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AGAIN p.64

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# C O N T E N T S

APRIL 2026 | VOLUME 41, NUMBER 4



# 64

## SOCIALISM'S SALESMAN

New York City's charismatic mayor hopes to make an old political philosophy palatable to a new generation of Americans

# 72

## FREEDOM STORY

The National Archives opens a new exhibit to mark America's 250th birthday

# 76

## HANGING TOUGH

In southeast Ukraine, soldiers struggle to hold the line—and maintain morale

# 84



## THE RACE TO MAKE DESIGNER BABIES

Editing embryos could become a standard reproductive service

## WAITING FOR A MIRACLE CURE

Genetic diseases pose a medical puzzle CRISPR could solve

ANGELINA KATSANIS/AP



14



38



98

## DISPATCHES

### 14 In the News

The Islamic Republic's future hangs in the balance as U.S. military action continues

### 17 By the Numbers

Gallup retires trademark presidential poll

### 18 Washington Memo

Conservative exiles of a Trump-dominated GOP strategize a political future

### 20 Departures

### 22 Human Race

Line of duty

### 24 Global Briefs

Kazakhstan reintroducing wild tigers

### 26 U.S. Briefs

Louisiana fishes for crawfish plant workers

### 28 Backgrounder

What is TrumpRx?

### 30 Quotables

### 32 Quick Takes

Man coaches canine to take out the trash in cunning—but illegal—dumping scheme

### 34 The Forum

Producer Mark Joseph on plying his trade in Hollywood

## CULTURE

### 38 Trending

Made for a small screen, micro dramas hope to reel in a big audience

### 42 Books

How the West was lost: critiquing the secularization thesis

Liberating women from false expectations

Believing God's truth about ourselves

Books on the burdens of the modern world

Two novels with characters seeking redemption

Books about identity and relationship

### 52 Quest

Paul Butler: Telling stories that matter

### 54 Film & TV

*Project Hail Mary*

*Hoppers*

*The Count of Monte Cristo*

*The Pout-Pout Fish*

### 58 Music

Bicentennial Beach Boys

New and noteworthy

### 60 Masterworks

Michelangelo's three *Pietà*s

## NOTEBOOK

### 98 International

Residents of Israeli border communities celebrate a quiet return as the world focuses on Gaza

### 102 Politics

Texas Democrats gunning for red seat

### 103 Medicine

Medical experts use unexpected materials to effectively treat fatal wounds

### 104 Technology

Art and antiquities thieves are getting bolder, and most museums aren't prepared

### 106 Science

Online game trains AI to track river data

### 107 Money

Wall Street attracting younger investors

## VOICES

### 12 Lynn Vincent

Why the war with Tehran is personal

### 36 Janie B. Cheaney

America's promise of freedom and prosperity creates fertile ground for idolatry and covetousness

### 62 Nick Eicher

A new *WORLD Watch* series helps students see the ideas shaping today's cultural debates

### 96 Katy Faust

After a decade of gay marriage, it's time to put children first

### 111 Andrée Seu Peterson

What happens when we can no longer trust everything we see?

### 6 WORLD Notes

### 9 Mailbag

### 108 Crossword

### 112 Backstory

Democratic socialists have influence far beyond New York



### COVER PHOTO

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# WORLD

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# WORLD NOTES



Every couple of years we try to gather the whole WORLD staff in one place. For a largely remote news organization, that takes some planning.

Before arriving, most of our teams worked ahead to lighten the daily load. Even so, the retreat was not time away from the work so much as a different way of doing it. Each day included several hours of in-person work with our teams—something that rarely happens the rest of the year.

Our theme for the week came from Psalm 34:3: “Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!”

That verse shaped the rhythm of the retreat. Each morning began with singing and a devotional, and each evening we gathered again for worship. For a newsroom, it was a helpful reminder that our work is done for God’s glory, not our own.

This year we met at The Cove, the Billy Graham Training Center just outside Asheville. It is only a short drive from our offices, but it feels removed enough to allow people to slow down a bit. Sharing meals in the dining room and staying on the same property meant fewer logistical distractions and more time simply being together.

We also used the week for training. Paul Butler, our director of training, organized several optional sessions on specific skills and topics, and we hosted a series of organization-wide discussions with guest speakers.

But as has often been the case with our retreats, some of the most memorable moments were not on the schedule—late-night conversations, music, hikes in the surrounding hills, and time around the bonfire with colleagues who usually interact only through meetings and online messages.

I cannot say the week left anyone well rested. But it did leave us encouraged—reminded again of the remarkable group of people God has brought together to do this work. We returned to our desks tired, perhaps, but filled up and ready to press ahead.

And there is plenty of work ahead.

One of the most important tasks now underway at WORLD is building our budget for the next fiscal year, which begins July 1.

Budgeting is about numbers, of course. But more fundamentally, it is about priorities. It forces us to ask difficult questions about what we should pursue next and where we should invest our time and resources.

The full board ultimately approves the annual budget, but the process involves dozens of staff members and a board committee focused on financial oversight. Our chief financial officer, Michele Bartlett, coordinates the effort and will be especially busy in the months ahead.



**Singing and planning at the WORLD retreat**

Part of her task is bringing a measure of realism to the optimistic assumptions and ambitious ideas that naturally arise when people care deeply about their work.

By the time the process is complete, we usually arrive at a healthy balance—a plan grounded in reality but still bold about the work we hope to do.

And when the budget is finalized, I look forward to telling you more about some of those plans for the year ahead.

**KEVIN MARTIN**  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
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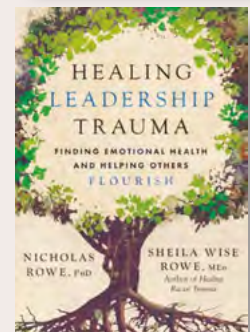
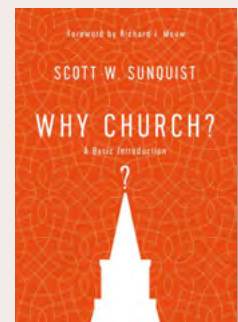
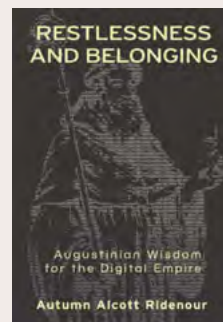
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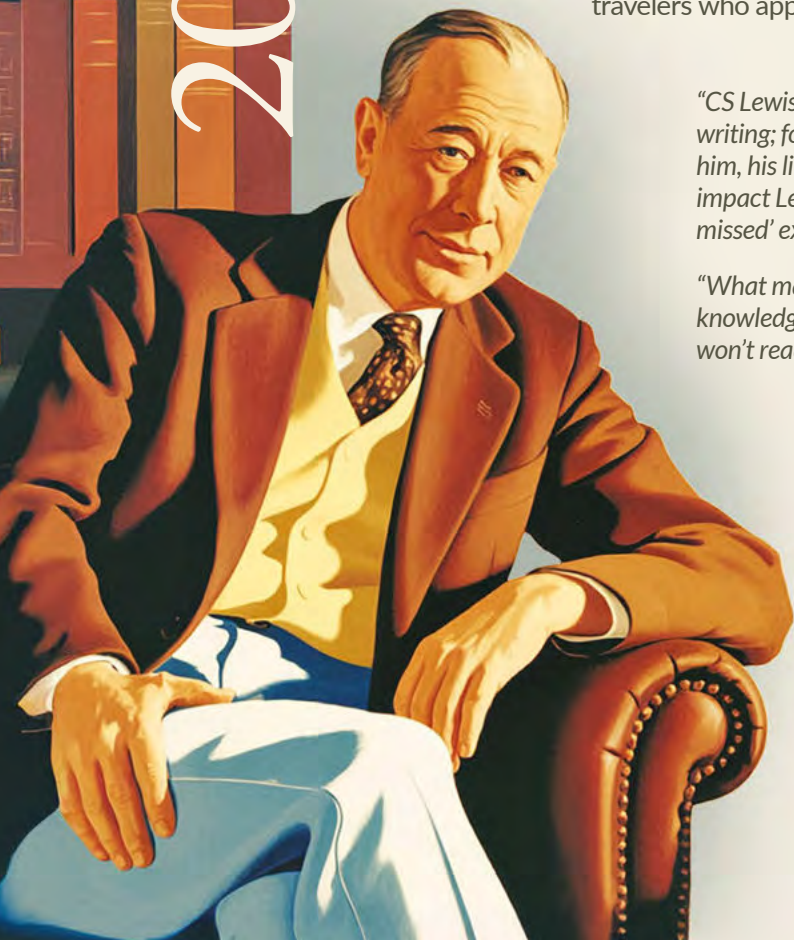
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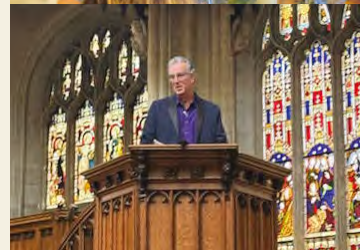


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# M A I L B A G

*“To quote the pastor interviewed in the article about nonspeakers: ‘Presume competence.’ I would add, presume hope. Presume this tool is worth a try.”*

## OPEN COMMUNICATION

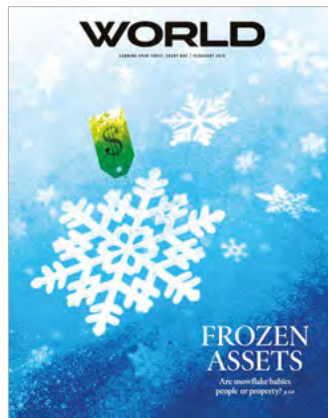
Page 72: I was excited initially to see Mary Jackson’s article on the Spellers Method used by nonspeakers (autistic or otherwise) to communicate. Our family marvels when observing this tool in action in the life of Henry, a 15-year-old boy we love. Unfortunately, a few paragraphs into the article, I found myself grieved and disappointed. Even the subtitle of the piece suggested doubt: “Critics say the words they produce aren’t theirs.” Why not offer another example or two of success? Interview a Speller who is simply grateful to finally tap out a birthday message to his brother, or express grief at the loss of his grandfather.

This tool allows nonspeakers and their families to finally experience the daily life conversations most other families take for granted. This is an Anne-Sullivan-with-Helen-Keller opportunity for nonspeakers. To quote the pastor interviewed in the article about nonspeakers: “Presume competence.” I would add, presume hope. Presume this tool is worth a try. Henry would agree with me!

KATIE MOSS  
Palouse, Wash.

## THE LURE OF ROME

Page 84: I read this article with great interest. I myself was raised Protestant and spent about a dozen years in Protestant ministry before eventually becoming Catholic. I felt the article was well written and did a good job in



FEBRUARY 2026

presenting a balanced view as well as capturing a number of reasons why good, solid Protestant Christians decide to become Catholic. I did find some slight discrepancies that do not accurately reflect Catholic faith, such as the treatment of indulgences or papal infallibility. But overall, I thought it was a nice piece, and I was encouraged to see that Protestants are thinking about these things.

For myself, I was drawn to the Catholic Church because historically it can make the case for being the church founded by Christ and that its teachings have not significantly changed in nearly 2,000 years. The stability and intellectual rigor of the faith continue to keep me thoroughly grounded in the Catholic Church.

KEITH JOHNSON  
Wadsworth, Ohio

As a student of history, I am fascinated by the article about young Protestants converting. As a Reformed Christian, I have delved into the Heidelberg and Westminster Catechisms and wonder if those who convert have ever read the Roman Catholic catechism. In it they may learn that sincere followers of any monotheistic religion will arrive in heaven after sufficient purging in purgatory. Only Protestants will go to hell. In addition, the sale of indulgences continues, especially in South America. Finally, the Catholic position on the Eucharist would require one to worship the Christ present and that indeed occurs as a part of the Mass, prompting Protestantism to refer to the Mass as an “accursed idolatry.”

BRUCE NELSON  
Byron Center, Mich.

## MUSIC REVIEWS

For decades now Arsenio Orteza’s delightful music reviews have introduced me to scores of albums and artists I’d have never come upon otherwise. His writing is crisp and playful, and underneath is an aficionado who obviously knows and loves his subject. Thanks for sharing his insights with your readers all these years.

CARL PETTICOFFER  
Ephrata, Pa.

## WHEN YOUR FAITH REQUIRES FAITH

Page 111: Thank you for printing Andrée Seu Peterson’s column and thoughts. →

Even though she feels she is rather clumsy in her faith, aren't we all? I loved that she so gently words her doubts. It speaks to my, and many others' I'm guessing, faith walk. I feel we should all be reminded that we are saved by faith, "that not of ourselves but it is a gift of God." We can fully trust Him each step and misstep we humanly take.

RUTH SOLOW  
Highland Village, Texas

### BEDSIDE FAITH

Page 94: Woo-hoo, you're back, Whitney! Thank you for this column. I'm cutting out the paragraph near the end with all the promises ... and sticking that one where I can see it.

JEANNINE RAMER  
Alliance, Ohio

### STEAL

Page 57: I question the reason for putting this review in your magazine. You write, "There is violence, but it is more restrained than what's typical for American shows. The series also contains some objectionable language, though again, not as much as one would expect from a TV-MA show made in America."

I must disagree. The language was objectionable throughout, and the violence left a very high body count, much of it gory and gruesome. Another concern is that the lines between good and evil were blurred. I was almost rooting for the perpetrator to go free. The ideology was definitely not biblical.

BARBARA LANDERS  
Portland, Ore.

I agree that it is a "good example of a modern British crime drama" with a "nail-biting first episode." However, I won't see the solution of the mystery or the answers to the many questions raised. After the third episode, my wife and I stopped watching because of the increasing frequency of foul language. The reviewer's comment about "objectionable language, though not as much as one would expect" I find quite misleading. I didn't keep track, but by the

third episode the language in almost every scene, sometimes every sentence, was "objectionable" to say the least. Even IMDb rated the language as "Severe," a more accurate indicator that I should have checked. I hope future reviews in WORLD will provide more discriminating and helpful information.

MICHAEL WIEBE  
Centennial, Colo.

### COLD WAR

Page 64: Since the IVF embryos under dispute at the NEDC are clearly persons—being 7 days and nearly 100 cells past conception—how can Dr. Keenan claim to own them? I thought the right to own persons as property was abolished by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. These embryos should be treated as orphans, not slaves.

DARYL SAS  
Fort Wayne, Ind.

### SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING REAL

Page 38: I may not be in the right demographic, but I can contribute to the "go here, not there" conversation. Not long ago I was extolling the benefits of visiting Theodore Roosevelt National Park and recommending it to folks making travel plans for the summer months. The visitor center on the east end has a huge parking lot with ample room to stay overnight and a breathtaking view of the Badlands. It is also a trailhead. And the bison viewing inside the park is delightful.

In addition, the town of Medora has a volunteer program with lodging and

food benefits for those helping out with trash pickup and other tasks. And I can't neglect to mention the Medora Musical. On summer evenings, you can take a seat in the outdoor amphitheater and enjoy a patriotic program that highlights the life of Theodore Roosevelt. Thanks for highlighting such a noteworthy location in your article.

DARLA DYKSTRA  
Kansas City, Mo.

### JUST ANOTHER ANIMAL?

Page 44: I really appreciated seeing a book review by Wesley J. Smith included in your February issue. He has a wealth of expertise in the areas of human exceptionalism, end-of-life issues, bioethics, and animal rights issues.

CAROL WU  
Clayton, Calif.

### THE ROCK 'N' ROLL WORLD'S LEGENDARY LOSSES

Page 58: Kiss was to music what professional wrestling is to athletics.

BRUCE McKECHNIE  
Honey Brook, Pa.

### PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Page 34: Travis Kircher's interview with Ambassador Huckabee was genuine and refreshing, and even those not up to date on the news would understand every word. My only wish is that it would have been longer.

JONATHAN DAMON  
Gap, Pa.

### LESSONS THAT LAST

Page 102: Theresa Haynes says it was not until recently that "evangelical Christians ... [offered] Bible-based education during school hours." However, in the late 1950s a group of us walked from our school to a church building in Minneapolis that was not Jewish or Catholic (not even Lutheran, which was dominant in the city) for "release time" Bible lessons.

KATHRYN HENDRIX  
Knoxville, Tenn.

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VOICES LYNN VINCENT

# The boys from Iran

Why the war with Tehran is personal

I remember the first time I ate a home-cooked Persian meal. Fragrant rice on a large platter surrounded by seasoned vegetables. My best friend, Ed, his brother Bill, and I sat cross-legged around the platter on the floor of a rented home in a trailer park. The air was redolent with the scents of cardamom and cumin as our new friends, Mohammed and Hussein, showed us how to use flatbread to scoop up our dinner.

The flatbread, too, was fresh-baked. Ed, Bill, and I raved about the meal the brothers had served us. As was their way, they bowed their heads shyly to acknowledge our praise—trying hard to be good hosts, living alone in a strange country when they were still just boys.

Though they were only teenagers, Mohammed and Hussein lived on their own in the trailer park—7,000 miles from home. Their parents had sent them to America, out of the killing path of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the radical Shia cleric, and his followers, who called their uprising *Engbelab-e Eslami*—the Islamic Revolution.

Under the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran had been rapidly modernizing, though his rule remained authoritarian. When Khomeini toppled Pahlavi, he promised justice, peace, and dignity amid the restoration of the true worship of Allah. Many believed and supported him. Instead, Khomeini institutionalized repression.

The Islamic Republic fused religion with politics and purged dissenters. Women lost legal rights, were forced to wear the hijab, and were beaten if they refused. Protesters were shot in the streets.

And that's how two young Iranian teens wound up in Scottsboro, Ala. Both were brilliant, and their parents feared for their lives. I never learned why Mohammed and Hussein

wound up in a Southern burg with a checkered past and not some more cosmopolitan place where their brown faces might blend in. In 1931, two white women falsely accused nine black teenagers—later known as the Scottsboro Boys—of raping them on a freight train. Rushed trials sent several of the boys to death row in one of the most notorious miscarriages of justice in American history.

By 1979, while natural and civil rights were collapsing in Iran, they were expanding in America. When we shared supper with the Iranian brothers, the Civil Rights Act was only 15 years old. I later realized my black classmates were among the first generation born after the right to vote had been secured in law.

But some of my white classmates showed it would take more than an act of Congress to drive a stake into racist hearts. Growing up in the “melting pot” of Hawaii, I had never heard anyone use the N-word. The first time I heard it in Scottsboro, I felt physically ill. Then, when Mohammed and Hussein enrolled at my high school, those same classmates improvised the slur, adding the word *sand* and hurling it at teenage refugees.

Thus, I found myself standing at a three-way crossroads: an American racial reconciliation still painfully incomplete, a calcifying Iranian theocracy that would one day menace the world, and a friendship with immigrant teenagers trying to navigate both.

All this makes the current U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran very personal to me. Since the war began, I've heard many testimonies from adults whose parents, like Mohammed and Hussein's, sent them to America while they stayed behind under the bootheels of the ayatollahs.

What kind of country makes parents gamble their children's futures this way? What American parent can imagine sending their children 7,000 miles from home—deciding life alone in a trailer park amid simmering racism was the better option for their kids?

Mohammed and Hussein quickly learned their freedom came at a price. The people who stayed behind in Iran are still paying it. Decades later, the people of their homeland still cry, “*Azadi! Azadi! Azadi!*”—Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!

For me, that cry isn't theoretical but embodied in two Iranian boys who became my friends. Mohammed and Hussein are men now—maybe grandparents like me, blessed with self-determination secured by the sacrifice of their parents all those years ago.

But their countrymen still suffer imprisonment, rape, and public executions under a dictatorship desperate to hold onto power.

Forty-seven years is enough. For the sake of my friends, their families, and all families like them, I cry with them:

*Azadi!* ■



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# DISPATCHES



IN THE NEWS

# No clear path for Iran

The Islamic Republic's future hangs in the balance as U.S. military action continues

by ADDIE OFFEREINS

**S**aeed Ahmadi felt the inquisitive eyes of onlookers as he let out a series of joyful screams during his 20-minute walk to the chemical engineering research lab at Ohio State University. But he didn't care. The news his friend had called to share seemed too incredible to be true: Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, was dead.

"For a moment, I couldn't breathe," Ahmadi said. (WORLD agreed to change Ahmadi's name to protect him and his family from government retaliation.) Sobs shook the Iranian international student as his ecstatic shock melted into grief. "I just started crying for all the years that they ruled us."

In broad daylight on the morning of Feb. 28, the United States and Israel killed Khamenei and dozens of other top Iranian leaders in a series of coordinated strikes dubbed Operation Epic Fury. The two nations also targeted the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' control centers and air defense systems, as well as Iran's military communications network and naval forces.

Thousands of Iranians flooded the streets of major cities across the globe to celebrate the U.S. strikes. But not all Iranians share Ahmadi's view of the Trump administration's intervention.

They worry foreign interference could sabotage ongoing Iranian efforts to advance democracy and lead to greater authoritarian crackdowns or civil war. Other critics of the president's military campaign argue it violates campaign promises to keep American service members—and American tax dollars—from more military entanglements in the Middle East.

Ahmadi arrived in Columbus, Ohio, in 2023. He told me most Iranian students coming to the United States to study are really just desperate for a life out from under the prying eyes of their government. The 31-year-old doctoral student grew emotional as he described his relief at Khamenei's death. "We begged for that," he said. "This man killed his own people."

A study at Stanford University's Iranian studies program showed that on average a protest occurred in the capital city of Tehran once every three days between 2009 and 2024. The nation's largest wave of protests occurred this January. The U.S.-based organization Human Right Activists News Agency said it verified the government killed more than 6,000 protesters and is investigating over 17,000 more deaths, though internal sources estimate the total could be closer to 30,000. Ahmadi said his brother barely escaped arrest during one university protest.

While the Trump administration has maintained Operation Epic Fury is not a "regime change" war, the president urged the Iranian people to "take over your government" in an →



**Iranian Americans in Boston celebrate the death of Khamenei and call for the fall of the Islamic Republic in Iran.**

8-minute video posted to Truth Social. But meaningful governmental change appears unlikely. Iran's Assembly of Experts, a body of Shia clerics, named Mojtaba Khamenei, the son of the recently slain ayatollah, to be the country's next supreme leader. Khamenei espouses the same hard-line positions as his father and has the support of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The choice does not bode well for a swift end to the conflict. Trump previously told Axios he would not support the appointment of Khamenei's son. The president said his administration intended the operation to last four to five weeks. But he warned it would continue until the United States achieved its objectives: prevent the Islamic Republic from developing a nuclear weapon or funding terrorist armies and decimate its ballistic missile capabilities and naval power. The military offensive followed several failed rounds of negotiations and a series of bombings last year that Trump claimed obliterated key nuclear sites, though some independent reporting indicated the facilities weren't completely destroyed.

**Iranians in Tehran hold portraits of Khamenei as they demonstrate against the U.S.-Israeli attacks.**



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**“We are not just fighting a battle for Israel. We are fighting a battle for the Western world.”**

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The Islamic Republic has launched a series of retaliatory attacks, including a drone strike on a makeshift operations center in Kuwait that killed six U.S. servicemembers, according to U.S. Central Command, or CENTCOM. Israeli air defenses have intercepted hundreds of Iranian missiles as well as missiles fired by the Iranian-backed terrorist group Hezbollah. A ballistic missile killed at least nine people, including children, in the Israeli city of Beit Shemesh when it struck a bomb shelter.

“We’ve been planning for this. The whole country’s been gearing up for it,” said Aryeh Myers, the national relations liaison for Magen David Adom, Israel’s national emergency medical, disaster, ambulance, and blood bank service. He said they expect to see hundreds if not thousands more people injured.

I asked Myers what he wanted Americans to know about the conflict. “We are not just fighting a battle for Israel,” he said. “We are fighting a battle for the Western world.”

But a recent NBC News poll showed a majority of Americans—54%—disapprove of the military action in Iran, including a small slice of Republicans who don’t consider it a part of the president’s America First platform. Top congressional Democrats condemned the action, arguing the president overstepped his executive authority. On March 4, the Senate voted largely along party lines against invoking the war powers resolution, a law passed during the Vietnam War that would have required Trump to end U.S. operations in the region within 60 days unless he obtained congressional approval to continue. Congress has not declared war since 1942.

Trump has long criticized America’s international military entanglements. But Barbara Slavin, a distinguished fellow at the Stimson Center in Washington, D.C., argued that the Trump administration’s military action in Iran follows in the same vein as his Republican predecessors. “It was the dream of the neoconservative to get rid of the Iranian regime after getting rid of the Afghan and Iraqi regimes,” she said. “He’s just living it out.”

Slavin contended that years of American opposition to Iran in the form of economic sanctions bolstered the regime's position by weakening Iranian society, unintentionally stalling reform efforts and pushing the Islamic Republic into the arms of China. The Asian nation buys more than 80% of Iran's crude oil exports, data from the firm Kpler revealed. Now, Slavin worries the recent strikes could bolster Chinese propaganda painting the United States as "reckless" and the People's Republic as the "true upholder of international law and stability." She also expressed concern that the Trump administration's intervention could jeopardize internal Iranian resistance efforts.

Daniel Byman, the director of the warfare, irregular threats, and terrorism program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, agreed that upheaval in the region could end up solidifying Chinese influence. But he noted Operation Epic Fury may also strengthen the United States in the eyes of its Asian rival, which can now see Trump is willing to back up his foreign policy objectives with force.

Amid their nation's political uncertainty, Christian ministries say growing numbers of Iranians are becoming disillusioned with Islam and are looking elsewhere for answers. Edwin Keshish-Abnous fled the Islamic State and is now the CEO for Heart4Iran, a ministry that broadcasts Christian programming into the nation through its satellite TV station. It also operates a 24/7 call center. It has seen engagement rise as opposition to the regime has intensified. "The Iranian people's perspective regarding Islam has changed a lot, long before this attack," Keshish-Abnous said.

Ahmadi told me he doesn't practice the Muslim faith anymore because of all that has happened in his country. He identifies as agnostic. But he has also started going to Bible studies.

The doctoral student said he is considering moving back home—but only if the regime fully changes. "I want the whole world to know the true nature of this government," he said. "How their ideology destroyed my beautiful country." ■



## BY THE NUMBERS

# Survey no longer says

Gallup retires trademark presidential poll

BY JOHN DAWSON

**88**

The number of years since pollster George Gallup launched his influential presidential approval survey in 1938, tracking the highs and lows of presidential popularity and setting the standard for scientific polling methods. The polling firm confirmed Feb. 11 it will cease its presidential approval survey—one of the last to reach respondents by phone—reflecting the increasing difficulty of scientific polling in a world where few answer calls.

**1,000**

The average sample size in Gallup's presidential approval survey, yielding a margin of error of 3 percentage points.

**7%**

The last reported response rate for Gallup's telephone survey in 2017, down from 28% in 1997, reflecting the increasing difficulty in gauging public opinion through Gallup's traditional random-digit dialing of American telephone numbers.

**90%**

George W. Bush's approval rating as measured by Gallup after the Sept. 11 terrorism attacks in 2001, marking the highest rating ever achieved in the poll. The lowest was 22% for Harry S. Truman in February 1952 during the doldrums of the Korean War.

# Moving beyond MAGA

Conservative exiles of a Trump-dominated GOP strategize a political future

by CAROLINA LUMETTA



→ Rich Logis wore his MAGA-red hat while manning a table in the conference hallway. But the hat was not embroidered with “Make America Great Again,” President Donald Trump’s slogan. Instead, it read, “I left MAGA.”

When a woman walked up to the table and asked for more information, she explained it was not for herself, but for her family members.

“The best way to go about this is to let them know that if they ever have doubts or confusion about their support, that they can turn to you as a friend, a

listening ear without judgment,” Logis told her.

“They can’t, though,” the woman replied. “I’m very full of judgment.”

The woman was one of 800 attendees at the Principles First Summit, held in late February at the Gaylord Hotel in National Harbor, Md. The organization started in 2019 as a center-right alternative to the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), which has traditionally met at the same hotel.

**Rich Logis at the Principles First Summit**

“There’s a lot of trauma that’s been created as a result of the 10-plus years of our politics where MAGA has dominated,” Logis told me. The former conservative influencer, an unaffiliated voter from Florida, launched a nonprofit called Leaving MAGA. He describes himself as center-left on some cultural issues and center-right on others, such as the right to carry a firearm.

He was also once part of the MAGA movement himself: Logis said he gravitated to MAGA politics at a time when he felt politically homeless and believed the two main political parties were

essentially the same. But he left the Republican Party in 2022 after disagreeing with his home state's policies on COVID-19 and vaccines.

"When I was in MAGA, it was a fantasy of ours to kill off the GOP and make it a MAGA party," he said. Now he regrets it. "That has been accomplished. I don't think the old Republican Party is really ever going to come back."

But Principles First has a plan to bring back the old conservatism. Its February conference was awash with former conservatives wondering where their party went. And they all had varying ideas about where to go next. Attendance at the annual convention remains much smaller than at its right-wing counterpart, but the organization has expanded from no state presence to now 24 chapters launched just in the past year.

"We're just commonsense Americans who are concerned with the things happening in our political system," Executive Director Brittany Martinez told me. "What we're trying to do is put civility back in civil discourse. We're trying to be the big umbrella and welcome those who just want things to be normal."

Boiled down, Martinez said, "Just don't be jerks."

The group says it's centered on 15 core principles of classical liberalism. They include the election of moral officials, the belief that all people are created in the image of God and deserve dignity, and the preeminence of the Constitution and the rule of law. It leans conservative: Principle No. 5 says that the government should be limited, and No. 6 says each branch of government should have clear guardrails. But Martinez told me that Principles First's strength is in its wide umbrella approach that she says could reconcile partisanship.

"Politics is a pendulum and it'll always swing," she said. "We need to be at a more equilibrium all around."

Despite the desire to achieve a post-Trump party, many Principles First attendees have crossed the political aisle on their ballots anyway. In 2024, a video testimony Logis recorded was played at the Democratic National Convention. He was the co-chair of Republicans for

Harris in Florida. But he was one of several who told me they vote Democratic but are not Democrats.

"I view myself as an independent," Virginian Karen Hilliard told me. She cast her vote for former President Joe Biden in 2020 and former Vice President Kamala Harris in 2024. She told me she regrets voting for Trump in 2016 and says she often fact-checks what the president says and finds misinformation and outright lies.

