

The Atlantic

**God's Plan for
Mike Pence**
By McKay Coppins

**The Power of
Negative Thinking**
By Sarah Elizabeth Adler

What Putin Really Wants

BY JULIA IOFFE



**How Charter Schools
Won** By Elizabeth Green

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**Robot Baristas Will Save
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**The New Testament,
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PATIENTS NEED PHYSICIANS—and physicians need patients. So what happens when they stop spending time together?

According to a recent article in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 50 percent of U.S. physicians experience burnout, an occupationally induced syndrome associated with profound personal and professional consequences, including ones related to patient safety and satisfaction. Meanwhile, in an *Annals of Internal Medicine* study released in late 2016, doctors reported spending the majority of their day at a computer, on clerical work and tasks

related to electronic health-record systems, rather than focusing their attention where they want it: on hands-on care.

Something needs to change. Aspiring doctors don't long to be data-entry clerks when they're in medical school. They dream of making diagnoses that save lives, performing ground-breaking surgeries, curing the planet's deadliest diseases, bringing babies into the world, and providing holistic family care.

To accomplish the noble goals of what patient care is meant to be, physicians need leadership, practical resources, advocacy efforts, and technological innovations that focus on putting people first.

That's the modern art of medicine.

And new evidence suggests that it pays off: Improvement is possible, investment in organizational change is justified, and the return on investment is measurable.

Giving physicians what they need most—more time with their patients—is crucial to the future of medicine. +



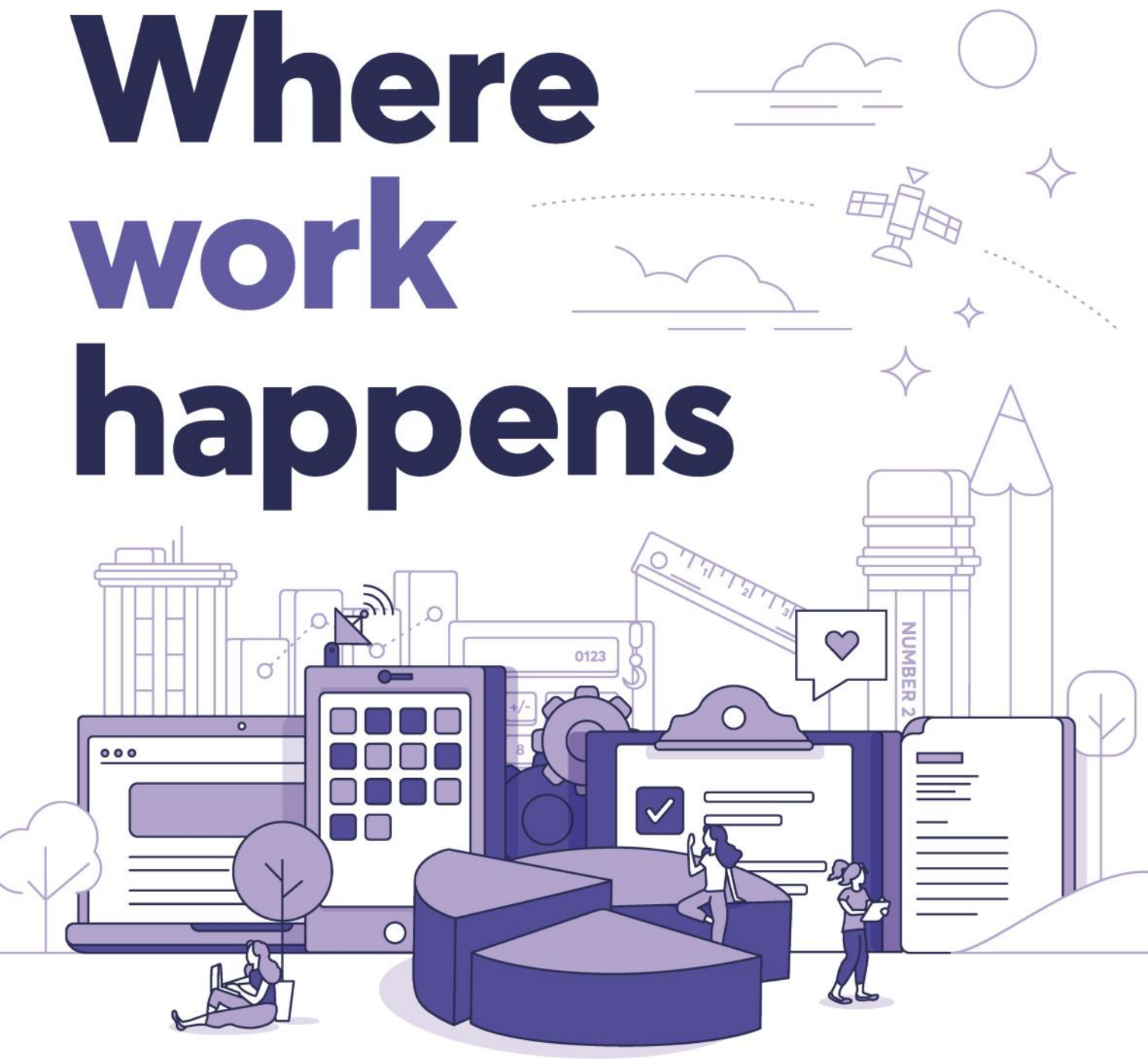
Harnessing the power of health data is an enormous and important challenge, and one that should be led by physicians. The solution must be useful for physicians, and it must allow us to spend more time with our patients and deliver better care.



JAMES L. MADARA, M.D.,
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
AND CEO,
AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

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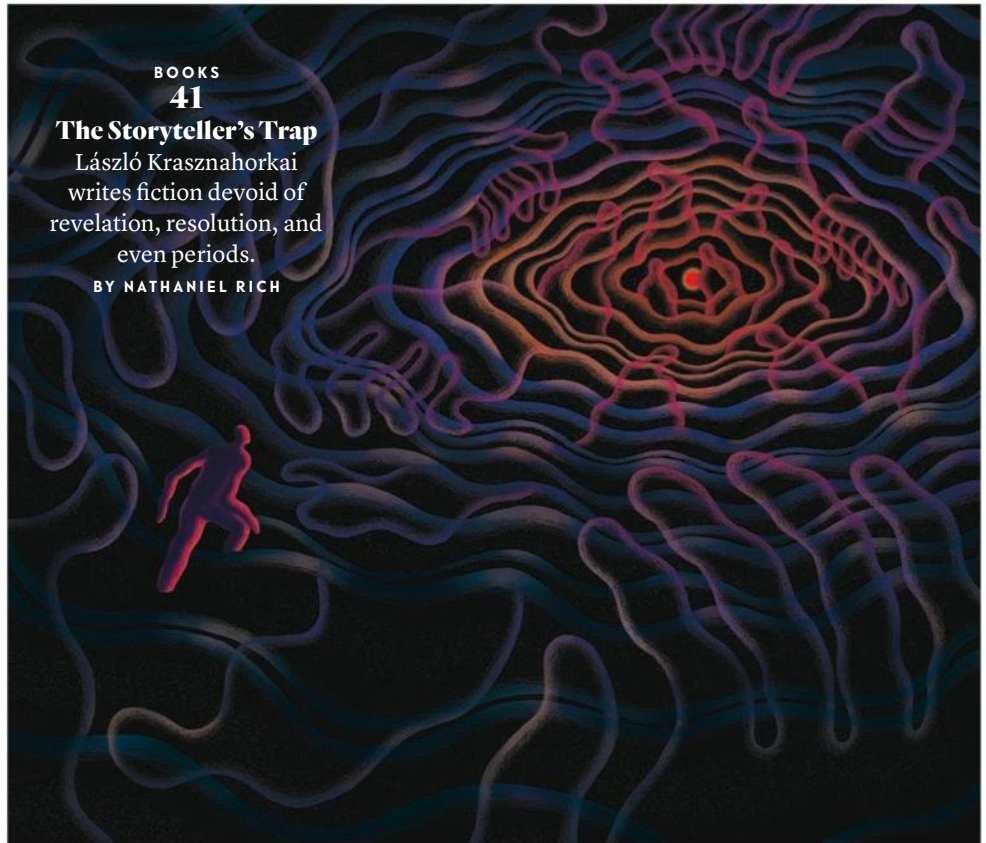
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Illustration by
Sam Spratt

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THE CONVERSATION

RESPONSES & REVERBERATIONS

A Death at Penn State

In November, Caitlin Flanagan wrote about how Tim Piazza, 19, was fatally injured at a Penn State fraternity party.

Caitlin Flanagan's stellar article was tragic but not at all shocking. I have taught at a state university for many years. Expecting a university to adequately monitor fraternity activities is like expecting the NFL to deal with concussions. Parents are finally preventing their kids from playing football, and parents of college-age young men should prohibit them from joining fraternities.

Naomi Rachel
BOULDER, COLO.

"A Death at Penn State" shows that the usual measures—officially banning hazing, creating commissions, and giving serious-sounding speeches—do not work. I have a modest proposal that should discourage at least some hazing: University presidents should require chapters to insure pledges to the extent of the average lifetime earnings that their college boasts for its graduates. Insurance companies could determine

risk levels based on individual schools and fraternities. The cost of premiums would be paid by the active chapter members, who would learn the financial lessons of assuming responsibility. Meanwhile, pledges would realize that they are about to undergo a process that their school considers risky enough to require serious insurance. Crass? Not any more crass than requiring insurance for anyone that transports students.

Clyde Black
RICHMOND, IND.

Here in Michigan, State Representative Sam Singh is proposing House Bill 5077 (introduced partly in response to Piazza's death), which would create a duty to assist individuals who face grave physical harm, provide immunity from liability for assisting them, and stipulate penalties for abdicating that duty.

I don't believe that legislation will stop fraternity mem-

bers' reckless and sadistic behavior, but until someone figures out how to convince young men and women that they're not invincible, it might save a life.

Judith Peltier
PRESQUE ISLE, MICH.

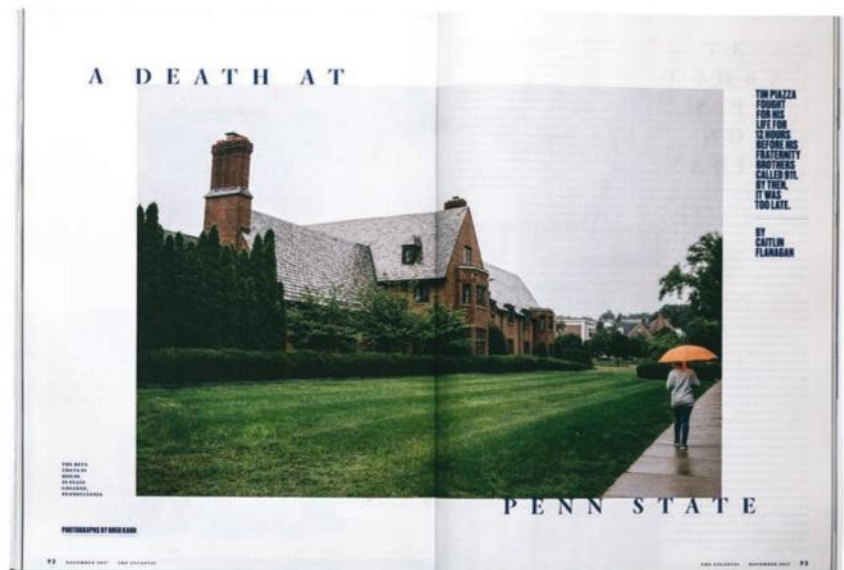
The Rise of the Violent Left

In September, Peter Beinart wrote about the burgeoning antifascist movement, which wants to fight the alt-right's fire—with more fire.

Peter Beinart suggests that antiracist and antifascist ("antifa") activists, some of whom resort to physical violence, are just as much of a danger to people's safety and the well-being of our civil discourse and democracy as neo-Nazis are. Beinart's equivocating click-bait has put *The Atlantic's* political analysis on par with Donald Trump's.

It is irresponsible to speculate that antifascist activists are "fueling" a newly empowered far-right movement. Over time, data show, the number of violent incidents caused by right-wing groups dwarfs those caused by leftist groups. (The shooting incident targeting members of Congress in Alexandria, Virginia, perpetrated by a supporter of Bernie Sanders, was upsetting—but also rare.) Patterns of violent action and intimidation are what antifa is prepared to confront, physically if necessary, before patterns grow into policy.

Fascism is designed to destroy large groups of people based on their identities and to control everyone else, with a state apparatus that legitimates and empowers ultraviolent individuals and groups who further the ends of nationalist authoritarianism. Killing is not a side effect of fascism; it is its method. If movement leaders who



promote this model, and who gain their power by cozying up to and trying to influence mainstream power structures, get punched on occasion, that might be distasteful to liberals, but it is nothing compared with fascism's methods.

We may be past the point of fighting fascist words with liberal words when dealing with armed white nationalists in contexts like Charlottesville, Virginia: a carefully planned coming-out party for American neofascists that they are excited to replicate. We now have a fascist-sympathetic president who has made no secret of his wish to (violently) get rid of words that do not serve his political purposes. Antifa activists may break the law sometimes. They are a militant front line, and are often thanked by nonviolent protesters for protecting their ability to use words against those who would destroy them. I hope Mr. Beinart will deploy a little nuance with his words next time.

Michaela Brangan, J.D.
ITHACA, N.Y.

The astonishing part of "The Rise of the Violent Left" is what is largely absent from the story: the police response. It appears that the police are not adequately responding to acts of violence from both the left and the right. History teaches us that in countries where law and order was amiss, the political system turned into anarchy and/or fascism very quickly.

Yeshayahou S. Ben-Ari
BROOKLYN, N.Y.

Hard Bargains

In her September article, "Innocence Is Irrelevant," Emily Yoffe showed how millions of Americans are suffering the consequences of plea bargains, which have taken over the U.S. criminal-justice system.

Thank you for tackling the elephant in the room that is mass criminalization in the U.S. While plea bargains have come to dominate the justice system domestically, they have also been growing in use internationally. Fair Trials' research has documented a 300 percent increase in the adoption of trial-waiver systems around the world since 1990. What's more, some of these systems are introduced with inspiration and technical and financial assistance from the U.S. Although it carries the potential to improve efficiency, the global shift to systematic reliance on defendants' waiving their right to a trial poses serious questions about rights protection and the rule of law in the administration of criminal justice.

Many trial-waiver systems in jurisdictions other than the U.S. feature safeguards that are not always common practice here: for example, mandatory (unwaivable) access to a lawyer, better pre-plea disclosure regimes, and regulation of the benefits offered to those pleading guilty. Cash-bail systems are much more likely to be linked to a defendant's means, and the astonishingly long sentences seen in the U.S. are rarely matched elsewhere in the developed world, so

THE BIG QUESTION

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

Q: What was the most significant event to happen on a holiday?

3. The Christmas Truce on the Western Front in 1914.

Allied and German soldiers left their trenches to sing carols together and exchange small gifts.

— Robert C. Hodge

2. The assassination of President Abraham Lincoln on Good Friday, 1865.

— Leslie Ellen Brown

1. George Washington crossed the Delaware River on the night of December 25, 1776,

to launch a surprise attack the next morning on an isolated garrison of Hessian troops, who had spent the night celebrating Christmas. The quick victory upped morale and encouraged Continental soldiers to reenlist.

— Astrid K. Redmond

coercion to plead guilty is reduced. As many U.S. states are now reckoning with the devastating consequences of mass criminalization and incarceration, they would do well to place themselves at the receiving end of global experience in justice reform.

Rebecca Shaeffer
FAIR TRIALS
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Emily Yoffe excellently describes the erosion of the Constitution's jury guarantee. But the story of the new "easy" path to convictions does not end there. Millions of American adults already have a criminal record, and there are estimated to be more than 1 million new felony convictions a year.

A conviction can greatly reduce ex-offenders' ability

to find housing, earn a living, get an education, obtain bank loans, support their children, or, generally, enjoy the usual rights and amenities of citizenship. As a result, our criminal-justice practices are literally creating a new social underclass, a discrete second level of citizenship for people whom the law separates out for lifelong discrimination.

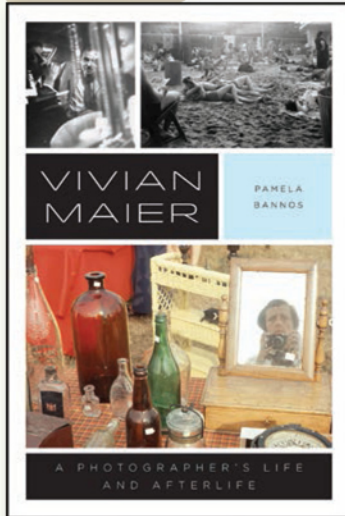
Since the early 1980s, America's ex-offender class has been growing exponentially. Being a "criminal" in the eyes of the law is now becoming just a variation on the American-citizenship norm.

John A. Humbach
PROFESSOR OF LAW, PACE UNIVERSITY
WHITE PLAINS, N.Y.

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

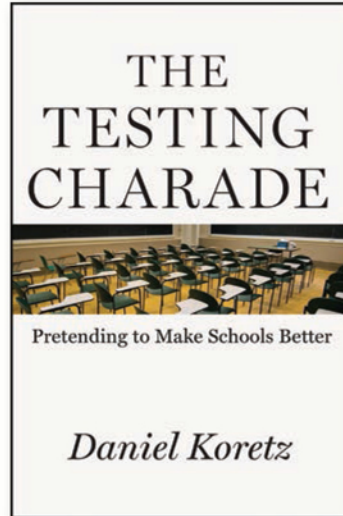
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A Photographer's Life and Afterlife
Pamela Bannos

"By the end of this impressively documented and nuanced page-turner, Maier will no longer be a mystery woman to the reader. Instead, a much richer and more valuable portrait emerges: that of a gifted and methodical artist and a multifarious human being."—*Chicago Tribune*
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Daniel Koretz

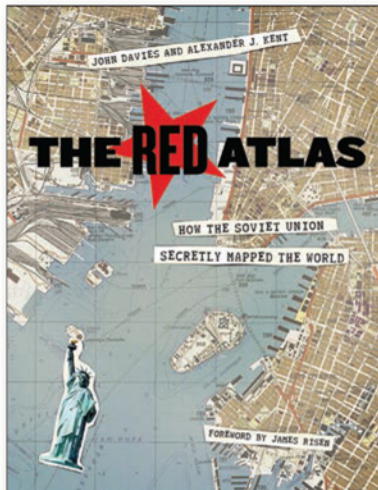
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With a Foreword by James Risen

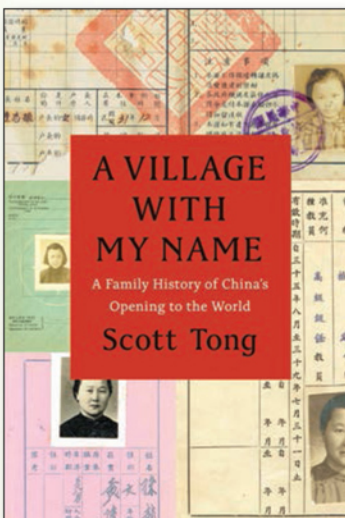
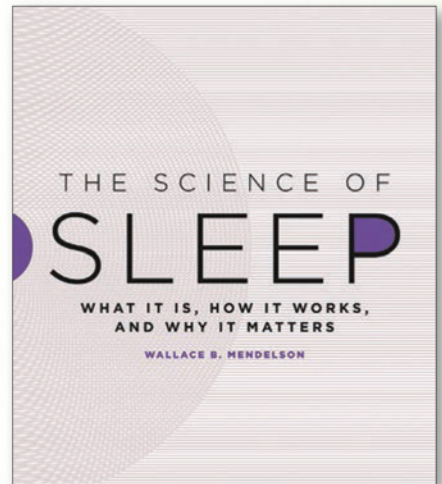
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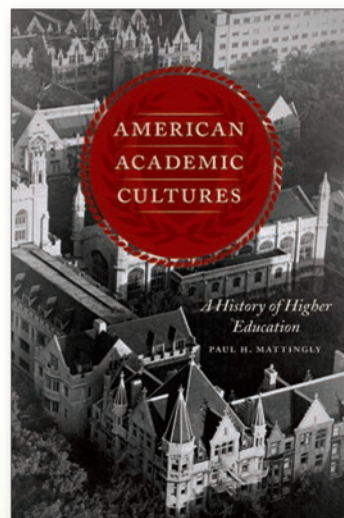
Addressing one of the major public health issues of the day with cutting-edge research and empathy, *The Science of Sleep* is the definitive illustrated reference guide to sleep science.
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DISPATCHES

IDEAS & PROVOCATIONS

January/February 2018

*Five times a day
for the past three
months, an app
called WeCroak
has been telling me
I'm going to die.*
— Bianca Bosker,
p. 30



• EDUCATION

What's College Good For?

College students learn little, and most forget what they do learn with shocking speed.
So why are we pushing ever more people into higher education?

BY BRYAN CAPLAN

I HAVE BEEN IN SCHOOL for more than 40 years. First preschool, kindergarten, elementary school, junior high, and high school. Then a bachelor's degree at UC Berkeley, followed by a doctoral program at Princeton. The next step was what you could call my first "real" job—as an economics professor at George Mason University.

Thanks to tenure, I have a dream job for life. Personally, I have no reason to

lash out at our system of higher education. Yet a lifetime of experience, plus a quarter century of reading and reflection, has convinced me that it is a big waste of time and money. When politicians vow to send more Americans to college, I can't help gasping, "Why? You want us to waste even more?"

How, you may ask, can anyone call higher education wasteful in an age when its financial payoff is greater than

ever? The earnings premium for college graduates has rocketed to 73 percent—that is, those with a bachelor's degree earn, on average, 73 percent more than those who have only a high-school diploma, up from about 50 percent in the late 1970s. The key issue, however, isn't whether college pays, but why. The simple, popular answer is that schools teach students useful job skills. But this dodges puzzling questions.

First and foremost: From kindergarten on, students spend thousands of hours studying subjects irrelevant to the modern labor market. Why do English classes focus on literature and poetry instead of business and technical writing? Why do advanced-math classes bother with proofs almost no student can follow? When will the typical student use history? Trigonometry? Art? Music? Physics? Latin? The class clown who snarks "What does this have to do with real life?" is onto something.

The disconnect between college curricula and the job market has a banal explanation: Educators teach what they know—and most have as little firsthand knowledge of the modern workplace as I do. Yet this merely complicates the puzzle. If schools aim to boost students' future income by teaching job skills, why do they entrust students' education to people so detached from the real world? Because, despite the chasm between what students learn and what workers do, academic success is a strong signal of worker productivity.

Suppose your law firm wants a summer associate. A law student with a doctorate in philosophy from Stanford applies. What do you infer? The applicant is probably brilliant, diligent, and willing to tolerate serious boredom. If you're looking for that kind of worker—and what employer isn't?—you'll make an offer, knowing full well that nothing the philosopher learned at Stanford will be relevant to this job.

The labor market doesn't pay you for the useless subjects you master; it pays you for the preexisting traits you signal by mastering them. This is not a fringe idea. Michael Spence, Kenneth Arrow, and Joseph Stiglitz—all Nobel laureates in economics—made seminal contributions to the theory of educational signaling. Every college student who does the least work required to get good grades silently endorses the theory. But signaling plays almost no role in public discourse or policy making. As a society, we continue to push ever larger numbers of students into ever higher levels of education. The main effect is not better jobs or greater skill levels, but a credentialist arms race.

Lest I be misinterpreted, I emphatically affirm that education confers some marketable skills, namely literacy and numeracy. Nonetheless, I believe that signaling accounts for at least half of college's financial reward, and probably more.

Most of the salary payoff for college comes from crossing the graduation finish line. Suppose you drop out after a year. You'll receive a salary bump compared with someone who's attended no college, but it won't be anywhere near 25 percent of the salary premium you'd get for a four-year degree. Similarly, the premium for sophomore year is nowhere near 50 percent of the return on a bachelor's degree, and the premium for junior year is nowhere near 75 percent of that return. Indeed, in the average study, senior year of college brings more than twice the pay increase of freshman, sophomore, and junior years combined. Unless colleges delay job training until the very end, signaling is practically the only explanation. This in turn implies a mountain of wasted

resources—time and money that would be better spent preparing students for the jobs they're likely to do.

THE CONVENTIONAL VIEW—that education pays because students learn—assumes that the typical student acquires, and retains, a lot of knowledge. She doesn't. Teachers often lament summer learning loss: Students know less at the end of summer than they did at the beginning. But summer learning loss is only a special case of the problem of fade-out: Human beings have trouble retaining knowledge they rarely use. Of course, some college graduates use what they've learned and thus hold on to it—engineers and other quantitative types, for example, retain a lot of math. But when we measure what the average college graduate recalls years later, the results are discouraging, to say the least.

In 2003, the United States Department of Education gave about 18,000 Americans the National Assessment of Adult Literacy. The ignorance it revealed



is mind-numbing. Fewer than a third of college graduates received a composite score of “proficient”—and about a fifth were at the “basic” or “below basic” level. You could blame the difficulty of the questions—until you read them. Plenty of college graduates couldn’t make sense of a table explaining how an employee’s annual health-insurance costs varied with income and family size, or summarize the work-experience requirements in a job ad, or even use a newspaper schedule to find when a television program ended. Tests of college graduates’ knowledge of history, civics, and science have had similarly dismal results.

Of course, college students aren’t supposed to just download facts; they’re supposed to learn how to think in real life. How do they fare on this count? The most focused study of education’s effect on applied reasoning, conducted by Harvard’s David Perkins in the mid-1980s, assessed students’ oral responses to questions designed to measure informal reasoning, such as “Would a proposed law in Massachusetts requiring a five-cent deposit on bottles and cans significantly reduce litter?” The benefit of college seemed to be zero: Fourth-year students did no better than first-year students.

Other evidence is equally discouraging. One researcher tested Arizona State University students’ ability to “apply statistical and methodological concepts to reasoning about everyday-life events.” In the researcher’s words:

Of the several hundred students tested, many of whom had taken more than six years of laboratory science ... and advanced mathematics through calculus, almost none demonstrated even a semblance of acceptable methodological reasoning.

Those who believe that college is about learning how to learn should expect students who study science to absorb the scientific method, then habitually use it to analyze the world. This scarcely occurs.

College students do hone some kinds of reasoning that are specific to their major. One ambitious study at the University of Michigan tested natural-science,

humanities, and psychology and other social-science majors on verbal reasoning, statistical reasoning, and conditional reasoning during the first semester of their first year. When the same students were retested the second semester of their fourth year, each group had sharply improved in precisely one area. Psychology and other social-science majors had become much better at statistical reasoning. Natural-science and humanities majors had become much better at conditional reasoning—analyzing “if... then” and “if and only if” problems. In the remaining areas, however, gains after three and a half years of college were modest or nonexistent.

The takeaway: Psychology students use statistics, so they improve in statistics; chemistry students rarely encounter statistics, so they don’t improve in statistics. If all goes well, students learn what they study and practice.

Actually, that’s optimistic. Educational psychologists have discovered that much of our knowledge is “inert.” Students who excel on exams frequently fail to apply their knowledge to the real world. Take physics. As the Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner writes,

Students who receive honor grades in college-level physics courses are frequently unable to solve basic problems and questions encountered in a form slightly different from that on which they have been formally instructed and tested.

The same goes for students of biology, mathematics, statistics, and, I’m embarrassed to say, economics. I try to teach my students to connect lectures to the real world and daily life. My exams are designed to measure comprehension, not memorization. Yet in a good class, four test-takers out of 40 demonstrate true economic understanding.

ECONOMISTS’ educational bean counting can come off as annoyingly narrow. Non-economists—also known as normal human beings—lean holistic: We

can’t measure education’s social benefits solely with test scores or salary premiums. Instead we must ask ourselves what kind of society we want to live in—an educated one or an ignorant one?

Normal human beings make a solid point: We can and should investigate education’s broad social implications. When humanists consider my calculations of education’s returns, they assume I’m being a typical cynical economist, oblivious to the ideals so many educators hold dear. I am an economist and I am a cynic, but I’m not a typical cynical economist. I’m a cynical idealist. I embrace the ideal of transformative

education. I believe wholeheartedly in the life of the mind. What I’m cynical about is people.

I’m cynical about students. The vast majority are philistines. I’m cynical about teachers. The vast majority are uninspiring. I’m cynical about “deciders”—the school officials who control

what students study. The vast majority think they’ve done their job as long as students comply.

Those who search their memory will find noble exceptions to these sad rules. I have known plenty of eager students and passionate educators, and a few wise deciders. Still, my 40 years in the education industry leave no doubt that they are hopelessly outnumbered. Meritorious education survives but does not thrive.

Indeed, today’s college students are less willing than those of previous generations to do the bare minimum of showing up for class and temporarily learning whatever’s on the test. Fifty years ago, college was a full-time job. The typical student spent 40 hours a week in class or studying. Effort has since collapsed across the board. “Full time” college students now average 27 hours of academic work a week—including just 14 hours spent studying.

What are students doing with their extra free time? Having fun. As Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa frostily remark in their 2011 book, *Academically Adrift*,

I’m cynical about students. The vast majority are philistines.

DISPATCHES

• EDUCATION

If we presume that students are sleeping eight hours a night, which is a generous assumption given their tardiness and at times disheveled appearance in early morning classes, that leaves 85 hours a week for other activities.

Arum and Roksa cite a study finding that students at one typical college spent 13 hours a week studying, 12 hours "socializing with friends," 11 hours "using computers for fun," eight hours working for pay, six hours watching TV, six hours exercising, five hours on "hobbies," and three hours on "other forms of entertainment." Grade inflation completes the idyllic package by shielding students from negative feedback. The average GPA is now 3.2.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN for the individual student? Would I advise an academically well-prepared 18-year-old to skip college because she won't learn much of value? Absolutely not. Studying irrelevancies for the next four years will impress future employers and raise her income potential. If she tried to leap straight into her first white-collar job, insisting, "I have the right stuff to graduate, I just choose not to," employers wouldn't believe her. To unilaterally curtail your education is to relegate yourself to a lower-quality pool of workers. For the individual, college pays.

This does not mean, however, that higher education paves the way to general prosperity or social justice. When we look at countries around the world, a year of education appears to raise an individual's income by 8 to 11 percent. By contrast, increasing education across a country's population by an average of one year per person raises the national income by only 1 to 3 percent. In other words, education enriches individuals much more than it enriches nations.

How is this possible? Credential inflation: As the average level of education rises, you need more education to convince employers you're worthy of any specific job. One research team found that from the early 1970s through the mid-1990s, the average education level

within 500 occupational categories rose by 1.2 years. But most of the jobs didn't change much over that span—there's no reason, except credential inflation, why people should have needed more education to do them in 1995 than in 1975. What's more, *all* American workers' education rose by 1.5 years in that same span—which is to say that a great majority of the extra education workers received was deployed not to get *better* jobs, but to get jobs that had recently been held by people with less education.

As credentials proliferate, so do failed efforts to acquire them. Students can and do pay tuition, kill a year, and flunk their finals. Any respectable verdict on the value of education must account for these academic bankruptcies. Failure rates are high, particularly for students with low high-school grades and test scores; all told, about 60 percent of full-time college students fail to finish in four years. Simply put, the push for broader college education has steered

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• VERY SHORT BOOK EXCERPT

GIRL POWER

SHIRLEY TEMPLE, then 6, landed a contract with Fox Film in 1934 that awed the country: \$1,000 a week for her, \$250 a week for her mother, Gertrude. From 1935 to 1938, she was the top box-office star; she dropped down but not off the top-10 list in 1939. She helped save 20th Century Fox from near-bankruptcy. At the height of her six-year reign, she made more money annually than anyone in Hollywood besides MGM's Louis B. Mayer (and more than General Motors' president): \$307,014 in 1938. She was photographed more often than anyone else on the planet, *Time* magazine reported in 1936. She received more than 3,000 fan letters a week. She endorsed products from Bisquick and Corn Flakes to Sunfreze ice cream and Vassar Waver hair curlers. In her prodigy domain—children whose fame no grown-up's could match—Shirley had only one predecessor: Jesus.

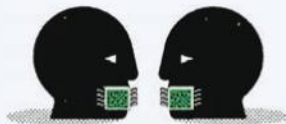
— Adapted from *Off the Charts: The Hidden Lives and Lessons of American Child Prodigies*, by Ann Hulbert, published by Knopf in January

CRAFTED BY THE ATLANTIC'S MARKETING TEAM
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THE NEXT Evolution of WORK

From robots to artificial intelligence, the future of work will be defined by technology. How will humans fit in with the machines—and one another?

A RE:THINK REPORT



The End of
Chitchat



Reconstructing
Work

The End of Chitchat

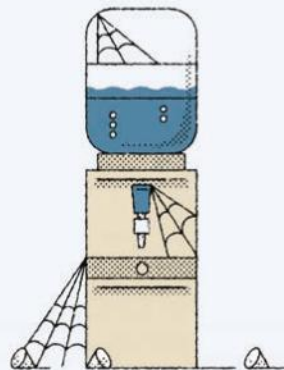
Workplace technology is revolutionizing how we communicate at the office. Will we ever stop talking altogether?

Illustrations by Michael George Haddad

On some level, offices exist to inspire in-person collaboration. But many of the basic technologies that employees now use to work together often encourage them to work virtually independent of one another.

Document-editing services, for example, allow employees to collaborate without ever communicating in physical space, while cloud-based chat programs let workers discuss projects, in real time, at their respective computers. In-office email chains have also given employees fewer reasons to speak in person, even as open-plan offices have proliferated, with employees sitting in direct view of each other.

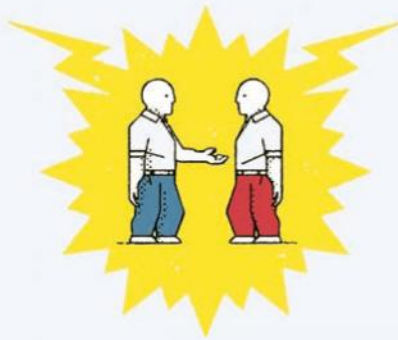
How have workers responded? "They don their headphones—headphones are the new walls—to signal they are involved in high-concentration work and not available for chitchat," says Stowe Boyd, a social critic whose research focuses on the future of work.



Without the water cooler-style chitchat that can make work life more vibrant, office relationships could start to resemble the interactions we have with strangers.

Such behavior is indicative of a wider workplace trend. As office-communication technologies have become more advanced, more and more employees are avoiding direct interaction with their co-workers. Experts say this is a shift that is likely to continue. A raft of emerging technologies even suggests a future—perhaps decades away, but maybe sooner—in which offices are populated by employees who engage in virtually no work-focused, face-to-face contact whatsoever.

Which isn't to say co-workers won't connect. Even as employees make the transition to solitary work, they may begin to communicate in new ways that are as engaging as real-life interactions. Virtual reality, for example, could "eventually allow for the kind of rich interactions that would take place in physical proximity," says Martin Ford, an author who studies artificial intelligence and robots, among other things.

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And while VR and other immersive technologies haven't yet gained a strong foothold in the office, there are signs that such features are making their way into the workplace, according to futurist Nikolas Badminton. Virtual-reality headsets, for instance, could facilitate 3-D work meetings around a digital conference table. And holoportation, a kind of real-time virtual teleportation currently in development, can beam employees, *Star Trek*-style, into spaces they are not physically in.

What's the upside of a chitchat-free future, in which colleagues work together in close physical proximity but never need to talk person-to-person? For one, it may make work experiences more seamless and efficient by eliminating gossipy distractions that can get in the way of substantive affairs. It also may safeguard employees from physical harassment, a growing workplace concern, says Jamais Cascio, an author and futurist.

But there are possible snags. Virtual environments have the potential to reduce social inhibitions, which could lead to confrontation. It's also possible that technology will create a more impersonal atmosphere. Without the water cooler-style chitchat that can

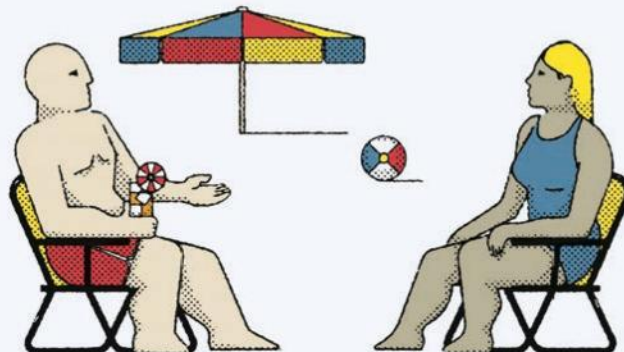
make work life more vibrant—research suggests informal office banter can boost productivity—office relationships could start to resemble the interactions we have with strangers in public spaces.

Ultimately, some experts believe, humans may remove themselves from the work equation altogether, though not in the sense that they will be replaced by robots, as many have predicted.

Cascio envisions a time when machine learning and artificial intelligence will bring about digital simulacra that emulate the appearance, voice, and knowledge base of individual employees. Such simulacra, he explains, will serve as information assistants, handling various brief professional interactions.

"All of this can come together into a scenario in which people working in the same physical location still have person-to-person interactions," Cascio says, "but almost exclusively for non-work issues, while using smart agents, bots, and simulacra to mediate professional issues."

