

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

**SEPT./OCT. 2024**



# MICHAEL MOORE

*What he's taught us.*

# Them WE'RE SPEAKING!

IF YOU HAVE AN ALLERGY TO GOOD TAKES, CURRENT AFFAIRS MAY NOT BE RIGHT FOR YOU.

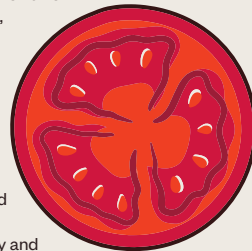
## RONALD REAGAN STILL SUCKS.

In our last issue, we pointed out at considerable length that Ronald Reagan sucked. In this issue (except for here), nothing indicates that Ronald Reagan sucked. We would hate for our readers to conclude from the omission that we have changed our minds about Ronald Reagan, and that we do not still think he sucked. Readers might assume that under the principle of "Inclusio unius est exclusio alterius" (the inclusion of one thing implies the exclusion of another), the inclusion only of content that does not imply Ronald Reagan sucked implies we deliberately left out content on why Ronald Reagan sucked, presumably because we like him now. But no! Space constraints preclude us from devoting all of each issue to explaining why Ronald Reagan sucked, but we would if we could, and we ask readers to mentally insert the words "Ronald Reagan sucked" in between every line of text in every issue of *Current Affairs* from now unto eternity.



## MAGAZINE WITH A TOMATO IN IT

In response to a reader who wrote in and asked: "If I place a tomato between two pages of an edition of *Current Affairs*, does it thereby become a sandwich?" We get this question a lot. The answer is yes, but with a crucial caveat, which is that just because you can do something, doesn't mean you *should* do it. But this is also America, where the prevailing concept of liberty is that you should be free to do even those things that are stupid and destructive, so long as the consequences of your stupidity and destructiveness fall chiefly on yourself. Here in the United States, you may place a tomato between any two things you wish, so long as they consent.



LAST MINUTE

HALLOWEEN

COSTUME

Put eyeholes in this issue and go as *Current Affairs*.



"I terrify the powerful with my potent witticisms and scathing reviews!"

## WOULD YOU LIKE A LITTLE WAR WITH THAT?



## YOU NEED A MAGAZINE THAT KNOWS HOW BIG A DROP CAP SHOULD BE

When we first started *Current Affairs*, we asked industry professionals: what is the secret to a great magazine? How did the classic magazines of yore attain their respectability and panache? The answer came back unanimously: they contained enormous drop caps at the beginning of crucial paragraphs. This, and only this, is the crucial ingredient to constructing a fine periodical. As you peruse our competitors, take note of the comparative size and elegance of their drop caps. If they are small and spindly, ask yourself: is this a magazine I can trust to give things to me straight? The question is merely rhetorical. Such a magazine is of course one you can never trust. Return, then, to *Current Affairs*, where the capitals are printed massively, and in only the most reputable typefaces.



## The Postman's Snakes

We consider it unseemly to point fingers (unless it is at war criminals or corporate executives). We especially do not like pointing them at postal workers, who are in the pantheon of *Current Affairs* Everyday Heroes alongside agricultural workers, nurses, and the people who walk along after Mardi Gras parades hoovering up leftover beads. But facts are facts, and we must tell of things as they are, not as we merely wish them to be. And so, if a reader writes in (as one has) to tell us that their magazine arrived at their home "full of writhing baby snakes," we did not

feel obliged to point out that said issue leave *Current Affairs* World Headquarters (CAHQ) with even a single snake tucked in its fold. Every edition of *Current Affairs* is now carefully checked for snakes before leaving the warehouse, a quality control measure introduced decades ago after an ugly (and, we must stress, *one-off*) incident. We are, in fact, proud of our record in this department, having been voted for four years running one of the industry's "most reliably snakeless" magazines. What you have, therefore, are the postman's snakes, and they should be returned to your local mailing office. *There are no snakes in this magazine, guaranteed.* Geckos, of course, are another matter. But the reader did not find geckos.

CURRENT AFFAIRS (ISSN 2471-2647) is published bi-monthly for \$69.99/year by CURRENT AFFAIRS INC., 300 LAFAYETTE ST., SUITE 210, NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130 Periodicals Postage PAID at NEW ORLEANS, LA and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Current Affairs, 300 Lafayette St., Suite 210, New Orleans, LA 70130 PRINTED IN PENNSYLVANIA BY Sheridan Press.

COME VISIT BEAUTIFUL FAKE ITALY! 377 POYDRAS ST, NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130

# THE BIG FIVE-OH!

We made it! This is the fiftieth issue of *Current Affairs*. Can you believe THAT? When we started out, no lesser of a personage than editor-in-chief Graydon Carter of *Vanity Fair* told us directly: "Print is dying and you will fail." Well, so much for that! We defied the predictions. We gainsaid the naysayers (and naysaid the gainsayers). We rocked it and rolled it and printed it on beautiful paper. *Current Affairs* is 50 issues old, and we show no signs of dropping dead or selling out.

Thank you to our magnificent subscribers for making it possible to defy expectations and thrive in the online era! You are all beautiful souls.

Now for 50 more. Then 50 more. Then 50 more. Eventually the sun will explode and relieve us. Until then, enjoy!

## BEWARE DANGEROUS REDS!

The following shades of red have been singled out as toxic or inflammatory, and should be avoided. Report all dangerous reds to your local authorities.

Vermilion

Cerise

Crimson

Scarlet

Burgundy

Carmine

Ruby

Cherry

Amaranth

## HIDDEN THING SCAVENGER HUNT

Somewhere in one of the last 50 issues, we have hidden a very special thing for you to find.

Can you find it???



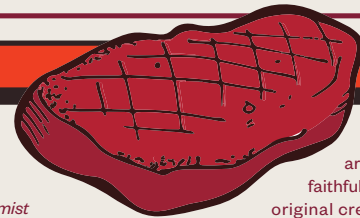
Have you considered sending a postcard to an old friend today?

Literally everyone loves getting a postcard. They'll be delighted! Bonus points if you put cheerful stickers on it.



## "MAGAZINE BEEF IS BACK"

So said a commenter online, referring to our recent 11,500-word evisceration of our print competitor, *The Atlantic*. ("The Worst Magazine In America," Sept. 13, 2024. Note, only America, because, after all, in London *The Economist* still publishes.) Apparently magazine beef went away for a while. In the Good Old Days, you'd see magazines fighting on the streets. Editors would challenge one another to pistols at dawn after exchanging sly insults in the editorial pages. Intellectuals would have televised brawls, such as the time Norman Mailer, William F. Buckley, and Gore Vidal started gouging out eyes and tearing one another limb from limb (while exchanging *bon mots*) on a live broadcast of *The Dick Cavett Show*. Truly, those days were the apogee of American literary culture. What happened to them? Well, by savaging *The Atlantic*, we are doing our best to revive them.



Actually, all we are doing is remaining faithful to an article of our original creed: Defend your stances! We recently gave *The Atlantic*

an award in these pages for being a terrible magazine. We were met with a furious response from a single reader, who said it was intellectual malpractice to disparage things without explaining the just reasons for the disparagement. We agree, and so we have expanded on the original point that "*The Atlantic* is terrible" with a careful, citation-laden exposition of precisely why it's terrible. That's called intellectual integrity, and it's why *Current Affairs* is famous across the land!

## Things That Are Good

Because *Current Affairs* is constantly disparaging things, readers occasionally wonder whether we "even like anything." "You don't like Ronald Reagan, *The Atlantic*, or the Hamilton musical, so what DO you like?" But reader, there is so much we like! We like butterflies, for instance. And socialism! And old vinyl records and patchwork quilts and candied yams and undersea creatures and big pink wigs and baby carrots and bell bottom trousers and blueberry pie! We could go on, listing for places, and



page after page the many persons, things in the world about which we feel fondly. Then there is a whole separate category of things toward which we are utterly indifferent, things we neither cheer nor condemn. So, no, it is not true that we dislike absolutely everything, but a magazine of criticism must criticize if it is to be worth the cover price, and we at *Current Affairs* always intend to be worth every penny of our cover price.

## SOLAR POWERED MAGAZINE

This is an experimental solar panel designed to maximize sustainability and efficiency, capturing a broader spectrum of sunlight and converting it into high-quality opinions. By featuring this experimental panel, the publication underscores its commitment to promoting eco-friendly solutions that address global energy challenges. We expect to receive widespread public acclaim for the move.

## PASTRY OF THE MONTH: The éclair

Fill your pockets with them!



WARNING: MAGAZINE CONTAINS CRITTERS



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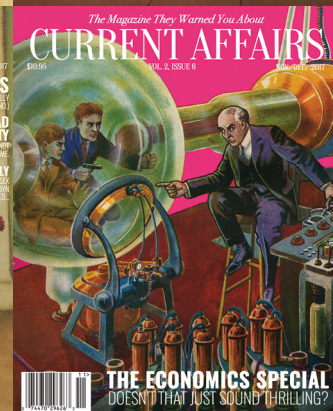
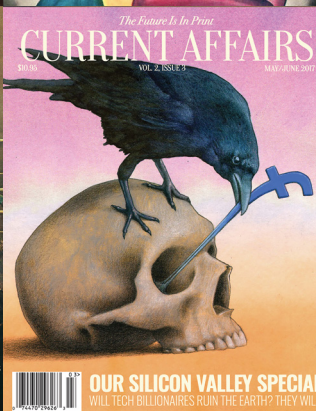
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# NOW THAT WE'RE 50 ISSUES IN...

WHEN WE BEGAN *CURRENT AFFAIRS* IN 2015, A LOT HADN'T happened yet. January 6 and October 7 were just ordinary days of the year. Donald Trump had only just announced his first presidential campaign, and the idea of Bernie Sanders being taken seriously as a presidential contender was still wishful dreaming among leftists. Personally, I was a graduate student feeling useless and adrift as a law student. The magazine was, essentially, a frivolous side project I made on my computer. I got a stack of other magazines from a newsstand and tried to teach myself how to design a magazine. Issue 1 came out looking good, and brought enough money to fund issue 2, and things just continued from there. Now we're on Issue 50, we're well-established, and we have a cute little office in New Orleans. Our loyal subscribers have made it possible for a print magazine to succeed at a very difficult time for media generally. So first off, thank you!

I am always reluctant to pick up old issues of *Current Affairs*. For one thing, I am too preoccupied with what's going to be in the next issue (and how late it is) than to spend time mulling over what was in the last one. I also inevitably immediately spot a small, irritating typo that we missed before the issue went to press. (Nothing more crushing for an editor than to see a typo that it's too late to do anything about.)

Still, it's interesting to look back at Issue 1 of *Current Affairs* from eight years later. (It's available free on our website.) The graphic design is much less professional (I was a complete amateur. Now we have a skilled professional designer, Cali Traina Blume.) Much of it was lifted from *Spy* magazine. We didn't have the stable of contributing artists we have now, so it was illustrated with recycled vintage advertisements and stock photos. We didn't have any readers to start, of course, but I wanted a "letters to the editor" section and drafted some letters under fictitious pen names (E.g., "To the editors: I had been led to believe that this was a periodical dedicated to contemporary philandering, of which I am a casual aficionado. Extremely disappointed with what came in the mail instead.") Starting around Issue 11, we introduced our unique photographic Table of Contents feature, in which every article is represented by a different physical object. It was originally just a one-off, but it was so much more interesting than an ordinary table of contents that I didn't want to disappoint people by going back. I've shot them on the seashore, in a bar, in front of a cathedral, and all kinds of other places. I built one out of Lego and in another commissioned custom cupcakes, each of which was decorated to represent an article in the issue. We put a lot of work into the Table

of Contents, and I'm convinced that if the National Magazine Awards had a category for Most Original Table of Contents, we'd kick the *New Yorker's* ass every year.

The mixture of politics and goofy satire was well-established at the outset, so in that first issue you'll find my essay on prison memoirs next to fake ads for Tony Blair's "Dictatorship Counseling Services" and Socialism pills (the cure for Affluenza!). From the outset, we were angry. The magazine mocks the *New York Times*, libertarians, Elizabeth Gilbert, Stalinism, Jonathan Franzen, and the drone industry. It's equally vicious toward both Bill O'Reilly and Ta-Nehisi Coates, which in retrospect shows a lack of discernment. Back then, we loved blowing spitballs, even at fellow leftists. In issue 4, after a reader said "*Current Affairs* is great, just don't disagree with them or they will be really mean to you," we actually produced a list of everything we had criticized in the first issue, which ranged from "the entire field of sociology" to "the president of Uzbekistan." Over time I feel we've developed a better sense of which targets deserve what level of criticism, when to wield the scalpel and when to wield the sledgehammer.

I was 26 when *Current Affairs* started, and it shows a bit. The magazine has since matured somewhat, I think, without losing its bite or *joie-de-vivre*. When I look back at Vol. I, Issue I, there are some things I actually miss, such as the little sidebars with digressions, and think we should consider reintroducing them. It's striking how much hasn't changed, though. The wonderful writer Yasmin Nair was with us from the start (her coruscating review of Gilbert's *Big Magic* is still a delight to read). The basic mission to provide left political and cultural analysis that was fun and readable and to intersperse it with little "amusements" like an adult *Mad* magazine is something we roughly achieved at the outset. I am pleased with how unashamedly stupid some of it is; one of the central messages of *Current Affairs* from the first moment was that it's okay to have fun.

*Current Affairs* began as a hobby, but we soon become swept up in the currents of history. Soon after we launched, it became clear that Trump was a serious presidential contender. At the time, pundits were dead certain that he couldn't possibly win an election and were making all kinds of hubristic predictions. "HRC was the best candidate against Trump: her strengths make the most of his weaknesses," Paul Krugman wrote in October of 2016. "Trump won't win Michigan, and I am frankly offended that people think this is even a possibility," said Jonathan Chait of *New York* magazine the day before the election. (Whoops.) I will always be proud that *Current Affairs* was one of the only voices (along with

filmmaker Michael Moore, food writer Mark Bittman, and a few others) to warn that Trump was in fact very likely to beat Hillary Clinton. In early 2016, I published an article arguing that Bernie Sanders was the Democrats' only hope against Trump. We argued throughout the election season that Democrats were failing to recognize the roiling anti-establishment anger in the country and that their complacency was suicidal.

The rise of Sanders was the other big story of 2016. Even leftists, for the most part, didn't anticipate it. We were so used to left candidacies being quixotic and hopeless (see: Nader '00, Nader '04, Kucinich '04, Kucinich '08, Stein '12) that it came as a shock, even to Bernie himself, when he began to take off and become seriously competitive. Bernie's emphasis on getting people's basic needs met (free healthcare, free college, good pay, etc.) resonated strongly with millennials who had been so frustrated with Obama-era neoliberal Democrats that they had launched the Occupy Wall Street campaign.

But all the warnings printed in *Current Affairs* could not change the course of history. Bernie lost, then Hillary lost, and we got four years of pure pandemonium, in which seemingly every day the president committed some new abominable act or introduced some cruel new policy. Environmental and labor regulations were torn up, the immigration system was made even more cruel, and the rich were handed a big fat tax cut. It all ended in the severely botched handling of a major public health crisis, which it turns out is not the sort of matter you want to put a reality television star in charge of.

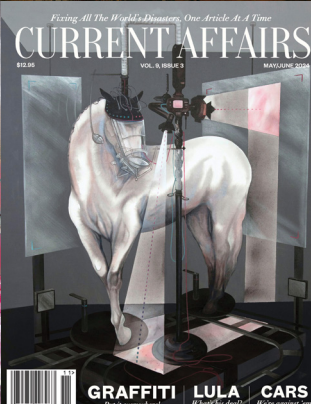
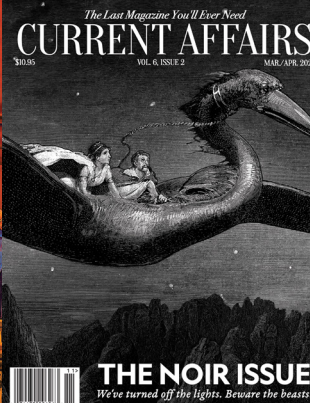
If you look back over our issues from the Trump years, you'll see that actually, we talked comparatively little about Trump compared with other political publications. I did write a book about him based on our *Current Affairs* coverage, *Trump: Anatomy of a Monstrosity*, which was released on Inauguration Day in 2017. But one of the duties we felt *Current Affairs* had was to try to get people to remember that there are more things in heaven and on Earth than whatever nonsense Donald Trump did (or tweeted) on any given day. We used the magazine to have the conversations we wished were being had. So we wrote about Karl Marx, Prince, Hawaiian history, North Korean graphic design, modern architecture, the lessons of World War I, utopian novels, psychedelic drugs, Motown music, the Green New Deal, transphobia, endangered fish, the fast food industry, shopping malls, drones, Charlie Chaplin, and *The West Wing*. We covered every topic under the sun and even some that aren't under the sun (such as a piece I did on why I think aliens exist). You can look through our "Index" page on the *Current Affairs* website to see the remarkable range of subjects we've dealt with across thousands of articles. Because we tried to keep away from the 24-hour news cycle, if you want to trace the history of the past eight years through picking up back issues of *Current Affairs*, you can't do it nearly as well as you might with old copies of *The Nation*. We deliberately tried to avoid being too "topical" and "newsy," but that's precisely why the magazines hold up relatively well today and are still a lot of fun to read. (Try going into our archive, which is available free online!) There are a lot of easter eggs and fun surprises, and I think we were quite prescient on a lot of stuff—we loathed Elon Musk long before his right turn and acquisition of Twitter, for instance. We built up an audience in part because of our famous long "take-down" pieces critiquing odious public figures (Charles Murray, Jordan Peterson, Steven Pinker, Pete Buttigieg, etc.) but we've actually published on an extraordinary range of topics, including Jeff VanderMeer's investigation of the destruction of Florida

wildlife, Ciara Moloney's excavations of forgotten films, Lauren Fadiman on codes of etiquette, Ben Burgis on central planning, Briahna Joy Gray's "How Identity Became a Weapon Against the Left," Rob Larson's dissections of free market economic ideology, Jag Bhalla's exposes of the "greedocracy," Marina Bolotnikova's superb writing on animal welfare, Arjun Byju's look at traumatic mass shooter drills in schools, and the wide-ranging work of my editorial colleagues Lily Sánchez and Alex Skopic. Plus much more, including coverage of fashion, board games, journalism, Brazilian politics, the Iraq war and more, and interviews with some of the world's most vital thinkers and activists from Rashid Khalidi to the late Barbara Ehrenreich.

Some of the changes we've witnessed over the eight years of our existence have been deeply depressing. Bernie Sanders lost twice, of course, and his movement dissipated. That moment when both Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn in the U.K. were ascendant felt full of such promise, like we could perhaps have a political system that cared about and served the interests of the people. It was not to be. The trajectory of media has been alarming in itself. Our early articles would be read, discussed, argued about. But over time, people read articles less and less. TikTok videos are the way to reach people now, and they of course don't allow for the same level of depth. Twitter, always a cesspool, is now crawling with neo-Nazis who would once have been kicked off. These are anecdotal observations, but public discourse does seem to have changed for the worse since our early days, when it seemed like there was a much greater hunger for substantive articles that made complicated arguments. I feel as if nowadays, fewer and fewer people even think it's worth bothering to have a political discussion. They feel so powerless that there's no point debating anything. That's my read of the "zeitgeist," at least. Am I wrong? Write to us! (We used to get a lot more angry letters to the editor. What happened to those? Again, I think people just stopped bothering to make counterarguments to anything.)

I hope we can change all this. I want us to start talking about Medicare For All and the Green New Deal again and pushing forward plans for fixing the worst crises facing humankind, which have not gone away. We need to reenergize the left. And *Current Affairs* will always be a magazine that believes it can be done. If you look over the past 49 issues, you'll find that while we covered a lot that was dark and depressing, we have never countenanced hopelessness. Our pages are filled with good cheer and encouragement, because we believe resignation and cynicism are simply not acceptable options. This magazine has always had a utopian streak—in fact, I've now published two "utopian novels" myself, *Echoland* and *My Affairs*—and we're not ashamed of it. (Also: there have been at least six other spin-off *Current Affairs* books!) We will never be "doomers." It's still possible to bring good things into the world. Heck, the success of *Current Affairs* itself is proof enough of that. We were told we'd never last, but here we are 50 issues in and we've got an amazing base of loyal subscribers and a network of phenomenal writers and artists who work to make this one of the most visually exciting and intellectually vibrant magazines in the world. With your help, this is just the beginning. The magazine will keep getting better. And hopefully, so will the world. It's hard to keep believing in that sometimes, when one's government is engaged in supporting crimes against humanity and is clearly indifferent to the climate peril that we are being plunged into. But we have confidence in the capacity of our fellow human beings to unite and build a world worth living in. Onward! ♣







# How I Found Myself Through Foraging

BY ANDREW ANCHETA

I CAN STILL REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I WORKED UP THE courage to cook a wild mushroom.

It was the height of the pandemic, and everyone's brains were still scrambled from too much boredom and isolation and the internet. I was on a long walk with my partner in the woods—walking was pretty much the only recreation left to us—when we spotted a pair of orange lips pouting from the rotten wood of a fallen log. Naturally, my first instinct was to eat them.

In those days, I had just started exploring mycology forums online, and had learned just enough to know that those lips were *probably* not poisonous. Still, there was an unavoidable anxiety as I trimmed a corner of that saffron flesh and watched it spit and pop in a hot pan. I started with a single bite, half-expecting to turn into the stricken hospital patient at the start of an episode of *House*.

It tasted exactly like chicken.

The Latin name for those orange lips is *Laetiporus sulphureus*. The fungus is more commonly known as Chicken of the Woods, and it's quite a bit better than the real thing. When picked young, the flesh has the taste and texture of the most succulent dark meat. But it does not dry out if you leave it on the grill; it only seems to get juicier. You also won't get salmonella if you undercook it, although some people can develop digestive upsets or allergic reactions.

If the idea of harvesting the Colonel's finest from a rotten tree strikes you as unusual, you might be surprised at just how many meaty meals you can find in the fungus kingdom. I know a clearing where skirt steak grows on trees, and lump crabmeat grows out of mossy logs. Lobster mushrooms are self-explanatory, and

in the summer, suburban lawns are full of fat white shrimp.

Since that first hesitant bite, I've tried many more wild mushrooms, and every year I cross a few off my list. Some of the advantages of foraging are straightforward: it's a convenient excuse to get outside, and many wild mushrooms have rich flavors that cannot be obtained in a grocery store. Others are more abstract: Foraging makes you think about your food, where it comes from, and the economic forces that brought you to a diet of factory-farmed mystery meat.

JOIN ME, THEN, ON A SUMMER DAY IN THE STEAMING WOODS of upper New York. Today we are looking for one of the rare treasures of the forest: The golden chanterelle, an elegant twist of butter-colored flesh that grows in the mossy shade under conifer trees. Chanterelles are among the finest of gourmet mushrooms, with a complex flavor and a delicate aroma of ripe apricots.

They are also very hard to find. Chanterelles depend on living trees for nourishment. Along with morels, porcini, and some other exotic fungi, they are nearly impossible to cultivate in farms, and can only be sourced through foraging. At the Hunts Point marketplace in the Bronx, which supplies 60 percent of New York's produce, the wholesale price of foraged chanterelles is up to \$25-30 per pound, and that's only when they're in season. The rest of the year, they are not available at any price. (It's the same on the West Coast, where a pound of golden chanterelles currently sells for \$31.77 on the website *Pacific Wild Pick*.)

Or—If you have access to the right kinds of woods, and know

when and where to look—you can dine like a French epicure for free, several times a year.

Identifying fungi is not quite as intimidating as you might think. While some edible mushrooms have deadly doppel-gangers, there are also plenty of beginner-friendly species that won't turn you into the subject of a murder mystery novel. The black-staining polypore (*Meripilus sumstinei*), which grows at the feet of older trees, has a rich beefy flavor and makes superb jerky. Hen of the woods (*Grifola frondosa*), which grows between the roots of old red oaks, can be roasted into a crunchy snack similar to crackling. Neither of them have any dangerous relatives, although it is still important to identify them correctly.

One encounters a lot of hand-me-down foraging wisdom through old saws, like “you can eat anything growing on wood” or “the ones that stain blue are poisonous.” All of these are bunk—there's so much diversity in the fungal kingdom that you might as well claim that berries are safe as long as they're not red.

Many mushrooms tend to accumulate heavy metals, and it's always a good idea to pass on meals that grow too close to a road or work site. In a way this feels more insidious than checking for poison—there's no guidebook that can tell you if a mushroom is full of mercury, and even edible species can be contaminated. Even foragers can't escape the industrial world and its pollution entirely.

There is something quite rewarding about a lucky or unexpected find. It's a bit like catching a rare Pokémon: I haven't yet had a chance to try the cauliflower mushroom (*Sparassis crispa*), which resembles a delicious mass of tangled egg noodles, or the black trumpet (*Craterellus fallax*), supposedly one of the most delicious edibles. One of the weirdest and rarest prizes is the beefsteak fungus (*Fistulina hepatica*), which resembles a slab of raw meat. For many years it was at the top of my bucket list.

The real reward in foraging, though, is psychological. For the people who make it their hobby, looking for food in nature is a deeply satisfying experience. Hunters and anglers tend to feel great pride in providing for the table through their own skill, and that feeling is much greater than the pleasure of getting a discount at the supermarket. Foraging has the same effect, without killing your local wildlife.

IN THIS WAY, SEARCHING FOR WILD MUSHROOMS IS A WELCOME contrast to the way our agriculture and food system works today. Unlike the factory-farmed, mass-produced, and highly processed food products sold to us in stores, eating mushrooms allows us to experience something truly natural—and, in doing so, to conceive of our human life as part of nature and the wider ecosystem, rather than something cut off from it.

The Marxist term ‘alienation’ is usually used to describe the effects of industrial capitalism—the sense of detachment and isolation that comes with being a tiny piece of a large and inscrutable machine of mass production. The classic example is a worker on a factory assembly line who might spend all day turning a single bolt over and over again and, in the process, feels like little more than a faceless hand in the workplace.

But the concept of alienation also applies to the manufacture of food. Unless you're one of the rapidly-shrinking number of

people who still works as a professional farmer, it's hard to keep track of the labor and subsidies and pesticides that it takes to bring food from the ground to your plate—not to mention the horrific conditions under which animals must live their short lives thanks to sadistic food corporations that produce boxes of McNuggets or pounds of hamburger meat. The whole system of food production is being taken over by a handful of gigantic agribusiness companies, and farming itself is increasingly automated. So it's difficult to feel, when you walk into a grocery store, that you have any real idea what you're eating or where it came from. The connection between humans and the rest of nature has been frayed, if not severed.

But foraging changes things. After a few trips to the woods, I started paying more attention to the seasons and the weather. Before, I couldn't tell the difference between elms and beech trees; later I learned to recognize their bark at a distance, the better to spot the mushrooms at their roots.

Apparently I'm not the only one. After the pandemic, many people became more interested in finding their own dinners,



Top: *Laetiporus sulphureus*; Bottom: Ancheta cooking Chicken of the Woods mushrooms



says Steve Brill, who leads foraging tours into New York parks. When I last saw him, Brill—who gave himself the nickname ‘Wildman’—was leading a group of around two dozen New Yorkers through the shrubs and weeds of Brooklyn’s Prospect Park.

Brill has the air of an eccentric old hippie, and he largely communicates through puns and painfully bad jokes. “On one tour, we had one person put a poisonous plant in his bag, and he didn’t survive,” he told me mournfully. “Poor guy died of embarrassment.”

“We teach people about the common edible and medicinal plants that people don’t realize are growing right outside their doorstep” said Violet, Brill’s 20-year-old daughter, who has been guiding tours with her father since she was nine. “The ones that are cut down by lawnmowers and keep growing back again, common renewable plants that people often think are weeds—we show that these plants are actually useful.”

Violet says that she’s been foraging since she was a toddler, when Brill used to hold her up to pick wild berries. She’s now studying environmental sustainability at Cornell.

“It’s nice to go outside and know what you’re looking at and what you can pick,” Violet said. “When people are exposed to nature and build a connection with the environment around them, that’s when people’s lifestyles will actually change.”

At Prospect Park, Brill introduced the common plantain—a common resident in driveways and sidewalks, useful for bandaging wounds—along with jewelweed, which can be applied to burns and rashes (including those caused by poison ivy). I knew both plants by sight—they grew in my backyard when I was a kid, and probably also in yours. But I’d never learned their names, or how to use them in medicine. This is the cost of urban life: In exchange for modern medicine, we’ve traded away our knowledge of plants and herbs.

Most of his tours focus on plants, but Brill can identify fungi just as easily. When I found a cluster of pink-gilled mushrooms, he identified the species at a glance, and told me exactly how to cook them. Altogether, Brill says he can recognize hundreds of edible species, as well as their poisonous look-alikes.

There are other hazards to foraging, as Brill learned in the 1980s. Back then, he caught the attention of the Parks Department, which busted him in an elaborate ambush—complete with undercover Park Rangers, who arrested Brill as soon as he took his first bite of a dandelion. As he tells the story, The Wildman, as he’s now known, became something of a *cause célèbre*—the Parks department ultimately dropped charges, and allowed his tours to resume. By his estimate, he has held about 5,000 wildlife tours since the 1980s.

