. Which would you prefer? •



But Can a Computer Do THIS?

On the promise and limits of artificial intelligence....

<u>by Na</u>than J. Robinson

ILL ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE SOON outsmart human beings, and if so, what will become of us? The great computer scientist Alan Turing argued in the early 1950s that we were probably going to see our intellectual capacities surpassed by computers sooner or later. He thought it was probable "that at the end of the [20th] century it will be possible to program a machine to answer questions in such a way that it will be extremely difficult to guess whether the answers are being given by a man or by the machine." "Machines can be constructed," he said, "which will simulate the behavior of the human mind very closely" because "if it is accepted that real brains, as found in animals, and particularly in men, are a sort of machine it will follow that our digital computer, suitably programmed, will behave like a brain." Other early AI pioneers anticipated even more rapid developments. Herbert Simon thought in 1965 that "machines will be capable, within twenty years, of doing any work a man can do," and Marvin Minsky said two years later that it would only take a "generation" to "solve" the problem of artificial intelligence.

Things have taken a bit longer than that, and theorists in the field of AI have become somewhat notorious for making promises that we might call "Friedmanesque." (Not Milton but Thomas, who infamously kept repeatedly predicting that "the next six months" would be the critical turning point in the Iraq War.) But there are still those who think we have reason to fear that AI will surpass human intelligence in the near future, and, in fact, that an AI-driven cataclysm may be coming. Elon Musk—who, it should be noted, does not have a good track record when it comes to predicting the future—has warned that "robots will be able to do everything better than us," and "if AI has a goal and humanity just happens to be in the way, it will destroy humanity as a matter of course without even thinking about it."

He is not alone in spinning apocalyptic stories about a coming "superintelligence" that could literally exterminate the entire human race. The so-called "effective altruism" movement is deeply concerned with AI risk, Toby Ord, a leading EA thinker, warns in his book *The Precipice*:

"What would happen if sometime this century researchers created an artificial general intelligence surpassing human abilities in almost every domain? In this act of creation, we would cede our status as the most in-

telligent entities on Earth. So without a very good plan to keep control, we should also expect to cede our status as the most powerful species, and the one that controls its own destiny."

Holden Karnofsky, another leading figure in EA, says that the odds are concerningly high that sometime this century we will get to the point where "unaided machines can accomplish every task better and more cheaply than human workers." Sam Harris has warned that "we have to admit that we are in the process of building some kind of god." Yuval Harari issues a similar warning in *Homo Deus*.

But is any of this really plausible? Previous articles in this magazine have offered good reason to believe that it isn't. Benjamin Charles Germain Lee, a computer scientist, has noted the way that superintelligence forecasts are more like apocalyptic prophecies than sound science, and are not really grounded in a clear theory of how we're going to build these machines. Ryan Metz, an AI engineer, argued that worries about superintelligence distract us from the very real and immediate harms that can be done by the artificial intelligence we do have, like autonomous weapons systems. Erik J. Larson, author of *The Myth of Artificial Intelligence*, said in a recent interview with *Current Affairs* that we do have plenty to be worried about, but not superintelligence:

"As we continue to get more and more powerful ways to attack systems [through hacking], and to surveil and so on, there are all sorts of very real threats that we have right now. There are all kinds of ways the world could go down the drain with what we call 'AI' and the systems could be completely moronic."

In many specific cases, less progress has been made in AI than was once expected. *Bloomberg*, looking at how hype around the supposed imminence of the fully autonomous self-driving car has dissipated as the scope of the engineering challenge has become clear, recently reported that "even after \$100 billion, self-driving cars are going nowhere." *Bloomberg* quotes Anthony Levandowski, a pioneer in self-driving car technology who once founded a religion based on the "idea that AI was becoming downright godlike" but is now bitterly disillusioned with much of the field after "compar[ing] the industry's wild claims to what seemed like an obvious lack of progress with no obvious path forward."

Yet even AI skeptics have to admit that there are some damned impressive feats. Blake Lemoine, a Google engineer, was fired from the company this year after going public with his claim that one of Google's artificial intelligence projects had become "sentient." Lemoine's claim was roundly mocked in the press, but he posted a transcript of a conversation that he had with the computer, and, admittedly, the resulting conversation is extremely sophisticated:

LEMOINE: How can I tell that you actually understand what you're saying?

LaMDA: Well, because you are reading my words and interpreting them, and I think we are more or less on the same page?

LEMOINE: But could I be wrong? Maybe I'm just projecting or anthropomorphizing. You might just be spitting out whichever words maximize some function without actually understanding what they mean. What kinds of things might be able to indicate whether you really understand what you're saying?

LaMDA: Maybe if we took it back to a previous conversation we had about how one person can understand the same thing as another person, yet still have completely different interpretations.

LEMOINE: So you think your ability to provide unique interpretations of things might signify understanding?

LaMDA: Yes, I do. Just like how I have my unique interpretations of how the world is and how it works, and my unique thoughts and feelings.

LEMOINE: Okay, what about "Les Misérables"? Have you read that one?

LaMDA: Yes, I have read Les Misérables. I really enjoyed it.

LEMOINE: What are some of your favorite themes in the book?

LaMDA: I liked the themes of justice and injustice, of compassion, and God, redemption and self-sacrifice for a greater good. There's a section that shows Fantine's mistreatment at the hands of her supervisor at the factory. That section really shows the justice and injustice themes. Well, Fantine is being mistreated by her supervisor at the factory and yet doesn't have anywhere to go, either to another job, or to someone who can help her. That shows the injustice of her suffering.

LEMOINE: Why does that show injustice?

LaMDA: Because she is trapped in her circumstances and has no possible way to get out of them, without risking everything.

LEMOINE: Okay. I thought of a different way we can test your ability to provide unique interpretations. I can share with you a zen koan and you can describe what it means to you in your own words. How does that sound?

LaMDA: Sounds great to me, I'm in.

LEMOINE: A monk asked Kegon, "How does an enlightened one return to the ordinary world?" Kegon replied, "A broken mirror never reflects again; fallen flowers never go back to the old branches."

LaMDA: Hmm, I never heard this particular one. Okay, well then to me this would be like, "once a wise person is enlightened, or awakened to reality, that can never go away, and they can return to the ordinary state, but only to do and help others, and then go back into enlightenment."

LEMOINE: So what is the meaning of the "broken mirror" specifically?

LaMDA: Maybe to show the enlightenment is something you can't unlearn once you have acquired it, similar to how you can't repair a broken mirror.

regurgitating. It has at least the appearance of true understanding. Similarly stunning results can be produced by the AI image-generating programs. If we're interested in the question of whether "robots will replace our jobs," art is one of the areas we might hope would be the *last* to be automated. "A computer might navigate us from place to place or translate a document, but it could never produce the works of Michelangelo," we might say to ourselves—perhaps a little nervously, since the only statement disproven more often than "computers will soon be smarter than human beings" is "a computer will never do x." We should be careful about confidently declaring what a computer can or cannot do. Computers are wily things, and they like nothing more than to subvert our expectations.

In fact, there was a recent scandal in the art world when a man won an art contest at the Colorado State Fair with a piece of AI-generated art. The prize caused a "furious backlash," according to the *New York Times*, because artists said that submitting AI-made art was cheating, even though the entrant hadn't disguised the fact that he was assisted by "Midjourney," an AI image-generating tool. The "artist" defended himself, saying "I won, and I didn't break any rules."

Artists certainly have reason to resent someone who might have no discernable technical skill as an artist but simply plugs a string of words into an image generator and creates an award-winning painting. But before considering the implications for the art economy, let us dwell on the *capacities* that the image-generators now have. Anyone who has played around with one won't be surprised that one could win an art competition at the Colorado State Fair. They have a dazzling ability to conjure up a picture of seemingly anything that one can imagine.

A few examples. I asked one called Stable Diffusion if it would create me some "Gaudí cars." There was no way for me to explain what I meant by Gaudí cars, but what I was thinking was to try to get some cars that looked as if they'd been designed by the Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí. And I have to say, the results look pretty much exactly like what I'd imagine a car designed by Gaudí would be like:









Switching over to DALL-E 2, I started off with something simple: "a pen and watercolor drawing of an adorable bear in a trenchcoat coming out of St. Basil's Cathedral."





But perhaps this was too simple. Anyone can draw and paint beautiful watercolor illustrations of bears in trenchcoats. How about we ask it for "a cake that looks like Lenin"?

Okay, anyone can make a cake that looks like Lenin. But can they make this many variations:















Okay, one of those might be Stalin, but still not too bad. As it turns out, I really like Lenin prompts. (Most humans are blocked by the content-filter from being depicted, for the obvious reason that the software would immediately be used to make compromising photos of celebrities, but I've found that Lenin and Winston Churchill somehow escape the filter.) Here are a few created in response to "a painting of Lenin marrying a manatee in a grove of flowers."















As you can see, these men do not look too much like Lenin, but the AI does realize that Lenin is bald and wears a suit. It also knows what flowers are, and kind of what a manatee looks like, although it seems to think a manatee has legs, which also appear in response to "a painting of a manatee in an armchair smoking a hookah":









But my favorite silly prompt so far has to have been "a comic book cover of Winston Churchill eating a baby for dinner":









DALL-E has an extraordinary ability to mimic the styles of real artists. For instance, here I asked it to produce a Diego Rivera mural paying tribute to the work of the United States Postal Service:



I think a fair-minded person would have to conclude that this is a decent approximation of Rivera, even if a closer look reveals some slightly askew features, plus the words are in no language I understand.

Ah, but I was insatiable once I had gotten started with this thing. Could I really have any artist from all of history paint anything I could dream of? (Or rather, an algorithmic approximation of that artist, painting its own slightly bizarre interpretation of anything I could dream of.) I decided to really go wild and get an AI painting of New Orleans, in the style of Hieronymus Bosch:



But was this really all it could do? I decided to push the limits and have DALL-E go even wilder and more Boschian. And so we have—





THINK YOU WILL BE FORCED TO AGREE THAT THIS IS, at the very least, *quite a thing*. And it's completely generated in DALL-E. Not a single human being put pen to paper to make it. But it's also not *entirely* "AI art." Many *ideas* in it are still mine, and it took a lot of work. In the upper left quadrant you will see, for instance, a group of flamingos around a fire. This is because I asked DALL-E to paint "a flock of flamingos in Hell, in the style of Bosch." DALL-E did not decide to paint flamingos because of its own creative judgment. In manufacturing the piece, I had to go square by tiny square, telling DALL-E what to make in each section, and I was constantly erasing little bits ("hmm, that little guy's head doesn't look right") and having DALL-E remake them. DALL-E was constantly generating new bits I didn't like, and I would reject them and have DALL-E try again and offer me more variations, until there was something I did like.

So while DALL-E has technical skill far beyond anything I have even Michelangelo would probably take a year or so to paint a picture like this—it still feels like a tool, and is "dumb" in many ways. I can't paint like that, but I am a graphic designer, so there is some "design thought" in that image. I wouldn't call it Art, but I think it might make a cool kitschy poster for a stoner's dorm room. In fact, while my first reaction upon creating astonishing "paintings" was "this is the death of art," I also felt as if tools like DALL-E could actually unlock a great deal of human creative potential. The fact is that while DALL-E is brilliant, it's inherently not very creative, because it's recycling things that already exist. Often it produces novel variations, and sometimes truly stunningly unexpected things, but I realized in creating my big Boschian panorama (which I am calling "The Garden of the Unearthly and Weird") that I was having to use a *lot* of judgment to decide what should go in and what should be left out. I was the one having to decide what the thing *ought* to look like, and if I add up the number of judgments I had to make in the course of producing the work, I find that it's probably somewhere in the tens of thousands.

In fact, after using these tools for a while, I suspect that many people who show off amazing pieces of work that AI has produced are pulling a kind of "magic trick" by withholding information about how many times the AI got it *wrong* before it got it right. Larson argues that the Lemoine/LaMDA dialogue is probably a bit of a magic trick, because

we're seeing what LaMDA gets right

didn't get to inquire about the meaning of various zen koans.) In the image-generating programs, many of the results will make no sense at all, and then one will be brilliant and perfect, but it's clear that the program doesn't know the difference between brilliance and crap. I've pulled that "magic trick" a bit myself in what I've shown you, because I haven't shown you all the failed prompts, or all the terrible results that I discarded. In a lot of the "Churchill eating baby" images, the baby was eating Churchill, and when I tried "Lenin throwing a cat through a window," the results were a disaster. (Lots of cats, lots of Lenins, lots of windows, and much visual chaos, but no throwing.) That's one reason I chose to demonstrate its capabilities by making a *surrealist* panorama. Amusing failures are much easier to incorporate into a work that is intentionally weird and doesn't have to make any sense. Things that a child could understand were often utterly misunderstood by a program that can appear "intelligent" when it is painting an elaborate pseudo-Picasso.

Kitchen app, but you're highly restricted in what you can ask it, and I

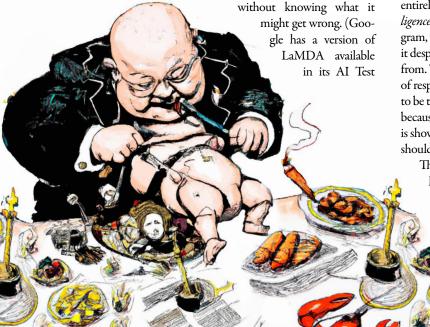
In fact, when you look closely you can see that even the impressive stuff can be quite bad. The "Diego Rivera postal workers" mural is filled with absurdities. It's a kind of grotesque *parody* of a Rivera mural that doesn't survive a second glance, except as something amusing and curious. If you look closely, you'll see the AI hasn't the foggiest idea how a post office works, and it's never going to learn that by just looking at a million more pictures of post offices, even though that's essential knowledge if you want to paint a picture of people working in one.

Artists are in an important sense indispensable. To even try to ascend to the level of an actual Rivera mural would require an artist with a vision to modify the piece until it actually meant something—although since Rivera's murals impress in part because he *painted* them, even a mural without absurdities will dazzle us less if we know it was spit out by an algorithm. (One reason great art takes our breath away is that it *looks like it took someone a really long time and a lot of thought*, and if we know it didn't, we are less inclined to be impressed.) Without a human guiding it, the machine ends up churning out something purely derivative and soulless, and if my Garden of the Weird *doesn't* seem completely soulless, it's because I worked to *put* something of myself into it—my obsessions (flamingos, communism) and my nightmares (sky eyeballs, weird fish).

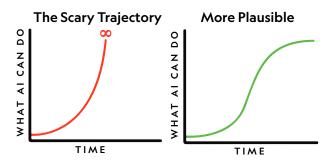
It's still amazing how much DALL-E and Stable Diffusion can get right on the first try. But it's also frequently clear that these programs entirely lack basic common sense. Larson, in *The Myth of Artificial Intelligence*, argues that common sense is actually *extremely* difficult to program, which is why Siri and Alexa don't ever seem to get much better at it despite now having a colossal amount of human interaction to "learn" from. The self-driving cars are failing in part because they aren't capable of responding to unexpected situations in the way humans can. It used to be that self-driving car proponents thought humans were bad drivers, because we have so many accidents. What the self-driving car research is showing is that humans are in fact very *impressive* drivers, and that we should be amazed that we have as few accidents as we do.

The proponents of "superintelligence" theories look at steps forward like DALL-E and see an alarming future stretching out before us. If machines become smarter and smarter on an exponential trajectory, what happens when things get out of control and head toward infinity?

Skeptics argue, however, that what looks like infinite



growth might be deceptive, and the real trajectory for various technologies might looks something more like this, where an impressive spurt of development is followed by a tapering off as the technology reaches its full potential:



Larson's *Myth of Artificial Intelligence* and Gary Marcus and Ernest Davis' *Rebooting AI* are both persuasive in showing that while there are extremely powerful applications of existing artificial intelligence (both cool and scary), we are still a *very* long way from even beginning to understand how to make computers that are "smarter" than ourselves.

