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THE MONEY REPORT

**How Online Shopping Dupes Us All**

**Adventures in Corporate Raiding**


Baldwin backstage at *Saturday Night Live*, March 11, 2017

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OF NO PARTY OR CLIQUE

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*Photograph by Andrew Hetherington*

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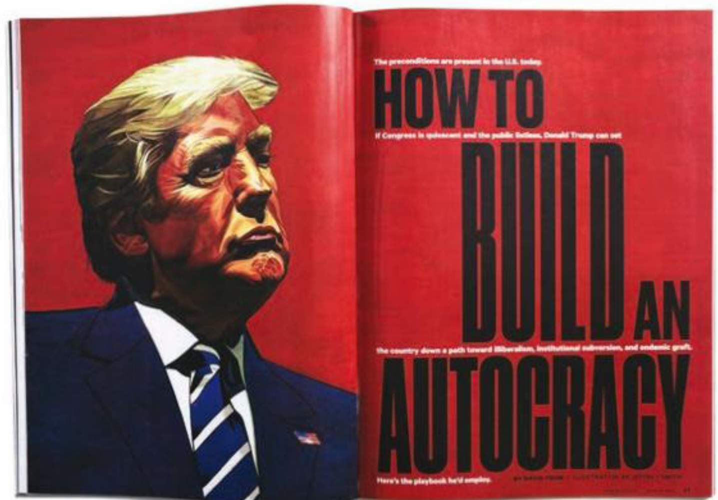
# THE CONVERSATION

RESPONSES & REVERBERATIONS




## How to Build an Autocracy

In the March cover story, David Frum wrote that corruption and intimidation by the president is possible "only if many people other than Donald Trump agree to permit it. It can all be stopped, if individual citizens and public officials make the right choices."

I am currently a senior in high school studying comparative politics. The part of this article that struck me the most was the near-dystopian prediction of life under the rule of President Trump. I was not shocked by the course of action that the president may choose to take, but rather by the docile state of the American population that Frum described—it seems the least feasible of all his predictions. Political participation has become a part of daily life, whether in the form of Facebook posts, conversations at the dinner table, or seemingly constant demonstrations. On top of that, media outlets such as *The Atlantic* are circulating ideas that push citizens to telephone their senators and to support laws that force Trump to expose his own autocratic ways. Although the state of democracy may seem bleak in our government, democracy has never been stronger in the public sphere.

**Jessie Berger**
CHICAGO, ILL.

Mr. Frum painted a very interesting portrait, but it has some major problems. The first is his apparent underestimation of the place of demonstrations and marches. There is good reason to believe that massive popular resistance to the government will play a big role during Donald Trump's presidency. Because of this oversight, Mr. Frum's analysis also fails to consider the probable character of the Trump administration's response to such resistance. The manifestly authoritarian characteristics of the man and many of his advisers lead me to think that a violent crackdown is highly likely. I would also predict much more domestic surveillance, as well as harassment of opposition groups. A violent crackdown could be the start of attempts by the administration to curb democracy, and possibly even shut down democratic institutions. Will congressional Republicans regard these moves as justified? Or will they decide there is an imperative to impeach?

The second major flaw that I see in Mr. Frum's fascinating analysis concerns his assessment of the role that is likely to be played by international events, crises, and war. It would hardly be surprising if Trump's bellicosity and recklessness got us into one or several military conflicts, leading to massive demonstrations and other resistance in the United States and around the world. Once again, given Trump's cruel and authoritarian disposition, this could all lead to a violent crackdown.

Finally, although Mr. Frum is right that Trump might oversee a period of economic expansion that raises wages for the working class, it is at least as likely that international economic instability will outweigh those gains, causing increased unemployment and lower wages.

My view is that we'll see a more turbulent period than Mr. Frum projects.

**Ross Zucker**
POLITICAL-SCIENCE PROFESSOR,
TOURO COLLEGE AND
UNIVERSITY SYSTEM
HARRISON, N.Y.

#TWEET of the Month

**I urge all Americans to read this critical piece by @davidfrum. It may be the most important of the year.**

— @Evan_McMullin
(2016 presidential candidate)

"How to Build an Autocracy," is a chilling read. "We are living through the most dangerous challenge to the free government of the United States that anyone alive has encountered," [Frum] writes. The argument works because its component parts are so plausible. Frum does not imagine a coup or a crisis. He does not lean on the deus ex machina of a terrorist attack or a failed assassination attempt. The picture he paints is not one in which everything is different,

but one in which everything is the same.

He imagines a Trumpian autocracy built upon the most ordinary of foundations: a growing economy, a cynical public, a cowed media, a self-interested business community, and a compliant Republican Party. The picture resonates because it combines two forces many sense at work—Trump's will to power and the fecklessness of the institutions meant to stop him—into one future everyone fears: autocracy in America.

But what Frum imagines is not an autocracy. It is what we might call a partyocracy—a quasi-strongman leader empowered only because the independently elected legislators from his party empower him …

If Trump builds an autocracy, his congressional enablers will, if anything, be more responsible than him. After all, in amassing power and breaking … norms, Trump will be doing what the Founders expected. But in letting any president do that, Congress will be violating the role [it was] built to play …

There is much talk of the resistance to the Trump administration, and many protests happening outside the White House. But it is in Congress members' districts—at their town halls, in their offices, at their coffee shops—where this fight will be won or lost. This is why it matters that the anti-Trump movement has begun adopting the tactics the Tea Party used to great success against President Obama in 2010: Those tactics focused on congressional offices, and that's why they worked …

But this is the beginning, not the end, of Trump's opposition seeing Congress as the core battleground. The real test will be in 2018 … Turnout tends to plummet in midterm elections, and overall turnout was historically low in 2014. The result, as political scientist Seth Masket writes, is that [politicians] are more afraid of their primary voters than general-election voters. Their behavior will change if and when that changes.

And that should change. It should change in 2018, and it should change thereafter. Congress is more powerful than the president. It comes first in the Constitution for a reason. The public should demand more of it, and care more who runs it.

**Ezra Klein**
EXCERPT FROM A *VOX* ARTICLE

I'm a typical Canadian liberal and would usually be ashamed of David Frum, another Canadian, supporting conservative ideals. But today I wrap my arms around him and say, "Well done." Although I'm not an American, I am a member of the free world and will have to endure Donald Trump's leadership. Hence my motivation to comment.

I was particularly aroused by Frum's comment that "people who expect to hear only lies can hardly complain when a lie is exposed." This circumstance has existed in the United States for years, maybe decades. I continually hear that misleading statements made during a campaign are discounted, almost expected. I know that if my prospective employer is aware that I lied during a job interview, then I don't get the job. Americans have been hiring presidents for years who have knowingly misled them during the campaign. Maybe if this habit were not condoned and if there were a way of highlighting these "alternative facts," Americans could be better positioned to hire the right man or woman.

**Wayne Mortson**
TORONTO, ONTARIO

David Frum points out how the erosion of political institutions and of the very concept of truth can help render Donald Trump unchallengeable. But I wonder if Frum, my fellow Canadian, albeit one with dual American citizenship, shares the peculiar blind spot most Americans have to the firmware of true fascism, which has to do with supporters carrying actual guns, and not mere robots and internet trolls that make miserable the life of dissenters (let us not yet call them dissidents). Trump's most ardent followers live in traditionally red states with a high percentage of gun ownership. The presence of armed supporters at political rallies has a chilling effect on people's desire to freely speak their minds, especially after the horrifying shooting of Representative Gabrielle Giffords, which also resulted in the deaths of six people, including U.S. District Judge John Roll and a young girl who came to watch an exercise in civics. The National Rifle Association has become more and more extreme, and it spent

## THE BIG QUESTION

*On TheAtlantic.com, readers answered April's Big Question and voted on one another's responses. Here are the top vote-getters.*

### Q: What was the most significant fad of all time?

**5. The Dutch tulip mania** of the 17th century was the first well-documented financial bubble. The widespread speculation on bulbs was a sign of things to come.

— *Pat Southward*

**4.** The biggest fad of all time is presently being re-experienced by Americans. **White nationalism** helped shape Western civilization and may now lead to its decline and irrelevance.

— *Robert Schmoldt*

**3. Texting.** It has, in one fell swoop, removed face-to-face conversations between humans and transformed them into letters, digits, and mindless emoticons.

— *Wayne Johnson*

**2. Television** has transcended its instant fad status, leaving a lasting impression upon the way societies receive and understand news, culture, and entertainment.

— *Brett Kucharski*

**1. Tobacco smoking** defined "cool" for many years and has led to many early deaths from heart disease, cancer, and other causes.

— *Bruce Brandt*

at least $30 million on ads for Trump's election campaign. Should armed agents provocateurs infiltrate anti-Trump rallies, it is not hard to imagine just how extreme the police response could become. Any kind of mass-violence scenario would play into Trump's assertion that America has become irredeemably violent, and can only benefit Trump's "law and order" brand.

Trump also calls the kind of attack that occurred in San Bernardino a terrorist

> **"Fascism is now the elephant in the room—but the unconscionable lack of gun control is the skeleton in the closet."**

story, rather than a massive failure of gun control, while blithely ignoring most incidents of domestic terror and hatred, especially when those who are shot happen to be black or Sikh or gay or female. Trump has great fondness not just for the soft power of prevarication, but for the hard power exercised by those who are willing and able to use guns as a last resort. That is the greatest, most unspeakable, and arguably most repressed truth of America.

Trump recently signed a measure ensuring that the mentally ill can obtain firearms. This from a man who promises to keep Americans safe with his rather arbitrary travel ban. Fascism is now the elephant in the room—but the unconscionable lack of gun control is the skeleton in the closet.

**Ron Charach, M.D.**
TORONTO, ONTARIO

Many of our fellow citizens—and as a result, much of our government—could care less about objective information. Logic and analysis are fading while emotionally satisfying, chest-pounding crazy talk and impulsive actions replace them. The goal seems to be to restrict Americans to an unchanging and therefore unrealistic place where they imagine they'll be okay again. Donald Trump and the Republicans are creating a tribe of Me and Mine while no longer even recognizing a democratic society of Us and Ours.

We have to face up to the reality that our country has embraced unreality. We need to figure out how to create arguments that play to feelings at least as much as they present facts. And we need to be smart about converting those arguments to results.

**John Kircher**
WASHINGTON, D.C.

## Corrections

"Can Wall Street Save Trump From Himself?," by William D. Cohan (April), said that Senator Elizabeth Warren espoused the view that anyone who has worked on Wall Street should be disqualified from government service. In fact, Warren has voted to confirm nominees with Wall Street experience, including Stanley Fischer and Jack Lew. "What Your Therapist Doesn't Know," by Tony Rousmaniere (April), said that in a survey by Columbia University's Matt Blanchard and Barry Farber, 93 percent of clients reported whitewashing feedback to their therapists. The correct figure is 70 percent. "Breaking Faith," by Peter Beinart (April), misspelled the last name of Ludvig Broomé while citing his undergraduate thesis. April's Study of Studies ("How to Buy Happiness," by Isabella Kwai) misspelled the last name of Leaf Van Boven, a co-author of "To Do or to Have? That Is the Question," from the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

To contribute to The Conversation, please email letters@theatlantic.com. Include your full name, city, and state.

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# The James W. Foley Legacy Foundation congratulates its 2017 Freedom Award honorees.

**THE JAMES W. FOLEY LEGACY FOUNDATION WAS FOUNDED IN SEPTEMBER 2014, WITHIN TWO WEEKS OF THE MURDER OF THE AMERICAN JOURNALIST JAMES FOLEY.**

**Jim was a courageous journalist, committed educator, and compassionate humanitarian.**

**The Foley Foundation seeks to continue his legacy of moral courage. It is dedicated to the return of Americans held hostage abroad, to the protection of freelance conflict journalists, and to safety education for journalism students.**

## Delphine Halgand

**AMERICAN HOSTAGE FREEDOM AWARD**

**DELPHINE HALGAND HAS BEEN THE DIRECTOR OF THE U.S. OFFICE OF REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS SINCE DECEMBER 2011.** She runs the American-based activities for the organization and advocates for journalists, bloggers, and media rights worldwide. Acting as the office's spokesperson, Halgand regularly appears on American media (CNN, Fox News, PBS, Democracy Now) and foreign media (BBC, Al Jazeera, France 24), and lectures at U.S. universities and conferences on press-freedom-violation issues. She previously served as press attaché in charge of outreach at the French Embassy to the U.S. Since graduating from Sciences Po in Paris with a master's degree in journalism, she has worked as an economics correspondent for various French media (*Le Monde*, *Les Echos*, *L'Express*), focusing mainly on international politics and macroeconomic issues.

## Emma Beals

**WORLD PRESS FREEDOM AWARD**

**EMMA BEALS EXEMPLIFIES THE COURAGE OF THE YOUNG FREELANCE JOURNALISTS COVERING TODAY'S CONFLICTS.** A New Zealander, she was the major force in the creation of the Frontline Freelance Register, a representative body for freelance conflict reporters. FFR has pressed employers to adopt standards that would increase security for their freelance reporters. "Thanks largely to Emma, the standards have become 'A Culture of Safety Alliance'–a movement of 80 organizations in 20 countries to increase safety," writes David Rohde–the recipient of the inaugural World Press Freedom award–who co-chairs the project with Beals. She is also a trustee of the Frontline Club in London. Emma's journalistic work covers Syria and the broader conflict, and has appeared in outlets around the world. Emma is currently working on a research project on Aleppo and a book about her time covering Syria.

## Arwa Damon

**HUMANITARIAN AWARD**

**ARWA DAMON IS CNN'S SENIOR INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENT BASED IN ISTANBUL, TURKEY.** She has more than a decade of experience in war zones across the MENA region and has often focused on humanitarian stories. Damon has received extensive recognition for her work, including Emmys, Peabodys, and the Investigative Reporters and Editors Medal, and most recently was the recipient of the International Women's Media Foundation "Courage in Journalism" award. She is the president and a co-founder of INARA, a by-product of her firsthand experience on the ground.

JAMES W. FOLEY
LEGACY FOUNDATION

# DISPATCHES

IDEAS & PROVOCATIONS

*May 2017*

*"Two companies now sell 'cat wine,' a mixture of liquid catnip and beet juice or other coloring."* — Katherine Riley, p. 20

•GEOPOLITICS

# The Plan to End Europe

## Why does Donald Trump want to undo the post–World War II order?

**BY DAVID FRUM**

WITHIN WEEKS of his inauguration, President Donald Trump had already wrought a strategic revolution in U.S. foreign policy. Russia, formerly an antagonist, has been promoted to preferred partner. In its place, Team Trump has identified a new enemy. With this enemy there can be no coexistence, no cooperation. It must be humbled and divided, not merely defeated but utterly overthrown. This enemy is the European Union.

The drama of this reversal cannot be overstated. George W. Bush observed in 2003, "Since the end of World War II, the United States has strongly supported European unity as the best path to European peace and prosperity." That was a precisely accurate statement. From Truman through Obama, America's European policy has been strikingly consistent: The United States has supported a democratic and united Europe joined to Canada and the United States by NATO. "We recognize we will benefit more from a strong and equal partner than from a weak one." Those words happen to have been pronounced by Bill Clinton. They could as easily have appeared in a speech by any of his predecessors or successors—until now.

Trump has more than once described NATO as "obsolete." During his campaign, he expressed uncertainty about whether, as president, he would honor America's NATO obligations to small countries threatened by Russia. He cheered Britain's exit from the European Union. Trump and his chief strategist, Steve Bannon, have made common cause with populist nationalists working to end the European Union outright. Trump reportedly received Nigel Farage, the former leader of the UK Independence Party, at the White House; when he ran Breitbart.com, Bannon promoted the Dutch politician Geert Wilders and France's Marine Le Pen. Hungary's authoritarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, claims to have been granted a call with President-elect Trump in November (two months before the president of France spoke to Trump).

Meanwhile, Trump has offered sharp personal comments on Chancellor Angela Merkel. One of his top advisers has called for Germany to flout the EU and negotiate bilaterally with the U.S. so as to reduce German trade surpluses. In a meeting with Merkel, Trump also called

Illustration by EDMON DE HARO

for direct negotiations, and suggested that Germany had outmaneuvered the U.S. On bad days, the U.S.-German relationship looks more strained than at any time since the end of the Cold War, including during the Iraq War. The Trump administration seems determined only to widen the breach.

G. K. CHESTERTON ADVISED that one should never tear something down until one knows why it was built in the first place. So let's review why our parents and grandparents constructed what Trump and his team now seem so set on destroying.

Their first concern was the internal peace of Europe.

The disturbing characters gaining access to the Trump White House profess to be united by their shared nationalism. That's not how nationalism works out in real life, though. Competing nationalisms ripped apart Yugoslavia in the 1990s. In Ukraine, an assertive Russian nationalism has sparked a conflict that has left some 10,000 dead and driven hundreds of thousands from their homes. Between Hungary and Romania, between Ukraine and Poland, between Bulgaria and Turkey, there still smolder antique grievances that a demagogue could rekindle.

In the confines of a small and heavily populated continent, people do not always agree on the boundary between one nation and another—or even on what counts as a nation. Is Kosovo a nation? Scotland? Catalonia? Corsica? The Flemish-speaking parts of Belgium? By opening borders, Europe has been able to avoid these questions and maintain peace. As a German government official once remarked to me, noting the contemporary irrelevance of the Alsace-Lorraine dispute, which cost France and Germany so much blood between 1870 and 1945: "If a German wants a house in Alsace, he can buy one. Who cares which government delivers the mail?"

Of course, one nationalism has troubled the peace of Europe more than any other: Germany's. Whenever Germany has unified—whether in 1871 or 1990—other European countries have gotten scared, and understandably so. How were they to live in peace with such a rich, strong, and well-organized neighbor? Here's Benjamin Disraeli speaking in the British House of Commons after the first unification: "The balance of power has been entirely destroyed, and the country which suffers most, and feels the effects of this great change most, is England." And here (according to Helmut Kohl's memoirs) is what Margaret Thatcher said, even more pungently, on the eve of the second: "We beat the Germans twice, and now they're back."

European unification sought to transform German power into a resource for the rest of Europe, rather than a threat—to build a European Germany, it's often said, rather than a German Europe. By submitting its decision making to the agreement of others, and accepting U.S. protection instead of seeking military

• VERY SHORT BOOK EXCERPT

## HOW TO KILL A LAKE

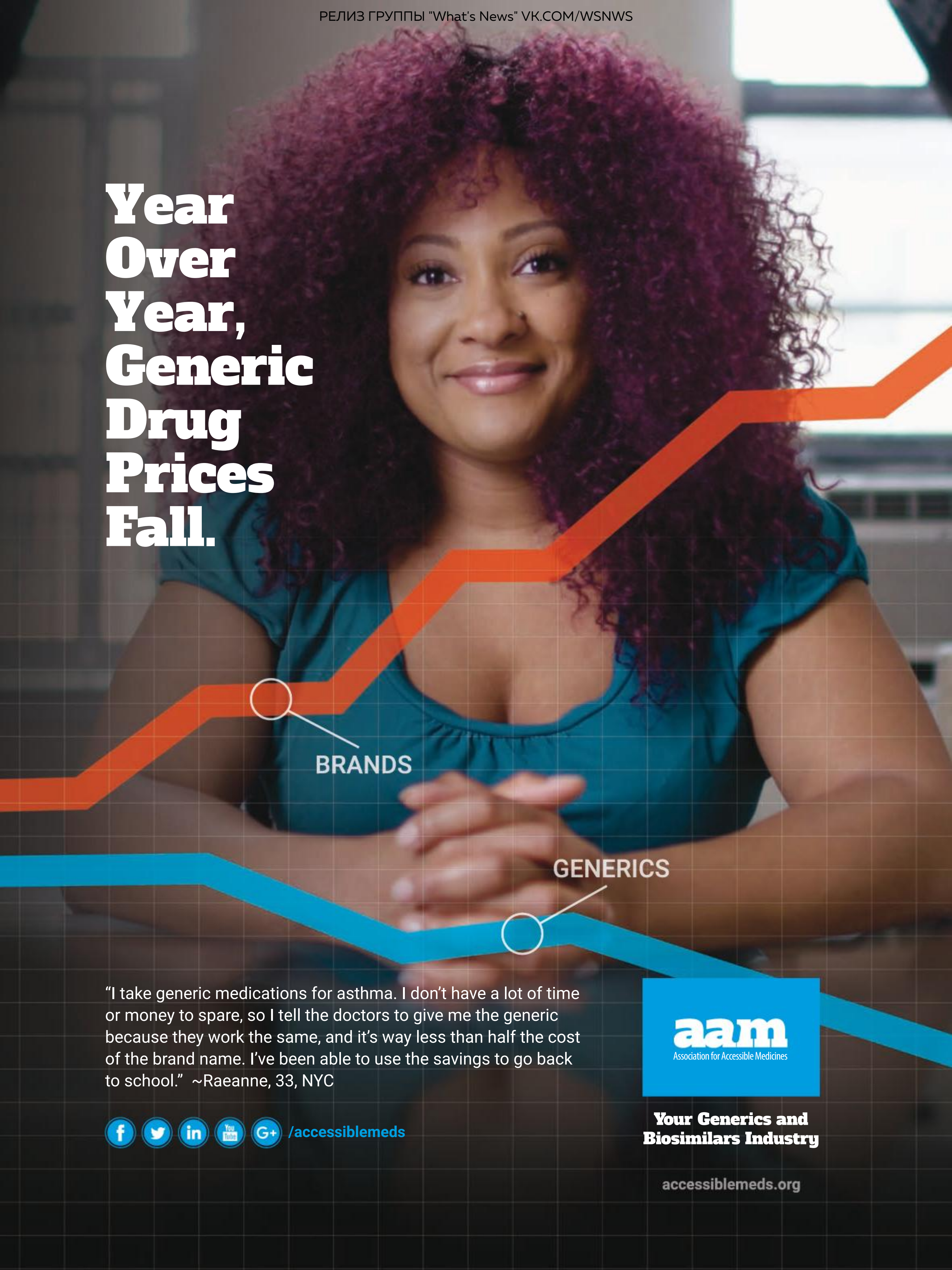
AN EXEMPTION IN THE CLEAN WATER ACT gives the shipping industry a free pass to dump the seawater stored in ships' ballast tanks, even though dumping noxious stuff like oils or acids is prohibited. Yet the seawater, picked up in foreign ports, swarms with perhaps the most potent pollutant there is: DNA. It would be hard to design a better invasive-species delivery system than an overseas freighter in the Great Lakes.

The Great Lakes are now home to 186 non-native species. None has been more devastating than the Junior Mint–sized zebra and quagga mussels, two closely related mollusks native to the Black and Caspian Seas. A college kid on a field trip in the late 1980s was the first to discover them in the Great Lakes. In less than 20 years, the mussels went from a novel find to the lakes' dominant species. If Lake Michigan were drained, it would now be possible to walk almost the entire 100 miles between Wisconsin and Michigan on a bed of trillions upon trillions of filter-feeding quagga mussels. The mussels, which have no worthy natural predators in North America, have transformed the lakes into some of the clearest freshwater on the planet. But this is not the sign of a healthy lake; it's the sign of a lake having the life sucked out of it.

***— Adapted from* The Death and Life of the Great Lakes, *by Dan Egan, published in March by Norton***



Illustration by JOE McKENDRY



Year Over Year, Generic Drug Prices Fall.
BRANDS
GENERICS
"I take generic medications for asthma. I don't have a lot of time or money to spare, so I tell the doctors to give me the generic because they work the same, and it's way less than half the cost of the brand name. I've been able to use the savings to go back to school." ~Raeanne, 33, NYC
/accessiblemeds
aam
Association for Accessible Medicines
Your Generics and Biosimilars Industry
accessiblemeds.org

supremacy, Germany gains peaceful consent to its economic primacy within Europe. Those rare moments when Germany acts unilaterally—as Merkel did by throwing open her country to mass migration in 2015 and then demanding that others share the burden she so impetuously undertook—are dangerous precisely because they corrode modern Europe's founding compact. The Trump administration's cold war against Germany threatens to upend the bargain that reassured Europe. Instead of exporting the security that reconciled the rest of Europe to German power, the U.S. is suddenly exporting uncertainty. Germans are confronted with the choice of depending on their own strength or relying on an increasingly unreliable protector. In turn, the rest of the Continent could find itself facing the old question: how to live with a Germany that is too rich and strong to be restrained by its neighbors, but not rich or strong enough to protect them.

Our parents and grandparents' second reason for supporting European integration was economic. Before 1939, wages and living standards were much higher in the U.S. than in Europe. Transatlantic trade was limited; American companies didn't export much, and European consumers couldn't afford to buy much. Hitler's response to Germany's privation was to conquer, enslave, and plunder the rest of Europe—a plan that propelled the Continent into war and genocide. The war's North Atlantic victors built a system both more humane and more effective: An integrated European market joined to a global open-trade system has raised European living standards to compare with those in North America, making us all better customers for one another.

Enriching Europe through trade and investment created an environment especially congenial for U.S. corporations used to operating on a continental scale in North America. The single currency may have seemed a bridge too far to most American economists. But the single market? Americans had been pushing Europe in that direction since V-E Day.

Finally, and perhaps above all, our parents and grandparents looked to a wealthier and more cohesive Europe to help shoulder the burden of its own defense. Individually, most European countries are no match for Russia. Standing together, Europe could be a superpower in its own right, with a population more than triple that of Russia and a joint GDP more than 12 times as large. The Kremlin has consistently sought to divide and weaken Europe; U.S. policy makers have consistently sought to unite and strengthen it.

So why has the president jettisoned the policy that guided his postwar predecessors? We cannot rule out the possibility that Russian influence affected Team Trump's stance toward Europe—but neither can we yet prove that it did. There are other plausible explanations. For one, certain Trump advisers seem gripped by the species of nihilism described in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*: "Some men just want to watch the world burn."

**The men who built the postwar world intended exactly the things that Trump now complains about.**

Yet it's also possible to see in Trump's approach a positive vision of an alternative to the postwar world order. As the president said at the Conservative Political Action Conference in February, "We're going to make trade deals, but we're going to do one-on-one, one-on-one, and if they misbehave, we terminate the deal. And then they'll come back and we'll make a better deal—none of these big quagmire deals that are a disaster."

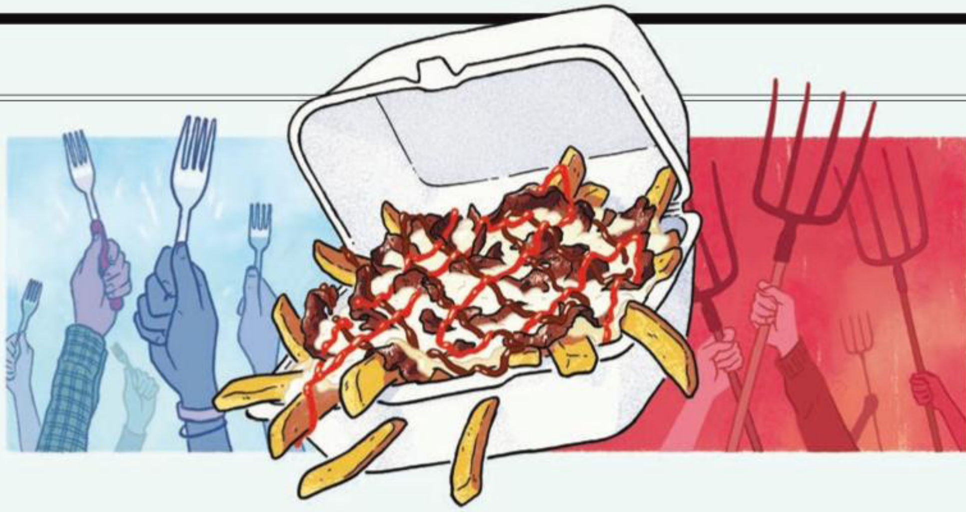
In any bilateral deal, even one with China, the United States will for the foreseeable future be the stronger party—especially if, as Trump promises, it also sets itself up as the judge of whether the deal is being complied with. Trump sees the world as a competitive arena in which nations either dominate or are dominated. And he imagines the U.S. as the world's ultimate dominator, imposing its will on each nation, one by one.

Trump is not the first leader to think this way. In fact, almost every previous ruler of a mighty state has thought this way, from Ozymandias onward. But they have all failed, with disastrous consequences. States that dominate inevitably inspire resistance. The subject states join together to overthrow the bully. And they almost always win, because no one state is ever stronger than all other states combined, or not for long anyway.

The men who built the postwar world anticipated this danger and sought to avert it. They designed trade and treaty systems governed by rules, rules to which the United States would submit, even though it was the strongest party. Indeed, they intended exactly the things that Donald Trump now complains about—that the U.S. would have to make concessions to smaller partners; that it would not act as judge in its own cases; that it would subordinate its parochial and immediate national interests to the larger and more enduring collective interest. America would find security by working for the security of others.

The Americans who led the effort took this approach in part because it's what they were accustomed to: The U.S. Constitution likewise overweights the interests of minorities and small groups. They also did it because they had learned from their wars against rulers who sought to dominate their neighbors. In the world as at home, systems that serve the interests of all endure better than systems that oppress many to serve a few.

They wanted a future in which non-Americans would be the ones who most wished to uphold U.S. hegemony and most feared to see that hegemony end. They succeeded in this, against every external danger. And now the good and wise and even glorious accord they created is more threatened than ever before—not by an enemy, but by the narrow-minded, shortsighted bullying of an accidental and unfit American president. Will the story really end this way? It all seems not only heartrendingly sad, but also teeth-grindingly stupid.



BIG IN … AUSTRALIA

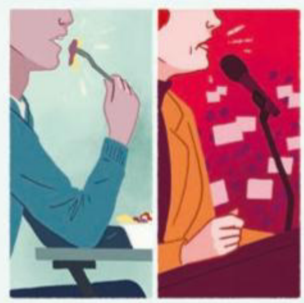
# SNACKTIVISM

TO THE LIST of 2016's surreal happenings, add one more: In Australia, a Styrofoam box filled with meat and french fries became a symbol of liberal values and tolerance.

Late in 2015, five friends jokingly created the Halal Snack Pack Appreciation Society, a Facebook group for enthusiasts of a dish combining halal meat, fries, and cheese, layered with what they called a "Holy Trinity" of sauces—garlic, barbecue, and chili. A staple of Sydney's kebab houses and food courts, it's the sort of meal beloved by hungry office workers and drunken night owls alike.

In a spoof of the halal-certification process, members were encouraged to review Halal Snack Packs (HSPs) according to a strict set of categories—instead of determining whether the meat was truly halal (prepared in accordance with Islamic dietary tenets), they focused on less weighty questions. Were the meat pieces tender and the fries crispy? Was halal signage clearly displayed? And did the seller greet the customer warmly, as "brother" or "sister"? The group hailed any vendor that passed these tests as a place of "Jannah," a nod to Islam's concept of paradise. Customers foolish enough to deviate from the sanctified form—by eating kebabs smothered in ketchup, say, or, worse, lettuce—were ridiculed as "haram dingoes," a made-up insult fusing the Arabic word for "forbidden" with classic Australian slang to mean "You, sir, are an idiot."


In a matter of weeks, as the group's membership swelled to thousands, people around the country were grading bewildered kebab vendors. A video on Facebook showed gleeful schoolboys ordering a pack several feet high. A "haram dingo" hat appeared for sale, featuring an embroidered dingo with a ketchup bottle in its mouth. Members



began sharing pictures of birthday cakes made to look like HSPs.

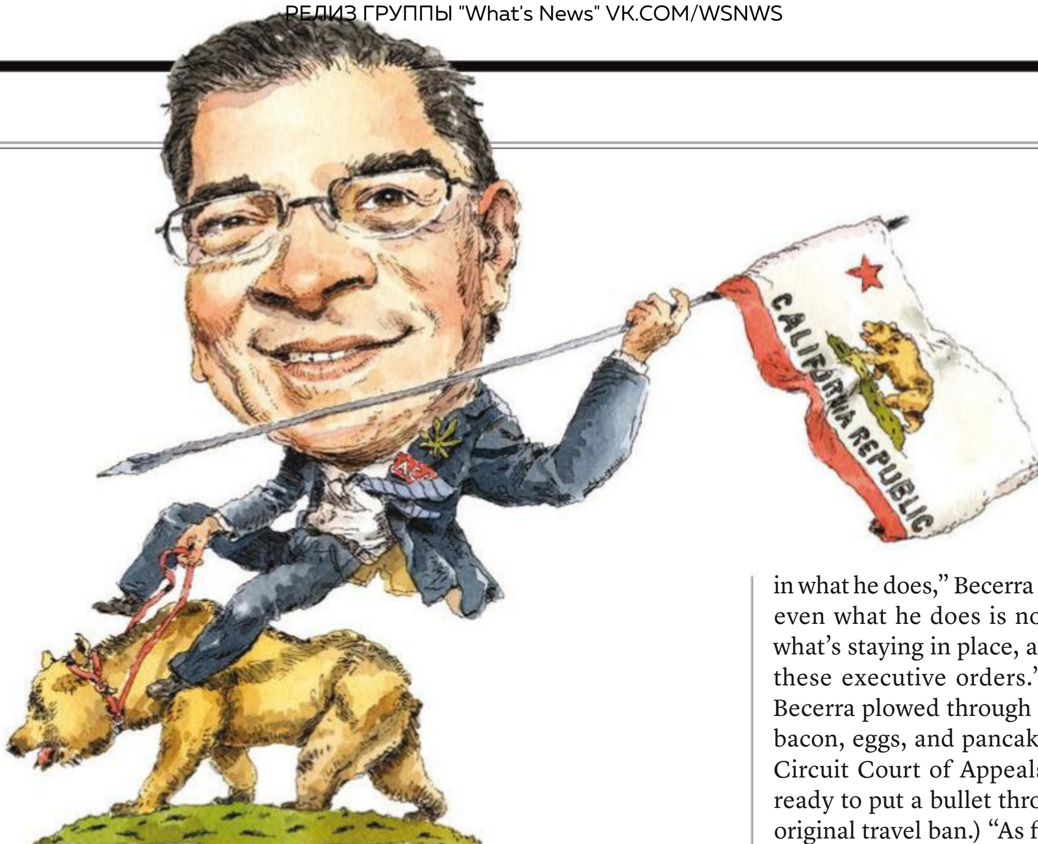
At the same time, Australia's federal election campaign was heating up, and xenophobia was surging. Against this backdrop, the Halal Snack Pack Appreciation Society Facebook group—which as of this writing is more than 185,000 strong—began to function as a space for Muslims and non-Muslims to reaffirm their harmony, and to vent about their fears. Soon, the HSP found itself a political star. On July 2, One Nation, a vehemently anti-immigration party, won nearly 600,000 votes, and four seats in the Australian Senate. That night, Sam Dastyari, a young, liberal senator of Muslim heritage, playfully extended an olive branch to One Nation's leader, Pauline Hanson, inviting her to celebrate over a Halal Snack Pack. "Not happening, not interested in halal, thank you," she replied, coldly. "Ninety-eight percent of Australians don't want halal certification."

While dubious, Hanson's claim was not surprising: Throughout the campaign season, One Nation had claimed that the process for certifying halal food had set Australia down a slippery slope to Sharia law. In an address to the Senate that March, Dastyari had revealed how, while co-chairing a government inquiry into food certification, he'd shared an image of a halal butcher on social media, only to find himself on the receiving end of "a type of hate, vitriol, and Islamophobic fear-mongering that I had never experienced before—a real dark underbelly in the Australian community." His faith in his fellow Australians was soon redeemed, however. "I did not realize there was a place where someone like me would belong," he said. "This was before I knew about the Halal Snack Pack Appreciation Society—a group of people who have come together to share the great Aussie tradition of halal meat in a box."

Dastyari finished his speech with a rousing review of his favorite kebab house.

— *Isabella Kwai*

Illustrations by JULIAN CALLOS




• SKETCH

# Golden State Warrior

California's new attorney general, Xavier Becerra, prepares to battle Trump.

**BY MICHELLE COTTLE**

XAVIER BECERRA, the new attorney general of California, paused midway through his breakfast to issue a warning to the president of the United States.

"Be *careful*," he said in a singsongy voice. "Be *careful*!" A wicked smile appeared.

The previous day, Super Bowl Sunday, Donald J. Trump had told Fox News's Bill O'Reilly that "California in many ways is out of control" and suggested that one way to bring the state to heel might be depriving it of federal funds. This came three days after the president tweeted a threat to cut funding to UC Berkeley in the wake of violent protests against a planned speech by the right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos.

