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ISSUE 97  
NUMBER 1  
VOLUME 31

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# AMASS

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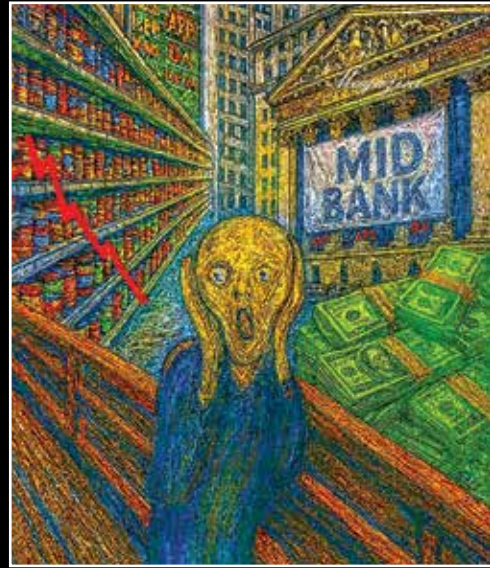
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**COVER:**

“THINKING ABOUT THE ECONOMY”  
O'KANE, MARCUS, AND SWENSSON

**“Thinking About the Economy”**

Cover Design by O'Kane, Marcus, and Swensson

This issue—along with its quarterly smorgasbord of cultural articles, reviews, fiction, and one cartoon—features creative deep dives into various aspect of the current economy, from Lois Parshley’s “Rage Against the Algorithm” to Dylan Scott’s “Why Are My Health Insurance Premiums Going Up So Much?” to Ellen Brown’s “Curbing Fed Independence” to Drew DeSilver’s “Food Stamps” to Robert Pollin’s “Wage Stagnation Versus Living Wages” to, last but not least, Harold Zimmerman’s insightful “The Supreme Court, Trump’s Tariffs, and the National Debt.”

For the cover, we wanted to step beyond facts and figures and convey something of the emotions our current economic vicissitudes can engender. Enter Norwegian artist, Edward Munch, born in 1863. A troubled soul whose life was fraught with tragedy, he presumably wasn’t thinking about the economy when he conceived his most famous work, *The Scream*. But is the angst depicted appropriate in this new context? Perhaps. Or perhaps not. Ask us again next year.

- Dan Marcus

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# RAGE AGAINST THE ALGORITHM

LOIS PARSHLEY

**A**s a former legal aid attorney, Kevin De Liban knows President Donald Trump's plan to double down on artificial intelligence comes with major risks. Over and over, De Liban has seen how automated decisions can ruin people's lives.

Just before Christmas in 2022, for example, Robert Austin and his daughter were living in his car in El Paso, Texas. As a single father, he had a hard time finding a shelter that would take them both.

He applied for food stamps, temporary aid, and tried to enroll his daughter in Medicaid, so she'd get health insurance from the government. Though they were eligible, his benefits were denied. Austin tried again; this time, the health and human services helpline said the paperwork he'd uploaded had been rejected and he needed to reapply. "They kept asking for the same forms, over and over again," Austin says. Every time he'd call to try to get to the bottom of things, he ended up "full circle back where [he] began."

Eventually, Austin turned to lawyers at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, who learned that Texas' automated verification system, developed by multinational consulting firm Deloitte, had made extensive and repeated errors, including issuing incorrect notices, wrongful denials, and losing paperwork.

For the next two years, Austin continued to reapply to Texas' safety-net programs as he bounced in and out of temporary housing, eventually losing his car. While his daughter grew into a busy toddler, he turned to the unreliable kindness of strangers on the street. "I ended up begging people for money so I could give her pull-ups, or child care so I could take a [medical] appointment," he says.

Though De Liban was not involved with Austin's case, he has worked with scores of people trapped in similar situations — victims of algorithmic decisions gone wrong. These kinds of systemic harms are already impacting Americans in every phase of their lives, he says. "Our legal mechanisms are totally insufficient to

deal with the scale and scope of harms these technologies can cause."

In Arkansas, De Liban won case after case for people who were denied medical care or other benefits because of artificial intelligence (AI) systems. But each victory underscored the deeper problem: The sheer scale of government actions being made by machines mimicking human decision-making, whether through simple code or machine learning, meant that individual legal victories weren't sufficient.

That's why De Liban recently started a nonprofit called TechTonic Justice to help people fight back. He's building resources to help affected communities hold these faceless, impersonal systems accountable, spreading the word about the problem in publications like *The Hill* and on NPR. The goal is to provide training for lawyers, educate advocates, and help affected people — those denied benefits like health care or social security — participate in policy conversations.

The stakes for his work just got higher. On Trump's first day back in office, the president removed existing federal safeguards for AI.

After a \$1 million donation from OpenAI CEO Sam Altman to Trump's inaugural fund, the company announced it would create a version of the popular artificial intelligence platform ChatGPT for government agencies — including highly sensitive information like nuclear weapon security. The contract followed the president's \$500 billion commitment to a joint venture by OpenAI, Oracle, and SoftBank to build new data centers.

Elsewhere, Elon Musk's new Department of Government Efficiency is already using artificial intelligence to flag programs at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the Department of Education as fraudulent or wasteful, using it as a justification to freeze or claw

back payments.

Given large language models' well-documented habit of making information up, De Liban is worried. "You've got to be sure the information you're acting on is correct, so you don't make choices that end up harming the public," he says.

Although nearly half of all federal agencies already use or are planning to use AI, the government's use of the technology is largely unregulated. Because of the lack of transparency and technical complexity of these systems, De Liban and other advocates say it's hard

**The stakes  
for his work  
just got higher.  
On Trump's first day  
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the president  
removed  
existing federal  
safeguards  
for AI.**

— Lois Parshley

to hold the government or their contractors liable for algorithms' flaws, even when they perpetuate biases or limit access to essential services.

Government officials are concerned about the lack of regulation too. "We worry about all these automated predictions and the way they really do scale inaccuracies or discriminatory outcomes," said an official at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, a government agency tasked with protecting consumers — until Trump recently fired the chief and attempted to dismiss an additional 1,500 employees.

In a recent report, De Liban found that even before the Trump administration's expansion, artificial intelligence and related technologies influenced basic decisions for almost all 92 million low-income Americans — impacting how people live, work, learn, and care for their families. And those technologies often reach conclusions that harm people.

They "go wrong in the same ways time after time," he explains. Long before Austin needed help in Texas, for example, Deloitte already knew their eligibility systems were inaccurate; they'd previously failed in Kentucky, Tennessee, New Mexico, Arkansas, and Rhode Island.

"Government exists to help facilitate a common well-being," De Liban says. "Right now, it's failing."

#### "What is Really Behind the Curtain?"

Back in 2016, De Liban was working at Legal Aid of Arkansas, providing free legal services to low-income people. That's when disabled and elderly Arkansans relying on a Medicaid waiver program for home care to help with basic tasks like going to the bathroom or taking medication were abruptly told that their care would be drastically cut back or eliminated. His phone started ringing with people confused about why they were losing their benefits. Many told De Liban "the computer did it."

It took some digging for him to discover the details: Seeking to cut costs, the state had switched from a primarily paper-based process conducted by nurses to a standardized algorithm for care allocation developed by one of the founders of a coalition called InterRAI, which has licensed its code to health departments in at least 25 states.

The algorithm sorted people needing medical care at home into categories, creating calculations that another software vendor used to implement the program. But it ignored important factors, like a history of medical needs. De Liban began keeping a list of the resulting "algorithmic absurdities," like a client who was marked as not having a foot problem because the foot in question had been amputated.

De Liban spent months responding to desperate calls, gathering evidence for a lawsuit in federal court. It was lonely, taxing work, requiring all-nighters and long weekends. He'd pull up to ranch houses like Shannon Brumley's, small in a sweep of overgrown farmland. A 44-year-old who became quadriplegic after a motorcycle accident, the algorithm had recently cut his care in half.



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Brumley feared he would be forced into a nursing home, stranding his teenage son.

“Whoever is trying to make these rules,” he told De Liban from his modified wheelchair, “if they could be handicapped for just one week — live my life — they would change their mind.”

As De Liban listened in kitchens and living rooms across the state, the weight of the stories grew. “You’re the difference between this person getting what they need and not,” he said. Looking for more hours in the day, he’d schedule calls from the car until he lost reception on the rural roads. Then he’d turn the volume up on his old Hyundai’s speakers and bump hip-hop.

Growing up in Fremont, California, listening to artists like Tupac Shakur and Public Enemy had helped foster his sense of justice, providing a political education in verse. Rolling down the red gravel roads, the beats were both a reprieve and a reminder. “Cyber warlords are activating abominations,” he’d spit along with Deltron 3030. “Arm a nation with hatred? We ain’t with that.”

Ultimately, De Liban discovered Arkansas’ algorithm wasn’t even working the way it was meant to. The version used by the Center for Information Management, a third-party software vendor, had coding errors that didn’t account for conditions like diabetes or cerebral palsy, denying at least 152 people the care they needed. Under cross-examination, the state admitted they’d missed the error, since they lacked the capacity to even detect the problem.

For years, De Liban says, “The state didn’t have a single person on staff who could explain, even in the broadest terms, how the algorithm worked.”

As a result, close to half of the state’s Medicaid program was negatively affected, according to Legal Aid. Arkansas’ government didn’t measure how recipients were impacted and later said in court that they lost the data used to train the tool.

As Texas resident Brooke Wilson has learned, states’ refusal or inability to prevent these algorithmic errors are now impacting people in the earliest stages of life. Her daughter Harper was born three months premature and still needs occupational and physical therapy for digestive and lung conditions, as well as an aide who regularly comes to their house to help care for her.

In 2023, the Wilsons received a letter saying Harper’s Medicaid would be terminated. The system claimed the family had failed to provide tax information, even though Harper’s coverage is due to her long-term disability and unrelated to the family’s income.

Harper is just one of 1.8 million children in Texas — almost the entire population of Houston — who were removed from the state’s insurance program in the last year. Sixty-eight percent of these children lost coverage not because they were found to be ineligible, but due to administrative issues like the Wilsons’, including waylaid paperwork or deadlines that may have been impossible to meet.



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vital information that will save us both in the  
end.

I give thanks to your voice, go ahead, sing one  
so everyone can feel the necessity to dance.

I give thanks to your brain, how it finagles  
and sorts the incoming news.

I give thanks to your legs for they take you  
places not yet apprehended or appreciated.

I give thanks to your energy  
for it has allowed you to overcome your pain.

I give thanks to how the light lands on you.

I give thanks to our ability to dream.

I dreamed that I said thank you,  
and you heard me.

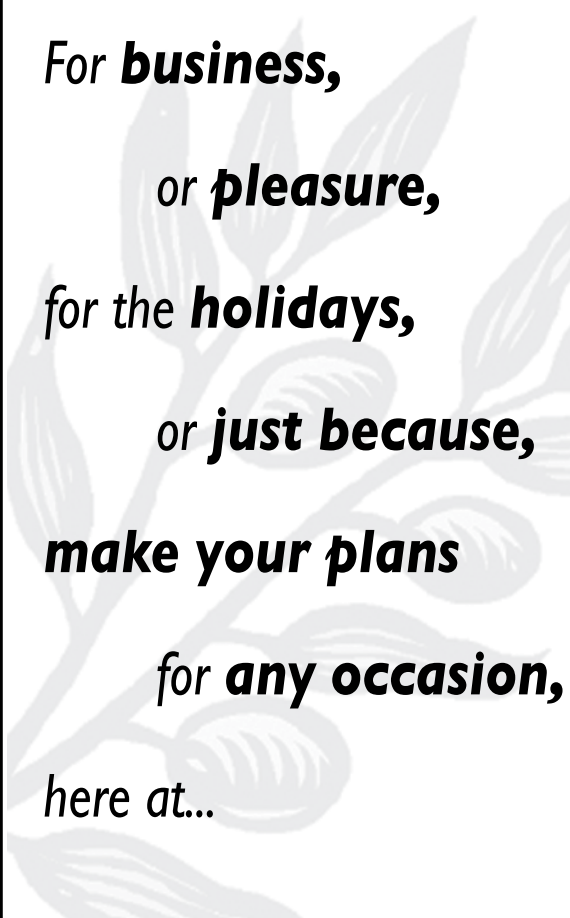
Come, join the attempted soiree.

The dancing light is on.

– Scott Wannberg (1953-2011) worked at Dutton's Books in  
Brentwood. A Los Angeles Times bestseller, Scott is the author  
of *The Official Language of Yes!* (Perceval Press).



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Like Austin, the Wilsons had run into problems with Deloitte’s automated eligibility verification system. A complaint filed with consumer protection regulators at the Federal Trade Commission alleges that “hundreds of thousands of people have been and are being injured by the system’s failure to accurately automate the relevant eligibility rules.”

Reducing these disenrollments to a number obscures the true human toll, says Maureen O’Connell, an attorney at Disability Rights Texas who says she’s “one of the people who answers the call when somebody’s life has been turned upside down because they’ve lost Medicaid.”

While the Wilsons appealed, Harper’s health deteriorated. They got a second notice — this one incorrectly claiming that Harper was over the age of 18 and somehow no longer had a disability. Like Austin, when Brooke called the state helpline, even the specialists she was transferred to couldn’t explain the decision. “211 is like the Wizard of Oz,” O’Connell says. “What is really behind the curtain?”

In 2023, a whistleblower from the Texas Health and Human Services Commission revealed that a single system error resulted in at least 24,000 children unnecessarily losing insurance. In emails to Texas Rep. Lloyd Doggett, the tipster disclosed that a coding mistake had also resulted in the state missing out on

\$100 million in federal funding, while thousands were prevented from accessing critical services during and after pregnancies. These kinds of tech failures, noted the insider, had created an automated system that can’t “effectively identify and preemptively mitigate issues before recipients are adversely impacted.”

After a lawyer helped the Wilsons resolve their coverage this fall, they were surprised to hear from Medicaid over Christmas, demanding evidence, once again, of Harper’s lifelong disability. When they tried to provide it, the system wouldn’t allow the family to electronically upload her lengthy medical records. The Wilsons have had to return to their lawyer and schedule another hearing, while Harper’s care remains uncertain. “If I wasn’t as tenacious as I am, I would have already given up,” Brooke says, “and I think that that’s what they’re hoping for.”

