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What's News

Business & Finance

◆ **Novo Nordisk's big bet** to improve on the success of its weight-loss drug franchise hit a stumbling block, wiping out nearly \$100 billion of the drugmaker's stock-market value. **A1**

◆ **VW said it had agreed** to a deal with its union to reduce its workforce by more than 35,000 and cut billions of dollars a year in costs while averting immediate factory closures in Germany. **B9**

◆ **The Dow, S&P 500** and Nasdaq rose 1.2%, 1.1% and 1%, respectively, but each ended the week down at least 1.8% after Wednesday's selloff. **B10**

◆ **A top financial regulator** sued JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America and Wells Fargo, alleging they allowed fraud to run rampant on the payments platform Zelle. **B9**

◆ **Netflix has secured** the U.S. rights to stream the next two women's soccer World Cups, a major step forward in its bet on live sports. **B9**

◆ **Starbucks baristas** launched protests at some union-represented locations in three cities after the union said talks with the chain hit an impasse. **B9**

◆ **Crypto news website** CoinDesk dismissed its top three editors, after the publication of a since-deleted story prompted backlash from a crypto titan. **B9**

World-Wide

◆ **The Republican-led House** approved revised legislation to avert a government shutdown and provide more than \$100 billion in disaster and farm aid, sending the measure to the Senate just hours ahead of the midnight deadline. **A1**

◆ **A driver rammed** a car into a German Christmas market, leaving at least two people dead and more than 60 injured. **A7**

◆ **Trump has threatened** to impose tariffs on European imports unless the continent buys more American oil and gas. **A2**

◆ **Biden is considering** commuting the sentences of the 40 men on the federal government's death row. **A4**

◆ **Eight people** were convicted of helping the man who beheaded a French schoolteacher four years ago after he showed caricatures of Islam's Prophet Muhammad. **A7**

◆ **The war in Ukraine** has taken a toll on Russia's stockpiles of armored vehicles, forcing Moscow to deplete its Soviet-era stockpiles and change tactics. **A8**

◆ **Malaysia has tapped** a marine-robotics company to resume the search for missing Flight MH370, which disappeared in 2014 with 239 people on board. **A8**

◆ **Canadian leader** Justin Trudeau lost the support of the New Democratic Party, which has been propping up his minority government. **A6**

NOONAN

What is your attitude toward Trump 2.0? **A13**

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College Playoff Is Off to a Cold, Snowy Start



SALTY: Indiana and Notre Dame kicked off the new 12-team college football playoff Friday night in snowy South Bend, Ind., where the Fighting Irish hosted the Hoosiers, the first of four games this weekend, including SMU vs. Penn State. **A14**

Novo Nordisk Shot Falls Short In Obesity War, Sinking Shares

By PETER LOFTUS AND DOMINIC CHOPPING

Novo Nordisk's big bet to improve on the success of its weight-loss drug franchise hit a stumbling block Friday, wiping out nearly \$100 billion of the drugmaker's stock-market value.

The Danish company—which had become Europe's biggest by market capitaliza-

tion on booming sales of Ozempic and Wegovy—reported disappointing results of a closely watched clinical trial testing an experimental anti-obesity treatment that the company hoped would be its next big weight-loss product.

The two-drug combination, dubbed CagriSema, helped study volunteers lose a significant amount of weight, some

22.7% on average after more than a year's treatment. And the drug might still make it to market. But the magnitude of weight loss it induced in the study fell short of the company's and investors' expectations.

The steep dive in Novo's shares, which plunged nearly 21% in Europe, shows the pitfalls of the large and fast-growing weight-loss drug

market that the Danish company helped create. Novo has prospered by spearheading the sale of drugs that can help people lose substantial amounts of weight, but the bar that it set with rival Eli Lilly is proving tough even for Novo to top.

Please turn to page A2

◆ **Heard on the Street: New tariff threat on oil..... B11**

James Bond Battles A New Foe: Amazon

The franchise is stuck in a tug-of-war between the family that controls 007 and the e-commerce giant

By ERICH SCHWARTZEL AND JESSICA TOONKEL

James Bond has dodged more than 4,000 bullets. He has jumped from an airplane, skied off a cliff and escaped castration by laser beam.

Now, 007 is in a new kind of peril.

Nearly three years after Amazon acquired the right to release Bond movies through its \$6.5 billion purchase of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studio, the relationship between the family that oversees the franchise and the e-commerce giant has all but collapsed. The decaying partnership has scuttled any near-term hope of a new Bond film—a black eye

for Amazon's ambitions in Hollywood, since at the time of the MGM sale, the Bond franchise represented a significant share of the \$6.5 billion the company paid for the studio.

When it comes to Bond's future, the power lies in the hands of Barbara Broccoli, who inherited the control from her father, Albert "Cubby" Broccoli, and who for 30 years has decided when a new Bond movie can go into production. She has told friends she doesn't trust algorithm-centric Amazon with a character she helped to mythologize through big-screen storytelling and gut instinct. This fall, she characterized the status of a new movie

Please turn to page A10

As Drone Hysteria Grips State, World Wonders: Why New Jersey?

* * *

Sightings launch a thousand theories while 'Sky Watch' monitors flying objects

By JOSHUA CHAFFIN

MENDHAM, N.J.—By day, Bud Murphy is a divorce lawyer. On Wednesday evening, though, the 53-year-old father of three was working a different job: drone spotter for the town's newly formed Sky Watch Task Force.

Murphy was stationed in the local Borough Park by a gazebo strung with Christmas lights to comb the night sky for signs of the drones that have been unnerving Mendhamites for weeks.

Accompanying him for the

group's inaugural stakeout was its founder, Mayor Christine Serrano Glassner, 62, and Chris Neff, 57, who typically looks for animals in his job as a conservationist at the New Jersey Audubon. Both were wearing custom-made Sky Watch hats emblazoned with a drone logo.

"I'm running out of answers for my kids," Murphy said of the flying objects he has been seeing, and sometimes chasing with his car.

"People are getting nervous," Neff said.

Drone hysteria is gripping

Please turn to page A10

EXCHANGE Ghosts Make the Most In Hot Writing Market



CODE NAME: ORION
The next great leap in AI is behind schedule and crazy expensive. **B1**

By JACQUI SHINE

Reality stars don't typically pride themselves on their literary prowess. Sandy Yawn of Bravo's seafaring series "Below Deck" is no exception. "I'm not a writer," the super-yacht captain said. "I was kicked out of 11th grade, and I went into the maritime industry."

She does, however, consider herself a storyteller. So when "the fans started asking for a leadership book," Yawn said, she hired Samantha Marshall to help.

Marshall spent weeks interviewing Yawn about her life. She learned about the time

Yawn's ship caught fire in the Red Sea and the motorcycle crash that led Yawn to a kidney-cancer diagnosis. And where details were foggy, she spoke to Yawn's family members and crew. "Sandy is the type of person who looks forward more than backward," said Marshall, a former Wall Street Journal reporter.

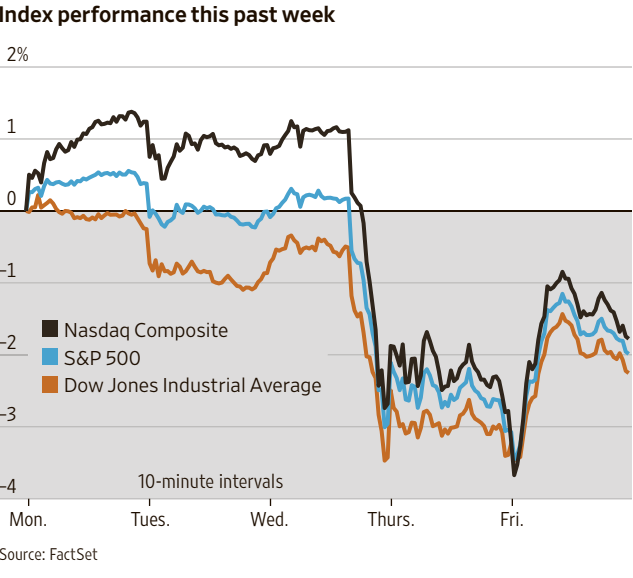
Their book, "Be the Calm or Be the Storm: Leadership Lessons from a Woman at the Helm," was published in 2023 by Hay House Business. Marshall is credited on the title page.

Ghostwriters have long been part of the world of pub-

Please turn to page A4

Stocks Rise but Fall for Week

Major U.S. stock indexes each rose more than 1% on Friday, clawing back some of Wednesday's steep drop. **B10**

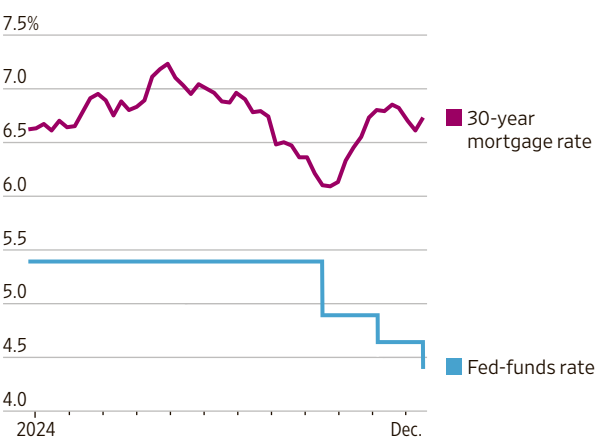


U.S. NEWS

The Fed Cut Rates. And Mortgage Costs Went Up.

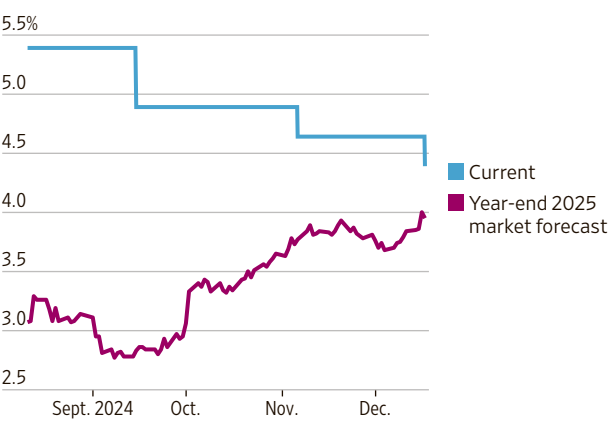
By SAM GOLDFARB

Interest rates



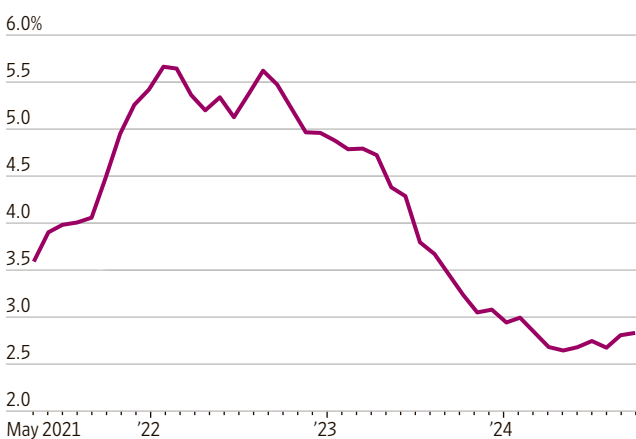
Sources: Freddie Mac (mortgage rate); Federal Reserve (Fed-funds rate)

Current and expected fed-funds rate



Note: Current rate is midpoint of Fed's target. Forecast is based on fed-funds futures. Sources: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (current); LSEG (expected)

Core PCE inflation



Source: Commerce Department via St. Louis Fed

A divergence

Hopes were high that the Federal Reserve could make homes more affordable by cutting interest rates. So far, mortgage rates instead are rising.

Average 30-year mortgages have climbed to around 6.7% from roughly 6.1% since the Fed started lowering rates in September, Freddie Mac says. They are poised to rise further because mortgage rates move with the 10-year Treasury yield.

These six charts show the forces aligned against potential home buyers at the moment.

Rates fall. Rate expectations rise.

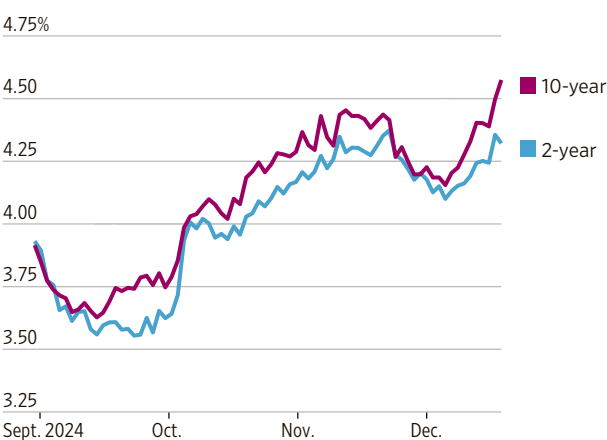
Mortgage rates are based on long-term Treasury yields. Those are mostly driven by expectations for where short-term interest rates will be in the future, rather than where they are now. And those expected rates have been going up, even as actual rates have been dropping.

The 'I' word

A big reason why rate expectations have been rising is inflation: After falling steadily back toward the Fed's 2% target, the pace of price increases has recently stalled out above that level.

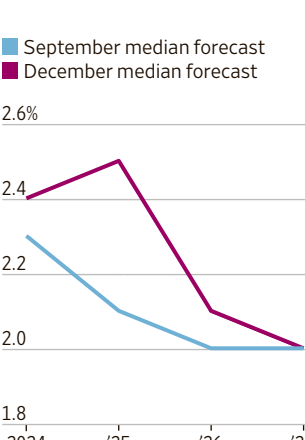
Most analysts still expect inflation to fall a little further next year, but the recent trend has become hard to dismiss. Fed Chair Jerome Powell said on Wednesday that the central bank's near-term inflation forecast had "fallen apart."

U.S. Treasury yields



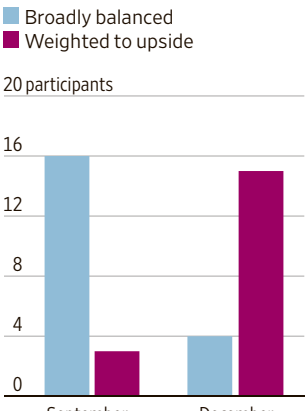
Source: Tradeweb FTSE clones

Fed PCE inflation forecasts



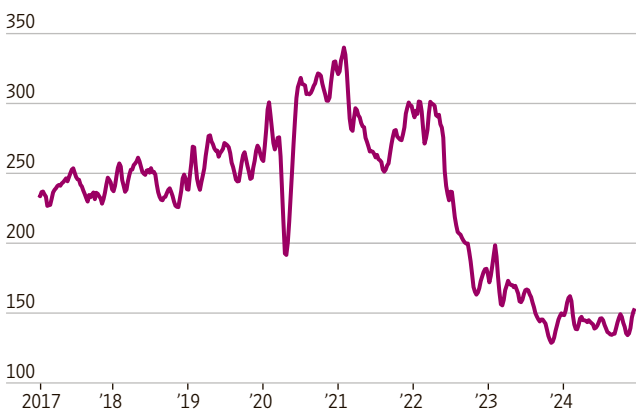
Source: Federal Reserve

Perceived risk to inflation forecast



Source: Federal Reserve

Mortgage purchase applications index, four-week moving average



Source: Mortgage Bankers Association

An added boost

Factors such as stubborn inflation, elevated budget deficits, and the prospect of tariffs and tax cuts in a second Trump administration have all helped turn investors against longer-term Treasuries in recent weeks. As a result, the 10-year yield has climbed more than the two-year yield.

New fuel

The Fed on Wednesday forecasted higher inflation over the next couple of years, with Powell saying that some officials had factored in potential policy changes into their projections.

There was also a big jump in the number of officials who said that the risks to inflation are "weighted to the upside"—likelier to come in hotter than expected than cooler.

Staying put

Meanwhile, high borrowing costs continue to dissuade people from buying homes. Mortgage applications to buy a home briefly ticked higher earlier this year. They have flatlined since.

Favored Measure of Inflation Increased Less Than Expected in November

By MATT GROSSMAN

The Federal Reserve's favored measure of inflation showed prices increased 0.1% in November and 2.4% over the past 12 months, the Com-

merce Department said Friday.

The 12-month pace marked a reacceleration from a 2.3% 12-month increase in the personal-consumption expenditures price index in October, underscoring the challenge

the Fed faces in getting inflation all the way back to its 2% target.

But inflation wasn't as stubborn as economists had predicted. Analysts polled by The Wall Street Journal had

forecast a 0.2% rise in November.

Excluding volatile food and energy prices, core PCE inflation was 0.1% in November and 2.8% over the past year. Through October, PCE infla-

tion had been 2.8% over 12 months.

Slow progress on reducing inflation has damped the Fed's earlier plans to continue cutting interest rates next year. In September, the Fed ex-

pected core PCE inflation to fall to 2.6% by the end of 2024, and 2.2% by the end of 2025.

This past week, however, officials projected that core PCE inflation will end 2024 at 2.8%, and 2025 at 2.5%.

Novo Nordisk's Shares Fall

Continued from Page One

Novo experienced a hit just like Pfizer, Amgen and other successful drugmakers seeking to enter the market confronted when their candidates didn't test well enough.

Investors had hoped CagriSema would be the next big thing in weight-loss drugs. Analysts had estimated it could generate peak annual sales of more than \$20 billion.

But the expectations hinged on CagriSema helping people lose significantly more weight than Novo and Lilly's current offerings. Novo's Wegovy has been shown to help people lose up to about 17% of body weight on average while Lilly's Zepbound has been shown to help patients lose up to an average of 22.5% after

more than a year of treatment.

CagriSema combines semaglutide—the main ingredient in Ozempic and Wegovy—with the experimental drug cagrilintide. Semaglutide works by mimicking the naturally occurring GLP-1 gut hormone to suppress appetite, while cagrilintide targets a second gut hormone called amylin that can make people feel full when eating.

The product is packaged as two separate drugs in a dual-chamber injection device.

Its late-stage, or Phase 3, study enrolled more than 3,400 people with excess body weight who didn't have diabetes. Some were given weekly injections of the CagriSema combination, others took semaglutide or cagrilintide alone, and some received a placebo. Researchers tracked how much body weight patients lost over a period of 68 weeks.

CagriSema's 22.7% reduction, while large and higher than the 2.3% among people getting a placebo, fell short of



The drugmaker reported disappointing results of a trial testing a new obesity treatment.

the 25% weight loss Novo Nordisk had expected. The company said the drug was well tolerated among patients. Side effects included mild to moderate nausea and diminished

over time, in line with existing weight-loss drugs.

The results, while less effective than Novo Nordisk had hoped, could still help bolster the company's competitive position against Lilly because CagriSema's study performance was on par with Lilly's Zepbound rather than better than it.

"We are encouraged by the weight loss profile of CagriSema," said Martin Holst Lange, Novo's executive vice president for development. He said the company would use the insights gleaned from the study to "further explore the additional weight loss potential of CagriSema."

Wall Street wanted better. BMO Capital Markets said the results delivered "coal for Christmas" for Novo, while Deutsche Bank said it meant Lilly had "made Santa's nice list."

"CagriSema was supposed to be the answer for higher efficacy and feels like we missed that mark today," said BMO analyst Evan David

Seigerman.

Novo shares initially fell by as much as 29%. The company's stock price recovered some ground and closed in Europe down 20.7%, a loss of \$94.5 billion in market capitalization.

Novo's American depositary receipts fell nearly 18% to \$85 each and are down about 17% year-to-date.

The Danish company is set to publish the results of its second late-stage trial of CagriSema in the first half of 2025. The trial is testing the treatment in adults with Type 2 diabetes and excess weight.

More potential rivals are in the works. Lilly is developing a new injected anti-obesity drug, as well as a pill, each of which could take significant market share. Other drugmakers also are still looking for a piece of the market, which analysts estimate could reach \$100 billion in annual worldwide sales.

—Helena Smolak contributed to this article.

Trump Says EU Must Buy Oil or Face Tariffs

By KIM MACKRAEL AND JOSHUA KIRBY

BRUSSELS—President-elect Donald Trump has threatened to impose tariffs on European imports unless the continent buys more American oil and gas, in a move that could frame early discussions between European leaders and his administration.

In a post on his Truth Social platform, Trump raised concerns about the U.S. trade deficit with the European Union, showing how he is doubling down on tariff threats as a negotiating tactic.

"I told the European Union that they must make up their tremendous deficit with the United States by the large scale purchase of our oil and gas. Otherwise, it is TARIFFS all the way!!!" Trump wrote.

The U.S. had a trade deficit in physical goods with the EU of 155.8 billion euros, equivalent to about \$162 billion, in 2023, according to EU trade data. The picture looks more balanced when trade in services is factored in.

"We are ready to discuss with President-elect Trump how we can further strengthen an already strong relationship, including by discussing our common interests in the energy sector," a spokesman from the European Commission said Friday.

◆ **Heard on the Street:** Lilly is obesity market king..... B11

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CORRECTIONS & AMPLIFICATIONS

A graphic indicating the average deductible amount for a single covered worker in insurance plans with a deductible was sourced from the KFF Employer Health Benefits Survey. The graphic with a U.S. News article Friday about healthcare prices incorrectly attributed the data to the Labor Department.

After taxpayers offset long-term capital gains with long-term losses, they can use remaining long-term losses to offset net short-term gains. An article about tax-planning

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U.S. NEWS



MADELINE HORDINSKI FOR WSJ (4)

In Indiana Town, Many Are Eager for Deportations

Immigration has become a focal point for Seymour; ‘kind of heartbreaking’

By Arian Campo-Flores

SEYMOUR, Ind.—Willard Everhart was incensed. After seeing this small town receive hundreds of migrants in recent years, he heard about a proposal to create an immigrant welcome center that he thought would bring even more. He joined other critics of the plan at a city council meeting in late March that drew hundreds of people, producing a line that snaked down the street.

Mayor Matt Nicholson opened the meeting by saying he wanted to clear up misinformation circulating online about the proposal—part of a broader economic-development agenda—such as the notion that the center would be a magnet for more unauthorized migrants. The gathering quickly grew raucous, including chants of “Shut it down!”

“I do not support this agenda, not in any way, shape or form,” said Everhart, a 73-year-old retired environmental-affairs director and lifelong Seymour resident, during his turn at the lectern. “We do not need this in Seymour.”

Seymour is one of many cities across the U.S. feeling the effects of a historic wave of immigration, where residents seeking to integrate migrants are clashing with others calling for them to be rooted out and sent home, saying that a flood of unauthorized migrants under the Biden administration strained schools, hospitals and housing.

Now, with President-elect Donald Trump promising mass deportations and an end to illegal border crossings, the pro-crackdown forces are feeling emboldened. They are organizing opposition to illegal immigration and pushing for legislation and action at the state level.

“Trump brought hope,” said Dana Clark, 66, who also spoke at the city council meeting. “Day one is going to see the biggest deportation ever.”

Seymour is a town of about 22,000 south of Indianapolis whose surrounding county, Jackson, voted 77% for Trump in the election. It is the birthplace of singer John Mellencamp, who sang about his experiences growing up here in his 1985 hit “Small Town.”

Incorporated in the 1860s, Seymour sits at the intersection of two major railroads. Jobs are plentiful at large manufacturers such as auto-parts suppliers and agricultural businesses, including the country’s second-largest egg producer.

Jackson County’s unemployment rate was 3.3% in October, compared with 4.4% statewide. Median household income in Seymour was \$63,000 and the homeownership rate 57% in 2023, both below statewide averages.

The hunger for labor has long drawn immigrants, who began arriving in significant numbers in the 1990s. For most of the period since, the flow of arrivals was manageable and generated few flashpoints, residents say.

Seymour’s population was 26% Hispanic in 2020, compared with 5% in 2000 and less than 1% in 1990, according to Census Bureau data. New immigration cases filed for



Scenes in Seymour, Ind., this month, from top left: Isabel Ponce, a Mexican immigrant and legal permanent resident, has opened a beauty salon and a cafe; Jon Stahl, Mike Wright, and Bob Beatty have tried to organize community opposition to illegal immigration; Larri-son’s Diner, a popular spot downtown; a mural devoted to native son John Mellencamp, whose hit song ‘Small Town’ is about growing up in Seymour.



people in the county—a proxy for migrant arrivals—jumped to 435 in the fiscal year ended in September, from 66 in 2021, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse at Syracuse University.

Isabel Ponce, a 52-year-old Mexican immigrant and legal permanent resident, arrived in Seymour 26 years ago and began working at a printing facility. She later started a beauty salon and more recently opened a cafe. She said she sympathizes with longtime

residents concerned about the burdens of new arrivals, but added that migrants play an essential economic role.

“Latino labor is very important here,” Ponce said. “You tell a Latino to work from 8:00 in the morning until 10:00 at night, they will work it.”

Mayor Nicholson, 47, who once was executive director of a literacy agency that helped immigrants learn English, said the city was approached in 2022 by the Indiana Economic Development Corporation to

participate in a study aimed at creating an agenda to boost economic opportunity for disadvantaged groups. It resulted in a 68-page draft, with proposals like developing more housing, that Nicholson said he provided to the city council in September 2023 and posted online. He heard no adverse reaction for months, he said, until some residents got wind of the welcome center proposal and set off a social-media outcry. It proved to be the spark that ignited frustration over illegal immigration.

At the March meeting, speakers fumed about migrants allegedly failing to assimilate, committing crimes and crowding multiple families into small homes.

Nicholson said later that of 21 metrics tracked by the police department, such as disorderly conduct and sex offenses, 17 were down over the past year. Seymour Police Chief Greg O’Brien said the overall crime rate is flat or down, but traffic-related cases are up.

The meeting concluded with council members passing a resolution opposing the economic-development agenda.

Tension deepened further. The following day, an immigrant with no driver’s license collided with the vehicle of James Bradley Castner, 27, who later died. Jon Stahl, Mike Wright and Bob Beatty, now a council member—pledged to try to channel the anger into action. They created a Facebook page that documents alleged crimes committed by migrants and pushes authorities to respond. It now has more than 4,500 followers.

Wright, 55, a former Marine and Indiana National Guard member, said he felt

help was on the way with a new Trump administration.

In recent months, Indiana Attorney General Todd Rokita, a Trump supporter, has issued civil investigative demands to the Seymour Police Department on whether it had “sanctuary city” policies that limit cooperation with federal immigration authorities.

Mayor Nicholson said, “We are not a sanctuary city,” adding that data don’t support the notion that the city is overwhelmed by migrants.

Unauthorized migrants in Seymour seemed largely unaware of local disputes but are fearful of Trump’s return to office. “We are all waiting to see what happens,” said Vicente Gaspar, a 27-year-old Guatemalan who crossed the border illegally six years ago and works at an auto supplier.

For Brandon Rodriguez, a 19-year-old college student born in Seymour and raised there by Mexican immigrant parents, the past year has been painful. He watched a video stream of the March city council meeting and said some comments made him feel rejected by certain members of the community he grew up in.

“I can’t believe this is what our town has come to,” Rodriguez told his parents afterward. “It’s kind of heartbreaking.”

One recent day at Larri-son’s Diner downtown, Tim Smallwood, 63, said he thinks the Trump administration should first target unauthorized migrants with criminal records and then pressure others to “self-deport.”

“It’s the only way they’ll solve this problem,” Smallwood said. “You’ve got to make it hard enough on them that they don’t want to come here in the first place.”

Holiday Travel Is Bustling, if Not Always Dashing



Drivers and airline passengers without reindeer and sleighs better make a dash for it: It is beginning to look like another record for holiday travel in the U.S.

The auto club AAA predicts that more than 119 million people will travel at least 50 miles from home between Saturday and New Year’s Day, which would top the previous

holiday-season high set in 2019. The two weekends on either side of Christmas look to be some of the most crowded times on the road and at airports, such as Dallas Love Field airport, above, on Friday.

Trade group Airlines for America also foresees record travel, saying it expected U.S. airlines to carry 54 million passengers during a 19-day

period that started Thursday and ends Monday, Jan. 6. The number would represent a 6% increase over last year.

The Transportation Security Administration expects to screen 40 million passengers over the holidays and through Jan. 2.

About 90% of Americans traveling far from home over the holidays will be in cars,

according to AAA.

The nationwide average for gasoline Thursday was \$3.05 a gallon, down from \$3.08 a year ago, according to AAA.

Transportation-data firm INRIX says travel times on highways could be up to 30% longer than normal over the holidays, with Sunday expected to see the heaviest traffic.

—Associated Press

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Writers Who Ghost Do Well

Continued from Page One
lishing. Yet their profession remains maligned, the imagined province of writers without ideas, working for clients without talent, trading, perhaps worst of all, in deception or dishonesty. *Who really wrote the book?*

But that world is changing. Ghostwriters are making six-figure salaries and negotiating more complex deals as demand increases for their services. Some are even getting credit as genuine collaborators.

Madeleine Morel, a literary agent who represents only ghostwriters at her firm 2M Communications, said that while few people can make a living as authors, “lots of writers can make their careers on ghostwriting.”

In a November survey of industry salaries by the American Society of Journalists and Authors (ASJA) and literary services firm Gotham Ghostwriters, 269 ghostwriters shared how much they make. One in three ghostwriters reported earning more than \$100,000 a year on ghostwriting projects. Twenty-five percent reported charging at least \$100,000 for their last nonfiction manuscript.

Kevin Anderson, CEO of a ghostwriting and editing company, said that his company regularly charges between \$300,000 and \$400,000 per project. That fee includes ghostwriting, editing and other publishing services. He said his company is involved in “just shy of 500” projects a year, including books that have yet to be sold.

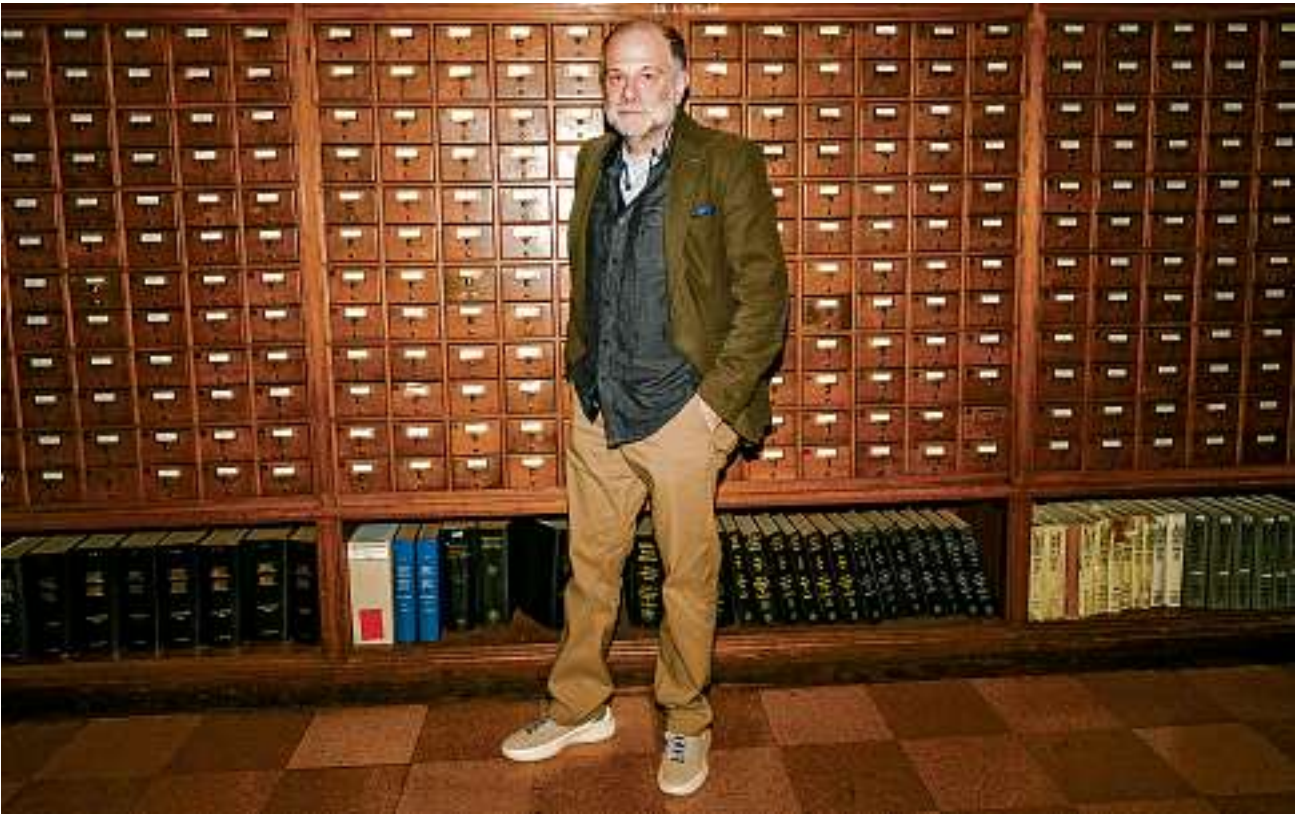
As major publishers face consolidation and slumping sales, self-publishing and “hybrid publishing”—where authors receive no advance but may earn a greater share of sales profits—are growing. This has helped propel the ghostwriting business, too.

“The barriers to entry to publishing have changed,” said Daniel Paisner, a ghostwriting veteran with more than 80 titles under his belt. “So more and more successful people are able to direct their publishing journey on their own without the gatekeepers at the Big Five publishing houses.” That often includes hiring ghosts to help.

At the Gathering of the Ghosts, a conference hosted in January by Gotham Ghostwriters agency and ASJA in



A ghostwriting conference in Manhattan, above, offered business advice earlier this year. Daniel Paisner, below, is a ghostwriting veteran with more than 80 titles under his belt.



Manhattan, 172 attendees traded business advice: on advertising one’s rates (use the phrase “starting at”); mentioning royalties in contracts (“royalties are almost nonexistent,” said Catherine Whitney); and deciding whether to sign a nondisclosure agreement or a confidentiality agreement (the latter is more flexible).

During a panel titled “The Money Dance,” Michael Levin, who got into the business in 1990, offered blunt advice: “Whatever you’re charging now, double it and add 20%.”

Michele Matrisciani of Bookchic LLC, which offers literary services including

ghostwriting, editing, proposal writing and book coaching, is credited on the cover of Gypsy-Rose Blanchard’s new memoir “My Time to Stand,” about years of childhood abuse and her conviction for second-degree murder in the death of her mother. She came to the project because she had published a book with Melissa Moore, the creator and executive producer of Lifetime’s six-episode documentary “The Prison Confessions of Gypsy-Rose Blanchard.” Moore befriended Blanchard while she was in prison, and when Blanchard asked Moore if she thought she could write a book, the two turned to Matrisciani for guidance.

They based a proposal on Moore’s initial interviews. Matrisciani then interviewed Blanchard, still incarcerated, extensively.

“I literally would be at baseball games with my sons, and I would see the call, Chillicothe Correctional Center, come on my phone, and I would just leave the field, go to my car and just sit there and just type,” she said. When Blanchard was paroled a year ago, Matrisciani and Moore went to Missouri to meet her.

In an email, Blanchard said that in addition to helping her organize her story into a narrative, “there was a creative component that I also found

healing beyond processing my past.”

All three women share cover credit (and any resulting royalties). For this reason, Matrisciani doesn’t think of it as ghostwritten. “No one is pretending that we could have ever made this book without each other,” she said. “We’re bringing our specialties to the project in equal weight.” Hers just happened to be the writing.

In the past, she said, there was some discomfort about co-authoring nonfiction books, but today “the stigma is completely removed. Why not say ‘I worked for two years with a partner, with a writing collaborator’? What’s wrong with that?”

Spending Plan Passes In House

Continued from Page One
ingly in a floor vote Thursday. “We are excited about this outcome tonight. We are grateful that everyone stood together to do the right thing,” said a relieved Johnson, whose struggles in recent days have raised questions about whether he would be re-elected speaker in the new Congress. Johnson said passage of the bill would set the stage for next year, when Republicans will control the White House as well as both chambers of Congress.

Johnson said he had spoken to Musk and had been in “constant contact” with Trump, including just 45 minutes before votes concluded.

“The speaker did a good job here, given the circumstances,” Musk posted on X about Friday’s bill.

The proposal would extend government funding until March 14, while also providing more \$100 billion in disaster relief and \$10 billion in economic aid for farmers. The bill also includes a one-year extension of the farm bill, the cornerstone of U.S. food and agriculture policy.

The bill approved Friday strips out a series of other provisions that were included in the bipartisan deal that Trump shot down, such as restrictions on investments in China. It also excludes a measure demanded by Trump in recent days to raise the nation’s borrowing cap before he takes office. GOP lawmakers instead pledged to raise the debt ceiling and cut spending next year, but not vote on it until then.

The original 1,547 pages of the bipartisan text was slimmed down to 116 pages for Thursday’s vote, and grew slightly to 118 pages on Friday.

Friday’s measure drew broad bipartisan support despite Democrats’ continued anger that the earlier agreement negotiated by Republican and Democratic leaders was killed. In Friday’s tally, 34 Republicans voted no, largely spending hawks and critics of party chiefs. All Democrats supported the bill except one: Rep. Jasmine Crockett of Texas, who voted present.

Democrats emphasized their role in defeating Trump’s effort to raise the debt ceiling on his terms.

House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D, N.Y.) told reporters that colleagues in his party “successfully stopped extreme MAGA Republicans from shutting down the government, crashing the economy and hurting working-class Ameri-



Speaker Mike Johnson addresses reporters after his third try at a funding measure succeeded.

cans all across the land.”

Asked if Democrats would support eliminating the debt ceiling next year, Jeffries said, “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

The last-minute scramble highlighted the problems Republicans have had for two years in unifying behind bills funding the federal government, with party leaders heavily dependent on Democratic votes. The GOP majority in the House currently stands at 219 to 211. In the wake of the November election, the Republicans will likely have a 219-215 margin on the first day of the new Congress.

Democrats expressed their exasperation all day, charging that Republicans were allowing Musk to drive their agenda.

“Instead of disaster funding, they’ve given us a disaster,” said

Rep. Lloyd Doggett (D, Texas).

“This is a mess that Speaker Johnson created. This is his mess to fix,” said White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre. She said Biden had been in touch with Democratic leaders on the Hill.

If no bill was close to being signed into law by 12:01 a.m. Saturday, the federal government would partially shut down, furloughing hundreds of thousands of federal workers, though critical services would continue to function. A partial shutdown of a few hours or weekend days would likely have little tangible impact on the functioning of the federal government.

The most recent government shutdown, in late 2018 and early 2019, lasted 35 days, and centered on a clash between Trump and Democrats over

whether to fund a border wall.

In this past week’s negotiations, Trump had sought a provision suspending the nation’s borrowing limit until January 2027. But Republicans instead punted the debt-limit question to next year.

Republican leaders on Friday floated a \$1.5 trillion debt limit increase along with \$2.5 trillion in cuts in mandatory spending programs—such as Medicaid, Medicare and food stamps—as part of party-line bills they are trying to pass next year.

Trump has promised to protect Medicare and Social Security, and the latter program can’t be cut through that party-line process known as budget reconciliation.

When the U.S. is running nearly \$2 trillion annual deficits, a \$1.5 trillion debt limit increase doesn’t last very long, probably not even until the 2026 midterm election.

—Richard Rubin, Catherine Lucey and Vivian Salama contributed to this article.

U.S. WATCH

BIDEN ADMINISTRATION Death Sentences Could Be Commuted

President Biden is considering commuting the sentences of most, if not all, of the 40 men on the federal government’s death row, people familiar with the matter said, a move that would frustrate President-elect Donald Trump’s ability to resume the rapid pace of executions that marked his first term.

A broad coalition of religious and civil-rights groups has been pressing Biden to take the step, and the effort gained momentum earlier this month after Pope Francis prayed for the commutation of America’s condemned inmates.

If their death sentences were commuted, the prisoners, all convicted of murder, would serve life without parole. A decision could come by Christmas, some of the people said.

A White House spokesman said that no final decision had been made.

Attorney General Merrick Garland, who oversees federal prisons, has recommended that Biden commute all but a handful of the sentences, the people familiar with the matter said, excepting a few terrorism and hate-crimes cases. The Justice Department had no immediate comment.

—Jess Bravin and C. Ryan Barber

FEDERAL RESERVE Dissenter Urges Restrictive Policy

Cleveland Fed President Beth Hammack said that her vote in favor of skipping a rate cut at the central bank’s meeting this week was based on her view that monetary policy needs to stay restrictive to control inflation.

“I believe that monetary policy will need to remain modestly restrictive for some time,” Hammack said Friday. “Based on my estimate that monetary policy is not far from a neutral stance, I prefer to hold policy steady until we see further evidence that inflation is resuming its path to our 2 percent objective.”

Hammack was the only dissenting vote on the Fed’s rate-setting committee as the group decided to reduce its target rate to a range of 4.25% to 4.5% on Wednesday.

She said that if the Fed is too tolerant of above-target inflation, it may lose credibility.

“A stall in inflation above 2 percent for too long would risk de-anchoring inflation expectations, making it harder to return inflation to our objective,” Hammack said.

On Friday, the Fed’s preferred inflation metric came in softer than expected for November, but on a 12-month basis increased to 2.4%, from 2.3% a month earlier. Core PCE inflation, which excludes volatile food and energy prices, stayed steady at 2.8%. —Matt Grossman

NEW YORK Iranian Is Charged In American Death

An Iranian officer blamed for the 2022 killing of an American in Iraq has been charged in New York with federal murder and terrorism crimes, authorities said Friday.

Federal authorities in New York City said Mohammad Reza Nouri, a captain in Iran’s paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, has been charged in Manhattan federal court with multiple terrorism and murder-related charges that carry a potential penalty of life in prison. At least one charge carries the potential for a death sentence.

Nouri, 36, is in custody in Iraq, where he already has been convicted by an Iraqi court for his role in Stephen Troell’s killing, authorities said.

Troell, a native of Tennessee, was killed in his car by unknown assailants as he pulled up to the street where he lived with his family in Baghdad’s central Karrada district. He worked for Global English Institute, a language school in Baghdad’s Harthiya neighborhood, which operated under the auspices of Texas-based nongovernmental organization Millennium Relief and Development Services.

It was a rare killing of a foreigner in Iraq, where security conditions have improved in recent years.

—Associated Press

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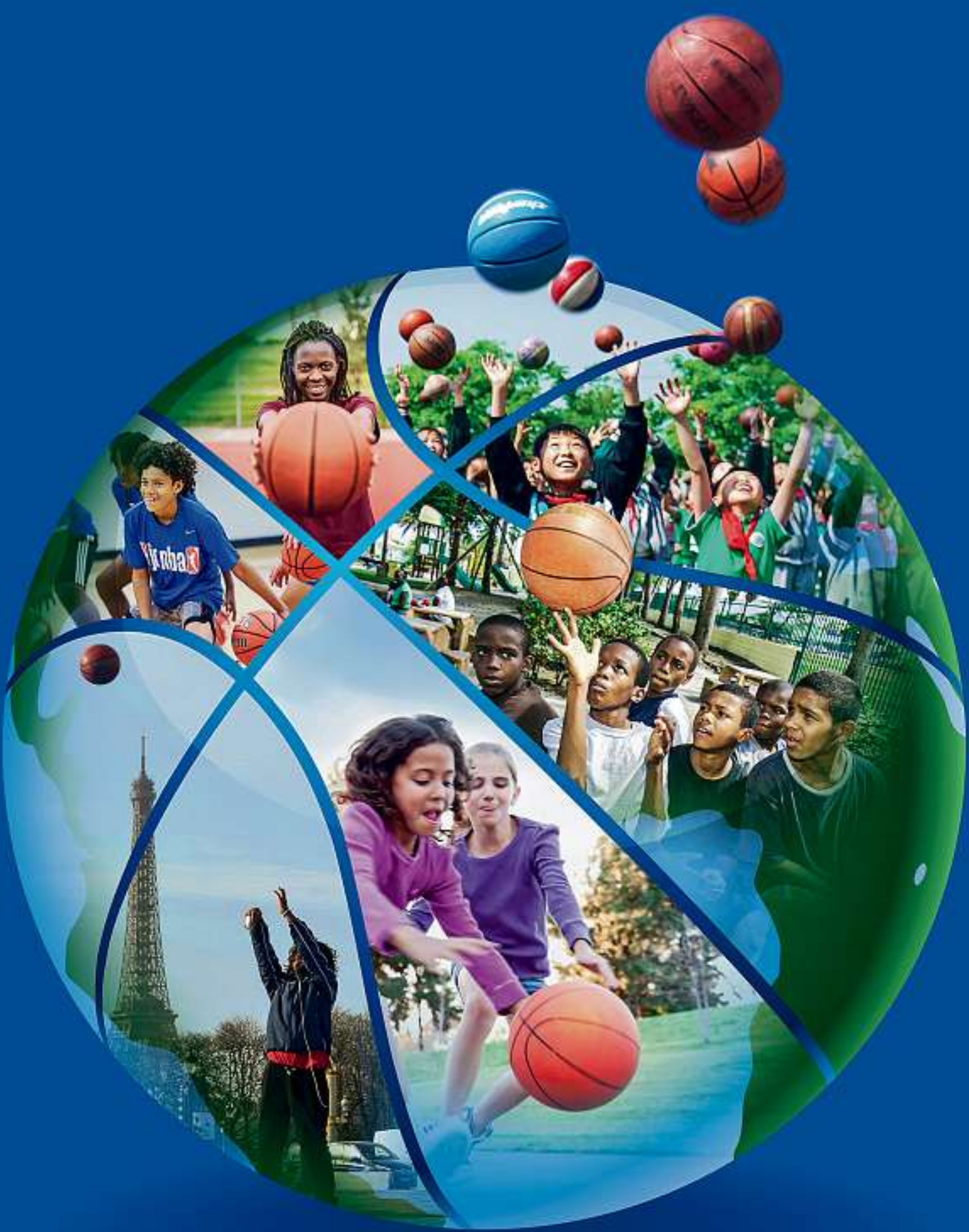
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WORLD NEWS

Diplomats Meet With Syria’s New Leaders

In Damascus, the West weighs lifting sanctions against the government

Europe and the U.S. are trying to navigate an awkward choice in Syria: Work with Islamists long designated as terrorists in the West or risk ceding influence to the countries that will.

By Omar Abdel-Baqi, Bertrand Benoit and Laurence Norman

It is a familiar conundrum posed in the past by the Taliban’s ascension to power in Afghanistan and other governments with uncertain commitments to human rights. Diplomats from Washington and European capitals took their first steps into Damascus this past week, trying to assess whether they can trust the emerging transitional govern-

ment being formed by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, the Sunni-Islamist group that led the coalition of fighters that toppled the Assad regime.

The militant group was formed as an offshoot of al Qaeda, and its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa was an anti-American jihadist in Iraq who spent five years in a U.S. prison camp there. He disavowed extremism years ago and has pledged to respect Syria’s ethnic and religious diversity.

