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COVER:
"Contemplating the Next Move"
Heli Swensson



"Contemplating the Next Move"
Cover Design by Heli Swensson

This issue of AMASS touches on various economic and cultural topics, from the housing crisis to the power of an iconic painting to an existential, almost Sartrian meditation on the nature of water. Several of the articles herein, however, fall squarely in the realm of geopolitics.

For the cover, chess is clearly the visual metaphor of choice. It's a game of war, with its pawns and knights storming the castle to capture the queen and dethrone the king. But we can choose to pour ourselves a civilized cup of tea and adopt a more optimistic scenario, one in which chess is viewed as a game of strategy with the objective of preventing war—or at the very least, minimizing it.

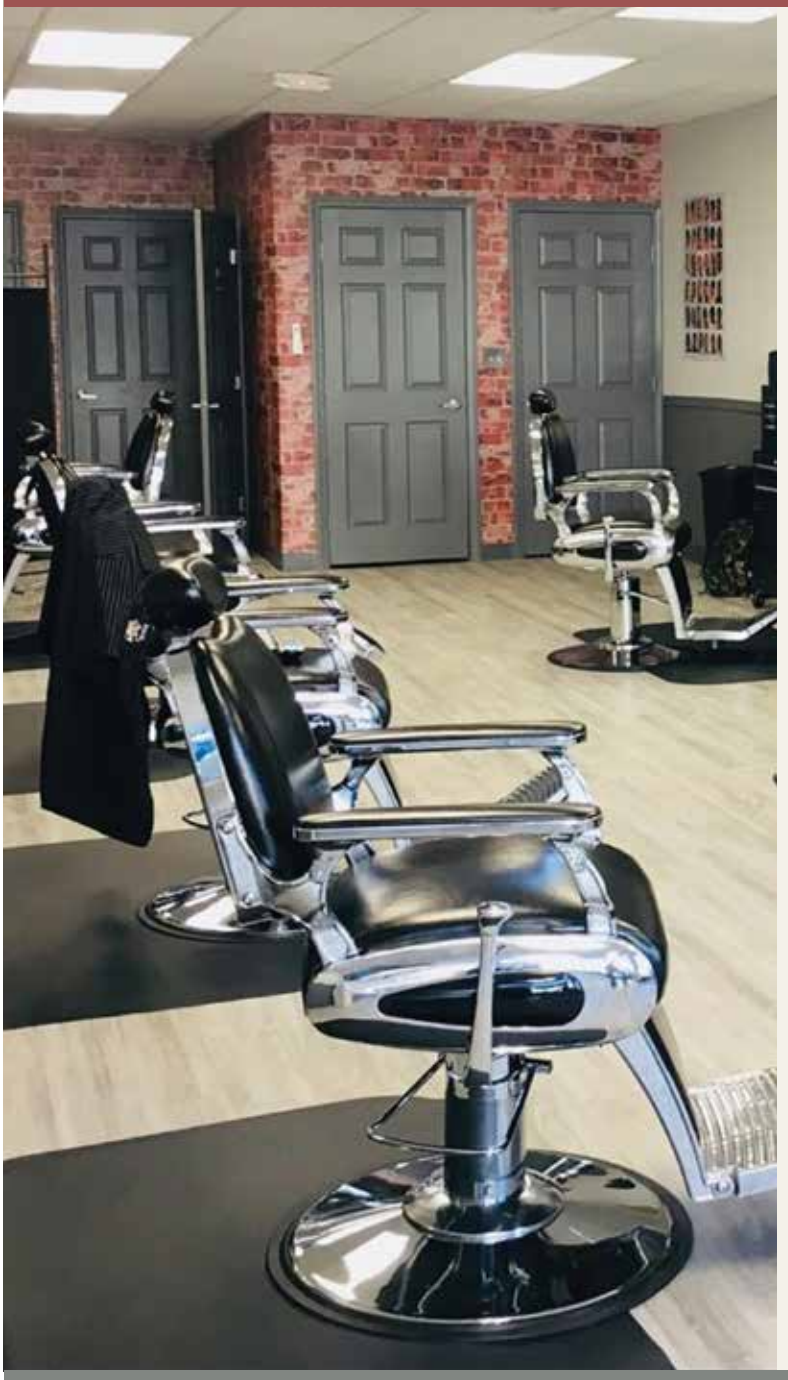
Whatever the case may be, this is one chess game where the outcome affects us all, whether we know how to play or not.

- Dan Marcus

AMASS is published by the Society for Popular Democracy and AMASS Press, 10920 Wilshire Boulevard Suite 150, Los Angeles, CA 90024. Web: www.amassmagpress.com. Email: amassmagpress@gmail.com. Subscriptions: $16 for individuals within the U.S., $20 outside these areas; $50 for institutions within the U.S., $60 outside. Single copy: $4.95. Back issues available on website. Permission required to reprint articles. Distributed by Ubiquity, New York; Angel City, Santa Monica, CA; and Ingram. Member IPA. Indexed in MLA; Alternative Press Index; Ebsco; Cengage, ProQuest. Copyright © 2026 by Society for Popular Democracy. ISSN 0193-5798d

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THE WEALTH CONCENTRATION ENGINE: RETHINKING AMERICA'S FINANCIAL PLUMBING

ELLEN BROWN

A Jan. 17 article on Quartz Markets by Catherine Baab reports that JPMorgan Chase, Goldman Sachs, Wells Fargo, Citigroup and Bank of America returned nearly all of their 2025 profits to shareholders. Goldman Sachs returned $16.78 billion on $17.18 billion in earnings, meaning 97.7% of its earnings went to shareholders. Wells Fargo, Citigroup, JPMorgan, and Bank of America collectively returned tens of billions more. Across the six largest banks, roughly $100 billion flowed to shareholders in a single year.

They are currently paid 3.65% on their reserves (substantially more than the banks pay on their customers' deposits), simply for holding them in reserve accounts rather than using them to capitalize new loans. Tens of billions of dollars that were once remitted to the Treasury now land on bank balance sheets with no public benefit attached.

We subsidize the banks' safety, underwrite their liquidity, and reward them for sitting on assets, without requiring them to invest in communities, build public wealth, or serve any public purpose. It all seems pretty outrageous; but as it turns out, the banks are doing what U.S. corporate law requires them to do. If they don't follow the "shareholder primacy rule," they could actually be sued by their shareholders.

The Rule of Shareholder Primacy

The rule comes from a 1919 Michigan Supreme Court case, *Dodge v. Ford Motor Co.,* in which the court required Ford Motor Company to issue an extra shareholder dividend of $19.3 million that year. The court said:

"A business corporation is organized and carried on primarily for the profit of the stockholders. The powers of the directors are to be employed for that end. The discretion of directors is to be exercised in the choice of men to attain that end and does not extend to a change in the end itself, to the reduction of profits or to the non-distribution of profits among stockholders in order to devote them to other purposes."

According to Robert Rhee in a 2023 Stanford Law Review article, the case sat quietly for decades in the law books. He writes, "Dodge was never influential among courts and was ignored by academics until the neoliberal turn of the 1980s."

The shareholder primacy rule is thus a judge-made doctrine, revived during an era of deregulation and financialization, which is now deeply embedded in corporate law. It is not a constitutional requirement, not a statute passed by Congress and not a democratic choice of the taxpayers. In fact, it directly contradicts the original American understanding of what a corporation was to be.

We subsidize the banks' safety, underwrite their liquidity, and reward them for sitting on assets, without requiring them to invest in communities, build public wealth, or serve any public purpose.

– Ellen Brown

In the 18th and 19th centuries, corporations were not private profit engines but were public institutions, created by state legislatures to serve explicit public purposes — building bridges, canals, turnpikes, water systems and banks. Their charters limited duration, capped profits, restricted activities and could be revoked if the corporation violated its public obligations. As Rhee notes, early corporations were "public bodies designed to serve public purposes." The idea that corporations exist solely to maximize shareholder value was an early 20th century judicial holding brought out of obscurity in the neoliberal era for political ends.

From Dividends to Buybacks: The Casino Model

For most of the 20th century, corporations returned profits to shareholders through dividends. But in 1982, the Securities Exchange Commission changed Rule 10b 18, effectively legalizing large-scale buybacks of a corporation's own stock. By reducing the number of shares outstanding, buybacks inflate earnings per share and drive up stock prices. They also enrich executives, whose pay is tied to stock price and who get bonuses in stock shares.

Unlike dividends, which are transparent, predictable, and relatively stable, buybacks follow the dynamics of a casino. The profit is paid, not by the company, but by the next buyer of the stock. That means

someone down the line becomes the "greater fool." And the corporation still has possession of its own stock.

Meanwhile, according to Gallup, nearly 40% of Americans own no stock at all; and of those who do, a much smaller percentage owns bank stock. The Federal Reserve confirms that the top 10% of the population owns more than 90% of all equities. So when banks return their profits as shareholder buybacks, most Americans are not even at the gaming table.

A White House Critique

In her Quartz article, Catherine Baab observes:

> "The White House has suddenly become very interested in both bank pricing and corporate buybacks. Last weekend, President Donald Trump warned that credit card issuers would be "breaking the law" if they didn't cap interest rates at 10% for one year.
>
> Never mind that no such law exists and he lacks the authority to create one. The threat was enough to trigger a Monday sell-off in bank stocks.
>
> Meanwhile, Trump's housing chief, Bill Pulte, told the Wall Street Journal that homebuilders are "making, in some cases, more money than they've ever made, and they're buying back stock like never before." Pulte hinted at penalties for companies that don't help the administration in its purported efforts to push housing costs down. …
>
> But no one in the administration, at least as of this writing, is saying a word about bank buybacks. In fact, the administration pushed to change rules that limited banks' ability to do that — just months ago."

Baab was referring to a November 2025 move by federal banking regulators to finalize a proposal to ease capital requirements on the nation's biggest banks. She writes:

> "After the change, Goldman sent 97.7% of earnings to shareholders. Wells Fargo, Citigroup, JPMorgan, and Bank of America collectively returned tens of billions, too."

Baab concludes:

> "Trump's populism isn't just hollow. It's counterproductive, targeting prices in ways that harm affordability while the financial structures that concentrate wealth with those who already have it continue to accelerate."

Some Counter-arguments

While critics accuse the Administration of indulging corporate interests, Reuters reports that the White House is preparing an executive order to restrict dividends, buybacks, and executive compensation for defense contractors whose projects are over budget or behind schedule. This is a direct challenge to one of the

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most entrenched, bipartisan power centers in Washington.

Meanwhile, at the local end of the financial spectrum, Treasury Sec. Scott Bessent has been making the case for reviving America's community banks — the institutions that actually lend to small businesses, farmers, first time homebuyers and local governments.

In remarks before the Federal Community Bank Conference on Oct. 9, 2025, Bessent emphasized the collapse of new bank formation since 2008, the regulatory tilt toward megabanks, the need to restore local lending ecosystems, and a goal of "Parallel Prosperity" — Wall Street and Main Street rising together. He affirmed, "No longer will regulation serve to entrench big banks and empower Washington bureaucrats to the detriment of community banks and the clients they serve."

This is a pro community move, and it opens the door to a deeper solution.

The Public Banking Alternative: When the People Are the Shareholders

If the law requires corporations to serve shareholders, then the simplest way to align banking with public needs is to make the public the shareholder. The best working model in the United States today is the Bank of North Dakota (BND) — a century old publicly-owned bank in a conservative state that partners with community banks to support local lending.

The BND finances infrastructure, keeps capital circulating in-state, and returns profits to the public treasury. It does not replace local private banks but strengthens them. And it proves that banks can do productive things with their money if the institutional design rewards it.

If the U.S. wants to redirect capital from buybacks to productive investment, it needs institutions designed for that purpose.

At the national level, H.R.5356, the National Infrastructure Bank Act of 2025, has been unanimously endorsed by the National Association of Counties among a long list of other endorsers. It mobilizes private capital for public infrastructure, creating long-term, low cost financing for projects that generate real economic value; and it is the kind of institution that China and other countries with modern infrastructure already have.