**L**ET ME SHARE ONE MORE MEMORY. SEVERAL YEARS AFTER I took that first bite of mushroom chicken, I was on another walk, this time arguing with my partner as we picked our way through the thorny undergrowth. It was one of those painful fights that seemed like a misunderstanding but, looking back, was only the first drop in a rapidly steepening decline.

We had just about decided to break up for good when she spotted a strange lump on a nearby stump. “What’s that?” she said.

It was a beefsteak fungus, one of the rare treasures of the forest. That was obvious, even before we’d checked the guidebook.



Andrew Ancheta overlooking fungi

Imagine a kidney-shaped slab of raw meat sticking out of the grass, complete with white marbling. When I cut it loose, it seeped pink “blood.”

The argument stopped when we realized what we’d found. We removed it carefully, and carried it reverentially back to our campsite.

For something that looked so much like meat, the beefsteak mushroom tasted exactly the opposite: it had a tart, summery flavor, with a hint of citrus. We sliced it raw and tossed it in a salad with fresh leaves. Years later, when we finally split for good, we still relished the memory of that tart taste as one of the best meals that we’d shared.

**I**F YOU FIND THE IDEA OF PICKING MUSHROOMS SCARY, THERE are easier species to choose for a quick snack. Depending on the season and the locale, raspberries and blackberry bushes are a common sight; in my part of the Northeast, it’s difficult not to find them. Some easy to spot plants, like wild onions and garlic mustard, are as delicious as they are invasive. You’re doing nature a service by eating them.

There’s plenty to pick in cities as well. In New York, I’ve met people harvesting mugwort and ginkgo nuts. In June, you can always spot the mulberry trees by the carpet of jam and fallen fruit on the sidewalk below.

In my neighborhood of Queens, there’s a park next to a Costco where I sometimes stop to watch the sunset. In the summer, shoppers sit on the grass to eat their pizza and dollar-fifty hot dogs, while their neighbors cast fishing lines and children pick mulberries from the trees lining the shore. It’s comforting to see that people are still engaging in the oldest modes of human subsistence alongside the newest. 🍄

# UPENDING THE WORLD

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

**B**Y THIS POINT, READERS OF *Current Affairs* will probably have heard me mention *The Myth of American Idealism: How U.S. Foreign Policy Endangers The World*, the book I've co-authored with Noam Chomsky, which was released this month by Penguin Random House. The book attacks the idea that U.S. foreign policy has been benign or benevolent, arguing instead that the quest for global dominance and the maintenance of power are often disguised—by the U.S. as well as other countries—as noble and selfless. Far from being “exceptional” in its commitment to human rights and democracy around the world, the U.S. government has a long, shameful record of pursuing its own perceived “national interests” even when doing so involves egregious violations of international law and basic moral principles. U.S. leaders have frequently couched this brutality in idealistic rhetoric, and the American people are frequently told uplifting fables that bear little relationship to their government's actual actions abroad. We prove that case by running through a long record of U.S. actions, including our involvement in major wars in Vietnam, Central America, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Ukraine. In each case, we argue, U.S. leaders

professed a commitment to freedom and democracy, but the actual facts show that the opposite was true: our own actions were eroding the chances for the people of these countries to live freely.

This argument will not surprise committed leftists, who may find that the book tells them only what they have already long since concluded, albeit filling out some factual details here and there. But the book is not an effort to preach to the converted. Rather, it's written so that readers who have been exposed to little except patriotic mythology can be in possession of the facts that challenge that mythology. I proposed the book to Prof. Chomsky because when I was a teenager, he had been the one to open my eyes to many disturbing facts about how the world really works, and I wanted a new generation of readers to be able to undergo a similarly transformative intellectual experience.

How, precisely, does Prof. Chomsky's work upend what we might call “conventional wisdom” or the “standard account” of U.S. actions abroad? What are the presumptions and myths that are being called into question, and how can we spot them in the wild? A good way of seeing the value of the Chomskyan critique is to see what it can do when we go through

a standard, respected U.S. textbook on international relations. When we do, we'll see how the facts that Chomsky has amassed can call into question what otherwise looks like plain common sense.

Let's try this exercise on a typical book by a member of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, *The World: An Introduction*, by Dr. Richard Haass. Haass is the consummate American diplomat, affiliated with numerous highly prestigious institutions, such as the Brookings Institution, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Harvard Kennedy School, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Council on Foreign Relations, where he served as president for twenty years. He is a moderate Republican who opposed the Iraq War and has advised both Democrats and Republicans. Haass was inspired to write *The World* after meeting a Stanford computer science undergraduate who knew absolutely nothing about foreign affairs. Haass was troubled, believing that Americans should know something about the world and their country's role in it, so the book is intended as a primer, one that gives the basic knowledge all Americans should possess. Importantly, this means it's fair to say that if the book does *not* include a piece of information, it's because

a typical member of the foreign policy establishment (such as Haass) does not think it's the sort of thing Americans need to know in order to understand their country or the world.

*The World*, which comes with effusive blurbs from Fareed Zakaria, Madeleine Albright, and Doris Kearns Goodwin, provides a potted summary of recent global history, guides to each region of the world, and discussions of the most serious issues facing the world today. Everything about it, from its ambitious title to its format reminiscent of the "CIA World Factbook," suggests *neutrality*. But it is in the works that most aggressively market themselves as neutral and unbiased that we must most vigilantly look for unspoken ideological assumptions. So how does *The World* distort the actual world through a pro-American lens?

Let's take a look at the way Haass describes a few different instances in the history of American foreign relations. Take, for instance, his account of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

*The United States took the lead in rolling back Japan's conquests in Asia. By the summer of 1945, most of Asia had been liberated, but Japan had not been defeated. The choice was judged to be either an invasion of the Japanese home islands—something that promised to be extraordinarily difficult and costly—or using a terrible new weapon that would likely convince the Japanese that further resistance was futile. The United States, then led by Harry Truman, who had become president following Roosevelt's death in April 1945, opted for the latter, and dropped atomic weapons on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Within days Japan surrendered, and the Pacific war (and with it World War II) was over.*

This may look like a neutral description. But in this short paragraph, numerous choices have been made about which information is worth including versus which information is to be left out. Of course, the most obvious omission is any mention of the horrific effects that the



*The aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing*

bombings had on the civilian population. We could tell a story of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that emphasized the extraordinary, historic brutality of these actions and which incorporated testimonies from surviving eyewitnesses to show what it meant for America to become the first (and so far only) country to use nuclear weapons on a population.

Haass might object that he is not intending to bring history alive through presenting the observations of its participants but merely to present the basic facts of U.S. foreign relations in a dry but accessible manner. Now, I would personally argue that you can't ever really understand an event without understanding what it meant to the people who experienced it, but even on Haass's own terms, there are a number of crucial distortions and omissions, one that the hypothetical "Stanford computer science undergraduate" won't notice are being made. For instance, Haass says that Japan had not been "defeated." But this is somewhat misleading. Japan had not surrendered, but it had been defeated as a military threat. That's the reason why a number of leading U.S. military officials later said the atomic bombings had been wholly unnecessary. General Douglas MacArthur, for instance, said he saw "no military justification for the dropping of the bomb." Dwight Eisenhower thought dropping the bomb was "completely unnecessary," saying that "the Japanese

were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing." Haass repeats a common argument that the choice was "judged to be" between a full-scale invasion and the dropping of the bombs, and the bombs were thought to be the least-bad alternative. But there is plenty of evidence (laid out by historians like John Dower and Gar Alperovitz) that there were other factors at work in the decision-making, like the low level of value placed on Japanese civilian lives, the desire to make use of a weapon that had been extremely costly to build, and the unwillingness of the U.S. to consider softening its demand for absolute "unconditional" surrender. There are also some deeply ugly facts left out of the standard U.S. narrative, such as the fact that Harry Truman lied to the public and claimed Hiroshima had been a "military base," that the U.S. covered up evidence of the grotesque harms inflicted by the bombing, and that even *after* the Japanese had offered to surrender, the U.S. staged a massive additional bombing raid on Japanese cities.

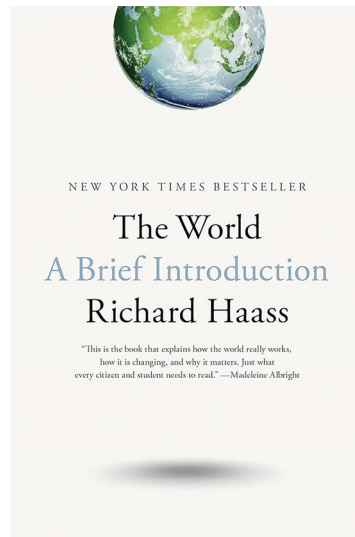
We can see that the omissions change the story. Haass's account suggests that the United States faced a difficult choice, and there is nothing in the paragraph that should lead us to agonize too much over that choice. The omitted facts suggest that the U.S. may have committed a horrific crime against humanity for no defensible reason. These facts commonly do not

appear in textbooks. Personally, I was never taught how widespread opposition to the bombings was among high U.S. officials, and it was only in Chomsky's writings and talks that I learned that the U.S. kept bombing Japan after the surrender. Chomsky argued consistently that the official history of our country, as told by mainstream intellectuals and the press, systematically suppressed facts that would call into question the basic idea that U.S. motives are noble (even if we make mistakes from time to time). Reading a standard account of the atomic bombings and seeing what it deliberately leaves out confirms that Chomsky is at the very least right to note that we're not being given the full picture.

As I read through Haass's *The World*, my knowledge of Chomsky allowed me to see in many different instances how the facts were carefully being spun to make the U.S. role seem more defensible than it was. Take the Vietnam War. Here is a paragraph in which Haass succinctly summarizes the war's trajectory:

*Following the epic military defeat of France near the village of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, a diplomatic conference was convened to dismantle French Indochina (which became Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam). Vietnam was divided into a Communist north and a non-Communist south, with an election scheduled for 1956 to decide the country's fate. National elections never took place as the governments of both North and South Vietnam consolidated power and prepared for war. The United States poured in money, arms, advisers, and, when all else failed, millions of troops to shore up a regime in South Vietnam that was challenged by an insurgency supported by North Vietnam and by North Vietnam itself, which was receiving material assistance from both the Soviet Union and China. Successive U.S. presidents hoped not just to preserve South Vietnam but to prevent Communists from taking over all of Southeast Asia. The U.S. effort ultimately failed in South Vietnam, which fell to the North in 1975, and sowed the seeds for the ensuing civil war and genocide in Cambodia.*

This is not an atypical "conventional" description. It's similar to the sort you might find in the curriculum of an Advanced Placement American History class. But once again, crack open a work by Chomsky and you'll immediately find all sorts of facts that entirely upend the picture presented here. For instance, Chomsky emphasizes, first, the fact that the U.S. was fully supportive of French efforts to retain colonial control over Vietnam (even as the Vietnamese independence movement was pleading with Truman to live up to U.S. values and support their effort to throw off their colonial overlords).



"The World: A Brief Introduction" book cover

Second, national elections never happened, but not simply because the governments of North and South Vietnam were preparing for war, but because the South Vietnamese government refused to hold the elections, a decision the U.S. supported because we knew that the communists would win. As Eisenhower wrote in his memoirs, "I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs who did not agree that had elections been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80 per cent of the populations would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh."

In other words, what was presented to the U.S. public as a war to defend a democratic government was in fact a war to keep an undemocratic government in power and to make sure democracy didn't break out in Vietnam. Chomsky emphasizes that the National Liberation Front insurgency in South Vietnam in fact had massive support among the rural population, but the U.S., under successive administrations, refused to countenance a political settlement that would bring the NLF into government and instead was willing to plunge the whole country into an abyss of death and destruction in a futile attempt to keep an unpopular client state in power. Americans were told they were fighting to stop North Vietnamese aggression against South Vietnam, when in fact we were often fighting South Vietnamese people who were trying to throw off the yoke of the brutal U.S.-backed dictatorship that governed them. The Vietnam War, often presented as having been "begun in good faith by decent people, out of fateful misunderstandings" (in the words of Ken Burns), was in fact a ruthless attempt to keep a friendly authoritarian regime in power at all costs.

Again, the horrors on the ground appear nowhere in the story, such as the extensive use of chemical weapons and napalm. Haass doesn't even mention the massive U.S. bombing of Laos, which turned the country into the most bombed nation in the history of the world and is still causing the deaths of Laotians thanks to millions of unexploded cluster bombs. How is it that a primer on U.S. foreign policy, intended to educate Americans in the basic facts of what their country has done, could somehow not even mention the biggest bombing campaign in our history? Surely even a cynic has to be a little astonished by how such a significant event could just be written out of history entirely. (Note, however, that every country's propagandists do this. Britain's imperial apologists left the history of colonized populations out of schoolbooks. Israel doesn't teach students about the Palestinian "nakba" of 1948.)

Across nearly every major event, *The World* leaves out critical facts that could, if known, lead the reader to reach more damning conclusions about U.S. conduct.

For instance, here is Haass's recounting of the facts of the Gulf War:

*Iraq, then led by the ambitious authoritarian ruler Saddam Hussein, invaded and quickly conquered its smaller and weaker neighbor to the south, Kuwait, making it part of Iraq. It was the sort of naked aggression that Iraq, closely associated with and dependent in many ways on the Soviet Union, would not have been allowed by its former patron to undertake at the height of the Cold War because it could have given the United States the pretext for intervening militarily in the part of the world that hosted the lion's share of global oil and gas reserves. [...] [Bush] could not have been clearer in what he declared to an anxious world: "This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait." Consistent with the president's words, the United States intervened, first with diplomacy and economic sanctions, ultimately with military force. President Bush did not want Iraq to dominate the energy-rich Middle East; nor did he want the new era to start with the terrible precedent that force could be used to unilaterally change borders.*

Again, we can ask the question: What is left out? Hussein's invasion of Kuwait was, of course, "naked aggression." But it was *not* unprecedented. In fact, Hussein had undertaken a major act of military aggression before by invading Iran soon after taking power. And far from "intervening militarily" when that happened, the United States actually supported Hussein, covering up his use of chemical weapons against Iranians and providing him with logistical support. We supported his aggression when it kept a hostile Iran in check, but we opposed it when Hussein became too big for his britches and it was in our interest to keep him from getting too powerful.

Once again, Chomsky's writing on the topic adds context left out by writers like Haass. For instance, Haass says the U.S. intervened "first with diplomacy," implying that Bush used military force as a last resort. In fact, the Bush administration spurned opportunities for diplomacy. As Thomas Friedman wrote in August of



Protestors at Raytheon Headquarters on the 20th Anniversary of the US occupation Afghanistan

1990, the Bush administration had taken the hardline position that "President Hussein must not only retreat from Kuwait, but he must do so in a manner that leaves no suggestion that Iraq gained from its invasion." In other words, it was not enough to reach a settlement by which Iraq would withdraw from the territory it occupied. Hussein also needed to be humiliated: "Officials say he must not only be defeated, he must also be seen as defeated by everyone in the Arab world and beyond." Bush administration officials were worried that diplomacy could *succeed* and that Hussein could be induced to pull back (thus averting a war). Officials "fear that in the context of a negotiation, the Arab world might be inclined to grant President Hussein some minor face-saving concessions to get him out of Kuwait and remove the threat of a full-scale war in the oilfields of the Persian Gulf." Note that the administration was particularly worried that Arabs didn't want a war and would prefer a diplomatic settlement!

As Chomsky documents, Hussein repeated made diplomatic overtures suggesting that he was willing to withdraw voluntarily from Kuwait, but the United States spurned these offers in part because war was an opportunity to teach Hussein the lesson that "what we say goes," as Bush put it. The Gulf War seems less of a heroic attempt to punish aggressors

if it becomes clear that the war could have been averted and that the Bush administration *preferred* war, knowing it could easily win and wouldn't have to be seen negotiating with Hussein. Haass also notes that in the aftermath of the war, the U.S. declined to offer aid to Iraqis who rose up against Hussein, leading to them being slaughtered. For Haass, this is because we wanted to "avoid getting caught up in taking sides in what was seen as a civil war." In fact, the uglier truth is that the U.S. may have preferred Hussein remain in charge in Iraq. As Friedman put it at the time, "as soon as Mr. Hussein was forced back into his shell, Washington felt he had become useful again for maintaining the regional balance and preventing Iraq from disintegrating." For all our supposed principles, the U.S. actually preferred a dictator in Iraq to a popular uprising, so long as that dictator knew his place.

Let us look quickly at two more cases, Afghanistan and Palestine. Here is Haass's description of the Afghanistan war:

*The U.S. administration at the time, that of George W. Bush, demanded the Taliban hand over al-Qaeda members who were operating out of Afghanistan, and when it refused to do so, the United States joined forces with many of the same tribes that had run Afghanistan following the fall of the*

former king. This coalition succeeded in removing the Taliban from power in 2002. President Bush asked me to coordinate U.S. policy toward the future of Afghanistan from my perch at the State Department. We managed to help the Afghans form a new unity government, but it proved unable to govern the entire country or to end the fighting. [...] In the ensuing decade, civil war raged, because the government, supported by forces from the United States and other NATO countries, could not secure the country against Taliban fighters who continued to enjoy great support in the south of Afghanistan (where they had ethnic and tribal ties) and sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan, which opposed the establishment of a government in Kabul with close ties to the United States and India.

Yet again, the moment we pick up a Chomsky book, we see crucial facts left out. Here are just a few: First, the Taliban did indicate it was willing to hand over Osama bin Laden if certain conditions were met (such as the presentation of evidence of his guilt), and the U.S. refused to enter into negotiations over the matter, saying its demand was non-negotiable. The anti-Taliban forces that the U.S. joined with actually condemned the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan as indiscriminate. Part of the reason the Taliban survived was not just that they “had ethnic and tribal ties,” but that the U.S. was supporting a corrupt and brutal government that did not enjoy popular support, and U.S. atrocities in Afghanistan alienated the population and helped the Taliban recruit. All of this (which we document in the Afghanistan chapter of *The Myth of American Idealism*) is crucial to understanding the reality of the war, but readers of *The World* will be left in ignorance.

Haass’s version of the Afghanistan story is similar to others: the U.S. tries to do the right thing, but, sadly, we fail, sometimes through hubris, sometimes because the world is complex and full of people with “ethnic and tribal ties” about which we can do little. But often the reality is that the U.S. was not trying to do the right thing. Instead, successive

governments were making callous Machiavellian calculations of what would be best for U.S. power, in almost complete indifference to the fate of the people who would be affected.

**“Often the reality is that the US was not trying to do the right thing. Instead, successive governments were making callous Machiavellian calculations of what would be best for US power.”**

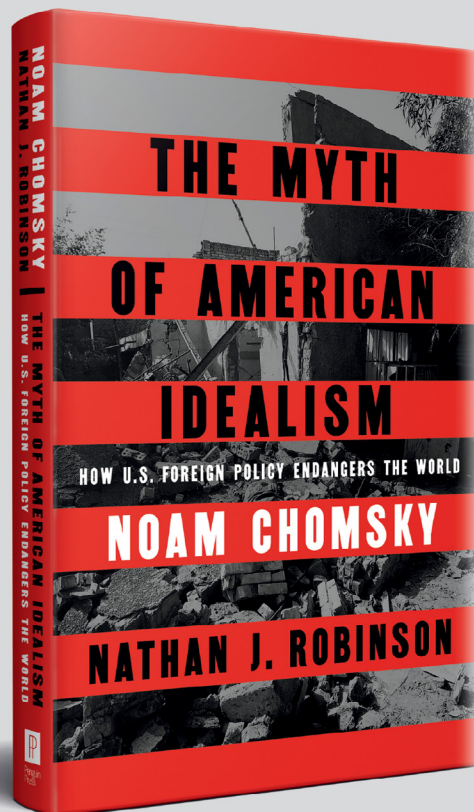
For instance, when Haass discusses Israel and Palestine, he says that “multiple diplomatic efforts, mostly led by the United States, as well as one notable undertaking in Oslo in the early 1990s that was spearheaded by Israelis and Palestinians themselves, have failed to produce a comprehensive outcome acceptable to both Palestinians and Israelis.” He says that “Palestinian leaders have shown themselves to be unwilling to accept American and Israeli proposals that offered the Palestinians much even if not all that many wanted.” Haass presents the U.S. as an honest broker that tried in good faith to help resolve a distant conflict but failed simply because the two parties could not agree (and partially because of Palestinian rejectionism). In reality, the U.S. has been a stalwart supporter of Israel, arming and funding Israel as it has systematically dispossessed Palestinians and colonized their land. The U.S. has vetoed U.N. resolutions that would have imposed a two-state settlement on the conflict and has declined to join most of the rest of the world in recognizing a Palestinian state. The central issue in the conflict is that Israel is occupying Palestine and refuses to end its occupation, instead gradually annexing Palestine while refusing to grant Palestinians the basic rights that Israelis

have. The U.S. could refuse at any time to continue supporting Israel as it does this. Instead, it offers weapons and diplomatic support, even as U.S. leaders proclaim themselves committed to a “peace process” and a two-state settlement. The U.S. role in the Israel-Palestine conflict has been brazenly hypocritical, and arguably we are the primary obstacle to peace. But in the telling of those like Haass, the U.S. is simply weak and helpless, unable to solve a very complicated situation.

It’s notable that Haass is not a militarist or rigid ideologue. While he has long been a Republican, he is not a neoconservative. Not only was he opposed to the Iraq War, but he argues in *The World* that NATO expansion was a mistake that unnecessarily antagonized Russia. He has recently been critical of the Biden administration’s outright refusal to consider restraining Israel’s conduct in the West Bank and Gaza. But Haass pushes common myths about the U.S., carefully finessing the historical record to exonerate us of any *serious* wrongdoing. All the U.S. does is make minor mistakes here and there.

This is the worldview that has been forcefully challenged across Chomsky’s 100-plus books. Chomsky argues that U.S. professions of noble intent ring hollow, that we are a state like any other, without uniquely exalted motives. He encourages us to look in the mirror and judge ourselves by the standards we judge other countries by, and to not sweep evidence of our worst misdeeds (such as the devastation of Laos, or the atomic bombings, or our shameful role in Palestine) under the rug. Books like *The World* present an attractive picture, one that Americans may be biased towards accepting, which is that the world is complicated, and we navigate its complexities as best we can. The reality is that we have inflicted a great deal of devastation on people around the world—without ever reckoning with what we have done or compensating the victims. To those who have been taught *The World*’s view of the world, I would suggest picking up a book of Chomsky’s like *Myth* and having a look at the facts you were never told. See how this supplementary information alters your judgment. You may find the experience just as eye-opening as I did myself. +

## AN URGENT WARNING AND A PASSIONATE APPEAL FOR ACTIVISM



**“VITAL** . . . Chomsky shows how, time and again, America refuses to accept the same constraints on its conduct that it demands of others, with uniformly disastrous results.” —*The Progressive*

**“A POTENT CRITIQUE** . . . A treatise on how the nation’s hubristic pursuit of ‘spreading democracy’ threatens not only the delicate balance of global peace, but the already-declining health of our planet.” —*The Millions*

**“BLISTERING** . . . The authors’ top-versus-bottom analysis becomes strikingly perceptive in a final chapter analyzing how today a global elite benefits from world-killing fossil fuels. This offers rich food for thought.” —*Publishers Weekly*



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in a hijab! TERRORISM???**



**ON THIS WEEK'S EXCITING EPISODE:**  
Our heroes seize \$7 and two grams of dirt weed from a kid!



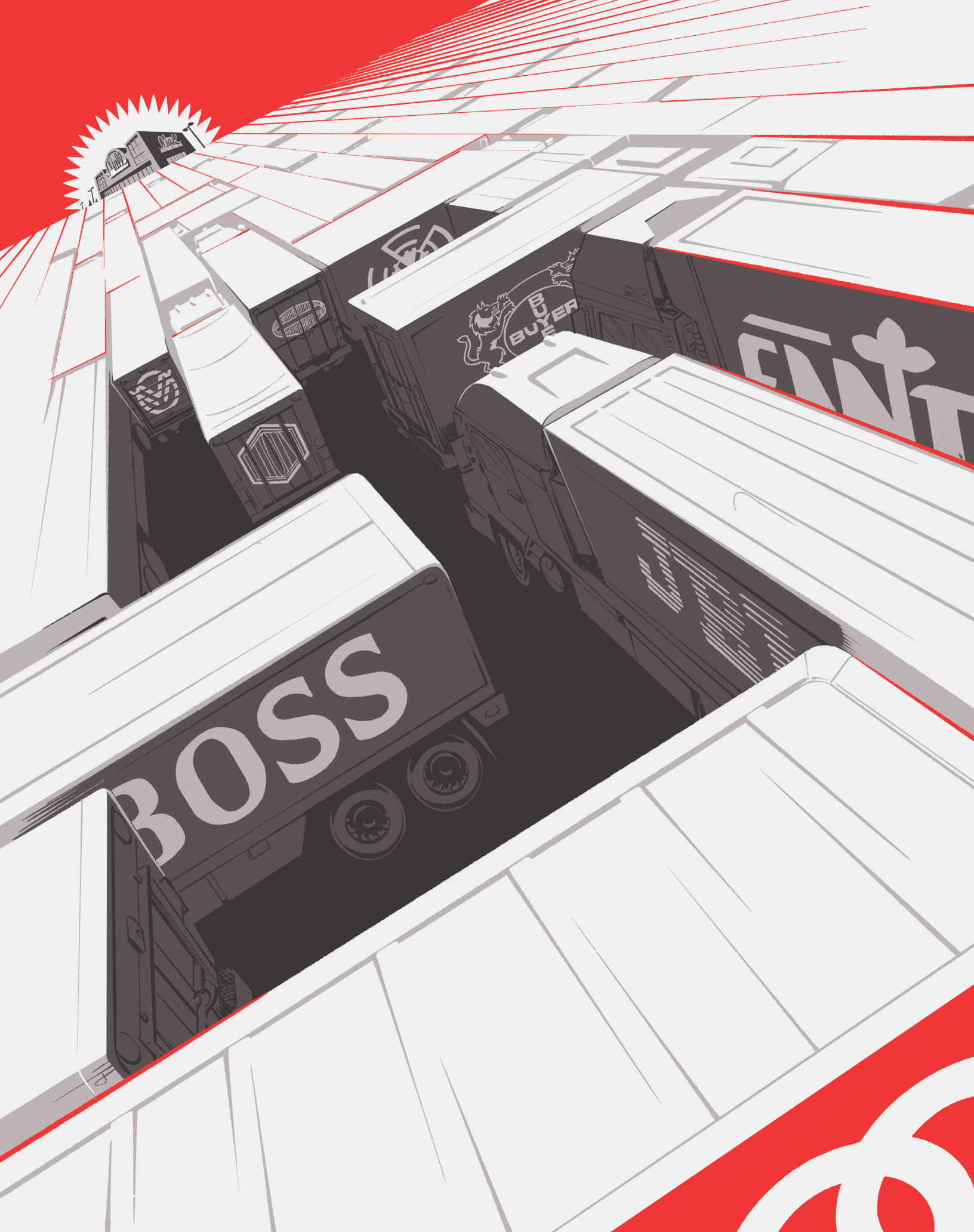
# NCIS BOZEMAN



**THEY PATROL THE MEAN STREETS!**



**TV  
GUIDE**



# NAZIS ON AISLE NINE

BY ALEX SKOPIC

**I**D YOU KNOW THAT EVERY TIME YOU WALK THROUGH A big retail store, the ghosts of dead Nazis stare at you from the shelves? It's true. They're in the soda aisle, peeking out from between the cans and bottles. They're in the automotive section, too, and the clothing department, and the pharmacy, and the electronics aisle. *Especially* the electronics aisle. Once you learn to see them, you'll never stop.

I'm being dramatic here, but only a little. The ghosts in question are metaphorical—representations of the ugly history of some of the world's most famous corporations. Many of those corporations, it turns out, are reluctant to discuss what they were doing between the years 1933 and 1945, and with good reason. In fact, they were busy collaborating with Nazi Germany and its leaders, and making a tidy profit in the process. They were sewing uniforms for Hitler's troops, designing cars for the Nazi Party, brewing soft drinks to serve at Nazi events, and in one particularly grim case, providing punch card machines to count the prisoners in the death camps. Today, the same corporations are still around, filling the shelves of your local Target or Walmart. In most cases, they faced little or no punishment for their complicity in one of the most heinous regimes of mass murder ever recorded, and they were allowed to carry on doing business as usual after the war. That tells us everything we need to know about capitalism—and the depths of evil that businesses within this amoral economic system will sink to when there's a buck to be made.

