

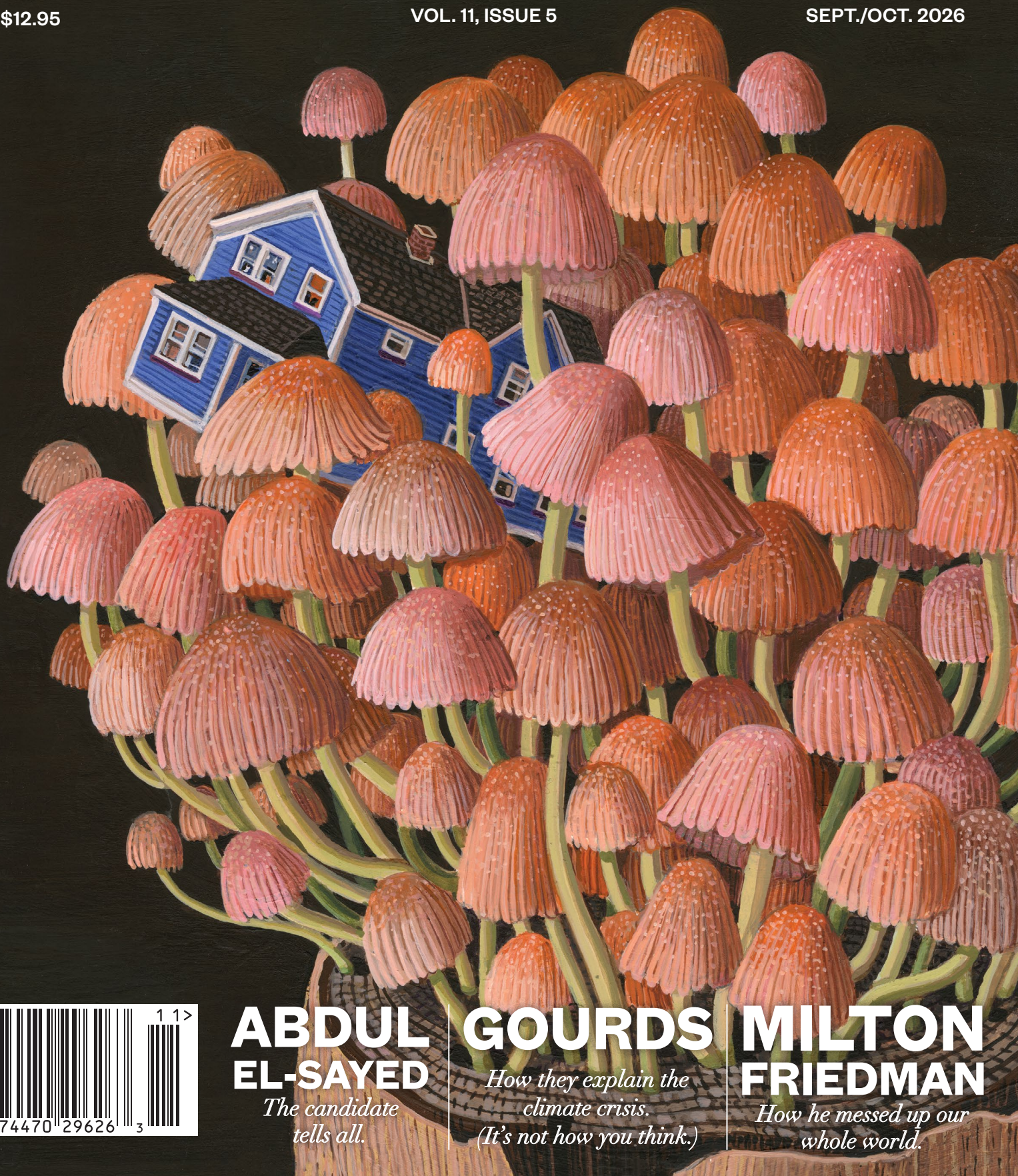
The Writer You're Reading Could Be The Next U.S. Senator

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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VOL. 11, ISSUE 5

SEPT./OCT. 2026



**ABDUL
EL-SAYED**

*The candidate
tells all.*

GOURDS

*How they explain the
climate crisis.
(It's not how you think.)*

**MILTON
FRIEDMAN**

*How he messed up our
whole world.*

FOR YOUR SAFETY

DO NOT REMOVE THIS PAGE FROM THE MAGAZINE

INTRODUCING

POWER CYCLING FOR PEOPLE.
WE TURN YOU OFF WITH A
BONK, THEN BACK ON AGAIN
WITH SMELLING SALTS, AND
YOU'RE BETTER.

MAGAZINE-EATING CONTEST CANCELED

We regret to inform readers that the annual contest to see how many copies of *Current Affairs* a reader can eat in a single sitting has been indefinitely postponed, on the advice of both legal and medical professionals. We realize how much this event meant to those who participated in it, but the rising yearly death count can no longer be ignored. While we do not intend to institute anything so vulgar as the seasonal hot-dog eating contest sponsored by our rivals at *The Atlantic*, readers can be reassured that *Current Affairs* is still committed to the principle of competitive eating and will find ways to incorporate it into our regular schedule of events.



THE MAGAZINE WITH GOURDS IN IT

You love gourds, you say? You've subscribed to *Current Affairs* for sixty (60) issues and been disappointed by how little gourds tend to be mentioned within our pages? Well then, oh boy, do we have the feature for you! This issue has *plenty* of gourds—some might (wrongly) say too many, even—and we trust that you will leave satisfied! Stop writing us letters! We gave you your damned gourds!

SEEKING AMUSING PERSONS

Current Affairs has always believed that amusement is a moral imperative. By this we mean that in order to keep one energized for the struggle ahead, it is vital to season dire subject matter with levity and whimsy. Not too much, mind you—all things in moderation, as a famous gentleman once said, in explaining why he refused to devour a whole hog. But "jokes be the tang of life," to use a stock phrase heard daily in the streets during our rough Irish childhood. And so we fill this magazine not just with essays and analysis of climate collapse, the jackboot of fascism, the decline of culture, and the predations of oligarchs, but with comics, puzzles, and false advertisements for products that will never exist.

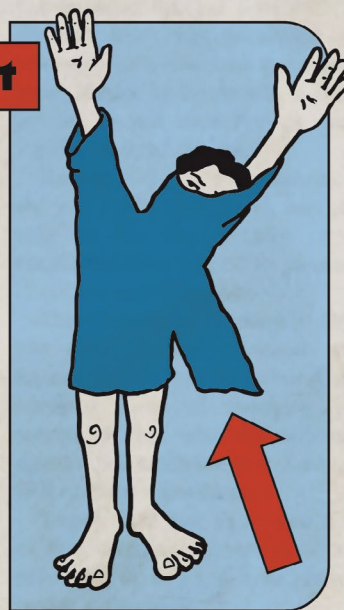
Here's the deal, though: *these little silly bits do not write themselves*. Not even in the age of so-called Machine Intelligence, where robots can be hired cheaply to think your thoughts for you. No, all of this stuff has to be dreamed up by slightly demented human minds. And we need *your* slightly demented human mind. If you want to write copy for fake ads, scripts for comics, or concepts for games and other miscellaneous satirical what-have-you, send samples of your work via our pitch form. Visit currentaffairs.org/writers-guide to learn more! And tell your funny friends! (Or your funny enemies. But *not* your unfunny friends.)

The Mystery of the K-Shirt

In our last issue (#60), we informed readers that in addition to T-shirts, we support the development of J-shirts and K-shirts. The letters we received were numerous and vituperative. A representative example:

"Sirs,
I write in a spirit of confusion and acrimony. I do not consider myself terribly conservative, but you are pushing the boundaries of sartorial decorum in ways I find discomfiting. The J-shirt, well, the J-Shirt makes sense. I get the J-Shirt. But what is this K-shirt of which your magazine writes? You advocate something you make no attempt to explain."

We will refrain from commenting on the archaic sexist form of address. It is true that while we provided a helpful illustration of what a J-shirt would look like, we made no attempt to clarify what it would mean for a person (whether male, female, or neither) to wear a K-shirt. We provide such an illustration here, in order to clear up any confusion.



To the mysterious benefactor who sent three boxes of pumpkin pies to the editorial offices: Thank you. They were unexpected and delicious. (We have a suspicion that due to his known obsession with gourds, award-winning filmmaker Adam McKay might have had something to do with inflicting these pies on us. But the evidence is only circumstantial and his guilt has not been proven beyond a reasonable doubt.) We can now confirm that the pies made by Carlo's Hoboken Bake Shop (est. 1910) are highly commendable and should be ordered by everyone who cares about quality in their choice of mail-order pumpkin pie.



**We invented HatGPT
for automating your
hat somehow.**



OUR ASCENT TO POWER

It is now known all across the land that for the first time in recorded history, a former *Current Affairs* writer, **Dr. Abdul El-Sayed**, has been nominated as a major party candidate for the United States Senate. We are of course delighted to have someone our magazine has collaborated with achieve such a distinction. But this momentous event is also a clear sign that *Current Affairs* is ascending into a position of major political power in the United States. The whisper goes round the halls of power: "*Current Affairs* is a kingmaker. It is the magazine that makes statesmen and heroes. It is the magazine you do not cross, should you wish to maintain your position of status." Terror has been struck into the heart of the political establishment! The plutocrats quake in their loafers! As the *New Republic* was once called "the in-flight magazine of Air Force One" (today it is *Highlights for Children*), so shall *Current Affairs* be, in the very near future! Mayors, members of world parliaments, distinguished jurists, zookeepers: when you poke around their mailboxes, or inspect their coffee tables, you will consistently find the People's Magazine. (Not *People Magazine*, an entirely different thing, although we respect this peer periodical in a way we do not respect the conniving war crime apologists at the *Atlantic*.) Now, we know that the democratic socialists are on the upswing, that their movement is unstoppable, and that they all read *Current Affairs* on Sunday morning with their coffee and croissant. But here is the real question: who among you will be next? Who among our subscribers shall be the next to change the world? Do not say "It shall not be I, for I am meek and small!" *Current Affairs* accepts no excuses! Our tasks are immense, our time short. You are all we have! Face the future, seize the time. The fate of the world depends on your choices, gentle reader!

A PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT



SOAP IS POISON! YOU CAN'T EAT IT.

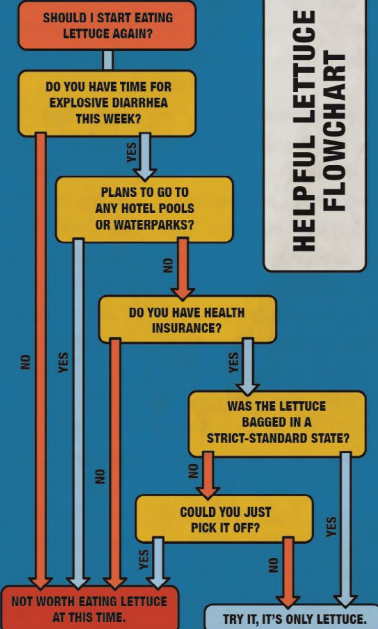
FURTHER CLIMATE CHANGE PROOF

You can tell climate change is real because Eminem thought "when the temp goes up to the mid-80s" sounded extra hot on 1999's "Forgot About Dre." Now that happens in March.

THE WOKE POSTAL SERVICE IS TRYING TO CANCEL STAMPS!



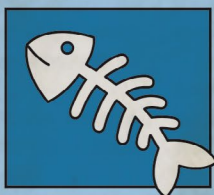
HELPFUL LETTUCE FLOWCHART



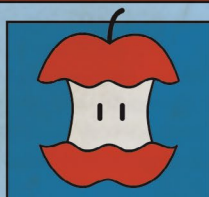
An elephant figures out how to fly and they call him Dumbo. Whenever you shine brightest, society's gonna try and bring you down.



WHAT TYPE OF CLASSIC CARTOON GARBAGE DO YOU FEEL LIKE TODAY?



FISH SKELETON



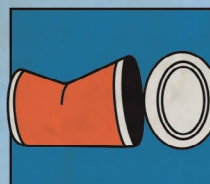
APPLE CORE



CIGARETTE BUTT



BANANA PEEL



CAN O' POISON



STINKY SOCK

THE FOLLOWING IS AN ACTUAL SERIOUS LEGAL NOTICE WE ARE MANDATED TO PUBLISH ANNUALLY BY THE UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE. IT IS EXTREMELY BORING AND WE DO NOT RECOMMEND ANYONE READ IT UNLESS THEY ARE AN EMPLOYEE OF THE UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE AND EVEN THEN ONLY DO IT IF YOU ABSOLUTELY MUST. WE APOLOGIZE FOR THIS UNFORTUNATE USE OF SPACE.

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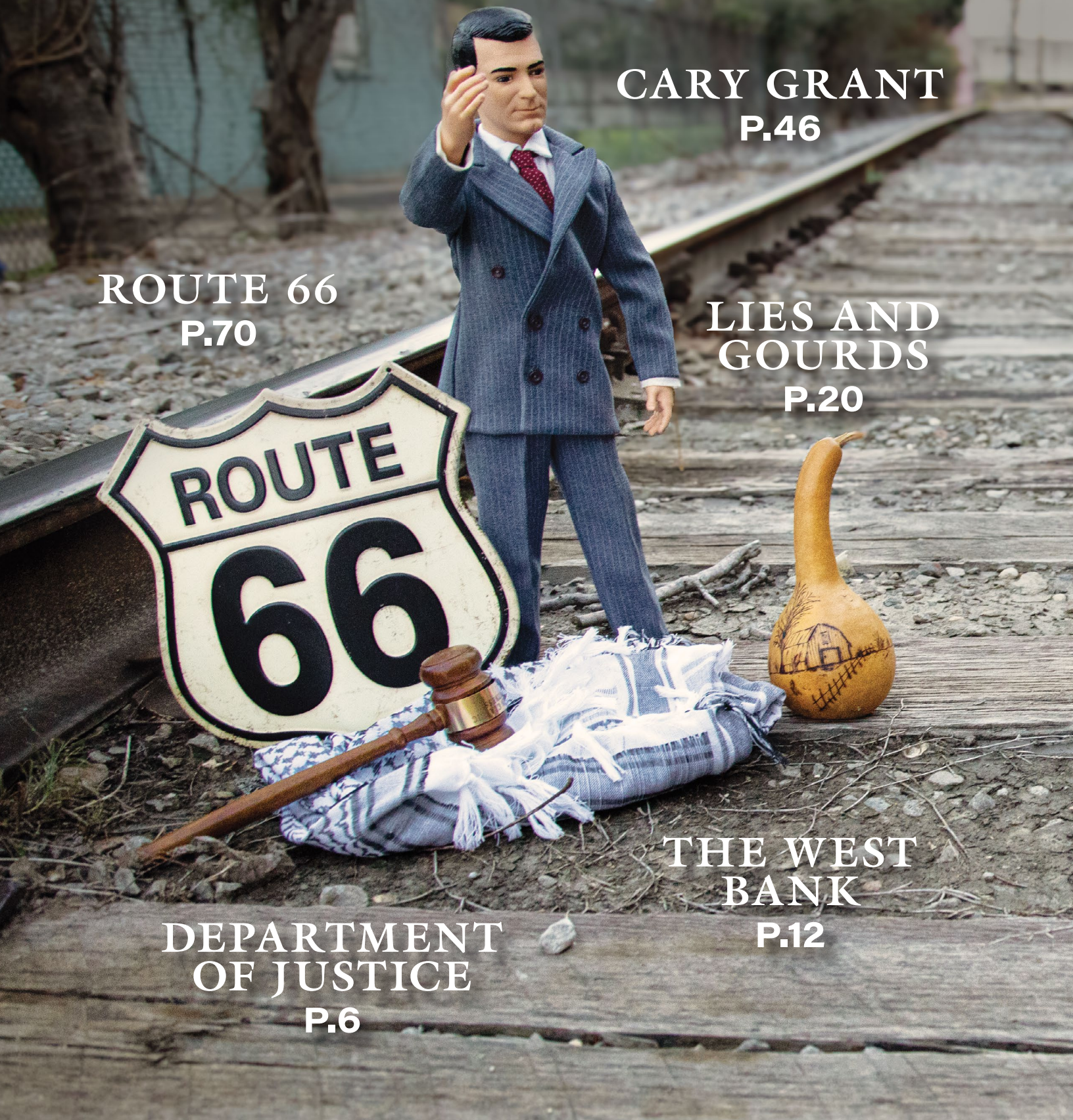
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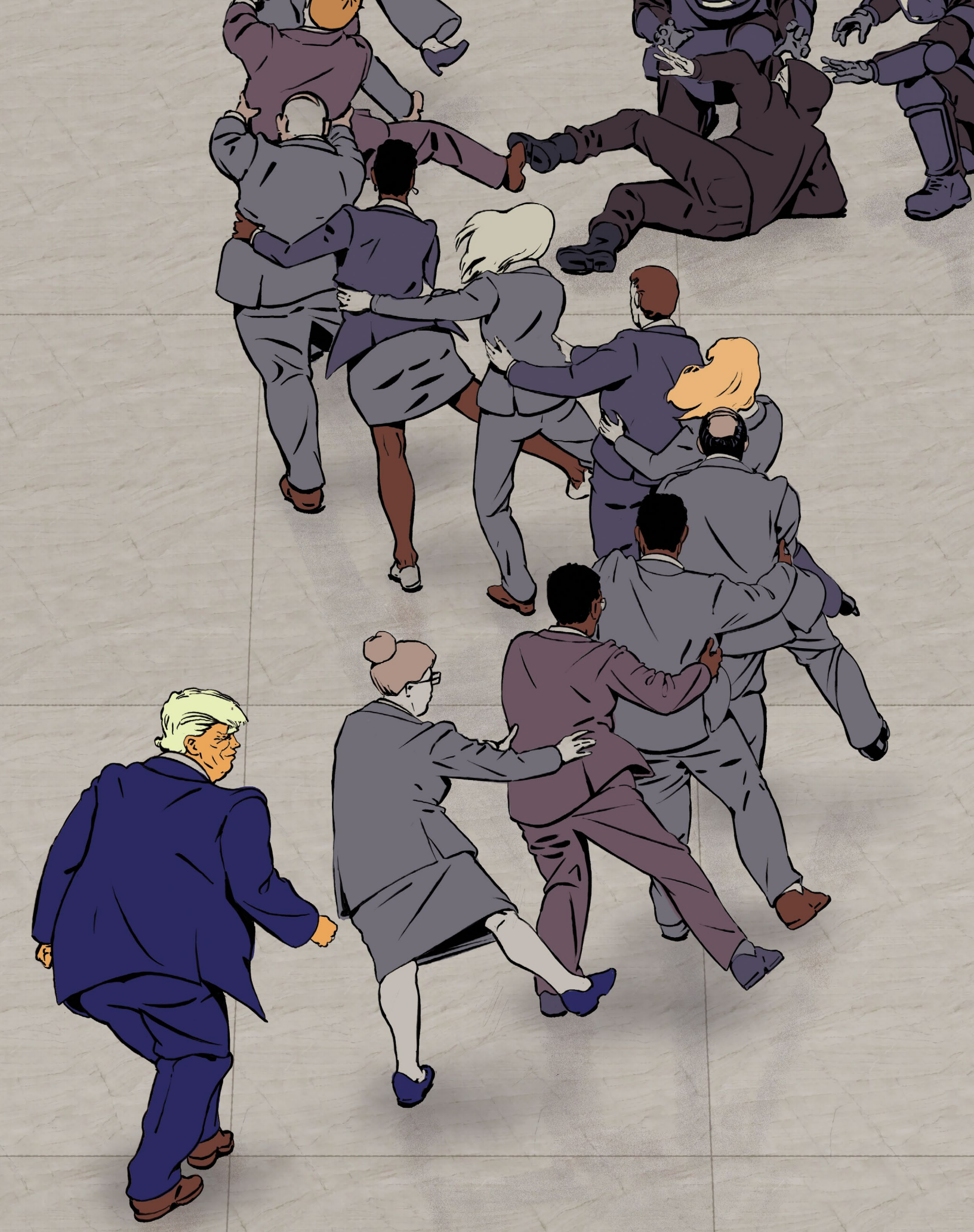
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BUSINESS AS USUAL AT THE DEPARTMENT OF INJUSTICE

BY RACHEL COHEN

THERE ARE SEVERAL TRUTHS WORTH ACKNOWLEDGING about the current state of the so-called Department of Justice. Donald Trump has weaponized the DOJ to attack political enemies, real and perceived. In general, Trump has abused government power in ways that are arguably unique, and inarguably terrible and worse than his modern predecessors. And also, this weaponization is possible only because the underlying systems of American prosecution were already weaponized against huge swathes of the country.

People across the anti-authoritarian universe tend to agree on the first two truths. The third, when named, strikes many proponents of American democracy as blasphemous. Justice, after all, is in the *name* of the Department. Surely the current moment is a dramatic deviation from how things usually function!

It isn't. It's an escalation; it's a deviation in terms of who is swept up in prosecutorial misconduct's net; it is not a major change to the underlying system. That wouldn't even really make sense. Massive arms of the federal government don't change dramatically overnight, or even in the span of a year and a half. The president's abuse of the DOJ is only possible because of the deep culture of prioritizing convictions over justice (even though it's in the name!) that permeates our country's adversarial legal system.

Problems must be acknowledged to be fixed. We cannot acknowledge them, not really, while pretending they are anything other than the result of a system doing what it did already, just to lower-profile people. As a case study, let's revisit the story of

Chicago's Broadview Six and the prosecutorial misconduct that caused its demise.

In October 2025, one month after protesters gathered outside an ICE facility in Broadview (a suburban village west of the city), six of the activists were federally indicted on both misdemeanor and felony charges. The facility is not a detention center but was being used as one, in violation of state law. The people detained there have reported truly horrifying treatment.

The government's indictment was based on protesters "blocking" an ICE vehicle that had literally driven into them while a crowd was participating in a Jericho Walk across a side street used to access the facility, creating an unbroken circle of marchers across the crosswalk to avoid arrest for blocking the street. Prosecutors alleged that the defendants "banged aggressively" on the car, then joined together and "pushed against the vehicle to hinder and impede its movement." When the crowd cleared, according to the filing, the car's side mirror and rearview window were broken and someone had etched "PIG" into the paint—though none of the defendants were specifically accused of causing damage.

There were dozens of protesters present, and only six indicted. All six had connections to the Democratic Party, except for Joselyn Walsh, a musician who left the protest early, she says, after an ICE agent shot a "less lethal" round through her guitar. One of the Broadview Six was Kat Abughazaleh, a high-profile congressional candidate whose pre-campaign career included reporting on the far right for *Media Matters*.

The federal indictments came amid many others filed against anti-ICE protesters and, occasionally with overlap, the President's political adversaries. The government struggled to obtain convictions in these cases. As of August 10, 2026, the federal government has charged 33 Chicago-area residents with non-immigration crimes connected to protest. Twenty-five of them have already been cleared, and only two defendants pleaded guilty.

Charges were also dropped in numerous other high-profile protest cases, including those against Newark Mayor Ras Baraka and labor leader David Huerta, while Congressman-elect Brad Lander was acquitted on misdemeanor charges related to an arrest in immigration court.

The government even struggled to obtain indictments, incredibly uncommon because the government gets to do so in one-sided grand jury proceedings where only the prosecutors are present. Grand juries refused to indict at least three of those Chicago-area protesters. A grand jury also refused to indict the protester Sean Dunn, who famously threw a sandwich at an immigration officer in Washington, D.C., on felony charges. A jury subsequently acquitted him on misdemeanor charges at trial.

The Broadview case eventually collapsed too. In March 2026, the charges against Walsh and one other protestor, Cat Sharp, were dropped. In April, all of the felony charges disappeared. And in late May, after Judge April Perry finally read the transcripts of the grand jury proceedings—something the defense initially moved to request at the beginning of April—the government dismissed all remaining charges days before the scheduled trial.

The transcripts have since been unsealed, a rarity, and reveal that the DOJ initially failed to obtain an indictment at all. They can just keep going, and they did, finally obtaining their indictment after dismissing a juror who called the case “a crock of shit.”

Judge Perry declared the misconduct shocking. Coverage framed the behavior as exceptionally bad, indicative of Trump's weaponization of the Department of Justice.

The attorney who eventually obtained the successful indictment is a woman named Sheri Mecklenburg. She has worked at the DOJ for almost 20 years. Her misconduct in grand juries, now under a microscope, has already led to the dismissal of two other cases. Those cases have nothing to do with Trump's political aims. The higher profile case—which is one of the higher profile cases to come from the Northern District of Illinois—is a fraud case against former executives at Loretto Hospital.

The Broadview charges upended the lives of all six defendants. They accrued huge legal bills, and faced years in prison. Abughazaleh was running a Congressional campaign, one she lost very narrowly following months of both running for office and also fighting the federal government in court. Do not mistake me saying this playbook is largely unexceptional for saying it was tolerable.

Criminal indictments are hugely burdensome, scary and disruptive, regardless of outcome, every single time they happen. They mostly happen to poor people.

In criminal cases, judges ascribe a “presumption of regularity” to the actions of the government, functionally assuming good faith unless presented with overwhelming evidence to the contrary. There are multiple problems with this approach, not least of which being that defendants don't know what they don't

know, and often need judges to rule to grant them access to the evidence that would overcome the presumption of regularity—which judges are often unwilling to do *because* of the presumption of regularity.

What happened to the Broadview defendants was actually well within regularity.

One common element of the DOJ's playbook in the Broadview case was its decision to charge several people who were barely involved in the alleged conduct at all. This tactic is used in the hopes that the government can get those defendants to testify against everyone else, in exchange for dismissed charges or a plea to a lesser offense. In Chicago, nobody went for it.

IN SPOKANE, PROTESTERS WEREN'T SO LUCKY: AFTER NINE anti-ICE demonstrators were charged with federal felonies in June 2025, six of the defendants took plea deals. The remaining three were found guilty and convicted of conspiracy charges, almost certainly due to the cooperation of people who cut deals.

This is how the system works, always, for everyone. A super-supermajority—roughly 98 percent—of federal criminal cases end in plea bargains. There are arguments for and against plea bargaining, and some of those in favor are compelling, but it's inarguable that the system incentivizes overcharging people.

To strike a bargain, a prosecutor has to have a lesser charge they can offer the defense. To do so, prosecutors indict people on whatever they can plausibly bring to a grand jury, even when they ultimately want a conviction on a lesser offense; basically, a “shoot for the moon and you'll land among the stars” philosophy. If the defendant wants to go to trial, they may well face charges the prosecution never thought were really fitting in the first place, but were only brought to coerce testimony against an alleged co-conspirator, or to get the lesser conviction they actually wanted without a trial. And as Broadview has made abundantly clear, if the government wants an indictment, it can get one.

This abuse of prosecutorial power didn't start with Trump. Consider what the Obama Administration did to Aaron Swartz.

In January of 2011, Swartz—a 24-year-old Harvard researcher and internet activist—was arrested on two state charges of “breaking and entering with intent to commit a felony,” after he entered MIT's campus and downloaded millions of academic articles from JSTOR using the school's network. (This, despite the fact that the university has an “open campus” and the door to the wiring closet where Swartz connected his computer was reportedly unlocked.)

Swartz returned the data, and JSTOR explicitly asked the government not to prosecute. Federal prosecutors went ahead anyway. They initially charged Swartz with four felony counts, carrying a potential maximum sentence of 35 years; another indictment later brought the total number of felony counts to 13.

Two years after his arrest, Swartz died by suicide in January 2013. Afterward, U.S. Attorney Carmen Ortiz defended the prosecution by pointing out that her office never *intended* to seek anything close to the maximum sentence the charges allowed. Prosecutors had offered to recommend six months of probation if Swartz pleaded guilty. This was presented as evidence that the government had acted reasonably.

But that is precisely the point: if six months was the punishment deemed appropriate for Swartz's actions, why charge him with crimes carrying the potential for decades in prison? Because it acted as leverage.

The Broadview case offers another example through the felony for which the defendants were indicted: conspiracy to impede or injure an officer. This was the stick to get people to flip; they faced years in prison if convicted. It also could be filed against literally anyone at Broadview that day, because conspiracy does not require the act be completed, or that the plan be made in advance. The ability of the government to abuse the loose bounds of conspiracy to overcharge has been well-documented for decades, with legal scholar Albert Harno warning in 1941 that the crime held "serious potential dangers of abuse."

And again, there is nothing uniquely Trumpian about prosecutors weaponizing conspiracy charges against people engaged in political activity. In 2022, President Biden's DOJ charged four American citizens for failing to register as "agents of a foreign

THE ABILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT TO ABUSE THE LOOSE BOUNDS OF CONSPIRACY TO OVERCHARGE HAS BEEN WELL-DOCUMENTED FOR DECADES. LEGAL SCHOLAR ALBERT HARNO WARNED IN 1941 THAT THE CRIME HELD "SERIOUS POTENTIAL DANGERS OF ABUSE."

government," alleging they had illegally spread "pro-Russian propaganda" in order to "cause dissension in the United States and to promote secessionist ideologies." The defendants were all members of the African People's Socialist Party and Uhuru Movement in St. Louis and St. Petersburg, Florida.

Prosecutors said that a Russian national named Aleksandr Ionov had secretly used the American political groups to sow discord inside the United States—and while the defendants did have a relationship with Ionov, who provided funding for some of their activities, they insisted that their political positions were their own, not instructions handed down from Moscow. The defendants were finally acquitted of acting as agents, but were found guilty of conspiring to defraud the U.S. government.

There's a narrative that Donald Trump's Department of Justice is stacked with loyalists, that he's corrupted the DOJ, that its prosecutorial behavior is deeply abnormal. *That narrative is based on nothing.* Much like defendants and their attorneys, we

don't know what we don't know, and grand juries are subject to precious little oversight. But the facts we can confirm about the current DOJ make it hard to believe the current culture is some massive deviation from the norm.

I took it upon myself to suffer through the broken links and typos that fill the Department of Justice's website to confirm whether current leadership is as inexperienced and unqualified as liberal commenters tend to allege. There are 93 U.S. Attorney's offices in the United States. Of the 93 people who were running them in mid-June, 81 were either state-level prosecutors or at the Department of Justice prior to their appointment.

