CURRENT AFFAIRS

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PRETTY GOOD WHEN COMPARED TO OTHER MAGAZINES

BEWARE

INSIDE YOU’LL FIND

CONSPIRACIES
ANARCHISM
PIT BULLS
EVICIONS
MUSICALS
CLINTONS
DEATH
LAW
“Now that’s a frontispiece!”
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There are also artists for example, we have

Ben Saucier

(“Suicide” and “Privilege” illustrations, p. 10, 32) is an American abstract artist based in Maine. See saucierstudios.com

Mort Todd

(“Chemtrails,” p. 58) is an illustrator and impresario who was formerly the editor of Cracked magazine. More at morttodd.com

Robert Pece

(Caption contest, p. 71) is a California artist who has been exhibiting his work since 1973. Visit rtpece.wix.com/bobsart
ASK YOUR BOSS WHY HE DIDN’T HAVE TO BE ELECTED.
**MARKETSARE INFALLIBLE**

**Upcoming Delights in Luminar Editions of Current Affairs**

Our Special Silicon Valley Issue

We probe whether startups are mostly useless, attempt to apply for a job at Facebook, and rank tech billionaires from least to most evil.

Some Invective Lobbed at Some Presidential Candidates

Wherever we say things about presidential candidates, our website becomes very popular.

The Mysterious Universe

**Dr. A-Hoc** uses science to explain why everything wonderful is actually quite boring.

Graeber Unhinged

His unreasoning support for the government has last his mind lately. Or does that question contain a faulty premise?

Should Children Be Trained To Adore the State?

We ask the questions that other media outlets inexplicably refuse to.

Naming Names

Current Affairs owns suspected dictators.

**Tspiras: Still a capitalizing mealworm**

**What are politics if words have no meaning?**

**Cities?**

**Current Affairs: the rejected covers**

Inside the magazine that redefined good taste.

**A Universal Consensus**

With the public execution of Peter Thiel last Thursday, the number of people in the world who believe wealth is not fundamentally immoral finally sunk to one. An era of generativity and mutual self-sufficiency has begun in earnest, as the wealthy have realized (or been made to realize) that there can be no justification for the possession of riches when there is incredible suffering and deprivation in the world. This should have been an extremely elementary point. It was empirically made, for example, by Jesus. But recent books about the Son of God, such as Christianity’s God-Own-Stump, have portrayed him less as the testing social, center of other depictions, and once as a sort of socratic entrepreneur, whose paradoxes are something like management case studies rather than moral exhortations. Fortunately, in a Thiel-less world, this diaphanous sanctity has finally ceased.

**Health is fundamentally immoral**

“Health,” or the possession of vast pools of money for no conceivable reason, was a popular means of marking social distinction in the 21st century United States. Even though most of those who possessed wealth appeared to be either poor entrepreneurs or have tracked moral companies, a certain respect was afforded to those who could own large numbers of objects. The theory, later discounted, was that wealth was distributed on the basis of individual merit and hard work, rather than on the basis of individual acquiescence. Slowly, some might say incomprehensively slowly, came the national realization that the rich were not “just like the poor, but with more money,” but some rather “incredibly horrible people who cared for nothing but their own pursuit of hideous luxury” at the expense of others. Fortunately, once this truth was proven and acknowledged, it did not take long for policy solutions to be implemented, and the national regime of executing the wealthy and decouraging their cancers has met with almost universal acclaim from both experts and the public at large. Everything went from miserable to blissful instantaneously.

**Department of Corrections**

Mistakes Acknowledged

For a publication so costly, Current Affairs contains an extraordinary number of factual and typographical errors. We take the opportunity of this space to grudgingly atone for these.

Our most recent edition of Current Affairs (2015, 8.50) featured a series of patently ridiculous tidbits at the late Antonia Scala. For the sake of balance, we have been able to note some of the portly justice’s several accomplishments to balance out our discussion of his numerous unacceptances. This we will happily do. Just as Scala was unique. Never before has a judge so resembled a hag, in either physical shape or the noise emitted. He penned his opinions with a deviled voice, never once letting mere scribbles stop him from his task of cackling at the disavantaged. This took merit. Justia Scala knew that to “morally” and “human decency” interact with the brand application of a law’s text constituted the basic form of feminine weakness. He had the courage to laugh at the gry and the dandified long after everyone else had succumbed to cowardice. We shall, God willing, never see a jot of his land again.

When asked at a party to describe just what Current Affairs is, the magazine’s editor replied that it was “Like a book by Alan Dershowitz, except that we write it ourselves.” For legal reasons, we sincerely apologize for this remark, and extract all but the first three words of it.

We have been informed that many of our magazine’s articles somewhat overserved the word “ostensibly.” Concerned observers noted that we have a noticeable tendency to deploy phrases like “ostensibly a serious magazine” and “ostensibly a Nobel Prize-winning economist.” We thank those who so rigorously pointed this out.

A quotation mark was left without a mate, causing the entire latter half of the magazine to technically become one long quote. We present the closing mark here, so that this madness may permanently be brought to an end: “ ‘With the public execution of Peter Thiel last Thursday, the number of people in the world who believe wealth is not fundamentally immoral finally sunk to one. An era of generativity and mutual self-sufficiency has begun in earnest, as the wealthy have realized (or been made to realize) that there can be no justification for the possession of riches when there is incredible suffering and deprivation in the world. This should have been an extremely elementary point. It was empirically made, for example, by Jesus. But recent books about the Son of God, such as Christianity’s God-Own-Stump, have portrayed him less as the testing social, center of other depictions, and once as a sort of socratic entrepreneur, whose paradoxes are something like management case studies rather than moral exhortations. Fortunately, in a Thiel-less world, this diaphanous sanctity has finally ceased.’ ”

**The Wall Street Jokele**

Laughing at the new fortune

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The face of a person who does not yet realize they are doomed.

Looking into whether it had misled investors.

Scores of blood testing results were invalidated by giants Quest and LabCorp. “Like so many entrepreneurial prodigies, she was convinced that she didn’t need to have any training or actually know anything in order to ‘shatter’ the industry.”

The Silicon Valley memo is “break this, and indeed that precisely what they generally end up doing.”

“This is what happens when you work to change things. First they think you’re crazy. Then they fight you. And then all of a sudden you change the world.”

Or, in the case of Elizabeth Holmes, all of a sudden you are voted the Worst CEO of 2015 by Entrepreneur magazine and you end up under federal investigation on fraud charges. But maybe they just don’t appreciate your genius.

**Message to Bernard/Otto**

As our longstanding custom, here we take a moment to send a warm word of solidarity to two imprisoned gentlemen, Bernard Noble of New Orleans and Otto E. Wambach, lately of Prongauge. We hope that they are holding up as well as could be expected, and that they are managing to make some friends among their fellow prisoners. Bernard and Otto can rest assured that Current Affairs continues to do everything in its power (nothing) to secure their release. Do let the bunzant get you down, old claps.

**JULY/AUGUST 2016**
TEACH FOR AMERICA
AFFECTING CHILDREN’S LIVES
The vigor with which certain parties have pursued Current Affairs over recent allegations suggests not only that they are unconcerned with the mission of spreading useful truths but that they harbor undisclosed grudges that should have been noted on their initial applications. That these vendettas remained clandestine is positive evidence in favor of the thesis that Current Affairs is right about all things, and that our enemies should be flayed alive.
More and more of us are killing ourselves. Is it the exploding of our deferred dreams?

By Nathan J. Robinson

"The millisecond my hands left the rail, it was an instant regret," recalled Kevin Hines, a man who attempted suicide from the Golden Gate Bridge in 2000. "My final thought was "What the hell did I just do? I don't want to die."

Hines picked the bridge for its "simplicity," it was a four-foot barrier that a person could almost just tumble over. Because the bridge made it so easy to jump, even someone who felt deeply ambivalent, in half a second could impulsively make a choice that they would be unable to undo. You can decide not to jump as many times as you like, but if you decide to jump, it's the last decision you'll make.

Suicide is unforgiving like that. It doesn't matter if one is perfectly content 99% of the time; a single moment of despair will suffice. The majority of suicides are on impulse; studies of people who have survived suicide attempts have found that the time between the decision to kill one's self and the actual attempt is almost always an hour or less. (It is often less than five minutes.) And 90% of survivors will never ultimately kill themselves, suggesting what the New England Journal of Medicine calls the "temporary nature and fleeting sway of many suicidal crises."

It is disturbing to consider how many people's brief time on Earth ends with that final thought: "What the hell did I just do?"

It's very difficult to write about suicide without appearing dreary, depressing, and morbid. Nobody wants to discuss it, nobody wants to read about it. Online, articles about suicide get about as much readership as exposes of sweatshop labor and cow torture, i.e. not a hell of a lot.

But the moment you appreciate the human implications of the statistics, you realize that silence on suicide is a moral outrage. Suicides in America alone are now at 42,000 per year; the country's suicide
rate is the highest it has been in 30 years. That means people, thousands upon thousands of them, made of flesh and deeply sad, are simply popping out of existence one after another. In terms of death toll, it’s fourteen 9/11s per year!

And it’s largely needless. The impulsive nature of so many suicides means that they are preventable. Reducing the easy availability of means, and supporting people through the brief periods of time during which they are most likely to act, can be the difference between their living a full life and their plunging into eternal oblivion.

It’s very difficult to acknowledge the full implications of the evidence. “I’m walking to the bridge, If one person smiles at me on the way, I will not jump,” wrote one suicidal man before heading for the Golden Gate. Evidently nobody smiled; he jumped to his death. It might be comforting to believe that a smile wouldn’t actually have made a difference, that he would have made the same choice no matter what. But from what we know, that’s often not true. Many who contemplate suicide are looking for a way out; most do not want to die. A small act of kindness can nudge people from the ledge. (This is a good argument for remembering to smile at strangers.) That fact should be disquieting; it implies that so many tens of thousands of tragedies have been avoidable. It is heartening, however, insofar as it affirms the possibility of saving countless lives.

That makes the city of San Francisco’s lifelong indifference toward Golden Gate suicides fairly outrageous. The bridge has been known as a “suicide magnet,” and dozens leap from it every year. Yet for decades, the city has been resistant to putting up a suicide net beneath the bridge. This has largely been for aesthetic reasons, as well as out of a reluctance to spend money on a problem that has little political value. After years of pressure from advocacy groups, in 2015 the city finally agreed to put up a barrier, though at the moment it’s being held up because the steel for the nets has to be American-made.

It’s no surprise that San Francisco dragged its feet, though, judging from the amount of media attention it gets, suicide is evidently seen as a non-issue in the United States. Partially, the reluctance has been because of that lie we tell ourselves: that people “would have found some other way.” That’s false, as we know, because the easier it is to do it, the more likely it is to be done. Sometimes it’s inevitable, more often it’s anything but.

Yet there’s also a uniquely American “free choice” aspect to the nation’s blasé treatment of suicide. “If people wish to kill themselves, that’s up to them” seems to be the dominant unspoken attitude. Nobody is forced to do it, thus nobody is responsible but the person who kills herself. (That’s surely one of the reasons that suicide hasn’t taken on a larger place in the country’s gun control debate. Half of all suicides per year are by firearm, and yet mass shootings—which are far rarer—are treated as the greater tragedy."

The individualist position, which treats every person’s life outcomes as being entirely of their own making, represents both a deep moral callousness and a total indifference to empirical fact. We know that people are irrational, frail, and ambivalent, that they make choices they regret, that their brains lie to them about how much other people love them. Yet the “minding your own business” ethic is a core part of the national ideology. Your choices are your own, and if you don’t like the consequences, well, sucks for you. That line of libertarian-ish thinking is common even in cases where people’s choices are far less free than suicide; there is little sympathy for those devastated by economic crises, or drowning in medical bills. So it’s little surprise that suicide, which appears entirely freely-cho sen, should be treated as an entirely private concern.

However, suicide is not some spontaneous product of the will. Like everything else, it’s brought about by a combination of a person’s internal wiring and their external conditions. Nobody would voluntarily choose to be incredibly, desperately sad all the time. Factors like unemployment and a lack of social support are obvious contributors; joblessness alone is thought to cause 45,000 global suicides annually. Depression alone generally doesn’t lead to suicide; on the other hand, depression combined with hopeless life conditions creates the sense of there being “no way out” that can lead a person to feel death is their only available option.

Consider how Gene Sprague felt in the last days of his life. Sprague, a gentle 34-year-old punk rocker, had suffered severe depression since his mother died during his youth. Sprague had often talked about killing himself, and when asked what he wanted to have for breakfast, would sometimes reply “death.” Sprague’s eventual suicide was therefore not especially surprising, even though it was tragic. But consider what Sprague wrote on his blog in the last entry before his death. Sprague was feeling especially low because he was broke and a job offer hadn’t come through:

“I have not heard from the future employer, I have not received a plane ticket to fly to Texas to interview for that job (I was supposed to leave tomorrow), I have completely run out of money, I am out of cigarettes, I am completely out of food, my eBay auctions have not been bid on, and I think my ferret is dying.

Sprague suffered with suicidal depression for decades. But it was only when his material circumstances became unbearable that he actually took his life. In prior times, Sprague had something to cling to. He might have been broke, but at least he had some cigarettes. Or he might have run out of food, but at least his ferret was healthy. It was the “perfect storm” of minor miseries that actually pushed him toward his death. (Even then, Sprague seemed apprehensive, pacing the Golden Gate for 90 minutes before finally standing atop the railing and allowing himself to fall backwards.)
Economic misery can drive people to the brink. The rising suicide rate in America has corresponded with a rising hopelessness among many about their prospects for financial security. At the same time as the suicide rate has risen, there has been a massive rise in death from alcohol and drug use among poor, less educated whites who have been among those with the bleakest job prospects in the 21st-century global economy. And, when it comes to suicide itself, rates have risen fastest in Native American communities, which are serially plagued by material deprivation.

The link between inequality and suicide is important. If a huge swath of people is left without any opportunity for advancement, and told that it is because of their own failure of initiative, can we be surprised at a consequent outbreak of suicides? Just listen to the testimony of one internet commenter, who described how college debt and an impossible job market had turned him fatalistic:

"Two B.A.s and I can't find a job making $7.50/hour. Even if I did, what's the point? Spin my wheels and get further into debt because I can't make a wage that covers the costs of life? I got degrees in English and History, graduated Spring of 2008...three months before the economic collapse. Things went from 'you can get $12/hour with any degree' to 'You will not be able to work if you have a BA and we'll rather hire someone without one.' When I was in high school I was making $1500/week. Now I have $22 in my pocket, no job, and come March 1st my debt to my roommate for rent will reach $1500. That's not including the $30k in student loans I have, or the cost of car insurance...There's no out, there's no way to make it work, that I've found.... I made all A's in 27 hours of class in one semester. In god damn motivated. I walked four miles yesterday in Louisiana heat to drop off resumes... I work hard at every fucking thing I do, and I lack no motivation whatsoever. Some people do not get this.... we don't need platitudes and this other bullshit. We need help.... if this shit doesn't get better soon, and some sort of avenue for self-advancement appears, I'm going to be left to assume that people just don't want me here enough, and I'm going to leave... It's either I get an opportunity soon, I step off the mortal coil, or I turn to robbery. If anyone has any better ideas I'm all ears, because fuck if I haven't explored every option I know about.

At a certain point, if people have to work to live, but do not have any work, they will find that they cannot live. It's hard to know what to tell someone like this; every reassurance is a lie. Is he ever going to pay off his debts while working minimum wage jobs? No. Is he ever going to advance beyond those jobs? Probably not, unless some massive new market for English majors suddenly opens up.

Research on the connections between unemployment and suicide has suggested that the link is strongest in countries that usually have low unemployment, meaning that people who expect to find a job but can't are more likely to kill themselves than people who never had the expectation to begin with. Suicides are therefore partially a product of the frustrated American dream; in a country where one expects that hard work will create success, but hard work yields nothing whatsoever, one is likely to feel like a useless failure.

A serious attempt to address suicide has to start, then, with the actual conditions of people's lives. People are lonely, they are broke, they are desperate, and words of encouragement offer nothing. Usually, attempts to address the suicide problem focus on the lack of adequate mental health care in the country. There are suicide hotlines, but little else to assure people's long-term mental health. Psychiatric counseling is expensive and often inaccessible. Yet it may be necessary to provide more than just increased access to counseling. Giving people support is obviously helpful. But a country with annual 42,000 suicides has a systemic problem, and needs to think about where despair originates.

The ability to counsel someone like Gene Sprague or the unemployed Louisianan may be limited. Certainly, there are things you can try to tell people, theories for why it’s better to live than to die. Albert Camus has a nice argument for why we shouldn’t kill ourselves; the choice to live is the only way to rebel against the absurdity of our human condition. It’s not a helpful argument, exactly, but it’s nice. There’s always the guilt argument; suicide is a selfish act because it forces other people to feel guilty about stopping you. But as psychiatrist Scott Alexander points out, this amounts to telling the suicidal person that “If you think you’re a burden upon others while you’re alive, just think how much more of a burden you will be on them if you kill yourself.” Perhaps one can shame someone into living, but it’s certainly not optimal (besides, the suicidal have a difficult time believing they will be missed... that’s half the problem to begin with).

The only real way to eliminate American suicide may be to eliminate the viciousness of American capitalism. If people weren’t kept chasing an impossible dream, and were given basic economic security, perhaps they could find the peace and resolve necessary to keep going. At the moment, millions of people face nothing but unendurable bleakness; a less brutally competitive economy means a less brutally unendurable life.

But the first step to addressing a problem is recognizing that we have a problem to begin with. Until America treats every suicide victim as a person, one toward whom we have a responsibility of care, 40,000 people will continue to pop off into the darkness with each passing year. The country must decide whether it cares enough to act, or whether the aesthetic value of our shimmering bridges outweighs the cost of installing a net.
COMMUNAL POTLUCKS WILL NEVER BE THE SAME...

Anarchist cooking is as popular as anarchist political philosophy, and just as well-thought-out! Finally, you don’t have to live in a twelve-person activist flophouse to experience the pleasures of anarchist cuisine. The Anarchist Cookbook contains dozens of classic favorites such as:

Chilled Sweet Potato Mash — Sriracha and Kale Salad
Reheated Dumpster Pizza — Wonderfully Raw Breakfast Potatoes
Non-Alcoholic Molotov Cocktails — Nutritional Yeast Pancakes
Nutritional Yeast Stir Fry — Nutritional Yeast Tofu — Nutritional Yeast Cabbage
Plus forty separate recipes that use nothing except peanut butter!
Because missiles can fly through windows, the courtroom is windowless.” So reports Ronen Bergman in “The Hezbollah Connection,” an epic 8,000-word dispatch from The New York Times Magazine last year. The courtroom in question belongs to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), a United Nations-backed entity in The Hague, Netherlands. The STL is tasked with trying in absentia five Hezbollah members accused of orchestrating the 2005 bombing that killed former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri along with 21 others in a massive blast in Beirut. More than a decade later, as the tribunal fumbles its way toward ostensible justice from the depths of its windowless chambers, one can’t help but begin to question how any disgruntled party in Lebanon would go about firing missiles at a Netherlands courtroom 2,000 miles away.

Earlier this year in Beirut, I spoke with members of several STL defense teams who were in town interviewing “witnesses” for the
tribunal. These particular witnesses were officials from Lebanese mobile phone companies, as the prosecutors' case is in large part based on the analysis of enormous quantities of mobile phone logs, which are said to point to the five Hezbollah men. Much of the STL's work thus consists of the endless examination of telecom information using unproven methods of co-location and link analysis. Indeed, as lawyer Philippe Larochelle—who has since resigned from his position as co-counsel for defendant Hussein Hassan Oneissi—put it to me: it's essentially the case that "the accused are phones."

The trial of the phones kicked off in The Hague in January 2014, following all manner of delays and detours. In one rather lengthy detour, from 2005-2009, four Lebanese generals were imprisoned without charge thanks to a recommendation by initial UN prosecutor Detlev Mehlis, who was operating on a defective theory that the generals had conspired with the Syrian government to assassinate Hariri. Once a sufficient international stink had been made over the wrongful imprisonment and the generals had finally been freed, the STL fixed its attention solely on Hezbollah.

As the New York Times sees it, the STL is “necessary simply because of Hezbollah's unique role in Lebanon and the world: Although the group is classified by the U.S. State Department as a foreign terrorist organization, it is also a popular political party in Lebanon, and therefore it is difficult, perhaps impossible, for Lebanon or any other single nation to provide an appropriate venue for its prosecution.”

But "necessary" is an odd way of describing the STL to begin with. The tribunal's singular nature makes it an unusual international priority. For one thing, it's expensive; some half a billion dollars had already been spent as of February 2015—with Lebanon in charge of 49 percent of the bill. This is hardly small change in a country plagued by widespread poverty and a dearth of government services. During my most recent visit to Tyre, Lebanon's fourth-largest city (located twenty minutes from the border with Israel), the area was receiving as little as two hours of government-supplied electricity per day. A November 2014 article in Lebanon's Daily Star newspaper noted that the country had just managed to fork over $36 million “in dues” to the STL despite “financial troubles, as the [Lebanese] economy reels from the impact of a massive refugee influx from Syria and ongoing security problems.” The previous December, meanwhile, the U.S. State Department issued a press statement applauding "Lebanon's decision to fulfill its 2013 funding obligations" to the STL and emphasizing that the United States, too, had "provided strong financial support to the Tribunal since its inception, and we will continue to do so.”

