

Current Affairs Is Great Because Current Affairs Is Good

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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OUR ACADEMIC "REVOLUTIONARIES"

by Yasmin Nair

WHEN REFUGEES GET TO TEXAS

by Brianna Rennix

THE DOMESTICITY CULT

by Amber A'Lee Frost

WONKS AND THE WEST WING

by Luke Savage



NOTICE & COMMENT

A subscriber inquires...

Dear friends at *Current Affairs*,

I am yet to receive my Jan/Feb issue. This is frustrating as I am holding out and not reading articles on your website so I can enjoy the full 3-D experience. However, delaying gratification has not been one of my strong points and much like my brief stint of left handed masturbation, I fear I may soon submit to my baser compulsions and read the online articles. I know Australia is a long way away, but for the love of God, we have a postal system, you have a postal system, this thing should work. My fear is that your move to New Orleans has precipitated a cognac, reefer, and ragtime fueled debauch at the offices of *Current Affairs*, and that my subscription fee has been frittered away on good food and high times.

Please address my concerns in a timely manner or I shall be forced to take further action and write another annoying email. I may even be forced to write in all caps. To make up for the inconvenience and frustration that I have endured, please have my copy autographed by a direct descendant of Louis Armstrong and/or the janitorial staff at *Current Affairs* HQ. I think we can all agree it's the least you could do.

Cheers,
Matt Powell

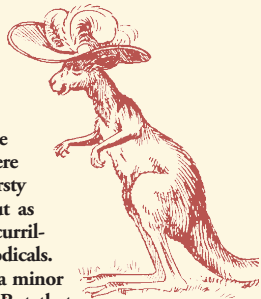
Dear Matt,

We value all of our subscribers, even Australian ones. That said, your allegations against us are borderline libelous and we vigorously reject them. Yes, it's true, there is ragtime on the stereo in the lobby of the Current Affairs Building. What of it? So there is a cognac cabinet in the press room. Are thirsty journalists undeserving of refreshment? But as for reefers, it is disappointing to hear such scurrilousness from a man with such fine taste in periodicals. True, a copy boy was once brought up on a minor possession charge in Plaquemines Parish. But that was a full six months ago, and no vetting procedure, no matter how extreme (and as you know, CA's is renowned for being extreme indeed) can prevent the occasional miscreant or ex-con from slipping past the Human Resources agents. Really all of this is most unfair.

Furthermore, I am quite surprised and saddened that the absence of a magazine in your postbox would instantly lead you to the conclusion that the editors of a nationally-recognized journal of political analysis and commentary are a bunch of hard-partying wastrels, who get sloshed and dance the Charleston when they should be ensuring the Jan/Feb issue has made its way successfully into the hands of the masses. I would ask you, Mr. Powell, which is more likely: that a group of the country's most highly-respected media professionals, whose quality of content has been praised by no less than William Kristol of *The Weekly Standard*, have decided to spend their time rat-arsed on Bourbon Street when they should be sending you a magazine, OR that the felonious bushrangers running what you so amusingly refer to as a "postal service" are off their faces on Tooheys under the shade of the nearest coolibah tree? Far be it for me to doubt the dependability and sobriety of the Australian Postal Corporation's finest, but let us be serious about where the fault most likely lies.

Anyway, we apologize and will send you another copy right away. We wouldn't want you to have to resort to all-caps, nor to suffer the hideous fate of having to read our magazine online. Thank you for being so understanding. We cannot provide a signature from a genuine Armstrong, and there is an ongoing labor dispute with the janitorial staff that will make them ill-disposed toward accommodating such a request at the present time, but we can throw in some *Current Affairs* stickers.

Yours,
Current Affairs



Les écrivains

ALL OTHER WRITERS ARE EDITORS AND THEREFORE INELIGIBLE TO BE DESCRIBED HEREIN.

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*is currently finishing her first novel, *The Blessing of the Hounds*.*

MATTHEW CHRISTMAN

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*is a Toronto-based writer and co-host of the *Michael and Us* podcast.*

Les artistes

ART IS THE BACKBONE OF A DECENT SOCIETY AND SHOULD NEVER BE TRIVIALIZED.

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is an illustrator and cartoonist from the Chicago suburbs.

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NOTE TO PRISONERS

In each edition we are sure to include a note directed toward our prison readership, to remind the incarcerated and enclosed that we are thinking of them and wish them well. We particularly send our greetings to Bernard Noble in Louisiana and Otto Warmbier in North Korea. And we repeat our ongoing call for the full abolition of the prison system, which is a moral stain on the world.

PLEASE TAKE NOTE OF OUR *Civility & Restraint*

CURRENT AFFAIRS HAS ALWAYS CONSIDERED ITSELF A MAGAZINE OF ELEVATED TONE and refined deportment. But lately it seems as if we have required a thoroughly unearned reputation as a “mean” magazine, one that takes enormous pleasure in defecating upon sacred cows. There is surely some minor particle of truth in this. But if we do drizzle a disproportionate amount of ink on insults and invective, it is because the world contains so many things, people, and phenomena that deserve to be insulted and invected against. In particular, several readers have noted a tendency on our part to bully and humiliate the *New York Times*, along with its various staff and columnists (especially its columnists). This, we are told, is not fair: engaging the *NYT* in a battle of wits is like challenging a legless man to a football contest.

This we cannot dispute. But do note: for now, the Lady in Grey retains a slightly higher circulation than *Current Affairs*. Its editorial staff is hundreds of persons larger than our own, however little there may be to show for it. Its headquarters is a good deal taller than the humble 25-story Current Affairs Building in downtown New Orleans. It has a bureau in Shanghai, while we do not. Its page layouts are constructed using high-tech digital computers, while ours are still produced using typewriters and mimeographs. Thus while there may be senses in which we feel superior to our rival, there are other senses in which our high opinion of ourselves is demonstrably factually false.

Nevertheless: we are people of decency and restraint. We will therefore take an extraordinary step. *We will refuse to mock the New York Times for this entire print edition.* You may think this impossible. What if Paul Krugman goes on some delirious rant about Putin? What if the editors use some ludicrously implausible euphemism to describe a U.S. atrocity? It matters not. The urge shall be resisted, the tongue shall be held. There are (thank God) more things in heaven and earth than the *New York Times*, and our energies must be diverted away from loathing it. “You cannot sit around all day just being annoyed by *The New York Times*,” as our mother once scolded.

There will surely be abundant future opportunities to cackle at the failures of the Paper of Record (such as our next issue). But for now, we are good lads and lasses who are willing to play nice. Please take note and praise us accordingly.

A final word: as regular perusers will undoubtedly have observed, there may be many things we do not love. But there will always be one party whom we adore with an immeasurable intensity. We love *you*, our subscribers and readers. *You* we will never taunt, never mock, never betray. You are our treasured *raison d’être*, and we are with you against the world. Never again shall you be alone!

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From our readers...



“ In our house, every day is a Current Affairs day.
Whether we’re spending a quiet evening on the sofa together solving the
Caption Contest, or getting shifaced on the beach while reading the Finance section,
Current Affairs is our sun and our moon, our summer and our fall.
It is the light of our life, the fire of our loins. Subscribing made life bearable. ”

CURRENT AFFAIRS?



From Mr. R. ROBINSON,
HOLBEACH, LINCOLNSHIRE

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HOW CHOCOLATE IS MADE
BROUGHT TO YOU BY A
GENEROUS DONATION BY
CHOCO-CO.



BLIGHT *at the* MUSEUM

by Colette Shade

THE SMITHSONIAN HAS LONG CARRIED A special virtuous sheen in the American imagination. It feels like one of our country's few genuine projects for the common good. It was established out of the bequest of James Smithson, a wealthy British scientist who gave his estate to the young American nation in order to create an institution "for the increase and diffusion of knowledge." In 1846, it became a trust administered by a special Board of Regents to be approved by the United States Congress. No other museum in the country has such an arrangement. And because its buildings line the National Mall, and admission is free, it has been regarded as something like the American people's own special repository for knowledge. The Smithsonian helps define how America sees itself, and carries a weighty sense of dignity and neutrality.

IT'S STRANGE, THEN, THAT IN CERTAIN PARTS OF THE Smithsonian, you may feel rather as if you've walked into the middle of a corporate sales pitch. When I visited the Smithsonian American History museum in December, for example, a "Mars Chocolate Demonstration" entitled "From Bean To Bar" was set up in a vestibule between exhibits. A half dozen people stood at a long table, showing how different stages in chocolate production worked. I had assumed they were docents until I noticed that most wore

shirts embroidered with the Mars logo.

The lead presenter passed around a silicone model of a cacao pod, describing the process of growing the trees, explaining the role of hot chocolate in the American revolution, and telling us that the Aztecs used to consume only the white pulp that grows around the beans in the cacao pods. He informed us that nobody knows how the Aztecs discovered that the beans themselves had value, but offered a theory that they left the discarded beans by the fire, where they burned fragrantly. Then he passed around a bowl of roasted cacao nibs.

Later, I asked him whether he was a historian.

"I make M&Ms for a living," he told me.

The demonstration was sponsored, I learned, by American Heritage Chocolate, a sub-brand of Mars that is sold exclusively at museums and historical sites. It is hard to critique a candy-making exhibit without seeming like a killjoy. But I don't think it's unreasonable to suggest that the Mars promotional demonstration has somewhat limited relevance to the core mission of Museum of American History, or that having chocolatiers speculate about Aztec history is possibly below the expected Smithsonian standard of rigor. Having a chocolate-making demonstration is certainly a crowd-pleaser, and we did get free hot chocolate samples. But one cannot escape the suspicion that Mars, Inc. is using the Smithsonian to advertise chocolate to kids.

THE CHOCOLATE EXHIBIT IS far from an isolated phenomenon. From the moment one arrives at the American History museum, in fact, its corporate sponsorship is evident. Much of the first floor is dedicated to the theme of “American Enterprise,” including the elaborate “Mars Hall of American Business.” The Hall of Business, sponsored by Monsanto, Altria (a.k.a. Philip Morris), S.C. Johnson, Intel, 3M, the United Soybean Board, and of course, Mars (among others) is intended to “convey the drama, breadth and diversity of America’s business heritage along with its benefits, failures and unanticipated consequences.” This kind of euphemistic, understated apologia is typical of the entire exhibition. American business may have experienced occasional “failures” and “unintended consequences,” but it has certainly never been guilty of, you know, “crimes,” or “wrongdoing.”

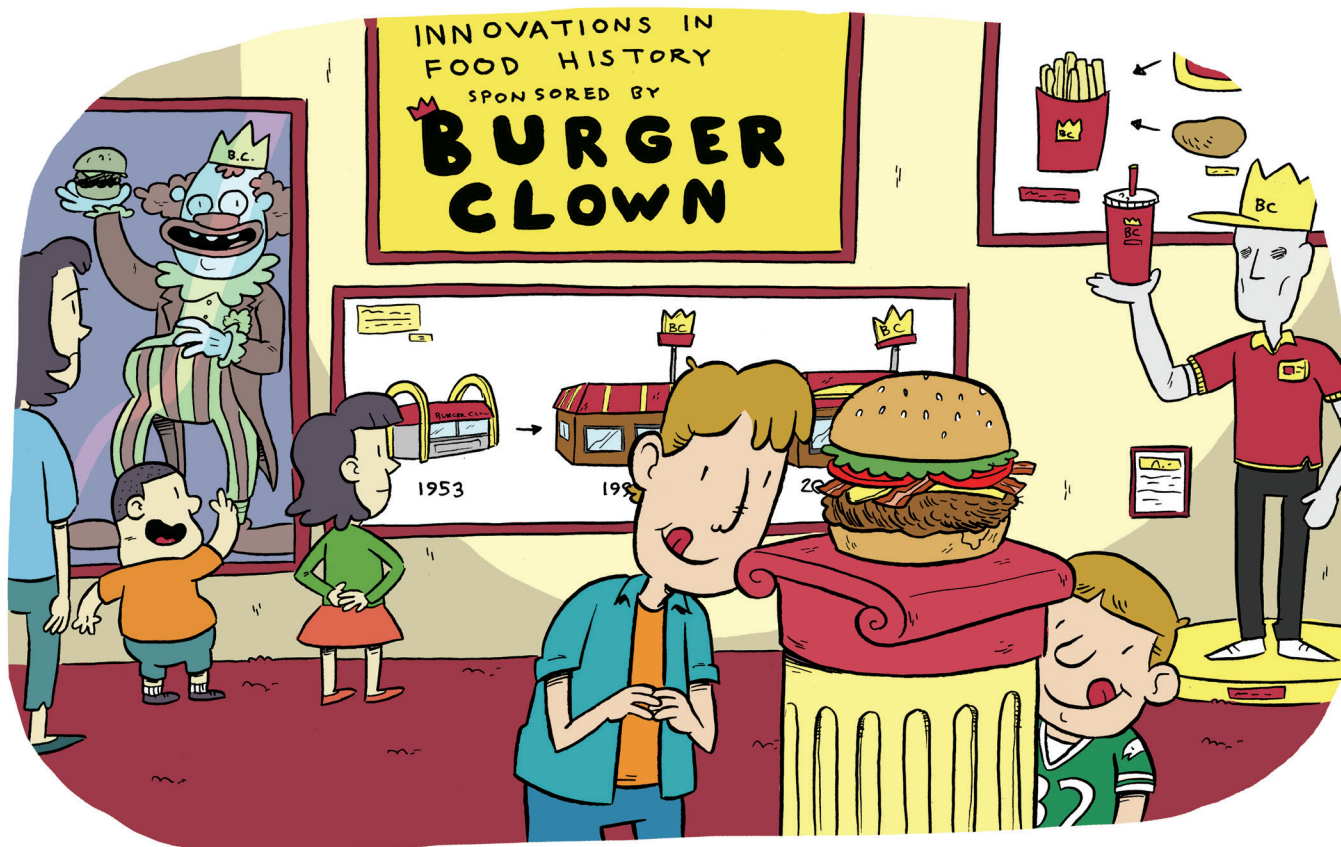
The Hall builds an entire history of the U.S. economy around “themes of opportunity, innovation, competition and the search for common good in the American marketplace.” (Note: *not* the search for profit.) When Mars first announced its multi-million dollar donation to build the Hall, the company’s president declared its intention to “provide examples of how U.S. companies and individuals have fundamentally, and positively, changed the way the world works and be a source of inspiration for future generations of business leaders and entrepreneurs.” The Smithsonian, in turn,

promised to “provide visitors with a hands-on understanding of innovation, markets and business practice,” with activities including “choosing marketing campaigns for target audiences [and] making or losing simulated money through ‘trades.’” Highlights would include “larger personal and family stories featuring biographies of innovators and entrepreneurs.” (Note: *not* day laborers and shoe shiners.)

Thus, there was no pretense whatsoever that the exhibit would be neutral on the question of whether American capitalism had been good for the world. This was to be a celebratory showcase of business’s *positive* achievements. Innovation, growth, and entrepreneurship were the watchwords; anyone expecting a Hall of American Labor Struggles, about the grinding exploitation and violence perpetrated on American workers (from slavery to the Ludlow Massacre to contemporary Florida orange groves) was in for disappointment. The sponsorship of Altria and Monsanto ensures that the history of American economic development is the history of cotton gins and Cadillacs, rather than of child laborers in Kazakhstan producing Philip Morris cigarettes, or Monsanto selling Agent Orange to the Department of Defense.

The pro-business perspective of the exhibition is present in every aspect of its carefully euphemistic language. Here is how the Hall’s text summarizes the “Merchant Era” that lasted from the 1770s to the 1850s:

“During the Merchant Era, many people profited from abundant land and resources—mining gold, acquiring territory, and establishing factories. A market revolution disrupted everyday life and ways of doing businesses. Indian nations struggled with



loss of their land, while other Americans faced changes in work and managing debt."

Of course, the period under discussion is the peak American era of massacre, indenture, conquest, and slavery. But in the Smithsonian's description, these are incidental and unfortunate side-developments, rather than the entire foundation of the economic successes of the "Merchant Era." And to the extent these unsavory details intrude at all, they are sanitized with calculated synonyms and painstakingly exculpatory grammatical constructions. Land is not "stolen," it is "acquired." Indian nations are not exiled, displaced, and killed; instead they "struggle with loss," as if this were some sort of private bereavement, rather than a deliberate campaign of despoliation and extermination waged by enterprising settlers, speculators, and government agencies.

The subsequent "Corporate Era" from the 1860s to the 1930s—the age of Chinese railroad work, the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, robber barons, Pinkertons, the re-enslavement of blacks through Jim Crow prison labor, and the massacre of striking miners—is characterized in a similarly upbeat manner:

"During the Corporate Era, industrialization, national competition, and business expansion brought widespread economic growth and social change to the United States. This period also saw turbulence in the form of widespread immigration, financial panics, and confrontations between labor and management."

The central characteristic of the era, then, is not the long hours worked by 12-year-olds in mines and textile mills. It is not the burning alive of 146 Jewish and Italian garment workers locked by their employers inside a high-rise sweatshop, nor is it the callous opulence of the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, or Astors. Rather, it is a time of game-show values like "expansion" and "competition." Corporations are bringers of Growth and Change, while immigrants and unions are lumped in with financial panics as bringers of Turbulence. It's an era that "saw" confrontation, in some kind of relaxed, desultory, impersonal manner, not an era in which incredibly rich people did their absolute utmost (using legal and extra-legal methods) to keep incredibly poor people working 12-16 hour days in unsafe conditions.

The story is expanded upon in the exhibition's companion book, *American Enterprise: A History of Business*, which is largely edited and written by Smithsonian historians, but also features chapters from such acclaimed historical scholars as Bill Ford of the Ford Motor Company, ex-Chevron VP Patricia Woertz, and S.C. Johnson CEO Fisk Johnson (as well as a single token labor leader). These days, corporations don't just sponsor the history; they even help write it.

None of this is to say that the Hall *ignores* the existence of slavery, labor struggles, and immigrant workers. The Smithsonian is keen to present the story of the "turbulence" that ran through American history, which includes a sympathetic contextualization of the lives of working people. But fundamentally, the "Hall of Business" inherently treats American economic history as the story of businessmen rather than workers. It is a story of success, in which the railroads go west, the canals are dug, and exciting new kinds

of marketing and advertising techniques are developed. The themes that predominate are precisely the themes emphasized by the Mars executive: America's entrepreneurs and innovators are the heroes who built our country. Thus, the bulk of our economic history has been a tale of *triumph*, rather than one of colonization and immiseration.

ELSEWHERE IN THE MUSEUM OF AMERICAN History, the tone is similar. You will find exhibitions on "The Value of Money," "Stories on Money," and "The Price of Freedom." Krispy Kreme, Nordic Ware, and Williams Sonoma all co-sponsor "Food: Transforming the American Table 1950-2000." (To the "Food" exhibit's credit, it does mention the United Farm Workers and point out that "many [have] raised questions about the long-term effects of mass production and consumerism, especially on the environment, health and workers." These questions evidently have not caused the curators of the Smithsonian to lose much sleep, but it is considerate of them to acknowledge their existence.)

In the museum's east wing, the General Motors Hall of Transportation houses an exhibit titled "America on the Move," made possible with generous support from General Motors Corporation (along with AAA, the State Farm Companies Foundation, the U.S. Department of Transportation, ExxonMobil, and others). A placard documents the history of public transit:

"In the early 1900s, streetcars and electric interurban systems helped fill the nation's transportation needs. But over the next few decades the limitations of streetcar systems, government and corporate policies and actions, consumer choice, and the development of alternatives—especially the bus and car—helped make trolleys obsolete... Most important [sic], Americans chose another alternative—the automobile. The car became the commuter option of choice for those who could afford it, and more people could do so. In Washington, D.C., the last streetcar ran in 1962. In 2000, a public-transit authority runs an expansive bus service and operates a subway system. But as in most cities, the majority of D.C.-area residents prefer to drive alone in their cars from their homes to their workplaces."

The language repeatedly emphasizes consumer choice as particularly important. Residents "prefer to drive alone" and the car became "the option of choice." But consumers can only choose among the options that are provided to them. The implication here is that people don't *want* good public transit, they want GM cars. We are thus led to infer that the people in Los Angeles, for example, prefer to sit in two hours of traffic to and from work, rather than be caught riding something as "obsolete" and *déclassé* as a trolley. But do they really have a choice? Driving may be preferable to the other existing transport options, but is really preferable to a functional, far-reaching, and efficient public transit system? By emphasizing that the sovereign consumer has already made up her mind, the exhibit rationalizes the status quo. There is no indication in these descriptions that the world we live in, and the options that are available to us, could possibly have looked otherwise than they do. Though the

IF YOU HAVE HANDS,
YOU'LL *LOVE*...

generic brand
RUBBER
Gloves

Available in
NINE FASCINATING BROWNS *and*
SIX SEXY BEIGES



wear them all the time or...
NEVER AT ALL!
either way you must buy them



Smithsonian exhibits pay lip-service to individual autonomy, the visitor nonetheless gets the sense that the historical development of American business was as inexorable and irreversible as the formation of our mountains and coastlines. We can explain the forces that brought them into being, but we don't think of these forces as having any kind of agency, or moral responsibility. Economic "production" continues to be a black box of hidden suffering, while the entrepreneurial spirit is lionized as the highest form of civic virtue.

ONE COMMONLY HEARS THE ARGUMENT THAT FUNDING doesn't influence content. It was, after all, Hillary Clinton's claim regarding her considerable Goldman Sachs speaking fees. It's also the claim made by corporate-funded researchers. And in theory, in the absence of direct quid-pro-quo corruption, the funder could just hand over the cash and leave the institution/candidate/researcher with total freedom to say and do as they please.

But wandering through the Smithsonian Museum of American History, it's hard to believe that this can be entirely true in practice. Throughout, one gets the vague sensation that the information being consumed has been subtly molded by its sponsors. The Smithsonian has certainly been plagued in the past by sponsorship-related controversies. In 2003, photographer Subhankar Banerjee debuted his exhibit "Seasons of Life and Land" at the American Museum of Natural History. His photos—of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska—were abruptly moved to the museum's basement after Senator Barbara Boxer brought a photo of a polar bear from the exhibit to the Senate floor to bolster an

argument against arctic drilling. The same museum paid for its Hall of Human Origins with a \$15 million grant from David Koch. The exhibit strongly implies that climate change may not be man-made, and reminds visitors that the earth is cooler now than it was ten thousand years ago. According to the *New Yorker's* Jane Mayer, a game at the exhibit suggested that humans could simply evolve to deal with climate change by building "underground cities" and developing "short, compact bodies" or "curved spines," so that "moving around in tight spaces will be no problem."

In some cases, corporate influence on informational presentation is direct and obvious, as in the S.C. Johnson CEO's co-authorship of a Smithsonian book. But elsewhere the effect is more subtle; a phrase swapped in here, the use of passive voice there, and the strategic withholding of anything that might lead the public to demand a change in policy, or to abhor the actions of the ruling class. As I went through the museum, I felt confused and paranoid, *not* because I felt as if all of the facts were being manipulated to serve an agenda, but because I couldn't tell *which* ones were being manipulated.

That's what should be concerning. Corporate sponsorship may only have a limited effect on museum content. Yet any effect at all erodes confidence in the museum's status as a reliable guardian of fact. It's understandable why chronically underfunded museums would turn to whatever revenue streams they can come by. But a museum sponsored by Mars and Monsanto cannot tell the full truth. To let American history be written by its corporations is to give preferential voice to the economy's winner and profiteers, and to downplay or excuse the injustices inflicted upon its underclass. ♦



HOW TV GOT CLASSY

the rise of prestige entertainment

by Matthew Christman

FOR A VERY LONG TIME, TELEVISION WAS BAD. A “vast wasteland,” as FCC chairman Newton Minow called it in his now-quiet 1961 speech *Television and the Public Interest*. Minow went on to ask his audience to sit through an entire day’s worth of television programs. He promised that: “You will see a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And endlessly commercials — many screaming, cajoling, and offending. And most of all, boredom.”

Anyone who took Minow up on his challenge would have been hard-pressed to disagree. For every *Twilight Zone* there was a *My Three Sons* and two *Lassies*. Television had barely come on the scene before people started calling it the boob tube and the idiot box.

Time did nothing to improve television’s quality, variety, or impact on culture. The only real innovation in the medium over its first fifty years was the reality show, which, by the end of the 20th century, was threatening to consume Western civilization entirely with increasingly dystopian nightmare offerings. By the time of George W. Bush’s election it seemed like only a matter of time before primetime network television would consist entirely of live executions and Regis Philbin. But then, when all hope seemed lost, a

shaft of light burst through the covering darkness. A shaft of light in the bulbous, gabagoolian shape of James Gandolfini.

The Sopranos changed what television could accomplish artistically. It utilized the serialized storytelling, the depth of characterization and theme of a novel, and the visual sensibility of film. Episodes ended without the pat resolution that defined traditional TV drama. Stories stretched out over episodes and seasons. Characters underwent the sort of transformations that would have confused and alienated the audiences of previous generations of shows that thrived on archetypes. Inspired by show creator David Chase’s accomplishment, a whole generation of creative heavyweights set to putting their own mark on the medium. The Davids, Milch and Simon, created a pair of HBO shows, *Deadwood* and *The Wire*, respectively, that failed to match *The Sopranos* in viewership, but achieved posthumous critical canonization. Then, the network AMC, which originally showed old Hollywood movies to a small audience of nostalgic geriatrics, really managed to copy the *Sopranos* formula with Matthew Weiner’s *Mad Men* and Vince Gilligan’s *Breaking Bad*. These shows achieved levels of popularity and critical acclaim that had never been seen before, and certainly not on basic cable. TV got so good, in fact, that it wasn’t long before the dominant opinion among cultural tastemakers, from *Vanity Fair* to *Newsweek*, was that television had surpassed film as the most vital popular narrative art form.