Eighty-seven percent of the people running federal prosecutions right now, the ones who are supposedly exceptionally biased and bad and beyond the pale in terms of ethics and lawyerly code, are experienced prosecutors. Eighty-seven percent. Fully 72 percent of them were specifically prosecutors in a U.S. Attorney's office.

The *New York Times* declares, "There's No Escaping the Rot in This Justice Department." I agree, but it's *largely staffed with the same people as it had been before*. Which hypothesis is more likely: that they had totally different ethical codes about obtaining an indictment or conviction prior to January 20, 2025, or that they were just being pressured to obtain indictments and convictions against *different people*, as opposed to the President's high-profile political enemies?

Roughly 38.5 percent of people in federal prison are Black despite Black Americans being roughly 13.7 percent of the United States population. One of the drivers of this disparity is the well-documented racial disparities at every level of the criminal legal system, including prosecutorial discretion in who gets indicted, what they get indicted with, and what plea deals they're offered. The DOJ has always weaponized prosecutions against specific people the government either does not care about or actively wishes to punish. It's just expanding the net now.

There's no need to distinguish protest cases, even. In August 2021, the Movement for Black Lives and the CUNY School of Law released a report outlining the Department of Justice's targeting of Black activists based on protest in the summer of 2020. While these prosecutions originated under the first Trump administration, President Biden did not direct the DOJ to drop the cases or grant clemency to protesters, even following media attention. The closest the BLM protesters got was a fake article widely shared on Facebook claiming Biden had pardoned them. He hadn't.

I doubt the DOJ attorneys making these decisions think they're doing anything racist. I also don't think Sheri Mecklenburg thought she was doing anything wrong in her grand juries, because she was a model DOJ employee for almost 20 years leading up to the Broadview case.

Mecklenburg was a top performer in an office described by a University of Chicago professor who used to work there as one with "this reputation of really being very, very upstanding and really focused on the facts and the law and being apolitical in the way that they operate." Mecklenburg definitely views herself as unbiased and apolitical, as most DOJ attorneys do. She withdrew from prosecuting the Broadview Six to accept a special assignment with the Senate Judiciary Committee, overseen by Democratic U.S. Senator Dick Durbin, a position she lost after the

misconduct surfaced. She was a recipient of the Chicago Bar Association's 2025 Frank J. McGarr Award for Distinguished Federal Government Service by a Government Attorney, the nonprofit Chicago Bar Foundation's 2017 Richard J. Phelan Public Service Award, and served as the President of the Board of Directors for the Federal Bar Association's Chicago Chapter.

She was also the General Counsel of the Chicago Police Department before she joined the DOJ.

WAS MECKLENBURG BODY-SNATCHED WHEN Donald Trump was sworn in last year? Was she the only prosecutor at this office who would have been willing to engage in unethical behavior to obtain an indictment, and staffed on this case by luck or coincidence? That's hard to believe, since there were multiple prosecutors present during the grand jury proceedings, one of whom she literally said would "vouch" for her while promising she wouldn't bring unsubstantiated charges to a grand jury. The name for improperly promising the grand jury can trust you, something very much not allowed, is "vouching." It also strains credulity that the DOJ might have staffed poor performers on such high-profile cases.

Mecklenburg was staffed on these cases because she was a high-performing prosecutor. She was a high-performing prosecutor *because* of a disregard for just outcomes and a willingness to obtain indictments and convictions at all costs, not despite that disregard.

The Broadview transcripts show Mecklenburg was willing to keep pushing for an indictment after failing to obtain one the first time, being told by a grand juror the case was a "crock of shit," and then dismissing that grand juror to finally be able to obtain said indictment. Presumably, she was willing to do this because her boss told her it was important to obtain an indictment. Do we really think someone who was unwilling to walk away from the job in those circumstances is prioritizing anything other than doing what she's told, and obtaining indictments and convictions in whatever cases are handed over? Here, again, we return to the racism endemic and demonstrable at every single decision point of our criminal legal system.

Many people have left the Department of Justice under Trump. The DOJ has lost 21 percent of its attorneys, down from 12,975 to 10,310, and across the entire federal system, comprising roughly 40,000-plus attorneys, the Trump administration has made about 3,200 hires. Undoubtedly, these handpicked replacements have the power to wield the justice system for political motives—but so did those who came before them. The large majority of the people in the Trump DOJ right now—from leadership all the way down—are the same people who were there before. They used to get different directives, ones that were still deeply harmful. Under President Obama, the DOJ pursued high-profile prosecutions against whistleblowers like Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning, and routinely subpoenaed journalists in an attempt to get them to reveal sources. Obama's DOJ allocated roughly 60 percent of its caseload to prosecuting drug or immigration offenses. The DOJ's focus was not on protecting rights, prioritizing justice, or prosecuting violent crime then, either.

Bear in mind, too, that the vast majority of criminal cases

happen in state courts, with even less oversight, brought by prosecutors who are generally viewed as less competent or qualified than those in federal court. Terrifyingly, they *are* sending their best people.

The story of the Broadview Six was framed as some horrifying abnormality. The DOJ is attempting to pin all culpability on Mecklenburg, to pretend the blame falls on one person instead of the system itself.

The reality is, this conduct came from an extremely well-regarded, experienced attorney within a respected office in the part of our court system subject to the most oversight, in a case that was certain, from the beginning, to be high-profile and fought by really good defense attorneys. There's no way this was abnormally bad behavior. At best, this was standard practice. At worst, this was Mecklenburg being careful.

It's not pleasant to watch the horrors of Trump 2.0 unfold, be horrified, and then be met with what can feel like a "well, actually" about how things have always been bad. Unfortunately, things have always been bad. Acknowledging that doesn't minimize the import of the way bad things are worse now. But it isn't just absurd to act as though prosecutorial misconduct was invented last year, in a country with a history of mostly racist and/or classist prosecutorial misconduct that has literally never abated. It's disrespectful.

There's a reason the Loretto defendants were the first to be able to get their cases dismissed based on Mecklenburg's misconduct. They are rich. They have good defense attorneys. And now all of Mecklenburg's recent indictments are called into question. What about all the ones before Trump? What about all the ones obtained by the prosecutors who watched her commit that misconduct and said nothing? What about all the ones obtained by the people tolerating and facilitating and leaning into the "rot" that corporate media is pretending sprung up overnight, among a bunch of people who had been doing this exact job before President Trump was a twinkle in a white supremacist's eye?

The *Atlantic* has declared that the presumption of regularity—the good faith judges automatically ascribe to the government—is now evaporating. To the extent that's true: it never should have existed in the first place, and it certainly should never have survived decades upon decades of statistics showing the racism that permeates our criminal legal system. But also, even among the judges who feel that way, this new suspicion of the government seems to only apply in cases that are arguably political prosecutions. There's no consideration of what the prosecutorial misconduct in those cases tells us about the whole rotten system, no attention paid to the people it's already gobbled up, no questioning of go-forward indictments for the vast majority of people charged with crimes, who are low-profile and whose actions are unrelated to protest.

Everyone is right to be outraged about the misconduct revealed in those grand jury transcripts, and they're probably right to say that this kind of misconduct being used to obtain indictments against high-profile political opponents is new. But they are wrong to pretend the misconduct itself, including in protest cases, is anything but business as usual. And if they pretend the problems of Trump 2.0 can be solved without addressing the racism and cultural rot undergirding our criminal legal system, they set themselves, and the country, up to fail. ✚



NO SUGAR ADDED
JUST A SUSPICIOUSLY SACCHARINE
AND POSSIBLY CARCINOGENIC
ARTIFICIAL SWEETENING COMPOUND

X-TREME

X-TREME ENERGY DRINK

IF YOU'RE NOT SLIGHTLY
VIBRATING 24/7
ARE YOU REALLY LIVING?



ONE THOUSAND
RED HOT
MILLIGRAMS OF
CAFFIENE



GLOWS IN THE DARK
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PROPRIETARY PEPTIDE, NOOTROPIC,
AND CREATIVE BLEND FOR A
MUSCULAR BRAIN

AAAAGGHHH!!!!

WRITING - ALEX SKOPIC
ILLUSTRATION - MATT BEAUDOIN

A HELLISH MONTH IN THE OCCUPIED WEST BANK

BY JASPER NATHANIEL

EACH TIME I RETURN TO THE WEST BANK, I TELL myself—against all available evidence and my better judgment—“Maybe it’ll be calmer this time.” Never have I been proven wrong so thoroughly as I was this past June and July.

The story, at the most basic level, is that Jewish settlers have seized more land. With the full support of the government, they have just about finished their takeover of Area C: the roughly 60 percent of the West Bank under full Israeli control. They have now moved on to Areas A and B—ostensibly under Palestinian Authority control and off limits to Israelis—something that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. Villages that had never seen a settler before are now finding themselves encircled by outposts, facing daily attacks.

I’ve had countless settler encounters over the past several years, but never have I seen them come out swinging the way they are now—showing up in a village and wasting no time before physically assaulting people. Of course it’s because they know that they are far more likely to be rewarded than punished; they are, after all, doing the state’s bidding.

There are stories I want to tell about the courage of Palestinians—men, women, and even children—whom I watched fend off settler attacks, resisting the occupation with whatever they could find. They are brave because they have no choice. But I can’t tell those stories without risking their lives. This is a riddle about writing on Palestine I haven’t yet solved.

In my first dispatch from the West Bank in January 2024—titled “You Don’t Understand How Bad It Is Here”—I wrote:

So there is my next obstacle: the struggle to convey the utter pervasiveness of the occupation’s cruelty. I worry that each story I share undermines this essential aspect by implying a start and



stop when the reality is more like a poison coursing through every inch of soil, emitting noxious fumes into schools, museums, hospitals, and homes, causing constant pain and suffering and degradation and, on occasion, a seizure or toxic shock or explosion of blood and death. I am convinced that no reasonable person

could spend even a week here and come away believing the occupation is morally defensible under any circumstances; the trouble is that most will neither come nor even look too closely.

I haven't solved that problem either, but for now, here's a brief "travelogue"—written in a jetlagged haze shortly after returning home—that I hope conveys something of what it feels like on the ground in the West Bank.

IN BETHLEHEM, I MET FAHED ABU HAIKAL, WHOSE seven-month-old son Sam was shot dead by an Israeli soldier weeks earlier while sitting in his mother's lap inside the family car. Fahed remembers everything. He remembers the soldier's nonchalant expression as he raised his weapon toward the car's windshield. He remembers slamming on the brakes, then watching the soldier pull the trigger—the first bullet shattering the windshield, passing through his hand, into his baby's face, out the back of his tiny head, and then into his wife's face and chest. He remembers pulling Sam from the car and trying to plug the hole in his head as thick, hot blood poured out, before realizing he was holding his dead child. The car seat is still stained a dry, crusty brown. When Fahed got home from the hospital, the first thing he did was disassemble the crib and hide the parts, along with Sam's box of toys—including the rattle he was holding when he was shot in the face—so his wife wouldn't have to see them when she returned home. Fahed believes they will get justice because the footage of the shooting so clearly shows a cold-blooded murder. He believes his baby's killer will go to jail. I do not.

Just beyond Bethlehem, in Beit Sahour, settlers took over an abandoned Jordanian military base late last year, chased Palestinian farmers off the surrounding agricultural land, and installed a handful of mobile homes. Months later, the Israeli government retroactively authorized it as a legal settlement and allocated it more than 100 dunums of Palestinian land, including a public park belonging to the town of Beit Sahour. In other words, the settlers' land grab—illegal even under Israeli law—was rewarded with post-facto legalization and even more land. That's the whole game: violent settlers are the tip of the spear in Israel's project of annexing the West Bank. So it goes. That night, Beit Sahour's semi-pro basketball team beat Qalandia Refugee Camp 66–62. It was the talk of the town.

I returned to Turmus'ayya, where a group of Palestinian farmers and I were attacked by settlers last October. After footage of that attack went viral, Israeli authorities arrested the man who clubbed a grandmother nearly to death. I told the officers that their arrest would mean virtually nothing if they didn't dismantle the settler terror network in the olive fields. You arrested a grunt, I told them, good for you. Now do something to actually stop the violence. You have a playbook for this sort of thing, I reminded them, you do it to Palestinians every day. Arrest their leader, Amishav Melet, the notoriously violent armed settler who established the illegal outpost. Demolish their structures. Tear gas them if they try to return. They told me they would—that they were serious about cracking down on settler violence. I told them I didn't believe them. They said they'd prove me wrong.

The outpost has tripled in size since then. When I arrived at the lookout point, a cement truck, escorted by the IDF, was pouring the foundation for a large new structure. The large Palestinian



Bassam Abuassaf, principal of Al Mughayyir Secondary School, sits in his office several months after a deadly shooting terrorized the campus. (Photo: Jasper Nathaniel)



The father of Jihad Abu Naim, who was killed in the April shooting, shows a photo of Jihad's newborn daughter. (Photo: Jasper Nathaniel)



Eight months after a 23-year-old settler named Ariel Dahari nearly clubbed Um Saleh to death (left), I visited her at her home (right). (Photos: Jasper Nathaniel)

home visible in the background of the October attack video is now occupied by settlers and off-limits to its owner, a businessman who lives primarily in Chicago. Amishav Melet is still menacing any Palestinian who dares approach their farmland. While I was there, he tried to steal a man's ATV at gunpoint. The settlers have taken the entire field, and the battle line has moved to the village itself. Settlers now routinely march through Turmus'ayya carrying machine guns, terrorizing residents. They want the homes. They want the whole village, of course. Maybe they'll get it.

IN NEIGHBORING AL-MUGHAYYIR, I VISITED THE SITE OF a school shooting in April, walking the grounds of Al Mughayyir Secondary School with its principal, Bassam Abuassaf. He showed me where a settler with a rifle crouched on a hill, peered through the scope, and took aim at panicked students trying to evacuate. Where 14-year-old Aws Hamdi Al-Nassan was shot in the back of the head and killed as he frantically searched for his little brother. The whole town is traumatized. Of course it is. That's what happens after a school shooting. But in this case, the shooter roams free, and the entire village remains under constant attack.

After the shooting, Bassam told me, Israeli authorities never even reached out to take a statement. A school shooting—and the police couldn't be bothered to speak with the principal! But he was determined to get his students back in the classroom, and he did the following week. He found he could no longer focus on education or administration. Instead, he became consumed with protecting his nearly 500 students and staff, pacing the school's

perimeter from the first bell until dismissal. "I just thank God we made it through the school year," he said.

I met the father of Jihad Abu Naim, the 32-year-old good Samaritan who was shot in the chest while rushing to the school to help. He showed me a photo of Jihad's infant daughter—his new granddaughter—who was born weeks after her father was killed. Then he showed me a photo of his son's corpse. This is a common occurrence in the West Bank: someone showing you a picture of their dead child.

As he scrolled through his camera roll, he landed on video of Israeli forces uprooting his olive trees, perhaps as punishment for having a dead son. He showed me a map, and I saw how the people of al-Mughayyir have been boxed into a fraction of their village, encircled by settler outposts and cut off from their farmland. The local economy, which relies almost entirely on agriculture, has collapsed. Military gates seal off the community for days or weeks at a time.

While I was in town, I met a friendly local who took me to see his home, which is, in fact, a pile of crushed stone and mangled rebar. The Israelis demolished it. He never found out why. Next door to his would-be home stood a house under construction, now indefinitely stalled because its owner was killed by settlers. I visited Um Saleh, the woman whose near-fatal clubbing in Turmus'ayya I documented last year. She cannot hold heavy objects with her right hand and still feels pain when walking downhill, but otherwise she is much improved. It was wonderful to see her laugh. A fundraiser after the attack helped her family buy a small flock of sheep, which now produces enough milk to support

them, with virtually all other work in the area gone.

Almost in passing, she mentioned that two months earlier, soldiers had entered her home, beaten her son in front of her and his own child, slapped his wife, and stolen all the money from his wallet before leaving. She didn't know why. They rarely do.

Last week, armed settler militias began a new round of daily, violent raids on al-Mughayyir. Another student at Al Mughayyir Secondary School, 17-year-old Fadi Al-Nassan, was shot. Months earlier, he had been filmed sprinting toward his cousin, 14-year-old Aws Hamdi Al-Nassan, after Aws was killed in the school shooting.

FADI, WHO HAD JUST FINISHED 11TH GRADE, HAD HIS leg amputated. He was supposed to play on the national soccer team next year, and his family dreaded the moment he'd wake up and realize his leg, and his dream, were gone. Then, on Friday, he died.

In Taybeh, I visited a tiny Bedouin community—Naif—that is perhaps in the process of being run off its land. A settler arrived on a donkey with a herd of camels. Camels serve no real purpose for the settlers, I learned, except to eat Palestinians' crops—which is, in fact, the opposite of no purpose for a group whose *raison d'être* is tormenting their indigenous neighbors. The camels fed from Naif's olive trees for more than an hour as the settler rode increasingly tight circles on his donkey around a small shed, throwing the occasional stone to frighten the children playing inside.

I followed him for as long as I could, trying to keep myself between him and the home, but at a certain point I realized he was laughing at me—wearing me down so that he could later cut their water pipes with less interference. A few nights later, settlers burned down a small home there.

Khallat al-Sidra, a Bedouin village on the outskirts of Mukhmas that I visited last year, had already met the fate that may await Naif: ethnically cleansed from the land, like more than 60 other communities since October 7. It once served as an incidental buffer for the village of Mukhmas itself, absorbing the worst of the settler violence. But after settlers burned it to the ground for the third time, the Israeli military finally intervened—not by protecting the community, but by expelling the people from their land.

And so the settlers pushed the frontier once again, now setting their sights on Mukhmas, where they shot an American teenager dead in February. Nasrallah Abu Siyam may be gone, but he is everywhere in the village. A ghost. Like so many Palestinian villages, the martyr is painted on walls, displayed in restaurants, dangling from rear-view mirrors. Nasrallah was the point of reference for everyone I met in Mukhmas—Nasrallah's aunt, his cousin, his very best friend.

I visited his father, Mohammed, who was building a house for his son when he was killed. He was a wreck. Regret was eating him alive: he'd asked Nasrallah to stay and help with the farm when he'd considered moving to America. He could barely speak. He couldn't understand why it had happened. What had they ever done to deserve any of this? Why couldn't it have been him instead of his son? Nasrallah's horse, a dapple gray mare named Shams, is still out back, but Mohammed can't bear to ride her. So Nasrallah's friends come every day to care for Shams—to clean her pen, feed her, and take her out for rides.

HUNG OUT WITH THE SHEBAB—THE YOUNG MEN OF THE village who have been forced into the role of its protectors. A farmer, a student, a car mechanic. When it was quiet, we went for drives into the mountains. Tested the boundaries—the outposts were always in view. We smoked cigarettes and talked shit. I rode on the back of a motorcycle. We went to a local honeybee farm, but the beekeeping suits left something to be desired. Like, say, full-body coverage. Like a true seal. Between the four of us, we were stung maybe a dozen times. Let me tell you, it was pure chaos. I don't remember the last time I laughed like that. The honeycomb was warm and chewy, and I've never tasted anything so sweet.

I love the shebab of Mukhmas. Fearless—minus the bee thing. I joined their night watch, guarding against settlers who come from all sides, on ATVs and in trucks, smashing windows, pouring kerosene, and setting buildings on fire. Menacing with their guns. You become fast friends after nights like this.

Days after I left, a car full of Haredi settler kids being chased by Israeli police—probably on account of the clown-car number of people packed inside—drove into Mukhmas at 4 AM. The police car turned around and left as soon as they entered the village, leaving the kids to joyride through its streets and wake its residents before they crashed straight into a wall and ran screaming for the hills. Nobody in Mukhmas ever saw them—only the car tearing through their narrow streets—but the kids reportedly called the army and pleaded for help. And so the army came in force: dozens of jeeps, drones, even helicopters. Soldiers kicked down doors, dragged people from their beds, zip-tied them, and beat them senseless. “We didn't ask for any of this,” my friend later said. By 8 AM, Israeli media was reporting that the Haredi boys had been “rescued” from Mukhmas and were safe. But that didn't stop the raid from continuing until 3 PM. Fifteen boys and men were arrested that day in Mukhmas. It appears soldiers chose their targets after stealing someone's phone and searching a group chat for people who had warned about the settler and soldier incursion. Incriminating texts like, “Be careful.” They broke the mechanic's jaw in four places, along with his shoulder and a rib. He said it all happened in his bedroom, seconds after he woke up. The soldier pulled him out of bed then teed off on him with haymakers and jackboot kicks before he'd even registered what was happening. Today, two young men remain in jail. Nobody knows what they're even being held for.

I left Mukhmas for Tamoun in the Jordan Valley, where I stayed with the family of Aymen Ghreyab, a local activist and journalist who has been in jail since November over his social media posts about state and settler violence. He was taken away just weeks after his daughter's first birthday. His wife knows what happens inside those jails—the torture, the sexual assault, the starvation. She hasn't heard a word from him. She cries all the time, but she has young children to raise.

I visited farmland being severed in half by Project “Crimson Thread”—Israel's plan to build a wall across the entire Jordan Valley, from the occupied Golan Heights all the way to the Red Sea. The Jordan Valley is the most fertile land in the region, the “breadbasket of the West Bank,” so it's only natural that Israel would try to take it. The plan would annex everything east of the wall, roughly 22 percent of the West Bank. Communities there would be expelled. Everything in the wall's path would be



A building in the Jenin refugee camp, where entire blocks have been destroyed by Israeli forces, is riddled with bullets. (Photo: Jasper Nathaniel)

demolished, and a buffer zone west of the wall would make tens of thousands more dunams of land inaccessible to farmers.

From Tamoun, I traveled north to Jenin, stopping just outside the city, next to a Palestinian amusement park, to see Israeli forces rebuilding the settlement of Ganim, which was evacuated in 2005 as part of the disengagement. It's one of four settlements they're rebuilding in the north. Israelis resettling the northern West Bank is one of the most underreported stories in the region right now, and you can see it in the widespread construction, multiplying outposts, and attacks in Areas A and B becoming increasingly routine.

The plan had been to venture into the Jenin refugee camp, whose more than 20,000 residents were forcibly evacuated in February 2025. The Israeli military has occupied the camp ever since, leveling entire neighborhoods, leaving parts of it looking more like Rafah than anywhere else in the West Bank. From the outside, you could see buildings speckled with bullet holes, gaping craters left by drone strikes, homes turned to rubble. The IDF is currently building a military base inside the camp, the first base in Area A since the Oslo Accords.

In the end, locals warned us not to go into the camp. They insisted, in fact; may have stopped me by force—for my own safety. Too many Israeli snipers hiding inside. It's where they killed Shireen Abu Akleh, after all. We drank coffee and ate cookies instead. I thought about the familiar online taunt: "Go to Jenin as a Jew and see how they treat you." With famously overzealous Arab hospitality, as it turns out.

We raced to Zabouba, just outside Jenin, where the earthy smell of freshly uprooted trees hung in the air after IDF bulldozers destroyed an olive field. Kids danced and played among felled trees, but the landowner walked solemnly, cursing the destruction of the land that had sustained his family for generations.

From Jenin, I drove southwest to Tulkarm, where two more refugee camps—Tulkarm and Nur Shams—remained destroyed and abandoned after the same military operation that cleared out the Jenin camp. I met Fadwa, 55, who stayed in Tulkarm Camp for nine months after the mandatory evacuation, hunkering down in her home with her cat, Koshkosh, and her dog, Jean Valjean. She had enough food and all of her books, her own private library, so she saw no reason to leave—until her health deteriorated to the point that she had no choice. I met a young man who was expelled from Nur Shams and later watched from a nearby hilltop as his home was demolished. During the demolition, Israeli soldiers shot at his feet to force him away.

I made it into the Nur Shams camp with a few other independent journalists in press vests. The word is apocalyptic. So much destruction, but so much evidence of recent life still there.

When we exited, a neighbor of the camp warned us that an IDF jeep was racing out behind us. We ran for our lives. Later that night, I got this message from a friend I made in Tulkarm:

Just so you know -- showing your story videos made [redacted] parents so so emotional, they both started praying, they were seeing parts of the camp they havent seen in a year and a half, and they were so sad nobody could take care of the streets and plants and get rid of the weeds 8:11 PM

You happened to photograph grandma's house without knowing

I traveled southeast to Qusra, where settlers had recently stolen a Palestinian home on the peak of the highest hill and were using it as a launchpad for attacks on the village. In February, they beat two Israeli activists, including an elderly woman, nearly to death, cracking their skulls with clubs. In March, they shot a Palestinian man dead and nearly stabbed his father to death. The surviving members of that family, strawberry farmers, have imprisoned themselves inside a cage to keep the settlers out.

I stayed with the shebab in another home on the stolen hill, where they kept a 24/7 watch. The attacks were constant. They went on all night. A pickup truck full of settlers arrived and unloaded a flatbed of large stones on us. They came with clubs and knives. Eventually, the army arrived. Soldiers chatted with the attacking settlers, smoked cigarettes with them, before coming to the home and throwing four Palestinian men against the wall. They were there to investigate the settlers' claims that the Pales-

tinians had thrown rocks at them. They had no answer when I asked why the settlers were allowed to live in a stolen home and attack locals from it—but the stones allegedly thrown in response were treated as a matter of grave concern.

Nobody was abducted, fortunately, perhaps because an American journalist was sticking a camera in their faces. But the settlers returned minutes after the soldiers left, cutting the electricity, blacking out the home—including the security camera system—and attacking again, nearly scaling the wall and making it inside. Fortunately, we had an amateur electrician inside who MacGyvered a new power source.

THE NEXT DAY, WE WATCHED A SETTLER GRAZING SHEEP just outside the home. “Those are my sheep,” one of the guys told me. The settler had stolen them. “That’s my land, my crops. And he’s living in my uncle’s home.” That night, settlers broke into another home on the hill and stole the doors and windows right out of the frames.

I went from Qusra to Sebastia, where the town’s beautiful archaeological sites were teeming with Israeli workers. I’ve been reporting on this town for years, but I have never seen so much occupation activity. The day before, they had stolen a newly excavated Roman column, lifting it with a bulldozer onto a truck and driving away with it. Looting the town’s treasures—exactly what they accuse the Palestinians of doing to justify their takeover of heritage sites. At a wedding, I bumped into Ayman Schaer, who was shot in the leg by an Israeli soldier with a butterfly bullet during one of my visits in 2024. I saw him last October, and he was still undergoing surgeries, still unsure if he would ever walk again. He was grimacing in pain, sweating just from sitting up to talk. At the wedding, he was on his feet and smiling—the first time I’d ever seen him like that. Outside, soldiers were raiding Sebastia again, kicking in the municipality’s door.

In Masudiya, next door to Sebastia, settlers had stolen the historic Ottoman-era railroad station, where families from across the region once gathered for festivals. It’s the same story, over and over: Settlers showed up one day and planted a flag. Then they built a fence. Then their flocks were grazing there. Then local farmers were beaten and tear-gassed for trying to reach their own land. It had only been a few months, but settlers had already taken over 4,000 dunams of land—everything in Area C—and were now pushing into Areas A and B. I met a young woman who had just graduated from Birzeit University and returned home to Masudiya. Already, she wants to leave again. “I can’t even leave the house by myself anymore,” she told me.

In Burqa, settlers had stolen a natural spring that supplied water for the village and many neighboring ones. Imagine stealing a spring. They’d cut all the pipes, built a swimming pool for settlers, and rerouted the flowing water into the nearby outpost.

Next to a wall commemorating the town’s 72 martyrs since 1936, soldiers spent the night with an electric saw, cutting down a thick metal statue of Handala, the Palestinian cartoon icon. Only its two feet remained.

I drove all the way south to Masafer Yatta in the South Hebron Hills, staying in Umm al-Khair, where a settler murdered Awdah Hathaleen less than one year earlier. I’d planned to spend a week visiting different villages in the hills, but the situation in Umm al-Khair was so bad that I wasn’t able to leave for more than a short

day trip. The outpost had grown exponentially since I was there in October. Israeli flags were everywhere, including covering the sign welcoming visitors to the small hamlet. A new gate was installed and closed at will by soldiers and settlers alike, blocking the only road in and out of the village. One indication that a settler attack was coming was that they’d locked the gate. A close friend of mine there told me he’d been diagnosed with depression. “I just see no hope,” he told me. “It’s all so dark.” Another told me he’d quit activism. “What’s the point?” he said. “It accomplishes nothing.” Before the Portugal vs. Spain World Cup game, he’d told me, “All I have left is Ronaldo.” We watched together. “If Ronaldo played for Israel, I’d have no choice but to cheer for them,” he said. He spit out his soda laughing. After Portugal lost, I barely saw him again.

The settlers’ latest gambit was attempting to steal an entire home. Salim’s home. They had been showing up in his backyard, ripping out his fence, and planting Israeli flags. They had kicked a woman out of a bathroom. On my first night there, they attacked, trying to push through the backyard and reach the house. The Palestinians and international activists formed a defensive line to try to stop them. Many of them were beaten. The settlers threw chairs and razor wire. A settler with a pistol swept my legs out from under me with a metal rod, then three men jumped on me, one of them swinging at my head. The soldiers came and arrested three activists. They declared Salim’s home a closed military zone—a classic technique to clear the area of activists—which did not stop the settlers from returning the next morning to drink coffee in his yard. Salim had not been able to reach his livestock in nearly a week. They had no food or water.

I spent time with Hanady, Awdah’s wife, and her three small children. She has been baking a lot because it is the only thing she enjoys. She discovered that I would eat anything she made. Her kids are afraid. She doesn’t know what to do. She wants to leave, but she has nowhere else to go. More than anything, she misses her husband. “Our love story was so rare,” she told me. “There’s no one else like him.”

One morning, two bulldozers drove into neighboring Deirat, accompanied by dozens of soldiers. We followed them and watched as families in every home along the demolition crew’s path scrambled to salvage their belongings. When the bulldozers stopped in front of their targets, soldiers began firing sound grenades and dragging people out with zip-tied hands. The smell of a demolished home is acrid. It burns your eyes and throat. A soldier took a video, panning from the home being demolished to the weeping women and children watching it happen. Maybe for TikTok. A young girl screamed. Her father was in jail, and now they took her home. The homes they destroyed had been beautiful.

