

the weekly Standard

NOVEMBER 5, 2018

\$5.99

THE LATE GREAT STATE OF ILLINOIS

BY ANDREW FERGUSON

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November 5, 2018 • Volume 24, Number 9



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Poets, Essayists, Nincompoops

PEN International, founded in London in 1921, is an organization of writers dedicated to the cause of free expression. Originally the title stood for Poets, Essayists, Novelists, but the group now includes every sort of *littérateur*, even humble magazine writers. We revere the organization's heritage and acknowledge that in many parts of the world—think of China and Russia—PEN's various affiliates have championed dissident writers at some risk.

At least one branch of PEN International, however—PEN America—has tended more and more to disgrace itself. There are for instance few places in the United States where the fundamental principles of free speech are more gravely threatened than on university campuses, but PEN America ties itself in knots in order to sound nuanced and balanced in the face of anti-First Amendment hooliganism. “Cries of ‘free speech,’” one PEN America report says, “have on occasion been used to refute or delegitimize protest and outrage—to dismiss the forms that speech takes and thereby avoid considering its substance. Yet protest and outrage, however infelicitously or unfamiliarly it may be expressed, must also be protected as free speech.” “Protest and outrage”

are protected speech, but “cries of ‘free speech,’” intended to “refute or delegitimize” them are not? Huh.

Similarly, when PEN America honored the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* with its Freedom of Expression Courage Award in 2015, around 200 PEN members—including famed novelists Francine Prose and Michael Ondaatje—boycotted the ceremony and signed a petition protesting the award. *Hebdo*, recall, is the Paris-based satirical magazine attacked by Islamist terrorists in January 2015. Twelve people on the magazine's premises were murdered. We won't bother to explain the reasons for the boycott.

At last, though, the members of PEN America have discovered a cause they can get behind: the all-around badness of Donald Trump. The organization has filed a lawsuit in federal court against the president. The lawsuit, PEN America explains, “seeks to stop President Trump from using the machinery of government to retaliate or threaten reprisals against journalists and media outlets for coverage he dislikes.”

So scary have the president's

condemnations of the press been, the PEN America statement says, that “individual writers may think twice before publishing pieces or commentary that could put them in the White House's crosshairs.” Really? That's

strange, because we are aware of many high-profile journalists and writers who wear disparagement by Trump as a badge of honor. In most quarters of the media with which we are familiar, it is a mark of high distinction to have been the subject of a Trump rant. Writers and journalists who fall afoul of, say, Vladimir Putin or Xi

Jinping tend not to boast so openly—if they ever have a chance to.

One need not defend Trump's boorish remonstrations about the media—“enemy of the people,” “fake news,” and so on—to find this all a bit rich. As we go to press, we're searching for PEN America's condemnations of the Obama administration for, among other things, surveilling Fox News reporter James Rosen and seizing the work and mobile phone records of Associated Press reporters. We haven't found anything so far. Maybe we've just overlooked it. ♦



Post Truth

The *Washington Post* ran an item recently about a private school in the greater Washington area that was hiring a director of alumni. Doesn't sound like much of a story, except for the fact that the institution in question is Georgetown Prep, the school attended by Supreme Court justice Brett Kavanaugh. Readers will likely recall that Democrats on the Judiciary Committee—and left-liberal commentators and talking heads across the country—portrayed the school as a place of wild drunken parties and

wanton debauchery. The *Post* item heavily implied that the new hire's chief responsibility would be to deal with bad publicity occasioned by the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings.

The opening line of the piece: “When graduates of your school are getting name-checked on ‘Saturday Night Live’ (oh, hey there P.J., Timmy and Squi!) it might be time to . . . um, reach out to them, maybe?”

There was just one small problem, as there often is in these gotcha pieces. The

position, contrary to the *Post*'s claim, hadn't just been listed. It had been open since July, when Kavanaugh's nomination was brand new and when all the media could come up with about the man was that he had once bought a lot of baseball tickets.

The school twice emailed the *Post* reporter Emily Heil and her editors to correct the error. A popular twitter account, @AG_Conservative, posted the original email exchange between the school and the reporter, clearly showing



that the reporter had been informed before the story ran that the job had been advertised since July.

Heil says it was “a completely unintentional error—I read right over the date in haste.” Fair enough. But surely it’s the job of a reporter, particularly a reporter employed by one of the nation’s premier news organizations, *not* to read over crucial dates in haste. We’re inclined to think some reporters at the *Post* and elsewhere in the mainstream press are especially prone to mistakes of haste because they already know, or think they know, the truth—the truth being, for them, the most unflattering possible interpretation of facts pertaining to selected right-of-center targets.

Heil’s column at the *Post*, incidentally, is called “Reliable Source.” ♦

It’s Not the Economy, Stupid?

A recent headline in the *New York Times*: “Democrats Want to Beat Scott Walker But the Wisconsin Economy Is a Hurdle.” The lengthy report examines the Badger State’s Democrats’ attempt to deprive Walker of a third term as governor. Their problems consist mainly of good news: The state’s unemployment rate stands at a staggeringly low 3.0 percent and average hourly wages are up 5 percent from last year, compared with 2.9 percent nationally. “Democratic leaders are watching Wisconsin closely,” the *Times* explains, “in part to understand how to run against a relatively upbeat economy, and in part for lessons for winning back the state in the 2020 presidential election.”

Wisconsin Democrats have a strategy: Pretend a robust economy is something other than what it is. “[Gov. Walker] can talk about the unemployment rate until the cows come home,” says challenger Tony Evers. “Most people are just scraping by, so that doesn’t mean anything to them. Many of the people that are employed are having



to get two or three jobs just to make ends meet. Also, we’re in a state that people are leaving because of the decisions he has made.” Of course, people are always moving away from Wisconsin—because it’s cold. (No offense to our editor in chief.) Out-

migration, though, appears to have been markedly *down* in 2017. “Around the state,” the report goes on, “Democrats said they had not felt the benefit of the state’s impressive economic statistics.” Kriss Marion, an organic vegetable farmer and a Democrat

running for a statehouse seat, speaks for many of her fellow partisans: “People are frustrated and sad at things deteriorating. Who wants to see their little town crumble around them?”

We’ll find out soon if Evers can moan his way into the governor’s mansion. Somehow we suspect Wisconsinites are smart enough to know if times are good or bad without the help of politicians feigning despondency. ♦

Chosen Fertility?

Liberal politicians—as distinct from progressive ideologues—rarely express their belief that “family planning,” as it’s euphemistically known,



FIGURE: PAX AHIMSA GETHEN; CHEESEHEAD: CHRIS F.

can alleviate or even solve the problem of poverty. We recall President Bill Clinton's first surgeon general, the logorrheic Joycelyn Elders, remarking in her confirmation hearing in 1993 that she "would like to make every child born in America a planned and wanted child." But you had to use your imagination to figure out the underlying ideology.

Not so with French politicians! Late last month, at the Gates Foundation's "Goal-keepers" confab in New York, French president Emmanuel Macron unloaded: "One of the critical issues we have regarding the African demography is the fact that this is not a chosen fertility," said Macron. "I always say, please present me the lady who decided—being perfectly educated—to have seven, eight, nine children."



Macron always says this? Then he should stop saying it. The French president insisted he wasn't "teaching African people from New York." *Mon dieu*, how condescending *that* would be! Such an imperialistic idea was "pure bull—," Macron said, his word choice hinting at perhaps a touch of defensiveness. He then attempted to soften his assertion by adding that he'd be "fine" with a woman having a large family—generous of him!—so long as "this is her choice after education." Which is weird, because earlier he'd said that having "seven, eight, nine" children signaled a lack of education.

The problem with Africans, the French president sounds as if he's saying, is that there are too many of them. But of course he couldn't possibly think that, being perfectly educated. ♦

Wodehouse Takes His Place

News that P.G. Wodehouse will at last get a memorial stone in Westminster Abbey in London will warm the hearts of Wodehouse fans. For some years after the Second World War, the British government treated the writer with disdain, owing to the mistaken belief that Wodehouse had willingly propagandized for the Nazis while in an internment camp in France. That is all behind us now, and Wodehouse assumes the greatness he deserves.

We are not of the opinion that

memorials signify literary worth; often they do not. But with only a few exceptions (it seems wrong to afford D.H. Lawrence a memorial in what is, after all, a church, does it not?), the roughly 130 headstones and memorials in the abbey's Poets' Corner are a pretty good survey of Anglophone literary immortality.

In light of the aforementioned item on PEN America, moreover, we thought perhaps we would pass along one of our favorite Wodehousean passages, this one from *Right Ho, Jeeves*, his second full-length Jeeves and Wooster novel, published in 1934. "I don't want to wrong anybody," writes Bertie Wooster of Madeline Bassett, "so I won't go so far as to say that she actually wrote poetry, but her conversation, to my mind, was of a nature calculated to excite the liveliest of suspicions. Well, I mean to say, when a girl suddenly asks you out of a blue sky if you don't sometimes feel that the stars are God's daisy-chain, you begin to think a bit." ♦



The floor of Poets' Corner

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The Weekly Standard (ISSN 1083-3013), a division of Clarity Media Group, is published weekly (except one week in March, one week in June, one week in August, and one week in December) at 1152 15th St., NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20005. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to The Weekly Standard, P.O. Box 85409, Big Sandy, TX 75755-9612. Please include your latest magazine mailing label. Allow 3 to 5 weeks for arrival of first copy and address changes. Canadian/foreign orders require additional postage and must be paid in full prior to commencement of service. Canadian/foreign subscribers may call 1-386-597-4378 for subscription inquiries. American Express, Visa/MasterCard payments accepted. Cover price, \$5.99. Back issues, \$5.99 (includes postage and handling). Send letters to the editor to The Weekly Standard, 1152 15th Street, NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20005-4617. For a copy of The Weekly Standard Privacy Policy, visit www.weeklystandard.com or write to Customer Service, The Weekly Standard, 1152 15th St., NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20005. Copyright 2018, Clarity Media Group. All rights reserved. No material in The Weekly Standard may be reprinted without permission of the copyright owner. The Weekly Standard is a registered trademark of Clarity Media Group.



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Scruples

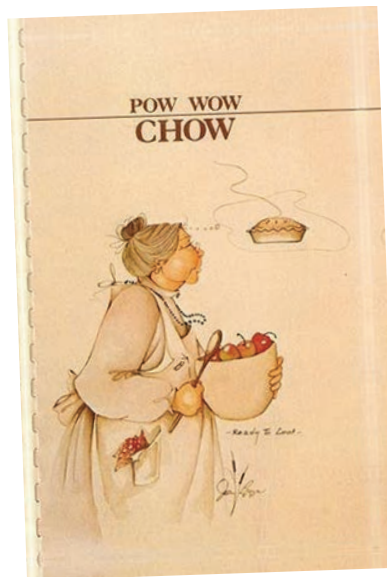
I'm not inclined to defend Elizabeth Warren on many counts but on one, well, I have scruples. When the pemmican hit the fan again about her genealogy, much was made of her contributions to *Pow Wow Chow*, a cookbook put out by the Five Civilized Tribes Museum of Muskogee, Oklahoma, in 1984. In particular, she was accused of plagiarism. A University of Texas law professor at the time, Warren chipped in several recipes of varying appeal, including one for cold crabmeat omelettes that came straight from a Pierre Franey column in the *New York Times*. (He said it was a great favorite with the Windsors and Cole Porter.)

Odd for Oklahoma? Maybe. Sprinkled with food-snobbery? Perhaps. Copied word for word? Well, close. But that's pretty much how it goes with the community recipe collection, published in the thousands by churches, civic and local groups, PTAs, and for all I know anarchist collectives since shortly after the Civil War. Designed to raise funds for a new church roof, or to support a museum, or for some other laudable purpose, such volumes were pretty much guaranteed to be local bestsellers. Presbyterian ladies bought the Baptist cookbook with the tacit understanding that the kitchen tables would be turned, as it were, when the newest edition of *Calvinist Cookin'* came along in a couple of years.

As the tradition grew in the 20th century, so did custom and convention. The editor asked her circle for their favorites, and contributors knew what they sent would see print. Secret, signature recipes were welcomed but not demanded. And church ladies being human too, a spice of competitiveness brightened the default of the tall-poppy, high-soufflé inclination not to get above one's leavening.

The hungrier reader will have noted that the era of community cookbooks

took off at about the same time as the national grocery market. Very early on it was necessary to tell cooks to "open the top of can with a can opener," but by the time Campbell's introduced cream of mushroom soup in 1934, that was a distant memory, and magazines—and the club cookbooks—gobbled up the opportunity to incorporate modern trends. Cake mixes came along and Jell-O too; in an effort to demonstrate its regional appeal, a 1922 cookbook



shows a California monk, in the Serra mold, carrying a glistening dessert, in the Jell-O mold.

The ubiquity of product-driven recipes meant a transition from genuinely local cuisine ("first, catch a possum") to the rapid dissemination of recipes originating in Betty Crocker's kitchen and its counterparts. By the time a couple of people copied one on three-by-five cards and passed it along, it was like a home-ec version of the telephone game. Sure, somebody added lemon zest and somebody else some diced onions or Le Sueur peas, but underneath it was the same Des Moines-tested recipe from *Better Homes and Gardens*.

This means that the golden era of

the community cookbook—say the 1950s through the 1980s, before foodism and the Interweb—featured a salmagundi of recipes, from surviving local specialties to a quite astonishing degree of duplication. (Remember, if you submit, it's going to fit.) Seven recipes for cornbread, sure, but probably seventeen for that all-time favorite: Better Than Sex Cake. BTS Cake (sometimes presented with a self-aware question mark) tends to involve the ur-ingredients of spiral-bound cookbooks: cake mix; pudding mix; sweetened condensed milk or Cool Whip or both; crushed pineapple; chopped nuts. The chocolate version is sometimes called "Robert Redford Cake" and may incorporate two (!) pudding mixes as befits the deliciousness of its namesake. Such was the popularity of these cakes that even the bluest-rinsed small-town ladies daringly submitted their versions, and I've seen them printed right alongside their recipes for scripture cake ("six eggs, Isaiah 10:14, 'my hand hath found . . . a nest . . . and as one gathereth eggs . . . have I gathered all the earth'").

As more people mastered fancy cooking and olive oil showed up all over the place, some cooks culled their dishes from fancier sources. That's how I submitted that coffee dessert involving espresso and whipped cream to the Crawford, Georgia, *Woman's Club Cookbook* of 1975, and it's probably how Elizabeth Warren clipped Pierre Franey's crabmeat omelette recipe and sent it to her cookbook-compiling cousin in Muskogee. A copied recipe is just a time-tested form of community participation, sort of like sharing an actual meal.

My scruples? A scruple is an ancient unit of measure, about equal to what most of the cooks we're talking about would call a nice big pinch. It seems like to me we can give Elizabeth Warren the benefit of the doubt here and take the plagiarism charge with a heaping scruple of salt.

PRISCILLA M. JENSEN

Medicare for Everybody

A decade ago, when Barack Obama was running for president, many of us on the right suspected he favored a single-payer health care system. As candidate and president, Obama always denied this. Today, though, he's calling for "Medicare for All," a proposal to make the federal health insurance program for Americans 65 and older the sole provider of health insurance for Americans of all ages.

As ever, Obama is not so much leading as following. It was Bernie Sanders's 2016 presidential campaign that lent a gloss of credibility to a federal take-over of the health-insurance market. The fact that Medicare for Some is already crippling expensive—together with Social Security and Medicaid it's the main driver of the federal deficit and our national debt—somehow doesn't register with Sanders or his base. Nor did a rigorous study from George Mason University concluding that Medicare for All would cost taxpayers an additional \$32 trillion over 10 years. (For perspective, note that the whole federal budget is only \$4.1 trillion this year.)

More and more Democrats are plumping for Medicare expansion. One survey conducted by National Nurses United, a progressive advocacy group, claims that more than half of all Democrats on the ballot in 2018 support Medicare for All. Irresponsible radicalism is nothing new among candidates striving for office, but it's officeholders, too. A little less than two-thirds of the House of Representatives' 193 Democrats have cosponsored Medicare for All legislation, and 16 of the 49 Democratic senators embrace the idea, including all of the upper chamber's presidential hopefuls: Kamala Harris, Elizabeth Warren, and Cory Booker.

Adding to the confusion, a survey conducted by the *Hill* suggests that 52 percent of Republicans support Medicare for All—with 25 percent "strongly" supporting the idea. It's easy to doubt the accuracy of that finding, but it does suggest that many voters, on the left and the right, have no idea what Medicare for All means.

Sanders likes to point to European countries as models of nationalized health care. Those nations nationalized their systems in the years after the Second World War—when they spent little on national defense and when immigration wasn't a serious strain on welfare programs. European nations still

spend a fraction of what the United States does on defense, but their aging populations and large-scale immigration have strained their national health systems to the breaking point. With a yearly deficit approaching a trillion dollars and a debt of \$21 trillion, the United States is in no position to imitate the troubled European health care model. Health care costs are already skyrocketing, and replacing the market for health insurance with a mammoth federal bureaucracy would make the problem infinitely worse. It would do for medical care what federal grants and guaranteed loans have done for college tuition. When someone else is paying the tab, prices always go up.

Republicans' failure last year to repeal and replace Obamacare won't make countering irresponsible Democratic claims any easier, but they can still champion serious health care reform—eliminating costly coverage

mandates, allowing more insurance plans to be sold across state lines, loosening prescription drug regulations. Calling Democrats "socialists" may be an ineffective way to counter the sudden popularity of a dangerously misguided idea, but the principle is still simple: Most voters understand that the federal government makes things more expensive, less efficient, and less humane. That's why Obama pretended to reject the idea in 2008 and 2009, and why voters will reject it in earnest when they know what it is. ♦



But do they know what that means?

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Swift Justice

Iran sends cash and fighters to aid Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war. It schemes to obtain illicit nuclear materials. It backs a range of insurgent and terrorist proxies across the Middle East. This behavior isn't new—it's been happening for years and is what led the Trump administration to withdraw from the ill-conceived Iran nuclear deal in May.

The United States is scheduled to reimpose pre-deal sanctions on November 4. This will involve cutting off Iranian banks, including the country's central bank, from the global economy. Over the last several months, the

GABRIEL / OLSEN / FILMMAGIC

administration has successfully pressured energy companies worldwide to cut ties with Iran, and it has imposed fresh penalties designed to punish Tehran for human rights abuses.

But a key question remains: Will the United States move to cut off Iran from SWIFT, the financial network critical for money transfers between countries? Taking that step would make it much harder for the regime to obtain hard currency or transfer funds to entities outside its borders, thus handicapping its ability to fund terror proxies. Suspension from SWIFT—the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication—is one of the most stringent economic penalties available and was essential in bringing Iran to the nuclear negotiating table in 2012.

SWIFT may choose to disconnect the Iranian banks on its own before the November deadline. If not, the United States could penalize its board of directors, an option endorsed by 30 former officials and policy experts in October. It was the possibility of congressional sanctions against its board that pushed SWIFT to boot Iran six years ago. As cover at the time, the Belgium-based institution cited a request from the European Union, which then supported sanctions against Iran. Today Europe is working hard to keep Barack Obama's nuclear deal alive and is opposed to suspending Iran from SWIFT. But access to global economic services is an earned reward, and no state that actively supports terrorism and foreign insurgencies ought to have it.

So dedicated are the Europeans to preserving the economic benefits that are flowing Iran's way from the nuclear

deal that they're proposing various ways to avoid U.S. sanctions. Among them: an alternative to SWIFT. Such a vehicle would not have access to the U.S. financial system and might still be subject to U.S. sanctions, but it would allow the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism to continue engaging in cross-border financial transactions.

As the November 4 deadline approaches, there are reports that suggest some in the Trump administration, led by Treasury secretary Steven Mnuchin, are opposed to pressuring SWIFT to expel Iran in the face of strident E.U. opposition. This is no time for such diplomacy. The mullahs have been anything but diplomatic since signing the 2015 deal and should not be allowed to drive a wedge between the United States and Europe.

It's true, of course, that cutting Tehran off from SWIFT will severely damage the country's economy and punish many Iranians who aren't complicit in the regime's malign behavior. But the country's rulers bear the responsibility for that pain. A financially crippled Iran would find it much harder to fund subversive proxies and wreak havoc across the region. Keeping Iranian banks connected to SWIFT, meanwhile, would make it that much easier for the regime to outlast the U.S. pressure campaign.