"If you try to do something that I don't believe comports with our regime of laws, starting with the U.S. Constitution, we'll test you," Becerra continued.

Becerra and I were sitting in a hotel restaurant in Fresno, where he was about to launch a statewide listening tour. He was not quite two weeks into his new job, and was looking forward to discussing what he called "bread-and-butter issues" with constituents. But Topic A this morning—as on so many of his mornings thus far—was instead California's brewing clash with Trump.

The president's open hostility toward Becerra's state was perhaps predictable, and not merely because California went for Hillary Clinton by 30 points. On a whole range of issues, from gun safety to health care to financial deregulation to environmental protection to marijuana legalization to immigration, Trump's deep-red vision for Making America Great Again has put him on a collision course with deep-blue California. As attorney general, Becerra will be the point man for the state's legal response.

He wants Trump to know how unimpressed he is by the chief executive's promiscuous smack talk. "I don't put a lot of stock in what he says. I put stock in what he does," Becerra told me. "And even what he does is not necessarily what's staying in place, as we see with these executive orders." (Indeed, as Becerra plowed through his mound of bacon, eggs, and pancakes, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals was getting ready to put a bullet through Trump's original travel ban.) "As for me, I work with what is operational. Not what is"—Becerra's fingers spidered furiously beside his temple—"in his mind."

A former member of Congress, Becerra brings to battle decades of Washington experience. He says this is likely part of why Governor Jerry Brown tapped him to replace the previous attorney general, Kamala Harris, who was in November elected California's junior senator. "The governor knew that much of what would occupy the next attorney general's time would be things coming from Washington."

The job carries considerable risks: By definition, it puts Becerra in the crosshairs of the famously vindictive Trump. (When the pro-Trump trolls get fired up, Becerra's Twitter feed can be a dark and scary place.) But the potential rewards are also considerable: If he succeeds in derailing at least some of the president's policies, while making others politically costly, Becerra could find himself a Democratic hero.

WITH REPUBLICANS in control of both the White House and Congress, Democratic attorneys general across the country are stepping up—and joining forces with one another—to act as a legal barricade against Trump's policies. Immediately upon being



Illustration by JOHN CUNEO

appointed, Becerra was welcomed to the fight by a number of his new colleagues, most notably New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, who is said to be picking apart Trump's business dealings. An effort of this magnitude requires "teamwork," Becerra says, with different states taking the lead on different issues.

He is particularly primed to challenge Trump's assault on "sanctuary cities"—cities that limit cooperation between local police and immigration agents. In his first week on the job, he sat down with the state's sheriffs and had a heart-to-heart on the topic. "Rather than wait for Trump to send something our way and then react to it, I wanted to make sure they understood how the new attorney general interpreted state and federal law," he told me.

Two state laws in particular clash with Trump's vision of mass deportations: the 2013 TRUST Act, which limits the detention of immigrants by local law enforcement, and the 2016 TRUTH Act, which strengthens the rights of immigrants detained in jail. "I tried to make pretty clear to the sheriffs what I thought we could and could not do."

When it comes to the so-called Trump resistance, Becerra sees California playing a special role by virtue of its size and "forward leaning" politics. "Sometimes it takes a generation, but we pull the country in certain directions." The state has shifted leftward in the past two decades, particularly on race and immigration. Back in the 1990s, "we were where the country seems to be ... on immigration. Look at Prop 187," he said, invoking the anti-immigrant ballot initiative pushed by Republican Governor Pete Wilson in 1994. Recalling the "Yes on 187" campaign's infamous ads (which showed migrants streaming over the Mexican border as a narrator darkly warned, "*They keep coming*"), Becerra observed, "That's exactly what Donald Trump is saying: 'We've got to do this ban because *they're coming*!'" Although voters approved Prop 187, which promised to deny illegal immigrants access to government services, the measure was blocked by the courts and never enforced. It did have one lasting consequence, however: a political backlash that hobbled the state's Republican Party for a quarter century and counting.

Some observers have likened a potential California offensive against Trump to Texas's assault on Barack Obama's agenda. During the Obama presidency, Texas Attorney General (now Governor) Greg Abbott and his successor, Ken Paxton, sued the federal government over everything from the Affordable Care Act to the president's transgender-bathroom directive to environmental regulations. Abbott once quipped that his job entailed going into the office, suing the federal government, and going back home. All told, Texas sued the Obama administration nearly 50 times—including a farewell filing on the president's second-to-last day in office. Not every case was a winner, not even close. As of Trump's inauguration, Texas had won seven, lost 12, and dropped nine, though 20 cases are still pending. Abbott and Paxton nonetheless thrilled the Republican faithful with their fierce resistance.

**At times, Becerra seems to be practically daring the new president to come at California.**

Becerra is quick to note that California is coming from a totally different direction than Texas. But he has no qualms about following "the mechanical aspects" of the Lone Star model. "If you're going to protect the rights of your people," he said, "you gotta do what you've gotta do."

MIDWAY THROUGH his Fresno visit—after touring the local Bureau of Forensic Sciences lab but before sitting down with area farmworkers—Becerra stopped for a Q&A with local reporters. Clutching a stack of papers, he headed into a charmless, windowless room near the front of the bureau's building, where he found a couple dozen journalists raring to grill him about the status of California-versus-Trump.

Specifically, they wanted to know about the amicus brief Becerra's office had filed that morning, joining 15 other attorneys general in supporting Washington State's suit to kill Trump's January 27 travel ban. Some asked why Becerra had waited until that morning to enter the fray. Others wondered why he considered the ban unconstitutional. At one point, a reporter from a Spanish-language network asked a long question that Becerra, who is of Mexican heritage, answered at even greater length in fluent Spanish.

Through it all, Becerra remained unruffled. He is, in many respects, a photo negative of Trump: genial and steady, disciplined and studious, eloquent and precise—cautious, even—with language. His default expression is a Mona Lisa smile. His close-cropped hair, black with silver sprinkles, is perfection.

Also unlike Trump, Becerra has spent decades in the political trenches. After four years as a deputy attorney general in the late 1980s, he served in the California Assembly. From there, he went on to the U.S. House, where he spent 24 years representing low-income, overwhelmingly Latino areas of Los Angeles. During his last two terms, he was the chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, the fourth-highest Democratic leadership position in the House.

Becerra does appear to enjoy a good political scrap, but he knows how to argue without losing his cool and how to attack without coming across as unpleasant. His good friend Judy Chu, who represents California's 27th District in the House, told me that he is a master at rallying public support: "His ability to rev up the crowds and get them excited about fighting back is his strong point." During the 2016 campaign cycle, he crisscrossed the country on behalf of numerous House candidates. He also served as one of Hillary Clinton's top emissaries to Latino voters, and he was among the politicians often floated as a potential running mate for Clinton.

All of which raises the question of his ambitions. At 59, Becerra is more than a decade younger than many of his party's leaders. He considered running for retiring Senator Barbara Boxer's seat in 2016, but ultimately ceded the field to Harris. Already, he has launched his 2018 campaign to win a full term as attorney general. Might he yet run for senator, when Dianne Feinstein retires? Governor? President? He declined to speculate. "How far will I take it? I don't know," he said. "I'm like Captain Kirk. I've never been here before."

For now, he clearly relishes his role as a burr in Donald Trump's backside. At times, he seems to be practically daring the new president to come at California. "I don't have to respect an executive order that violates the Fourth Amendment," Becerra told me, proclaiming Trump's immigration views "not just idiotic but unconstitutional." He insisted, "The Feds have every right to enforce immigration law. That's their province. They *don't* have the right to tell us how to enforce local public-safety laws."

Becerra's fight against Trump's us-versus-them rhetoric is, at heart, deeply personal. His mother, Maria Teresa, emigrated from Mexico as a young woman. His father, Manuel, was born in Sacramento but raised in Tijuana. He later returned to settle in the state capital, and over the years, he held a variety of menial jobs: picking crops, working construction, canning soup. Becerra was the first in the family to graduate from a four-year college, receiving his undergraduate and law degrees from Stanford.

He is given to talking about how far his family—and his state—have traveled since his parents' early adulthood, when California restaurants posted signs proclaiming NO DOGS OR MEXICANS ALLOWED. This history gives him a decidedly unsentimental perspective on the grievances of Trump voters, and on the political hand-wringing over the plight of the white working class. "I don't think folks in the Rust Belt states couldn't walk into a restaurant and eat the food they had harvested themselves," he said.

Which isn't to say that Becerra doesn't get Trump voters' angst. "They're feeling left out, which is ironic in a way," he said, conveying a mix of sadness and frustration. "They shouldn't feel left out, because a lot of folks have been in the same boat with them for a long time."

• STUDY OF STUDIES

# Puppy Love

## The coddling of the American pet

BY KATHERINE RILEY

NEUTERING YOUR pet isn't exactly an aesthetic decision. But if for some reason you find Buddy's postprocedural appearance disconcerting, you have options—like Neuticles, a set of testicular implants that promises to give your pet a more "natural" look. The manufacturer claims to have sold more than 500,000 implants, prompting a question: Just how big is the pet economy?

According to the American Pet Products Association, pet spending has risen every year since 1994, even during the Great Recession, and is estimated to have reached almost $63 billion last year. Some of us contribute more to that total than others, however. For example, people who have attended college are more likely than those who didn't to make "specialty purchases" for their dogs. **[1]**

In general, the less disposable income you have, the less you buy for your pet. **[2]** Unless, that is, you're a Millennial: One study finds that dog owners under 30 are more likely than those in other age groups to buy premium pet food, despite having less money. **[3]** Another found that more than 41 percent of Australian dog owners under 25 "always" bring their dogs on vacation. **[4]**

In fairness to Millennials, people of all ages treat their pets like family. According to one consumer survey, two-thirds of all dog owners consider their pet's comfort when purchasing a car. Ditto getting a divorce. Although most states still treat animals as personal property, subject to the same equitable-distribution laws as other possessions, a review in the *Journal of Law and Family Studies* reported that petitioners are beginning to ask judges to consider "the animal's best interest"—an approach previously reserved for children. In one famous case, a California woman reportedly spent $146,000 on her divorce case, which centered around a (successful) bid for custody of Gigi, her pointer-greyhound mix. **[5]** And where there's a Gigi, there's a crop of lawyers vying for the case. More than 150 North American law schools now teach animal law, including pet-custody disputes.

The legal system isn't the only costly, dysfunctional part of American life that we've imposed on our pets. A new journal article finds striking parallels between the American pet health-care system and its human equivalent: From 1996 to 2012, pet and human health-care spending closely tracked each other, rising by 60 percent and almost 50 percent, respectively. America's high health costs are often blamed on its insurance system—but this alone can't explain veterinary spending, because pet insurance is uncommon. Other possible culprits affecting Buddy and Grandma alike include expensive new technologies and spikes in end-of-life spending. **[6]** On a happier note, a longitudinal study of German and Australian health care found that people who'd had pets for at least five years went to the doctor less than others, saving their countries $5.2 billion and $2.2 billion, respectively, in 2000. **[7]**

So maybe it's okay to spoil our pets—we spend billions on them, but they save us billions in return. If Neuticles aren't your thing (or things?), you might consider wine. Two companies now sell "cat wine," a mixture of liquid catnip and beet juice or other coloring. Compared with a vet bill, a $12 bottle of Pinot Meow seems half-reasonable. And just think, you'll never have to drink alone again.


THE STUDIES:

**[1]** Dotson and Hyatt, "Understanding Dog-Human Companionship" (*Journal of Business Research*, May 2008)
**[2]** Henderson, "Spending on Pets" (Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Beyond the Numbers*, May 2013)
**[3]** Kumcu and Woolverton, "Feeding Fido" (*Journal of Food Products Marketing*, 2015)
**[4]** Carr and Cohen, "Holidaying With the Family Pet" (*Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Oct. 2009)
**[5]** Wharton, "Fighting Like Cats and Dogs" (*Journal of Law and Family Studies*, 2008)
**[6]** Einav et al., "Is American Pet Health Care (Also) Uniquely Inefficient?" (*American Economic Review*, May 2017)
**[7]** Headey and Grabka, "Pet Ownership Is Good for Your Health and Saves Public Expenditure Too" (*Australian Social Monitor*, Nov. 2002)



Illustration by CHRISTOPHER DeLORENZO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•WORKS IN PROGRESS

# Jet-Age Chic

## Eero Saarinen's soaring TWA terminal was an icon of mid-century cool. Now it's being reincarnated as an airport hotel.

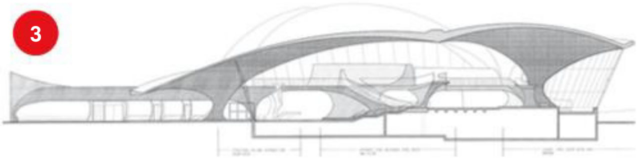
**BY HENRY GRABAR**

IT WAS the world's most famous airport terminal 1, and the most beloved project of the mid-century architect Eero Saarinen 2. Likened to a bird taking off, the TWA Flight Center at New York's Kennedy airport comprises four vaulted concrete shells perched lightly on the ground. There are few walls; instead, the exterior is dominated by canted banks of windows.

"Most people are blind," Saarinen said after his extravagant design was unveiled 3. "If you get too subtle about architecture, people come in and walk through it and never notice the difference." They noticed the Flight Center. Its form was inseparable from the thrill of transatlantic air travel. For a generation of international travelers, it was

2

3



a memorable first impression of America, an Ellis Island for the jet age.

In 1962, when its opening was broadcast on national TV, the Trans World Flight Center was the most distinctive example of corporate-showpiece architecture, a movement led by Saarinen himself, with projects such as the General Motors Technical Center, in Warren, Michigan, and IBM's research center north of New York City. "Like a good advertising agency," the critic Reyner Banham wrote of Saarinen that year, "he bestowed status, improved the image."

Yet even as the terminal captured the futuristic spirit of the '60s, it was soon rendered out-of-date by the demands of larger planes and crowds. Annexes were built to accommodate the jumbo jet; as security requirements changed, a phalanx of metal detectors was added, cutting the atrium in two and creating lines that sometimes stretched through the terminal's doors. By the time TWA went out of business, in 2001, the building suffered from a predicament common to iconic mid-century architecture: It was too useless to live, and too beautiful to die.

For the next 15 years, preservationists, developers, and the Port Authority—which manages the airport—engaged in a tug-of-war over the building's future. Structurally inflexible and

1: EZRA STOLLER/ESTO; 2: PHOTOQUEST/GETTY; 3: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; 4, 6–7: IKE EDEANI; 5: PHILLIP HARRINGTON/ALAMY

costly to restore, decaying mid-century landmarks by Paul Rudolph, Richard Neutra, and others were being demolished. If anything, the Flight Center seemed even less likely than these to survive. But in 2015, on its third attempt, the Port Authority finally found a developer willing to take a 75-year lease on the terminal. MCR Development, which owns dozens of hotels, proposed a restaurant-hotel-conference-center complex around the Flight Center; the project broke ground in December.

There are some challenges to rehabilitating 4 a structure that has more in common with a sculpture 5 than with your average transportation facility. The panels of quarter-inch-thick, nontempered glass that form the building's windows, for example, have been dropping from their brittle, aging gaskets and shattering like ice on the ground. They must be replaced, a routine task complicated by the fact that no two of the 486 panels 6 have the same dimensions. The roughly 4 million custom-made ceramic tiles 7 that cover the terminal's floors, walls, and steps are cracked and worn; many of them are being replaced.

"The whole world is a giant Walgreens now," Tyler Morse, the CEO of MCR, told me when I visited the terminal recently. "When you go to Paris, London, New York, or St. Louis, it's the same restaurant chains, the same supermarkets. As the world becomes more homogenized, people become interested in a unique product."

This particular product will be not only unique but costly: With a budget of $265 million, it is likely to be the world's most expensive airport hotel. Bulldozers are now digging out a 50,000-square-foot subterranean event space, which will sit below and behind the old terminal. Flanking the landmark will be two six-story buildings 8, which will hold the hotel's 505 guest rooms (expected to start at about $250 a night), a rooftop swimming pool, and an observation deck, from which visitors will be able to watch planes take off.

But pay the new construction no mind. "These buildings are designed to be as neutral as possible," Morse told me. He wants his hotel to be a 1962 time capsule. A fin-tailed Lincoln Continental and an Aston Martin DB4 will be parked out front, offering guests a ride to the terminals. Staff members will dress the part, in old-style uniforms and pill-box hats 9. On a 90-minute tour of the site, Morse did not mention the project's living architects—the firm of Beyer Blinder Belle is leading the restoration; Lubrano Ciavarra is designing the additions. It was as if the ghost of Saarinen himself were undertaking the conversion.

There are some things that MCR can't, or won't, bring back, however. The Flight Center's shell once loomed over the airport access road. Now it is sandwiched between a parking garage and the JetBlue terminal, which opened in 2008. The restaurants inside will be named for European capitals, just like the terminal's original restaurants—the Paris Café, the Lisbon Lounge—but they will no longer look out on runways leading to those cities.

In 1968, at the peak of jet-age glory, TWA emphasized its efficiency with the slogan "Nobody likes to hang around airports." Fifty years later, Morse's big challenge is to get them to do just that.

8 (RENDERING): PORT AUTHORITY; 9: POPPERFOTO/GETTY

• TECHNOLOGY

# Apps for Refugees

## How technology helps in a humanitarian crisis

**BY AMY WEISS-MEYER**

In September 2015, the body of Aylan Kurdi, a 3-year-old Syrian migrant, washed up on a Turkish beach. The boy had fallen off a rubber raft provided by a smuggler who had promised the boy's father a motorboat. As the startling images of the drowned boy spread, they prompted an outpouring of humanitarian aid—including from the tech sector, which wanted to help prevent the next Aylan from drowning. Knowing that many refugees have access to cellphones, volunteers around the world began developing apps and other tools to help guide refugees on their journeys, adding to the innovative work under way at humanitarian organizations.

The resulting technologies are already helping refugees gather crucial information, reconnect with lost relatives, and establish a legal identity in new countries. Technologies still being developed promise to take the place of translators and perhaps even nurses and doctors. Here are what some current and future tools look like.

### 1 Instant Intel

Nina Kov, a choreographer who researches the intersection of dance and technology, was in Budapest in the summer of 2015 as migrants streamed into the city's train stations. Kov and her husband saw a need for reliable and up-to-date information on everything from train schedules to the safety of tap water. They developed an app, which they called InfoAid, to give this kind of guidance, including warnings to avoid smugglers. The app used very little network data, meaning it was convenient for people on restricted data plans, and was available in several languages. InfoAid has been tested in the real world: During the peak of the crisis in Budapest, when the city faced an influx of thousands of migrants, it maintained an online translation chat room, staffed by volunteers. Translating refugees' questions is time-consuming and relies on attracting qualified volunteers—"Arabic is very specific," Kov says—and in the absence of funding, InfoAid has become inactive; Kov hopes to get it back up and running soon.

ADOC/CORBIS/GETTY; SANTI PALACIOS/AP; BETTER SHELTER; MINT/GETTY

**TECH AND REFUGEES: A TIMELINE**

**1680s:** Tens of thousands of French Protestants seek asylum in England, and the word *refugee* enters the English language.

**1950:** The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is created.

**1964:** To protect spacecraft from extreme temperatures, NASA designs reflective material, which is later used in blankets for refugees.

HISTORY 1700 1960



Illustration by ALVARO DOMINGUEZ

In Croatia, an engineer named Valent Turkovic is working to provide internet access in asylum centers, where it is often unavailable. In 2015, Turkovic built makeshift Wi-Fi routers and set them up in Croatian refugee camps; he's now working on a prototype of a compact, durable router called MeshPoint, which will use open-source software to give hundreds of people internet access at once. The device's hardware will be open-source as well, which means that anyone with a 3-D printer will be able to construct a router. MeshPoint is easier for aid workers to set up and configure than standard models. And because it runs on batteries, it works even when natural disasters—or terrorist groups—disrupt the power grid.

The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) is already using drones to monitor on-the-ground conditions in refugee camps. In the future, drones could also provide temporary Wi-Fi and extend phone networks in areas without coverage.

## 2 Doctor-Free Diagnoses

Refugees often need immediate medical attention and can't get it. In Oslo, the creators of an app called HealthIntelligence hope to work with local governments and health organizations to build a chatbot that provides pregnant refugees with medical, legal, and other advice in their native language. "Just getting to the hospital can be very hard if you don't speak the language and have limited legal rights," says Vincent Olislagers, who oversaw the design of the app.

The difficulties are magnified for refugees in remote camps. Basil Leaf Technologies has been at work on DxtER, an app that will come with a small tool kit and use AI to guide patients through a questionnaire, collect vital signs and bodily-fluid samples, and diagnose dozens of health conditions on the spot. Via remote programming, the app will be able to continuously incorporate new data on emerging outbreaks.

A company called Zipline has designed a "sky ambulance" to help treat conditions of the kind DxtER will be able to diagnose. This small, robotic airplane can deliver vaccines, medicine, and blood to remote areas. Health workers can place orders via text message; once the materials have been flown in, they float down in parachutes.

## 3 Finding Family

Separation from relatives is a common trauma for refugees. Since 2008, more than 600,000 people have registered for a mobile platform made by a nonprofit called Refunite, which has reconnected more than 38,000 family members. Refunite's platform operates in six languages and asks users to enter information about themselves and the people they're looking for, then allows users with connections to send each other messages.

Red Cross and Red Crescent societies have their own reconnection initiative, called Trace the Face. It publishes pictures online of people looking for missing relatives and lets them search photos that others have posted of themselves, filtering by criteria like gender, age, and country of origin. Before long, facial-recognition software could transform this database and others like it into advanced people-finding machines.

Blockchain, the decentralized technology behind bitcoin, could offer privacy and safety to people who have reason to fear that registering with a government could put them in danger. In 2015, Bitnation, which offers users banking, education, notary, and other services without any formal state affiliation, created a Refugee Emergency Response program that participants can use to register for emergency IDs. These allow users to securely verify one another's identity and connect with far-flung family members.

## 4 Identity Protection

Refugees who want to establish a legal identity in a new country confront countless obstacles—they may have fled without their birth certificate, for instance, if they ever had one. So the UNHCR Biometric Identity Management System, active in 25 countries, collects fingerprints, iris scans, and photographs, and can link them to citizenship records and dates of birth.

Biometric identification tools could also help refugees receive financial assistance from nonprofit organizations, according to Rosa Akbari, a senior adviser in Mercy Corps's Technology for Development division. Iris scanning and fingerprinting, for example, can already be used to verify whether someone is eligible for aid.

Official IDs could themselves be made smarter and more useful. The Welcome Card, a finalist in a 2016 UNHCR design challenge, would be distributed to all asylum-seekers in European Union countries as temporary identification. By scanning the cards, which use radio-frequency identification technology, at welcome centers and immigration offices, refugees would be able to check their legal status, learn about language courses, and search for transportation options as they travel across borders.

Programs like the Welcome Card will work best if government representatives, immigration-policy experts, and members of the tech community collaborate to ensure that migrants continue to gain access to sophisticated new tools. But of course, for migrants of uncertain status, there is a flip side to that sophistication. A biometric entry/exit tracking system of the sort called for in President Donald Trump's March executive order is hardly novel; some aspects of it are already in use in the United States. It's easy to imagine a government using biometric data to track down migrants—not to assist them but to deport them.

**2009:** Ashok Gadgil, a professor at UC Berkeley, introduces fuel-efficient stoves, which require 60 percent less wood than traditional stoves, in refugee camps in Darfur.

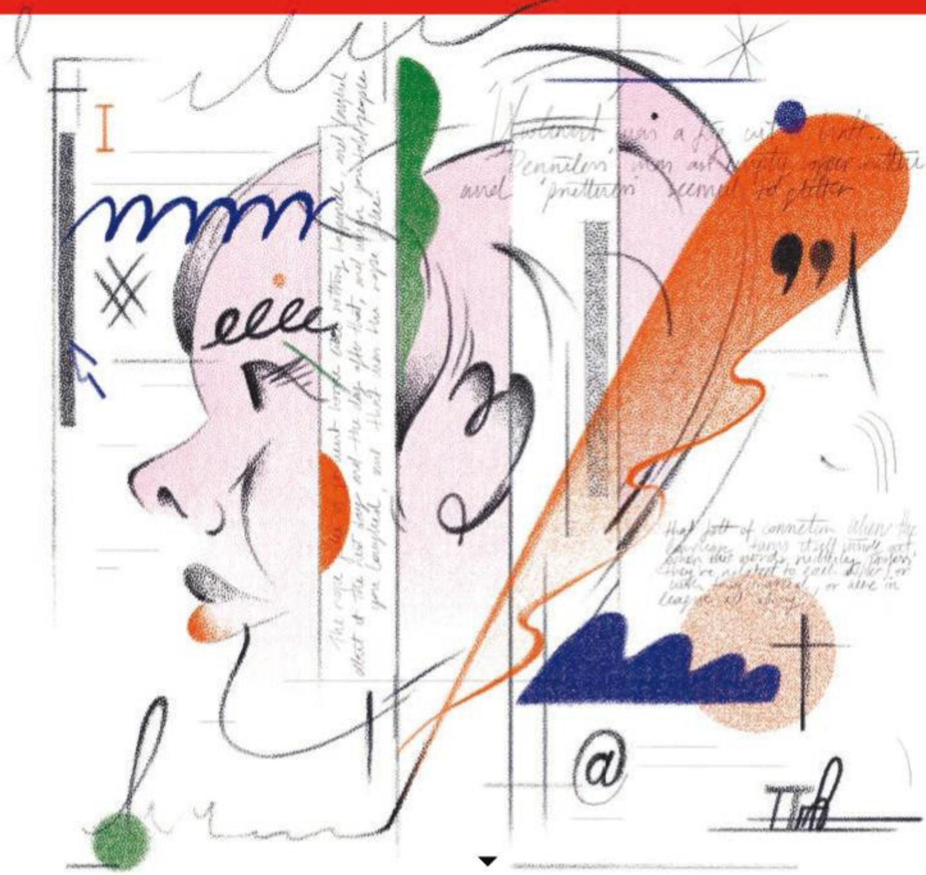
**2013:** Better Shelter, a flat-packed, 68-piece modular refugee shelter made from recyclable plastic, is first used in Ethiopia.

**2016:** EyeCloud, a UNHCR project, uses iris scanning to enable refugees in Jordan to access financial aid.

2017

**2023:** AI makes human translators obsolete.

2010 PREDICTIONS 2020



THE OMNIVORE

# Poet on the Edge

Indiana-born, Twitter-savvy, and Millennially mischievous, Patricia Lockwood taps into the temper of the times.

**BY JAMES PARKER**

IF THE NUMBER of bullyboys, bootlickers, power nerds, language goons, and slithering propagandists in society remains more or less constant, inflammations and outbreaks notwithstanding, then so—thank God—does the number of poets. And while the former, breathing heavily, go about their work of flattening and coarsening the imagination, the latter are helplessly dedicated to its renewal. They're more fragile, of course, the poets; seething with nervous debility, in fact. That's the point of being a poet. And they get paid less, a lot less. But they have reality on their side: Reality desires to have poems written about it, not hack verbiage or ideological jingles, and so gives the poets its best material.

Patricia Lockwood is an American poet whose prismatically witty, sexually slippery, polymorphous, and Millennially mischievous poetry—like the internet talking in its sleep—has made her semi-famous at the age of 35. Best known for a poem of savage seriousness called "Rape Joke" (we'll get back to that), she is also at home in the wasteland frivolities of social media. Like Donald Trump, she does pretty well on Twitter. Whose tweets are funnier? It's debatable. The Supreme Tangerine, brooding in his lights-out White House, fires off those little gobbets of world-historical petulance. Lockwood discharges blebs, zingers, and whimsicalities, and since 2011 has been delighting her followers with intermittent and surreal "sexts": *I am a living male turtleneck. You are an art teacher in winter. You put your whole head through me.*

Before the election, when editors were dispatching persons of advanced sensibility—George Saunders, Dave Eggers, etc.—to attend Trump rallies and flourish their antennae over Trump fans, Lockwood hit the trail for the *New Republic*. And at an arena in Manchester, New Hampshire, a beautiful piece of poetically paranoid journalism was born. Melania Trump "wore an outfit best described as Sensual Band-Aid and took small, ruthlessly edited steps." Lockwood felt it in her whiskers, and she caught it in high-alert prose: the voluptuous illiteracy of Trumpismo.

> Language as I knew it had either ceased to exist, or else reverted to an automatic form. A phrase lit in a mouth was spoken, went looking for another. A different kind of thinking was happening—the kind you find around racetracks, casinos, the floor of the stock market. I had not thought politics was a physical pleasure. Feeling the air crackle around me, I knew it must be.

(Then, using the *New Republic*'s Twitter account, she tweeted "fuck me daddy" at Trump. Sigh.)

Lockwood's was the best of the Trump's Inferno pieces because she was ideally equipped for the job. First, she can handle herself in that kind of roaring imaginal



Illustration by GIZEM VURAL

space. Second, geographically and psychically, she's from Trumpland. Lockwood was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and, as we learn from her new memoir, *Priestdaddy*, lived in a trailer with her family while her father prepared for his ordination as a Lutheran minister. Formerly a callow and swaggering atheist, Greg Lockwood had been converted while serving on a nuclear submarine, during a fathoms-deep screening of *The Exorcist*. "That eerie, pea-soup light was raining down," writes Lockwood, "and all around him men in sailor suits were getting the bejesus scared out of them, and the bejesus flew into my father like a dart into a bull's-eye." He would later cross the Tiber, as ecclesiastical types say, and become a (married) Catholic priest, theologically traditional while continuing to present all the symptoms of a defiant conservatism: gun nut, Rush Limbaugh listener, devoted viewer of Arnold Schwarzenegger movies. In Lockwood's hyperbolic, admiring/horrified portrait, he is an almost wordless autarch who sits in sprawling grandeur in his underwear, displaying mighty thighs and periodically debauching an electric guitar. His orthodoxy, inevitably, is precisely what Lockwood spirals away from.

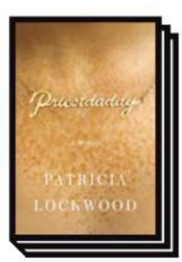
Get past its horrible hipster title (surely there are at least two bands in Brooklyn called Priestdaddy?) and Lockwood's book is really a rather deliciously old-school, big-*R* Romantic endeavor: a chronicle of the growth of a mind, the evolution of an imagination. (I'm trying to avoid the word *burgeoning*.) Some of the most interesting stuff is about her relationship to language, to words, with which she enjoys an enviable Nabokovian intimacy: " 'Violinist' was a fig cut in half … 'Penniless' was an empty copper outline, and 'prettiness' seemed to glitter." Asked by her mother how she starts a poem, Lockwood invokes the concept of Pun Lightning, "that jolt of connection when the language turns itself inside out, when two words suddenly profess they're related to each other, or wish to be married, or were in league all along."

At one point in her story, having joined a fervently religious youth group, she experiments with "the gift of tongues." She doesn't like it. "It felt like I was sticking my finger down English's throat." Later, she falls in love with the man who will become her husband when he emails her some of his verses and, amid many lines about "the majesty of canyons, arroyos and mesas," she finds "one good image": *The milk bottles burst like scared chickens*. There's the poetic intelligence at work—exacting but rapturously available, elitist as to quality but erotic-democratic as to feeling, searching with its nose in the air for the line that can sweep it off its feet.

*The Culture File*

**THE OMNIVORE**

**"Rape Joke" is the outlier. Is it prose or poetry?**



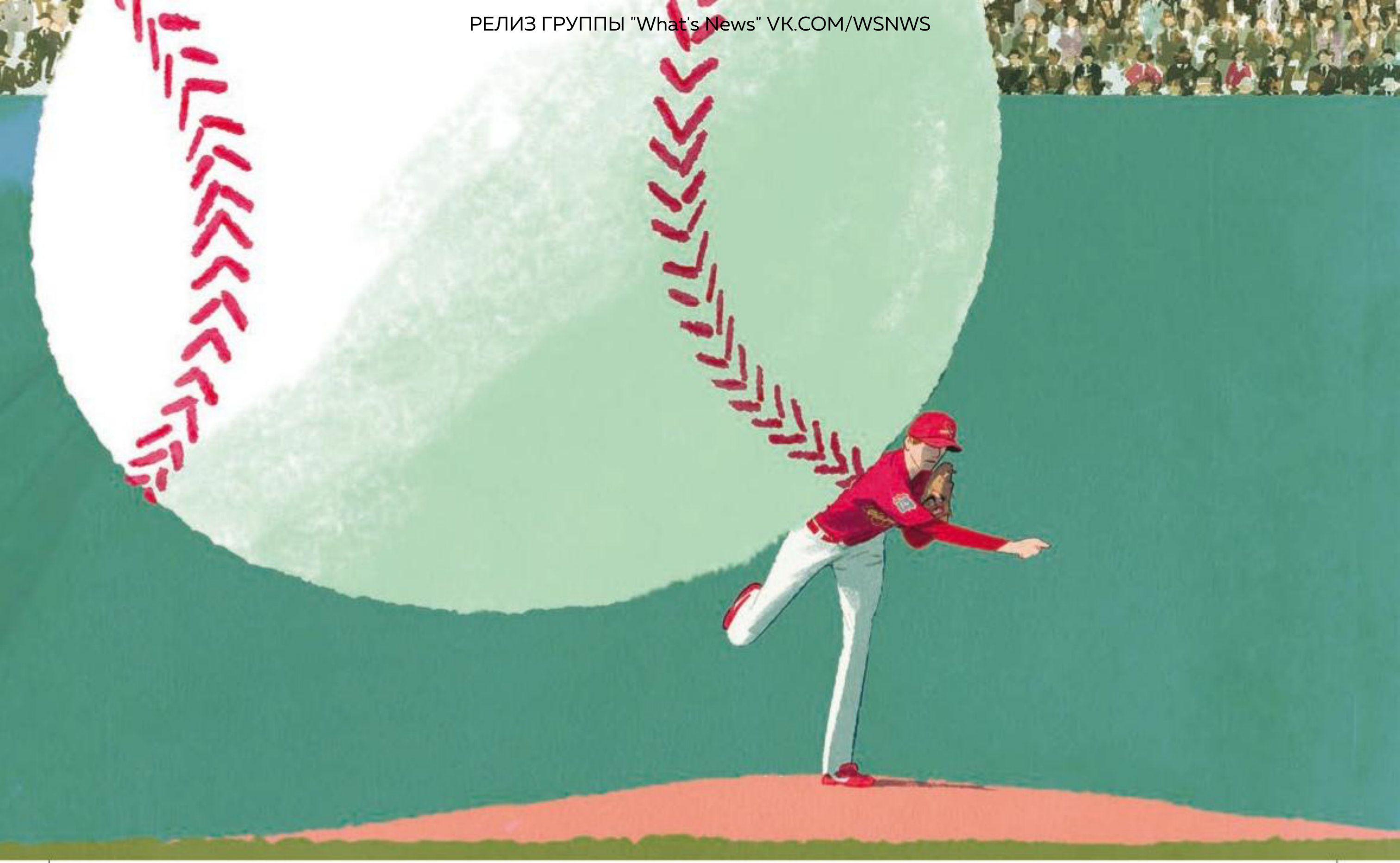

**PRIESTDADDY**
PATRICIA LOCKWOOD
Riverhead

The poems in Lockwood's 2014 collection, *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals*—her second book, after 2012's *Balloon Pop Outlaw Black*—have titles like "The Whole World Gets Together and Gangbangs a Deer" and "The Father and Mother of American Tit-Pics." (*When you want to say a poet is mysterious, say, "Very few tit-pics of him exist."*) Her flavor is post-porn, a kind of ironic biological burble. Are some of the poems just a little too long? They look a little too long, tiny Floridas of expression, running over one page to trail off in a few vestigially dangling lines on the next one.

"Rape Joke" is the outlier. Only Lockwood could have written this poem, but it doesn't quite fit into her corpus. It doesn't quite fit into literature, period. *The rape joke is that you were 19 years old. / The rape joke is that he was your boyfriend.* Is it prose or poetry? It goes on like this, spinning out in fragments and one-liners from the violent oxymoronic rotor of its title, then circling, trying again, flashing back, a comedian's monologue inside a trauma ritual. She could have published it on Twitter—it would have made sense on Twitter—but she didn't. *The rape joke is you went home like nothing happened, and laughed about it the next day and the day after that, and when you told people you laughed, and that was the rape joke.* The poem came to her, Lockwood tells us in *Priestdaddy*, in "a strong fluent flood," the first poem she published about "the things that really happened to me, the real things." Sometime in its aftermath, she overhears her father and a seminarian discussing a local priest's molestation of a 14-year-old girl: " 'She shouldn't have put him in that position,' I hear a male voice say, and an old familiar wildness flutters up my chest and into my throat, sending feathers and flames into my voice box until I cannot speak."