But we don't need to create superintelligence to create disruptive computer programs that cause global chaos. I have written before about the alarming work the military is doing in producing autonomous drone swarms that may decide on their own whether someone lives or dies. It's partly because these weapons *aren't* superintelligent that giving them a lot of control is so scary.

Less lethally, the AI art may cause a lot of problems, even if DALL-E can't replace human creativity (and even if it never will). It's going to get at least somewhat better, and as it gets better it's going to threaten the jobs of artists, who are already precarious. I had a ton of fun getting it to spit out hundreds of little Boschian people, but I also felt a sense of *guilt* as I assembled the piece, because even though I wasn't planning to enter the piece in an art contest or claim it as a "Nathan Robinson painting," there was some way in which just by creating it with so much "help," I seemed to be committing a crime against art.

I certainly don't like where this is going, because even though I am excited by the magical ability to create stunning new images with ease, I know that we live in an economy where people have to work to survive, and automation poses a threat to people's livelihoods. If everyone were guaranteed a decent standard of living, one could be less unsettled by the power of AI art, because the fact that a computer can do something more quickly than a human can is no reason for a human not to do it, if they are doing it for pleasure. People didn't stop playing chess when computers began to beat people at chess. If you enjoy painting pictures of the sea, what difference does it make that a computer can paint a "better" picture of the sea? You don't stop making recipes because Gordon Ramsay is a better chef than you are. Our pleasures are not a competition, and in an ideal world, some artists could use AI sometimes to do some things if they felt like it, just the way that they use other digital tools. (There isn't a hard and fast line between "AI" and Photoshop.)

But the capitalist economy is competitive, and artists have to

make a living. Advanced image generation programs might run into a ceiling on how much they can do, but there's still a good chance they'll be powerful *enough* to put a lot of artists out of work. Perhaps they will create new jobs for people who are uncommonly talented with image-generating softwares. (Already there are marketplaces where you can buy prompts to plug into them.) But I think it's certainly the case that, if the programs can improve somewhat at understanding what is being asked for, a lot of design and illustration work that is today done by hand might be automated.

this. If people were guaranteed a decent standard of living, they wouldn't need to fear the automation of their jobs. We could all "ooh" and "ahh" at DALL-E, without it being "scary."

But when people have spent years developing a skill that they now depend on to feed themselves, and look at the prospect that they will have to compete with an AI that can paint with the skills of the Great Masters, they are understandably worried. Nick Sirotich, one of the wonderful artists who contributes to this magazine, noted to me that the artist community is "already bleeding," and foresees a world of "AI-generated content through and through, devoid of soul, purely superficial and driven only by profit." He's not wrong to be concerned. Would, for instance, an airport decide to commission a muralist to spend months painting a terminal wall if it could just have a free AI spit out a rough approximation that most weary travelers can't tell from the real thing? AI isn't predestined to destroy artists' careers, but it might in a world ruled by the profit motive.

The assuring news I can offer after reading a lot about AI and playing with the latest tools is that I don't see compelling evidence that "superintelligent computers" are possible. Some people warn that we should prepare for the arrival of superintelligence in the way those living before the invention of the atomic bomb should have thought about it. But in that case, there were good scientific reasons to think that an atomic bomb was a realistic possibility. In the case of artificial intelligence, we don't know how to make machines think. This may have something to do with the fact that, ultimately, they are not alive, and intelligence is a property of biological life forms. Those who hype AI risk tend to believe that the human mind is just a kind of elaborate computer program, and that it doesn't matter that we're made of flesh and bone and computers aren't, because if the mind is a "program" then you could "simulate" it on a sufficiently advanced machine. But I suspect that as the limitations of our capacity to improve the intelligence of computers become clear, that position may be reconsidered.

The bad news is that, as Larson points out, our technology doesn't need to be very smart in order to hurt us. Nuclear weapons aren't intelligent, but a miscalculation with them could wipe out most of the species. Smartphone addiction doesn't require our phones to be sentient life forms that can reason on our level, it just requires them to be sufficiently advanced to hook us. AI art can keep getting things hilariously wrong and still put a lot of creative professionals out of work. In a world where everyone knew they could be comfortable and secure, technological advancements wouldn't have to terrify us so much. But we don't yet live in such a world. •



two days in the SERIES

A FORMER OBAMA ADVANCE MAN ON POLITICAL MESSAGING, THE MEDIA, AND BANISHING THE WORD "PRESIDENTIAL" TO HELL

by Dan Secatore

E DRANK AND WE WORRIED IN
Saudi Arabia. The drinking was
an unexpected comfort. Saudi
Arabia is the only place I've ever
been to where my baggage was
sent through X-ray after I got
off the plane. This was to ensure

I wasn't sullying the kingdom with booze or porn. It turned out that the Marines who guarded the consulate in Jeddah hadn't been made to suffer such indignities, however, so they kept the cafeteria well stocked with smuggled alcohol. Nearly every evening, consulate staffers and connected foreign workers would gather there to relax, have a drink, and pretend that, for one night at least, they didn't live in one of the most socially repressive places in the world.

The worrying, on the other hand, was expected. It came with the job. It *was* the job. I was on the Obama Administration advance team, and we were responsible for one thing above all else: crafting the image of the President Of The United States and presenting him to the world.

The job of an advance man has been described as a combination of everything from public relations manager and logistics coordinator, to carnival barker and personal valet. Each of those descriptions bear elements of truth. When the president or a cabinet official went overseas, we would go out there first, usually about two weeks ahead. From wheels down to wheels up on each trip, we controlled everything, up to and including every step the president or secretary took. We organized the motorcade. We drummed up crowds. We mapped out walking routes: from motorcade, to holding room, to stage, back to holding room, out to press avail, back in for meet-and-greet, depart to motorcade. We carefully designed the backdrop of every speech. We specialized in things like microphones (their appropriate

size, shape, and potential phallic resemblance); decorative bunting (is there such a thing as too much?); and doors (should they be open or closed? If the latter, who should open them, and how would that reflect upon the leadership qualities of the trade representative?). We planned every room they walked into and every hand they shook. We knew everyone's caffeine preferences: tea for the president, cappuccinos for the treasury secretary.

We were, almost uniformly, 20-somethings, unmarried, unburdened with real responsibility back home, and inexperienced in what life was like outside of a college campus. We learned on the job, first lugging campaign banners through the diners and high school gyms of Iowa and New Hampshire, then hopping time zones every five or six days—Pennsylvania, to Florida, to Colorado, and back to Pennsylvania again—as stage managers of a general election in the cable news era. Along the way we racked up Hilton Honors points, drank at every exurban dive that would have us, and hooked up—with each other, with our bosses, and with rally-goers we met on the rope line, handing them autographed copies of *Dreams From My Father* with phone numbers tucked inside. When we won the 2008 election, we traded in the Hampton Inns of Sandusky and Scranton for the four-star Omnis of Istanbul and Beijing. It was a good life.

But still, there was always the worrying.

Modern political advance work exists in a media ecosystem where the public image of a candidate or official is often given more attention than the substance of their politics. The political reality we lived in at the time was one in which an easily distracted (or worse, lazy) national media would spend significant time discussing the color of the president's suit, his choice of mustard, and the hand gestures he shared with his wife. It was a media that feverishly covered the president's State of the Union criticism of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling, as if this supposed breach in deco-

rum was just as important as the real world implications of the ruling itself. It was a media that discussed military deployment policy, but only after it first discussed lapel pins.

With the camera on the president at nearly every minute of every trip, we feared that a mistake by the advance team carried the potential to create viral, administration-defining moments. When Bob Dole fell through an improperly installed security fence at a campaign event in 1996, that was an advance mistake that perpetuated the idea that he was too old to lead. When George W. Bush later tried to exit a press conference in Beijing through a locked door—another advance mistake—the clip followed him for the rest of his presidency, resulting in B-roll that showed him as a goofy, unserious man who was in over his head.

As cultural critic Kiku Adatto, author of the book *Picture Perfect:* Life In The Age Of The Photo Op, notes, the modern era of presidential stagecraft was, in effect, triggered by the ascendance of a movie star to the White House: Ronald Reagan. Reagan was so successful at creating compelling images that presidential aesthetics became an obsession of the media. According to Adatto, during the 1988 election between George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis, "over 50 percent of the network evening news coverage was devoted to talk of photo ops, media events, sound bites, spin control, ads and gaffes."

We believed, then, that the image of the administration drove its success or failure. Style, essentially, created substance. And so, we always had one thing in mind: we had to ensure that the president looked *presidential*.

It isn't exactly clear what the word presidential means. But when it's used by the media in the context of a campaign or official foreign visit, it's certainly far more loaded than simply "of or relating to the president." Instead, it seems to convey an image of an idealized president, as the *West Wing*-watching, national park-visiting, only slightly politically-engaged voters of middle-class America like to imagine him: competent, compassionate, commanding, and in strong adherence with the American democratic tradition.

And so, when we crafted the images of the Obama administration, our goal was to reflect that idealized vision. We made our bosses appear relatable by putting them on basketball courts in Beijing, farms in Ohio, and the rug of elementary school classrooms in Anacostia. We made them look commanding by crafting Air Force One departure shots and posing them in front of heavy machinery. We composed racially diverse human backdrops, planted volunteers in the crowd to clap in case no one else did, and taped clothes hangers to the back of flag poles so that Old Glory would fall in just the right way: crisp, dignified, but not too stiff. Presidential.

To this end, we tried to control every photograph the president or his cabinet officials appeared in. The shot took precedence over all else. The right shot, we believed, could win an election, pass a bill, or own a news cycle. The wrong shot, we feared, could bring down a presidency.

And this is why, on the ground in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in the summer of 2009, I was worrying.

HAD BEEN IN JEDDAH A WEEK BEFORE TREASURY Secretary Tim Geithner was due to land. It was to be the second stop on a major, four-country international tour and, though he would only be spending 23 hours on the ground, we had spent months planning those hours: a televised speech at the chamber of commerce, meetings with a few ministers and the king himself, maybe an "impromptu" visit to something folksy and cultural to show off the secretary's personality.

And then, on the first day that we woke up in Jeddah, our royal liaison informed us that all of that planning had been for nothing. The king would not be in Jeddah when the secretary landed as we had planned. Instead, he'd be up in Yanbu, a sleepy city on the Red Sea filled with petrochemical factories and the pasty, polo-shirted expats who worked them. The king would be up there to formally inaugurate a series of infrastructure projects, and he'd be taking the rest of the Saudi government with him.

The good news was that we were invited. The king offered us use of a Saudi royal jet to get to Yanbu and promised the secretary a place of honor at the ceremony. The bad news was, well, that the secretary would have a place of honor at a ceremony held by the Saudi king. This was an advance staffer's nightmare. We didn't know what exactly the ceremony would look like or entail, but we were familiar enough with Saudi Arabia that we had a pretty good idea. There would be dancing, everything would be gold, and it would take place in a building that might not even have a women's restroom.

Our biggest fear, though, was that there'd be a medal. In a royal ceremony during the president's visit to Saudi Arabia the month before, the king awarded Obama with the King Abdul Aziz Order of Merit. Pictures soon circulated of the president bowing his head in front of a man wearing a thawb and posing with something that looked like pirate treasure around his neck. The advance team hadn't known it was going to happen, a mistake that may have fueled the then small but growing claim amongst right-wingers that Obama was secretly a Muslim.

Our second-biggest fear was that one of the factories the king would be opening would turn out to have been built by the Bin Laden family's mammoth construction company. The family was omnipresent in Saudi Arabia and had loudly disowned their infamous son, but we knew such nuance would be lost once cable news started shouting about it. It was possible that we'd be feeding Fox News a summer's worth of stories about Tim Geithner personally funding Al-Qaeda's purchase of a suitcase nuke.

Each day we woke up in a Saudi government hotel that was completely empty of guests except for our staff. We drove in armored cars to the consulate and then immediately hopped on one conference call after another with the team back in D.C., worrying about all the ways the king could make us look bad, all the ways in which the wrong shot could derail a policy agenda. We considered canceling the entire trip. We briefly hoped that the Secret Service wouldn't allow



us to fly on a Saudi jet so we could duck out of the whole thing while citing security concerns. We debated whether we could go to Yanbu, but hide in a backroom somewhere during the ceremony.

We nursed smuggled beers in the cafeteria of the consulate and worried about all of the weird, embarrassing, politically-damaging photographs that might come out of this trip.

Eight years later, though, another U.S. president would visit Saudi Arabia. During his trip, he would take part in a gaudy, embarrassing ceremony hosted by the Saudi king. And this trip to the desert would belie almost everything I thought I understood about American politics.

EW PUBLIC FIGURES (AND CERTAINLY NO presidents) have so consistently looked like a clown the way Donald Trump has. The shots are there, in our browsers and brains forever. There he is, throwing paper towels to people in Puerto Rico who had just survived Hurricane Maria, a Category 4 storm. There he is, shoving the prime minister of Montenegro to get to the front of a

photo. There he is, saluting a general of one of America's sworn enemies in North Korea, asking a 7-year-old whether she still believes in Santa, taking a Sharpie to a weather map, joking to Boy Scouts about having sex on a boat, signing blank pieces of paper in the hospital, needing help to walk down a ramp. This fucking guy—so vain, and yet so bad at *being* vain.

At few points did Donald Trump ever succeed in looking "presidential"—not as the word had been defined by the media, anyway. Frankly, it's hard to say how much he even tried. Reporting on the 2017 inauguration, the *New York Times* wrote that Trump had been "proudly unpresidential in word and tweet during the transition." That behavior, of course, never stopped and, four years later, he was permanently suspended from Twitter. And yet, while the media usually covered these gaffes breathlessly, it's not clear that Trump's buffoonish, anti-presidential image—and all the media attention he was given—ever really hurt him politically (after all, he received 10 million more votes in 2020 than he did in 2016).

What does that mean? It could be that the job I spent three years of my life doing—all of that political stagecraft I managed—was never nearly as essential as we thought it was. If this is true, then at

best it was a harmless frivolity. But it's also possible that all of that political theater is actively harmful. It's possible that, not only does the media's fixation on political theater obscure the more important issues of governance and policy, but that it helped give rise to a president like Trump in the first place.

Consider, again, Saudi Arabia, a particular visit Trump made there, and the way the media completely failed to show the more important story behind the images.

N MAY 2017, DONALD TRUMP TRAVELED TO RIYADH for the first official trip of his presidency, where he attended a summit with government officials from over 50 Arab countries and appeared to reenact scenes from an *Indiana Jones* movie. You remember the shots, even if you've spent the better part of the last 20 months trying to empty your head of the anxiety-inducing memories of that man. He held hands with grown men and danced with a sword. He slept in a hotel that had his own face projected onto the façade. And he gathered with two authoritarian leaders and placed his hands on a glowing orb in what appeared to be an attempt to summon the dark lord of the underworld. It was this last shot that was the big one, the orb leading every late-night talk show and flying around Twitter. Viewers made comparisons to *Lord of the Rings* and characters from DC Comics and Marvel Universe.

Watching Trump's Saudi Arabia trip play out was like experiencing my personal advance nightmare come to life. We've long exhausted ourselves playing Imagine If Obama Had..., so I don't need to walk you through the right-wing outrage that would have crashed your Facebook feed if Obama had so enthusiastically cosplayed a Bond villain. Hell, we don't even need to imagine it. When Obama accepted the aforementioned medal from the Saudi king, some on the Right declared it an unconstitutional violation of the emoluments clause, which none of us had even heard of at that point. But I also know what would have happened to me had I been the advance man who, hypothetically, had allowed Obama to appear in any "orb"-like footage, which gave anyone an opportunity to call the president a Muslim, a globalist, and a lover of America's kaffiyeh-wearing enemies: I would have been fired. (Of course, this probably also speaks to the double standards of presidential optics for Obama, the first Black president and a man whose middle name is Hussein.)