The fundamental mistake of the 2015 Iran deal was that it ignored the regime's support for international terrorism. The current administration was right to scuttle the deal, but it must embrace its own logic and put a full stop to Iran's terror-imperialism. ♦



CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

Brussels Against the Italians

Italy's coalition government came to power in May partly by winning an economic argument: The tight-budget "austerity" policies promoted by the European Union in the wake of the financial crises that began a decade ago were a sucker's game, at least for slow-moving economies like Italy's. Now the government finds itself in a battle of nerves with the rest of the 28-country E.U. that will test whether any government dedicated to this proposition can long endure.

The battle is over Italy's budget, which fulfills most of the campaign promises of the two governing parties—the anti-corruption Five Star Movement and the anti-immigration League, each of them frequently described as "populist." Both parties are anathema to the politicians and economists who have charted Italy's course since the end of the Cold War, but voters, almost 60 percent of them, love the new budget. It includes a modest version of the guaranteed basic income promised by the Five Star Movement and a reversal of certain reforms (including later retirement ages) meant to trim the Italian welfare state. It uses a few tricks that will be familiar to Americans who have studied Obamacare—delaying the implementation of the basic income and early retirements, for instance, so that a full time-period of taxation gets balanced against a partial time-period of spending.

Italy submitted its budget to the European Commission in Brussels on October 15, and a week later the commission rejected it. What this means is hard to say. The commission has never rejected a budget before. On the



one hand, the budget has passed Italy's parliament. It is law. On the other hand, when Greece went bankrupt in 2010 and 2011, and almost dragged the whole European economy down with it, the E.U. claimed the right to correct its members' budgets. Up till now, the point of submitting a budget to the E.U. Commission has been to ensure that countries do not run deficits over 3 percent.

In rejecting the budget, the commission demanded revisions and gave Italy three weeks to make them. Matteo Salvini, leader of the League, and Luigi di Maio, the Five Star leader, say they will not waver. That could lead, around Thanksgiving, to an "excessive deficit procedure" under which the E.U. could fine Italy up to 0.5 percent of its GDP. (This idea of discouraging deficits by exacerbating them has been met with an understandable skepticism by both economists and politicians.)

But there is a twist to this story. Italy's projected deficit is only 2.4 percent. While it does exceed the 0.8 percent the government promised last spring, it is well below the 3 percent threshold at which the E.U. has traditionally claimed a right to intervene. In fact, other countries' much larger deficits have been waved through—in 2012, France had a deficit of 4 percent and Spain of 9 percent. Italy has long run a tight budgetary ship. It even has a "primary surplus"—that is, it takes in more than it pays out except for its debt servicing costs.

The problem is that those costs are crippling. Three decades ago, Italy emerged from the Cold War more deeply indebted than any major Euro-

pean economy. But if this means the country is to be more trammled in its freedom to make economic policy than its fellow E.U. members, then perhaps the grounds for political union were not there in the first place.

In the Italian government's view, the snobs in Brussels are less interested in upholding fiscal responsibility than in punishing a democracy for choosing wrong. There are reasons for this distrust. At the height of the euro crisis in 2011, Italy's prime minister Silvio Berlusconi was replaced by economist Mario Monti after Berlusconi reneged on structural reforms desired by financial experts *outside* Italy. The process involved the collusion of Italy's ex-Communist president Giorgio Napolitano with German chancellor Angela Merkel. Days earlier, Merkel and then-French president Nicolas Sarkozy had moved in a similar way to oust Greek prime minister George Papandreou.

National sovereignty is the main thing at stake here, but it is not the only thing. The E.U.'s Greek "bailout" destroyed the country's economy and many of its social institutions. Greece wound up in a weaker and more dependent position than before the bailout. Some Italians believe their own country was similarly damaged after 2011, in order to provide a more propitious set of economic arrangements for Germany. They make up a good deal of the support that went to Five Star and the League in this year's elections, and they are likely to interpret the European Commission's moves as an attempt to rally debt-traders and bonding agencies to bully Italy into submission. The gap between Italy's interest rates and Germany's—*lo spread*, as it is called in Rome—widened in April and May as the government was being formed, and it has widened further in recent weeks, as Moody's lowered its rating of Italian debt.

It is a dangerous game, and sides are forming in unpredictable ways. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the French leftist who took almost a fifth of the vote in last year's presidential elections, has little ideological sympathy for the Italian government. He nonetheless warned that in attacking the budget of a state that had respected all its treaty responsibilities, the commission was entering uncharted waters. "This is an attack on popular sovereignty," Mélenchon said,

"whatever we might think of the choices [Italy] has made."

If you take away a government's authority over its budgets, you have taken away much of that government's reason to exist. The Italian budget battle thus brings out the destabilizing ambiguity of the E.U.: It is a proudly proclaimed project for the building of a future European nation-state. But to the same end, it is an underhanded project for the destruction of the existing nation-states that make it up. ♦

COMMENT ♦ MARK HEMINGWAY

Firing extinguished: a victory for the First Amendment

On October 15, the city council of Atlanta voted to pay \$1.2 million to the city's former fire chief Kelvin Cochran. The settlement comes after a federal court ruled last December in Cochran's favor in a lawsuit he filed against the city for suspending him in 2014 and firing him early the next year. The city claimed Cochran had violated procedures for pursuing outside work; Cochran was convinced that he had been fired because of views he expressed in a short devotional book aimed at Christian men, *Who Told You That You Were Naked?* (the question is drawn from the book of Genesis) that grew out of classes he taught at his church—in particular, two sentences that described homosexuality as sinful behavior.

The U.S. District Court for the northern district of Georgia agreed with Cochran, noting, "This policy would prevent an employee from writing and selling a book on golf or badminton on his own time and, without prior approval, would subject him to firing. It is unclear to the Court how such an outside employment would ever affect the City's ability to function, and the City provides no evidence to justify it," adding, "This does not pass constitutional muster."

Cochran's victory is the latest in a long string of legal battles that have ended badly for opponents of religious liberty. Cochran was represented by the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Christian legal group that racked up two Supreme Court victories earlier this year. For years liberal advocacy groups such as the ACLU have argued, often with some measure of hyperbole or dishonesty, that "religious liberty" is a code word for discrimination. But in recent years, courts are recognizing the arguments of religious-freedom advocates, particularly the claim that you can't separate an expression of personal religious beliefs from constitutionally protected free speech.

Kelvin Cochran's life is a compelling American success story. Born to a single mother, he grew up in poverty before becoming a fireman. He rose through the ranks and eventually became fire chief in his hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana (the first African-American to hold that position), before becoming fire chief of Atlanta in 2008. He left Atlanta in 2009 to become the U.S. fire administrator, the top federal firefighting official, in the Obama administration. Atlanta mayor Kasim Reed, a self-styled progressive who later orchestrated Cochran's firing, said

he "begged" Cochran to return to his job as fire chief in Atlanta in 2010, which he did. In 2012, Cochran was named Fire Chief of the Year by *Fire Chief Magazine*.

Cochran knows a thing or two about bigotry as well: When he was one of the first black men to join the Shreveport department, he was made to sleep in separate quarters from the white firefighters. "It gave me a conviction that should I ever be in a position of leadership, that I would not allow anyone to have the same experience I had as a minority," Cochran says of the experience.

Since Cochran's qualifications were not in doubt and the city's own investigation concluded he had engaged in no discriminatory behavior, the federal court found that the city of Atlanta's eventual justification for firing Cochran (the existence of "pre-clearance" rules governing the speech of city employees) was unpersuasive.

Cochran's case isn't just a win for religious freedom but for free speech generally. Like the Supreme Court's decision this year in *National Institute of Family and Life Advocates v. Becerra*, which rejected the state of California's effort to require religiously oriented crisis pregnancy centers to read what Justice Clarence Thomas called a "government drafted script" telling women about abortion, Cochran's case highlights the importance of protecting the right of employees to express their beliefs on all manner of topics.

But these rights remain at risk. Alarming, four justices on the High Court approved of California's efforts to compel speech. If much of the institutional left in this country believes that Kelvin Cochran can be told to shut up and crisis pregnancy centers can be told what to say, then let's at least be honest about what's happening: An influential number of activists want to eliminate the First Amendment as an obstacle to achieving their vision of social equality. Proponents of religious liberty are going to need to keep amassing popular support and racking up significant legal victories to counter them. ♦

The good news about socialism

When Bernie Sanders entered the presidential race in 2015, his candidacy seemed like a joke. He was an independent senator from Vermont running as a “democratic socialist.” With his mad-scientist white hair, he looked like just another crank.

But then a funny thing happened: Campaigning almost entirely on the issues, Sanders nearly won the Democratic nomination. While some of his support came from liberal opposition to the Clinton sleaze machine, his rants against corporate power and calls to raise the minimum wage, make college tuition free, and implement universal health care resonated.

Nobody’s laughing now. Democrats nationwide largely support Sanders’s hard-left agenda. And more and more people, particularly young people, tell pollsters they’re open to the idea of voting for a socialist. In a poll this summer, Democrats by a 10-point margin said they prefer socialism to capitalism. For decades, the Marxists in our universities have been salivating over the impending arrival of “late-stage capitalism,” in which the inequalities of free enterprise awaken the masses to our own oppression and leave us clamoring for an enlightened government to step in, take control, and fix everything.

The tide has certainly shifted against free enterprise, an economic system that has lifted countless masses out of abject poverty, and toward socialism, whose track record is far worse, to put it charitably. There are plenty of potential explanations, from the hostility of university professors toward free enterprise to the villainous portrayal of business leaders in entertainment to anger at the lack of

comeuppance for the banking system after the 2008 crash. The younger generation also seems curiously unwilling to credit capitalism with the creation of modern conveniences they hold so dear. There’s a reason text messaging and Netflix didn’t emerge from Cuba or North Korea.

Socialism is traditionally defined as the government owning the means of production, and it just as traditionally leads to authoritarianism. Maybe it’s cool to think of oneself as a socialist now that we are decades away from Stalin’s Great Terror and Mao’s Great Leap Forward. With a body count in the millions, you’d think “socialism” would be hard to rebrand. But thanks to Bernie, being a socialist is in vogue.



One of the ironies of the Trump presidency is that his political opponents, while decrying his impetuosity and authoritarian tendencies, happen to favor modifying our political and economic system into one that invests more power in Washington and its leaders—who could very well turn out to be impetuous and have authoritarian tendencies. Decentralized government power, in the parlance of today’s politics, is a norm that shouldn’t be broken.

The Sandernistas say that “democratic socialism” is a more benign variant, akin to what is practiced in Scandinavia. Yes, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark are clean, prosperous, and beautiful countries with robust social safety nets. They are also small and not particularly socialist. Their tax rates may be high, but they have thriving private sectors and no minimum wage laws. Their economies rank as “mostly free,” the same category as the

United States, in the Heritage Foundation’s annual index of economic freedom. As the Danish prime minister noted in a speech at Harvard in 2015: “Some people in the U.S. associate the Nordic model with some sort of socialism. Therefore, I would like to make one thing clear. Denmark is far from a socialist planned economy. Denmark is a market economy.”

If there’s any good news about the increasing allure of socialism in the United States, it is that the problem stems less from a failure to consider the dangers of centralized power than from basic ignorance. In September, Gallup asked Americans to define “socialism.” The most popular response was “equality” (23 percent). In second place was the traditional definition, “government ownership or control” (17 percent). Providing enhanced benefits and services came in third at 10 percent. Six percent defined socialism as “talking to people” or “being social,” which means 4 out of 10 Americans think socialism is just some form of making nice. That’s a big switch from 1949, when Gallup found that respondents identified socialism as state control of the economy over “equality” by a three-to-one margin.

Eugene V. Debs ran for president five times on the Socialist ticket a century ago. He preached the overthrow of the capitalist system and returning the means of production to workers (and was jailed for sedition in 1918). Harry Truman nationalized the country’s steel mills in 1952, which was a clear example of government taking control of the means of production. (The Supreme Court declared Truman’s move illegal.) We’re not approaching such extremes.

Capitalism will always result in some people having more than others. But those who have the least have still far higher standards of living than they used to. Large majorities of those living in poverty in the United States own cellphones, computers, televisions, cars, washers and dryers. Breaking out of poverty might not be easy, but it’s possible in our free-enterprise system. The glory of capitalism: opportunity. It sure beats all the alternatives. ♦

Don't Blame Him

The voter-suppression rap on Georgia's Brian Kemp is unfair. BY MICHAEL WARREN

Brian Kemp, the Republican candidate for governor of Georgia and two-term secretary of state, is a husband and father of three, his ads never fail to emphasize. He's also a "politically incorrect conservative," according to a TV spot that featured him revving the engine of his pickup truck, which he might use to "round up criminal illegals and take 'em home" himself. "Yup, I just said that," he smirked into the camera. Kemp, if you haven't guessed, is a Trump-loving Republican, and the feeling is mutual. "He has my Strong Endorsement," the president tweeted on October 20.

Kemp also risks being the first Republican candidate for governor to lose in Georgia since 1998. His Democratic opponent Stacey Abrams has kept the race tight, and Kemp is just two percentage points ahead in the *Real Clear Politics* average of polls. If she wins, Abrams would be the first black female governor in the country and the vanguard in a years-long effort by Democrats to turn Georgia blue. The closeness of the race and the conventions of contemporary politics have revealed Kemp to be a bit of a demagogue. He's unfairly accused Abrams of voting in the state legislature to protect the ability of sex offenders to live near schools and day-care centers. He's also uncharitably said Abrams has encouraged illegal immigrants to vote.

The Abrams camp, in return, unfairly accuses Kemp of being a

racially motivated vote suppressor. At an October 23 debate, Abrams charged Kemp with creating an "atmosphere of fear" and claimed Georgia voters "have been purged, they have been suppressed, they have been scared." On October 12, several civil rights groups sued Kemp in his capacity as secretary of state over his enforcement

of the state's voter registration laws. The same day, the chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, Cedric Richmond of Louisiana, urged Attorney General Jeff Sessions to take oversight action against Kemp, saying the Republican candidate "has targeted black voters with laser precision."

The charge has been amplified with enthusiasm in the media, but it ultimately doesn't hold water. Let's unpack the indictment. Kemp's position as secretary of state makes him Georgia's chief elections officer. Around 53,000 voter registrations have been deemed "pending" by the state, the majority of which are for African-American and other minority voters. Meanwhile, there was a purge of a large number of inactive registrations from the voter rolls last year. Both are being cited as proof minority votes are being suppressed by the state official who happens to be running for governor.

In fact, what we see in Georgia is the result of a patchwork of federal, state, and local laws governing voter registration requirements and verification. First, consider the cache of pending voter registrations. A federal law passed by Congress in 2002 requires states to maintain an official

voter registration list and to regularly remove duplicate or ineligible voters. In Georgia, individual counties administer elections, including voter registration, but the secretary of state's office manages the verification process for those registrations.

In 2010, the Department of Justice cleared Georgia's process, which requires voters to submit either a driver's license number that can be verified by the state or a Social Security number that can be verified by the feds. Six years later, the NAACP and other civil-rights groups sued the state over this process, arguing it was too restrictive. Kemp's office settled, and in 2017 the Republican-controlled general assembly modified the verification process in line with the settlement. The principle remains the same: Certain relevant information (like last name, first initial of first name, and address) must match exactly with the appropriate database. If there's a mismatch, voters are informed by their county elections officials and have 26 months to fix the incorrect information. Meanwhile, their registrations are designated "pending."

An October report by the Associated Press found more than 53,000 voter registrations pending in Georgia, most of which are the result of a mismatch in information. The AP also reported that 70 percent of pending applications belong to African Americans. But Kemp's campaign and the secretary of state's office have pushed back on the idea that this means suppressing votes. A department spokeswoman, Candice Broce, notes that every eligible voter with a pending status can still vote, early or on Election Day, simply by showing up to the proper polling place and providing a driver's license or other identifying card, as required of all voters by state law. This act alone would allow the person to vote on a regular (not provisional) ballot.

How does a "mismatch" happen? Most often, by human error. Perhaps a county elections official made a typo. One Georgia woman who discovered her registration was pending was featured prominently in the AP's report.



Brian Kemp

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According to the secretary of state's office, the first letter of her last name was missing in her registration form.

There might not be much to a story about sloppy data entry, but the racial disparity is arresting. Black voters make up about 30 percent of Georgia's electorate—so how do they account for 70 percent of this pending pile? The secretary of state's office doesn't have a complete answer, but there is reason to think racial bias isn't a primary factor. That's thanks to an investigation into a nonprofit voter registration initiative called the New Georgia Project, which seeks to register minority voters. In 2014, elections officials in more than a dozen counties issued complaints about possible forged applications and other problematic practices by New Georgia Project canvassers, prompting an investigation by the state elections board (a bipartisan commission Kemp chairs). To make things more complicated, the New Georgia Project was founded by Abrams.

As part of the investigation, which ended last year with no charges against the group, the secretary of state's office subpoenaed the New Georgia Project's list of registrations for 2014. According to Broce, 14 percent of the state's pending applications come from this list. One plausible explanation: The New Georgia Project uses paper forms exclusively (as opposed to online registration). That increases the opportunity for error—both on the original forms and when the information is keyed into the database.

Now what about the voter purges? An investigative piece by American Public Media reported that nearly 600,000 Georgia voters were removed from the rolls in 2017. Team Kemp has an explanation for that: A 2016 lawsuit brought by Common Cause and the NAACP over the state's voter list temporarily halted the biennial purge of inactive voters. After the lawsuit was thrown out, Georgia had two cycles' worth of inactive voters to remove from its list.

Many of these voters were dead, convicted felons, or had moved out of the state. But others—107,000, APM estimates—were kicked off

“because they had not decided to vote in prior elections.” The report admitted that while purging voters for this reason is legal, “voting rights advocates say [it] is a potential tool for voter suppression.”

That tool is the “use it or lose it” law, and Georgia is one of nine states to have adopted such a law since Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act in 1993. Here's how it works: If a registered voter does not vote in any election in Georgia for three consecutive years, he is considered to be inactive. This is a designation that's required by the 1993 National Voter Registration Act before a state can revoke a voter's registration. The voter is notified via a prepaid return postcard that he is inactive and can become active again in three ways: by voting again, by returning the notice, or by otherwise making contact with local elections officials. The inactive voter has an additional four years (or two federal election cycles) to reactivate his registration. The entire process takes seven consecutive years and doesn't require a registered voter to vote at all—only make some form of contact renewing the registration.

In June of this year, the Supreme Court overruled a lower court opinion on a similar law in Ohio and found such procedures are not unconstitutional. Justice Samuel Alito, writing the majority opinion, argued that federal law prohibits failure to vote as the “sole criterion” for revoking a registration. But Ohio's “use it or lose it” law, like Georgia's, includes the return notice process, which the majority concluded was fully in line with federal law. All of which is to say that the “purges” attributed to Kemp are in keeping with state and federal law, passed by duly elected representatives.

Finally, there are the numbers to consider: In Kemp's eight years as secretary of state, black voter registration in Georgia has gone up every cycle, with an overall increase of 462,000 voters, or more than 31 percent, between 2010 and 2018. That outpaces white voter registration both in real numbers and as a percentage of all voters.

Black voter turnout has been consistently around 50 percent for midterm federal elections and 70 percent during presidential years.

Kemp hasn't helped his own case. He's referred to critics of the state's voter registration laws as “outside agitators”—a phrase that recalls the rhetoric of white segregationists. He has also tried to turn the tables on Abrams, arguing that a recent remark she made about the “blue wave” of Georgians, including undocumented immigrants, was a call for illegal aliens to vote in the midterm election.

The merit of Georgia's voter registration laws is hardly beyond debate. Kemp cites concerns about voter fraud as a reason to implement tough voter maintenance, but according to the APM report, “Georgia officials have pursued 19 election fraud cases in the past two decades” and just 7 of them resulted in convictions. States have broad discretion to implement their own election laws within the federal framework, but perhaps Georgia's “use it or lose it” and “exact match” laws are more onerous than Georgians prefer. And given that systemic suppression of black voters happened in Georgia in living memory, there's an argument that more liberal registration laws are a corrective to perceived or real racial bias. Considering Georgia's volatile racial history, a reasoned debate about the efficacy of the state's laws may be in order.

But casting Kemp as an agent of blanket disenfranchisement is not only unfair but counterproductive. If Kemp edges out Abrams by just a few thousand votes—a quite plausible outcome, given the polls—the perception that Kemp suppressed more than enough minority votes to put him over the top could threaten the legitimacy of the election in the minds of many Georgia voters. Kemp's critics argue this is precisely why a spotlight on the registration issue is so important. But without the context and with hyperbolic rhetoric, the claims of voter suppression aren't much different from the demagoguery Democrats decry from the likes of Kemp and Donald Trump. ♦

A Born Candidate

But don't call Missouri's Josh Hawley a 'golden boy.' BY FRED BARNES

Ballwin, Mo.