**W**HEN HITLER CAME TO POWER IN JANUARY 1933, IT was already perfectly clear that Nazism was indefensible. This is a critical thing to recognize. There was never a point in time when anyone, if they had a

basic knowledge of world events, could plausibly say that Nazi Germany was a normal European nation, or that it was acceptable to do business with it. Before he became Führer, Hitler had already laid out his views and goals in 1925's *Mein Kampf*—his loathing for democracy, his violent antisemitism (including fantasies about using “poison gas”), and all the rest. These were the guiding principles of the Nazi state from Day One, and they resulted in state-sponsored violence and oppression almost immediately. The first concentration camp opened at Dachau in March 1933 and was quickly filled with political opponents of the Nazi party, especially communists. By April, an estimated 60,000 German Jews had been imprisoned, at Dachau and elsewhere, and another 10,000 had fled the country. The initial stages of the Holocaust had already begun, and plenty of people around the world were raising the alarm. In Manhattan, more than 100,000 protesters rallied against the Nazi government and its antisemitic policies in May 1933, and there were loud and widespread calls for boycotts of German firms and products. Even at this early stage, the right and wrong sides of the situation were clear. But that didn't stop the world's big international corporations. They didn't boycott; just the opposite. They knew about the oppression and horror, heard the calls for justice, and chose to embrace Nazi Germany as a business partner anyway.

Take the Coca-Cola company. Today it's one of the most famous corporations on Earth, with sales in more than 200 of the world's countries and territories—including Antarctica. But in the 20th century, it was also intimately linked to the Nazis. In his book *For God, Country and Coca-Cola*, historian Mark Pendergrast lays out the full details of the alliance between the two, and they're profoundly disturbing. The key figures were

two executives named Ray Rivington Powers and Max Keith, who Pendergrast calls “at once the quintessential Coca-Cola man and [a] Nazi collaborator.” They were in charge of Coca-Cola GmbH (the GmbH is for “Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung,” the German equivalent of “LLC”), the company’s German subsidiary. By all accounts, both Powers and Keith were brilliant marketers, and Coke’s German sales grew dramatically in the 1930s. But they were also utterly amoral, and as Germany became a fascist dictatorship, they embraced the change:

*Keith zeroed in on “special events,” such as patriotic mass meetings, realizing that sampling was the best way to build the business. Coca-Cola appeared at bicycle races, emphasizing its wholesome refreshment for athletes. As young men goose-stepped in formation at Hitler Youth rallies, Coca-Cola trucks accompanied the marchers, hoping to capture the next generation.*

The biggest “special event” of all was the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, commonly known as the “Nazi Olympics” today. Hosting the games was a huge propaganda coup for Hitler’s government, which pioneered “sportswashing”—the use of athletics to promote a nation’s image on the world stage while distracting from atrocities being committed at home. The games were also a forum for Nazi theories of racial superiority, complete with an “Aryans Only” policy for the German teams. (Famously, this resulted in a “thumb in the eye” for Hitler when the African American runner Jesse Owens beat the alleged master race, taking home four gold medals.) Coca-Cola sponsored the games, advertising them with images of statuesque Aryan athletes with German eagles on their chests:



Coca-Cola posters for Nazi Germany summer Olympic Games 1936

As Pendergrast recounts, Max Keith and his fellow executives “provided enormous quantities of Coca-Cola for athletes and visitors,” and they spent the whole Olympics hobnobbing with Nazi elites. At one point, company president Robert Woodruff flew to Berlin and “brought over an entire Coca-Cola entourage” to a party hosted by propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and Field Marshal Hermann Göring. They made no objection to the Nuremberg race laws—then in full effect—that stripped civil rights from Jews and other non-Aryans. But they *did* raise a fuss about one point of Nazi policy, one thing they just couldn’t forgive: the mandate of a “contains caffeine” label on their packaging.

From a purely capitalistic, profit-seeking point of view, Keith and Powers were being rational. They had a good reason to like Nazism: Nazism was good for business. In particular, it helped keep labor costs down and workers in line:

*[W]orkers were little more than serfs, forbidden not only to strike but to change jobs. The employer became a kind of mini-dictator, a Geschäftsführer, or “leader of the enterprise.” Wages were deliberately set quite low, but most workers were happy just to have jobs and to believe Hitler’s propaganda that the Teutonic “Volk” would overcome all obstacles. [...] No wonder Max Keith’s faithful workers labored so diligently. By 1939, forty-three German plants bottled Coca-Cola, with nine more under construction. Over six hundred concessionaires, independent franchisees making considerably more money than most German workers, distributed the drinks. Each was his own mini-Führer, though bowing ultimately to Max Keith, who had made it all possible for them.*

Again, this makes perfect sense from a capitalist perspective. Even today, in what’s ostensibly the age of democracy, there’s nothing more authoritarian and less democratic than the workplace. Your boss doesn’t have to be elected, and in most cases you have no say in their decisions; you just have to obey, or be fired. We know, too, that bosses as a class do everything they can to suppress workers’ ability to organize and challenge their power. When the Nazis took over Germany, one of their first actions was to ban trade unions. Is it any wonder, then, that Coca-Cola’s executives jumped at the chance to operate under fascism?

Even when World War II broke out, the collaboration didn’t end. When Hitler invaded Austria in 1938, Max Keith and his fellow executives once again made no objection. Instead, they wasted no time opening a Vienna branch in the newly conquered territory. Keith also ordered a group *Sieg heil!* at Coca-Cola GmbH’s headquarters “to commemorate our deepest admiration and gratitude for our Führer” on Hitler’s 50th birthday. And when the war broke out in earnest in 1939, making it impossible to import chemical ingredients from the United States, Coca-Cola GmbH came up with a solution: manufacture a whole new drink from whatever scraps were available on the domestic market, including such appetizing things as whey byproducts and apple fiber left over from cider-making. They even got a special exemption from the Nazi

sugar-rationing laws to do it. The drink was called Fanta, from the German *Fantasie*, and it's still sold today; you've probably had it yourself a time or two. But trade embargoes on Nazi Germany are the only reason it exists.

Today, Coca-Cola avoids discussing its Nazi era whenever possible. In their publicity materials, they briefly acknowledge that they sponsored the 1936 Olympics and that Fanta was “introduced in 1940,” but that’s about it. In the “World of Coca-Cola” museum at the company’s Atlanta headquarters, the 1930s are carefully glossed over. In fact, the British comedian Mark Thomas once trolled the museum by offering it a donation: a facsimile of an old Hitler Youth “Mein Dienst” training booklet, complete with a Coke ad on the back. (Unsurprisingly, the museum staff didn’t hang it up.)<sup>1</sup> More recently, the company faced a wave of backlash in Germany when it ran a TV ad in 2015 for the 75th anniversary of Fanta’s creation, calling the soda “good like before... just today” and promoting a “Klassik” bottle modeled after the original. The company eventually pulled the ad and said that “We had no intention to call Nazi Germany ‘the good old times,’” but by the time you’re making a statement like that, things have already gone seriously wrong.

**T**HIS IS ONLY TOUCHING THE SURFACE. IF WE TAKE A WALK down to the clothing section, more hidden Nazis reveal themselves. By this point, it’s fairly well-known that Hugo Boss was a member of the Nazi Party, starting in 1931 (he was an early adopter), and did a booming trade in Nazi uniforms. In fact, his clothing company was saved from bankruptcy in 1931 by a wave of orders from the Party, including for the infamous brown shirts of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA). We can even find old advertisements for Boss products in Nazi publications:



An advertisement for Nazi uniforms by Hugo Boss from 1933

Later, when the Nazis took over the German government, Boss would boast that he’d been a “supplier of Party equipment since 1924,” and his company won lucrative contracts with the German military as they ramped up uniform production in 1938. It’s a popular misconception that Boss designed the black uniform of the SS; that was Karl Diebitsch and Walter Heck, high-ranking SS members who also created the twin lightning bolt symbol. But the Boss company certainly manufactured SS uniforms, along with those for the Wehrmacht, the Hitler Youth, and other Nazi organizations, and it used forced labor to do it. Even a historical study commissioned by the company itself in 2011 admits that around 140 people, mainly Polish women, were “forced to live in [a] special camp set up for eastern Europeans” at one of the company’s factories in 1943, where they worked grueling 12-hour shifts sewing uniforms. Historian Roman Köster also writes that “hygiene levels and food supplies were extremely uncertain at times” in the camp, and that “there were some committed National Socialists in the company who treated the women extremely harshly and threatened them with concentration camps.” (Again, keep in mind that this is a study commissioned by Hugo Boss itself, so “treated harshly” is likely a polite euphemism.) In 2011, the company made an official apology expressing its “profound regret to those who suffered harm or hardship at the factory,” and since the 1990s it has paid an unspecified amount into a reparations fund for Holocaust victims. But it still uses the name “Hugo Boss,” loud and proud, in all its advertising—and when its menswear catalog happens to include a square-jawed blonde model with blue eyes, it’s frankly a little unnerving.

Even the perfume counter isn’t completely Nazi-free. Two of the most popular scents in the world, Chanel No. 5 and No. 19, have their own dark history. As Hal Vaughan’s 2011 book *Sleeping with the Enemy: Coco Chanel’s Secret War* details, Hugo Boss wasn’t the only iconic fashion designer who sympathized with the Third Reich; the creator of the “little black dress” did too. Coco Chanel was blatantly antisemitic throughout her life, saying at one point that “I only fear Jews and Chinese; and the Jews more than the Chinese,” and during World War II she became an active collaborator with the Nazi regime. Vaughan’s book takes its title from a romantic affair Chanel had with Baron Hans Günther von Dincklage, a German intelligence officer who operated in France, but she was also a spy in her own right. In 1941, she traveled to Madrid, then England, carrying “economic and political information” on behalf of the Nazi Abwehr. In exchange, the Nazis freed her nephew André from prison. She was also involved with Operation Modellhut, a somewhat half-baked plan to smuggle a message from the commanders of the SS to Winston Churchill about a possible peace deal with England in 1943 and ’44. But the most shameful part of Chanel’s record was when she tried to use Nazi race laws to her advantage, reporting her business partners Pierre and Paul Wertheimer—who were Jewish—to the Gestapo in an attempt to have their shares of the perfume business confiscated and given to her. Thanks to some clever financial maneuvering on the Wertheimers’ part, the plot failed, and they maintained control of Chanel No. 5 from a new

<sup>1</sup> Thomas has also written a book on Coca-Cola’s use of child labor and other human rights abuses around the world, memorably titled *Belching Out the Devil*.

headquarters in New Jersey. So Chanel created her own rival perfume, No. 1, and marketed it from neutral Switzerland in direct competition to them. Like with Fanta, that particular scent wouldn't exist if not for antisemitism and the Nazis—and it's still sold today, rebranded as No. 19.

**T**URNING TO THE AUTO DEPARTMENT, THERE ARE SEVERAL famous car brands with Nazi ties. Henry Ford, for instance, was a virulent antisemite—so much so that he devoted multiple issues of his Michigan newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, to the subject of “The International Jew.” In a 1924 letter, Heinrich Himmler referred to Ford as “one of our most valuable, important, and witty fighters.” In 1938, he accepted a medal called the “Grand Cross of the German Eagle” from Hitler's government, although Ford implausibly denied “any sympathy on my part with Nazism” at the same time. (Sure, Henry.) Meanwhile, as investigative journalist David de Jong has extensively reported, the Quandt family of industrialists—who control the BMW Group today—were guilty of using slave labor on a mass scale during the Nazi years, along with buying up Jewish businesses that were confiscated or forcibly sold. Like many other companies, BMW is reluctant to broach the subject nowadays.

And then there's Volkswagen. Here, it's not just that the company worked with the Nazis in one capacity or another. Rather, the company itself was *created* by the Nazi Party. It was a project of the Kraft durch Freude (KDF) organization—whose name literally means “Strength through Joy”—which coordinated things like tourism and consumer goods in order to promote the supposed success of Nazism to both domestic and international audiences. The original idea was to create a “people's car,” literally a *wagen* for the German *volk*, that every citizen could afford. (Apart, of course, from German Jews, who were banned from owning or driving cars in 1938.) The first Volkswagen was designed by Ferdinand Porsche, who had succeeded where Coco Chanel failed, taking advantage of Nazi “Aryanization” laws to force his Jewish business partner Adolf Rosenberger out of the Porsche company and gain full control for himself. The car looked very, very similar to the iconic “Beetle,” and there are photos of Hitler grinning with approval at a model, then inspecting the prototype cars when they came off the assembly line. Even the original logo incorporated a fan or rotor-like swastika around the “VW” symbol:



**Beetle's beginnings:** German Nazi leader Adolf Hitler speaks at a ceremony at the Volkswagen car factory in Fallersleben on May 26, 1938.

When World War II broke out, the plan changed. Instead of making the “people's car,” Volkswagen instead went into military production, building Jeep-like utility vehicles (*Kübelwagen*) and amphibious trucks that could float as well as drive on land (*Schwimmwagen*). And as the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum notes, the firm was complicit in the Holocaust itself:

*The company actively sought out forced labor from the concentration camp system. One VW plant engineer traveled to Auschwitz and selected 300 skilled metalworkers from the massive transports of Hungarian Jews in 1944. In addition, 650 Jewish women were transferred to assemble military munitions. The official relationship between the Nazi concentration camps and Volkswagen was cemented when the Fallersleben facility officially became a subcamp of the Neuengamme concentration camp. Overall, the Volkswagen plant contained four concentration camps and eight forced-labor camps.*

It wasn't until after the war, when Volkswagen had been seized by the British military and turned over to new management, that the first Beetles actually went into mass production. But when they did, the Nazi connection had successfully been scrubbed away, and they became associated with the hippie movement of the 1960s instead. (Talk about a reversal!) Ferdinand Porsche was jailed for two years in France, but he never stood trial for his war-era crimes and died without facing justice in 1951. Today, his heirs own the majority of the Volkswagen Group—which also includes Audi, Bentley, Lamborghini, and Škoda—and have

an estimated net worth of roughly \$20 billion. And in an echo of the past, *Der Spiegel* reports that Volkswagen is once again accused of using forced labor; this time exploiting members of the Uyghur minority at its factory in Ürümqi, China.

**S**TROLL A LITTLE FURTHER DOWN THE AISLES TO THE pharmacy, and we can find even more Nazis lurking. These ones come from the archives of the Bayer corporation, which sells billions of aspirin tablets and other medications worldwide every year. During the 1930s and '40s, Bayer was a subsidiary of I.G. Farben. You might remember that from history class as the company that manufactured Zyklon B, the chemical agent used to kill millions of people in the Nazi gas chambers. Bayer itself hadn't invented Zyklon B—that was the pesticide company Degesch, also under the I.G. Farben umbrella—but its record was almost as vile. As the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum records, its leaders “took advantage of the absence of legal and ethical constraints on medical experimentation to test its drugs on unwilling human subjects” who had been rounded up and imprisoned in the concentration camps:

*Bayer was particularly active in Auschwitz. A senior Bayer official oversaw the chemical factory in Auschwitz III (Monowitz). Most of the experiments were conducted in Birkenau in Block 20, the women's camp hospital. There, [SS physician Helmuth] Vetter and Auschwitz physicians Eduard Wirths and Friedrich Entress tested Bayer pharmaceuticals on prisoners who suffered from and often had been deliberately infected with tuberculosis, diphtheria, and other diseases.*

Today, we even have access to some of the chilling communications that were sent back and forth from Bayer employees to Nazi camp commandants, including this letter to Auschwitz overseer Rudolf Höss:

*The transport of 150 women arrived in good condition. However, we were unable to obtain conclusive results because they died during the experiments. We would kindly request that you send us another group of women to the same number and at the same price.*

One of the most important figures responsible for these atrocities was Fritz ter Meer, a Bayer executive and Nazi Party member who had helped to design the Monowitz sub-camp at Auschwitz. When the Nazis were finally defeated, ter Meer went on trial at Nuremberg—but in a truly obscene miscarriage of justice, he was given only seven years' prison time as punishment, and even that was shortened for good behavior. He was released in 1950, and in 1956 he was appointed as a supervising board chairman for Bayer, now an independent West German company after the liquidation of I.G. Farben. The company thrived under his leadership, and continues to thrive today. There have been some minor gestures of contrition from its leadership, mostly grudging. CEO Helge Wehmeier made a public apology in 1995 after he was confronted by the Holocaust survivor and author Elie

Wiesel. There was also a class-action lawsuit in 1999 from another group of Holocaust survivors, which was settled out of court with Bayer agreeing to contribute to a \$5.2 billion reparations fund. But compared to the sheer scale of the horrors the company is responsible for, even that seems too little. By all rights, the name “Bayer” should be as infamous as the names “Eichmann” or “Mengele,” and it should be impossible to operate a company under that name. All of the firm's assets, not just a token donation, should have been seized and given to the victims. But thanks to the miracle of capitalism and public relations, it hasn't ended up that way.

The darkest legacy of all, though, belongs to IBM. Today, the computer company is one of the most recognizable in the world, and an industry leader in new technologies like AI and quantum computing. But in the 1930s and '40s, things were different. Back then, IBM had a close business relationship with the Nazi state, and it helped that state carry out some of its worst crimes. There's an entire 528-page book about this period, Edwin Black's *IBM and the Holocaust*, and it makes for nightmarish reading. Black is the son of two Holocaust survivors, and his book is a meticulously—some might say obsessively—detailed account of how IBM supplied punch card data processing machines to the Nazis. Known as Hollerith machines, these were precursors to the modern computer. They were capable of processing simple facts and figures much faster than a human clerk could, and were initially used for taking census data. In the United States this was innocent enough, with IBM punch cards recording facts like people's gender, their occupation, and what language they spoke at home. But when the company expanded into the German market, things became more sinister. In 1933, the Nazi government hired IBM to help it conduct a national census, and it cared about one question more than any other—whether or not its citizens were Jewish:

*“Be Aware!” reminded huge block-lettered signs facing each cluster of data entry clerks. Instructions were made clear and simple. Column 22 RELIGION was to be punched at hole 1 for Protestant, hole 2 for Catholic, or hole 3 for Jew. Columns 23 and 24 NATIONALITY were to be coded in row 10 for Polish speakers. [...] When Jews were discovered within the population, a special “Jewish counting card” recorded the place of birth. These Jewish counting cards were processed separately.*

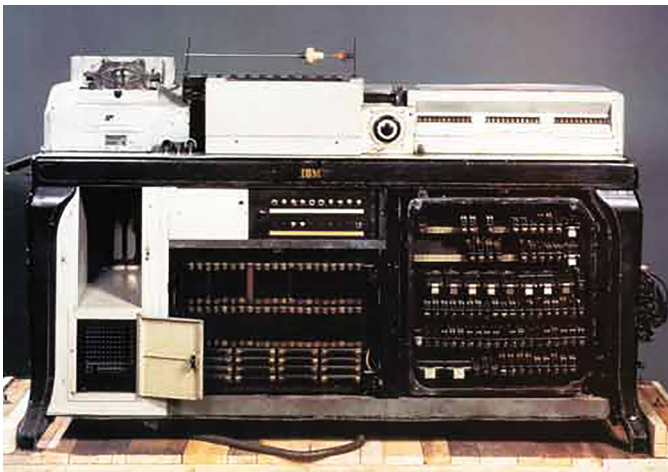
It was this mechanized record-keeping, Black argues, that allowed the Nazis to accurately estimate where German Jews lived, and to compile lists of “targets for confiscation, arrest, imprisonment, and ultimately expulsion.”

Later, in the concentration camps, the Hollerith machines were again used to keep track of millions of prisoners. Consulting archival documents, Black lays out the numerical code that classified each camp: 001 for Auschwitz, 002 for Buchenwald, 003 for Dachau, and so on. There were also sixteen different categories of victim: 1 for political prisoners, 2 for Jehovah's Witnesses (who were singled out for their pacifism and refusal to swear oaths to Hitler), 3 for LGBTQ prisoners, 8 for Jewish prisoners, 12 for ethnic Romani, etc. Together, all of these

punched-out digits formed a serial number, which in some cases was identical to the one tattooed on prisoners' forearms. The extent of the computing operation was massive:

*In some camps, such as Dachau and Storkow, as many as two dozen IBM sorters, tabulators, and printers were installed. Other facilities operated punches only and submitted their cards to central locations such as Mauthausen or Berlin. [...] Without IBM's machinery, continuing upkeep and service, as well as the supply of punch cards, whether located on-site or off-site, Hitler's camps could never have managed the numbers they did.*

The phrase “continuing upkeep and service” reveals a horrible truth. IBM did not actually *sell* its machines to the Nazis. Rather, they pursued a business model that was much more efficient and profitable from a capitalist standpoint. They *leased* the machines, and sent their own IBM technicians to make repairs and adjustments when they were needed, “even when [the] site was in or near a concentration camp.” IBM was also the only source for new punch cards, which had to be custom-made by the million.



IBM's Hollerith Machine

As Black writes, it's unclear how much the company's leaders understood about the exact ways their technology was being used. Many records have been lost or destroyed, and machines were often moved “with or without IBM's knowledge” from one location to another. But by the early 1940s, it was clear that the Nazis were pursuing a program of racial extermination everywhere they went. That didn't stop IBM from doing business with them, or even give it pause. In fact, CEO Thomas Watson personally ordered the opening of “new subsidiaries established in conquered territories in cadence with Nazi invasions,” and IBM's New York leadership sought “special bureaucratic exemptions [...] to continue or expand business dealings throughout occupied Europe.” Like Henry Ford, Watson received a German Eagle medal from Hitler in 1937. Like so many wealthy businessmen,

he faced no real consequence for IBM's dealings with the Nazis after the war. Today, the company makes roughly \$62 billion a year, and its AI model Watson is named after the former CEO. At Brown University, students raised a petition to take Watson's name off the Center for Information Technology in 2021—but their request was unanimously denied.

**S**O WHY DOES ALL THIS MATTER TODAY, SO LONG AFTER the fact? In part, it matters because justice does not come with an expiration date, and there is still a historic debt owed to the victims of Nazi violence and their descendants. Most of the individual capitalists who collaborated with the Nazis are long dead, but the companies they built are alive and well—and as David de Jong points out, their tainted fortunes have been passed down to their heirs. To a large extent, they *got away with it*, and that's unacceptable.

There is a possible remedy that's worth looking into, both for the case of Nazi collaborators and many others where corporations knowingly harm people. It's called the “corporate death penalty,” or the less dramatic term “judicial dissolution.” It's an extension of the British legal doctrine of corporate manslaughter, which allows companies to be held criminally liable for causing people's deaths in much the same way people are. The corporate death penalty takes the logic a step further, holding that if corporations are legally “people”—the way Mitt Romney and the Supreme Court keep telling us they are—then it should also be possible for them to be “executed,” or forced out of existence. One version of the theory, proposed by Joshua M. Pearce in the journal *Social Sciences*, would “execute” any corporation that kills more people than it employs, like tobacco and coal companies. Another paper in the *Journal of Management Inquiry* proposes the chopping block for corporations that “achieve goals via corruption, cause permanent environmental damage, cause physical pain and death, and violate basic human rights.” The author of that version, John F. Hulpke, even uses Volkswagen as an example because of the 2015 scandal where it systematically lied about its vehicles' carbon emissions. Really, the company's use of concentration camp labor seems like ample grounds too. The same isn't necessarily true for every company we've examined here. Chanel, for instance, had a less direct relationship to the Nazis and is actually owned by the Wertheimer family—Coco Chanel's intended victims—today. It's probably fine for it to keep existing, even if the name is a little distasteful. But we should think seriously about “executing” IBM and Bayer for what they've done, and even Coca-Cola is on thin ice.

In a wider sense, though, it's important to understand this history because of what it teaches us about capitalism—the economic system we all, unfortunately, still live under. The lesson is twofold. First, knowing about the links between the Nazis and major international corporations makes it clear that the narrative about fascism being somehow “left-wing” or “socialist” is laughable nonsense. This shouldn't even need to be said, but thanks to right-wing propagandists like Dinesh D'Souza (who wrote a book purporting to show “the Nazi roots of the American left” in 2017), the myth is still around. It basically holds that because

“Nazi” is short for “National Socialist,” and Hitler occasionally named “the bourgeoisie” as one of the many groups he hated, the Nazis were therefore actual socialists, and socialism is Nazism. But as we’ve seen, this is silly. When they were in power, Hitler and the Nazis made no real attempt to eliminate capitalist companies. Instead, they made lucrative deals with them for the most vital parts of their war machine, from Hugo Boss uniforms to Bayer and I.G. Farben chemicals. (They also relied heavily on oil refineries built for them by the Koch family of U.S. conservative fame, and on the Krupp steel company. The latter is still around under the name ThyssenKrupp, and is one of ten companies that student protesters want Cornell University to divest itself from because it supplies weapons for the Israeli atrocities in Gaza. Not that there are any parallels to be drawn *there*, or anything.) The whole Nazi state was powered by private contractors from top to bottom. It was the workers and their organizations who got suppressed, on *behalf* of the capitalists. In every meaningful sense of the word, the Nazis practiced capitalism. It was capitalism in the context of a military dictatorship, sure, but capitalism nonetheless.

More fundamental, though, is the opposite lesson. Not only was there nothing anti-capitalist about the Nazis, but there is nothing anti-Nazi about capitalism. In other words, capitalism has no morality or humanity at its core. If selling poison gas to Hitler is what’s most profitable, that’s what capitalist firms will do. Importantly, this isn’t a case of a few “bad apples” within capitalism; it’s not just that some companies sometimes behave unethically. Rather, the structure of capitalism and its competitive markets ensures that they will. Suppose, for example, that the leaders of Coca-Cola had done the noble thing and refused to do

business with Germany once the Nuremberg Laws were passed. Another firm would doubtless have stepped into the gap. Coca-Cola would have lost out financially, and the other, less moral company would have been rewarded. Capitalism always rewards vice and punishes virtue. This pattern repeats throughout history, whether it’s fossil fuels destroying the climate, AR-15 rifles slaughtering civilians in mass shootings, addictive nicotine products being marketed toward children, or any other horror that results in healthy profits for its perpetrators. In Nazi Germany, people with money had a demand for drinks—and for steel, and for Zyklon B. And so, the market dictated there would be a supply.

In fact, the most honest of the capitalists say outright that this is how things should work. Milton Friedman, one of the high priests of 20th-century libertarianism, espoused something called “shareholder primacy”—the idea that “the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits,” and nothing else. Friedman was a monster in many ways, and “shareholder primacy” is a terrible way to think about the responsibilities of companies to the public. But he was right in the sense that corporations really do behave like they have no other responsibility except to make money. (And in the rare cases when they are held responsible for their unethical acts, it’s often in the form of a fine, which they absorb as the cost of doing business rather than changing their ways.)

In this light, even the “corporate death penalty” doesn’t go far enough. If it were implemented today, new unethical companies would pop up just as soon as the old ones were abolished. To really bring the harm to an end, we need to uproot the system itself. Capitalists worked hand in hand with the Nazis yesterday, and they can’t be trusted to run the world today. ✚

**The following is an actual serious legal notice we are mandated to publish annually by the United States Postal Service. It is extremely boring and we do not recommend anyone read it unless they are an employee of the United States Postal Service and even then only do it if you absolutely must. We apologize for this unfortunate use of space.**

**1. PUBLICATION TITLE:** Current Affairs Magazine **2. PUBLICATION NUMBER:** 021-590 **3. FILING DATE:** 9/23/2024  
**4. ISSUE FREQUENCY:** Bi-monthly **5. NUMBER OF ISSUES PUBLISHED ANNUALLY:** 6 **6. ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION PRICE:** \$59.00 **7. COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF KNOWN OFFICE OF PUBLICATION:** 300 Lafayette Street, #210, New Orleans, LA 70130 **8. COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF HEADQUARTERS:** 300 Lafayette Street, #210, New Orleans, LA 70130 **9. FULL NAMES AND MAILING ADDRESSES OF PUBLISHER, EDITOR AND MANAGING EDITOR:** Publisher: Nathan J Robinson, 300 Lafayette Street, New Orleans, LA 70130; Editor: Nathan J Robinson, 300 Lafayette Street, New Orleans, LA 70130; Managing Editor: Lily Sanchez, 300 Lafayette Street, New Orleans, LA 70130 **10. OWNER:** Current Affairs Inc, 300 Lafayette Street, New Orleans, LA 70130 **11. KNOWN BONDHOLDERS ETC** None **12. TAX STATUS:** Has not changed in the previous 12 months **13. PUBLICATION TITLE:** Current Affairs Magazine **14. ISSUE DATE FOR CIRCULATION DATA BELOW:** November 2021 **15. EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION:** Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months a. Total number of copies 3260 b. Paid circulation by Mail: 1. Mailed outside-county paid subscription stated on PS Form 3541:2587. 2. Mailed in-county paid subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541: 0. 3. Paid Distribution outside the mails including sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales and other paid distribution outside USPS: 350. 4. Paid Distribution by other classes of mail through the USPS: 0 c. Total Paid Distribution: 2937. d. Free or Nominal rate Outside-county copies: 0.e. Total free or nominal rate distribution: 14. f. Total distribution: 2951. g. Copies not distributed: 309. h. Total: 3260. i. Percent Paid: 99.53%. Number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date a. Total number of copies 2970 b. Paid Circulation: 1. Mailed outside-county Paid subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541: 2417. 2. Mailed in-County paid subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541: 0. 3. Paid Distribution outside the Mails: 350. 4. Paid Distribution by other classes of mail: 0 c. Total Paid Distribution: 2876 d. Free or nominal rate Outside-county copies: 0. e. Total free or nominal rate distribution: 11. f. total distribution: 2887. g. Copies not distributed: 83. h. Total: 2970. i. Percent paid: 99.62%

# CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

*In our ever-changing world, it can be tough to keep up with the latest fashion trends. From cheetah print leotards to wooden clogs, what you wear says a lot about you, and in today's political climate it's more important than ever to look your best. In the immortal words of ZZ Top, "every girl crazy 'bout a sharp dressed man." Feeling lost? Don't worry! Our fashion editors have you covered! Here's our guide to the hottest looks right now.*

by Aidan Yetman-Michaelson

Prosthetic Klingon makeup may be time consuming, but the effort is worth it. Nothing says "Heghlu'meH QaQ jajvam" like a man who cares about how he looks.