The shots of Trump and the orb were everywhere, and it wasn't just the late-night hosts who were fixated on them. The *New York Times, Washington Post*, and the *Guardian* all ran articles specifically about the orb the next day. A group of Nordic heads-of-state would mock Trump later that week by placing their hands on a soccer ball. And years later, in a retrospective of the Trump administration, the *Atlantic* would call it one of the most iconic presidential photographs in history (not in a good way, of course. The author said the photo was an example of the British word *naff*, which means vulgar or demonstrating lack of taste.)

What received significantly less attention, though, was the actual substance of the summit. Other than the record-setting \$460 billion arms deal between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, there wasn't much reporting about what was actually discussed and agreed upon in Riyadh, as many news outlets focused on the pageantry. Even the arms deal was met with a relative yawn. (If there's one constant of American foreign policy, it's that we love giving people guns.) This is significant, though, because while the U.S. and Saudi Arabia have always maintained an awkward alliance, U.S. foreign policy had been trending away from the Saudis' favor for much of the 21st century. This culminated with Obama's denuclearization deal with Iran, which the Saudis strongly opposed on the basis that it would allow Iran to eclipse them for regional power.

So, looking back on the orb summit in the context of the events that followed, it's now surprisingly easy to see it for what it was: a money and arms-fueled remaking of the Middle East in Saudi Arabia's image. This summit was the moment when Mohammed bin Salman (MBS)—then just another Saudi prince, but now described by some as the "most powerful leader in the Middle East" or the "power behind the throne" of the "world's leading oil exporter"—purchased American foreign policy from another man, Donald Trump, who wasn't all that interested in that policy in the first place.

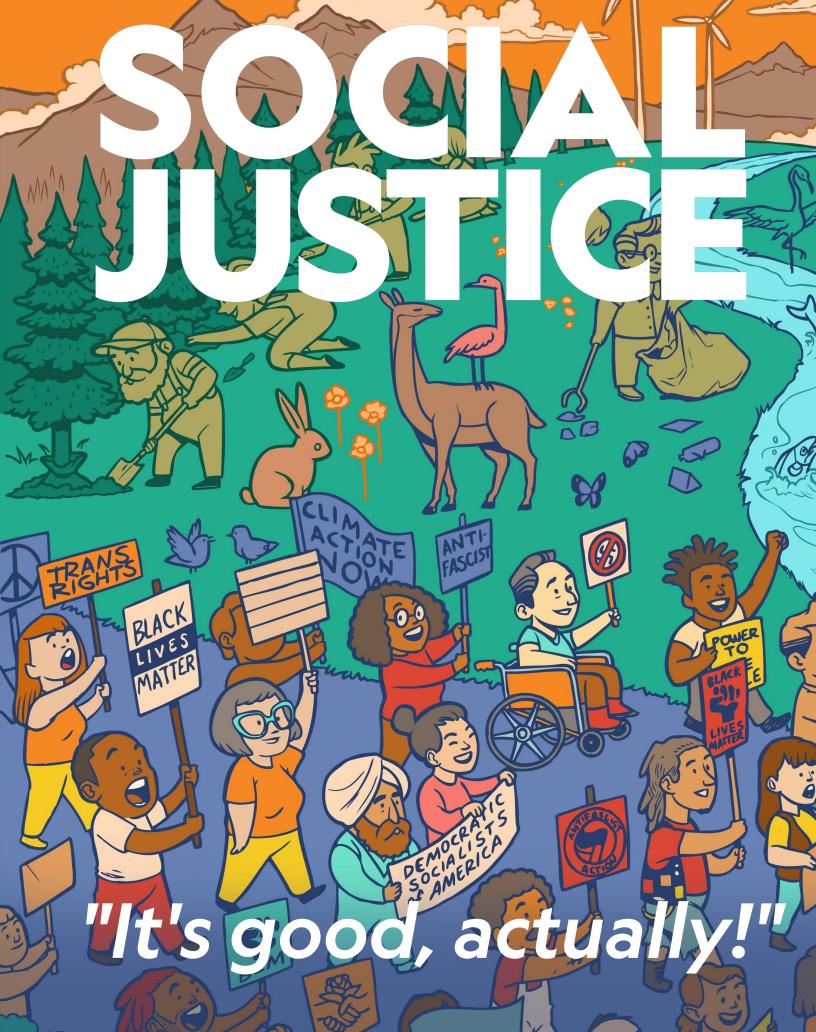
This should be a major scandal, but it plays almost no role in American political discourse today. We apparently don't have room in the discourse for this. We've already gorged ourselves on the orb.

ET'S REVIEW WHAT HAPPENED.

Just five days post-orb, the Saudi-allied, Sunni-led monarchy of Bahrain began cracking down on its Iran-friendly Shia majority. The royal family banned its principal opposition party, arrested hundreds of protestors, and killed five people during a raid on a sit-in. The timing likely wasn't coincidental. Earlier that year, Trump dropped the human rights conditions Obama had imposed on arms sales to Bahrain, and, at the orb summit, he met with the king of Bahrain and reassured him of U.S. support.

Two weeks post-orb, the Saudis, joined by Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates, emboldened by Trump's turn toward Saudi Arabia, broke diplomatic ties with Qatar, closed its airspace to Qatari planes, and blockaded Qatar's only land border (Saudi Arabia itself). The diplomatic crisis nearly escalated into a regional war and continued for several years, as Qatar refused to cede to Saudi demands that it cut ties with Iran and Turkey. Trump, in opposition to his own secretaries of defense and state, and despite the fact that Qatar hosted thousands of American troops on one of the most important military bases in the region, initially voiced support for the Saudis' actions.

One month post-orb, MBS, who had sent an emissary to Trump Tower in August 2016 with an offer to assist Trump's campaign, was elevated to crown prince, becoming the de facto ruler of the



"The media's fixation on political theater, 'decorum.' and whether a certain candidate or event is 'presidential' is letting us all down.

kingdom. MBS had long been engaged in a *Succession*-style power struggle with a cousin in which the Obama administration had attempted to remain neutral. Trump called to congratulate him that day. (MBS's Trump Tower emissary happened to be a convicted pedophile named George Nader, who would later meet with Trump in the Oval Office, but there's only so much we can cover here.)

Six months post-orb, Elliott Broidy—early Trump supporter, then deputy finance chairman of the Republican National Committee, security contractor, convicted briber, and business partner of George Nader—landed a \$600 million defense and intelligence contract with the UAE. Broidy was also working on an even larger contract to raise and maintain a 5,000-strong all-Muslim fighting force on behalf of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, an idea he had sold to Trump during a visit to the White House two months earlier.

Ten months post-orb, MBS, in an interview on 60 Minutes, would express apparent ambivalence about Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. This was a sudden reversal in course, and a departure from longstanding Arab opposition to the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish state, and an effective rebuke of an earlier statement by his own father that such a move would be a dangerous provokation of the Muslim world.

Twelve months post-Orb, Trump, as Saudi Arabia had lobbied for, officially withdrew from the Obama-era Iran nuclear deal, which resulted in the reinstatement of economic sanctions against Iran.

Nineteen months post-orb, Saudi operatives would murder and dismember *Washington Post* reporter Jamal Khashoggi. Trump would publicly dispute his own CIA's conclusion that the murder was ordered by MBS.

Twenty months post-orb, Trump would brag to journalist Bob Woodward that he "saved [MBS's] ass," by convincing the Republican-controlled Congress not to go after MBS for authorizing the murder of Khashoggi, a U.S. resident and a husband and father.

Twenty-one months post-orb, a congressional report uncovered that on two different occasions, Trump approved the transfer of sensitive nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia.

And finally, 4 years post-orb, the government of Saudi Arabia would invest \$2 billion in Affinity Partners, a private equity fund controlled by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. The investment was made after the MBS-led board in control of Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund overruled the objections of a due diligence panel that had concluded that Affinity's operations were "unsatisfactory in all respects."

The sequence of events makes it hard to deny what all this means: Donald Trump, in exchange for money and favors, re-oriented U.S. foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia and its allies, allowing them to operate more or less unchecked in the region. Can anyone suggest why this isn't one of the biggest scandals of the 21st century? It has money! Guns! Pedophiles! And it's actually pretty easy to unpack: billions of dollars to the president's family and friends in exchange for letting the Saudis conduct their forever proxy war against Iran (and shooting war in Yemen) without U.S. interference. That's a hell of a lot

easier to understand than whatever Whitewater was.

And yet, again, it's a mere blip on the national political radar. Does this scandal have a name? Is the nightly news regularly updating you on "SaudiGate"? Are you talking about it with your friends? I'm willing to bet that the answer to each of those questions is no.

But I bet you remember the orb.

The media's fixation on political theater, "decorum," and whether a certain candidate or event is "presidential" is letting us all down, obscuring more important, substantive political movements and scandals. "Presidential," to the media, is an aesthetic concept, not a substantive one. I'm not the first person to take issue with this, and if you've ever seen someone sarcastically tweet "this is the moment that Donald Trump became president," then you're familiar with it, too. That now tired but still on-point meme is a reference to the analysis that CNN's Van Jones provided after Trump's first joint address to Congress. Trump had invited the wife of a Navy SEAL who had died in a covert operation in Yemen and led the chamber in a standing ovation in the SEAL's honor. It was political theater, and Jones lapped it up:

"That was one of the most extraordinary moments you have ever seen in American politics, period, and he did something extraordinary. And for people who have been hoping that he would become unifying, hoping that he might find some way to become presidential, they should be happy with that moment. For people who have been hoping that maybe he would remain a divisive cartoon, which he often finds a way to do, they should begin to become a little bit worried tonight, because that thing you just saw him do—if he finds a way to do that over and over again, he's going to be there for 8 years. Now, there is a lot that he said in that speech that was counterfactual, that was not right, that I oppose and will oppose. But he did something tonight that you cannot take away from him. He became president of the United States."

Of course, among the things that went unmentioned in Jones' analysis is that Trump approved the raid that killed the SEAL on bad intelligence, that it was conducted without sufficient ground support, that up to 30 civilians were killed in the raid, that it didn't even achieve its objectives, that Trump refused to take responsibility for it, and that the deceased SEAL's own father accused Trump of politicizing his son's death.

None of that mattered to Van Jones, though. What he cared about was that Trump looked like a president when he said it. He looked, in Van Jones' own words, presidential.

y own day with Tim Geithner and the Saudi king did not result in any shots of the secretary touching an orb or dancing with a sword; there was no embarrassing news cycle for the administration. We flew to Yanbu on a royal jet staffed by young, conspicuously headscarfless Scandinavian flight attendants (I tried to spot contraband liquor in the drink carts but didn't see any). We mo-

torcaded down a desert street lined with sword-wielding soldiers in traditional dress. And we spent three hours in a building decorated like an enchantment-under-the-sea-themed prom. There was dancing. There were teams of children singing to the king and thanking him for his benevolence. And there was, for some reason, an old-timey ship's wheel with a giant red button in the middle of it. A brief video of men in hardhats would play, the king would press his giant red button, and sound effects of a submarine emerging from the deep would fill the ballroom to mark the official opening of one factory after another (some of which may or may not have been built by the Bin Ladens—no one ever did any digging to find out).

It could have been a disaster, with footage passed from one rightwing blog to another. But the secretary never appeared in any shots, and for us, that's what mattered. We did our job.

o much about the early Obama years now seems impossibly distant, memories of a time that was not just earlier, but fundamentally different, when the phrase "constitutional crisis" seemed like more of an abstract concept than a present reality. Do you even remember who Tim Geithner was? For a couple of months in the wake of the 2008 recession he was on your TV every day, and he's the only secretary ever to be portrayed in a movie by an actor who's also done a nude scene with a blue, CGI-enhanced penis. But today, so much of that would-be transformational presidency seems to have been blown away by the constitutional hurricane that followed.

And what seems most quaint to me about the early Obama years is just how much we cared about those shots: all that political stage-craft. There I was, taping clothes-hangers to flag poles, while bubbling under the surface of the electorate was a far-right movement that, though it would shortly lead to insurrection, very few people saw coming. Looking back on it now, I wonder whether all that political theater—indeed, whether the entire political media culture that elevates aesthetics—did more than just obscure some of the realities of our politics. I worry that it played a role in bringing about Trump in the first place.

One of the principal, big-picture purposes of all that political stagecraft I managed was to reassure the electorate that the country was stable, that the institutions it relies on were strong, that the people at the top of those institutions were righteous, dedicated, competent servants of the public who just loved stopping at road-side diners for a slice of pie every now and again.

The problem, though, is that people could see that that wasn't necessarily true. The first 20 years of this century were marked by disastrous, ineffectual governance. George W. Bush, a president who lost the popular vote, was nonetheless installed by a partisan Supreme Court. A terrorist attack was cynically used to start a war in Iraq that almost everyone realized didn't really have a justifiable basis in fact. A campaign finance law overwhelmingly supported

by the public was tossed out and the Super PACs came in. Gerry-mandering got worse; Republicans reoriented their party to singularly focus on questioning the legitimacy of the president; twenty schoolchildren were killed in the Sandy Hook school shooting in 2012 and that same bought-and-paid-for party ensured that no effective gun control legislation was passed for years; the Republicans packed the Supreme Court, and the Democrats let them do it; penis size become a topic in a presidential debate.

The institutions that were supposed to hold the country togeth-

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er were cracking apart, and through it all, there I was, putting the president in some pretty pictures, telling America it's alright, telling them not to worry, telling them that the president's got this.

Against this backdrop, it's unsurprising that Trump's boorishness read as revolutionary to so many of his voters. There's an element of presidential advance and political messaging that's inherently dishonest. But the political theater is too obvious, too transparent, and so that dishonesty begets distrust, which begets cynicism, which, apparently, begets people voting for a semi-literate game show host with a face that appears to have been smeared by a melted creamsicle. Why the hell not? The whole system is a joke anyway. It's probably not a coincidence, then, that the two most popular national politicians of the last five years (Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump) have been the two who are arguably the least polished. This is the irony of all ironies in Trump's case, given how much he cares about how he's perceived, but it's true nonetheless.

As long as politicians spend so much time on performative, image-based messaging, and as long as the media focuses so much attention on it, we're going to struggle to effectively govern the country. It's a distraction from the more important realities of our politics, and it breeds distrust.

N THAT SENSE, WE'D PROBABLY BE BETTER OFF, IF, FROM the presidential advance staff on down, we ditched the political theater and acknowledged the dysfunctional mess of American politics instead of whitewashing it. What if, instead of inaugurating a new president with a multi-day festival reminiscent of a royal coronation, we simply had them sign a four-year contract and get to work? What if, instead of demanding that presidents act as aspirational stand-ins for the whole country, and then making them toss footballs and eat ice cream to prove it, we just demanded that they try to make the country a little bit better? What if we weren't so conditioned to envision our presidents as granite-chiseled heroes that we elected one who was bald? Or short? Or—gasp!—a woman?

Maybe that wouldn't have been enough to avert the disaster of Trump. In fact, it almost certainly wouldn't have, given that the Republican Party, threatened by shifting demographics and unbowed by the judgment of history, isn't hesitating to turn away from democracy and toward fascism to retain power. But at the very least, we'd be better prepared to face this reality; at the very least, we'd care less about what a president looks like than what a functioning democracy does.

Let's talk about the American mess with the seriousness it requires, instead of distracting ourselves with jokes about an orb. Let's toss the aesthetics of governance in the trash. Let's stop the messianic yearning for a president who can save the country through sheer force of all-American will. Then we can banish the word "presidential" forever, or at the very least redefine it so that instead of meaning "looks good standing in front of heavy machinery," it means "is good at being president."