The Deeper Issue: America's Financial Plumbing Is Misaligned

The real problem is that America's financial plumbing is not aligned with the needs of the productive economy. We have built a system optimized for shareholder extraction and short term returns, which favors megabanks over community banks, the already-rich over struggling families, and private profit over much-needed public infrastructure.

If the problem is in the rules that banks are required to follow, then the solution is either to change the rules or to build institutions that serve the community while operating under the existing banking framework.



GOOD TROUBLE

– after Thomas Paine, for the Honorable John Lewis (1940-2020)

we are locked in a conflict born of
unlimited executive power
building a burning bridge to hell

chaos and otherness
growing the artificial fortunes of small minds
hiding behind clean masks of murder
wielding panic and terror as a just cause
for the unjust suffering of our people drowning in lies
burnished by heartbreak and sorrow

it is time to awaken the flame of liberty
set forth by the blood of our forebearers

willing whores for freedom
we rise
speaking truth to power
bound together in good trouble
swearing allegiance
one to the other
in a chain of mutual love and devotion

embracing the present fear in lieu of a certain future
that will look back in tangled wonder
and weep for 250 years of democracy
which only took seconds to destroy

with no one to blame but ourselves

– S.A. Griffin
Author of *Pandemic Soul Music*,
publisher and editor *Catching Fire: The Los Angeles Wildfires.*

This can be done with public-community banking partnerships on the model of the Bank of North Dakota and with a national infrastructure bank that serves public infrastructure needs.

At a time when we seriously need to bring the warring factions of our economy together, these banking arrangements can appeal to all political persuasions — to conservatives who value local control, to liberals who value public investment and to independents who are tired of a financial system that seems to serve no one but itself.

Tens of billions of dollars that once went to the public now land on bank balance sheets with no public benefit attached. Banks need to return to their original purpose to serve as public utilities. When the people own the banks, or at least some of them, maximizing shareholder profit means generating profits that flow back into the public arena, available to build schools, bridges, water systems, housing and the modern infrastructure needed to compete on the international stage.

Ellen Brown is 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.

"Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed. Everything else is public relations."

– George Orwell

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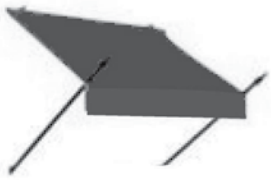
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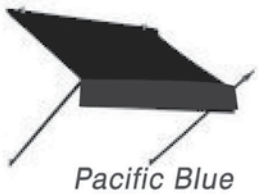
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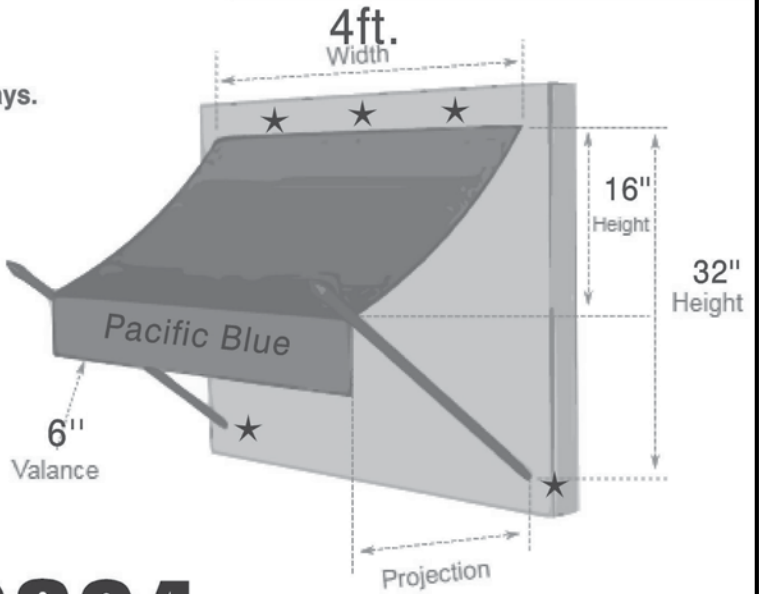
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THE HOUSING CRISIS

MARINA BOLOTNIKOVA

It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that, for more than a century, American urban planning has been devoted to layering on ways to all but ban apartment buildings. And so, as the U.S. now tries to shift out of the anti-density gear that's driving our housing affordability crisis, policymakers are finding that there are obstacles hiding in a lot of places. Like, a lot.

States and cities are already working, little by little, to roll back the foundational problem often blamed for the current housing shortage: our rigid system of zoning, which dictates what kinds of buildings can be built where. Exclusionary zoning is the reason that it is illegal to build anything other than a detached single-family home on most residential land in the U.S., making homes scarce, spread out, and unaffordable.

Less appreciated but perhaps just as culpable are the labyrinthine rules governing how new homes must be built — the materials, safety features, and other requirements that make up the entrails of American buildings.

Increasingly, housing abundance advocates, home builders, and policymakers are discovering that fixing zoning is merely the entry point into a gauntlet of other constraints. Especially in the quest to build more "missing middle" housing — duplexes, triplexes, and small and mid-size apartment buildings. "Simply allowing a fourplex on paper does not guarantee that one will be built," John Zeanah, the chief of development and infrastructure for Memphis, wrote in a recent report on non-zoning barriers to housing for the Center for Building in North America, a nonprofit that advocates for reforming U.S. and Canadian building codes to align them with other affluent countries.

Increasingly, housing abundance advocates, home builders, and policymakers are discovering that fixing zoning is merely the entry point into a gauntlet of other constraints.

– Marina Bolotnikova

Why? Even as cities re-legalize the traditional housing forms that once supported economic mobility and urban vitality in America, extremely strict, sometimes ill-considered building codes and other requirements can quickly make them financially infeasible to build.

Many of our building codes are rooted in important safety needs — they're the reason why residential fire deaths have been greatly diminished and why we can enjoy convenient electricity without getting shocked all the time.

But in the US, a morass of construction codes, fire safety requirements, utility rules, and even tax policies, treat even small multifamily buildings fundamentally differently from the way they treat single-family homes. Anything larger than a duplex is regulated under building codes as a commercial building rather than a residential one, even though apartments are, obviously, residences. That saddles multifamily homes with costly construction requirements that housing advocates argue are not evidence-based and can balloon the cost of building to crippling levels.

As a result, it costs significantly more per square foot to build multifamily homes in the U.S. (and in Canada, which has similar codes) compared to single-family homes, a report from the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Center for Building in North America found last year. This is not the case in peer countries, because of the economies of scale that often otherwise come with building multi-families.

If the words "building codes" make you want to crawl into bed and take a nap — I get it. But consider that all of this converges on a more profound point about American culture. At seemingly every level of policy, we penalize and stigmatize apartments as though they're a second-class form of housing. The last century-plus of urban planning has shaped the deeply rooted American reverence for single-family home ownership, adding up over time to thousands of little rules that stack the deck against denser, more affordable homes.

Building codes are "supposed to be this technocratic process focused on safety, when in reality there are all sorts of values and biases embedded within them," Jesse Zwick, a Santa Monica city council member and author of a recent report on American building codes, said on the UCLA Housing Voice podcast last year.

Here are just a handful of ways that seemingly obscure rules can thwart building missing middle housing in America.

1) The Cost Cliff for Small Multifamily Buildings

Building codes revolve, to a great extent, around fire safety — quite understandably and importantly, given our country's traumatic history with deadly fires. But the process by which the codes are written in the U.S., and their appropriateness for small- and medium-scale multifamily homes, is under growing scrutiny.

In the U.S., building codes are drawn from models developed by a private organization, the International Code Council (despite the name, though, its codes are primarily just used in the U.S.). They're

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.

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then adopted as law at the state and local levels. Single-family homes, townhomes, and duplexes fall under the ICC's residential code, while anything with three or more housing units — triplexes and up — are regulated under a code "designed for everything from apartments and offices to airports and stadiums," the Center for Building report notes.

That code, known as the International Building Code, is not one-size-fits-all — it does have different rules for different kinds of buildings. Still, it is often "over-scaled" for small multifamily homes, Zeanah writes. "The leap in complexity from duplex to triplex is dramatic" in terms of requirements. Most new multifamily buildings must have extensive sprinkler systems, along with other commercial-grade fire safety equipment.

Who, you might be asking, could be against sprinklers? They're very effective at putting out fires, and in many contexts, they may make perfect sense, like in apartment buildings with dozens or hundreds of units.

But everything comes at a cost — and the problem is that sprinklers cost so much to install and create such high ongoing maintenance expenses that they "can be a make-or-break factor" for small multifamily home construction, Zeanah writes.

Since small apartment buildings aren't radically different in scale from single-family homes and duplexes — triplexes can have the same square footage as a large single-family home — Zeanah's report argues that cities and states should consider amending their codes to allow flexibility in that requirement that would permit developers to take advantage of other fire safety options.

Fireproofing as a Pretext for Banning Apartments

A bit of historical context can help shed light on the predicament we now find ourselves in. Over a century ago, the Progressive-era reformer Lawrence Veiller, who helped shape the foundation of America's exclusionary zoning laws, essentially called for using fire codes to regulate multifamily housing out of existence by making it too expensive to build.

"The easiest and quickest way to penalize the apartment house is not through requiring larger open spaces, because I think that would be unconstitutional, but through the fireproofing requirements," he said. "In our laws most of our fire provisions relate solely to multiple dwellings and allow our private houses and two-family houses to be built with almost no fire protection whatever."

To be fair to Veiller, he was writing during a time of horrific tenement fires, and he probably couldn't have imagined a future like ours, where apartments are even safer than single-family homes.

Zeanah recounts an example of a small developer in Memphis, Andre Jones, who struggled to build fourplexes because sprinkler systems would have been financially unworkable. So Jones and Zeanah worked together to find a solution, which eventually helped lead to a Tennessee law allowing many small buildings up to four units to forgo sprinklers if they have two-hour fire-resistant separation between walls, floors, and ceilings.

There's precedent for such exceptions. The code that governs single-family homes and duplexes has required sprinklers in new builds since 2009, but nearly every U.S. state has passed a law exempting single-family houses from that rule.

The residential code itself, Zeanah told me in an interview, was created as an exception from the International Code Council's default building code, and it's not clear why the council chose to carve out just one-and two-family structures rather than make the cutoff at triplexes, fourplexes, or elsewhere.

Meanwhile, modern buildings are already much safer than old ones, and codes that are designed for safety end up making new homes so expensive to build that people remain in old ones may have net negative effects on safety. Many critics of U.S. building codes have pointed out that the ICC creates these rules without meaningful cost-benefit analysis to determine whether a requirement is worth its costs to housing supply, affordability, and safety.

Gabe Maser, senior vice president for innovation and growth for ICC, told me in an interview that there's little evidence that home construction costs significantly contribute to housing prices. "No peer-reviewed study has found that building codes have any appreciable implications for housing affordability," he said. And there is, to be sure, a great deal of uncertainty and complexity here — more research is needed on the subject. Some research suggests that building costs don't have much to do with home prices, especially in the most expensive cities, where prices are bid up more by sheer scarcity than by the direct cost of building. But that evidence comes largely from single-family homes.

Evidence for apartments, which have different underlying economics than single-family homes and are regulated by stricter building codes, has found that construction costs do drive housing prices. A recent working paper by Michael Eriksen, a Purdue University economist, and co-authors Deniz Besiktepe and Claudio Martani modeled how recent building code changes impact the rents that landlords need to charge to break even, finding an increase of about $169 to $279 in monthly rent on a theoretical two-bedroom apartment in a new-construction three-story building.

Many small-scale homebuilders also say that code requirements make missing middle projects infeasible. "When a project is no longer financially viable, it simply doesn't get built, which means its impact won't show up in observed [housing] price data," Eriksen told me in an email.

2) Stair Regulations Make Our Buildings More Expensive and Less Liveable

Almost every new apartment building more than three stories tall in the U.S. is required to have at least two staircases to provide a second fire escape route (and sometimes even smaller buildings have to have two as

well). That adds hundreds of thousands of dollars to the cost of construction and cuts down liveable square footage.