Boyd envisions a similar future, in which employees use artificial intelligence in the workplace. "We'll soon be at a point when our AIs are meeting on our behalf, making agreements, and then potentially doing our work as well," he says, only half joking. In the end, though, such a scenario might bring us closer together. "We could all be sitting at the beach, next to each other, unaware that our surrogates were doing business," says Boyd, "while we doze in the sand." Re:



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WORK

Reconstructing

Automation, artificial intelligence, and the essential role of humans

Written by Peter Evans-Greenwood, Harvey Lewis, and Jim Guszcza

Illustrations by Michael George Haddad

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT the future of work often coalesce around one major point of contention: the impact of automation on the workforce. Pessimists believe that humans will be made redundant by artificial intelligence (AI) and robots, leaving them unable to find work in a future bereft of jobs. Optimists believe that historical norms will reassert themselves and technology will create more jobs than it destroys, resulting in new occupations that require new skills and knowledge and new ways of working.



Rarely does anyone engaged in this debate step back to examine what is meant by *work*. Yet both the pessimistic and optimistic views are founded on a culturally bound

If work is viewed essentially as a collection of tasks, then AI's growing capabilities may indeed seem troublesome.

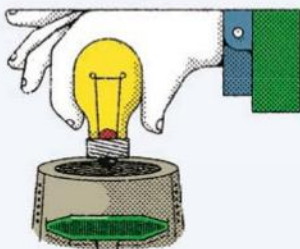
conception of work, shaped by the ideas and practices of the Industrial Revolution. In this conception, work is seen as the performance of a well-defined task or set of tasks, laid out sequentially, in assembly-line fashion, to achieve a particular outcome. Efficiency gains come from specialization, which allows workers to become better and faster at a given task through practice, and from automation, which replaces the human task performer with an even better and faster machine.

If work is viewed essentially as a collection of tasks, then AI's growing capabilities may indeed seem troublesome, raising the specter that most or all human work will simply be automated away. But is it time, in this post-industrial age, to consider a different path? As AI becomes more capable and flexible, might it not enable *work itself* to be reconstructed—not as a set of discrete tasks in a process, but as a collaborative problem-solving effort

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in which humans define the problems, machines help find the solutions, and humans verify the acceptability of those solutions?

ATOMIZING WORK into a predefined set of tasks suits neither human nor intelligent machine. To be sure, people *can* perform specialized tasks, and AI *can* be used to automate them. But realizing our full potential—and that of our technologies—may lie in putting them both to a more substantive use, with each augmenting the other's capabilities.¹



Consider how humans and machines could productively interact if work were organized around *problems to be solved*, not processes to be executed. In such an

environment, management of the problem definition becomes the main concern.² Humans take responsibility for shaping the problem—what data to consider, what *good* looks like—and for evaluating the appropriateness and completeness of the solution. Automation, including AI, augments this work with a set of digital *behaviors*³ that replicate specific human actions—but with the advantage of using more data to provide more-precise answers, while not falling prey to the cognitive biases to which humans are prone.

Reframing work from *task to be done* to *problem to be solved*—and the consequent reframing of automation from the replication of tasks to the replication of *behaviors*—could give us the opportunity to make the most of AI's capabilities, as well as our own. ●

LOOK DEEPER.

Read more about artificial intelligence in the workplace at: dupress.deloitte.com/future-of-work

¹Jim Guszcza, Harvey Lewis, and Peter Evans-Greenwood, "Cognitive collaboration: Why humans and computers think better together," *Deloitte Review* 20, January 23, 2017.

²We should note here that shifting our focus from process to problem enables us to make processes malleable, rather than being static. AI technologies already exist—and are, in fact, quite old—that enable us to assemble a process incrementally, in real time, allowing us to more efficiently adapt to circumstances as they change. This effectively hands responsibility for defining and creating processes over to the robots—yet another complex skill is consumed by automation.

³We note that behaviors are not necessarily implemented with AI technologies. Any digital (or, indeed, non-digital) technology can be used.



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DISPATCHES

too many students who aren't cut out for academic success onto the college track.

The college-for-all mentality has fostered neglect of a realistic substitute: vocational education. It takes many guises—classroom training, apprenticeships and other types of on-the-job training, and straight-up work experience—but they have much in common. All vocational education teaches specific job skills, and all vocational education revolves around learning by doing, not learning by listening. Research, though a bit sparse, suggests that vocational education raises pay, reduces unemployment, and increases the rate of high-school completion.

Defenders of traditional education often appeal to the obscurity of the future. What's the point of prepping students for the economy of 2018, when they'll be employed in the economy of 2025 or 2050? But ignorance of the future is no reason to prepare students for occupations they almost surely won't have—and if we know anything about the future of work, we know that the demand for authors, historians, political scientists, physicists, and mathematicians will stay low. It's tempting to say that students on the college track can always turn to vocational education as a Plan B, but this ignores the disturbing possibility that after they crash, they'll be too embittered to go back and learn a trade. The vast American underclass shows that this disturbing possibility is already our reality.

Education is so integral to modern life that we take it for granted. Young people have to leap through interminable academic hoops to secure their place in the adult world. My thesis, in a single sentence: Civilized societies revolve around education now, but there is a better—indeed, more civilized—way. If everyone had a college degree, the result would be not great jobs for all, but runaway credential inflation. Trying to spread success with education spreads education but not success. **A**

*Bryan Caplan is an economics professor at George Mason University. This essay is adapted from his book *The Case Against Education*, published in January by Princeton University Press.*



BIG IN ... JAPAN

CHOKE-PROOF FOOD

HERE'S A GRIM fact: According to the diaper maker Unicharm, in Japan, adult diapers now outsell baby diapers. That's because a quarter of the country's population is 65 or older. By 2060, that proportion will hit 40 percent.

What adjustments have to be made when so many people grow old simultaneously? To take one example, after a recent surge in accidents involving older drivers, the government began testing the Robot Shuttle, an autonomous bus intended for use in rural areas, where Japan's shrinking pains have hurt the most. Other tweaks include slowing down escalators and equipping shopping carts with magnifying glasses.

It's long been observed that Japan's aging doesn't bode well for its economy. Lots of old people means a financial drain on both the private and public sectors, as health-care and pension costs skyrocket and productivity declines. But the news isn't all bad: Amid this elder boom, a new, 100 trillion yen (\$800 billion) consumer category

has emerged, known as "the silver market."

Millions of Japanese seniors who have long been saving for retirement find themselves at the center of a commercial bonanza. The products vying for their attention range from Docomo's Raku-Raku 4, a smartphone that's "easier to hear" and also has jumbo screen icons, to Fujisoft's Palro, a \$6,000 "carebot" that combats dementia through trivia games and fitness drills. Even video-game arcades, long a bastion of youth, are wooing golden-agers with benches for resting; arcade staffers are encouraged to get certified as senior-friendly "service assistants."

The most intriguing product, though, may be *engay* food. *Engay* is Japanese for "swallowing," something that can become increasingly difficult as people age: More Japanese now die each year from choking than in traffic accidents.

Instead of settling for, say, a cup of Ensure-brand pudding, throw some cooked salmon in a blender. Then, with a little help from modern chemistry, mold the

resulting pink puree back into the shape of a fillet, and add "grill" marks with a propane torch. Presto: salmon that looks like it was plated in a restaurant and almost tastes that way, minus the flaky texture.

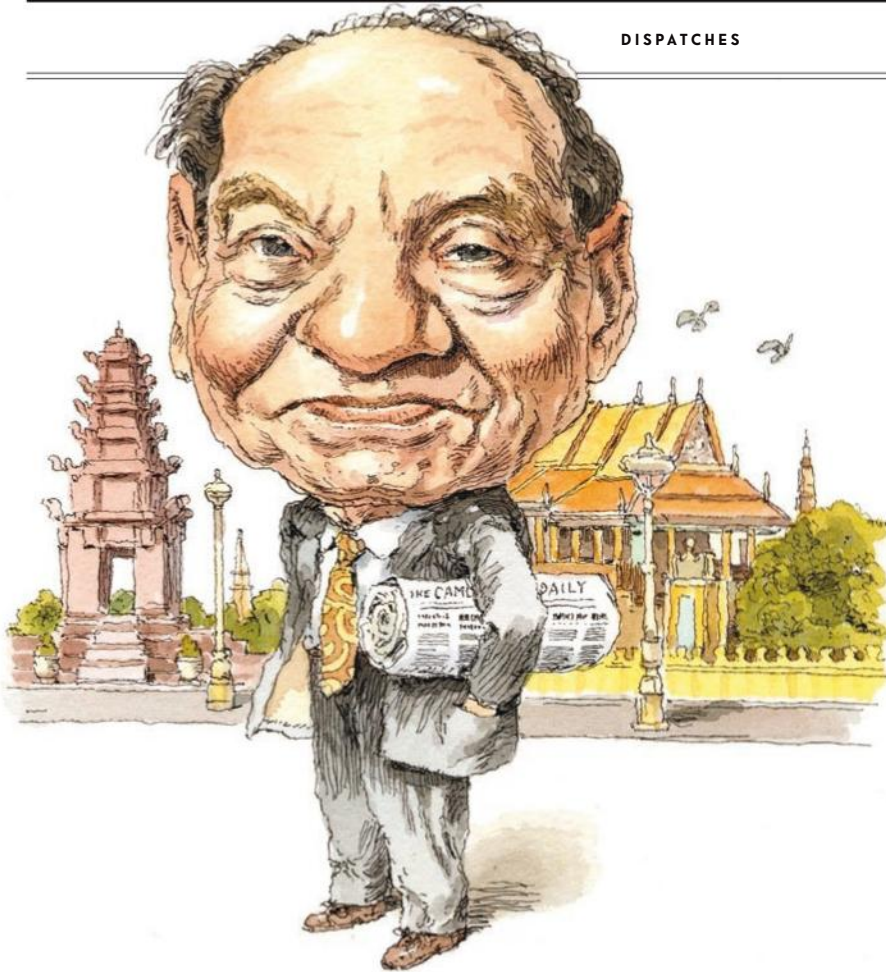
The thing that makes this culinary alchemy possible is a gelling agent called Softia G, one of many nutritional-therapy products from Japan's Nutri Co. Softia G allows cooks to reshape pureed food into something resembling its original form, but with a texture that goes down easy. Almost any dish can get the *engay* treatment, from dumplings to mochi cakes. The technique has been widely featured on cooking blogs and has given rise to its own cookbook and cooking contest. Even the fancy Hotel New Otani Osaka now uses it to prepare meals for geriatric guests.

Nutri hopes to bring *engay* food to the rest of the world, though it's not clear how the rest of the world would respond. "This is gorgeous stuff, but you have to be practical," says Howard Rosenberg, the director of food services at the Resort Nursing Home in Queens, New York. "Putting a glaze on salmon with a blowtorch ... You can't have an open flame in a nursing facility."

The contrast between the American and Japanese approaches to food is stark. "It's a difference of cultures," explains Koichi Yanagisawa, a marketing executive for Nutri. America serves its eldest residents mush; Japan serves them salmon *à la torché*.

— Rene Chun

DISPATCHES



• SKETCH

When the Presses Stop

Bernie Krisher helped bring free journalism to Cambodia. Now, as the country reverts to autocracy, his paper has been shut down. Will he survive the heartbreak? Will Cambodia?

BY MOLLY BALL

THE MAN ON THE BED in the Tokyo apartment was shriveled and weak. His bare legs poked like sticks out of his short one-piece pajamas. As he beckoned to his daughter, Debbie, his arm shook. "Put me in the wheelchair," he said in a hoarse whisper.

When I first met Bernie Krisher, in 2001, he was spry and wiry, with apparently infinite energy. He seemed to hardly sleep, preferring to spend every moment badgering someone for something. He had been a lifetime of willfulness. As a child, he escaped the Holocaust. As a reporter in Asia, he

interviewed President Sukarno of Indonesia and the Japanese emperor Hirohito, then launched a tabloid that revolutionized Japanese media.

In "retirement," he became a humanitarian, flouting international sanctions to bring rice to North Korea and pouring vast sums into war-ravaged Cambodia. There he built hundreds of schools, founded an orphanage and a hospital, and started *The Cambodia Daily*, where I worked from 2001 to 2003. He was constantly thinking of ways to better the country—persuading J. K. Rowling to let him translate *Harry Potter* into Khmer (and sell copies for

50 cents), say, or helping the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof buy brothel workers out of servitude.

But when I visited Krisher in Tokyo this fall, I found him much reduced: At age 86, he had experienced a stroke and contracted an antibiotic-resistant staph infection. He could scarcely see or hear, and his comprehension was foggy. He spent his days shuttling up and down the hallway between his bed and the living room, where his wife, Akiko, who has dementia, often sat motionless.

The last time I had been in contact with Krisher, I was the sick one. About a year after I'd gone to work for *The Daily*, I began to suffer from a mysterious illness. On my 24th birthday it was diagnosed as cancer, but the flimsy insurance Krisher granted his expat staffers would not, based on a technicality, cover treatment. I asked Krisher—who managed the paper from Tokyo, visiting semiannually—whether he could help somehow. A phone call, a letter? He did nothing. (Krisher, through his daughter, denies this, claiming that he appealed to the insurance company without success.)

I felt, and still feel, that it was cruel and hypocritical for a purported humanitarian to abandon an employee when she became inconvenient. But I had not come to Tokyo to confront Krisher over that long-ago incident. I had come because his legacy was in crisis, as were Cambodia's hopes for democracy.

The government had forced a shutdown of *The Daily*, which, despite its tiny circulation of about 5,000, had been the paper of record for Cambodia's civil society: Its courageous reporters had regularly broken news that the rest of the country's media then followed. The closure was part of a broad crackdown on Cambodia's independent press and institutions—one that would in short order see the opposition leader jailed and multiple watchdog groups shuttered. The bank accounts of Krisher's charities had been frozen, and Debbie and her husband, who ran the charities day to day, had been threatened with arrest.

Krisher wanted to tackle the problem the way he had always tackled problems—by storming in and demanding to be heard.

He had planned to fly to Cambodia the day I visited, but his doctors had talked him out of the trip. If the flight didn't finish him off, they worried, the Cambodians might: His name was posted in every passport-control kiosk at the Phnom Penh airport.

To appease her father, Debbie had tried distracting him: The paper wasn't ending, she said, just being reincarnated.

"What are we doing with *The Cambodia Daily*?" she yelled into his ear. "Opa, what are we going to do?"

"We're taking it offshore," he said.

KRISHER WAS BORN in Frankfurt in 1931 to Polish Jewish parents. In 1937, the family fled Germany, eventually settling in Queens. After college and the Army, Krisher spent a year in Tokyo on a Ford Foundation grant. He fell in love with his interpreter and brought her back to New York, where they married. In 1962, the couple returned to Japan, and he got a job at *Newsweek*.

Krisher, who worked his way up to bureau chief, specialized in writing puffy Q&As; he was legendary for who he knew. Once, in a Tokyo bookstore, he buttonholed Sukarno, who called Krisher "crazy"—and invited him to Jakarta. In turn, Sukarno introduced him to the Cambodian leader Norodom Sihanouk, a former king who, following Cambodia's independence from French rule in 1953, had refashioned himself as prime minister, albeit an autocratic one. Krisher's proudest achievement was an exclusive interview with Hirohito, which he still boasts is the only one the Japanese emperor ever granted. In fact, this is typical Krisherian exaggeration: Hirohito gave many such interviews.

Krisher was also famous for his difficult personality. Imperious and bullying, he berated staffers for failing at tasks he'd never assigned them. According to Alan Field, a reporter who worked under Krisher, he caused at least one young woman at *Newsweek* to have a nervous breakdown. Eventually, he was fired.

Not long afterward, Krisher founded his own magazine, a gossip weekly called *Focus*. Modeled on *People*, it made its name off tawdry scoops, such as a photo

of a politician urinating on a ginkgo tree, and another photo that Krisher described as "Mia Farrow getting out of a car and her legs were spread apart and she wasn't wearing panties." *Focus*, which is now defunct, sold millions of copies and (together with a *Newsweek* termination settlement)

helped make Krisher rich. Despite the magazine's profitability, when I spoke with Krisher in Tokyo, he expressed regret. "It was pornography," he told me.

In the early 1990s, his old friend Sihanouk, the deposed Cambodian leader, called to ask a favor. The country had recently emerged from decades of civil war, and its people were preparing for their first real election. Sihanouk asked Krisher whether he would be willing to give Cambodia a newspaper.

Krisher, naturally, said yes.

SIHANOUK'S YEARS out of power had marked a bloody period for Cambodia. The Communist Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975 and orchestrated a genocide that killed as many as 3 million Cambodians. In 1979, the regime was driven out by the Vietnamese, who occupied the country for a decade while the Khmer Rouge waged resistance from the countryside. The Vietnamese tapped as their prime minister a former Khmer Rouge commander named Hun Sen.

In 1989, the Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia, and in 1991, the warring parties signed peace accords. In turn, the United Nations embarked on an unprecedented effort to build a democracy from scratch. As soldiers, police, and aid workers flooded in, UN administrators helped the Cambodians write a constitution, which declared its commitment to "principles of liberal democracy and pluralism," including due process, property rights, and freedom of expression.

And so, in 1993, Krisher started his English-and-Khmer-language newspaper out of an old hotel on the Mekong riverfront. He drafted a few Americans to run

it, and they recruited Cambodian staffers who had worked as fixers or translators. In a country where the local press was mostly corrupt or partisan, the paper, whose motto was "All the news without fear or favor," aimed to embody objective journalism, and to train a generation of journalists.

Although 90 percent of eligible voters participated in the UN-administered 1993 elections, Cambodian democracy got off to a rocky start. The royalists, led by Sihanouk's son Prince Norodom Ranariddh, got the most votes, but Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party, which came in second, refused to accept the result. After a

standoff, Ranariddh and Hun Sen were made co-prime ministers. A bloodless coup had taken place, and the international community, wary of a return to civil war, had looked away.

The country's needs seemed infinite. Krisher pumped his connections for money and started project after project, from the orphanage and the schools to an initiative that paid families to educate their daughters. He was not fussy about his donors. One school was funded by—and named for—the brother of Henry Kissinger, who, as Nixon's secretary of state, had directed a bombing campaign that killed thousands of Cambodians. To build his hospital, Krisher partnered with a Japanese religious leader whose sect has been called a cult.

The UN stayed in Cambodia for just 18 months, after which the constitution was only lightly observed. In 1997, violent clashes pushed out Hun Sen's rivals, allowing him to take sole control, which he has never relinquished. Today he is one of the world's longest-serving leaders.

But even as Hun Sen consolidated power, his country's dependence on foreign aid required him to pay lip service to constitutional ideals. At meetings, he would hold up *The Daily* as proof of press freedom. There were hiccups: Once, during a Mekong River booze cruise, the information minister told me he was revoking the paper's license over

The paper aimed to embody objective journalism, and to train a generation of journalists.

a translation error. But Krisher used his connections to smooth things over, as he always did. Later that year, *The Daily* landed a rare interview with Hun Sen.

The Daily was not progovernment, but neither was it antigovernment. Our job wasn't to take down Hun Sen; it was to accurately report what was happening. Covering the country's first local elections, in 2002, I found that many Cambodians viewed the opposition, led by a French-educated former banker, as out of touch. The ruling Cambodian People's Party won by a wide margin, in an election that observers hailed as a positive step for democracy.

As for the paper's mission of training journalists, it succeeded beyond Krisher's hopes: *The Daily's* Cambodian alumni staffed bureaus in Phnom Penh and abroad, wrote books, and directed documentaries. Over the years, as young expats came and went, the Cambodians, more so than the foreigners, were the ones training their colleagues. *The Daily's* American alumni now work at publications including *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*, and two have won Pulitzers.

However high-quality its journalism, *The Daily's* offices were run-down to the point of crumbling, with donated Apple IIs and salvaged furniture. In 2001, staff barely got word of the 9/11 attacks, because Krisher hadn't paid the cable bill. As Ryun Patterson, the night editor, scrambled to update the paper, Krisher called from Washington, D.C., where he could see smoke billowing from the Pentagon. That wasn't why he was calling. He wanted to check the wording of a brief item about a staffer's defamation lawsuit.

The staffer, Kay Kimsong, had pioneered *The Daily's* business coverage. When the foreign minister accused him of defamation for truthful reporting, Kimsong stood little chance in the corrupt courts. Still, Krisher left Kimsong responsible for his own defense—and

suggested that he spend a few days in jail as a goodwill gesture. Kimsong soon left to work for the country's other English-language paper, *The Phnom Penh Post*, which (unlike *The Daily*) encouraged Cambodians to work in management.

As for me, in 2003 I went to the U.S. for chemotherapy, which was successful. Four months later, I wanted to say goodbye to Cambodia. I asked Krisher whether I could return to *The Daily* for a final month's work, but he said no. I returned anyway, and worked for free.

AS KRISHER'S HEALTH has declined, Debbie and her husband, Douglas Steele, have taken over many of his affairs. In 2014, Douglas moved from Tokyo to Phnom Penh to run *The Daily*, arriving as Cambodia's political winds were changing. Sam Rainsy, an exiled opposition leader, had been allowed back just before the 2013 elections, in what Hun Sen intended as a prodemocracy gesture. The regime was blindsided by what happened next. Tens of thousands of Cambodians showed up to

Rainsy's speeches. The previously fractured opposition, which had recently united under one banner, won 45 percent of the vote to the ruling party's 49 percent, despite widespread reports of irregularities and voter suppression.

Claiming victory, the opposition launched a wave of largely nonviolent protests that continued until January 2014, when a few rogue protesters clashed with police and four were shot dead. The next day, the Interior Ministry banned political gatherings of more than 10 people, and the cowed opposition agreed to accept 55 seats in parliament to the ruling party's 68 seats.

For the next national election, in 2018, Hun Sen is not taking any chances. In August, the Krishers received a letter claiming that *The Daily* was not properly registered (it operated under a decades-old license) and that it owed 25 billion riel—about \$6.3 million—in taxes. Soon after, Hun Sen, in a speech, decried

the paper as a “thief.” (He has taken to quoting, approvingly, Donald Trump's attacks on the press. Once a beacon of freedom to the world, America now offers inspiration to dictators.) *The Daily's* advertisers withdrew, leaving it unable to operate. It announced that it would close its doors on September 4.

The Daily was not the only organization targeted. Radio stations broadcasting Radio Free Asia and Voice of America, U.S.-backed services that provide independent news to many rural Cambodians, were shuttered, as was the U.S.-funded National Democratic Institute.

Once, Hun Sen might have hesitated to so flagrantly defy the foreign-aid community. But Cambodia is less dependent on the West than it once was. China now provides the country with nearly four times as much direct aid as the U.S. does and is a major source of private investment. Phnom Penh, formerly a sleepy backwater, is today dotted with skyscrapers-in-progress, their scaffolding hung with Chinese signs.

On September 3, *The Daily* prepared to publish a commemorative final issue, filled with reflections and analyses. But before dawn, news broke that Kem Sokha, the leader of the opposition party, had been accused of treason and jailed. As *Daily* reporters rushed to the scene, staffers who had planned to spend a leisurely, mournful day in the newsroom found themselves expanding the edition. The news pushed *The Daily's* closure off the top of the front page. The final issue instead featured Sokha in handcuffs, with the headline “Descent Into Outright Dictatorship.”

Things have only deteriorated since. In October, Hun Sen threatened opposition figures with arrest, and many lawmakers fled the country. The government has also moved to dissolve the opposition, forcing its candidates off the ballot. “The 25-year international effort to create a multiparty, rule-of-law-respecting, due-process-respecting regime in Cambodia has now died,” John Sifton, Human Rights Watch's Asia advocacy director, told me. “We have reached the end of the line. Democracy is dead in Cambodia.”

Cambodia's leader now quotes, approvingly, Donald Trump's attacks on the press.

• STUDY OF STUDIES

The Power of Negativity

Why pessimists win

BY SARAH ELIZABETH ADLER

Debbie and Douglas say they still plan to turn *The Daily* into an online-only news service, with information from byline-less Cambodians fed to a news desk in Bangkok. But their bare-bones website is blocked in-country, and the project has hit various snags.

As for the Cambodians who worked for *The Daily*, sometimes at great personal risk, many are in difficult straits. Some have found work as stringers or fixers, but they are on a government blacklist that prevents them from covering official events. When I visited Cambodia in October, right after seeing Krisher, I traveled to Phnom Penh's outskirts to see a couple of old colleagues—Saing Soenthrith, who was orphaned by the genocide, and Van Roeun, an environmental journalist who broke important stories on the country's illegal deforestation. Roeun's foyer was filled with cages—he was raising fighting cocks to earn money for his children's school fees. Soenthrith, for his part, was dying of kidney disease.

Their plight struck me as a metaphor for the West's involvement in Cambodia: For all the good intentions, the gifts from abroad were only temporary. The structures that foreigners tried to build weren't sustainable—Cambodia's entrenched power was too ruthless, its inertial force too strong. *The Daily* couldn't survive without Krisher's force of will; democracy couldn't survive once the international community moved on.

I thought back to that day in Tokyo, when I asked Krisher what he believed his newspaper had contributed to Cambodian society. Debbie yelled the question into his ear. He could hardly see me and didn't remember who I was, but he glared in my direction. "It's now a democracy," he replied, haltingly.

"But they closed our paper down," Debbie shouted. "Is that a democracy?"

Krisher was silent. "Opa?" she yelled.

"Put me in the wheelchair," he muttered again. **A**

Molly Ball is Time magazine's national political correspondent. Support for this article was provided by a grant from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

DESPITE America's reputation for optimism, nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults are pessimistic about the country's future. **[1]** This may not be all bad, though. Decades of research have found that positive thinking isn't always so positive. In some cases, pessimists fare better than those with a sunnier disposition.

Married couples who were extremely optimistic about their relationship's future were more likely to experience relationship deterioration. **[2]** Optimism may also be tied to lower earnings. A study of data from British households found that across two decades, especially optimistic self-employed people earned about 25 percent less than their pessimistic peers. **[3]** And National Cancer Institute researchers found that people who lowballed their risk of heart disease were more likely to show early signs of it. **[4]**

Maybe this is because a rosy outlook leaves us overconfident. For example, homeowners who underestimated

their chances of radon exposure were less likely to buy radon test kits than were those with a more realistic sense of risk—their optimism left them vulnerable. **[5]**

Optimism can also beget disappointment. In one study, psychology



students were surveyed immediately before and after receiving exam results. Students who had anticipated a higher grade than they received were upset after learning their score; students who had underestimated their grade (i.e., the pessimists) felt better afterward. **[6]**

Embracing negativity may also have social benefits. Compared with cheery moods, bad moods have been linked to a more effective communication style, and

sadness has been linked to less reliance on negative stereotypes. **[7, 8]** Feeling down can make us behave more fairly, too. People who saw sad video clips before playing an allocation game were more generous with their partners than those who saw happy clips. **[9]**

So how can you get the most out of a glass-half-empty mind-set? In the 1980s, two University of Michigan researchers described a strategy they called "defensive pessimism," whereby people harness their anxiety for good. **[10]** A pair of follow-up studies found that by setting low expectations and envisioning worst-case scenarios, defensive pessimists optimized their performance on a variety of tasks, from darts and math problems to fulfilling real-life goals. **[11, 12]**

This approach might work across one's lifetime, too. A 30-year study of more than 10,000 Germans found that older adults who had underestimated their future satisfaction were less likely than their optimistic peers to end up disabled or die prematurely. **[13]** Defensive pessimism isn't exactly a new strategy, of course—the Stoics were urging "the premeditation of evils" some 2,300 years ago. Still, it may be time to revise an old maxim: Forget about hoping for the best. Instead, focus on preparing for the worst. **A**

THE STUDIES:

[1] Jones et al., "The Divide Over America's Future" (Public Religion Research Institute, Oct. 2016)

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Mood Improve Your Conversation?" (*European Journal of Social Psychology*, Aug. 2013)

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DISPATCHES



• BUSINESS

Iron Chefs

How automation is transforming the restaurant industry

BY ALANA SEMUELS

VISITORS TO HENN-NA, a restaurant outside Nagasaki, Japan, are greeted by a peculiar sight: their food being prepared by a row of humanoid robots that bear a passing resemblance to the Terminator. The “head chef,” incongruously named Andrew, specializes in *okonomiyaki*, a Japanese pancake. Using his two long arms, he stirs batter in a metal bowl, then pours it onto a hot grill. While he waits for the batter to cook, he talks cheerily in Japanese about how much he enjoys his job. His robot colleagues, meanwhile, fry donuts, layer soft-serve ice cream into cones, and mix drinks. One made me a gin and tonic.

H.I.S., the company that runs the restaurant, as well as a nearby hotel where robots check guests into their rooms and help with their luggage, turned to automation partly out of necessity.

Japan’s population is shrinking, and its economy is booming; the unemployment rate is currently an unprecedented 2.8 percent. “Using robots makes a lot of sense in a country like Japan, where it’s hard to find employees,” CEO Hideo Sawada told me.

Sawada speculates that 70 percent of the jobs at Japan’s hotels will be automated in the next five years. “It takes about a year to two years to get your money back,” he said. “But since you can work them 24 hours a day, and they don’t need vacation, eventually it’s more cost-efficient to use the robot.”

This may seem like a vision of the future best suited—perhaps only suited—to Japan. But according to Michael Chui, a partner at the McKinsey Global Institute, many tasks in the food-service and accommodation industry are exactly the kind that are easily automated.

Chui’s latest research estimates that 54 percent of the tasks workers perform in American restaurants and hotels could be automated using currently available technologies—making it the fourth-most-automatable sector in the U.S.

The robots, in fact, are already here. Chowbotics, a company in Redwood City, California, manufactures Sally, a boxy robot that prepares salads ordered on a touch screen. At a Palo Alto café, I watched as she deposited lettuce, corn, barley, and a few inadvertently crushed cherry tomatoes into a bowl. Botlr, a robot butler, now brings guests extra towels and toiletries in dozens of hotels around the country. I saw one at the Aloft Cupertino.

Ostensibly, this is worrying. America’s economy isn’t humming along nearly as smoothly as Japan’s, and one of the few bright spots in recent years has been employment in restaurants and hotels, which have added more jobs than almost any other sector. That growth, in fact, has helped dull the blow that automation has delivered to other industries. The food-service and accommodation sector now employs 13.7 million Americans, up 38 percent

• BUSINESS



since 2000. Since 2013, it has accounted for more jobs than manufacturing.

These new positions once seemed safe from the robot hordes because they required a human touch in a way that manufacturing or mining jobs did not. When ordering a coffee or checking into a hotel, human beings want to interact with other human beings—or so we thought. The companies bringing robots into the service sector are betting that we'll be happy to trade our relationship with the chipper barista or knowledgeable front-desk clerk for greater efficiency. They're also confident that adding robots won't necessarily mean cutting human jobs.

ROBOTS HAVE ARRIVED in American restaurants and hotels for the same reasons they first arrived on factory floors. The cost of machines, even sophisticated ones, has fallen significantly in recent years, dropping 40 percent since 2005, according to the Boston Consulting Group. Labor, meanwhile, is getting expensive, as some cities and states pass laws raising the minimum wage.

"We think we've hit the point where labor-wage rates are now making

automation of those tasks make a lot more sense," Bob Wright, the chief operations officer of Wendy's, said in a conference call with investors last February, referring to jobs that feature "repetitive production tasks." Wendy's, McDonald's, and Panera are in the process of installing self-service kiosks in locations across the country, allowing customers to order without ever talking to an employee. Starbucks encourages customers to order on its mobile app; such transactions now account for 10 percent of sales.

Business owners insist that robots will take over work that is dirty, dangerous, or just dull, enabling humans to focus on other tasks. The international chain CaliBurger, for example, will soon install Flippy, a robot that can flip 150 burgers an hour. John Miller, the CEO of Cali Group, which owns the chain, says employees don't like manning the hot, greasy grill. Once the robots are sweating in the kitchen, human employees will be free to interact with customers in more-targeted ways, bringing them extra napkins and asking them how they're enjoying their burgers. Blaine Hurst, the CEO and president

of Panera, told me that his no-longer-needed cashiers have been tasked with keeping tabs on the customer experience. Panera customers typically retrieve their food from the counter themselves. But at restaurants where they place their orders at kiosks, employees now bring food from the kitchen to their tables. "That labor has been redeployed back into the café to provide a differentiated guest experience," Hurst said.

How many employees, though, do you need milling about in the café? The early success of the kiosks suggests that, at least when ordering fast food, patrons prize speed over high-touch customer service. Will companies like CaliBurger and Panera see sufficient value in employing human greeters and soup-and-sandwich deliverers to keep those positions around long-term?

The experience of Eatsa may be instructive. The start-up restaurant, based in San Francisco, allows customers to order its quinoa bowls and salads on their smartphone or an in-store tablet and then pick up their order from an eerie white wall of cubbies—an Automat for the app age. Initially, two greeters were stationed alongside the cubbies to

DISPATCHES

welcome and direct customers. But over time, customers relied less frequently on the greeters, co-founder and CEO Tim Young told me, and the company now employs a single greeter in its restaurants.

The type of person who orders a grain bowl on an iPhone is perhaps content to forgo a welcoming human face. There may not be enough such people to sustain a business, however, at least not yet. Eatsa announced in October that it was closing its locations in New York City; Washington, D.C.; and Berkeley. Young told me that the problem was the food, not the technology, and that other restaurant chains are interested in deploying Eatsa's model. The taco salad I ordered was pretty good, though, and, at \$8, cheaper than the fare at many other salad chains. I wondered whether the problem wasn't that Eatsa had crossed the fine line separating efficiency from something out of *Blade Runner*.

Less dystopian was the scene at Zume Pizza, in Mountain View, California, where I watched an assembly line of robots spread sauce on dough and lift pies into the oven. Thanks to its early investment in automation, Zume spends only 10 percent of its budget on labor, compared with 25 percent at a typical restaurant operation. The humans it does employ are given above-average wages and perks: Pay starts at \$15 an hour and comes with full benefits; Zume also offers tuition reimbursement and tutoring in coding and data science. I talked with a worker named Freedom Carlson, who doesn't have a college degree. She started in the kitchen, where she toiled alongside the robots. She has since been promoted to culinary-program administrator, and is learning to navigate the software that calculates nutritional facts for Zume pizzas.

This has typically been the story of automation: Technology obviates old jobs, but it also creates new ones—the job title *radiology technician*, for example, has been included in census data only since 1990. Transitioning to a new type of work is never easy, however, and it

might be particularly difficult for many in the service sector. New jobs that arise after a technological upheaval tend to require skills that laid-off workers don't have, and not all employers will be nearly as progressive as Zume. A college education helps insulate workers from automation, enabling them to develop the kind of expertise, judgment, and problem-solving abilities that robots can't match. Yet nearly 80 percent of workers in food preparation and service-related occupations have a high-school diploma or less, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.


The better hope for workers might be that automation helps the food-service and accommodation sector continue to thrive. Panera's Hurst told me that because of its new kiosks, and an app that allows online ordering, the chain is now processing more orders overall, which means it needs more total workers to fulfill customer demand. Starbucks patrons who use the chain's app return more frequently than those who don't, the company has said, and the greater efficiency that online ordering allows has boosted sales at busy stores during peak hours. Starbucks employed 8 percent more people in the U.S. in 2016 than it did in 2015, the year it launched the app.

Of course, whether automation is a net positive for workers in restaurants and hotels, and not just a competitive advantage for one chain over another (more business for machine-enabled Panera, less for the Luddites at the local deli), will depend on whether an improved customer experience makes Americans more likely to dine out

and stay at hotels, rather than brown-bagging it or finding an Airbnb.

That could be the case. James Bessen, an economist at Boston University School of Law, found that as the number of ATMs in America increased fivefold from 1990 to 2010, the number of bank tellers also grew. Bessen believes that ATMs drove demand for consumer banking: No longer constrained by a branch's limited hours, consumers used banking services more frequently, and people who were unbanked opened accounts to take advantage of the new technology. Although each branch employed fewer tellers, banks added more branches, so the number of tellers grew overall. And as machines took over many basic cash-handling tasks, the nature of the tellers' job changed. They were now tasked with talking to customers about products—a certificate of deposit, an auto loan—which in turn made them more valuable to their employers. "It's not clear that automation in the restaurant industry will lead to job losses," Bessen told me.

My experience with service bots was mixed. The day I visited the Aloft Cupertino, its robot butler was on the fritz. And when I asked Marriott's new artificial-intelligence-powered chat system to look up my rewards number, it said it would get a human to help me with that. Neither interaction left me anticipating more-frequent hotel stays. As I wrote this column, however, Starbucks went from being a weekly splurge to a daily routine. The convenience of the app was difficult to pass up: I could place my order while on the bus and find my drink waiting for me when I got to the counter.

One day, I arrived at my local store to find that it had instituted a new policy requiring customers to retrieve mobile orders from a barista. (Apparently things can get a little hairy at the mobile-pickup station during rush hour at some stores.) I didn't like the change; I'd grown accustomed to frictionless transactions. I started going to a different Starbucks location nearby, where I could pick up my coffee without the interference of a fellow human being. 

One robot, Flippy, can flip 150 burgers an hour.