When set loose into a privatized, fragmented system, AI amplifies existing inequalities. Because multiple vendors are often used, “no one at the state has the full picture of how these systems are potentially layering on top of each other,” De Liban explains. Without better oversight, AI’s harms can compound in ways no one fully understands — until it’s too late.

Lois Parshley writes for *Common Dreams*, *The Lever*, and other publications.

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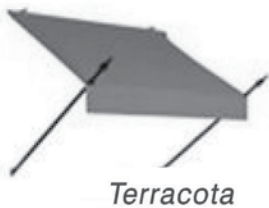
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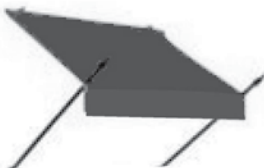
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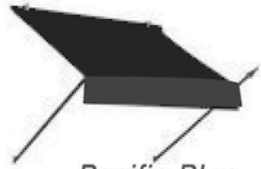
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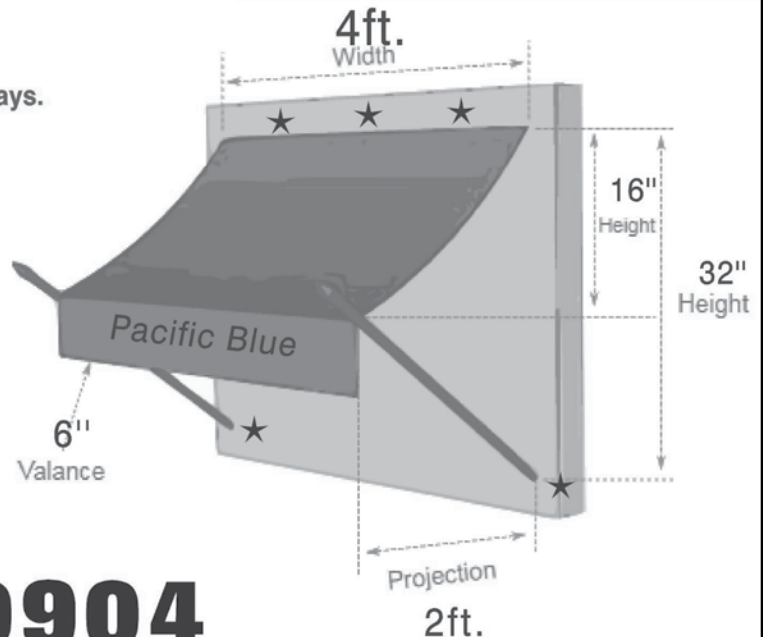
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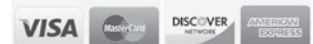
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# WHY ARE MY HEALTH INSURANCE PREMIUMS GOING UP SO MUCH?

D Y L A N S C O T T

**M**any Americans are going to have sticker shock when they sign up for health insurance this year.

For the roughly half of Americans who get insurance through their work, premiums are set to grow by another 6 percent on average, up to roughly \$27,000 per year for family coverage. That is a 26 percent increase since 2020. Costs have been steadily climbing for a long time now: Rates are more than twice as high as they were in 2010.

And then there are the 24 million people who buy insurance on the Affordable Care Act marketplaces who face much higher increases — by 30 percent on average next year because Congress can't agree on a deal that would keep them lower. This is the sticking point at the center of the ongoing government shutdown.

Defending and expanding federal health care funding has been a winning issue for the Democrats since Republicans tried and failed to repeal the ACA in 2017. But is the law worth defending, really? If it has been such a success, then why are costs still climbing for the vast majority of Americans? It's a complicated story with a complicated answer.

## The ACA Was Designed to Expand Coverage, Not to Control Costs

The ACA has one unambiguous success: The uninsured rate in America is around 8 percent, roughly as low as it has ever been, half what it was before the law passed. More than 40 million people have been covered by either the marketplaces or Medicaid expansion.

But you would be forgiven for thinking the real purpose of the ACA was to lower the cost of health care for everyone: It is named, after all, the “Affordable Care” Act. And Democrats sold it on that premise.

“In the end, our goal is to make health care more affordable for families, businesses, and the federal government. If you have health insurance, the reforms we seek will bring stability and security you don't have

today,” President Barack Obama said in 2009 during a speech to Congress as the bill was being debated. “For those who don't, we'll offer you quality, affordable choices. And we'll finally keep insurance companies from discriminating against those who are sick and need care the most.”

But in reality, affordable health care is still elusive. Most of the law's provisions and funding focused on “those who don't” — on expanding coverage to the uninsured. The vast majority of ACA spending was earmarked for financial assistance for people who buy insurance on the marketplaces or for covering the cost of expanded Medicaid for people who are in or near poverty.

For many of those people, the law has delivered clear benefits.

Insurance companies can no longer deny them coverage for preexisting conditions, and the federal government is stepping in to cover much of their health

care costs. According to one study, Medicaid expansion saved about 27,400 lives from 2010 to 2022. Bankruptcies for Medicaid patients dropped. Evaluations of the ACA marketplaces likewise find that the people signing up for those plans who were previously uninsured are now better off.

But those wins encompass, at most, about 13 percent of the population. For everyone else, the ACA's record is mixed.

## Confused About Your Benefits?

Medical costs keep going up, and yet our two political parties are stuck in an impasse over what to do about health care policy — while patients hang in the balance. And now, here again is that stressful time of the year — even without government chaos — to sign up for your health insurance and other benefits for

next year. Health care costs and the cost of living keep rising, making these decisions all the more important.

Yes, even employer plans are now required to cover preventive services, including some forms of birth control, for free. Yes, those plans also now have to place an annual limit on how much patients can be asked to pay for their medical care. But more diffuse savings — going to your annual physical and not owing a \$30 copay is nice — aren't as life-altering as getting covered for the first time in years. The new annual out-of-pocket limits only come into play if you have a serious medical situation; they are a valuable safety net, but not necessarily something that makes more routine health care more affordable.

**And now the US population is getting older, and the cost crunch is likely to only get worse as more people require more serious medical care.**

– Dylan Scott



# ABOUT BEYOND BAROQUE

Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center is one of the nation's most successful and influential grassroots incubators of literary art. Founded in 1968 and housed in the original Venice City Hall building in Venice, California, it is a nonprofit public space dedicated to cultivating new writing and expanding the public's knowledge of poetry, fiction, literature, and art through cultural events and community interaction. The Center offers a diverse variety of literary and arts programming, including readings, workshops, art exhibits, and education. The Center also houses a bookstore with the largest collection of new poetry books on the west side of Los Angeles; the Mike Kelley Gallery, which specializes in text and language-focused visual art; and a 50,000 volume archive of small press and limited-edition publications that chronicles the history of poetry movements in Los Angeles and beyond.

Few literary spaces have done more to cultivate innovative art from cultural outsiders, or to shape emerging artistic movements. Across five decades Beyond Baroque has nurtured the Venice Beats, cradled the Los Angeles punk scene, and provided crucial support to a series of seminal experimental writers and artists that include Dennis Cooper, Wanda Coleman, Mike Kelley, and Will Alexander.

Its legendary free workshops have profoundly shaped Los Angeles literature by helping to launch a number of influential careers, including those of Kate Braverman, Tom Waits, Leland Hickman, Bob Flanagan, Eloise Klein Healy, David Trinidad, Jim Krusoe, Exene Cervenka, Amy Gerstler, Paul Vangelisti, Michael Ondaatje, Harry Northup, Brendan Constantine, Jenny Factor, and Sarah Maclay.

Its reading and performance series have exposed L.A. audiences to some of the world's most notable writers and artists, often at early stages in their careers, including Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Raymond Carver, X, Patti Smith, Viggo Mortensen, Paul Auster, Chris Kraus, Eileen Myles, Luis J. Rodriguez, Dana Gioia, Hector Tobar, David St. John, Robin Coste Lewis, and Maggie Nelson.

Today the Center continues to provide a vital cultural forum through its free workshops, reading series, youth programming, and artistic gatherings.

## **Beyond Baroque's Mission**

Beyond Baroque's mission is to encourage the writing, reading, publication, dissemination, and preservation of contemporary literature through programming, education, archiving, and services in literature and the arts.

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Nevertheless, the ACA has grown in popularity over time as more people have gained health care access. But it's proven not to be enough to fix the problem of rising costs.

## Health Care Costs Are Still Rising Too Fast

Democrats said they want to lower the country's overall health care costs within the framework of the ACA, but the law's provisions to actually do that were limited. The current law allows the government to run pilot projects that could bring down the cost of healthcare, but while some have shown promise, they have not been adopted widely enough to fundamentally change how healthcare is financed in the United States.

But the ACA is not a major financing reform bill. It did not fundamentally change how providers set prices for their services. And the law's new insurance requirements to cover all people, no matter their health status, and to provide a broader suite of benefits actually pushed costs in the other direction. It is simply more expensive to require insurers to cover everyone.

Over time, though, there have been some positive effects on costs. Medicare spending has flattened, and the ACA likely deserves much of the credit for that, given its direct payment cuts. But if you look at other measures, such as medical price inflation or workers' contribution to their premiums, as *New York Times* economics reporter Talmon Joseph Smith pointed out on X, it's hard to see any discernible impact from the ACA at all.

Obama and congressional Democrats hoped that the ACA would bend the cost curve over time. Part of the plan was those targeted payment reforms. Part of it was the belief — still contested to this day — that giving people health insurance would lead to them being healthier in the long term, which would save money over time.

But, at Least So Far, the Law Appears to Have Merely Put a Ding in the Cost Curve.

Health care costs are growing at a slower rate, but they are still growing: According to a 2020 Health Affairs review, national health spending grew at a 6.9 percent annual pace from 2000 to 2009 and then a 4.3 percent pace from 2010, the year the ACA was passed, to 2018.

The ACA delivered real benefits, especially to particular patients, but it did not solve the problem of unaffordable health care. Even people who have health insurance increasingly struggle to afford their medical bills because costs have kept rising: The rate of underinsurance — when you have coverage but can't afford your medical bills — has been steadily rising for years.

And now the US population is getting older, and the cost crunch is likely to only get worse as more people require more serious medical care.

So What Do We Do?

## America's Health Care System is Stuck

No country's health care system is perfect, but

ours is uniquely flawed: We spend more money than our economic peers and yet we see worse outcomes. We're getting a bad deal, and Americans understandably want health care prices to come down.

And so it makes sense that Republicans and Democrats are fighting over what comes next — and why they're at such an impasse: Both sides have a point.

Democrats acknowledge that the ACA is flawed. In 2021, the party made federal subsidies more generous and made more people eligible for them. Now, they want Republicans to agree to extend those enhanced subsidies in exchange for the votes to reopen the government, arguing that without the additional funding, health care would become unaffordable for many people.

Republicans, on the other side, have never liked Obamacare. They believe the continued increase in health care costs is evidence that the ACA was a bust, and they are reluctant to pump any more money into it — especially, they would argue, when Democrats are holding the government hostage over the issue. They want the Democrats to fund the government, without any strings attached, before they negotiate ACA funding. (The GOP may not support the law, but they do worry about voters blaming them for rising costs and may be willing to deal. They just don't want to give in to Democrats with the government shutdown.)

Health insurance is going to become a lot more expensive for people if Congress refuses to act. And people who lose their health coverage are more likely to skip necessary medical care and let chronic conditions fester, which can lead to worse outcomes. Progressives believe it is better to have the government pick up the tab, even as health care costs continue to rise, rather than let people get sick or die because they can't afford medical services. And most Americans agree: More than 60 percent of the public believes it is the federal government's responsibility to make sure everyone has health coverage.

And yet, GOP leaders are also correct when they point out that health care costs kept rising after the ACA. That has required the federal government to funnel more and more money into health care to keep costs down for people on the ACA's marketplaces or on Medicaid, while those people on employer-sponsored plans have seen their premiums more than double since 2010.

But at the same time, Republicans don't have much of a plan to reduce aggregate costs. In general, they talk about deregulating health insurance again — which could then re-create all of the problems that predated the ACA and led to its passage in the first place. And their major legislation passed this year, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, did cut Medicaid funding, but by cutting people off the program — not the best approach if the goal is to improve people's health, even if it does reduce government spending.

Some conservatives have become more interested in tightly regulating health care prices, and President Donald Trump has tried to use the bully pulpit to address prescription drug costs specifically. But the

prevailing attitude within the GOP is still to try to get the government out of health care — and whether that is the fix for an industry already beset by market failures is, at best, dubious.

Absent better ideas and the political will to implement major changes to the health system, we're left with little choice but to keep pumping more money into a broken system — or leave more people on their own to cover unaffordable medical bills.

To escape that trap, we'd need to make health care pricing more rational and value-based. Rather than pay providers based on the volume of services they perform, could a system instead connect their payments to the quality of care they provide and the outcomes that their patients experience? There have been halting steps in that direction — with health insurers like Cigna experimenting with value-based contracts with providers — but it is difficult to build on that momentum both practically and politically, given the power of the various health care industry lobbies.

The shutdown has revealed the fragility of the US safety net: When food stamps ran out of funding in early November, thousands of people struggled to afford food.

But the standoff will end eventually. It's even

plausible that Democrats and Republicans will reach a deal on extending the ACA subsidies. But that is just another Band-Aid. Patients will keep feeling the squeeze every time they sign up for a new health plan or check out at the doctor or pharmacy — until policymakers get serious about the real problems making health care unaffordable to too many Americans.

Dylan Scott writes for *Vox* and other publications.



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# TURNING TRUMP'S BASE ON THE EPSTEIN FILES

A L A I N S T E P H E N S

It's hard to imagine a worse moment for Donald Trump to be caught in the Epstein dragnet than at the tail end of the longest government shutdown in U.S. history, with food benefits rattled, "affordability" on everyone's minds, and his own voters starting to wonder if the guy in the red tie is actually on their side.

On the same day Trump finally signed a bill to reopen the government after 43 days of chaos, a coalition of House Democrats and Republicans dropped a tranche of Jeffrey Epstein emails that punches holes straight through the president's carefully curated story about a distant, long-ago acquaintance, with Epstein alleging Trump "knew about the girls" and "spent hours at my house" with one of the victims.

While the messages don't show criminal conduct by Trump, they landed at a moment when Americans are already furious with his handling of Epstein's files, the shutdown, and the basic question of whether their government works for the powerful or for everyone else. Together, they form a pincer around a president who keeps promising transparency and law and order, then flinching the second those promises threaten him personally.