On July 8, Congressman Ro Khanna came to visit Umm al-Khair. The locals took him in, showed him how the state was erasing their lives. Shortly after he left, I got frantic texts from one of his staffers saying that their bus had been hijacked by machine-gun-wielding settlers. When soldiers showed up, they sided with the settlers. Days later, when the story made international headlines, Israel’s allies would claim it was embellished or entirely fabricated. Obviously, it was not. There is nothing remarkable about what happened there. In fact, they got off easy.

I didn’t respond to the staffer’s texts right away because I was busy being attacked myself. Shimon Attaia, the sadistic settler who established the outpost in Umm al-Khair, showed up with a mob



Children watch as bulldozers demolish a home in Deirat, its occupants helpless to the destruction.

(Photo: Jasper Nathaniel)

of his vicious young disciples. They were trying to steal another tract of land. First they went for the men. I was hit more times than I could count. Kicked repeatedly in the inside of my kneecap. Punched in the gut. Jabbed in the throat. You cannot fight back, because they'll take revenge on the community itself. It's just what they want, and when we wouldn't give it to them, they turned on the women and elderly. Hanady's mother was thrown to the ground. She had to be hospitalized. Attaia kneed an old man in the groin. But it still wasn't enough. Attaia threw a tantrum and flipped a dumpster. He called his friend, who showed up with an assault rifle that got tangled in his dog leash. Attaia called the army and stamped his feet, pointing at who he wanted arrested. I was one of the chosen ones. They detained me for 30 minutes, demanded I unlock my phone and give it to them. When I told them I was calling my lawyer, they left without a word.

Khanna would go home and talk about what happened to anyone who would listen. It was great exposure, I thought. He said he'd never experienced racial profiling like he did in the West Bank. Then he started getting pressed on his policy positions, especially by Jeremy Scahill of *Drop Site News*. No to broad economic sanctions on the state. No to a full arms embargo. No to blocking the sale of Iron Dome parts. Israel had a right to defend itself, he said, but Palestinians should focus on nonviolent resistance. I found it inexplicable. How does one witness an occupying force's ruthlessness firsthand, then refuse to disarm it or affirm its victims' right to self-defense?

MY LAST STOP WAS AL-MAZRA'AH-SHARQIYA. THIS is where Mohammed Ibrahim, the 16-year-old Palestinian American kid who was abducted by soldiers and held in military prison for nearly ten months, is from. And also his first cousin Sayfollah Musallet, who was beaten to death by settlers there on July 11, 2025. I went there for the anniversary. To accompany his father, Kamel, to the

site where his son was killed. Settlers had occupied the land since last April. Anyone who went near was attacked, including me, when I tried last October. The mayor of neighboring Sinjil warned us that a settler with an M16 lived on the mountain and shot from afar. We knew it was dangerous. Kamel traveled in an armored SUV with a CNN crew. I followed behind in a rental Kia with a few other independent journalists. Of course, we were attacked.

I talked to an Israeli soldier after. I informed him that the settlers who attacked us were living in a Palestinian home in Area A. "Are you sure?" he said. "I'm pretty sure you're wrong." He told me he'd visited the home and was pretty sure it belonged to the settlers. Of course I wasn't wrong.

CNN aired the footage of the attack. Millions of people saw it. It was another PR disaster for Israel, and so they went

out and arrested four settlers. It was just like Turmus'ayya—they arrested a few grunts to quiet the critics, but unless the settlers were removed from the land they had stolen, it would be meaningless. The settlers told a judge they had been sent down to detain us by the leader of the outpost. They said there was a "gun attack threat." Ha ha. One of them was 14 years old—a child soldier. How about going after the leader?

It was a terrible week of press for Israel when it came to settler violence. First Ro Khanna, then the CNN attack. Here's the part that didn't make headlines in the US: that same week, Israel approved dozens of new settlements in the West Bank—including the retroactive legalization of violent outposts—committed more than a billion shekels to building them, and announced plans for new access roads to connect them. In the Jordan Valley, the government distributed drones and other military equipment to settlers living in illegal outposts. The IDF's West Bank chief then appeared at a conference for settlers living in illegal farming outposts, many of which have been linked to violence and the displacement of Palestinian communities, where he told residents that they "greatly strengthen security." "I love you," he said. "I appreciate you, and I appreciate what you do." How nice.

Five days after the anniversary of Sayf's death, settlers came down from the same olive fields where they'd attacked us to assault Sinjil with fire and guns. Apparently those four arrests didn't make the problem go away.

With CNN cameras gone, the military responded by tightening the siege on Sinjil, a community already trapped inside a cage. As I write this, the attacks by both settlers and soldiers are ongoing. The West Bank is the most predictable place on earth. ♣

JASPER NATHANIEL is an independent journalist covering the West Bank. You can find his latest reports and support his work at the Substack page *Infinite Jaz*: infinitejaz.com

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THE GREATEST LIE EVER TOLD

BY ADAM MCKAY

LIES ARE A LOT LIKE GOURDS. They come in hundreds of different varieties, sizes, and bulbous, twisty shapes. Some are off-puttingly spiked and prickly (see e.g., Gourd 1), while others remind us of fall childhood memories.

Some lies, if prepared correctly like squash or pumpkin, can appear delicious and irresistible—"I can't believe you're not a model!"—only to be rotten inside: "For \$5,000 I can photograph you so you have a portfolio." The central aim of most lies is to avoid consequences. When an untruth is especially desperate and self-serving, it can be unintentionally hilarious: "Yes, I tried marijuana... but I did not inhale."

Embezzling money or murdering someone for the insurance payout are part of a phylum of lies that cross into serious criminality. These deceptions' sphere of influence often stays fairly localized. But sometimes covering up the initial lie can spawn lots of other lies that spread and spread, like with Watergate or Bernie Madoff. What started as a little decorative Thanksgiving-gourd-sized lie suddenly becomes larger and quite ugly. This family of lies strives to not only avoid consequences, but to gain status and resources, another common endgame of many deceptions.

And then there are the large society-wide lies: hulking distortions and misrepresentations watered and tended to by leaders, mass media, culture, and industry. (See Gourd 2.)

This particular subgenus of grifts, half-truths, and strategic omissions have led throughout modern history to wars, mass death, societal collapse, and the theft of humanity's great treasures. "Manifest Des-

GOURD 1



GOURD 2



tiny." "Aryan superiority." "The divine right of kings." "The domino theory." "Israel has a right to defend itself." "Oxycontin isn't addictive because it's time-released." These county-fair, blue ribbon-winning prevarications tend to be driven by a myriad of short-term incentives, irrational manipulated fears, unexamined assumptions, convenient blind spots—and of course, the desire to avoid consequences and expand status and resources.

"People always pay their mortgages" became the half-true rallying cry used by Wall Street, news media, and politicians to collapse the world economy in 2007. Turns out when you change lending rules to feed an unregulated derivatives market by giving mortgages to people who can't pay them... they don't. "Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction," along with the subvariations on the central lie—"We want to bring democracy," "If you don't support the troops, you support the terrorists," "Saddam orchestrated 9/11," etc.—killed millions of people, devastated the entire nation of Iraq, and in many ways also gutted the United States, all while enriching oil companies, weapons manufacturers, and big banks, juicing TV ratings, and expanding the power of the Bush/Cheney presidency.

However, there is one type of rare, gargantuan, towering lie that makes all the other mass lies throughout human history seem like frightened, scurrying, little adorable fibs. It is a lie told worldwide by hundreds of thousands of institutions, elected officials, many universities, legacy

news, some large nonprofits, and eventually—as the deception entered mainstream culture—even by ourselves, to ourselves, every single moment of every day. It is a constantly growing gourd that even as a baby back in the 1970s was the size of three aircraft carriers. These days it is so massive it is almost easier to refer to what isn't part of it (Disneyland, a BLT sandwich, that green Croc by the side of the highway) than what is.

This massive lie can best be summed up as "when it comes to climate change, we have more time."

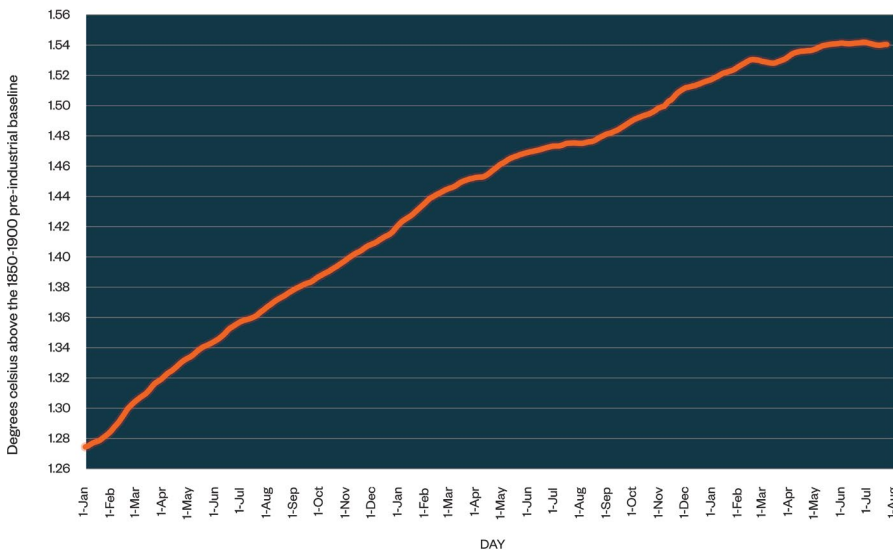
To be clear, we are not talking about the kind of total climate denial one would find on the extremist, lunatic fringe inhabited by the likes of Alex Jones or the current U.S. president. And we're not referring to cartoonish hucksters and "climate skeptics" like Joe Rogan or Jordan Peterson. Polling shows only 14.8 percent of Americans deny the basic sixth-grade science behind global warming. To put that in perspective, as much as ten percent of the population still believes the Earth is flat.

No, the monstrous, misshapen garden colossus lie we're referring to is subscribed to by most of the U.S., has stopped and slowed climate action far more than outright denial, and keeps growing and growing. Every day this deception whispers seductively in the ears of mankind: "Global warming is real but not urgent. Keep doing what you're doing."

Less embarrassing than "climate change is a Chinese hoax," but every bit as unscientific and ridiculous, it is the preferred

GLOBAL MEAN SURFACE TEMPERATURE ANOMALY: 3-YEAR RUNNING MEAN

JANUARY 1, 2024 - JULY 29, 2026

Data: https://sites.ecmwf.int/data/climatepulse/data/series/era5_daily_series_2t_global.csv

lie of the ruling class, mainstream news media, and corporations.

Sir David King—former science advisor to the United Kingdom, professor at Oxford and then Cambridge, winner of too many awards to list and as establishment as they come—was quoted as saying that what we do over the next three to four years will “determine the fate of humanity.”

He said this in 2021.

Like all grand lies, “we have more time” takes many different forms, often focus-grouped. There are the lofty-sounding promises to reach “Net-zero emissions by 2050,” as if 24 years from now was soon enough. There are the queries of “What’s your carbon footprint?,” as if individual people with plastic bags or straws were the problem and not gigantic multinational corporations. There’s the accusation that anyone who expresses urgency is a “doomer.” There are those who treat climate as an abstraction to win political campaigns, first arguing that the Biden administration’s Inflation Reduction Act was a victory despite doing nowhere near enough to address the scale of climate collapse, and more recently that Democrats should just stop talking about climate and focus on more “winnable” issues. Most damaging and common of all, there are those who simply don’t mention it.

All of these distortions have robbed us of the most critical element people need

to understand a threat and adjust their actions accordingly: context. And make no mistake, when it comes to how much time we have, the data and the geological record are crystal clear.

For some badly-needed context, the last three years, likely for the first time in over 100,000 years, have averaged above the Paris Accords’ “do not cross” threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius of planetary warming. Only ten years ago, that was considered catastrophic, but now mainstream news tells us it’s just a number.

And with a bump coming next year from a growing, historic El Niño, likely to cause agricultural failure and food shortages and take us up to 1.7 degrees Celsius average warming, we are staring right at the vaunted 2°C number.

Why is 2°C so vaunted?

Let’s do the context thing again: 2°C will mean we have completely left the stable climate period known as the Holocene. This is the 11,000-year-old era that has given us large-scale crop and livestock agriculture, which in turn gave us cities and written language, modern science and medicine, warm beds and showers.

Before that, for hundreds of thousands of years in the Pleistocene era, humans (and our hominid ancestors) spent most of their time running from drought, fires, floods, extreme cold and heat, predators, and each other.

The population was likely no more than a few million people spread across the whole planet. At one point we may have almost gone extinct, with just 10,000 *Homo sapiens* clinging to life. But after the advent of the Holocene and its remarkably stable climate, the world population has risen to 8 billion in only 100 centuries.

That is what we stand to lose. In fact, if our institutions, news outlets, and elected officials continue to feed and water the oil company-conceived mega-falsehood that climate breakdown is something just “our great-grandkids need to worry about,” human civilization as we know it will collapse and billions could die.

And we’re not talking about the far distant future. We are talking about collapse within years, not centuries.

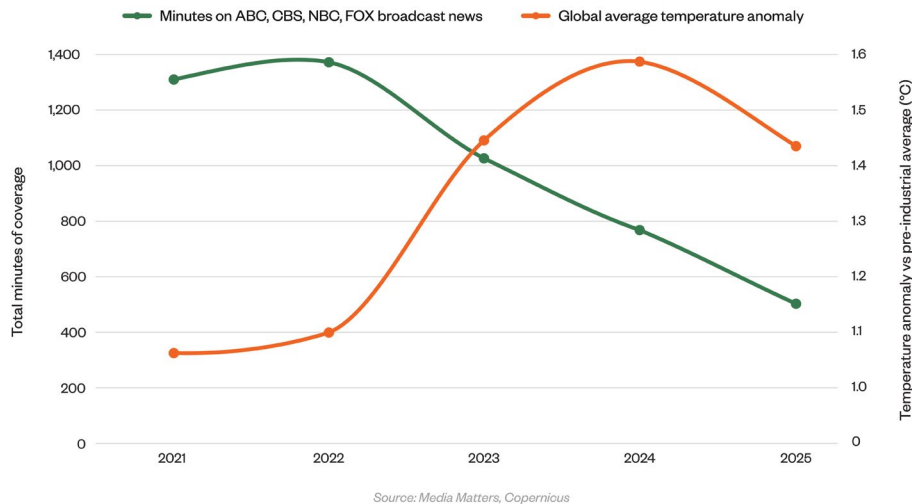
For real.

This is right around the corner. A joint study by the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries and the University of Exeter suggests that a 2°C temperature increase—which we are hurtling toward, with no plans of slowing down—could result in 2 billion deaths. And that is virtually the best-case scenario, as temperature rise predictions have worsened and put 1.5°C of warming out of reach. According to the United Nations, in order to limit warming to 2°C, we would need “emissions to drop around 35 per cent by 2035.” Even if “current national commitments” were fully implemented they “would cut emissions only 12 to 15 per cent by that date.”

The other scenario, which scientists now say “recent data aligns more closely with,” is 3°C of warming. At that level, the Exeter authors warn of up to 4 billion deaths. Four billion. That is half the planet. In 26 years or less. Even for those lucky enough to survive the worst weather events, life as we know it would cease to exist due to war, involuntary mass migration, and “catastrophic mortality events from disease, malnutrition, thirst and conflict.” According to the lead author of the report, there is no realistic plan in place to avoid this scenario.

How effective and finely tuned is this civilization-killing lie? Recently, out of curiosity, I asked the people at my nonprofit media studio, Yellow Dot, to create a graph with two data points: mentions of climate on U.S. broadcast news and recent spiking global warming numbers. And this is what they sent me:

BROADCAST TV COVERAGE VS GLOBAL TEMPERATURE ANOMALY



One look at the near perfect correlatory X at the center of this graph, and it is clear something about humankind and western civilization is profoundly and deeply broken. The revelation hit me as almost biological in its clarity: as a species, we are behaving like a pod of dolphins beaching themselves because some kind of brain parasite disrupted their echolocation. Our ability to share knowledge and understand the situation we're in has become utterly compromised, and deadly.

If so many people weren't dying and going to die, it would almost be impressive. The lie—and the financial markets, corporations, and billionaires that suckle on it—have created a vast, highly sensitive information system over the decades, consisting of careerists, company men, and people who fear for their jobs. That system has so internalized big capital's desires that it responds nearly instantly to any threat to big capital's hegemony. And remember, by "threats" we are referring to the reality of billions of deaths.

Lately, as extreme weather goes into uncharted territory, broadcast and much of online and print news has increasingly been framing each freakish weather disaster as a one-off event disconnected from one of the fastest and most deadly shifts in Earth's history.

For example, a recent segment on *NBC News* showed a montage of disaster scenes happening all at once across the United States, clip after clip in succession, while the reporter narrated:

This video appears to show a massive

funnel cloud in New Jersey, just outside New York City. Round after round of severe weather bearing down on millions across the northeast.

This time lapse shows the storm rolling through Manhattan, with multiple tornado warnings west of the Big Apple.

Floodwaters swamping streets and downpours across the tri-state area.

Flooding as far south as Maryland, with drivers navigating flooded streets in Ocean City.

In the South, Tropical Storm Bertha is looming in the Gulf. Double red flags in Panama City Beach warning beach-goers "stay out of the water." Bertha bringing dangerous rip currents and waves up to 11 feet.

Our [reporter] in St. Bernard Parish in Louisiana, with people getting sandbags to protect their homes from flooding.

Meanwhile in the west, monsoon rains inundating Prescott, Arizona.

And in western Colorado, heavy rain sending mud and debris onto Interstate 70, shutting it down.

It's remarkable for how it paints a picture of the scale of the crisis we're facing, without ever mentioning what the crisis is. The top comment on the YouTube video reads: "Tornadoes DO NOT sound normal in

New York. Very odd." If only someone at the news desk had bothered to explain why this is happening. And there are thousands of news pieces just like it.

Pieces like this put millions of people in active danger by robbing them of the key information they need to adjust their personal risk assessment. Namely, that because oil companies are flooding the planet with heat-trapping gases, our environment is getting more and more dangerous every day.

The most recent study of the earth's energy imbalance, or EEI—the difference between the heat the Earth absorbs from the Sun, and the amount it sends back out into space—shows 12 Hiroshima bombs of heat being trapped by greenhouse gases every single second of every day. As recently as 2020, it was only five or six atomic bombs' worth. That's how fast the crisis is accelerating, but you'd never know it by watching the TV news.

It's one thing to warn your teen daughter who is going into the city for the weekend not to take a ride from a stranger, and entirely another to fail to mention that the city she's going to is hosting a serial killer convention.

At this exact moment, oceans are hotter than they've ever been since record-keeping began, and air temperatures on average are warmer than they've been in around 100,000 years. We refer to humans of the Pleistocene as Hunter Gatherers and not farmers, fishermen, influencers, or IT consultants for a reason. Good luck taking corn to market in 135 degree Fahrenheit heat while dodging dry lightning with a saber-toothed tiger stalking you.

Back in 2015, the number chosen for preserving the Holocene and avoiding at least a billion people starving, dying in extreme heat, or in storms or fires was set at 1.5 degrees Celsius, through a mixture of science and political considerations, formalized in the Paris Climate Accord.

We are, once again for the people in the back, averaging over that number for the past three years. And never mind that several renowned scientists, like Michael Mann, think even 1.2°C of warming should have been a do-not-cross line.

Still have doubts? If you do, I don't blame you. We live in a consumer culture hammering us daily with triggering political proclamations, sales pitches, and clickbait designed to spike engagement



responses in the brain. “Immigrants are coming for your way of life!” “This new SUV is the best ever!” “Great White Shark Eats Porn Star!” Most of it is misleading, in one way or another, so there’s a natural tendency to assume that “Planet about to boil!” might be too.

But Big Oil and its PR agencies know this, and they’ve weaponized the healthy skepticism we’ve developed as a survival mechanism against those voices speaking the truth about the urgent state of the climate.

After all, who are you going to believe? The *New York Times*, an outlet famous for downplaying climate urgency, or some weird scientist saying crazy things? Even when a profession famous for dead-eyed, bottom-line risk assessment like insurance actuaries releases a statement about how serious the situation is, corporate news media turns it into what

people used to call a “below the fold story,” framing it as just another minor environmental item—not headline news. And when the *Guardian* actually did report on that study—you know, the one warning that half the planet’s population could likely die in 24 years—this is the headline they chose: “Global economy could face 50% loss in GDP between 2070 and 2090 from climate shocks, say actuaries.” They focused on the economic crash that may occur several decades *after* four billion people are already dead. If it were satire, it’d be too on the nose.

In service of the Great Lie, the government of the United Kingdom even tried to bury a climate report from its own intelligence agency before it was leaked. To my knowledge there aren’t

many spies being called tree huggers, unless they’re undercover of course. But the MI5 and MI6 are clear-eyed about the danger that’s coming. The report warned that “global ecosystem degradation and collapse threaten UK national security and prosperity.”

No one wants to eat a raw pumpkin. It looks like a Dr. Seuss character’s brain, is full of seeds, and has no real taste. But like with any good lie, when the right sugar, spices, buttery crust, and time in the oven is added, a pumpkin pie becomes a cherished classic.

The same thing happens with the climate lie. The financial markets, massive oil companies, the banks that finance them, the travel industry, car companies, your career and job security, the people you’re having dinner with who don’t want to be bummed out, all of these incentives and forces don’t want you to know you are eating a big, weird gourd.

And as long as we go with their mendacious flow, hundreds of millions, and then billions will die well before “Net Zero by 2050” or “our great grandkids’ future” arrive. Because we are out of time. And we need to get to work immediately. There are a million things to do. ✚

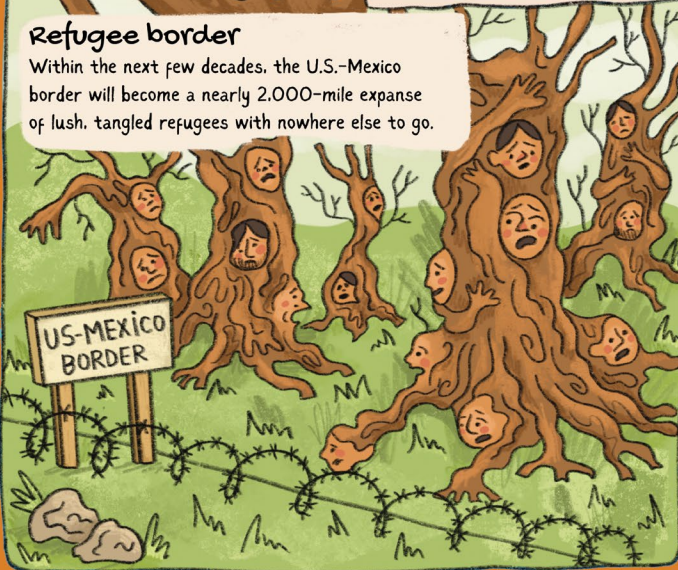
ADAM MCKAY is the Academy Award-winning director of *The Big Short*, *Vice*, and *Don’t Look Up* and the founder of Yellow Dot Studios.



Exciting New Biomes Brought to you by Climate Change

Refugee border

Within the next few decades, the U.S.-Mexico border will become a nearly 2,000-mile expanse of lush, tangled refugees with nowhere else to go.



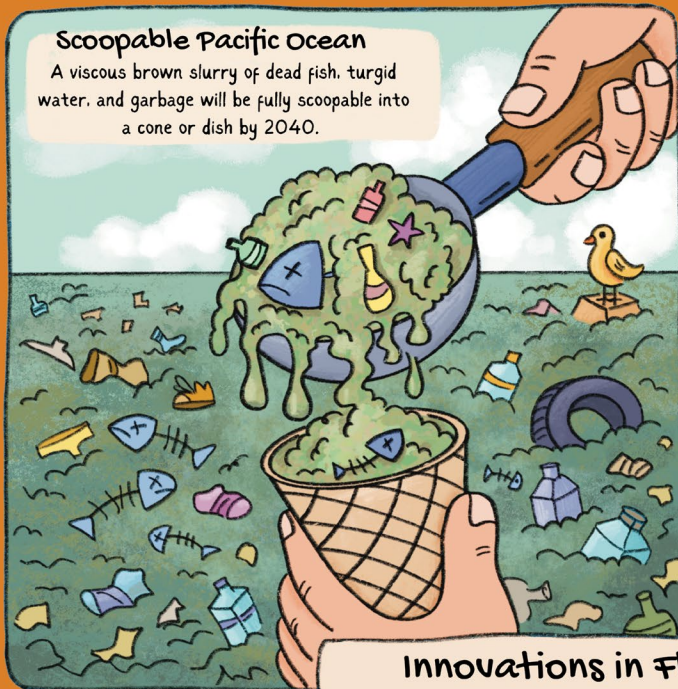
Laminate woods

Future folks who still have their limbs can enjoy peaceful strolls through hastily assembled faux forests of laminate and particleboard.



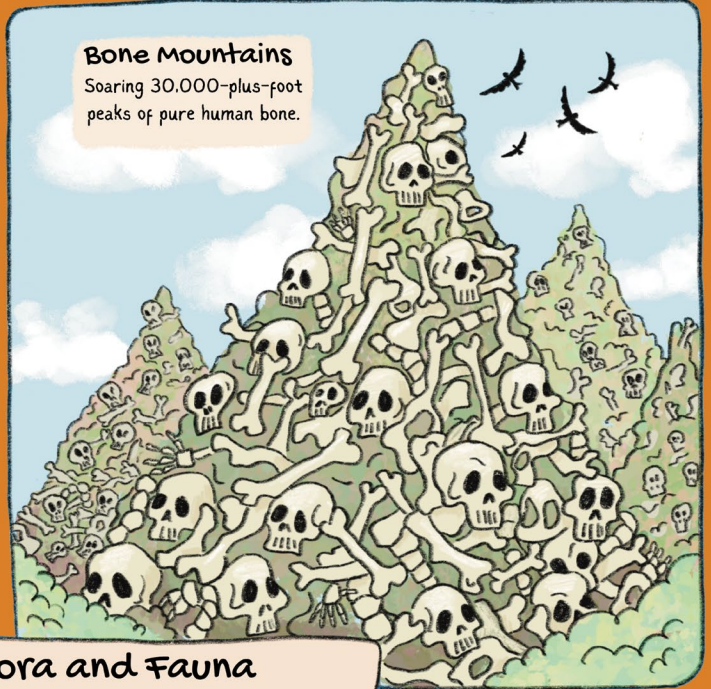
Scoopable Pacific Ocean

A viscous brown slurry of dead fish, turgid water, and garbage will be fully scoopable into a cone or dish by 2040.

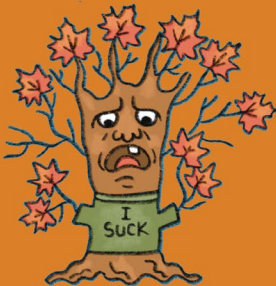


Bone Mountains

Soaring 30,000-plus-foot peaks of pure human bone.

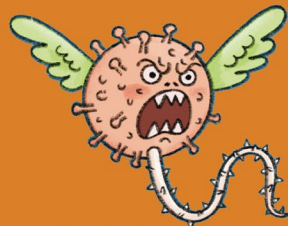


Innovations in Flora and Fauna



Self-loathing Tree

A red maple that evolved to hate itself.



White-tailed Measles

While declining vaccination rates and lab leaks will wreak some havoc, they'll also give us a measles virus with wings and a tail that can travel at speeds of up to 35 miles per hour.



Rabid Tesla

A botched software update in 2031 will lead to tens of thousands of highly contagious feral Teslas roaming U.S. cities.



Honey Bee with a gun

The bees had to save themselves somehow.



TICKET TO NOWHERE

BY EMILY TOPPING

WHEN ALICIA KUTCH HOPPED HER FIRST TRAIN IN May 2024, a southbound freighter out of Georgia, there were a few things she didn't know yet. First of all: where it was going. Second, that when you're riding the rails, it's best to travel light.

She and her new boyfriend Steve had been planning to hitchhike out of the state—to anywhere really—but after failing to catch a ride, they soon found themselves stuck on foot for nearly 16 miles through the forest, lugging heavy jugs of water and dog food. More than four hours from Atlanta as the sun waned, Steve decided on a new plan: “He said it was taking too long walking,” Alicia recalls. “He was right—the train was a whole lot faster.”

The couple peeled off the roadway and into a neighboring railyard, where a freighter had paused to reload. They ducked under a fence, lifting up the chainlink so their two dogs could crawl beneath it, then hoisted the animals and their packs into the first empty car they saw.

Alicia and Steve are still on the road two years later. A few vital items stick with them: “I got a Bible with me. I got my sleeping bag, because that’s a must. I got a tarp. I got dog food bowls,” she says. And since last summer, “I got my sister’s ashes.”

On that very first train ride, Alicia had only been hoping to get outside of Clark County. But ever since her beloved little sister died in July 2025, she’s been searching for a specific destination—one she won’t recognize until it’s directly ahead.

“That girl, she told me when we were teenagers that if she died, she wanted me to take her to Mount Everest,” Alicia says. “I figure one of these days I might get to see a set of mountains that maybe she went to when she was younger, or maybe even never been to. And that’s where she’ll feel at home.”

Until then, she’s going to keep riding the rails.

And so there ain’t no tellin’ where the wind will blow or what will come up out of the weeds [...]

Does the truth help to heal you when you hear it? Does a clear mind make a sick body well?

— Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*

The United States boasts the largest rail network in the world, spanning nearly 140,000 route miles from coast to coast. The tracks run through the blistering Mojave Desert to the northeastern outcrops of the Appalachian Mountains near the Canadian border, carrying crude oil and diesel, loose gravel and coal, heavy machinery, cars and trucks. And since their inception in the 1820s, these freight trains have also carried people, many of whom never purchased a ticket.

Hopping trains is an American pastime nearly as old as the railroads themselves. Immediately after the Civil War, poor soldiers and displaced workers began using the expanding rail network to search for seasonal work or to travel back home. For many, the homes they returned to no longer existed, and the only option was to keep moving—creating a new and nomadic population that gravely concerned the country’s middle class.