Poetry heals and integrates; online, things fly apart. God knows what kind of feedback Lockwood gets, the trolls and mugwumps and flickering testicular wraiths she has to contend with. I can see her in my mind, post-religion, post-family, a savvy, wounded poet hanging over an electronic abyss. But the pen that can describe a rural motel room as looking "like the place where Smokey the Bear went to cheat on his wife" is sharp enough for the occasion, for the moment. Can poetry address the massive and systematic degradation of the mental environment? Lockwood, her personae shimmering, her linguistic sensors tingling, is one of the few poets tough enough and shrewd enough to try. And it looks like we're all going to have to try, in our own lives, in our own poems. Or burst like scared chickens.

*James Parker is a contributing editor at* The Atlantic.



BOOKS

# The Secret Life of Pitchers

What happens on the mound has more to do with the mind than the arm.

BY WILL LEITCH

THE MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL commissioner, Rob Manfred, will never be mistaken for a rebel. He's a 58-year-old Harvard Law School grad who clerked for a U.S. district judge appointed by Richard Nixon; became a partner at the lofty Philadelphia law firm Morgan, Lewis & Bockius; and made his name in the league negotiating collective-bargaining agreements and investigating the Biogenesis doping scandal of 2013. The guy even wears a tie when he throws out the first pitch at games.

Yet as Manfred enters his third year as commissioner, no one should underestimate just how much of a baseball radical he is. Since taking over in 2015, Manfred has imposed new strictures on the use of instant replay, banished chewing tobacco from the field for new players, abolished the decade-and-a-half-old rule that the All-Star Game decides home-field advantage at the World Series, and now inaugurated the no-pitch intentional walk. But his most explosive ideas are yet to come. Manfred has floated the notion of limiting defensive shifts and the number of pitching changes a team can make, altering the strike zone, and shortening the season. He has even said that he'd consider, when a game reaches extra innings, automatically putting a runner on second base. (The rookie leagues are doing just that this year.)

Manfred's guiding principle is "pace of play," rooted in a presumed need to appease increasingly restless fans: Millennials who supposedly (proof is lacking) can't keep their eyes off their phones. Speeding up the game has become a full-on crusade, and Manfred is focused on the feature of baseball that entails the most standing around—the pitch. The pitch clock, which was introduced into the minor leagues in 2015, shortened games by an average of 12 minutes, for example. He has talked about wanting batters to hurry up and get in the box, catchers to hurry up and flash the sign, and pitchers to hurry up and pitch.

But here, in daring to contemplate meddling in the action (or seeming inaction) on the mound, Manfred is in for trouble. A pitcher throwing to a batter is the most elemental event in baseball: Nothing can happen until the pitcher releases the ball. All the fielders, all the base runners—they're just bystanders like the rest of us. The drama out there on the field can't compare with the drama going on between those two men, one poised to pitch and the other to hit, each trying to outsmart the other. Mess with that delicate balance, and I'm not sure the sport will be baseball anymore.

 Illustration by TATSURO KIUCHI

TALK ABOUT PRESSURE: A multibillion-dollar industry—one that has been a centerpiece of American popular culture for more than a century—rests on a figure standing alone in the grass with millions of eyes staring at him. Such a pivotal role can exact a high price, as Rick Ankiel discovered one day back in October 2000. The Cardinals phenom, who made his Major League debut at 20, was described as the next Sandy Koufax, blessed with a 95-mph fastball and a backbreaking curveball that Mark McGwire called "The Snapdragon." As a lifelong Cardinals fan, I felt that the whole world changed when Ankiel arrived in 1999. We had a new Bob Gibson, heck, a new Bobby Fischer or Mozart: a kid who could do the most difficult job in the world without even thinking about it, just because he had lightning-bolt talent straight from the gods.

On October 3, 2000, though, the magic vanished. Ankiel was making his first postseason start, against the future Hall of Famer Greg Maddux. The Cardinals manager Tony La Russa, himself a future Hall of Famer, was so concerned about the pressure that he lied to the press and told them someone other than Ankiel was starting. In his new autobiography, *The Phenomenon: Pressure, the Yips, and the Pitch That Changed My Life*, written with Tim Brown, Ankiel reports that he wasn't sure what the big deal was: It was just another game, right? Then, without warning and without reason, it wasn't.

Ankiel notes the exact moment that everything fell apart: "Forty-fourth pitch of the game. Third inning. One out. A one-strike count to Andruw Jones. Greg Maddux at first base. Cardinals 6, Braves 0. Throw strikes, keep the ball in the big part of the park, nothing crazy, we win. I win. The future wins." He winds up.

> Everything was fine. I wasn't tired. Not too hot, not too cold … Head was clear. No thoughts of anything other than a curveball, so natural there'd be no need to consider the mechanics of it.

He released the pitch a little late. Just a little late, but it went awry, a wild pitch, far away from the catcher, Carlos Hernández. "I stood near the front of the mound and watched all of it happen, sort of curious."

Suddenly, Ankiel could no longer pitch. He threw four more wild pitches in the inning, along with four walks. He left the field with, as he puts it, "one psyche forever hobbled." A friend of mine who was at Busch Stadium that day said the crowd's reaction was akin to 50,000 people reacting as one to the sight of their child being punched in the stomach, five times, by a bully. In subsequent seasons, Ankiel attempted comeback after comeback. But he couldn't recover the old command.

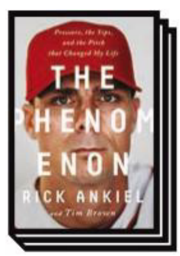
HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN? In *Off Speed: Baseball, Pitching, & the Art of Deception*, the reporter Terry McDermott quotes Hank Aaron saying, "The pitcher has got only a ball. I've got a bat. So the percentage of weapons is in my favor and I let the fellow with the ball do the fretting." We're all waiting on the pitcher, and nobody knows that better than he does. Much of McDermott's book—which features chapters on fastballs, changeups, and spitballs, and a discussion of one game in particular, the Seattle Mariners pitcher Félix Hernández's August 15, 2012, perfect game against the Tampa Bay Rays—focuses on the power the pitcher has to dictate all that surrounds him. That power, as McDermott understands, involves the brain far more than it does the arm.

McDermott's deeply felt portrayal of the men on the mound is informed by an awareness of how much of what they do takes place in their head. A pitcher's job is to upset a hitter's timing, to get him off his rhythm—which means entering his mind. Jamie Moyer, who pitched for the Phillies and many other teams too, could not throw a 90-mph fastball but thrived on his ability to fool hitters into thinking that one was just around the corner. Give them a slow pitch, and he could count on them to overestimate the speed of what he threw next. "I would never have had a career if it wasn't for the pride of major league hitters," he tells McDermott. "They were determined to never get beat by a fastball."

A hitter's job is, essentially, to guess what a pitcher is thinking—which means that a pitcher needs time to think. Imagine if he had to throw on the run, or before he was tackled by a rushing linebacker. The mental battle staged between the mound and home plate is the catalyst for every other contest on the field. No wonder batters try to steal signs or find a pitcher's "tell," like a poker player's. (McDermott reports that when Babe Ruth was a pitcher, he would stick out his tongue slightly before throwing a curveball. That giveaway was one of the reasons he became a hitter.) But when a pitcher is in peak control, physically and mentally, as Félix Hernández was on that day in August 2012, he can be virtually unhittable.

And then comes a day like that one in October 12 years earlier. Ankiel didn't suddenly lose the ability to throw hard, or to make his curveball move as if controlled by a string. He still had all the talent that made Cardinals fans like me so excited. But in an instant, he ceased to be able to summon it. Ankiel calls his affliction—one shared by various haunted souls in baseball history,

*The Culture File*




**THE PHENOMENON: PRESSURE, THE YIPS, AND THE PITCH THAT CHANGED MY LIFE**
RICK ANKIEL AND TIM BROWN
PublicAffairs


**OFF SPEED: BASEBALL, PITCHING, & THE ART OF DECEPTION**
TERRY McDERMOTT
Pantheon

perhaps most notably the former Pirates pitcher Steve Blass—"The Thing." He doesn't know why it decided to attack him, and he spends most of the book earnestly searching for answers. He talks to sports psychologists and former managers, to fellow pitchers, even to Blass. He talks to his therapist and his family. (His father was a two-bit criminal who abused his mother and made Ankiel's childhood a series of nightmares suffered in public, at times on a youth-league pitching mound.) Their insights are no more helpful than his ultimate conclusion: There was no reason. Ankiel offers the analogy of dealing with a rabid dog.

> If a boy had reached to pet a large dog and that dog had bitten him, he'd think of that pain every time he put his hand near a dog again. That's what pitching had become for me, even when I was pitching well enough to keep pitching. Every time I picked up a baseball, I was reaching out to that dog. Its ears were back. It was growling. My heart raced. The blood drained from my head. I reached further and hoped it wouldn't bite and waited for the pain.

In his surprisingly open and compelling memoir—a standout in the motley genre of athlete autobiographies—Ankiel details his many efforts to cope with the problem, from drinking to drugs to a brief retirement to deciding that he'd rather forget pitching altogether, returning as a hitter and an outfielder instead. "I couldn't recall being in higher spirits," he writes of that turning point. His victory is understanding that no matter how much talent you have, no matter how much will and determination you might muster, you will always be constrained by the limits of your own mind. Ankiel doesn't know why he can't pitch anymore. All he knows is that he can't.

*The Culture File*

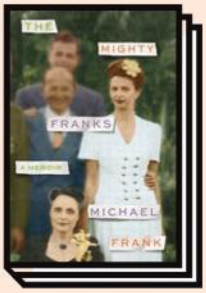
BOOKS

**The brain gets in the way—yet the brain makes the game.**

It's the rare quarterback who loses the ability to throw the ball downfield, or basketball player who can't shoot free throws. "Target panic" is a term among archers, and golfers are familiar with the yips. In baseball, an especially fertile field for the affliction, when catchers and infielders get stuck, easy plays seem to pose the challenge—"because you have time to think," sufferers will say. For pitchers, of course, no throw is possible without just that. Ankiel loved being at bat, because for him, the task was reactive rather than proactive; he just saw the ball and hit it. (That approach ultimately proved to be his weakness, and the reason he was out of the game at 33. His raw power left his swing full of massive holes that Major League pitchers happily exploited.) It's of note that when he made throws from the outfield, he could fire off 300-foot bullets with unerring precision. The brain gets in the way—yet the brain makes the game.

A once-in-a-generation arm like Ankiel's is only a tiny part of a drama that can't be rushed. If you forgo patience in the name of picking up the pace, you lose that Old West–style showdown between two men staring at each other—and you risk fundamentally altering what gives baseball its eternal allure. Baseball is a beloved game in large part because it can be played by anyone. It isn't a sport suited only to monsters and giants, for a simple and subtle reason: It is more about the mind, and the soul, than the body. Rob Manfred wants to save baseball. But the best way to save the game is to let it be.

*Will Leitch, a senior writer for Sports on Earth, is the author, most recently, of* Are We Winning? Fathers and Sons in the New Golden Age of Baseball.




COVER TO COVER

**The Mighty Franks: A Memoir**

MICHAEL FRANK
FSG

"I'M SURE THAT you will be an artist one day, Mike. I'm convinced of it. Everything you do has such *style*," Auntie Hankie told the nephew she adored "beyond life itself." Young Michael Frank thrilled to his childless aunt's attention, her talk, her certainty that he was special, "her spark—her sparkle." He lived for their frequent outings together in and around Los Angeles, after school as well as on Saturdays.

And he lived by her fierce dictum: "Fitting in is death. Remember that. You want to stand apart from your peers. Always." How could he do otherwise, striving daily to reward her devotion, to nurture the cultural interests she prescribed? No wonder he hardly knew where to turn when, in adolescence, he struggled to escape her thrall, and she succumbed to possessive rage.

Frank brings Proustian acuity and razor-sharp prose to family dramas as primal, and eccentrically insular, as they come. His aunt, in addition to being his father's sister, was married to his mother's brother—and they were not just Mike's alternate, all-consuming parents. They were Harriet Frank Jr. and Irving Ravetch, one of Hollywood's most successful screenwriting duos from the late 1950s through the 1980s. As Frank discovers the dark flaws in his aunt's script for him, he also reveals what she got right, and couldn't wreck. Frank's eye and ear, his words and wit—the voice in these pages has such *style*. Better yet, the style is utterly his own.

*— Ann Hulbert*

BOOKS

# A Match Made in Heaven

## Why conservative evangelicals lined up behind Trump

BY MOLLY WORTHEN

DONALD TRUMP has never been known for displays of Christian humility. The first few minutes of his remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast in February were no exception. He thanked the creator of *Celebrity Apprentice* and, pronouncing Arnold Schwarzenegger a "total disaster," asked the audience to pray for the show's ratings. Trump went on to remind everyone that he is a billionaire, "somebody that has had material success and knows tremendous numbers of people with great material success—the most material success." Later he acknowledged that his mission to stop terrorism "may not be pretty for a little while," and promised that his administration would confront threats "viciously, if we have to." Trump's signature swagger makes many Christians wince, but it has deterred few white evangelicals. Eighty-one percent of those who voted last year cast their ballot for him.

That figure has become one of the most discussed statistics of the 2016 election. How could so many conservative Christians have voted for a thrice-married casino mogul who has bragged about assaulting women and rarely goes to church? Some commentators have speculated that perhaps these voters weren't all that "evangelical" to begin with. "Many cultural Christians who never go to church identify as 'evangelical' or 'born-again,'" suggested one conservative Christian blogger. A writer in *The Nation* emphasized evangelicals' concern about future nominations to the Supreme Court: "If you can rally voters around abortion, few other issues matter." Other observers credited plain old party loyalty or wondered whether this election proved that religion doesn't matter very much anymore. So many voters seemed motivated by economic and racial grievances and resentment of Washington elites, not faith.

At the end of *The Evangelicals,* her nearly 700-page history of white evangelical Americans from colonial times to the present, Frances FitzGerald settles on the last of these assessments. "The simplest explanation was that those evangelicals who voted for Trump had affinities with the Tea Party," she writes. They seemed to care more about shrinking the government, creating jobs, and deporting illegal immigrants than about enforcing Christian morals. "The Trump victory had shown," she goes on, "that the Christian right had lost its power." Yet FitzGerald's careful account offers grist for a much richer exploration of evangelicals' affinity with Trump.

FITZGERALD BEGINS WITH the great revivals of the early 18th century, which brought forth evangelicalism as we know it today, more or less. The emphasis on the literal truth of the Bible, the focus on the born-again experience, and the swarm of entrepreneurial evangelists whom no Old World church hierarchy could control—the basics of evangelical culture were in place 300 years ago.

She follows this story through the rise of the Christian right in the 1970s and '80s, and evangelicals' role in politics today. Synthesizing a wide range of scholarship, FitzGerald offers no major argument of her own, but she reveals long-standing patterns in evangelical politics and leadership. Her overview, in tandem with an array of more pointed books on the subject, suggests that evangelical


MARK WALLHEISER/GETTY

support for Trump is not a deviation at all—not a sign of hypocrisy or declining influence. On the contrary, that 81 percent figure makes perfect sense.

Late in her book, as FitzGerald recounts evangelical activists' embrace of the Tea Party movement during the Obama years, she deems the alliance "unlikely," at least "from a historical perspective." In fact, the partnership between white Protestants and libertarians dates back at least to the American Revolution. In the 18th century, evangelical Christians had plenty of company among their fellow colonists in decrying the king's abuse of power. But evangelical preachers fused their commitment to freedom from "civil tyranny" with a demand for the spiritual freedom to decide, *The Culture File*

BOOKS

without political coercion, to accept Christ. "There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost and religious liberty preserved entire," preached John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister with evangelical sympathies who signed the Declaration of Independence. "If therefore we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage."

Evangelicals in the early republic nurtured a deep suspicion of an encroaching federal government, and many were happy to collaborate with heterodox politicians who felt the same way. Thomas Jefferson may have taken a razor to his personal copy of the Gospels, excising the tales of miracles, but he had friends among the Baptists, who supported his campaign to enshrine religious freedom into law. Trump is not the first politically useful infidel to find allies in the evangelical world.

The point is that American evangelical religion was born in a revolutionary state. This founding moment of rebellion against big government left evangelicals keenly aware of the fragility of personal liberty—and the capacity of centralized power to snuff it out. Over time, the conservative evangelical vision of spiritual liberty fused with free-market ideology. Recent research has called attention to the collaborative efforts of capitalists and evangelical ministers to convince Americans that the free market is sacred. In the late 19th century, Darren E. Grem notes in *The Blessings of Business* (2016), businessmen recruited evangelical organizations to help them pacify a restive labor force. "Either these people are to be evangelized, or the leaven of communism and infidelity will assume such enormous proportions that it will break out in a reign of terror such as this country has never known," warned the evangelist Dwight L. Moody in 1886.

The labor unrest of the turn of the 20th century, the Great Depression, and the New Deal hardly appear in FitzGerald's book, but those decades of economic disaster and reform are crucial to explaining conservative white evangelical politics through the rest of the century, as well as the embrace of Trump. By the time the Roosevelt administration began to transform the federal government's relationship to American capitalism, millions of Catholic, Jewish, and Eastern European immigrants had settled in the United States. Large numbers of African Americans began migrating north and agitating for civil rights. Many white evangelicals feared they were losing control over the nation's culture. By redistributing wealth to the poor—including so many foreign-born arrivals and African Americans—the New Deal threatened to undermine that authority even further. Opposition to Soviet Russia provided a perfect rallying cry: The country represented the godless, totalitarian end toward which the New Deal might lead.

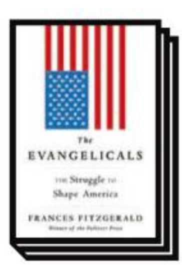
In *One Nation Under God* (2015), Kevin M. Kruse probes the alliance between leading industrialists and the Los Angeles preacher James W. Fifield Jr. In 1935, Fifield co-founded an organization called Spiritual Mobilization to battle the New Deal's "encroachment upon our American freedoms." His propaganda campaign, funded by donations from tycoons like the tire magnate Harvey Firestone and J. Howard Pew Jr. of Sun Oil, dazzled Americans with radio spots and Independence Day media blitzes celebrating "freedom under God." Mailings encouraged ministers to warn their flocks of the "anti-Christian and anti-American trends toward pagan stateism in America."

**American evangelicalism was born in a revolutionary era.**

FIFIELD AND HIS ALLIES did not succeed in dismantling the New Deal. But by the 1950s, Billy Graham was rallying huge crowds with his dark predictions about the communist menace, an ideology "masterminded by Satan," he said in 1957. "Graham sometimes invoked Communism as part of an end times prophecy," FitzGerald writes, "and at other times as part of a jeremiad in which Americans had a choice to make." In blending their movement's libertarian inclinations with anticommunist hysteria and anxieties about cultural change, these evangelical leaders helped catalyze the most powerful ideology in modern American politics: Christian free-market mania. Evangelicals in other countries, such as Canada, worked alongside secular Social Democrats to build a generous social safety net. In the United States, conservative white Protestants ensured that the welfare state remained anemic.

At the same time, conservative white evangelicals have a long record of being highly pragmatic, rather than purist, in their libertarianism. Throughout American history, they have been more than happy to use the tools of the federal government to protect their own authority and advance a moral agenda—as they did, for example, during the campaign for Prohibition. This selective libertarianism continues to thrive. Trump's promises to "drain the swamp" resonate with deeply rooted suspicion of big government, but conservative evangelicals applaud his more intrusive proposals as well. Today, many on the religious right find themselves on the losing side of global capitalism, and they don't want anyone messing with their Social Security or Medicare.

Trump's threats to curb free trade and punish journalists may make real libertarians apoplectic. And his initial executive order restricting immigration from seven majority-Muslim countries




THE EVANGELICALS
FRANCES FITZGERALD
Simon & Schuster

outraged some prominent evangelical organizations and leaders who lamented the order's unbiblical abandonment of refugees. But other influential evangelicals, such as Billy Graham's son Franklin, support Trump's policy. The president's isolationist approach plays well among Americans who believe that the time has come to restore the capitalist order as God intended it to be: with native-born white Americans on top.

IN ANY CASE, ideology is not the sole bond between conservative evangelicals and Donald Trump. His dictator-lite charisma is essential to his appeal. To the majority of Americans—those who did not vote for him—Trump has all the allure of the boorish boss who takes too many liberties at the staff Christmas party. But his authoritarian machismo is right in step with a long evangelical tradition of pastor-overlords who anoint themselves with the power to make their own rules—and, in the event of their own occasional moral lapses, assure their followers that God always forgives.

Other forms of Christianity, like Roman Catholicism and many strains of liberal Protestantism, feature formidable Church structures: diocesan councils and synods, hierarchies and protocols that help keep rogues and would-be autocrats in line. In the evangelical world, these institutions are generally much less powerful—or nonexistent. FitzGerald chronicles the imperial ambitions of ministers like the Midwestern fundamentalist William Bell Riley and Jerry Falwell, a prime mover behind the Moral Majority. "Those who had built up their own churches or Bible schools," she writes, "were rulers of their own fiefdoms."

Down through the decades, more than a few of these figures, FitzGerald observes, have squelched dissent or scandal with little concern for the opinion of denominational bureaucrats. In a tradition that has always prized "soul liberty" and spiritual autonomy, American evangelicals have sometimes shown a strong preference for leaders who demand unquestioning obedience—and who, like Trump, consider disagreement a form of disloyalty.

Nowhere is this tendency more obvious than in the evangelical subculture that nurtured Donald Trump himself: the prosperity gospel. When Trump was a child, his family attended Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, pastored by Norman Vincent Peale, a celebrity minister whose influence radiated throughout evangelical circles and beyond. He was one of the most famous proponents of a spiritual style sometimes called the "Health and Wealth" gospel or "Name It and Claim It" faith.

Praying for a new car or a promotion may sound "shockingly materialistic," FitzGerald writes. But for believers, prosperity theology means that the material world has "a miraculous, God-filled quality." Its basic tenets appear throughout the Bible—the notion that God answers prayers, rewards believers with worldly blessings, and punishes those who don't keep the faith. And then, like most heresies, it pushes such orthodox teaching to an extreme. Imagine that your desired reality is true, Peale urged believers. His handy slogan: "Prayerize, picturize, actualize." Peale, the dean of "the power of positive thinking," would have understood Trump's penchant for inventing his preferred reality.



**Trump's authoritarian machismo is in step with a long evangelical tradition of pastor-overlords.**

God never goes back on his word. According to many prosperity-gospel preachers, if you don't get that new job you prayed for, then you didn't pray sincerely enough, live righteously enough—or give generously enough to your church. The Florida mega-church pastor Paula White, who is frequently called the president's "spiritual adviser" (and, like him, is on her third marriage), encourages her followers to donate generously to her ministry, and to expect financial returns. "When you give the 'firstfruits of your increase,' as the Word says, your 'barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will OVERFLOW,' " her website promises.

Trump perfected his own brand of prosperity ministry in the ad campaigns for the now-defunct Trump University. "I'll show you how to turn this sizzling opportunity into a tidal wave of profits," one 2007 newspaper advertisement read. The candidate who specialized in ludicrous promises has continued that magical thinking now that he's in office, as he vows to create "25 million new jobs" and insists that he can replace Obamacare with "a much better health-care plan at much less money."

Throughout the 2016 campaign, historians suggested a range of analogies to explain Trump's growing popularity. Did his momentum resemble the rise of fascism in 1930s Germany? Do his despotic tendencies and sensitive ego remind us of Napoleon? Maybe Henry VIII? Distant echoes are always tantalizing. The truth is that Trump's victory—especially his popularity among conservative white evangelicals—has sources closer to home. His ascendancy was certainly galvanized by a 21st-century whirl of social media and global economic discontent. But in the end, Trump won over evangelicals—and won the election—because he exploited beliefs and fears with origins deep in America's past.

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BOOKS

# Tragic Muses

## What Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell taught each other about turning pain into art

**BY MEGHAN O'ROURKE**

ELIZABETH BISHOP, then 35, and Robert Lowell, almost 30, met in 1947 at a dinner in New York City hosted by Randall Jarrell. They struck up an unusual lifelong friendship fueled by mutual admiration, genuine devotion, and the fact that they rarely saw each other—which meant that in their correspondence they could divulge their best and worst selves, without the friction of actual contact. Each felt that the other had what he or she was missing. Bishop (shy, hesitant) saw "assurance" in Lowell and he (wayward, erratic) saw "unerring" judgment in her. Both led lives marked by tragedy and illness, and as they navigated an era during which American poetry took a sharp turn toward the personal, they became each other's best reader. "I think I must write entirely for you," Lowell told Bishop. She agreed, in her dry way: "I feel profoundly *bored* with all the contemporary poetry except yours,—and mine that I haven't written yet."

Now Bishop and Lowell are once again together, with the release of a pair of unorthodox biographies, Megan Marshall's *Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast* and Kay Redfield Jamison's *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire*. Neither is quite the definitive new biography we might wish for. Marshall, who incorporates reminiscences of her own time studying poetry with Bishop at Harvard, makes good use of letters that became available only after the death, in 2009, of Bishop's lover Alice Methfessel. Her readings of both the poetry and the life, though, can be disappointingly reductive. Jamison has written insightfully before about art and bipolar disorder (and about her own experience of the disease). She focuses usefully on the part that mania played in Lowell's life and career, and writes about his poetry with thrilling acumen. But she strains too hard to make the case that his illness made him a better poet.

Still, the books vividly dramatize the mysterious relationship between personal suffering and art, and embrace the idea, articulated in Edmund Wilson's *The Wound and the Bow*, that "genius and disease, like strength and mutilation, may be inextricably bound up together." As Marshall puts it, "Elizabeth's shyness—her extreme self-consciousness—may have been the 'fault' her existence as a poet depended upon." Jamison writes that "a germ in the mind, some flaw in the motor" (Lowell's metaphors) "rocks the lives of poets. Without question, Lowell's attacks of mania spurred his work." Both biographies offer a welcome occasion to reconsider two pioneers who left very different marks on the poetry of self-disclosure that flourished over the ensuing half century—and to reflect on how a burgeoning culture of online sharing has revised our views of these two titans of their era.

LOWELL AND BISHOP were writing at a time when, as Marshall puts it, American poetry was witnessing "the stripping away of artifice and sentiment" and embarking "on an inward course toward personal narrative." Although they were starkly different poets and people, they were just like and unalike enough to goad each other on. Lowell, often described as the leading poet of his generation, was a voluble Boston Brahmin given to what he called "enthusiasms," symptoms that later elicited a diagnosis of manic depression, now known as bipolar disorder. As a student at Harvard, encouraged to uphold the Lowell name, he rebelled, and after two years he left to study poetry at Kenyon College. Bishop, by contrast, was an introverted, asthmatic all-but-orphan from Nova Scotia. Skeptical by nature, she was often slyly funny



Illustration by JULES JULIEN

in her assessments of herself and others. While he wrote and rewrote copiously, she could take years to put words on the page.

Perhaps the greatest affinity between them was the way that deep-rooted pain kept surfacing in their work. Lowell's overbearing mother, as Jamison powerfully depicts her, was a chilly, frustrated woman, consumed by anger at his passive father, whose naval career had failed to thrive. Bishop's father died when she was eight months old. Her mother became mentally ill, and in 1916, when Bishop was 5, was admitted to a mental hospital, where she lived for nearly 20 years; Bishop never saw her again. Lowell's manic depression worsened over the years despite eventual treatment with lithium. Bishop was an alcoholic, prone to drinking binges followed by drying-out periods, as Marshall sympathetically portrays. A lesbian in an age when it was difficult to come out, she appears to have felt, at times, the pressures of being half-hidden in plain sight.

With the publication of *Life Studies* in 1959—hailed at the time as marking "a major expansion of the territory of poetry"—Lowell paved the way for the frankly autobiographical poetry of the 1960s and '70s. Earlier in his career, he had distinguished himself by writing tightly patterned, highly emblematic poems infused with self-conscious grandeur: "The world out-Herods Herod; and the year, / The nineteen hundred forty-fifth of grace, / Lumbers with losses up the clinkered hill / Of our purgation." (During his mania, he sometimes thought he was Dante.) Then Lowell and Bishop began corresponding, and in her poetry he found a new colloquial scale, later calling her a "muse who makes the casual perfect."

Influenced both by Bishop's conversational tone and, as Jamison points out, by his therapist's urgings to explore his childhood, Lowell shifted register in *Life Studies*. The volume traces an arc from formal historical poems to autobiographical free verse describing his hospitalizations, the strains that manic depression placed on his marriage, and his shame—offering up what the critic M. L. Rosenthal dubbed "the most naked kind of confession," a form of "soul's therapy." The revelations were his, but the emotional clarity seems learned from Bishop. "I myself am hell," Lowell proclaimed in what is arguably his most famous poem, "Skunk Hour," a masterful lyric whose off-kilter lines and insistent repetitions of *-ll* sounds mimic emotional destabilization. After the publication of *Life Studies*, Sylvia Plath declared herself "very excited" by "this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo."

**"I write my best poetry when I'm manic."**

Bishop, too, thought that suffering was crucial to the insights of poetry: "Nobody's heart is really good for much until it has been smashed to little bits," she once wrote. But unlike Lowell, she was averse to intimate exposure, Marshall observes. As she wrestled with autobiographical matter that threatened to overwhelm her—her mother's insanity, the suicide of her long-term partner Lota de Macedo Soares—she kept a disciplined aesthetic distance, striving at the same time for emotional lucidity. Bishop believed that poetry derived power from reticence (she once referred to "disasters, etc." in a letter to a lover). Interviewed about Lowell and the confessional movement by *Time* magazine in 1967, she tried to justify confessional poetry's blunt approach to traumatic revelation, noting that in a sense, "the worst moments of horrible and terrifying lives are an allegory of the world." But, as Marshall notes, she couldn't help adding that "the tendency is to overdo the morbidity. You just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves."

Bishop's poems are saturated with personal tragedy, but for her a poem isn't so much a vehicle for personal expression as it is an object that can dramatically *enact* loss, through the use of irony and understatement. In "Sestina," she writes in the third person about a girl drawing a series of "rigid" and "inscrutable" houses as her grandmother looks on. As the poem progresses through its demanding formal twists (a sestina repeats a prescribed series of end words six times), the absence of parents in the domestic tableau becomes glaringly obvious—even if the poem never says as much. "Crusoe in England," one of Bishop's most poignant poems, is a dramatic monologue, spoken not by the poet but by Robinson Crusoe on returning home to England. It was finished after Lota died, which, Marshall notes, was nearly 17 years into their relationship:

> The local museum's asked me to
> leave everything to them:
> the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes,
> my shedding goatskin trousers ...
> How can anyone want such things?
> —And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles
> seventeen years ago come March.

BISHOP AND LOWELL are ideal vehicles for biographers hoping to examine the interplay between creativity and suffering. But Marshall succumbs to the temptation to overplay the one-to-one correlation between events in Bishop's life and her work, quoting poems almost as if they were journals or letters. The question she too often skirts is how a particular wounding event became a poem. The answer lies in the tortured hours Bishop spent *not* writing and then, once she finally got started, drafting and redrafting until a poem found the virtuosic form that would contain its urgent emotions. Given how fully realized and restrained her published poems are, readers were shocked to discover the rawness of many of her early drafts and unpublished poems, versions of which were gathered in *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments* (2006).

Jamison blurs the artistic process too. She fascinatingly suggests that Lowell's many radical stylistic swerves were connected to his manic breakdowns. That there is a deep relationship between his "elated" states and his literary aspiration seems true. But as richly nuanced as Jamison's book is, her medical lens by definition leaves some crucial questions unexplored. "I write my best poetry when I'm manic," Lowell once noted, a declaration she takes seriously. But he also spoke about having to edit what he wrote when manic. One wonders in what ways Lowell's poetic ambition (a therapist observed that he had "an undue preoccupation with greatness") was powered by forces other than his mania. Jamison cites studies that show poets are more likely to be bipolar than the rest of us. Yet she leaves the reader to puzzle over why. Does poetry's compression and intensity draw such minds? Or does the high value that poetry places on figurative language provide the allure, since it dovetails with the tendency of manic people's speech to display what Jamison describes as "flight of ideas"?

IN THE DECADES since the poets died, Lowell's star has fallen while Bishop's has risen. You might think that this is odd—that in an era of social media and seemingly endless self-disclosure, Lowell's bold confessions would feel more modern than Bishop's almost prim restraint. But Bishop is the more original poet, and nearly 60 years after *Life Studies*, her challenging irony, her plainspoken tone, and her resigned clarity sound as fresh as ever. By contrast, Lowell's poems can seem overworked, antiquated in their metaphor making. "I liked your *New Yorker* fish poem," Lowell told Bishop in a revealing early exchange. "I am a fisherman myself, but all my fish become symbols, alas!" This tendency to inflate would haunt his work to the end.

Meanwhile, the self-revealing mode that he helped catalyze is by now so thoroughly assimilated into American poetry as to seem staid, unimaginative, even retrograde. Neither Marshall nor Jamison says as much, but taken together, their biographies suggest that Lowell's and Bishop's best poems grow out of the ordinariness of suffering, not out of its extraordinariness. In fact, reading Jamison, one begins to see that for all Lowell's bombastic, grandiose tendencies, he is a great poet of the daily reality of illness, its small degradations.

This view of Lowell is underscored by an insightful introduction by the poet and critic Katie Peterson to *New Selected Poems*. Returning to Lowell afresh, she finds that alongside the poet of grandeur is a poet writing poems spoken with a voice that "came straight from a human body, in the middle of an ordinary day." She cites these lines from "Waking in the Blue," one of his best poems:

> In between the limits of day,
> hours and hours go by under the crew
> haircuts
> and slightly too little nonsensical bachelor
> twinkle
> of the Roman Catholic attendants.

He continues:

> After a hearty New England breakfast,
> I weigh two hundred pounds
> this morning. Cock of the walk,
> I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's
> jersey
> before the metal shaving mirrors,
> and see the shaky future grow familiar
> in the pinched, indigenous faces
> of these thoroughbred mental cases,
> twice my age and half my weight.
> We are all old-timers,
> each of us holds a locked razor.

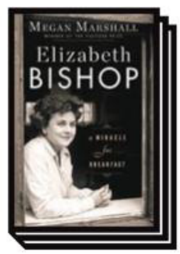
Lowell's project, it turns out, was (and still is) radical in its commitment to the bedraggling horrors of mental illness as a chronic experience of debilitation and loss—loss of time, of self, of possibility. His poems about being bipolar, Jamison understands, are spectacularly unsentimental, indeed almost dreary, in an era when other poets writing about depression (Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton) tended to sensationalize the experience.

Ultimately what makes a confessional poem good is not the frisson of revelation but the drama of its voicing—its persistent freshness as an artifact, a verbal creation. "The art of losing's not too hard to master / though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster," Bishop wrote in "One Art." The moments that make Bishop's and Lowell's work endure—the moments, even, that offer us consolation—are, strangely enough, not the extreme ones, but the modest, inhabited ones.

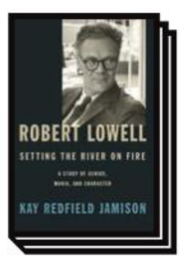
*Meghan O'Rourke is the author of several poetry collections, including the forthcoming* Sun in Days.