## "The Dog That Hasn't Barked"

The new emails came from the Epstein Estate in response to a subpoena and were released by the House Oversight Committee.

In one April 2011 exchange, Epstein tells Ghislaine Maxwell, his associate who is currently serving a 20-year sentence for sex trafficking, that "the dog that hasn't barked is trump," adding that a trafficking victim "spent hours at my house with him" yet "he has never once been mentioned." Maxwell replies that she has "been thinking about that."

In another email, from January 2019, Epstein writes to author Michael Wolff about Mar-a-Lago: "Trump said he asked me to resign, never a member ever. Of course he knew about the girls as he asked Ghislaine to stop."

A third exchange from December 2015 shows Wolff and Epstein gaming out how Trump should respond

to questions from CNN about their relationship, with Wolff advising Epstein to "let him hang himself" if Trump "says he hasn't been on the plane or to the house" because that would give Epstein "PR and political currency" over him.

The emails cut against Trump's own narrative that he barely knew Epstein.

The more than 23,000 documents do not contain the storied "client list" the internet — and Trump's own supporters — have been clamoring for, and none of the publicly released civil case records accuse Trump. But the emails do something almost as politically toxic: They cut against Trump's own narrative that he barely knew Epstein, and that he had no meaningful insight into what Epstein had done.

The White House is already calling the messages a "fake narrative" stitched together by partisan Democrats and pointing out that key accuser Virginia Giuffre, who died by suicide earlier this year, repeatedly said she never saw Trump engage in wrongdoing. (Trump himself has also repeatedly denied any wrongdoing related to Epstein's crimes.) Republicans

on the Oversight Committee accused Democrats of selectively redacting her name to make the emails look worse. But the specific denials aren't the point anymore; the point is that the president now looks like he has something to hide about his role in a story where many Americans are already inclined to believe there was a cover-up.

## America Wants the Files

Public opinion on this issue is not subtle. Polling in early October found that about three-quarters of Americans want all Epstein-related files released, with only 9 percent saying no documents should be made public.

A Reuters/Ipsos survey in July went even further: 69 percent of respondents said they believe Trump's administration is hiding details about Epstein's clients; just 6 percent said it isn't. Only 17 percent approved of Trump's handling of the case, his worst score on any issue in that poll. Even among Republicans the president was underwater.

This isn't a niche, left-wing obsession. A July Economist/YouGov poll found that views on the need for transparency in the Epstein investigation cut across partisan lines, even as Trump's overall job approval slid to a net negative of 15 points. PBS's own write-up notes that support for releasing the files includes majorities of Republicans and independents.

The long algebra cut short, Americans might be OK with all manner of Trump impropriety, but you lose them when a disgraced billionaire pedophile enters the

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— Alain Stephens

fray.

For years, Republicans have built their identity around a moral panic of their own design — branding political opponents as “groomers,” painting LGBTQ+ people as threats to children, and accusing anyone outside their tribe of abetting pedophilia. They’ve cast themselves as the last line of defense against child trafficking, stoking a base that’s become genuinely animated by fantasies of a global cabal preying on kids. That’s why the Epstein revelations land like an airburst: Not because the conspiracy is real in the way they imagine it, but because it punctures the mythology they’ve wrapped themselves in, exposing the rot inside the movement that claims to be protecting America’s children.

The Epstein emails hit, and suddenly the MAGA universe isn’t marching in lockstep; Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene went online and tore into Trump for “how hard he’s fighting to stop the Epstein files from coming out,” a line you only write when something in the foundation has shifted. She followed it by saying her loyalty is to God and her voters first — a subtle mutiny, but a mutiny all the same.

That’s the backdrop for the House push to force the issue. Reps. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., and Thomas Massie, R-Ky., and dozens of bipartisan co-sponsors have been pushing legislation that would compel the Justice Department to publish its Epstein records, building on earlier efforts from Florida Democrats who chased these documents during the Biden years. The House

forced Speaker Mike Johnson’s hand with an arcane rules maneuver that finally made him schedule a vote on releasing the records, over objections from House Republicans and the White House. That measure is likely to pass the House but would face a much tougher road through the Senate. However, should it pass the Senate, it would force a showdown in which Trump could either sign that bill and live with whatever comes out — or veto it and tell an already suspicious public that he personally stopped the truth from seeing daylight.

### A Credibility Crisis

If that were the only fire burning, the White House might be able to ride it out. It isn’t. The email release landed in the final days of a 43-day shutdown that shuttered much of the federal government and froze Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program payments for roughly 42 million people — the first time in modern history SNAP funding was allowed to lapse during a shutdown. Federal judges twice ordered the administration to restore full benefits; the Supreme Court granted Trump’s emergency appeal and temporarily blocked one of those orders, leaving families in limbo while states scrambled to cover the gap.

Policy analysts and state attorneys general pointed out that the Department of Agriculture has billions in contingency reserves and other emergency accounts precisely for situations like this, and that the administration could have used them to keep food

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assistance flowing. Instead, the White House chose a monthslong game of chicken over health care tax credits while airports backed up, disability beneficiaries rationed groceries, and parents fielded notices that their EBT cards would go dry. And while the GOP shutdown gambit paid off for the Republicans in the short term, many Americans blamed them as the source of their pain.

America's affordability crises has arrived, and Trump is on the hook. A new AP/NORC poll released this week found only 36 percent of adults approve of Trump's overall performance and just about a third approve of his handling of the economy, health care, or the federal government. Most dangerous for Trump, the erosion of his establishment is finally showing up, and the call is coming from inside the house. That same poll found his declining approval rating was mostly driven by Republicans, with their approval for his management of the federal government falling from 81 percent in March to 68 percent now.

Ask voters what actually matters to them, and they point first to the economy and affordability: Three-quarters say the economy is "very important" to their 2026 vote; majorities say the same about threats to democracy, immigration, and housing costs. Trump is underwater on almost all of it.

So when new emails emerge suggesting that he has not told the whole story about his relationship with a convicted child sex trafficker — just as his choices have people lining up at food banks — that story doesn't land in a vacuum. It lands in a country that already suspects the president is looking out for himself first.

### A Pincer of His Own Making

The looming House vote on Epstein transparency turns that suspicion into a structural problem. On one flank, Trump faces a broad electorate that overwhelmingly wants every unclassified Epstein record released and already believes his administration is hiding the worst of it. On the other, he faces a Congress that, for once, is being nudged toward genuine oversight by a coalition that runs from progressive Democrats to libertarian Republicans.

If the bill passes the Senate and Trump signs it, he loses control of the documents — and the narrative — entirely. The Justice Department has already admitted it is sitting on tens of thousands of pages of records beyond what civil suits and Maxwell's trial exposed and has so far produced only a fraction of what congressional subpoenas demand. Nobody in the White House can guarantee that there isn't another "dog that hasn't barked" email buried somewhere in that pile.

Veto the bill, and the president becomes the single most visible obstacle to telling Epstein's victims — and the public — the full story. He would be doing it after a shutdown that left poor and disabled Americans wondering how they were going to eat and after months of promising that his second term would finally bring accountability for elites who prey on children.

Either way, the myth Trump sold to his base —

that he was the one man willing to expose the secrets of the powerful — is collapsing in real time. In poll after poll, people say they think he is protecting somebody. Increasingly, they have to ask whether that somebody is himself.

### The Wrong Time to Blink

You can feel Republicans straining to square the circle. On Capitol Hill, they accuse Democrats of weaponizing the emails while insisting they, too, support "full transparency" — eventually, after careful redactions and more closed-door review. In conservative media, some MAGA dynamos have raged that the Epstein focus is a liberal "distraction" from real issues like inflation, even as their own viewers tell pollsters that grocery prices and rent are exactly why they're so angry at the shutdown and at Trump's economy.

With full awareness of that dissonance, the administration is now sprinting toward an economic message it hopes can drown out the rest. Trump has reportedly ramped up his travel schedule, darting through swing states in a rushed attempt to smother the Epstein fallout under the safer storyline of economic revival. The White House may frame it as a shoring up of constituency, but it looks more like damage control: factory visits, small-business roundtables, and grocery store photo ops meant to convince voters the economy is better than it feels.

But no amount of travel gloss can obscure the deeper habit Americans are starting to recognize. A president who promised to smash corrupt systems has instead opted to starve his poorest citizens during a manufactured crisis and slow-walk the truth about one of the most notorious predators of our time. It's the same reflex: Use state power to protect the powerful, then gaslight the public about who is really to blame.

The House and Senate may be about to force him to choose. Release the files and gamble that whatever is in there won't destroy him, or veto transparency and finally make clear that the swamp he promised to drain was never meant to include the likes of Jeffrey Epstein — or that he's a creature of the swamp himself.

Alain Stephens writes for *The Intercept* and other publications.

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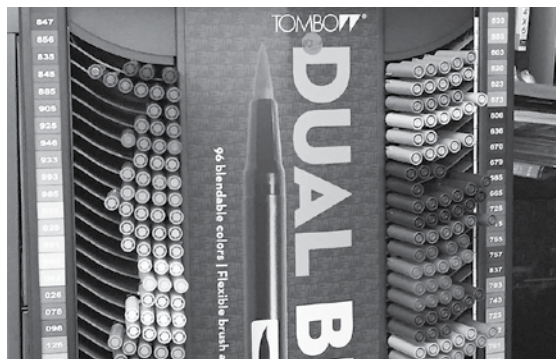
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# CURBING FED INDEPENDENCE

E L L E N B R O W N

**T**here has been considerable discussion in recent years about reforming, modifying, or even abolishing the Federal Reserve. Proposals range from ending its independence, to integrating its functions into the U.S. Treasury Department, to dismantling it and returning monetary policy to direct congressional or Treasury oversight.

The Federal Reserve Board Abolition Act (H.R. 1846 and S. 869, 119th Congress, 2025-2026), introduced by Rep. Thomas Massie in the House and Sen. Mike Lee in the Senate on March 4, 2025, calls for abolishing the Fed's Board of Governors and regional banks within one year of enactment, liquidating Fed assets and transferring net proceeds to the Treasury. It echoes earlier efforts like Ron Paul's 1999 bill to "end the Fed," but the odds of its passing are slim.

Less radical are proposals to curb the independence of the Federal Reserve. Former Fed governor Kevin Warsh is considered one of five finalists to take over as chairman after Jerome Powell. In a July 17 CNBC interview, he called for sweeping changes in how the central bank conducts business, and suggested a policy alliance with the Treasury Department.

Substantial precedent exists for that approach, both in the United States and abroad. In the 1930s and 1940s, before the Fed officially became "independent," it worked with the federal government to fund the most productive period in our country's history. More on that shortly.

## The Werner Findings

In a Sept. 1 Substack post titled "Fed Faces Biggest Direct Challenge by a President Since JFK – and This Is a Good Thing", UK Prof. Richard Werner cited multiple studies showing that central bank independence not only does not reduce inflation but can actually harm economic performance. He wrote:

"The published consensus is that there is no evidence that more independent central banks deliver lower inflation and better macroeconomic performance. In fact, more independent central banks deliver worse results: lower growth, greater inequality, higher unemployment. Considering the 1970s and 2020s we must also say: higher inflation."

Werner referenced a 1993 paper by Alesina and Summers that claimed to show a correlation between independence and low inflation. But later analyses revealed that the data was cherry-picked and the methodology was flawed. Werner also pointed to the European Central Bank (ECB), one of the most independent in the world, which has reigned during a period of extended stagnation and deflation in much of the Eurozone. He suggests that the notion that independence is a universal ideal is a Western invention, often used to shield monetary policy from democratic accountability.

## The Fed's Historical Errors

The Federal Reserve's track record, like the ECB's, is less than pristine. In a 2002 speech honoring Milton Friedman, then-Fed Chair Ben Bernanke famously admitted, "Regarding the Great Depression we did it. We're very sorry... We won't do it again."

Bernanke was referring to the Fed's failure to act as lender of last resort during the banking panics of the early 1930s. Instead of expanding liquidity, the Fed tightened it. Its goal was to curb excessive stock market speculation, but reducing the money supply raised borrowing costs and triggered a contraction that cascaded globally. The result was a decade of mass unemployment, deflation, and social upheaval.

## The Fed Was Not Independent During the Great Depression and World War II

Following the monetary contraction that triggered the Great Depression, the Fed shifted course in 1932, pegging interest at very low rates to support banking liquidity and boost economic development. Large public projects were funded and directed through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), a federal agency established by Pres.

Hoover to save the failing banks.

The RFC was greatly expanded under the New Deal to fund public works, agriculture, and housing. By 1941 it had injected over \$10 billion into the economy, a sizable sum at the time. During WWII, the RFC transformed into a war production engine, financing synthetic rubber plants, aircraft factories, and shipyards, and establishing subsidiaries like the Defense Plant Corporation to accelerate industrial output. By the war's end, the RFC had disbursed more than \$35 billion, catalyzing both economic recovery and military victory.

During its existence between 1932 and 1957, the RFC authorized over \$50 billion in loans and commitments, with significant portions directed toward self-liquidating infrastructure projects like bridges,

**History shows that sovereign money creation can be a tool for public good when wielded wisely. It is time to reclaim that tool, not to serve the banks and speculative investment but to serve the public and the productive economy.**

– Ellen Brown

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dams, and utilities repaid through tolls or fees, along with factories and other emerging industries. It raised funds by issuing bonds, most of which were bought by the Treasury; but the Treasury also issued bonds, some of which were bought by the Fed. These Fed purchases were modest in the 1930s but were greatly expanded in the 1940s, when the United States was running deficits exceeding 40% of GDP funded largely by Treasury-issued debt. To support the war effort, the Fed committed to maintaining a very low interest rate on short-term Treasury bills, something it did by engaging in “direct debt monetization” – it bought large amounts of government securities with new reserves. This was later described in Fed papers as an early form of quantitative easing.

By 1945, the U.S. had full employment and rising wages; and infrastructure investment surged postwar, with returning veterans trained as engineers and builders. The Fed’s collaboration with the Treasury enabled economic development, technological innovation and full employment.