To accommodate two staircases, architects typically design buildings with a long hallway running down the center, called a "double-loaded corridor," with apartments on either side. This tends to also push toward bigger buildings. Single-staircase buildings, on the other hand, can arrange apartments with a smaller number of units opening onto a single central staircase, opening up more space for larger apartments, including more units that can stretch across multiple sides of a building for more natural light, without it needing to be bisected by a central corridor. They can also have more flexible layouts that are more amenable to family-sized apartments with three or more bedrooms.

Countries in Europe and elsewhere in the world, plus Seattle and New York City, already safely build single-stair structures, and research has found that they do not have a worse safety record. Modern U.S. multifamily homes are already significantly safer than single-family homes, likely thanks to all of their other fire safety features, according to research from Pew.

3) When a Triplex Suddenly Needs its Own Architect

Homes that fall under the residential code can be built according to a pre-prescribed recipe book that ensures the safety of various structural elements, like their ability to withstand wind. But want to build a residential building with more than two homes in it? In many places, that means you'll need to hire a dedicated architect or engineer to draw up and sign off on custom plans, Zeanah writes in the Center for Building report.

This might be perfectly reasonable for a 100-unit building. But it means that small developers looking to build a triplex or fourplex, for example, face higher upfront costs before they're approved to build what is ultimately similar in scale to a single-family home, Zeanah points out. He recommends that governments consider allowing modest multifamily buildings to use pre-designed standards that are already allowed for single-families and duplexes.

4) The U.S. Seems Unusually Bad at Building Elevators

Elevators are a marvel of modern life, making apartment living far more viable and accessible to people with a range of physical abilities. But "the United States and Canada have the most expensive elevators in the world," sometimes costing upward of three times what European elevators do, Stephen Smith, executive director of the Center for Building, writes in a comprehensive report on elevator policy.

Regulatory factors explain most of that gap. Newly installed American elevators must typically be twice as big as their European counterparts, big enough



to fit a seven-foot stretcher lying flat and a wheelchair's turning radius. In Europe, whose elevators are essentially the global standard, typical elevators are big enough to accommodate a wheelchair and a person standing behind it, but not a wheelchair radius; the buttons in European elevators are placed on the side, so that wheelchair users can access them regardless of whether they're facing forward or backward.

The stretcher size requirement, meanwhile, appears to provide particularly clear evidence of a lack of rigor in U.S. building codes: It was increased to seven feet about 20 years ago with perfunctory research, and the cost impact was stated as "none," Smith's report found. Prior to that, the requirement had been for elevators to fit a stretcher up to 6 feet, 4 inches long. U.S. paramedics are already trained to navigate smaller spaces by, for example, tilting stretchers.

Today, the International Code Council requires proponents of new rules to add more documentation to justify cost impact claims, and Maser told me these claims are closely scrutinized when deciding whether to adopt a rule.

Besides code requirements, U.S. labor union rules effectively bar some of the most productive methods for building elevators, like factory preassembly, Smith writes. And the U.S., along with Canada, uses technical standards for elevator construction that are incompatible with the rest of the world, effectively "walling us off from the global market" for elevator parts. If you've ever had to live with a broken elevator that took ages to repair, that might be why!

Rather than making American homes safer and more accessible, these policies more likely mean, as Smith suggests, that fewer elevators are built, fewer apartment buildings are built, and more of our housing stock is comprised of low-density, inaccessible homes.

The Bigger Picture

The lesson of our housing crisis is straight out of Econ 101: If you perpetually raise the cost of building something, it will not be built at all. The barriers go beyond building codes, too, to things like property taxes: Tennessee, for example, treats apartment buildings as commercial property and taxes them at a higher rate than single-family homes — a prime example of how we subsidize homeownership at renters' expense.
When you don't build something, there will be little constituency to advocate for it — and in this case, for right-sizing codes to accommodate it. For all the energy spent on the housing debate, the costs of mandating perfect construction have escaped meaningful public deliberation.

That brings U.S. to the deeper lesson about building codes. Zoning, right now, is a problem of too many state-prescribed rules. But with building codes, the problem could be interpreted as the opposite — a lack of government capacity. The U.S. has effectively handed off building code rulemaking to a private nonprofit that is enmeshed with private interests, including homebuilders and materials manufacturers. "I think we've really outsourced this decision to, honestly, a group of lobbyists, building manufacturers, labor unions," Eriksen, the economist, said.

While only people in government roles have a final vote on changes to the ICC's codes, critics have argued that the organization's processes are not well set up for these public servants to make well-informed decisions. They vote on a huge volume of changes that they aren't always equipped to understand, and the ICC's committees, comprised of industry and nonprofit employees as well as public servants, are very influential in whether a proposed change succeeds.

Maser, of the ICC, though, stressed that proposed code changes are evaluated with a "high level of scrutiny." They're "thoroughly reviewed by a wide swath of experts," he said, and "housing affordability is thoroughly vetted through the process." Any member of the public can submit a proposed change if they're unhappy with the current code, and code updates happen frequently enough (every three years) that a good idea can be implemented relatively quickly. Right now, a proposal to allow more single-stair buildings is working its way through the code change process.

In the near term, housing advocates are organizing to modify building codes state-by-state, such as legalizing more single-stair buildings and allowing greater flexibility for meeting fire safety standards in small multifamily buildings.

That approach is making real progress, though its piecemeal nature makes it inherently slow. In an ideal world, some advocates hope that the federal government can create a new, more transparent, and publicly accountable system for regulating the buildings in which we spend so much of our lives. Many European systems, for example, emphasize "performance-based" standards that mandate certain safety outcomes, rather than strictly dictating the tools (like sprinklers) that must be used to get there.

That may be a vision worth aspiring to, as we slowly feel our way out of the decades-old planning mistakes that have turned as basic a human need as housing into a luxury good.





Courtesy of the Dan Marcus Gallery.

TRUMP'S IMPERIALISM WITHOUT ALIBIS

RICARDO HAUSMANN

Commentators have largely framed the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro as a US-orchestrated attempt at "regime change," or as an effort to preserve the country's existing political order, minus Maduro. But these interpretations overlook the more consequential development: the emergence of a new, more discreet form of imperialism.

Rather than installing an American colonial governor in Miraflores Palace, this system operates through subtler means that are, in some ways, more cynically effective. Venezuela still has ministries, security services, courts, and ceremonial symbols like the presidential sash. Yet its economic lifeline – the ability to sell oil and access the proceeds – has been placed under the United States' control. As President Donald Trump told reporters, "We need total access. We need access to the oil and to other things in their country that allow U.S.to rebuild *their* country."

Unlike traditional sanctions, which seek leverage through external punishment, this arrangement functions like an informal receivership. The U.S. government markets Venezuelan oil, deposits the revenues into accounts it controls, and uses access to these funds to discipline local authorities.

The nearest historical precedent is not the postwar reconstruction of Europe and Japan but colonial-era indirect rule. Under such a system, a local government remains in place to administer daily life, maintain order, and manage dissent, while the imperial power retains the core attributes of sovereignty, including trade, foreign policy, and control over the principal sources of state revenue.

Contrary to many outside observers' expectations, the vast majority of Venezuelans welcomed the apparent end of their sovereignty, according to a recent *Economist poll.* That response is less an endorsement of American imperialism than a devastating indictment of Chavismo. For years, many Venezuelans believed sovereignty had already been lost, effectively outsourced to powers like Russia and Cuba through dependence on foreign intelligence services and opaque financial entanglements.

The January 3 raid to capture Maduro and his wife only reinforced that perception. Cuba later reported that 32 members of its armed forces and intelligence services were killed during the U.S. operation, a striking indicator of how deeply Cuban personnel had been embedded within Venezuela's security apparatus.

Venezuelans must thus confront a bitter irony. Long perceived as a client state, their country is now being recast as an American protectorate through control of its oil exports and revenues rather than through formal annexation or a ground invasion.

This is where narratives, often dismissed as mere rhetoric, become strategically imperative. Empires have always relied on stories not only to legitimize coercion before domestic and international audiences but also to shape expectations in ways that make power predictable and enforceable.

European empires in the 19th century understood this well, often cloaking imperial domination in uplifting narratives of moral duty and civilizational progress. France spoke of its "civilizing mission" (*mission civilisatrice*), while British imperial ideology found its most notorious expression in Rudyard Kipling's exhortation to "take up the White Man's burden." In 1884, French statesman Jules Ferry articulated the imperialist logic with striking bluntness, writing that "the superior races have a right because they have a duty" to "civilize the inferior races."

Contrary to many outside observers' expectations, the vast majority of Venezuelans welcomed the apparent end of their sovereignty, according to a recent conomist poll.

– Ricardo Hausmann

By contrast, postwar America advanced a different narrative. President Harry Truman emphasized support for "free peoples" resisting "attempted subjugation," while John F. Kennedy pledged to "pay any price" and "bear any burden" to "assure the survival and the success of liberty," explicitly linking U.S. power to shared purpose rather than imperial plunder.

That self-image was later inscribed in stone at the World War II Memorial in Washington, which declares that "Americans came to liberate, not to conquer, to restore freedom and to end tyranny." In a farewell statement shortly before his death, Senator John McCain drew on the same tradition, describing America as "a nation of ideals, not blood and soil" that was at its strongest when it helped "liberate more people from tyranny and poverty than ever before in history."

Far from being mere rhetorical flourishes, these narratives helped shape America's postwar foreign policy, making U.S. commitments more credible and strengthening alliances built on shared values. Crucially,

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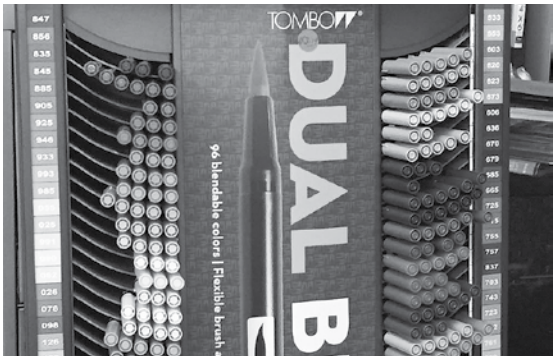




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they also raised the reputational cost of predation.

Trump's emerging narrative breaks sharply with that tradition. Whereas earlier forms of imperialism relied on moral justification, he dispenses with such alibis, reducing the exercise of power to an entry on a balance sheet. Trump himself made that shift explicit in a recent *New York Times* interview, brushing aside international law altogether. Asked what, if anything, constrained his actions, he replied, "My own morality. My own mind. It's the only thing that can stop me." He also spoke of rebuilding Venezuela "in a very profitable way," adding, "We're going to be using oil, and we're going to be taking oil."

The implications for Venezuela and the international order are profound. Rules-based narratives bind power to institutions, generating and sustaining trust. Personalist narratives, on the other hand, tie power to temperament, making it unpredictable and ultimately unreliable.

If the U.S. wants Venezuelans – and the world – to regard its intervention as temporary and legitimate, it must impose clear structural constraints: a credible, time-bound path to elections; transparent, independently audited management of oil revenues; and a firm commitment to human rights, including the release of political prisoners. Above all, the U.S. must recognize that its power is not self-justifying.

Absent those constraints, Venezuela will not be moving from dictatorship to democracy. Instead, it will simply be trading one form of tutelage for another.

Ricardo Hausmann is a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School.

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IRAQ AND VENEZUELA: ONE AS TRAGEDY, ANOTHER AS FARCE

JOHN O'KANE

The invasion of Venezuela we've just witnessed brings to mind the two invasions of Iraq—under George H. W. Bush in 1990 and George W. Bush in 2003. The first was flagrantly about oil. The second was more insidious.

In a reactionary response to 9/11, the United States invaded Iraq nearly two years later, allegedly to combat terrorism through regime change despite evidence that the perps of the atrocity were elsewhere. The rationale for the operation was also belied by the fact that our forces had invaded Afghanistan in the weeks following 9/11.