“Even in a nation where over half the population changed residences every ten years, such extreme mobility caused alarm,” writes historian Todd DePastino in *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America*. It wasn’t so much the lack of permanent housing or steady work that worried the masses, considering most Americans were self-employed as farmers or tradesmen. Rather:



A southbound “junk train” rides near Bear Mountain, New York. Among train-hoppers, “riding junk” refers to mixed-freight trains that carry an assortment of different car types and lower-priority cargo; their schedules are typically less predictable, but can make for a more comfortable ride. (Photo: Lou Cranston, @anyfoolltellya)

...the tramp’s ‘homelessness’ denoted a broader-based moral crisis of domesticity, a crisis of men, as one religious journal put it, ‘let loose from all the habits of domestic life, wandering about without aim or home.’

As 19th-century Baptist minister and economist Francis Wayland wrote, “The strength and sacredness of family ties, the love of mother or wife, or child, have often restrained, and sometimes reclaimed a hardened criminal [...] But this possible refuge of respectability is wanting to the tramp.”

The concept of homelessness, then, first emerged in America out of a fear of what a migratory person represented. Excluded from the confines of domestic life, the hobo became more than a description of a particular kind of worker, but an American character: rootless and self-reliant, suspicious of authority and perpetually looking toward the horizon.

Beyond the Reconstruction Era, throughout each subsequent period of economic downturn—and even during more fruitful times—Americans of various classes continued to hop freight trains in search of new dawn. Their pursuit wasn’t always economic. As Nels Anderson, an early American sociologist, wrote in his 1923 book *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man*:

From the records and observations of a great many men, the reasons why men leave home seem to fall under several heads: (a) seasonal work and unemployment, (b) industrial inade-

quacy, (c) defects of personality, (d) crises in the life of the person, (e) racial or national discrimination, and (f) wanderlust.

It is the mythology of this final reason that has persisted most strongly. The legend of the rails seeped into American music and literature: it was inside those rumbling boxcars that Woody Guthrie learned to play the blues, as immortalized in his 1943 autobiography *Bound for Glory*; where, shoulder to shoulder with migrant workers, he developed the politics that led him to scrawl “THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS” across his guitar. It was inside a Santa Barbara-bound train that Jack Kerouac opened his semi-autobiographical novel *The Dharma Bums*, laying the groundwork for a Beat generation who rejected materialism and embraced transience.

Later, in a 1960 magazine article titled “The Vanishing American Hobo,” Kerouac mourned that increased police surveillance was suffocating the lifestyle: “In America camping is considered a healthy sport for Boy Scouts but a crime for mature men who have made it their vocation.”

But the “American Hobo” never truly vanished. There are still people today who risk injury and arrest to climb aboard freight trains, still moving through the country in cars designed to carry things rather than people. Some are unhoused; others have white-collar jobs and apartments waiting for their return. What connects them is not necessarily why they leave, or even where they are going. It is the choice—or, sometimes, the necessity—of

moving through America on their own terms, seeking a form of agency in a country that has all but stripped that luxury from most of us.

And while some practices of this 150-plus-year-old-tradition have changed, one core tenet has survived: the idea that there are things you can learn on the rails that cannot be learned anywhere else.

Here, one was not a productive unit—hardly a part of the economy at all, in fact—and life was more attuned to watching, thinking, and talking.

— Ted Conover, *Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America's Hoboes*

There's nothing nobler than to put up with a few inconveniences like snakes and dust for the sake of absolute freedom.

— Jack Kerouac, "The Vanishing American Hobo" (1960)

LOU CRANSTON FIRST LEARNED TO RIDE TRAINS IN Olympia, Washington at 19 years old. As a sophomore at one of the city's local universities, Lou had recently become friends with a guy he viewed as somewhat of "a pseudo-older brother figure": a fellow musician, skateboarder, punk.

"He was just someone I thought was really cool," Lou says. So when the teenager first heard about people train-hopping in the area and decided to learn, he knew exactly who to ask. Within a week, Lou's friend handed him a thick stack of papers known as the "CCG," or Crew Change Guide.

In an era where almost nothing is spared from overexposure, it seems near-miraculous that the Crew Change Guide has remained sacred since its inception. The pamphlet of loose, hand-scanned documents has been passed between generations of train-hoppers for nearly 40 years, acting as the closest thing available to an official textbook on illicit rail-riding. It can't be found online; instead, someone must trust you enough to hand you a physical copy. (And sure, anything can be found online—but distributing the CCG on the internet almost always leads to swift banishment, blocking, and a concerted group effort among veteran riders to maintain the sanctity of the text. As soon as a link pops up, it is quickly buried in a never-ending game of poser-vagabond whack-a-mole.) The fact that it has remained obscured from the public for four decades almost leads one to believe that the secrecy might last forever.

The underground handbook contains "dense walls of highly acronymized text in a miniature nine-point font," writes Jeremiah David in the *Paris Review*, providing detailed maps of rail yards, schedules, security locations, and tips for where to hide during a train crew's shift change, down to "which individual bush or abandoned building you want to hide behind."

Pre-internet, the CCG acted as a crucial kind of bible for train-hoppers. Today, a number of its tips could likely be sourced elsewhere, but for those who wish to follow in the footsteps of those who came before them, holding a copy is essential. Hopping freight trains may be an act of legal deviance, but for the many devoted, it is more akin to a cultural practice, one where you must pay respect to your ancestors.

One of those founding fathers is the author of the Crew Change Guide. According to David:

The true identity of its author, a reclusive seventy-six-year-old Vietnam veteran known only as Train Doc, is as fiercely protected as the Guide itself. Train Doc disguised his voice for his sole interview, and of the three people I've spoken to who claimed to know him, none agreed to go on the record. The most consistent report about him is that he is remarkably litigious—he's purported to threaten anyone and everyone who uploads the Guide to the internet with copyright infringement.

True or not, the document remains conspicuously absent online. It exists only in the physical form, and this scarcity has made the Guide a sacred writ to train-hopping circles across the country.

After poring over the pages during his summer break in 2012, awe-struck, Lou and two friends chose a balmy July evening to embark on their first journey, starting in Portland, Oregon: a city whose railways have been extensively mapped by previous riders. The CCG told them where to hop on, including which points of the tracks were least patrolled by security. Choosing the right moment to leap, though, was a little more difficult. In the pitch black, Lou and his friends crouched for several hours near the skeleton of Portland's Steel Bridge, a towering overpass that looms over the Willamette River and splits the city in half.

"The intel we'd been given was that [the train] comes around, crosses the river and slows down just enough on this S curve that you can hop on," Lou says. "And all three of us, never having done it before, successfully got into a gondola as it rode past."



Alicia, Steve, and the couple's two dogs, Pumpkin and Clifford, have traveled all across the country by train, including a trip to Washington D.C.

He still remembers the feeling of successfully landing inside, and a rush of joyous dizziness washing over his chest for the first time.

Now in his mid-30s, Lou is now a licensed therapist living on the East Coast. He spends his Mondays to Fridays counseling clients through issues of anxiety and depression, substance abuse and relationship struggles. And still, multiple times a year, whenever possible, he rides trains. It's not something Lou has ever shared with his parents or siblings, and certainly not his clients. But in many ways, he says this hidden aspect of his life has allowed him to see the world in a more measured way.

"I find in my work, this is something people really, really struggle with: this idea of control. People crave routine," Lou says. But on the railways, he says, it's the opposite: "I may be *trying* to go to this place, and I'll *probably* get there when I get there. Maybe I'll need to hitchhike, or find somewhere else to sleep, et cetera."

Several times since that initial Pacific Northwest trip, Lou has hopped on a southbound train wearing only a backpack, hoping it's headed toward New York City—though it could be Philadelphia, or Florida for all he knows.



26-year-old Cleft Twain—a pseudonym—uses a paint marker to tag a train in the New Orleans railyard in June 2026.

Of course, one could argue there are surely other methods of expanding your mindset that don't involve an inherent risk of losing a limb. A few years ago, Lou says he mentioned his train-hopping proclivities to his own therapist, to which the older practitioner widened his eyes: "He said, 'Oh I had a friend in high school who did that. He died,'" Lou recalls. Not in a judgemental way, just a knee-jerk reaction: *the one thing I know about this is that it kills people*.

And it can; just last summer, in June of 2025, a 24-year-old man riding a freight train toward Utah alongside his girlfriend was killed after accidentally falling from the boxcar. In 2017, a popular YouTuber named James "Stobe the Hobo" Stobie died in an apparent train-hopping accident—the same year railroad trespassing fatalities in the U.S. reached a 10-year high. According to the Federal Railroad Administration, yearly "injuries and deaths related to tracks and trains" have been steadily climbing since 2014.

But Lou says his "double life" has nothing to do with an impulse to flirt with death. Rather, he sees himself as walking in the footsteps of giants.

"It's this thing that is a hundred-year-old tradition that's tied to poetry and politics and philosophy... it's intrinsically tied to the history and development of America as a country," he says. "When you're out there, you can truly feel the weight of all these souls that came before you." And because of Lou, others have come after too.

*Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waitin' for a train
When I was feelin' near as faded as my jeans,
Bobby thumbed a diesel down, just before it rained
That rode us all the way in to New Orleans.*
— Janis Joplin, "Bobby McGee" 1971

WHEN I MET 26-YEAR-OLD CLEFT AT THE COUNTER of a dive bar in the St. Roch neighborhood of New Orleans, just a few blocks from the train yard that had carried him across multiple states to get here, I felt a little relieved that he seemed nervous too. It's always a gamble meeting someone from the internet.

A few weeks before, Cleft had responded to a post I'd made in the Reddit group "r/vagabond" looking to speak with people about their experiences train-hopping. Some of the replies were combative: people warned that the forum was full of yuppie influencers who'd never actually hopped freights, and if they had, it was just for show; others insisted that I ignore the input from junkies who couldn't be trusted to speak for the subculture. I was intrigued by the hostility: clearly, there were arguments about who counted as a real vagabond.

Among the riders I spoke with, though, the dividing line was less ideological than practical. Alicia, who has been unhoused and continuously riding the rails for the past two years, has no problem with people hopping trains just for fun. What worries her are the people who broadcast themselves taking unnecessary risks—walking atop moving trains, for instance—which she worries may encourage young riders to do the same. There's also the fear of drawing attention from the railroad authorities: "The old school people, they keep telling the young ones: 'you'll make it harder!'" she says. "They're going to crack down and make it so no one can ride."

Cleft doesn't spend much time debating the qualifications of the subculture, but he is a thorough researcher, scouring the internet for advice, routes, and all possible avenues of preparation before a trip. That's how he'd come across my call for sources—and it just so happened, he and Lou had a trip planned down to the Big Easy the following month.

The pair first met through the punk scene in their small New England town a few years ago, becoming close after Cleft asked for advice on hopping his first train. Lou offered to demonstrate in-person; then he passed along a copy of the Crew Change Guide, just like someone had done for him in Olympia all those years ago.

Cleft's approach to train-hopping is less outlaw bravado than careful study. When he first emailed me, he signed the message "c. twain"—a pseudonym, I later learned, for "cleft twain," the name of a character he'd invented years earlier in a comic strip



Two trains pass each other in central Massachusetts. Lou documents his journeys on 35mm film and in lyrics written for his band, an Americana folk group in which he sings and plays guitar. (Photo: Lou Cranston, @anyfoolltellya)

during his two-year stint in college studying art. C. Twain, a hapless pigeon learning to navigate the world, now serves as Cleft's graffiti tag. After we ducked underneath the chain-link fence into the New Orleans railyard, Cleft pulled a paint marker from his pocket and branded one of the cars with a simple scrawl.

As we navigated deeper into the railyard, Cleft's head on a swivel in case of approaching security guards, he pointed out the features of various cars: which ones you could sleep in, which ones you only entered in an emergency, since the gaps in the floor were wide enough to fall through. We were trespassing, of course, but he moved through the space with the familiarity of someone showing a friend their neighborhood.

For all the mythology surrounding train-hopping, much of the experience is considerably less cinematic. There are long stretches of waiting, sleeping, and watching the landscape crawl past. And much of the skill involved has less to do with daredevilry than with learning how to read the enormous transportation system around you without being noticed by the people operating it.

Lou and Cleft bring portable radio scanners with them, which allow them to listen in on the railroad's own communications. (Alicia, meanwhile, says that she and her boyfriend are saving up to buy one.) Dispatchers and train crews use designated radio frequencies to communicate about the movement of trains, their planned stops, and what is happening along the line. For riders, listening in provides a window into the machinery carrying them across the country, and at times, acts as a warning system.

A conductor might mention seeing someone riding in one of the cars, or a crew member might report a suspicious person

to another train employee. When that happens, the riders know they've been spotted—and that their window to get off may be closing.

The railroad has another set of eyes watching its trains, too. These are people who spend their free time doing almost exactly the opposite of what train-hoppers do: standing beside the tracks and watching trains pass them by. Known as trainspotters or railfans, they photograph locomotives, collect their serial numbers, and track the movements of particular trains. One of the most famous modern examples is Francis Bourgeois, a British internet personality whose ecstatic videos of trainspotting have turned an otherwise obscure hobby into a social-media spectacle.

Sometimes, it's these observers—armed with binoculars and a dedication to preserving the integrity of the American railways—who report the stowaways. (The dichotomy is a little funny: two groups of train enthusiasts, each expressing their passion in very different ways—the anarchists vs. the narcs.)

Once, Cleft and a friend were riding past a yard when they accidentally made eye contact with a railfan standing at a nearby vantage point.

"Then the train stopped again a little bit down the line, and eventually the conductor walked back and yelled to us, 'Hey, you guys still back here?'" he recalls. Their hearts were pounding.

Then the conductor threw a curveball: "I'm glad the cops didn't get you guys," he laughed, peeking his head around the boxcar to the spot where both of the young men lay crouched. "Someone saw you when we were leaving the rail yard and they called the police, and the police called me."

For some reason, the conductor had lied to the cops on the phone, saying it looked like the stowaways were already gone. “It was really incredible. I mean, we were two random dudes wearing face masks—he was probably nervous, but he saved our asses,” Cleft says.

The travelers profusely thanked their unlikely ally, then napped all the way to New York.

TRAIN-HOPPING VIOLATES PLENTY OF ACTUAL LAWS, trespassing chief among them. But in a society organized around the expectation that every person, in every moment of their life, must be economically useful, simply opting out can feel like the greater transgression. On the rails, there is nowhere to clock in, nothing to buy, and often nothing to do for hours but watch the landscape pass by. You surrender control over when you will arrive and sometimes where you are going at all. The danger is only part of the bargain. For the people who keep climbing aboard, the risk is worth those stretches of time in which they cease to be workers, tenants, customers, or anything else useful to the machinery around them. For a few hours, they exist, just on the periphery, simply moving through the world.

*When I die, oh bury me deep
Down at the end of old Chestnut Street
So I can hear old Number Nine
As she comes rolling by
— Elizabeth Cotten*

Unlike other riders, Alicia Kutch is not someone who can simply go home when a trip is over. The railroad is a way to travel the country—her dream since childhood—but it is also one of the few ways she has found to keep moving through it. After a car accident left her knee permanently injured a few years ago, she was forced to quit her job, and became homeless soon after.

Alicia, however, is adamant that she, too, chose the road. She likes being in motion, and after a childhood marked by constant upheaval and loss, settling down feels more like confinement.

The first time we spoke on the phone, the 42-year-old was sitting in a clearing in the woods outside of Nashville. While her boyfriend Steve set up their tent, she tossed sticks for their two dogs, Pumpkin and Clifford. The couple typically sets up camp for just a few days at a time, moving along once they realize someone in the area has spotted them. It can be difficult constantly scouting new, safe locations to sleep, but Alicia prefers it to the alternative.

“Living stationary and being homeless in that situation, doing the same thing day in, day out, seeing the same people over and over in the same environment, you start losing hope,” she explained. “But the moment you start traveling, you realize there are some really nice people out there.”

With anti-homeless sentiment growing across the country, Alicia has a theory that strangers tend to be kinder to new faces they’ve never seen before, as opposed to the unhoused people who remain visible on the same street corners for months or years at a time. “They get tired of helping the same people over and over, and I would too,” she says. While passing through small towns, she’s careful not to wear out her welcome.

It makes sense to be wary, as a wave of new laws targeting homeless people are now being implemented across the South. In Tennessee, where Alicia was traveling, unauthorized sleeping or camping on public property can carry a felony charge. Another state law now allows for the use of deadly force to prevent property damage or trespassing—which advocates say will disproportionately be used to target homeless people.

It was two years on the rails and only a few days into Tennessee when Alicia found herself face down on the side of a freeway outside Nashville, sobbing as a police officer aimed his gun at her dog’s head.

“I’ll fucking shoot,” the officer threatened. “Let go of the leash now!”

Steve was crouched beside her, trying to pry the dog’s collar from her grip. One of her arms was pinned beneath her body and the other was held behind her back. Several feet away, the cardboard sign that had started the whole encounter lay crumpled in the grass: *NEED \$5 FOR A PRE-ROLL*, it read.

It wasn’t the reference to weed that had initially caught the officer’s attention. A few minutes earlier, he had pulled over to tell Steve he was standing too close to traffic while panhandling. In the body-camera footage I obtained, Steve agreed to move along, and the conversation initially appeared cordial—but when Steve said he didn’t have any ID, the encounter escalated.

That’s when Alicia approached, holding the couple’s two dogs on leashes, and offered to show a photograph of Steve’s driver’s license on her phone.

“Back the fuck up,” the officer said as she got closer.

“Excuse me; [the dog] was just trying to say hi to you,” Alicia replied, stepping backward. Their pets had come to associate police uniforms with food, she says, after several sympathetic officers had given them treats over the years. Even now, they were silent and wagging their tails.

A second officer approached, again telling Alicia to “back the fuck up.” Visibly upset, she cried out: “I’m not doing anything!”

The cop lunged at her. He grabbed Alicia and pulled her to the ground, gripping her arms while shoving her down in the grass. Pumpkin, a black retriever mix, cowered beneath her, barking at the officers as they continued to scream.

“I’ll shoot that fucking dog!” the officer yelled. He drew his gun, pointing it first at Alicia’s back and then at Pumpkin. The dog turned and bit the officer on the elbow.

“Let go of the fucking dog!”

“Please don’t hurt him,” Alicia sobbed.

Eventually, the officer holstered his weapon. Alicia and Steve were handcuffed and taken to jail; the dogs were taken to the pound. She was charged with several offenses, including aggravated assault and reckless endangerment involving a deadly weapon—the alleged weapon being Pumpkin. A local mugshot page misspelled her name when it posted her booking photograph online.

Alicia was released the next morning, while Steve remained in jail for two weeks. He eventually took a plea deal, which meant accepting charges of aggravated assault against an officer—despite the fact the video footage fails to show him so much as touching the cop. Alicia’s charges were dropped.

But she couldn’t simply leave Tennessee and return to the life she’d been living before. First, she needed to raise \$200 to get the dogs out of the pound, then stay in the area until Steve



Dusk falls on the high desert somewhere between Elko and Winnemucca, Nevada, on the Overland Route. This rail line travels from northern California to Chicago, and is now owned entirely by Union Pacific. (Photo: Lou Cranston, @anyfoolltellya)

was released. All the while, she could be arrested again for sleeping outside.

For the first time in what felt like forever, Alicia was trapped in one place. Forget the sleeping outside, the foraging mushrooms, the scouting for small-town diners that hadn't yet wised up and put duct tape over their outlets so homeless people can't charge their phones; she could handle all of that. But come nightfall, hearing the freight trains pass by her tent—knowing that freedom was as close as a sprint down to the tracks, a toss of her bag onto the platform and the dogs after it—*that* was a sentence worse than torture. She was now something even scarier than alone: stuck still.

SITTING BY THE RIVER THAT NIGHT, ALICIA RETURNED TO a familiar place in her memory: the year leading up to her sister's death.

It was the spring of 2025 when Alicia's little sister called and pleaded for her to come visit Christiansburg, Virginia. She didn't sound well. Alicia wanted to go, but was unsure of the route to get there. "We're kind of new to this, we sort of end up wherever," she recalls saying on the phone. "We'll try."

But they missed their stop: by the time the couple got off the train, they were in Roanoke, about 30 miles too far. Alicia soon learned that after that desperate phone call, her sister had gotten into her car—with a suspended license—and started driving toward them anyway. She was arrested for going the wrong way down a road and spent several weeks in jail, then a psychiatric facility. Shortly after, she died by suicide.

Alicia never saw her again. It is one of several heartbreaks that come to her at times like this, evenings that are too quiet and too still, with nowhere to go but backwards in memory.

So two weeks later, when Steve was finally released from jail, they did what they had been trying to do all along: they got back on a train.

The couple made their way north toward Virginia, hoping to find better resources for their dogs and a veterinarian who could treat them. Something in the river water in Nashville had given Pumpkin an eye infection, and both dogs were dealing with kennel cough after their night in the pound. Eventually they hopped off in a small town in the New River Valley, nestled between the Appalachian and Blue Ridge Mountains.

Only after they had set up camp did she realize where they were. This was Christiansburg, Virginia—the last place her sister lived, and the train stop she missed. After envisioning these streets countless times, Alicia says, imagining an alternate reality where she'd known the way, she had walked right into town, purely by accident.

"I laughed when I got here. I looked at my bag and I said, 'I'm sorry, I made it here two years too late,'" she says.

"We've been here for only a few nights now, and it's just a really pretty area. I can't see why she was drawn to this place."

It wasn't Mount Everest, or the mountains she'd spent a year imagining might someday feel like the perfect resting place for the little silver vial in her bag. But maybe neither of them were much for resting. Soon enough, Alicia would say goodbye to this town too, and she'd be bringing her sister along for the ride. ✚



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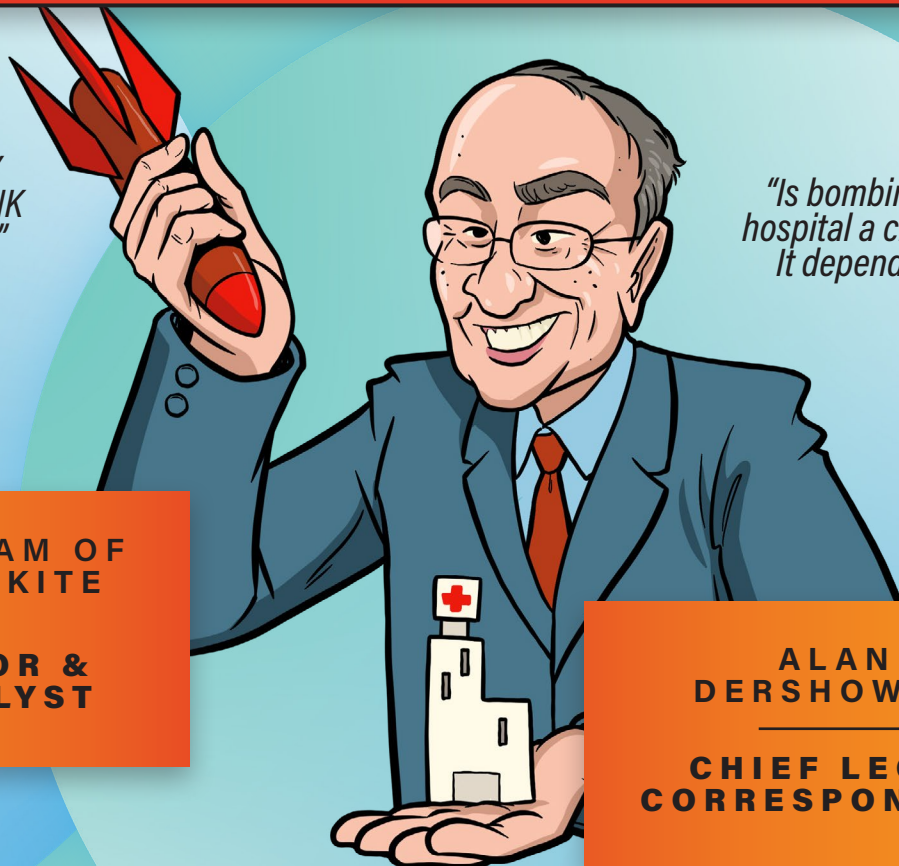
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AN AI HOLOGRAM OF
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"Is bombing a
hospital a crime?
It depends!"

ALAN
DERSHOWITZ

CHIEF LEGAL
CORRESPONDENT

60 SECONDS



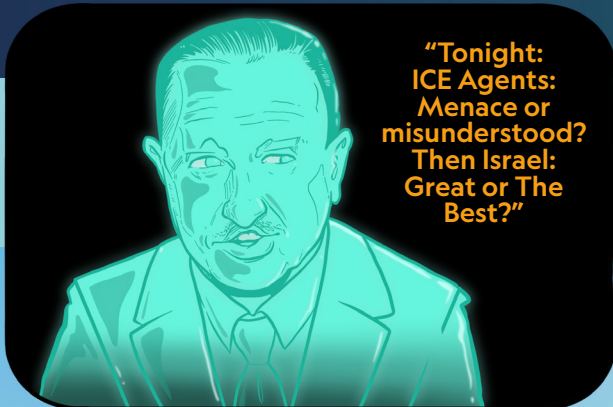
TONY DOKOUPIL drinks whiskey and confronts distinguished Black intellectuals.

FACE THE NATION



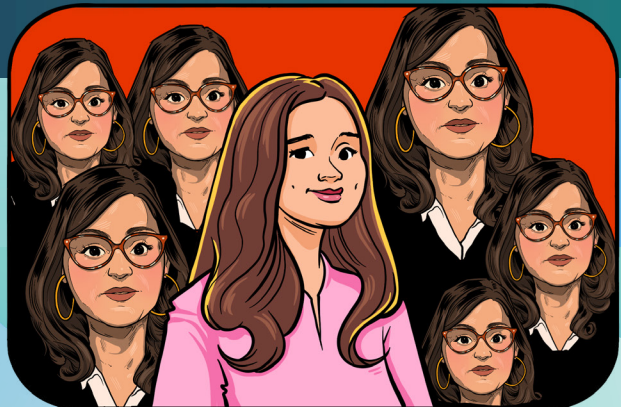
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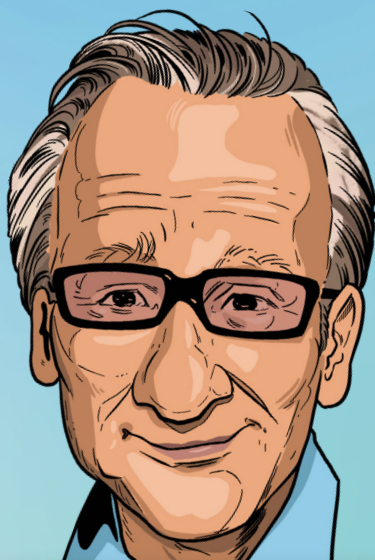


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BILL MAHER
MISCELLANEOUS NOISE

"Is it just me, or is there a woke jihad against heterosexuality?"

JOE ROGAN
CHIEF SCIENCE
CORRESPONDENT



THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE INVISIBLE HAND

BY MAX FROM UNF*CKING THE REPUBLIC



MORE THAN 20 YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH, WE'RE still living in the neoliberal world Milton Friedman made.

The arc of neoliberalism begins in 1947, gathers steam in the 1970s, and reaches its zenith in the 1990s before breaking into a million pieces and forever out of the control of its progenitors.

The story of Milton Friedman rises and falls along with it, and it's a complicated one of ego, ambition, and academic notoriety; a confluence of factors and foibles that came to define the modern economic age.

Much of what plagues our society today and fueled the rise of Donald Trump can be traced to the theories of two giants in the field of economics, the so-called "dismal science"—Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. They actually didn't refer to themselves as neoliberals, preferring the term "neoclassical liberals." A difference without a distinction, perhaps.

It's impossible to separate Friedman from his early mentor and supporter Hayek. Their mentor-mentee relationship evolved over time to a respectful intellectual rivalry, but they would be forever linked through the economic society Hayek formed and Friedman later helmed.

Moreover, it's equally impossible to separate either of them from their chosen antagonist, John Maynard Keynes—the man they supplanted in the halls of academia and power.

But Friedman's penchant for media, outsized personality, and army of disciples have made him the avatar of neoliberalism, the economic theory that dominated U.S. politics for the past half century.

To wit, in a *New York Times* eulogy penned shortly after Friedman passed away, former Treasury Secretary Larry Summers famously offered this opening salvo:

If John Maynard Keynes was the most influential economist of the first half of the 20th century, then Milton Friedman was the most influential economist of the second half. Not so long ago, we were all Keynesians. ("I am a Keynesian," Richard Nixon famously said in 1971.) Equally, any honest Democrat will admit that we are now all Friedmanites.

For better or worse, truer words may never have been spoken.

THE BOY FROM RAHWAY TAKES OVER CHICAGO

Born in Brooklyn on July 31, 1912, to Jenő and Sára Friedman—Jewish immigrants from Carpatho-Ruthenia who had arrived in America with little more than the clothes on their backs—Milton Friedman grew up in Rahway, New Jersey, in a household where financial hardship was not an abstraction. His father died in 1927 during Milton's senior year of high school, leaving the family to navigate the Depression on a seamstress's income. (Friedman graduated high school at 16.)

It was clear from an early age that Friedman had a keen mind. He earned a competitive scholarship to Rutgers, intending to become an actuary before economics seduced him away from pure mathematics. He went to the University of Chicago in 1932, then to Columbia on a fellowship, then back to Chicago, where

he would remain, intellectually if not always physically, for the rest of his career.

From the start, Chicago's economics department had a chip on its shoulder the size of the Midwest. Harvard had its prestige. The London School of Economics had its lineage. Chicago had its ambition—and a foundational conviction that economics was not philosophy, not art, not politics. It was science. Hard, mathematical, empirically rigorous science. Johan Van Overtveldt, author of *The Chicago School*, describes the department's governing characteristics as "a strong work ethic, an unshakable belief in economics as a true science, academic excellence as the sole criterion for advancement, an intense debating culture focused on sharpening the critical mind, and the University of Chicago's two-dimensional isolation."

Removed from the policy groupthink of Washington, insulated from the social pressure of the East Coast establishment, Chicago's economists developed what amounted to a self-contained intellectual universe. They called their arguments "bullfights." They encouraged dissent. And in that crucible, they forged a particular kind of certainty—the kind that comes not from comfort but from endless combat with every counterargument until only one truth remained standing.

That truth, increasingly, was Milton Friedman's.