### **The Ideological Breakthrough that Mobilized the Economy**

“America’s response to World War II was the most extraordinary mobilization of an idle economy in the history of the world,” wrote Doris Kearns Goodwin in her 1992 article “The Way We Won”:

“Historians, economists, and politicians have long wondered why this remarkable social and economic mobilization of latent human and physical resources required a war. The answer, I think, is partly ideological. World War II provided the ideological breakthrough that finally allowed the U.S. government to surmount the Great Depression. Despite the New Deal, even President Roosevelt had been constrained from intervening massively enough to stimulate a full recovery. By 1938 he had lost his working majority in Congress, and a conservative coalition was back, stifling the New Deal programs. When the economy had begun to bounce back, FDR pulled back on government spending to balance the budget, which contributed to the recession of 1938. The war was like a wave coming over that conservative coalition; the old ideological constraints collapsed and government outlays powered a recovery.”

Fed holdings of Treasury securities rose from \$2.25 billion at the end of 1941 to \$24.26 billion at the end of 1945 (a \$22 billion increase), while total Treasury indebtedness grew from \$58 billion to \$276 billion (a \$218 billion increase). That means the Fed absorbed about 10% of the expansion of the federal debt to finance war deficits.

If the Fed did that today, it could purchase about \$3.8 trillion of the \$37.89 trillion federal debt, more than enough to pay the interest on it (\$1.16 trillion) and close the federal deficit (\$1.775 trillion). It could, but the economy would need to grow in tandem to avoid price inflation. More on that shortly.

### **The Fed Did Not Officially Become Independent Until 1951**

Inflation was held to modest levels during World

War II, and the economy boomed. But to support the war effort, the Fed’s commitment to buying large amounts of government securities with new reserves (basically QE) increased the money supply, and this increase was blamed for a surge in price inflation after the war. It was not the only reason prices went up. There were also major supply shortages – from global supply bulk bottlenecks, industrial retooling (e.g. turning auto industries that had been turned into airplane factories back into auto factories), labor strikes, and a surge in pent-up demand after the war.

But postwar inflation was the trigger for relieving the Fed of the federal mandate that it keep interest rates low by buying federal securities, and this was achieved in a 1951 Treasury-Fed Accord giving the Fed its independence. The Accord was not a law but was just a joint statement issued by the Treasury and the Fed after oral negotiations, but it did give the Fed independent control of interest rates and the money supply.

The Fed became independent of public control, but the Accord opened the door for Wall Street control of its operations for the benefit of the banks – particularly the largest banks. Bank mergers and consolidations in the 1950s and 1960s created “Too Big to Fail” institutions, including J.P. Morgan Chase and Citibank. Wall Street influence culminated in the 1999 repeal of major portions of the Glass-Steagall Act, formally fusing investment and commercial banking. Speculative bubbles and systemic risk then led to the financial crises of 2007-09 and the bailout of the Too Big to Fail banks, leaving the victims to bear the losses. See Nomi Prins, *All the Presidents’ Bankers*.

### **GDP Growth, Not Fed Independence, Curbed Postwar Inflation**

The Consumer Price Index did stabilize after World War II, but it was not due to an independent Fed raising interest rates. It was the result of major productivity gains that drove up GDP, lowering the debt to GDP ratio to sustainable levels. Technological advances to meet war demands transformed domestic manufacturing; women joined the workforce; soldiers trained in the military brought new engineering skills; and the G.I. Bill provided low-cost higher education and affordable housing for returning veterans.

This GDP growth was greatly aided by RFC funding, with the help of the Treasury and the Fed. A 2025 Yale study showed that U.S. infrastructure as a share of GDP peaked in the 1940s–60s, then declined steadily. Productivity gains from infrastructure were highest during periods of federal investment, not austerity. Meta-analyses confirm that public infrastructure investment boosts private sector productivity, especially when targeted toward transportation, energy, and digital systems.

### **China’s Central Bank: Liquidity for Development, Not Speculation**

Today, a number of central banks are not independent but align their policies with their national governments’. The leading and most successful example is China, the chief economic competitor of the United States. The People’s Bank of China (PBOC) operates



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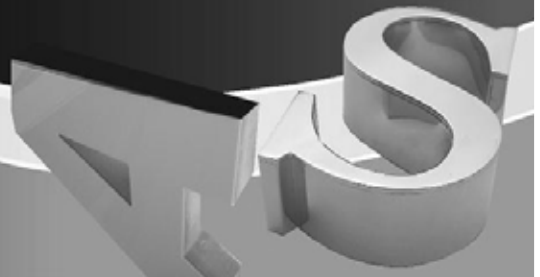
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under the State Council, aligning credit creation with the government’s five-year plans. Through policy banks including the China Development Bank, the PBOC channels liquidity into infrastructure, energy, and industrial development.

In 2024, the PBOC and Finance Ministry held their first joint meeting to align treasury bond issuance with monetary policy, with fiscal and monetary tools synchronized to support national development goals. According to the State Council, “The two authorities will coordinate development and security, strengthen policy synergy, maintain the stable development of the bond market, and provide a sound environment for the central bank’s treasury bond trading in its open market operations.”

The PBOC also engaged in massive sovereign money printing over the 28-year period from 1996 to 2024, increasing the national money supply by more than 5300% — from 5.84 billion to 314 billion Chinese yuan.

### **The PBOC Collaborates with the China Development Bank in Funding Productive Investment**

Like the RFC during the New Deal and World War II, the China Development Bank (CDB) plays a pivotal role in coordinating and executing long-term infrastructure funding for China. With over \$2.6 trillion in assets, CDB is larger than the World Bank, the European Investment Bank, and Germany’s KfW combined. In collaboration with the PBOC, it provides capital for large infrastructure projects such as railways, energy grids, and green technology. In 2025, CDB increased loan support for logistics, housing, and ecological restoration, including a 185 billion boost to leading regional economies.

The Chinese model has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty and built unprecedented infrastructure. Rather than the sort of speculative finance that profited from the Fed’s 2007-09 QE, the CDB and PBOC target liquidity for productive expansion aligned with national priorities. This joint mechanism allows China to issue new bonds for specific purposes — transport, housing, manufacturing — and to have them absorbed by the central bank with newly created currency. CDB then executes the plan by deploying the funds. Supply rises with demand, stabilizing prices.

### **Other Non-Independent Central Banks**

Other central banks operating in coordination with their governments today include the Reserve Bank of India, which has limited independence and works closely with the Ministry of Finance; the Central Bank of Russia, which is state-aligned and supports national development goals; and the central banks of many African nations, which coordinate with their ministries of finance to support infrastructure and agriculture.

This has also been true of a number of central banks historically. Besides the U.S. Fed itself, notable examples include the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, the Reserve Bank of New Zealand, and the Bank of Canada, all of which funded substantial development in their early years either by direct money issuance or by

money issued as bank credit without full reserve backing. Those early experiments in “sovereign” money creation deserve a separate article, but in the meantime if interested you can read about them in my book *The Public Bank Solution*.

The lesson of these precedents is that when government-issued money is spent on productive assets — roads, factories, energy grids and the like — supply expands along with demand and prices remain stable.

### **Can the United States Generate the Necessary Supply?**

The U.S. government also has the sovereign capacity to issue money directly, provided that real productivity rises in tandem with monetary expansion to maintain stable price levels. But is that possible today? The current economic landscape shows signs of recession and systemic strain, yet the stock market continues to soar. Why? Much of the momentum is fueled by investor optimism around artificial intelligence (AI), which is seen as a transformative engine of future productivity.

Hopefully those visions will manifest, but to compete with China’s rapid development, we also need a national development bank similar to the CDB. A dedicated development bank can ensure that credit creation is funneled into productive endeavors rather than speculative bubbles, and it can finance long-term, large-scale projects that are beyond the reach of private capital.

A bill for a national infrastructure bank on the Hamiltonian model, HR5356: The National Infrastructure Bank Act of 2025, is currently before Congress and has 42 cosponsors. Like the RFC and the early 20th century banks of Australia, New Zealand and Canada, it can provide off-budget financing for a wide range of urgently needed infrastructure projects without tapping the federal budget. For more information, see NIBCoalition.com.

### **Conclusion: Print to Build, Not to Bail**

Printing money is not inherently inflationary. It depends on what the money is used for. If it funds speculation, it inflates bubbles. If it funds production, it builds prosperity. The vaunted independence of the Fed is not a constitutional mandate but is a political choice. As Prof. Werner wrote in an October 10 Substack post: “Given the facts of the credit creation process and the powers of central bankers, we know that whenever we see a country in recession, this is a policy-decision by the central planners, because the tools are available to quickly exit any recession and deliver high growth and prosperity for all.”

History shows that sovereign money creation can be a tool for public good when wielded wisely. It is time to reclaim that tool, not to serve the banks and speculative investment but to serve the public and the productive economy.

Ellen Brown is an attorney, founder of the Public Banking Institute, and author of thirteen books including *Web of Debt*, *The Public Bank Solution*, and *Banking on the People: Democratizing Money in the Digital Age*. Her 400+ blog articles are posted at [EllenBrown.com](http://EllenBrown.com).

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# THE AMNESIA CURE

J O H N O ' K A N E

The entry area to the structure is currently being upgraded with new carpet and fresh paint. It's a wide, rectangular space, stretching across nearly the full width of the building. Once you pass into the interior, however, it's clear this is merely a modern appendage to an existing structure. The ceilings inside are much higher, and pillars protrude at random in the wide hallways, some partially embedded in the walls like the architects meant to leave remnants of earlier structures without blending them together or hastily cobbled the new one together in the heat of the moment's retrofit craze.

There are two wings to the building—mirror images of each other—separated by a spacious yard for exercise and other outdoor activities. The cafeteria is in the rear of the left wing. There's a garden strip behind the structure that consumes the full width of the property and separates it from Speedway, the alley that runs parallel to the boardwalk. There are rooms on both sides of the hallway in each wing. The structure consists of three floors. Each of the rooms has a large window, the interior rooms giving the occupants a full view of the yard. The administrative offices are in the front and rear of the third floor and extend about thirty feet beyond each side of the main structure. Their oversized windows present a full view of the exercise yard as well as the interior and exterior windows. These portions of the building are also elevated above the rest of the structure. The floors below these offices include rooms for consultations, testing, and workshops.

It's just after the breakfast period and residents amble through the hallways enroute to the exercise yard, their rooms, or appointments in the administrative area. The morning's faint, yellowish-orange orb has just appeared over the tree-tops, flaring-up the panes of glass and spiking spirits. This seems to refresh the air and temper the whiffs of smog-fragrance.

"Good morning, everyone," screeches the electronic voice. "We hope you will have a memorable day! There will be a workshop on new drug therapies in Room 3 at 9 AM."

All residents turn instantly to the nearest

loudspeaker and ponder the message in a stupor, like they've been summoned. The message delivered, they snap out of it and plod methodically to various destinations. Some in the yard crane toward the third-floor offices for a sign.

Kara peeks out of her window, the sun's glare blocking her full view, and pulls away straight into the path of two eyeballs wavering through the partially shadowed window on the north side. Andre rubbernecks a squint at the vacant space, seeing a blur of human shapes and then the gaze of a woman he can't identify. He pulls back from the window and swivels to his left, pressing his frame flat against the wall. Taking a deep breath, he stretches to sneak another glance from the window's edge, seeing other faces now moving slowly in his direction. Repelled by them, he falls back and collapses on the sofa, wondering now where he is, shaking his head back and forth in frustration.

"Attention, everyone. We apologize for the intrusion. The workshop on new drug therapies has been rescheduled for 10 AM."

Jolted by the electronic voice, he juts up from the sofa and rushes to the window, gazing at the scene below like he expects to discover the source of the voice. Exhausting his survey, he pivots around and peruses the surroundings, stuttering a self-satisfied smile and stepping feebly toward the closet, his face firming with feeling in rhythm with the movement like some invisible agent is inflating it with an air pump. Inside, he kneels and reaches between two boxes, extracting several dog-eared folders, and carries them to the sofa. He exhales fully to the ether, hesitating for a few seconds like he might be afraid to see what's inside or possibly feeling humble in the face of

discovering a sacred artifact. Plunging passionately into the task, he clasps bunch after bunch of discolored photos from their folders and deposits them on the floor at random. He spies a few of them and turns away as if the effort has spent his energy and rises from the sofa, now preoccupied with a new task. Hesitating for a few more seconds, he rushes through the door into the hallway, then turns and re-enters the room. He instantly locks the door. A soothing piece of music engulfs the space, and he settles refreshed on the sofa, carefully eyeballing the photos on the floor. He passes over each one very quickly, but one grabs his attention. Gracefully picking it up, he concentrates intensely on the figures. They pique his interest, but he doesn't fully recognize them, his eyes

**All residents turn instantly to the nearest loudspeaker and ponder the message in a stupor, like they've been summoned. The message delivered, they snap out of it and plod methodically to various destinations. Some in the yard crane toward the third-floor offices for a sign**

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flickering from speech to silence. Fatigued, he embraces a pillow.

“Who’s that woman?” he screams as his eyes fulminate. “Why did I call her Anastasia?” At a loss to answer these questions, he turns his attention back to that photo, this time giving it a more sustained glance, and then to a few others. That couldn’t be...no, that’s my neighbor down near...where? No, that’s...I don’t know. I can’t make out that street sign. The house looks kinda familiar. The bicycle in the corner of the yard is...I wonder who took this picture...and why. Why do I have it? But there’s something about it. I feel like I was in that yard...at some time. When? Why? Who’s tall with long, dark blond hair? Why does he have that troubled face? Who are the two women near him? They seem familiar too...with their frizzed-out hair and clownish expressions. They must be having a good time but...Why is he so sad? The women seem the opposite, having a lot of fun and...maybe they’re actresses. They’re dressed kind of...skimpily. Why did I pick up this photo? Is it possible that one of those women is Anastasia? Who was she? I must’ve met her back then some time. But where? Why can’t I recall more? Why can’t I remember what I was doing back then? What kind of job did I have? I remember being here but not when I arrived. Was I always here?

Exhausted from his mental exertion he retreats, takes several deep breaths while staring into the ether, and retrieves his focus.

I think I remember being in Detroit. But when? Is that where I grew up? No, I must’ve been passing through there or...Santa Fe! I remember an adobe house on the edge of town where...maybe I was there when I was a kid. But where did I grow up? I remember living with some people in an A-Frame house not far from a body of water...maybe it was the ocean. But I don’t think my parents lived there. Who were they? Several people lived there. Maybe Anastasia did too. I think it was two other males and at least two females. Was that here? I can’t see faces. Someone seems to be screaming...they won’t stop. But who is it? Wait, it doesn’t seem like screaming after all but...several people speaking with high-pitched, clashing voices or...maybe they’re excited about something. They’re in a large room, five of them. Am I there? I can’t tell who anyone is...their faces are all blank...they don’t have any features. Two of them are small. Is this my family? Did I have a happy childhood? I think this was Santa Fe. That’s where I went to high school. Yes...now I remember. But how did I get here? Did I go on to college? What did I do? What have I done since then?