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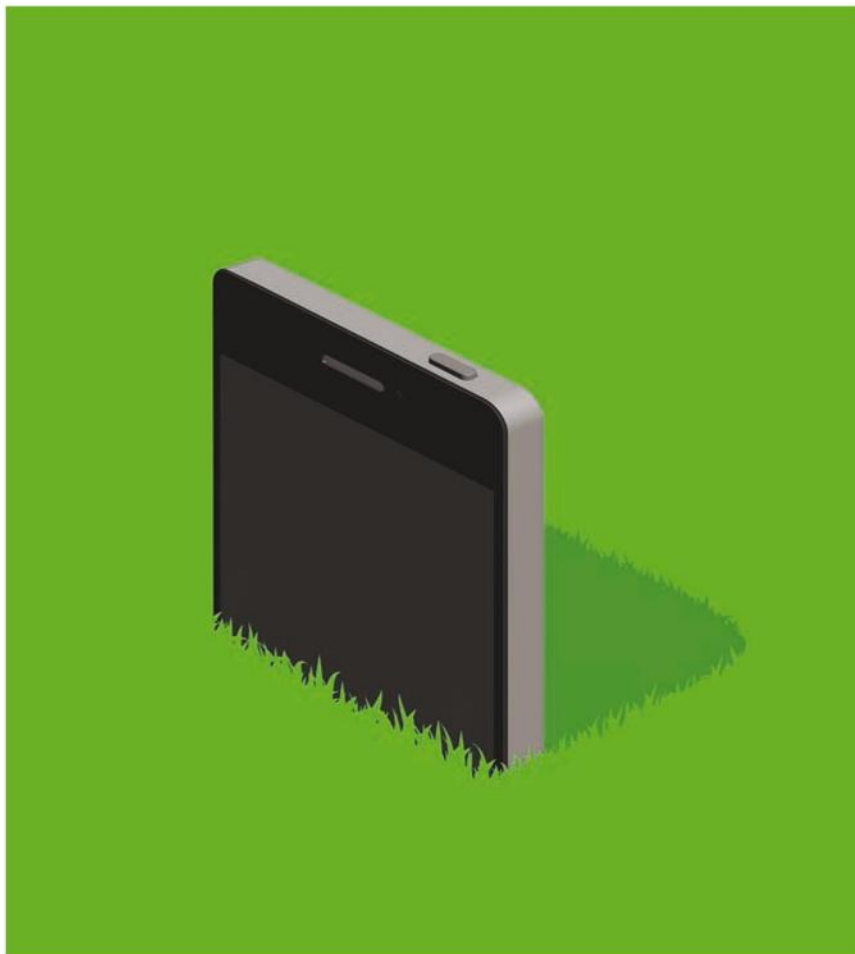
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• TECHNOLOGY

When Death Pings

How an app's grim reminders helped me find inner peace

BY BIANCA BOSKER

FIVE TIMES A DAY for the past three months, an app called WeCroak has been telling me I'm going to die. It does not mince words. It surprises me at unpredictable intervals, always with the same blunt message: "Don't forget, you're going to die."

Sending these notices is WeCroak's sole function. They arrive "at random times and at any moment just like death," according to the app's website, and are accompanied by a quote meant to encourage "contemplation, conscious breathing or meditation." Though the

quotes are not intended to induce nausea and despair, this is sometimes their effect. I'm eating lunch with my husband one afternoon when WeCroak presents a line from the Zen poet Gary Snyder: "The other side of the 'sacred' is the sight of your beloved in the underworld, dripping with maggots."

I welcomed these grisly reminders into my life in the hope that WeCroak, along with half a dozen other mindfulness apps, could help transform my iPhone from a stressful distraction into a source of clarity and peace. According to a study by a research firm called Dscout,

Americans check their phone an average of 76 times a day for a cumulative two and a half hours—and while many would like to cut back, simple willpower isn't always enough. Amid growing concerns over our phone fixation, Silicon Valley has, in typical fashion, proposed technology as the solution; there are now more than 1,000 mindfulness apps designed to help us disconnect.

"You can become a master of this powerful device rather than a slave to it," says Michael Acton Smith, a co-founder of Calm, an app that offers guided meditation and soothing soundtracks and has surpassed 14 million downloads. Headspace, a rival app that provides meditation sessions led by a former Buddhist monk, has been downloaded more than 18 million times. There are apps to improve your breathing; apps that track the time you spend on other apps; and apps to teach you to be mindful while running, eating, giving birth, browsing the web, or, per the Buddhify app, "waiting around." I decided to test whether technology could be both malady and cure.

On a beautiful morning this past summer, I woke up to an email—subject line: "Death Makes You Happy"—that I initially mistook for Silicon Valley satire. It was a pitch for WeCroak, which was inspired by a "famous Bhutanese folk saying" averring that "to be a truly happy person, one must contemplate death five times daily." "Because we are either unable or unwilling to live a rural life in the picturesque Himalayas where time for contemplation may happen more easily," the email explained, the app's creators had developed the next best thing: a 99-cent app that would "foster happiness" and "cultivate mindfulness" by pestering users with reminders about death. I installed it mostly to see whether it was a joke.

In fact, WeCroak is the very real passion project of Ian Thomas, a 27-year-old freelance app developer, and Hansa Bergwall, a 35-year-old publicist, who met through Airbnb. Last spring, Thomas, who is based in California, rented a room in Bergwall's Brooklyn apartment while taking an

artificial-intelligence class, and one evening, Bergwall brought up the Bhutanese maxim. He'd come across it the previous year while researching Himalayan ashrams, and had attempted to put it into practice. "I would get to the end of the day and realize I'd forgotten the entire day to think about death," Bergwall told me. "And it occurred to me, *This is so easy: I could just get my phone to remind me.*" Thomas was intrigued by the idea and began building a prototype that very night. Six weeks later, on July 26, WeCroak debuted on Apple's App Store. (An Android version is not yet available.) The app has since been downloaded 84 times.

ONE IMPEDIMENT to its success: Next to other mindfulness apps, WeCroak is a serious downer. Whereas Calm greets me with uplifting prompts to "take a deep breath," WeCroak interrupts to warn that "the grave has no sunny corners." (This is tame compared with traditional Buddhist meditation fodder: A foundational fifth-century text suggests viewing the 10 stages of a decomposing corpse—including "the bloated," "the festering," "the bleeding," "the worm-infested," and "the hacked and scattered"—and Buddhists from Southeast Asia use YouTube to share videos of cadavers turning black or crawling with flies.)

Still, I do not immediately delete WeCroak, and by the fourth week, I begin to enjoy its company. Trembling with nerves before giving a talk to a group of strangers, I get a ping: "Don't forget, you're going to die." What's a little public speaking next to the terrifying finality of my inevitable demise? Soon after, I'm at a friend's wedding, sulking about an impending deadline, when WeCroak again reminds me, "Don't forget, you're going to die." I loosen up, finish my champagne, and opt to enjoy myself. With each day the app sounds less like a Hobbesian warning—"Life is short"—and more like an Oprah-esque affirmation: "Life's too short!"

The simplicity of WeCroak also begins to charm me. This is not an app on which I can linger. It has no feed, no

option to browse previous quotes, no way to procrastinate. (The only button on the app, "About," repeats what users already know: This is WeCroak, and it sends you five quotes a day.) Bergwall and Thomas contemplated adding other features, such as links to learn more about the quotes' authors or a sliding scale to decrease the frequency of notifications. But they ultimately nixed everything beyond the basic template in an effort, Thomas told me, to "disengage people as quickly as possible."

Despite buzzing me five times a day, WeCroak comes to feel less obtrusive than the other mindfulness apps on my phone. These apps are meant to be an antidote to Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram—the sorts of digital media that, according to my Calm meditation coach, are creating "an epidemic of overwhelm." The irony is that although mindfulness apps promise to help us disengage from our devices, they also have incentives to keep us tethered—and they use many of the same techniques as the Facebooks of the world.

"Our community generates more meditation minutes than any other app," boasts Insight Timer, sounding distinctly un-Zen. That app automatically displays an activity feed ("Karen is meditating to Sacred Journey of the Shamans Gong") that exploits our innate desire to socialize and distracts us from actually meditating. Calm, meanwhile, emails me every few days to say, for example, "Christi from Calm" is "here to support you on your mindfulness journey"—a tactic, called an "external trigger," meant to nudge users back to the app. Headspace conditions users by rewarding consistent meditators with adorable animations, such as a pink brain doing push-ups, that reinforce desirable behavior. All of these apps incorporate a "streak" feature that, by tracking consecutive days of meditation, taps into users' competitive drive.

WeCroak, in its inability to do anything besides a single, highly specific

task, offers a model for designing software that respects our attention rather than inducing glassy-eyed scrolling. So many online services try to hook us through what Tristan Harris, a former Google ethicist, has called a "bottomless bowl" of content—auto-play videos and clickbait and continuously repopulating feeds. (I profiled Harris for this magazine in 2016.) "What if we designed devices for quick in-and-out uses, not endless interactions?" asks Harris's nonprofit advocacy organization, Time Well Spent, on its website. The result might resemble WeCroak.

A Time Well Spent survey of 200,000 iPhone users found that people spend an average of 20 minutes a day on Insight Timer, and 10 minutes a day on Calm. According to Thomas, people spend an average of 36 seconds a day on WeCroak.

Over time, WeCroak changes the way I relate to my phone. As I scroll through Instagram or refresh Twitter, WeCroak interrupts with the sobering reminder that it is not just my attention these other apps are consuming, but chunks of my life. This was Bergwall's ambition: Having struggled with a Candy Crush addiction, he hoped WeCroak would restore his power over his device. "I've gotten angry at my phone and all the apps on it one too many times," he told me. "I wanted to do something about it, take matters into my own hands, and create something that would reclaim it as a space that wouldn't just knock me off track, but also put me back on."

I've come to embrace WeCroak as the anti-app. Social-media platforms seduce by providing a distraction from the tedium of everyday life—the awkward silences, boring waits in line, and unpleasant thoughts, chief among them the fact that we, and everyone we love, will kick the bucket. WeCroak makes escapism feel futile: We're all going to die. The phone buzzes for thee. **A**

Bianca Bosker is the author of Cork Dork and Original Copies. She is the former executive tech editor at HuffPost.

WeCroak's message is always the same: "Don't forget, you're going to die."

The CULTURE FILE



THE OMNIVORE

The New New Testament

David Bentley Hart's translation recaptures the awkward, multivoiced power of the original.

BY JAMES PARKER

IN THE BEGINNING WAS ... well, what? A clap of the divine hands and a poetic shock wave? Or an itchy node of nothingness inconceivably scratching itself into somethingness? In the beginning was the Word, says the Gospel according to John—a lovely statement of the case, as it's always seemed to me. A pre-temporal syllable swelling to utterance in the mouth of the universe, spoken once and heard forever: God's power chord, if you like. For David Bentley Hart, however, whose mind-bending translation of the New Testament was published in October, the *Word*—as a word—does not suffice: He finds it to be “a curiously bland and impenetrable

designation” for the heady concept expressed in the original Greek of the Gospels as *Logos*. The Chinese word *Tao* might get at it, Hart tells us, but English has nothing with quite the metaphysical flavor of *Logos*, the particular sense of a formative moral energy diffusing itself, without diminution, through space and time. So he throws up his hands and leaves it where it is: “In the origin there was the Logos...”

It's significant, this act of lexical surrender, because if you'd bet on anyone to come up with a fancy English word for *Logos*, it'd be David Bentley Hart. Vocabulary is not his problem, unless you think he has too much of it. A scholar, theologian, and cultural commentator, Hart is also a stylist; or

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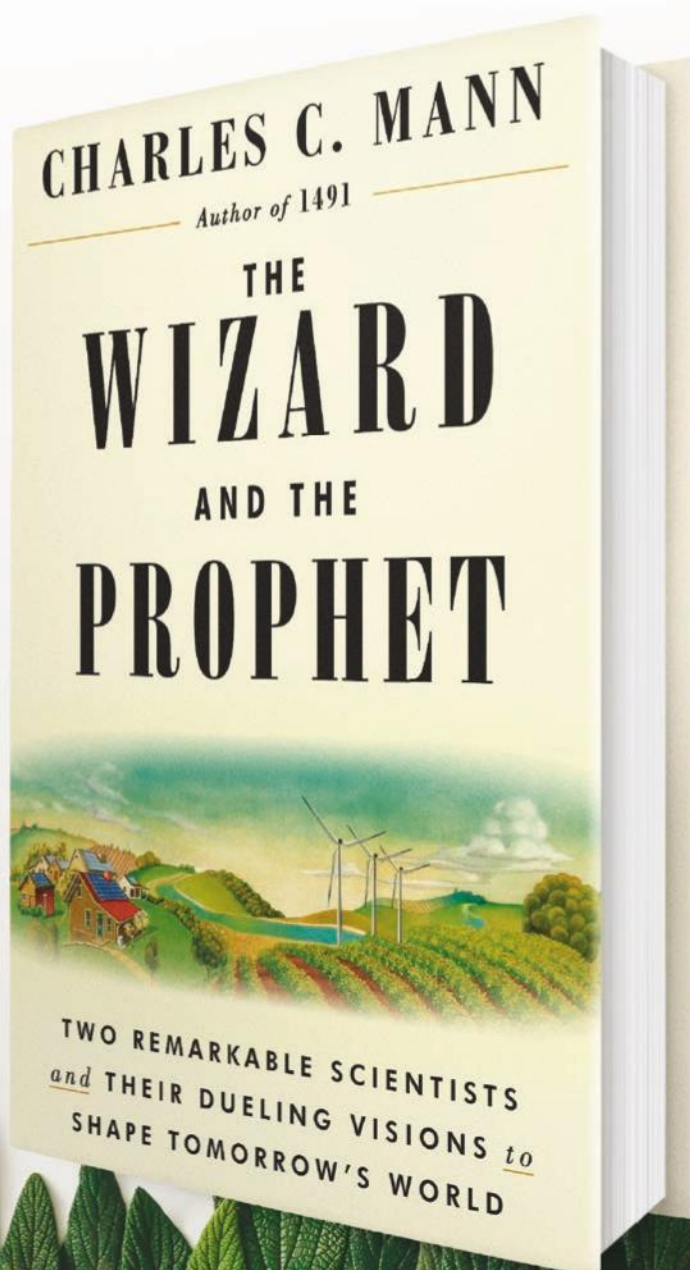
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—ELIZABETH KOLBERT,
author of *The Sixth Extinction*

**“SHOWCASES
AN IMPORTANT
NEW KIND OF
FUTURISM,**

which looks to the
past to understand how
we'll survive.”

—ANNALEE NEWITZ,
Editor, *Ars Technica*

12 KNOFF

rather, the prickly and slightly preening polemical exhibition that is his style is indivisible from his role as a scholarly and theologically oriented cultural commentator. Like G. K. Chesterton, he has one essential argument: that God is the foundation of our being and that every human life therefore has its beginning and its end in eternity. He rehearses this argument in numberless witty variations against whichever non-God ideology happens to slouch beneath his pen: materialism, scientism, consumerism, pornographism ... And he can sound a Chestertonian note. "My chief purpose," he wrote in 2013's *The Experience of God*, "is not to advise atheists on what I think they should believe; I want merely to make sure that they have a clear concept of what it is they claim not to believe."

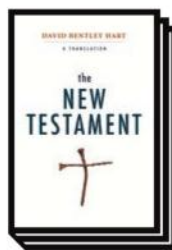
Unlike Chesterton—and this is how you know he's an early-21st-century guy, someone with Wi-Fi—Hart is extremely rude. Richard Dawkins, "zoologist and tireless tractarian," has "an embarrassing incapacity for philosophical reasoning"; Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* is "extravagantly callow"; and Dan Brown's heretical *The Da Vinci Code* is "surely the most lucrative novel ever written by a borderline illiterate." (All this from the first one and a half pages of 2009's *Atheist Delusions*.) He once proposed, as a thought experiment, that bioethicists such as the late Joseph Fletcher ("almost comically vile") be purged from the gene pool: "Academic ethicists ... constitute perhaps the single most useless element in society. If reproduction is not a right but a social function, should any woman be allowed to bring such men into the world?"

So what has he done to the New Testament, this bristling one-man band of a Christian literatus? The surprising aim, Hart tells us in his introduction, was to be as bare-bones and—where appropriate—unsqueamishly prosaic as he can. The New Testament, after all, is not a store of ancient wonders like the Hebrew Bible. It's a grab bag of reportage, rumor, folk memory, and on-the-hoof mysticism produced by regular people, everyday babblers and clunkers, under the pressure of a supremely irregular event—namely, the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So *that*, says Hart, is what it should sound like. "Again and again," he insists, "I have elected to produce an almost pitilessly literal translation; many of my departures from received practices are simply my efforts to make the original text as visible as possible through the palimpsest of its translation ... Where an author has written bad Greek ... I have written bad English." Herein lies the fascination of this thing: its deliberate, one might say defiant, rawness and lowbrow-ness, as produced by a decidedly overcooked highbrow.

The CultureFile

THE OMNIVORE

"Where an author has written bad Greek ... I have written bad English."



THE NEW
TESTAMENT: A
TRANSLATION
DAVID BENTLEY HART
Yale University Press

Let's zoom in on Mark, the roughest and tersest of the Gospels. (Hippolytus of Rome, in the third century, called Mark "stump fingered"—possibly a physical descriptor but more likely, I think, a comment on his prose.) Here's how Monsignor Ronald Knox handled Mark 1:40–41 in his 1945 translation: "Then a leper came up to him, asking for his aid; he knelt at his feet and said, If it be thy will, thou hast power to make me clean. Jesus was moved with pity; he held out his hand and touched him, and said, It is my will; be thou made clean." Hart's version: "And a leper comes to him, imploring him and falling to his knees, saying to him, 'If you wish it, you are able to cleanse me.' And, moved inwardly with compassion, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and says to him, 'I wish it, be clean.'" There's a stumbling, almost rustically blundering urgency to this, the verb tenses tripping over one another; beside it the Knox translation feels smoothed out, falsely archaized, too rhetorical. In Hart we can hear more clearly both the leper's challenge—*heal me!*—and the quickness and intimacy of Jesus's response.

A more rugged Mark, then, but not exactly "bad English." For that, we must go to Hart's version of Revelation, a book that is, he opines, "if judged purely by the normal standards of literary style and good taste, almost unremittingly atrocious." Indeed his rendering of the first line—"A revelation from Jesus the Anointed, which God gave him, to show his slaves what things must occur extremely soon"—is quite aggressively maladroit. *What things must occur extremely soon.* The book as a whole, freshly ranty and ungrammatical, seems more of a schizoid pileup than ever. But even amid Revelation's welter of imagery, Hart maintains his artistic intent, or at least a radically inspired pedantry. Look what he does with the metallic locusts of Revelation 9, the ones with long, womanly hair and wings that buzz and clatter like a charging army. "They had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron," says the King James Version. Hart, fantastically, instead gives them "thoraxes like cuirasses of iron." Far more monstrous, far more strange. It's the slurred half-rhyme of *thoraxes* and *cuirasses*; it's the crunch of the ancient Greek against the prissy medieval French; it's the sheer freaking oddness.

Oddness, in fact, might be the signature—the breakthrough, even—of Hart's translation. No committee prose here, no compromises or waterings-down: This is one man in grim submission to the kinks and quirks of the New Testament's authors—to the neurology, as it were, of each book's style—and making his own decisions. At the wedding feast at Cana, Hart's

Jesus addresses Mary, his mother, as “madam,” for perhaps the first time ever. “Dearly beloved,” runs the King James Version of 1 Peter 2:11, “I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims ...” Hart is more immigration-conscious: “Beloved ones, I exhort you as sojourners and resident aliens ...”

“The sole literary claim I make for my version,” writes Hart, “is that my mulish stubbornness regarding the idiosyncrasies of the text allowed me to ‘do the police in different voices,’ so to speak.” That’s no small claim, actually, and it takes a little unpacking. The idea of “doing the police in different voices” is one of the genetic strands of early modernism: “You mightn’t think it,” says the virtuous Betty Higden of her foster son Sloppy in Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*, “but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices.” T. S. Eliot took this last line—with its undertone of channelings and polyphonic possessions—as the working title for an early draft of *The Waste Land*. The life of Jesus in the New Testament reaches us via four voices, four accounts that overlap, diverge, corroborate, and destabilize one another. It’s all very contingent and fractured, all very partial and mortal, all rather amazingly modern in technique. By putting us closer to these differences, to the distinctive sound of each voice—the heavy-breathing rush of Mark, or the bureaucratic polish of Luke—Hart is doing something important.

I hope I’m getting across the beautiful paradox of his New Testament—that it is simultaneously a kind of feline, Nabokovian modernist project, a meta-text in a matrix of eccentric scholarship, and a wild rush at the original upset, the original amazement, the earthshakingly bad grammar of the Good News. “And opening his mouth he taught them, saying: ‘How blissful the destitute, abject in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of the heavens.’” This is from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’s gently administered program for pulling down thrones, decapitating idols, and jamming eternity into the present tense. Hart opted for *blissful* over the traditional *blessed*, he writes, because the original Greek, *makarios*, “suggested a special intensity of delight and freedom from care that the more shopworn renderings no longer quite capture.” So now we hear it, and are shocked by it: not the ambiguous benediction of *blessed*, but the actual bliss, right now, of destitution, the emancipation of everything being stripped away. It comes at us like white light, this generosity of emptiness, and because we’re not angels, we shield our eyes. **A**

James Parker, an Atlantic contributing editor, is sharing the Omnivore column with Caitlin Flanagan through the summer.

FILM

Cinema’s Drollest Hipster

Finland’s most famous filmmaker, Aki Kaurismäki, takes on immigration and its discontents.

BY TERENCE RAFFERTY

A SMALL MAN, a refugee, his face and clothes blackened by coal, emerges from the darkness of a ship’s hold at the beginning of Aki Kaurismäki’s new film, *The Other Side of Hope*, and although the coal dust gets showered off a little later, the grit of politics won’t wash away. The stowaway, a young Syrian named Khaled Ali (Sherwan Haji), is not political himself—he neither knows nor especially cares who launched the missile that wiped out most of his family in Aleppo. “Government troops, rebels, U.S.A., Russia, Hezbollah, or ISIS,” he says, naming the suspects with a weary shake of his head.

But as he discovers when he applies for asylum in Finland, he is no longer merely himself, an unassuming mechanic far from home and searching for the sister who was separated from him at one of the many borders he’s crossed. He is now a problem, something that requires the machinery of bureaucracy to creak into motion. There are photos to be taken, questions to be asked, forms to be completed, dormitories to be filled with those who, like Khaled, have the misfortune to come from dangerous places. Even before he presents himself at the police station on his first morning in Helsinki, Khaled has already learned that he will be looked at with suspicion by many Finns and with outright hostility by some; a bunch of goons calling themselves the Finnish Liberation Army threatens him almost as soon as he arrives on the unfamiliar city’s streets. For him, a Middle Eastern refugee in Europe in 2017, the ability simply to be himself—to enjoy a meal, a beer, a cigarette, a comfortable bed, some music every now and then, unencumbered by his refugee identity—feels like an impossible hope, a luxury. Politics has stuck to him, stained him like original sin. He *is* politics, now.

Aki Kaurismäki has not, until the past few years, seemed a terribly political man either (although he did boycott the 2003 Academy Awards as a protest against the war in Iraq). For most of his three-and-a-half-decade career as a filmmaker, he’s been content to turn his camera on the lives of taciturn working-class characters with modest pleasures and low expectations, wherever he finds them—usually in his native Finland, but sometimes in France or England or America or Estonia. Nobody in his pictures ever appears to feel quite at home anywhere; every Kaurismäki film, no matter where it’s set, has the what-the-hell restlessness of a road movie.

But everywhere, even in the direst circumstances, he and his comically stoic characters somehow manage to locate sources of comfort, of ordinary ease. Cheap cafés and bars, boxy old portable radios, record players, accordions, music of all kinds (especially country blues and rock and roll), cigarettes, booze, and dogs—these are the elements of the Kaurismäki Cinematic Universe, the things his characters savor, usually

in silence. (In most of his films, people smoke a lot more than they talk.) All of these creature comforts are present in *The Other Side of Hope*, too. But Khaled, because he is no longer just himself, can't find any solace in them, as Kaurismäki's people are supposed to do. The wrongness of that state of affairs is pretty clearly what has turned this generally apolitical artist into a (dry, tight-lipped) firebrand. For Kaurismäki, the institutional denial of small pleasures is a call to arms.

HIS PASSION ABOUT the plight of today's refugees is unmistakable, though American audiences, who are largely unfamiliar with his work, might be a little puzzled by the simplicity and apparent serenity of his cinematic manner. Kaurismäki doesn't go in for big dramatic moments. And although immigration is a hot topic these days, in both Europe and the United States, and many moviegoers are rightly suspicious of filmmakers who feel the need to weigh in on current political issues, there isn't a whiff of Oscar-seeking opportunism in this picture. Kaurismäki has been outraged about the situation of refugees and immigrants for a long time. In a 2007 interview with the film scholar Andrew Nestingen, he raised the issue practically out of the blue, and delivered this pithy rant:

The real disgrace here is Finland's refugee policy, which is shameful. We refuse refugee status on the flimsiest of grounds and send people back to secure places like Darfur, Iraq, and Somalia. "It's perfectly safe, go ahead." Our policy is a stain among the Nordic nations. Shameful.

His first film on the issue, *Le Havre*, came out four years later. In that lovely movie, the beleaguered immigrant is a young teenage boy from Gabon named Idrissa (Blondin Miguel), who arrives at the French port of Le Havre in a shipping container, packed in with about a dozen other desperate pilgrims. He's hoping to make his way to his mother, in London. On the run, he has the good fortune to meet a peculiarly jaunty shoe-shine man named Marcel Marx (André Wilms), who's something of a wanderer himself. He was once, he tells the boy, a bohemian in Paris, before washing up in Le Havre and settling down. (Those who have seen Kaurismäki's gloriously funny 1992 comedy, *La Vie de Bohème*, will recognize Marcel as the spectacularly unsuccessful writer being evicted from his apartment in the movie's opening scenes.) He takes Idrissa in and, with the help of friends and neighbors who might have been at home in a good populist French film of the 1930s, hides him from the authorities.

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"I think the more pessimistic I feel about life, the more optimistic the films should be."

The realities that *Le Havre* addresses are grim, but the movie is at heart a fairy tale, of a sort that Kaurismäki has been known to make. The amnesiac hero of his Cannes-award-winning *The Man Without a Past* (2002) is also a kind of refugee—a person without papers or means of support who nonetheless manages to survive, to find love, and to live more or less happily ever after. "I always decide to put a sad ending," Kaurismäki once said, "but then I feel pity for my characters and put at the last moment a happy ending."

Actually, Kaurismäki's endings tend to alternate between happy and sad from film to film, a darker one always following a sunnier one, as if to atone for unwarranted optimism. His next movie after *The Man Without a Past*, a noirish crime thriller called *Lights in the Dusk* (2006), tells the harsh story of a lonesome but hopeful security guard framed for a jewelry heist, sent to prison, and ultimately discarded by society—no fairy-tale resolution for him. Similarly, the final scenes of *The Other Side of Hope* leave Khaled with a far more uncertain future than Idrissa has at the conclusion of *Le Havre*. The African boy sails off like the lovers in Kaurismäki's shaggy-dog romance, *Ariel* (1988); the last time we see the Syrian refugee, he's still in Helsinki, with no prospects and only a scruffy stray mutt for company. The movie leaves us hanging, wondering what might lie on the other side of this unfortunate man's dwindling hopes.

Le Havre, of course, is a vision of possibility, and its point of view is less that of the frightened fugitive than that of his resourceful, lapsed-bohemian savior. If the charming tale has a moral, it's that we should all be more like Marcel. But the story of *The Other Side of Hope* is told primarily from the perspective of the refugee as he tries to navigate the treacherous waters of Finnish society. There's human kindness here as well, mostly embodied by a beefy middle-aged restaurateur named Wikström (Sakari Kuosmanen, a Kaurismäki regular), who gives Khaled a job and a place to sleep: a windowless storage space where Wikström, a former shirt salesman, used to keep his inventory.

Wikström is an unlikely-looking patron, but he's embarking on a new life too. The restaurant, a dodgy establishment called the Golden Pint, is his hope for a better future. (The restaurant scenes in the second half of *The Other Side of Hope*—particularly a sequence in which Wikström and his frazzled staff attempt to reinvent the Golden Pint as a sushi bar—supply most of the movie's distinctively Kaurismäkian comedy, and rescue it from the looming threat of pathos.) But throughout, the filmmaker's focus is on Khaled, whose



troubles are more consequential than Wikström's and whose options are scander. In the end, being like Marcel, or Wikström, might not be enough.

This is as close to despair as Kaurismäki gets, and although it's not an entirely unaccustomed place for him to be—his first solo film as a director was a modern-day version of *Crime and Punishment* (1983), after all—it's probably not where he thought he'd wind up at 60, after a long career as his country's most famous filmmaker and international cinema's drollest hipster comedian (sorry, Jim Jarmusch). Early in 2017, he announced that *The Other Side of Hope*, which he'd originally planned as the middle film of a trilogy he'd begun with *Le Havre*, would in fact be his last movie. A few months later he walked this back, with typical wry self-deprecation, in a *Guardian* interview: "I always say that."

PART OF KAURISMÄKI'S APPEAL is that the dark and light sides of his sensibility are in constant conflict in his movies—not a battle to the death, exactly, but something more like a messy, fumbling exchange of ineffectual punches at the end of a long night in a bar. One of his funniest pictures, *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990), is about a man who is unable to kill himself and hires a hit man to do the deed for him. But he falls in love, suddenly and totally, before the contract has been fulfilled and, with something to live for now, goes on the lam from his lethal employee. Kaurismäki's most tragic movie, the silent black-and-white melodrama *Juha* (1999), has moments of goofy humor and a tone that sustains a perilous balance

of parody and homage (mostly to F. W. Murnau's 1927 classic, *Sunrise*). He's an artist who embraces his own contradictions.

And that's why, improbable though it may seem, Aki Kaurismäki is the right filmmaker to take on this particular political issue, to find both the tragedy and the comedy in the subject of immigration and its discontents. The question for him, as it should be for all citizens of the civilized world, is how we assimilate different points of view, different ways of life, without losing ourselves. That's a process he knows intimately, from his career-long skirmishes with himself in his films: his attempt to reconcile his vague, humanist politics with his temperamental anarchism; his austere visual style with his taste for dopey jokes; his emotional reserve with his desire to believe in romance; his general pessimism with his odd, bright flashes of optimism. (He once said, "I think the more pessimistic I feel about life, the more optimistic the films should be.") If he can live with—and make art out of—all those wild discontinuities, surely his fellow Finns can live with a few displaced Iraqis and Syrians, his latest movie seems to say.

Sure, that's simplistic, maybe even naive, but this is the kind of simplicity that political discourse sometimes needs, and the kind of naïveté that movies, from Murnau's and Jean Renoir's and Jean Vigo's to Kaurismäki's, are awfully good at. Artists aren't always sophisticated thinkers about matters philosophical or political, and for the most part they don't have to be. Which doesn't mean that their work is completely innocent of philosophy or politics. Artists, filmmakers in particular, express their ideas on these subjects by means of the difficult act of being themselves—or rather, of finding themselves in the characters they dream up and the landscapes they move through, crossing border after border until they end up someplace they didn't know they'd been heading for.

Kaurismäki made the choice, when he picked up a camera for the first time, long ago, to spend his life looking for himself that way, the artist's way. In *The Other Side of Hope* he extends a hand to those who, like Khaled, are *involuntary* pilgrims—migrants to places where they are less, not more, themselves. It's a gesture, small but meaningful, like Khaled's Iraqi roommate offering him a (stolen) cigarette on his first day in Helsinki. Khaled has a fleeting moment of pleasure, irreducibly personal; the smoke goes in and out of his lungs, and no one else's. Such small gestures, the movie makes us realize, are as political as human acts can be. **A**

Terrence Rafferty is the author of The Thing Happens, a collection of writings about movies.



BOOKS

Listening to Jellyfish

Why blooms of the bloodless, brainless creatures inspire visions of environmental apocalypse

BY REBECCA GIGGS

IN MY MID-20S, I spent three months living in Broome, a coastal township in Western Australia famous for its moonrises, pink beaches, and pearl farms. Each morning during what is known locally as “the buildup” (the hot, muggy weeks heralding the wet season), I would stuff a towel in a bag and trudge out to where the red pindan soil—distinctive to the Kimberley region—marbles powdery dunes, longing to dunk my body in the postcard

sea. Often, I could go no farther than the water’s edge. Signs pitched by lifeguards along the beach showed a stick figure lashed by a mass of tentacles: Irukandji jellyfish.

By midday, the mercury might have drifted above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and still no one would dare to even dabble in the shallows of the jade ocean—corduroyed by waves—knowing that Irukandji had been detected. Back from the shoreline, a few tourists resolutely sweated their silhouettes onto beach chairs. If the notices were plucked from the sand in the afternoon, a tense choreography would ensue. Each heat-strained person would approach the surf and make an elaborate pantomime of applying sunscreen or stretching out hamstrings, hoping not to have to be the first to get in.

The most common Irukandji, *Carukia barnesi*, are the size of a chickpea, and because they’re colorless, in the ocean they’re more or less invisible. The smaller ones might appear to you as the residue of a sneeze. The Irukandji’s translucent bell, shaped like a tiny boxing glove, trails four tentacles, delicate as cotton thread and about three feet long. The jellyfish’s sting

doesn’t hurt overmuch. The pain is perhaps equivalent to a mild static zap from a metal doorknob—hardly even enough to make you want to suck your finger. The *C. barnesi* does not leave red welts, as other jellyfish do. You might miss the prick of its microscopic, stinging darts. You might think it’s just the start of sunburn.

Worst-case scenario: You’re dead by the following sunset. There are thought to be 25 species of Irukandji. One species, *Malo kingi*, is commonly known as “the king slayer.” After the initial sting comes a procession of ever more dreadful symptoms: back pain, agitation, the sensation of crawling skin, vomiting. The heart can become arrhythmic. Fluid may build up in and around the lungs. Patients “beg their doctors to kill them, just to get it over with,” the marine biologist Lisa-ann Gershwin told ABC Radio National in 2007.

That desperation is often accompanied by one of the more striking indications of contact with an Irukandji jellyfish: a sense of impending doom. To the afflicted person, nothing seems likely to alleviate distress, no medical professional offers hope. The swimmer might not have seen or felt the sting, but if a touch point can be identified, the treatment is to splash the area with vinegar to neutralize any nematocyst cells on the skin's surface. Then, if the malady progresses, morphine and antihypertensive drugs are administered. Very few people stung by an Irukandji will be so unlucky as to die, but at least one victim has compared the latter phases of envenomation to childbirth.

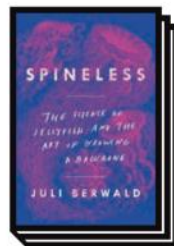
THERE MAY BE as many as 4,800 different species of jellyfish. Not every kind possesses a sting that is perceptible to humans. Individual jellyfish are fragile creatures. Being composed largely of soft collagen, they easily tear. In a net or bunted along a reef by a storm surge, jellyfish are soon shredded. Washed ashore, they evaporate, leaving only a remnant halo of mesoglea (the jellyfish's gluey core). *Organized water*: That was one 19th-century naturalist's minifying description of the jellyfish. The creature's wispy anatomy confers on it the specific beauty of the readily destroyed, a quality that elicits comparisons to things that are empty and lambent—light bulbs, dropped lingerie, a nebular constellation, the cellophane wrappers from hotel soaps, dribbles of wax.

How appealing it is to fashion metaphors out of a jellyfish. The animal is all stimulus, sensuousness without consciousness. Such evanescent creatures pose none of the anthropomorphizing complications of, say, octopuses. An octopus will regard you with features that resemble a face, and an intelligence that we've been advised is akin to that of dogs and dolphins. Most jellyfish are see-through, so we can tell they don't have minds of their own to speak of. Eyeless, bloodless, brainless—jellyfish are more than alien enough to comfortably objectify.

Their delicacy notwithstanding, in recent decades jellyfish species have come to be thought of as the durable and opportunistic inheritors of our imperiled seas. Jellyfish blooms—the intermittent, and now widely reported, flourishing of vast swarms—are held by many to augur the depletion of marine biomes; they are seen as a signal that the oceans have been overwarmed, overfished, acidified, and befouled. These invasions are sometimes discussed as if they had the potential to culminate in ecophagy, the devouring of an ecosystem in gross. (*Phage* derives from the ancient Greek word meaning “to eat up.”)

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One of the more striking indications of contact with an Irukandji jellyfish is a sense of impending doom.



SPINELESS:
THE SCIENCE
OF JELLYFISH
AND THE ART OF
GROWING
A BACKBONE
JULI BERWALD
Riverhead

The vision—hat tipped to science fiction—is of the planet's oceans transformed into something like an aspic terrine. In waters thickened by the gummy mucus of living and dead jellyfish, other sea life will be smothered. Because jellyfish recall the capsules of single-celled protozoa, this eventuality invites portrayal as a devolution of the marine world—a reversion to the “primordial soup.”

The unraveling back into the past is a theme that proves common to the apocalyptic arc of how we imagine environmental change. A jellyfish-dominated sea is conceived of as the sea of prehistory, the preserve of simple animals—slimes, diatoms, pulsing dabs—and a reminder of a time when anything motile moved as a squiggle, scuttle, or ooze. Jellyfish have been around for at least 500 million years, probably longer. We know that they're older than trees, older than leaves. Paleontologists are quick to point out that because jellyfish are soft-bodied, they don't fossilize the way animals with skeletons or cartilage do, so it's harder to find their imprints or to know how ubiquitous they may have been in ancient seas.