The invasion of Iraq was sold to the American public through the Bush administration's hyped-up claim that the country possessed weapons of mass destruction. Colin Powell, a credible foreign policy figure, was put forward to present the evidence used to justify the intervention, later admitting that he was pressured.

We still live with the effects of this feckless blunder, which led to the massacre of 1.4 million civilians and the over-elevation of the Shia population at the expense of the Sunnis, which subsequently led to the creation of ISIS.

Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense and arguably the major force in pushing this policy. was driven by oil concerns. In the 1970s, he was the Nixon administration's emissary tasked with pressuring the Iraqis to reverse their recent nationalization of the oil industry. His maneuvers were not successful; the decade was rife with anti-colonial ruptures, extensions of the post-WWII backlash from the Third World against imperial repression. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 fulfilled Nixon's, Rumsfeld's, and Bush's designs for this reversal.

Despite the earlier failure, the 1970s did witness severe crackdowns against these successful ruptures. As director of the CIA, George H. W. Bush sanctioned the military coup against Chile's president Salvador Allende for nationalizing the copper, iron, banking, and steel industries.

The anti-colonial rupture in Venezuela occurred in 1976 when the government created an organization, PDVSA, which through the years seized the oil assets of Exxon, Gulf, Mobil, Chevron, and ConocoPhillips (Chevron still operates in Venezuela). Attempts by the U.S. to reverse the process were unsuccessful—the firms were only able to continue limited operations in Venezuela through joint ventures under the umbrella of state ownership.

In the early 2000s, this control and expropriation was increased under Hugo Chavez, the architect of the Bolivarian Revolution, forcing the companies to seek remedies for their investment losses through international arbitration. (They were adequately compensated eventually.)

But in 2017, the U.S. imposed financial sanctions on Venezuela that restricted bond trading and access to capital markets here, explicitly targeting the oil sector at the core of the Maduro government's revenue. In 2019, the U.S. sanctioned PDVSA, froze 7 billion dollars in U.S.-based assets, and blocked payments for Venezuelan oil exports to this country, aiming to cripple state oil revenues and pressure regime change by cutting off Maduro's access to revenues. And more recently, Trump announced a 25 percent tariff on exports to the U.S. from any country buying Venezuelan oil.

The Venezuelan economy had already taken a dip before the 2017 sanctions were imposed, resulting in significant migration to the U.S. and other countries. But post-2017 has witnessed a compounding of these numbers, with the bulk of the migrants to this country over the past several years coming from Venezuela, Cuba, and Guatemala. The United States caused this critical migration crisis from Venezuela and now penalizes its victims by deporting them back to their deprived origins.

History is certainly repeating itself. The U.S. is out to reclaim its oil once again, oil that somehow ended up in another country. Trump could not mince his words.

This is not the only issue. The U.S. is committed to out-maneuver Russia and China in the country based on a paranoia rooted in refusal to accept the emerging multi-polar world. And of course there's the mandate

The invasion of Iraq was sold to the American public through the Bush administration's hyped-up claim that the country possessed weapons of mass destruction.

– John O'Kane


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to combat drug trafficking, always laudable as a public relations initiative though its incidence is credibly far greater in other countries. Could this issue be the "lite" equivalent of the WMD claims that preceded the invasion of Iraq? True, it's not easy to ignore the issues with Maduro's governance, especially the fact that he retained his grip on power when he wasn't re-elected. But how can the U.S., which has severe governance problems of its own, police a sovereign country?

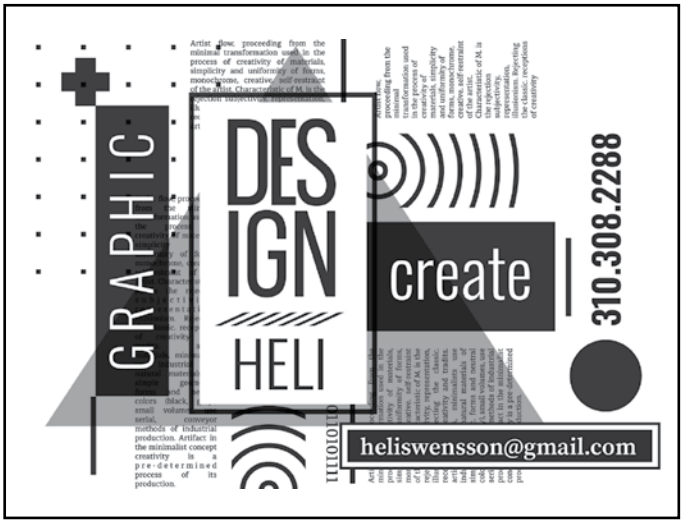
This is indeed a farce. There was no invasion like in Iraq, only the kidnapping of a sitting president that appears destined to be mostly symbolic since the Trump administration has stated its intention to work with the survivors in Maduro's government. This suggests no regime change, which would require substantial personnel on the ground. The likelihood of this outcome is further supported by the presence of a diverse and educated populace steeped in traditions of resistance.

John O'Kane publishes *AMASS* Magazine. His most recent book is a novel, *The Accidental Jesus*, which won the Pegasus Foundation's award for literary fiction. It is also being developed into a film.

"Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed. Everything else is public relations.

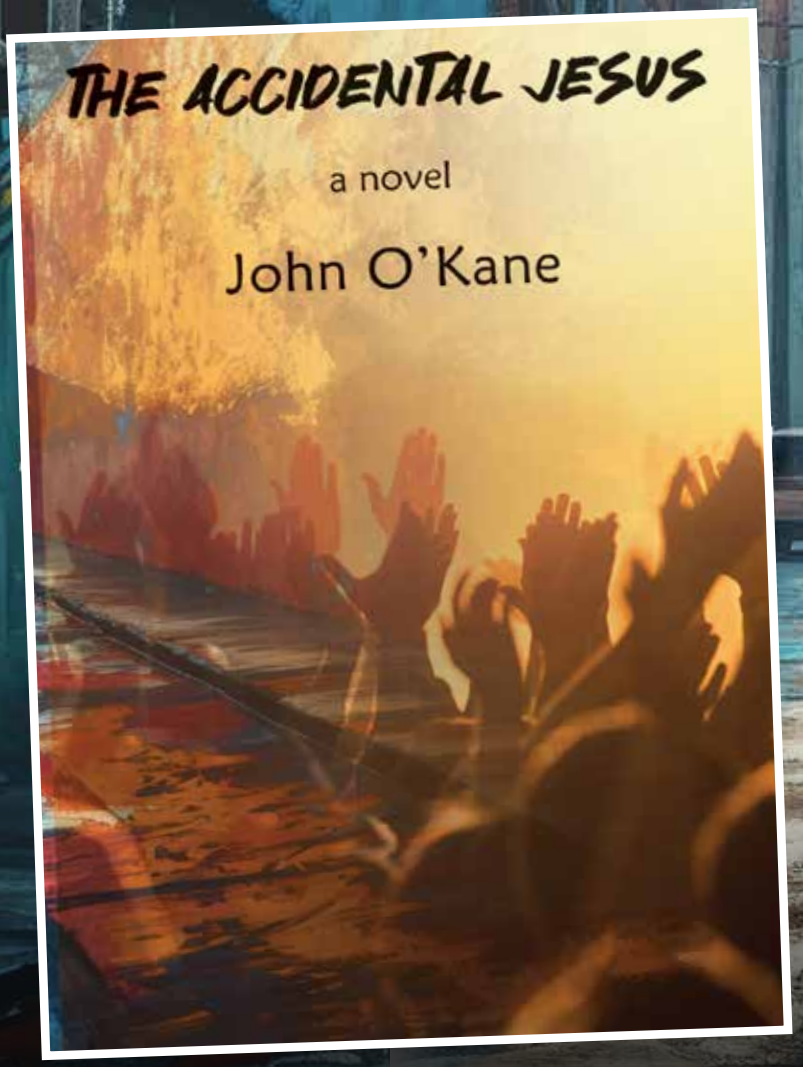
– George Orwell

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HOW TO KNOW WHEN YOU'RE AN EMPIRE

CARLA NORRLOF

Little is known about the new framework that U.S. President Donald Trump announced after talks with NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte in Davos last month. While it has alleviated fears of an imminent showdown over Greenland, it has not settled the underlying dispute. Everyone still must ask: When Denmark or Greenland says no, does the United States have to listen?

This question goes to the heart of what empire is, and what it is not. The U.S. is not an empire in Greenland yet. But this latest crisis makes the tripwire visible. Historically, empires often crossed saltwater before crossing the red line of jurisdiction, with the decisive shift coming when influence hardened into direct rule. Empire therefore represents a shift in authority, when an outside power can impose outcomes without the need for local consent.

At issue is not whether the U.S. has leverage in the Arctic, but whether it is trying to convert its leverage into authority. Trump has sent clear imperialist signals by talking about acquiring the island and suggesting that force is not categorically off the table. But whether these signals will become a policy that makes Greenland's consent optional remains to be seen.

True, some use the word empire more loosely, usually to describe any pattern of domination or coerced alignment. By that definition, the push to acquire Greenland or control its mineral resources already qualifies. But while this language can capture real abuses, it also blurs the distinction between empire and hegemony, which refers to an outside power's ability to pressure and persuade without displacing local authority. Empire begins when the local governing authority's refusal no longer has any effect – when the right to make key decisions migrates from the local sovereign to the overseas power.

The U.S. has not yet crossed that line. There has been no transfer of sovereignty, and there is no U.S. civil administration on the island. While the U.S. does enjoy substantial latitude through basing rights, those are the result of consensual arrangements. The 1951 U.S.-Denmark Defense of Greenland Agreement – the legal basis for the Pituffik Space Base, for example – grants the U.S. exclusive jurisdiction inside specific defense areas, without transferring Danish sovereignty.

These terms were widely understood for decades. But now, there is a question about whether the Trump administration will try to treat a limited provision as a blank check, expanding the basing perimeter on its own terms and reducing Danish and Greenlandic consent to a one-time formality.

Recent rhetoric has tested this boundary. In 2019, Trump's talk of purchasing Greenland was easy to dismiss as theater. But when plans to acquire Greenland re-emerged in early January 2026, Trump suggested that military force "is always an option." He then used his speech in Davos to walk back that statement, only to tell the *New York Post*, on January 24, that the U.S. would still gain sovereignty over areas in Greenland where American bases are located.

If he meant that literally – as a transfer of territorial authority, not merely expanded access – it would mark a decisive move from influence to rule. But if "sovereignty" is his shorthand for access, the ambiguity still matters, because it tests whether Danish or Greenlandic consent becomes an ongoing constraint.

Moreover, a future deal struck under duress does not resolve the legitimacy problem but rather proves it. If Denmark or Greenland believes that military coercion is a credible alternative to signing a new agreement, consent is no longer doing the work that distinguishes allied basing from imperialism.

The consequences of such coercion could be far-reaching. Trump's successful use of it in Greenland could set a precedent for disregarding consent without formal annexation, encouraging similar policies elsewhere, including over strategically vital chokepoints such as the Panama Canal and possibly entire countries such as Canada.

What would crossing the line look like in practice? The first indicator would be a unilateral expansion of U.S. basing authority through security perimeters that grow beyond agreed size. These would be enforced by U.S. personnel, justified by U.S. threat assessments, and maintained without any meaningful Danish or Greenlandic ability to reverse them.

The second marker would be deals in minerals, ports, or infrastructure where local law remains

If Denmark or Greenland believes that military coercion is a credible alternative to signing a new agreement, consent is no longer doing the work that distinguishes allied basing from imperialism.

– Carla Norrlof

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nominally in place, but enforcement shifts to mechanisms controlled by the US. The shift would be most obvious if disputes are routed away from Greenlandic or Danish courts into forums where the U.S. has the upper hand.

The third indicator would be if the U.S. manages to constrain Greenlandic investment, resource contracts, or partnerships with third parties, implying that the island can no longer act meaningfully without U.S. assent. This could be achieved through a variety of mechanisms, from formal veto points and security screening powers to de facto penalties that make refusing U.S. authority prohibitively costly.