Overwhelmed with emotion, he closes his eyes and tries to relax. Books flash through his mind, but he can’t see the titles. Maybe I read a lot of books, but what kind?

He swings his feet onto the floor and revisits the picture maze, some images now becoming more familiar. But none have books in them.

That bookstore...where was that? I think I spent

a lot of time there. Did I work there? Was it here or... Santa Fe? Here...musta been here. Lots of people sitting around and reading and talking. Where was that? Who’s the woman who owned it? But why was I there? When was this?

Oblivious, he rises and rushes to face the mirror on the far wall, but he can’t concentrate long enough to recognize what he sees and anxiously pulls away. He tries again, finally managing to fix on the target, and studies it with a pained expression for several seconds before lurching back to the scatter of photos. Frantically surveying the collection, he zones into the first photo he scanned, the one with the tall, dark blond male, and utters a protracted silent scream.

“Mr. Berkoff...Andre...are you in?” follows a musical rap on the door. Andre’s facial expression remains impervious to external stimuli. A variation on the first rhythmic knock softens his features. He’s still captured by his own reflections. After one more effort, this time a more methodical knock, he starts toward the door but stops like he’s trying to mute any noise he may have generated, thinking that if he remains stationary the person might go away.

“Mr. Berkoff...are you there?”

“Yes...it’s me...I’m...” He treads to the door, apprehensive but afraid his visitor might leave, and opens it to a woman and a male white coat.

“Hello Andre, may I come in?” asks the woman. “It’s Cassandra.” Andre nods approval. She steps inside, leaving the white coat at the door. At first glance he thinks it’s the woman who first interviewed him because of her free form, silverish hair and exuberant smile. But he sees now that she has a taut, nearly wrinkle-free face and the eye contact and skin texture of a younger person. He’s in awe of her healthiness and struck by the thought that both women could be part of the same kin group.

“We like to keep tabs on our new members... make sure there are no major adjustment issues.”

“Attention everyone. We have a late addition to tonight’s entertainment. The April Segura quartet will perform at 7:30 in the auditorium.”

She tours the room, giving it a once-over, then moves to the closet area where she presses her hands over the wall surfaces and steps firmly on the floor like she’s testing for a soft space. From there she heads to the far corner of the room where there’s a cove sectioned off by a pillar. Inside there’s a built-in bookcase and she spreads the books apart on both of its shelves and runs her hands across the back several times in each direction. Apparently satisfied, she turns around and approaches Andre with another engaging smile.

“We’ve had some...structural problems with this section of the building,” she says, trying to answer Andre’s unasked question. He remains unfazed.

“Have you been visiting with any of your neighbors, Andre? We want you to mix with the rest of our family.”

“I’ve talked to some...no one has come here.”

“That’ll change.”

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“Where is Anastasia’s room?”

“You mean, Lili’s?”

“I don’t know any Lili.”

“We wanted to ask you about her. Did you know her?”

“Yes, I...think so.”

“Is it possible you’re confusing her with someone else?”

“I don’t know. If I can just talk to her then...”

“She seems in terror of you...we have to keep you separated until we know what’s going on.”

“How long have we...I been here?”

“It’s been about a week since you arrived.” His face contorts and he turns to face her directly with a blank expression. Cassandra opens her arms, hesitates, and reaches out to embrace him. He submits timidly but every second they’re coupled increases his strength to hold on, reciprocate her overtures. She pulls away and flashes of a different person superimpose her image and then fade, only to repeat. He’s thinking that this is her when she was younger, when he possibly knew her. In the hiatus she looks at him with a fresh perspective and winces, pulling him toward her for a brief climactic embrace.

“Have you been taking your meds regularly, Andre?” she asks while separating from him, perusing his full frame. He pulses to the sofa, red-faced.

“Yes, I think so.” She plops down on the other end of the sofa.

“Have you experienced any side effects from your meds?”

“Side effects?” He tries to retrieve his focus.

“Yes, like being able to recall more things from your past...having more energy in your physical fitness sessions...using your mind more productively.”

“I’ve been trying hard to re...member my past.”

“What have you come up with?”

“Flashes of my family and friends. I think I know where I grew up...not sure when I came here. I keep seeing books and a bookstore. Maybe I worked in one once.”

“That’s a lot. Keep taking your meds and...be sure to stick to the diet we gave you.”

“Some of that food in the cafeteria tastes really...strange.”

“Well, it can take some getting used to but...it will help get your body and mind in shape. You said you see books...what kind?”

“I can’t make out the titles...they’re blank.”

“Maybe you were a writer and you’re getting visions from the days when you were active. In group you blurted ‘the poem’ and you seemed to become more aware when you did this. Have you been writing poetry?”

“I...don’t think so.”

“Do you recall reading poetry when you were young...or writing it?”

“Not really.”

“How have you been sleeping?”

“Good...but sometimes I sleep a long time and wake up not knowing where I am. And I’ve been

having a lot of dreams. Sometimes it’s like they aren’t even dreams. I feel like I am taking part in a play or something. Then I wake feeling like I’ve been drugged and...it takes a while to feel normal again.”

“Well, we’ll talk about that in group. Keep attending your workshops.” She steps toward the door as she speaks. “I’ll check in with you in the next few days. Have a good day!”

She graces her exit with another captivating smile. He fights off an urge to hurry after her. Once she’s gone, he experiences a curious feeling. There’s a smell in the air, a bouquet that makes him feel weak, submissive, but also more alert, more alive. As if this aroma threatens to evaporate, he goes through the motions of inhaling the air, approximating the gestures of someone who’s siphoning fuel from a gas tank. His face radiates satisfaction like he’s been able to package the bouquet in his being and preserve it as a powerful stimulus. He takes a deep breath and hustles to his photos on the floor, giving them one more serious glance before rearranging them in familiar piles for storage.

As he decides to head out to the exercise yard, he feels the floor shake slightly. Wondering if there has been an earthquake, he rushes to the window but sees no evidence of any damage or residents mingling outside. As he rushes back across the room his foot slips over a crease under the large rug that covers most of the room. Feeling around the area, he notices another crease of roughly the same size running perpendicular to the first and realizes there must be a trap door under the rug. His first urge is to find someone and tell them about his discovery, but when he enters the hall and sees a white coat approaching, he slips back inside and locks the door. Feeling secure inside, he now senses someone’s presence in the room and turns to the trap door. He tries to press its edges down but with no success. A curious odor now suffuses the space, and he decides to reposition some of the furniture over the area.

“Attention, everyone! There will be a workshop on the values of community at 5 PM in Room 3. We encourage you to attend.”

This message dissolves his concentration on the trap door, and he turns sharply to the large flat-screen TV on the far wall as if the voice emanated from it. He creeps cautiously up to it like his presence might secure the source and begins to inspect it from every angle. After repeated viewings he feels there might be someone on the other side of the glass who’s following his movements. Stepping a few paces to his right, he thinks he sees a figure move but the light now streaming through the window spreads a glare across the screen, obscuring the figure. As the brightness recedes, he can no longer see the figure. He steps closer to the screen and angles in on the vague outlines of what appears to be a person and wonders if it’s the same figure. He waves but the figure doesn’t move. He waves again with the same result.

The screen brightens and a grayish-blob surfaces, soon morphing into a form that resembles a digital

knife carving a sculpture. The scene is his room, and the resulting form appears to be a male. Andre glares at him, squinting as he drops his head downward and closer, and the form seems to move with him, mimicking his very gestures. This forces him to jerk back in fright all the way across the room where he can't see what's on the screen. He reclines on the sofa, wondering how that person on the screen can do the same thing as him. He rubs his eyes and blinks repeatedly, panning around the room like he again feels the presence of someone, or something, afraid to get back up and approach the screen. But he's impelled to. A siren dopplers by the rear of the building, scrambling his concentration, but it soon gives him a boost of energy. He jumps up and creeps a few steps toward the screen until images start to appear, then inches further, recognizing the area around the sofa in the background as a male comes toward him, growing larger the closer he gets. He feels it's the person from before and stares him down, freezing his movements. Why won't he move, he wonders. A flaring of conversation from the yard twitches his head to the right as if the words might be directed to him, and he glimpses the figure on the screen moving with him in cadence. He jerks back in a gotcha gesture to the same insistent gaze that freezes with his own. As his eyes bulge, he sees the figure's eyes doing the same and springs back from the screen to his left, resting on his haunches below the lip of the screen. Head angled toward the floor, he takes several deep breaths and carefully lifts his gaze above the bottom of the screen into the figure's sightline, his eyes lasered to his. He tries to glean every detail on the person's face, commit his qualities to memory without flinching, but feels invaded by his penetrating gaze and blinks, turning away sharply

to snatch a glance of the side of his face. Scrutinizing the uncanny circuitry of lines and blotches, he frowns and turns sharply back to meet what seems like the frown from the same face as before. Imbibing the absurdity of this impression, he hobbles to the mirror on the far wall to his right and faces the image on the glass. He curls a grin and swivels a one-eighty as if someone's behind him and swivels back, examining the details of this image even more intently. Semi-satisfied, he blinks repeatedly before hobbling back to the screen. But now the figure is gone and the screen fades to dark. He tries unsuccessfully to turn it back on and retires to the sofa, hoping to see someone conjured from the shadows. The trap door now pops into his head and he thinks of opening it when the TV suddenly re-engages.

He jumps up and scans the images forming on the screen but can't make them out since they're blurry, and the background is dark. They brighten slightly but not distinctly enough to identify like there's a time-sync problem, the digital equivalent of a film projector that's running afoul of 24 frames per second and caught in some limbo. The screen fills with pulsing blobs. Some convert to strings that expand and contract around them, these soon changing into images that someone is trying to shape into three dimensions. They start to resemble the formation of a crowd out front of HOME, but the scene is too dark. The camera cuts to another before he can absorb it. The screen finally fades to dark. He hustles to it and tries to get it back on, but it's no use. He drops to his knees and stretches his arms upward like he's appealing for an explanation to someone who might be present. After several minutes prostrate before the screen he rises, pans the room once again, and rushes to the door. He

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opens it carefully and peruses the hallway before exiting.

Once in the hallway he feels relieved, like he's escaped confinement. The thoughts that swirled in his head inside the room now vaporize as he joins the bodies streaming to the rear of the building. After several feet he steps to the side and backs against the wall like he realizes he's been going in the wrong direction. But the longer he maintains this pose the less he's sure where he is. Suddenly he's driven to exit the building for some fresh air. He trudges back down the hall to the front exit, trancing onto the boardwalk.

The crowd bristles with intimidation so he cowers to the first bench he can find and scans the shapes angling from various directions around him. He can almost feel their presence. He wants them to wrap him up and carry him off.

A shape surfaces directly in front of him, a woman with frizzed-out salt-and-pepperish hair. Her proximity seems to jolt him to clarity, the lens through which he's seeing her and everything around her has now adjusted to the right focal length.

"I think I...know you," Andre says as if he's not entirely sure. "Do you know me?"

"No...I don't think so. You looked like you needed help and...there's something about your face."

Her companion edges around her and gawks at Andre. He's tall and lanky with a slight stoop, and has a gaunt, pock-marked face. His cowboy hat is tilted to the right and at an upward angle, revealing a large swatch of forehead that seems to amplify his gawks. "We don't know you," he says in a tone that expunges any trace of possibility.

"Wait...wait, I think I know where we might've met," says the woman. "It was...at a poetry reading. But I can't remember where."

"I think I used to go to poetry readings but..."

"It might've been at that café...on the beach. The readers sat with the customers on old sofas and chairs with ragged coverings...some of them would recite lines they couldn't remember creating."

"The poem...the poem!"

"Do you remember a certain..."

"You don't mean that dive that burned down just a block or so from here?" interrupts the male in a skeptical tone. "That was a...cathouse!"

"Are you thinking of a poem someone wrote?" queries the woman, seemingly enthused by Andre's outburst.

"No...I don't think so. I just..."

"Just what?" Andre's face turns blank.

"Anyway, we met at that café and...it wasn't a cathouse! It was on a Saturday night and...a woman read. She was tall and shapely and wore glasses and...you were sitting in the corner writing something in a notebook. I think that was you. You were...with someone, a woman with red hair."

"The poem...the poem!" Andre gazes up into the cloudless vapor.

"Are you thinking of a poem about...the

heavens?"

"I live at HOME, down the boardwalk, and I needed to..."

"I heard about that place," says the woman.

"That's supposed to be an experimental halfway house or clinic or some kinda space for the..."

"You probably think I'm...strange or something."

"No, not...strange. I'm trying to imagine you in this place and you don't seem to fit. But I don't know that much about it."

"I just got there recently...not sure what it's all about. I've had some strange thoughts there and...sometimes I feel like I was there before, a long time ago. But I can't really remember."

"Some of the people on the beach wanna find out what goes on there," says the male in a distracting tone of voice.

"The poem...the poem! The poem...the poem!" Andre jumps up from the bench as he utters these words and strolls methodically onto the boardwalk, jerking around to face them. "Come and...see me."

"We...would like to," says the woman who lurches toward him and follows for a few feet, arms akimbo.

Andre slogs through the colorful, undulating shapes, dodging skaters and strollers. A young man with a goatee resting against his knapsack in lotus position zooms into his visual field across the street from the entrance to the Sidewalk Café, and he rushes him. The closer he gets the more familiar he looks.

"I remember...you from...are you headed back over to the Lafayette?"

"To the...what?" He squirms uncomfortably and pushes his frame upward at an angle away from Andre's piercing gaze.

"The Lafayette."

"What's that?"

"A...the café...the café over on..."

"On what?"

"Well...I can't remember."

"Not sure if it's the same place, but I heard that closed a long time ago."

Andre stares at him, speechless. The young man springs from Andre's visual field and hobbles up the side street to Speedway, turning around to face him. Andre stares at the man like he's been shunned by a close friend, and waves repeatedly, watching him scamper up the street and cut sharply between two houses. He wonders if he said something to alienate him. His gaze freezes on the point where the man vanished like he expects him to reappear. A passing skater jolts him, and he pivots toward the sand, trudging through the clusters of bathers all the way to the water. Ping-ponging glances at the surfers angling toward him, he stretches both arms upward and marches into the water, his head pitched aloft. As it rises to his stomach a lifeguard clasps his shoulders...