Yet the absence of any actual defendants gives the STL an air of the farcical. Indeed, it is the first international trial in absentia since Nuremberg. In Beirut, defense lawyer Larochelle remarked to me that having worked more than two years for the STL without ever seeing the person whose “interests” he was supposed to be representing had taken its toll on his motivation. A lawyer can
find it dispiriting to defend an invisible client. Any eventual conviction by the "mock court," Larochelle said, would be "imperfect" in light of the reality that "the accused are not there"—and that the most the prosecutors could hope for was "a conviction for five ghosts." Given the specifics, imperfect would seem something of a wry understatement.

One might think that the May 2016 assassination in Syria of one of the defendants, Mustafa Amine Badreddine, would also have put the operation in a pickle. (It wasn't, however, unexpected: when I spoke to a member of the defense team in Beirut several months prior to the assassination, he claimed there was a good chance Badreddine would be killed—either before or after the verdict—by the Mossad, CIA, or some other interested party.) But so far, the tribunal appears undeterred. Following Badreddine's death, the STL swiftly took to Twitter to assure the world that it remained "committed to fulfill its mandate with the highest standards of international justice." Granted, a dead Badreddine is no less present at the proceedings than he was before.

The United States, for one, has long been insistent on seeing things through at the STL, regardless of the court's eccentricities. In the aforementioned press statement, the State Department condemns "those responsible for reprehensible and destabilizing acts of violence in Lebanon," lamenting that, "for too long, Lebanon has suffered from a culture of impunity for those who use murder and terror to promote their political agenda against the interests of the Lebanese people." A lofty promise is put forth: "The Tribunal, working with the Government of Lebanon, will help end this impunity by providing a transparent, fair process to determine responsibility for the terrorist attack that killed former Prime Minister Hariri and scores of others."

But the only obvious transparency on display at the STL is the transparent selectivity of its justice. No other political assassination—a tradition that has defined the Lebanese landscape for decades, both before and after Hariri's demise—has merited such attention. And as a Beirut-based criminal justice analyst pointed out to me, the post-cold war crop of international tribunals—for the former Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, and so on—have all dealt with genocide and crimes against humanity rather than crimes against individuals.

The tribunal's mandate also depends on the highly contested nature of the word "terrorism." The STL defines itself as "the first tribunal of its kind to deal with terrorism as a distinct crime." In these groundbreaking dealings, the STL notes, it "applies the Lebanese legal definition of terrorism, of which an element is the use of means that are liable to create a public danger." As usual, the word "terrorism" is so broad as to be almost entirely empty of meaning, making its application open to extreme subjectivity.

One of the most blatant hypocrisies in the international community's stance against "terrorism" is in its lack of application to more-than-eligible actions by the United States and Israel. Hezbollah's very raison d'être, it bears mentioning, lies in Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, an affair that killed an estimated 20,000 people, the vast majority of them civilians. After occupying south Lebanon for no fewer than 22 years and subjecting the country to intermittent bouts of slaughter, the Israeli military returned in 2006 to decimate its northern neighbor and wipe out approximately 1,200 lives, again mainly civilian. In regularly flattening sections of Lebanon, Israel would appear to have the "creation of public danger" down to an art. But Israel's maneuvers have not yet proven special enough for a Special Tribunal.

In fact, Hezbollah has accused Israel itself of carrying out the Hariri assassination, though the STL has categorically refused to consider the possibility. Arguably, the Israeli state did possess not only the technical sophistication to orchestrate the murder but also sufficient motivations. After all, the direct outcome of the assassination—which has from the get-go been blamed on varying combinations of Syria and Hezbollah—was the Syrians' departure from Lebanon, where they had maintained an occupying presence since being summoned by Christian forces shortly after the launch of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. The termination of the Syrian occupation translated into big points for Israel, which had been forcibly evicted from its own occupation in 2000 by the Hezbollah-led resistance movement—an affront the Israeli government still hasn't managed to get over.

The United States' own insistence on pursuing the prosecution solidifies the double standard. After all, it was none other than the U.S. that was rush-shipping bombs to the Israeli military in 2006 while it engaged in slaughtering Lebanese children. The one-way moral reasoning once again raises the question of just who deserves the denomination of foreign terrorist organization. The United States has never faced international legal action for its various violent incursions abroad, and has freely supported the assassination of heads of state from Patrice Lumumba in the Congo to Salvador Allende in Chile. In 2011, a U.S. drone was directly involved in the killing of Libya's leader, Muammar Gaddafi, plunging the country further into a ruinous civil war. Yet strangely, Hezbollah faces the only international terrorism tribunal ever constituted. In The Hague, phone lines are being put on trial for the killing of a Lebanese super-billionaire, while U.S. politicians have not once been summoned to answer for the destruction of Iraq.

The proceedings are hopelessly hypocritical in other ways. The "Government of Lebanon" that has been assigned the job of helping to end "impunity" is itself largely comprised of sectarian warlords hailing from the civil war era. Those warlords have remained entrenched in power despite being responsible for untold quantities of spilled blood. There's a lot to be said for impunity.

There's also something to be said for social class, it seems. The excessive fixation with the killing of Hariri has tended to distract from the fairly pervasive injustice suffered by much of the rest...
THE MORE DYSFUNCTIONAL THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IS, THE MORE DYSFUNCTIONAL THE JUSTICE.
of the Lebanese population. Unsurprisingly, a not insignificant amount of suffering is attributable to aforementioned warlords. As Lebanese criminal justice expert Dr. Omar Nashabe remarks in a 2012 paper published by the American University of Beirut, “families of thousands of persons who disappeared during the [Lebanese] civil war question the creation of the STL to investigate the killings of a few elites with no serious investigations into the fate of their own relatives.”

There are other thorny geopolitical implications to the tribunal’s work, too. It’s worth reviewing the words of Lebanese Druze chief-tain Walid Jumblatt, who in a leaked American diplomatic cable from 2006 is quoted as characterizing the tribunal as “our best weapon against the Syrians.” Jumblatt is a civil war relic whose public positions have been, at best, a jumble of schizophrenic self-contradiction. Despite opposing the invasion of Iraq at the time it occurred, Jumblatt is quoted in a book by George W. Bush as retrospectively praising the invasion as equivalent to the fall of the Berlin Wall. (Note that, since the invasion quickly turned to disaster, most observers would have revised their opinions in the opposite direction.) Jumblatt additionally appeared in a 2007 issue of The New Yorker, advising then-U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney on how to undermine Syria’s Bashar al-Assad so as to disrupt “the basic link between Iran and Lebanon.”

Fast forward to 2015, when Jumblatt himself testified in The Hague, as one of a lineup of Lebanese politicians trotted before the STL to aid the battle against “impunity.” No matter that, like many of his colleagues, Jumblatt is guilty of ethnic cleansing and other misconduct dating from the civil war period. According to the Daily Star, the Druze leader had at the outset “personally lobbied world leaders to finance the [Hariri] tribunal” but had since had a change of heart:

At a meeting with the outgoing Russian ambassador to Lebanon in 2010, Jumblatt said he wished the tribunal had never been established. ‘We got the tribunal, but I wish we did not,’ Jumblatt said... ‘The aim of [U.N. Security Council] Resolution 1559 and the 2006 War [with Israel] was to disarm the Resistance [Hezbollah]. When this failed, they resorted to [attempting to use] the STL’s indictment [to carry out this goal]’ (rampant brackets in original).

Jumblatt’s own psychological oscillations aside, the STL has since become an even better “best weapon against the Syrians” and affiliated entities on account of the war raging in Syria and efforts to discredit select tribunal participants.

Now that one of the “ghost” defendants, Badreddine, has definitively crossed over, it’s anyone’s guess what the future holds for the defense attorneys who represent the deceased man’s remaining earthly “interests.” But however things ultimately shape up in The Hague, it seems there is plenty of job security to be had in the tribunal industry, as the Times notes, many of the judges and lawyers involved in the STL “have made a career of serving in such international tribunals.” The U.N.’s International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, for example, has now been operating continuously for over twenty years, and defendants quite literally grow old as they wait for their trials to conclude.

Philippe Larochelle, himself a veteran of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the International Criminal Court, cast as the STLs most distinguishing characteristic the sheer amount of money and resources being thrown at the project. Larochelle suggests, with characteristic understatement, that the STLs lucrative employment opportunities raised the question of “to what extent” participants were being “paid to validate a dubious process.” He describes the court as the “Dubai or Qatar of tribunals.” On its sleek website, the STL offers free downloads of high-quality professional photographs of its gleaming facilities, encouraging the media to disseminate them. There is, however, one area in which the STL has attempted to pinch pennies: the court’s website specifies that “interns will not receive remuneration for their work [and] will cover the travel and living costs in the Netherlands.”

As the funds keep flowing in, the folly and general arbitrariness of the result is readily apparent. Even The New York Times acknowledged that “the prosecution has produced no direct evidence,” an indication that the court “is also likely to establish new precedents in murder convictions on the basis of circumstantial evidence.”

STL aficionados might have hoped for at least a few incidents of compelling testimony to redeem the court’s mission and give it an aura of useful purpose. But these, too, have been few and far between. Instead, the most crucial witnesses have lapsed into contradiction and recantation. In December, for example, a former bodyguard for “Sami Issa”—said to be the alter-ego of now-non-existent defendant Mustafa Badreddine—positively identified Issa/Badreddine in two photographs and then backpedaled. The Daily Star summed up the ensuing scene:

Bizzarely, he testified that the man in the photograph was wearing eyeglasses, comparing them to Issa’s. Though the photo was of poor quality, the person depicted did not appear to be wearing any.

But the money is certainly being spent. The Times noted some of the results:

The tribunal’s budget makes it possible for lawyers to present their graphic exhibits in the clearest possible manner. During some hearings, prosecutors place impressively accurate before-and-after models of the scene of the bombing on an enormous table at the center of the room. The model makers, who spent weeks constructing them, put special emphasis on precisely reproducing the destruction, even the damage to trees.

As is well known in criminal justice circles, leaf disfigurement patterns hold the key to any murder mystery.

All of this may be slightly unfair to the STL, though. After all, there may be little hope for any venue dedicated to the pursuit of “international justice.” As Larochelle pointed out to me, it’s an ideal that is categorically impossible, given that it can’t be disentangled from the (inevitably politicized) international community itself. As he noted, “The more dysfunctional the international community is, the more dysfunctional the justice.”

Two days prior to the announcement of Badreddine’s demise, I subjected myself to a brief but excruciating viewing of STL courtroom proceedings, which are transmitted with a thirty-minute delay on the STL website. During the segment I watched, a female prosecutor examined a protected witness—a representative of a telecommunications company in Lebanon. The witness’s protected status meant that the screen went blank each time he spoke, and his voice was mutated into a cross between Darth Vader, Optimum Prime, and the guy who narrates movie previews. The prosecutor spent most of her own screen time reading to the court the scintillating text of Lebanese mobile network subscription agreement forms.

Watching justice plod along into eternity at the STL, I couldn’t help but wonder how many in the courtroom secretly longed for a window. Or perhaps even a missile.
THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF TALK LATELY about the importance “Securing Our Borders” and restoring our country. These kinds of statements always come with an implicit premise: that the present-day free-for-all is a deviation from some “normal” state of affairs that existed in the past.

But when was this era of law and order to which everybody seeks to return? When were these American borders last secure? Well, as it turns out, never. The U.S.-Mexican border did not officially come into existence until the 1840s, and it was only vaguely mapped out at the outset. Many of the desert places it traversed were considered too remote and inhospitable for human habitation, and thus not worth the bother of a meticulous survey. The United States had no legislation regulating immigration flows until the 1862, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed; before that time, the U.S. was a frenzy of loosely-regulated settlement. When immigration regulations first began to be passed, initially in the form of narrow but nastily racist restrictions, the Mexican and Canadian borders were the immediate resort of those who wished to thwart the immigration inspectors. Our borders have been highly permeable throughout our nation’s entire history.

This should really come as no surprise, because permeable borders are in fact the rule, not the exception. For most of human history, open borders have been the default. Given how difficult it is to “police” border crossings in an age of motor vehicles and sophisticated surveillance technology, imagine how much harder it would have been as a border agent when all you had was an exhausted horse, your own two eyes, and untreated venereal disease (most likely). Before the age of large nation-states, territories rarely abutted each other directly, but were usually separated by areas of semi-autonomous wilderness. This pre-industrial open-borders world was not, of course, a utopia of harmonious coexistence: individuals perceived as “strangers” within a given territory have always been vulnerable to persecution and expulsion, and sudden migrations by large groups of people have usually been seen as threatening. But the idea that a government ought to strictly regulate the physical presence of all individuals within its territory, and expel individuals who do not have affirmative permission to be there, is quite new in human history, and fairly new even in American history. Administratively speaking, there are far more barriers now to legal resettlement in a new country than there have ever been.

WE MIGHT ASK WHETHER THIS INNOVATION is desirable. And indeed, arguments in favor of open (or at least more open) borders have been increasingly made, even at a time when certain buffoonish presidential candidates talk of wall-building and travel bans.

Broadly speaking, there are two perspectives on open borders: the liberal and the libertarian. They are not totally aligned, but they have certain points in common. On the libertarian side, open borders are morally mandated because the ability to move about as one chooses is a fundamental exercise of free will. Movement is permissible because the state has no right to restrict it. The liberal argument is more complex. Unlike free-market libertarians, liberals believe that governments have an obligation to provide social services to residents. For liberals, the state takes on certain administrative responsibilities when it admits new residents. For libertarians, admitting a new resident is costly to the government, because it is not the job of the state to provide a safety net. Thus, when a liberal says that anyone who wishes to should be allowed to cross the border, they are asking the receiving state to incur a certain level of obligation that libertarian open-borders advocates are not.

As a result, liberal open-borders advocates have felt pressured to justify the expenditures that come with immigration. They often do so by arguing that immigration “grows” the economy, and thus, in effect, pays for itself. By this logic, open borders, or any less restrictive immigration process, will economically benefit both incoming immigrant and currently-resident Americans. It has become commonplace in liberal pro-immigration articles to see many citations to studies showing that immigration is an economic boon, and refuting accusations that immigrants over-collect benefits, commit disproportionate numbers of crimes, and take away jobs from American citizens.

There is no doubt a great deal of truth to these arguments: the available statistics certainly seem to show that there is no truth to widespread public perception that immigrants are more likely to commit crimes and less likely to pay taxes than native-born Americans. It’s important to neutralize bogeyman scare tactics and to set the facts straight. However, we might be wary of the philosophical underpinnings of this particular argument. The economic case for immigration may be attractive—and, for the moment at least, persuasive—but it is essentially a conservative argument, suggesting that human beings ought to be treated in a certain manner because it generates economic benefit, and not necessarily because it is morally required. Of course, liberals don’t really want to look a gift horse in the mouth: with the political climate hostile to the humanitarian plight of even the most sympathetic of migrants, liberals are thrilled to have statistics and pie charts and suchlike to lay before a skittish American public. It isn’t every day that the right thing to do is also the rationally self-interested thing to do, and we should certainly celebrate those joyous occasions when they arise. However, it’s important not to lose sight of the moral dimension of the argument, and in that context there are a few questions worth asking.
1. WHAT ABOUT IMMIGRANTS WHO AREN'T POTENTIAL JOB-CREATORS?

Should borders only be opened for immigrants who are likely to be economically successful? What about people who are too sick to work? Too old to reenter the workforce? What about people suffering from trauma and PTSD, multiplied a thousandfold by cultural shock and the incredible intellectual labor of mastering a new language? The economic argument surely does not hold for these vulnerable individuals, but the idea of turning back certain classes of people at the border as “undesirables” should rightly make us feel queasy. Our current system already operates this way; high-skilled workers can get visas far more easily, and business owners who promise to create jobs can get fast-tracked approval. But the people who are most desperately in need of being admitted may often be the people who are the least “productive.” Are those people less deserving of the freedom to move from place to place? If pro-immigration advocates make the argument that immigrants should be admitted because they make excellent workers, they risk endorsing the argument that immigrants who aren’t excellent workers shouldn’t be admitted.

2. REALY ONLY DOING JOBS THAT NATIVE-BORN AMERICANS DON'T WANT TO DO?

What if immigration grows the economy overall, it's possible that those benefits come with costs to people who are extremely vulnerable, and already suffering from extreme structural disadvantages. Among certain categories of low-income workers immigration may well depress wages and increase competition for jobs. It's not unreasonable to think that sometimes immigrants and native-born workers do in fact compete for the same jobs. That doesn't create a moral justification for restricting immigration; native-born workers don't "deserve" jobs more than immigrants. But it means being honest about the fact that immigrants may displace certain workers.

3. IF IMMIGRANTS ARE DOING JOBS THAT NATIVE-BORN AMERICANS DON'T WANT TO DO WHY IS THAT?

But perhaps immigrants are mostly only doing jobs that Americans don't want to do. If that's the case, though, it is because those jobs are so degrading, dangerous, and poorly-compensated that no legally-resident individual would take them. In those cases, employers are paying so little that the positions can only be filled by someone with no work authorization, in desperate need of money and in constant fear of deportation. If there's a job that native-born Americans literally will not do, it's probably a job that shouldn't exist in the first place. The jobs in question are often unsafe. Workers have no bargaining power, and can easily have their wages stolen by employers. Agricultural work, for example, is one of those jobs that native-born Americans supposedly refuse. But that's because those who work in fields across the country—including children—work punishing hours, are exposed to dangerous pesticides, and are paid pittances for their hard labor. The construction industry, too, has notoriously lax safety standards on work sites with immigrant laborers. In New York City, the skyscraper construction boom has coincided with a 53% increase in injuries, including dozens of fatalities, mostly among undocumented immigrants. (Companies have found that simply paying the OSHA fines is more cost-effective than improving worker safety.) Is this something to celebrate? Is it something that can even be tacitly accepted as a necessary premise of an economic system? The “jobs Americans won't do” line has become a key part of the pro-immigration argument, yet it endorses a situation that runs contrary to basic liberal principles of justice. Don't we want these jobs to get better? Don't we want them to be well-paid, secure, and humane? But in that case, they would become the sort of jobs Americans would be perfectly happy to do. Will we then have scuppered a major argument for immigration? Anyone who makes the “jobs Americans won't do” case is implicitly defending a system of morally reprehensible, exploitative labor.

4. WHAT IF IMMIGRATION FAILS TO GROW THE ECONOMY?

What if, as a result of instituting better worker protections, or simply as a result of a variety of economic and social factors, immigration ceases to have positive economic effects? What if it has no economic effect, or someone can produce statistics showing that it is having a negative effect? Do we, at that point, stop allowing immigration? Do we have a global caste system, in which people can enter the U.S. only to the extent that they generate benefits for Americans who happened to have resided there from an earlier date? Of course, immigration may well be an economic boon. But one can conceive of a situation in which it isn't (if immigrants were poor and depended heavily on government services, and were unable to find jobs, for instance). If the argument for immigration is an economic one, then pro-immigration activists need to be certain that immigration will never have an economic cost. The left has something to learn from the moral clarity of the libertarian case for immigration, which asserts that human beings simply have a natural right to migrate freely. The moral argument is far more robust than the economic one, because it is true universally regardless of changing economic conditions. One doesn't need to prove that immigrants grow the GDP or that they will never compete for the same jobs as Americans. The better point is that there is no good moral reason for putting up walls and keeping people out. And just as Americans feel entitled to the freedom to go anywhere in the world they please (and would be surprised to be turned away at a border), so everyone else should be granted the same basic entitlement. It's also worth emphasizing the inherent arbitrariness of global inequality. Given that the earth's resources are unevenly apportioned, and people's life circumstances depend on the geographic accident of their birth, shouldn't we understand this to be a moral evil, and strive to correct it where we can? Perhaps such arguments will fail to persuade. But they are far more sound, and ultimately, far more honest. Increased immigration should be allowed because it is morally right, not because it is in our narrow economic self-interest.
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ON: What was the goal of doing the research?
MD: For me, the first goal was just understanding. I’ve always been perplexed and troubled by how much poverty there is in America, the richest country with the most poverty, and I’ve always found that totally unnecessary. And I wanted to understand the role housing plays in that story. If you read poverty literature, you read a lot about jobs and joblessness in families in all sorts of forms and mass incarceration. There’s just not a lot on housing. But we’re at this point where the majority of poor folks live in private apartments and get no assistance. They spend most of their money on housing, it’s a completely vital and imposing thing in their lives, and we just didn’t know much about it. When I started I had no idea how prevalent eviction was, I had no idea how consequential it would be. I thought eviction would be like a good window into [poverty], a good narrative device to hold the story together. I didn’t have any idea that it would be the central problem that emerged from the research.