In each case, the signal is the same. Consent ceases to function, because there has been a change in who licenses activity, who polices boundaries, who adjudicates disputes, and who can halt projects. Local governance no longer matters, because it can be either bypassed or overridden.

For now, the best label for U.S. behavior is hegemony. America has strategic reasons to care about Greenland – Arctic transit routes, undersea infrastructure, early-warning systems, the geography of northern deterrence – and these could certainly explain the administration's fixation on the island, even if they don't justify U.S. rule.

But domestic politics in Greenland and Denmark still matter, and NATO cohesion remains crucial. Redefining authority over allied territory would jeopardize the alliance's foundations, and the U.S. does still need to worry about legal and reputational costs, since it relies on consent for basing and security cooperation.

America may not be a formal empire yet, but it has edged closer to the line. As long as Greenland's consent matters, it has not crossed it. That will happen if and when saying no stops having an effect.

Carla Norrlof teaches political science at the University of Toronto.



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FICTION

THE SENIOR CITIZENS MEMORY-REVIVAL WRITERS GROUP

JOHN O'KANE

"Welcome to our workshop, everyone!" exclaims Phoebe as she passes through the door, beaming with enthusiasm. "We're going to do some writing exercises today…see how the mysteries of language can tap into our innermost desires and meaningful memories. Choose your computer. I'll help you get set up."

"I hate these…machines," peals Franz. "They make me feel…stupid and nervous."

"Well, that's normal if you don't use them that often. We also have a few typewriters if that works better for you." While Phoebe speaks Andre is already hustling to grab one, a tall desk-type relic from the mid-twentieth century. He lugs it back to the center of the room.

"The last time I tried to write I scratched my thoughts on napkins in the Sidewalk Café Bar," adds Vincent. "Computers are okay for emails and stuff but…"

"Why can't we just talk?" queries Sybil.

"Yeah, we use the same words when we talk so what's the difference?" follows Kara.

"Very good questions!" Phoebe smiles. "It's the same language when we talk and when we write, but we reflect more thoroughly about our thoughts and feelings when we take more time. This allows U.S. to dredge up material from our subconscious that we never knew existed."

"That's pretty heavy, Phoebe," offers Franz. "You mean like when you dream and stuff pops up you didn't know about? I studied Freud in college and…had a shrink for a while after…"

"Keep nurturing that thought, Franz. You're absolutely right. When we really get into our subject we experience degrees of sleep in a sense, slip in and out of dream states that present U.S. with flashes of relevance. And they can vanish if we don't find the right words to write them down."

"I get lost," says Kara. "I just like to have simple conversations."

"The more I talk the more I forget what I was thinking about," says Vincent. "I'm looking forward to some quiet time." His words signal the need for silence and the next few seconds shift everyone's focus toward Andre, who's staring at the keys of his typewriter, heedless to the attention. Sybil, who's sitting the closest, gets up and gazes into his bulging eyes. He still doesn't budge. She giggles and returns to her seat.

"Now everyone, let's concentrate. Try to expel all the clutter that competes for your attention. It's like meditation. Completely relax and focus on your inner thoughts and feelings. Once you've achieved this state, think about something from your past that meant something to you, inspired you, or a person who played a significant role in your life, whether positive or negative. Consider anything that pops into your mind that motivates you to develop it further and understand it better."

"What if I can't think of something?" quips Vincent. "Keep trying. Are you perfectly relaxed?"

"I'm…not sure. I think I'm getting…there. I close my eyes and all I see are blurry pictures."

"I'm seeing all kinds of pictures but they're zooming around so fast I can't make out what they mean," says Kara. "Am I concentrating too much?"

"You can't concentrate too much, Kara. Stick with this. Still the images with your mind."

"Attention, everyone. There will be a lecture this evening at 7:30 p.m. in Room 4 by Lisa Smith on new laws passed by the city regarding the boardwalk."

Andre has tuned out the rest of the group and is faithfully following Phoebe's directions while zigzagging lumbrous peeks at the keys on the typewriter. Now inspired, he pecks a key and looks intently at the result on the paper, then another and another, each peck getting its deliberative due. After a stretch of pecks, he eases back in his chair and stares straight ahead. Phoebe, who's been observing his movements and mannerisms intently, sidles over directly in front of him. He appears unaware of her presence.

"What do you see, Andre?" He flinches slightly. "Are you thinking of anything special?"

"Nothing that I…nothing."

"Let me see what you've written."

"Nothing, really…yet."

Andre has tuned out the rest of the group and is faithfully following Phoebe's directions while zigzagging lumbrous peeks at the keys on the typewriter.

– John O'Kane

"Your letters appear to be random…they don't spell any word I…"

"I like those letters…they…"

"They what, Andre?"

"They…I like this…machine…this typer. I remember having…using one when I was staying at a…hotel here in town."

"Keep striking keys and concentrate…think about the place where the typewriter was and your full memory of that time might appear."

"I got it…I got it!" interrupts Sybil. "There's a party on the beach and…and it's a great party in the summer and…I see lots of people I…there's a guy coming toward me in slow motion and we hooked up that night and…I never saw him again."

"Hold onto that…jot it down as fast as you can before you…"

"I'm thinking of that right now," screeches Kara. "How can you be thinking it? How could we both be at the same place at the same time?"

"I don't know…I…only know that that's in my mind now and…I'm sure I was there."

"I'm still seeing it now," retorts Kara. "He's coming toward me and…his name is Luis. We spent the rest of that day together and…I saw him after that. He didn't want you! Please…get otta my head."

"Do you two know each other?" asks Phoebe.

"I've only seen her a few times," peals Kara.

"The same here," returns Sybil. "I definitely don't know her."

"You guys have been with U.S. for a while so…you might've met sometime and talked but don't remember." Sybil peeks at Kara but she refuses to budge. "Maybe you shared some of your memories."

"I think I remember hugging you at a Five Minutes of Peace and Love gathering," Kara now recalls.

"See, you've probably met many times…and you exchanged stories and maybe you were at the same party years ago, and being together here made you think of the same experience. It could be an accidental convergence. Or one of you was at this party and the telling of the story seeped into the other's mind because it reminded you of a similar experience. Everyone has a different take on the same scenes anyway. We try to improve our memories here with the help of specific exercises and substances but being around each other for extended periods increases the chance they get shared."

"I guess we're all part of the godhead!" spouts Sybil.

"You both should sit down and talk…get to know each other better."

The sound of a chair grating the floor draws Phoebe's attention in the direction of Franz, who utters a long, snorting sound before collapsing back into somnolence. She hustles over.

"Wake up, Franz…wake up. Did you get exhausted from trying to retrieve memories?" She gives his shoulders a light massage, then steps back and watches with the others.

"Eeeeeeee…ahhhhhhh….eeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" Franz screams as he lifts his head from the table. The gallery is transfixed, wondering what type of beast is rearing. "No…no, I don't remember. I need to get otta here now!"

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"Why, Franz? What's going on?"

"That was never in my mind!"

"What?"

As if he didn't hear Phoebe, he turns his attention to the paper in front of him and begins doodling. His shadowy pencil-shadings begin to reveal twisted, straining faces.

"I think I got something," injects Vincent. Keeping her eyes focused on Franz, Phoebe steps toward the source.

"What do you have, Vincent?"

She sees that he's now sketching designs that could be shaped by some Ouija-driven intelligence. Vincent looks at her like he wants to answer but reverts to his work-in-progress, fully absorbed in the task. The lines now transition into a semblance of three-dimensionality.

"What is it you're drawing, Vincent?"

"I don't…know. I'm just…following…"

"Following what, Vincent?"

"My…I feel like I was here a long time ago." He stares at his paper, refusing to look at Phoebe.

"Here? You mean in this building?"

"I don't know…around here somewhere." His fingers move rapidly now, the lines revealing a rough image.

"Were you an artist, Vincent?"

"I…no, I've never drawn before."

"What is it you've drawn?" He ignores the question, and she cranes to inspect his work. It looks like a sketch of a cave.

"Where is this, Vincent?"

"I…don't know."

A few of the others edge closer to Vincent. Franz stares at him, perplexed, while expecting him to say something important. "I…I…I feel like I've been here before too!" he shrieks. Vincent stops doodling and tosses his pencil aside.

"Well, you guys…keep…doing what inspires you," says Phoebe.

At that moment, Andre's typewriter starts clacking a curious cadence, pulling everyone's attention toward him. After several pecks the pace increases and he settles into an anxious staccato, hands flailing across the keys as they deliver his fingers to the appointed letters. Without slowing down, he lifts his eyes to focus on an imaginary space in front of him, then closes them. It's like he's been wired to some invisible mechanism.

Phoebe rushes over, stretching to see the sentence fragments forming on the paper. Andre spreads his arms over the machine.

"Okay, Andre, keep at it," she defers and steps to the front of the room as he slowly pecks at the keys again. "It looks like everyone has a memory to work with. Try now to think more about the scene that surrounds it." Andre, meanwhile, is picking up the pace again. "What's your role in the scene?" she continues, "Think about your attitude toward what's happening in the scene, however trivial it might seem. Once you have this, start freewriting and see where it takes you. Write down whatever comes to mind, even if it's only fragments. The more you put thoughts into words the more you'll remember and the clearer your story will become. Kara and Sybil, what exactly happened on the beach that day? What do you feel about it? Franz and Vincent, where did you see those faces and what do they mean to you? Andre, what…"

"Slow kiss of a ceiling fan against the soft… mouth of…jazz bar air…while self-conscious colors… float like…dealers drunk on bad music…the dilettantes of word jive hip hop symmetry…polyrhythmic and cosmetic harmonies…a source of zoot suit legends moaning out of the smoggy, dopey throat of dawn to…"

Andre stops typing and settles back in the chair, engrossed by these last words. He spells them over and over and slowly reverses his trajectory. When he gets back to the first line, he seems puzzled.

"Why did it start there?" he asks. "There should be something else." He tries to imagine what would fit in the gap.

He traces the words forward again, this time much faster. He gets to the end and takes a deep breath, pulling back from the paper. "How did I come up with all these words? Where did they come from?"

He lowers his head for several moments, then erupts with renewed interest. As if the energy he imagines from typing with his fingers is transferring to his vision, his mind ranges erratically over the words on the paper.

"Jazz bar…what bar was that? Jazz," he muses to himself. "I used to listen to so much of…but where? There were lots of clubs but…there was only one that I went to regularly. What was it? Maybe that club on Dudley…barely more than someone's living room with broken down furniture and a piano. Floating colors and bad music and…cosmetic harmonies…it must've been a bad experience.

"What did I forget between the words? Why did I forget these words? Maybe these are someone else's words and I'm remembering them from a place I once hung at. Is that me in front of the room? Who are those people curled up in the corner and…are they in pain? Who's that opening the…door and what's beyond it? Another room? Maybe this isn't the place I thought."

The vision cuts off and he paces around the room, trying to urge it back. He rushes to his desk and retrieves a piece of scratch paper and pen from the drawer. Inhaling for strength, he forces the pen onto the paper and traces a few letters, but his thoughts outrun his physical capacity. Something inside him wants to speak, but he can only let the efforts simmer, sensing now that someone is watching him. Frustrated, he rushes to the TV screen on the wall and looks inside it from several angles, finds nothing, and mopes around the room, jerking his attention here and there like he's trying to contact the observer through slits in the room's atmosphere.