The above is excerpted from O'Kane's upcoming novel, *Altz House*.



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# FOOD STAMPS

D R E W D E S I L V E R

**E**ven before large pieces of the federal government shut down in October 2025, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP – sometimes called the food stamp program – was in for some big changes.

The tax, spending and policy bill passed by Congress earlier this year expanded work requirements for SNAP, tightened eligibility rules, imposed new cost-sharing obligations on states and made other changes to the program. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the changes will reduce federal spending on SNAP by \$186.7 billion over the next decade.

But the 43-day shutdown created further challenges for the program, which helps nearly 42 million Americans put food on the table. While October benefits were paid in full and on time, November’s payments got caught up in a tangle of lawsuits, conflicting court rulings and short-term, state-level fixes. The law reopening the government funds SNAP through September 2026, the end of the current fiscal year.

Here’s a closer look at the food stamp program, based on data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (whose Food and Nutrition Service administers SNAP), the Census Bureau and other sources.

## How Many Americans Use Food Stamps?

The numbers vary from month to month. But in May 2025, the most recent month with available figures, 41.7 million people in 22.4 million households received SNAP benefits. That works out to nearly 1 in every 8 people in the country.

On average, 42.4 million people in 22.7 million households received monthly SNAP benefits through the first eight months of the 2025 fiscal year (October 2024 to May 2025).

SNAP operates in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam and the Virgin Islands. A separate program provides nutrition assistance grants to Puerto Rico, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands.

## How Has the Number Of Food Stamp Recipients Changed Over Time?

The program now known as SNAP began in 1964 but took several years to ramp up. It wasn’t until July 1974 that states – which share administrative duties over SNAP with the federal government – were required to extend it to all jurisdictions within their borders. That year, 12.9 million

people, or 6.1% of the resident U.S. population at the time, received SNAP benefits.

Program participation has ebbed and flowed over the ensuing decades, driven both by changes in economic conditions and eligibility rules. More people file for SNAP benefits during recessions, and participation generally doesn’t fall back until recoveries have fully taken hold.

For instance, between fiscal years 1980 and 2008, the share of all U.S. households receiving SNAP benefits stayed between about 7% and about 11%. But that percentage rose rapidly during the Great Recession, peaking at 18.8% in fiscal 2013 – representing 47.6 million people.

In March 2020, as the nation headed into COVID-19 lockdowns, Congress authorized extra SNAP benefits for recipients and suspended work and training requirements for the duration of the declared public health emergency. The number of recipients immediately jumped, from 37.2 million to 40.9 million in April 2020. Participation eventually reached just over 43 million recipients in September 2020, or 13% of the resident population.

## Who is Eligible for Food Stamps?

In general, a household qualifies for SNAP if it has a gross monthly income at or below 130% of the federal poverty level, as well as a net monthly income at or below 100% of the federal poverty level. For a family of four, this currently works out to \$3,483 in gross monthly income and \$2,680 in net monthly income. (These limits are higher in Alaska, Hawaii, Guam and the Virgin Islands.)

Households with people aged 60 and older or with disabilities only have to meet the *net income* requirement. And households of all types are limited in how much they can have in cash, investments and other assets and still qualify for SNAP. In addition, the policy law enacted by Congress in July 2025 places new restrictions on how households can deduct expenses for utilities and internet service from their gross income.

Households receiving other types of aid, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), may be eligible for SNAP automatically.

States have a certain degree of latitude in how they administer the SNAP program. For example, they can decide how broadly to extend its benefits to people receiving other TANF-funded benefits, whether to count vehicles as household assets, and whether to count child support payments as income. In addition, there are somewhat different eligibility rules for Alaska, Hawaii,

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– Drew DeSilver

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Guam and the Virgin Islands.

**What Work Requirements Are There for Receiving Food Stamps?**

To receive SNAP benefits, most Americans ages 16 to 59 who aren't disabled must register with their state SNAP agency or employment office; meet any work, job search or job training requirements set by their state; accept a suitable job if one is offered to them; and work at least 30 hours a week. Failure to comply with these rules can disqualify people from benefits.

In addition, nondisabled adults without dependents must either work or participate in a work program for 80 hours a month or participate in a state workfare program. If they fail to do so, they can only receive SNAP benefits for three months out of any 36-month period.

Until recently, this additional work requirement only applied to people ages 18 to 49. A deal that resolved the 2023 debt-limit standoff raised the maximum age to 54, and the big domestic policy law enacted by Congress earlier this year raises it further, to 65. That law also removes exemptions from the work requirements for veterans, homeless people and young adults who have aged out of foster care, and it adds exemptions for Native Americans.

The most comprehensive data source we have is the Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation, although its most recent data is from 2023. That year, nearly 23 million SNAP recipients (65%) were adults, and 12.4 million (35%) were children.

Non-Hispanic White people accounted for 44.2% of adult SNAP recipients and 24.8% of child recipients in 2023. Nearly 27% of adult recipients and almost a third of child recipients (32.3%) were Black. Hispanics, who can be of any race, accounted for 24.2% of adult recipients and 40.7% of child recipients.

The vast majority of both adult and child recipients were born in the United States – 81.1% and 96.9%, respectively.

Among adult recipients, 54.1% had a high school diploma or less education. And despite the program's work requirements, 61% said they had not been employed at all that year.

The Census Bureau also looked at households where at least one person received SNAP benefits. More than six-in-ten of these households (63.1%) reported having no children in 2023; almost a third (32.7%) said they lived alone. Among all SNAP-receiving households, 39% were in the South, the highest share of any region.

**How Much Do Food Stamp Recipients Get Each Month?**

In May 2025, the national average benefit was \$188.45 per person and \$350.89 per household. Amounts were considerably higher during the pandemic period, when Congress authorized extra benefits. At its peak in November 2022, the average monthly benefit was \$259.50 per person and \$493.76 per household.

The purchasing power of SNAP benefits held relatively steady for decades leading up to the Great

Recession. The average per-person monthly benefit, in 2025 dollars, ranged from \$122 to \$151 between 1979 and 2008. The inflation-adjusted value of the average benefit rose during the Great Recession, and quite a bit more during the pandemic era – peaking in 2021 at \$252.96 monthly.

However, those nationwide averages conceal a considerable amount of state-by-state variation. SNAP beneficiaries in New York received an average of \$218.44 per person in May 2025, while recipients in Minnesota got \$158.45 on average. (These rankings exclude Alaska, Hawaii, the Virgin Islands and Guam, where there are different rules in place to reflect higher food costs in those places.)

Why do benefits vary so much by state? One reason is that benefit amounts are largely determined by recipients' income, minus certain expenses. Household size also factors into the calculation. So a state's demographics and the condition of its economy will influence how much its residents can receive through SNAP.

The maximum SNAP benefit is based on the Thrifty Food Plan, an estimate by the Department of Agriculture (USDA) of how much it costs a family of two adults and two children to buy food and beverages "on a limited budget to support a healthy diet through nutritious meals and snacks at home." That amount is adjusted for other household types when determining benefit levels.

The Thrifty Food Plan was updated in 2021 for the first time in 15 years, and it had been scheduled for another reevaluation in 2026. However, under the policy law Congress passed in July, USDA can't reevaluate the food plan until Oct. 1, 2027, at the earliest. Additionally, any cost increase is limited to the overall inflation rate. These changes are projected to reduce future benefit levels: By 2034, the Congressional Budget Office estimates, the average monthly benefit will be \$213 rather than the \$227 it would have been under prior law.

**Where Is Food Stamp Usage Highest And Lowest?**

In Guam, 22.5% of the population receives SNAP benefits – the highest rate of any state or territory, according to a Pew Research Center analysis. New Mexico is next highest (21.5%), followed by the District of Columbia (20%) and the Virgin Islands (19.9%).

Wyoming has the nation's lowest rate of SNAP use: Just 4.6% of Cowboy State residents get the benefits. Wyoming's neighbor, Utah, is close behind at 5.1%. Other states with low rates include New Hampshire (5.4%) and Kansas (6.3%).

**What Can You Buy With Food Stamps? What Can't You Buy?**

SNAP benefits can be used to buy most groceries for household use, including breads and pastries; meats, poultry and fish (but not, in most cases, live animals and birds); fruits and vegetables; dairy products, including ice cream; and snack foods such as cookies, cakes and soft drinks. Recipients can also use SNAP benefits to buy plants and seeds to grow food for the household, but not (for example) non-edible flowers.

Alcoholic beverages and tobacco products



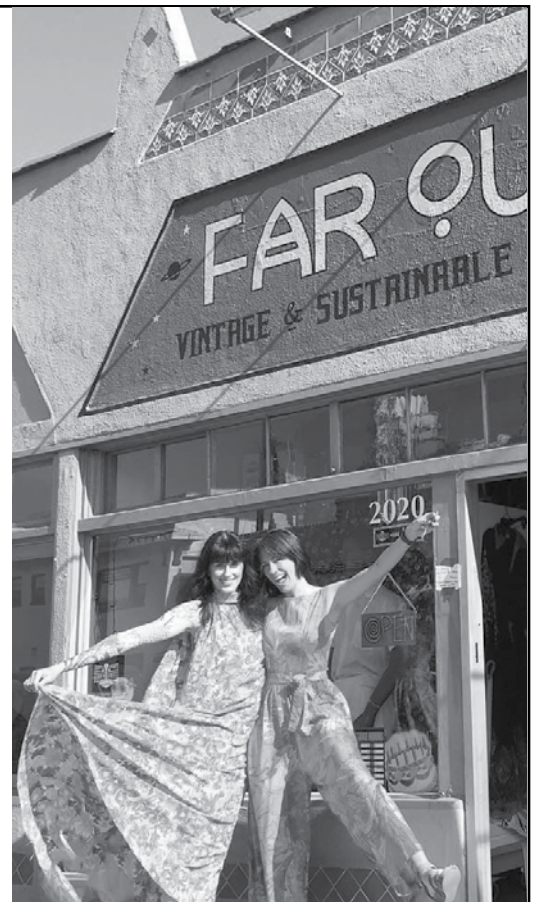
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cannot be bought with SNAP benefits, nor can nutritional supplements, medicines or pet food. Foods that are sold hot (think rotisserie chickens or ready-to-eat soups) aren't eligible either, nor are household goods such as paper towels, cleaning products and toiletries. Gasoline isn't eligible either.

**Where Can People Use Food Stamps? Where Do They Use Them Most Frequently?**

Almost 267,000 establishments – from grocery stores and farmers markets to meal delivery services and senior centers – were authorized to accept SNAP benefits as of September 2024. A few types stand out:

- Supermarkets and superstores, such as Walmart and Target, together make up about 15% of SNAP-accepting establishments, but they accounted for nearly 74% of all redemptions.
- More than 44% of all SNAP-accepting establishments are convenience stores, but they accounted for only about 5% of redemptions in 2024.
- While only 561 internet retailers, such as Amazon, were authorized to accept SNAP benefits, they accounted for more than 10% of all redemptions.

**How Much Does the Federal Government Spend on Food Stamps Each Year?**

Through the first eight months of fiscal 2025, the government spent almost \$65 billion on benefits alone, 4.7% more than during the corresponding period in fiscal 2024.

In fiscal 2024, the government spent \$100.3 billion on SNAP. Nearly all of that money (\$93.7 billion, or 93.4%) went to benefits, while \$6.6 billion (6.6%) went to reimburse states for half of their administrative and other expenses. (Under the new domestic policy law, that reimbursement rate will fall to 25% starting in fiscal 2027.)

SNAP is one of the larger federal social welfare programs, but by no means the largest. For comparison, in fiscal 2024, the federal government spent \$874.1 billion on Medicare, \$617.5 billion on Medicaid, \$161.3 billion on income security for veterans, \$54.4 billion on Supplemental Security Income and \$38.3 billion on unemployment compensation.

Currently, the federal government pays 100% of SNAP benefit costs. However, starting in fiscal 2028, many states may have to pay anywhere from 5% to 15% of benefit costs from their own funds, depending on how much they over-or-underpay SNAP benefits in a given year.

This summer's tax and policy law penalizes states with relatively high rates of overpayment or underpayment. States with combined over-and underpayment rates above 6% – the “error rate” – will have to start paying for a share of their state's benefits. The higher the error rate, the higher the cost share.

Most states could feel the pinch. In fiscal 2024, the most recent year for which data was available, only eight states and the Virgin Islands had combined error rates lower

than 6%, while Alaska's was the highest at 24.7%.

States that exceed the allowable error rate could be faced with unpalatable choices: raising taxes or cutting other expenses to pay for their cost share, restricting eligibility to lower the potential cost, or even dropping SNAP entirely.

**How Has the Cost of the Food Stamp Program Changed Over Time?**

SNAP is an entitlement program, which means spending on it rises and falls based primarily on how many people qualify for benefits – but also through changes in its authorizing legislation.

For decades, annual spending on SNAP appeared to follow a regular pattern: It fell to around \$31 billion a year (in inflation-adjusted 2024 dollars) during strong economic times and rose during and immediately after recessions, at times topping \$50 billion.

But that pattern changed following the dot-com recession of 2001. Inflation-adjusted spending on SNAP rose throughout the 2000s, even after the economy began growing again. It then jumped after the economy sank into the Great Recession, topping out at \$107.6 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars in fiscal 2013. SNAP spending then fell slowly, until the COVID-19 pandemic upended the economy again. Spending on the program soared from \$74.2 billion in fiscal 2019 to \$132.4 billion in fiscal 2021 in inflation-adjusted dollars. Since the 2021 peak, inflation-adjusted SNAP spending has fallen 24.2%.

**Why Are They Called ‘Food Stamps,’ Anyway?**

The precursor to the modern SNAP program, which began in 1939 and ran until 1943, did use actual stamps. Besides feeding the hungry, the program was designed to aid farmers struggling with surplus crops they couldn't sell profitably.

People receiving public assistance could buy orange stamps that were exchangeable, dollar for dollar, for most food items at grocery stores. For every dollar participants spent on orange stamps, they also received 50 cents' worth of blue stamps, which could be spent only on USDA-designated surplus commodities such as beans, eggs, dairy products, fruits and vegetables. Over the program's lifespan, approximately 20 million people received food stamps at one time or another, at a total cost of \$262 million.