As movie theaters were choked with sequels and reboots and soulless,

THE DIRTY LITTLE SECRET OF THE GOLDEN AGE OF TELEVISION IS THAT THE MAIN REASON WE ALL KNOW THAT WE'RE LIVING IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF TELEVISION IS BECAUSE WE'RE TOLD SO BY AN EMERGENT CLASS OF TV WRITERS...

obscenely-expensive comic book spectacles, the choice to stay home and absorb yourself in a rich, complex extended narrative just made sense. David Remnick, editor-in-chief of that ur-cultural tastemaker the *New Yorker*, said as much in a letter he wrote to the Pulitzer Prize committee recommending Emily Nussbaum, the magazine's TV critic, for this year's criticism award. According to Remnick, television is "the dominant cultural product of our age—it reaches us everywhere and has replaced movies and books as the thing we talk about with our friends, families, and colleagues." (Nussbaum won that Pulitzer, by the way.)

THIS NEW ARTISTIC CONSENSUS ONLY HOLDS UP IF YOU put a rather fat thumb on the scale. Critics who make the case for the superiority of television to film invariably compare their preferred boutique cable or streaming experience to the latest blockbuster hackwork, but this is an absurd and unfair comparison. It ignores the vast majority of television shows, from *NCIS: Pacoima* to *Toddlers and Tiaras* to the latest Kevin James fart-fest. You know, the shows people actually watch. *The Big Bang Theory*, a show that somehow never makes it into articles about the Golden Age of TV, averages over twenty million viewers, most of whom are the same people filling theaters for *Transformers: Knight of the Day*. A direct, apples-to-apples comparison would be between the best TV shows the medium has to offer and the best films cinema has to offer.

It would be pointless to argue that a given film is objectively better than a given television series. Tastes are relative. The formats are wildly different. The most revealing contrast is between what kind of critically-acclaimed movies are being made and what kind of critically-acclaimed TV shows are on offer. Just in the past few years, we've seen a film about the painful coming-of-age of a gay black youth in Miami (*Moonlight*), a period horror film about colonial America (*The Witch*), a stop-motion

animated film about loneliness and loss (*Anomalisa*), and a film about an alternative reality where people who fail to find a romantic partner get turned into an animal of their choice (*The Lobster*).

While there are many kinds of television shows being made at the moment, it's worth pointing out that a significant majority of critically-acclaimed, so-called "prestige television" shows are about angsty white criminals (*The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*), angsty white cops (*The Wire*), and angsty white ad execs (*Mad Men*). The current generation of prestige shows, which are universally inferior to that first wave by all accounts, rely on an assortment of genre tropes and the template laid by those pioneering programs. Mostly crime. Mostly male. Mostly extravagantly unlikeable anti-heroes whose sheer awfulness makes us feel better about our own, more mundane foibles.

It's also worth keeping in mind that television shows are, even more than films, advertisements for themselves. Issues of character, theme, story, setting, are, in practice, very often subsidiary to the primary objective of keeping people watching. All the cliffhangers and suspense sequences have less to do with artistic expression than in keeping the audience hooked. Even shows on streaming services like Netflix and Hulu, where binge-watching is the norm, are angling for that second season renewal. A movie can do its own thing for two hours, leave the audience confused or alienated or angry, and everyone involved moves on to the next project. A show that did that wouldn't get to come back, and therefore wouldn't be able to complete whatever grand design its creators insist is animating the entire thing. Staying on the air in a fractured media landscape, where the difference between a hit and a quietly-canceled flop is a few hundred thousand viewers, is essential if one wishes to be Part of the Conversation.

As a result, the subgenre of "Prestige TV" has become a tautological concept, with show after show earning the label simply by aping the aesthetic sensibility and glossy production value of the shows that first defined the genre. Everything is brooding, tortured anti-heroes, stillness punctuated by sudden acts of violence, montage and ironically counterposed musical choices. Plus bad writing—really, howlingly bad writing. Kevin Spacey, in his Golden Globe-winning performance as *House of Cards*'s Frank Underwood, regularly looks into the camera and fake-Southern-drawls some fortune-cookie nonsense like "There's no better way to overpower a trickle of doubt than with a flood of naked truth." Jon Hamm's Don Draper, meanwhile, routinely gifted *Mad Men* viewers with such high-level insights into the human condition as "People tell you who they are, but we ignore it because we want them to be who we want them to be." Were epigrams such as these accompanied by, say, a tender swell of orchestral music, it would be immediately obvious how banal and lazily-written they are. But when uttered over the rim of a scotch-glass in a moodily-lit room by an exquisitely-dressed actor, they are, somehow, imbued with profundity.

The dirty little secret of the Golden Age of Television is that the main reason we all know that we're living in the Golden Age of Television is because we're told so by an emergent class of TV writers who have risen to prominence in tandem with it. The rise of the internet has as much, if not more, to do with the rise of perceived TV quality than any show-runner revolution. *The Sopranos* debuted at almost the same moment that the World Wide Web started reaching into the majority of homes, creating an explosion of websites that demanded content directed at a class of office workers who needed something to read to distract them from their white collar drudgery.

And so an army of recappers and critics were called from the digital ether to ceaselessly whisper a constant consolation for the future that never came. After a century of intense economic productivity, you still don't have space colonies or even shorter work-weeks, but hey, you do have your couch and your Seamless and hundreds of hours of

streamable, premium television at your fingertips.

And these new TV shows are not only to be watched, but to be endlessly obsessed over and speculated on: plot puzzles and opaque character motivations offer endless opportunity for fans to take to the web and start theorizing. There are certainly strong incentives in the direction of manufacturing contrived mysteries and intentional plotheoles in order to fuel speculation and drive clicks to websites.

Such is certainly the case with the last prestige TV show to dominate the cultural conversation: *Westworld*. When HBO, the Zeus from whose head the Goddess of Quality Television sprang, debuted *Westworld*, a show with lavish production detail, acclaimed actors, and a Nolan brother behind the camera, there was no real doubt as to how the recappers and critics would respond. But is there anything truly interesting, fresh, and groundbreaking about *Westworld*? The pilot seeps through 80 lugubrious minutes of recycled meditations on man's inhumanity to robot, spiked with gratuitous nudity and violence, and climaxing with one of the cheapest bits of dramaturgy in the prestige TV toolkit. I won't spoil it for new viewers, but it's the same kind of tired old stylistic tricks that the genre routinely uses to make a show's violent, titillating aspects (i.e. the main reason everyone was watching) seem artistic and rewarding. A character monologues optimistically over a montage of her fellow cast members looking stricken or sadistic, all scored with an ironically foreboding ambient score, punctuated by a small act of violence and an abrupt fade-to-black. There's an ominous low tone that signals you're watching Something Very Serious and Important. Behind it, you can almost hear another voice, the voice of the internet opinions to come, assuring you that all of this is as it should be in the best of all possible worlds.

After a few episodes, the fundamental insufficiency of *Westworld* as a piece of art became impossible to ignore even to the most fervent

television evangelist, but the flagship prestige show on the flagship prestige network was simply too big to fail. So the *Westworld* articles spit out by content-mills focused mostly on decoding the show's central plot mysteries (Who is the Man in Black? What is the Labyrinth? Who killed Arnold?), rather than analysis of banalities like "character" or "theme" or "emotional resonance." The glossier outlets insisted that *Westworld*'s woolly-headed pretentiousness and compulsive mystery-mongering were actually a satire of prestige TV tropes. ("An exploitation series about exploitation, full of naked bodies that are meant to make us think about nudity and violence that comments on violence"—Emily Nussbaum) Anything to avoid the obvious fact that everyone watched the show because it had boobs and blood and because everyone else was watching it and it's so lonely out here.



Ed Harris in HBO's *Westworld*

ONE OF THE BITTEREST OF THE MANY BITTER IRONIES OF the digital age is that the explosion of television options and web-based platforms featuring cultural writing has led not to a flowering of creativity and a golden age of critical insight, but an all-consuming monoculture. A cargo cult where the trappings of a few groundbreaking cable shows from early in the millennium have hardened into tropes that power a legion of inferior imitators. Even more disturbingly, dozens of writers at dozens of outlets that depend on clicks and engagement have forged a hive-mind of positivity about the whole thing, assuring their audience that a diet of cultural junk food is just as healthy as balanced meals, because television is the medium best suited to the lives of internet-addicted office drones. Hopefully, as the Golden Age of the Golden Age of Television recedes farther into memory, and as viewers' working conditions grow more and more intolerable, there will be a collective realization that we deserve better than Prestige TV. ❖

QUIZ: WHICH KIND OF INSANE AUTHORITARIAN LEADER WILL I END UP VOTING FOR SOMEDAY?

1. What sentence best sums up our current problem?

- A. "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity."
- B. The old order is broken beyond repair.
- C. Our society can only heal itself through universal love, acknowledging the fundamental interconnectedness of all living things.
- D. Oh God, I'm so tired.

2. If you could designate funding for anything right now, what it would be?

- A. The arts.
- B. Neighborhood self-defense units.
- C. Model farms.
- D. My utility bill.

3. What are your thoughts on free speech?

- A. I'm always in favor of intelligent discourse.
- B. Free speech is a term that's constantly being misused by my enemies.
- C. All our words should be uttered in a spirit of love.
- D. Whatever you want. I'll talk when you tell me to talk! I'll be quiet when you tell me to be quiet! Just—ugh. Just fix this.

4. Is it better for humans to be free and unhappy, or happy and unfree?

- A. Happiness is an elusive concept, isn't it? How can you quantify something so profoundly personal, so inherently subjective? In any case, people should have freedom in proportion to their abilities, don't you think? That way everyone's talents can be put to their best use.
- B. None of us are free until all of us are free. The unfree must be disabused of any mistaken idea that they are happy.
- C. Only when we cease to be slaves to our own happiness will we be truly happy.
- D. Either situation would be an improvement, honestly.

5. Against whom is the use of violence justified?

- A. Against those who seek to disrupt the peaceful social order.
- B. Against those who seek to preserve the corrupt social order.
- C. Nobody: not people, or animals, or fish, or trees, or bacteria, or mosquitoes, or semen, or anybody. We're all one family.
- D. I don't know, man, I'm not at that point yet, but—seriously.

ADD UP YOUR ANSWERS

Mostly A's. Urbane dictator with an art collection. You would never vote for a vulgar demagogue, but here your desire for a more coherent national aesthetic won out easily against your democratic scruples. Are you surprised? Be honest with yourself. If you lived somewhere with cathedrals and boulevards and a national literature, you would be a fascist. Luckily, you live in the United States of America, and so this cup has passed from you. You give thanks for our hideous buildings and our shitty novelists, you bastard! They're the only reason you've resisted your evil angels this long. Anyway, your candidate is going to institute serfdom, at best, and end up committing genocide, at worst.

Mostly B's. Revolutionary who turns out to be a straight-up terrorist. This guy gave you the creeps from day one and you still voted for him. Why? Why, for God's sake? Probably you spent so many years complaining about the corrupt social order at parties that you were embarrassed not to vote for the most radical candidate on the ballot. Well, now look what you've done. The streets are running with blood and it's your fault.

Mostly C's. Religious cult leader. You were so attracted to this fellow's earnestness that you missed some obvious warning signs that he's a raving lunatic. It's not the first time in your life you've made this mistake; though, sadly, it may well be the last, as average life expectancy is about to plummet. Your new spiritual father will establish a state religion, dismantle the healthcare system, and force everyone to return to subsistence agriculture. Chances are there's some weird sex stuff going on behind the scenes as well. Too much interconnectedness altogether. It was such a nice idea, though!

Mostly D's. Literally anyone who will forgive my student loan debt. Sadly, there was no such candidate in this election. Your vote was wasted.

THESE SORDID AFFAIRS

ON TINY FONTS



IT WAS AN ISSUE WE HAD HOPED NOT TO ADDRESS. “Oh, the letters will stop eventually,” our editor declared. “The best way to deal with something like this is to pretend it isn’t there.” The letters did not stop. Month after month, the readers made it clear: *Current Affairs*, they said, was majestic. But in many places, its fonts were simply too tiny. At best, this made them unreadable. At worst, we were engaging in systematic age discrimination. No national political magazine has been a more stalwart voice for the elderly than ourselves (see our “Old People: Their Various Uses” feature, from the Nov./Dec. 2016 issue). Thus it is disturbing to have been charged with acts of a bigoted nature. Our editor’s blithe unconcern

notwithstanding, the issue caused a rumble of self-doubt and anguish among the more social justice-minded of our editorial staff. And as a trickle of letters turned to a torrent, it was resolved that Something Must Be Done. The difficulty, of course, is that we like our tiny fonts, even if our readers do not. Font size is a highly serviceable way of indicating the relative importance of various lumps of text, and if we have occasionally placed items in 4-point font, it is only because we feel as if any larger size would display an unwarranted arrogance to which the reader would also object. Further, having tiny fonts allows us to sprinkle “buried treasure” throughout the magazine, and is one of the reasons *Current Affairs* has come to know itself as “a magazine that rewards the re-reader as much as the reader.” Nevertheless, we recognize that the elderly’s eyes are not what they used to be. Thus, unwilling to compromise our font sizes, but sensitive to the differential abilities of the reading public, we have hatched a solution: magnifying glasses shall be provided to paid subscribers, so that they may enlarge our various printed offerings at their leisure. For \$1 + S&H, we will dispatch to the reader a cheap and shoddy magnifier, which will forestall any grounds for serious complaint. We feel it is a just and innovative solution. Please sent cheques to: *Current Affairs*, Attn: Compliance & Receivables, P.O. Box 441394, W. Somerville, MA 02144.

A VISION OF TOMORROW

YOU HOLD IN YOUR HANDS (OR UPON YOUR LAP) the sixth edition of that esteemed periodical, *Current Affairs*. The preternaturally numerate among our audience will have noted that this means we have now been publishing for *one entire year*, a year during which not much happened and the world floated gently through the stream of time without suffering serious discontent. Of course, the main difference between 2016 and any other year in the history of Earth is that 2016, unlike those other years, had *Current Affairs* in it. This made 2016 objectively the best year that our species has yet experienced.

It cannot be said that human life began with *Current Affairs*. But nor can life before *Current Affairs* truly be classified as life at all. And when tomorrow’s sociocultural anthropologists look back at our epoch, they will surely note above all the difference between the state of the world before our periodical and the state of the world during it. Before us, the dark. With us, the light!

The history of humankind up until now has been lamentable. For aeons (and aeons), the people of Earth have struggled to sort themselves out. As a species, they have generally behaved in a manner unbefitting their role, recklessly squandering their potential. They have fussed, mused, and cussed. They have fought over the most trivial piffle. They have developed thoroughly ludicrous notions, from racism to capitalism. Their finest minds have conjured totally imaginary fields of study, from phrenology to theology to sociology. They have squandered the Earth’s bountiful resources on building ridiculous and unusable things like the City of Los Angeles. They have grinded up the forests and made piñatas from them. They have eaten the animals against the animals’ will. They have devised poison gas, the hydrogen bomb, and various kinds of attack submarine.

All in all, it has been a track record of folly, blunder, and calamity. We have blown ourselves up, given ourselves heart conditions, and ruined our verdant land-

scape. None of this is any good.

Fortunately, things are on the verge of changing for the better. No more will human beings fumble and bumble themselves into the abyss. No more will our personalities range from the hapless to the malevolent. It is time to shape up and sort out our predicament. The warfare, the despair, the cheap and shoddy consumer goods: all of this has gone on far too long and must be stopped. Governments must free their people and bosses must free their workers. The future will be far better than the present. It must be. (It is a task easily accomplished, as the present is widely known to be absolute rubbish.)

The coming era will be a great one, “great” not in the Trumpian sense but in the actual sense. There will be more joy, more culture, more democracy, more fellatio. The buildings will be more attractive. Strangers will beam at one another and say “How do you do?” Hats will be worn, some silly, some sober. Our habitations will be made fresh and cozy. New York City will finally be washed. There will be more romantic gestures, more soft pillows, more ball-room dances. Racial divisions will evaporate, the rich will have their money taken away, space will be explored. The muffins will be more delicious, the children less noisy. New kinds of cacti will be developed, some friendlier than others.

There is no room for pessimists here on Spaceship Earth. It is understandable, given the state of certain institutions, that some people may be feeling a trifle gloomy just about now. But gloom builds no utopias. Only delusional optimism and excitement can take us anywhere worth going! Besides, what the pessimist forgets is that from now on, every subsequent year will have more *Current Affairs* in it. This is reason enough to feel cheerful.

There is an old saying, a variation on that of a certain war criminal, and now the *Current Affairs* guiding mantra: “The improbable we do immediately. The impossible takes slightly longer.”

Onward!

LETTERS

RE: “THE VIEWING OF NATURE” (JAN./FEB. 2017)

To the editor:

There’s so much wrong with this poorly written piece by Amber A’Lee Frost. Frost is really the last person who should be writing about this domain. She has previously proven herself ignorant in the area of animals and has done so again here. One can return to her essay in the *Baffler*, “Flakes Alive”, where Frost trashes and misrepresents animal rights advocates. However ignorant the David Brooks and Tom Friedmans of the world are, the Amber A’Lee Frosts are even worse.

Yours,
T. Schmidt

Mr. Schmidt, we can assure you that we treat this complaint with the amount of seriousness it deserves. Ms. Frost has been temporarily suspended from the Animals beat, and her status will not be restored until she completes a remedial education in online sloth videos.

To the editor:

I accidentally doused my *Current Affairs* in coffee. Is there a way I can order a replacement?

Those who mistreat *Current Affairs* should hardly be allowed to handle additional copies of *Current Affairs*. Please provide a written explanation of the means by which you will ensure that no such irresponsible mishap befalls the replacement. Should it please our editors, a replacement may be dispatched.

REGISTER YOUR COMPLAINTS

Does *Current Affairs* nauseate or displease you? Do you feel compelled to let us know? Do you possess inordinate quantities of free time?

Write to us: CURRENT AFFAIRS, ATTN: DEP’T OF PUBLIC RELATIONS, P.O. BOX 441394, W. SOMERVILLE, MA 02144.

HOW LIKABLE WE ARE

IT IS A BURDEN BEING LIKABLE. PEOPLE always wish to spend time around you, and people are exhausting. Your very appearance causes them to smile, and you find yourself obliged to smile back, which over time becomes taxing on the mouth.

Lately, *Current Affairs* has found itself in the concerning position of being extremely well-liked. We are an affable magazine, and unless you are Jamelle Bouie of *Slate*, you almost certainly think very highly of us. If one of our editors approaches a lady at a party, and says "Good evening, madam, I am an editor for *Current Affairs*. May I ask you some questions of an invasive nature?", the lady in question is almost certain to reply "Oh, *Current Affairs*, that's that *likable* little magazine, isn't it?" And indeed it is, with the minor qualification that we are anything but a "little" magazine, being distributed in 9 of the world's nations and 45 of the United States' various states. The key word here is *likable*. She will not say "in-depth" or "prize-winning," though we are both of these things (having received what is known as a "Reverse Pulitzer" by having the Pulitzer Prize committee's Twitter account retweet a disparaging comment about our work). No,

she will say "likable." For it seems that no matter what we do, we cannot turn public opinion against us.

This is in spite of being something of a "mean" magazine, having insulted a long list of notable public worthies and widely-beloved cultural phenomena. (See our Sept./Oct. 2016 issue for a thorough list of the individuals against whom we have directed contemptuous snorts.) Some deeply concerning praise has come our way. Mr. Ross Douthat of *The New York Times* as well as Mr. Mike Cernovich of the "alt-right" have both publicly boosted our work. (Mr. Cernovich is almost certainly disinclined to do so ever again, having now seen our recent review of his books.) We are clearly doing something wrong, if such odious characters are in love with us. We must become more repugnant!

Thus far *Current Affairs* has consistently maintained a suave and elevated tone, and been devoted to caution, civility, and restraint. It is clear that this must cease. Henceforth, *Current Affairs* shall slay its enemies, not just give them a good chuckle and an inconvenient poke in the ribs. The talons shall be sharpened! Watch yourself, Douthat!

A NASTY RUMOR

A certain nasty rumor has been circulating about *Current Affairs*, one which we feel obliged to deal with. This pernicious smear must be put to rest immediately: our magazine is *not* run from the living room of a 27-year-old graduate student. It is *not* entirely produced on one man's laptop with no paid staff. And any and all "journalists" who say otherwise are, to quote the President of the United States, #FakeNews.

We have always been reluctant to discuss the editorial and publication process by which each issue of *Current Affairs* is turned from a mere notion into an affordable but luxurious coffee-table commodity. This is not because we are opposed in principle to navel-gazing; observation of one's umbilicus is a necessary and admirable pastime, when done modestly and in private. And while this magazine has never achieved true transparency, it has certainly strived for mild translucence.

No, our reason for hesitation has mostly to do with death threats. We don't like them. And when we receive them, we recoil. The more details about the nature and origin of *Current Affairs* we disclose, the easier it is to seek us out and threaten us with death. And *Current Affairs* must never die!

Nevertheless, pernicious rumors must be smothered in the crib. Here, then, are the facts: *Current Affairs* is produced on the twelfth through fifteenth floor of The Current Affairs Building in downtown New Orleans. Our offices are staffed with a vast multitude of editors, sub-editors, assistant sub-editors, copy boys, typesetters, misaligners, administrators, inkers, letterers, marketers, and libel attorneys. A fleet of 1200 *Current Affairs* delivery vans ensures that each edition is hand-delivered to subscribers, to prevent filching by grubby postmen. We have regional offices in Washington, D.C. and Savannah, and international bureaus in London, Buenos Aires, and Novosibirsk. Our New Orleans office has an annual Christmas party (we are still officially a Christian periodical), which is well-attended by luminaries and personages. Our lobby is filled with flowers and kept extremely clean.

With these facts having been frankly and forthrightly disclosed, let there be no further murmurs or rumblings.

WELCOME TO THE MONKEY HOUSE

SHORTLY AFTER THE ELECTION, DONALD Trump began telling people that, even though he had won, there had been millions of illegal votes. The claim baffled people. Where on earth did Trump get the ludicrous idea that a substantial number of votes were fraudulent? There was, the press said, "no evidence" for this. But when a Trump spokesperson was asked about the claim, he did produce some evidence: a 2014 article from the *Washington Post* entitled "Could non-citizens decide the November election?" The article, by two academics, cited a study which suggested that a decent quantity of people who were not actually citizens of the United States were registered to vote. They estimated that 14 percent of noncitizens were registered, and that "their participation can change the outcome of close races."

This should have been somewhat embarrassing for the *Washington Post*. After all, it had accused Trump of pushing a false claim without any evidence. But it turned out that exactly such a claim had been pushed in the *Washington Post* itself.

But the *Washington Post* did not concede error. Instead, it did something rather peculiar. *Post* fact-checker Michelle Ye Hee Lee awarded Trump's claim "Four Pinnochios," saying it had relied on "dubious sources." Of course, one of the "dubious" sources in question was certain D.C.-based daily newspaper. But Ye Hee Lee brushed this off. The article about how noncitizen voting could decide elections, she said, "was published

two years ago in the Monkey Cage, a political-science blog hosted by *The Washington Post*. (Note to Trump's staff members: This means you can't say *The Washington Post* reported this information; you have to cite the Monkey Cage blog.)"

This was extremely interesting. After all, the article had appeared on *The Washington Post*'s website, displayed just as any other piece of reporting or commentary would be. But according to Ye Hee Lee, one could not cite it as coming from *The Washington Post*. Instead, one was *required* to say that it came from "The Monkey Cage," something that sounds vastly less reputable. Indeed, if one goes to the article, sure enough, in small font above the article (and below where it says *The Washington Post*) are the words "Monkey Cage."

Consumers of news therefore ought to beware: *The Washington Post*'s website does not entirely consist of *The Washington Post*. It consists of *The Washington Post* and something called a "monkey cage," in which baseless claims are flung about like, well, monkeys throwing feces. If you think you're reading *The Washington Post* just because you're on the *Post*'s website, you may in fact be reading a series of ravings and speculations for which the *Post* insists it bears no responsibility.

Here at *Current Affairs*, we were intrigued by the idea that one could bifurcate one's coverage this way. It is evidently permissible for a publication to divide its content into "serious reportage" and "monkey poop," and publish

both under the same banner, so long as it includes a barely noticeable warning that the monkey poop is monkey poop. Your paper's news department would have been aghast if you had proposed to print an article alleging that millions of noncitizens voted fraudulently, and based your claim upon the flimsiest scraps of evidence. Fortunately, however, if the news editor recoils, you can always take it down the hall to the monkey room, whose team of suspender-wearing macaques will deploy a less discerning eye.

This license to print nonsense strikes us as a rather a good idea. Long have we wished we could speak our minds freely, without being constrained by the tiresome dictates of "truth" and "journalistic responsibility." We have entire filing-drawers full of scurrilous libels and calumnies, all of which we have been yearning to issue in print. And yet we have restrained ourselves, surrendering to the drudgery of fact and the exasperated pleading of our attorneys.

No longer! Inspired by the *Post*, we are introducing the *Current Affairs* Bonobo Chamber. Inside the Bonobo Chamber, we can do as we please, and nobody can dare come along and chastise us. When someone confronts us with some seeming error or demi-truth printed in our pages, we can reply: "Ah, you misunderstand. That was not *Current Affairs*. That was the *Current Affairs* Bonobo Chamber, and you are required to cite it as such. All content in the chamber is written exclusively by bonobos. It would be outrageous to expect us to stand by it."