The lesson we're meant to take from all this is that ecological collapse will spawn nothing new. No Boschian hellscape of strange and shuddering hybrids will emerge. Environmental disaster is fundamentally uncreative.

Jellyfish have served as excellent protagonists for this narrative, perhaps because they are as close to automatons as anything in the animal kingdom. The insidiousness of a jellyfish bloom lies in its amassed torpor—a monster more monstrous for lacking a center, each animal stewarded by no more than a basic set of compulsions (light, gravity, food, reproduction). Jellyfish species being widespread, people can also recognize them anywhere. Jellies are found in every sea at nearly every depth, and in many brackish rivers. One type in Antarctica looks like a raw mince patty. The Arctic and other frigid waters are home to the lion's mane, a headless wig of a creature with tentacles that have been measured at about 120 feet. Jellyfish might be primitive animals, but they have an immense carrying capacity for a story that is planetary in scale.

DO JELLYFISH, IN FACT, deserve their reputation as an oceanic menace? Should we view blooms with anticipatory dread? In her memoir, *Spineless: The Science of Jellyfish and the Art of Growing a Backbone*, Juli Berwald embarks on a mission that leads her to challenge the way blooms are popularly characterized. Inspired by a yearning to return to marine science (a professional ambition abandoned after

graduate school, and her relocation to Texas), Berwald proceeds to take apart the evidence underpinning depictions of jellyfish as both passive indicators of sickening seas and drivers of environmental atrophy. The ubiquity of jellyfish, she finds, masks a plurality of stories—some well substantiated, others only speculative. The demonization of jellyfish, as Berwald frames it, correlates with the new visibility of the creatures. As underwater technologies have become more fine-tuned (as well as rugged, functional in the open ocean and the deep sea), jellyfish have swerved into focus. Are their numbers increasing, or are contemporary scientists now capable of observing profusions that once went under the radar? Jellyfish blooms may occur at intervals that pre-date their surveillance—spreading, say, in 20-year cycles. What looks to us like an aberrance could, viewed in a longer time frame, prove natural.

We see many more jellyfish, Berwald points out, not simply because their numbers are greater but because our population is. The proliferation of coastal and subsurface infrastructure for resource extraction, maritime trade, and power generation has provided ample hardscape for jellyfish-polyp nurseries to graft onto. Human industry is in more frequent and sustained contact with many types of sea life. That we see more jellyfish says one thing; that they see more of us is a different matter.

Perhaps the most complex issue Berwald takes on is jellyfish blackouts. Sweden, Scotland, the Philippines, Tokyo, California, and Israel have all suffered intermittent electrical outages caused by jellyfish sucked into the intake pipes and cooling systems of coal-fired and nuclear power stations. (On Luzon, the largest of the Philippine Islands, the crashing grid was mistaken by some for the start of a coup.) Desalination plants likewise have had to go offline when jellyfish have clogged their conduits and filters. The significance of such damage will only increase as on-land freshwater resources degrade and electricity demand grows. In cities experiencing greater temperature extremes, blackouts expose particularly consequential frailties—refrigeration, air-conditioning and heating, and transportation all matter more in hard weather. These jellyfish-human interactions, Berwald suggests, may say less about their encroachment than about ours.

Jellyfish are not universal adapters, and the world's oceans are not all subject to the same set of problems. In *Spineless*, Berwald travels to Spain's Murcia region and takes us to the Mar Menor lagoon, which had become so jellified in 2002 that "you couldn't drive a boat through the water." Here barrel and fried-egg jellyfish are

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The lagoon became so jellified that "you couldn't drive a boat through the water."

pernicious—so much so that they're removed from the sea by the bargeload and dumped into ditches near the airport. But elsewhere, as Berwald shows, jellyfish are key to the life cycles of dependent organisms: Open-ocean jellies can host larvae, fish, and small crustaceans "like shrubs with birds nesting in their boughs."

Some jellyfish thrive in low-oxygen water and can tolerate a wide pH bandwidth. Others so efficiently stir up heavy metals that scientists have proposed using them as mops in contaminated waters. Still other jellyfish appear to be disoriented by upticks in acidity and have no resistance to toxins.

Berwald doesn't rebut the dark jellyfish narrative, but she usefully qualifies it, exploring a diversity of jellyfish responses to harms unevenly distributed throughout the sea. There is no global jellyfish ecophagy. The real bloom, Berwald argues, is in jellyfish science, where the interplay of jellyfish and their ecosystems is only now beginning to be pieced together.

ON A CLOUDY AFTERNOON in London after finishing *Spineless*, I caught the train to the Sea Life Aquarium to see Britain's feted "largest jellyfish experience," in the "Ocean Invaders" exhibit that opened this past spring. With an hour left before closing, kids were elbowing one another aside for the chance to plunge their hands into a wall cavity emitting purple light and draped with plastic tentacles—an opportunity to experience a pretend jellyfish sting. A motion sensor set off the sounds of electric shock, zzz, zzz, and then the kids fell all over the floor, beating their fists on their ribs. One boy snapped his incisors with such force I thought he might throw sparks. "No teeth!" he screamed. "No teeth! How does it eat?!"

A map of the range of jellyfish species on the wall read GLOBAL DOMINATION. As the crowd thinned out, I saw blue blubber jellies from Australia—studded balls like spaniels' chew toys—in an underlit tank that went from red to green to red. I saw the Pacific sea nettle, Vaseline- and cola-colored; I saw jellyfish that looked like the crushed Kleenex swept out of a house of mourners. A plaque boasted that "up to 5,000 jellyfish were bred behind the scenes as Ocean Invaders got ready to open." How strange to think of this swarm, cosseted and captive in so many glass tanks, when beyond the aquarium such a prodigious bloom would be eyed with trepidation, as a jittery forecast for the future of oceans. **A**

Rebecca Giggs is a writer based in Sydney, where she teaches at Macquarie University.



BOOKS

The Storyteller's Trap

Hungary's László Krasznahorkai writes fiction devoid of revelation, resolution, and even periods.

BY NATHANIEL RICH

TO AN INNOCENT BYSTANDER, *The World Goes On* might seem a bland title for a story collection, suggestive of heartwarming tales about good, simple people enduring life's hardships with grit and courage. Seasoned Krasznahorkaians, however, will understand that the title should be read in a tone of mocking, even deranged, sarcasm, followed by a mirthless snort and a forceful expectoration. In László Krasznahorkai's fiction the world never goes on. It is always ending. Or, as Krasznahorkai might write, the world is always ending, bursting into flames, collapsing into itself, exploding, tearing apart, disintegrating, being devoured by nothingness.

This sensibility is announced in the opening lines of the first story, which bears one of Krasznahorkai's proudly obscurantist titles, "Wandering-Standing":

I have to leave this place, because this is not where anyone can be, or where it would be worthwhile to remain, because this is the place—with its intolerable, cold, sad, bleak and deadly weight—from where I must escape ...

This note echoes through the remaining 20 stories, in various shades of darkness, ranging from starless night to oblivion. A scrapbook of representative phrases, each taken from a different story: "foundering in a slough of despond"; "the incidental termination of an excruciating spiritual journey"; "the endgame of the spirit"; "how could I say anything new when there is nothing new under the sun?"; "exploring the dance steps of *saying goodbye to the world*"; "nothing whatsoever exists at all"; "the hope that he would die some day."

László Krasznahorkai—born in 1954 in Gyula, Hungary, a town near the Romanian border best known for its thermal baths, and now living, according to his publisher, “in reclusiveness in the hills of Szentlászló”—is the rare author with a unified subject matter, style, and theme. He writes claustrophobic prose about entrapped characters who suspect that reality is a cruel labyrinth from which it is impossible to escape.

THE RIGOR OF his sensibility has attracted a passionate following among a subset of lettered readers bored with narrative convention and has made him a fashionable reference among novelists asked to praise other novelists. Recent English translations of his work—by John Batki, Otilie Mulzet, and George Szirtes—have won various literature-in-translation prizes, among them the 2015 Man Booker International. Krasznahorkai’s subversions are not unique—he borrows tactics from Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, and Yukio Mishima, writers to whom he acknowledges his debt. But his defiance is especially bracing at a time when the literary novel has become an orthodoxy of its own, its rules as inflexible as those governing any other genre.

Krasznahorkai takes pleasure in holding those rules up to ridicule. He favors abrupt, disorienting plot twists; displays an unflinching enmity toward the possibility of dramatic resolution; and is a devoted practitioner of purposeful obscurity, withholding basic information, such as names of characters and places, to create a sense of mystery. His fiction is a sect that requires suspension of disbelief, patience, and above all submission before readers can reap its austere rewards.

In order to frustrate expectations, one has to create expectations in the first place. Like his stylistic forebears, Krasznahorkai possesses one of fiction’s most valuable skills: He is an excellent writer of premises. His debut novel, *Satantango* (1985), set in an impoverished village populated by desperate grifters and thieves, begins with a series of noir scenarios: a blackmail plot, a double cross, and the promised return of two beloved villagers long believed dead. In *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989), a declining town is visited by a mysterious traveling circus featuring the stuffed corpse of “The Biggest Whale in the World.” In the haunting pair of death-soaked stories that appear under the title *Herman* (1986), a retired game warden at a public park has a crisis of conscience and uses his trapping expertise to hunt the most-dangerous game. But Krasznahorkai soon abandons these plots, thwarting a tidy ending; most of them don’t end at all.

The World Goes On begins with a series of short pieces that are closer to philosophical salvos than

The Culture File

BOOKS

Hidden within the dense thickets of prose are sublime, often uncanny visions.

to narratives, but many of the stories that follow offer similarly tantalizing lures. A man receives a strange videotape in the mail from a friend, but the friend dies before they can discuss it (“György Fehér’s Henrik Molnár”). A man driving through the country locks eyes with a puppy “sitting perfectly still on the white line in the middle of the road” beside a disemboweled dog (“Downhill on a Forest Road”). A flustered woman at a post office holds up the queue with incessant questions about a telegram she is anxious to send, only to leave the office without providing the recipient’s address (“Universal Theseus”).

Krasznahorkai is at heart a writer of suspense, though he takes the genre’s methods—deferral, misdirection, portent—to deranged extremes. He is expert at attenuating a premise, and the reader’s patience, to the vanishing point. He has fun with this. His characters occasionally interrupt themselves with criticisms of their own long-winded style. “I will not continue,” says one, before continuing, “not wishing to overdo things and let a tormenting stylistic inanity heighten the tension to the breaking point.” His most conspicuous gambit is his prose style, which denies readers the satisfactions that most other writers are careful to grant, such as periods.

One begins a Krasznahorkai story like a free diver, with a deep inhalation before plunging in. Each chapter of *Satantango* is a single paragraph. Many of the stories in *The World Goes On* are a single sentence. Krasznahorkai’s long sentences are nothing like Marcel Proust’s nesting-doll magic tricks, James Joyce’s litanies of quotidian minutiae, or David Foster Wallace’s manic digressions. They proceed tentatively, a tide advancing by imperceptible increments. When the dramatic stakes are high, the effect is absorbing, incantatory; in longueurs about planetary rotation or the hermetic nature of human imagination, it is literary water torture. “A Drop of Water,” a single sentence lasting 29 pages, follows a tourist’s increasingly panicked meanderings through the chaotic streets of the Indian holy city of Varanasi:

... in this wildfire of noises he comes to the decision that he must leave, because he is in mortal danger here, demanding not only certain safety measures, not only an elevated attention level, but the realization that he must immediately beat it from here, perhaps the best way would be to withdraw cautiously, retreating step by step, backing out of this place, the upshot of it being that he absolutely must leave the city, he must right now take the first steps toward this end ...

He must leave, he must immediately beat it, he must leave. He must withdraw cautiously, retreat step-by-step, back away. Why use one word when eight will do?

KRASZNAHORKAI'S MOST DIABOLICAL form of deferral is the introduction of a monologue of excruciating technical detail. At the climax of "A Drop of Water," the narrator makes the mistake of pausing to converse with an obese native who has the manner of a religious mystic. Did you know, asks the man, "that according to local tradition a single drop of the Ganges is in itself a temple?" This is the point at which, in the kind of short story taught in American M.F.A. programs, the cynical Western narrator would achieve some glimmer of enlightenment or regret. Not in a Krasznahorkai story.

The obese prophet, who might be a madman, embarks on what the narrator describes as a "totally insane" lecture on the molecular structure of water ("... if you picture this hydrogen bond as well as the covalent bond and keep in mind the simple fact that water in a liquid state is an alternating system of covalent and intermolecular hydrogen bonds, well then at this point matters start to become interesting..."), while all meaning evaporates. Similarly maniacal accounts unfold elsewhere in the collection, of a bank's internal audit and the arrest of a beggar for public urination. Revelation is denied—not only to the reader but to the characters. "He only paid attention occasionally," Krasznahorkai writes of a character listening to an acquaintance discuss personnel decisions at his bank. "It was difficult, he wasn't interested, the story bored him."

Yet hidden within these dense thickets of prose are sublime, often uncanny visions, much like the

The Culture File

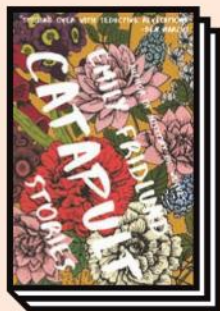


THE WORLD GOES ON
LÁSZLÓ KRASZNAHORKAI,
TRANSLATED BY
JOHN BATKI,
OTTILLIE MULZET, AND
GEORGE SZIRTES
New Directions

ruins of a palace of dark marble and painted tiles that emerge from a remote Portuguese forest in "One Time on 381." At 4:15 a.m. in a Hong Kong hotel room, a gigantic waterfall suddenly appears on the television screen; during a drug trip a tourist in Kiev finds himself adrift in the cosmos, amid trillions of stars, caressed by a mild breeze. There are also enough ironic asides to suggest that all the talk of foundering in sloughs of despond can't be taken entirely seriously. Any writer who was truly hopeless, after all, would not bother to write. At the very least, he would not seek publication.

The eeriness of Krasznahorkai's best work derives from its dogged hostilities to resolution, revelation, symbolism, parable, narrative clarity, character development. His fiction is not faithful to literary convention, but it is faithful to life. The extended periods of quiescence, the isolated glimpses of the sublime, the portentous images signifying nothing, the mundane images signifying everything, the arbitrary eruptions of horror and beauty—though Krasznahorkai's technique relies upon artifice, the result is an honest, courageous, often harrowing portrait of a civilization in drift and decline. His dreary worlds are familiar, and the recognition of that familiarity is unsettling: We don't like to acknowledge the meaninglessness of our lives. Most fiction is essentially escapist, allowing the reader passage to distant worlds or to the even more distant territory of the inner self. Krasznahorkai offers no escape. He writes fairy tales without morals, jokes without punch lines. They are designed to appeal to two kinds of readers: those with a good sense of humor, and those with none. **A**

Nathaniel Rich's new novel, King Zeno, comes out in January.



COVER TO COVER

Catapult

EMILY FRIDLUND
SARABANDE BOOKS

THE 11 STORIES

in Emily Fridlund's slim collection, *Catapult*, make her title seem especially apt. They reveal the coiled, uncanny power that propelled her debut novel, *History of Wolves*, onto the Man Booker Prize shortlist this fall. The teenage loner at the center of that haunted coming-of-age tale (a babysitting arrangement swerves onto grim terrain)

turns out to have off-beat kin in the uncozy houses that Fridlund has been visiting in her short fiction in recent years.

Families are upended again and again in stories that, though they rarely have tight plots, unfold in taut sentences packed with startling insights. Why wives suddenly leave, or what husbands expect, or how siblings cope may

at first seem weirdly baffling. Yet the worries and the secrets, the lies and the confusions that Fridlund exposes are likely to strike a chord.

"I can't tell anymore which parts we're supposed to play: who's the parent here, who's the wife, who's the child," says the narrator of the opening story, an abandoned husband and semi-embattled father. Many of

Fridlund's characters share his disorientation. They don't grow up, exactly, but they do grasp at wisdom. And they appreciate wit. That father, saddled not just with his teenage son but with his son's infant, wryly takes note of who among them most astutely sizes up the domestic tensions. "The baby says, all sarcasm and scorn: 'Wow.'"

— Ann Hulbert

GOD'S PLAN *for* MIKE PENCE

WILL THE VICE
PRESIDENT—AND THE
RELIGIOUS RIGHT—BE
REWARDED FOR THEIR
EMBRACE OF DONALD
TRUMP, OR HAVE THEY
SOLD THEIR SOULS?

BY
McKAY COPPINS

ILLUSTRATION BY
TIM O'BRIEN





NO MAN CAN serve two masters, the Bible teaches, but Mike Pence is giving it his all. It's a sweltering September afternoon in Anderson, Indiana, and the vice president has returned to his home state to deliver the Good News of the Republicans' recently unveiled tax plan. The visit is a big deal for Anderson, a fading manufacturing hub about 20 miles outside Muncie that hasn't hosted a sitting president or vice president in 65 years—a fact noted by several warm-up speakers. To mark this historic civic occasion, the cavernous factory where the event is being held has been transformed. Idle machinery has been shoved to the perimeter to make room for risers and cameras and a gargantuan American flag, which—along with bleachers full of constituents carefully selected for their ethnic diversity and ability to stay awake during speeches about tax policy—will serve as the TV-ready backdrop for Pence's remarks.

When the time comes, Pence takes the stage and greets the crowd with a booming "Hellooooo, Indiana!" He says he has "just hung up the phone" with Donald Trump and that the president asked him to "say hello." He delivers this message with a slight chuckle that has a certain, almost subversive quality to it. Watch Pence give enough speeches, and you'll notice that this often happens when he's in front of a friendly crowd. He'll be witnessing to evangelicals at a mega-church, or addressing conservative supporters at a rally, and when the moment comes for him to pass along the president's well-wishes, the words are invariably accompanied by an amused little chuckle that prompts knowing laughter from the attendees. It's almost as if, in that brief, barely perceptible moment, Pence is sending a message to those with ears to hear—that he recognizes the absurdity of his situation; that he knows just what sort of man he's working for; that while things may look bad now, there is a grand purpose at work here, a plan that will manifest itself in due time. *Let not your hearts be troubled*, he seems to be saying. *I've got this.*

And then, all at once, Pence is back on message. In his folksy Midwestern drawl, he recites Republican aphorisms about "job creators" and regulatory "red tape,"

and heralds the many supposed triumphs of Trump's young presidency. As he nears the end of his remarks, his happy-warrior buoyancy gives way to a more sober cadence. "We've come to a pivotal moment in the life of this country," Pence soulfully intones. "It's a good time to pray for America." His voice rising in righteous fervor, the vice president promises an opening of the heavens. "If His people who are called by His name will humble themselves and pray," he proclaims, "He'll hear from heaven, and He'll heal this land!"

It's easy to see how Pence could put so much faith in the possibilities of divine intervention. The very fact that he is standing behind a lectern bearing the vice-presidential seal is, one could argue, a loaves-and-fishes-level miracle. Just a year earlier, he was an embattled small-state governor with underwater approval ratings, dismal reelection prospects, and a national reputation in tatters. In many ways, Pence was on the same doomed trajectory as the conservative-Christian movement he'd long championed—once a political force to be reckoned with, now a battered relic of the culture wars.

Because God works in mysterious ways (or, at the very least, has a postmodern sense of humor), it was Donald J. Trump—gracer of *Playboy* covers, delighter of shock jocks, collector of mistresses—who descended from the mountaintop in the summer of 2016, GOP presidential nomination in hand, offering salvation to both Pence and the religious right. The question of whether they should wed themselves to such a man was not without its theological considerations. But after eight years of Barack Obama and a string of disorienting political defeats, conservative Christians were in retreat and out of options. So they placed their faith in Trump—and then, incredibly, he won.

In Pence, Trump has found an obedient deputy whose willingness to suffer indignity and humiliation at the pleasure of the president appears boundless. When Trump comes under fire for describing white nationalists as "very fine people," Pence is there to assure the world that he is actually a man of great decency. When Trump needs someone to fly across the country to an NFL game so he can walk out in protest of national-anthem kneelers, Pence heads for Air Force Two.

Meanwhile, Pence's presence in the White House has been a boon for the religious right. Evangelical leaders across the country point to his record on abortion and religious freedom and liken him to a prophet restoring conservative Christianity to its rightful place at the center of American life. "Mike Pence is the 24-karat-gold model of what we want in an evangelical politician," Richard Land, the president of the Southern Evangelical Seminary and one of Trump's faith advisers, told me. "I don't know anyone who's more consistent in bringing his evangelical-Christian worldview to public policy."

But what does Pence make of his own improbable rise to the vice presidency, and how does he reconcile his faith with serving a man like Trump? Over the past several months, I've spoken with dozens of people who have known the vice president throughout his life—from college fraternity brothers and longtime friends to trusted advisers and political foes. (Pence himself declined my requests for an interview.) While many of them expressed surprise and even bewilderment at the heights of power Pence had attained, those who know him best said he sees no mystery in why he's in the White House. "If you're Mike Pence, and you believe what he believes, you know God had a plan," says Ralph Reed, an evangelical power broker and a friend of the vice president's.

Pence has so far showed absolute deference to the president—and as a result he has become one of the most influential figures in the White House, with a broad portfolio of responsibilities and an unprecedented level of autonomy. But for all his aw-shucks modesty, Pence is a man who believes heaven and Earth have conspired to place him a heartbeat—or an impeachment vote—away from the presidency. At some crucial juncture in the not-too-distant future, that could make him a threat to Trump.

PENCE'S PUBLIC PERSONA can seem straight out of the Columbus, Indiana, of his youth, a quiet suburb of Indianapolis where conformity was a virtue and old-fashioned values reigned. His dad ran a chain of convenience stores; his mom was a homemaker who took care of him and his five siblings. The Pences were devout Irish-Catholic Democrats, and Mike and his brothers served as altar boys at St. Columba Catholic Church.

Young Mike did not initially thrive in this setting. He was useless at football (he later sized up his own abilities as "one grade above the blocking sled"), and he lacked the natural athleticism of his brothers, who were "lean and hard and thin." Pence was "a fat little kid," he told a local newspaper in 1988, "the real pumpkin in the pickle patch."

But by the time Pence arrived at Hanover College—a small liberal-arts school in southern Indiana—he had slimmed down, discovered a talent for public speaking, and developed something akin to swagger. The yearbooks from his undergraduate days are filled with photos that portray Pence as a kind of campus cliché: the dark-haired, square-jawed stud strumming an acoustic guitar on the quad

as he leads a gaggle of coeds in a sing-along. In one picture, Pence mugs for the camera in a fortune-teller costume with a girl draped over his lap; in another, he poses goofily in an unbuttoned shirt that shows off his torso.

Pence wasn't a bad student, but he wasn't especially bookish either, managing a B-plus average amid a busy campus social life. As a freshman, he joined Phi Gamma Delta and became

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Pence was "a fat little kid," he told a local newspaper, "the real pumpkin in the pickle patch."

an enthusiastic participant in the Greek experience. Dan Murphy, a former fraternity brother of Pence's who now teaches history at Hanover, told me that the "Phi Gams" were an eclectic bunch. "You had in that fraternity house everything from the sort of evangelical-Christian crowd to some fairly hard-core drug users." Pence was friendly with all of them, and in his sophomore year was elected president of the fraternity.

Murphy and Pence lived in neighboring rooms, and made a habit of attending Catholic Mass together on Sunday nights. On their walks back home, they often talked about their futures, and it became clear to Murphy that his friend had a much stronger sense of his "mission in the world" than the average undergrad. Pence agonized over his "calling." He talked about entering the priesthood, but ultimately felt drawn instead to politics, a realm where he believed he could harness God's power to do good. It was obvious to his fraternity brothers, Murphy told me, that Pence wanted to be president one day.

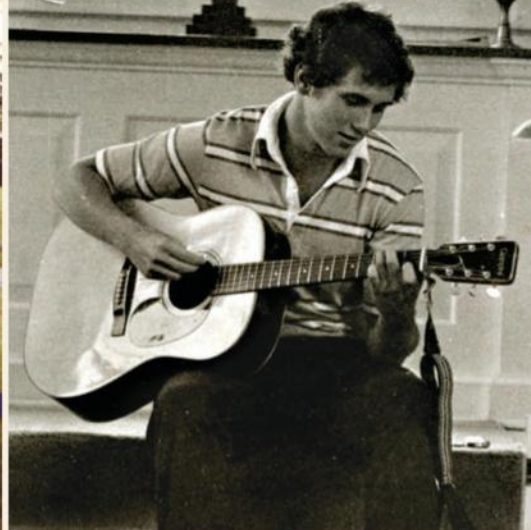
Pence underwent two conversions in college that would shape the rest of his life. The first came in the spring of 1978, when he road-tripped to Kentucky with some evangelical friends for a music festival billed as the Christian Woodstock. After a day of rocking out to Jesus-loving prog-rock bands and born-again Bob Dylan imitators, Pence found himself sitting in a light rain, yearning for a more personal relationship with Christ than was afforded by the ritualized Catholicism of his youth. "My heart really, finally broke with a deep realization that what had happened on the cross in some infinitesimal way had happened for me," Pence recounted in March 2017. It was there, he said, that he gave his life to Jesus.

The other conversion was a partisan one. Pence had entered college a staunch supporter of Jimmy Carter, and he viewed the 1980 presidential election as a contest between a "good Christian" and a "vacuous movie star." But President Ronald Reagan won Pence over—instilling in him an appreciation for both movement conservatism and the leadership potential of vacuous entertainers that would serve him well later in life.

Murphy told me another story about Pence that has stayed with him. During their sophomore year, the Phi Gamma Delta house found itself perpetually on probation. The movie *Animal House* had recently come out, and the fraternity brothers were constantly re-creating their favorite scenes, with toga parties, outlandish pranks, and other miscellaneous mischief. Most vexing to the school's administration was their violation of Hanover's strict alcohol prohibition. The Phi Gams devised elaborate schemes to smuggle booze into the house, complete with a network of campus lookouts. Pence was not



By college, Pence had slimmed down and developed something akin to swagger. The yearbooks from his time at Hanover College, in southern Indiana, depict him as a popular, square-jawed hunk.



a particularly hard partyer, but he gamely presided over these efforts, and when things went sideways he was often called upon to smooth things over with the adults.

One night, during a rowdy party, Pence and his fraternity brothers got word that an associate dean was on his way to the house. They scrambled to hide the kegs and plastic cups, and then Pence met the administrator at the door.

"We know you've got a keg," the dean told Pence, according to Murphy. Typically when scenes like this played out, one of the brothers would take the fall, claiming that all the alcohol was his and thus sparing the house from formal discipline. Instead, Pence led the dean straight to the kegs and admitted that they belonged to the fraternity. The resulting punishment was severe. "They really raked us over the coals," Murphy said. "The whole house was locked down." Some of Pence's fraternity brothers were furious with him—but he managed to stay on good terms with the administration. Such good terms, in fact, that after he graduated, in 1981, the school offered him a job in the admissions office.

Decades later, when Murphy read about Pence vying for a spot on the presidential ticket with Donald Trump, he recognized a familiar quality in his old friend. "Somewhere in the midst of all that genuine humility and good feeling, this is a guy who's got that ambition," Murphy told me. And he wondered, "Is Mike's religiosity a way of justifying that ambition to himself?"

FOR ALL PENCE'S outward piousness, he's kept the details of his spiritual journey opaque. Despite his conversion to evangelical Christianity in college, he married his wife, Karen, in a Catholic ceremony and until the mid-'90s periodically referred to himself as an "evangelical Catholic." That formulation might befuddle theologians, but it reveals the extraordinary degree to which Pence's personal religious evolution paralleled the rise of the religious right.

Indeed, it was just a year after Pence's born-again experience in Kentucky that Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority,

a national movement that aimed to turn Christian voters into a pavement-pounding political force. In the decades that followed, white evangelicals forged an alliance with conservative Catholics to fight abortion, gay marriage, and an encroaching secularism that they saw as a threat to their religious freedom. With conservative believers feeling under siege, denominational differences began to melt away.

In 1988, at age 29, Pence launched his first bid for Congress. He garnered attention by riding a single-speed bicycle around his district in sneakers and short shorts, dodging aggravated motorists and drumming up conversations with prospective voters on the sidewalk. It was a perfectly Pencian gimmick—earnest, almost unbearably cheesy—and it helped him win the Republican nomination. But he was unable to defeat the Democratic incumbent, Phil Sharp.

Pence tried again two years later, this time ditching the bike in favor of vicious attack ads. The race is remembered as one of the nastiest in Indiana history. In one notorious Pence campaign spot, an actor dressed as a cartoonish Arab sheikh thanked Sharp for advancing the interests of foreign oil. The tone of the campaign was jarring coming from a candidate who had nurtured such a wholesome image, a contrast memorably captured in an *Indianapolis Star* headline: “Pence Urges Clean Campaign, Calls Opponent a Liar.” He ended up losing by 19 points after it was revealed that he was using campaign funds to pay his mortgage and grocery bills (a practice that was then legal but has since been outlawed).

Afterward, a humbled Pence attempted public repentance by personal essay. His article, “Confessions of a Negative Campaigner,” ran in newspapers across the state. “Christ Jesus came to save sinners,” the essay began, quoting 1 Timothy, “among whom I am foremost of all.”

With two failed congressional bids behind him, Pence decided to change tack. In 1992, he debuted a conservative talk-radio show that he described as “Rush Limbaugh on decaf.” The quaint joke belied the meticulousness with which Pence went about building his local media empire. “He knew exactly what he wanted his brand to be and who his audience was,” says Ed Feigenbaum, the publisher of a state-politics tip sheet, whom Pence often consulted. Most of his listeners were “retirees and conservative housewives,” Feigenbaum says, and Pence carefully catered to them. Over the next eight years, he expanded his radio show to 18 markets, started hosting a talk show on a local TV station, launched a proto-blog, and published a newsletter, “The Pence Report,” which locals remember primarily for its frequent typos and Pence’s lovingly drawn political cartoons.

“His Mikeness,” as he became known on the air, began each radio show with a signature opening line—“Greetings across the amber waves of grain”—and filled the hours with a mix of interviews, listener calls, and medium-hot takes. Pence’s commentary from this period is a near-perfect time capsule of ’90s culture-war trivia. He railed against assisted suicide (“Kevorkian is a monster”) and fretted about the insufficient punishment given to a female Air Force pilot who had engaged in an extramarital affair (“Is adultery no longer a big deal in Indiana and in America?”). He mounted a rousing defense of Big Tobacco (“Despite the hysteria from the political class and

the media, smoking doesn’t kill”) and lamented parents’ growing reliance on day care (pop culture “has sold the big lie that ‘Mom doesn’t matter’”).

Pence also demonstrated a knack for seizing on more-creative wedge issues. For instance, a 1995 initiative to reintroduce otters into Indiana’s wildlife population became, in Pence’s able hands, a frightening example of Big Government run amok. “State-sanctioned, sanitized otters today,” he warned, ominously. “Buffaloes tomorrow?”

Despite Pence’s on-air culture-warring, he rarely came off as disagreeable. He liked to describe himself as “a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican, in that order,” and he was careful to show respect for opposing viewpoints. “Nobody ever left an interview not liking Mike,” says Scott Uecker, the radio executive who oversaw Pence’s show.

By the time a congressional seat opened up ahead of the 2000 election, Pence was a minor Indiana celebrity and state Republicans were urging him to run. In the summer of 1999, as he was mulling the decision, he took his family on a trip to Colorado. One day while horseback riding in the mountains, he and Karen looked heavenward and saw two red-tailed hawks soaring over them. They took it as a sign, Karen recalled years later: Pence would run again, but this time there would be “no flapping.” He would glide to victory.



O HIS COLLEAGUES on Capitol Hill—an overwhelmingly secular place where even many Republicans privately sneer at people of faith—everything about the Indiana congressman screamed “Bible thumper.” He was known to pray with his staffers, and often cited scripture to explain his votes. In a 2002 interview with *Congressional Quarterly*, for example, he explained, “My support for Israel stems largely from my personal faith. In the Bible,

God promises Abraham, ‘Those who bless you I will bless, and those who curse you I will curse.’” He became a champion of the fight to restrict abortion and defund Planned Parenthood.

Pence didn’t have a reputation for legislative acumen (“I would not call Mike a policy wonk,” one former staffer told the *Indianapolis Monthly*), and some of his colleagues called him a nickname behind his back: “Mike Dense.” But he did have sharp political instincts. Before long, he was climbing the leadership ranks and making connections with key figures in the conservative-Christian establishment. *The New Yorker*’s Jane Mayer has documented Pence’s close ties to the Koch brothers and other GOP mega-donors, but his roots in the religious right are even deeper. In 2011, as he began plotting a presidential run in the upcoming election cycle, Pence met with Ralph Reed, the evangelical power broker, to seek his advice.

Reed told Pence he should return home and get elected governor of Indiana first, then use the statehouse as a launching pad for a presidential bid. He said a few years in the governor’s mansion—combined with his deep support on the Christian right—would make him a top-tier candidate in the 2016 primaries.

Pence took Reed’s advice, and in 2012 launched a gubernatorial bid. Casting himself as the heir to the popular outgoing governor, Mitch Daniels, he avoided social issues and ran on a pragmatic, business-friendly platform. He used Ronald

Reagan as a political style guru and told his ad makers that he wanted his campaign commercials to have “that ‘Morning in America’ feel.” He meticulously fine-tuned early cuts of the ads, asking his consultants to edit this or reframe that or zoom in here instead of there.

But he wasn’t willing to win at all costs. When the race tightened in the homestretch, Pence faced immense pressure from consultants to go negative. A former adviser recalls heated conference calls in which campaign brass urged him to green-light an attack ad on his Democratic opponent, John Gregg. Pence refused. “He didn’t want to be a hypocrite,” the former adviser says.

Pence won the race anyway, and set about cutting taxes and taking on local unions—burnishing a résumé that would impress Republican donors and Iowa caucus-goers. The governor’s stock began to rise in Washington, where he was widely viewed as a contender for the 2016 presidential nomination.

Then, in early 2015, Pence stumbled into a culture-war debacle that would come to define his governorship. At the urging of conservative-Christian leaders in Indiana, the GOP-controlled state legislature passed a bill that would have allowed religious business owners to deny services to gay customers in certain circumstances. Pence signed it into law in a closed-press ceremony at the statehouse, surrounded by nuns, monks, and right-wing lobbyists. A photo of the signing was released, and all hell broke loose. Corporate leaders threatened to stop adding jobs in Indiana, and national organizations began pulling scheduled conventions from the state. The NCAA, which is headquartered in Indianapolis, put out a statement suggesting that the law might imperil “future events.” *The Indianapolis Star* ran a rare front-page editorial under an all-caps headline: “FIX THIS NOW.”

Caught off guard by the controversy, Pence accepted an invitation to appear on *This Week With George Stephanopoulos*, where he intended to make the case that the law wasn’t anti-gay but rather pro-religious liberty. What took place instead was an excruciating 12-minute interview in which Pence awkwardly danced around the same straightforward question: Does this law allow a Christian florist to refuse service for a same-sex wedding? “George, look,” Pence said at one point, sounding frustrated, “the issue here is, you know, is tolerance a two-way street or not?”

For Pence—and the conservative-Christian movement he represented—this was more than just a talking point. In recent years, the religious right had been abruptly forced to pivot from offense to defense in the culture wars—abandoning the “family values” crusades and talk of “remoralizing America,” and focusing its energies on self-preservation. Conservative Christians had lost the battles over school prayer, sex education, and

pornography censorship, and the Supreme Court was poised to legalize same-sex marriage. Meanwhile, a widespread decline in churchgoing and religious affiliation had contributed to a growing anxiety among conservative believers. By 2017, white

evangelicals would tell pollsters that Christians faced more discrimination in America than Muslims did.

To many Christians, the backlash against Indiana’s “religious freedom” bill was a frightening sign of the secular left’s triumphalism. Liberals were no longer working toward tolerance, it seemed—they were out for conquest. “Many evangelicals were experiencing the sense of an almost existential threat,” Russell Moore, a leader of

the Southern Baptist Convention, told me. It was only a matter of time, he said, before cultural elites’ scornful attitudes would help drive Christians into the arms of a strongman like Trump. “I think there needs to be a deep reflection on the left about how they helped make this happen.”

After seven chaotic days, Pence caved and signed a revised version of the religious-freedom bill—but by then it was too late. His approval ratings were in free fall, Democrats were raising money to defeat him in the next gubernatorial election, and the political obituaries were being written. Things looked grimmer for Pence, and the religious right, than they ever had before.

D

ELIVERANCE MANIFESTED ITSELF to Mike Pence on the back nine of Donald Trump’s golf course in New Jersey. It was the Fourth of July weekend, and the two men were sizing each other up as potential running mates. Each had his own hesitations. Coming into the game, Trump had formed an opinion of the Indiana governor as prudish, stiff, and embarrassingly poor, according to one longtime associate. Pence, meanwhile, had spent the primaries privately shaking his head at Trump’s campaign-trail antics, and had endorsed Senator Ted Cruz for the nomination. But as the two men played golf, Pence asked what his job description would be if they wound up in the White House together. Trump gave him the same answer he’d been dangling in front of other prospective running mates for weeks: He wanted “the most consequential vice president ever.” Pence was sold.