A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF ECONOMICS

Before we go further, a brief but essential detour into the history of the economic discipline, and into terminology—because certain labels tend to be misconstrued when viewed through modern ideological lenses.

Classical economics is the foundation constructed by noted Enlightenment-era political and economic theorists, such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Jeremy Bentham, and Cesare Beccaria, who provided foundational elements of market theories and economic measurements that persist to this day. One of the earliest convictions among the classical economists was that markets, left alone, allocate resources efficiently through price signals and competition. Thus the introduction of *laissez-faire* capitalism, a concept that is either celebrated or maligned depending upon one's political lens.

Importantly, these early philosophers were observing pre-industrial, agrarian economies. Industrialization created new economic and political laboratories that became increasingly interconnected through transportation and trade, providing fertile ground for a new generation of economists to build on the classical theories. Chief among them, of course, is Karl Marx, who both observed and projected the dangers of industrialization on the capitalist system and how it would lead to the social stratification and economic dislocation of the working class.

Neoclassical economics is the methodological revolution that began around the 1870s, as figures such as William Jevons, Léon Walras, and Alfred Marshall built on the work of their Classical predecessors. They formalized economics into mathematics—marginal utility, supply and demand curves, equilibrium theory.

As the Great Depression and the New Deal era unfolded, progressive economic policy began to revolve around John Maynard Keynes, who laid the foundation for the next era in his



Friedman accepts the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Ronald Reagan, 1988

seminal work *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, published in 1936. Keynes, the titan of the discipline for most of the 20th century, was working within a neoclassical framework even as he constantly challenged its policy conclusions. He believed capitalism could be reformed and integrated with features of social democracy and opened the door to the idea that government stimulus could alternately mitigate the impact of down cycles and cool periods of inflation.

It was Keynes who made the invisible hand visible, and argued that the hand belonged to the government—and it was this idea that Friedman would spend his life opposing.

What we know today as “neoliberalism” is where the clean academic narrative gets complicated. The term has been so relentlessly contested—including, as noted, by Friedman himself—that its meaning has been deliberately obscured. But it has a precise historical definition: the post-World War II project of reconstructing market order through the active use of state power.

In an interview for the book *Economics and the Left*, South Korean economist Ha-Joon Chang notes: “These days, Hayek is considered an eccentric European version of Milton Friedman, but Hayek’s theory—that is, Austrian economics—is very different from Friedman’s neoclassical theory.” Friedman was a mathematician’s economist. His models demanded quantifiable inputs and produced quantifiable outputs. Hayek was something else entirely—a social philosopher whose economics were inseparable from a broader vision of Western civilization, culture, and what he believed to be the organic superiority of Christian liberal society.

It is Hayek’s framework, not Friedman’s, that directly nourishes the xenophobic, white nationalist strand of contemporary libertarianism. Quinn Slobodian’s recent book *Hayek’s Bastards* traces precisely how those racial and civilizational anxieties became fused to free market doctrine—a lineage that runs from Mont Pèlerin through the Heritage Foundation through to the ideological infrastructure of the contemporary far right.

Friedman was not that. This distinction is critical, and this inquiry would be dishonest to collapse it. Milton Friedman was seemingly not a racist, although he was oblivious to the reality of how racial oppression works. He advocated for the abolition

of the welfare state because he believed the free market would provide for the impoverished. He was, by all accounts, a devoted husband to Rose Director Friedman—an accomplished economist in her own right and the older sister of Aaron Director, one of Friedman’s closest collaborators at Chicago—and a generous intellectual sparring partner who made himself available to students and peers alike.

He was a small man, physically, who commanded a room through the sheer velocity of his mind. He was funny. He was warm. And he was, in the most complete sense of the word, wrong.

THE COUNTER-REVOLUTION CONVENES

In April 1947, Friedrich Hayek convened 39 economists, philosophers, and historians at a hotel on Mont Pèlerin, a Swiss mountain overlooking Lake Geneva. Among them: Milton Friedman, Karl Popper, Ludwig von Mises, and George Stigler. The Mont Pèlerin Society, as they named it, was not a think tank. It was a counter-revolution in embryo—a network of ideological allies who shared a conviction that Western liberalism was under existential threat from collectivism, central planning, and the creeping influence of Keynesian thought.

Friedman later recalled that the inaugural meeting was “thrilling,” as it was his first time out of the country and meeting other economists from around the world. Over the following four decades, Mont Pèlerin alumni would seed their ideas into governments, universities, and media institutions across the globe—funding think tanks, training economists, and building the institutional infrastructure that would eventually deliver the Reagan Revolution, Thatcherism, and the structural adjustment programs of the IMF.

The Society’s self-described purpose was to defend “freedom.” But as Van Overtveldt notes, the foundational assumption beneath every Chicago model was already in place:

The basic assumption of neoclassical economic theory is the proposition that in a competitive market environment, individuals and corporations pursuing their own self interests necessarily promote the best interest of society as a whole.

This concept haunts us to this day.

Back at the University of Chicago, Friedman began his long collaboration with economic historian Anna Schwartz at the National Bureau of Economic Research. It was here that he worked out the ideas that would eventually reframe post-war economics: the permanent income hypothesis, the natural rate of unemployment, and above all, monetarism.

Permanent Income challenged the longheld Keynesian notion that the rate of consumption—literally, how much stuff people buy—was correlated to one’s current financial position. Friedman suggested, instead, that consumption was a reflection of expected *future* income. This may sound like a subtle distinction, but it’s one of the underpinnings of “trickle down” economics, because policymakers extrapolated this to mean that reducing taxes adds to future income expectations, thereby spurring consumer spending.

His concept of a “natural” rate of unemployment is worthy

of its own treatise, and in fact has been the subject of debate in economic and policy circles since Friedman introduced it in his landmark 1968 presidential address to the American Economic Association.

The argument was devastating to the Keynesian consensus. According to Friedman, there is a “natural rate” of unemployment determined by real structural factors—labor market frictions, skills mismatches, information gaps, regulatory barriers—and monetary policy cannot push unemployment below that rate permanently. If you try, you won’t get lower unemployment; you get accelerating inflation. And because workers eventually figure out they’re being paid in dollars that are increasingly less valuable, they demand higher wages, thus wiping out any employment gains. Nearly six decades after Friedman’s address, this basic concept still drives Federal Reserve policy, which revolves around the so-called “dual mandate” of maximum employment and price stability.

Here’s how this translates into our everyday lives. The Federal Reserve and all government agencies with budgetary responsibility buy into the notion that there is a magic equilibrium of employment; that the perfect or “natural” rate is somewhere between 4.5 and 6 percent unemployment. In other words, both parties ascribe to the notion that a significant number of Americans who are considered “available” to work *must* be out of work for the economy to function properly. In the most generous reading of this (4.5 percent), that means that 7.6 million of the 170 million “available” American workers must be unemployed. By extension, our fiscal and monetary policies should therefore be oriented around this goal. These hypotheses became part of the modern economic belief system from the Alan Greenspan era forward.

The dogmatic devotion to Friedman’s principles helps explain why his broader framework of monetarism took hold with such devotion. At its core, monetarism exists in opposition to Keynes’ belief that governments are obligated to intervene with fiscal measures during times of crisis in particular. Friedman argued that monetary policy—interest rate guidance and changes to the money supply—are all that’s required to provide equilibrium in the markets.

This monetarist framework rests on a deceptively clean premise: “Inflation is always and everywhere a monetary phenomenon.” The phrase anchors Friedman’s 1963 magnum opus, *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867-1960*, co-authored with Schwartz—a book that demonstrated with meticulous archival work that the Federal Reserve’s failure to expand the money supply during the early 1930s had turned a severe recession into the Great Depression.

It was a radical inversion of the then-dominant narrative, which blamed the Depression on speculative excess and structural failure. Moreover, it created a permission structure for future monetarists to downplay the role of fiscal interventions and social welfare programs—such as expanding unemployment benefits—during times of economic crisis. It also absolved those who participated in the culture of reckless speculation that always precedes these events.

Binyamin Appelbaum, in *The Economists’ Hour*, describes the tension between Friedman and Keynes’ views as such:

Keynesians regarded inflation as a complex phenomenon with

many potential causes and many potential remedies. The problem might be too much government spending, or a sharp drop in the oil supply, or unions pressing for higher wages. And each cause had its own cure. Friedman, by contrast, had a radically simple view: governments caused inflation by printing too much money—by expanding the quantity of money in circulation faster than the growth of the economy—and governments could reduce inflation only by printing less money.

In academic circles this distinction became part of the “normative” versus “positive” economics debate. The former is often associated with Keynes’ comprehensive and situational worldview, the latter with Friedman’s narrower monetarist convictions that were supposedly more empirical and universal.

But this reliance upon scientific methodology had a massive hole in it, as Friedman’s detractors would come to point out. As Friedman asserted in one of his most influential essays, *The Methodology of Positive Economics*, “Economics as a positive science is a body of tentatively accepted generalizations about economic phenomena that can be used to predict the consequences of changes in circumstances.” Essentially, Friedman was dismissing the importance of assumptions, arguing that they were too open to interpretation and therefore only the equations mattered in the explanation of economic phenomena.

This led critics to accuse Friedman and his acolytes of essentially bending formulas to justify outcomes no matter how absurd the premise. In economic circles this is described as the F-Twist: a methodological get-out-of-jail card.

Over the next few decades, the devotion to monetarism became an almost religious orthodoxy. The Chicago School and its adherents filled the ranks of think tanks, NGOs, and every administration from Reagan to Trump, armed with the confidence of men who believed they had put economics on the same footing as physics, and the incuriosity of men who had stopped checking whether the equations matched the world outside the window.

“TANSTAAFL”

Friedman didn’t invent the phrase “there ain’t no such thing as a free lunch”—its traceable lineage runs to a fable in a 1938 Scripps-Howard newspaper editorial, and Robert Heinlein immortalized the acronym TANSTAAFL in his 1966 Hugo Award-winning novel *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. But Friedman weaponized it. He deployed it as a rhetorical battering ram in lectures, columns, and television appearances for decades, and published a 1975 essay collection under that exact title. It became so associated with Friedman that even *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* attributes the phrase to him.

Friedman co-opted the phrase by explaining it as “the belief that somehow or another, the government can spend money at no one’s expense.” In keeping with the more laissez-faire interpretations of Adam Smith, Friedman acknowledged certain government functions as legitimate and therefore worthy of taxation. In these limited cases, most notably the common defense of the nation, a transparent universal tax would apply. “The least bad form of taxation is a straight flat rate tax on all spending above

a minimum charged on everybody and collected in such a way that people know they are paying it. The second least bad tax is a similar flat rate tax on all income above a minimum,” he wrote.

His view on taxation and the distribution of funds relied on his faith in the free market to deliver funds where they are needed. In need of a road? Charge a toll. Parks need upkeep? Charge an entrance fee. The market, in its infinite wisdom, would always know what to extract. Supply would always match demand if the government would simply leave it alone. Otherwise, surplus government taxation would come at the cost of this efficiency.

Bureaucracy was the enemy of the people, not the extractive nature of the corporate class. And in fact, Friedman believed that corporations should be exempt from all forms of taxation.

There is also a profound irony embedded in Friedman’s signature line. It’s perhaps true that there is no such thing as a free lunch. But there is also no such thing as a free market. In the purest sense, a market is a general term to describe a physical or virtual place where buyers and sellers come together to exchange

goods and services. But the idea that a “pure” market exists is itself a fallacy that ignores the mechanisms and human interventions required to construct them.

The central object of Friedman’s creed—the free market—is, as author Bernard Harcourt demonstrates with irrefutable clarity in his book *The Illusion of Free Markets*, something that simply does not exist:

At the end of the day, the notion of a free market is a fiction. There is no such thing as a non-regulated market—a market that operates without legal, social and professional regulation. Those forms of regulation—including the criminal sanction—are precisely what distributes wealth and resources, what makes it possible for the CBOT [Chicago Board of Trade] to exclude

nonmembers from the trading floor, for the Big Four accounting firms to effectively control accounting standards, and for large commercial banks to essentially coordinate lending practices. All these practices are regulated. The question is thus not whether to regulate. Instead the only question is how the existing and prospective kinds of regulation distribute wealth. That is the only important question and it is, crucially, masked by our faith in natural order and efficient markets.

The Chicago School’s foundational commitment was not to freedom per se. It was to a particular configuration of regulation—one that concentrates wealth upward while making that concentration

appear natural, inevitable, and beyond political remedy.

If we think of the foundational elements of markets that are allowable under Friedman’s doctrine, the logic falls apart immediately upon inspection. Property rights are regulation. Contract law is regulation. The limited liability corporation—the legal structure that shields shareholders from accountability for the harms their companies produce—is regulation. The exclusion of non-members from institutions like the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT), as Harcourt notes, is regulation. Moreover, every “free” market that has ever operated has been constituted by the state. The only question Friedman never allowed himself to ask—because the answer would have dismantled everything—was: regulated for whose benefit?

FROM ECONOMIC THEORY TO DOCTRINE OF FAITH

If Mont Pèlerin brought Friedman out of academia, the critical transition in Friedman’s career was a political campaign that showed him how economics was a discipline capable of reshaping civilization.

In 1964, Barry Goldwater ran for president on the most uncompromising conservative platform in modern American history. Friedman signed on as an advisor. He would always bristle at being called a conservative—he considered himself a pure libertarian, untethered from the social traditionalism of the GOP’s dominant wing. But the Goldwater campaign was a marriage of convenience that suited both parties. Goldwater needed intellectual legitimacy. Friedman needed a political vehicle.

Goldwater was, as Appelbaum describes, “the beta version of Reagan.” Friedman’s first non-academic book, *Capitalism and Freedom*—based on a series of his lectures—was a sensation in conservative circles (and publicly lauded by both Reagan and Goldwater).

The candidate lost in a historic landslide. The ideas, however, took root in the minds of a generation of young conservative operatives who were paying attention.

Goldwater also gave Friedman’s politics their first public airing. His position on race and poverty was not the crude bigotry of the segregationist wing—but it was, in its own way, almost as structurally pernicious. He argued that it was government, not racism, that kept Black Americans poor. Minimum wage laws priced them out of the labor market. Inferior public schools—themselves a product of state mismanagement—left them underprepared.

The free market, he insisted, was colorblind. This argument conveniently absolved capital of any responsibility for centuries of enforced exclusion, redlining, and deliberate economic suppression.

The moment that crystallized Friedman’s transformation from economist to ideological warrior arrived shortly after in 1970, courtesy of Ralph Nader. Nader had already remade American consumer culture with *Unsafe at Any Speed*, his 1965 exposé of General Motors’ deliberate suppression of safety data on the Chevrolet Corvair. The book was a bestseller, triggered Senate hearings, and directly produced the Department of Transportation and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. When GM, rather than addressing Nader’s criticisms, hired

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private investigators to surveil and attempt to entrap him, the company's president was forced to issue a public apology before Congress. Nader sued, won, and used the settlement to fund the modern consumer advocacy movement.

Friedman was not amused. His response, published in the *New York Times Magazine* in September 1970, was one of the most consequential op-eds in American economic history.

Its central claim was this: *the sole social responsibility of business is to increase its profits*. Any executive who diverted corporate resources toward social ends—cleaner air, safer products, fairer wages—was guilty of a form of taxation without representation, spending shareholders' money on causes they hadn't sanctioned.

The piece didn't merely push back on Nader. It gave the shareholder primacy movement its founding scripture. This is the concept that the only responsibility of a corporation is to its shareholders. This may sound innocuous or even obvious to modern ears, but it was a revelation that hit corporate America like a thunderbolt. As Kurt Andersen writes in *Evil Geniuses*: "Starting in the 1970s, the Friedman Doctrine and its extrapolations freed and encouraged businesspeople and the rich to go ahead and conform to the left-wing caricatures of them, to be rapacious and amoral without shame."

Friedman didn't just describe how corporations behave—he gave them permission to behave badly. Of course, he wasn't alone in this pursuit. Within a year of his *New York Times* broadside, the intellectual infrastructure for a full corporate counter-offensive was being assembled.

In August 1971, Lewis Powell—a corporate attorney who would be appointed to serve as an associate justice of the Supreme Court two months later—drafted a now infamous memorandum to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce that reads today like a founding document of the modern right. American free enterprise, Powell argued, was under systematic attack—from campuses, from consumer advocates like Nader, from the media, from the government. Business needed to fight back not issue by issue but institutionally: funding think tanks, placing economists in universities, cultivating the judiciary, and buying the credibility of the academy itself.

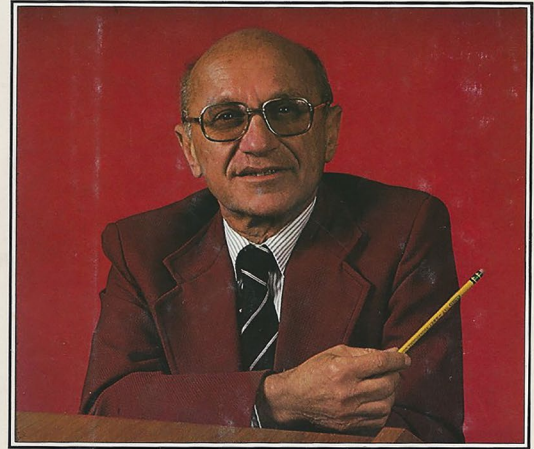
What followed was a social project of stunning scope. The Heritage Foundation (1973). The Cato Institute (1977). The Manhattan Institute (1977). The American Legislative Exchange Council (1973). A network of funded academic chairs, law school programs, and media outlets was designed to produce, amplify, and legitimize many of the ideas born at Mont Pèlerin, with Friedman emerging as a media-ready spokesperson of sorts.

The think tanks produced papers. The papers influenced legislation from Ronald Reagan's tax cuts and deregulation, to Bill Clinton's destruction of the welfare state and criminalization of immigrants, to the Trump era's tax cuts and gutting of federal agencies.

The legislation was defended in courts staffed by judges trained in the law and economics movement pioneered at—where else?—the University of Chicago.

By the time he debuted his ten-part Public Broadcasting System (PBS) series in 1980 to support *Free to Choose*, which he co-authored with his wife Rose, Friedman had crossed from economist to cultural phenomenon. It was a groundbreaking

FREE TO CHOOSE



A Personal Statement MILTON & ROSE FRIEDMAN

series, designed as a response to the rise of Nader's consumer advocacy, that announced Friedman as a public intellectual. Yet one should note the deep irony in utilizing PBS—a nonprofit organization supported in substantial part at the time by taxpayer dollars—as the vehicle for this same documentary.

STAGFLATION OPENS THE GATE

Free to Choose made Friedman somewhat of a cultural phenomenon. He frequently lectured around the country and became a regular on popular talk shows such as Phil Donahue. He was a master communicator and polemicist who honed his persona and debate skills over the years at the University of Chicago. But it was more than the vessel; it was also his message that resonated with a public hungry for answers when the stagflation crisis of the 1970s gripped the nation.

Stagflation—simultaneous high inflation and high unemployment—was supposed to be impossible. The Phillips Curve, the empirical relationship between inflation and unemployment identified by New Zealand economist A.W. Phillips in 1958, had become the backbone of Keynesian economic management. Its logic was intuitive: when unemployment was high and fewer people were earning and spending, inflation stayed low. When unemployment was low and workers were gainfully employed, consumer spending rose, demand outpaced supply, and prices followed in what economists call demand-pull inflation.

The curve implied a stable tradeoff—a policy menu governments could use to dial between the two evils depending on which was more politically tolerable. Stagflation blew that menu apart. High inflation and high unemployment were not supposed to coexist. The fact that they did—violently, across the entire Western world—discredited the framework that had ruled economic policy for a generation and left Keynesian policymakers without a coherent response.

Milton Friedman, who had predicted for years that the Phillips Curve relationship was unstable and would eventually break down, stepped forward with his diagnosis and his cure. Thus, the political opening for Friedman's ideas came not from the strength

of the theory but from the convenient collapse of its competitor.

The true causes of the 1970s stagflation crisis were complex and well documented—twin oil shocks, oil embargos, changes to the value of the dollar and the inflationary pressure of an overheated war economy—but Friedman had a simpler, more digestible message: money supply.

Friedman's monetarism did not explain stagflation. It simply had a pre-packaged answer ready when the old answers failed. In a crisis, whoever has the simplest message usually wins the narrative. And Friedman's message—government causes inflation, the market cures it—was

simple, authoritative, and delivered by a Nobel laureate.

The Reagan administration absorbed the Chicago creed wholesale. Cut taxes on the high earners. Deregulate industries. Break the unions. Shrink the government. And frame every one of these choices not as a political decision made by people with interests, but as the natural, inevitable, scientifically validated operation of the market. Grover Norquist's famous formulation—"I don't want to abolish government, I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub"—was not a fringe position. It was the logical endpoint of the Chicago doctrine, applied without Friedman's occasional squeamishness.

It was not only Republicans who capitulated. The Clinton administration delivered the most comprehensive Democratic embrace of neoliberal governance in American history: NAFTA, welfare reform, the crime bill that supercharged mass incarceration. Then there's the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act, Depression-era legislation designed to protect consumer depositors from

Wall Street speculators. Many believe this was the true catalyst of the 2008 global financial crisis.

"The era of big government is over," Clinton told Congress in 1996. He meant it.

The universal solvent of free market ideology worked on Democratic politicians for the same reason it worked on Republicans: it was not merely an economic argument. It was a moral one. It offered a framework in which every act of deregulation was reframed as liberation, every tax cut as freedom, every gutted social program as an act of respect for individual dignity.

Read generously, this is a coherent libertarian philosophy. Read honestly, it is a blueprint for the elimination of every public institution that stands between ordinary people and the raw coercive power of the market. It's all in how you sell it. And that's why we still talk about Milton Friedman to this day.

THE ORIGINAL 9/11

No discussion of Friedman's legacy can avoid Chile.

The "Chicago Boys" were a cohort of Chilean economists who had trained at the University of Chicago under Friedman and his colleague Al Harberger. After the CIA-backed coup that overthrew Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973 and installed Augusto Pinochet, these economists became the architects of Chile's radical economic restructuring—privatization of state industries, elimination of trade barriers, pension privatization, the gutting of labor protections. It was, in many respects, the most comprehensive real-world experiment in Chicago School economics ever conducted.

Friedman's personal involvement was limited. He visited Chile in 1975, met briefly with Pinochet, and advised a rapid "shock treatment" approach to bring inflation under control. His contacts with the regime were few. In fact, Friedman took great pains to avoid speaking on foreign policy and interventions, though he was a fierce opponent of conscription. He was genuinely uncomfortable with ballooning defense budgets but believed them to be far less problematic than the size of social programs and regulations.

But the distinction between the theorist and the laboratory does not exculpate him. Friedman knew what was happening in Chile. He knew that the "economic freedom" being implemented was built on a foundation of political terror—the disappearance and murder of thousands of dissidents, the systematic destruction of organized labor by force. His response, when pressed, was that economic liberalization would eventually produce political liberalization. He was wrong about that too. And more importantly, the comfort with which he deployed his theories in the service of a murderous regime revealed something about the internal logic of Chicago economics: in a world where only market outcomes matter, everything else—including human beings—becomes an externality.

THE RECKONING THAT WASN'T

On October 23, 2008, Alan Greenspan—the Ayn Rand acolyte, the 18-year Federal Reserve chairman, the man known in the halls of power as "The Maestro"—appeared before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. When pressed

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for what had gone wrong in the financial system that he presided over for decades, The Maestro meekly conceded: “I found a flaw. I have been very distressed by that fact.”

The flaw was greed. “I made a mistake,” Greenspan continued, “in presuming that the self-interests of organizations, specifically banks and others, were such that they were best capable of protecting their own shareholders and their equity in the firms.” The self-interest of banks and financial institutions—which the entire Chicago framework assumed would function as a self-correcting mechanism, protecting shareholders and the system—had instead produced systemic fraud, predatory lending, and a global financial collapse that wiped out trillions of dollars in household wealth and threw millions of people out of their homes.

The field of economics had not predicted the crisis. Had not understood it when it began. Could not agree on what to do about it. And as the dust settled, the economist whose framework proved most useful in diagnosing the damage and prescribing a capitalist response was the one Friedman and his disciples had spent 60 years trying to bury. As Gregory Mankiw—a conservative Harvard economist, not a Keynesian—wrote in the *New York Times* in the depths of the crisis: “If you were going to turn to only one economist to understand the problems facing the economy, there is little doubt that the economist would be John Maynard Keynes.”

The markets had done what Keynes always knew they would do, given the opportunity. They had followed human nature to its logical conclusion.

THE PATSY

The neoliberal era was made possible by the economic theories and ideas hatched within the Mont Pèlerin Society. These ideas would have remained fringe concepts were it not for the stagflation crisis of the 1970s that perplexed the Keynesian economists of the day. It was this stretch of simultaneously high inflation and unemployment that opened the door to new schools of thought. It just so happened that the Mont Pèlerin economists were extremely prepared to offer one. But to lay the entirety of the neoliberal era at the feet of Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics would be intellectually lazy and dishonest.

The dystopian libertarian vision of people like Charles Koch was an ideology in search of a framework, and Milton Friedman’s free market concept fit neatly within it. If all of society’s ills could be explained away by rules, regulations, bureaucracy and government spending—and explained away by legitimate economists, with peer-reviewed papers and Nobel Prizes and PBS series—then it made sense to shoehorn libertarian and racial grievance politics into the “free market” narrative.

It was the Southern Strategy in mathematical form. Don’t be overtly racist, just implement policies that produce racist outcomes and say the market will provide. Don’t fund welfare, let the corporations that provide jobs and innovation do the job. Don’t fund public schools equitably; instead, simply offer the freedom to “choose” a different one.

Milton Friedman was a megalomaniac with supreme ambitions to be taken seriously, a man who was seduced by the power and celebrity his ideas eventually brought him, and who became so blinded by his own fame and his rabid following at Chicago

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that he could never acknowledge the flaws in his own theories or genuinely consider other viewpoints. He believed—truly, in his bones—that his philosophy would make the world a better and more just place.

The true villains are always the same. The billionaires who funded the think tanks, the economics departments, the law schools and the endowed chairs. The ones who bought the newspapers and networks that amplified the work generated by their think tanks. The

ones who turned a set of academic arguments into a political program and a political program into received wisdom. The ones who bought the entire political system.

Only now, many of the billionaires (and for a brief moment, the world’s first trillionaire) who enjoy the fruits of the seeds planted by the white Christian nationalist libertarians in the 1970s have personal wealth equivalent to the GDP of developed nations. They control the vast majority of levers in the American political system. They own our data and command our attention. They rarely pay taxes and have dismantled the regulatory apparatus that used to restrain them. They have campaigned to destroy social welfare programs and are building artificial intelligence systems designed to eliminate jobs. They have unfettered access to the U.S. Treasury and are re-ordering the global monetary system.

Worse yet, they admit to all of it—are even boastful of it—because they believe in it.

That is Milton Friedman’s legacy.

Milton Friedman was a high priest who genuinely believed in his god. His gift—our curse—was in convincing those around them that his god was real. ✚

MAX is the publisher of UNFTR Media and host of the popular *Unf*cking the Republic* podcast and YouTube channel where he covers current events, U.S. politics, and the economy from a progressive perspective. Prior to launching UNFTR in 2020, Max spent 15 years in the alternative weekly industry as a publisher and political columnist.

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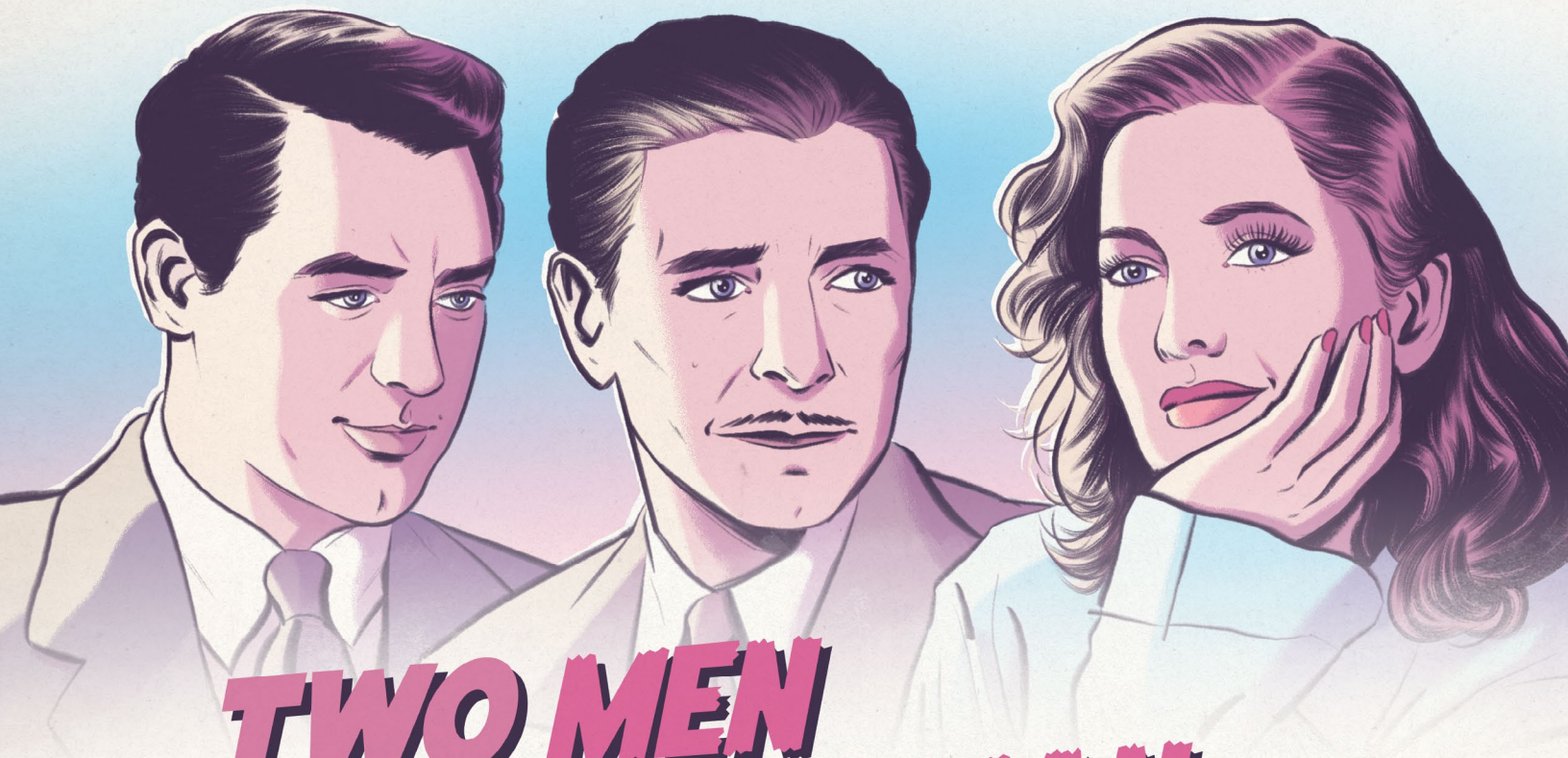
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TWO MEN ONE WOMAN *and* **JUSTICE**



BY CIARA MOLONEY

IN A JUST WORLD, I COULD SELL JUST ABOUT ANYONE ON *The Talk of the Town* (1942) with the words “it stars Ronald Colman and Cary Grant.” Two titans of charm and glamor that never let being gentlemanly get in the way of being hilarious, it’s a crossover as tantalizing as John Wayne and James Stewart co-starring in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Yet in the world in which we live, more drastic measures are required. Like its star, the film was ahead of its time but has nevertheless fallen through the cracks of modernity.