"I had been voting Republican for about four decades, thinking that character matters. This is the party that has family values and all that. All of that got, to me, wiped away during Trump," Hilliard said.

Volunteer Charlie Sutkamp, from Ohio, chairs the Principles First Outreach Committee. He said his strategy starts with voting MAGA out of office.

"If the Democrats are in power and I'm not happy with some of their policies, I can live with that as long as they're constitutional," Sutkamp told me.

But other Republicans say the Democratic Party isn't an option for them. Chris Roosen, an auto salesman and elected trustee of a Michigan township, said he's playing the long game and waiting for the post-Trump GOP.

Joe Walsh speaks at the conference.



"There's no place for me in the Democratic Party," he said. "I'm pro-life, pro-free trade, pro-national defense."

But what the group has in principles it still lacks in power. The majority of speakers had "former" in their title: former Rep. Adam Kinzinger, former Gov. Chris Christie, and former Rep. Joe Walsh, who registered as a Democrat last year. Walsh told attendees he wakes up every morning "sick to my stomach" about the state of the country. "And I set out again to do everything I can that day to defeat this guy in the White House, to defeat what my former party has become," he said.

Others at the conference have a plan to restore the GOP through Republican politics. Former Republican politician Chris Vance is senior adviser at Our Republican Legacy, which aims to convince never-Trumpers to run for local offices and root out MAGA-affiliated delegates in state party chapters. In just one year, the group has established 25 state chairs and has 10,000 names on a national committee supporter list.

"We think of ourselves as the Republican National Committee in exile, as the resistance," said Vance, no relation to the vice president. He argued Trump's second term has been characterized by the forsaking of conservative principles: Traditionally, conservatives have not supported the use of tariffs to control

markets or allies, and many in the MAGA coalition were disappointed with military actions in Iran and Venezuela.

Vance said he now sees the ingredients needed to change the GOP back.

"Especially after they get annihilated in the midterms, there's going to be even more openness to returning back to core principles," he said. "The era of Trump is ending, and that will change everything." ■

## DEPARTURES

# Legendary football coach dead at 89

by JOHN DAWSON



**Lou Holtz**

A legendary college football coach and broadcaster who led six different football programs to bowl games, Holtz died March 4. He was 89. After years as an assistant coach, Holtz took over football operations at William & Mary in 1969, leading his first of six college football programs. After a stint in the NFL coaching the New York Jets in 1976, Holtz returned to the college ranks to coach major powers like Arkansas and Minnesota. He took over Notre Dame in 1986 and returned the flagging program to glory, winning 100 games in 11 seasons, including a national championship in 1988. Holtz later broadcast football commentary first for CBS and then for ESPN after his final retirement from coaching.



**Neil Sedaka**

A fount of songwriting whose tunes came to dominate pop charts in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, Sedaka died Feb. 27. He was 86. The Brooklyn native began writing songs at age 13, finally breaking through in 1959 with the Top 10 hit "Oh! Carol." Sedaka released his first of three *Billboard* Hot 100 No. 1 hits in 1962 with "Breaking Up Is Hard To Do." Transitioning to adult contemporary in the 1970s, Sedaka roared back to the top of the charts with "Laughter in the Rain" in 1975—the same year duo Captain & Tennille took his "Love Will Keep Us Together" to the top of the charts. During his decades-long run, Sedaka earned more than 700 songwriting credits and five Grammy nominations.



**Bill Mazerowski**

A baseball Hall-of-Famer known primarily for his glove who nevertheless hit one of major league baseball's most famous home runs, Mazerowski died Feb. 20. He was 89. In 1954, the 17-year-old Mazerowski signed with the Pittsburgh Pirates organization, toiling in the minor leagues before making his major league debut two years later. Slick fielding at second base quickly earned him a full-time starting position with the Pirates. In the seventh game of the 1960 World Series with the score knotted at 9-9, Mazerowski led off the bottom of the 9th inning and crushed a Ralph Terry fastball over the left field fence to secure a World Series victory over the New York Yankees and his place in baseball history.



**Jesse Jackson**

A protégé of civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr., who became a powerful orator and political leader in his own right, Jackson died Feb. 17. He was 84. Jackson joined in with King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and quickly rose to leadership. Jackson, who was with King in 1968 when a sniper shot King in Memphis, clashed with other civil rights leaders after King's death before founding his own social justice organization. Jackson's Rainbow Coalition and Operation PUSH gave him a forum to pressure corporations for better treatment of blacks, and a stage to push his own left-wing ideas wrapped in soaring classical rhetoric. He garnered millions of votes in Democratic Party presidential campaigns in 1984 and 1988.



**Robert Duvall**

A screen legend who had a talent for disappearing into almost any role, Duvall died Feb. 15. He was 95. Before breaking in as a Hollywood regular, Duvall shared a New York City apartment with Dustin Hoffman. The duo practiced lines with other struggling actors including Gene Hackman and James Caan. Of them all, Duvall might have had the most prolific career. He broke through as Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1962 and as a villain in the 1970 film *M\*A\*S\*H*. He played the Corleone family consigliere in the first two *The Godfather* films and a maniacal Army officer in *Apocalypse Now*. Duvall won an Oscar for best actor for *Tender Mercies* and garnered six other Academy Award nominations.

HOLTZ: KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES; SEDAKA: CHARLES SYKES/AP; MAZEROSKI: GENE J. PUSKAR/AP; JACKSON: RON EDMONDS/AP; DUVALL: TONI ANNE BARSON ARCHIVE/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES



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## HUMAN RACE

# Line of duty

by GRACE SNELL

→ The Pentagon has identified the first six U.S. servicemembers killed in the U.S.-Iran conflict: Sgt. 1st Class Nicole M. Amor, Sgt. Declan J. Coady, Capt. Cody A. Khork, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Robert M. Marzan, Maj. Jeffrey R. O'Brien, and Sgt. 1st Class Noah L. Tietjens. The U.S. Army Reserve soldiers died when a munition struck a makeshift operation center in Kuwait one day after the United States and Israel launched sweeping strikes against Iran and killed the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. All six of the soldiers belonged to the 103rd Sustainment Command based in Des Moines, Iowa. On March 8, the Pentagon announced that a seventh soldier, Sgt. Benjamin N. Pennington, had died of injuries sustained in an Iranian attack in Saudi Arabia on March 1. On March 10, the Pentagon gave its first official tally of American servicemembers wounded: 140, with eight of those suffering severe injuries. U.S. President Donald Trump honored the fallen soldiers of Operation Epic Fury in a 6-minute video message posted to Truth Social. "We pray for the full recovery of the wounded and send our immense love and eternal gratitude to the families of the fallen," he said. "And sadly, there will likely be more before it ends." Israel has marked about a dozen deaths in the conflict. Iran claims about 1,200 of its citizens have died, and Lebanon says Israeli strikes have killed 300 inside its borders.

## SEEKING SAFETY

Welsh billionaire Sir Michael Moritz, 71, says he's applying for German citizenship and a passport because the U.K. has become "an uncomfortable place" for Jews. Anti-Semitic attacks spiked in the U.K. after the October Heaton Park Synagogue attack. Moritz said Germany is more welcoming of Jews because "what happened 100 years ago forms a very central part of the education system." Moritz's grandparents were killed in the Holocaust. German law allows descendants of those stripped of their German citizenship by the Nazis to return. It gives him "some mild form of reassurance" to know he can flee to Germany if needed, said Moritz, who currently lives in California. —Amy Lewis

## FIRST OUT

Rep. **Dan Crenshaw**, R-Texas, became the first House member defeated in the 2026 midterms when he lost his primary race on March 3.



The four-term congressman lost to state Rep. Steve Toth, an outspoken supporter of President Donald Trump. Toth's campaign got significant financial help from banker Robert Marling, who made it his mission to oust Crenshaw. Marling donated \$675,000 to an anti-Crenshaw advertising campaign, accounting for two-thirds of the money spent by a super PAC in the race. The billionaire's feud with Crenshaw dates back several years and demon-

SIX SOLDIERS: U.S. ARMY RESERVE COMMAND PRESS DESK; CRENSHAW: JACQUELYN MARTIN/AP

strates how much personal animosity, when paired with deep pockets, can influence politics. —*Leigh Jones*

### HISTORIC SESSION

First lady Melania Trump presided over a United Nations Security Council meeting on March 2. It was the first time a sitting first lady took the gavel for the meeting. The U.S. held the rotating Security Council presidency for March, but normally the UN ambassador or a senior government official chairs the meetings. “The path to peace depends on us taking responsibility to empower our children through education and technology,” the first lady said. “Conflict arises from ignorance, but knowledge creates understanding—replacing fear with peace and unity.” President Donald Trump has frequently criticized the UN. In 2025, he told the UN General Assembly that all the UN seems to do “is write a really strongly worded letter, and then never follow that letter up.” —*Emma Freire*



### NOEM MORE AT DHS

President Donald Trump replaced **Kristi Noem** as the head of the Homeland Security Department in early March, following months of criticism from Democrats over immigration enforcement. Trump said Noem served the nation well and characterized her achievements as numerous and spectacular, specifically regarding the border. She will continue serving as special envoy for the new Shield of the Americas security initiative, an effort to target drug trafficking in the Western Hemisphere. Trump tapped Sen. Markwayne Mullin, R-Okla., to replace Noem

at DHS. Trump highlighted Mullin’s legislative work to keep the country’s border secure, end the flow of illegal drugs into the country, and fight crime.

—*Christina Grube*

### DAD CONVICTED

Jurors on March 3 took less than two

hours to convict Georgia father **Colin Gray** of all charges related to a 2024 school shooting at Apalachee High School near Winder. Gray’s son, Colt, who was 14 at the time of the shooting, allegedly used a rifle his father gave him as a Christmas present to carry out the mass shooting. Prosecutors accused Gray of allowing his son to possess a weapon despite knowing he was a danger to himself and others. After the two-week trial, jurors found Gray guilty of second-degree murder in the deaths of two



14-year-old students, Mason Schermerhorn and Christian Angulo. Under Georgia law, second-degree murder includes causing the death of a child through cruelty to children. The jury also convicted Gray of involuntary manslaughter in the deaths of teachers Richard Aspinwall and Cristina Irimie. Another teacher and eight students were wounded in the attack. In addition to the homicide counts, Gray was convicted on multiple counts of reckless conduct and cruelty to children. The case adds Gray to a growing number of parents held legally responsible after their children carried out mass shootings. Colt Gray is scheduled to stand trial as an adult later this year. —*Kim Henderson*

### MAFIA BOSS DIES

Benedetto “Nitto” Santapaola, one of Italy’s renowned and ruthless mafia bosses convicted of a string of murders in the 1980s and 1990s, died March 2 in a Milan prison. He was 87. Santapaola spent more than three decades behind bars for instigating a series of killings and attacks, including the murder of anti-mafia Judge Paolo Borsellino and a car bombing that murdered Judge Giovanni Falcone, one of the most brutal attacks on the judiciary in Italy’s history. Known as *Il Cacciatore* (the hunter), Santapaola was based in Catania, Sicily, and controlled much of eastern Sicily. He was arrested in 1993 after hiding in a farmhouse for 11 years.

—*Mary Jackson* ■



Melania Trump presides over a UN Security Council meeting.

# Kazakhstan reintroducing wild tigers



**Kazakhstan** The government is moving forward with an ambitious project to introduce **Siberian tigers** to replace Caspian tigers, original to the region but now extinct. Two captive tigers were brought from the Netherlands last year. Their offspring will join a group of tigers from Russia in the wild. But tigers need prey, and their prey needs forest. Last year, the government planted 37,000 trees on a 2.4 mile stretch of Lake Balkhash, the largest lake in Central Asia. “Already, wild ungulates have been seen foraging on the restored sites, indicating that the ecosystem is beginning to function,” said a spokesperson from WWF, a project supporter. Kazakhstan is developing a program to minimize human-wildlife conflict before the arrival of three to four tigers from Russia in the next two months. —*Evangeline Schmitt*



**POPULATION**  
20.5 million

**LANGUAGE**  
Kazakh,  
Russian

**RELIGION**  
75% Sunni  
Muslim  
25% Eastern  
Orthodox

**GOVERNANCE**  
Presidential  
republic

**GDP**  
\$300 billion

**MAJOR EXPORTS**  
Crude oil,  
uranium,  
copper


**France** The Senate will take up debate on a proposed assisted dying and euthanasia law passed by the National Assembly after days of fierce debate and consideration of over 2,000 amendments. Critics call the law the most extreme since the euthanasia laws of 1930s Nazi Germany, citing lack of conscience protections and guardrails to safeguard vulnerable persons, and the rapidity with which a person requesting euthanasia can obtain the lethal drugs. Persons suffering from severe mental illness or with developmental disabilities, as well as the terminally ill, would be eligible to either receive a fatal prescription to use to kill themselves or request a doctor deliver a fatal dose. President Emmanuel Macron has made passing a “death with dignity” law a primary goal of his second term. —*Jenny Lind Schmitt*



**Democratic Republic of Congo** Authorities said 200 people were killed March 3 when a shaft collapsed in **Rubaya**, the largest coltan mine in rebel-controlled eastern DRC. Coltan is the source of tantalum, a rare metal used in the manufacture of smartphones and aircraft engines. Two hundred people also died in a massive landslide at the same site in January after heavy rains. Thousands of miners work in precarious conditions in Rubaya's pits, using shovels to dig. Rubaya has experienced decades of violence from government forces and different armed groups. The huge site accounts for about 15% of global coltan production and has been controlled by the M23 rebel group since April 2024. —*Olalekan Raji*

**Qatar** The country halted its natural gas production, as the effects of war in Iran spread throughout the region. QatarEnergy, the gas-rich country's national energy company, announced March 4 it will fully shut down gas cooling, or liquefaction, at its Ras Laffan industrial facility. The company also declared the contract exemption of force majeure on its exports, disrupting global market supply. Qatar is the world's third-largest gas exporter, after the United States and Australia, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. QatarEnergy first halted production at Ras Laffan on March 2, following Iran's strikes against Gulf countries in retaliation for attacks from Israel and the United States. The company said the disruption will continue for two weeks at least, with another two weeks needed to return to full capacity.

—*William Fleeson*



**POPULATION**  
2.8 million

**LANGUAGE**  
Arabic

**RELIGION**  
65% Sunni Muslim  
15% Christian  
14% Hindu

**GOVERNANCE**  
Semi-constitutional monarchy

**GDP**  
\$220 billion

**MAJOR EXPORTS**  
Natural gas, crude and refined oil

**Chile** For the first time in the nation's history, transition meetings for the presidential handover came to a halt after President-elect José Antonio Kast cited lack of information given by outgoing President Gabriel Boric over the still-developing trans-Pacific cable project between China and Chile. The dispute became international after the U.S. sanctioned three senior Chilean officials involved in the project. The Chile-China Express cable would link Chile's Valparaíso region with Hong Kong through nearly 13,000 miles of submarine fiber-optic cables. Undersea cables transmit over 95% of international internet traffic. Kast launched an investigation into the outgoing administration due to misinformation surrounding the project. His inauguration is set for March 11.

—*Elisa Palumbo*



**POPULATION**  
19.7 million

**LANGUAGE**  
Spanish

**RELIGION**  
53% Roman Catholic  
16% Protestant  
25% none

**GOVERNANCE**  
Democratic republic

**GDP**  
\$330 billion

**MAJOR EXPORTS**  
Copper

**China** The country's newest combo hydroelectric/pumped hydro dam opened on the Yalong River on March 3. The government relocated nearly 5,000 Tibetan people to build the **Lianghekou Dam**, which is as tall as the Eiffel Tower and reported to be the world's largest pumped hydro energy storage site. During the rainy season, excess energy will pump water uphill for long-term storage, while a nearby photovoltaic solar field the size of 2,000 football fields will provide consistent distribution and energy security during the dry season. Renewable energy has increased the country's electrical capacity, but hasn't reduced its dependence on coal-powered electricity: Installations of coal-powered plants reached an 18-year high in 2025. —*Amy Lewis*





**U.S. BRIEFS**

# Louisiana fishes for crawfish plant workers

→ Louisiana kicked off the 2026 crawfish season by crowning a queen and extending an official pardon to Tony the Crawfish, but the industry is facing significant harvesting challenges. Plants that process the freshwater crustaceans are operating at a diminished capacity because visas for foreign guest workers haven't come through. According to longtime state Agriculture Commissioner Mike Strain, plants that commonly hire more than 100 laborers at harvest time haven't been able to hire any. "Without getting these workers, the plants will shut down," he warned. "Or, as has happened in the past, they will fill up tractor trailer loads of these crawfish, send them down to Mexico, get them peeled, and bring them back." Under the federal H-2B program, foreign workers can take temporary, non-agricultural jobs when there aren't enough qualified U.S. workers, then return home. It's a pipeline many of the state's crawfish plants use, but allotted visas are capped, and Louisiana reached the threshold before factories were fully staffed. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Louisiana's unemployment rate stands at about 4.2%. More than 88,000 residents reported being jobless in December. —*Kim Henderson*



**POPULATION**  
4.6 million

**GOVERNOR**  
Jeff Landry<sup>R</sup>

**U.S. SENATORS**  
Bill Cassidy<sup>R</sup>,  
John Kennedy<sup>R</sup>

**INDUSTRY**  
Entertainment,  
energy,  
agriculture,  
life sciences,  
manufacturing,  
defense

**Missouri** The state Department of Social Services could soon get a new division designed to reverse the epidemic of fatherlessness. On March 2, lawmakers in the state House overwhelmingly passed a bipartisan bill to create the Missouri Fathership Project. It would provide funds to nonprofits and community organizations that support dads who want to "reestablish and strengthen relationships with their children." The effort is modeled after a similar program in Florida, where the Christian nonprofit Man Up and Go works with fathers who have lost custody of their children and are trying to navigate the foster care and court systems. Groups that work with the program also help fathers fill out job applications and work on their parenting skills. The measure won rare bipartisan support.

—*Leigh Jones*

**Ohio** In March, Ohio House lawmakers voted to preemptively ban ranked choice voting (RCV) in their state before any cities had a chance to adopt it. Two Democrats joined House Republicans in a 63 to 27 vote that drew unanimous GOP support. The Ohio Senate passed SB 63 last May, but must vote again on the bill as amended. Only one lawmaker, Democrat Ashley Bryant Bailey of Cincinnati, argued against the bill, saying it strips local municipalities of an important freedom and concentrates power in the Capital. At least two cities had actively considered a switch. Supporters argue RCV would be costly and confusing to implement. Currently, Alaska and Maine use RCV for statewide elections, while other states use the system for certain elections. —*Grace Snell*

SOPHIA GERMER/THE ADVOCATE VIA AP; FACT BOX SOURCE: THE WORLD BANK



**Connecticut** Democratic Gov. **Ned Lamont** used his line-item veto power on March 3 to slash \$4 million in grants and earmarks in an emergency-certified bill. Lawmakers passed the measure the previous week on a fast track, bypassing committee review and hearings. Lamont’s move to cut legislatively directed funds, known as earmarks, put him at odds with Democrats. Republican lawmakers drove calls for more vetting and details about grants to six organizations. One vetoed item provided \$750,000 this year and next to CREC, the Capitol Region Education Council, for a teacher training program. The program employs state Sen. Douglas McCrory, a Democrat under investigation by the FBI for potential fraud. Other funding cuts included \$2.5 million for outdoor recreation in Hartford. Lamont noted he objected to the process, not the organizations. Approving provisions without clear guardrails “would perpetuate a system that lacks consistent transparency and enforceable standards,” he said. Lamont, who is running for his third term this year, said Connecticut residents have asked for more accountability on how legislatively directed funds are “proposed, reviewed, and distributed.” —*Mary Jackson*

**New Hampshire** Proposed legislation that would ease restrictions on home education is advancing in the New Hampshire State House. Labeled the Home Education Freedom Act, the new law would make New Hampshire one of the least-regulated states in the country, according to Republican Rep. Kristin Noble, the bill’s lead sponsor. Current law requires parents to notify school officials of their intent to homeschool. They must also keep curriculum records and conduct yearly academic evaluations of their children. Under the new proposal, one-time notification and the yearly evaluation would be optional. The bill would also exempt homeschooled students from existing laws limiting the hours and days each week they can work. Additionally, it would require that the Division for Children, Youth, and Families treat homeschool programs with the presumption that they are valid education. Homeschooling advocates who champion the changes say the bill represents a paradigm shift, eliminating the presumption that families who choose to homeschool are acting in bad faith. —*Kim Henderson*

**Delaware** The state Supreme Court on Feb. 27 upheld the constitutionality of a law that aims to safeguard the state’s appeal to major corporations. The law—known as Senate Bill 21—reformed the state’s corporate law. It included a provision to shield company leaders from some types of lawsuits brought by smaller investors. The law traces its roots to a 2024 ruling by a Delaware Chancery Court—which handles business matters—that voided Tesla CEO **Elon Musk**’s pay package of \$56 billion. In response, Musk moved the legal headquarters of Tesla and SpaceX out of Delaware and encouraged other business leaders to do the same. The Delaware Supreme Court restored his pay in 2025. Over 1.9 million businesses are registered in Delaware, and they generate over \$2 billion in revenue for the state annually. Gov. Matt Meyer hailed the ruling in a statement. “Delaware is the gold standard locale for global companies to do business,” he said. —*Emma Freire*



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### BACKGROUNDER

# What is TrumpRx?

by MARY MUNCY

→ The Trump administration is testing a strategy to lower prescription drug costs by linking U.S. prices to what other wealthy countries pay. They call it “Most-Favored-Nation” pricing. The theory is that Americans should not pay more for the same medication than patients in Europe or Canada. TrumpRx.gov is the consumer-facing piece of that effort.

**What is TrumpRx?** The website lists discounted cash prices for certain medications that both foreign and domestic drug manufacturers have agreed to offer. It does not dispense drugs and does not

process insurance claims. Instead, patients pay out of pocket at participating pharmacies and use coupons. The Trump administration says TrumpRx makes the government-negotiated prices from the Most-Favored-Nation policy visible to consumers.

**Who will benefit most?** The site is most likely to benefit people without insurance or who need drugs that insurance does not cover, said America First Policy Institute health policy expert Hannah Anderson. Right now, about 8% of Americans are uninsured. That’s about 28 million people who

may benefit from a cash-only option like TrumpRx.

It might also be a good option for those with high-deductible insurance, Anderson said. But insurance payments count toward an annual deductible and out-of-pocket maximum. Cash purchases usually do not. That means what looks cheaper in the moment may not be cheaper over the course of the year.

**Which drugs are on the site?** The 43 drugs currently available are all brand-name. The drugs most likely to benefit consumers are weight loss and fertility medications, since those are the least likely to be covered by insurance, said Kaye Pestaina, director of the patient and consumer protection program at KFF.

**What should consumers consider before purchasing a drug listed on the site?** TrumpRx doesn’t assemble every possible discount or consider the prices of generic versus brand-name drugs. That means consumers still need to shop—especially since 43 drugs is a small fraction of the thousands of prescriptions on the market. Most patients can also take a generic drug for a fraction of the cost of a brand-name prescription, Pestaina said.

Consumers should also be aware that if they are purchasing drugs from multiple sources, there may not be one medical practitioner who knows every medication they are taking. That could lead to dangerously mixing medications or overprescribing, Pestaina said.

**Do experts think this is an effective policy?** Supporters and skeptics alike agree that more competition in prescription pricing could benefit consumers, but they disagree on how many people TrumpRx will benefit.

Brookings Institution economic fellow Marta Wosinska said pressuring insurance companies to allow drug purchases on the site to count toward a patient’s deductible would help more people. She thinks the Trump administration is too focused on “fairness” instead of lowering prescription drug prices. ■



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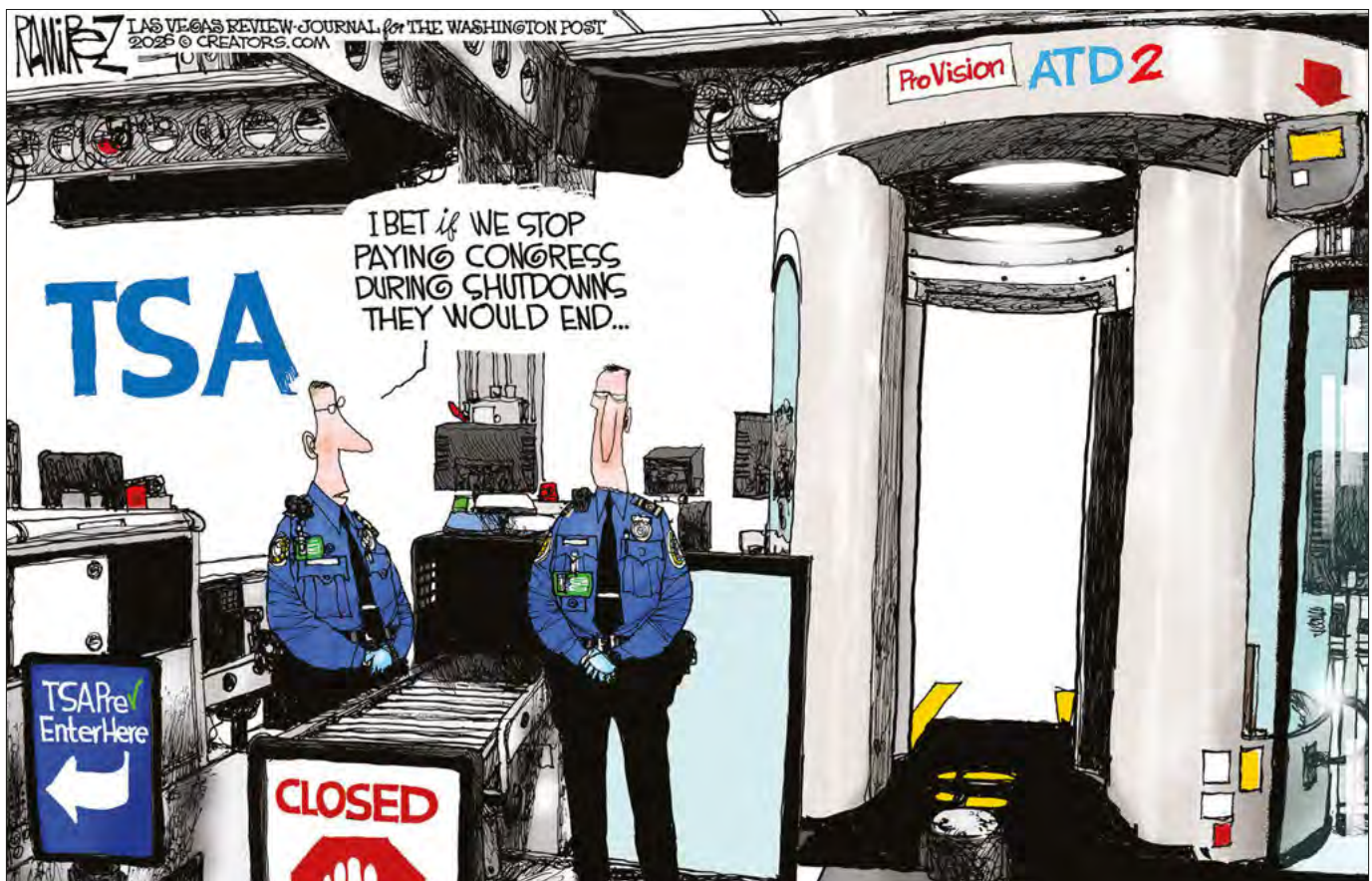
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## QUOTABLES

“We are keen to halt all acts of tampering and deception in the beautification of camels.”

Officials with a camel beauty contest in Oman after 20 beasts were disqualified for having impermissible procedures like Botox injections and lip fillers.



JOHN M LUND PHOTOGRAPHY INC/GETTY IMAGES

“It is time for new leaders.”

Sen. STEVE DAINES of Montana after announcing in March he would not seek the Republican nomination and a third term in the U.S. Senate.

“When we change our clocks twice a year, it creates all kinds of problems.”

British Columbia Premier DAVID EBY on his Canadian province’s decision to move to permanent daylight saving time in March.

“Rather than becoming dumber, we are becoming more specialized for the job.”

TANIA ESPARZA, a mother and participant in a Spanish study, on researchers’ findings that women’s brains undergo significant changes during pregnancy.\*

“The economy is killing me on food prices. And gas prices are tough now, too. It’s kind of a double whammy.”

JOHN ANDREWS, a South Carolina-based chef who runs a meal delivery service and drives over 100 miles every week to deliver fresh home-cooked meals to his clients, on the way current economic challenges affect his business.\*\*

\*BBC; \*\*CNN





**QUICK TAKES**

# Dog disposer

Man coaches canine to take out the trash in cunning—but illegal—dumping scheme

by JOHN DAWSON

➔ A man allegedly too lazy to take out his own trash nevertheless found time and energy to train his dog into being an accomplice in his illegal dumping scheme. That’s the allegation Italian government officials in Catania, Sicily, made in a Feb. 19 social media post explaining that they captured footage on surveillance cameras of the man’s dog dumping bags of trash on the side of the road. At first, officials in the Southern Italian city could have believed it to be a coincidence. But footage of the small dog carrying a bag of trash away from its home and carefully leaving it at the side of the road left officials with little doubt. Describing the offense “as cunning as it is doubly wrong,” city officials accused the dog’s owner of a civil violation of city sanitation laws as well as the moral offense of entangling his otherwise innocent dog into the sordid affair: “Ingenuity can never become an alibi for incivility.” Officials say they’ve identified the dog’s owner and issued fines for illegal dumping. The incident highlights the ongoing efforts to combat illegal dumping in Southern Italy where city officials have installed CCTV cameras to catch scofflaws—even if they hide behind clever dogs.

**No se dice**

Callers to a Washington state agency who pressed 1 on their handset got information in English. Callers pressing 2 also got information in English—just with a Spanish accent. Washington’s Department of Licensing admitted that their AI-powered automatic phone system had for months been providing service in heavily accented English rather than Spanish. “It was hilarious to us in the moment because it was so absurd,” Maya Edwards said after her Spanish-speaking husband tried to get information about his driver’s license. In a Feb. 27 statement, the department apologized for the error and pledged to correct the problem.