Western powers are wary. Before lifting sanctions against HTS and Syria, they are looking for commitments to dispose of the chemical weapons left over from former President Bashar al-Assad’s despotic rule, protect women and minority groups and fight against extremists like Islamic State that could flourish in Syria’s power vacuum. They also want to return some of the millions of Syrian refugees who fled the war. But Western countries don’t want Syria’s new govern-

ment to fall under the sway of other powers with interests there like Russia and Iran.

The State Department’s top Middle East official, Barbara Leaf, and special presidential envoy for hostage affairs Roger Carstens met Sharaa in Damascus on Friday in the first visit to the Syrian capital by U.S. diplomats since Assad’s regime crumbled on Dec. 8.

Leaf said Sharaa—who recently dropped his *nom de guerre* Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani—committed to preventing terrorist groups from posing a threat to Syria or the U.S. and its regional partners. Based on that she said the U.S. dropped a \$10 million bounty it placed on him several years ago.

She said she also communi-

cated the importance of broad consultation in the transition to a new government that represents and includes women, as well as Syria’s diverse ethnic and religious communities. She described the discussion with Sharaa as “quite good, very productive, detailed,” and said Sharaa came across as pragmatic. “We will judge by deeds, not just by words.”

Diplomats from the U.S., U.K., France and Germany also visited Damascus this past week. One European diplomat said HTS made clear that it is trying to push Iranian influence out of the country, and is looking to rebuild existing state institutions with the help of Syrians in the diaspora, rather than replacing them from scratch. The diplomat said Syria’s new leaders

likely will make mistakes because of their inexperience with governing, but they seem focused on reconstruction.

British officials sense that the former rebels want reform and don’t want to run a tyrannical state, a U.K. diplomat who met with the group said, but they worry about whether HTS will actually do as it says.

HTS has enormous tasks ahead of it and will need international support and funds to rebuild the country and its government, restart the economy, and resettle millions of refugees. The group, which is broadly aligned with Turkey, is also negotiating with Russia over the presence of Moscow’s important military bases on its coast. Syria also shares a volatile border with Israel, which has stationed troops on Syrian territory and destroyed much of the country’s military assets.

Among the biggest tasks for Western countries is assessing whether they should lift sanctions imposed after

the start of the civil war in 2011, and remove the terrorist designation for HTS.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the U.S. has urged HTS to usher in a moderate, inclusive and nonsectarian government. The Taliban has become a pariah since it reimposed strict Islamic rule on Afghanistan after the chaotic U.S. departure in 2021, he reminded them.

HTS has detained political opponents, tortured prisoners and committed extrajudicial killings in northwestern Syria, territory it partially controlled before Assad’s fall, said a report by the United Nations’ Syria Commission of Inquiry. Despite HTS’s vow to protect minorities in Syria, some of them have expressed anxiety over life under an Islamist group.

Sharaa has called on the West to lift sanctions and remove the group’s terrorist designation so the new government could access more funds to rebuild the country.

An Arab Minority Stands Between Israel and Syria

By DOV LIEBER

MAJDAL SHAMS—For decades after Israel conquered the Golan Heights, the minority Druze community that lives in this mountainside village considered themselves Syrians. But for many younger Druze, Israel is the only country they have known, and they see their future there, not in Syria.

“I don’t want to return,” said Nirvana Yusef, 20 years old, whose grandfathers fought for Syria against Israel in the 1967 Mideast War. “We live a much higher quality of life here.”

Israel is trying to capitalize on that sentiment, hoping to use the community’s success in Israel to persuade its relatives across the border in Syria that their neighbor is a friendly force. It is part of a broader effort that Israel is making after Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s fall to help secure its border.

As Syrian rebels overtook Damascus, Israel’s military and political officials rushed to meet with the leadership of the Druze—a 150,000-strong Arabic-speaking community in Israel that has strong familial and communal ties to the hundreds of thousands of Druze living in southern Syria. About 20,000 of them live in the Golan Heights. Druze practice a closely held religion that formed as an early offshoot from Islam.

Both Israel and the Druze minority in Syria fear that despite the moderate messaging of Syria’s new Islamist leaders, they represent a serious future threat. To that end, Israel occupied the buffer zone between the two countries, and in recent days destroyed Syrian military assets to prevent them from falling into potentially hostile hands.

Should Syria splinter or descend into further rounds of factional fighting, current and former Israeli officials say Is-

rael could help protect Druze communities in Syria, and in turn, the Druze could act as a buffer against enemies trying to encroach on Israel’s borders.

“Israel is looking for good neighbors, and the Druze don’t want anyone to threaten their existence, honor, land or religion,” said Brig. Gen. (Res.) Hassen Hasson, a Druze and former senior Israeli military official.

Such a tightening of ties would be the continuation of a policy Israel instituted in the early years of the Syrian civil war. Between around 2011 and 2018, Israel established ties with a variety of rebel groups near its border, and gave them cash, food, fuel and medical supplies. Publicly, Israel said its efforts were strictly humanitarian.

Current and former Israeli officials, including high-ranking Druze authorities, said Israel secretly acted to protect Druze in Syria during the civil war, but declined to provide details.

“We did it in the past, and we can do it in the future,” said Hamad Amar, an Israeli Druze lawmaker. He stressed that Israel doesn’t want any Syrian land, and that it wishes to live peacefully alongside Syria.

In 2017, amid fierce fighting in Hader, a Druze village across the border from Majdal Shams, Israel’s military said it wouldn’t let Hader be harmed.

A recent video spread rapidly on social media showed a gathering of Druze in Hader at which people called for it to be annexed by Israel. “Even if it’s considered evil to ask to be annexed to the [Israeli] Golan, it’s a much lesser evil than the evil coming our way,” a speaker is heard saying.

Those sentiments were roundly opposed by the leaders of Hader and other nearby villages in an official statement. They said the Druze wished to be a part of a united democratic Syria and that the



Majd Abu-Saleh, above, said: ‘We are Syrian civilians living under Israeli occupation.’ At left, Nirvana Yusef, who works in a Majdal Shams pub, said: ‘I think I’m from Israel, not Syria.’



live in a united secular Syria.

Syria’s aspiring leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa—who recently dropped his *nom de guerre* Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani—met Syria’s Druze leaders on Dec. 16 and told them that he expects Syria to remain unified, and all fighters integrated into the ministry of defense.

In Majdal Shams, the blue and white flag of Israel flies on each municipal building. While Arabic is still the dominant language, most here now also speak Hebrew.

“I think I’m from Israel, not Syria,” said Yusef, who works at a pub in Majdal Shams. She is part of the roughly 20% of Druze in the Golan Heights who have gotten Israeli citizenship, most in the past decade.

Hers isn’t a universal sentiment. All of the village’s statues, some recently decorated with the new three-star flag of a free Syria, celebrate their community’s historic role in establishing modern Syria in 1946. “We are Syrian civilians living under Israeli occupation since 1967,” said Majd Abu-Saleh, 66,

a lawyer from Majdal Shams.

One of the village’s landmarks is a statue of Abu-Saleh’s grandfather, Asaad Kanj Abu Saleh, a local leader in the Arab revolt against the French rulers of Syria in the 1920s. It features the revolutionary atop a horse on its hind legs, thrusting his rifle into the air.

“We paid the blood for the independence of Syria,” he said, emphasizing that he was expressing his own opinion.

As a vulnerable minority spread through Lebanon, Syria and northern Israel with no country of their own, Druze are loyal to whichever country they live in. But that strategy is under threat as Mideast minorities have been persecuted because of the breakdown of countries like Iraq and Syria, said Yusri Hazran of Jerusalem’s Hebrew University, who is Druze and researches minorities in the region. The internal dispute among Druze over whether to ally with Israel depends on if individuals believe in the safety of the territorial national state, he said.

WORLDWATCH



POINT OF ORDER: Lawmakers from the Democratic Progressive Party and the opposition party Kuomintang debated controversial bills the old-fashioned way in Taiwan’s legislature on Friday.

RUSSIA

U.S.-Made Missiles Kill 6, Official Says

A Ukrainian attack Friday on Russia’s Kursk border region using U.S.-supplied missiles killed six people, including a child, Kursk acting Gov. Alexander Khinshstein said. The attack came hours after Ukraine said a Russian missile strike on Kyiv killed at least one person and wounded 13. Moscow said that was in response to a Ukrainian strike earlier in the week. Friday’s strike with Himars missiles also left 10 people hospitalized, Khinshstein said.

The truck-mounted Himars launchers fire missiles capable of hitting targets up to 50 miles away. President Biden last month authorized Ukraine to use U.S.-supplied missiles to strike deeper inside Russia, easing earlier limitations. The move was a response to Russia’s deploying North Korean troops, officials said.

—Associated Press

LITHUANIA

Plane Crash Wasn’t Result of Sabotage

A preliminary analysis of the flight data recorder and cockpit voice recorder, as well as an examination of evidence from the accident scene found “no signs of unauthorized interference” behind the crash of a DHL cargo plane as it approached the airport in Vilnius on Nov. 25, the Lithuanian government said Friday.

A Spanish crew member was killed and the other three crew members were injured, but no one was hurt on the ground as the 31-year-old Boeing 737 crashed and skidded into a house. Officials said at the time that one line of inquiry would be whether Russia played a role, given its suspected involvement in cases of sabotage, though they stressed there was no evidence pointing in that direction.

—Associated Press

CANADA

Trudeau’s Grip on Power Weakens

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s hold on power grew more tenuous Friday as the New Democratic Party, which has been propping up his minority government, said it was withdrawing its support.

A chorus of voices from Trudeau’s Liberal Party, called on him to resign as he named a new cabinet days after the resignation of the finance minister, who stepped down because she disagreed with Trudeau’s spending proposals. On social media Friday, Trudeau said he made changes to the cabinet and “it’s back to work on what matters most—making life better and more affordable for Canadians.”

The NDP, the Conservative Party and Bloc Quebecois together have enough votes to pass a no-confidence motion against Trudeau when Parliament reconvenes in January.

—Vipal Monga and Paul Vieira

WORLD NEWS

At Least Two Die in Attack In Germany

More than 60 were injured at Christmas market; a suspect is being questioned

By BERTRAND BENOIT AND BOJAN PANCEVSKI

A driver rammed a car into a Christmas market in the eastern German town of Magdeburg, leaving at least two people dead and more than 60 injured, officials said, in a setback for local security agencies which had warned about markets being targeted by Islamist attackers.

The suspect, a 50-year-old doctor from Saudi Arabia who had been living in Germany legally since 2006, was detained, said Reiner Haseloff, state premier of Saxony-Anhalt. One of the casualties was a child, he said.

It was too early to tell whether the attack, which oc-

curred shortly after 7 p.m. Friday, was a terror attack, Haseloff said, “though there are certainly elements pointing in this direction.”

Other details suggested the more complicated picture of a man deeply critical of Islam and who felt persecuted by German authorities.

The Saudi national had arrived in Germany in 2006 as an asylum seeker, arguing that he fled the Islamic theocracy that ruled Saudi Arabia, according to a senior German security official familiar with the investigation.

He obtained refugee status and later received permanent residence in the country, where he started working as a doctor and psychotherapist. He lived in the town of Bernburg.

The man rose to prominence in the small Saudi community in Germany as an anti-Islam and womens’ rights activist.

He ran a website and sev-



Emergency services, police and firefighters were on the scene after a man drove a car through a Christmas market in Magdeburg, Germany, on Friday. The victim's identity was blurred by the photo service to adhere to European privacy laws.

eral social-media channels warning about the dangers of Islamization and advising prospective asylum seekers. He posted frequently about what he said was the persecution of women in the Middle East.

He had also shared pro-Israel content since the Oct. 7 attack, as well as support for Germany’s anti-immigration AfD party.

In his recent social-media

posts published days before the attack he claimed the German government was promoting the country’s Islamization, and accused authorities of censoring and persecuting him because of his critical views of the religion.

On his website, he warned prospective refugees to avoid Germany because of what he said was its government’s tolerance of radical Islam.

While the motives for the attack remain unclear, it revived painful memories for Germans, coming one day after the anniversary of a terror attack in Berlin in December 2016, in which a rejected Tunisian asylum seeker drove a stolen truck through a Christmas market in the capital, killing 13 people.

Since that attack, Christmas markets have been held under

heightened precautions, with security guards often checking bags at the entrance and bollards blocking access for vehicles.

Watch a Video



Scan this code for a video on a car ramming the crowd at a German market.

Eight People Guilty in Beheading of French Teacher

By NOEMIE BISSEERBE

PARIS—Eight people were convicted of helping the man who beheaded French schoolteacher Samuel Paty four years ago after he showed caricatures of Islam’s Prophet Muhammad in class as part of a lesson on free speech.

The attacker, an 18-year-old Russian national of Chechen origin identified by authorities as Abdoullakh Anzorov, was fatally shot by police minutes after the attack.

After a seven-week trial,

judges in Paris handed down a 13-year prison sentence to Brahim Chnina, the father of one of Paty’s students, for belonging to a terrorist organization. Chnina made videos in which he called Paty a thug and demanded his dismissal.

Abdelhakim Sefrioui, a 65-year-old Franco-Moroccan Islamist, who helped Chnina lead a campaign online against Paty, got a 15-year prison sentence. The two men testified that they never called for Paty’s murder.

Azim Epsirkhanov, 23, and Naïm Boudaoud, 22, each re-

ceived a sentence of 16 years in prison for helping Anzorov buy a knife, which wasn’t used in the slaying, and driving him to the school on the day of the attack. Both men testified that they didn’t know Anzorov’s intentions. They said Anzorov told them the knife was a gift for his grandfather.

Four other defendants were in contact with Anzorov on social media and received sentences ranging from one to five years in prison for inciting or condoning terrorism.

Paty, a 47-year-old history

and geography teacher, was killed in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, a Paris suburb, on Oct. 16, 2020. The assault shocked the nation and prompted a crackdown by French authorities on Islamic associations, schools and mosques that they said were promoting an extreme version of Islam that challenged France’s secular values.

Two days after the attack, thousands of demonstrators poured into the streets of cities across France to pay tribute to Paty, proclaiming their support for the nation’s teachers.

Still, French authorities have done little to help protect teachers, who continue to be the target of threats and abuse, says Mickaëlle Paty, the sister of the assassinated teacher. “I feel like my brother died for nothing,” she said in a TV interview on Friday before the ruling was announced.

Authorities said Paty’s assailant acted after seeing Chnina’s videos. In one video, Chnina said Paty asked Muslim students to raise their hands and then leave the classroom, before showing his daughter

and the remaining students an image of a naked man that Chnina said the teacher identified as Prophet Muhammad. Paty said he had led a debate in his class over the limits of free speech and showed cartoons of Prophet Muhammad from Charlie Hebdo, the satirical magazine targeted in a terrorist attack in 2015. He said he had warned students who might be offended to avert their eyes before he displayed the cartoons.

Ten days later, Paty was killed after leaving school.

Musk Eyes Shaking Up Politics in United Kingdom

By MAX COLCHESTER

LONDON—Elon Musk has helped propel Donald Trump into the White House. Now, he might have his sights on a political shake-up at another iconic address: 10 Downing Street.

There is growing alarm among Britain’s political establishment that Musk, who has been sharply critical of Prime Minister Keir Starmer, might radically alter the U.K.’s electoral landscape by donating millions of dollars to Reform UK, a populist upstart party. Britain’s government says it wants to change the law to prevent foreigners from making outsize political donations.

Reform leader Nigel Farage, a Trump supporter, recently met with Musk and says the world’s richest man is considering donating to Reform, a move that could turbocharge the fast-growing anti-immigration party’s support.

Musk regularly has endorsed politicians or parties he likes. Donating to a foreign political party, however, would be new ground. He has so far relied on X, the social-media platform he owns, as a megaphone to promote his views. This week, he also endorsed Germany’s far-right Alternative for Germany, an anti-immigration party that is running second in polls ahead of a Feb. 23 election.

Farage, who was a driving force behind Britain’s departure from the European Union, has been spreading the message among Trump allies that Britain is in the grip of a woke-minded, left-wing Labour government. Labour has only been in power for five months after winning a July election.

This past week, Musk was photographed meeting Farage in Mar-a-Lago. Farage shared a photo of the meeting on X on Tuesday with the caption: “Britain needs Reform.” Musk replied: “Absolutely.”

Following speculation, Farage confirmed he is in negotiations with Musk over a possible donation, the size and timing of which he says is un-



Reform Party leader Nigel Farage, right, says Elon Musk is considering donating to his anti-immigration party.

known. Asked on Wednesday if Musk would donate, Farage said: “He isn’t against the idea.” Musk didn’t reply to a request for comment.

In early December, a British newspaper reported Musk was considering donating \$100 million. When asked whether he would give Farage that kind of money Musk said “Err, no.”

Still, the issue has dominated Westminster’s Christmas-party circuit. Even only a few million dollars would be a phenomenal amount in a thinly funded political system. During this year’s U.K. elections, the country’s biggest single donor gave £2.5 million to the Labour Party, about \$3.1 million.

In the U.S., Musk ultimately poured roughly \$250 million into two pro-Trump groups ahead of the election.

The U.K. government has said it wants to change the law to stop foreign political interference, but it is unclear when or what those changes would look like. Members of the opposition Conservative Party have asked Musk to give them the money instead.

Musk’s interest in British politics could be traced to his

view that the U.K. is a bulwark against wokeism in the anglosphere, says Gawain Towler, a former adviser to Farage. Musk “sees Britain as the Athens to America’s Rome,” he adds. Farage said in a newspaper article that Musk “regards the mother country of the English-speaking world as being in very deep trouble” under mainstream parties.

Musk’s interest in Reform appears to have been piqued just after Farage launched an election campaign in June with a rallying cry to take on the British establishment and clamp down on illegal migration. “What are your policies?” Musk asked him on X. “Call me!” Farage replied.

Musk said on X that “civil war is inevitable” in Britain because of the high level of immigration. Starmer’s spokesman said Musk’s claims are untrue.

About this time last year, Farage was eating a kangaroo anus on a reality TV show as his political career wandered. Six months ago, he set out to secure a bridgehead in parliament before mounting a bid to become prime minister. He achieved his first aim. The next step will take funds.

Bromance with Farage is causing a stir among Britain’s political class.

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WORLD NEWS

Russia Taps Soviet-Era Stockpiles

Moscow has lost about 11,000 armored combat vehicles in the Ukraine conflict

By MATTHEW LUXMOORE

KYIV, Ukraine—When the director of Russia’s largest film studio met President Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin last month, he highlighted how he supported the war—by handing over dozens of tanks and armored vehicles dating to the 1950s.

The company, Mosfilm, had used armored vehicles from the Soviet era as props for decades. Now, with the Ukraine war chewing through stockpiles, Mosfilm is turning them over. “I was told they were needed, so I reached out to the Defense Ministry,” Karen Shakhnazarov, Mosfilm’s director general, told Putin.

The donation of about 50 vehicles was a drop in the bucket for Russia’s military—but an indication of how deep the deficit of armor has become for one of the world’s most powerful armies. Two-and-a-half years of intense warfare along a 600-mile front has taken its toll, while sanctions have cut off access to Western parts.

Russia has lost more than 11,000 armored combat vehicles in the war, including some 3,600 tanks, according to the estimates of Western officials and analysts—equivalent to nearly 15 years of Russian tank production at prewar levels. Analysts say Russia has about 2,600 tanks in reserve.

New tank deliveries to the front largely are older models plucked from storage, which depletes stockpiles and degrades the overall quality of Russia’s force. The vehicles have “to be sent for refurbishment, then for maintenance and finally, prepared for combat duty,” said a senior Ukrainian intelligence official. “All of this takes time.”

Russia has shown an ability to adapt to fierce resistance from Ukraine and pressure



Destroyed Russian armored vehicles lined the street in the city of Bucha, Ukraine, in 2022.

from Western sanctions, and it is doing so again now to preserve its supplies of armored vehicles. It has shifted its fighting tactics, stepped up efforts to refurbish old equipment and increased military spending. Most analysts estimate, at the current rate of production, Russia has enough tanks to last another two years.

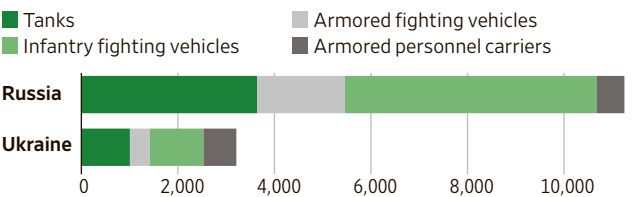
Moscow’s existing stocks are a legacy of the late Soviet period, when it ramped up defense production in anticipation of a potential war with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. By 1991, the crumbling U.S.S.R. had tens of thousands of tanks in reserve, and as many armored vehicles as the rest of the world put together.

In subsequent years, many of them stood idle in fields, exposed to the elements. Thousands were shipped off for export. A small number were melted down for the production of other hardware. A large portion of what is available today dates from the 1960s and 1970s and requires weeks of work to become operative.

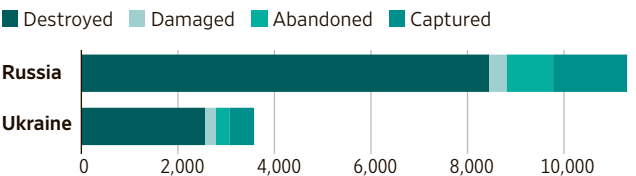
The vehicles handed over by Mosfilm, a titan of Soviet and Russian film production, were given to the studio by

Russian and Ukrainian losses of armored vehicles since February 2022

BY VEHICLE TYPE



BY VEHICLE STATUS



Note: As of Dec. 18

Source: Oryx

the Soviet Defense Ministry in the 1960s. The company is now returning what it had effectively borrowed, including six armored-personnel carriers and 36 tanks dating to the period just after World War II.

“Losses can’t be replenished very quickly,” said Ruslan Pukhov, head of the Moscow-based defense think tank Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies. “Since you constantly need more, you priori-

tize quantity over quality.”

In the first months of its 2022 invasion, Russia expected a swift thrust toward Kyiv. It deployed large parts of its arsenal to Ukraine, including some of its most modern equipment. Kyiv’s forces had success picking off Russian armored vehicles using drones and antitank missiles in spectacular displays of firepower. By the end of the year, ordinary Ukrainians could stroll

Malaysia Resumes Search For Flight

By JON EMONT

Malaysia’s government has tapped a private marine-robotics company to resume the search for missing Flight MH370, in a fresh effort to resolve one of history’s biggest aviation mysteries.

The Malaysia Airlines passenger jet disappeared from radar screens en route to Beijing from Kuala Lumpur on March 8, 2014, with 239 people on board from more than a dozen countries, including 152 Chinese nationals.

Search teams led by Australia scoured vast stretches of the ocean for signs of the wreckage, but came up empty after a multiyear effort that, at about \$150 million, was the most expensive in aviation history. At least three pieces of debris from the plane were found, including a tail part located on a sandbank in Mozambique and a wing part on Réunion Island, in the Indian Ocean. Researchers used these snatches of evidence and complicated modeling to try to locate the bulk of the wreckage, without success. The government-led search ended in 2017.

On Friday, Anthony Loke, Malaysia’s transportation minister, said his government had agreed in principle to authorize an 18-month search by Ocean Infinity, a marine-robotics company with offices in the U.S. and U.K., in a new area measuring roughly 5,800 square miles in the southern Indian Ocean. Negotiations are being finalized, but the government is offering \$70 million to Ocean Infinity on a “no find, no fee” model.

Without examining the aircraft, there has been no way to determine a conclusive cause of the crash, but Malaysian officials believe there was a deliberate action to take the plane off course.

Brazil Weighs Spending Cuts As Currency Is in a Tailspin

By SAMANTHA PEARSON AND KEJAL VYAS

SÃO PAULO—For months, Brazilian leaders have thrown nearly everything they have to stop the country’s currency from a precipitous yearlong plunge. But nothing worked, including hiking its benchmark interest rate above 12%.

Now, as the Brazilian currency, the real, slipped in recent days to its lowest level against the dollar since its introduction in 1994, lawmakers rushed to do something that is anathema to leftist President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva: cut government spending.

Da Silva and his leftist allies in Congress have spent lavishly on pensions and social benefits since he defeated the far-right firebrand Jair Bolsonaro in the 2022 election. But worries about Brazil’s soaring deficit have torpedoed the currency of Latin America’s biggest economy, just as this country of more than 200 million faces the prospect of a trade battle with President-elect Donald Trump that could weaken the real further.

For the leftist leaders who rule most of Latin America’s biggest countries, Trump’s incoming administration promises significant political challenges. His government will pressure drug-producing countries—among them Mexico and Colombia—to slow the exportation of fentanyl, methamphetamine and cocaine. Trump has pledged to slow illegal migration, which courses from South America to the Mexico border.

And he’s outlined how the U.S. will freely use tariffs to achieve trade and other goals. From Mexico to Brazil, economies are bracing for higher taxes on their exports to the U.S. The exception may be Argentina, where President Javier Milei has built close ties to both the incoming president and tech mogul Elon Musk. Milei has expressed hope Trump would support his free-market overhaul and even initiate trade talks.

While Trump has yet to



The Brazilian currency has slipped to its lowest level against the dollar since its introduction in 1994. A São Paulo grocery.

outline details of how he will deal with Latin America, his presence is already being felt in the currency markets.

Comments by Jerome Powell, Chair of the U.S. Federal Reserve, this past week on inflation risks under the incoming administration strengthened the dollar, adding to the weakness of Brazil’s currency. The Brazilian real has lost about 20% against the dollar this year despite a series of massive dollar auctions by the Central Bank to reverse the trend.

“Most of the Brazilian economic challenges are domestic,” said Alberto Ramos, an economist at Goldman Sachs. But a stronger U.S. dollar and fewer rate cuts ahead by the Fed “require even more policy discipline by the Brazilian authorities.” Brazil’s Senate on Friday approved the remainder of the government’s long-awaited fiscal package that wasn’t approved the night before. The goal is to cut annual spending by some \$11.6 billion to calm fears over the country’s widening deficit.

The fiscal package caps minimum-wage increases to which pension spending is

linked, restricts benefits for the elderly and disabled, limits lawmakers’ ability to allocate public funds, and reduces a series of tax benefits.

Investors say it still might not be enough.

Da Silva has been under growing pressure as the country’s budget deficit—long the Achilles’ heel of Latin America’s biggest economy—has crept closer to 10%. The deficit reached 9.52% of GDP in October, up from 4.6% in January last year, according to the latest central bank data.

The government was facing a race against the clock to approve the proposed cuts in Congress when da Silva was

rushed to the hospital for emergency brain surgery this month, causing more delays. J.P. Morgan estimates that the Brazil and Mexico economic growth will taper off in 2025.

The region as a whole is still expected to expand by 2.2% next year, compared with 1.8% in 2024, buoyed by a turnaround in Argentina under Milei, whose deregulation and budget cuts have helped tame runaway inflation.

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WORLD NEWS

China Tells Economists They Must Be Boosters

By REBECCA FENG

HONG KONG—China economists and strategists at leading brokerages say they are hewing closer to the official government line and being cautious in their commentary in response to signs of tighter monitoring.

The latest sign came Friday when the state-run China Securities Journal said the main securities industry body has told brokerages to ensure their chief economists play a positive role in analyzing official policies and boosting investor confidence.

Government sensitivity to criticism has risen recently as discontent festers. Directives to be careful about commentary are a familiar feature of China's markets, especially during politically delicate periods. From time to time economists and analysts are sidelined from social media after sharing unauthorized or negative views.

Some local securities bureaus in China have told brokerages and other financial institutions to place more scrutiny on public statements made by employees, especially chief economists and research analysts, Chinese media outlet Caillian reported Thursday.

China Securities Journal, supervised by the government's official Xinhua News Agency, cited the official guidance as saying chief economists should publicize and interpret official policies and guide market expectations, and that those who repeatedly cause serious adverse effects with inappropriate comments should be punished or possibly fired. The newspaper didn't say what comments were inappropriate. The China Securities Regulatory Commission didn't respond to a request for comment.

Revenge Clouds Bangladesh's Future

Victims of the ousted prime minister's harsh rule seek justice, retribution

DHAKA, Bangladesh—When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was toppled in August in a student-led uprising, it was supposed to be a new dawn for Bangladesh. Instead, the raw wounds left by her repressive rule have prompted many to pursue revenge by weaponizing the law—just as she did.

By Jon Emont, Refayet Ullah Mirdha and Muktadir Rashi

Two journalists, seen by some as propagandists for Hasina's regime, are under investigation for allegedly abetting the killing of protesters by her government. A sportsman who was a lawmaker from Hasina's party was among more than 150 named in another murder case linked to protester deaths—even though he was abroad playing in a cricket tournament at the time. In one murder case registered this year, related to a protester who died last year, some 700 people have been named as suspects.

In some incidents, mobs have lynched supporters of Hasina's party, the Awami League.

The country's reckoning poses a stiff challenge for Nobel Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, a soft-spoken development economist, who answered the call of student protesters to lead the country.

Yunus must answer demands for justice from those who were victims of Hasina's long rule, while preventing a spiral of violence that could derail his efforts to shepherd the country to a stable democracy.

"We always try to remind ourselves, this is the new Bangladesh," he said in an interview. "We don't want to copy the old Bangladesh."

The thirst for justice runs deep following the harsh rule of the 77-year-old Hasina,



Mohammad Baker, right, has been seeking justice for his son, Ahadul Islam, who was shot in the leg during a summer protest.

who took refuge in India after being toppled last summer. Some 1,500 people died in demonstrations that broke out in July, initially over access to government jobs, before spiraling into a broader challenge to Hasina's rule.

On the long list of people targeted by the former government is Yunus himself. He was ousted from the pioneering microfinance organization he founded and faced numerous investigations. He denied wrongdoing. Since taking power, he has been cleared of charges by courts.

Hasina, whose father was the leader of Bangladesh's independence struggle, didn't start out an autocrat. Her first stint running the country came after she and other parties fought to end a period of military rule during which she was often under arrest.

Back in power since 2009, Hasina was far quicker to punish her enemies. Critics say the courts were used to pursue po-

litical opponents, some of whom were sentenced to death, including several from Bangladesh's main Islamist party, the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami. Investigators have unearthed secret detention centers and evidence of torture during her reign and are examining nearly 1,700 complaints of enforced disappearances.

A commission set up by the Yunus government said in its preliminary report this past week that some victims were shot in the head and tossed in rivers with cement bags tied to their bodies. One prisoner, former army officer Abdullahil Amaan Azmi, released in August after eight years of captivity in a dark cell, said he prayed to God every night "asking that my body is not turned into a

meal for dogs."

Mohammad Arafat, who served as information minister under Hasina, denied her government was authoritarian.

After Hasina fled, there was a short period of violent score-settling. More than 100 people likely were killed in retaliatory attacks, mainly Awami League and police officials, the United Nations Human Rights Office said. The government says such incidents have largely declined. Many people with links to the previous government remain in hiding.

A senior BNP member said attacks are often driven by personal grudges, rather than political motives, and the party is quick to expel anyone who targets members of the Awami League.

The country's Hindu commu-

nity also fears being targeted because they are seen as supporters of Hasina, whose secular politics reassured religious minorities in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

By far the most common-place form of revenge is lodging a police complaint, as it was during the Hasina years.

A national police spokesman said more than 2,350 cases have been filed against alleged perpetrators of the July and August violence against protesters, and that more than 10,000 people have been arrested.

"What's happened is the families of the victims, they are filing cases," Yunus said. "As a government, I cannot tell the father of the young boy who was killed during the mass uprising, I cannot tell them, 'Do not file a case.'"

He said the government is pursuing select cases against senior officials—it plans to seek the extradition of Hasina to stand trial—while pushing to improve the legal process.

Second Trump Trade War Will Be Harder on Vietnam

Vietnam found the sweet spot in the global economy during President-elect Donald Trump's first trade war with Beijing: smack in the middle of the U.S. and China.

By Liza Lin, Jason Douglas and Rebecca Feng

The country became a magnet for Chinese manufacturers looking for a production base from which to ship their goods to the U.S. tariff-free. Buoyed by a gusher of foreign investment and booming exports to the U.S., Vietnam's economy has grown around 8% a year since Trump placed tariffs on Chinese goods six years ago.

Now Trump and his team are signaling that they intend to slam this backdoor shut, meaning pain for Vietnam's small economy and likely higher prices for U.S. consumers who buy Vietnamese goods and U.S. companies supplied by Vietnamese factories.

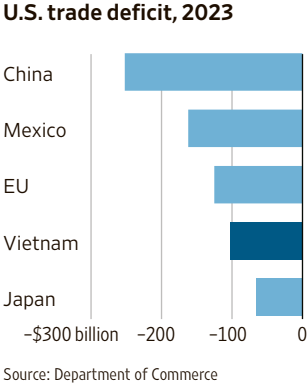
The country now provides a third of the sports shoes, half of the wooden beds and dining tables, and a quarter of the solar cells imported by the U.S.

In once-sleepy northern provinces, rice paddies have given way to billion-dollar factories assembling smartphones and semiconductors.

U.S. companies with suppliers in Vietnam include **Apple**, **Nike** and **Gap**.

But in May, Jamieson Greer, Trump's nominee for U.S. trade representative, said the U.S. should tighten rules to prevent "third-country work-arounds," in which goods that contain a lot of Chinese parts or were made in a third country by a subsidiary of a Chinese company enter the U.S. without the steep tariffs they would have faced had they come direct from China. Vietnam and Mexico are among those countries where Chinese companies have built bridge-heads into the U.S. market.

Vietnam is a trade target of the incoming administration in other ways, too. The presi-



dent-elect has floated the idea of levying tariffs on all imports into the U.S., and talks about forcing countries to close their trade gaps with the U.S. Vietnam exports to the U.S. nine times as much as what it imports from the country. In 2019, Trump said Vietnam was the "single worst abuser of everybody" on trade, a charge Hanoi denies.

Still, some in Vietnam say Trump's focus on China and Mexico will allow Vietnam to fly under the radar, ultimately driving more foreign investment into the country. And any new tariffs on Vietnamese goods will likely be lower than those Trump levies on China, helping Vietnam maintain its competitive edge.

"A lot of the things that made Vietnam attractive during Trump's first term are still the same," said Thuy Anh Nguyen, a country specialist at Dragon Capital, a Ho Chi Minh City-based asset manager, citing improved infrastructure and low costs.

For some tech companies especially, Vietnam is still a big draw. U.S. chip juggernaut **Nvidia** said this month that it plans to open an artificial intelligence research-and-development center in Vietnam.

South Korea's **Samsung**, which has invested more than \$22 billion in Vietnam, recently agreed to construct a \$1.8 billion new factory making diode displays.

Apple, which began diversifying its supply chain from China in recent years, has

about 35 suppliers with production in Vietnam, assembling iPads, MacBooks and its earphones there.

Vietnam's success in straddling the U.S. and China reflects its favorable demographics and geography. A country of 98 million with a young and cheap labor force, it borders China, allowing easy shipments of materials and parts to factories. Vietnam has also been diplomatically adept in its dealings with Washington and Beijing.

In November, U.S. companies including fashion designer **Steve Madden** and **Acushnet**, the maker of Titleist golf balls and FootJoy golf shoes, talked in investor calls about moving shoe production to Vietnam from China. Acushnet said it would make all of its shoes in Vietnamese factories by the end of 2025.

Since Trump's first term began in 2016, Vietnam has attracted almost \$290 billion in foreign investment, nearly as much as in the previous two decades. South Korea and Japan are among its biggest investors, but China has been rapidly catching up. China and Hong Kong have invested \$54 billion there in the same period, 10 times as much as U.S.-based companies.

There are some signs of caution. Since Trump's election win, some Taiwanese electronics manufacturers have started reconsidering possible new investments in Vietnam, fearing that his administration will put tariffs on Vietnamese exports or target the country for other alleged trade violations.

Vietnam also has problems with corruption and a shortage of skilled manpower. And it still relies heavily on components and intermediate goods from China. This lack of an ecosystem for components has sent business looking into countries such as Thailand, which have more local raw material manufacturing, or sometimes even back to China.



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FROM PAGE ONE

New Jersey Swarmed By Drones

Continued from Page One
New Jersey, fueling anxiety and confusion. While locals float theories and search for clues, the wider world is asking a larger question: Why New Jersey, of all places?
“I mean no disrespect to New Jersey when I say that I think it’s very unlikely that an alien invasion would begin in New Jersey,” Pete Buttigieg, the transportation secretary, told the radio host Charlamagne Tha God recently. “I

love New Jersey. I’m just saying I don’t think that’s the main point of entry.”
The first sightings cropped up a month ago. These weren’t hobbyist drones, witnesses said. Some were the size of SUVs, and they seemed to hover for far longer than a typical battery-powered drone and maneuver with unusual agility.
As word and images spread on social media so did the sightings. Earlier this week the FBI said it had reports of more than 5,000 drone sightings since mid-November, many clustered in New Jersey. A large drone was spotted over the Trump National Golf Club in Bedminster last month. Chris Christie, the former governor, reported one hovering over his house in nearby

Mendham Township.
The state’s politicians have responded with a master class in how not to soothe an anxious public. Jeff Van Drew, a Republican Congressman from south Jersey, said he had inside information that the drones were launching from an offshore Iranian mother ship. (Not so, the Pentagon said.)
Mike Ghassali, the mayor of Montvale, wrote on Facebook that “a highly respected, professional and trustworthy Montvale resident informed me with 100% certainty, that his son’s hobby drone attempted to follow one of the drones and it was ‘drone-jacked.’”
The mayor of Belleville aired his suspicions that the drones might be searching for missing radioactive material.

That was also debunked—but not before Murphy and his wife prepared “go-bags” in case the family had to jump in the car and make a speedy escape. “I’m not an alarmist,” he said. “But you never know.”
Gregory Goins, part owner of a title business in Highland Park, N.J., may be one of the state’s leading authorities on unidentified aerial phenomena—or what used to be known as UFOs.
Goins said much of the current hysteria stems from people misidentifying hobbyist drones, airplanes, even distant stars. Some might also be military drones—American or foreign—that the Pentagon wouldn’t acknowledge for security reasons, he said.
But that may not explain all the sightings, according to

Goins, whose years of research have led him to conclude there is a “strong, strong likelihood” that objects not made by humans are floating in our skies.
That deepens the New Jersey mystery. The drones have also popped up in neighboring Delaware. But they clearly favor the Garden State.
Rob D’Amico, a former counterdrone chief at the FBI who is from New Jersey, offered a native perspective. The hysteria had prompted drone operators to send more drones to the area, adding to the chaos.
“I grew up in New Jersey. If I was a teen with a drone, I’d be flying over the mayor’s house, I’d be flying over the sheriff’s house,” said D’Amico, from Wayne. “I’m a smartass and there are a lot of smart-

asses in New Jersey.”
Wednesday night, the Sky Watch task force’s first outing, was a rainy one, dampening expectations.
At around 5:30 p.m., there was a brief stir when an object rumbled past and Murphy was unable to locate it on the Plane Finder app on his smartphone. The sound of the engine indicated it was a plane. Was it military, he asked? “It’s a United flight,” Mayor Glassner said, ending the suspense, after consulting her own app.
Around 7 p.m., the Sky-watchers called it a night.
Asked why drones—or extraterrestrials—would target New Jersey, the mayor offered her own theory: “Maybe because it’s a great state!”
—Andrew Tangel
contributed to this article.

Bond’s Latest Foe: Amazon

Continued from Page One
in dire terms—no script, no story and no new Bond.
To friends, Broccoli has characterized her thoughts on Amazon this way: “These people are f— idiots.”
A representative for Eon, the production firm behind the Bond films, said Broccoli and other members of the family had no comment.
The two sides are at an impasse: Amazon needs Broccoli to furnish them with ideas for a new Bond movie, but Broccoli doesn’t want to make a new Bond movie with Amazon. The standoff, say people on both sides of the divide, boils down to a clash between the 20th-century Hollywood of big screens and big swings and a new entertainment industry ruled by Silicon Valley firms that prize data, algorithms and streaming subscriptions.
This story is based on interviews with more than 20 people familiar with the Broccoli-Amazon feud, including executives, business partners and friends.



The name’s Bond

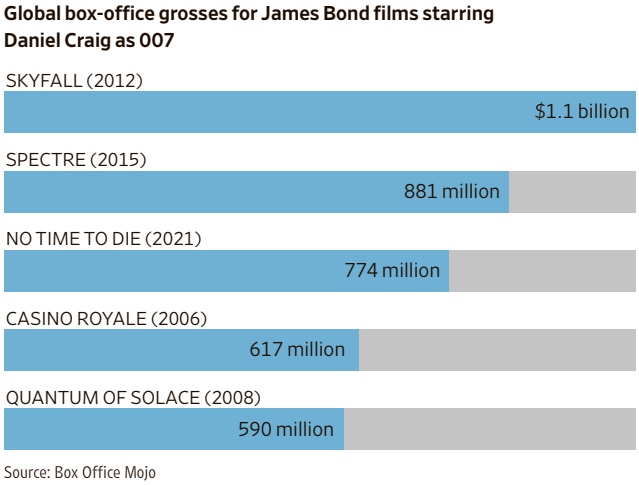
The Broccoli family’s control of James Bond has few comparisons in contemporary Hollywood, where cherished characters are gobbled up by conglomerates eager to exploit them across screens, toy shelves and theme parks. For decades, studio executives have salivated over the chance to do the same with Bond.
Broccoli, 64, had already turned down TV shows, videogames and at least one tie-in casino before Amazon entered the picture. For much of her career, Broccoli has made those calls with her stepbrother, 82-year-old Michael Wilson. She has emerged more recently as the primary steward of Bond as Wilson nears retirement.
To Broccoli and Wilson, Bond is more than a character with \$7.6 billion in box-office sales to his name. He is a lucrative family heirloom, to be handled with care.
On set, Broccoli’s colleagues say she exudes a den-mother authority over all the stunts, explosions and egos. She presides as the head of a British empire with rules of its own (nothing sensitive is put in email) and ensures that cardinal rules of storytelling are followed (Bond rarely shoots first).
It’s a job that has forced her to weather the hot-potato game of studio mergers and consolidations before. Due to the current impasse, the franchise hasn’t moved any closer to its next installment since “No Time to Die” came out in 2021, after a delayed premiere during the pandemic. That’s unusually long for a series that regularly saw releases every year or two starting with “Dr. No” in 1962 and rarely took more than three years off—and it’s a risky lull in today’s crowded entertainment landscape.
Broccoli has complained that Amazon isn’t a good home for Bond, since the company’s core business is selling everything from toilet paper to vacuums—a perspective Amazon executives find unfair. But since she makes the creative calls that come first—script, casting, story—Broccoli can hold Bond hostage from Amazon for as long as she sees fit.
In doing so, she quotes a refrain attributed to her father, a film agent who’d sold hair driers before he secured the rights

to adapt Ian Fleming’s novels.
“Don’t have temporary people make permanent decisions.”
Few deals could have merged the old Hollywood with the new quite like the MGM-Amazon tie-up. It placed a studio best known for “Gone with the Wind” and “The Wizard of Oz” under the same roof as a cloud computing service and Ring doorbells.
Amazon paid \$6.5 billion (excluding debt) for MGM, eyeing a library of titles to pipe into its streaming service or reimagine, from “Rocky” to “Legally Blonde.” One property in particular was to become the crown jewel in a growing entertainment empire: Bond.

Streaming era

The company’s tech-centric focus loomed over the franchise as soon as merger discussions began. Some executives at MGM were concerned that Bond and other titles would be given at-home launches in an era of ascendant streaming services like Amazon Prime Video.
Before agreeing to the deal, MGM made sure that Amazon was committed to releasing Bond on the big screen, a critical point for Broccoli, who waited out 18 months of Covid-19 lockdowns to play “No Time to Die” in theaters.
Broccoli and Wilson had been looped in on the deal before it was announced. Broccoli had reservations, but didn’t want to complicate what many in Hollywood viewed as a massive payout for MGM’s owners—plus, she and her family would retain final say over all creative matters, including who plays Bond.
Mike Hopkins, who oversees Amazon’s Prime Video business, told associates ahead of the sale that he was optimistic the company could win over

Broccoli’s trust and convince her to allow them to do more with the franchise.
Before the purchase closed, Amazon executives brainstormed among themselves how Bond could be plugged into their machine. Would Amazon produce a James Bond TV show for its Prime Video service? What about a Money-penny spinoff? Or a TV spinoff centered on a female 007?
Broccoli’s response to such enthusiasm, one friend said, is often the same: Did you read the contract?
Hopkins assigned the delicate task of managing the relationship to one of his top entertainment executives, Jennifer Salke, a former NBC-Universal executive who has run Amazon Studios since 2018.
Broccoli was irked in one early meeting when Salke referred to James Bond by a dreaded word: “content.” Using such a sterile term, one friend reflected, was like a “death knell” to Broccoli.
It was also antithetical to Broccoli’s approach, which she has said mixes gut instinct with a healthy amount of risk—with no decision more critical than determining who will play Bond. Daniel Craig was a relative unknown when he got the part, starting with 2006’s “Casino Royale.” The decision, she has said, is as serious as choosing one’s spouse.
Former Amazon executives have criticized the company’s approach to development, saying it is overly reliant on calculating risk—based on factors such as an actor’s past performance. The idea of casting an unknown in a lead role like Bond is hard to imagine at Amazon, they said.
Since taking over the Bond business in the 1990s, Broccoli and Wilson have become accustomed to the soft touch and deference that defined the old-



school studio system. When they called, studio chiefs got on the line.
Wilson, her stepbrother, has complained to friends that he couldn’t land a meeting with anyone at Amazon above an “L6,” the internal designation for a senior role that is nonetheless six rungs below Chief Executive Andy Jassy, an L12. A person close to the company said Wilson has met with several senior leaders.

‘Her father’s store’

For Barbara Broccoli, the Bond legacy has been described as “her father’s store.” She was 2 years old when “Dr. No” opened in London. She began working on the films as a teenager, and she and her stepbrother presided over a blockbuster age starting with Pierce Brosnan’s debut in 1995’s “GoldenEye” and continuing through Craig’s five-film run. In 2012, “Skyfall” became the first—and is still only—Bond movie to collect more than \$1 billion worldwide.
Broccoli and Wilson have begun showing the next generation the ropes. Wilson’s son, Gregg Wilson, helped to produce recent installments. That passing of the torch has



Albert ‘Cubby’ Broccoli.

brought with it some disagreements over who the next James Bond should be. To associates, Gregg Wilson has appeared to be more sympathetic to calls for an update to Bond, a role that’s so far been filled by white male actors.
Some say a person of color in Bond’s tuxedo would better reflect the U.K.’s changing demography, and even nod to its ugly history of colonization. Take it a step further, others say, and cast a woman or a gay man.
Broccoli has told friends that she doesn’t have any qualms with casting a non-white or gay actor, but does believe Bond should always be played by a man, and should always be played by a Brit.
Villains have also presented a creative challenge, since Bond has already dispatched so many. In a world where the 1% have more power than ever, some have suggested, a stateless billionaire autocrat might seem the obvious choice.
Broccoli’s response to such suggestions: Been there, done that. Recent villains include a wealthy banker to terrorist groups who weeps blood out of one eye (“Casino Royale,” 2006); a wealthy oil heiress (“The World Is Not Enough,” 1999); and a wealthy tycoon whose global media empire includes a satellite network (“Tomorrow Never Dies,” 1997). That last one has come up more recently when she is offered inspiration from the real world.
“Elon Musk?” she said to one friend. “I did that back in 1997.”
In the nearly three years since the deal closed, Amazon has produced one Bond-related product: a reality show, “007: Road to a Million,” that features teams competing in spy-themed challenges. (Broccoli has also worked with Amazon on other non-Bond projects.)