***The Culture File***

**BOOKS**




**ELIZABETH BISHOP: A MIRACLE FOR BREAKFAST**
MEGAN MARSHALL
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt




**ROBERT LOWELL, SETTING THE RIVER ON FIRE**
KAY REDFIELD JAMISON
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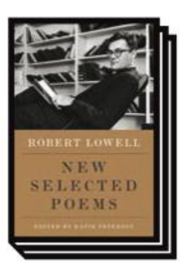
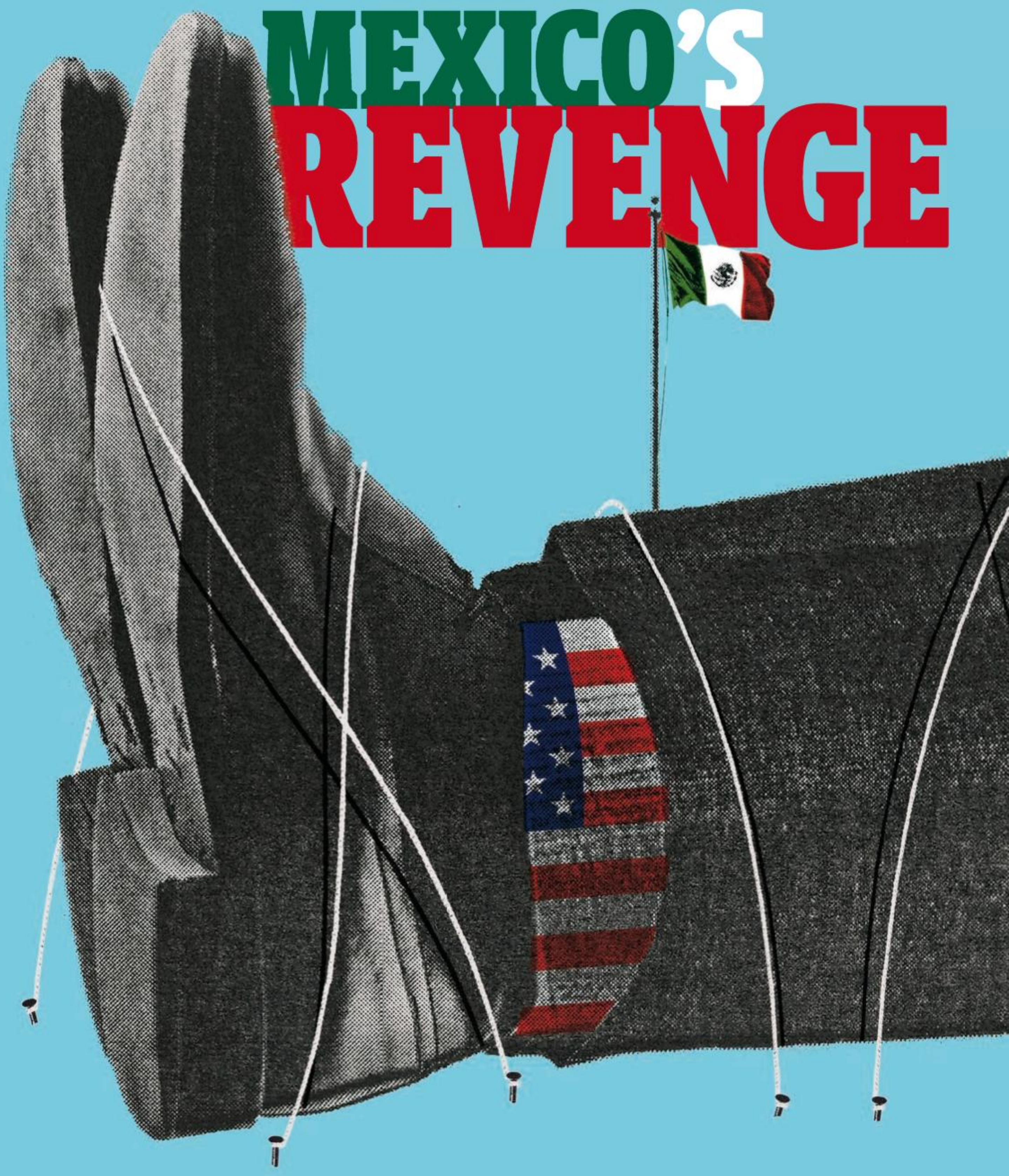


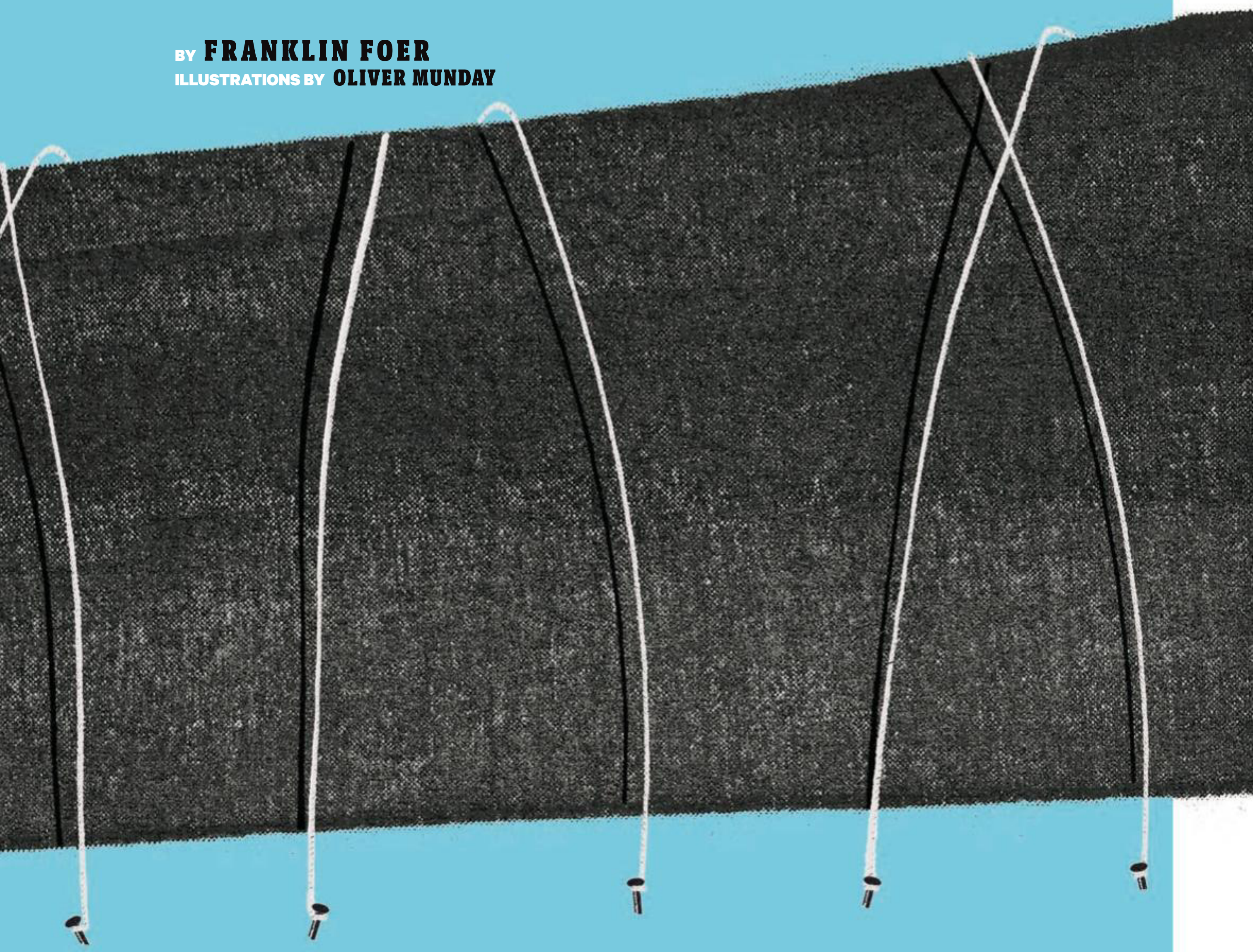

**NEW SELECTED POEMS**
ROBERT LOWELL, EDITED BY KATIE PETERSON
FSG

# MEXICO'S REVENGE



**By antagonizing Mexico, Donald Trump has made the classic bully's error: He has underestimated his victim. On issues ranging from counterterrorism to China, the Mexican response could be devastating.**

BY **FRANKLIN FOER**
ILLUSTRATIONS BY **OLIVER MUNDAY**



**When Donald Trump first made sport of thumping Mexico—when he accused America's neighbor of exporting rapists and "bad hombres," when he deemed the country such a threat that it should be contained by a wall and so clueless that it could be suckered into paying for its own encasement—its president responded with strange equilibrium. Enrique Peña Nieto treated the humiliation like a meteorological disturbance. Relations with the United States would soon return to normal, if only he grinned his way through the painful episode.**

In August, Peña Nieto invited Trump to Mexico City, based on the then-contrarian notion that Trump might actually become president. Instead of branding Trump a toxic threat to Mexico's well-being, he lavished the Republican nominee with legitimacy. Peña Nieto paid a severe, perhaps mortal, reputational cost for his magnanimity. Before the meeting, former President Vicente Fox had warned Peña Nieto that if he went soft on Trump, history would remember him as a "traitor." In the months following the meeting, his approval rating plummeted, falling as low as 12 percent in one poll—which put his popularity on par with Trump's own popularity among Mexicans. The political lesson was clear enough: No Mexican leader could abide Trump's imprecations and hope to thrive. Since then, the Mexican political elite has begun to ponder retaliatory measures that would reassert the country's dignity, and perhaps even cause the Trump administration to reverse its hostile course. With a presidential election in just over a year—and Peña Nieto prevented by term limits from running again—vehement responses to Trump are considered an electoral necessity. Memos outlining policies that could wound the United States have begun flying around Mexico City. These show that Trump has committed the bully's error of underestimating the target of his gibes. As it turns out, Mexico could hurt the United States very badly.

The Mexico–U.S. border is long, but the history of close cooperation across it is short. As recently as the 1980s, the countries barely contained their feelings of mutual contempt. Mexico didn't care for the United States' anticommunist policy in Central America, especially its support of Nicaraguan rebels. In 1983, President Miguel de la Madrid obliquely warned the Reagan administration against "shows of force which threaten to touch off a conflagration." Relations further unraveled following the murder of the DEA agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena in 1985. Former Mexican police officers aided drug traffickers who kidnapped and mercilessly tortured Camarena, drilling a hole in his skull and leaving his corpse in the Michoacán countryside. The Reagan administration reacted with fury at what it perceived as Mexican indifference to Camarena's disappearance, all but shutting down the border for about a week. The episode seemed a return to the fraught days of the 1920s, when Calvin Coolidge's administration derided "Soviet Mexico" and Hearst newspapers ginned up pretexts for a U.S. invasion.

The grandiose promise of trade is that it binds countries together, breeding peace and cooperation. This is a risible overstatement when applied generally to the world. But in the case of the countries separated by the Rio Grande, it has proved wondrously true. A generation after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the United States and Mexico couldn't be more interdependent. Anti-Americanism, once a staple of Mexican politics, has largely faded. The flow of migrants from Mexico to the U.S. has, more or less, abated. Economic ties have fostered greater intimacy between intelligence services and security agencies, which are today deeply enmeshed in each other's business. While the economic benefits of NAFTA are less impressive than the architects of the deal promised, the geostrategic benefits of integration are far more important than anyone could have anticipated. But the Trump administration has come dangerously close to trashing the relationship—and, in the process, unleashing a terrifying new reality.

Once the threat of Soviet expansion into the Western Hemisphere vanished, the United States paid less-careful attention to Latin America. It passively ceded vast markets to the Chinese, who were hunting for natural resources to feed their sprouting factories and build their metropolises. The Chinese invested heavily in places like Peru, Brazil, and Venezuela, discreetly flexing soft power as they funded new roads, refineries, and railways. From 2000 to 2013, China's bilateral trade with Latin America increased by 2,300 percent, according to one calculation. A raft of recently inked deals forms the architecture for China to double its annual trade with the region, to $500 billion, by the middle of the next decade. Mexico, however, has remained a grand exception to this grand strategy. China has had many reasons for its restrained approach in Mexico, including the fact that Mexico lacks most of the export commodities that have attracted China to other Latin American countries. But Mexico also happens to be the one spot in Latin America where the United States would respond with alarm to a heavy Chinese presence.

That sort of alarm is just the thing some Mexicans would now like to provoke. What Mexican analysts have called the "China card"—a threat to align with America's greatest competitor—is an extreme retaliatory option. Former Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda told me he considers it an implausible expression of "machismo." Unfortunately, Trump has elevated machismo to foreign-policy doctrine, making it far more likely that other countries will embrace the same ethos in response. And while a tighter Chinese–Mexican relationship would fly in the face of recent economic history, Trump may have already set it in motion.

The painful early days of the Trump administration have reminded Mexico of a core economic weakness: The country depends far too heavily on the American market. "Mexico is realizing that it has been overexposed to the U.S., and it's now trying to hedge its bets," says Kevin Gallagher, an economist at Boston University who specializes in Latin America. "Any country where 80 percent of exports go to the U.S., it's a danger." Even with a friendly American president, Mexico would be looking to loosen its economic tether to its neighbor. The presence of Trump, with his brusque talk of tariffs and promises of economic nationalism, makes that an urgent task.

Until recently, a Mexican–Chinese rapprochement would have been unthinkable. Mexico has long steered clear of China, greeting even limited Chinese interest in the country with wariness. It rightly considered China its primary competition for American consumers. Immediately after NAFTA went into effect in 1994, the Mexican economy enjoyed a boom in trade and investment. (A flourishing U.S. economy and an inevitable turn in Mexico's business cycle helped account for these years of growth too.) Then, in 2001, the World Trade Organization admitted China, propelling the country further into the global economy. Many Mexican factories could no longer compete; jobs disappeared practically overnight.

**WHAT MEXICAN ANALYSTS HAVE CALLED THE "CHINA CARD" IS AN EXTREME RETALIATORY OPTION.**

Mexico's hesitance to do business with the Chinese was also a tribute to the country's relationship with the "Yanquis." A former Mexican government official told me that Barack Obama's administration urged his country to steer clear of Chinese investment in energy and infrastructure projects. These conversations were a prologue to the government's decision to scuttle a $3.7 billion contract with a Chinese-led consortium to build a bullet train linking Mexico City with Querétaro, a booming industrial center. The cancellation was a fairly selfless gesture, considering the sorry state of Mexican infrastructure, and it certainly displeased the Chinese.

But China has played the long game, and its patience has proved farsighted. The reason so many Chinese are ascending to the middle class is that wages have tripled over the past decade. The average hourly wage in Chinese manufacturing is now $3.60. Over that same period of time, hourly manufacturing wages in Mexico have fallen to $2.10. Even taking into account the extraordinary productivity of Chinese factories—not to mention the expense that comes with Mexico's far greater fidelity to the rules of international trade—Mexico increasingly looks like a sensible place for Chinese firms to set up shop, particularly given its proximity to China's biggest export market.

Mexico began quietly welcoming a greater Chinese presence even before the American presidential election. In October, China's state-run media promised that the two countries "would elevate military ties to [a] new high" and described the possibility of joint operations, training, and logistical support. A month and a half later, Mexico sold a Chinese oil company access to two massive patches of deepwater oil fields in the Gulf of Mexico. And in February, the billionaire Carlos Slim, a near-perfect barometer of the Mexican business elite's mood, partnered with Anhui Jianghuai Automobile to produce SUVs in Hidalgo, a deal that will ultimately result in the production of 40,000 vehicles a year. These were not desultory developments. As Beijing's ambassador to Mexico City put it in December, with the American election clearly on the brain: "We are sure that cooperation is going to be much strengthened."

Let's pause to consider the illogic. Trump says that China is a grave threat, both militarily and economically. He has accused China of "rap[ing] our country." That's not the way most analysts would put it, but a fairly broad bipartisan consensus holds that China's expansionism should be contained and its mercantilism checked. Barack Obama's vaunted "pivot" to Asia tried to keep China's neighbors from succumbing to its gravitational pull. Thanks to Donald Trump, China is now better positioned to execute the most difficult maneuver in its own, North American pivot—pushing the U.S. and Mexico further apart.

Even before Donald Trump's foray into presidential politics, Mexico was a primary subject for incendiary right-wing news accounts. During the Obama years, conservative media in the U.S. blared unsubstantiated stories about Islamic State operatives camping out in Ciudad Juárez, waiting to commit car bombings across the border. It was reported on Fox News that copies of the Koran had been strewn along smuggling routes into Texas. Of course, the idea of terrorists slinking into the country isn't itself outlandish. But these stories shared a profoundly faulty core assumption: that somehow the Mexican and U.S. governments were blasé about the threat.

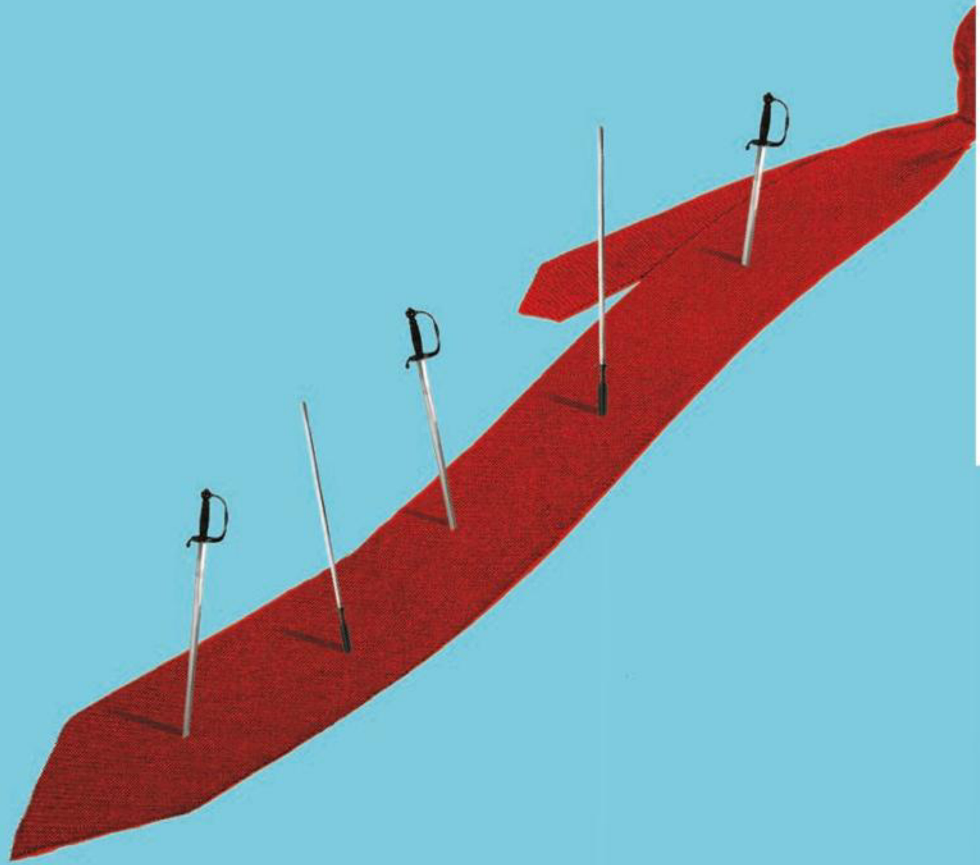
One common complaint of populists, no matter their country, is that their nation has ceded sovereignty. This, in fact, has happened in Mexico's case. The shock of September 11, and the immediate imperative of preventing a sequel, joined Mexico and the U.S. together. Their security services began sharing information, an exchange that became casual, almost automatic. When I called up an American official who served in the Department of Homeland Security, he recounted the ways in which the Mexican government has been integrated into U.S. counterterrorism efforts. The passenger list of every international flight that arrives in Mexico is run through American databases, and the results are passed along to American officers, some of whom are posted in Mexico City's Benito Juárez airport. Cargo bound for the United States is inspected before it leaves Tijuana. In Virginia, Mexican officials sit in the National Targeting Center, which monitors the comings and goings of international cargo. The American official told me, "They would never balk by saying, 'This isn't in our interest.' What's in the interest of one is considered to be in the interest of the other." Given the length of the shared border, and the fact that it is the most frequently crossed border in the world, the perfect success rate of these measures to date is a bureaucratic and diplomatic feat.

Mexico could assert its importance by dialing back these efforts. What seems more likely is that relations between the security agencies will slowly decay, as trust between the two countries evaporates and warm feelings give way to tensions. America's everyday relationship with Mexico is like *The New York Times*' presence at White House press briefings or a president's avoidance of conflicts of interest: It's a modern norm that seems a fixture of governance, until it erodes and perhaps irreversibly disappears.

So much of Donald Trump's rise was predicated on a nonexistent fear: that Mexicans are pouring over the border. In fact, more Mexicans now leave the United States each year than arrive. But Trump could inadvertently trigger the waves of newcomers that he rails against. For the past few years, the border has been periodically flooded with Central Americans fleeing gang violence. Those surges could have been far larger had Mexico not stepped up enforcement of its southern border with Guatemala in 2014, largely stanching the flow of migrants. From 2014 through July 2016, with American prodding, the Mexicans detained approximately 425,000 migrants who were attempting to make their way to the United States.

Recently, however, migrants and their smugglers have found new routes through the reinforced border, and the number of Central Americans reaching the United States is again climbing. If Mexico were to conclude that there is little upside to its expensive efforts, the U.S. could find itself facing a genuine immigration crisis. The moral case for the United States' welcoming these migrants is strong, but a sudden influx could overwhelm the American immigration system, straining budgets and exceeding the capacities of courts and detention centers.

Trump's rush toward hard-line immigration policies could yield a grim bonanza of other unintended consequences. Mass deportations of Mexicans could uproot hundreds of thousands and deposit them on the other side of the border, forcing their reintegration into lives they left, many of them long ago. Perhaps the Mexican economy, the 15th-largest



**THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRUMP AND MEXICO'S LIKELY NEXT PRESIDENT MAY BE A SOURCE OF COMBUSTION.**

in the world, has the capacity to absorb these refugees from Trump's America. But it's equally easy to imagine a scenario in which they inundate the labor market. And even that possibility doesn't begin to capture the likely economic costs of deportation. The Mexican economy would be deprived of the remittances that immigrants send back to their relatives. It's hard to speak hyperbolically about the importance of these transfers—in 2016, Mexican Americans sent $27 billion back to their Mexican families, more than the value of the crude petroleum Mexico exports annually. Remittances are extensively studied by economists. Ample evidence suggests that they are as effective an antipoverty program as anything devised by governments or NGOs: Families that receive remittances are more likely to invest in their own health care and education. Relieved of the daily scramble for sustenance, they are free to participate in productive economic activity with lasting benefits.

If the Trump administration were to engage in mass deportations that choked the flow of remittances at the same time it engaged in a trade war with Mexico, it would wreck the Mexican economy, generating the sort of conditions that have, in the past, triggered waves of migration northward. Even if the likelihood of getting caught were far greater than before, the threat of capture wouldn't necessarily deter migrants. History vividly shows that desperate people take risks that might otherwise appear irrational.

These scenarios may seem unimaginably distant, especially under current political circumstances. Peña Nieto has cautiously ambled into the Trump era, in keeping with his bland suavity. Mexico has much to lose from brinkmanship and blustery threats—perhaps more than the United States does. But Mexican prudence might not persist. Next year, the country will pick a new president. According to early polls, the likely winner is a familiar loser: the left-wing populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador—aka Amlo, or, as the great Mexican intellectual Enrique Krauze dubbed him, the "Tropical Messiah." Amlo lost his first presidential election, in 2006, by the thinnest of margins, and alleged that funny business cost him the presidency. His second defeat, six years later, was by a far wider margin. In both instances, his supporters took to the Zócalo, Mexico City's main plaza, to noisily protest the results. In 2006, he even declared himself Mexico's "legitimate president," donning a red, white, and green sash of the sort that is ritualistically draped over the chief executive.

Amlo has squandered big early leads before, and is by no means an inevitability. Still, there's a good chance that, in a year's time, the populist Trump will be staring across the border at another populist. The differences between Trump and López Obrador are immense, and a potential source of combustion, but similarities also abound. Amlo's political party is called the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA)—he wants to make Mexico great again. Like Trump, Amlo professes an almost mystical connection with the people. He alone can channel their will.

Pundits are fond of placing López Obrador in the same genre as Venezuela's late strongman Hugo Chávez. That comparison might overstate his danger. During this campaign, Amlo has embraced a more business-friendly persona—the sort of savvy repackaging that helped longtime runner-up Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva climb to power in Brazil. Still, López Obrador has been very clear about his attitude toward the United States. He despises collaboration with the DEA and relishes the idea of renegotiating NAFTA on terms more favorable to Mexico. "Everything depends on strengthening Mexico," he has said, "so we can confront aggression from abroad with strength." If Amlo becomes president, all of the worst-case scenarios, all of the proposals for petulant retaliation, would become instantly plausible.

Not so long ago—for most of the postwar era, in fact—the United States and Mexico were an old couple who lived barely intersecting lives, hardly talking, despite inhabiting the same abode. Then the strangest thing happened: The couple started chatting. They found they actually liked each other; they became codependent. Now, with Trump's angry talk and the Mexican resentment it stirs, the best hope for the persistence of this improved relationship is inertia—the interlocking supply chain that crosses the border and won't easily pull apart, the agricultural exports that flow in both directions, all the bureaucratic cooperation. Unwinding this relationship would be ugly and painful, a strategic blunder of the highest order, a gift to America's enemies, a gaping vulnerability for the homeland that Donald Trump professes to protect, a very messy divorce.

*Franklin Foer is a national correspondent for* The Atlantic *and the author of* World Without Mind.

**SEAM**

The pain can be endured until it can't.
The therapy will work until it won't.
The light will fill the room until it's out.
The kisses halt, or should, when one says
"Don't!"

And sleep will come as long as you can wait.
The weavers—bird and spider, human being—
are born to knot and net, a kind of fate.
And every seamless garment has a seam.

Where no horizon's visible, the dawn
breaks out like a flash mob, ready or not.
Better to let it help you put your clothes on
than hide them in a deeper, darker spot.

A clear blue sky can load the atmosphere
and laughter greet the weight of a monsoon.
Childhood can end abruptly or stay here,
looking for those who left to come back soon.

—**Mark Jarman**

*Mark Jarman's new collection,* The Heronry, *was published earlier this year.*

BY
CHRIS
JONES

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ANDREW
HETHERINGTON

# ALEC BALDWIN GETS UNDER TRUMP'S SKIN

COMEDY AND TRAGEDY IN AN AGE OF POLITICAL CHAOS


PLEASE
DO NOT
OPEN COSTUMES
& WIGS
AVATAR
THE AMAZING
SPIDER-MAN
MARVEL
SUPERMAN
BLACK
PARTYSUIT
PARTY
SUITS
PERSEUS THE
GLADIATOR
ASSASSIN'S
CREED II
Ezio
TRANSFORMERS

# ALEC BALDWIN COLLAPSES ONTO HIS DRESSING-ROOM COUCH AT *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE*

like a man participating too enthusiastically in a trust fall. He is 58 years old. He has three children under 4. He has been dividing what's left of his time between filming a movie with Emilio Estevez in Cincinnati and answering the call from NBC whenever it comes, which, because of his now-signature portrayal of Donald Trump, has been many weeks this season. His appearances gather eyes like car accidents; some clips have been watched on YouTube more than 20 million times. Those legions of viewers have formed a kind of makeshift resistance, a community of the gaslit, together feeling a little less crazy for knowing that at least Alec Baldwin can see what they are seeing. Turning the president into a running joke might prove the most consequential work of his career. It's at least been the most consuming.

Baldwin has bags under his eyes, his normally enviable hair appears as though it's been beaten flat with a tire iron, and he has two blood-red spots on the bridge of his nose. His whole body looks like it aches. He is keeping it going by alternating between a bottle of Diet Coke and some grainy concoction from Starbucks served in a bucket. This week he is hosting *SNL* for a record 17th time, expectations are soaring, and the pressure, like the workload, is telling on him like a terrible secret. It's only Tuesday.

There is a knock at the door. It's time for Baldwin to go to makeup. Among his many chores today, February 7, he has to pose for this week's "bumpers," the photos of the host that bookend *SNL*'s commercial breaks. His wife, Hilaria, is coming in later with their kids for what will be a lovely family portrait, but the first shot is of Baldwin as Hamlet, holding the skull of the ill-fated court jester Yorick, with Baldwin's Trump wig on it. *He hath borne me on his back a thousand times.*

Baldwin walks down the hall slowly, listing a little, as though he's walking on a ship. When he reaches his destination—bright lights, mirrors, and a bunch of people who are really happy to see him—he straightens up and smiles, jolted to life by the affection. He climbs into a chair, and a woman surveys his hair for half a second before firing up her clippers. A makeup artist asks whether he can put cooling pads under Baldwin's eyes, and Baldwin beckons him forward as if to say, "You think I'd rather look like *this*?"

On a shelf behind him, his custom-made Trump wig shines golden on a life-size model of Baldwin's head. The shelf contains the disembodied heads of every cast member, each labeled with a name and a size. Vanessa Bayer has the smallest; Baldwin's dome is tied with several others' for the biggest. There have been rumors that he will wear the wig for the entire show—that on Saturday, February 11, he will play Trump in every sketch. The team here in makeup has heard as much.

"No," Baldwin says. "No. That would be a horrible idea." He slips into Jack Donaghy, the executive he played so well on *30 Rock*, dry as straight gin ("What am I, a farmer?"). "There's a lot of talented people here. When I show up, I'm really only one of several people who make the show worthwhile. Sometimes I'm the least of what makes the show worthwhile." He returns to playing himself. "That's the most idiotic idea I've heard in my life. Ninety minutes of me walking around, like—"

Then it happens.

Baldwin's face spasms almost uncontrollably, seized by muscle memory. He opens his left eye wide, he nearly closes his right eye, and he pushes out his wet lips as far as his chin will allow, his mouth turned suddenly into a bottomless black pit. His hands fly up, his fingers doing ridiculous, discordant things. He turns his head as though he's been startled by a loud noise, and the woman cutting his hair has to snatch away her clippers with a jerk, her face gone urgent with the realization of how close she came to disaster.

"These are my golf clubs," Baldwin says, his trademark voice transformed into Trump's strange muffle, his naturally seamless, rapid-fire cadence turned halting. "They were given to me as a gift from Qaddafi. We're doing a lot of business together, Muammar and I."

Baldwin stops there. "Muammar," he repeats, his mouth pushed out to the point of rupture, now satisfied that he has it right.

Everyone but the very professional hairstylist is in stitches. "Careful," she says. "You'll have a bald spot." Baldwin relaxes. She moves quickly to finish her work, exchanging the clippers for scissors. She can't help but marvel at the magnificence taking shape before her. "It's unbelievable," she says to no one and everyone at once. "He has gorgeous hair."

Baldwin looks at himself in the mirror. "I don't have anything else left," he says. "It's so sad. Seriously: age. Now you see why Cary Grant retired. People will do that to me on the internet. 'Oh, here's a picture of you ... WHEN YOU WERE HOT.'" He puts on his best polite voice. "Thank you! THANK YOU, SUZIE." He's quiet for a moment, and then he's back to playing the imaginary Suzie. "Here's a picture of you ... WHEN YOU LOOKED GOOD."

His hair is soon rinsed and gelled to perfection. He shifts into the makeup chair. The cooling pads are removed,

and they have done admirable work. Then his face is touched with makeup, special attention paid to the spots on his nose. They vanish like the bags under his eyes. A guy from costumes wanders in to see what kind of outfit Baldwin wants for Hamlet, and he asks for something "flouncy." The costume guy nods and heads out the door, flouncy coming right up. Baldwin calls after him: "In extra large!"

More and more makeup is applied, and in between the layers, Baldwin plays four more parts. For a long stretch in the chair, he's Tony Bennett. His Bennett is the anti-Trump, a hilarious, joyous, occasionally oblivious force for good. Baldwin remembers a sketch in which he played Bennett interviewing David Gest, Liza Minnelli's then-husband (portrayed by Chris Kattan). "David, I hear you're gay," Baldwin-as-Bennett says. "David, I gotta ask you, if you like bananas, why are you rooting around in the strawberry patch?"

Baldwin answers as Gest: "I beg your pardon?"

**BALDWIN SOMETIMES WISHES TRUMP WOULD APPEAR NEXT TO HIM ON *SNL*. "IF HE WAS SMART, HE'D SHOW UP THIS WEEK. IT WOULD PROBABLY BE OVER. HE COULD END IT. IF HE SHOWED UP."**

**When Baldwin agreed to play Trump, he assumed the role would last only until November.**

"DON'T YOU MISS HAVING SEX WITH OTHER MEN?"

Gest again: "Now, that I do miss. That I do miss."

Then Baldwin does his Robert De Niro impression. More specifically, he does Robert De Niro complimenting Alec Baldwin on his Robert De Niro impression. "Very good, Alec." He nods. "Very good."

Lastly, Baldwin rips into his version of Al Pacino, doing a screen test for *Top Gun*. "I got a need. FOR SPEED."

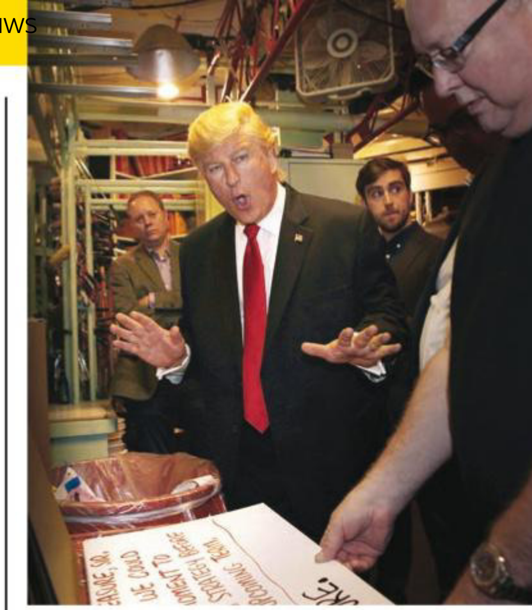
Baldwin's ear is so good, he can do three phases of Pacino: early, middle, and late. It is a breathless, almost vaudevillian routine, performed entirely while seated. It is also desperately funny. In 20 minutes, Baldwin has inhabited seven different characters. Of all the parts, Trump is his least favorite to play. "It's not easy," he says. "It's not easy."

Playing Trump is physically demanding—watching footage of his longer performances, Baldwin can sometimes see his mouth begin to droop, his Trump face requiring a combination of contractions that can be hard to sustain—but it's a psychic challenge, too. Jokes are supposed to provide an escape, for the listener and the teller. Instead Baldwin lives in a state of constant reminder. His country is so far from his hopes for it, and now people won't stop asking this liberal New Yorker to portray the primary vessel of his disappointments. Baldwin sometimes wishes that Trump would appear next to him on *SNL*, the way Tony Bennett did years ago, reclaiming his own voice and in the process maybe helping Baldwin do the same.

"If he was smart, he'd show up this week," Baldwin says. "It would probably be over. He could end it. If he showed up."

Trump will not show up, and nobody has any idea how this might end, least of all Baldwin. (He doesn't even know whether he'll continue to play Trump after this season concludes in May.) He harbors many suspicions, one of which is that the Republican apparatus will force Trump to resign behind closed doors as soon as May or June, citing health concerns as the public excuse. "He looks like he couldn't run a block," Baldwin says. Or maybe the bar for Trump is so low that if he changes his behavior even a little bit—witness the reception to his first address to a joint session of Congress—he might be allowed to play out his useful-idiot string for four or eight more years. "Oh God," Baldwin says, shivering at the thought.

He rises from his chair and changes into his extra-large flouncy shirt, and he lifts that bewigged skull into the air and looks at it with a surprising melancholy.



*Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols?*

For the next shot he pulls on an ill-fitting suit and too-long tie, and he watches as that same wig is placed on his enormous, groomed head, and he mangles his eyes and pushes out his lips, this tired man made beautiful made ugly. It's an unsettling transformation to watch. It's almost as though Alec Baldwin, before he can become Donald Trump, must first become the best version of Alec Baldwin, and then ruin him.

T**HIS WAS NEVER** part of Baldwin's plan. It was Tina Fey, the former *SNL* stalwart and the creator of *30 Rock*, who told Lorne Michaels, *SNL*'s iconic chief of everything, that if he was looking for a Trump, Baldwin would make a good one. Fey knows something about political satire; she garnered wide acclaim for her uncanny portrayal of Sarah Palin on the show in 2008. It was so cutting, one study found, that watching it made young Republicans and independents less likely to vote for John McCain, Palin's star-crossed running mate. "The difference for Tina," Baldwin says, "is that Palin lost."

He remembers Michaels floating the idea in August. Baldwin's initial response: "Please don't ask me that." But Baldwin and Michaels have enjoyed a long, special relationship. Baldwin first hosted *SNL* in 1990 and is supposedly one of just two people, along with the actor Christopher Walken, who have a standing invitation to host whenever they want. "You have to be willing to pull your pants down," Baldwin says. "Once I did that, they just kept asking me to come back." He remembers one sketch in which he played a queasy cop vomiting all over the place at a crime scene, gallons of pea soup pumping out of a hose hidden up his sleeve. Being Trump wouldn't be so different. Besides, he'd have to do it only until November.