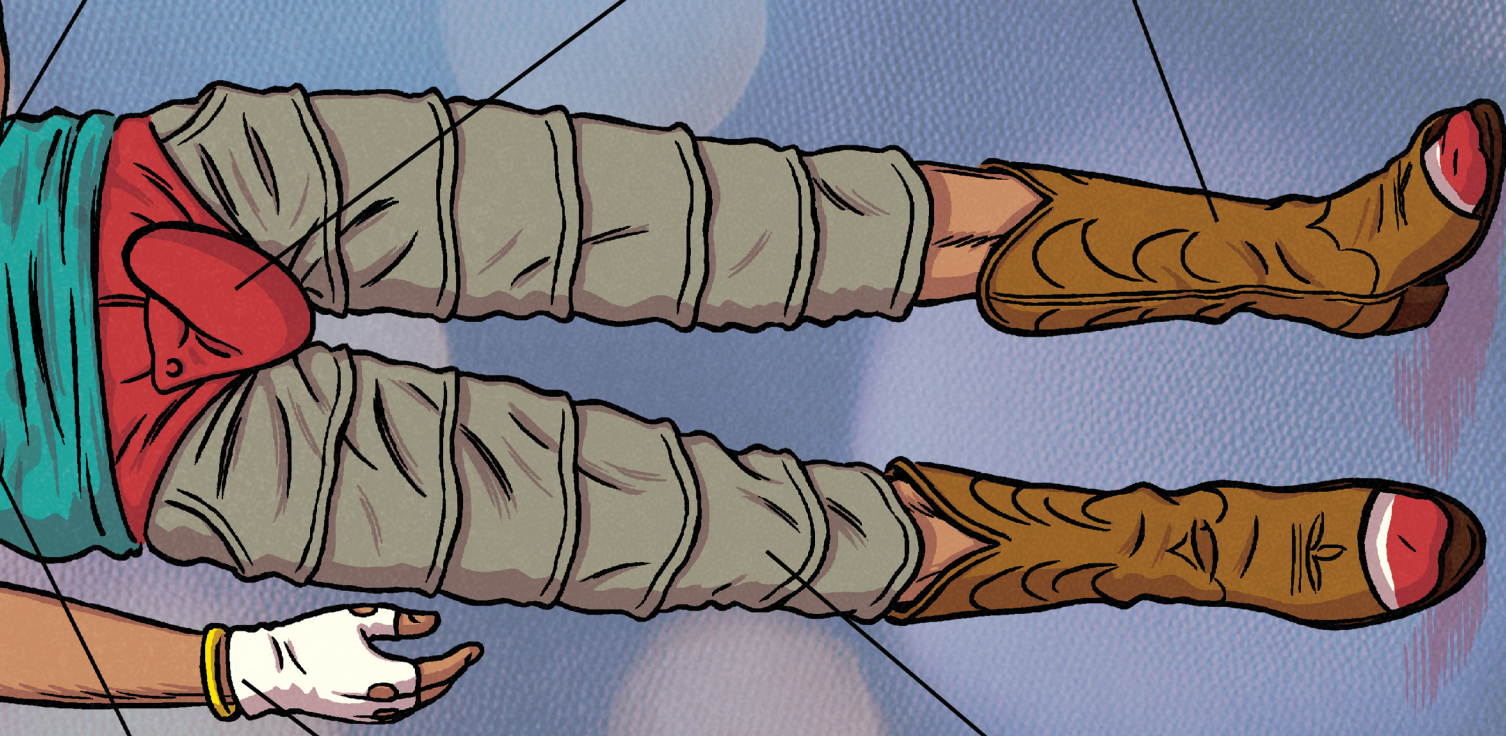
Wearing a shark tooth necklace is a surefire way to add an air of mystery to any outfit. Did you claim it as a trophy after barehand wrestling a great white to the death or did your grandma bring it back for you after her winter trip to Margaritaville? Don't worry; your secret's safe with us!

Who doesn't love to be the life of the party? Wearing a party hat shows you're a fun-loving spirit with natural charisma—at any occasion!

Airpods are an excellent status symbol, and they show you're into tech! However, with their small size they can get lost rather easily. A stylish chain fixes this problem and adds a bit of bling.

Too hot out to wear a cape but too cold not to? A capelet should do the trick!





A bong water-stained Rick and Morty shirt not only shows you're an intellectual, but also masks the smell of your B.O.!

Remember those gloves Ryan Gosling wore in the movie *Drive*? Man, he looked so cool! You could totally pull those off!

A fanciful codpiece conveys respect and attention to historicity. Some modern versions are even equipped with tearaway snaps for emergencies.

Cowboy boots are an iconic symbol of the American spirit, but their pointy toes can be a bit intimidating. We recommend cutting them off. As an added bonus, this modification shows off your socks, allowing for a bit of personal flair!

We were all saddened when Lance Armstrong had his fall from grace, but that doesn't mean that the message debossed on his Livestrong bracelets was a bad one. We should be living strong! Bring these back! Be the change!

Zip-off pants may be practical, but they only offer so many options. A set of these bad boys with zippable sections every four inches allows you to go from pants to capris to short shorts in mere minutes!



# OPERA

## IS FOR EVERYONE

BY ANNIE LEVIN

I CAN'T REMEMBER EXACTLY WHEN I GOT BIT BY THE OPERA bug, but it might have been during Act II of Puccini's *Tosca*. It was the moment after the titular soprano witnesses the villain, Scarpia, torture her lover Cavaradossi. We hear his screams offstage. Tosca agrees to give herself to Scarpia to spare her lover's life. But there's a twist: rather than be raped by Scarpia, she declares, "this is Tosca's kiss!" and stabs him. I was so shocked by this staged murder that I gasped. I knew the plot of *Tosca* perfectly well before going into the show and yet somehow I was still surprised. It was the feeling that one is supposed to have during well performed Shakespearean tragedies—when the audience is so locked into the drama that the familiar plot twists appear fresh and spontaneous. But this had never happened to me before. Gasping in shock at theatre is pretty uncharacteristic of me. The characters in *Tosca* are not especially relatable. They are emotional extremists in high 19th century Romantic style. Cavaradossi is ultimately killed, and Tosca, devastated by his death, cries "Scarpia, we meet before God!" before throwing herself off a rooftop. There is no question of social realism. Nothing about what I was seeing reflected my lived reality. I generally don't gasp in shock unless I see a minivan narrowly avoid collision with a three-year-old. Surely my irony-pilled, ferociously critical modern mind couldn't have such an outsized response to such grand, over-the-top artifice. This is a work that is not merely acted but sung and ornamented in the 1001 affectations of an ancient tradition. And yet, I did. Reader, I gasped.

Perhaps it was a matter of all that came before Act II of *Tosca*. The composer Wagner described his ideal opera as a "total work

of art" (*gesamtkunstwerk* in German), meaning an artwork that brings together all the arts into a single masterwork: music, dance, drama, literature, and visual art, all combined and synthesized. This is true of much musical drama globally, such as Chinese Xiqu, Indian Kathakali, or Japanese Noh theater. Western opera, however, unique in most western classical arts, takes each artform to sensuous extremes. An artwork that uses all the arts, especially in lush Romantic operas like Puccini's, can be like a circus of sensation. In the production of *Tosca* I saw, the rapturous music was accompanied by a religious processional, with dozens of elaborately costumed performers, including an entire children's chorus. The processional has no practical purpose in the plot except to create a vibe. It takes place outside a gilded baroque basilica which had been built on stage merely for Act I and then taken apart during intermission by a team of carpenters to create the palatial room in which Tosca will murder Scarpia.

I could also pinpoint Act I Scene III of Philip Glass's *Akhnaten* as the moment when opera wormed itself inside me and stayed there. Akhnaten was an Egyptian pharaoh who temporarily transformed the state religion from polytheism to monotheism during the 14th century BC. I was hooked in Glass's 1983 opera when Akhnaten, clothed in robes decorated in gilded baby skulls, praises the divine creator, in ancient Egyptian, in a high clarion voice. Akhnaten contains two of my favorite operatic voice parts: countertenor and contralto. A countertenor is the highest male voice and a contralto the lowest female voice. At their extreme ends, the male countertenor can sing high as a soprano and the contralto as low as a bass. These composite voices, countertenor and contralto,

which sound neither male nor female but both simultaneously, are so otherworldly in *Akhmaten* as to sound supernatural. As they sang, to the accompaniment of tubular bells and pulsing violas, I fell into a wakeful trance.

Between the glitter, the ancient languages, the gender mixing, and the hauntingly good music, the glam goth girl who lives in my heart squealed in pleasure. *Akhmaten* also left me with a feeling of wholeness and spiritual fulfillment. As I watched, something inside me shifted, a membrane disintegrated, and I became immersed, however temporarily, in a new world of sensation. There is an immersive and psychotropic quality to great opera. During *Akhmaten*'s intermissions the colors of the world seemed brighter, and the sound of my friends' voices was like music. All that which had seemed alien was now intimate. We couldn't stop laughing. I felt tingly all over and ecstatic, like the pleasure centers of my brain were being engaged by foreign chemicals. The opera produced sensations similar to those from MDMA or LSD. I was high on Philip Glass.

**M**Y INTEREST IN OPERA AS a writer began not with any particular production, however, but with a conversation with a friend about health insurance. The friend happened to be an operatic baritone. I was writing about labor unions in the performing arts at the time and my friend mentioned that opera singers, even when they perform as soloists at prestigious opera houses, sometimes don't have health insurance. Unlike workers in unions like Actors' Equity or the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), a singer employed in a unionized opera house may not actually have health insurance. Through an unusual and circuitous path this conversation brought me towards writing first about labor and social change in opera, and ultimately to writing about operas themselves.

It was by seeing operas not just as works of art but predominantly as work that I truly began to enjoy and understand them. When you see grand opera, you're seeing a group of people who can do something only a scarce handful of people in the world can do. Operatic voices can take over a decade to blossom and sometimes don't mature until a singer is middle aged. Opera singers traditionally do not use microphones, and the sound of their voices filling a 3,800-seat theater like The Metropolitan Opera is literally one of the loudest sounds a human voice can make without screaming. Through the shape of the mouth, the muscles in the diaphragm, the way singers move air through their chest and lungs and mouth, they transform oxygen into some of the most beautiful and most difficult to perform music that exists. There is an unbelievable amount of skill, to say nothing of

physical strength, required to transform a frail human body into a finely configured wind instrument. Attention is paid in practice to single phrases of music (that is the equivalent of a phrase or a sentence in writing) which are to be shaped differently depending on the language you are singing in, the specific tradition and era of the opera, the character's emotional state in that moment of the performance, the singer's own voice, the director's instructions, the composer's intentions, and the expectations of an audience who has heard this particular phrase pronounced in an arbitrarily specific way at that opera house for the last generation.

Adding intense pressure to the performers is the fact that opera runs tend to be short. Performers rehearse for a few weeks, perform at most maybe 10 times, and then are off to another gig.

The performers generally all need to know their roles before rehearsals even start. A long run of a single production at the Met is under 20 shows. Compared to a popular Broadway show that runs hundreds of times in a year, seeing an opera can feel like catching a rainbow in a jar. Traditional grand opera can be wildly complex. The cast of performers can consist of principal roles, a forty-person chorus, a 100-piece orchestra, supernumeraries (non-singing actors in small parts), and sometimes dancers and occasionally live animals. As a result, many performances come with their surprises. The famous arias, the renowned songs that the operas are known for, are also famously hard to sing. Singers sometimes nail the iconic phrase and sometimes they don't, and it depends entirely on which night you attend one of a handful of performances with that cast member. It's what makes opera such damnably hard work for performers and such a thrilling experience for the audience.

Since these thrills are also not easily transferable to a screen, live broadcasts do not remotely approach the real thing. The sheer physicality of opera is incredibly important to its understanding and enjoyment. You want to physically be in the room with the singer as they fill the enormous space with their naked voice. You want to feel the sound reverberat-

ing on your skin, feel the way it travels across your body after it's left the singer's body, raising the hairs on your arms. When you are physically in the room when the performance takes place, you also become a part of its history and traditions. As you share the same air as the singers on stage and become part of an opera audience, you have your part and costume, too, and some opera fans take their roles very seriously.

It is not only permissible to dress fancifully at a grand opera house, it is especially encouraged. Given the splendor of your surroundings—lush carpets and sculpted chandeliers, ushers in opera cloaks carrying handbells to call the audience to their seats—you may feel inclined to fit in. The Metropolitan Opera can be a high



Opera poster for "Tosca" (1899)

fashion carnival: I've seen opera gloves, opera capes, crushed velvet ball gowns, fuchsia tuxedo jackets brocaded in black feathers, every kind of Victorian men's facial hair, and the inevitable couture gowns that cost twice what I make in a month. At intermission you can watch this fashionable set waiting in line at the concession stand with opera bros (yes, they exist—I'm pretty sure they're singers themselves) in football jerseys. Like sports fans, opera aficionados tend to know a lot about their subject. They are constantly doing comparisons to past productions and past performances by this dramatic soprano or that Wagnerian baritone. Like sports fans they watch a career unfold over years and chart their rise from rookie young artist to headlining star. When a singer snags that famous high note, the audience cheers like they've just watched a slam dunk. Opera buffs, like serious sports fans, are also famously merciless. Commentary is suffused with vicious takedowns. Some critics eviscerate a performer, drilling down into errors perceived in single phrases of a song, sometimes single words or even vowels. (And we wonder why opera singers are known to be such prickly divas.)

In my experience of going to the opera and speaking with opera lovers, I've found that most people who go to the opera do so because they enjoy opera and not because they are high society operators mingling among Astors and Rockefellers. But opera nevertheless has a reputation as an antiquated pastime for rich people, and for good reason. A major hurdle to becoming an opera aficionado is money. While anyone can look up operatic performances on YouTube, opera houses are not so accessible. Everything from living in a city with enough wealth to have a grand opera house, to buying \$200 tickets, to having that outfit snazzy enough to fit in with the Met set, presents a barrier to entry. We also think of opera as a corny pastime for old white rich people because they're the ones donating money to opera houses. In the U.S., government arts funding is a minuscule fraction of what it is in similarly wealthy, developed nations. Since millions of dollars are often required to put on grand opera, places like the Met turn to a donor base of overwhelmingly wealthy people. This donor base partially accounts for why many grand opera houses are so stuck in the past, putting on few new works, if any, and generally performing the same 20-40 operas over and over again.

Granted, those 20-40 operas are mostly pretty great, and being stuck in the past can sometimes be a delightful experience. We glory in the traditional skill of the musicians, the handcrafted sets and costumes, the conductors in their tailcoats, and the roses flung at the feet of the grand diva as she takes her final bow. At other times operatic nostalgia is utterly repugnant. On the Met's bottommost level generations of singers are memorialized in a wall of black-and-white photos: on close inspection, a portion of these turn out to be a rogue's gallery of grinning white people in appropriate and racist costumes. Nineteenth-century Romantic opera in particular is fraught with orientalism and Western fantasies of the exotic east. Opera's racist leanings are hardly buried in the infamous past either. Blackface was used continuously at the Met until 2015 when a public outcry over a production of Verdi's *Otello* finally put an end to the practice.

Racism in opera isn't limited to backwards costuming choices either. Wagner's German nationalist opera, *Die Meistersinger von*

*Nürnberg*, was performed at the Met last in 2021. It includes the humiliation of a Jewish caricature as well as a concluding number that defends the purity of German art against toxic foreign influence. The Met's decades-old production, which includes a set of Disnified medieval Nuremberg, and beautiful Mädchen in dirndls and braids, has all the historic awareness of a Bing Crosby musical.

The Metropolitan Opera was founded in 1883, and its first donors were Rockefellers, Morgans, Vanderbilts, and other robber baron families grown monstrously wealthy from oil, railroads, and banking in the Gilded Age. To this day, the decadent dazzle of that era seeps through at the Met, despite a change in location and the passing of over a century. When the Met opens its season in September, the orchestra plays the "Star-Spangled Banner," and the entire audience stands up and sings along. It's just like at a ball game, except the audience is in evening wear and they're accompanied by one of the best orchestras in the world. In this seat of American wealth and power, the imperialist gleam shines through clearly. When I witnessed the anthem sung in 2022, my opera buddy and I didn't stand for the anthem (reader, I admit it, we giggled). The ballgowned lady beside us shouted at us to show some respect. To my horror and delight, my friend told her to shut up, and she did. The opera was Cherubini's *Medea*. After our encounter we sat uncomfortably beside our heckler for the next several hours, watching the lead soprano plot the slaughter of her family in song. I felt like a poor relation in an Edith Wharton novel: I was in another country whose traditions and taboos I didn't know. This encounter felt not just out of place in New York City, where people turn minding their own business into an artform, but also out of time. It felt like a clash not merely of cultures but of eras.

This ingrained conservatism is at odds with the steps opera houses have taken, especially post-pandemic, to maintain their relevance. Grand opera houses like the Met try to at least appear progressive these days, from performing new operas by Black and Latin American composers, to placing more diverse singers in leading roles. While diversity and inclusion in repertoire is an improvement over the recent past, given that opera's funding model will not change anytime soon, the likelihood of the industry getting a serious ethical makeover is small. Tales of sexual predation, grooming, and manipulation are to be found throughout the operatic world. (Things don't look much better behind the scenes, either.) As in theater and publishing and Hollywood and academia and any field where only a handful of players can make it big or even make a living, the road to success is narrow and plagued with predation. While this dynamic is present across the arts, it is especially palpable in opera, where the stars are sometimes literally costumed in cloth of gold and perform as kings and knights and gods.

At this moment the opera world appears to be inching towards a precipice: its donor base is shrinking and dying. According to Peter Gelb, the Met's General Manager, today's super wealthy are less interested in funding the arts. As a result, the Met, the wealthiest performing arts institution in the country, had to reach into its endowment in 2022 and 2024 to make payroll. The Washington Opera and Los Angeles Opera have experienced similar shortfalls and responded by cutting back programming. Smaller opera houses without huge endowments to fall back on in crises have

closed completely. You might not be bothered by the closure of places like the Syracuse Opera House, but for singers, especially young ones, the collapse of the already small and faltering regional opera houses means that they have nowhere to learn roles and become seasoned artists. Such opportunities were few enough to begin with, and now they've almost disappeared. Without the ability to make money, artists drop out of the field and find other work. As a result, more and more singers must be independently wealthy enough to afford to learn their craft through competitions and predatory pay-to-sing young artist programs. This means that the pool of singers will continue to shrink and, much like opera's donor base, will remain overwhelmingly white and well-to-do.

**B**UT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THAT WAY. IN AUSTRIA AND Germany, classical music is well-funded and more accessible. On a trip to Vienna in my early 20s—occurring while I fought with a musician friend who had declared that “opera combines bad theater with worse music”—I went to the opera every night, sometimes twice a day. This is possible in Vienna, where there are multiple government supported opera houses and, back in 2004, you could get standing room tickets at the Vienna State Opera for 2 euros (today they're a whopping 13 euros, less than the price of a movie ticket). The singers at these houses also have more stable employment and better pay than their equivalents in the United States. I've heard American singers lament that the U.S. loses some of its greatest singers to “fest” contracts in which a singer is fixed to a single ensemble in Germany, Austria, or Switzerland for a period of years.

As we await a government arts funding windfall, there are some good tidings on the horizon for opera. Opera Philadelphia is setting tickets at a mere \$11 for any seat for its entire 2024-2025

season. With opera audience shrinking, just getting people in the door is an accomplishment. While you'd probably hesitate to throw down \$200 on a ticket to some antique artform you're not sure you even like, for \$11 you might give it a shot. In the meantime, the Met is attempting in fits and starts to bring opera into the 21st century with more new works, alongside their traditional offerings. Friends of mine in New York City Democratic Socialists of America, after getting arrested together at a Gaza ceasefire rally in New York City last year, memorialized the occasion by going as a cohort to see Anthony Davis's 1986 opera, *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, performed for the first time at the Met.

While some ultrarich people may now be abandoning arts institutions, that doesn't mean that all is lost for opera. I believe that opera is not merely pleasurable but necessary, and keeping it alive means transforming institutions like the Met into palaces of the people: places where the productions are accessible to anyone in need of the succor and catharsis that great opera can provide. This doesn't mean we should all throw money at already wealthy institutions with incoherent and outdated industrial nonprofit funding models. But just as we have progressive think tanks coming up with methods of costing out Medicare for All and a Green New Deal, we can simultaneously be thinking about how we will structure our arts institutions of the future. While we labor in a political doldrums between center right neoliberalism and outright fascism and wait for the tides of history to present the left with an opening, it's time we start thinking about making an impact through culture. This might begin by drawing back the curtain on high culture and discovering how we can bring it down to earth, not as an extravagant luxury but as a birthright for every living human. ♣

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# FORGET THE ALAMO

BY CIARA MOLONEY

**J**OHN SAYLES HAS ONE OF THE MOST BIFURCATED careers in Hollywood. As a screenwriter and script doctor, he's turned his hand to horror, action, and space opera, but largely as a means to fund independent films that he can write and direct on his own terms. He established his *modus operandi* early: in 1980, he used the money he'd earned writing scripts for Roger Corman-produced cheapo B movies to fund his own independent film, *Return of the Secaucus 7*, a drama about 1960s college activist friends reuniting years later at a very different point in their lives and in American history.

Sayles's 1996 film *Lone Star* is one of his independents, but it's got traces of genre movie in its DNA. I instinctively reach to call it a western, but it's more like the aftermath of one. Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) is the sheriff of a small town in Texas on the U.S.-Mexico border who has been elected almost entirely because his late father, Buddy Deeds (played in flashbacks by Matthew McConaughey), was sheriff before him. For most of the town, Buddy is a beloved figure who has already entered into myth. The local courthouse is being renamed in his honor, and apart from a smattering of detractors citing Buddy's corruption, the renaming seems to have cross-community support. This is a diverse town, one in which Anglos—white people—are now outnumbered collectively by Tejano (Mexican), Black, and Native inhabitants. They all buy into the folktale of Buddy Deeds—it

might be the only thing they agree on. But it can be tweaked just a little for one's own purposes: both racists and people of color imagine him as their ally.

But Sam doesn't buy in. He resents his father not just for the shadow he casts but for forcing him apart from his high school sweetheart Pilar (Elizabeth Peña), who now works as a schoolteacher and gets scolded at school board meetings for teaching more than one way of remembering the Alamo. Even after not seeing each other for all these years, Sam and Pilar are drawn to each other as if their love were written in the stars. Their separation is, you assume, what gives Sam the ability to see beyond the heroic image of Buddy Deeds. And when a skeleton is discovered on an old army shooting range, decades old and accompanied by a Freemason ring and a sheriff's badge, Sam investigates when everyone around him seems to want it left alone.

The foundation of the Buddy Deeds myth is a story that Mayor Hollis (Clifton James) tells and retells: one night in 1957, Buddy stood up to then-sheriff Charlie Wade, a corrupt and violent man played by Kris Kristofferson with the brazen, blood-chilling coldness of one who knows himself to be untouchable. After Buddy stood up to him, Charlie Wade disappeared. He just left, so the story goes, with money from the public coffers in his back pocket. But when Sam discovers that the skeleton is Wade's, he's pretty sure his father murdered him. He just has to prove it.



Elizabeth Peña and Chris Cooper in "Lone Star"

**Y**OU EXPECT THAT THE FILM WILL DECONSTRUCT THE story of Buddy being a great hero, revealing his true villainy. And for a while, it does play out that way. An opponent of the courthouse renaming says that Buddy manipulated planning laws to increase the value of his property, but more revealing than criticism is the praise: a bartender says that Buddy would have gotten the Black couple sitting in his bar to move along. But the deconstruction of the myth of Buddy Deeds soon doubles over itself, deconstructing Buddy as a villain, too: Sam has built up a narrative around Buddy just like the townspeople have, but from another side. The truth of him—of this town, of history, of Texas, of America—is so much messier and more complicated and more painful than a black-and-white distinction could account for. But so many people attempt to force those distinctions anyway. That's what the border is there for: this unnatural dividing line drawn on a map just to make people criminals for crossing it.

"One of the things that *Lone Star* is about, to me, is the way in which American culture has always, always been many cultures. As in many places, the dominant culture gets to write the history," John Sayles said in an interview in 1996. "The Mexican border wasn't even closed until about 1930. Mexicans could come into the United States and work and go back and there was no border patrol." He goes on, "One of the reasons I was interested in setting this movie on the border is that here is this arbitrary, artificial line."

*Lone Star* captures the basic absurdity of the Texas-Mexico border and its militarization by destabilizing the ahistorical assumption that Spanish speakers in the U.S. are immigrants, or even descended from immigrants. Their community has existed on both sides of the present-day border long before there was such a thing as Texas. But the longer the border exists, the more engrained it becomes in how communities and cultures imagine themselves: we see Pilar's mother as a slip of a girl cross the Rio Grande, and decades later, we see her complain about the "wet-backs" working at her restaurant.

The unearthing of Buddy Deeds is the narrative throughline of *Lone Star*, but it's an ensemble movie in which even one-scene actors feel like they're the protagonist of their own story. It would seem sprawling if it wasn't all so tangled together: in a town this

small, even the most apparently disparate lives are intimately entwined. The newly stationed colonel at the army base is the estranged son of the Black bar owner who covers his walls with images of Black and Native cowboys. It's not a melting pot, but God, it could be. Not when Charlie Wade was sheriff; he was an open, violent white supremacist who shot people of color at traffic stops. And not when Buddy Deeds was sheriff, either: he exploited, even reinforced, de facto racial segregation to serve his own interests, even if he did it in a genial fashion that left most people thinking of him as their ally.

You expect Sam to expose Buddy as a murderer. But, if I may spoil the final act twist, what should be his most damning sin is peeled away to reveal a covert nobility. But it doesn't feel like truth and beauty and goodness cutting through the horror around it—it's a gut punch. We've seen Mayor Hollis in flashbacks as sheriff's deputy, clearly uncomfortable with Charlie Wade's way of doing things but not so much as to say a word about it. But when Wade was about to murder Otis, the Black bar owner, Hollis shot Wade before he could. That's when Buddy arrived. The three of them cooked up the story about Wade leaving town, the story that the legend of Buddy Deeds was built on. It's a reveal that calls to mind the end of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." But the characters must live with the consequences of the truth regardless of whatever legends you print.



Kris Kristofferson in "Lone Star"

**H**ERE'S THE TRUTH THAT SAM AND PILAR HAVE TO live with, can't ever unknow: during Sam's investigation, he finds out that Buddy was Pilar's father, too. This decades-long cosmic pull between them isn't that of soulmates, it's that of siblings. Their parents had good reasons to keep them apart, even though they messed it all up worse. Sam and Pilar still want to be together, despite it all—"Forget the Alamo," Pilar says. But there is no real forgetting. We are doomed to live in the context of history, unable to pick and choose what makes up the truth—unless, like Buddy Deeds, we transcend to become stories. ✦

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# WHEN HEALTHCARE IS A *BLUDGEON*

BY LILY SÁNCHEZ

**I**N 1966, THE REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. SAID AT A conference of healthcare activists that “Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.” If this is true in the United States in general, it is even more true inside the criminal punishment system, where “healthcare” as you and I might conceive of it—a healing art and science, the aim of which is to improve people’s health and longevity and reduce pain, suffering, and illness—does not exist. Much like the healthcare system for non-incarcerated Americans, “prison healthcare” is not a single entity, as it varies by state and facility. But one thing we can be certain of is that healthcare in jails and prisons has always been grossly inadequate. It has always functioned as a total subversion of what healthcare is supposed to be.

Along with the isolation, degradation, violence, and abuse that are routine parts of imprisonment, people are subjected not just to shockingly bad “healthcare”—more often medical *neglect* than care—but to healthcare as a bludgeon. In other words, “prison healthcare” might be thought of as simply another form of punishment, torture even. Prisoners requesting care are often accused of faking their symptoms for potential gain (“malingering”) or of drug seeking. Women prisoners complaining of cold symptoms have ended up getting unnecessary pelvic examinations, which highlights the fact that, for women, “sexual abuse is often frequently linked to medical practices.” Doctors have carried out coercive medical research studies on prisoners who were desperate to earn money or get medical attention. Doctors have force-fed hunger-striking prisoners, an act widely considered a violation of medical ethics. And the ultimate punishment—the death penalty, a fate that has been inflicted upon 1,354 people since 1976—is administered by medical means: most commonly, lethal injection, or, more recently, nitrogen gas, a new method considered by veterinarians to be too barbaric for the euthanasia of animals. Leave it to the state of Alabama, whose prison system is one of the deadliest in the country, to put this experimental method into practice earlier this year, becoming the first state to do so. One anesthesiologist

who read firsthand accounts of the nitrogen gassing of Kenneth Smith, age 58, in January of this year, said, the “intent here was torture.”

