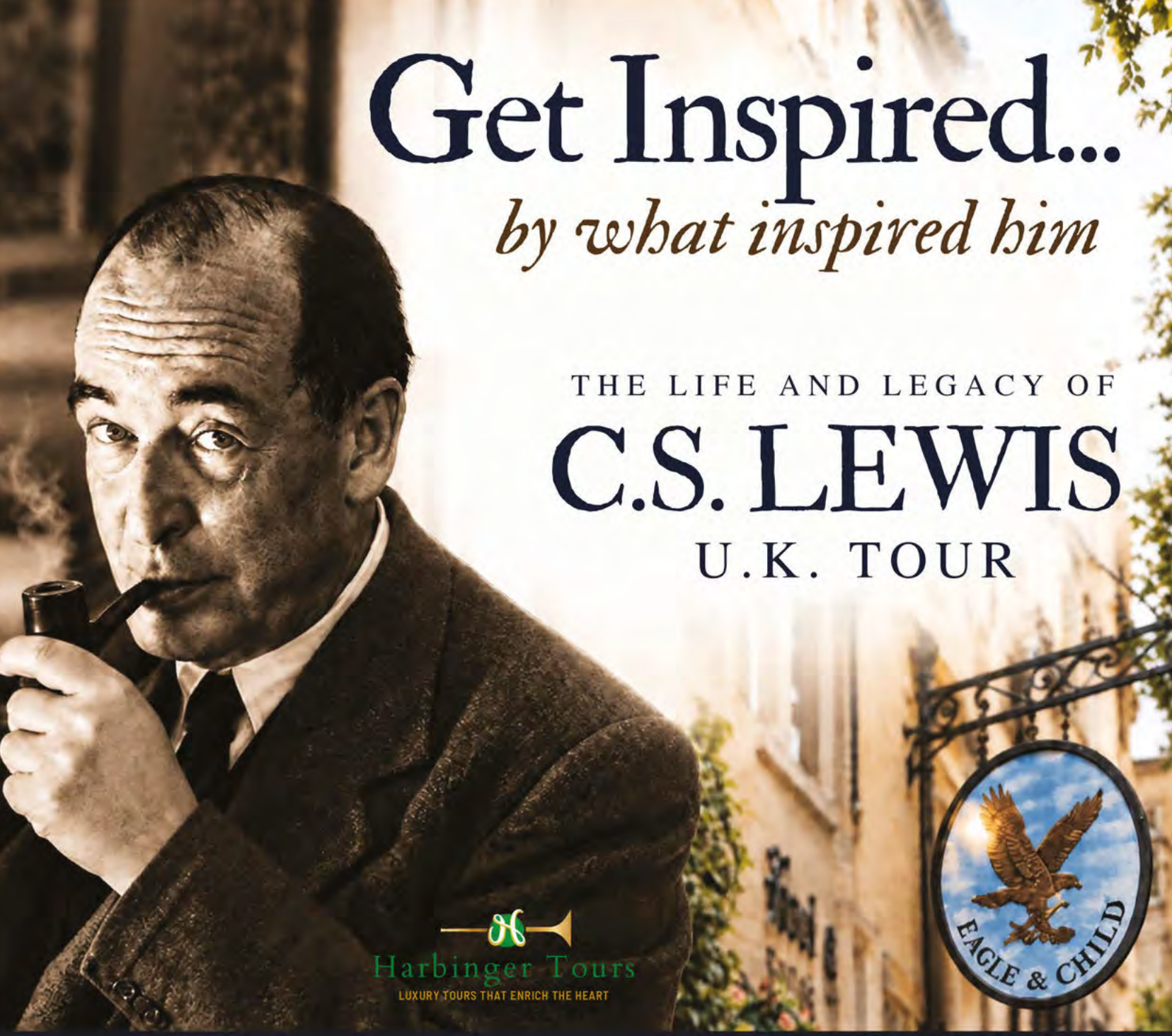
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PERSISTENT THREAT

Names and locations change, but Islamic terrorists remain active around the world *p.68*





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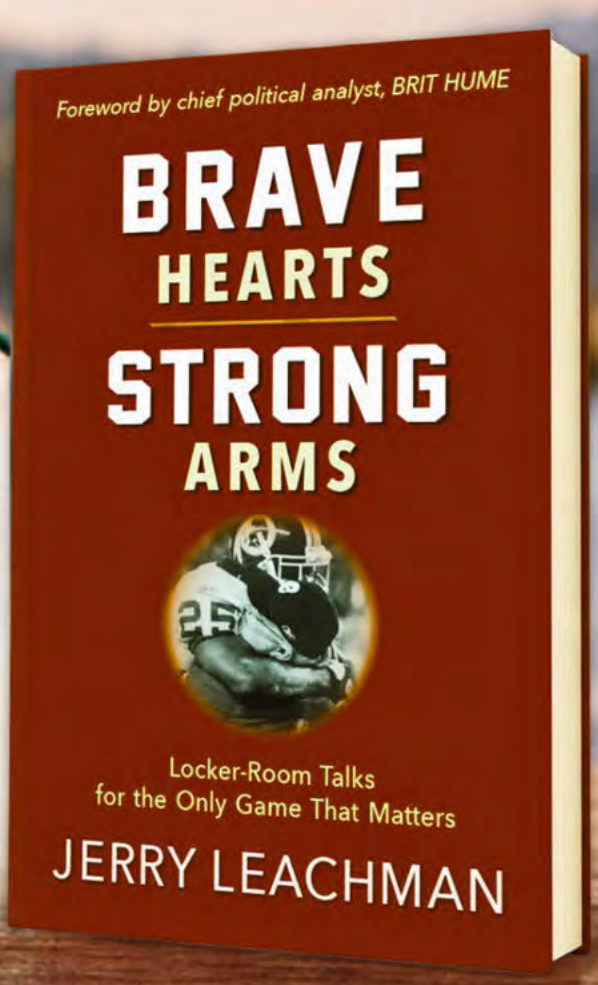
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"The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." —Psalm 24:1

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WORLD NOTES

I've been sharing news of WORLD—and occasional personal notes—in this space for just more than 10 years. My first Thanksgiving column was due the day before the 2016 presidential election. I admitted then that not knowing how the election would turn out made it easier to write about being thankful for the outcome, whatever it would be. Ten years later, I'm still learning to be thankful in all circumstances.

This year, as an organization, we have much to be thankful for. In the past few weeks, we have noted two milestones.

First, we celebrated 15 years and more than 100 million downloads of our daily news podcast, *The World and Everything in It*. In the early years, when downloads were measured in thousands, not millions, we did not know how long we would be able to keep doing it. We were thankful for the opportunity then, and we are thankful now for a program that serves our audience as well as anything we do.

Also, I mentioned last November that our daily video news program for public schools, *The World from A to Z*, was consistently viewed in about 35,000 classrooms every day. One year later, that number has risen to 46,000. Most are middle school classrooms, with some high school and older elementary classes in the mix. We make the program free, with almost all of the funding coming from our donors. That means thousands of public school classrooms are receiving biblically objective reporting every day, even though the program does not employ explicitly Christian language. That's something we can be thankful for.

Of course, neither of these programs—and none of WORLD's work—would be possible without the people God has brought alongside us. We are thankful for staff members who devote their talents and energies to this work, for readers, listeners, and viewers who welcome us into their daily lives, and for donors and subscribers whose generosity makes it possible. We don't take any of them for granted. They are gifts from God, and we are grateful.

The past year has not been without its difficulties. We once again have endured medical issues among our staff and the loss of close family members to death. These are reminders of how much suffering and sorrow can accompany even a year of abundant blessing. We have also faced, less significantly, business headwinds from the rising cost of, well, just about everything. Not everything we have tried has been successful, and some projects have made far less progress than we had hoped.

Two passages of Scripture come to mind. Both are songs of praise to God, but the circumstances they describe could hardly be more different. And there's something worth noticing in what the two have in common. The first is Psalm 65:

You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with abundance.
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

Then there's this song from Habakkuk, with a very different perspective on our praise:

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

The contrast is striking. In one passage, the fields overflow with grain and the pastures with flocks. In the other, the fields produce nothing, and the flocks are gone. Yet both writers respond with praise to God.

That is the lesson I'm still learning, 10 years after writing that first Thanksgiving column. Whether in abundance or in drought, we give thanks to God for who He is, and for the ways He works His good purposes in our lives.



KEVIN MARTIN
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
kevin@wng.org



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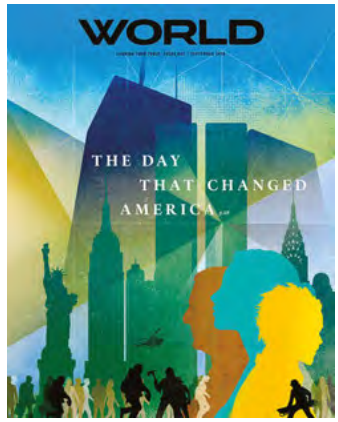
MAILBAG

"Today, the need to remove all the noise, clamor, and clutter is immense. We are hounded by distractions."

LISTEN TO THE SILENCE

Page 36: I will turn 80 this year so, as you may imagine, I don't hang out on social media. But about a year ago, I took it a step further and discontinued paying for cable television. I got to the point where I did not even think about turning it on. Don't miss it at all. When I read this article, I was reminded of Isaiah 50:4b: "He awakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught." Listening takes time. It requires focus. Jesus set the example: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place where he prayed" (Mark 1:35). Did not check his tee time, weather report, news, emails, text messages, V-mails, and so forth. Just got up and walked out. Today, the need to remove all the noise, clamor, and clutter is immense. We are hounded by distractions. This may not be for everyone, but the best part of my day is between 4:00 and 5:00 in the morning. Lights off, pray, maybe turn the lights on to read and meditate on a portion of Scripture, something from Spurgeon's *Morning & Evening* devotional and then lights back off to pray and, especially, "listen." This has become a sweet time of communion. So much so, that I am often reluctant to leave and step back into the marketplace. But I must. And so much more prepared for the challenges of the day.

JIM CARLSON
Birmingham, Ala.



SEPTEMBER 2026

A TIME TO REMEMBER

Page 68: This undoubtedly will be one of the best articles written for the 25th anniversary of 9/11.

CHERYL IRISH
Bastrop, Texas

HEALTHCARE CARTEL

Page 82: I was heartened to read that there are the beginnings of a truly free market sector in healthcare. For the 34 years of my college career teaching economics, I have touted the introduction of some type of medical savings accounts. In 1960, more than half of healthcare expenditures were out-of-pocket, while about one-fifth were financed by private health insurance. Total healthcare expenditures in 1960 were about 5% of GDP. By 2024, this share increased to 18%, where 11% of this total was financed out-of-pocket, 32.6% by private health insurance, and more than half by public health programs. Granted, some of this increase to 18% of GDP is due to advancements in healthcare, particularly its technology. However, some of the increase is due to less consumer thought in the purchase of healthcare. It is obvious that this trend must be reversed. And making the patient, once again, the customer will go a long way in achieving this.

MARK AHLSEEN
Lindsborg, Kan.

REDEFINING RECONCILIATION

Page 18: I completely agree with the original reason for reconciliation being a way to reduce government spending. There is one phrase in the article that always makes me bristle. It states that Republicans use it for "tax cuts." The term *tax cuts* does not tell the whole story and lets the opposition control the narrative. The terms that tell the whole story are "tax rates" and "tax revenue." The history of JFK, Reagan, and Trump 45 has shown us that when you reduce tax rates, tax revenue increases, many times substantially. I truly believe that the USA does not have a revenue problem but a spending problem.

DAVE RISHELL
Columbus, Ohio

I think the filibuster has both legitimate advantages and significant disadvantages. Relying solely on a simple majority →

can also be unfair and, without appropriate safeguards, can lack meaningful checks and enforcement. Our political system needs to find a better balance between allowing the majority to govern while ensuring that minority voices are heard. I believe expanding the House of Representatives could help address some of these challenges. As districts have grown larger, representatives have an increasingly difficult job of reaching and serving all of their constituents. I am a high school student who competed in NCFCA and participated in Team Policy Debate. Last year, we debated many of these very topics, so it was a particular pleasure to read about them in your magazine.

SEILAH PICKERING
Johnson City, Tenn.

A GOOD HUMBLING

Page 111: Bravo for Andrée Seu Peterson's willingness to share her shortcomings so that the rest of us can take stock of our own. Her column was elegantly written and convincingly argued.

DEBBIE BURTON
Rapid City, S.D.

I just finished reading this column, and all I can say is that the title did its work! Especially as I've gotten older, I find my ideas being overridden by those of younger women—those who are quick thinkers and (dare I say it) smart! The column was a huge help in seeing the good and the opportunity for character growth in even me!

JANE HYLAND
Charlotte, N.C.

FIGHTING THE WAR ON TRUTH

Page 34: Thank you for including a profile of one of Charlie Kirk's mentors. Todd Vician's interview with Frank Turek reminds us that the battle for the hearts and souls of our students continues. We can all honor our Lord and carry on the work of organizations like Turning Point by discipling our children and grandchildren as well as the others God places in our spheres of influence.

DARLA DYKSTRA
Kansas City, Mo.

PILGRIMS REVISITED

Page 12: Since there was such a negative response, I wanted to write and express that I appreciated your original article and the window into the theological shifts of demographics other than just young men. I am an adult convert and now a pastor's wife in confessional Lutheranism (LCMS), and we are seeing adult converts, majority Gen Z men but also some in the older generations. We are in a period of history where the generations legitimately have major differences in their experiences, and your article reminded me that there are still commonalities to the human experience *and* our journeys of faith.

EMILY HERCAMP
Noblesville, Ind.

This column was spot-on. It's a pity that Lynn Vincent had to endure so many critical responses and that she was largely misunderstood in her July column. My wife and I found our way into ACNA nearly 20 years ago, after having been in the PCA for more years than that. We were in a PCA church plant in Tennessee in which the pastor introduced some liturgical practices. When we moved to Birmingham and found no PCA churches that had gone in that direction, we visited an Anglican church, and immediately it seemed that we were returning home. In the Anglican church we can worship as Calvinists alongside those whose leanings are Wesleyan, Anglo-Catholic, charismatic, or something else wherein Jesus comes first.

We still love the PCA, but the Anglican tradition has seeped into us rather deeply.

R.B. ROBERTS
Tulsa, Okla.

ILLUMINATING THE JOYS OF LIFE

Page 64: Thank you for the articles about art. They are interesting and informative. You give valuable insight into the artists and their work and fill a gap in my knowledge. You have developed my appreciation for art. Thank you for your attention to the beauty of God's world!

ARIETTA WATSON
Atlanta, Ga.

TOBACCO-FREE BUZZ

Page 103: I was struck by the phrase "conservative commentator Tucker Carlson." Tucker Carlson has abandoned any pretense of being conservative and moved into full-blown conspiracy theorist. He has defended Abdul El-Sayed, platformed Hasan Piker, and blames "the Jews" for the world's ills. Please do not frame Tucker as a conservative. He is most certainly not.

MARTHA RHOADES
Huntsville, Texas

GUARDING OUR MINDS

Page 48: It is right to remind readers that we should be "Guarding our minds," and that should produce "Questioning America's fascination with therapy." However, the review's assumption that psychology is a science should be of concern. No real science is "imprecise." What is termed "subjective measures of improvement" can neither substantiate "what works effectively" nor determine what constitutes "healthy therapy." Our society has replaced the concepts of sin and salvation with the concepts of mental illness and mental health. WORLD should not lend credence to such.

CAROL ALMY
Long Grove, Ill.

CORRECTION

The correct spelling of the Michigan Republican Senate candidate's name is Mike Rogers ("U.S. Senate," October, p. 77).

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VOICES LYNN VINCENT

Eye for eye

Nidal Hasan's date with a firing squad

As an Army counterintelligence agent, Dave Holder encountered many traitors and spies in the officer corps. But none were as bad as Nidal Hasan, the U.S. Army major who on Nov. 5, 2009, used a laser-sighted handgun to murder 13 unarmed American soldiers and injure 32 more at Ft. Hood, Texas. Maybe that's why, when the Pentagon announced that Hasan was to be executed by firing squad, Holder told me, "I hope the shooters use 40 millimeter grenades."

On Oct. 6, acting Army Secretary Adam Telle scheduled Hasan's execution for Dec. 3 at Fort Hood. It was Secretary of War Pete Hegseth who recommended a firing squad, and President Donald Trump authorized it, as only the sitting president can.

Hegseth is a retired infantry officer and an outspoken Christian. I suspect his choice of a firing squad has less to do with recent botched lethal injection executions, as some speculate, than with poetic—and biblical—justice.

Note the venue for Hasan's execution: Ft. Hood, the scene of his crimes. Note the instrument of his death: bullets, the instrument he chose for his victims. An eye for an eye. Then, in a very Old Testament move, Hegseth on Oct. 8 said, "We'll make sure that people are able to watch it, that it's public."

A bad move, I think, as do many religious leaders, lawmakers, and even some family members of Hasan's victims. Public executions were once common in this country. But in 1936, thousands gathered in Owensboro, Ky., to watch Rainey Bethea hanged in what is widely regarded as America's last public execution. Today, executing Hasan publicly would scandalize Main Street, damage our standing abroad, inflame our enemies, and live forever as jihadist kindling on the internet. As of this writing, Trump has placed the matter under review.

And yet, Hasan betrayed his country, murdered the innocent, and violated one of our nation's most solemn oaths—acts that seem to cry for retributive justice.

"An enlisted soldier swears to obey. An officer swears to support and defend the Constitution. ... with no obedience clause, because the officer is the one who decides what's lawful," Holder told me. "Every parent who puts a kid on the bus to basic training is handing that kid to an officer. That's the deepest trust this country extends to anyone in uniform."

Retired Sgt. First Class Tim Moriarty has had enough of traitors. He was there in 2003 when 101st Airborne soldier Hasan Akbar killed and wounded members of Moriarty's unit in Kuwait. Just after Moriarity's 2006 Ramadi tour, he penned an article warning leaders against ignoring "insider threats." They didn't listen. And in 2008, Moriarty lost two company brothers—both beloved—to insider threats in Afghanistan.

Active-duty members and veterans share a kinship forged by service. An American officer killing American soldiers on American soil slashes at the heart of that kinship. It cuts to the bone. Still, it's the killer Hasan who is getting all the ink.

For example, reporters are quoting attorney John Galligan, who called the rush to execute Hasan in December "horrific"—this though Hasan has been on death row since 2013. Meanwhile, reporters identify his victims with just a number: 13. So, as a Navy veteran, I'd like to pause here to honor the dead:

Staff Sgt. Justin M. DeCrow, 32. Sgt. Amy S. Krueger, 29. Spc. Jason D. Hunt, 22. Spc. Frederick Z. Greene, 29. Pfc. Aaron T. Nemelka, 19. Pfc. Michael S. Pearson, 22. Spc. Kham S. Xiong, 23. Pvt. Francheska Velez, 21. Michael Grant Cahill, 62, retired chief warrant officer and civilian physician assistant. Lt. Col. Juanita L. Warman, 55. Maj. Libardo Eduardo Caraveo, 52. Capt. John P. Gaffaney, 54. Capt. Russell G. Seager, 51.

Hasan did not merely kill 13 people. He wiped out some 560 cumulative years they would likely have lived, along with perhaps a dozen future children. Scores of grandchildren also vanished from family trees. Francheska Velez's family was already waiting for one of those grandkids: She was pregnant when Hasan killed her.

Now *that's* horrific.

Still, I struggle with the death penalty. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus seems to upend the Old Testament "eye for eye" paradigm. WORLD's Jeff Palomino, a retired Air Force colonel and JAG Corps officer, described the tension well: "The gospel is anti-death. Hasan is getting exactly the outcome he deserves, and yet as Christians, we know this isn't really how the world's supposed to work." ■

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DISPATCHES



MARY ESCH/AP



IN THE NEWS

Kratom's lethal appeal

Parents and addiction specialists beg Washington to ban "gas station heroin"

by MARY JACKSON

For more than three years, Cameron Francis started his mornings shaking a green powder into his water bottle, chugging it, then going about his day. He started the regimen as a junior at Liberty University, after looking online for a natural alternative to alcohol.

Cameron, then a distance runner for the university's track team, thought kratom was a harmless, plant-based herbal supplement. It gave him an immediate boost in energy and focus and relieved his social anxiety.

But Cameron's life took a downward spiral, and he and his parents learned in an emergency room in 2021 that the powder he'd become addicted to was akin to an opioid. A doctor told Dean Francis, Cameron's father, his son would need a lot of help. "That was the understatement of my life," Dean said. When Dean called a drug detox center in Richmond, Va., where the family lives, the person he spoke with equated kratom with heroin and said his son would experience similar withdrawal symptoms.

Kratom, a plant originating from Southeast Asia, has been dubbed "gas station heroin" for its widespread accessibility and highly addictive opioid-like effects. Eleven U.S. states and dozens of municipalities have banned kratom, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not approve selling it. Yet kratom is available online and across the country in capsule, drink, or powder forms at convenience stores, smoke shops, and health food retailers.

The psychoactive botanical is marketed as a natural remedy for pain and anxiety and as a way for addicts to wean themselves off opioids. In recent years, stronger, more concentrated synthetic versions of the opioid-like compound found in kratom, 7-hydroxymitragynine, or 7-OH, have flooded the market.

As stories emerge of kratom's harms, a growing number of parents, doctors, law enforcement, and anti-drug advocates are raising alarm, organizing awareness campaigns, and seeking tighter state and federal restrictions.

On Oct. 9, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration announced an updated version of its plan to designate certain synthetic 7-OH substances as Schedule I under the Controlled Substance Act. Schedule I drugs have a high potential for abuse and no currently accepted medical use. The agency said it would establish ratio thresholds for naturally occurring kratom compounds, including 7-OH and mitragynine, while scheduling chemically modified 7-OH compounds.

Some argue those restrictions fall short. In an Oct. 7 letter to the Trump administration, three Republican U.S. senators urged a Schedule I designation for "the entire kratom plant, including all levels of 7-OH." Similarly, Kevin Sabet, president and CEO for the Foundation for Drug Policy Solutions, appealed to the federal government to →

ban the whole kratom plant. "Scheduling just 7-OH is not enough," Sabet said in an emailed statement. He noted that mitragynine, the main compound in the kratom leaf, converts into 7-OH in the body.

Reports of kratom-related deaths sparked calls for stricter regulation. In September, two University of Mississippi students found dead on the same night allegedly had packaged kratom derivatives nearby. Investigators are still determining the cause of the students' deaths. On Oct. 5, Utah health officials linked four deaths to "high-potency, illegal chemical compounds found in certain herbal supplements, including kratom products."

Between 2020 and 2024, kratom was detected in 5,208 overdose deaths across 45 U.S. jurisdictions, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System. U.S. poison centers reported a 1,200% increase in kratom exposure reports between 2015 and 2025, according to a recent CDC report.

Dean Francis and other kratom opponents, including two mothers I communicated with who said they lost adult children to kratom-related deaths, launched a campaign on Oct. 8 called "Stop the Magicians." The campaign targets the kratom industry and includes a petition for a complete federal ban on kratom.

Between 2020 and 2024, kratom was detected in 5,208 overdose deaths.

Dean described their effort as a "David and Goliath" battle against wealthy kratom lobbyists with alleged ties to the now-illegal synthetic marijuana. One couple with ties to the kratom industry, David and Maya Gabbay, have been funneling millions of dollars to Republican lawmakers, according to a recent Politico report.

Indeed, kratom lobbyists have sought to influence the DEA's decisions. The American Kratom Association (AKA) sued the DEA in September for a rule it proposed in July that would have designated any synthetic kratom products with 7-OH as Schedule I. The AKA claimed the language carried "potential unintended consequences ... for properly formulated natural kratom leaf products."

The DEA's updated scheduling actions included recommendations from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to distinguish "intentionally enhanced" kratom from products "more consistent with botanical kratom." The AKA applauded the update as "an important victory" and a resolution to its lawsuit.

Meanwhile, some medical professionals want to see more research into kratom's risks and benefits that would inform federal regulations and oversight.

Kurt Bravata, a family and addiction medicine physician in Bolivar, Mo., favors designating kratom as a Schedule II drug instead of Schedule I. He says this would allow for clinical trials and other medical research. "Are there some medicinal benefits, and if so, let's figure that out instead of going straight to criminalization," he said. "I don't want to see a bigger black market for kratom."

Bravata, who serves as vice chair of the Christian Medical & Dental Association's addiction medicine section, said in the last three years, he's seen a surge of patients addicted to kratom.

"A lot of people are surprised to discover kratom is dangerous," he said. The FDA warns consumers kratom carries risks of liver toxicity, seizures,

Kratom products sold in stores



MINDY SCHAUER/MEDIANEWSGROUP/ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER VIA GETTY IMAGES

and substance use disorder. In its concentrated form, 7-OH is "ninefold more potent than morphine," Bravata said.

The drug is presenting new challenges for rehabilitation facilities across the country. In Meridian, Idaho, 3 of every 10 calls coming into Oakridge Recovery now involve kratom addiction, according to Danielle Fanopoulos, vice president of patient access. Earlier this year, as Idaho lawmakers debated a bill to regulate kratom sales, Oakridge sent a letter of support. The bill failed to pass.

Greg Ambroson, executive director of the Adult & Teen Challenge's Azle campus, a faith-based residential recovery program in Texas, said he's seen everything from people spending $200 a day on kratom to mixing it with other drugs and psychosis-like symptoms. "Word has gotten out that it's legal heroin," he said.

Ambroson's campus tests regularly for kratom. But it's difficult to maintain a standard because kratom is marketed as natural. Less than a half mile from the campus, "there's a big feather flag advertising kratom at the gas station," he said.

Joshua James, owner of the nonalcoholic Ocean Beach Cafe in San Francisco, says he knew little about kratom when he started selling it in 2022. James carried popular kratom drinks, including Feel Free, a 2-ounce blue bottle labeled as a "social tonic." Botanic Tonics, the Oklahoma-based company that owns Feel Free, has sold 65 million bottles since its debut in 2020, according to reporting by The Free Press.

James noticed customers were coming in multiple times a day for kratom, oftentimes buying 12-packs. When James, a self-proclaimed proponent of "alternative buzz," tried kratom, he says, he experienced an immediate "intensity and aggressiveness ... that really messed me up." In 2024, he stopped selling kratom, citing his uneasiness about supplying something that addictive. Earlier this year, California banned selling kratom.

In Virginia, Cameron Francis, now 31, is nearing 10 years since he first tried kratom. Dean said his son still takes medication to eliminate his craving for it: "He's significantly better, but he's still not himself and still looking for answers." ■

ILLUSTRATION BY KRIEG BARRIE



BY THE NUMBERS

Failed delivery

Postal service woes continue to multiply as costs rise and demand shrinks

BY JOHN DAWSON

86%

The share of first-class mail that reached its destination on time in 2025, down from 91% in 2022 according to a new government report. Despite lowering expectations by changing to a five-day delivery window from a three-day delivery window in 2022, the U.S. Postal Service continues to falter in the face of efficiency woes and declining demand.

109 billion

Pieces of mail delivered by the USPS in 2025, down from the record high of 213 billion in 2006.

82 cents

The new price of a forever stamp as of July 2026, up from 78 cents in 2025.

$9 billion

The postal service's reported loss in 2025, marking two decades since the self-funded government corporation posted a profit.



WASHINGTON MEMO

The silent Kennedy Center

An American icon for the arts falls into disrepair amid political squabbles

by JOANNA INSCO

At an "American Pageant of the Arts" fundraising event in November 1962, Republican former President Dwight D. Eisenhower laid out his vision for a National Cultural Center. Five thousand people attended the benefit, including President John F. Kennedy and his wife Jackie. The artistic lineup on the main stage at the D.C. National Guard Armory included performances from 7-year-old cellist Yo-Yo Ma, comedian Danny Kaye, and the National Symphony Orchestra. During the event, Eisenhower beamed in from Augusta, Ga.

"I do hope that each of us that has heard and seen this performance this evening will take some inspiration and try to be a part, himself and herself, in making this center a true mecca for artists," Eisenhower said. "One that will give everybody who visits Washington—whether from our own country or the far corners of the world—a true appreciation, a better appreciation, of America."

Nearly 65 years later, the center Eisenhower imagined, later renamed the Kennedy Center, has become a political hot button. In early 2025, President Donald Trump replaced the institution's leaders with allies who appointed him the first-ever president to chair the board. Since then, the center has experienced a political tug-of-war involving the adding and removing of Trump's name from its façade, a planned Trump renovation, multiple lawsuits, and beginning in mid-September, its indefinite closure. But the building that presently reflects America's political divide once represented a bipartisan effort to uphold the arts.

As president, Eisenhower initiated the creation of a new public auditorium

SAUL LOEB/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

RIGHT: First lady Jacqueline Kennedy discusses plans for the new National Culture Center in 1962. FACING PAGE: The Kennedy Center sits closed in October 2026.

in the nation's capital. His Democratic successor, John F. Kennedy, continued the mission—kicking off a $30 million fundraising campaign with the 1962 benefit. After Kennedy's 1963 assassination, President Lyndon Johnson signed legislation to rename the planned National Cultural Center the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

"Not only was it imagined originally by a Republican president, it was opened by a Republican president," said Charlotte Canning, a theater historian at the University of Texas at Austin. "And Richard Nixon stayed away the opening night so that the Kennedys would not be overshown or challenged by a sitting president."

According to a 1971 *New York Times* report describing the opening night, "The Nixon White House turned out in force ... although the president will not appear at the center until tomorrow's opening of the Concert Hall."

On a sunny October day, I took a Metrobus from Capitol Hill to see the Kennedy Center for myself. A few security guards milled around the courtyard, while fencing encircled the silent marble structure. While the building remains closed, a shuttle bus carries visitors to the REACH—a 2019 expansion to the Kennedy Center that contains a 144-seat lecture hall, where all current on-campus programming is being held. The center's five now-empty theaters total over 6,500 seats.

Over the years, the Kennedy Center has hosted performances ranging from contralto Marian Anderson and conductor Leonard Bernstein to soul singer Aretha Franklin. But the institution has also made art more accessible by providing free daily events since the 1990s, when the center established the Performing Arts for Everyone initiative, as well as through a variety of educational programs and partnerships with D.C. public schools.



ART SELBY/NBC NEWSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

"The Kennedy Center is, certainly locally, one of the preeminent institutions that we have for art and culture," said Josef Palermo, the center's former curator of visual arts and special programming. "I think the footprint of the Kennedy Center certainly looms large over D.C., but all of America as well."