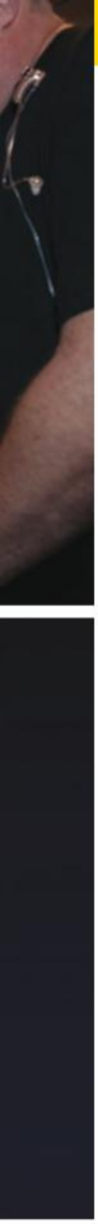
The first time he walked into the *SNL* studio dressed as Trump—American-flag pin on his lapel, later to be switched out for a Russian one—he was poised for his opening debate with Kate McKinnon's spry, pantsuit-wearing Hillary Clinton. Studio 8H is a chaotic place, almost like a movie set of a set. The backdrops for two or three different sketches might be hammered up at once, each a puzzle of temporary walls and props, the tight spaces between them filled with cables and rigs and sweating carpenters. The set for the presidential debate was right in the middle of the studio, surrounded by darkness. Baldwin was literally led by the hand to his mark, and he waited outside the glare of the lights for his surprise introduction.

He hadn't rehearsed much. He had watched Trump on TV with the sound off, hunting for tics and physical cues (Baldwin still does this, recently adding Trump's habitual neck stretch to his repertoire), but mostly he'd just hoped lightning would strike. Now he stood in the shadows, terrified that he didn't have it—he worried out loud that he didn't have it—trying to remind himself that, if nothing else, he needed to look as though he were "trying to suck the wallpaper off the wall." That "nasty scar" of a mouth was Baldwin's only certainty: "a puckering butthole," he calls it, dropping into his Trump voice to describe his vision of it. Then he heard Michael Che, playing debate moderator Lester Holt, summon him to the stage: "He's the man to blame for the bottom half of all his kids' faces. It's Republican nominee Donald Trump."

**Baldwin has hosted *SNL* a record 17 times, starting in 1990. He is supposedly one of two people with a standing invitation to host.**

MARY ELLEN MATTHEWS/NBC; ALAN SINGER/NBCU PHOTO BANK

Baldwin walked out onto the stage and, as if by dark magic, there he was: not Trump, exactly, but some nightmarish goof on Trump, a distillation of everything gross about him, boiled clean of any remnant that could be mistaken for competence or redemption. Unlike Fey's pitch-perfect echo of Palin, Baldwin's Trump isn't an impersonation. He saves his more accurate work for Tony Bennett, for Robert De Niro, for Al Pacino—for men he loves and admires. Those are mischiefs, born of appreciation. His Trump is mimicry, born of disgust. Even after so many successful appearances—even after his and Trump's visages have become so closely associated that a newspaper in the Dominican Republic ran a photograph of his Trump instead of the real



one—Baldwin can still seem as though he doesn't have the stomach to inhabit Trump fully. "Push, push, push," he says in his makeup chair, his lips once again threatening to burst from his distorted face. "It's exhausting. I'm hoping I can come up with someone else I can imitate. Pence?" In the meantime, he will keep his Trump at a remove, almost like an abstract painting, not of Trump the man but of Trump's withered soul.

"Good evening, America," Baldwin said on that first jittery Saturday. "I am going to be so good tonight."

There was no way to predict what happened next. The crowd packed into the balcony above him laughed and cheered with an elusive abandon. Steve Higgins, a longtime producer at *SNL*, remembers the feeling in the room. "It was like a shot of electricity went through the studio. It was like a punch to the face. It was undeniable." Baldwin gives himself less credit. "You just catch people in the mood," he says.

This is *SNL*'s most-watched season since 1993, when Adam Sandler, Chris Rock, and Mike Myers were in full swing. In December, Trump tweeted about Baldwin's performances, thumbing that they "just can't get any worse." Then Baldwin tweeted back, saying he'd stop if Trump released his tax returns. Then Trump didn't release his tax returns, and Baldwin didn't stop.

Then Trump became president.

EVERY Wednesday afternoon, on the 17th floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza, sometime around 4 o'clock, there occurs one of *SNL*'s most sacred rituals: the read-through. A signal goes out, and the show's creative armies assemble in a conference room with a big picture window. Michaels sits with his back to the view, at the head of a large table laden with trays of sandwiches and chips. There is a bowl of edamame next to his left elbow. The week's host sits to his right. Higgins sits past the edamame. The show's cast members occupy the rest of the seats around the table. The writers and various assistants fill several rows of stacking chairs. The writers don't have a table, and they don't have any food.

Today, the gathering starts a little later than usual, around quarter to five, and the Manhattan skyline is turning gold in the setting sun. Baldwin arrives with a beverage tray containing four different drinks, because it's going to be a long evening and it's important to stay hydrated. Like everyone else, he has picked up the week's "script pack," a mountain of white paper stamped with black type. He sits down and looks at the first page, the show's all-important cold open. Last week, it was him declaring war over the phone to various world leaders, as Steve Bannon, represented by the grim reaper, egged him on. Baldwin received *SNL*'s customary guest-star fee of $1,400 for that appearance. (He has a gentleman's agreement with Michaels not to perform as Trump anywhere else, although he and Kurt Andersen, the writer and *Spy*-magazine co-founder, have signed a deal with Penguin to write a mock presidential memoir titled *You Can't Spell America Without Me*.) Then Melissa McCarthy came on and crippled White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer with her viral, crimson performance. "We were crying," Baldwin says. Now a little whisper goes through the room. The cold open will be hers this week. She's coming back.

The writers have been at it for about 24 hours straight, having come to work right around the time Baldwin was staring mournfully at a skull on Tuesday afternoon. They look like nothing is funny to them anymore. They have cranked out 40 or so sketches, the way they do every week. The large majority of them will be read today and dropped to the floor, dismissed with such silent authority that they are never mentioned again. Maybe a dozen sketches will make it as far as dress rehearsal. Eight or nine will appear on the live show. The culling begins in these first fateful hours. There is no fanfare, no small talk. Everybody just begins reading their parts out loud—Michaels mumbling stage directions through his steady diet of edamame, the cast members hoping to see their names in the sketches, the writers hoping to hear even a little wheezing after their jokes.

**"I REALLY FEEL SORRY FOR HIM," BALDWIN SAYS OF TRUMP. "HE WILL HAVE ACHIEVED THE EXACT OPPOSITE OF WHAT HE BELIEVED HE WAS GOING TO ACHIEVE."**


CHARACTER:
TRUMP
SKETCH: Alec Baldwin
COLOR:
FACIAL HAIR
BALD PATE
24 3/4
SNL

The feeling in the room is hard to describe, an odd strain of foreboding, as though each writer and actor is Damocles, except each of them gets to wield a sword, too. Last week, Spicer had no way of knowing what was coming for him, had no inkling that by that Wednesday afternoon he was already dead. Now, with every turn of the page, the cast members see for the first time who among them will be Saturday night's stars and who among the rest of humanity is about to be savaged.

Michaels has long vowed to keep the show politically agnostic. Whatever the leanings of its stars and hosts, *Saturday Night Live* is an agent of chaos, as victim-blind as a bomb. It can seem these days that the show is single-minded in its pursuit of the Trump administration, but *SNL* has always gone after presidents, beginning with Chevy Chase staging some remarkable pratfalls as Gerald Ford. A grinning Dan Aykroyd was the principal Jimmy Carter ("Inflation is our friend"); no fewer than seven performers took their shots at Ronald Reagan, Joe Piscopo most reliably; Dana Carvey's George H. W. Bush ("Not gonna do it") became synonymous with the man himself. Phil Hartman jogged into McDonald's as Bill Clinton, and Darrell Hammond played him as a glad-handing hound. Will Ferrell made for the best George W. Bush, an innocent, distractible child. The show sometimes struggled with Obama—his single most memorable Saturday-night incarnation was arguably Dwayne Johnson's "The Rock Obama"—but it's hard to satirize competence.

Trump just makes comedy easy.

Unseen are the myriad times Michaels has cut a line or trimmed a sketch for going too far. In the sketch when Baldwin's Trump was threatening world leaders, he complained to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, portrayed by McKinnon, about his treatment by the press. It was so bad, he was going to write a book called *My Struggle*. "What would that be in German?" he asked. In the original version, a shocked Merkel said, "*Mein Kampf*." The line made it as far as dress rehearsal before Michaels decided to kill it. "They'll get it," he said.

Saturday's live show is the result of decades of collective experience and reflection. Wednesday's script pack, however, is the product of 24 hours of individual madness, and each gathering around this table offers a glimpse of so many possible futures. Baldwin's 17th turn at it opens with Beck Bennett reading as Melissa McCarthy as Sean Spicer, and there is wordless agreement that the poor sap is doomed. Then comes Baldwin's proposed monologue, when he will stand next to Pete Davidson, *SNL*'s 23-year-old kid star, and trade barbs about age and youth. Maybe the biggest laugh of the entire read comes when Baldwin says that Davidson looks like Steve Buscemi's lesbian sister. Davidson, sitting directly across the table from Baldwin, tries to shake off the blow. "That's a little too real," he says over the hysterics. There are sketches involving a gay crab-boat captain, a love-starved romance expert, an actor who can't remember his lines, a gassy high-school student doing sit-ups, and a drill sergeant who loves his soldier son a little too much. And there are no fewer than four Trump-related sketches in the running, not including "Weekend Update," which these days essentially writes itself: *Look at this guy over here*.

**"BETWEEN NOW AND FRIDAY IS AN ETERNITY IN THE NEWS CYCLE. THE NEXT THING YOU KNOW, TRUMP IS GOING TO CALL THE HEAD OF SOME COUNTRY A WHORE."**

One of them is an infomercial. The White House is advertised as an ideal place to stash your doddering, self-harming relatives, an old-age home where they get to pretend they're the president. Melania Trump, played by Cecily Strong, decides it's perfect for her senile husband. The big joke is that Donald Trump is scared of walking on stairs, a wink at his rumored request to hold British Prime Minister Theresa May's hand down an incline during her official visit the previous month.

Another possible sketch doesn't star Baldwin but Leslie Jones, who, even during her table read, puts on her own Trump wig. In it, she's trying to convince Michaels that she can play Trump, because McCarthy played Spicer. Women can play all the parts, especially if they're going to make Trump as mad as the Spicer sketch reportedly did. Baldwin watches Jones from across the room when her onscreen love interest, played by Kyle Mooney, tells her she sounds less like Trump and more like "someone from Trinidad." Baldwin erupts.

Yet another is a digital short, a *Fatal Attraction* spoof starring McKinnon as Kellyanne Conway, needy and deranged, breaking into Jake Tapper's apartment and holding a knife to his throat to get him to put her on the news. In real life, CNN had just declined the White House's offer of her services. In the sketch, Tapper acquiesces before Conway falls from a 20-story window, splatters on the sidewalk, and reanimates like a zombie, telling Tapper that he needs to be more careful next time: She has only four lives left.

The read-through takes hours. Michaels gives no immediate indication as to which of the sketches he likes best or even likes at all—he doesn't laugh once—but everyone is aware of the possibility that none of these sketches will see air no matter what Michaels thinks of them.

"Between now and Friday is an eternity in the news cycle," Baldwin says later. "The next thing you know, Trump is going to call the head of some country a whore. 'GET THAT WHORE OUT OF HERE.' We'll have laid out all the stuff and finished setting the table and it will be like, 'Okay, reset the table. Get the whore sketch ready.'"

On they soldier into the night, city lights flickering to life over their hunched shoulders, the Empire State Building now a great beam of white. The sketch about the gassy high-school student doing sit-ups reads pretty funny. Mikey Day will play the kid, Baldwin his gym coach. Who doesn't like a fart joke?

**THE ROLE OF SATIRE** in troubled times is a debatable one. Historically, the evidence suggests that laughter is the best medicine only if what ails you isn't very serious. Frederick the Great's attitude toward the mockery directed his way was telling: After struggling to read a poster that made fun of him, he is said to have remarked that it would have been more effective had it been hung lower. Nazi Germany saw its share of subversive humor, but of course it was bombs delivered by pilots, not comedians, that finally dismantled Adolf Hitler's regime. The jokes might have even helped him hold on to power, providing ordinary Germans with both catharsis and a distraction from the fact that he was as monstrous as he was.

The Soviet Union saw satire as a societal release valve, worth opening whenever internal pressure began to build. The country's most prominent satirical publication, *Krokodil*, was published by the Communist Party itself. A government that could laugh at itself couldn't be that bad.

In modern America, where we have long taken for granted the idea that our leaders should be able to laugh at themselves, some consumers of satire have become more cynical and perhaps less likely to engage in meaningful action. A 2006 paper called this sense of comedy-fueled apathy the "*Daily Show* Effect."

Baldwin himself sometimes wonders about the efficacy of his work. He has never before won the sidewalk gratitude that his Trump turn has given him. He receives warm hands on his shoulders when he walks the streets of Greenwich Village; strangers nod and mouth their thanks to him from across restaurants. No less an authority than David Letterman has said he should be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, although that seems unlikely. "There's really been nothing in my life like this," he says. "It's all day long." Once, he had dreams of such celebrity, of being a serious actor who commanded serious roles. He peaked with seven incredible, unforgettable minutes of gravitas, shouting invectives at salesmen played by his idols in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, but there will always remain a gap between his fantasy and his actual self. When asked why he's been such a good fit at *SNL*, he says, "Let's face facts: They don't ask me to come back because my movies are such blockbusters lately." It's taken the role of his nightmares to make him feel the most like a star.

But Trump still won, and Baldwin has been told he deserves some of the blame for that, for having made Trump seem more benign than he is, a buffoon rather than a would-be autocrat. "The way this played out is just unbelievable," he says, and he says it the way Hamlet would say it. When so few of our former facts seem to hold true anymore, Baldwin knows that the most Faustian of them all still does: This wave of late-career love will wash over him only as long as Trump's heavy breath is on the back of his neck. One exists only because of the other. "This lives on a parallel track with something very regrettable" is how he puts it.

Baldwin has searched for ways to soothe himself, finding relief and comfort in a pair of ideas. The first is larger, a macro consolation over which he has no real control: that the Trump presidency, as historically awful as it might be, will prove a necessary disruption, the cataclysm that leads to corrections long overdue and a renewed sense of civic engagement. "I never really thought we'd have to go this far," Baldwin says, "but we do have to have these periodic shocks to the system to remind people again about their role in the process."

He doesn't see Trump as a singular enemy. Trump just happens to be the part that he's been given to play. He saves his purest contempt for FBI Director James Comey. ("Comey is a partisan piece of shit and a disgrace to the Department of Justice, a disgrace to the FBI, and a disgrace to law enforcement.") Baldwin looks at him, he looks at Reince Priebus and others, and he sees the worst cravenness that Americans have come to expect from their government. But Baldwin hopes that we're nearing the rock bottom we need to hit before we can begin recovery.

Baldwin's second wish is smaller, more immediate, and maybe up to him. He hopes that, because Trump and his team seem so vulnerable to televised criticism, the constant belittlement might sting them into submission. Trump isn't a conventional politician.

**IN AMERICA, SOME CONSUMERS OF SATIRE HAVE BECOME MORE CYNICAL AND LESS LIKELY TO ENGAGE IN MEANINGFUL ACTION. A 2006 PAPER CALLED THIS THE "*DAILY SHOW* EFFECT."**


**Backstage at *SNL*, Baldwin prepares to play Trump. When in character, he makes his mouth look like he's "trying to suck the wallpaper off the wall."**

His presidency exists only because of TV, because of his fame and ratings and flair for glib spectacle. And perhaps it exists only because of *jokes* on TV, today's unthinkable present having begun the instant Barack Obama humiliated the guy who hosted *Celebrity Apprentice* at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner in 2011. "Obviously we all know about your credentials and breadth of experience," Obama said, while Trump rocked back and forth in his chair. "You fired Gary Busey. And these are the kind of decisions that would keep me up at night."

Why shouldn't President Trump's behavior continue to be manipulated—and the nation's history altered—by jokes on TV?

So much of Trump's popularity hinges on his image as a self-made miracle, a winner, a strong and successful man who is the best at everything and always gets his way. Baldwin has become our deflator in chief, a weekly pinprick in Trump's balloon. Every time Trump tweets a wounded Sunday-morning response, every time Spicer laughs off McCarthy's portrayal but then tries a little harder to bury his rage, every time Conway shows up on TV looking a little more challenged and broken, Baldwin can tell himself that *SNL* is not just making laughs but effecting change.

"Any administration wants the opposite of what Trump is getting now: They want to be saluted for what they're doing," he says. "They want to do their job and have people blow trumpets and worship them and throw confetti. They're like movie stars in that way." Trump lashes out at Hollywood, but it's his dream to belong there. "I think that the comedy is effective—I believe that it's absolutely, 100 percent effective—in that it's achieving the opposite results," Baldwin says.

Or maybe a slightly different reality is unfolding here.

Baldwin has lived a famously flawed life; like Trump, his temper has too often beaten his sense of reason to the surface. He endured a difficult divorce from the actress Kim Basinger, and—at a low point during the custody battle—left their 11-year-old daughter an irate voicemail that was leaked to TMZ. He has also punched more people, especially people aiming cameras at him and his family, than a man at peace ever might.

"Do you realize what this show could have done to me, if Lorne didn't want to be kind?" he says. "Can you imagine?" He contemplated running for office but is aware that what he's now doing to Trump would have easily been done to him. Maybe Trump, who has hosted *SNL*, would have even done it himself.

Instead, Baldwin wakes up beside Hilaria, his fun and generous wife—"What she's doing with me, I'll never know," he says—and has three beautiful young children who look at him without preconceptions. He has a new memoir coming out this spring, and a role in the next *Mission: Impossible* movie, filming this summer, and before that whatever might remain of this unexpected, triumphant season when millions of Americans are planning their weekends around his every turn under the lights and forgetting everything else he's ever done, the bad things most of all.

Maybe it's not that he has to ruin the best Alec Baldwin to play Donald Trump. Maybe inhabiting Trump reminds him of the ugly man he is capable of being and the man he would prefer to be. Maybe by playing a person who yearns so deeply for a chorus of praise he will never receive, Baldwin has found the resolve to be his best.

"I wonder if this is the guy we need to see ourselves clearly," he says.

**Baldwin with his family and, below, with Tracy Morgan, Melissa McCarthy, and Ed Sheeran on *SNL*.**

MARY ELLEN MATTHEWS; WILL HEATH/NBC

**OR MAYBE IT'S ALL** just one long fart joke.

On Thursday, endless rounds of rehearsals begin, and special attention is about to be paid to the gassy-gym-student sketch. Baldwin has already had a busy day. He's just finished shooting the show's promos with Ed Sheeran, the week's musical guest, his tangled mop of ginger hair the antithesis of Baldwin's now-immaculate head. He's somehow gaining energy as the week goes on, his body looking fit and alive in his perfectly tailored suit. In one of the clips, Sheeran is meant to do his own Trump impersonation, and he seems uncertain that it's a good idea. "Are you sure this is funny for an Englishman to do?"

"It better be," Baldwin says.

Once the Sheeran bits are shot, Baldwin disappears for a moment. When he reappears, he's still in his suit pants and dress shoes, but with only a black T-shirt on top. He wanders over to the make-believe gym that the carpenters have knocked together in a corner of the studio, a single black mat on the floor. Alex Moffat is already in position, ready to do sit-ups—he will fail to break the school record. That part is easy. Then Moffat will get up and be replaced by an eager Mikey Day. The gag—literally, the entire gag—is that every time Day does a sit-up, he farts, good for a cacophony of maybe two dozen fart sounds over the course of the sketch. They will be provided by Steve Higgins, standing nearby with a microphone, using his fingers to stretch out his cheeks so that his mouth has the necessary robustness.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Eric Clapton of fart sounds," Baldwin says.

Everyone works through the sketch with an endearing attention to detail, trying to get the rhythm of the sit-ups and the lines (Baldwin's encouragements, Day's protests) and the fart sounds tonally and thematically right. It is their only focus. Within the walls of the ersatz gym, Trump ceases to exist, at least for a little while. Maybe that's all we can really ask of our entertainers: Please give us a dumb laugh, and better yet a dumb, universal laugh, our bottomless reserves of scorn redirected, if only for an instant, at those mirthless few who don't find farts funny. "I don't want anything you do or I do to mask the fart sounds," Baldwin says to Day, who, prone on his back, looks up and nods at Baldwin as though he were a sensei. They run through the sketch again ("Ladies and gentlemen, the Jimi Hendrix of fart sounds," Baldwin says) and again ("Ladies and gentlemen, the Kenny G of fart sounds").

Day needs a break at one point, and he starts laughing while he's on his knees, holding his stomach and gasping for air. "So many people right now are like, 'I bet they're working on some insane political shit,'" he says.

Baldwin, in the meantime, is conferring with Higgins. "I think the last fart sound has to be long," he says.

Three time zones away, in San Francisco, Trump's Muslim travel ban is about to be struck down by three federal judges at the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. "SEE YOU IN COURT," the president will tweet in response. The distraction was nice while it lasted. Back upstairs, it's time to reset the table.

"He is the head writer of everything we do," Baldwin says.

**BALDWIN HAS BECOME OUR DEFLATOR IN CHIEF, A WEEKLY PINPRICK IN TRUMP'S BALLOON.**

THE REST OF Thursday and Friday and most of Saturday are lost in a blur of rehearsals and the shooting of digital shorts. Leslie Jones as Trump and Kellyanne Conway as a knife-wielding psycho both make the cut; in the final version, Conway has only three lives left, not four. In fact, she will disappear from her usual TV rounds not long after this week's show. There will be rumors that she has been benched because she fumbled the news of National-Security Adviser Michael Flynn's resignation. It might not have helped that she's made herself such a soft target on Saturday nights.

Sets continue to be built. Costumes are fitted. Camera shots are blocked. Stacks of cue cards are written. Baldwin navigates his way through the mounting demands with patience and care. Every now and then he retreats to the quiet of his dressing room for a big slug of coffee and a handful of yogurt-covered pretzels, his equivalent of a water break during a marathon. He drops onto his couch and begins to talk. He likes to talk. He is a man who thinks out loud.

"I honestly think you can mock all of these people, Democrat or Republican. It doesn't matter who is in that office; they all open themselves up—some more than others, and in a different way than others," he says. "But because of who he is, and what he brings and doesn't bring in all ways to that job, Trump has opened himself up to a heretofore unseen level of this. He is being mocked on a level that just exceeds anything you've ever seen. In a way, and I say this very sincerely, I really feel sorry for him. Because here's a man—you look at anybody in life, where you see someone set out to do something, and he will achieve the exact opposite. He will have achieved the exact opposite of what he believed he was going to achieve when he set out to do this in the first place."

Then Baldwin walks back out into the studio that has become his second home, fussing over the smallest details of this week's job: making Americans laugh, at the American president hardest of all.

"I love Alec," Higgins says. Asked why he thinks Baldwin's Trump has captured imaginations the way it has, he takes a few seconds to answer. "It makes you feel like everything's going to be okay," he says. That Baldwin is on TV and not on trial for the part he's playing means that Trump's power still has its limits. All is not lost.

At 8 p.m., a big crowd, vibrating with energy, fills every seat in the balcony to watch the dress rehearsal. The show will be performed in its entirety—full makeup, full sets, on camera—and Lorne Michaels will walk the floor, listening to the crowd's reactions, consulting his own ear, making his final few decisions. The action begins when the set for the White House press room is hastily assembled in the middle of the studio, and already the crowd is cheering, because they know what those blue curtains mean. Melissa McCarthy is led by her hand to her mark. "Thirty seconds!" someone yells. "Twenty seconds!" McCarthy comes out to rapturous applause, people rising out of their seats, and she proceeds to burn the place to the ground. She tears into a giant piece of gum, hurls insults, fires up a leaf blower, her face turning purple with a barely contained fury. Kate McKinnon makes a brief cameo as Jeff Sessions, because women really can play all the parts.

Then Baldwin does his monologue with Davidson, the applause raining down on him when he first appears. He says that Davidson looks like Steve Buscemi's lesbian sister. Then the cast bursts into sketch after sketch, sprinting from mark to mark. Baldwin first plays an ad executive making an overwrought pitch to Cheetos. Then he's Beyoncé's gynecologist ("I haven't had a hit baby since Suri Cruise"). Then he's

Trump, facing off on *The People's Court* against the three federal judges who rejected his initial travel ban. Cecily Strong, playing the celebrity judge Marilyn Milian, says, "I want one day without a CNN alert that scares the hell out of me." The crowd explodes into cheers. Baldwin's Trump starts talking about crime in Chicago; he points to Kenan Thompson's bailiff and says, "He knows what I'm talking about." Michaels decides to cut that line.

The rehearsal rolls seamlessly on, a frenetic ballet, with Baldwin playing the gay crab-boat captain, and a husband fighting with his wife on their first anniversary, and the drill sergeant, and the gym teacher, and a photographer for sexy calendars. Michaels watches and listens, and he rearranges the sketches in his head, fitting and refitting the blocks together like puzzle pieces. The crab boat isn't going to make it. Neither is the sexy calendar or the anniversary. The live show is going to end on the gym class. More specifically, it's going to end with the sound of a long fart.

Maybe 30 minutes after the end of the rehearsal, the studio welcomes a new crowd. The audience members watch a giant clock hanging from the ceiling and wait for 11:30 p.m. the way kids wait for the end of the school day. McCarthy sits in her chair in makeup and has her Spicer wig reapplied. Baldwin gathers himself in the sanctuary of his dressing room. He puts on his suit, no tie. He looks great. He is led to his mark near the door behind the *SNL* house band, the musicians' fingers ready on their instruments, poised to blow out the show's theme.

Baldwin stands in the dark and waits for his cue. His stomach begins to turn. His makeup is touched up. He goes over his lines in his head. He watches the action on the other side of the door on a monitor. The White House press-room set is rolled out for the second time tonight, and a deep, low rumble of anticipation runs through the building. His nerves start to crackle. McCarthy slays; somewhere, Sean Spicer is curling up into a ball. "LIVE FROM NEW YORK, IT'S SATURDAY NIGHT!" she screams.

The door opens for Alec Baldwin. All he can hear is applause and trumpets.

*Chris Jones is a longtime magazine writer. This is his first story for* The Atlantic.

# HOW LATE-NIGHT COMEDY ALIENATED CONSERVATIVES, MADE LIBERALS SMUG, AND FUELED THE RISE OF TRUMP

BY CAITLIN FLANAGAN
ILLUSTRATIONS BY KRISTIAN HAMMERSTAD

A MONTH AFTER the election, Trevor Noah, the host of *The Daily Show*, published an op-ed in *The New York Times* that sought to position himself and his show as instruments of healing in a broken land. It was called "Let's Not Be Divided, Divided People Are Easier to Rule," and it zapped around progressives' inboxes and Facebook feeds like a digital balm of Gilead. It was a reminder that we were not, in those fevered early weeks, being our best selves: "Instead of speaking in measured tones about what unites us, we are screaming at each other about what divides us." How true that was, and—one might churlishly observe—what a sea change from Noah's tone during the campaign, when he berated the Republican candidate for tweeting with "those fat little tiny fingers of yours" and for trying to think with "that stupid head," and when he advised the candidate that "maybe you should look in the mirror, asshole."

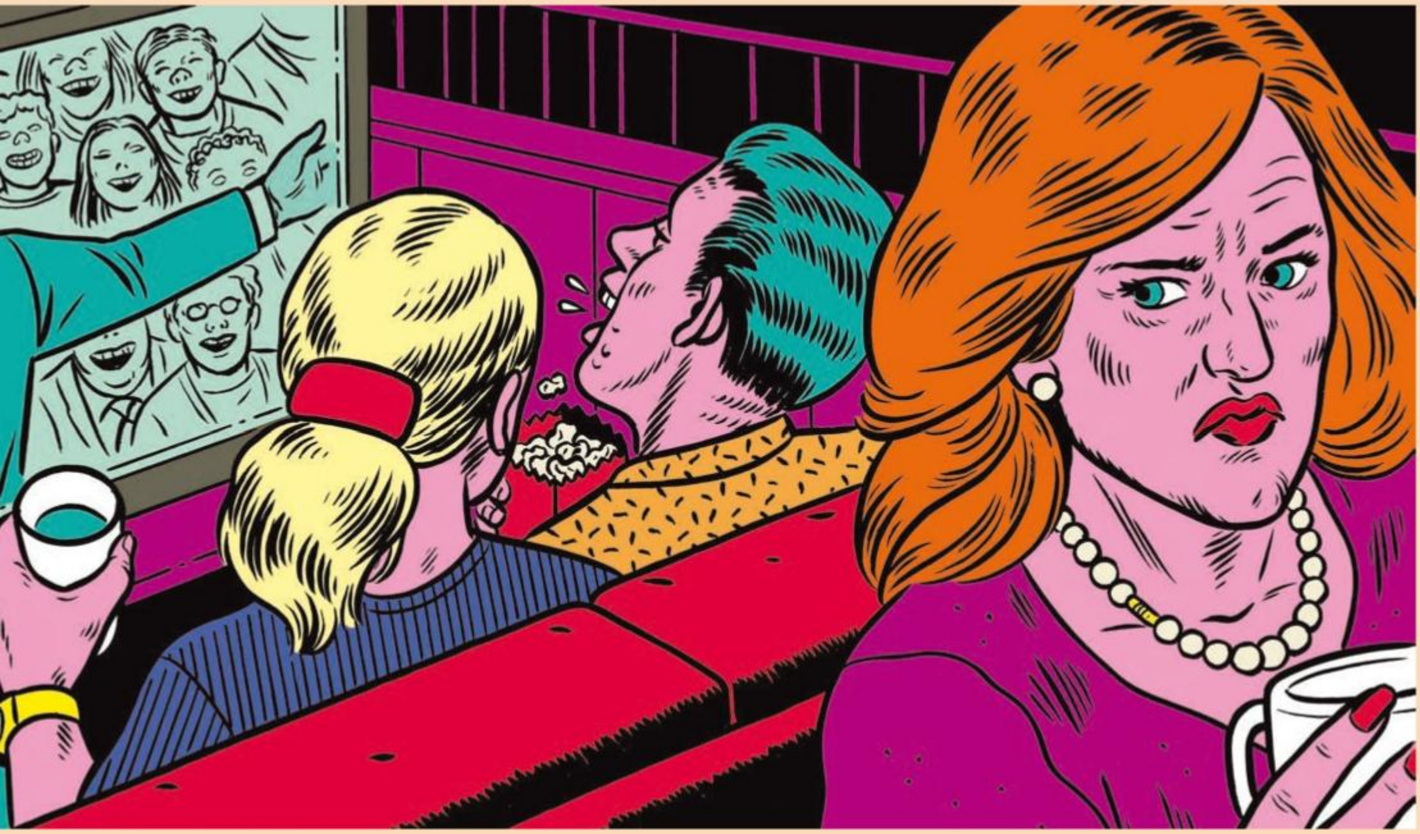
This combination of sentiments—the excoriating, profanity-strewn, ad hominem tirade against the president (and by extension against anyone who might agree, in any small measure, with his actions), and the saintly appeal for reaching out to the other side—dominates the political discussion inside the blue bubble these days. The excoriating outweighs the reaching-out at a ratio of about 20 to 1, but the earnestly expressed desire for a more humane form of discourse is enduring.

The late-night political-comedy shows—principally Noah's *Daily Show*, Samantha Bee's *Full Frontal*, and John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight*—staked their territory during the heat of the general election: unwavering, bombastic, belittling, humiliating screeds against Donald Trump. Fair enough. Trump is a man who on any casual summer day during the campaign could be found inciting a crowd to violence. This isn't the slippery slope; this is the ditch at the bottom of the hill. Once a man stands before a mob and exhorts the powerful to beat the outlier, it's all over except for the cannibalism and the cave painting. "Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth," said Abraham Lincoln. "Knock the crap out of them," said Donald Trump.

So Trump has it coming, and so do the minions pouring out of his clown car, with their lies and their gleeful disregard for what Nick Carraway called "the fundamental decencies." But somewhere along the way, the hosts of the late-night shows decided that they had carte blanche to insult not just the people within this administration, but also the ordinary citizens who support Trump, and even those who merely identify as conservatives. In March, Samantha Bee's show issued a formal apology to a young man who had attended the Conservative Political Action Conference and whom the show had blasted for having "Nazi hair." As it turned out, the young man was suffering from Stage 4 brain cancer—which a moment's research on the producers' part would have revealed: He had tweeted about his frightening diagnosis days before the conference. As part of its apology, the show contributed $1,000 to the GoFundMe campaign that is raising money for his medical expenses, so now we know the price of a cancer joke.

It was hardly the first time *Full Frontal* had gone, guns blazing, after the sick or the meek. During the campaign, Bee dispatched a correspondent to go shoot fish in a barrel at something called the Western Conservative Summit, which the reporter described as "an annual Denver gathering popular with hard-right Christian conservatives." He interviewed an earnest young boy who talked about going to church on Sundays and Bible study on Wednesdays, and about his hope to start a group called Children for Trump. For this, the boy—who spoke with the unguarded openness of a child who has assumed goodwill on the part of an adult—was described as "Jerry Falwell in blond, larval form." Trump and Bee are on different sides politically, but culturally they are drinking from the same cup, one filled with the poisonous nectar of reality TV and its baseless values, which have now moved to the very center of our national discourse. Trump and Bee share a penchant for verbal cruelty and a willingness to mock the defenseless. Both consider self-restraint, once the hallmark of the admirable, to be for chumps.

Yes, yes, I know: She is a comedian, he is the president of the United States; there is no scale by which their words and actions can be reasonably compared. Yet while for Bee, as for so many in her



field, Michelle Obama's "When they go low, we go high" may have been a ravishing meme, Trump's mockery of a war hero, grieving parents, and a disabled man showed how you get the job done. When John Oliver told viewers that if they opposed abortion they had to change the channel until the last minute of the program, when they would be shown "an adorable bucket of sloths," he perfectly encapsulated the tone of these shows: one imbued with the conviction that they and their fans are intellectually and morally superior to those who espouse any of the beliefs of the political right. Two days before the election, every talking head on television was assuring us that Trump didn't have a chance, because he lacked a "ground game." After his victory, one had to wonder whether some part of his ground game had been conducted night after night after night on television, under flattering studio lights and with excellent production values and comedy writing.

Though aimed at blue-state sophisticates, these shows are an unintended but powerful form of propaganda for conservatives. When Republicans see these harsh jokes—which echo down through the morning news shows and the chattering day's worth of viral clips, along with those of Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert, and Seth Meyers—they don't just see a handful of comics mocking them. They see HBO, Comedy Central, TBS, ABC, CBS, and NBC. In other words, they see exactly what Donald Trump has taught them: that the entire media landscape loathes them, their values, their family, and their religion. It is hardly a reach for them to further imagine that the legitimate news shows on these channels are run by similarly partisan players—nor is it at all illogical. No wonder so many of Trump's followers are inclined to believe only the things that he or his spokespeople tell them directly—everyone else on the tube thinks they're a bunch of trailer-park, Oxy-snorting half-wits who divide their time between retweeting Alex Jones fantasies and ironing their Klan hoods.

Of course, late-night entertainers can hardly be expected to ignore the comedic bounty with which Trump and his henchmen have blessed them. And in this bizarre new political reality, treating Trump the way other presidents have traditionally been treated puts the host in danger of committing the grave sin of "normalizing" him, as Jimmy Fallon did last fall.

Trump had appeared on Fallon's *Tonight Show* before the primaries, in September 2015, back when he was still the joke candidate, back when a lighthearted interview with him rang no alarm bells. The two evinced an immediate television rapport—Fallon as straight man, Trump as the same Trump he's been on television and radio shows for more than three decades. But when Fallon had him on again a year later, the situation was very different. Now Trump was the Republican nominee, and his bag of tricks—inciting violence in crowds, threatening religious tests, calling the press a pack of liars—was no longer so amusing. Fallon didn't see any need to turn his show into *Meet the Press*. He leaned toward Trump and said, "Donald, I just wanted to ask you if there's something we could do that's just not ... presidential, really." And then, with his guest's permission (it was a bit; they'd worked it out beforehand), he playfully reached over and mussed up that famous hair. Fallon was lambasted the next day (a tweet from Jon Lovett, a former speechwriter for Barack Obama, was representative: "This photo will be in history books and the caption will not be about how Jimmy Fallon is such a fun nice guy"), and rightly so. By then Trump had exhibited enough ugly and norm-breaking behavior to have made treating him as a lovable bridge-and-tunnel celebrity straight out of Queens circa 1975—President Crazy Eddie, President Tom Carvel—beyond the pale. Trump had already revealed himself to be a dangerous person; perhaps the best thing that can be said about the man is that he let America know exactly what it would be getting if he were elected. It was a huge mistake on Fallon's part, one he has been paying for ever since—his ratings have not recovered from it.