ON: One possible risk I saw was that, over the past 10-15 years in particular, there have been a lot of books that pitch themselves as saying “this is actually the thing that explains poverty.” “It’s actually mass incarceration,” “it’s actually
jobs,” etc. There’s a lot of value in saying that these are elements of poverty, the way it manifests, but if you say “no, this is actually the root cause,” and we address housing but don’t address other aspects of poverty, we will just continue to poke at the problem while the underlying conditions continue to reify.

MD: I so wish that was our problem. I so wish our problem was that we’re focusing too much policy on housing. I would love that problem. I think the problem we have is that only 1 of 4 American families that qualify for housing assistance get it. The vast majority of poor folks get nothing, from any level of government. If you ask the typical American, maybe not your readership, but the typical American “where do poor folks live”? They would say public housing, and that couldn’t be further from the truth. And so we have to have an huge investment that’s on the scale of the problem, we can’t settle for smaller change anymore when it comes to this issue of the affordable housing crisis.

Poverty is never just poverty, and this search for a silver bullet doesn’t confront the complexity of the problem and I hope the book does. You see the problem of joblessness, the problem of trauma, in the book, and we have to confront all of these things. I think you’re right, but that housing has to be at the table and for a long time it just hasn’t been. And so any comprehensive poverty legislation has to have a housing component. I wouldn’t argue that that would a panacea. But also, we are existing in a world where the waiting list for public housing in our nation’s capital is like 20 years long. That’s our world. I would love it if we had inherited a world where housing assistance, etc., were addressed and we had dealt with that problem.

ON: One thing the book makes clear is that while it is partially about these grander systems of economics and housing availability, it’s also about actual people that make decisions every day in those systems. I’m thinking of the main landlord in the book, who makes decisions every day about whether to give leniency on rent or evict a tenant. There’s a place that you cite as the one time you intervened and convinced her to not call the Sheriff, which actually changed someone’s life, however marginally. How do we get at that, the fact that it’s not all systemic, that there are individual people making often devastatingly cruel choices?

MD: Or super generous choices. Part of me just doesn’t want something as fundamental as housing to come down to the whims of an individual, and I think that if you are a stable renter, it doesn’t. And there are legal protections and procedures for both landlords and tenants. But if you are someone like Arleen, renting at the bottom of the market and paying 80% of your income in rent, those laws literally cost money. And you exercise them at serious risk of eviction. So under those kinds of conditions, you really are at the risk of caprice either way; you could experience benevolence and magnanimity or callousness.

ON: It’s hard when we talk about discretion. Because a lot of times, for example in criminal defense, on one hand we’re pushing for judges to have less discretion, since discretion can result in racism. But when you have less discretion, all boats sink, and we end up with everyone just being harmed equally by policies like mandatory minimums. In the book you show this, too. In the trailer park, for example, when there’s more discretion, Tobin [the manager of the trailer park] is often kicking people out that need leniency, and it’s really based on his own personal whim, and in a really gendered way where men seemed to garner a lot more favor from him. But then when the new property management company came in, and had really strict evenly applied rules, that wasn’t necessarily a benefit to the residents either.

MD: Well, people were terrified of that. There was real terror when the new property management firm was coming in and cleaned up. On paper, by all accounts they were more professional, they were fairer, there was a system. But that terrified the people of the park, because they thought that confronting that kind of bureaucracy or these kinds of rules would eviscerate this discretion that sometimes favored them. I hope it comes through in the book that Tobin bailed people out, paid for people’s funerals... and also evicted folks.

ON: A lot of times in the book you describe the difference between “stable poverty” and the tenuous poverty of a lot of tenants. What is the biggest core difference between the two experiences of poverty, other than the money?
MD: There’s a ton of differences. Over the last 20 years, we’ve had a massive expansion of inequality, not just between rich and poor, but under the poverty line. There are stable folks, the working poor, and then this grinding poverty, often the non-working poor. The big difference is stability, as well as exposure to trauma. Another big difference is access to help, so there’s paper published a few years ago out of Johns Hopkins about per capita welfare spending over the last two decades and it showed that if you’re a working poor person, just in terms of per capita aid, you’re a lot better off than twenty years ago, if you’re a non-working poor person, it’s a lot worse. So just having access to things like the earned income tax credit, and public housing. Basically it’s an employment-based safety net, rather than welfare payments, which are almost dried up and haven’t increased since 1997, or SSI which is really just helping you scrape by. That’s the huge difference.

ON: One thing that was striking in the book is who landlords are. You see tenants that are living in pretty terrible conditions, clearly in violation of myriad housing codes, but at the same time its true that some (by no means all), of the landlords are actually lower middle class or stable poor. And they actually couldn’t afford to bring the house up to code without losing the property. What’s your feeling about these rules that are on one hand there for the benefit of tenants but on the other hand if they were all followed might actually deprive some people of housing, even as we try to make the housing better.

MD: I think the bigger problem is just that it’s hard to pay your rent if you’re a poor person. And under those conditions, rules and regulations, kind of tinkering with them, criticizing or praising them... there’s bigger game afoot. We’ve reached the point where most poor families are spending most of their income on housing, and 1 in 4 are spending over 70%. So addressing that point then allows us to address building blocks like code and things.

The history of housing codes can in one way be read as a history of unanticipated consequences. In another way, though, it is an enormous success story. If I wrote this book in the beginning of the 20th century, what would be different? Poor folks would be living in conditions a lot worse than they now are today. We’ve eviscerated slums from our communities. The book is totally clear on that; we have a long way to go, but we’ve made huge leaps forward on that score. But the other thing is this problem that’s facing folks, that they’re just at the mercy of landlords, and they’re just crushed by the high cost of housing. Until we fix that, it’s hard to regulate ourselves out of the problem.

ON: A lot of the people I represent are low wage workers, domestic workers particularly, and one thing that struck me when I started representing them was that, in my mind, a domestic worker-employer relationship looks like a low-wage immigrant worker working for a wealthy white family in the suburbs. But what I found was that many of my clients were low-wage immigrant workers, working for other low-wage immigrant workers. And those workers have to work two jobs and can’t take care of their kids themselves, so they hire a domestic worker, who they then underpay because of their own low wages. So they’re violating the law, minimum wage, overtime etc., but it’s also true that they actually can’t pay that wage because they’re getting screwed over by their bosses in turn... It brings up this thing where in a sense because of the way the employment relationship is set up, it’s poor people robbing the poor to feed the poor. Some of that appeared in the book as well; Tobin didn’t seem particularly well off. And a lot of the times the landlords actually weren’t big firms or property manage-
ment companies but were regular people with a couple of dilapidated properties. Of course, by the end, the main landlord has expanded quite a bit and I think had like 34 or 35 properties. But they were also people who didn't necessarily always have access to all the resources needed to keep the buildings up to code.

MD: I think some would say that. Some would say the landlords in the book were undercapitalized so they have to resort to distractions. So, what's acceptable? How much should a landlord that's renting to a very poor person profit? So Sherena, the main landlord, took home about $10,000 [per month] after expenses, 36 units all squarely in the inner city. She rented almost exclusively to black families, she had a five bedroom home, Jacuzzi in the basement. She and her husband took vacations every year, they had two cars, and ate out every day. She took home in a month what her tenants took home in a year. So, there it is. And part of the profit model that she practiced was running some properties into the ground to be able to minimize expense and maximize profits. And there's a ton of different landlord strategies. But there is a business model at the bottom of the market and there is a way of making money off of properties, not in spite of the neighborhood, but because of it... The big takeaway for me is like a lot of times when we write about poverty we write about it like it's a sad accident and no one ever asks "Who's profiting off this in a direct way? And what does that mean for how to fix poverty?" One thing that means is that if we don't confront that bare fact, our public policies are going to fall very flat. And wealth will continue to be extracted and markets will just adapt.

ON: One thing I appreciated about the book was that the shine was off the apple as far as law was concerned. Legal remedies for both landlord and tenant were just viewed as pieces in a calculus rather than having some kind of mystical overriding force. I think a lot of people who haven't experienced any poverty or housing difficulties would be baffled that you wouldn't show up for an eviction court date. And there's two elements to that, one point is that it's just an economic calculus, should I pay all or part of rent, should I withhold but plan to move out and then not show to court, and then combined with that there's a psychological element of I just don't have the energy to deal with this.

MD: So when I first started this research and I was going to eviction court with Sherena and seeing most of her tenants not show up...I mean, you've spent time in eviction court, housing court.

ON: Here it's about 200 people every Thursday in a bureaucratic processing mill...

MD: It's just so crowded and so much noise and so much is going on, it's hard to even call in a court. It is, like you said, really just a processing plant. I remember giving a talk at a law school when I was starting this research and I got this question from a legal scholar, and I have been asked it a few times and then I realized, "oh, they've never been to an eviction court" like they have this image of what a court is and it's not squaring with the image that I'm presenting. I've now gotten to go to a few housing courts and Milwaukee is not an outlier, I was in South Bronx housing court a few months ago and I learned that until just recently there had been a daycare inside because there were just so many children around. I think when I saw this high default rate a lot of tenants not showing, I tried to get a hold of that statistically, and there's this little footnote in the book about this but we didn't find anything, no connections, like if you owe more are you less likely to come, no, if you live further away no, so if the model is right then it means it's random, so it's like why did you show up, oh well you happened to watch your kids, or you had the day off of work, or you randomly just value that highly, or you think you have a case. So it's really disheartening. And I think some commissioners, who are the ones who handle the cases in Milwaukee, some commissioners are known to be more pro or anti tenant and I don't think it really matters, everyone's just trying to get through the stack of cases and get to the end of the day. And there's another stack tomorrow. So when we think of how to fix that, and when we think of suggestions of the right to civil counsel, it also means staffing the court so that it can function like a court.

ON: So in Boston Wednesdays are public housing eviction day and Thursdays are private housing eviction day and its very different to go into court on those days. The first client I ever had in Boston was a 93 year old woman getting...
evicted from subsidized housing. She was getting evicted for spilling juice on another tenant, which the landlord was charging as an assault. She defaulted on her first date, before I was representing her, just because it took her PCA [Personal Care Attendant] 2 hours to get her dressed every morning and the PCA didn’t get in till 8am so there was no way even without travel time (which was substantial) for her to make a 9 am court time. She had so many obstacles, but still came. I really didn’t expect her to ever. I think sometimes it’s a lot about mood, on that day, are you too depressed to deal with having to go to court, or do you think you can bear it?

MD: I think that comes through a few places in the story. Where one of the tenants in her first eviction, there were two things really, like one she didn’t think it was a big deal, and there was this moment where I was kind of trying to say “Aren’t you nervous? This is your first eviction, aren’t you nervous about it going on your record?” And her response was, “all my friends except my white friends have evictions on their record.” The racism was staggering and the whole thing is normalized. And the second thing is that I think she could have gone to court, she thought she would be embarrassed, though. She told a story about her mom going to court and she was nervous about it going on her record, she thought she would be embarrassed, she has a bit of a point. I ask myself, if you had to go and face off with an attorney, would I go? And I have a PhD. And Patrice, a tenant in the book didn’t finish high school, would you want to go in there against a lawyer or a landlord that’s in there all the time and knows the system?

ON: In the book, although there’s a lot of hope and struggle, there’s also this pervasive hopelessness. Overwhelming hopelessness. Particularly when the movers are coming to kick people out and initially they’re in a frenzy and then just succumb to despair. A lot of the movers were even moving out people they knew. What is that like, that amount of human misery caused by other humans? What did you see from the tenants, in terms of how they dealt with that constant overwhelming force?

MD: A smoke and a drink a lot of times to be honest. A good amount of dark humor. I think the movers try to do it as civilly as possible... if that’s even possible, by being polite and asking people things. But in the end they have a ton of houses to do by the end of the day. The amazing thing is just that you open your door, and the next minute your house is just not your house anymore, and they’re flipping on your lights and opening your cupboards and the invasiveness is astounding. And you’re moving people out in all circumstances; first eviction of the morning you’re waking them up, and the woman you mentioned was just cooking dinner and like she knew the day was coming but didn’t know exactly when it was going to be. And I remember she had this chalkboard on er wall with like a to-do list of the most pedestrian things like oil change for clock, homework, you know normal parts of home life. I think the psychology is really complicated about what that does to someone. You know we have this paper that links eviction to depression and it shows that evicted mothers, two years later experience high rates of depression and we control for rates of homelessness and other fallout of eviction, so one way of thinking about that relationship is to say that eviction itself, the physical act of removal leaves a mark, above and beyond the later fallout.

ON: Are there solutions short of full redistribution of property or wealth that will actually have an impact? Can any little tinkering really effect this? Or will the market just shift around whatever you try to do?

MD: There are little things, there are free things we can do that would matter. There are also things that involve an investment and this is a problem deserving of an investment. Among the free tinkering things... can we have a conversation about eviction records? Should they be public and free and put online for all to see? They have real effects on people’s ability to get housing. And I don’t have to tell you this, but most families that go to eviction court have no legal representation; there’s no check against a landlord’s claims for most cases. And the results of those cases just go up online for free, and they can stop you not just from getting safe housing, but also keep you from getting public housing. Can we have a conversation about that? It would be costless to limit those records. Or can we have a discussion about renter discrimination, about how landlords can just turn away folks with public housing vouchers just because they have vouchers? It’s a really immense barrier that stops people from moving into safer neighborhoods with better schools. I think we need to have a conversation about that. Then, moving from that end of the spectrum to the other, we do have to have to confront the fact that people just don’t have money. So, as you know, the book comes out in favor of a universal voucher idea. We don’t have to reinvent the wheel, the program we have works pretty well, but we just expand it to everyone below the poverty line. That would have a huge, huge effect on poverty in America and would make evictions and homelessness rare. That’s a solution that’s equal to the scale of the problem, and one that’s within our capacity.
How to think about Voting

by John Halle

To those on the left, presidential elections pose a dilemma. They represent only a weak form of democracy, offering limited and unpalatable choices. To vote in a presidential election risks sanctioning the results as the legitimate expression of popular will, rather than a grotesque mockery of the principle of self-governance. Energy spent on participating in the electoral extravaganza imposes a significant cost on one’s ability to build meaningful political opposition. And of course, the differences between the parties can seem slight. The Republicans are the party of war, big business, and the surveillance state, whereas the Democrats are the party of drone strikes, Wall Street, and government watchlists.

At the same time, it is not true that there is “no difference” between the Democrats and Republicans, or that presidential elections have no meaning. Appointments to the Supreme Court do matter; they can mean the difference between the preservation and the destruction of fundamental rights. And not voting, or voting third-party, can have potentially severe repercussions. Purely in terms of consequences (as opposed to culpability), it is the case that if 500 Florida Nader voters had changed their minds in 2000, multiple thousands of Iraqi children might be alive instead of dead.

Still, in the case of the 2016 election, leftists are faced with a particularly queasy compromise. In order to stop Donald Trump, they must vote for a candidate who is essentially a neoconservative. With Hillary Clinton having the support of the right-wing architects of the Iraq War and the financial crisis, leftists are being asked to make common cause with those who oppose their most fundamental principles.

But the question of how to think about voting in 2016 need not be a complicated one. It is perfectly possible to believe simultaneously that (1) presidential elections are largely corporatized pageants of minimal democratic value, with both the
Democratic and Republican candidates being morally noxious choices and (2) one should still vote for Hillary Clinton, depending on one’s circumstances.

Because individual vote choices are of such limited importance compared with other forms of political participation, little time should be spent thinking about the question. To maximize one’s effectiveness, and minimize the irrational overinvestment in presidential elections as the central focus of political action, one should combine a straightforward Lesser Evil Voting (LEV) strategy with an honest understanding of its limits. By adopting this kind of “lesser evilism without illusions,” leftists free themselves to focus on matters of far greater significance, and prevent themselves from directly causing outcomes they strongly oppose.

By adopting lesser evilism without illusions, leftists are free to focus on matters of far greater significance...

Lesser-evil voting is a simple strategy. In safely Democratic states, vote for the losing third-party candidate of your choice, or do not vote at all. In competitive “swing states,” vote for the “lesser evil” Democrat. The reasoning behind LEV can be summarized as follows:

1. The exclusive consequence of the act of voting is to marginally increase or decrease the chance of one of the major party candidates winning.

2. One’s decision of whether or not to vote, and for whom, should be determined by how one’s vote affects that outcome. Voting should not be seen as an act of political self-expression, but a tool for potentially slightly affecting the likelihood of a particular outcome.

3. It is therefore senseless to use one’s vote simply to retaliate against major party candidates who fail to reflect left values, unless one has a strategic theory for why doing so improves the chances of enacting left values.

4. A logic of “lesser-evil voting” is therefore justified. One votes in order to improve the chances of the outcome that will do the least damage.

5. In the 2016 presidential election, there are two major-party candidates with a chance of winning. One of these candidates, Trump, denies the existence of global warming, and calls for increasing use of fossil fuels and the dismantling of environmental regulations. He plans to refuse assistance to India and other developing nations as called for in the Paris agreement, the combination of which could, in four years, take us to a catastrophic tipping point. Trump has also pledged to deport 11 million Mexican immigrants, offered to provide for the defense of supporters who have assaulted African American protesters at his rallies, stated his “openness to using nuclear weapons,” and supported a ban on Muslims entering the U.S. He regards “the police in this country as absolutely mistreated and misunderstood” while having “done an unbelievable job of keeping law and order.” Trump has also pledged to increase military spending while cutting taxes on the rich, hence shredding what remains of the social welfare “safety net.”

6. The suffering which these and similarly extremist policies and attitudes will impose on marginalized and already oppressed populations has a high probability of being significantly greater than that which will result from a Clinton presidency. The use of nuclear weapons, and the refusal to address climate change, pose existential threats to the future of humanity. A Clinton presidency poses a slight lesser likelihood of an apocalyptic threat to the species, thus a Clinton presidency is at least marginally preferable, regardless of how much else one believes the two parties are essentially alike.

7. This should constitute sufficient basis to voting for Clinton where a vote is potentially consequential, namely in a contested “swing” state. However, in a state whose outcomes are unlikely to change based on the collective decisions of left-wing voters, one can safely vote third-party or stay home. Voting third-party...
left-wing cause. For the LEV strategy to be justified, the lesser evil doesn't have to be much less evil, just less evil.

Another point of disagreement is not factual but involves the underlying ethical/moral principle. It sees voting one's conscience as an important aspect of the "politics of moral witness," a core practice of the religious left. Even some secular leftists implicitly invoke similar thinking when they reject LEV on the grounds that "a lesser of two evils is still evil." This reasoning holds that it is never justified to vote for a candidate who crosses a certain threshold of moral reprehensibility.

But this position romanticizes voting as something more than a mere tool. It views the vote as an important declaration of identity and principle, rather than a highly flawed means to a possibly marginally better set of outcomes. It suggests voting is a form of individual self-identification rather than as an act to be judged on its likely consequences. To adopt this conception is to maintain the somewhat mystical supposition that by voting for something one has fully endorsed it, and that by not voting for it one has been absolved of responsibility for it. This supposition cannot be justified; by abstaining from participating in a decision one can nevertheless be fully responsible for it, if one's refusal is what has caused the decision to occur.

The person who believes "a lesser of two evils is still evil" is ostensibly concerned with minimizing the amount of evil in the world. But this is precisely the point of lesser evil voting, which supposes that an opposition to evil requires doing less evil. The LEV voting strategy is a strategy of minimizing evil. The basic moral principle at stake is simple: not only must we take responsibility for our actions, but the consequences of our actions for others are a far more important consideration than whether our vote makes us feel good. It is the predictable consequences of our actions that count, not a belief in our own superior purity. The rejection of LEV on a moral basis is the rejection of considering the effects of one's actions on other people. Thus the "moral" argument against LEV actually involves a profound moral indifference, a belief that voting is about one's personal fulfillment rather than the pursuit of left political goals.

A third criticism of LEV equates it with passive acquiescence to the bipartisan status quo. According to this perspective, mainstream Democrats are constantly attempting to cajole leftists into voting for their "lesser evil" candidates, and so long as leftists keep obliging, they will forever be sacrificing any possibility of realizing their own agenda. If leftists are willing to fall in line behind any Democrat, however loathsome, they will eliminate their own ability to pressure the party for meaningful change. Leftists therefore need to threaten to stay home, or to vote third-party, so that centrist Democrats are forced to make concessions.

This objection would be more powerful if it were connected with political reality. But in practice, the leftist threat to vote third-party does not exact concessions from the mainstream Democratic Party. In fact, once can even imagine this strategy resulting in the Democratic Party becoming more conservative: If Clinton faces a challenge from the left, she might simply spend more energy going after Republican voters. Courting conservatives has always been a core element of Clintonism, and there is no reason to expect that a Clinton looking for votes would move left rather than right.