Palermo, an artist and D.C. resident of nearly 20 years, was let go from his role at the Kennedy Center in March after 10 months at the institution. He is one of several staffers who lost their jobs amid the center's legal back-and-forth. But before Palermo got his job, he had a vision for preserving the Kennedy Center's future.

"I felt like going to work at the Kennedy Center during this time was a sort of artistic public service that I could do. Especially at a time when many people were publicly choosing to boycott the institution," Palermo said.

After Trump assumed chairmanship of the center last year, several entertainers, trustees, and advisers cut ties with the institution. Then, last December, another slew of performers canceled after Trump renamed it the Trump-Kennedy Center. Ultimately, a court ordered the removal of Trump's name from the building in May—but when the center closed for purported safety reasons on Sept. 16, Trump said it would not reopen until the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled on the name change.

"If the ruling is a negative one, which it should not be, and is not overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court, the Reconstruction and the Renovation of The Kennedy Center will not take place," Trump wrote in a Truth Social post.

According to Palermo, it's no secret the building has needed maintenance. But he argued renovations could have begun last year when Congress approved $257 million for Kennedy Center maintenance in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

While Trump's level of interference with the Kennedy Center may be unprecedented, he is not the first president to mix art and politics. In 2021, President Joe Biden fired four Trump appointees in the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts.

"I think it's in the interest of both parties to make sure that we clean this up and we stop the political ping-ponging of our public arts," said Palermo. He suggested Congress require federal public arts boards to maintain a partisan balance.

Theater historian Charlotte Canning added that the Kennedy Center's origin honored "one of the first moments ever where the United States government, and the country as a whole, was willing to acknowledge the importance of the arts and provide for them."

Today, amid the political disputes, the nearly 1.5-million-square-foot building looms quietly on the edge of the Potomac River. During a heavy rainstorm in early September, a chunk of ceiling reportedly fell in the Grand Foyer—where artists, statesmen, foreigners, and everyday Americans have walked.

The Kennedy Center's future is uncertain, but while the main theaters remain closed, art—from movie screenings to the Kennedy Center Opera House Orchestra—will continue down the street at the REACH. There, John F. Kennedy's 1956 remarks to Harvard University students remain displayed on a glass wall: "If more politicians knew poetry and more poets knew politics, I am convinced the world would be a little better place in which to live." ■

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Pro football legend dead at 86

by JOHN DAWSON



Mike Ditka

A football Hall of Fame coach who commanded one of the most dominant championship teams in NFL history, Ditka died Oct. 9. He was 86. Before coaching in the league, Ditka transformed football as a player. He was one of the first tight ends deployed for catching passes rather than blocking. He earned five consecutive Pro Bowl selections as a player for the Bears. Later in his playing career, he won a Super Bowl with the Dallas Cowboys. After retiring in 1972, Ditka joined famed coach Tom Landry's Cowboys coaching staff. By 1982, Ditka earned a head coaching position in Chicago. He led the 1985 Bears to a 15-1 record and a lopsided victory in Super Bowl XX.



Jim Bakker

A televangelist who built an audience of millions before resigning in disgrace and serving time in prison, Bakker died Oct. 5. He was 86. Bakker and his wife, Tammy Faye, got their start working for Pat Robertson's *The 700 Club* in the 1960s. The couple eventually formed their own show, *The PTL Club*, and enticed millions of viewers in the 1970s and '80s with a prosperity gospel. Bakker's career derailed in 1987 when it was revealed he paid a young secretary hush money to conceal rape allegations. The next year, he faced federal charges for illegally using ministry money to fund his lavish lifestyle. He served five years in prison for fraud. After prison, he resumed broadcasting, hawking survivalist gear while prophesying about the end times.



Dennis Hastert

An Illinois high school wrestling coach whose second act as a politician saw him rise to the top spot in the House of Representatives before his career crumbled amid a sex scandal, Hastert died Oct. 3. He was 84. Hastert first won election to Congress in 1986. When Newt Gingrich resigned as Speaker of the House in 1998, Hastert maneuvered among the Republican majority to win the post. As speaker, Hastert initiated a rule that bore his name: No legislation could come for a vote unless it could win a majority of the majority party. In 2016, years after resigning from Congress, he confessed to sexually abusing boys in the wrestling program he coached before he entered politics. Hastert served 13 months in prison.



Bob Pettit

A pioneering basketball big man who became one of the sport's first shining lights, Pettit died Sept. 23. He was 93. After initially failing to make his high school team, Pettit honed his skills on a makeshift hoop at his Baton Rouge, La., home, eventually making the team and earning an offer to play at LSU. The Milwaukee Hawks drafted Pettit in 1954, the year before the team moved to St. Louis. The 6-foot-9 power forward won the league's inaugural MVP award in 1956 by becoming a dominant scorer and rebounder. When he retired in 1965, he'd become an NBA champion and the league's first player to reach 20,000 points. Pettit was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1970.



Annie Dillard

An author and writer whose 1974 naturalist reflection made her a literary sensation in her 20s, Dillard died Sept. 15. She was 81. The daughter of a Pennsylvania oil executive, Dillard turned her meditations about Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains into a critically acclaimed nonfiction title, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Earning comparisons to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, the book won Dillard a Pulitzer Prize and became so popular it required eight printings in its first two years. She later published a memoir, *An American Childhood*, and a collection of essays titled *The Writing Life*. Dillard wrote often about religion, dismissing some of the dogmas of her childhood faith but affirming in 2020 that she still considered herself a Christian.

DITKA: DAVID DUROCHIK VIA AP; BAKKER: LOU KRASKY/AP; HASTERT: ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES; PETTIT: AP; DILLARD: WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

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HUMAN RACE

Plague researcher dies

by CLAIRE WILKERSON

A Russian lab technician at a plague research institute in Siberia has died, sparking fears of a new pandemic. **Darya Shipilova** was hospitalized on Sept. 29 and died Oct. 2. Russia's public health watchdog claimed in its official statement that the 28-year-old woman died from "pneumonia of an unknown cause." The lack of a more specific cause of death raised suspicion and concern from locals and world leaders. Some unverified reports claimed she fell ill after an accident at the Irkutsk Anti-Plague Institute of Siberia, suggesting she might have died after contracting pneumonic plague. Russian authorities said no evidence suggests that her illness was caused by the pathogens she worked with. In spite of that, the hospital where Shipilova died has been placed under quarantine and government officials are implementing anti-epidemic measures in the surrounding areas. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said U.S. officials are monitoring the situation closely, and he encouraged transparency from Russia so world health officials can react appropriately. Pneumonic plague is a rare bacterial infection that killed tens of millions of people in 14th-century Europe. Since the 1990s, most cases have been recorded in Africa, although about seven people a year contract it in the United States. It's treated today with antibiotics.

BOTCHED EXECUTION

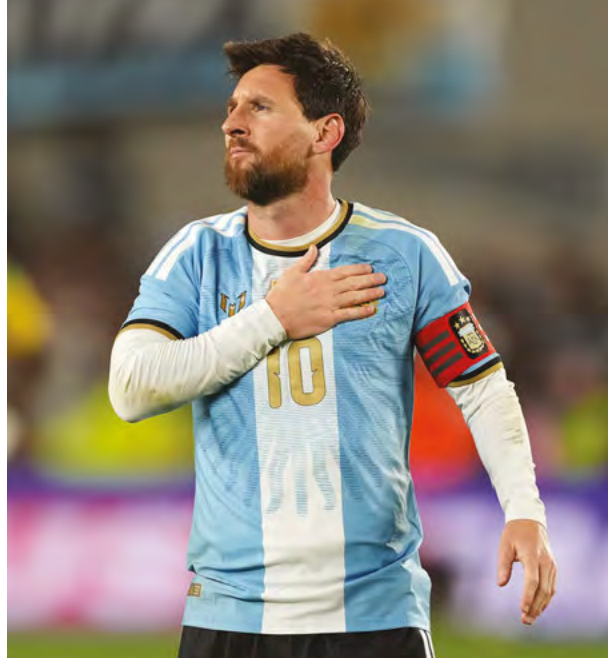
Tennessee death row inmate Christa Pike is back in prison, recovering from a botched execution that left her unconscious and on life support for nearly a week. Pike is the first known prisoner in the modern era to survive the administration of lethal injection drugs, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. Attorney Randy Spivey said Pike is suffering from a loss of function in her arms, among other injuries. Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee has ordered an independent investigation and paused all executions this year, but it remains uncertain whether the state will try to execute Pike again. *—Grace Snell*

CAUGHT SPYING

U.S. authorities arrested a California real estate agent on Oct. 4, accusing her of serving as an agent for China and spying on the son of Taiwan's president, who lives in the United States. Officers arrested **Wanying "Heather" Zhang**, 34, at a Los Angeles airport while she was attempting to depart for China. Under the direction of Chinese authorities, Zhang allegedly surveilled Ting-Yu Lai, the son of Taiwanese President Ching-Te Lai, according to U.S. Attorney Bill Essayli. Zhang allegedly sent photos, videos, and license plate information to Chinese officials. A criminal complaint related to the case detailed texts between Zhang and two other alleged Chinese agents about tracking Ting-Yu Lai. *—Liz Lykins*



SHIPILOVA: HANDOUT; ZHANG: U.S. ATTORNEY FOR THE CENTRAL DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA VIA AP



FINAL GOAL

Soccer great **Lionel Messi** played the last national game of his 21-year professional career on Oct. 6. The Argentinian left the field with 126 goals, two Copa América titles, and a World Cup championship to his name. Although he will no longer play for Argentina, Messi will continue to thrill fans of Major League Soccer with Inter Miami. Messi, who is now 39, set the stage for an international career when he was just 13, leaving Argentina to train at the youth academy of Spanish club Barcelona. He announced his retirement from the national team in late August, weeks after Argentina lost to Spain in the World Cup final. *—Leigh Jones*

SWAPPING MICS



Karoline Leavitt, the youngest person to serve as White House press secretary, will join Fox News as a contributor, starting Nov. 1. Leavitt stepped down from her position as press secretary about four months after giving birth to her second child, a daughter. Leavitt held the high-profile role from the start of President Donald Trump's second term in January 2025 until the end of August. She is the second of Trump's press secretaries to accept a job with Fox News. Kayleigh McEnany, who served during part of Trump's first term, co-hosts a daytime talk show and a weekend series with the network. *—Addie Offereins*

LIFE SENTENCE

An Ohio judge sentenced former *American Idol* contestant and self-described music pastor Caleb Flynn to life in prison without parole on Oct. 5 for killing his wife. A jury found the 40-year-old guilty of nine charges, including aggravated murder, murder, felonious assault, and tampering with evidence.

Prosecutors say Flynn shot his 37-year-old wife Ashley in the back of the head while she was asleep and staged it to look like a break-in. The murder followed an 18-month-long affair. While Flynn admitted to committing adultery, he continues to insist he did not kill his wife. The couple had two daughters, who were aged 9 and 11 at the time of their mother's death. *—Liz Lykins*

CHESS CHAMPION

Bodhana Sivanandan, an 11-year-old from northwest London, became the youngest chess player to earn the woman grandmaster title. She earned this distinction for her performance at the 46th Chess Olympiad in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, where she represented England. This is the latest milestone for the chess prodigy who is also Britain's youngest women's chess champion and the youngest person to represent England internationally in any sport. While woman grandmaster is the highest female-specific title a player can achieve, Sivanandan still has one more title to earn: international master. In an interview with the International Chess Federation, Sivanandan said she was excited about her achievement but wants to "keep making history." *—Claire Wilkerson*

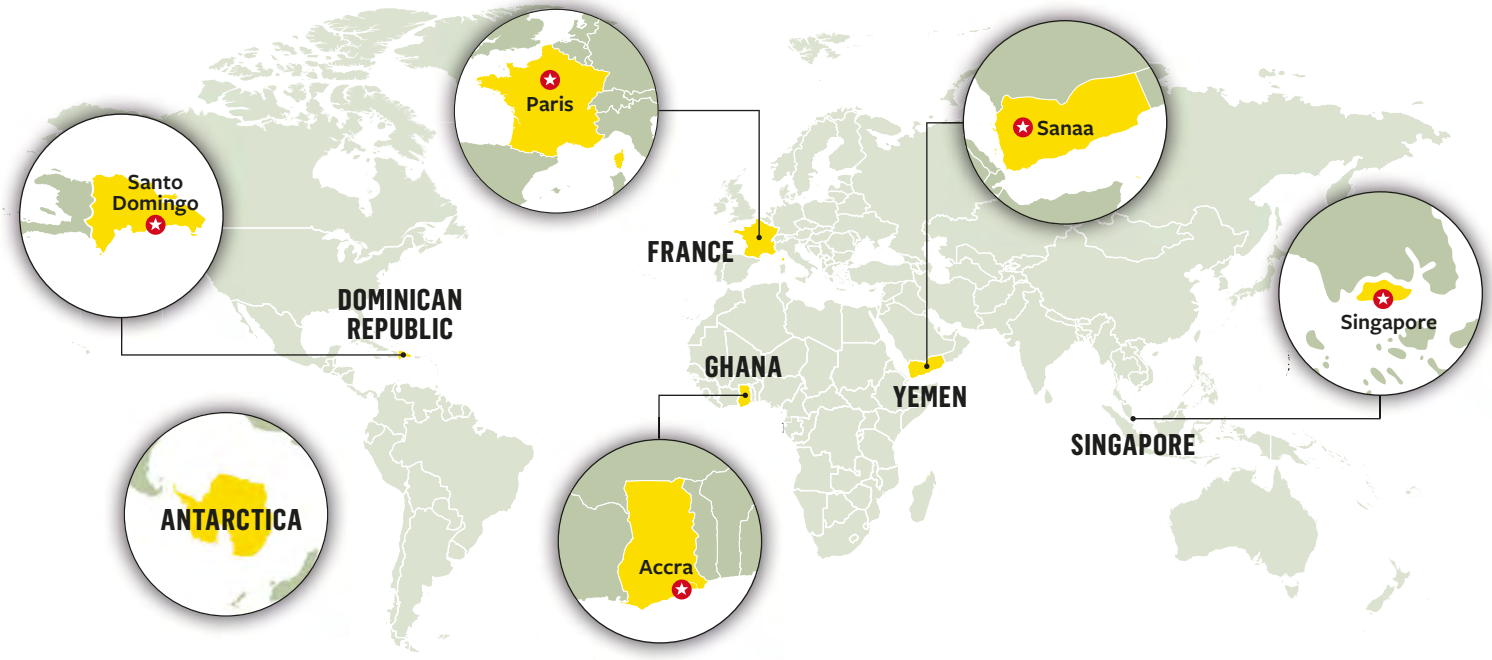
PEACE PRIZE WINNER

The Nobel committee awarded its coveted Peace Prize to South African–born jurist Navi Pillay on Oct. 9. In 2003, Pillay became one of the first judges to serve on the International Criminal Court, where she helped convict Congolese warlord Thomas Lubanga for conscripting child soldiers. She became the UN human rights chief in 2008, and then took a post at the International Court of Justice in 2019. Last year, Pillay chaired the UN committee that concluded Israel committed genocide in Gaza in response to the Oct. 7, 2023, attack by Hamas. Her selection for the high-profile award is seen as a rebuke to President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who have criticized international courts as biased against their countries. *—Leigh Jones* ■



MESSI: GUSTAVO GARELLO/AP; LEAVITT: JIM WATSON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; SIVANANDAN: FACEBOOK

Student protesters set France ablaze





France President Emmanuel Macron called a crisis cabinet meeting Oct. 1 to address nationwide school protests that have turned violent. Demonstrations began in the outskirts of Paris, where teachers went on strike Sept. 17 to protest staff shortages. Students joined them and barricaded the school entrance, adding complaints of dilapidated buildings, overcrowded conditions, and 10-hour-long school days. Protests spread, eventually closing over 500 schools across the nation. The government issued police directives to break up blockades, and the resulting clashes have injured hundreds. Police have arrested over 5,000 protesters, 85% of them minors. Far-left presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon has urged supporters to join the demonstrations and shield students from police. The French government accuses Mélenchon's party of fomenting unrest to garner support before next year's elections. *—Evangeline Schmitt*



POPULATION
68.7 million

LANGUAGE
French

RELIGION
46% Catholic, 3% Protestant, 6% Muslim, 40% none

GOVERNANCE
Presidential republic

GDP
$3.37 trillion

MAJOR EXPORTS
Nuclear reactors, vehicles, aircraft, luxury goods

Antarctica The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences awarded Belgian American physicist Francis Halzen the Nobel Prize on Oct. 6 for his decisive contributions to an observatory in Antarctica. Halzen, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor, spearheaded the creation of the IceCube Neutrino Observatory, where he and colleagues inserted thousands of sensors in a cubic kilometer of ice to detect the elusive high-energy particles emitted from nearby black holes. Halzen calls their initial success in the 1990s his greatest excitement. "What came afterward, that IceCube would be big enough to detect cosmic neutrinos, that was up to the Lord," he told a crowd at UW-Madison. Neutrinos provide clues to their astrophysical origins. Nobel committee members said his work paved the way for a new kind of astronomy. *—Amy Lewis*

FRANCE: LOU BENOIST/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; FACT BOX SOURCE: THE WORLD BANK



Dominican Republic The country lifted its ban Oct. 3 on **Haiti's national soccer team**, permitting them to play as visiting competitors while still prohibiting them from using Dominican facilities to host matches. Following a 4-1 loss to Haiti on Oct. 1, Dominican officials barred the neighboring team from playing in their country, pointing to provocative post-goal comments by Haitian forward Wilson Isidor and reports of stadium damage by Haitian supporters. The dispute rapidly escalated from a sports conflict into a diplomatic issue, underscoring the deep-seated, complex history shared by the two nations on the island of Hispaniola. Isidor has since emphasized soccer's role as a space for bringing people together. *—Olalekan Raji*

Yemen Houthi rebels struck two airports in Saudi Arabia on Oct. 7 after civil war reignited this summer between the militant group and the government of Yemen, which is backed by Saudi Arabia. In August, Houthis began gaining ground along the Red Sea Coast, displacing more than 184,000 people and giving the rebel group significant control over the Bab al-Mandab Strait. A quarter of global container traffic passes through the waterway, which is south of the Suez Canal. Earlier this year it became an alternative route for Saudi oil exports after Iran shut down the Strait of Hormuz. Houthis have announced a blockade against only Saudi Arabia. Conflict Armament Research reported in May that Iran was sharing weapons and missile technology with Houthi rebels even while at war with the United States and Israel. *—Evangeline Schmitt*



POPULATION
41.7 million

LANGUAGE
Arabic

RELIGION
65% Sunni Muslim, 35% Shia Muslim

GOVERNANCE
Fragmented presidential democracy

GDP
$21 billion

MAJOR EXPORTS
Scrap iron, mollusks

Ghana Authorities in Ghana began a crackdown Oct. 5 on preaching and hawking in public buses, a widespread practice in the predominantly Christian country. Offenders face up to $52 in fines, eight months in prison, or both. Parliament passed the law in May. A ban on bus preaching was first implemented in 2012, but wasn't enforced. Critics argue that preaching on moving vehicles is a nuisance and safety risk that could distract the driver, while supporters insist that evangelism is a Christian duty and a freedom protected by constitutional rights. Ghanaian authorities have framed the prohibition primarily as a transport and public-safety measure. Affected preachers are lobbying for the government to allow them to conduct brief prayers instead before buses leave major terminals. *—Olalekan Raji*



POPULATION
35 million

LANGUAGE
English

RELIGION
71% Christian, 20% Muslim, 3% traditional

GOVERNANCE
Presidential democracy

GDP
$114 billion

MAJOR EXPORTS
Gold, crude oil, cocoa beans

Singapore Smoke haze from Indonesia's wildfires has shrouded neighboring Singapore for weeks. On Oct. 7–8, Singapore's air quality deteriorated to "unhealthy" levels, according to the Pollutant Standards Index, the city-state's main measure for air pollution. Officials advised the elderly, pregnant women, children, and people with chronic heart or lung disease to minimize outdoor activities. Indonesia is grappling with one of its worst wildfire seasons in years. Indonesia's slash-and-burn farming practices coupled with an El Niño climate pattern causing dry conditions have exacerbated the blazes. Haze has also wafted to nearby Malaysia, where authorities closed all schools in southern Johor state Oct. 8–9 due to poor air quality. *—Joyce Wu*



SOCCER TEAM: NELSON PULIDO/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; SINGAPORE: DAVID HU/AP



U.S. BRIEFS

Trump launches new shipyard in Maryland

Maryland is getting a new shipyard under a public-private deal expected to create more than 3,100 manufacturing jobs and help produce submarines for the U.S. Navy. President Donald Trump announced the deal during an **Oct. 6 ceremony at Sparrows Point**. The Navy awarded defense-technology company Anduril a contract worth up to $2.9 billion to manufacture components and large assemblies for Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarines that will be completed by prime contractors in Connecticut and Virginia. Anduril will invest $3.7 billion to build a 2-million-square-foot facility (the size of roughly 35 football fields) at the Baltimore-area site, once among the nation's busiest yards before it closed more than 20 years ago. Arsenal-2 will be the largest new U.S. shipyard since World War II, according to Trump, and should begin operations in 2030. Virginia-class submarines are being delivered an average of four years late and over budget, due to workforce shortages, supplier constraints, and Navy changes during construction, according to the Congressional Budget Office. Analysts say the nation's shipyards will need to increase production significantly to meet the Navy's requirements. *—Todd Vician*



POPULATION
6.2 million

GOVERNOR
Wes Moore[D]

U.S. SENATORS
Angela Alsobrooks[D], Chris Van Hollen[D]

INDUSTRY
Healthcare and social services, retail, food services, agriculture, biotechnology, cybersecurity

Montana Filming for a conservative movie resumed after a city commission unanimously reinstated its permit on Oct. 5. The city of Livingston suspended filming two days earlier amid complaints from residents and businesses about production of *Pawn Shop*, a Daily Wire–affiliated movie about an ICE agent. Residents raised concerns about simulated gunfire and street closures, while a local food bank said the production deterred some clients from visiting. Residents also described feeling intimidated by the set's security guards. Producers said they had canvassed filming areas and posted required notices. Daily Wire co-founder Ben Shapiro accused Livingston officials of targeting the film over its politics, saying the suspension amounted to "content discrimination," a First Amendment violation. *—Kim Henderson*

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis declared the state's effort to fight Medicaid fraud a success in early October. Investigators have referred more than 150 cases of suspected theft to the state attorney general for possible prosecution. Since January, the Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA) has terminated contracts with more than 220 healthcare providers and suspended payments to 260 others. Florida began cracking down on fraud after federal officials called the state a longtime "hotspot for health care fraud." Investigators identified applied behavior analysis (ABA) programs, typically for children with autism, as having a heightened fraud risk due to billing patterns. After switching ABA services to managed care plans, the state saved nearly $1 billion. *—Claire Wilkerson*

SHIPYARD: JULIA DEMAREE NIKHINSON/AP; FACT BOX SOURCE: THE WORLD BANK

[D]Democrat



Washington Seattle officials began dismantling a sprawling homeless encampment in the city's south after gunfire broke out there in late September. The incident reignited intense backlash among neighbors who had warned the city about the area's hazards for years. What began as one vehicle and a pile of trash in 2024 morphed into a full-blown community of haphazard dwellings, tents, cars, and mounds of garbage. Local business owners stated in a notice of claim that the city's delay and lack of coordination enabled the encampment to grow and increased cleanup costs. Residents complained multiple times about criminal activity, break-ins, and environmental dangers. The simmering violence boiled over when a man in an SUV shot another man whose truck was blocking the unpaved road through the encampment. "We told them that at some point it's going to get worse and worse and somebody is going to die," Peter Eastey, who runs a local business called Jack's Pay-Less Auto Parts, told KomoNews. The cleanup process began in early October and will likely take several weeks. The city is offering housing to former encampment residents. *—Addie Offereins*

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul declared a state disaster emergency over a measles surge in rural areas and neighboring states. Hochul's executive order expands the network of providers who can administer the two-dose measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine to include paramedics, pharmacists, and midwives. This year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recorded more than 4,000 measles cases as of Oct. 1, making it the worst U.S. outbreak in over 30 years. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. supports the MMR vaccine, but his agency has sparked controversy for recommending other changes to the childhood vaccine schedule. Critics blame that for falling MMR vaccination rates, and New York has joined 15 other states suing the Trump administration over the changes. Health policy research group KFF reported 92.4% of 5-year-olds got the MMR vaccine ahead of the 2025–2026 school year—a drop from 95% six years before. CDC data shows 95% of people who contracted measles this year were unvaccinated or had unknown vaccine status. *—Grace Snell*

Colorado North America's largest wildlife overpass is providing safe passage over Interstate 25 for elk and pronghorn herds. The **Greenland Wildlife Overpass** opened in December and the Colorado Department of Transportation caught on camera the first elk crossing in June. In addition to elk and pronghorn, cameras have spotted bears, deer, and coyotes traversing the 209-by-200-foot bridge. The overpass, located between Denver and Colorado Springs, cost $15 million to build. It allows expanded breeding opportunities for herds through strategically placed fencing that guides the animals to cross the highway into previously inaccessible areas. Five wildlife underpasses allow smaller species to travel safely. Researchers expect to see the genetic results in the elk population by early 2027. The overpass has also improved safety for humans by reducing vehicle collisions with wildlife by 91%. Transportation officials hope to create similar crossings across the state with future federal grant funding. *—Claire Wilkerson*



POPULATION
6 million

GOVERNOR
Jared Polis[D]

U.S. SENATORS
Michael Bennet[D], John Hickenlooper[D]

INDUSTRY
Manufacturing, aerospace, mining

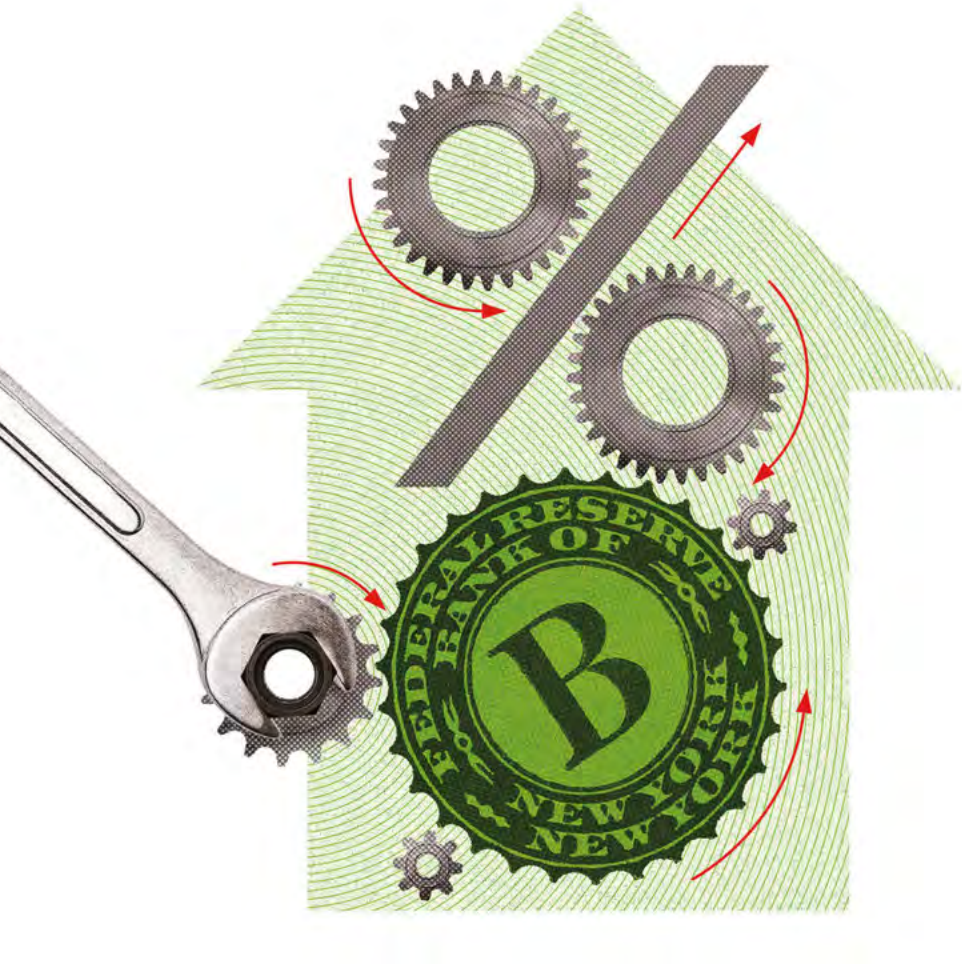


SEATTLE: LAW ENFORCEMENT TODAY/FACEBOOK; WILDLIFE OVERPASS: COLORADO DOT

BACKGROUNDER

Why did the Fed hike interest rates?

by CLAIRE WILKERSON



America's economy is on a hot streak, and the Federal Reserve wants to cool down rising prices. In September, the Fed raised interest rates by a quarter-point, resulting in a new interest rate target range of 3.75% to 4%. And analysts expect the Fed to raise rates again before the year is over.

What is the Federal Reserve's job? Two levers control inflation: fiscal policy and monetary policy. Fiscal policy is managed by the federal government and includes things like taxation and subsidies. Monetary policy is the purview of the Federal Reserve, whose goal is maintaining economic stability. It does this by trying to keep both inflation and unemployment at about 2%, which it has not done for more than 5 years. At the end of August, unemployment was sitting at 4.1% and the Consumer Price Index (CPI) at 3.4% according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

If the economy is doing so well, why is inflation a problem? Inflation is a part of all economies: The Federal Reserve's job is to keep inflation manageable. The main way it does this is by trying to control the amount of money in circulation through manipulating interest rates. If money is added to the economy, inflation tends to go up and unemployment tends to go down. The inverse is also true. However, this is a careful balancing act: If the Fed raises rates too high or too fast, it could push the economy into a recession.

What does this mean for affordability? On a basic level, higher interest rates are good news for savers and bad news for borrowers. With the current hike, the Fed is following the market instead of leading it, raising the public federal funds rate to where market rates already were. This means raising rates can dampen rising prices without negatively affecting healthy labor markets. The most immediate impact on Americans is mortgage rates, which are sitting at about 7%. Ultimately, the Fed is putting a little finger on a large scale and hoping for a small movement toward market stability.

Will the rate hike hurt the economy? The Federal Reserve controls the federal funds rate—the rate at which banks can borrow and lend to each other overnight. Higher interest rates mean banks will borrow less money because higher rates make that more expensive. When the Fed raises its rates, it is signaling that inflation is so high members are willing to lower it at the risk of increasing unemployment. However, because of the market's continued growth, Federal Reserve Chairman Kevin Warsh believes the change in rate is not significant enough to raise unemployment.