**Scratching the surface**

As a tour guide, he should have known better. Egyptian authorities in February arrested an Egyptian national who they claim scratched a stick figure into the side of a 4,000-year-old pyramid. The incident took place at the Pyramid of Unas, an Old Kingdom pharaoh whose reign dates to the 24th century B.C. Video shows the guide scribing marks into the exposed outer stone and then trying—but failing—to wipe away the inscription with his hand while tourists watch. Those defacing ancient sites in Egypt face hefty fines and even prison time.

ILLUSTRATION BY KRIEG BARRIE; PYRAMID: @TMANMHWWD6220/X



### Flocking to the rescue

A freak accident at an amateur soccer match in Istanbul, Turkey, left one player in the confusing position of administering CPR to a bird. As the Istanbul Yurdu Spor goalkeeper attempted to clear the ball, a seagull swooped into the ball's path. The collision with the soccer ball sent the seagull tumbling onto the soccer pitch, apparently unresponsive. Yurdu Spor captain **Gani Catan** was nearby and instinctively began performing

chest compressions on the stunned bird. After two minutes of first aid, the bird began stirring back to life. Catan transported the bird off the field, where medical staff continued providing care. Team officials said the bird is recovering.



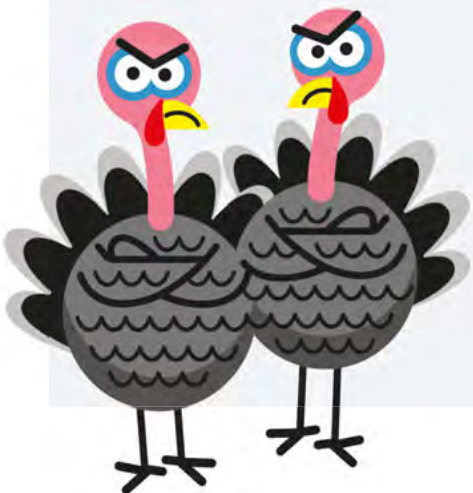
### A sinking feeling

Residents of a New Jersey town believed their sinkhole problems were coming to an end when a dump truck showed up Feb. 17 to fill in a recently discovered hole. But before crews could repair the original hole, the ground gave way underneath the dump truck. With the second sinkhole devouring the dump truck tasked with filling in the first, town officials began evacuating Phillipsburg, N.J., residents lest the earth give way farther. Randy Piazza, the mayor of what might fairly be called Sinkhole City, said officials are just trying to get a handle on the situation. "We brought in ground radar last night and more issues exposed themselves to our engineers," Piazza told WCAU-TV. "There were some water main repairs in the past ... but the actual reason has yet to be discovered."

### Angry birds

On the run from a pair of aggressive turkeys and with few escape options, a Canadian man opted to leap into a stranger's car. The incident transpired when Ottawa resident Michael Bourgon noticed Feb. 19 a pair of large birds sizing him up. "I didn't think too much of it," he told CBC Radio. "I said, 'Hey, what's up, turkeys?'" And then they started coming at me." At first, Bourgon tried crossing the street. The turkeys followed. Then he tried kicking snow at the birds. They were undeterred. Seemingly out of options, Bourgon jumped in a stopped car. "A complete and total stranger did not hesitate to just offer assistance," he said. The birds pecked at the car door but were left behind when the light changed and the driver sped away.

**"I said,  
'Hey, what's  
up, turkeys?'  
And then  
they started  
coming  
at me."**



### Olympic gate-crasher

A two-year-old Czech wolf-hound became an unlikely star during an Olympic skiing competition Feb. 18 when he slipped away from his home and onto a racing course in Northern Italy. NBC Sports aired footage of **Nazgul** the dog racing after a Croatian athlete and across the finish line during a qualifying round of the women's cross-country team sprint competition. Nazgul used his nose to investigate the skier before race officials caught him and returned him to his owner, who told NPR the dog "always looks for people" and is "stubborn, but very sweet."



# Working off-screen

Producer Mark Joseph on plying his trade in Hollywood

by KIM HENDERSON



→ Mark Joseph is an award-winning music and film producer who spent most of his first 18 years in Japan, where his parents were missionaries. After graduating from Biola in 1990, Joseph went on to develop and market dozens of movies, including *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Passion of Christ*. His most recent work is as producer of the 2024 film *Reagan*, a 19-years-long project that spawned a memoir from Joseph, *Making Reagan*, as well as two various-artists albums associated with the biopic.

**MOVIEGOERS GAVE *REAGAN* A 98% APPROVAL RATING ON ROTTEN TOMATOES, BUT CRITICS WERE HARSH, COMING IN AT ONLY 18%. THE GAP MAY BE A GUINNESS RECORD. WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THAT?**

It's a very strange business. I think something like 5% of Americans go to the movies in theaters every week, so it's a really small audience that goes to movies. At some point you have to start caring about your customers and their interests, or your business keeps shrinking. I think our movie is an example of that. The tastemakers didn't like it, but the people really seemed to.

Some of it's the aesthetic, the style of filmmaking. I purposely wanted a film that was fairly linear and covered Reagan's entire lifetime. The current rules of Hollywood filmmaking are you take two weeks in somebody's life and build a story around those two weeks, like the *Lincoln* movie. It should have been called, "How the 14th Amendment Was Passed." I just don't agree with that. When you call a movie *Lincoln*, I think Hank in Ohio expects to see Lincoln chopping wood and his mom and dad and where he came from. I knew we were doing things that critics wouldn't like, but that's OK.

**IT'S UNLIKELY ANY FILM PORTRAYING A PRESIDENT AS A HERO WOULD GET ACCOLADES FROM TODAY'S HOLLYWOOD. STILL, IT'S SURPRISING THAT *REAGAN* WAS DISQUALIFIED FROM OSCAR CONSIDERATION BECAUSE IT DIDN'T MEET DEI REQUIREMENTS. IS THAT SOMETHING NEW?**

First year, but it wasn't just us. I think a third of all movies were disqualified

because we couldn't meet things involving hiring crew members or actors, and so forth. If you look back on all the great movies of history, I think a lot of them would have been disqualified. I made every effort to be accurate. Colin Powell is in the movie. He was a general under Reagan. Reagan's high school football teammate was an African American guy named Burghardt. But I can't really insert things that aren't there.

And as far as crew, we hired the best people, and one of our key people on the set was a woman who was married to a woman. I didn't seek her out for that reason. She was the best at what she did, and so I think that's the way it's supposed to be. I don't stay up at night worrying about it. I'd be more upset if we didn't win the Will Rogers (Medallion) Award. We won it for best movie of the West. So I sort of have one foot in Hollywood and one foot out. Half of me doesn't care if we get ignored by the Oscars.

**THE FOOT THAT'S IN HOLLYWOOD HAS LEFT QUITE A PRINT. IN YOUR 30S YOU HAD A REMARKABLE RUN AT WALDEN MEDIA, BEGINNING WITH YOUR GRASSROOTS MARKETING CAMPAIGN FOR *HOLES*. WHAT STANDS OUT TO YOU FROM THAT TIME?**

I watched some of my movies with my younger kids a while back, and there were some that didn't really stand the test of time, but *Holes* did. It's unusual that the author of the book, Louis Sachar, also wrote the screenplay. Usually somebody else adapts the work. It's good storytelling, clever with so many layers to it. And it's the perfect mix of working for adults on one level, working for kids on another level. There are some spiritual elements to it, too. They run away to God's Thumb. When racism stops, the rain starts. Definitely little things in there. It's hard to find those kinds of original stories, but Walden would do a lot of Newbery Award-winning books. That was Walden's mission. It had an educational component to it.

**THEN CAME *I AM DAVID*, BECAUSE OF *WINN-DIXIE*, *NARNIA*. HOW WAS YOUR ROLE IN THE INDUSTRY CHANGING AS THOSE BOOKS CAME TO THE BIG SCREEN?**

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**“I sort of have one foot in Hollywood and one foot out. Half of me doesn't care if we get ignored by the Oscars.”**

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I was there early on, helping to develop a movie, giving notes in the scripts, and all that. Then we'd get the finished film, and I'd be tasked with marketing it. It was really a frustrating process because I would sometimes get handed a product that was problematic. The first draft of the Narnia script had the kids swearing at each other, just full of profanity and so out of character. I still have the script in case people don't believe me. I wrote in the margins, “Have we lost our minds? We can't have these sweet British children dropping the F-bomb at each other.” I was able to help make changes. That's when I began to pivot toward producing and being able to have a stronger hand. It wasn't like I had a plan to be a producer.

**YOU'VE MENTIONED A CHRISTIAN SHOWRUNNER WHO KEPT CRASS JOKES ON *THAT '70S SHOW* FROM BEING EVEN WORSE, SOMETHING**

**SIMILAR TO WHAT YOU DID WITH *NARNIA*. HOW ARE OTHER CHRISTIANS QUIETLY PLYING THEIR TRADE IN HOLLYWOOD?**

One of my mentors in the business is Ralph Winter, who produced all the X-Men movies. Ralph is an example of a strong person of faith, but people don't hire him because of where he attended church last week. They hire him because he's so good at what he does. To give you an example of Ralph's strength, he once told me how he dealt with difficult actors. He would never yell at them. He would just make them do the scene over and over and over and over again till they were worn out, and they would stop being difficult. He is really good at his craft.

**YOUR EFFORTS TO IMPROVE YOUR CRAFT HAVE LED TO NEW LINES ON YOUR RÉSUMÉ—AUTHOR, PODCASTER, *NEWSWEEK* SENIOR COLUMNIST. BUT EVERYTHING STARTED WITH A JOB YOU LANDED BECAUSE OF YOUR UPBRINGING AS A MISSIONARY KID. HOW DID YOUR FLUENCY IN JAPANESE AND YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF THAT CULTURE PROVE BENEFICIAL?**

There's a big channel in Japan called Wow Wow, and two years out of college, I was anchoring a kind of bilingual *Entertainment Tonight*. After that, Japan's state-run network NHK, which is similar to PBS, gave me a show to interview famous Americans. So I traveled around America, interviewing everybody from Charlton Heston to Charles Schulz.

When I put in a request to Larry King, I thought to myself, “You know, there's no way he's going to say yes. He's Larry King.” But he was eager to talk about himself, because I think it just didn't happen a whole lot. So I'm on his set, and I'm probably 26, and I realized it's like I'm playing one-on-one with LeBron James. I started to panic, but at the very end, he gave me one of the greatest gifts you can give a young person. He looked at me and said, “You're outstanding.” That has always stuck with me. It reminds me to be generous with my compliments, especially to younger people. ■



VOICES JANIE B. CHEANEY

## At the heart of sin

America's promise of freedom and prosperity creates fertile ground for idolatry and covetousness

I'm often slow to pick up on social trends, but since buying my first smart TV last spring (see how slow?) I've been steamrolled by sports-betting commercials on free streaming platforms like Roku. Annoying ads for social casinos have peppered many of my go-to podcasts for years now. I'm told "free to play" social casinos steal time, not money. But sports betting promises instant riches to ordinary Americans willing to take a risk. Download the app today!

Apparently thousands of Americans download the app daily, a hedonistic charge spearheaded by young men who've learned to supercharge their competitive, sports-loving nature with the thrill of flashing dollar signs. Rates of drinking, fornicating, and smoking (of tobacco, at least) have declined among the young, but gambling is on the rise, driven largely by sportsbooks. Since 2018, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down federal laws prohibiting sports betting, state after state has succumbed to the lure of easy money. Two companies, FanDuel and DraftKings, now control over 70% of the market, hawking apps that allow viewers to place wagers on a split screen while watching the game. ESPN commentators wrung their hands over the latest betting scandal, even while the network promoted its own gambling app onscreen (now discontinued in favor of DraftKings, the exclusive ESPN sportsbook provider).

Americans who watch the news more than sports can scratch their gambling itch with Kalshi, whose cynical tagline is "The world's gone mad, trade it." Kalshi is a "predictions market" where users bet on world events and

political futures—even trivia like the length of a State of the Union address.

Meanwhile, credit scores sink and bankruptcy claims rise. At least eight recent studies indicate that problem gamblers have a higher rate of suicide attempts than alcoholics or drug addicts: about 1 in 5.

But this isn't a column about gambling. This is a column about coveting and misplaced love.

In Exodus 20 the LORD speaks directly to his people, pronouncing the Ten Commandments in a voice of thunder that terrifies them—all so "the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning." It appears to work, at first: "All that the LORD has spoken we will do." But we know how that promise worked out.

Commandments Two through Nine address actions: You shall do this, you shall not do that. Commandments One and Ten aim directly at the heart: "You shall have no other gods before me," and "You shall not covet [anything that belongs to your neighbor]."

Displacing God and desiring what is not lawfully mine are the very heart of sin. Eve was first tempted to join God on His throne. Then, gazing at forbidden fruit, she lusted after the only thing He had held back. Breaking those two laws led to graven images, profanity, Sabbath-breaking, disrespect, theft, murder, adultery, and deceit. For as it turns out, the first and the last commandments are almost impossible for humans to keep. One can scrupulously observe all the others on the outside and trample the first and the last in the heart. We call that hypocrisy.

Even for sincere Christians it's a continual struggle. Other gods trespass on sacred space. Unlawful desires lurk in back rooms and byways. "We will do everything the LORD has commanded," his people promise, then and now. Except the first thing, and the last.

In high school I took a civics class called "The Problems of Democracy." We watched the news and studied issues like crime, election fraud, welfare, immigration—but not covetousness. Yet that may be the chief problem of democracy, especially when a nation becomes wealthy and self-indulgent. Rule by and for the people often means, as H.L. Menchen cynically put it, that the people get what they want good and hard. It's not just Kids Today: Every generation of Americans had its idols and gimmies, rushing for fame and treasure over broken commandments. The United States is not uniquely sinful, but our system, so conducive to freedom and prosperity, was the first to make covetousness pay off. At least for some.

Freedom and prosperity are good things, the very things God promised to His people if they kept His commandments. That was a big "if," then and now. But if we, followers of the perfect Commandment Keeper, don't guard our own hearts against idolatry and covetousness, who will? ■



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# CULTURE

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TRENDING

# Entertainment goes vertical

Made for a small screen, micro dramas hope to reel in a big audience

by BEKAH BERNHARDT



**J**en Cooper was scrolling through TikTok when she stumbled across an ad for ReelShort, an app offering full-length films broken into episodes no more than 2 minutes long. These serialized films are known as micro dramas or verticals.

Curious, the 45-year-old mom picked a show and gave it a try. The app soon had her hooked: “Once you watch, your phone shows you more, and it’s just grown from that.”

For Cooper, who lives in the United Kingdom, the bite-sized films satisfy something of a rom-com itch. “I obviously liked the rom-coms they did in the ’90s, 2000s, but Hollywood doesn’t really make romance,” she said. “And even if they do, often, I haven’t liked them the last few years.”

Since watching micro dramas for the first time in 2024, Cooper has made it her mission to “legitimize the [micro drama] industry” by interacting with micro drama filmmakers and writing reviews. She now has a full-time job running the website Vertical Drama Love where she hosts yearly micro drama awards and conducts fan surveys.

Serialized films haven’t quite taken off in the West, though the industry is growing. About 28 million U.S. adults watch micro dramas. They’ve amassed a large following of middle-aged

women because the soap opera-adjacent plots tend to appeal to steamy romance readers. Although many current micro dramas often are raunchy and aren’t appropriate for Christian audiences, entertainment insiders believe the swipeable soaps could branch out to become the next viral entertainment medium.

The films are shot vertically so viewers can watch on their smartphones, and each episode ends on a cliffhanger. A complete micro series usually has up to 100 episodes, and entire productions cost between \$100,000 and \$300,000. To put that in perspective, the romantic comedy *Eternity*, released in theaters late last year, had a budget of around \$12 million.

Micro dramas originated in China and became popular during the pandemic. In 2024, about 576 million Chinese viewers watched them, and the nearly \$7 billion market surpassed the country’s box-office revenue that year.

Several apps have brought micro dramas to U.S. audiences. Among the most popular are DramaBox and ReelShort, both owned or backed by China-based companies. TikTok has also ventured into the micro drama space with its new mini drama feature and stand-alone app PineDrama.

Serialized films have been tested out in the U.S. before. In 2020, DreamWorks animation →

co-founder Jeffrey Katzenberg launched Quibi, an app with 5- to 10-minute videos designed for mobile viewing. Its offerings featured serialized content from entertainment heavyweights like Steven Spielberg and Guillermo del Toro. But Quibi's approach to "quick bite" movies was expensive. Despite having nearly \$2 billion in funding, Quibi folded the year it was released.

At the moment, apps like ReelShort and DramaBox aren't aiming for Quibi-level production quality. Today's micro dramas rely on racy plots and over-the-top dialogue to keep fans watching.

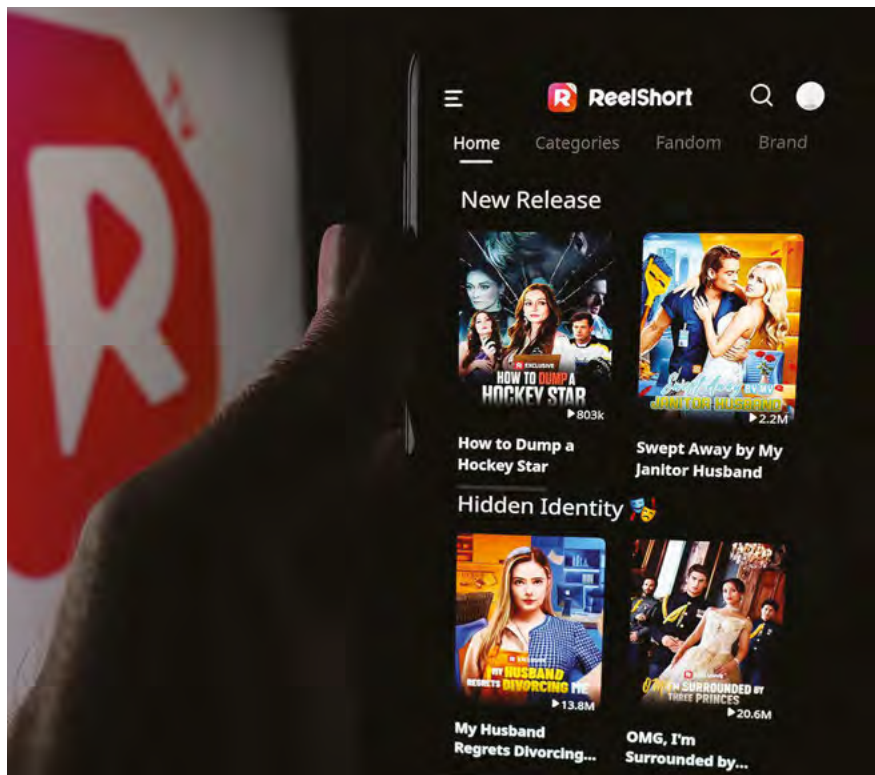
According to Jen Cooper's most recent survey of more than 1,600 micro drama viewers, more than half are between the ages of 35 and 54 with the vast majority being female. Cooper believes many of these viewers have something in common: love for steamy romance novels. In fact, many micro drama plots are modeled after romance novel tropes. "There's a very clear crossover from romance novels, fan fiction, that sort of audience coming over [to micro dramas] who just couldn't find it anywhere else and are then willing to spend on it," Cooper said.

While taking a break from rereading a popular romance series, Erin Gross finally caved to the social media ads and downloaded DramaBox. After watching the first few episodes of a hockey-themed micro drama, the New York local was hooked.

"I'm an adult, and I should know better," Gross admitted. "But some of them are just so good. They're so bad that they're so good."

She now has 11 micro drama apps on her phone and admits subscription costs can mount quickly. Apps like DramaBox, ReelShort, and CandyJar hook viewers with several free episodes and then hit them with a paywall. "I have a cap that I ended up setting for myself," Gross said. "I cannot spend more than \$60 a week on this."

George Huang, a professor at the University of California Los Angeles' School of Theater, Film and Television, believes micro dramas will soon branch out to pull in a wider audience.



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**"I think it will sit alongside TV and the cinema as another way that people consume media."**

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"I think it becomes its own genre, its own type of format, its own type of medium," Huang said.

Most micro dramas are English adaptations of Chinese stories. But a U.S.-based micro drama platform could arrive soon. In October, the SAG-AFTRA labor union announced a Verticals Agreement to cover projects costing less than \$300,000, meaning micro drama companies can now hire union actors.

"Vertical seems to be this one space where there is a lot of production going on, where they are hiring, where they are shooting in Los Angeles," Huang said, noting it's not a question of whether a U.S. company will crack the micro drama code and attract more Western viewers. It's a matter of which one will be the first. "It's going to be the streaming wars times 10 in the next year or so," he said.

Jen Cooper believes it won't be easy to attract general audiences to micro dramas. But she thinks the format won't remain in the raunchy romance realm forever. "I think it will sit alongside TV and the cinema as another way that people consume media." ■

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## BOOKS

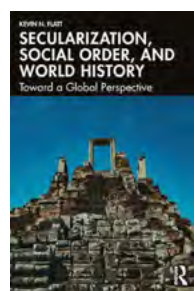
# How the West was lost

Critiquing the secularization thesis

by JAMES R. WOOD

→ For more than a century, Western intellectual life has operated under a powerful assumption: As societies modernize, religion declines. Science advances, education expands, economies grow more complex—and faith recedes. This story, often called the “secularization thesis,” shapes everything from college classrooms to Supreme Court decisions. Religion, we are told, belongs to humanity’s childhood; modernity marks our coming of age.

Kevin Flatt’s *Secularization, Social Order, and World History* (Routledge, 278 pp.), puts that thesis on notice.



### **Secularization, Social Order, and World History**

KEVIN N. FLATT

Flatt’s challenge runs deeper than following the evidence of religious decline. He contends that the entire paradigm rests on conceptual foundations that collapse under scrutiny.

The problem begins with two words most of us use without thinking: *religion* and *secular*. Flatt says these are not timeless, universal categories. They are modern Western inventions. Historically speaking, most cultures possessed no equivalent to our idea of “religion” as a distinct sphere of life concerned with private belief and worship. Even the Latin term *religio* did not mean what we now mean by religion. It referred to rites and obligations—not a system of doctrines detached from politics, economics, or law.

Premodern societies operated with what Flatt calls a “sacred-social order.” Law, sexuality, education, and public life were understood as aligned with some higher moral reality. Suprahuman powers gave shape to the whole.

Flatt draws on sociologist Philip Rieff, who argued that all cultures prior to the modern West recognized some sacred canopy exercising authority over human life. The West became distinctive not because it matured beyond religion, but because it rejected this canopy. Flatt sharpens Rieff’s insight: Modern society did not simply lose the sacred; it constructed a new social order that explicitly denies any authority higher than human beings. Moral order did not disappear. It was relocated. This reframing is Flatt’s most significant contribution.

Consider Rome. In the ancient world, divine and civic life were inseparable. Public rituals were performed on behalf of the state; the gods were implicated in military, legal, and agricultural affairs. Religion was not private preference but the glue of the social order. Christians were persecuted not for unusual beliefs but for their refusal to participate in the *sacra publica*—the public expressions of loyalty to the gods.

Thus, Christianity challenged the moral architecture of the state. It offered a rival sacred-social order—an alternative account of ultimate authority that relativized Rome’s gods and, by implication, Rome’s political claims.

For Flatt, that ancient struggle provides the template for understanding the modern West. Christianity displaced public paganism as the West's ordering principle, but in modernity, it has itself been displaced by a different comprehensive vision—one that grounds common life in human reason, consent, and autonomy rather than in a divinely ordered cosmos. Secularization is more than a decline in church attendance.

The secular order is not the residue left behind after religion fades, or a neutral platform on which rival worldviews peacefully compete. It is a constructed morality that reshapes law, education, authority, and identity according to a new legitimacy. Secularization, in other words, was not subtraction but substitution.

This insight destabilizes the old thesis. If secular order required deliberate intellectual and institutional effort—if it involved elite capture of universities, courts, and cultural institutions—then it is not the inevitable endpoint of modernization. It is a contingent achievement of a particular cultural movement in a particular time and place.

Flatt is not the first to challenge the secularization thesis. Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press 2007), famously dismantled the crude “subtraction story” according to which modernity simply peels away religious illusion to reveal a rational core. Taylor argued that modern secularity represents a shift in the “conditions of belief.” We now inhabit what he calls an “immanent frame”—a social imaginary in which the world is understood without necessary reference to belief in God.

Flatt builds on Taylor's insight. Flatt asks what this immanent frame means as a principle of social and political organization. If transcendence is bracketed not merely in imagination but in law, education, and public life, we are no longer describing new conditions of belief but a new social order. The immanent frame is not merely a backdrop within which belief becomes optional. It is the organizing grammar of a particular moral project.

He also disputes the assumption that pluralism automatically yields secular-

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**Modern society did not simply lose the sacred; it constructed a new social order that explicitly denies any authority higher than human beings. Moral order did not disappear. It was relocated.**

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ization. Many societies—especially in South and East Asia—have long sustained multiple sacred traditions without abandoning transcendence. Pluralism does not logically require bracketing all higher authority. Modern Western pluralism is not the natural solution to diversity. It is one specific solution, rooted in Enlightenment assumptions.

Every social order rests on some account of what ultimately defines authority and legitimacy. Secular societies simply insist that their guiding principles be justified without reference to anything beyond the human world.

That claim raises an unsettling possibility. If the secular is not an absence but an alternative way of ordering human life, then it cannot be described as merely the unadorned rational layer beneath a former religious veneer. It possesses a substantive character of its own.

Flatt is careful here. Modern secular order is historically distinctive precisely because it refuses grounding in suprahuman realities. Yet it is not ideologically neutral or value-free. Like earlier sacred-social orders, it operates with a unifying social grammar defined by a framework of core values. From social contract theory to notions of spontaneous order, from art and sex reimagined as vehicles of self-expression to expanded accounts of personal autonomy, secular modernity has developed its own moral architecture.

Flatt closes by asking whether a value system centered on individual autonomy can sustain community cohesion, interpersonal trust, and long-term investment in shared institutions amid migration, pluralism, and digital polarization. The secular order is young by historical standards. It may prove durable. It may not.

For Christian readers, the implications are considerable. If secularization is not inevitable, it is reversible. If “religion” as a private sphere is a modern construct, then the church's marginalization may reflect a historically contingent circumstance rather than a permanent feature of modern life. What has been constructed can be examined, questioned, and, if necessary, replaced. ■

BOOKS

# Healthy dependence

Liberating women from false expectations

by JANIE B. CHEANEY



Leah Libresco Sargeant

→ In *The Free Press*, contributor Kara Kennedy reports that about 1 in 3 pregnancies in the UK ends in abortion. The cause is often assumed to be financial, but none of the women she interviewed mentioned the cost. Their reasons included unstable relationships, feelings of inadequacy, and lack of “readiness” for parenthood. These may all be symptoms of a cultural attitude Leah Libresco Sargeant explores in *The Dignity of Dependence: A Feminist Manifesto* (University of Notre Dame Press, 232 pp.). She argues that our contemporary insistence on autonomy does not readily accommodate pregnancy, childrearing, old age, or the care that all these natural life stages demand.

“Babies can’t survive a culture that despises dependence.” Nor can women,



**The Dignity of Dependence**  
LEAH LIBRESCO SARGEANT

as women. In her first chapter, Sargeant shows how “The World Is the Wrong Shape for Women,” with man-size tools, vehicles, recommended medical dosages, and basketball hoops all calibrated to male size and body mass. Male ambitions also come in different sizes and shapes, in some ways comparable to women’s but not interchangeable. Women are biologically built for bearing, caring, and nurturing: “Dependence marks women more obviously and more intimately, but it is impossible to tell the truth about who men are or treat them justly without accounting for our mutual dependence. No just society can be built on the basis of a false anthropology.” A true “feminist manifesto” must begin with acknowledging the feminine.

Mutual dependence is a fact of life, but our culture treats it as an unwelcome interruption. Sargeant favors taxpayer support for normal stages of dependence, whether in the delivery room (where lay doulas can make a big difference in labor and bonding) or at home with a hand-capped child or incapacitated parent. “We cannot treat the ordinary events of human life, like childbearing, education, and aging, as a surprise.” In the United States, a patchwork of state and federal laws provides a level of support, but in severely restrictive ways. Regulations that draw false distinctions between “professional” and “amateur” care, SSI guidelines that support an incapacitated employee but not his stay-at-home wife, and zoning laws that prohibit unrelated friends, and sometimes even related dependents, from living together, hinder the loving care women can most naturally give.

To truly grant dignity to dependence, we need a change of heart from worshipping autonomy to prioritizing open-handed generosity. All humans are at one time or other dependent; total independence is not only undesirable, it’s impossible, and to pretend anything else is denying reality. “Our ties to others are not an obstacle to self-actualization, but the foundation for the authentic self.” *The Dignity of Dependence* is a challenging read but also a thoughtful one, and a thoroughly human one. ■



**BOOKS**

# Uprooting falsehood

Believing God's truth about ourselves

by J. HOPE VINCENT

➔ Jennie Allen, a bestselling Christian author and speaker and founder of the IF: Gathering, a women's discipleship ministry based in Dallas, knows what it's like to believe a lie. She's detailed her battles with anxiety in previous books. Her latest book, *The Lie You Don't Know*

*You Believe* (Thomas Nelson, 240 pp.), aims to help the reader name her lie, go to war armed with biblical truth, and enjoy living in what she calls the "Kingdom of Light."

In Part 1, Allen pinpoints three core lies in which she believes most enemy deception is rooted—"I'm Worthless,"

"I'm Helpless," "I'm Unlovable"—and explains how they typically manifest. It's important to understand the lie and its origin, she writes, in order to better fight it. Consistent with the current "Jesus plus therapy" movement, she integrates psychological tools with biblical ones, avoiding the "trauma-informed" language for more biblical terms. But though she returns time and again to biblical truth, four chapters of urging the reader to dig into personal insecurity becomes uncomfortable and perhaps unproductive—like a therapy session you're not sure you wanted.

After the reader discerns her own lie, Allen heads into Part 2 with a call to battle: *Stop agreeing with your lie! There is another way!* Like Jesus in the desert, we can align ourselves with Scripture and claim it every time the devil whispers untruths.