Ralph Nader's run in 2000 did not drag the Democratic party leftward, or cause Democratic centrists to believe they needed to be more accommodating of their leftist brothers and sisters. Instead, it simply caused them to become enraged, and resulted in major backlash. If a third-party challenge, or widespread left-wing refusal to participate, did create a Trump presidency, it is unlikely that Democrats would respond by becoming more generous to their progressive wing in the future. Rather, if the left rejects voting for Clinton on principle, it will face the accusation that it lacks concern for those sure to be most victimized by a Trump administration. This accusation will be based in fact; in swing states, not voting (or voting third-party) does undermine the chances of defeating Trump. As in 2000, the charge will do damage to the left's ability to build support. If the Democratic Party blames leftists for Trump's election, many of those who would otherwise be sympathetic to a left challenge will find it a convincing reason to maintain their ties with the political establishment rather than breaking with it.

Thus threatening not to vote is a weak mechanism for exacting concessions from the Democratic Party. Furthermore, even when "concessions" are obtained, they will inevitably be in the form of non-binding promises, which can be broken immediately upon taking office. By contrast, running progressive primary challengers can be an effective means of bringing pressure on the party. The Sanders campaign was so successful that the Democrats were forced to give up seats on the party platform committee. And the Tea Party's primary challenges to Republicans shifted the entire balance of power in the party.

Of course, building third-party support in blue states can be an important justification for voting third-party in those states. Adopting strategic voting does not mean always voting for the lesser evil, if there is some good one can do in one's state by defecting. Broadly speaking, however, it should be recognized that general election voting strategy is not an especially effective realm for the building of left-wing political power.

**“Those who ignore political strategy are engaging in political fantasy...”**

Leftists should never shy away from confronting the existing political system, and challenging the two parties that dominate it. But these challenges should be conducted in full awareness of their possible consequences. This includes the recognition that far-right victories not only impose terrible suffering on the most vulnerable segments of society, but also function as a powerful weapon in the hands of the establishment center. A Trump presidency, should it materialize, would undermine the burgeoning movement centered around the Sanders campaign, particularly if it is perceived as having minimized the dangers posed by the far right.

Cost/benefit strategic accounting is fundamental to any politics that is serious about radical change. Those on the left who ignore it, or dismiss it as irrelevant, are engaging in political fantasy. Voting, like all other political action, should be thought about in terms of its value in achieving actual left political goals. In that respect, its possibilities are limited. Nevertheless, the optimal strategy for the ballot box is simple. If there is a chance it could make a difference, then vote for the lesser evil. But do so without any illusions.
Everyone knows privilege is a rotten thing. But should it be excised or democratized?

by Z.W. ROCHEFORT

Long before he fled to Mexico sporting a hastily dyed goatee, Ethan Couch was already a deeply unsympathetic figure. One night in 2013, when he was 16 years old, Couch drunkenly plowed a truck into a group of people, killing four of them. Hauled before a Texas judge, Couch offered one of the most notorious excuses for a brutal crime since “If the glove doesn’t fit” or the “Twinkie defense”: Couch’s crime was caused by an ailment known as affluenza.

Affluenza, a disease not recognized by any of the prominent medical manuals, is a novelty portmanteau of the words “affluent” and “influenza,” and refers to a phenomenon whereby rich children become so spoiled that they become incapable of restraining themselves from indulging their every impulse. As the psychologist testifying in Couch’s defense explained, from the earliest days of his upbringing, Couch had been raised without limits. Couch’s father, who owned a prosperous suburban roofing company, had let his son do precisely as he pleased. At the tender age of 13, Ethan was allowed to drive himself to school alone in his father’s truck. When the principal of the Anderson Private School pointed out to the older Couch that this might be unwise, the father “threatened to buy the school.” Couch’s mother was no less indulgent, reportedly supplying her son regularly with Vicodin.

All of this, argued the psychologist, turned Couch into a creature incapable of understanding that people “should” or “shouldn’t” do certain things, that there are acts, such as causing deadly accidents while driving drunk, that are considered “wrong.” Indeed, witnesses at the scene of the crash reportedly heard Couch bragging to his passengers that he could get them out of any legal trouble, and the victims’ families were shocked when he expressed no remorse whatsoever for killing four people. Raised in an environment where none of his actions had ever brought him so much as a scolding, Couch must have been puzzled by the very idea that people would hold him responsible for causing the deaths.

And so when Couch was sentenced, the judge appeared to take the “affluenza” diagnosis into account, letting Ethan off with probation and a required stint in a rehab facility. Nationwide outrage ensued, with Couch’s punishment being seen as absurdly light, and Couch himself becoming the poster boy for the rich, white, and privileged. The decision had been made, though, and Couch went free.

But Ethan Couch couldn’t even satisfy the extremely generous terms of his probation; after two years, a video surfaced of Couch playing...
GE
WHILE PRIVILEGE IS SMALL COMFORT WHEN YOUR CHILD IS BEING EATEN BY AN ALLIGATOR

beep pong at a party. Faced with the possibility of serving a prison sentence for failing to comply with the requirement that he not drink, Couch then went on the lam. He and his mother fled to a resort town in Mexico, where he was finally caught after reportedly spending thousands of dollars at local strip clubs. Three years after his crime, Couch is now finally facing the possibility of serious prison time.

It is tempting to see Ethan Couch as being emblematic of every inequality in the American justice system. Couch was the ultimate unaccountable brat, hurting people in whatever ways he pleases and then accepting no responsibility whatsoever. However we slice the thing, it is difficult to care about him.

In the language of progressivism, Couch seems like an extreme case of “white privilege.” “Privilege” is a popular term referring to the “set of unearned benefits” that accrue to someone because of their membership in an advantaged group. If you’re white, you’re simply more likely to catch a break than if you’re not. Many of us probably suspect that if Couch had been a poor black teenager, he would have been far less likely to receive a probationary sentence after killing four people.

The available evidence strongly suggests that this is indeed the case. By now, the horrifying statistics on black incarceration rates have long since ceased to actually horrify. A black man has a 1 in 3 chance of being imprisoned in his lifetime, as compared with a 1 in 17 for a white man, and there are more black men under the custodial control of the state (including probation and parole) than were enslaved in 1850, with a total of nearly one million African Americans imprisoned.

In criminal courtrooms, race is depressingly salient in sentencing decisions. The United States Sentencing Commission found that “prison sentences of black men were nearly 20% longer than those of white men for similar crimes.” While blacks are no more likely than whites to sell or use drugs (about 10% of both racial groups consumes illicit substances), blacks are 3.6 times more likely to be arrested. In capital cases, the race of the victim and the race of the defendant are two of the most important variables predicting whether the death penalty will be imposed. Statistics like these cannot be explained away by differences in the rate at which people of different races commit crimes; the precise same level of criminality results in different levels of punishment.

But it’s a mistake to just look at a single institution, like the criminal court system, in order to understand the continuing salience of race in American life. The heap of privileges that accrues based on skin color has a multitude of components, and the small instances of discrimination are pervasive. Researchers have found that a white job applicant who states he is a convicted felon is more likely to receive a callback for an interview than a black applicant with a clean record. And black applicants from Ivy League schools are less likely to receive callbacks than white applicants from less socially prestigious institutions. Landlords, too, were much less likely to respond to African Americans applicants.

Similar studies have shown race-based differences in how doctors judge the degree to which a patient is responsible for their health outcomes. (If you’re black, you’re irresponsible. If you’re white, you’re helplessly afflicted.) Two political scientists even found that white state legislators were far less likely to respond to emails from black constituents (the finding applied to legislators in both major political parties).

Looming over all the other disadvantages is wealth. Black Americans have lower median incomes than white Americans. But the difference becomes far more extreme when we look at the wealth people hold rather than just the incomes they receive. According to the Pew Research Center, the median white family in the United States was about 13 times wealthier than the median black family in 2014. A typical white family has over $100,000 in assets, while a typical black family has only $7,000.

The term “white privilege” is useful insofar as it captures the way the sum total of these differences creates a kind of “web” of disadvantage, in which being white just tends to make life much easier in a multitude of ways, both large and small. The theory does not say that for certain, without a doubt, in all circumstances that one’s life is going to better off if one is a straight white male. There are homeless white veterans and phenomenally wealthy black women. There are white defendants that receive unfairly heavy sentences, and black defendants who receive leniency. But the existence of exceptions doesn’t disprove a tendency, and to be black in America means experiencing constant daily reminders that You Do Not Belong. It means being followed around and searched in your local deli even when you are one of the most recognizable...
world-renowned actors (as in the case of Forest Whitaker). Or it means coming home from an academic conference celebrating your scholarly achievements, only to be suspected as a burglar and arrested on the doorstep of your own home (as happened to Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates). Ta-Nehisi Coates describes racism in modern America as a day-to-day experience of physical exhaustion that bores deep down into the soul. “White privilege” means being free from all of this.

A recent article from “EverydayFeminism.com,” a fairly typical exemplar of progressive discourse. The author describes six indicators that one has “class privilege.” These include: 1. Waking up well-rested. 2. Paying for a convenience (such as deciding to buy a coffee so as not to have to make it). 3. The ability to call in sick. 4. Having reliable transportation. 5. Being paid for all of the hours that one works. 6. Being able to buy healthy food. The author is, of course, right that poor people can’t be assured of these things, and that to have money confers an extraordinary amount of additional comfort and security in ways that often go unrecognized. But there is something disturbing about using the word “privilege” to describe something as basic as getting a good night’s sleep. Being well-rested seems like something that all human beings ought to deserve as a right. By classifying something as basic as “not having one’s wages stolen by one’s employer” as a “privilege” instead of a right, one erodes the degree to which such a guarantee should be universally expected by all.

Take the Ethan Couch case. Couch’s “lenient” sentence was met with outrage, because he was given rehab and probation after causing four deaths. This was seen as a clear case of privilege. And indeed it was, insofar as Couch would have been less likely to get such a sentence if he had not been of such a moneyed background and such a marshmallowy complexion. But hatred of Couch easily blurs the difference between his sentence was unfair because he received it on account of his race” and “his sentence was unfair because it was too lenient.” In fact, the sentence Couch received was perfectly fair. Couch was a teenager who had driven drunk. There were horrendous consequences to his irresponsibility, but Couch killed people negligently rather than premeditatedly. Sending him to rehab, and then giving him a full decade of probation (during which time any offense would result in his imprisonment), seems an entirely appropriate punishment for someone whose actions were grossly reckless rather than actually malicious.

Couch’s punishment was an injustice, of course. But it was an injustice because only Couch and people like him get the benefit of leniency, not because leniency is itself inappropriate. It is not unfair that Ethan Couch was given probation, it is unfair that Ethan Couch’s black counterpart would likely have been sentenced to spend half his life in a cage.

The same was true in several other recent cases of “white privilege” in the criminal justice system. Last June, after a 22-year-old white supremacist murdered nine black parishioners at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, he was treated with courtesy by arresting officers. When transporting the shooter to the station, police placed him in a bulletproof vest (in case he was attacked). Then, and most controversially, police bought him a hamburger from Burger King, because he had not eaten.

The police’s treatment of the Charleston shooter was instantly taken as a case of “white privilege.” If the shooter had been black, ran the criticism, he would have been slammed against the police car and tossed into the backseat like a sack of mulch. If the shooter’s black equivalent had asked for a bulletproof vest and a hamburger, officers would have laughed in his face, and possibly administered a beating.

All of that was true. But it’s also the case that criminal defendants deserve to be treated as the Charleston shooter was. If they haven’t eaten, somebody should bring them some food. A humane country feeds its prisoners. If they could be in danger because their crime was high-profile, measures should be taken to protect them. In the Charleston case, the injustice committed was not the granting of a hamburger to one individual, but the denial of hamburgers to others.

It can be hard to admit this. The Charleston AME shooting was so horrendous, and the defendant such a monstrous and hateful individual, that it is easy to feel rage upon thinking of him munching on a Whopper compliments of the Charleston Police Department. Imagining him smugly devouring it, one cannot help but want to knock it out of his hand and pummel him to a crimson pulp. These are understandable instincts. But they are also our worst instincts; it is our least rational self that fantasizes about vengeance. And to be
scandalized by injustices against black defendants does not mean one should wish it on white defendants instead.

That concerning tendency became very clear in a recent case involving a Stanford University athlete, who was witnessed raping an unconscious woman. The athlete, Brock Turner, was given a six-month sentence (plus probation) and required to register as a sex offender. Prosecutors had asked for Turner to receive six years in prison, but the judge, Aaron Persky (himself a former Stanford lacrosse player), rejected the recommendation.

When Turner's victim released a harrowing statement describing the assault, and Turner's lack of remorse, the case became a nationwide scandal. An effort was launched to recall Judge Persky for his “undue leniency.” Turner became the latest poster boy for “white privilege,” an individual who believes himself free to violate and dominate whomever he pleases without having to fear any major consequence. Turner's father was derided for his alarming statement that Turner was having his life ruined over “20 minutes of action” and for remarking that prison would have a “severe impact” on Turner.

But while the Turner case certainly illuminated the existence of “white privilege,” it also demonstrated some limits of the “privilege” framework. Those scandalized by Turner's sentence were progressives, but they began voicing sentiments somewhat contrary to the ordinary progressive position on punishment. After all, it is typically rare for those on the left to (1) advocate recalling judges for being too lenient (2) mock the idea that prison has a severely negative impact on defendants and (3) demand more prison time. Very few of those who condemned the judge, and supported Turner's victim, said explicitly how much prison time they wished Turner had been given. But it was an odd position for people on the left to put themselves in. After all, prisons themselves are dens of rape and abuse. To advocate that a young person be sent to prison, no matter how privileged that person may be, is to advocate something that should be meted out justly.

Critiques of white privilege can therefore slip into the very callousness that we are attempting to critique in the first place. If white people are perceived to experience “undeserved” advantage, then just deserts will involve removing those advantages. But if those “advantages” are necessities rather than luxuries, we may bizarrely find ourselves advocating to take away things we support. If only white people get fair criminal procedure, with a presumption of innocence, we could remove white privilege by giving everyone an extremely unfair system, but it’s hard to believe we would have successfully increased the amount of justice in the world.

LAST MONTH, AT A DISNEY RESORT IN Orlando, a small child was killed by an alligator. The boy had been splashing about in the water at the edge of a man-made Disney lagoon (though there were signs warning against swimming), before being snapped up and carried off. The alligator death was a national news story; it was devastating to imagine the pain of the boy's parents, their inevitable trauma and grief and guilt. But one internet commentator put things differently, saying: “I'm so finished with white men's entitlement lately that I'm really not sad about a two-year-old being eaten by a gator because his daddy ignored signs.”

That heartless sentiment was only expressed by a select few online. But it shows the moral reasoning toward which “white privilege” analysis can lead, if it is not combined with empathy and a belief in people's common humanity. The Disney toddler's parents would surely trade every last scrap of their racial advantage for another moment with their son; white privilege offers small comfort when your child is being eaten by an alligator.

While “white privilege” is an important concept, then, it can have terrible pitfalls. It can lead to a belief that whiteness versus non-whiteness is the end-all determination of the human experience. At the extreme end, it can let us believe that grief itself can somehow be mitigated by privilege. But the benefits of privilege, as the alligator case shows, are limited. Often, privilege just means getting something, like a good education, that should be guaranteed.

The problem with privilege is not that it is an undue luxury, then. It is that all do not share in it equally. A failure to recognize that causes a doomed political strategy; it results in critiquing those who have privilege rather than granting it to those who do not. That means dragging entitled people down rather than lifting non-entitled people up; it’s a bit like responding to the racial disparity in death penalty sentences by resolving to kill more white people rather than to kill fewer black people. Indeed, that's not as absurd as it sounds: Bill Clinton once professed himself very concerned by the racial differences in federal cocaine sentences (majority-African American crack users are more harshly punished than majority-white powder cocaine users), only to later announce that he supported raising powder sentences rather than decreasing sentences for crack. You can always fix inequality by making everyone equally miserable.

Certainly, some kinds of privilege are more “zero-sum.” A number of “privileges” operate like positions in a queue, where if I am near the front, you are necessarily near the back and vice versa. If I have $100,000 and you have $7,000, the only way to address my privilege may be to redistribute some wealth from me to you. But for those things, like fair criminal procedure, that can easily be given to all equally, “white privilege” matters less than black disadvantage.

Racial inequalities are pervasive in the United States, and take the form of both micro-level miseries and massive structural obstacles to economic and physical security. But privilege itself is a better thing than is traditionally supposed; everyone deserves privilege in abundance. The question is not how privilege can be eliminated, but how it can be democratized.
ALL THINGS MUST PASS AWAY

tips for TEENS

the kind the STATE won’t tell you...

SOMEDAY BIEBER WILL BE A SKELETON!
ISN’T THAT REASSURING?

THE JONAS BROTHERS
IMMATERIAL TO HUMAN PROGRESS

Soon your more popular classmates will have babies and be forced to work low-wage jobs and have their dreams CRUSHED beneath the weight of the brutal realities of the FREE MARKET and there’ll be no relief because America doesn’t even have PAID MATERNITY LEAVE.

You are more attractive now than you will EVER BE AGAIN.
You have more life left ahead of you now than you will EVER HAVE AGAIN.

OK!

You are never having lived at all
2. your life in almost any previous historical era
3. being sent to war for an unjust cause
4. being sent to war for any cause at all, really
5. being older than you are now
6. having like a job and stuff
7. being exhumed
8. being on life support
9. being on life support and knowing you’re going to die
10. being on life support and knowing you’re going to die, and then dying
11. being on life support and knowing you’re going to die, and then dying, and then being exhumed
12. being on life support and knowing you’re going to die, and then dying, and then being exhumed, and then becoming a future corpse

Nearly every successful person is incredibly unhappy.

SOME DISEASES YOU PROBABLY DON’T HAVE
fibrosing alveolitis
vesiculobullous dermatosis
Waldenström macroglobulinemia
subacute bacterial endocarditis
rheumatic fever
oligodendroglioma
toxic megacolon
norwegian scabies

PAID MATERNITY LEAVE

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the Banality of Instagram
Dictator Chic in the Age of Social Media...

by Adam Patterson

One of the most consistent traits of individuals who perform acts of monstrous evil is their capacity for being simultaneously unremarkable and ridiculous. Kim Jong-Il was responsible for perpetuating the system of immobilizing Stalinist repression and satanic gulags that infest the North Korean state. He also publicly claimed a world-record golf handicap and maintained a status as the world’s sin largest purchaser of Hennessy cognac. Joseph Goebbels was a darkly amoral propagandist who headed the public-relations apparatus for the Nazi genocide machine. He was also a fidgety, easily agitated man, and when he saw a British parody film in which producers had set Nazi marches to whimsical dance music, Goebbels immediately ran out of the screening room while shrieking obscenities and throwing chairs like an enraged toddler.

Ramzan Kadyrov, the standing dictator of Chechnya, is a second-generation death squad commander and Putin lackey. He’s known for his pitiless cruelty and brutality toward any and all perceived political enemies. He also enjoys taking taking selfies and recording videos of himself working out despite being a rather goofy-looking sort with the physique of a potato.

Bashar al-Assad looks like a nervous substitute teacher. Joseph Stalin looked like someone’s jovial uncle. And Ramzan Kadyrov looks like a smiling doofus who films himself on the treadmill and named his pet dog “Tarzan.” (“Tarzan” is apparently female.)

Hannah Arendt is widely cited for her analysis of Nazi logistician Adolf Eichmann’s unremarkable personality—an observation that lead to her famous remark about the “banality of evil.” Eichmann was not a snarling cartoon, or a flamboyantly malevolent persona who cackled while plotting the Final Solution. He was a mousy bureaucrat who engineered genocide with all the theatricality of a tax attorney.

Ramzan Kadyrov has been accused of ordering the killing of celebrated anti-Putin dissident Boris Nemtsov, a middle-aged father of four. There are allegedly videos of a man bearing a damning resemblance to Kadyrov beheading soldiers during the Second Chechen War. He is, by all accounts, a compulsively homicidal figure whose name has been attached to murder throughout every step of his life. Yet he also maintains one of the most personal and aggressively jovial social media presences of any head of state today. Online, Ramzan Kadyrov looks oddly similar to your least intelligent friend from college who grew up and somehow fell into a successful marketing career.

Kadyrov’s Instagram account has a following totaling more than 1.8 million users—a figure that rivals some of America’s most visible celebrities. As a point of comparison, Chechnya’s standing population was little more than 1.25 million as of 2010. Kadyrov’s social media presence extends well beyond those in his nation of birth and into the Russian-speaking world as a whole. It’s an astounding feat of subtle whitewashing. It makes Kadyrov seem friendly and acceptable, not through the usual means of outright lies and manipulation, but simply by making him look so staggeringly unremarkable that it’s hard to imagine this grinning cheeseball perpetrating atrocities.

When you comb over Kadyrov’s Instagram account, you notice a series of running themes—his puppy-like adoration of Putin, his obsession with fighting sports, assertions of nationalistic pride, and rather inane displays of piety and good cheer. One of Kadyrov’s most liked Instagram posts is merely a photo of him holding a baby lion, captioned with a heart emoji. None of these are in any way reminiscent of, for example, cutting off someone else’s head.