**ONE CLUE TO** Trump's improbable victory lies in the fact that getting a noogie from a comic on late-night television is now considered a "normalizing" activity for a presidential candidate. The implication

**THOUGH AIMED AT BLUE-STATE SOPHISTICATES, LATE-NIGHT COMEDY SHOWS ARE AN UNINTENDED BUT POWERFUL FORM OF PROPAGANDA FOR CONSERVATIVES.**

is that you're not fit for executive office unless you can clown for us on the tube when we're half awake.

John F. Kennedy was the first candidate to appear on late-night television, visiting Jack Paar's set in 1960. No matter what you think of the short, dangerous presidency of JFK, watching their conversation could bring you to tears. At one point, Paar invites audience members to ask their own questions of the senator. "Let's have, you know, responsible questions from responsible people," Paar says, and I waited for the laugh, but it didn't come. It wasn't a joke. This wasn't Judy Garland making eyes at him and telling Lana Turner stories and biting her thumb seductively. This was a chance to interview someone who wanted to be the president, and Paar asked his audience members to act accordingly—which they did. (It was a love-in about the commie threat, including certain dark intimations about Southeast Asia, but what are you going to do? *Camelot!*)

The new age officially began with Bill Clinton's 1992 appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, playing his saxophone. This wasn't Richard Nixon—too little, too late—solemnly playing his own mournful composition on a baby grand piano for Paar in 1963, after losing both the presidential and the California gubernatorial elections. This was "Heartbreak Hotel," with the audience on their feet, Bubba in shades, Arsenio out of his mind for the power of "the big man." This was the president as entertainer, the president as a guy so young and so cool that he could slide right onto the set of the most with-it late-night show and sit in with the band. Who couldn't love this guy? Well, possibly the family of Ricky Ray Rector, the retarded man on Arkansas's death row, whom Clinton had cruelly allowed to be executed just five months earlier to prove he was tough on crime. A pointed question about that bit of horror might have been more instructive to the electorate than the sax solo and Hall's penetrating inquiries about whether Clinton preferred the young Elvis or the old Elvis for a postage stamp. But somewhere along the way, we decided that we wanted the values of a Las Vegas lounge act to become part of our most important civic conversation. So the stunt, the shtick, the mildly embarrassing question—soon President Bubba, well on his way to reelection, would be telling an MTV crowd whether he wore boxers or briefs—became an essential campaign feature, and now we have a reality-TV star for president. You could argue that by giving Trump a noogie, Fallon did the responsible thing: He subjected the man to one of the requisite tests of fitness for office. We created our own black hole, and we collapsed into it.

Trump's appearance with Fallon may mark a moment in our national story. It was the last fleeting glimmer of anything approaching goodwill—and possibly of anything deserving it—between political factions. Since then it's been a race to the bottom, as the crudeness of the president is matched by that of "the resistance," with all of us being judged by how well—how thoroughly and consistently and elaborately—we can hate each other. Nothing about this time is elevating. It's just all of us—on the left and on the right—sworn to our bitterness and our anger.

As I embarked on writing this essay, Trump had just made what was then the latest in his endless series of preposterous moves: He had tweeted, without evidence but with certainty, that Trump Tower had been "wiretapped" by Barack Obama in the final days of the campaign. In the range of things Trump is capable of saying, doing, or tweeting, this was not "big league"; it was just another day at batting practice. But the episode was one more stunning reminder of how this impulsive, self-obsessed leader—who holds grudges, lies recklessly, and appoints his own family members to substantive positions—is making America into a laughingstock around the world. We are a country with the greatest creed in all of history—the Constitution of the United States—yet we are looking more and more like a banana republic.

I've thought about that a lot—but I've also thought a good deal about the boy on Samantha Bee's program. I thought about the moment her producer approached the child's mother to sign a release so that the woman's young son could be humiliated on television. Was it a satisfying moment, or was it accompanied by a small glint of recognition that embarrassing children is a crappy way to make a living? I thought about the boy waiting eagerly to see himself on television, feeling a surge of pride that he'd talked about church and Bible study. And I thought about the moment when he realized that it had all been a trick—that the grown-up who had seemed so nice had only wanted to hurt him.

*My God*, I thought. *What have we become?*

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*Caitlin Flanagan is the author of* Girl Land *and* To Hell With All That.

# HOW ONLINE SHOPPING MAKES SUCKERS

THE MONEY REPORT

# OF US ALL

Will you pay more for those shoes before 7 p.m.? Would the price tag be different if you lived in the exurbs? Standard prices and simple discounts are yielding to far more exotic strategies, designed to extract every last dollar from you.


**BY JERRY USEEM**

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN FANTL**

**As Christmas approached** in 2015, the price of pumpkin-pie spice went wild. It didn't soar, as an economics textbook might suggest. Nor did it crash. It just started vibrating between two quantum states. Amazon's price for a one-ounce jar was either $4.49 or $8.99, depending on when you looked. Nearly a year later, as Thanksgiving 2016 approached, the price again began whipsawing between two different points, this time $3.36 and $4.69.

We live in the age of the variable airfare, the surge-priced ride, the pay-what-you-want Radiohead album, and other novel price developments. But what was this? Some weird computer glitch? More like a deliberate glitch, it seems. "It's most likely a strategy to get more data and test the right price," Guru Hariharan explained, after I had sketched the pattern on a whiteboard.

The right price—the one that will extract the most profit from consumers' wallets—has become the fixation of a large and growing number of quantitative types, many of them economists who have left academia for Silicon Valley. It's also the preoccupation of Boomerang Commerce, a five-year-old start-up founded by Hariharan, an Amazon alum. He says these sorts of price experiments have become a routine part of finding that right price—and refinding it, because the right price can change by the day or even by the hour. (Amazon says its price changes are not attempts to gather data on customers' spending habits, but rather to give shoppers the lowest price out there.)

It may come as a surprise that, in buying a seasonal pie ingredient, you might be participating in a carefully designed social-science experiment. But this is what online comparison shopping hath wrought. Simply put: Our ability to know the price of anything, anytime, anywhere, has given us, the consumers, so much power that retailers—in a desperate effort to regain the upper hand, or at least avoid extinction—are now staring back through the screen. They are comparison shopping *us*.

They have ample means to do so: the immense data trail you leave behind whenever you place something in your online shopping cart or swipe your rewards card at a store register, top economists and data scientists capable of turning this information into useful price strategies, and what one tech economist calls "the ability to experiment on a scale that's unparalleled in the history of economics." In mid-March, Amazon alone had 59 listings for economists on its job site, and a website dedicated to recruiting them.

Not coincidentally, quaint pricing practices—an advertised discount off the "list price," two for the price of one, or simply "everyday low prices"—are yielding to far more exotic strategies.

"I don't think anyone could have predicted how sophisticated these algorithms have become," says Robert Dolan, a marketing professor at Harvard. "I certainly didn't." The price of a can of soda in a vending machine can now vary with the temperature outside.

**THE PRICE OF A CAN OF SODA IN A VENDING MACHINE CAN NOW VARY WITH THE TEMPERATURE OUTSIDE.**

The price of the headphones Google recommends may depend on how budget-conscious your web history shows you to be, one study found. For shoppers, that means price—not the one offered to you right now, but the one offered to you 20 minutes from now, or the one offered to me, or to your neighbor—may become an increasingly unknowable thing. "Many moons ago, there used to be one price for something," Dolan notes. Now the simplest of questions—*what's the true price of pumpkin-pie spice?*—is subject to a Heisenberg level of uncertainty.

Which raises a bigger question: Could the internet, whose transparency was supposed to empower consumers, be doing the opposite?


**If the marketplace** was a war between buyers and sellers, the 19th-century French sociologist Gabriel Tarde wrote, then price was a truce. And the practice of setting a fixed price for a good or a service—which took hold in the 1860s—meant, in effect, a cessation of the perpetual state of hostility known as haggling.

As in any truce, each party surrendered something in this bargain. Buyers were forced to accept, or not accept, the one price imposed by the price tag (an invention credited to the retail pioneer John Wanamaker). What retailers ceded—the ability to exploit customers' varying willingness to pay—was arguably greater, as the extra money some people would have paid could no longer be captured as profit. But they made the bargain anyway, for a combination of moral and practical reasons.

The Quakers—including a New York merchant named Rowland H. Macy—had never believed in setting different prices for different people. Wanamaker, a Presbyterian operating in Quaker Philadelphia, opened his Grand Depot under the principle of "One price to all; no favoritism." Other merchants saw the practical benefits of Macy's and Wanamaker's prix fixe policies. As they staffed up their new department stores, it was expensive to train hundreds of clerks in the art of haggling. Fixed prices offered a measure of predictability to bookkeeping, sped up the sales process, and made possible the proliferation of printed retail ads highlighting a given price for a given good.

Companies like General Motors found an up-front way of recovering some of the lost profit. In the 1920s, GM aligned its various car brands into a finely graduated price hierarchy: "Chevrolet for the hoi polloi," *Fortune* magazine put it, "Pontiac … for the poor but proud, Oldsmobile for the comfortable but discreet, Buick for the striving, Cadillac for the rich." The policy—"a car for every purse and purpose," GM called it—was a means of customer sorting, but the customers did the sorting themselves. It kept the truce.

Customers, meanwhile, could recover some of their lost agency by clipping coupons—their chance to get a deal denied to casual shoppers. The new supermarket chains of the 1940s made coupons a staple of American life. What the big grocers knew—and what behavioral economists would later prove in detail—is that while consumers liked the assurance the truce afforded (that they would not be fleeced), they also retained the instinct to best their neighbors. They loved deals so much that, to make sense of their behavior, economists were forced to distinguish between two types of value: acquisition value (the perceived worth of a new car to the buyer) and transaction value (the feeling that one lost or won the negotiation at the dealership).

The idea that there was a legitimate "list price," and that consumers would occasionally be offered a discount on


this price—these were the terms of the truce. And the truce remained largely intact up to the turn of the present century. The reigning retail superpower, Walmart, enforced "everyday low prices" that did not shift around.

But in the 1990s, the internet began to erode the terms of the long peace. Savvy consumers could visit a Best Buy to eyeball merchandise they intended to buy elsewhere for a cheaper price, an exercise that became known as "showrooming." In 1999, a Seattle-based digital bookseller called Amazon.com started expanding into a Grand Depot of its own.

The era of internet retailing had arrived, and with it, the resumption of hostilities.

**In retrospect, retailers** were slow to mobilize. Even as other corporate functions—logistics, sales-force management—were being given the "moneyball" treatment in the early 2000s with powerful predictive software (and even as airlines had fully weaponized airfares), retail pricing remained more art than science. In part, this was a function of internal company hierarchy. Prices were traditionally the purview of the second-most-powerful figure in a retail organization: the head merchant, whose intuitive knack for knowing what to sell, and for how much, was the source of a deep-seated mythos that she was not keen to dispel.

Two developments, though, loosened the head merchant's hold.

The first was the arrival of data. Thomas Nagle was teaching economics at the University of Chicago in the early 1980s when, he recalls, the university acquired the data from the grocery chain Jewel's newly installed checkout scanners. "Everyone was thrilled," says Nagle, now a senior adviser specializing in pricing at Deloitte. "We'd been relying on all these contrived surveys: 'Given these options at these prices, what would you do?' But the real world is not a controlled experiment."

The Jewel data overturned a lot of what he'd been teaching. For instance, he'd professed that ending prices with .99 or .98, instead of just rounding up to the next dollar, did not boost sales. The practice was merely an artifact, the existing literature said, of an age when owners wanted to force cashiers to open the register to make change, in order to prevent them from pocketing the money from a sale. "It turned out," Nagle recollects, "that ending prices in .99 wasn't big for cars and other big-ticket items where you pay a lot of attention. But in the grocery store, the effect was huge!"

The effect, now known as "left-digit bias," had not shown up in lab experiments, because participants, presented with a limited number of decisions, were able to approach every hypothetical purchase like a math problem. But of course in real life, Nagle admits, "if you did that, it would take you all day to go to the grocery store." Disregarding the digits to the right side of the decimal point lets you get home and make dinner.

By the early 2000s, the amount of data collected on retailers' internet servers had become so massive that it started exerting a gravitational pull. That's what triggered the second development: the arrival, en masse, of the practitioners of the dismal science.

This was, in some ways, a curious stampede. For decades, academic economists had generally been as indifferent to corporations as corporations were to them. (Indeed, most of their models barely acknowledged the existence of corporations at all.)

But that began to change in 2001, when the Berkeley economist Hal Varian—highly regarded for the 1999 book *Information Rules*—ran into Eric Schmidt. Varian knew him but, he says, was unaware that Schmidt had become the CEO of a little company called Google. Varian agreed to spend a sabbatical year at Google, figuring he'd write a book about the start-up experience.

At the time, the few serious economists who worked in industry focused on macroeconomic issues like, say, how demand for consumer durables might change in the next year. Varian, however, was immediately invited to look at a Google project that (he recalls Schmidt telling him) "might make us a little money": the auction system that became Google AdWords. Varian never left.

Others followed. "eBay was Disneyland," says Steve Tadelis, a Berkeley economist who went to work there for a time in 2011 and is currently on leave at Amazon. "You know, pricing, people, behavior, reputation"—the things that have always set economists aglow—plus the chance "to experiment at a scale that's unparalleled."

At first, the newcomers were mostly mining existing data for insights. At eBay, for instance, Tadelis used a log of buyer clicks to estimate how much money one hour of bargain-hunting saved shoppers. (Roughly $15 was the answer.)

Then economists realized that they could go a step further and design experiments that *produced* data. Carefully controlled experiments not only attempted to divine the shape of a demand curve—which shows just how much of a product people will buy as you keep raising the price, allowing retailers to find the optimal, profit-maximizing figure. They tried to map how the curve changed hour to hour. (Online purchases peak during weekday office hours, so retailers are commonly advised to raise prices in the morning and lower them in the early evening.)

By the mid-2000s, some economists began wondering whether Big Data could discern every individual's own *personal* demand curve—thereby turning the classroom hypothetical of "perfect price discrimination" (a price that's calibrated precisely to the maximum that *you* will pay) into an actual possibility.


**As this new world** began to take shape, the initial consumer experience of online shopping—so simple! and such deals!—was losing some of its sheen.

It's not that consumers hadn't benefited from the lower prices available online. They had. But some of the deals weren't nearly as good as they seemed to be. And for some people, glee began to give way to a vague suspicion that maybe they were getting ripped off. In 2007, a California man named Marc Ecenbarger thought he had scored when he found a patio set—list price $999—selling on Overstock.com for $449.99. He bought two, unpacked them, then discovered—courtesy of a price tag left on the packaging—that Walmart's normal price for the set was $247. His fury was profound. He complained to Overstock, which offered to refund him the cost of the furniture.

But his experience was later used as evidence in a case brought by consumer-protection attorneys against Overstock for false advertising, along with internal emails in which an Overstock employee claimed it was commonly known that list prices were "egregiously overstated."

In 2014, a California judge ordered Overstock to pay $6.8 million in civil penalties. (Overstock has appealed the decision.) The past year has seen a wave of similar lawsuits over phony list prices, reports Bonnie Patten, the executive director of TruthinAdvertising.org. In 2016, Amazon began to drop most mentions of "list price," and in some cases added a new reference point: its own past price.

This could be seen as the final stage of decay of the old one-price system. What's replacing it is something that most closely resembles high-frequency trading on Wall Street. Prices are never "set" to begin with in this new world. They can fluctuate hour to hour and even minute to minute—a phenomenon familiar to anyone who has put something in his Amazon cart and been alerted to price changes while it sat there. A website called camelcamelcamel.com even tracks Amazon prices for specific products and alerts consumers when a price drops below a preset threshold. The price history for any given item—Classic Twister, for example—looks almost exactly like a stock chart. And as with financial markets, flash glitches happen. In 2011, Peter A. Lawrence's *The Making of a Fly* (paperback edition) was briefly available on Amazon for $23,698,655.93, thanks to an algorithmic price war between two third-party sellers that had run amok. To understand what happened, it seemed sensible to talk to the man who helped develop the software they were using.


**Guru Hariharan uncapped** a dry-erase marker in a conference room at Boomerang's headquarters in Mountain View, California. He was talking about what had led retailers to this desperate place where it's necessary to change prices multiple times a day. On a whiteboard, he drew a series of lines representing the rising share of online sales for various kinds of products (books, DVDs, electronics) over time, then marked the years that major brick-and-mortar players (Borders, Blockbuster, Circuit City and RadioShack) went bankrupt. At first the years looked random. But the bankruptcies all clustered within a band where online sales hit between 20 and 25 percent. "In this range, there's a crushing point," Hariharan said, clapping his hands together for emphasis. "There's a bloodbath happening."

**THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF JOHN NASH, THE EPONYMOUS BEAUTIFUL MIND, NOW EXTEND TO THE SETTING OF MOP PRICES.**

Beyond this crushing point, traditional retailers with both a brick-and-mortar and an online presence feel compelled to compete purely on price. Hariharan talked wistfully of the days when he'd walk into RadioShack and have a salesperson direct him to the exact connector cable he needed. But once retailers enter the crushing zone, expenses like staff, training, and customer support typically are slashed. Profit margins keep falling nonetheless—why go to the store at all if no one there can help you?—and a death spiral ensues. (RadioShack traced just this path before filing for bankruptcy in 2015.)

"It didn't have to be that way," Hariharan said. Now he's helping retailers fight back.

We can't process every piece of price information thrown our way. So we judge a store's prices based on a handful of products we know well. Grocers have recognized this for decades, which is why they keep the price of eggs and milk consistently low, making their profits on other goods whose markups we don't notice as easily.

When he was at Amazon, Hariharan, who has a degree in machine learning, helped invent and patent the Amazon Selling Coach, a system that helps third-party vendors optimize their inventory and prices. He and his team at Boomerang have built a massive system that tracks prices and has informed billions of pricing decisions for clients ranging from Office Depot to GNC to U.S. Auto Parts. But its software engine isn't built to match the lowest price out there. (That, Hariharan notes, would be a simple algorithm.) It's built to manage consumers' *perception* of price. The software identifies the goods that loom largest in consumers' perception and keeps their prices carefully in line with competitors' prices, if not lower. The price of everything else is allowed to drift upward.

Amazon long ago mastered this tactic, Hariharan says. In one instance, Boomerang monitored the pricing shifts of a popular Samsung television on Amazon over the six-month period before Black Friday. Then, on Black Friday itself, Amazon dropped the TV's price from $350 all the way to $250, undercutting competitors by a country mile. Boomerang's bots also noticed that in October, Amazon had hiked the price of some HDMI cables needed to connect the TV by about 60 percent, likely armed with the knowledge, Hariharan says, that online consumers do not comparison shop as zealously for cheaper items as they do for expensive ones.

What's interesting is how other retailers are now beginning to adapt. To show me this, a Boomerang employee opened up the dashboard seen by the firm's clients. Scrolling through a menu of premade algorithms, he selected a rule, "Beat Competitor by 10%," for certain items meeting the following criteria:

```
If (comp_price>cost) and (promo_flag = false)
   then set price = comp_price*0.90
```

That is: *If the competitor's price is greater than the cost of making the item, and the competitor isn't running a onetime promotion, then undercut the competitor by 10 percent*. The rule was implemented with a click, and onscreen, I could see a healthy drop in the client's Price Perception Index.

But that's not the end of the story. The price cuts will register on competitors' pricing sonars. Whether or not to respond in kind depends, in part, on how *their* algorithms interpret the signal. Is this the first shot in a pricing war? Or is the retailer just trying to clear inventory from its warehouse? In practice, it's hard to tell. So an innocuous, temporary price cut may set off a machine-against-machine price war that, if left unchecked, could quickly devastate a retailer's bottom line. Boomerang clients are prompted to select "Guardrails"—further rules that provide a check on the initial set of rules—and establish a certain amount of human oversight. Faisal Masud, the chief technology officer at Staples, one of Boomerang's first customers, thinks human involvement makes sense only in rare cases. "We want to make sure the software makes the decisions, not the human being," he says. "It's all automatic. Otherwise you're losing."

The complexity of retail pricing today has driven at least one of Boomerang's clients into game theory—a branch of mathematics that, it's safe to say, has seldom found practical use in shopping aisles. Hariharan says, with a smile: "It lets you say, 'What is the dominant competitor's reaction to me? And if I know the reaction to me, what is my first, best move?' Which is the Nash equilibrium." Yes, that's John Nash, the eponymous Beautiful Mind, whose brilliant contributions to mathematics now extend to the setting of mop prices.

Where does all this end?


**One scenario is:** in simplicity.

The apparel start-up Everlane, for instance, is betting that it can capitalize on consumer backlash to retailers' ever more vaguely underhanded tactics. The company spells out the cost of making each of its products and the profit it earns on each. Recently it informed customers that the cost of cashmere from Inner Mongolia had dropped. It was dropping the price of its cashmere sweaters by $25, because they now cost less to make. "Radical transparency," Everlane founder and CEO Michael Preysman calls the approach.

On another occasion, Everlane decided to clear clothing and shoe inventory by giving customers three choices of what to pay. The lowest price covered the cost of making and shipping


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HISTORY'S LESSONS IN TRUST

# Investing in History

THE ACT OF INVESTING is an ancient one, but its modern iteration is the result of more than a thousand years of evolution. In that millennium, landmark moments have demonstrated shifts in the meaning and process of investment, but trust between individuals has remained a key factor in the success of any financial transaction.

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## *1000* Money as an institution

As cities grow, trade and labor become increasingly specialized, inspiring guild and merchant groups to begin trusting each other with trade secrets and collective pools of money. This motivates them to act in each other's best interests. That trust helps form the foundation for the growth of urban centers and financial systems. It also makes collaborating members responsible for each other's shared assets, since they were available to any member in need.

## *1792* The opening of the New York Stock Exchange

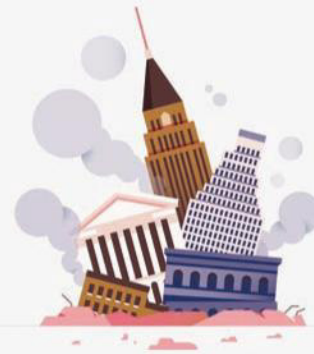
Twenty-four brokers on Wall Street sign the Buttonwood Agreement, pledging to trade financial assets only with each other based on the mutual confidence that they had established among its members. That group would become the New York Stock Exchange, a space for traders to buy and sell stock on behalf of investors, under the assumption that they would do so only to benefit those investors.

## *1940* The Investment Advisers Act

The increasingly complex world of investing leads to the rise of investment advisors. Recognizing their importance to the financial system, a new federal law gives the Securities and Exchange Commission the responsibility to provide oversight, ensuring that advisors register themselves and abide by the fiduciary standard, which requires that they act in their clients' best interests. Starting small, with approximately 700 advisors, the act further reinforces the level of trust between advisor and investor.

## *2008* The Great Recession

The power of marketplace forces to overwhelm caution and prudence demonstrates the need for greater vigilance and stronger protections for individual investors. Market manipulation and the proliferation of mortgage-backed securities and other derivatives led to the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression. The recession and market collapse make clear that the trust economy was in need of retooling.



## *2017* The present day

New policies address practices that led to the recession. But as the political climate changes, the fate of these policies is uncertain. Investors need to make informed decisions now more than ever, and advisors can help investors make those decisions. As part of their research process, investors can consider working with advisors, such as registered investment advisors, who are required to act in their clients' best interests. However uncertain policy may be, investors keep trust at the heart of their financial relationships.

the items. The middle price also covered the overhead of selling them. And the highest provided Everlane a profit.

Lest someone wonder, *Would framing price as a moral dilemma be the ultimate pricing ploy?*, the answer is no: 87 percent of customers chose the lowest price, Preysman reports. (Eight percent picked the middle price; 5 percent chose the highest.) The point, Preysman stresses, was to give customers a glimpse of how stuff gets made, how workers get paid, and other things not typically visible on a shoebox or a sweater tag.

"The theory of Everlane, I think, is still a theory we have to prove," Preysman says. Companies have "trained customers in the U.S. to be as addicted to sales as possible. It has become a core piece of the retail-industrial complex and it is very, very difficult to unwind. So reeducation is hard when you play in a market where people play these games on a daily basis."

But a different scenario follows from the possibility that consumers don't really want clarity. They are content to be fooled into paying more if they can keep the belief that they're paying less; that they have the agency and agility to find special, unbeatable deals, only for them. This would amount to a rejection of the new truce that Everlane is extending. And it would open the way for retailers and economists to grab their holy grail.

Perfect price discrimination was, again, supposed to exist only as a classroom thought experiment. But it posits that a seller knows the walk-away price of every single buyer and hence, by offering a price just barely below it, can extract every last farthing of potential profit from each of them.

In the past, retailers have used demographic data to try to deduce walk-away price. In 2000, some people thought Amazon was doing this when customers noticed they were being charged different prices for the same DVDs. Amazon denied it. This was the result of a random price test, CEO Jeff Bezos explained in a news release. "We've never tested and we never will test prices based on customer demographics."

But demographics are actually a crude way of personalizing prices, the Brandeis economist Benjamin Shiller argued in a recent paper, "First-Degree Price Discrimination Using Big Data." If Netflix were to use only demographic factors, such as people's race, household income, and zip code, to personalize subscription prices, his model predicted, it could boost its profits by 0.3 percent. But if Netflix also used people's web-browsing history—the percentage of web use on Tuesdays, the number of visits to RottenTomatoes.com, and some 5,000 other variables—it could boost its profits by 14.6 percent.

Netflix was not doing any of this; it hadn't even provided Shiller with the data he used (which he obtained from a third party). But Shiller demonstrated that personalized pricing was feasible.

Are other companies doing this? Four researchers in Catalonia tried to answer the question with dummy computers that mimicked the web-browsing patterns of either "affluent" or "budget conscious" customers for a week. When the personae went "shopping," they weren't shown different prices for the same goods. They were shown different goods. The average price of the headphones suggested for the affluent personae was four times the price of those suggested for the budget-conscious personae. Another experiment demonstrated a more direct form of price discrimination: Computers with addresses in greater Boston were shown lower prices than those in more-remote parts of Massachusetts on identical goods.

**IN ONE STUDY, COMPUTERS WITH ADDRESSES IN GREATER BOSTON WERE SHOWN LOWER PRICES THAN THOSE IN MORE-REMOTE PARTS OF MASSACHUSETTS.**

In their paper, "Detecting Price and Search Discrimination on the Internet," the researchers suggested that consumers could benefit from a price-discrimination watchdog system that would continuously monitor for customized prices (although it's unclear who would build or operate this). Another paper—this one co-authored by Google's Hal Varian—argues that if personalized pricing becomes too aggressive, shoppers will become more "strategic," selectively withholding or disclosing information in order to obtain the best price.

Which, to Bonnie Patten of TruthinAdvertising.org, seems like a whole lot of work. It's already "so complicated," she told me. "Everything is 50 percent off, but they have all these exclusions where it doesn't count, and then everyone is trying to calculate 20 percent of 50 percent in their heads." She already has a full-time job, was her point. And three kids.

"As a general matter," she went on, "I find it so difficult to determine the actual price of the product that when I'm shopping for my kids, my new technique is to make all my decisions at the cashier. I pick up lots of clothes. I completely ignore all pricing until I get to the register. And then if something is too much, I say, 'I don't want it.'"

This struck me as sensible in the extreme. And how did she shop for herself?

"I do not shop," Patten said.

In what sense?, I asked, confused.

"I just gave up," she said. "I just stopped shopping."

I thought about this after we hung up. Maybe it was a function of her job, which let her see too much. Maybe she was a certain type—"survival shopper" was the label she used—who simply didn't experience the thrill of finding a pair of $30 moccasins for $8. Such thoughts helped stay the alternative explanation, the one Gabriel Tarde called "the madness of doubt": that there's a finite amount of uncertainty we can absorb, a limit to how much we can check the ticker to see whether the Swiffer's price is up or down this morning; that somewhere in us is a shut-off point, and that Patten had hit it.

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*Jerry Useem has covered business and economics for* The New York Times, Fortune, *and other publications.*

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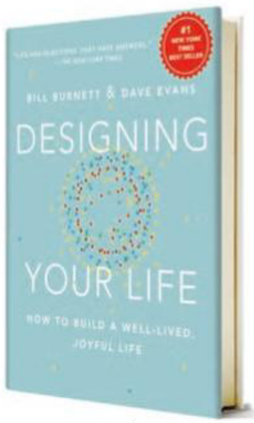


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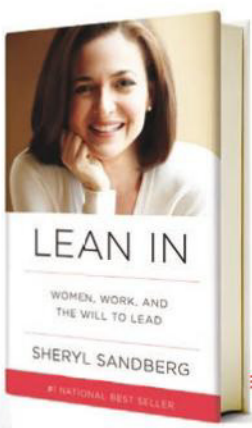



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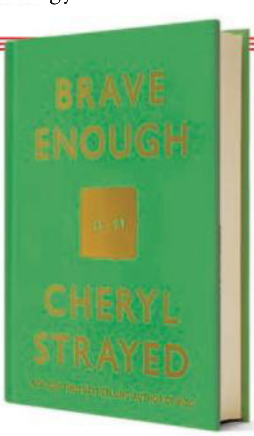


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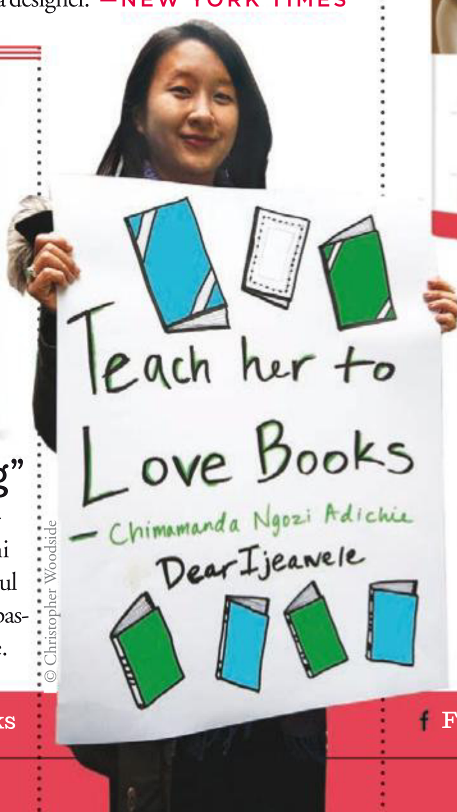


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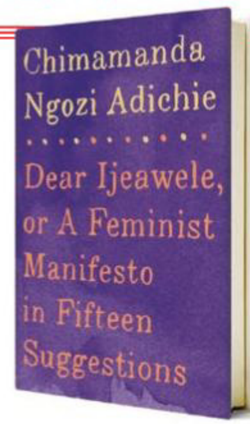


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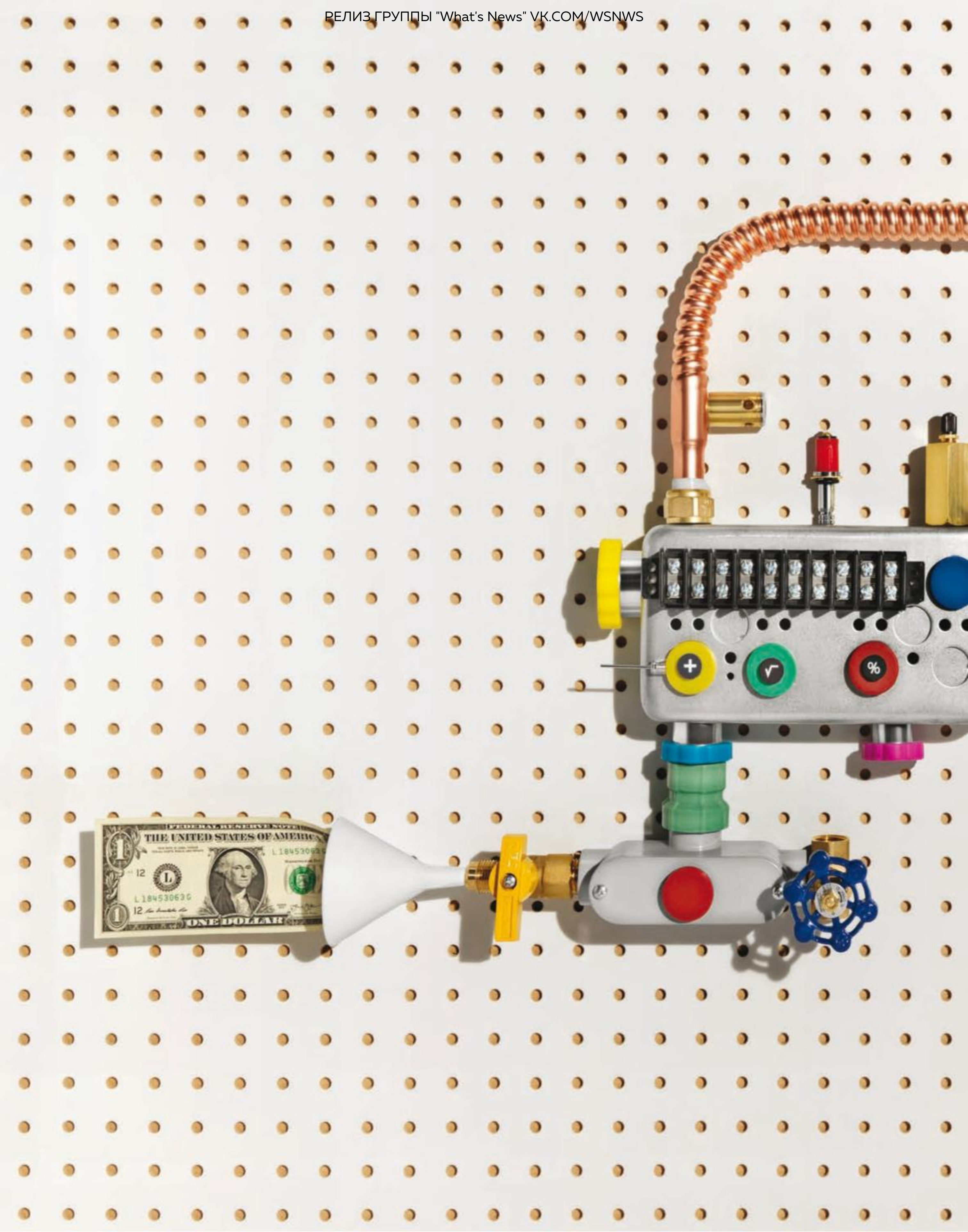
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THE MONEY REPORT

# HOW TO TRICK PEOPLE INTO SAVING MONEY

Inside Walmart's curious, possibly ingenious effort to get customers to build up their savings accounts by exploiting the power of lotteries

BY ROB WALKER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN FANTL

**Late last summer,** Dawn Paquin started keeping her money on a prepaid debit card from Walmart instead of in a traditional checking account. The wages from her factory job—she works from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m., inspecting blades on industrial bread-slicing machines—now go directly onto the Visa-branded card, which she can use like a regular debit card, though unlike most debit cards, it is not linked to a checking or savings account. She made the switch after a $4 check she wrote to buy coffee for herself and a friend tipped her checking account below the required minimum and triggered $100 in overdraft fees.

This was before she got the factory gig, and she wasn't working full-time. Paquin lives in Salem, Illinois, where, she told me recently, if you don't have a college degree, your job choices are "fast food or factory." Money was extremely tight. "I kind of had a bit of resentment about banks after that," she said dryly.

The card is more convenient, Paquin said, and she doesn't have to worry about monthly statements; she tracks her money, and pays all her bills, with the card's associated phone app. But even with the job, money remains tight. Paquin is divorced, with two sons, and shares a car with her boyfriend.

Like many Americans, Paquin thinks about the importance of saving more often than she actually saves. In a 2015 Federal Reserve Board survey, 46 percent of respondents reported that they would have trouble coming up with $400 in an emergency; living paycheck to paycheck is now a commonplace middle-class experience. So while Paquin noticed that her Walmart MoneyCard app asked her from time to time whether she wanted to "stash" some money, she didn't bother to figure out what that actually meant, let alone respond.

Then, late last year, she got an email saying that a "prize savings" feature had been added to her card. If she kept some of her balance in a virtual "vault," meaning that it would not show up in her available funds, she would be eligible to win a cash prize in a monthly drawing—up to $1,000. Every dollar in the MoneyCard Vault would equal an entry in that month's drawing. This caught her interest. A prize would go a long way toward her being able to buy a car. It also made her focus on what all those "stash" requests were about. "*Oh, cool, this can work as a savings account, too*," she remembers realizing. So when she got paid, she started setting aside "10 bucks, 20 bucks, whatever I could."