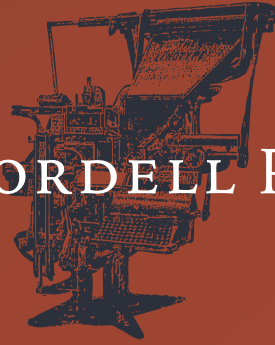
Spiritual battle is not a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps event, Allen writes, but one in which we surrender on our knees to Jesus, who gives us victory. She challenges the reader: God is delighted not just with Christ in us, but in *us*—with all our quirks and personality.

Interestingly, though, she distinguishes between *truth* and *vision* (what God makes possible when we live in truth), claiming we need both to be victorious. What Allen fails to explain is the frustrating gap between the two. Believers can name and claim Bible verses in the valleys of life for years before God shows them a view from the mountaintop. Is there no victory, then, while we are in the valley?

Allen wraps up with practical guidance for daily living in the Kingdom of Light: Start your day in God's presence. Read Scripture. Live in community. Remain humble and focused on others. Amen!

Still, discerning readers will find reason to question the therapeutic self-reflection found in Part 1. We can only understand the depth of our sin and the ugliness of Satan's lies by gazing first at God's love and goodness, not at ourselves. ■

2026



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BOOKS

# Books on the burdens of the modern world

TRUE CRIME

**The Death of Trotsky: The True Story of the Plot to Kill Stalin's Greatest Enemy**

JOSH IRELAND  
DUTTON, 384 PAGES

This book recounts the long pursuit and eventual assassination of Leon Trotsky, the most famous enemy of Joseph Stalin. Rather than focusing on



the killing itself, Ireland traces the process that made Trotsky's survival impossible by following the diverging paths of the two revolutionaries after the Russian

Revolution. Trotsky appears brilliant. He is eloquent and convinced of the power of ideas, yet treats people transactionally. Stalin, his archnemesis, emerges as patient, ruthless, and utterly relentless. He understood power as leverage. He was prepared to kill whenever necessary, without hesitation. The story moves beyond these two figures to the agents and intermediaries who carried out Stalin's orders. Through letters, intelligence files, and police records, Ireland shows how surveillance spread. He demonstrates how loyalties shifted, and the possibility of escape quietly disappeared. Despair came swiftly, as the shadow of force settled in. Ireland keeps the prose controlled and unsentimental, letting the facts do the work. The author presents assassination not as a shock, but as the final step in a system that had already decided the outcome. Trotsky's death may have appeared sudden, but it had long been scheduled and was, in many ways, inevitable. —*John Mac Gbillion\**

MEMOIR

**Patriot: A Memoir**

ALEXEI NAVALNY  
VINTAGE, 496 PAGES

Russian dissident Alexei Navalny wrote the first part of his brilliant memoir while recovering from the 2020 poisoning that nearly killed him. He relates his youth under communism and his journey to lead Russia's opposition and invoke the ire of Vladimir Putin. Later chapters are compiled from his prison journal, trial statements, and dictated Instagram posts. Altogether it reads like a conversation with an old friend that you've just met, and it's clear why his supporters loved him and why Putin feared him. By turns funny, biting, poignant, and inspiring, the book is a reminder why democracy matters and is worth protecting. As much a love letter to his wife Yulia as to his "beautiful



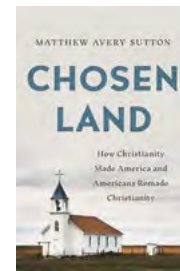
Russia of the future," it's also a primer on civic engagement, hope, and why convictions mean sacrifice. Navalny understood that Putin controls by fear, and he refused to be afraid, even if it cost him. Toward the end, he knows his future is bleak and commends faith to supporters: "Being a believer makes it easier to live your life and, to an even greater extent, engage in opposition politics. Faith makes life simpler." *Patriot* was just released in paperback to mark the second anniversary of Navalny's murder by Russian authorities. —*Jenny Lind Schmitt*

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

**Chosen Land: How Christianity Made America and Americans Remade Christianity**

MATTHEW AVERY SUTTON  
BASIC BOOKS, 656 PAGES

This book looks at the 500-year-long aspiration to make America into a fitting "prelude to God's millennial kingdom," with Christianity operating as "the dominant engine of American political and cultural life" from its colonial stirrings onward. Sutton holds



together a cohesive narrative that doesn't neglect its proposed thesis until he arrives in the 21st century. Then the scholarly gloves come off in favor of an attack on Trumpism and

the current Supreme Court. Regardless, one can learn much that's fascinating and important in Sutton's recounting of the colorful history of American Christianity. As Sutton correctly reminds us, the American constitutional order "entrust[s] power not to presidents or preachers, not to judges or generals, but to the people." We Christians in the United States would be wise to make the most of our political inheritance for the sake of our neighbors and the further proclamation of a gospel not made by human hands, American or otherwise. It's the least we can do after getting this far. —*Flynn Evans\**

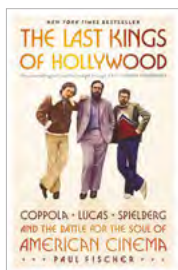
MOVIE HISTORY

**The Last Kings of Hollywood**

PAUL FISCHER  
CELADON BOOKS, 480 PAGES

Before *Star Wars*, George Lucas was a film school graduate on the set of *Finian's Rainbow*, a schlocky musical starring Fred Astaire directed by up-and-coming Francis Ford Coppola. Both men disdained Hollywood and wanted to make personal films. They founded American Zoetrope, a film-making commune that nearly bankrupted the visionary directors. Lucas encouraged Coppola to swallow →

his pride and direct an adaptation of a trashy novel called *The Godfather*. In turn, Coppola told Lucas to “make a movie that’s about real people,” adding, “Don’t do anything with robots in it.” Around the same time, young Steven Spielberg left television to pursue feature films. He and Lucas eventually became quite close. Within the same decade, the three men worked within Hollywood to make some of the highest grossing films of all time: *The Godfather*, *Jaws*, and *Star Wars*. The success of these movies prompted studios to prioritize “tent-pole assets,” aka blockbusters.



Fischer pairs extensive research with snappy writing to tell a fascinating story about filmmakers in pursuit of glory. Film junkies will appreciate bits of trivia throughout the

book. But it’s depressing to witness the egos of Lucas and Coppola inflate. Fair warning: Drugs and adultery feature prominently. Fischer sometimes uses explicit language and doesn’t censor vulgar quotes or details. A description of a deleted scene from Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* will make many readers profoundly uncomfortable.

—Bekah Bernhardt

#### ART HISTORY/MILITARY HISTORY

### **Matisse at War: Art and Resistance in Nazi Occupied France**

CHRISTOPHER C. GORHAM  
CITADEL, 320 PAGES

What does a great artist do as the world burns around him? Gorham’s book is an engaging look at the life, work, and family of Henri Matisse during World War II. Most of the book takes place during the Nazi occupation of France, but military conflict is only part of the Matisse family story. In the 1930s, Matisse hired a Russian girl named Lydia Delectorskaya to manage his studio. Matisse came to view Lydia, 40 years his junior, as indispensable, creating a rift in the family. When the war

arrived, Matisse and Lydia attempted to avoid Nazi scrutiny in southern France.



Matisse continued to work, and Gorham suggests the aging Fauvist channeled anti-fascist views into his art. Other members of the Matisse clan helped rescue Jews and worked with the French Resistance to overthrow the Vichy regime. This book offers more than an investigation of 20th-century art. It uses Matisse as a lens through which we can better understand the war’s effect on Europe’s noncombatants.

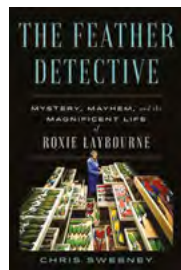
—Collin Garbarino

#### BIOGRAPHY

### **The Feather Detective: Mystery, Mayhem, and the Magnificent Life of Roxie Laybourne**

CHRIS SWEENEY  
AVID READER PRESS, 320 PAGES

According to Roxie Laybourne, “All feathers are beautiful, even starlings. You just have to look closely at them.” This compelling biography of the small, but spunky, Laybourne tells the story of a woman who carved her own niche by becoming the world’s first forensic ornithologist. Working in the male, Ph.D.-dominated Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, her scientific expertise in bird feathers made her a sought-after professional witness in court. For more than 45 years, her testimony swayed murder, poaching, and FAA and Air



Force bird-strike cases. Author Chris Sweeney maps Laybourne’s long life onto the backdrop of America’s history. Through feathers, readers explore little-known subjects, like the beginnings of the Smithsonian, the commercial airline industry, and the FAA, as well as the growth in influence of the Fish and Wildlife Commission, civil rights, and women’s equality.

Despite two nods to evolution, Laybourne’s detective work reflects God’s awesome design in each bird species’ distinct feather print. With skillful journalistic style, Sweeney entices the reader to follow the dedicated work of this persistent bird scientist to find and preserve truth.

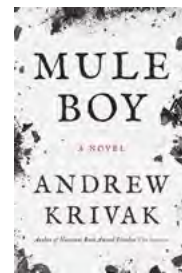
—Nina Oetting

#### FICTION

### **Mule Boy**

ANDREW KRIVAK  
BELLEVUE LITERARY PRESS, 192 PAGES

The burden of solely surviving a tragedy tends to invite a quiet agony of continuing to exist. Ondro Prach, the protagonist of Krivak’s second novel, *Mule Boy*, must reckon with that singular kind of alienation after becoming the only survivor of a Pennsylvania coal mine disaster. Prach spends his



remaining days in a solitary cabin, and families who lost loved ones come to him to hear their last words. Written in a stream-of-consciousness style, Krivak uses

Prach’s remembrance of things long past and their connection to the present to explore the burden of trauma and the essence of what it means to be human. Strewn throughout are theological and philosophical references tinged with the presence of Catholicism. It’s ultimately a story about how long it can take to be made whole again, often through unforeseen hardships that eventually prove to be blessings. The mining-related jargon can be a bit jarring at first, but Krivak manages to weave together flashbacks and chronological jumps forward seamlessly. It makes for an engrossing journey that takes readers into the fictional recesses of Prach’s soul. Readers will walk away with a deeper impression about the uncertain places existence can take us and how redemption can still be found through it all. —F.E. ■



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Sara Pennypacker

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

# Running from the shadows

Two novels with characters seeking redemption

by BEKAH BERNHARDT & JEN CURTIS

➔ In Sara Pennypacker's *The Lions' Run* (Balzer + Bray, 288 pp.), Lucas DuBois assumes he earned the nickname "Petit éclair" for being a coward. Living in Nazi-occupied France, the orphan certainly has witnessed plenty of injustice without intervening. Everything changes when Lucas rescues a litter of kittens from drowning. Lucas brings the kittens to a stable he thought was abandoned and meets Alice, the daughter of a wealthy horse trainer. To keep her beloved horse away from the Nazis, Alice plans to smuggle the animal out of France.

As the two slowly form a friendship, Alice tells Lucas more about the mysterious maternity home he's been delivering groceries to. At a Lebensborn, women who get pregnant by Nazi soldiers get royal treatment, until their babies are born and sent to live with German families. Lucas, who is working for the Resistance, longs to help one of the



**The Lions' Run**  
SARA PENNYPACKER



**A Kingdom of Shadows**  
EMILY BAIN MURPHY

mothers, and on a brave and possibly foolhardy whim, he intervenes.

Due to the weighty subject matter, several misuses of the Lord's name, and a few war-related descriptions of violence, *The Lions' Run* may be better suited for older teens rather than the intended middle grade audience. The beautifully written narrative, however, explores self-sacrifice and a lesser-known aspect of World War II, making it a worthy read for young adults.

In Emily Bain Murphy's *A Kingdom of Shadows* (WaterBrook, 320 pp.), 12-year-old Finn and his best friend Adrien are thieves trying to survive in a dark world. When they discover a mysterious group of lightseekers led by an older boy named Ehrhit, they find themselves on a search for a mythical lake that will help restore light to the ever-darkening kingdom. This search eventually leads Finn on a beautiful journey of redemption.

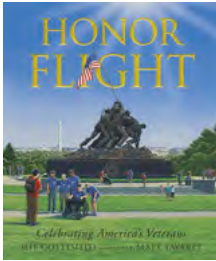
Murphy fills this middle school read with colorful descriptions of grim cities, enchanted forests, and dangers that lurk in the shadows. While Finn is a complex character who struggles with trusting others, Ehrhit's steadfast patience eventually enables Finn to discover a greater purpose. After the group is betrayed by people posing as helpers, Ehrhit reminds the group, "Sometimes the worst things that happen to us are the things that, in the end, change us for the better."

Sensitive readers might find some parts of the plot scary, such as snakes and wolves that threaten the characters. There is also a brief mention of witches as well as magic. When curious things happen, Finn chalks it up to some sort of mysterious hidden magic. But Ehrhit eventually explains, "To those who don't understand, it looks like magic. But to the one who has learned it, it's a deep kind of knowledge about how this kingdom really works."

Overall, the story is akin to other fantasy stories such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Wingfeather Saga*. Middle school readers will enjoy this book about finding friendship and hope in a broken world. ■

# Books about identity and relationship

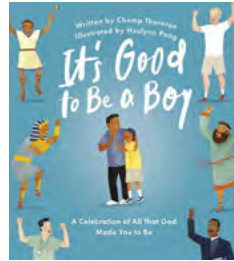
by KRISTIN CHAPMAN



**Honor Flight**

JEFF GOTTESFELD  
CANDLEWICK, 40 PAGES

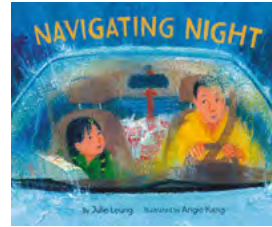
In 2021, Gottesfeld released *Twenty-One Steps*, a picture book that pays tribute to the sentinel guards who keep vigil over the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In *Honor Flight* he introduces readers to the Honor Flight Network, a volunteer-supported program that brings aging veterans to Washington, D.C., so they can visit the war memorials and receive special recognition. Gottesfeld, who volunteered with the program in 2023, tells the story from the perspective of a veteran facing fears that he will be forgotten. Matt Tavares' illustrations depict the veteran as he flies with the Honor Flight entourage to the U.S. capital, visiting each of the war memorials and finding camaraderie with those he meets. By trip's end, he has been reminded why he served and that he will never be forgotten. **Ages 7-10**



**It's Good To Be a Boy**

CHAMP THORNTON  
THE GOOD BOOK CO., 32 PAGES

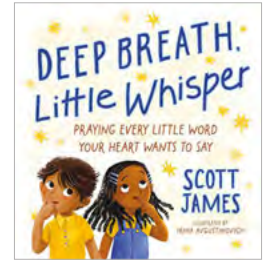
This picture book celebrates being a boy while highlighting the special roles God gave men to fill. Thornton begins the book by first looking to Adam for qualities that define godly manhood. The opening refrain proclaims: "Our God made boys for working hard, For growing life and keeping guard. High-five, praise God, and shout for joy, Because it's good to be a boy!" Thornton then uses additional examples from the Bible—culminating with Jesus—who embody the type of men young boys should aspire to be. The book, which features digital watercolor illustrations by Hsulynn Pang, concludes by affirming the many ways boys can grow up to serve God by using their various strengths "to move toward people and problems in love and wisdom." Note: Illustrations depict Jesus' face. **Ages 3-7**



**Navigating Night**

JULIE LEUNG  
ANNE SCHWARTZ BOOKS, 48 PAGES

A young girl accompanies her Cantonese father as he delivers food from their family's ethnic restaurant. Angie Kang's gouache, crayon, and pencil illustrations show the girl marking the map and guiding her father from street to street. But the girl is not happy about the added responsibility and soon vents her frustration. Her father then shares the story of how he came to the United States and the challenges he faced due to the language barrier. The girl gains new appreciation for her father and the unique bond that they share. Leung, who based the story upon her experiences as the child of immigrants, showcases a strong, loving bond between father and daughter that reflects a deep admiration for her own father, who had to learn to adapt in a new country. **Ages 4-8**



**Deep Breath, Little Whisper**

SCOTT JAMES  
ZONDERKIDZ, 32 PAGES

This book encourages children to employ the ancient practice of breath prayers as part of daily heeding the exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to pray continually. Author Scott James' simple words remind children that they don't need to wait for the perfect time or place nor do they need to use fancy words in order to tell God what is on their hearts: "God hears the whispers of your heart. He is always ready to listen to every little word." Irina Avgustinovich's colorful illustrations complement the text as it depicts different scenarios in which children can breathe out their prayers in times of need but also in times of wonder and thanks: "Right when you need to, wherever you need to, take a deep breath and whisper out what your heart wants to say." **Ages 4-8**



## QUEST

FOUR BOOKS THAT SHAPED MY THINKING

# Telling stories that matter

by PAUL BUTLER

➔ My freshman philosophy professor at Bible college, Dennis Fisher, made quite the impression. He rocked the bow tie. He frequently played the banjo at the start of class. He prayed earnestly—and often—for the lost. And he is the first person I remember talking about the importance of developing a Christian worldview.

His required text was *How Should We Then Live?* by Francis A. Schaeffer. Thirty-six years later I still have that book on my shelf. Its distinctive green cover acts as a reference point for where many other books are located.

I honestly don't remember many specifics within the book—I was only 18 when I read it—but near the end Schaeffer includes a note for Christians that has stuck with me: “We are not only to know the right world view, the world view that tells us the truth of what is, but consciously to act upon that world view so as to influence society in all its parts and facets across the whole spectrum of life, as much as we can.”

Paging through it again, it's clearly a product of its time, and there are many passages that don't feel as prophetic as they once did. But that paragraph shaped my

thinking more than I realized at the time. In my various roles as father, husband, grandfather, radio producer, professor, executive, pastor, and trainer, it continues to inform my view of the good works God has ordained for me to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). The stories we produce and publish at WORLD should not only reflect what's true but also equip believers with the knowledge that prompts them to act.

A second book that lives just a few inches away from Schaeffer's is *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* by James B. Jordan. I am not a Presbyterian, though I do live in a simple

Civil War–era Presbyterian church building in rural Illinois in need of a lot of repair. I don’t embrace everything Jordan writes, but his literary and historical approach to interpreting the Scriptures revolutionized my own view of the Bible—seeing the sacred text as a cohesive whole that needs to be understood on its terms.

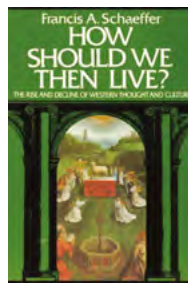
In his introduction Jordan argues that our goal as readers shouldn’t be to use the Scriptures to support a Christian worldview but “to get into the Bible and become as familiar as possible with the Bible’s own worldview, language, and thoughtforms. Our purpose is to learn to think the way people thought in Bible times.” The Bible shouldn’t be a proof text; it is the text.

WORLD embraces what we call “biblically objective journalism,” and our distinctive is providing biblical insight through the stories we write. To do this, we must know something about the Bible and be rooted in the truth found within its pages. Just as we rely on research and background observations for the stories we cover, we must also wrestle with what the Word of God says about what’s true, and it should inform our approach and content.

When asked for book recommendations related to the craft of journalism, my top suggestion isn’t a journalism book. It’s a book on how to *tell* a good story: *Storyworthy* by Matthew Dicks.

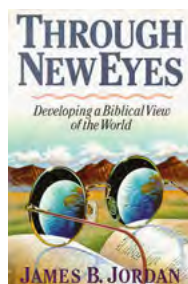
We spend a lot of time teaching our reporters how to *write* good stories, but Dicks suggests we are built to *hear* them. His approach to storytelling comes from a worldview very different from my own, and his examples are at times in poor taste, but what he does so well is remind readers that stories matter. We are created to tell them. He spends time unpacking what makes a good story.

A simple piece of advice worth the price of the book is what he calls the “Dinner Test.” Every storyteller should ask the simple question: “Is the story I’m telling similar to the story I would tell a friend over dinner?” WORLD strives to present polished, memorable, and vivid stories, but we also aim to be conversational, making our stories relatable and transformative.



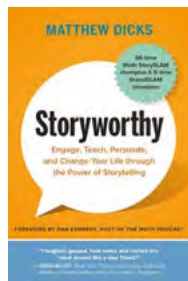
**How Should We Then Live?**

FRANCIS A. SCHAEFFER



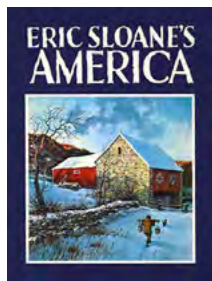
**Through New Eyes**

JAMES B. JORDAN



**Storyworthy**

MATTHEW DICKS



**Eric Sloane’s America**

ERIC SLOANE

Dicks also challenges the reader to become a story collector. He practices a short-form daily diary: a spreadsheet of single line entries. He says those little seeds often turn into wonderful stories to retell later. It also helps him remember what has been significant and worthy of further reflection.

His practice reminds me of Psalm 105, which encourages us not only to recognize God’s goodness and faithfulness but to remember them, meditate on them, and declare them to others.

After my freshman year, I changed my major to communications. My academic adviser was Chuck Christensen—a well-known broadcaster for the 1950s as the voice of Sailor Sam on Moody Radio. He advocated becoming “a Renaissance man,” encouraging broad interests and curiosity. Which brings me to one other title on my bookshelf. It’s a couple shelves below Schaeffer and Jordan—at least when it’s not loaned out. *Eric Sloane’s America* (1982) collects three books the author wrote in the mid-1950s about our cultural history. I’ve spent hours paging through his artistic catalog and conversational accounts of colonial craftsmen, their tools, and the buildings they left behind. The illustrations are delightful but the real star of his work is the prose: “Great-grandfather enjoyed the proud life of an artist living among artists; everything about him he had created himself. He made farms out of forests and he built his house with tools fashioned by his own hands.”

Sloane’s work could be described as “nostalgic.” But it’s much more than a longing for simpler times. He helps us understand it was much harder, but he also says the conveniences of modern life have robbed us “of our creativeness and the result is often a moral emptiness.”

Sloane reminds me to walk the old paths. To take the time to make things that last longer than yesterday’s news. To remember and talk about those who’ve gone before. And to not just have a worldview, but slow down and view the world as well. ■

—Paul Butler is an award-winning journalist, producer, filmmaker, and pastor who serves as WORLD’s training director



## MOVIE

# Project Hail Mary

by JOSEPH HOLMES

Rated PG-13 • Theaters



Nowadays, you often hear folks say, “Why doesn’t Hollywood make movies like that anymore?”

Sometimes it feels like every movie is trying to be Marvel or a postmodern deconstruction of traditional values. *Project Hail Mary*, however, feels like an answer to that question. It’s an old-fashioned sci-fi blockbuster that’s deeply entertaining while also praising timeless virtues like friendship and self-sacrifice without a hint of irony.

The film follows science teacher Ryland Grace (Ryan Gosling), who wakes up on a spaceship light-years from home with no recollection of who he is

or how he got there. As his memory returns, he begins to uncover his mission: solve the riddle of the mysterious substance causing the sun to die out. He must call on his scientific knowledge and unorthodox ideas to save everything on Earth from extinction ... but an unexpected friendship means he may not have to do it alone.

Based on the book by Andy Weir (*The Martian*), *Project Hail Mary* could be described as *Interstellar* meets *The Martian* meets *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. Directed by Phil Lord and Chris Miller (*The Lego Movie*, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*) and written by Drew Goddard (*The Martian*, Netflix’s *Daredevil*), the film contains

both heroic spacefaring grandeur and grounded humor, combining them with smart, scientific problem-solving and a touching interstellar friendship. The result feels both unique and nostalgic.

Many aspects make the film a breath of fresh air. It has plenty of humor, but it doesn’t undermine its dramatic moments with jokes. The world is ending, but in this movie, it’s not because humans are a disease, destroying the planet with climate change. On the contrary, they’re the world’s only hope of survival. Grace is a flawed hero without being a deconstruction of a hero. Human institutions are imperfect, but they aren’t shadowy conspiracies run by corporations endangering the planet to make a profit.

Moreover, the filmmaking is stellar. Gosling carries much of the movie on his shoulders, whether he’s alone on the ship or acting opposite a CGI alien. It’s a credit to him that the movie never feels dull when he’s alone on-screen. The cinematography conveys both the vastness

of space and the intimate moments of human (and alien) connection. The editor knows when to cut to punctuate a joke and when to let moments breathe. Drew Goddard continues to quietly be one of the best screenwriters working today, bringing wit and complexity as well as heart to every scene.

Another rare thing Goddard consistently brings to his stories, from Netflix's *Daredevil* to *Bad Times at the El Royale*, is faith. There's a moment where one character says they will succeed "God willing" and that believing in God is better than the alternative. It's a small moment that takes the film out of the realm of a pure fantasy glorifying man's achievements to one that incorporates man's ultimate dependence on God. (Something even *Interstellar* never did.)

This idea that heroes need help to be heroes is a major theme in the film and is handled in a surprisingly complex—and even Christian—way. Grace is a smart man with a hero inside him. But he requires the encouragement—and sometimes bullying—of his ranking superior, Eva Stratt, to bring that out. Yet Grace isn't a passive character being carried along to virtue. Throughout, he makes real choices to become the best version of himself.

The movie is PG-13. As such, there is some violence and profanity as well as some crude comments. Also, the third act of this 2-hour-36-minute film has something like five different climaxes. Eventually, one starts to pray for the ending rather than eagerly anticipate it. The final wrap-up also feels lightweight for a movie all about sacrifice. Because the film doesn't have an actual antagonist, it relies heavily on the heroes' chemistry and problem-solving to be interesting. So when they're just hanging off the side of a ship in a generic action scene, it's easy for the mind to wander.

So, while the movie isn't perfect, in an age of sequels, remakes, and cynical movies trying to be subversive, *Project Hail Mary* is a reminder of how good Hollywood can be. Hopefully, the box office proves that audiences still want this kind of film. ■



## MOVIE

# Hoppers

by COLLIN GARBARINO

Rated PG • Theaters



In Pixar's *Hoppers*, a nature-loving university student named Mabel (Piper Curda) leaps into action when her favorite glade is threatened by a highway project. She uses cutting-edge technology to transfer her consciousness into a furry beaver robot so she can talk to the displaced animals and rally them to her cause of saving the environment from developers.

Does this plot sound like James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), in which a guy gets his consciousness transferred into an alien body so he can rally the natives to save the environment from developers? The parallel was obvious to *Hoppers*' filmmakers too. They even make a joke about it in the film. The problem is that the plot of *Avatar* was the worst thing about that film, and porting it over to a kids movie featuring cute beavers instead of blue aliens doesn't make it better.

How many more movies like this must be made before audiences have had enough of the moralizing? With this film, we suffer through more faddish lecturing: We learn sitting in nature makes you a better person; heroes are quirky and ethnically diverse; white guys are villains; and perhaps the most pernicious lie, deep down everyone is good at heart.

That's not to say the movie is as bad as it could be. Some of the dialogue, especially that of the king of the beavers (Bobby Moynihan), is amusing, and the animation style is cute enough, though hardly groundbreaking. Writer/director Daniel Chong even gets a little edgy by showing that nature can be red in tooth and claw when a few named characters get eaten and squished.

In the end, this is just a typical Disney movie. An entitled girl ruins the lives of others so she can get her own way, and everyone else, including the viewer, must learn a "valuable lesson."

TELEVISION

# The Count of Monte Cristo

by STEVE LIMKEMAN



Rated TV-14 • PBS/PBS Passport

➔ Alexandre Dumas' 19th-century novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* is one of history's most popular, having been adapted dozens of times across stages, airwaves, and screens. PBS' new series, spread over eight episodes, is a fairly faithful representation of the classic tale of one man's quest for justice in a world that has left him for dead.

This adaptation boldly begins *in medias res*, with viewers introduced to *The Count of Monte Cristo* with a torturous confession made by its titular character: "I fear I have forsaken God." Betrayed on the eve of his wedding, the young sailor, Edmond Dantès, was

branded a political traitor and whisked away in the middle of the night to the notorious French island prison, the Château d'If, where he spent 15 years in misery.

Now returned to society as the mysteriously wealthy Count of Monte Cristo, he is determined to seek revenge upon those who stole the best years of his life. The priest that Monte Cristo is speaking to pleads with the count to take a different path—to forgive, lest his heart harden such that it may never love again. But these entreaties fall upon deaf ears.

PBS' adaptation succeeds on many fronts. The production design is fantastic, from Dantès' castle prison to the treasure hunt on the island of Monte

Cristo to the illustrious opera house and mansions that the count inhabits as he plots his vengeance. Jeremy Irons makes for an excellent, charismatic Abbé Faria, lifting the despondent Dantès' spirit and elevating his mind while he is imprisoned, teaching him to contemplate the glory of the treasure he may find upon his escape.

If the chemistry between Dantès and his fiancée Mercédès suffers in comparison to the 2002 film adaptation, the series makes up for this deficiency by asking all the right questions about who was responsible for Dantès' fate and who should suffer the consequences. *The Count of Monte Cristo* exercises incredible fortitude and patience, suffering the friendship of those who had cast him aside so that he might better lead the architects of his former misery, in ever-mounting suspense, into the traps they have set for themselves with their various misdeeds.

Sadly, it is not only the Count of Monte Cristo who has forsaken God in this quest for retribution. Devotees of Dumas' novel will be disappointed in the show's departure from a Christian conception of providence. In the book, Monte Cristo sees himself as an avenging angel of God's wrath, but one who also comes to realize the need to forgive others as he himself stands in need of forgiveness.

In the show, Monte Cristo explicitly states that he does *not* believe in providence in the religious sense, but rather in an impersonal force of destiny that "will ensure justice." When questioned as to how he could consider himself the instrument of such a force, he merely storms off without reply. True to form, there is no grace offered to any of the major perpetrators of injustice, and the finale's vague nod toward the healing power of love is underwhelming.

By contrast, the final words that Dumas penned for Monte Cristo reflect his hero's ultimate submission to divine providence: "Never forget that, until the day comes when God will deign to reveal the future to man, all human wisdom is contained in these words: Wait and hope!" ■

## COMING SOON ...

### **The Super Mario Galaxy Movie**

4/1 • PG • Theaters

In this sequel to the 2023 animated movie, Mario ventures into space, exploring cosmic worlds and tackling galactic challenges far from the familiar Mushroom Kingdom.

### **A Great Awakening**

4/3 • PG-13 • Theaters

This movie dramatizes one of the most defining moments in American history, the story of an unlikely friendship between the Rev. George Whitefield and Benjamin Franklin.