Look, then, for the Pipe-Smoking Bonobo. Wherever you see its face, the content may or may not be trustworthy. Even if the Pipe-Smoking Bonobo is not present, the Bonobo Chamber may still be in effect. All typos are the fault of the Bonobo Chamber. So is all material that gives offense. Any content that opens *Current Affairs* up to legal liability is presumptively part of the Bonobo Chamber. (Forgive the bonobos, they know not what they do.) If something we say seems unfounded, outrageous, and irresponsible, think twice before penning a Letter to the Editor: after all, you just might be in the Bonobo Chamber.



HOW
LIBERALS
FELL IN LOVE
WITH
THE
WEST WING

by Luke Savage



President of the United States

IN THE HISTORY OF PRESTIGE TV, FEW DRAMAS have had quite the cultural staying power of Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing*.

Set during the two terms of fictional Democratic President and Nobel Laureate in Economics Josiah "Jed" Bartlet (Martin Sheen) the show depicts the inner workings of a sympathetic liberal administration grappling with the daily exigencies of governing. Every procedure and protocol, every piece of political brokerage—from State of the Union addresses to legislative tugs of war to Supreme Court appointments—is recreated with an aesthetic authenticity enabled by ample production values (a single episode reportedly cost almost \$3 million to produce) and rendered with a dramatic flair that stylizes all the bureaucratic banality of modern governance.

Nearly the same, of course, might be said for other glossy political dramas such as Netflix's *House of Cards* or *Scandal*. But *The West Wing* aspires to more than simply visual verisimilitude. Breaking with the cynicism or amorality characteristic of many dramas about politics, it offers a vision of political institutions which is ultimately affirmative and approving. What we see throughout its seven seasons are Democrats governing as Democrats imagine they govern, with the Bartlet Administration standing in for liberalism as liberalism understands itself.

More than simply a fictional account of an idealized liberal presidency, then, *The West Wing* is an elaborate fantasia founded upon the shibboleths that sustain Beltway liberalism and the milieu that produced them.

*"Ginger, get the popcorn
The filibuster is in
I'm Toby Ziegler with The Drop In
What Kind of Day Has It Been?
It's Lin, speaking the truth
Agent Butterfield level detail
On this track
While you got that
Black Vera Wang retail
Well, you can find me
And Tommy Schlamme behind me
With the steadicam I'm ready
Damn, Mrs Landingham"*

*Remind me why I'm Five Votes Down
Always ready for my close-up
The cops pull me over
Fully sober
Judge Mendoza"*

—LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA, "WHAT'S NEXT?"

During its run from 1999 to 2006, *The West Wing* garnered immense popularity and attention, capturing three Golden Globe Awards and 26 Emmys and building a devout fanbase among Democratic partisans, Beltway acolytes, and people of the liberal-ish persuasion the world over. Since its finale more than a decade ago, it has become an essential part of the liberal cultural ecosystem, its importance arguably on par with *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*, and the rap musical about the founding fathers people like for some reason.

If anything, its fandom has only continued to grow with age: In the summer of 2016, a weekly podcast hosted by seasons 4-7 star Joshua Malina, launched with the intent of running through all 154 episodes (at a rate of one per week), almost immediately garnered millions of downloads; an elaborate fan wiki with almost 2000 distinct entries is maintained and regularly updated, magisterially documenting every mundane detail of the *West Wing* cosmos save the characters' bowel movements; and, in definitive proof of the silence of God, superfan Lin-Manuel Miranda has recently recorded a rap named for one of the show's most popular catchphrases ("What's next?").

While certainly appealing to a general audience thanks to its expensive sheen and distinctive writing, *The West Wing*'s greatest zealots have proven to be those who professionally inhabit the very milieu it depicts: Washington political staffers, media types, centrist cognoscenti, and various others drawn from the ranks of people who tweet "Big, if true" in earnest and think a lanyard is a talisman that grants wishes and wards off evil.

The West Wing "took something that was for the most part considered dry and nerdy—especially to people in high school and college—and sexed it up," former David Axelrod advisor Eric Lesser told *Vanity Fair* in a longform 2012 feature about the "Sorkinization of politics" (Axelrod himself having at one point advised *West Wing* writer Eli Attie). It "very much served as inspiration", said Micah Lasher, a staffer who then worked for Michael Bloomberg.

Thanks to its endless depiction of procedure and policy, the show naturally gibed with the wonkish libidos of future Voxsplainers Matt Yglesias and Ezra Klein. "There's a cultural meme or cultural suggestion that Washington is boring, that policy is boring, but it's important stuff," said Klein, adding that the show dramatized "the immediacy and urgency and concern that people in this town feel about the issues they're working on." "I was interested in politics before the show started," added Yglesias. "But a friend of mine from college moved to D.C. at the same time as me, after graduation, and we definitely plotted our proposed domination of the capital in explicitly *West Wing* terms: Who was more like Toby? Who was more like Josh?"

Far from the Kafkaesque banality which so often characterizes the real life equivalent, the mundane business of technocratic governance is made to look exciting, intellectually stimulating,

“THE ADMINISTRATION AND ITS STAFF ARE INVARIABLY DEPICTED AS TRIBUNES OF THE SERIOUS AND THE MATURE, THEIR IDEOLOGICAL MALLEABILITY TAKEN TO SIGNIFY THEIR VIRTUE...”

and, above all, honorable. The bureaucratic drudgery of both White House management and governance, from speechwriting, to press conference logistics, to policy creation, are front and center across all seven seasons. A typical episode script is chock full of dweebish phraseology — “farm subsidies”, “recess appointments”, “census bureau”, “congressional consultation” — usually uttered by swift-tongued, Ivy League-educated staffers darting purposefully through labyrinthine corridors during the infamous “walk-and-talk” sequences. By recreating the look and feel of political processes to the tee, while garnishing them with a romantic veneer, the show gifts the Beltway’s most spiritually-devoted adherents with a vision of how many would probably like to see themselves.

In serving up this optimistic simulacrum of modern US politics, Sorkin’s universe has repeatedly intersected with real-life US politics. Following the first season, and in the midst of the 2000 presidential election contest, *Salon*’s Joyce Millman wrote: “Al Gore could clinch the election right now by staging as many photo-ops with the cast of *The West Wing* as possible.”

A poll published during the same election found that most voters preferred Martin Sheen’s President Bartlet to Bush or Gore. A 2008 *New York Times* article predicted an Obama victory on the basis of the show’s season 6-7 plot arc. The same election year, the paper published a fictionalized exchange between Bartlet and Barack Obama penned by Sorkin himself. 2016 proved no exception, with the *New Statesman*’s Helen Lewis reacting to Donald Trump’s victory by saying: “I’m going to hug my *West Wing* boxset a little closer tonight, that’s for sure.”

Appropriately, many of the show’s cast members, leveraging their on-screen personas, have participated or intervened in real Democratic Party politics. During the 2016 campaign, star Bradley Whitford—who portrays frenetically wily strategist Josh Lyman—was invited to “reveal” to *Vanity Fair* who his [fictional] boss would endorse:

“There’s no doubt in my mind that Hillary would be President Bartlet’s choice. She’s—nobody is more prepared to take that position on day one. I know this may be controversial. But yes, on behalf of Jed Bartlet, I want to endorse Hillary Clinton.”

Six leading members of the cast, including Whitford, were even dispatched to Ohio to stump for Clinton (inexplicably failing to swing the crucial state in her favor).

During the Democratic primary season Rob Lowe (who appeared from 1999-2003 before leaving in protest at the ostensible stinginess of his \$75,000/episode salary) even deployed a clip from the show and paraphrased his own character’s lines during an attack on Bernie Sanders’ tax plan: “*Watching Bernie Sanders. He’s hectoring and yelling at me WHILE he’s saying he’s going to raise our taxes. Interesting way to communicate.*” In Season 2 episode “The Fall’s Gonna Kill You”, Lowe’s character Sam Seaborn angrily lectures a team of speechwriters:

“Every time your boss got on the stump and said, ‘It’s time for the rich to pay their fair share,’ I hid under a couch and changed my name... The top one percent of wage earners in this country pay for twenty-two percent of this country. Let’s not call them names while they’re doing it, is all I’m saying.”

What is the actual ideology of *The West Wing*? Just like the real American liberalism it represents, the show proved to be something of a political weather vane throughout its seven seasons on the air.

Debuting during the twilight of the Clinton presidency and spanning much of Bush II’s, it predictably vacillated somewhat in response to events while remaining grounded in a general liberal ethos. Having writing credits for all but one episode in *The West Wing*’s first four seasons, Sorkin left

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Hiring Committee
Office of the Professional Anarchist
University of California, Berkeley

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to inquire about the position of Professional Anarchist for the University. As a dedicated and bloodthirsty revolutionary with multiple years of experience in insurrectionary struggle, I believe I am highly qualified for the position and would be honored to be considered. I believe I could serve the University in a variety of capacities, ranging from performing ordinary administrative tasks to coordinating the violent overthrow of the capitalist state. A résumé is attached.

My particular areas of interest are in terrorizing the bourgeoisie, taking the streets, and roughing up fascists. Wanton destruction and mayhem are a particular subspecialty. My core competencies include burning, looting, and frightening unsuspecting commuters. I am highly skilled at both fomenting and inciting. I know a number of menacing protest chants, which frequently include vulgar references to police officers. I am also proficient in Word and Excel.

I have always been interested in pursuing a career in anarchism. As a child, when I was told I must do this or that, I obeyed only reluctantly, and frequently muttered comments of disdain toward my elders. In high school, I once became very frank with my trigonometry teacher, which resulted in a written disciplinary notice. Most of my time in the classroom was spent idly doodling circle-As on a notepad (sometimes, even on the desk itself). I persisted at this even in the face of repeated admonishment from parents, instructors, and peers. My anarchism, you see, has always been steadfast.

I hold a bachelor's degree in from Brandeis University, *magna cum laude*, where I was a member of the Fuck Fascism Collective and made the Dean's List all semesters. I majored in Literature, but I would like to think I minored in misdemeanor arson. I occasionally distributed zines explaining how the twin behemoths of capitalism and the state oppress the working class, and was Vice President of one of the more notable *a cappella* groups on campus. I was not afraid to shake things up during my undergraduate years. In my honors thesis, I included a quote from Bakunin as an epigraph. As an anarchist, I was not afraid what the faculty would think of this.

In recent years I have honed my skill for setting large fires in public settings. When people have attempted to extinguish them, I have blockaded these people's passage, or distracted them with a flash grenade or some light conversation. I have always been a strong believer in setting nearby objects aflame and believe I could do very well at it in a professional setting. (You will find a list of major conflagrations under "Extracurriculars," beneath the section on academic honors and awards.)

My background in true violent insurrection has been limited. I have not yet been afforded the opportunity to blow up an armaments train or poison a constable. I did, however, once toss an extremely heavy brick at the window of a Panda Express in Cleveland during the Republican National Convention. The window did not shatter, but my comrades praised the destructive spirit of the act. As an anarchist, I am prepared to dismantle the window of any storefront by force. My most significant professional experience was in Seattle during 1999, where I did excellent work as part of the "black bloc" and was considered "detail-oriented" by peers for my careful selection of streetlights to shatter. (In addition to this work, I overturned a policeman's motorbike. He pursued me to no avail. I am one slippery anarchist.)

I have other, non-related professional experience. I would ask you to look kindly upon my several law firm internships, which admittedly were not especially anarchistic. However, at these jobs I did intentionally misplace numerous important documents, generating considerable confusion among the associates. Supervisors nevertheless praised my punctuality and diligence, although as an anarchist I do not care what supervisors think. Soon there will be no supervisors. Death to all bosses. (I can still provide references as needed.)

I am strongly dedicated to putting anarchist philosophy into practice in my day to day life. When policemen come near me, I make a point of rolling my eyes and saying "Ugh." I frequently tweet rude things about the President of the United States. I do not care if he sees them. It does not matter to me if he becomes upset. I am an anarchist.

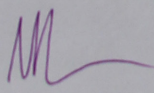
I am against all hierarchies. When I see a hierarchy, I destroy it. Or, at the very least, I raise very serious questions about it. If someone tells me to do something, I will frequently respond: "I am sorry, but I am unable to comply, for I am an anarchist." I am also not afraid to confront the state. I have four traffic infractions for a failure to yield at a stop sign. I freely confess to having committed these crimes. I am an anarchist. I yield to no one.

In my spare time, I enjoy gardening and reiki. I live with two cats, Emma and Johann, both of whom are named for famous anarchists. (Note that I do not say I "own" the cats. The cats are free. An anarchist must practice what he preaches.)

I know my record of serious vandalism may be somewhat more sparse than that of other candidates for this opening. But I am a highly motivated individual and willing to learn quickly. I am goal-oriented, and within the next five years I aspire to turn a limousine on its side and scrawl something lewd on the wall of a Wells Fargo branch. I am a team player and have an unquenchable thirst for the blood of capitalist parasites.

Thank you for considering me for the position. I look forward to hearing from you.

Down with the state,



Nathan J. Robinson

In the wake of riots at the University of California, Berkeley over a conservative speaker, the President of the United States released the following communication via the Internet:

“Professional anarchists, thugs and paid protesters are proving the point of the millions of people who voted to MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!”

—@realDonaldTrump,
Feb. 3, 2017



LUXURY
WHEREVER YOU GO

in 2003, with Executive Producer John Wells characterizing the subsequent direction as more balanced and bipartisan. The Bartlet administration's actual politics—just like those of the real Democratic Party and its base—therefore run the gamut from the stuff of Elizabeth Warren-esque populism to the neoliberal bilge you might expect to come from a Beltway think tank having its white papers greased by dollars from Goldman Sachs.

But promoting or endorsing any specific policy orientation is not the show's true *raison d'être*. At the conclusion of its seven seasons it remains unclear if the Bartlet administration has succeeded at all in fundamentally altering the contours of American life. In fact, after two terms in the White House, Bartlet's gang of hyper-educated, hyper-competent politicians do not seem to have any transformational policy achievements whatsoever. Even in their most unconstrained and idealized political fantasies, liberals manage to accomplish nothing.

The lack of any serious attempts to change anything reflect a certain *apolitical* tendency in this type of politics, one that defines itself by its manner and attitude rather than a vision of the change it wishes to see in the world. Insofar as there is an identifiable ideology, it isn't one definitively wedded to a particular program of reform, but instead to a particular aesthetic of political institutions. The business of leveraging democracy for any specific purpose comes second to how its institutional liturgy and processes look and, more importantly, how they make us feel—virtue being attached more to posture and affect than to any particular goal. Echoing Sorkin's 1995 film *The American President* (in many ways the progenitor of *The West Wing*) it delights in invoking "seriousness" and the supposedly hard-headed pragmatism of grownups.

Consider a scene from Season 2's "The War at Home", in which Toby Ziegler confronts a rogue Democratic Senator over his objections to Social Security cuts prospectively to be made in collaboration with a Republican Congress. The episode's protagonist certainly isn't the latter, who tries to draw a line in the sand over the "compromising of basic Democratic values" and threatens to run a third party presidential campaign, only to be admonished acerbically by Ziegler:

"If you think demonizing people who are trying to govern responsibly is the way to protect our liberal base, then speaking as a liberal...go to bed, would you please?... Come at us from the left, and I'm gonna own your ass."

The administration and its staff are invariably depicted as tribunes of the serious and the mature, their ideological malleability taken to signify their virtue more than any fealty to specific liberal principles.

Even when the show ventures to criticize the institutions of American democracy, it never retreats from a foundational reverence for their supposed enlightenment and the essential nobility of most of the people who administer them. As

such, the presidency's basic function is to appear presidential and, more than anything, Jed Bartlet's patrician aura and respectable disposition make him the perfect avatar for the *West Wing* universe's often maudlin deference to the liturgy of "the office." "Seriousness," then—the superlative quality in the Sorkin taxonomy of virtues—implies presiding over the political consensus, tinkering here and there, and looking stylish in the process by way of soaring oratory and white-collar chic.

"Make this election about smart, and not. Make it about engaged, and not. Qualified, and not. Make it about a heavyweight. You're a heavyweight. And you've been holding me up for too many rounds."

—TOBY ZIEGLER,

HARTSFIELD'S LANDING (SEASON 3, EPISODE 14)

DESPITE ITS RELATIVELY THIN IDEOLOGICAL commitments, there is a general tenor to the *West Wing* universe that cannot be called anything other than smug.

It's a smugness born of the view that politics is less a terrain of clashing values and interests than a perpetual pitting of the clever against the ignorant and obtuse. The clever wield facts and reason, while the foolish cling to effortlessly-exposed fictions and the braying prejudices of provincial rubes. In emphasizing intelligence over ideology, what follows is a fetishization of "elevated discourse" regardless of its actual outcomes or conclusions. The greatest political victories involve semantically dismantling an opponent's argument or exposing its hypocrisy, usually by way of some grand rhetorical gesture. Categories like left and right become less significant, provided that the competing interlocutors are deemed respectably smart and practice the designated etiquette. The Discourse becomes a category of its own, to be protected and nourished by Serious People conversing respectfully while shutting down the stupid with heavy-handed moral sanctimony.

In Toby Ziegler's "smart and not," "qualified and not" formulation, we can see a preview of the (disastrous) rhetorical strategy that Hillary Clinton would ultimately adopt against Donald Trump. Don't make it about vision, make it about qualification. Don't make it about your plans for how to make people's lives better, make it about your superior moral character. Fundamentally, make it about how smart and good and serious you are, and how bad and dumb and unserious they are.

In this respect, *The West Wing*'s foundational serious/unserious binary falls squarely within the tradition that has since evolved into the "epic own/evisceration" genre characteristic of social media and late night TV, in which the aim is to ruthlessly use one's intellect to expose the idiocy and hypocrisy of the other side. In a famous scene from Season

4's "Game On", Bartlet debates his Republican rival Governor Robert Ritchie (James Brolin). Their exchange, prompted by a question about the role of the federal government, is the stuff of a John Oliver wet dream:

RITCHIE: My view of this is simple. We don't need a federal Department of Education telling us our children have to learn Esperanto, they have to learn Eskimo poetry. Let the states decide, let the communities decide on health care and education, on lower taxes, not higher taxes. Now he's going to throw a big word at you — 'unfunded mandate', he's going to say if Washington lets the states do it, it's an unfunded mandate. But what he doesn't like is the federal government losing power. I call it the ingenuity of the American people."

BARTLET: Well first of all let's clear up a couple of things: unfunded mandate is two words, not one big word. There are times when we are 50 states and there are times when we're one country and have national needs. And the way I know this is that Florida didn't fight Germany in World War Two or establish civil rights. You think states should do the governing wall-to-wall, now that's a perfectly valid opinion. But your state of Florida got 12.6 billion dollars in federal money last year from Nebraskans and Virginia's and New Yorkers and Alaskans, with their Eskimo poetry — 12.6 out of the state budget of 50 billion. I'm supposed to be using this time for a question so here it is: Can we have it back please?"

In an even more famous scene from Season 2 episode "The Midterms", Bartlet humiliates homophobic talk radio host Jenna Jacobs by quoting scripture from memory, destroying her by her *very own logic*.

If Richie and Jacobs are the obtuse yokels to be epically taken down with facts and reason, the show also elevates several conservative characters to reinforce its postpartisan celebration of The Discourse. Republicans come in two types: slack-jawed caricatures, and people whose high-mindedness and mutual enthusiasm for Putting Differences Aside make them the Bartlet Administration's natural allies or friends regardless of whatever conflicts of values they may ostensibly have. Foremost among the latter is Vinick: a moderate, pro-choice Republican who resembles John McCain (at least the imaginary "maverick" John McCain that liberals continue to pretend exists) and is appointed by Bartlet's Democratic successor Matthew Santos to be Secretary of State. (In reality, there is no such thing as a "moderate" Republican, only a polite one. The upright and genial Paul Ryan, whom President Bartlet would have loved, is on a lifelong quest to dismantle every part of America's feeble social safety net.)

Thus Bartlet Democrats do not see Republicans as the "enemy," except to the extent that they are rude or insufficiently

respectful of the rules of political decorum. In one Season 5 plot, the administration opts to install a Ruth Bader Ginsburg clone (Glenn Close) as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The price it pays—willingly, as it turns out—is giving the other vacancy to an ultra-conservative justice, for the sole reason that Bartlet's staff find their amiable squabbling stimulating. Anyone with substantively progressive political values would be horrified by a liberal president's appointment of an Antonin Scalia-style textualist to the Supreme Court. But if your values are procedural, based more on the manner in which people conduct themselves rather than the consequences they actually bring about, it's easy to chuckle along with a hard-right conservative, so long as they are personally charming (Ziegler: "I hate him, but he's brilliant. And the two of them together are fighting like cats and dogs ... but it works.")

"What's next?"

THROUGH ITS IDEALIZED RENDERING of American politics and its institutions, *The West Wing* offers a comforting avenue of escape from the grim and often dystopian reality of the present. If the show, despite its age, has continued to find favor and relevance among liberals, Democrats, and assorted Beltway acolytes alike, it is because it reflects and affirms their worldview with greater fidelity and catharsis than any of its contemporaries.

But if anything gives that worldview pause, it should be the events of the past eight years. Liberals got a real life Josiah Bartlet in the figure of Barack Obama, a charismatic and stylish politician elected on a populist wave. But Obama's soaring speeches, quintessentially *presidential* affect, and deference to procedure did little to fundamentally improve the country or prevent his Republican rivals from storming the Congressional barricades at their first opportunity. Confronted by a mercurial TV personality bent on transgressing every norm and truism of Beltway thinking, Democrats responded by exhaustively informing voters of his indecency and hypocrisy, attempting to destroy him countless times with his own logic, but ultimately leaving him completely intact. They smugly taxonomized as "smart" and "dumb" the very electorate they needed to win over, and retreated into an ideological fever dream in which political success doesn't come from organizing and building power, but from having the most polished arguments and the most detailed policy statements. If you can just *crush* Trump in the debates, as Bartlet did to Richie, then you've won. (That's not an exaggeration of the worldview. Ezra Klein published an article entitled "Hillary Clinton's 3 debate performances left the Trump campaign in ruins," which entirely eliminated the distinction between what happens in *debates* and what happens in *campaigns*. The belief that politics is about argument rather than power is likely a symptom of a Democratic politics increasingly incubated in the

Ivy League rather than the labor movement.)

Now, facing defeat and political crisis, the overwhelming liberal instinct has not been self-reflection but a further retreat into fantasy and orthodoxy. Like viewers at the climax of *The West Wing*'s original run, they sit waiting for the decisive gestures and gratifying crescendos of a series finale, only to find their favorite plotlines and characters meandering without resolution. Shockingly, life is not a television program, and Aaron Sorkin doesn't get to write the ending.

THE WEST WING IS MANY THINGS: A UNIQUELY popular and lavish effort in prestige TV; an often crisply-written drama; a fictionalized paean to Beltway liberalism's foundational precepts; a wonkish celebration of institutions and processes; an exquisitely-tailored piece of political fanfiction.

But, in 2017, it is foremost a series of glittering illusions to be abandoned. ♦




THE VIEW FROM

THE BACK ROW

Journalist and photographer
Chris Arnade discusses a country
divided by meaning, morality,
education, and economics.





In 2016, pundits speculated endlessly on that mysterious place called Trump Country. To many in the Beltway, much of America was a foreign country, to be analyzed statistically rather than in person. Chris Arnade, on the other hand, was determined to escape his coastal bubble. Arnade got into his old van, and has spent the last several years traveling hundreds of thousands of miles, interviewing people all over the country, discovering their joys, sorrows, discontents, and aspirations. In the process he has produced a set of photographs and stories, depicting the everyday Americans who are left out of the media's understandings of the country, and who feel left out of the 21st century economy. Arnade spoke to Current Affairs editor Nathan J. Robinson about what he has learned in his travels, and has allowed Current Affairs to reprint some of his photographs.

NR: You've traveled over 100,000 miles across America talking to people from all stripes of life. What are some of the misconceptions that people have about the country they live in? What are some things people think they know about America that are totally wrong?

CA: Everyone knows we're a divided country, but I don't think people understand exactly how deep that division is,

and what the true nature of it is. I was a banker for 20 years. I lived in Brooklyn Heights, I sent my kids to private school. I was paid well; I had a Ph.D. in physics. I was kind of the New York neoliberal elite who valued science, valued rationality. And that elite built a world over the last 30 years that is massively unequal. I think everybody knows statistically that we have massive wealth inequality and continued racial inequality. But we kind of pat ourselves on the back and say



we're an egalitarian society in other ways. We've given equal legal status to gender, sexuality, and race. And so we kind of think we've addressed many of the issues. But when you go out in the country, you realize that we're massively unequal, and we're unequal beyond economics. We're unequal in terms of the way we live, how we choose to live, unequal in our valuation framework, what we view as moral, what we view as right and wrong, what we view as the goals. And beyond the obvious racial differences, which are huge—I spent, as much time in poor minority neighborhoods as I did in poor white working class neighborhoods—the most salient division I see beyond race is education.

NR: Yes, you've described this framework for thinking about educational inequality, what you call the "front row kids" versus the "back row kids." The kids who did well in school and advanced to the top of the economic ranks, and the kids who were sort of left behind, and the differences that creates in their worldview. Could you talk a little bit about that framework and what that division in worldview really is?

CA: Right, the front row kids and the back row kids. Now within that there are some divisions and complexities obvi-

ously. But the most salient thing about it is that it's not about political party. It's non-partisan. "Front row kids" means both Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton. The front row is anybody who comes from an elite school, Princeton, Harvard, the Ivies or has a postgraduate degree, Ph.D. They're mobile, global, and well-educated. Their primary social network is via college and career. That's how they define themselves, through their job. And within that world intellect is primary. They view the world through a framework of numbers and rational arguments. Faith is irrational, and they see themselves as beyond gender. You can describe this using other frameworks, like "the Acela corridor" types.