Before flying out to New Jersey, Pence had called Kellyanne Conway, a top Trump adviser, whom he’d known for years, and asked for her advice on how to handle the meeting. Conway had told him to talk about “stuff outside of politics,” and suggested he show his eagerness to learn from the billionaire. “I knew they would enjoy each other’s company,” Conway told me, adding, “Mike Pence is someone whose faith allows him to subvert his ego to the greater good.”

True to form, Pence spent much of their time on the course kissing Trump's ring. *You're going to be the next president of the United States*, he said. *It would be the honor of a lifetime to serve you.* Afterward, he made a point of gushing to the press about Trump's golf game. "He beat me like a drum," Pence confessed, to Trump's delight.

The consensus among the campaign's top political strategists was that a Trump-Pence ticket was their best shot at winning in November. After a bitter primary season, Trump's campaign had moved swiftly to shore up support from conservative Christians, who advisers worried would stay home on Election Day. Trump released a list of potential Supreme Court nominees with unimpeachably pro-life records and assembled an evangelical advisory board composed of high-profile faith leaders.

One of the men asked to join the board was Richard Land, of the Southern Evangelical Seminary. When the campaign approached him with the offer, Land says, he was perplexed. "You do know that Trump was my last choice, right?" he said. But he ultimately accepted, and when a campaign aide asked what his first piece of advice was, he didn't hesitate: "Pick Mike Pence."

Nonetheless, as decision time approached, Trump was leaning toward New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, a fellow bridge-and-tunnel loudmouth with whom he had more natural chemistry. The candidate's advisers repeatedly warned that the "Bridgegate" fiasco would make Christie a liability in the general election. But they were unable to get through to Trump.

Then, on July 12, a miracle: During a short campaign swing through Indiana, Trump got word that his plane had broken down on the runway, and that he would need to spend the night in Indianapolis. With nowhere else to go, Trump accepted an invitation to dine with the Pences.

In fact, according to two former Trump aides, there was no problem with the plane. Paul Manafort, who was then serving as the campaign's chairman, had made up the story to keep the candidate in town an extra day and allow him to be wooed by Pence. The gambit worked: Three days later, Trump announced Pence as his running mate.

On the stump and in interviews, Pence spoke of Trump in a tone that bordered on worshipful. One of his rhetorical tics was to praise the breadth of his running mate's shoulders. Trump was, Pence proclaimed, a "broad-shouldered leader," in possession of "broad shoulders and a big heart," who had "the kind of broad shoulders" that enabled him to endure criticism while he worked to return "broad-shouldered American strength to the world stage."

Campaign operatives discovered that anytime Trump did something outrageous or embarrassing, they could count on Pence to clean it up. "He was our top surrogate by far," said one former senior adviser to Trump. "He was this mild-mannered, uber-Christian guy with a Midwestern accent telling voters, 'Trump is a good man; I know what's in his heart.' It was *very* convincing—you wanted to trust him. You'd be sitting there listening to him and thinking, *Yeah, maybe Trump is a good man!*"

Even some of Trump's most devoted loyalists marveled at what Pence was willing to say. There was no talking point too preposterous, no fixed reality too plain to deny—if they needed Pence to defend the boss, he was in. When, during the

vice-presidential debate, in early October, he was confronted with a barrage of damning quotes and questionable positions held by his running mate, Pence responded with unnerving message discipline, dismissing documented facts as "nonsense" and smears.

It was the kind of performance—a blur of half-truths and "whatabout"s and lies—that could make a good Christian queasy. But people close to Pence say he felt no conflict between his campaign duties and his religious beliefs. Marc Short, a longtime adviser to Pence and a fellow Christian, told me that the vice president believes strongly in a scriptural concept evangelicals call "servant leadership." The idea is rooted in the Gospels, where Jesus models humility by washing his disciples' feet and teaches, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave."

When Pence was in Congress, he instructed his aides to have a "servant's attitude" when dealing with constituents. Later, as the chairman of the House Republican Conference, he saw his job as being a servant to his fellow GOP lawmakers. And when he accepted the vice-presidential nomination, he believed he was committing to humbly submit to the will of Donald Trump. "Servant leadership is biblical," Short told me. "That's at the heart of it for Mike, and it comes across in his relationship with the president."

Another close friend of Pence's explained it to me this way: "His faith teaches that you're under authority at all times. Christ is under God's authority, man is under Christ's authority, children are under the parents' authority, employees are under the employer's authority."

"Mike," he added, "always knows who's in charge."

After two failed bids for Congress, Pence was elected in 2000 and served until 2013, when he became the governor of Indiana.



MANUEL BALCE CENETA/AP

O

N FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2016, *The Washington Post* published the *Access Hollywood* tape that showed Trump gloating about his penchant for grabbing women “by the pussy,” and instantly upended the campaign. Republicans across the country withdrew their endorsements, and conservative editorial boards called on Trump to drop out of the race. Most alarming to the

aides and operatives inside Trump Tower, Mike Pence suddenly seemed at risk of going rogue.

Trump’s phone calls to his running mate reportedly went unreturned, and anonymous quotes began appearing in news stories describing Pence as “beside himself” over the revelation. One campaign staffer told me that when she was asked on TV the day after the tape came out whether Pence would remain on the ticket, she ad-libbed that, yes, he was 100 percent committed to Trump. She remembers walking away from the set and thinking, “*I have no idea if what I just said is true.*”

It’s been reported that Pence sent Trump a letter saying he needed time to decide whether he could stay with the campaign. But in fact, according to several Republicans familiar with the situation, he wasn’t just thinking about dropping out—he was contemplating a coup. Within hours of *The Post*’s bombshell, Pence made it clear to the Republican National Committee that he was ready to take Trump’s place as the party’s nominee. Such a move just four weeks before Election Day would have been unprecedented—but the situation seemed dire enough to call for radical action.

Already, Reince Priebus’s office was being flooded with panicked calls from GOP officials and donors urging the RNC chairman to get rid of Trump by whatever means necessary. One Republican senator called on the party to engage emergency protocols to nominate a new candidate. RNC lawyers huddled to explore an obscure legal mechanism by which they might force Trump off the ticket. Meanwhile, a small group of billionaires was trying to put together money for a “buyout”—even going so far as to ask a Trump associate how much money the candidate would require to walk away from the race. According to someone with knowledge of the talks, they were given an answer of \$800 million. (It’s unclear whether Trump was aware of this discussion or whether the offer was actually made.) Republican donors and party leaders began buzzing about making Pence the nominee and drafting Condoleezza Rice as his running mate.

Amid the chaos, Trump convened a meeting of his top advisers in his Manhattan penthouse. He went around the room and asked each person for his damage assessment. Priebus bluntly told Trump he could either drop out immediately or lose in a historic landslide. According to someone who was present, Priebus added that Pence and Rice were “ready to step in.” (An aide to the vice president denied that Pence sent Trump a letter and that he ever talked with the RNC about becoming the nominee. Priebus did not respond to requests for comment.)

The furtive plotting, several sources told me, was not just an act of political opportunism for Pence. He was genuinely

shocked by the *Access Hollywood* tape. In the short time they’d known each other, Trump had made an effort to convince Pence that—beneath all the made-for-TV bluster and bravado—he was a good-hearted man with faith in God. On the night of the vice-presidential debate, for example, Trump had left a voicemail letting Pence know that he’d just said a prayer for him. The couple was appalled by the video, however. Karen in particular was “disgusted,” says a former campaign aide. “She finds him reprehensible—just totally vile.”

Yet Pence might also have thought he glimpsed something divine in that moment of political upheaval—a parting of the seas, God’s hand reaching down to make his will known. Marc Short told me that in moments of need, Pence turns to a favorite passage in Jeremiah: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Short said, “Mike believes strongly in the sovereignty of God, and knowing that the Lord has a plan for him.”

Whatever God had planned for Mike Pence, however, it was not to make him the Republican nominee that weekend. Trump proved defiant in the face of pressure from party leaders. “They thought they were going to be able to get him to drop out before the second debate,” said a former campaign aide. “Little did they know, he has no shame.” Indeed, two days after the tape was released, Trump showed up in St. Louis for the debate with a group of Bill Clinton accusers in tow, ranting about how Hillary’s husband had done things to women that were far worse than his own “locker-room talk.” The whole thing was a circus—and it worked. By the time Trump left St. Louis, he had, in pundit-speak, “stopped the bleeding,” and by the next day, Pence was back on the stump. The campaign stabilized. The race tightened. And on the night of November 8, 2016, Pence found himself standing on a ballroom stage in Midtown Manhattan—silently, obediently, servant-leaderly—while Trump delivered the unlikely of victory speeches.

B

ACK IN INDIANA, Pence’s Trump apology on the campaign trail surprised those who knew him. In political circles, there had been a widespread, bipartisan recognition that Pence was a decent man with a genuine devotion to his faith.

But after watching him in 2016, many told me, they believed Pence had sold out.

Scott Pelath, the Democratic minority leader in the Indiana House of Representatives, said that watching Pence vouch for Trump made him sad. “Ah, Mike,” he sighed. “Ambition got the best of him.” It’s an impression that even some of Pence’s oldest friends and allies privately share. As one former adviser marveled, “The number of compromises he made to get this job, when you think about it, is pretty staggering.”

Of course, Pence is far from the only conservative Christian to be accused of having sold his soul. Trump’s early evangelical supporters were a motley crew of televangelists and prosperity preachers, and they have been rewarded with outsize influence in the White House. Pastor Ralph Drollinger, for example, caught Trump’s attention in December 2015, when he said in a radio interview, “America’s in such desperate straits—especially

economically—that if we don’t have almost a benevolent dictator to turn things around, I just don’t think it’s gonna happen through our governance system.” Now Drollinger runs a weekly Bible study in the West Wing.

But the president has also enjoyed overwhelming support from rank-and-file conservative Christians. He won an astonishing 81 percent of white evangelicals’ votes, more than any Republican presidential candidate on record. And while his national approval rating hovers below 40 percent, poll after poll finds his approval rating among white evangelicals in the high 60s. The fact that such an ungodly president could retain a firm grip on the religious right has been the source of much soul-searching—and theological debate—within the movement.

On one side, there are those who argue that good Christians are obligated to support any leader, no matter how personally wicked he may be, who stands up for religious freedom and fights sinful practices such as abortion. Richard Land told me that those who withhold their support from Trump because they’re uncomfortable with his moral failings will “become morally accountable for letting the greater evil prevail.”

On the other side of the debate is a smaller group that believes the Christians allying themselves with Trump are putting the entire evangelical movement at risk. Russell Moore, of the Southern Baptist Convention, has made this case forcefully. In a *New York Times* op-ed in September 2015, Moore wrote that for evangelicals to embrace Trump “would mean that we’ve decided to join the other side of the culture war, that image and celebrity and money and power and social Darwinist ‘winning’ trump the conservation of moral principles and a just society.”

Moore and others worry that conservative Christians’ support for Trump has already begun to warp their ideals. Consider just one data point: In 2011, a poll by the Public Religion Research Institute found that only 30 percent of white evangelicals believed “an elected official who commits an immoral act in their personal life can still behave ethically and fulfill their duties in their public and professional life.” By 2016, that number had risen to 72 percent. “This is really a sea change in evangelical ethics,” Robert P. Jones, the head of the institute and the author of *The End of White Christian America*, told me. “They have moved to an ends-justifies-the means style of politics that would have been unimaginable before this last campaign.”

But even as the debate rages on, there is one thing virtually all conservative Christians seem to agree on: Mike Pence. “He’s an incredibly popular figure,” Moore told me. “Evangelicals

who disagree about all sorts of things still respect Mike Pence. Regardless of how they voted or what they think about Trump, they feel a sense of identification with him, and trust in him.”

Some prominent evangelicals have gone even further to describe Pence’s role—reverently invoking biblical heroes who aligned themselves with flawed worldly leaders to do God’s will.

One pastor compared Pence to Mordechai, who ascended to the right hand of a Persian king known for throwing lavish parties and discarding his wife after she refused to appear naked in front of his friends. Pence has also drawn comparisons to Daniel—who served a procession of godless rulers—and to Joseph of Egypt, the valiant servant of God who won the favor of an impetuous pharaoh known for throwing servants in prison when they offended him.

Pastor Mark Burns—a South Carolina televangelist

who was among the first to sign on as a faith adviser to Trump—told me Pence’s role in the administration is like that of Jesus, who once miraculously calmed a storm that was threatening to sink the boat on which he was traveling with his disciples. (Burns, who stressed that he was not equating Pence with the Savior, said Trump is represented in this analogy by one of Jesus’s more “foulmouthed” apostles.) “Mike Pence is there praying over the White House every day,” Burns said. And in this tempestuous political climate, the success of Trump’s presidency may depend on those intercessions. “It takes somebody who knows when you’re headed toward a storm to be there praying for you.”

THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT began reaping the rewards of Trump’s victory almost immediately, when the president-elect put Pence in charge of the transition. Given wide latitude on staffing decisions, Pence promptly set about filling the federal government with like-minded allies. Of the 15 Cabinet secretaries Trump picked at the start of his presidency, eight were evangelicals. It was, gushed Ted Cruz, “the most conservative Cabinet in decades.” Pence also reportedly played a key role in getting Neil Gorsuch nominated to the Supreme Court.

Pence understood the price of his influence. To keep Trump’s ear required frequent public performances of loyalty and submission—and Pence made certain his inner circle knew that enduring such indignities was part of the job. Once, while interviewing a prospective adviser during the transition, Pence cleared the room so they could speak privately. “Look, I’m in a difficult position here,” Pence said, according to someone familiar with the meeting. “I’m going to have to 100 percent defend everything the president says. Is that something you’re going to be able to do if you’re on my staff?” (An aide to Pence denied this account.)

“It’s not a matter of when Republicans are ready to turn on Trump. It’s about when they decide they’re ready for President Pence.”



Trump does not always reciprocate this respect. Around the White House, he has been known to make fun of Pence for his religiosity. As Mayer reported in *The New Yorker*, he has greeted guests who recently met with Pence by asking, "Did Mike make you pray?" During a conversation with a legal scholar about gay rights, Trump gestured toward his vice president and joked, "Don't ask that guy—he wants to hang them all!"

When I asked Marc Short, who now serves as the White House director of legislative affairs, about these exchanges, he dismissed them as good-natured razzing between friends. "I think it's fun for him to tease Mike," Short told me, "but at the same time, the president respects him." Not everyone is so sure. When it was reported last January that the Pences would be moving some of their family pets—which include two cats, a rabbit, and a snake—into the Naval Observatory, Trump ridiculed the menagerie to his secretary, according to a longtime adviser. "He was embarrassed by it; he thought it was so low class," says the adviser. "He thinks the Pences are yokels."

Pence's forbearance hasn't always yielded concrete policy victories for the Christian right, a fact that was highlighted during a skirmish over religious freedom early in the Trump administration. Social conservatives had been lobbying the president to issue a sweeping executive order aimed at carving out protections for religious organizations and individuals opposed to same-sex marriage, premarital sex, abortion, and transgender rights. The proposed order was fairly radical, but proponents argued that it would strike a crucial blow against the militant secularists trying to drive the faithful out of the public square. At first, Pence's office reportedly worked to build support for the executive order inside the White House—but the effort was torpedoed when a draft was leaked to *The Nation* magazine, which warned that signing it would "legalize discrimination." There proceeded a noisy backlash from the left, and hasty backpedaling by the White House. By the time Trump got around to signing the order, several months later, it was dramatically watered down.

Conservatives blamed Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner for gutting the order. But according to one Trump associate with knowledge of the debate, Pence barely put up a fight. The surrender infuriated Steve Bannon, who was then serving as the chief White House strategist. "Bannon wanted to fight for it," says the Trump associate, "and he was really unimpressed that

Pence wouldn't do anything." But perhaps Pence was playing the long game—weighing the risks of taking on Trump's kids, and deciding to stand down in the interest of preserving his relationship with the president. Pence, after all, had his future to think about.

I**N AN EMBATTLED** White House, the question of the vice president's ambition for higher office is radioactive. When *The New York Times* reported last summer that Pence appeared to be laying the groundwork for a 2020 presidential bid, he denied the "disgraceful and offensive" story with theatrical force. But Pence has shown that his next move is never far from his mind—and he's hardly the only one weighing the possibilities. One senior GOP Senate aide told me that pundits miss the point when they speculate about what kind of scandal it would take for the president to face a serious

defection from lawmakers of his own party. "It's not a matter of when Republicans are ready to turn on Trump," the aide said. "It's about when they decide they're ready for President Pence."

What would a Pence presidency look like? To a conservative evangelical, it could mean a glorious return to the Christian values upon which America was founded. To a secular liberal, it might look more like a descent into the dystopia of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Already, in some quarters on the left, it has become fashionable to fret that Pence's fundamentalist faith and comparative political savvy would make him an even more "dangerous" president than Trump. He has been branded a "theocrat" and a "Christian supremacist."

There is, of course, nothing inherently scary or disqualifying about an elected leader who seeks wisdom in scripture and solace in prayer. What critics should worry about is not that Pence believes in God, but that he seems so certain God believes in him. What happens when manifest destiny replaces humility, and the line between faith and hubris blurs? What unseemly compromises get made? What means become tolerable in pursuit of an end?

On the night of May 3, 2017, members of the president's evangelical advisory board arrived for a private dinner at the White House. They were scheduled to appear the next day in the Rose Garden to cheer Trump on as he signed an executive order most of them considered a disappointment. Instead of creating the far-reaching protections for believers that they had been hoping for, Trump's order merely made it easier for pastors to voice political opinions from the pulpit—a conspicuously self-serving take on religious freedom. Some social conservatives were already voicing their discontent. Ryan Anderson, a scholar at the Heritage Foundation, called the order "woefully inadequate"; David French, a writer for *National Review*, dismissed it as a "sop to the gullible."

But inside the West Wing, the president's faith advisers were getting the full Trump experience. After dining on shrimp scampi and braised short ribs in the Blue Room, they were treated to a tour of the private residence. Trump led them onto the Truman Balcony, and waved off Secret Service agents who tried to stop them from taking pictures. The faith leaders pulled out their smartphones and snapped selfies, intoxicated by the VIP treatment. "Mr. President," Robert Jeffress, the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, said at one point, "we're going to be your most loyal friends. We're going to be your enthusiastic supporters. And we thank God every day that you're the president of the United States."

For many of the attendees, though, the most memorable moment came when Pence stood to speak. "I've been with [Trump] alone in the room when the decisions are made. He and I have prayed together," Pence said. "This is somebody who shares our views, shares our values, shares our beliefs." Pence didn't waste time touting his own credentials. With this crowd, he didn't need to. Instead, as always, he lavished praise on the president. **A**

McKay Coppins is a staff writer at The Atlantic and the author of The Wilderness: Deep Inside the Republican Party's Combative, Contentious, Chaotic Quest to Take Back the White House.

Benjamin Spencer,
photographed
November 7, 2017,
at the H. H. Coffield
Unit, a maximum-
security prison
about two hours
south of Dallas





NO WAY OUT

Benjamin Spencer's case had all the hallmarks of a successful DNA exoneration: shoddy police work, questionable eyewitnesses, an unreliable jailhouse informant. It lacked just one thing—DNA evidence. Can a convict prove his innocence without it?

By Barbara Bradley Hagerty

EARLIER

THIS YEAR, I visited the New Jersey home of Jim McCloskey. We sat at his dining-room table, eating takeout Greek on paper plates. McCloskey is 75, stocky and bald, with wisps of white hair that tend to stand on end, as if he's just walked across a carpet in wool socks. For more than three decades, he has worked to exonerate the wrongly convicted. The group he founded, Centurion Ministries, has succeeded in freeing 61 men, including five recently, during what was supposed to have been McCloskey's retirement. I asked him which case from his long career haunts him the most. "Ben Spencer's case," he replied. "There's probably not a day that goes by that I don't at least think of Ben."

McCloskey brought me down to his basement, where he stores his case files. Opening a banker's box, he took out a file folder full of yellowed letters written in Benjamine Spencer's small, neat hand or typed on a prison-issue manual typewriter. The letters described what Spencer considers the shoddy police work and questionable testimony that led to his conviction—and a life sentence—for the 1987 robbery and assault of a Dallas man.

McCloskey honed his craft in the era before DNA analysis became common. Over the years, he has continued to rely on the tactics he developed in those early days: carefully reinvestigating crimes and building cases proving that authorities prosecuted the wrong person.

That may seem like an antiquated approach in an age of ever-improving DNA technology; some 350 men and women have now been freed thanks to its dispositive power. But McCloskey's approach may in fact be more urgent today than it was in the past.

Our conception of how many Americans have been wrongly imprisoned has changed drastically since the first DNA exoneration in the United States, in 1989. Again and again, DNA evidence has demonstrated beyond a doubt that people were convicted of crimes they

didn't commit based on unreliable eyewitnesses, bad forensic science, and prosecutorial misconduct. But such evidence is not available in many cases that otherwise have the markers of potential exonerations—because convicts don't have the resources to track it down, because investigators failed to collect it from the crime scene, or because there was simply never any such evidence to collect in the first place. While non-DNA exonerations are on the rise—there were 152 in 2016—that number remains vanishingly small compared with the ranks of the wrongly imprisoned. Simon Cole, a criminology professor at UC Irvine and the director of the National Registry of Exonerations, estimates that thousands—possibly tens of thousands—of innocent men and women may have been convicted.

McCloskey believes that Benjamine Spencer is one of these convicts. Had investigators found sufficient biological evidence at the crime scene, Spencer might have hoped that it would eventually point to another suspect, and irrefutably establish his innocence. But no such evidence emerged, leaving Spencer to walk a narrow path to exoneration.

ON MARCH 22, 1987, Jeffrey Young drove to his office in a warehouse district of Dallas. He was 33 years old and the acting president of FWI, a clothing manufacturer and importer. It was Sunday evening. His wife and three children were traveling for spring break, and Young needed to reach a company in Taiwan, where the workweek had already begun. At 8:21 p.m., security records show, Young opened the door to the building. Twenty-five minutes later, he called Troy Johnson, whose firm provided technology services to FWI, to request access to the computer system. Johnson told Young he was conducting maintenance, and the computer would be down for an hour or so. At 9:45, Johnson called Young's office, but there was no answer. He called back several times before finally concluding that Young had gone home.

No security cameras captured what unfolded after Young placed his call to Johnson, and there were no witnesses at the warehouse. Later, at trial, the State of Texas advanced a theory: Two men spotted Young's silver BMW 320i in the

parking lot, pushed open the door to the building, and stormed into the office. They grabbed Young and emptied his pockets, taking the cash from his wallet and leaving the credit cards. They stripped him of his Seiko watch and wedding ring, and took a portable TV from the office. The perpetrators smashed Young's head with a blunt instrument, cracking his skull in five places. It would require an "extraordinary amount of force to cause [the skull] to shatter the way it has," the medical examiner testified. The perpetrators then crammed Young into the back seat or the trunk of his BMW and drove over the Trinity River into West Dallas, one of the poorest and most violent parts of the city.

Sometime after 10 p.m., Young was pushed or fell out of the car on Puget Street. The BMW crept slowly for two more blocks, eventually pulling into an alley. There, one man or two—witnesses differ—rushed from the car. Residents found the body and called for help. Young was still alive when the paramedics arrived, but he was pronounced dead at 3:05 a.m.

Detective Jesus Briseno arrived in West Dallas early Monday morning. He had been working homicide cases for two years, though rarely as the lead investigator, as he would be in the Young case. Canvassing the neighborhood, he had little initial luck finding cooperative witnesses. West Dallas in the 1980s was not a place where residents were in



Benjamine Spencer's mug shot. Police failed to recover the stolen items or a murder weapon in the robbery and assault of Jeffrey Young. Three eyewitnesses, however, said they saw Spencer emerge from Young's BMW in a West Dallas alley.

the habit of helping the police; the predominantly black neighborhood viewed police with suspicion, if not hostility. In the hope of turning up leads, Young's parent company offered a \$10,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and indictment. Electronic Data Systems, the Plano company founded by Ross Perot, offered its own \$25,000 reward—Young's father had worked closely with Perot.

On Monday, 42-year-old Gladys Oliver told the police the same thing most of her neighbors had told them: She had seen nothing. The next day, however, she called Crime Stoppers, an organization that feeds anonymous tips to the police and also offers rewards for information that leads to an arrest. Crime Stoppers informed her that she would need to tell her story to the police to receive her reward. She called them the next day. From her bedroom window, she said, she had watched a young man jump out of the passenger seat of the BMW and dash away. She then saw another young man, short and squat, get out of the driver's side and walk toward the trunk. Both men were black; she knew them from the neighborhood. The stocky one, Robert Mitchell, lived around the corner, and would sometimes buy the barbecue sandwiches Oliver sold on Sunday nights. The other man was an acquaintance of her son's; he'd looked in on a dominoes game her son had hosted on her porch the day Jeffrey Young was attacked. His name was Benjamine Spencer.

SPENCER

WAS 22 YEARS OLD, saddled by the weight of unwanted responsibilities and the disappointment of derailed dreams. He worked the night shift loading and unloading trucks. He'd had a few brushes with the law. He had twice spent several days in jail for driving with a suspended license, and had received six years of probation for joyriding in a car his friend had stolen. Newly married, he loved his wife, Debra, but lately they seemed to have more bad days than good ones. They were expecting a baby in two months. "I was trying to get myself together financially and mentally and physically,"

he told me recently. "It wasn't really the life I wanted."

On the Sunday of Jeffrey Young's murder, the couple argued during lunch at her parents' house, prompting Debra to go to bed early and Benjamine to roam the neighborhood. He drove a friend, Ramona Williams, to an evening church service and picked up a box of chicken. Sometime after 7 p.m., he dropped by Williams's house to see her sister, Christi, a high-school senior headed to college on a track scholarship. Spencer was quiet, polite, and handsome in a way that turned heads, a man who favored snakeskin boots and colorful Perry Ellis shirts. When he went to clubs, he would bring a second shirt—in case someone else was wearing the one he had on. He'd never had trouble attracting women, although he told me he'd never strayed as a married man before that night.

Spencer claims that he spent the evening with Christi Williams, talking and fooling around a little at her house. At about 10 p.m., her teenage brothers came home, and she and Spencer drove in his wife's red Thunderbird to a nearby park, where he says they remained past midnight. The next day, he learned that the body of a white man had been dumped in his neighborhood.

That week unfolded as usual: Spencer drove his wife to work, then picked her up at 5 o'clock before leaving for his night shift unloading trucks. On Thursday afternoon, he took a nap until 2:30, when he was jolted awake by someone pounding on the door. He opened it to find police officers, and Detective Brisen, on his porch.

With Spencer's permission, the police searched the house. They did not find the portable TV, the Seiko watch, the wedding ring, or a murder weapon. The police nevertheless took him down to the station and booked him for the murder of Jeffrey Young. "I wasn't really scared at first," Spencer told me. "I knew that they had made an awful mistake when they arrested me, and believed that it was just a matter of time before they figured that out."

"I KNEW THAT THEY HAD MADE AN AWFUL MISTAKE," SPENCER TOLD ME, "AND BELIEVED THAT IT WAS JUST A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THEY FIGURED THAT OUT."

BENJAMINE SPENCER and Robert Mitchell were tried separately for murder. Spencer was appointed a lawyer named Frank Jackson, who had played professional football for the Kansas City Chiefs and the Miami Dolphins and was respected as a savvy foe by prosecutors. Jackson told me the state had substantial evidence against his client. Three eyewitnesses put him in Jeffrey Young's BMW. At the suggestion of Gladys Oliver, investigators had interviewed Jimmie Cotton, a young man who also knew Spencer from the neighborhood. He described the same sequence of events as Oliver, and further offered that he'd seen Spencer jump over a fence separating the alley where the BMW was found from Oliver's yard and run down her driveway. He said he then saw Spencer get into a red Thunderbird. Another neighborhood witness, Charles Stewart, corroborated Cotton's account. "These are not eyewitnesses who were strangers—strangers who all of the sudden had to pick somebody out of a lineup," Faith Johnson, the current district attorney of Dallas County, told me. "They *knew* Spencer and Mitchell." Investigators had also turned up a jailhouse informant, who swore that Spencer told him he had killed Jeffrey Young.

The state had virtually no physical evidence, however. The police never recovered a murder weapon, or the stolen property. They had lifted 12 fingerprints and one partial palm print from Jeffrey Young's office and car; none matched Spencer's or Mitchell's prints. They towed the BMW to an impound



lot without photographing its location in the alley and left it outside overnight before examining its exterior for prints. It rained that night. As for the alley itself, they first photographed it six months after the crime, when new structures and foliage had altered the scene.

Spencer's trial began on October 26, 1987. The particulars are lost: Inexplicably, the trial transcript has gone missing. The prosecution presented its eyewitnesses and the informant. The defense relied almost exclusively on Spencer's alibi witness, Christi Williams, who testified that she had spent the entire evening with Spencer. Four days after the trial began, the jury found Spencer guilty of murder and sentenced him to 35 years in prison.

Spencer was granted a reprieve, however. During jury deliberations, his attorneys discovered a document in the prosecutor's files indicating that Gladys Oliver had received a reward from Crime Stoppers for her role in identifying Spencer. Spencer's attorneys noted to the judge that the prosecution had failed to disclose the reward. In fact, according to the motion filed by the defense, the prosecution repeatedly stated that it had received no information in exchange for a reward, and Oliver denied on the stand that she had received a reward. The judge granted Spencer a new trial.

(The Crime Stoppers reward was \$580. There is no court record of either of the five-figure rewards being paid out, and I was unable to determine whether either sum was ever distributed.)

On the eve of the second trial, the state offered Spencer a deal: 20 years in prison, and parole eligibility in less than five years. "If it were me, I would have probably taken it and run with it," Jackson told me. "Do my time and get out and get on with my life." Jackson advised Spencer that if he risked another trial, prosecutors would ask for life, and they'd get it. "It's hard to overcome a dead white guy who's killed by two black men in a black area of Dallas where you dump his body out on the street," Jackson said.

"I don't care what they likely to get," Spencer said. "I'm not going to plead guilty to something I didn't do."

SPENCER'S

SECOND TRIAL WAS prosecuted by an assistant state's attorney, Andy Beach, who had a winning smile and an easy rapport with juries. Like his predecessor, he was confident that Gladys Oliver would make a devastating witness,

even after acknowledging her Crime Stoppers reward.

"She was one of the most effective, believable eyewitnesses that I ever proffered in a felony case," Beach told me. Oliver entered the courtroom in a wheelchair, wearing a shawl around her shoulders. Sitting at eye level with the jury, she told her story with precise details and a no-nonsense demeanor. She stated that she had been awakened sometime after 10 o'clock by dogs barking next door. She looked out her bedroom window to see Benjamine Spencer—illuminated by a streetlight and her neighbor's porch light—climb out of a car's passenger seat. She then went to her front door, from which she saw Spencer walk down her driveway and greet her son. (Oliver stated that her son had been drinking all day. He was not called as a witness by either the prosecution or the defense.)

"She had a personality," Beach said. "She had a wit. She wasn't going to tolerate silly questions. Mr. Jackson was a very effective defense lawyer, a good cross-examiner, and he just didn't get anywhere with her."

Oliver made an impression on the jury. "I still remember her saying, 'I peeps out my window ...,'" says William Alan Ledbetter, the jury foreman, who was then a 28-year-old auditor at the local electric



Spencer at the H. H. Coffield Unit. Before trial, the state offered Spencer a deal: 20 years in prison, and parole eligibility in less than five years. He turned it down. He's now serving a life sentence.

Photographs of the men freed by Centurion Ministries. The group has exonerated 61 prisoners, frequently without the benefit of DNA evidence.



company. "She sounded just so much like my grandmother, keeping an eye on the neighbors, and particularly the neighbors who my grandmother thought were up to no good."

Ledbetter told me that the jury was not particularly bothered by the Crime Stoppers reward. They also believed the two young men who corroborated her testimony.

They gave less credence to Danny Edwards, the jailhouse informant who said Spencer had confessed to him. Edwards had landed in county jail after being arrested for burglary in mid-March. Ten days later, Spencer was placed in Edwards's holding tank. The two men started talking and, Edwards claimed, Spencer confessed that he had killed "the white dude." In court, Edwards recounted a lurid blow-by-blow of the attack on Young. He said Spencer had told him his only regret was that he didn't finish the job at Young's office. "He said, 'I should have killed the bitch right then and there.'"

Edwards's testimony was the only evidence connecting Spencer to the assault, not just the stolen car. It also frequently conflicted with the known facts and even the prosecution's theory of the crime. He demonstrated for the jury how Spencer had grabbed the victim by the tie and choked him. But

Young, in the office on a Sunday night, had been wearing jogging clothes and no tie. Edwards claimed that Spencer had been driving the victim's BMW. The state's witnesses said Spencer had been the passenger. Edwards said that Spencer hadn't worried about fingerprints because he had scoured off his prints by rubbing his fingertips on the pavement. Spencer's fingers were intact.

"Danny Edwards's testimony probably hurt us more than it helped us," Beach told me. But Edwards was also able to undermine Spencer's only defense: the alibi witness. He told the jury that he had heard Spencer on the phone telling a woman that if she did not provide an alibi, Spencer would have her house burned down.

The jury convicted Spencer of aggravated robbery and sentenced him to life in prison. (A week later, at the conclusion of his first and only trial, Robert Mitchell was found guilty of aggravated robbery as well.) The night of the verdict, Spencer returned to his cell. He was stunned, wrestling with his faith in the justice system and in a just God. "To be honest, I really wanted to die," he told me. "I thought about committing suicide while I was in the [cell]. But I was like, *If I kill myself, I can't go to heaven*. And so that was the only hope I had. I didn't want to go to hell."



1979, JIM MCCLOSKEY entered the Princeton Theological Seminary at the age of 37. He had served as a naval officer in Vietnam, and enjoyed some success as a management consultant, but he despaired that he had been living a "superficial, self-centered life." During his second year at the seminary, he volunteered to serve as a chaplain at Trenton State Prison, in New Jersey. There he met a former heroin addict who had been sentenced to life for murder. "All he wanted to talk about was his innocence," McCloskey told me. "I had a tough time accepting that, because at that time I couldn't imagine that police would lie. Or that prosecutors would hide evidence of innocence." But as the seminarian read the trial transcripts, he came to believe that the wrong man was sitting in prison. "What are you going to do about it?" the prisoner asked. "You can't just go back to your safe little dormitory room and pray for me. God works through human beings, and you're the only human being I have."

McCloskey deferred his seminary classes for a year and reinvestigated the case. He discovered that an eyewitness had lied and that the state knew its star

witness—a jailhouse informant—had perjured himself on the stand. He recruited a lawyer to represent the inmate; relying on the evidence McCloskey had gathered, the lawyer persuaded a federal judge to exonerate his client.

McCloskey realized that his calling was not to the pulpit, but to the work of freeing the wrongly convicted. He launched Centurion Ministries out of his bedroom, naming it after the Roman centurion who stood at the foot of the cross in the Gospel of Luke. As Jesus was dying, he looked up and said: "Surely this one was innocent."

Over the next few years, McCloskey relied on a few volunteers to investigate cases in relative obscurity. But in 1986, Centurion won freedom for Nate Walker, who had been convicted of rape and kidnapping. *The New York Times* covered the story, and *60 Minutes* followed up with a profile of McCloskey and his work. Centurion's office was inundated with letters from hundreds of prisoners across the country.

In January 1990, Centurion received a handwritten letter from Benjamine Spencer, now an inmate at the H. H. Coffield Unit, a maximum-security prison

legal briefs, police reports—with two questions in mind: Was this person innocent, and could that be proved?

Spencer's 14-page autobiography begins: "I was born on December 20, 1964. I am now twenty-five years of age and have spent the last three years, almost, locked up for something I didn't do."

Inside prison, his world moved glacially. He spent his days working as a barber and doing legal research in the library. (An appeal filed soon after he arrived in prison was denied.) Outside, the world sped by. Shortly after he was arrested, his wife, Debra, gave birth to a baby boy, Benjamine John—B.J. Debra was promoted at her telecommunications company and moved out of West Dallas. Whenever she could, she and B.J. drove down to the prison. The baby first glimpsed his father through a Plexiglas window. After a while, they were permitted contact visits. "I'd stand him on the table. They'd play and talk and carry on," Debra told me. They could barely hear each other over the clamor of other prisoners and their visitors. Eventually, Spencer urged his wife to file for divorce. "When she would come visit me, she would cry most of the way home.

I mean, that wasn't a life for anybody," Spencer said.

"For a while I couldn't let go," Debra recalled. "But I knew I had to be strong and raise B.J., so after years passed, I decided maybe I need to go ahead and divorce." She kept the Spencer name.

Spencer corresponded with Centurion throughout the 1990s. "I wanted them to know everything I knew. And what I didn't know, I wanted them to try to find out." He sent them his trial record, annotated in his meticulous handwriting, pointing out

errors and inconsistencies in the testimony. He identified people who could corroborate his alibi—people who were never called by the defense. He explored an alternative theory, that another man had committed the crime, and located two men who could back the theory up. From within the prison walls, Spencer drafted a blueprint for Centurion's investigation, should it accept his case.