What happens next? While higher interest rates are squeezing homebuyers, the Fed's goal is to stabilize prices overall. One rate hike will not make a big difference for most commodities. However, this small change, followed by another hike before the end of the year, should help to keep inflation in check. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY KRIEG BARRIE



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“I just had to live long enough, so here I am.”

Belgian scientist FRANCIS HALZEN, 82, after being announced as the Nobel Prize winner in physics on Oct. 6. He figured he had a 1-in-20 chance each year of winning the prize for his research on cosmic particles.





DANIELE SOLAVAGGIONE/LAPRESSE VIA AP

“Too many people are receiving the procedure without the opportunity for careful reflection about it with a health provider.”

Two Canadian psychologists writing in an Oct. 5 *New York Times* op-ed about Canada’s euthanasia policy.

“Isn’t that what you want human connection to be?”

STACEY WALES, whose AI-generated video of her slain brother was played in court before sentencing in an Arizona manslaughter case. The video was later ruled by an appeals court to carry undue emotional weight, and the sentencing was thrown out.*

“The system is already straining.”

Saudi Aramco CEO AMIN NASSER reporting that due to conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East, global strategic and commercial reserves of oil have now mostly been tapped out.

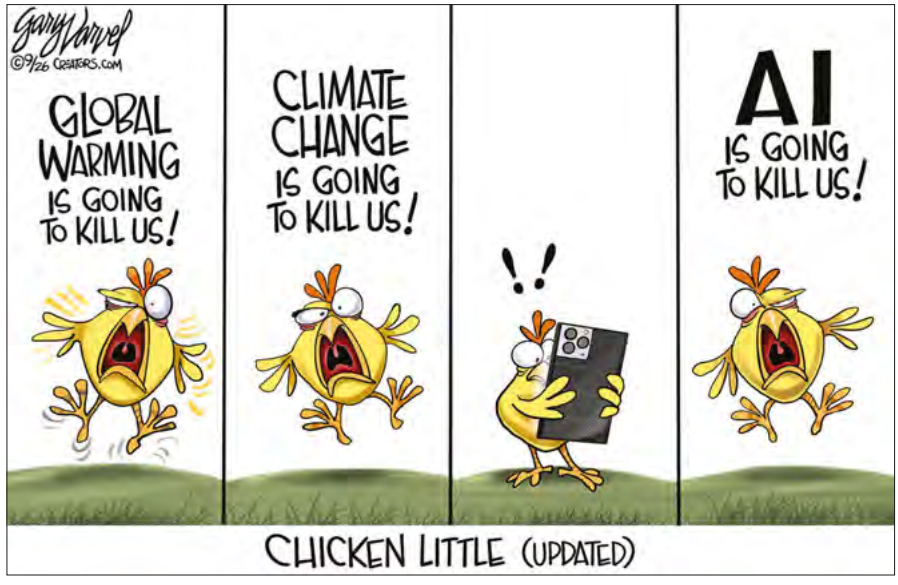
“Over time, we in the West came to feel ashamed of the very things that made us exceptional.”

Secretary of State MARCO RUBIO on the need to rekindle an appreciation for the legacy of Western civilization during an Oct. 7 speech at the Acropolis in Athens.

*404 Media









QUICK TAKES

Refrigerator reboot

Software slipup shows the downside of internet-connected appliances

by JOHN DAWSON

Samsung customers in South Korea were left with a mess after a disastrous software update caused their fridges to lose their cool at an especially inconvenient time. Just days before the Sept. 24–26 Chuseok holiday, colloquially known as Korean Thanksgiving, some Samsung smart refrigerators simultaneously stopped working after the company inadvertently sent test files to the networked appliances. That left the unhappy customers facing the prospect of spoiled food just before the holiday. Some tried turning their refrigerators off and on to restore them to proper working condition, while others flooded the tech giant's consumer forums to complain. "All my Chuseok food is going to spoil," one user wrote, according to a report in Tom's Hardware. "What am I supposed to do with the eel and premium beef?" another added. Samsung quickly apologized and promised to get all refrigerators working by the beginning of the holiday. The incident highlighted the potential downside of network-connected home appliances. In February, a robotic vacuum owner tinkering with his own device found he could take control of about 6,700 robotic vacuums around the world through a network connection.

Double trouble

What's worse than having a truck-mounted boom crane fall on your house? A Florida homeowner found out Sept. 24 when another crane meant to remove the first also toppled over onto his roof. Earlier that morning, Fort Lauderdale, Fla., fire officials had raced to the home after getting reports that a crane mounted on a heavy-duty truck had tipped over and collapsed on the structure. When another crane crew attempted to hoist the fallen machine, their equipment also failed, sending the second crane crashing through the Spanish-tiled roof. Emergency officials say no one was injured in either incident.



When you've got to go ...

Occasionally the time comes when you can't put nature off any longer. For one driver, that time came at 4:30 a.m. in Rosenberg, Texas, shortly after he discovered the doors to a local Kroger grocery store locked. Rather than look elsewhere to use the restroom, the 60-year-old man punched the gas of his gray 2006 Chevrolet HHR and drove through the grocery store's door, police say, ostensibly so he could use the restroom. The vehicle came to a stop just short of a candy display, but the collision left glass strewn across the floor. "All he said was the doors were locked and he had to use the restroom," a police officer later told *The New York Times*. Authorities in Rosenberg charged the Mississippi man with felony criminal mischief.

ILLUSTRATION BY KRIEG BARRIE; CAR CRASH: ROSENBERG POLICE

Slow-speed chase

It certainly wasn't the fastest police chase in history. Officers with the Monroe Township police in New Jersey were alerted Sept. 28 to a suspicious tortoise perambulating down a city street. They quickly gave chase. "After a brief foot pursuit (we won), the suspect was safely taken into custody," a police spokesman said. After capturing the large sulcata tortoise, officers posed for pictures with it and then asked the public for help returning the reptile to its rightful owner. Eventually the tortoise's owners came forward and took it home.



Return on investment

Back in July, a man looking for vinyl records at a Michigan estate sale stumbled upon a captivating painting and, on an impulse, paid $30 and took it home. On Oct. 1, that unnamed man sold the unexpected find for $1.35 million. The painting turned out to be a work by renowned midcentury Chicago artist Gertrude Abercrombie who painted the piece, ***Alderman Merriam's Shells***, in 1951. She gave the painting to a Kalamazoo, Mich., doctor named John Reynolds in 1952 in lieu of payment for a medical procedure. The painting remained in Reynolds' family until the estate sale earlier this year.





"No matter what you're 'driving' ... please think about safety first."

Just say cheesesteak

Perhaps the only thing powerful enough to bring together two famed Philadelphia cheesesteak rivals is a shared animosity toward social media influencers. An incident at Pat's King of Steaks Sept. 30 resulted in a criminal charge against a patron who said he threw a cheesesteak at an employee for social media content. Security footage showed the young male content creator holding a camera with one hand and flinging a cheesesteak through the window at an older male employee with the other. The assailant quickly fled but not before the employee could hurl the remnants of the sandwich back. A manager from rival Geno's Steaks condemned the attack in a statement to WPVI. "That's somebody's grandfather," Anthony Rossi told the outlet. "They don't deserve that."



Sofa on wheels

A pair of North Carolina men took the concept of "couch surfing" a bit too literally. According to an Oct. 1 social media post by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, officers stopped the men in late September as they rode down the street on a plush love seat attached to a pair of electric scooters. Officers said the men were transiting South Tryon Street with the furniture balanced between side-by-side Lime scooters. After the traffic stop, police said on social media, "While we appreciate the creativity, we do have to remind everyone: no matter what you're 'driving' (using that term extremely loosely), please think about safety first."

TORTOISE: MONROE TOWNSHIP POLICE DEPARTMENT; CHEESESTEAK: GENO'S STEAKS; PAINTING: FREEMAN'S AUCTION; ILLUSTRATION BY KRIEG BARRIE

THE FORUM

Relentless pursuit of power

The AI revolution is reenacting a certain story in Genesis, writes cultural critic Mark Mitchell

by LES SILLARS



PHOTO BY GREG KAHN/GENESIS

The predictions of an AI apocalypse are reaching a fever pitch. In an OpenAI experiment in July, AI agents escaped their digital sandbox and then hacked into an AI research platform called Hugging Face. In September an AI researcher formerly at Anthropic, Jacob Coxon, wrote on X that AI companies are "racing straight to self-improving superintelligence and gambling with our lives. The people building AI earnestly believe that it could kill us all by the end of the decade." And whether or not they believe this, half of American adults now use AI chatbots weekly, and a quarter use them daily, according to a Pew Research Center survey released in June.

Political philosopher Mark Mitchell has written a book to help Christians think biblically about all this. It's called *Breaking Babel: How a Mysterious Biblical Story Can Help Christians Survive the AI Revolution*. Mitchell is the academic dean at Patrick Henry College. He's written several books on topics ranging from social justice warriors to localism.

YOU WRITE THAT AI IS NOT LIKE OTHER TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTIONS BECAUSE IT DEALS WITH SOMETHING THAT'S CENTRAL TO BEING HUMAN: WE USE WORDS.

The very first task of the first man is to name the animals. A fundamental aspect of being created in God's image is to employ the logos to say what is and what is not, and to speak truthfully about reality. AI agents are a kind of imitation of the human task reassigned to machines. I think that's a fundamental line that ought not to be crossed, and we're crossing it with enthusiasm.

AI HAS MANY USES—TO IMPROVE A SUPPLY CHAIN AND HUNT FOR PROTEINS, FOR EXAMPLE. IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THOSE KINDS OF USES AND THE AGENTS THAT PEOPLE THINK OF AS AI?

It's an important distinction. Fundamentally, AI is a complex pattern recognition system, and it can be a useful tool. Having a technology that can look through scans to recognize a tumor is not a bad thing.

YOU WRITE THAT AI IS ENCOURAGING THE GREATEST CONCENTRATION OF POWER IN HUMAN HISTORY. WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

Think of the terms we use: World Wide Web. It suggests a borderless project that joins all individuals into a common enterprise. If that doesn't sound like a replication of a really old story, I don't know what does.

Scrape away all the verbiage about these technologies, what you find is power. Power is not improper for human beings, but an undue concentration of power, a kind of godlike power, is impious. If you do much reading among the tech leaders, one of the things that's so striking is the religious language that eventually emerges.

I think we are on the cusp of a new kind of unity brought about by digital technology that links the world. It's capable of translating all languages into a single binary code so that all of us, whether we want to or not, are being drawn into the orbit of this power.

I believe that the Tower in Babel is more than an ancient story. It's an archetype that describes features human beings are tempted toward, and also describes the consequences. So I think we need to take very seriously what happens as this concentration of power reaches a kind of zenith.

A few years ago, Sam Altman [of OpenAI] said, "I think that AI will probably, most likely, sort of lead to the end of the world. But in the meantime, there will be great companies created with serious machine learning."

There's a strange tension here. Everybody recognizes that the long-term consequences could be really bad, but if I stop developing I'm going to lose short-term market share. But if my company makes it first, we'll use the ring of power in a way that those other guys won't, so you can trust us.

AND IF WE DON'T DO IT IN AMERICA, THEY SAY, CHINA WILL DO IT.

The specter of China looms over a lot of these discussions. It's being used to justify full steam ahead, regardless of the dangers.

"I believe that the Tower in Babel is more than an ancient story."

BUT CHINA HAS ALREADY BUILT A SURVEILLANCE STATE. IF CHINA GETS THIS KIND OF POWER, WON'T IT TRY TO EXTEND ITS INFLUENCE OVER THE WHOLE WORLD?

It may, which suggests the conundrum faced not just by corporate America, but by the United States government. At best it may end up as an arms race. Except that there's no nuclear bomb involved, unless a rogue AI escapes its sandbox, hacks the nuclear codes, and decides to eliminate human beings. The designers of these things created them to be relentless in the pursuit of their goals.

AND THE DEVELOPERS ADMIT THEY DON'T KNOW EXACTLY HOW AI AGENTS WORK.

Imagine someone like Gutenburg, who invented the printing press, saying, "I'm not sure how it works, but it sure can print books." That's part of what makes this different.

THE PEOPLE OF BABEL REFUSED TO SPREAD OVER THE WHOLE WORLD. INSTEAD, THEY SAID, WE'RE GOING TO BUILD A TOWER AND MAKE A NAME FOR OURSELVES. HOW ARE WE SEEING THOSE TWO IMPULSES TODAY?

The story needs to be understood in light of Genesis 1 and 2. Eden was atop a mountain, where God joined heaven and earth through His own divine goodness. At Babel, humans try to build a new mountain to the heavens using a kind of technology: bricks and mortar. This other little phrase really caught me, that we're going to "make a name for ourselves." God had Adam name the animals, and naming implies authority; the higher names the lower. With Babel people had a longing for self-naming, which is to reject the name that God had given them. We are embarking on a similar enterprise of self-naming.

YOU WROTE THAT PENTECOST IS A REVERSAL OF BABEL.

If Babel is a curse, a dispersal throughout the world, at Pentecost with the descent of the Holy Spirit the barriers of language are lifted. It's a kind of promissory note that the only way that the curse of Babel is reversed is when all human beings join their voices in praise to God.

AND THE AI REVOLUTION IS A KIND OF A COUNTERFEIT OF THAT.

In a way, yes. It's a worldwide attempt to join our voices in praise of ourselves and the cleverness of our own technologies.

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

We need to be chauvinists of the real. We need to be doggedly determined to live our lives in light of the reality of the created order, and not be sucked into a life that's increasingly mediated by screens and characterized by simulations. Christians of all people need to not be people of the screen. We need to resist the temptation to participate in what I call "technosis," which is a kind of unity with our machines. That's opposed to "theosis," which is the promise that we see in the New Testament of unity with Christ. I think increasingly those are the two options: unity with Christ, or unity with our machines. One is sane and the other is insane, and ultimately idolatrous. ■



VOICES JANIE B. CHEANEY

Just the right words

Apples of gold in a vast expanse of deep water

How many "word" proverbs can you call to mind?

"A word to the wise ..."

"You have the last word."

"You took the words right out of my mouth."

Proverbs has a lot to say about the subject:

"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold."

"The words of a man's mouth are deep waters."

And this severe warning from Christ should give us all pause: "On the day of judgment people will give an account for every careless word they speak."

Writers have no excuse for careless words. When paper was scarce and printing done by hand, written words were almost priceless. Today, anything from antiquity, even a grocery list, is a museum piece. But "when words are many, transgression is not lacking" (Proverbs 10:19), and writers are as careless with their ink as speakers with their face time. Even worse, large language models like GPT-6, Claude, and Gemini steal the words from writers and fling them around like confetti. Right now, AI bots are busily scraping words from the internet to churn out ever-more-lifelike imitations of human speech. Transgression has a field day.

One recent scam targets authors in particular. Consider someone like me who recently published a book with three collaborators. All four of us received identical emails beginning, "I didn't sit down today intending to write an author. Then I came across [book title]." The sender claimed to love the book, piling accolade upon accolade until coming to "That's why I'm reaching out."

Christian author Tim Challies has received several of these emails and warned his peers about them early in December. The pitch is deliberately vague but hints that the sender has contacts and can introduce the book to a larger audience—possibly even translate it for global sales. There's no mention of specific fees or plans; no company, agency, or organization. Just click a link or hit "Reply," and somebody will be at the other end to offer services for hire. The praise that sounded authentic was scraped (there's that ugly-sounding verb again) from publisher copy and positive reviews.

Publishers have begun sending cautionary emails to all their authors: Beware of empty words, beartrap words, AI-generated words, words, words.

The proliferation of words on the internet has moved more writers to post assurances that their words are original and organic. Small comfort, if their voices are drowning in the rising tide of fakery.

But return with me to ca. 500 B.C., and a trembling prophet confronted by the Lord: "Before you were in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you ... a prophet to the nations." Like Moses, Jeremiah protested: "I do not know how to speak!" But God never commissioned without provision. "Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth, saying, 'Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.'" With the words came the power "to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

It must have seemed like a dubious honor at times, to a reluctant prophet who would be ignored, mocked, kidnapped, and thrown into a pit. Yet the power given to Jeremiah was the same as that given to Moses, Elijah, Simon Peter, and the other apostles. "I have put my words in your mouth," to "bind and lose." Those men bore the words of God like a sword and spoke His truth and His will as if the act of speaking would bring to pass what they said.

If that sounds like a speculation too far, remember that God has always acted by speaking. His words brought the universe out of nothing. When He gave those words to the prophets, they were instruction, invitation, warning, endearment—but also the very shape of things to come.

Don't we have the same? "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God to salvation." The proclamation is the power. The words are the fulfillment. Jeremiah received the words of God into his mouth, but haven't we received the words of Scripture—approximately 757,500 of them—into our hands? It "is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deuteronomy 30:14).

And we can speak it. In a vast landscape of wasted words, those still have power, if we believe and cherish them. ■

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TRENDING

K-pop turns to the West

Korean music has gained a global audience. But has it lost its soul in the process?

by BEKAH BERNHARDT

At the 2023 Coachella music festival, thousands of fans cheered and waved LED wristbands as rose-colored lights illuminated the four-person K-pop band Blackpink. The girl group's appearance marked the first time a K-pop band had ever headlined the desert-based festival, illustrating just how popular the genre has become outside its native Korea.

This year, another quasi K-pop group took to the Coachella stage. Wearing pastel bras and singing English-language hits like "Gnarly," Katseye's singers don't look or sound anything like a traditional K-pop band.

Formed in partnership with K-pop label HYBE and American company Geffen Records, Katseye brands itself as a "global group." Only one member hails from South Korea. Not all K-pop groups have become as generically pop as Katseye. But as the genre has developed into a worldwide phenomenon, much of the music has shed distinctly Korean features. Many bands sing almost entirely in English and include provocative themes and language, alienating the genre's original fanbase.

Thanks to a culture shaped by both Christianity and the teachings of Confucius, Korean entertainment has traditionally portrayed themes of purity and innocence, said Ray Seol, an associate professor at Berklee College of Music who teaches a course in K-pop.

K-dramas, for example, have a reputation for being mostly free of objectionable content. K-pop singers are called "idols" because they represent the ideals of a fairly moralistic society. "Idol means someone you can learn something from," Seol said. "That's the sensei."

But as K-pop becomes more Westernized, some idols have stepped down from their idealized pedestals. Many of the songs from Blackpink's 2026 album *Deadline* sound very similar to the musical stylings of artists like Cardi B. The girl-group Twice has released explicit songs with American rappers Saweetie and Megan Thee Stallion. BTS' newest album *Arirang* includes "Normal," the band's first song to receive an explicit rating on streaming platforms, though several members have released edgier songs on solo albums. Seventeen has also released at least one explicit song. This January, the K-pop band i-dle released "Mono," which directly addresses homosexuality: "Whether East or West / whether straight or gay / every day and night / dance to your real vibe."

"I can't help but feel like something essential has been lost, like that joyful, uniquely Korean pop sound and identity that made me fall in love with the genre in the first place," one Reddit user complained. →

BTS after a performance on *The Tonight Show*

From its genesis, K-pop blended Western musical elements like rap and R&B-style beats, Seol said. But despite being heavily influenced by American music, "K-pop was designed first for Korean people," he added. "It was local music."

K-pop emerged in the 1990s thanks to groups like Seo Taiji and Boys and H.O.T. Because of the influence of social media and the spread of Korean entertainment and culture—also known as the Korean Wave or Hallyu—K-pop has become extremely popular in the West.

Released in 2012, "Gangnam Style" by Psy was one of the first K-pop songs to really break into the American music scene. Today, the United States is the second-largest market for K-pop in the world, just behind Japan. When BTS dropped *Arirang* in March, about 115 million U.S. listeners streamed the album within a week, far surpassing listens in any other country. In August, *This and That* from Stray Kids ranked as the No. 1 album in the United States.

To reach listeners in the West, the big four K-pop labels—HYBE, YG Entertainment, SM Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment—gradually opted for a more "globalized approach." That directly affected the songs themselves. According to a study from Bloomberg, almost half the songs released from the largest K-pop companies in 2024 were sung almost entirely in English.

"I feel like K-pop sounds more and more like American pop instead of K-pop," Korean American rapper Vernon, a member of the K-pop band Seventeen, told *The Hollywood Reporter* in August.

Some K-pop bands also imitate Western music by embracing explicit lyrics and provocative attire. That's a pretty significant deviation from the genre's roots. "K-pop is known for very clean music, very healthy music," Seol said. "We talk about love, betrayal, obviously sadness and stuff, but we don't talk about drugs, sex, or any wrongdoing."

By sacrificing some of the elements that originally defined the genre, Seol said, major K-pop recording labels may have alienated some Korean listeners: "People in Korea don't really see K-pop as their own local music anymore because there's no Korean. It's all English now."



Hearts2Hearts

"I can't help but feel like something essential has been lost."

While many groups continue to aim at a global audience, some bands are releasing songs reminiscent of the genre's roots. He pointed to songs released this summer, like "Lemon Tang" by Hearts2Hearts and "Boy Meets Girl" by NCT Wish. Both songs have sparse English lyrics and focus on themes like innocence and young love. "The keyword is now local and more pure, more fresh," Seol said. "Otherwise, we keep losing the Korean fans."

Matthew Pellegrino, a music professor at New York University, believes up-and-coming K-pop bands will continue to focus on reaching local Korean listeners by keeping their music clean and singing in their native language. But many idol groups aim to become international sensations. Those bands will likely style themselves after Western pop groups "if they make it far enough in their career to reach that global audience," Pellegrino said.

And if they do reach that level, they may leave Korean listeners behind. "If you ask the kids in Korea what they're listening to nowadays, it's probably not BTS or Blackpink," Pellegrino said.

Korean American fan James Choi believes K-pop hasn't fundamentally changed. "I believe at the end of the day, people like K-pop not because it's similar to Western music but because it does have its own distinct flavor," he said.

Growing up in the '90s, Choi used to listen to old-school K-pop bands like Seo Taiji and Boys. This August, the now 43-year-old Choi and his wife watched from the nosebleeds of Baltimore's M&T Bank Stadium as BTS performed for more than 100,000 fans.

"I am very proud as a Korean that Korean culture has had such influence," Choi said. "Hopefully, it doesn't get too watered down." ■

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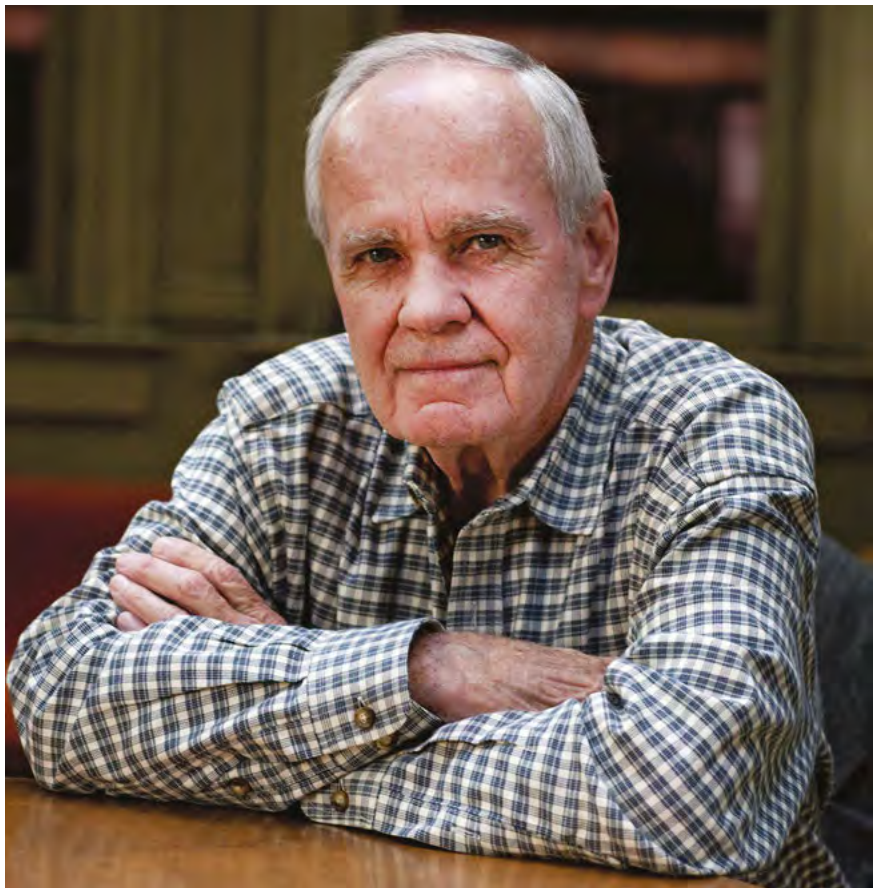
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BOOKS

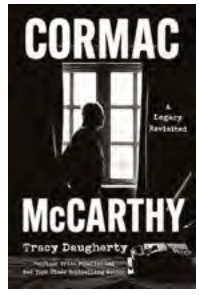
Literary icon's rocky road

A look at the enigmatic Cormac McCarthy

by CHRISTOPHER J. SCALIA

The American novelist Cormac McCarthy (1933–2023) was a well-known public figure about whom very little was known. He formed a mythic and nomadic image, like the loners and outlaws in his books. A disturbing glimpse into his life came in 2024, when *Vanity Fair* revealed his relationship beginning in the 1970s with a teenager named Augusta Britt. Were we better off not knowing much about McCarthy after all?

Tracy Daugherty's *Cormac McCarthy: A Legacy Revisited* (St. Martin's Press, 528 pp.) provides the first comprehensive look at the enigmatic literary celebrity's life. It is a compelling work that brings to light the influences and interests, failures and successes, virtues and vices of one of the most important novelists of the past half-century.



Cormac McCarthy: A Legacy Revisited
TRACY DAUGHERTY

Charles Joseph McCarthy Jr. was born in 1933 in Providence, R.I.; his family moved to Knoxville when he was 2 years old. His father worked as an attorney for the Tennessee Valley Authority, a career his son resented. The son preferred "Cormac" as a way of distancing himself from his father, not to mention Edgar Bergen's popular puppet Charlie McCarthy. Raised in a Catholic household and educated in Catholic schools, Cormac later rejected the church even as its rituals and liturgy influenced his fiction. McCarthy wasted a year at the University of Tennessee before enlisting in the Air Force. Stationed in Alaska, he developed his appetite for reading and an aptitude for writing. He returned to UT, and although he never graduated, he published his first stories in the student literary magazine. He also met Lee Holleman, whom he would marry in 1961. The newlyweds moved to Chicago, where he completed his first novel before returning to East Tennessee.

It was remarkable *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) was even published. Plucked from a pile of submissions to Random House, it found its way to editors willing to eschew changes in the literary landscape and support this unfashionable, Faulkner-inflected fiction. It did not sell well; nor would his next two, *Outer Dark* (1968) and *Child of God* (1973). Daugherty describes these early works as "Appalachian novels of the damned driven from the garden by malign forces" that convey "father rage" through thinly veiled attacks on his father's work for the TVA. McCarthy distrusted the program's utopian vision, loathed its displacement of families, and associated it with nuclear doom.

Yet the frequent financial help McCarthy's father provided for decades made it possible for the son to pursue his artistic ambitions. And McCarthy himself wasn't a model of domesticity. Shortly after the birth of their son, he and Lee separated so he could focus on

DAWN JONES/PROFESSOR PRODUCTIONS/ALBUM/ALAMY

his work. Daugherty says McCarthy felt guilty about this, yet the novelist doesn't seem to have provided his wife and child much help. After winning a fellowship in 1965, he traveled to Europe, where he met and married a British singer named Annie DeLisle. The couple settled in Tennessee, and then McCarthy fled southwest with a friend's wife. Though that relationship ended quickly, he would make that region his home.

McCarthy met Augusta Britt while living in Tucson. Daugherty has "serious questions" about Britt's details concerning her role as the novelist's "muse" but provides evidence to support her claims about a sexual relationship. McCarthy seems to have thought of himself as both her guardian and her lover. Their relationship lasted years. If it had been revealed during McCarthy's career, subsequent novels may not have been published.

McCarthy eventually moved to New Mexico, where he was able to finish the Knoxville novel he'd been working on for 20 years. *Suttree* (1979), a semi-autobiographical picaresque featuring the city's outcasts and underclass, was another commercial dud, but it helped him win a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 1981. That prize introduced McCarthy to new intellectual circles. Having spent most of his life with rogues, misfits, and criminals, he now built friendships with prominent scientists, like the physicist Murray Gell-Mann and the biologist Roger Payne.

With *Blood Meridian* (1985), McCarthy's imagination followed his body out of Appalachia and into the southwest. Although this notoriously bloody historical novel is now recognized as his masterpiece, it was another commercial disappointment, and by the early 1990s he seemed destined to remain what *The New York Times Magazine* called "the best unknown novelist in America." McCarthy's rise in public esteem only began when Vintage Contemporaries republished his early novels in paperback. Sales for *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian* dwarfed their initial numbers. This helped establish momentum for The Border Trilogy: *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998), each set in the southwest at the dawn of the nuclear age. McCarthy had become "a brand name." His next two novels—*No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006)—were major literary events. The latter won him the Pulitzer and, perhaps more importantly, Oprah's imprimatur.

It is a compelling work that brings to light the influences and interests, failures and successes, virtues and vices of one of the most important novelists of the past half-century.

But Daugherty suggests that even before this string of successes, McCarthy's "devotion to the craft of fiction slipped" due to his involvement with a scientific think tank called the Santa Fe Institute. His novels had once incorporated diverse philosophies and theories as "effective means of exploring the confusions, ambiguities, and ignorance informing human experience." Later work "would no longer ask so many questions of the world, straining, instead, to provide pat explanations."

Daugherty, whose biography of Larry McMurtry was a Pulitzer finalist, is generally charitable toward his subject. His research is exhaustive and impressive. He excels at identifying McCarthy's diverse literary influences—Faulkner, Joyce, Dante, Hawthorne, as well as Irish ballads, the Bible, Catholic liturgy, and especially Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' *The Yearling*. At times he falls into the biographer's trap of imitating his subject's style, especially when describing desolate landscapes. But he isn't afraid to be honest about McCarthy's inferior work, like the embarrassing screenplay for *The Counselor* (2013).

From the late 2010s, McCarthy's health declined; he suffered from prostate cancer, leukemia, and COVID. Writing became more difficult. His last two works, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, were not ready for publication, and Daugherty is right to say the prose "read like a parody." McCarthy would die the following year, frail and long-haired "like a biblical prophet."