On the Democratic side, you can think of the Matt Yglesias types in the media, these kinds of global technocrats, policy wonks. Their framework is: "Give me a problem and I'll devise a maximally optimal solution using my data." Most importantly, though, they view their lives as having been better than their parents, and they think their children's lives will be better than their own. And for them, that's still true.

The front row kids have won. They're in charge of things. They are the donor class in politics, they're the analysts and specialists who scream every time someone has a policy difference they disagree with. "You can't do X, you're going to cause a global world war." Or "You can't get rid of NAFTA," "you can't do Brexit."

NR: What about the “back row kids,” then? What is that segment of society, and what is the difference in its worldview?

CA: It encompasses a lot of types of people, but it's defined by its difference with the front row. It's not just the “white working class,” it includes minorities, black kids who are stuck in east Buffalo or central Cleveland or Bronx in New York. Mostly they don't have an education beyond high school degree and if they do it's kind of cobbled together through trade schools and community colleges and smaller state schools. Their primary social network is via institutions beyond work such as family. And their community is defined geographically, meaning they generally don't leave where they grew up. They might leave for 5-6 years to go to the military, take jobs that bring them to Alaska for a few years, but they'll come back.

And they have different kinds of worldviews and values. They find meaning and morality through faith, which is also a form of community. And if you read the work of [Harvard sociologist] Michèle Lamont, she writes about the ethos of the decency of hard work. It's the idea that you don't necessarily use your brain to advance, you use your strength and you use your commitment. You're going to play by the rules, you're going to break a few rocks, you're going to work hard. It's also, and here's where I'll sweep a lot under the rug, a kind of traditional view of race and gender.

This group of people views their life as worse than their parents, and they think their children's lives will be worse than theirs. And that's rational, from their perspective. After all, they've lost. Their kind of worldview has been devalued, because it's the front row kids that have been in charge: the globalized, rational meritocracy versus the more traditional concepts of morality.

NR: You mention rationality. One of the things that seems to puzzle elites as they try to understand these other parts of society is that they feel the grievances there are genuinely irrational. From their perspective, free trade has been good for everybody, it's made everybody better off than the alternative. And so they don't understand these kinds of populist backlashes in the form of the support for Trump (or Bernie Sanders), because they feel like the rage and the desire to destroy the elite is a failure to recognize their own self-interest. After all, why would you vote for someone whose economic policies are irrational, or who, like Trump, might destroy the universe? It just doesn't make sense. They don't know why people hate experts, since experts have expertise, and expertise is good!

CA: Well, let me approach it this way. I think that when you talk about *any* group's failings as being atavistic, because of laziness, because of weakness, because of some other failing, you're doing it wrong as a progressive. So when we progressives look at poor minorities and, from a sociological perspective, the frus-

“When your sense of **meaning, place** and valuation comes from your community, and your community **gets eroded**, that's it.”

trations and deviances that are there, and when conservatives say “Hey, there's more crime in black neighborhoods because they're more violent” or “There's higher unemployment because they're lazier,” we liberals rightly push back. We say “Whoah, let's look at the structural issues here. Let's look at the structural racism that denies them access to jobs. Let's look at the structural inequalities in the educational system which provide a harder route for them to leave.”

And I'd say you have to do that for all groups, instead of dismissing them as irrational. And that includes the white working class. You have to look at the context of what they're facing. So from their perspective, knocking over the system probably makes sense because their worldview is being devalued. It's being devalued monthly, has been devalued for 25 years.

Now, some of that devaluation I agree with; I believe the idea that you should get supremacy from being white and male *should* be devalued. But regardless of what you disagree with, that devaluation is happening. And they're also being devalued economically. And then, even further, their whole worldview, their sense of place and meaning, is being eroded.

So let's talk about NAFTA, you alluded to NAFTA and free trade. Mathematically it works, because the winners win more

than the losers lose. So on a net basis, you say: “Hey look! The data says everybody wins.” There are three fundamental problems with that. One is that winners never share with the losers, that just doesn’t happen. Secondly, what you’re measuring is a very narrow framework of what’s valuable; you’re making the assumption that everybody wants more *stuff*, having more stuff is what meaning’s about. But the back row finds meaning through their connections, their community, through their structure. When they lose, they’ve lost everything. When the factories go, the town and community fall apart. Their churches hollow out. Their families start facing problems with drugs. So when your sense of meaning and place and valuation comes from your community, and your community gets eroded, that’s it. Game over.

politics, we’ve done it over the past 20-30 years. We’ve created a system that’s immensely unequal, created a ruling class, which is educated and uses their education to elevate themselves and demean anybody else. And we’ve rendered it not simply economic, but cultural as well. These divisions are massive. You can blindfold me and put me in any town in the United States and I can tell you within five minutes if it has a college in it or not.

There are these marches across the country that are taking place against Trump. And they’re great. I approve. I don’t like Trump. But there’s a meme that’s going around now that says: “Look it’s all across America. It’s even happening in Texas! And Arkansas! But it’s happening on a goddamn college campus in Texas and Arkansas. I spent a week and a half in two towns, Kalamazoo and Battle Creek, Michi-

“They’re looking at the system that they feel like is devaluing them every year so they’re just going take a hammer and break it...”

NR: And this something quite real, it’s not an illusion, it’s not just on paper. You’ve traveled all over, and there really are communities like that, that have just been hollowed out. And you’ve extensively covered the drug epidemic.

CA: I didn’t get into this because I wanted to write about politics. I got into this because I was writing about drugs. And I always kind of glibly say that wherever I went to find drugs, I found hope leaving. And where I found hope leaving I saw Trump entering, if it was a white community. Drugs don’t just go into a place because people are lazy; drugs go into a place because drugs work and help. They’re a get-meaning-quick scheme. So is fascism, so is populism. Both these things give a sense of meaning. People use drugs because they think their life is stuck. It’s a form of suicide, and for them, it’s a way of finding some relief from something that seems like it’s not working. That they’re humiliated and devalued, and they want to find a way to fight back against that. And drugs are just one way to do that, with another way being fascism and populism.

NR: So the rise of Trump is definitely some kind of response to despair and hopelessness, then.

CA: Oh, hell yeah. But I would go even further. First, just because I say I’m not surprised this happened, doesn’t mean I’m justifying it. But what I’m saying is: if you want to put a recipe together to create populist fascist white identity

gan, separated by 35 miles. One has a college, one doesn’t. Which one do you think voted for Trump? First time they ever voted for a Republican.

To go back to the question of the rationale for being “irrational”: you have to put people, the way they think, in context. When people are faced with constraints, or when they view the world as having a different goal from themselves, from their perspective they make the right choices. So in my mind, voting for Trump, they felt like they had limited options. They’re backed into a corner, and they’re looking at the system that they feel like is devaluing them every year so they’re just going take a hammer and break it.

NR: Which is actually a kind of rational thing to do in that situation, given the set of values they hold.

CA: I even put it in mathematical terms for people, because I used to be a Ph.D. in math. I can give you the economic framework for it. If you look at their probability outcomes, their downside is limited, the upside is not limited. So you break the system, you want volatility.

Now you can ask the question, what about the black working class? Why aren’t they doing it? Well, there’s some huge differences there. One is the front row kids have made a very valiant attempt to elevate minority communities, and that’s great. I applaud that. So blacks, minorities know who butters their bread and they say, “Ok, I’m gonna go for that.” But in addition, if you look at this election, one

of the things I wish I had written more about: I spent time in black working class neighborhoods, and I didn't hear a lot of enthusiasm for Hillary. I heard a lot more distaste for Trump on college campuses than I did in poor black communities. They rendered their frustration, not by voting for Trump, it was by not voting. Or by a mute cynicism. They've been so, so eroded for such a long time that there has been pressure to just kind of throw their hands up, and give up on the political process. The black back row is frustrated, but they've been frustrated for 80-100 years.

NR: So there's class divide in non-white communities, too, and the front-row/back-row framework isn't just about the white working class versus a kind of racially diverse elite. And perhaps the difference in expectations makes a difference to the amount of rage there is.

CA: And their lives are getting marginally better. Marginally. If you look at the rate of change, it's going up from a very low base. In many cases, that's what matters.

But if I had to kind of get one point across about the elite, it's this: they speak a different language. They *don't know* how different their worldview is. They have no clue. And it took me 3 ½ years to figure it out.

NR: You've suggested that that is actually going to prevent them from understanding when Trump is succeeding and failing, because what he does will send different messages to different groups of people.

CA: Yeah. So, for example, right now, this immigration action, from the measure of the front row, has been a disaster. But measured from the other valuation framework, not so much. He's doing what he said he was going to do. The outrage is not shared everywhere. They like that Trump drives the media and the elites crazy. Trump is a genius at knowing how to find that gap and exploit it.

NR: There's actually a quote from him where he says something like: "There are two audiences. There's New York society bullshit, and I don't care what they think because they've always hated me. And then there's America, and America has always loved Donald Trump." So that's what he says.

CA: Think about this: what does he spend his life doing? He spends his life selling cheap meaning to people, people who feel meaningless or humiliated. The biggest buzzword I would use to describe what I've found in Trump country is "humiliation." And a desire for pride.

NR: You wrote a piece suggesting that "respect" was the big thing that they all cited as wanting.



“ Meaning comes
from having a
community,
having a network.
Being valued, not just
having 5 iPods,
but having one iPod
and **four friends**...

CA: At our core, everybody wants to feel valued as a part of something larger. And right now the front row has that. At least up until this election, they had that. They generally can look at their lives and say: “I’m an adjunct professor of Greek History at Bumblefuck University...” Uh, don’t use Bumblefuck.

NR: We can change it.

CA: At Cornell. Anyway, they have a source of pride. But that person has a lot more in common with a bond trader than a truck driver.

NR: Liberal professors definitely don’t think they have more in common with bond traders...

CA: Well, that’s my whole frustration. That was the revelation I had over the last 2½ years. You have to view it from a framework of valuation and morality. And also culture, it’s not about economics. You have to use the old framework of is something banal or sacred? Is it profane or is it sacred?

I often use my favorite example, which is McDonald’s. I grew up in a white working-class town, so for me, it’s kind of rediscovering what I already knew. But McDonald’s, which is viewed with

contempt, is actually a center of community, it’s where people gather. McDonald’s is not a joke.

And actually, I can link this back to Trump and explain how he exploits this. Remember when he sends his VP to eat in Chili’s in Times Square? The front row kids went ballistic. Fast food is profane, it’s low culture, it’s banal. It’s without meaning. And they went insane. But viewed from the back row’s perspective, McDonald’s and Chili’s and Applebee’s and Wal-Marts are a central part of the community.

NR: I seem to remember there was a moment during the campaign when Trump said something like “Oh, Melania is a great cook, she makes the most wonderful meatloaf.” And then people said “That’s not being a chef! Anyone can make that.”

CA: He does that intentionally. Because he knows getting the front row to scream will cause them to do what they do when they get mad. They’ll use scorn and derision. They’ll mock. Because that’s what you do when you’re an educated person. To engage with someone, to even bother to argue with them is beneath you. So they mock. Look at Jon Stewart. Look at all the fucking Comedy Central people. You mock the opponent because to engage with them is beneath you. Now when you’re at the bottom, in the back row, your form of engagement is anger, is bitterness, is violence. Because the people above you refuse to engage, what are you going to do?

NR: Well, if you’re not mocking them you’re fact-checking them. That’s the other weapon.

CA: Right, because that’s your valuation framework. Let me give you another example. I was a banker. I liked TARP. For however many fucking years of my life, I supported TARP. I supported all the goddamn neoliberal acronyms: NAFTA, TARP, TPP, all of it. So I can have an argument with a macro person. I go into town to McDonald’s, because I hang out in churches and McDonald’s when I go into town. So if I go in there and I say “Well, TARP will help.” They’ll say, “Yeah, but why are you giving 20 billion dollars to Wall Street?” And I can say, “Well, actually, the money was used to buy assets, and the assets increased in value, and then we got paid back.” And they’d say: “Well, what the fuck? Look at that factory over there: that’s been, kind of sitting there.” And you look out the window and there’s a factory that’s all rusted and boarded up. “That used to employ lots of people. Where was our bailout?” And you have those conversations 30 times and you say: “Maybe I should stop saying ‘Well, actually.’” Maybe I should listen. It’s always a “Well, actually.” And these are clever arguments, but ultimately they just benefit *you*.

NR: That’s how I feel about a lot of these arguments for why things like the TPP benefit people in the statistical aggregate. Because even if that’s the case, you’re still not really granting



All photographs © Chris Arnade 2017

people their humanity, because you're treating them as numbers on a balance sheet, and you're the one who is in charge of moving the numbers around and doing what's best for them, and you don't care if they understand, they're just supposed to be grateful.

CA: Again, you're judging things within a framework that benefits you, a data framework. This mentality says: "We want data geeks. We're rational people, so we want to do two things: We want to maximize GDP, and we want to do it efficiently." That's the neoliberal mantra, which is Larry Summers, Robert Rubin, Bill Clinton. And when you take that worldview, and you take that framework, the natural thing to do is to hand that power to businesses, to deregulate, because that's how you can maximize GDP and be most efficient. Let's give industry whatever it wants. And you maximize GDP but you steamroll everything in the process, forgetting about the consequences. Forgetting that that may not be what everybody wants. People don't just necessarily want uber-efficiency and more stuff. They might think meaning comes from having a community, having a network. Being valued, not just having 5 iPods, but having one iPod and four friends!

NR: I saw something similar in the way some Democrats were

frustrated that people didn't appreciate Obamacare enough. "You've all been made better off, I don't see why you're upset." But if it's complicated to use, and it's policy being made from afar, and people aren't being engaged in politics or included, they can get better off in the narrow statistical aggregate, and still not appreciate it, for a very rational reason.

CA: One thing elites don't get about the working class—and there are differences, but in the aggregate—is that they don't want handouts from above. They would much rather have good jobs than handouts. And both conservatives and liberals have misused this notion. But it's true that people want things that give them a role, that respect them. Obamacare is complicated. It did get a bad rap, because this tribal division in the U.S. means things can get knocked just because they have the wrong label attached. But I'm on Obamacare, and it's a nightmare to use. I can't tell you how much I just want to kill myself every time I have engage with it. It's not easy to use.

NR: I think about the difference between the way that policies look on paper, versus the way that people actually experience them. One of the major problem with a kind of technocratic attitude is that it's not sympathetic to the real-life frustrations



that people have, because these are often things that are never going to show up in the numbers. So unemployment rates might be going down, and that's great, but the kind of jobs there are might be qualitatively worse.

Anyway, your writings are not particularly hopeful about the prospects for the divide. And post-election, you don't seem to have much hope that the media is going to help. Their realization seems to have been "Oh, we should have visited more parts of the country," but there's not really a change in how well they understand people different from them, just a sort of recognition that there is another America and it's powerful and angry. And so you don't think the front row has much hope.

CA: Nope, not much, and also, just to make this clear, I don't have much hope the back row is going to understand the front row either. It's a two-way street. I happen to believe the front row is in power so there's more of an obligation for them to understand the back row. Although currently, the back row has gained power for a short period here.

NR: Well, they've sort of gained power. They elected Trump, but Trump isn't exactly "back row." I mean, elite Democrats are furious. But all the people that Trump appoints, and all the people that are going to be running the country, they're not necessarily people from the angry working class.

CA: I do think he is going to burn the very people that voted for him, not so much because he doesn't have intentions of working for them as because he's just incompetent himself. But I also disagree because, despite the people that he has around him, I think his overall arc is towards his supporters' valuation framework more than it is towards the front row valuation framework. I just think he's personally corrupt, and he's incompetent, and he'll get taken advantage of by the people around him.

NR: Also he doesn't actually care about people.

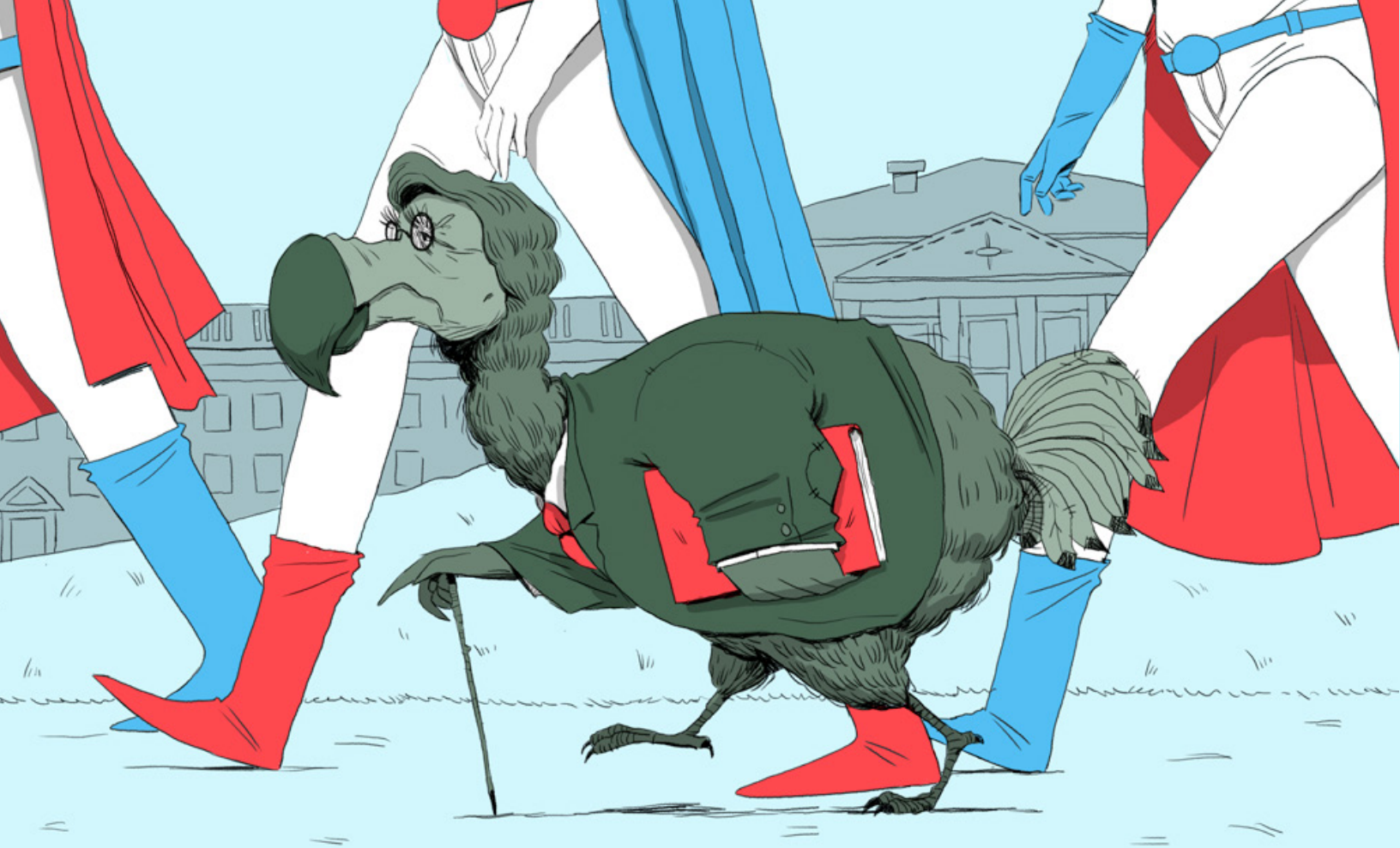
CA: Oh no, he doesn't. I mean, this whole thing is just another scam. He's been doing that all his life. But he's certainly not helping the front row with his policies, and he has no intention of doing that. He may help his buddies, some front row people might be smart enough to glom onto him and sell out and be corrupt. But overall 8 years of a Trump administration is not going to do the front row well. It will do the back row better than the front row, I would speculate, if he wasn't incompetent.

But I think ultimately the division we have is close to unsolvable. There's no policy that's going to address it, because I think it is so social and cultural. It requires almost a national kumbaya, the front row going back and living in different communities and opening their mind, and it requires the back row to drop a little bit of their anger. I just don't see that happening in either case.

NR: Well, we'll leave it on that somewhat hopeless, discouraging note.

CA: I hope that wasn't too negative. ❖

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THE DANGEROUS ACADEMIC IS AN EXTINCT SPECIES

*If these ever
existed at all,
they are now
deader than
dodos.*

by Yasmin Nair

IT WAS CURIOSITY, NOT STUPIDITY THAT KILLED the Dodo. For too long, we have held to the unfair myth that the flightless Mauritian bird became extinct because it was too dumb to understand that it was being killed. But as Stefan Pociask points out in “What Happened to the Last Dodo Bird?”, the dodo was driven into extinction partly because of its desire to learn more about a new, taller, two-legged creature who disembarked onto the shores of its native habitat: “Fearless curiosity, rather than stupidity, is a more fitting description of their behavior.”

Curiosity does have a tendency to get you killed. The truly fearless don't last long, and the birds who go out in search of new knowledge are inevitably the first ones to get plucked. It's always safer to stay close to the nest.

CONTRARY TO WHAT CAPITALISM'S MYTHOLOGIZERS would have you believe, the contemporary world does not heap its rewards on those with the most creativity and courage. In fact, at every stage of life, those who venture beyond the safe boundaries of expectation are ruthlessly culled. If you're a black kid who tends to talk back and call bullshit on your teachers, you will be sent to a special school. If you're a transgender teenager like Leelah Alcorn in Ohio, and you unapologetically defy gender norms, they'll make you so miserable that you kill yourself. If you're Eric Garner, and you tell the police where they can stick their B.S. “loose cigarette” tax, they will promptly choke you to death. Conformists, on the other hand, usually do pretty well for themselves. Follow the rules, tell people what they want to hear, and you'll come out just fine.

Becoming a successful academic requires one hell of a lot of ass-kissing and up-sucking. You have to flatter and impress. The very act of applying to graduate school to begin with is an exercise in servility: *please deem me worthy of your favor*. In order to rise through the ranks, you have to convince people of your intelligence and acceptability, which means basing everything you do on a concern for what other people think. If ever you find that your conclusions would make your superiors despise you (say, for example, if you realized that much of what they wrote was *utter irredeemable manure*), you face a choice: conceal your true self or be permanently consigned to the margins.

The idea of a “dangerous” academic is therefore somewhat self-contradictory to begin with. The academy could, potentially, be a place for unfettered intellectual daring. But the most daring and curious people don't end up in the academy at all. These days, they've probably gone off and done something more interesting, something that involves a little bit less deference to convention and detachment from the material world. We can even see this in the cultural archetype of the Professor. The Professor is always a slightly

harrumphy—and always white and male—individual, with scuffed shoes and jackets with leather elbows, hidden behind a mass of seemingly disorganized books. He is brilliant but inaccessible, and if not effeminate, certainly effete. But bouncing with ideas, *so many ideas*. There is nothing particularly menacing about such a figure, certainly nothing that might seriously threaten the existing arrangements of society. Of ideas he has plenty. Of truly dangerous ones, none at all.

IF ANYTHING, THE UNIVERSITY HAS ONLY GOTTEN *less* dangerous in recent years. Campuses like Berkeley were once centers of political dissent. There was open confrontation between students and the state. In May of 1970, the Ohio National Guard killed four students at Kent State. Ten days later, police at the historically black Jackson State University fired into a crowd of students, killing two. At Cornell in 1969, armed black students took over the student union building in a demand for recognition and reform, part of a pattern of serious upheaval.

But over the years the university became corporatized. It became a job training center rather than an educational institution. Academic research became progressively more specialized, narrow, technical, and obscure. (The most successful scholarship is that which *seems* to be engaged with serious social questions, but does not actually reach any conclusions that would force the Professor to leave his office.)

The ideas that do get produced have also become more inaccessible, with research inevitably cloaked behind the paywalls of journals that cost astronomical sums of money. At the cheaper end, the journal *Cultural Studies* charges individuals \$201 for just the print edition, and charges institutions \$1,078 for just the online edition. The science journal *Biochimica et Biophysica Acta* costs \$20,000, which makes *Cultural Studies* look like a bargain. (What makes the pricing especially egregious is that these journals are created mostly with free labor, as academics who produce articles are almost never paid for them.) Ideas in the modern university are not free and available to all. They are in fact tethered to a vast academic industrial complex, where giant publishing houses like Elsevier make massive profits off the backs of researchers.

Furthermore, the academics who produce those ideas aren't exactly at liberty to think and do as they please. The overwhelming “adjunctification” of the university has meant that approximately 76% of professors... aren't professors at all, but underpaid and overworked adjuncts, lecturers, and assistants. And while conditions for adjuncts are slowly improving, especially through more widespread unionization, their place in the university is permanently unstable. This means that no adjunct can afford to seriously offend. To make matters worse, adjuncts rely heavily on student evaluations to keep their positions, meaning that their classrooms cannot be places to heavily contest or challenge students' politics. Instructors could

literally lose their jobs over even the appearance of impropriety. One false step—a video seen as too salacious, or a political opinion held as oppressive—could be the end of a career. An adjunct must always be docile and polite.

All of this means that university faculty are less and less likely to threaten any aspect of the existing social or political system. Their jobs are constantly on the line, so there's a professional risk in upsetting the status quo. But *even if* their jobs were safe, the corporatized university would still produce mostly banal ideas, thanks to the sycophancy-generating structure of the academic meritocracy. But *even if* truly novel and consequential ideas *were* being produced, they would be locked away behind extortionate paywalls.