There was no eureka moment. But over time, Spencer convinced the Centurion staff of his innocence and of the strength of his case. They saw in it the elements of previous Centurion successes: poor police work and questionable testimony by eyewitnesses and a jailhouse informant. In 2000, McCloskey traveled to the Coffield Unit and spoke with Spencer for the first time. "I walked away thinking, *We can't leave this man behind.*"



2004, SPENCER FILED a petition for a writ of habeas corpus, seeking to get his conviction overturned based on new evidence. McCloskey and his colleagues had tracked down new witnesses, heard recantations from old ones, and discovered fresh evidence they considered exculpatory. They had hired Cheryl Wattley, a former federal prosecutor, to represent Spencer. As they continued to find new witnesses and poke holes in the original police investigation, they grew more confident. (Robert Mitchell, Spencer's alleged accomplice, had been released on parole in 2001, years before Spencer was eligible to petition for it. Mitchell died soon after, of a heart attack.)

In some ways, Texas was fertile ground for pursuing a long-shot exoneration. Despite its reputation for harsh justice, it is one of a handful of states that allow a convict to petition for a new trial based on a claim of actual innocence, even if the convict's constitutional rights were not violated during the original trial. The district attorney's office opposed Spencer's habeas petition. But in 2006, Centurion thought it caught a break: Dallas elected Craig Watkins, a reform-minded Democrat, to serve as district attorney. He established the Conviction Integrity Unit, a group of prosecutors within the office to reinvestigate claims of innocence. The unit quickly developed a national reputation for exonerating wrongly convicted prisoners, and would later become a leader in pursuing non-DNA cases.

Early on, however, Watkins made a strategic decision. To earn the trust of the

IN SOME WAYS, TEXAS WAS FERTILE GROUND FOR PURSUING A LONG-SHOT EXONERATION.

about two hours south of Dallas. By this time, the organization had developed a process. First, it requested a detailed autobiography. What had the inmate's childhood been like? Did he have a criminal record? (Centurion declines cases of people convicted of prior violent crimes.) How had he been using his time in prison? Next, Centurion staff assembled a written record—trial transcripts,



Jim McCloskey, the founder of Centurion Ministries. McCloskey stores case files in the basement of his New Jersey home. He first met Benjamine Spencer in prison, in 2000. "I walked away thinking, *We can't leave this man behind.*"



courts and the public, the unit would initially accept only cases involving DNA evidence. If DNA pointed to another perpetrator, or excluded the convict, this was as close to absolute truth as one could get. "It was safe," Watkins told me. "There was no question."

Watkins looked at Spencer's appeal and saw a case with no known DNA evidence. "I'm building credibility," Watkins told me. "I'm not going to take a chance on a person who's been convicted of murder and aggravated robbery—when somebody died? I'm not going to take a chance on that." Watkins proved no more amenable to helping Centurion than his predecessor had been. McCloskey told me that in the Texas system, in which district attorneys, trial judges, and appellate judges are all elected, no one wants to be seen as soft on crime. DNA is valuable for the political cover it provides.

Spencer's case languished. Then, in January 2007, Rick Magnis, a former public defender, began presiding over the 283rd District Court in Texas. Magnis was wary of the case at first. Because of the state's open-minded approach to

Jeffrey Young's body had been dumped. When he completed his review, Magnis agreed to hold an evidentiary hearing—a proceeding to consider whether the evidence merited a new trial.

The hearing began on July 24, 2007. On one side of the courtroom sat the appellate attorneys from the district attorney's office, with Jeffrey Young's family and friends filling the rows behind them. Cheryl Wattle set up on the other side, with Spencer's supporters behind her.

Wattle's case centered on three arguments: that it would have been impossible for the eyewitnesses to identify Spencer, given the conditions under which they claimed to have seen him; that the jailhouse informant had lied; and that the Dallas Police Department and the prosecutors had ignored a more plausible suspect.

The state's star witness, Gladys Oliver—now 62 years old—held her ground, insisting that she saw Spencer leave the BMW and walk down her driveway. But its other witness wobbled under Wattle's cross-examination. Jimmie Cotton said he never saw the face of the man who

ran from the car and hopped Oliver's fence. (The third eyewitness, Charles Stewart, had been killed in the 1990s, reportedly in a drug deal gone wrong.) Under questioning from Judge Magnis, Danny Edwards, the jailhouse informant, now said Spencer had never confessed to him personally, but had told another prisoner of his guilt. Had that been Edwards's testimony at trial, it would have been inadmissible as hearsay. Wattle suggested that Edwards had been rewarded for his testimony: He had been facing 15 to 25 years in prison. That sentence was later reduced. He

ultimately served 15 months.

Wattle called several witnesses who had not appeared at either trial—among them Sandra Brackens, a West Dallas resident who testified that the perpetrator had run directly in front of her, and she was certain he was not Benjamine Spencer. (Spencer's original defense team hadn't called her to testify, as she was a minor at the time,

and they felt she was a reluctant and inconsistent witness.)

Paul Michel, a forensic visual scientist and an optometrist, described to the court the science of sight, explaining what would be required to positively identify someone at night. At 10 p.m. on March 25, 2003, he had visited the alley where Young's car had been abandoned, doing his best to approximate the lighting conditions of the night of the crime. In the intervening years, the alley and its surroundings had changed—crucially, Gladys Oliver's house had been torn down. The failure of the Dallas police to document the scene in the alley also hampered his work. But based on measurements in a police diagram that had been made six months after the crime, Michel concluded that none of the witnesses could have identified the man leaving the BMW, even if he had been standing still and not running away. At most, they could have seen a silhouette.

Michel told the court that an observer would have to be no farther than 25 feet away to identify a person in those conditions. The state's expert wrote an affidavit that a witness could be 49 feet away and still make a reliable positive identification. Gladys Oliver had been 123 feet away; Jimmie Cotton, 93 feet away; and Charles Stewart, more than 200 feet away.

Wattle also presented an alternative scenario. A few hours before Jeffrey Young was killed, several men were hanging out at a neighborhood park in West Dallas. Michael Hubbard, then 22 and already an accomplished thief, told his friends he was going to "hit a lick"—that is, rob someone. According to two of his friends, Kelvin Johnson and Ferrell Scott, Hubbard later boasted of having gone to the warehouse district nearby and hit his lick, netting a watch, a portable TV, a wedding ring, and some cash. Police had never released the details about what was stolen from Young.

The Hubbard theory had been briefly explored by both the prosecution and the defense at the time of Spencer's first trial. In April 1987, while in jail awaiting trial for aggravated robbery, Johnson gave an affidavit to Detective Briseno that implicated his friend and absolved Spencer and Mitchell. Briseno didn't believe him: Johnson never signed the

A WEST DALLAS RESIDENT TESTIFIED THAT SHE WAS CERTAIN THAT THE PERPETRATOR WAS NOT BENJAMINE SPENCER.

hearing appeals from convicts, Texas judges receive many petitions claiming innocence. The successful ones generally turn on DNA evidence. Spencer's case was murkier. But as Magnis read deeper in the habeas petition, he grew more interested. The judge took the extraordinary step of closing his court for a week to review the evidence; later, he visited the neighborhood where



Centurion hired Cheryl Wattley, a former federal prosecutor, to represent Spencer. Before a Texas judge, she challenged the state's eyewitnesses, and argued that police and prosecutors had ignored a more plausible suspect.

affidavit, failed a polygraph, and admitted that he and Hubbard had had a falling out. Hubbard's prints didn't match any of the sets lifted from the warehouse or the BMW. Spencer's original defense lawyer, Frank Jackson, now says that he decided against putting Johnson on the stand because he considered him to be untrustworthy. At the evidentiary hearing in 2007, Johnson and Scott both insisted that Michael Hubbard had killed Jeffrey Young.

Years before the hearing, McCloskey had tracked down Hubbard and asked him whether he'd assaulted Young. Hubbard denied having anything to do with the assault. Now Wattley called him to the stand. Hubbard, who was then serving time for aggravated robbery, declined to testify, invoking his Fifth Amendment right to avoid self-incrimination.

Judge Magnis spent eight months weighing the evidence presented during the hearing before he issued his findings. Spencer's visual expert had conclusively established that it was "physically impossible" for the eyewitnesses to have identified the perpetrator, he wrote; therefore, the state's eyewitnesses could not be believed. He further found that Danny Edwards's jailhouse testimony was not credible.

As to the alternative theory of the crime that Wattley had presented, Magnis said that Kelvin Johnson's statement implicating Michael Hubbard was "more consistent with the actual facts of the murder and therefore more credible" than Edwards's testimony. On March 28, 2008, Magnis declared that Benjamine Spencer deserved a new trial "on the grounds of actual innocence."

Magnis wasn't the only person in the courtroom who had been convinced by Wattley's arguments. William Alan Ledbetter, the foreman of the jury that convicted Spencer and sentenced him to life in prison, had taken off work to attend the evidentiary hearing. On the first day, he'd sat behind the Young family. But as the proceedings continued, he said, "it was very clear that we had made a tragic mistake." He felt implicated in what he came to view as a failure of the system. "There's a bit of personal culpability that one takes on," he told me. "I had a role in this. Our role as jurors was to sort through the evidence and reach a reasonable conclusion. And it's clear that we worked with what we had. But we were very wrong." By the end of the hearing, he had moved to the other side of the courtroom, sitting among Spencer's supporters.

UNDER

TEXAS LAW, Judge Magnis could not grant a new trial. He could only recommend that the Court of Criminal Appeals, the state's highest criminal court, allow a new trial to proceed. But McCloskey was sanguine. "We thought we were on firm ground," he said. "We didn't see how the Court of Criminal Appeals could not defer to Judge Magnis's findings of fact." Spencer and his family thought it would be a matter of days, perhaps weeks, before they'd get word of a new trial or, better yet, before the district attorney's office would change its position and support his exoneration, which might have allowed him to leave prison a free man. "I thought, *This is it. I'm going home*," Spencer recalled.

He remained in the Dallas County jail where he'd been held during the evidentiary hearing, rather than returning to the maximum-security prison. His ex-wife and friends bought him new clothes: jeans, boots, and Perry Ellis shirts. But some two years passed without news. Spencer asked to transfer back to prison. At least the place was familiar, less noisy, better suited to permanent stays.

On April 20, 2011, the Court of Criminal Appeals denied Spencer a new trial. The court's responsibility was not to retry the case but to look specifically at the evidence presented to Judge Magnis and determine whether it was "newly discovered"—that is, whether it offered information that had been unavailable to the trial court—and whether it could prove Spencer's innocence. The eight elected judges—all Republicans, five of them former prosecutors—dismissed Spencer's arguments in quick strokes. They gave "little weight" to Michel, the forensic visual scientist, who'd stated that the eyewitnesses could not have identified Spencer. Michel could not replicate the crime scene, they concluded, because too much had changed since 1987. His "assumptions" could not "overcome the testimony of witnesses who said they had enough light to see"—witnesses the defense had already challenged at trial. As for Danny Edwards, the judges still credited his original testimony. The evidence pointing toward

another possible suspect, they wrote, was speculative at best.

"Basically, it's just a theory," Judge Larry Meyers, who wrote the majority opinion, told me. "It wasn't conclusive by any means and probably wasn't anywhere near as strong as the actual evidence of Mr. Spencer's guilt."

We were sitting in Meyers's kitchen in Fort Worth, his three yellow Labrador retrievers snoring softly at our feet. Meyers had retired after failing to be reelected in 2016. To win the right to a new trial, Meyers said, Spencer needed to do more than cast doubt on the underlying police work or the eyewitness testimony. He had to *prove* that he was innocent, to establish that "no rational jury would have convicted him in light of this new evidence." Texas judges call this a "Herculean burden."

There's a reason, of course, why our criminal-justice system tends to favor the findings of trial courts. Jurors look into the eyes of witnesses and the defendant and judge their credibility; they view the physical evidence up close and with relative immediacy, compared with appellate judges, who see materials years after the commission of a crime. A jury may look at the events leading up to a crime through a glass darkly, but an appellate court looks through its own dark glass, one further distorted by time.

Still, I asked Meyers whether Texas has set the bar so high that it has trapped innocent people in prison with no available remedy. He said he's sure of it. "There were some people I really thought were innocent and they didn't get relief. I was so mad, but there was nothing I could do about it."

"But you feel the court reached the right opinion here?," I asked.

"I hope we reached the right opinion," Meyers said, "and that Mr. Spencer has hopefully been rehabilitated."

NOTHING

PREVENTED SPENCER from petitioning for another evidentiary hearing. But he would need evidence that had not been available during his trial, evidence that would have changed the outcome

of that trial. New facts with exculpatory power are elusive. Cold-case investigators will tell you that time is the enemy of truth. Memories fade. Witnesses die. Evidence degrades or disappears—the fingerprints that the police lifted from Jeffrey Young's car, for instance, long ago went missing from the Dallas Police Department's evidence room. This is another reason DNA evidence can be so crucial. Its power lies not only in its scientific certainty, but in its relative imperviousness to time's rigors.

And yet, time can expose truth as well. Relationships change, old loyalties dissolve. Conscience eats away at sleep. A person no longer has a reason to lie.

I saw this dynamic for myself when I undertook my own effort to investigate what happened on the night of March 22, 1987. At the suggestion of Wattley and McCloskey, I teamed up with Daryl Parker, a private investigator who had been a legal officer in the Marine Corps and later worked as a police officer and a criminal investigator. Parker, who wears his blond hair in a tight military cut and a 9-mm gun on his hip, has extensive experience tracking down people who don't necessarily want to be found.

We began with the most basic, and pivotal, question in Spencer's case: What could the witnesses have seen on that night 30 years ago? At 10 o'clock, when a silver BMW crept down Harston Street and pulled into an alley, the moon had not yet risen. One streetlight and one back-porch light shed some illumination on the car.

Gladys Oliver now suffers from dementia, and declined to speak with us. Charles Stewart is dead. Jimmie Cotton, however, invited us into the apartment he shares with his mother in West Dallas. Cotton, 6 foot 4 and rail thin, was 18 years old in 1987. He had been cooking a late Sunday dinner when, he testified, he looked out the kitchen window to see Spencer climb out of a BMW.

When I asked him whether he was certain he'd seen Spencer, he sounded a less confident note than he had at trial. "I'm not positive it was him," he said. With that, the interview became

THE POWER OF DNA LIES NOT ONLY IN ITS SCIENTIFIC CERTAINTY, BUT IN ITS RELATIVE IMPERVIOUSNESS TO THE RIGORS OF TIME.

something closer to a confessional. It was dark that night, he said. The man was rushing away from him. He never actually saw his face. Cotton assumed that he was Spencer from the tall, lanky build. "The police was saying that Benjamin was under investigation for this murder," Cotton recalled. "I said, 'It looked like him. Maybe it was him.' And they went on from there."

How certain are you that the person you saw was Spencer?, I asked. "I'd say about 30 percent chance," Cotton replied.

What about one of the seemingly most damning details in his testimony—the fact that he saw Spencer getting into a red Thunderbird soon after the BMW pulled into the alley? "It might have been earlier in the day," Cotton now said. He thought it had still been light out.

It felt too easy: Was Cotton just saying what he presumed his guests—one of them possessed of a marine's bearing and carrying a firearm—wanted to hear? I asked Cotton, twice, whether he felt pressed to recant. "Naw," he said, "I feel bad about this. If he didn't do it, he needs to be out." He shook his head. "That's a long time. Thirty years."

Our next stop was the last known address of Danny Edwards, the jailhouse informant. Edwards had recently been released from prison, after serving time for the latest in a series of convictions that had made prison his home for half his life. He greeted us affably, gently setting down his puppy, a Labrador-pit bull, before shaking our hands.

Edwards remembered the Spencer case well. He said the police had called him into an interview room and showed him a document allegedly signed by

Spencer, which he did not read. He said they told him that Spencer had accused him, Danny Edwards, of killing Jeffrey Young. No, Edwards replied: *Spencer* confessed to *me*. "He say I did it. I say he did it. The best liar wins."

In fact, Edwards told us, Spencer had never admitted to killing Young. "He didn't even know the guy. He ain't even been over there." Nor had Spencer ever threatened the alibi witness, Christi Williams. "He ain't said nothing, threatened nobody." Accusing cell mates of a crime in exchange for a reduced sentence is simply how the game is played, he told us.

I wondered how Detective Jesus Briseno, now retired, would view these statements. On our third visit to his house, 50 miles north of Dallas, he grudgingly consented to talk. I pointed out that two of the four key witnesses against Spencer had recanted when we confronted them. "Why do you want to believe them now?," Briseno asked. I noted that Jimmie Cotton and Danny Edwards had said the police pushed them to identify Spencer. "It's lies," he said. "We don't give them information. We ask them information."

Briseno also dismissed Christi Williams, the star athlete who was Spencer's alibi. "She was young, and she was a girlfriend of Ben, so of course she might have tended to cover up for him," he said. But when Parker and I met with

her, she said she had no incentive to lie. "I'm in high school, headed to college. What do I look like, messing with a married man?" She stood by her testimony that Spencer had been with her all evening, and said her brother Israel would corroborate her version of events.

We met with Israel at his apartment in West Dallas. His mother hadn't wanted him to testify at Spencer's trial, as he was a minor at the time; his account could today be considered new evidence. He remembered the night clearly: noticing the Thunderbird outside his house when he returned from playing street football, seeing Spencer "courting" his sister at the time Jeffrey Young was being murdered. "That man was in the house," he told us. "I saw him."

The detectives had believed Danny Edwards, a career criminal, and dismissed witnesses like Christi and Israel Williams. Parker called it tunnel vision. "Investigators and police are so driven to catch the person that just did this heinous crime that when they find someone, they focus on them to the exclusion of all others," he said. "And then they start making the evidence fit their theory, instead of making their theory fit the evidence."

The investigative notes kept by Jesus Briseno and his fellow detectives detail an all-out sprint for four days, until the arrest of Spencer and Mitchell. The detectives continued to interview

witnesses after the arrest, but it feels like a cooldown lap. This was the moment Michael Hubbard entered the frame.

Kelvin Johnson, who tried to finger Hubbard for the crime in 1987, went to prison that year for aggravated robbery. He was released in 1995. He has since embraced an evangelical faith and started a family; he works at Home Depot. When we tracked him down, in a middle-class suburb south of Dallas, he was still adamant that Hubbard, not Spencer, had killed Young. "These were his exact words," Johnson told me: "The white man who they found dead over in West Dallas?" I said, 'Yep.' He said, 'I did that, man.'" Ferrell Scott is currently serving a life sentence in a federal prison in Allenwood, Pennsylvania, for conspiracy to distribute marijuana. He, too, maintains that Hubbard is the killer. I asked Scott, whom I reached by phone, why I should believe him. "I might be a convicted felon," he said, "but I'm not a liar."

Michael Hubbard was convicted of a different aggravated robbery in 1987. Two years after he was paroled in 1992, a string of violent robberies terrorized Dallas. The perpetrator would wait outside an isolated industrial park, usually at night. When a businessman left the office, he would bash his skull with a bat. In one case, the victim needed 170 stitches; he still suffers from mild seizures. In another case, surgeons had to remove part of the victim's frontal lobe; a former executive, he could later only find work bagging groceries. When Kelvin Johnson read about that string of crimes, he thought to himself: *It's Hubbard's MO*. "He got away with it in 1987; he thought he would get away with it in '94," he told me. In February 1995, however, Hubbard was arrested in connection with one of the assaults. He was convicted on one count of aggravated robbery and is serving life in prison. He declined an interview.

I reached Karo Johnson, the lawyer who represented Hubbard in his last case. I asked him whether he was familiar with the Young case. "I'm not saying that Michael Hubbard was the person who did that murder," he said. "But my opinion is that Michael Hubbard was the person who likely did that [murder]. He was the most dangerous person I ever represented."

The alley where, according to eyewitness testimony, Spencer emerged from Jeffrey Young's stolen BMW. Police failed to properly secure the scene at the time, hindering later efforts to reconstruct the events of March 22, 1987.





Benjamin Spencer's Centurion Ministries case file. "I always felt that the truth would prevail," Spencer says.

BENJAMINE

SPENCER LIKES TO rise early. He dresses quietly, trying not to disturb the 110 other prisoners who share a large dorm room at the H. H. Coffield Unit. Usually he skips breakfast. By 4 a.m. he has arrived at his job as a general clerk in the prison's Education Department, filing papers and running errands. "I work with some very nice people," he told me. Most of them have read about his case. "They're always asking me, 'When are they going to let you go?'" He calls his ex-wife every other week, as well as Jim McCloskey.

"This is not living. It's existing," Spencer told me through a Plexiglas window at Coffield. He speaks in a soft southern drawl. He looks professorial in his wire-rimmed glasses, his hair flecked with gray, a few lines etched in his forehead. He is tall and lanky and still handsome. But the man who once favored bright-colored shirts is now consigned to the prison's white uniform. "This is as sharp as I get now," Spencer said, laughing. "You know, some of these guys, they press their own clothes: They put water on them, put them under the mattress. I don't even care. I'm just at a point where I'm still hopeful, but at the same time, it's like I'm stuck in a system."

Spencer has given up exercising every day. He's given up attending Church of Christ services every week. He used to spend hours in the law library, trying to find a precedent that might win his release; he's stopped going there, too.

"I always felt that the truth would prevail," he told me. Spencer insisted that it did prevail, if briefly, when Judge Magnis recommended that he receive a new trial. Magnis told me that he has come to see Spencer as a victim of a broken system. "What we have is another African American male who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, who got caught up in the criminal-justice system and is now in prison for something that anyone who was in the area could have done," he said.

Spencer said many people believe in him, are pulling for him, are praying for him. "However, they're not the people with the power to release me."

He is now eligible for parole, and in theory, he could walk out of prison in February, when the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles considers his case. But every year for the past six years, the board has rejected his petition. Spencer has a near-perfect record, with just three infractions in three decades in prison. But more meaningful to the board might be the wishes of Jeffrey Young's family. The family has a right to object to Spencer's release, and each year, it does. I reached Young's two sons, who were 10 and 12 at the time of their father's murder, but they declined to participate in this story. They believe their father's killer is in prison.

The parole board does not explain its decisions, year after year issuing the same short statement: Parole denied, based on the violent nature of the crime. "Well, that's never going to change," said Jim McCloskey. "What happened to Jeffrey Young, as tragic and as brutal as it was, will never change. So I just hope and pray that someday the parole board

RING

To throw your hat
in is to make

yourself bare-
headed, ready—

by oils to be
anointed, or by ark-

hard rains, of an
instant, stricken.

— Andrea Cohen

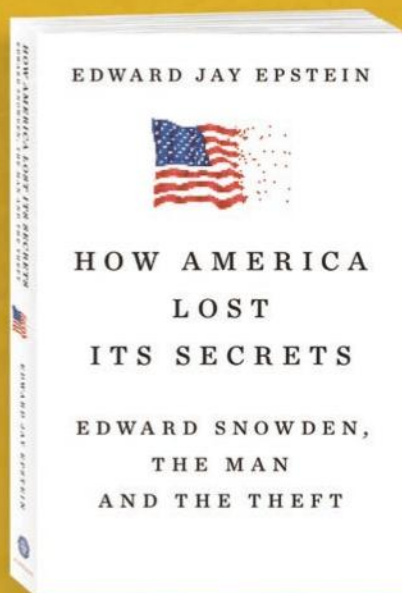
Andrea Cohen's most recent collection is Unfathoming (2017).

will get tired of denying Ben, and will eventually let him go home."

In the course of my reporting on the Spencer case, I filed a public-information request with Dallas County's crime laboratory, the Southwestern Institute of Forensic Sciences. I had already seen firsthand how difficult it is to gather exculpatory evidence decades after a crime, and wanted to know whether the lab had preserved biological matter in the Spencer case. I was told that it had, and sure enough, buried in the medical examiner's documents, past the diagrams of the injuries to Jeffrey Young's body and skull, was a notation indicating that the lab had preserved fingernail clippings from Young's right hand. If Young and his assailant had struggled before he was fatally wounded, there is a chance that he scratched the killer and captured his DNA beneath his nails. If it is still present, it could conceivably point to another perpetrator—or, of course, to Benjamin Spencer. I shared the information with Cheryl Wattlely, who told me she intends to have the clippings tested. I asked Faith Johnson, the Dallas County district attorney, whether she would agree to the testing. She said her office would not oppose it: "We don't want any innocent person to be in prison." **A**

Barbara Bradley Hagerty is the author of Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife. This article is part of a joint project between The Atlantic and NPR.

RIVETING New Paperbacks



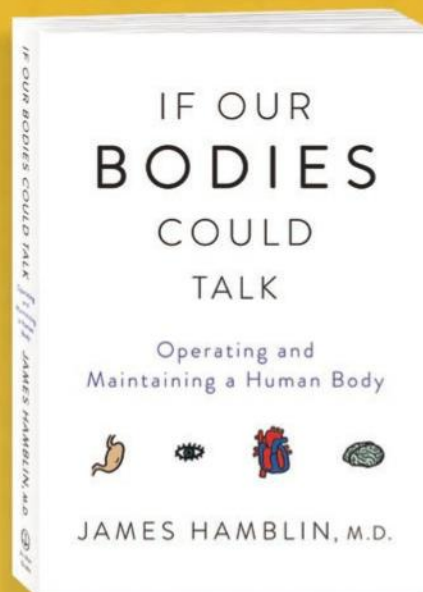
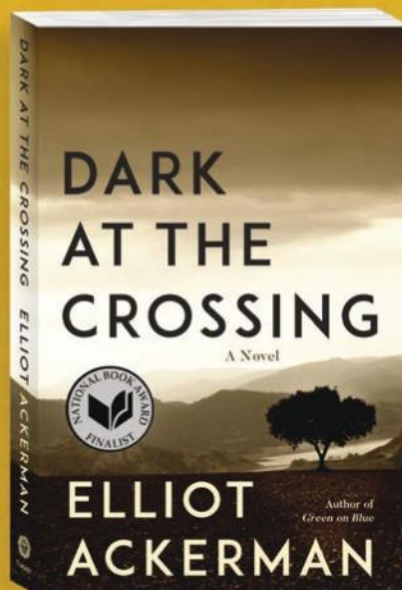
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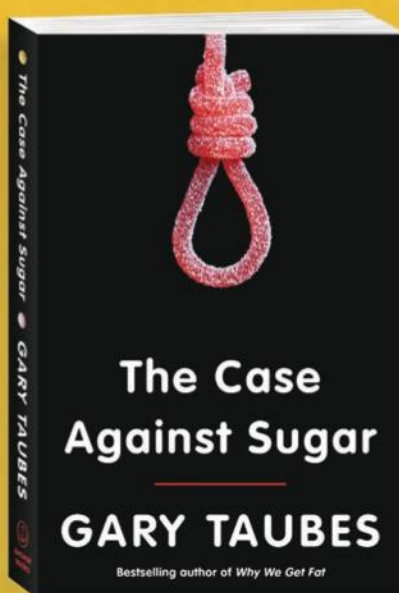
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P U T I N ' S



G A M E

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B Y J U L I A I O F F E



The large, sunny room at Volgograd State University smelled like its contents: 45 college students, all but one of them male, hunched over keyboards, whispering and quietly clacking away among empty cans of Juicy energy drink. "It looks like they're just picking at their screens, but the battle is intense," Victor Minin said as we sat watching them.

Clustered in seven teams from universities across Russia, they were almost halfway into an eight-hour hacking competition, trying to solve forensic problems that ranged from identifying a computer virus's origins to finding secret messages embedded in images. Minin was there to oversee the competition, called Capture the Flag, which had been put on by his organization, the Association of Chief Information Security Officers, or ARSIB in Russian. ARSIB runs Capture the Flag competitions at schools all over Russia, as well as massive, multiday hackathons in which one team defends its server as another team attacks it. In April, hundreds of young hackers participated in one of them.

"I've been doing cybersecurity since I was 18, since I joined the army in 1982," Minin told me after we'd ducked out into the hallway so as not to distract the young contestants. He wouldn't say in which part of the army he'd done this work. "At the time, I signed a gag order," he told me, smiling slyly. "Do you think anything has changed? And that I'd say it to a journalist?"

After the army, Minin joined the KGB. And when the Soviet Union collapsed, he went to work in the Russian government's cyber and surveillance division. In 2010, after he'd retired and gone into the private sector, he helped found ARSIB, which has connections to the Russian defense ministry, the Federal Security Service (FSB), and the interior ministry.

The hacking competitions are Minin's way of preparing future generations, of "passing my accumulated knowledge on to the kiddies," he told me. He said Russian tech firms regularly come to him to find talent. I asked whether government agencies, like the security services that conduct cyber-operations abroad, did the same. "It's possible," he demurred. "They also need these specialists."

When the Capture the Flag competition broke for lunch, Minin and I stepped into the brightness and the wind outside. The university, a complex of stark white buildings, sits atop a steep hill with the city and the Volga River below. Once, the river was blood, and the hill was shrapnel and pillboxes and bones. Once, this was Stalingrad, a city made famous by the grueling battle fought here in the winter of 1942-43, when more than 1 million men died before the Germans lost the fight and a field marshal and the momentum of the war. Today, it is a haunted city.

"Have you been to Mamayev Kurgan yet?" Minin asked me. He was referring to another hill, where the battle was so intense, it changed the hill's shape. Now



Victor Minin, who has close ties to Russian intelligence, runs hacking competitions at universities all over Russia—his way, he says, of preparing future generations.

the *Motherland Calls* statue stands there, a 170-foot concrete woman raising a sword to summon her countrymen into battle. It's where Nazi Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus was captured, Minin noted with reverence, and looked into the sunny distance. "You know, it's important to see how young people defended their homeland."

When we got to the cafeteria, I saw that it, too, was haunted by its Soviet past. Grouchy middle-aged women in hairnets dished out bland, greasy cuisine. If it weren't for students tapping at their smartphones, it would have been hard to tell that the 21st century had ever arrived. I sat down at a table with a team from Astrakhan and told them I had been to their hometown once, a romantically shabby old city by the Caspian Sea.

The students smirked. "Everyone wants to leave," a third-year named Anton said.

"There's nothing to do there," his teammate Sergei added.

Anton was hoping that Minin could help him get his foot in the door at one of the state security services. "It's prestigious, they pay well, and the work is interesting," he said. If he were accepted, he could hope for a salary of 50,000 rubles (less than \$900) a month, which was almost double the average salary in Astrakhan. Was he motivated by any feelings of—"Patriotic conviction?" Anton finished my sentence, and started to chuckle. "No," he said. "I don't care what government I work for. If the French Foreign Legion takes me, I'll go!"

Isn't it sacrilege to say such things in a place like Volgograd?, I asked them.

Sergei said the kind of patriotism being fostered in Russia these days was empty, even unhealthy. He'd been angered by restrictions of online behavior imposed after the prodemocracy protests of 2011–12, and by government monitoring of online speech, which he called unconstitutional. "And if you look at the state of our roads and our cities, and how people live in our city, you want to ask, why are they spending billions of rubles on storing people's personal information in massive databases?"

"They're going to lock you up, Sergei," a classmate said, stealing a glance at my phone.

Sergei laughed. "Keep chewing," he said.

OVER THE PAST YEAR, Russian hackers have become the stuff of legend in the United States. According to U.S. intelligence assessments and media investigations, they were responsible for breaching the servers of the Democratic National Committee and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. They spread the information

they filched through friendly outlets such as WikiLeaks, to devastating effect. With President Vladimir Putin's blessing, they probed the voting infrastructure of various U.S. states. They quietly bought divisive ads and organized political events on Facebook, acting as the bellows in America's raging culture wars.

But most Russians don't recognize the Russia portrayed in this story: powerful, organized, and led by an omniscient, omnipotent leader who is able to both formulate and execute a complex and highly detailed plot.

Gleb Pavlovsky, a political consultant who helped Putin win his first presidential campaign, in 2000, and served as a Kremlin adviser until 2011, simply laughed when I asked him about Putin's role in Donald Trump's election. "We did an amazing job in the first decade of Putin's rule of creating the illusion that Putin controls everything in Russia," he said. "Now it's just funny" how much Americans attribute to him.

A businessman who is high up in Putin's United Russia party said over an espresso at a Moscow café: "You're telling me that everything in Russia works as poorly as it does, except our hackers? Rosneft"—the state-owned oil giant—"doesn't work well. Our health-care system doesn't work well. Our education system doesn't work well. And here, all of a sudden, are our hackers, and they're amazing?"

In the same way that Russians overestimate America, seeing it as an all-powerful orchestrator of global political developments, Americans project their own fears onto Russia, a country that is a paradox of deftness, might, and profound weakness—unshakably steady, yet somehow always teetering on the verge of collapse. Like America, it is hostage to its peculiar history, tormented by its ghosts.

None of these factors obviates the dangers Russia poses; rather, each gives them shape. Both Putin and his country are aging, declining—but the insecurities of decline present their own risks to

America. The United States intelligence community is unanimous in its assessment not only that Russians interfered in the U.S. election but that, in the words of former FBI Director James Comey, "they will be back." It is a stunning escalation of hostilities for a troubled country whose elites still have only a tenuous grasp of American politics. And it is classically Putin, and classically Russian: using daring aggression to mask weakness, to avenge deep resentments, and, at all costs, to survive.

I'd come to Russia to try to answer two key questions. The more immediate is how the Kremlin, despite its limitations, pulled off one of the greatest acts of political sabotage in modern history, turning American democracy against itself. And the more important—for Americans, anyway—is what might still be in store, and how far an emboldened Vladimir Putin is prepared to go in order to get what he wants.

**"WE DID AN
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ILLUSION THAT
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EVERYTHING
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HOW MUCH
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“I **T WASN’T** a strategic operation,” says Andrei Soldatov, a Russian journalist with deep sources in the security services, who writes about the Kremlin’s use of cybertechnology. “Given what everyone on the inside has told me,” he says, hacking the U.S. political system “was a very emotional, tactical decision. People were very upset about the Panama Papers.”

In the spring of 2016, an international consortium of journalists began publishing revelations from a vast trove of documents belonging to a Panamanian law firm that specialized in helping its wealthy foreign clients move money, some of it ill-gotten, out of their home countries and away from the prying eyes of tax collectors. (The firm has denied any wrongdoing.) The documents revealed that Putin’s old friend Sergei Roldugin, a cellist and the godfather to Putin’s elder daughter, had his name on funds worth some \$2 billion. It was an implausible fortune for a little-known musician, and the journalists showed that these funds were likely a piggy bank for Putin’s inner circle. Roldugin has denied any wrongdoing, but the Kremlin was furious about the revelation. Putin’s spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, whose wife was also implicated, angrily ascribed the reporting to “many former State Department and CIA employees” and to an effort to “destabilize” Russia ahead of its September 2016 parliamentary elections.

The argument was cynical, but it revealed a certain logic: The financial privacy of Russia’s leaders was on par with the sovereignty of Russia’s elections. “The Panama Papers were a personal slight to Putin,” says John Sipher, a former deputy of the CIA’s Russia desk. “They think we did it.” Putin’s inner circle, Soldatov says, felt “they had to respond somehow.” According to Soldatov’s reporting, on April 8, 2016, Putin convened an urgent meeting of his national-security council; all but two of the eight people there were veterans of the KGB. Given the

secrecy and timing of this meeting, Soldatov believes it was then that Putin gave the signal to retaliate.

The original aim was to embarrass and damage Hillary Clinton, to sow dissension, and to show that American democracy is just as corrupt as Russia’s, if not worse. “No one believed in Trump, not even a little bit,” Soldatov says. “It was a series of tactical operations. At each moment, the people who were doing this were filled with excitement over how well it was going, and that success pushed them to go even further.”

“A lot of what they’ve done was very opportunistic,” says Dmitri Alperovitch, the Russian-born co-founder of the cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike, which first discovered the Russian interference after the company was hired to investigate the hack of the Democratic National Committee servers in May 2016. “They cast a wide net without knowing in advance what the benefit might be.” The Russian hackers were very skilled, Alperovitch says, but “we shouldn’t try to make them out to be eight feet tall” and able to “elect whomever they want. They tried in Ukraine, and it didn’t work.” Nor did it work in the French elections of 2017.

Alperovitch and his team saw that there had been two groups of hackers, which they believed came from two different Russian security agencies. They gave them two different monikers: Fancy Bear, from military intelligence, and Cozy Bear, from either foreign intelligence or the FSB. But neither bear seemed at all aware of what the other was doing, or even of the other’s presence. “We observed the two Russian espionage groups compromise the same systems and engage separately in the theft of identical credentials,” Alperovitch wrote on CrowdStrike’s blog at the time. Western intelligence agencies, he noted, almost never go after the same target without coordinating, “for fear of

Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama at the G20 Summit in September 2016. Obama warned Putin against election meddling, but did not sanction Russia before Election Day—Hillary Clinton, he believed, would handle Putin after she won.



compromising each other's operations." But "in Russia this is not an uncommon scenario."

It was almost like one of Minin's hacking competitions, but with higher stakes. The hackers are not always guys in military-intelligence uniforms, Soldatov told me; in some cases they're mercenary freelancers willing to work for the highest bidder—or cybercriminals who have been caught and blackmailed into working for the government. (Putin has denied "state level" involvement in election meddling, but plausible deniability is the point of working through unofficial hackers.)

American officials noticed the same messy and amorphous behavior as the summer of 2016 wore on. A former staffer in Barack Obama's administration says that intercepted communications between FSB and military-intelligence officers revealed arguing and a lack of organization. "It was ad hoc," a senior Obama-administration official who saw the intelligence in real time told me. "They were kind of throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what would stick."