Left, Daniel Craig at the 2021 premiere of ‘No Time to Die’ in London. Above, Amazon’s Mike Hopkins and Jennifer Salke. Below left, Barbara Broccoli and Michael Wilson.

The Bond reality show was in development before the MGM sale to Amazon, with Broccoli’s backing.
Broccoli had wanted a full marketing push, with billboards and TV commercials of the kind a Bond movie typically receives. At Amazon, the algorithm often does the work, surfacing shows to Prime users based on their viewing habits.
Amazon executives have griped that the show’s first season lost a significant share of viewers after six minutes. Its biggest surge of attention came when its host, “Succession” actor Brian Cox, admitted in an interview that he’d agree to do the show because he mistakenly thought he was signing on to star in a James Bond movie.
Still, work has begun on a second season. And with no clear direction of the Bond movie strategy, the show has become a venue for discussion within Amazon about the character’s place in the broader world, and whether the valorization of a dangerously violent, womanizing secret agent is what’s best for society today.
During a company meeting about the second season, an Amazon employee admitted her own misgivings.
“I have to be honest,” she said. “I don’t think James Bond is a hero.”
The room went silent.
Tomorrow never dies
Broccoli has taken her time before. There was a six-year stretch between 1989’s “Licence to Kill” and “GoldenEye” as the family figured out who should play Bond after Timothy Dalton and what his adventures would entail in the post-Cold War era.
“Many people and organizations have tried to put their own footprint on Bond,” Daniel Craig said in a speech honoring Broccoli and Wilson as they received honorary Academy Awards in November. “I admire your integrity in holding on to your singular vision as you brought Bond into the 21st century.”
In his acceptance speech, Wilson acknowledged the support of Amazon and MGM.
In her acceptance speech, Broccoli thanked the Academy for honoring producers and her father for enabling her to have “the greatest life imaginable.” She did not mention Amazon.
—Sarah Krouse
contributed to this article.

OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Benjamin Netanyahu | By Elliot Kaufman

The Inside Story of Israel’s Comeback Victory

‘Hello?’ Benjamin Netanyahu begins over the phone. “I’m going to give you a précis of everything that happened because we stand now at a crossroads of history. The campaign that we carried out changed the Middle East.” I’m fine, thank you, but Israel’s prime minister has no time for pleasantries. He has to testify six hours a day, three days a week, at his trial. Prosecutors allege he was bribed with positive news coverage, a novel theory, and employ the kind of vague breach-of-trust and fraud statutes that U.S. federal courts no longer allow. Mr. Netanyahu maintains his innocence. Most of all, he maintains that he has a war to run—and that Israel is winning big. He poses the question: “How did it happen?” From the darkness of Oct. 7, 2023, Israel has roared back to crush Hamas and defang Hezbollah, leaving the Assad regime in Syria to crumble and all their masters in Iran to fret, without air defenses, over Mr. Netanyahu’s next move. How *did* it happen?

The prime minister details the key decision points in the war against Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran.

“On Oct. 7, they woke me up at 6:29 in the morning,” Mr. Netanyahu says. That’s hours after senior security officials knew something was awry, but there’s no getting around the failure. Hamas death squads slaughtered nearly 1,200 Israelis. By this time, “there was a full-scale attack from Gaza,” he says. “It was clearly not just another round. I went to the Kirya, our military headquarters, called the cabinet and declared war,” Mr. Netanyahu says. “And I said it’s going to be a long war.” “On Oct. 8, Hezbollah came into the fighting. Now we had potentially two fronts,” he says. “On Oct. 9, I told the heads of the communities next to Gaza, ‘I ask that you stand steadfast, because we are going to change the Middle East.’” The word then from Mr. Netanyahu’s office was that although this war had started worse than the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and with zero early warning, it could end better than even the Six-Day War in 1967, and with a greater chance for peace. On Oct. 11, “the defense minister and the military chiefs suggested we go after Lebanon. That is, shift the whole war north, against Hezbollah, and leave Hamas intact in the south,” Mr. Netanyahu says. “I said, ‘we can’t do that.’” The perpetrators of the Oct. 7 massacre couldn’t be left to stew, and “we shouldn’t conduct a two-front war. One massive front at a time.” But the fog of war is real. “Suddenly, we were receiving intel that there were Hezbollah paragliders already going into the Galilee, into Tiberius,” Mr. Netanyahu says. The U.S. had urged him not to invade Lebanon. “But if we’re going to be attacked and invaded, what choice do we have?” he says. “I actually let the planes take off to have a full-scale attack on Hezbollah,” early in the war. “And you know

why it stopped?” he asks. “It turns out the gliders were geese. I called back the planes.” Mr. Netanyahu praises President Biden for visiting in solidarity on Oct. 18, 2023. “It’s the first time a U.S. president came to Israel at a time of war,” Mr. Netanyahu says, “and he sent two carrier battle groups, which was important to stabilize the northern front.” Disagreement emerged over how to fight Hamas. “Nobody had ever fought with such intense tunnel warfare in such a dense urban area,” Mr. Netanyahu says. The Americans advised against a ground invasion of Gaza. U.S. military experts said to fight from the air instead. Mr. Netanyahu knew from experience that wouldn’t work. “From the air, you can mow the lawn. You can’t pull out the weeds,” he says. “We’re here to uproot Hamas—not to deliver deterrent blows, but to destroy it.” As Israel advanced on the ground, “Hamas saw us moving, moving, moving with American support,” he says. “There was not yet the buildup of public pressure against us.” That, Mr. Netanyahu says, scared Hamas into the first hostage deal, in late November 2023, and assured him that he could briefly stop the fighting. Hamas’s leader, Yahya Sinwar, “thought it was bravado on my part—that once I paused the war, I wouldn’t be able to resume it.” Mr. Netanyahu wasn’t bluffing, but as the war restarted, “they began to turn on us in the media and in the West.” The more Americans, international bodies and liberal Israelis pressed Mr. Netanyahu to fold, the less inclined Hamas became to cut a second hostage deal—“and Hamas said so openly.” Meanwhile, Israeli troops “parked” as the invasion of Rafah, on Gaza’s border with Egypt, was debated. “It’s not enough to destroy Hamas if you don’t control the southern closure,” Mr. Netanyahu says. That means the Philadelphi corridor, along the Egyptian border—or, he allows, some line above it. Otherwise, Hamas would rear. The U.S. predicted as many as 20,000 new casualties if Israel invaded Rafah. Vice President Kamala Harris said it would be impossible to evacuate civilians: “I have studied the maps. There’s nowhere for those folks to go.” When Israel finally advanced in May, casualties were notably low as civilians quickly went to the safe zone by the beach. “The Americans said to me, ‘If you go into Rafah, you’re on your own, and we’re not going to send you the critical arms,’ which is tough to hear,” Mr. Netanyahu says. Internally, others argued that Israel was too reliant on U.S. munitions to risk fighting on. “That’s a legitimate case,” Mr. Netanyahu says. “But if we don’t go into Rafah, we can’t exist as a sovereign state. We’d become a vassal state and we won’t survive. The question of arms will fix itself, but the question of our independence will not. That’s the end of Israel.” In Rafah, Israel cut off Hamas’s supply route and later killed Sinwar, its chief. The Biden administration imposed a de facto arms embargo on Israel, delaying weapons shipments. “The U.S. withheld critical



TERRY OSHFNER

weapons,” Mr. Netanyahu admits, but he appreciates the pressure Mr. Biden was under. “It’s not easy to be president, let’s face it, with these very radical fringes in his party. It wasn’t easy to do what Mr. Biden did,” including helping Israel in its defense against Iranian missile attacks, he says. Many senior Israeli officials argued that Israel should make concessions to Hamas to quiet Hezbollah and avoid escalation in Lebanon. Mr. Netanyahu summarizes their position: “ ‘We’re going to get a cease-fire anyway in the north—either we can get it after the fighting or before the fighting, and it’s going to be the same deal. So, why not skip the fighting?’ ” He rejected the premise: “It makes a hell of a difference whether we make the cease-fire after we cut Hezbollah down to size or after we leave it intact.” Hezbollah couldn’t be left holding a sword of Damocles above Israel’s head. Even after 11 months of Hezbollah rocket fire, depopulating Israel’s north, the U.S. opposed any move to take the fight to Hezbollah. “I said we should do it in October,” Mr. Netanyahu recounts. “One of the reasons was that October is one month before November.” Who knew what would happen after the U.S. election? But during the campaign, the chances of securing U.S. support would be greater. “We prepared for Hezbollah a massive surprise,” Mr. Netanyahu says, and I presume he means the exploding pagers on Sept. 17. When attacking Hezbollah was first contemplated, nearly a year earlier, this surprise “was barely considered, if at all, because at that time those capabilities had not yet been amassed. Their lethality was but a fraction of their full force a year later,” he says. This time, “there were those who had misgivings about using it at all. But since it was time-sensitive, I pushed it through.” The result was “a shock and awe of historic proportions” and “the greatest surgical targeting in history.” The expectation, in Israel and America, was that Hezbollah’s response would be like nothing Israel had seen before, toppling tow-

ers in Tel Aviv. But the terrorists had been stunned, and because of what Israel did next, they were unable to retaliate effectively. To follow the surprise attack, Mr. Netanyahu pushed a plan to destroy Hezbollah’s missiles, including those the group considered invulnerable. Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s longtime leader, “was relying on the missiles and rockets that he put in private homes” and trusting Israel not to target them, he says. Mr. Netanyahu credits his army with “an improved plan, which was actually brilliant, because among other things they took over Lebanese television” to warn civilians to evacuate their homes. Then, Israel struck. “In six hours, we wiped out most of the ballistic-missile stockpiles Hezbollah had amassed.” Raw intelligence convinced Mr. Netanyahu to kill Nasrallah. “He was literally taking over the command of the military actions. But the thing that startled me was that I realized he was the axis of the axis,” Mr. Netanyahu says. “He had replaced [Qassem] Soleimani,” the Iranian general who was killed in a January 2020 U.S. strike. “It’s not only that Iran was using him. He was using Iran.” Israeli troops entered Lebanon to destroy Hezbollah’s underground infrastructure by the border. “This was going to be Hezbollah’s main thrust for an invasion of the Galilee. They could reach Haifa, easily, and beyond,” Mr. Netanyahu says. “The subterranean network turned out to be enormous—much bigger than we thought.” When Hezbollah sued for a cease-fire, leaving Hamas to twist in the wind, Mr. Netanyahu saw a chance to refresh Israeli forces. U.S. arms shipments are expected to speed up—“reinforcements are on the way,” as incoming Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R., S.D.) put it—and Israel can prepare a “full-scale offensive” if Hezbollah tempts it. But “Hezbollah doesn’t want to continue the fight right now,” Mr. Netanyahu says. Neither do the Iranians. “They were dumbfounded when we took out their critical air defenses” after their second missile attack on Israel, he says. Israel also damaged Iran’s ballistic-missile pro-

duction, “which means they now have to calculate how much ammo they have, because it’ll take them several years to resuscitate it—assuming we don’t hit it again.” Each attack had a multiplier effect. “We knocked down Hezbollah, which was supposed to protect Iran. And Iran didn’t protect Hezbollah either. And neither of them protected [Syria’s Bashar al] Assad. So, we just split that whole axis right down the middle.” Mr. Netanyahu says Iran “spent probably \$30 billion in Syria, another \$20 billion in Lebanon, God knows how much on Hamas. And it’s all gone down the tubes,” he says. “They have no supply line.” Mr. Netanyahu intends to keep it that way. “We warned Assad not to let Iran supply Hezbollah with weapons through Syria. He played dumb.” As Hezbollah licked its wounds, Syrian rebels felled the Assad regime on their own. Immediately, Israel bombed Syria’s chemical-weapons facilities and other military assets. “I don’t know if we killed anyone, but we certainly smashed the weaponry of the Syrian army,” Mr. Netanyahu says. “We don’t want all the stuff the Syrians amassed falling into the hands of the jihadists.” For Israel, it’s a return to form. “Power isn’t merely guns, missiles, tanks and aircraft,” Mr. Netanyahu says. “It’s the will to fight and seize the initiative.”

Iran’s nuclear program now looks vulnerable. “I’m not going to talk about that,” Mr. Netanyahu says. When I say I’ve never heard him so reticent on his favorite subject, he responds cryptically: “I’ve always said the jury’s out, still out on all of us, and I don’t exclude myself.” It is perhaps on this that he expects to be judged. Iran will enter 2025 with an ailing 85-year-old leader, staring down the barrel of another Trump administration. I’d imagine the president-elect hasn’t taken kindly to Iran’s attempts to kill him and his former officials since his first term in office. “President Trump has supported Israel throughout this war,” Mr. Netanyahu says. There’s new optimism for a hostage deal after Mr. Trump’s threats to Hamas, and maybe even for diplomatic normalization with Saudi Arabia to follow. “It would be the natural expansion of the Abraham Accords that we forged under President Trump’s leadership,” Mr. Netanyahu says. “The threat to Hamas can only help. He places the onus squarely on Hamas and tells them there will be consequences.” The hostage deal Mr. Netanyahu envisions is a partial one in exchange for a pause in the fighting. “I’m not going to agree to end the war before we remove Hamas,” he says. “We’re not going to leave them in power in Gaza, 30 miles from Tel Aviv. It’s not going to happen.” There was a time when people didn’t believe him. “I was arguing for ‘total victory,’” he says, “and they said there’s no such thing as victory.” You don’t hear that so much anymore, now that Israel and its leader seem to have emerged on top. Mr. Kaufman is a Journal editorial writer and the letters editor.

How Colleges and Universities Get Around State DEI Bans



CROSS COUNTRY By Henry Stone

Des Moines, Iowa Someone’s lying. That’s what I’ve discovered after trying to free my state’s higher-education system from “diversity, equity, and inclusion.” Instead of complying with a DEI ban we passed into law earlier this year, the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine says it’s forced to maintain these programs or it will lose its accreditation, essentially killing the institution. Yet accreditors say that isn’t the case, even as they give quiet cover to universities. If federal reforms don’t stop these shenanigans, virtually every part of higher education may soon wriggle free of state DEI bans. I co-sponsored Iowa’s ban on DEI, which Gov. Kim Reynolds signed in May. As an Asian-American, I’m well aware that activists have used this ideology to discriminate against people like me, especially in higher education. Our legislation aimed to right this wrong and provide equal treatment to everyone by banning public institu-

tions, including Iowa’s three public universities, from having DEI offices, programs and staff. I thought that our law would soon drive DEI from our college campuses and state government. I was wrong. In early November, the Iowa Board of Regents, which oversees the state’s public universities, issued a report on compliance with the law. It laid out, in detail, how DEI initiatives have been shut down statewide. But in the fine print on page 78, I learned that Carver College is keeping its Office of Health Parity open. The office proudly declares on its home page that it “strives to achieve excellence through the advancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion.” The Board of Regents says its hand was forced by accreditors. These are private institutions that decide whether universities and graduate schools can grant degrees. Iowa’s DEI ban exempts programs that accreditors deem necessary, and accreditors have significant leverage over state lawmakers. If they withdrew their approval from one of our state universities, the political blowback would be severe. No lawmaker wants to be accused

of killing a beloved state institution. In other states, including Missouri and Tennessee, the threat of losing accreditation has delayed and even prevented the passage of DEI bans. Unfortunately, that exemption was loophole enough for Iowa’s premier medical school to continue advocating a worldview that divides people by skin color and encourages discrimination. They hide behind vague demands from accreditors. Congress should deprive them of this excuse. The accreditors deny pushing the DEI agenda. Last year, as the Journal reported, the Liaison Committee on Medical Education, which accredits U.S. medical schools, told federal lawmakers that it doesn’t require DEI. But its charter does demand that medical schools engage “in ongoing, systematic, and focused recruitment and retention activities, to achieve mission-appropriate diversity outcomes.”

Other accreditors have made similar noises. I sent letters to the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education and the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education. The former said that DEI must “be considered,” but that it isn’t required for a school to get its approval. The latter denied requiring common DEI beliefs, including that America is systemically racist and people are either privileged or oppressed based on their race. Yet medical schools say accreditors still require them to practice DEI. According to Stanley Goldfarb of the medical nonprofit Do No Harm, accreditors know that if they merely nod to the value of DEI, universities will read it as a requirement, while university administrators know they can point to accreditors to justify keeping DEI programs. The confusion is enough to weaken the reform we passed in Iowa. What’s to stop accreditors in other fields from doing the same thing? Whether they oversee business schools, public-policy schools, teacher education schools, or other professions, accreditors can just as easily use vague language and drop hints to keep DEI offices and pro-

grams up and running. Despite state DEI bans, support for that ideology runs deep in most collegiate administrators’ offices. They’re looking for an excuse to keep indoctrinating students and undermining the principles at America’s core. To prevent this backsliding and truly kick DEI out of higher education, the federal government must finish what states like Iowa have started. I urge President-elect Trump and Republicans in Congress to pass H.R. 3724, the End Woke Higher Education Act, as soon as possible in the new year. This bill would prohibit U.S. accreditors from requiring schools to accept DEI or any other political litmus test. With such a law in place at the federal level, neither Iowa’s medical school nor any other college or university would be able to claim that it has to maintain DEI to satisfy an accreditor. The lying would stop—and schools would finally get back to respecting the fundamental truth that we’re all created equal. Mr. Stone, a Republican, is majority whip of the Iowa House of Representatives.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Woody Johnson Republicans

Mike Johnson is still Speaker of the House, but this week Republicans have behaved as if the Speaker is another Johnson—as in Woody of the New York Jets. He’s the impulsive owner who, reports The Athletic, overrules his football people on a whim, consults his teenage sons for football insights, and looks for guidance from the internet. Result: perennial losing seasons.

The Woody in this political story isn’t Mike Johnson, who has done an excellent job with a narrow, faction-ridden majority since succeeding Kevin McCarthy. The Woody here is Donald Trump, who on the advice of Elon Musk blew up the end-of-session budget bill without a plan for getting another one passed. There are bad omens here for 2025 and the ability of Republicans to govern.

* * *

The immediate result has been a fiasco by any measure. Mr. Musk, and then Mr. Trump, delivered a social-media barrage against Mr. Johnson’s continuing resolution to fund the government through March 14. Republicans then walked away from the bipartisan bill, which collapsed.

Mr. Johnson put together a substitute that included Mr. Trump’s demand for a much longer suspension of the federal debt limit. Mr. Trump declared his support. But nearly all Democrats and 38 Republicans voted no, and the Musk-Trump substitute lost in an embarrassing rout, 174-235. Democrats are chortling about “President Musk,” which can’t sit well with the President-elect.

By Friday evening Mr. Johnson had put together a Plan C—or was it Plan D—that passed the House and headed to the Senate to avoid a government shutdown at midnight Friday. The negotiating details are too abstruse to follow, and the stakes aren’t all that high in any case. The political damage won’t be great if there is no shutdown or it is short-lived. Most Americans are too busy to be paying attention.

But it’s worth noting that Mr. Musk tweeted Wednesday that “No bills should be passed [by] Congress until Jan. 20, when [Trump] takes office. None. Zero.” Perhaps he thought he could blame President Biden for the shutdown he demanded. History shows the party urging a shutdown gets the blame.

The greater concern is what this episode suggests about how Mr. Trump and his social-media enforcers will try to govern. These are the days of MAGA euphoria and chest-beating. Sue the

press. Banish Mike Pompeo because Tucker Carlson says so.

“We aren’t just the media here now. We are also the government,” Donald Trump Jr. tweeted Thursday. He boasted that MAGA’s online army can “pressure our representatives to act in a manner that actually represents what we want.”

Well, maybe not, judging by Thursday’s defeat. Unlike Don Jr., Members of Congress were elected and have their own constituents. Some of them also have principles beyond toeing the Musk-Trump line.

One of the weaknesses of President Trump’s first term was his preference for bullying over persuasion. He denounces dissenters in social-media posts rather than trying to bring them on board with arguments or an appeal to their political self-interest.

Another weakness is that the President-elect governs by impulse, and often by whoever talked to him last. Someone told him he should demand that Congress include a debt-limit increase this year, which isn’t a bad idea. But apparently no one noticed that Democrats still control the Senate and the White House. Democrats aren’t likely to raise the debt limit to make life easier for Mr. Trump, and if they do, they will want something for it. The increase was dropped from Mr. Johnson’s latest bill.

This is how Congress works, and for all Mr. Musk’s brilliance, he hasn’t figured that out. He’s also supposed to be a math whiz, so he can probably count to 218, the votes needed for a House majority when everyone is present. Memorize it.

In 2017 Republicans had a large majority and experienced hands with policy chops like Paul Ryan and Kevin Brady. They had an outline for tax reform that they had spent years socializing among Members. Today’s House GOP has little such institutional or policy memory, and its majority is small and divided. Its majority will probably be 219-215 when Republicans take over in January. Bullying Members will have a short shelf-life if it works at all.

Mike Johnson is probably the best the GOP can get as a Speaker. He listens and understands how Congress works. Some Republicans are saying Mr. Musk should be Speaker, and if they want a short-lived majority, go for it.

This week’s blundering won’t matter if Mr. Trump and his coterie learn the right lessons. But the hard reality of governing arrives in January, and it’s much harder than the Woody Johnson Republicans think.

This week’s budget fiasco carries bad omens for governing in 2025.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

America Is Led by Two ‘Old Men in a Hurry’

In a speech given in 1886, Lord Randolph Churchill, Winston’s father, is reported to have warned that Prime Minister William Gladstone was an “old man in a hurry.” Peggy Noonan’s “Biden Gets Lost in Trump’s Shadow” (Declarations, Dec. 14) offers interesting observations about two old men, 82-year-old Joe Biden and 78-year-old Donald Trump, and how Mr. Trump appears to be running things even though he isn’t president yet.

I think Ms. Noonan may be a bit premature in discounting President Biden. It was only a few weeks ago that he changed his policy to permit Ukraine to use weapons supplied by the U.S. for long-range missile strikes into Russia. Was this an old man’s desperate attempt to leave a positive legacy following his administration’s longstanding policy of restraint, with its resultant devastating loss of Ukrainian life and property?

Just as no one knows what Mr. Trump may do as president to leave a positive legacy, also unknown is what other surprises Mr. Biden may present before Jan. 20, 2025. We should take heed of Randolph Churchill’s cautionary advice and beware of what old men in a hurry can do.

RAYMOND J. TERMINI
Dallas

It shouldn’t surprise Ms. Noonan the degree to which Mr. Trump is “essentially functioning as the sitting president.” Nature abhors a vacuum. Mr. Biden falls asleep at an economic meeting, rousing himself only to issue more pardons. Vice President Kamala Harris runs off to Hawaii to lick her wounds and contemplate the ashes of her political career.

Meanwhile, someone must run the country.

PROF. MICHAEL H. WAY
California State University, Bakersfield

Political Bias Isn’t Inevitable in the TV News

Roland Fryer argues for society’s need for a nonpartisan television news source while making the case that the basic economics of the business promote partisanship (“The Economics of Media Bias,” op-ed, Dec. 16). His plea for an unbiased news source in our partisan age overlooks that such an offering already exists.

For more than 45 years, C-SPAN’s television networks, websites, apps and podcasts have provided informative daily coverage of Washington without taking sides. And yet our network proves Mr. Fryer’s point: C-SPAN has been able to survive the intensely competitive environment in political news precisely because we were founded as a nonprofit. Because C-SPAN has no advertisers who demand viewership numbers, we don’t have to titillate, frustrate or animate to drive audiences to our content. We are a network, described many years ago by journalist Brooke Gladstone, which “dares to be boring.”

No one knows this better than I, who joined C-SPAN in September after 30 years at CNN, where delivery of audience numbers frequently defined our success. I am honored to be at the helm of a media organization that can offer information for its own sake, without the temptation to create conflict where it doesn’t exist to attract viewers.

We know that on many days the number of people tuning in to watch a Senate debate on, say, agriculture policy can be small, but our nonprofit structure makes this OK.

SAM FEIST
CEO, C-SPAN
Washington

Through the support of the distributors that fund us—Comcast, Charter, Cox, Verizon, DirectTV, etc.—we have been able to create an institution to which Americans knows they can turn for unfiltered political news when they want it.

In graduate school for psychology and journalism in the 1960s and ’70s, I was taught that the new theory of journalism is that all journalists are biased. Reporters, the argument went, should include their own biases in stories, assuming reporters with opposite biases will do the same, and readers and viewers can get both sides to each story from other biased news sources.

I also participated in an every-10-year study correlating college students’ political, social and economic beliefs with their college majors. I helped tabulate the results. The study showed that the most liberal students in the decade’s previous study tended to major in art and philosophy. In my study, they tended to major in political science and journalism.

The study’s theory was that during the 1960s and ’70s, liberal students wanted to change society, and politics and journalism were the means to do it. Those strongly biased students are now running our country through politics and biased journalism.

RON BURDA
Gilbert, Ariz.

The Cultural Escapism of the Current Timeline

In “Overwhelmed by the Trump Era? Try a Different Timeline” (op-ed, Dec. 14), Josh Zoffer mocks the linguistic fad of referring to this or that “timeline.” I remember “The Elements of Style” from a writing guide that I had in high school. It advised writers to avoid needless words such as “in the present moment” and “at the current time” and use a simple “now.”

Sixty years later, in the current timeline, that advice rings true.

DAVID GOODWIN
Birmingham, Ala.

Mr. Zoffer credits science fiction, in particular “The Matrix,” with introducing the notion of “alternative timelines” (or “realities”). But there’s an even more direct antecedent to the fantasies in which some of those gobsmacked by Donald Trump’s second election indulge. “The West Wing,” which premiered the same year as “The Matrix” (1999), offered liberals

an imaginary alternative to George W. Bush’s head-spinning election and presidency, an escape to a timeline in which a wise, temperate president led a team of conscientious public servants seeking the public good. And still we dream on . . .

ERIC SCIGLIANO
Seattle

Between Sept. 5 and Oct. 7

The drama regarding ABC Sports during the 1972 Munich Olympics brings back stark memories of where I was when Jim McKay told the world, “They’re all gone” (“September 5: Tragedy Gets Televised” by Kyle Smith, Film Review, Dec. 13). As it happened, I was in a college pub.

While the tragic news of the murder of Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists sunk into our gestalt, several foreign students at the table next to us stood and applauded. For the only time in my life, I thought about throwing a punch or two. But the sickening feeling in my gut pre-empted such bold action. Instead, I was left to wonder how any sane person could applaud such a dastardly deed.

Then, Oct. 7 happened. Fifty years on, I still lacked any comprehension of the evil in our world.

JON FOX
Linwood, N.J.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



“The lines are all espresso. The shading is just medium roast and breakfast blend.”

JAMES SCHAFER, M.D.
Lansing, Mich.

Letters intended for publication should be emailed to wsj.letters@wsj.com. Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

Teamsters Try to Steal Christmas

If Santa comes late this year, tell little Suzy to blame the Teamsters union, which has called an illegal strike at Amazon warehouses amid the pre-Christmas delivery rush. The union plans to punish millions of Americans to spite Amazon.

The Teamsters on Thursday urged Amazon workers across the country to walk off the job to pressure the online retailer to recognize and collectively bargain with the union. Teamsters President Sean O’Brien said customers frustrated by delivery delays should “blame Amazon’s insatiable greed” and that “this strike is on them.”

No, the Teamsters are striking on Amazon customers. While the Teamsters claim to represent nearly 10,000 of Amazon’s some 1.5 million workers, Amazon doesn’t recognize the union as their representative. Nor do many of the workers who haven’t voted for the union.

Amazon uses a network of contractors to deliver packages. Many drivers whom the Teamsters claim to represent are independent contractors, whom federal law prohibits from organizing. Drivers employed by these contractors also aren’t Amazon employees, and Amazon is under no obligation to bargain with them.

The Teamsters’ other gripe is that Amazon has refused to recognize and bargain with a local union at a New York warehouse. Amazon has

challenged the results of that union election in court, arguing that the Biden National Labor Relations Board improperly interfered to help the Teamsters and denied it due process.

So now Mr. O’Brien is retaliating against Amazon for opposing the union by encouraging workers to walk off the job and sending organizers to

picket outside facilities and impede deliveries. One organizer at a New York distribution center was arrested after blocking trucks from leaving the facility. This is the thuggish behavior that the Teamsters are famous for.

“What you see here are almost entirely outsiders—not Amazon employees or partners,” Amazon spokesperson Kelly Nantel said. “The Teamsters have actively threatened, intimidated, and attempted to coerce Amazon employees and third-party drivers to join them, which is illegal and is the subject of multiple pending unfair labor practice charges against the union.”

The Teamsters’ Christmas “strike” comes after Donald Trump rewarded Mr. O’Brien for his presidential non-endorsement this year by nominating the pro-union Oregon Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer as his Labor Secretary. Don’t expect unions to reciprocate with labor peace. By empowering unions, the Biden Administration encouraged more strikes. Mr. Trump can expect the same.

Trump’s favorite union boss is trying to block Amazon deliveries.

Montana opens the door for climate litigation based on ‘stress.’

And the Children Shall Lead Them—Astray

There are many competitors for craziest court decision this year, but the Montana Supreme Court may take the prize. A 6-1 majority this week effectively declared—get this—a state constitutional right to protection from climate change. What’s next? A right to sunshine?

Sixteen youth plaintiffs (*Held v. Montana*) in 2020 challenged two state environmental permitting laws that barred regulators from considering the climate impact of projects permitted under the state’s environmental law. They argued that climate change caused them severe stress and anxiety.

Writing for the majority, Chief Justice Mike McGrath decreed that the right to a “clean and healthful environment” in the state constitution includes protection from the purported harms of climate change. The Justices upheld an August 2023 lower-court decision that held the children could challenge state permitting laws since they were harmed by Montana’s contribution to climate change. The court also ruled the permitting laws were unconstitutional.

Children felt fear “from disappearing glaciers in Montana (both aesthetically and from the dependence many communities place on the water they provide throughout the summer); the im-

pacts climate change is having on culturally important native wildlife, plants, snow, and practices; summer smoke and extreme heat” and much more, the High Court says.

Montana represents an infinitesimal fraction of global CO2 emissions, so any alleged injuries suffered by the plaintiffs couldn’t be redressed by

the court’s ruling anyway. No matter. The court’s decision essentially puts Montana on the hook for global climate change, which opens the door to environmental challenges to almost any economic activity in the state.

Republican Gov. Greg Gianforte said the ruling is a ticket to “perpetual lawsuits.” He’s right. It’s also a ticket to less economic growth. Fossil fuels will no doubt be a target of lawsuits. But so could new housing developments or data centers, which consume loads of power. The ruling may also encourage similar lawsuits in other states’ courts.

Montana’s GOP Legislature could seek voter approval for a constitutional amendment that reverses the ruling, which will benefit no one but plaintiff attorneys. This children’s crusade could end up doing a lot more harm than warming temperatures will.

OPINION

What Is Your Attitude Toward Trump 2.0?



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

I closed the year with a book tour that ends as Christmas comes. It was sheer pleasure to talk to journalists about their preoccupations, to go to bookstores and signings and meet readers and hear what's on their minds. When asked why I wrote the book I'd say it was because I wanted to give a second life to columns that gave me special pleasure in the writing or subject matter. But many questions reflected the political moment we're in, and often circled back to Donald Trump.

Which was the more important election, 2016 or 2024?

His first victory felt like something that happened. This one was a decision.

Absolutely '24, and it felt that way even on election night. It felt fateful. The 2016 election was a Hail Mary pass, voters didn't know if he'd catch it, weren't even sure he knew where the end zone was. Mr. Trump had a presidency, it ended with "stop the steal" and 1/6, he was gone for four years, and finished. Then the voters take the field in '24 and call exactly the same play, throw the long ball, but this time they know exactly who the receiver is, how he'll catch it, how he'll run and in what direction. Twenty sixteen always felt like something that happened. Twenty twenty-four was a decision.

Is Mr. Trump an irrevocable break with the past?

He isn't the old-style president who allows you to say to the kids, "I'd like you to be like that man." Jimmy Carter with his personal rectitude,

Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush with their virtues—Mr. Trump is a break with that, and the way he spoke when he first announced in 2015 made it clear. When he spoke of Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists, "and some, I assume, are good people," which is a very Trumpian formulation, I thought, that's not how presidents talk, you have to be measured, thoughtful, kindly.

I thought: That's bad. But my sister and uncle thought it was good. They understood what he was saying and why he was saying it, they agreed with him, but they also knew he couldn't walk it back. He couldn't be elected and then say, "Oh, I changed my mind, on second thought we need more illegal immigration." They felt the crudeness of his language meant that he was actually telling them the truth. It was a relief to them. "Forget eloquence, close the border!" They felt if the right policy requires a brute, get the brute.

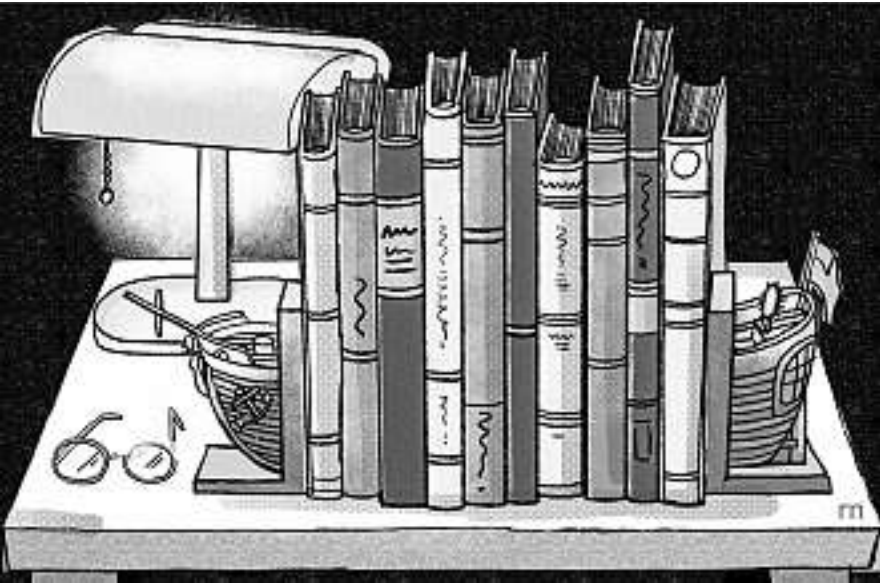
Could a Lincoln become president today, a Reagan?

Our current politics came from extremity. Things this century seemed so extreme—the wide open borders, DEI, boys on the girls' team. The American people would love it if in the future their top candidates classed the joint up. Mr. Trump and his generation of political followers came from broken politics and a broken culture and things not working. With all that breakage, politics got outlandish. The American people would love to see the return of a certain kind of elegance and dignity. But things would have to get more settled down first, more regular and normal.

What do you expect from Trump 2.0? Nonstop 24/7 Hellzapoppin.

What would be your advice to Republican senators in the cabinet confirmation battles?

Take it seriously. It isn't about short term loyalty to MAGA, it's



ROBERT NEUBECKER

about life-and-death appointment to such critical American agencies as defense, intelligence and health. Senators would best show loyalty to Mr. Trump by voting down those who are unsuited to various roles and would cause harm. They would best serve him by operating in a way that shows they are people of stature, not vassals. Urge him to find assistant-secretary jobs for some of those who don't deserve confirmation.

Mr. Trump should show his new cool and calm by doing what he did when Matt Gaetz was forced to step down from his nomination: accept it as if it were nothing. He took his shot, it didn't work, he offered a better replacement, next. In the end he looked good. But Republican senators must approach the hearings with gravity because, again, they're life-and-death appointments. If Mr. Trump is making a mistake save him from it, as a friend would.

Advice for Democratic senators?

The confirmation hearings will be the first time people see you since the November defeat, after which you got drunk and hid behind rocks. Now you're out in the open again, in

clean shirts and leaning into a mic. You think you've got a bonanza—all these rich targets, all these sketchy nominees! You hope to carpet-bomb Pete Hegseth, Tulsi Gabbard, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. That would be a mistake. You'll look obstructionist, vengeful, merely partisan. The country won't be in the mood for it. Democrats too should be cool. Draw the nominees out with respect, get a real handle on their views, bring the research and receipts. Accept who you can, giving due deference to a new president. But again, life and death. Be serious.

The biggest threat to the coming administration? "We have a huge mandate, we can do anything!" They're high on their own supply. It was a mandate, not an overwhelming one—popular vote carried, narrowly, both houses of Congress won. But we're a 50/50 country, and claiming otherwise doesn't make you look bold, it makes you look cruisin' for a bruise. They are going to make bad mistakes here. They're making them.

What's a helpful attitude going forward?

Trump supporters should shock

themselves with magnanimity. Victors should grow taller, not smaller. They shouldn't act like losers—truculent, resentful. If that's how you act, everyone else will think you're just losers at heart, losers who won't last. Accept not triumphing in some of the confirmation battles, some of those battles deserve to be lost, and if they're not they'll come around and bite you later, badly.

For Mr. Trump's opposition, if you believe in democracy you accept with as much good grace as you can muster—and after more than two centuries of this you ought to be able to muster a lot—the decision the people have made. If you're an American you wish America to prosper, and part of its prospering will involve successful presidential leadership, so you want Mr. Trump to be successful. In the Catholic faith you take a moment during Mass to pray for leaders at home and abroad. It has to be sincere when you say it or you're messing with God. Don't do that.

If you're an opinion columnist you should watch for what's good and say so, watch for what's bad and say that, and be afraid of neither observation. If you lose your temper, lose it; if you find yourself unexpectedly moved, admit it. Keep your tools, compass and gyroscope, clean, dry and level.

Are you an optimist?

Optimists tend to think the right, nice thing will happen, and I don't necessarily. But I have faith and I have hope. Life takes guts. Don't let all the bad news enter you and steal your peace. Keep the large things in your head. Two millennia ago a baby was born and the whole ridiculous story—the virgin, the husband, the stable, the star—is true, and changed the world. Compared to which our current concerns are nothing.

New Jersey Drones and My Own Close Encounter

By Richard Muller

The recent drone sightings across the country have produced the silliest public hysteria of my lifetime. Our government says there's nothing to fear, but it also hasn't offered an explanation. These messages aren't calming the panic.

In 1967 I was a graduate student working on a particle-physics experiment for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. My team worked near Cahto Peak, just west of Laytonville, Calif. Because of the NASA logo on our trucks, many local residents assumed that our research wasn't academic. They were sure our study of cosmic-ray interactions was a cover story to hide our real mission: tracking down the flying saucers that Laytonville residents had been spotting. Working at an unidentified-flying-object hotspot excited me. Maybe flying saucers were real and I would get to see one.

Late one night, I was working at our base up a dirt road on the mountainside. I stepped out of our trailer to get some air and saw something fantastic, one of the most thrilling sights of my life—a real flying saucer! It was hovering above a distant hillside, making a high-pitched warbling sound like I'd heard in the movie "Forbidden Planet." I watched its lighted windows move as the saucer wobbled and slowly rotated. I estimated that it was 1 or 2 miles away. Incredible!

I shouted to my team members in the trailer and ran for my camera. I took a photo, then walked toward the edge of the mountain to get a better look. Oddly, the position of the saucer changed as I moved sideways. Then I noticed that it seemed to get unexpectedly larger as I took a few steps forward. Maybe it wasn't as far away as I initially thought. I pulled out a flashlight, and discovered that it was very close to me—and that it was a trash-can lid with a cord attached to its handle, hanging from

a tree branch, wobbling in the light breeze. It had a string of tiny Christmas-tree lights around its rim that I had mistaken for distant windows. The warbling noise came from a small audio oscillator on the lid. I had been primed by locals' stories of UFOs, and a jokester on our team set this all up as a fantastic prank on me.

I asked myself afterward why I had thought the saucer was a couple of miles away. At night, the pupils of your eyes open wide, and you lose much of your ability to estimate distance. That's why it might look like the moon is setting into a nearby chimney, until you move your head back and forth. I had assumed the flying saucer was large and therefore deduced that it must be distant.

Let's imagine that someone is flying a small, cheap drone about a few hundred feet away from you at night. The more panic-prone among us might assume that the object is as big as a Predator drone, which is an intimidating 55 or so feet

across. In reality, the drone might only be about 2 feet in diameter. And because the panic-prone are basically estimating that the object is about 27 times as far away than it actually is, they will believe it is 27 times as high and moving 27

The UFO I saw in 1967 turned out to be prank. It taught me an important lesson about science.

times as fast too, guessing that it's moving 270 miles per hour instead of its actual 10 mph.

These small, cheap drones are everywhere now. Perhaps the public doesn't realize how accessible they've become. Just as I was primed to believe a flying saucer is a few hundred feet across, many people may believe that drones must be large, expensive and operated by some spy agency or foreign



BUSINESS
WORLD
By Holman W.
Jenkins, Jr.

Some outreachers drew attention to themselves, like Mark Zuckerberg and venture capitalist Marc Andreessen. Others Mr. Trump himself mentioned, such as Tim Cook.

A diverse lot, CEOs tend to be high on a sense of responsibility and Mr. Biden's debate performance crystallized the irresponsibility of Mr. Biden's team, hiding his condition, doing all they could to promote Mr. Trump on a belief

Mr. Trump was the only opponent he might beat.

One onion of irresponsibility has yet to be peeled. A Journal investigation this week finds his staff compensating for Mr. Biden's decline as far back as the 2020 campaign. If not Mr. Biden himself, who on his behalf decided that it would be a good idea to complicate U.S.-Russia relations by falsely blaming Moscow for his son's laptop?

The Logan Act of 1799 presumably outlaws interference in U.S. foreign policy by private citizens, as Mr. Biden was at the time. Then again, Logan may be moot if several of the 51 former officials were still under contract to the U.S. government or their activities were tacitly approved by then-CIA Director Gina Haspel, who held her job with advice and approval of the Senate.

The few traditional foreign-policy columnists still in business haven't given themselves permission to see it yet. But 51 ex-officials, representing both parties and all four of the most recent U.S. administrations, were overkill for Biden campaign purposes. To intelligence agencies and in government chancelleries around the world, the laptop misdirection instead looked very much like a quasi-official U.S. intelligence operation to assure Mr. Biden's election and Mr. Trump's defeat.

It would be too much to say Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter would thereupon secure Mr. Trump's 2024 win. It's not too much to say his Twitter takeover dismantled a left-wing and government-aided intimidation and cancellation machine that was instrumental in Mr. Biden's narrow 2020 victory.

The revolution in Twitter's ownership and management philosophy is only part of the story. Mr. Musk's emergence late in the race as a second pole of Trumpism, legitimizing Mr. Trump as a revolutionary rather than reactionary force for a pro-technology electorate, is also part of the story.

On another level, the election outcome is the most overdetermined reaction in history—a reaction

It isn't the only factor, but Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter helped unblock American democracy.

against a class of mostly white elites who don't really care about blacks, trans people, immigrants or climate but revel in moral grandiosity and self-righteousness over other, mostly but not exclusively less affluent whites.

Anyone might have seen it coming who paid attention to a series of Pew surveys on public attitudes toward "political correctness" or 2018's "Hidden Tribes" study that identified the country's "exhausted majority."

In all this, one thing you can't say is that Joe Biden ever took his times by the scruff of the neck.

He was the antithesis of leadership, whipped this way and that by his son's opportunism, by his future veep's suggesting on TV he was an anti-busing racist.

His vertebrate stand on Ukraine, by the end, has become a case of

Gorham-Stout syndrome, also known as vanishing bone disease.

His sole defense, whose plausibility I feel obliged to uphold, is that he never possessed the political or personal stamina to enlist Americans to assume any risk or even endure modest inconvenience for the purpose of resisting Russian aggression.

Last week the veteran conservative anti-Trumper Bill Kristol finally allowed reality to leak into his podcast. Guest and legal scholar Jack Goldsmith forthrightly acknowledged "the Trump people have credible reasons to be upset about some of the things that the [Justice Department and FBI] did to them over many years. . . . There were some deep state shenanigans against him in his first term. So, I get it."

Don't expect a lot more of this. A voluminous cowardice still rules in the media, all the more so because it has become so obvious their method of opposing Mr. Trump only strengthened and legitimized him and enabled his re-election.

Deep State is a poor term for shifting patterns of elite influence in an open society. Yet I wonder how Vladimir Putin, in his hall of mirrors, explains to himself the sudden displacement of America's *siloviki*, for at least the next four years, by an optimistic entrepreneurial class that Russia has little known for more than a century.

That this optimism is coming from an especially informed group is helping to counter the unseasonal foreboding this column expected it would be feeling no matter who won last month's election.

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Question: Is there such a thing as—heresy!—too much football?

We may find out this weekend. Prepare the couch, fluff the pillows, shoo the dog, or at least the cat, and steady your eyeballs, America.

A long afternoon of sports TV can soothe the merry sloth—there’s nothing better than wasting away New Year’s Day with a string of one-sided bowls—but there’s something new and alarmingly lethargic about this football weekend, which is headlined by the debut of the 12-team College Football Playoff.

An amuse-bouche arrived Friday night with a round one playoff game between the Indiana Hoosiers and the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame, a game otherwise known as the Indiana Super Bowl.

This will be followed by Saturday’s time-suck college playoff spectacular: SMU at Penn State at noon ET...followed by Clemson at Texas at 4 p.m....followed by Tennessee visiting Ohio State at 8 p.m.

Hungry for more? Just for kicks, there are two spicy NFL games on Saturday afternoon, too—Houston Texans-Kansas City Chiefs (1 p.m. ET, Patrick Mahomes is saying he’ll play) followed by Pittsburgh Steelers-Baltimore Ravens (4:30 p.m.).

Burp! That’s 12 hours of consequential playoff college football—and six or so simultaneous hours of NFL football—slithering down the chimney to swallow the final Saturday before Christmas.

Did anyone think this through in advance?

Have efficiency experts considered the potential havoc upon holiday shopping, domestic equilibrium and personal self-esteem—to say nothing of possible holiday fallout?