The corporatized university also ends up producing the corporatized student. Students worry about doing anything that may threaten their job prospects. Consequently, acts of dissent have become steadily de-radicalized. On campuses these days, outrage and anger is reserved for questions like, “Is this sushi an act of cultural appropriation?” When student activists do propose ways to “radically” reform the university, it tends to involve adding new administrative offices and bureaucratic procedures, i.e. strengthening the existing structure of the university rather than democratizing it. Instead of demanding an increase in the power of students, campus workers, and the untenured, activists tend to push for symbolic measures that universities happily embrace, since they do not compromise the existing arrangement of administrative and faculty power.

IT'S AMUSING, THEN, THAT CONSERVATIVES HAVE LONG been so paranoid about the threat posed by U.S. college campuses. The American right has an ongoing fear of supposedly arch-leftist professors brainwashing nubile and impressionable young minds into following sinister leftist dictates. Since massively popular books like Roger Kimball's 1990 *Tenured Radicals* and Dinesh D'Souza's 1992 *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race on Campus*, colleges have been seen as hotbeds of Marxist indoctrination that threaten the civilized order. This is a laughable idea, for the simple

reason that academics are the very opposite of revolutionaries: they intentionally speak to minuscule audiences rather than the masses (on campus, to speak of a “popular” book is to deploy a term of faint disdain) and they are fundamentally concerned with preserving the security and stability of their own position. This makes them deeply conservative in their day-to-day acts, regardless of what may come out of their mouths. (See the truly pitiful lack of support among Harvard faculty when the university's dining hall workers went on strike for slightly higher wages. Most of the “tenured radicals” couldn't even be bothered to sign a petition supporting the workers, let alone march in the streets.)

But left-wing academics are all too happy to embrace the conservatives' ludicrous idea of professors as subversives. This is because it reassures them that they are, in fact, consequential, that they *are* effectively opposing right-wing ideas, and that they need not question their own role. The “professor-as-revolutionary” caricature serves both the caricaturist and the professor. Conservatives can remain convinced that students abandon conservative ideas because they are being manipulated, rather than because reading books and learning things makes it more difficult to maintain right-wing prejudices. And liberal professors get to delude themselves into believing they are affecting something.

TODAY, IN WHAT MANY CALL “Trump's America,” the idea of universities as sites of “resistance” has been renewed on both the left and right. At the end of 2016, Turning Point USA, a conservative youth group, created a website called Professor Watchlist, which set about listing academics it considered dangerously leftist. The goal, stated on the Turning Point site, is “to expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom.”

the latest work from esteemed biologist
RICHARD DAWKINS
A great scientist gives his insights on deep questions of religion ...

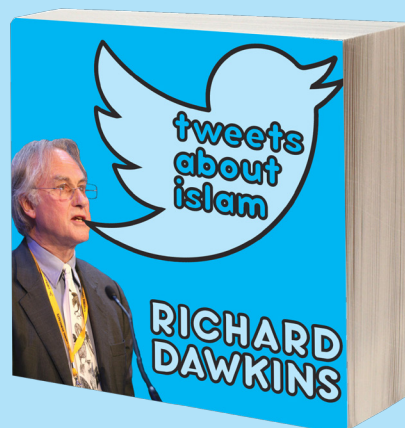
INCLUDES SUCH PROFOUND GEMS AS:

@RichardDawkins: If you think criticising Islam is racist, you must think Islam is a race. And if you think Islam is a race you are a racist.

@RichardDawkins: All the world's Muslims have fewer Nobel Prizes than Trinity College, Cambridge.

@RichardDawkins: Of course you can have an opinion about Islam without having read Qur'an. [sic] You don't have to read Mein Kampf to have an opinion about nazism.

AND LOOK FOR THE SEQUEL: “RICHARD DAWKINS TWEETS ABOUT FEMINISM”



Some on the left are delusional enough to think that professors as a class can and should be presenting a united front against conservatism. At a recent University of Chicago event, a document was passed around from Refusefascism.org titled, “A Call to Professors, Students and All in Academia,” calling on people to “Make the University a Zone of Resistance to the Fascist Trump Regime and the Coming Assault on the Academy.”

Many among the professorial class seem to want to do exactly this, seeing themselves as part of the intellectual vanguard that will serve as a bulwark against Trumpism.

“love their neighbors,” and Yancy knows this. He wants to simultaneously possess and devour his cake: he is doing nothing that anyone could possibly object to, yet he is also attempting to rouse his students to overthrow the patriarchy. He suggests that his work is so uncontroversial that conservatives are silly to fear it (he’s just teaching students to think!), but also places himself in the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was trying to radically alter the existing social order. His teaching can be revolutionary enough to justify Yancy spending time as a philosophy professor during the age of Trump, but benign enough for the Professor

“UNIVERSITY FACULTY ARE LESS AND LESS LIKELY TO THREATEN ANY ASPECT OF THE EXISTING SOCIAL OR POLITICAL SYSTEM...”

George Yancy, a professor of philosophy and race studies at Emory University, wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times*, titled “I Am A Dangerous Professor.” Yancy discussed his own inclusion on the Professor Watchlist, before arguing that he is, in fact, dangerous:

“In my courses, which the watchlist would like to flag as ‘un-American’ and as ‘leftist propaganda,’ I refuse to entertain my students with mummified ideas and abstract forms of philosophical self-stimulation. What leaves their hands is always philosophically alive, vibrant and filled with urgency. I want them to engage in the process of freeing ideas, freeing their philosophical imaginations. I want them to lose sleep over the pain and suffering of so many lives that many of us deem disposable. I want them to become conceptually unhinged, to leave my classes discontented and maladjusted... Bear in mind that it was in 1963 that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. raised his voice and said: ‘I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination.’... I refuse to remain silent in the face of racism, its subtle and systemic structure. I refuse to remain silent in the face of patriarchal and sexist hegemony and the denigration of women’s bodies.”

He ends with the words:

“Well, if it is dangerous to teach my students to love their neighbors, to think and rethink constructively and ethically about who their neighbors are, and how they have been taught to see themselves as disconnected and neoliberal subjects, then, yes, I am dangerous, and what I teach is dangerous.”

Of course, it’s not dangerous at all to teach students to

Watchlist to be an act of baseless paranoia.

Much of the revolutionary academic resistance to Trump seems to consist of spending a greater amount of time on Twitter. Consider the case of George Ciccariello-Maher, a political scientist at Drexel University who specializes in Venezuela. In December of 2016, Ciccariello-Maher became a minor *cause célèbre* on the left after getting embroiled in a flap over a tweet. On Christmas Eve, for who only knows what reason, Ciccariello-Maher tweeted “All I Want for Christmas is White Genocide.” Conservatives became enraged, and began calling upon Drexel to fire him. Ciccariello-Maher insisted he had been engaged in satire, although nobody could understand what the joke was intended to be, or what the tweet even meant in the first place. After Drexel disowned Ciccariello-Maher’s words, a petition was launched in his defense. Soon, Ciccariello-Maher had lawyered up, Drexel confirmed that his job was safe, and the whole kerfuffle was over before the nation’s half-eaten leftover Christmas turkeys had been served up into sandwiches and casseroles.

Ciccariello-Maher continues to spend a great deal of time on Twitter, where he frequently issues macho tributes to violent political struggle, and postures as a revolutionary. But despite his temporary status as a martyr for the cause of academic freedom, one who terrifies the reactionaries, there was nothing dangerous about his act. He hadn’t really stirred up a hornet’s nest; after all, people who poke actual bees occasionally get bee stings. A more apt analogy is that he had gone to the zoo to tap on the glass in the reptile house,

THE TEST OF WHETHER YOUR IDEAS ARE ACTUALLY DANGEROUS IS WHETHER YOU ARE REWARDED OR PUNISHED FOR EXPRESSING THEM...

or to throw twigs at some tired crocodiles in a concrete pool. (When they turned their rheumy eyes upon him, he ran from the fence, screaming that dangerous predators were after him.) U.S. academics who fancy themselves involved in revolutionary political struggles are trivializing the risks faced by actual political dissidents around the world, including the hundreds of environmental activists who have been murdered globally for their efforts to protect indigenous land.

Of course, it's true that there are still some subversive ideas on university campuses, and some true existing threats to academic and student freedom. Many of them have to do with Israel or labor organizing. In 2014, Steven Salaita was fired from a tenured position at the University of Illinois for tweets he had made about Israel. (After a protracted lawsuit, Salaita eventually reached a settlement with the university.) Fordham University tried to ban a Students for Justice in Palestine group, and the University of California Board of Regents attempted to introduce a speech code that would have punished much criticism of Israel as "hate speech." The test of whether your ideas are actually dangerous is whether you are rewarded or punished for expressing them.

IN FACT, IN TERMS OF DANGER POSED TO THE *world*, the corporatized university may itself be more dangerous than any of the ideas that come out of it.

In Hyde Park, where I live, the University of Chicago seems ancient and venerable at first glance. Its Ye Olde Kinda Sorta Englande architecture, built in 1890 to resemble Oxbridge, could almost pass for medieval

if one walked through it at dusk. But the institution is in fact deeply modern, and like Columbia University in New York, it has slowly absorbed the surrounding neighborhood, slicing into older residential areas and displacing residents in landgrab operations. Despite being home to one of the world's most prestigious medical and research schools, the university refused for many years to open a trauma center to serve the city's South Side, which had been without access to trauma care. (The school only relented in 2015, after a long history of protests.) The university ferociously guards its myriad assets with armed guards on the street corners, and enacts massive surveillance on local residents (the university-owned cinema insists on examining bags for weapons and food, a practice I have personally experienced being selectively conducted in a racially discriminatory manner). In the university's rapacious takeover of the surrounding neighborhood, and its treatment of local residents—most of whom are of color—we can see what happens when a university becomes a corporation rather than a community institution. Devouring everything in the pursuit of limitless expansion, it swallows up whole towns.

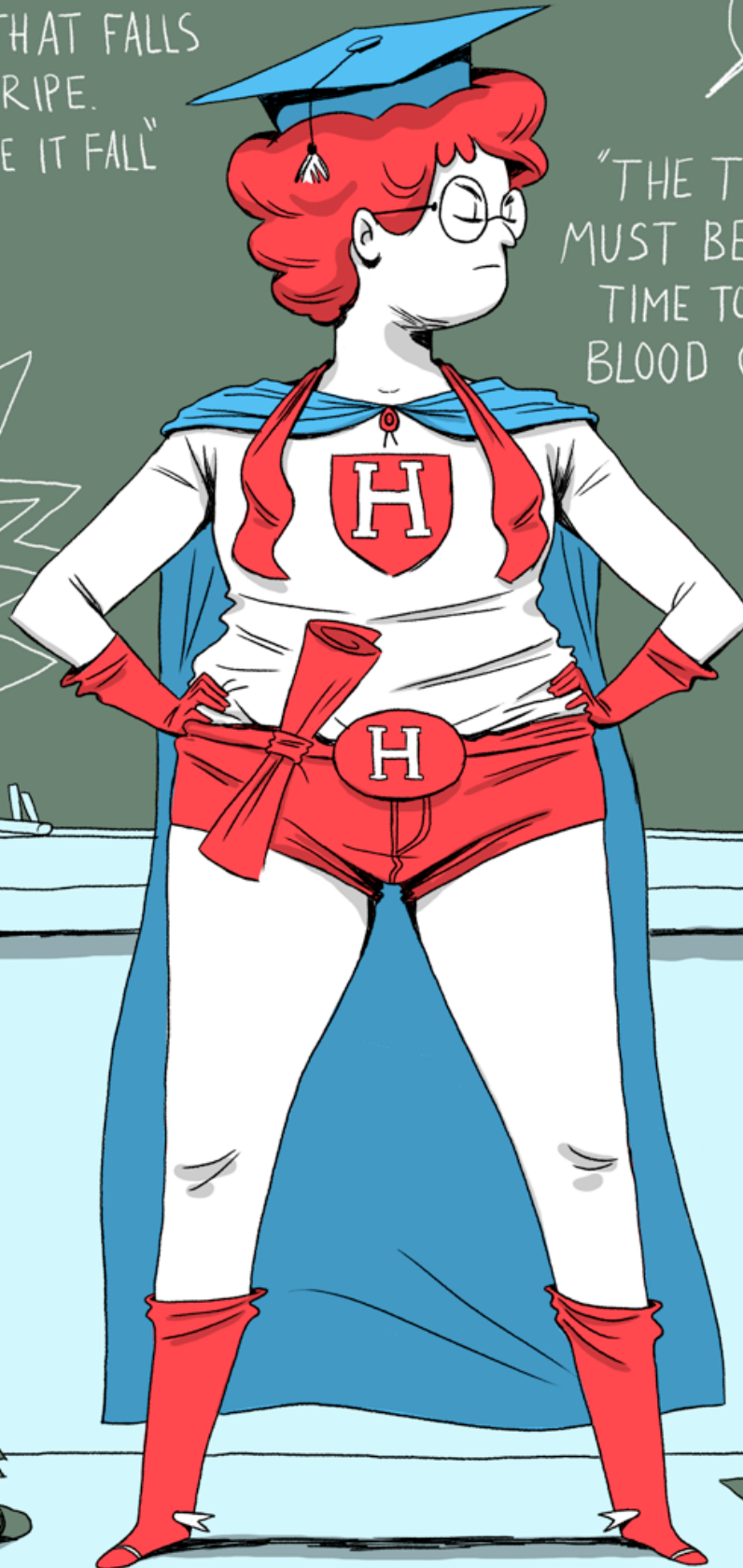
The corporatized university, like corporations generally, is an uncontrollable behemoth, absorbing greater and greater quantities of capital and human lives, and churning out little of long-term social value. Thus Yale University needlessly decided to open a new campus in Singapore despite the country's human rights record, and New York University decided to needlessly expand to Abu Dhabi, its new UAE campus built by low-wage workers under brutally repressive conditions. The corporatized university serves nobody and nothing except its own infinite growth. Students are indebted, professors lose job security, surrounding communities are surveilled and displaced. *That* is something dangerous.

L EFT PROFESSORS ALMOST certainly sense this. They see themselves disappearing, the campus becoming a steadily more stifling environment. Posturing as a macho revolutionary is, like all displays of machismo, driven partially by a desperate fear of one's impotence. They know they are not dangerous, but they are happy to play into the conservative stereotype. But the "dangerous academic" is like the Dodo in 1659, a decade before its final sighting and extinction: almost nonexistent. And the more universities become like corporations, the fewer and fewer of these unique birds will be left. Curiosity kills, and those who truly threaten the inexorable logic of the neoliberal university are likely to end up extinct. ❖

"THE REVOLUTION IS
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WHEN IT IS RIPE.
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"THE TREE OF LIBERTY
MUST BE REFRESHED FROM
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PRETENDING IT ISN'T THERE

How We Deal With the Nuclear Threat

by NATHAN J. ROBINSON

I HAVE LONG HAD AN OBJECTION TO THE PROSPECT OF BEING blown to smithereens. It is a peculiar fixation of mine. I prefer my life as a fully intact human being, my organs comfortably encased beneath my flesh. I don't wish to be burned to a crisp, splattered onto a wall, or boiled alive. I do not want to be described as "charred beyond recognition." I am strongly opposed to having my limbs, brains, and other components violently extracted from my person and scattered in all directions.

I am therefore somewhat horrified by the prospect of nuclear war. I find it disquieting to realize that the United States possesses about 6,800 warheads, ready to be deployed at any time via submarine, aircraft, and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).

Yet others do not seem to share my horror. Certainly, if they do, they don't talk about it much. The number of nuclear war-related conversations I have overheard or been invited into in the last six months stands at zero. It doesn't seem to come up much.

I suppose it's easy to forget that all the warheads are lying there, ready to vaporize every city on earth in an instant. After all, you rarely see them. Sometimes it's hard to even believe they exist. They don't sit in your front garden waiting to be exploded. They hide deep within secure military installations, often in remote deserts. You don't see many pictures of them, they aren't paraded down the streets. Living under the nuclear threat doesn't *feel* like living with a person permanently pointing a loaded gun at your head.

And yet that's precisely what it is. In fact, it's much, much more

terrifying than living with a gun to your head. Because the weapon in question doesn't just threaten you, it threatens *every single thing you love*, every family member, every friend, every colleague, every beautiful and precious thing in your life and the lives of everybody you know.

My God, that makes me sound like some alarmist nutcase. I seem like I'm exaggerating. But I don't think my premises are in any way controversial; it's simply factually true that, in the course of a single day, the world's great powers could end almost all life on earth. We all know this. It's beyond argument. And yet it doesn't really seem *plausible*. It's hard for me to really believe, sitting at my desk in a fuzzy blanket looking out the window at sunshine and trees, that everything could truly be obliterated instantaneously.

But it absolutely could. And by everything, I do truly mean everything. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (in which the United States decided to demonstrate its newfound capabilities to the Japanese by detonating atomic weapons in the middle of two cities rather than, as some in the Truman Administration thought would be more reasonable, in an uninhabited area) look like holiday firecrackers next to the explosions we are now capable of producing. A nuclear device 12 feet long could turn every single person in Manhattan into a smudge, and give everyone else within a 100 mile radius both hideous burns and cancer.

I know everybody knows this. I know it's a cliché. But I can't think that everybody really *does* know it, because nobody seems to act as if it's true. Perhaps that's because after a certain amount of repetition, the

language and imagery of nuclear war becomes empty of feeling, a set of symbols and signs that don't actually convey much appreciable content. Differing amounts of megatons just seem like numbers, they don't seem real in any substantive way. The word "warhead" becomes innocuous; for decades now it's been a candy with a mushroom cloud logo. The mushroom cloud itself is almost *adorable* or comical. It's still *vaguely* morbid, but if it made us think of Japanese babies without any skin, you wouldn't be able to brand sour candy with it.

PERHAPS WE'VE BEEN IN A STATE OF RELATIVE peace for so long that we've forgotten what war really is. It hasn't been *that* long, of course; there are still World War II veterans and Hiroshima victims alive. And plenty of people on earth *do* have an intimate acquaintance with the realities of large-scale violence. But especially in the United States, it's perfectly possible to go through life with only the fuzziest and most cartoonish understanding of what it means to actually destroy places and people. I've never even seen a very large explosion, let alone had one near me, let alone watched someone I love be torn to bits. How can I possibly contemplate the scale of a nuclear weapon? I can think about it intellectually. But the realities are not just too *horrible*, but too remote from anything in my experiences, for me to be able to seriously conceive of what we are even talking about. Yes, I can affirm that, rationally, I believe a 12-foot long metal object can vaporize everything in the Greater Boston Area. Rationally, I know that there are thousands of hidden underground launching silos, filled with tubes that can fly thousands of miles and turn a million human bodies to ash. I know that the great cities we have spent a dozen generations building are so precarious that Donald Trump could eliminate one within an hour. Yet for these being the *rational* results of inescapable logic, they sound totally and profoundly *irrational*, because they feel just about as true as the existence of leprechauns or the Great Pumpkin. Really, there are warheads everywhere? I've never seen one. And I can't accept that everything here in Boston, from the Old North Church to the Suffolk Law School to every stop on the Red Line, could cease to exist in a nanosecond.

The good thing about it not seeming like a real threat is that maybe it *isn't* a real threat. Maybe nuclear deterrence really does make us very secure. It certainly seems to have worked for seventy years. Perhaps, despite the counterintuitiveness of the idea, the safest thing for countries to do really is to point the largest possible weapons at one another and depend on the mutual operation of rational self-interest.

I will confess that this does not bring me too much comfort. That's mainly because it only has to fail one time. I actually *do* believe that rational self-interest is a pretty good predictor of much human behavior. Unfortunately, I also believe in the existence of madness. And it only takes one or two nations controlled by the mad or the ambitious in order to plunge humanity into eternal oblivion. To keep nuclear weapons around is to operate on the assumption that there will never again be another Hitler, bent on expansion at all costs and ideologically committed to mass murder. It assumes that a death cult, or a cruel and stupid religious sect like ISIS, will never control the governing apparatus of a major state. And while that may be true in the short term, is it possible that it can be true *forever*? Someday something irrational will happen, and it only needs to happen once.

Maybe that's not the case. Maybe the world *really has* entered a period totally different from every other historical era, in which large-scale war will never again occur. Maybe no government of a major nation will ever again be unhinged and irrational. Or maybe I am a uniquely naïve and pessimistic person, who simply fails to comprehend the way the world works. It's hard not to believe that I

am, since everyone else seems so untroubled.

But I just don't know. And it doesn't seem absurd to me to think that some crazed form of religious fundamentalism could have some theory for why the world needed to be destroyed in order to please their god. It doesn't seem a stretch to believe that a chain of small human errors could add up to a very large mistake, one which can never be undone. (As Albert Einstein put it in his warning about the bomb, "So long as there are sovereign nations possessing great power, war is inevitable. [Yet] unless another war is prevented it is likely to bring destruction on a scale never before held possible and even now hardly conceived." Einstein's logic actually leads to the conclusion that the ultimate goal should be the elimination of "sovereign nations possessing great power" altogether.)

I often think of the "Oh, shit" moment that comes along with a catastrophe. This is the moment where someone realizes that everything they thought was true was totally wrong, that what seemed impossible was actually quite possible indeed, and that there is no way to go back and fix the problem. It's the moment where we become fully cognizant of the fact that there was no real logical reason to assume the thing wouldn't happen, that we had just kind of *assumed* it because contemplating it was so unbearable. The last big "Oh, shit" moment was the night of Donald Trump's election. Over the course of the evening, those who were horrified by the prospect of a Trump presidency, but were dead certain that he would lose, realized that they had been conflating desire and reality. They realized that actually, the polls had showed a close race, and the experts' confidence had been completely unwarranted. They realized that the fact that a Trump presidency was *inconceivable* didn't actually affect whether it was *likely*. But by the time that realization came, it was over. There was no way to go back and adjust one's actions accordingly.

My fear is that nuclear war could be similar. It won't seem possible until it becomes inevitable. And once it becomes inevitable, we will have an "Oh, shit" moment. We'll realize that everyone's certainty had been totally groundless, that it had been based entirely on wishful thinking rather than fact. But having the moment of realization doesn't actually let you go back and undo anything. *It's too late*. All you get is those two words. Oh, shit.

I'M NOT ALONE IN THINKING THIS. WILLIAM J. PERRY, Secretary of Defense under Bill Clinton, has spent the most recent decade or so of his life trying to warn the world of the serious possibility of nuclear catastrophe. In his book *My Journey at the Nuclear Brink*, Perry recounts his experiences with nuclear weaponry from the Cuban Missile Crisis to the present, and issues an urgent call to humanity to wake up and recognize that there is literally no reason to believe that the unthinkable is impossible merely because it is unthinkable. Perry states it plainly: "Today, the danger of some sort of a nuclear catastrophe is greater than it was during the Cold War and most people are blissfully unaware of this danger." Yet during the Cold War, people actually felt the danger. They were afraid. Talk of nuclear war was part of life. (It was even a recurrent theme in pop culture. The six-disc CD box set *Atomic Platters: Cold War Music from the Golden Age of Homeland Security* collects nuclear-themed music from the 40s through 60s, including Muddy Waters playing the "Atomic Bomb Blues" and a gospel number called "Jesus Hits Like An Atom Bomb.")

It's strange, then, that as the destructive capabilities of atomic weapons have only increased, their presence in the public consciousness has diminished. And while during the postwar era, Einstein, Bertrand Russell, and countless other public intellectuals constantly discussed the implications of atomic weaponry for humanity's long-term prospects, today's physicists and philosophers are largely silent on the topic, even as our destructive potential has continued to multiply.

Examining William Perry's work in the *New York Review of Books*,

the usual array of HORRIFYING STATISTICS

Because we've allocated our priorities wisely during the time since WWII, we are now capable of vastly more impressive explosions.

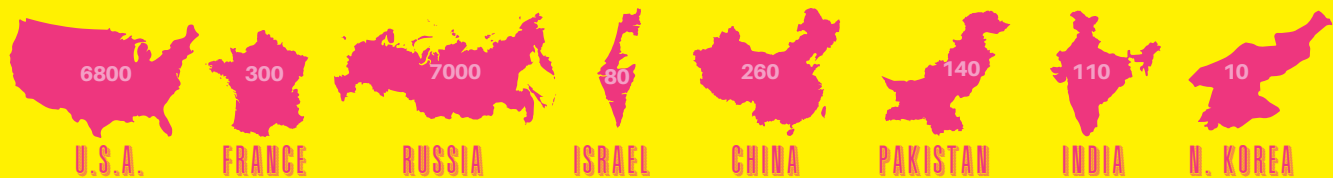


The UK nuclear arsenal alone has the destructive power to destroy over 80% of the 195 capital cities of the world. England! England could do this. Better be nice to England.



Nuclear-armed submarines carry dozens of missiles, each of which is capable of producing a blast many times more powerful than Hiroshima. A submarine it's sitting under the water waiting to kill us!

NUCLEAR WARHEADS BY NATION: COLLECTIONS OF MASS DEATH DEVICES AROUND THE WORLD



An intercontinental ballistic missile can travel nearly 10,000 miles. The distance from San Francisco to Saudi Arabia is 8,000 miles.



Oh, by the way, did I mention that they travel at 4 miles per second? That's

14,000 MPH

This means that if Russia or North Korea decided on a whim to fire one of these things, you would be dead before your television program ended.



The United States will spend over **\$179 BILLION** during the nine fiscal years of 2010-2018 on its nuclear arsenal, averaging \$20 billion per year.

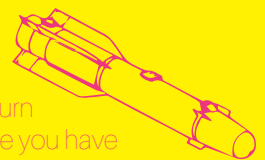
The Against Malaria Foundation estimates that it can save a life for \$3,340. For the cost of ten years of weapons that we can never fire, we could save 33 million people from malaria. Nearly

500,000

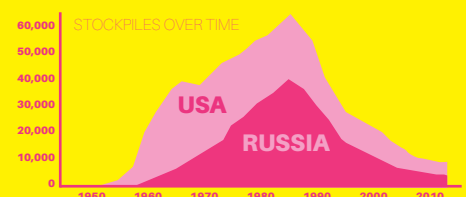
people die from malaria each year. We literally let millions of people die so that we can keep weapons that exist solely to kill millions more.