In politics, when a candidate is called a “golden boy” it's usually not a compliment. More often than not, it means he has been elevated to a position he didn't deserve, through help from party bigwigs or big donors.

The press is primed to target such candidates. And when it is looking for flaws—the more embarrassing the better—it can usually find some. Republicans, far more than Democrats, are targets of this treatment because the media love to poke holes in Republican candidates.

This brings us to Missouri's Senate race. Missouri is a red state. President Trump won here by nearly 19 percentage points in 2016. Nonetheless, Democratic incumbent Claire McCaskill, 65, was regarded as highly competitive in her bid for reelection. She is tough and resourceful, and her campaign is massively well financed.

Republicans were apoplectic when she won in 2012. She ran ads in the GOP primary—yes, the other party's primary—that boosted congressman Todd Akin, the weakest Republican aspirant. He won the primary and then lost ignominiously to McCaskill.

To avoid a repeat, four prominent Republicans intervened. In July 2017, they addressed a public letter to Josh Hawley, 38, the state attorney general, urging him to run against McCaskill. The four included two who'd been senator and governor (John Ashcroft, Kit Bond) and two former senators (John Danforth, Jim Talent). At



Hawley and Trump, September 21

first leery, Hawley then acquiesced.

You can see where this is heading. Hawley won the primary and became a “golden boy.” And the onslaught began. In May, *Politico* called him “lackadaisical” and headlined its story “GOP golden boy mails it in.” In July, the *New York Times* reported Democrats and Republicans were saying “his swift rise made him a political opportunist who was looking ahead to a Senate bid when he ran for attorney general.” There's no evidence for this accusation.

It's at this point an unexpected thing happened. Hawley defied the golden boy stereotype. He emerged as an impressive and likable candidate. He campaigned effectively. He did well in the first televised debate with

McCaskill, put her on the defensive time after time in their second debate, and did it again in the third. And as he moved ahead in polls, the golden boy tag faded. The press and critics had been wrong.

He never fit the label in the first place. A golden boy in politics is supposed to be an intellectual lightweight. Hawley isn't—a point made by the party leaders. He graduated from Stanford and Yale Law School and served as a clerk to Chief Justice John Roberts. He met his future wife, Erin, at the High Court, where she was a fellow clerk. For all his education, Hawley is an old-fashioned conservative. He's a champion of his state. He's running as one “who's of our way of life, who knows it, who loves it, and will represent it.”

“We are convinced that you would be more than an additional vote for a functioning Senate,” the four leaders

wrote in their letter. “You are a constitutional scholar. You have studied constitutional law, written about it, and taught it at law school. You understand that advocacy for a functioning legislative branch is the essence of what it means to be a conservative . . . and [you have] the ability to be a leading voice for the constitutional order, not only in Missouri but nationally.”

That appeal would apply to few other potential candidates and never to a politician like McCaskill. “I think Senator McCaskill would be a tremendous senator from Hollywood,” Hawley told me. She has been endorsed by a bevy of movie stars.

By the third and final debate on October 25, McCaskill looked outclassed and worn out by the pressure of Hawley's campaign. She appeared to lose her way as the debate neared the end. She hesitated to find the right words. Her message was disorganized.

Hawley's wasn't. He was disciplined and relentless. He returned again and again to his message: that McCaskill's time is past and she doesn't represent what the people of Missouri want. She's become a liberal hack. The Republican landslide in 2016 showed that.

Hawley linked the senator to opposition to Trump's priorities. She voted against his tax cut, funding for the border wall, replacing Obamacare, confirmation of Supreme Court justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh.

Hawley's consistent support for the Trump agenda is enough to make Democrats and Never Trump Republicans weep. He doesn't quibble publicly with Trump on any matters. It's as if he's adopted the pre-Trump position of never getting on the wrong side of the president of one's own party.

If Hawley has any qualms with the Trump presidency, he's skillful at hiding them. Take the trade war with China. His position is: “If we're going to be in a trade war, I'm for winning.” Since Missouri is a farm state, “I would pick Missouri farmers as winners. I want to pick China as losers.”

Nor does Hawley acknowledge defeats. Rather than accept the Democratic charge that Republicans would do away with mandatory health

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insurance for those with previously existing conditions, he has his own plan for keeping these patients insured.

A few months ago, Missouri voters killed a right-to-work law. Since Hawley believes in supporting the will of Missourians, does he now oppose a national right-to-work law? Hawley wiggled out, saying he'd never considered that proposal.

But Hawley gives McCaskill no wiggle room. "She does not represent this state any more," he said in the second debate. "She does not represent the people of Missouri any more. She has not accepted what the people said in 2016. She has not worked with this president or this administration on any major priority. She does not vote with this state anymore."

McCaskill, Hawley said, "has been in politics 36 years. She's been in the Senate 12 years. She's become a party-line liberal. She said she'd be independent. She said she'd be bipartisan. But she hasn't been."

Hawley insists McCaskill's reputation for willingness to compromise is a myth. "She's had many opportunities to cross the party aisle" to support Trump's plan for border security. "She has voted no on wall funding. She has mocked the idea of it. She rejected a Dreamers compromise plan because of wall funding. It's the party line over and over and over."

While losing on issues and doubling down on Trump, whom she criticized sharply in the third debate, McCaskill has one advantage: money. Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer has made her reelection the top Democratic priority in the midterm election. And she has raised more than Hawley.

But there are a couple of twists. Campaigns only need to have enough money to get their message out, and Hawley's done that. The latest quarterly report shows that Hawley had more on hand for the closing weeks of the campaign than McCaskill did. A golden boy wouldn't have thought of that.

States change politically, few as dramatically as Missouri. But great candidates always have an advantage. That's what Hawley is counting on. ♦

As Goes Nevada?

A close Senate race may hold clues for 2020.

BY JOHN McCORMACK

Las Vegas

It's a little after 10:00 A.M. on a sunny 70-degree Saturday when first-term congresswoman Jacky Rosen, Nevada's Democratic Senate candidate, takes the stage at a rally outside of the Culinary Workers Union Local 226, just off the Vegas Strip. "I know it's early," Rosen, dressed in a pale blue suit, tells the crowd. "But I always start a rally off like this."

The 61-year-old member of Congress proceeds, to

the beat of a 23-year-old song by the rapper Coolio, to say: *Ain't no party like a Democratic party 'cause a Democratic party don't stop.*

It's not quite as cringe-inducing as the time Hillary Clinton urged voters in 2016 to "Pokémon Go to the polls," but the Democratic party rap would've been only slightly less coolio if Mitt Romney had recited it.

Another problem is that there isn't much of a party gathered here to kick off the first day of early voting in Nevada, despite the fact that the Nevada Democrats brought in former vice president Joe Biden, Nevada senator Catherine Cortez Masto, gubernatorial candidate Steve Sisolak, Rosen, and a mariachi band.

When Donald Trump speaks less than an hour later to a crowd of thousands alongside incumbent Nevada senator Dean Heller in rural Elko County, a seven-hour drive north of Vegas, he mocks Biden. "Biden, they just said the count: 193 people showed up," Trump says. "And we love Elko,

but in all fairness, it is easier to draw a crowd in Las Vegas." As Trumpian embellishments go, it's not far off: The union said there were more than 500 rallygoers in Vegas, which was itself an exaggeration. In any event, in 2016, about 800,000 people voted

in Clark County (home to Vegas); 18,000 voted in Elko County.

Nevada is widely seen as a must-win state for Democrats if they're going to take back the Senate in 2018. Heller is the only Senate



Jacky Rosen

Republican up this year in a state won by Hillary Clinton in 2016, and if Democrats can't win here polling suggests it will be extremely difficult for them to net the two seats necessary to control the Senate. With a blue wave likely to sweep over the House of Representatives, many analysts expected Rosen would've put this race away by now. But on October 25, Heller led Rosen by 1.7 points in the *Real Clear Politics* average of polls.

Why Rosen hasn't run away with it in Nevada isn't entirely clear. She is not a bad candidate. She's relentlessly focused on delivering her message about keeping Obamacare's rules for preexisting medical conditions. "It's time to repeal and replace Dean Heller" is one of her favorite canned lines. But she isn't very well known or experienced. "Nobody knew who she was until three years ago, until the Democrats got a little bit desperate trying to find a candidate to run for Congress," says Jon Ralston, the veteran Nevada political reporter and editor of the *Nevada Independent*. Rosen, a Chicago native, moved to Las Vegas after graduating from the University

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ETHAN MILLER / GETTY

of Minnesota; she started as a waitress and later did some consulting work for Nevada businesses. Ralston says Rosen was “Harry Reid’s 17th choice in 2016, and I may be being generous there.”

The good news for Rosen is that unenthusiastic votes will count just as much as enthusiastic votes, and the Nevada Democratic machine has a good record of dragging voters to the polls. In 2010, Reid trailed Republican Sharron Angle by 2.7 points in the final *Real Clear Politics* polling average; he won by 5.6 points. Democrats did a few points better than their polling in 2012, when Heller eked out a 1.2-point victory while Obama bested Romney by 6.7 points. And in 2016, Donald Trump had a 0.8-point lead in Nevada polling; Hillary Clinton beat him by 2.4 points.

It’s not unusual for polls to be off by a few points, but many believe the consistent Democratic overperformance is due to the union machine turning unlikely voters into actual voters. “Today, we’ve got about 250 hospitality workers who have taken a leave of absence from their union jobs,” Bethany Khan, spokeswoman for the 57,000-worker strong Culinary Workers Union Local 226, tells me after the October 20 rally. “They’re in the field every day, maybe 9 to 12 hours a day, and six days a week.”

The number of union campaign workers is about double that of a typical midterm, Khan says: “It’s the same as a presidential year, which is unprecedented.” But Ralston says Republicans have been working to catch up. The Republican National Committee, he notes, “really came in here early last year and started erecting a foundation I’ve never seen here.” The RNC has 36 full-time paid staffers and a network of 2,000 unpaid volunteers in Nevada.

The unions may still be strong enough to pull a generic Democrat like Rosen across the finish line in Nevada. But it’s easy to see why Rosen’s campaign is not firing up the progressive left the way that, say, Senate candidate Beto O’Rourke’s campaign is in Texas.

While Rosen wants to take a half-step toward single-payer health care (a Medicaid “buy-in”), O’Rourke is all-in on a single-payer “Medicare

for all” plan. While Rosen awkwardly recites rap lines, O’Rourke rocks out on his guitar to squeals of delight from his fans. (O’Rourke, who skateboarded at a campaign event last month, is a dorky guy’s idea of a cool guy—much like Trump is a poor person’s idea of a rich person.)

O’Rourke scratches just about every progressive itch. On October 18, he said he believes President Trump should be impeached. The next day, I asked Rosen if she too thought Trump had committed impeachable acts.

“You know, I guess we can see where the Mueller investigation takes us, and we’ll let that follow out to its completion. And if it shows something there, then I guess we’ll take it from there,” Rosen replied. “But right now what we have to do—look, we have I think it’s 18 days now till the election. I have my blinders on, I’m working hard for Nevada. I have a job in Congress that me and my staff are still doing, and I’m working hard to win this election to represent the people of Nevada. Going forward, we’re going to look towards 2020, and hopefully we’re going to put forth a good candidate, get out the vote, and that’s how we’ll take back the presidency.” That’s a long way of saying: Don’t bet on it.

Back in June, liberal megadonor Tom Steyer said that politicians like Rosen were afraid they would “enrage Republicans and drive them to the ballot box in November” by talking about impeachment, according to the *Washington Free Beacon*. Nothing that has happened since, including Michael Cohen’s pleading guilty to campaign finance law violations, has changed Rosen’s wait-and-see stance on impeachment. A Suffolk poll from September shows why: Nevada voters opposed impeaching Trump 60 percent to 36 percent. When Biden was asked about the possibility of a Democratic House impeaching Trump, he told CBS: “I hope they don’t. I don’t think there’s a basis for doing that right now.”

While Rosen is closely following the mainstream Democratic playbook, Heller is tightly hugging Trump. At the rally in the mining town of Elko, Heller set a 24-karat standard for sycophancy,

saying, “Mr. President, you know a little bit about gold. In fact, I think everything you touch turns to gold.” The night before the rally, the moderator at the only Nevada Senate debate this year recalled Heller saying in October 2016 that he was “100 percent against Clinton, 99 percent against Trump.” Heller responded: “I don’t agree with everything he says, but I do agree with most of what he does.”

In Nevada, the economy remains a source of strength for Republicans and a challenge for Democrats. At the debate, Heller argued that he helped create the economic success by drafting the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. Rosen hit Heller for adding \$1.8 trillion to the deficit with the tax cut, but when asked after the debate if she’d vote to repeal it, she said: “No, I think we need to go back and reform it bit by bit.”

When Barack Obama appeared at a rally with Rosen on October 22, he claimed credit for the current economy, saying: “When you hear all this talk about economic miracles, remember who started it.” When Biden spoke at Rosen’s rally, he identified a number of pocketbook issues—worker pay, education, the growing use of non-compete clauses in contracts—without specifying solutions. “Nobody—nobody—should have to work two jobs to make a living in the United States of America,” he said.

Biden also focused on Trump’s character and lack of decency. In an effort to reach disaffected Republicans, he cited columnists George Will and David Brooks on how Trump was undermining the values that define America. “This is not your father’s Republican party,” Biden said.

Despite its boring candidates, the Nevada Senate race is worth watching, and not just to see who will control the Senate. It could also send Democrats an important message about whether in 2020 they should be the party of Joe Biden or the party of Bernie Sanders. If Rosen’s mainstream message fails in Nevada, while staunch progressives win elsewhere, Democrats may conclude they’d be better off with a presidential candidate who paints in bold colors, not pale pastels. ♦

Bet Red for Senate

What the model shows.

BY DAVID BYLER

The 2018 Senate races come down to a battle between a near-immovable object and a strong, possibly unstoppable, force.

The immovable object is the map. In 2018, Democrats are defending 26 Senate seats (I'm counting Bernie Sanders and Angus King as Democrats) and Republicans are defending only 9. And in five of the states Democrats are defending (Montana, North Dakota, West Virginia, Missouri, and Indiana), Donald Trump won by a wide margin. It's very difficult for Republicans to lose with this sort of map.

But Democrats have a strong force on their side: anti-Trump sentiment. With two weeks to go, Trump's approval rating is 43 percent, and the Democrats lead by about 9 points in congressional generic ballot polls. In a presidential year, numbers like that would likely translate into a big disadvantage for Trump and down-ballot Republicans.

The analytical challenge is figuring out if anti-Trump sentiment is strong enough to overcome the GOP-friendly map—or if the Republicans will be able to exploit the map, adding to their 51-seat majority by defending their vulnerable seats and taking some red-state ones.

To that end, early this year I built a Senate forecast called SwingSeat. Every day, I feed this statistical system new head-to-head polling and other data (e.g., historical polling data, which states have incumbents running, past results in each state, presidential approval ratings, etc.), and the model spits out forecasts for every

race and for which party will control the chamber. We can use this model (which has been cranking away since June) to chart the outlook for Senate control and show how the race has evolved over time.

Forecast: likely Republican control with a chance of an upset

At the time of publication, SwingSeat projects Republicans are roughly 4-to-1 favorites to hold the Senate. The most likely result is 52 GOP seats, probably attained by holding Texas and Tennessee, unseating Heidi Heitkamp in North Dakota, and winning two more seats. The model isn't exactly sure where those wins come from—sometimes the GOP takes tossup states (like Nevada and Missouri), and sometimes it wins upsets in leans-Democratic states (like Indiana, Arizona, Florida, or Montana) or some combination of the two. Either way, per the model, 52 GOP seats is for now the best prediction.

But the spread of possible outcomes is quite wide, and a Democratic win is still plausible. If a few Republican candidates stumble at the last minute (remember Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock in 2012?), if the Democrats see a late surge, or if the polls have systematically underestimated the Democrats (as they underestimated Donald Trump in 2016 and Barack Obama in 2012), Democrats could take enough seats to win a majority.

The pivotal race seems to be Tennessee. If Democrats manage to hold all their seats except North Dakota and take Tennessee, Arizona, and Nevada, they'll win a narrow majority. And the model shows an outside chance that Republican losses could be worse (e.g., Democrats also hold North Dakota and/or pick up Texas or the Mississippi special Senate seat).

If the Democrats were to have such a truly exceptional night, they might end up with 52 or 53 seats. Those are far from the most likely outcomes, but we can't rule them out based on the data we've seen so far.

The model also thinks a GOP landslide is possible. In some simulations, the model reverses all those factors and imagines some Democratic faceplants (Kyrsten Sinema in Arizona and Heidi Heitkamp may be doing that right now), a last-minute improvement in Trump's numbers, and a polling error that works in the GOP's favor. In those cases, it's plausible that the GOP holds on to all its seats, adds North Dakota, Missouri, Indiana, Florida, and possibly another seat where the Democratic incumbent has been running strongly (e.g., Montana or West Virginia). The exact numbers vary, but a truly great Republican night could end with a GOP count in the mid-to-high 50s.

How the GOP got into the driver's seat

Earlier this year, the race for Senate control looked more competitive. The model put the GOP win probability a little below 60 percent (it's hovering around 80 percent right now) and projected that a 50-50 split (with Vice President Mike Pence breaking ties in favor of the GOP) was the likeliest result. But there was a real shift in mid-to-late September.

What happened? Why did the race move towards the Republicans? There are a few possible answers.

The most obvious is Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation fight. Right around the time that Christine Blasey Ford (who accused Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her when they were both teenagers) and Kavanaugh testified before Congress about the allegations, the Republican win probability began to climb. Much of this was due to movement in the red states. Marsha Blackburn's win probability in Tennessee began to climb then, as did Ted Cruz's in Texas. Polling has been sparse in North Dakota so it's hard to know how much Kavanaugh may have changed the numbers there. Still, it's worth noting that around

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the time of the hearings Republican Rep. Kevin Cramer suddenly started posting double-digit leads against Heidi Heitkamp.

But the Kavanaugh fight didn't change the dynamics of every race. West Virginia's Joe Manchin, the lone Democrat who voted for Kavanaugh, hasn't seen any slippage in his numbers (some of his most recent polls have been quite strong). The race between Democratic incumbent Joe Donnelly and Republican Mike Braun may be tightening in Indiana, but the model didn't see any major changes in that race until well after the Kavanaugh hearings. In Missouri, the race has remained tight before and after the hearings, and there hasn't been enough data in Montana to come to a firm conclusion either way. In the swing states, it's hard to discern any trend. Republicans have gained in Arizona and Nevada but lost ground in Florida, and those changes don't line up neatly with the Kavanaugh and Ford testimonies.

This pattern makes sense intuitively. The Kavanaugh fight likely fired up both sides. In some very red states (North Dakota, Tennessee, Texas) the GOP base is bigger,



Marsha Blackburn

so its enthusiasm overwhelmed any gains on the left. In other red states, Democrats with a stronger brand (Joe Donnelly, Jon Tester) seem to have weathered it, and Manchin may have benefited in West Virginia from supporting Kavanaugh. In more marginal states, any increase in Republican enthusiasm for Kavanaugh was likely met by increased Democratic enthusiasm against him. This doesn't explain Missouri, where the polls didn't move against Claire McCaskill, but it can account for much of the Kavanaugh-related movement (or lack thereof) elsewhere.