One imagines a disappointed child or grandchild, standing in an empty room, trying to figure out why there’s no tree this year, and the “big family present” is a jumbo bag of sunflower seeds purchased that morning at a 24-hour gas station.

Sorry kid. Santa just had to watch SMU-Penn State. And Vols-Buckeyes. And Cowboys-Bucs.

Football is already the great American preoccupation, but how much is too much?

Millions of lives are already consumed by football scuttlebutt, infighting, social media chitchat, fantasy leagues, survivor pools, gambling, gambling, gambling, and making fun of the New York Giants and New York Jets.

(Rough season in Jersey. Not even the visiting outer space drones want to watch the Giants and the Jets.)

Overall, there’s confidence that

JASON GAY

Get Ready for Football’s Wild Wall-to-Wall Weekend

A Saturday smorgasbord of games and more gluttony on Sunday. America’s megasport doesn’t think there’s too much of a good thing.



Clockwise from top: Travis Kelce and the Kansas City Chiefs take on the Houston Texans; Penn State and quarterback Drew Allar play SMU in a College Football Playoff first-round game; Texas faces Clemson.

we can’t get enough—that football’s golden goose is so succulent, it’s impossible to overcook.

In any other business, this would be called hubris. With football, it’s just called...football.

There’s belief that this is the last mass entertainment product, that nobody cares anymore about sitcoms, board games, whittling, charades, serious cinema or unseri-

ous columnists writing about sports in a financial newspaper.

Audiences are hard to keep. We’re presumed distracted by our niche streamers, text threads, video clips and notification pings—and we’ll only watch as a country if helmeted men in shiny pants start pummeling each other on a gridiron.

It’s only going to get bigger. The

12-team college playoff hasn’t even debuted and people are *already* talking about its expansion.

No kidding they are. This playoff figures to be a TV hit, and you know the first rule of TV: If something works, do it again and again and again and again and again, until it doesn’t work, and everyone loses their jobs.

I’m curious to see how the col-

lege football ratings fare against the NFL.

I’m presuming the starry NFL games on NBC and Fox will crush the numbers for the first two college playoff games, which are both running on TNT. But the overall audience data will be interesting, especially if some games turn out to be duds.

Meanwhile, the college playoff format has more urgent issues. I’ve already argued for discarding the automatic first-round byes for conference champions, in favor of just seeding the field 1-12.

There’s also a huge hubbub about the transfer portal, since players have been fleeing teams with football left to play. One school, Marshall, bailed from its non-playoff Zombie Bowl commitment (the Radiance Technologies Independence Bowl) after a staggering number of athletes fled to the portal after the departure of the school’s head coach.

Washington State is amid a similar drain. The Cougars have lost more than 20 players including their quarterback, plus the defensive coordinator, offensive coordinator, and now the head coach, who’s off to Wake Forest just days after lamenting the ransacking of his program. The Cougs say they’re still playing in the Holiday Bowl on Dec. 27, but they may need to put pads and a helmet to the mascot.

Can you run, catch or block? I’d give them a call up in Pullman, Wash.

It’s a mess. And though moving the portal beyond December will stave off some of this musical chairs comedy, it won’t eliminate it, now that free agency has effectively arrived in college football. (Keep in mind it’s long been there for coaches, who’ve happily bailed on bowl-bound schools for decades.)

It’s hard to see a potential transfer—to say nothing of a top NFL prospect—wanting to risk their future for the sake of a Zombie Bowl. But even playoff teams are losing athletes to the portal—Penn State just lost its valued backup quarterback.

Hate it? Hang on—more is coming. The era of radical change is here. The NCAA is trying to get its revenue sharing/direct payment program under way. It’s unlikely that Year Two of the 12-team playoff will mirror Year One. Alabama could play in it, for starters.

If you’re a fan, it’s a whole new wild weekend to obsess over. My advice? Hydrate. Walk the dog. Occasionally go outside, say hello to the neighbors, and embrace the season. Realize that the true holiday spirit is gratitude, and generously giving to others.

Then run right back to the couch for more football.

How the SMU Mustangs Came Back From the Dead

By LAINE HIGGINS

IT’S BEEN SOME 40 YEARS since Southern Methodist University was in the national title hunt at the business end of the college football season.

From 1980 to 1984, the Mustangs posted a 49-9-1 record that ranked as the best in Division I. Boasting a bunch of blue-chip recruits headlined by Eric Dickerson, SMU earned three Southwest Conference titles and claimed a share of two national championships.

You probably know what happened next.

The program was busted for illegally paying its players. And in 1987, the NCAA made SMU into the pariah of college football, handing out the harshest punishment in the book—the death penalty. Just like that, SMU football went from nearly winning national championships to not existing overnight.

Yet this weekend, 37 years after being left for dead, 11-seeded SMU is back in the spotlight with a first-round date against No. 6 Penn State in the College Football Playoff.

“Holy crap, it took us 40 years,” said Bill Armstrong, a major athletics donor and SMU trustee. “It’s been absolutely a long tortuous journey through the fricking desert.”

Oddly enough, the story of how SMU got here isn’t all that different from how they landed in hot water in the first place. Boosters fed up with losing opened their checkbooks and shelled out tens of millions of dollars to upgrade the football team and secure a spot in the Atlantic Coast Conference.

The primary difference, of course, is that in 2024 paying players is completely legal, thanks to rules that allow athletes to profit from their name, image and likeness.

“Our running joke was we were



Hall-of-Fame running back Eric Dickerson was a star for the SMU Mustangs from 1979 to 1982.

the first NIL,” said Dickerson, who famously had a gold Trans Am “appear” in his driveway—courtesy of a Texas A&M booster—while getting recruited.

Nevermind that most teams in the Southwest Conference back then were breaking the rules, it was SMU that had its football team placed on a one-year hiatus, among other punishments, when the NCAA determined the Mustangs had broken the rules.

“It was devastating,” said David Miller, chairman of the SMU Board of Trustees. “It not only crushed the athletic program, it frankly brought the university to its knees.” It took a long while for the foot-

ball team to get back to its feet. From the reinstatement of the program in 1989 until 2005, SMU enjoyed just one winning season. It wasn’t until 2019 that the Mustangs achieved a 10-win season.

Making matters worse, this demise came at the same time that financial disparities between the premier conferences and everyone else grew wider than ever before. If SMU was ever going to recapture the glory of the early ’80s, boosters felt they needed to abandon the American Athletic Conference for one of the sport’s powerhouse leagues.

“It felt like we needed to pony up now,” Armstrong said, “or we

might forever be relegated to obscurity.”

The year everything changed was 2021. First, the NCAA made it legal for college athletes to make money—exactly what the Pony Express had gotten in trouble for. Then Texas and Oklahoma touched off a years-long scramble of conference realignment by ditching the Big 12 for the Southeastern Conference.

Miller assembled a group of trustees to explore how SMU could earn its own invitation to a power conference. The mission proceeded down two tracks. The first was to spend millions—roughly \$250 million since 2013—to put the Mus-

tangs’ athletic facilities on par with other schools in power conferences. Donors gave even more to help the university hire better coaches and raise their salaries enough to hopefully keep bigger programs from poaching them.

The second boiled down to a lot of schmoozing. Mustangs athletic director Rick Hart worked the phones with his peers while Miller, a billionaire oil investor, went through his Rolodex to connect with other well-heeled boosters across the country.

“SMU had the winningest football program in Texas over the last five years...and the Dallas-Fort Worth media market is the fifth largest in the country,” Miller said. “We needed to be more proactive in telling that story.”

An ACC invitation accelerated the strong recruiting efforts launched by coach Rhett Lashlee, who scooped homesick Texans out of the transfer portal and sold youngsters on Dallas glitz. He also embraced the brash spirit of the Pony Express era, asking Dickerson and fellow running back Craig James to film a promotional video while riding through the city in a sports car. “The university tried to shy away from us,” said Dickerson. “Now they’re trying to undo what they’ve done.”

In 2024, SMU was the only team in the ACC to not lose a regular season league game (they fell to Clemson in the championship game). SMU is unfazed about being an 8.5-point underdog for its date in Happy Valley. This scenario was exactly what Hart, Miller and the rest of the Mustangs faithful had hoped for when they signed all those checks.

“We have clawed our way to get here,” Armstrong said. “We’re not going to squander this opportunity.”



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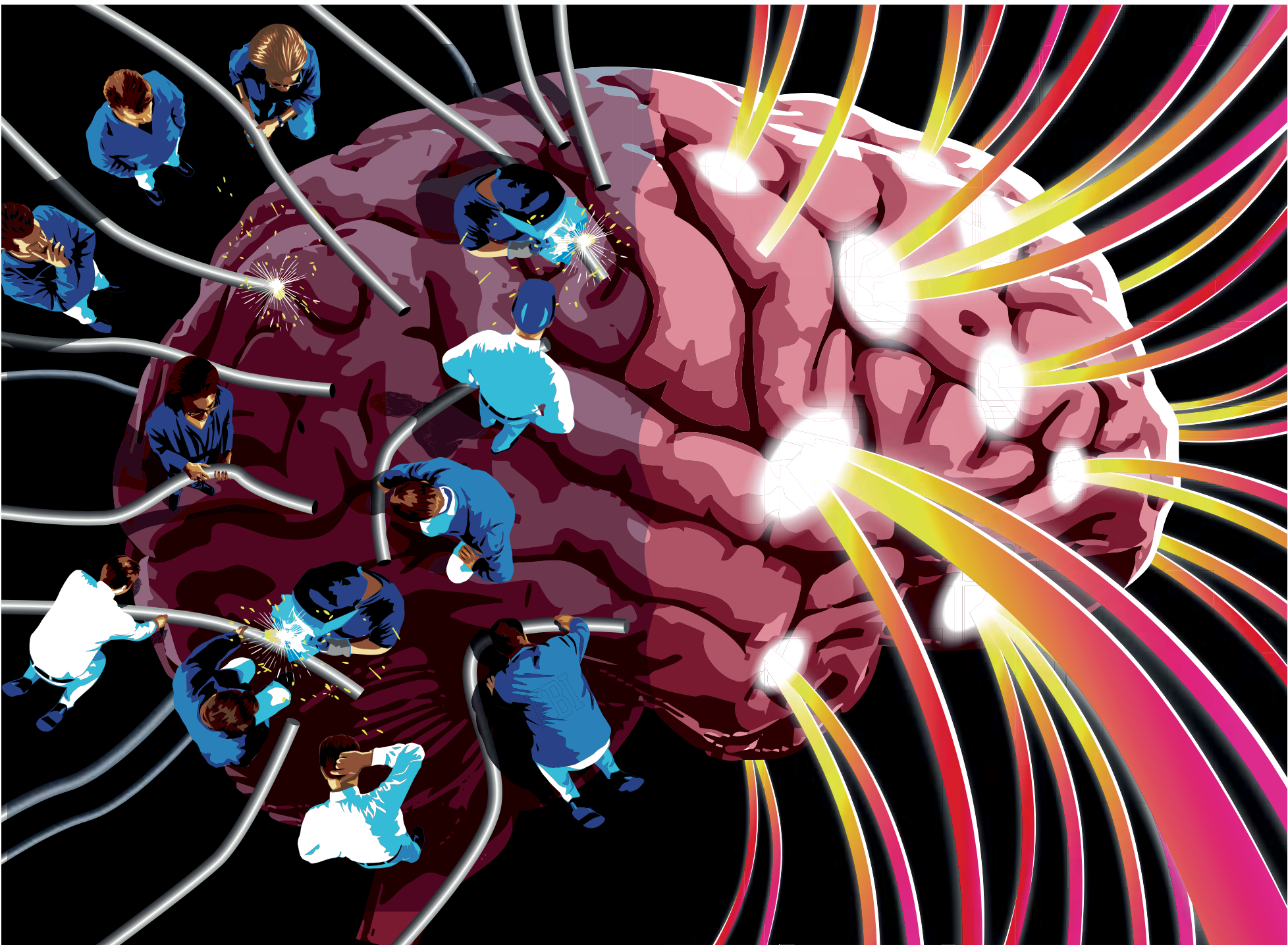
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The Next Great Leap in AI



OpenAI's new artificial-intelligence project is behind schedule and running up huge bills. It isn't clear when—or if—it'll work. There may not be enough data in the world to make it smart enough.

The project, officially called GPT-5 and code-named Orion, has been in the works for more than 18 months and is intended to be a major advancement in the technology that powers ChatGPT. OpenAI's closest partner and largest investor, Microsoft, had expected to see the new model around mid-2024, say people with knowledge of the matter.

OpenAI has conducted at least two large training runs, each of which entails months of crunching huge amounts of data, with the goal of making Orion smarter. Each time, new problems arose and the software fell short of the results researchers were hoping for, people close to the project say.

At best, they say, Orion performs better than OpenAI's current offerings, but hasn't advanced enough to justify the enormous cost of keeping the new model running. A six-month training run can cost around half a billion dollars in com-

IS BEHIND SCHEDULE AND CRAZY EXPENSIVE

OpenAI faces an existential question: If the smartest minds working on artificial intelligence can't make ChatGPT better, is AI itself doomed to disappoint?

BY DEEPA SEETHARAMAN

puting costs alone, based on public and private estimates of various aspects of the training.

OpenAI and its brash chief executive, Sam Altman, sent shock waves through Silicon Valley with ChatGPT's launch two years ago. AI promised to continually exhibit dramatic improvements and permeate nearly all aspects of our lives. Tech giants could spend \$1 trillion on AI projects in the coming years, analysts predict.

The weight of those expectations falls mostly on OpenAI, the company at ground zero of the AI boom.

The \$157 billion valuation investors gave OpenAI in October is premised in large part on Altman's prediction that GPT-5 will represent a "significant leap forward" in all kinds of subjects and tasks.

GPT-5 is supposed to unlock new scientific discoveries as well as accomplish routine human tasks like booking appointments or flights. Researchers hope it will make fewer mistakes than today's AI, or at least acknowledge doubt—something of a challenge for the current models, which can produce errors with apparent confidence, known as hallucinations.

Please turn to page B5

At Gamblers Anonymous, Stock Traders Seek Help

BY GUNJAN BANERJI

A new type of addict is showing up at Gamblers Anonymous meetings across the country: investors hooked on the market's riskiest trades.

At Gamblers Anonymous in the Murray Hill neighborhood of Manhattan, one man called options "the crack cocaine" of the stock market. Another said he faced hundreds of thousands of dollars in trading losses after borrowing from a loan shark to double down on stocks. And one young man brought his mom and girlfriend to celebrate one year since his last bet.

They were among a group of about 60 people, almost all men, who sat in rows of metal folding chairs in a crowded church basement that evening. Some shared their struggle with addiction—not on sports-betting apps or at Las Vegas casinos—but using brokerage apps like Robinhood.

Many of the men, and scores of others around the country, discovered trading and betting during the pandemic boom that began in 2020. Some were drawn in by big wins in meme stocks and other viral stock sensations, leading them into even

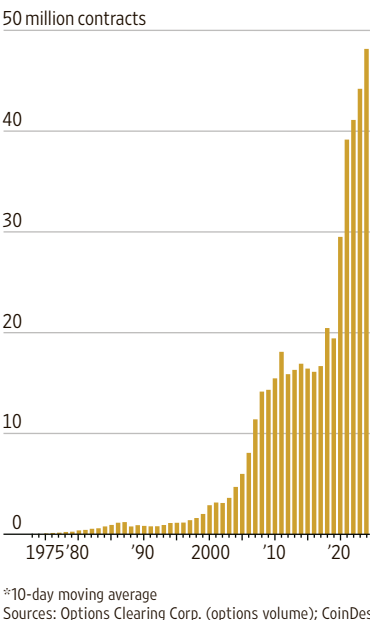
higher-octane wagers that offer the chance to put up a small amount of cash for a potentially mammoth return—or more often, a crushing loss.

Others bought and sold cryptocurrencies on apps that make trading as easy as ordering takeout on Uber Eats. In an age when sports betting has become an accepted pastime—accessible by the flick of the thumb on an iPhone app—they found the same rush betting on dogecoin, Tesla or Nvidia as wagering on Patrick Mahomes to carry the Kansas City Chiefs to the Super Bowl.

Doctors and counselors say they are seeing more cases of compulsive gambling in financial markets, or an uncontrollable urge to bet. They expect the problem to worsen. The stock market has climbed 24% this year and bitcoin recently topped \$100,000 for the first time, tempting many people to pile into speculative trades. Wall Street keeps introducing newer and riskier ways to play the market through stock options or complex exchange-traded products that use borrowed money and compound the risk for investors.

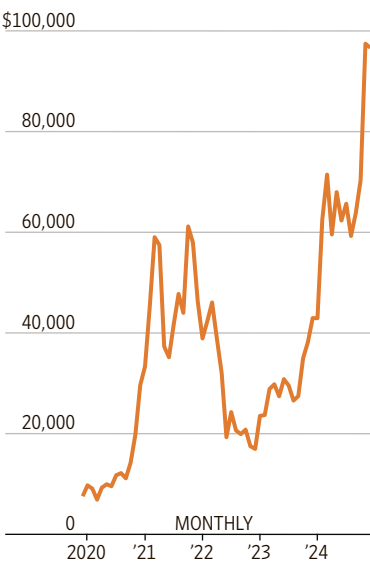
Some who are desperate to stop trading are turning to self-help

Average daily options volumes, annually

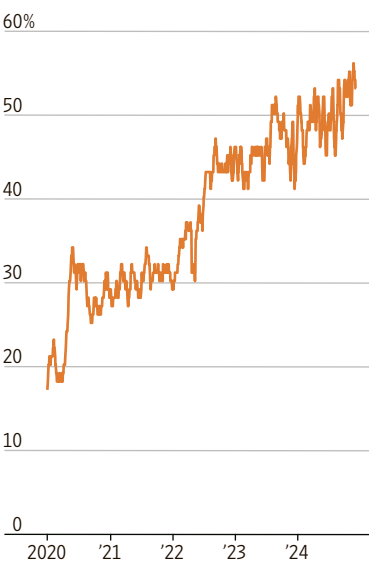


*10-day moving average Sources: Options Clearing Corp. (options volume); CoinDesk (Bitcoin); Spotgamma (S&P 500 index options)

CoinDesk Bitcoin Price Index (XBX)



Share of S&P 500 index options activity expiring the same day*



groups like Gamblers Anonymous. A GA pamphlet advises members to stay away from bets on stocks, commodities and options as well as raffle tickets and office sports pools. Sometimes members hand over retirement accounts to their spouses.

Modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous, GA dates back to 1957 and now has hundreds of chapters and is in every U.S. state. Attendees at local GA

meetings from Ponca City, Okla., to Allentown, Pa., subscribe to a 12-step program. It begins with accepting that they are powerless over gambling and can include a financial review in a so-called pressure relief group meeting. New attendees are peppered with calls from others and latch on to veteran members who commit to helping them stay on track.

More than 30 people interviewed by The Wall Street Journal, many of whom regularly attend GA meetings, said they've struggled with compulsive gambling in financial markets. At times, the trading led to mood swings, sleepless nights and even depression. Their trades—and spiraling losses—became a shameful secret that they kept from their partners or

Please turn to page B4

EXCHANGE

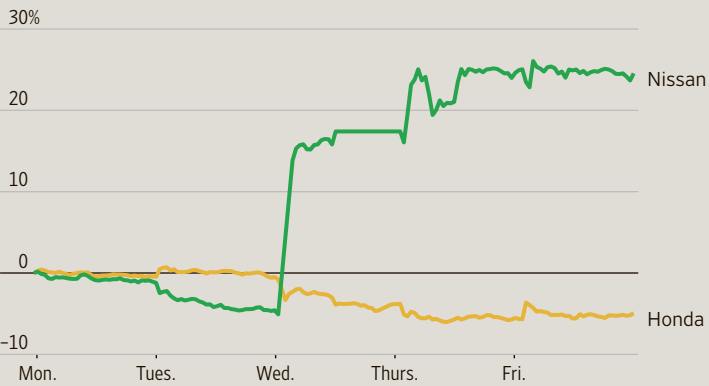
THE SCORE | THE BUSINESS WEEK IN 6 STOCKS

Nissan, Honda Talk Deal, Amazon Workers Strike

NISSAN MOTORS

▲ **NSANF** 16% Honda and Nissan said Wednesday they were exploring a merger following a downturn in Nissan's results and struggles for both automakers in China. The two Japanese companies have been caught flat-footed by the rapid shift to electric vehicles and plug-in hybrid vehicles in China, the world's largest auto market. Nissan has also posted weaker results in the U.S. The companies have grown closer this year and had previously announced plans to work together on electrification technologies, seeking to share development costs. American depository shares of Nissan **jumped 16% Wednesday**, while Honda's fell 4%

Performance of Japanese automakers this past week



Source: FactSet

FEDEX

▼ **FDX** 0.1% FedEx announced plans to spin off its freight-trucking division, moving to streamline its structure and unlock value that some shareholders have argued has been lost inside the delivery giant. Shares **slipped 0.1% Friday** as the company reported lower quarterly profits and trimmed its financial goals for the rest of its fiscal year. The division that is to be spun off, FedEx Freight, has more than 30,000 vehicles and 350 facilities in North America.

\$9 billion

Revenue from the FedEx Freight division in its last fiscal year

NOVO NORDISK

▼ **NONOF** 18% Novo Nordisk, the maker of Ozempic, released results of a study that showed a two-drug combination dubbed CagriSema helped people lose 22.7% of their weight on average after taking weekly shots for more than a year. American depository shares of the Danish company **dropped 18% Friday**, as the outcome fell short of the 25% weight loss it expected. Manufacturing and administering injections of the two-drug combo could prove challenging, and rivals are pursuing weight-loss pills.

25%

The amount of weight loss Novo Nordisk expected its new two-drug combination would yield if taken for more than a year



Amazon workers went on strike in the week ahead of Christmas.

AMAZON

▲ **AMZN** 13% Workers at seven Amazon fulfillment centers across the country went on strike Thursday over contract negotiations and the company's refusal to recognize the Teamsters labor union. The strike wasn't expected to affect operations, Amazon said, branding the action as an illegal public-relations play. Amazon shares **rose 1.3% Thursday**. On Friday, Starbucks baristas at about 10 stores in three cities walked out after contract talks hit an impasse.

Amazon share price this past week



Source: FactSet

NIKE

▼ **NKE** 0.2% The sneaker giant Thursday reported its third consecutive drop in quarterly sales and warned of more revenue declines ahead. New Chief Executive Officer Elliott Hill is slashing prices to clear out inventory and rebuilding relationships with retailers. For a time, Nike had focused on selling items directly to consumers. The strategy yielded record profits, but early last year, executives realized they were stuck with excess merchandise. Nike shares **fell 0.2% Friday**.

HONEYWELL INTERNATIONAL

▲ **HON** 3.7% Honeywell said Monday it was considering a potential separation of its aerospace business, about a month after activist investor Elliott Investment Management called for the industrial conglomerate to break itself up. An aerospace separation would be a big deal for the Charlotte, N.C.-based company: Honeywell gets about 40% of its annual revenue from the aerospace business. Shares **rose 3.7% Monday**.

—Erik Holm



KEYWORDS | CHRISTOPHER MIMS

To Shake Our Reliance on Chinese Minerals, America Looks to...Salt

Batteries that rely on sodium could create a new way to store energy



The U.S. and China are in a high-stakes race, with the energy security of America and its allies hanging in the balance. It involves batteries made from the same sodium found in table salt.

In both countries, researchers and companies are working furiously to make batteries that rely on a very different starting material than the lithium-ion batteries currently powering everything from our cellphones to our power grids. Such a battery could break China's near monopoly on crucial battery-making elements at a time when trade tensions and America's electric storage needs are on a collision course.

Instead of lithium, this nascent battery tech uses a sodium compound called soda ash, which can be produced using table salt. Unlike lithium, sodium is easily accessible everywhere. Even better for the U.S. is that China must synthesize soda ash from salt, while it is cheap and plentiful here. In fact, with 92% of the world's reserves, you might even say that the U.S. is the Saudi Arabia of the stuff.

Researchers and entrepreneurs have twice failed in their attempts to turn the U.S. into a battery-making powerhouse. They are more optimistic this time, partly because they've teamed up with a bipartisan group of policymakers that is armed with incentives enacted by the current administration, and expected tariffs in the coming one.

Securing the gargantuan quantities of batteries the U.S. will need in the future is critical, given the transition to electrified transportation, as well as the essential role that battery storage has and will play in the reliability of our electrical grid. Experts who have worked on previous revolutions in energy storage say this latest technology gives the U.S. a third crack at the problem—and that we might not get another.

A consortium of six national laboratories and eight universities just received a \$50 million grant from the Energy Department to advance this technology.

Sodium-ion batteries have a number of advantages over lithium-ion battery tech, including being tougher and potentially safer. They also have one big disadvantage, thanks to unavoidable realities of the periodic table—they are bulkier and heavier.

Proponents of this kind of battery say their size and weight disadvantages hardly matter in many applications, such as large, stationary batteries for capturing energy when the sun shines and the wind blows, and feeding it back to the power grid when they don't. And researchers say that eventually, they may be able to produce sodium-ion batteries which would be small and light enough to be used in electric vehicles.

This could lead to safer and cheaper EV batteries that also work across a wider range of temperatures—including the cold weather which can be a drag on EV range in conventional lithium-ion-powered vehicles.

The U.S. should give priority to the development of sodium-ion batteries on account of national security, says Venkat Srinivasan, director of research in energy storage at Argonne National Labo-

ratory and head of the recently-announced consortium. The supply chains for lithium-ion batteries nearly all flow through China, which is by far the dominant refiner of critical minerals and also the dominant manufacturer of finished cells.

This is no idle threat. China has repeatedly restricted exports of minerals critical for other components of electric cars and renewable energy infrastructure, most recently with a ban on exports of rare-earth elements. It has also reviewed controls on exports of graphite, essential for making lithium-ion batteries.

As people everywhere become increasingly dependent on batteries, there is a hazard that China gains a level of power over other countries that would make the OPEC of the early 1970s green with envy. Twice before—with the initial breakthroughs that led to lithium-ion batteries, and again with the recent refinement of that chemistry into more affordable batteries which are fast becoming dominant in EVs the world over—

the U.S. that is learning.

At a Peak Energy facility in the Bay Area, dozens of engineers are working out how to turn the battery cells from China into assemblages the size of large shipping containers so they can replace the arrays of lithium-ion batteries used by utilities. Eventually, the goal of the company is to open a factory to produce sodium-ion batteries here in the U.S., but that will take years, says Mossburg.

Meanwhile, researchers at the consortium led by Srinivasan are working on improving the sodium-ion batteries that companies like Peak Energy are already buying. One eventual goal, he says, is to figure out how to make battery packs for electric vehicles that are as energy-dense as the current standard for lower-cost EV batteries, known as lithium iron phosphate, or LFP. These are used in base models of the Tesla Model 3, Ford F-150 Lightning, Mustang Mach-E, and many models of Chinese vehicles.

Getting there will require a substantial amount of research, as



Battery ingredients are mixed with a mortar and pestle at Argonne National Laboratory.

the U.S. has completely ceded the field to China.

If the U.S. can move quickly enough it can build up a battery-based energy independence from China, using sodium ion batteries, says Landon Mossburg, chief executive of Denver-based Peak Energy. His company is attempting to bring sodium-ion batteries to grid energy storage in the U.S., and already has contracts to build a handful of small pilot installations for utility companies and independent power providers in 2025.

The U.S. has vast reserves of naturally occurring sodium carbonate, also known as soda ash, the primary component of sodium-ion batteries. While soda ash can be synthesized, it's cheaper to simply mine it, says Srinivasan. About half of the soda ash the U.S. digs up every year is used in the production of glass—everything from the windows in your home to beer bottles.

China is the only country producing early commercial versions of sodium-ion batteries at scale. As a result, Mossburg's company is purchasing its battery cells from a Chinese partner he declined to name—while also attempting to learn all it can about their manufacture. It's a process analogous to the decades of forced technology transfer U.S. firms have had to sign up for whenever they want to build manufacturing plants in China, only this time it's China that's ahead technologically, and

there are many problems to overcome, says Srinivasan. One is figuring out how to tweak the chemistry of current sodium-ion batteries to eliminate nickel—a China-controlled critical mineral. Another is figuring out how to cram more of them into a smaller space to make the battery packs more competitive with lithium-ion.

Ultimately, what could make sodium-ion batteries a viable alternative for electric vehicles is that the rest of the tech in an EV is also evolving. As Lucid Motors CEO Peter Rawlinson mentioned in a recent interview on the Wall Street Journal's Bold Names podcast, advancing technology in every aspect of their vehicles means that in the future, EVs with far smaller battery packs could go just as far as ones with larger packs do today.

Getting there will require as much policymaking as science, says Mossburg. If the U.S. slaps broad tariffs on imported Chinese goods, his company could be hamstrung, unless there's a carve-out for sodium-ion batteries. Despite analysts' worries that policies of the next administration will derail the U.S. build-out of next-generation energy technologies, he remains optimistic.

"In our discussions with the incoming administration, we are seeing a fairly bipartisan viewpoint that energy security is national security," says Mossburg.

EXCHANGE

His Product Was Free. He Made It Worth Billions.

Ali Ghodsi has performed a series of ‘strategic surgeries’ to make his company one of the fastest-growing startups in Silicon Valley



Ali Ghodsi

- **Tech support:** Ghodsi began coding on his home computer in fourth grade and started a business where he charged his classmates to fix their broken computers.
- **Ph.D. thesis:** ‘Distributed k-ary System: Algorithms for Distributed Hash Tables’
- **Places lived:** Germany, India, Iran, Italy, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland, U.S.
- **Multilingual:** Speaks Farsi, Swedish and English
- **Side hustle:** Also works as an adjunct professor at U.C. Berkeley

“You can pry it out of my dead, cold fingers,” Dan DeMeyere, chief product and technology officer at the online clothing reseller ThredUp, said of his engineers’ loyalty to Databricks.

In 2022, Ghodsi realized Databricks had grown too bloated and needed another surgery. Nearly a decade after its founding, his startup was doubling the number of new hires each year and losing money, but his investors were now demanding efficiency.

At an annual company off-site held at the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas in February 2023, Ghodsi told his roughly 5,000 employees that he wanted to make the startup profitable within three years. He had his chief financial officer, Dave Conte, share a giant chart tracking progress toward this goal. The chart became so widely referenced among employees that it even got its own nickname—the Conte Curve.

Ghodsi began personally approving all new hires while offshoring jobs to countries with cheaper labor such as Costa Rica and India. The company holiday party was cut. And the startup’s engineers began building AI-powered bots—including one named after R2-D2 from “Star Wars”—to automate internal tasks.

Unlike most big tech companies trying to economize around the same time, though, Databricks didn’t lay off workers.

At the same time, Ghodsi went on a dealmaking spree to try to position Databricks for a new spurt of growth.

In the summer of 2023, he called Naveen Rao after learning that Rao was fundraising for his two-year-old AI startup, MosaicML. Ghodsi offered to buy his company for \$1.3 billion instead. Databricks customers now use Mosaic to build AI models that can predict spending habits or determine which promotions to offer their clients.

In the spring, he caught wind that Tabular, a popular data-management startup that was catching on with businesses, was in talks to sell itself to Snowflake. Ghodsi won the deal by offering the startup roughly \$2 billion—more than triple what Snowflake proposed, according to people familiar with the deal.

Soon after, Ghodsi began debating whether to take Databricks public by the summer of 2025. Instead, he chose to raise another private funding round—the one announced Tuesday. The company intends to use some of the new cash to buy out employee shares and the taxes associated with them.

By BERBER JIN AND TOM DOTAN

When he was in college in Sweden, Ali Ghodsi read an article about a chief executive who was hired to save a struggling tech company. It reminded him of the surgeries his parents, both doctors, performed while he was growing up.

“I loved the fact that you could think about large corporations as patients, and you could perform surgery on them to make them super healthy and successful,” he said.

Ghodsi is now CEO of a software company called Databricks, which has quietly become one of the fastest-growing startups in Silicon Valley. The 11-year-old company is now valued at \$62 billion after securing \$10 billion from investors including Andreessen Horowitz and Thrive Capital. The new funding, announced Tuesday, is among the largest in the history of venture capital.

Ghodsi has gotten Databricks to this point thanks to the “strategic surgeries” he said he’s performed to keep the company healthy. After taking the reins in 2016, he refashioned the business by charging for an upgraded version of the software the company had been giving away free. Two years ago, when investors demanded efficiency, he slowed hiring and had his engineers build tools to boost productivity.

Today, data scientists at some of America’s largest companies use Databricks’ software to analyze the large volumes of information they collect—a tool that’s become even more valuable with the rise of artificial intelligence. Walgreens, for example, uses Databricks to help forecast inventory for filling prescriptions, while Rivian uses it to improve the battery life of its electric trucks.

Ghodsi was born in Tehran in 1978 on the eve of the Iranian Revolution. Five years later, the family fled to Stockholm, where they initially lived in student dormitories.



Ali Ghodsi, top, has been CEO of Databricks since 2016. The Databricks office in San Francisco, above.

tially lived in student dormitories.

He began coding on his home computer in fourth grade and started a business where he charged his classmates to fix their broken computers.

Ghodsi enrolled at a Swedish university with plans to study computer science. On his first day, his roommate, a business student, joked that he would one day become Ghodsi’s boss. Ghodsi added a second major in business.

In 2009, after completing a Ph.D. in computer science, Ghodsi moved to the U.S. as a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley. A year later, while working at AMPLab, a data-analytics lab affiliated with the university, he and six other researchers developed a new piece of code called Spark.

Spark became an instant hit among data scientists for its ability to analyze messy data sets at record speed—at one point setting a world record for sorting through

100 terabytes of data in 23 minutes, beating the old record by over 40 minutes. The seven researchers decided to build a business around it called Databricks.

They asked Ben Horowitz, co-founder of Andreessen Horowitz, for \$200,000 to help launch the business. Horowitz encouraged them to think bigger, writing an \$11 million check on behalf of his venture-capital firm.

At first, Ghodsi was unsure whether he wanted to become a full-time tech executive. He worked part time at Databricks, where the first CEO was fellow Berkeley computer scientist Ion Stoica. In the fall of 2015, Ghodsi applied to become a computer-science professor at the university.

Then came a call from Horowitz. He asked Ghodsi to become CEO.

In January 2016, Ghodsi succeeded Stoica, who returned to academia. At the time, Databricks charged for a more user-friendly ver-

The Great Unblonding Is Here

By FIORELLA VALDESOLO

Mousy brown and dishwater blond have never been particularly trendy hair colors. But as bright-blond hair associated with screen sirens and news anchors has fallen out of fashion, those darker shades are rising in popularity.

Referred to by fans as “recession blond” or “old-money blond,” the light-brownish hue is taking off. At a time when salon treatments regularly cost \$400 and inflation is top of mind for Americans, hairstylists say more women are asking for hair color that is low-maintenance and natural-looking. Celebrities have helped popularize the shift. Taylor Swift, who has previously had gold waves and a platinum bob, has embraced a natural darker shade in her most recent era, as has musician Maggie Rogers.

Paige Sander, a 29-year-old marketing manager in Utah, said her full head of cool-toned blond highlights required five-plus hours in a salon chair every four months

and over \$400 per visit. “As I got older it became less of a decision and more of a routine,” she said. Last year, she decided to grow it out. “I am not a blonde anymore. I’m somewhere in the middle and I feel more confident than ever,” she said. She posted about her experience on TikTok and got over 44,000 likes.

“This noncolor is subtle and ambiguous, sitting in a neutral space between colors,” said Julie Dickson, master stylist and founder of Joon Drop Salon, adding that tones can vary from light, beige-y blond and pale, sunlit sand to deeper taupe and cool, gray-tinged hues.

Emaly Baum, owner and colorist at Beauty Supply in New York, likens it to a child’s hair color: “Like when you were a kid and didn’t have anything but soft highlights from the sun.” Baum recently toned down the once-brighter shades of Rogers and actress Dianna Agron.

Salon and spa-software company GlossGenius’s annual report,

which culls statistics from more than 80,000 beauty and wellness professionals and experts, found that “lived-in color” (which refers to partial, versus full, highlights or balayage, which is strategically freehand painted color) was the number one favorite hair color among stylists this year. Stylists said more clients are requesting a return to their natural color or something akin to it, which can be achieved using dye or gloss, which tones and adds shine to hair.

Keeping bright, faux-blond fresh often requires significant time and money. “Lighter blonds require tons of maintenance, and it’s also intricate work with very little room for error, which requires a higher level of expertise,” said Dickson. “Not only does a slightly darker blond require less frequent salon visits, but it causes less damage, so it’s shinier.”

It’s quiet luxury as hair color, said Natalie Rotger, a colorist at Jenna Perry Hair Studio, and it’s enough to sway people who have been blond for years.



Hair salons are selling darker shades that require less upkeep and fewer appointments. Taylor Swift in 2019, left, and earlier this year, right.



One of Rotger’s recent clients, Holly Siegel, 42, a Long Island, N.Y.-based creative director, got a partial highlight to return to a more natural color. “I’d been doing different levels of blond highlights for 10 years, but it was starting to feel too stripy or too brassy,” Siegel said. “Bright blond didn’t feel very chic anymore to me.”

Andrea Brodfuehrer, a 43-year-old interior designer in Manhattan, found that blond hair no longer suited her as she entered middle age. “The carefree blond of perceived effortlessness and vitality I was going for started to feel more like I was clutching at youth,” Brodfuehrer said. Just don’t call it dishwater.

EXCHANGE



Hold on to your wallet. Wall Street is gearing up for a sales push that could enrich the middlemen and impoverish you.

I'm talking about private or alternative assets—investments outside the public stock and bond markets. In the right hands, these assets work wonders. In the wrong hands, they wreak havoc.

This coming year, with Wall Street and Washington likely opening the floodgates in unison, your financial adviser may inundate you with pitches to buy private assets. You should evaluate them with more skepticism than ever.

Hedge funds, venture capital, private-equity funds, nontraded real estate, private credit and other alternatives hold out the hope of better diversification and higher returns. All too often, those potential virtues come at the cost of higher fees, greater risk, more conflicts of interest and less disclosure. And you can generally sell only at certain times, not whenever you feel like it.

That's why access to alternatives has long been restricted to big institutions and wealthy individuals, who can afford to lose most or all of an investment without going broke.

A few great investors, led by the late David Swensen of Yale University, have used alternatives to drive impressive outperformance. Often, however, these investments have been a costly path to mediocrity for even the world's biggest investors.

As the managers of alternative funds have struggled to resell a glut of overpriced assets, they've also been stymied trying to convince big clients to add more money.

No wonder there's an intensifying push to strip away the traditional protections for smaller investors.

A bill pending in the U.S. Senate would allow anyone who can pass an exam about "the risks and opportunities of investing in securities" to purchase alternatives.

Project 2025—the policy blueprint that President-elect Donald Trump has said he partly disagrees with—calls for loosening the regulatory restraints on who

THE INTELLIGENT INVESTOR | JASON ZWEIG

Don't RSVP to This Private Party

Higher fees and greater risk await small-time investors in the private markets



can invest in private assets. (As of now, purchases are often restricted to investors with at least \$200,000 of income and \$1 million in net worth, not counting their home.)

And the managers of private assets that may not trade for years at a time are stuffing them into exchange-traded funds, which trade all the time.

Financial advisers might tell you that you need to buy alternative assets because public stocks and bonds are overpriced and doomed to provide years of poor returns.

What they won't tell you is that they need to *sell* you alternative assets, because otherwise their own firms will be doomed to years of poor returns.

Wall Street's traditional sources of vigorish—the cut it takes as the middleman—have withered away. Many mutual funds used to charge 1% and up in annual expenses; now you can buy ETFs for 0.1% or less. Stock commissions, once 1% or more, have gone the way of the dodo.

On the other hand, expenses on alternative funds, often 2% annually, can range up to 6% or more. Commissions, often 2% to 5%, can sometimes even exceed 10%.

And no matter how private assets are repackaged, they have drawbacks that are hard to paper over.

Because the underlying holdings don't trade publicly, valuing them

is a mix of art and sorcery, with some managers booking one-day gains of 1,000% or more.

Private-equity and private-credit funds use lots of borrowed money to focus on smaller companies. "You're adding a high-risk thing to your portfolio with a lot of the same exposures as public markets," says Daniel Rasmussen, founder of Verdad Advisers and author of the forthcoming book "The Humble Investor."

While some managers of alternative assets deliver superior returns, most don't—and getting access to the few outperformers is all but impossible for most investors.

When it comes to the opacity

and complexity of alternative assets, some financial advisers know what they're doing. Others might not even know what they don't know.

A recent survey of more than 500 advisers who use alternatives, conducted by private-asset specialist CAIS and the consulting firm Mercer, asked what their top challenges were.

The greatest number of respondents, 48%, named "high levels of administration and paperwork."

Only 36% cited the lack of liquidity; a mere 26% said fees and expenses were too high; only 10% doubted they could get access to superior managers; and a piddling 4% said alternatives are "too risky."

These advisers didn't merely drink the Kool-Aid; they're drunk.

In the past couple of years, I've reported on a series of quirks, mysteries, bad deals and outright rip-offs among alternative assets:

- investments with "guaranteed" yields of 15% or more that evaporated, now being investigated by federal and state authorities;
- "interval funds" that charge lavish fees but let you take money out only a few times a year;
- illiquid portfolios that sometimes do change hands—for 75% or less of their reported value;
- funds purporting to offer high returns at impossibly low risk;
- nontraded companies that don't even exist claiming to have sold more than \$344 billion in imaginary shares;
- brokers hawking illiquid shares and debt in companies they control, without disclosing their conflicts of interest;
- private real-estate funds that lock money up and open the door for only a fraction of investors to sell at a time.

Jonathan Treussard of Treussard Capital Management, an investment manager in Newport Beach, Calif., suggests telling your adviser: "If you can't explain the strategy well enough for me to understand it, you have no business encouraging me to get in there."

Unless your adviser has extraordinary expertise, I'd suggest an even shorter response: "No thanks."

ALEX NABAUM

Traders Say Stock Options Are Their 'Crack Cocaine'

Continued from page B1

other loved ones.

I asked Gamblers Anonymous for permission to attend some meetings. Attendees introduced me to the groups at the start of the meetings, and I observed the discussions. Members introduced themselves by their first names, according to GA practices.

"Hi, my name is Mitch, and I'm a compulsive gambler," one said at a GA meeting this month near Ozone Park, in New York. "Hi Mitch," the group responded in unison.

The suburban dad of three stood in front of more than a dozen members in a church basement. He is haunted by the rising price of bitcoin—and the riches that could have been his, he said. Up around 40% since Election Day, bitcoin prices are on a wild ride.

What would have happened, he wondered out loud, if he had just left his bitcoin in a digital wallet and handed it over to his wife?

Then he reminded himself and the group that he was never able to just buy and hold. "I needed more and more," Mitch told the group. "I'm a sick, compulsive gambler. That's why I keep making these meetings. I don't trust myself."

One attendee reminded him of the toll trading had taken on his family and asked: "What's more important, crypto or your kids?"

The entrepreneur, based in Long Island, N.Y., said cryptocurrencies caught his eye when he was in his late 40s, more than 20 years after he'd placed his last bet. He had sworn off gambling after a penchant for bold bets had led him to Gamblers Anonymous meetings in his early 20s.

He invested \$100 in bitcoin and watched it soar. He poured thousands of dollars into smaller, more speculative coins. Something kept him from sharing with his GA group that he was trading.

When his portfolio rose above \$1 million, he thought to himself, "That's four Lambos." He flew to Florida to look at homes for his family near Walt Disney World.

Within months, he found himself in a familiar cycle. The rush of adrenaline he got when he bought and sold tokens pushed him to trade more frequently—to the point where he was trading hundreds of times a day—and taking bigger risks. He would wake at 4 a.m. to monitor his portfolio.

When crypto prices started tumbling, snowballing losses left him sullen. "Sometimes I would get a passing thought as I went to bed: I hope I don't wake up in the morning," he said. His portfolio had fallen around \$1 million from its peak.

Desperate for a way out, he typed "crypto gambling treatment center" into Google. He confessed to his GA mentors that he had been gambling.

Pennsylvania's gambling hotline has fielded more calls tied to gambling in stocks and crypto since 2021 than it did in the prior six years combined. At a New York-based treatment center, Safe Foundation, clinical director Jessica Steinmetz estimates about 10% of patients are seeking help for addictions tied to trading. Before 2020, there were no such patients.

Lyndon Aguiar, a clinical director at Williamsville Wellness, a gambling treatment center in Hanover, Va., said counselors sit down with traders and delete dozens of stock, sports and financial-news apps from their phones when they walk in the doors for its inpatient treatment program. The center has seen a 25% increase in gambling tied to markets since 2020, compared with the prior four years.

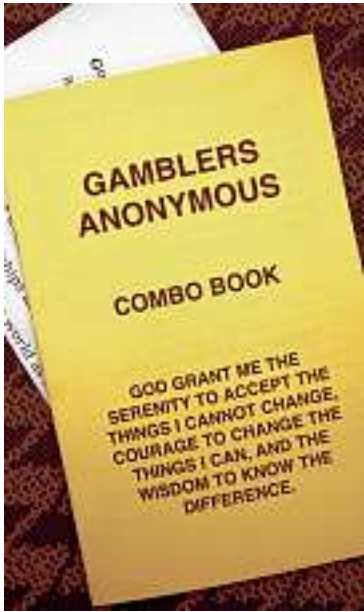
Patients might install Gamban, an app that locks individuals out of gambling on their phones. The app started blocking Robinhood and Webull in July 2021.

A Robinhood spokesperson said it includes "robust safeguards to help customers make informed decisions" and that individuals deserve the freedom to become stewards of their own finances. A spokesperson for Webull said the platform offers educational tools to foster responsible investment decisions.

New patients often suffer from withdrawal symptoms including severe anxiety and depression when they first stop trading, he said. Some start fidgeting or repeatedly tapping their fingers against a table, itching to place a trade.

Abdullah Mahmood, administrative coordinator of a gambling program at the Maryhaven addiction treatment center in Columbus, Ohio, said he has seen several clients enter the treatment center's doors this year for trading addictions. Options are particularly problematic, he said.

Activity in options is on track to smash another record this year.



A Gamblers Anonymous pamphlet. More men who say they're hooked on trading have been seeking help.

Trading in contracts expiring the same day, which are the riskiest, has soared to make up more than half of all trades in the market for S&P 500 index options this year, according to figures from SpotGamma. These trades are more electric than traditional stocks, with the potential to rocket higher or plunge to zero within minutes.

Similar to wagering on how many points Mavericks point guard Luka Dončić will score in the first quarter of an NBA game, traders are increasingly using options to speculate how stocks will fare during the trading session, rather than at the closing bell.