That's more or less the goal of the Walmart MoneyCard Vault: to encourage the unexciting habit of saving, especially among the considerable number of low- and middle-income Americans who don't use traditional bank accounts. The program was launched to a limited number of MoneyCard holders in August, offering 500 prizes a month—one for $1,000, the rest $25 each. In December, the company reported that the number of Vault users had grown more than 130 percent, to more than 100,000, and that the average savings had grown from $413 to $572, a 38 percent increase.

By itself, of course, this does not solve the savings challenge so many Americans struggle with. But it's remarkable for a couple of reasons. One is its clever appeal to human tendencies recognized in behavioral-economics research but seldom harnessed to socially desirable goals. Another is that it is squarely aimed at the 67 million Americans inartfully described as "unbanked or underbanked"—a massive group that financial innovators have long ignored, even though that group, more than any other part of the population, could use some financial innovation.

**Americans' difficulty saving,** Daniel Eckert told me recently, is a textbook example of how brains wired to reckon with short-term threats and opportunities struggle to think about long-term consequences—and struggle even harder to take current action to stave off future disaster. Eckert, who oversees Walmart's financial-services businesses, became interested in behavioral economics while earning his M.B.A. at the University of Chicago in the early 2000s.

Take a walk through a retail store—a Walmart, let's say. You'll pass heaps of products in every category, big signs advertising prices that seem too good to pass up, TV screens touting bargains galore. I shop at Walmart frequently, and somewhere in the long walk from the dog-biscuit aisle to the yogurt case I am at the very least tempted to buy something I didn't know I needed when I arrived.

Behavioral economics has been creeping into policy making for years; Barack Obama's administration even created a team devoted to applying its lessons in the real world. The field also informs new start-ups, such as the maker of an app called Digit, backed by Google's venture-capital arm, which analyzes your spending patterns and, based on the results, diverts a few dollars into a separate account on a regular basis. Digit used research from Common Cents Lab, co-founded by Dan Ariely, a Duke University behavioral-economics professor, to design a feature encouraging users to pre-commit to saving a percentage of their tax refund. Common Cents has also worked with an app maker that helps food-stamp recipients budget more efficiently.

Richard Thaler, an economist at the University of Chicago and one of the field's pioneers, told *The Wall Street Journal* in 2015 that saving for retirement is "a prototypical behavioral-economics problem" because it is "cognitively hard—figuring out how much to save—and requires self-control." One solution is defined-contribution retirement plans, which set money aside automatically; a 401(k) is the most common form. Employees may choose to opt out, but they opt in by default—meaning the passive response is actually the better response. Some plans are even built to gradually escalate, again by default, the amount employees set aside for retirement savings. Admittedly, that's not how all 401(k)s work—most automatic-saving plans still require some active decision making about, say, how much you contribute. Still, default plans like these are "probably behavioral economists' greatest success story," Thaler said.

**AMERICANS SPENT $70 BILLION ON LOTTERY TICKETS IN 2014—AN AVERAGE OF ABOUT $300 PER ADULT.**

But that doesn't mean much to Dawn Paquin, whose factory gig is through a temp agency and doesn't offer a retirement plan, or to millions of other Americans like her. And it does nothing to encourage shorter-term savings, the kind that can cushion unexpected economic blows. The notion of helping this vulnerable group by way of cash-prize enticements draws on a different strand of research entirely.

Americans spent $70 billion on lottery tickets in 2014—an average of about $300 per adult. Poorer Americans spend a bigger chunk of their income on the lottery than richer ones; a 1999 study of state lotteries by researchers at Duke reported that nearly half of all households with incomes below $25,000 at least dabbled in the lottery. This despite the fact that lotto players lose about 47 cents of each dollar they spend on tickets.

Why do they do it? The knee-jerk assumption is that the answer boils down to ignorance. But in a 2008 article in the *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, researchers at Carnegie Mellon University argued that the lottery is "alluring for poor people" because it offers a shot at an otherwise unavailable dramatic economic gain. The lottery can seem to be the only way out. So people keep playing.

The idea of redirecting these actions on a mass scale through a prepaid-card feature, rather than trying to suppress them, is still relatively novel, at least in the United States. It didn't come from Walmart, or from a big bank, or from a Silicon Valley start-up. It came from a meeting organized by an earnest nonprofit.

**Commonwealth was founded** in Boston in 2001 with the goal of addressing America's "pervasive financial insecurity." Timothy Flacke, a co-founder and the executive director, describes it as a financial-innovation incubator to benefit vulnerable people. A few years ago, another co-founder, Peter Tufano, now the dean of the business school at Oxford, got interested in the United Kingdom's Premium Bonds, which were introduced in the 1950s. Buying these bonds enters holders into a lotterylike system with regular prizes of up to 1 million pounds, paid for out of the pooled interest on the bonds. They're popular. So are similar programs in Latin America, South Africa, New Zealand, and elsewhere.

Commonwealth wanted to try this approach in the United States. But Flacke says that aside from the unknown appeal to Americans of a prize-linked program, there were questions at the time about whether such a program would be legal. Most states had carved out exceptions for government-run lotteries and for charities, but private lotteries were largely forbidden. Still, cursory research involving one of Flacke's colleagues' "standing in a Walmart in rural Indiana" and quizzing customers suggested consumer interest. Eventually Commonwealth figured out that the laws in Michigan would allow it to test a program there like the ones in the U.K. and other countries.

Commonwealth and its partners designed a plan called Save to Win, which offered monthly cash prizes through the Michigan Credit Union League. The plan included a single big prize and a bevy of smaller ones—a jackpot and something more like the experience, Flacke says, of playing scratch tickets: a large number of small prizes, awarded more frequently and paid out quickly. Offering a large number of frequent payouts played to "hyperbolic discounting," the tendency to value short-term possibilities disproportionately higher than long-term gains. A shot at $25 right now captures attention in a way that the promise of $100 earned through a few points of interest over a period of years does not. Throw in the slimmer possibility of a much bigger immediate payoff, and people really get interested.

**A SHOT AT $25 RIGHT NOW CAPTURES ATTENTION IN A WAY THAT INTEREST EARNED OVER YEARS DOES NOT.**

Also, fantasizing about what to do with extra money is something low-income Americans "don't get a lot of space in their lives to do," Flacke says. "That's what powers the lottery industry." He adds that there is a sort of "contagion of winners"—when a customer at a credit-union branch collected a $25 prize for saving money, everybody else waiting in line was interested, and many wanted to get in on the action.

After a year, 11,600 members of eight credit unions, half of whom said they had not previously been regular savers, had deposited $8.5 million in new accounts, averaging about $730 each. The CEO of one participating credit union observed at the time that Save to Win was far more effective in getting people to save than previous incentives, including a CD at an eye-popping 10 percent interest rate. Commonwealth began working with lawmakers to allow the practice in other states, and pushing for federal legislation to allow it throughout the country. To date, it says, its efforts have helped inspire more than 80,000 people to save more than $170 million.

Nevertheless, the approach remained piecemeal. So in 2014, Commonwealth and the similarly minded Center for Financial Services Innovation co-hosted a conference with the Boston Federal Reserve, inviting a variety of players in the growing business of prepaid debit cards to talk about ideas for increasing savings.

The prepaid-card industry is not known for its beneficence. The cards don't offer interest. Users pay fees to get the card itself, to load money onto it, and to withdraw funds at an ATM; some cards charge a monthly fee unless the balance rises above a certain level. Regulators recently ordered one of the early, high-profile brands, RushCard, and its payment processor, MasterCard, to pay $13 million in fines and restitution stemming from a huge technical error in 2015 that denied thousands of users access to their own money. Walmart's MoneyCard experienced a similar, if less severe, incident last year.

Even so, as the smartphone revolution has made such cards vastly more convenient, they have become an increasingly popular alternative to traditional banking. Americans stored an estimated $100 billion on reloadable cards in 2016, up from less than $1 billion in 2003. A Pew Charitable Trusts study estimates that more than a quarter of prepaid-card users don't have a bank account.

The Boston conference included a workshop on prize-linked savings. Flacke, who ran the workshop, says that he told the group, "Look, guys, you have a really important platform that serves a lot of financially vulnerable consumers, but most of it is not being used to help people get anywhere. It's all transaction-focused. You should be thinking about savings." Eckert, the Walmart executive, told me that when he heard Flacke's prize-based-savings presentation at that event, he thought: *We could do that.*

It took more than a year to sort out the details. By using a sweepstakes model, Walmart was in a position to work around lottery restrictions: Although the federal legislation Commonwealth had backed to encourage and ease prize-saving lottery experiments did pass, waiting for all 50 states to enact specific changes would have slowed things down. And Walmart could roll out the idea on a scale few businesses could match: 90 percent of Americans live within 15 miles of a Walmart.

L **Loretta Taylor**, who lives in the southern-Illinois town of Mount Vernon, started using a Walmart MoneyCard when her local bank branch closed late last year, forcing her to drive 45 minutes to make a deposit. A registered nurse, she has lately been working as an in-home caregiver, and sometimes gets paid in cash, which she can put onto the card (for a $3 fee) at a nearby Walmart. "I'm not making much money right now," she told me recently. But in early January she decided to put $23 in the card's Vault—and won a $25 prize. Taylor has kept her traditional bank account, and she sounds slightly skeptical of Walmart's motives. Still, she has continued to use the Vault; she had saved $75 when we talked in early February, including the $25 prize.

For people like Taylor, using a prepaid debit card may reflect a lack of better choices more than anything else: The prepaid-card industry is serving a market that conventional banks don't serve well or in some cases at all.

**WALMART HAS AN INCENTIVE TO BECOME THE PLACE PEOPLE THINK ABOUT WHEN THEY THINK OF THEIR FINANCIAL FUTURE.**

Walmart's MoneyCard is a product of Green Dot Corporation, one of the giants of the prepaid-card industry. When CEO Steven Streit started the company in 1999, he called it i-Gen, and envisioned his market as tech-savvy youths. "The packaging was all about kids; the marketing was all about cool teenagers surfing the web," he told me recently. He landed a deal to sell the cards through Rite Aid.

Young people didn't buy them. Low-income adults did. The company started asking the people who called its service center why they were using the product, and the answer was usually that they didn't have bank accounts. "That's when I realized," Streit says, "*Wow, we've got the right product, but the wrong demographic*." The packaging was redesigned, and the renamed Green Dot started making new deals—including one with Walmart to create the MoneyCard, which debuted in 2007.

Check-cashing outfits, payday lenders, and similar businesses are often thought of as merely preying on poor people, who, the conventional wisdom goes, tend to make bad financial decisions. Lisa Servon, a University of Pennsylvania professor of city and regional planning, offers a different angle in her recent book, *The Unbanking of America: How the New Middle Class Survives*. During Servon's research working as a teller at a check casher and payday lender, consumers told her that the fee structures of nonbank alternatives were more transparent and predictable than those at conventional banks—crucial to anyone living on a budget.

Prepaid cards offer this predictability, and over time their reputation for transparency has improved. (Last year, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau announced new rules that later this year will require card issuers to package their products with a standardized fee-disclosure form; some congressional Republicans are now pushing legislation that might block this change.) Servon notes that online information sources such as NerdWallet.com offer detailed prepaid-card assessments and discussion forums to help consumers choose a card. But it's unclear how many low-income Americans know about or have time to examine these sources. "A lot of it is kind of word of mouth and personal experience," Servon told me.

That has remained true even as prepaid cards have taken off. I asked Green Dot's Streit whether he worried that the big banks would recognize and pursue his growing customer base. His answer was: Not really. "The challenge with poor people is that they're poor," he said. "To really make big money off a customer, a bank needs them to be underwritable for mortgages, new automobiles, home-improvement loans, margin loans on stock, management fees." For conventional financial-services companies, he said, it makes more sense to pursue a small number of high-income customers than, well, everyone else.

Six years ago, Green Dot obtained a bank charter, giving it even more options for offering financial services. In 2013 it launched an alternative checking service called GoBank (later made available through Walmart) that included a vault feature, so users could designate some of their funds as savings. This feature migrated to the MoneyCard, but plenty of users, including Dawn Paquin, ignored it until it incorporated the sweepstakes feature. Walmart is, of course, a cathedral of consumption, and has been relentlessly criticized for the way it pays and treats its workforce. The new savings card could be seen as so much

image-burnishing. Still, a retail business by definition tempts you to spend, not to withhold available funds. I asked Eckert, the head of Walmart's financial-services businesses, directly: What's in it for Walmart to help people save?

"People always look for that angle," he replied with a weary chuckle. His answer skewed mostly toward social responsibility: What's good for Walmart customers is good for America, and Walmart has a unique reach and a direct relationship with consumers who really want or need help making ends meet. "There was no other commercial motive," he said flatly.

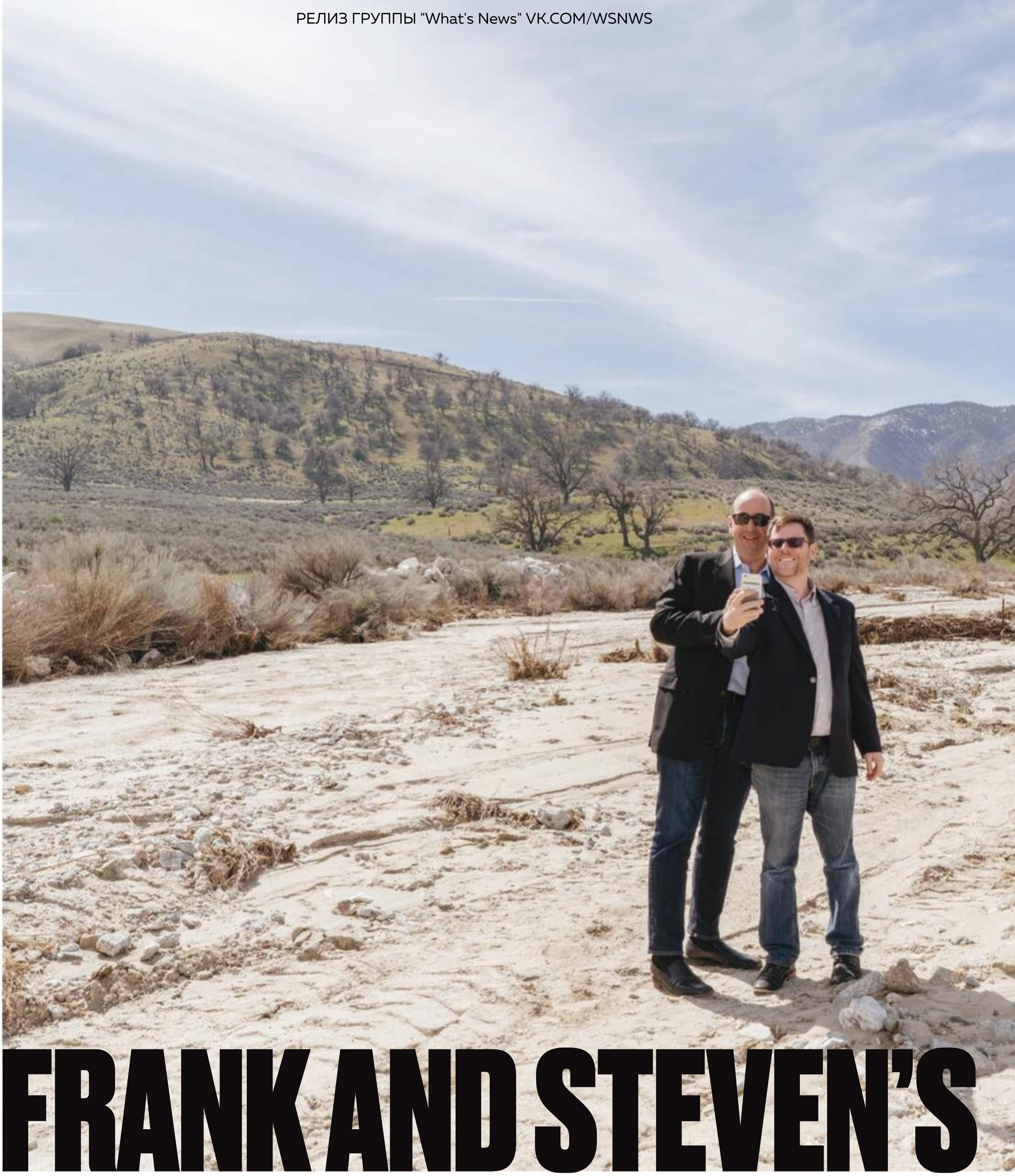
Every big business's reflex is to say it wants to do good for its customers. On a practical level, Walmart sells the card for $1, and Green Dot charges the usual associated fees: $5 a month if your balance is less than $1,000; $2.50 for ATM withdrawals; etc. That can add up fast for a low-income card user who is struggling to save. Neither Walmart nor Green Dot would get into how much money they actually make on the card, or the costs associated with the prize-savings program. But for Walmart, at least, the bigger gain is probably not immediately tangible. Walmart has dabbled in financial services for years, flirting with obtaining an actual banking license, but has so far worked with partners instead, including Green Dot, Jackson Hewitt Tax Service, MoneyGram, and American Express. All of these help make its stores de facto locations for a host of money-related services that its customers may need.

When Eckert says that Walmart has a real incentive to help its customers save, it is another way of saying that Walmart has a real incentive to become the place customers think of when they think of their financial future. Lots of Walmart customers are underserved by banks and other financial institutions, Eckert says; the company's experiments with finance-related products and services help customers "not only save money but also have access to a financial ecosystem they were crowded out from." That access keeps them loyal to Walmart, and keeps them coming back to its stores. If they buy more dog biscuits or yogurt or whatever else they need or want while they're there—well, that's business.

Flacke, of Commonwealth, sees one of the world's biggest brands working with a big player in the burgeoning prepaid-card industry on something that might really help low-income Americans save. And he hopes others copy the idea.

In late January, Dawn Paquin got a call from someone at Green Dot informing her that she had won $1,000. She suspected some sort of scam, but a few days later the money appeared in her MoneyCard Vault. She gave her two sons $50 each, took them and her boyfriend to dinner, and bought a much-needed new pair of Skechers. She left the rest in her Vault, which now contains a bit more than $800—more than she's had saved for a while. She still has an eye on a car, but she's waiting to see whether, as she hopes, her factory job becomes permanent. "I like," she says, "to have money put away."

*Rob Walker writes the Workologist column for* The New York Times' *Sunday Business section.*



# FRANK AND STEVEN'S EXCELLENT

The authors in March, on the property of the Tejon Ranch Company, the owner of California's largest continuous expanse of private land

Two law professors tried to mimic the big activist hedge funds, investing their retirement savings in a small, languishing public company and trying to shake it up. Here's what happened.

BY FRANK PARTNOY AND STEVEN DAVIDOFF SOLOMON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN FANTL

# CORPORATE-RAIDING ADVENTURE

# IF WE HAD SHOWERED OR SHAVED OR NOT BEEN DRESSED IN WRINKLED SHIRTS,

we would have gotten out of our rented Hyundai to speak with the man in the blue blazer who was walking into the Balboa Bay Resort, a hotel and private club in Newport Beach, California. It was Gregory S. Bielli, the president and CEO of the Tejon Ranch Company. We'd met him once before, when we were in a better frame of mind.

Tejon Ranch is a small public company headquartered in Lebec, about an hour north of Los Angeles, and its main asset is obvious from Interstate 5: real estate. The company owns the largest continuous expanse of private land in California, a 270,000-acre parcel—about half the size of Rhode Island—wedged between two national forests, Los Padres and Sequoia.

Together, the two of us owned more than 18,000 shares of Tejon Ranch, an investment our wives had advised us against. When we'd bought in about a year earlier, the shares had been worth nearly half a million dollars—a significant chunk of our retirement nest eggs. Tejon Ranch had appeared to us to be poorly managed. As professors who write about shareholder activism, we'd thought we'd seen an opportunity to mimic the big activists, such as Bill Ackman and Carl Icahn, who agitate to improve the transparency and performance of much larger companies.

We had been pressuring Tejon Ranch's executives, using the playbook that top activists have developed over the past decade or so. But the stock had tanked, we had lost more than $70,000, and we thought Bielli had lied to us.

We rolled down our windows to shout to him as we entered the resort's roundabout, but then thought better of it. We were on a scouting trip, in advance of the company's annual shareholder meeting the next morning; we'd come to see the meeting room and plan our attack. (The cheapest rooms at the Balboa Bay Resort were four times as expensive as those at the Newport Mesa Inn, so we were staying four miles inland.) We would have plenty of time to badger Bielli at the meeting, when we would be clean, better dressed, and better prepared.

**For as long as** public companies have existed, so too has tension between shareholding owners and company managers. In their 1932 book, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, Adolf A. Berle and Gardiner C. Means described the "separation of ownership and control" inherent in corporations, and noted that owners and managers have different goals. As a company grows and its shareholders become more dispersed, they wrote, it becomes harder for shareholders to pressure managers, and a gap develops between the owners' interests and the managers' behavior.

Over the decades, the size of this gap has oscillated. At times of minimal pressure from shareholders, power has shifted toward managers, who pay themselves more, enjoy corporate perquisites, build dubious empires, and in some cases relax into mediocrity. But every so often shareholders revolt, not

unlike citizens staging a coup when their leaders lose touch.

The 1980s, a decade of corporate raids evoked so memorably in the book *Barbarians at the Gate*, were one such revolutionary moment. At the start of that decade, most stock was held by scattered, individual investors, and institutions such as pension funds and insurance companies were passive owners. In 1981, there was not a single attempt in the U.S. by any investor to unseat a manager. It was a good time to be a chief executive.

But during the following five years, all of that changed. By 1986, more than 10 percent of corporate takeovers were hostile—the buyers bypassed managers and instead directly offered shareholders a large premium to sell their shares—and banks were making record-setting loans to fund them. (The raiders greatly augmented, or leveraged, their investments with borrowed money, enabling them to target even the biggest corporations.) Carl Icahn targeted and broke up underperforming companies, such as the airline TWA. T. Boone Pickens and others went after bulky conglomerates, questioning what a company like Beatrice might gain from making both orange juice and bras, or why the CEO of Unocal, a sprawling oil company that eventually merged with Chevron, needed a piano on a company jet.

Eventually, companies developed defenses, most notably the "poison pill," which dilutes the stake (and voting rights) of anyone who acquires a substantial amount of stock without first obtaining the board's approval. By the 1990s, power had been returned to management.

But the past decade or so has brought another round of agitation against management, just as significant as the corporate raiding of the 1980s. Activist hedge funds have sought out companies whose managers didn't seem to be acting in the best interest of shareholders, and exposed them. Some of these funds, like the ones led by Ackman and Icahn, have attracted the media spotlight, but most are considerably quieter in their approach and in the news coverage they generate.

Steven Davidoff Solomon *(left)* and Frank Partnoy *(above)* studied and wrote about shareholder activism for years before deciding in 2014 to try it themselves.

Unlike the 1980s corporate raiders, activist hedge funds don't seek to take over companies outright. Instead, they buy minority stakes—typically 5 to 10 percent—in companies that seem to be performing poorly, and then press for actions that would increase the share price: buying back stock, spinning off a key division, firing the CEO, or even selling the company to someone else.

Activists have found allies in mutual funds and pension funds, which are unwilling or unable to play an active role on their own, in part due to the sheer number of holdings in their vast portfolios. Hedge funds also help one another, forming "wolf packs" that together can overcome managers' resistance to their demands: After one buys in, others follow. Today, numerous activists, including Ackman, Icahn, and Paul Singer at Elliott Management, each control more than $10 billion of capital—capital that is, in its own way, highly leveraged, not by debt but by the money and voting shares of allies.

Activist hedge funds are controversial; some observers have accused them of pushing companies to take actions that yield quick profits but ultimately destroy value and jobs. Regardless, major companies have bent to their will. Activists pushed for the ouster of Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer. They created turmoil at Sotheby's, where they aggressively fought to rework the board. Starboard Value, a prominent activist fund, shook up Darden Restaurants, not only replacing the entire board, but scrutinizing small operational details at Olive Garden. (Starboard's analysts found that Olive Garden could save up to $5 million a year simply by training staff to give each patron one or two bread sticks instead of passing them out like swag. Savings would likewise emerge from cutting down on salad dressing—a win for patrons as well, the analysts surmised; they'd concluded that overdressed greens were leaving customers unhappy.)

By the time we were ready to try our experiment, in 2014, shareholder activism was ubiquitous, at least at large companies. More than 500 activist funds controlled a total of more than $100 billion in assets. According to our research, they were targeting more than 100 public companies a year.

**On November 2, 2014,** over dinner at Juniper and Ivy, a bustling "left-coast cookery" in the Little Italy neighborhood of San Diego, we got to discussing our professional plans. We thought we had done just about everything two academics studying shareholder activism could do. We had published well-received research articles. One of us (Frank) had served as an expert witness in disputes brought by companies who challenged activists' tactics under federal law. We had spoken at and hosted conferences on activism and knew many of the big players. In between bites of buttermilk biscuits, we considered possible new projects.

When dessert arrived, Steven was struck with what initially seemed like a crazy idea: "Let's get out of the ivory tower and try actually being activists. We'll pick a company and target its managers. How hard can it be?" It wasn't completely crazy. Steven had been a corporate attorney for almost a decade, and Frank (also an attorney) had worked in derivatives at Morgan Stanley; we hadn't always been creatures of the tower, and had skills and experience that seemed germane. We resolved that night to find a small company, invest, and shake things up.

We first learned about Tejon Ranch from a student presentation in one of Steven's classes. The company made money from a hodgepodge of farming and minerals businesses related to its land, as well as from commercial leases. It grew almonds, grapes, and pistachios; collected royalties on oil and gas and on limestone excavated for cement; even traded water rights. Along Interstate 5, a giant Tejon Ranch outlet mall boasted the highest-grossing Starbucks in California. But the company's true value was still unrealized.

The land had been in development for decades, and yet the great majority of it was still undeveloped. What's more, it was unclear exactly when the various residential developments that the company had approved would be finished (or even started). The market capitalization of Tejon Ranch—the value of all its shares traded on the New York Stock Exchange—was about half a billion dollars. By our calculations, the value of the land alone was likely at least twice that. We spotted two crucial problems that we felt we could help address. First, Tejon Ranch needed to improve its disclosures, so investors could understand the value of its land. (For example, the company could disclose the value per square foot that its joint-venture partners had estimated for small parcels that were already being developed.) Second, the company needed a more aggressive timetable for development.

**"LET'S GET OUT OF THE IVORY TOWER AND TRY ACTUALLY BEING ACTIVISTS. WE'LL PICK A COMPANY AND TARGET ITS MANAGERS. HOW HARD CAN IT BE?"**

Tejon Ranch seemed like a perfect target. Its stock price had dropped almost 50 percent over 10 years. Its revenue in 2014 was minuscule for a public company: just $52 million. Profits were just $5.7 million. Meanwhile, the managers were feasting: Bielli, the CEO, made $2.7 million in 2014; his CFO and second-in-command, Allen Lyda, made $1.2 million. The company appeared in need of a shake-up.

We began buying shares, building our stake over the course of about a week and a half. On some days, our purchases were more than 10 percent of the

company's stock activity on the New York Stock Exchange. By May 13, 2015, we each owned about 9,000 shares—more than Bielli himself owned.

At lunchtime the next day, we sent a short letter to Bielli, asking for a meeting. We didn't say much other than that we were "significant shareholders" who were "excited" about the business. We assumed the company would ignore us, at least at first.

But the head of investor relations replied that afternoon, saying he, Bielli, and Lyda would be "more than happy to meet with you." We set a date in July. It was that easy.

**Shareholders are** typically happy when activists target a company they're invested in: When an activist hedge fund announces an ownership stake of more than 5 percent (the threshold that requires public disclosure), the company's stock price tends to go up immediately. (Frank's co-authored research shows that this increase has been, on average, about 7 percent.) Securities analysts give targeted firms higher ratings and, although studies

Interstate 5 runs alongside Tejon Ranch, which was established by land grants from Mexico in the mid-1800s. Much of the land remains undeveloped today.

differ, most available evidence shows that targeted companies report higher returns over the next five years.

And yet chief executives are seldom pleased when activists darken their door. It's not hard to see why. In a majority of cases, activists push for some kind of organizational change, especially at the top. Historically, CEO pay has declined by an average of about $1 million in the year after an activist intervention, and CEO turnover post-intervention is higher than that at similar corporations.

There is also the matter of some activists' tactics. One weapon in their arsenal—sometimes deployed almost immediately—is the "poison pen" letter, a vitriolic exposé not unlike the letters that sometimes featured in Agatha Christie's novels, but focused on business transgressions instead of sexual ones.

Daniel Loeb, a pioneering activist and the founder of the hedge fund Third Point, made billions of dollars by excoriating CEOs and board members with such letters, which he released publicly. In 2003, for instance, he labeled L. Pendleton Siegel, then the CEO and chairman of the lumber-and-real-estate company Potlatch, the "Chief Value Destroyer" after the company's shares dropped 60 percent in six years. Loeb also lambasted the company's directors for acting as management's "lackeys," calling two people on the board—both descendants of the timber baron Frederick Weyerhaeuser, a co-founder of Potlatch in 1903—members of the "Lucky Sperm Club." He asked pointed questions about Potlatch's losses, its pension plan, and its business strategy. In another letter, to Irik Sevin, the CEO and president of Star Gas, Loeb wrote: "Do what you do best: retreat to your waterfront mansion in the Hamptons where you can play tennis and hobnob with your fellow socialites." (Sevin resigned less than a month after Loeb first disclosed his fund's investment; Siegel fared better, staying on as the chair of the Potlatch board until he retired in 2006.)

We imagined a gentler approach—we wanted to work constructively with Bielli and the Tejon Ranch management team. We figured it would be difficult to force Tejon Ranch to develop its property more quickly. But several sophisticated investors already sat on the company's board, including Daniel Tisch, the son of Laurence Tisch (the late financier and a co-founder of the Loews Corporation), who had been buying up Tejon Ranch shares for years. Four investment funds held stakes more than 100 times larger than ours. If we could persuade management merely to illuminate the business more fully—perhaps with the support of some of these large investors—we might start a chain reaction.

Activists often target the most-opaque companies. By shining a light on the dark corners of a business, they can uncover problems that demand fixing. In the case of Tejon Ranch, a lack of clarity about land value and development hurdles—regulatory, environmental—created uncertainty about whether management was doing all it could. That uncertainty might have inhibited potential buyers of the company from coming forth. If we could persuade the company to disclose more details, a potential buyer might emerge.

**A billionaire activist** might have traveled to the Tejon Ranch headquarters by private jet or helicopter. We drove.

We followed the same route that the Butterfield Overland Mail stagecoaches took in the mid-19th century. We marveled at the mountains, the valleys, the trees—and the absence of people. There hasn't been much development at Tejon Ranch since it was established in the mid-1800s, with land grants from Mexico. Much of the acreage probably looks about the same now as it did then.

To prepare for our meeting, we pulled into one of the company's few developed plots of land, a rest stop, where the Black Bear Diner was as deserted as the surrounding landscape. Midway through 2015, Tejon Ranch was not having a banner year. Combined revenues from farming and minerals were essentially flat, and the timetable was uncertain for the company's main hope, three new residential communities totaling more than 30,000 homes.

We finalized our pitch while we pulled up to the corporate headquarters, an unimposing ranch-style building.

There were maybe a dozen cars in the front parking lot. We pulled on the door handles of the entrance, which are replicas of the Tejon Ranch logo: a cross above a semicircle, a little like an upside-down ankh.

The lobby was deserted, but the receptionist was expecting us, and Bielli and Lyda quickly appeared, along with the head of investor relations. The three men ushered us into a conference room. There was no general counsel. The only lawyers present were us.

Bielli had well-coiffed hair and a smooth, friendly swagger. We liked him immediately. He had been hired in 2013 to replace the outgoing CEO, after working as a regional president of a residential real-estate developer. At age 55, he was also the company's youngest board member, its "new blood."

We told Bielli we thought that Tejon Ranch shares were massively undervalued, and that the company needed to disclose many more details about its finances and its development timetables. We believed that if potential investors knew that the land would be developed soon, the stock price would skyrocket. Disclosures are a touchy issue for corporate managers: They can make problems public or, if they are false or misleading, they can be the basis for a future class-action lawsuit. But Bielli was gracious and affable, saying that he agreed with every point. He assured us that Tejon Ranch had a disclosure-review process that would be lead to improvements by the end of the year. It would respond to all our concerns. We left after an hour feeling energized and validated. Bielli seemed ready to do everything we'd asked. Lyda, the CFO, followed up a few weeks later with assurances that the company's joint ventures, a specific area we had mentioned where we thought disclosures were poor, were "definitely an area where we will continue to expand our disclosure."

We were frankly at a loss as to what to do next. We had the promise of improved disclosures in six months, but after the meeting, we began to worry that it was a delay tactic. Some shareholder activists might have turned up the heat immediately, publishing an angry letter. But we decided to be patient.

We also worried a bit about what the disclosure might show. Would it really cause the share price to rise, as investors came to understand the company's true value? Activists succeed by demonstrating that the answer to that kind of question is yes. But it was also possible that more disclosure would show that faster development was nearly impossible, due to California's bureaucracy, regulatory requirements, and environmental challenges. In that case, the share price might not change—if anything, the revelation that management could do nothing to develop the land faster might depress it.

The end of the year came and went with no disclosure-review results in the areas we'd discussed, so on January 19, 2016, we sent Bielli an email asking for an update. We also expressed our displeasure with Tejon Ranch's recent performance. The stock price had declined by more than a third since the start of 2015; we had lost more than $100,000 collectively on paper. Bielli received $1.9 million in pay that year.

The response was again swift, but not nearly as friendly. Bielli wrote: "We wish to clarify that during our meeting in 2015, we advised you that management and the board, including the audit committee, regularly and continually discuss our level of disclosure, and that of our peer group." Then he said, "We did not intend to imply that the board and/or management was engaging in a specific, unique disclosure review process"—but rather that there was an "on-going" process to review disclosure. (Tejon Ranch declined to comment further on our conversations with Bielli and other company executives, or on our arguments in this article, except to say that the company

The value of Tejon Ranch hinges partly on the future of three big residential projects. The authors hoped for greater clarity on when these projects would be started and finished.

"does not disclose material non-public information unless such disclosure is to all investors at the same time," that it is "receptive to the views of shareholders," that its board and management regularly review its strategy, that it is a unique company, and that it is confident in its prospects. It also declined to participate in the fact-checking of the article.)

**Bielli had evidently** lawyered up, and we should not have been surprised. As activism has become more common, some companies have responded proactively by doing what many activists would ask for: buying back their own stock, spinning off divisions, and paying out cash to stockholders in the form of dividends. But they are also defending themselves better against the deeper operational changes some activists seek. Many have hired lawyers and consultants to advise them on how to avoid being targeted—and how to resist activists' demands if they are targeted.

Some companies have adopted notice provisions in their bylaws, which force activists to give the board advance warning before they try to replace directors or propose new strategies. These and other measures add cost and red tape to activists' efforts, and give management time to wage a public-relations war against them. Companies have also become more proactive with shareholders generally, blasting them information and conveying the idea that they are transparent and open to dialogue. The main goal of all this defense is to rally the shareholder base to management's side. Painting activists as money-grubbing short-timers who will harm the company's long-term prospects—and who care nothing for the broader social goals the company's management has always cherished—is a favored strategy. We worried that Tejon Ranch might be preparing some of these strategies against us.

We retained an attorney—a prominent securities lawyer who agreed to represent us for free—to try to prove that Bielli had backtracked on his promise of disclosure. But that was a tough assignment, because we had nothing in writing, and we weren't successful.

We again considered sending out a Daniel Loeb–like poison-pen letter, to cast public aspersions on Bielli for misleading us. But that didn't appeal to us, so we swallowed our anger and tried to understand his perspective. Bielli made a lot of money, but he was a new CEO and his job was difficult.

We wanted to keep the pressure on him and the company, but in a responsible way. Shareholders of public companies really have only one chance per year to do that: the annual meeting. That is when the directors are elected or reelected, and threatening to unseat directors is the activist's ultimate weapon. In recent years activists have won some 70 percent of election contests, known as proxy fights, and even when they lose, the board and management frequently yield to the pressure anyway. For example, the activist Nelson Peltz lost his proxy fight against DuPont, but the CEO still eventually resigned.