To take a deeper look at “prison healthcare” is to step into a litany of horrors of our own making. To think about reforming prison healthcare would require acknowledging the humanity of prisoners—the one thing that our system of imprisonment denies at every turn.

**I**N *ARE PRISONS OBSOLETE?*, PRISON ABOLITIONIST ANGELA DAVIS quotes criminologist Elliott Currie, who wrote in 1998 that “Short of major wars, mass incarceration has been the most thoroughly implemented government social program of our time.” To fully understand what Currie was talking about, you need to get a sense of the numbers and the demographics. Imagine you are one of the approximately 2 million people currently in one of the country’s sprawling network of 6,325 state or federal prisons, local jails, or immigration or juvenile detention facilities, among others. (For readers who are in prison or jail, please bear with me.) If you end up in one of these places, chances are you are poor, Black or Native American or Latino, and have a lower level of education than the general population. If you’re in jail—around 9 million people cycle through local jails each year—you comprise around one-third of all people currently locked up, and more than 70 percent of the time, you’re there awaiting a trial. In other words, you and your approximately 500,000 fellow pretrial detainees haven’t even been convicted of anything. But you can’t go home because, in many cases, you simply can’t afford to post bail. You’re also more likely than those in the general population to have a disability, chronic health condition, mental illness, substance use disorder, or history of trauma or abuse. Increasingly, you might also be 55 years or older, in part because tens of thousands of people convicted in the War on Drugs in the 1980s and ’90s have been aging as they serve decades-long sentences in what *Vox* has called “de facto nursing home[s].”

What all this means is that prisoners tend to need *more*



*Inmate uprising in the prison yard at Attica Prison (1971)*

healthcare than those who are free. But prisoners in the United States often face abysmal healthcare—when they actually get it. Often, their symptoms are ignored or allowed to worsen until they become urgent, life-threatening, or irreversible. There are countless stories of prisoners’ bodies visibly deteriorating as they are denied care for months or years on end. Bellies swell up from failed livers or growths, extremities go numb from masses impinging on nerves, cancers that have spread to the brain cause severe pain which goes untreated. Sometimes the need for care is more immediate, and the state completely fails to render basic aid. In one particularly disturbing case that took place on Rikers Island in 2022, Michael Nieves, age 40, sliced his throat with a razor, and guards watched him for 10 minutes without offering any aid, allowing him to bleed out and die. They were found to have violated no policy and faced no criminal charges. Nieves happened to have severe mental illness, and it’s often the case that jails and prisons fail to adequately treat mental health conditions (especially suicidality) as well as substance use disorders—both of which are significant causes of death in this population. Equally disturbing is the practice of “medical bond,” when a sheriff releases a sick detainee to a medical facility so that the jail can avoid paying the cost of that care. Sometimes the person is already experiencing a medical crisis or is just on the verge of it. This is essentially a form of “patient dumping,” which federal law has prohibited since 1986. The practice is thought to be particularly widespread in Alabama.

**T**HE PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE NOTES THAT ABOUT ONE-third of Americans have an immediate family member who has been to jail or prison at some point in their life. Despite how common imprisonment is, many people might not think or know much about the conditions of confinement for prisoners. Simply put, prisons are not healthy places to be. They are, in the words of prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba, “death-making institutions.” This is not an exaggeration. Everything—from the physical environment to the psychological conditions—is “designed to promote premature mortality.” The prison system has “entirely

dispensed with even a semblance of rehabilitation,” write Angela Davis and fellow prison abolitionist Cassandra Shaylor. Davis has argued that the main objective of prisons is now “incapacitation.”

Here’s how Ruth Delaney and co-authors at the Vera Institute of Justice described prisons in 2018:

*By their very design and aesthetics, the physical buildings and layout of American prisons cultivate feelings of institutionalization, immobilization, and lack of control among the people who live there. A typical cell is a small cement and brick box—the size of a typical parking space—with a metal or cement bed (sometimes a bunk bed) covered with a thin mattress, an open metal sink and toilet, perhaps a fixed metal desk, and a small window that is often sealed shut. Other interior spaces are similarly utilitarian in nature, with hard fixtures and fittings, cinder blocks, and little color, ornamentation, or natural light. These common prison architectural designs do not encourage positive individual or group experiences. Even recreation spaces are designed in this way—with little or no access to green spaces, often as covered cages, sometimes outdoors, but too often simply as another indoor space, such as a gymnasium. In *Madrid v. Gomez*—a case challenging the constitutionality of conditions at Pelican Bay State Prison in California—the court remarked that the sight of incarcerated people in the facility’s barren exercise pens created an image “hauntingly similar to that of caged felines pacing in a zoo.”*

Ventilation in cells is poor, and often there is no heating or air-conditioning, which allows temperatures to reach deadly highs or lows. The summer months are particularly brutal in the South, where cells can reach triple-digit temperatures. One 2022 study of Texas facilities found that 14 inmates on average died due to heat-related causes each year between 2001 and 2019, whereas no heat-related deaths occurred in climate-controlled facilities. The United Nations Committee on Torture has called for the U.S. “to remedy any deficiencies concerning temperature, insufficient

ventilation and humidity levels in prison cells,” but state budgets rarely cover such upgrades.

Prisons are overcrowded, and social distancing to prevent the spread of communicable diseases such as tuberculosis or COVID-19 is practically impossible. Mortality in prisons skyrocketed by 77 percent at the height of the coronavirus pandemic. In the early '90s, the New York State prison system was the source of outbreaks of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis, which is as dangerous as the name implies. And when natural disasters happen, prisoners are left to the whims of corrections staff. In New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, for example, guards abandoned one jail building for days, and some prisoners were not evacuated until days after the storm hit, when floodwaters had reached chest-level, according to Human Rights Watch. More recently, as Hurricanes Milton and Helene hit, prisoners were trapped in their cells without functioning utilities or plumbing in Florida and North Carolina.

Prisons are often located near environmentally hazardous sites. Rikers Island, for example, is “literally on top of a landfill.” Water and air quality are predictably poor in U.S. prisons, as is the food, which the American Civil Liberties Union has described as “often unpalatable and innutritious” as well as lacking in fresh fruits and vegetables. Instead, it is “high in salt, sugar, and refined carbohydrates” such as breads, cookies, and crackers. Prison diets are just the kind that exacerbate (or facilitate the onset of) chronic conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure.

Then there are the psychological aspects of being under constant supervision and control. Ram Subramanian of the Brennan Center for Justice writes:

*Life in a U.S. prison is filled with an endless parade of security measures (caging, handcuffing, shackling, strip and cell searches, and lockdowns) punctuating a daily routine marked by enforced idleness, the ever-present risk of violence, often adversarial relationships with prison staff, and only sporadic opportunities for constructive activities offering rehabilitation, education, or treatment. Solitary confinement is often used as punishment for minor violations of prison rules, such as talking back, being out of place, or failure to obey an order. Incarcerated individuals in America live in a harsh, dystopian social world of values and rules, designed to control, isolate, disempower and erode one's sense of autonomous self.*

The daily deprivation and exploitation faced by prisoners is endless, and it's worth dwelling on a few more examples. Solitary confinement is abhorrently widespread and causes lasting harm, both physical and mental. Mail is intercepted and sometimes scanned and sold back to the inmate by a for-profit company. Even hugging one's visiting child can be off-limits. Phone calls and “commissary” items—everything from food to shampoo to over-the-counter medications—are extremely overpriced and unaffordable (prison labor, when paid, often provides pennies on the hour). In a nine-month investigation of prison commissaries this year, *The Appeal* found markups for everyday items to be as high as 600 percent (for a denture cup in Georgia). Peanut butter in Georgia was more than 70 percent marked up. In Missouri, ramen noodles and Tums were more than 65 percent marked up. In Virginia, a prisoner would have to work over 8 hours to earn

enough to pay for a Ramadan greeting card. Some prisons also charge sales tax and fees besides taking out various deductions from pay such as “room and board.”

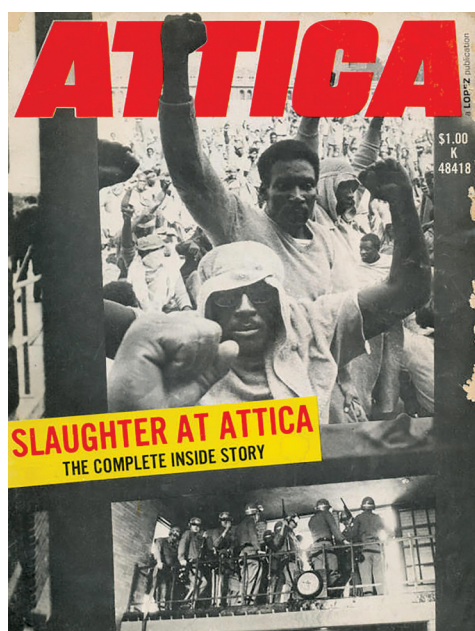
I mention all of these examples to counter a tendency in our culture to see prisons and imprisonment as just another normal part of our society. As Davis has written, “[T]he prison is considered an inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives, [...] so ‘natural’ that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it.” Citing the popularity of prisons as tourist attractions and the fact that so many prison films have been made, Davis notes that there is a “persisting fascination” with prisons. There's also no shortage of TV shows about cops, investigators, lawyers, and judges—the people who help put other people in jail and prison. Last year I wrote about how prison writing in popular publications does political work to normalize what is actually an unacceptable cruelty: to put someone in a cell and subject them to isolation and violence, sometimes for years on end. As I put it, “It is all too easy to conflate the humanity of the people in the stories with the idea that our punishment system is acceptable.” We cannot forget that mass incarceration is part of a larger criminal punishment system that is rife with injustice. It is this system of jails and prisons—these bleak and punishing places that are unhealthy for both the body and spirit—into which we have chosen to put millions of people, at enormous cost to them, their families, their communities, and society as a whole.

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world and targets its most vulnerable citizens for imprisonment. It's no surprise that imprisonment itself is considered a social determinant of health. For every year spent in prison, a person loses 2 years from their life expectancy. Even *family members* of incarcerated people lose 2.6 years of life compared to people who have not had a family member locked up. This makes sense when we think about how traumatic it is to be separated from a family member. More than half of women prisoners have children, and most were the primary caregivers before being locked up, meaning that kids are being punished simply for being their parents' children.

AS MARC MAUER TRACES IN HIS 2006 BOOK *RACE TO INCARCERATE*, our current era of “mass incarceration” began in 1973, at which point the state and federal prison population began to dramatically increase. There were many forces at play: the War on Drugs, started by President Nixon and ramped up by President Reagan, New York's Rockefeller Drug Laws (which imposed harsh sentences for possession of even small amounts of drugs, setting the tone for the nation's criminal punishment going forward), the previous decades of deinstitutionalization (which left people with mental illness on the streets, where they were then picked up and put into jails and prisons), and the various drug epidemics (heroin in the 1960s, cocaine in the late '70s, crack cocaine in the '80s). The loss of traditional manufacturing jobs in the '70s and '80s and Clinton's dramatic cuts to welfare in 1994 were also policies that left people without employment or government assistance. Thus, people were more prone to economic precarity and encounters with the criminal punishment system.

In the years before the rise of mass incarceration, prisoners began to protest the conditions of their confinement with urgency. In parallel with the social justice and civil rights movements of the

1960s and '70s, people behind bars became more politically conscious and organized to demand better treatment. One of the key areas of protest was healthcare, which was a top concern of prisoners in the Attica Prison uprising of 1971 in New York. During this "prison rights movement" of the '60s and '70s, prisoners brought a slew of cases to court. As legal scholar Elaina Marx notes, it was a time of "judicial activism" in which many courts ruled in favor of prisoners' rights for the first time. The courts enacted consent decrees, or court orders, under which prisons were required to make "reform in areas including housing conditions, security, medical care, mental healthcare, sanitation, nutrition, and exercise." The judiciary insisted that prisons "provide (costly) medical care and reasonable housing." What's more, Marx writes, the courts were "directly supervising those improvements."



"Slaughter at Attica: The Complete Inside Story" by James A. Hudson (1971)

Journalists and other experts, too, documented the sorry state of prison healthcare in the 1970s. In 1973, the English investigative journalist Jessica Mitford wrote *Kind and Usual Punishment: The Prison Business*, in which she details the sham of "rehabilitation" efforts in California prisons and the unethical practices of lucrative (for the researchers) medical research conducted on prisoners. From interviews with ex-prisoners, Mitford concluded that "medical treatment amounts to criminal neglect in many instances." The confidential doctor-patient relationship, she noted, had been completely distorted, as files on inmates, which included psychiatric information, were available to prison officials and police agencies but not the inmate or their attorney.

In 1975, Seth B. Goldsmith, a professor of hospital administration at Columbia University, wrote *Prison Health: Travesty of Justice*, in which he outlined "terrible conditions" in jails and prison, a "barren wasteland of medical care." The healthcare programs there, he concluded, were "obsolete, unsafe—in a word,

unsatisfactory" and violated the Eighth Amendment's prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment. Susan M. Reverby, a historian of American healthcare, noted in 2019 that a study from around the same time as Goldsmith's 1975 book "concluded that modernization in the provision of health care had eluded prisons and jails. Such care was still stuck in the 'horse-and-buggy' era, this national report claimed, where the physician merely stopped by but could, or would, do very little."

Goldsmith had also written a review of healthcare conditions at Orleans Parish Prison in New Orleans in 1973. At that time, he had been assigned by a court as a medical consultant to see how healthcare could be improved in light of a class action lawsuit brought by inmates (the court had found that conditions there violated the Eighth Amendment against cruel and unusual punishment). He documented what he called "abysmal medical conditions": patients were shackled to hospital beds when taken to outside facilities for specialty care; dental care consisted mostly of inmate-requested tooth extractions performed once a week; medical records were sloppily kept, if at all; few basic resources (medical reference books, exam tables) existed; and psychiatric care was "essentially nonexistent" except to send the most serious cases to Charity Hospital, the local healthcare provider for the indigent.

Ultimately, Goldstein concluded in 1975 that his findings were not unexpected, as "the custodial goals of a jail-house conflict with the therapeutic goals of a medical department." Sixteen years later, in 1991, physician and prisoner Alan Berkman would argue essentially the same thing. Berkman was a radical who had been active in the Weather Underground and Students for a Democratic Society and was convicted of armed robbery and possession of explosives, for which he served eight years in federal prison. He was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma during his pretrial detainment and spent years struggling to obtain adequate healthcare in prison. He became an activist for the improvement of prison healthcare as well as the rights of people in the Global South with HIV and AIDS to obtain treatment. Berkman argued that "control rather than care [formed the underlying] medical rationale in prison health care" and that this "undermine[d] humane treatment of incarcerated people."

Given the contradictory mandates of "control" versus "care," it almost seems absurd to ask whether good healthcare can actually be offered in a modern U.S. jail or prison. In a nation that prides itself on consumer choice—especially in regards to "commodities" like healthcare—a prisoner is unable to choose their healthcare provider, and informed consent becomes less meaningful in an environment where a patient is coerced by the state to accept care on a "take-it-or-leave-it basis."

Coercion has, of course, been a big part of the relationship between the medical profession and prisoners going back to the post-World War II era, when doctors exploited vulnerable prisoners to conduct medical research experiments on them rather than providing healthcare. In one particularly egregious case from 1971, described by Mitford in her book, medical researchers in Iowa fed five "volunteer" inmates an unpalatable liquid diet via a feeding tube in order to induce scurvy, or vitamin C deficiency. The participants developed anemia, joint pain, extremity swelling, hair loss, shortness of breath, and depression, among other symptoms; one man was so severely affected he almost couldn't walk. The lead researcher admitted to Mitford that the symptoms of scurvy had

already been documented by British clinicians, so the study was conducted merely to confirm what was known. Mitford concluded that the research had been “a senseless piece of savage cruelty.”

In her 2006 book *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, Harriet A. Washington devotes an entire chapter to detailing coercive experiments on “caged subjects” that took place from the 1950s to ’70s. These experiments (on Black and white prisoners alike) involved everything from CIA “chemical-warfare tests” with mind-altering drugs to injecting people with “live human cancer cells” or transfusing them with large amounts of plasma (“very sloppily” done, causing some patients to die and others to contract hepatitis from tainted blood products). The “most risky and painful” experiments, though, were “reserved for African Americans.” Washington describes dermatological research carried out at Holmesburg Prison complex in Philadelphia between the 1950s and ’70s, mostly conducted on African American men by Dr. Albert M. Kligman on behalf of dozens of pharmaceutical and cosmetics companies including Johnson & Johnson, Merck, and DuPont. For “anywhere from ten to seven hundred dollars,”

## COERCIVE RELATIONSHIPS ALLOW “RESEARCH” TO BE CONFLATED WITH “CARE” OR “TREATMENT.”

the men underwent exposure to a suspected carcinogen, their fingernails were biopsied, their backs were patch tested with various chemicals, and they were inoculated with foot fungus, syphilis, and gonorrhea, among other infectious diseases. Three-fourths of the men at the prison, Washington notes, “were administered cosmetics, powders, and shampoos that caused baldness, extensive scarring, and permanent skin and nail injury.” Washington characterizes prison medical research in this period as overall “racially unbalanced, abusive, dangerous, and scientifically sloppy.” The experimentation there only stopped in 1974, the year after a congressional hearing on human experimentation brought to light testimony by former Holmesburg inmates.

Despite the overwhelming ethical problems with this research, Washington explains that prisoners generally *wanted* the opportunity to participate in research. Even though informed consent was shoddy at best—risks were downplayed if mentioned at all—and sometimes prisoners (who may have had low literacy) had to sign legal waivers absolving the researchers of responsibility for any harm that might occur, prisoners stood to benefit in several ways. They could earn money or get reprieve from “the hell of prison life.” But, most disturbingly, research participation was “often [an] inmate’s sole point of entry to medical care, which was sketchy.” Ultimately, Washington notes, such experimentation came about in the first place because of who the prisoners were: many were poor, uneducated members of “despised and powerless minority groups”

that were “feared and hated.”

For historical context, recall that the 1947 Nuremberg Trials had convicted (and hanged) Nazi doctors for conducting horrific and cruel medical experiments on concentration camp prisoners, thus resulting in the Nuremberg Code that was supposed to guide medical experimentation and thus could have justified an end to experimentation on prisoners (a point noted by both Mitford and Washington). But as Mitford wrote, this had little effect in the U.S.—even though the American Medical Association and the World Medical Association had both issued guidance against prison research, with the latter describing prisoners as “captive groups” of persons who should not be used as research subjects. In 1979, the Belmont Report, issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, outlined guidance for research involving human volunteers, but it mostly rehashed the basic principles of bioethics (autonomy of the patient, beneficence on part of the clinician, non-maleficence or “do no harm,” and justice). The United States continues to allow prisoners to participate in medical research, but states have their own laws or restrictions in place as well.

As Washington points out, we can see how coercive relationships allow “research” to be conflated with “care or treatment.” This is eerily reminiscent of how Mitford described the sham of prisons “rehabilitation” in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For a brief period at that time, prisons promised “rehabilitation as opposed to punishment, utilization of the latest scientific therapy techniques, classification of prisoners based on their performance in prison, [and] a chance for every offender to return to the community as soon as he is ready.” A key part of this system, Marc Mauer notes in *Race to Incarcerate*, was the indeterminate sentence. A prisoner could hope to “leave earlier if they were rehabilitated.” But “rehabilitation,” as Mitford describes it, was simply another way to mete out the sentence as a form of punishment, another form of control “disguised as treatment.”

**T**WO DOCTORS WHO WORK IN CARCERAL MEDICINE, RACHAEL Bedard and Zachary Rosner, say that prison healthcare is, at best, harm reduction:

*What does it mean to practice medicine in death-making institutions? Knowing that jails are fundamentally sites of harm, our work as physicians is best framed as harm reduction. Partly we try to prevent and mitigate the negative impact of illness in a population overburdened with health issues; partly we try to mitigate the negative impact of jail. At its best this means meeting people where they are to offer them sensitive, accessible health care. In some cases, patients get treatment they’ve long needed and long been denied in the community. We can diagnose and treat hepatitis C, for example, or take care of undermanaged high-blood pressure and diabetes. At its worst, though, the work is despairing. In these moments, it becomes bearing witness without being able to intervene effectively in the worst of what you see.*

Much like healthcare for people who are not behind bars, prison healthcare is a patchwork system. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention noted in 2010 that it did not have national-level data on the healthcare carried out in state prisons. So the CDC conducted a first-ever survey, the National Survey on Prison Healthcare, published in 2016. This was a very basic look at things

like medical conditions tested for on admission, specific services and specialties offered, and whether care was onsite or offsite, among other variables. A 2017 Pew Charitable Trusts report found large variation in state spending on healthcare per inmate per year. The state that spent the least (2015 figures) was Louisiana, at \$2,173; the most was California, at nearly \$20,000. (The 49-state median figure was \$5,720.)

Louisiana and California stand out for other reasons. The former is home to Angola, the State Penitentiary located on a former plantation that's one of the most notorious prisons in the country. There, a judge ruled in 2023 that the facility, over a period of 26 years, had demonstrated a "callous and wanton disregard" for the health of inmates, saying that "The finding is that the 'care' is not care at all but abhorrent cruel and unusual punishment that violates the Constitution." This "medical mistreatment" had led to "unspeakable" human costs, the judge wrote. Just a few examples: one man experienced many months of delays in diagnosis and treatment for cancer and died. Another man made several requests for assessment of worsening back pain which were ignored; he became incontinent and eventually died, with an autopsy revealing he had a large tumor compressing his spinal cord. Yet another inmate complained of chest pain for 16 months; when he was evaluated, he was discovered to have cancer and died a week later. And in California, the state which boasts an incarceration rate higher than any democratic nation in the world, the Department of Corrections sterilized at least 250 women from the late 1990s until 2010 without obtaining proper agency approval, bringing back the kind of practices once thought relegated to the eugenics movement of the first half of the 20th century.

THE SOCIAL SECURITY ACT OF 1935 PROHIBITS FEDERAL dollars from being used on prison healthcare, and it is politically unpopular, as one ethicist puts it, to spend money on people who have "violated society's norms and rules." So facilities have found a few ways to provide healthcare to inmates: they can run healthcare themselves, either under the Department of Corrections or with local health departments (New York, Louisiana); they can contract out with a university or other local healthcare system (Texas, Georgia, New Jersey, and Connecticut), or they can contract out to a for-profit corporation. In Harris County, Texas, which includes Houston, jail healthcare for some 9,500 inmates is administered by Harris Health, the county's healthcare system for the indigent. Private, for-profit corporations that carry out corrections healthcare include Wellpath (owned by private equity), Corizon, and NaphCare. A Reuters study in 2020 found that 60 percent of the country's top jails contract healthcare out to corporations, and the news agency's analysis of 500 jails from 2016-2018 found a higher death rate among facilities that contracted out care compared to those run by government agencies. Wellpath, which claims it cares for 220,000 adult and juvenile "vulnerable patients in challenging clinical environments," was the subject of a Senate investigation headed by Elizabeth Warren in 2023 which documented a number of disturbing findings: significant delays in care, blanket denials of care, inadequate staff, negligent care, failure to follow doctors' orders and internal policies, cost-cutting measures, and inadequate mental healthcare including inappropriate use of restraints and solitary confinement. Senator Warren's investigation concluded that "Nationwide,

the privatization of prison health care has been associated with instances of reduced quality of care, higher death rates, and less transparency." Reporting on the "jail health-care crisis" in the *New Yorker* in 2019, Steve Coll noted that the trend of privatization started in the Reagan era and continued into the '90s, especially after Clinton's 1994 crime bill, which caused significant growth in the prison population. Other for-profit providers, including NaphCare and Correctional Health Partners, have much to answer for as well.

Whatever agency is administering the healthcare, prisoners face a series of obstacles to obtaining care: administrative burdens to request care, copays, waiting, denials, worsening of symptoms, and the psychological distress of advocating for oneself while also staying in the good graces of people whose help you need. Because life in prison is so expensive, Cecille Joan Avila explained in *Prism* in 2022, prisoners often have to choose whether they will pay for healthcare, food, or other basic necessities. Avila found that in 2022, all federal prisons and 40 states required prisoner copays. Often, these are in the range of a few dollars. But again, taking into account the exploitatively low pay rates for prison labor, these copays are a hardship, sometimes taking up to a month's pay to save. Much as they do outside of prisons, copays simply serve as barriers to care. Consider the experience of Cynthia Alvarado, who served 12 years in Pennsylvania for a wrongful murder conviction:

*"People struggle with not affording the copay. [...] That creates mental health issues 'cause now you're depressed, now you're sad, now you have more problems over not being able to afford something that should just be free while you're in the custody of their care." [...] Alvarado explained that to deal with her acid reflux or other ailments while she was incarcerated, it was \$5 to make a sick call and then \$5 for each medication needed to treat it. She could buy some medication at the commissary, like antihistamines, but it was often extremely expensive. The costs to treat any chronic conditions would quickly pile up. Eventually, she just learned to deal with the impacts on her health rather than risk a large amount of outstanding debt to be paid upon her release.*

Luci Harrell, herself formerly incarcerated, wrote in 2022 in *Scalawag* about how unaffordable prison healthcare is, describing the experience of her friend, Vanessa Garrett:

*On top of that, every visit required a \$5 copay for being seen, plus a copay for each medication. [...] Of all Garrett's negligent prison health care experiences, one issue had the potential to be life-threatening. After several visits for unusual numbness she was experiencing in both legs in 2017, Garrett developed a growth on the side of one leg. Some nurses said it was a bug bite: \$5. Others told her to lose some weight, ignoring her characteristic numbness and the fact that she was falling down whenever her toes would go to sleep because she simply could not walk. Another \$5. "They were telling me I was just making it up, that it was in my head," said Garrett. "But when they finally did the ultrasound, they found out it was a blood clot that had broken itself down."*

In a *Washington Post* op-ed earlier this year, Hope Corrigan described the ordeal of her ill 71-year-old father, who was sentenced to three years in prison for racketeering. At the time of his sentence, he had an autoimmune condition and a blood cancer that required

careful management. She writes:

*In many prisons, including my father's, inmates must request health-care services through corrections officers who have no medical training, and who often decide whether an issue is worthy of medical care. This means that even minor and nonfatal health issues that aren't life-threatening often result in needless suffering. We quickly learned how to thread a delicate needle: be advocates, loud enough that prison officials knew he had family watching and waiting, but not so loud that it seemed like we were asking for special treatment. In prison, the guards and nurses are in control. Be silent and your family member has no advocate. Push too hard and risk retaliation. "There is a constant and consistent fear that if you push too much, if you advocate too much, somehow there will be an equal and opposite force that harms your loved one," Williams [a physician] said.*

These examples show not only the bureaucratic barriers to prison healthcare but the fact that power relations are always present and always, as Alan Berkman pointed out, have the ability to undermine care.

Another serious problem faced by prisoners is their inability to challenge the conditions of their confinement. The "judicial activism" originating in the '60s and '70s was ultimately met with backlash in later decades from the conservative Right, who saw it as evidence of prisoners' unreasonable demands for special treatment. Citing cases involving prisoner complaints about melting ice cream, chunky versus smooth peanut butter, doctors implanting mind control devices into prisoners, and demands for gender-affirming healthcare, among others, lawmakers at the time talked disparagingly about "jailhouse lawyer antics" and the "crushing burden" of "frivolous lawsuits" which amounted to crimes against taxpayers. As a result, in 1996, a Republican Congress and Democratic President Bill Clinton passed into law the Prison Litigation Reform Act, which imposed practically insurmountable barriers to prisoners seeking to bring lawsuits against their imprisonment. Lawsuits plummeted as a result. The Act has prevented countless cases of mistreatment from being challenged and remains a major obstacle to the improvement of prison healthcare and prison conditions in general. As Elaina Marx noted, in 2003, legal scholar Margo Schlanger of Harvard Law School reviewed inmate litigation in the years prior to and after the PLRA and found that lawsuits rose in proportion to the rise in inmate population and that prisoners had not actually been particularly frivolous in their lawsuits. It wouldn't be the first time the Right had made hyped-up claims in the name of law and order.

**I**N 1957, THE UNITED NATIONS CREATED THE STANDARD Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, a legally nonbinding set of guidelines for member states based on the principles of international law. Revised and renamed the Nelson Mandela Rules in 2015, these are essentially best practices for prison operations worldwide. A major emphasis of the Rules is that prisoners must be treated as human beings who have inherent dignity and worth. One of the nine areas that was revised in 2015 was Medical and Health Services, which are considered the responsibility of the state and should be offered free of charge and in a timely manner at a level comparable to care in the wider community. There is also an absolute ban on torture or other ill treatment.