A device the size of a mid-sized automobile can instantaneously turn you and everyone you have ever met into a heap of ash, and by the way there are thousands of them everywhere. Isn't that truly extraordinary?



SOME GOOD NEWS



Fortunately the number of nuclear weapons in the world has drastically declined since the peak of Cold War Insanity. Unfortunately, when we're talking about something that wipes out cities, the difference between 10,000 and 60,000 doesn't mean terribly much.

The refusal to deal seriously with the nuclear threat can only be based on myths and fallacies, born out of a desire not to face the unthinkably horrific...

California governor Jerry Brown pondered why nobody was listening:

"No one I have known, or have even heard of, has the management experience and the technical knowledge that William Perry brings to the subject of nuclear danger. Few have his wisdom and integrity. So why isn't anyone paying attention to him? Why is fear of a nuclear catastrophe far from the minds of most Americans? And why does almost all of official Washington disagree with him and live in nuclear denial?"

Brown answers these questions by quoting Perry:

"Our chief peril is that the poised nuclear doom, much of it hidden beneath the seas and in remote badlands, is too far out of the global public consciousness. Passivity shows broadly. Perhaps this is a matter of defeatism and its cohort, distraction. Perhaps for some it is largely a most primal human fear of facing the 'unthinkable.' For others, it might be a welcoming of the illusion that there is or might be an acceptable missile defense against a nuclear attack. And for many it would seem to be the keeping of faith that nuclear deterrence will hold indefinitely—that leaders will always have accurate enough instantaneous knowledge, know the true context of events, and enjoy the good luck to avoid the most tragic of military miscalculations."

It's reassuring, if that is the right word, to hear Perry confirm this. I keep thinking I must be missing something. But I'm not. Perry knows more about nuclear weapons than anybody, and he says I am right to be shitting myself. The refusal to deal seriously with the nuclear threat can only be based on myths and fallacies, born out of both a desire not to face the unthinkably horrific and a sense that even if one did think about it, it would be impossible to know what to do about it, thus it is better to keep it out of mind.

That type of thinking is suicidal, though. And I am not suicidal. For a person who thinks about the apocalypse as much as I do, I actually believe I am *more* of an optimist than many other people. When I do talk to people about the future of humankind, especially people my age, they often seem to feel resigned to doom. Jokes are made about how

the species will be lucky if it survives another fifty years. People do not have much confidence in our ability to solve our problems, to eliminate warfare and the threat we pose to ourselves. Human nature is too flawed, technology advancing too rapidly, militaries too sophisticated, social systems too uncontrollable, for a non-catastrophic future to be possible. We must enjoy what we can while we can, but there's generally very little hope. I find this attitude woefully pessimistic. Yet it's extremely common. I worry, though, that it's a self-fulfilling prophecy and a license to justify inaction through resignation. If you're doomed, why try to fix anything? The courageous and forward-looking thing is to treat human problems and civilizational threats not as our inevitable fate, but as quandaries needing solutions. I may scare people with my talk of nuclear war, with my constant exhortations to people to look at the photos of Hiroshima victims and the numbers on available megatons and ICBM capabilities. But *I* am more scared of those who *refuse* to look at these things, who avoid them and leave them to others, and whose first thoughts about them will come at the "Oh, shit" moment.

I know full well that it's hard. I don't want to think about what happened to the people in Hiroshima. The true horrors are so revolting that if I described or showed them to you fully, you would throw this magazine away. You would be sick to your stomach. And to a certain degree, it is necessary to couch our discussions in morbid jokes, irony, cartoons, because we are ill-equipped to think about what really happens to people when a nuclear weapon is detonated. Actually contemplating it would require us to think of our friends as skeletons, to think of toddlers without skin. I want it so desperately for it to be word, not a physical occurrence in the lives of humans like myself. But it isn't. The bombs are sleeping and waiting, and there's no use thinking they're not.

LET ME BE CLEAR ON WHAT I AM TRYING TO ARGUE: I have not advocated immediate nuclear disarmament. My sole contention here is that nuclear weapons need to be *thought about* and understood for what they are, because if their threat isn't taken seriously, it will only be appreciated in hindsight, and in hindsight we will all be dead. I have not taken a position on *how* nuclear war is to be averted, only that it needs to be given the same sober attention that Einstein and Perry have given it.

There are, in fact, good arguments that certain attempts at disarmament could actually make the world less secure. Brad Roberts, in *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, counsels extreme caution in approaches toward reducing U.S. nuclear capability. (Despite a title that makes him sound like Dr. Strangelove, Roberts is sensible and even-handed in his approach.) After all, if the great powers are constantly engaged in a classic "Mexican standoff" situation (the one in films, where the cowboys and banditos are all pointing their guns at each other at once, waiting for one false move), there might be far more risk in trying to get everyone to lower their weapons than in holding things where they are. Roberts, who worked in the Obama administration on nuclear weapons policy, shares a belief that nuclear weapons pose a major threat to humankind, but believes that there are serious perils in trying to disarm quickly. As is often pointed out, if you eliminate nuclear weapons, but countries are still hostile to one another, then instead of being a race to stockpile the most weapons, there will be a race to produce the greatest capacity to reproduce nuclear weapons *quickly* if war were to occur. Thus it may be necessary to focus on reducing *hostility* rather than simply weapons.

I can entertain the intellectual arguments that people like Roberts make, about how from a pragmatic and strategic perspective, campaigns like Global Zero (aiming for the total elimination of nuclear weapons) could increase global instability. However, when reading works on nuclear policy from think tank scholars, I am frequently disturbed by the lack of appreciation shown for the real-world implications of the underlying question. To Roberts, as to many who opine on military

strategy, international relations is a policy like any other, to be discussed in precise and technical language. But when we are talking about nuclear weapons, we are fundamentally talking about a set of incredibly violent acts that will be perpetrated upon human beings against their will. It is necessary to appreciate what Hiroshima actually meant to the people it happened to in order to have any kind of sensible discussion about control of nuclear weapons. There is something missing from books like *The Case for Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, which is any sense of what nuclear weapons actually *are*: what they do to people, how they do it, and what the scenarios we are envisaging would really imply. (I feel the same way about the writings of those who defend the Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombings as necessary. I can entertain the *argument* that the bombings were the least worst option. But those making the argument are *never* willing to discuss what the bombings actually did to people. They always wave away these considerations, as Roberts does, with some cursory line about how we all know that nuclear weapons are terrible things that inflict a lot of damage. But *do* we know this? Do we really?) Thus even those who have given the *most* thoughtful consideration of the problems surrounding weapons control still have an insufficient sense of urgency and alarm, and an insufficient appreciation of the true stakes of the issue. When we *do* think about the stakes, we realize in our bones that global nuclear war *cannot be allowed to happen under any circumstances*. However many of these weapons we have, however many we build, we must never, ever fire one. (This makes them, even at their most useful, an incredibly expensive, useless, and inefficient side effect of an unfortunate intercontinental Prisoner's Dilemma.)

LYNDON JOHNSON'S INFAMOUS "DAISY" AD IS NOW MOSTLY known as a successful piece of political propaganda, and a milestone in the history of scaremongering. (In it, a little girl picks petals off a daisy before being annihilated in a nuclear explosion; Johnson's voice warns viewers that "These are the stakes... we must love each other, or we must die." The implication was that

one shouldn't vote for Barry Goldwater.) Johnson was criticized for trying to terrify Americans into voting for him.

But the scenario depicted in the ad was perfectly plausible. In fact, we've come close to it several times. Anyone who is insufficiently concerned about arms control should pick up Eric Schlosser's *Command and Control*, which spends 600 pages documenting the United States' long history of very near misses with nuclear bombs. The Johnson ad was absolutely right, and hardly propagandistic, in focusing Americans' attention squarely where it should be: on the issue of which candidate is more likely to end human civilization. Next to this question, everything else is somewhat secondary.

I have a recurring nightmare about nuclear war. In it, I am in a vast cave, deep within a mountain in Colorado or New Mexico. I turn a corner and realize I am in a storage chamber for nuclear warheads. It is totally silent. I cannot believe how peaceful it is. I go up and touch the warheads. They are so still. They seem like they are sleeping. It is difficult to believe that they can even explode, let alone that they can destroy cities. Suddenly, an alert sounds. The usual flashing red lights and sirens. The missiles fire up and launch from the cave. Hundreds of them leave. I know they are heading for cities all over the world. Soon, I am left alone, back in the silence, with the knowledge that in only a few minutes, there will be nothing left of humanity, save for me and the empty cave. I call out, trying to get the missiles to come back. They are gone. I was sitting next to them. But I did not stop them, and now there will be nothing.

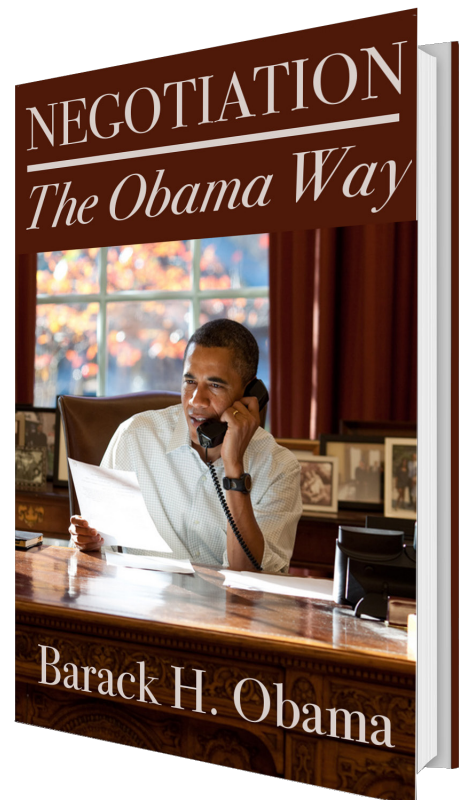
The funny thing about this nightmare is that it's not really a nightmare at all. It's the reality we inhabit every day, whether we'd prefer to think about it or not. The missiles are in the caves. They are on submarines, and at air force bases. And if we don't do something while they slumber, there's no calling them back once they've woken up. All you can do is stand at the mouth of the cave, and spend the last few moments thinking about what you did, and what you didn't do.

Oh, shit. ❖

The GREAT COMPROMISER *shares his secrets...*

In his first book since leaving office, America's 44th president shares the valuable strategies he used in his tough-minded negotiations with congressional Republicans. Sample tips include:

- *Make sure your opening bid gives everything important away, so that they'll realize you're serious about reaching agreement.*
- *Offer moderate proposals that everyone can get behind. If you're reasonable enough, they'll have to see your point of view.*
- *Conceding instantly will "surprise" the opposing party, giving you a tactical advantage.*
- *Emphasize that all parties have the same interests, by adopting major parts of the opposing party's position.*
- *Appeal to their sense of moral decency. This is almost always effective.*



On Jan 21, 2017, 4 million people marched in solidarity against Donald Trump on behalf of women all over the world. But can you find the following: (1) The littlest marchers (2) The eldest marchers

(3) A lingering suffragette (4) A spacefaring princess
(5) A disused feminine hygiene product
(6) A Nazi receiving his due
(7) Michael Moore
(8) Hillary Clinton







AT THE BORDER

by Brianna Rennis

I'M SITTING IN A TRAILER, IN A SMALL ROOM FURNISHED with a table and two chairs. There is a woman sitting across the table from me. She has a squirming child held down firmly in her lap. She is telling me why she left Honduras. I half-understand Spanish, so the meaning of her speech is reaching me in a muffled, underwater kind of way. In a few seconds, a telephonic interpreter will translate her words into English for me. The voice from the phone has the polite, neutral cadence of someone who is used to translating business conference calls.

The woman is telling me how a local gang member used to follow her home every day after work. Now the little boy in her lap is chewing on a pen he snatched off the table. His face is covered with small pen-marks. As his mother begins to tell me about the time she was raped, I see the cap of the pen vanish into the boy's mouth. I watch the pointed tip emerge and retract several times threateningly between his lips, like a black bee-stinger. Ah shit, I think, what if this kid accidentally swallows that cap? I don't want to interrupt his mother, who is in the middle of telling me one of the worst things that's ever happened to her. I also don't want her child to choke to death in front of us both.

I've almost mustered up the right combination of Spanish and frantic gesticulation to alert the mother to the situation, when the kid suddenly spits out the cap with a wet pop. He grins at me openmouthed, his tongue blue with ink.

I want to smile, so the kid doesn't think I'm angry at him. But this is a bad moment to smile. I don't want the mother to think I'm smiling at what she's telling me. In the end, I have no idea what kind of a face I end up making. Some sort of hideous half-grimace, probably.

As with all of these consultations, I come away thinking of a hundred things I should have done differently. Under other circumstances, I would probably brood over this interaction for hours, replaying it over and over in my mind. But now I simply don't have the time. There are many more women to see.

THE INSIDE OF THE VISITORS' TRAILER, AND THE bits of scenery visible out the various office windows—revealing, what else, more trailers—are the most I ever see of the South Texas Family Residential Center. The Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), the private prison company that manages the center, doesn't allow outsiders to wander around the facilities. Viewed from the front, the optics of this “family residence” aren't too great. There are dozens of floodlights suspended on high poles, and below them, rows upon rows of little trailers, all surrounded by a big fence. It looks like an internment camp. And that, more or less, is what it is.

The South Texas Family Residential Center is the place where we detain many of the mothers and children who approach our southern border without papers. Not all of the women even

make it this far. The Border Patrol officers who pick them up will usually attempt to persuade them—sometimes with threats—to sign self-deportation orders. But if a woman tells the officer she's afraid to return to her home country, he may send her and her children to a detention center to await something called a "credible fear interview." The outcome of this interview will determine if she can remain in the United States to formally apply for asylum, or if she'll be deported back to the country she fled.

The vast majority of these women and children are from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, whose citizens have been

involved, rates of positive credible fear determinations have gone up exponentially, indicating that a lot of the people who were deported under the earlier system almost certainly had viable asylum claims.

This legal operation, dubbed the CARA Pro Bono Project, is no small feat, requiring a massive expenditure of private resources: most of the legal assistants on the ground at any given time are out-of-town volunteers who travel to the detention center at their own expense and live out of hotel rooms. The South Texas Family Residential Center is located in Dilley, Texas, a tiny town about

“You want to tell them that they can breathe easy now, that they’re in a safe place, that the United States will welcome and protect them. But of course, you can’t promise them anything...”

fleeing in large numbers since around 2014. In these countries, organized gangs control large territories, and the impunity rate for violent crime, including murder, rape, and domestic violence, is estimated to be as high as 95%. The two biggest gangs in Central America, MS-13 and Barrio 18, were originally founded in Los Angeles, and expanded to Central America when the U.S. deported a large number of gang members in the 1990s. In a region exhausted by decades of conflict (in which U.S. meddling played no small part), with weak civic institutions and high unemployment, the gangs proliferated rapidly. MS-13 and Barrio 18 rely on extortion to sustain themselves, and they exact compliance through terror. For sheer, cinematic horror, their techniques—arson, murder, rape, kidnapping, mutilation, decapitation—rival anything that ISIS has been getting up to on the other side of the Atlantic. A lot of the refugees fleeing the Northern Triangle don't even try to sneak across the border. Rather, they present themselves directly to border patrol officials, hoping they will protect them.

WHEN WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST BEGAN appearing at the border in significant numbers, during Obama's presidency, they were detained and processed in a highly clandestine manner. Women, along with their children, were locked up without access to legal counsel. Exhausted, traumatized, terrified, most of them were rapidly deported without any substantive opportunity to appeal the decision to a judge. The purpose of this high-speed deportation mill was to get people out the country as quickly and unpleasantly as possible, in the hopes that rumors of this poor reception would deter future border-crossers. Then some immigration lawyers got wind of the situation and decided to set up permanent shop right next to the family detention centers. Since the lawyers got

an hour's drive from the border, far from the metropolitan centers where lawyers tend to be concentrated. A briefly up-and-coming but now mostly abandoned fracking town, Dilley has a disproportionately large number of gas stations and motels, but not much else. (According to its Wikipedia page, it also has a haunted grain silo, which I regret to say I never visited.) The detainee population inside the detention center, which can house up to 2,400 people, is usually about half as big as the population of the entire town of 3,800.

I first glimpse the women of the detention center sitting in a circle, listening to an orientation speech by a CARA volunteer. I am struck by how small many of them are: seated in their chairs, their dangling feet barely graze the floor. Some of the women are holding babies, or have toddlers playing in front of their chairs. They have all recently traveled approximately 1450 miles across Mexico, partly on foot, a long journey fraught with terrible dangers, from Mexican immigration authorities, from drug cartels, from drifters and fellow-migrants. One woman begins speaking about her time in an *hielera*: this is a U.S. Border Patrol cell where migrants are held for several days right after they're apprehended. The cells are air-conditioned to uncomfortably frigid temperatures, are continually illuminated all through the night, and usually have no cots or blankets to sleep on. The woman tells a story about how her child wanted a drink of water and the officer wouldn't give her any. My Anglophone brain, trying to parse the Spanish on the fly, catches on a word that I know, that I keep hearing over and over: *llorando*, *llorando*, *llorando*—crying, crying, crying.

ONE STAFF MEMBER DESCRIBED THE CARA PRO Bono Project to me as “a cross between a legal aid office and an emergency room.” Every week, new women and children arrive at the

detention center. The CARA volunteers' job is to prepare these mothers for their credible fear interviews with the asylum office. In order to pass her interview, the woman must state enough facts to show that she could, potentially, win an asylum case in court. If she can do that, she'll be paroled out of the detention center with a notice to appear before a court on a particular date. But if she doesn't tell the asylum officer the right information, or if the asylum officer doesn't believe her story, she is in immediate danger of deportation. In addition, for the many women who won't be able to afford private lawyers and may not have access to pro bono assistance after they leave the detention center, this consultation with CARA may be the last and only time they get to speak to a legal adviser of any kind.

I talk to women back-to-back for eight or nine hours a day. I hear a lot of stories. The stories are all similar: they all have elements in common, but they are all different: there are always strange details, elaborate side-narratives, that make each story untidy, and thus, somehow, more plausible. "Why did you leave your country?" I ask, and all the women begin their reply, almost without exception, with "Por miedo"—because of fear. Many women talk about the gangs: how the gangs extorted them, attacked them, murdered their family members, threatened to forcibly recruit their young children. Some women fled because they received an anonymous phone call, or a threatening note slipped under their door. It might have come from a gang, it might not: they have no idea. They may have fled because a frightening-looking man stood in front of their house three nights in row, or because a tattooed stranger made an "I'm watching you" gesture at them in the street. In an environment of continuous threat and sudden eruptions of violence, signs of impending lethal danger are often strange, inarticulate, highly contextual.

The other major theme is domestic violence. Abused women who are coming from countries where the police refuse to intervene over "private" family matters, or don't have the resources to control offenders, may have a legally solid asylum case. The precise legal formulation for a successful domestic violence case hinges on whether the woman had the ability to leave her partner without facing retribution, whether her partner considered her to be his personal property. And so you always ask: "Did he ever say you were his property? Did he ever say that because you were a woman, you had to do whatever he said?"

The initial response I get from almost every woman I interview is the same: a sudden, wry smile. What the smile means I can't quite say—I think it's something between gratification that I've guessed correctly, and a kind of amusement that I even had to ask something so obvious. "Yes," they reply, "he said that all the time."

Many people bring their children into the room with them during consultations. Some mothers are, understandably, reluctant to let their children out of sight. Others are still breastfeeding their infants or toddlers. Consultations are intermittently interrupted by temper tantrums and deferred-naptime meltdowns. One woman has to stop her story of abuse several times as her son barges playfully in and out of the room. "He's old enough to understand," his mother tells me in a nervous voice. Another woman tells me how a gang member tried to run her down in his car, chasing after her while she ran with her child in her arms. "He still has nightmares about the car," she whispers, nodding

to her son. The little boy, suddenly frightened, begins grabbing her arms urgently, trying to climb into her lap, saying over and over, "El carro, mamá, el carro." Yet another woman puts her head down on the table and sobs, begging me not to let them send her home, crying that she would rather spend the rest of her life in prison in the United States than go back to her country. Moments earlier, she had described to me how a gang member had threatened to cut up her daughter into four pieces. She had good reason to believe that this was no idle threat: the same gang member had already killed and dismembered her uncle.

In the corner of the office, her daughter is playing with a toy truck. Not long ago, someone, somewhere, was looking at the living body of this child and contemplating cutting her into four pieces.

LIKE BEING AN EMT, WORKING IN ASYLUM law gradually fucks up your normal emotional reactions. You get eerily accustomed to watching near-strangers cry in front of you. You also experience a disturbing sense of relief whenever a client reveals some harrowing detail that will bolster their case. The legal standards in asylum law are, frankly, bizarre.

Under the law, you can get asylum if you can show that you have a "well-founded fear" of future persecution, "on account of" a protected ground, at the hands of your government or an actor that your government is "unwilling or unable" to control. Sometimes the hardest thing to prove is the "on account of a protected ground" part: you have to show you were targeted for a specific reason, namely, "race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion." If someone in your home country is trying to murder you because he just hates your guts, that's not persecution. If you live in an active conflict zone where everyone is being indiscriminately targeted for violence, that's not persecution. You have to prove that there's something about you, some belief you hold, some "immutable characteristic," that made someone decide to come after you. Tiny details, like the specific insult somebody used when they were threatening you, can become hugely relevant. So a woman comes to you with her story, and its natural points of narrative emphasis: and you must suggest to her different points of emphasis, the ones that are legally relevant, even though no sane person outside our legal system would think these kinds of details mattered a damn, in terms of whether somebody deserves to be sent home to a life of unrelenting violence and fear.

In a little office room, it's just you, and this woman you only met a minute ago, talking about some of the worst things that can happen to a human being. It's a strangely intimate experience, having that level of trust suddenly placed in you, even if you know it's borne of desperation, rather than anything you've done to earn it. You want to offer these women some word of encouragement. You want to tell them that they can breathe easy now, that they're in a safe place, that the United States will welcome and protect them after all they've suffered. But of course, you can't promise them anything. So instead, you nudge a box of tissues across the table, and try to think of something you can say. What you can say are mostly platitudes, but they are also true. "You're strong, to have survived so much. You're a brave person,

“I felt, viscerally, that a single fingernail or hair follicle of any one of these women was worth more than Donald Trump’s entire body.”

to have come all this way. You did the right thing, to protect your children. You’re well-prepared for your interview.”

I WAS A VOLUNTEER AT DILLEY IN AUGUST 2016. Halfway through my time there, Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump gave his first major immigration policy speech. He announced his intention to build an impenetrable southern border wall, complete with aerial drones and underground sensors. He discussed expanding immigration detention, tripling the number of ICE and Border Patrol officers. He conjured up a terrifying picture of the widespread violence and lawlessness threatening innocent U.S. citizens across the land, all because of lax immigration enforcement.

Listening to Trump’s speech, I thought about the dozens of women I had spoken to so far. They had all been, without exception, shockingly gracious, warm, and friendly, greeting me with smiles, laughing indulgently at my bad Spanish, earnestly answering all the terrible and intrusive questions I had to ask them. They were at once ordinary, and also the heroes of unwritten epics. I imagined these women and their children, at the end of their long, perilous journey across the whole length of Mexico, coming up against an impenetrable wall, coming up against a Border Patrol officer who’s been implicitly authorized to turn a deaf ear to their pleas. I imagined what the return journey would feel like, heading southwards again, knowing that you were going back to the same hell you had risked so much to leave, knowing that your escape attempt will certainly have been noted, knowing that it will not go unpunished. I felt, viscerally, that a single fingernail or hair follicle of any one of these women was worth more than Donald Trump’s entire body.

Now, every one of the talking points from Trump’s policy speech has resurfaced in the form of executive orders. Though Trump’s “Muslim ban” has received the most national attention, his executive orders on border security and interior enforcement—which include promises to “end the abuse of parole and asylum provisions currently used to prevent the lawful removal of removable aliens”—are the ones that pose the greatest danger to refugees

coming from the south. These orders contemplate a relocation of significant enforcement and adjudication resources to the border. They envision the universal detention of all people entering the U.S. without authorization, and a possible halt to the parole system, which has previously allowed people who aren’t deemed to pose a security risk—like the mothers at Dilley—to be released from detention centers on bond, or with ankle monitors, during the multi-year adjudication process for their case. It remains to be seen exactly how these orders will be carried out in practice, and whether Congress will appropriate the necessary funds for their most ambitious provisions. But it certainly isn’t comforting that all the agencies which deal with immigration matters, including the immigration courts, are part of the executive branch.

The orders, if fulfilled to their maximum extent, would create a system where asylum-seekers are detained in centers near the border until the outcome of their case is resolved, with limited access to attorneys, far from their family members and support networks in the United States. They would not be able to take their cases to, say, California or Massachusetts, where the case law is generally more favorable and asylum grant rates are higher. Instead, more immigration judges would be stationed along the border, where legal aid resources for immigrants are already stretched to the limit.