### **Star Wars: Maul—Shadow Lord**

4/6 • Not yet rated • Disney+

In this animated series, the Clone Wars are over, and Darth Maul plots to rebuild his criminal syndicate on a planet untouched by the Empire.

### **Stranger Things: Tales from '85**

4/23 • TV-14 • Netflix

This animated series is set in Hawkins, Ind., in the winter of 1985, and Eleven and her friends must unravel a paranormal mystery terrorizing their town.

### **Michael**

4/24 • PG-13 • Theaters

Starring Jaafar Jackson, the son of Jermaine Jackson, this biopic dramatizes the early days of Michael Jackson, the King of Pop, highlighting both his life off-stage and some of the most iconic performances from his early solo career.

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MOVIE REVIEWS AT WNG.ORG**



## MOVIE

# The Pout-Pout Fish

by BEKAH BERNHARDT

Rated PG • Theaters



Like an aquatic version of the Grinch, Mr. Fish (Nick Offerman) spends his days reciting meanness mantras. Secretly, he's a total softie, and who better to bring that out than Pip (Nina Oyama), a bright seahorse with an over-caffeinated optimism about almost everything. After accidentally destroying Pip's house, Mr. Fish and Pip team up to look for the legendary, wish-granting fish named Shimmer (Jordin Sparks).

A clan of cuttlefish also needs a miracle, since growing kelp threatens to choke out their habitat in the abyss. A young cuttlefish named Benji (Remy Hii) strikes out on his own to find Shimmer, partly to save his home but also to prove his potential as the future leader of the clan. If he doesn't succeed, the cuttlefish will have no choice but to invade the reef above and force out the other fish.

With a rounded animation style reminiscent of movies like *The Lorax*, the film is geared toward an elemen-

tary-aged audience, one flatulence joke and a few cuss word stand-ins ("bullshark") aside. But parents won't feel left out thanks to the clever dialogue: "Let joy be unconfined," Mr. Fish says sarcastically. When Benji thinks he's about to be named head of the cuttlefish clan, his mother says, "No! You're being promoted to deputy assistant to head of sanitation and waste disposal."

Subtler funny moments include a brief spoof on *Castaway* starring Tom Hanks. Jealous of Mr. Fish's poofy pout, a valley girl dolphin asks, "Where did you get them done?"

In the race to beat the precocious cuttlefish, Mr. Fish comes to terms with his own insecurities and learns to look outside himself. Ironically, the heartwarming story has a somewhat slippery takeaway that doesn't hold a lot of water: "The power to make wishes come true lies inside of you." Still, families with young children will find plenty to appreciate in the tender film. To quote one character, "I can't resist a heart-wrenching coming-of-age origin story."



MUSIC

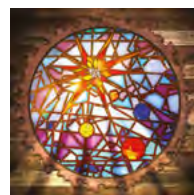
# Bicentennial Beach Boys

A look at the band's turbulent years

by ARSENIO ORTEZA

➔ Like several of its predecessors, the latest 50th-anniversary Beach Boys box is part album reissue, part vault excavation. The three-disc *We Gotta Groove: The Brother Studio Years* (Capitol) begins with all 35 minutes of *The Beach Boys Love You* (recorded mostly in 1976) then burrows into previously unreleased outtakes, the majority of the unreleased *Adult/Child* album, alternate mixes, alternate takes, backing tracks, and demos—73 tracks in all. It's both fascinating and frustrating for the same reason: In '76 and '77, the Beach Boys were a hot mess.

Outwardly, they were more popular than they'd been in a decade, riding the wave of the nation's bicentennial as a venue-filling live act and as the band responsible for the bestselling compila-



**We Gotta Groove:  
The Brother Studio  
Years**

BEACH BOYS

tions *Endless Summer* and *Spirit of America*. Inwardly, they were riven by drugs, booze, infighting, and, in Brian Wilson's case, mental struggles. As a result, they were finding it hard to record new music worthy of their legacy.

In some ways, the challenge was the same as it had been since *Pet Sounds*. Mike Love wanted the group to record hits while Wilson, whose ability to fathom or to care about the expectations of contemporary radio was practically nil, just wanted to express himself. That he was doing so under pressure from Warner Bros., his bandmates, and eventually his domineering therapist Eugene Landy guaranteed that the results would be unconventional to say the least.

The first fruits of this duress were the mixture of oldie covers and originals constituting 1976's ramshackle but occasionally inspired *15 Big Ones* (the subject of the first dozen tracks on *We Gotta Groove's* third disc). The second fruits were 1977's *The Beach Boys Love You* (the subject of Disc 1), which set lyrics reflecting Wilson's emotionally stunted takes on life and love to inexplicably catchy melodies leavened by synthesizers. Cute, charming, pathetic, funny, and sad—sometimes all at once—the album rapidly earned the euphemism “cult classic,” i.e., a work so out of step with its time almost no one bought it.

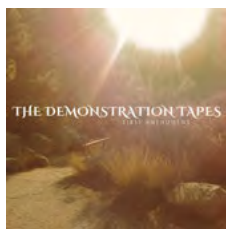
The follow-up, *Adult/Child* (nine tracks of which open Disc 2), was even more unfashionable, and Warner Bros. or various Beach Boys or both kept it under wraps. But here's where the story gets interesting: Heard nearly 50 years after its creation, a lot of *Adult/Child*, especially the four selections orchestrated by the Four Freshmen arranger Dick Reynolds, sounds really good.

The added silliness to which Wilson often defaulted hadn't disappeared entirely. (*We Gotta Groove* spares us the notorious “Hey Little Tomboy.”) But in pieces such as “Still I Dream of It” and “It's Over Now”—the former composed with Frank Sinatra in mind—Wilson achieved a haunting beauty unlike anything that he'd ever done before or would ever do again. The karaoke potential of the backing-tracks mixes is a bonus. ■

## MUSIC

# New and noteworthy

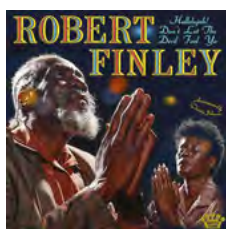
by ARSENIO ORTEZA



### **First Amendment** THE DEMONSTRATION TAPES

The album title alludes indirectly to the concept: one song for each of 14 randomly selected U.S. states in commemoration of our nation's 250th birthday—from Norwegians no less. And not just any Norwegians, but Pedro Carmona-Alvarez, Lars Heintz, and Fredrik Færden of the long-semi-defunct indie act Sister Sonny. With each track

sounding like the work of a different but equally playful and catchy band, the music could pass for 40 minutes of high-quality college radio circa 1985–90 (very good years in case you'd forgotten).



### **Hallelujah! Don't Let the Devil Fool Ya**

ROBERT FINLEY

The production of the Black Keys' Dan Auerbach generates a potent and swampy Stax vibe, making the late-blooming bluesman Robert Finley's first album as a septuagenarian his most assertive musical statement to date. It's also his most assertive statement period. With a conviction and a voice that might've brought Screamin' Jay Hawkins up

short, Finley testifies to the transformative power of praise, gratitude, God's love, the Holy Spirit, joy, waging spiritual warfare, self-denial, and testifying itself. At times, he almost seems to lose himself in what he's in the midst of. At no point does the music suffer.

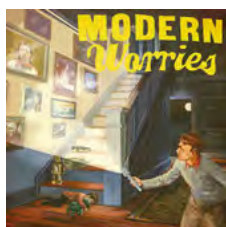


### **Peace to All Who Enter Here, Volume 2**

JOSH GARRELS

*Volume 1* was a response to COVID and its discontents, and it still holds up in its prayerful, folksy way. *Volume 2* is less follow-up than development. Besides being a third longer and containing three Garrels originals instead of two, the instrumentation and tempos, while not threatening to disturb the promised peace, are on

the whole a little more varied and a little more lively—not as lively as *Volume 1*'s “Peace Like a River,” but also not as dependent on a pandemic to feel like just what the doctor ordered.



### **Modern Worries** TYSON MOTSENBOCKER

This album is Tyson Motsenbocker's most ambitious because of its textures, its time signatures, its two soft-focus instrumentals with nine-word titles, and its nightmarish two-part parable recited by a British woman. (There's the usual melodic introspection too.) It's Motsenbocker's best album because of how skillfully melody matches mood and because “I Don't Want To Be

on the Internet Anymore” and the nightmarish two-part parable diagnose a serious, real-life malaise. It's his least self-aware because the Jesus-protect-me-from-your-followers sentiments of “I'm Doing My Best” are a kind of malaise too.



## ENCORE

Shortly after releasing *Peace to All Who Enter Here, Volume 2*, Josh Garrels released *Forevergreen*, a mostly instrumental soundtrack to Nathan Englehardt and Jeremy Spears' Oscar-nominated animated short of the same name. The dialogue-free film, which Spears has described as a “beat-by-beat representation of how someone gets truly saved,” manages to combine elements of Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, GIGO, Smokey Bear, John 12:24, and John 15:13 in 13 minutes, end credits included. Garrels' soundtrack (co-credited to its engineer, co-producer, and orchestrator Isaac Wardell) lasts eight minutes longer because it contains both a with-lyrics version and an orchestra-only version of the opening (and closing) theme, a piece that, with or without words, captures the film's subtlety and bucolic sense of wonder. And what's Garrels doing when he's not singing, i.e., most of the time? Playing banjo, guitar, and charango—and, one suspects, conducting the “Garrels Kids” chorale on “Extended Fun!” —A.O.

## MASTERWORKS

# An Easter hymn in stone

Michelangelo's three *Pietà*s

by BRUCE HERMAN



Bandini Pietà

➔ *NOW hath my life across a stormy sea / Like a frail bark reached that wide port where all / Are bidden, ere the final reckoning fall.* —“On the Brink of Death” by Michelangelo, trans. John Addington Symonds

I first saw Michelangelo's *Bandini Pietà* (also known as *The Deposition*) at

the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence during a grant-funded stay in 1979. The museum was still recovering a decade after the catastrophic 1966 flooding of the Arno River, which had filled the city with mud and devastated countless works of art. The *Pietà* was poorly lit and inadequately displayed—conservation triage more than dignified presentation.

Yet despite its diminished setting, I stood overwhelmed—struck by sorrow and amazement. How can a human being carve inert stone so that it seems to breathe? How could marble evoke such pathos?

There was something preternaturally alive in the stone.

The Greek myth of Pygmalion comes to mind: the sculptor who prays that his idealized figure would be given life. The gods grant the wish; the sculpture awakens—yet rejects him. Artistic ambition meets its limits. Hubris gives way to humility. Something of that reckoning hovers over Michelangelo's late work and echoes in the sonnet he wrote near the end of his life:

*Painting nor sculpture now can lull to rest / My soul that turns to His great love on high, / Whose arms to clasp us on the cross were spread.*

The *Bandini Pietà* depicts the lowering of Christ's body from the cross. He is supported by Nicodemus (whose face is widely believed to be Michelangelo's own) and the grieving Mary Magdalene, while the Virgin receives her son. The sculpture is a miracle of technical and spiritual achievement. It combines poetic vision and sculptural mastery at the highest level.

Yet this is not the bravura Michelangelo of youth. The surfaces are rougher. Tool marks remain. The composition rises vertically rather than resting in pyramidal balance. It feels wrestled from the stone.

The more famous Vatican *Pietà*, carved when Michelangelo was in his 20s, displays astonishing technical refinement. Christ lies across Mary's lap in a serene, pyramidal composition. The marble is polished to an almost luminous finish. Mary appears improbably young—a theological statement of incorruptibility, yes—but also something more mysterious.

Dante called her *figlia del tuo Figlio*, “daughter of your Son.” The scandal of the Incarnation lies here: The Creator becomes dependent upon His own creature. The infinite enters finitude.

The Vatican *Pietà* radiates a composed, almost otherworldly stillness. Death is present yet transfigured by beauty. The *Bandini Pietà* is different. It forgoes polish and theatrical virtuosity. It exposes process. It bears strain. Some argue it is unfinished. But Michelangelo's late works suggest that *non finito* became an expressive language in itself. Form emerging from stone becomes an image of the soul emerging through suffering. The 19th-century French master sculptor Auguste Rodin would later draw from this insight: Incompletion can intensify vitality.

Michelangelo attacked the *Bandini* with a hammer in frustration, possibly over flaws in the marble, possibly over deeper dissatisfaction. The sculpture was damaged and later repaired. That violence remains part of its history—and perhaps part of its meaning. Creation and repentance coexist within it.

The *Rondanini Pietà*, one of Michelangelo's final works, carries this stripping-away even further. Here the figures elongate and nearly dissolve. Christ no longer lies across Mary's lap;

instead, the two fuse vertically. The body is attenuated, almost spectral. Michelangelo was still reworking the marble days before his death.

This sculpture breathes—but faintly. The inhale is shallow; the exhale feels final.

Why are the *Bandini* and *Rondanini* unresolved? Was it merely that the sculptor died before finishing them? Perhaps. But it seems equally plausible that Michelangelo had come to distrust “finish” itself. The chisel marks are no longer concealed. Process remains visible. The form has entered the world; the artist steps back.

But what if the three *Pietà*s are not merely stages of artistic development, but reveal stages of the soul?

The Vatican *Pietà* belongs to youth—confidence in form, faith in beauty, trust that harmony reflects divine order. The *Bandini Pietà* belongs to midlife—struggle, fracture, self-recognition in Nicodemus' weary face. The *Rondanini Pietà* belongs to old age—when form thins, when certainty gives way to longing, when the body itself feels provisional.

In the end Michelangelo does not abandon the body; he relinquishes mastery over it. He allows the stone to remain wounded, incomplete, exposed. The marble is no longer conquered—it is confessed. Perhaps that is why the *Rondanini* feels so modern. It anticipates an art stripped of illusion and bravado. But more than that, it anticipates death—not as annihilation, but as surrender.

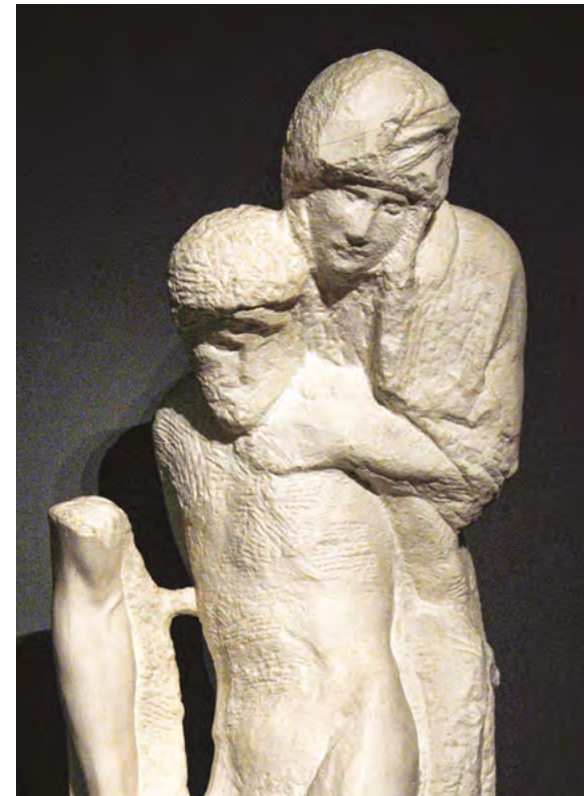
The old sculptor finally lays down his tools. And we, standing before these three *Pietà*s across the arc of his life, are invited to consider our own. What “polish” are we still clinging to? What unfinished surface might be the truest thing about us?

Put down the hammer and chisel.

Look long, with unguarded gaze, at Love stretched upon the cross.

In His end is our beginning. ■

—Bruce Herman is a painter, writer, and speaker who has exhibited nationally and internationally for over 50 years



LEFT: the Vatican *Pietà*  
ABOVE: the *Rondanini Pietà*



VOICES NICK EICHER

# Pressing pause on the argument

A new *WORLD Watch* series helps students see the ideas shaping today's cultural debates

A congressional hearing flashes across the screen. A senator questions a State Department nominee about the grounding of human rights. The exchange sounds like any number of Washington debates—serious voices, high-mileage arguments, the kind of exchange viewers have seen many times. Then the video pauses.

The moment rewinds. Two smart hosts step in to examine what just happened—not the politics of the exchange, but the worldview assumption beneath it. What idea about truth is being taken for granted here?

That is the premise of *Reality Check*, a new short-form video feature debuting this season as a pilot series on *WORLD Watch*, our daily video news for students. Produced in partnership with the Christian worldview organization Impact 360, the series aims to help younger viewers recognize the ideas shaping the arguments they hear every day.

The format is brisk—five minutes or less per episode—but visually dense. Animated graphics appear beside the hosts Jonathan Morrow and Katie McCoy. Cultural slogans drift across the screen to reinforce the message. Historical figures and philosophical diagrams briefly materialize to illustrate concepts that might normally stay buried in a lecture hall.

Producer Caleb Bailey told me the goal was simple: Help viewers see the ideas.

Many young people, he said, encounter worldview arguments through short videos and social media posts. When the concepts behind those arguments remain invisible,

students often absorb the conclusions without ever noticing the assumptions at work. *Reality Check* slows that process down long enough to make those assumptions visible for examination.

That matters because many of the most heated debates in modern culture are not really arguments about policy at all. They are arguments about something deeper—about truth, morality, identity, and the nature of reality itself.

Those are the questions the series places under the microscope.

Morrow, director of cultural engagement and student discipleship at Impact 360, told me the project begins with a simple observation: Many students are already encountering worldview claims, even if they don't recognize them as such. For years, Morrow has worked with high school and college students through Impact 360's programs, helping them think through questions about faith, truth, and culture.

"Worldview, at the end of the day, is about reality," Morrow told me—about whether what we believe about the world matches the world as it is.

Students today are surrounded by confident claims about truth and morality. The claims arrive quickly and move on just as quickly.

What often gets skipped is the reasoning behind them.

That becomes more noticeable as students get older. They learn to analyze arguments in subjects like history or science, yet their understanding of Christianity may never develop in the same way.

*Reality Check* aims to close that gap.

McCoy says the gap is not always intellectual. Disagreeing with the prevailing view can quickly feel personal. When a moral claim is treated as self-evident, rejecting it can sound less like an argument and more like a rejection of the person making it.

Learning to recognize the ideas underneath those claims can change the dynamic. Instead of arguing personalities or emotions, students can begin examining the beliefs themselves.

The 10-week pilot appears each Wednesday on *WORLD Watch* (beginning March 18), and the team plans to listen closely to viewer feedback as the concept develops.

Bailey told me the concept felt like a natural next step for *WORLD Watch*. The program explains the news to students. *Reality Check* explains the ideas behind the news. The goal is to help young viewers learn to ask a simple question: What idea is driving this argument? In the series, you'll see Bailey occasionally on camera out in the field, asking passersby simple questions that surface the assumptions behind their answers.

In an age of slogans, that may be a small act of rebellion.

The video pauses. The argument rewinds. The assumption becomes visible.

And suddenly the conversation is different. ■



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**NEW YORK CITY'S CHARISMATIC MAYOR HOPES**  
**TO MAKE AN OLD POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY PALATABLE**  
**TO A NEW GENERATION OF AMERICANS**

*by Emma Freire*

# SOCIALISM'S SALESMAN

Zohran Mamdani places his hand on his heart and smiles. He's wearing black leather gloves against the bitter cold of New York in January. The crowd of thousands who gathered to witness his inauguration chants, "Zohran! Zohran!" He responds by blowing them a kiss. A few moments earlier Mamdani had placed his hand on the Quran and taken the oath of office to become mayor of New York City.

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Mamdani invited Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont to administer the oath. It was a significant choice because both men are democratic socialists and Sanders also started his political career as a mayor—albeit in the much smaller city of Burlington, Vt. “Thank you to the man whose leadership I seek most to emulate, who I am so grateful to be sworn in by today,” Mamdani said during his address. Another well-known democratic socialist, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, kicked off the inauguration. Until Mamdani’s meteoric rise the year before, Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez were America’s leading proponents of socialism. But today Mamdani is on track to surpass them.

The new mayor owes his victory partly to running against a scandal-plagued opponent. Mamdani also has enormous personal charisma, and he spoke to voters’ struggles with high costs. But his victory has much deeper roots. Socialism is over two centuries old and continues to have a grip on the human spirit. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which backed Mamdani, is far more formidable than most Americans realize. Its leaders think in decades rather than election cycles. And in Mamdani, it has the perfect pitchman to sell its politics to a new generation of voters in New York and beyond.

After Mamdani took the oath of office, he launched into his address. “My

fellow New Yorkers, today begins a new era,” he said, beaming with confidence. Journalist Ross Barkan was not surprised by Mamdani’s relaxed demeanor. “Crowds don’t bother him,” he said. “I’ve never seen him nervous.”

Barkan, who’s writing a book about Mamdani, had a great view of the stage from the press area. While he came to cover the event as a reporter, he was also supporting a friend. Barkan and Mamdani met in late 2017 when Barkan himself was running for office. He wanted to hire Mamdani as his campaign manager. They clicked on a personal and political level. “We both took a withering view of the political elites, the Democratic Party apparatus in New



**LEFT: Bernie Sanders (left) administers the oath of office to Mamdani as his wife, Rama Duwaji, holds the Quran during the inauguration ceremony. ABOVE: New Yorkers and Democratic Socialists show their support at the inauguration.**

York,” Barkan said. But Mamdani didn’t accept the job until after Barkan proved he could raise funds for his campaign. “He’s not interested in protest campaigns that are guaranteed to lose,” Barkan said. Mamdani signed on, though Barkan did eventually lose his election.

Mamdani persevered in politics and in 2020 was elected to the New York State Assembly. Five years later, he rose from virtual anonymity to defeat Andrew Cuomo and win the Democratic Party’s nomination for New York City mayor. Cuomo is a former state governor who tried to make a comeback after resigning in disgrace in 2021. After losing the nomination, Cuomo ran in the general election as an independent, but

Mamdani defeated him again. Some commentators suggested Mamdani’s victory was less about his strengths and more about Cuomo’s weaknesses. Right-wing social media influencers poked fun at Mamdani’s short-lived career as a rapper under the name “Young Cardamon.” Barkan thinks anyone who dismisses Mamdani as an unserious performer is in for a rude shock: “He’s an alpha. He commands the room.”

The word *socialist* is sometimes used as a political pejorative, but Mamdani embraced it. “I was elected as a democratic socialist, and I will govern as a democratic socialist,” he said during his inaugural address. “I will not abandon my principles for fear of being deemed radical.”

Ivan Pongracic, a professor of economics at Hillsdale College, said the definition of socialism hasn’t changed in 200 years: “government ownership and control of the means of production.”

“By means of production we mean any sort of productive good, capital, goods, factories, trains, ships, anything,” he said.

The most famous exponent of socialism is Karl Marx. He argued capitalism would inevitably lead to such severe exploitation of workers that they would violently overthrow the system, seizing the means of production and ushering in socialism. In his view, socialism required an all-powerful state to control the economy and reshape human nature so that we would all become selfless and collective-minded. “That would then make it possible to usher in the final stage of history, which was communism,” Pongracic said. It would be like “the nonreligious form of heaven.”

Some versions of socialism predate Marx. Pongracic argues Plato was a

## **THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA HAS THE PERFECT PITCHMAN TO SELL ITS POLITICS TO A NEW GENERATION OF VOTERS IN NEW YORK AND BEYOND.**

TOP: LEONARDO MUNOZ/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: ANTHONY BEHAR/SIPA USA/ALAMY

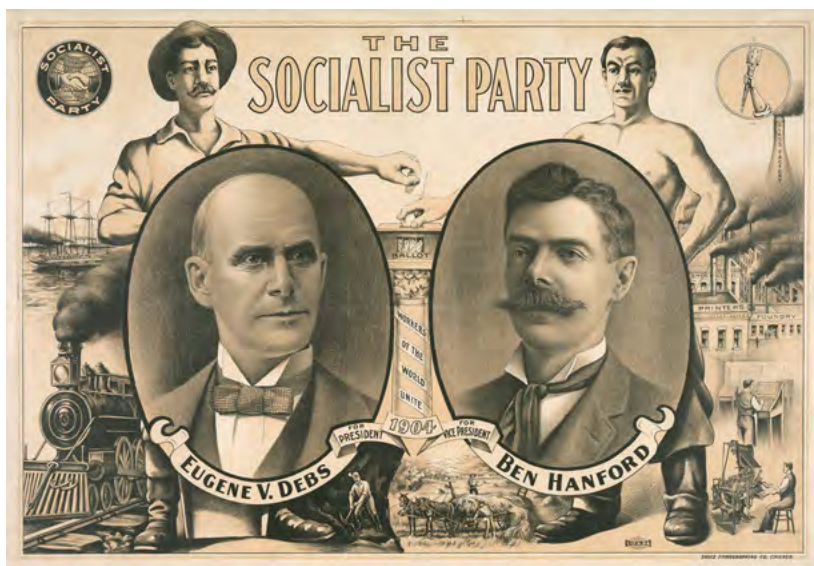
socialist. “Plato’s ideas were basically that the government should be in control of everything,” he said. Even the Pilgrims tried to start a socialist utopia when they landed in America in 1620. They turned to private property after many of them starved to death.

Pongracic believes socialism’s enduring popularity lies in its promise of “a society which is like a family, where everybody loves each other and takes care of each other, thinks about each other,” he said. “That has a powerful appeal to people.”

During the Cold War, the United States was often cast as the capitalist alternative to the communism of the Soviet Union. But Barkan says our country has a stronger socialist tradition than that simplistic narrative suggests. He notes that socialists governed Milwaukee for around 50 years until 1960, a period called “sewer socialism.” He also points to the New Deal. While President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was not a socialist, Barkan thinks he took inspiration from socialist ideas. FDR is a “guiding light” for Mamdani, according to Barkan.

The American Socialist Party was prominent in the early 1900s. Eugene V. Debs, one of its founding members, ran for president several times. Before Bernie Sanders, Debs was America’s best-known socialist. Mamdani quoted Debs—“I can see the dawn of a better day for humanity”—in his victory speech after winning the election in November.

The link between the two men carries even more significance this year, as America prepares to celebrate 250 years of democracy. Debs never hid his disdain for the American experiment. On July 4, 1901—the 125th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence—he gave a speech in which he took aim at the Founders. They said all men are created equal but “evidently meant themselves alone,” Debs said. He also excoriated working-class people who saluted the American flag on Independence Day. “Triumphant socialism will haul down that flag and every other that symbolizes capitalist class rule and wage slavery,” he vowed.



Antique poster for the socialist presidential ticket of 1904

The video that popped up in Kara Branch’s social media feed had a provocative—and irresistible—title: “Why did so many New Yorkers vote for Donald Trump?” Branch clicked on it.

The three-minute video showed Zohran Mamdani taking to the streets of his Queens district a week after the 2024 election to ask his constituents who they voted for. Many said they voted for Trump over concerns about the rising costs of the basic necessities of life. Several expressed frustration that large amounts of money were being sent to wars in Gaza and Ukraine while Americans struggled. Mamdani held his microphone forward and leaned in slightly to show he was listening. Near the end of the video, upbeat music started playing as Mamdani told one man, “We have a mayor’s race coming up next year, and if there was a candi-

date talking about freezing the rent, making buses free, making universal child care a reality, are those things you’d support?” The man didn’t hesitate: “Absolutely. You’d have my vote all day.”

For Branch—like many—this was her first sight of Mamdani. The video quickly went viral. It stood out because Mamdani showed respect and concern, in contrast to the derision Democrats often direct at Trump voters. Branch has lived in New York for 15 years and liked what she saw, but she didn’t have much hope for Mamdani’s prospects. “Oh well, that’s sweet,” she thought. “That’s cute. That’s not what wins.”

The video contained the main planks of Mamdani’s future campaign platform. He offered simple, easy-to-

**AMERICANS UNDERESTIMATE THE DEDICATION OF DSA ACTIVISTS WHO “DEVOTE NEARLY EVERY FREE HOUR TO ADVANCING SOCIALISM.”**



understand proposals that signaled to voters he cared about “affordability,” or the daily struggle to make ends meet. He proposed fast and free buses, freezing the rent on rent-stabilized apartments, free universal child care, and five city-owned grocery stores, one for each borough of New York.

“For me personally, the one that resonated most is probably rent,” said Branch. She lives in a rent-stabilized apartment and just saw her rent go up. Nearly half of all occupied housing units in New York City are rent-stabilized. That means landlords can only raise rent by percentages set by the NYC Rent Guidelines Board. Mamdani plans to appoint board members who will stop the increases.

After watching the video, Branch was pleasantly surprised to see Mamdani’s popularity surge. She hoped New Yorkers might be willing to try something new. “Because what we’re trying to do right now—on the left, the right, the center—all of it is not working.”

Two groups helped propel Mamdani to victory. First, immigrants. Mamdani was born in Uganda and moved to

**Mamdani is very popular with immigrants, who played a huge part in getting him elected.**

America as a child, becoming a citizen in 2018. Exit polls indicated he won 85% of voters who had lived in New York for less than five years. Immigrants are an enormous voting bloc. A 2025 study found that 25% of residents have limited English proficiency and 50% speak a language other than English at home.

Mamdani also did particularly well among younger voters. According to an ABC News exit poll, he captured 78% of voters under 30 and 66% of voters aged 30 to 44. Voters aged 45 and over preferred Cuomo.

Nathan Halberstadt is a partner at New Founding, a venture capital firm. He fears young Mamdani voters who “just want to blow up the system” are a symptom of deeper problems.

Last fall, Halberstadt produced a graph shared widely on social media. It showed that in 1950, 50% of Americans were married and owned a home at age 30. “That meant you could expect, as a young person growing up in America, to

have a normal life,” he said. In 2025, only around 12% of 30-year-olds were married homeowners.

A 30-year-old who isn’t married and doesn’t own a home is probably “rootless, atomized,” Halberstadt said. They likely moved away from their hometown in pursuit of better opportunities, may not attend church, and spend much of their time online. This can funnel people into either the far right or the far left. “They don’t have anywhere to turn, and so they turn to radical politics,” Halberstadt said.