Just based on these few examples, it's fair to say that U.S. jails and prisons are violating the Mandela Rules on a daily basis. While the U.S. lacks national standards for prison healthcare (although there are voluntary accreditation programs, and President Biden recently signed into law an overhaul of federal prison oversight), because the Rules exist, there is simply no excuse for the U.S. to maintain such dismal healthcare within its criminal punishment system. In a 1972 analysis, two scholars at the NYU School of Law found that nearly all of the Attica prisoner demands, for instance, were consistent with the Rules. They concluded that "the prisoners demanded their putative rights as world citizens."

In the U.S., we are used to politicians telling us that law and order will keep us safe. By this logic, keeping certain "bad" people in prisons will lead to public safety. But this isn't true at all. Mass incarceration came about because of policy choices related to the way we criminalize people who are often poor and marginalized. Levels of what we call "crime" have gone up and down over the years even as imprisonment levels reached a peak in 2009. Even the Nelson Mandela Rules, as useful as they might seem, are predicated upon the idea that prisons are useful because they keep society members safe from crime. The U.N. document reads, "The ultimate purpose of imprisonment—the protection of society from crime—is undermined in prisons which are overstretched and poorly managed." But we know that prisons do not stop crime—if anything, they actually increase future crime. And they are not rehabilitative.

Prison abolitionists Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie argue that our concept of "safety" needs to be completely rethought:

*Safety isn't a commodity that can be manufactured and sold to us by the carceral state or private corporations. Nor is safety a static state of being. Safety is dependent on social relations and operates relative to conditions: We are more or less safe depending on our relationship to others and our access to the resources we need to survive.*

A safe society is one in which people have the resources they need to survive and thrive, including healthcare, housing, food, education, a living wage, and a clean and healthy environment. A safe society is not one in which the poor and marginalized are targeted for arrest, locked up, and released often in worse condition than when they entered. A safe society is one in which reparation, not retribution, is the basis for justice after someone has committed a harm to another person and to society.

The immediate imperatives are those of police and prison abolition more generally: to reduce harm without legitimizing or strengthening the criminal punishment system. We need to decrease people's contact with the system and to decarcerate whenever possible. Beyond that, we need to repeal the PLRA, ensure that any Medicare for All legislation includes prisoners in its universal program, enable federal spending on prison healthcare, enact more robust public health policies, and continue the work of a leftist political project to create a society that truly meets people's needs.

As Davis reminds us, prisons *themselves* are reforms. They were created as alternatives to corporal and capital punishment. But we know that the *reform* is too grotesque to be *reformed*. To truly address the crisis of healthcare in jails and prisons, we have to get rid of prisons entirely. They are "death-making institutions," and we simply cannot expect to nurture life and health in something that is not designed for that. ✚

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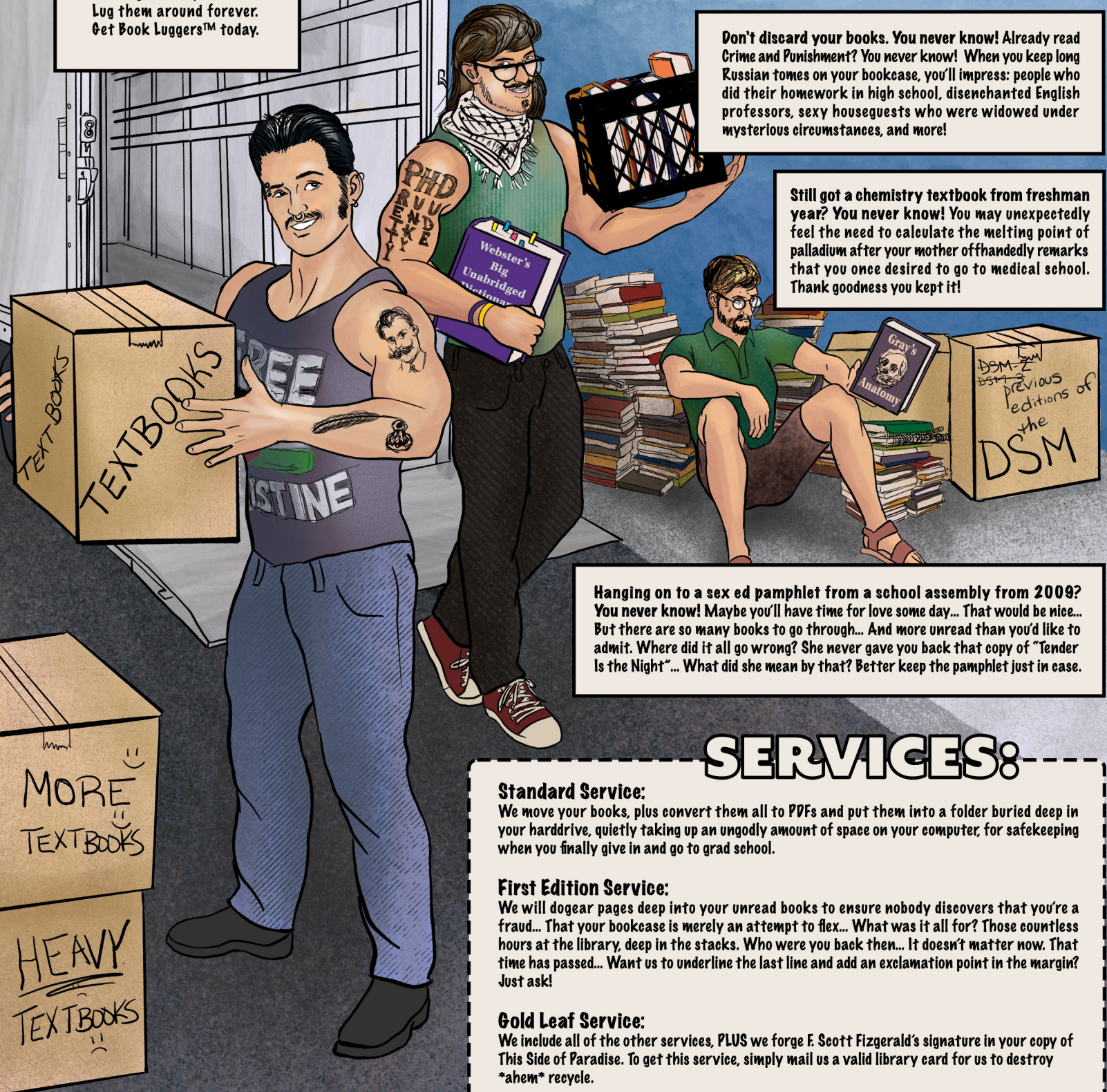
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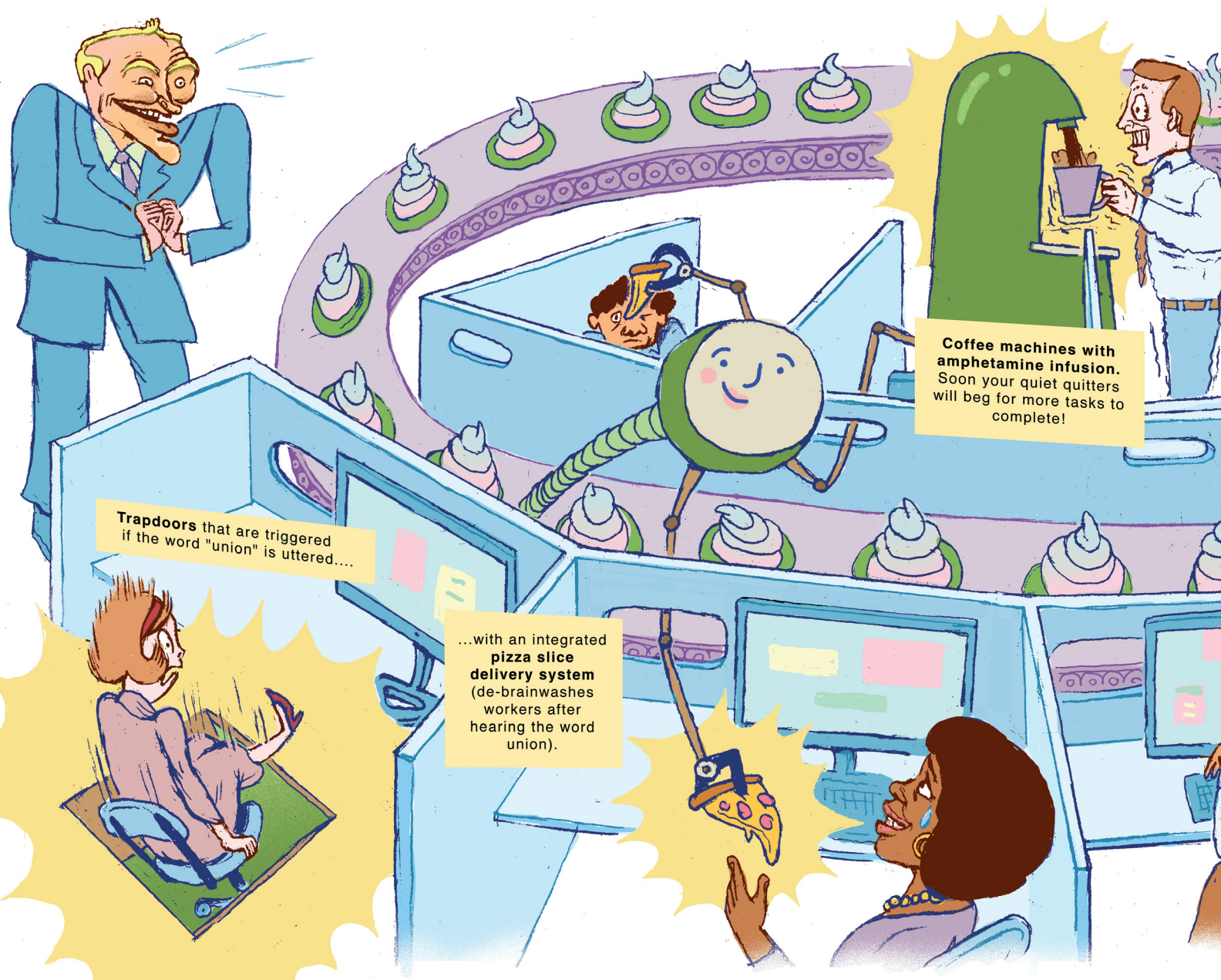
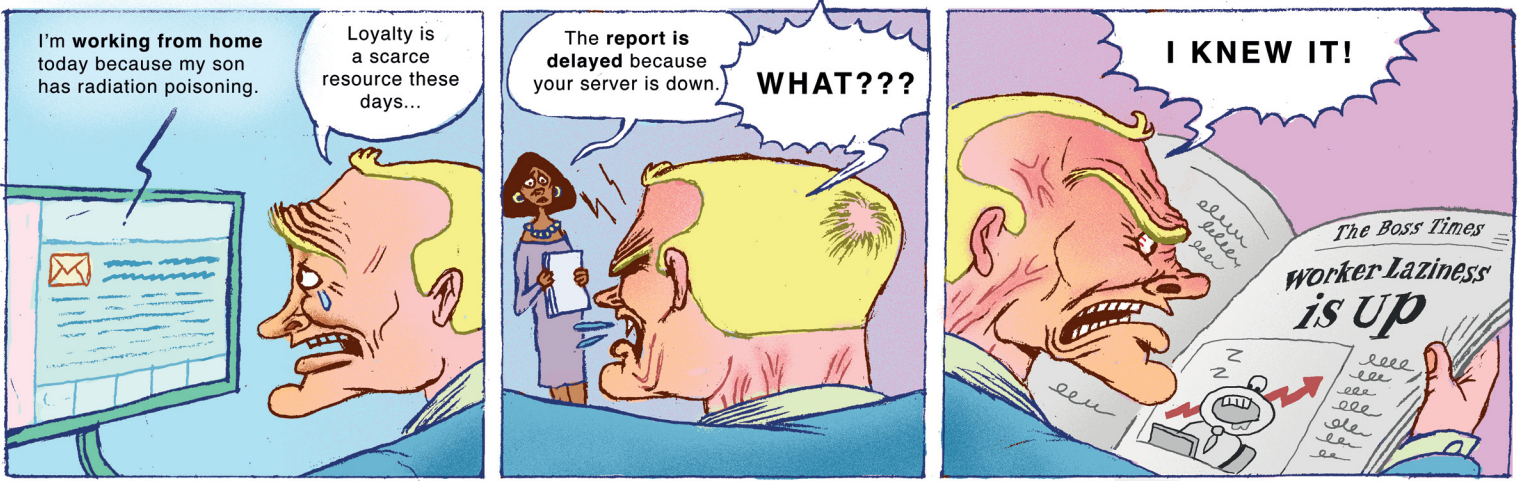
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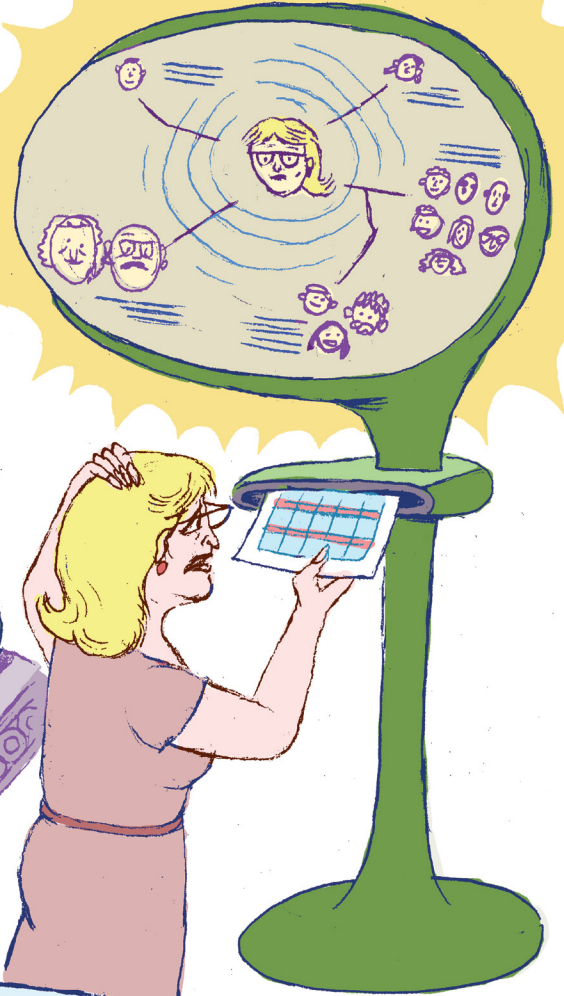




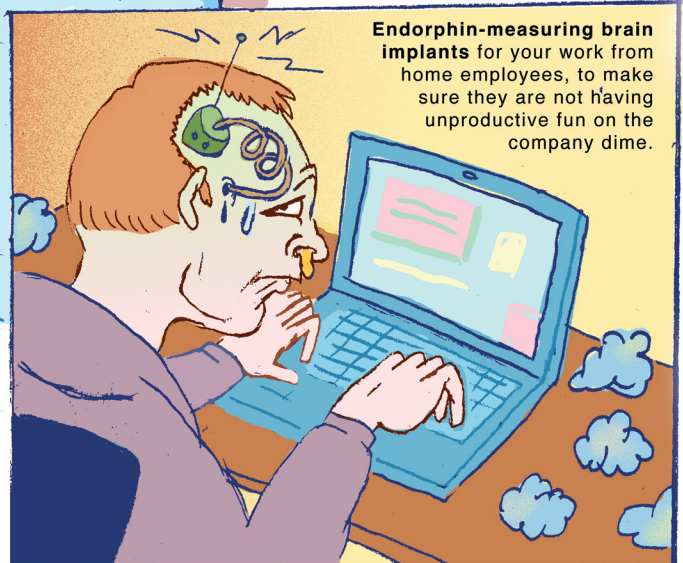
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# WHAT MICHAEL MOORE HAS TAUGHT US

BY LIAM BURTON

I SAW MY FIRST R-RATED MOVIE TWENTY YEARS AGO, WHEN MY parents took me to see Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. As a 9-year-old, I was far outside of the target audience for a nonfiction political film about the War on Terror. Yet I found myself deeply engaged. Moore's film revealed the truth about the world in which I lived in an unusually entertaining fashion.

*Fahrenheit 9/11* does not shy away from extremely serious topics. A harrowing montage preserves the pain and fear people felt in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. We learn how the legislative branch subsequently got away with passing a civil liberties-suppressing bill like the PATRIOT ACT without bothering to read it. ("We don't read most of the bills," Democratic Rep. John Conyers of Michigan tells Moore in the movie.) We are heartbroken seeing the damage and carnage innocent Iraqis experienced when the U.S. invaded. ("They have no conscience! [...] They slaughtered us! They destroyed our houses!" an Iraqi woman screams.) Moore also sympathetically profiles Lila Lipscomb, the mother of a U.S. soldier who died in Iraq. In the course of the film, Lipscomb goes from being an unquestioning, patriotic citizen to someone who cannot hide her grief and her growing anger at a government that caused her son's death by launching a war under false pretenses.

Yet, *Fahrenheit 9/11* is not a somber and depressing slog. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* describes Moore's style as a mixture of "aggressive reportage with goofy humor," and the film does not disappoint. Interspersed are moments of hilarity and absurdity. I still remember my mom laughing in the theater when, after recapping President Bush's first few months in office, Moore abruptly cuts to a montage of Bush's seemingly endless golfing trips, set to the song "Vacation" by The Go-Go's. Any viewer is bound to chuckle when they see that Bush learned of 9/11 during a classroom photo op and instead of leaping to action, chose to awkwardly stare at a book called *The Pet Goat*. Similarly, a viewer is shocked to see Bush making funny faces at the camera just moments before going on live TV to announce the start of combat operations in Iraq.

*Fahrenheit 9/11* soon became the highest-grossing documentary of all

time, bringing in over \$220 million at the box office, and won the Palme d'Or at Cannes. But its success should not have been a surprise. At the time of the film's 2004 release, the then one-year-old invasion of Iraq had already turned into a bloody calamity. That, along with a dearth of anti-Bush administration voices in the media, created a politically hungry audience that was all too eager to see a polemical film directed against the president. Good timing aside, Moore succeeded because instead of making a simple documentary, he made a fun and engaging political statement and packed it into a feature film.

In fact, the first thing Moore tells aspiring filmmakers in his 13 rules for making documentaries is, "Don't make a documentary! Make a movie!" *Movies*, Moore reminds us, are fun, exciting pieces of entertainment that thrill people as they eat their popcorn and Goobers. Moore never felt that the nonfictional nature of documentary films meant they had to be boring and depressing. As Moore explains:

*Many of you will say, "Well, I make documentaries because I think people should know about global warming! They should know about the War of 1812! The public must be taught to use forks, not knives! This is why I make documentaries!" Oh, you do, do you? Listen to yourselves. You sound like a scold. Like you're Mother Superior with a wooden ruler in your hand. "I Am The One Who Knows All And Must Impart My Wisdom To The Masses Or At Least To Those who Watch PBS!" Really? Oh, now I get it. This is why tens of millions flock to the theaters each week to watch documentaries—because they are just dying to be told what to do and how to behave. At that point, you aren't even documentarians—you're Baptist preachers.*

Moore's entire body of film and television work showcases world injustices and advocates for systemic change. At no point does Moore *preach* to his audience. Instead, he deploys attention-grabbing stunts and hijinks that entertain in order to convey his message. The result is that people cannot help

but want to learn more about the serious topics he presents and repair the broken world they have been forced to see.

In his first show, *TV Nation*, Moore had real TV sportscasters Bob Costas and Ahmad Rashad narrate a “Health Care Olympics” in which the U.S. healthcare system faced off against Canada and Cuba (the U.S., of course, trailed). Moore upped the ante multiple times for his next TV show, *The Awful Truth*. For one episode, Moore ran a ficus tree for Congress as a write-in candidate (among the ballots that were counted, it had a 4-1 lead on the Republican incumbent) and brought lung cancer victims to Philip Morris’s corporate headquarters to sing Christmas carols through their electronic voice boxes. Moore tormented Fred Phelps’s homophobic Westboro Baptist Church by sending a “Sodomobile” filled with LGBTQ activists to a WBC protest. In the 2000 election, Moore lampooned the primaries by promising his show would endorse the first candidate to jump into a mosh pit (Republican candidate Alan Keyes dived in).

In a very memorable *Awful Truth* episode, Moore profiled a diabetic father in his 30s, Chris Donahue, who faced imminent death from pancreatic failure. Donahue had dutifully paid his insurance premium to Humana for over seven years. However, Moore explains in his show that Humana refused to cover a much-needed pancreas transplant operation. This is despite Humana’s statement in Donahue’s plan that they would cover “all problems related to his diabetes.”

If a Gen-Z charity YouTuber like Mr. Beast covered Chris Donahue’s problem today, Donahue might have had his pancreas cost covered by the video’s sponsor (perhaps Shopify), so long as he thanked them by name. Zero mention would be made about insurers like Humana penny-pinching while earning billions in revenue annually. Nor would the video examine how, in a nation that lacks Medicare for All, insurers reward doctors for denying people like Donahue treatment.

Moore, on the other hand, identifies the villain. In his quest to illustrate Donahue’s situation, Moore had Donahue file his own obituary with the *Palm Beach Post*, select his coffin, and then handed bystanders at Humana’s headquarters invitations to Donahue’s upcoming funeral (date and time “Any Day Now”). Moore also forced Humana’s Head of PR into a handshake, promising to include him in a recurring segment for his show called “If Chris Was Still Alive.” Oh, and they left the hearse outside of the headquarters and performed a funeral service with a bagpipe player. Thanks to Moore, it took less than a week for Humana to reverse their decision and agree to cover the cost of a pancreas transplant.

**S**UCH STUNTS WERE IN MOORE’S BLOOD. BEFORE HE WAS EVER on camera, Moore stuck it to Ronald Reagan. When Reagan decided to lay wreaths on the graves of Nazi soldiers in Germany, Moore and his friend faked press credentials, outsmarted the thousands of police officers surrounding the graveyard, and flashed a giant banner to Ronald and Nancy that said: THEY MURDERED MY FAMILY. Years later, Moore directed a music video for Rage Against The Machine set in New York City. The city had demanded Rage stay off of the sidewalk adjacent to the New York Stock Exchange. Naturally, Moore told Rage to perform on the sidewalk adjacent to the New York Stock Exchange. *No matter what*, Moore instructed the band: *do not stop playing*. Moore got arrested, Rage led a crowd to rush the NYSE, and the building’s metal riot doors were activated, forcing the traders to stop trading. All of this can be seen in the actual music video.

Humor and gutsy antics were far from Moore’s only unique contribution to nonfiction filmmaking. He also taught filmmakers to avoid using clichés and overplayed images when directing viewers to heated issues.

Moore’s first film, *Roger & Me*, is about the struggles of Flint, Michigan, in the 1980s era of deindustrialization. Moore wanted to show audiences what brutal economic hardship really looked like in Flint. Gen-

eral Motors had shut down their domestic auto-manufacturing factories (outsourcing their labor for cheap in Mexico) and killed countless Flint jobs. Audiences might have been numb if *Roger & Me* had only shown miserable Flint residents waiting in a sad unemployment line, a stale image Moore specifically refrained from including. It’s much harder to be numb when Moore, instead, shows us desperate Flint locals attempt to make ends meet by performing as human statues at a “Great Gatsby” party or selling rabbits for “pets or meat.” Laid-off autoworker Ben Hamper speaks about having a breakdown while listening to the Beach Boys’ sunny “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” on the radio, followed by the song playing over a montage of Flint’s destitution. Moore even follows a local sheriff who evicts people on Christmas Eve, tossing their tree and presents to the curb, all for being as little as \$150 behind on their rent. Despite the sheriff admitting to Moore that he evicts people around Christmas every year, the local Flint news never covered this apparently common occurrence. Instead, they spent every Christmas predictably tracking “Santa’s sleigh” and the Pope’s midnight mass.

Ultimately, Moore’s one crucial piece of advice is this:

*Don’t tell [your audience] the things they already know. [...] We need to show them something that will make them sit up in their seats saying, “Jesus, this is not the America I want to live in!”*

Moore never relented in showing the ugly sides of America that the mainstream media avoided highlighting. In *Fahrenheit 11/9* (*Fahrenheit 9/11*’s spiritual sequel), Moore takes the time to call out Barack Obama’s discomforting PR stunt of lightly “sipping” poisoned Flint water to prove that it’s drinkable (in response, Moore sprayed Flint water on the Michigan governor’s mansion). In *Capitalism: A Love Story*, he shows Ronald Reagan giving a speech, only to be told by a banking executive to speed it up, showing where power truly lies. In *Bowling For Columbine*, his Oscar-winning film about gun violence in America, Moore confronts NRA president Charlton Heston about his insensitivity to mass shootings, signs up for a bank account that comes with a free gun (“Do you think it’s a little dangerous handing out guns at a bank?”), personally calls out a frightened Dick Clark for exploiting “welfare-to-work” mothers at his restaurants, displays law enforcement and the media’s open preference for attacking poorer people of color over (much worse) white-collar criminals, and brings shooting victims to Kmart so they can return the bullets lodged in their body to the store from which they were purchased. In *Sicko*, Moore’s film about the American healthcare system, he took 9/11 first responders to Cuba to get free medical care, and in *Where to Invade Next* (about which countries America should pilfer social democratic policies from), he disgusted French children by showing them horrible, everyday American school lunches.

Of course, even when showing how ugly a nation America is, Moore still seizes the chance to be funny. We see this when he searches in vain for the billing department in a British hospital and when he tests whether acclaimed Black actor Yaphet Kotto was more likely to get a New York City cab than a white felon.

In addition to exposing audiences to original humor, creative stunts, and never-before-seen footage, Moore educates them by offering reminders of events easily consigned to the memory hole. *Fahrenheit 9/11*, for instance, starts with a very fast-paced explanation of everything that went wrong in the 2000 presidential election and why George W. Bush’s victory was likely illegitimate. As wacky “hillbilly” music plays, you can’t help but be astounded as Moore explains that Fox News called the election for Bush off a tip from Bush’s cousin, Bush’s brother was the governor of the state with contested votes, the Florida secretary of state was a co-chair of Bush’s Florida campaign, and the shady voting count company she hired suspiciously purged the votes of African American voters. In their efforts to forcibly shut down the vote recount, the Republicans essentially did

January 6 before January 6. Then the Supreme Court rigged the election for Bush anyway. Moore explains this all in less than five minutes.

Moore's method has been described as manipulative or misleading. A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* accused Moore of "slippery logic, tendentious grandstanding, and outright demagoguery." The late Christopher Hitchens and David Edelstein both called Moore a "propagandist." Some details in the films can indeed leave viewers with mistaken impressions. *Roger & Me* was criticized for arranging the events of the '80s out of chronological order; for example, Flint's failed attempts to boost economic activity with a hotel and theme park happened before General Motors laid off their American workforce, not after, as *Roger & Me* implies. Roger Ebert defended Moore's editorial choice, though, because the film isn't supposed to be a literal chronology; Moore is showing us what everyday people look like in economic despair. Critics called the "bank handing out guns" scene from *Bowling for Columbine* inaccurate because the bank didn't typically hand the guns out at the bank itself; they did that just for Moore's cameras. But the offer of a gun for a bank account was very real!

Often, the criticisms are minor, and the major points Moore makes still stand. Yes, in *Bowling*, Moore makes it look like the NRA came to Colorado in 1999 to mock victims of the Columbine shooting without mentioning that, out of sensitivity, the NRA canceled much of their already scheduled "World Class Guns & Gear Expo." However, secret recordings revealed that following Columbine, the NRA knew they faced a PR crisis and a public eager for stronger gun control laws. Rather than cancel their Expo (which they felt would be accepting responsibility for the massacre), the NRA defiantly held their convention, blaming politicians and the media for using Columbine to "politicize" gun ownership. Therefore, Moore was correct in framing the NRA as callous. Likewise, Moore might not have gotten every single detail correct about the Bush family's ties to the Carlyle Group and Saudi Arabia, but the reporter behind *House of Bush*, *House of Saud* still contends that \$1.5 billion ties the Bush cabinet to powerful Saudi families.

More recent criticisms of Moore come from leftists who think Moore's films can be unfocused in their arguments. Luke Savage and Will Sloan, from *Michael and Us* (the film podcast that initially began as a Michael Moore movie retrospective), criticize Moore's films for not having clear consistent theses and for lacking a call for systemic change. But Moore deserves enormous credit for popularizing leftist ideas and critiques and for using creative filmmaking techniques to spark conversations on war, deindustrialization, healthcare, gun violence, capitalism, and more.

**M**OOORE LEARNED HIS MESSAGE WAS NOT WELCOME everywhere, even in supposedly "liberal" Hollywood. *Bowling For Columbine* won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature three days after the U.S. invaded Iraq, and I can still recite Moore's short acceptance speech to this day:

*I've invited my fellow documentary nominees on the stage with us, and [...] they are here in solidarity with me because we like nonfiction. We like nonfiction, and we live in fictitious times.*

*We live in the time where we have fictitious election results that [elect] a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons. Whether it's the [fiction] of duct tape or the [fiction] of orange alerts, we are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush. Shame on you. And any time you've got the Pope and the Dixie Chicks against you, your time is up.*

Moore recalled that as soon as he mentioned Bush, a "cacophony of boos" began among the audience, and he could not even hear himself. One stagehand screamed "asshole" in Moore's ear backstage (he apologized to Moore many years later).