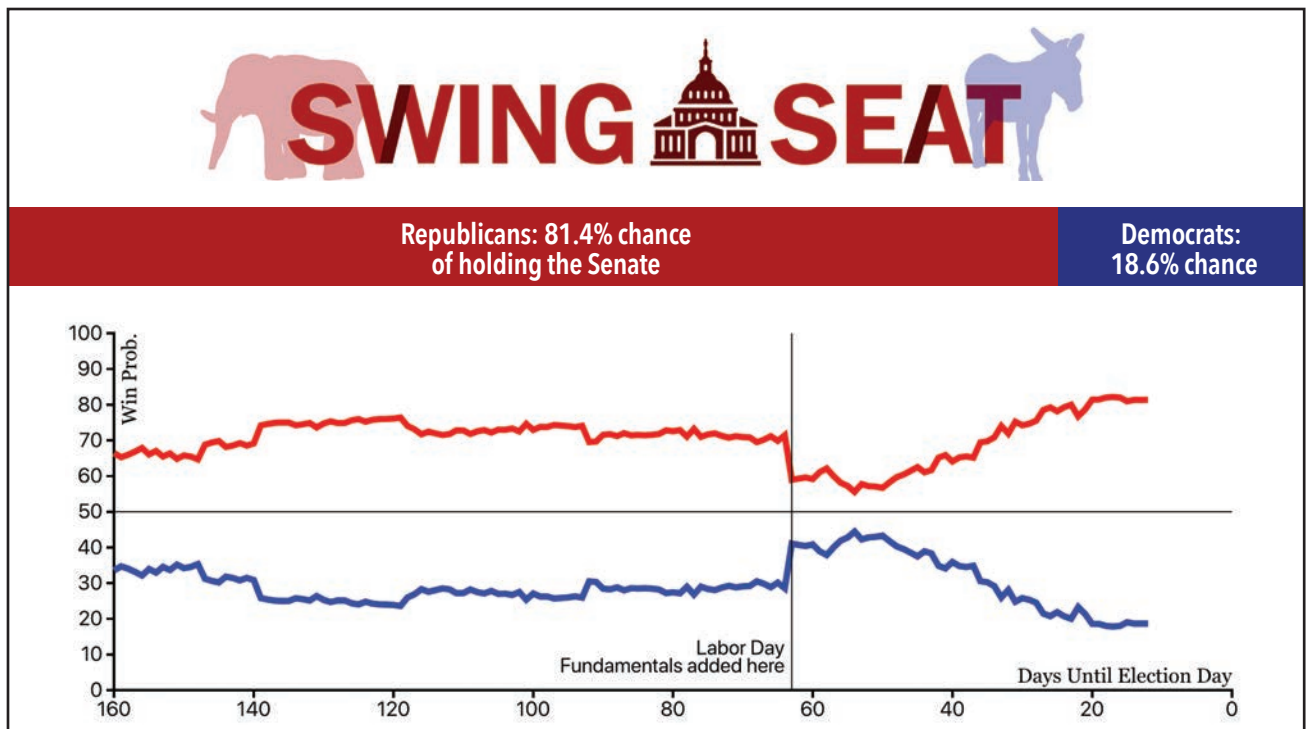
Kavanaugh explains a lot but doesn't explain everything. Martha McCally had started to gain ground in Arizona's Senate race before the Kavanaugh

hearing. Cruz, Kevin Cramer, Blackburn, and others have managed to stay strong after the Kavanaugh hearings left the front page. And Democratic senator Bill Nelson has been making last-minute gains in Florida.

In many cases, we're seeing races move toward what we might expect given the basic political conditions. Texas, Tennessee, and North Dakota are red states—it's possible that they were always going to head right and that the Kavanaugh spectacle gave them an extra push in that direction. This drift toward the fundamentals would explain why Arizona is tightening (the blueness of the year and the light redness of Arizona don't quite cancel out, but they come close) and why Nelson (a Democratic incumbent running in a purple state in a Democratic year) has been showing strength in Florida.

These fundamentals are a very rough guide. There's a wide range of possible outcomes, and the facts on the ground—what the candidates actually do and say—will matter a lot. But it's possible to see some of the current GOP advantage as something the Republicans were always going to have with these candidates, on this map. ♦

TOP: DREW ANGERER / GETTY; BOTTOM: THE WEEKLY STANDARD



A Thorn in the Kremlin's Side

Bellingcat's amateurs excel at the intelligence game. BY JENNA LIFHITS

It feels like the plotline of a Soviet comedy. Ruslan Boshirov and Alexander Petrov, whom British authorities have identified as the main suspects in the March poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter, appeared on Russia Today—a Kremlin-funded network—and claimed to be fitness consultants who only traveled to Salisbury, the scene of the attempted murder, to see its famous cathedral. “We were walking around and enjoying this English Gothic, this beauty,” explained Boshirov in the September broadcast.

It was over-the-top, absurd, and almost laughable—similar to the Kremlin’s disinformation efforts via Facebook and Twitter. Unfortunately for Vladimir Putin, the day after the interview, the investigative website *Bellingcat* reported that “Boshirov” and “Petrov” are aliases. Both men, the site showed, are Russian intelligence operatives.

Bellingcat has found itself at the heart of some of the Kremlin’s touchiest affairs over the last few years—starting with the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine in July 2014. A Russian missile killed the 298 passengers onboard and sparked months of disinformation and denials. The tragedy was “a massive catalyst both for the work of *Bellingcat* but also the development of the field of online open-source investigation as a whole,” says Eliot Higgins, *Bellingcat’s* founder, who is based in Leicester, England.

Higgins and a crew of volunteers

cut through the Kremlin’s falsehoods about what happened to the flight known as MH17, ferreting out the origins of the missile launcher used in the downing and tracking its journey into Ukraine. Obsessive curiosity is Higgins’s trademark. Blogging under the name Brown Moses, he became known for using YouTube videos to identify the weapons being used in the Syrian civil war. At *Bellingcat*, he has put together a roster of skilled contributors who specialize in sorting through just such information mazes.

One is Aric Toler, a Kansas City-based researcher with a background in Russian literature. Toler started “for fun” in 2014, helping on the MH17 reports. He ended up working on project after project and with *Bellingcat’s* website gaining popularity and funding, was brought on full-time. About half of the organization’s income comes from grants and donations from groups like the Open Society Foundations and the National Endowment for Democracy or from crowdfunding for specific research projects. The other half comes from *Bellingcat’s* workshops on how to responsibly leverage open-source information. Toler helps lead these five-day seminars for journalists, analysts, and others, which are offered in Western capitals as well as near Russia’s border in Georgia and Armenia.

Open-source reporting centers on analyzing publicly available material in an effort to pin down objective facts about an individual or incident. *Bellingcat* walks people through the process on its website, showing how you can verify a video or identify the

weapon used in an attack. The site’s reports detail how the underlying information was obtained. “The hope is that my audience will see the process of verification and investigation, learn from that, and participate, so they learn how verification works and become skilled investigators themselves,” Higgins told the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Even as the site staffs up, it continues to crowdsource its work. *Bellingcat* asks readers whether they can identify the location of a particularly obscure photo or video, for example, or figure out what time it was taken. “It’s kind of like a game, who can figure it out first,” says Toler. “Some people garden and some people do other things. It’s just a hobby that people have.”

In the course of its work, *Bellingcat* has sniffed out some unusual intelligence slipups. Back in April, Dutch authorities intercepted four Russian agents who were trying to hack into the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). The operation seemed sloppy. Dutch authorities found the men parked near the OPCW building in the Hague with hacking equipment, cash, and a laptop they had neglected to wipe. They also found a cab receipt documenting one agent’s ride from the barracks of the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence service, to the Moscow airport.

Months later, the names of the agents were released. In an effort to verify their identities, *Bellingcat* tracked down the registration for one of the officers’ cars—and came across the names of more than 300 people who had registered vehicles to the same address. This happened to be the address of the GRU’s cyberwarfare department. Using openly available information, *Bellingcat* had stumbled upon the identities of hundreds of Russian intelligence officers. An analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center, the Russian affiliate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, described it as the “largest intelligence blunder in modern Russian history.” “A lot of it is just laziness and very petty corruption,”

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Toler says of the agents using the address. “When they get pulled over for drunk driving or speeding tickets, they are just let go as soon as the cop sees the address.”

Bellingcat has been particularly effective in undermining Russia’s traditional coverup strategy in cases like the downing of MH17 or the attack on the Skripals: distraction and lies. “It’s not actually about making it harder for the Russians to spy,” says Mark Galeotti, a Russian intelligence expert at the Institute of International Relations Prague. “It’s more that it then makes it more embarrassing for the Russians and harder for them to cover up what they’ve been doing.”

Russia accuses *Bellingcat* of using leaks from British security services and Higgins himself of being an intelligence agent. In its attempts to rebut the site, the Kremlin has shown a tendency to recycle Internet memes and lift other easily debunked content from social media. “We had a little spat with them, and we asked for clarification,” says Toler. “They sent us this 20-page meandering diatribe against us with all this ‘evidence.’ We took some paragraphs from there and put them in Google. They had simply copied and pasted 10 pages from a LiveJournal post.”

Bellingcat’s work on the Salisbury attack has been particularly frustrating for the Russians. In addition to the usual suspects, officials as high-ranking as foreign minister Sergey Lavrov are directing accusations at the organization. Higgins observed on Twitter that the Kremlin’s campaign against the site in the wake of its Skripal reports is unlike anything he’s experienced in its four years. “Never seen them look so weak or emotional at such a high level,” he wrote. “Tells you a lot about the problems we’ve caused them with our Skripal work.”

Yet Russia’s angry response appears at odds with what 30-year CIA veteran Daniel Hoffman describes as the trail of “breadcrumbs” left behind in Salisbury. “Nobody does Novichok except the Soviets and Russians,” he says, referring to the class of chemical agents used in the attack. “You could



‘Boshirov,’ left, and ‘Petrov’ on *Russia Today*

have targeted Skripal in a bar, you could have run him over with a lorry, but that’s not what they did.” The traceability of the attack had a “purpose,” Hoffman says.

In exposing “Boshirov” and “Petrov” as spies rather than tourists, *Bellingcat* used human sources and public information. Boshirov, it turns out, is a decorated GRU colonel named Anatoliy Chepiga. *Bellingcat* began by assuming the two were intelligence operatives. With their Russian partner, the *Insider*, they spoke to former Russian military officers to figure out which training academy the two might have attended, sifted through yearbook photos for possible matches, and then searched leaked databases for any residential details. As the group got closer to identifying Boshirov as Chepiga, they obtained parts of Chepiga’s passport file, which included a photo of him.

“I don’t think [the Russians] necessarily were ready for, firstly, how quickly they were burned, secondly, the depth of information that was provided, and thirdly, and perhaps most gallingly, that it came from *Bellingcat*, rather than, say, MI5,” says Galeotti.

The reports kept on coming. In mid-October *Bellingcat* identified the second suspect, “Petrov,” as Alexander Mishkin. An investigator from the *Insider* visited the village where he was born in northern Russia. Mishkin, like Chepiga, received the Hero of Russia award, the country’s highest honor, from Putin. Some suggested he

received it for events related to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, or for helping ex-Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich escape the country that year. *Bellingcat* has established that Mishkin visited Ukraine a number of times between 2010 and 2013. Clearly, the man is not a fitness consultant who stayed in Salisbury only a short time because “the city was covered in snow.”

Russia and similarly closed societies will always try to control the narrative surrounding controversial events, but organizations like *Bellingcat* make that increasingly difficult. “It’s a growth industry,” says Steve Hall, who served as chief of Russian operations at the CIA, of open-source analysis. “You don’t have to have clandestine sources, you don’t have to have satellites, you don’t have to have NSA or GCHQ-style intercept capabilities to find out some good stuff.”

Organizations like *Bellingcat*, adds Galeotti, are making Russian intelligence uncertain about old certainties. “You might reckon that you’ve got a really strong legend, a really strong cover identity for your agents. You might reckon that you’ve covered your tracks,” he says. “And yet along comes this irritating collection of nerds, amateurs, and obsessives, which is probably, I’m sure, how they think of *Bellingcat*. All of a sudden, they are able to get around that—especially when they’re working with sources in Russia.” ♦

The Late Great State of Illinois

Political dysfunction as far as the eye can see

BY ANDREW FERGUSON

Payson, Ill.

As the sun rose, the first frost of the season flashed silver across the mowed fields of Adams County, Illinois, and the same small group of regulars gathered at the Fast Stop gas station in Payson. They get their coffee here most mornings before commencing the day's business. (One definition of progress: Americans used to worry about getting gas from a coffee shop; now we think nothing of getting coffee from a gas station.) Most of the guys are retired or close to it—firefighters, farmers, machinists. All but a couple of them are Republicans, and when they talk politics, as a visitor from out of town asked them to do one morning not long ago, they speak with an air of weary resignation. Like most people who've bothered to pay attention, they're pretty certain what will happen on November 6, when the state decides who its governor will be for the next four years—the incumbent Republican, Bruce Rauner, or the Democrat challenger, J. B. Pritzker.

"We were just debating whether there's such a thing as a conservative Democrat in Illinois anymore," one of the regulars told the visitor. "We decided there are not."

Another regular agreed. "Just about everybody around here owns a gun," he said. "And nowadays if you own a gun in Illinois, you're a Republican."

"Basically," said a third, "we're never going to win another election statewide. The numbers just don't add up. Which means not much is going to change."

Adams County will vote for Rauner on November 6, but it won't make a lot of difference, all agreed. Political scientists divide Illinois into three sections. First there's Chicago, which fills almost all of Cook County. Then there's the Chicago suburbs. And then there's everywhere else. Technically, everywhere else is called "downstate." Payson and Adams County are part of everywhere else.

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Chicago, politically, is as blue as a Cubs cap, of course. The once reliably red suburbs slip occasionally toward a pale periwinkle, though experts differ on when or whether the change will be permanent. Everywhere else, 90 percent of the state's landmass, is Republican. It's not unheard of in the last 20 years for a statewide Republican candidate to carry every county but one or two and still lose his race, so long as Cook County is one of the counties he loses.

Rauner's victory in 2014 was a kind of reverse fluke. He lost Cook County, he won the suburbs and downstate, and he still managed to win the election, though his popular vote barely rose above 50 percent. He became the first Republican governor since a man named George Ryan won in 1999. But this underestimates the uniqueness of Rauner's victory: Republicans and Democrats had rotated in and out of the governor's mansion in the capital of Springfield for 40 years without much change in the way the state was governed. A lot of them were crooks—four of Rauner's nine predecessors, including Ryan, went to jail. Alone among recent governors, Rauner ran as a radical: a reformer who promised to upend, in fact to reverse, the way his predecessors had governed the state. Staying out of jail would be a bonus.

Four years later, Rauner and his critics, Republicans and Democrats alike, agree that his efforts at reform haven't succeeded, although they differ on why this is so. Rauner's chief problem in his reelection, according to polls, is that his critics include two out of every three voters in the state. The three most recent surveys put his support at 30, 32, and 27 percent. Pritzker, a billionaire businessman from Chicago, runs 15 to 20 points ahead. "He's the most unpopular governor in the history of the state," says Christopher Z. Mooney, a political scientist at the University of Illinois at Chicago. No one disputes this. The question is what comes in the wake of Rauner's failure. And everyone seems to agree that Chicago, for all its crime and fiscal mismanagement, will thrive after its fashion, as one of the great cities of the world. And the suburbs will probably trail along after Chicago. But downstate . . .

"You just wonder whether this is our last chance," said one of the regulars at the Fast Stop.

Two more propositions everyone in Illinois seems to agree on: (1) The state is a mess, and (2) it shouldn't be.

Even in the rust belt, Illinois stands out for its economic sickliness. "We're not Greece or Puerto Rico yet," says Adam Schuster, an economist with the Illinois Policy Institute, a conservative think tank. "We're not *functionally* insolvent. But we're right on the doorstep." Estimates of the state government's debt vary wildly, but the watchdog group Truth in Accounting puts the number at \$216 billion, including unpaid current accounts and unfunded obligations such as pensions—especially pensions. This jaw-dropping figure places Illinois 48th out of the 50 states. Credit agencies rate Illinois's general obligation bonds at just above junk status. The state avoids junk ratings, analysts say, only because it retains the power to tax and thus, theoretically, the power to balance its books at a single confiscatory stroke. For practical purposes, in other words, Illinois's bonds are junk.

For the last two years the state operated without a budget, greatly adding to the general air of political and economic chaos. Finally a group of Republican legislators in the capital joined with the Democratic majority this summer to cobble a compromise. The governor vetoed it, and the veto was overridden. The bipartisan compromise raised the state income tax rate from 3.75 to 4.95 percent—the reason for the governor's veto. Among the 50 states, Illinois's income tax rate is only middling, ranking from 25th to 36th depending on who's doing the counting, but overall its total average tax burden, according to the economic research firm WalletHub, is the worst in the country. A home-owning family in Illinois earning the U.S. median income of \$55,000 can expect to pay 14.89 percent of that to the state. For comparison's sake, they would pay 11.86 percent if they moved next door to Indiana and just 5.67 percent for number one Alaska. Only New Jersey—New Jersey!—has higher property taxes. In many Illinois municipalities it's not unusual for owners of a house assessed in the \$150,000-\$200,000 range to be paying more in property taxes than in principal and interest on their mortgage.

After he laid out all these unhappy facts with tables and charts at his office at Bradley University's Foster College of Business in Peoria, I asked Joshua Lewer, chairman of the economics department, how his fellow Illinoisans were reacting to the mess. (Lewer, by the way, has seen his property tax rise by 60 percent over the last decade while the

value of his home stayed flat.) "A lot of them just leave," he shrugged, with that familiar Illinois air of resignation. Out-migration has been a problem in the deindustrialized states of the Midwest for two generations, but Illinois has managed to outdo its rivals. From 2015 to 2016, the U.S. Census Bureau tells us, 114,000 residents left Illinois, an out-migration rate of 9 per 1,000 citizens. The next highest neighboring state was Michigan, with a rate lower than 3 for every 1,000. Jobs are returning with the Trump boom—indeed, nearly every business owner you talk to is hoping to hire—but at a slower pace than elsewhere. Wage growth is second to last in the country since the 2008 recession.



Bruce Rauner, governor for now

A recent poll showed that only one out of four Illinoisans had confidence the government could improve conditions in the state. A poll by Southern Illinois University a couple years ago was even more alarming. Only 10 percent of residents said the state was headed in the right direction. Nearly half—47 percent—said that offered the opportunity, they would move to another state without hesitation. The overwhelming reason given was taxes (27 percent), followed, at 16 percent, by the weather, which by general consensus is unbearable for eight months out of the year though no one ever does anything about it. "Confidence—consumer confidence, business confidence, confidence in everything—is

just extremely low," says Jim Ardis, the mayor of Peoria. *Decatur* magazine cites a national survey of CEOs from 2017 that ranked Illinois the "third worst state to invest in," after New York and California.

To return to the second proposition everyone agrees upon: Illinois really shouldn't be a mess. "That's the awful thing," Ardis says. "Illinois has so much to offer." The advantages make for a rare combination. It's located near the center of the country, crisscrossed with heavy rail and mighty interstates and easily navigable freshwater rivers that can guide you (and your products) from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mississippi and thence to anywhere in the world. Vast stretches of the state are given over to some of the world's most fertile and versatile farmland. Its map is dotted with municipalities to every taste, from small cities and farm hamlets to river towns and lush suburbs and of course the great Sodom rising up at the edge of Lake Michigan. One or another segment of its diverse workforce is educated to suit every style and level of commerce: agriculture, light industry, heavy manufacturing; the workers come from an above-average system of K-12

education and at least two world-class universities. Even for those aesthetic numbskulls unable to grasp the timeless, lonesome beauty of the prairie, the state's landscape offers the bluffs above Galena, the river canyons of the national forests to the south, and nearly everything in between. (And no deserts.)

Then there is the less measurable but still distinct matter of state character. Illinois towns and their citizens, through a combination of native whimsy, a desire for uniqueness, and a play for commerce, have long been given to stunts. A complete list would fill a book and has, several times. The town of Chester boasts its larger-than-life Popeye statue, so



J. B. Pritzker celebrates his victory in the Democratic primary.

pop-eye-ular that statues of Olive Oyl and Wimpy have been added to fill out the population. No one would dare tear down the two-story outhouse in the town of Gays, offering a double-decker experience not nearly as gross as it sounds. A citizen of Cornell got up the idea of the Friendship Shoe Fence, which is a fence draped in laced shoes, furthering (somehow) the cause of friendship. Freeport built a one-third scale Wrigley Field, for no particular reason. You can see the Home of the Sock Monkey in Rockford, a tribute to the city's sock-making heritage. You don't have to travel far, wherever you are, to get the joke.

A few years ago a pair of NPR reporters worked with a demographer from the Brookings Institution on a silly but revealing project. They set out to find the "perfect state"—the state that was most representative of the USA as a whole. They tested five criteria for a state's population: racial makeup, educational attainment, age, median income, and religiosity. Illinois took the prize, mapping the country more closely than any other state in one category after another. In some important respects, Illinois is the country built to scale. You don't have to be a native deeply attached to your

home state to worry that if Illinois can't make it, then maybe the country can't either.

So what happened? In 2014, Bruce Rauner thought he had it figured out. He ran for governor that year on a "Turnaround Agenda" to "shake up Springfield," the sleepy capital famous for a sclerotic bureaucracy overseen by an inert, self-dealing legislature of part-time pols. As an outsider with very little political experience and a venture-capital fortune large enough to fund his own campaign, Rauner seemed the model of a selfless public servant.