It’s not uncommon for Kadyrov’s posts to open with “As-salam alaykum!”, a friendly salutation used between Muslims that translates roughly to “Peace be upon you.” In fact, the usage of this phrase is so common it starts to look like a sort of social media tic. It also goes without saying that Kadyrov doesn’t actually spend much time attempting to visit peace upon others.

To give some background to Kadyrov and his ascent as Chechnya’s current dictator and #1 Vladimir Putin fan, his family crawled to power out of the ashes of the Second Chechen War. He is, by all accounts, a compulsively homicidal figure whose name has been attached to murder throughout every step of his life—turning perceived weakness or distraction into a point of severance. Chechnya fought viciously for autonomy during the post-Soviet era, eventually achieving de facto independence for a nearly three-year period from 1996-1999 along with the full removal of Russian military presence. This came to a brutal halt during the Second Chechen War when Russia, under the guidance of Vladimir Putin as newly elected Prime Minister, attempted to reassert territorial control.

The Second Chechen War was less of a prolonged conflict and more of a harrowingly brutal shock operation aimed at crushing local resistance. While the primary combat phase only lasted from summer 1999 to spring 2000, civilian fatalities at the hands of pro-Russian forces are alleged to have reached into
HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR POLITICAL BELIEFS IN A HURRY

At 10am, you manage to open a bleary eye. A man in business attire stands at the foot of your bed. You have no memory of this man, or of the past 36 or 72 hours of your life. You introduce yourself as your campaign manager. He explains that last night, in a stupor, you filed the paperwork to run for the state senate.

“You are due at the Portakabin in one hour to give your kick-off speech,” he tells you.

“But I don’t even have any political beliefs!”

“Well, you’d better hurry up and get some.”

“But I don’t even have any political beliefs!”

“You’ve got both eyes open now, and your brain is whirling. The situation is urgent: you must find beliefs.

Fortunately, you happen upon this list of the pros and cons of every major political belief, which enables you to settle on some in a hurry:

**MAINSTREAM POLITICAL BELIEFS: FOR AND AGAINST**

**CONSERVATISM**

Good – loves the old traditions, skeptical of innovation, supports the status quo.

Bad – some of the old traditions are very racist, perfectly fine with dubious capitalist schemes, breathlessly responsive to the paranoid of nuclear inspectors. Basically anything that blocks a lot of the time.

**LIBERALISM**

Good – loves the world “democracy” of “the right to be free from discrimination for the sake of freedom.”

Bad – believe in redistribution, support a living wage, and employ a centralized system of governmental control.

**FASCISM**

Good – supports a reformed, well-organized government.

Bad – supports a new system of death camps.

**MARXISM (generic)**

Good – supports not only the abolition of class, but also the abolition of work, the abolition of the state, the abolition of the private ownership of resources.

Bad – is thoroughly unappealing, and lacks any kind of broad appeal.

**LIBERTARIANISM**

Good – loves to be free from all social constraints, including work, the state, and the need to produce anything.

Bad – is completely unappealing, and lacks any kind of broad appeal.

**STAUROMATISM**

Good – believes in the death of all life, the destruction of all thought.

Bad – is completely unappealing, and lacks any kind of broad appeal.

**TRIPTOPHATISM**

Good – believes in the consumption of tryptophan, the essential amino acid.

Bad – is completely unappealing, and lacks any kind of broad appeal.

**SCHIZOPHRENOLOGY**

Good – believes in the fragmentation of the self, the splitting of the personality.

Bad – is completely unappealing, and lacks any kind of broad appeal.

**SOCIAL DEMOCRACY**

Good – believes in the redistribution of wealth, the provision of social services.

Bad – is completely unappealing, and lacks any kind of broad appeal.

**WHAT IF YOU ADOPT A STRANGE POLITICAL BELIEF?**

1. When should the government regulate businesses?
   - A. All the time.
   - B. Never.
   - C. Sometimes, but only when absolutely necessary.
   - D. Not my problem.

2. What is the ideal relationship between citizen and government?
   - A. The relationship between a greedy capitalist and his inscrutable gastroenterologist.
   - B. The relationship between a terrified colonoscopy patient and his inscrutable gastroenterologist.
   - C. The relationship between a gardener and her prize red wine, and well-choreographed parades. You think horses are the most beautiful of all God’s creatures, and the right of one has often遥 you want.
   - D. The strong devour the weak.

3. Why is altruism necessary?
   - A. It is a necessary component of the human character.
   - B. It is a necessary component of the human character.
   - C. It is a necessary component of the human character.
   - D. It is a necessary component of the human character.

4. How can we achieve freedom from the state?
   - A. Through revolution and insurrection.
   - B. Through mass education and political organizing.
   - C. Through the controlled imposition of a society.
   - D. Through the controlled imposition of a society.

5. Why is the world this way?
   - A. The strong devour the weak.
   - B. The strong devour the weak.
   - C. The strong devour the weak.
   - D. The strong devour the weak.

**OFFICIALLY SANCTIONED DEMOCRATIC PARTY TIC-TAC-TOE**

**RULES COMMITTEE**

1. Use “H” and “B” in places of “K” and “C.” (These letters have been randomly selected.)

2. Play as you would play any other game of Tic-Tac-Toe. Each player starting with “H” takes turns placing their marker in each of nine squares, inserting the choice of “K” or “C.”

3. At any point, if the player whose turn it is, selects a square next to the player whose turn it is, the player whose turn it is picks another square, the player whose turn it is picks another square, and so on.

4. After the player whose turn it is, selects a square next to the player whose turn it is, the player whose turn it is picks another square, the player whose turn it is picks another square, and so on, all of the previous selections are reversed.

5. Play as you would play any other game of Tic-Tac-Toe.

**WHAT IF YOU USE A POLITICUS GUESS-THAT’S-IT-TO-CODE GAME?**

- A. The strong devour the weak.
- B. The strong devour the weak.
- C. The strong devour the weak.
- D. The strong devour the weak.

**AMBIGUITY**

Pun intended, in a narrow interpretation. You are not a Democrat, you are not a Republican, you are not a Libertarian, you are not a Marxist. You are an existentialist.

**FREEKISHNESS**

Pun intended, in a broad interpretation. You are not a Democrat, you are not a Republican, you are not a Libertarian, you are not a Marxist. You are a rebel, a nonconformist, an anti-establishmentarian.

**FREEDOM**

Pun intended, in a narrow interpretation. You are not a Democrat, you are not a Republican, you are not a Libertarian, you are not a Marxist. You are a libertarian.

**FASCISM**

Pun intended, in a narrow interpretation. You are not a Democrat, you are not a Republican, you are not a Libertarian, you are not a Marxist. You are a fascist.

**FASCISM**

Pun intended, in a narrow interpretation. You are not a Democrat, you are not a Republican, you are not a Libertarian, you are not a Marxist. You are a fascist.
the tens of thousands. Once Russia’s scorched-earth policy achieved its intended effect, Putin promoted a particularly loyal death squad commander named Akhmad Kadyrov to the upper echelons of government. Akhmad soon become the president of Chechnya in 2003, but was assassinated by Chechen Islamists only months thereafter as an act of revenge. (Chechnya tends to produce uniquely capable jihadis, by contrast with the klutzes and blunderers that often emerge from France or England.)

Enter young Ramzan, stage right. Both slavishly loyal to Putin and enthusiastically violent, the younger Kadyrov proved an ideal successor. Moscow propelled him up the ranks in a manner similar to his father, with Ramzan being appointed supreme leader of Chechnya at the tender age of 30.

Predictably, Ramzan acted much like a death squad commander would when handed absolute power. He’s known for assassinating not just political opponents, but even members of the Chechen state apparatus who criticize him at all. His loyal paramilitary squads, referred to as Kadyrovtsy (it’s good to have a brand name), are known for wantonly terrorizing anyone who might offer the slightest dissent. Their uniting purpose seems to be cementing the power of the Kadyrov clan through the most horrific means possible. Kadyrovtsy were once accused of displaying the severed head of an anti-government partisan in the village of Kurchaloi as warning to the locals who might be tempted to make any gestures against Kadyrov’s rule. Some of the bravest people in the entire Russian Federation are prone to dying horrible deaths the moment they start to criticize Kadyrov, and Kadyrov has been accused of personally participating in tortures and executions.

One should adopt a balanced perspective though. It’s true that local beheading statistics seem to escalate precipitously whenever Kadyrov comes to town. On the other hand, a few months ago Kadyrov endearingly took to Instagram to ask followers to help him find his missing cat. As of this writing, no one has been able to locate Kadyrov’s cat, which probably makes him very sad. This is Ramzan and his cat, in better days:

Kadyrov simply takes this to its logical next step. His online presence shows a man who has murdered dissidents with his own hands playing with his dog and wishing the faithful a peaceful Ramadan. Brutal regents throughout history have had few better assets at their disposal than the power of distraction and public posturing. If you can mislead your subjects it becomes harder to imagine the brutality that goes undocumented. The unspoken rule behind this style of misdirection is that the cheerfulness of a despot’s propaganda often corresponds directly with the magnitude of their atrocities.

No matter the scale of murder occurring on Assad’s watch, his various Instagram posts still broadcasted little more than benign magnanimity.

This can even be seen in the case of the Syrian Civil War. Bashar al-Assad has been responsible for significantly more civilian murder than ISIS has—despite ISIS making every attempt to advertise themselves as menacing, lethal, and dangerous. Assad presented himself as an even-handed statesman, all the while executing a military policy centered on massacring civilian populations loyal to the rebel opposition. During the harrowing earlier days of the Syrian Civil War, observers would occasionally remark on the dissonance of Assad’s well-composed, patrician social media presence. No matter the scale of murder occurring under Assad’s watch, his various Instagram postings still broadcasted little more than benign magnanimity. Kadyrov simply takes this to its logical next step. His online presence shows a man who has murdered dissidents with his own hands playing with his dog and wishing the faithful a peaceful Ramadan. Brutal regents throughout history have had few better assets at their disposal than the power of distraction and public posturing. If you can mislead your subjects with one hand, it’s easier to commit murder with the other. It’s just that these days, the first hand is holding a smartphone.
Cecil and Harambe. The names circulate in the public consciousness like those of beloved celebrity icons or fallen heroes, or street names evoking particular histories that we might be in danger of forgetting.

Cecil the lion was named after Cecil Rhodes, one of the most brutally racist imperialists ever to roam the planet. In July of 2015, Cecil was lured away from Zimbabwe’s Hwange Game Reserve and shot for sport by Walter James Palmer, an American dentist and hunting enthusiast. International outrage over Cecil’s death was instant and long-lasting, resulting in the creation of laws banning or curtailing trophy game hunting.

Harambe was a 17-year old lowland gorilla, also born and raised in captivity. He was shot to death by zookeepers in May 2016 when a three-year-old wandered into his enclosure. The gorilla had supposedly showed signs that he might prove harmful to the child, after dragging the boy through the water. The shooting provoked a public furor; a petition signed by over 500,000 insisted that the child’s family be prosecuted for negligence.

When such deaths and stories publicly erupt, they reveal more about the place of animals in human social relations than they do about the actual animals themselves. The culture relentlessly anthropomorphizes them, granting them names and imbuing them with human qualities in order to render them more sympathetic, more deserving of our attention and sympathy.

But such love for animals is profoundly selective. Only certain classes of relatable animals, ones bearing endearing names, are empathized with. Consider, in contrast, the fate of countless and nameless pit bulls.

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a review of **Pit Bull: The Battle Over an American Icon**
by Bronwyn Dickey, Knopf, 352pp, $26.95
Pit bulls have long been the bogey dogs of America, subject to harassment and torture because of the unwar- ranted fears about them. Few breeds have been as demonized, though a persistent public relations effort on the part of pit bulls’ fervent supporters may slowly be causing a shift in the tide of opinion. Pit bulls even continue to be exterminated as part of pre-emptive measures designed to protect the public. Bronwyn Dickey’s new book, *Pit Bull: The Battle over an American Icon*, reproduces a photograph of pit bulls euthanized in Kansas. There are no names attached to the photograph, no individual dogs here, only a dogpile, a small mountain of canine carcasses seemingly thrown casually atop one another, heads and paws facing in different directions.

The laws surrounding pit bulls are as vicious as the dogs’ supposed reputation. Out of all breeds, pit bulls are the most likely to be subject to Breed Specific Legislation (BSL) and they have been cruelly and mercilessly killed by irate neighbors and police. American police have become notorious for their practice of routinely executing dogs when entering houses under search warrants, and an inner-city pit bull owner cannot expect to see their dog survive any such encounter with police. There are few legal remedies available when police shoot dogs, and the Internet is full of disturbing, heartbreaking testimonies from bereaved owners who have seen their pets gunned down before their eyes.

Importantly, there is no such thing as a pit bull “breed” to begin with. There are several different breeds of dogs that are broadly defined as such, including the English bulldog, a short-legged, slobbering animal that was once literally bred to fight and corrall bulls but is now light years away from its long-legged, active ancestor. No one could possibly look at a contemporary bulldog and imagine it as a vicious hunter. (These days they give off more of an “asthmatic Winston Churchill” vibe.)

One of the most prominent myths about pit bulls is that they have special locking jaws and that, once they’ve sunk their teeth into flesh, they cannot be dislodged without either thrusting a rod between their teeth or killing them. This is not the case, as can be deduced by both common sense and a glance at the skull of any pit bull. Another myth is that these demon jaws can exert pressure up to 740 pounds of pressure per square inch. This, too, is false.

As a result of such attitudes, pit bulls can essentially be hunted down at will, and their owners suffer from various forms of stigma. BSL means that people with pit bulls or other dogs defined as dangerous breeds cannot rent in many neighborhoods and are compelled to find housing in poorer and often more precarious areas. In 2012, a Maryland court ruled that pit bulls, unlike other dogs, were “inherently” dangerous, thus increasing the owners’ liability for their acts. (The court’s decision was later undone by the state legislature.)

It wasn’t always like this. Fans of vintage television may be familiar with Pete the Pup, the pit bull with a ring around his right eye who became a star on the show *Little Rascals*. Then there was “Stubby” (widely held to be a pit bull), who served with the Twenty-Sixth Yankee Division and played an active role with American troops as they traveled to fight alongside the French in 1917. Stubby even reportedly “took” his own German prisoner of war.

Dickey’s book explores how the pit bull went from being a beloved American icon to a much despised demon dog, subject to extermination at will. The shift in attitudes towards pit bulls reveals much about American society. Dickey’s assiduously researched book takes us through the creation of the breed, from its earlier place as a stalwart companion to war heroes (and, indeed, even as a war hero itself), through the 19th century when they were deployed in New York City’s notorious dog fighting rings.

In the 20th century, the 1970s witnessed the swift and precipitous decline of modern cities. As America’s urban areas struggled, poorer residents, often Latino and Black, came to depend on pit bulls, which were an affordable means of receiving protection and companionship.

The media vilification of pit bulls soon followed. Dickey suggests that the creation of the 24-hours news cycle, inaugurated by CNN in 1980, represented a turning point. The rise of cable television created a salacious interest in “ghetto” and “thug” stories, and the news networks loved to report on the viciousness of urban “animals” both canine and human. A July 1987 *Sports Illustrated* story about pit bulls featured a cover illustration of the dog snarling, open-mouthed, with fangs on full display. The title in large print and all caps: “BEWARE OF THIS DOG.” During this time, at the height of the Drug War, the media similarly stigmatized Latino and Black men. They were treated as toxic carriers of drug addiction and social dysfunction, much as rats and other animals have been cast as sources of disease.

The link made between savage beasts or dangerous animals and black humans is as old as the history of enslavement. As the actor Michael B. Jordan memorably phrased it: “Black males, we are America’s pit bull. We’re labeled vicious, inhuman, and left to die on the street.” (Jordan made the comment in a promotional interview for the film *Fruitvale Station*, in which he played Oscar Grant. Grant was an Oakland resident fatally shot by transit police, in a killing that anti-police brutality activists have described as an execution, and proof that black lives in America are treated as expendable.)

The history of relations between African Americans and dogs is complex. On plantations, dogs were trained to track and hunt runaway slaves, a practice that continued in the Southern use of police dogs against civil rights activists. Yet slaves also forged loving relationships with the animals. Dickey writes about Charles Ball, a slave “who escaped from a South Carolina plantation around 1812” and for whom “the love of a dog provided the only sense of comfort he knew.” Ball named his beloved dog Trueman but had to leave him behind during his final escape, knowing that the dog’s bark might give him away. In a poignant section of his memoirs, he wrote, “I recollected that he had always been ready to lay down his life for me; that when I was tied and bound to the tree to be whipped, they were forced to compel me to order my dog to be quiet, to prevent him from attacking my executioner in my defense.”

But one cannot tell the story of relations between African Americans and animals without noting the ways in which black people have been consistently dehumanized themselves. In a slave economy, Africans were treated not just as exploited labor, but as display
items, suitable for zoos. Their bodies were presented as evidence that they were closer to baser animals like apes. Hundreds of year of racial pseudoscience, which lasted long after slavery’s abolition, offered supposed proof that they were less evolved than their white rulers and owners.

Black people were quite literally exhibited as curios and specimens. The most notorious example may be that of Saartje Baartman, born in South Africa in 1789 and sold in her twenties to two white men who took her around the world and put her on public view. They forced her to endure throngs of crowds who came to see and even poke the “Hotentot Venus,” endowed with larger buttocks and, so the rumor went, a more extensive labia than white women. Baartmen would die penniless in Paris only a few years later, and her genitals, brain, and skeleton could be viewed in the Museum of Man till the 1970s. Her remains were only returned to her homeland and buried in 2002.

Baartman was no anomaly. Dickey recounts the story of the Congolese pygmy Ota Benga who, in 1906, was exhibited alongside an orangutan trained to do tricks in the Bronx Zoo. The New York Times weighed in that Benga was part of “a race that scientists do not rate high on the human scale” adding that “it is probably a good thing that Benga doesn’t think very deeply.” Desperate and unable to return to his home, Benga committed suicide in 1916.

Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution were used to further dehumanize entire races of people, put on display or discussed, as Baartman and Benga were, as proof of “living links” between apes and men.

That dehumanization, the belief that black, brown, and other non-white people are lesser beings, persists today, especially evident in the continuing series of police brutality incidents that break out with depressing regularity in the United States. When Rodney King was beaten almost to death in Los Angeles, police officers told of their fear that he was under the effects of Phencyclidine (PCP). The same justification was heard in Chicago after the police killing of Laquan MacDonald, a 17-year-old shot sixteen times while walking down the street. Since MacDonald had drugs in his system, he had become that deadlast of creatures, the frenzied black male, capable of anything. In public discourse, a black man killed by police is inevitably cited or described as someone possessed by PCP, and thus possessed by forces beyond his control, forces which make him so lethal that only death will quell the danger to those around him.

We might recall the myth of pit bulls and their interlocking jaws.

The concepts of breed, blood, and race have served to determine what constitutes the human and the non-human...

The notions surrounding classification made it easy to attest that the “race” of pit bulls was inherently unstable, with persistent breed characteristics that can never diminish. To a degree, of course, dogs can be bred to indicate some characteristics more than others. Australian shepherd dogs will herd their humans if they’re not put to work in actual fields. But as Dickey shows in an entire chapter devoted to the issue, a “breed” has to be carefully maintained—its defining features can literally disappear in the matter of just a few generations of puppies. And, as the animal theorist Colin Dayan points out, “There is no pit bull gene for danger.”

In fact, Dickey’s research indicates that most of the animals supposedly involved vicious killings or injuries were not even actual pit bulls. Instead, the simple fact of an attack caused the animal to be identified as a pit bull, with even Golden Retrievers labeled as such. In the tautology established around pit bulls, all pit bulls are dangerous dogs and all dangerous dogs are pit bulls.

African Americans are subjected to the same axiomatic reasoning, even though the races of humans are just as indeterminate. Racial categories are a fluid mess, impossible to define with any precision. But the scientific reality, that race is far more social than biological, has done nothing to prevent confident pronouncements on the essential characteristics of racial groups. And it has certainly never kept African American men from being treated as a dangerous breed, in need of locking up.

The racist attitude connecting dogs and African Americans was never clearer than in the case of Michael Vick. 2007 saw the explosive revelation that Vick, star quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, had been running a dogfighting ring out of his home in Virginia. The news shocked and horrified his fans and the general public. Reports emerged that several dogs from his “Bad Newz Kennels” had been “drowned, hanged, electrocuted, and beaten to death in addition to the daily pain and suffering they experienced as victims of dogfighting.” Vick himself had killed several of them.

Vick served twenty-three months of a three-year sentence, and after his release faced a massive public backlash. He found himself a pariah. No matter how many apologies Vick delivered, scant forgiveness was on display.

But as Dickey points out, none of the athlete’s public denounc-
ers seemed to recall that in 1969, Doug Atkins, the white defensive end of the Saints, openly admitted to using his pit bull Rebel in dogfights. Atkins was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1982.