Moore Filming "*Roger & Me*" (1989) and "*Bowling For Columbine*" (2002)

At the time of the speech, anti-war sentiment was not popular. In early 2003, President Bush had a 71 percent approval rating. A similar percentage of Americans supported plans for the nation to start a war with Iraq. Twenty-nine Democratic senators agreed with them and the Bush Administration. The media was of no help. Sixty-three percent of on-air talking heads were government sources, and only six percent were anti-war. Networks including those owned by Viacom and Clear Channel refused to air advertisements from anti-war groups, and CBS threatened to "pull off the air" any artist mentioning the war during that year's Grammys. Perhaps sealing the deal for Iraq was the *New York Times*' supposed confirmation of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. As Moore explained in his memoir, *Here Comes Trouble*, "The *New York Times* had given Bush the cover he needed and the ability to claim, 'Heck, if a liberal paper like the *Times* says so, it must be true.'"

As soon as Moore returned home after the speech, he faced violent threats and attempted attacks. One couldn't help but see the parallels in 2024, when director Jonathan Glazer upset the entertainment industry for offering the most milquetoast criticism of U.S.-backed genocide in his Oscar acceptance speech. But Moore was right to speak up when he did. The Iraq War displaced millions, created further violence and economic stability, and led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. The war was waged for fictitious reasons. Invading Iraq wasn't a mistake. The Bush administration lied outright by frequently claiming that intelligence reports and nuclear weapons experts had conclusively confirmed the existence of WMDs, when, in fact, they said the opposite.

While Moore was known for his scathing criticism of Bush, Moore was equally critical of establishment Democrats. In his book *Stupid White Men*, he lambasts Democratic hypocrisy: "The Democrats say one thing ('Save the planet!') and then do another—quietly holding hands behind the scenes with the bastards who make this world a dirtier, meaner place."

He's right. Bill Clinton, Moore points out, was actually the greatest

Republican president of the '90s. Clinton allowed federal funds to go to "faith-based charities" that supported anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ causes, expanded the death penalty, opposed same-sex marriage, deprived millions of welfare benefits, supported lowering the capital gains tax, built prisons, restricted abortion access, and undermined environmental regulations. Moore continued to criticize conservative Democrats during the 2004 election, refusing to endorse John Kerry despite his urgent mission to unseat George W. Bush. Moore has fittingly shown no mercy to Joe Biden and Kamala Harris in 2024.

All the way back in 2000, Moore supported Ralph Nader's Green Party candidacy, vehemently rejecting the idea that Nader cost Al Gore the presidency by "stealing" votes from Gore's would-be supporters. Nader, in Moore's mind, was responsible for "nothing other than inspiring over a million new voters." Gore completely blew the debates with Bush by failing to "unmask Bush's ignorance and stupidity," and Ralph Nader to this day contends that Gore alienated progressive voters by being too boring and cautious. Voters, meanwhile, blamed Gore for siding with Republicans on issues like the death penalty and healthcare. It did not help that during the debates, Gore stated his desire to invest in "clean" coal technology and vowed to spend more than Bush on the military.

Moore's characterization of Nader's 2000 campaign sums up the same terrible choices we're given in every election:

*Everyone knew [Nader's effort to campaign] in the swing states could cost Gore the election and put Bush in the White House, but when you've seen the administration you voted for side more often with the Republicans than the traditional Democrats, when you've watched as these Democrats make life harder for the poor, paving the way for the rich to have their biggest orgy in history, when my hometown ends up losing more GM jobs during the eight years of Clinton/Gore than during those twelve years of Reagan/Bush—well, here's your choice: Do you want to get fucked by someone who tells you they're going to fuck you, or do you want to get fucked by someone who lies to you, and then fucks you?*

Moore impressed on his readers that, yes, George W. Bush ended up being a worse president, but Bush only succeeded because Democrats like Clinton already "laid down the groundwork."

Moore's criticism of both parties' establishments made him particularly perceptive about Donald Trump. Moore was one of the few people (this magazine's editor-in-chief was another) to predict that Trump would win in 2016. Trump's victory was inevitable, Moore thought, because voters now had an opportunity to make a "good practical joke on a sick political system," and he predicted that all Trump needed to do to win the election was to obtain the electoral votes of Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin (the "Rust Belt Brexit"). American bigotry and misogyny aside, Moore pointed out, Hillary Clinton was a seriously unpopular candidate whose track record included supporting NAFTA and voting for the Iraq War. He was right: Trump not only won the exact states he predicted, but Hillary Clinton barely campaigned in the states where she most clearly needed to.

By the time his documentary *Fahrenheit 11/9* came out, Moore agreed that Donald Trump was bad but always insisted that Trump was only a symptom of a much bigger problem. He also refused to accept the idea that our political system had any form of "deus-ex-machina" in place to take Trump down. When the Mueller Report came out in 2019, Moore said, "All you pundits and moderates and lame Dems who told the public to put their faith in the esteemed Robert Mueller—just STFU from now on."

Moore could not tolerate the press and establishment Democrats accepting Trump as another standard public figure. "Our media has no idea what it is up against," Moore stated in 2018. "They're getting steamrolled by a tyrant because Trump understands the media and understands the country he lives in more than those that cover him do.

This puts us all in grave danger."

Moore has been vindicated all these years later. The press continues to rationalize Trump's bizarre behavior while subjecting his rivals to bogus "both-sides" fact checks. At the same time, Democrats warmly accept endorsements from neoconservative warmongers like Dick and Liz Cheney. When examining the issues that would motivate Americans to vote for a person like Trump, Moore notes that the Democrats brought it upon themselves. They screwed themselves in 2016 with their frequent compromises and for interfering when popular candidates like Bernie Sanders ran in their primary. The Democrats' real problem, Moore notes, is that they get "handed" a progressive population eager to vote them into office but then are simply unable to win critical elections.

In *Fahrenheit 11/9*, Moore cites statistics showing that 71 percent of the public supports abortion, 82 percent want equal pay for women, 74 percent support stronger environmental laws, 61 percent want to raise the minimum wage, 60 percent support free college and childcare, and 61 percent support reducing the military budget. Oh, and 75 percent believe that immigration is *good*. Sadly, we do not live in a nation with robust funding for social services, environmental protections, and free education and childcare. In his work, Moore has always asked, "What happens when these resources are absent in a community?"

The answer: breakdown and backlash. Moore not only shows how the failure to fulfill basic social needs creates an opening for far-right politics. He also exposes the denial that Democrats and media elites have chosen to live in.

AT THE PEAK OF HIS FILMS' POPULARITY, MOORE BECAME A ubiquitous media presence. The *South Park* creators parodied him in *Team America: World Police*, as did the director of *Airplane!* in a dreadful right-wing film spoof of *A Christmas Carol*.

The success of Moore's documentaries encouraged a string of conservative "response" films such as *Michael Moore Hates America*, *FahrenHYPE 9/11*, and *Celsius 41.11*. *Michael and Us* podcast co-host Luke Savage observed that while these conservative filmmakers ostensibly *hated* Moore, they still could not help but imitate Moore's style, making themselves characters in their own documentaries and alleviating their tense scenes with comedy sketches.

To this day, you can't say the name "Michael Moore" without instantly conjuring a picture of the man in a baseball cap and glasses who always pointed his camera and launched targeted questions at uncomfortable-looking, often powerful people. He genuinely seemed to be looking out for the interests of the American people. As Michael Scott from *The Office*, said when confronting his own boss with a camera:

*This is exactly what Michael Moore does, famous documentarian. He goes up to people with a camera and he's like "Why did you do this? Why did you pollute? You are bad. You're a bad person." It's very dramatic.*

Moore's work has enduring lessons for us. If we really want to change the world we live in, it might not hurt to think like him. As Moore stresses, people need to let their anger motivate their activism. Do not trust the establishment media. Freak the powerful out with your tough questions and pointed actions, all while using your creativity!

Moore ominously asks, during the ending of *Fahrenheit 11/9*, "When was the moment we could have turned things around before it was too late?" Well, it's definitely too late to go back in time and change the results of the 2016 election. We have no choice but to face our country as it is. Thankfully, Moore has provided a playbook for how we can fight back. ♣

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# CULT OF THE KILDOOZER

BY STEPHEN PRAGER

**I**T'S JUNE 4, 2004, AND THE STREETS OF GRANBY, COLORADO, are rumbling. As one of just under 1,800 residents of this sleepy service town nestled within the Rocky Mountains, you aren't used to hearing much beyond the sounds of chirping birds, rushing streams, and the steady whirl of car engines as they refuel or their drivers stop for a snack on their way to more interesting places. But today, you peek outside to witness something akin to the footage you've seen on TV of Fallujah. People run for their lives. The city hall, the local newspaper office, and the bank have been reduced to rubble. Gunshots echo across the street, and then you see it. A hulking tank lumbers down the road, rolling over trees, flattening cars, and finally bursting through the walls of the Gambles general store. Its tread becomes stuck in the building's basement. The beast roars with an impotent fury. Authorities surround the machine. The engine is failing. With only a long prison sentence to look forward to, the captain of this death machine, Marvin Heemeyer—the owner of a local muffler shop—whips out a .357-caliber handgun and shoots himself in the head. But had Marv known how he'd be remembered twenty years later, perhaps he wouldn't have.

If you spend much time on the internet, it's only a matter of time before you come across the word "Killdozer," the name affectionately given to Marv's steel-plated Komatsu D355A bulldozer. Despite the name's menace, those who invoke it tend to do so more with awe or outright admiration than scorn. You don't have to look far to find posts describing Heemeyer's vehicle not as a tool of senseless violence, but one of righteous fury. Accounts of his rampage paint him as "a reasonable man driven to do unreasonable things" (a quote lifted from a note Heemeyer left behind after his death). Perhaps the most widely circulated post in the Killdozer mythos, which was shared more than 45,000 times on Facebook, celebrates Heemeyer as "the last Great American Folk Hero" and "a man driven to the brink who chose to fight back against an indifferent system."

The web is littered with Killdozer merchandise. You can buy any number of T-shirts and hats, a Killdozer patch for your tactical gear, and a set of Killdozer coasters for your dining room. You can slap

a bumper sticker on the back of your F-150 reading "Honk if the News Makes You Want to Modify a Bulldozer." Etsy has countless mini replica Killdozer toys to choose from, and you can also find a Marv Heemeyer action figure. (They're the perfect companion for your Oklahoma City Bombing Lego playset!) But perhaps the most ubiquitous pieces of Killdozer kitsch are iterations of the famous Gadsden flag emblazoned with Heemeyer's vehicle. While the classic version displays the phrase "Don't Tread on Me," Killdozer versions modify it to a more ominous sentiment: "Tread on Those Who Tread on You" or simply "Tread on Them." There's even a metal wall decoration that reads "Live, Laugh, Tread."

Right-wing admiration of Heemeyer is of a piece with the similarly meme-laden reverence for the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, who died in prison last year at the age of 81. Invocations of the Killdozer are popular among terrorist and vigilante groups on the far right (though even some left-wingers seem to admire him as well). Megan Squire, a data analyst for the Southern Poverty Law Center, told the *Tampa Bay Times* that it's common for chapters of the far-right Proud Boys street gang around the country to make posts on Telegram celebrating "Killdozer Day" each June. A similar group, the Boogaloo Bois, frequently invokes the phrase "I became unreasonable" in its messages, and one adherent even scrawled those words in blood across a car after murdering a sheriff's deputy in Oakland. It has also been speculated that the Boogaloo Bois' uniform—the Hawaiian shirt—is a reference to Heemeyer, who wore one on the day he carried out his rampage.

Heemeyer's story, at least as it's frequently told in the public imagination, is one of a humble yeoman pushed to the edge by forces more powerful than him. As *Sky-Hi News* publisher Patrick Brower, who covered Heemeyer extensively and had his paper's building destroyed in his rampage, would later tell ABC7 Denver, "They think of [Marv] as the itty bitty guy who fought back at the government that got in their way." But an examination of the years-long saga that led Heemeyer to construct a death machine to terrorize Granby reveals something much different.

One of the most viral “Killdozer Day” posts states that “His business and livelihood were in ruin. Rather than lie down and die, Marvin chose to fight back.” In reality, at the time of his rampage, 9WTK News estimated that Heemeyer left behind an estate worth nearly \$1 million, including a home worth nearly \$400,000 and a business and tools worth more than \$500,000. With that number in mind, it’s a lot harder to view him as an Ordinary Guy fighting back against The Man after being pushed around too long. Rather, he was a wealthy man seething with rage that he couldn’t become wealthier, even at the expense of others.

**T**HE SERIES OF EVENTS LEADING UP TO HEEMEYER’S rampage began in 1992, when he arrived in Granby from nearby Grand Lake, Colorado, seeking a business opportunity. A talented welder, he was renowned for his work with mufflers—“Marv the Muffler Man” was able to change one in 20 minutes, according to one friend quoted by the Associated Press. In his book *Killdozer: The True Story of the Colorado Bulldozer Rampage*, Patrick Brower wrote:

*It didn’t take him long, working at shops in North Denver and Boulder, to see that he was better than his bosses at the mechanics and the business side of muffler repair. He opened his own shop with help from a partner and before long he had two more shops in Boulder and Denver. Through the ups and downs of the economy he had managed to buy land for the shops at low prices and sell them high. He made money on real estate and he still owned a shop that was making good money. He’d keep it, hire a manager, and move to the mountains to enjoy the good life.*

In the aftermath of the Savings & Loan crisis of the 1980s, foreclosed properties were being sold for rock-bottom prices. It was in this environment that Heemeyer saw his next opportunity. He learned of a distressed two-acre plot of land in Granby that was coming up for auction. He’d learned that multiple appraisers had valued the land at over \$100,000, well over the starting bid of \$20,000. And he knew that his snowmobiling buddy and former auto-repair partner, John Kleiner, had been seeking to move his own business from Boulder into the mountains. According to Brower, “Heemeyer hoped he could buy it for a song, lease it or sell it back to Kleiner on favorable terms and add to his already fairly comfortable income stream.”

After bidding against two other men, Heemeyer wound up with the winning bid, getting the plot for \$42,000, much less than the \$66,000 that he and Kleiner had been willing to pay. Little did Heemeyer know, one of the other bidders was the property’s former owner—Cody Docheff, who owned a concrete plant right next door.

The other was the former mayor of Granby, Gus Harris. As Heemeyer recalls in a series of tapes he left behind as a manifesto, Docheff and Harris approached him after the auction to give him a “tongue lashing for about 10 minutes about who I thought I was and what I was going to do with the property.” Heemeyer also says he offered to sell the property to the men for \$66,000, but they couldn’t reach a deal. Heemeyer would later say it was because they offered him \$50,000, less than the amount he’d get if he sold the land to Kleiner. Heemeyer would later go on to describe Docheff as “about the rudest, most arrogant person... a fucking asshole.” For their part, Docheff says he doesn’t remember having any conversation with Heemeyer, while Harris only recalls saying, “Well, it looks like you got yourself a piece of property.” Another local businessman who was present says he did not remember any verbal confrontation between the men.

At any rate, Heemeyer was now the owner of what seemed like a “perfect” piece of land. Or at least that’s what he thought. He soon realized that the plot didn’t have a legal water or sewer service—instead, Brower says in the documentary *Tread*, “it had nothing more than just a concrete mixer tank that was holding the sewage.” Heemeyer had been told by Bud Wilson, the manager of the Granby Sanitation District, that he could be hooked onto the local sewer system. But when he arrived at a board meeting to iron out the details, he learned that he’d be responsible for installing a pump station and 100 feet of service line in order to get connected to the sewer main. According to Brower’s book, Heemeyer was told by the board’s Vice President, Ron Thompson (the son of another former mayor, Dick Thompson, and part of another wealthy land-owning family), that it would cost him “a pretty penny,” both to set up and maintain. They also told Heemeyer that he could instead install a septic tank for a considerably smaller amount of money.

Marv Heemeyer rejected both of these offers. He said he’d be willing to pay to get annexed into the system and pay property taxes, but that “you’ve got to hook me up.” The board told Heemeyer that the town couldn’t just hook him up for free. “This little district isn’t made of money. We can’t let the other



people, people here before you, pay for you,” Thompson said. “We’ll pay to annex. You have to pay to hook on. Those are the rules. Development has to pay its own way, otherwise we’d go broke.” Heemeyer was irate about this, saying it was “not worth it,” as the hookup might end up costing more than \$70,000, more than he’d paid for the property itself. “You should want to hook me on,” Heemeyer argued. “I’ll bring business and fees to you. I’d become part of the community with a nice little business down there. Even more. I could expand. I mean, what do you do then?” After Thompson refused again, Heemeyer stood up and exclaimed, “You can’t expect to grow if this is your policy. It’s extortion by government fiat. I don’t need you. You need me.”

This interaction gives you a very clear look into Heemeyer’s beliefs about his rights and obligations as a businessman and, by extension, the beliefs of his defenders. Heemeyer would come to believe that he was being set up by Thompson, who owned the excavation company that likely would be responsible for installing the line. That could well have been the case. And it’s definitely fair to wonder if someone like Thompson, who stood to privately benefit from sanitation contracts, should have had a place on a board that decides what sanitation projects need to be paid for. But it’s clear that Heemeyer’s objection was not so much about who’d benefit from his payment, but about the fact that he had to pay for the sewage line at all. The real question here was about whether Heemeyer’s business should have been subsidized by the town, or whether he should have had to bear the costs to get his business up and running himself. His argument for the former is quite familiar if you’ve listened to right-wing economists for any length of time: It’s essentially a case for trickle-down economics on a local scale. Instead of a huge tax break from the Reagan or Bush administration, Heemeyer wanted a free sewer line from the government of Granby. But the logic is the same in both cases. He expected the public to assume the risk on his behalf, while he would most immediately profit—privatizing the gains and socializing the losses, in other words. By draining the government coffers to pay for his sewer hookup, Heemeyer made the case that it would pay off in the long term for the town as a whole. We can’t know for sure if

he was right, although Thompson made a compelling argument that if this same logic was extended to every business that wanted to establish itself on unincorporated land, the town would quickly go broke. In Heemeyer’s myopic and paranoid worldview, this requirement that he play by the same rules as everyone else came to be interpreted not as the cost of doing business within a larger society, but as a conspiracy against him on the part of the town’s grantees.

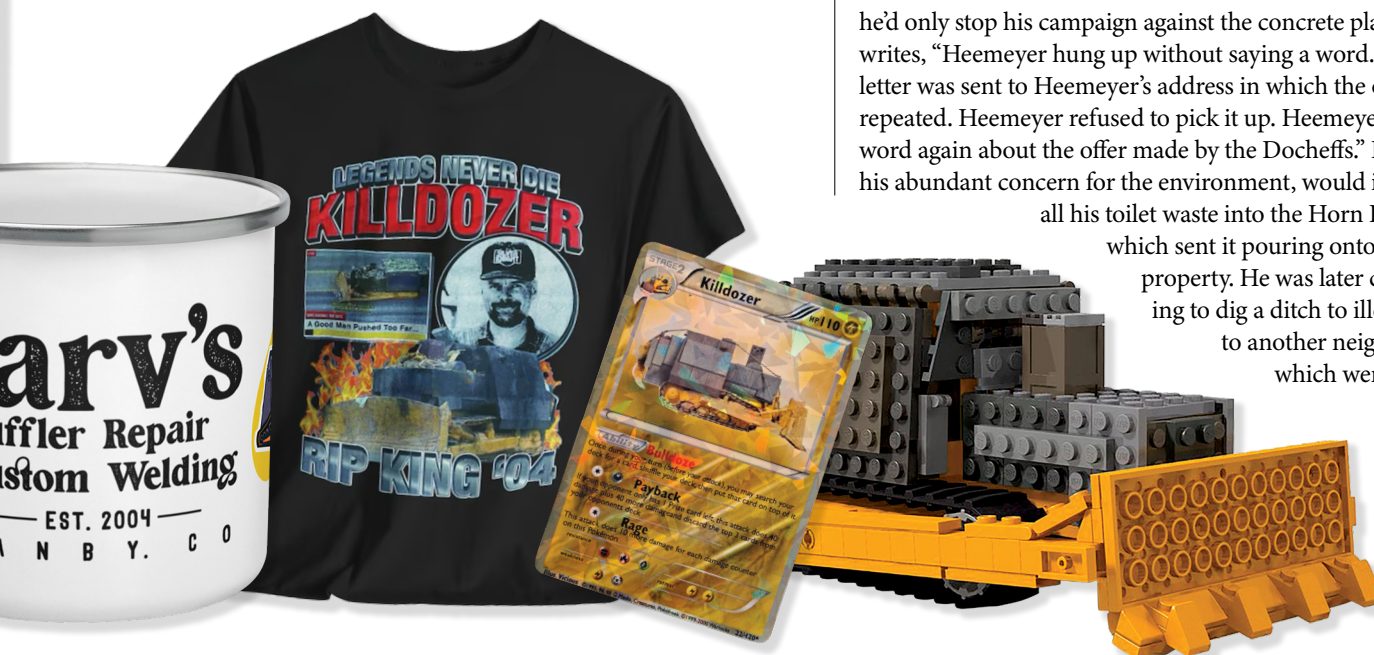
**E**VEN AFTER HIS OUTBURST, HEEMEYER’S PROPERTY WAS unanimously granted the right to connect to the sewage system by Granby’s sanitation board. His hopes of selling the property to Kleiner fell through due to oil spills, which led to an EPA audit and some expensive cleanup. With no buyer left for his land, Heemeyer decided to open his own shop, Mountain View Muffler, on the plot. He maintained steady business, but his resentments continued to build.

In 1997, Joe Docheff (the son of the property’s previous owner, Cody) approached Marv hoping the family could buy his property and construct a concrete plant there. He initially agreed to Marv’s offer to sell him the land for \$250,000, but after checking with his family, he returned to find that Marv had increased the price to \$375,000, then \$450,000 after consulting with appraisers. As the Docheffs presented a plan to the Granby Planning Commission, Marv had initially agreed to swap his property for some prime land elsewhere. But once again, he kept asking for more—including a \$150,000 building paid for by the Docheffs. When the Docheffs refused, Heemeyer began a door-to-door campaign attempting to rally the town against the proposed concrete plant. He wrote a lengthy letter to the editor in which he railed against the plant’s supposed environmental impacts (something he was curiously not worried about when it came to his own lack of a proper sewage system).

In an effort to get Heemeyer to drop the issue, the Docheffs offered to do him a solid. With that old cement tank long filled up with toilet and septic waste, John Docheff called Heemeyer, offering him an easement to be connected to his property’s pipes and onto the local sewer main local sewer main free of charge, if he’d only stop his campaign against the concrete plant. As Brower writes, “Heemeyer hung up without saying a word. A registered letter was sent to Heemeyer’s address in which the offer was repeated. Heemeyer refused to pick it up. Heemeyer never said a word again about the offer made by the Docheffs.” Heemeyer, in his abundant concern for the environment, would instead pump

all his toilet waste into the Horn Ditch out back, which sent it pouring onto a neighbor’s property. He was later caught attempting to dig a ditch to illegally connect to another neighbor’s pipes, which were hooked up to the city system.

In 2001, as Heemeyer’s neighbors



grew sick of dealing with his shit (both literally and figuratively), the town fined him \$2,500 for contempt of the town code for failing to obtain the required sewer hookup—something he'd resisted for nearly a decade. After another year, he'd still not taken the offer. As Brower writes:

*[The board] had been giving him a chance to make it good, without angst. People in town had noticed, wondering why Heemeyer was being given such leeway. He'd been in clear violation for a full year and nothing had happened and many argued he had been in violation long before that. And now Heemeyer wasn't even willing to take advantage of the leeway he had been given.*

They told him that until he removed the concrete tank he'd been using and got a proper hookup to the sewer line, he'd be unable to operate his business. After initially agreeing to the terms, Heemeyer reneged, instead punching out an email with the subject line "Misguided Malice," in which he denounced their efforts as a "form of terrorism":

*I signed unjust and manipulative documents, as the lessor (sic) of two evils, to undeservedly appease what I believe to be a misguided, corrupt and unjustifiably malicious and vengeful group of people who have over the last 10 (TEN) years plus effectively, maliciously, willfully and perversely sought to impede my attempt to develop a property, earn an income and provide for my future.*

As he walked out of the courtroom, Heemeyer's attorney Ben McClelland said he recalled hearing him say, "I'm just gonna bulldozer this whole place to the ground."

**"God built me for this job. He rewarded me for 45-50 years with a lifestyle that I am so thankful for. And it's unfortunate. The poor people in Granby. So many of them were so jealous of my lifestyle — that I could come and go as I pleased. Well, God blessed me in advance for the task that I am about to undertake."**

— MARVIN HEEMEYER

**I**N 2002—IN THE MIDST OF HIS LEGAL BATTLE—MARVIN Heemeyer traveled to California and purchased a Komatsu D355A bulldozer for \$16,000 at auction. After having it shipped to Granby, Heemeyer put the dozer up for auction but struggled to find any takers. He soon eased the hulking machine back into his garage and found that it fit perfectly. He believed that it was a sign from God. Shortly after the disastrous town meeting, he reclined in his hot tub and recorded these words to a cassette tape:

*I'm trying to understand why this was happening to me. And, to do what I have to do — to make these people listen. A peace is coming over me that has only come over me a few times before in my life; where I know that what I will do is tough but it is the right thing and that it is above me. It wasn't me. I am doing this because God wanted me to do it. And I didn't understand it. I said "Why did you ask me to do this? Is that why I've never been married?"*

*So I didn't have a family? Is that why I've always been successful? So that I would realize my reward before doing this task?" I don't know. There are other things I can ask. Why had I not carried my cross earlier, and now God has prepared me to carry this cross? I believe so.*

He shut down Mountain View Muffler in October 2002, putting almost all of his tools up for auction. He was able to sell much of his property, including the building itself, for \$400,000 (nearly ten times what he'd paid for it). Within a day, the new owners got hooked up to the sewer main.

Marvin Heemeyer would take the next year and change off work. He spent the winter snowmobiling through the mountains with a group of friends. When the weather warmed up, he headed back to Granby. The dozer remained off in a corner, covered in a polypropylene tarp. Heemeyer had leased back part of his property from its new owner—a trash company known as The Trash Company—and converted the steel shed into a miniature apartment, with a small windowless area blocked off from view with more tarps. The only thing the apartment lacked was a toilet and water. But that was no issue—Heemeyer just kept dumping everything into Horn Ditch.

He'd set up security cameras outside to ensure nobody would enter unexpectedly. According to his tapes, Heemeyer "spent the whole summer of 2003 in that freaking building, lived there without a shower for as much as four days at a time working." Under cover of darkness, he hauled supplies from the local Ace Hardware and drove up to Denver to procure massive slabs of steel. He constructed a homemade crane that he used for welding. He fortified the engine, cabin, and part of the tracks with layers of quick-dry concrete sandwiched between two sheets of half-inch thick steel. At some parts, the armor was more than a foot thick. He installed a ventilation system, air conditioners, and security cameras on the now-windowless machine's exterior that he could view with two computer monitors on the dashboard. Some of the only vulnerabilities in the shell of the nearly 50-ton monstrosity were the three small ports he'd sliced out for his rifles.

**O**N JUNE 4, 2004—A DRIZZLY FRIDAY AFTERNOON—MARVIN Heemeyer clanked down the hood of his death machine and spent two hours smashing through thirteen different buildings. His first stop, naturally, was the Docheff's property next door, where his battering ram destroyed virtually everything but the concrete plant itself. Docheff tried to stop the machine by throwing objects between its treads, but it was no use. Heemeyer proceeded to rumble down Agate Avenue, wrecking his enemies' businesses one by one: Liberty Savings Bank, Mountain Parks Electric Co., Maple Street Builders, Granby Town Hall, the Sky-Hi newspaper office, and Kopy Kat Graphics and Printing.

A common myth in the Killdozer community is that Marv limited his attacks only to those who'd wronged him. Even if this were true, it would hardly be justified. But it's not. He attacked the office of a random woman who happened to sit on the zoning board. In an attempt to bulldoze the home of Mayor Dick Thompson, who by that time was already dead, he wound up instead attacking Thompson's 82-year-old widow. He rammed into the city hall just

moments after a group of children who were there for a story hour in its basement library had evacuated. While the kids narrowly escaped, countless town records and archives did not. Defenders point to the fact that nobody but Heemeyer died that day as evidence of his benevolence. But that fact is no thanks to him. People only knew to evacuate because of a reverse 911 call from the police department that was sent out shortly after news got out of a bulldozer on the loose. At one point, Heemeyer swerved into a propane storage yard and began firing dozens of rounds at the tanks, which were right next door to a senior center that had to be evacuated. He not only seemed determined for someone to die, but determined to engulf the town in a ball of fire.