This year, "a client came down to my office, suicidal," Mahmood said.

"He had lost \$14,000 in just five minutes in options trading on the app Robinhood."

Doug Royer, 61, has been attending Mahmood's group counseling sessions every Monday.

He initially entered the center's doors for help with his drinking. Then, he saw signs for a gambling program while walking the halls of Maryhaven's treatment center. Immediately, the six figures he lost trading came to mind.

After selling his house in 2022, he had poured thousands of dollars into investments like the Grayscale Bitcoin Trust, Lockheed Martin and Texas Pacific Land before amping up the risk with options trading. He traded in and out of companies such as Spirit Airlines and Estée Lauder, while borrowing on margin in an attempt to magnify his bets, brokerage statements show.

Eventually, he said he had almost no money left to trade with after losses in options and lotteries. He said he has been working part-time as a massage therapist near Columbus.

Addiction counselors say gambling in financial markets often goes undetected because individuals confuse their actions with investing. Unlike sports-betting apps such as FanDuel and DraftKings, most brokerage apps don't post warnings about gambling or offer hotlines to seek help.

The proliferation of financial instruments, along with flashy brokerage apps that make them easy to trade, has also helped some gamblers convince themselves that they weren't actually placing bets.

The National Council on Problem Gambling started including questions about investing in its annual survey in 2021, after its gambling

hotline received an influx of calls during the meme-stock mania. The council's executive director, Keith Whyte, said NCPG reached out to apps like Robinhood to suggest they adopt consumer protections ingrained in gambling apps.

"In some cases, the consumer protections in the gambling industry exceed that in the financial markets," Whyte said.

Like the anticipation of sex or delicious food, a financial gamble like an options trade can flood your brain with feel-good chemicals, said Brian Knutson, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Stanford University. The bigger the financial payout or tastier the dish, the stronger the rush.

That anticipation can keep a trader going back to place another bet, forming a reinforcing habit, added Knutson, who has studied risk-taking in financial markets for more than two decades.

"It's not just the release, per se, of the dopamine, but the speed of the release that's reinforcing," Knutson said.

Chris Cachia, a 38-year-old power-plant technician in Ontario, Canada, got swept up with trading during the meme-stock mania in 2021. After turning around 7,000 Canadian dollars into roughly 50,000 by trading stocks like GameStop and BlackBerry, he found short-dated stock options when he went hunting for fatter profits.

He scored some early wins. Before long, the thousands he had made evaporated and his account sank into a deep hole. Yet he said he couldn't walk away.

One week while his wife was traveling, he holed up in his home office for days trading. He grew desperate for a win and bet more money than he had in his brokerage account. It didn't work out.

The subsequent loss left him so depressed that he skipped his brother's bachelor party.

"It was causing erratic changes in my behavior as I got deeper and deeper in," Cachia said. "I was basically a full-out gambling addict."

He said he tried to quit countless times since his trading ramped up during the pandemic, deleting apps from his phone, only to quickly download them again.

He wasn't able to pull away until his wife threatened to leave him. "She gave me an ultimatum," Cachia said. "You need to stop this, or I'm done."

—Jim Oberman and Elisa Cho contributed to this article.

EMIL LENDOFF/WSJ; ISTOCK; SARAH BLEISNER FOR WSJ

EXCHANGE

The Next AI Breakthrough Proves Elusive

Continued from page B1

AI chatbots run on underlying technology known as a large language model, or LLM. Consumers, businesses and governments already rely on them for everything from writing computer code to spiffing up marketing copy and planning parties. OpenAI's is called GPT-4, the fourth LLM the company has developed since its 2015 founding.

While GPT-4 acted like a smart high-schooler, the eventual GPT-5 would effectively have a Ph.D. in some tasks, a former OpenAI executive said. Earlier this year, Altman told students in a talk at Stanford University that OpenAI could say with "a high degree of scientific certainty" that GPT-5 would be much smarter than the current model.

There are no set criteria for determining when a model has become smart enough to be designated GPT-5. OpenAI can test its LLMs in areas like math and coding. It's up to company executives to decide whether the model is smart enough to be called GPT-5 based in large part on gut feelings or, as many technologists say, "vibes."

So far, the vibes are off. OpenAI and Microsoft declined to comment for this article. In November, Altman said the startup wouldn't release anything called GPT-5 in 2024.

Training day

From the moment GPT-4 came out in March 2023, OpenAI has been working on GPT-5.

Longtime AI researchers say developing systems like LLMs is as much art as science. The most respected AI scientists in the world are celebrated for their intuition about how to get better results.

Models are tested during training runs, a sustained period when the model can be fed trillions of word fragments known as tokens. A large training run can take several months in a data center with tens of thousands of expensive and coveted computer chips, typically from Nvidia.

During a training run, researchers hunch over their computers for several weeks or even months, and try to feed much of the world's knowledge into an AI system using some of the most expensive hardware in far-flung data centers.

Altman has said training GPT-4 cost more than \$100 million. Future AI models are expected to push past \$1 billion. A failed training run is like a space rocket exploding in the sky shortly after launch.

Researchers try to minimize the odds of such a failure by conducting



enough.

"It gets really expensive and it becomes hard to find more equivalently high-quality data," said Ari Morcos, CEO of DatologyAI, a startup that builds tools to improve data selection. Morcos is building models with less—but much better—data, an approach he argues will make today's AI systems more capable than the strategy embraced by all top AI firms like OpenAI.

OpenAI's solution was to create data from scratch.

It is hiring people to write fresh software code or solve math problems for Orion to learn from. The workers, some of whom are software engineers and mathematicians, also share explanations for their work with Orion. Many researchers think code, the

▲ OpenAI Chief Executive Sam Altman has predicted that GPT-5 will represent a 'significant leap forward.'

▼ OpenAI's offices, where employees hunch over computers during AI training runs that can last weeks or months.

months to produce a billion tokens.

OpenAI also started developing what is called synthetic data, or data created by AI, to help train Orion. The feedback loop of AI creating data for AI can often cause malfunctions or result in nonsensical answers, research has shown.

Scientists at OpenAI think they can avoid those problems by using data generated by another of its AI models, called o1, people familiar with the matter said.

OpenAI's already-difficult task has been complicated by internal turmoil and near-constant attempts by rivals to poach its top researchers, sometimes by offering them millions of dollars.

Last year, Altman was abruptly fired by OpenAI's board of directors, and some researchers wondered if the company would continue. Altman was quickly reinstated as CEO and set out to overhaul OpenAI's governance structure.

More than two dozen key executives, researchers and longtime employees have left OpenAI this year, including co-founder and Chief Scientist Ilya Sutskever and Chief Technology Officer Mira Murati. This past Thursday, Alec Radford, a widely admired researcher who served as lead author on several of OpenAI's scientific papers, announced his departure after about eight years at the company.

Reboot

By early 2024, executives were starting to feel the pressure. GPT-4 was already a year old and rivals were starting to catch up. A new LLM from Anthropic was rated by many in the industry as better than GPT-4. Several months later, Google launched the most viral new AI application of the year, called NotebookLM.

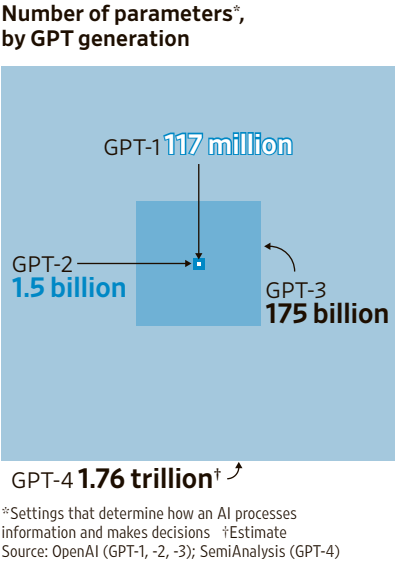
As Orion stalled, OpenAI started developing other projects and applications. They included slimmed-down versions of GPT-4 and Sora, a product that can produce AI-generated video.

That led to fighting over limited computing resources between teams working on new products and Orion researchers, according to people familiar with the matter.

Competition among AI labs has grown so fierce that major tech companies publish fewer papers about recent findings or breakthroughs than is typical in science. As money flooded the market two years ago, tech companies started viewing the results of this research as trade secrets that needed guarding. Some researchers take this so seriously they won't work on planes, coffee shops or anyplace where someone could peer over their shoulder and catch a glimpse of their work.

That secretive attitude has frustrated many longtime AI researchers, including Yann LeCun, chief AI scientist at Meta. LeCun said work from OpenAI and Anthropic should no longer be viewed as research, but as "advanced product development."

"If you're doing it on a commercial clock, it's not called research," said



LeCun on the sidelines of a recent AI conference, where OpenAI had a minimal presence. "If you're doing it in secret, it's not called research."

In early 2024, OpenAI prepared to give Orion another try, this time armed with better data. Researchers launched a couple of smaller-scale training runs over the first few months of the year to build up confidence.

By May, OpenAI's researchers decided they were ready to attempt another large-scale training run for Orion, which they expected to last through November.

Once the training began, researchers discovered a problem in the data: It wasn't as diversified as they had thought, potentially limiting how much Orion would learn.

The problem hadn't been visible in smaller-scale efforts and only became apparent after the large training run had already started. OpenAI had spent too much time and money to start over.

Instead, researchers scrambled to find a wider range of data to feed the model during the training process. It isn't clear if this strategy proved fruitful.

Orion's problems signaled to some at OpenAI that the more-is-more strategy, which had driven much of its earlier success, was running out of steam.

OpenAI isn't the only company worrying that progress has hit a wall. Across the industry, a debate is raging over whether improvement in AIs is starting to plateau.

Sutskever, who recently co-founded a new AI firm called Safe Superintelligence or SSI, declared at a recent AI conference that the age of maximum data is over. "Data is not growing because we have but one internet," he told a crowd of researchers, policy experts and scientists. "You can even go as far as to say that data is the fossil fuel of AI."

And that fuel was starting to run out.

Reasoning

Their struggles on Orion led OpenAI researchers to a new approach to making an LLM smarter: reasoning. Spending a long time "thinking" could allow LLMs to solve difficult problems they haven't been trained on, researchers say.

Behind the scenes, OpenAI's o1 offers several responses to each question and analyzes them to find the best one. It can perform more complex tasks, like writing a business plan or creating a crossword puzzle, while explaining its reasoning—which helps the model learn a little bit from each answer.

Researchers at Apple recently released a paper that argues reasoning models, including versions of o1, were most likely mimicking the data they saw in training rather than actually solving new problems.

The Apple researchers said they found "catastrophic performance drops" if questions were changed to include irrelevant details—like tweaking a math problem about kiwis to note that some of the fruits were smaller than others.

In September, OpenAI launched a preview of its o1 reasoning model and released the full version of o1 earlier this month.

All that added brainpower is expensive. OpenAI is now paying to generate multiple answers to a single query, instead of just one.

In a recent TED talk, one of OpenAI's senior research scientists played up the advantages of reasoning.

"It turned out that having the bot think for just 20 seconds in a hand of poker got the same boost in performance as scaling up the model by 100,000x and training for 100,000 times longer," said Noam Brown, the OpenAI scientist.

A more advanced and efficient reasoning model could form the underpinnings of Orion. OpenAI researchers are pursuing that approach and hoping to combine it with the old method of more data, some of which could come from OpenAI's other AI models. OpenAI could then refine the results with material generated by people.

On Friday, Altman announced plans for a new reasoning model smarter than anything the company has released before. He didn't say anything about when, or whether, a model worthy of being called GPT-5 is coming.

—Tom Dotan contributed to this article.



their experiments on a smaller scale—doing a trial run before the real thing.

From the start, there were problems with plans for GPT-5.

- In mid-2023, OpenAI started a training run that doubled as a test for a proposed new design for Orion. But the process was sluggish, signaling that a larger training run would likely take an incredibly long time, which would in turn make it outrageously expensive. And the results of the project, dubbed Arrakis, indicated that creating GPT-5 wouldn't go as smoothly as hoped.

- OpenAI researchers decided to make some technical tweaks to strengthen Orion. They also concluded they needed more diverse, high-quality data. The public internet didn't have enough, they felt.

- Generally, AI models become more capable the more data they gobble up. For LLMs, that data is primarily from books, academic publications and other well-respected sources. This material helps LLMs express themselves more clearly and handle a wide range of tasks.

For its prior models, OpenAI used data scraped from the internet: news articles, social-media posts and scientific papers.

To make Orion smarter, OpenAI needs to make it larger. That means it needs even more data, but there isn't

language of software, can help LLMs work through problems they haven't already seen.

Having people explain their thinking deepens the value of the newly created data. It's more language for the LLM to absorb; it's also a map for how the model might solve similar problems in the future.

"We're transferring human intelligence from human minds into machine minds," said Jonathan Siddharth, CEO and co-founder of Turing, an AI-infrastructure company that works with OpenAI, Meta and others.

In AI training, Turing executives said, a software engineer might be prompted to write a program that efficiently solves a complex logic problem. A mathematician might have to calculate the maximum height of a pyramid constructed out of one million basketballs. The answers—and, more important, how to reach them—are then incorporated into the AI training materials.

OpenAI has worked with experts in subjects like theoretical physics, to explain how they would approach some of the toughest problems in their field. This can also help Orion get smarter.

The process is painfully slow. GPT-4 was trained on an estimated 13 trillion tokens. A thousand people writing 5,000 words a day would take

13 trillion
Estimated number of word fragments known as tokens used to train GPT-4

\$1 trillion
Projected amount tech giants could spend on AI projects over the next five years

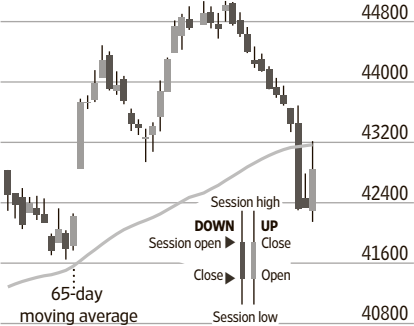
MARKETS DIGEST

Dow Jones Industrial Average

42840.26
▲ 498.02
or 1.18%
All-time high
45014.04, 12/04/24

Last Year ago
Trailing P/E ratio 26.93 27.04
P/E estimate * 21.69 20.70
Dividend yield 1.90 1.97

Current divisor
016268413125742



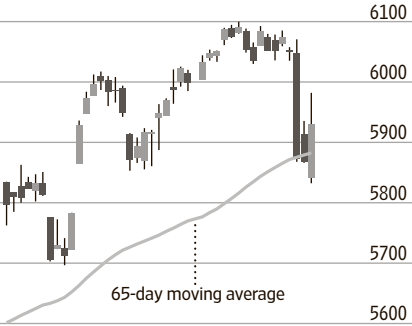
Bars measure the point change from session's open

Weekly P/E data based on as-reported earnings from Birinyi Associates Inc. * Based on Nasdaq-100 Index

S&P 500 Index

5930.85
▲ 63.77
or 1.09%
All-time high
6090.27, 12/06/24

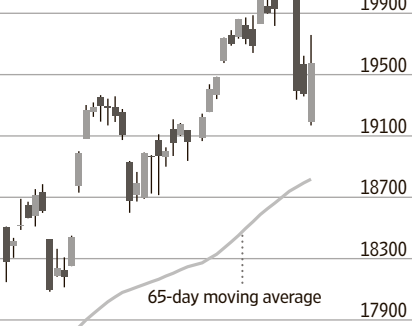
Last Year ago
Trailing P/E ratio 24.45 21.78
P/E estimate * 21.96 21.37
Dividend yield 1.30 1.57



Nasdaq Composite Index

19572.60
▲ 199.83
or 1.03%
All-time high:
20173.89, 12/16/24

Last Year ago
Trailing P/E ratio 33.97 29.98
P/E estimate ** 27.43 28.78
Dividend yield ** 0.73 0.80



Track the Markets: Winners and Losers

A look at how selected global stock indexes, bond ETFs, currencies and commodities performed around the world for the week.

Index	Currency, vs. U.S. dollar	Commodity, traded in U.S.*	Exchange-traded fund
Nymex natural gas			14.27%
Corn		3.78	
Lean hogs		2.63	
Wheat		1.23	
WSJ Dollar Index		0.85	
Mexican peso		0.24	
-0.02	Swiss franc		
-0.16	Indian rupee		
-0.28	Chinese yuan		
-0.28	VangdTotIntlBd		
-0.35	U.K. pound		
-0.38	iSh 1-3 Treasury		
-0.63	VangdTotalBd		
-0.70	Euro area euro		
-0.70	Shanghai Composite		
-0.73	S&P 500 Information Tech		
-0.77	South Korean won		
-0.93	Indonesian rupiah		
-0.99	Canadian dollar		
-0.99	iShNatlMuniBd		
-1.03	Comex gold		
-1.05	iShiBoxx\$HYCp		
-1.12	Bloomberg Commodity Index		
-1.15	iSh TIPS Bond		
-1.15	iSh 7-10 Treasury		
-1.25	Hang Seng		
-1.39	Soybeans		
-1.57	Norwegian krone		
-1.60	iShiBoxx\$InvGrdCp		
-1.62	S&P 500 Utilities		
-1.68	iShJPMUSEmgBd		
-1.69	Nymex ULSD		
-1.73	Japanese yen		
-1.74	Australian dollar		
-1.78	Nasdaq Composite		
-1.82	CAC-40		
-1.92	Nymex crude		
-1.95	NIKKEI 225		
-1.99	S&P 500		
-2.00	S&P 500 Financials		
-2.01	Bovespa Index		
-2.04	iSh 20+ Treasury		
-2.14	Euro STOXX		
-2.15	S&P 500 Communication Svcs		
-2.20	S&P 500 Health Care		
-2.25	Dow Jones Industrial Average		
-2.25	Nasdaq-100		
-2.38	South African rand		
-2.42	IBEX 35		
-2.52	S&P 500 Consumer Staples		
-2.55	DAX		
-2.59	S&P 500 Consumer Discr		
-2.60	FTSE 100		
-2.60	Comex copper		
-2.64	S&P 500 Industrials		
-2.67	S&P/TSX Comp		
-2.76	S&P/ASX 200		
-2.76	STOXX Europe 600		
-3.01	Nymex RBOB gasoline		
-3.22	FTSE MIB		
-3.25	Comex silver		
-3.62	KOSPI Composite		
-3.94	S&P/BMV IPC		
-4.16	S&P 500 Materials		
-4.45	Russell 2000		
-4.67	S&P MidCap 400		
-4.82	S&P SmallCap 600		
-4.90	Dow Jones Transportation Average		
-4.97	S&P 500 Real Estate		
-4.98	BSE Sensex		
-5.58	S&P 500 Energy		

*Continuous front-month contracts

Sources: FactSet (indexes, bond ETFs, commodities), Tullett Prebon (currencies).

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Major U.S. Stock-Market Indexes

	High	Low	Latest Close	Net chg	% chg	High	Low	% chg	YTD	3-yr. ann.
Dow Jones										
Industrial Average	43216.03	42146.33	42840.26	498.02	1.18	45014.04	37266.67	14.6	13.7	7.0
Transportation Avg	16088.70	15677.38	15891.99	32.54	0.21	17754.38	14781.56	-1.1	-0.04	0.7
Utility Average	989.17	965.87	986.32	14.76	1.52	1079.88	829.38	13.0	11.9	1.2
Total Stock Market	59418.30	57917.95	58920.26	645.89	1.11	60836.59	46849.48	23.6	23.3	8.1
Barron's 400	1269.17	1237.51	1259.82	11.96	0.96	1356.99	1039.19	17.2	17.5	6.5

Nasdaq Stock Market										
Nasdaq Composite	19758.61	19168.38	19572.60	199.83	1.03	20173.89	14510.30	30.5	30.4	9.3
Nasdaq-100	21540.32	20913.72	21289.15	178.64	0.85	22096.66	16282.01	26.9	26.5	10.9

S&P										
500 Index	5982.06	5832.30	5930.85	63.77	1.09	6090.27	4688.68	24.7	24.3	9.1
MidCap 400	3157.99	3088.19	3124.28	18.54	0.60	3390.26	2691.79	12.1	12.3	5.2
SmallCap 600	1432.10	1393.60	1416.89	8.43	0.60	1544.66	1241.62	7.4	7.5	2.3

Other Indexes										
Russell 2000	2264.48	2194.90	2242.37	20.87	0.94	2442.03	1913.17	10.2	10.6	1.6
NYSE Composite	19246.41	18860.61	19119.44	161.23	0.85	20272.04	16522.83	14.0	13.4	5.2
Value Line	618.18	603.87	613.29	5.42	0.89	656.04	566.64	3.3	3.3	-1.3
NYSE Arca Biotech	5778.68	5658.53	5728.01	39.75	0.70	6154.34	4861.76	6.7	5.7	0.8
NYSE Arca Pharma	940.41	925.21	928.89	-10.68	-1.14	1140.17	899.26	3.3	2.1	4.8
KBW Bank	127.99	124.30	127.21	2.50	2.01	138.78	91.80	33.5	32.5	0.1
PHLX® Gold/Silver	140.84	137.82	139.22	1.79	1.30	175.74	102.94	8.8	10.8	3.3
PHLX® Oil Service	69.97	68.49	68.88	-0.23	-0.34	95.25	68.88	-19.0	-17.9	11.1
PHLX® Semiconductor	5032.98	4853.20	4964.91	71.44	1.46	5904.54	3908.85	20.1	18.9	10.0
Cboe Volatility	26.51	17.82	18.36	-5.73	-23.79	38.57	11.86	40.9	47.5	-7.1

\$ Nasdaq PHLX

Sources: FactSet; Dow Jones Market Data

Trading Diary

Volume, Advancers, Decliners

	NYSE	NYSE Amer.
Total volume*	3,833,394,865	78,104,611
Adv. volume*	3,143,797,401	56,891,277
Decl. volume*	657,261,881	20,375,831
Issues traded	2,860	303
Advances	2,080	206
Declines	711	89
Unchanged	69	8
New highs	25	4
New lows	173	18
Closing Arms*	0.62	0.63
Block trades*	6,745	246

Nasdaq NYSE Arca

Total volume*	10,962,453,304	394,371,780
Adv. volume*	8,608,357,947	319,242,197
Decl. volume*	2,266,672,968	71,727,759
Issues traded	4,512	2,121
Advances	2,972	1,825
Declines	1,411	282
Unchanged	129	14
New highs	74	7
New lows	272	83
Closing Arms*	0.55	1.99
Block trades*	70,954	1,506

* Primary market NYSE, NYSE American, NYSE Arca only.
(TRIN) A comparison of the number of advancing and declining issues with the volume of shares rising and falling. An Arms of less than 1 indicates buying demand; above 1 indicates selling pressure.

Percentage Gainers...

Company	Symbol	Close	Net chg	% chg	High	Low	% chg
Nvni Group	NVNI	8.58	5.91	221.35	12.19	0.33	475.8
Intchains Group ADR	ICG	8.77	4.12	88.60	14.22	3.21	-36.0
Vince Holding	VNCE	4.82	2.04	73.38	4.82	1.27	190.4
HomesToLife	HTLM	12.55	4.15	49.40	13.53	2.57	...
Aadi Bioscience	AADI	3.39	1.07	46.12	3.60	1.21	72.1
NFT	MI	7.25	2.22	44.22	16.72	2.05	-25.1
Mainz Biomed	MYNZ	6.68	1.91	40.04	49.60	3.65	-86.1
Elutia	ELUT	4.84	1.31	37.11	5.24	1.96	137.3
SEALSQ	LAES	2.75	0.74	36.82	3.95	0.29	139.1
Heritage Distilling	CASK	3.02	0.79	35.42	4.00	2.00	...
authID	AUID	7.03	1.82	34.93	13.63	4.62	-29.3
Humacyte	HUMA	4.64	1.18	34.10	9.97	2.48	61.1
KULR Technology Group	KULR	2.95	0.71	31.70	3.07	0.10	1353.2
Diamedica Therapeutics	DMAC	6.41	1.54	31.62	6.41	2.14	124.9
Psyence Biomedical	PBM	3.18	0.72	29.27	945.15	1.51	-99.6

Percentage Losers

Company	Symbol	Close	Net chg	% chg	High	Low	% chg
PainReform	PRFX	5.30	-5.86	-52.51	80.64	1.73	-92.5
Galectin Therapeutics	GALT	1.04	-0.96	-48.00	4.27	0.73	-41.2
FingerMotion	FNGR	1.07	-0.93	-46.50	4.36	1.03	-73.4
Battalion Oil	BATL	1.39	-1.05	-42.92	9.69	1.31	-85.6
Zoomcar Holdings	ZCAR	1.56	-0.98	-38.58	1289.00	1.25	-99.9
Defiance Target 2X Lg NVO	NVOX	11.60	-6.37	-35.47	21.09	10.34	...
Eshellgo	EHGO	3.33	-1.66	-33.27	5.50	1.45	...
Polyrizon	PLRZ	1.57	-0.76	-32.62	4.80	0.77	...
Nukkleus	NUKK	40.01	-12.09	-23.21	78.32	1.30	49.0
Defiance Dly Tgt 2x Sh	SMST	5.72	-1.70	-22.91	118.40	3.47	...
Innovative Ind Prop	IIPR	73.66	-21.68	-22.74	138.35	70.88	-26.9
Baird Medical Invnt Hldgs	BMDR	1.83	-0.50	-21.46	13.52	1.42	-82.9
Scholastic	SCHL	19.81	-5.03	-20.25	40.75	19.74	-47.2
Sidus Space	SIDU	3.96	-0.97	-19.68	18.85	1.15	6.5
Exodus Movement	EXOD	41.00	-9.95	-19.53	67.00	5.05	1682.6

Most Active Stocks

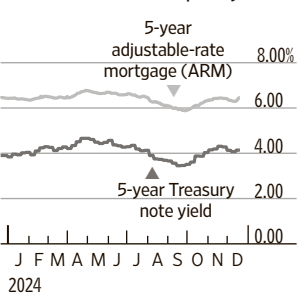
Company	Symbol	Volume (000)	% chg from 65-day avg	Latest Session Close	% chg	52-Week High	Low
Edible Garden	EDBL	343,436	7367.8	0.24	63.48	12.47	0.12
Aptose Biosciences	APTO	304,218	24406.6	0.28	63.92	2.68	0.13
NVIDIA	NVDA	296,405	25.6	134.70	3.08	152.89	47.32
Palantir Technologies	PLTR	278,386	267.1	80.55	8.54	80.91	15.66
Tonix Pharmaceuticals	TNXP	275,773	222.3	0.61	7.30	14.08	0.12

* Common stocks priced at \$2 a share or more with an average volume over 65 trading days of at least 5,000 shares. † Has traded fewer than 65 days

Consumer Rates and Returns to Investor

U.S. consumer rates

A consumer rate against its benchmark over the past year



Selected rates

Five-year ARM, Rate

Bankrate.com avg:	6.45%
Florence Savings Bank	5.13%
Florence, MA	800-644-8261
The Torrington Savings Bank	5.63%
Torrington, CT	860-496-2152
Grow Financial FCU	5.75%
Hillsborough, FL	800-839-6328
Star One Credit Union	5.88%
Sunnyvale, CA	408-742-2801
Citizens Equity First Credit Union	6.25%
Peoria, IL	309-633-3603

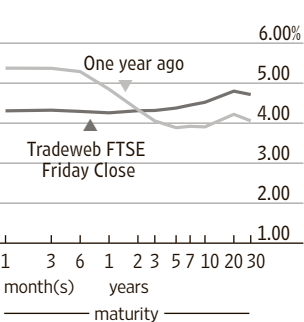
Interest rate	Yield/Rate (%) Last	Yield/Rate (%) Week ago	52-Week Range (%) Low	52-Week Range (%) High	3-yr chg (pct pts)
Federal-funds rate target	4.25-4.50	4.50-4.75	4.25	5.50	4.25
Prime rate*	7.50	7.75	7.50	8.50	4.25
SOFR	4.30	4.62	4.30	5.40	4.25
Money market, annual yield	0.42	0.42	0.41	0.52	0.35
Five-year CD, annual yield	2.86	2.86	2.80	2.89	2.43
30-year mortgage, fixed†	7.37	7.17	6.69	7.72	4.08
15-year mortgage, fixed†	6.62	6.44	6.02	7.11	4.09
Jumbo mortgages, \$766,550-plus†	7.44	7.25	6.78	7.79	4.14
Five-year adj mortgage (ARM)*	6.45	6.29	5.88	6.78	3.59
New-car loan, 48-month	7.27	7.41	7.18	7.94	3.70

Bankrate.com rates based on survey of over 4,800 online banks. *Base rate posted by 70% of the nation's largest banks. † Excludes closing costs.

Sources: FactSet; Dow Jones Market Data; Bankrate.com

Treasury yield curve

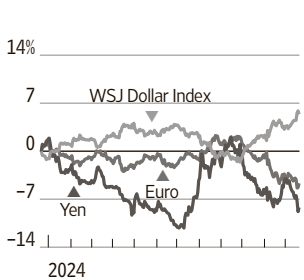
Yield to maturity of current bills, notes and bonds



Sources: Tradeweb FTSE U.S. Treasury Close; Tullett Prebon; Dow Jones Market Data

Forex Race

Yen, euro vs. dollar; dollar vs. major U.S. trading partners



Corporate Borrowing Rates and Yields

Bond total return index	Close	Last	Week ago	High	Low	52-wk	3-yr
U.S. Treasury Bloomberg	2190.420	4.460	4.360	4.880	3.630	0.753	-2.979

How to Read the Stock Tables

The following explanations apply to NYSE, NYSE Arca, NASDAQ American and Nasdaq Stock Market listed securities. Prices are consolidated from trades reported by various market centers, including securities exchanges, financial information companies, electronic networks and other broker-dealers. The list comprises the 1,000 largest companies based on market capitalization.

Underlined quotations are those stocks with large changes in volume compared with the issue's average trading volume.

Boldfaced quotations highlight those issues whose price changed by 5% or more if their previous closing price was \$2 or higher.

Footnotes:

†-New 52-week high; †-New 52-week low; **dd**-Indicates loss in the most recent four quarters.

Stock tables reflect composite regular trading as of 4 p.m. ET the previous day.

Friday, December 20, 2024										YTD 52-Week				CSP Yld				Net			
% YTD	52-Week	Lo	Stock	Sym	% YTD	Lo	Stock	Net	% Chg	Hi	Lo	Stock	Sym	% PE	Lo	Stock	Net	% Chg	Hi	Lo	Stock
ABC																					
68.04	144.06	68.38	AAON	AAON	0.3	124.13	0.30	124.13	21.07	48.26	297.25	Cardlife	CSSL	1.10	31.827	0.30	0.30	21.07	48.26	297.25	Cardlife
168.11	186.52	62.31	AEOM	AEOM	0.9	107.99	0.95	107.99	23.42	55.11	36.65	Carlyle	CC	2.8169	50.27	0.30	0.30	23.42	55.11	36.65	Carlyle
32.47	122.1	122.94	AES	AES	5.4	9.13	0.56	9.13	44.55	21.76	13.78	Carnival	CCL	0.01	24.26	16.80	16.80	44.55	21.76	13.78	Carnival
24.47	115.50	75.08	AGNC	AGNC	1.7	9.45	0.18	9.45	44.55	21.76	13.78	Carnival	CCL	0.01	24.26	16.80	16.80	44.55	21.76	13.78	Carnival
-3.67	108.09	64.55	AGNC Inv	AGNC	1.7	9.45	0.18	9.45	19.22	83.32	52.13	CardGlobal	CARR	0.3	14.26	0.30	0.30	19.22	83.32	52.13	CardGlobal
27.12	364.31	289.82	ANVS	ANVS	52	338.30	3.90	338.30	32.99	266.61	26.12	Carvana	CVNA	0.5	28.246	1.48	1.48	32.99	266.61	26.12	Carvana
6.27	12.18	8.01	ASE Tech	ASE	52.3	2.22	1.0	-0.59	47.64	49.88	268.07	CaseysGenStores	CVS	0.5	28.246	1.48	1.48	47.64	49.88	268.07	CaseysGenStores
-6.77	108.09	64.55	ASML	ASML	0.8	70.58	0.68	-0.08	22.99	100.51	26.62	Celast	CLS	0.3	9.565	2.40	2.40	22.99	100.51	26.62	Celast
35.58	240.35	159.47	AT	AT	1.7	9.45	0.18	9.45	19.22	83.32	52.13	Cemex	CMT	1.1	38.65	0.30	0.30	19.22	83.32	52.13	Cemex
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BUSINESS & FINANCE



Bank of America is part of the consortium that owns Zelle.

Big U.S. Banks Are Sued Over Zelle Scams

Chase, BofA and Wells didn't do enough to protect users, CFPB says

By Dylan Tokar

Three of the biggest U.S. banks are being sued by a top financial regulator that says they allowed fraud to run rampant on the payments platform Zelle and failed to put safeguards in place to protect users.

The lawsuit by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau names **JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America** and Wells Fargo, which are among a consortium of big banks that owns Zelle. The suit said the three banks rushed to roll out Zelle to compete with other payments apps such as Venmo and Cash App, and that the platform's guardrails against fraud suffered as a result.

Zelle, which has surpassed payment volumes on Venmo in recent years, has drawn fire from consumers, regulators and lawmakers over the rise in fraud on its platform. Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D., Mass.) in particular has pressured the bank CEOs in public hearings and letters to address the number of scams on Zelle.

The Wall Street Journal in August reported that the CFPB was probing the banks over their handling of scams on the platform.

Customers of the three banks have lost more than \$870 million since Zelle was launched in 2017, according to the CFPB lawsuit.

"Behind that number are real people who trusted their banks to protect their money and instead were left fending for themselves when criminals struck," Rohit Chopra, the CFPB's director, told reporters Friday.

Thousands of users have filed fraud complaints and were largely denied assistance, according to the lawsuit. It

said that in some cases people were told to contact scammers to recover stolen funds. The failure to stop the fraud occurred at both the network and at the banks, the agency said.

The CFPB's lawsuit said banks' negligence enabled fraudsters to open and use deposit accounts, and that banks could have done more to stop them by sharing information about fraudulent transactions and repeat offenders.

Zelle operator Early Warning said in a statement that scams on the platform have dropped significantly, resulting in 99.95% of payments being sent without report of scams and fraud.

"The CFPB's attacks on Zelle are legally and factually flawed, and the timing of this lawsuit appears to be driven by political factors unrelated to Zelle," a Zelle spokeswoman said in a statement.

The CFPB has ramped up its enforcement and rule-making activity ahead of President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration, sparking criticism from Republicans in Congress who say the agency should halt activity.

Trump hasn't yet named a nominee to lead the agency, and it is possible that a future director would decide to abandon the action against Zelle and its operators.

Four other banks—Capital One, U.S. Bancorp, Truist and PNC Financial Services—are part of the consortium that owns Zelle. The CFPB said it focused its lawsuit on the banks that benefit most from the network.

Together, JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America and Wells Fargo account for more than 70% of Zelle network activity, according to the agency.

Zelle has become one of the most widely used peer-to-peer payment networks, with more than 2,200 banks and credit unions offering the service to their customers.

—AnnaMaria Andriotis contributed to this article.

CoinDesk's Top Editors Fired After Article Flap

Crypto news website CoinDesk dismissed its top three editors Friday, after the publication of a since-deleted story prompted backlash from a crypto titan, current and former employees said.

By Caitlin Ostroff, Justin Baer and Vicky Ge Huang

The article showed Justin Sun, the founder of Tron blockchain who purchased a \$6.2 million banana, eating the expensive fruit. Not long after the story was published on Nov. 29, Sun's team complained about the tone of the piece to both CoinDesk's editors and its owner, crypto exchange Bullish, and demanded it be taken down, employees said. The article was removed from the site this month, prompting backlash from CoinDesk's staff.

Tron is a major sponsor of CoinDesk's flagship Consensus conference, which employees say is a moneymaker for the company. A spokesperson for Sun's company didn't respond to a request for comment.

CoinDesk's editor in chief Kevin Reynolds, its deputy editor in chief Nick Baker and

Marc Hochstein, who was listed on CoinDesk's website as executive editor for Consensus and deputy editor in chief for features, opinion, ethics and standards, were dismissed Friday.

Tensions over CoinDesk's editorial independence had been building for months, as some newsroom staffers grew more aware of the publication's financial struggles and felt some pressure from management to avoid alienating its biggest sponsors, employees said.

Bullish executives ordered that CoinDesk remove the Sun piece on Dec. 2. In a meeting later that week, Reynolds told staffers that management considered the story a negative opinion piece about an important sponsor, justifying the removal, the employees said.

The newsroom delivered a letter earlier this month to management raising concerns about the publication's independence and defended the substance of the Sun article. CoinDesk Chief Executive Sara Stratoberdha told the newsroom Friday that the decision to reduce senior staff was, in part, due to financial considerations and wasn't due to the banana article.

VW Aims to Reduce Workforce By 35,000 in Deal With Union

By Stephen Wilmot

Volkswagen said it had agreed a deal with its union to reduce its workforce by more than 35,000 and cut billions of dollars a year in costs while averting immediate factory closures in Germany.

Under the agreement announced Friday, VW said it would gradually reduce staffing levels through early retirement and other measures. Workers will also forgo pay increases and lose certain bonuses. In exchange, the company agreed to not make any compulsory job cuts until 2030 and to keep all its German factories open.

The cost-cutting plan comes as VW and other European carmakers contend with a tough economic environment, high domestic costs, abrupt shifts in demand for electric vehicles and increasing competition from lower-cost Chinese EV makers.

"The agreement is an important signal for the future viability of the Volkswagen brand," Chief Executive Officer Oliver Blume said in a statement, adding that the company had set a "decisive course for its future in terms of costs, capacities and structures."

Friday's deal concludes almost three months of negotiations between VW's management and the company's powerful union and works council.

Friction between the two sides had led to some 100,000 workers temporarily walking off the job in recent weeks, with the union threatening wider strike action in the new year.

VW had said in September that it was considering closing factories in Germany for the first time in its history in a bid to boost its competitiveness. The weak recovery of Europe's car market following the pandemic had left it with capacity to make very roughly 500,000 more cars than it needed—two factories' worth, the company said at the time.

In response, VW and its union brought forward long-scheduled wage negotiations and broadened their scope to include the company's annual investment-planning process and the allocation of projects to factories, leading to unusually complex talks.

The final round of talks started on Monday in a hotel in Hanover and continued through Friday almost uninterrupted except for breaks to sleep. IG Metall, the German auto workers union, said the final negotiation lasted an unprecedented 70 hours.

At the heart of the deal is a novel cost-control tactic initially proposed by the union. Pay increases won't go directly to workers but will instead fund measures such as early retirement to help the company cut costs without relying on layoffs.

The staffing and bonus reductions will reduce VW's annual costs by 1.5 billion euros, equivalent to \$1.7 billion. Taken together with factory-capacity

adjustments and other measures, annual savings will rise to €4 billion, the company said.

While the deal avoids factory closures today, Volkswagen's two smallest German plants face an uncertain future. Its factory in Osnabrück doesn't have a clear purpose after 2027, when production of the VW T-Roc convertible will end, while production of the ID.3 EV in Dresden will stop in about a year's time. VW said it is looking for alternative uses.

VW is the largest automaker in Europe, where vehicle sales are running almost a fifth below their prepandemic level.

High vehicle prices have collided with a slow economy. During the pandemic, automobile

manufacturers passed on inflation in material costs while also trying to juice their margins to help cope with the investment requirements of EVs.

The average price of a car in Germany—Europe's largest market—is the equivalent of roughly \$59,000, according to JATO Dynamics, which is more than the average annual salary in the country. In the U.S., workers earn more and the average vehicle is cheaper.

"A lot of the population is being left out of buying a new car," said Felipe Munoz, global analyst at JATO, referring to the European market.

This year has brought further signs of stagnation, with sales in the region for the 11 months through November up less than 1% compared with the same period last year, according to data released Thursday by ACEA, the regional trade association.

Volkswagen isn't alone on the Continent in its struggles.

Stellantis, Europe's second-largest carmaker with brands such as Peugeot, Opel and Fiat, has repeatedly paused production in its Italian factories to keep inventories under control, leading to a standoff with unions and the government in Rome.

—Sarah Sloat and Andrea Figueras contributed to this article.

Netflix Scores Women's World Cup

By Gareth Vipers

Netflix has secured the U.S. rights to stream the next two women's soccer World Cups, taking a major step forward in its bet on live sports.

The deal, announced Friday, means the streamer will broadcast the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2027 and 2031. The value of the deal wasn't given.

The move marks the first time Netflix has bought all of the rights for such a high-profile international competition.

Netflix has tested the waters with one-off sports events, including last month's glitch-plagued boxing match between YouTuber Jake Paul and former world heavyweight champion Mike Tyson.

The stream was marred by technical difficulties with fans taking to social media to complain about slow loading speeds and pixelated pictures. The fight drew an estimated 108 million viewers globally, Netflix said.

Netflix declined to comment on the tech issues at the time, but the program raised questions about the company's technical chops ahead of other high-profile sporting events, including National Football League games on Christmas and World Wrestling Entertainment content.

The 2027 Women's World



Netflix will stream the FIFA Women's World Cup in the U.S. in 2027 and 2031.

Cup, which covers 32 teams and 64 games, will be played in Brazil from June 24 to July 25. The 2031 hosts haven't yet been decided.

World Cups are typically broadcast on free-to-air public networks to reach the biggest audiences. Netflix's foray into live sports programming is part of its long-term strategy to build appointment viewing on the platform, which not only furthers its push to replace traditional TV networks as the main household entertainment but also offers lucrative

advertising potential.

The streamer has been expanding its footprint with investments in live sports and events. In addition to the Paul-Tyson fight, Netflix has produced a live celebrity golf tournament and a tennis exhibition between Rafael Nadal and Carlos Alcaraz. The company has also announced a \$5 billion, multiyear deal with WWE wrestling and a tie-up with the NFL to stream Christmas Day football at roughly \$75 million a game.

Women's sports is seen as

a key growth area for the company. The Paul-Tyson fight included a tense undercard fight between Katie Taylor and Amanda Serrano, which the company has said was likely the most watched professional women's sporting event in U.S. history with 74 million global viewers. "Our record-breaking success with Amanda Serrano vs. Katie Taylor demonstrated the massive appetite for women's sports and live programming," Netflix Chief Content Officer Bela Bajaria said.

Starbucks Baristas Walk Out in 3 Cities

By Heather Haddon

Starbucks baristas launched protests at some union-represented locations in Chicago, Los Angeles and Seattle on Friday after the union said contract talks with the coffee chain hit an impasse.

Seattle-based Starbucks said workers in roughly a dozen U.S. stores called out of their shifts or picketed outside locations, leaving some of those stores unable to open.

Starbucks Workers United said it was set for a five-day walkout in the three cities and beyond, with baristas leaving their posts in other markets through Christmas Eve if the company doesn't respond to the union's demands for wage increases and other economic concessions, as well as outstanding legal disputes.

A Starbucks Workers United representative said Friday that walkouts began in the morning and would continue throughout the day. "We're ready to do what it takes," said Michelle Eisen, a union delegate and barista in Buffalo, N.Y., where the labor organizing effort first



A Chicago Starbucks was one of the stores picketed Friday.

began.

Starbucks said Friday that the majority of its domestic locations were open and serving customers normally. A Starbucks spokeswoman said union delegates walked out of their bargaining session this past week, a move the company called disappointing. "We are ready to continue negotiations to reach agreements. We need the union to return to the table," the company spokeswoman said.

Starbucks Workers United currently represents around 530 of the coffee company's more than 10,000 U.S. stores. Employees of the chain began organizing stores in 2021, saying that unionizing was the most effective way to push the company to raise wages, improve staffing and address what baristas said were long-running equipment and operational problems in cafes.

Starbucks later raised wages and expanded benefits for

baristas and other workers, but those moves didn't extend to union-represented cafes, where the chain said separate agreements would need to be negotiated with Starbucks Workers United. The company later relented on that stance. Both sides earlier this year began negotiating a framework for store-level contracts and had hoped to have achieved agreements by the end of this year.

Starbucks Workers United and the company have been at odds over minimum pay increases for union-represented workers. Starbucks said it offered to guarantee that annual merit increases offered to union-represented workers would never be less than 1.5%. Starbucks Workers United said that proposal is insufficient.

Starbucks does brisk business during the holiday period, as does Amazon.com, which is also grappling with worker protests. Amazon workers went on strike Thursday, with thousands of employees protesting the state of contract negotiations and the company's refusal to recognize the Teamsters labor union.

HEARD_{ON THE} STREET

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS & COMMENTARY

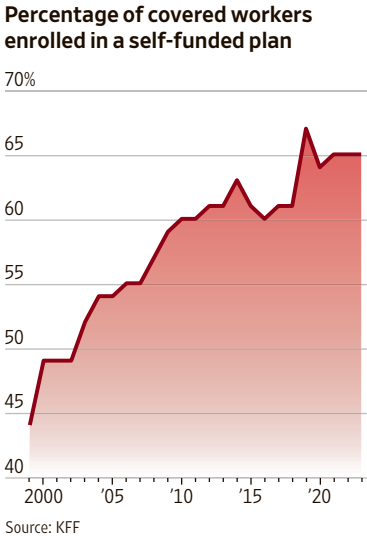
How to Fix Health Insurance

The U.S. health-insurance system is infuriating. These tweaks could make it slightly less so.

The killing of UnitedHealthcare boss Brian Thompson has sparked widespread reflection on the frustrations of navigating America's healthcare system. Many have shared stories of insurance denials and the devastating financial and emotional toll these have taken on families.

Every country aims to control medical costs, and many wealthy nations—Switzerland, for example—also rely on private insurers to help manage care. What sets America apart is its patchwork system that pits loosely regulated, profit-driven players against each other. The result: enormous administrative waste, uncertainty for patients and little added value.

The U.S. spends almost twice as much as comparable wealthy countries, including those with private insurers, on healthcare. Cracking down on insurance companies can only go so far in rectifying the disparity. That is because the bulk of America's health bill stems from



the high cost of hospital services, drugs and care in general. Even if we were to eliminate insurer profits, we wouldn't make much of a dent in the high cost of U.S. health-care. But that doesn't mean the insurance system can't work better.

The roots of today's fragmented system can be traced back to a quirk in U.S. history. Unlike most high-income countries, which created centralized government systems to ration care in the 20th century, the U.S. followed a different path. During World War II, wage controls prompted employers to offer health insurance as a tax-free benefit to attract workers.

Medicare and Medicaid, followed decades later by Affordable Care Act exchanges, were added over time to cover those who couldn't get insurance through their job, creating a highly decentralized and convoluted system. In addition to expanding insurance coverage through the exchanges, the ACA—also known as Obamacare—attempted to fix many issues with insurers by, for example, forcing them to cover people with pre-existing health conditions and requiring that they spend 80% to 85% of what they collect on medical services.