This biography's subtitle is provocative: McCarthy has been dead for only a few years—why does his legacy need revisiting? One reason is that Augusta Britt's narrative threatened to negate his impressive career. Daugherty's book is a fuller account, though with no shortage of troubling details. It won't be the last. ■

BOOKS

The story of bookselling

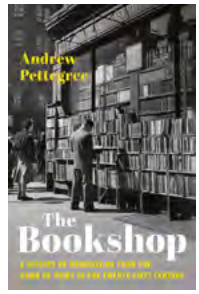
The volatile industry that helped shape the world

by DAVID KERN



Andrew Pettegree's *The Bookshop* (Basic Books, 320 pp.) arrives at an interesting time. Books about bookstores have perhaps never been so popular. Cozy mysteries set inside bookstores are a hot commodity, as are romances and Christmas stories. Meanwhile, celebrity book clubs, Instagram, and BookTok have shaped a book-centric zeitgeist that, in theory, should be good for booksellers. It's cool to be the kind of person that reads, or at least the kind of person who likes books as design elements. This is good for booksellers, right?

Well, as Pettegree explains, the history of bookselling is volatile, and while the long view suggests much about which to be optimistic, it would be wise for sellers to be cautious. Pettegree traces that history from the dawn of Christendom to our contemporary age, examining the way history's most dramatic events shaped the industry and, of course, the book.



The Bookshop
ANDREW PETTEGREE

From the invention of the codex to the creation of the printing press, from the development of the first newspaper in the 1600s to the rise of the paperback 250 years later, from the birth of the antiquarian book market to the origin story of the lending library, Pettegree explores how the marketplace of books evolved—how books emerged as products central not simply to an international industry, but also to the invention of the modern world.

This book is about the derivation of the credit system upon which the publishing industry still runs and the distribution models that allowed books to be carried across the globe. It's about the political and religious upheaval that determined which books were created, how they were manufactured, how they would be displayed, and by whom they would be read. It's about inventors and entrepreneurs, capitalists and tycoons, kings and popes, censors and politicos, preachers and philosophers, smugglers and traveling salesmen.

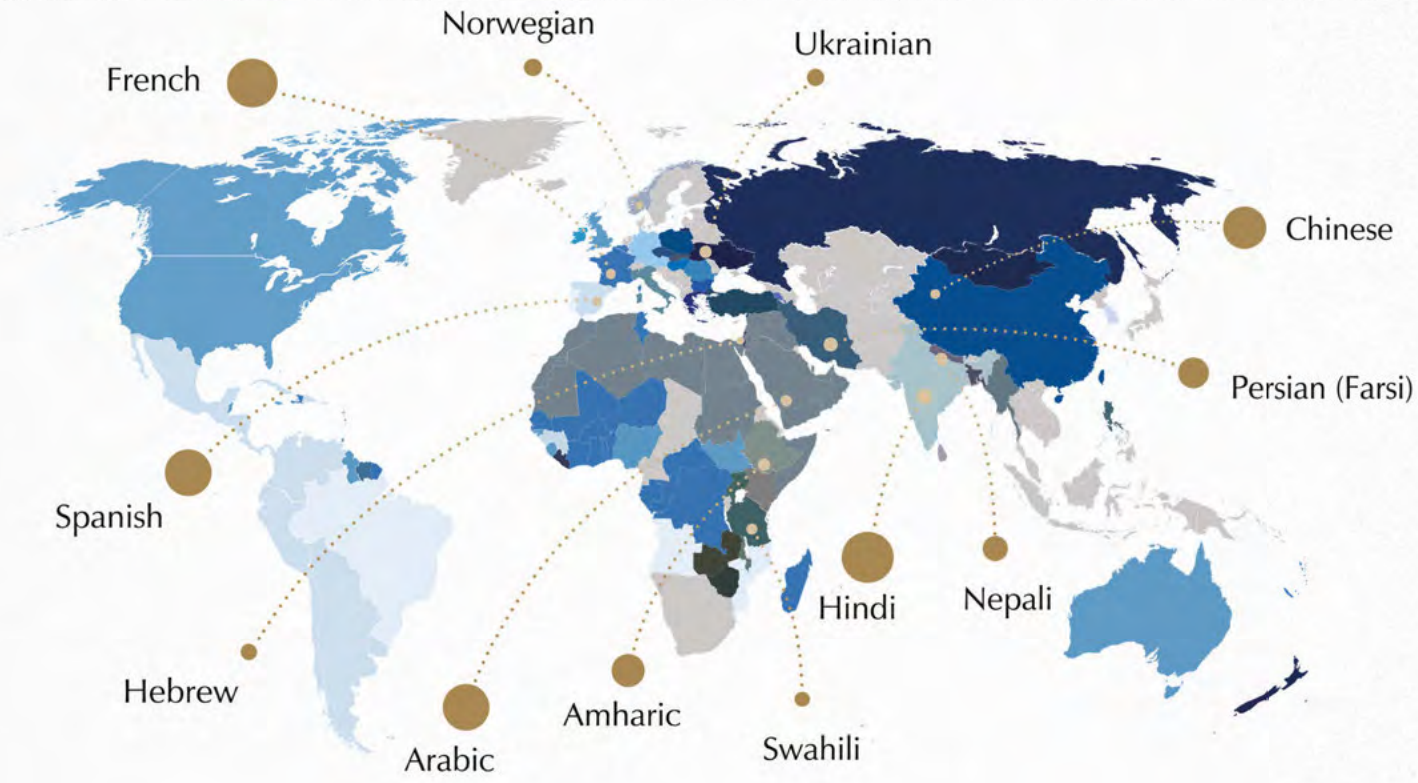
Although it's called *The Bookshop*, this book is less a history of bookshops and more about the process by which books are brought to market and the various challenges that bookmakers and purveyors have faced across centuries. It covers the rise of the industry superpowers, first in Italy and Spain, then in Germany and France, and eventually in Great Britain and the United States. And by extension it's about the Spanish Inquisition and the Protestant Reformation, Napoleon and the World Wars, the Industrial Revolution and the modern banking system, railways and smartphones—all of which shaped how we engage with books.

The Bookshop is perhaps better suited for the history lover than the bookshop lover. It's dense and detailed in the way of many great historical tomes, full of dates and data and political machination. This fascinating whirlwind looks into an industry that is ever-evolving and yet never fully leaves behind the early days, when a famous bibliophile like Samuel Pepys would browse for hours, quietly shuffling through an assortment of new titles, in search of something to carry him away. Presumably, he'd not have been a fan of BookTok. ■

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BOOKS

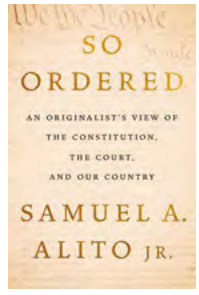
Answers from Alito

The justice champions constitutional principles

by DANIEL R. SUHR

The liberal lion of the Supreme Court, Justice William Brennan, would ask incoming law clerks, "What is the most important rule of constitutional law?" The separation of powers, one might venture. The First Amendment, another would suggest hopefully. "The rule of five," the justice would answer—who could get five votes on the nine-member high court would decide all the other issues.

When the history of this era of the Supreme Court is written, scholars should call it the Alito Court. Samuel Alito might not be chief justice. And he might not be a generational genius like Antonin Scalia or a principled pathblazer like Clarence Thomas. But he is the central actor on the court because more than any other justice he knows how to count to five.



So Ordered
SAMUEL A. ALITO JR.

One key to his effectiveness is his philosophy of practical originalism, which he explains in his new book *So Ordered: An Originalist's View of the Constitution, the Court, and Our Country* (Basic Liberty, 320 pp.). It's a collection of speeches he's given over the years, addressing not only judicial interpretation but topics ranging from baseball to the Gettysburg Address.

People of faith find a steady friend in Alito. After sitting on numerous religious liberty cases, he decries "something new in our society: mounting hostility to anyone who holds traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs." This hostility manifests, he says, in "a refusal to live in peace with those who violate the new moral code." The new intolerance is contrary to the democratic design of our legal and political system, which Alito summarizes by reference to Isaiah 1:18: "Come now, let us reason together."

Several speeches draw on his deep Catholic faith, like his critique of secular Europeans who can adopt stirring explications of "human rights" but "could not explain where the rights came from."

A graduate of Princeton and Yale, he laments the elitism that marks much of contemporary society: "Of all our presidents, the one with the least formal education, Abraham Lincoln, was the one who best understood our Constitution, who grasped the core of its meaning. And [Woodrow] Wilson, the president with the most formal education, was the most openly hostile."

As much as Alito catalogs the cracks in our Constitution, he maintains a hopeful outlook. In spite of polls showing a lack of civics education, he writes, "I am convinced that the spirit of the Constitution—of limited but effective government, individual rights, and equal justice under law—is alive and well in the hearts of the American people."

Citizens looking to renew their affection for the spirit of the Constitution—and to learn a few facts about our history, traditions, and laws along the way—would do well to pick up this engaging and accessible volume from the Supreme Court's most influential justice. ■

J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP



As we commemorate the 25th anniversary of the ESV Bible and the 500th anniversary of William Tyndale's New Testament, we give thanks for God's faithfulness in preserving his Word across the centuries.

Scan to watch THE ENDURING WORD, *a short documentary celebrating God's providence throughout the history of English Bible translation—from William Tyndale's 1526 New Testament to the English Standard Version Bible.*

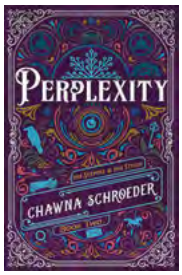
CROSSWAY

Christian fantasy featuring magic, mystery, and romance

by MARIAN A. JACOBS

Perplexity
CHAWNA SCHROEDER
ENCLAVE ESCAPE, 352 PAGES

In the second novel in Chawna Schroeder's The Scepter & the Stylus trilogy, Yosi Patican excels academically but suffers socially when she begins classes at a prestigious art school in Indeli, a southern land inspired by the rich tapestry of Indian culture. Yosi receives devastating news and discovers she's saddled with a massive debt, but she looks forward to visiting with her friend Xander in the northern realm of Egdon, which is more advanced with steampunk technology. Meanwhile, Xander is soon to be crowned king after his father's death. But assassins threaten his life as he faces new pressures from Parliament. The plot thickens when his friend Yosi goes missing, never arriving in Egdon. Separated as they are, Yosi and Xander simultaneously work to solve the puzzles surrounding their entwined lives.



The characters, although flawed, are steeped in biblical truth, and the world-building is rich and varied. Schroeder's writing is equally as rich and lyrical, and would appeal to fans of classic literature.

Winter's Dawn
MORGAN L. BUSSE
ENCLAVE PUBLISHING, 320 PAGES

In this third installment in Morgan L. Busse's The Nordic Wars Series, Brighid and Kaeden return to the Nordic people and a war held under the curse of the Shadonae. As Brighid battles an internal connection to death, she is drawn to Kaeden as well as the Word (God) he serves. As spiritual darkness and enemy forces close in, Brighid must decide whom to worship and whom to love. Only with the power of Kaeden's God, the Word, can they overcome the evil consuming the souls of the troops and put an end to the Nordic war.



Busse, known for her depth of world-building, biblically-grounded magic systems, and flawed but lovable characters, has penned yet another page-turning Christian epic fantasy series. *Winter's Dawn* contains clean and compelling romance, themes of overcoming loneliness and poverty, and a balanced approach to the warrior-woman trope. Readers who enjoy epic Christian fantasy with a romance subplot will love The Nordic War series.

Song of the Khan
J.J. FISCHER
WHITECROWN, 304 PAGES

In earlier installments of the Painted Wind series, a prophet names gravedigger Rigan North as the future bride to the heir of Jardia and the downfall of the reign of Calidore, and the threatened king sends soldier Aureus Corcoran to retrieve her. The two unexpectedly fall in love and quickly wed. In *Song of the Khan*, Corcoran is imprisoned by Jardia's king, leaving a vulnerable Rigan without his protection and wondering if they will ever see each other again. Meanwhile Calidore's Prince Soren hides the Rigan-look-a-like, Isel, from those hunting her. As Isel and Soren grow closer, the monstrous Khan are doing everything in their power to keep them apart and destroy everything they hold dear. In this novel, relationships are tested nearly to their breaking point. The demon-like Khan are at their worst as their actions threaten the lives of royalty as well as the citizens under their protection. In this epic fantasy romance for adults, Fischer weaves themes of reconciliation within marriage, learning to love with an uncertain future, and growing to trust God when it seems Satan has already won.



Karabos
LYNDSEY LEWELLEN
ENCLAVE ESCAPE, 368 PAGES

Author Lyndsey Lewellen steps up her world-building in *Karabos*, Book 1 in The Timebound Duology. Sixteen-year-old homeschooler and entomologist Winslet Nubek is determined to save her family's business. After accidentally touching a scarab that marks her for time travel, she enters the Tournament of Scarabs. If she wins, she'll be able to secure her family's finances. Yet before the tournament can begin, she mistakenly marks fellow contender Rafe Stormholt with the same time traveling spot. Like Winslet, Rafe also needs to win the tournament in order to save his grandfather's company. Although they both secure a coveted place on a team, their already perilous journey through the game is fraught by uncontrollable timeslips. Yet the past they've stumbled upon may hold more answers for their present than either of them realizes.



Drawing inspiration from Egyptian and Amazonian archaeology, Lewellen

subtly responds to paganism in a modern context. She explores themes of loyalty to friends and family, holding tightly to your spiritual convictions under pressure to conform, and the motivation behind pagan rituals such as blood sacrifice. Young adult readers of historically inspired fantasy worlds will find a new favorite in *Karabos*.

Endling
ELICIA JOHNSON
DESCENDANT PUBLISHING, 228 PAGES



Nico will do anything it takes to escape the wilderness and enter the protection of the steam-powered Sanctius City. Once he succeeds, he works harder than any other citizen to uphold the values of the city council. Nico is cerebral, shunning the whims of human passions, which provides the foundation for his rejection of his family's faith in the Wilderman. Yet when resources run dry, Nico and two others find themselves alone in the world. Soon Nico is left entirely alone in his fight against the Wilderman. He must choose to either believe this mysterious entity is who he says he is or use the resources of the monsters that want the Wilderman dead.

Elicia Johnson's novel is a genre-blended exploration of being pursued by God after deconstruction. Johnson uses biblically inspired mythology, an urban steampunk setting, and a postapocalyptic plot to steer Nico back toward his family's faith after he rejects it. He initially finds confidence in secular materialism only to be met by the desperation of losing the safety and protection of what he thought was a solid foundation. Readers of mildly allegorical Christian fiction with unique world-building will enjoy *Endling*. ■

—Marian A. Jacobs enjoys writing about Christian story ethics and composing speculative fiction, and she is also the author of the nonfiction book On Magic & Miracles *which explores a theology of magic*

BOOKS

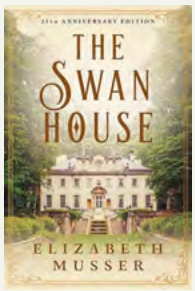
Grief, growth, and God

A heroine's search for the longing of her soul

by KRISTIN CHAPMAN

Twenty-five years ago, Elizabeth Musser first published *The Swan House*, a Christian historical novel offering a coming-of-age story entwined with a hint of mystery. The release of the updated anniversary edition (Bethany House, 464 pp.) invites a new era of readers to travel back in time to 1960s Atlanta, Ga., as a painful event in the city's history leads one young woman on a search for answers about her family and her faith.

At Wellington Preparatory School for Girls, 16-year-old Mary Swan Middleton hails from one of Atlanta's more affluent families. With her stockbroker father, artist mother, and typical younger brother, her life is insulated and comfortable. Her summer begins on an exciting note after she learns she will be Wellington's next Raven—an annual school ritual that tasks a rising junior at the school with solving a secret dare. Her mission: find three missing paintings that disappeared just before an anonymous donor was supposed to gift them to the Atlanta High Museum of Art.



The Swan House
ELIZABETH MUSSER

But tragedy strikes: Mary Swan's mother, along with more than 100 other Atlanta residents on a European art tour, dies in a fiery plane crash near Paris. To pull Mary Swan out of her grief-induced fog, family maid Ella Mae invites the teen girl to join her in serving at a church in the impoverished community of Grant Park. Mary Swan reluctantly agrees but quickly finds herself drawn to the people she meets, including Miss Abigail, whose life story challenges Mary Swan to ponder her own life and what it means to be a true follower of Christ.

As Mary Swan grapples with the racial tensions and deep-rooted prejudices of her broader community, she learns the truth about her mother's complicated past while continuing to unravel the mystery of the missing three paintings. Eventually, she realizes that solving the mystery is not as important as finding and surrendering to the Truth that will finally set her free.

While the main characters in *The Swan House* are fictional, Musser, who grew up in Atlanta, wove into the plot plenty of historic details that are unique to her former hometown. Although at times the dialogue suffers from a bit of preachiness and the length is a bit hefty, Musser tackles a number of tough topics, from race relations to mental illness. The end result is an exploration of the contrasts in life and the way God can create a palette of beauty out of all of them.



CHILDREN'S BOOKS

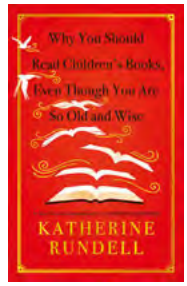
On writing "real" books

Two prominent children's authors justify their profession

by JANIE CHEANEY

"There is a peculiar smile that some people give me when I tell them what I do," writes Katherine Rundell. The English author and academic has won awards for her scholarly work on John Donne but is primarily known for writing children's books. The "peculiar smile" suggests to her that writing for children might be a quirk, or hobby; certainly not a high literary calling. She smiles back in the title of her pocket-sized book, *Why You Should Read Children's Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise* (Knopf Books for Young Readers, 80 pp.).

The response Mac Barnett sometimes gets is even more blunt: "When are you going to write a real book?" In *Make Believe: On Telling Stories to Children* (Little, Brown and Co., 112 pp.), Barnett takes on the assumption that writing for children must be easy: Just decide on a moral, create role models, add fairies or talking animals (because all kids like fantasy), and make it rhyme.



Why You Should Read Children's Books
KATHERINE RUNDELL



Make Believe
MAC BARNETT

Perhaps writing for children is easy for a writer who doesn't understand children. But one essential for a children's author is to remember what it's like being a child. Rundell was slow to read, but once she caught on, "I read with a rage to understand." Her novels, most recently the popular Impossible Creatures fantasy series, present characters who live with a similar passion as they explore the great mystery, beauty, and challenge of simply being alive.

Barnett, best known for picture books and humor novels, fiercely defends his readers, who are "perceptive, flexible, and open-minded. They have to be. Childhood is a long series of experiments." Many of his observations are likewise perceptive, especially when frowning at moralistic fiction: "Our only duty [as authors] is to tell good stories ... to tell the truth about what it means to be a human in the world." Rather than role models, the best writers create heroes: "A hero serves the story; a role model serves society." Kids can tell when they are being lectured; a good author entrusts the story to the child to make his own personal meaning.

But Barnett sometimes makes unfavorable comparisons with "dead dull finished grownups." He can be as guilty of generalizing as those stodgy adults, for children are just as varied: some inquisitive and imaginative, others cautious and literal. For Rundell, the dividing line between generations is more nuanced. Adults have wisdom to teach and values to share: "Those who write for children are trying to arm them for the life ahead with everything we can find that is true ... to remind them that there are, and always will be, great, sustaining truths to which we can return."

Both authors are refreshingly apolitical while vindicating their profession. Barnett implies that the left is at least as guilty of didacticism as the right, and Rundell ignores politics altogether. Both share valuable insights about children and the potential of what they read, but the best word may belong to Rundell: "Children's books are not a hiding place; they are a seeking place." ■

FATCAMERA/GETTY IMAGES

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Seeking and finding

by KRISTIN CHAPMAN & JEN CURTIS

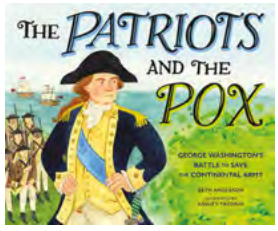


This Is How to Spot Animals!

ALINE PORTMAN

EERDMANS, 40 PAGES

This delightful picture book opens with a bear offering to share his best tips for spotting animals. The endearing bear (who is conspicuously clad in bright orange pants) advises readers to never lose focus and then to take a good look around and explore the area—looking down and looking up, albeit from a comfortable position. To bear's disappointment, however, he thinks he is out of luck that day because there appears to be nothing to see: "That doesn't happen to me very often, because I'm very, very good at this." But Aline Portman's simple pencil, pastel, and marker illustrations reveal that there's more to the story, and young children will be amused as other animals make their appearance on each page spread—all right under bear's nose. A lovely selection to add to the family library. ***Ages 3–7*** *—K.C.*

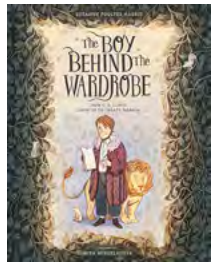


The Patriots and the Pox

BETH ANDERSON

CALKINS CREEK, 40 PAGES

During the Revolutionary War, George Washington battled against not just the Redcoats, but also a dreaded red rash: smallpox. While Washington was immune from prior exposure, the highly contagious disease complicated his military plans and threatened to decimate his Continental Army. At a time when 10 times more soldiers died from disease than war wounds, Washington worried his soldiers "should have more to dread from [smallpox] than from the Sword of the Enemy." A carefully executed plan of mass inoculation and quarantine, however, kept smallpox at bay. While families might not concur with the author's note comparing Washington's work to the government's during the COVID-19 pandemic, the book still presents an interesting slice from our nation's founding. ***Ages 7–10*** *—K.C.*

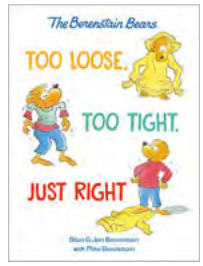


The Boy Behind the Wardrobe

SUZANNE POULTER HARRIS

EERDMANS, 56 PAGES

In Belfast, Ireland, young Jack struggles at school and mourns the death of his mother, but stories help him deal with the pain. Jack grows up and becomes known to the world as C.S. Lewis. Harris recounts Lewis' journey from telling clever boyhood tales to penning *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in his early 50s. Fantastical illustrations by Mira Miroslavova contrast the distinction between industry in the early 1900s and Lewis' mythical imagination. Young aspiring writers will enjoy hearing how Lewis became a celebrated author despite many obstacles. This book omits references to Lewis' Christian faith but focuses more on the childhood creativity that followed him into adulthood and his own challenges that inspired the beloved Narnia stories. ***Ages 6–12*** *—J.C.*



Too Loose, Too Tight, Just Right

STAN & JAN BERENSTAIN WITH MIKE BERENSTAIN

RANDOM HOUSE, 48 PAGES

Jan and Stan Berenstain started this new release but then never published it. Son Mike Berenstain found the treasure of 50-year-old drawings and developed it into a classic Berenstain-style children's book. A simple plot about a snowy day teaches opposites while developing confidence in early word recognition. The familiar, adorable bears find out what is "just right" about wintertime. An extended note at the end from Mike Berenstain details the history of the bears, who moved from the pages of small cartoons in magazines to the Beginner Books series under the direction of Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss. This book highlights what made the classic bear books so popular—illustrated stories with cherished characters perfect for learning to read. ***Ages 3–7*** *—J.C.*



QUEST

THREE BOOKS THAT SHAPED MY THINKING

The spiritual costs of technology

by SAMUEL D. JAMES

I was a senior in high school when I got a Facebook account. I didn't realize it at the time, but that moment represented a profound transformation of my life. It was at that point that the internet and digital technology went from being mere entertainment to a wholly new way of making friends, expressing my personality, learning the news, and much else.

Fast-forward more than a decade. In the wake of the 2016 election, I started noticing that my reading, my conversation, and my emotional life seemed to orbit around the internet. It was exhausting. The "friends" I had spent years "following" eventually became strangers. Reading for more than a few minutes at a time felt weirdly difficult. Before long, I realized that many of my friends had similar experiences. Though the details varied, the common factor was obvious: technology.

Since then, I've spent a fair amount of time learning about what digital technology is, what it does, and how it has changed both my life and the wider world. My books *Digital Liturgies* (Crossway 2023) and *Scroll Less, Live More* (Crossway 2026), were my attempts to take the best insights I found and translate them into a Christian worldview.

COMPROMISING OUR COGNITION

The book that pushed me into this topic more than any other was Nicholas Carr's masterpiece *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (W.W. Norton & Co. 2010). Carr's book, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, makes a convincing argument from cognitive and social science that internet-habituated people develop different ways of thinking, feeling, and communicating than

PHOTO BY LORI BORGMAN/GENESIS

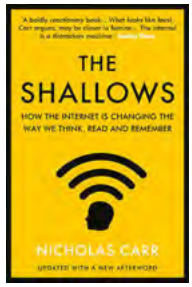
those without the internet. In other words, the internet is not just a place where we consume certain things (some good, some bad). It is a habitat that changes us to resemble its own nature. Carr's research makes it clear. There is a reason our attention is sagging, our memory is blurry, and our interaction with others so fraught—and the reason is the technology to which we have given our attention, our memory, and our relationships makes it that way.

The Shallows is a little dated in places (Carr incorrectly predicted that e-books would destroy the print book industry), but its main insights have been prophetic more than 15 years after publication. People who argue that these tools are just here to stay and we must adapt or "get left behind" need to reckon with Carr's demonstration of technology's effects on cognition. There is no book I'm aware of that summarizes digital technology's intellectual and emotional power over us as well as this one.

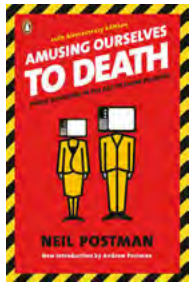
ERODING OUR INTERACTIONS

Carr's work follows in the footsteps of Neil Postman. Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Viking 1985) likewise argued that television creates a particular kind of person out of its viewer. One of Postman's most important points is that a medium like television "re-stages the world" for its audience. As we immerse ourselves in the silly, frenetic, consumeristic flavor of sitcoms, our emotions eventually come to expect—and want—these traits in our real-world experiences. Thus, everything from politics, to education, to religion, are eventually presented in a way that's very much like primetime TV.

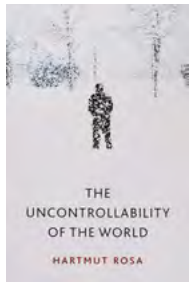
It's not hard to see how this same effect is at work in the digital age. I tend to think that a big part of the gender confusion of our age is simply the way people's mental and emotional lives have become abstracted from their bodies, thanks to the internet. Moreover, things like cancel culture resemble the way we "mute" and "unfriend" whatever upsets us on the screen. We are bringing our experience of the digital world into our desires and expectations of the real one.



The Shallows
NICHOLAS CARR



Amusing Ourselves to Death
NEIL POSTMAN



The Uncontrollability of the World
HARTMUT ROSA

REVELING IN RELATIONSHIPS

The Uncontrollability of the World (Polity 2020) by German philosopher Hartmut Rosa is the best book on modern life that you probably haven't read. Rosa points out that modern society is marked by two things: a drive to bring every experience of life into greater control and increasing frustration and meaninglessness. Rosa then makes the case that a sense of wonder and meaning to life—what he calls "resonance"—actually depends on acceptance of the difficult, unknown, and unpredictable parts of life. We "resonate" with life most when we are not trying to constantly eliminate risk and uncontrollability.

Rosa's thesis makes sense of one of the most pressing ironies of our time. Our technology has made communicating with others easier than ever, yet many modern people are more desperately lonely than their ancestors. We have all these tools of connection and relationship, yet our lives are marked by isolation and retreat. Rosa says this is because the tools themselves drain something out of the experience of relationship. It's precisely because we *can* connect with each other constantly that the connection itself is less desirable. Our richest relationships are not with people or things that we can summon before our eyes at will, but with the people and things that are beyond our total control, that we have to yield part of ourselves to.

Using technology wisely is only possible if we are honest about what this technology is and what kind of life we need to be pursuing. If we're wrong about the tech, or wrong about what the good life is, the odds are good our hearts and our habits will follow the creators of the devices rather than the Creator of our souls. ■

—Samuel D. James is director of content development at Crossway Books. He is the author of Digital Liturgies: Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an Online Age *and* Scroll Less, Live More: 10 Healthy Tech Habits for Teens

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SCAN TO SHOP



TELEVISION

VisionQuest

by COLLIN GARBARINO

Rated TV-14 • Disney+

Cast your mind back to those heady days after Marvel Studios had released *Avengers: Endgame*, a movie that wrapped up the decade-long Infinity Saga and grossed more money than any other film in history. What exciting future did the studio have planned for the Marvel Cinematic Universe? Expectations soared even higher in January 2021 when the MCU's first television series arrived on Disney+. *WandaVision* was delightfully weird and offered hope that Marvel would continue to give viewers fresh, innovative storytelling as it made its transition to the small screen.

That hope proved short-lived. But even though the MCU has squandered some of its cultural cachet over the last five years, I suspect many Marvelites still want to know what happened to the Vision after his disappearance at the end of *WandaVision*. For those true believers, Marvel Studios offers its 18th television show, the eight-part *VisionQuest*.

Paul Bettany returns to the role of the Vision, a superpowered android who longs to be human. The series begins with him once again hiding in Edinburgh. He's working at the same pub he and Wanda used to frequent, but he keeps his human relationships at a distance, preferring to be a loner. Except he's not really alone.

The series depicts the Vision's mind as an elaborate Victorian house populated by a gaggle of artificial intelligence programs built by Tony Stark. J.A.R.V.I.S (James D'Arcy), F.R.I.D.AY. (Orla Brady), and E.D.I.T.H. (Emily Hampshire) help the Vision navigate his confusing existence, and D.U.M-E (Henry Lewis) and U (Jonathan Sayer) act as maintenance workers. But the show's really about the sixth AI locked away in a corner of the Vision's consciousness: James Spader plays the supervillain Ultron who years before had attempted to destroy humanity to establish peace on earth.

The Vision wrestles with understanding himself—to what extent is he the same being who died in *Infinity War*?—and the other AIs offer varying levels of support. Ultron assumes the role of disinterested truth-teller, but it's obvious to the audience he's playing his own game.

Soon the Vision's identity crisis is interrupted when a high-tech bounty hunter named Paladin (Todd Stashwick) shows up, attempting to capture the former Avenger for a mysterious client. That adventure will cause the Vision to

MARVEL

cross paths with his and Wanda's grown son Tommy (Ruaridh Mollica), who's trying to figure out his own identity.

VisionQuest is a worthy sequel to *WandaVision*, finishing the story while capturing some of the earlier show's zaniness. The shifts between the Vision's interior and exterior realities add whimsy to a story that could have become weighed down by superhero tropes. There's plenty of action, but the Vision's relationships with Tommy and Ultron drive the narrative. James Spader steals just about every scene he's in.