The dozer withstood hundreds of bullets from the police. With efforts to stop the monstrosity proving futile, Governor Bill Owens reportedly considered calling in Hellfire missiles or Javelin anti-tank missiles to take the bulldozer down, but ultimately decided against it, as an airstrike would cause greater damage than Heemeyer was capable of. In the end, it was not military or police firepower that did the Killdozer in. As Brower writes, “Heemeyer had over-designed and over-engineered the MK Tank. It was too heavy.” Heemeyer added an extra 25 tons to the dozer’s already considerable mass, making it weigh as much as a school bus. As a result, once he got stuck in the basement of Gambles, he stood no chance of escaping. Meanwhile, the extra weight also caused the machine to overheat and its radiator to burst. Fittingly, it was Heemeyer’s hubris that slowly killed his Killdozer.

IT’S WORTH PAUSING FOR A MOMENT TO NOTE HOW THE popular Killdozer narrative describes Marvin Heemeyer at the point in his life when he began planning his revenge: “*His business and livelihood were in ruin. Rather than lie down and die, Marvin chose to fight back.*” If having more than \$400,000 worth of assets counts as having your “livelihood in ruin,” then ruin doesn’t sound half bad. After shutting down his business, Heemeyer didn’t have to hop from mountain town to mountain town searching for work. He wasn’t bagging groceries or working as a Walmart greeter, as far too many people in his age bracket end up doing. He got to enjoy, at least for a time, an idyllic early retirement. People who are actually in dire financial straits typically don’t get to take a year off work snowmobiling. They don’t have \$55,000 lying around to spend on frivolous lawsuits. And perhaps this goes without saying—they don’t have the money to build killdozers!

Whatever you want to make of the motivations of Marvin Heemeyer’s antagonists—whether they were truly following the letter of the law or using it as cover to pick on a newcomer—I struggle to find anything remotely sympathetic about Heemeyer’s grievances. His objection seems less to do with the fact that there was a “good ol’ boys club,” but that he wasn’t a part of it, and was not afforded the special treatment he believed he was entitled to. However, I can easily understand how a libertarian, someone who believes in the right to operate a business free of any considerations about its effect on wider society, might find inspiration in the Killdozer. Many sentiments in Heemeyer’s tapes sound like they could have been uttered by Ayn Rand:

**“It’s my life. I am an independent business person and only**

**I am responsible for my future and my income and my livelihood. And they’re threatening that and they’re pissed off because I’m trying to defend my property and my livelihood against this and that.”**

**“I want to say that I believe that I am an American Patriot. I believe in the free enterprise system. I believe in a level playing field of competition. If you want to change that level playing field of competition to your advantage, basically you give me license to do that also when my opportunity comes around.”**

**“They have to get some self-esteem, some self-respect, and love their neighbors and not try to deprive them of a right to make a living to have their dreams realized. And it’s sad that people down there do that and I’m talking about the leaders of the community. They keep people down because if they didn’t, the real cream of the crop would rise to the top and, you know, knock them from their position.”**

THE NARRATIVE THAT VALORIZES HEEMEYER SAYS HE WAS just “minding his own business” before the government decided to push him around. But if you take on the responsibility of owning and operating a business within a community where other people live, there’s essentially no way to “mind your own business.” When you dump out your waste, it doesn’t just disappear, it ends up becoming someone else’s problem. If the town pays to hook you up to the sewer line, which Heemeyer expected to be done for him, that’s money that comes out of other important services.

But a key aspect of libertarianism is that it refuses to take these external factors into account, or at least downplays them to the greatest extent possible. This is certainly liberty for the person free from the fetters of government. But I would not feel particularly free if piss and shit were suddenly pouring into my yard. Heemeyer reveals the Janus-face of libertarianism, which expects “non-aggression” on the part of government bureaucracy—even the requirement that human waste end up in the right place is deemed coercive. But the maximum amount of aggression—a Killdozer rolling through the streets and plowing into children and old ladies—is allowed in response. In that sense, Heemeyer is the perfect martyr for the libertarian cause, and arguably a predecessor to the class of “small business tyrants” who would come to form the base of the Tea Party movement and eventually Trumpism. There are millions of Marvin Heemeyers around the country, busy seething that anyone would dare govern or regulate them. And though most of them are not building killdozers in their garages, some of them marched on the Capitol four years ago, while others are driving a figurative killdozer through labor law in states and cities around the country, and using lobbying groups to get rid of rights as basic as mandated water and lunch breaks for their employees. Whatever their methods of reaction, their core tenet is the same as Heemeyer’s—that they are the “cream of the crop,” and the expectation that they exist cooperatively among the rest of society is the sole thing keeping them from rising. ✦



These College  
**PRESIDENTS**  
have lost **SLEEP**  
over the protests

**SETTLEMENT  
ABROAD PROGRAM**

**FREE  
SPEECH  
HERE**  
→

**DESIGNATED  
PROTEST  
PIT**

**FREE  
PALESTINE**

**CEASEFIRE  
NOW**

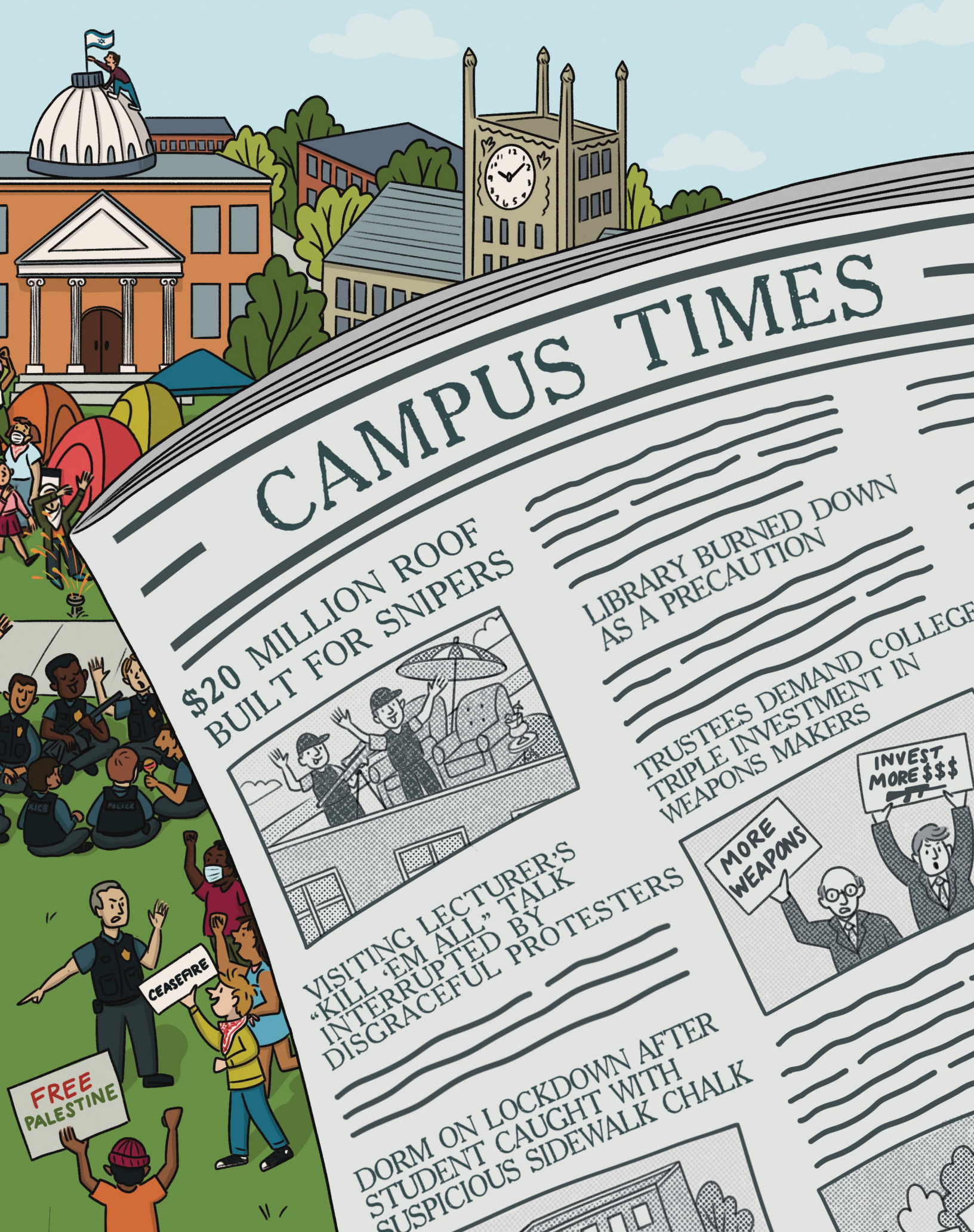
**STOP THE  
GENOCIDE**

**STOP  
FUNDING  
GENOCIDE**

**NEW RULES**  
1. NO SIGNS  
2. NO CHANTS  
3. NO  
KEFFIYEH  
4. NO  
WATERMELON  
5. NO  
SINGING  
6. NO  
PALESTINIAN  
FLAG  
7. NO SMILING  
8. NO TENTS  
9. NO  
YELLING

**ADMIN**

**LIBRARY**



# CAMPUS TIMES

\$20 MILLION ROOF  
BUILT FOR SNIPERS



VISITING LECTURER'S  
"KILL 'EM ALL" TALK  
INTERRUPTED BY  
DISGRACEFUL PROTESTERS

LIBRARY BURNED DOWN  
AS A PRECAUTION

TRUSTEES DEMAND COLLEGE  
TRIPLE INVESTMENT IN  
WEAPONS MAKERS

MORE  
WEAPONS

INVEST  
MORE \$\$\$

DORM ON LOCKDOWN AFTER  
STUDENT CAUGHT WITH  
SUSPICIOUS SIDEWALK CHALK

CEASEFIRE

FREE  
PALESTINE

# THE TAKING OF CHILDREN

IS OUR “CHILD WELFARE” SYSTEM SUCCESSFULLY HELPING PROTECT KIDS FROM NEGLECT AND ABUSE? OR IS IT INFLECTING WIDESPREAD TRAUMA THROUGH UNNECESSARY, UNJUSTIFIABLE FAMILY SEPARATION? DOROTHY ROBERTS, PROFESSOR OF LAW AND SOCIOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, HAS LONG BEEN ONE OF THE COUNTRY’S MOST DEEPLY-INFORMED AND CORUSCATING CRITICS OF “CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES,” WHICH SHE ARGUES SYSTEMATICALLY TARGETS POOR BLACK MOTHERS WHOSE ONLY PARENTING ERROR IS TO BE POOR. ROBERTS IS THE AUTHOR OF “TORN APART: HOW THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM DESTROYS BLACK FAMILIES—AND HOW ABOLITION CAN BUILD A SAFER WORLD,” WHICH SUMS UP OVER 25 YEARS OF HER RESEARCH INTO THE SUBJECT. ROBERTS IS ALSO A 2024 WINNER OF THE MACARTHUR FELLOWSHIP, COMMONLY KNOWN AS THE GENIUS GRANT.

## NATHAN J. ROBINSON

You’re doing something very difficult in this book. You are upending people’s understanding of the seemingly obvious. You talk about how we use words that are ultimately perverse euphemisms: “Child Protective Services” and even “child welfare.” It’s a tough task because you’re talking about something that many people won’t even have thought about. They will assume there’s a system out there that deals with cases of abuse, and re saying, “It is not at all how you think it is.” How do you begin to unsettle people’s presuppositions?

## DOROTHY E. ROBERTS

You’re absolutely right. I think it’s even harder to get people to understand how punitive the child welfare system is than for them to understand how the criminal legal system or prisons are oppressive. People expect prisons to be punitive, whereas there’s a myth deeply embedded in our culture and our politics that the child welfare system—and as you point out, it’s partly just the words that are used—improves children’s welfare, foster care takes care of children, and child protection protects children also, even though this system separates hundreds of thousands

of families, with hundreds of thousands of children in the foster system that have been forcibly taken from their families.

Most families, especially white, middle-class, and wealthy families, have no idea what the system does. They've never encountered it, and so all they know is what they see on TV or read in the paper or on social media, which for a long time has been very biased against families that are involved in the system and very pro-family separation. So, it's a difficult task. What do I do to get people to see? One is statistics.

## ROBINSON

Yes, they're shocking. They really are.

## ROBERTS

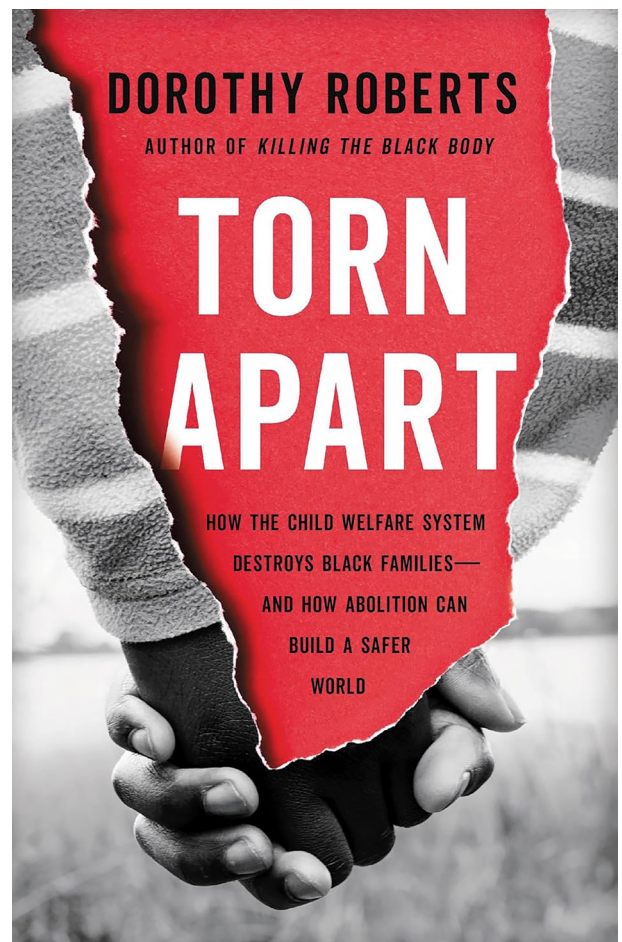
People are shocked when they find out that 200,000 children, at least, are taken from their homes every year, that there are millions of child welfare investigations every year, and that all it takes is an anonymous phone call to a child abuse hotline to trigger an investigation. And one of the most shocking statistics to me is a recent study that found that half of Black children in America—more than half, 53 percent—will experience a child welfare investigation before they reach age 18. So, just the numbers alone, I think, are very shocking. The United States separates more children from their family than any Western nation. So that's one.

The other is to tell the stories of families that have been terrorized and torn apart by the system. People are surprised when they hear that there are children who've been forcibly taken from their homes because a caseworker thought their house was too messy or they found some marijuana in the home, even in a state or city where it's legal to possess marijuana in your home. Most children who are in foster care are there because of so-called neglect, and neglect is almost always associated with poverty. Simply look at the definitions and state statutes. It just means that the family has failed to provide some material need. It could be clothing, education, healthcare, or housing. People are surprised when they hear the stories.

I point out the history of this system, which was never developed to be a system to really support families and keep children safe. It was, from the very beginning, developed as a way to deal with impoverished children's needs without having to actually provide for their needs. It has always targeted impoverished families, and for Black and Indigenous families, it has been used deliberately—explicitly with Indigenous families—as a weapon of war, as a way of destroying communities.

## ROBINSON

You've begun to discuss something that's an incredibly cruel feature of the system. It's hard enough to raise a child when you are poor, when it's a struggle to provide and you just don't have much money. You are talking about the symptoms of poverty: the fact that because you're working all the time, your house is a mess because you don't have time to take care of it, and you can't pay for a cleaner; the fact that there's not much food in the fridge because you can only buy food for the next couple of days. These things are not just your day-to-day struggle, but they are then



*Dorothy Roberts "Torn Apart" book cover*

used as evidence against you, as evidence of your own failures, and they can be used to justify the worst and most horrendous conceivable outcome, which is the removal of your children.

## ROBERTS

That's exactly right. It's one of the cruelest things about this system, what I call a family policing system, because that's really what it does. It targets the most marginalized and vulnerable families in our nation, and it punishes them for being the victims of social inequities. So instead of seeing a family that has [material needs]—insecure housing, roaches and rodents in their apartment, not enough food or clothing, they're unable to afford healthcare, they have a child who's struggling with a mental health disorder, and they can't afford proper care for that child—and offering to provide these material resources, the response of the system is to punish the parents who are struggling with inadequate means to be able to care for their children.

As you said, [child removal] is for most families the worst nightmare that could ever happen to them. Their children are taken from them by force and put into a system, and they don't know what's happening with their children other than knowing that their children are traumatized by this. Also, it's well-documented that the foster system in America has terrible outcomes

for children. So it's just one violence after another after another for these families.

## ROBINSON

One of the things that you draw attention to that's under-discussed is the fact that—well, obviously, there are serious cases of child abuse out there, and you discuss those in the book. But then the separation of children from parents is also, in itself, a form of child abuse. You look at the effects, and you quote pediatric experts who say that this is a catastrophe for both the parents' well-being and for the child's well-being. And we know this because of the Trump family separations. Even when the children were put back with the parents, the children were incredibly traumatized by it.

ONE OF THE REASONS THIS KIND OF GOVERNMENT TERROR IN FAMILIES IS JUSTIFIED OR EXCUSED IS BECAUSE OF THIS MYTH THAT CHILDREN WILL BE BETTER OFF ANYWHERE ELSE BUT WITH THEIR FAMILIES.

## ROBERTS

That's right. So, first of all, anyone who has a family—we all do, whether you're a child or a parent—knows how devastating it is even to lose a child for an hour, let alone to have your child taken from you, and it's well-documented by pediatric experts that family separation is one of the worst things you can do to a child.

So, as you mentioned, during the Trump administration, when there was an increase in intensified family separation at the border, there was an outcry in our nation because people recognized that an extremely harmful and cruel thing to do to a child is to take them away from their parents. There were briefs filed in federal court, there were briefs filed at the U.N., about how this family separation constitutes even a form of torture for children and their parents.

So we know that this is harmful.

But many Americans have been convinced that it is better to put children through the trauma of family separation than to leave them at home. They don't realize that the vast majority of children who are removed from their homes aren't removed because of physical or sexual violence or abuse. They're mostly removed because of neglect. And so you have loving, caring parents who, in most of these cases, are trying to take care of their children, and they just don't have the material resources. And instead of helping them, you're making it worse for these children by adding this trauma to their lives.

## ROBINSON

You mention this idea of neglect. We recently did a program on "broken windows" policing, which emphasized the need for the police to enforce something called "order." And in that program, we discussed how people's conceptions of "order" and "disorder" are racialized. That is, what they perceive to be a disorderly neighborhood coincides and maps on very well to the race

of the neighborhood. You've discussed poverty so far, how the symptoms of poverty are treated as neglect. But also, a very strong theme that you emphasize is that these perceptions of neglect are also racialized.

## ROBERTS

Absolutely. One of the reasons this kind of government terror in families is justified or excused is because of this myth that children will be better off anywhere else but with their families. Now, that myth is supported by long-standing stereotypes about Black families, that Black children grow up in disorderly homes where their parents don't really care for them. These are ideas that stem from the institution of slavery and the separation of families during slavery, and the myth that Black children and their parents

weren't really harmed by this separation because they didn't have strong bonds with each other. And I think this is one of the most profound—in a negative way—and influential ideas that fuels the child welfare system, the idea that Black children, even though they may be harmed in foster care, are still better off taken away from their families than being raised by their Black parents and family caregivers. This racial bias in child welfare decision-making is so well-documented.

I'll just give you a few examples. We know very well from multiple studies that doctors are more likely to interpret injuries to children as child abuse if the children are Black. There are studies that look at the X-rays and compare the doctor's response to a toddler with a fractured bone that looks exactly the same in a white toddler and a Black toddler, but it's far more likely that the doctor is going to suspect and test for and report child abuse in the case of Black toddlers than white toddlers.

Multiple studies show that in the case of suspicion of drug use during pregnancy, doctors are far more likely to suspect that Black women are using drugs while pregnant than white women as well as test for it and report it to child welfare agencies. And then there was a study in Minnesota that used a test that went out to all social workers who were trying to be licensed in the state, and they showed them pictures of a so-called messy house, which I mentioned can be grounds for removing children. And they showed them the same picture of a messy bedroom, one that had a Black child on the bed and another that had a white child on the bed. A significant number of these social workers who were taking this test felt that the picture with the Black child showed [neglect in the] house compared to the picture with the white child. [There is plenty of] documentation of racial bias, which is also borne out in the statistics that show that Black children are at least twice as likely to be removed. And also, it's more likely that Black children will be removed for the same kinds of risks to children than white children. There's so much evidence that it's related to racist ideas, biases, and stereotypes about families.

## ROBINSON

You've talked about the trauma of actual separation, which is so severe. But also, just the fact of an investigation to begin with sets up a presumption of guilt, where you have to prove that you're a good parent. As I was reading your book, I couldn't help but think that at no point in my childhood did my mother have to prove to anyone, ever, that she was a capable parent. There was no moment where someone asked for evidence of that. Whereas in the system that you're describing, even in the majority of cases where the investigation is closed, and they say, "we've decided that you are fit," there's a level of proof now that the majority of Black parents have to have. They have to undergo a test that white parents do not have to undergo.

## ROBERTS

Let me put it this way to be perfectly accurate: it's the parents of a majority of Black children—because these families will have more than one child—who have to undergo this. And think about it: what triggers [this process in which] you have to prove you're a fit parent? It is mostly calls to a child abuse hotline, which can be completely anonymous. And so it can be from a biased doctor, a biased teacher, a biased social worker, or a doctor, teacher, or social worker who wants to help the family and doesn't realize that this is going to lead to a traumatizing investigation and perhaps family separation. This system relies on mandated reporters instead of giving resources to these professionals who are supposed to be helping you care for your children. And so, based on a tip or a report, which can be completely false, an investigation begins.

As you said, most investigations are unsubstantiated—the accusations are unsubstantiated. But still, think about what this investigation is. You're terrified. They tell you that if you don't prove you're a fit parent when they knock on your door, that if you don't let them in—which, by the way, violates the Fourth Amendment, under which you have a right to be presented a warrant before a government agent comes in to search your home, but this is rarely applied—[they're going to take your children]. But once you let



Dorothy Roberts

them in—because you're terrified that if you don't, they're going to take your children—they can search every corner of your house. They can wake up your children and drag them out of bed and strip-search them to look for evidence of abuse even when that's not the allegation.

Let's say they don't find evidence of the harm that was alleged. They're going to keep looking for evidence of something else, and so they get private, confidential records from schools, from hospitals, from other sources. They hire big companies like IBM, SAS, Deloitte, and others to conduct these predictive analytics based on huge databases of private information about families. Then they have this army of so-called mandated reporters who can provide more evidence to try to get families who are accused to be prosecuted. It's very much like a criminal case prosecuted against parents if they don't prove they're fit.

You pointed out that your parents never had to prove that, and it is an important point: most white parents never have to prove [fitness to parent]. But many more proportionally Black parents—a larger percentage of Black parents—have to prove to child welfare workers that they're fit parents, and wealthy white people rarely ever have to prove it, even when their doctors may have evidence that their children have been neglected or abused, even when the children might be suicidal or suffer from anorexia or other

kinds of harms that they may blame their parents for.

If you read almost any memoir by a wealthy white person—maybe it's just the ones I read, I don't know—every one I've read recently tells a story of parents who psychologically or physically abuse them. There's one that was just in the *New York Times* yesterday, and I saw a program on it on the CBS "Sunday Morning" show—not to single her out—by Ina Garten, the "Barefoot Contessa" chef who has a new memoir out now. She talks about her traumatic childhood, of the father who beat her, who dragged her by the hair. He was a physician, I believe. I have never seen in these bestsellers in the *New York Times*—

## ROBINSON

Child Protective Services (CPS) never shows up in those books?

## ROBERTS

Never shows up. And this television actor who wrote *I'm Glad My Mom Died*, everyone on the set knew her mother was psychologically torturing her, and nobody thought to call CPS on her. Now, I'm not arguing that we should expand and take their children away, too. That's never going to happen. Because if white children, especially white middle-class and wealthy children, were taken from their homes at the rate of Black children, it would be—

## ROBINSON

A national scandal.

## ROBERTS

It's never going to happen because it's not designed for them. It's designed for marginalized communities.

## ROBINSON

One of the most disturbing things that you discuss in the book is the financial aspect. One of the darkest parts of this country's history, the fact that for many years, during the period of chattel slavery, Black children were actually taken from their parents and sold. But the fact is that even today, there are plenty of people who do well because of this system, who bene-

fit and profit from it, which in some ways does make it a system in which children are still taken *for money*. So, could you tell us about the kind of perverse financial incentives that are built into parts of the system?

## ROBERTS

Yes. Money makes a difference. Why does this system continue, despite all its flaws and failures and harms? It is an investment for many people, and also, it supports a capitalist approach, that you have to rely on market-based, private means to be able to take care of your children, and if you can't do it, you get thrown in jail, or you have your children taken. That is the basic capitalist approach to care in this nation, and part of that approach is for people to make money off of the removal of children. Multiple agencies—private

**TAKE THE BILLIONS AND BILLIONS OF DOLLARS THAT ARE SPENT ON SEPARATING FAMILIES AND KEEPING CHILDREN IN A HARMFUL FOSTER SYSTEM AND GIVE THAT MONEY DIRECTLY TO FAMILIES.**

nonprofit as well as for-profit agencies, along with public agencies—make money every day that a child is kept in foster care. They are paid to maintain children away from their home. Most of the money that is in this system, which is tens of billions of dollars, goes to maintaining children away from their homes. Ten times as much money is spent on maintaining children away from their homes. So these companies are profiting, making money from keeping children away from their families. That's one part of it.

Another part of it is how the government steals the benefits of children who are entitled to Social Security benefits because their parent is deceased or because they have a disability. And in jurisdictions around the country, the state becomes the guardian because it's the guardian of these children. It takes control of their bene-

fits, and it does not save it for them. It does not spend these benefits on them. It spends it on whatever they want to spend it on. So sometimes children age out of foster care at 18 or 21, and they have no money even though they are entitled to thousands and thousands of dollars in Social Security benefits.

And then there are some departments that charge families for the costs of forcibly taking their children away and keeping them in the foster system. So in multiple ways, this is a system that continues because it's financially beneficial to many people who are hired by the system to keep children away from their families.

## ROBINSON

Now, we don't have time today to go into all of your prescriptions for an alternative, which is a long project that requires dismantling this system piece by piece and putting real care in place. Obviously, step one is to understand the kind of system we're dealing with, the horror that is inflicted every day around this country, and to start thinking and realizing how deeply wrong this thing that is accepted as benevolent and normal is, and the adversarial

approach, this presumption that mothers are under suspicion and not instead that they probably love their children and need help—that presumption needs to shift. How should we begin to start thinking about the alternative?

## ROBERTS

It's an abolitionist frame of mind, and that means both dismantling this harmful system we have now, piece by piece, through legislation, for example, and actually applying the Fourth Amendment to parents and forcing these state agents to get a warrant before they search someone's home, providing lawyers for families—whatever can reduce the power of the system. But at the very same time—this is equally important—reimagining what it would mean to actually support families and keep children safe. That means com-

munity-based resources.

One way of thinking about it is to take the billions and billions of dollars that are spent on separating families and keeping children in a harmful foster system and give that money directly to families. We have so much evidence now that giving cash to needy families improves children's welfare. We should have known that, anyway, but we learned from the COVID policies that it helps children. Unfortunately, Congress ended those, and we saw the child poverty rate double since then. One easy way of thinking about it is to think about how we can shift the resources and the attention from punishing and separating families to community-based resources and policies that actually support families and help them take care of their children.

## ROBINSON

And I want to emphasize that you're not talking about ignoring genuine cases of child abuse. I'm sure that's the first reaction that you always get. People say, here's an instance where a parent killed their children.

## ROBERTS

Right. I'm not ignoring that at all. What I'm saying is, if we had an approach that generously helped struggling families, it would drastically reduce what are rare cases of extreme child abuse and killing of children, and we should also be looking into other ways of approaching the reasons why there's domestic violence in families, whether it's against an intimate partner or against children, and often those are tied together. [The current system] doesn't get at the root of why there's so much violence. And in fact, it deters survivors of domestic violence from getting help because they're afraid their children are going to be taken from them. So we need to just radically change the way we approach this. When you read about a child who was killed at home, it seems like almost always it's a child known to the system, and the system failed to protect that child. So why are we putting more money and more attention into a system that has failed to protect children, instead of imagining and building radically different ways of truly protecting children and keeping them safe? ✚

*Transcript edited by Patrick Farnsworth.*

# *the Illustrators*



## HOW MANY DO YOU RECOGNIZE?

For issue 50, longtime CA cover artist C.M. Duffy has produced a special panorama featuring characters from previous covers!

But how many references do YOU recognize? Are you a CA superfan?

## 1-10 | Do you even subscribe??

11-20 | Okay, maybe there's a copy or two on your coffee table.

21-29 | You are the kind of diligent,  
committed reader we love.

30 | You are S. Chapin Domino.

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