But he quickly proved himself a terrible politician. Rauner's turnaround agenda was admirably but also laughably ambitious: 44 separate reforms, including term limits for politicians, caps on property taxes, and dozens of other items designed to offend any constituency that had a stranglehold on some coalition of state legislators. Tort reforms and workers' compensation cutbacks (Illinois is often called the most litigious state in the country) would pass only over the dead, plump bodies of trial lawyers. Restoring sanity to the runaway pension system would lose him the votes of more than a million pensioners. A repeal of prevailing wage laws and compulsory union dues would run into the solid wall of legislators financed by state and municipal worker unions, who would also kill new apprenticeship programs designed to bypass organized labor.

So Rauner decided to do everything all at once in his first year. He would advance each reform while also fulfilling his mandatory duty of reaching a budget deal with the same legislators the rest of his agenda was trying to emasculate. He looked surprised when the large Democratic majorities in both the senate and house were disinclined to help him. Rauner's signal success came from outside the system. In 2015 he launched the lawsuit that came to the Supreme Court as *Janus v. AFSCME*—a landmark decision in the history of labor law forbidding unions from collecting dues from nonmembers.

With the state budget frozen, services suffered, although both the governor and legislature took care to fund the projects and activities—schools and roads, preeminently—most visible to the public eye. Rauner dropped one item after another from his original agenda, until the fabled 44 had been reduced to 5. The legislature remained uncooperative. In a familiar act of journalistic alchemy, the mainstream media in Illinois managed to cover this standoff between two stubborn negotiators as if it were the fault of only one of them, who happened to be the Republican. Rauner was depicted in the press as a confused, petulant booby. Meanwhile—another familiar trick—he sought the good will of his political adversaries by betraying his friends. Ostensibly pro-life, he signed a bill mandating state payments for abortions for

JOSHUA LOTT / GETTY

poor women; allegedly a skeptic of illegal immigration, he signed a law discouraging law enforcement from detaining people on the basis of their immigration status.

Rauner seemed surprised again this year when he faced a vigorous primary challenge from a conservative state representative. He won by 20,000 votes out of more than 700,000 cast. Having alienated the right of his party and the center of the voting public, he now turns to Pritzker, his Democratic opponent. The campaign has been uniquely unpleasant and vicious, probably because on the face of it so little is at issue. Rauner's platform commits him to doing what he said he would do four years ago, though the chances of this are by now provably small. He is left to seek votes by portraying himself as the last obstacle to the certain ruin a united Democratic state government would bring.

Pritzker, for his part, is unwavering in his support for good things and fiercely opposed to the bad. Among the good things are more tax revenues. He proposes to replace the state's flat income tax, mandated by the constitution for now, though he declines to say who would pay the higher rates, aside, of course, from the rich (undefined). His supporters are flirting with a "vehicle miles tax," which would tax drivers for each mile they drive. More tax revenues would help fund more good things. Chief among the bad things Pritzker fiercely opposes is Bruce Rauner.

Pritzker is a fixture of state politics but only as it plays out in the vape-filled rooms of Chicago and Springfield. He has bankrolled dozens of Democratic campaigns over the last 20 years. Pritzker's fortune was inherited from one of the largest fortunes in the country, now spread over a large family tree, with holdings ranging from cruise lines to hotel chains. His main success as a dauphin has been to avoid the financial disasters his less discreet siblings and cousins have managed to engineer with their share of the family money. (A bank run by his sister failed in 2001 with a loss of more than \$2 billion.) Pritzker has been content to dabble in philanthropy and run a professional association of venture capitalists. (Somebody has to speak for the VCs.)

This year he's directing his munificence to himself. He has pumped more than \$165 million of his personal fortune into his campaign. With the \$50 million that Rauner has kicked in on his own behalf, the 2018 gubernatorial election in Illinois will probably end up the most expensive state race in U.S. history. Seeing the two men spitting insults at one

another in a televised debate, you can't help but think that even in Illinois there must be better ways to spend \$220 million. Side by side the two candidates make for an odd couple. Rauner is long and lean and angular, with the hangry look of a marathon swimmer on an unnecessary diet; Pritzker is short and round and fleshy, with the well-fed, self-satisfied look of a man who long ago decided diets were for losers. On the debate stage it's as if Jack Sprat (who would eat no fat) and his wife (who would eat no lean) are in the midst of an ugly child-custody battle.

The most important man in this battle is offstage—and indeed remains anonymous even to many Illinois voters. "Michael Madigan is the single most powerful state legislator in the country," says Mooney, the UIC political scientist. Madigan is one of the last surviving protégés of Richard J. Daley, the Chicago mayor who before his death in 1976 perfected the most enduring Democratic machine in American politics. (His son Richard M. Daley went on to rule Chicago for another 20 years starting a decade after his father's death.) Madigan has represented his district on Chicago's southwest side since 1971. With a two year interregnum in the 1990s, he has been speaker of the Illinois house for nearly 40 years. He is both the shaper and the embodiment of the way of politics that has brought Illinois to the brink.



The one who rules them all: Michael Madigan

Other Midwestern states, for better and worse, have a political culture at least partly under sway of an ideological tendency. Wisconsin, not the Land of Lincoln, was the birthplace of the Republican party and home to great progressives like Robert La Follette. Southern Indiana was the setting for the revival of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. Iowa's politics has always been infused with Christian piety. Illinois has none of this—what it has in their place, what it has that all its neighbors lack, is an urban powerhouse at the center of its political force field. The real impress on Illinois politics has been the ethnic machine of Chicago, transplanted into Springfield and spreading from there to all corners of the state.

And ideology has nothing to do with it. Madigan has moved with the direction of his party. He began his career, for instance, when Catholic politicians like him understood abortion to be murder, and he's just as comfortable today with its status as the preeminent sacrament of feminist individualism. The purpose of a machine, as Mooney points out,

is the allocation among friends of the spoils of power: the jobs, contracts, services, and perquisites that government affords. “It’s a very practical mindset,” Mooney says. “It’s all about ends and not means. And that kind of thinking doesn’t really require any one person to take responsibility for long-term planning of the government’s direction.”

Madigan, by all accounts, is fiercely intelligent. When the legislature is in session he always eats dinner in the same seat at the same Springfield restaurant. Lunch is an apple, sometimes two, at his desk, and in meetings he seldom speaks: The signal that the meeting is over is when he starts eating the apple, according to pols who have experienced the brushoff. He doesn’t use email and seldom a cell phone, preferring communication face to face. When he takes questions from the press it is considered a historic occasion. One veteran Springfield reporter said the other day he had never interviewed Madigan, but he did have fond memories of a Madigan press conference back in . . . 2004. “He must have spoken for 45 minutes!” the reporter said.

Madigan’s power is enforced quietly and without pity. Under house rules, all legislative staff report to the leader. All perks from office space to parking slots flow through his office. He has an active program of internships and apprenticeships, bringing in recruits from all over the state. “It’s like a training program for politicians,” says Mooney. Most important, he is not only the house majority leader, he is chairman of the state party. Every dollar of party campaign funding is under his control. Over the years a dozen wayward Democrats who crossed him on important votes have found themselves suddenly faced with primary challengers, well-funded and usually victorious. And every other Democratic officeholder knows it could happen to them.

“There’s one common denominator in Springfield over the last 40 years as the state has gotten deeper in trouble,” Ardis says. “And that’s Madigan.” Indeed, Madigan was present at what Adam Schuster calls the “original sin” of Illinois government finance—he was a delegate to the constitutional convention of 1970 when a provision was inserted into the new state constitution that state pensions, once enacted by the legislature, could never be reduced. A cascade of political folly ensued, at the hands of Republicans and Democrats alike. In 1990, a Republican governor signed a provision that guaranteed increases in state pensions at a compounded rate. Increases have been regular and untouchable ever since, thanks to Madigan and his colleagues, with the resulting horror stories that fill the state’s newspapers—like the retired teacher from the Chicago suburbs with a \$452,000 pension payout. Eighty percent of the state’s last tax increase went to the pension system.

Sooner or later, a political machine becomes its own object: The purpose of the machine is to keep the machine alive. This is the evolutionary stage that the Chicago

machine, downstate version, has reached over Madigan’s long reign. There’s little chance that Rauner, given a second term, could reverse it, and no sign that Pritzker, once elected, would care to. Governor Pritzker’s political destiny will likely resemble that of Louisiana’s Oscar K. Allen, a puppet that the state’s true ruler, Huey Long, installed in the governor’s chair in the 1930s. He earned the nickname “OK.” “A leaf blew in through OK’s office window yesterday,” one observer said. “He signed it.”

Despair is a sin, even in Illinois, and the resignation felt by the regulars at the Fast Stop in Payson, while understandable, isn’t necessarily the final word. On the other side of the state is the leafy town of Sullivan, population 4,300, which boasts a stately brick courthouse from 1906 and a town square of the kind you come to expect when you travel the two-lane highways of the state: There’s a restaurant, a Dollar Tree, maybe a theater, and lots of abandoned storefronts.

This year Sullivan hosted the last of the state’s Oktoberfests on the town square, with food trucks, vendors of scented candles and religious trinkets, moonbounces, fundraising bake sales, and the main event: a performance by the Sullivan Singers. The group, by the look of it, comprises a healthy percentage of the high school student body. Mingling through the crowd they were unmistakable for their purple T-shirts and unbridled enthusiasm.

It was a golden afternoon but a wind storm blew through—the moonbounces had to be disassembled, the proprietor of the pony ride packed up his pony, a bake sale table tipped over, and a few vendors shuttered their trucks. The singers were undeterred. They shortened their program but this compression seemed only to intensify their showmanship. Their specialty is the Broadway show tune, and it involves much movement—hips, shoulders, feet, arms in all directions. Fingers splay, then compress into fists, heads rise, then lower dramatically. The girls swing their ponytails while the pudgy boys stand back admiring.

For their last number they sang “Just Wanna Be with You,” from *High School Musical 3*. “I got a lot of things I have to do / All these distractions / Our future’s coming soon / We’re being pulled / A hundred different directions / But whatever happens / I know I’ve got you.”

The music was a heaping portion of Hollywood uplift, and the kids were by-God determined to put it across, and the effect was enchanting, exhilarating: pure energy, good humor, fellowship, and innocence. The wind for a moment died down. The hour was getting late. The autumn sun came slanting straight at the Sullivan Singers, right down East Jefferson Street, lighting their orthodontics and their animated faces, and for a moment, no one could tell if it was rising or setting. ♦

Time to Worry

It took the United States 193 years to accumulate its first trillion dollars of federal debt. We will add that much in the current fiscal year alone.

By JAMES GRANT

America's deteriorating public credit is the cold-button issue of the 2018 midterms. With rare bipartisanship, Democrats and Republicans compete to pretend that the country isn't going broke. In 1992, the third-party presidential candidate Ross Perot likened the widening gap between federal receipts and federal spending to "the crazy aunt tucked away in the room upstairs nobody talks about." The old gal's dottier than ever.

It took the United States 193 years to accumulate its first trillion dollars of federal debt—the gross debt, as it's called. We will add that much in the current fiscal year alone. All told, the government owes \$21.5 trillion, give or take a few careless tens of billions—that works out to \$65,885 for each American. It's the ease of borrowing that drives the growth in federal IOUs.

The remote political cause of this predicament is the ideology of statism. In Washington, this takes the form of tax and tax, spend and spend, elect and elect; on Wall Street, it's found in too-big-to-fail, a virtually socialized mortgage market, and an overreaching, manipulative central bank.

The remote monetary cause of our troubles is the closing of the gold-standard era in 1971, or what little remained of it by then. It was the breakdown of the fixed monetary order that opened the floodgates. From Alexander Hamilton to Richard Nixon, the dollar was an IOU, a promise to pay gold or silver at a fixed rate. It subsequently became a thing

unto itself, an IOU nothing. In consequence, for the past several decades, federal liabilities have grown faster than the national income with which to service them. Ultra-low interest rates have cheapened the cost of this profligacy and hidden the looming dangers.

The sophists and economists who contend that we ought to borrow because, at an interest rate only slightly over 2 percent, we can hardly afford not to borrow, have a point of a kind. In 1988, on a debt of \$2.6 trillion, the Treasury paid net interest of \$152 billion. In the just-ended fiscal year, on \$21.5 trillion of debt, the Treasury paid net interest of \$371 billion. Thus, over the past 30 years, the debt jumped by 727 percent, the cost of servicing it by just 144 percent. To the casual question, "What's the harm in the Treasury's availing itself of the market's over-generous hospitality?" there is no casual, tweetable answer.

Common sense dictates that debt ought not to be easily incurred, but common sense is not an unfailing guide to federal finances. Even the \$21.5 trillion gross debt (so called because it encompasses the obligations that one branch of government owes another) is only slightly larger than a single year's GDP. If the voters chose, they could elect politicians to erase the debt in its entirety, as Thomas Jefferson tried to do, as Bill Clinton talked about doing, and as Andrew Jackson, in 1835, actually did. ("An unprecedented spectacle is thus presented to the world, of a Government . . . virtually without any debt," Jackson's secretary of the Treasury, Levi Woodbury, boasted.) Or the government could sell its assets, applying the proceeds to debt reduction. What might the Grand Canyon fetch in an honest auction?

But the 21st-century Treasury is under no pressure to take such actions. Its creditors, for now, seem perfectly happy. Though the supply of government securities on



Ah, 2009—the good old days.

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offer this fiscal year, from all sources, including the Federal Reserve, is projected to be the greatest, as a percentage of national output, since World War II, interest rates have risen only by enough to rattle President Trump and (at this writing) the stock market; the government is still easily financing its \$3.9 billion or so of daily new borrowing needs. The dollar-exchange rate likewise signals complacency. In the worldwide laundromat of fiat money, the dollar is the cleanest dirty shirt.

Certainly there is no audible clamor for debt reduction, let the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, the Concord Coalition, and *Grant's Interest Rate Observer* scold as they might. Still-elevated stock prices and a 49-year low in the unemployment rate are not the kind of data to instigate financial anxiety, and the projected depletion of the Social Security and Medicare trust funds' surpluses in 2020 is too contingent, and too distant, an event to prompt a professional speculator to dump Treasury bonds.

The Democratic party, from Jefferson to Grover Cleveland to the fleeting moment in 1999 when Clinton dangled the prospect of a national mortgage-burning in the year 2015, was the party of hard money and a presentable balance sheet. Up until the 1960s, there was a predictable rhythm to the movement of the national debt in proportion to output. It rose in wartime and fell, or at least stopped rising, in peacetime. During the War of 1812, Albert Gallatin, secretary of the Treasury under James Madison (and under Jefferson before him) went so far as to urge that military operations be subordinated to fiscal considerations, rather than the other way around. The frugal Gallatin was guilty of bean-counting for the sake of bean-counting.

In the 20th century, the Republican administrations of Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Dwight D. Eisenhower nobly emulated the early Democratic examples, not necessarily to extinguish the debt but to keep it manageable. Now neither major party espouses the old-time fiscal and monetary canons, let alone seeks to restore them.

America was born indebted in 1789, and Hamilton famously called those Revolutionary War obligations, if properly funded, a "national blessing." But there was a codicil. "[T]he creation of debt should always be accompanied with the means of extinguishment," he said. Here was the "true secret for rendering public credit immortal."

If you attended the same undergraduate economics

classes I did in the 1960s, you learned that the debt was immortal. And so it should be, said the Keynesian at the blackboard. When a bond falls due, the Treasury will simply issue another one; somebody will buy it at one price or another. You learned, too, that the public's debt is unlike anyone else's. It's not really an encumbrance but an instrument of macroeconomic stabilization. Federal spending, with dollars procured by borrowing, stimulates business activity, according to this worldview. There was, however, nothing said about the utility of a trillion-dollar

deficit in a time of supposedly bounding prosperity. The silence on that point foreshadowed a great fiscal truth. The truth is that in the absence of monetary or market constraints, federal borrowing begets more federal borrowing.

If statism is the debt-facilitating doctrine of the left, "growth" is the debt-rationalizing ideology of the right. Pro-growth conservatives preach, correctly, that only a strong economy can produce the goods and services with which to meet tomorrow's vast entitlement bills. But these happy fiscal warriors forget that the government has a balance sheet as well as an income statement. They carelessly overlook the risk that the worsening federal finances themselves

could undermine economic growth.

The bulge in capital-gains tax receipts during the 1998-99 stock-market bubble helped to produce the first federal budget surplus since 1969. With it came a lively debate over what to do with the unspent funds. Invest them, urged the left. Return them to the taxpayers, countered the right. There was no gainsaying the correctness of the proposition that the money belongs to the people, not to the state. Nor was it clear, as the editors of the *Wall Street Journal* observed, that paying down the debt would have positive effects: "In the high-growth 1950s, federal debt as a percentage of gross domestic product ran almost double what it did during the low-growth 1970s." But the *Journal* pushed its argument past the breaking point. "Debts and deficits and surpluses are accounting identities," the editors wrote. "They are not the actual engines of economic growth. Not all that long ago, paying down national debt was considered a quaintly archaic notion."

Quaintly, the Founders themselves, finding sanction in the ideas of Blackstone, Montesquieu, and Pitt the Younger, established a special fund—a sinking fund—to

Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon found it necessary, first, to loosen the fetters of the Bretton Woods system and, in 1971, to abandon any idea of a monetary anchor. Thus was born the Ph.D. standard, the system of monetary management by former tenured economics faculty.

do just that. In truth, the sinker was a kind of gimmick, albeit a purposeful one, its purpose being to erase the public debt, “that wasting canker of the nations,” as Martin Van Buren later put it. The sinking fund retired its last government security in 1960.

More significantly, the Founders established a dollar defined as a weight of precious metal: first of silver, later of gold and silver, finally of gold alone. Writing in 1830, Gallatin asserted that the Constitution afforded “a complete security against the danger of paper money” and that if further authority on the monetary utility of the precious metal were required, a skeptic could consult the Book of Genesis.

From 1789 till 1971, with time out for the Civil War, America’s bank notes were convertible under law into precious metal at a fixed and statutory rate. By the time the sand ran out on the gold standard, only foreign governments enjoyed the right to exchange their promises to pay (a dollar being a note, or debt obligation, a promise to pay as opposed to money itself) for gold at the then-fixed rate of \$35 an ounce. And when the foreigners sought to exercise their rights more vigorously than the depleted American gold store could bear, Nixon ordered the Treasury to suspend payment. Henceforth, the dollar would be just as good as paper or, subsequently, a digital representation of paper; the date was August 15, 1971.

Modern economists, their heads turned neither by the Constitution nor the Old Testament, contend that the gold standard is an anachronism that, if reinstated, would tie the government’s hands and consign the nation to deflation. They are wrong about that, although, admittedly, there is something anachronistic in the image of a willful political class subordinating its electoral interests to the higher cause of the integrity of the dollar. Then again, there is nothing so very new about the money-printing alternative, either. John Law invented “quantitative easing” in France 300 years ago, from which followed a legendary boom and a gaudy bust. Anyway, not even the flower of the Harvard economics department would deny

that the discipline of a convertible currency checks a government’s ability to overspend and overborrow. It was to buy guns *and* butter *and* to establish a schedule of perpetual entitlements that the administrations of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon found it necessary, first, to loosen



the fetters of the Bretton Woods system (the halfway gold standard put in place after World War II) and, in 1971, to abandon any idea of a monetary anchor. Thus was born the Ph.D. standard, the system of monetary management by former tenured economics faculty that reached its apogee under Dr. Ben S. Bernanke in the wake of 2008. Under the Bretton Woods regime, there could have been no wasting canker such as the one that gnaws today.

DAVE MALAN

The second trillion dollars of gross federal debt came on the books in 1986, four years after the first. Five trillion was the grand total in 1996, \$10 trillion in 2008, and \$20 trillion in 2017. Since the suspension of dollar convertibility in 1971, growth of the debt has outpaced growth in GDP, a rough and ready expression of the nation's ability, if not its willingness, to pay. The debt has registered compound annual growth of 8.8 percent, the GDP of 6.3 percent. On current trends, GDP will be hard-pressed to close the gap.

Under the Ph.D. standard, the dollar has become America's greatest export. It costs us nothing to produce, and only we may lawfully print it. The Google or Coca-Cola of monetary brands, it passes for value the world over. Spending it, we may—and we do—consume much more than we produce, putting the balance on the tab.

Under the true-blue gold standard, nations settled up accounts in commercial bills exchangeable into gold or, less frequently, in the metal itself. To get money, you dug it out of the earth or attracted it with high interest rates or fetching investment opportunities. Some gold-standard-bound nations, of course, were more powerful than others (Britain ruled the roost until 1914), but the system inherently advantaged no one participant over the others.