This chaos was, ironically, one reason the Russians ended up being successful in 2016. The bickering, opportunism, and lack of cooperation seemed to the Obama administration, at least initially, like the same old story. A report published in January 2017 by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence assessing

THE ELECTION HACK "WAS A VERY EMOTIONAL, TACTICAL DECISION." THE KREMLIN WAS "VERY UPSET ABOUT THE PANAMA PAPERS," WHICH CAST LIGHT ON PUTIN'S WEALTH.

Russian involvement in the election noted that in 2008, a ring of 10 Russian spies, the most famous of whom was the fiery-haired Anna Chapman, had been in the U.S. in part to monitor the presidential election. But a Department of Justice complaint from 2010 paints a picture that is more *The Pink Panther* than *The Americans*. The spies, dubbed "The Illegals," went to think-tank events and summarized press coverage for Moscow; Chapman registered a burner phone with the address 99 Fake Street. (Chapman was arrested in 2010, and she and her compatriots were deported in a dramatic spy

exchange.) The Obama administration seemed to be expecting something similar early in 2016. "They've nibbled on the edges of our elections" in the past, the former Obama-administration staffer told me. In 2008, the Illegals "had been trying to cultivate think-tank people who might go into the administration." But Russia hadn't tried "to affect the result of the election until this time."

When the Obama administration began to realize, in the summer, that the Russians were up to something more wide-ranging than what they'd done before, the White House worried about only half the problem. At that point, the most alarming development was Russian probing of states' voting systems. The dumps of hacked data and the churn of false stories about Clinton seemed less troubling, and also harder to combat without looking political.

In September, Obama approached Putin on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Hangzhou, China, and told him to "cut it out." That fall, National-Security Adviser Susan Rice hand-delivered a warning to the Russian ambassador to Washington, Sergey Kislyak. The White House tasked the Treasury and State Departments with exploring new sanctions against Russia, as well as the publication of information about Putin's personal wealth, but decided that such moves might backfire. If the White House pushed too hard, the Russians might dump even more stolen documents. Who knew what else they had?

Nevertheless, with just a month to go until the election, the Obama administration took the extraordinary step of alerting the public. On October 7, 2016, a joint statement from the Department of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said, "The U.S. Intelligence Community is confident that the Russian Government directed the recent compromises of e-mails" from U.S. political organizations. "These thefts and disclosures are intended to interfere with the U.S. election process."

The White House expected the media to run with the story, and they did—"from 3:30 to 4 p.m.," Ned Price, a former National Security Council spokesperson under Obama, said at this summer's Aspen Security Forum. But at 4 p.m., the statement was overtaken by a revelation of a different sort: the



ALEXEI DRUZHININ/SPUTNIK/AP

CREDIT

Access Hollywood tape, in which Trump bragged about sexually assaulting women. Both the media and the Clinton campaign focused almost exclusively on the explosive tape, not the intelligence-community statement.

Even if the public notice went unheeded, the Obama administration felt that the Russians had heard its warnings behind the scenes. According to Soldatov and two former Obama-administration officials, Moscow seemed to have backed off its probes of U.S. election infrastructure by October. But the leaks and bogus news stories never stopped. Obama feared that going public with anything more would look like he was putting his thumb on the scale for Clinton. And he was sure that she would win anyway—then deal with the Russians once she took office.

THE COUP DE GRÂCE, perhaps, was the receipt by the FBI of a dubious document that seemed to paint the Clinton campaign in a bad light. *The Washington Post* reported this spring on a memo, seemingly from Russian intelligence, that had been obtained by an FBI source during the presidential campaign. The memo claimed that then-Attorney General Loretta Lynch had communicated with a Clinton campaign staffer, providing assurance that the FBI wouldn't pursue the investigation into Clinton's use of a private email server as secretary of state too strenuously. Sources close to James Comey told *The Post* that the document had "played a major role" in the way Comey, who as FBI director took fierce pride in his political independence, thought about the case, and had pushed him to make a public statement about it in July 2016. (He said he would bring no charges, but criticized Clinton sharply.) Comey's public comments about the investigation—in July and then in October—damaged Clinton greatly, possibly costing her the presidency. The document, the article noted, was a suspected Russian forgery.

A forgery, a couple of groups of hackers, and a drip of well-timed leaks were all it took to throw American politics into chaos. Whether and to what extent the



Trump campaign was complicit in the Russian efforts is the subject of active inquiries today. Regardless, Putin pulled off a spectacular geopolitical heist on a shoestring budget—about \$200 million, according to former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper. This point is lost on many Americans: The subversion of the election was as much a product of improvisation and entropy as it was of long-range vision. What makes Putin effective, what makes him dangerous, is not strategic brilliance but a tactical flexibility and adaptability—a willingness to experiment, to disrupt, and to take big risks.

"They do plan," said a senior Obama-administration official. "They're not stupid at all. But the idea that they have this all perfectly planned and that Putin is an amazing chess player—that's not quite it. He knows where he wants to end up, he plans the first few moves, and then he figures out the rest later. People ask if he plays chess or checkers. It's neither: He plays blackjack. He has a higher acceptance of risk. Think about it. The election interference—that was pretty risky, what he did. If Hillary Clinton had won, there would've been hell to pay."

Even the manner of the Russian attack was risky. The fact that the Russians didn't really bother hiding their fingerprints is a testament to the change in Russia's intent toward the U.S., Robert Hannigan, a former head of the Government Communications Headquarters, the British analogue to the National Security Agency, said at the Aspen Forum. "The brazen recklessness of it ... the fact that they don't seem to care that it's attributed to them very publicly, is the biggest change."

That recklessness nonetheless has clear precursors—both in Putin's evolving worldview and in his changing domestic circumstances. For more than a decade, America's strategic carelessness with regard to Russia has stoked Putin's fears of being deposed by the U.S., and pushed him toward ever higher levels of antagonism. So has his political situation—the need to take ever larger foreign risks to shore up support at home, as the economy has struggled. These pressures have not abated; if anything, they have accelerated in recent years.



When it is snowing, as it was on this spring afternoon, the gray crags of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations blend into the low-slung, steely sky. This is where the Soviet state once minted its diplomats and spies. Here they mastered the nuances of the world before stepping out into it. Today, the university's role is much the same, although it has been watered down by corruption: The wealthy often buy their children admission. I had been invited to listen to a lecture by one of the institute's most prominent faculty members, Andranik Migranyan, who himself graduated from the school in 1972. Migranyan spent much of the past decade in New York, where he ran the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, a Russian think tank reported to have ties to the Russian foreign ministry. Among his old classmates is Sergei Lavrov, the foreign minister, whom he still counts as a friend.

This afternoon, Migranyan was lecturing on Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy, a speech that seems to be Russia's sole post-Soviet ideological document—and key to understanding how the relationship between Russia and the U.S. reached today's nadir. Putin, still a painfully awkward speaker at the time, was seven years into his now nearly two-decade reign. Eighteen years prior, in 1989, he had been a KGB officer stationed in Dresden, East Germany, shoveling sensitive documents into a furnace as protesters gathered outside and the Berlin Wall crumbled. Not long after that, the Soviet Union was dead and buried, and the world seemed to have come to a consensus: The Soviet approach to politics—violent, undemocratic—was wrong, even evil. The Western liberal order was a better and more moral form of government.

For a while, Putin had tried to find a role for Russia within that Western order. When Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first post-Soviet president, named him his successor in 1999, Russia was waging war against Islamist separatists in Chechnya. On 9/11, Putin was the first foreign leader to call President George W. Bush, hoping to impress on him that they were now allies in the struggle against terrorism. He tried to be helpful in Afghanistan. But in 2003, Bush ignored his objections to the invasion of Iraq, going around the United Nations Security Council, where Russia has veto power. It was a humiliating reminder that in the

eyes of the West, Russia was irrelevant, that "Russian objections carried no weight," as Migranyan told his students. But to Putin, it was something more: Under the guise of promoting democracy and human rights, Washington had returned to its Cold War-era policy of deposing and installing foreign leaders. Even the open use of military force was now fair game.

In 2007, speaking to the representatives and defenders of the Western order, Putin officially registered his dissent. "Only two decades ago, the world was ideologically and economically split, and its security was provided by the massive strategic potential of two superpowers," Putin declaimed sullenly. But that order had been replaced by a "unipolar world" dominated only by America. "It is the world of one master, one sovereign."

A world order controlled by a single country "has nothing in common with democracy," he noted pointedly. The current order was both "unacceptable" and ineffective. "Unilateral, illegitimate action" only created "new human tragedies and centers of conflict." He was referring to Iraq, which by that point had descended into sectarian warfare. The time had come, he said, "to rethink the entire architecture of global security."

This was the protest of a losing side that wanted to renegotiate the terms of surrender, 16 years after the fact. Nonetheless, Putin has spent the decade since that speech making sure that the United States can never again unilaterally maneuver without encountering friction—and, most important, that it can never, ever depose him.

"You should have seen the faces of [John] McCain and [Joe] Lieberman," a delighted Migranyan told his students, who appeared to be barely listening. The hawkish American senators who attended Putin's speech "were gobsmacked. Russia had been written off! And Putin committed a mortal sin in Munich: He told the truth."

The year that followed, Migranyan said, "was the year of deed and action." Russia went to war with neighboring Georgia in 2008, a move that Migranyan described as a sort of comeuppance for NATO, which had expanded to include other former Soviet republics. But Western encroachment on Russia's periphery was not the Kremlin's central grievance.

The U.S., Migranyan complained, had also been meddling directly in Russian politics. American consultants had engineered painful post-Soviet market reforms, enriching themselves all the while, and had helped elect the enfeebled and unpopular Yeltsin to a second term in 1996. The U.S. government directly funded both Russian and American nongovernmental organizations, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, to promote democracy and civil society in Russia. Some of those

same NGOs had ties to the so-called color revolutions, which toppled governments in former Soviet republics and replaced them with democratic regimes friendly to the West.

The Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan—"Russia looks at this with understandable mistrust," Migranyan told his students.

He pointed out that the United States, by its own admission, had spent \$5 billion in Ukraine to promote democracy—that is, to expand the liberal Western order. Through this prism, it is not irrational to believe that the U.S. might be coming for Moscow—and Putin—next. This is why, in 2012, Russia kicked out USAID. It is why Russia banned the National Endowment for Democracy in 2015, under a new law that shuttered "undesirable" organizations.

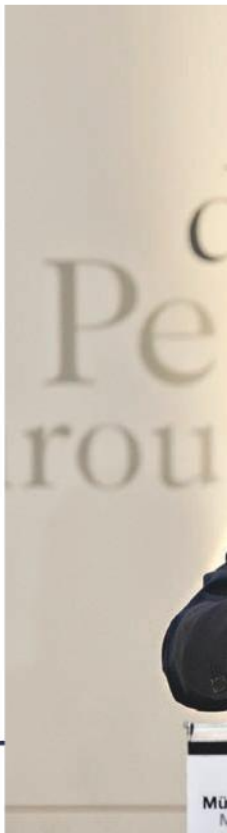
Putin's Munich doctrine has a corollary: Americans may think they're promoting democracy, but they're really spreading chaos. "Look at what happened in Egypt," Migranyan said, beginning a litany of failed American-backed revolutions.

In 2011, the Egyptian strongman Hosni Mubarak stepped down following protests the U.S. had supported, Migranyan contended. But after "radical Islamists" won power democratically, the U.S. turned a blind eye to a military coup that deposed the new leaders. Then there was Libya. "You toppled the most successful government in North Africa," Migranyan said, looking in my direction. "In the end, we got a ruined government, a brutally murdered American ambassador, chaos, and Islamic radicals."

"If we count all the American failures, maybe it's time you start listening to Russia?" Migranyan said, growing increasingly agitated. "If [Syrian President Bashar al-Assad] has to go, then who comes in, in place of Assad? ... Don't destroy regimes if you don't know what comes after!"

Putin had always been suspicious of democracy promotion, but two moments convinced him that America was coming for him under its guise. The first was the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, which led, ultimately, to the ousting and gruesome lynching of the Libyan dictator, Muammar Qaddafi. Afterward, many people who interacted with Putin noticed how deeply Qaddafi's death troubled him. He is said to have watched the

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video of the killing over and over. "The way Qaddafi died made a profound impact on him," says Jake Sullivan, a former senior State Department official who met repeatedly with senior Russian officials around that time. Another former senior Obama-administration official describes Putin as "obsessed" with Qaddafi's death. (The official concedes, "I think we did overreach" in Libya.)

The second moment was in November 2013, when young Ukrainians came out onto the Maidan—Independence Square—in the capital, Kiev, to protest then-President Viktor Yanukovich pulling out of an economic agreement with the European Union under pressure from Putin. The demonstrators stayed all winter, until the police opened fire on them, killing some 100 people. The next day, February 21, 2014, Yanukovich signed a political-reconciliation plan, brokered by Russia, America, and the EU, but that night he fled the capital. To Putin, it was clear what had happened: America had toppled his closest ally, in a country he regarded as an extension of Russia itself. All that money America had spent on prodemocracy NGOs in Ukraine had paid off. The presence of Victoria Nuland, a State Department assistant secretary, handing out snacks on the Maidan during the protests, only cemented his worst fears.

"The Maidan shifted a gear," Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national-security adviser for strategic communications, told me. "Putin had always been an antagonist, and aggressive. But he went on offense after the Maidan. The gloves were off, in a way. To Putin, Ukraine was such a part of Russia that he took it as an assault on him." (A source close to the Kremlin confirmed this account.)

Putin and Lavrov were known within the Obama administration for their long tirades, chastising the American president for all the disrespect shown to Russia since 1991—like the time in 2014 that Obama listed Russia and Ebola as global threats in the same speech. Yanukovich's fall made these tirades far more intense. "For two years afterwards, there wasn't a phone call in which [Putin] wouldn't mention it," accusing the U.S. of supporting regime change in Ukraine, Rhodes recalled.

Regime change in Libya and Ukraine led to Russia propping up Bashar al-Assad in Syria. "Not one more" is how Jon Finer, former Secretary of State John Kerry's chief of staff, characterizes Putin's approach in Syria. It also led inexorably to Russian meddling

in the U.S. election: Russia would show the U.S. that there was more than one regime-change racket in town.



For Russia, a country relentlessly focused on its history, 2017 was a big year. November marked 100 years since the Bolsheviks, a radical minority faction of socialists, brought guns into a fledgling parliament and wrested Russia onto an equally radical path. That bloody experiment itself ended in 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union; December 2016 marked its 25th anniversary. Both anniversaries were largely ignored by the Kremlin-controlled media, because they are uncomfortable for Putin. Bolsheviks were revolutionaries and Putin, a statist to his core, loathes revolutions. But he was also raised to be a person of the Soviet state, to admire its many achievements, which is why he famously referred to the fall of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century."

Putin governs with the twin collapses of 1917 and 1991 at the forefront of his thinking. He fears for himself when another collapse comes—because collapse always comes, because it has already come twice in 100 years. He is constantly trying to avoid it. The exiled oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky has publicly spoken of deposing Putin, and until recently did not eschew violent means. People like Alexey Navalny, the opposition leader, openly talk about putting Putin and his closest associates on trial. The Russian opposition gleefully

Vladimir Putin, speaking at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy, where he dis-sented sharply from the post-Cold War ideological order





waits for Putin to fall, to resign, to die. Every misstep, every dip in oil prices, is to them just another sign of his coming personal apocalypse. The hungry anticipation is mirrored in the West, especially in the United States.

For the most part, the Kremlin is focused not on any positive development program, but on staving off that fate—and on taking full advantage of its power before the state's inevitable demise. That's one reason corruption among the ruling elite is so breathtakingly brazen: A Russian businessman who works with government clients describes the approach as the “last day of Pompeii,” repeated over and over. Another businessman, who had just left the highest echelons of a big state-run bank out of frustration at its corruption and mismanagement, told me, “Russia always rises from the ashes, time and time again. But I have a feeling that we’re about to go through a time of ashes again.”

Fear of collapse is also why Russian propaganda is intent on highlighting the bloody aftermath of revolutions the world over. Things may not be great in Russia now—the country has struggled mightily since 2012—but, the country's news programs suggest, things can always get worse. That's what Russians are told happened in the 1990s, in the nine frenetic years between the Soviet Union's collapse and Putin's ascent to power. “When you have two governmental collapses in 100 years, people are scared of them,” Migranyan told me. Many Russians remember the last one personally.

But the number who do is shrinking. One in four Russian men dies before the age of 55. Putin turned 65 in October, and is surrounded by people who are as old as he is, if not older. Russia is now “in an autumnal autocracy,” Ekaterina Schulmann, a political scientist in Moscow, says. “The more it tries to seem young and energetic, the more it obviously fails.” As Aleksey Chesnakov, a former Kremlin insider, told me, in Russia “the most active voters”—the people who buy in most fully to what Putin's selling—“are the pensioners.”

T O PUTIN'S SUPPORTERS, his regime isn't an autocracy, exactly. “It can be described as *demophilia*,” Migranyan explained. “It is not a democracy, but it is in the name of the people, and for the people. Putin's main constituency is the people. All of his power comes from his rating with the people, and therefore it's important that he gives them the fruits of his rule.” The Kremlin calls it “managed democracy.”

This, too, is crucial to understanding why Putin acts as he does, and how he is likely to think about new campaigns against the United States. The Kremlin's direction of the press, the close eye it keeps on polls and approval numbers, and especially its foreign policy—they all exist to buttress Putin's legitimacy, to curry favor with his 144 million subjects. It's a complicated, hiccuping feedback loop designed to guarantee that Putin's authoritarian rule remains popular and unthreatened.

This is why Putin insists on having elections, even if the result is always predictable. “Without renewing the mandate, the system can't survive,” Chesnakov said. “According to polls, two-thirds of Russians don't want a monarchy. They want a democracy. But they have a different sense of it than Americans and Europeans.”

Putin's third presidential term is up in the spring of 2018. As of this writing, he has not yet declared that he will run in the March presidential election, but once he does, he likely won't campaign. This is Putin's carefully cultivated image at home: the phlegmatic leader who hovers coolly above the fray as it churns on beneath him. But in the past year or so, the fray has given him reason to worry.

On a chilly afternoon this spring, I watched college students standing on the steps of a nondescript building off Volgograd's central square, waiting to meet with Alexey Navalny. The opposition leader and anti-corruption crusader has captured the imagination of many young Russians, as well as that of



Alexey Navalny, a Russian anti-corruption crusader and presidential candidate (left) meeting with staff and (center) being arrested during a rally in Moscow on March 26, 2017. Right: Pro-Navalny protesters in St. Petersburg on the same day.



Westerners who see him as a potential rival of, or even replacement for, Putin. Navalny has declared that he is running for president in the upcoming election.

Police had blocked off the street in front of the building, which housed Navalny's local campaign office. They stood groggily watching as Cossacks, members of a southern Russian tribe who have historically acted as the state's vigilante enforcers, strolled up and down the block, casually swinging their black-leather whips. Angry-looking young men in track pants and sneakers—the other fists-for-hire preferred by the Kremlin—paced around the students, eyeing them menacingly. Young women in vertiginous heels—plainclothes cops—milled around. Every few minutes, they took out identical camcorders tagged with numbered yellow stickers and filmed the students standing on the steps, zooming in on their faces.

Navalny had recently been attacked by progovernment thugs who splashed "Brilliant Green," a Soviet-era antiseptic, on his face. His supporters subsequently posted an image of *The Motherland Calls*, the giant statue commemorating the Soviet victory at Stalingrad, with its face Photoshopped green, to publicize his rally in Volgograd. The image touched a nerve in a country where the government fetishizes World War II. Within hours, pro-Kremlin social-media accounts were using the image to fuel local outrage. By the time Navalny arrived in Volgograd, from Moscow, the youth wing of Putin's party was waiting with a protest.

The students standing on the steps of the campaign office found the manufactured outrage funny. They were at an age when most things were funny, even when the state was clearly watching them. The FSB had recently sent a summons to the home of Vlad, a fourth-year student at Volgograd State University who had previously picketed in support of Navalny's Progress Party. Roman, a bespectacled third-year student in veterinary science, had been called into the dean's office for participating

in a protest. "The dean said, 'Don't go to Navalny's protests. His political position is wrong,'" Roman told me, shrugging and shoving his hands into the pockets of his puffy red jacket.

These young men would soon graduate into an economy that had only recently started to grow again after a five-year malaise. But the growth is barely perceptible, while prices for basic goods have soared. Some of their neighbors and family acquaintances hadn't been paid in months, they said. "Our parents say things have gotten worse," Roman told me. But their parents also knew the potential cost of openly opposing the government, and weren't happy that their sons were at the rally that day. They also believed, from watching state TV, that Navalny was an American agent.

The young men laughed at this, too. Navalny had begun to build his base about a decade earlier, with a blog on LiveJournal that carefully documented how government officials supposedly carved thick slices off the state budget and stashed the money in Moscow mansions or real estate abroad. A few years ago, Navalny launched a YouTube channel where he posts slickly produced videos describing alleged government corruption schemes. On another YouTube channel, Navalny Live, he and his team at the Anti-Corruption Foundation host talk shows about politics, the kind of programming that would never be allowed on state-controlled television. Together, the channels have more than 1.5 million subscribers, and the videos have collected hundreds of millions of views.

As the students and I stood chatting, a retinue of preschoolers marched past the office with their teachers. The college students broke into laughter and cheers. "Everyone says that Navalny's supporters are really young, but I didn't know they were this young!," Roman said.

But things quickly lost their comic lightness when a young man in track pants started loudly arguing with an older Navalny supporter, saying Navalny was funded by the

U.S. State Department and noting the personal offense he took at the green-faced *Motherland Calls* statue. "It's a monument to a great victory!" his friend, another angry young man in track pants, screamed. "It was built on bones! My grandfather fought for Stalingrad!" (His grandfather, he later admitted to me, had been born in Georgia in 1941.)

Suddenly, scores of anti-Navalny protesters appeared, some with brooms, as if preparing to sweep him out of their city. "Navalny, come out!" a middle-aged man with a shaved head screamed into a megaphone as the protesters surged across the sidewalk toward the campaign office. "Navalny, come out!" they yelled in response. The college students packed in tightly on the campaign office's front steps, ready to defend their leader. The two camps started pushing and shoving, the crowd swaying violently. The cops watched. I looked up and saw Roman's red jacket. He had taken off his glasses and stood on the top step, blinking and squinting into the noise. The swagger and irony had gone off his face. He looked vulnerable, like a child.

Navalny emerged at the top of the steps, calm as ever. Part of the crowd started chanting, "Shame! Shame! Shame!" Navalny invited the man with the megaphone and his comrades up the steps to talk with him calmly, face-to-face. They came up and grabbed him by the legs and started to drag him toward the hostile part of the crowd. Finally the cops acted, freeing Navalny and pushing the crowd back toward the street.

Navalny escaped into his campaign office, where, for the next three hours, he fielded questions in a room so packed with supporters that his hair was soon dripping with sweat. He spoke about the contrast between government elites' luxurious lifestyles and the region's sagging wages; about rising utility fees, despite falling energy prices; about the pitiful state of the roads.

"Alexey!" one of his supporters yelled out. "There's nothing left in our city since 1945 except the victory!" Everyone clapped.

Navalny laughed at the state's accusations that his supporters—the hundreds of people sweating with him in the room—had been paid by the U.S. State Department to show up. "This is the real political force of the country," he said. "And we will win. We are destined for victory, because in any culture, in any civilization, people like us win, because *they* lie and *we* tell the truth."

I wiped clear a small rectangle on a fogged-up window. There was nothing left of the angry crowd, not even the police. They had vanished as quickly as they had materialized.

Two days later, on March 26, Navalny rushed back to Moscow, where thousands of people had heeded his call to come out and protest state corruption. Tens of thousands more came out in nearly 100 other Russian cities and towns, across Russia's 11 time zones—an unexpected showing that grabbed international headlines. Earlier that month, Navalny had posted an hour-long exposé on YouTube about the extensive luxury-real-estate holdings of the prime minister and former president, Dmitry Medvedev—who in 2008 had lamented that a sum equivalent to a third of the Russian federal budget had disappeared to corruption. Navalny contrasted the opulence of Medvedev's many homes, filmed by drones, with his awkward call for austerity to the residents of Crimea, who, on joining Russia, had lost access to a steady supply of water, electricity, and reasonably priced

food. "There's no money," Medvedev advised them two years after the annexation, in 2016, "but you hang in there."

By the time of the mass protests, the exposé had been watched almost 12 million times. A couple of schoolboys climbed up on a lamppost in Moscow's iconic Pushkin Square, packed with protesters, and called to the cops trying to get them down, "There's no money, but we're hanging in there!"

I **N RECENT YEARS**, as the economy has struggled, Putin has purchased his popularity with a series of tactical measures. Putin pays extremely close attention to his approval ratings to see what works and what doesn't. He and his advisers are addicted to polls. According to Alexander Oslon, who runs the Public Opinion Foundation, which does polling for the Kremlin, "They can't live without them."

Putin's approval rating surged in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea—and, by extension, Russia's return to imperial grandeur. It was a risky maneuver, the equal, perhaps, of Putin's later interference in the U.S. election. And it paid off, at least in the short term. Russians rallied behind the Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine—and behind Putin, their audacious president. "There was a spike in loyalty" toward "every organ of the state," Kirill Rogov, a political analyst in Moscow who studies Russian polling, told me—"a conservative shift in all directions. People started paying more attention to the news, they watched more TV, and they became more indoctrinated." For a decade, a majority of Russians had told pollsters that they would rather be well-off than live in a great power. In 2014, those preferences flipped.

But the rush of patriotism provided by the Crimean annexation proved fleeting. Connected by land only to Ukraine, Crimea is hard to supply from Russia. The peninsula is facing severe water shortages in its near future, and tourism, a mainstay of the local economy, has plummeted. On a recent trip there, I was told by even the most ardently pro-Russia locals, Cossacks who had staged protests supporting Moscow in 2014, that they had come to regret their stance. The violent lawlessness and corruption of Moscow had reached their home, and life had become much harder as Russian citizens. In some ways, they missed being Ukrainian.

Meanwhile, the already sluggish Russian economy has lost cheap Western financing, following the imposition of American and European sanctions. Putin's response to those sanctions—banning food imports from the United States and the EU—made food prices climb by double-digit percentages. The economy sank into recession. By the beginning of 2017, the government's approval numbers had nearly returned to pre-annexation levels.

Russia's intervention in Syria, which began in the fall of 2015, offered another flag-wrapped distraction. As America shrank from its traditional role in the Middle East, Russia expanded its own, making an ostentatious show of fighting Islamist terrorists on behalf of a reluctant Western Christendom. Shortly after the Syrian army, aided by Russian airpower and commandos, retook the ancient city of Palmyra from the Islamic State, the Russian military flew the Mariinsky Orchestra in from St. Petersburg

for a concert in front of the city's historic ruins—and a dozen press cameras. (Russian TV barely covered the loss of the city by Russian-backed forces to ISIS half a year later.)

There will inevitably be a reckoning for the Syrian adventure, too. For the entirety of his reign, Putin has struggled to contain an Islamist insurgency in Russia's North Caucasus mountains, from which terrorists have launched attacks on Moscow. But on a trip this spring to Dagestan, a mostly Muslim enclave in the heart of the mountains, I found that the region, once extremely violent, was peaceful. Worried about potential terror attacks in nearby Sochi during the 2014 Olympics, the Russian secret services had allowed hundreds, if not thousands, of Islamist rebels, all of them Russian citizens, to go to Syria. According to one report in *Novaya Gazeta*, the FSB even provided some of them with a passport and transportation to the Russian border.

It was a shortsighted counterterrorism strategy. Two Dagestani men who traveled to ISIS-controlled territories in Syria in order to bring back their children told me that they heard as much Russian as Arabic on the streets of ISIS cities. An October report by the Soufan Center, a security-intelligence nonprofit, showed that more foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria came from Russia than from any other country. What will become of these Russian fighters, now better trained and battle-hardened, as ISIS territory continues to shrink? Some 400 have already returned to Russia, according to the Soufan Center report, but even those who don't return home can wreak havoc: In April, a suicide bomber blew himself up at a St. Petersburg metro station, killing 13 people. Russian speakers outside the country who had joined ISIS were suspected of having radicalized him.

Russia's interference in the U.S. election was just as shortsighted. At first, Donald Trump's victory seemed to be a great coup for Putin. Kremlin loyalists celebrated Trump's inauguration in Moscow, including at a live watch party with free-flowing champagne. And it conferred on Russia prestige of a sort. When I asked Victor Minin, the former Russian-government cybersecurity specialist who runs hackathons across Russia, about the effect of American media coverage of Russian hackers, he said, "It's the brand of the year. It's a good thing when, aside from oil, we have cutting-edge specialists and the whole world is talking about them."

But this victory has burned out even faster than the others. The fingerprints that the Russians left behind, once discovered, raised an uproar in Washington. Congress, in a rare near-unanimous vote, stripped Trump of the ability to unilaterally lift American sanctions on Russia. They will very likely remain in place indefinitely, a prospect Medvedev bemoaned in a

Facebook post the day Trump reluctantly signed the bill into law. Unable to get back the two diplomatic compounds in the U.S. that had been seized during the last days of the Obama administration, the Russians plunged headfirst into a destructive tit for tat—which resulted in the seizure of three more Russian diplomatic posts.

Ironically, one of the Russian institutions to suffer the most blowback for the Russian hack is the FSB, one of the agencies believed to be behind the 2016 interference. "Before 2016, the

FSB had a good reputation in Washington," Andrei Soldatov, the Russian journalist, told me. The head of the FSB "was considered a reliable partner in fighting terrorism." But "it all ended in 2016, and it ended very badly." FSB officers were put on the FBI's most-wanted list for cybercriminals, an unprecedented retaliation. The head of the FSB's elite cyber unit and his deputy were forced out; two other top officers from the unit ended up in Moscow's most notorious jail. "They're now under incredible pressure both from the inside and the outside," Soldatov said. "Sometimes," says Michael Hayden, a director of the National Security Agency under George W. Bush, "you have successful

covert operations that you wish hadn't succeeded."

Meddling in the U.S. election might have destabilized the American political system, but it is unclear how carefully Putin considered the potential consequences for his country. His goal is to stay in power another day, another year, and to deal with complications when—and if—they arise.

THE PROTESTS SPARKED by Navalny are a complication that has, for now, been dealt with. Police arrested 1,043 people on March 26 in Moscow alone. On October 7, following another, smaller round of protests, they arrested hundreds more. Navalny will not be allowed on the election ballot, according to various reports and one Kremlin insider I spoke with; a recent court finding against him following trumped-up charges of embezzlement will most likely be used to disqualify him.

These were hardly the first protests that Putin has weathered. Massive prodemocracy, anti-Putin demonstrations rocked Moscow in the winter of 2011–12—and were followed by a violent police crackdown on May 6, 2012, the day before Putin was sworn in for a third time. Dozens of people, some of them first-time protesters, were given multiyear prison sentences. The Kremlin soon raised the penalties for participating in any kind of unsanctioned protest. Several people are now in jail simply for sharing or liking posts on social media.

"IT'S THE BRAND OF THE YEAR," MININ SAID OF RUSSIA'S HACKERS. "IT'S A GOOD THING WHEN, ASIDE FROM OIL, WE HAVE CUTTING-EDGE SPECIALISTS" WHOM THE WHOLE WORLD TALKS ABOUT.

Olga Romanova, who founded the NGO Russia Behind Bars to provide Russians with legal assistance, told me that the lesson the government is preparing for this new batch of young protesters “will be bigger and harsher” than the one in 2012, and that “it will last years.” She said the state was threatening to separate protesting minors from their parents. The feared Investigative Committee “is calling in school principals, school psychologists, teachers for questioning,” Romanova said. “And they testify against the kids.” (This summer, under pressure from the Russian government, Romanova fled to Western Europe.)

Once Putin finally declares his candidacy, he will almost certainly win another six-year term. Instead of Navalny, the television celebrity Ksenia Sobchak, a daughter of the man who helped launch Putin’s political career, will run against him—acting, it is commonly believed, as a Kremlin-approved steam valve for the liberal opposition. The oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, the majority owner of the Brooklyn Nets, is thought to have played this role in 2012. (Both Sobchak and Prokhorov have denied any Kremlin involvement in their campaigns.) In reality, Putin will run essentially unopposed. Other dummy candidates will likely include old men from the “loyal opposition” parties that are on the Kremlin’s payroll. Protests notwithstanding, Putin is still broadly popular, especially among older Russians, and the election, in any case, will be engineered to deliver the right result.

In 2012, when Putin ran for his third term amid protests, the Kremlin put out the message that the system had to deliver at least 50 percent of the vote to Putin to prevent an embarrassing runoff. But as that target moved down through the giant Russian bureaucracy, each layer added a little extra padding, to avoid the wrath of supervisors. The electoral machinery employed various tricks—manipulating voter rolls, stuffing ballot boxes,

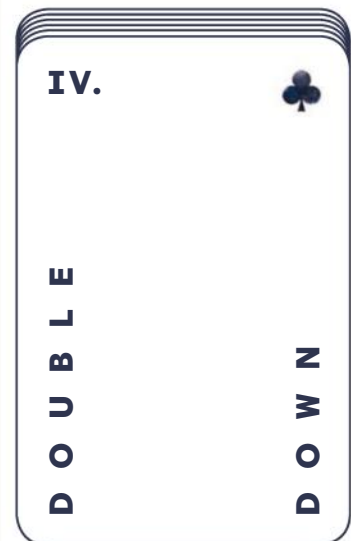
The Russian pranksters Vladimir “Vovan” Kuznetsov (left) and Alexey “Lexus” Stolyarov (right), in Moscow in 2016. Their efforts help undermine the United States.

Olga Romanova, in Paris after fleeing Russia. She had assisted Russians facing legal charges for political protests.

driving busloads of supporters around to vote at multiple precincts. All the padding added up. On election night, Putin stood on a stage with the Kremlin behind him and tears gleaming on his cheeks: The people had resisted the Western-backed protesters and delivered him a resounding win—64 percent of the vote.

But the margin of that win must now be exceeded, and given that election fraud was the issue that initially catalyzed the protests in 2011–12, the Kremlin has been trying to perform a tricky balancing act: delivering the right result while making the election look fair. On Christmas Eve 2016, at a gathering of deputy governors in Moscow, the Kremlin laid out its election strategy for 2018, which it called “70/70.” The goal was a 70 percent turnout, with 70 percent of the vote to Putin. Without overt fraud, those are very hard targets to hit.

So the Kremlin is said to be looking for the next ratings bump—“a rally-around-the-flag effect,” said Kirill Rogov, the political analyst, “like the surge in Bush’s popularity after 9/11, when, in a moment of national crisis or success, the opposition tamps down its criticism because it just won’t resonate with the population.” In most countries, this wave passes and the criticism reemerges. “But in Russia,” Rogov said, “the rally around the flag never stops.”



On April 10, 2017, an assistant to Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, which is



investigating Donald Trump's campaign for possible collusion with the Kremlin, patched in a long-planned call from Andriy Parubiy, the speaker of the Rada, the Ukrainian parliament. Parubiy said he had some potentially explosive information about Trump's visit to Moscow for the Miss Universe pageant in 2013.

"I would just caution that our Russian friends may be listening to the conversation, so I wouldn't share anything over the phone that you don't want them to hear," Schiff warned.

But Parubiy persisted. "In November 2013, Mr. Trump visited Moscow, he visited competition Miss Universe, and there he met with Russian journalist and celebrity Ksenia Sobchak," he said in his heavily accented, awkward English. He explained that in addition to having ties to Putin, Sobchak is "also known as a person who provides girls for escort for oligarchs. And she met with Trump and she brought him one Russian girl, celebrity Olga Buzova." Schiff soberly asked for clarification, and Parubiy answered directly: Sobchak, he said, is a "special agent of Russian secret service."

Buzova "got compromising materials on Trump after their short relations," Parubiy said. "There were pictures of naked Trump."

Schiff betrayed no emotion. "And so Putin was made aware of the availability of the compromising material?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," Parubiy said. Putin wanted it communicated to Trump that "all those compromising materials will never be released if Trump will cancel all Russian sanctions." The biggest bombshell: He had obtained a recording of Buzova and Sobchak talking about the *kompromat* while the two were visiting Ukraine. He told Schiff, "We are ready to provide [those materials] to FBI."

Parubiy had more to say. He told Schiff about meetings that Trump's former national-security adviser, Michael Flynn, had had with a Russian pop singer who served as an intermediary

for the Kremlin. They'd met at a café in Brighton Beach, a Russian-immigrant enclave in Brooklyn, where, Parubiy said, "they used a special password before their meetings." One would say, "Weather is good on Deribasovskaya." The right response was "It rains again on Brighton Beach."

"All righty. Good, this is very helpful. I appreciate it," Schiff said. He told Parubiy that the U.S. would welcome the chance to review the evidence he had described. "We will try to work with the FBI to figure out, along with your staff, how we can obtain copies."

Schiff was right to be concerned about "our Russian friends" listening in, though not in the way he imagined. It wasn't Parubiy who'd called. It was Vladimir Kuznetsov and Alexey Stolyarov, two Russian pranksters known as Vovan and Lexus. There was no *kompromat*, no meetings between Flynn and a Russian pop star in Brighton Beach. The call made the Americans look gullible, which

suited the callers. Kuznetsov and Stolyarov immediately sent the recording to Kremlin-friendly media, which gleefully made hay of it: another dumb American, ready to believe the most-ludicrous stories about a Russia run by sneaky, evil spies. Any Russian listening to the tape would have instantly recognized how silly the conversation was. There were the B-list Russian celebrities, plus other cultural signals, like the code phrase Flynn allegedly used, which is actually the title of a classic Russian comedy.