The Talk of the Town is about a Supreme Court nominee who learns that the law and justice are not necessarily the same thing. It is also, improbably, a screwball comedy about Cary Grant and Ronald Colman falling in love with the same woman—and, perhaps more importantly, with each other.

Colman was an actor unstuck in time: a would-be icon of 1970s Hollywood who, through cosmic mishap, was born in the 19th century. The soulfulness and subtlety with which he plays to the camera—decades before Marlon Brando would popularize a film acting style totally distinct from that of theater—leads me to conclude that he was actually meant to play Robert Downey Jr.’s role in *Zodiac*, but decided to travel back in time so he could have a transatlantic accent and pencil mustache, no questions asked. He became a film star in the silent era, yet his greatest gift as an actor was his dulcet voice: rich, resonant and instantly recognizable, he sounded like an English gentleman without any sense of snobbishness or superiority.

Colman’s voice was so distinctive that his appeal extended well beyond the movies themselves. In the 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison namedrops Colman in his description of a particular manner the narrator wishes to adopt: “dazzling eloquence... polished... charming. Like Ronald Colman. What a voice!” That voice was particularly remarkable in the early sound era, when actors were still figuring out how to perform for a microphone. In *Bulldog Drummond* (1929), Colman’s first sound picture—the poster boasts that it is “all talking!”—everyone on screen is caught between the acting styles of silent film and stage, except for Colman, larky and tenacious and utterly natural, who invents the next century of sound-screen acting in front of your eyes. It’s hard not to wonder what he might have done with the decades of film history that followed. I have no doubt that had he lived past 1958, Colman would have played some interesting role in the rising independent and youth-led film movements just around the corner—even if only joining the roster of elderly leading men for Roger Corman’s trashy exploitation movies.

But Colman, in his newly revealed velvety baritone, isn’t the only one who commands the screen. His co-star in *The Talk of the Town*, Cary Grant, was hardly less perfectly suited to the part.

Cary Grant, in the year he became a naturalized American citizen and legally changed his name from Archibald Leach, plays Leopold Dilg. In a noirish opening montage—light on dialogue and heavy on newspaper headlines—Dilg is arrested on suspicion of burning down the mill where he works and killing the foreman in the process (though no body is found). Facing the death penalty, he breaks out of prison partway through the trial. Dilg injures his ankle during the escape, and so doesn’t get

far: just to nearby Sweetbrook Cottage, homeplace of his old schoolmate Nora Shelley (Jean Arthur). Unfortunately for the fugitive, his planned hideaway comes with unexpected company; Miss Shelley, now a schoolteacher and living with her mother in the town, is renting out the home for the summer.

The new tenant arrives minutes after Dilg does: famed law professor Michael Lightcap (Colman), hoping for some peace and quiet to write his book. In zany, madcap fashion, Shelley tries to contrive reasons she needs to stay at the cottage—ranging from “I had a terrible fight with my mother” to “I am currently wearing your pajamas”—so she can keep Lightcap from discovering Dilg hiding in the attic. She contacts Dilg’s lawyer, Sam Yates (Edgar Buchanan), hoping to lay the groundwork for Dilg’s innocence.

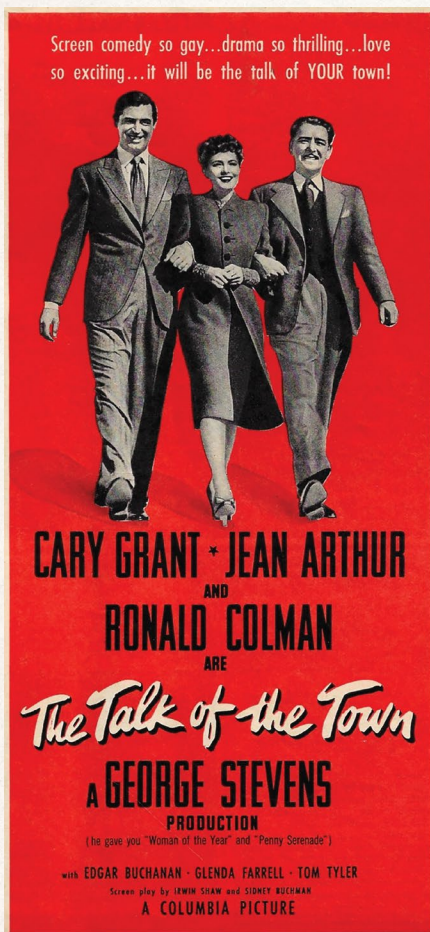
“He’s the only honest man in town and they want to hang him,” Yates tells the Professor. “Mind you, he’s just a worker with gumption enough to fight the boss.”

He thinks that if Lightcap—“the most distinguished legal mind in the state” and a prime candidate for the Supreme Court—could be convinced that a miscarriage of justice is taking place, he could successfully call for a fair trial for Dilg, away from the town’s prejudice and the mill owner’s interference.

Lightcap isn’t buying it. “My business is with the principles of law. I can’t get mixed up in these little local affairs,” he says, “The philosophy behind the deed, that’s my field.” One of the



Cary Grant, Jean Arthur, and Ronald Colman star in *The Talk of the Town* (1942). Dilg (Grant) has just knocked Lightcap (Colman) unconscious after the professor discovers that his so-called gardener is actually a fugitive. (Columbia Pictures)



A vintage theatrical poster for *The Talk of the Town* features the starring thruple walking arm-in-arm. (Columbia Pictures)

youngest men to ever graduate from Harvard Law School, Lightcap is an idealist in the truest sense: he lives in Plato's world of Forms, where the law is perfect and abstract, untainted by petty human concerns.

In the 18th century, he dictates, "Law became, for the first time, the instrument of pure logic... It was the aim of the lawmakers and the law administrators to build the law firmly on principles, which are above small emotions, greed, and the loose thinking of everyday life."

Dilg overhears this, having crept into the kitchen to sneak some food. He stands over the open fridge, furrows his brow, tilts his head, and hobbles out with his swollen ankle, munching on half a dry roll of bread. "Impossible," he announces: "What is the law? It's a gun pointed at somebody's head. All depends

upon which end of the gun you stand whether the law is just or not."

It's insanely reckless on Dilg's part. He's an injured fugitive who blows his hiding spot simply because he couldn't stand bullshit to go unchallenged. ("When I hear nonsense, I get an impulse.") He knows the law is political, because he is the victim of a political prosecution. He knows the law can be bought and paid for, because the mill owner has bought the judge in his case. He knows the law is a gun because it's planning to kill him. But it's not just his personal experience: since he was a schoolkid, he's always known you can't rely on the law for justice; you have to fight like hell for it yourself.

"Always collecting a bad reputation, even after you grew up. Speeches on street corners, petitions," Shelley says at one point. "Any kind of a squawk, Dilg's right in the middle of it." He leaves it to Shelley to scramble for a cover story: she introduces him as Joseph, the gardener.

It's also a brave move on the film's part, when they could have easily milked the hiding-a-fugitive farce for another 30 minutes. But once Dilg and Lightcap meet, *The Talk of the Town* really gets down to business. It's from here that the film reveals itself, as film critic Nathan Cook puts it, as "a universally appealing story, asking 'who does our legal system actually protect?' and 'why are these attractive people clearly in love but pretending they're not a thruple?'"

These apparently disparate questions are deeply entangled, as political debate functions as a kind of love language between the characters. They debate legal ethics, play chess, and eat voraciously. (Dilg's preference for borscht with an egg in it becomes a key plot point.) Keeping Dilg's true identity a secret continues to lead to hijinks, even as they try to soften Lightcap's heart to this Dilg case. Shelley takes Lightcap to a baseball game so he can bump into the local judge, who admits—no, brags—about writing his opinion of the case before all the evidence has been presented. Lightcap's ivory tower idealism begins to waver. He's like a little boy, Shelley says several times. One who's been pretending to be an old man since he started teaching at 22, and grew a beard to hide his baby face.

Lightcap and Dilg are a legal scholar and a working-class political activist with very different views of how the world works. For Lightcap, law is the transcendent prime mover, shaping every individual's rights and responsibilities. It is written down and carried out accordingly. For Dilg, law is an instrument of the powerful, and must be fought against if necessary. Lightcap has a whiggish belief in the ongoing improvement of human reason. Dilg has the heart of a revolutionary.

T

HE WORDS THE SCRIPT uses to describe these contrasting schools of thought are things like logic or emotion, theory or practicality.

But it is clearly a political debate, first and foremost. *Talk of the Town* co-writer Sidney Buchman surely understood this: he had been Oscar-nominated for *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), still one of the best political dramas ever put to film, and would later be found guilty of contempt of Congress and blacklisted by the Hollywood studios for refusing to name names at the House Committee on Un-American Activities. This latter event is as good an example as any of Dilg's argument that law functions to protect the powerful and is entrenched in mon-eyed interests: Buchman was punished as a worker through blacklisting, and was punished by the legal system with fines and a suspended sentence. Law and justice aren't synonyms; often they're in stark opposition.

Lightcap and Dilg's debates are about whether that's true, but more importantly, what we must do with that knowledge. And unlike any debate between a liberal and leftist on Twitter, their conflict is not one of bitterness or rage, but is earnest, kind, and funny. "The odd houseshare comedy that takes over *Talk of the Town* is all about its principles effectively falling in love with each other..." writes the blog *Movie Musings*. "Grant learns to respect Colman's self-effacing, shy wit. Colman learns to enjoy Grant's instinctive intelligence. Both of them find deeper feelings growing for Arthur's feisty Nora, just as she finds herself drawn to the charm, good

nature and honesty of the other two.”

It’s widely claimed that director George Stevens filmed two endings—one in which Shelley ends up with Lightcap, and another with Dilg—and let test audiences decide which they preferred. Annette Bochenek’s analysis of the George Stevens papers housed in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences library suggests this isn’t true, but the claim speaks to a narrative equality between Dilg and Lightcap. Most love triangle stories are not actually about choosing between two equally plausible love interests. You know from the jump who’s supposed to end up together. A man will tell Shirley Maclaine that he doesn’t like her hair cut short, or say that Katharine Hepburn shouldn’t wear pants, or work in private equity, and you know the female lead isn’t meant to be with him. There’s no serious possibility that Bridget Jones will choose smarmy Hugh Grant over sweet Colin Firth, no matter how bad a first impression he makes.

But in *The Talk of the Town*, there is no delineation between romantic

lead and potential rival. It’s what I call a “two guys and girl” movie: that is, a movie in which two men are in love with the same woman, and also with each other. It sounds like bisexual polyamory wouldn’t come up that much in mainstream cinema, but once you notice it, it seems to pop up everywhere. There’s Ernst Lubitsch’s delightful screwball comedy *Design for Living* (1933), which Louis Chilton writes “remains the urtext for exploring throuples on film.” *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *Paint Your Wagon* are both variations on the theme set in the old west and released in 1969. There’s *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986), *Michael Collins* (1996), and *Y tu mamá también* (2002). In these films, as *Challengers* (2024) director Luca Guadagnino put it, “The triangle is not just two people after one, but the corners touch together all the time.”

Dilg and Lightcap are both explicitly in love with Shelley, but utterly adore each other. “You wouldn’t believe it, Sam, the way those two like each other,” Shelley tells Dilg’s lawyer. Like Grant,

Dilg is only nominally closeted in his bisexuality. “Naturally you feel like kissing him,” he says to Shelley about Lightcap, “He’s a wonderful man.”

Lightcap, on the other hand, has dutifully cut himself off from all hotblooded feelings, sexuality included. Both Dilg and Shelley are instrumental in thawing his heart. He goes from telling Dilg he’s “no oil painting”—a claim it’s hard to deliver with conviction, since he looks like *Cary Grant*—to telling him “I’ve never been fonder of a man in my life.” They each use the phrase “I know just how you feel” when describing how the other two are in love.

And that love, inevitably, relativizes abstract ideals. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love.” Love melts Lightcap, and builds him back stronger, fiercer, and believing, at last, in a justice that is bigger than the law. In a justice that demands everyone’s active participation, down in the dirt. He’s gonna be one hell of a Supreme Court justice. ✚

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THE WAR *for* FERDINAND

BY ELIZABETH MARSHALL

ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC PACIFISTS IN American literature celebrates his 90th birthday this year. The bovine hero of the children's picture book *The Story of Ferdinand* rose to fame in 1936, when he refused to partake in a bullfight.

Written by Munro Leaf and illustrated by Robert Lawson, *The Story of Ferdinand* tells the tale of a young bull in the Spanish countryside who prefers smelling flowers and lounging under a cork tree to jumping and butting heads with the others. When five men in funny hats arrive to pick the biggest, fastest, toughest bull to fight in the big city, Ferdinand happens to sit on a bee, causing him to leap into the air and snort in pain. The scouts see a ferocious opponent and cart him off to Madrid. Once in the ring, however, Ferdinand sits quietly sniffing flowers and refuses to fight “no matter what” is done to provoke him. Eventually, the matador admits defeat and Ferdinand returns home to spend the rest of his days in peace.

The pacifist fable is often used as a cultural shorthand for dissent. But nearly a century after its release—amidst a renewed cultural panic over what kids are reading—the book's uses reveal a far more complicated story about how politics infuses children's literature.

The Story of Ferdinand was an instant bestseller, garnered critical acclaim, and has remained in print since its debut. It stands as an exemplary picture book: a form that relies on a tight interplay between word and image. Lawson's simple black-and-white, pen-and-ink drawings communicate visual comedy, and

when juxtaposed with Leaf's matter-of-fact prose, result in a book that's both straightforward and intricate. The text's sly humor invites multiple readings.

The tale circulated to a broad audience through the Federal Theatre Project's Marionette Workshop, Walt Disney's 1938 animated short “Ferdinand the Bull,” and numerous musical and creative adaptations. In 2026, the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art hosted the exhibit “Under the Cork Tree: The Story of Ferdinand.” Two million copies have been sold worldwide, and it has been translated into more than two dozen languages—and yet, like so many lasting works of art, the book emerged almost as an accident.

Leaf penned the story in just 40 minutes, according to a 1938 article in the *New York Times*, “as a vehicle to show the public what his friend, Robert Lawson, could do with a real illustrating assignment.” Leaf assured the public that his only message was humor: “If the book fails to make you chuckle there is no excuse for its existence, so far as I am concerned,” he quipped. Yet what the creators dubbed a “perfectly absurd tale,” some saw as a political tract packaged as innocent children's fare.

Those concerns weren't all that surprising given the timing of the book's release. Published less than two months after the start of the Spanish Civil War, *The Story of Ferdinand* quickly became a political lightning rod. So much so that Leaf told an audience at the 1937 National Book Fair that letters sent to Viking Press accused him of “deliberately corrupting children of an impressionable age”:

Here in *Ferdinand* people saw the laissez-faire theory of economics seconded by the bourgeois ideology of utility[...] letters complained that 'Ferdinand' was Red propaganda, others said it was Fascist propaganda, while a number protested it was subversive pacifism. On the other hand one woman's club resolved that it was an unworthy satire of the peace movement.



Munro Leaf appears on a 1937 playbill for a marionette production of his best-selling picture book. (Credit: Federal Theatre)

The *New Yorker* dedicated a column to the bull's confounding reception as both a rugged individualist and a ruthless fascist. In the *Salinas Morning Post*, a reporter referred to Ferdinand as "the guy the mob couldn't push around," and quoted Leaf, who stated that people had read into the book "The Communist Manifesto, the Declaration of Independence and *Mein Kampf*."

Sales bloomed in keeping with the controversy. In 1938, *Life* magazine dubbed *The Story of Ferdinand* "the children's-book-for-adults" and Ferdinand a "grownups' hero." The bull's enduring popularity with audiences of all ages is in no small part due to the man who sold the world on the idea of childhood innocence: Walt Disney.

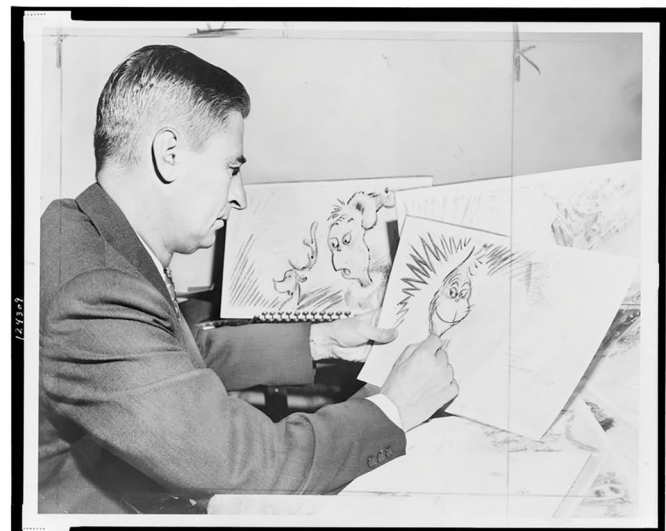
Rather than retelling a fairy tale, as he'd done for many Silly Symphony shorts and the hit full-length animated musical *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Disney optioned the rights to *The Story of Ferdinand*. Studio animators worked from Lawson's illustrations, and along the way amplified racial caricatures and gender stereotypes to entertain audiences. (The inept villains in the ring are also caricatures of real-life Disney animators, and Disney himself voiced Ferdinand's mother.)

Walt Disney Productions' *Ferdinand the Bull* transformed the quiet story-book hero into a celebrity. "Bull Market Soars as Ferdinand Becomes a Commercial Product," proclaimed a *Life* magazine headline for a profile of Leaf, Lawson, and May Massee, children's book editor at Viking Press, noting that the creators stood to make a substantial profit from licensing the bull's image.

To create a buzz ahead of the short, the studio released the song "Ferdinand the Bull," composed by Albert Hay Malotte with lyrics by Larry Morey. Fans could purchase Ferdinand Cartier brooches, dolls, toys, soap, pajamas, ties, umbrellas, raincoats, balloons, and stationery. The bull's likeness appeared on Post Toasties cereal boxes, and Ferdinand floated in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. "Ferdinand the Bull" premiered the next day and would go on to win the hearts and minds of a multigenerational audience as well as an Oscar for Best Cartoon Short.

Ninety years later, the reputation of *The Story of Ferdinand* as a political manifesto of one kind or another lingers. Retrospectives often repeat difficult-to-substantiate stories, including that Hitler burned copies of the book or that Spanish dictator Francisco Franco banned it outright. Still, Sharon McQueen's meticulously researched 2012 *The Story of Ferdinand: The Creation of a Cultural Icon* found no "historical evidence yet surfaced that substantiates a special burning of the book or of the book being labeled 'degenerate democratic propaganda' by any German individual or group." Likewise, McQueen's investigation into whether the book was banned until after Franco's death proved inconclusive.

The International Youth Library in Munich confirms that loans and sales of the first German translation of *Ferdinand the Bull*, published in Switzerland in 1942, were in fact prohibited during the war. However, the book's censorship wasn't due to its pacifist message, but because all of Güttinger's translations of American and British literature fell into the category of "enemy" literature.



Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss) sketches a drawing for his forthcoming book, "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" in 1957. During World War II, Geisel worked alongside Munro Leaf in the animation department of the U.S. Army's First Motion Picture Unit. (Photo: Library of Congress)

Ferdinand's actual history is less tidy than the mythology that has accumulated around him: one that exemplifies the childlike wonder with which adults often approach children's books, as containers of simple indisputable truths. Ariel Dorfman explored this concept in his 1983 cultural critique *The Empire's Old Clothes*, contending that children's media "uses its self-proclaimed innocence as a way of whitewashing—or is it rosewashing—the world." The fantasy that the small but mighty Ferdinand stood up to totalitarianism reflects the view of children's books as objects imbued with special powers to subvert and educate, corrupt and save.

Though Ferdinand was both valorized and critiqued for his pacifism, Leaf was by no means an anti-war activist. During WWII, he served in the U.S. War Department, and alongside Theodor Geisel (better known as Dr. Seuss) he created *This is Ann: She's Dying to Meet You*, a public health pamphlet used to educate soldiers stationed in the South Pacific about malaria. After the war, Leaf spent much of his career in the employ of the U.S. government.

FERDINAND, MEANWHILE, TOOK ON A NEW LIFE AS AN instrument of American cultural diplomacy, proselytizing peace much further than his creator could have initially imagined. *The Story of Ferdinand* circulated in postwar Germany during America's re-education program through Jella Lepman, a German-Jewish activist working as a major in the U.S. army. She organized a traveling International Children's Book Fair from 1946 to 1949, convincing her superiors that children's books were educational tools that would imbue lessons of peace and tolerance.

Wanting to give Berlin's children a Christmas present, Lepman translated the story into German, convinced a publisher to create 30,000 copies of *Ferdinand der Stier* printed on newsprint, and distributed the low-budget copies to youth to take home. Lepman later stated that Leaf and Lawson should have received the Nobel Peace Prize for their work. In 1949, she established the International Youth Library in Munich, and several years later founded the International Board on Books for Young People—two key organizations for the promotion of children's literature across the globe. Though not originally written as anti-war literature, the organizations Lepman founded later dubbed *The Story of Ferdinand* the "earliest anti-war book in modern children's literature" in a 1998 exhibit, "Hello, Dear Enemy! Picture Books for Peace and Tolerance."

The same pliability that made Ferdinand useful in postwar Germany made him useful elsewhere, too. During the Cold War, *The Story of Ferdinand* circulated across the Middle East and other "developing" countries through the Franklin Book Program, a private nonprofit organization subsidized by the U.S. government as well as corporate foundations. The program operated from 1952 to 1978 and published more than 3,000 titles and 50,000 volumes.

Franklin's first office opened in Cairo, Egypt in 1953 and expanded to Beirut, Baghdad, Tehran, Tabriz, Lahore, Dacca, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta, and in the 1960s into Africa and Latin America. In a 2007 *Library Trends* article, Louise Robbins laid out the program's mandate:

1. To help strengthen the economic, social, and political structure of the Middle Eastern Countries. 2. To provide information and points of view regarding America, democracy, and the idea of an open society so that, if the people of the Middle East wish this, they can judge fairly, and not with the field having been abandoned to the totalitarians. 3. To further international cultural exchange.

In each country, Franklin staff worked alongside highly-regarded local citizens, who translated and edited the books.

The desire to promote Western values and resist Soviet influence included materials for children. In 1957 Datus Smith, president of the program, celebrated that "'attractive' children's books mirroring the 'American way of life' had filled a need that would otherwise be filled by communist material." In 1963, *Publishers Weekly* noted that the most widely distributed book published under Franklin's sponsorship was Robert Lawson's children's title *Robbut* (300,000 copies widely used in Egyptian schools). Another highly popular title was *The Story of Ferdinand* (as well as Leaf's other works), which the journalist noted "had been published in Arabic and some African vernaculars and was scheduled to go into Bengali."

Though the program officially ended in 1978, University of Alberta professor Mahdi Ganjavi, author of *Education and the Cultural Cold War in the Middle East: The Franklin Book Programs in Iran*, verified that "a Persian translation of Ferdinand is now available via Entesharat-e Elmi va Farhangi, a publishing house that emerged from the former Franklin Book Program's organization after the 1979 Revolution, when Franklin's assets and publications were confiscated by the new regime. That suggests the book continued to circulate after the Revolution."

How children, then and now, interpret, resist, or reimagine *The Story of Ferdinand* is difficult to know. Youth are active consumers, producers, and critics. What is certain is that childhood was integral to cultural imperialism. The imagined child reader of the Franklin Book Program (as well as Lepman's international library) was a blank political slate, a future ally or enemy, unhinged from economic, social, and cultural contexts, a being that could be easily manipulated, indoctrinated by communism or saved by Western democratic values.

Likewise, in postwar America, a moral panic erupted over 10-cent comics, the most popular reading materials with youth at the time. Unlike *The Story of Ferdinand*, these graphic narratives were easily accessible and cheap. Adult concerns about sex, violence, and horror in comics that seduced innocents led to bans and burnings in the United States and to the establishment of a 1954 *Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency*.

Only three years later, however, the Supreme Court in *Butler v. Michigan* overturned a law that made it illegal for any person to sell books or other materials that contained "obscene, immoral, lewd, or lascivious" language or pictures "tending to the corruption of the morals of youth." The court unanimously struck down the Michigan statute on the grounds of the 14th Amendment. Justice Felix Frankfurter delivered the opinion stating that "quarantining the general public against books not too rugged for grown men and women in order to shield juvenile innocence" violated the individual rights of adults, who under

the law would only have access to child-appropriate materials.

The fight over what children should read, in other words, has always been partly a fight over what adults believe children can become. And Ferdinand continued to be recruited into those battles, even as his meaning changed.

At the tail end of the Cold War, *The Story of Ferdinand* re-emerged as a darling of literacy education in both Bush administrations. In the early '90s, accompanied by special guest Bugs Bunny, Barbara Bush read the story on "Mrs. Bush's Storytime," an ABC radio network production in the 1990s.

Years later, the picture book was Jumpstart's 2007 Read for the Record title choice. Politicians, sports figures, and hip-hop celebrities like Wyclef Jean and Lil Mama supported the initiative, which raised funds for early literacy in underfunded preschools. Penguin published a special Young Readers' edition of the picture book for the event and the Pearson Foundation donated 50,000 copies to schools. Matt Lauer and Meredith Vieira co-wrote in the foreword that early literacy was a "way out of poverty, a path toward a future full of opportunity and a known deterrent to crime and drug use."

On September 20, 2007, First Lady Laura Bush appeared on the "Today" show from Pershing Hill Elementary School at Fort Meade in Maryland, with *The Story of Ferdinand* once again in tow. (No one seemed to pick up on the irony of reading a pacifist children's book on an Army base four days after Blackwater murdered and injured Iraqi civilians in Nisour Square in Baghdad.) Likewise, Margaret Spellings (on her No Child Left Behind bus tour) read the book to preschoolers at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.



In *The Blind Side* (2009), offensive lineman Michael Oher is compared to Ferdinand: "Everyone assumed because he was big that he wanted to fight in the ring ... do you even wanna play football?" asks Leigh Anne Tuohy, played by Sandra Bullock. (Credit: Alcon Entertainment/Warner Bros. Pictures)

The Story of Ferdinand even makes a cameo appearance in *The Blind Side*, the controversial 2009 white savior film about NFL Super Bowl champion Michael Oher and the well-to-do suburban family who informally adopted him in high school. (Oher sued the Tuohy family in 2023 for using his name for financial gain and for his depiction that left "the NFL people wondering if I could read a playbook.") In a pivotal scene in the film, Leigh Anne Tuohy (Sandra Bullock) reads the picture book aloud to her son and the teenage Michael (Quinton Aaron), after learning that his absent mom never read with him as a child. The use of the picture book and the character—Michael is nicknamed "Ferdinand" by his white peers, who view him as a "gentle giant"—further the movie's racist and classist stereotypes. Children's books and early literacy define childhood innocence that Oher was denied.

THROUGHOUT THE 20TH CENTURY, THE DOMESTIC and international deployments of *The Story of Ferdinand* soft launched a number of political agendas. As Leaf recalled in *The Los Angeles Times*, Ferdinand was everywhere he travelled when working with the U.S. State Department in the 1960s: "Even in the Malaysian bush, Ferdinand was there. He's a great advance man." Yet despite his global popularity, some readers questioned whether Ferdinand—with all his flower-sniffing and conflict-avoiding—was really a "man" at all. More importantly: could his influence turn boys weak?

From his first appearance, debates swirled around Ferdinand's masculinity. A writer for *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* suggested that "certain irate fathers assert that the book is a deliberate attempt to make mollycoddles out of little boys." Jazz duo Slim & Slam began their cover of "Ferdinand the Bull" with a voice over: "Ferdinand, you're a sissy." Film critic Benjamin Crisler reported that Leaf:

[...]is indignant when wits suggest that Ferdinand is a sissy, because he loves to sit under a cork tree and smell flowers. He says Ferdinand is just a superior soul, a philosopher, and that his refusal to fight in the bull-ring at Madrid when there was a lovely bouquet to smell was a proof of good taste, and strength of character as well.

Walt Disney was asked to weigh in about whether Ferdinand was "a sissy or a pretty wise bull," according to a reporter for the *Omaha Daily Standard*, and responded that he was wise.

In 1951, Ernest Hemingway's parody "The Faithful Bull," published in *Holiday*, began, "One time there was a bull and his name was not Ferdinand and he loved to fight and he fought with all the other bulls of his own age, or any age, and he was a champion." (Spoiler alert: this bovine dies a brave champion in the ring.)

Progressive educators, however, celebrated Ferdinand's gentle masculinity in articles and on non-sexist children's book lists, touting the story as a positive influence on young boys. "Watch even the most aggressive, tyrannical youngster listening to the story of Ferdinand. With complete honesty he nods his head, recognizing himself as the peace-loving, flower-smelling bull," stated an expert in a 1957 issue of *Child Study: A Journal of Parent Education*.