But the pressure to increase their earnings means insurers have looked for ways to overbill the government and skimp on patient care. In recent years, they have become vertically integrated conglomerates, controlling doctors, pharmacies and payment-processing systems. This dynamic creates opportunities for self-dealing, putting the onus on the government to rein in improper practices.

Rules that more clearly define what insurers can and can't do could make healthcare less maddening for patients and doctors. In



America's for-profit model rewards healthcare providers for spending more.

other developed countries, doctors and insurers are tightly regulated and work in alignment, resulting in significantly lower costs. While systems such as those in the U.K. or Canada motivate the doctors and hospitals themselves to keep costs down, America's for-profit model rewards providers for spending—and charging—more.

"We have a system of whack-a-mole, with providers trying to get paid and insurers trying to constrain costs—patients are caught in the middle," says Christopher Whaley, an associate professor at Brown University's School of Public Health.

And often insurers aren't keeping costs low on their own behalf but as a service to large companies. Howard Forman, a healthcare professor at Yale School of Medicine, notes that two-thirds of employer-sponsored health insurance is self-funded, meaning employers cover the cost of claims while paying insurers a fee to manage care. In those cases, any savings accrue to employers, not insurers. That distinction is often lost on the insured, who see "Aetna" or "UnitedHealthcare" on their insurance cards.

One reason healthcare has become more frustrating is because employers and the government have made patients increasingly responsible for the cost of care through higher premiums, copays and deductibles—a concept known as "having skin in the game."

One of the most frustrating aspects of the system is a tactic called prior authorization, a process requiring providers to obtain insurer approval before delivering certain services. While that might be disagreeable, there is little public data on how often insurers deny care. This lack of transparency allows insurers to wield prior authorization aggressively, particularly when expensive treatments are recommended.

A recent Senate report revealed that UnitedHealthcare and CVS denied prior-authorization requests for postacute care for seniors at rates nearly three times higher than their overall denial rates.

Streamlining the prior-authorization process—making it smoother, less burdensome and more transparent—could significantly reduce friction in the healthcare system.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services, has the power to make sure that insurers are playing fair. Under the Biden administration, CMS has proposed several rules to standardize the process. Lindsay Bealor Greenleaf, head of federal and state policy at the consulting firm ADVI Health, says that is expected to continue under the Trump administration.

"There are a lot of routine services and medications where patients and doctors encounter ridiculous and unnecessary barriers," she says. Solutions could include shortening approval times or implementing "Gold Carding," a policy that exempts physicians from Medicare Advantage prior-authorization requirements if 90% of their requests were approved over the past 12 months.

People might always dislike insurance companies—it is baked into how the system works—but that doesn't mean patients should have to live in fear every time they see a doctor.

—David Wainer



Eli Lilly CEO David Ricks presides over a drugmaker with a robust pipeline.

All Hail Eli Lilly, The New Obesity King

Novo Nordisk falls behind on obesity treatment

Eli Lilly is surging ahead in the race to dominate the lucrative obesity market. That is the takeaway from the disappointing **Novo Nordisk** study that has erased as much as \$100 billion in market value for the maker of Ozempic.

Novo's latest setback centers on CagriSema, a next-generation obesity treatment combining two drugs, which was meant to outshine Lilly's Zepbound. The drug helped people lose 22.7% of their weight on average, falling short of the 25% weight loss Novo Nordisk had expected. Additionally, the announcement suggested the side effects might be hard to tolerate because only 57% of patients in the trial proceeded to the highest dose.

The CagriSema disappointment is another setback for Novo's pipeline, after midstage trials of Novo's experimental obesity pill, monlunabant, failed to meet market expectations back in September. Novo's stock was down sharply on Friday.

Adding to Novo's woes is the specter of Medicare drug-price negotiations. Analysts expect that diabetes drug Ozempic, which has the same active ingredient as anti-

obesity shot Wegovy, could be selected for Medicare drug negotiations next year, with discounts taking effect by 2027. While Wegovy is already highly discounted after rebates, that could potentially compress profit margins.

Novo's meteoric rise—at one point its market cap matched the GDP of Denmark, its home country—is increasingly starting to resemble a classic boom-and-bust cycle for a pharma company. Having fallen more than 40% from its peak, the stock now trades at just 21 times projected 2025 earnings, compared with Lilly's more robust 35 multiple.

In the race for global domination of the obesity market, Novo's pain can be Lilly's gain. Lilly's drug Zepbound, which seems to deliver better efficacy than Wegovy, now has no near-term challenger. Lilly also boasts a robust pipeline, including an experimental oral obesity drug that could transform the market.

But Lilly faces its own challenges, two of which will take center stage next year, says Kevin Gade, portfolio manager at Bahl & Gaynor. The first test will come in February, when the company re-

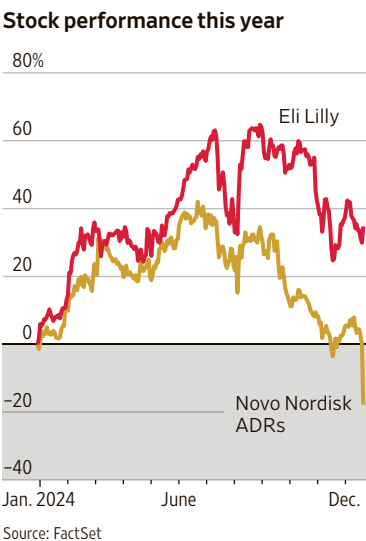
ports first-quarter earnings. In October, Lilly disappointed investors with weaker-than-expected sales of its diabetes and anti-obesity drugs. All eyes will be on whether the drugmaker can reverse that trend and deliver a beat this time.

The second—and potentially more pivotal—moment will arrive later in the year, when Lilly releases data for orforglipron, the anti-obesity pill. Oral medications can be produced faster and more cost-effectively than injectables, making them more affordable for patients and more accessible to the wider market. Success with orforglipron could open up a massive market opportunity for Lilly. However, Gade cautions that, much like Novo's CagriSema trial, this is a high-stakes event, where success is far from guaranteed.

Before Wegovy and Zepbound came around, no drug had proven both safe and effective at addressing obesity on such a wide scale. These GLP-1 drugs shattered expectations by delivering dramatic weight-loss results without terrible side effects. But surpassing these treatments won't be easy.

The commercial rollout also faces mounting hurdles. Early demand for GLP-1s was explosive, leading to supply bottlenecks. Now, to get the market to expand to the masses, questions about coverage remain: Will employers widely embrace these drugs? Will Medicare cover them comprehensively? Without broader insurance coverage, the market might fall short of Wall Street's ambitious forecasts.

—David Wainer



A New Tariff Threat On Oil Misses the Boat

"I told the European Union that they must make up their tremendous deficit with the United States by the large scale purchase of our oil and gas. Otherwise, it is TAR-IFFS all the way" wrote Donald Trump early Friday morning on his social-media site.

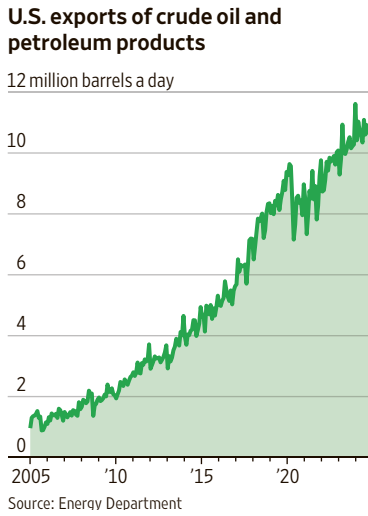
Critics of the incoming administration's wide-ranging tariff proposals have suggested that the president-elect read an introductory economics textbook on how they would harm consumers and boost inflation. In case of this latest threat, a dictionary might be useful.

Some products are fungible, meaning they can be easily exchanged or replaced. Oil, gas and other commodities mostly fit that definition. Getting Europe to buy more U.S. commodities might improve that specific balance of trade, but it wouldn't change the overall U.S. balance and might even hurt it a little.

The U.S. is a huge hydrocarbon producer. It is also a gigantic consumer. It has been just 15 years since terminals being built to import liquefied natural gas to forestall a shortage were mothballed, with some since converted into export terminals for booming LNG demand—especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. And it was as recently as 2020 that the U.S. became a net petroleum product exporter for the first time since the 1940s. The fracking technology revolution, not aggressive trade tactics, is to thank for the boost in domestic energy production.

But when a U.S. producer decides whether or not to hire a new drilling crew, it looks at what it expects the global price to be in the future and also other constraints like pipeline, export terminal and shipping capacity. If that barrel or its energy equivalent in the form of natural gas gets more expensive—something Trump surely doesn't want—it might produce more. But if certain buyers feel compelled to buy American, the end result might even be that it earns a bit less.

Forcing someone in Europe to buy a barrel from America that it might have from Nigeria or Saudi Arabia just redirects that trade.



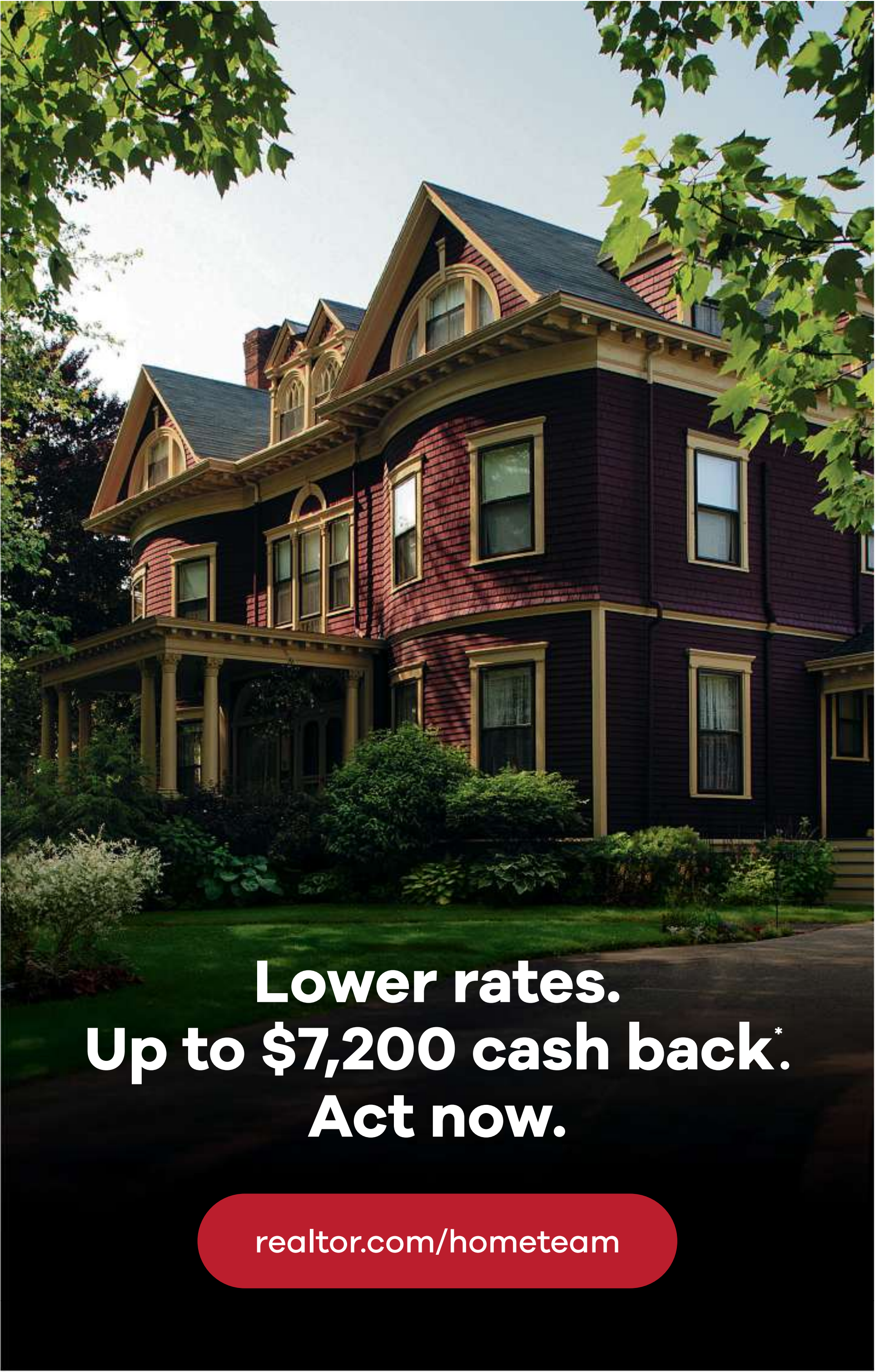
Those barrels would then find a different customer—possibly one who originally would have bought the diverted U.S. barrel. The buyer could even be American. And, since the decision about what kind of oil and where to buy it has to do with shipping costs and what sort of crude a refinery is best-suited to process, the result could be slightly more costly gasoline and diesel, even if oil prices are unchanged.

The U.S. is, for this reason, still a big importer of crude oil. Gulf Coast refineries optimized for the years when Venezuela was a reliable producer import heavy, sour crude barrels even as U.S. light, sweet barrels and refined products flow in the other direction.

Gas is complicated too. Europe is already a huge buyer of U.S. LNG, in many cases on long-term commercial agreements. Asian buyers largely have deals too. But even if the U.S. could get over logistical and contractual hurdles to selling Europe more gas, would it? Back in 2021, as domestic gas prices crept up before Russia's invasion, U.S. industrial groups lobbied the Biden administration to keep the gas at home for their use. Natural-gas prices just hit their 2024 high.

Luckily for U.S. producers, that America First policy, which would have alienated our allies for no gain, was ignored. This one isn't any better.

—Spencer Jakab



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Babies and Me
Infants, it turns out, are not all chunder-spewing bores **C5**

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Birth of ‘Messiah’
The pain, shame and vexation behind Handel’s oratorio **Books C7**



ILLUSTRATION: WSJ

The Global Hunt For Putin’s ‘Sleeper Agents’

A suburban mom, a war correspondent and an Arctic researcher were hiding in plain sight, championed by the Kremlin’s No. 1 fan of spy fiction.

By Drew Hinshaw and Joe Parkinson

MI6 HAD A SECRET so sensitive that Slovenia’s spy chief needed to fly to London to hear it in person. ¶ Somewhere in his tiny Alpine nation, a pair of elite Russian spies were hiding under deep cover. But the British intelligence agency couldn’t—or wouldn’t—tell him their names. The CIA had heard about them just days earlier. ¶ Josko Kadičnik, director of Slovenia’s intelligence service Sova, meaning Owl, felt his stomach sink. In its three decades of independence, Slovenia had never arrested such a spy. Now, just weeks after Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, he was being tasked with a mission that went far beyond Slovenia’s borders to the heart of a New Cold War: His small team of officers needed to capture two Russian sleeper agents. ¶ The stakes of this mission lay in Russia, where jail cells were filling up with political prisoners and a growing list of Americans seized as hostages in a geopolitical game of arresting and trading people like pawns. For every Russian spy the U.S. and its allies could capture, a prisoner could be exchanged into freedom. ¶ Working out of the Central Intelligence Agency’s headquarters, analysts in the

mission center known as “Russia House” had been mapping a network of so-called “illegals”: spies who spent years delicately weaving themselves into the fabric of Western society. They included Russian intelligence officers posing as Brazilian researchers in the Arctic and at Johns Hopkins University; and a Spanish news reporter working on Ukraine’s front lines.

The Kremlin called these foot soldiers Vladimir Putin’s “invisible front,” an army of agents living false lives on foreign passports and second languages. Identifying one, American spy catchers would complain, was like finding a needle hiding in a needle stack. Few would prove as well-concealed as Kadičnik’s target.

The story of how the West hunted those sleeper agents has never been told. Wall Street Journal reporters worked on three continents and spoke to more than 30 former and current officials in the countries where they operated: Slovenia, Argentina, Norway, Greece, Poland, Ukraine, the U.K., Canada and the U.S. Hundreds of court documents and personal records revealed painstakingly built false biographies,



Anna Dultseva and Artem Dultsev, an elite Russian spy couple also known as ‘Maria Rosa Mayer Muñoz’ and ‘Ludwig Gisich.’



from a fraudulent Mexican passport to a doctored Greek birth certificate. The spies left behind a trail of confused friends, colleagues and romantic partners, more than two dozen of whom spoke in detail about the people they thought they knew.

The clandestine transnational pursuit

hinged on lucky breaks and leaps of faith. One country after the next would identify a spy only to face the same ethical quandary: Should the illegals be outed, to end their activities, or silently studied to unlock their networks and the riddle of why Putin invests so much in this mysterious tradition? Each day

brought the risk that the prey could catch wind and flee. By the time the Greek National Intelligence Service went to investigate a Russian woman living undercover, she had already vanished, cleaning out her knitwear boutique in the shadow of the Acropolis, leaving a longtime boyfriend bereft and confused.

Kadičnik was determined not to let his targets, whoever they were, slip away. Tall with a shaved head, the intelligence chief had spent so long running operations against organized crime bosses that colleagues joked he’d adopted their flair for chunky silver neck-chains and salty language. This next operation would have to proceed without a single leak in a country of just 2.1 million where a significant percentage still sympathized with Russia.

The spies he was after were much closer than he realized: a husband and wife living in a quiet suburban lane less than 3 miles from his office. The couple had spent more than a decade molding themselves into an Argentine family of four, all of them conversing in fluent Spanish. Not even their own children knew who they really were.

Each day brought the risk that the prey could catch wind and flee.

The Shield and Sword

In 1968, a 15-year-old Vladimir Putin watched the biggest Soviet TV spectacle of the year: “The Shield and Sword.” The four-part miniseries heralded the fictional exploits of a Communist agent whose masterful command of German allowed him to pass as “Johann Weiss,” an SS officer delicately extracting the Third Reich’s deepest secrets.

The U.S.S.R. was stagnating behind the capitalist West, but its films, novels and even postage stamps were celebrat-

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Inside



The Christmas Gift I’ll Never Forget

Guy Fieri, Zooey Deschanel, Neil Patrick Harris, Junot Diaz, Amanda Foreman and more share their holiday memories **C5-C6**



REVIEW

How the West Found Moscow's Treasured Spies

Continued from the prior page

ing a human weapon Moscow possessed that Washington lacked: sleeper agents. In Soviet mythology, these heroes were the antithesis of James Bond, chameleons who could blend into the enemy's nest, surviving not on martini-infused bravado and a license to kill, but on patience, wits and a monk-like capacity to sacrifice in service to the motherland.

Decades later, Putin would recall the effect the TV thriller had on him. He studied German in high school, then walked into his local KGB office and volunteered for a life undercover.

The young Putin had become entranced by a tradition whose origins stretched back to the 1917 Revolution, when the new Bolshevik government, unrecognized and encircled by hostile neighbors, couldn't place spies under diplomatic cover in embassies abroad. Instead, its Communist agents acquired new passports. They honed second languages to operate as sleepers behind enemy lines. The spies had a unique strength (they could operate undetected) offset by a weakness (they had no diplomatic immunity and could thus be arrested for espionage).

Back in the U.S.S.R., their legend burned bright through stories of illegals like Rudolf Abel, who helped steal atomic secrets and was later depicted in Steven Spielberg's "Bridge of Spies." In reality, illegals often grew bored and depressed, burdened with long stretches between instructions and the constant stress of withholding a double life from the friends, lovers, spouses and children they accumulated abroad. Some simply walked away from their missions, joining the prosperity of the unsuspecting West, taking their secrets to their graves.

The KGB didn't offer young Putin a chance to vanish into Europe as an illegal, though he

question of where was home.

Another spy, Anna Chapman, had left behind a trail of former lovers and a confused ex-husband, a story condensed under headlines like "Russian spy babe's hot affair." Within two weeks of their arrest, all of the spies were swapped on a Vienna runway for four Russians Moscow had imprisoned for collaborating with the West, including Sergei Skripal, a military-intelligence officer who had given MI6 the names of Russian agents.

Putin's most prized agents were reduced to tabloid fodder and later inspiration for a six-season FX series, "The Americans." After their return, Putin joined the illegals in front of a live band for a rousing singalong of the theme song from "The Shield and Sword," "Where Does the Motherland Begin?"

The Obama administration sang a different tune: Eager to maintain its "reset" of relations with Moscow, senior officials downplayed the discovery of Russian spies living in suburbia as an anachronistic artifact of the Cold War.

It was anything but. Almost as soon as the swap was over, another generation of illegals was heading back into the field, their operations relayed in regular briefings to Russia's most powerful fan of spy fiction.

The Boot

Pablo González was a spy hiding in plain sight.

When protesters thronged the streets of Kyiv, braving gunfire to oust their pro-Russian government in 2014, the bearded freelance reporter was in the crowd, charming pro-Western activists with his booming baritone and a taste for danger. Early on, the photojournalists he teamed with noticed he bashed out articles only after several beers, in bars where he preferred to close his laptop and talk animatedly about the Kremlin's military strategy—or the women he'd conquered.

He explained his fluent Russian with shifting stories, at first telling a few friends he had studied it in college before explaining the full picture: He had spent part of his childhood in Russia, where his grandfather had fled after the Spanish Civil War.

Born Pavel Rubtsov in Moscow, he and his mother had left Russia for Spain's Basque country when he was 9, taking her maiden name, González. Spanish authorities would later suspect he had been recruited by the GRU, Russia's military-intelligence agency, on a visit to see his father and stepmother around 2010. González, who had fathered four children by a Spanish wife and Russian girlfriend, was an attractive potential asset. The bilingual and truly bicultural news reporter could use his freelance writing for Spanish media outlets as cover for operations. The GRU could offer him money and membership of a secret army to help them monitor two of their key targets, Ukraine's westernizing army and Russia's exiled opposition.

Within a year of Ukraine's 2014 revolution, he had charmed and drunk his way into the company of the lawmakers, press secretaries and customs officials of the new Ukraine, cataloging his victories in text files he left on his laptop, under innocuous headings like "Business Trip to Ukraine." His handlers would urge him to be more careful, to delete incriminating documents. He in turn would bill them for the tiniest expenses, down to the inexpensive bottles of wine he brought to meetings with Russians living in exile.

Meanwhile, officials at Ukraine's Defense Ministry took a liking to the daring, garrulous war reporter and regularly invited him to functions, including a 2016 tour of a base near the Polish border where he witnessed new NATO-structured military exercises and spoke with U.S. and Canadian instructors.

The next year, González on his own initiative tried to befriend Putin's most feared opponent, op-



Top, the 'owl' coin given to the team of Slovenian intelligence agents clued in on the search for the Russian 'Slipper' operatives. Above, the Dultsevs' Ljubljana home, the site of their eventual arrest.

position leader Alexei Navalny, who had traveled to Barcelona for eye treatment after unknown assailants attacked him with green dye. González slipped into the clinic, offered Navalny help translating and navigating Barcelona, then took a selfie with him. He later sent his GRU handlers the address and descriptive details of the hospital, even the Wi-Fi passwords of a cafe where Navalny supporters were hanging out. Months later, he joined the protest leader for an evening of drinks with prominent Russian opposition figures, none of them wise to the GRU spy at their table.

González was working for the GRU's 5th Department, one of two competing directorates Putin had expanded to seed sleeper agents abroad. The GRU encouraged its officers, nicknamed "Boots," to take risks for quick results. For a Boot, the fluent Spanish-speaker was an unusual asset. Usually, the GRU trained and dispatched illegals so fast that their accents still betrayed a Slavic lilt. They sometimes tried to explain themselves with patchy back stories that fell apart under even light scrutiny.

The Boots' rivals were the "Slippers" of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, or SVR, who prided themselves on floating undetected. SVR operatives spent so many years acculturating themselves to the minute details of their supposed homelands—the way its citizens hold their cutlery, stand at a bar, or smoke cigarettes—that the best could pass for natives of countries they only arrived in as adults. They were patient. And just as Pablo González began hopping around Ukraine, two of them, more tortoise-like, had arrived in Buenos Aires.

The Slippers

On June 14, 2013, a diminutive woman with mousy brown hair calling herself María Rosa Mayer Muñoz walked into the Italian hospital in Buenos Aires, with barely an hour left in her pregnancy, to face one of her most difficult endeavors as an undercover spy: birthing a child without betraying her true identity.

Obstetrician Mario Pérez had already logged in his notes that the woman had conspicuously little interaction with staff at the private hospital, one of the best in the Argentine capital. She had waited more than halfway through her term to book her first consultation. Now she

walked into the basement delivery room "fully dilated," he said. "She made us all run!" Dr. Pérez had no idea that "María" was Anna Dultseva, on a yearslong journey to transform her life into the perfect lie.

Born in the Soviet city of Gorky, she married her husband Artem in 2004, then joined the SVR with him, she later told the spy service's magazine. She spent three years in immersive training to transform herself into an alter ego, built on documents seen by the Journal. First, in 2010, she secured the Greek birth certificate of a dead child, which a bureaucrat in an Athens suburb falsified to claim her mother was Mexican. Then she used that to secure a Mexican passport.

Finally, she moved to Argentina in 2012 to join Artem, who was living under the name Ludwig Gisch, with fraudulent papers stating he was born in Namibia to an Argentine mother. They lived in a building in the middle-class neighborhood of Belgrano, attracting little attention among the 146 apartments and rarely attending tenants' meetings. The concierge saw them come and go at routine times, with Artem usually wearing a tie. By 2014 they had both secured Argentine citizenship and Anna was pregnant.

In the delivery room, medical staff had noticed she was calm—barely speaking, save for some quiet words for her husband in fluent Spanish. "This woman has a very high tolerance for pain," Dr. Pérez said. The couple cooed over their new daughter, Sophie. No one came to visit them.

Anna and Artem were still building their cover. On Sept. 14, 2015, they married under their assumed names, María and Ludwig, a service in an otherwise empty building attended by two witnesses from Colombia, one of whom spoke to the Journal. A son, Daniel, arrived the same year—like his older sister, a true Argentine citizen by birth. The family marked birthdays privately, without inviting other children, and the kids almost never attended their schoolmates' parties.

Nobody in the tiny circle of parents she interacted with seemed to notice anything odd about Anna's accent or life story, other than a quiet sense of loneliness. Artem's Spanish betrayed the lightest touch of something foreign, a trace he chalked up to his childhood in Africa. Forbidden from watching TV, their children ate healthy food and took swim-

ming lessons. In 2017, the two Slippers got a message from their handler. After more than a decade building their cover it was time to secure new visas and deploy for the next stage of their mission: Slovenia, in the heart of Europe. First, there was a troubling wrinkle they would have to iron out to avoid detection. In the Argentine civil registry where their wedding record was stored, Anna had listed her mother's nationality as Austrian, a falsehood Slovenia could easily check with its northern neighbor. In formal, im-



that widened from war correspondents to dissidents. But what he didn't know was that the U.S. and its allies were on his tracks.

The Spy Catchers

Behind the passkey-activated doors that separated them from the rest of the CIA's Langley headquarters, the officers at Russia House were piecing through a gathering stack of reports chronicling the double life of Pablo González.

For years the storied CIA division, formally known as Mission Center for Europe and Eurasia, had operated from the same warren of cubicles and offices as the agency shifted focus toward the War on Terror. But by 2017, the dozens of Russia analysts, officers and "targeters" scouring communications, official files and business records were tracing the contours of an expanding Russian spy network that included González.

Since 2014, Spain's Centro Nacional de Inteligencia had been tracking the jet-setting reporter. In time, so were their counterparts in MI6 and in Poland, where González had been interviewing members of a new left-wing party and would begin dating a local freelance journalist.

For the spy catchers, this Boot was a bargain. The more he threw himself into missions, at times on his own volition, the more the Spanish and Americans could map his handlers, contacts, allies and command chain. Western officials studying the bilingual spy admired his natural talent and zest for the dangerous work, even as slips in tradecraft allowed them to track his network. One agency was able to find his documents uploaded onto a cloud service.

The hard-drinking war correspondent embodied an old spy-craft dilemma for the officers monitoring him: Once you catch a spy, should you intervene to stop their mission? Or silently follow them, to harvest more secrets? The CIA analysts in Russia House and their Spanish counterparts were inclined to keep watching.

He was becoming romantic with Zhanna Nemtsova, the grieving, exiled daughter of Boris Nemtsov, a Putin critic recently murdered near the walls of the Kremlin. She lent the Spaniard her father's old laptop and he slipped the device's email archive onto a 512 gigabyte thumb drive.

Then, on March 4, 2018, two GRU agents visiting England's



The Dultsevs and their children return to Moscow on Aug. 1, part of a prisoner swap that included Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich.

Before, intelligence agencies at times had brushed aside the dangers of Putin's fixation with illegals. Now, they increased information sharing, scheduling rounds of face-to-face meetings with liaisons in embassies and check-ins over secure channels including the Battlefield Information Collection and Exploitation Systems created by NATO for wartime communication.

New personnel were posted to Russia House, tasked with the painstaking detective work of tracking the illegals' flows of money, personnel and logistics. Analysts were surprised to see that the GRU was still acquiring passports through the old Cold War tactic of misusing a dead baby's birth certificate. Soon, the CIA began identifying Boots.

One, Sergey Vladimirovich Cherkasov, who posed as Victor Ferreira, a Brazilian graduate student, was caught by a résumé slipup: The CIA noticed he had worked at a travel agency in Rio de Janeiro that they suspected was run by a GRU officer. By 2018, he was motorcycling each morn-

ing through Washington, D.C., studying American Foreign Policy and International Economics at Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies. Though students puzzled over his odd accent, he ingratiated himself with professors unaware that their pupil was a GRU officer born in the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.

Another Boot they found was Mikhail Mikushin, undercover as José Assis Giammaria, an eager student at Canada's Centre for Military, Security and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary. He was also struggling to convince his schoolmates that he truly was Brazilian. After what he claimed was a trip home to renew his visa, Giammaria passed out Rio de Janeiro souvenir bottle opener keychains to every student in his class.

What the Western pursuers didn't know, and wouldn't for years, is that two more spies—at least—had managed to slip right past them. Now ensconced in a two-story home in the suburbs of Ljubljana, the quiet capital of Slovenia, the Dultsevs cut a low profile. They spoke to their children only in Spanish, and wouldn't attempt even a sentence in Slovenian—the Slavic language was too close to Russian, and their native accent might poke through. Neighbors noticed little about the family who never entertained visitors and whose belongings, down to their white Kia Ceed sedan and the bike the husband pedaled downtown daily, all seemed designed to attract as little attention as possible.

The couple said almost nothing about their past except to blame the crime in Buenos Aires for their move. Neighbors overheard the Dultsevs' children playing in the garden, jabbering in Spanish, but the parents almost never stayed long outside. She was hardly ever photographed, with a rare exception: One Wednesday in late November 2019, she joined a Christmas decorating party in her daughter's kindergarten classroom, flashing a strained smile over the caption "A real Christmas spirit was in the air."

For work, she had set up Art Gallery 514, an online company buying and selling mostly modern art. Hardly anyone in Slovenia's small community of artists would remember anything at all about the unassuming mother of two whose office happened to sit a few steps from an EU gas and energy regulator. The gallery claimed to work with 90 artists across the world and posted several images to its prolific social-media accounts almost daily. Strikingly, not a single picture showed her face.

The Trap

Pablo González was flying closer to the sun.

Colleagues in the Spanish press corps had been gossiping over his ample supply of top-shelf cameras and expensive drones. He had been freelancing for U.S. government-funded Voice of America while airing Kremlin-sympathetic views on hourlong YouTube videos. He even attended a training hosted by Bellingcat, the open source investigative outfit that unmasked Russian spies at a clip the analysts at Russia House often envied. His on-off romantic partner Nemtsova, the prominent Putin critic, had started to confide suspicions to other exiles about the well-connected reporter for small Spanish newspapers who took expensive weeklong trips to Ukrainian warzones.

One night in November 2021, over beers in eastern Poland, he made a grand prediction to a small group of fellow foreign correspondents: Putin was about to invade Ukraine.

His cover unraveled three months later. Taking extended video footage of defensive posi-

tions along Ukraine's eastern front, he spooked anxious soldiers bracing themselves for an impending invasion. Ukraine's SBU intelligence agency immediately asked him to visit their Kyiv headquarters, where they questioned him for hours, probing his finances, career and where exactly he was born.

The same place as you, González shot back. The Soviet Union.

González was in a belligerent mood that night, downing drinks faster than other war reporters could keep up and laughing about the Ukrainian officers who'd scanned his phone and warned him to depart the country. He stepped out to call the Spanish embassy, which encouraged him to heed the advice. He flew to Istanbul to meet his handlers, then visited Spain for a brief stopover with his wife, before returning to Warsaw, reconnecting with his Polish girlfriend. He told journalists he'd left Ukraine because his Spanish ID was set to expire. All the while he was being tracked by British intelligence.

Just as Putin's invasion moved ahead, the U.K. sent a tip to one of Poland's top security officials: Did they know Pablo González was back in town?

One of the largest international arms transfers since World War II was underway at a small airport in Poland, where giant military cargo planes, loaded with equipment bound for Ukraine, were landing hourly. González, they realized, had visited the airport, typing detailed notes on its layout and logistics on his new laptop.

Polish officers watched as González and his Polish girlfriend returned late on the night of Feb. 27, 2022 to the makeshift housing of a student dormitory near the border. The couple had been squabbling over his relations with other women. Shortly before midnight, a knock came at the door and officers filled the room, frisking them both then pulling González aside. He said nothing as they led him away.

The next morning, the Spanish woke up to learn the spy they'd hoped to keep studying had gone dark—the Poles hadn't warned them. In interrogations, González said he was worth a lot to the Kremlin and suggested they trade him for Alexei Navalny, Russia's most prominent dissident, one of the officials dealing with the case said. Back in Spain, his lawyer and supporters launched a campaign saying he was guilty of nothing except journalism. González, who didn't respond to emailed requests for comment, never admitted publicly to being a spy.

Neither the Kremlin nor Russia's foreign and military intelligence agencies, the SVR and GRU, responded to questions seeking comment.

On the other side of Europe, the CIA was delivering a tip to the officers of the Netherlands' national security and defense intelligence agencies. The Brazilian

Johns Hopkins graduate Victor Ferreira—Cherkasov, the GRU deep cover officer—would soon be flying in to take an internship at The Hague's International Criminal Court.

Russia House hoped the Dutch would keep watching him, but Dutch officials debating the stakes felt doing nothing could allow a Russian spy to access the building and email system of a court whose prosecutors had war crimes cases against Russia as far back as 2008.

Tall, with coiffed blond hair, Cherkasov walked through Amsterdam's Schiphol airport in April to find Dutch authorities waiting to pull him aside, then scan his devices. Like González, he'd been sloppy: Hidden on a laptop was his legend, or cover story, that ran just four large-text pages, much of it an elaborate explanation for his peculiar accent and why, unlike most Brazilians, he didn't eat fish.

The Dutch deported him back to Brazil in the hopes that the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva would be a co-operative partner against Russian espionage. The country would hold him on a fraudulent passport charge. He arrived with a handwritten sign taped to his suitcase as a joke by the Dutch, a pun on São Paulo's international airport code: "To GRU."

José Assis Giammaria—GRU officer Mikhail Mikushin—was

By 2017, dozens of analysts, officers and 'targeters' were tracing the contours of an expanding Russian spy network.

next. The University of Calgary graduate was now a security studies researcher in Norway's Arctic city of Tromsø, where police grabbed him on the way to work. Just like that, the West had rolled up three illegals in quick succession.

Yet there was an evidence trail pointing to another pair, who were proving far harder to track. The hunt began shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, when Josko Kadivnik, the director of Slovenia's Owl, received his invitation to fly to London.

The Family

Armed with a vague tip from MI6, Kadivnik built his investigative team slowly, inviting only the most trusted underlings into his office, framed by a metallic mosaic of an owl.

Most of the officers would not be told the full scope of their mission and were frequently rotated over months of slow police work. For the few who knew the truth, Please turn to the next page

REVIEW



BULENT ULUG/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

After Ukraine’s February 2014 revolution, González ingratiated himself with the new government.

Hidden Boots and Slippers

Continued from the prior page

Kadivnik checked their pockets for loyalty: Select officers were given a gold coin emblazoned with an owl, a symbol of their tightknit club. If ever he found them without their coin, they would have to treat their colleagues to a round of drinks.

It isn’t clear how, in the needle stack of foreign-born residents, the officers slowly homed in on an Argentine family living at number 35 Primožičeva Street, a quiet suburban lane on the outskirts of the capital. Maria Rosa Mayer Muñoz had been flying to art fairs in London and Edinburgh, melding into an industry where laundered money and fraud mixed with high society. Was she legitimate? Slovenia’s national security adviser Vojko Volk, an erudite former ambassador to Italy, studied her paintings, noting that they all seemed unimpressive, like new-age art sold cheaply to clueless tourists.

Poring through the family’s bank accounts, investigators puzzled over whether the tuition of her children’s private British-curriculum academy was within their means. Her husband Ludwig Gisch had set up an online IT business selling domain names and cloud hosting, but it only had four followers on X, including the account of his wife’s business. He had promptly filed his tax returns, reviewed by the Journal, in 2021 claiming revenues of 40,000 euros alongside his wife’s 23,000.

Neither husband nor wife ever got so much as a parking ticket. Their operations security appeared nearly perfect, except for one error: Deep in their immigration records, Kadivnik could still see where the Interior

Ministry had wondered, why had she changed her mother’s nationality from Austrian to Mexican? Now, the odd rectification added to a convincing body of evidence that the Argentinians might not be who they said they were.

Owl began surveilling the gallerist, at times closely, other times backing off to avoid spooking her. Investigators opened their mail, hacked into their phones and discreetly trailed their white Kia Ceed along Ljubljana’s cobblestone streets and past riverside cafes. The agency

After meeting sources, Anna Dultseva placed handwritten messages under a rock in a forest.

cross-checked information with Interpol and the CIA, eventually uncovering the real names, Anna and Artem Dultsev.

Slowly, the couple’s mission revealed itself. They were surveilling the director of a European Union energy regulatory agency based in Slovenia, as it tried to rapidly wean the continent off Russian gas and help Ukraine avoid blackouts.

On trips across the visa-free Schengen bloc and London—for art exhibitions, ostensibly—Anna would

meet sources. When she returned she’d ferry handwritten messages using an unhackable technique from the Cold War: placing them under a designated rock in a forest near the coast.

Owl would never know the full picture of what she was up to—but by Dec. 5, 2022, it was ready to strike.

The arrest would have to unfold without word reaching a single friend or neighbor of the couple, or any Russian sympathizer. Not even the U.S. ambassador was told more than she needed to know, as the local CIA station chief shuttled back and forth to meet the tiny set of Slovenians organizing the raid.

A cold fog was settling on Ljubljana, Christmas markets just opening their shutters, as a string of unmarked vehicles weaved toward 35 Primožičeva Street where the Dultsevs were shepherding their children off to school. Kadivnik was watching in real-time on a feed filmed by some of his officers. He would extend the couple one courtesy before arresting them: Neither their daughter Sophie nor their son Daniel would be home to watch their parents taken.

At 9:03 he gave the order and special forces burst through the windows so suddenly that Artem, hunched over a laptop, fell backward off his chair. He’d had no time to close the tabs on his screen or shutter its secure communication to the SVR, which was still running. Screaming echoed through the home as officers thundered upstairs, shouting “get down!” and bundling Anna onto the floor. She began to cry, claiming an injury, before returning to her feet, standing in silence. The arrest lasted only minutes and the couple left in handcuffs, their breakfast uneaten on the kitchen table.

Neighbors watched through their

blinds, late into the night, as detectives searched the home and its yard, leaving with bags of money found in a secret compartment of the refrigerator, documents that included Anna’s forged Greek birth certificate, dozens of USB devices equipped with technology police had never seen before and Artem’s laptop, to be sent to Washington for analysis.

Kadivnik delivered word to the CIA that the operation was complete. After nine months of high-strung police work, Slovenia had nabbed the first deep-cover spies in its history.

The Trade

Three months later, in March 2023, Kadivnik slipped into a government building in Belgrade—neutral Serbian territory—to face the Kremlin’s top negotiator for prisoner swaps. The power imbalance was palpable.

Col. Gen. Sergei Beseda was known to some in Russia House as “the Baron” for his tailored suits and a cigar habit hinting at a youth as a KGB officer in Havana. He was wanted in Ukraine for allegedly encouraging former President Viktor Yanukovich to mow down demonstrators before he was toppled.

Now he was seated opposite Kadivnik with a question for Slovenia, a tiny state that won independence from communist Yugoslavia in the 1990s: Why are you doing America’s bidding? Most of all, he was there to deliver a direct message from the Russian president. Putin wanted his spies back.

On the phone with CIA Director Bill Burns, Kadivnik was nervous over what he was supposed to do with two elite Russian agents. Putin’s oldest ally, archhawk Nikolai Patrushev, had called to propose trading them for Slovenians in Russian

prisons, but when Slovenia’s national security adviser insisted there were no Slovenians jailed in Russia, Patrushev paused then asked, menacingly: “Are you sure?”

The small country would have to be patient. All through 2023 and into 2024, Moscow and Washington haggled over which prisoners to trade. Poland held off bringing González’s case to a trial that, once it began, would make it harder to swap him.

The Dultsev children remained unaware their parents were charged with being spies. They lived in foster care, overseen by a female deputy Kadivnik appointed. Anna and Artem were allowed to speak to their children daily. But they begged prison guards to still call them Maria and Ludwig when their children came to visit. Watching the married spies, the Owl chief could tell that she was the more senior officer.

By July, President Biden was facing pressure to step down as his party’s presidential nominee. That month, Kadivnik got a call from the office of Slovenia’s prime minister: a deal was coming together. The FSB and the CIA had inked an agreement at a clandestine meeting in Riyadh. The trade would take place on Aug. 1.

Russia would free a mix of dissidents, German prisoners, and three Americans: former Marine Paul Whelan and journalists Alsu Kurmasheva and the Journal’s Evan Gershkovich, sentenced to a combined 40 years on national security charges they and the U.S. government denied. Washington and its allies would release eight Russians, including one held for ammunition smuggling, two convicted cybercriminals, and a hit man serving a life sentence for murdering an enemy of Putin in a Berlin park. The rest were Boots and Slippers.

At a NATO summit in Washington in July, Biden’s national security adviser asked the Slovenians how the U.S. could thank the small country for its efforts. Slovenia wanted to build new nuclear plants. Could the U.S. help? Weeks later, Biden welcomed the Slovenians to the White House to discuss what Westinghouse Electric could do.

The plane that came to collect the Dultsevs from Ljubljana was a U.S. government jet. Kadivnik and a CIA officer would escort the family all the way to the exchange point in Turkey, and then, once they were rid of the spies, pop open a celebratory bottle of bourbon for their trip home.

Eleven-year-old Sophie spent the journey tapping away on a tablet. Her mother looked at her. At some point during their flight to Moscow she would have to tell her children the truth: Her name was Anna Dultseva, a citizen of Russia, the country she had quietly served for almost half her life as a deep cover spy.

Kate Vtorygina, Novica Mihajlović, Karolina Jeznach, Silvina Frydlewsky, Joel Schectman and James Marson contributed to this story.

ABOUT FACE

I Used to Think Babies Were All Chunder-Spewing Bores. I Was Wrong.

Prejudice may be a natural product of unfamiliarity, but infants just seemed gross.

BY HENRY ALFORD

BABIES ATTRACT AN amount of attention incommensurate with their contribution. This is an opinion I held for years. It started when I was in college in the 1980s. I was telling an amusing anecdote to a group of friends at a teacher’s house when, seconds before I delivered my punchline, one of our hosts walked into the room with her newborn, derailing my story. Screams of “So cute!” were followed by gales of laughter when the child coughed up a tiny rivulet of purple chunder.

Cut to the early 1990s, when various jobs convinced me that a baby, when paraded through an office, is the signal

that all operations must cease in entirety until said baby has left the premises. Cut to the millennium, when a years-long friendship sputtered out after a friend—a new mother—was unable to find any time to spend with me.

Was I being a churl? I didn’t think so. It seemed plain to me that dazzled eyes, a slick of drool and a fixation on the bottle were no substitute for a personality. I knew enough professional writers to say so.

Prejudice is a natural product of unfamiliarity. If you know no French people, then you might presume that they are all snifty beret-wearing swoon-hards who stink of brie.

You might cling to this narrow view until you travel to Paris and learn no one wears berets anymore.

I knew a few babies, from a distance, but was I similarly guilty of blurring them into a nonspecific scrum of neediness and spit-up? It’s a forgivable offense: Babies have undifferentiated facial features and zero opinions about single-payer healthcare. They’re complicit in the mass dissemination of sticky goo, slyly turning all surfaces into glue traps. They can’t teach you how to make a JPG. They are, in short, “other.”

My feelings started to shift when my close friends went

through the agonizing process of adopting two kids from Russia. Watching them invest hundreds of hours on the application and vetting process, then fly twice to Russia to visit an orphanage, redrew the parenting map for me.

This adoption was no mere rite of passage for my friends, nor a desperate gambit to keep their marriage afloat. It was something these hopeful, aspiring parents were fighting for. My hazy ideas about children began to make room for something more specific.

My burgeoning appreciation of what a child might mean was then deepened when a gay friend “made” a baby with a surrogate: here was another person making big sacrifices and spending hundreds of hours to bring a child into his life. Once I’d fully appreciated that this child, like my other friends’ Russian kids, was a unique entity with a rich back story, it dawned on me that

most babies are probably more than mere mammalian instinct and saliva. My former generalizations: unmoored. My snarkiness: undone.

An acquaintance brought her six month-old to a gathering of friends at a cafe last fall. When it was my turn to hold the tiny bundle, I felt as if my every action might imprint on little Eli and reverberate throughout his life. The traits that had once irritated me about infants now seemed like assets: This baby’s daze was a beautiful expression of wonderment bordering on synesthesia; his drool, a testament to his ability to live in the moment; his thirst, a symbol of his vigor. He fell asleep in my arms and I felt like Atlas.

I don’t want to be a baby again, or make one or have one, but whenever I get a chance to pull one in for a snuggle these days? I hold on for dear life.

Henry Alford is a humorist and journalist. His latest book, “I Dream of Joni: A Portrait of Joni Mitchell in 53 Snapshots,” will be published by Gallery Books on Jan. 21.

NATHAN HACKETT

“About Face” is a column about how someone changed their mind.

REVIEW

The Christmas Gift I'll Never Forget

Some holiday presents are so perfect, or so awful, that you remember them forever. With contributions from Guy Fieri, Zooey Deschanel, Amanda Foreman, Junot Diaz, Neil Patrick Harris, Emily Flake, Claire Lombardo and Rob LaZebnik.



A Big, Bad Horse Named Rebel

GROWING UP, MY PARENTS owned a shop called Dave's Saddlery, a western clothing store in my hometown of Ferndale, Calif. So the western lifestyle was big in our family.