Vick, by contrast with Atkins, was not just denounced, but was relentlessly dehumanized. Dickey writes:

 Critics called for Vick to be “neutered,” electrocuted, or torn apart by dogs. Cartoonists portrayed him as an animal. PETA demanded that he receive a brain scan to test for possibly psychopathy before being allowed to return to football. Threats were made against Vick’s family members, specifically his children. In 2010, the conservative television commentator Tucker Carlson said, “I’m a Christian, I’ve made mistakes myself, I believe fervently in second chances, but Michael Vick killed dogs, and he did [it] in a heartless and cruel way. And I think personally he should have been executed for that. He wasn’t.”

The brutal language used to denounce Vick was widespread, legitimized by the fact that it was in defense of dogs. As Jane Berkey, founder of the Animal Farm Foundation put it to Dickey, “Finally, the public hated something worse than it hated pit bulls, and that was Michael Vick.”

Ironically, the Vick revelations created a massive turnaround in the public perception of pit bulls. Vick was ordered to pay $1 million for the long-term care of forty-nine dogs seized from his property. Eventually, according to reports, all but two were accepted by shelters and homes around the country, and they were referred to as the “Vicktory Dogs.” Sports Illustrated ran a story about the dogs, featuring one of the rescued animals on the cover.

Today, after a massive public relations campaign waged by Berkey and others, pit bulls are attaining a nearly mythical image, one completely opposite to their former reputation. They have been termed “nanny dogs” for their temperament and ability to get along with children. On its website, the online resource site Pit Bull Rescue Central lists figures like Helen Keller and Fred Astaire as notable owners of the dogs. All of the famous owners on the list are white. The implication is simple: Who is the typical pit bull owner? Not Michael Vick. The pit bull’s redemption in the public mind directly coincided with its transition from a dangerous “black” dog to a lovable “white” dog. Michael Vick, by contrast, was an animal and a savage, who deserved to be put down.

Dickey is relentless in exposing the brutal racism and classism at the heart of the pit bull scare. For that reason alone, her book is an invaluable resource for those who want and need a counter-narrative to the usual stereotyping of animals. Pit Bull is an important study of how one animal and its context can reveal everything about the link between race, class, and “animality.”

Yet, as much as it presents necessary histories and analyses, Pit Bull works less as a book than a collection of usually interesting essays. Dickey is clearly a superb journalist, but there’s a difference between writing a series of journalistic pieces and writing a unified book on a theme. As a monograph on pit bulls, this work lacks an animating principle and often lags in tempo. Dickey is often too caught up in her factual reporting to keep her eye on the larger coherence of the book.

To her credit, Dickey does not take the easy way out by concluding her book with details on happy pit bull owners. Instead, she focuses on organizations like Pets for Life, which provides pet care supplies and veterinary services to those who cannot afford to keep their dogs, even though they depend on their animals as a lifeline of love and support. Rather than romanticizing pit bulls as “nanny dogs” in accordance with the current trend, Dickey writes simply that:

“They are no more or less deserving of good homes. They didn’t cause society’s ills, nor can their redemption—real or imagined—solve them. More important, there never was a ‘pit bull problem.’ What happened to these animals was a byproduct of human fears, and what humans feared was one another.”

Meanwhile, the question of race flies to the surface every time animals return to public discussion. The death of Harambe, the lowland mountain gorilla, provoked an outcry against the child’s family that was distinctly racialized. Media reports demonized the African American family of the child, focusing on the father’s previous history with drugs. Some argued that the mother’s irresponsibility proved that all her other children were being neglected at home. Over 500,000 petitioners insisted that, surely, the mother’s behavior was negligent, and that she should face criminal charges. (Apparently none of the petitioners had ever actually lived with toddlers; preventing a truly determined preschooler from clambering into the gorilla enclosure would require superhuman vigilance.)

About a month later, a white two-year-old, Lane Graves, waded into waters at Orlando’s Walt Disney and, while his horrified parents tried to save him, was drowned by an alligator who made off with the body (it was eventually recovered). In that case, there was never any question of the parents having charges filed against them for negligence. Instead, the nation mourned. Five alligators were killed in the hunt for the one that had drowned the child. But no Facebook groups sprang up to pay tribute to the alligators.

The impulse to quickly separate black parents from their children in order to provide them with supposedly better homes has historical roots, as Dorothy Robertson demonstrates in her book, Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare. Robertson critiques the foster care system that has consistently wrested black children away from their parents and funneled them towards white adoptive or foster parents. In an eerie echo of this process, pit bull and animal owners left bereft by Katrina, many of whom refused to leave their pets in the face of disaster, watched as animal rescue organizations swooped in and took away their beloved companions. Attorney Steve Wise, quoted by Dickey, put it bluntly: “The message is, ‘You’re poor, and we can take care of these dogs a lot better than you can.’” It doesn’t take much to stir up the public perception that African Americans are irresponsible and uncivilized.

Of course, there are other explanations for the differing treatment of Harambe’s death versus that of the alligators. One is simply that alligators, lacking in any cuddly features, rank lower than gorillas on the likeability scale for humans. But Harambe’s death and the outrage that surrounded it also reflected a difference between the value placed on animal lives versus black lives. Once, apes were seen as contiguous to Africans and other non-white people, hence the placement of the orangutan next to Ota Benga. But apes are now anthropomorphized, and many would rather have seen the child die than the gorilla.

Contrary to previous mythology, apes are no longer signifiers of blackness. They are treated with compassion and dignity, recognized for their intelligence and sophistication. Yet no such transformation has occurred in the treatment of race for humans. Black bodies are still shot at will and caged by the hundreds of thousands. Black people continue to be treated as animals even as animals have become human.

The redemption of the pit bull shows that animals have finally transcended race. It is only black humans who must continue to bear its burden.
you should be terrified that people who like
HAMILTON run our country...

by Alex Nichols
In 2012, Captain Dan and his Scurvy Crew, a four-man hip-hop ensemble trying to cement "pirate rap" as a tenable subgenre, appeared on America's Got Talent. The quartet had clearly put some thought, or at least effort, into the act; their pirate costumes might even have passed historical muster were it not for the leftmost crewmember's Ray-Bans and Dan's meticulously groomed chinstrap beard.

The routine itself went precisely in the direction one might have expected:

Captain Dan: When I say yo, you say ho. Yo!

Scurvy Crew: Ho!

Captain Dan: Yo!

Scurvy Crew: Ho!

The group managed to rattle off two-and-a-half stilted lines before the judges began sounding their buzzers. Howard Stern was the last to give them the red "X," preferring to let the audience's boos come to a crescendo before he cut the Scurvy Crew off. Stern seemed to take great pleasure in calling the group "stupid," "moronic," "idiotic," and "pathetic" on a national stage (Captain Dan grimaced through his humiliating dressing-down while his bandmates laughed it off, exposing a gap in emotional investment in the project between captain and crew, one that likely led to some intra-group tension during the post-show commiseration drinks).

Howie Mandel: They have restaurants like this—like Medieval Times—where you go and you get a pirates thing and you get a chicken dinner. We didn't get a chicken dinner with this.

In 2012, everyone (save for Captain Dan himself, along with people whose tastes range from "music from video games" to "music about video games") was in agreement that performing high-school-history-project rap in Colonial Williamsburg garb was culturally unconscionable. Right?

Wrong. The world in which we live now includes Hamilton, a wildly successful "hip-hop musical" about the first Secretary of the Treasury of the United States of America.

Now, perhaps the America's Got Talent audience isn't an accurate sample of the American population as a whole. Perhaps they actually thought "when I say yo, you say ho" was clever, but were directed to boo by an off-screen neon sign. Or perhaps something happened in the past four years that made everyone really stupid.

But what if the American public's taste hasn't devolved? What if Hamilton's success is the result of something else altogether?

Brian Eno once said that the Velvet Underground's debut album only sold a few thousand copies, but everyone who bought it started a band. The same principle likely applies to Hamilton: only a few thousand people could afford to see it, but everyone who did happened to work for a prominent New York/D.C. publication.

The media gushing over Hamilton has been downright torrential. "I am loath to tell people to mortgage their houses and lease their children to acquire tickets to a hit Broadway show," wrote Ben Brantley of the New York Times. "But Hamilton... might just about be worth it."

The hyperbolic headlines poured forth unceasingly: "Is Hamilton the Musical the Most Addicting Album Ever?" "Hamilton is the most important musical of our time." "Hamilton Haters Are Why We Can't Have Nice Things." The media then got high on their own supply, diagnosing all of America with a harrowing ailment called "Hamilton-mania." The work was "astonishing," "sublime," the "cultural event of our time." Clarence Page of the Chicago Tribune said the musical was "even better than the hype." Given the tenor of the hype, one can only imagine the pure, overpowering ecstasy that must comprise the Hamilton-viewing experience. The musical even somehow won a Pulitzer Prize this year, alongside Nicholas Kristof and that book by Ta-Nehisi Coates you bought but never read.

One of the publications to enter swooning raptures over Hamilton was BuzzFeed, which called it the smash musical "that everyone you know has been quoting for months." (Literally nobody has ever quoted Hamilton in my presence.) BuzzFeed's workplace obsession with the
musical led to the birthing of the phrase “BuzzFeed Hamilton Slack.” That three-word monstrosity, incomprehensible to anyone outside the narrowest circle of listicle-churning media elites,* describes a room on the corporate messaging platform “Slack” used exclusively by BuzzFeed employees to discuss Hamilton. J.R.R. Tolkien said that “cellar door” was the more beautiful phonetic phrase the English language could produce. “BuzzFeed Hamilton Slack,” by contrast, may be the most repellent arrangement of words in any tongue.

Those of us unfortunate enough not to work media jobs can never be privy to what goes on in a “BuzzFeed Hamilton Slack.” But the Twitter emissions of the Slack’s denizens suggest a swirl into which no man should tread. A tellingly ominous and thoroughly representative Tweet: “When the BuzzFeed Hamilton slack room has a heated debate about which Hogwarts houses the characters belong to” —@Arielle07

“NERDcore” music (Wikipedia: “a genre of hip hop music characterized by themes and subject matter considered to be of general interest to nerds”) has always had trouble getting off the ground. The “first lady of nerdcore,” rapper MC Router (responsible for the song “Trekkie Pride”), never achieved the critical success for which she had seemed destined, instead ending up on the Dr. Phil show after an acrimonious dispute with her family over her unexpected conversion to Islam. Similarly, the YouTube series “Epic Rap Battles of History,” however numerous its subscribers may have been, has consistently been unjustly robbed of the Pulitzer. Now, finally, nerd rap has apparently found in Hamilton its own Sgt. Pepper, a lofty, expansive work that wins the hearts and minds of previously skeptical elite critics.

One should have no doubt that “expensively-staged nerdcore” is a perfectly accurate, even generous description of Hamilton. Doubters need only examine a brief lyrical snippet. Consider this, from “The Election of 1800”:

**Madison: It’s a tie!**
**Jefferson: It’s up to the delegates!**
**Jefferson/Madison: It’s up to Hamilton!**
**Hamilton: Yo.**
The people are asking to hear my voice.
For the country is facing a difficult choice.
And if you were to ask me who I’d promote...
Jefferson has my vote.

Perhaps marginally less embarrassing than “when I say yo, you say ho.” But only ever so marginally.

One could question the fairness of appraising a musical before putting one’s self through its full three-hour theatrical experience. But if nobody could criticize Hamilton without having seen it, then nobody could criticize Hamilton. One of the strangest aspects of the whole “Hamiltonmania” public relations spectacle is that hardly anyone in the country has actually attended the musical to begin with. The show has been exclusive to Broadway and spent most of its run completely sold out, seemingly playing to an audience comprised entirely of people who write breathless BuzzFeed headlines. (Fortunately, when you can get off the waitlist it only costs $1,200 a ticket—so long as you can stand bad seats!) Hamilton is the “nation-wide sensation” that only .001% of the nation has even witnessed.

There’s something revealing in the disjunction between Hamilton’s popularity in the world of online media and Hamilton’s popularity in the world of actual human persons. After all, here we have a cultural product whose appeal essentially consists of a broad coalition of the worst people in America: New York Times writers, 15-year-olds who aspire to answer the phone in Chuck Schumer’s office, people who want to get into steampunk but have a copper sensitivity, and “wonks.” Yet because a large fraction of these people are elite taste-makers, Hamilton becomes a topic of disproportionate interest, discussed at unendurable length in The New Yorker and Slate and The New York Times Magazine, yet totally inaccessible to anyone besides the writers and members of their close social networks. When The New Yorker writes about a book that nobody in America wants to read, at least they could theoretically go out and purchase it. But Hamilton theatergoing is solely the provenance of Hamilton thinkpiece-writers. The endless swirl of online Hamilton-buzz shows the comical extreme of cultural insularity in the New York and D.C. media. The “cultural event of our time” is totally unknown to nearly all who actually live in our time.

Given that Hamilton is essentially Captain Dan with an American Studies minor, one might wonder how it became so inordinately adored by the blathering class. How did a ten-million-dollar 8th Grade U.S. History skit become “the great work of art of the 21st century” (as the New Yorker’s Adam Gopnik says those in his circle have been calling it)?

To judge from the reviews, most of the appeal seems to rest with the forced diversity of its cast and the novelty concept of a “hip-hop musical.” Those who write about Hamilton often dwell primarily on its “groundbreaking” use of rap and its “bold” choice to cast an assemblage of black, Asian, and Latino actors as the Founding Fathers. Indeed, Hamilton exists more as a corporate HR department’s wet dream than as a biographical work.

The most obvious historical aberration is the portrayal of Washington and Jefferson as black men, a somewhat audacious choice given that both men are strongly associated with owning, and in the case of the latter, raping and impregnating slaves. Changing the races allows these men to appear far more sympathetic than they would otherwise be. Hamilton creator Lin-Manuel Miranda says he did this intentionally, to make the cast “look like America today,” and that having black actors play the roles “allow[s] you to leave whatever cultural baggage you have about the founding fathers at the door.” (“Cultural baggage” is an odd way of describing “feeling discomfort at warm portrayals of slaveowners.”) Thus Hamilton’s superficial diversity lets its almost entirely white audience feel good about watching it: no guilt for seeing dead white men in a positive light required. Now,

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*A listicle is a portmanteau of “list” and “article,” used to describe such pieces of internet journalism as “10 Cats Who Don’t Know What They’re Wearing,” or, in this case, “19 Things You’ll Only Understand If You’re A Hamilton Fan.”*
“MAMA SAID I SHOULDN’T SUBSCRIBE TO CURRENT AFFAIRS...

...BUT MAMA SAYS A LOT OF THINGS.”
Miranda did consider adding a slavery number. “write nonwhite people into the story.” As historians have pointed out, there were plenty of nonwhite people around at the time, people who already had fully-de of these people appears in the play. As some have quietly noted, the vast majority of African American cast characters in this play.” (Although Jede Hemings gets a brief shout-out.)

Besides, you don’t actually need to “write nonwhite people into the story.” As historians have pointed out, there were plenty of nonwhite people around at the time, people who already had fully-developed stories and identities. But none of these people appears in the play. As some have quietly noted, the vast majority of African American cast members simply portray nameless dancing founders in breeches and cravats, and “not a single enslaved or free person of color exists as a character in this play.” (Although Jefferson’s slave and mistress Sally Hemings gets a brief shout-out.)

Slavery is left out of the play almost completely. Historian Lyra Monteiro observes that “Unless one listens carefully to the lyrics—which do mention slavery a handful of times—one could easily assume that slavery did not exist in this world.” The foundation of the 18th century economic system, the vicious practice that defined the lives of countless black men and women, is confined to the odd lyrical flourish here and there.

Miranda did consider adding a slavery number. But he cut it from the show, as he explains: There was a rap battle about slavery, where it was Hamilton and Jefferson and Madison knocking it from all sides of the issue. Jefferson being like, “Hey, I wrote about this, and no one wanted to touch it!” And Hamilton being very self-righteous, like, “You’re having an affair with one of your slaves!” And Madison hits him with a “You want to talk about affairs? And in the end, no one does anything. Which is what happened in reality! So we realized we were bringing our show to a halt on something that none of them really did enough on.

Miranda found that by trying to write a song about his main characters’ attitudes toward slavery, he ran into the inconvenient fact that all of them willfully tolerated or participated in it. That made it difficult to square with the upbeat portrayals he was going for, and so slavery had to go. Besides, dwelling on it could “bring the show to a halt.” And as cast member Christopher Jackson, who plays George Washington, notes: “The Broadway audience doesn’t like to be preached to.” Who would want to spoil the fun?

Instead, Hamilton’s Hamilton is what Slate called simply “lovable—a product of the play’s humanizing focus on Hamilton’s vulnerabilities and ambitions.” The play avoids depicting his unabashed elitism and more repellent personal characteristics. And in the brief references that are made to slavery, the play even generously portrays Hamilton as far more committed to the cause of freedom than he actually was. In this way, Hamilton carefully makes sure its audience is neither challenged nor comforted, and can leave the theater without having to confront any unpleasant truths.

Just as Hamilton ducks the question of slavery, much of the actual substance of Alexander Hamilton’s politics is ignored, in favor of a story that stresses his origins as a Horatio Alger immigrant and his rivalry with Aaron Burr. But while Hamilton may have favored opening America’s doors to immigration, he also proposed a degree of economic protectionism that would terrify today’s free market establishment.

Hamilton believed that free trade was never equal, and worried about the ability of European manufacturers (who got a head start on the Industrial Revolution) to sell goods at lower prices than their American counterparts. In Hamilton’s 1791 Report on Manufactures, he spoke of the harms to American industry that came with our reliance on products from overseas. The Report sheds light on many of the concerns Americans in the 21st century have about outsourcing, sweatshops, and the increasing trade deficit, albeit in a different context. Hamilton said that for the U.S., “constant and increasing necessity, on their part, for the commodities of Europe, and only a partial and occasional demand for their own, in return, could not but expose them to a state of impoverishment, compared with the opulence to which their political and natural advantages authorise them to aspire.” For Hamilton, the solution was high tariffs on imports of manufactured goods, and intensive government intervention in the economy. The prohibitive importation costs imposed by tariffs would allow newer American
manufacturers to undersell Europe’s established industrial framework, leading to an increase in non-agricultural employment. As he wrote: “all the duties imposed on imported articles… wear a beneficent aspect towards the manufacturers of the country.”

Does any of this sound familiar? It certainly went unmentioned at the White House, where a custom performance of Hamilton was held for the Obamas. The livestreamed presidential Hamilton spectacular at one point featured Obama and Miranda performing historically-themed freestyle rap in the Rose Garden.

The Obamas have been supporters of Hamilton since its embryonic days as the “Hamilton Mixtape song cycle.” By the time the fully-fledged musical arrived in Washington, Michelle Obama called it the “best piece of art in any form that I have ever seen in my life,” raising disquieting questions about the level of cultural exposure offered in the Princeton undergraduate curriculum.

In introducing the White House performance, Barack Obama gave an effusive speech worthy of the Buzz-Feed Hamilton Slack:

[Miranda] identified a quintessentially American story in the character of Hamilton—a striving immigrant who escaped poverty, made his way to the New World, climbed to the top by sheer force of will and pluck and determination… And in the Hamilton that Lin-Manuel and his incredible cast and crew bring to life—a man who is “just like his country, young, scrappy, and hungry”—we recognize the improbable story of America, and the spirit that has sustained our nation for over 240 years… In this telling, rap is the language of revolution. Hip-hop is the backbeat. … And with a cast as diverse as America itself, including the outstandingly talented women—(applause)—the show reminds us that this nation was built by more than just a few great men—and that it is an inheritance that belongs to all of us.

Strangely enough, President Obama failed to mention anything Alexander Hamilton actually did during his long career in American politics, perhaps because the Obama Administration’s unwavering support of free trade and the tariff-easing Trans-Pacific Partnership goes against everything Hamilton believed. Instead, Obama’s Hamilton speech stresses just two takeaways from the musical: that America is a place where the poor (through “sheer force of will” and little else) can rise to prominence, and that Hamilton has diversity in it. (Plus it contains hip-hop, an edgy, up-and-coming genre with only 37 years of mainstream exposure.)

The Obamas were not the only members of the political establishment to come down with a gassy case of Hamiltonomania. Nearly every figure in D.C. has apparently been to see the show; in many cases being invited for a warm backstage schmooze with Miranda. Biden saw it. Mitt Romney saw it. The Bush daughters saw it. Rahm Emanuel saw it the day after the Chicago teachers’ strike over budget cuts and school closures. Hillary Clinton went to see the musical in the evening after having been interviewed by the FBI in the morning. The Clinton campaign has also been fundraising by hawking Hamilton tickets; for $100,000 you can watch a performance alongside Clinton herself.

Unsurprisingly, the New York Times reports that “conservatives were particularly smitten” with Hamilton. “Fabulous show,” tweeted Rupert Murdoch, calling it “historically accurate.” Obama concluded that “I’m pretty sure this is the only thing that Dick Cheney and I have agreed on—during my entire political career.” (That is, of course false.

Other points of agreement include drone strikes, Guantanamo, the NSA, and mass deportation.)