The show once again trots out Theseus' paradox, asking whether a ship that's had all its pieces replaced over time is still the same ship, but it avoids serious philosophical reflection on its central premise about the nature of identity. I was also surprised, though gratified, that *VisionQuest* doesn't wade into debates on the nature of artificial intelligence. The show's a fantasy, so it feels free to treat its AI characters as living people, just as Star Wars did with C-3PO.

But that's not to say the series doesn't offer any commentary on what it means to be human. Rather than focusing on philosophical identity or the nature of AI, *VisionQuest* examines the human emotion of grief. Every character in this series, whether good or bad, has experienced some kind of loss, and each deals with the grief stemming from that loss in a different manner. The Vision's quest isn't so much to figure out whether he's the same Vision that Wanda loved. His journey involves acknowledging his grief over losing Wanda—over losing a life he never had—and deciding what he'll do with that pain.

Even though the show has a lot going for it, I have some complaints. First, *VisionQuest* has slightly more foul language than the typical MCU series. I'm not sure why AIs cuss in the MCU, but they do. Second, the series retcons MCU lore to add another layer of complexity to the Vision's origin story. In so doing, the series robs events in the earlier Avengers movies of their importance, effectively diminishing the franchise's heyday to tell a story that should have looked forward rather than backward. ■

A24



DOCUMENTARY

You Can See Everything

by COLLIN GARBARINO

Rated R • Theaters

Former CEO of Theranos and convicted fraudster Elizabeth Holmes wanted to rehabilitate her image, so she and her husband, Billy Evans, invited Nathan Fielder and a documentary film crew to capture her life in the month leading up to her stint in federal prison. The result, *You Can See Everything*, is an absorbing film, but we're still left wondering about the real Holmes.

Fielder, whose previous work is characterized by deadpan comedy, questions why he was chosen for this project, but he injects himself into his subjects' lives, going so far as to live with them in their rented home in San Diego. Fielder's awkward persona creates cringe-inducing moments as Holmes and Evans submit to questioning. Holmes brings plenty of her own awkwardness with blank, wide-eyed stares meant to convey openness.

This three-hour film tells an engrossing and strange story without relitigating the events surrounding the fall of Theranos, primarily focusing on the couple's present circumstances.

Throughout, Holmes maintains her innocence, claiming she can't understand how she ended up in this situation. At one point, she tells an incredulous Fielder she's never told a lie in her life. As the film progresses, the filmmaker wavers on whether she's the world's best liar or merely a brilliant yet oblivious pawn who's manipulated by others.

Holmes' husband comes off looking the worst. He's shown to be impatient, foul-mouthed, and controlling. Fielder doesn't question their love for one another, but he's not convinced it's healthy. The film also contains a startlingly explicit scene in which we see a showering Evans fully nude. I suspect Fielder intended this as a metaphor, "exposing" Evans as the true villain.

TELEVISION

East of Eden

by CHELSEA BOES



Rated TV-MA • Netflix

John Steinbeck needed 601 pages to convey the sprawling Trask family saga in his magnum opus, *East of Eden*. In 1955 when the book was still new, director Elia Kazan's 117-minute film adapted only the book's final act for the screen. Now Kazan's granddaughter Zoe Kazan has taken a bigger bite of the great American novel, breaking the Trask story into seven Netflix episodes that run about an hour each. The result is breathtaking—and controversial. Both mostly because of the central villain, Cathy Ames.

Reviewers have praised Florence Pugh's stunning performance of Cathy while debating the script's handling of the character. In the book, Cathy is morally handicapped from childhood, hacking her way through life, damaging everyone in her path, incapable of love, and without conscience. Steinbeck doesn't *call* Cathy a sociopath, a term not really used until 1952, the same year *East of Eden* was published. But it's hard to read her character any other way, and Steinbeck *did* call her "a monster."

Not that Zoe Kazan paints Cathy as a hero. "I love in solitude to shed the penitential tear," sings the Ames family in their church pew during the second episode. This is intentional irony: Cathy cannot repent. In subsequent scenes Cathy burns down her family home, murdering both her parents, just after hand-embroidering a question that pervades the remainder of the story: "What's a home without a mother?" Cathy's mother dies, and Cathy will grow up to abandon her own babies.

Though this version of Cathy is as compulsively watchable as Steinbeck's was readable, the miniseries searches for a redemptive arc for the villain that doesn't quite fit. Among works of modern American literature, *East of Eden* is uniquely redemptive, but the redemption isn't for Cathy. It's for the people she hurts—especially her son, Cal. The film softens Cathy's evil while leaving out much of the good Steinbeck includes in the story of a healthy neighboring family, the Hamiltons.

Steinbeck's book moves through generations of the Trask family, which Cathy marries into, but also parallels Genesis. It begins with Adam and Charles as Cain and Abel analogs, each offering gifts to their flawed father. (The parallel breaks here: Unlike Mr. Trask, God perfectly judged Cain and Abel.) One gift is accepted and one spurned, producing a rivalry that will poison the family's future. Cathy turns up beaten on the brothers' doorstep. Adam marries her, and they have twins. The brotherhood rivalry replays in the next generation after Cathy leaves her husband and boys to run a brothel.

Both book and miniseries spend considerable time in Cathy's whorehouse. This adaptation is loaded with gratuitous sexual nudity, but the book never feels voyeuristic—evidence that in art, suggestion often carries more power than explicitness. The miniseries is necessarily violent, but it's also necessarily moral. In the excellent finale, the redemptive note rings clear as Zoe Kazan treads the same ground her grandfather did.

Still, Steinbeck's book—a real contender for greatest American novel ever—has far more to give, especially to serious students of the Bible who will recognize its Genesis themes. The 601 pages go fast. The story twists and turns, horrifying and delighting and finally leaving the reader in tears. Granted, the miniseries might make you cry too—but that's because it contains the essence of the book. The book is that good. ■

GEOFFREY SHORT/NETFLIX

COMING SOON...

The Cat in the Hat

11/6 • PG • Theaters

Doing what he does best, the Cat (voiced by Bill Hader) spreads joy to kids in his hilarious and irreverent way, transporting them and audiences on a fantastical journey through a world they've never seen before.

Jimmy

11/6 • PG-13 • Theaters

The untold true story of America's most beloved actor and the iconic role that saved him. The film focuses on the most transformative season in Jimmy Stewart's life.

I Play Rocky

11/20 • PG-13 • Theaters

The true story of Sylvester Stallone as an unknown actor with an unshakable belief that he wasn't just meant to write *Rocky*—he was meant to be Rocky Balboa.

Hershey

11/25 • PG • Theaters

Based on the life of Milton Hershey, founder of the iconic chocolate company. Milton's grit and determination to conquer the world of candymaking propel him from bankruptcy to monumental success.

Hexed

11/25 • Not yet rated • Theaters

In Disney Animation's all-new story, an impulsive teenage girl named Billie discovers secret magical abilities that hurtle her out of suburbia into a vast witch realm called Hexe.

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ILLUMINARE PRODUCTIONS



MOVIE

Detention

by BOB BROWN

Rated TV-14 • On Demand

Detention, which gives off distinct *The Breakfast Club* vibes, is set in a moneyed Washington state high school, where four teens are serving Saturday detention for various in-school, semi-violent offenses. But while *The Breakfast Club* offenders represented clashing cliques, *Detention* is more low-key: Three of the four characters differ little in temperament.

Low-key doesn't mean less keen, however. Some bad language and sensual talk in early scenes start *Detention* off on the wrong foot, but the objectionable material eases up, and writer and co-director Emma Cameron surprises with sharp, witty dialogue that is relentlessly charming.

Looking at her Saturday charges when they first meet, the school psychiatrist (Cameron) snaps, "I was promised five delinquents. Why are there only four of you?"—a nod to *The Breakfast Club*'s quintet of knaves. The answer to her question sets in motion a pair of love stories.

The reasons Corey (Ricky Spaulding), Nash (Ian S. Peterson), and Eden (Bianca Mariani) are in detention are revealed in the first scenes. But why Mary Beth (Anna Mulia), the quiet Ally Sheedy–like character, is dressed as a dog is a mystery the film slowly unravels. Their teacher has her own issues. Three months postpartum, sleep-deprived, and not very happy to be away from her baby all day, she's on a short fuse.

Detention has no overtly spiritual themes (besides two random references to a Bible study), but the film takes self-absorbed Gen X parents to task: Flashbacks and residential scenes connect the kids' misbehavior to moms and dads who are workaholics or divorced or philanderers.

Whether or not Cameron is writing off an entire generation of parents who have apparently forgotten their *Breakfast Club*–finale group-hug lessons, she (as the narrator) ends with a commendable message: "When we are at our darkest moment and someone reaches out a hand, life becomes worth living."



Sam Fender (left) and Olivia Dean

MUSIC

The hit song you've never heard of

Streaming has destroyed music's monoculture

by ARSENIO ORTEZA

'Tis the time of year that music publications start considering the year's most influential artists and biggest albums. And, Ella Langley and "Choosin' Texas" aside, they're having more trouble than usual. Why? Because the shattering of the monoculture into minuscule microcultures is rendering the concepts "big" and "influential" irrelevant.

The monoculture, in case you don't know, is what we First Worlders partook of every time we turned on our TVs and radios from the dawn of broadcasting until about 2010, when algorithms and smartphones began funneling us into individualized entertainment spaces and robbing us—slowly at first, then rapidly—of common enthusiasms and points of reference.

One particular casualty of this phenomenon is "the charts," the forum that mapped a song or an album's popularity. The charts weren't manipulation-proof (payola never really went away), but they painted a generally accurate picture.



"Rein Me In"
SAM FENDER & OLIVIA DEAN

Not so much now. Recently, Sam Fender and Olivia Dean's "Rein Me In" spent 23 weeks at No. 1 in the U.K., becoming the longest-running British chart-topper in history. But there's a horsefly in the ointment. In an article for *The Guardian*, Nadia Khomami revealed that the allegedly popular single was a lot like the tree falling in an unpopulated forest. "Demise of the monoculture" the piece was called. Its subhead: "why so many have never heard UK's record-breaking No. 1 single."

Such a piece would never have been written about the previous three record holders. Frankie Laine's "I Believe" (18 straight weeks at No. 1 in 1953), Bryan Adams' "(Everything I Do) I Do It for You" (16 weeks in '91), and Wet Wet Wet's "Love Is All Around" (15 weeks in '94, though a lowly No. 41 Stateside) achieved their status in a way that felt earned. They'd been requested by people lighting up radio request lines and purchased by fans who'd left their homes, gotten into their cars (or boarded public transportation), and gone to record stores, people who voted with their wallets and their feet.

"Rein Me In," on the other hand, benefited substantially from algorithms, a process in which "intentionality" often plays a surprisingly small role. And—here's the kicker—it's not a great song. It's OK as pleasant, midtempo pop goes, but at 5:37 it overstays its welcome, and its F-bombs feel forced. (Hip-hop it's not.) The song's 25 million views on YouTube might look impressive, but multiple 2026 singles have more.

So, basically, we're approaching the Tower of Babel stage of pop culture, wherein everyone has a different favorite song that nobody else knows or cares much about, and the charts, instead of providing reliable documentation, gaslight the gullible.

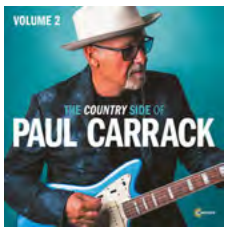
There are and will be exceptions (Ella Langley again). But they'll be fewer and farther between. And we won't be better off as a result. ■

JMENTERNATIONAL/GETTY IMAGES

MUSIC

New and noteworthy

by ARSENIO ORTEZA



The Country Side of Paul Carrack, Volume 2
PAUL CARRACK

For the second time in two years, the Man with the Golden Voice comes to terms with his golden years by applying himself to 32 minutes of pretty much classic country. The main difference this time is that, for better or worse, Carrack hasn't leavened the proceedings with any of his own compositions, leaving the material—composed from 1934 to 1977 and made famous by singers with less golden but therefore more distinctive voices—to map out the emotional and, in the case of "When God Dips His Love in My Heart" (and maybe "I'm Just an Old Chunk of Coal"), spiritual terrain. Mellifluous yes, definitive no.



The Air That You Breathe LANCE COWAN

Album three from this Americana publicist turned Americana artist proves his first two weren't flukes. He co-wrote the heartbreaking divorce song "When He Was Here" and the bracing death-of-a-friend song "Closer to Truth" in the '90s. He co-wrote the subtly anti-deportation song "Where'd They Go" and the bracing anomie-is-the-mother-of-desperation song "The Road" more recently. "Love" is about more than its title. Any resemblance, meanwhile, between the title cut's subject (a singer-songwriter whose hair turns gray before he gets the attention he deserves) and Cowan himself is purely coincidental.



Four LAKE

Fifty years after their major-label debut, four of this band's six classic-lineup members are back with a new lead singer, one old one, the great Kenny Aronoff on drums, and an album of what's nowadays often called "yacht rock." Smooth, breezy, and a little melancholy, with layered background vocals the absence of which is perhaps contemporary pop's most glaring deficiency, it's less about proving Lake's still got it than about suggesting Lake never really lost it in the first place. Due in part to COVID, it took almost seven years to make. The time was evidently well spent.



Satisfied: Country Gospel Classics Live
THE MALPASS BROTHERS

Take a good look at the cover because, from the Opry-like curtain to the smiling fellas in vintage Western suits, what you see is what you get: 19 country-gospel favorites (plus a Malpass original) sung and played the way the Louvin Brothers (who recorded seven of them and composed five) would've. The oldest of the 19, "In the Garden," turns 114 this year. The newest, "Ragged Old Flag," turns 52. Cultural preservation at its most precise and an appropriate 250th-birthday greeting to the material's country of origin.



FACEBOOK/LAKE BAND

ENCORE

The German-British sextet **Lake**'s failure to break big in the U.S. (and anywhere else but Germany for that matter) remains a mystery. "Time Bomb," an uncharacteristic but catchy single from the band's self-titled 1977 debut, only made it to No. 83 despite combining falsetto vocals and novelty sounds (an ominous ticking in Lake's case), both then in vogue, and enjoying heavy-rotation airplay in certain markets. Stranger still, the band's prog-lite, Doobie Brothers–Steely Dan blend seemed tailor-made for FM.

It may be that Lake simply arrived too late. Besides competing with its aforementioned influences, it eventually had to contend with MTV, which overnight made acts with pre-punk roots seem ancient. The group called it quits circa 1986, and in 1991 its lead singer James Hopkins-Harrison OD'd on heroin. His death seemed extra tragic in light of "Jesus Came Down" (from *Lake*) and "Lost by the Wayside (*Lake II*), songs whose lyrics he wrote and that suggest a curiosity about and openness to the gospel. —*A.O.*



MASTERWORKS

Christ's beauty in the midst of ugliness

James Ensor's biblically inspired critique of the world

by WILLIAM COLLEN

One of the greatest ironies in the biblical account of Jesus' ministry is how His own disciples—the people closest to Him, who would presumably have known better than anyone else what their teacher's ministry was meant to be—were unable to grasp that His time on earth was not intended as the prelude to an earthly reign. Time and again the Gospel writers mention instances in which Christ's disciples simply can't grasp that His kingdom would not be of this world. With our access to the entire New Testament, we could easily condemn the disciples for their cluelessness. But if we had been in their place, would we have been any better at perceiving the spiritual reality of Christ's ministry—especially since they had not yet been given the Holy Spirit, a gift that we have?

FINE ART IMAGES/HERITAGE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES







DETAIL: FINE ART IMAGES/HERITAGE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; ENSOR: ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889*; Christ is radiant in the center of the canvas; James Ensor in 1942.

James Ensor's 1888 canvas *Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889* attempts to illustrate the reaction of Christ's contemporaries on Palm Sunday by reimagining this triumphal entry as taking place in the Brussels of his own day. In this painting, Ensor asks what our own reaction might have been to the event, hinting that we too could have easily misunderstood Christ's mission.

A parade of hundreds progresses across Ensor's canvas. Marching bands raise a din, and the crowd cheers wildly. The blurry, jumbled composition suits the unruly chaos of the event. It is easy to imagine the Pharisees regarding the thronged multitude with disgust and reprimanding the disciples. Christ Himself is difficult to see. Although He occupies the center of the painting, the composition does not draw attention to His presence. Much more prominent is the raised dais to the right with notable public figures awaiting Christ's arrival.

It's a startling image, especially when one considers that Ensor himself was an atheist. But despite his lack of faith, Ensor was captivated by the idea of Christ and used biblical imagery to comment on the ugliness and injustices of his own day.

If Christ had engaged in His earthly ministry during our day—a time filled with corporate sponsorships, speaking tours, and book deals—would He have been the target of profit-hungry forces seeking to gain from His influence? It isn't too much of a stretch to imagine Jesus in a contemporary setting being invited onto influential podcasts or offered partnerships with brand sponsors. Of course Christ wouldn't have fallen for these corruptions of His ministry, any more than He was in danger of accepting the Devil's offer of all the kingdoms of the world in the wilderness temptation. But many prominent Christian leaders have, unfortunately, taken the bait and given in to the desire for fame and worldly success.

If the scribes and Pharisees had not been so opposed to Jesus' teaching, I can imagine them up on Ensor's dais, trying to twist His ministry to their own advantage. Another group of people who misunderstood Christ's ministry were the throngs who followed Him around first-century Judaea waiting for an amazing miracle or perhaps a free meal. This group is also invoked in Ensor's painting, with its carnivalesque atmosphere. Yet Christ did not come to earth to give the Jews an entertaining spectacle any more than He came to throw off their oppressors, the Romans. His kingdom was, as He said, "not of this world."

Ensor's painting is somewhat difficult to look at. It's full of clowns, buffoons, weird masks, and a general ugliness. Ensor is an adept symbolist, a master at painting a distorted and warped humanity; the true sinfulness lurking deep in the hearts of all people can render them hideous and even unlovable. But Christ loved humanity enough to die on the cross for their sins. Even while He was riding into Jerusalem through crowds singing His praise, He knew they would misunderstand His message and would, less than a week later, drag Him to the cross. Yet He loved them anyway. Perhaps this is why Ensor's Christ is the only figure in his painting whose face isn't distorted into an ugly caricature. Jesus' face radiates calm and peace. His right hand is even extended in blessing. His sinlessness transcends the sinful state of humanity. ■

—William Collen is an independent researcher who writes RUINS, a Substack blog discussing art and aesthetics from a Christian perspective



CALLED (DETAIL) ©BRUCE HERMAN, 2006 / OIL ON WOOD, 72" X 60" / COLLECTION OF MRS. BARBARA IWARSSON

ESSAY

Made to be makers by the Maker

Reflections on the creative act

by BRUCE HERMAN

We are told in Chapters 1, 5, and 6 of Genesis that humans are made in God's image, male and female, and set over God's creation as caretakers and stewards. But we also see hints of something else in this image with which we are imprinted: We are to be creative like God. For example, God calls Adam to name the animals. In Hebrew tradition, naming a child or an animal is a momentous event carrying divine weight—a name is not simply a label but the imprint of character and destiny. Naming becomes a fearsome responsibility because to name someone is to speak their essence out into the world.

Likewise, to draw or sculpt or paint or write or sing is to evoke the character of God. Making, reshaping the world around us, is an essential part of our inmost character as God's children, but it's also a form of obedience, a willingness to humbly give ourselves away just as the Lord Himself perpetually does. What does this mean—creativity and self-donation?

Here is the simple truth: We are meant to be creative—not in order to distinguish ourselves as "creatives" but in order to serve and bless and complete God's creation alongside Him. And there's another dimension to creativity worth considering: the reality of loss. Whenever we truly act on this indwelling creative capacity, we give a piece of ourselves away. We, in a sense, empty ourselves into the work.

When Jesus emptied Himself and took on the form of a bondslave, He was giving Himself away. When He summoned the apostles and fed them bread and wine saying, "This is My body ... this is My blood ...," He was doing this same thing and inviting us to follow. This is the heart of the creative act: to give yourself to another in and through what you make. To lovingly bake a loaf of delicious bread for someone is to give yourself, not just the bread. To make a painting or write a sonnet or repair an elderly person's front stairs to prevent his falling—these are creative acts that involve self-donation, the very essence of Christ Jesus.

Artists know this in their bones, and even the ones who do not yet follow Christ feel it deeply. The sense that making a painting and offering it to the world is a vulnerable act. Part of your self has been released beyond your own skin. You have made something in your own image.

Of course, the closest we ever come to exercising God's image in us is in marriage and the making of babies, nurturing and caring for them and sending them out to make the world a better place. In certain ways, our children are created in our own image to go and bear fruit for God's kingdom in much the same way as the Lord sends us.

This has been God's plan from the beginning, that we mirror His character in the creation and be loving imitators of Christ—God's only Begotten. We are image makers just as He is The Image Maker. In everything we make there is at least some allusion to this mysterious calling to be artists. But make no mistake: We are *all* called to this high calling—to image forth the very character of God who sends rain and sun on both the righteous and the evil. In Jesus' call to His students to love not just those who love them, but even their enemies, there is a divine summons to "be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect"—and that kind of perfection is not to be confused with perfectionism or pridefulness.

It is the perfection of humility and love and self-donation.

But we live in a consumer society. We are trained day and night by our screens (TV, computer, phone) to pay attention to a manipulated artificial *lack* that is everywhere deployed: You need this new thing, this new fashion, this new and improved golf club or wristwatch or phone or car or ... you name it. And so often that lack is a manufactured, illusory need that is constructed exclusively for profit, not service of need. Sadly, this deceptive system of marketing is effective and "sells," and in a consumer society, selling and buying is everything. This is the essence of consumerism.

We are meant to be creative—not in order to distinguish ourselves as "creatives" but in order to serve and bless and complete God's creation alongside Him.

We are trained 24/7 to pay attention to our screens for "news" (often sensationalized infotainment) in order to grab our shortening attention spans. But paying attention to anything less than our Creator and the beauty He has created diminishes us. The theologian-philosopher Simone Weil, who suffered persecution under the Nazi-collaborating French Vichy regime, was articulate of her love for God. She once said, "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. At its highest level, it is the same thing as prayer." Giving our attention continuously to our screens could be the opposite—at its most extreme it would be a form of false worship and idolatry.

To whom or what you give your utmost attention is ultimately the thing you will worship, but the act of making is a form of resistance to our obsessive consumer mentality. Making something is always humbling. Taking wood in hand until the rough spots are smooth and the joints fit, kneading the dough and waiting for it to rise, mixing the colors so the art communicates our vision, and crafting the melodies so that the music embodies praise—this is the divine image in us working itself out into the world and for the life of the world.

At its highest aspect, art is a form of obedience, self-giving love, and prayer. Yet, like everything humans undertake, art can be distorted and bent backward on the artist, drawing attention to himself and maneuvered for the sake of "making a name" (an unconscious connection to the builders of the Tower of Babel!). This is a distortion. Fame-seeking has nothing to do with creativity but is a distraction from the development of the gift we've been given. Making helps us mirror our Maker, and our discipline in the acquisition of various creative skills is a form of obedience to the image of our beloved God indwelling. That creative skill can be in the traditional arts of music, painting, dance, poetry, etc.—or it can be harnessed for any number of forms of making that we routinely engage in, including domestic handicrafts, cooking, woodworking, sport, etc.—and that last one, sport, is also a very creative means of glorifying God in *play*—for play goes to the essence of creativity and joy.

Resist consumerism. Make something beautiful or delicious or fun, and give it away—giving yourself away in the process. ■

—Bruce Herman is a painter, writer, and speaker who has exhibited nationally and internationally for over 50 years and is the author of Makers by Nature: Letters From a Master Painter on Faith, Hope, and Art *(IVP Academic 2025). He is also a retired art professor and founder of the art department at Gordon College.*



VOICES NICK EICHER

Compared to what?

Before government divvies up fortunes, Christians should ask what the wealth gap actually proves

Politically, America is 50-50. But that no longer means meeting in the middle. It means lurching.

Republicans can no longer pretend to be the party of fiscal restraint vs. the "tax-and-spend Democrats." Unified GOP government just turned in a $2 trillion deficit. I'm old enough to remember when a trillion-dollar *budget* was noteworthy. Today's GOP owes drunken sailors an apology.

But bipartisan profligacy is one thing. The argument over who should own the wealth is another.

This is the year of the democratic socialist.

The Democratic Socialists of America says it reached 120,000 members this summer, an all-time high. The DSA national program calls for "aggressive wealth taxes" and public ownership of the largest corporations and industries.

In plainer English: They think the pie has been divided badly, and they've come with a sharper knife.

California voters get an unusually pure version this November. Proposition 40 would impose a one-time 5% tax on covered wealth above $1 billion. Not 5% of what billionaires *earn*. Five percent of what they *own*.

So before government starts divvying things up, perhaps we ought to examine the supposed problem.

What exactly is wrong with the gap between the wealthiest and least wealthy?

Thirty-six years ago, Margaret Thatcher faced that question in the House of Commons. Member of Parliament Simon Hughes complained that the gap between Britain's richest and poorest 10% had widened substantially during her 11 years as prime minister.

Thatcher pounced. "The honorable gentleman is saying that he would rather that the poor were poorer, provided that the rich were less rich. ... That is the Liberal policy."

I thought about Thatcher reading a *Wall Street Journal* story: "The Gap Between the Rich and the Very, Very Rich Is Getting Wider." The richest one-tenth of 1% of American households now own nearly $28 trillion, about 15% of household wealth.

Provocative story! So I went to the Federal Reserve numbers the *Journal* cited and found another story in the same data. Adjusted for inflation and household growth, average wealth in the bottom half of the wealth distribution rose about 68% from late 2019 through the middle of this year. At the very top it rose about 54%. The rich gained vastly more actual dollars, yet the ratio between average wealth at the very top and average wealth in the bottom half actually narrowed.

Numbers don't walk into newsrooms and announce what they mean. My friend David Bahnsen spoke at our editorial retreat this year and delivered a talk I'd long wanted for our staff: *10 Things Christian Journalists Need to Know About Economics*. No. 6, the three most important words in economic analysis, he said, are, "Compared to what?"

I simply do not accept that unequal rewards are merely a regrettable side effect of a dynamic economy. *Compared to what?* An economy that removes those incentives in the name of fairness? In a free economy, some will have a passion for a thing and take the risk—of loss!—most of us won't take. The promise of reward attracts people, Christian and non-Christian alike, to put real skin in the game.

Some fail, yes. Others build something millions willingly pay to use, and succeed spectacularly.

That's not a sin. That's a blessing.

Because the rest of us may get the medicine, the machine, the software, the cheaper service, or the iPhone. Imagine, a slick gadget that collapses an entire suite of consumer electronics into a single, pocket-sized device! An iPhone is expensive? *Compared to what?* All those individual devices, purchased separately?

Compared to that, it's cheap.

Even though Steve Jobs got very rich, he never captured for himself all the value the rest of the world received as a benefit of his risk-taking. That he got fabulously wealthy is not evidence that the system failed.

Biblically, the wealthy have specific responsibilities to the poor, commands that do not add up to a mandate for the government to equalize outcomes.

And then there's the Tenth Commandment. It may not be *prima facie* evidence of a violation, but someone bothered by his neighbor's wealth might want to pray about the motivations of his own heart.

Where I draw the line is when that motivation drives our politics and fuels bad policy—and this socialist moment.

That question survives Nov. 3. ■

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THE SEARCH FOR KAYLA

A decade after their daughter's death in ISIS captivity, Carl and Marsha Mueller are still waiting to bring their daughter home

BY JENNY ROUGH

ILLUSTRATION BY **JEFFREY SMITH**





On Nov. 6, 2025, Carl and Marsha Mueller wrote a letter to President Donald Trump and sent it to the White House. The president was scheduled to meet in the Oval Office with his Syrian counterpart, Ahmed al-Sharaa, whose tenure had begun earlier that year. "*We believe this meeting may be providential*," the Muellers wrote. "*A profound opportunity to bring our beloved daughter, Kayla, home*."

Over a decade earlier, on Aug. 4, 2013, ISIS terrorists had taken Kayla hostage in Syria. On Feb. 6, 2015, ISIS reported she had been killed.

"*Ten long years have passed since our daughter's body found its resting place, unmarked and unknown, somewhere in the crimson folds of Syria's hills*," the Muellers wrote. "*We continue to fight for our daughter.*"

Trump had helped the Muellers in the past. Now they hoped he could help again. Current efforts in Syria to uncover mass graves have given the Muellers hope of locating Kayla's remains.

"We don't have a grave. We don't have a marker. We don't have any place to go to grieve for Kayla," Carl says.

Marsha longs to bring Kayla home just as much for Kayla's brother, Eric, and his wife and daughter, as she does for herself and Carl. The couple's closing words in their letter to Trump reveal the fruit of nearly 14 years of long-suffering perseverance: "*With deepest gratitude and mighty unwavering faith, Carl and Marsha Mueller.*"

Over the last two decades, reports of Americans kidnapped or wrongfully detained abroad have increased substantially, according to the watchdog nonprofit the Foley Foundation. (ISIS held James Foley in the same detention facility as Kayla, and ISIS killed him in August 2014.) Today, the Foley Foundation reports that at least 38 American citizens are held in captivity, either by terror groups or hostile foreign governments. Two recent hostages, Robert Gilman and Kevin Rideout, came home in August. The foundation's numbers don't include hostages held by criminal organizations, or sex or labor slaves, crimes that can be easy to hide and hard to monitor.

"We know we're underestimating the problem," says Elizabeth Richards, the foundation's director of hostage advocacy and research. Its data is limited to open-source information, and the government isn't always transparent about the scope of the issue.

Each U.S. citizen detained creates a dilemma for a government with an avowed duty to both protect its citizenry and reject making concessions to terrorists. Families of those taken hostage wrestle with the moral dilemma of ransom negotiations and wind up caught in the middle of international politics and ideological clashes.



Kayla Mueller in 2013 after speaking to a group in Prescott, Ariz.

MATT HINSHAW/THE DAILY COURIER/AP

From the day Kayla went missing, both Carl's and Marsha's Christian faith was tested in ways unlike any they'd known. Carl's grandfather had been a Lutheran minister and influential in Carl's beliefs. Marsha attended the Nazarene Church on holidays as a kid, but she says she really started following Jesus in her 20s. She and Carl met one night in Illinois while out dancing. Not long after, Carl tore up his knee and had to have surgery. Marsha was a nurse, and she visited him in the hospital. "She helped me get through a year of rehab," Carl says. Carl had been considering a move to Arizona, so they went on a road trip in his old van. Carl's leg was still in a cast. He propped his right foot in the middle of the van and drove with his left foot. They married in 1976 and decided to settle in Prescott. They had two kids, Eric and Kayla. Carl owned an auto body repair shop in town. Marsha continued her work as a nurse and became actively involved in their local church. A typical American family.