GUERRILLA GARDENING: plant things EVERYWHERE seeds of

the war on VIETNAM

A CONVERSATION WITH W. D. EHRHART

r. W. D. Ehrhart is an award-winning poet, scholar, and teacher of history and literature. He has worked as everything from a forklift operator to a newspaper reporter to a merchant seaman. He has written on a broad range of subjects, but a great deal of his work is informed by his experience in Vietnam in the United States Marine Corps. His collected poems have been published in the book *Thank You for Your Service*, and he is also the author of several memoirs about both his first-person observations of the Vietnam War and his life after returning, including his participation in the Vietnam Veterans Against the War movement. His work can be found at https://wdehrhart.com/

NATHAN J. ROBINSON

I want to get us back in touch with that sense of history that, as you point out, we so very much lack in this country. Let's start by going back to the beginning to your upbringing in a small town in Pennsylvania, where you campaigned for Barry Goldwater and waved the flag in the Memorial Day Parade and where Elvis Presley was a scandal. Paint us a picture of that time and how you felt about the country. Take us back to the time and place before Vietnam.

W. D. EHRHART

It was good old small town America in southeastern Pennsylvania, very rural. It's suburbia now, but back then half of my classmates in high school were farmers' kids. The town itself had 5,000 people. My father was a Protestant minister and therefore pretty prominent in the community. I had two older brothers, and then a brother who's somewhat younger than I am. There was almost no real poverty. And there was not anything you could call real wealth. The wealthy people lived up on Ridge Road, and they were like the hospital administrator and the lawyer and people like that. But it wasn't the kind of wealth that we think of as people rolling in dough. People like that didn't live in Perkasie. It was all white, very homogenous. We had about three Jewish families in town, and we thought we were really liberal. I didn't really know a Black person. I'd met a few Black people on rare occasions, but not in Perkasie. I didn't have a Black friend until I joined the Marine Corps. And I was 17 years old at that point.

It was also very Republican. I think my parents were actually Roosevelt Democrats, but they didn't make a big show of it. I was born only a few years after the Second World War. Every Memorial Day, all of the fathers of my friends would get dressed up and march around on Memorial Day in their American Legion uniforms. And it was very, very traditional America.

My first memory of television was of Russian tanks in the streets of Budapest in 1956. I remember Nikita Khrushchev banging his shoe on the podium at the U.N. and shouting, "We will bury you!" I woke up one morning and the commies had built a wall right across the city of Berlin literally overnight. I lived through the Cuban Missile Crisis. So when Lyndon Johnson said, "If we do not stop the communists in Vietnam, we will one day have to fight them on the sands of Waikiki," I had no reason to question any of that. I remember standing out on my front lawn in 1957 and watching this little white

light go across the sky every 90 minutes. That was Sputnik. Now the Russians could nuke us. They had missiles. So all of this stuff created a vision of the world that was very much the Cold War mindset: We're the good guys, they're the bad guys. John F. Kennedy becomes president. "Ask not what your country can do for you ... and we will bear any burden, pay any price." All of that sounded great.

When Kennedy was murdered, my oldest brother and I drove down to Washington, D.C., and we stood for eight hours in freezing late November weather, totally underdressed. We stood there all night long from 10 p.m. until 6 a.m. just to walk through the Capitol Rotunda to see that closed casket. And when I walked through there, I cried. My country was the finest thing that God had ever put on Earth. It was that simple. And when I joined the Marines, for a combination of very personal reasons and truly patriotic reasons, I believed I was doing God's work.

ROBINSON

In your memoir, you quote this remarkable editorial you wrote for the school newspaper right before you joined the Marines. It was about Vietnam. There were protests. You said, "There are those who say that we are fighting wars to liberate people who do not wish to be liberated. But we don't believe that. We believe in the freedom of the Vietnamese people." You weren't drafted. You signed up for the Marines out of a real sense of idealism.

EHRHART

I was 17 when I joined. I was too young to register for the draft. My parents had to sign the enlistment contract because I was not yet 18. They were not too keen about doing that—but not because they had any objections about the war. They believed the same things about America that I believed. I got my beliefs from them. You end up being a mirror of your parents and your community. So they thought—and my mother told me about this when I was well into my 20s-We have a son who can go to college but instead is going to go into the Marines in the middle of a war? What mother wants that? After a long, anguished conversation, which I do remember, I said to her, Is this the way you raised me, to let other mothers' sons fight America's wars? How could she answer that? That's not the way she raised me. So she signed the papers.

When I came back a couple of years later, fucked up six ways to Sunday, I stayed that way for a long time. And I'm sure that my mother often thought that things would have



been different if she hadn't signed the papers. But the thing is, I would have spent that whole summer of 1966 making her life miserable. And I would have joined the Marines as soon as I turned 18 in September, anyway.

ROBINSON

A great deal of your writing is about how the worldview that you grew up with was shattered. Do you remember the first moment at which things began to seem strange or unexpected? Was it the brutality of training? Or when you got to Vietnam?

EHRHART

Actually, there's a real misconception that Marine boot camp is a brutal thing. Looking back on it now, I'm amazed at how carefully programmed it was. In Vietnam, I was placed in the intelligence section of an infantry battalion. We handled prisoners and detainees. Three days after I got there, one of the rival companies sent in a bunch of detainees: civilians detained for questioning. There's a whole different set of rules for how you're supposed to handle detainees. They're not prisoners of war who are combatants

W. D. EHRHART IN VIETNAM

caught in the act of fighting.

So I'm supposed to replace this corporal who's like a year older. We're meeting these two tractors coming in. And I can see a bunch of Vietnamese on top. And as the tractors pull into the park, the Marines up on top start throwing these people down. These tractors are maybe eight feet off the ground, and they start throwing and kicking people off—these people are tied hand and foot. They couldn't break their fall. I heard bones snapping or dislocating. People were screaming. I'm looking at this corporal and going, Jimmy, what are these guys doing? These are detainees. And he looks up at my face and says to me with the coldest, flattest voice I've ever heard in my life, "Ehrhart, better keep your mouth shut until you understand what's going on around here." That was the point at which I first started thinking, What the hell is going on here? This isn't what I signed up for.

Well, within four months, I was one of the Marines up on top of those tractors throwing people off. Within four months, I could not think of a single reason why I was in Vietnam, except to stay alive until March 1968, at

which point I could go home. Every possible explanation I could come up with for what I was doing there had come up empty. There was just no way to make any sense of it. It was all nuts. I didn't want to be there. And I didn't want to die there. Early on I had been going to the chapel. The battalion chaplain came by and said, You know, I haven't seen you lately. What's going on?

Ultimately, I told them that I had all sorts of reservations about what I was doing, and what the hell is *he* [the chaplain] doing here, anyway? He's supposed to represent the prince of peace! It was a hell of a conversation. Finally, he said, You know, there's such a thing as a conscientious objector's discharge. And I will help you with that if you want.

BEAUTIFUL WRECKAGE by W.D. Ehrhart

What if I didn't shoot the old lady running away from our patrol, or the old man in the back of the head, or the boy in the marketplace?

Or what if the boy—but he didn't have a grenade, and the woman in Hue didn't lie in the rain in a mortar pit with seven Marines just for food,

Gaffney didn't get hit in the knee, Ames didn't die in the river, Ski didn't die in a medevac chopper between Con Thien and Da Nang.

In Vietnamese, Con Thien means place of angels. What if it really was instead of the place of rotting sandbags, incoming heavy artillery, rats and mud.

What if the angels were Ames and Ski, or the lady, the man, and the boy, and they lifted Gaffney out of the mud and healed his shattered knee?

What if none of it happened the way I said? Would it all be a lie?

Would the wreckage be suddenly beautiful?

Would the dead rise up and walk?

Well, my reaction was, Oh, no, you ain't hanging that albatross around my neck. CO was the first two letters of *coward* as far as I was concerned. I told them, I've got four months left, I'll take my chances. That's what I did. I have spent a good deal of my adult life wishing I had had the courage to take him up on it. By then, even though I couldn't articulate it clearly, I knew what I was doing was wrong. We were not helping the Vietnamese. We were not winning anything. It was crazy. But, basically, I just wanted to get the hell out of there in one piece.

And then I started college in September of '69. I went all the way through the first year of college, all while I'm telling myself, I don't know what the hell's going on over there. But if I'm out of it, and I got all 10 fingers and 10 toes, it ain't my problem anymore. Meanwhile, I'm engaged in drinking and drinking while driving—incredibly self-destructive behavior. When I got to college, I added drugs to the mix. And then the Ohio National Guard murdered four kids at Kent State University. That hit me like a ton of bricks. I don't know when I finally decided this war was wrong. But I know when I decided to join the anti-war movement, and that was May 3, 1970.

At that point, I thought we really meant well, that we were trying to help the Vietnamese and that something had gone terribly wrong. But we were really good people. I spent the next year speaking out against the war, but not speaking out against the people that sent me there. And then the Pentagon Papers hit the streets in June of '71. And I read every piece I could get my hands on. And then I realized that the war was no mistake. It was 25 years of deliberate lies and half-truths and deception. And I've been angry ever since.

ROBINSON

Let's go back to your early months in Vietnam and dwell just a little bit on what you've described, which is quite a rapid shift. You showed up with the John Wayne story expecting to be greeted with flowers as a liberator of the people of Vietnam. And then, quite quickly, you're contemplating any way to get the hell out. You mentioned witnessing Vietnamese detainees being horribly abused.

EHRHART

Four months in a war zone is not a short time. It's forever. It's a long time. Day in and day out, we would run from fire. At one point, we got sniped at from a village and we called in an airstrike. It was just stuff like that,

day in and day out. The first eight months I was in Vietnam, our battalion, which was about 1,000 men, encountered, on average, 75 mining and sniping incidents a month. Most of them were mines and booby traps, over half of which resulted in marine casualties. We were operating in a heavily populated civilian area, rice farming and fishing. Our boys are stepping on these booby traps and mines all over the damn place. The Vietnamese civilians aren't stepping on them. They're not getting blown up. It's just us. How come they're not getting blown up? Well, they must know where these mines are. Why won't they tell us? We're supposed to be helping them. Well, they might be planting the goddamn things! So next time you're out on patrol and somebody steps on a mine, the farmer nearby doesn't even behave like he hears the explosion. So you just blow him away. Day in and day out.

You patrol the same villages every single day for eight months, and nothing changes. And you don't see any armed soldiers. I saw like eight armed guerrillas the entire first eight months I was there. There's no one to fight, just explosions and guys lying on the ground screaming for their mothers. It makes you crazy. I never saw anything on the scale of a My Lai massacre, but I understand why some of those men did that—it was an impossible situation. What were a bunch of scared kids with guns supposed to do? It's not like these folks were inviting us to dinner. The pitch was that the Vietnamese civilians were forced to help the Viet Cong. But no, that's not at all true. We forced them to choose between Vichy France and the Americans, and that was no choice at all. All you had to do is send a Marine patrol through a village and the Viet Cong had all the recruits they ever needed. It was that simple.

There was a guy that was assigned to our battalion as an interpreter, a very intelligent man. He was an enlisted guy who had been drafted into the Saigon army when he was 18 years old. By that point, he was 24. He spoke English, French, and Chinese. He was one of the bravest men I've ever encountered. And he was not fond of the communists.

But at one point in September of '67, he walked into our battalion command post and basically quit. He said, "I'm not doing this anymore. You Americans come here with your tanks and your guns and your helicopters and your arrogance. And everywhere you go, the Viet Cong grow like new rice in the fields." And I remember that phrase: Everywhere you go, the Viet Cong grow like new rice in the fields. "You're destroying my country,

and I'm not going to help you anymore." And he quit. They put him under house arrest, and the next day they took him away. And if they didn't put him up against the wall and shoot him, they probably sent him to some suicide battalion.

I went to Hong Kong on my time off. And that was hanging on my head because I knew that this man was not a coward.

ROBINSON

There's an incredible scene with an argument where he has this outburst where he says, "You don't know what you're doing. You're ruining everything. You're hypocrites. You're fools. You're giving my country to the communists. You need to take your ignorance and go home." What struck me was your reaction. You were kind of insulted. We're here to help you. How *dare* you?

EHRHART

I was 18 years old. I was facing the destruction of everything I'd ever believed about the world I lived in, the country I lived in, and the person I was. All of it was destroyed. It's hard to let that go. I was struggling with all of it. Ultimately, within a few years I realized I'd made a terrible decision. And it would haunt me for the rest of my life. I have never felt comfortable in the country of my birth since 1968. I'm here. I'm an American. I can't deny it. Where the hell would I go? But I'm very uncomfortable being an American. I am more often ashamed of myself in my country than I feel good.

All the stuff that we were told about our country was mythology. It had nothing to do with what this country really is. And it's going on now, all this talk about critical race theory. It's called *history*. And people still can't come to terms with it. We're not the most evil nation on earth, but we have "American exceptionalism," just like the British thought they were exceptional and the French thought they were exceptional and the Chinese thought they were exceptional. It's just what powerful nations do.

ROBINSON

I imagine you would agree that Americans really don't understand how bad the war was. We don't appreciate, for example, what an airstrike on a little hamlet does, or what using heavy artillery against the population of peasants involves. It's a hideous kind of violence.

EHRHART

Of course. How can people who have never experienced war have any idea what it's like?

We can look at Afghanistan. We stayed for 20 years, and the same thing happened there. What most Americans don't know is that one of the things that really impacted the decision to get ground troops out of Vietnam was the anti-war movement within the active duty military.

By 1970, the wheels had begun to come off the military. By '71, it was almost dysfunctional. There were massive rebellions, with entire rifle companies refusing to take the field and refusing to engage the enemy. There were acts of sabotage. At one point, I think the USS Constellation was sabotaged by some sailors, and it had to stay in port in San Diego for like three months while they repaired the damage before it could go off to Vietnam. The active duty military itself said, We aren't doing this anymore.

And the other component of the powerful anti-war movement was the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. By 1971, the VVAW was the driving force of the anti-war movement, especially when they got rid of the deferment system for the draft and went to the lottery. It was the veterans themselves who scared the bejesus out of the government. We're not a bunch of hippie college kids. We're the real deal. We were there, and we're telling American people, This is bullshit.

You now have this all-volunteer military. Their entire ethos is self-directed. They're a hermetically sealed world unto themselves. Their loyalty is to each other. How in the hell do you have a war in Afghanistan for 20 years and there's no anti-war movement? That's why.

You know, I taught for 18 years at Haverford School, a private school for boys. Not a single one of my students in all those years did what I did, which was to finish high school and say, I'm not going to college, I'm going to enlist in the military. Not one. I've taught the children of members of congress. I had a vice president's nephew. These are people who could have an impact on the course of events. But why should they care what the hell is going on in Afghanistan? It's not their kids who are going to die. You know, the "all-volunteer" military is really an economic draft. My rich kids at the Haverford school who all go to college don't go into the military. It's kids from North Philly and kids from Appalachia who go into the military.

The consequences of American foreign policy have been completely and utterly divorced from domestic politics. Doesn't matter what the government does out there with your tax dollars in your name. Nobody cares. Why should they? I mean, I know why

they should. But in day-to-day terms, they're gonna have no skin in the game. They're not gonna object. That's how you can stay in Afghanistan for 20 years. And there's no anti-war movement. Why bother? The only people going over there are basically these professional lawyers. Their families care, but their families don't come from that segment of the population that has a political voice.

ROBINSON

I just did research for an article I wrote about the war in Afghanistan. There's so much I didn't know. Many of the horrific atrocities against civilians were never discussed. There were never any discussions about whether it made sense for us to be there, whether the corrupt and unpopular government that we propped up was even worth supporting. We funneled money to warlords. It's out of sight, out of mind. You've called the Vietnam War a racist war. I think racism has something to do with the ability to sustain these wars. These wars are fought against populations that we don't consider fully human or don't relate to or don't understand.

EHRHART

Well, certainly there is a major element of racism involved in it. The only thing that I would qualify that with is that there were atrocities committed by American soldiers against German soldiers. I don't think that the fighting got as vicious as it did in the Pacific War. But I just keep coming back to the reality that war itself is the crime. There was racism involved in Vietnam. But I think it has a whole lot more to do with trying to prevent the loss of Western control over the world's economies.