The post-1971 regime advantages the United States. Or, rather, it confers on us an advantage that we may regret having availed ourselves of. Possessing a currency that doubles both as America's money and the world's, we've been able to run up deficits domestic and foreign, to "acquire without paying," as the French economist Jacques Rueff put it in 1972. We pay with our magic dollar-printing press, allowing, as Rueff observed, "deficits without tears."

Just how long this dry-eyed state of being may last is, of course, the great question. Analysts at Bank of America Merrill Lynch suggest that, at the least, America is trading on her might and majesty rather than plain arithmetic. They add our budget deficit to our trade deficit (technically, the deficit on the current account) and then divide that sum by our forecast GDP. The answer—the twin deficits as a percentage of anticipated national output—comes out to minus 7.3 percent. It places the United States 41st in a field of 45 countries, behind South Africa and ahead only of Argentina, Turkey, Brazil, and Pakistan. Singapore is tops, at positive 18.5 percent.

Again, according to projections by the International Monetary Fund concerning the 36 member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, only the United States, Turkey, South Korea, and Chile will register a rising percentage of gross government debt to GDP over the next five years. It's American

exceptionalism, all right, though perhaps not the kind that the Founders were thinking of.

Shortly after the 2002 midterm elections, Dick Cheney was overheard to say, "Reagan proved deficits don't matter." If those were Cheney's words, and if by "matter," the vice president was alluding to the sensitivity of interest rates to shortfalls in federal revenue against federal receipts, he was as right as rain. Under Ronald Reagan, the public debt more than tripled but interest rates (at their extreme high and low readings) were sawed in half. When Cheney made his remark the 10-year Treasury note was being quoted at 4 percent. But interest rates continued to push lower, such that on July 8, 2016, the 10-year security yielded less than 1³/₈ percent, the lowest recorded on an obligation of a leading global sovereign borrower in 743 years, according to a study prepared for the Bank of England.

Franklin D. Roosevelt ran for president in 1932 on a balanced-budget platform, but proceeded to run up deficits that seemed immense at the time. There are three things to say about these Depression-era shortfalls. They did not restore prosperity, they did not raise long-term interest rates, and they did not come close to setting modern peacetime borrowing records. In 2009, the first year of the Obama presidency, the deficit reached 9.8 percent of national output; Roosevelt's maximum effort was 5.8 percent, in 1934.

Perhaps what the borrowing records of Reagan and Roosevelt illustrate is not that deficits don't matter but that the forces that drive the movement of interest rates are more complex than the condition of the balance sheet of even a great power. In obedience to laws nowhere spelled out, interest rates have tended to rise and fall in long cycles. Thus, in America, they were down from the 1870s till 1900, up till 1920, down till 1946, up till 1981, and down till 2016. And now, perhaps, they are going up.

Steven Mnuchin can only hope that they're not, or at least not very fast. This fiscal year, a 1 percentage-point rise in net borrowing cost, to 3 percent or so, would cost taxpayers an extra \$163 billion. As recently as the 1990s, the Treasury paid an average cost of 6.6 percent. Apply that rate to this year's projected debt, and net interest expense would top \$1 trillion. For perspective, in the just-ended fiscal year, Social Security outlays totaled \$977 billion.

The thoughtful citizen, no less than the professional speculator, would like to know when to worry. There have been many false alarms—the first \$1 trillion of gross public debt seemed scary, too, in 1982.

It is important to realize that the financial future is unpredictable, the pretensions of the Wall Street forecasting profession notwithstanding. The nil public debt that Bill Clinton projected for 2015 turned out to be \$18.2

trillion instead. War, politics-as-usual, and a pair of recessions, including the Great Recession, took him by surprise—as they did so many others. There’s no reason to think that bearish forecasts are likely to prove any more prescient than bullish ones.

But we do know some things and may plausibly speculate about others. For instance, we know that if the debt keeps growing at a faster rate than GDP, there will be a debt crisis.

We know, thanks to John F. Cogan’s 2017 study *The High Cost of Good Intentions*, that in 2015, 55 percent of American households received a check from one or more of the major federal entitlement programs. In a contest between the entitlement constituency and the federal balance-sheet-improvement constituency, the balance sheet will surely come in second.

We know there is no magic threshold of gross debt to GDP below which a government is safe and above which a government is in jeopardy. Japan, though 238 percent encumbered, has near-zero interest rates and complacent creditors (notably its captive central bank). Italy, though 132 percent encumbered, has restive creditors. The United States, at 106 percent, is, like Japan, seemingly at peace with its lenders, though sentiment can change. Just the other day, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that overseas buyers of U.S. government securities had invested only half as much in the first eight months of 2018 as they had in the same period of 2017.

And we know that since 2016, interest rates have been rising. We know that the Federal Reserve has stopped buying bonds and begun selling them. We know that sooner or later, there will be a recession and that in a moderate downturn, a \$2 trillion deficit may well be in the cards (there’s a \$1 trillion deficit on tap in today’s boom).

Finally, we know that America’s credit record is not unblemished. The government defaulted on domestic bondholders in 1814 (it happened to be the year that the British burned down the public buildings in Washington). By devaluing the dollar against gold, it defaulted in 1933-34 and again in 1971. Suffering the Great Inflation, it defaulted in all but name in the 1970s, when creditors received dollars much less valuable than the ones they had lent.

As recently as 2011, Barack Obama’s chief political adviser, David Plouffe, speaking on the eve of that summer’s threatened government shutdown, dismissed as “inconceivable” the idea that if push came to shove, the

government would pay creditors before pensioners. “The notion,” said Plouffe, “that we would just pay Wall Street bondholders and the Chinese government and not meet our Social Security and veterans’ obligations is insanity and is not going to happen.” It is not inconceivable that the chief political adviser to an Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders White House would say the same. Credit, ultimately, is an opinion, and America’s creditors may wake up one morning and change their minds about either the ability or willingness of this country to meet its obligations.

Therefore, taking one thing with another, I would advise worrying now.

Might we do anything else? Long-term solutions to the problem exist. We could, for instance, raise federal revenue by broadening the tax base while lowering and flattening the rate. Steve Forbes has been pushing the idea for years. We could—arguably, we must—replace the Ph.D. standard with a 21st-century variant on the classical gold standard, as the monetary theorist Lewis E. Lehrman has long espoused. No, we would not all carry \$20 gold pieces in our pockets. We would continue to pay with our plastic, and our phones, but the money on which we draw would finally be convertible into grams of that tangible, ductile, eternal precious metal. And while we’re at it, we could get the Federal Reserve out

of the business of manipulating long-term interest rates, which, after all, are prices and ought not to be under the government’s thumb. Let them be discovered in the market, like the price of corn and soybeans.

Each of these propositions will sound farfetched. Steve Forbes is not president, and the pure paper dollar is the only dollar that most Americans have known. Monetary habits, even the unwholesome ones, die hard, as the so-far-unsuccessful Citizens to Retire the U.S. Penny can attest.

Better to begin with the humble hope that someone, maybe a Republican or a Grover Cleveland Democrat, says something about the scandal of the national balance sheet. It is no opinion, but an arithmetic truism, that our debts are growing faster than our means to discharge them. It strains credulity to think that our creditors are unaware of the fact. Some of us fret about foreign hackers tilting American elections with lies. We should all spare a worry about hackers causing a bond-market crisis by spreading the truth.

Auntie in the attic needs our help. ♦

America’s credit record is not unblemished. The government defaulted on domestic bondholders in 1814. By devaluing the dollar against gold, it defaulted in 1933-34 and again in 1971. With inflation, it defaulted in all but name in the 1970s.



The grisly aftermath of a February 1880 dynamite bomb in the Winter Palace—one of many attempts to assassinate Czar Alexander II

Dagger and Swagger

The literary legacy of 19th-century Russian revolutionary terrorism.

BY GARY SAUL MORSON

How many firsts we owe to Russians! Lenin invented the political system we call totalitarianism. The Soviet Union was the first state based on terror and the first “one-party state.” (Previously, a party, as its name implies, represented only a part of society.) The first dystopian novel was not Huxley’s *Brave New World* or Orwell’s *1984*, but Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *Wē*, well known by Huxley and Orwell. Czarist Russia inspired both the modern prison-camp novel, beginning with Dostoyevsky’s

House of the Dead, and the “terrorist novel,” starting with Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed*. Prison camps, dystopia, terrorism: Whatever else it has been, Russian history has been a godsend for literature. And for political language as well: We get the word “intelligentsia” from Russia, where it was coined about 1860; and before the American “populists” of the 1890s there were the Russian *narodniks* (populists) of the 1870s. Political extremism and great fiction—these are Russia’s obsessions.

Russia was also the first country where young men and women, asked to name their intended careers, might well say “terrorist.” Beginning in the 1870s, terrorism became an honored,

if dangerous, profession. It was often a family business employing brothers and sisters generation after generation. Historians sometimes trace modern terrorism to the Carbonari of early-19th-century Italy, but it was Russia that gave it unprecedented importance. You cannot relate the history of czarist Russia in its last half-century without the history of terrorism. As we now associate terrorism with radical Islam, Europeans then associated it with “Russian nihilism.” By the early 20th century, no profession, except literature, enjoyed more prestige among well-educated Russians.

Russian history, one of novelist Vasily Grossman’s characters observes,

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stands as an object lesson to the rest of the world, a lesson it has failed to learn. People still romanticize revolutionary violence, as we see in all those posters of an angelic-looking Che Guevara. In czarist Russia, the mentality Tom Wolfe was to dub “radical chic” gripped educated society. The privileged cheered on those who would destroy them.

Terrorism has arisen in many cultures, but Russian terrorism, so far as I know, is unique in one respect: its intimate connection with literature. Not only did great writers like Dostoyevsky and the symbolist Andrei Bely (author of *Petersburg*) write major novels about terrorism, the terrorists themselves composed riveting memoirs and fiction. Prince Peter Kropotkin, once the world’s most influential anarchist, authored a masterpiece of Russian autobiography, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, and many other terrorists, most notably women, have left classic accounts of terrorist movements. When the assassin Sergei Kravchinsky escaped to Europe and assumed the name Stepniak, he became internationally famous for both his history *Underground Russia: Revolutionary Profiles and Sketches from Life* and his novel *Career of a Nihilist*. Still more amazing, Boris Savinkov, the longtime leader of Russia’s most important terrorist organization, responsible for spectacular killings of high officials, also published his *Memoirs of a Terrorist* as well as three novels about terrorists. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether terrorist experience demanded literary treatment or was chosen to provide compelling literary material.

The scale of 19th- and 20th-century Russian terrorism boggles the mind. According to the movement’s best historian, Anna Geifman, terrorism affected just about everyone. Conventionally, accounts describe a brief prehistory in the 1860s and early 1870s, then a “heroic phase” from 1878 to 1881, and, after a pause, a period when terrorism assumed staggering proportions. In 1866, Dmitri Karakozov, a member of a radical organization called “Hell,” tried to kill the czar and was hanged. Sergei Nechaev, who inspired *The Possessed*, not only committed mur-

der but, more important, wrote the infamous *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, which provided a model for revolutionaries to come. The true revolutionary, according to Nechaev, “has no interests, no affairs, no feelings, no habits, no property, not even a name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed by a single, exclusive interest, a single thought, a single passion—the revolution.” He must suppress all feelings of compassion, love, gratitude, “even honor.” For him only one criterion of good and evil exists: “Everything that promotes the

Great writers like Dostoyevsky took terrorism as the subject of major novels, and the terrorists themselves composed riveting memoirs and fiction. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether terrorist experience demanded literary treatment or was chosen to provide compelling material.

revolution is moral; everything that hinders it is immoral.” Without hesitation the revolutionary uses other people, including other revolutionaries, as Nechaev did. By comparison, Machiavelli was a softie.

In the mid-1870s, idealistic men and women became “populists” and “went to the people.” They flocked to the countryside to imbibe the peasants’ natural goodness while instructing them in socialism. (I described this movement recently in these pages: See “Pig and People,” August 6, 2018.) The peasants were unimpressed and often turned them in to the police, in much the way Turgenev describes in his novel *Virgin Soil*. Far from abandoning their ideals, the populists decided to realize them without the people, even against

the will of the people, through terror and a coup d’état. Ironically enough, they called their organization “The People’s Will.” Eventually, in 1881, they succeeded in killing the czar.

Why should they have targeted Alexander II, the most liberal czar Russia ever had? Alexander had freed the serfs—thus liberating the third of the population owned outright by private landowners, not to mention an equal number owned by the crown. Before the liberation of 1861, serfs were routinely bought, sold, and lost at cards. His “great reforms” included creating organs of self-government, first in the countryside (1864) and then in towns (1870). The entire justice system was reformed along Western models. The modernization of the military in 1874 reduced mandatory active service from 25 to 6 years. Nevertheless, the radicals insisted that terrorism was their only choice. “There was nothing to hope for in legal and pacific means,” Stepniak explained with a straight face. “After 1866 a man must have been either blind or a hypocrite to believe in the possibility of any improvement except by violent means.” The very day the czar was killed he had approved a reform moving in the direction of a constitution.

Russian terrorism’s “heroic period” began in January 1878 when Vera Zasulich shot General Trepov, who had ordered corporal punishment of a member of the intelligentsia as if the man were some peasant: These radicals took their class privileges seriously! At her trial in the new law courts, the defense attorney, the Clarence Darrow of his day, in effect put Trepov on trial while portraying Zasulich as a saint. In his account, she was living in a “rural wilderness”—it was actually a revolutionary commune where she rode about carrying a gun—when she heard about Trepov’s outrage and resolved to sacrifice herself for justice. The cream of society vied for tickets to the trial, applauded the defense, and were utterly delighted when the jury preposterously acquitted her.

Soon after, Stepniak stalked General Nikolai Mezentsev, head of Russia’s security police, and, finding him unprotected, stabbed him in the back



On March 1, 1881, Czar Alexander II was riding along his regular route to a military roll call when a terrorist bombed his carriage, above. He survived the blast but a second terrorist's bomb killed him. Below, the uniform he wore, shredded and bloody, is now in the Hermitage.

with a stiletto, turned it in the wound, and made his escape. He became the toast of British society, the friend of William Morris and George Bernard Shaw, among others. Abroad, the radicals would claim that all they wanted were basic civil liberties, but in fact they either rejected Western “freedoms” or favored them only to make revolution easier. They opposed democracy because they knew very well the peasants would never support them. As one historian observes, “Terror seemed easier than beating one’s head against the wall of peasant indifference.” It gave a small group the chance to demoralize the government while creating a mystique of violence to ensure endless recruits. They achieved both these goals.

The story of how the People’s Will, the world’s first modern terrorist organization, killed the czar makes gripping reading. Surviving attack after attack, Alexander seemed to enjoy divine protection. He certainly had a run of good luck. The terrorists tun-



neled under a street on which he was to pass and planted explosives, but his route changed. Then they blew up what was supposed to be his railway carriage but, because of a last-minute rearrangement, turned out to be a baggage car. The most amazing attempt took place when they blew up the dining room in the Winter Palace, intending to kill the czar and everyone else pres-

ent. Police incompetence staggers the imagination. They had already arrested a terrorist in possession of a map of the Winter Palace with an X marked on the dining room! Guards checked visitors to the Winter Palace but paid no attention to workers going in and out of the basement. A terrorist had no trouble getting a job, smuggling in a little dynamite every day, and eventually causing the explosion. The bomb killed 11 people and injured 56 others, but Alexander was late. The People’s Will blamed their failure on the ruler’s unpunctuality. “What is most depressing,” opined one conservative journalist, “is that so-called political crime has become a veritable national tradition.”

The police were closing in and on February 27, 1881, arrested terrorist leader Andrey Zhelyabov, but his lover Sofya Perovskaya took over. The terrorists got their man on March 1, when an assassin threw a bomb at Alexander’s carriage, wounding two people but leaving the czar unharmed. Instead of just

TOP: FINE ART IMAGES / HERITAGE IMAGES / GETTY; BOTTOM: ALBUM / ALAMY

driving on, he stopped to see to the wounded. The bomb-thrower had just said ironically, “Still thanking God?” when a second terrorist hurled his bomb. The mangled czar died hours later. Under the leadership of Vera Figner, the People’s Will survived for a few more years.

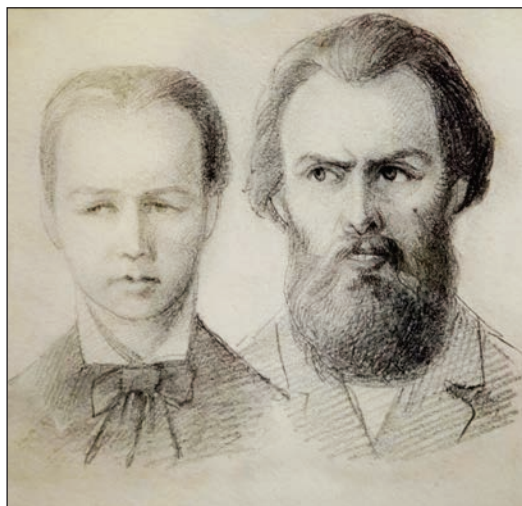
During the 1880s and 1890s, sometimes called pejoratively “the era of small deeds,” terrorism pretty much took a holiday. To be sure, there was one spectacular exception. On March 1, 1887, the sixth anniversary of the assassination of Alexander II, a group of terrorists planned to murder his successor, Alexander III, by throwing bombs at his carriage but were stopped by the police. The conspirators were sentenced to death, but the czar pardoned all but five of them. One of those hanged, the group’s leader and chemist, Alexander Ulyanov, was the older brother of Vladimir Lenin, who, as legend has it, swore to take revenge.

When the movement resumed after 1900, it grew to unprecedented dimensions. It is hard even to fathom the extent of the terror. The Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries (or SRs), founded in 1901, immediately created a combat organization to conduct mass terror. Each of its three leaders—the second was Savinkov—achieved mythic status. In 1879, the People’s Will had some 500 members, but by 1907, the SRs had 45,000. So many bombs—referred to as “oranges”—were manufactured that people joked about fear of fruit. In 1902, SRs killed minister of the interior Dmitri Sipiagin and in 1904 his successor Vyacheslav von Plehve, along with the czar’s uncle Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich in 1905, among others.

As Geifman calculates, between 1905 and 1907, some 4,500 government officials of all ranks were murdered, plus at least 2,180 private individuals killed and 2,530 wounded. Between January 1908 and May 1910, authorities recorded 19,957 terrorist acts that claimed the lives of 700 government officials and thousands of private people. Robberies—called “expropriations”—became commonplace. Terrorists robbed not

just banks and the imperial treasury but also landowners, businessmen, and eventually just ordinary people with barely a ruble to steal. According to one liberal journalist, robberies occurred daily “in the capitals, in provincial cities, and in district towns, in villages, on highways, on trains, on steamboats.” Newspapers published special sections chronicling violent acts, while murder became more common than traffic accidents.

The SRs were far from the only ter-



Sofya Perovskaya and her lover Andrey Zhelyabov were hanged with co-conspirators for the czar’s assassination.

rorist organization. Even more crimes were committed by various anarchist groups. The Bolsheviks, while late to the game, caught up. Though some other Marxist parties rejected terrorism as contrary to the dogma that individuals don’t matter, the Bolsheviks engaged in it anyway. Criminals calling themselves revolutionaries joined in, but since revolutionaries themselves recruited criminals and applauded their violence, it is impossible to draw a line between revolutionary and criminal action. Some terrorists would give half their take to a revolutionary party and use the other half to buy a villa or even their own business. In Riga, terrorists effectively replaced the local government by levying taxes, establishing police patrols, and, of course, creating their own secret police to uncover disloyalty.

Liberal professionals and industri-

alists did more than applaud: They offered their apartments for concealing weapons and contributed substantial sums of money. Lenin supposedly said “when we are ready to hang the capitalists, they will sell us the rope,” but he might better have said “buy us the rope.” Liberals proudly defended terrorists in court, in the press, and in the Duma. Paul Miliukov, the leader of the liberal Constitutional Democratic (Kadet) party, affirmed that “all means are legitimate . . . and all means should be tried.” The Kadets rejected the government offer of amnesty for political prisoners unless it included terrorists, who would, they well knew, promptly resume killing government officials. “Condemn terror?” exclaimed Kadet leader Ivan Petrunkevich. “Never! That would mean moral ruin for the party!”

If the strategy was to demoralize the government, it worked. Wearing a uniform made one a target for a bullet—or sulfuric acid in the face, another favorite form of attack. In Petersburg the head of the security police faced insubordination from agents afraid of revolutionaries. My favorite story concerns the reporter who asked his editor whether to run the biography of the newly appointed governor-general. Don’t bother, came the reply. Save it for the obituary.

In Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s novel *August 1914*, two radical aunts, Adalia and Agnessa, struggle to raise their nephew Sasha and niece Veronika. Sasha is willing to follow family tradition and become a terrorist like executed Uncle Anton, but Veronika falls in with a disreputable crowd, including her unspeakably lower-class friend Yelikonda, that prefers poetry to propaganda. When Veronika refers to the radicals’ “herd behavior,” the aunts accuse her of “nihilism”! “Silly girls like Yelikonda, the aunts thought, can do what they like, their families are tradesmen or moneygrubbers of some sort,” but Veronika must be persuaded to change her ways.

“In our day,” they tell her, “girls used to be blessed—you were, Nessa!—with Vera Figner’s portrait, as though

it was an icon. And that determined your whole future life." Everyone learned about saintly Vera Zasulich, whose acquittal, "a still more glorious moment in Russian history than her pistol shot," inspired "a long and brilliant succession of women," including "iron" Sofya Perovskaya, who not only directed the assassination of the czar but also earned glory as the first Russian woman to be executed for a political crime. Bombmaker Dora Brilliant's "black eyes shone with the holy joy of terrorism" and another woman became a suicide bomber: "What fanatical zeal for justice! To turn yourself into a walking human bomb!" the aunts enthuse. "What women they were! The glory of Russia!" Even better than suicide, in their view, is to survive long enough to make a fiery speech at one's trial and then experience "a still greater happiness—to die on the scaffold!"

When Veronika recoils from celebrating lying and killing, the aunts explain that depending on who commits it, *the same act is not the same act*. One cannot equate

the oppressors of the people and its liberators, speaking as though they had the same moral rights! . . . Let him [the terrorist] lie—as long as it is for the sake of the truth! Let him kill—but only for the sake of love! The Party takes all the blame upon itself, so that terror is no longer murder, expropriation is no longer robbery.

Veronika succumbs, but it is not love of the people that convinces her. Rather, she cannot resist the "precariousness and poignancy of life in the underground, a life that was really a succession of thrilling experiences." Solzhenitsyn got it right: what is most remarkable in the memoirs of terrorists is how rarely they express concern for the unfortunate. "Sympathy for the suffering of the people did not move me to join those who perished," Vera Zasulich explains. "I had never heard of the horrors of serfdom [when growing up] at Biakolovo—and I don't think there were any."

Then what did motivate terrorists? Zasulich describes how as a girl she wished to become a Christian martyr,

but when she lost her faith, terrorism offered a substitute martyrdom. Some men and women were, like Veronika, attracted to the excitement of living the prescribed terrorist biography. The fact that life was likely to be short endowed each moment with a vertiginous intensity that became addictive, and many reported that they could not live for long without committing another murder.



Terrorist leader Vera Figner survived prison and exile to die old and unrepentant in Soviet Russia.

Zasulich also saw terrorism as an escape from a lifelong feeling that she "didn't belong. No one ever held me, kissed me, or sat me on his knee; no one called me pet names. The servants abused me." Like many others, she loved the camaraderie of the closely knit terrorist circle, in which mortal danger created bonds of intimacy experienced nowhere else. Many found the idea of suicide enchanting. We often think of suicide bombing as a modern invention, but it, too, was pioneered by the Russians.

It never occurs to these memoirists that their motives are entirely selfish. They amount to saying that one practices terrorism for one's own satisfaction. Other people, whose suffering is a mere excuse, become what Alexander Herzen called "liberation fodder." Interestingly

enough, some heroes of Savinkov's novels do know that such murder is above all self-affirmation. As aesthetes affirm art for art's sake, they accept terror for terror's sake. "Earlier I had an excuse," one hero reflects, "I was killing for the sake of an ideal, for a cause. . . . But now I have killed *for my own sake*. I wanted to kill, and I killed. . . . Why is it right to kill for the sake of an ideal . . . and not for one's own sake?"

Like Kropotkin's autobiography, Figner's became a classic, but the two differ in one important respect. Figner is utterly unable even to imagine any point of view but her own. "My mind was not encumbered with notions and doubts," she explains. She describes her early life as the sudden discovery of one unquestionable truth after another. "Every truth, once recognized, became thereby compulsory for my will. This was the logic of my character." Although she disdains attachment to any specific socialist program, she is certain that socialism will at once cure all ills. She gives up medicine for revolution when she concludes that medicine can only palliate ailments but socialism will eliminate them.

After the revolution, Bolsheviks insisted that anyone who differed from party dogma in the slightest respect deserved liquidation: There could be no nuance or middle ground. Figner, too, presumes that no decent person could think otherwise. "If all means of convincing him [someone who disagrees] have been tried and alike found fruitless," she explains matter-of-factly, "there remains for the revolutionist only physical violence: the dagger, the revolver, and dynamite."

To be a terrorist, Figner explains, one must practice constant deception. One lives under a false identity and regularly abuses trust. One spreads rumors among the peasants and plants spies in the enemy's camp. So it is mind-boggling to read of her shock upon discovering that she herself has been deceived. It turned out that her comrade Degaev was working for the police. His betrayal led to her capture,

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but what did that matter “in the face of what Degaev had done, who had shaken the foundation of life itself, that faith in people without which a revolutionist cannot act? He had lied, dissimulated, and deceived. . . . To experience such a betrayal was a blow beyond all words. It took away the moral beauty of mankind, the beauty of the revolution and of life itself.” The same act is not the same act.

On one page Figner denounces the unjust persecution of radicals’ harmless work in the countryside while on the next she describes their work as revolutionary propaganda. With no irony she says that soon after Perovskaya killed the czar she “was treacherously seized on the street.” She finds imprisonment of terrorists immoral even though she also claims that upon release they immediately resume killing. How dare the government defend itself! She mentions only casually the death of many innocent bystanders, as if no one could seriously object. More horrifying than her actions is her mentality. Someone who reasons this way could justify anything. Stalin added very little to this sort of thinking.

The revolutionaries had no more effective advocate abroad than Stepniak, with his charisma, facility for languages, literary talent, and oratorical skills. It was Stepniak who tutored Constance Garnett in Russian, suggested she translate Turgenyev, and helped correct her early work. Garnett, of course, went on to translate some 70 volumes of Russian classics, and many of her versions, lightly revised, remain the best ever done.

Stepniak made his literary reputation with *Underground Russia* (1882), written in Italian but soon translated into English, Swedish, German, French, Dutch, and Hungarian. The best commentator on Stepniak, Peter Scotto, stresses the significance of a letter Stepniak wrote to some Russian comrades to explain why the book was less than candid. *Underground Russia* was designed, Stepniak explained in the letter, to convince polite Europeans that Russian radicals shared their liberal ideals—a bald-faced lie—even if

they were compelled to resort, highly reluctantly, to violence. Westerners won’t sympathize if you talk to them the way we talk among ourselves, he cautioned, and so you must omit mentioning our program and illuminate the movement “in a way that makes it clear that the aspirations of Russian socialists are identical—temporarily, to be sure—with those of the radicals of European revolutions.” By “temporarily” Stepniak means that the radicals demand civil liberties only so long as



Stepniak, the toast of literary London

they make terrorism easier. “Propaganda in Russian for Russian youth should, of course, have a completely different character.”

More than one commentator has compared *Underground Russia* to an Orthodox *paterikon*, a collection of incidents from saint’s lives. Stepniak first offers a composite portrait of “the terrorist”: “He is noble, terrible, irresistibly fascinating, for he combines in himself the two sublimities of human grandeur: the martyr and the hero. . . . From the day when he swears in the depths of his heart to free the people . . . he knows he is consecrated to Death. . . . Alone, obscure, poor, he undertook to be the defender of outraged humanity. . . . Proud as Satan rebelling against God . . . [with] almost superhuman energy, which astounds the world . . . such is the Terrorist.” Even if we dismiss such rhetoric, it is hard not to find Stepniak’s accounts of

trials, persecutions, and hairbreadth escapes thrilling. Scotto shrewdly observes that Stepniak, who represents his terrorists as victims, never describes an actual killing. Even the murder of Mezentsev is ascribed not to himself, nor to any human agent, but to something he calls “the Terrorism”: “On August 16, 1878 . . . the Terrorism, by putting to death General Mezentsev . . . boldly threw down the glove in the face of autocracy.”

Stepniak’s novel is more candid than his memoirs. Set in the late 1870s, *The Career of a Nihilist* (1889) describes a group of terrorists who plot assassinations and a prison escape while arguing about terrorist morality. To the distress of the hero Andrei, one comrade despises all ideology as “metaphysics” and believes in terrorism for its own sake. When Andrei falls in love with a new convert to the cause, Tatiana, they must consider the propriety of love among those already married to the revolution. The terrorists are shocked when a court sentences a group of terrorists to death since, in their view, one of the condemned was entirely “innocent of any real offense”: He had only aided and financed the others, but hadn’t himself killed anyone.

The moment Andrei sees his comrade Zima hang, “everything was changed in him.” All feelings are now “submerged by something thrilling, vehement, indescribable. . . . It was a positive thirst for martyrdom, a feeling . . . which was . . . the fulfillment of an ardent desire, a dream of supreme happiness.” Andrei attempts to kill the czar, is caught, and hanged. The narrator ends the novel: “He had perished. But the work for which he died did not perish. It goes forward from defeat to defeat towards the final victory, which in this sad world of ours cannot be obtained save by the sufferings and sacrifice of the chosen few.” It is the “chosen few,” not the suffering people, who matter in terrorist memoirs and fiction.

Boris Savinkov’s life not only reads like fiction but, as historian Lynn Ellen Patyk has argued, was consciously lived according to fictional models. As director of the SR Combat Organization,



Terrorist, assassin, and (of course) novelist Boris Savinkov, second from left, on trial in 1924 for his participation in anti-Bolshevik plots

Savinkov organized several important assassinations. His career also included a prison escape, a later attempt to set up a new combat organization, service in the French Army during World War I, a cabinet post in Alexander Kerensky's Provisional Government, and the founding of a terrorist organization directed against the Bolsheviks. Pretending to be a group of his followers, Bolshevik officials lured him from abroad, arrested him, and condemned him to death, after which he offered to join them. He begged the head of the secret police, Feliks Dzerzhinsky, to be employed in more terror, but soon after, in 1925, either committed suicide or, more likely, was defenestrated. Much later, Stalin, demanding that one of his henchmen employ more torture during interrogations, supposedly exclaimed: "Do you want to be more humanistic than Lenin, who ordered Dzerzhinsky to throw Savinkov out a window?"

The hero of Savinkov's novel *What Never Happened* at last realizes that "he had fallen in love, yes, yes, fallen in love with terror." Savinkov's own memoirs describe one figure after another who shared this passion. His friend Kaliayev, a terrorist almost as famous as Savinkov himself, "dreamed of future terror . . . he said to me . . . 'A Socialist-Revolutionary without a bomb is no longer a Socialist-Revolutionary.'" Savinkov describes Chris-

tians who worship terror and a "convinced disciple of Kant . . . [who] nevertheless regarded terror with almost religious reverence." Russian philosophers are a breed of their own.

Savinkov's career exhibits a dynamic found in most, if not all, revolutionary movements. At first the goal is social justice, which must be achieved by revolution. Soon the goal becomes revolution itself, which in turn requires terror. Finally, terror itself becomes the goal. Whenever sufficient justification for a position is that it is more radical, and whenever compromise suggests cowardice or collusion, the drift toward greater horror becomes irresistible.

After 1917, SRs and anarchists denounced the Bolsheviks as betrayers of the cause, but all the Bolsheviks did was direct the same tactics against them that they had directed against others. The terrorist state emerged directly from the terrorist movement and did so without a break. The Bolsheviks employed terror—including random killing, taking hostages, and seizing property by force—as soon as they took power. Lenin set up the Cheka, his secret police force, in December 1917, before the Bolsheviks faced any serious armed resistance. That same month Trotsky declaimed: "There is nothing immoral in the proletariat finishing off the dying

class. . . . Be put on notice that in one month at most this terror will assume more frightful forms." Concentration camps were set up in 1918. We "must execute not only the guilty," Nikolai Krylenko, a top Bolshevik, demanded. "Execution of the innocent will impress the masses even more." Even in relatively peaceful 1922, Lenin wrote that in any new criminal code "jurisprudence must not eliminate terror. . . . It must vindicate and legalize it."

So brutal was the new Cheka that its deputy director found it hard to recruit agents because candidates were too "sentimental." It is hardly surprising, then, that terrorists of all stripes joined the Cheka and the revolutionary tribunals. Especially in remote regions, mass murder and torture were common.

Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Cheka, was himself an experienced terrorist, while Stalin, though he did not take part personally, led the Bolshevik combat organization in the Caucasus.

Dostoyevsky's *Possessed* had suggested that terrorist success depends on support from polite liberal society, and that proved accurate. The division of people into friends and enemies, the celebration of righteous anger, and the romanticization of violence eventually led to a state based on sheer terror. In the name of the many, the radical intelligentsia and their liberal defenders made possible the rule of the chosen few. ♦

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Cleese's Classroom

Lectures and laughs from the comic actor and Monty Python legend. BY THOMAS VINCIGUERRA

At first I winced. So it turns out that John Cleese, the 6-foot-5 silly-walking fulcrum of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *Fawlty Towers*, was the Andrew D. White Professor-at-Large at Cornell University from 1999 to 2006! And now he is a Provost's Visiting Professor! Upon learning this, painful memories of Milton Berle's comedy "seminars," replete with lame wisecracks and threadbare show-biz anecdotes, erupted in my hippocampus.

But my skepticism quickly melted. When, very early in his new collection of lectures and interviews from his Ithaca interludes, Cleese invoked Neil Postman and Descartes and quoted the Polish proverb "Sleep faster, we need the pillows," I began smiling.

Cleese famously went to Cambridge. This doesn't necessarily qualify one for smarts; witness Burgess, Maclean, Philby, et al. And strictly speaking, Cleese is no professor. Yet he's not merely a comedian either. He is a lively, quirky enlightener, always zipping between—or bringing together—the ridiculous and the sublime.

Two main intellectual disciplines occupy him in these pages. The first is human thought. The coauthor of two self-help books with psychiatrist Robin Skynner, Cleese is particularly taken with the concept of "Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind," as popularized by Guy Claxton. At its base is the struggle

Thomas Vinciguerra is the author of Cast of Characters: Wolcott Gibbs, E. B. White, James Thurber, and the Golden Age of 'The New Yorker.'

Professor at Large

The Cornell Years

by John Cleese
Cornell, 231 pp., \$25



John Cleese and students at Cornell

between "practical workaday thinking" and our "more playful, leisurely, or dreamy" tendencies. "Let's be clear," Cleese says. "We need both."

To demonstrate, he briefly exits his talk on a pretext. Offstage sounds of a struggle and a gunshot ensue. The next thing the audience knows, he has returned in the guise of John Cleese's "brother" Colin. "Stop this nonsense!" he shouts. "Now! This instant! My brother is a deranged and dangerous subversive. You are to forget every word he's told you. If you've taken notes, eat them. Now!"

Who knew that besides *Python* and *Fawlty*, myriad business-training films, *A Fish Called Wanda*, and a couple each of Harry Potter and James Bond flicks, Cleese not only hosted but wrote a four-part BBC documentary called *The Human Face*, all about presentation, perception, and identity. Cleese offers many fine takeaways on the complexity of physiognomy. Pointing to his mouth,

he says, "If I want to disguise my appearance, if I wear dental prosthetics, teeth that push my lips out like this, people actually don't recognize me."

Cleese's second major concern is religion. He confesses that his Church of England upbringing turned him off organized worship for a good 20 years. Then he began reading Alan Watts and Aldous Huxley. Soon he was forging his own particular relationship with the Almighty. It's a work in progress.

"I am still puzzled why, in the West," he says a few months before 9/11, "there's been so little interest in experiencing the divine and so much emphasis

on religion as crowd control. Is it because, once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, it attracted as priests some who were unconsciously motivated by the desire for power?" Cleese has interviewed the Dalai Lama, admits that "Love your enemy" is a concept "simply beyond my emotional capacity," and emphasizes that the Son of God was, ultimately, a mystic. For the record, Cleese believes in an afterlife. "The trouble comes when you try to say how it works."

Regarding faith, he can be glib: "I bet that the gap in intelligence between God and me is rather bigger than the gap between me and [my cat] Wensley." He can be snide: "If Dick Cheney were scourged for hours and then crucified, I would genuinely feel sorry for him ... *eventually*." But really, he is altogether disarming. He recalls when zealots excoriated *Monty Python's Life of Brian*: "We were condemned by the Jewish Orthodox folk, the Jewish liberal folk, the Catholics, the Lutherans, and the Calvinists. And we were very proud about that because, as Eric Idle said, 'We've given them the first thing they've agreed on for five hundred years.' So I like to think of us Pythons as 'unifiers.'"

Inexplicably, Cleese thinks *Life of Brian* a better movie than *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* because it has "quite a good story." No religious quarrels here; *Grail*, while a lot looser, is just plain funnier.

Cleese's scope in *Professor at Large* is considerable—ever heard of the French quasi-astrologer Michel Gauquelin? Or his “Mars Effect”?—and his intellectual restlessness ever evident. Little wonder that he thought *Monty Python* had only two truly original sketches in its third season and he appeared not at all in its fourth.

The book is short: There are only seven chapters, and one is a lengthy interview with Cleese's “favorite screenwriter,” William Goldman. The volume sometimes disappoints: From the man behind *Fawlty Towers* there is, incredibly, no lecture directed specifically to Cornell's School of Hotel Administration. (In recalling Donald Sinclair, the “gloriously rude” inspiration for Basil Fawlty, Cleese does note the man's guiding principle: “I could run this place properly if it weren't for the guests.”)

Along the way, though, we do learn quite a bit about our prof: He was “hopeless with young women” thanks to his mother's “vast spectrum of anxiety.” Today, this advancing septuagenarian can do only a pale version of his silly walk because of a “totally artificial knee and two artificial hips.” Just before *Python* taped its first episode—portions of the show were recorded before live studio audiences—Cleese confessed to Michael Palin, “This could be the first time in history where people have recorded an entire comedy show to complete silence.” Palin was similarly nervous.

And there are splendid insights into the world across the pond. Except for Prince Charles, Cleese is not big on the royal family: “I just don't think that people who are running countries should spend a lot of time watching horses run.” Why has his country traditionally been so uncomfortable with emotions? “We've got an empire to run; we don't have time to be depressed.” Want to know how to be popular in England? “Have a big public failure. Nobody feels envious, and they can all feel really good about themselves because they come to your rescue and show that they are still your friend.”

Professor Cleese, may I audit your next course? ◆

BCA

Scary Good

The lasting appeal of the horror genre.

BY CHRIS R. MORGAN

Peter Laws's *The Frighteners* is the kind of book I was predisposed not to like. There is Laws's chatty, hands-free-mike, from-the-pulpit style (his writing out of “nah” being his most unwelcome tic). Then there is his “sinister minister” persona—the apparent discontinuity of this ordained Baptist minister from Britain who is also somehow so committed to the macabre that he posts horror-movie reviews on YouTube, speaks at horror conventions, and writes horror fiction with Garth Marengi-esque titles like *Purged* and *Unleashed*, as if no one has ever before read a John Donne sermon. (Okay, maybe a lot of people haven't lately, but I'm permitted my annoyance.) And above all, there is his pie-in-the-sky optimism.

But *The Frighteners* is one of a few recent nonfiction works attempting in earnest—and with some success—to get at the heart of horror, a genre that rarely stays very long in the realm of the respectable yet one that has never wanted for a curious audience.

Laws examines the most popular tropes of horror (zombies, werewolves, vampires, haunted houses, and serial killers) and its general themes (violence, mortality, and trauma) by exploring corners of the world they infiltrate. He tours Transylvania, tries to survive a simulated zombie outbreak, talks with a woman whose boyfriend made her a coffin (“I keep it in the lounge”), peruses collections of murder memorabilia, and walks through the Capuchin Crypt in Rome—where the skeletal remains of thousands of monks have been arranged with morbid artistry. Laws argues that an attraction to, or at least curiosity about, the

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The Frighteners

A Journey Through Our Cultural Fascination with the Macabre

by Peter Laws

Skyhorse, 288 pp., \$24.99

Sleeping with the Lights On

The Unsettling Story of Horror

by Darryl Jones

Oxford, 181 pp., \$16.95

scary and the strange is, if not universal, at least very common: “Millions of us spend an inordinate amount of time and money pondering the violent demise of real victims,” Laws writes. “We might not pay for killer collectibles, but we sure like to follow the antics of these murderers.” (Hello, person who shelled out \$200 to attend a live taping of the podcast *My Favorite Murder*.)