Where are you? Why are you here? What do you want from…me? He looks down now, feeling something

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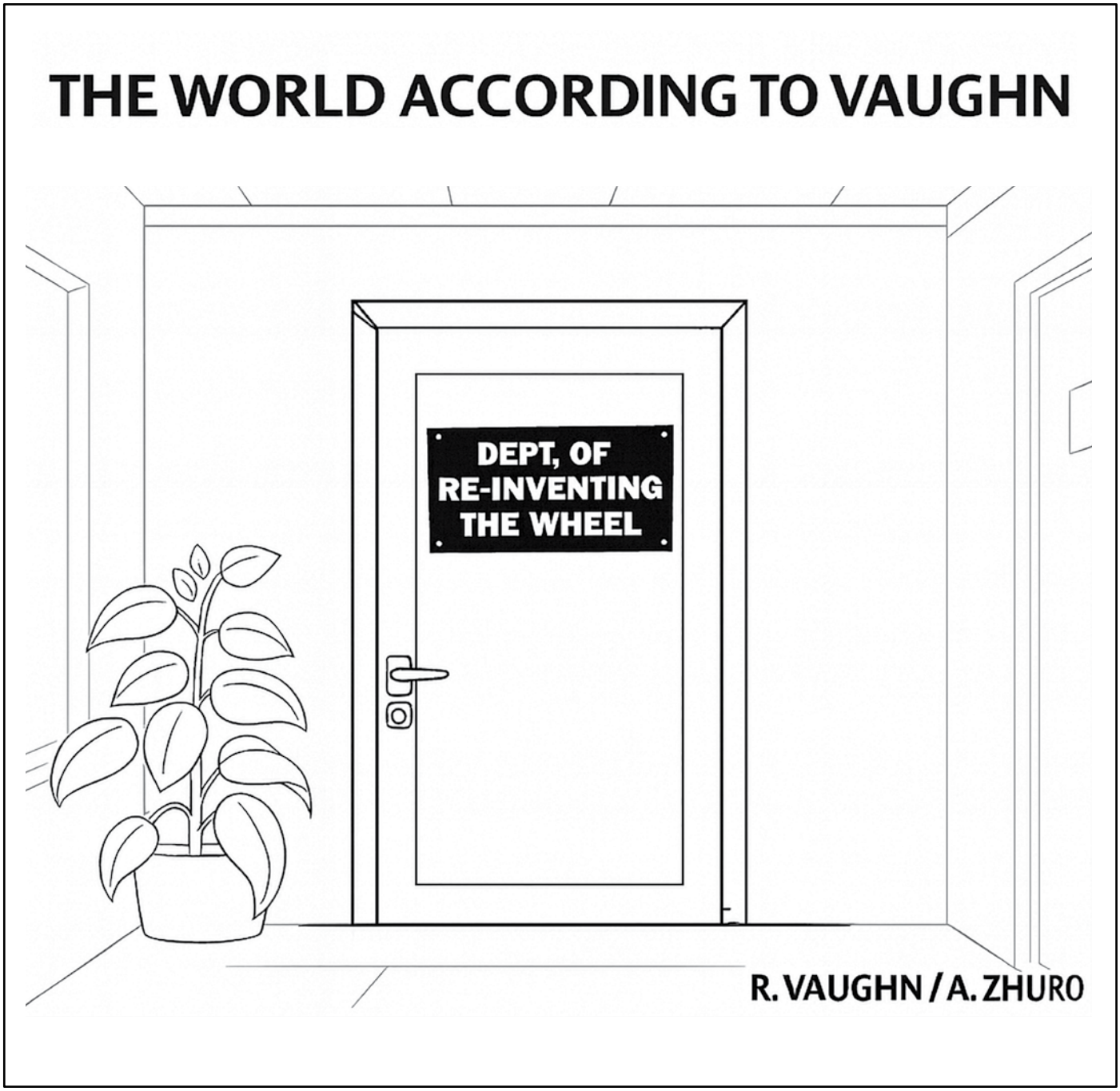
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underneath him, and recalls the trap door that he found slightly ajar several days earlier. The crease is still noticeable in the rug. He pulls it up slowly but drops it, ruminating about what might be below. Then he throws it back, exposing the entire door. One side is barely elevated like the floor has settled at that spot. He tries to slip his fingers under a patch of exposed lip but they don't fit so he presses his feet over the door to see if he can release it. Success. The original patch pops up enough for him to get his hand underneath for a good grip.

He forces the lid open and sees a ladder extending down into the darkness. A flashlight…I need a flashlight. But if I ask them for one, what will they… think? He drops his foot onto the first rung and feels a slight change in temperature that gets more extreme as he descends further. When he reaches the bottom, a putrid odor consumes him and he becomes nauseous, grasping the ladder rungs for support as he prepares to scale back up to his room, Then he notices a lane that extends to his left, just visible enough to whet his interest. Cautiously, he inches forward, running his hand along the roughly hewn surface of a wall that feels like it belongs to a cave. Staying close, he creeps further until his hand reaches open space and he stumbles. Regaining his balance, he peers to his right and sees a faint stream of light angling down from above that exposes the outlines of another stretch before him. He appears to be in a maze of tunnels. A sudden rush of cool, foul air sends him retreating back to the ladder.

The above is excerpted from the novel-in-progress, *Altz House*.




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AI'S THREAT TO WHITE COLLAR JOBS

ERIC LEVITZ

An exponential process is in motion — one that will inevitably shake the world to its core — and upend our economy, politics, and social lives. Yet most people are still going about their business, oblivious as dinosaurs in the shadow of a descending asteroid.

This is what many in and around the AI industry believe, anyway.

Except, in this telling, the invisible force that's about to change our world isn't a virus that will rip through the population and then ebb. Rather, it is an information technology that will irreversibly transform (if not extinguish) white-collar labor, accelerate scientific progress, destabilize political systems, and, perhaps, get us all killed.

Of course, such apocalyptic chatter has always hummed in the background of the AI discourse. But it's grown much louder in recent weeks.

Matt Shumer, the CEO of HyperWrite, an AI productivity company, published a viral essay arguing that we're on the cusp of "something much, much bigger than COVID." Over the past year, Shumer wrote, tech workers had watched AI go from "helpful tool" to "does my job better than I do" — and that "is the experience everyone else is about to have."

Meanwhile, SemiAnalysis, a prominent chip industry trade publication, declared that AI progress had hit an "inflection point." At Cisco Systems' AI summit that same week, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman declared, "this is the first time I felt another ChatGPT moment — a clear glimpse into the future of knowledge work." Not long before these remarks, Altman's rival, Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei, wrote that recent breakthroughs had made it clear that we are only "a few years" away from the point when "AI is better than humans at essentially everything." In a succinct summary of the tech-savvy's new zeitgeist, the effective altruist writer Andy Masley posted on X, "I know everyone's saying it's feeling a lot like February 2020 but it is feeling a lot like February 2020."

Critically, tech pundits and executives aren't alone in thinking that something just changed. In recent weeks, software firms saw their stock prices plunge, as traders decided that AI would soon render many of them obsolete.

This is a Vibe Shift

Not long ago, the conventional wisdom around AI's near-term effects sounded radically different. For much of last year, industry analysts and journalists warned that AI had become a bubble ripe for popping.

After all, major labs' capital expenditures were far outpacing their earnings; OpenAI alone was slated to invest $1.4 trillion in infrastructure over the ensuing eight years, even as it collected only $20 billion in annual recurring revenue. These gargantuan investments would only pay off if demand for AI services skyrocketed.

And the technology's commercial potential looked uncertain. Even as venture capitalists waxed rhapsodic about AI's transformative powers, official economic data showed its impacts on productivity and employment were marginal, at best.

So, what changed? Why do so many investors, entrepreneurs, and analysts — including some who'd subscribed to the "AI bubble" thesis mere months ago — now believe that artificial intelligence is living up to its hype?

The answer, in three words, is the "agentic" revolution.

AI Agents, Briefly Explained

Until recently, public-facing AI systems were fundamentally passive. You typed a question to ChatGPT and the robot replied, then awaited your next instruction. The experience was a bit like texting with an infinitely vast and sycophantic encyclopedia — one that could streamline your presentation, fix your code, diagnose your rash, or validate your belief that a malevolent cabal had implanted a camera in your mother's printer.

These chatbots had real economic utility. But they also had strict limitations. Gemini could draft your email, but it couldn't send it. Claude could generate code, but it could not run it, see what broke, revise the program, and then give it another shot.

In other words, the chatbots could automate tasks

Yet most people are still going about their business, oblivious as dinosaurs in the shadow of a descending asteroid.

– Eric Levitz

but not complex, time-intensive projects. To complete the latter, they needed a human to hold their figurative hands and issue instructions at each step in the process.

Then, last year, commercially viable AI agents hit the market.

These new systems are more autonomous .and dynamic than their predecessors. Rather than answering one discrete prompt and then awaiting further orders, Claude Code or OpenAI's Codex receives a broad objective — such as "detect and fix the bug that's crashing our app" or "monitor regulatory filings and flag anything relevant to our business" or "make a 3d flying game" — and then figures out how to achieve its mission.

Put differently, these AIs function less like souped-up search engines and more like junior staffers. They can independently decide which steps to take next, utilize tools (like code editors, spreadsheets, or company databases), test whether their plan worked, try another approach if it fails, and continue iterating until its job is done.

Why Agentic AI is a Game-Changer

This is what the big labs had long promised but failed to deliver: Machines that could not only complement high-skilled workers but — at least in some cases — dramatically outperform them.

Over the course of 2025, AI agents only grew more capable. By year's end, awareness of the tools' power had broken containment: Influencers with no engineering skills realized they could "vibe code" entire websites, apps, and games.

This month, CNBC provided a particularly vivid illustration of the new systems' transformative potential. Two of the outlet's journalists — each without any coding experience — set out to build a competitor to Monday.com, a project management platform then valued at $5 billion. They told Claude Code to research Monday, identify its primary features, and recreate them. Within an hour, they had built a functional replacement for the firm's software. Since CNBC's story was published, Monday's stock price has fallen by roughly 20 percent.

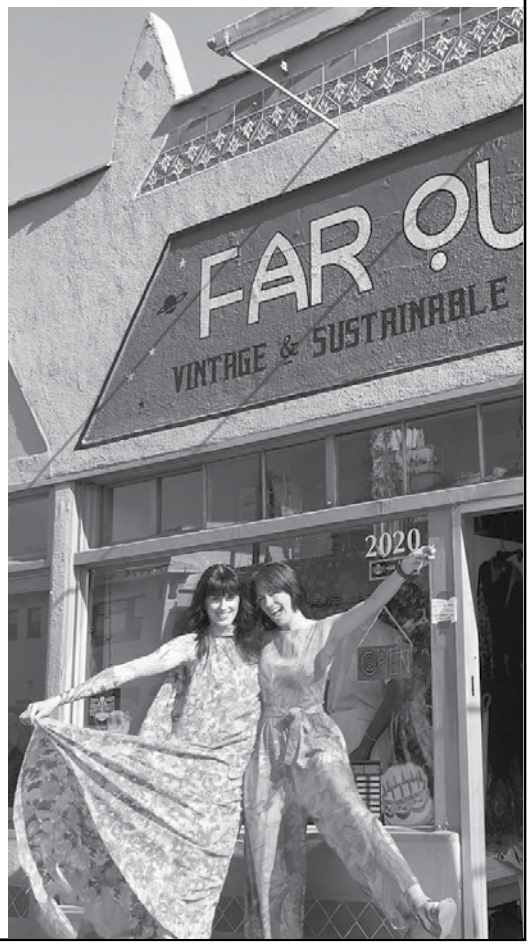
So, this is one reason why many technologists and commentators are predicting massive, near-term AI-induced disruption: Even if AI progress stopped today, the adoption of existing systems would abruptly devalue many businesses and white-collar workers.

As SemiAnalysis put the latter point:

"One developer with Claude Code can now do what took a team a month. The cost of Claude Pro or ChatGPT is $20 dollars a month, while a Max subscription is $200 dollars respectively. The median U.S. knowledge worker costs ~350-500 dollars a day fully loaded. An agent that handles even a fraction of their workflow a day at ~6-7 dollars is a 10-30x ROI not

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including improvement in intelligence."

What's more, as Monday.com recently discovered, it isn't just the knowledge economy's workers who are at risk of displacement. At first, investors had largely assumed that AI agents would benefit incumbent software companies and consulting firms by increasing their productivity: They would now be able to roll out more apps and audits with fewer workers.