The U.S. entry into World War II put an end to the first food stamp program, as the war effort absorbed both farm and labor surpluses. But the concept stuck in people's heads, and when it was revived in 1964 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's “War on Poverty,” it was formally named the Food Stamp Program. But instead of stamps, beneficiaries purchased multicolored “food coupons” that could be used much like cash. The purchase requirement was eliminated in 1977, benefits began to be widely delivered by debit card in the 1990s, and by 2004 the paper coupons had gone the way of the blue and orange stamps. The program was renamed SNAP in 2008.

Drew DeSilver is a senior writer at Pew Research Center. Reprinted from the Pew Research Center with permission.

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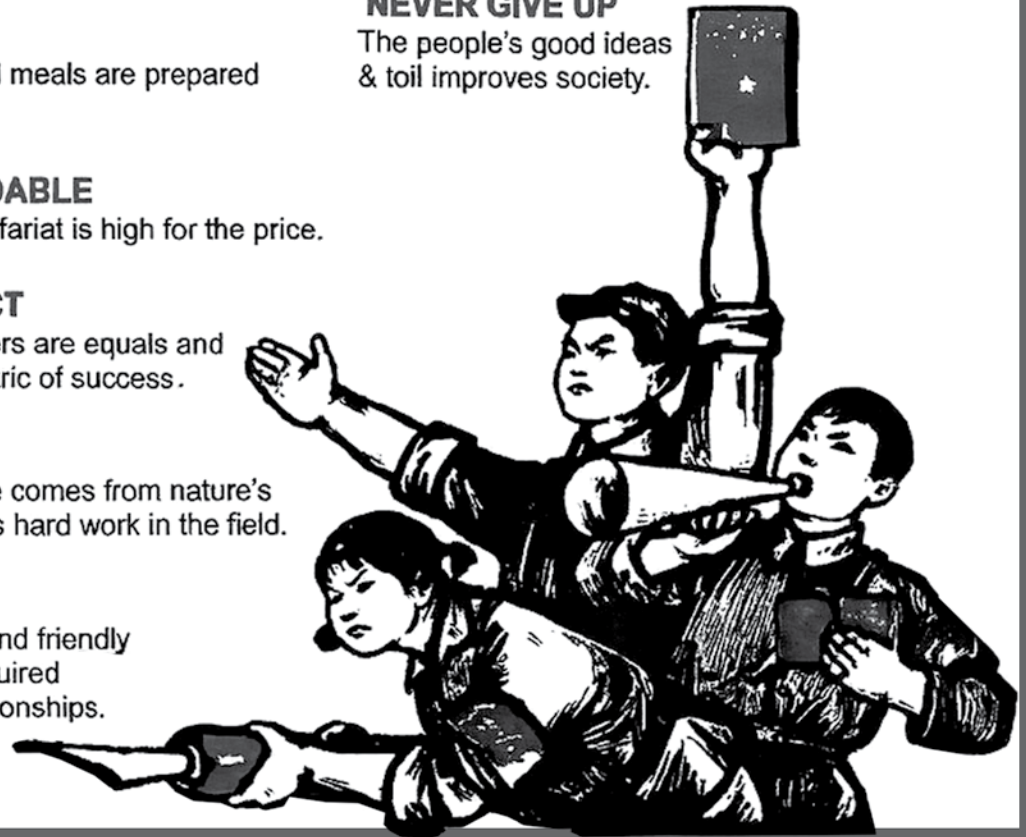
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# WORKING WAGE STAGNATION VERSUS LIVING WAGES

ROBERT POLLIN

At the end of last August, President Donald Trump asserted that average wages for U.S. workers had risen by \$546 during the first six months since he returned to office in January 2025. As with virtually all of Trump's pronouncements, this one bears little relationship to the truth. In fact, when using the most reliable government data on wages and then controlling for inflation, workers' wages did still rise under Trump, but by \$26—that's 95% less than the \$546 average pay raise proclaimed by Trump.

The reality of wage stagnation under Trump is fully consistent with his broader attack on working people. As just one example, the labor historian Joseph McCartin called Trump's move in March to cancel the union rights of more than one million federal government workers "by far the largest single action of union-busting in American history."

Still worse is that wage stagnation to date under Trump follows what is now a 50-year pattern. In 1973, the average nonsupervisory employee earned \$29.15 an hour (in 2024 dollars). As of 2024, that average wage was \$30.13. Over the same time period, the average productivity of U.S. workers—the average value of

what they produce when they show up at work—rose by 150%. If these workers had received raises every year between 1973 and 2024 just equal to their increased productivity, but not a penny more, their average hourly pay today would be \$72.88 an hour.

To further clarify, the current pay levels for nonsupervisory workers, compare their current average hourly wage of \$30.13 with what we could consider a living wage standard. There are various ways in which one can define what we mean by a living wage. In *A Living*

**Since the early 1990s a strong political movement in the United States has fought to establish living wage standards at the municipal and state levels.**

— Robert Pollin

*Wage: American Workers and the Making of a Consumer Society*, Lawrence Glickman defines the term qualitatively, as being a wage level that offers workers "the ability to support families, to maintain self-respect and to have both the

means and leisure to participate in the civic life of the nation."

A research group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has produced a Living Wage Calculator that provides detailed annual quantitative estimates of living wage standards for every state and county in the United States, as measured relative to the cost of living in each area. Their definition of what constitutes a living wage in a given community is less ambitious than the standard suggested by Glickman. Specifically, according to the MIT Calculator's definition, "The living wage is the basic income standard that, if met, draws a very fine line between the financial independence of the working poor and the need to seek out public assistance or suffer consistent and severe housing and food insecurity. In light of this fact, the living wage is perhaps better defined as a minimum subsistence wage for persons living in the United States."

Working from this lower-end but still reasonable definition, the MIT researchers estimate living wages for various family household types, including those with one or two adults and between zero to three children. For example, their living wage estimates at the state level for family households with one adult and one child range between a low of \$32.62 an hour in Mississippi and a high of \$55.15 an hour in Massachusetts. These figures yield the striking result that even the low-end Mississippi living wage of \$32.62 an hour is 8% above the \$30.13 average

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now being earned by nonsupervisory workers in the United States. The \$55.15 Massachusetts living wage is 83% higher than the current average hourly wage of \$30.13.

Since the early 1990s a strong political movement in the United States has fought to establish living wage standards at the municipal and state levels. The movement has achieved some significant successes. Between 1994 and 2010, living wage laws were enacted in over 125 cities and counties. At the state level, 30 states and Washington, D.C., now have minimum wage rates above the poverty-level federal minimum of \$7.25 an hour. Washington State has the highest state-level minimum wage

at \$16.66 an hour. The minimum wage for Washington, D.C., is still higher, at \$17.95 an hour.

Yet these state and city living wage rates remain uniformly well below even the MIT Calculator's lower-end standards. Given the broader 50-year pattern of wage stagnation in the United States, we cannot avoid the conclusion that the living wage movement has not been successful enough, despite great efforts by thousands of organizers and activists throughout the country.

Under Trump, we can only expect more of the same outright lies and vicious assaults on workers' rights, job opportunities, and living standards. It is therefore

now imperative to revive the living wage movement throughout the country. A ramped-up living wage movement can become one important force contributing to the resistance against Trump and Trumpism. More fundamentally still, a revived living wage movement can be a means for building working class power and, with that power, delivering pay levels for nonsupervisory wages that—after 50 years of U.S. wage stagnation—can reach true living wage standards.

Robert Pollin is a distinguished university professor of economics and Co-Director of the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.



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# SHADES OF DOSTOYEVSKY: SPEAKING WITH FILMMAKER VITALY SUMIN

DAN MARCUS

**DAN MARCUS:** What was it like working with a cast of unknown actors on *Notes from the New World*?

**VITALY SUMIN:** Much better than with “known” actors.

**MARCUS:** If you had to do it all over again, what would you do differently?

**SUMIN:** I wouldn't do it again. I would simply make another movie.

**MARCUS:** What have you learned from directing films?

**SUMIN:** It's better to watch films than to make them.

**MARCUS:** Who are your influences?

**SUMIN:** Bergman, Truffaut, Kubrick, Kurosawa, Hitchcock, Tarantino, and two films by Aki Kaurismäki: *The Man Without a Past* and *Fallen Leaves*.

**MARCUS:** What do you see

as the future of filmmaking?

**SUMIN:** And you?

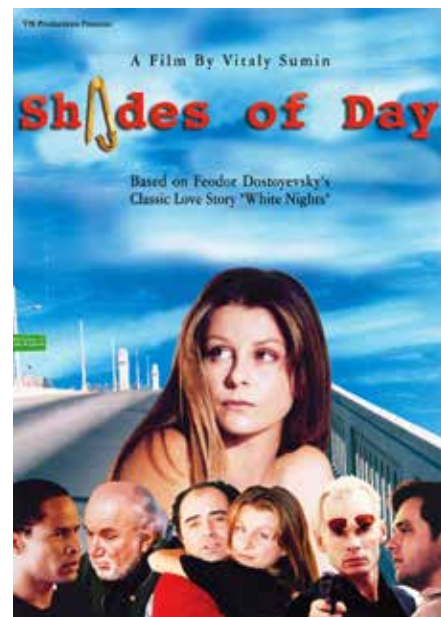
**MARCUS:** Do you view your *Notes from the New World* and your previous film, *Shades of Day*, as adaptations of Dostoyevsky's work or as continuations of it? [editor's note: *Shades of Day* is based on the novella, *White Nights*.]

**SUMIN:** They can be viewed as both or neither. What's important are the ideas and themes of the original writing. I've never been particularly interested in the exact re-creation of stories by classical authors, including the appropriate attributes of the corresponding

Well, we're  
living in an  
unprecedented  
time of technological  
revolution and  
the fall  
of the walls.

— Vitaly Sumin

historical time period involved. For me, every classic work of fiction is a template serving as a basis for

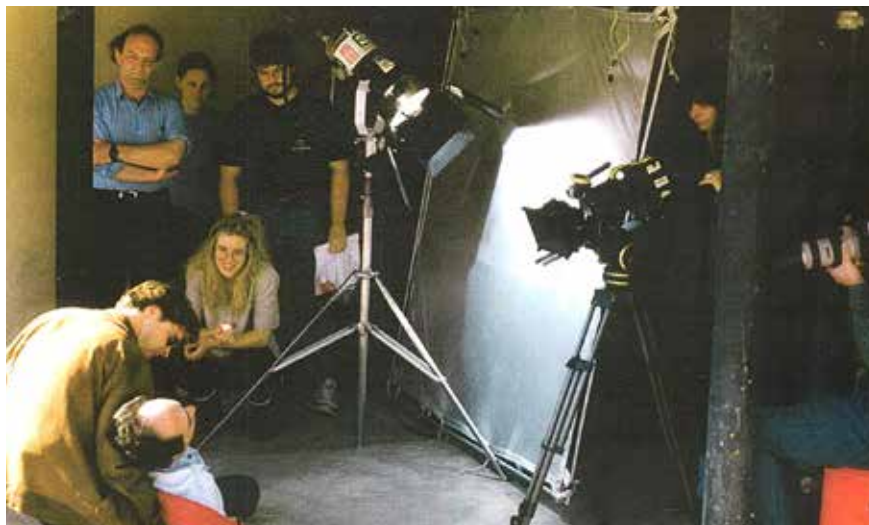


explorations of our own age.

**MARCUS:** Beyond the storylines you've developed in your films, what is your broader message regarding the state of the modern world?

**SUMIN:** Well, we're living in an unprecedented time of technological revolution and the fall of the walls. Hamlet who lived at the time of another revolution—the passage from Renaissance to Baroque—stated that “time has dislocated the joint!”—which I'm citing from memory. Whatever happens in a faraway corner of the globe may become known right away anywhere by everyone. The problem is that to change a living human being in an evolutionary way requires a longer time, if it's even possible. Most, if not all, social revolutions that intended to quickly change the world failed but provided us with experience. On the other hand, the technological revolution made some dreams come true; in a way, the world has become one. But there is a darker side. Steven, the hero of *Notes*, who is assigned to portray a modern Underground Man in Los Angeles, claims, “Not all civilizations progress at the same pace, but then the losers use bombs to make all of us equal.”

**MARCUS:** Describe the process that you went through to develop a “life imitates art” storyline for the film where the characters are



actually living a modern version of the play in which they are acting on screen.

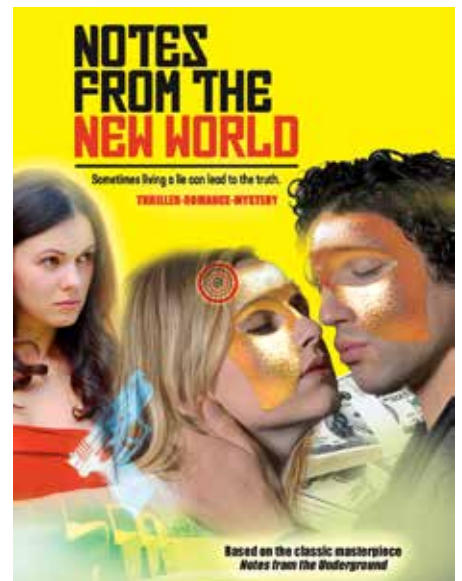


**SUMIN:** When an actor performs on stage, a process of identification with a character takes place. Depending on the degree and scope of the identification, an actor may need some time to “get back” and restore his or her inner self. In the story, Steven, a young actor at the beginning of his career, is asked by Bob, a mad Machiavellian-type director and playwright, to perform the part of the Underground Man in real life. Once Steven puts on the mask of the Underground Man,

there’s no way back — he’s entering a world of mythical forces that will push him all the way through the labyrinth into the Unknown.

**MARCUS:** Yet, the protagonist of your film does endeavor to change himself and the society he blames for his misery—in other words, to escape the sense of existential futility underlying Dostoyevsky’s novella.

**SUMIN:** Every common man of no particular influence or stature throughout history has felt that he has no real control over his own fate. In today’s society, however, the common man has a sense of controlling his own destiny through technology. And even though Steven is surrounded by elements of modern technology—such as the spy cameras throughout his living quarters being used to help him develop his part—he ultimately finds that he’s not the one in charge. He only has the illusion of control. As such, he is really no different than the Underground Man that he is



researching.