"We wanted to talk to someone who specifically works on intelligence and give him a completely insane version of events," Kuznetsov told me of the prank.

"We leaked him a bunch of disinformation," Stolyarov said. "It was completely absurd." (A spokesman for Schiff said, "Before agreeing to take the call, and immediately following it, the committee informed appropriate law-enforcement and security personnel of the conversation, and of our belief that it was probably bogus.")

Kuznetsov and Stolyarov come off as the Jerky Boys of Russia, but they are more than that. We met at a Belgian pub in one of Moscow's bedroom communities. Kuznetsov, 31, wore a white shirt flecked with black skulls, and Stolyarov, 29, a gray hoodie with Putin's face superimposed on a map of Russia. ("I see Putin positively," Stolyarov said. "I can't think of anything major I'd disagree with him on," Kuznetsov concurred.) When the duo met, in 2014, they started pranking Russian celebrities, but quickly tired of it. "It's more interesting talking to people who decide people's fates," Kuznetsov said.

He and Stolyarov have repeatedly denied any connection to the Russian secret services, but they clearly have cozy ties to the government. They have had shows on several Kremlin-controlled TV channels, which requires high-level approval.

Putin, shown at a military ceremony in July 2017, has increasingly shored himself up through actions designed to prompt Russians to rally around the flag.



When I met them, they casually mentioned that they had been at the Russian Parliament the day before, meeting with a well-known elected official. “We’re working on a project,” Stolyarov said coyly, then bragged about having hacked the Skype account of the late Russian oligarch—and Putin enemy—Boris Berezovsky “for a long time.” They had somehow obtained the cellphone numbers of foreign leaders such as Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Kuznetsov and Stolyarov have an extensive list of American victims. In February, posing as the Ukrainian prime minister, they prank-called Senator John McCain, who confessed that the Trump era was the hardest time of his long political life. “He sounded like he didn’t know what to do—like, at all,” Kuznetsov recalled. That same month, they prank-called Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who told them that new sanctions against Russia were unlikely.

The point of Kuznetsov and Stolyarov’s American work is both to uncover important information—like what will happen regarding sanctions—and to troll, distract, confuse, and ridicule people whom American voters might be inclined to respect but who are hostile to Russia. They play on what they see as American naïveté. “This would never happen in Russia,” Stolyarov said. “People wouldn’t be so trusting, especially if they are a member of parliament or a civil servant.” They’d like to prank Hollywood actors, Kuznetsov added, but they are “much harder to reach than American senators.”

If one were to design avatars of Russia’s approach to undermining the U.S.—opportunistic, oblique, clownish, and shockingly effective—it would be hard to do better than Vovan and Lexus. They and the future hackers trained by Minin are all small pieces of a shifting, multipronged covert-influence campaign against Western politicians, systems, and values—a campaign built more on the premise of trial and error than

on grand strategy. The Russians have “1,000 ways to attack,” a former U.S. intelligence official told me. “They don’t need all of them to get through. Just a few are enough.”

Where the Russians have broken through, the apertures they’ve exploited seem glaring in retrospect. “I have been impressed over the last five weeks by how fragile our democracy is,” Schiff told me not long before he was prank-called, as we sat in a cafeteria booth in the basement of the Capitol. What Russia showed in the 2016 election—and what it has continued to show in the election’s aftermath—is not so much its own strength, but American vulnerability: that it doesn’t take much to turn the American system on itself. “Covert-influence operations don’t create divisions on the ground; they amplify them,” says Michael Hayden, the former NSA chief. John Sipher, the former CIA operative, agrees. “If there’s anyone to blame, it’s us,” he says. “If we accept the stoking, it’s our fault.”

As Americans are left trying to puzzle out what exactly happened in 2016, and how they fell prey to what Hayden has called “one of the most successful covert-influence campaigns in history,” the campaign continues. Putin, ever the gambler, will continue to seize opportunities as they arise, and bend them to his immediate advantage. Given what’s already been revealed—and the extent to which Congress has tied Trump’s hands on sanctions—he knows that he’ll see no immediate benefit from playing nice. Without meaningful new deterrence, he will continue lashing out as both he and his country age and decline.

Some Americans, including the current president, believe that if only we could identify where our interests align, Russia could be a good partner. But those who have dealt with Putin for decades understand that this is, at best, a fantasy. “Putin defines Russia’s interests in opposition to—and with the objective of thwarting—Western policy,” Ash Carter, Obama’s last

defense secretary, told me recently. "It's very hard to build a bridge to that motivation. It makes it ipso facto impossible" to "work cooperatively with Russia."

Putin is not a supervillain. He is not invincible, or unstoppable. He pushes only until the moment he meets resistance. His 2014 plans to lop off the eastern third of Ukraine, for instance, broke apart against the surprisingly fierce resistance of the Ukrainian army, and Western sanctions. Obama sanctioned the Russian government for its election interference during his last days in office, closing those Russian compounds and expelling some diplomats, but it was a belated, feeble response. More-forceful options—revealing intelligence that would embarrass Putin, or introducing truly crippling new sanctions—Obama decided not to use.

The current presidential administration, meanwhile, is uninterested in punishing Russia. And the various investigations into Russian election meddling, along with the press's attention to them, are mostly focused on what happened in 2016, rather than on what Russia will inevitably do in the 2018 and 2020 elections if it is not penalized and credibly warned off future intervention. American counterintelligence forces sit idle, waiting for a directive to do battle with the Russians that insiders suspect will never come.

Putin set out to show that there is nothing special about America, that it is just another country. Whether he is right depends in no small part on whether enough Americans—especially powerful or politically connected Americans—still believe their system is worth defending.

T HERE IS ONE dot on the horizon that particularly worries the Kremlin.

In 2024, Putin's next six-year presidential term will be up. The constitution limits Putin to two consecutive terms, and he will be 71 years old. "All these guys are thinking about 2024," said the businessman high up in United Russia, Putin's party. The parliament could change the constitution to allow Putin to serve yet another term. But that's not ideal. Putin, who trained as a lawyer before he was a KGB agent, has insisted on maintaining a simulacrum of legality. And anyway, he, a mortal man, can serve only so many terms.

So what is Putin to do? Will he hand off his throne to a successor? There are ever fewer candidates. His circle of advisers has shrunk; now it's made up mostly of old men who, like him, came from Leningrad or served in the KGB. In recent years, he has replaced regional governors with young loyalists and even former bodyguards—most of whom have no significant governing experience but owe everything to him. More and more, he appears to be a man without an exit strategy. As one Putin

ally told me in 2013, "We don't have this tradition of, okay, you served two terms and you leave. We have no other tradition but to hold out to the end and leave feetfirst"—that is, in a coffin.

In 2014, Vyacheslav Volodin, now the speaker of the Russian Parliament, said, "If there is Putin, there is Russia. If there is no Putin, there is no Russia." Putin has personalized the institutions of the state—the courts, the army, the security forces, the parliament, even the opposition parties—and the economy, too. As the economic pie gets smaller, the elites are cannibalizing one another in the struggle over whatever resources remain, and can be squeezed out of the population. The people now filling Russia's most notorious jails are elite government officials: countless bureaucrats, at least four governors, and numerous mayors. A minister is under house arrest. They are the losers in an increasingly savage fight. The winners are typically those who spin in the orbit closest to Putin's dying star.

Ironically, Putin has laid the groundwork for exactly the kind of chaotic collapse that he has spent his political life trying to avoid, the kind of collapse that gave rise to his reign. He has made himself a hostage to a system he built with his own hands. "The lack of alternatives worries everyone, including Putin," Andranik Migranyan said. He said that in 2012, Putin told him, "I often have to spend time on *ruchnoe upravlenie*"—Russian for a car's manual transmission and a term that has come to signify micromanagement. "I would love to leave if

I felt like I did enough work to make institutions work independently of the next leader."

But of course, the longer Putin spends using the stick shift, the less likely the gears will catch on their own, without his strong hand to guide them into place. "It's the dictator's dilemma," says one of Washington's veteran Russia-watchers. "The only way to take away risk is you can't leave. And you can't reform, because that leads to cracks in the system that lead to your overthrow."

Putin has been kicking the can down the road for a long time, and this has generally worked for him. He is still popular and still in good shape, as his shows

of bare-chested masculinity are meant to remind us. But there is less road left every day, and one day, it will run out. Everyone in Moscow knows that day is coming, but no one knows what happens the day after. "If he suddenly leaves in 2024, we will be orphaned," says Konstantin Malofeev, an oligarch who was sanctioned by the West for supporting pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine (which he has denied doing). He believes that Putin was chosen by God to lead Russia. The next person, he fears, won't have the same sense of duty. "The next person," he says, "will be worse." **A**

Julia Ioffe is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

U.S. INVESTIGATIONS ARE MOSTLY FOCUSED ON WHAT RUSSIA DID IN 2016, INSTEAD OF WHAT IT WILL INEVITABLY DO IN 2018 AND 2020.

The Charter-School Revolutionary

The combative Eva Moskowitz has created the nation's most impressive school system—and made lots of enemies in the process. What does her growing empire mean for the future of public education?

By ELIZABETH GREEN

Illustration by Nuria Rianza Rovira



IN THE SPRING of 2007, I moved to New York City to cover what I was sure was the most important story in the country. One of those annoying people who had settled on a career before I knew how to drive, I was a young and enthusiastic reporter on the education beat. In New York, I could cover the biggest education revolution ever attempted: a total overhaul of the way public schools worked, in the country's largest school system.

The drivers of this transformation were the city's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, and his handpicked schools chancellor, Joel Klein, a prosecutor who had previously taken on Microsoft and had now set his sights on toppling his hometown's education status quo. "BloomKlein," as their enemies called them, radiated a crusading moral confidence. Both liked to say that their work, begun in 2003, was the next phase of the civil-rights movement. And they wielded unprecedented authority to actually follow through





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on their enlightened mission to tackle inequities and eradicate dysfunction; in 2002, state lawmakers had dissolved New York City's elected school board and handed total control to the mayor. Supporters and opponents alike shared the BloomKlein conviction that their “disruptions” would soon spread to cities all across the country.

A decade later, I can say that I did indeed land in New York City just as a sweeping remake of public education got under way not only for New Yorkers but for families all across America. Except I got the architects of the transformation wrong. Bloomberg and Klein played their part, but the real revolutionary was another person I met early on in my reporting: a 5-foot-2-inch redhead from Harlem named Eva Moskowitz.

IT WAS JUNE 2007, and I was following the mayor around as he took a victory lap celebrating record-high test scores. “Who’s excited about summer?” Bloomberg asked a group of 5-, 6-, and 7-year-olds seated in front of him at their new Harlem elementary school, which had opened the previous August. He ticked off the fun things they might do once school let out, like go to the pool. The school’s principal, Eva Moskowitz, spoke next. She didn’t “want to contradict the mayor,” she said solemnly, “but there’s going to be some swimming, but there’s also going to be some *reading*.” Later, the mom of a kindergartner told me just how serious the principal was. To keep up with the school’s reading requirements, she and her son regularly hauled 50 books home from the library. What were *you* doing in kindergarten?

I had visited impressive schools before, but none quite like this one. The kids, who congregated in a corner of a large public-school building on West 118th Street, were a sight with their orange-and-blue uniforms and blue backpacks. But the person who made the biggest impression was Moskowitz herself. She stalked the school corridors more like a rear admiral than a pedagogue, rattling off to whomever would listen the obstacles she was up against: union rules governing sink repair, school bells ringing on a cryptic schedule, doors requiring custom fixes. She was either paranoid or plagued, probably some of both. Feeling under siege,

she could either defend or attack. She picked the Napoleon option.

Like other charter schools—which operate independently of a school district’s control but are still publicly regulated and funded—Harlem Success Academy, as the school had been named, was starting up slowly, serving 165 kindergartners and first-graders in its inaugural year. But already Moskowitz had set herself apart. While other charter-school leaders ran only a handful of schools in a given state, she planned to open 40 more schools like this one. All in New York City, and all in a single decade.

I underlined the number in my reporter’s notebook. By some measures, 40 wasn’t unprecedented. The country’s best-known charter network, KIPP, had grown to 46 schools by 2006. It was part of an expansion funded by the founders of the Gap, Doris and Don Fisher, after the charter movement took

Moskowitz stalked the school corridors more like a rear admiral than a pedagogue.

off in the 1990s. But KIPP schools were spread across 15 states, with just a few schools per city. New York City had four. Like the Gap, which had made its name targeting young people, the point was to serve not an entire market, but a niche—in KIPP’s case, the poorest students.

KIPP and other charter-school operators had a pragmatic take on how big school networks could or should get. As of 2006, laws in 25 states and Washington, D.C., limited the number of new charters that could open; 10 states did not have charters at all. And while the idea was to improve on traditional public schools, the first comprehensive report on outcomes revealed that many charter schools performed no better, and sometimes worse, than comparable district schools. Serving just 1 percent of all New York City students and about 2.5 percent of students nationwide, charter schools were, at best, “a proof point,” as one KIPP board member put it: not a new model to follow, but experiments to inspire, and goad, the government-run public-school system.

Forty Success Academy schools in a single city in a decade, on the other

hand—that was two-thirds the number of charter schools in all of New York City at that point. What Moskowitz had in mind was not a proof point but a blueprint, not a Gap but a kind of educational superstore. A whole new school system, run by her instead of the government. “Hopefully this will be the first prototype,” the chair of Harlem Success Academy’s board told me that day in 2007. “This is meant to be replicable.” I tried to picture 15,000 students across New York City, all carrying matching blue backpacks. Moskowitz couldn’t have stunned me more had she said that she intended to one day run for mayor (a goal she announced a few months later). Her charter plan was audacious, but it probably wouldn’t happen.

IT HAPPENED, and then some. One school became 46. One hundred sixty-five students became 15,500. A tiny outpost in Harlem spawned brethren all across Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens; Harlem Success Academy is now part of the Success Academy Charter Schools network, of which Moskowitz—the author of a lively new memoir, *The Education of Eva Moskowitz*—is CEO. From that position, she has become one of the country’s most influential crusaders at a turning point for charter schooling.

Empire has not killed quality. On the contrary, students at Success—where intensive test prep in math and reading goes hand in hand with a strong emphasis on science, art, and chess—regularly trounce their peers all across New York on state tests. Unlike other high-scoring charter schools, such as KIPP, Success saw no dip in performance after the state adopted the tougher Common Core academic standards. The stellar scores helped Moskowitz open more schools, faster, than any other charter-school leader in New York.

In her march forward, Moskowitz has added considerably to the ranks of her foes. Teachers who oppose charter schools carry signs denouncing EVIL MOSKOWITZ. In 2013, Mayor Bill de Blasio campaigned on an education platform of ending Moskowitz’s “run of the place.” Even many supporters hold Moskowitz at what can generously be called a careful distance, and I get it. Her acid tirades are legendary and can get scathingly personal more quickly than I might have believed had she not once dressed me down after I wrote a story she didn’t like.

The Education of Eva Moskowitz is plainly positioned to soften and humanize, yet even here, she often swerves into score-settling eviscerations of her perceived enemies. She devotes two chapters to decrying the media, in particular a *New York Times* reporter’s coverage of Success’s disciplinary practices; Moskowitz accuses her of a biased “abuse” of journalistic privilege. *Lazy*, meanwhile, is a tag she affixes to students and bureaucrats alike. She has no patience

for critics who question Success’s high-stress test prep (as some of her own teachers do). Nor can she resist deriding fellow charter-school leaders as “political pacifists.”

Personally, I draw the line at *evil*, but Moskowitz is undeniably scary. Cross her, and you’ve also crossed her students, her schools, and justice itself. Entrusting a person who has such an exceptional capacity for venom with the care of children can seem unwise. Which is just one reason I am more than a little terrified by the conclusion I’ve reached: Moskowitz has created the most impressive education system I’ve ever seen. And as she announces in her memoir, 46 schools is just the beginning. “We need to reach more students,” she writes.

How big should Success get? She doesn’t specify, but says that “maybe a public school



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system consisting principally of charter schools would be an improvement." A proud product of public schools herself, Moskowitz did not reach this conclusion lightly. Imagining the end of public education as we know it—or at least its significant diminution—at first felt “almost disloyal,” she writes. But that was before she lost faith in schools run by the government. In her memoir she describes how she finally decided against a mayoral run—swayed not by a lack of ambition but by a surplus of it. The point is worth pausing over: Moskowitz has realized that she can do more to change public schools as a private citizen than as mayor—by operating outside of democracy rather than within it. I agree with her, and that unsettles me.

MOSKOWITZ CAME BY her disillusion firsthand. In 1999, then in her 30s, she ran for New York’s city council, spurred in part by a desire to improve the city’s schools. She’d lived through hapless management (in high school, she never used the bathroom, because the stalls had no doors) and wildly uneven teaching quality (one teacher at her high school slept through class drunk, she reports). She won the race and, investigating what held back the schools, found a chief culprit: constrictive union contracts fortified by labor’s monopoly over local politics. She set out to use her city-council seat to publicize the unions’ power and create living proof of an elected official who flouted the unions and lived to tell the tale.

In a dramatic series of hearings she held in 2003, one set of witnesses described the rules governing how school custodians were paid—not according to how well they maintained the building, but according to how little of the school’s custodial budget they spent doing so. Leftover funds became bonuses, arguably disincentivizing the provision of, say, doors on bathroom stalls. “As political theater, it doesn’t get much more dramatic than this,” the *New York Observer* wrote.

As actual politics, Moskowitz’s attempt to prove that a politician could survive taking on organized labor backfired. In 2005, she lost a close race for the next rung of office, Manhattan borough president. In the months that followed, Joel Klein approached elected officials

for support of his reforms, which had also earned the ire of the teachers’ union. Over and over, he received the same rueful rebuff: “I agree with you, but I ain’t gonna get Eva’d.” When the time came to negotiate a new contract with the teachers, just before Bloomberg’s 2005 reelection campaign, even the mayor—seemingly protected from politics as usual by his personal fortune—succumbed to union pressure, according to Moskowitz and others. Klein ended up having to accept a contract he didn’t like. By then, plans for Moskowitz’s first charter school were under way. She was ready to test the viability of working outside the government.

I became disillusioned with the status quo too—but later, and with more trepidation. At the news organization I co-founded in 2008, now called *Chalkbeat*, reporters began covering reformers whose aggressive plans to close district schools and replace them with

We could hardly have designed a worse system for supporting good teaching had we tried.

charters seemed to inflame the very parents whom the reformers said they aimed to serve. And the district-hating almost always came with a thuggish brand of teacher-bashing. I knew bad teachers existed, and I knew many of them were unfairly protected. But the idea that merely pruning the bad apples would save schools was unsupported by evidence or reason. Fire the rotten 10 percent, and who exactly did these reformers think would fill out a 3.8-million-person workforce? Vilifying teachers and their unions was surely counterproductive because it alienated the same overloaded foot soldiers who would ultimately be responsible for turning around poor-performing schools.

I also knew that we Americans have good reasons for subjecting our public schools to the direction of elected government. We like democracy, especially when it gives us a say in what and how our children are taught. Unwieldy though school districts may be when they’re run by a school board or a mayor—and guided by the dictates of

governors, state lawmakers, Congress, and the president—they give citizens a chance to weigh in. They are without a doubt *public*.

And yet, as I began work in 2010 on a book about teaching, I started to see why blowing up school districts might not be as crazy an idea as I initially thought. What struck me most is how impossible teaching is, especially in traditional public schools. While those who pursue the profession in other countries are provided with the infrastructure crucial to educating kids effectively—a clear sense of what students need to learn, the basic materials necessary to help them learn it (such as a curriculum), and a decent training system—teachers in the U.S. are left stranded.

The reason isn't terrible union contracts or awful management decisions. The fault, I came to see, lies in the (often competing) edicts issued by municipal, state, and federal authorities, which add up to chaos for the teachers who actually have to implement them. It's not uncommon for a teacher to start the year focused on one goal—say, improv-

ing students' writing—only to be told mid-year that writing is no longer a priority, as happened just the other day at a Boston school I know of. We could hardly have designed a worse system for supporting good teaching had we tried.

Of all the reforms that have set out to free schools from this trap, to date I've seen only one that works: the implementation of charter-school networks. Large enough to provide shared resources for teachers, yet insulated from bureaucratic and political cross-currents by their independent status, these networks are creating the closest thing our country has ever seen to a rational, high-functioning school system. They have strengthened public education by extracting it from democracy as we know it—and we shouldn't be surprised, because democracy as we know it is the problem.

THE NETWORK APPROACH is gaining traction. Although charter schools are still boutique side offerings in most parts of the country, a growing number of cities have turned them into a centerpiece,

which makes *The Education of Eva Moskowitz* especially timely and important reading. (Last November, the president-elect paraded Moskowitz into Trump Tower during his auditions for secretary of education; after she took herself out of the running, he selected Betsy DeVos.) Today, charter schools educate 94 percent of students in one city, New Orleans, and more than 30 percent of students in 19 other cities. If a determined group of philanthropists have their way, charters will take a leading role in more cities soon. Many of these schools are part of ambitious and fast-growing networks like Success.

In New York City, for instance, nearly 2 percent of all public-school students currently attend Success Academies, a percentage bound to climb. When I spoke with her recently, Moskowitz told me that she expects her network to expand to 100 schools in the next decade. That means Success would serve more than 50,000 students, making the network roughly the same size as Syracuse's and Buffalo's school districts combined. In Denver, meanwhile, a charter-school network called DSST

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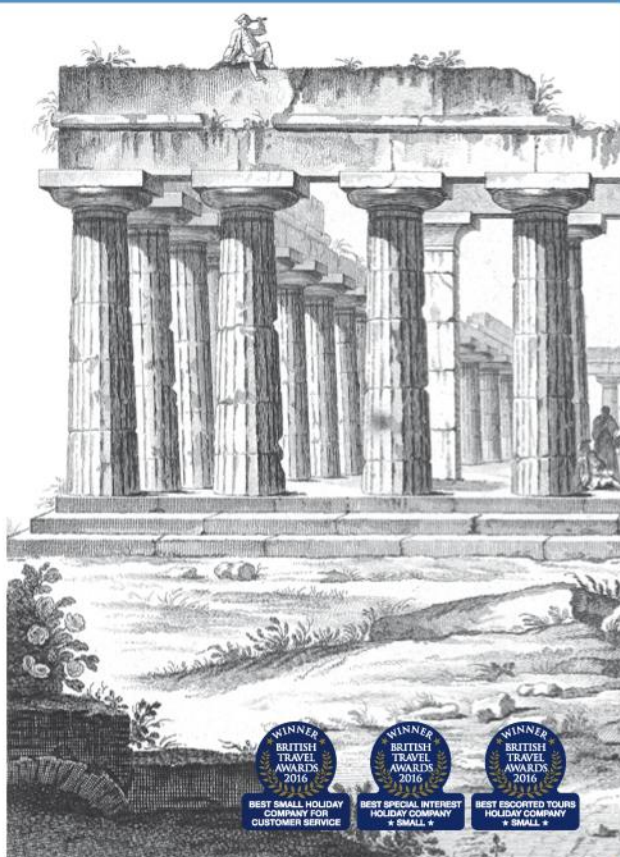


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Public Schools—which, like Success, has regularly posted academic results well above average public-school scores—will educate nearly a quarter of all middle- and high-school students in the city in the next decade. In New Orleans, four large charter networks together enroll one-third of all students who attend public school.

If the trend continues, parents across the income spectrum won't face a tapestry of alternatives to the mainstream school district, each one with its own name and unique approach. Instead, they will get to choose from a handful of charter-school networks that are likely to make the original district—the one governed by an elected school board or the mayor, depending on the city—more peripheral.

Another new book, *Reinventing America's Schools*, by David Osborne of the Progressive Policy Institute, describes the spread of charter schools as the shedding of an antiquated bureaucratic skin. He uses a nautical metaphor to illustrate the distinctive way charter schools work. At traditional public schools, the various layers of government are responsible for both steering and rowing. They steer by supplying funding and deciding what schools should broadly aim for: what kids should learn, and by when. The government also rows, hiring the bureaucrats and superintendents and teachers charged with meeting those goals. In the charter-school model, government responsibility ends at steering—providing funding, deciding which measures of success matter, and holding schools accountable for results. Choosing whom to hire (and fire), what to pay them, what else to spend money on, how to design curricula—all those decisions are contracted out to private, mostly nonprofit organizations. Those are in turn governed by boards usually—in the case of larger networks like Success—made up of wealthy donors.

Critics of charter schools, a large and vocal group, call this privatization, a word Moskowitz considers an inaccurate smear. True believers like Osborne, whose book and project at the Progressive Policy Institute are both sponsored by some of the same philanthropists promoting the Success model, call it “a 21st century system.” Whatever you label it, the model dif-

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Almost everything you've heard that's great or terrible about charter schools flows from these two big changes. Because of the difference in governance, charter-school teachers are less likely to be represented by unions. Thus, depending on whom you talk to, charters are either union-busters or mercifully free from union strictures that put teachers before students. Disciplinary policies also reflect charter schools' monopoly on rowing. Traditional public schools must follow

The zones that create the beloved institution of the neighborhood school are notoriously impermeable to integration.

suspension and expulsion policies written by the school district; charter schools write their own rules, and many have a no-excuses style that mandates good posture, precisely folded arms and legs, and silent hallways—injunctions some hail as essential to a strong school culture and others skewer as paternalistic and inhumane.

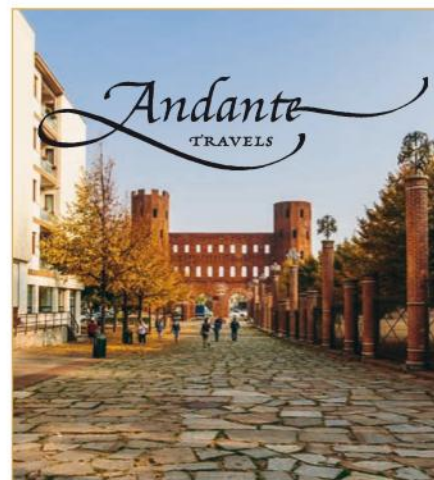
The lottery innovation—also known as “school choice”—invites perhaps the most-polarized interpretations. A district can allow one of its schools to expel a student, but it still bears responsibility for making sure he is educated somewhere else. Similarly, a district has to educate every child in its purview, whether she started in kindergarten or arrived yesterday from Jamaica, and no matter how far behind she may be academically. Many charter schools, by contrast, admit students only during the once-a-year lottery, and sometimes only in certain grades. But while critics see the lottery approach as an abdication of responsibility, Moskowitz and Osborne champion it as a tool for social justice. Neighborhood schools, they argue, institutionalize housing segregation, making a child's zip code his educational destiny. Charter schools, by contrast, hand the power of choice

to parents who can't afford to exercise it through real estate.

WHAT DO WE LOSE if and when public education takes this new shape? Supporters of a charterized public-school system argue that we'll be giving up only on a fantasy, a “theoretical ideal,” in Moskowitz's words. We like to think that our current public-school system is democratic. In reality, voter turnout for school-board elections—the main mechanism for holding schools accountable to local communities—averages between 5 and 10 percent. We dream that public schools serve all children equally well, whatever their background, race, or level of need. The reality is not even close. Many of the policies that charter schools get criticized for, moreover, are rampant in traditional public-school systems. School districts adopted “zero tolerance” discipline before charters embraced the no-excuses approach. School districts, not charters, were the original architects of a system that divides students by race, class, and special needs and abilities. And the zones that create the beloved institution of the neighborhood school are notoriously impermeable to integration.

In Moskowitz's view, a charter-school system isn't just the best available compromise. It's our best shot at delivering the public-school system we wish we had. Take integration: While a majority of Success schools serve homogenous populations (mostly black and Latino students, most of them poor or low-income), the network has opened a new crop of schools in neighborhoods like the Upper West Side and Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, that are more integrated than most traditional New York City public schools. DSST, the Denver charter-school network, also embraces integration as part of its mission, and even boasts one school with a 50-50 split between white students and students of color. As a tool for bridging divides without posing a direct threat to anyone's property values, charter schools hold real promise.

Moskowitz, meanwhile, has been advocating weighted lotteries that give preference to students from particular disadvantaged backgrounds, such as students whose first language isn't Eng-



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lish. And in Denver and Washington, D.C., the dizzying, M. C. Escher-esque system of a different lottery for every individual charter school—so complicated that only the savviest families with plenty of time on their hands could be expected to successfully navigate it—has been replaced by a more accessible single lottery. Worries about a lack of democracy could similarly be quieted by giving locally elected leaders more oversight of charters, an approach that reformers have adopted in Indianapolis and will try in New Orleans next year.

I want to believe in such an evolution. It would be the best of all worlds if the most efficient way to run great schools was also the most equitable, accountable, and parent-friendly. But I worry that's hard to pull off. One problem is the lottery. Charter-school supporters say that nothing could be more liberating for parents than to grant them a direct say in which schools their children attend. But existing systems of parent choice compel a more skeptical view of the path to inclusion. A recent study of New York City's public-high-school system—in which students have applied to schools outside their neighborhood for years—found that parents seem to care less about the quality of the school than about the academic ability of the other students there. Left to their own choices, parents could very well resegregate schools as effectively as zip-code-based systems of assigning schools have done.

Another problem is incentives. As Moskowitz built Success, she enforced what she calls a "dual mission": first, to build schools "to which any parent would want to send their children," and second, to enlist staff, students, and families in the fight for laws and policies that let Success build such schools. Her contention is that one mission reinforces the other. But does she wishfully overlook deeper tensions? For all Moskowitz's eloquence about the importance of rigorous academics and extracurricular activities, teacher after teacher has reported that at Success, test prep always comes first, narrowing the kind of work students do. Similarly, however much Moskowitz aspires to make Success Academy inclusive, in practice she and her staff sometimes tell families to look elsewhere for a school, because Success just isn't the right fit.

And while Moskowitz has fought to favor disadvantaged groups of students in the lottery, she has declined to fully adopt another policy that would open the schools' doors wider, a practice known in the charter world as "backfilling": When students leave partway through their schooling, other charters fill their spots with kids from the lottery's waiting list. Success backfills only in kindergarten through fourth grade. Any older than that, Moskowitz argues, and the

Dip into the acknowledgments section of Moskowitz's memoir and you'll find a who's who of New York billionaires.

students won't be sufficiently prepared for the school's rigorous academics.

According to Moskowitz, the choices she's made have been pedagogically driven. Opting out of backfilling ensures that her students aren't distracted by peers who lag behind; test prep arms her students for the meritocratic ordeal ahead. At the same time, these policies clearly advance Success's reputation and help cement its political power. If those imperatives sometimes entail putting the network's organizational interests ahead of the broader well-being of students—both those inside Success schools and those who are kept out—the pragmatic trade-offs shouldn't be glossed over.

Who gets to make these trade-offs? In large part, the decisions belong to Moskowitz—or, more accurately, to the Success board. Charter boards, designed to sidestep the unwieldy directives of democratic school governance and focus ruthlessly on leading good schools, are the main reason charter networks operate so well—and also the main reason I worry as the networks grow. Back in 2007, when I visited Harlem Success Academy, two men were also in the room with Moskowitz, the mayor, the kindergartners and first-graders, and their parents. In dark-gray suits, they stood silently at the back of the auditorium, arms crossed—present, but not intrusive.

Their names, I learned, were Joel Greenblatt and John Petry, and they were the hedge-fund managers who, as

founders and board members of Harlem Success Academy, had recruited Moskowitz as their CEO. They were, I also learned, very nice gazillionaires. Petry, who graduated from the same Maryland public-school district I did, helped throw me a book party in 2014. To this day, he and his wife send their own children to Success schools. In the decade after my Harlem visit, he always cheerfully took my calls, though "Ask Eva" was the refrain when it came to on-the-record comments.

Yet Petry and Greenblatt aren't just nice. They are in charge, and nobody elected them. Like Moskowitz, the two men who founded her school really want, I think, better schools for all kids, and I believe they want to achieve this by the most-ethical means possible. But as the three of them have worked at revamping and expanding the network's slice of public education, they have added new members to its board, and predictably, they have picked some of the wealthiest and most politically connected people.

Dip into the acknowledgments section of *The Education of Eva Moskowitz* and you'll find a who's who of energetic New York billionaires. She reserves the most gratitude for Daniel Loeb, the hedge-fund manager who is now the chair of Success's board. If Petry and Greenblatt are Moskowitz's Jekyll, Loeb is her unfettered Hyde. The vitriolic letters he sends to CEOs led *Vanity Fair* to rank his tactics among "the nastiest and most florid" deployed by activist investors. The pleasure he takes in his role as provocateur extends to his involvement in education—Moskowitz calls him her "Chief Advocacy Officer." Like Moskowitz, he seems completely confident that his ends more than justify his often hair-raising means. (He recently apologized for likening an African American elected official to a Ku Klux Klan member.) And as the number of schools

under Success's direction grows, so does Loeb's power.

I don't mean to suggest that Loeb and his counterparts in Denver, New Orleans, and beyond have nefarious motives. Unscrupulous school impresarios do of course exist, but they gravitate to the minority of charters that are for-profit, rather than to nonprofits like Success. But I do think that bequeathing power over the education of America's children to a tiny group of ever more influential plutocrats means that the rest of us will have much less say in the direction of public schools than we do today.

As these networks grow, overseeing them will become both more important and more difficult. Already networks in several states have rejected requests for documents, saying that public-records laws don't apply to them. Once the Success empire includes 100, 200, or even 300 schools, will regulators feel comfortable exerting their ultimate authority to shut a school down? Or will charter networks become, like banks, too big to change?

We can't know for sure. We can speculate, though, and when I do, I worry. The best-case scenario is that the bigger Moskowitz's network becomes, the more responsibility she and her board take—not just for their students and for their network's growth, but for all students and the civic community, too. But what if well-heeled activists like Loeb decide to push for state laws that weaken regulators' power and strengthen the power of wealthy board members (and why wouldn't they)? The best we can do is hope that the same dogmatic confidence that has fueled the most promising model we have for public education won't also destroy it. **A**

Elizabeth Green is a co-founder and the CEO and editor in chief of Chalkbeat, and the author of Building a Better Teacher.

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THE BIG QUESTION

Q:

What was the most influential photograph in history?



John Stanmeyer,
photojournalist and co-
founder, VII Photo agency

One image that summarizes our fragility and the need to work for peace is the simple yet poignant **photo-graph of Earth taken by the astronaut William Anders** during 1968's *Apollo 8* mission.

Pete Souza, photographer and author, *Obama: An Intimate Portrait*

John Filo's photograph showing a woman kneeling over a victim of the Kent State shootings, taken in 1970, won a Pulitzer Prize, and was the first picture that riveted my attention as a teenager, when it appeared in my hometown newspaper.

Steve McCurry, photographer, *Afghan Girl*

It almost doesn't matter whether viewers know the backstory of **Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*** (1936), of a mother and her children during the Depression, because the photo instantly reaches deep down into our souls and grabs us at a visceral level. This wom-

an's humanity, adversity, determination, and fortitude will remain with us forever.

Joel Sartore, founder, *National Geographic Photo Ark*

Eddie Adams's iconic *Saigon Execution* (1968) helped stop a war. This image demonstrates the power of still photography to make a single moment last forever. The impact of this photo motivates me in my work to take images that inspire people to stop a different battle: the extinction crisis.



Charles H. Traub, photographer and educator, *School of Visual Arts*
Mathew Brady's 1860 photograph of Abraham Lincoln is likely the first truly mass-distributed image during a political campaign. Because it was

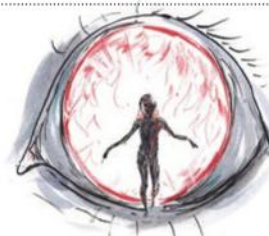
reproduced in many forms—lithographs, wood engravings, etc.—it was widely visible, in periodicals and on campaign buttons, postcards, *cartes de visite*, and the like. Lincoln exclaimed that this photograph helped make him president, and the rest is history.

Tabitha Soren, fine-art photographer
With the *Untitled Film Stills* series (1977–80), **Cindy Sherman** turned portraiture into performance: She fooled us by dressing herself up in different guises and then capturing her own image. Sherman also prefigured the idea that people are presenting a “self” all the time—even when not on camera and even without Instagram and Photoshop.

READER RESPONSES
Ernest Davis, New York, N.Y.
Rosalind Franklin and Raymond Gosling's diffraction photographs of DNA (1952) were crucial to James Watson and Francis Crick's discovery of its structure.

Henry Burney, Syosset, N.Y.
The photograph of the atomic cloud over Hiro-

shima introduced the world to the bomb's destructive power and ushered in the nuclear arms race.



Don Gervich, Watertown, Mass.

Nick Ut's photograph of 9-year-old Phan Thị Kim Phúc—running, naked, and crying from napalm burns—captures war's merciless cruelty. The 1972 image may have helped end the Vietnam conflict.

Brian G. Gilmore, Washington, D.C.

The photos of 14-year-old Emmett Till's mutilated body that appeared in *Jet* magazine and other publications in 1955 energized the U.S. civil-rights movement. Rosa Parks later stated that what happened to Till was what made her decide to protest on the bus that day in Montgomery, Alabama.

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