We couldn't credibly threaten a proxy fight. We didn't have the money to stage one; it would require the hiring of both a publicist and a proxy-solicitation firm to reach out to all the other shareholders, and would cost more than $1 million. But there was one thing we could do at the annual meeting: talk. We would have an opportunity to take the floor and advocate for improved disclosure and a clear timetable. We thought our plan was a good one—and well timed to resonate with other shareholders. The stock price of Tejon Ranch had recently hit its lowest point since the 1990s. Our retirement funds were evaporating.

The meeting at Balboa Bay was scheduled to begin at 9:30 a.m. on May 11, 2016, with breakfast in the Commodore Room, overlooking some yachts. As we signed in, wearing freshly pressed shirts, Bielli appeared with Lyda, the CFO, and a newly hired general counsel who had been an attorney with the city of Anaheim. Lyda seemed uncomfortable interacting with us, but Bielli slapped us on our shoulders and joked about our row over disclosures. We told him we were looking forward to some new disclosures in his investor-relations presentation later that morning. He laughed and suggested we grab some food.

This was a half-billion-dollar company, one we thought was worth a lot more, but only about 10 shareholders were in attendance. One was wearing a Route 66 T-shirt and cargo shorts and told us he owned 50 shares, now worth about $1,000. He had decided to buy the stock after driving back and forth past the property for many years. Of course, we weren't expecting a scene from *Wall Street*, where Gordon Gekko speaks to a packed hall of shareholders. The reality is that, with the exception of a few well-known large companies such as Berkshire Hathaway, almost no one attends shareholder meetings. (Some companies are even doing away with in-person meetings, instead having virtual meetings where personal interaction is impossible.) Tejon Ranch's annual meeting was typical. Although the company's stock was languishing, it looked like the only pressure from shareholders would be coming from us.

Even so, this was our chance to interact with the board. We met several of the company's directors, including Daniel Tisch, who still owned a large stake and said he'd be happy to speak with us further at some point. All were men, and their average age was 65. One told us he was serving on the board as a public service. Another said he couldn't believe Tejon Ranch was still a public company, and should find a buyer. When we asked a third director about the idea of selling the company, he said, "Sure, we'd be open to that, but we haven't received any offers." The board was certainly not without expertise, but overall, its members seemed more like a friendly group of retired local real-estate brokers than the independent directors of a New York Stock Exchange–listed company.

The meeting started on time, and the chairman of the board read from a script. Bielli gave his presentation, which summarized the company's proposed land developments but didn't add new detail. When he finished, the chairman asked whether anyone would like to speak. We stood up and poured our hearts out about Tejon Ranch's potential, its falling stock price, its sluggish development, and its inadequate disclosures. We emphasized that we believed the stock price was low because management refused to commit to a clear development timetable. The man in the cargo shorts seemed impressed. We felt we had made our mark, and the meeting ended with tension in the air. A few of the directors walked over to thank us. Tisch gave us his contact information.

**THE STOCK PRICE HAD RECENTLY HIT ITS LOWEST POINT SINCE THE 1990S. OUR RETIREMENT FUNDS WERE EVAPORATING.**

We weren't sure how Bielli would react. The largest investors, who sat on the board, told us they wanted Tejon Ranch to be more aggressive. They were open to finding a buyer. But they didn't seem inclined to put genuinely heavy pressure on Bielli or his team. Tejon Ranch was just a sliver of the portfolios of many of its investors. And some saw the company as a very long-term investment: The land would always be there, awaiting its eventual development; slow progress wasn't optimal, but it might have a silver lining nonetheless—pushing the share price down further and presenting a good opportunity to buy more shares. (Tisch, who is 66 years old, later said his grandchildren would see the fruits of his investment.)

We weren't interested in waiting decades, and we asked to meet with Bielli again, in early November. Even after our dispute, he agreed. We planned our final gambit.

**On Election Day,** we drove back to the Tejon Ranch headquarters. The air was crisp and dry, and the markets were calm. Tejon Ranch's stock was up a bit since the shareholder meeting, but we were still carrying a paper loss of more than $40,000.

Once again, everyone knew we were coming. Bielli and a couple of his colleagues greeted us with smiles and Tejon Ranch–labeled water bottles. We sat around a table ringed with photographs of sites of the company's potential developments. Facing us was a large photo of a shimmering lake at the entrance to one of the three residential communities the company had planned.

The best shareholder activists know the granular details of their target's businesses. After a year and a half as amateur activists, we had learned those details as best we could. We asked about a new joint venture, which had valued some land at $3.50 per square foot. We pressed them about whether this value was accurate and represented a fair estimate of other real estate on the property. If it did, Tejon Ranch should be worth billions. But they dodged this question, and referred us to their most recent investor-relations presentation for any information about valuation estimates. Bielli was prepared. He wasn't going to say too much, as he had during our first meeting.

We dug into some financial minutiae. We even asked about the state of the lake depicted in the photograph on the wall, given its importance to the marketing of that development project and the drought in California; Bielli admitted that "it's completely dry now, and has been for some time." We hoped they would tell the public more about these issues, but had little power to make them do so.

Then we asked the big question: What did Bielli think about selling the company? We had been speaking with a few potential buyers (though our conversations had been only preliminary),

and we told him that. We thought he would be angry, or at least surprised. But he responded smoothly. He said that the benefits of being public outweighed the costs. He had been at a private company and had worked under pressure from private-equity investors. Public markets, he said, enabled Tejon Ranch to operate under much less short-term pressure, and to take a longer-term perspective. We were flabbergasted: Many companies go private or stay private to avoid the short-term pressure that public markets can create. But the fact is, for companies the size of Tejon Ranch—and there are thousands of them, filling the portfolios of mutual funds and pension funds, even though most investors have never heard their name—Bielli is probably right. Because so many investors are passive today, most CEOs can relax, even if their performance is mediocre.

We drove away discouraged. The company had enormous potential. But realizing its value seemed impracticable. To be sure, Bielli and his team faced an uphill battle to develop the property and clear regulatory and environmental hurdles. And they disclosed more in 2016 than they did in 2015, perhaps because of us. But the timeline was still vague. This was what the company's annual report said about their three major residential projects: "Estimated completion time anticipated to be 25 years, or greater, from commencement of construction. To-date construction has not begun." That wasn't going to lure a buyer.

As we drove back through the mountains, we tried to imagine what the land would look like in 100 years. Would this area be a flourishing exurb of Los Angeles? A home to new campuses of big tech companies like Google and Apple? Or would it still be deserted, a source of high income for a handful of executives, but of little value to anyone else?

**Whether you love them** or hate them, activist hedge funds are the most important phenomenon to emerge in the financial markets during the past 20 years. But this wave of activism recently seems to have peaked, for reasons that—if you squint hard—mirror our own failure.

Even large activists are having difficulties. Easy opportunities, like getting big, cash-rich companies to pay some of that cash out to shareholders, are mostly gone; the remaining opportunities involve the hard work of organizational change. And as companies develop and share their own playbooks for fending off activists, that's becoming harder for outsiders to impose. This was a lesson we learned: Without a quick trick in mind—a proposal that would be relatively painless for management to adopt—you need to dig in and be willing to unseat and replace the CEO and operate the company differently. Many of today's hedge funds are not prepared to face more-difficult operational tasks. And once you start looking at companies below a certain size, it's not worth your while to try.

**ACTIVIST HEDGE FUNDS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT PHENOMENON TO EMERGE IN THE FINANCIAL MARKETS DURING THE PAST 20 YEARS.**

Some large institutional investors, such as pension funds, have begun pulling their money from activists. Bill Ackman's Pershing Square, which had been one of the most successful activist funds, lost money last year (in large part due to an ill-fated bet on Valeant Pharmaceuticals). As in the 1990s, following the incursions of 1980s corporate raiders, the tide may be shifting back to calmer, pro-management seas.

It's undoubtedly true—as the increasingly sophisticated public outreach of companies under attack tends to highlight—that activists are primarily looking to make a buck, not protect the interests of employees or pursue social goals. This feeds criticism that activists are short-termers bent only on that buck. But in our view, they've mostly strengthened rather than weakened the companies they've targeted, and provided a spur to executives that probably should be welcomed not just by shareholders but by anyone who cares about a strong economy. Activists hold stock for longer, on average, than pension funds or mutual funds do: years, not days or weeks. And while some evidence suggests that activism is associated with lower spending on research and development—which might harm a company's long-term prospects—other evidence contradicts that finding.

We still think Tejon Ranch is undervalued. But we didn't have the resources to make a sale happen, and in any event, we weren't certain enough to wait for a buyer to emerge.

In the weeks after the presidential election, Tejon Ranch shares soared, increasing as much as 27 percent, perhaps on expectations that as a firm dealing in real estate, it would thrive during Donald Trump's administration. We felt that we had done as much as we could, so we ended our experiment in December, selling our stock for a combined gain of about $55,000. We'd like to take some credit for the increase. After all, the company did improve its disclosures a bit, as we had hoped. But in truth, the gain was mostly plain luck, and as of late March the stock price had fallen back below our initial purchase price.

Whatever happens to the big activist funds, small public companies, such as Tejon Ranch, seem likely to remain mostly unperturbed. Last year, according to FactSet SharkRepellent, a corporate-governance database, fewer than 1 percent of these companies had to fight a battle with a hedge-fund activist over board control. The managers of these companies know that they're safe—to the detriment, we believe, of their shareholders, of the economy, and ultimately even of their own employees.

From our perspective, corporate America is now too well guarded. There are too few, rather than too many, of us activists out there banging at the gate.

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# *The* BRILLIANT INCOHERENCE *of* TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY

The United States periodically debates whether to do more or less abroad. Trump won by straddling the divide and promising both. But he can't possibly deliver.

*By* STEPHEN SESTANOVICH

*Illustration by Sachin Teng*

EVERY 20 YEARS OR SO—the regularity is a little astonishing—Americans hold a serious debate about their place in the world. What, they ask, is going wrong? And how can it be fixed? The discussion, moreover, almost always starts the same way. Having extricated itself with some success from a costly war, the United States then embraces a scaled-down foreign policy, the better to avoid over-commitment. But when unexpected challenges arise, people start asking whether the new, more limited strategy is robust enough. Politicians and policy makers, scholars and experts, journalists and pundits, the public at large, even representatives of other governments (both friendly and less friendly) all take part in the back-and-forth. They want to know whether America, despite its decision to do less, should go back to doing more—and whether it can.

The reasons for doubt are remarkably similar from one period of discussion to the next. Some argue that the U.S. economy is no longer big enough to sustain a global role of

the old kind, or that domestic problems should take priority. Others ask whether the public is ready for new exertions. The foreign-policy establishment may seem too divided, and a viable consensus too hard to reestablish. Many insist that big international problems no longer lend themselves to Washington's solutions, least of all to military ones. American "leadership," it is said, won't work so well in our brave new world.

With minor variations, this is the foreign-policy debate that the country conducted in the 1950s, the 1970s, and the 1990s. And it's the same one that we have been having for the past few years. The rise of the Islamic State, the Syrian civil war, Russian aggression in Ukraine, and China's muscle-flexing in East Asia

**Trump dominated by proposing a more hopped-up foreign-policy activism—and a fuller kind of disengagment.**

jolted the discussion back to life in 2014. Presidential debates in 2015 and 2016 added issues (from Barack Obama's Iran nuclear deal to his Asian trade pact) and sharpened the controversy.

Those of us in the foreign-policy business are always glad to have our concerns get this kind of prominence. Down the decades, these debates have tended to produce a consensus in favor of renewed American activism. Yet each version unfolds in its own way. The global turmoil of 2016 meant that nobody could be completely sure how this one was going to turn out.

We still don't know. The advent of Donald Trump—his candidacy, his election, and the start of his presidency—has given our once-every-two-decades conversation extra drama and significance. Some commentators claim that Trump wants to cast aside the entire post–Cold War order. To others, he is repudiating everything that America has tried to achieve since 1945. Still others say he represents a break with all we have stood for since 1776 (or maybe even since 1630, when John Winthrop called the Massachusetts Bay Colony "a city upon a hill").

That we talk this way is but one measure of the shock Trump's victory has administered. The new president is raising questions about the foreign policy of the United States—about its external purposes, its internal cohesion, and its chances of success—that may not be fully answered for years. Yet to understand a moment as strange as this, we need to untangle what has happened. In this cycle, America has actually had two rounds of debate about its global role. The first one was driven by the 2016 campaign, and Trump won it. The second round has gone differently. Since taking office, the new president has made one wrong move after another. Though it's too soon to say that he has lost this round, he is certainly losing control of it. In each case, we need to understand the dynamics of the discussion better than we do.

LIKE ITS PREDECESSORS, the 2016 debate began with a negative premise: America wasn't doing well enough in the world. In the '50s, and again in the '70s, the worry was that the United States had ceded the strategic initiative to the Soviet Union. By the mid-'90s, the U.S.S.R. was no more, but Americans came to feel that they needed a better way of coping with the conflicts of the post–Cold War world. Existing policy did not seem good enough.

Last year was no different. Of the 20-odd Republican and Democratic presidential candidates, none fully embraced the Obama administration's version of retrenchment. As always, the critiques varied. Some urged doing more; others, less. Among the Republicans, the more-to-less spectrum ran from Marco Rubio to Rand Paul (with upwards of a dozen contenders in between). Among the Democrats, it went from Hillary Clinton to Bernie Sanders (with others in between whom no one can remember). Candidates of both parties seemed more open than they had been in years to the idea of rethinking what America stands for—and should be trying to do.

Eager as they always are in election years to shape the candidates' views, scholars, experts, and former officials produced a flood of books and articles. Their common theme: the growing obstacles America faced in getting its way abroad. Iraq, Afghanistan, and other post-9/11 military campaigns had shown the costs and risks of overreliance on force as an instrument of foreign policy. The greater assertiveness of competitors like Russia and China, the slowing of the global economy, the seeming intractability of problems like terrorism, cybercrime, and climate change—these realities made U.S. goals still harder to achieve.

But a shared diagnosis hardly meant shared prescriptions. While experts lined up along the same more-to-less spectrum as the candidates, predicting who stood where was not as easy as you might think. Among analysts within the academy, a do-less faction was strong, as always. Veterans of previous Republican administrations stressed that their do-more views did not mean support for "boots on the ground." Within the Democratic foreign-policy establishment, eight years of Barack Obama had opened up divisions over trade, the use of force, and human rights. Some who had worked for Obama argued that his downsizing strategy had gotten most things right; others argued that he had let U.S. influence shrink. For them, a world of fraying order made a large American role more necessary than ever.

And the public? Polls suggested that it, too, was open to new approaches—but unsure how to choose among them. In May 2016, the Pew Research Center reported that 70 percent of voters wanted the next president to focus on domestic affairs rather than foreign policy. In the same poll, Pew found that majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and independents favored policies that would keep the United States "the only military superpower." Not for the first time, it seemed that Americans wanted to have it all.

SO HOW DID CANDIDATE Donald Trump fit into—even hijack—this right-on-schedule foreign-policy debate? His anti-immigrant talk, angry denunciation of free-trade agreements, and embrace of the pre–World War II slogan "America First" led many to treat him as the campaign's extreme outlier—an old-fashioned isolationist. But this was never the right label. It failed to capture the novel mix of positions Trump had settled on—and it grossly underestimated his ability to dominate the discussion.

Trump rode to victory as the candidate who promised to do both more and less than Obama. He offered the voters a resolute call to arms and relief from the burdens of global leadership. The problem with American foreign policy, he suggested, was not a simple case of too-costly overcommitment. It was the result of something more ominous: the ill will of friends and foes, and the moral culpability of our own leaders. Sinister forces—especially religious ideologues—threatened our safety. Intellectual confusion—the dreaded "political correctness"—made it hard to name our enemy. Allies and trading partners cheated us at every turn. Waves of foreigners were taking our jobs. Futile wars had left the military "depleted." In its weakened state, the United States no longer commanded respect.

It's hard to think of an American political figure who has ever put forward such a dark view of the world—or such a despairing picture of policy paralysis. To fix matters, Trump did not offer a conventional "Come Home, America"-style program of isolationism. Instead, he promised kick-ass confrontation. We had been "losing" for too long. The right response, the way to start and keep "winning," was not to get out of the game but to play it better—smarter, harder, tougher. Trump was the candidate who, claiming to know more about ISIS than the generals, would "bomb the shit" out of it. (With no inhibitions, either: What, he reportedly asked expert briefers, was wrong with using nuclear weapons against terrorists?) He had more experience negotiating business deals than the trade lawyers did, and knew how to cultivate the kind of personal relationships with the world's high rollers that professional diplomats could only dream of.

Trump dominated the election-year debate by proposing a more hopped-up version of foreign-policy activism than the usual advocates of activism, and a fuller kind of disengagement than those who wanted to scale down. The combination—radicalism at both ends of the spectrum—seemed the essence of his appeal. Sure, other do-more candidates wanted to increase spending on defense, but they cluttered their message with commitments to help others—friends, allies, and those who "shared our values." And do-less candidates wanted to pull out of trade agreements, but not to cut foreign aid. For Trump, American policy was supposed to serve only American interests.

Best of all, Trump suggested, his entire approach would be free. The famous boast that Mexico would pay for Trump's proposed border wall echoed many of his other pronouncements. Seizing Iraq's oil—the "spoils" of war, in his term—would help defeat terrorism. Allies would finally be made to "pay their bills." The Pentagon budget increases that Trump promised would be funded, he claimed, by "ending the theft of American jobs." Yes, we could be "great again"—and on the cheap.

Such a blend of much more and much less could easily have seemed incoherent, or crazy. But the two halves of Trump's formula worked together better than critics appreciated. He sensed that the public wanted relief from the burdens of global leadership without losing the thrill of nationalist self-assertion. America could cut back

**Trump sensed that the public wanted relief from the burdens of global leadership without losing the thrill of nationalist self-assertion.**

its investment in world order with no whiff of retreat. It would still boss others around, even bend them to its will. Trump embraced Bernie Sanders's economics without George McGovern's geopolitics. Of self-identified conservative Republicans, 70 percent told Pew last year that they wanted the U.S. to retain its global military dominance. "Make America Great Again" was a slogan aimed right at them.

Trump's more-*and*-less strategy also helped him with those who wanted a bristly, muscular America but did not want endless military involvements. Rejecting "nation building" abroad so as to focus on the home front was Trump's way of assuring voters that he knew how to avoid imperial overstretch. He offered supporters the glow of a Ronald Reagan experience—without the George W. Bush tab.

There was, to be sure, one other candidate in the 2016 field who also tried to have it both ways—more activism and more retrenchment at the same time. This was, oddly enough, Hillary Clinton. She offered up her own version of a mix-and-match foreign policy. To neutralize Sanders's challenge from the left, Clinton backed away from her previous endorsement of the Obama administration's East Asian trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). To attract Republicans and independents who felt Obama had been too passive internationally, she promised "safe zones" in Syria that would protect civilians and adversaries of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Yet merely to recall Clinton's hybrid foreign-policy platform is to see how pallid it was next to Trump's. While she quibbled about the TPP (which few seemed to believe she was really against), her opponent ferociously denounced *all* trade agreements—those still being negotiated, like the TPP, and those, like NAFTA and China's WTO membership, that had long been on the books. "Disasters" one and all, he said. For anyone genuinely angry about globalization, it was hard to see Clinton as a stronger champion than Trump. She was at a similar disadvantage trying to compete with Trump on toughness. His anti-terrorism policy—keep Muslims out of the country and bomb ISIS back to the Stone Age—was wild talk, barely thought through. But for anyone who really cared about hurting America's enemies, it gave Trump more credibility than Clinton's vague, muddled talk of "safe zones" ever gave her.

Clinton was doubtless trying to dispel suspicion that she was the continuity candidate in the race—that she wouldn't change Obama's foreign policy all that much. But in competing for voters who hated the status quo, she had little chance against Trump. Clinton had the more thoughtful, balanced policy, and Trump almost surely had no real grasp of how his own international strategy fit together. Even so, he got people out of their seats.

In both the primary campaign and the general election, Trump showered all his rivals, Republicans and Democrats, with schoolyard taunts. Yet he always treated Barack Obama as his true opponent. On issue after issue—immigration, trade, alliance commitments, nuclear weapons, China, Syria, ISIS, Iran, Israel—Trump positioned himself, with greater consistency than any other Republican candidate, as the anti-Obama. He disagreed with every element of the president's foreign policy.

This pattern may even hint at an explanation of Trump's odd stance on Russia. By 2016, Obama's relationship with Vladimir Putin had long since unraveled. The sanctions imposed on Russia because of its invasion of Ukraine, beefed-up U.S. troop deployments in eastern Europe, opposition to Russia's intervention in Syria—all of these policies were a problem for most Republicans. Could they really prove that they were tougher on Putin than Obama was?

**Trump's perverse admiration for Putin preserved his purity as the candidate who did not agree with Obama on a single thing.**

Trump had his own, ingenious solution to the puzzle. His perverse admiration for Putin—the claim that the two of them would "get along very well"—preserved Trump's purity as the candidate who did not agree with Barack Obama on a single thing.

Had Donald Trump run for president in 2012, the entire case he made about America's desperate position in the world probably would have flopped. In that campaign, foreign policy was widely considered one of Obama's strengths, and he coasted to reelection—just as Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, two past presidents brought in to clean up unsuccessful wars, had done.

As Obama's second term wore on, however, the global landscape changed. A series of new problems made his policies look more ragged than commanding. Americans' personal regard for their president was up, but they felt his international standing was down. (In 2012, 55 percent of respondents told Gallup that they thought Obama was respected abroad; by 2015, that number was just 37 percent.) In this new environment, Trump was able to make


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his critique more compelling than anyone else's. Though his views—and his way of presenting them—were shocking, there was a kind of brilliance in the way he seized the moment.

ELECTIONS OFTEN settle our cyclical foreign-policy debates. Not in this case. The discussion has now gone into overtime, and Trump is faring far worse than he did in the campaign. His crude and contradictory ideas have proved hard to implement—and hard to sell to audiences more skeptical than his campaign-rally crowds. His opponents have the rhetorical advantage and seem likely to hold it.

Trump's problems go far beyond the familiar idea that politicians campaign in poetry but have to govern in prose. He has had to confront the enormous difficulty of advancing a platform that promised simultaneously to do more and less. Writing in his diary, Richard Nixon, who had tried a similar strategy himself, recalled Churchill's views of its challenges: "One can have a policy of audacity or one can follow a policy of caution, but it is disastrous to try to follow a policy of audacity and caution at the same time. It must be one or the other."

In this spirit, many analysts found it hard to believe that Trump would stick to his more outlandish policy ideas and impulses once he took office. Weren't they just a little too nutty to survive in the real world? A *Saturday Night Live* skit soon after the election gave this forecast a wide audience. As the rattled president-elect, Alec Baldwin reversed one ambitious campaign promise after another. Mass deportation of immigrants? "Let's not do it. Scrap it." Obamacare? "No change."

The hope that Trump would yield to reason gained further strength from his selection of sober-minded Cabinet secretaries—General James Mattis to run the Pentagon and Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson to be secretary of state—and the choice of H. R. McMaster to replace Michael Flynn as national-security adviser. As administration spokespeople backed away from Trump's statements on many issues—China, NATO, mass deportations, the Iran nuclear deal, a two-state formula for Israeli–Palestinian peace, and others—the voices of good sense seemed to be carrying the day.

Trump is not the first president to have assembled a divided team of advisers, or to face the near-united opposition of senior Cabinet officers. (Lyndon Johnson would have stories to tell Trump about how he handled such problems.) What makes the new administration's predicament unique is the apparent commitment—still very much in place—to pursue a more activist foreign policy while reducing the costs and risks of America's global leadership role. To start "winning" again at last.

The tension between the two halves of Trump's policy is not merely one of logic, but one of institutions. Activist policies are necessarily inclusive—to work, they depend on the resources, technical expertise, coordinated implementation, and support of the national-security bureaucracy. By contrast, downsizing requires central control of policy—fewer hands on the tiller, careful steering, quiet diplomacy, and conceptual discipline.

Yet in the administration's early going, Trump and his advisers have gotten things exactly backwards. The initial version of their "Muslim ban" was precisely the kind of activist measure that called for the laying-on of hands by multiple agencies. Instead, it was hatched virtually in the dark by a few brand-new White House aides. As for rapprochement with Russia—whether it makes sense or not—the entire idea calls for confidential talks out of the usual channels, in which each side's flexibility and interest can be carefully explored. Despite Trump's clear personal interest in outreach to Putin, he may have already lost the chance to make the initiative work. He has let so many of his own officials criticize it—and allowed so much congressional opposition to build up—that his options are drastically narrowed.

No president with any knowledge of government at all would have bungled these matters the way Trump has. Even inexperienced presidents have adjusted more adeptly to the exercise of power. The Obama administration's first-year fulfillment of a campaign promise—the controversial 2009 decision to add troops in Afghanistan—was almost a textbook case of good process compared with Trump's. Obama got bureaucratic buy-in where he needed it: His advisers came together in backing the decision for a "surge." At the same time, he maintained personal oversight of the issue he cared about most—a tight timetable for the withdrawal of the extra troops, which most of his team hated but no one openly opposed. Obama's early decisions helped him gain control of policy. Trump's have helped him lose it.

A president trying to change policy can also hurt himself if he misunderstands America's power position—and is misled by his own rhetoric. When the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 finally obliged Jimmy Carter to toughen his strategy toward Moscow, his administration quickly came forward with a raft of additional measures: a new "doctrine" for Persian Gulf security, outreach to China, suspension of strategic arms control, and more. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national-security adviser, even appeared at the Khyber Pass with a dagger and a machine gun. With tensions (and tempers) running high, my old boss Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan urged the president and his advisers to recognize that they had badly misjudged the balance of power—and could not know for sure how the Soviets would respond to their show of strength. It was crucial, he said, to make no false moves. Nothing would be worse than to pick a new fight and lose it.

President Trump probably needs to learn the opposite lesson: Don't pick fights that the U.S. has already won. Trump painted a picture of extreme American weakness convincing enough to win him the White House. But he will keep making mistakes if he believes his own assessment. With net migration from Mexico at its lowest levels since the 1940s, and with not a single person since at least 1975 (and maybe ever) having been killed in terrorist acts on U.S. soil by nationals of the countries on the administration's "Muslim ban" list, Trump has the freedom to decide which problems he most wants to solve. His actions have to be broadly consistent with the message that got him elected, but he has nothing to gain from urgent and disruptive measures to address vulnerabilities that do not exist. Such moves will not reverse the decline Trump fears; they will accelerate it.

Ronald Reagan, Trump might recall, defeated Carter by pointing to the danger of Soviet military advances. In office, however, Reagan was acutely conscious of the communist system's flaws and sought to exploit them carefully. He wanted a big military buildup, not a war. Advisers who didn't understand this fell out of favor. Secretary of State Alexander Haig confided to Reagan early on that it would be easy to turn Cuba into "a fucking parking lot." The president ignored him.

THERE MAY BE no more important indicator of how isolated Trump has become in the post-election round of foreign-policy debate than the routine way in which critics berate him for undermining what they see as America's supreme foreign-policy achievement—an international order variously described as "open," "liberal," and "rules based." Whatever the value of these labels, the critics are right that, after World War II, the U.S. repudiated beggar-thy-neighbor trade policies and every-man-for-himself security policies. They're also right that Trump seems strangely attracted to such approaches. Despite the stupendous results of American strategy since 1945—victory in the Cold War, spreading global prosperity, an era of sustained (if uneasy) peace among major states—the president is clearly convinced that the United States has paid for almost everything and gotten almost nothing in return. In order to shift the cost-benefit analysis back in our favor, he seems determined to challenge the policies and practices that have cemented America's vast power and influence in the 20th and 21st centuries.

**A president trying to change policy can hurt himself if he misunderstands America's power—and if he is misled by his own rhetoric.**

In doing so, Trump has unified people who disagree about many elements of U.S. foreign policy and who recognize the many shortcomings of the so-called liberal international order. Experts, scholars, and former policy makers do not have a single view of the institutions that embody this order. NATO enjoys strong support in most quarters; the European Union, considerably less support; the United Nations, far less than that—and even supporters disagree about how the United States should make use of these forums in the future. Whether they lean Democrat or Republican, or reject both parties, the best experts and analysts take for granted the need to rethink, and to do better. It's good that they disagree about the big choices America faces—about globalization, terrorism, military spending, foreign assistance, democracy promotion, nuclear proliferation, cybersecurity, climate change, the rise of China, the future of Iran, Putinism, and much more. Trump, unfortunately, has gotten the very people who should be leading our debate to put their differences aside.

This unity comes at a cost. A once-every-two-decades debate is an opportunity to measure American policy against all the ways in which the world is changing—and the ways in which U.S. responses have fallen short. It's a chance to come to grips with the vulnerabilities of the liberal order. To do so means thinking about narrow practical questions *and* broad conceptual ones. Can America's leaders manage, explain, and defend this order better in the next decade than they did in the last? At a time when the power of the U.S. is, in relative terms at least, slowly declining, will rules that have long depended on that power continue to matter? Americans have never much liked applying the rules to themselves. What will happen when others feel strong enough to evade them too?

These are, in one form or another, the questions that the candidates, experts, and voters were supposed to wrestle with in last year's campaign. Because of Trump—and the very necessary pushback against him—serious discussion of America's role in the world has been virtually suspended, and no one can say when or how it will start up again. One thing is for certain, though. We can't wait another 20 years to resume the debate.

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# Q:

# What was the most significant environmental catastrophe of all time?


**John McNeill, history professor, Georgetown**
**The deliberate rupture of the dikes on China's Yellow River** in 1938, by Chinese troops trying to halt a Japanese advance. It killed half a million Chinese, displaced millions more, and led to a decade of flooding.

**David Yarnold, president and CEO, National Audubon Society**
**DDT** was a human-made environmental disaster that caused the shells of bird eggs to thin, which crushed populations—and harmed the food chain in ways that affected humans.

**John Schwartz, science writer, *The New York Times***
It would be hard to beat **the six-mile-wide asteroid that struck Earth** about 66 million years ago with an explosive force billions of times more powerful than that of the atomic bomb the United States dropped on Hiroshima.

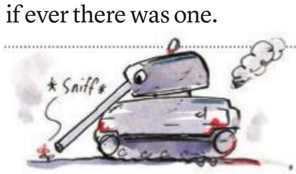
**Bill McKibben, author and environmentalist**
The asteroid strike that some scientists theorize wiped out the dinosaurs was pretty significant. Of course, with **climate change,** we're on the path to accomplishing something on the same scale, and this time it's entirely voluntary.

**Jon Jarvis, former director, National Park Service**
**The *Deepwater Horizon* blowout** spewed boiling-hot oil like a fire hose for 87 straight days, and every day was Groundhog Day, requiring teams to repeat cleanup of the same hundreds of miles of shoreline as oil smothered beaches, coastal wetlands, and countless birds.

**Matthew Michael Carnahan, screenwriter, *Deepwater Horizon* and *World War Z***
**It hasn't happened yet.**

**Donald Worster, environmental historian**
The worst environmental catastrophe in Earth's history occurred 66 million years ago, when an asteroid struck, killing an estimated 70 percent of all species. Nothing humans have done compares. But **the 1930s Dust Bowl** was the worst catastrophe in America's history, and such a phenomenon may become global as the world's climate changes.

**Elizabeth Kolbert, author, *The Sixth Extinction***
The end-Permian extinction, which took place about 250 million years ago, killed off something like 90 percent of all species around at the time. The event, sometimes called **the Great Dying,** brought the Paleozoic era to a dismal close. It was probably caused by a massive release of carbon dioxide—a warning if ever there was one.




**J. Samuel Walker, author, *Prompt & Utter Destruction***
**World War II** destroyed fields and forests, polluted waterways, and produced urgent demand for raw materials. The environmental catastrophes it created in vast sections of Europe and Asia caused countless civilian deaths.

## READER RESPONSES

**John Short, Bend, Ore.**
**The deforestation and soil degradation** that contributed to the collapse of the Roman empire. The creation of Rome and the care and feeding of its soldiers laid waste to much of the continent's agricultural land, resulting in low population for 1,000 years.

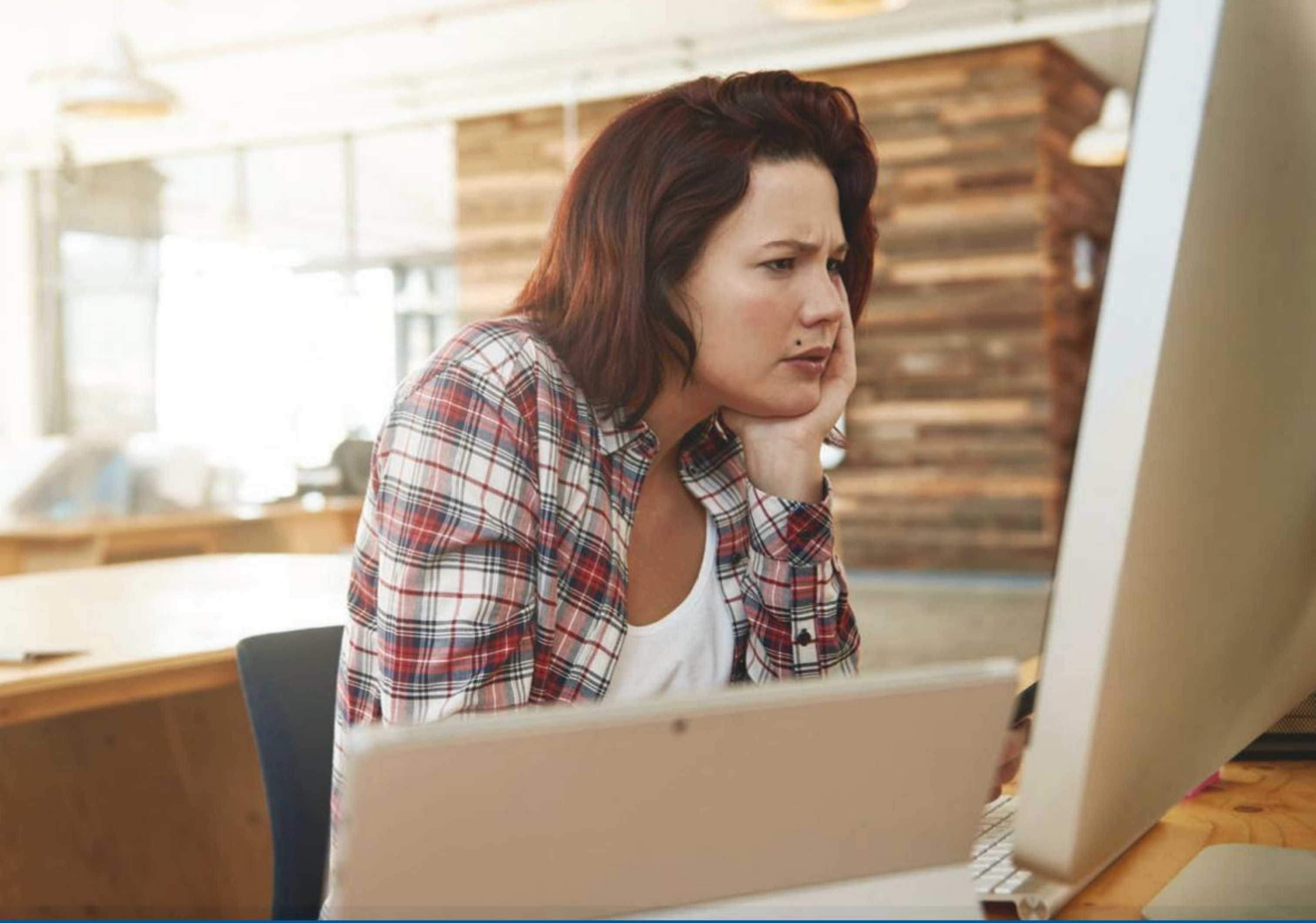
**Adrienne Moravec, Falls Church, Va.**
**The Irish potato famine of the 1840s and '50s.** Due to poor agricultural practices compounded by cruel and inept British land management, a disease affecting a single crop caused the deaths of more than 1 million Irish and the emigration of another 1.1 million people.

**Allan Havis, La Jolla, Calif.**
**The Chernobyl nuclear disaster,** which killed 31 people in three months and released 400 times more radioactive material than the Hiroshima atomic bombing.

Want to see your name on this page? Email bigquestion@theatlantic.com with your response to the question for our July/August issue: **What is the most underappreciated medical invention in history?**



Illustrations by GRAHAM ROUMIEU



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