**MARCUS:** Do you see yourself as an Underground Man?

**SUMIN:** From time to time.

Dan Marcus is a playwright, songwriter, and curator of the Dan Marcus Gallery (YouTube). His song, “It’s Hard to Say,” co-written with Merrily Weeber, appears on the recently released album *Moon Over Larrabee* by Diane Hubka & the Sun Canyon Band.



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# THE SUPREME COURT, TRUMP'S TARIFFS, AND THE NATIONAL DEBT

HAROLD ZIMMERMAN

**W**ith the Supreme Court likely to put a stop to Trump's tariffs, the revenue from which helps to pay down Our National Debt, what's next?

The National Debt now at \$38 Trillion and climbing. If left unchecked, it could cause Our Dollar to lose its Status as The World's Reserve Currency with (presumably) China and the Chinese Yuan becoming the next new Global King.

This became apparent on April 2 with Trump's Liberation Day instituting multi-nation tariffs. On the same day, the stock market crashed and China and Japan, our biggest foreign government bondholders, threatened to dump their Treasury bonds, which caused Treasury yields to "shoot up" while stocks plummeted—the exact opposite of what one would expect when the stock market "takes a dive."

Then Moody's dropped their Triple-A (AAA) rating for the U.S. to a Double-A (AA) rating, reflecting loss of confidence in the Dollar which brings us to the whole point of this article: Is there anything we can do to prevent The Dollar from losing its status as The World's Reserve Currency should we reach the Unthinkable?

In her article "The Genius Act and the National Bank" (AMASS issue 96), Ellen Brown makes the following observation: "The rapidly expanding stablecoin market is projected to be able to fill the void

left by disenchanted governments that are dumping Treasuries and "dedollarizing" in response to Western sanctions and U.S. tariffs." Echoing a statement by Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, she concludes that "stablecoins are a strategic tool to 'lock in dollar supremacy'."

Earlier in the article, Ms. Brown explains that stablecoins "are cryptocurrencies... backed by safe assets (e.g., short-term U.S. Treasuries)... As of March 2025, their total market capitalization reached \$232 billion, a 45-fold increase since December 2019. Projections suggest this figure could hit \$400 billion by year-end and as

## With the Supreme Court likely to put a stop to Trump's tariffs, the revenue from which helps to pay down Our National Debt, what's next?

— Harold Zimmerman

much as \$2.8 trillion by 2028."

Below is an additional way "to fill the void left by disenchanted governments" as suggested by this author, Yours Truly, H. Zimmerman:

In light of China's and Japan's (our two biggest bondholders) threat to sell their Treasuries, this country can prevent a massive bond sales threat by a collective of foreign nations by requiring importers to purchase U.S. Treasuries with a certain percentage (say 10 percent) of their sales when importing goods here—in essence, creating a NEW 3rd class of U.S. Treasury purchasers!!

Before we get into this NEW 3rd new class of bond purchasers, the obvious way to handle our growing

National Debt would be to simply balance our budget and NOT spend more than what we take in!! But because of the many things we must do to protect the health and safety of the population, to regulate business, prevent fraud, and provide for defense on land, sea, air, and now in space, "balancing the budget" simply isn't going to happen. Fortunately, all advanced industrialized G7 nations have national debts that are more than what they make. Our debt to GDP ratio is currently 124 percent. Some nations are even higher!!

Fact is, it simply takes more to adequately protect and police our society than what we collect in taxes.

As a result, bonds must be issued in the form of debt to do everything that must be done!!

As it now stands, there are two main groups of large-scale bond purchasers: (1) domestic institutional investors such as banks, retirement-pension funds and insurance companies, and (2) foreign governments. But because of their present concern over our rising National Debt, the latter are now buying less and investing more in their own country's infrastructure and economy and that of their trading partners. A prime example is China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Requiring importers to purchase Bonds would stabilize the U.S. Bond Market and provide "guaranteed" relief and confidence for domestic institutional investors and foreign governments AS WELL! The required minimum of cash reserves would always be there as a result, facilitating the Treasury's ability to make scheduled payments and cover current government expenditures as they come due. This alone would create a "hedge" against any fears causing large scale selloffs or future non-purchases of U.S. Treasuries by both foreign governments and domestic investors fearing a loss of value to their investment!!

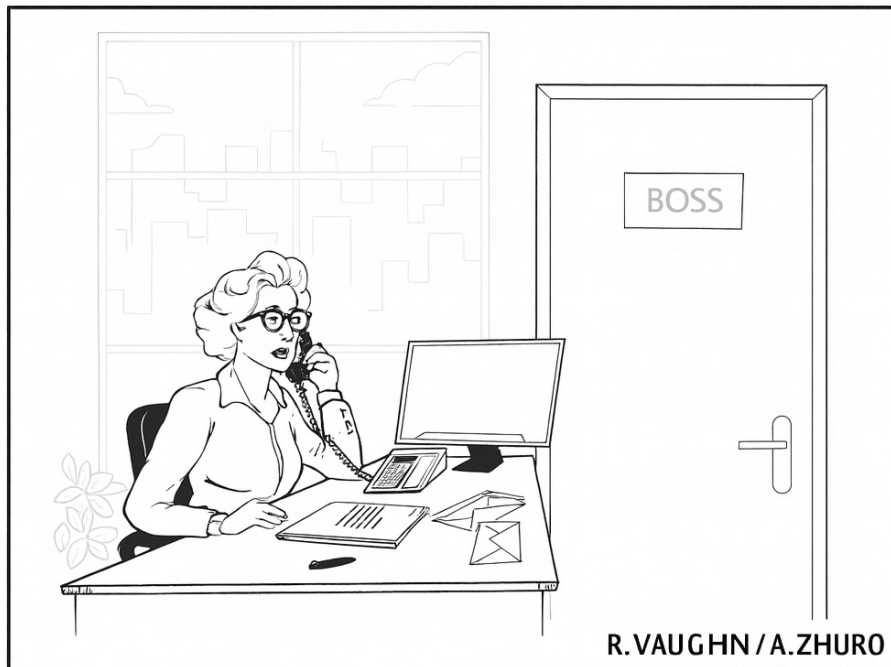
Such a non-purchase of bonds, if that were to happen, would force the Treasury to raise their yield rates to attract additional buyers,

thereby causing debt servicing costs to skyrocket from the \$1 Trillion it already pays annually. Yield rates are now in the 4 percent range. If they got out of control as they did during the Carter administration—when interest rates reached 18-20 percent—debt servicing costs could rise to as much as \$3-\$4 Trillion per year. And if such non-purchase of bonds were to continue, the Fed could be forced to print money to pay for maturing bonds held by the Treasury coming due and to cover the costs of federal budget overruns. This would inevitably cause the Dollar to drop in value.

In conclusion, Stablecoin and requiring importers purchase bonds would be the best two ways to guarantee a new source of U.S. Treasuries, stabilizing our bond market should foreign governments decide to “roll-back” purchases of Treasuries!!

Harold Zimmerman is an attorney and former auto mechanic/repair shop owner. His current passion is developing creative solutions to problems involving the U.S. economy.

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# THE GRAMMAR OF LOSS: MARIANO ZARO'S THE WEIGHT OF SOUND

RICHARD MODIANO

**M**ariano Zaro's *The Weight of Sound* (Walton Well Press) is a quietly devastating and meticulously crafted collection that moves through illness, memory, love, and mortality with the clarity of a surgeon and the tenderness of a son. Writing in his second language, English, Zaro transforms linguistic precision into emotional revelation. His lines often feel translated not just from Spanish, but from silence itself—the kind of silence that lingers between doctor and patient, parent and child, teacher and student.

In “On a Silver Platter,” a diagnostic conversation becomes a metaphysical treatise on grief: the doctor identifies “spots” on a spine as “sadness,” classifying it with scientific detachment—Type Zero, Type 1, Type 2—while the patient seeks meaning in the absurd logic of loss. The poem’s calm tone and clinical diction heighten the surrealism, allowing the reader to inhabit the poem’s eerie equilibrium between knowledge and helplessness. Zaro’s use of English here feels both measured and vulnerable; his second language becomes a scalpel that cuts with deliberate slowness, exposing the emotional anatomy beneath the technical vocabulary.

“Synapse” continues this interplay between science and intimacy. The language of neuroscience—the “dendritic tentacles,” the “gap at the end of long axons”—interleaves with the

vigil beside a dying father. The factual precision of the English terminology contrasts with the son’s faltering speech, collapsing the space between the biological and the spiritual. Writing in English allows Zaro to evoke a kind of estranged tenderness, a distance necessary for bearing witness.

In “Thermostat,” a son cares for his mother in a nursing home where the broken thermostat becomes a symbol of lost control. The mother’s shifting memory, her confusion between son and grandson, her yearning for cold air—all are rendered in lucid, unadorned sentences that vibrate with withheld emotion. The English idiom of understatement works in Zaro’s

**Writing in English allows Zaro to evoke a kind of estranged tenderness, a distance necessary for bearing witness.**

– Richard Modiano

favor here; what is unsaid becomes the poem’s pulse.

Similarly, “After the Diagnosis” blends narrative prose and lyric observation, describing a man’s flight from his own failing body. The plainness of the language—“He thought that moving would push the symptoms away”—gives way to visionary imagery: “The body follows you wherever you go, and sleeps with you every night, like a lover who cannot breathe without your lungs.” The juxtaposition of restraint and rapture is one of Zaro’s great achievements in this book.

Even in the quieter

domestic scenes—“Mandarin at the Edge of a White Formica Table” or “Vaporetto”—Zaro’s voice maintains a balance of intimacy and observation, using English’s sharp consonants and clean syntax to trace the delicate geometry of desire and loss. His poems are populated by doctors, teachers, dancers, scientists—figures who name, classify, or measure the world—yet each poem exposes the limits of that knowledge, the inevitability of the ineffable.

Writing in a second language enriches Zaro’s poetry not by exoticizing it but by intensifying its precision. English, for him, is a language of chosen vulnerability—a tool that allows him to weigh words carefully, to distill experience to its essentials. The result is a voice at once clinical and compassionate, luminous in its restraint.

*The Weight of Sound* is not a book of confession, but of observation transformed into empathy. Zaro reminds us that language—like the body—bears its own scars, and that to speak, especially in a second tongue, is to risk both clarity and exposure. His poetry accepts that risk, and in doing so, turns sadness itself into a form of understanding.

Richard Modiano is the poet/author of *The Forbidden Lunchbox*, winner of the 2022 Joe Hill Prize for labor poetry, a Pushcart Prize nominee, and former executive director of the Beyond Baroque Literary/Arts Center. He’s been named by the Huffington Post as one of 200 people doing the most to promote poetry in the United States. (Modiano is featured on the cover of AMASS issue 70, which includes a full-length interview.)



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# The Candy Shop

## Sweet Susie

# THE JOURNEY OF THE SLAUGHTERMAN'S DAUGHTER

DAN MARCUS

To console me following the loss of a brother years ago, my friend Tim Mathews made a comment, one that has stayed with me ever since. “Life,” he said, “is a comedy and a tragedy, but mostly it’s a tragedy.” The observation itself is humorous for the very reason that it rings true. Which brings us to *The Slaughterman’s Daughter*, a brilliant novel by Yaniv Iczkovits. Its dark humor seems to spring—not from any artifice on the part of the writer—but from the earth itself.

The place is the Jewish shtetl of Motal, located in the former Russian empire toward the end of the nineteenth century. Our heroine is Fanny Keismann, married with five children to the town’s celebrated cheesemaker. One night she slips out of the house to embark on a journey. Her mission: to track down her sister’s husband, a pompous, self-styled philosopher who’s abandoned his family, leaving them destitute. Word has it that he’s now residing in the city of Minsk. She intends to force him to sign a writ of divorce as required by Jewish law so her sister can ease her despair and get on with her life. Fanny is accompanied on the journey by the town’s ferryman, who conceals a mysterious past.

Even with a knowledgeable male companion, a woman travelling across the rough and tumble Russian landscape of that time would be engaged in a daunting and

dangerous pursuit. But as the book’s title informs us, she’s not just any woman—she’s the daughter of a slaughterman, an individual tasked with killing animals humanely for meat in accordance with the Jewish laws of kashrut. And here we have an extreme case of the apple not falling far from the tree. Though she’s a girl living in a man’s world, she takes to her father’s profession like a proverbial duck to water, learning to wield the slaughterman’s knife joyfully with an almost preternatural degree of skill. Suffice it to say that when Fanny hits the road with the ferryman, a slaughterman’s knife is strapped securely to her thigh.

The adventures that ensue

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with a dollop of  
Tarantino thrown in  
for good measure.**

– Dan Marcus

make the term “picaresque” seem quaint. Vividly drawn characters encountered by the pair include a family of highway robbers who are summarily dispatched to the next world by Fanny’s fearsome blade, a local official of the Russian secret police who seeks to bolster his career status by spearheading a murder investigation when the remains of Fanny’s victims are found scattered along the road, and an addled would-be cantor who provides comic relief.

If it was being pitched as a

film, the story could be positioned as *The Odyssey* meets *Don Quixote* meets *The Wizard of Oz* meets *Fiddler on the Roof*... with a dollop of Tarantino thrown in for good measure. It’s layered, like life itself; one gets the uncanny feeling that Iczkovits isn’t creating the extraordinary incidents that transpire but documenting them. The writing is translucent—we go beyond the words on the page and find ourselves immersed in a bygone world. It’s as if the genre of magical realism has been melded seamlessly with a well-researched documentary.

In his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre states a fact whose very obviousness makes it easy to miss: we can never know another person’s consciousness firsthand; we can only assume it through the agency of our own senses. Author Iczkovits breaks down the walls. Writing in the third person as an intimate narrator, he “gets into the heads” of his characters, each of whom carries the narrative forward from a unique, individual perspective.

Then there’s the story, the plot... or better yet, plots (both meanings of the word apply). It’s an interlocking puzzle, a nineteenth century noir. Each character has an agenda; friends and strangers are seldom what they seem. But what elevates this particular narrative are the hard-won experiences that lead them to become *more* than they seem—at the very least, they’re moving in that direction.

What typically qualifies a given story for a place in the pantheon is the ending, the manner in which it resolves. And on that score, among others, Iczkovits’s novel is a prime candidate. The denouement satisfies. More than that, it encourages and uplifts. It’s an oft-repeated cliché that life is a journey, not a destination. In *The Slaughterman’s Daughter*, they amount to one and the same.

Dan Marcus is a playwright, songwriter, and curator of the Dan Marcus Gallery (YouTube).



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