One Christmas morning when I was about 8 years old, we were all sitting around the tree after opening our presents and my dad, Jim, pulls the classic dad move and says he hears something out back...maybe it's Santa!

By Guy Fieri

So I run to the other side of the family room, to the sliding glass door, and lo and behold, standing outside in the snow is my parents' business partner, an old cowboy named Dave, holding this giant mountain of a horse...my new mountain of a horse, Rebel! Mind you, snow is really rare in Ferndale, so it made the sight all the more picturesque. Rebel was half Quarter Horse and half Clydesdale and was so big that the saddle stirrups didn't even hang down, they just stuck out to the side.

Rebel was my first horse and went on to become my favorite horse, even after I fell off him when I was 9 and had to have emergency surgery. So whenever I think of amazing Christmases, I think of my family being together, with my big bad Rebel out in the snow. I'll never forget it.

Guy Fieri, a restaurateur and Food Network host, is at work on the upcoming season of "Tournament of Champions."

A Cheesy Tribute From My Vegan Sister

THE BEST HOLIDAY gifts make you feel like you've been spied on, lovingly, by a psychic who sees your soul but doesn't judge you for what's there. You feel celebrated for the most you things you do. You feel seen. You feel distilled.

You feel celebrated. You feel gently roasted on an open fire, but not too much, just enough to make you a lightly toasted and perfect marshmallow. At least that's how it is for me.

I have received so many amazing gifts in my life, but one of the best was a Hello Kitty-themed panini maker. I was 21, it was Christmas, and the gift giver, the person who understood me enough to give me this spectacular thing, was my sister Emily.

The object itself was a marvel. But the real gift was the

By Zooey Deschanel

fact it came from Emily, a devoted vegan, even though she knew I would use it to melt cheese, forbidden on a vegan diet, into buttered bread seared with a Hello Kitty logo. It was the ultimate show of holiday generosity.

Her smirk when I opened it, knowing she had nailed it, was perfectly her, and I was perfectly me—a lifelong lover of all things bread and cheese but, like, in a fun Hello Kitty way. My parents had gotten me some truffle cheese for Christmas that year and so I made Hello Kitty truffle cheese panini for everyone...except dear vegan Emily, who was satisfied with a job well done.

Zooey Deschanel is an award-winning actress, musician and entrepreneur.



More Time Together

CHRISTMAS EVE. Things are not going according to plan.

Wind back: It's T-minus 15 days to Christmas. I'm shopping for reindeer hats when my phone rings. That X-ray for my husband Reg's sore rib? The problem isn't his rib.

T-minus 12 days: He has cancer!

T-minus 9: Don't worry. Our physician thinks they caught it early.

T-minus 7: Worry. The surgeon says it's stage 4. "But there is always hope," she tells us.

T-minus 2: Reg goes in for more tests.

T-minus 1: And another biopsy. Ouch.

So here we are on a stormy Christmas Eve. I am driving to the country with unwrapped gifts in the trunk, five sleeping kids in the back and my semiconscious, possibly dying husband in the passenger seat.

My revised plan: Forget the turkey. Just wrap presents, stuff the stockings and sleep, so I'm not a wreck on Christmas morning.

Midnight: I'm ahead of the game.

2 a.m.: The wind has dislodged some roof tiles, and water is cascading through the children's bedrooms

By Amanda Foreman

to the dining room below. I find sleeping bags and herd the kids into the corridor. Yay! Christmas and camping, their two favorite activities. I don't have enough buckets.

3 a.m.: Oh wait, I still need to do the stockings! I'd been thrilled to find ones that were the perfect Norman Rockwell red. Now, I hate them.

7:50 a.m. I think I dozed off. Only the reindeer hats to stuff.

8:00 a.m. Christmas Day! Reg is awake. His eyes widen when he sees me. "Why are you crying?" he asks.

"Everything. This. You."

"Look at me," he says. "I love you. I have everything I have ever wanted in you, our children, our life together. The only thing I no longer have is time." Time. His words are the worst and best Christmas gifts rolled into one.

That was 15 years ago. It turned out there was hope—and more time, too.

Amanda Foreman is a historian whose next book, "The World Made by Women: A New History of Humanity," will be published in 2026.

REVIEW

My Christmas Gift Memory *Continued from page C5*



A Poor but Proud American Christmas

OUR FIRST TWO YEARS in the States we didn't celebrate Christmas. Despite the Yuletide madness, the sales, the commercials, the music, the Charlie Brown Christmas special, my mother refused to put up a tree or give any of us gifts. Not even cook a special meal. It was obvious we were super-poor but still—no holiday cheer at all?

By Junot Diaz But what could a poor Dominican immigrant kid do? It wasn't like we could lobby our parents or pester them into compliance. My mother was old school, would as soon put us on the streets as give in to our wishes.

Imagine my surprise when our third Christmas rolled around, and I came back from school one December day to find our mother had put up a fake Christmas tree—and there were actual wrapped presents nestled beneath. No names on the presents—but presents nevertheless.

We picked them up, felt their weight, shook them—but in secret. We knew if we so much as glanced at the presents in front of our parents they were liable to give them away. But among ourselves we were half-mad with the possibilities. At last we were going to celebrate a real American Christmas! With gifts!

(If you ain't been an immigrant kid you have no idea how much that type of thing matters: to take part in the larger culture, to be like everyone else.)

Finally, Christmas morning. Our father was at work and our mother was asleep, but we figured we were in the safe zone and at dawn we kids descended en masse.

What did we find inside those presents?

Not the Mego Star Trek Phaser Battle I'd been dreaming about. Not the Barbies my sisters wanted. Not the baseball glove my brother had been praying for.

No. Inside were bags of rice and corn meal and some of our old dishes.

At first we didn't understand what we were seeing, but clarity was not long in coming. Our mother had wanted her friends in the neighborhood to think we were doing Christmas, had weighed down the boxes just in case one of the nosier ones happened to pick one up.

It was all for show.

My mother must have heard the commotion, because she came out—and when she saw all the opened presents she didn't say a word. Just returned the dishes and the food to the cabinets.

Junot Diaz is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and professor of creative writing at M.I.T.

A Lesson in Good Spirits

I'M A BIG fan of experiential gifts. As much as I enjoy a cashmere sweater or a box of sea salt caramels, my favorite gifts have been ones where I experienced and learned something. One year, my husband David got me mixology lessons from

By Neil Patrick Harris Jonathan Lind, the bar manager at the former NoMad Hotel in New York.

Each lesson focused on a different spirit—tequila, gin, Scotch, rum—and I learned the history and the recipes, how to make a perfect Negroni, a great Old-Fashioned. I'm putting those skills to use constantly, and not only at home: I just finished doing a play called "Shit. Meet. Fan." that takes place at a cocktail party in a Dumbo loft, so my character goes to the bar, and I'm mixing proper drinks all night long on stage. That Christmas gift continues to play out even in my professional life.

Neil Patrick Harris is an award-winning actor and game designer whose new tabletop escape game, "Box Two," is out now.



The Upside of an Empty Stocking

MY HUSBAND IS a good man, a stellar father and skilled in many things. Gift-giving is not his strong suit and that's OK. However, a woman has her limits. I found mine one Christmas a few years ago.

The night before, I stuffed my husband's and daughter's Christmas stockings with the usual treats and doodads. Come morning, at the ungodly hour that most Christmas-celebrating children rise to kick off their annual binge of heedless materialism, I noticed that my stocking

was curiously flat. I looked inside: Nothing. Nada. Not a card, not a hastily purchased bodega candy bar.

By Emily Flake I should note here that this isn't about the objects themselves. I'm a grown

woman, capable of buying myself a candy bar if I want one so bad. But that old saw about gifts is actually true: It really is the thought that counts. The omission of this thought, of any thought at all, felt crushing. It felt like disrespect. As a New England Protestant, I did not

make a scene. I simply raised my stocking and said, "Really?" You can pack a lot into one word if you pitch it right. There's no Academy Award yet for Saddest Mom in a Family Drama, but my husband saw right away that he'd blundered. He promised that he'd never let me wake up to an empty stocking again.

In the classic Dr. Seuss story "The Grinch," a misanthropic cretin deprives everyone in Whoville of their gifts, which yields a more powerful gift. Devoid of pre-sets, the citizens still

break out into merry songs, which teaches the Grinch the true meaning of Christmas.

My experience was like that, but better. By failing to fill my Christmas stocking, my husband gave me something more valuable: leverage. I now had something to hold over his head for many Christmases to come. That, dear reader, is the most precious gift of all.

Emily Flake is a writer, cartoonist and performer. Her illustrations can be seen in the show "All In: Comedy About Love," now on Broadway.

A Dog Named Tinsel

I WENT TO MY LOCAL animal shelter on Dec. 19 of 2019 just to browse, with tentative sights set on a little gremlin dog named

By Claire Lombardo

Krampus I'd seen on their website. (The shelter also had, savvily, a Pomeranian named Dreidel and a pit-bull named Scrooge.) But after witnessing up close Krampus's luxurious Josh Groban hairstyle and boundless energy, I found I admired him the way I admire my most confident students: anxiously, a little jealously—and knowing he'd find his way with or without me.

I found myself taken instead with the tiny black foxlike face I saw over Krampus's shoulder. Then called Tinsel, this dog had incredibly intelligent eyes and a quiet intensity. I asked to meet her.

Tinsel had fleas and stress dandruff and had recently given birth to a

litter of puppies, whereabouts unknown. She trusted no one but occasionally approached me as I sat on the floor and offered wet food on a spoon. She didn't miss a trick and had a habit of cocking her head and lifting her left front paw in the air, like she was testing the wind. At an inflection point in my own life, I, too, was highly suspicious of others and occasionally won over by food or kindness. I, too, was prone to observation, to assessment, to stress dandruff.

Reader, I married her. I took her—now Renee—home the next day, just before Christmas. She is,

hands down, my greatest gift, beating out my 1992 Fisher Price roller skates a hundredfold.

Renee came into my life with nothing but a tiny purple hoodie and, inexplicably, a stuffed Subaru Forester toy, but she has since amassed a large collection of outerwear, unearthed an enormous personality and made my life unequivocally better, simply by existing.

Claire Lombardo is the author of the bestselling novel "The Most Fun We Ever Had" and, most recently, "Same As It Ever Was," published by Doubleday.



The Action Figure That Turned Me Into a Hero

THE BEST CHRISTMAS present I ever received was when I was a kid and requested an action figure of Tonto and his horse Scout from the "Lone Ranger" TV show. I don't remember why in the world I wanted this toy—I guess something about Tonto spoke to me. Maybe it was his cleverness. When Tonto first came upon the Lone Ranger, he had been left for dead in an ambush. Tonto created a fake grave for him so that the killers would never try to hunt down his Kemosabe. That's the kind of high-prairie smart I wanted to be.

In my memory, on that Christmas morning I ripped off the wrapping paper and saw a heroic, muscular action figure riding his rearing, heroic, muscular horse. I played with the toy for weeks, pretending I was Tonto, galloping on Scout to an old saloon that was on fire, then leaping up onto the saddle to rescue my beautiful teacher from a second-story window. What was Mrs. Reed doing in that Old West saloon? Well, not burning alive, I can tell you that!

I have no idea what became of my Tonto. Curious to see him again, I did an internet dive and found the J.C. Penney catalog he was featured in, from 1973. Wait, I was still playing with action figures at the age of 11? What a dork! Anyway, I excitedly paged through

the catalog's 172 pages (!) of toys and found him—a stiff, buckskin-clad figure with a long face and sad eyes. Not at all the powerful warrior I remembered. And his horse Scout wasn't rearing up but instead had all four feet fixed to a base.

So maybe I only imagined that my Tonto figure was handsome. And maybe I only imagined that his horse was powerful. And maybe I only imagined that Mrs. Reed could fall in love with a skinny 11-year-old. But isn't imagination the stuff that Christmas dreams are made of?

Rob LaZebnik is a writer and co-executive producer on "The Simpsons."



◆ For more tales of unforgettable gifts, go to [WSJ.com](#)
◆ Celebrities, designers and athletes reveal the gifts they most want to give, and get, this year. [Off Duty D3](#)



Making It Big
On Edna Ferber's
novel 'Giant' and its
on-screen success **C11**

BOOKS

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Moment of Peace
The spirit of
Christmas across
enemy lines **C12**



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**** Saturday/Sunday, December 21 - 22, 2024 | **C7**

The Story of Handel's Rebirth

The composer from Saxony had fallen out of favor in Britain—but his musical creativity never faltered

Every Valley

By Charles King
Doubleday, 352 pages, \$32

BY BARTON SWAIM

THE STORY OF George Frideric Handel's "Messiah"—its composition, premier and gradual rise to worldwide popularity—has been told many times. Charles King's innovation in "Every Valley" is to chronicle the pain, shame, vexation and disappointment experienced by several people connected to the oratorio's creation. There is, to adapt a line by Adam Smith, much ruin in a great work of art.

Handel's music had been a favorite of the concertgoing public, and of the royal court, since almost the moment he arrived in London in 1710. He remained productive throughout the 1730s, but his work had begun to lose its appeal. In 1734, the King's Theatre, with which Handel had been associated for more than 20 years, declined to renew his position as resident composer. He found another position, at Covent Garden, but public taste was moving away from his Italianate operas and oratorios based on biblical narratives.

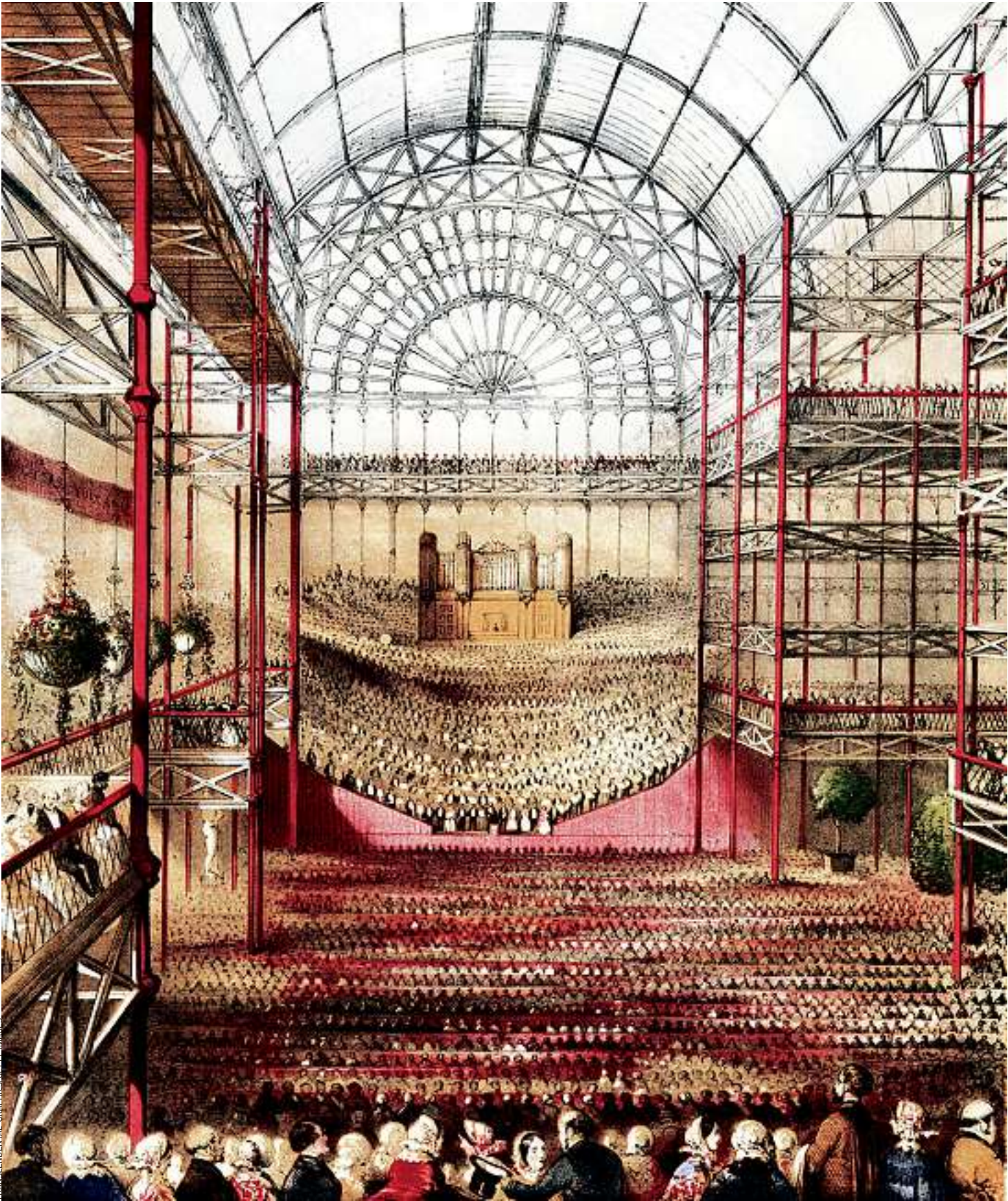
The librettist for 'Messiah,' knowing government agents would read his mail, referred to Handel only as 'the Prodigious'

In 1737 Handel suffered what was probably a stroke, which for a time affected the use of his right hand. Friends noted periods of mental confusion, perhaps, Mr. King writes, "a result of lead poisoning, a common danger from wig powder and fortified wines and spirits stored in leaded vessels." Journalists and pamphleteers began to ridicule him as fat (which he was) and his music as stale (which it never was). That "Messiah" was first performed in Dublin, where Handel had been invited to give a series of concerts in the winter of 1741-42—and not in London—is itself suggestive of a waning career.

The work's librettist, Charles Jennens, was a wealthy man and a keen collector of art, books and musical manuscripts. A lifelong bachelor with few friends, Jennens (pronounced Jennings) was in constant bad health and prone to irascibility and depression. His Protestant convictions were orthodox, but he remained loyal to the Stuart monarchy, which had been finally defenestrated in 1714 with the accession of George I. As a "nonjuror" who refused to swear allegiance to George and his Hanoverian successors, Jennens rightly suspected that government agents would read his mail. In letters he referred to Handel, whom he revered, as "the Prodigious" in order to shield the composer from suspicion.

"Messiah" wasn't the first biblical oratorio that Jennens had written for Handel—he had compiled the texts for "Saul" and "Israel in Egypt," both of which premiered in 1739. Unlike those works, however, "Messiah" had no plot. It was instead a kind of musical essay on the fulfillment of biblical prophecies in the person of Jesus Christ, an idea that likely occurred to Jennens from reading the 17th-century Anglican bishop Richard Kidder's "A Demonstration of the Messias."

Handel set Jennens's text in less than a month, writing new music for some parts and



HALLELUJAH A London concert hall filled for a performance of Handel's 'Messiah,' ca. 1845.

repurposing older pieces for others. When the librettist obtained a copy of the score, in early 1743, he didn't like it. "His Messiah has disappointed me," he wrote to a friend, "being set in great haste. . . I shall put no more Sacred Words into his hands, to be thus abus'd."

The most affecting story in Mr. King's account is that of Susannah Cibber, one of the soloists in the Dublin premiere of "Messiah." Cibber had once been a famous actress. Although she couldn't read music, Handel had given her secondary roles in some of his earlier operas and oratorios, so dulcet was her voice. Since then, she had been the subject of a

humiliating scandal. Her abusive and profligate husband, Theophilus, also a well-known stage actor, had condoned her affair with a wealthy tenant, probably for money, then sued the man for committing adultery with his wife. Susannah and her lover fled, and when Theophilus found the pair he sued again. He won both times, but the juries awarded him paltry sums.

Susannah's career appeared over, and she disappeared from public view. The second lawsuit, however, had made it clear to the public that Theophilus was a scoundrel, and so when she re-emerged by singing in "Messiah," the audience was ready to forgive her. She sang the

first aria of the oratorio's second part, the words taken from the Book of Isaiah: "He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." One clergyman in the audience, according to a later account, said aloud from his seat: "Woman, for this, be all thy sins be forgiven!"

Among the other figures in Mr. King's chronicle is the dyspeptic satirist Jonathan Swift, dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin when "Messiah" premiered. No great fan of music, Swift nearly forbade the churches under his authority from lending their choirs to the Han-

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Modern Castles In the Air

Atlas of Never Built Architecture

By Sam Lubell and Greg Goldin
Phaidon, 368 pages, \$150

BY BENJAMIN RILEY

AS EARLY AS 1964, the British architectural historian Ian Nairn identified the fatal flaws in modern architecture, saying that it "is hamstrung by self-consciousness and strangled by intellectual inhibitions. It is always what people ought to want, and too often what they had better want or else; almost never what they really want. Everything is done for people, not with them; the whole thing is sick."

Those with a more neutral reaction to modern architecture may come around to Nairn's view after digging into "Atlas of Never Built Architecture," an attractively produced compendium of what Sam Lubell and Greg Goldin, both longtime architectural writers, describe as "projects that were on the cusp of realization."

More than 300 unbuilt projects are presented here, with large reproductions of drawings and renderings coupled with text that describes how the buildings were conceived and why they failed to materialize. (In a book with design as its subject, it is surprising that the text is typeset in a frustratingly small font.) Though unbuilt, the designs and aspirations tell us a good deal about modern architecture's sense of its own importance and about the wayward ideas that have defined so much of the built environment we see all around us.

A 1944 plan for central Boston by the Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius and his colleague at Harvard Martin Wagner makes evident how quickly the severe, structural plainness of modern architecture swept up the profession. In that year a contest was organized "with the aim of overhauling the city entirely." The authors describe the design as "both radical and brutal, calling for the large-scale demolition of the centre's outdated buildings and streets, to be replaced with a mega-scaled core suited to the modern age."

Imagine: The red-brick federal townhouses of one of America's best-preserved colonial cities whisked away and in their place gigantic rectangular blocks looking something like airport hotels. Gropius and Wagner were kind enough to include parks between the structures, where the poor souls who would be forced to live and work in these monstrosities could at least get

some air. We can be grateful that the plan never came off, and neither did any of the other Boston Contest entrants, for "all had suggested a degree of metropolitan-level planning that the communities around Boston were unwilling to accept."

Such failures indicate that modern architecture's march has not been entirely inexorable. When in 1962 Mies van der Rohe was hired to put up one of

Gropius once presented a plan to replace Boston's red-brick center with 'a mega-scaled core.'

his signature glass boxes at a historic corner of the City of London, the British architect Richard Rogers, best known for Paris's amusement-park-tubular Centre Pompidou, called it "the culmination of a master architect's life work." Prince Charles, as he then was, had a different view: "a giant glass stump better suited to downtown Chicago."

The authors blame the prospective building's undoing on "political turmoil unleashed by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's neoconservative government." (They mean simply conservative.) But we might instead see the public rejection of the structure—it was

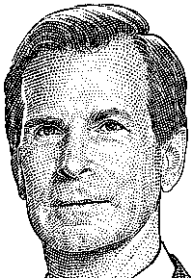
Please turn to page C8



MONOLITH A digital rendering of Daniel Libeskind's Ngaren: Museum of Humankind (2019).

BOOKS

‘I / Have often noticed that / Ancestors never boast / Of the descendants who boast.’ —DON MARQUIS



FIVE BEST ON FAMILY BUSINESSES

Charles Scribner III

The author, most recently, of ‘Scribners: Five Generations in Publishing’

I, Claudius

By Robert Graves (1934)

Founding a family business for the ages? Think big. The Roman empire, for starters. That’s the subject of Robert Graves’s “I, Claudius,” a fictional memoir by the most unlikely emperor of them all. Writing as Claudius, Graves recounts with wit and candor the course of that Julio-Claudian family business founded by Claudius’ stepgrandfather, Caesar Augustus. In 40 years, Augustus doubled the size of his empire. His family proved more outrageous, conniving and deadly than the Sopranos. Next came Augustus’ stepson Tiberius, followed by the latter’s great-nephew Caligula, the apotheosis of depravity. Caligula’s uncle, the stuttering bookworm Claudius, survived to rule the business next since no one took him seriously enough to murder him. “I am supposed to be an utter fool,” he confesses, “and the more I read the more of a fool they think me.” Following his sudden crowning by the guardsmen who had just dispatched Caligula, Claudius muses, “so, I’m Emperor, am I? What nonsense! But at least I’ll be able to make people read my books now.” His “confidential history,” as he calls it, is a Horatian “monument more durable than bronze.”

The Valley of Decision

By Marcia Davenport (1942)

Marcia Davenport, the author of the first American biography of Mozart (1932) and the best novel about opera, “Of Lena Geyer” (1936), didn’t stint on research. Mozart brought her to Prague; “Of Lena Geyer” drew deep from her mother, the Metropolitan Opera soprano Alma Gluck. Davenport’s unhappy first marriage found her in Pittsburgh for 18 months, which inspired her most famous novel, a family saga about the Pittsburgh industry that won two world wars: steel. “The Valley of Decision” follows the Scott family through four generations of industrial growth, labor unrest, strikes, a world war and the Depression. The protagonist of this riveting “upstairs/downstairs” drama is Mary Rafferty, a 16-year-old Irish immigrant who comes to work for the Scott family as a maid in 1873. The son



CLAN First-century cameo depicting the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

which she loses her brogue and gains her place as the family’s confidante and adviser. (Here, a curtain must be drawn: no spoilers!) Decades later, asked if she would change anything in “The Valley of Decision,” she replied: “adverbs.”

Vanderbilt: The Rise and Fall of an American Dynasty

By Anderson Cooper and Katherine Howe (2021)

The journalist Anderson Cooper first learned about his ancestor Cornelius “Commodore” Vanderbilt as a 6-year-old, when seeing the bronze sculpture of the tycoon outside Grand Central Terminal. Vanderbilt was the richest American at his death in 1877. In this spirited personal history, Mr. Cooper recalls: “I was convinced that all grandparents turned into statues when they died.” A Dutch-American farm boy on Staten Island, Vanderbilt began

and heir, Paul, introduces Mary to the world of books, through

with a rowboat and through sheer force of will built it into a ferry business that dominated New York Harbor. After the Supreme Court struck down the New York law that protected the steamboat monopoly, he turned to railroads. Making money thrilled Vanderbilt, not the pleasures wealth could bestow, or the social or political power it could buy. His son William doubled the fortune. The next three generations would spend it with a vengeance. By the time the author’s mother, the heiress Gloria Vanderbilt, died, it was gone—“the story of the greatest American fortune ever squandered,” Mr. Cooper writes. Yet this engrossing tale isn’t without a redeeming irony. The Commodore was no philanthropist, but the widower’s second wife persuaded him to make a singular donation: the founding of Vanderbilt University, his name writ large for the ages.

Richard II

By William Shakespeare (1597)

The English monarchy, dubbed “the Firm” by current royals, ranks high among ancient family busi-

nesses. But a “peaceful transfer of power” was not always the norm, as Shakespeare reminds us. Richard II is a most eloquent CEO. The tragic young king insists he was “not born to sue, but to command”; yet vain, foppish and irresolute, he proves a born poet, not a ruler. When his alpha-male cousin Henry Bolingbroke arrives with an army to challenge him, Richard laments, “For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings.” In soaring cadences he vacillates between insistence on his divine right (“show us the hand of God that hath dismissed us from our stewardship”) and mythic resignation (“down down I come like glistering Phaeton wanting the manage of unruly jades”). John Gielgud virtually sang the title role on stage: This tale of troublesome succession almost begs for an opera.

The Godfather

By Mario Puzo (1969)

A family business need not be legal to thrive. In Mario Puzo’s epic, crime pays generational dividends. It’s all in the family, from Sicily to Long Island. “Italians have a little joke, that the world is so hard a man must have two fathers to look after him, and that’s why they have godfathers.” Again the question of succession is paramount. Don Vito Corleone’s golden son, Michael, a Marine back from World War II, seems at first as unlikely as unwilling to join the brutal business. Puzo’s description of Michael conjures up F. Scott Fitzgerald more than a ruthless capo: “He did not have the heavy, Cupid-shaped face of the other children. . . . His skin was a clear olive-brown that would have been called beautiful in a girl.” (He is memorably portrayed in the 1972 film adaptation by a young Al Pacino.) But Michael rises to the occasion, albeit over several lifeless bodies. Puzo’s novel boasts more memorable quotations than “Hamlet”: “I’ll make him an offer he can’t refuse” and “It’s all personal, every bit of business.” If “The Godfather” weren’t fiction, it could be a handbook—too true to be good.

The Coming Of the ‘Messiah’

Continued from page C7

del concerts, including “Messiah,” but in the end relented.

Another is Thomas Coram, founder of the home for orphaned and abandoned children where Handel led the most famous production of “Messiah.” Coram had worked tirelessly to persuade dukes and earls to put up money for the institution, though many objected that it would reward women for licentiousness. Eventually he succeeded—the Foundling Hospital began accepting children in 1741. Yet by the time Handel conducted “Messiah” in its chapel in 1750, Coram had tangled with the board of governors and resigned. The Foundling Hospital’s annual performances of “Messiah” gave the oratorio its popularity with the British public. Coram died in 1751, a poor man.

The Foundling Hospital’s annual performances of ‘Messiah’ made it popular with the public.

Mr. King’s account of “Messiah” and its troubled origins is fluently written and instructive, but on two points I find it unpersuasive. One of the book’s “desperate lives” (as the subtitle has it) is that of Ayuba Sulayman Diallo, a Muslim prince captured by slavers in 1730 on the Gambia River and taken to North America, from which he was eventually transported to London and, at last, back to West Africa. His story is gripping, but it bears no connection to “Messiah” other than the coincidental fact that Diallo was in London when Jennens and Handel were also there.

Mr. King, a professor of government at Georgetown, has included Diallo in his narrative mainly, it seems, in order to represent 18th-century British society as dependent on the slave trade. “The era’s art, wealth, and power,” he writes, “all rested on a common source—enslavement.” You see this facile claim in some modern histories, but it isn’t remotely true.

Similarly amiss are Mr. King’s frequent and patronizing attempts to make “Messiah” acceptable to areligious readers. The work’s “form is a Christian story of God’s plan for humanity’s salvation,” he tells us. “Its substance, however, is the struggle to think ourselves toward hope.” Or this: “In line after line of song, the *Messiah*’s main message still comes through: a key to living better is practicing how to believe more.”

Sorry, no. “Messiah” is a work of Christian sacred music written and composed by Christians as an expression of praise to the man Christians believe to be the Eternal Son of God. I assume readers of an unbelieving sort are capable of enjoying it without having its text reinterpreted as Hallmarkish cant.

Mr. Swaim is an editorial-page writer for the Journal.

Postcards From Nowhere

Continued from page C7

caught up in contentious planning reviews for two decades—as a bit of common sense. Its neighbors would have included Christopher Wren’s sensitively domed church of St. Stephen Walbrook, the Palladian home of the Lord Mayor of London and Edwin Lutyens’s quietly gorgeous Midland Bank—structures built across three centuries but all speaking the same language of classical architecture, with columns, arches and other decorative motifs. What Mies’s building lacked above all was context. The relentless rows of glass windows simply weren’t neighborly.

Other projects at least had the advantage of not contending with nearby structures. Daniel Libeskind, known in America for his master plan for the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site, was hired to design a “museum of humankind” in Kenya’s Rift Valley in 2019. His splintery stone structure, purportedly meant to mimic prehistoric tools found in the valley, would have lorded over the landscape, less a monument to humankind than to human vanity. When the museum’s patron moved the site, Mr. Libeskind’s design was deemed unsuitable.

In the category of never let a crisis go to waste, the authors describe the New Orleans National Jazz Center, which in 2006 was slated to rise next to downtown’s Hyatt Hotel, damaged like much of the rest of the city by Hurricane Katrina the year before. While the Hyatt’s form wasn’t particularly inspired, the proposed structure was “like a giant armoured whale shark, rearing to take a bite out of the street.” Apparently nothing says jazz like acutely curved glass walls and massive

Libeskind designed a ‘museum of humankind’ for Kenya—a monument, unbuilt, to human vanity.

slanted metal beams. The local government never came up with the funds, and the plan was scotched.

Another project of rebarbative ambition was John Portman’s 1988 scheme for the Porto Vecchio of Genoa, Italy, which sought to build a triangular island in the harbor whose focal point would be a 60-story tower clad in white marble. Here was to be a bloodlessly futuristic counterpoint to the charming medieval alleys and baroque palaces of the city. While the old port was redeveloped, Portman’s plan was never enacted.

Things were not so bleak on the design front in the early 20th century,

an era that sought to combine new technology with somewhat traditional forms. Take the Kalevalatalo, a 1921 proposal for a Finnish cultural society’s headquarters. A sturdy and imposing design by Eliel Saarinen—whose son, Eero, would rise to fame in America as the architect of the TWA terminal at what is now called JFK Airport—the structure looks like a fortress, with a phalanx of towering, fenestrated outer buildings enclosing a courtyard. At the center rises a 262-feet tall, 16-sided “Panthemon” bearing the influence of the then-nascent Art Deco movement, with minimal decoration and tall, thin windows doing the ornamental work. Though the building was stripped down, with hardly a classical detail in sight, it was denigrated by the muralist Akseli Gallen-Kallela as having “progressed too far into the sign of antiquity.” In short, the past had become suspect, and architecture was required, as this book demonstrates again and again, to shed the baggage of conventional historical forms.

As one turns the pages of “Atlas of Never Built Architecture,” it is easy to despair at how far our aesthetic sense has declined from the pediments, arches and columns of those pesky Greeks. Still, there is some solace in the fact that, however shoddy and anti-humanistic our current architecture is, it could have been so much worse.

Mr. Riley, the managing editor of the New Criterion, is the author of “The Bridges of Robert Adam: A Fanciful and Picturesque Tour.”



PROPOSALS Kalevalatalo (1921) by Eliel Saarinen (at top) and the New Orleans National Jazz Center (2006) by Thom Mayne.



TOP: MUSEUM OF FINNISH ARCHITECTURE; BOTTOM: MORPHOSES

BOOKS

‘Dogs look up to you, cats look down on you. Give me a pig! He looks you in the eye and treats you as an equal.’ –WINSTON CHURCHILL

Keeping the Table Pure

Forbidden

By Jordan D. Rosenblum
NYU, 272 pages, \$30

By DOMINIC GREEN

IN 167 B.C. the Judeans, led by a priest named Mattathias and his sons, rebelled against their Seleucid Greek overlord, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Antiochus’ idea of reform, the historian Diodorus the Sicilian reports, was sacrificing a sow in the Temple and forcing the Judeans to eat pork. The festival of Hanukkah commemorates the rebels’ victory and the restoration of the temple cult. At the time, Jordan Rosenblum argues in “Forbidden,” the “main topic was not the miracle of the oil but the tragedy of the pig.”

The second and fourth Books of the Maccabees describe how, during Antiochus’ repressions, an old man named Eleazar, and a Judean mother and her seven sons, chose death by elaborate torture over eating pork. Mr. Rosenblum, a Jewish-studies professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, argues that these “martyrdom narratives” increased the pig’s significance as a marker by introducing the “violent motif of forced ingestion of pig as a means of forced conversion” of Jews. This motif turned out to have a long and dismal history. For Jews, the martyrdom narratives linked political abasement (“submission to foreign rule”) to religious desecration. For imperial sophisticates such as Petronius (who suggested that Jews worship a “pig-god”), they marked the Jews as hicks with an attitude problem. Either way, pork was to die for.

“Forbidden” is an engaging and surprisingly cheerful study of that odd couple of the religious imagination, the Jew and the pig. There are plenty of real Jews here, and some real swine, too, but mostly, the Jew and the pig are singular and abstracted by the definite article. We are in the realm of ideas, usually irrational. You are what you eat. You define yourself by what you do not eat. Pigs are “impure,” God tells Moses in Leviticus, and again in Deuteronomy. The camel, the hare and the rock badger are off the menu for Jews. Bat, gecko, mouse and eagle are also not kosher.

Rather than ponder the mystery of why God thought this was a good idea, or what role the pig played in rival Canaanite and Philistine cults, Mr. Rosenblum seeks to identify the moment when the “signifying swine” acquired its “outsized historical influence.” This, he argues, falls late in the Second Temple period, an era bookended by the restoration of the Temple around 515 B.C. after the Jews’ return from Babylon and the Temple’s destruction by the Romans in A.D. 70.

The state that emerged out of the Second Temple fostered national and religious cohesion among the Judeans, but it was buffeted by waves of imperial pressure, first Persian, then Greek



NARWIK/GETTY IMAGES

and Hellenistic, including under Antiochus, and then Roman. Archaeological findings suggest that pig consumption in the region increased “significantly” in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Yet the crucial events for Judeans were national-religious

For the Maccabees, ‘the main topic was not the miracle of the oil but the tragedy of the pig.’

revolts against the empires. When the rabbis assembled Judaism from the ruins of the Second Temple, the pig, Mr. Rosenblum writes, became their “swine qua non,” the image of Rome’s evil empire. The fourth-century Babylonian rabbi Rav Pappa could not bring himself to let the word pass his lips. He refers to the pig as *davar acher*, “another thing.”

Like ethical monotheism, what started with the Jews did not end there. Christians and Muslims also adopted the pig as a marker of Jewish difference, devising their own imager-

ies of hog-centric contempt. While Muhammad affirmed the no-pork ruling, the Quran reports that Allah turned sabbath-breakers into apes and pigs; hence the still-common Islamic denigration of all Jews as the “sons of apes and pigs.”

Though the Gospels show Jesus’ metaphorical preference for freshwater fish, in medieval Spain a forced convert to Christianity was a *mar-rano* (“swine”). In Germany, many churches were adorned with a *Judensau* (“Jews’ sow”), a sculpture showing Jews sucking on a sow’s teats. No one calls the Jews “sons of mice and rock badgers.” No one ever sculpted an image of Jews suckling a camel. Pigs are different, including for Jews. Jews are different, in their eyes and in the eyes of others. These are not the same thing, and the ascribed values differ accordingly.

Medieval Christianity spread the Roman taunt that Jews, the kind of people who disliked pork, were the kind who were really piggish. Pork-eating became a trial of faith for believing and a loyalty test for lately converted Christians. Before Jews could testify in lawsuits against Christians, they had to take the Jewish

Oath, Torah in hand as the Talmud recommended, but standing on a sow’s hide. The theater of sadism included the obscene imagery of Judensau sculptures, some of which show Jews eating pig manure, and the medieval Roman carnival custom of rolling an elderly Jew downhill in a barrel filled with nails. Eventually, the Jews of Rome managed, for the annual payment of 10 florins, to substitute two pigs.

The Enlightenment was not very enlightened about Jews. In 1753 the British Parliament passed an act allowing Jews to naturalize as Englishmen. An outcry and rioting forced its repeal a year later. In one engraving from the “Jew’s Bill” episode, a Jew in English dress rides a pig and says “I am naturalized” while the pig says “Buy Buy my pork.” In 1823, when the Jewish bare-knuckle boxing legend Aby Belasco fought the Irishman Patrick Halton, the bout was promoted as “Pork and Potatoes, or Ireland versus Judea.” (Belasco was declared the winner, followed by more rioting.)

“In a corner by himself a Jew, muzzle down in the plate, was guiltily wolfing bacon,” George Orwell wrote

in “Down and Out in Paris and London” (1933), in which everyone else goes hungry. The animal imagery is medieval, the anticapitalism is modern. So is the Jew who eats bacon by choice. Eating a sandwich of pork and matzo was an act of rebellion and assimilation for the young Karl Marx. For the German socialist Eduard Bernstein, renouncing pork was his first conscious act after deciding to be a “proper Jew.”

Even for assimilated Jews, eating pork remains a uniquely symbolic act. In Israel, pork is euphemized—as it was in the days of the Talmud—this time as “white steak.” Jewish-American pork-eaters may make the Roman argument that the practice shows their cosmopolitanism, or may claim that the pork does not count if it is minced and served in a Chinese restaurant. The anthropologist in Mr. Rosenblum calls this a “balancing of rupture and continuity.” There is, of course, no balancing rupture and continuity. Sometimes, you have to pick a side. And a main.

Mr. Green is a Journal contributor and a fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

She Draws Out Their True Gifts

Shy Creatures

By Clare Chambers
Mariner, 400 pages, \$30

HELEN HANSFORD is an art therapist at Westbury Park, a psychiatric hospital in South London that figures prominently in Clare Chambers’s lovely 10th novel, “Shy Creatures.”

The 1960s have just started to swing, change is in the air—the doctors are reducing their reliance on sedatives and shock therapy for patients—and change is on the air—the Beatles, the Hollies, the Rolling Stones, the Dave Clark Five are piping out of radios at the hospital.

Helen, meanwhile, is stuck in an affair with her married colleague, Gil Rudden, a charismatic psychiatrist for whom “intensity had always been more important than permanence.” Though she has a talent for making the ugly beautiful, after three years in a relationship with no future and abundant skulking, Helen is finding splendor to be in short supply.

She discovers a new focus when the hospital gets word of a distur-

bance at a neglected house in the neighborhood and admits the source of the tumult—one William Tapping, a 37-year-old who appears to be as much a wreck as his home. He has a matted thatch of dull brown hair, a beard that hangs down “like shaggy bell ropes to his waist,” a childlike affect and a disinclination to speak or make eye contact, but displays prodigious artistic gifts.

Helen is determined to excavate William’s baffling past: a sheltered, undocumented childhood with three elderly aunts and a short, brutish stint at boarding school. This gumshoe work is a useful distraction when Helen’s teenage niece is admitted to Westbury Park for treatment of a mental breakdown and develops a crush on Gil, who doesn’t exactly discourage the romantic attachment.

Inspired by a true story, “Shy Creatures” toggles between chapters centering on Helen and William, and moves back and forth in time between the novel’s 1964 setting and the ’30s, ’40s and ’50s. While there are longueurs, the historical details are captivating, the author’s observational skills and psychological acuity no less so. “She had not expected this fresh betrayal,” Helen thinks toward the end of her relationship with Gil, “but now saw that in the graceless, stumbling descent that was the only way out of a dying affair, there was always a little further to fall.”

SHORTCUTS: FICTION
By JOANNE KAUFMAN



LAURIE RUBIN/GETTY IMAGES

A Song And Its Secret

A Home for the Holidays
By Taylor Hahn
Knopf, 256 pages, \$28

MEL HART, the protagonist of Taylor Hahn’s “A Home for the Holidays,” spent a good bit of her childhood longing for her mother, Connie, to be like the other moms—to pack Fruit Roll-Ups and heart-shaped sandwiches in her lunch bag, for example, and to yank her out of bed in the morning instead of Mel having to do the yanking. Such is life for the child of an alcoholic.

Still, Connie had a way of sprinkling her own special brand of fairy dust: She went to elaborate lengths to keep Mel believing in Santa Claus long past the normal age of dissent, dyed all her food green on St. Patrick’s Day and had pizza delivered to school on her birthday. “So,” Mel thinks, “it didn’t matter that sometimes, if I had a fever or a nightmare, I couldn’t wake her no matter how hard I shook her. It didn’t matter.”

Alas, “A Home for the Holidays” not only sounds like a

Hallmark movie; it unspools like one too. Mel, now 33 and a wedding singer—her band is called the More the Marry Her—gets word from a hospital that Connie has died. Two weeks before Christmas, no less.

Then comes a knock at the door. It’s a warm, ebullient woman named Barb, Connie’s long-estranged best friend. (The two had a falling out over a no-good guy.) Barb invites the lonely, grieving Mel to spend Christmas with her family, gives her a shoulder to cry on and a priceless gift: information about the Connie she never knew. It turns out that her mother almost had a career as a country music singer-songwriter. It also turns out that Barb has a very appealing son—a doctor!—who’s on the cusp of a divorce.

Over the course of the yuletide season, snow and tears fall, an ugly secret is revealed, mother-daughter relationships are interrogated and love triumphs. But the characters aren’t particularly convincing, the plot turns are contrived and Ms. Hahn’s observations seem made for stitching on a sampler. “The perfect family wasn’t one that avoided the darkness altogether, but helped each other through it.” Hallmark, take note.

Ms. Kaufman regularly reviews fiction for the Journal.

BOOKS

‘From infancy on we are all spies; the shame is not this but that the secrets to be discovered are so paltry and few.’ —JOHN UPDIKE



A Spy’s Sleepless Nights

Gabriel’s Moon
By William Boyd
Atlantic Monthly, 272 pages, \$28

By ANNA MUNDOW

THE HERO of William Boyd’s novel “Gabriel’s Moon” is, in his own words, “a useful idiot”—at least when it comes to matters of espionage. Which is hardly surprising; Gabriel Dax is, at the beginning of this adventure story, a travel writer, not a spy. Unlike his older brother, Sefton, who has risen in the ranks of the British Foreign Office, Gabriel lives modestly on a freelancer’s budget and writes books with titles such as “The Wine-Dark Sea” and “Rivers.” We meet him on assignment for a major British newspaper in the Congo in 1960, where he is invited to interview Patrice Lumumba, the newly elected prime minister. Already out of his depth, Gabriel is even more perplexed when Lumumba confides that “there are people here sent to kill me,” adding, “I tell you three names. Remember them.”

Returning to London, Gabriel is informed that his story has become “yesterday’s news,” thanks to the apparent ousting of Lumumba in a military coup. His tapes of the Lumumba interview, on the other hand, are much in demand. The question of who wants them and why is at the heart of “Gabriel’s Moon,” a pleasingly intricate Cold War novel that takes us to Franco’s Spain, to Eastern bloc Warsaw

and into the murky terrain traditionally prowled by secret agents and their overlords. Gabriel’s adventure begins with a chance meeting that is expertly staged and an innocent request that is nothing of the sort. Could he, for a generous fee, pop over to Spain and buy a drawing from an artist named Blanco? Gabriel completes the peculiar task and further requests follow, each delivered by a cool beauty named Faith Green who effortlessly snares her increasingly besotted courier.

In William Boyd’s novel of espionage and deception, a writer is recruited for a job that at first seems innocent.

But Gabriel’s suspicions are also aroused, particularly when he finds that not only his handler but also someone far closer to him is lying. “It was like discovering an adultery,” he reflects of the moment when he uncovers the critical deception. “the absences, the excuses, the lies were all mercilessly exposed for what they really were.” By then it is too late for this reluctant foot soldier to extricate himself from what is in fact a dangerous mission to insert a British agent into an extraordinary undercover posting. “I was recruited by the Secret Intelligence Service in 1933,” the field operative in question tells Gabriel, adding that intelligence

work was simply “one of the things rootless, overeducated young men did in those days.” If, that is, those men survived World War I as he did, as a junior army officer at age 19, “pretty much straight out of school.”