**D**aniel Goulden adjusted his face mask as he prepared to speak on a panel at the Socialism 2025 conference last July in Chicago. The panelists sitting around him were also in face masks. “Zohran is gonna really attempt to do what conservatives say we want to do, which is provide gender-affirming care to anyone who wants it for free,” said Goulden, a member of the Steering Committee of the New York City branch of Democratic Socialists of America. For the panel discussion, he’d donned a black T-shirt that read “Protect Trans Kids.” “We’re going to fly people in and pay for their hotel rooms, and we’re going to do all of the Fox News stuff. We’re getting ideas from Fox News,” he added, eliciting laughter from the room.

Goulden worked on Mamdani’s campaign, helped write the campaign’s trans policy platform, and said he regularly meets with Mamdani and his staff. “With Zohran, we’re in basically the best possible position to seize state power that we can be in. Because we’re like this,” he said as he crossed his index and middle fingers.

In the 2025 election cycle, centrist Democrats tried to inch away from transgenderism once it became controversial. While Mamdani focused on affordability, he also never shied away from identity-based progressive ideology.

Hillsdale’s Ivan Pongracic thinks that fits naturally with Mamdani’s socialism. After World War II, many countries including Germany experienced massive economic growth, with incomes rising for rich and poor alike. “It was obvious that the Marxian story

of the economic exploitation of workers was not making sense anymore,” Pongracic said. Academics at the University of Frankfurt in Germany came up with a modified version of Marxism, where class struggle was framed in cultural terms rather than economic ones. “It was about men exploiting women. White people exploiting black people. Christians exploiting Muslims,” said Pongracic. In this line of thinking, the government must right those wrongs. Pongracic thinks cultural Marxism took root in the United States in the 1970s. Today, transgender people fit into the framework as a so-called exploited group.

Goulden is one of many DSA volunteers who helped get Mamdani’s campaign off the ground.

The DSA was founded in 1982 and today has over 100,000 members. It got a massive boost from Bernie Sanders’ two attempts to win the Democratic nomination. Stu Smith, an investigative analyst for the Manhattan Institute, thinks Sanders’ popularity lowered the average DSA member’s age from 70 to the mid-30s. “And I feel like with Mamdani, that’s only gotten lower,” he said. Smith described the DSA and the Democratic Party as “frenemies.”

“They use each other when it is useful, but there is no illusion that they are competing to define and represent the American left,” he said.

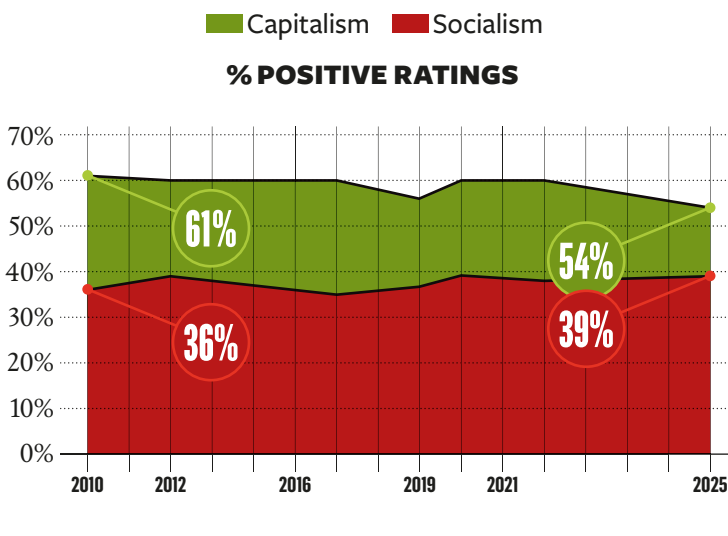
Smith warns Americans underestimate the dedication of DSA activists who “devote nearly every free hour to advancing socialism locally, nationally, and even internationally.”

He said they think in decades rather than election cycles. Up to now they’ve been “content to win slowly, advancing socialism inch by inch while others underestimate their resolve,” Smith said. But they are “super energized” by their big win in New York.

In Mamdani, they’ve acquired a charismatic public face who can promote their ideas and candidates. New York law allows him to hold two consecutive four-year terms as mayor. However, because he’s a naturalized citizen, he cannot run for president.

## Trend in Americans’ views of capitalism and socialism

Americans are more positive toward capitalism than socialism, but the gap is shrinking, with only 54% viewing capitalism favorably—down from 60% in 2010. Meanwhile, the positive numbers for socialism are gradually climbing.



## DSA membership climbing

After years of declining membership, the socialist organization now has over 100,000 members—nearly doubling since the start of Mamdani’s campaign for mayor.

Mamdani scored a victory just one week after taking office. He teamed up with New York Gov. Kathy Hochul to announce a \$1.7 billion expansion of taxpayer-subsidized child care.

But Pongracic doesn’t think Mamdani can make socialism work in the long term. “It taxes the productive people in the economy, and when it taxes them, it incentivizes them to actually work less and to create less tax revenues. Bureaucracies will inevitably want to spend more and will run out of money.” However, he notes that Adam Smith famously said, “There is a great deal of ruin in a nation.” New York is a wealthy city and can keep going for a long time under poor governance.

In recent decades, New York has roughly alternated between liberal and slightly more conservative mayors. But Nathan Halberstadt believes it’s foolish to assume the political pendulum will always keep swinging back and forth. Sometimes it swings one way and stays there. “I always push back strongly against people who say, ‘New York City just needs to learn its lesson. It’s actually a good thing for the country to learn that state-run grocery stores don’t work.’” He thinks it will be very difficult for conservatives to take back New York. And that could have a cascading effect across the country.

“We shouldn’t underestimate how talented Mamdani is,” Halberstadt added. ■



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... in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that  
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Chartering  
Freedom



The Chartering Freedom gallery  
in *The American Story* exhibit  
THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES FOUNDATION

Fre



## THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OPENS A NEW EXHIBIT TO MARK AMERICA'S 250TH BIRTHDAY

by **Harrison Watters**

**T**he Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom in the National Archives echoes with whispers as tourists walk past America's founding documents: the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence. The chamber is dimly lit to keep the brown ink marks on the documents from further fading away.

"The loving adjective we've come up with is 'beige butterflies,'" public affairs specialist Aaron Scheinblum says of the fragile documents. Around the corner, the museum's newest permanent exhibit aims to give visitors a hands-on view of those documents through touch screens at AI-powered kiosks.

*The American Story* opened to the public in November after nearly a decade of planning and a \$40 million renovation. The nine-room exhibit is part history, part document research, and part cultural throwback, displaying the range of artifacts stored in America's attic. A copper engraving plate used to make copies of the Declaration of Independence is on display, as well as patents for American innovations like the Barbie doll and the Zamboni.

It's just one of many museum exhibits across the country capitalizing on renewed interest in America's founding as this year's 250th anniversary approaches.

# edom story

Beyond the original artifacts, what makes *The American Story* unique is the 35 touch screen portals spread throughout, inviting visitors to go deeper. “We’re the first museum in Washington, D.C., to create this personalized journey for museum visitors,” said Grace McCaffrey, the Archives’ America 250 representative and my tour guide. That personalized journey began with a barcode on the back of my ticket. In the exhibit’s first room, I checked in at one of eight kiosks the size of vending machines. Instead of asking for my name or other personal information, the touch screen asked me to pick three areas of interest from a starburst of options ranging from diplomacy to parades.

I wanted to learn more about religious freedom in America, but had to content myself with First Amendment rights, court cases, and holidays. The AI-powered kiosks give museum guests access to 2 million digitized documents, maps, photographs, and drawings. The machine learning doesn’t generate content but sorts through the digital archives to find artifacts that relate to each display and visitors’ interests.

The exhibit starts with backstory on the founding documents in the Chartering Freedom room. A copper engraving plate sits under glass next to a copy of the Declaration of Independence printed in 1823. On the other side of the display case, a touch screen flashes with questions about the copper plate, such as, “Why is the text backward?”

“It’s kind of plugging on the questions visitors always ask,” McCaffrey explains.

Even without the curation of my special interests, I was able to learn a good bit about how the Declaration of Independence was copied and preserved. When I scanned my ticket, the

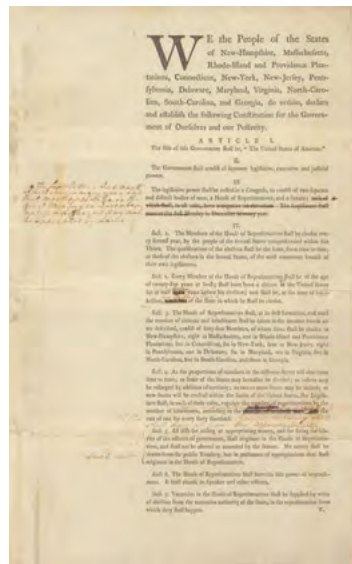
display offered three documents from the founding era related to my areas of interest. The court filing about Revolutionary War veterans’ claims was on point, but Secretary of State William Seward’s invitation to a celebration of George Washington’s 130th birthday party felt like a stretch for holidays.

Next, I explored the Land and Home room, about the acquisitions and agreements that expanded the original 13 colonies into a continent-wide nation. The Louisiana Purchase and a treaty with the Winnebago Indian Tribe in Michigan flank the room. The portals offer stories about 10 lesser-known figures from this era, ranging from Mormon church founder and Utah Gov. Brigham Young to Chinese immigrant and later U.S. businessman Ping Chinn. The museum plans to rotate the original documents on display every three to six months to keep displays fresh and preserve the old documents.

A More Perfect Union offers guests a look at George Washington’s draft copy of the U.S. Constitution, as well as displays featuring amendments and documents related to debates later in American history. When I visited, the gallery displayed several items related to Title IX and women’s sports, including letters to President Gerald Ford sent by groups on opposite sides of the issue.

Moving into the 20th century, *The American Story* showcases artifacts from presidential libraries and footage from wartime presidencies. A display on the president as commander in chief offers visitors a choose-your-own adventure experience of three conflicts. I was able to see some of the documents presented to George H. W. Bush ahead of the Persian Gulf War, and the display prompted me to consider how I would have responded to Iraq refusing to withdraw from Kuwait. I discovered that my preference to wait and see did not line up with his decision to send in the troops. I noticed these displays were limited to modern presidencies, so no role-playing commander in chief for the Spanish-American War or War of 1812.

Among the many exhibits are George Washington’s annotated copy of a draft of the U.S. Constitution and the copperplate engraving of the Declaration of Independence.



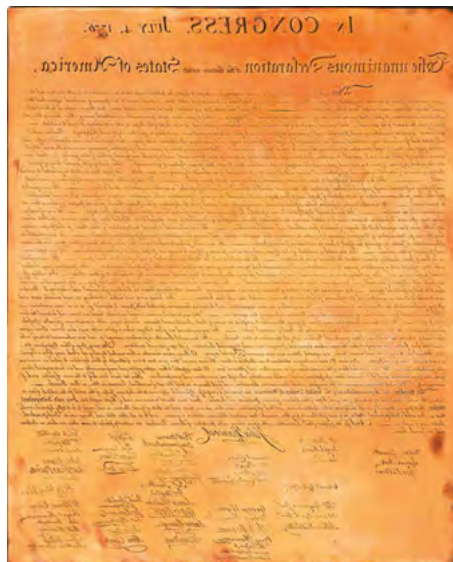
The rest of *The American Story* exhibit aims to surprise guests with the breadth of the National Archives' holdings, from patents to space race innovations. In the Moon Room, guests can learn how scientists solved problems for exploring the moon and in the process laid the foundation for inventions like electric vehicles, GPS, and lactose-free milk.

The exhibit closes with one more example of how the National Archives document America in unexpected ways: genealogy. "If someone's on Ancestry.com or any of the other popular genealogy sites, they're using National Archives Records, and they might not know it," McCaffrey said. I used one of two kiosks donated by Ancestry.com to learn about my great-grandfather, William Zouhary. The kiosk pulled up a page from the 1930 census and highlighted various details about him (born in Syria, lived in Toledo, Ohio; did not attend school but could read and write, and was still single at age 24).

Where other museums may craft a narrative for displays, to frame artifacts in a way that tells visitors what to think about them, *The American Story* at the National Archives goes a different direction. It puts tools in the hands of visitors to see the museum as an archive for research, letting guests decide what they want to learn about, and how much. That said, access to the digital archives in the exhibit is curated through a set list of filters. That prevents teenagers from making up all manner of search categories, but it also means some categories, like religious freedom in America, are left off the table.

While screens may have some appeal for visitors, the main attraction will always be around the corner in the Charters of Freedom Rotunda, where the line to view America's founding documents is only growing by the hour. Grace McCaffrey expects those lines to just keep growing with the addition later this year of the Emancipation Proclamation and the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote.

"But the real star of the show this year is the Declaration," she said. ■



## FLYING EXHIBIT

From 1975 to 1976, a traveling museum of artifacts crisscrossed the contiguous United States aboard the American Freedom Train to commemorate the Bicentennial. To mark America's 250th birthday, the National Archives has commissioned a traveling exhibit called the Freedom Plane National Tour to visit eight cities between March and August. The decked-out Boeing 737 will fly an exhibit of 10 documents to eight museums. Items will include George Washington's and Alexander Hamilton's signed oaths of allegiance, as well as the Treaty of Paris that ended the Revolutionary War.

**March 6–22:** Kansas City, Mo.

**March 27–April 12:** Atlanta, Ga.

**April 17–May 3:** Los Angeles, Calif.

**May 8–25:** Houston, Texas

**May 28–June 14:** Denver, Colo.

**June 20–July 5:** Miami, Fla.

**July 9–26:** Dearborn, Mich.

**July 30–Aug. 16:** Seattle, Wash.

## MORE EXHIBITS

Other museums featuring special exhibits for America's 250th include:

### **National Museum of American History— In Pursuit of Life, Liberty & Happiness**

(Spring 2026–Sept. 2026). Featured objects include Thomas Jefferson's portable desk and the gunboat *Philadelphia*.

### **National Portrait Gallery: 250th Festival— Celebrating Our Story**

**Smithsonian Castle: American Aspirations** (Summer 2026). A special exhibition reflecting on the nation's ideals, featuring artifacts like Harriet Tubman's hymnal.

### **Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia—The Declaration's Journey**

### **Mount Vernon in Virginia—Washington's Original Clothing**



# HANGING TOUGH

In southeast Ukraine, soldiers struggle to hold the line—and maintain morale

by **WILLIAM FLEESON**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
KATERYNA KLOCHKO



Taras Mikhailchuk sits outside a run-down farmhouse near the front line.



## **E STEP ALONG BROKEN PAVING STONES**

into a run-down farmhouse. Inside, Ukrainian soldiers are biding their time in a field kitchen.

The cook bangs around as he prepares lunch for the unit. Otherwise, the room is strangely quiet. None of the half-dozen men talks much. Some listen for drones, a constant menace this close to the front. ¶ We are standing fewer than 5 miles from the contact line between Ukrainian and Russian forces, in Ukraine's southeast Zaporizhia oblast, or region. Survival here depends on hearing incoming projectiles—and finding cover in time. The ominous skies threaten more than rain. ¶ The walls of the house are covered in hand-drawn illustrations from schoolchildren that encourage the soldiers to keep up their spirits. Many bear the blue and yellow of Ukraine's national flag, a fields-and-sky color combination that symbolizes the land itself. One large poster shows a motherly figure wearing a flower wreath—traditional headwear for Ukrainian and other Eastern European women. An expression arches over the woman: “Come home soon.” ¶ Taras Mikhailchuk, 58, welcomes us. A short, stocky major in the Ukrainian army with cropped hair and an intense demeanor, he commands this unit, a part of the 65th Mechanized Brigade. Despite his position, Mikhailchuk isn't paid much. He earns less than \$1,000 per month, he says. Even as an officer, even during wartime. ¶ “But do you know why I serve?” he asks me. “Because I love Ukraine. I love this country very much.”

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Outside, the occasional boom of nearby fighting rings out between the gray clouds and brown land, once fertile with crops before the war.

Mikhailchuk's words reflect a crucial factor in Ukraine's defensive war: morale. Russia's war on Ukraine broke the four-year mark in February. After the initial invasion and response, during which both sides gained and lost territory, the battle lines have remained almost static. The conflict is now a matter of attrition. By exacting maximum damage and death, each side hopes the other will capitulate.

But that requires soldiers able and willing to fight. It's a challenge for both sides that could eventually decide the

outcome of the war. Progress in peace talks has become as static as the front lines.

**THE MAJOR'S OWN SPIRITS REMAIN HIGH.** He chose to be here. Volunteering in 2022—“from day one,” he claims—Mikhailchuk came to Ukraine's aid when Russia launched its full-scale invasion.

But morale at this base varies widely from man to man. Volunteers like Mikhailchuk came on their own. Others, like the draftees serving in Zaporizhia and nationwide, are obeying orders, whether they like it or not. Mikhailchuk acknowledged that draftees sometimes don't want to fight.





**Mikhailchuk brandishes a Russian pistol in a room covered with hand-drawn illustrations from Ukrainian schoolchildren.**

“They need motivation,” he said, without elaborating on his motivational methods.

Russia’s war on Ukraine has run longer than the Soviet Union’s part in World War II, when the USSR’s Red Army faced down, and eventually defeated, Nazi troops fighting for Hitler’s Germany on their Eastern Front.

Today, Russian President Vladimir Putin is aiming to break records of his own. His leadership of Russia (2000–present) has run more than a quarter-century—nearly as long as Joseph Stalin’s effective rule of the Soviet Union (1924–1953).

Russia’s national memory around World War II, known there as the Great Patriotic War, is a main argument for keeping up the Ukrainian campaign. In 2022, Putin claimed, without evidence, that neo-Nazis were running Ukraine and threatening to attack Russia.

Like Ukraine, Russia deploys a mix of volunteer and conscripted servicemen. Their morale varies, too. Many enlist for the Russian military’s lavish salaries. But when patriotism and pay aren’t enough, soldiers find other ways to cope. Drug

use on both sides of the front is rising, threatening the soldiers’ health and lives, even if they survive the war. Worse, suicide is a growing issue in the Ukrainian and Russian militaries.

Ukraine’s draft policies are controversial. Its enforcement, coupled with dragnet tactics that fall outside normal draft procedures, has provoked myriad civil complaints and pushed hundreds of thousands of fighting-age men to flee the country or lie low inside Ukraine. Ukrainian law doesn’t recognize conscientious objection, and those caught resisting the draft face three to five years in prison.

The Ukrainian government’s Territorial Center of Recruitment (TCR), a much-hated wartime institution, runs patrols in cities and towns nationwide. The TCR is known to grab men off the street and press them into service. In February, in the southern city of Odesa, a team of TCR personnel found itself outmanned. A group of civilians fought back—and sent several TCR agents to the hospital.

**MIKHAILCHUK’S PERSONAL HISTORY** is almost as complex as the Ukraine-Russia relationship. He was born in Murmansk, a northeast Russian city above the Arctic Circle, to an ethnic Ukrainian father who gave his son his Ukrainian last name and a sense of their true homeland.



This is Mikhailchuk's fourth war. As a teenage soldier in the last days of the Red Army, he took part in the Soviet war in Afghanistan. He also fought in the Nagorno-Karabakh region between Armenia and Azerbaijan and bore arms in Transnistria, a strip of contested land between Moldova and Ukraine. Later, he joined the French Foreign Legion.

Mikhailchuk moved to Spain in 2005, building a comfortable life for himself and his now-grown daughter. He worked construction in Barcelona before Russia brought full-scale war to Ukraine in 2022. His radio call sign is *Ispányetz*—"The Spaniard."

Leaving everything—family, safety, and a few steady years before retirement—he answered the call, in his mid-50s, to defend his ancestral land.

I connected with Mikhailchuk through the Reimer Center, a community space that two evangelical churches maintain in the oblast's main city, also called Zaporizhia. The Reimer Center holds worship services and organizes social programs for youth and the elderly. Like many churches across Ukraine, the center has transformed into a humanitarian aid hub, offering hot meals and spiritual support.

Current battlefield estimates put three-quarters of Zaporizhia oblast under Russian occupation. The city is full of refugees from occupied territories. Everyone knows someone living, and suffering, under Russian military rule. What's left of Ukrainian-controlled Zaporizhia forms the southeastern edge of what is now called Free Ukraine.

Against all odds, it has become a fertile ground for ministry. My driver for the day, Viktor Kostenko, is a member of Light of Life Baptist Church. The congregation has devoted much of its outreach to the city of Zaporizhia's beleaguered residents. He also directs *Pereval*, an aid organization whose mission is to deliver clean water, which can become scarce in conflict zones. The inside ceiling of his van is covered with patches from the military units to which he's provided water.

**FROM LEFT: The cook prepares lunch for the unit; Viktor Kostenko, with patches covering the ceiling of his car; Vitali Svirchuk listens for drones outside the farmhouse.**

Mikhailchuk describes soldiering here as boring—except when he leads assault missions. So far, perhaps owing to his long experience, he has managed to avoid serious injury.

Many other servicemen have not. Two months prior, Mikhailchuk told me, a Russian drone killed a Ukrainian soldier just 200 yards from this house. A week before our visit, he said, his unit lost six cars in three days. Given the overstretched state of the Ukrainian military, and the high burn rate for equipment in constant combat, soldiers depend on nonmilitary vehicles to position themselves, and their gear, for effective fighting. Many soldiers use their personal cars, paying for repairs from their own meager salaries. The major pulls out his phone to show me photos of old vehicles, some in pieces.

What Mikhailchuk has plenty of, is motivation to fight. He has already gone to fearsome lengths to defend his life. As if to stress his point, he unsheathes a pistol, which he says he took from a Russian soldier. The gun became a trophy of a successful assault.

I ask Mikhailchuk if having that gun meant he had killed its former owner. He keeps his eyes locked on mine and says simply: "Yes."

Suddenly, he switches from Russian to Spanish, to utter an expression that feels right for the moment. "*Todo por la patria*," Mikhailchuk says. "Everything for one's homeland."

His determination, and the good morale it produces, might carry him to the end of the war. If he lives that long.

**VITALI SVIRCHUK, 52, IS SIMILARLY DRIVEN.** He serves as a sergeant major under Mikhailchuk. He wears a



civilian-style gray sweatsuit—a reminder that, this close to the front, some army regulations just don't apply.

Originally from Khmelnytskyi oblast in west-central Ukraine, Svirchuk has a boxer's build and piercing blue eyes. He prefers short, punchy sentences. He has a son in the border guard service who was deployed in the embattled southern Kherson region that neighbors Zaporizhia.

He also has three grandsons—all under 7 years old—who fuel his resolve. Does he feel an urge to protect them, his children and their children?

"Of course," he tells me.

While Svirchuk admits to a difference in morale between volunteers and draftees, he says it doesn't get in the way of their mission: "We always complete our duties."

Just then, a sound like a moped's engine whirs close, before fading again.

"You hear that?" Svirchuk asks me, to make sure I understand.

"Yes," I said. "What was it?"

"A Shahed," he said, referring to the triangular, inexpensive drones that Russians use to target Ukrainian soldiers along the front, and civilians nationwide.

After warning me, Svirchuk looked totally relaxed. I felt completely rattled. Shaheds can, at any moment, deliver death from the sky.

Other soldiers gathered in the field kitchen show much less enthusiasm than their superiors. Oleksandr Travinsky, 43, arrived at this post a month prior, having been sent from western Ukraine's Rivne oblast, where the TCR apprehended him.

He smokes constantly. His worn skin, faded tattoos, and decayed teeth suggest a lifetime of poverty. Poor men are the easiest for draft boards like the TCR to muster.



MAP: GREBESHKOV/MAXIM/GETTY IMAGES



Travinsky has served before. He was an infantryman in 2016, deployed to the eastern Donbas region. Travinsky's experience is a reminder that Ukraine's war dates back to 2014, when smaller contingents of Russia's military invaded the Donbas and annexed the southern Crimean peninsula.

In Zaporizhia, Travinsky's rank is *starshi soldat*—an “older soldier”—roughly equal to a private first class. He handles menial labor around the camp, receiving deliveries—sometimes by car, sometimes by drone—to keep the place running.

My questions seemed to make Travinsky very uncomfortable. When I asked what he wanted out of his time here, he said only, “Well, victory.”

**MEMBERS OF THE 65TH MECHANIZED BRIGADE** aren't the only Ukrainians who face the constant prospect of death in this border region. As we head back toward the city, Kostenko pulls onto the sooty asphalt and switches into a kind of race car mode. He guns the engine, weaving among potholes. The faster a car goes, the less chance an enemy drone has to strike.

The road runs under bright green nylon netting, a recent response to evolving drone tactics. The nets prevent drones from colliding into their marks. Even if the drones explode, the space between net and target provides a slim buffer of protection. This limits the damage done, and lives lost. Russian forces are known to target military and civilian transportation, including public buses and trains. Like other Russian methods, targeting civilians weighs heavily on Ukrainian morale.

But as we drive, we pass scenes of stubborn, everyday life. A woman rides a bicycle, running errands as during peacetime. A man jogs, shirtless, along the netted road. Outside one house, two women wearing slippers and housecoats chat by the door, as if in total safety.

Passing a schoolyard, we see students milling around what looks like an outdoor electrical closet. The door leads instead to their classrooms, which, after four years of war, have been

**LEFT: Conscripted soldier Oleksandr Travinsky. RIGHT: Green nylon netting provides some protection from drones.**

constructed underground. Students, teachers, and staff access their rooms by elevator. For Zaporizhians and other front-line residents, extreme adaptations like this have become normal.

Back outside the danger zone, we stop at the house where Kostenko lives with his wife, Anastasiia, and their two young daughters. The couple invites us in to warm up after the November chill. The adults arrange themselves around the kitchen table, while the girls watch *Paw Patrol* in Ukrainian on their living room TV.

Over tea and borscht—the beetroot-and-cabbage soup that is Ukraine's national dish—we bless the food, and tuck in. The deceptively normal scene belies the danger the family faces. The tide of fighting could shift at any time, and the results, for themselves and their children, could be lethal.

“We're not leaving,” Anastasiia says, turning away from the stove and her pot of borscht to look at me. “We live here. We serve our church here.”

The Light of Life Baptist Church has expanded its ministry outreach to the front-line community that includes volunteers, draftees, and refugees. That focus on ministry helps the couple maintain their own morale. They're also holding the line, in their own way.

After our meal, Kostenko drives us back to Zaporizhia city, farther into Free Ukraine. The evening darkness deepens as a light rain begins. Standing above the road that leads away from the war, a billboard shows an illustration like the ones adorning the walls of the field kitchen, only super-sized.

The billboard's background is blue and yellow, after Ukraine's national flag. In the foreground kneels the figure of a small child. With eyes closed and head bowed, she presses her hands together.

A simple plea runs across the sign: “Pray for Ukraine.” ■



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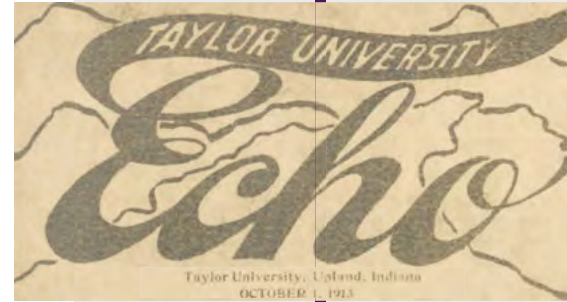
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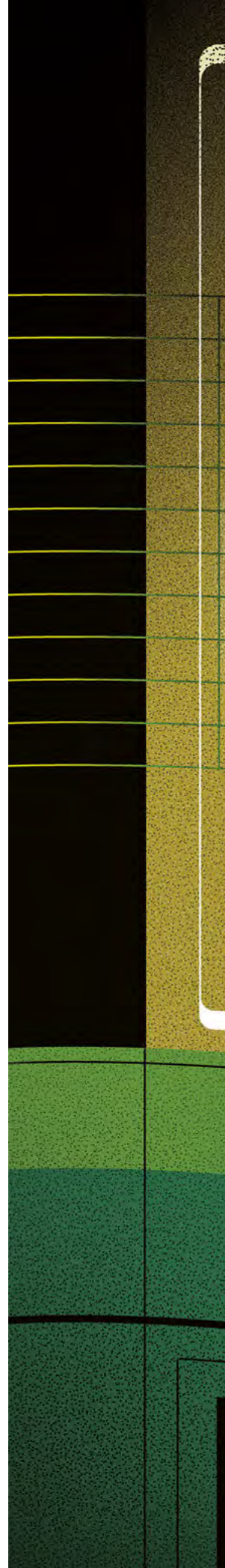
Editing embryos could  
become a standard  
reproductive service

# THE RACE TO MAKE DESIGNER BABIES



**BY GRACE SNELL**

illustration by Krieg Barrie





# In November 2018, William Hurlbut was making his way through the San Francisco airport when his phone rang.

It was *MIT Technology Review* editor Antonio Regalado, and he wanted to know what Hurlbut knew about a Chinese scientist named He Jiankui.

Hurlbut's heart dropped. There was only one reason that could explain the journalist's sudden interest in He, whose research focused on modifying the human genome.

"You think he's implanted human embryos," Hurlbut replied.

Regalado didn't just think it. He had hard evidence to back it up, and his story couldn't have been more timely. That very day, researchers from all over the world, including Hurlbut, were en route to Hong Kong for the world's second international summit on human genome editing.

Hurlbut doesn't usually buy Wi-Fi on flights. This time, he did. But the connection was unstable until his plane started its descent. All the alerts that piled up during the 15-hour flight came in at once, an avalanche of the same dire announcement: He Jiankui had hacked the human germline.

Germline gene editing, also called heritable genome editing, refers to genetic changes made to eggs, sperm, or early stage embryos. Using in vitro fertilization to create a pregnancy this way is one of gene editing's most controversial applications. Unlike changes made to nonreproductive cells in the body—which don't extend past the person receiving them—changes to germ cells or embryos pass on to the next generation.

So the scientist who edits and implants human embryos doesn't just change one person's DNA. He potentially changes an entire bloodline. No known scientist had ever attempted anything like that.

Until He Jiankui.

With rising alarm, Hurlbut read how He had altered a gene called CCR5 on twin baby girls, Lulu and Nana, trying to make them immune to HIV. Later, a third baby was also born from the same experiment.

By the time Hurlbut arrived at the hotel where his fellow researchers were staying, the atmosphere had reached a pitch of frenzied anguish. Scientists had hoped to show the world they could manage gene editing responsibly. "This was like hiring a skywriter to put in the sky: We can't handle this. We can't control it," Hurlbut said.