The conservative-liberal D.C. consensus on Hamilton makes perfect sense. The musical flatters both right and left sensibilities. Conservatives get to see their beloved Founding Fathers exonerated for their horrendous crimes, and liberals get to have nationalism packaged in a feel-good multicultural form. The more troubling questions about the country’s origins are instantly vanished, as an era built on racist forced

**An era built on racist forced labor is transformed into a colorful, culturally progressive, and politically unobjectionable extravaganza.**

As the director of the Hamilton theater said, “It has liberated a lot of people who might feel ambivalent about the American experiment to feel patriotic” “Ambivalence,” here, means being bothered by the country’s collective idol-worship of men who participated in the slave trade, one of the greatest crimes in human history. To be “liberated” from this means never having to think about it.

In that respect, Hamilton probably is the “musical of the Obama era,” as The New Yorker called it. Contemporary progressivism has come to mean papering over material inequality with representational diversity. The president will continue to expand the national security state at the same rate as his predecessor, but at least he will be black. Predatory lending will drain the wealth from African American communities, but the board of Goldman Sachs will have several black members. Inequality will be rampant and worsening, but the 1% will at least “look like America.” The actual racial injustices of our time will continue unabated, but the power structure will be diversified so that nobody feels quite so bad about it. Hamilton is simply this tendency’s cultural-historical equivalent; instead of worrying ourselves about the brutal origins of the American state, and the lasting economic effects of those early inequities, we can simply turn the Founding Fathers black and enjoy the show.

Kings George I and II of England could barely speak intelligible English and spent more time dealing with their own failed sons than ruling the Empire—but they gave patronage to Handel. Ludwig II of Bavaria was believed to be insane and went into debt compulsively building castles—but he gave patronage to Wagner. Barack Obama deported more immigrants than any other president and expanded the drone program in order to kill almost 3,500 people—but he gave patronage to a neoliberal nerdcore musical. God bless this great land. ✨
| Crook County  
Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve  
Stanford University Press, $24.00 |
| The Closing of the Liberal Mind  
Kim R. Holmes  
Encounter Books, $25.99 |
| False Choices  
edited by Liza Featherstone  
Verso, $14.95 |
| The Fix  
Jonathan Tepperman  
Penguin, $28.00 |

**This book could have been useful, informative, and topical.** Unfortunately, it was written by a sociologist. The author set out to uncover whether racism has an impact on American courts, only to find out (to her great horror and surprise) that racism has an impact on American courts. Her extensive observations, made over several years in various parts of the Chicago criminal court system, offer rich factual material for understanding the U.S.’s depressing system of bureaucratic justice. The bits where people other than the author are quoted are often well-written. But these days, who does? It’s an awful lot of fun to jeer at Yale undergrads demanding safe spaces (surer than Yale?) or Oberlin sophomores insisting that the dining hall Vietnamese food is “cultural appropriation.” Yet amusing as it may be to watch the children of privilege telling people to check their privilege, it’s also fish-in-a-barrel stuff. There’s only one thing more smug than a 19-year-old liberal arts student. But a decade in graduate school has hideously led the author’s prose style (we get digressions on Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus”) and the result is essentially a sociology thesis super-glued to a Facebook rant.

**Kim Holmes does not like the campus left.** But these days, who does? It’s an awful lot of fun to jeer at Yale undergrads demanding safe spaces (surer than Yale?) or Oberlin sophomores insisting that the dining hall Vietnamese food is “cultural appropriation.” Yet amusing as it may be to watch the children of privilege telling people to check their privilege, it’s also fish-in-a-barrel stuff. There’s only one thing more smug than a campus progressive, and it’s a sneering conservative who sees objections to racism as part of some kind of grand erosion in the Great Traditions of Western Thought. Allan Bloom wrote this book in 1987. Kim Holmes has written it again, worse. Fellas, go back to reading political philosophy. Meanwhile, in assembling False Choices, Liza Feathers has collected work from some of the most exciting and talented feminist writers in the country. This book is smart, fun, and iconoclastic. (Chapter One, by Kathleen Greer, is titled “Hillary Clinton, Economic Populist: Are You Fucking Kidding Me?”) It devastatingly punctures the liberal myth that Hillary Clinton is a reliable fighter on behalf of women; certainly that’s not true for the women of Honduras, or those in America’s prisons. False Choices should finally (but won’t) kill the nasty myth spread by Twitter-dwelling Clintonites that strong critiques of Hillary emanate from a cabal of misogynistic “Bernie Bros.” The book’s contributors approach Hillary’s record from a number of different angles, but always with wit and verve. But the best thing about False Choices has nothing to do with its subject matter. The book is refreshing because it shows that thoughtful, independent left-wing feminist criticism is alive and well. The writers in False Choices are not jargon-laden in their prose or dogmatic in their politics; they are fundamentally concerned with writing well. False Choices proves that feminist political analysis need not be predictable or stodgy; it can be fun, vicious, and vibrant. The women whose essays comprise False Choices are worth reading on any subject. If only there was a magazine in which one could regularly find their work.

**Are we biased toward liking this book merely because it contains contributions from three Current Affairs writers?** Of course we are. But that is only because a book containing contributions from Current Affairs writers is certain to be excellent. In assembling False Choices, Liza Feathers has collected work from some of the most exciting and talented feminist writers in the country. This book is smart, fun, and iconoclastic. (Chapter One, by Kathleen Greer, is titled “Hillary Clinton, Economic Populist: Are You Fucking Kidding Me?”) It devastatingly punctures the liberal myth that Hillary Clinton is a reliable fighter on behalf of women; certainly that’s not true for the women of Honduras, or those in America’s prisons. False Choices should finally (but won’t) kill the nasty myth spread by Twitter-dwelling Clintonites that strong critiques of Hillary emanate from a cabal of misogynistic “Bernie Bros.” The book’s contributors approach Hillary’s record from a number of different angles, but always with wit and verve. But the best thing about False Choices has nothing to do with its subject matter. The book is refreshing because it shows that thoughtful, independent left-wing feminist criticism is alive and well. The writers in False Choices are not jargon-laden in their prose or dogmatic in their politics; they are fundamentally concerned with writing well. False Choices proves that feminist political analysis need not be predictable or stodgy; it can be fun, vicious, and vibrant. The women whose essays comprise False Choices are worth reading on any subject. If only there was a magazine in which one could regularly find their work.
QUICK FIXES
FOR VEXING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

THE ACADEMIC PROBLEM

Problem: Most contemporary academic work cannot be justified, yet academics continue to produce it.
Solution: Becoming a professor should carry a strong social stigma. Academic journals will require all submissions to include a "statement of relevance to the long-term interests of humankind." This will not require the author to justify their work as having some obvious narrow practical benefit, but will require the author to make at least a marginally persuasive case that there is some purpose to what she has done. "Knowledge for the sake of knowledge" is a tautology and will henceforth be prohibited.

THE PRISON PROBLEM

The country's universities have been widely mocked for acceding to student demands that "trigger warnings" be offered in courses containing objectionable content. It is our theory that this practice has been subject to derision not because the practice itself is silly (should students not be warned if they will see a film with a beheading in it?) but because the phrase "trigger warning" is ludicrous. If the warnings were simply called "content warnings," or a similarly non-silly name, the whole controversy might die.

THE BREXIT PROBLEM

Problem: The Brexit
Solution: The Brexit will be treated as if it never occurred.

THE MEN PROBLEM

Problem: Men
Solution: No more men

THE BIODIVERSITY PROBLEM

Problem: The various species cannot peaceably coexist.
Solution: A Congress of the Animals will be held, each species with its representative, and votes will be cast on which species should be made extinct based on how well they did or did not get along with the others. (No cats will be permitted to attend the Congress.)

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THE POLITICS PROBLEM

Problem: American politics is a shallow, vacuous spectacle.
Solution: A new media entity shall be founded, one that shall consider social problems with practicality and intelligence. Perhaps it will take the form of an attractively-designed print magazine.

THE LAVATORY PROBLEM

There has been a lot of controversy involving restrooms lately, emanating from some of the country's less reputable Carolinas. All of this bother about which gender of person can use which water closet is, we propose, unnecessary. The solution (as several lesser periodicals have pointed out) is architectural rather than political (though all political problems are to some degree architectural problems.) Instead of having restrooms divided by gender (as in the topmost diagram), we must move to a world of universal unisex restrooms (as in the bottom-most diagram). The key difference, which the eagle-eyed reader will have spotted, is that instead of "stalls," toilets themselves are housed in "rooms." The greater privacy of a full wall ensures no peeping.

THE ORGANS PROBLEM

Those who agree to be organ donors get served first at the DMV. People who do not are served only when there are no organ donors ahead of them. Complaints will result in the immediate removal and redistribution of complainant's organs.

THE CITY PLANNING PROBLEM

Any engineer or transportation official who constructs or rebuilds an urban road without accommodating pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit must walk the full length of whatever freeway bisects their town while listening to Jane Jacobs on audiobook.

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The Current Affairs Department of Social Research Wishes to Thank the Following Readers for their Contributions to Human Well-Being:

ROBERT COBBS AND NICHOLAS ARRIVO
Earlier this year, after Prince was found dead on the floor of an elevator in his Paisley Park recording studio, some strange headlines appeared through Google News. These included “Did The Chemtrail Flu Kill Prince?” and “Special Report: Was Prince Murdered By Illuminati Record Execs?” These articles suggested that Prince had not been killed by excessive indulgence in opiates, as was the default hypothesis at the time and as the autopsy would eventually confirm. Instead, Prince’s death was allegedly related to “chemtrails,” airborne chemical agents released by planes as part of a global conspiracy.

In fact, the singer himself had been a believer in the sinister influence of “chemtrails.” On the Tavis Smiley Show, Prince explained:

“You know, when I was a kid I used to see these trails in the sky all the time and ‘Oh that’s cool—a jet just went over.’ And then you started to see whole bunch of them and next thing you know everybody in your neighborhood was fighting and arguing and you didn’t know why.”

When Prince died suddenly at the age of 57, some believed the late star was assassinated for speaking out. Others theorized, as swivel-eyed Infowars editor Alex Jones suggested to his two million radio listeners, that he was killed by a “weaponized flu” caused by the trails.

To believers, the “chemtrail” is like any ordinary plane condensation trail (or “contrail”) in the sky, but one with suspiciously long-lasting features. Chemtrails, they say, persist for as many as 12 hours, and contain a mixture of ominous particulates such as aluminium, pathogens, and even desiccated blood. To denizens of online chemtrail forums, the trails have all manner of sinister purposes. Believers speculate that the trails may be part of a secret geo-engineering project involving solar radiation management or weather modification. Some on chemtrail forums also insist they have seen changes in the moon’s orbit, or claim to possess information that WiFi frequencies could be changing our DNA. They suspect some kind of government attempt at either social manipulation, human population control, or biological/chemical warfare (perhaps even all three). One frequenter of the GeoEngineeringWatch site writes:

“They are altering the weather and sunlight to cause a seemingly “natural” global famine to depopulate human beings to numbers of their choosing. They are committing perpetrated democide, depopulating exactly as they said they would do, and they are using “global warming” as their cover story for mass murder.”

Some believe, as Prince evidently did, that the trails are causing illnesses and social problems, part of a plot to spread disease in order to create future markets for powerful pharmaceutical corporations. A few claim to have acquired the symptoms of “Morgellon’s disease,” a delusional non-ailment in which a person believes herself to be infested with insects, parasites or fibers. Chemtrail forum-dwellers call the whole phenomenon a part of “the largest crime against humanity in human history.”

It is fair to say that scientists have universally dismissed (and repeatedly, exasperatedly debunked) every single one of the chemtrail theorists’ claims. However, this only provides further proof to believers of how deep the conspiracy goes! Believers post photographs depicting the interiors of planes, in which the cabin is stocked with large containers connected by tubes. The photos are accompanied by the exclamations of “This is the spraying equipment!” In fact, the pictures merely show planes filled with ballast barrels, water tanks that are used to simulate passenger loads during the flight testing of new airliner designs. (The tubes allow water to be pumped from tank to tank, simulating passenger motion in the cabin.)

The theory’s proponents insist chemtrails are a new phenomenon, but when confronted with photographs of long-lasting condensation trails from as far back as World War II, they refer...
to the military’s long history of weather modification plots. As for so many faiths and cults, every piece of contradictory evidence is seen to further bolster the theory. Moon-landing conspiracies work similarly—every additional photograph of human beings literally standing on the moon is just more evidence that the whole thing was faked.

The allegations of chemtrail theorists are pretty easily dealt with. But the belief has proven impressively persistent. A search for chemtrails brings up 5.5 million Google results and a 2011 study found that 16.6% of a sample of 3105 people in the US, Canada and the UK believed either “entirely” or, more often, “to some extent” in the existence of a conspiracy involving chemtrails. Prince was not the only celebrity to issue expositions against chemtrail doubters. Aging TV martial artist and right-wing paranoiac Chuck Norris also plugged the theory, insisting that chemtrails regularly appear in the skies over his Texas ranch. Joni Mitchell has publicly claimed to be a sufferer of “Morgellon’s disease.” Mitchell was among those condemning the CDC for treating the syndrome as imaginary, insisting she had contracted a “weird, incurable disease that seems like it’s from outer space” in which “…fibers in a variety of colors protrude out of my skin like mushrooms after a rainstorm: they cannot be forensically identified as animal, vegetable or mineral.”

The origins of the chemtrail conspiracy narrative can be traced back to the late 1990s when a piece by “investigative journalist” William Thomas suggested that “Contrails spread by fleets of jet aircraft in elaborate cross-hatched patterns are sparking speculation and making people sick across the United States.” From there, the idea spread to late-night talk radio, where “UFOlogists” and paranormal investigators have long found a sympathetic ear. But the chemtrails conspiracy also coincided directly with the early rise of the Internet forum as a venue for the sharing of ideas, and it was on exhaustive-ly-compiled, garishly-designed websites that the theory was most successfully promoted.

The success of the chemtrails theory in the online world shows the particular conduciveness of the platform to conspiratorial thinking, though the Internet has also always been the perfect platform for making fun of such thinking. Richard Hofstadter’s famous description of the “uncommonly angry minds” that made up the “paranoid style” in American political thought could be a description of just about any contemporary online forum on even the most mundane and uncontroversial of topics. Add to that mix an all encompassing theory of government geo-engineering, population control and a global apocalyptic conspiracy raining down from the sky, throw in Big Oil, Big Pharma and the Jews and Hofstadter’s description becomes something of an understatement.

Chemtrail activists frequently attend events and conferences on geo-engineering, and many academics working in the area have been subjected to threats and verbal abuse for their alleged role in the conspiracy. Pilots and weather reporters receive harassment and threats from anti-chemtrails activists. While conspiratorial paranoia may generally be America’s harmless national pastime, in the case of chemtrails, online forums are full of justifications and fantasies of violence toward those seen to be involved in the plot. On a generically populist site titled “thepeoplesvoice.org,” one writer says, “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve fantasized about firing a missile at the jets laying chemtrails over our skies.” Other commenters on chemtrail forums warn, “There’s only one answer. Kill them before they kill you” or “Why won’t they tell us there [sic] plan and leave us and the world we live in alone.” Another wonders, “Am I the only one that is considering picking up a gun and shooting these people dead before they get my mother, my father, my sister, my brother, and even my garden?” (First they came for the begonias, and I said nothing…) Perhaps needless to say, Jews are often implicated. One believer posted a video on YouTube called “Star of David chemtrails/persistent contrails” in which he films criss-crossing trails in the sky, grimly observing o-camera that “They create the Star of David… speaks for itself.”

There is a genteel approach, sometimes found in academic writing, to consider the ill-written and baseless ramblings of conspiracy theory forums as kinds of “counter-knowledges” or different “ways of knowing.” Indeed, such beliefs often do come from seemingly politically disenfranchised people with possible mental health issues.

But the only thing more patronizing than to deride such beliefs would be not to do so. One also has to wonder if such a sympathetic reading would be given if the racial conspiratorial undertones were against any group but the Jews. And in practice it’s hard to be patiently open-minded while reading typical communiqués like this on an anti-chemtrails YouTube video: “MORGELLONS KILLS!!!!!! […] MORGELLONS FROM CHEMTRAILS THIS SECRET WAR ON YOU MUST BE STOPPED!!!

If you don’t say no and stop this, we all will suffer and die
Thank you for stopping New World Order/NATO/Chemtrails/RFID Powder/Smart Dust!!!!!!!”

THANK YOU FOR STOPPING!!!

IF YOU DON'T SAY NO AND STOP THIS, WE ALL WILL SUFFER AND DIE

WHO NEEDS THE

ILLUMINATI

WHEN THE ENTIRE

BRITISH GOVERNMENT

ATTENDED THE SAME PRIMARY SCHOOLS?

T
The 1990’s saw an explosion of conspiracy theory culture in the United States, in the reverberations from decades of the paranoid Cold War years. Beginning in the 1990s, the era-defining TV show *The X-Files* featured Russian nuclear sewer monsters, U.S. government alien cover-ups, secret geo-engineering, population control projects and domestic terrorism (back when the term “terrorism” conjured up nightmare visions of rampaging Southern hillbillies instead of bearded jihadis). And it is worth remembering that many of the conspiratorial domestic terrorists of the 1990’s had in fact experienced terrible crimes at the hands of the state. Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, was subjected to cruel CIA experiments during his time as a Harvard undergraduate. The so-called “MK Ultra” research of the ‘50s and ‘60s, which used LSD and psychological abuse on unsuspecting subjects, is now a notorious chapter in the agency’s history and as horrifying as anything alleged on anti-chemtrails forums. Timothy McVeigh, who carried out the Oklahoma City bombing, killing 168 and injuring around 600, was a veteran who had witnessed the horrific violence of the Gulf War. McVeigh had become fixated on the Clinton Administration’s needless massacre at Waco, in which 76 people were shot and burned alive after a siege by the FBI and ATF went horrendously awry.

As in Hofstadter’s 1964 analysis, the online world of the chemtrails conspiracy is not recognizably right or left wing. There are elements associated with the fringe of U.S. ultra-conservatism, such as fear of Big Government’s statist dastardliness. The overlap between the militia movement and the conspiracy crowd is significant. But there are also elements of the more Romantic-tinged Green left, such as an opposition to the industrial plunder of nature and a fear of being poisoned by sprayed chemicals. There are echoes of ideas also found in the Unabomber’s manifesto about the evils of industrial society. Conspiratorial notions also tend to find a sympathetic audience among the socially-inclined during times of real political weakness. The Left Forum in New York (a prominent annual gathering attended by what Amber Frost called “bitter old codgers,” “Maoist Third World-ists,” “sanctimonious Trotskyists,” and “adherents of similarly esoteric ideological traditions”) hosts conspiracy theorists on its panels. These include 9/11 “Truthers”, who remind the assembled radicals that jet fuel can’t melt steel beams.

The cultural critic Fredric Jameson argued that conspiracy theories are used as an improvised guide to our overwhelm-ingly complex social landscape. It is often easier to imagine sinister cabals and physically impossible phenomena than it is to accept the open and known injustices of the world. Who needs the Illuminati when almost the entire British government went to the same schools? One only has to read Yanis Varoufakis’ accounts of the internal workings of international financial bodies or look at the dynasties and tiny elites that run the world of government and capital to wonder if the paranoid person is just, as William Burroughs put it “a person in possession of all the facts.” The paranoid impulse is not so much wrong as too often misdirected and it is often not a particularly distant leap from the truth to the fiction. People are right in their intuition that there are dark forces arrayed against them but they’re more likely to find the information they seek in the dull finance section of any newspaper than on chemtrails forums that weave more compelling narratives.

In fact, chemtrail believers have a paradoxical mixture of rationalist skepticism and dogmatic faith. They spend their time carefully parsing documents with a scrupulousness worthy of the IRS. Like committed scientists, they quest after “truth,” they want to know what’s “really” going on. They see unexplained horrors in the world around them, and they are persistent askers of “Why?”

Yet they are fundamentally religious in their outlook, insofar as they believe on faith in something that others cannot see. The online conspiracy world speaks of “sheeple” and issues commands to “wake up.” This is one expression of an entire online discourse of waking up, also shared by the “men’s rights” online community “RedPill” (a reference to the film *The Matrix*, in which by taking the “red pill,” one become aware of the truth about one’s fabricated reality.) There is a quasi-spiritual dimension to the born-again experiences people describe when they “woke up” to reality. Although unlike Christians, who awake to something they find beautiful and fulfilling, the online rebirth tends to involve plunging into darkness to see the truth.

Chemtrail conspiracies are, to some extent, just another incarnation of the human search for meaning, albeit one that is irrational and occasionally threatening. Today most of us live at the mercy of unknowably complex and volatile economic forces whose inner financial workings are entirely opaque to all but a few. The all-encompassing chemtrails conspiracy may appeal because it orders a chaotic world. As a replacement for religious traditions and political projects which both contained beautiful and redemptive ideas, individualism as the only surviving ideology has turned out to be thin gruel for some. In the absence of anything else to have faith in and so much to try to understand, why not chemtrails?
Dear Ms. Pett,

Enclosed, per your request, is a single copy of the March/April issue of Current Affairs. I’m afraid I was unable to procure the other item you asked for; repeated inquiries at exotic goods marketplaces turned up nada. I think they don’t usually make sellable wares from that part of the elephant, so it’s not the sort of thing that gets imported. Perhaps there’s a mountain of them lying discarded somewhere in Botswana. I’d hate to think it were so.