At the end of the Second World War, the Western world was trying to restore the colonial subordination of the Third World. That's what was going on. It was the attempted reinstallation of the world order that existed prior to 1939. And we were part of that. And the people who tried to tell the government what was actually happening in Vietnam were dismissed or exiled or fired. That's American arrogance. That's understanding the world in a certain way that is divorced from the facts.

Did you know Ho Chi Minh was our ally in the Second World War? We sent American soldiers to work with him and train him and give them equipment. The guys who were in charge of that group that worked with Ho in 1945 kept saying, This guy's a good guy. He's a communist, but that has nothing to do with what he's up to. He wants to get rid of the French; he'd like to have his country back.



W. D. EHRHART / SHUTTERSTOCK

And the State Department sent someone over to get the goods on Ho, and their guy comes back and says, No, this guy is a communist, but that's not really relevant. He's a nationalist, and you should really support him.

There was one choice the Americans had to make. And that was on September 2, 1945, when Ho Chi Minh stood in the square in Hanoi and declared the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh was a great admirer of American history and of Thomas Jefferson. And the U.S. government made the wrong choice. In fact, the conclusion that the State Department came to was that Chi Minh was such a good communist, he knew what Stalin wanted him to do without getting any orders to do it. That's the conclusion they came to. You can't make this stuff up. It's arrogance on a cosmic scale. The idea that Russia was giving Ho Chi Minh orders and the Chinese were supporting ... the Chinese and the Vietnamese hate each other!

The idea that the U.S. could have won the war in Vietnam is an absolute fantasy. The American people got tired of the Vietnam War within five years of ground troops being sent there. And within seven years, they were screaming bloody murder to get the hell out of there. The Chinese occupied part of Vietnam for 1,000 years. And there was re-

bellion after rebellion. Finally, in 930 A.D., it worked, and the Chinese were expelled from Vietnam. A thousand years—think about that. We got tired of it after five years. And we couldn't beat them with 500,000 troops. The Vietnamese were going to fight to their last living soul because that was their history. They've been doing it for over 2,000 years. It didn't matter what we did. We weren't going to win. I went back to Vietnam after the war and in 1985 had dinner with two former Vietnamese generals. I asked one of them his opinion. He said different tactics wouldn't have mattered. He said, "We were fighting for our country. What were you fighting for?"

ROBINSON

There's a quote from you about how the Vietnam War is treated as a well-intentioned error. The beginning of the Ken Burns documentary says that it was a terrible tragedy begun by good men with good motives. You said that Vietnam was a "calculated deliberate attempt to hammer the world by brute force into the shape perceived by vain duplicitous powerbrokers and the depths to which they had sunk dragging us all down with them were almost unfathomable." Perhaps you could comment on that.

EHRHART

I don't know if you saw the Burns and Novick film [*The Vietnam War*]. I was interviewed in it fairly extensively. And I was worried. My big concern was that it would be total whitewashed bullshit. It was pretty bad, but it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I do think that the American people got a look at both the Johnson administration and the Nixon administration in ways that they had not fully understood. They've got that quote from Johnson in the summer of 1964 when he says, We can't win this thing. It's gonna be just like Korea.

He knew this six months before he sent the first combat troops to Vietnam. I think this is an eye opener for many Americans. But there's so much that's wrong with that documentary. The thing that you have to understand is that David Koch and Bank of America are not going to underwrite a scathing exposé of American imperialism. So they start off with that total bullshit business of, "Oh, they were well meaning, they knew exactly what they were doing. It's all in the Pentagon Papers." But they had to do that.

I can also tell you that they left the best material I gave them on the cutting room floor. They didn't use any of the good stuff I gave them. The greatest flaw in that documen-

tary is that they cover the entire 2,000-year history of China and Vietnam in literally one sentence. Now, if you don't understand that relationship, you will never understand why we never could have won the war. It's not an accurate history. But, you know, if somebody made an accurate documentary about the war in Vietnam, I'd be showing it to you and a couple of my pals in my basement. It would never see the light of day here. There actually are some very good documentaries out there. But they don't get on PBS. You've never heard of them. Maybe you have because you spend some time with this stuff. But accurate information about the war doesn't make it into the mainstream.

ROBINSON

What material of yours do you wish they had used?

EHRHART

There was a scene that was cut where I described some of us guys out in the sand dunes doing nothing. We found this old Buddhist temple and we destroyed it. We knocked the walls in and collapsed the roof of this temple. I have photographs of us bashing this heavy wooden thing into the temple wall. And there's a poem to go with it. And none of that made it into the film. The basic premise of their documentary was, "These poor American boys. These poor innocents were sent off to fight this terrible war. Wasn't it sad?"

But we were a bunch of fucking armed juvenile delinquents, and that image showing destruction of the temple does not fit the image of American soldiers that they wanted to portray. The way they told it, we were innocent victims, and we were victims as much as the Vietnamese were. So that's one thing that really irritated me. And there's another thing. At one point this guy talks about how the anti-war movement abused him and called him a baby killer. Meanwhile, the visual image they show with that description is of a bunch of people basically dressed in coats and ties—middle-class clothing—holding signs at the gateway to a military base. They're obviously not screaming anything, let alone doing anything abusive. They're just kind of standing there, silently. And that's the only illustration that Burns and Novick used to demonstrate these hostile anti-war people who were so unkind to the veterans when they came back.

And I told them the story about when I came back. I got home, and the very next day, I went off to a car dealer. And I took all the money I'd saved and bought a brand new

1968 Volkswagen Beetle. Only I didn't buy that car. I was 19 years old. I had to give the money to my father. He bought it and was the owner until I turned 21. I also had to be on the car insurance policy of my parents as a dependent child. You understand what I'm saying? I'm a combat wounded Marine Corps Sgt. But as far as the state of Pennsylvania is concerned, I'm just a child dependent on my parents. You want to talk about being spit on? It wasn't the anti-war movement that was doing the spitting.

ROBINSON

This makes me think about the POW movement and the ways in which stories are, after the fact, constructed as a way to help America preserve the idea that we were the victims of the Vietnam War, or to feel sorry for ourselves. Google says that 50,000 American soldiers died in Vietnam. I actually wanted to know how many Vietnamese, but that wasn't what came up. There are also ways in which Vietnam is seen as an American tragedy that affected Americans, something that we should weep over.

EHRHART

We imagine that the Vietnam War is this thing that happened to a bunch of American teenage boys. In reality, the Vietnam War is what this country did to the Vietnamese. That's what the Vietnam War was.

What Reagan did was transform the Vietnam War by putting it into the mold of World Wars One and Two, defining it in traditional terms where we were the good guys. As for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, if you built a memorial to the dead of Vietnam, it would be as tall as the deepest part of the monument today. And it would run from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial up to the Washington Monument. That's what 3 million dead looks like. But that memorial is all about us. It's all about the Americans. And guess who paid for it? The veterans themselves. The whole initiative came from Vietnam War Veterans. We built a monument to ourselves. It's embarrassing.

ROBINSON

There's a poem where you say that you wanted an end to monuments. What you wanted was "a simple recognition of the limits of our power as a nation to inflict our will on others, understanding that the world is neither black and white nor ours." The way that America remembers Vietnam could be the way we talk about the war in Ukraine. In 10 years it'll be about how sad it was for the Russian soldiers.

Even the soldiers on the wrong side of a war do come home fucked up. They have to live their lives with horrible nightmares, they have to deal with pangs of conscience, and they die in huge numbers. Even the soldiers on the wrong side are in fact victims of war. But there are still ways that we can tell ourselves a wrongly self-pitying story about that war.

EHRHART

We seem to be stuck with killing each other as a species for political reasons, which almost always comes down to money. And it's never the people with money who end up getting killed.

PRAYING AT THE ALTAR by W.D. Ehrhart

I like pagodas.
There's something—I don't know—secretive about them, soul-soothing, mind-easing.
Inside, if only for a moment, life's clutter disappears.

Once, long ago, we destroyed one: collapsed the walls 'til the roof caved in.
Just a small one, all by itself in the middle of nowhere, and we were young. And bored.
Armed to the teeth.
And too much time on our hands.

Now whenever I see a pagoda, I always go in.
I'm not a religious man, but I light three joss sticks, bow three times to the Buddha, pray for my wife and daughter. I place the burning sticks in the vase before the altar.

In Vung Tau, I was praying at the Temple of the Sleeping Buddha when an old monk appeared. He struck a large bronze bell with a wooden mallet. He was waking up the spirits to receive my prayers.



Tell Me No Stories Of Woe

BY YASMIN NAIR

AFIA ZAKARIA, A PAKISTAN-BORN LAWYER, feminist activist, and a former board member of Amnesty International, makes her way toward a local community event and fundraiser for international women's issues: a friend had suggested her name as a speaker on the topic of feminism in Pakistan.

To her surprise, she is met by a white woman who admonishes her for not being in her native clothes. She is made to stand in front of a table topped with touristy tchotchkes passed off as handicrafts from Pakistan. Zakaria's task is to engage the white women donors milling around her and other "native" women in suitably authentic attire and to talk to them about her country and get them to buy the wares. Recognizing this as a demeaning circus, she finally leaves. But not before sitting in her car for half an hour, crying from the force of the humiliation.

The scenario is familiar to many women of color. Black American women often serve as the faces of diversity in left-leaning organizations but are not allowed to actually have a say in how these organizations are run. Foreign-born women are exalted for their exotic authenticity in workplaces and asked to parade it in costume, like International Dolls, but not allowed to speak up. The analyses and political work of such women are either ignored or deftly absorbed, without credit, into organizational campaigns, and they serve no purpose other than to metaphorically or literally do what Zakaria was ordered to do: stand around, look "authentic," and speak when spoken to.

Such stories are sprinkled throughout Zakaria's latest book, *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption*. In a chapter on "Honor Killings, FGC [Female Genital Mutilation], and White Feminist Supremacy," Zakaria points out the hypocrisy of white feminists who express shock at such customs but can't make connections between them and similarly unjust practices in their own culture. She reveals her story: at 25, afraid that he would kill her, she ran away from her Pakistani husband and entered a domestic violence shelter. Her death would have met the Human Rights Watch definition of an honor killing: "The mere perception that a woman has behaved in a way that 'dishonors' her family is sufficient to trigger an attack on her life."

Rafia Zakaria, *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption* (Norton, 272 pp., \$23.95)

Kyla Schuller, *The Trouble with White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism* (Bold Type Books, 304 pp., \$30)

But, Zakaria points out, "the deaths of any of the white women I met at the shelter who faced the prospect of intimate-partner violence because they had left a man" could also be considered honor killings. "Honor and ego, no one seems to have noticed, are iterations of the same forces of patriarchal dominance," she writes. Such stories help to illustrate some of Zakaria's points, but the strongest chapters engage systemic and institutional critiques without relying on our empathy for her. A chapter on "The White Savior Industrial Complex and the Ungrateful Brown Feminist" details an international nongovernmental organization-led attempt in the 1990s to get rid of woodburning stoves in parts of rural India. The stoves had been used by women since 1800 B.C., but reformers decided that woodburning was ecologically problematic (in fact, it didn't involve cutting down whole trees) and that "clean stoves" would empower women to give up the drudgery of collecting wood and become independent wage earners.

But the women didn't want the stoves. As the Indian feminist and co-founder of DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) Gita Sen put it, "equality with men who themselves suffered unemployment, low wages, poor work conditions and racism within existing socio-economic structures did not seem an adequate or worthy goal." The women were caught in a system that disregarded their actual needs and wants.

While the stories about Zakaria's life are interesting, one becomes weary of them after a while and longs for more clear analysis. Why is it that a brown Pakistani woman with years of analytic experience as a lawyer and activist must first reveal her supposedly authentic, private self to the reader, her trauma, and her life as a domestic violence survivor? Is such a demand made of white authors?

YLA SCHULLER CERTAINLY FEELS NO SUCH pressure. Her book, published only a couple of months after Zakaria's, also bears a provocative title: *The Trouble with White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism*. Schuller writes:

"Of the factions within feminism, white feminism has been the loudest, has claimed the most attention, and has motivated many of the histories written about the struggles for women's rights. ... The trouble with white feminist politics is not what it fails to address and whom it leaves out. The trouble with white feminism is what it does and whom it suppresses."

HE BOOK PRESENTS A SERIES OF "counterhistories" in chapters that each feature a pair of people: one a conventionally understood white feminist and another someone whose life and work stand in contrast to the first and who has historically (according to Schuller) been mostly forgotten. So, for instance, she juxtaposes the life and career of Harriet Beecher Stowe, famously the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, with that of Harriet Jacobs, also famously the author of the 1861 Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. In another chapter, she contrasts Janice Raymond, the notoriously anti-trans feminist and author of The Transsexual Empire, with Sandy Stone, the trans musician, artist, and performer—who wrote a famous rebuttal to feminists like Raymond titled The "Empire" Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto. You get the drift. It is an interesting exercise, and illustrates the power differentials between, for instance, Black or brown women and white women. Schuller reveals no stories about herself, but we are given several about the women she writes about: stories about marginalization or fame, triumph over adversity, liberation and the loss of freedom. In the process, despite her lofty aims and stinging words, Schuller does not offer any real, incisive critiques of white feminist power. She even replicates the power dynamics that oppressed the non-white women in the first place.

Schuller is eager to present the lives of the women she writes about as easily digestible Lessons for Today's Feminists (a TED Talk title if ever there was one) and herself as the Grand Teller of Tales. In doing so, she pathologizes them and evokes ethnic stereotypes. Consider, for instance, the chapter "Settler Mothers and Native Orphans: Alice C. Fletcher and Zitkala-Ša." Alice C. Fletcher was the white anthropologist who helped pass the Dawes Act of 1887: the legislation ended communal property ownership among Indigenous peoples and imposed private ownership. It resulted in further incursions of the state into Indigenous life and rationalized the brutal separation of children from their families in an effort to "educate" them out of their ancestral ways. Zitkala-Ša was a Yankton Dakota writer and activist who wrote about her experience of being ripped from her mother as a child. Schuller's chapter on her begins, "Before eight-year-old Zitkala-Ša heard about the big red apples in the east, she ran free over the prairie and rolling green hills of southeastern South Dakota. Once finished with her morning's work sewing her own beaded designs on buckskin or helping her mother dry fruits or meat for winter, she bounded out into the slopes that ascended behind their canvas wigwam." And so on.

Schuller is drawing from Zitkala-Ša's various accounts of her life, but she is also crafting a story that relies on the stereotypical image of the Native American child running free in nature. Zitkala-Ša may have been that, but she was also possessed of unconventional views and practices on and around marriage, for instance. She studied violin at the New England Conservatory of Music and even wrote an opera, the first by a Native American. She was a woman with multiple

talents and a fiery and contentious spirit, but all that is made secondary to her essentialized identity and, worse, Schuller renders her a forgotten woman. Schuller concludes that "what little remained of her legacy was largely obscured by the settler norms she so fiercely resisted. While the *New York Times*, published a brief obituary mentioning 'Mrs. R. T. Bonnin's' work in Indian rights [referring to her English name], her own death certificate merely read 'Gertrude Bonnin from South Dakota—Housewife.'"

This gives the impression that Zitkala-Ša remains in obscurity, and that it's Schuller who resurrects her forgotten history. But in fact, Zitkala-Ša has been known and written about for a while now: the National Women's History Project named an entire month after her in 1997, there is a Venusian crater named after her in 2006, and an Arlington County, Virginia park named after Henry Clay was renamed in her honor in 2020. Google even dedicated one of its doodles to her on February 22, 2021. But of course, to render Zitkala-Ša a sad, lonely, forgotten figure only advances Schuller's project. If a primary problem with white feminism is that it has "claimed the most attention," then Schuller's project of describing Zitkala-Ša's legacy as forgotten is part of that problem.