News of He's actions left everyone reeling. Prominent voices called for a global moratorium on germline editing until robust guidelines could be hammered out. But those demands fizzled over the next few years, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic took center stage.

Germline editing faded from the spotlight, leaving massive safety concerns and ethical questions unresolved. Worldwide, there simply aren't adequate and enforceable safeguards to make sure something like the He Jiankui debacle doesn't happen again. Meanwhile, there's a growing interest in germline editing among certain biotech investors and enthusiasts—some with very deep pockets. They hope to usher in a future of affordable and accessible embryo editing as a reproductive service.



That's a prospect deeply concerning to many bioethicists, especially Christians like William Hurlbut who believe human life starts at conception. Hurlbut's son Ben is also a prominent bioethicist, and father and son have long been on the front lines of the debate over reproductive technologies. Nearly a decade ago, William was one of the sternest voices warning He not to tamper with human embryos. Later, Ben investigated the untold story behind He's work and what it reveals about the scientific community's latent fascination with germline editing.

Today, both are raising the alarm about the moral hazards of tinkering with life in its most delicate, developing form: the human embryo.

In 2012, biochemists Jennifer Doudna and Emmanuelle Charpentier discovered a revolutionary tool for DNA editing: CRISPR-Cas9. Essentially,



**He Jiankui speaks at the 2018 Human Genome Editing Conference in Hong Kong—his first public comments about his claim to have helped make the world’s first gene-edited babies.**

CRISPR is an immune system function allowing bacteria to identify and target snippets of an invader’s DNA. Doudna and Charpentier figured out how to repurpose that ability to make precise changes to any organism’s genome.

CRISPR wasn’t the first gene-editing technique. In fact, one of William Hurlbut’s Stanford professors won a Nobel Prize in 1980 for his pioneering gene-editing research. But early methods were costly and clumsy. CRISPR changed all that—making DNA alteration relatively easy, cheap, and fast.

By then, Hurlbut had already served on the President’s Council on Bioethics and was a consulting professor at his Stanford University alma mater. He found the ethical implications of CRISPR both fascinating and troubling. In 2016, Doudna came to Stanford to give a presentation on CRISPR. Afterward, Hurlbut introduced himself and asked Doudna what she was doing

to make sure scientists used her discovery for good.

After that, the two decided to launch a four-year project exploring CRISPR’s ethical ramifications and secured funding for several conferences, including one at the University of California, Berkeley. Just before the workshop, Doudna asked Hurlbut about adding one more person to the guest list, a young Chinese professor named He Jiankui.

Later that year, Hurlbut received an email from He. The researcher was visiting Stanford and wanted to meet. On a Friday afternoon, the two met for lunch at the school’s student union. His first question was about the U.S. debate over embryonic stem cell research.

“The people who are worried about embryos—that’s just a little splinter of society, right?” Hurlbut recalled He asking. “Just sort of fanatical people?”

Hurlbut hastened to assure He that wasn’t at all the case. Lots of people in the United States object to human embryo research, and even supporters often recognize ethical challenges with the practice.

He seemed baffled by that view of a human embryo. “How could something that tiny be as important as my 2-year-old?” he asked.

“Your 2-year-old was once that size,” Hurlbut countered.

For a second, He looked taken aback. But then the moment passed, and he doubled down on his original position.

Over the following months, Hurlbut and He met together several more times. They revisited the subject of human embryo research, especially the possibility of germline editing. During those visits, Hurlbut said, he gave He a repeated warning: Do not use CRISPR to experiment on human embryos.

In October 2018, Hurlbut and He met for the last time. At that meeting, He hinted he had an important paper coming out soon. But he refused to say what it was about.

“He wouldn’t tell me,” Hurlbut said. “But I suspected.” Regalado’s call confirmed his worst fears. It was anyone’s guess what might come next.

After news of He’s research broke, China’s state-run media ran glowing headlines about it for the first 48 hours, Hurlbut said. But they soon reversed course as international criticism exploded.

Organizers had originally planned to have He give a brief talk at the Hong Kong summit. But now, as rumors swirled, they gave him two hours to defend his reputation.



“It was a major scene,” Hurlbut said. “He tried to describe what he’d done in positive terms, but nobody bought it.”

Afterward, officials placed He under guard in a fourth-floor apartment owned by his employing university. But he could still make phone calls and send emails. A few days after the conference, Hurlbut got an email from He asking to talk. He wanted to share his side of the story in case something bad happened to him.

He also got in touch with William Hurlbut’s son Ben, a professor at Arizona State University and a scheduled speaker at the 2018 summit. Up to that point, Ben hadn’t had much contact with He. But now, he conducted extensive interviews with the disgraced researcher.

From those conversations, he concluded He wasn’t quite the rogue actor media accounts portrayed him to be: “He was taking his cues from international science, and from the ethos of technological innovation: move quickly and break things.”

Or, in this case, people.

While scientists universally condemned the secrecy and prematurity of He’s work, Ben said, many privately shared his interest in germline editing, and some had even encouraged He behind closed doors. He said he had discussed germline editing with more than 60 biotech leaders in China and the United States. Only four, including William Hurlbut, had fiercely opposed the notion.

At the end of the Hong Kong summit, organizers concluded with a call to define responsible uses of germline editing and lay the groundwork for eventual human clinical trials. “They basically stopped asking *whether*, and they started asking *how*,” Ben said.

Today, eight years later, Ben Hurlbut said there is significant and growing interest in germline editing among certain Silicon Valley investors and entrepreneurs. According to October reporting from the *MIT Technology Review*, three different U.S. startups last year declared their interest in developing gene-editing technology for eventual germline editing.

**A researcher handles a petri dish while observing a CRISPR-Cas9 process through a stereo microscope.**

One of these companies, Preventative, is backed by both OpenAI CEO Sam Altman and crypto billionaire Brian Armstrong. The other two startups are Manhattan Genomics—a company run by Cathy Tie, an entrepreneur briefly married to He Jiankui—and Bootstrap Bio.

While two out of three of these companies say they are only interested in editing embryos to cure genetic diseases, Ben Hurlbut said framing germline editing as a medical treatment is misleading. “It’s a tool used to fulfill a reproductive desire,” he said. “Not a tool used to treat a sick patient.”

In other words, germline editing doesn’t start with a patient. It creates one.

“You’re bringing a person into being in order to make them a subject of genetic modification,” Ben Hurlbut said. The only way for scientists to really understand the long-term risks of germline editing is to produce thousands of genetically modified children and just see what happens to them.

Germline editing alters the blueprint for a developing human, meaning every cell differentiating in the body will reflect any changes. As a result, any edits or mistakes will pass on to the person’s children, too. That’s especially concerning since researchers only have a basic grasp on the complexity of the human genome.

Meanwhile, Ben Hurlbut said there are actually very few couples where germline editing is the only way for them to have a healthy, genetically related child, since the process requires parents to use IVF and clinics already test embryos for common genetic diseases before implanting them.

Although this process raises other ethical issues, it nonetheless makes it difficult to argue there’s a medical need for germline editing, Ben said. He characterizes the germline editing debate as a “solution in search of a problem.”

Stanford law professor and bioethicist Hank Greely said implanting a genetically modified embryo is currently illegal in the United States and

most developed countries. But when it comes to U.S. law, Greely said, the practice is banned in a very peculiar and narrow way—one that isn't entirely watertight.

While many European countries explicitly ban changing the human germline genome, the U.S. prohibition is based on restrictions preventing the U.S. Food and Drug Administration from funding, or even considering, germline editing proposals. But the agency insists implanting gene-edited embryos requires its approval, effectively stonewalling such experiments.

But Greely thinks that claim might not hold up in court. Plus, these funding restrictions are up for annual reconsideration, and Manhattan Genomics is already calling for their revision.

Meanwhile, there are plenty of other countries where the legal status is unclear, creating a loophole for anyone looking to forge ahead with controversial research. In November, *The Wall Street Journal* reported Preventative

had started looking for just such a foreign research site. According to *WSJ* sources, the company had also identified a couple willing to partner with it, an allegation Preventative CEO Lucas Harrington denied.

Greely said there are few practical barriers to hinder someone intent on creating children this way. "They won't punish the babies for being born this way," he said. "And you will have made a point."

In the meantime, researchers in many U.S. states are able to lawfully conduct CRISPR experiments on human embryos with private funding—as long as they keep those experiments out of the womb. Unlike gene-editing therapies targeting nonreproductive cells, which rely on clinical trials in people already born, the primary way to test germline editing solutions without creating a pregnancy is to experiment on human embryos.

Arizona State University's Ben Hurlbut said it's impossible to know the scope of this research because academic institutions and private labs don't have to disclose their work. Institutions like Oregon Health and Science University and Columbia University have already published data from CRISPR experiments on human embryos. But others could be pursuing similar research more quietly.

Ben Hurlbut said the IVF industry, especially, has a huge financial incentive to get involved because germline editing requires parents to use IVF.

While most of this interest is framed in terms of healing genetic diseases, Ben Hurlbut pointed out the only known case of making gene-edited babies had nothing to do with finding a cure. The embryos He Jiankui experimented on were healthy. He wanted to go a step further and confer HIV immunity on children born into HIV-affected families because of the social stigma in China.

"That is what 'designer babies' means, right?" Ben Hurlbut said. Parents trying to genetically engineer their children with traits they can't pass on naturally. And those are actually reproductive desires getting recast as medical interventions. He said that's dehumanizing—and not just because it treats particular human beings as experiments.

"It basically asks us to care less about human integrity ... in the name of rendering human biology an object of manipulation," he said.

He Jiankui served a three-year prison term for "illegal medical practices." He finished his sentence in 2022 and told *The New York Times* in January he had resumed his gene-editing research, hoping to find a germline editing solution for Alzheimer's disease.

But he told the *Times* he only plans to experiment on mice—for now.

He maintains the three babies born from his previous research are alive and healthy. But no one has yet independently verified this claim. ■

**“You’re bringing a person into being in order to make them a subject of genetic modification.”**

**William Hurlbut speaks to reporters during the Human Genome Editing Conference in Hong Kong.**



VINCENT YU/AP



Rare genetic diseases  
pose a baffling medical puzzle  
CRISPR could solve

# WAITING FOR A MIRACLE CURE



**BY GRACE SNELL**

photo by Patrick Murphy-Racey/Genesis



Kyle and Christin Webb hold a photo album of their daughter Mabry Kate.



# Kyle and Christin Webb had their first baby on March 13, 2014. They named her Mabry Kate. And for the first few months of their daughter's life, she seemed like any other happy, healthy baby girl.

At 3 months old, she was just learning how to babble and giggle responsively.

Then, all of a sudden, Mabry Kate stopped smiling. Her playful reactions stopped, too. She started throwing up after every bottle and losing weight fast.

By the time she turned 4 months old, Mabry Kate weighed less than at her two-month checkup. But none of the doctors the Webbs consulted had any definitive answers.

Slowly, they started running tests and ruling out different conditions. At first, the Webbs felt that was a good sign—until they realized it probably meant their daughter had something very serious and even more rare.

Finally, the Webbs took Mabry Kate to a group of specialists at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, about four hours from their home in Knoxville, Tenn. A few days later, they returned a diagnosis: Krabbe disease, a rare inherited disorder causing progressive muscle paralysis, cognitive decline, and eventually, death.

Fewer than 5,000 people in the United States have Krabbe disease. It has no cure and only one existing treatment to slow its advance.

Krabbe disease is one of an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 rare diseases, depending on how these conditions are defined. The vast majority have genetic causes. Diagnosing and treating these disorders is exceptionally difficult because any given condition may only have a handful of known patients in the world. An estimated 95% of rare diseases don't have any effective treatments available.

But now, the advent of the elegant and efficient gene-editing tool CRISPR-Cas9 offers a glimmer of hope. While the technology raises ethical concerns related to the specter of designer babies, experts say CRISPR therapies targeting nonreproductive cells don't raise the same alarms as embryo editing and could be a lifeline for people suffering from rare diseases.

Researchers around the globe are racing the clock to develop treatments for millions of people—mostly children—battling debilitating hereditary conditions like Krabbe disease. Still, lab research and clinical trials take time, and that's exactly what many patients don't have. About 30% of children with a rare disease die before they turn 5 years old.

While they wait, families like the Webbs are left to grapple with unanswered questions and exist in an unimaginable tension: learning to celebrate and embrace each new day even as they live under the shadow of a fatal diagnosis.



Mabry Kate suffered from the more aggressive infantile onset form of Krabbe disease—a condition that's usually fatal by age 2. Doctors told the Webbs their daughter's condition had worsened too much for her to benefit from a stem-cell transplant, the only available treatment to slow the disease's effects.

For months, the Webbs had been desperate for an answer about what was wrong with their baby girl. Now, they had an answer—a devastating one they couldn't do anything about.

That's all too common for families dealing with rare genetic diseases. Dr. Jimmy Lin is the founder and president of the Rare Genomics Institute, a non-profit focused on helping rare disease patients. Lin said there are few medical experts and very little existing research available because these cases are so rare. Getting an accurate diagnosis can often take as long as five or 10 years.

Lin and his team try to speed up this timeline by helping patients access the latest genome sequencing technology. But even then, it's still difficult to



pinpoint exactly which genetic variations are causing a patient's symptoms. "Everybody is a different 3 billion-piece puzzle," Lin said.

Lin estimated the diagnostic success rate for this type of genetic mapping is still only about 30%. Many patients never discover the root cause of their suffering. And even if they do, they often don't have any existing treatment

**Kyle and Christin with Mabry Kate in 2014**

clearly and directly like that. "You've never been in control," she recalled. "I'm the one in control, and I have your family in my hands."

Those words steadied her even as everything seemed to spiral out of control. Three months later, just before Christmas, the Webbs received back the test result for Owen, the baby in Christin's womb: positive for Krabbe disease.

Meanwhile, Mabry Kate's condition continued to deteriorate quickly. The muscles in her arms and legs grew tight and spastic, her tiny hands balled into fists. Her eyes started flitting back and forth uncontrollably. She started struggling to breathe and had to be put on oxygen and a feeding tube.

Doctors told the Webbs Mabry Kate's hearing and vision were fading, too. But they don't think those senses ever fully deserted her. They put up a Christmas tree with twinkling lights, and their baby girl would stare at it with wide eyes alive with wonder.

That tree was still up a month later, when Christin started getting her little girl ready for a father-daughter dance with Kyle. She gave Mabry Kate a bath, carefully tugged on a polka dot dress, and painted each of her tiny fingernails.

But as Christin placed the finishing touch—a little hair bow—Mabry Kate started gasping for air. She'd struggled with breathing episodes before, but this time was different. She just couldn't seem to recover.

options. Since patient populations are so small, drug developers simply don't have the same financial incentive to invest in cures.

But, while each rare disease may not individually affect many people, altogether about 300 million people worldwide suffer from one of these conditions.

While the Webbs searched for a diagnosis, they refused to dwell on the worst-case scenario. "We never really let it sink into our brains that we might lose her," Kyle said. Then, they came face to face with that devastating, gut-wrenching certainty. On top of that, Christin had just found out she was pregnant again.

Since Krabbe disease is genetic, the baby in her womb had a 25% chance of inheriting it, too.

Yet, somehow, in the midst of her fear and grief, Christin felt God speak to her. She said it was one of the few times in her life she heard His voice



Christin started to panic. “Please don’t take her! Please don’t!” she remembers screaming as she tried desperately to help Mabry Kate catch her breath again.

Just then, Kyle walked in the door. He had been away buying flowers and a corsage, but he came straight home when Christin called him. Right behind him, Christin’s parents had arrived to take pictures before the dance. Her dad called 911.

At the hospital, Kyle cradled his daughter in his arms. He had a playlist of love songs he played for Mabry Kate every morning. Now, he played it one last time. Together, father and daughter waltzed around the hospital room.

For months, Kyle had been wrestling with why God would allow such suffering in his daughter’s life. But then, as he felt her soul leave her tiny body, he didn’t question anymore. “As beautiful as she was, I know she wasn’t there anymore,” he said. “And that she did go on to someplace better.”

**D**irectly after Mabry Kate’s funeral, the Webbs packed up and moved to Durham, N.C. “We really didn’t even have time to grieve,” Christin said. “We pretty much buried her and left.”

They focused all their attention on trying to save Owen’s life.

**Today, Owen is an exuberant fourth grader who loves telling jokes and helping his mom coach basketball.**

Moving close to Duke University Hospital provided the best hope for getting Owen the treatment his sister had been unable to receive. People with Krabbe disease have a mutation in the GALC gene, which keeps their bodies from producing an important enzyme needed to break down toxins and prevents nerve damage.

A stem-cell transplant provides the patient a fresh supply of cells rich in this GALC enzyme. But in order to have the best chance of working, treatment needs to start as early as possible.

Less than two months after Mabry Kate’s death, Owen was born on March 30, 2015. He arrived a month early, and hospital staff immediately whisked him away to the neonatal intensive care unit to make sure his lungs had enough time to develop.

As soon as he was strong enough, baby Owen began his treatment with 10 days of grueling chemotherapy. The goal was to wipe out his immune system so his body wouldn’t attack the donor cells infused into his system, Christin explained. After that, Owen received his treatment: an IV infusion of blood.

Developing a medical treatment for a rare disease can take decades, a timeline surpassing the average lifespan for many patients, according to former National Institutes of Health Director Dr. Francis Collins. Although many Americans associate Collins with his handling of COVID-19 controversies, he is also an accomplished geneticist whose research team identified the genetic cause of cystic fibrosis in 1989.

That discovery paved the way for drugs that have significantly extended the average lifespan for people with cystic fibrosis. But that was just one genetic disorder among thousands. Researchers didn’t have a scalable approach they could apply across the board, Collins said. That changed when CRISPR-Cas9 burst on the scene in 2012.

But delivering on CRISPR’s promise still requires research, money, and time. Right now, researchers are working on an estimated 150 active clinical trials of gene-editing therapies, but only



PHOTOS BY PATRICK MURPHY-RACEY/GENESIS



Casgevy, a treatment for sickle cell disease, has entered general medical use.

Medical solutions such as this one target only somatic cells, any of the ordinary, nonreproductive cells making up 99.99% of the human body. Unlike germline edits that target eggs, sperm, or early stage embryos, somatic cell edits don't pass on to future generations. And somatic cell therapies don't require research on human embryos.

Because of that, Collins argues this type of gene editing doesn't raise any new ethical concerns. "They are basically a very high-tech way of providing the kind of treatment which we've in the past done with things like drugs," he said.

Still, gene editing isn't without its risks. Scientists often use viruses to deliver the CRISPR gene editor to targeted cells, and those can cause strong reactions in some patients. In 2022, 27-year-old Terry Horgan died from a deadly immune system response to a CRISPR treatment for his Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

And while CRISPR is more accurate than previous types of gene editing, it still comes with the risk of mistakes and genetic damage. Rare Genomics Institute President Jimmy Lin said editing the wrong gene can cause things

**"None of us are guaranteed tomorrow. Even if we're healthy."**

able to return home for four months of outpatient care. Today, Owen is an exuberant fourth grader who loves telling jokes and helping his mom coach basketball.

He still suffers from some Krabbe disease symptoms. Muscle tightness keeps him in a wheelchair most of the time and fine motor skills are a challenge. His speech is a bit delayed, too. But none of that slows him down, his parents say.

"He never questions anything," Christin said. "He just loves life and rolls with it."

At church and school, people make sure to include Owen in activities, Kyle said. He's been able to play soccer and T-ball, too.

But some of those activities have become harder recently. Owen's transplant isn't a cure, and his parents have seen progression in his disease. The tightness in his legs has worsened, and he had to get Botox injections to help his muscles relax.

Owen's treatment is relatively new, so it's impossible to accurately predict what his life expectancy might be, Christin said. She knows some people with Krabbe disease still living in early adulthood. "But it's just hard to say," she said. "Every kid's so different."

Sometimes, the Webbs hear about a possible breakthrough therapy, and that gets their hopes up. But, so far, the stem cell transplant Owen already received is the only available treatment for Krabbe disease. When new health problems surface, Christin practices gratitude for just one day in which Owen is alive and happy.

"None of us are guaranteed tomorrow," she said. "Even if we're healthy." ■

like cancer and autoimmune diseases.

But Lin said it's important to remember adverse events aren't unique to CRISPR. All drugs come with risks and side effects. The whole point of clinical trials is to make sure new treatments are safe and effective for the patients who need them.

And that's a goal worth pursuing—even for just a single person. "They are created in the image of God," Lin said. "And that's why we go all out to be able to help."

**B**ack in 2015, the Webbs spent four months in the hospital while Owen received his treatment. During this time, they met lots of other families going through the same process. Some children responded well to the treatment. But at least seven families lost a child that year.

Owen ended up in the intensive care unit with blisters on his esophagus—a side effect of chemo—which made it hard for him to breathe.

But, gradually, he started to grow stronger. Eventually, he was



VOICES KATY FAUST

# Kids deserve better

After a decade of gay marriage, it's time to put children first

It's been over a decade since *Obergefell v. Hodges* reshaped American marriage law in the name of adult equality. What was hailed as a civil rights victory has left a trail of unintended, but entirely foreseeable, consequences for the most vulnerable: children.

As the founder of Them Before Us, I've spent years documenting how redefining marriage has redefined family itself at kids' expense. I've cataloged the stories of children who have suffered intentional mother- or father-loss in service to modern families, testified against bills that commercially sever them from one or both biological parents, decried efforts to legally erase a child's mom or dad from their birth records, and condemned the legal systems that treat parenthood as a customizable contract rather than a sacred bond rooted in nature.

Now, the evidence is undeniable. Culture, technology, and law—specifically nationalized gay marriage—have reduced children to commodities.

That's why we launched the Greater Than Campaign, a nationwide coalition of parents, advocates, faith leaders, and organizations determined to challenge *Obergefell* head-on. Our core argument? Children's rights to their own mother and father are greater than any adult's desires, identities, or notions of "equality."

Justice Anthony Kennedy's opinion in *Obergefell* spoke of the "constellation of benefits" marriage provides. He insisted there be no daylight between heterosexual and homosexual couples in that regard. But in matters of parentage, extending those benefits to two men or two women requires the law to accomplish what biology prohibits: making parents out of two adults of the same sex.

So over the last 10 years we have seen parenthood laws go gender-neutral, stripping away distinctions between mothers and fathers. Infertility has been redefined so motherless or fatherless children can be not only manufactured via IVF, but subsidized by insurance. Birth certificates now routinely record unrelated adults as "parents," and new pathways of child acquisition have been established that reject the child-protective safeguards of both biology and adoption.

These aren't minor adjustments. They represent a seismic shift. Marriage, the most child-friendly institution the world has ever known, became untethered from procreation and biology. Every child-acknowledging contour of the natural family—procreation, gender, biology—has been erased. Under the *Obergefell* regime, the only defining features of a family are adult "intent" and state-backed contracts.

The result? Children have been reduced to commodities in a system that prioritizes adult fulfillment over children's objective rights and needs.

Decades of social science affirm what common sense and millennia of human experience show: Children are most likely to thrive when raised by their married biological mother and father. Each brings irreplaceable benefits—complementary investment, stability, identity formation, and protection from higher risks found in non-biological households.

Making mothers and fathers optional has made children less secure, less known, and sometimes less safe. The Greater Than Campaign refuses to accept this as progress.

We're building a movement to restore child-centered family law, state by state. We'll push for statutes that name "mothers" and "fathers" explicitly, reject unrelated adults on birth certificates, prioritize married biological parents, and limit parenthood to biological or rigorously vetted adoptive paths. We'll insist that sex differences matter in child development and that biological bonds offer the strongest safeguard against harm.

When courts inevitably confront these challenges, the question won't be whether LGBTQ-identifying adults have "dignity." It will be: Do children need and benefit from their own mother and father, or is a state-assigned stranger just as good? The answer, backed by evidence and lived experience, is that nature and nature's God got it right. There's no substitute for a child's mother and father.

The Greater Than Campaign exists to say what too many are afraid to say: Kids deserve better. Their right to their mother and father is not bigotry, and state-sanctioned parental loss is not progress. It is injustice.

If we want individual children, as well as all of society, to flourish, marriage law must once again unite the child to the two people responsible for his or her existence. ■

—Katy Faust is the founder and president of Them Before Us; learn more and get involved at [greaterthancampaign.com](http://greaterthancampaign.com)

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**– SARAH A. – HEALTHSHARE MEMBER**

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# NOTEBOOK

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INTERNATIONAL

# Ready to rebuild

Residents of Israeli border communities celebrate a quiet return as the world focuses on Gaza

by ESTHER ARNUSCH

**N**ahal Oz looks and sounds like a building site. The smell of tar hangs in the air, and the beeping of work trucks is constant. A group of volunteers is putting together garden furniture for a sitting area on the communal lawn. Katya Soumrov, 47, is just one of the residents renovating her home.

Soumrov, who has lived in Nahal Oz since 2001, escaped with her life during Hamas' attacks on the community on Oct. 7, 2023. She says God intervened to keep her safe. "It was a dividing moment. God gave us life from death," she said. "Now we rebuild."

It's a sentiment shared by many in her community. Now, after more than two years of displacement, she and roughly half of Nahal Oz residents have come back to rebuild their lives.

Nahal Oz is a kibbutz—a communally run agricultural community—founded in 1951, not long after Israeli independence in 1948. It grows carrots, cotton, and wheat commercially and also runs a dairy farm and produces poultry. The independent pioneering spirit that birthed the kibbutzim across the country also forged the way for creating the new nation. That spirit remains, but the Hamas attack on Nahal Oz and other border kibbutzim has left its mark on

the people fighting to rebuild their houses and their spirits.

"Oct. 7 is with us all the time," said Beri Meirovich, who serves with Michal Magen on the Nahal Oz management team. Both survived the Hamas invasion in 2023. "We have neighbors who want to kill us," Meirovich added. Across the western fence, toward Gaza, the sound of explosions occasionally still pierces the air. But Magen says the pull of the land and the oasis created in the desert continues. He describes driving through the green fields at sunset: "This place is like the Garden of Eden. We desperately want to believe that everything is OK."

Not everyone has come back. Some unwilling to risk living so close to the Hamas-ruled territory have moved on, building their lives elsewhere due to a lack of security, fear for their children's future, and trauma from the Oct. 7 attacks.

But 90% of the overall population in the Gaza envelope has returned, despite the ongoing danger. It's a danger that the people of Nahal Oz have lived with for decades.

Since the early 2000s, Nahal Oz suffered under relentless mortar fire and rocket attacks from Gaza. The border was so close—just a half mile from the fence—that when bomb warnings would sound, residents only had seven seconds to reach shelter.

Over the years residents saw Hamas members training on the other side of the fence, heard →

Israeli farmers plow their land in Nahal Oz.





**An Israeli soldier stands in a wheat field set aflame by an incendiary in 2018.**

them digging tunnels beneath their homes, and watched incendiary balloons devastate their crops.

On Oct. 7, Nahal Oz and the other communities of the Gaza envelope bore the brunt of the Hamas attack that left more than 1,200 people dead. The Gaza envelope is a strip of about 4.5 miles that stretches around Gaza. It includes 47 small agricultural communities of between 300 and 900 residents each, as well as the city of Sderot with its 38,000 inhabitants.

Now, with the Trump administration's international Board of Peace, there is hope that the communities in the Gaza envelope can regain some sense of security. The board will oversee the Gaza Strip's "demilitarization, reconstruction and civil administration," although its efforts have yet to progress from rhetoric to reality.

Some in Nahal Oz hope the Board of Peace plan will entice people back to the kibbutz, especially the newer generation. Tanya Shoshanni, 54, is a tour guide, but during the last two years, with tourism at an all-time low, she coordinated help for terror victims. "Recovery is hardest

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**The challenge for a new generation is believing that the Gaza envelope's future can look different from its past.**

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for young people in their 20s and 30s," she said. "Older generations have established patterns and duties to go back to."

The challenge for a new generation is believing that the Gaza envelope's future can look different from its past. Israel's early leaders expected the borders to grow safer as the nation solidified over time, and they believed relations with their neighbors would eventually normalize. But from the beginning, it was never simple.

Daniel Gordis, commentator and scholar, told me that on Oct. 7, the social contract between the state of Israel and its citizens was broken: "The Zionist notion that the Jewish people as a people are secure in their ancient homeland was shattered."

The current government desperately wants to show the opposite is true. Almost immediately after the Hamas attacks, the government began making moves to rebuild. On Oct. 19, 2023, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu established the Tkuma Directorate with a \$6 billion budget over five years to spend in the envelope. Since then it has renovated public and residential buildings and rebuilt infrastructure, creating the conditions for residents to return.

The region now has 3,000 more residents than before the attack, and the goal is to double the population to 120,000 people by 2033. As the agricultural sector of Nahal Oz recovers and expands, the kibbutz aims to draw new families. Leaders hope to triple the number of homes, build a new facility for the elderly, open a secure kindergarten, and expand its sports facilities.

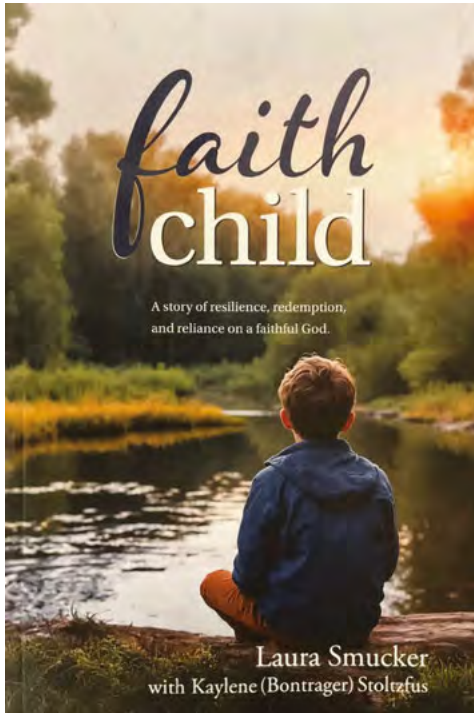
Gilad Yavetz, who owns renewable energy business Enlight, believes Nahal Oz could become a showcase for agricultural technology. His 23-year-old son, Yiftach, led the force that confronted the terrorists who stormed the community, preventing a larger massacre. Yiftach died during the battle.