I should probably forewarn you that the magazine contains a number of highly uncomplimentary remarks about newspaper columnists, and that you may want to have someone else give it a read-first if you tend to be easily rattled by such things. It is the Current Affairs official editorial stance that newspapers are a blight on civilization, and so I’m afraid much of the text is spent condemning your peers. I know I did explain this to you somewhat when we met, but for obvious reasons I don’t think either of us remembers that afternoon very well and so it is possibly worth reiterating.

But if you can stomach the calumnies, I think you may find the rest of the publication vaguely appealing and I recommend persevering with it. To my great chagrin, the sports section was cut entirely for space reasons, and so all of the wonderful golf photography I promised you is nowhere to be found. Such are the vicissitudes of the magazine industry. I suppose as a blogger you might not understand, since the internet’s limitless capacity means you can post any old thing you like regardless of quality.

Anyway, next time you’re back in Cambridge let’s make a return visit to the Algiers. I promise I won’t make that noise again, though I still insist everyone in the cafe found it just as funny as I did. You have always embarrassed too easily.

Most sincerely,

J. Sharon McEwan
Sports Editor, Current Affairs
On Thanksgiving evening in 1915, William J. Simmons gathered fifteen men, and ascended the windy summit of Georgia’s imposing Stone Mountain, just outside of Atlanta. Atop the mountain, they built an altar of sixteen boulders, upon which they placed an American flag, a copy of the Holy Bible, and an unsheathed sword. Then, standing in the moonlight, they raised an enormous wooden cross, and set it alight. With “the angels” watching over them “shout[ing] hosannas,” Simmons and his men pronounced the Ku Klux Klan newly reborn, and inaugurated a new and terrible phase for an organization that had lain dormant for several decades. This was the beginning, they declared, of a new Imperial Empire.

1915 was the year of D.W. Griffith’s notorious Klan-glorifying blockbuster Birth of a Nation, which romanticized the role of terrorist posses in the post-Civil War South and created a nationwide burst of nostalgia for the great halcyon years of white supremacy.

1915 was also the year of the Leo Frank lynching. Frank, the director of an Atlanta pencil factory, had been wrongfully convicted of strangling a 13-year-old employee at the factory, Mary Phagan. When Frank’s death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, a mob of local worthies (including an ex-Governor and the future president of the State Senate) tore him from his prison cell and hanged him from a tree in Marietta.

It was in the fervor of white bloodlust emerging from the Frank killing and the Griffith film that William J. Simmons and his band of enthusiastic bigots ascended Stone Mountain. They would initiate what is known as the “Second Klan,” which eagerly and viciously picked up where the first left off. The organization’s original anti-black mission statement expanded to encompass all-new violent intolerances, such as anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia.

In the years following the Klan’s resurrection ceremony, Stone Mountain became an iconic site for American white supremacists. The group held regular events there, having been granted a special easement by the mountain’s owners. In the 1920s, they began fundraising with the United Daughters of the Confederacy, for the purposes of erecting an enor-
The rallies persisted until 1991. A speaker at the 1985 event called for a new wave of "white vigilantes" across the country. "Death to the race mixers," he said, forecasting that "when the hour of retribution strikes, there will be 10 million dead ones in America." A firsthand report from another 1980's event described the surreal sight of "kiosks selling popcorn, soft drinks, and KKK T-shirts." (Several concessions to modernization had been made, namely the presence of a few Klansmen in business suits and the fact that organizers insisted the event was to be called a "cross lighting" rather than a "cross burning.")

The town of Stone Mountain itself also became a "white supremacist mecca," sitting as it did in the shadow of the "shrine of the Ku Klux Klan." In 1988, it voted to name a park after the notorious Imperial Wizard who had been instrumental in building the monument, and who had also designed the Klan's second-generation robes. (After controversy, the decision was rescinded. Instead, he got an official plaque in the park and had a small lake named after him.)

There was a reason, then, that in Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream Speech," he made sure to single out a specific plea: "let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia." A dream that freedom could ring from Stone Mountain was ambitious indeed; perhaps no other location in the country has remained so closely associated with white supremacy for so long.

ILL CLINTON was a NEW DEMOCRAT. And NEW DEMOCRATS, unlike the old Roosevelt liberals, were tough on crime. With the Democrats having lost three Presidential elections, Clinton argued that political success required the jettisoning of many of the left's most cherished tenets. In particular, Clinton aimed to woo the so-called "Reagan Democrats," the somewhat socially conservative white voters who had fled the party during the 1960s and 1970s. And doing this, in part, required what Michelle Alexander calls "signaling to poor and working-class whites that he was willing to be tougher on black communities than Republicans had been."

Crime was a key issue on which Clinton tried to distinguish himself in this respect. In 1988, Michael Dukakis had been relentlessly and effectively criticized by Republicans as "soft on crime"; Dukakis was dogged by a Republican televised advertisement showing a hairy, menacing black inmate who had raped a woman while free on a furlough scheme that Dukakis had approved as governor. Bill Clinton was determined not to suffer the same kind of attacks; nobody would accuse him of coddling "inner city" criminals. "I can be nicked on a lot," he said, "but no one can say I'm soft on crime."

So he shed his platform of any soft liberal pity for the rights of criminal defendants, and brought his anti-crime rhetoric in line with that of the Republicans. He even made sure to take a detour from the campaign trail and return to Arkansas to preside over an execution. Clinton was concerned, first and foremost, with sending a carefully tailored message to white America. And one of the most effective deliveries of that message came in the form of a press conference held at one of the most infamous sites in the South: Stone Mountain.

In the early 1990s, though it was a town with a population of less than 6,000, Stone Mountain was home to a small state correctional facility. It was not among the state's more consequential prisons, holding only a few hundred people. Prisoners were given "boot camp" style routines and discipline, and were put to work maintaining the grounds of the monument.

The complex was nestled directly at the Mountain's foot, at the outer
Who better to trust with your reproductive health?

RON PAUL, M.D.
he is seriously a gynecologist

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT THAT?

You want a gynecologist who has read Hayek. Someone with an understanding of the nature of economic freedom. Someone who isn't at all creepy. Ask Dr. Paul to tell you his ideas on the connection between his gynecological practice and his political theories.
ASK ABOUT OUR INTERNSHIPS
There is little question that Clinton knew what he was doing in going to Stone Mountain. As Christopher Petrella explained in a recent Boston Review article about the incident, the site was too consequential and notorious, and the photo-op too perfectly aligned with Clinton’s open goal of reassuring the white populace, for it to have been anything but completely deliberate:

“It is hard to imagine the DLC would not have been aware of Stone Mountain’s significance as a theater of white supremacy when it staged Clinton’s campaign event at the prison there. In fact, the choice of that particular place as a campaign stop—arranging white political leaders in business suits in front of subjugated black male prisoners in jumpsuits—is illegible except in light of this history.

By picking such an allusive location, Clinton managed to quietly convey to the right parties that, even though he might be no white supremacist, he was not the sort of Democrat to go ripping the Stars and Bars off every last Dixie flagpole, nor one who would let members of the more troublesome races go swimming freely across the land.

Nobody mistook the message at the time. Clinton was instantly criticized by his opponents for the repugnant racial undertones of the event. Iowa Senator Tom Harkin said the Stone Mountain photo offered an ugly depiction of the Democratic party’s priorities: “What this picture demonstrates is an insensitivity… A picture is worth a thousand words, and we can’t afford to have pictures like this going around America in major newspapers because it sends the wrong message about what we want to be as Americans.” California governor Jerry Brown was even more forthright, saying that Clinton and the other politicians looked “like colonial masters” trying to tell white voters “Don’t worry, we’ll keep them in their place.” Brown said the implication was clear: “Two white men and forty black prisoners, what’s he saying? He’s saying we got ‘em under control, folks.”

Defending himself, Clinton accused his opponents of placing “racial politics,” and insisted that the facility was for “youths” who were “get[ing] their lives back together.” (It is mysterious why Clinton thought it made it better rather than worse that the inmates were youths.) Clinton spokesman George Stephanopoulos called Harkin’s criticism “the act of a desperate man.”

But the event doesn’t look any better with hindsight than it did on the campaign trail. Re-examining the visual record, Tom Harkin seems less desperate than accurate: after all, the photo shows a buoyant Clinton standing in front of black kids stored in a pen at the base of an infamous Confederate monument and pilgrimage site, only a year after its Klan picnics had finally stopped. For a clutch of white politicians to pose in front of black inmates would be mildly nauseating in the most innocuous of locales; that Clinton did it with a pair of open bigots at the entrance to the “Confederate Rushmore” should violently churn the stomach.

From the beginning, though, Bill Clinton had made a priority of appealing to “Reagan Democrats,” the group of white “Middle American” voters whose support the Democrats had steadily lost during the McGovern-Carter-Mondale-Dukakis years. Clinton solidified the political cliché of targeting “the forgotten middle class,” what he referred to as “the people who used to vote for us.”

This required subtly assuaging the fears of white voters in particular. As Democratic strategist Ted Van Dyk phrased it, Clinton’s New Democratic politics were intended to signal to “Reagan Democrats that it is safe to come home to their party because poor, black, Hispanic, urban, homeless, hungry, and other people and problems out of favor in Middle America will no longer get the favored treatment they got from mushy 1960s and 1970s Democratic liberals.” Clinton pollster Stanley Greenberg, in an article that The American Prospect’s editors called “widely recognized for its influence on Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign,” wrote that the Democratic Party had become “too identified with minorities and special interests to speak for average Americans.” Clinton thus called himself “a different kind of Democrat,” which ob-
Also to be found in SUPERPREDATOR

WELFARE REFORM

The welfare bill was never in any sense a compromise for Clinton. The elimination of welfare was something Clinton introduced into the 1992 race, something he fundamentally made an issue in the first place. In 1996, Bob Dole was so flustered by Clinton’s “tough welfare talk” that he accused Clinton of engaging in “petty theft” of Dole’s platform. And it’s not as if Clinton came to regret what he had wrought: 10 years after it passed, free to speak his mind without fear of political consequence, Clinton proudly wrote that “the 1996 Welfare Act shows us how much we can achieve when both parties bring their best ideas to the negotiating table and focus on doing what is best for the country.” Clinton said that “we never betrayed our principles and we passed a bill that worked and stood the test of time.”

CLINTON IN RWANDA

Nobody in the United States government was willing to use the word “genocide” publicly. The United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide contains a binding requirement that countries prevent genocide, so acknowledgment of the genocide would have created a legally binding mandate to stop it. Even though internally, members of the Clinton Administration were referring to a genocide, publicly their spokespeople were under strict orders to refuse to confirm that a genocide was occurring. “Be careful,” warned a document from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense’s office. “Legal at State was worried about this yesterday – Genocide finding could confirm U.S.G. to actually ‘do something’.”

CLINTON IN HAITI

The recovery under the Clintons was notorious for its mismanagement. The Clinton Foundation earned particular criticism in Haiti for its management approach: Foundation staffers “had no idea what Haiti was like and had no sensitivity to the Haitians.” They were reportedly rude and condescending toward Haitians, even refusing to admit Haitian government ministers to meetings about recovery plans. While the Clintons called in high-profile consulting firms like McKinsey to draw up plans (at great expense), they had little interest in listening to Haitians themselves. The former Haitian prime minister spoke of a “weak” American staff who were “more interested in supporting Clinton than helping Haiti.”

servers interpreted to mean that he was “a centrist candidate more attuned than his predecessors to the concerns and values of the white, middle-class voters who had deserted the party.”

Clinton thus intentionally avoided paying any attention to racial injustice. In their 1992 campaign book, Putting People First, Clinton and Al Gore included only one mention of race: a criticism of racial quotas. They did feature a chapter on civil rights, but this was “mostly about people with disabilities.” As political scientist Corey Robin writes, Clinton intended to “win over white voters by declaring to the American electorate: We are not the Party of Jesse Jackson, we are not the Rainbow Coalition. The cynical reasoning was that since black voters were hardly likely to vote Republican, but white voters were, Democrats’ political platforms should focus on issues that matter to white people. Because black voters were reliably loyal to the party (their only alternative being the party of Trent Lott, Jesse Helms, and Strom Thurmond), there was nothing to gain electorally from the pursuit of racial equality.

The irony, of course, is that this meant selling out the party’s strongest supporters precisely because of their support. A major part of the new white-focused agenda involved prioritizing the issue of crime. The crime rate in the 1980s and early 1990s was especially high, and with the devastating attack on Dukakis, Republicans had shown they could successfully capitalize on the widespread fear of crime in order to achieve political success. Clinton and the New Democrats believed that Democrats should never again cede this issue to the conservatives who had traditionally parlayed it into electoral success.

But while getting tough on inner-city criminals had always been a favorite mantra of the Right, it had also always been met with charges that by “inner city criminals,” Republicans just meant “poor blacks.” When Richard Nixon accepted the Republican nomination in 1968, his “law and order” policies were so widely seen as a euphemism for ending civil rights gains that in his speech he felt the need to specifically address “those who say that law and order is the code word for racism.” (Confirming nearly ever word of his critics’ charges, Nixon’s defense of “law and order” largely involved denouncing “government programs for the unemployed” and “programs for the poor.”)

Clinton’s embrace of Republican anti-crime rhetoric was therefore unprecedented, and “signaled a dramatic shift in Democratic priorities. Previously, many Democrats had resisted pressure to placate white fears with “get tough” rhetoric. During a 1988 debate, Dukakis was asked whether he would support the death penalty even if his wife were raped and murdered. “No, I don’t,” Dukakis replied. “I think you know that I’ve opposed the death penalty during all of my life. I don’t see any evidence that it’s a deterrent and I think there are better and more effective ways to deal with violent crime.” Dukakis received intense criticism for the response, for reasons he professed himself unable to fathom. The previous generation of liberal politicians had been unwilling to surrender their ideological commitment to compassion, even as they paid a strong electoral price for it. The 1992 Clinton campaign jettisoned that commitment, reasoning that winning elections was more important than maintaining a purity of principle.

Some of this, however, was not simply the politically expedient discarding of liberal sympathies, but reflected longstanding conservative commitments on Clinton’s part. Capital punishment in particular was not a “compromise” with the electorate, Clinton having consistently supported the death penalty. Clinton had never commuted a death sentence while serving as Arkansas governor, and “from 1983 to 1993, he repeatedly ordered the Arkansas Department of Corrections to schedule execution dates for Arkansas Death Row inmates.” On, Saturday Night Live, Phil Hartman’s impersonation of Clinton caricatured the governor’s over-the-top punitive stance, with Hartman’s Clinton bragging that “no state is tougher on crime. Last year we passed Florida to become #2 in executions by lethal injection, and first in crushed by heavy stones.

The newer, tougher Clinton stance caused other Democrats to follow suit, since as Daryl Carter explains, “Clinton actually sat at the head of the Democratic Party, thereby forcing Democrats to place crime prevention at the top of their domestic agenda.” Along with his other more conservative “New Democrat” proposals (such as ending welfare), Clinton’s raising of the crime issue would help build a Democratic/Republican consensus around a number of ideas that had previously been the sole provenance of the right. And the strategy worked, insofar as it successfully kept Clinton from being painted as a bleeding-heart during the 1992 election. As University of Texas criminologist Mark S. Kleiman noted, by positioning himself as harsher than the Republicans, Clinton “neutralized that issue in a way no Democrat has been able to do for 30 years.” After that, it simply “becomes a macho competition: Who hates criminals more?”
DO YOU DESIRE A MAGAZINE WITH NOVELTY FLOWCHARTS IN IT?

NO.

YES.

THIS IS A NOVELTY FLOWCHART.

WELL, THERE'S MORE TO LIFE THAN PIES.

DO YOU LIKE ARTICLES?

YES.

NO.

WELL, HOW DO YOU LIKE YOUR FLOWCHARTS?

SIMPLE.

COMPLICATED.

WANT YOU TO KNOW WHAT ELSE THERE IS?

WON'T TELL YOU, THEN PIES.

DO YOU LIKE Puzzles?

YES.

NO.

DO YOU LIKE JOKES?

YES.

NO.

DO YOU LIKE MUSIC?

DO YOU LIKE MANATEES?

WELL, WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR A MAGAZINE?

PICTURES OF SLOTHS.

Naked ladies.

GRATUITOUS SLANDER OF POLITICIANS.

TED CRUZ IS A FUCKWIT.

SUBSCRIBE.

FATE WILL GET YOU.

SO, ONES WHERE YOU DON'T HAVE TO MAKE MANY CHOICES?

NO.

YES.

YOU'RE CHOSING THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE.

YOU'RE CHOSING THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE.

THAT'S NOT FUNNY.

WHAT IS ISIS AND MISS MUFFETT HAVE IN common?

OF COURSE.

ONE INQUISTABLE FUNK.

MAWS.

WILL YOu LIKE TO HEAR ONE?

YES.

NO.

THE MANATEE HAS FOUR SEPARATE STOMACHS.

WHICH IS WHY IT IS CALLED A "SEA COW."

HERE IS AN ALGORITHM FOR THE INDECISIVE.

PLEASE BEGIN HERE.

Pics of sloths.

Our algorithm is designed to help you decide whether or not to subscribe to our magazine. Based on your choices, we'll guide you through a series of questions to help you determine if our magazine is the right fit for you. Please answer truthfully to the best of your ability.

1. Do you desire a magazine with novelty flowcharts in it?
2. Would you like to know what else there is?
3. Do you just want to hear more about flowcharts?
4. Is Paul dead?
5. Are you sure you don't want to control your own fate?
6. Are you sure you don't want to control your own fate?
7. Death makes striving irrelevant.

SUBSCRIBE.

Death makes striving irrelevant.

Tell me something useful.

Okay.

Or not.

We have those!

Not especially.

Fuck puzzles.

Puzzles!

Yes, I like articles.

I do not.

I would.

An algorithm for the indecisive.

Not especially.

I enjoy jokes.

I am humorless.

Would you like to hear one?

Mmm...

Certainly not!

We do not.

But you know, that's okay.

I am.

You lose.

You know where things are likely to end up...

If you're leaving your destiny up to us.

It really doesn't.

It works better if you say it out loud.

They both had kurds in their way.

I don't get it.

Curds in their whey!

No? Come on.

Well, there's more to life than pies.

Like games. Shall we play a game?

Please don't.

They can still have a pretty good life.

All you need to do is...

There will be so many more manatee facts in our magazine.

False. It seems as if you don't know very much.

Just tell me something useful.

Sir Paul, it is an honor.

Because you have a lot of money, wouldn't it be unjust to withhold it from the needy?

If you pretend to be something long enough, you can become it.

There is only one way to find out more facts like this. Do you know what it is?

No, it can't.

Yes.

You are aware that choice is an illusion?

You understand that everything is predetermined?

That's why we're here. We will help you maintain your intellectual humility.

If you pretend to be something long enough, you can become it.

We all end up in the same place, don't we?

We do.

We do not.

Death makes striving irrelevant.

If you pretend to be something long enough, you can become it.

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THERE IS NOTHING HE DOES NOT SEE
THERE IS NOTHING HE DOES NOT JUDGE
Throughout the ages, the cartoon medium has been a crucial means of political expression. Centuries of satirists have used this deceptively simple art form to rouse the populace and intimidate the powerful. Current Affairs is proud to follow in this tradition, with our signature Political Cartoons from California artist R.T. Peco. The most “topical” caption will be rewarded with an exclusive Current Affairs sticker pack.

PREVIOUS WINNER

“The right perspective makes the impossible possible.”
—Lauren Lueder, Huntington Woods, MI
"In war, the first to a million carcasses wins."
—Sun Tzu

NEVER CONFUSE THE IMPLAUSIBLE WITH THE IMPOSSIBLE

can philosophy be justified in a time of crisis?

Which Hardy Boy is not like the other Hardy Boys?

A QUESTION OF ETHICS

What is the most important thing you've learned about ethics? I believe that the most important thing is to be moral. Morality is the foundation of our society and the basis for all other values. Without morality, we would not be able to live in a peaceful and just society. If we don't respect the rights of others, we risking violence and chaos. The essence of morality is to do what is right, even when it is difficult.

I have always tried to be a moral person. I believe that it is important to be honest, fair, and just. I have always tried to make decisions that are based on what is right, rather than what is convenient. I have always tried to treat others with respect and kindness. I believe that it is important to have a strong moral compass, and to always strive to do the right thing.

One must always have faith in human reason even when doing so is extremely unreasonable.

LONDON FOG

I had absolutely no idea you felt that way but in retrospect I suppose it explains an awful lot.

The essence of journalism is to be Socratic, i.e. as irritating as humanly possible — Józef Politzer

"And a gathering cloud of beasts awaits, conscious of our idle fears.

A QUESTION FOR OTHERS TO ADDRESS

There is no such thing as an illusion.