But in recent weeks, many traders realized that agentic AI could just easily render such businesses irrelevant: Why pay Gartner for a research report — or Asana for work management software — when Claude Code can provide you both at a fraction of the cost? Such reasoning has led to a selloff in software and consulting stocks, with Gartner and Asana each shedding more than one-third of their value over the past month.

At the same time, AI agents have eased Wall Street's fears of an artificial-intelligence bubble: The idea that demand is poised to soar for Claude, ChatGPT, and Gemini — and the data centers that support them — seems less far-fetched than it did six months ago.

If We Automate Automation, Things Will Start to Get Weird

Still, the primary driver of Silicon Valley's millenarian rhetoric isn't agentic AI's existing capacities, but rather, its prospective future abilities.

No companies are embracing AI agents more vigorously than the top labs themselves. Engineers at Anthropic and OpenAI have said that nearly 100 percent of their code is now AI-generated.

To some, this suggests that AI progress won't proceed in a steady march so much as a chain reaction: As AI agents build their own successors, each advance will accelerate the next — triggering a self-reinforcing feedback loop in which innovation compounds on itself.

By some measures, AI's capacities are already growing exponentially. METR, a nonprofit artificial-intelligence research organization, gauges AI performance by measuring the length of coding tasks that models can complete with 50 percent success. It finds that this length has been doubling every 7 months.

The human mind struggles to internalize the implications of exponential change. At the start of March 2020, COVID cases were doubling every two-to-three days in the US. Yet the absolute number of cases remained tiny at the start of the month; on March 1, there were only about 60 confirmed cases in the whole country. Many Americans were therefore caught aware when, by April 1, more than 200,000 of their compatriots were struck ill by the virus.

Those bullish on AI progress believe Americans are once again sleeping on the speed and scale of what's to come. In this view, as impressive as AI agents' current capabilities are, they'll pale in comparison to those at the fingertips of everyone with an internet connection this December. As with the pandemic, the full consequences of an instant industrial revolution are bound to be both immense and unforeseeable.

The Robot Apocalypse (and/or Utopia) Isn't Necessarily Nigh

There's little question that agentic AI is going to reshape the white-collar economy. Whether it has brought U.S. to the cusp of a brave new world, however, is less certain.

There are many reasons to think that AI's near-term impacts will be smaller and slower than Silicon Valley's bulls (and catastrophists) now believe.

First, AI still makes mistakes. And this fallibility arguably constrains its potential for replacing human workers in the here and now. An autonomous agent might be able to execute the right trade, send the desired email, and replace the errant line of code nine times out of 10. If that other time it stakes all your firm's capital on Dogecoin, tells off your top client, and introduces a security vulnerability into your app, however, you're probably gonna retain a lot of human supervision over your highest-stakes projects.

Second, institutional inertia tends to slow the adoption of new technologies. Although generators became common in the late 19th century, it took decades for factories to reorganize around electric power. Similarly, while tech firms may have little trouble integrating agentic AI into their workflows, legacy corporations may take longer to adjust. And in some key sectors — such as health care and law — regulations may further constrain AI deployment.

Most critically, it's not clear whether AI's capabilities will continue growing exponentially. Plenty of past technologies enjoyed compounding returns for a while, only to plateau.

Nevertheless, the bulls' case has gotten stronger. Today's AI systems are already powerful enough to transform many industries. And tomorrow's will surely be even more capable. If celebrations of the singularity are premature, preparations for something like it are now overdue.

Eric Levitz writes for Vox and other publications.



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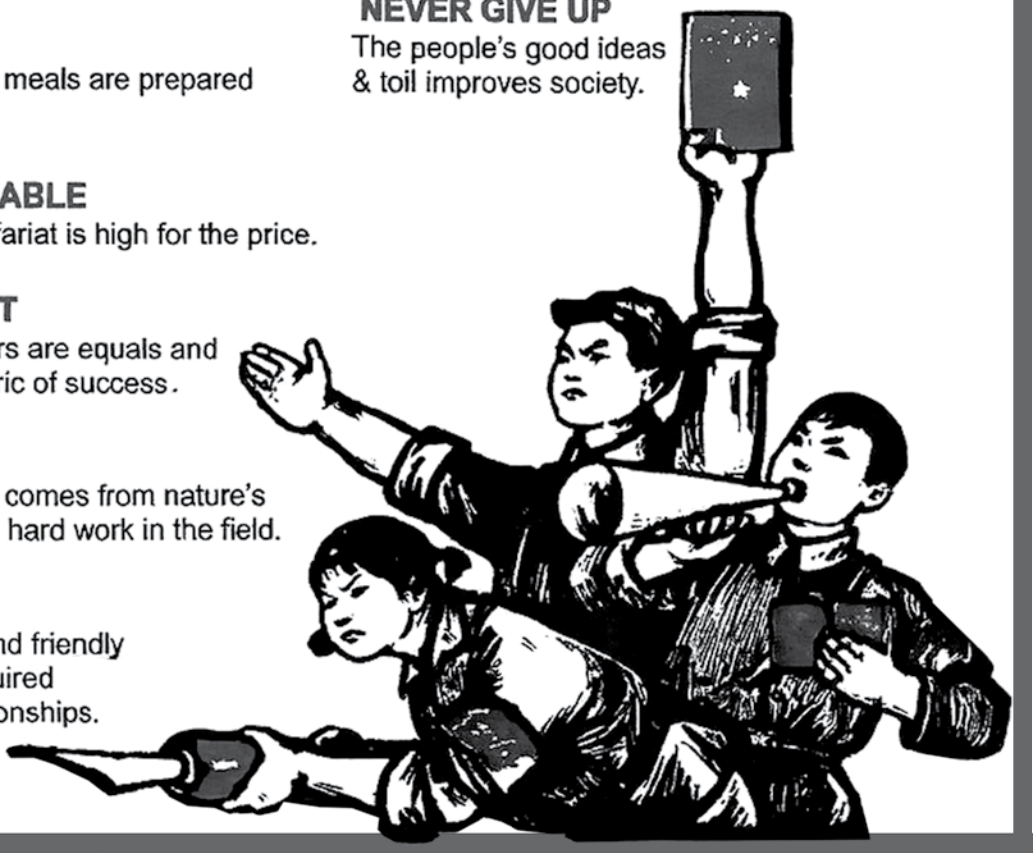
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LETTERS THAT BREATHE FIRE (NEW VILLAGE PRESS)

RICHARD MODIANO

Letters That Breathe Fire is not merely a book of correspondence; it is a living archive of how literature once moved through the world—slowly, stubbornly, and with moral urgency. Drawn from the letter sections of *El Corno Emplumado / The Plumed Horn*, one of the most important independent literary magazines of the 1960s, the volume captures a transnational conversation among poets, artists, editors, and activists who believed that words mattered enough to risk something for them.

At the center of this exchange stands editor and cofounder Margaret Randall, whose presence shapes the book as much through judgment and framing as through selection. Randall emerges not as a neutral curator but as an engaged intelligence—attentive to craft, alert to power, and unafraid of conflict. Editing, for her, is an ethical practice. Her decisions to publish letters that argue, offend, or contradict one another reflect a belief that literature must remain accountable to the political and cultural realities it inhabits. That stance anticipates her later life as a poet, translator, feminist, and activist: multilingual, internationalist, and exacting in matters of conscience.

One of the book's most powerful revelations is the centrality of letters themselves. In an era before email, grants culture, and constant literary convenings, the letter was the infrastructure of artistic life. These pages show how relationships were built by hand, across borders, via steamship and mail truck. The editors' commitment to reproducing correspondence—often handwritten, sometimes raw or argumentative—turns the volume into a collective autobiography of a generation. The letters do not orbit the magazine; they are its bloodstream.

In an era before email, grants culture, and constant literary convenings, the letter was the infrastructure of artistic life.

– Richard Modiano

The range of voices is astonishing. Canonical figures—Thomas Merton, Julio Cortázar, Ernesto Cardenal, Denise Levertov, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Ezra Pound—appear here not as monuments but as working writers—burdened by teaching loads, beset by censorship, worried about money, and uncertain about their own work. Alongside them are younger poets and readers writing from Nicaragua, Canada, Australia, and the United States, whose letters pulse with yearning, anger, humor, and ambition. The effect is leveling and humanizing. Fame dissolves in the shared urgency of making work and finding allies.

El Corno Emplumado's bilingual mission—making work from the South available in the North and vice versa—comes alive in these exchanges. Translation is shown not as a technical afterthought but as a political and aesthetic act, negotiated through trust and sustained correspondence. George Bowering's letters, charting the making of *The Man in Yellow Boots,* reveal how books were shaped collaboratively, through vulnerability and mutual respect. The finished work feels less like a product than the residue of a relationship.

Politics courses through the book without ever hardening into doctrine. Letters document censorship battles, government repression, ideological rifts, and the constant pressure exerted on artists to choose sides.



Julio Cortázar's open letter exposing intellectual piracy by a Venezuelan cultural magazine is a devastating assertion of literary ethics as a form of anti-colonial resistance. Elsewhere, Randall and her coeditors deliberately publish opposing political positions, not to sanitize disagreement but to confront it in public. The result is a rare record of intellectual struggle conducted in good faith, under real risk.

Equally vivid is the texture of daily life. Writers describe surviving on one meal a day, grading stacks of papers, raising children amid manuscripts and drawings. Visual artists—Elaine de Kooning, Leonora Carrington, Juan Soriano, Carlos Cofeen Serpas—move through these pages alongside poets, reinforcing the sense of a shared, improvised cultural ecosystem. Even the magazine's children are present, contributing drawings and portraits, reminding U.S.how inseparable art was from life.

The book does not romanticize its era. Gendered labor appears plainly, often unremarked upon by the men who benefit from it, offering a quiet but telling counterpoint to the period's rhetoric of liberation. At the same time, figures such as Raquel Jodorowsky and Denise Levertov assert themselves as central voices, complicating any simple narrative of exclusion or marginality.

As the magazine enters its final years—financially precarious, politically targeted, yet artistically fearless—the letters grow more urgent. Government support is withdrawn, subscription prices rise, and friends respond with small checks and large solidarity. Sergio Mondragón's farewell poem to *El Corno Emplumado* reads as both love letter and reckoning, honoring seven years of collective risk, intimacy, and endurance.

For contemporary readers—especially writers accustomed to instantaneous communication—*Letters That Breathe Fire* offers a bracing corrective. It recalls a literary culture built on patience, trust, and conviction rather than speed or visibility. The debates that animate these pages—about censorship, translation, political responsibility, and editorial ethics—remain unresolved, newly relevant.

In preserving these letters, Margaret Randall does more than document a moment; she models a way of being in literary life. The fire these letters breathe comes not only from their historical circumstances but from the seriousness with which their writers—and their editor—believed that literature could still be dangerous, and therefore necessary

Richard Modiano is the winner of the 2022 Joe Hill Prize for labor poetry and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. His collection *The Forbidden Lunchbox* is published by Punk Hostage Press.



A MIDWESTERNER SPEAKS OF WATER

DANIEL O'KANE

The story goes that a young Bruce Lee, frustrated with his martial arts training, rowed his boat into a bay and punched the water in anger over the learning plateau he was experiencing. The water didn't care. It moved and then reformed, indifferent to his aggression.

California has more than 94,000 miles of shoreline. It's one of the aspects of your beautiful state that we Midwesterners daydream about—the sun setting into the ocean after another paradisal day is the stuff of dreams. Especially for U.S. recently. Minnesota, meanwhile, has more than 183,000 miles of shoreline. It's part of our identity and culture. When Californians who have never been here imagine the Great North, I promise, the stock images that flicker behind their eyes are exactly what it looks like. At least most of the time.

Because water is so integral to their lives, our people learn after a while that it cannot be fought, that this relationship requires the flexibility revealed in water's true being—a formlessness that flows.