In these uncertain times, it’s far from clear whether CARA and the other legal organizations that work in detention centers will continue to have their present level of access to detainees. The CARA system in Dilley has worked well, in part, because the organization eventually came to enjoy a certain level of respectful cooperation from the private prison authority and from ICE under President Obama. (Indeed, CARA was sometimes annoyingly touted by visiting government officials as an example of how well the family detention system was working; look, we know that detaining toddlers and nursing mothers sounds bad, but hey! We let them have lawyers!). A more hostile tone within ICE could have a huge impact on these arrangements. Small, vindictive policy changes, like reductions in consultation spaces, or banning the volunteers’ wireless network, could significantly gum up CARA’s operations. Under the Trump administration, ICE might do something even more brazen, like simply refuse to let lawyers see their would-be clients at all. CCA, the private prison authority, has already tried this maneuver at adult detention centers, repeatedly. It’s hard to know how far they might now test the boundaries of the law, which already offers far from optimum protection for immigrant detainees.

Inhumane asylum proceedings and unforgiving enforcement policies may well, over time, have a deterrent effect on border-crossings. When those border numbers drop, we can expect to hear the figures cited at press briefings. It will be hailed as a major policy victory. But we mustn’t forget what those numbers mean. They mean women trapped in violent homes, in violent cities, with no means of escape. They mean children run down with cars, children chopped into pieces. To plead for the vulnerability of children feels, at times, like a cheap rhetorical trick, or a denial of the deservingness of other kinds of people. But if we can’t care about children, we can’t care about anyone. And if these children and their parents stop showing up in person to our border, no further hint of their sufferings will even make our morning news. ❖

NAVIGATE YOUR WAY THROUGH THE ASYLUM PROCESS



* We will assume here that you've never been ordered deported from the U.S. in the past, because that alters your chances significantly.

*** What happens to unaccompanied minors within the asylum system is beyond the scope of this flowchart.

*** We'll say you haven't been charged with any crimes, because good Lord, that gets complicated.

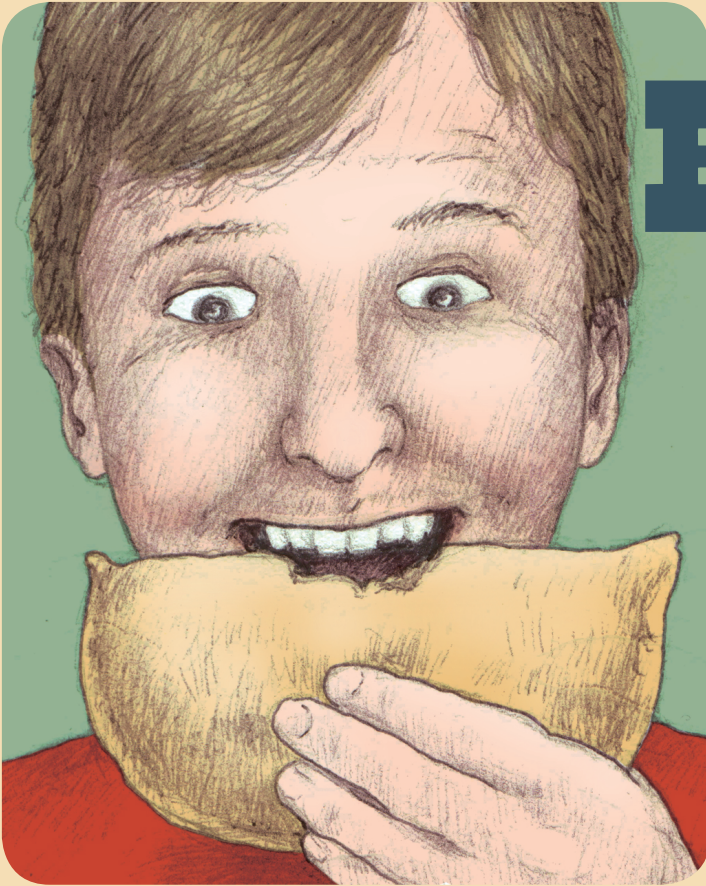
**** Until now, expedited removal had only been a possibility if you're apprehended within 100 miles of the border, but in Trump's America, it can happen anywhere!

***** This practice is what Trump calls "catch and release," so we may be seeing less of it now.

Uh-oh! Having...

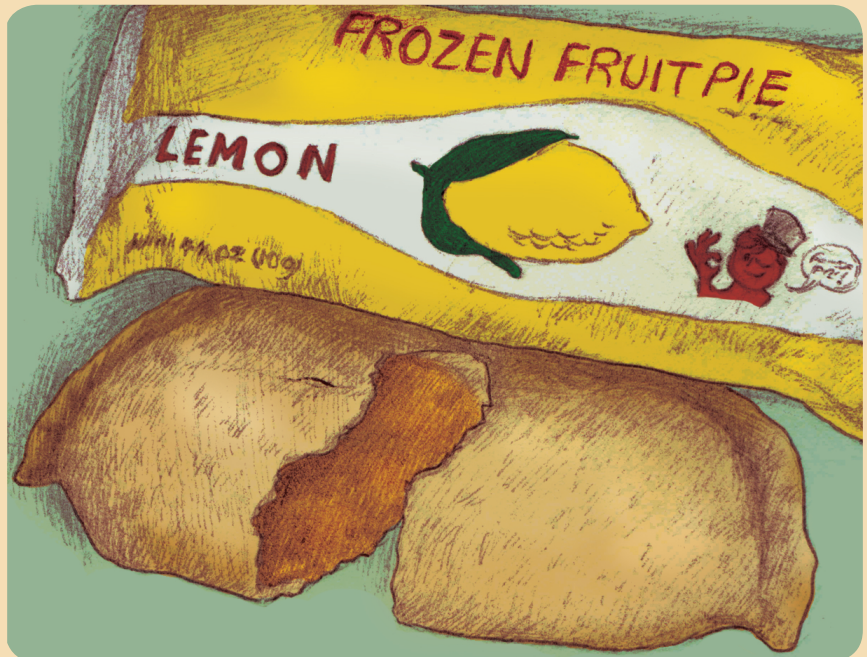
DOUBTS ABOUT DEMOCRACY?

Time for another...



FROZEN FRUIT PIE!

THEY MAY NOT OVERTHROW
THE BOURGEOIS STATE
BUT THEY TASTE PRETTY GOOD
FOR BEING A BUCK EACH



available in:

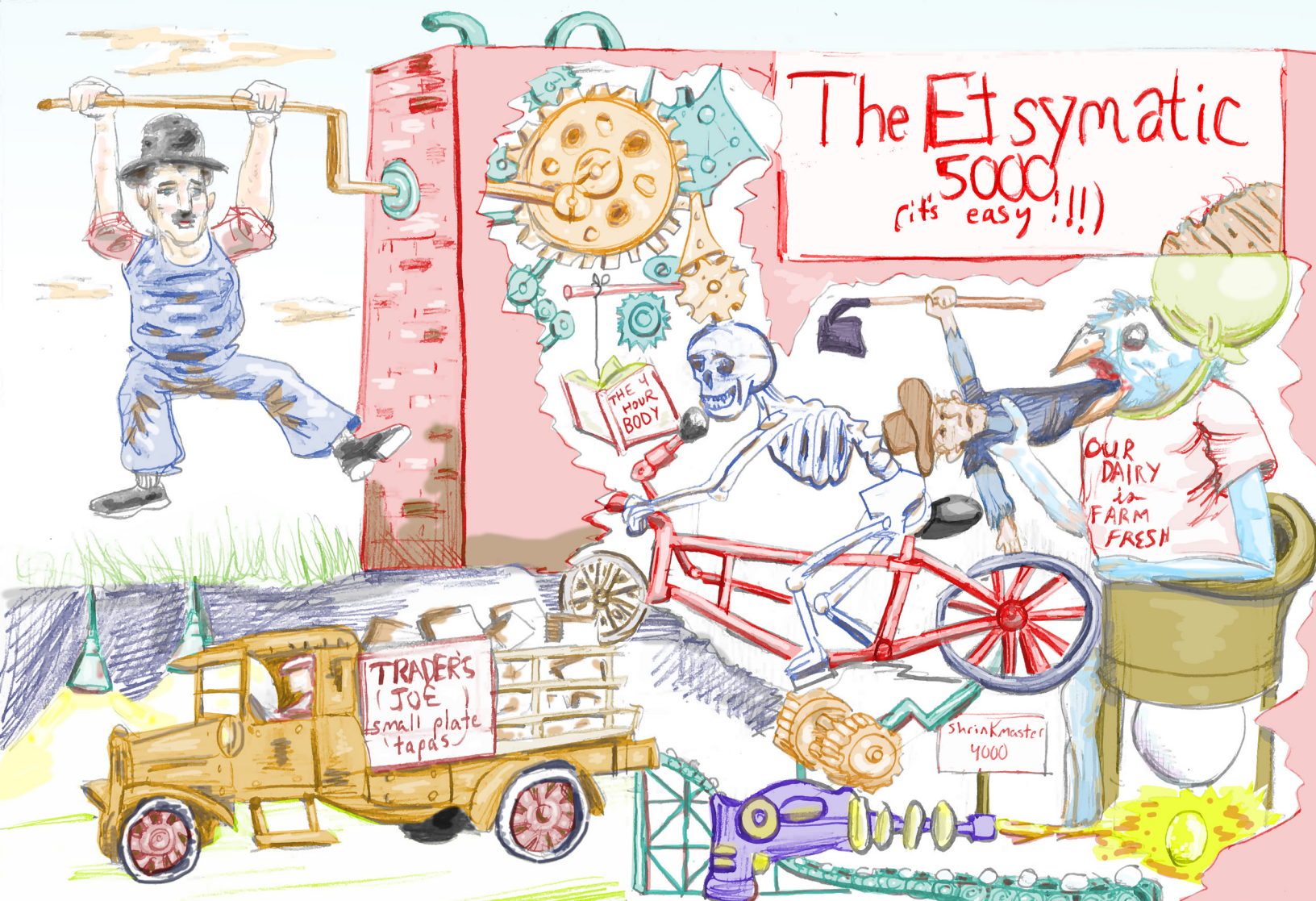
LEMON - CANTELOUPE - MYSTERY

AGAINST DOMESTICITY

by Amber A'Lee Frost

RECENTLY I SOLICITED TWITTER FOR THE best Tom Kha Gai in New York City. The slightly spicy chicken coconut soup is a standard menu item in most Thai restaurants, but although it's often served as an entrée in Thailand, here in New York it's generally ordered as an appetizer. Appetizers are unlikely to be the dish that creates buzz around an eatery, so the quality often varies wildly from restaurant to restaurant, and a lot of places bullshit their way through a Tom Kha Gai. I'm ideologically and aesthetically opposed to reading Yelp reviews, and as a result, I have consumed a lot of very phoned in Tom Kha Gai. However, I'm also opposed to *leaving* Yelp reviews, so I won't name names. It's true that half-assing such a glorious soup is an ignoble disservice to the dish, but that's a sin that's better left between the chef and their god.

I should never have asked Twitter for a restaurant recommendation of course, because when one asks any large group of people for a restaurant recommendation, one will inevitably get the *opposite* of a restaurant recommendation: a recipe. "It's actually really easy to make!" they chirp. "All you need is..."—this is the point at which I slam my laptop in indignation, not because the crowd has responded to my inquiry with information I have not requested, but because





they have responded with treachery and lies.

It is *not* easy to make Tom Kha Gai. That is simply empirically untrue.

Unless you live near a market with a Thai section, the ingredients are expensive and difficult to source. It's a fairly time-consuming and labor-intensive dish, and honestly the process is quite fraught; is difficult to get the flavor out of lemongrass, coconut milk burns easily, and if you overdo it even a little bit on the fish sauce, the entire batch will taste like low tide.

Of course Tom Kha Gai is hard. Cooking is often highly skilled labor (a fact that usually goes overlooked, especially when women or immigrants are the ones feeding people, as they usually are). But nowadays there is absolutely no dish, no matter how time-consuming or elaborate, that cooking enthusiasts won't describe as "actually really easy to make!!!". This is because they are delusional, unsympathetic people, who want nothing more than to draw you into their anachronistic cult of domesticity.

To clarify, it is not that I think people *should not* cook, or clean, or launder or garden. I like restaurants, and delivery, and I adore the odd fast food indulgence, but I understand that various aspects of keeping a home are enjoyable—even soothing—to some people. I can only assume a propensity toward housework of any kind can well be attributed to nature as well as nurture. A friend once claimed to me that his Italian Catholic upbringing inscribed upon him an almost spiritual pleasure in the ritualistic cleansing of his floors. Meanwhile his Jewish girlfriend, raised by a lesbian feminist, was happy to encourage his pious compulsions.

As a bohemian layabout made nervous by industriousness, I

don't even like when someone cleans *on my behalf*. I would prefer robots to clean my house, and maintain that dining programs must be integrated into any socialist vision (hardly a radical proposition; seize the hot bar at Whole Foods and you've got yourself a ready-made Soviet-style cafeteria). Anyway, home-cooked meals are nice, but they're hardly necessary for a healthy and delicious diet. For example, I usually eat as if I were at a party—nibbling on charcuterie all day.

I understand that everyone has their strange little kinks—but as drudgery is not my personal fetish, I'm simply saying I'd rather press my hand on the burner than actually spend any measurable amount of time sweating over a hot stove. But obviously housework is a valid and necessary perversion—my issue is that a contemporary cult of neo-domesticity appears intent on undermining the difficulty and complexity of traditionally feminine labor by insisting upon the myth of effortlessness.

AND IT DIDN'T USE TO BE THIS WAY.

Take for example, the late great Julia Child, a radiant soul if ever there was one.

Child *loved* cooking, but she also loved the challenge of it, and never denied that it was complex work, and allowed viewers to witness her frustrations and defeats. "Cooking," she proclaimed, "well, lots of it, is one failure after another, and that's how you finally learn." Once, after a botched attempt to flip a potato pancake, she scooped up the spilled and splattered bits of latke and mashed them back into the pan, giving the viewer permission to do the same, remaining

cavalier in her trademark sing-song voice, “if you’re alone in the kitchen, who is to see?” She would chuck broken or inadequate cookware into the garbage can like lovers that had outworn their use. She had strong aesthetic principles, and abhorred abstemious health and weight loss trends, once saying during a show, “I’m going to put some light cream in, or you can put in some more milk... if you’re on one of those hideous diets.”

As a true sensualist, she paired entrées not only with wine, but with beer, and often recommended bubbly with dessert. “You could serve this with coffee or tea, but we’re going to serve it with champagne.” (Yes Julia, yes we are.) She had good taste, but she was never pretentious or snobby, and when asked what her favorite wine was, she would shrug and laugh and say “gin.” Numerous interviews asked her for her favorite meal, and without fail she would reply “red meat and gin.” She had a natural elan, an easy laugh, and a contagious bravery.

Compare that to one of the most prevalent genres of cooking instruction now: the time-lapse tutorial. You’ve probably seen them on Facebook, as *BuzzFeed’s* Tasty vertical has over 82.5 million followers. The videos are comparable to POV porn, which is shot from the perspective of the party receiving sexual attention (usually orally); correspondingly, the cook’s face is not visible in Tasty videos. You don’t hear their voice, you see only a pair of hands doing the work in a rapid fast-forward that belies the actual amount of work necessary for the dish. Most prep work is never shown—ingredients are pre-portioned and measured. Repetitious tasks are shown only once. No mess or dirty dishes are ever visible, and the twee instrumental music that plays (they love ukulele) seems to imply a breezy, mess-free little craft project, rather than the toil of dicing onions. The food itself is almost always some Guy Fieri nightmare of inelegant American gluttony, but look! It only takes two minutes to make macaroni and cheese breadsticks! And of course, sometimes the videos are sponsored, though often in confusing ways. Philadelphia cream cheese makes sense for the cream cheese stuffed monkey bread, but I’m not quite sure why this Garlic Citrus Chicken and Veggies video is brought to you by Bank of America.

Tasty videos aren’t just sterile lies, they’re a social media servants’ entrance, where you’re the servant, and all the unsightly or dull work that you’re being invited to perform has been hidden away. They edit the prosaic labor of cooking into an effortless leisure pursuit. Every time I see another one on Facebook I have to resist the urge to denounce the person who posted it as a closet reactionary and possible misogynist. The most generous assumption I can make is that they’re a hopeless philistine suffering from a pathological compulsion. If you eat cheeseburger onion rings at the State Fair, you’re an American. If you’re fantasizing about actually *making* them, *in your own home*, you are in need of treatment.

And it *is* a fantasy. That’s why those videos are primarily shot from the perspective of the cook. They’re hardcore domestic pornography, so they don’t have to be real, they just have to be graphic. The people who circulate Tasty’s content almost never actually make that terrible, nearly poisonous food, but they like to imagine themselves as the sort of person who could, the sort of person who has the time to learn and try new indulgent recipes. Tasty tutorials edit and accelerate cooking into a carefree

“NOWADAYS THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO DISH THAT COOKING ENTHUSIASTS WON’T DESCRIBE AS ‘ACTUALLY REALLY EASY TO MAKE!’

blur of alienation because we don’t have the time to do anything at a regular pace, and these sedative little videos (dare I call them “opiates?”) offer a little bit of escapism.

THE FRANTIC BLEAKNESS OF NEOLIBERAL efficiency does make a retreat to the home sound appealing, but the idyllic warmth of the hearth actually comes with a lot of maintenance—home is another workplace. Nonetheless *The New Yorker* declared 2016 “the year of *hygge*”—a Danish term that everyone insists has no translation but appears to mean little more than “coziness.” The lifestyle craze imagines a home replete with “candles, nubby woolens, shearling slippers, woven textiles, pastries, blond wood, sheepskin rugs, lattes with milk-foam hearts, and a warm fireplace.” Being aspirationally cozy sure sounds expensive and time-consuming. And collecting all the accoutrements of relaxation sounds pretty stressful; in fact it sounds a lot like a job, specifically the sort of job worked mostly by women.

What’s worse, these lifeless, cutesy interiors, with all their bland affectations of comfort, have become the aesthetic of choice for so-called “creatives.” What was once the boho dirtbag pad is now clean white walls, décor artfully curated to look “rustic,” and perhaps an austere but lovely potted succulent. (In my own experience, real bohemians can’t even keep a cactus alive.)

There is a feminine energy to the entire domestic lifestyle endeavor, but nowadays even men love making a house into a home, reveling in anachronistic skills that they inevitably get an absurd amount of credit for. (Cooking is one of those things that people are always shocked that men are capable of. Parenting is similar; they wipe one ass and they’re father of the year.)

Of course there’s a lot of brilliant feminist thought on housework, but one of my favorites is literally quite elementary. *Free to Be You*

and *Me* was a 1974 progressive children's entertainment project created by actress Marlo Thomas, and co-produced by The Ms. Foundation for Women. The book was popular, but the album and television special were a legitimate phenomenon. My favorite segment was from the record, but it was so mired in controversy that they decided not to include it in the TV special. In the poem "Housework," the glamorous and ebullient Carol Channing gives the kids a dose of reality:

*Remember, nobody smiles doing housework but those ladies
you see on TV.
Your mommy hates housework,
Your daddy hates housework,
I hate housework too.
And when you grow up, so will you.
Because even if the soap or cleanser or cleaner or powder or
paste or wax or bleach
That you use is the very best one,
Housework is just no fun.
Children, when you have a house of your own,
Make sure, when there's housework to do,
That you don't have to do it alone.
Little boys, little girls, when you're big husbands and wives,
If you want all the days of your lives
To seem sunny as summer weather,
Make sure, when there's housework to do,
That you do it together!*

In her review for *The New York Times*, Deborah Jowitt managed to take the poem personally, saying, "The skit, unintentionally, I'm sure, demeans those who accept the clean-up chores without fuss, and makes those who take pleasure in such chores sound like real suckers." *Ms* actually received letters from upset parents as well, one of whom felt uncomfortable hearing the track in the presence of their maid, saying "It seemed too demeaning and insensitive to this woman, who does derive a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment from her work." Now it's very possible this woman enjoyed her job cleaning up for wealthier people than herself, but I think the fact that her cleaning was wage labor and not a hobby may have been lost on her employer.

Personally I am only domestic to be social. Aside from wage labor, I never cook or clean for anyone that I do not love. (If I have ever so much as made you a cup of tea, it is likely that you are very dear to me.) I avoid the broom and spray bottle until I have a guest that I don't want to disgust. When I actually get an urge to cook for myself, I almost immediately regret the

commitment, seething with boredom and dreading the clean-up (handy tip: if you have a friend suffering from depression, finger foods, disposable plates, bowls and cutlery make a merciful gift). And I like home-cooked food, but there is nothing social or intimate or culturally resonant for me about a pot of stew for one. I learned to cook from my grandmother, from whom I inherited an ancient cast iron skillet that I almost never use. The most delicious cuisine from where she's from in rural Kentucky is labor-intensive, and evolved from the batch production necessary to feed large families. Talk about anachronistic labor—tending to a pot on simmer for six hours probably isn't so bad when you have nine children thanking you for the meal (of course, Jesus always gets thanked first, feminine labor slighted yet again).

As for even more ambitious domesticity, like say, gardening, I am unable to even discuss it without sputtering in incoherent anger. If my grandparents knew that they left their bleak cabins and precarious agrarian lives in Appalachia only to see their granddaughter raise chickens in Brooklyn, they'd assume I had cracked, or perhaps fallen on hard times.

IT USED TO BE THAT DOMESTICITY WAS THE province of conservatives, but progressives now adore a cultivated domestic lifestyle and frankly I find the fetish insidious. On the other hand, I think Rosa Luxemburg missed the mark in her 1914 barnburner, "The Proletarian Woman," when she said that domesticity is a reliable way to keep women complicit and complacent, saying:

"The bourgeois woman has no real interest in political rights, because she exercises no economic function in society, because she enjoys the finished fruits of class rule. The demand for equal women's rights is, where it arises with bourgeois women, the pure ideology of weak groups of individuals, without material roots, a phantom of the contrast between woman and man, a quirk. Thence the farcical character of the suffragette movement."

It's not an exaggeration to say that petit bourgeois domesticity has driven many a woman to literal suicide, and that anxiety of crushing boredom has historically been pretty fertile ground for radicalization. (Also, call me a bourgeois reformist, but women's suffrage was a Good Thing.) What Rosa got right in that essay though, was the gilded cage of capitalist *hygge* patriarchy:

"For the propertied bourgeois woman her house is the world. For the proletarian woman the whole world is her house, the world with its sorrow and its joy, with its cold cruelty and its brutal size."

It's not only a poetic insight, but a liberating truth to we feminists of the lazy, louche and carousing variety; one cannot roam the world and keep it clean and cozy at the same time. Feminism once championed a salient skepticism of domesticity's so-called "comforts," and I think that labor critique (and intellectual tradition) is due for a comeback. At this point it would be ideal for me to leave you with a thought from *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, by Sylvia Federici, but honestly I'm on deadline, and I can't seem to find the book. I think it's under some dirty laundry. ❖

CROSSWORD ANSWERS

ACROSS

2. MLK 3. CLIMAX 8. CONSTITUTIONAL 10. WHITE 11. PHILADELPHIA 12. FEBRUARY 13. SUBVERSIVE 14. INCIDENTALLY 15. TRUMAN 17. CASTRO 18. DECEMBER 19. CITIZENS 20. CULT

DOWN

1. HAMPTON 4. INDIRECTLY 5. CHINA 6. FUTURE 7. INVESTIGATION 9. SCHLESINGER 16. BURGLED

BOOK REVIEW

Hillary Clinton and Tim Kaine, **Stronger Together: A Blueprint for America's Future**, 251pp, \$9.95

YOU CAN UNDERSTAND MUCH ABOUT WHY the Clinton campaign failed from the first two sentences of Hillary Clinton and Tim Kaine's 251-page campaign book *Stronger Together*: "It has been said that America is great because America is good. We agree." This bizarre declaration was a butchered quote frequently misattributed to Tocqueville. (According to *Tocqueville on American Character* author Michael Ledeen, "He never said that, and doesn't believe it. He knows we're much more complicated.") It was also exactly the sort of thing that Clinton's strategists and speechwriters deployed repeatedly: a political banality that *sounded* like something with meaning, but in fact meant nothing at all. Clinton issued the "good because great" line repeatedly during the campaign, most famously at the Democratic National Convention and second presidential debate on October 9 in St. Louis. At no point, apparently, did anyone stop and ask whether anyone thought the quote was resonating with people, or whether ordinary voters thought it made any sense.

But to the extent that the slogan was meaningful, it also turned out to be false. On November 8 we found out that America was neither "already great" (another rightly ridiculed Clinton line) nor was it even particularly "good." The country looked at a choice between Clinton—a lifelong centrist synonymous with an American political establishment that led us into multiple wars and economic catastrophe—and Donald Trump, a well-known dipshit with a ton of money and TV show, and picked Trump, so says the archaic Electoral College. Judging from the one hundred million eligible voters who stayed home, it turns out a lot of people think America is either bad or in bad shape, and quite possibly irredeemable.

In the days following the election, Clinton channeled her inner Cheryl Strayed and went for a long hike in the woods near her family's home in Chappaqua, N.Y. She went to the inauguration, and is working on another book. Meanwhile, Senator Tim Kaine, her vice presidential candidate and "America's dad"—in that he's sorely disappointing, woefully uncool, and thinks the Hyde Amendment is good—returned to the Senate as a reliable yes vote for Trump's cabinet appointments. Kaine voted to confirm torture advocate Mike Pompeo for CIA Director, the abysmal Bush Labor Secretary (and Mitch McConnell's spouse) Elaine Chao to be Secretary of Transportation, "Mad Dog" Mattis for Secretary of Defense and retired Marine Corps General John Kelly—who wants a border wall with Mexico—for Homeland Security. It was only after massive protests and thousands of constituents flooded Congressional phone lines and inboxes that Kaine and fellow Senate Democrats began pushing back on certain Trump nominees, such as Betsy DeVos and Scott Pruitt.