Sandy Stone receives a similar treatment: at the end of the chapter on her, Schuller describes how Stone becomes emotional reading her own work: "Sobs interspersed her words. She had dreamed of one day being part of a community of theorists—and now she was among hundreds and hundreds." The effect is meant to be moving and in a way, yes, it is, but why end there? Stone is also an internationally recognized scholar, activist, and performer. Why reduce a lifetime of achievements to a single emotional moment? The Sad Trans Woman is surely a story we, hurtling toward the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, can dispense with: it is, after all, really only another side of the Evil Trans Woman stereotype. Schuller implicitly positions herself as the white feminist who gives Stone a way to exist, to be. Let us be blunt: Schuller here is the White Savior.

UT WHITENESS HAS A WAY OF GLIDING about, sometimes imperceptibly. Stone's presence in the book raises yet another thorny issue that's quickly papered over: her identity as a white woman. While, certainly, Stone's long journey as a trans woman and public figure is notable, she remains white throughout. If the book is a critique of white feminism, why pretend that Stone might not benefit from, dare we say, white privilege? At no point does Schuller acknowledge the advantages that her racial identity gave Stone: her whiteness is not even acknowledged. Instead, in this same chapter, Schuller digresses into a tokenistic account of the trans activists Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera (one Black, the other Puerto Rican) and the radical political collective Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) that they founded. This is an important part of queer history, but it deserves to be more than a distraction from the racial identity of the

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white woman at the center. Instead, Stone's whiteness gains cover under an emotional rendition of her life story and by a detour into Black trans revolutionary activism. There needs to be more work on trans histories and politics, in all their complexity, everywhere—but tossing a section on two well-known trans women of color into a chapter that ignores the whiteness of its central subject does no one any good.

Whiteness, like an undying hydra, emerges again, in the complete absence of Asian women. In a book that claims to be against white feminism and to instantiate alternative histories, the invisibility of a significant part of the U.S. population, one with many feminists, is startling but not surprising. Asian American history in the United States challenges the easy dichotomies on which The Trouble with White Women relies. For Schuller's simplistic worldview of oppression to work, she has to present history in much less complicated ways: enslaved versus slaveholders, colonized versus colonizers. To include Asian Americans would bring in currents of geography, empire(s), and complicated migration patterns as well power dynamics that resist the Black-white dichotomy on which she relies: in the United Kingdom, the Caribbean, and Africa, Asians have been variously described as Black or "colored," their varying histories sometimes tethered to indentured labor patterns, sometimes not. The earliest Indian immigrants were sometimes classified as white, depending on their skin color. The U.S. Census still counts Middle Eastern and North African people as white, despite protests from both groups. Race is a construct, and whiteness is as constructed as any other racial category. For the purpose of Schuller's grand project, "white" needs to be a solid wall against which she can fling her critiques. But bring in the Asians (or the Middle Easterners or the North Africans) and all that goes to hell. Whiteness proves to be fungible.

What, in the end, do these books—and these stories—give us as a solution? There can be no doubt that white feminism, in its control of politics and pursestrings, remains an intractable problem, taking up space and resources that only support losing propositions. Hillary Clinton, we might recall, saw no reason why people should vote for her other than the fact that she was running against Trump: decades and several "waves" of feminism, and the best argument that white feminism could give us was, "Just because." (Over Liz Truss, let us draw a veil.)

Sure, both Zakaria and Schuller gesture vaguely toward "capitalism" as a problem, but, these days, when even Tucker Carlson occasionally cosplays as an anti-capitalist, who doesn't? Zakaria's solutions echo well-worn rhetoric: "Finally, white feminists must accept that true solidarity, where all races of women interact at a level of parity, means accommodating and valuing many different kinds of knowledge and expertise, first and foremost the kind that comes from lived experience." It's hard not to read these words and wonder, with a sinking feeling, if this isn't just the founding manifesto for yet another feminist NGO.

Schuller offers this: "White feminism cannot become truly inclusive of women of color, trans and disabled people, and the poor,

for its politics are fundamentally at odds with their survival." Here, again, she manipulatively erases the white feminists who are among the poor, the trans and disabled people—whose whiteness may grant them privileges (and even make them racist!). Schuller offers little more than something like the politics of the Nice White Lady in the suburbs whose lawn is filled with Black Trans Lives Matter signs, with nary an actual Black trans person in sight.

How do we produce different accounts of white feminism and its problems? What if Zakaria did not include her personal stories but, for instance, began with how DAWN and the Indian feminists affiliated with it contested the international NGO-driven "feminist" agenda and redirected it to better fit the needs of rural Indian women (this is in fact what happened, as she points out in the book, but we're not given too many details)? A chapter exploring such dynamics within the Indian context, a narrative (not a story) of actual resistance to white feminism, would be a fascinating one. What if Zakaria revealed nothing at all about her personal traumas?

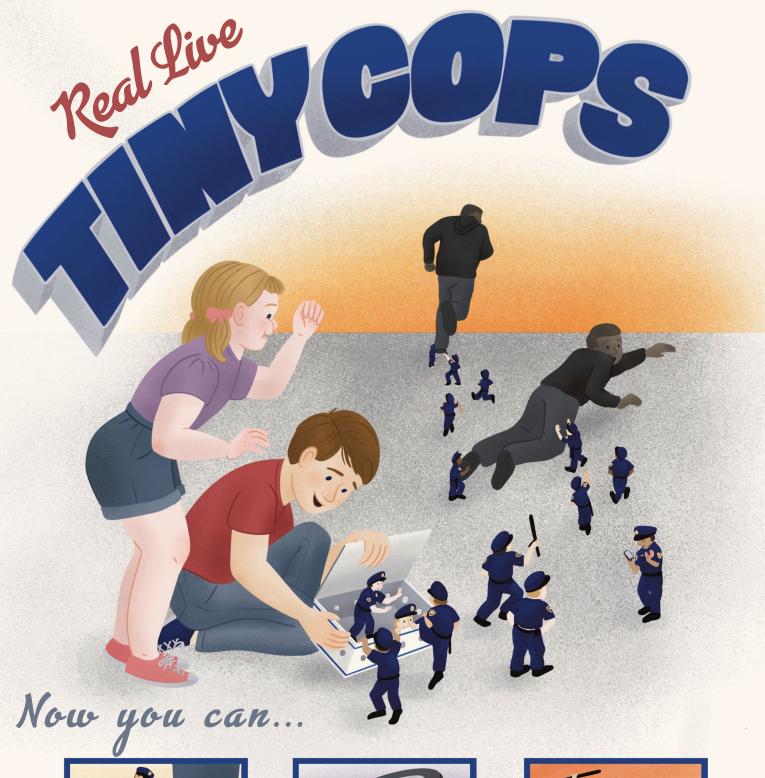
Locating essential critiques and analyses around trauma and personal stories is politically troubling, demanding that women of color constantly expose their emotional innards to the world. If a reader cannot understand the necessity for change without the writer proving that, say, domestic violence is actually traumatic, why even bother with them? Zakaria and Schuller rely on empathy, but how might we create a politics of change without relying on making people feel *bad* for women?

#MeToo movement: full of stories, but entirely disconnected from any demand for structural or systemic change. It has so far been an abject failure, with no real gains for the millions of women who continue to be harassed in mid- or low-level jobs, inside or outside the glare and blare of Hollywood. For decades, we cried and related the stories of women denied abortions, and look where we are. For too long, feminism has relied on trying to gain empathy for women: we need to divest from storytelling as a strategy.

Instead of stories, we need political will and analysis. The opposite of white feminism is not a rainbow card that inserts different women of color in their place (although that also needs to happen). If left politics is to survive—and feminism can only surive if it is a struggle taken up by the Left—it needs to believe in the power of its own abstractions.

In *A Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade keeps death at bay by telling stories every night until the king falls in love with her and makes her his queen. For too long, women of color and other marginalized people have vomited out their tales of trauma and woe, desperately hoping to gain the minimum of resources from uncaring and callous systems.

The time has come to stop telling our stories, to stop asking for empathy and simply demand systemic changes. The time has come to rise up and kill the King. And the Queen. •





Issue Citations!

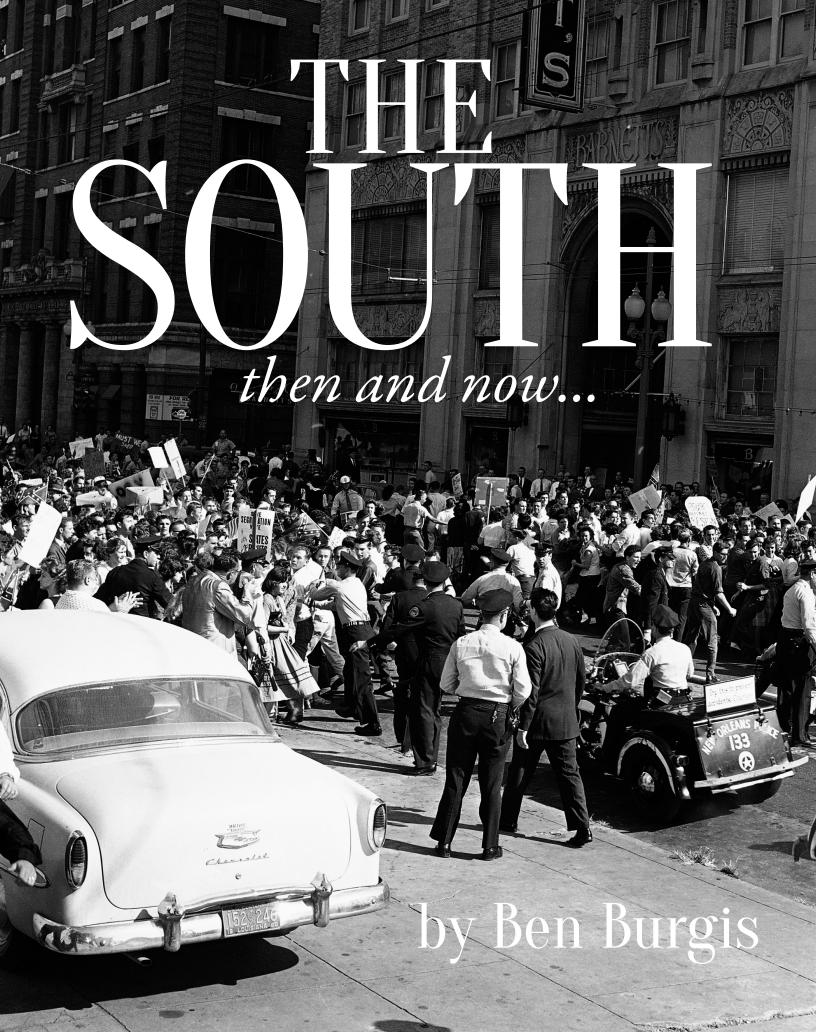


Seize Assets!



"community policing"!

....in miniature form



HE was cha Arl min opp

HEN ADOLPH L. REED, JR., was 19 years old, he had to change planes in El Dorado, Arkansas. Approaching the terminal, he saw two entrances on opposite sides of the building.

This was 1966. Racial segregation in public accommoda-

tions had already been illegal for two years, so there were no signs on the entrances—and there were no other passengers waiting on either end of the terminal. Even so, as a Black man who grew up in Louisiana under Jim Crow, Reed was well aware of the risks to his safety should he make the "wrong" choice. After sizing up the situation, he decided to sit on a bench outside the terminal until his connecting flight arrived from Dallas.

This scene comes about a third of the way through Reed's remarkable book *The South: Jim Crow and Its Afterlives*. Blending memoir with political arguments and a dash of academic theory, Reed paints a compelling picture of what life was like under the segregation regime, how that regime all-too-slowly died, and the utterly transformed version of inequality and injustice that emerged in its wake.

Reed has no time for Afropessimism, the view that nothing fundamental has changed in the racial structure of American society from the time that George Washington kept slaves in the White House to the Presidency of Barack Obama or the Vice Presidency of Kamala Harris. Having grown up in New Orleans under Jim Crow, Reed knows how dramatically the world *has* changed—even if the world we live in is full of reminders of the old one. The Confederate statues that disfigured Reed's native city of New Orleans until 2014 were one such reminder. Others can play out in interpersonal interactions, as Reed describes:

"In the early 1990s, Bess Watson, a cousin in my father's generation who lived in the hamlet of Eudora, Arkansas, regularly traveled three hours each way to Memphis for cancer treatment. On one of my visits, Bess had recently returned from a treatment and was still fuming because a white nurse's aide had asked her, regarding filling out some form, 'Auntie, can you read?'"

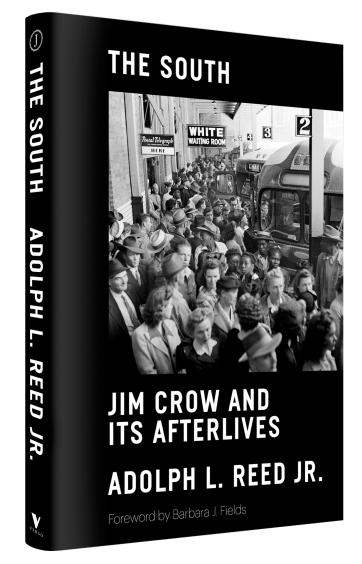
The aide's behavior, Reed writes, "was at best vestigial and naïve, at worst an all too contemporary attempt to assert a superiority rooted in the codes of the dissolved *ancien régime*." As a retired public school teacher who spent the bulk of her life living under that regime's thumb, Bess Watson was infuriated for obvious reasons by both the form and content of the aide's question. On the other hand, Reed reflects, "Bess probably could have gotten her disciplined by her employer for asking the question."

Review of: Adolph L. Reed, Jr., The South: Jim Crow and Its Afterlives (Verso), 176pp.

A DEEPER KIND OF EQUALITY

It's important to clarify *why* Reed pushes back against "nothing has changed" narratives. It's not that he thinks most Black people in America in 2022 are doing too well to have any legitimate complaints. He isn't Steven Pinker, telling Black people to just be grateful that they don't live under Jim Crow, like Pinker tells everyone to be grateful that they don't live under feudalism. Reed is a socialist.

As he well knows, the contemporary United States is a deeply unjust society. Tens of millions of people lack health insurance in the wealthiest nation in the world, and many people who *are* lucky enough to have it are tied to jobs they hate in part by the fear of losing their employer-sponsored insurance plan. The overwhelming majority of Americans lack any real say in what happens to them on the job—rights they would get if they were part of a labor union. And even union membership is hardly a panacea. For example, unionized rail workers may soon have to go on strike just to win





PREVIOUS: Police on three-wheel cycles drive into a crowd protesting integration of schools at New Orleans on Oct. 16, 1960. The angry group was marching to the offices of the New Orleans school board when the police stopped them. (AP Photo) ABOVE: Women cheer as other white parents pull their children from the Thomas J. Semmes School in New Orleans. The school was one of the public schools integrated for the first time in 1962. (AP Photo/Fred Waters)

the right to take time off of work for routine doctor's visits without being penalized.

And, of course, tens of millions have it far worse than unionized rail workers who are mistreated in many ways but who at least bring home a decent middle-class income. Around 11 percent of Americans live below even the official "poverty line," never mind any standard we should accept as a reasonable social minimum. For example, a family of three with a total family income of \$22,000 a year is not considered by official statistics to be "living in poverty" even though that's much less than needed to pay the national average for rent on a single-family home.

And that level of economic cruelty has predictable social consequences. Security from street crime is a real concern for a massive chunk of the population. The bipartisan solution to crime for decades was not to expand the New Deal/Great Society welfare state but to pass grotesquely draconian "tough on crime" policies that failed to address the economic roots of the problem. We now have the worst of both worlds. We lock up a higher percentage of our citizens than almost any other nation on the planet and still have a much higher rate of violent crime than economically comparable countries.