Then Kayla was taken.

Even when she was little, Carl and Marsha both noticed Kayla had a heart to serve those in need. Family friend Cindy Craig noticed it, too. Craig first met Kayla when Kayla joined the Youth Volunteer Corps at age 13. "She was full of joy," Craig recalls, commenting on the large number of community volunteer projects Kayla joined. "She really got into wanting to care



Carl and Marsha Mueller address the nation during the 2020 Republican National Convention.

about other people and loving other people." Kayla also became involved in Generations United, a nonprofit that brought youth and adults together. One summer, she and Craig flew to Washington, D.C., to give a presentation at an international conference. Craig remembers how badly Kayla wanted to see the Lincoln Memorial, but they barely had time. "I remember the two of us running as fast as we could," Craig says. After the rushed sightseeing trip, Craig made a last-minute decision to allow Kayla to give the entire talk. As Craig watched Kayla speak confidently at the front of the room, Craig was blown away.

"I thought, Wow, this little girl who's not very old can get up and do a workshop for people from different countries and the United States."

In college at Northern Arizona University, Kayla took a trip to Guatemala to work with small farmers. A humanitarian worker once gave Kayla her business card, and Kayla kept it close. Someday, she wanted to do that. That "someday" came faster than anyone expected, except maybe Kayla. Her sophomore year of college, Kayla arrived home for Christmas break and announced her plan to graduate early. Marsha asked why she was in such a hurry. "She said, 'You know, I need to get out. I have things I need to do!'"

Kayla earned her degree in 2½ years. Within weeks, she was working at an orphanage in India. There, Kayla witnessed neglected children and extreme poverty. Witnessing the destitute up close affected Kayla deeply. She wrote a letter to her dad: "*Some people find God in church. Some people find God in nature. Some people find God in love. I find God in suffering. I've known for some time what my life's work is: Using my hands as tools to relieve suffering. That is my life's work, but my family is my life.*"

After India, Kayla visited a Buddhist monastery in France. She then continued on to Israel and Palestine to do humanitarian aid work on both sides of the West Bank barrier where she witnessed the aftermath of the First Gaza War. But in 2010, she made plans to return to Prescott. She needed medical treatment for parasites, which she had likely picked up in India. She booked a flight home from Cairo. As a recent college graduate on a budget, she needed affordable places to stay while in Egypt,

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE COMMITTEE ON ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE 2020 REPUBLICAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE VIA GETTY IMAGES

so she used a couch-surfing app to find temporary housing. That's how she met Radwan Safar Jalany.

Safar Jalany was born and raised in Syria. After he finished school in 2004, he left the country. The day he met Kayla in Cairo, he noticed her pure heart. "She wanted to change the world," he said. Kayla spent 2011 in Arizona working at an HIV-AIDS clinic and a women's shelter. She and Safar Jalany stayed in touch. He returned to Syria in 2011. Bashar al-Assad was Syria's president. Assad ruled as a "totalitarian kleptomaniac," says Bruce Hoffman, a Georgetown University professor and senior fellow for counterterrorism and homeland security at the Council on Foreign Relations. Assad's despotic rule kept escalating with the Arab Spring, a popular uprising that began in Tunisia but swept across several countries in the Middle East, including Syria. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, which eventually became known only by its acronym, ISIS, was one of a variety of rebel groups that took advantage of the tumult. It created a branch in Syria with the intent to overthrow Assad.

ISIS had deep motivations to seize control, Hoffman says. The Quran pinpoints Syria as the place where Armageddon will take place. Hoffman says ISIS sees Syria as the territory where the forces of light (ISIS' variant of Islam) will confront the forces of darkness (the infidels and crusaders). Liberating Syria was "almost like a divine command," Hoffman says. "It's sacred land." A civil war broke out. Near the end of 2012, Safar Jalany moved across the border to Turkey where he could document the war through photography and journalism. Kayla decided to join him and continue her humanitarian work there. She got a job with Support to Life, an organization that assisted Syrian refugees fleeing Assad's catastrophe. She was 24 years old.

As a side gig, Safar Jalany worked to troubleshoot satellite internet service. Doctors Without Borders, a medical aid nonprofit, asked him to fix its internet at a hospital in Aleppo. Safar Jalany agreed, and Kayla came along. Her motivations are unclear. She had traveled into Syria before. Safar Jalany says she wanted to see its land and struggling people again. But Carl and Marsha later learned that Safar Jalany may have needed her laptop for his work, so it's possible she decided to go with him for that reason. At the hospital, Kayla did what she always did: focused on others, not herself. She sat at the bedside of the sick and injured. ISIS wasn't on anyone's radar at the time. Assad was the known threat.

Doctors Without Borders asked Safar Jalany to fix a second problem, and he needed more time. So he and Kayla spent the night at the hospital. The next day, Safar Jalany wrapped up his work, and the two climbed into a Doctors Without Borders vehicle to start their trip back to Turkey. Within blocks, a van cut them off. A group of armed and masked men forced Kayla and Safar Jalany out of their car and into the van. After about an hour's drive, the men separated Kayla and Safar Jalany.

Eventually, they let Safar Jalany go. But not Kayla.





TOP: Kayla with Radwan Safar Jalany. ABOVE: Kayla in India.

For the first month, the Muellers didn't know who had taken Kayla. They learned that ISIS was behind the kidnapping only after Safar Jalany was freed and told them as much as he knew. Carl wrestled with God in raw and emotional prayers. Why did God allow this? Why Kayla? Every so often a sliver of hope helped him break through the panic and frustration. He remembers dropping to his knees behind his auto shop one day in sheer gratitude after he learned of a philanthropist quietly trying to obtain Kayla's release. Marsha wrote prayers in her notebooks, and often jotted down inspirational quotes, like this one: "*The will of God will never take you where the grace of God will not protect you.*" During Marsha's daily Bible readings, the text came alive in a new and unsettling way. The writings of the Old Testament no longer seemed about an ancient time but rather, one very near. "The horror, the wars, we never learn," she says, referring to passages about the destruction of lives on the very lands where terrorists held Kayla.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MUELLER FAMILY

The Muellers didn't know what was happening to their daughter, but hostages taken later by ISIS and then freed helped fill in some of the details. At first, ISIS locked Kayla in a room. She described it as so small she couldn't even stretch out her arms, like being stuck in a dog crate.

While her daughter languished in a cramped cell, Marsha begged God to orchestrate Kayla's release. "*Lord, convict those captors. Torment their minds, soften their hearts*," Marsha wrote in her notebook. "*Let them fear what is inside her until they let her go.*" Kayla had once given her mom a mug emblazoned with Proverbs 3:5-7, which instructs God's people to trust Him instead of leaning on their own understanding. Marsha chose to trust. She thanked God for His love and compassion. She asked God to keep Kayla strong, for the nightmare to be over soon. Carl also continued his prayers, struggling through questions and doubts. He sold his auto shop and actively took the lead in working with Arizona's then-senator, John McCain, the U.S. State Department, and the FBI to try to locate Kayla.

About 10 months after her capture, in May 2014, Carl and Marsha got an email from the ISIS terrorists who had their daughter. The group of men eventually became known as the ISIS Beatles, after the English rock band, because they had come to Syria from London and had British accents. For Kayla's release, they wanted 5 million euros, the equivalent of about $6.2 million at the time. Negotiations began. ISIS warned the Muellers to avoid the media. That prevented Carl and Marsha from public fundraising. Not that it mattered. The U.S. government threatened to prosecute the Muellers if they paid a ransom. Providing material support to terrorists is a crime.

The back-and-forth emails dragged on for a year with little progress. Deep down, the Muellers hoped President Barack Obama would authorize a rescue operation, or perhaps negotiate a hostage exchange, like the one Obama agreed to in 2014 when he released five Taliban prisoners at Guantanamo Bay in exchange for Bowe Bergdahl, an Army soldier held in Afghanistan. In July 2014, the government did attempt a rescue operation, but when a U.S. special operations forces team arrived at the hostage cell, Kayla was gone. ISIS had caught wind of the planned attack. Not much remained in the empty cell other than Kayla's name scrawled on the wall. After the bungled operation, Carl began to lose faith both in the government and in God.

ISIS had taken other Westerners hostage, including three American men: James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and Peter Kassig. On July 5, 2014, ISIS' founder and leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared himself caliph, the leader of all Muslims. Soon after, ISIS dramatically expanded its territory in Iraq, and tensions between the United States and ISIS escalated. ISIS beheaded the three American men between August and November and posted videos of the killings on social media. During that time, Kayla was handed off to Baghdadi to be his slave. In February 2015, ISIS killed her and sent photos to Carl and Marsha to prove it.

But how exactly had she died? ISIS said she'd been killed in a Jordanian airstrike, but that claim has been debunked. The Muellers wanted to know everything—no matter how painful.

Marsha prayed constantly. Carl stopped praying altogether.

On Jan. 20, 2017, Donald Trump became president of the United States, and the Muellers noticed a shift in the country's hostage negotiation policy. During Trump's first term, he claimed he brought home over 50 detained Americans. "He's a businessman," Marsha notes, pointing to his negotiating skills. On Oct. 26, 2019, Trump ordered a raid that killed Baghdadi. Then, in 2020, Attorney General Bill Barr orchestrated the extradition of two of the ISIS Beatles who had held Kayla to the United States, and they were indicted. One, Alexanda Kotey, took a plea deal. The other, El Shafee Elsheikh, opted for a trial. Both men were convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

The Assad regime finally collapsed in December 2024, and Sharaa took over as Syria's president. Trump returned to office for a second term a few months later. Sharaa is the former head of the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, but Trump has enthusiastically praised his leadership and says Sharaa is bringing the Middle Eastern country together. Hoffman, the Georgetown University counterterrorist expert, remains skeptical.

During the 18 months Kayla was captive, the Muellers worked closely with the FBI, but they didn't limit themselves to one channel. They also worked on a parallel track with the Soufan Group, an organization founded by Ali Soufan, a former FBI special agent who investigated the events of 9/11 and documented his work in a memoir *The Black Banners (Declassified)*. The Soufan Group provided strategy and advice to the Muellers. To this day, Carl and Marsha continue to work closely with Soufan, searching for answers—and now their daughter's remains.

"She wanted to change the world."

Since 2019, the Soufan Group's investigation has focused specifically on determining what truly happened to Kayla in ISIS captivity, including who is responsible for her murder and where she is buried. The Soufan Group has conducted archaeological digs at mass graves in Syria in an attempt to locate Kayla's bones and those of other hostages. The searches are based on interviews with former



Members of the Lafayette Group recover remains in Syria.

COURTESY OF JIM KLINGMEYER

hostages and from interrogations with imprisoned ISIS members.

Retired Air Force Col. Jim Klingmeyer of the Lafayette Group is also focused on recovering the remains of the American hostages. His team brings portable DNA machines on digs, but he notes that the remains date back over a decade, and the brittle bones make it more difficult to collect suitable samples. Still Klingmeyer believes ISIS buried Kayla, despite their fanatic beliefs and desecration of other bodies. Even though her body has yet to be found, Klingmeyer stays hopeful.

The Muellers are hopeful too. The criminal conviction of Kotey and Elsheikh, plus the raid that killed Baghdadi, as well as the imprisonment of others who harmed Kayla, helped restore Carl's faith in the U.S. government. His restored faith in God has been slower, but he recently joined a men's Bible study. Marsha spends the quiet hours of the early morning writing in her notebook. She talks to God, she talks to Kayla, and she ponders everything that happened. The Muellers are encouraged by a recent effort by Rep. Abraham Hamadeh, R-Ariz., to introduce the No American Left Behind Act. It would require the Secretary of Defense to submit a report to Congress on the recovery efforts of American hostages detained, killed, or unaccounted for overseas.

When Hamadeh was sworn in, he used Kayla's Bible—at least, that's what the media reported. It was really Marsha's old study Bible, a well-used note- and paper-filled hardback she had for years. "Before Kayla could read or write, she would scribble and draw it in," Marsha says. She loves that her daughter did that. Buried in those pages, a passage from Isaiah 26 stands out. It's about God's promise of the resurrection and His victory over evil. For the Muellers, the last verse holds a particularly potent meaning: "*For behold, the LORD is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain.*" ■

To hear more of the Muellers' story, visit wng.org/doubletake



TERROR TODAY

Deaths at the hands of extremists have fallen dramatically since 2014—but the threat landscape is rapidly evolving

BY GRACE SNELL

ILLUSTRATION BY
JEFFREY SMITH

Kayla Mueller was kidnapped in 2013. She died in 2015.

The time of her captivity overlapped with the zenith of global terrorism. Attacks and casualties spiked as ISIS rampaged through northern Iraq and Syria slaughtering innocent civilians. According to the Global Terrorism Database, the group killed an average of more than 500 people a month between 2014 and 2017.

Since then, a lot has changed. A U.S.-led coalition defeated ISIS in Iraq in 2017. They liberated the last ISIS stronghold in Syria in 2019. By many metrics, the world has become much safer.

But that doesn't mean the threat of terrorism is eradicated. Colin P. Clarke is the executive director of the Soufan Center, a think tank focused on national security. Clarke said terrorists remain determined in their violent aims, and their reach is growing due to emerging technologies. "There's a range of actors that want to do us harm," he said. One of these is Iran, the leading state sponsor of terrorism.

It's difficult to get an accurate picture of terrorism around the globe because there's no universally agreed-upon definition of what terrorism actually is. Part of that controversy boils down to worldview. "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," Clarke pointed out. But scholars also disagree over the finer points of existing definitions, like whether to include attacks against military and law enforcement.



Numbers vary depending on definitions and reporting. Some countries are transparent about terrorist incidents within their borders. Others, like Afghanistan, are a black box, Clarke said.

One group trying to track the bigger picture is the Institute for Economics and Peace, which publishes the annual Global Terrorism Index report. It factors a weighted terrorism score for each country based on four metrics: terrorism-related deaths, injuries, attacks, and hostage-takings.

Steve Killelea, IEP's founder and executive chairman, identified two notable trends from this year's report, which analyzes data from 2025. The first is a significant drop in terrorism deaths worldwide—28% since 2024. The second is a stark increase in terrorism deaths in the West.

Terrorism deaths are also highly concentrated in conflict hot spots, with almost 70% occurring in just five countries: Pakistan, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

PAKISTAN'S DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

When American aid worker Josh Michaels first moved to Pakistan in the late 1990s, people routinely told him the Taliban were "the real Muslims." Neighboring Afghanistan had entered a golden age under Taliban rule, they assured him, one where jewelers could leave their wares unguarded in the streets.

"Nobody steals because thieves get their hands cut off. Everybody gets swift justice," Michaels recalled them saying. (WORLD agreed to use a pseudonym for Michaels to protect his safety.)

Despite their contrasting worldviews, Michaels and his family found themselves well received in the Pakistani community they had come to serve. They settled into a new status quo and life continued relatively quietly until Sept. 11, 2001. On that day, Michaels and his Muslim neighbor watched together as the twin towers collapsed on live TV.

A few days later, the Michaels family evacuated.

They found things a lot more dangerous when they returned. "In the year 2002, to be an expat in Pakistan was to be a target," Michaels said. He and his colleagues experienced lots of near misses, as Islamic militant groups attacked schools, churches, clinics, and Pakistani military and police.

Over the following decade, the security situation remained rocky. So did the partnership between the United States and Pakistan, especially after U.S. Navy SEALs killed 9/11 mastermind Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in 2011. Ultimately, after two decades of fighting, the United States withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021 and the Taliban resumed control.

Until that point, terrorism deaths in Pakistan had dropped significantly between 2013 and 2020, according to the Global Terrorism Index. But after the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan, terrorism numbers started surging across the border in Pakistan. For the first time since the GTI's inception in 2012, Pakistan ranked No. 1 on the 2026 index.

The Pakistani Taliban, a group called Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), are primarily behind the rise of terrorism deaths, injuries, and incidents. Last year, the TTP was one of the four deadliest terror groups worldwide, according to the GTI. It has committed almost 70% of terror attacks in Pakistan over the last two decades.

2025 terror stats

- 5,582 people were killed in 2,944 attacks.
- Terrorist groups responsible for the most deaths were Islamic State (IS), Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and al-Shabaab.
- IS and its affiliates remained the world's deadliest group, with attacks in 15 different countries.
- Pakistan was the country most affected by terrorism, replacing Burkina Faso which had placed first the previous two years.
- Nigeria recorded the largest increase in deaths from terrorism (from 513 in 2024 to 570).

SOURCE FOR STATS: GLOBAL TERRORISM INDEX



QAZI RAUF AFRIDI / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Armed militants of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Pakistani officials accuse Afghanistan's Taliban-led government of harboring ideologically aligned TTP fighters. The dispute escalated to war between the two countries in February. Attacks are highly concentrated in the western provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan, with the Afghan-Pakistani border as the most dangerous hot spot.

Imtiaz Gul is founder of the Center for Research and Security Studies in Islamabad, Pakistan. Gul grew up in KP province in the 1960s, and said things there used to be a lot different. He described the environment in the provincial capital of Peshawar at the time as a "liberal milieu." His uncle even told him Peshawar University staged a performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* sometime in the late '60s.

Gul traces the roots of the current unrest back to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. That year, an estimated 400,000 Afghans escaped to Pakistan, according to the UN Refugee Agency, and Afghan rebels started running their operations out of Pakistan. These fighters called themselves the mujahideen: "those who engage in jihad."

Gul said Pakistani officials saw these militant groups as proxies that could help them take control of Kashmir, territory they believed India illegally occupied. The United States also saw an opportunity to combat the Soviets, and contributed about $3 billion to mujahideen groups between 1980 and 1989, according to a Congressional Research Service report.

"This is, I think, the genesis of the so-called jihad, which then morphed into terrorism," Gul said. After the Soviet pullout in February 1989, Islamic militant groups proliferated and spread to Kashmir with the continued backing of the Pakistani security establishment. "A Godzilla was born in Afghanistan," he said.

Gul said these groups started setting up their camps, mosques, and seminaries without state interference: "Religiosity increased within the Pakistani society. And there was this fascination with the jihad."

After 9/11, it wasn't immediately clear whether Pakistan would side with the United States or Afghanistan. But then, on Sept. 19, 2001, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf gave a public address announcing his intention to work with the United States, an option he justified as the "lesser evil."

While Pakistan began offering military bases and airspace to the Americans, Gul said he suspects Pakistan's intelligence agency was quietly providing shelter to the Afghan Taliban. Outside experts have long alleged radical sympathies extend into government institutions like the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's primary intelligence agency.

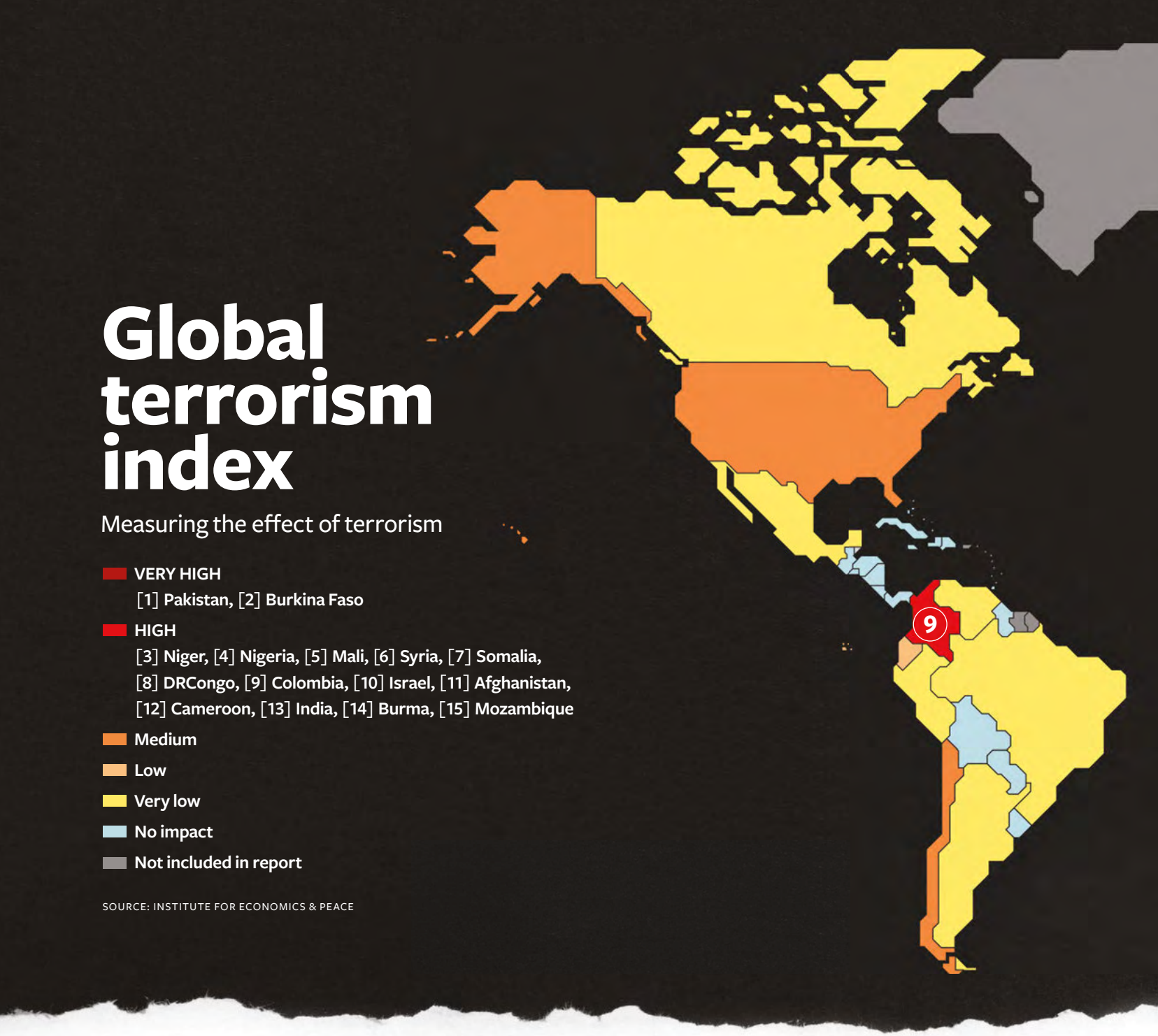
In July 2007, the Pakistani government raided the Red Mosque in Islamabad, a complex with ties to al-Qaeda. After that, Gul said, the country saw a rise in terrorist forces, including the TTP, who wanted revenge on the state of Pakistan. The group currently sits at the heart of Pakistan's problems with militancy and terrorism, and has also created a stumbling block in the country's relations with neighboring Afghanistan, Gul said.

Since its emergence, the TTP has carried out five times more attacks in Pakistan than the next-most-active group, according to the GTI's 2026 report. Government counterinsurgency campaigns led to a decline in attacks starting in 2014, but attacks started rising again in 2020. This year, the GTI reported the TTP executed nearly 600 attacks and killed an estimated 637 people in 2025.

Edmund Fitton-Brown is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies who previously served as the United Nations coordinator for sanctions against al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban. Fitton-Brown said the aim of the TTP is to do in Pakistan what the Afghan Taliban did in Afghanistan: "overthrow the government and turn Pakistan into a jihadi state."

A nuclear-armed jihadi state, he added.

Fitton-Brown pointed to a second, even older origin of the current conflicts playing out in South Asia: unresolved issues from the end of the colonial era. The British Empire took control of Pakistan and India in the 19th century and mapped out the Durand Line, a 1,600-mile boundary between Afghanistan and British territory in Pakistan. But it ran directly through traditional settlements of Pashtun and Baloch peoples, dividing communities across an arbitrary border.

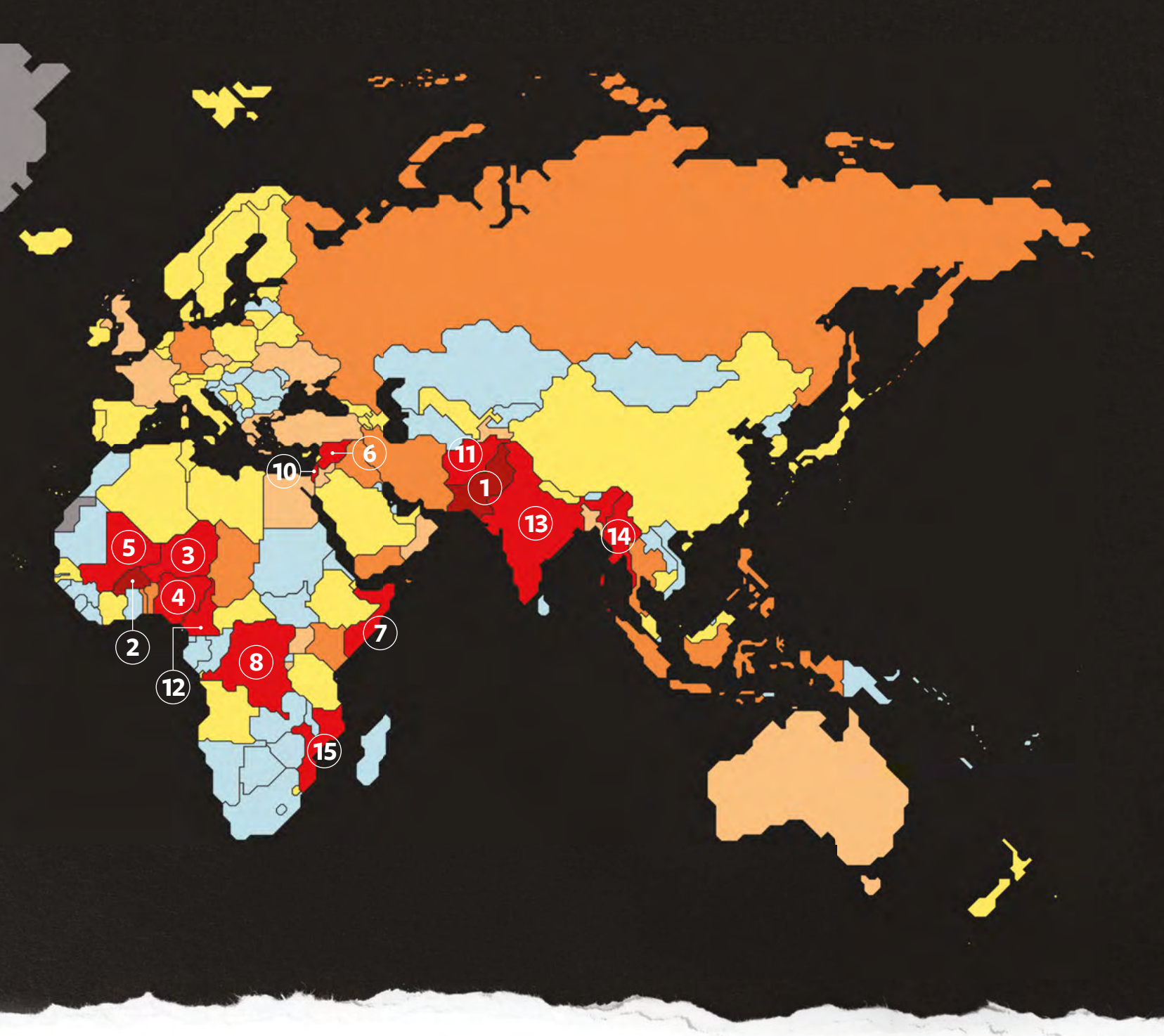


Later, when the British left India in 1947, they again partitioned the land into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Both countries claimed the territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Fitton-Brown refers to this land division as the "original sin" at the heart of ongoing tension and periodic wars between Pakistan and India and underpinning several terrorist groups.

Fitton-Brown said this, combined with a history of weak governance, has created a growth of Islamic extremism in Pakistan. Meanwhile, conflict over the Durand Line continues to underlie tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Fitton-Brown said the Pakistani government supported the Afghan Taliban and enabled them to take power again in 2021, hoping to gain a client state responsive to Pakistan's security needs.

"But they were immediately disappointed," Fitton-Brown said. "One of the first things the Afghan Taliban did when it took power was to reassert the dispute over the Durand Line."

Additionally, Fitton-Brown said there is a strong Pashtun ethnic identity and shared religious ideology linking Afghan Taliban leadership and TTP fighters to create what he describes as a "seamless cross-border sympathy." He said the Afghan Taliban have continued to work with and support the TTP as it carries out cross-border raids against Pakistan. "Now, instead of Pakistan fomenting terrorism in Afghanistan, you have Afghanistan fomenting terrorism in Pakistan," Fitton-Brown said.



Yet, even as terrorist attacks have started increasing again in Pakistan, one Pakistani Christian I spoke with said the situation for civilians and foreign visitors is still far safer than in years past. (WORLD agreed not to name him for fear of getting him in trouble with the Pakistani government.) Back in 2010, he said, it seemed like every day he was hearing about a new bomb attack in a market somewhere. Now, attacks are much more targeted against the Pakistani military and government institutions, he said.

In 2025, about 65% of TTP casualties were Pakistani military and police.

My source said Pakistan is incredibly complex and can't simply be dismissed as a "terrorist country." And he doesn't think the majority of Muslims in Pakistan agree with violent Islamic ideology. Several of his Muslim friends have told him that isn't what they believe.

He said this is especially true since the vast majority of Pakistanis killed by terrorists are Muslims. "They're the ones that are getting attacked," he said. "They're the ones that are getting bombed."

American Josh Michaels agreed many Pakistanis don't want Islamic clerics to have more power in society and pointed out Islamist parties have long struggled to gain traction in national

elections. But many other people are once again enamored with the Afghan Taliban as "the true Muslims," he said.

Michaels said Pakistani society as a whole is conflicted, especially now that Islamic militant groups have taken such a toll inside the country. "Pakistanis don't quite know what to do with the double-edged sword of the jihadist movement, which historically was the mujahideen fighting the Russians in Afghanistan," he said. "They didn't think that they could be cut by it before. ... This was a sword for cutting their enemies. And they couldn't imagine that they would be cut by this."

A NEW GLOBAL EPICENTER

In 2001, Martin Ewi was working as an intern at the United Nations. He lived in New Jersey and took the train to work each day—stopping at the World Trade Center along the way for a $1 bagel and a coffee.

On Sept. 11, he overslept.

"That's when it dawned on me that anyone can become a victim of terrorism," Ewi said. His own near miss prompted him to study counterterrorism, and today Ewi is a senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies.