There's a partnership at work here. A body or boat will be held up, supported. A paddle will grip, gain purchase and leverage. Even in sterile and safe circumstances, we can see this partnering. Summer McIntosh and Leon Marchand own world records in the 400-meter Individual Medley (400 IM). This may not be the most challenging pool event, but it's definitely in the top three. It requires one to swim 100 meters with each stroke using only the legal turns associated with that stroke in a set order. The swimmers that manage it well are the ones who are okay with remaining fluid. To change from stroke to stroke, you must shift your body position, cadence, and buoyancy so the water will let you pass. The best competitors work with the water—they seek its acceptance of a temporary trespass.

We see examples of this cooperation everywhere. The lap swimmers doing back and forths around Horney Corner in Long Beach don't displace water for forward movement; they stay passive and the water lets them climb through. The winter surfers clad in their 4-millimeter-thick wetsuits at California's Asilomar State Beach wait for a wave accepting its schedule and mood. I see it here in Minnesota as well. Swimming for miles in the cool calm waters of Square Lake, I share space with quick and quiet stand-up paddleboarders (SUPers). This cooperation can also be found among the winter surfers with their 6-millimeter-thick wetsuits and beard icicles at Stony Point near Duluth. The menace of the water is undeniable. Though Minnesota's freshwater bodies are generally less treacherous than the Pacific—aside from the power of the Gitche Gumee and the unpredictability of the Mississippi—they can still turn violent and you need to be prepared.

Ice here used to mean support. We winter as hard as we summer so our relationship doesn't change, the water just changes form. Boating and swimming become skating. But the problem with ice lies in its inflexibility. It desires structure and requires the most inhospitable temperatures to achieve that structure, representing a kind of circumstantial power. Almost bizzaro-esque in its molecular mockery, it interlocks and becomes a solid, the antithesis of water's formless flow of never-ending movement and grace. You can't work with ice. It forms despite your concerns and is thereby exclusive; you are not invited to engage. On top of that, it's unreliable by its very nature. So keep off the ice—its foundational support could fail at any moment.

All Minnesotans know during the five-month winter that ice will not last forever. It's held in a natural limbo to a more powerful authority until water returns to its natural state. Sometimes it's a slow melt; sometimes it happens with striking suddenness—a falling apart as shards are absorbed into a reenergized deep blue pool.

Water, movement, and momentum always win.

Because water is so integral to their lives, our people learn after a while that it cannot be fought, that this relationship requires the flexibility revealed in water's true being —a formlessness that flows.

– Daniel O'Kane

Daniel O'Kane is a swimmer and writer who lives in St. Paul, Minnesota.

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PRESERVING OUR POSITION IN THE ECONOMIC FIRMAMENT

HAROLD ZIMMERMAN

Unless a gigantic comet crashes into planet Earth, the dollar losing its status as the world's reserve currency is the worst potential disaster we face.

If that were to happen, the dollar would lose its value relative to other currencies—we would get less for what we sell to other nations and what we import would cost more. And inflation? "You ain't seen nothing yet!"

In addition, when converting dollars into foreign currencies, we'd be achieving diminishing rates of return. This would be especially true with China and if the Chinese yuan was crowned the New Global Currency!

Currently, when other nations purchase oil from OPEC, these transactions are nearly always conducted in U.S. dollars. As a result, banks all over the world maintain a large amount of dollars in their reserves, sometimes more than their own currency.

This demand alone could keep the value of the dollar high in relation to all other currencies. This would also be assured by trading with as many countries as possible so that foreign nations and corporations continue to use the dollar to conduct business with the United States and with OPEC.

However, if the U.S. continues to overspend in relation to its budget, we'll see the opposite effect; sooner or later the dollar will decrease in value compared to other currencies. In 2025, the federal government spent $7.01 trillion and collected $5.23 trillion in revenue, resulting in a deficit of $1.78 trillion. The U.S. spent $1.17 trillion in interest on its debt — almost double the amount it was paying five years ago. At present, servicing the national debt costs as much as annual defense budget. Our debt to gross annual domestic product (GDP) is currently listed at 125 percent. Other G7 countries are about the same, some even higher—Japan's, for instance, is 237 percent!

China's economy, meanwhile, is growing in "leaps and bounds," aided by the formation of the new trade alliance BRICS (consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) along with its neighboring nation trading partners. At the same time, Trump is alienating trading partners such as Canada, Mexico, Britain, and members of the European Union, causing them to enter into new trade agreements with China to the exclusion of the United States. Also, let us not forget losing our lucrative major export agreement of soybeans to Brazil and Argentina, causing mass layoffs, bankruptcies and destroying the economic and community infrastructure in many Midwestern farming towns. China, or course, has taken up the slack.

The dollar would lose its value relative to other currencies. And inflation? "You ain't seen nothing yet!"

– Harold Zimmerman

Then there's the price of gold going from under $3,000 to over $5,000 an ounce. This price increase is caused in large part by investors and foreign governments spending more on gold and less on U.S. Treasuries. It's another reason we absolutely must stabilize our bond market due, especially since the announcement of Trump's Liberation Day tariffs last April. In the last issue of AMASS, in addition to the use of U.S. Stablecoin backed by U.S. Treasuries (projected to be $2.8 trillion by 2028), I proposed that importers be required to purchase U.S. treasury bonds to help make up for the loss of treasury bond sales to foreign governments. The feasibility of such a plan would be enhanced if the Supreme Court rules against Trump's tariffs.

In a recent Congressional vote, enough Republicans defected from the Trump party-line to terminate tariffs on Canada. This will be especially important if the Supreme Court rules against the constitutionality of the tariffs on the basis that they are, in fact, a tax, which would place them under the sole purview of Congress. This would require that a favorable decision in Congress be mandatory for the Trump policy to continue.

Lastly, the argument could be made that if domestic importers were required to purchase bonds instead of absorbing tariffs, wouldn't that still amount to a tax? The counter argument is NO, these bonds could be easily resold on the open secondary bond market for almost what it would initially cost the importer should

a particular importer—instead of keeping their bonds and collecting the bond yields—choose to opt for immediate cash flow to invest in more purchases or other business investments, which presumably would be more profitable than what the treasury bond yields produce.

The bidding among institutional commercial bond buyers would probably go as high as 90 to 95 cents on the dollar. In this scenario, domestic importers would be buying imported goods several times a year, thereby having to also buy U.S. Treasuries several times a year under this new plan. As a result, the institutional commercial bond purchasers could see that—even at 90-95 cents on the dollar—a reasonable profit could be made.



The government simply reimburses our domestic importer for this 5-10 percent loss so there is no potential pass-thru loss to the consumer, but such reimbursement would not be with cash but with Stablecoin. Our domestic importer could then use their Stablecoins to pay their foreign importer-shipper in part, further placing into circulation new Stablecoin cryptocurrency that these foreign businesses would then redistribute throughout the world, further stabilizing our bond market (since Stablecoin is backed by U.S. Treasuries) and helping to preserve our Dollar as The World's Reserve Currency!

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LEARNING FROM PICASSO'S *GUERNICA*

HANNAH GEMENY

Pablo Picasso lived a rich life spanning the late 19th century to the end of his life in the 1970s. Through this time, countless historical events took place, applying mountains of pressure on the very fabric of society. Artists like Picasso were influenced by this never-ending storm of chaos, enduring both world wars, and the ever-evolving technology that permeated our world. It is no wonder why Picasso's *Guernica* remains one of the most chilling and influential anti-war paintings in history.

The oil painting stands over eleven feet tall and is over twenty-five feet long (roughly 3.49 meters by 7.76 meters). Unlike some of Picasso's other well-known paintings, it is monochromatic, relying on varying grey, black, and white values. The painting's composition is quintessential cubism, relying on geometric shapes and abstractions. While most of the canvas is filled with distorted figures there are several identifiable symbols: a sun, a lightbulb, a bull, and a horse. *Guernica* has been reproduced over the years, including a mural in the town of *Guernica* itself. The tiled wall adds much more texture to the piece than the original painted canvas. This is made apparent by the gridded lines running through the composition; the painting becomes a puzzle of assorted pieces, organizing the chaos into comprehensive segments.

It is impossible not to speak of *Guernica* by just grazing the surface. The painting is rich with historical context. *Guernica* is the Spanish spelling of the town *Guernika*, a town in the province of Biscay. The community is extremely small, a slice of a principality within the Basque country (a somewhat autonomous region of Northern Spain). *Guernica* fell victim to a massive bombing as a result of a civil war in 1937. Air forces decimated the land, commanded by Nationalist and dictator Francisco Franco.

Pablo Picasso was in Paris when he discovered what had happened to this small town. As a man born in Spain, one can only imagine what he must have felt upon reading the news. Interestingly, this added distance had an influence on the work. One could argue that this would be a detriment; he wasn't there when it happened, how could Picasso encapsulate the raw emotion and carnage? The painting answers that and more. The monochrome colors become not just a tone of horror but also present the image as a historic news piece. Like a war photographer, he goes beyond reporting and deep into the dread and despair of the moment.

When asked what an artist is, Picasso famously responded: "He is a political being, constantly aware of the heart breaking, passionate, or delightful hings that happen in the world, shaping himself completely in their image.

– Hannah Gemeny

When asked what an artist is, Picasso famously responded: "He is a political being, constantly aware of the heart breaking, passionate, or delightful things that happen in the world, shaping himself completely in their image. Painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war."

Guernica tells a story of spaces dismantled by chaos. Disembodied limbs are strewn across the canvas: hands, feet, arms, and even heads. One hand in particular clutches a broken blade and what appears to be a flower; the two clutched together may symbolize the capacity for peace and war in the hands of Man. This theme extends to the bull and horse, again implying that humans are certainly more animalistic than we may like to believe. The light bulb in the sun is interesting too, as the sun could also be an eye, or perhaps a rift in the sky. Either way, there is something to be said of who watches the destruction. Perhaps it is the eye of the pilot, who dropped the bombs onto the town below. It could also be the eye of a divine creator, casting judgement on the chaos. These symbols provide plenty to reflect on, and Picasso seemed comfortable with this ambiguity.

In Picasso's *Guernica: A Critical Study* edited by Ellen C. Opper, Picasso is quoted saying: "It isn't up to the painter to define the symbols. The public who looks at the picture must interpret the symbols as they understand them."

When art is framed in a political setting, could this prove to be problematic? There are plenty of arguments for what the function of art should be. After all, whole political regimes have commissioned entire departments and government bodies to do just that. If abstract art is left up to interpretation, what can be said about the quality of the message that comes from it? Does it diminish its clarity?

In this case, Picasso's *Guernica* balances abstraction and emotional intelligence and sentiment in the most effective way possible.

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The recognition is absolutely deserved, primarily because of its honesty. The entire movement of abstract art is inherently expressive and individualistic – emotive characteristics exactly opposite of what an oppressive regime expects from a nation. The world's most deplorable historical figures, including Hitler, again and again attempted to discredit the validity of such art movements. Art movements such as Cubism, Dada, and most under the category of Modern Art were demonized, penalized, and removed from the eyes of the public. This "Degenerate Art" stood opposite to values of tradition, heroism, and domesticity, all characteristics these regimes sought after in art. Picasso was not only recollecting a horrific event in time, but also used this massive mural as a platform to support modern expressionism and an art movement dedicated to freedom and creative thought.

The power of *Guernica* does not come from initial glances. It takes time to sit with, and a moment of independent reflection to fully grasp. In this fast-paced world, it is easy to look at things too quickly. Generalizations are made, headlines are quick and catchy, but it is very rare that a person gets to sit and reflect on a story for more than a few minutes or so. Picasso's work demands introspection, and through such asks, the audience grows better for it. This doesn't just increase the value of Picasso's work but also strives to empower the public with personal knowledge, media literacy, and attention to detail. All of these things make *Guernica* and pieces like it a shield against totalitarianism and non-independent thought.

The world is becoming more and more volatile as the years go on. Thus, it is extremely important to allow history to better prepare U.S.for our future. It is easy to stomach what is nice to look at, or what is comfortable, but that complacency can prove dangerous. *Guernica* is just as much a reminder of past horrors, as it is a warning to never let something like this happen again.

Hannah Gemeny writes for *MutualArt* and other publications.




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