Ferdinand refuses to battle the matador in Disney's 1938 animated short. (Credit: Walt Disney Productions)

The debate over Ferdinand's masculinity has proved remarkably durable. In 2017, Ferdinand hit the big screen again as "an icon of gender nonconformity" in Carlos Saldanha's animated full-length feature *Ferdinand*, produced by 20th Century Fox. Saldanha's Ferdinand was a tough but sensitive hero (voiced by WWE pro John Cena) who challenged the ties between masculinity, violence, and bullfighting that Hemingway glamorized.

Told from Ferdinand's perspective, the audience journeys alongside the bull as he confronts the floor-to-ceiling horns lining the matador's trophy wall, the butcher's gleaming steel hooks awaiting carcasses, and the realization that the system is stacked against him. PETA lauded the film on its kids' site and awarded it an OSCAT (honoring the best animal-friendly films and stars of 2017).

As the news media drums up another boy crisis, Ferdinand's gentleness remains a feminist touchpoint. In a 2023 piece in the *Evening Standard*, "How to Talk to Your Children About Andrew Tate and Online Misogyny," Martha Alexander notes that many of Tate's followers are school-age children, and recommends reading *The Story of Ferdinand* as an antidote.

The socio-political backdrop of *The Story of Ferdinand*'s production shares uncanny similarities with our own—economic precarity, global conflict, and rising authoritarianism within and outside the United States. Likewise, the many ideological interpretations of Ferdinand trace a direct line to highly-contentious conflicts taking place right now over political messages in children's books.

By the 2010s, political arguments surrounding children's books became increasingly explicit. Board books for toddlers like Innosanto Nagara's bestselling *A Is for Activist!*—self-published in 2013 and "written and illustrated for the next generation of progressives: families who want their kids to grow up in a space that is unapologetic about activism"—appeared alongside attempts to challenge the "whitewashed" histories served

up in traditional textbooks. Duncan Tonatiuh's award-winning picture book biography *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* was one such intervention. (It was one of the most banned children's books of the 2021-2022 school year.) Critiques of offensive racial caricatures in Dr. Seuss's children's books led Seuss Enterprises to stop publishing six of his picture books in 2021. Meanwhile, Puffin books hired sensitivity readers to comb through Roald Dahl's work and edit out adjectives like "fat" and "ugly."

The Right has responded to these efforts by banning liberal books, and any others they don't like, claiming to protect youngsters. According to a 2025 report from PEN America, book bans targeting school libraries in the U.S. are now the norm. These challenges and bans are connected to Trump's executive order to end "radical indoctrination" in K-12 schools via parents' rights groups like Moms for Liberty. In 2023, Kids1st, an association of parents and teachers in Maryland, filed a federal lawsuit against the Montgomery County Board of Education for "forcing pre-K and elementary-aged children to read controversial books that promote a one-sided transgender ideology, encourage gender transitioning, and focus excessively on romance." Two years later, in *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, the Supreme Court in a 6-3 vote upheld parents' rights to opt-out of curriculum that used LGBTQ+ inclusive picture books.

In addition to lawsuits, the Right peddles their conservative ideologies through their own children's book imprints like Brave Books, which *Politico Magazine* aptly dubbed "a literary hub for the wee and anti-woke, searing a conservative viewpoint—and, sometimes, conservative talking points—into the youngest minds." Kirk Cameron (the former *Growing Pains* actor, turned evangelist, turned children's book author) advertises his wares through hyperbolic scare tactics: "our children are under attack."

Adults have long invested children's books with the power to save or liberate children, or viewed them as potential vehicles for corruption and ideological indoctrination. Ninety years post-Ferdinand, there exists a persistent belief that picture books can wield extraordinary political power over a child. The question is not whether books matter—they plainly do—but why so much political energy is devoted to controlling what children read while the conditions in which they live receive comparatively less attention.

In a *Publisher's Weekly* promo for *The Story of Ferdinand*'s 30th birthday, Leaf stated:

I have been accused of defending or attacking practically every 'ism' that has popped up in the last few years. As far as I am concerned, there is one story there, the words are simple and quite short. They try to make sense and if there is a message in them, as many people seem to want, it is Ferdinand's message, not mine—get it from him according to your need.

Tracing the cultural afterlives of *The Story of Ferdinand* shows the political pliability of children's literature. The battle over what "children of an impressionable age" should or shouldn't read isn't new—and it isn't really about children at all, but rather a smoke screen for adult anxieties. ✚



SEIZE THE MEANS

OF VIDEO GAME PRODUCTION

BY MICHAEL CARTER

WHEN COMPOSING THEIR LATEST OFFERING, THE creators of the futurist communism-flavored spy adventure *Zero Parades: For Dead Spies* had to reckon with three proverbial elephants in the room. First, their studio's first game, *Disco Elysium*, was an instant classic and critical darling that revitalized the genre of Computer Role-Playing Games (CRPGs) and set sky-high expectations for their sophomore effort. Second, they aren't actually the creative talent responsible for *Disco Elysium*, but the businesspeople who took over studio ZA/UM and fired most of its founding talent, completing its transition from an Estonian artists' collective to a subsidiary of a for-profit company. Third, the game's themes, which set the ideologies of communism, neoliberalism, and techno-fascism against each other, are becoming much more salient in the political world. The U.S. government has rediscovered its zeal for hunting communists at home and abroad and revived its longstanding obsession with Cuba, billionaire tech-men are attempting to achieve immortality, various trends associated with the People's Republic of China are trending on U.S. TikTok, and remaining neoliberals continue to tinker around the edges as Rome burns (good riddance, but still).

These looming realities create a central irony at the core of *Zero Parades*, which was released on PC this May. While it attempts to comment upon ideologies that are increasingly relevant in the real world, it does so without the intellectual grounding in those ideologies that the original creative team brought to the table for *Disco Elysium*. Instead, the new ownership ape the style and basic

subject matter of their first game without fully understanding the political substance that made it compelling. In this way, ZA/UM's new owners have taken the crystallized output of a decade of labor from a Marxist artists' collective and repackaged it for private profit, garbling their message in the process.

The warping of the first game's distinct perspective is apparent in the opening of each game. In the first five minutes playing *Disco Elysium*, you are confronted with a labor strike, hints at racism in society, and anti-police sentiment directed at your character, a detective. Meanwhile, in *Zero Parades*, the initial framing suggests that political change isn't driven by the streets or the shop floor, but by the elite, secretive machinations of spies and assassins.

Your character, Hershel Wilk, is a spy with a checkered service record who has been reactivated after five years of punitive desk duty to return to the site of her greatest failure for one last mission. Unfortunately, by the time you reach your partner—code-name PSEUDOPOD—he has been rendered comatose through unknown (probably nefarious) causes. Upon hearing this, your handler tells you to abort the mission, but Hershel decides to figure out this mystery herself.

Once you exit the initial scene you are let into the game's main setting, the charming but dilapidated city-state of Portofiro. The game's environment, with its Spanish-sounding proper nouns, Caribbean architecture, old propaganda posters, makeshift structures built in the shadow of past glories, and run-down civil infrastructure, feels like a heightened caricature of communist Cuba, complete with a heavy international debt burden and a neighbor-



PSEUDOPOD is mysteriously out of commission.

ing imperial power threatening invasion. Once there, you talk to its people, using Hershel's spy skills and your own ability to tie together patterns to learn about the world around you, Hershel's own history in Portofiro, your former comrades, and ultimately, your mission. From the first moment you start interacting with the people of Portofiro, the underlying politics of the situation (and the helplessness of ordinary people to influence them) are foregrounded in each new mystery you encounter—from a young woman whose father has been abducted by agents of a multinational investment bank to a man whose vocal cords have been removed as punishment for ferrying refugees escaping genocide. In Portofiro, it is especially true that, as the saying goes, even if you aren't interested in politics, politics is interested in you.

The three major ideologies in the world of *Zero Parades* are almost immediately introduced, each with their own geopolitical champion. First, there is the player's employer, the "Supreme Union of Proletarian Republics" or "Superbloc," a clear analogue to the Soviet Union that seems to have surrendered the political momentum to its rivals (for now). This may be because their ruling ideology of "Post-Historical Materialism" holds that human history has reached its ultimate conclusion with the signing of a treaty 96 years before the game starts. In this treaty, the communists renounced "perpetual revolution" against the neoliberal Developed World, restarted their calendar, declared history a thing of the past, and ushered in the uneasy detente, cold war, and slow decline that seems to have ensued since.

The second piece on the board is the Developed World, a rough analogue of the so-called "West" in our world; it's made up of several post-industrial wealthy nations with governments ranging from monarchies and dictatorships to constitutional republics.

These governments are knit together by an organization called L'Empire sans Territoire, also known as EMTERR or simply "The Bank," a multinational investment bank and extraterritorial governing structure that represents the forces of global capital. Their governing principle is profit, and they are the true power behind the thrones, juntas, and parliaments of the "Developed World." They issue predatory loans, overthrow governments at risk of default, conduct assassinations and kidnappings, and generally do whatever is necessary to protect their shareholders and investors from losing their shirts.

Those shirts were probably designed in the third major nation, the Illuminated Empire, or "La Luz." This proudly technofascist empire is one of the most cartoonishly evil polities I have ever encountered in fiction, but also manages to maintain cultural dominance in fashion, popular culture, and even children's cartoons. La Luz was always an empire, but it wasn't always techno-fascist. That happened when an advisor to the emperor, Anonimo, devised an ideology based on conquering "The Three Fears" to build something called "The Final Society." First, the "Fear of Unknowing," which leads the good technofascist to pursue technological discovery with no regard for any kind of moral, ethical, or religious taboo (including unwilling human experimentation). Second, the "Fear of The Other," which references the classic fascist desire to erase humanity's cultural diversity through horrific violence and subsume everyone and everything into a single united culture of oppression. Third, the "Fear of Death," which is potentially the most chilling (and particularly relevant to our times as tech CEOs fantasize about living forever through AI and robotics).

Anonimo, like many delusional tyrants, wanted to live forever, but computers did not exist yet to hold out the false hope

of consciousness preserved in silicon. Therefore, he attempted to “imprint” his consciousness into a child. He arranged for a series of young boys to undergo first torture, then a mystical form of brainwashing to attempt to instill his consciousness into them. After many casualties, he named three of the surviving boys as passable copies of himself. These three traumatized, brainwashed, dissociated boys became the templates for the consciousnesses of the entire Luzian ruling class. First, through repeating the analog “imprinting” process, then through an “imprinting machine” invented later. This governing structure is a closely-guarded state secret, particularly the fact that even the more faithful imprinting machines introduce errors into the copies. This means that the Luzian ruling class, from the generals to the ministers to the bureaucrats, are twisted copies of copies of copies of the original brainwashed boys, created through a game of intergenerational telephone that constitutes the Big Lie at the core of the Illuminated Empire.

In Portofiro, it is especially true that, as the saying goes, even if you aren't interested in politics, politics is interested in you.

I will admit that ZA/UM shows a basic familiarity with aspects of fascism, post-industrial capitalism, and communism. La Luz is suitably genocidal, “The Bank” issues predatory loans to poor countries, and one of the People’s Republics employed their former monarch as a gardener, a reference to the fate of the final Chinese emperor after the Chinese Revolution. However, the game’s creators seem substantially more confident when describing the game’s fascist and neoliberal regimes. By contrast, the game’s descriptions of the Superbloc feel hollow, and seldom show any understanding of why people remain loyal to it. They often feel like echoes of decades-old criticisms of the Soviet Union, complete with gulag jokes.

While the Superbloc is portrayed as a stagnant, decaying state, La Luz is shown as a dangerous, but vigorous nation. Under the leadership of the Minister of Mass Culture, Facundo Reyes, aka the “Grand Lich of Technofascism,” La Luz has embarked upon an aggressive campaign of cultural promotion, spreading Luzian music, television, fashion, and other forms of culture (all of which are laced with technofascist ideology) in order to overwhelm local culture and entice former territories to willingly rejoin them.

When you first set foot in Portofiro, it appears well on its way to losing touch with its proud revolutionary history and succumbing to its former jailer’s propaganda. It is particularly disturbing to see truant Portofiran children watching fascist cartoons, wearing Luzian fashion, and listening to addictive “L-Pop” when you learn Portofiro’s origin as a penal colony for prisoners of La Luz.

This history underscores the role it plays in the game as a meeting place for the world’s great powers. At some point, Portofiro’s people executed a jailbreak and a post-colonial communist revolution, breaking free of La Luz, building domestic industries,

achieving natural resource sovereignty, and breaking down class divides. However, as is often the case in postcolonial states, a charismatic strongman eventually took power. Over time, the putative ideals of the revolution began to look suspiciously like the personal interests and passing fascinations of its increasingly dictatorial leader. Instead of joining the communist “Superbloc,” “Sweet Nestor,” as he was known, instituted his own personal ideology called “Nestorismo.” This involved taking out the first of 15 predatory “stabilization” loans from “The Bank” and locking in his country’s dependence on The Developed World for generations.

This complex political environment unfolds gradually as you fulfill quests that lead you inexorably toward your Hershel’s version of the game’s final conclusion. Your first breakthrough comes when you finally discover the purpose of your trip to Portofiro. It turns out you were sent here to assassinate Facundo Reyes, the aforementioned minister and war criminal who is responsible for the flood of Luzian fascist cultural products that often precede their bombs or guns.

At this point, you assemble a team of spies, recruiting various old and new acquaintances including members of your previous crew. You then select a method of assassination and enter the game’s final action sequence. In my playthrough, we managed to kill the fascist spymaster, but not the minister, at the cost of two of our own lives.

When reading about the game’s various endings, I felt that mine was far from the worst, but that wasn’t saying much. No matter what your Hershel chooses, the ending you’ll get is ambiguous at best (and at worst, you might provoke La Luz into carpet-bombing Portofiro). It seems that the best you can hope for is getting an imprinting device for your employer while preserving the status quo and losing at least one member of your new crew. Portofiro’s people will still live in the ruins of their proud revolutionary history, waiting to be either culturally swallowed by their more powerful neighbor or bombed into sand, but have gained a temporary reprieve. As for Hershel herself, she may be sent back to her desk job, but she may not, and at least she spent some time in the sun.

It seems that for the game’s developers, communism and socialism are primarily associated with stagnation, not with revolutionary change.

This status quo ending underscores a curious inconsistency that struck me about the world constructed by the new team at ZA/UM. It seems that for the game’s developers, communism and socialism are primarily associated with stagnation, not with revolutionary change (perhaps this is elements of the Estonian cultural memory of the Soviet Union talking). It was striking to me that the ideology they constructed for the Superbloc was called “Post-Historical Materialism.” As someone who is quite familiar with socialism and communism, I found it telling that the creators of *Zero Parades* associated communist ideology with the end of



The surreal art panels that represent Hershel's in-game quests are one of the game's strongest points. (Illustration by Anton Vill, from *Zero Parades: For Dead Spies*)

processes of historical change as opposed to their advancement.

First, the “end of history” as an idea is most famously associated with neoliberal political thinker Francis Fukuyama, who prophesied that after the fall of the Soviet Union, capitalism and liberal democracy would usher in a new post-historical age of freedom and prosperity. It is capitalism, not socialism or communism, that constantly attempts to convince us that it has always existed and will always exist as the inevitable state of human society.

Second, one of the founding premises of socialist thought is that historical change cannot really “end.” Under the philosophical worldview of dialectical materialism, history is driven by contradictions in the material world, particularly class conflict, which cannot end until classes themselves no longer exist. With this decision, it seems the *Zero Parades* creative team either misunderstood or co-opted a socialist term to imply the opposite of its actual meaning.

This betrays cracks in the game's political lens which I am tempted to attribute to the purge of the original creative team responsible for the outspoken radical perspective of the first game, *Disco Elysium*. Despite creating a game where you play as a communist spy pitted against fascists, there are moments like these throughout the narrative where I questioned whether the creators really understood these ideologies. For example, I thought it was strange that they portrayed fascist cultural products as so compel-

ling. While the game implies there are technological dirty tricks La Luz may be using to foster addiction to their culture, one would hope that a unitary society where differing perspectives are considered immoral would not be much of a cultural dynamo. I could see the creators explaining away the Superbloc's lack of influence by echoing anti-Soviet criticism about the stifling effect of state ideology on the arts, but why isn't that a much bigger problem for La Luz, and what about the Developed World? Presumably, they would have the needed capital and the intellectual and cultural diversity necessary to develop cultural institutions, particularly since our world's version of the Developed World is extremely culturally influential (blue jeans, anyone?).

In this way, the game's writers accurately portray the fascists as evil, but also as the only culturally or politically dynamic force in the world, implicitly discounting the potential for any kind of effective resistance to their agenda from the Superbloc. This is classic liberal ideology, in that the fascists are certainly portrayed as dangerous, but not so dangerous that it's worth encouraging the communists to gain power instead. In this way, the communists are simultaneously presented as dangerous imperial actors themselves and as somehow doomed to fail due to the inherent failings of their economic and political systems.

One of the themes of my writing about video games from a leftist perspective is the way in which the default political assumptions of our society inform how these virtual worlds are constructed, thereby strengthening those assumptions. While I have not played all the way through *Disco Elysium*, it seems so far to be a rare game that substantively challenges default pro-capitalist political attitudes. For just one example, take this line of dialogue the player receives upon starting *Disco Elysium*'s communist quest:

*Yes—you're ready to start building communism *again*. You've built it before, *they've* built it before. Hasn't really worked out yet, but neither has *love*—should we just stop building love, too?*

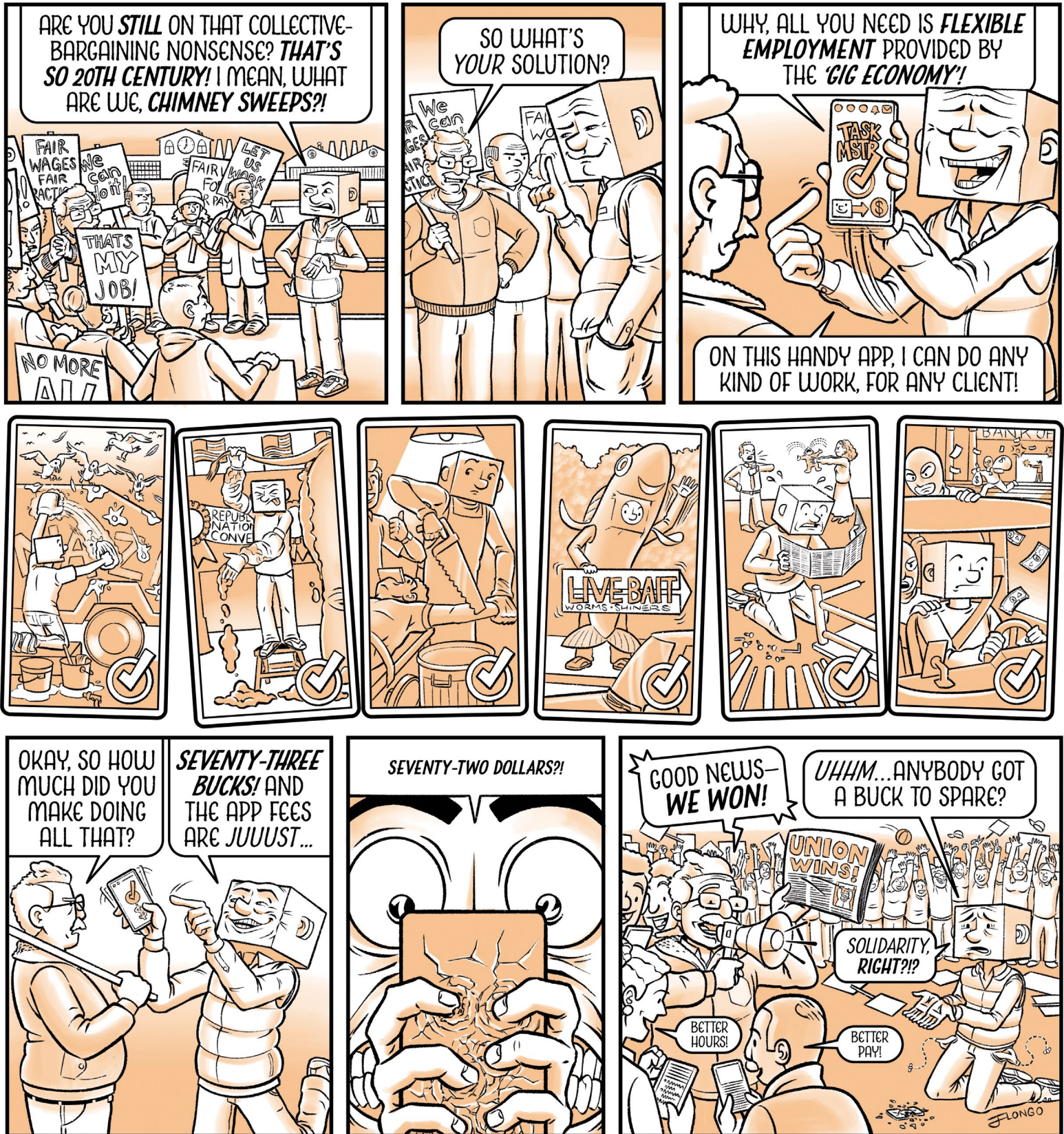
There's nothing similarly hopeful in *Zero Parades*. This may be because unlike the vast majority of games, the world of *Disco Elysium* was not initially written by employees of a for-profit games company owned by shareholders, but a cooperative artists' collective conceived by several outspoken Marxists (they literally thanked Marx and Lenin at the video game awards for the political education that allowed them to create the game). It leads me to the conclusion that a collectively-owned project made a game that seriously grappled with the potential of collectivism, only for the means of production to be privatized. Of course, these more conventional material conditions could not help but create a more conventional sequel, which used the trappings of the first game but could not understand what made it special. And indeed, history has repeated itself: after disappointing sales figures, many of the creators behind *Zero Parades* have likewise found themselves abruptly laid off by the capitalists who now control ZA/UM.

While I deeply enjoyed playing through this game and would recommend it to others, I would caution any aspiring revolutionaries taking serious inspiration from the Superbloc's “Post-Historical Materialism.” The old-fashioned dialectical kind works just fine. ✚

In 1912, cartoonist **Ernest Riebe**—a trade unionist with the Industrial Workers of the World—created one of America’s most memorable cartoon characters. **Mr. Block**, Riebe wrote, is “the representation of that host of slaves who think in terms of their masters,” and sides with the rich and powerful in every argument. Mr. Block “owns nothing, yet speaks from the standpoint of the millionaire,” he is “patriotic without patrimony,” and he “licks the hand that smites him and kisses the boot that kicks him.” In short, **Mr. Block is “the personification of all that a worker should not be.”** Thanks to the wonders of the Public Domain, *Current Affairs* is proud to present to you the 21st-century adventures of:

MR. BLOCK “He Loves the Flexible Gig Economy”

WRITTEN BY: ALEX SKOPIC & ART BY: J. LONGO





ABDUL EL-SAYED

an exclusive interview

DR. ABDUL EL-SAYED is the Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate in Michigan. In August, he won the state's primary despite being outspent approximately 10 to 1. If elected, he will be the first Muslim senator in U.S. history. Years ago, Dr. El-Sayed contributed several articles and YouTube videos to this magazine, which means that his election would mark another milestone: the first former *Current Affairs* contributor to serve in the U.S. Senate. We recently caught up with Dr. El-Sayed after his remarkable victory, to discuss some of the most pressing issues in American politics.

NATHAN J. ROBINSON: So, how does it feel to be the first former *Current Affairs* contributor to be nominated for the United States Senate?

ABDUL EL-SAYED: I mean, you know, I couldn't be more honored. But I guess, how does it feel for you?

ROBINSON: Oh, it's so exciting. Because for us, we've been making a lot of arguments in favor of things like Medicare For All for a long time. We felt like we were in the political wilderness, and now it seems like people are taking these ideas a lot more seriously. So I think it's probably the first of many.

EL-SAYED: As there should be, as there should be. But we appreciate your advocacy, man.

ROBINSON: Let me ask you—I guess I was a little surprised after you won the nomination at just how much Islamophobia came pouring out. You might have felt, like me, as if we had a little bit of faith in the country and the diminishment of racism

and bigotry. But so many of the attacks have been *explicitly* on your faith: Laura Loomer saying “I don’t want Muslims in positions of elected office.” Tommy Tuberville calling you a “jihadist.” Did this surprise you? Does it change how you feel about where America’s at?

EL-SAYED: It’s not particularly surprising, unfortunately. This is what these people do. There’s always been a small group of people in America who wanted to define America to be as small as they are, and you can imagine I’m a direct threat to their vision of an America that’s excluding certain kinds of people.

My vision of America is one where all of us come together around the ideals of this country: the Constitution, the notion of “*e pluribus unum*,” the responsibility to build together the kind of world that we want to hand off to our kids and grand-kids. And you know, for *them*, they gain power through division, and for us, our vision of politics is about unity and collective action.

So I’m not surprised, and it doesn’t really say much about America; it just says something about them. We’ve always been up against these folks. They’ve always attempted to exclude us, and I think a lot of folks are seeing that for what it is. And our responsibility is to keep bringing people together around the vision we believe in.

ROBINSON: Donald Trump recently posted these side-by-side pictures of himself and Melania, then you and your wife Sarah, and he said they represent “two VERY DIFFERENT Americas.” And in a way you agreed with him, because you said, “He’s right; this is two Americas and my wife and I genuinely love each other,” or something like that.

We found an article in the *Michigan Daily* from 2006, profiling young Muslim couples—which, really cute article, if people want to look it up—and it talks about you and your wife meeting on the Michigan campus. You’re quoted in there as saying: “The interesting thing about the Muslim perspective on [committed relationships] is that it’s a lot more serious [...] the ring on your finger and the contract—the stakes are higher.”

And it said in the article, “This sort of devotion is unusual in the morass of campus hook-ups and break-ups, to say

the least.” So I wondered if you could say a little more about the kind of values in the “other America” that you represent, versus Donald Trump.

EL-SAYED: Well, you know, it’s interesting. People like Donald Trump like to talk about family values, and you know I value family, but I also understand that family is going to look a lot of different kinds of ways, and people build family in different ways. And for Sarah and I, we’ve built a family we’re really proud of. That’s built on the love and trust and shared values that we hold, and that is about trying to raise up our daughters and trying to create more love.

And we’re so grateful to be able to come together across families that look very different from ours. For Donald Trump, he doesn’t understand that “family values” isn’t something you cosplay. It’s something that you nurture and you embrace. “Family values” is not about what a family looks like. It’s about the kind of love that you share in a family. He clearly doesn’t understand that.

I think what folks on the MAGA right find so threatening is that we are able to show that you can both have a family that’s built on love and caring, and also do so in a way that does not limit what other people’s families can be like. For Donald Trump, he thinks family is supposed to look a certain way—but has no concept of what family is supposed to feel like and be like on the inside. And you see it in, you know, the hapless Don Jr. and Eric that he’s raised. These are, like, men who clearly grew up with a father who did not know how to show love. Donald Trump, I’d argue, is a man who grew up with a father who did not know how to show love, and they’ve been broken men because of it.

ROBINSON: I asked our readers what they’d like to ask you, and in addition to the joke questions—like “Will Abdul condemn Hasan Piker for dressing better than he does?”—the number-one most-asked-question was about Medicare for All. There’s been a bit of confusion lately over Medicare for All.

You are one of the most well-known advocates of Medicare for All in the country. But a lot of people were concerned, because there’s been this suggestion that, lately, you have been doing what you—in

fact, in our magazine in 2020, you wrote an article saying *don’t let politicians water down Medicare for All*. But now you’ve been accused of embracing Pete Buttigieg’s “Medicare for All Who Want It,” essentially a rebranding of the “public option,” [whereby people could buy into Medicare if they wanted to but it wouldn’t be provided to everyone by default. Matt Yglesias said that maybe for you, Medicare for All could just be “an aspirational statement of values” that more healthcare is good rather than “a specific piece of legislation.”]

I want to ask you directly: what do you consider the *baseline non-negotiables* that constitute Medicare for All, that you don’t think politicians should water down?

EL-SAYED: I’ll answer the question, then I’ll explain why I think this confusion has been deliberately created. Medicare for All is about guaranteed baseline public health coverage with no copays, no deductibles, no premiums, which is guaranteed for everyone. That is not an “option.” That’s not a public option, because if it was a public option, then you could not have it. This is a public *guarantee*.

Now, what I’ve always said is that there’s different approaches to dealing with private insurance under Medicare for All. You can go back to my book in 2021. We have a whole section of the book talking about these different approaches under Medicare for All, and some folks say that it should ban private health insurance outright. Some folks say that it should allow supplemental coverage, and some folks argue that you could continue to allow private coverage.

What I’ll tell you is that I spent a lot of time talking to a lot of people who say: “My union fought really long and hard for that private health insurance through the union, and we’ve taken wage cuts because of it, and we’re afraid of what we could lose.” And I am sensitive to that argument, because too often when people promise something, there’s always this [fear] of loss.

But Medicare for All is not about what it takes away. It’s about what it gives, and that is guaranteed public coverage. That is what’s non-negotiable under Medicare for All. Pete Buttigieg’s “Medicare for All Who Want It” is a public option—not a public guarantee, a public *option*. Meaning if

WE'VE JUST GOT TO BE TALKING ABOUT THE THINGS THAT PEOPLE ARE ACTIVELY THINKING ABOUT EVERY DAY, AND MAKING SURE THEY UNDERSTAND THAT THEY SIT DOWNSTREAM OF A CHOICE THAT WE MAKE TO CONTINUE TO BURN FOSSIL FUELS INTO THE LUNGS OF OUR KIDS.

you have private health insurance, then you don't have public coverage, but you can optionally opt into public coverage [instead]. That is not Medicare for All. That is different.

Now, why do I think that there has been this deliberate attempt to redirect the public around "Medicare for All Who Want It?" Well, because we won this primary, and I think folks are actively trying to take an issue that was litigat-

ed in the primary to create more space on healthcare for would-be candidates in 2028—arguing that *I've* now created that space. I have not.

If you don't want to guarantee public coverage for everyone, regardless of whether or not they carry additional private insurance, I disagree with you. I don't think that that's Medicare for All, and I want public guaranteed healthcare. Is that clear?