While the Clinton campaign will go down (if we live long enough) as one of the biggest darkest jokes in American history, the whole farce is a little less funny now that we've been saddled with unified control over the government by the far-right and they've begun swinging an ax at civil liberties for Muslims, immigrants, and refugees. But the platform that Clinton

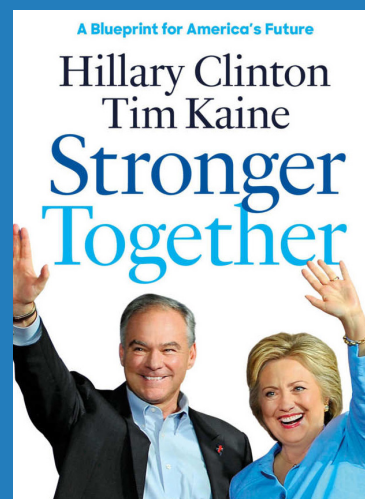
and Kaine put forth during that doomed and hapless campaign, as well as their lackluster responses following its conclusion, should inform future progressive efforts on what to do and definitely what *not* to do.

As is to be expected, *Stronger Together* is utterly unreadable. It is as if someone printed out the contents of the Clinton campaign website and bound it together. Each section, labeled with insipid nonsense like "Be firm but wise with our rivals," dedicates two to five pages to each specific, deeply complex issue, and still manages to seem entirely too long. For example, a section on bringing back manufacturing begins, "Manufacturing matters." No shit.

The book, it won't surprise you, is just as protective of business as Nancy Pelosi's "We're capitalists, that's just the way it is" response during a recent televised town hall. In one section, Clinton and Kaine implore American business to "break free from the tyranny of today's earnings report so they can do what they do best: innovate, invest, and build tomorrow's prosperity." It then goes on to list Great Events in Business History that might not have happened if the companies backing the projects shut them down too soon. "What if Xerox had decided that its Palo Alto research park wasn't doing enough to boost share prices in the short term?" Clinton and Kaine breathlessly ask. "A young Steve Jobs would never have visited and the personal computer revolution might not have happened." (Here we can see the absurd logical endpoint of the "progress is made by individual entrepreneurial geniuses" view of historical change; it leads you to the laughable conclusion that desktop computers may never have come about if Steve Jobs hadn't once stopped by a Xerox factory.)

It's difficult for the reader not to return to the same question over and over: who is this book *for*? Littered throughout is a mess of statistics and charts, with little in the way of promises other than to "invest" or "expand access." (As Bernie Sanders said in a February town hall debate on healthcare with viscerally unlikable Ted Cruz, "Access doesn't mean a damn thing!") Maybe the D.C. set loved this, but hardly anyone else did: according to *The New York Times*, the book sold less than three thousand copies in its first week.

It's easy to see why. One paragraph, titled "Target more investment to communities left out and left behind," includes this whopper of a line: "To increase public and private investment in these hardest-hit communities," Clinton and Kaine write, "we will explore policies like South Carolina Representative Jim Clyburn's 10-20-30 proposal, in which 10 percent of program dollars are directed to communities where 20 percent or more of the population has been living in poverty for 30 years or longer." Aside from the fact that this is an incredibly convoluted way to say, "Impoverished areas need better public services," the campaign wouldn't even fully commit to it; they just said they would "explore" it. This lack of commitment, the embrace of compromise as a political philosophy in itself, helps to explain why Democrats have failed in recent years. If you can't bring yourself to stand behind even your most watered-down and convoluted proposals, why should anyone think you're going to actually accomplish anything? Not to mention the fact that these numbers seem almost entirely arbitrary. We're



only helping people in places that have been in poverty for 30 years (as opposed to 28 years), entirely because 30 goes nicely with 20 and 10?

The book's text makes it apparent why the Clinton campaign was so strongly supported by policy wonks. Her solution to "ensure the wealthy, Wall Street, and big corporations pay their fair share," for example, boils down to three points: a tax credit for companies that share profits with employees, up to \$5,000 in tax relief for healthcare costs, and \$1,200 in tax relief for caregiving. This is "pragmatism" at its finest: Clinton never shoots for the big idea, but adopts some anemic form of it that Republicans will never agree to anyway.

At the tail end of the book, there's a seven-page essay devoted to "getting results," a nod to Clinton's "progressive who gets things done" dig at Sanders during the primary. "Getting results means understanding that compromise is not a bad thing," they write, before listing off a litany of bills, all pre-dating the Nixon resignation, that passed with votes from both parties. (Democrats' psychotic need to have at least one Republican vote in favor of every one of their bills, just so that they can say it was "bipartisan," is what killed the public option in the Affordable Care Act.)

And therein lies the main problem with the vision that the Clinton campaign laid out: it just isn't suited for these times. Starting from a position of compromise and non-commitment rather than proposing big solutions that are easy to rally behind—free healthcare, free public education, eliminating poverty—leads to a defeatist tone that says, "We've given up on making your life substantially easier and better."

The Clinton campaign exposed deep, catastrophic flaws in the Democratic message. Only by replacing the tortuous technocratic language of white papers with ideas that can be expressed clearly, directly, and in a single sentence, can the left recapture the political imagination and combat Trumpism. The *Stronger Together* campaign, terminally boring and bereft of emotional force, was never going to work. *Stronger Together* is bad because Clintonism is neither great nor good. ♦

—Paul Blest

Tired of SJWs in academia and the Globalist NWO agenda? *Weak noodly arms?* Misogyny mixed with self-hate? Just two spritzes of the Alex Jones Male Potency Alpha Spray® is guaranteed to turn even the most simpering weak beta into a **world class prime alpha**. The women of the world demand you make yourself into a superman and overthrow the corrupt government.

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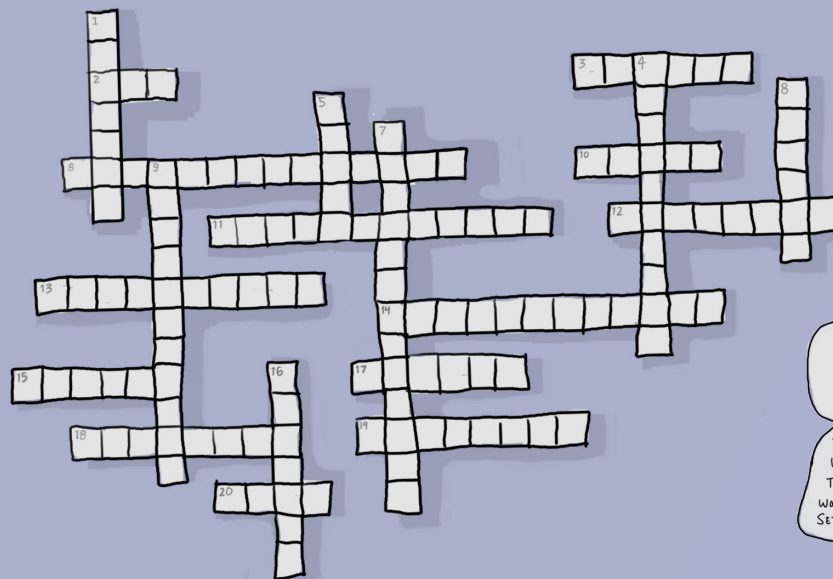


ALEX JONES MALE POTENCY ALPHA SPRAY



CLANDESTINE FUN, FUN, FUN PAGE

SPONSORED BY THE UNITED STATES DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE AGENCY



ANSWERS ON PAGE 60

ACROSS

- 2.** Civil Rights Leader ____ Was surveilled, harassed, and blackmailed by J Edgar Hoover and the FBI.
- 3.** Operation Midnight ____ was a subproject of MKULTRA where CIA agents did all sorts of bizarre things like dose one another with LSD as a prank. One famous plot involved luring Johns into a CIA safe house with a prostitute, giving them a large dose of LSD without telling them, and watching them from behind a two-way mirror.
- 8.** The Church Committee found that COINTELPRO was designed to deny citizens the right to free association and free speech, and the FBI had violated ____ rights of Americans.
- 10.** George ____ was responsible for some of the most bizarre and illegal LSD subprojects of MKULTRA. His resignation letter to the CIA read: "I was a very minor missionary, actually a heretic, but I tolled wholeheartedly in the vineyards because it was fun, fun, fun."

- 11.** ____ Police dropped a bomb provided to them by the FBI on a city block. The MOVE bombing happened in 1985.
- 12.** US President, Gerald Ford signed an executive order forbidding US-backed political assassination on ____ 18, 1976.
- 13.** J Edgar Hoover's Illegal COINTELPRO ordered that agents expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, neutralize or otherwise eliminate leaders and movements that were deemed ____.
- 14.** In December of 1981 Ronald Reagan signed an executive order allowing the government to retain, modify, and distribute "____ collected information" that contains evidence of crimes. It is considered a key authorization of NSA mass data collection. In this same executive order, he also echoed Jimmy Carter's EO against direct or indirect support of assassination.

- 15.** US President Harry S. ____ said of J Edgar Hoover: "[The FBI is] dabbling in sex-life scandals and plain blackmail. All congressmen and senators are afraid of [J Edgar Hoover]."
- 17.** It was revealed in the 1970s that the CIA was responsible for failed and illegal assassination plots on Fidel ____, Congolese Leader Patrice Lumumba, the Dominican Republic's President Rafael Trujillo, and René Schneider, Commander-in-chief of the Chilean Army.
- 18.** In ____ of 2014 the CIA Torture Report found that the CIA had routinely used ineffective and brutal torture techniques without oversight during the "War on Terror." Prisoners were kept awake for periods of over 180 hours, subjected to psychological humiliation, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. CIA officials lied to Congress and the White House about these abuses "to try to protect their budget."

- 19.** Booz-Allen IT contractor Edward Snowden blew the whistle on the NSA in 2013, including PRISM which is a program that 'incidentally collects' information on American ____.
- 20.** Former CIA agent Victor Marchetti wrote a book called "The ____ of Intelligence" in 1974 which alleged the CIA had fallen into a foolish obsession with clandestine operations. Marchetti was placed under CIA surveillance for this.

- Union and ____ in a program called HTLINGUAL.
- 6.** Although 3 executive orders have forbidden state-sponsored assassination, these rules have been reinterpreted to not be applicable during wartime. Needless to say, we have been at war for the last 16 years and will probably continue to be at war for the foreseeable ____.
- 7.** The FBI was created in 1908 under the name Bureau of ____ (BOI.) It didn't become the FBI until 1935.
- 9.** In 1973 the CIA Director James R. ____ commissioned an internal report on 'current or past CIA actions that 'may have fallen outside of the CIA's charter.' That report was nicknamed "The Family Jewels" and was 693 pages of CIA-backed illegal activity.
- 16.** The reason that we know COINTELPRO existed: a group of left-wing activists broke into a FBI field office and ____ a bunch of paperwork.

DOWN

- 1.** Fred ____ was shot to death in his bed by Chicago police as part of a COINTELPRO operation to suppress the Black Panthers on December 4th, 1969
- 4.** Jimmy Carter signed an executive order forbidding anyone in the US government from directly or ____ being involved in any type of assassination on January 24th 1978.
- 5.** The CIA illegally opened domestic mail going to and from the Soviet



HOROSCOPES

ARIES

You've got an opportunity to knock a bad habit today. Your legal right to a fair trial has been suspended under the jurisdiction of laws which are not made public. You will be detained indefinitely.

TAURUS

Someone from your past will contact you, possibly seeking a recommendation or renewed partnership. You will be held indefinitely by the US government without a trial.

GEMINI

You might not like it at first, but the change in weather will also bring changes in the way you relate to your career. During the night your house will be raided and you will be taken to a black site. You will not get a trial.

CANCER

The universe is giving you the chance to break out of your rut and learn something new. Take advantage of it. You will be indefinitely detained without trial.

LEO

Being in charge will come easily to you, and you'll gain new admirers and lots of new friends who can't believe you're not too good to be true. You will spend an extended period of time in solitary confinement before you receive a trial.

VIRGO

The stars are on your side if you're planning a hot date with a new flame or a weekend getaway with your love. This will be a bad month for fair and legal trials. Expect indefinite detention.

LIBRA

Your job might feel just a touch too demanding. Cultivate efficiency and you'll have plenty of time for other pursuits. You will have your rights suspended without oversight.

SCORPIO

Get a groove, find your rhythm, and beautify your space! You will be taken to a detention facility without trial.

SAGITTARIUS

If you've got your heart set on a trial remember to keep your chin up if you get disappointing news. You'll be detained.

CAPRICORN

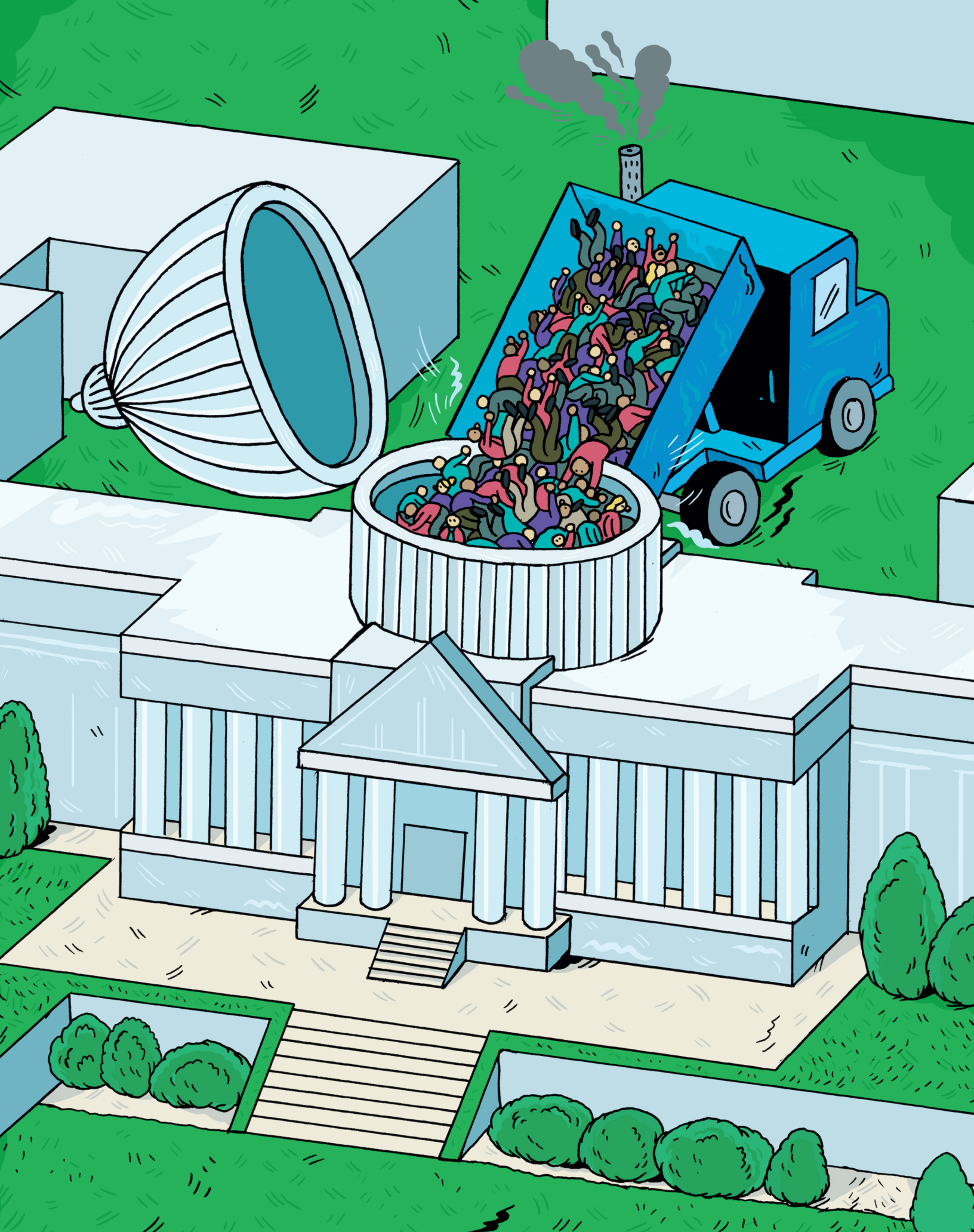
Your natural talent for charming chitchat will be even more useful this week than normal. You may even be able to have a positive impact on a tough family situation. You will be held indefinitely without a trial.

AQUARIUS

I know you've been feeling locked down. Now is the time to be spontaneous. Throw off your inhibitions and live without plans for once. You're going to jail without trial.

PISCES

If there is something you feel guilty about nagging at your conscience, now is the time to own up to it. The stars tell us that you will have your rights suspended and you will be detained without trial indefinitely.



Surely we'd be better off with a...

RANDOMLY SELECTED CONGRESS

by Brianna Rennix & Nathan J. Robinson

IT IS NO SECRET THAT ELECTED LEGISLATORS ARE GENERALLY either inept or heinous. The data confirm that Congresspeople have a lower approval rating than marketing executives and bubonic plague. The only mystery, then, is why we keep them around. Part of the reason seems to be that we can't seem to think of an alternative way of governing ourselves that isn't far, far worse. Democracy is the worst thing in the world, so the saying goes, except for everything else in the world.

But what if it isn't? What if there is a better system of choosing our overlords? In fact, there is: *sortition*, or random selection. We could do as the Athenians once did, and select our legislators like we select our jurors: by picking citizens off a list, and asking them to govern.

Instead of a legislature filled with the typical crop of ghouls, sleazes, and Small Business Owners, imagine one filled with schoolteachers, pipe-fitters, book-binders, typewriter repairmen, lifeguards, bellydancers, whaleboat captains, flight attendants, and strawberry-pickers. Yes, the occasional petty criminal or podcaster might be drawn by mistake. But such is the diversity of the nation. The randomly selected congress would display a full polychromatic cross-section of America's extraordinary populace.

As it is, our legislators are intolerable people. The fact that we elect them has failed to make them any better. Choice does not yield superior results; something has gone horribly wrong. In fact, if we had paid any attention to our Greek forebears, we would have been unsurprised. Aristotle said that elections produced oligarchies, but random selection produced democracies. It is difficult not to think he was on to something.

A fully representative congress, assigned by lot, would ensure that our governing bodies actually resembled the population for which they are

supposed to enact laws. We may not like what it would look like, but at least it would look like us.

Certainly, there are arguments to be made in favor of elections. There's something that *feels* right about having a legislature elected by public vote. This is, after all, the gold standard for democracy around the world: a previously corruption-ridden state "becomes" democratic as soon as it holds free, fair elections. We have a general sense that a legislature, because elected, must therefore "represent" the people who voted for it. But in what sense does it represent them? Demographically? We all know that isn't true. Take our current Congress, which is 80% male, 95% college-educated, and 50.8% millionaires. The population it "represents" is 50% male, 30% college-educated, and 5% millionaires. That's not even close.

Well, you might say, the legislature doesn't need to be an exact demographic mirror of the population, so long as it matches them ideologically. If your Congressman (or Congresswoman, but probably Congressman) puts forward the kinds of policies that you yourself would wish to see advanced, why does it matter whether you and he happen to have wildly different backgrounds? That would be an excellent argument, if Congress usually put forward policies that Americans agree with. Alas, it does not. One Princeton study estimates that, statistically speaking, the preferences of 90% of the American electorate have a "near-zero" impact on policymaking. And a number of highly-publicized legal reforms with a broad popular mandate, such as closing the gun show loophole, have never made it anywhere near the President's desk. How is that possible in a "representative" Congress?

The obvious answer is that Congress is not representative of the population in any meaningful sense. (Of course, many of the reasons why this is so are obvious: high educational and financial barriers to entry, out-of-control

campaign spending, grossly disproportionate donor and lobbyist influence, party-controlled nominations, obsessive focus on reelection prospects, etc., etc.) But ah, you might say, that's not what's meant by "representative." A legislator isn't someone you expect to think *like* you: he's someone you empower to think *for* you, because he is specially qualified for his job.

But consider the fact that this is nonsense. First, nobody actually believes that our legislators are especially qualified people. (We might note in passing that fully 42% of Congress are lawyers, reportedly viewed by the public as the least useful profession in America, in terms of positive contributions to societal well-being.) And the idea of outsourcing our thought processes to them is horrifying in the utmost.

Aren't elections a way to hold bad legislators accountable? No. They are not. Congress's incumbency rate is between 85% and 90%. Its overall approval rating is 18%. That argument is garbage, and it was silly of you to even bring it up.

So fine, we know elections are bad. But why is sortition better? Why would it be preferable to, say, an electoral system with term limits and tighter restrictions on campaign contributions and advertising? The inherent problem of elections is twofold. The first issue is political capture. Our present system is incredibly vulnerable to manipulation by wealthy, well-organized political interests, which dictate both the initial nomination and eventual lawmaking behaviors of legislators. It's hard to see how electoral reforms could ever totally eliminate this kind of capture, even though they could conceivably make it more difficult. The second issue, however, is self-selection.

Even if you managed to remove *some* financial and institutional barriers to entry for would-be legislators, you're still left with the fundamental problem that, ultimately, 100% of the candidates you end up with are people who *actually want to be in Congress*. Inevitably, elections will disproportionately select those who most want to win them, and the people who most want to win elections are disproportionately likely to be venal and self-serving. It is an ancient cliché that those who want power are the least suited to have it. Just think about the people you know in your daily life, the ones who enjoy being the first to speak at meetings, and willingly make decisions on behalf of the group. Most of these people are awful. You might be able to think of one who's marginally less awful, but still, if you had a choice in the matter, you wouldn't want 535 clones of them making rules for the entire country.

Sortition has all the benefits of campaign finance reform, and then some. For starters, the great Sortition Amendment will be much simpler and easier to understand than whatever nightmarishly complicated reform scheme it would take to make elections viable. Legislators will be chosen by lot from the entire adult population. Boom, no more campaign spending: the \$1,771,368,063 that went into Congressional campaigns last year can now be donated instead to scientific research and children's hospitals and dirigible-based public transport systems and other such useful things. Without reelection campaigns hanging over legislator's heads, nobody can be honeyed or coerced into advancing particular legislative agendas, except by the kind of quid pro quo, "here's a nice sack of cash" methods that are more easily punishable as corruption. Interest groups will still lobby to persuade legislators, of course, but they won't be able to influence their nomination or the length of their tenure.

Will the Sortition Congress actually be good at making laws? Who knows.

Will they be worse at making laws than the Congress we have now? *Is that even possible?* When you average them out, a random collection of ordinary people is almost certain to be less dreadful than a self-selected group of people whose chief shared characteristic is their insane belief that they are qualified to have decision-making power over the fate of nations. Yes, you might randomly select a certain number of terrible individuals, but would they be *more* terrible than the people that are initially attracted—and then deeply, irrevocably entrained—by an electoral system? The issue is not whether this is a good idea, but whether it is a better one.

Anyway, chances are, the laws themselves will end up being largely written by people besides the legislators. This is already the case in our present system, where congressional staff and political think tanks do a significant amount of drafting. But your sortition-selected legislators still have the final yea or

nay on the bills, and while they may very well cast their votes for stupid reasons, at least they won't be casting them for purely career-advancing reasons.

PROS AND CONS OF A RANDOMLY SELECTED CONGRESS

PROS

- ◆ Aristotle thought it was a good idea
- ◆ Reduces the probability that Ted Cruz will be a U.S. Senator
- ◆ Limits the likelihood of Congress being dominated by rich white guys
- ◆ Fully embodies democratic principles
- ◆ Gives the Green Party the only chance it will ever have of reaching elected office
- ◆ Provides fully representative cross-section of the American people

CONS

- ◆ Aristotle was also pretty big on slavery
- ◆ Increases the probability that Charles Manson will be a U.S. Senator
- ◆ There is no downside to this.
- ◆ Democracy often nightmarish
- ◆ Jill Stein thinks wifi signals cause autism
- ◆ Provides fully representative cross-section of the American people

LET US ILLUSTRATE THIS another way. Imagine that you have a large retinue of grateful and attentive lovers, and that you have consequently received many, many boxes of chocolates for Valentine's Day. You know that some of these chocolates are probably more or less appetizing candies: truffles and caramels and so on. However, others of them are bound to have horrifying fillings, like coconut cream and lime mousse, that no sane human being could possibly want. You can't easily tell the different kinds of chocolates apart by sight, so you buy a machine to sort them for you.

The machine is incredibly complex and requires a great deal of expensive fuel, but the general idea is, you put the boxes in, and only the good candies will come out.

Now, imagine that your chocolate-sorting machine has been chugging along steadily for hours, and to your distress, most of the candies coming out the other end are *weird*. For every succulent praline, there are at least five chocolates filled with some unidentifiable pink sludge. A decent number of the chocolates, in fact, are so tongue-numbingly, bowel-wreckingly awful that you can hardly imagine they were deliberately manufactured that way: you're beginning to suspect that the machine itself is *actually making the candies worse*. Even the good candies are starting to have an unpleasant aftertaste. So what do you do? Call the manufacturer and demand elaborate modifications to the machine? Construct an entirely new machine? Or do you just say, fuck it, I'll take my chances eating my boxes of chocolates like a normal person, and hope that some of them turn out to be more or less decent?

This, in essence, is the situation of our country in choosing our legislature. An election is supposed to be an elaborate sorting mechanism to filter out the best and most sumptuous chocolates/congresspeople. Instead, it belches out a toxic slurry. Better to just fling away the choosing-machine and pick around at random. Nobody is suggesting that randomly-selected citizens would make especially capable congresspeople. (Nobody, after all, suggests that randomly-selected citizen jurors make especially capable arbiters of forensic evidence, but we let them do it anyway.) The only question is: could it possibly be worse? We posit that it could not. ♦

“cuando despertó, el dinosaurio
todavía estaba allí.”
—augusto monterroso