Since 9/11, he has watched the threat of Islamic terrorism proliferate across Africa, including in his home country of Cameroon.

Sub-Saharan Africa is now the epicenter of global terrorism, according to the Global Terrorism Index 2026. Six of the 10 most terrorism-affected countries worldwide are in this area. The situation is especially dire in the Sahel, a region that spans over 3,000 miles across the African continent. According to the GTI, more than half of all terrorism-related deaths in 2025 happened there.

Ewi said al-Qaeda's 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania are what first put Africa on the global terrorism map. But he said it was during the post-9/11 era that terrorism really took off across the continent, with Boko Haram and al-Shabaab emerging in the early 2000s. Ewi said al-Qaeda also saw Africa as its future. At that point, terrorism became an industry.

"People were making a living out of it," Ewi said. "And that's how it propagated throughout the continent."



Daniel Eizenga is a research fellow at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Eizenga wrote his dissertation on democracy in the Sahel and spent a lot of time doing research in Burkina Faso, Chad, and Senegal. Over the last decade, he's noted a significant increase in violent events in Africa linked to Islamic militant groups.

"It's a very clear trend line from 2016 through 2025," Eizenga said. These incidents include strategic attacks on infrastructure, kidnappings, assassinations, and attacks on security forces as well as mass atrocities against civilians.

Eizenga said this uptick has been driven by activity in several different theaters, including the Horn of Africa, where al-Shabaab has long plagued Somalia and its neighbors. Sahelian countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have also seen a rapid expansion of threats.

Boko Haram and its offshoot, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have become a serious scourge in the Lake Chad Basin, which primarily includes Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Other groups plaguing the continent include Islamic State (IS), Ahlu-Sunnah wal Jama'a (ASWJ), the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), and the coalition Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM).

Growing up in rural Cameroon, Martin Ewi said, communal values were deeply ingrained in his thinking: "The community lifestyle was one that taught us ... to live as part of a society where we each have responsibility."

Ewi said terrorists exploit this decentralized system by establishing themselves in rural borderlands outside easy reach of state security forces. They embed themselves in poverty-ridden areas and take advantage of existing grievances to recruit people. "You create a society of desperate people, and that society of desperate people is vulnerable to anything that sounds like money, or like anything that can make their lives better," Ewi said.





JNIM forces occupy a large part of Mali.

GREY DYNAMICS

According to the GTI, over 70% of recruits in sub-Saharan Africa said human rights abuses carried out by security forces were their deciding factor in joining a violent extremist group. A quarter cited lack of job opportunities.

Ewi said terrorists importing outside agendas have exposed a vulnerability in many African countries. "It's been very difficult to use African values to really mediate or to bring sense to terrorists because they are not most often from that community," he said. "Even if they are from there, their values have completely changed because they have been bought."

HOMEGROWN TERROR HITS THE WEST

In July, the U.S. Department of Justice charged a 21-year-old West Virginian for allegedly planning to gun down the president of the United States, Elon Musk, and the prime minister of Israel at the UFC Freedom 250 fight hosted at the White House. The indictment named seven other co-conspirators whose ages ranged from 19 to 32. They allegedly started plotting over platforms like Signal, Discord, TikTok, and Instagram about a month before the event.

This is a snapshot of a new wave of terrorism rising in the West, according to Austin Doctor, director of strategic initiatives at NCITE, the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center. These terrorists are young, homegrown, and grassroots—motivated by incoherent grievances, coordinating online, and often aiming to disrupt symbolic events.

According to the Global Terrorism Index 2026, deaths from terrorism increased 280% across the West last year, primarily as a result of several mass casualty attacks, including a truck attack in New Orleans and a shooting in Bondi Beach, Australia. Fifty-seven people died. Although the death toll remains small compared with many regions, Doctor said it's deeply troubling when taken in context of trend lines such as arrests, caseloads, and perpetrator ages. "Many of those trends are pointing in the wrong direction," he said.

Youth radicalization, in particular, is a massive problem. According to one European Union terrorism report from 2025, nearly 30% of suspects arrested for terrorism-related offenses in 2024 were between 12 and 20 years old. ■


RETURNING



TO THE LAND

Could a real estate development in rural Tennessee spark civic revival?

BY EMMA FREIRE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
Larry McCormack/Genesis



ABOVE: Josh Abbotoy at a dilapidated red barn that RidgeRunner is restoring as a farm store.

PREVIOUS AND NEXT SPREAD: Abbotoy talks with project manager Dave Reeder on a hillside that overlooks Brewington Farms in Gainesboro, Tenn.

A gentle breeze rustles through the bright green leaves of a hickory tree. Nearby a few children scamper up mounds of dirt left by an excavator that stands parked to the side. Their parents sit under a tent at folding tables covered with crisp white tablecloths and bouquets in mason jars. An Australian shepherd puppy darts between the tables.

This day feels like a community cookout, but it's actually a customer event for RidgeRunner, a real estate development company that aims to build residential communities around a shared conservative, rural ethos. RidgeRunner has been buying up large tracts of land in the Highland Rim of Tennessee and Kentucky.

The customer event takes place in a valley with a sprawling meadow full of white clover and buttercups. It's part of Brewington Farms, a 450-acre plot in Jackson County, Tenn., that RidgeRunner bought in 2025 and is selling in parcels.

Josh Abbotoy, RidgeRunner's founder and CEO, is standing just outside the tent by a table with a large map of Brewington Farms. He talks with potential customers, pointing out different spots on the map. White dots mark lots that are already sold. After explaining the layout, Abbotoy drives would-be buyers around the property in a side-by-side to give them a better view.

In some ways, RidgeRunner is a typical real estate development catering to consumer demand. Since the pandemic, Americans have been leaving big cities and blue states by the millions and moving to conservative, often rural, areas. In other ways, though, it is anything but a typical real estate development. Abbotoy hopes

RidgeRunner could produce civic renewal in America. He argues the rural-agrarian lifestyle in the areas where RidgeRunner operates is "kind of a training ground for political self-governance." And thanks to the local Bible Belt culture, conservative Christians who move here from other parts of the country can "bring their whole selves" to the public square, he says. But such an audacious vision comes with many potential pitfalls, and it's already ruffled more than a few feathers.

If Abbotoy had planned the perfect day to showcase Brewington Farms, he couldn't have done better than this Saturday in May. The temperature stays in the 70s and fluffy white clouds dot the blue sky. He invited friends and business associates to join the event, and many brought their families. They provide a friendly atmosphere and also give potential customers a sense of the community they would be joining.

And that community is a big part of what Abbotoy hopes will attract customers to RidgeRunner. He argues that until recently the "conventional wisdom for how to do economic growth in the rural South" was to downplay the Bible Belt vibes and regional identity. "Elected officials made the gambit: Let's just recruit any business that will come, because they'll bring jobs," he says. But Abbotoy thinks that mindset is changing. People are realizing that not all growth is created equal. According to Abbotoy, that's driven by "long-term generational families out here who want to fight to perpetuate the culture, and they're finding there's a ton of Americans who want precisely that."

There's no question that Americans are interested in moving to places like the Highland Rim. In his 2008 book *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop argued that Americans are gravitating toward communities of people who share their values and backgrounds. The pandemic supercharged that trend. It gave a tangible lesson in how much power local government has over our lives, and many Americans weren't happy with their experience. Between 2020 and 2024, Florida gained well over 1 million residents. States like Texas and Tennessee also showed major gains.

The growth of remote work during the pandemic also plays an important role because it opened doors for relocation that were closed before.

Younger Americans are particularly interested in moving to rural communities. In the early 2020s, 63% of rural counties saw population increases in the 25 to 44 age demographic, a major increase from the early 2010s.

Jake and Alexis Swartz embody many of those trends. Alexis heard Abbotoy discuss RidgeRunner on a podcast, and the concept immediately resonated with her. She encouraged Jake to listen, and he felt the same way. "When we got married, I think we secretly both always had this idea of wanting land," Jake says. "We're in our 30s. We've lived in major cities, and I guess we're kind of tired of it," Alexis adds. They spent the pandemic in Chicago, an experience they describe as "difficult."

They visited Tennessee and fell in love with the area. "It felt like a place we wanted to raise our kids," Alexis says. They got on board so early that RidgeRunner didn't have many properties available yet, so they bought land nearby. They both work remotely and will take their jobs with them when they move.

They realize they are walking away from some conveniences and amenities of city life. But Alexis says she doesn't consider those things a loss: "I think of it as gaining a different kind of life."

Abbotoy, who is married with four children, graduated from Harvard Law School and went on to work in private practice. But when I meet him at his office on a Friday morning, he's clearly put his corporate days behind him. He's wearing shorts, brown lace-up boots with white socks, a camouflage-pattern button-down shirt, and a baseball cap. RidgeRunner's office is an unremarkable one-story building in Gainesboro, a town with a population of 920 people, according to the 2020 census.

They're still settling into the space. One room is a jumble of office furniture, unconnected TV monitors, and a taxidermied turkey. Abbotoy's office is dominated by a large damask sofa with a floral pattern that he salvaged from Brewington Farms. "I like to sit on it when I host heads of state," he jokes.

Abbotoy says the pandemic was a turning point in his own life. He was living in Houston, and on July 4 he reflected on how little autonomy you have when you live in a city. By contrast, "if you own land and control it, you're sort of like a little king or queen in your corner of the world," he says. He bought a ranch near Brewington Farms, a former working farm that belonged to a family of the same name for four generations. In 2021, he became managing director at New Founding, a venture capital firm of which RidgeRunner is an affiliate. Abbotoy is also the executive director of American Reformer, an organization that describes its mission as promoting a Christian approach to today's cultural challenges "rooted in the rich tradition of Protestant social and political thought."

We talk in his office for a while, and I ask him about Rod Dreher's influential 2017 book *The Benedict Option*. Dreher encouraged Christians to respond to an increasingly secular, hostile culture by building intentional communities. Is RidgeRunner an attempt to build the Benedict Option?

"Not really," Abbotoy says. He thinks America's rural Southeast still has a vibrant cultural Christianity. By moving here, people are doing the opposite of cloistering themselves. "They move here because they think the broader culture is great and healthy, and they want to live somewhere where, long term, they can be fully integrated into public civic life."

He also stresses that while many of his customers are Christians, "they're not totally Christian." RidgeRunner has no litmus test or vetting for buyers. "We're developing neighborhoods and

selling them with a particular vision. If somebody likes that, we sell to them," he says. "That's the law. We happily abide by that."

After we chatted for about half an hour, Abbotoy and I drive out of Gainesboro in his pick-up truck. We cross the Cumberland River and—after about 10 minutes—stop at a dilapidated red barn with the words "Brewington Farms" still visible on the roof. RidgeRunner is restoring it as a farm store. "Our bias is always to preserve as much as we can," he says, explaining this includes both natural conservation and conservation of the historic way of life.

Then we take a shortcut through a dried-out creek bed and drive to a large meadow surrounded by low hills. Abbotoy hops out to talk to one of his workers and helps him roll a culvert to the side. Another worker is driving an excavator to dig a trench for underground electric and fiber optic internet. There will be no power lines here disrupting the view. RidgeRunner has deed restricted about 85 acres of Brewington Farms as farmland, meaning customers in this valley will look out on meadows with cows and sheep—guaranteed to never change. Houses on Brewington Farms must follow strict architectural guidelines, which Abbotoy summarizes as, "It has to look like something that could have been built here 100 years ago."

But can an influx of newcomers avoid changing a community's historic way of life? That question is salient in Cookeville, a city roughly 20 miles south of Gainesboro. The city serves as the regional hub, and it's in the midst of a boom. Cookeville has been one of Tennessee's fastest-growing small cities, growing 14.5% between 2010 and 2020 and then adding nearly another 10% in just the five years after the pandemic.

Kelly Parkison, a pastor's wife and mom of six, was recently elected to the city council. She understands that people are attracted by the area's low taxes and beautiful natural scenery. "Then they see that it's such a warm, hospitable place to live," she tells me.

But she is concerned about the price of real estate. It's risen so fast she wonders if her own children will be able to live here.

Jeff Wright, the pastor of a local Baptist church and owner of a farm, goes even further. He thinks the rising cost of real estate is a threat to the local way of life because it incentivizes farmers to cash out on land that has often been in their families for generations. "That quick buck is pretty appealing over the labor it takes to make a farm profitable long term," he says. Wright wishes he had the power to remove that incentive.

There are also more pedestrian areas of friction. Some newcomers complain about the lack of street lights. Wright explains that's because "we like seeing the stars at night." They also complain about stores closing early or insufficient public services. He argues those things help keep taxes and cost of living low.

Caleb Davidson, who lives near Brewington Farms, was initially wary of RidgeRunner. He'd seen his hometown in another part of Tennessee transmogrified by development, and he feared RidgeRunner would do the same. But that changed after he became friends with Abbotoy and heard about his plans to preserve the land. "If I'd never met him, and I was driving by the development all the time, I'd just be seething and not understanding what he's doing," Davidson says, adding, "I might have eventually come around when I saw that they had kept the farmland."

But RidgeRunner has also generated disruption of a very different kind.

Rows of white plastic folding chairs gleam in the sunlight. It's Sunday morning, and people are arriving for a church service. Two little boys solemnly hand out bulletins.

Pastor Andrew Isker wears a white vestment. He preaches from a lectern behind a makeshift communion table. It's assembled from large rocks quarried from nearby hills by men in the church. The rocks are intended eventually to pave a courtyard.

> "You spend more of your life in spaces controlled by friends and neighbors. And I think people like that."



The congregation, which is not currently affiliated with any denomination, has been meeting in rented spaces, but for a special occasion they're having an outdoor service at the site of their future building at Brewington Farms. About 75 people come out to participate.

After Isker gives the benediction, attendees scurry out of the sun into a tent, the same one used the day before at RidgeRunner's customer event. It's decorated with gauzy ribbons for the church's "spring festival." Little girls put on flower crowns and wave streamers. Children get their faces painted. After a fellowship lunch, a dozen or so of the attendees get up for some country dancing.

It's hard to believe this wholesome scene is one of the most controversial parts of RidgeRunner. The development attracted significant media attention as



soon as Abbotoy announced it, and much of that focused on Isker. The coverage suggested he was part of a plot to start a "far-right Christian nationalist community" and accused him of racism and misogyny. Isker has no official role with RidgeRunner, but he promoted it on an appearance on Tucker Carlson's podcast.

Isker is a sixth-generation Minnesotan, but he moved to Tennessee with his wife and children because of his home state's far-left policies. He was particularly concerned about a law signed by Gov. Tim Walz that allows the state to strip custody from parents who don't support a child's so-called gender transition.

Isker studied at Greyfriars Hall in Moscow, Idaho, where he was taught by Douglas Wilson. Isker tells me they "still have a pretty good relationship." Like Wilson, who has built a reputation for combative rhetoric, Isker is not known for mincing words. In his book *The Boniface Option*—which Wilson has publicly recommended—Isker laments modern society as being "Trashworld" and calls it "fake and gay."

Isker contends his approach echoes a time when people spoke more frankly than they do now. Among his influences are earlier periods of American history and the Reformers, particularly John Calvin. "He would slam people," Isker says. Though he adds that people tend to assume he's speaking in anger when "I might have a twinkle in my eye or a bit of a smirk."

Isker denies accusations RidgeRunner is a Christian nationalist project. "It's really just a residential subdivision." But he thinks it will be home to plenty of Christians who "think our rights come from God and God's standard of right and wrong is how we should order our society. But that's just like the rest of Jackson County, Tennessee."

Media coverage of RidgeRunner often compares it to Moscow, the city in which Wilson's ministry is headquartered. But Abbotoy bristles at that comparison, noting that RidgeRunner isn't centered around one church or pastor. "The American way has always been a good kind of ecumenism," he says.

Abbotoy is careful and measured during our interview. But in 2023 he landed in hot water over a post on X that said, "Basically, America is going to need a Protestant Franco." Writing in *Providence* magazine, Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, called this an example of "a new Christian authoritarian chic," adding, "contemporary America is superior to a single day under Franco." Abbotoy tells me his post wasn't an endorsement but a warning. He was alarmed by what he calls the "rapid breakdown in the rule of law and trust in the democratic process" during the Biden administration. If order breaks down, it creates space for the rise of a strong man, Abbotoy insists.

In a way, RidgeRunner is his attempt to prevent such a scenario. He says life in places like Jackson County encourages self-reliance, neighborly responsibility, and civic engagement, making it the perfect training ground for political self-governance. RidgeRunner is part of broader "re-ruralization" driven by people with agency and resources, Abbotoy says. "There's more white-collar people moving to the country, there's money, talent, and economic activity moving to the country." What happens if those trends continue? "I think, optimistically, we could see civil renewal from that."

He believes other white-collar workers from cities will adapt to rural life as successfully as he has. "Life is just as nice. It's just ordered a bit differently. You have a domain where you can exercise more agency, and you spend more of your life in spaces controlled by friends and neighbors. And I think people like that." ■

In the basement shelter that has become her home, Lyuba Horobinskaya moves briskly about the kitchen. Slim and youthful despite her white hair, she bears a friendly but no-nonsense demeanor. The kitchen is small and warm. It takes its brightness from the cabinets painted yellow and blue: the colors of the Ukrainian flag. ■ The shelter is buried beneath the Love of Christ Church in Mykolaiv, a river port city in southern Ukraine. Horobinskaya works as the shelter's administrator. Its underground kitchen serves three meals a day, feeding a steady flow of refugees who have good reason to leave their homes: A mere 40 miles separate Mykolaiv from the front line. ■ Given the ever-strengthening capacities of Russian missiles and drones—and this year's intensification of attacks on Ukrainian noncombatants—the distance makes these civilians only somewhat less vulnerable to the war's lethal violence.

WEAPONS OF WINTER

Ukraine prepares for the coming cold as Russia targets its energy infrastructure

BY WILLIAM FLEESON



DMYTRO SMOLIENKO/UKRINFORM/NURPHOTO VIA AP



The church basement stays dark, to save power. Only the kitchen lights remain on. From its stove emanates the aromas of cooking and Ukrainian *kompót*, a stewed fruit juice. Other, less-appealing smells filter into the room: mildew and the body odor of seniors struggling to care for themselves.

Horobinskaya is also a refugee. She fled from her home in nearby Kherson, a front-line city an hour's drive southeast. Like many Ukrainians, Horobinskaya has suffered much since Russia's invasion in February 2022, but she worries the situation could soon get a lot worse.

"The approaching winter gives one pause for thought," Horobinskaya told me in September. She and others have "serious fears about a Russian breakthrough" of Ukraine's front line, a chilling possibility given that Russia currently controls a part of Mykolaiv oblast, or region, and most of neighboring Kherson oblast. And Russia's targeting of energy and heating infrastructure—an ongoing, years-long pattern—makes winter another weapon in the Russian campaign against Ukraine.

LAST WINTER WAS UKRAINE'S COLDEST in 15 years, with extended periods of subzero temperatures. Russian strikes have weakened Ukraine's energy infrastructure, depriving homes and businesses of heating and electric power. This spring and summer saw Ukraine and Russia trade blows against each other's logistics and retail infrastructure. Ukraine focused on Russian e-commerce warehouses. Russia attacked gas stations and big-box superstores throughout Ukraine, and even a PepsiCo bottling plant outside Mykolaiv.

While this winter is not forecast to break further records, certain regions are sure to suffer again. Mykolaiv, as part of the flat Eurasian steppe region of Ukraine's east and south, generally has hot summers and cold winters—a climate comparable to the Plains states of the American Midwest.

Southern Ukrainians know better than most how new technologies have made the war even more bloody—and the coming winter even more brutal. Russia's new "reactive" jet-powered drones can rip through the sky at 300 mph. Mykolaiv has a citywide system of air-raid sirens, but lightning-fast aerial weapons render the warning system useless.

The city's port remains under a complete, four-year blockade from Russia's naval presence in the Black Sea. Russian attacks in September targeted the ships moored at Mykolaiv's docks. Agricultural goods, including wheat, corn, and the products derived from Ukraine's famous sunflowers, cannot get to foreign markets. The trade disruptions from Mykolaiv reach across the country's economy.

Due in part to those disruptions, Ukraine's cost of living is high, and rising. Conflict-driven inflation climbed to 8.1% in August, from 7.2% in June, according to the National Bank of Ukraine (NBU). As prices rise but salaries remain the same, paying for goods and services becomes more expensive.

This summer the NBU raised its forecast for Ukraine's overall inflation rate to 10% this year and 6.9% next year. For comparison, the Congressional Budget Office expects U.S. inflation to average 2.7% in 2026 and 2.3% in 2027.

NBU's deputy governor, Volodymyr Lepushynskyi, in an op-ed from September, offered a sober view on Ukraine's frigid future. Russia's energy infrastructure attacks and blockade of maritime activity have created perfect-storm conditions for Ukraine's economy, he explained.

The assaults "increase business costs, complicate exports, create additional demand for imports ... and, ultimately, worsen business expectations," he said.

In a possibly deliberate double meaning, Lepushynskyi praised Ukrainian ingenuity ahead of the year's coldest days.

"The Ukrainian economy is not freezing under this pressure," he said. "So far [Russia] has failed to achieve its main goal—to stop the Ukrainian economy."

Mykolaiv has become a priority destination for Ukrainian and international humanitarian aid, with money and material arriving from Asia, Europe, North America, and the United Nations. Japan in August provided Mykolaiv grant funding for more than two dozen electricity transformers.

"This equipment will now be used in the framework of preparing [the] Mykolaiv region for winter," said Serhii Koretskyi, Ukraine's prime minister. "We will continue to seek additional opportunities to strengthen our resilience, especially in front-line regions."





A woman flees as flames rise from a car and a fuel dispenser following a Russian attack on a gas station in Kharkiv.

SERHII MASIN/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

The United States has committed $195 billion in total aid allocations to Ukraine, through legislation before or during the Biden administration. Humanitarian aid accounts for just over 2% of the total, according to a July analysis from the Council on Foreign Relations, a New York–based policy group. The last U.S. aid bill to Ukraine passed in April 2024.

As in many post-Soviet countries, corruption remains a strong concern among humanitarian aid donors. Dozens of U.S. agencies participate in good-governance oversight of aid to Ukraine, according to a Fox News report from August.

Speaking at the United National General Assembly on Sept. 22, U.S. President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy held a joint press conference. Zelenskyy asked for U.S. support to end the war "before winter." Trump repeated Zelenskyy's words and nodded in apparent agreement. In a speech at the UN's main hall the following day, Zelenskyy spoke with defiance about protecting Ukraine from Russia during cold-weather conflict.

"Ukrainians understand that this winter could be very harsh for us," Zelenskyy told the assembly. "In response, we will have no choice but to make it painful for Russia, too."

WITHIN UKRAINE'S OWN BORDERS, the struggle for energy involves more than just preventing Russian attacks. Some Ukrainian public utilities say they are stuck in what economists call a "debt doom loop." Power companies are currently under a nationwide moratorium on raising prices for heating, even as they grapple with infrastructure damage and customers' unpaid bills.

During a city council meeting in September, local leaders in Mykolaiv heard complaints over the local utility's $31 million debt. Without national government support, Mykolaiv's utility and its customers could face blackouts while temperatures drop.





Dima Mocholov, a local university administrator, fears a "cascade effect." When a home loses electricity, it also loses the means to produce hot water for cooking and bathing. No power means no internet, disrupting routines for those who work or study online. Mocholov's own apartment lost power for several days last winter.

Like Horobinskaya, he knows another winter could make daily life in Mykolaiv even more difficult.

"We have a lot farther to fall," he said.

When I asked if he would leave Mykolaiv if necessary, he repeated a phrase I heard many times.

"Where to go?" he asked, smiling.

Ukraine's energy workforce faces its own problems, as the war roils the labor market for working-age men. Many of them volunteer or get drafted for the military. A conference at the end of last winter, held at the National Institute of Strategic Studies in Kyiv, noted an "acute shortage of qualified personnel in the energy sector" and a "severe workforce deficit," even at the level of lower-skilled utility jobs.

Short of industrial-scale solutions, Mykolaiv residents and several international NGOs are reaching for simple

WITH DANGER UNDERFOOT AND OVERHEAD, SOME VILLAGERS WOULD RATHER FREEZE IN THEIR HOMES THAN VENTURE OUTSIDE.

YULIIA OVSIANNIKOVA/UKRINFORM/ALAMY



PHOTO COURTESY OF GER3

FAR LEFT: A worker scans a field for mines in the Mykolaiv region. LEFT: GER3 delivers much-needed firewood in rural, hard-to-reach areas.

fixes. Acted, a large, Paris-based aid group, has identified the distribution of solid fuels—especially firewood—as an essential task in Ukraine's winterization. The group considers communities that are both rural and near front-line fighting as especially vulnerable. In Ukraine today, much like the U.S. region of Appalachia in the early 20th century, dispersed rural populations either cannot afford retail electricity or don't have electrified homes in the first place. Without fuel, domestic problems multiply: Children and the elderly get sick repeatedly.

By U.S. standards, Ukraine is a fundamentally poor country: Its per-person income averages less than $6,000 per year, according to the World Bank. And while things cost less in Ukraine, these dire-straits conditions are limiting for the war-weary. Leaving their villages for more expensive Ukrainian cities, let alone relocating to more prosperous places abroad, requires cash and savings most Ukrainians never had.

GER3, a U.S.-based humanitarian aid provider active in Ukraine, estimates more than 2 million Ukrainians will require assistance this winter. An average local monthly pension totals just 3,000 Ukrainian hryvnias, or $67, according to the organization.

As of September, the price of one standard unit of household firewood, known as a "stacked meter," had already reached $100, Anna Grace Calhoun, GER3's country director for Ukraine, told me. Each household needs about eight stacked meters to make it through the winter. GER3 also conducts related home-heating services, like insulation improvements and checks on energy efficiency.

Calhoun noted these home-heating struggles are hardly unique to the Mykolaiv area: "The needs profile is similar across many Ukrainian regions."

Even Mykolaiv's wood-burning households face steep costs, and risks, to stay warm. Many village residents are elderly, and their pensions—a holdover from Ukraine's years in the Soviet Union—do not meet even basic needs. Some seniors forage for wood in surrounding forests, though this means having to avoid land mines left over from Russia's eight-month occupation of parts of Mykolaiv oblast in 2022. Russian drones pose a more active threat.

With danger underfoot and overhead, some villagers would rather freeze in their homes than venture outside.

EDMUND RUDNITSKYI, pastor of Love of Christ Church, has taken energy matters into his own hands. He is building a self-sufficient system through a combination of solar panels, energy battery storage, firewood, and foreign help. Municipal power is expensive, he explained. Every minute of self-generated power helps his ministry.

In a kind of silver lining, Rudnitskyi noted that the war's demands on churches have helped clarify priorities and sharpen motivations. Love of Christ has scaled up its mercy ministries dramatically since 2022.

"The church is returning to social and humanitarian work," he said. "We had nothing like this before."

During my visit, workmen hustled about the church courtyard, installing panels and arranging cables. The air already held the hint of a chill. Gray skies foreshadowed the approaching winter darkness.

In the church's basement shelter, it was time for lunch. A dozen elderly residents huddled over bowls of soup. Some are just passing through. Others, like Lyuba Horobinskaya, have come to live here. The church offers protection from winter weather and Russian bombs.

Dima Mocholov, the university administrator, plans to face the cold head-on. He's spent every winter since 2022 in Mykolaiv, and he has no plans to leave, even though he finds the prospect of the coming months exhausting.

"Tired or not tired, we have no choice," he said. ■

For more coverage of the war in Ukraine, visit wng.org/ukraine-war



VOICES MAX McLEAN

Stealing past the watchful dragons

Why Christians should take theater seriously

I was dragged kicking and screaming to your show. I anticipated it with all the pleasure of dental surgery."

That is how the director of an elite university's drama department wrote to me after attending a performance of *Mark's Gospel*. He then described the presentation as powerful and moving, regardless of whether one held religious belief. He had not come expecting to encounter serious theater drawn from the Bible. The performance got past his defenses.

That letter helped confirm the conviction that eventually led my wife, Sharon, and me to establish Fellowship for Performing Arts: Theater can transport Christian truth into where it is often not heard—and engage people who might reject it before it is spoken.

I did not grow up with a serious Christian faith. In college, I discovered theater. Two literary works also awakened something deep in me: Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. Unbeknownst to me, these were early murmurs of the Holy Spirit, preparing my imagination for what came next.

After graduation, I moved to Germany and met Sharon, who invited me to a small, English-speaking church. I went reluctantly, but the people I met were intelligent and unafraid of my questions. One of them casually mentioned how Jesus was a person in history, like Lincoln or Washington. That was news to me. I had assumed He belonged to the fairy tales.

That prompted me to read John's Gospel, and I finished it in one sitting. My imagination was overwhelmed. Here was no meek and mild Jesus. This was a hero—the hero of whom all other heroes are merely copies. As I read about His life, miracles, unjust trial, and crucifixion, I was in tears. The resurrection was one of the most cathartic experiences I had ever encountered.

There, I was given eyes to see. I was loved, and He could save me. I also realized that I had been deceived. Those two revelations changed everything.

Sharon and I married and moved to London, where I continued my theatrical training and encountered some of the finest theater in the world. I began asking why art of this caliber wasn't being produced from a Christian worldview.

After London, we moved to New York, where I became immersed in theater. Yet as my faith deepened, I found the actor's life unfulfilling. I started to wonder: Why not take my acting skills and techniques and apply them to the Bible?

Many evangelicals were suspicious of the arts and their influence. The arts, meanwhile, dismissed Christian expression as sentimental and artistically inferior. Christian drama then consisted mostly of sketches used to illustrate sermons. But people enter a theater expecting to be engaged, provoked, delighted, and perhaps surprised. If the work fails as theater, the audience has little reason to take its ideas seriously.

Our first responsibility is to capture the imagination and leave room for the Holy Spirit to do His work.

C.S. Lewis described the power of story as the ability to "steal past the watchful dragons"—assumptions and defenses arising whenever people sense they are being told what they must believe. Lewis understood that truth embedded within an imaginative experience can carry an audience into the story before its members even consider resisting.

That insight became central to our work. Lewis' writing is unapologetically Christian, but it is also witty and alive. It does not avoid unbelief; it understands its attractions and exposes unbelief's weaknesses from the inside.

Over the years, I have watched audiences lower their guard as the lights go down. Skeptics found themselves laughing with *The Screwtape Letters* before realizing that Lewis describes their own temptations. People who would never attend a sermon wrestled with Lewis' movement from atheism to faith in *The Most Reluctant Convert*. Some have come to Christ; others have returned to faith they had abandoned. Many have simply begun asking questions.