ROBINSON: Would you affirm [this statement]: one of our readers pushed back on the people who were saying, "Has Abdul walked back his support?" He said,

"Abdul has not walked back his support for Medicare for All. He advocates single-payer for everyone, covering all medically necessary care, including dental, vision, and mental health. No deductibles, no pays, or other forms of health cost-sharing. What he has said is that where private insurance comes in, is if someone wants to waste their money on completely redundant supplemental insurers. He won't ban them from doing so, but that's not a substitute for being covered by the single payer system."

So that's what one of our readers, Gar Li-pow, said. Is that an accurate statement?

EL-SAYED: That would be a technically correct characterization. And you know, I don't want to be harsh on folks who—you know, for a lot of reasons—feel a sentimental relationship to their health insurance, their insurance company, or the notion that their union might have negotiated that for them. Right? But yes, it would be entirely redundant. But you know, there are folks who wear two shirts. That's okay! Like, I'm not going to tell people, "You can't wear two shirts. You just gotta wear one." I'm just saying I want you to have a shirt guaranteed to you by the federal government. If you want to throw on another shirt: okay, I'm not going to stop you from doing it. That is exactly correct.

ROBINSON: What about reforming Medicare itself as it exists now? Because when you talk about Medicare for All, people

might assume that you mean "no changes to existing Medicare." But Medicare right now *does* have premiums, copays, deductibles. There's Medicare Advantage, which is characterized by a lot of people as kind of a scam.

EL-SAYED: The most technically accurate way of talking about this would be *improved* Medicare. The reason that we've always talked about Medicare is because it's an analog; because it's a service that the federal government offers you at 65. But you're right: Medicare has been, as we know it, deliberately kept less good than it could be, as a function of a lot of lobbying to create space for Medicare Advantage.

I don't believe in Medicare Advantage. I don't believe that you should be able to take public coverage and privatize it so that a corporation can put your healthcare coverage, that you're entitled to, behind a paywall and a prior authorization. That I disagree with.

So it would be improved Medicare, so that it would cover vision, dental, and hearing. You wouldn't have parts A through D. It'd be one Medicare. It would be available for everyone who pays into the system. It would cover all medically necessary care and dental care and vision care, mental health care, and it would be accepted by all clinicians. No in-network or out-of-network, and that's what we're talking about here.

ROBINSON: Let's turn to the issue of climate, because you were one of the few politicians I've seen recently—maybe you still find the term "politician" an insult, and if so, I'm sorry—

EL-SAYED: Little bit.

ROBINSON: —who actually did add, when the wildfires happened, all the smoke in Detroit, you said, in essence, *This is part of the climate crisis. It is driven by the fossil fuel industry.* Democrats have been encouraged by a lot of think tanks not to discuss climate change; even as we see record heat waves around the world, they say, "It's not a winning issue. People don't care." But of course, thousands of people are dying in Europe. We threaten to see much worse effects here in the next few years.

So, as a senator, how can you make sure climate remains front and center, and what kinds of policies should we be rallying around to deal with this ongoing crisis?

EL-SAYED: You know, so often we find that our party runs away from talking about issues because we take polling too seriously—that “this is popular, this is unpopular.” Well, [it’s] the way you’re talking about it, because this is real, right? Like, you know, the problem with it too often is when we talk about climate, we talk about it in terms that are esoteric. I never want to hear another public debate about 1.5 degrees Celsius or seven degrees Celsius. I don’t want to hear another public debate about melting polar ice caps and polar bears, right?

Because the conversation that I’m having is about the accessibility of electricity that you can afford. It’s about the jobs that we can create in this incredible new industry around renewable energy. It’s about protecting our babies from having to breathe the putrid air that comes out of a smokestack, and it’s about stopping these kinds of “once-in-a-century events,” that are happening once every year, from completely devastating our lives and livelihoods: making certain communities unlivable because they’re uninsurable, forcing water backups into people’s basements in communities like Detroit or up north. That’s what I’m talking about.

And so I think that the argument needs to be had in terms of the lives that people actually lead, rather than about esoteric scientific questions—that are, you know, of technical importance, but are not translated into the lives that people lead. Why are we worried about two degrees centigrade? Well, because that has huge implications for wildfires, and huge implications for the probability of “once-in-a-lifetime” hurricanes, or these crazy rain events or killer heat. Yes, okay, so why don’t we just talk about those things?

ROBINSON: I assume you’re not saying there that the melting ice caps don’t matter, or if the polar bear disappears, and biodiversity and what have you.

“Opponents of single-payer healthcare within the Democratic party haven’t gone away. They are lining up. Yet strangely, rather than lining up to oppose Medicare-for-All, they’re lining up to support it. Rather than take a loss for opposing a popular policy, they’ve identified a different strategy: rebrand it. Embrace the name, ditch the policy—redefine it until it means whatever you want it to mean. ... This muddling of a simple concept is being echoed by pundits, too. ... Ezra Klein said it was a ‘confused and confusing’ debate and that Medicare-for-All ‘doesn’t mean what it sounds like it means.’ Only the phrase ‘Medicare-for-All’ is actually quite clear. For the past several decades ‘Medicare-for-All’ has had a clear meaning, describing a specific set of bills in Congress—first introduced by Congressman John Conyers in 2003 as ‘Expanded and Improved Medicare for All Act.’ Medicare-for-All bills have been introduced in every Congress since then, and a new version is slated to be released in the House this month. What’s changed is that opponents to single-payer healthcare are trying to confuse the meaning of Medicare-for-All. So let’s be clear about what Medicare-for-All actually means. It means single-payer healthcare that would provide cradle-to-grave government-supported healthcare for all Americans. Under the current version, it would be free at the point-of-care so that it doesn’t discriminate against low-income Americans. And it does not rely on the private health insurance industry, though opinions differ about whether or not private plans would be fully eliminated or allowed as a surplus luxury... There are, no doubt, some really important policy discussions to have about the form and function of real Medicare-for-all, but they don’t include stripping out the engine.”

— Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, “Don’t Let ‘Medicare For All’ Be Rebranded,” *Current Affairs*, Feb. 22, 2019.

EL-SAYED: That *matters*. The point that I’m making is that we’re not having the conversation in terms that matter to everyday people. Like, yes, biodiversity matters, but let’s be clear: when you can’t afford your groceries and you can’t afford your utilities, biodiversity is a nice-to-have. And so we’ve just got to be talking about the things that people are actively thinking about every day in their lives, and making sure they understand that it sits downstream of a choice that we make to continue to burn fossil fuels into the lungs of our kids. We don’t have to do that!

Also, that Exxon and Chevron and BP can continue to make huge amounts of money selling stuff that we, in theory, don’t really need—because at the end of the day we could do a lot of this stuff better. That’s not to say that I want to ban anything, right? That’s the other problem: so often we’re focused on what

we’re going to take away. Let’s focus on what we add, right?

We could invest so clearly in renewable energy that we drop the price of oil dramatically, because the price of a kilowatt of energy could go down. That’s what I’m talking about. Let’s create a whole bunch of jobs, creating really, really accessible renewable energy, drop the price of electricity, and create the situation where it just *makes more sense* to do it this other way. Right? There’s always going to be some uses for legacy energy sources, but I want to be able to compete on redundancy. [Oil and gas] are redundant and less efficient. So let’s focus on making renewable energy way more efficient.

ROBINSON: I want to ask you about policing. In 2020, there was a major national conversation, in the wake of the death of George Floyd, about reforming police.

Some in the progressive movement have kind of expressed embarrassment over some of the slogans like “abolish the police” and “abolish prisons,” that were spoken in that time. At the same time, I worry that we’re moving away from having a serious conversation about police reform.

“When the story of the COVID-19 pandemic is told, our private, for-profit healthcare system will have emerged as one of the single worst vulnerabilities we had as we faced the crisis. When we emerge from this, let us learn the lesson and replace this terrible system. Medicare for All would have solved all of these problems. While it may not have prevented the pandemic from occurring in the first place, everyone in and no deductibles means that everyone gets the care they need—without a paywall. Direct government reimbursement for all services means that hospitals don’t rely on fickle private insurers to reimburse for elective procedures to get paid, and the government can surge support for hospitals in their times of greatest need. And the fact that the federal government would be the single payer for healthcare when people get sick allows it to invest on the incentive to keep them healthy in the first place.”

— Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, “In The Middle of a Pandemic, Our For-Profit Healthcare System Is Failing Us,” *Current Affairs*, April 2, 2020.

You said back then, “*Why are we investing so much in people with guns and less in people with the means of being able to invest in young folks [...] Do police really need to use guns? Do we need as much of a police force?*”

And I actually think you were [saying something] important there, as a doctor thinking about alternatives to policing and prisons. Could you clarify how you think we should have the conversation about reforming police and prisons in this country?

EL-SAYED: Let’s start with the end in mind. First of all, campaigning by slogan is just less effective. You know, we have good ideas, and I think when you sieve those ideas into two words, they’re going to be misinterpreted. So we all want to start with the end in mind, which is *we want everybody to be able to get home safely*. We want folks in communities to be able to get home safe. We want law enforcement to be able to get home safe.

And if we start with that end in mind, then the question is: what are the things that we should be able to do to do that? There are some situations where the right answer is somebody with a gun. You have somebody who’s got a gun, and they’re actively committing a violent crime. You do need to be able to respond with someone with a gun.

But that’s not the answer to *a lot of* problems to which we send a guy with a gun. When you think about somebody having a behavioral crisis, when you think about a situation where you have a nonviolent offense. There are sometimes better ways to solve those problems that involve being strategic and thoughtful, like community violence intervention; that involve behavioral health response; that involve investments in public health and public service. So if we start with that end in mind, let’s think about all the things we need to fund.

When you have the situation where you have somebody who’s responding with a gun, you want that person to be *from* the community, which means you actually have to invest in recruitment, retention, retirement. So folks from that community see that as a legitimate career path, and will choose it. That is an “investment” in police, but we should not be investing in war material like

tanks and Humvees, because that often will yield the kind of policing that is about, in effect, making war against the community.

Similarly, we should be investing in behavioral health response. We should be investing in community violence intervention—the things that Donald Trump and this administration have disinvested in that leave communities less safe. And we need to be investing in the long-term healthcare system to be able to provide substantial and significant mental healthcare in communities. We need to be investing in public health and anti-poverty measures that address a lot of the long-term causes of crime.

And if you’re going to incarcerate somebody, you need to make sure they get all the healthcare and mental healthcare and job preparation that they need while they’re there, because the goal is not to just incarcerate somebody. The goal is rehabilitation. So if we have a policy failure in which somebody ends up committing a crime and ends up in the system, the goal is to make sure that they never end up in the system again.

So what do you need to invest in? You need to make sure that they have the healthcare they need. You need to make sure that they have the education and job training they need. Make sure that there’s job placement for them, that there’s housing available on the back end. That’s the way we should be optimizing and operating. None of that gets captured in a three-word statement. That requires really smart policy design and investment, which is not defund anything. It is *fund the things that we need*, and maybe don’t fund the things we don’t need.

ROBINSON: What about the U.S. military budget? Donald Trump is proposing raising it to \$1.5 trillion. There are 800 U.S. military bases around the world. You’ve talked about withdrawing U.S. support for countries that abuse human rights around the world; what about the ever-expanding nuclear arsenal, the ever-expanding militarization in this country?

EL-SAYED: Look, the challenge that we have is that we’ve got a military-industrial complex and special interests that

are interested in making sure that that military-industrial complex supports the interests of foreign governments. None of those things are in our best interest, right? Basic economics, right?

For the capitalists in the room, there was always the “guns and butter” curve, and right now we are disinvested in healthcare. We’re disinvested in housing. We’re disinvested in public education, and we are spending more and more on guns, meaning spending more and more on material that does not, you know, provide less expensive groceries. It doesn’t reduce the cost of housing. It doesn’t improve the quality of our air and water. It doesn’t provide us healthcare. And so it’s crazy to allow these corporations to continue to buy and sell politicians that are going to do their bidding.

I mean, there was \$70 million of spending against me in my primary, in large part built around my advocacy against sending our money to foreign militaries and selling weapons to foreign militaries. But that’s the power of these corporations and special interests in our politics, which takes me back to my central campaign point: I want money out of politics, so I can put money in your pocket and pass Medicare for All.

ROBINSON: I said our readers’ number-one question was about Medicare for All. The number-two was, they have heard you say that you are a capitalist, not a socialist. Our readers are concerned that you’re on the side of the bosses here. You know, the DSA agenda is “workers deserve more” not “the rich capitalists deserve more.”

In the Democratic Party, the word “socialism” now polls better than “capitalism.” So when you say you’re on the side of “capitalism,” they get a little worried that you might be soft on the bosses here. So I think you’re going to need to reassure some of them.

EL-SAYED: Have no fear, I’m never going to be soft on the corporate bosses. I’m an anti-corporatist capitalist, and I don’t think we live in capitalism. I think we live in corporatism. You know, if you go back to Adam Smith, he’ll tell you that the biggest danger to markets functioning was never government regulation. It was always monopoly. He’ll tell you



Photo: Associated Press

there is no market without a moral. So I’m just saying that the allocation of resources based on supply and demand, I’ve got no issue with.

But what I have an issue with is big corporations using their power and their money to dominate markets to rent-seek, which is a fancy way of saying using their money to shape government policy in their industry that always works for them. And I oppose that vehemently. So I’m looking forward to working alongside folks like Bernie Sanders and AOC and Elizabeth Warren to start regulating heavily against the power of these corporations in our politics, against the power of these corporations in our society, to break up their power and break them up where they have too much power.

So have no fear, you’re never going to see me being soft on the bosses.

ROBINSON: What about the left argument that workers deserve greater ownership of their companies? In a company like Amazon, workers should have much, much greater control than just having to take orders from above.

EL-SAYED: Which is why I stand with unions. Which is why I’m grateful that I’ve been endorsed by the UAW. Which is why I will always fight for the right to organize. I think there’s plenty of

opportunity for us to be able to think about incentivizing things like co-ops and cooperative ownership. I think these kinds of companies tend to be governed better and make smarter decisions in the market, and always put the well-being of the broader community ahead of just the simple bottom line.

I’m also for regulating a lot of the way that the interests of corporations get decoupled from the well-being of the people who make it possible. You know, rethinking the quarterly bottom line, rethinking the power of CEOs and their interests in corporate decision making.

ROBINSON: Finally, I would love it if you could give a specific thing that you have learned in the course of winning a very tough primary. A lot of others might be interested in running for office. They know the kinds of things they need to talk about, but clearly you’ve learned something about how to campaign, and how to win and how to beat an enormous amount of money.

EL-SAYED: Say the same thing. Say it everywhere. Don’t shape what you’re going to say based on your opposition. Shape what you’re going to say based on the people you want to serve. And have fun. This is a gift. Democracy is a gift. Not everybody has this, and people need to see that you love what you do. ♣



THE MOTHER ROAD AND THE MACHINE

BY JESSE WRIGHT

TWO DECADES INTO THE 20TH CENTURY, ROUTE 66 tied half the country together. Before the interstate highway system, the Mother Road brought California harvests east, Chicago meats west. It took families on their first big road trips. During the hard times, the Great Depression and Dust Bowl, it brought a whole lot of hungry migrants anywhere there was work. It was a roadmap of opportunity.

The best infrastructure inspires a people. It creates opportunities. It builds and builds and when, finally, it dies, the ghosts linger and people pay for the ghost tour.

For a lot of people, and for decades, Route 66 delivered those opportunities right to the front door. It still stands as one of the best examples of collective cultural design in American history, and its legacy as a highway is unparalleled. At its 100th birthday this year, it remains a cultural reservoir for nostalgia, music, movies, and the classic road trip experience. A century on, the road is still out there, delivering opportunities.

“They come into 66 from the tributary side roads, from the wagon tracks and the rutted country roads. 66 is the mother road, the road of flight.”

— John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

The road was born on November 11, 1926, not the first highway but, from its birth, one of the most popular, connecting a bustling Midwest to a nascent West. It begins a few blocks from Lake

Michigan, snakes a middle path through the Illinois prairie and hangs a left through the old Missouri mountains, jumps across the Missouri River, skips across the Kansan plains and, in Oklahoma, heads off west into the sunblasted sands of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, before resting, finally, after 2,448 miles, at the Santa Monica Pier and the Pacific Ocean.

It began as a collection of state and local roads, not really owned in whole by anyone or anything. Each state or city paid for a little at a time as they could and, by 1926, miles yet remained unpaved.

The road was a blank canvas to draw a 20th-century national identity, filled with dreams of cars and cities, hope and forward movement. Billboards burst out all over, advertising everything, anything. Reportedly, the billboards grew so numerous in places, it was impossible to read them all and critics claimed they caused accidents. Finally, in 1965, at the behest of First Lady “Lady Bird” Johnson, the Highway Beautification Act cleaned some of the billboards up. Of course, industry pushed back and the final bill contained a raft of compromises, and it took years for companies to comply, but it was at least an attempt at easing corporate claws from the landscape.

Johnson saw the highways and the roadsides as deeply important to the nation’s mental health, writing in her diary, “All the threads are interwoven—recreation and pollution and mental health and the crime rate and rapid transit and highway beautification and the war on poverty and parks[...] everything leads to something else.”

That wild road went tearing ass through the wild boondocks and backcountry into the golden sunset of California. It led to legend.

The road inspired songs, a TV show, and, in part, the movie *Cars*. Along its asphalt edges bloomed museums, dance halls, snake farms, gas stations, motels, and coffee shops. Cave tours, fudge, and cold AC awaited travelers—something new at every stop. All those travelers brought hunger, flat tires, empty gas tanks, curiosity, hope, and for a few decades, good times. And cash.

Those dollars came by car and left in country hands. Those dollars kept the road maintained and they kept the ice cream cold, the coffee hot, and the snakes fed. The legend outlasted the federal highway.

In 1946, Bobby Troup wrote “(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66” and since then, the song has been covered by hundreds of artists, from all over the world. It was a hit every decade for the next 50 years, most recently in 2006, when John Mayer’s cover for *Cars* earned a Grammy nomination. Considering the song celebrates an American pas-time—the car trip—along an American highway, it’s perhaps surprising that it caught on in England. But the Rolling Stones, fans of American music generally and Chuck Berry specifically, covered his 1961 cover on their debut record, released in 1964—omitting, mysteriously, Joplin, Missouri. Later, Depeche Mode covered it, presumably from the Stones as they, too, skip Joplin. English musician Billy Bragg covered it as “A13 Trunk Road to the Sea,” but reworking all the geography, making it distinctly English. He skips all the American towns.

In the 21st century, the route might be best known from *Cars*, the animated film set in a small Arizona town based on a town along Route 66. It’s about Lightning McQueen, a brash city race car who gets stuck in Radiator Springs, a small town on the decline. Over time, Lightning comes around to the charms of life off the beaten track, and he also learns about what happens when the highway moves on.

In real life, Seligman, Arizona—supposedly an inspiration for the film—today capitalizes on the fame. Rusty signs draw in tourists and some clever entrepreneurs have dressed up dead automobiles as movie characters.

But as in the movie, the interstate highway system really did pass Seligman—and a whole lot of other little towns—by. The kicks moved out of town, away from the annoying speed limits and stoplights which forced drivers to slow down and ponder

an ice cream cone or a cave tour. The man behind the counter at the Historic Route 66 Motel in Seligman told me he was over the town, and was saving up to get out. Not a lot of jobs, no real future—the same story you’d hear from any 20-something in any small town.

Pretty soon, new gas pumps, chain hotels, and restaurants opened up a few miles away, just out of reach of the old motels and diners. In 1984, the last highway bypass was finished in Williams, Arizona and, with that, there was a faster, easier way west: Interstate 40.

In 1985, Route 66 was decertified, a federal highway no more. With that, it became a relic—the road itself just another roadside attraction.

But what an attraction!

Evidence of that mid-century bonanza still litters the landscape. Open any page of any Route 66 travel book and any town will have the same broad strokes: Hotels, opened in the 1930s

or ’40s, closed in the 1970s or ’80s—stop and see the old signs. Get a glimpse of what you missed.

Not everything on Route 66 is gone, of course. Some attractions, like the Meremac Caverns in Missouri, are doing big numbers, and little by little investors are snapping up the classic old motor courts, rehabbing them, sticking a classic car out front and luring in the summer motorists with the old signs, burning bright again, boasting “a TV in every room” and “cold AC.” And there



The charming town of Seligman, Arizona claims to be the inspiration for the animated Disney film “Cars,” and features several replicas of its characters. (Photo: Jesse Wright)

are still a few cafés and custard stands around.

More than once, I ran into retired men—always men—who had bought property along the route and were in the process of rehabbing it, rebuilding, recreating or saving some version of the past. Young men wanted to leave these towns; retired folks stuck around to hang on to the past, or they came looking for it here.

In Miller, Missouri, Ed Klein, formerly of Chicago, was busy inside his old stone service station/post office/barber shop on July 4, doing carpentry work. He bought Spencer Station in 2022 after falling in love with Route 66 years ago. The concrete road in front of the store is, he says, the last untouched portion of Route 66 left—never paved over, never restored. Your car, he explained, can drive on the actual road here.

It’s a neat trip, if you can take the time off to drive it. Every year, thousands do, and they spend an average of \$2,000 to get a whiff of what America once was. That’s 2011 numbers for a five-day trip; I just did the trip myself, and it was closer to \$4,000 for

a 20-day trip. Either way, there's money in the nostalgia circuit. Cars still need gas and drivers still need coffee. Caves still need touring. The old guys need visitors to talk to.

Even so, it has faded. What was once a long line of ice cream stands, motor courts, oddball attractions, and busy downtowns is, as of 2026, looking a lot emptier. On the most popular Route 66 app, a ghost icon pops up when something used to be there, but isn't any longer.

Each ghost represents an empty gas station, hotel, store, or highway café. Turn and look at the ghosts. For all the wealth that road brought, when the highway passed it by, it left behind about 200,000 empty houses and 15 percent poverty, according to a 2011 federal study. At least these small towns have ghosts. One imagines what the poverty rate might be had the road never been built, had the dreams never materialized.

God help the country without anything at all.

In 1985, the same year Route 66 was decertified, Peter Peterson and Stephen Schwarzman founded the investment company Blackstone, which is today one of the biggest landlords in the United States, owning 274,000 rental units. They're everywhere, right in the heart of the country—but there's nothing to see.

They own homes, apartments, and condos and, of late, they're also the biggest private owner of data centers (they own QTS). They're building data centers in communities all over the country. In May 2026, the company announced it would invest \$5 billion in an AI company with Google. Blackstone is worth roughly \$1.3 trillion. Google is worth over \$4 trillion. All that money, and still nothing to see.

In July, the *New York Times* quoted unnamed "technologists" and wrote that "In size and ambition, this moment compares to the building of the railroads in the 1800s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s, and the Manhattan Project[...] in the 1940s."

I'm leery of the salesman's pitch here, but something big is happening. The difference is, those projects created stories, built a nation, made generations, and fed the myth of America. Those things, they built a country.

Data center developers are currently buying up whole neighborhoods, whole houses filled with lives left behind, tearing them down and building low-slung industrial sites. The *New York Times* reported in July that federal lands, thousands and thou-

sands of acres, are being turned into data centers. Inside these centers, banks of electronics whirl and hum, cooled by water and powered by natural gas, sitting on public land, fouling public air and delivering a promised ROI to far-away private investors.

What dreams must these machines draw? And for who?

They build nothing. Neither a store nor factory, nor even a blank canvas—they leech, suck resources from communities, and hawk lies. Take a look at but one data center. The world's largest supercomputer, the Elon Musk-baked xAI Colossus in Memphis, will supposedly bring 500 jobs, according to the Memphis Chamber of Commerce. The first Colossus moved into an old 785,000-square foot Electrolux plant, which laid off 530 people when it shuttered in 2019—down from a jobforce of 1,200 people in 2017. Yet, in 2026, one watchdog report puts the number of employees closer to 300 permanent positions—or about the same as a Walmart Supercenter, which takes up a small fraction of the space and doesn't suck up natural resources.

But more to the point, Electrolux builds vacuum cleaners, washing machines, and actual home goods appliances everyone uses regularly. Colossus, on the other hand, is "the most powerful supercomputer in the world," also known as "the Gigafactory of Compute." Furthermore, it powers Grok, xAI's chatbot, which has become notorious for incidents where it randomly started calling itself "MechaHitler" and spouting Nazi rhetoric, or generated sexualized "deepfake" images of unsuspecting women. Common



The WigWam Motel in San Bernardino, California is one of two tee-pee motels on the highway, of only three left in the country. Down the street is Mitla Cafe, the Mexican restaurant that inspired Taco Bell. (Photo: Jesse Wright)

Sense Media, a nonprofit watchdog for parents and educators, calls Grok "inappropriate for kids and teens."

So, users can talk to it, if they like. It won't clean your house, but it can fuel your mania and psychosis.

And that's the difference. From its outset, the Mother Road offered something real. But nothing lasts forever, and endless lamentation on the olden giants is so much cliché. So turn the seasons, so comes the age, so arrives the decay.

But what is new, perhaps, is the utter absence of even having been at all. The data centers' legacy will be nothing. Their absence will be complete. Computer hallucinations leave no room for the dreams of humans. In 100 years, there will be nothing. Nobody will want to spend their vacation touring endless rooms full of rusty server racks.

And that's the difference.

Some of these places, they used to be somewhere, and that

place where they used to be, it is something to see. History, memory, and even the remnants of the *ye olde whatever* bring in visitors and money, inspire song and art. Anywhere there are people, people go to pay tribute to old ghosts.

In 50 years, what songs will they sing about the data highways paved and abandoned by AI centers? Will there be such a thing as a classic Cybertruck stuck out front of an old-timey charging station?

The paths forward we're building put money into the pockets of a handful and they turn the land to dust, foul up the air, and leave a cultural legacy as barebones as the landscape, just drying up the imagination with artificial hallucinations, fake facts, and reassuring nonsense intended to assuage the most psychotic and hypochondriacal.

You're free to believe as you like with AI; they're notoriously sycophantic. You need not leave your house to get your kicks—and certainly there is no real place to get them with these things. The simulacrum is enough, the illusion is the thing. Just stay put; keep feeding the machine quarters.

So far, not too many people are feeding quarters. A CBS story from April 2026 reports about 2 percent of Americans are paying \$20 a month for AI subscriptions. Those subscriptions are kept, on average, for seven months. Free and lower-cost tiers are available, some with advertisements. Presumably those ads meet users where they are—with exactly the products and services the AI predicts people need. Like yesterday's highway billboards, promises of wonder lie just down the road a bit. With AI though, it's always a bit further, always a bit deeper.

Skeptics point out current subscription revenue isn't sustainable. In fact, there's still no clear agreement on how much the big AI operations even cost to operate. Without a clear cost or a clear and consistent revenue stream, there will be a bust. But presumably those fears can be assuaged by AI, too—for a while, at least.

Just keep dropping quarters into the machine.

The quarters, presumably, will go toward more technology. More, bigger, faster AI. More data centers. The hands that snatch up those quarters, those hands are quite clean of any country dirt. They don't live there.

These techno landlords, they buy up our homes, take our money, the water, the air. They strip away the local, the everyday and the dreamers, and they deliver us more hallucinations. Some places somewhere, turned into nowhere.

When the quarters run out, they leave not even ghosts in their wake. There is nothing to see, nothing to remember, nothing to inspire. The con, long gone.

The lone and level sands, stretching far away.

"Wonder was the grace of the country. Any action could be justified by that: the wonder it was rooted in. Period followed period and finally the wonder was that things could be built so big. Bridges, skyscrapers, fortunes, all having a life first in the marketplace, still drew on the force of wonder. But then a moment's quiet. What was it now that was built so big? Only the marketplace itself. Could there be wonder in that? The size of the con?"

— George Trow, "Within the Context of No Context"

Route 66 is a shorthand for something obvious—the size, scope and possibilities within the country. From its very birth it was that thing.

It's no wonder it was so popular from its start. It wasn't the first highway and it wasn't the longest, but in the second decade of the 20th century it led straight to Los Angeles, a promised land growing fat on motion pictures, fruit orchards and, soon, military contracts building the war machines that would free the world. It was a road anyone could get on and find themselves a future.

Route 66 delivered about the only thing anyone can hope for out of progress, a chance to get some-

where and do something and make something of themselves. A chance to live.

I took that road west, from Lou Mitchell's breakfast table in downtown Chicago, through every dusty dying town, hit every stop sign, stopping at every cave tour and highway motel that looked worth a damn until I hit the Santa Monica pier, where I parked, got changed, and walked into the warm Pacific waters. That trip took 17 days.

The road is still a shorthand for the size, scope and possibilities of the country. But it's a symbol of what was. It's a monument of that one time progress meant progress for everybody. For anybody. It's filled with ghosts.

On the trip back, I took the interstate. Unbothered by stop lights, cave tours, museums and charms, I ran the car fast—right past everything and everyone in between.

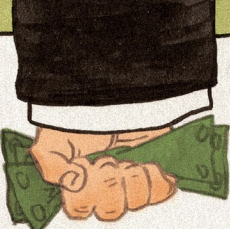
It took two days. It's filled with gas stations. ♣



The American Giants Museum in Atlanta, Illinois is an early draw along Route 66, collecting roadside advertisements from long-gone businesses that once littered the American byway. (Photo: Jesse Wright)

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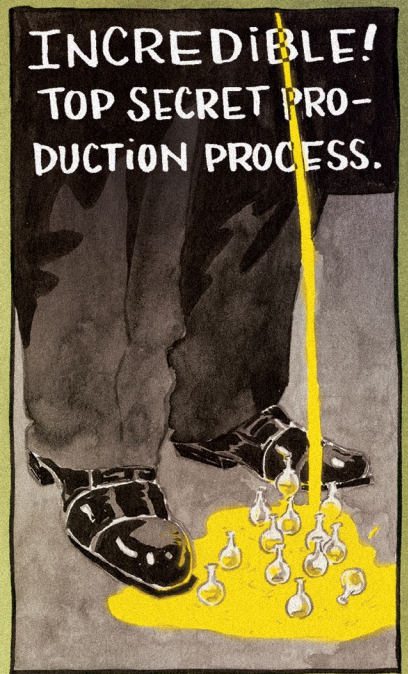
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