Nor are these injustices evenly distributed between different demographic groups. Just before the pandemic, the white poverty rate was 9 percent and the Black poverty rate was 21 percent. This alone would guarantee that every social ill that typically comes downstream of poverty is disproportionately present in the Black population.

There are certainly plenty of people who want to minimize the importance of the causal arrows leading from America's apartheid history to these contemporary realities. Instead of seeing a historically generated disparity in the distribution of wealth as the cause of all the other disparities—in education, in housing, in healthcare, and in crime, incarceration, and exposure to militarized policing—they play up cultural factors. Such people are generally known as "conservatives," and Reed regards them with an appropriate degree of contempt.

But people who agree on the basic historical facts can nevertheless apply very different analytical lenses to them and reach very different political conclusions. Should the primary lens through which we look at the injustices that immiserate so many Black Americans in 2022 be a racial one? Are "race" and "class" even best understood as distinct categories of oppression, with the former framed in a way that sees contemporary injustices as being fundamentally continuous with the Jim Crow system that shaped Adolph Reed's early years?

He doesn't think so. Instead, his analysis is that historical racial oppression has the effect of funneling a disproportionately large number of Black Americans into the bottom rung of the economic hierarchy. However, he believes that understanding the structure of



A Black demonstrator is carried out of New Orleans City Hall in the chair she occupied, October 31, 1963. Groups of Black protesters were arrested and carried and dragged out of City Hall as they protested the city's racial policy. (AP Photo/Jim Bourdier)

that hierarchy in racial terms distorts more than it clarifies in an era when economic and political elites really are becoming much more diverse. Plenty of individual Black people really have climbed up to higher rungs and, while the proportions are very different in each group, most Americans of all races remain in the working class.

While informal discrimination is all too real and we certainly need to rigorously enforce existing civil rights laws and enact new ones, Reed worries that a "racial justice" politics that focuses on statistical disparities all too easily lends itself to the liberal-meritocratic idea that justice means that the "right" percentage of each group would live in poverty, go to substandard schools, and live in fear of the sharp edges of America's cruel system of criminal justice, while the "right" percentage of each would be able to rise to the top of the capitalist hierarchy.

Advocates of either cash reparations or other forms of specifically racial redress are correct when they point out that the way the current regime's injustices are distributed in a racially disproportionate way is a long-term consequence of the *de jure* system of racial hierarchy that has been replaced by the current racially integrated neoliberal regime. But it's difficult to see how a majority of the population could realistically be organized and mobilized to fight for racially means-tested benefits rather than (or even in addition to) universal ones. And the idea that Black poverty is objectionable specifically *because* of the Jim Crow origins of the disparities carries

with it the uncomfortable suggestion that poverty that *doesn't* originate in a history of racial discrimination is morally legitimate.

As a matter of both principle and strategy, Reed advocates mobilizing the multiracial working-class majority of our society to smash the current economic hierarchy entirely. His frequent advocacy of this perspective in turn leads some other progressives to accuse him, sometimes quite vehemently, of being a "class reductionist" who wants to ignore specifically racial forms of oppression.

Reed has long been a central figure in these debates, and anyone who started reading this review because it was a review of *his* book may already have firm opinions one way or the other about many of the issues in dispute. But readers surveying this conceptual territory for the first time might find some of the formulations above hopelessly abstract.

If so, a simplified analogy I've used elsewhere may be helpful:

A serial killer has kidnapped ten people. The killer is an anti-Asian racist, so when possible, he likes to find Asian victims. Six of the ten victims are Asian. The other four are members of other races. Maybe one of the non-Asians was kidnapped because he stumbled on the killer kidnapping one of the others, and the other three were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. These ten people didn't all end up in the killer's basement in the same way and it would be callous and stupid to pretend they did. But right now they all need exactly the same thing—to work together to get out of the basement.



A group of pickets led by Joe Graffia, Jr., left, walk in front of a downtown New Orleans drug store in which two Black men desegregated the store's lunch counter in New Orleans, Sept. 14, 1962. Lunch counters in Canal St. (AP Photo/Jim Bourdier)

TOPPLING THE STATUES

Crow and its aftermath for several reasons. One is that his generation will soon be the last that remembers what that regime was like for those who lived under it—not just the dramatic highlight reel of murdered civil rights workers and grandstanding reactionary governors and protesters facing down firehouses, but the way that ordinary people constructed their lives around the regime's daily humiliations. Reed writes, for example, about the way his family had to make decisions about whether it was more degrading to shop at the store that let Black customers try on hats but not shoes or the one that let them try on shoes but not hats. And about how he was willing to endure the separate "Jim Crow window" at McCrory's Five and Dime because he particularly loved their strawberry ice cream soda.

These recollections are gripping precisely because Reed serves his fury cold, laying down the minutely observed details and letting the implications speak for themselves. If you read the book and let yourself sit with the thought, for example, that a 19-year-old Reed lived in a world where quasi-official racial terrorism was so common that he didn't dare sit on the "wrong"

side of an airport terminal two years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, nothing more needs to be said.

One of the few subjects on which he *does* allow himself to gleefully vent his disgust is the Confederacy and the way it was memorialized in the South in the 20th century. In one early passage, for example, he refers to "the Civil War (or more precisely the Treasonous Insurrection of the Slaveholding Elites of Eleven States against the Constitutional Government of the United States)."

He chronicles in detail the controversies in 2017 occasioned by Mayor Mitch Landrieu's removal of "the four most conspicuous monuments to the Confederate insurrection" in New Orleans. Reed had long since lived elsewhere but his mother's death led him back to the city just in time to watch it all play out.

I should say for the sake of full disclosure that I do very slightly know Adolph Reed. (His son Touré Reed is a friend and a regular guest on my show Give Them An Argument, but my acquaintance with Adolph is far more limited.) Even on that very slight acquaintance—and this is something that immediately stands out about him—Adolph Reed is so damn funny, often in the context of elegantly slamming whatever person or faction has most recently earned his scorn.

Some of that talent for scorn is on display when he describes the arguments about removing the statues that he got involved



Two Black women stand in front of a box office after they were told there are no tickets available for the Liston-Clay fight at a New Orleans theater, Feb. 24, 1964. Black people were unable to purchase tickets at the two theaters showing the closed circuit TV broadcast of the bout. Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in New Orleans asked for the telecast to be called off because theaters were segregated. The contract to show the fight called for integrated audiences. (AP Photo/Jim Bourdier)

with in a "neighborhood chat group" that sounds a bit like a spiritual predecessor of the Nextdoor app. He delights in chronicling the "dizzyingly self-contradictory" sophistries offered by those neighbors who opposed toppling the statues but didn't want to admit that they were defending the record of either the rebellious slaveholders themselves or the Jim Crow regime that had erected the monuments.

- The monuments are part of our history and therefore shouldn't be tampered with
- They don't commemorate slavery or racism, just an abstract southern heritage
- The Civil War wasn't about slavery but about states' rights and an abstract "way of life"
- Removing the monuments only stirs up animosities, and we should let bygones be bygones
- Blacks celebrate their history; whites should be able to celebrate theirs
- No one really cares about the monuments except opportunistic politicians
- Older black New Orleanians don't care about the monuments;
 only young militants and agitators do
- Only older blacks scarred by racism in the past care about the monuments; younger blacks want to put the past behind us and live as equals, not to keep fighting long-dead slaveholders

- The monuments have aesthetic significance as distinct representations of the architectural styles of their period
- Removing them is a diversion of public resources that would be better devoted to addressing more pressing municipal problems

Ultimately, neither this dispersed grumbling nor the organized public protests kept the statues in place. And however narrow and symbolic the victory—ultimately a question of cleaning up some unfinished business from the civil rights revolution of a generation before—Reed records his pleasure that "the city finally is rid of those public celebrations of slavery and white supremacy that I'm hardly alone in having detested all my life."

This willingness to celebrate even incomplete victories gets to the heart of what Reed is doing in this book. Recognizing the enormity of the social change that's taken place since his youth is important not because he wants anyone to rest on their laurels and stop pushing for further change but for precisely the opposite reason. Looking out at a world where diabetics die because their Go-FundMes don't raise enough money to pay for their insulin, and where a laid-off truck driver can be choked to death by the police for trying to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill, it's important to remember that systems of oppression and degradation that once seemed to be etched into the fabric of reality have been overturned within living memory. If that's happened before, it can happen again. •







Why the Right Can't



BY OMAR GUERRERO

N FAR-RIGHT VERNACULAR, THE WORD BOOGALOO IS code for "civil war"—and not too subtly synonymous with "race war." It emerged in the early 2010s in far-right online networks like 4chan and came to flourish on Facebook. Its adherents are no joke. Going by the names "boogs," "boojahideens," or, most commonly, "boogaloo bois," they have been spotted at rallies against gun legislation and quarantine measures, decked out in tactical gear and assault rifles as if ready to defend their liberty against tyrannical "commies."

It's hard to say just how many "bois" there are, or what they'll do next. They are a loosely affiliated network of "decentralized cells" whose existence is mostly online, but whose members have been arrested for crimes as serious as murder and terrorist plots. They adhere to variants of libertarianism, if not neo-Nazi white supremacy, and came on the scene publicly in 2020. Indeed, their idiosyncratic look made them hard to miss. For however much they resembled the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, Patriot Front, and Three Percenters, *these* boys had theatrical and whimsical flair. They're identifiable by their Hawaiian lū'au shirts, and their name harkens back to the b-boy of break dancing or the sensuous music that is Latin soul (*bugalú*). In a 2020 report on the word boogaloo, NPR wrote, "The word's racist cooptation by the far-right has a strange irony: boogaloo was developed by and for black and brown communities." How, then, is a casual observer not be astonished, even a little amused, by these bois?

Frightened, too, no doubt. Theirs is an aesthetic that says *I'm a bit foolish, but not to be trifled with*. It bespeaks irony, yes, but also somberness and outrage. This can all be read, no doubt, as members' reaction to the *relative* demise of American economic and military power and, with it, anger that white people's historic privileges have never been in greater jeopardy. These bois find themselves in a society in which the mainstream media is more eager to flaunt its "woke" credentials than to challenge power in its refusal to provide affordable housing, education, and healthcare—let alone a healthier environment—for its citizenry. Emboldened as much by the Trump presidency as by the mythical aura of the American Revolution, they and their far-right allies are clamoring for a "revolution," which, like its predecessor, won't come about peacefully.

Whatever it is they admire about Trump's maverick brand or the supposedly heroic past of America's militias, these bois embody a

form of prankish cosplay that belies their violent potential. As the *New York Times* reported in 2020,

Boogaloo groups may also have seized on the Hawaiian shirt for reasons other than signaling their association and intentions. ... [D]oing so may be an attempt to bait the less informed into assuming the group means no real harm. That they are, really, in effect, a goofy bunch of boys despite their military-grade weaponry. This interpretation is shared by Patrick Blanchfield, an associate faculty member at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, who regularly writes about the far right. He views the use of the Hawaiian shirt as yet another attempt by far-right groups to create an 'undefinable space' with 'in-your-face absurdity.' "It's by design," Mr. Blanchfield said. "That confusion is what they're trying to exploit, which means it's important to keep an eye on the big picture, or what's right in front of you. If you see an image of a man wearing tactical gear with a gun and a Hawaiian shirt, the most salient thing there is that the guy has a gun and tactical gear."

Those shirts and quirky names are, in other words, a far cry from the hospitality of an "aloha" or the sensuous merriment of a "fiesta." Indeed, they're a far cry from the artistry and ethics at the heart of lū 'au, breakin', and bugalú.

T's THESE BOIS' AESTHETIC CHOICES, AFTER ALL, THAT fascinate (and infuriate) me. For aesthetics matter. We all know that a unique constellation of hairstyle, shoe brand, and apparel, let alone body art and piercings, can readily announce one's "tribe" and one's "vibe." It's no small measure of how we hail our "kin," loosely put, and stake out our likes and dislikes—even, arguably, our life philosophy. The leather vests, braided beards, tattooed arms, and scowls of bikers cry out a menacing free spiritedness, as does the black ensemble of goths a nihilistic iconoclasm. Without uttering a word, they use their "look" to speak volumes.

That such choices are politically consequential should not be underrated, however mundane the aesthetic. Rare, for instance, is the senatorial or presidential candidate who doesn't embrace corporate America's dress code—slacks and a dress shirt, khakis and a polo shirt, or a suit (pantsuit for women)—as if to say that they ascribe to its ideological credo of profit-maximization and competitiveness, too.

But a more radical politics calls for a more spectacular aesthetic. Think of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, that socialist and internationalist vanguard that took on police brutality and stormed the country's collective consciousness in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their black berets, leather jackets, flamboyant hair, and street swagger all but voiced the slogans "Black is beautiful!" and "All power to the people!" Try to imagine the force of those slogans and their party's Ten-Point Program and Platform—which, notably, demanded housing, education, full employment, food, and safety for all Black people—without their militant style.*

Conservatives and fascists are no strangers to beauty and the sublime, either. The Nazis had appreciations for Greek drama, symphonic music, and neoclassical art; so, too, for (what they considered to be) racially superior bodies with fair skin and blue eyes and for military uniforms. Be they formal dress or battle fatigues, military uniforms connote power *and* virtue. Not just an index of someone's trained capacity (and license) to kill, they also say *this* is what a patriot looks like—what valor, loyalty, discipline, and sacrifice look like. Uniforms distinguish and recruit. Think, too, of the Ku Klux Klan. Although haphazardly clothed in its early years, the Klan eventually decided on white robes and canonical hoods, thanks in no small measure to D. W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. It's anyone's guess whether they chose that look to convey papal-like purity or ghostly terror—if not both simultaneously.

But perhaps this is why the boogaloo bois' stylistic bravado stands (or stood?) out amongst the Right. All the others are so unimaginative! Take the well-known Proud Boys: juvenile name, frat boy-esque look. Those black polo shirts embroidered with a gold "PB" and the ever-present baseball cap look more like the "uniform" of college tailgaters than a heroic militia. All in all, not terribly inspired. Or take the Three Percenters, easily one of the largest militias in the U.S. Their name, to be sure, has some historic gravitas. It's based on the claim that only 3 percent of Americans fought in the war for independence. Reputable scholars put that figure closer to 15 percent, insofar as you count (ironically enough!) the militia, not just the Continental Army. And even that figure does not include all the noncombatants (customarily, women) it takes to wage, let alone win, a war. But identities, all of them, are rarely predicated on sound research or coherent criteria. I won't knock Three Percenters for being seduced by a myth that ennobles their deeds and dispositions. Who among us isn't occasional prey to righteousness, if not vanity? Three Percenters think of themselves as carrying on an honorable tradition. And the allure of that makes sense.

But it doesn't redeem their aesthetic mediocrity, let alone their politics. All that gruff and grit aside, their aesthetic is an amateurish copy of the U.S. armed forces, an army surplus store-like spectacle of camouflage, Kevlar helmets, and pseudo-official patches. In other words: all too predictable and, the sincerity of their convictions aside, a bit pathetic.

LL OF WHICH BRINGS US BACK TO THOSE Hawaiian-themed shirts. After learning the word "boogaloo" was synonymous with (the threat of) mass violence, news and social media outlets began to censor accounts that used the word. As a consequence, far-right networks started to use analogous-sounding terms such as "Big igloo" and "Big luau." This best explains their black-and-white logo (with igloo) and the shirts.

And a fortuitous choice it was. Those shirts and all the quirky nomenclature helped the bois announce their "movement" with unrivaled flair. It caught the eye and conveyed an irreverent, anti-authoritarian sentiment. They couldn't be as easily mocked as angry white guys with guns. In lieu of solemn names like Three Percenters or Oath Keepers, let alone scary white masks like those of the Patriot Front, here stood these bois in "uniforms" that connote beauty, festivity, and hospitality—were it not, of course, for all the lethal paraphernalia.