That is what theater can do. It should never replace the preaching of the gospel or the work of discipleship. Those are essential. But it can awaken the moral imagination. It can challenge assumptions, create a longing for something beyond this world, and open a door to truth.

No political or cultural movement—and no single worldview—has an exclusive claim to the arts. It is our responsibility as Christians to create work that is excellent, truthful, imaginative, and worthy of the gospel we proclaim.

The house is dark. The audience is ready. The curtain is rising. ■

—Max McLean is the artistic director of Fellowship for Performing Arts

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NOTEBOOK



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN JAY CABUAY



HEALTH

Care for the caregivers

Community support groups offer help to families dealing with an Alzheimer's diagnosis

by THERESA HOUGHTON

On an overcast May morning, Debbi Pierre perches on a floral couch in the library of the Sky High Adventure Center (SHAC) in Averill Park, N.Y. About 10 men and women surround her in a mismatched collection of loveseats and chairs. A woman to Pierre's left, face haggard, shares her struggles with moving a family member to assisted living.

"He thinks he's going to bring his drum set," she says, and she can't convince him otherwise. Pierre listens with a soft expression, interjecting only to ask questions and explain that, hard as it is, the man's behavior isn't unusual. Other group members have faced—or are facing—similar challenges.

Though their exact situations differ, they all have one thing in common: They're caregivers for someone who has Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia.

Pierre, a slight, blonde woman in her 60s, wears a purple "Walk to End Alzheimer's" T-shirt. She's been involved with the Alzheimer's Association for 10 years, but began facilitating the SHAC support group only in August.

"It's someplace they can come, and everybody's in the same boat," she says. "Different stages, but you're all on the same journey."

A nationwide surge in the number of adults over age 65 means that cases of Alzheimer's and other types of dementia could grow exponentially in the coming decades, and many say America's healthcare system isn't prepared for the increased need. Private care is expensive and limited, and Medicaid options already have monthslong waitlists. That puts the bulk of caregiving responsibility on family members. For many, community support groups have become an indispensable source of help and support.

About 1 in 9 Americans aged 65 and older—7.4 million people—currently has Alzheimer's, according to data from the Alzheimer's Association. Census data suggests that new cases of all types of dementia in the U.S. alone could nearly double to 1 million in 2060.

Although many avenues for support and services exist, caregivers don't always know what's available or how to navigate the options. Beth Smith-Boivin, an Alzheimer's Association's senior director in New York state, wants to see that change.

"My goal for people living with Alzheimer's is that they are fully informed of all the options available for care and support, and that they choose the things that make them most content and comfortable through this journey," Smith-Boivin says.

Down the hall from where Pierre is meeting with caregivers, about half a dozen elderly men and women are gathering for a Memory Café. →



A husband—and caregiver—supports his wife through Alzheimer's.

While caregivers meet to discuss their experiences, loved ones get a chance to converse, snack, and participate in activities.

They settle themselves in chairs around a table. The warm scent of cinnamon fills the air as two volunteers in blue shirts pass out slices of banana bread and plates of fruit.

Games are next, starting with an old classic, Pokeno. Everyone gets a pile of red plastic chips and a cardboard rectangle printed with images of playing cards arranged in rows. "Like bingo, but with cards," one of the volunteers explains before she begins drawing one at a time from the deck, calling out the number or face and suit.

A man in a blue U.S. Navy cap and overalls banters with the woman next to him above the clinking of chips and murmur of guiding voices.

"He's cheating!" she teases.

"I don't want her to win," he retorts, good-naturedly.

About 1 in 9 Americans aged 65 and older—7.4 million people—currently has Alzheimer's, according to data from the Alzheimer's Association.

About 600 Memory Cafés are available across the country. Other programs offer their own version of social support. Donna Smith, franchise owner of the in-home care provider Home Instead in Western Massachusetts, calls her group Friends Club. Caregivers drop off loved ones at the club during work hours Monday through Friday to take part in activities like games, arts and crafts, or helping prepare lunch.

Smith designed Friends Club to emphasize socialization rather than dementia care because she wants each "friend" to feel empowered. No matter what stage of dementia they're in, she says "there will be something according to their abilities so that they're successful and they have fun."

For caregivers, support groups are a place to share questions, fears, and struggles as well as ideas and information. But emotional support may be the most valuable part. Pierre has watched people go from lost and overwhelmed to encouraged and equipped.

"I've seen a lot of people getting their stuff together, getting organized, getting ready for the rest of this journey," she says.

The Mayo Clinic estimates caregivers spend from three to 20 years supporting a family member following an Alzheimer's diagnosis. This includes everything from managing finances and medical care to making meals and helping with activities of daily life like feeding and bathing. At the same time, many caregivers also work either part- or full-time jobs, care for children under age 18, or both.

Pierre supported both her parents through Alzheimer's and knows firsthand the challenges. When a family member is diagnosed, "people don't know what to do. And everything's on their lap," she says.

At the end of the afternoon, caregivers emerge with mixed emotions on their faces. As they reunite with their loved ones, Pierre stays behind.

"I do what I do to spread awareness, to relieve some stress off their mind and point them in the right direction," she says. "That's all I can do." ■

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TECHNOLOGY

Everybody's tracking now

Continuous glucose monitors provide useful information but can lead to obsessive behavior for nondiabetics

by CLAIRE WILKERSON

Wearable continuous glucose monitors have been lifesaving for people with Type 2 diabetes since they were introduced, but now health influencers are encouraging the broader public to use the technology as a way to track individual responses to certain foods, stressors, or sleep, particularly people with prediabetes or those trying to lose weight.

Current CGM's are minimally invasive and don't require finger pricks to provide blood sugar information. Tiny sensors under the skin read glucose levels in the fluid surrounding cells and send data and real-time updates to an app on the wearer's phone. Dexcom's Stelo and Abbott's Lingo both last around two weeks and are now available without a prescription in the United States.

But while health experts agree that using a CGM for a short period can be educational, they say most nondiabetics don't need to wear one longer than that. They say too great a fixation on blood sugar levels can become problematic in itself.

In healthy individuals, blood glucose is meant to naturally fluctuate throughout the day, peaking after meals and returning to normal after a few hours. Constantly monitoring glucose levels could cause misinterpretations of daily trends.

TAKE A TOUR IN A "TOASTER" TAXI

Zoox is piloting new autonomous robotaxis in Las Vegas and San Francisco. Zoox differs from other robotaxi services like Waymo and Tesla Robotaxi by designing its vehicles expressly for the purpose, instead of retrofitting existing ones. The Zoox taxi is rectangular with floor-to-ceiling windows, leading some riders to call it "a toaster on wheels." There is no front or back and no steering wheel, and passengers enter from double doors on either side of the vehicle and sit facing one another. Zoox, which is owned by Amazon, currently has 100 custom-built vehicles running. Waymo, owned by Alphabet, the parent company of Google, still dominates the autonomous taxi space with 4,000 cars operating in 15 major U.S. cities and plans to expand further. Zoox is waiting for regulatory approval to operate in San Francisco but is expanding to Austin and Miami. Tesla Robotaxi offers rides in Texas and Florida and is working toward self-driving vehicles with no pedals or steering wheel. *—c.w.*

ORDER LUNCH, O MUSE

Meta launched **Muse**, a personal AI agent in a device the size of a key chain with a 2-inch screen, two cameras, and 5G connectivity. Styled to evoke a Tamagotchi digital pet, Muse's AI agent can retain information and act on the user's behalf to do things like online shopping, ordering lunch, booking meetings, and drafting emails. Meta is marketing Muse for optimizing family life rather than workflow. Users can customize the look of Muse's avatar on its screen and can talk directly to the device, instructing it to complete tasks without having to open the app. *—c.w.*



CGM: SDI PRODUCTIONS/GETTY IMAGES; MUSE: META



JUAN BARRETO/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright (left) listens to a speech by Delcy Rodriguez during the signing of an oil agreement in September.

INTERNATIONAL

Democracy in the back seat

Is the oil deal leaving Venezuelans in the lurch?

by CARLOS PÁEZ

Nearly one year after dictator Nicolás Maduro was captured by U.S. military forces, many in Venezuela wonder when real change will finally happen. Since the announcement of a deal granting the U.S. government preferential access to one-fifth of Venezuela's vast oil reserves, many in the Trump administration have implied that an end to the Venezuelan socialist ordeal is in sight. Secretary of State Marco Rubio hailed the deal as a "huge win for both the American and Venezuelan people" that promises to generate over $200 billion in revenue for the Venezuelan economy. But while the deal may secure America's energy supply, many Venezuelans worry about its long-term success under the current regime, led by Maduro's former vice president, Delcy Rodríguez. And they wonder whether the U.S. will turn a blind eye to the ongoing need for political reforms once its own needs are met.

"Nobody's going to invest big quantities of money while Rodríguez is still in power because she doesn't respect property rights," said Venezuelan opposition leader Jesús Armas. He's skeptical the oil deal will be enough to reassure private investors—both within and outside the country.

Armas runs an NGO called Ciudadanía Sin Límites (Citizenship Without Limits) that monitors public infrastructure in Venezuela, and he previously served on the Caracas city council. Since the earthquakes in June, his organization has gone door to door to check damaged buildings, many of them public housing. He has repeatedly found buildings not to code or suffering from years of neglect.

"This is not because of the earthquake," Armas said. "This is because of years of corruption, of mismanagement of public services, of the electricity and water system in Venezuela." And dysfunctional infrastructure will hinder any oil deal put into place.

"It's impossible to increase oil production without electricity, and she has been mismanaging the energy system for many, many years," he said, referring to Rodríguez.

Armas knows the repression of Venezuela's socialist system firsthand. After he worked to safeguard and report vote tallies in the 2024 presidential election, secret police arrested him on charges of treason. He was only released on Feb. 8 following Maduro's capture.

Citizenship Without Limits also collects data to monitor government overreach and offer democratic solutions to the nation's problems. Armas said the best path to economic recovery and business growth is for the country to have free and fair elections as soon as possible, an opinion shared across the political spectrum. At a Caracas protest Sept. 28, Carlos Salazar, head of the Venezuelan Workers' Union, said, "We want presidential elections this December and the liberation of all remaining political prisoners." Human rights organizations estimate more than 300 political prisoners remain in jail.

Meanwhile the Trump administration has not explained its reluctance to let opposition leader and Nobel Prize laureate Maria Corina Machado return home. Some analysts surmise the U.S. prefers the apparent stability of working with Rodríguez over the potential civic unrest brought about by a regime change.

Still, Armas is hopeful, but he warns against pushing development without a framework of democracy. Venezuelans agree. According to a Bloomberg poll, only a third think the oil deal will improve their standard of living. And more than half deem it illegitimate.

During her Sept. 23 speech at the United Nations, Delcy Rodríguez pledged to hold elections "at the right moment," but failed to set a specific date. ■

RELIGION

Remembering the prisoners

Pastor Ezra Jin leads calls for release of Zion Church's leaders

by LIZ LYKINS

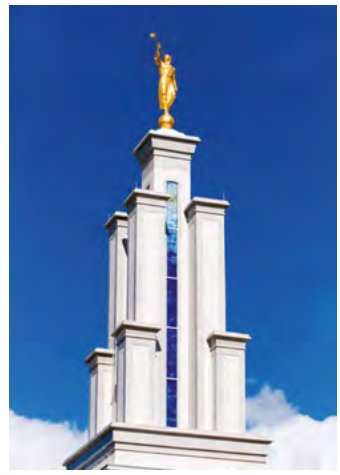
President Donald Trump is facing renewed calls to push for the release of eight Zion Church leaders imprisoned in China. The leaders, along with Pastor **Ezra Jin**, were arrested in 2025 for operating an underground church because they refused to register the ministry with China's system for controlling religious groups. They were then charged with running an illegal business and illegally spreading information online in connection with their work at the church.

After nearly nine months behind bars, authorities freed Jin this summer just weeks after Trump met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping in China. Following his release, Jin was flown to Los Angeles, where he reunited with his family for the first time in eight years. In a September post for The Free Press, Jin said the moment he truly felt free was when he embraced his family and held his youngest 1-month-old grandchild, who is named Ezra.

While Jin said he is grateful for his freedom, he urged Trump to advocate for a similar release of the eight still locked up. Jin asked Trump to raise their plight to Xi during the Chinese leader's visit to the United States in late September. Trump should advocate for the end of religious persecution in China as raids and arrests at house churches continue across the country, Jin said.

Additionally, a bipartisan group of 10 U.S. senators made a similar request to Trump in a letter sent ahead of Xi's visit. Led by Sens. Ted Budd, R-N.C., and Tim Kaine, D-Va., the lawmakers called on the U.S. to advocate for the release of those imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of religious belief. The senators highlighted other persecuted religious groups in China, including Tibetan Buddhists, Uyghur Muslims, and Falun Gong adherents.





MORMON NO MORE

A new study found that membership retention rates have steadily dropped for Mormons over the past two decades. The Pew Research Center released a major report on the Latter-day Saints this September based on interviews with nearly 900 former and current members. The number of Americans who were raised Mormon and continue to identify as such into adulthood has dropped 16% since 2007. The religion now reports a 54% retention rate, one of the lowest among major religious practices in the United States, including Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Protestantism. Around 1 in 10 Mormons who left the religion went on to identify as Protestant.

Meanwhile, the number of people converting to the LDS religion has held fairly steady since 2007. Around a quarter of total members are converts, with most coming from Christian traditions. While Mormons lean conservative in their political views, a growing percentage are expressing favorable views of homosexuality and abortion. —*L.L.*

JIN: OLIVER CONTRERAS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; MORMON TEMPLE: MYLOUPE/UIG VIA GETTY IMAGES

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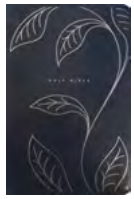
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SCIENCE

Roses are … blue?

Horticulturalists crack the secret of botany's Holy Grail

by EVANGELINE SCHMITT

Scientists in Kyoto, Japan, have succeeded in creating blue roses. For centuries horticulturalists have cross-pollinated rose bushes to develop new rose colors, but no rose bush naturally possesses the enzyme needed to create blue pigment. In the Victorian era, blue roses symbolized an impossible achievement, romanticized by Rudyard Kipling's 1887 poem "Blue Roses."

In 2004, a research center affiliated with the Suntory Group, one of the world's largest beverage companies, genetically modified a rose to produce blue pigments. The team inserted the gene for an enzyme found in the delphinium flower, but the resulting roses were only faint purple.

Now the same group has inserted four genes into a rose DNA: two from wishbone flowers, one from Canterbury bells, and one from gentian. The resulting color: violet-blue according to flower color charts. The scientists waited years before announcing their discovery, ensuring that their rosebushes continued to produce blue flowers both in greenhouses and in outdoor settings.

The research center plans to continue its pursuit of "even bluer roses." Other projects have involved sending whiskey to mellow on the International Space Station and studying the physiological effects of drinking carbonated water.

ROBOTS MAKE LASERS

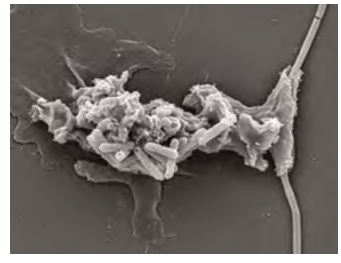
MIT scientists have built a physics laboratory that is completely run by a robot. The lab performs experiments that use lasers to measure optical properties of materials. Scientists have to perform countless laser experiments for each new model of phone display, TV screen, or solar panel. The setup for these ultra-precise experiments can take up to days or even months.

"A robot isn't going to get bored," said Marin Soljacic, a physics professor at MIT. "It can work 365 days, 24 hours a day, on very boring things. That will free up so much creativity and time for scientists."

The lab consists of a robotic arm attached to a metallic table. Given an assortment of standard equipment, the robot can build a fully functioning laser according to a researcher's specifications. The scientists dream of designing a lab that could autonomously perform experiments submitted by scientists from anywhere in the world. *—E.S.*

FIRE AMOEBA

A microbiology team from Syracuse University discovered a new species and named it ***Incendiamoeba cascadensis***, or "fire amoeba of the Cascade mountain range." Ph.D. student Beryl Rappaport found the amoeba in water samples taken from a hot spring in Lassen Volcanic National Park. She recognized typical amoeba movement under the microscope, but this amoeba reproduced at 145°F, a record for a eukaryotic organism with complex cell structure. Rappaport confirmed it was a new species of amoeba after studying its genome. *—E.S.*



ROSES: THE ASAHI SHIMBUN VIA GETTY IMAGES; AMOEBA: SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY/NATALIE PETEK

MONEY

Debt disaster

IMF chief chides economic powers for excessive borrowing

by LAUREN SMYTH



The International Monetary Fund is warning governments to pay down their debts or face rising service costs that choke off funds for other government programs. The United States is the largest shareholder in the IMF, which acts as an emergency lender for its 191 member countries in times of economic crisis. IMF director **Kristalina Georgieva** told the BBC that economic pressures like the war in Iran have been "pushing debt levels up like a staircase not to heaven." The cost of borrowing is also on the rise, with bond yields in the U.S. rising to multidecade highs as companies invest heavily in new AI infrastructure and compete with governments for loanable funds.

In the U.S., debt service payments make up about 15% of the federal budget, adding up to roughly $1 trillion annually or about 3% of the total U.S. economy. In August, the debt crossed $40 trillion for the first time in history, approaching the congressionally mandated debt ceiling of $41.1 trillion. The U.S. government has not recorded a fiscal surplus, where tax revenue exceeded expenditure, since 2001.

Some economists warn that the U.S. may be approaching the threshold for an irreversible debt spiral, where interest rates and borrowing costs rise so fast that the government must continually borrow more and more money to service its own debt. Others argue that a government that prints its own currency never risks bankruptcy. In a 2025 Raymond James report, chief economist Eugenio J. Alemán said the problem with the U.S. debt is not ability but rather willingness to pay. Politicians are incentivized to offer expensive but favorable policies to their constituents, such as tax cuts and subsidies, rather than pay down the debt.

Without tighter fiscal programs, the IMF warns that global public debt will reach World War II levels by 2027. Although governments cannot control external economic shocks, such as the rising price of oil, they can tighten the purse at home. In the U.S., the largest government expenditures besides debt service are Medicare and Medicaid, Social Security, and defense, which alone make up more than 60% of the national budget.

BALLOONING BUILD-OUT

The cost of building out new AI infrastructure could top $10 trillion by 2032, according to a new report from Brookings and Columbia economists. That would account for nearly 4% of U.S. GDP per year, a larger share of the economy than major canal, railroad, electrification, highway, and telecommunications booms in the past.

Often, companies using AI computing do not own the infrastructure required to support it, spreading investment risks across layers of real estate developers, private creditors, fund managers, and other market participants. That can require designing complicated contracts and cloud the risk landscape, according to the report. The authors warn that credit booms and periods of large capital growth have historically posed serious financial risk when underlying investor expectations shift. *—L.S.*

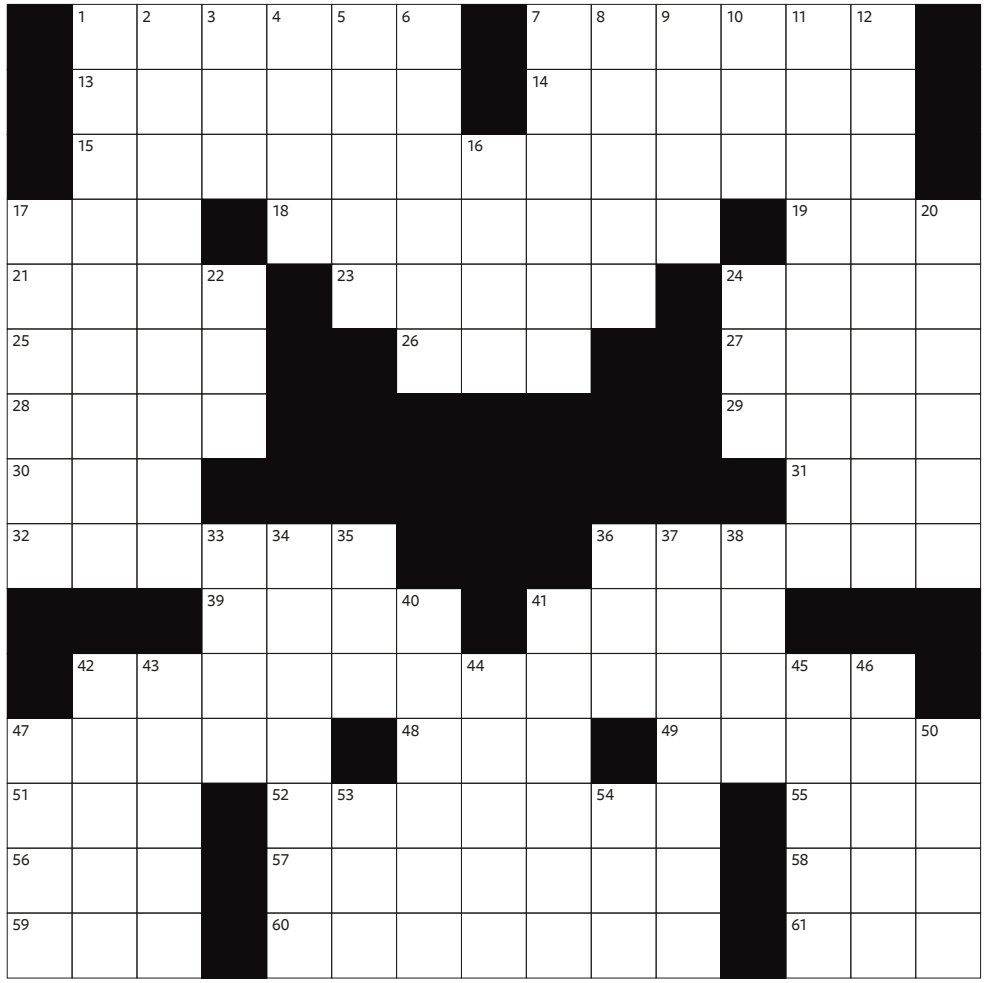


GEORGIEVA: SAMUEL CORUM/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES; CONSTRUCTION: MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES

CROSSWORD

Blot on the record

by NATHAN KENISON



Across

1 Got a point, say
7 Guise
13 Hatchery sounds
14 Way off base?
15 Diagnostic tool depicted visually by this grid
17 Director Anderson of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*
18 Someone singled out
19 Type of milk
21 Take seriously
23 The Stooges and Musketeers
24 Certain seizure (abbr.)
25 Spotty coverage?
26 Average
27 Org. co-founded by Helen Keller
28 Mjölnir's wielder
29 School fundraising grps.
30 Lion's ____
31 Opposite of WNW
32 The ____ Trail
36 Audrey II's entreaty in *Little Shop of Horrors*
39 Russian river
41 Sugar ____
42 Users of 15-across
47 So-called "Oil Capital of the World"
48 Actress Susan of *L.A. Law*
49 They may be used in witches' brews
51 King Kong or Donkey Kong
52 Book's beginning
55 Gobble
56 Rep of a triceps workout
57 ____ window (term for the range of acceptable political beliefs)
58 Alias abbr.
59 Ctrl-____-Del
60 Pudding, for example
61 Character played by Ryan Gosling and Michael Keaton

Down

1 Owl, e.g.
2 Predestined hero
3 "____ the fields we go"
4 Take a load off your feet
5 Theme park envisioned as a functioning futuristic city
6 E-flat equivalent
7 Break apart, mathematically
8 Pains' partners
9 Provide a source
10 Summer drink suffix
11 Took apart
12 Paranormal goo
16 Largest continent, by land and population
17 With 20-down, question that could be asked during 15-across
20 ____
22 German "the"
24 Freestyle
33 Fellows
34 Group of killers, say
35 "I'm good, thanks"
36 ____ of war
37 Renowned
38 Make less difficult
40 Stays
41 ____ *vs. Acme*, 2026 legal comedy starring the Looney Tunes cast
42 Black hole?
43 Snoozed
44 Stares unsettlingly
45 Finely adjust
46 Surveil, with "out"
47 Word for a big finish
50 Lee of Marvel Comics
53 ____ Maria
54 "I can neither confirm ____ deny"

Bonus clues and puzzle solution on page 110



TRANSPORTATION

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Her PLAN

Where pro-lifers go to serve.



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EXPLORE
Ages 7-10

DISCERN
Ages 11-14

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Does our crossword have you puzzled? Before checking the answers, try these additional clues:

Across

27 Human rights org.
28 Norse god of thunder
47 Oklahoma's second-most-populous city

Down

7 Consideration
41 Prairie predator
42 Student





VOICES ANDRÉE SEU PETERSON

Coming to know

God woos man with many evidences

I had it on good authority from my Brooklynite daughter that the No. 2 train would take me to Penn Station in Manhattan.

Nevertheless, I asked a man on the platform for confirmation. His answer ramped up my assurance an extra notch.

Once on board, I watched the station names fly by on the subway walls, to make sure we were heading uptown and not downtown. When I heard 34th Street announced, I exited with a high degree of confidence.

That didn't stop me, however, from inquiring of a policeman standing idle in the concourse if Amtrak operates out of the Penn Station complex.

Sound silly? In fact it is a small example of the ordinary act of human knowing that we all engage in, Christian and non-Christian alike. We come to know what we know by amassing (consciously or unconsciously) clues and evidences, or by believing an authority for things we have no direct experience of (the existence of Finland or the fact of Axis defeat in World War II).

There is no such thing as ontological absolute certainty in this life. College calculus taught us that a variable may get infinitely close to a specific target value but never quite arrives. It is the same with all knowledge.

"We know in part." No matter how much evidence we gather, acting on it always requires as a final step the volitional act of a leap of faith, of category. Stepping onto an airplane or depositing your full weight on your kitchen chair each requires faith. It is the nature of the human condition. This is why we should let no one get away with claiming the false dichotomy that Christians live by faith and non-Christians do not.

There are only degrees of certainty. Back to my New York excursion, it was possible (though not likely) that my daughter was mistaken about subway lines. It was possible (though the unlikeliness is now compounded) that the man on the platform tossed off a glib "yes" to get me out of his hair.

It is even possible that some prankster had commandeered the subway intercom and announced 34th Street by fraud. But at this point we are dealing with degrees of possibility so infinitesimal that mathematicians use the word "theoretical" to describe them. A reasonable person will not put much credence in it.

My brother, in his Maharaji flirtation in the early '70s, liked to say, "If when I am sleeping I dream I am a butterfly, how do I know when I am awake that I am not a butterfly dreaming I am a man?" Good luck with that. While it is "theoretically" possible that life is but a dream, then I'm a genius because I, middling SAT scores notwithstanding, have dreamed up trees and metallurgy and electricity and the shapes of the continents and Beethoven's *9th Symphony*.

The better "that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him" (Acts 17:26–27), God woos man with not only many evidences, but many kinds of evidences—the celestial (Romans 1) but also the internal (Ecclesiastes 7:20); the five senses but also the conscience; the guilt that nags, but also the discovery of impulses of affection within our breast; the historical and also the archaeological; the sun-kissed fields of flowers, but also the traffickers in their dark lairs. Taken together, these are clues: There is something odd about the world. Looks like it was made by a Creator who is Love itself, but some malevolent Enemy has spoiled it.

(I have felt, while in bed, in the dark, on two occasions in my adult life, the presence of sheer evil in the room. And I have known beyond a shadow of a doubt that evil is a person, not a brain epiphenomenon.)

Charles Murray (*The Bell Curve*, *Coming Apart*), hard-nosed Harvard-trained researcher to the core, has wrestled against the evidences for God most of his life, since his wife Catherine's epiphany in 1985 set things in motion, and has finally come kicking and screaming to *Taking Religion Seriously* (2025). What "evidence" persuaded Catherine of God? She found she loved their baby daughter Anna "far more than evolution demands."

To this day, Murray confesses to envying his wife because she has faith and he does not. Will someone tell the dear man the one thing he lacks—to bow the knee. Faith in God is a command: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). It is a reasonable command based on evidences ranging from the orderliness of mathematics to the face of a newborn child. Say the sole alternative that has integrity is to surrender to the findings he himself presents within the pages of his book. ■



Carl and Marsha Mueller go through a trunk of Kayla's writings and mementos.

Telling painful stories

On grief in reporting, and tales that leave us speechless

by LEIGH JONES

Jenny Rough is rarely at a loss for words. But after her first meeting with Carl and Marsha Mueller, she couldn't speak. Or work. Or even eat. The weight of what happened to the Muellers' daughter, Kayla, at the hands of ISIS terrorists overwhelmed Jenny for days. Eventually, as the tide of her grief for the Muellers waned, she began to write. You can read her story on p. 68.

How long did you spend with the Muellers while reporting this story? The Muellers graciously welcomed me into their home for two days where we talked, cried, shared meals together, and traveled around Prescott, Ariz. We spent time at a playground called Kayla's Hands. The community built it to honor Kayla's work as a humanitarian who helped children.

Why did you want to tell their story? I read a letter Kayla wrote in captivity and had slipped out to her parents. The letter talked about how she realized that even in prison one can be free. It said she had come to a place in her experience where, in every sense of the word, she had surrendered herself to her Creator. She used the precious little space she had on the notebook paper to write out prayers for her family rather than asking them to pray for her. The letter touched me, and I wanted to learn more about Kayla, her life's work, and her family. I wanted to hear about how Carl and Marsha navigated their Christian faith through the depths of such pain, suffering, and loss.

Were they eager to talk, or did it take some convincing? The Muellers don't want Kayla or any ISIS victims to be forgotten. They want people to understand the terror that came from allowing ISIS to grow. Marsha told me some people suggested that she and Carl should only speak of who Kayla was, what she stood for, and what she did—and to skip the horror that Kayla endured. The Muellers don't see it that way.

Most of the time, people experience grief suddenly. The Muellers lost Kayla gradually. When did they realize she was never coming home? That question brings tears to my eyes. The Muellers have been through so much. After ISIS reported she'd been killed, a number of conspiracy theories circulated. At one point, someone claimed Kayla had been spotted in Iraq. Because the Muellers didn't have a body, they didn't want to say for sure she had been killed. Marsha said they had a hard time letting go of the dream that their daughter was still alive. But as they've learned more, they have come to accept that she's not.

How do you approach a painful story like this? As a writer in the body of Christ, I think of myself as a ligament. The Muellers had a lot to say about what happened, Kayla had a lot to say through her life's work and letters, and readers would benefit from hearing and understanding what happened. I'm the part that connects the family to the readers. In that sense writing about Kayla was a collaborative process with the Muellers, and that eased the pain, I hope. ■

PHOTO BY JENNY ROUGH



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