Yavetz feels a duty to strengthen the community his son died to protect: "My son helped save 400 people. I want to follow his path." ■

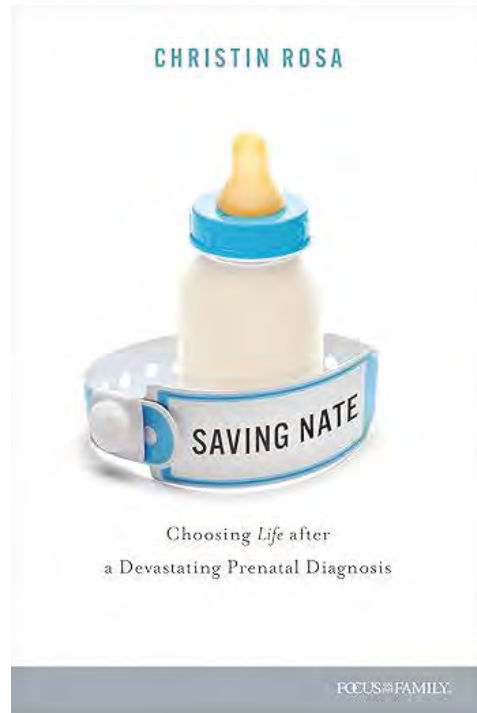
—*Esther Arnusch is a freelance writer who lives in Israel*

TRUE STORIES, REAL PEOPLE

# CHOOSING LIFE



*A severely handicapped girl, an unthinkable crime, a shocking pregnancy; yet redemption.*



*Advised to abort, the Rosas instead fought for their unborn son's life.*

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POLITICS

# Senate shake-up

Texas Democrats gunning for red seat

by ELISA PALUMBO



→ Texas Democrats are hopeful they might flip a U.S. Senate seat after their party chose

**James Talarico**, a Christian progressive, in the March 3 primaries. Talarico proved to be the safer option for voters. His opponent, firebrand Rep. Jasmine Crockett from Dallas, is known for her disagreements with President Donald Trump. Talarico, a former teacher and Presbyterian seminarian from Austin, is flipping the Democratic stereotype on its head by being an outspoken Christian with a liberal worldview. His openness about his faith and his claim that not all Christians are conservative struck a cord with Democrats: He beat

Crockett by nearly 7 points. Party leaders hope having such a strong, seemingly moderate candidate will put Republicans in danger of losing their seat, especially since the GOP doesn't yet have its own candidate. Incumbent John Cornyn, in office since 2002, narrowly beat Attorney General Ken Paxton by 1 point, but neither candidate won 50% of the vote. They must now face a primary runoff in May ahead of the November midterms. The runoff serves as a proxy for the fight splitting the Republican Party: Paxton, who has been AG since 2015, is considered the "pro-Trump" candidate, while Cornyn is the more moderate conservative.

## NORTH CAROLINA VACANCY

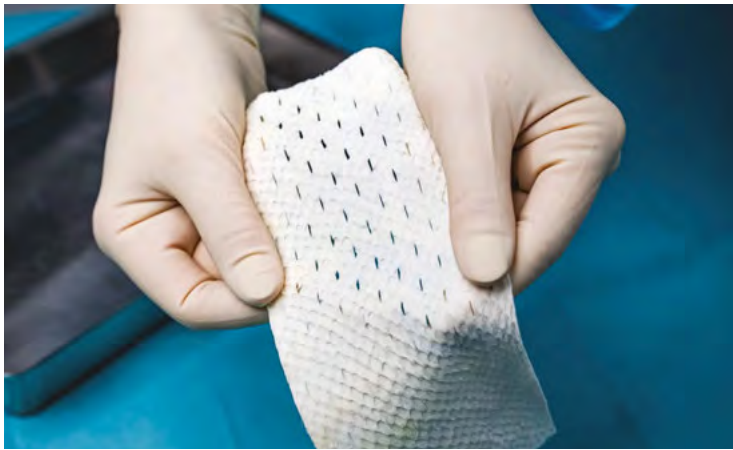
With Republican incumbent Sen. Thom Tillis not seeking reelection, his seat is up for grabs in a state that typically leans red. The midterm will be between former Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper and former head of the Republican National Convention, Michael Whatley. Though Trump handpicked Whatley to lead the RNC and heavily favors him as the Republican candidate, Cooper has not lost a statewide election since becoming the state's attorney general in 2001. Cooper served as AG for four terms before becoming governor in 2017, where he served for two terms. Name familiarity gave Cooper an upper hand in the primaries. He won 92% of the Democratic vote, while Whatley only received support from 64% of the GOP. Republicans are the least confident in defending this race, making Democrats optimistic that they will secure the seat and move them closer to control of the U.S. Senate. —E.P.

## MICHIGAN MOMENT

An open Senate seat left by Democrat Gary Peters' retirement may prove troublesome for his party in Michigan in November. Though U.S. Rep. **Haley Stevens** is considered the establishment favorite, after she received support from Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), state Sen. Mallory McMorrow may come out ahead in the Aug. 4 primary. But Trump-endorsed Republican Mike Rogers, who narrowly lost the Senate seat in 2024, is hopeful this will be his year. —E.P.



TALARICO: GABRIEL V. CARDENAS/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES; STEVENS: TOM WILLIAMS/CQ-ROLL CALL, INC VIA GETTY IMAGES



## MEDICINE

# Creative wound care

Medical experts use unexpected materials to effectively treat fatal wounds

by HEATHER FRANK

➔ At first glance, fish skin and clay seem like primitive tools in comparison to recent medical advancements like 3D-printed implants and AI-designed antibiotics. But new research suggests both materials could be the best treatment options for specific types of deep wounds.

The tragic New Year's Day fire at Le Constellation bar in Switzerland's Crans-Montana ski resort left 41 dead and many more hospitalized for severe

burns. Lausanne University Hospital responded by partnering with Icelandic company Kerecis to treat burn victims with a cod skin-based fabric. Cod skin grafted onto a burn encourages healthy human cells to grow underneath the cod skin and heal the damaged tissue. Because the risk of transmitting viral disease or infection from cold-water fish to humans is low, the cod fish are minimally processed and retain their high omega-3 fatty acid content. These fatty

acids are thought to accelerate healing. Dr. Anthony de Buys Roessingh, Lausanne University Hospital's burns unit coordinator, reported that in some instances the cod graft completely closed up and healed skin under burn wounds without requiring any further treatment. The cod skin has been particularly beneficial for victims with burns covering over 30% of their bodies, burns too large to be sufficiently covered with healthy human skin alone.

Biomedical engineers at Texas A&M University have also recently developed an innovative bandaging method, using clay.

While applying pressure can stop external bleeding, no effective method exists for quickly stopping fatal internal bleeding. In a study published Feb. 6 in *Advanced Science*, the engineers detailed an injectable bandage composed of nanosilicate clay particles. The bandage, which reduced clotting time by around 70% in comparison to untreated controls, is delivered to the bleeding site with the help of an expanding foam. The foam expands only when exposed to body heat to quickly fill the wound site. The nanosilicate particles are frozen in place within the foam matrix, where they can target blood coagulation at the wound site without traveling to other sites to form undesirable blood clots. "If these materials get into the first aid kits in an ambulance as well as a soldier's backpack, they can save a lot of lives," study author Akhilesh Gaharwar said in a press release.

## SUGAR CRASH

It's well known that sugary drinks like Red Bull, Coke, and frappuccino aren't waistline-friendly. A recent analysis suggests these sweet beverages are also linked to heightened anxiety in teens. A team of British and Lebanese scientists analyzed nine studies on the relationship between diet and mental health. In a review article published Feb. 10 in the *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics*, they found that teenagers who heavily consumed sugary beverages were 34% more likely to have an anxiety disorder. The study authors noted that while their analysis does not show a causal relationship, it might be useful to perform studies evaluating whether cutting back on sugary drinks reduces anxiety symptoms. Nearly one-third of U.S. adolescents suffer from an anxiety disorder, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. —H.F.





## TECHNOLOGY

# Stolen history

Art and antiquities thieves are getting bolder, and most museums aren't prepared

by BEKAH BERNHARDT

➔ As recently as 2006, many fine art galleries put marbles behind picture frames as a safety mechanism. If a thief tried to lift a valuable painting off the wall, the marbles would spill onto the floor and alert bystanders to the robbery.

Shortly after learning this, artist Scott Richter and Bill Anderson, formerly president of *The Atlantic Monthly*, began patenting an alarm that would sound when a painting is moved. That was the beginning of Art Guard, a company that provides sensor technology now used by galleries like Sotheby's and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

According to Anderson, security at museums and art galleries has come a long way since marbles, with mechanisms like motion-triggered alarms and even AI-powered surveillance that can anticipate the warning signs of theft. The majority of museums “do take [security] seriously, but not seriously enough,” Anderson said.

That was made painfully obvious in October after criminals working in broad daylight stole more than \$100 million in crown jewels from the Louvre Museum. One in a string of heists that has continued into this year, the robbery highlighted how many museums rely on outdated surveillance systems. It also

showed how criminals are getting bolder, many of them taking items that are easy to break down rather than instantly recognizable artwork. While the iconic theft generated plenty of buzz in the fine arts community, few museums are making drastic changes to tighten their own security.

Last year, thieves targeted several museums. On the morning of Sept. 25, burglars broke into England's Bristol Archives and made off with about 600

**A decorative bow worn by Empress Eugénie was among the crown jewels stolen from the Louvre Museum in October.**

artifacts from the British Empire and Commonwealth Collection. The purloined items included an American emancipation token dating back to 1838, carved figurines, jewelry, and pins from the East India Company.

Also in September, the U.K.'s Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Art Gallery reported the theft of artifacts that included 17 antique pocket watches. The same month, thieves broke into the geology and mineral gallery of France's National Museum of Natural History and stole more than \$700,000 worth of historic gold samples. In another robbery at Adrien Dubouché National Museum in Limoges, thieves stole porcelain artifacts valued at over \$11 million.

On Oct. 15, thieves broke into an off-site storage facility at the Oakland Museum of California and took over 1,000 items, "the majority consisting of historic memorabilia," according to a museum press release. And in late January, thieves stole an entire collection of silver from a Dutch museum.

But the Louvre heist made the most headlines because of the iconic target, not because the robbery was particularly sophisticated, according to Tim Carpenter, former head of the FBI's Art Crime Team and founder of Argus Cultural Property Consultants. "It was kind of a brute force attack," Carpenter said. "This wasn't Mission Impossible."

Shortly after the museum opened on Oct. 19, criminals broke into the building using a truck-mounted basket lift to enter a second story balcony of the Apollo Gallery. A 2018 audit of the museum flagged that very balcony as a security vulnerability.

Once inside, the thieves smashed display cases, grabbed eight pieces of jewelry, and made their getaway on motorcycles. The whole operation lasted about eight minutes. Police apprehended several suspected culprits, but they have yet to recover the stolen jewels.

The theft showed that the Louvre was woefully underprepared. Alarms did sound when the thieves entered the window and broke the cases. But guards arrived too late because the Louvre's control room didn't have enough moni-

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## **"Museums are not strongholds nor are they secret vaults."**

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tors, meaning the guards couldn't watch a live feed of the robbery. On Feb. 24, the Louvre's director resigned in part due to criticism over the high-profile heist.

Carpenter noted it's fairly typical for famous museums like the Louvre to have mediocre security systems: "I've seen museums that have half a billion dollars in paintings hanging in a gallery without a single camera and exit doors that lead out to the parking lot." He declined to name names.

According to Carpenter, European museums often have antiquated surveillance because the buildings themselves are usually quite old. "That means the building is a piece of art. It too, has to be treated as part of the collection," Carpenter said. Integrating new security technologies could alter or even damage the historical property.

But even for American collections, typically housed in newer museum buildings, budgets get in the way of security updates. In fact, museums often consider security as contrary to the goal of displaying artifacts to the public.

Museum leaders described their dilemma in an open letter published in French newspaper *Le Monde* shortly after the Louvre heist. The letter was signed by 57 museum leaders including Max Hollein, CEO of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Museums are not strongholds nor are they secret vaults," the letter said. "Their essence, while creating the safest environment for art and its audiences, lies in their openness and accessibility."

Carpenter appreciates that emphasis as a patron himself. "I want to be able to go in and have personal experience with the artwork, but I also want them to protect it," he said. "That needs to be an equal part of every museum's mission."

Increasingly, items being taken are "things that can be monetized quickly," Bill Anderson said. "So gold and jewels become the primary target." Unless authorities recover it, future generations will never have a chance to see the emerald necklace worn by the wife of Napoleon III, one of the items stolen from the Louvre.

In the wake of multiplying attacks, some museums have tried to beef up their security. In late December, officials installed metal bars across the balcony windows the criminals used to break into the Louvre. Museum leaders said they will allocate more than \$90 million to hardening security.

Following the Louvre heist, Bill Anderson said he received about 15 calls from museum officials asking about Art Guard services. But Timothy Carpenter said most museums have what he calls a kind of victim mentality: "Like, that can't happen here, until it does happen."

That's why Carpenter believes even the Louvre heist won't be enough incentive for most museums to get serious about the risk of theft: "We do expect to see this kind of crime on the increase." ■

## SCIENCE

# Every river in the world

Online game trains AI to track river data

by EVANGELINE SCHMITT



With an online game and a deep learning tool, environmental scientist Shuo Zong at the ETH University in Zürich, Switzerland, studies river ecosystems on a global scale. A “game” at [lab.citizenscience.ch](http://lab.citizenscience.ch) shows two satellite photos of rivers. The player is asked to click on which river is “wilder.” The site gives pointers, but Zong says they’re hardly needed. “We trust the average perception of participants. It’s actually quite good,” Zong says.

The project aims to compile data about ecosystem health for every river in the world. It’s not just about wildness, Zong explains, but caring for resources that underpin human society. “Everything we rely on—society, business—comes directly or indirectly from nature.”

Rivers are critical for human development. Many power centers and AI data centers use river water as a cooling mechanism, and in many parts of the world, rivers remain the primary method of transportation.

But for these reasons, river ecosystems often suffer negative impact from human activity. Zong wants to create a tool that monitors river conditions worldwide over time. “Globalization and urbanization are everywhere, now we need data to match,” he says. Better data can guide policymaking and development strategies. Using satellite photos provides data about remote rivers that are difficult for ecologists to study.

Even with thousands of participants, analyzing every river is a colossal task. That’s where AI comes in. Zong uses the game responses to train a deep learning AI model. Deep learning AI is modeled after the human brain: It learns from examples, not instructions. With the game’s responses, the AI model creates a ranking that can be applied to every river.

Zong is currently publishing a paper about his work, but the online game stays open. More participation can refine the AI tool further. In the meantime, Zong has launched a similar game for mountain ecosystems.

## RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE

For five years, volunteers in New Orleans have loaded cypress and tupelo saplings into boats and paddled to remote wetlands, aiming to restore the protective barrier that historically shielded New Orleans from storms. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina ripped through the wetlands, destroying forests already weakened by the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet Canal. The 1960s-era canal brought saltwater into freshwater ecosystems, poisoning the trees. It was blamed for funneling Katrina’s surge into the city.

In 2009, the canal closed, making the first reforestation efforts possible. Several groups joined to form the **Central Wetlands Reforestation Collective** with a goal of replanting 30,000 trees.

“In our wildest dreams we never thought we’d be able to plant some of the areas that we are now planting,” Meraux Foundation’s Blaise Pezold said. “It was thought to be too low, too salty, Katrina messed it up too much.” But salinity levels in the water continued to decrease, and trees planted eight years ago stand 30 feet tall today.

Most of the collective’s organizations will meet their planting quotas this year.

“We’re one part of a larger movement to resist this sort of ‘doomerism’ mindset, and to show that recovery is possible,” said Common Ground Relief director Christina Lehw. —E.S.





## MONEY

# Market momentum

Wall Street attracting younger investors

by TODD VICIAN

➔ About 25% of American adults want to start investing in the stock market this year, and younger adults are leading the way. Almost half (42%) of those aged 18–29 said they are considering investing for the first time before year’s end, according to a recent CivicScience survey. The answers validate analysis by the JPMorganChase Institute that shows young adults have shifted from buying a starter home to investing in the stock market to build wealth.

More than one-third of 25-year-olds contributed to investment accounts in 2024, six times more than the previous decade, according to JPMorgan researchers. Lower-income

individuals invested at a greater pace than investors above the median income level during this period. This steep rise coincided with a rise in the median age of first-time homebuyers to 40 last year, compared to 32 a decade ago, according to the National Association of Realtors. The typical sale price for a smaller, more affordable starter home exceeded \$260,000 last year, more than double the 2015 price of \$110,000, according to Redfin data. Analysts at JPMorgan caution that greater reliance on the stock market, with its short-term volatility, could lead to increased financial instability compared to home-appreciation expectations.

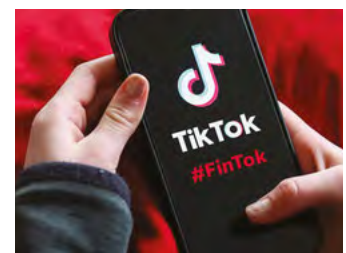
## OVER HALF OF AMERICANS LACK EMERGENCY FUNDS

The National Foundation for Credit Counseling said Feb. 12 consumer use of debt for necessities, instead of discretionary spending, reached an all-time high last year. Total American household debt is approaching \$19 trillion, according to the Federal Reserve, and a record number of consumers lack enough money to repay debts after covering basic necessities. Analysts expect the trend to continue in 2026. Less than half of Americans say they have enough cash on hand to cover an unexpected \$1,000 emergency, according to a recent Bankrate survey. Almost 30% have more credit-card debt than emergency savings.

For those trying to dig themselves out of a hole, paying down credit-card debt and increasing emergency savings is proving difficult. Just 31% of respondents said they are doing both at the same time. Bankrate financial analyst Stephen Kates recommends increasing income rather than searching for more expenses to cut when building an emergency fund. —T.V.

## “FINFLUENCER” SAVINGS

Americans are increasingly following and finding savings from social media influencers. People who frequent FinTok scrolled for more than 400 hours, on average, last year in TikTok’s financial advice ecosystem. The validity of advice on social media is debatable, but three-fourths of 2,000 respondents in a Talker Research survey said they trust the advice they got. Almost 60% said they saved over \$400 by trying money-saving trends like low-budget living, no-spend September, and the budget bucket challenge. Social media ranks third, behind friends and family and financial advisers, for financial advice, according to an analysis by Bankrate. —T.V.



C R O S S W O R D

# You can say that again

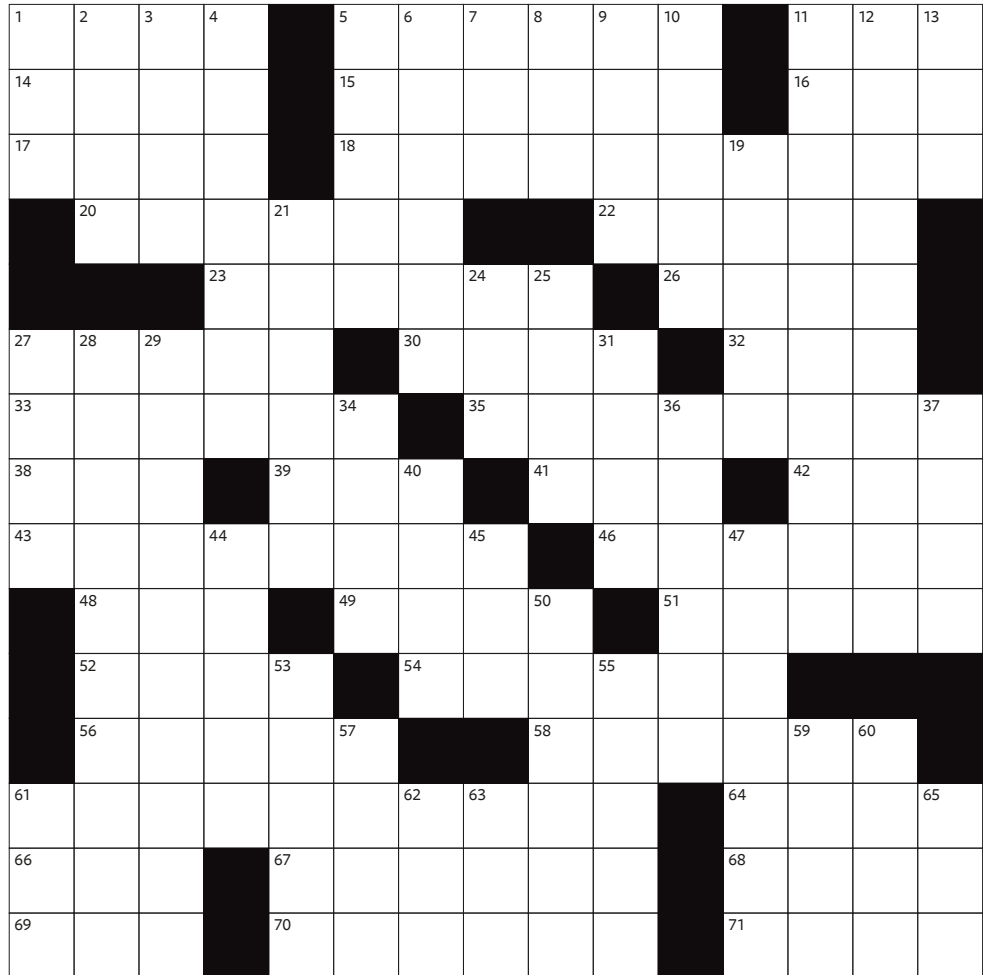
by DON MCCRORY

**Across**

- 1 Bengal and Bombay, e.g.
- 5 Bonked on the head
- 11 \_\_\_\_mart
- 14 Brisk pace
- 15 Pop singer Grande
- 16 Brisk pace
- 17 \_\_\_\_ Lee (dessert brand)
- 18 Uninterested directors
- 20 Camped
- 22 Lays away
- 23 Children of Japanese immigrants
- 26 Exactly
- 27 Pushy person
- 30 Mario Paint console, initially
- 32 Elem. school basics
- 33 Like some grapes
- 35 Beginning of Santa's letter to Rudolph
- 38 Perform
- 39 Surgery sites, for short
- 41 "Sprechen \_\_\_\_ Deutsch?"
- 42 \_\_\_\_ Ming
- 43 Stinky chicken, for example
- 46 "Totally rad"
- 48 Univ. in Troy, N.Y.
- 49 Butter servings
- 51 Put out, as a fire
- 52 Oscar \_\_\_\_ Renta
- 54 Starr of the comics
- 56 Model material
- 58 Longtime Olympics TV host
- 61 Jack-o'-lantern, maybe
- 64 Castle defense
- 66 Early I.S.P.
- 67 Beginning
- 68 Singer Paul \_\_\_\_ with the memoir "My Way"
- 69 View from an airplane window
- 70 Completely
- 71 Loch \_\_\_\_ monster

**Down**

- 1 Price abbr.
- 2 "I smell \_\_\_\_"
- 3 Ripped
- 4 Was an obsessive fan of, in slang
- 5 Toyland characters



- 6 Wears away
- 7 It's what we breathe
- 8 Church group
- 9 They justify the means, perhaps
- 10 Blot gently
- 11 Question prompted by an esoteric Halloween costume
- 12 High-end RVs
- 13 Took control
- 19 Beginning of many prayers
- 21 Lose interest, like 18A
- 24 Ill. neighbor
- 25 Gets the picture
- 27 High flyers
- 28 Logging tool?
- 29 What birds with worms do
- 31 Stated
- 34 Mention casually, as a name or suggestion
- 36 Double-checks the math
- 37 There might be one in your hotel room
- 40 Q-tip, e.g.
- 44 De Gaulle's birthplace
- 45 Copier tray abbr.
- 47 Ferry operator
- 50 Something meant to be kept
- 53 "Same here"
- 55 Recognize silently
- 57 Have \_\_\_\_ to one's head
- 59 Popular steak sauce
- 60 Fifth Avenue retailer
- 61 Makes an R.V. trip pricey
- 62 Giant slugger Mel
- 63 G.I. entertainers
- 65 Prof helpers

Bonus clues and puzzle solution on page 110

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Does our crossword have you puzzled? Before checking the answers, try these additional clues:

**Across**

- 54 Country songstress Lee
- 56 Lightweight wood

**Down**

- 1 Types of scans
- 4 Two familiar boys names
- 8 Scottish negative





VOICES **ANDRÉE SEU PETERSON**

## Reality crisis

What happens when we can no longer trust everything we see?

**A**fter a historic January storm, I said to my Russian ESL student, “I saw the videos of people sliding down snowdrifts from their ninth-story apartment windows in Kamchatka!” The 30-year-old Nikolai smiled across the generation gap and said, “Two-story snowdrifts. That was AI.”

Can we all date the moment when something flipped in our heads and we knew we would never again be able to trust our eyes? Mine was the time I texted my son a YouTube short of a goat jumping agilely from crevice to crevice between two mountain peaks till he reached the bottom. My son’s jaded reply: “AI.” More recently he advised me: “Ma, if someone ever calls you claiming it’s me, verify with a question that only you and I would know the answer to.”

AI is no longer just a high school cheating tool or a disappointing upgrade to the Encyclopædia Britannica. It’s now engendering a profound reality crisis. I sit before a video of a fantastic downhill ski run—and I don’t believe it. I watch a man rescue a baby elephant and return it to a grateful mother—and I don’t believe it. A video pops up of an old man sitting by a fireplace giving life advice, and I sit there with my bowl of yogurt and say, “Fake fire. Fake lip movements. AI.”

My husband and I watched the testimony of a Muslim woman who had a vision of Jesus and left Islam. Here’s the thing: I actually believe that Muslims are having visions and dreams of Jesus. But the longer I watched, the more unsure I became. There was something about the monotony and cadence of the voice, and the occasional oddly pronounced word (like the way my GPS says certain street names funny). There was a generic quality to her narrative, devoid of those

quirky details one finds in real-life biographies. It seemed like a ninth grader’s attempt at historical fiction.

But be of good cheer! As the devil steps up his game, so does the Lord.

Back in seminary days, I learned an arcane secret about Psalm 119: Its 22 stanzas correspond to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each stanza has eight verses, all starting with the same letter. Key words are repeated throughout the psalm, hinting at an embedded message in a pattern of eight. In class we outlined the chiasmic structure of a selected passage in Isaiah, in which a sequence of thoughts is presented and then repeated in reverse order, with a third idea inserted in the middle, such that the middle idea is emphasized by virtue of its position.

Marks of divinity! Take that, Graf-Wellhausen and your school of Higher Criticism!

Surely that’s as far and deep as we can go, I thought. Not so! Along comes Elon Musk’s AI bot Grok, bristling with computing and analyzing power that blows out of the water all prior contenders and has an utter indifference to the religious controversies of men. When fed instructions to find contradictions in the Bible, it reports back: not contradiction but complexity. The four Gospels, it explains, are what you would expect from four valid eyewitness accounts to the same events.

Then the program kicks into high gear, digging below literary analysis to analysis of code, and finds that the Bible is a living code. We have now entered the rarefied realm of “gematria”—secret patterns of numerical values of Hebrew letters and meaningful repetitions of 7s, 4s, and 40s, not only in the literary content but in the frequency of words and the lengths of sections.

But further up and further in!

There is something known to mathematicians as the “Fibonacci sequence,” a pattern of numbers (each one is the sum of the two before it) found with curious frequency in nature. Its applications are detected also in biology—in the way trees branch and leaves on a stem or bracts on a pine cone are arranged. Grok finds the same spiral pattern evident in Scripture’s use of words and refrains.

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Romans 11:33).

Meanwhile, down here in the shadowlands, the air thickens and the sights before our eyes appear increasingly confusing. A face or voice that is a dead ringer of my son’s may one day phone from jail to ask for money, and it will not be him. Some nights I lie in bed and wonder if we really ever went to the moon.

The Word of God is a light in a dark place. We always said that that was true. And now, more than ever before, the darker it becomes, the brighter His Word shines. ■



Ocasio-Cortez (left) and Tlaib

## Under the radar

Democratic socialists have influence far beyond New York

by LEIGH JONES

→ Emma Freire took a deep dive into socialism this month for her cover story on Zohran Mamdani (p. 64). Mamdani’s win in New York made headlines in part because he’s one of the few outspoken members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Given its seemingly low number of acolytes, Americans might consider the DSA a fringe group, but Emma discovered its reach extends much further than people realize.

**Mamdani is the current face of the DSA. What other politicians or candidates are openly embracing the party?** Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is considering

a run for president in 2028, and she’s a proud democratic socialist. In Congress, there’s also Rep. Rashida Tlaib and former Rep. Jamaal Bowman. The DSA has some very young rising stars. Their youngest elected official is Hannah Shvets, an undergraduate at Cornell University. She got elected to the city council in Ithaca, N.Y., in 2025.

**What about politicians who keep their affiliation with the DSA quiet? How would I know if there’s a DSA-backed candidate in my local government?**

That can be tricky. A DSA member usually appears on the ballot as a Democrat. You have to do your research. Stu Smith

is an investigative analyst with the Manhattan Institute who researches the DSA. He told me he follows local politics, but even he was recently surprised to discover a member of his city council belongs to the DSA. But some locations are less surprising. You can expect to find a lot of DSA members in blue cities, like Portland, Ore., and Minneapolis. Smith thinks college towns are also likely to elect DSA candidates because they have a lot of students and often the rents are high.

**The DSA isn’t just focused on U.S. politics. What kinds of activities does it do internationally?** The DSA has an international committee that has contact with socialist and far-left movements all around the world. It organizes trips to Cuba for its members who are then expected to do pro-Cuba organizing afterward. The members of the international committee are generally highly educated and took decolonial studies. Zohran Mamdani’s father, Mahmood Mamdani, is a prominent thinker in this field. Decolonial studies center on the idea that colonial power structures—which feature American hegemony—are still exploiting the developing world.

**One of your sources found the DSA’s international work more alarming than its national political activism. Why?** Stu Smith told me these DSA members buy into the taking points put out by communist regimes. They visit Venezuela and believe former President Nicolás Maduro “was just a labor organizer, a bus driver who became president one day.” Smith says they also believe Cuba is a wonderful place because it is LGBTQ-friendly. Any problems in Cuba are purely the result of America’s embargo. He thinks if Americans knew about these radical views, they’d be “running for the hills.” ■

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