In the chapter “The Beast Within,” covering werewolves and vampires, Laws's observational empathy goes into high gear when he visits a “furry” convention in a hotel in Birmingham, England. “Some of them seem wary of me,” he writes—and with good reason, as the subculture has been the subject of derision and disgust. Media reports depict “furring” as a “sex craze” and its practitioners as “sick” and “perverts.” “But I'm not here to expose any animal sexing,” Laws writes—rather, he is looking “to find out how the once dreaded inner beast is being embraced by this subculture.” Quite innocently, as far as he sees: Men and women frolic through the hotel in full costume or just wearing dog ears around their heads. It appears to Laws to be a gathering of “bespoke, alternative personas”—or “fursonas”—that these people “develop both online and off.” Many furies, one tells Laws, “aren't really good at social

interaction,” and donning a mask, even a figurative one, helps.

By “dreaded inner beast,” Laws refers to the Victorian fear—an offshoot of Darwinism, though Darwin himself did not support it—that civilized man will degrade into a baser, beastly form. “Darwinism made people turn their fearful focus further inward. What if the monster out there was really the beast *in here*?” Out of this milieu, Laws continues, came *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s quickly written accidental classic of “the horrors of human duality.” And here Laws offers a valuable insight:

The Victorians saw this as a chilling literary example of degeneration. Yet, do we really think this book, and other Gothic double stories, were successful because of the clean-living Jekyll? Nah... It’s *Hyde* that really drew the crowds. ... Hyde certainly was wild and scary, but wasn’t he the one who got to have all the fun?

Some of what Laws covers has an air of “the more things change, the more things stay the same.” For instance, our itch for art that is relevant to the zeitgeist. “Unusual times demand unusual pictures,” reads an advertisement for a Bela Lugosi movie that Laws discusses: “Americans were in the thick of a tumbling economy and exploding unemployment. *White Zombie* debuted in 1932 ... a year that historian Frederick Lewis Allen describes as ‘the cruelest [year]’ of the Great Depression.”

But some things *do* change. Even if the elements of horror don’t change much over time, their moral weight is always shifting. Laws’s reverse-engineering of *Jekyll and Hyde* puts into perspective how contemporary filmmakers and audiences see monsters. “Themes of generational trauma, inherited mental illness, and the guilt and fear that accompany them have been popular in horror this year,” Katie Rife writes in her *AV Club* review of the new Netflix series *The Haunting of Hill House*. In fact, trauma and mental illness have *always* been staples of horror; what has shifted recently is their *source*. To borrow from an observation of Eve Tushnet’s: Horror classics from



Spencer Tracy as the title character(s) in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941)

the last few decades tended to link the characters’ trauma or mental illness to other people (like the repressed anger and hurt of Carrie White in *Carrie* or the entity who lives “in the weak and the wounded” in *Session 9*). “Humans are the *real* monsters” is a popular interpretative line in horror. Increasingly, though, the trauma in the horror genre arises from within—and rather than fight against it externally, it must be overcome internally. The old saying could be refashioned as “We create our own monsters—good and bad.”

The Frighteners is notably reliant on the first-person plural—as if Laws is writing on behalf of everyone, as secret and not-so-secret horror fans. “We’ve become experts at hiding the realities of mortality.” “Through crime dramas, horror films and Halloween scare attractions, we engage in only the type of memento mori we can handle.” “Both we and zombies are hopelessly addicted to consumption.” “Because despite how it looks, we’re just like everybody else. We love and adore life. We laugh. We care. It doesn’t matter whether we’re into faith or not. Many

of us *aren’t*, actually. Yet we still detest real-life violence and know the difference between real and fake blood.”

“*Despite how it looks...*” Though faith is mostly an incidental element here, an extension of his own journey, Reverend Laws is preaching to a congregation of “shadow-watchers.” But rather than seeking to convert new congregants, he wants to tell the vast unaware that they are already members.

Darryl Jones’s *Sleeping with the Lights On* covers many of the same themes and tropes as Laws’s book, but it’s ultimately very different. As a professor of English literature at Trinity College Dublin—with such research interests as “Welsh nationalist horror”—Jones’s designs are more hermeneutic than homiletic. Moreover, Jones favors a confrontational reading of horror over Laws’s cathartic one. “While the products of horror can often be readily incorporated into capitalism,” Jones writes, “part of the power of horror lies in its transgressive nature. It can be ... an avant-garde art form, whose function is to shock us out

of our respectability and complacency.”

This divide between scary stuff intended to be popular and scary stuff intended to shock audiences into new ways of thought has long been present in horror. Films like *Halloween*, still frightening 40 years later even without the use of jump scares and

that H.P. Lovecraft was, “by any traditional literary standards, the author of some of the worst prose ever committed to print”—are pretty much horror-fan conventional wisdom.

Still, Jones offers some welcome elucidation on a few old favorites, like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. He reminds

berg, the grotesque retro pastiches of Rob Zombie, the Asian horror boom of the 1990s (and then the remake boom of the 2000s), the cyber-horror of *Unfriended*, and the Internet meme Slender Man. Much of this is restricted to an afterword, but he presents well the kaleidoscopic array of tones, themes, and media through which the genre’s recent entries have been produced.

What if, despite the dark flowering of the horror genre, the mainstream continues to treat it unseriously? No matter—for as Jones notes, “some of the finest horror ... comes from the margins. It arises out of the peripheral, the regional, the provincial, the neglected, the discarded ... occluded identities insist on their presence.”

Horror’s most fascinating attribute is its ability to push boundaries of theme, style, and format while also being wildly popular. In fact “horror” sometimes acts like a magic word that can make intimidating art seem instantly more accessible. (At least it worked for a friend who was having trouble coming around to David Lynch.) Laws and Jones take different stands on this. While Jones is worried about the “corporatization” of some subgenres of horror, on the grounds that they might lose their authenticity and be drained of their power, Laws is, if not less concerned, at least more nuanced:

We humans are insecure, and so we can’t resist the type of tribal dominance games our ancestors used to play. ... We just have different signifiers now—the bigger house, the cooler car, the slicker Facebook photos. To find success in these modern games of significance is hard work, and we often fail to match up. But there’s always a pixelated zombie waiting to let us shoot them, meaning there are still arenas in which even the weakest among us can be heroes for a while.

Whatever the merits of either book’s insights, each proves at least three things. First, that thinking about horror is fun, with not a few intellectual calories; but, second, not as fun as actually watching or reading horror itself; and, third, that whether we live in a time of social harmony or social discontent, the horror genre is secure. ♦



Creepy killer Michael Myers (Nick Castle) in the original *Halloween* (1978)

high-tech special effects, and *Dawn of the Dead* use their techniques to articulate shared fears that may never have been expressed clearly but are on some deep level widely shared. That is why they are so popular—and so often and so egregiously imitated. A film like Takashi Miike’s *Audition*, however, has no such intentions, preferring instead to upend viewers’ expectations and challenge their tolerance levels if not their thinking. On this point, Jones quotes the horror writer-director Clive Barker: “The kind of horror which is all suggestion and undertow ... doesn’t do a thing for me. ... I like imagining horrors in detail.”

The scope of *Sleeping with the Lights On* is, surprisingly for such a small book, vast. Jones mines horror as far back as ancient Greece. He brings into the mix not just Burke’s aesthetics of the sublime but also Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, the crucifixion, and multiple versions of *Faust*. Many of his broader conclusions—like the notion that the serial killer is “our great modern demon” and the assertion

us that Bram Stoker’s novel differs from today’s culturally omnipresent vampire fiction. It is “one of the major novels of Victorian London. Reading *Dracula*, we encounter a city of immigrants and suburbs, gentlemen’s clubs, lawyers, banks, docks, graveyards, and lunatic asylums.” Moreover, Stoker’s book offers a “reverse colonization” narrative wherein “the British Empire is vulnerable to invasion and infection.”

Conversely, Jones brings Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* closer to the present. “Our Victor Frankenstein is not a mad scientist as such, but a computer geek. Brilliant, callow, nihilistic, and plutocratic, this figure is emblematic, or even symptomatic, in modern popular culture, from Robert Downey Jr.’s Tony Stark to Jesse Eisenberg in *The Social Network* ... to Oscar Isaac in *Ex Machina*.”

More noteworthy, though, is how Jones makes extra time for works of horror from recent decades that have not received wide critical attention. This includes “body horror” as pioneered by Barker and David Cronen-

Forging Character

A down-and-out writer's clever path to sham success.

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

There are still people all over Manhattan like Lee Israel, the writer who died in 2014 and has been resurrected as the protagonist of a finely wrought movie set in the early 1990s called *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* I see them even now, pushing a cart with cat-food cans in a harshly lit basement supermarket late at night, or in midafternoon stops at the drug store arguing over the prescription card, or standing outside bars smoking one of those cigarettes whose brand names suggest a time long gone by—Kent, or Kool, or Benson & Hedges.

Only the generous rules of New York City apartment tenancy seem to keep them from having to take up residence elsewhere—certainly a fate worse than death for all confirmed Manhattanites. They are Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* in the age of the Internet, city ghosts that walk among us.

Israel is ornery, solitary, descending into late middle age; her life was the story of an early climb and a vertiginous descent—as I imagine was the case with her present-day doppelgängers, likely people of some promise years back. Having been a reasonably successful freelancer with a couple of well-regarded biographies under her belt, Israel threw a third bio together, this one of Estée Lauder, and came a cropper. Her writing career followed that book into obscurity, helped along the way by her own difficult personality and rank alcoholism. At 52, Israel found herself all but unemployable and totally alone, having long since driven away her girlfriend.

John Podhoretz, editor of Commentary, is THE WEEKLY STANDARD's movie critic.

Can You Ever Forgive Me?

Directed by Marielle Heller



Melissa McCarthy as Lee Israel, surrounded by some of the typewriters used for her forgeries

The explosively brilliant comic actress Melissa McCarthy plays Israel in *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, and it's a miraculous performance—taut, controlled, unyielding. Under the direction of Marielle Heller and using the words of screenwriters Jeff Whitty and Nicole Holofcener, McCarthy refuses ever to wink at the camera, to make Israel winsome or even remotely likable. What she does convey is Israel's growing despair and desperation. Out of options, she comes across a few dull letters by a forgotten celebrity (Fanny Brice, the stage and radio comedienne played by Barbra Streisand in *Funny Girl*) and conceives of a scheme to forge correspondence and sell her forgeries to various memorabilia dealers around New York.

How she does it, how the dealers fall for it, and how she enlists another New York character named Jack Hock

(the marvelous Richard E. Grant) to work with her are the meat and bones of *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* The movie is smart and literate and adult, and you should see it. But it's missing something, and that something is revealed in Israel's memoir of the same name, which was published in 2008.

I didn't read the book until after I'd seen the movie, and it turns out to be a marvel—compact and jaunty, snappily observed, brimming with a cool-eyed wit you'd never know Israel possessed from the film version. Israel's memoir is the story of a corrupt person who both revels in her corruption and understands why and how she was brought low because of it:

I dreamt that I was sitting in one of the chicken-wire buses on my way upstate to prison. Noël Coward was driving the bus, and I was surrounded by the celebrity subjects of my forgeries, who were not on this occasion such good company: all nattering about how bad my typing was, how inept my punctuation. Dorothy Parker sniffed at my use of serial commas, which she compared to serial killers. ... Noël wore elegant evening wear, shifted the gears in anger.

That is just marvelous writing, and it indicates Israel was not simply a hack but something much more tragic—a genuine talent whose profound personal weaknesses laid her low. Israel waited 15 years to publish her story and what comes across is her quiet delight in her own cleverness. Her forged letters, reproduced in the book, were brilliant acts of mimicry both physically and spiritually. "I was a better writer as a forger than I had ever been as a writer," she concludes—and her conclusion is wrong, because her *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* is better still.

The movie never allows us to share vicariously in Lee Israel's pleasure in her two-year success as a con artist who pulled off 400 forgeries before she was caught. The filmmakers and Melissa McCarthy (who may win an Oscar for this performance) are too committed to their unvarnished portrait of her surpassing misanthropy to allow us a few complicit moments of joy as the forger's sidekicks.

Little Free Librarian

Todd H. Bol, 1956-2018.

BY MICAH MATTIX



Just down the road from our home in southeastern Virginia, in front of the local arts center, there is a small wooden box on a pole with a handful of books inside. You can take any book you want from the box, or add one. There are no due dates, no late fees, and no record of who took which book. A few blocks from the arts center, in the front lawn of the home of Pam and Tom DuBois, there's another. They took it over from a neighbor who moved away a year ago. About a half mile from the DuBois's, Dixon Rollins and his wife host another with the help of the local arts league.

These are Little Free Libraries, and there are over 75,000 registered

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ones around the world and perhaps as many unregistered ones. The people who build and stock them ("stewards," as they are called) do it not only to share a love of reading—particularly in neighborhoods where there is no library—but also to bring neighbors together. As one steward put it: "It's a place to stop—an oasis of sorts."

Todd H. Bol, who stumbled onto the idea in 2009, died on October 18. He was 62 years old.

"I originally started Little Free Library," Bol wrote in 2015, "because of the sheer delight I saw when people approached a Little Free Library for the first time." That first library was the one he built in 2009. As Margret Aldrich notes in her book about the movement, Bol had just returned from a month-long trip across the country—a trip his wife had suggested

he take to clear his head after the company he had started closed its doors. He was cleaning out his garage to turn it into an office and decided to use an old wooden garage door to build a model one-room schoolhouse in honor of his late mother, a former teacher. When he and his wife had a garage sale, Bol put books in the schoolhouse and put it on a pole in his front yard. The neighbors were fascinated, and an idea was born.

Bol built six more libraries—some for his neighbors in Hudson, Wisconsin, and some to place at strategic locations in Madison with the help of Rick Brooks, who was an outreach coordinator at the University of Wisconsin at the time and later became cofounder of the Little Free Library organization. The going was slow at first, but after they received a grant from a nonprofit foundation in Chicago in 2011, they were interviewed on Wisconsin public radio. In 2012, NBC News ran a story about the libraries and other media outlets were soon covering their efforts; interest in Little Free Libraries exploded.

Bol's hope for Little Free Libraries was, partly, that they would promote literacy and encourage reading. "There are more than 11,000 small towns across the United States that don't have a public library," he once noted. "While this might seem like a daunting obstacle . . . Rotary Clubs, Lions, 4-H groups, Boy and Girl Scout troops, churches, schools, businesses, and many other groups and individuals are stepping up to . . . make sure all small towns have . . . free access to books."

He also hoped they would bring neighbors together. "The reason Little Free Library has been successful," Bol remarked, "is that people tell us, constantly, 'I've met more neighbors in a week than I've met in 30 years.'" That's a recurring sentiment in the 2012 documentary about the movement, *A Small Wooden Box*. "It's a way to connect on common ground," Darren Wang said, "that feels communal and simple and really beautiful. . . . It's a way of sharing and talking that people haven't explored

VIA YOUTUBE

I think in the same way in years.”

Dixon Rollins told me that the kids in his neighborhood regularly bike to the little library to pick up books and that he and his wife enjoy decorating the library by season. Pam DuBois said she enjoyed meeting neighbors and that she and her husband have started adding other items to the library, like board games, for people to take. They are also considering moving it to make it more accessible for an elderly woman who uses the library regularly but who has trouble reaching it.

In a world where everything is regulated, Little Free Libraries are wonderfully free of bureaucratic requirements such as permits, registrations (other than the option to register your library with the home organization and receive a charter number and sign), government oversight, required tax filings, and unnecessary licensing—and I hope it stays that way.

We lose something when the face of

every act of generosity or service is an employee of a government agency or nonprofit. Little Free Libraries offer people the opportunity to serve others face to face in the places they live.

Both Brooks and Bol have always been reluctant to take much credit for the success of Little Free

In a world where everything is regulated, Little Free Libraries are wonderfully free of bureaucratic requirements such as permits and registrations.

Libraries. “I think we owe the success of this little social invention to the early adopters and first stewards,” Brooks has said. “They were enthusiastic and selfless about it, not in it for themselves . . . but for the

sheer joy and simple generosity” of it.

But their commitment to the idea, especially in the early years when there were only a handful of libraries, and their selfless interest in the people starting them in their neighborhoods was no doubt contagious. In her book, Aldrich remembers how Bol, when he would speak to Little Free Library stewards, would always “pass along the microphone, encouraging people to tell their own stories.” “Every Little Free Library was his favorite Little Free Library,” she said. “He genuinely loved this movement and the people behind it.”

Bol leaves behind a wife and three adult children. He also leaves behind tens of thousands of Little Free Libraries, millions of books shared in neighborhoods around the world, and countless people talking to other people about life around a simple box of books atop a pole. May he rest in peace. ♦

Plaintiffs’ Lawyers Hit the Jackpot

THOMAS J. DONOHUE
PRESIDENT AND CEO
U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The largest ever lottery prize in U.S. history grabbed headlines last week as one lucky winner walked away with a cool \$1.6 billion. But there’s another billion-dollar figure making news—and in this case, it’s the plaintiffs’ lawyers who are hitting the jackpot.

According to a new study released by the U.S. Chamber Institute for Legal Reform (ILR), the U.S. tort system racked up \$429 billion in total costs and compensation associated with lawsuits in 2016 alone. Our nation has long had the most expensive civil justice system in the world, but this is a new record!

For the amount of money that went to lawsuit costs and compensation that year, we could have paid for three-quarters of U.S. defense spending or covered the U.S. Department of Education’s budget six times over.

This is equivalent to 2.3% of U.S. GDP, which translates to \$3,300 per household—almost double what the average household spent on gas in 2016.

What *isn’t* equivalent is cost and value. Victims receive just 57 cents on the dollar of reward settlements. Much of the rest goes straight into the pockets of the plaintiffs’ lawyers.

And that’s only part of the story. Class action lawsuits account for a portion of tort costs. But a 2017 report by ILR shows that very few potential class members ever see a dime from class actions supposedly brought on their behalf. A 2015 Consumer Financial Protection Bureau study found that out of a sample of 562 cases, 87% of resolved class actions resulted in no benefit to absent class members. Even when relief is made available to class members, its impact is often negligible.

Soaring tort costs and diminished value for those who have truly been harmed are symptoms of bigger problems in our legal system. The

class action lawsuit system is broken, fraud permeates asbestos litigation, third-party litigation financing is rampant, and entrepreneurial plaintiffs’ lawyers are continually pioneering new ways to hijack the system for their own gain. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce spotlighted many of those issues and explored new trends in litigation at ILR’s annual Legal Reform Summit last week, bringing together top legal minds and business and industry leaders.

The bottom line is that in a deeply flawed legal system, there are few winners and many losers. Lawsuit abuse harms American businesses, shortchanges legitimate victims, saps economic vitality, and undermines justice. The Chamber and ILR remain committed to rooting out abuse, restoring balance, and ensuring justice through commonsense legal reforms.



Learn more at
uschamber.com/abovethefold.

Remarks by President Trump at
Reelection Rally for Senator Ted Cruz
Toyota Center, Houston, Texas, October 22, 2018

(continued from page 18)

as far as horses go.

But let’s get back to this Senate race. As you know, I won Texas. By a lot. And I couldn’t have done it without this one guy right here. Greg Abbott! What a guy. He’s in a wheelchair but he still crushed his opponent, another nasty woman, Wendy Davis. Remember her? What a piece of work she was! And Greg—he rolled over her!

But again, this Senate race. It’s so important you vote for this guy who is running for reelection. A guy who lost to me in the primary—he didn’t have a chance. I mean, there was just no way he could match my energy, my smarts, my wealth, my gorgeous wife, and my entrepreneur father who was nowhere in Dallas on November 22, 1963.

But we’ve got to win this Senate race. We cannot let Beto O’Rourke—what a name, am I right?—we cannot let Beto win. He’s a phony, believe me. You might think he sounds smarter than his opponent and is more charming and likable and even perhaps more handsome than his out-of-shape opponent, but Beto is a bad guy. You can “Beto” on that!

So again, this Senate race. We gotta win it. Just imagine I am on the ballot. Instead of the Republican candidate’s name, imagine it’s my name and my face. Just do that and vote for the Republican. You can pinch your nose with your other hand!

If you want to keep winning, we gotta keep the Senate. That is why I am down here stumping for this guy. He doesn’t lie anymore. Like I said, he’s beautiful, like a big baby—a big, beautiful Cuban baby. Just remember, a vote for the beautiful baby is a vote for me. You can do it, folks. Think of it as root canal surgery—it hurts like hell, but you’d be worse off not doing it. Or think of it like it’s your annual physical, like you’re getting your pros-