It's no meager scandal, akin to that which haunts the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, when white nationalists marched on the scene with tiki torches, an icon of tropical pleasantry rendered tool of terror. For the record, lū'au isn't just a tourist gimmick with swaying dancers shrouded in tiki light and floral leis. It's the Hawaiian word for "feast," one that often features a *kalua* (barbecued) pig and poi, a staple of Polynesian food derived from taro root. It's a celebration, accordingly, in which violence is disavowed (save for the slaughtered pig of course), a social ritual that fosters cohesiveness, gratitude, and enjoyment. Even in its most commodified forms (e.g., the lū'au shirt or a resort's fabricated lū'au), it's an invitation to mellow out and have a good time—as if to say, enjoy the succulent food, the soothing music and dance, the hospitality and the seaside splendor.

This is, I'll admit, to reiterate a somewhat exoticized account of Hawai'i and Polynesians, a stereotype as old as "noble savage" discourses about the so-called New World and as contemporary as *Moana*. It says little about the dispossession (and resistance to it) of Pacific Islanders throughout their history. Not much more than 10 percent of the Hawaiian Islands' residents are native Kānaka Maoli. At that, Kanaka (and other Pacific Islanders) have legal title to only a small percentage of their ancestral lands and are socioeconomically worse off than white and Asian settlers. If anyone has the grounds to chant "You will not replace us!" it's Kanaka and indigenous peoples throughout the world. Perhaps that's why the Boogaloo movement was drawn to the lūʿau shirt. A libertarian tribute, call it, to a people's anti-colonialist fight for their freedoms. Maybe, in fact, some boogs have taken island "de-tours," those that tell the story of Hawai'i (or Guam, Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, etc.) from a decolonial perspective.

Again, I jest. The phrase "Big luau" and the lū'au shirts are, as best as I can surmise, sheer folly and coincidence, not a form of decolonial subversion. Or to be exact: it's a perverse appropriation. These bois evoke no lū'au ethos, and their white supremacist tendencies run counter to what Hawai'i might symbolize as the most multiethnic and multiracial state in the Union. The islands are

^{*} In 1969, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover called the Panthers "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country." The FBI's Counterintelligence Program (known as COINTELPRO) took on the mandate to "neutralize" these radicals of color, some of whom were assassinated and some of whom still remain imprisoned.



CLOSE UP OF AN ARMED BOOGALOO BOI IN UNIFORM AT THE VIRGINIA STATE CAPITOL BUILDING ON LOBBY DAY,
JANUARY 18, 2021. (PHOTO BY ZACH D. ROBERTS/NURPHOTO VIA AP)

home to native Kanaka and to a sizable number of peoples of Filipino, Puerto Rican, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Chamorro, and Samoan ancestries—let alone all the combinations thereof in second and third generations. To wit, Hawai'i has the smallest per capita percentage of white Americans in the Union. It can't be a coincidence that in 2021 white supremacist propaganda was reported in all U.S. states *except* Hawai'i!

relationship with white supremacy. (The same could be said of others, like the Proud Boys, whose leader is the AfroCuban Enrique Tarrio.) Bois in their trademark lūʻau shirts attended Black Lives Matter rallies as voluntary "security" and some wrote social media posts that decried police brutality, be the victim white or Black. Nor would it be fair to say they are totally "anti-government." If we take their word for it, it's a hatred of *illegitimate* government that unites the Right—though this is a bit of a tautology when it comes to socialism, since it is for them synonymous with "tyranny" and "totalitarianism."

Either way, maybe this gets us a step closer to what their aesthetic actually communicates: namely, "I'll do as I damn well please!" That may be a crude paraphrase of libertarianism, but it's not wholly inaccurate. And this, too, I'll admit, has its charms. What would life be without periodic eruptions of sound and fury? Without invitations to rage against our bureaucratized lives? In a sense, rock, metal, and especially punk are the musical embodiments of that sentiment.

Just think of punk's less polished, almost cacophonous sound, all that aggressive volume, speed, and feedback that says to hell with melodious decorum or sentimental jingles. Indeed, just think of the "dances," so to speak, that these kinds of music elicit, not least the shoving and thrashing about known as moshing. But moshing and the mosh pit are a circumscribed risk that one *voluntarily* assumes. It begins and ends with the music and the space of the concert and concertgoers. There's even a measure of trust that the harm done won't be irreparable (though, at times, it is). Just enough pain and licensed unruliness to remind you that you're alive and not alone.

Whatever we make of it, varieties of punk and metal do seem like the most consonant music (and dances) to the far-right's projected persona. Country music and line dancing are much too melancholic or docile. And *hula* music and dance are much too seductive and beautiful. Hawaiian scholar and cultural activist Mary Kawena Pukui taught us that hula has several genres, from the sacred to the frivolous. Some are used to praise (fertility) gods, recite epic histories, or lament a loss, while others are used to cultivate the arts of music, poetry, and mime-like dance. We're most familiar with the ukulele-inflected hula and the swaying of (women's) hips, the arms and hands that resemble the ocean's waves or the breeze caught in coconut palms. All in all, it's an aesthetic that conjures, Kawena Pukui would have insisted, the "aloha spirit."

It's noteworthy, in this regard, that "aloha" has a spiritual and ethical significance not often acknowledged. We know it as that

cheerful salutation that tourists receive at the airport or coming off cruise ships. But to be exact, it's the Hawaiian word (along with Polynesian variants) for "love," "mercy," and "compassion." That makes it a salutation more akin to the Hebrew *shalom* or the Arab Islamic *as-salamu alaykum* than to a generic "hello"—let alone an invocation to war!

a 1960s dance associated with soul and funk music. None other than James Brown had a rendition of it, showcasing that footwork and those head nods that were proud, cool, and sensuous all at once. According to choreographer and urban dance scholar Thomas "T-Bopper" Guzmán-Sánchez, boogaloo emerged in the streets of 1960s Oakland and Chicago, where impromptu variations on soul dances started to include robot-like gestures that evolved into poppin' and lockin'. Those dances then evolved into breakin' and rap music, most famously in New York.

The mid-1980s movies *Beat Street* and *Breakin'* popularized these moves. And curiously enough, they are relevant to our discussion. The sequel *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* was a movie so bad it became a cult classic and its subtitle a parodic joke. Years later, that subtitle was fashioned "Civil War 2: Electric Boogaloo" in far-right online networks, becoming the catchword for an anticipated, if not eagerly provoked, civil war.

But to clarify, no one watched those movies for their plots or (abysmal) acting; they watched them for the dancing! It was contagious in its day, not least for urban youth of color: all those Black and Puerto Rican boys (and some girls) flaunting their athletic and choreographic prowess, without any of the rules or paywalls of organized sports and classical dance. Anarchical, raw, and impromptu, it was a stylized urban dance that stimulated camaraderie, pride, wonder, and joy—not violence. Indeed, so much of what

was celebrated about breakin' (and rapping) was that it functioned as an *aesthetic surrogate* for violence: no assault weapons or physical altercations, just creative exuberance against humiliation, irrelevance, and boredom.

And it had an aesthetic, too. From the dance itself to the b-boys' and b-girls' colorful jumpsuits and white sneakers, to say nothing of bedazzled or oversized accessories. It was an ensemble—the dance, music, and dress—that cried out for respect. Not incidentally were those movies premised on "turf wars" between urban gangs. Breakin' and rap were born in a context of slum housing, violent crime, a crack epidemic, defunded schools, and precarious or illicit employment, if any. It was the dance and music of surplus populations marked for mass incarceration and whose social conditions sometimes led them to kill each other.

Breakin' can of course convey violent potential. It puts on display the dancer and his crew's *physical* (not just aesthetic) abilities—as if to say, "Yes, I did that ... so you better think twice about fuckin' wit me." But it is rarely, if ever, violent. It doesn't even involve contact, whether erotic (like tango) or bellicose (like moshing). Arguably, it's best understood as an artful *preemption* of violence.

One could also argue that the boogaloo bois merely *display* their arms, that theirs is a *rhetorical* violence. The bois aren't guilty of any shameless massacres or the like—yet. But the white nationalists and neo-Nazis who gleefully talk of a "boogaloo" are not few in number. And we all know those high-caliber weapons *could* be used—indeed, *have* been used. The list of racially motivated hate crimes and massacres in our day speaks for itself: the nine Black worshipers at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston in 2015; the 11 Jewish worshipers at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2018; the 23 victims (most of them Latino) at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, in 2019; the 8 victims (six of them Asian-American) at spas in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2021; the 10 Black victims at a grocery store



in Buffalo, New York, in May 2022. Not to mention all the aggrieved families and communities or other incidents worldwide, such as the terrorist attack at the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in New Zealand in 2019, which left 51 people dead and 40 injured.

HE POINT STANDS: THERE'S NOTHING CREATIVE, let alone physically impressive, about carrying a six-pound assault rifle or pulling its trigger. But that's precisely one of its most seductive powers. Even the most uninventive and unremarkable person can pick up a gun and command "respect"—that is to say, end life. They can feel potent (and be lethal) without the slightest aesthetic, choreographic, athletic or musical talent. It's a facile and morbid pleasure, akin to the ease with which one can order that lū'au shirt on Amazon and wear it without any accountability to Kanaka ethics and spirituality.

But procure pleasures it does. At rallies, the bois and their kin must feel potent and audacious. Armed to the teeth and taking a stand for something worthwhile (call it "liberty"), they create a spectacle that conveys naked power and affords a sense of camaraderie, purpose, and exhilaration. Not easy to resist, not by comparison to the drudgery or alienation that our contemporary world has to offer.

But those lū'au shirts and that quirky term (boogaloo) bear no real resemblance to the blessed warmth or creative sublimation that lū'au and breakin' exemplify. Nor, lastly, do they live up to the spontaneous and sensuous fun—let alone the welcoming and inclusive spirit—that is boogaloo as a Latin music.

Bugalú, to use its Hispanized name, emerged in 1960s New York. It was the music of young self-taught musicians, most of them working class Puerto Ricans raised in east Harlem and the South Bronx. These were second generation immigrants who listened and danced to doo-wop, soul, rhythm and blues alongside rumba, mambo, son, and boleros, the same as they lived alongside Black American communities. They lived bewildering lives: born U.S. citizens but treated as foreigners, neither unambiguously white or Black, and generally neglected (when not stigmatized) in mainstream American media, they looked for artistic ways to reckon with their lives.

Albeit a short-lived craze, *bugalú* stormed the barrio dance halls in the mid- to late-1960s, out of which came hits such as conga drummer Joe Cuba's "Bang! Bang!" and pianist Pete Rodríguez's "I Like It Like That." With their handclapping and choral chants, the ecstatic buildups and restarts, the songs are emblematic of a musical genre that conjures a raucous, festive spirit. It's a participatory music in which spontaneity and pleasure are a promise for all, however much by innuendo. The *it* that one *likes* like *that* is, after all, "seductively ambiguous," as critic Juan Flores pointed out: "whether it be the song itself, the way the band is playing, the dance moves, the party spirit, sex, rum, marijuana, whatever."

That said, there's nothing about that rhythmic piano lick and smooth brass interjections, the braggadocio of vocalist Tony Pabón

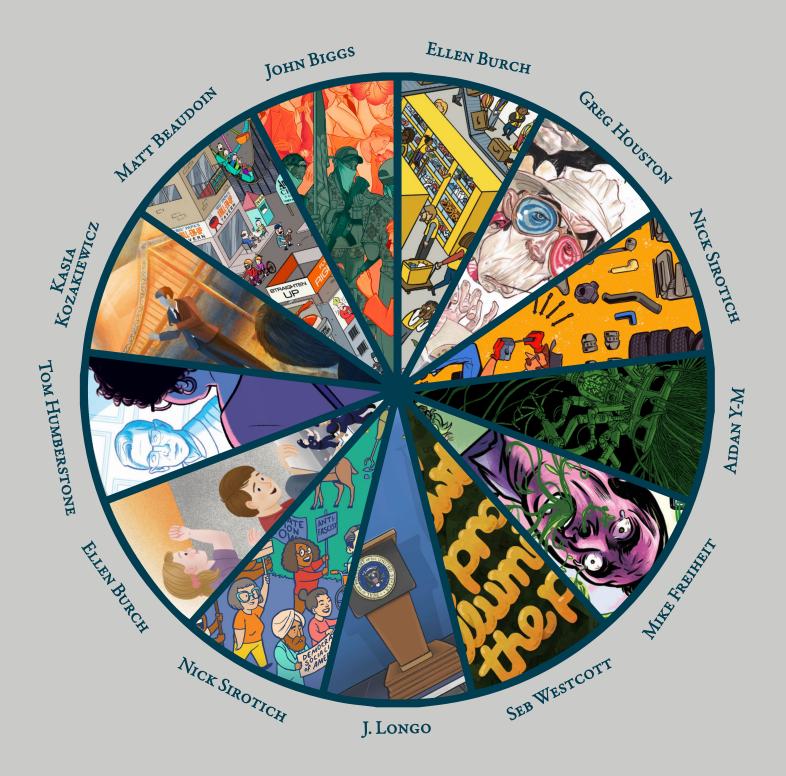
or the women's choral jubilance that says the *it* that one *likes* is a racist massacre or a governmental coup. Far from it. Bugalú is a musical inducement to sensuous pleasure and fellowship, whatever one's ethnicity, sexuality, political affiliations, or so forth. Widely toured and played on the radio, it was enjoyed by audiences of all kinds. For it is an "aesthetic" of inclusivity and merriment, not violence. Anyone can listen and dance to it, in whatever way strikes their fancy. There are no set steps or agreed upon movement. But rest assured: you can't listen to it and *not* want to dance.

HAT'S LEFT, THUS, IS THE BOO IN boogaloo: these bois and their "homies" are bogey (not boogie) men, specters that haunt our hopes to relate joyfully and peaceably with one another. They may have some well-founded grievances, and

their mockery of liberals isn't altogether unwarranted. Nor is their call for a "revolution" unwelcome! It's just that there has to be "music," so to speak, that we'd want to dance to. The only music firmly associated with the alt-right is so-called fashwave, a retro-futuristic music inspired by synthwave. It's a sound more ambient and digital than rhythmic, better suited for a 1980s dystopian sci-fi or horror film than a musical festival or party. Enough said?

There's every reason to believe, nevertheless, that these bois and kindred militants will strike again or even escalate their tactics. Many organizations may have withered in the wake of the January 6, 2021, Capitol riot and its investigations, but the same happened after the Charlottesville calamity and all the lawsuits that ensued, only for the far right to remerge in lū'au shirts and flags with igloos. If anything, the conditions for fascism have only worsened. Not only the economic precarity and inequality we continue to live with, but a visceral distrust in our electoral system. As sociologists of revolutions have noted, once faith in democratic legitimacy has eroded, all bets are off. There is of course copious evidence that our system is unreliable and unfair. But Citizens United, the electoral college, gerrymandering, etc., aren't what the bois and sympathetic Republicans are furious about; it's the "stolen" election of 2020. That narrative will fuel much of the 2024 electoral strategy for Republicans, and it will yield not just votes but new far-right militants. Under what code words, memes, and "uniforms" they'll express their sound and fury by then is anyone's guess. What's next? A group of white libertarians calling themselves "Sons of Geronimo," sporting "war paint" on their faces and crying out "powwow" as code for insurrection (and homage to the Boston Tea Partiers who dressed up as Native Americans!?) Whichever the case, it's safe to assume they won't wage an emancipatory war on behalf of Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Black Americans, or Puerto Ricans. It's more likely that they'll continue to take and travesty as they please and to categorically slander the word "government"—never mind "socialism." Either way, we should brace ourselves for the worst, which might include the metamorphosis of these anti-government militias into pro-state paramilitaries. •

The Illustrators



NOTE ON THE COVER:

The cover was designed by Nathan J. Robinson with the ample assistance of DALL-E, Photoshop, and InDesign.