Gabriel’s past, we know from the outset, is defined by a more private tragedy. When he was 6 years old—and still longing for his dead father—he awoke one night to find his childhood home in flames and his mother dead downstairs. The cause of the fire was found to be Gabriel’s bedside night light, his “moon”; the trauma has left him with chronic insomnia. “I go to sleep and then I dream of fire, fires burning,” Gabriel tells his psychotherapist, Katerina Haas. “I wake. I can’t get back to sleep.” Over the course of the novel, Dr. Haas guides her patient through his recollections of that night; Mr. Boyd skillfully interrupts his suspenseful narrative with short transcripts of those sessions, adding emotional depth to this well-executed adventure story. In the unfolding action, Gabriel’s personal and psychological quest, with its mundane details and muted revelations, becomes riveting on its own account. We care as much about him, consequently, as we do about a world on the brink of nuclear war.

Like John le Carré, with whom he has been compared, Mr. Boyd at his best creates characters that are complex, emotionally and psychologically—much like the dramas that ensnare them. With few exceptions, he has employed this skill to great effect over the course of more than a dozen novels, most

notably perhaps in the 2006 thriller “Restless,” which also turned on the nested deceptions of the British secret service. Though there the resemblance to “Gabriel’s Moon” ends, for Gabriel Dax has none of the cunning expertise of Sally Gilmartin, the spy at the center of “Restless”—and far less is required of him in a plot that relies on action as much as on revelation.

Mr. Boyd, as always, stages that action with dexterity and gusto. There are thrilling escapes across sinister borders, pistols brandished on stormy seas and passions unleashed in exotic—and not so exotic—locations. The author has previously written a highly enjoyable James Bond novel, “Solo” (2013), and “Gabriel’s Moon” is, perhaps, only the first adventure featuring this writer/secret agent who discovers a talent for skulduggery. Though Gabriel Dax, we suspect, could never turn into Bond. He has a past, after all, that in this first outing emerges with palpable yet mysterious force. “Memories were stirring, like fish circling in a deep pool,” this troubled hero observes. A pipe-smoking insurance agent, of all people, delivers Gabriel from his nightmares, though not from his aching loss. “We’re not as strong as we think. As a species,” the punctilious Mr. Dryden concludes, referring to the memories that a terrified child buried in order to survive. And in so doing, became adept at deception. Learning to forget what stops you from getting on with the job? Perfect training, some might say, for a spy.

Ms. Mundow is a writer in Massachusetts.

For Christmas, a Wish and a Scheme



FICTION
SAM SACKS

In an Oslo holiday market, two sisters plan to make their season brighter. What if they get caught?

‘IT WAS ALWAYS snowing at Christmas. December, in my memory, is white as Lapland,” wrote Dylan Thomas in “A Child’s Christmas in Wales.” December is similarly blanketed with snow in the Oslo of Ingvild Rishøi’s “Brightly Shining” (Grove, 192 pages, \$20), a winning holiday tale with just the right proportions of hardship and hope.

Translated by Caroline Waight, this short novel is narrated by 10-year-old Ronja, who lives in poverty in the Norwegian capital with her older sister, Melissa, and their layabout, alcoholic father. When Dad gets hired at a Christmas tree market, the girls indulge in dreams of a normal holiday—until he takes an advance on his pay and disappears into the corner bar. Melissa takes his position, slaving away in the early morning and after school, and that’s when a co-worker, Tommy, has an idea: When the tightfisted manager is gone, Ronja will come to the market and help them sell wreaths and other seasonal decorations on the side. To really bring in buyers, they will claim that the proceeds go to children in need—only a partial lie, since Ronja and her sister will share half the commission. “We’re selling a dream. What our customers are buying here is the spirit of Christmas,” Tommy

explains as he instructs Ronja on how to bring in passersby. “All I had to do was look skinny and sweet and poor,” Ronja learns, and holiday shoppers would be eager to spend. “Brightly Shining” follows Ronja’s hustle to its inevitable discovery by the manager and the reckoning that results to its inevitable discovery by the manager and the reckoning that results.

For all of its irony about holiday consumerism, Ms. Rishøi’s book never quite gives up on the spirit of Christmas. “I can’t not hope,” Ronja says, and she finds support for her attitude in warmly portrayed side characters, such as her school’s caretaker, who sneaks her lunches, and an elderly neighbor who becomes a surrogate grandfather. Most of all she’s buoyed by Melissa, and in the story’s magical ending a well-timed snowstorm turns the Christmas tree lot into a winter paradise that the sisters explore together.

It doesn’t snow in Faha, the fictional Irish parish created by Niall Williams, but that’s because the rain never stops. “It came dressed as drizzle, as mizzle, as mist, as showers, frequent and widespread, as a wet fog, as a damp day, a drop, a dreeping, and an out-and-out downpour,” Mr. Williams wrote in his 2019 novel, “This Is Happiness,” and it’s still coming down in the lat-

est Faha chronicle, “Time of the Child” (Bloomsbury, 304 pages, \$28.99), set over the Christmas season of 1962.

At the heart of this story is the village doctor, Jack Troy, a melancholic widower who is still in his 50s but feels “like a hundred.” Jack has carried on treating the ailments of his water-

THIS WEEK

Brightly Shining
By Ingvild Rishøi

Time of the Child
By Niall Williams

Eclipse
By Keiichiro Hirano

logged neighbors, “caring, if not curing.” His zeal for the work, though, has fled, in part because he believes he has also thwarted his introverted daughter, Ronnie, who seems to have abandoned the chances of marriage to live with him and help his practice. Then, on the night of the Christmas Fair, a village boy comes to him with a baby girl he discovered close to death in a bundle behind the church. The doctor revives the child and Ronnie tends to her—and, struck by love and awe, the father and daughter conspire to somehow make her a part of their family.

The schemes that Jack concocts to keep the baby, whom Ronnie christens Noelle, make up the novel’s minor plot. Mr. Williams is more interested in fleshing out the way of life in a town that, despite the miracle of the child, he celebrates for its ordinariness. Electricity has just been introduced to Faha, but because the poles tilt in the spongy earth, blackouts are regular. Mrs. Prendergast, the postmaster’s wife, buys the inaugural television set, marking “the first time in the history of the parish that a room was not aimed at the fireplace.” Holding Noelle, Ronnie experiences “the common rapture of all parents,” and common rapture is a good way of describing the sense of everyday wonder the novel so touchingly affirms.

A feeling of revitalization builds as the novel reaches its ending, which is tangled but optimistic. In some ways, Mr. Williams is like a village doctor himself, kindly but firmly administering a healthy dose of sentiment as Jack might a tonic or salve. The holiday season can be hard, so read this, he seems to say. You will have your little cry, and it will do you good.

If Mr. Williams celebrates the ordinary, something more fantastical is on offer from Columbia University Press, which has brought out the Japanese nov-

elist Keiichiro Hirano’s 1998 debut, “Eclipse” (152 pages, \$20), in a translation by Brent de Chene and Charles De Wolf. This slim but potent book takes an imaginative leap into the point of view of a 15th-century Dominican friar who travels to the south of France in pursuit of esoteric texts of pagan philosophy. Friar Nicolas, the narrator, hopes to understand these heretical teachings in order to better oppose them. But in his travels he encounters a recluse who has devoted his life to the ancient practice of alchemy, and the friar becomes dangerously spellbound by the man’s creations.

“How does one arrive at a judgment on seeing a pagan god shown in incomparable splendor?” he worries as the alchemist begins to unleash mesmerizing elemental forces upon the countryside. The unearthly spectacle is countered by a crackdown led by an official of the Inquisition, and a crazed climax contains both black magic and an auto-da-fé. Mr. Hirano’s feat is to render this in a voice of almost removed intellectual fascination, producing a heady fable about Christianity’s collisions with and synthesis of certain pagan traditions—something worth considering when we glance at the season’s yule log and Christmas tree.

BOOKS

‘The creative writer is rarely alone. The room in which one works is peopled with the men and women and children of the writer’s imagination.’ —EDNA FERBER

A Story Fit for the Big Screen

Giant Love

By Julie Gilbert
Pantheon, 400 pages, \$35

BY ANDREW R. GRAYBILL

PERHAPS THE most enduring scene in “Giant,” the 1956 movie based on Edna Ferber’s novel of the same name, is the moment when Jett Rink, played by James Dean, strikes oil on his bleak West Texas patch of land. The young wildcatter—“down to his last collar button,” according to one of the other characters—twirls about in the geyser spray before speeding off to confront his doubters. It’s an apt metaphor for both the film and the book. Ferber’s searing portrait of the Lone Star State—brash, greedy and racist—tapped a deep well of antipathy among its residents and led to threats of violence against the author. Meanwhile, the story of the film-shoot, as well as assessments and reassessments of the movie, have kept writers pumping inks wells dry for nearly 70 years.

Julie Gilbert’s “Giant Love” is the latest contribution to this field but comes with a plot twist: Ferber was the author’s great-aunt. Ms. Gilbert knows her subject well, having grown up around Ferber and published a biography of her famous relative in 1978. While she never makes explicit her reasons for writing “Giant Love,” especially considering that she devoted considerable space to the movie in her earlier book, several factors may be at play. For one thing, Ms. Gilbert acknowledges an abiding curiosity about her great-aunt’s relationships with a handful of men connected with the film, including George Stevens, who directed “Giant,” and James Dean, who immortalized it. But most of all, it seems Ms. Gilbert wishes to revisit Ferber’s signal achievement at greater personal and professional remove than she possessed nearly 50 years ago.

Ferber was born in 1885 to a Jewish family that, because of her father’s uneven career in dry goods, moved frequently around the Midwest. She worked as a reporter at a Milwaukee newspaper before publishing her first novel in 1911; her fourth, “So Big” (1924), won the Pulitzer Prize. Ferber began work on “Giant” with a research trip to Texas in 1940 and later recalled her first impressions of the state this way: “Exhilarating, violent, charming, horrible, fascinating, shocking. Texas alive. A giant.” At first, she thought that it was “a novel for a man to write” and put it off; but, haunted by the subject, she returned to it at the end of the decade.

“Giant,” which was published in 1952, focuses on the relationship between Jordan “Bick” Benedict, the scion to a ranching dynasty, and his



SUNSET BOULEVARD/GETTY IMAGES

WILDCATTER James Dean on the set of ‘Giant’ (1956) outside of Marfa, Texas.

Virginia-born wife, Leslie, who, like Ferber, is at once attracted to and repelled by Texas—a contradiction embodied by Jett Rink, one of Bick’s ranch hands. Jett’s overnight ascent symbolizes the transition to hydrocarbons from livestock among the state’s big money during the first half of the 20th century.

Several of Ferber’s previous novels had been adapted for the screen; thus when Stevens—fresh from directing “Shane” (1953)—approached her about a movie version of “Giant,” Ferber agreed, but only after negotiating the establishment of a production company in which she would have a one-third ownership stake. (Her savvy paid off handsomely: In a subsequent rights deal with Warner Bros., she made \$18,750,000.) The filming on location in Marfa, Texas—a dusty outpost that the movie helped transform into an artists’ colony and popular tourist destination—in the summer of 1955 is the stuff of Hollywood legend, remembered particularly for Dean’s sullen behavior on set, which he insisted was necessary to stay in character but

which infuriated Rock Hudson, who played Bick opposite Elizabeth Taylor as Leslie. For her part, Ferber adored Dean, who took her for spins on his motorcycle around the studio backlot in California. Although the movie came in well over budget, it was an instant commercial and critical success. In 2005 it would be added to the National Film Registry.

Much of this story will be familiar to fans of cinema’s Golden Age or readers of other books on the subject. But Ms. Gilbert’s personal connection to the material lends “Giant Love” an intimate feel, as if the audience has been invited into a private conversation enlivened by the author’s own memories, several of which feature Dean. For instance, Ms. Gilbert—then only 9—was invited along with her parents to a cast party in New York but came down with chicken pox the night before. Dean popped in to visit her and asked, jokingly, how many sores she had, teasing that “ya mean ya haven’t counted ‘em?” Soon after, in September 1955, Dean would die in a car crash.

Ms. Gilbert’s access, however, carries a price. Her proximity to the topic and her admiration for Ferber—which many readers will come to share—sometimes complicate the framing of her own shots. Early on, for example,

Ferber recalled her first impressions of Texas: ‘Exhilarating, violent, charming, horrible, fascinating, shocking.’

she promises no more than a cursory look at her great-aunt’s career before “Giant” but then devotes nearly a quarter of the book to it. What might otherwise have been light and gossipy name-drops occasionally morph into lists of Ferber’s prominent friends and associates. And some readers may want to yell “cut” after confronting yet another block of direct quotation that runs onto a second or even a third page. One chapter is titled “More Was

More,” but there are moments when less is, too.

This excess may stem from Ms. Gilbert’s agitation that Ferber—who died in 1968—is no longer much read, a fate Ms. Gilbert attributes to a growing cynicism in American life. “Edna Ferber understood disappointment but not doom. She believed in hard work and deep hope”—values that Ms. Gilbert finds lacking in the United States today. Critics might counter with the charge that Ferber’s oeuvre is middlebrow and does not speak to contemporary concerns. Yet “Giant” most assuredly does. Texas was big then and is even bigger now, looming large in the national consciousness because of its enormous social, economic and cultural power. Ferber’s novel and the movie it inspired help us understand how it got that way. And still it grows, poised to eclipse California by midcentury as the nation’s most populous state.

Mr. Graybill is a professor of history at Southern Methodist University.

Luminous Tales for the Shortest Days



CHILDREN’S BOOKS
MEGHAN COX GURDON

Real light comes from a board book thanks to holes cut in the cardboard.

AS LOVELY as this time of year can be, many of us regret the shortness of the days. Aaron Becker turns a seasonal deficit into an asset in “**Winter Light**” (Candlewick Studio, 16 pages, \$17.99), an elegant and understated board book for children ages 3-8 that invites an expansive understanding of luminosity. “Hush, now. Be still,” we read. “It’s time for winter light.” Real light comes through the book—literally—thanks to six diamond-shaped holes cut into the cardboard, from the front cover to the back. In pages touched with color, these apertures combine with abstract printed shapes to evoke snowflakes, candle flames and even stained-glass windows. “Winter Light” has a soothing, meditative feel that imparts a sense of gratitude for the gleams and sparkles to be found even in days grown “short and dark.”

Winter can be stalked, talked, tracked, cracked and even ridden, as Nancy White Carlstrom tells it in “**Counting Winter**” (Eerdmans, 44 pages, \$18.99), a picture book of short, playful poems that encourages children ages 4-8 to practice their numbers while considering the aspects of different animals in frosty conditions. Claudia McGehee’s scratchboard illustrations—similar in style to woodcuts—emphasize contrasts of light and texture: between snow and soil, fox and field, bird and

birch tree. “Six furry voles / skitter in and out of holes / nervously / hiding winter,” goes one bit, as a predator listens with an avid ear to the movements of the tasty little

THIS WEEK

Winter Light

By Aaron Becker

Counting Winter

By Nancy White Carlstrom, illustrated by Claudia McGehee

My Wonderful Christmas Tree

By Dahlov Ipcar

Santa’s First Christmas

By Mac Barnett, illustrated by Sydney Smith

On a Chariot of Fire

By Erica Lyons, illustrated by Siona Benjamin

rodents. On the next page we read: “Seven shaggy musk oxen / stand solid and sure / sturdily / facing winter,” as (yes) seven of the animals stand in a huddle, perhaps for warmth, against a distempered blue-black sky.

Another wintry counting book, first published in 1986, presents animals and birds as living decorations on a towering evergreen. “**My Wonderful Christmas Tree**” (Tilbury House, 40 pages, \$18.99), by

the late Dahlov Ipcar, has a nostalgic feel in word and image. The conceit here is of a narrator—maybe the author, maybe a reader between the ages of 3 and 6—who looks out the window on Christmas night and sees, under a single shining star, “a most wonderful sight” of birds and animals congregating in ever-greater numbers in the boughs of a tree outside. The first to appear are two black bears, “Velvety black, / Soft and warm,” followed by three bobcats “with spotted coats, / Tufted ears, and soft white throats.” At the end, all the animals appear in ranks, bathed in starlight and covering the tree from crown to trunk.

Mac Barnett has written—and Sydney Smith has illustrated—a supremely cozy and beguiling story of yuletide enjoyment with “**Santa’s First Christmas**” (Viking, 40 pages, \$18.99). It is hard to say which is more wonderful, Mr. Barnett’s droll and low-key narration or Mr. Smith’s soft, warm, humorous pictures (at right). Certainly the combination of author and artist makes for a splendid story, which tells how Santa went from delivering Christmas goodies to others, year after year, to enjoying Christmas himself. The catalyst for the change is a polar bear who asks a party of elves how Santa celebrates when he’s done delivering gifts on Christmas Eve. The elves confess that their boss sleeps-in an extra

half-hour. The bear frowns: “Look, I love to sleep. But still. It’s Christmas.” This prompt induces the elves to lay on a deluxe holiday for Santa, with breakfast in bed, tree trimming and cookie baking, and poetry reading by the fire. Mr. Smith’s jolly pictures glow with fun and comfort; and when a “bearded someone in red” arrives—emphasis here on “bear,” as in polar—readers ages 3-7 get to see the real Santa opening presents (which he loves, even if every giver had the same idea, and even though there are only so many fishing rods a fellow can use). Warm and funny and delightful, “Santa’s First Christmas” is likely to become an annual read-aloud in families with young children.

Erica Lyons departs from ordinary Hanukkah fare with “**On a Chariot of Fire**” (Levine Querido, 40 pages, \$18.99). In this picture book, lavishly illustrated by Siona Benjamin, Ms. Lyons tells a

real-life diaspora story of Jews who fled Israel in biblical times during the Maccabean Revolt, the conflict in which the Hanukkah miracle occurred. In this story there’s no long-burning oil but instead a long journey of refugees fleeing the battle with Judea’s rulers. Tossed by storms at sea, the travelers pray “towards the heavens,” and in this telling Eliyahu Hame-Navi—the prophet Elijah—guides the survivors to shore. The newcomers find themselves in India and, forming a community that would become known as Bene Israel, maintain their faith while adapting to local customs in food and dress. An author’s note explains that most of the Bene Israel have since left India but that a small number remain, primarily “in the Mumbai area.” “On a Chariot of Fire” adds welcome depth and historicity to a holiday that many children’s books depict as dealing chiefly with dreidels and latkes.



SYDNEY SMITH

BOOKS

‘Such a thing should not happen in wartime. Have you no German sense of honor?’ —ADOLF HITLER



A Miniature Miracle

The ‘Christmas Truce’ of 1914 was unprecedented—and worth memorializing

By RICHARD SNOW

LAST CHRISTMAS my son, Willie, surprised me with a trim, little maroon box that said “Look At Him Go” in gold lettering. Inside were two toy World War I soldiers—a Scot in a khaki kilt and a German officer in his greatcoat looking glum as the grinning highlander claps him on the shoulder. The German may seem a bit out of sorts because one of the Scot’s mates has just scored a goal in an impromptu football match gotten up on a scarce patch of level ground in no-man’s-land between the British and German trench lines. I understood at once the meaning of the figurine, as my son and I shared a fascination with what it depicted, one of the most unusual events of World War I.

A few years earlier I’d shown Will the Richard Attenborough 1969 musical film, “Oh! What a Lovely War” (1969). Attenborough had coaxed every famous British actor except David Garrick into his show—John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Michael Redgrave, Vanessa Redgrave, Susannah York—for his unique comical epic about the “Great War.” Yet one highly affecting scene seems to contain no players I recognized.

It begins with a few British infantrymen huddling around a burning brazier in their trench on Christmas Eve, with the dire year of 1914 about to yield to the worse one of 1915. From across the frozen strip of no-man’s-land comes a shout: “Hey, Tommy!” Tommy was the generic name of all British foot soldiers. “You drink with us?” The German voice suggests meeting in the middle of the two lines. The Britons aren’t buying that. “The middle of Piccadilly,” one calls, and they all laugh. Yet come Christmas morning Germans and British are offering one another drinks in no-man’s-land.

The movie suggested this actually happened; and so it did. Willie and I did enough homework to find its historical validity ratified in two excellent books, one by the American Stanley Weintraub, carrying the nice title “Silent Night” (2001), and the other, “Christmas Truce” (first published in 1984), by two Britons, Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton. A more recent volume, Anthony Richards’s “The True Story of the Christmas Truce: British and German Eyewitness Accounts From World War I” (2021), adds further details from both sides.

“The truce bubbled up from the ranks,” writes Weintraub in “Silent Night.” “Though it was to become so widespread as to impact much of the front, no one was ever certain where and how it had begun.” The Germans far outnumbered their opponents, but the army they faced may have been the best-trained ever to leave Britain’s shores. Each Briton worked his bolt-action, single-shot Lee-Enfield so skillfully that the Germans believed they were facing machine guns. That superb riflery brought them to a standstill at Ypres, and once nobody could keep moving forward, thousands of men started digging, first straight down and then westward until they had gouged out a vast metropolis of trenches that ended only at the Belgian coast. The incessant shelling from both sides transformed gentle pastures into a

landscape of poisoned water and churned mud. The opposing trench lines were sometimes only yards apart, often close enough for the embattled combatants to see and hear one another.

As dusk fell on the evening of Dec. 24, German and English alike began singing carols. Weintraub cites the letters of a Sgt. Bob Lovell, who wrote about what happened.

You will hardly credit what I am going to tell you: but thousands of our men will be writing home today telling the same strange and wonderful story. Listen.

Last night as I sat in my little dugout, writing, my chum came bursting in upon me with: ‘Bob! Hark at ‘em!’ . . . From the German trenches came the sound of music and singing. My chum continued: ‘They’ve got Christmas trees all along the top of their trenches! Never saw such a sight . . .’

Night put an end to the fraternization, but the next dawn was a glorious one by Western Front standards: no rain at all. “It was kind of Nature,” wrote a British observer cited by Brown and Seaton, “to look so beautiful on this particular Christmas Day; for even the saddest faces showed a gleam of pleasure in the glory of the morning.”

Some holiday arrangements had been made the evening before. We read in “Christmas Truce” about the “extraordinary state of affairs” that Brig-Gen. Walter Congreve described in his diary: “The men had arranged a truce between themselves in a.m., and all day they have been walking about together singing and smoking. The officers also walked and smoked even to a colonel.” The authors also cite Capt. Edward Hulse, who wrote: “George told [the Germans] ‘Well, my boys, I’ve brought you over something to celebrate this funny show with,’ and he produced from his pocket a large bottle of rum (not ration rum, but

on a yuletide encounter with the French elsewhere along the line: “The greeting between the enemies is gallant, gentleman-like: a strong handshake, then an exchange of small gifts, such as chocolate, cigarettes and uniform buttons. Then a German shrapnel whizzes by at high velocity.” The French returned fire, and the war began again. On Dec. 27, it was back to business: heavy rain, heavy shelling, heavy gunfire, heavy losses.

As I contemplated Willie’s little gift, the entire strange event was again summoned up to me. The figurine was produced by the firm of W. Britain, which has been making toy soldiers since 1893. I began to wonder if instead of putting up a Christmas tree, I might assemble a diorama of that Christmas truce. It turned out I could. Britains, along with other British companies, offers a variety of soldiers doing appropriate things: English and Germans shaking hands, sharing a plum pudding, posing for snapshots, and so forth.

What surprised me most about this is what these toy soldiers look like. I remembered from my boyhood little Buckingham Palace guards with bland baby-doll faces. Today they are made like elegant small sculptures, holding expressions—concern, humor, alarm, weariness—on their pea-size faces. And they’re not just either charging or presenting arms but carrying out a multitude of everyday chores: stretcher bearers take a minute for a cup of tea; men write letters home; a brooding rifleman bids farewell at the grave of a comrade.

A company called Department 56 produces a “Snow Village Collection”—six little ceramic houses, nicely painted, all radiating high coziness. Many of the little structures looked like building my British soldiers might have retreated past. A company with the doughty name of King and Country supplied me with wrecked French buildings to create a wrecked landscape: restaurants, butchers, bakeries, all with breached roofs, scorched timbers and brooding, glassless windows.

I violated historical precision by adding to the scene a big Santa standing with a basket of presents under each arm, looking down while Willie’s football players re-created a game that a German lieutenant named Johannes Niemann had described: “Suddenly a Tommy came with a football, kicking already and making fun, and then began a football match. We marked the goals with our caps. Teams were quickly established for a match on the frozen mud, and the Fritzies beat the Tommies 3-2.”

Eventually, I stopped buying my martial miniatures. But I have plenty by now, and this Christmas have created an expanded windowsill zone of wartime fraternization. I’m gloomily surprised by how much I’ve spent on this little project. Yet I’m not truly penitent, as the idea remains sound to me. December is not the worst time of year to splash out on a display suggesting that, at the dawn of the most destructive century since the fractious world began, in the very worst place human ingenuity could devise, there was still a sparkle of peace on earth, and goodwill toward men.

Mr. Snow is the author of “I Invented the Modern Age: The Rise of Henry Ford.”



TANNENBAUM A German poster that reads ‘War Christmas.’

Right along the whole of their line were hung paper lanterns and illuminations of every description, many of them in such positions as to suggest that they were hung upon Christmas trees. And as I stood in wonder a rousing song came over to us; at first the words were indistinguishable, then, as the song was repeated again and again, we realized that we were listening to ‘The Watch on the Rhine.’ Our boys answered with a cheer. . . . Then began a series of answering shouts from trench to trench. It was incredible. ‘Hallo! Hallo! You English we wish to speak’ . . . and lo! A party of our men got out from the trenches and invited the Germans to meet them halfway and talk.

the proper stuff).” This went over very well. The bottle was passed around from English to German mouth, and “polished off before you could say knife.”

Some carols were familiar to both British and Germans, and they sang them together. Souvenirs and presents changed hands—tobacco, and, from the British, many plum puddings. The celebrations were not all jollity. Mounds of snow hid scores of corpses, and someone suggested that burials take place. Briton and German worked alongside one another on this, with prayers for the dead read out in both languages: “. . . He maketh me to lie down in green pastures . . .”/ “. . . Er weidet mich auf einer grünen Aue. . . .”

Christmas Day could not last, nor could the Christmas weather. Mr. Richards quotes one German soldier

Deep Roots And Branches Spread Wide

Oak Origins

By Andrew L. Hipp
Chicago, 288 pages, \$35

By GERARD HELFERICH

OAKS HAVE been uncommonly successful. The roughly 425 species in genus *Quercus* range across nearly every continent, and in the U.S. and Mexico they claim a greater biomass than any other major genus of tree. They also support more forms of life, including fungi, insects, birds and mammals. In the temperate forests of the Northern Hemisphere, oaks reign supreme, a so-called keystone on which the rest of the ecosystem depends.

In “Oak Origins,” the evolutionary biologist Andrew L. Hipp traces *Quercus*’s mighty family tree back millions of years to its modest roots, when a single population began to diverge from its relatives in the beech family. How did oaks evolve into so many species? Why were they able to spread so widely? And what is their future likely to be?

All oaks are woody plants with certain shared characteristics, such as leaves arranged in an alternating pattern, male flowers borne on threadlike catkins, female flowers fertilized by the wind and seeds encased in acorns. For the vital task of acorn dispersion, the trees rely on animals such as squirrels and certain birds, which are attracted to the nuts by the densely packed nutrients intended to nourish young plants. The animals cache some of the bounty for later, but a portion are forgotten and germinate.

As Mr. Hipp makes clear, a key to oaks’ success is their exceptional diversity, including their “plasticity,” the nonheritable ability of an individual tree to adapt to its environment, such as responding to warmer summers by growing thicker, more drought-

The earliest known oak fossils are grains of pollen deposited near present-day Salzburg, Austria, about 56 million years ago.

tolerant leaves. Oaks are also known for their “promiscuity.” Though they don’t generally lose the distinctiveness that marks them as separate species, they hybridize easily, and these offspring are usually fertile. As a result, oaks inherit an uncommon amount of genetic variation from their parents.

Until recently, the intricacy of oak genes has made them largely inscrutable to researchers, but breakthroughs in genome sequencing pioneered by Mr. Hipp and other biologists now use DNA from living species to trace *Quercus*’s long past. The earliest known oak fossils are a few grains of pollen deposited near present-day Salzburg, Austria, about 56 million years ago, when the earth’s climate was so warm that oaks grew in the Arctic. Beginning 52 million years ago, as the planet began to cool, oaks were forced to retreat southward, eventually spreading as far as South America. They also split into two distinct branches, one now found mainly in the New World, the other only in Eurasia and North Africa. Over the past 10 million to 15 million years, isolated populations of oaks have evolved into the diverse species we see today.

Mr. Hipp writes lucidly, and even lyrically in places, such as his brief evocations of spring and autumn in the upper Midwest and his extended metaphor likening oaks’ genetic recombination to Miles Davis’s “Pharaoh’s Dance.” Like a jazz composition, “each oak genome might have been reassembled in any of trillions upon trillions of different ways. Yet each ended up just the way we find it today, conspiring with the wind, the seasons, the jays, and the squirrels to get its genes into the next generation.”

But it’s impossible to write deeply about oaks’ thorny genetics without introducing a degree of complexity. Mr. Hipp addresses his subject with the rigor and vocabulary of a scientist, making parts of “Oak Origins” a challenge for the general reader. Which is not to say that this rich and thoughtful account doesn’t reward the effort.

What does the future hold for the genus? Despite their adaptive diversity, oaks are not immune from the stresses of a changing climate, including fungal diseases and insect pests. Will *Quercus* adapt swiftly enough to retain its widespread supremacy? Though Mr. Hipp fears that individual species will be lost, he concludes that “oaks as a lineage may survive longer than the human species.”

Mr. Helferich’s books include “Humboldt’s Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Latin American Journey That Changed the Way We See the World.”



DEA/GETTY IMAGES

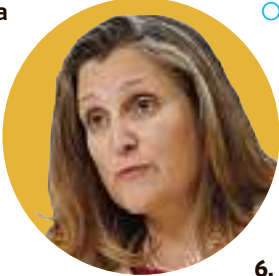
PLAY

NEWS QUIZ DANIEL AKST

From this week's
Wall Street Journal

1. In Canada, Chrystia Freeland called it quits—as minister of what?

- ☐ A. Fisheries
- ☐ B. Finance
- ☐ C. Foreign Affairs
- ☐ D. Federalism



- ☐ A. A slowdown on cuts
- ☐ B. A speed-up of cuts
- ☐ C. A turn to raising rates
- ☐ D. A shift in focus to cryptocurrency

2. Who agreed to pay \$15 million to settle a defamation lawsuit filed by President-elect Trump?

- ☐ A. ABC
- ☐ B. CBS
- ☐ C. NBC
- ☐ D. NPR

3. Russia is withdrawing advanced weapons systems from Syria—and moving them where?

- ☐ A. Russia
- ☐ B. Lebanon
- ☐ C. Libya
- ☐ D. Egypt

4. Lamb Weston replaced its CEO and cut its outlook. What's Lamb Weston?

- ☐ A. A Connecticut meat packer
- ☐ B. An Idaho maker of French fries
- ☐ C. An Australian wool supplier
- ☐ D. A global law firm based in London

5. The Fed cut its benchmark rate a quarter point and signalled what going forward?

6. Washington may ban a Chinese router that has big U.S. market share. Name that brand.

- ☐ A. Asus
- ☐ B. Huawei
- ☐ C. TP-Link
- ☐ D. Black & Decker

7. Jesus look-alikes are in demand lately in what particular place?

- ☐ A. Nazareth, Pa.
- ☐ B. Nazareth, Israel
- ☐ C. Ypsilanti, Mich.
- ☐ D. Salt Lake City

8. Business for ghostwriters is booming. When they had a conference, what was it called?

- ☐ A. Gathering of the Ghosts
- ☐ B. Out of the Shadows
- ☐ C. Shades of Ventriloquism
- ☐ D. The Voicegivers

9. India is a surging power in chess. Where was the game invented?

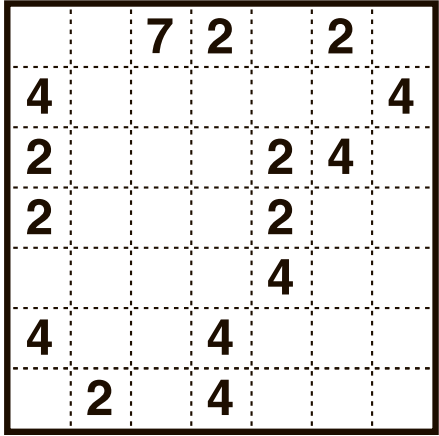
- ☐ A. China
- ☐ B. Russia
- ☐ C. Turkey
- ☐ D. India



Answers are listed below the crossword solutions at right.

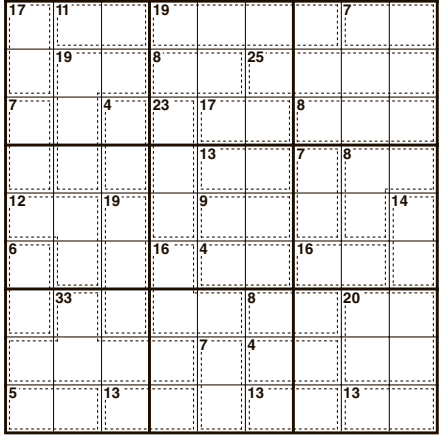
NUMBER PUZZLES

Cell Blocks



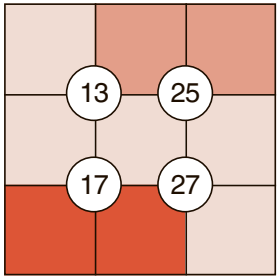
Divide the grid into square or rectangular blocks, each containing one digit only. Every block must contain the number of cells indicated by the digit inside it.

Killer Sudoku Level 1



As with standard Sudoku, fill the grid so that every column, every row and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9. Each set of cells joined by dotted lines must add up to the target number in its top-left corner. Within each set of cells joined by dotted lines, a digit cannot be repeated.

Suko



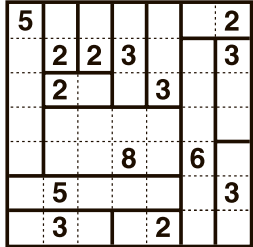
Place the numbers 1 to 9 in the spaces so that the number in each circle is equal to the sum of the four surrounding spaces, and each color total is correct.

ALL PUZZLES © PUZZLER MEDIA LTD. - WWW.PUZZLER.COM

ACROSS 2. GOO + GLE ("leg" anag.) 6. CA(PR)A 10. P(OWE)R 11. TAN + DEM 13. A + WAITS 14. ME(A)N 16. S(LIDE) 17. A + RM 18. A IS LE 20. OG + RE 23. DIES ("dyes" hom.) 25. HO(S)ES 26. EMT (anag.) 28. UNSPOKEN (anag.) 29. GoROUND 31. PLAGUE (anag.) 32. T(RACE)D 33. FE + LINE 34. SE(V)E + N 35. pADDLED
DOWN 1. S(PA)M 2. GOL + DEN ("log" rev.) 3. O + DIN 4. GETS IT (hid.) 5. E + TOILETS 6. CAR(D)NAL 7. A + NoXIOUS 8. REBAR (anag.) 9. AMP + LE(S)T 12. DANG(L)ER 15. AM(N)ES + IA 17. AB + DUCTS 18. ADS + PACE ("sad" anag.) 19. SHOULDA (anag.) 22. R(EEL)ED 24. INUR + E ("ruin" anag.) 25. wHO + USE 27. MOB (hid.) 29. GAL + L 30. BEE + F

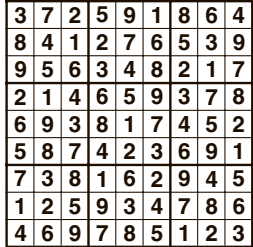
SOLUTIONS TO LAST WEEK'S PUZZLES

Cell Blocks

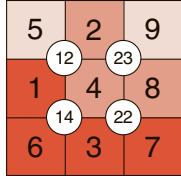


For previous weeks' puzzles, and to discuss strategies with other solvers, go to [WSJ.com/puzzles](https://www.wsj.com/puzzles).

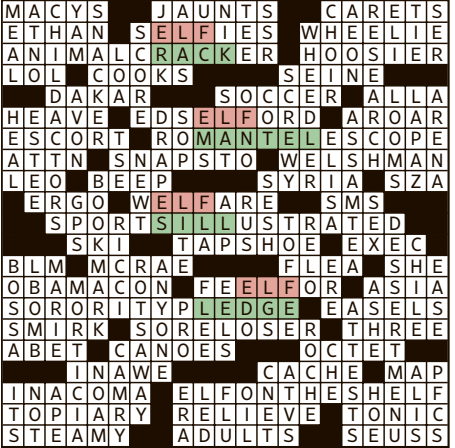
Killer Sudoku Level 3



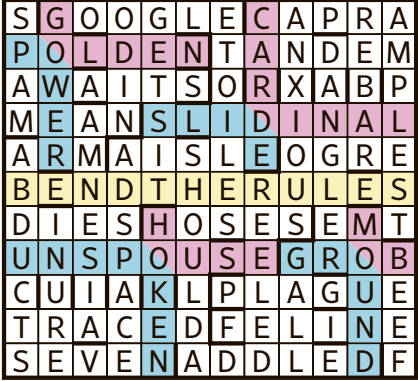
Suko



Cheer Up



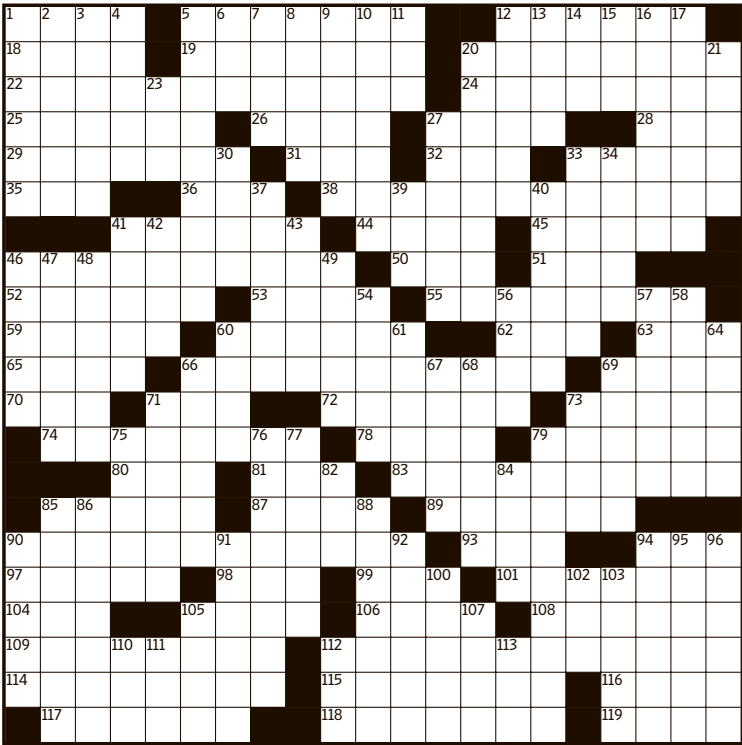
Loopholes



Eight answers are each a type of "rule," which must be "bent" in order to fit in the grid.

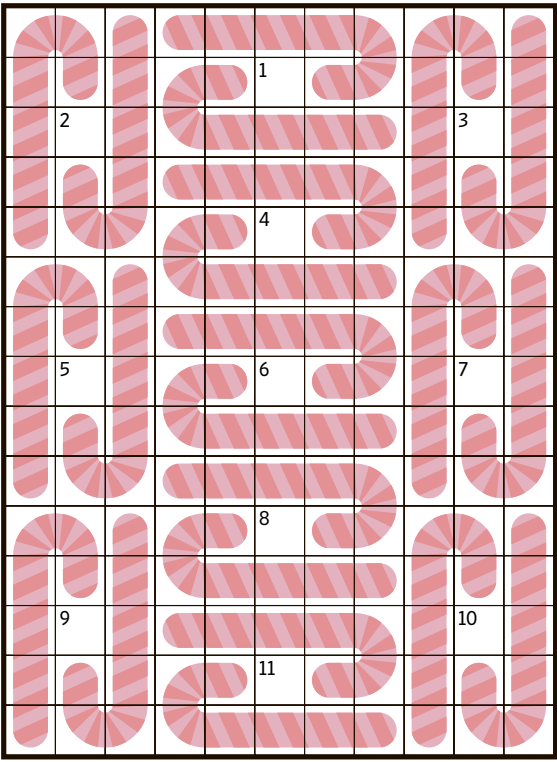
Answers to News Quiz: 1.B, 2.A, 3.C, 4.B, 5.A, 6.C, 7.D, 8.A, 9.D

THE JOURNAL WEEKEND PUZZLES edited by MIKE SHENK



Unexpected Presents | by Mike Shenk

- Across**
- 1 Bluster
 - 5 Briefly
 - 12 Pulse quickeners
 - 18 Kuwait's Mishal, e.g.
 - 19 Jumbled
 - 20 Having a good pedigree
 - 22 Jargon used by Tour de France fans?
 - 24 Talk of Torino
 - 25 Diva's display
 - 26 Durango daddy
 - 27 "Hamilton" Tony winner Leslie ___ Jr.
 - 28 For example
 - 29 Frisky
 - 31 But, in Latin
 - 32 Play reviewer
 - 33 Hotel laundry room sight
 - 35 SFO-to-LAX heading
 - 36 Gumshoe, in hard-boiled fiction
 - 38 Stone's climb from TV commercials to "Casino" fame?
 - 41 Drawing room
 - 44 Fall precursor
 - 45 Grow narrower
 - 46 Have the sense that you're falling over?
 - 50 Thomas Gray's "The Bard," e.g.
 - 51 Harshly criticize
 - 52 Cloverleaf feature
 - 53 Reward the actors
 - 55 Naughty and nice, e.g.
 - 59 "Analyze This" director Harold
 - 60 Laggard's cry
 - 62 Jct. parts
 - 63 Lennon's love
 - 65 Surrounded by
 - 66 Round region surrounding a cathedral?
 - 69 Mattress choice
 - 70 Longing
 - 71 Angled pipe
 - 72 Very little
 - 73 Gambler's markers
 - 74 Surveyed skeptically
 - 78 Location
 - 79 It may involve hand-holding
 - 80 "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" director Howard
 - 81 Channels 14 and up, on old TVs
 - 83 Heat lamp for poultry farm hatchlings?
 - 85 Uncomplaining
 - 87 Signing, perhaps
 - 89 Garden pests
 - 90 Purina exec in charge of livestock products?
 - 93 Elliott of 1989's "Prancer"
 - 94 Miss at a hoedown
 - 97 Baffled
 - 98 Pontiac in a 1964 hit song
 - 99 Bar topic
 - 101 Player's contract stipulation
 - 104 Play favorites, perhaps
 - 105 Wood's counterpart
 - 106 Topper for a 56-Down
 - 108 Fail to meet at the planned time
 - 109 Fatalistic cry
 - 112 Ones taking sabbaticals with no game plan?
 - 114 Shocking scandals
 - 115 Like contraband
 - 116 Ending akin to -trix and -ette
 - 117 Made the coffee
 - 118 Blot on the landscape
 - 119 Miss in the Highlands
 - Down**
 - 1 Renaissance fiddles
 - 2 Peruvian pals
 - 3 Kidman who debuted in 1983's "Bush Christmas"
 - 4 "Have a taste!"
 - 5 Outmoded classroom visual aid
 - 6 "You're a mean ___, Mr. Grinch"
 - 7 Grating noise
 - 8 Oscar-awarding org.
 - 9 Paging device
 - 10 Forceful words after "There!"
 - 11 Scolding sound
 - 12 Begin a journey
 - 13 Quahog or geoduck
 - 14 "...and may ___ your Christmas be white"
 - 15 Cleanup hitter's goal
 - 16 Proof of fallibility
 - 17 Cotton from Arkansas, e.g.
 - 20 Like a good target for a pass
 - 21 Ranking member
 - 23 Long-running CBS franchise
 - 27 "Potatoes done perfect" brand
 - 30 "Everybody knows a turkey and some mistletoe ___ to make the season bright"
 - 33 Burden for Marley's ghost
 - 73 Alcatraz unit
 - 75 Undermine
 - 76 Book reviewers
 - 77 Charlize of "Reindeer Games"
 - 79 Vehicle for dashing through the snow
 - 82 Dad, sis, bro, etc.
 - 84 James of "Elf"
 - 85 "A round for everybody!"
 - 86 Having a will
 - 88 Bad way to be accused
 - 90 One-named model from Milan
 - 91 "You're absolutely right!"
 - 92 Christmas, in Cremona
 - 94 Lead ore
 - 95 Adds tinsel to, e.g.
 - 96 Items in some frames
 - 100 They crash and break
 - 102 Crayola color
 - 103 Supergiant in Orion
 - 105 "Bus Stop" playwright
 - 107 ___ Park (Queens neighborhood)
 - 110 Boxer warning
 - 111 Bourbon cask material
 - 112 Commit perjury
 - 113 Realm for Mars



Candy Canes | by Patrick Berry

Answers fit into this grid in two ways, Canes and Rows. Cane answers are all seven letters long and fill one of the two cane-shaped areas surrounding the correspondingly numbered square, starting at the curled end of the cane and proceeding around to the base. Each row of the grid will be filled by one of the fifteen pairs of Row answers. The two answers in each Row pair are clued in order, but the pairs themselves are in random order, so you must use the Cane answers to determine what goes where. When the grid is filled, the numbered squares will reveal a follower of yuletide traditions.

Canes

- 1 Mollusk with an iridescent inner shell
- Bring joy to
- 2 Healthy muffin ingredient (2 wds.)
- Made privy to, as secrets (3 wds.)
- 3 "Rosie the ___" (1944 musical) Utterly bewildered (3 wds.)
- 4 Comes into view
- Reddish-purple shade
- 5 Word that derives from the French for "sour wine"
- Commonwealth realm in the Atlantic

- 6 Removes ice from a windshield, perhaps
- Stable containers
- 7 "Wow, that's gorgeous!" (3 wds.)
- In opposition to
- 8 ___ scan (high-tech way to verify identity)
- Where Dracula hails from
- 9 Way to prevent through traffic (2 wds.)
- Keep an engine from overheating, perhaps (Hyph.)
- 10 River crossed by Arlington Memorial Bridge
- Seattle baseballer
- 11 Leaves' central veins
- News, quaintly

Rows

- * Instrument upon which glissandi are often played
- Eavesdropper's range
- * South-of-the-border bar
- Unhurried gait
- * Of the kidneys
- Hit duo? (Hyph.)
- * Captain Marvel or Captain America, e.g.
- Barbecue side dish

► **Get the solutions** to this week's Journal Weekend Puzzles in next Saturday's Wall Street Journal. Solve crosswords and acrostics online, get pointers on solving cryptic puzzles and discuss all of the puzzles online at [WSJ.com/Puzzles](https://www.wsj.com/puzzles).



sweet wonders



HERMÈS
PARIS

Publicis EtNous



What Dogs Can Teach Us About Giving
As long as you buy them cute things **D7**

OFF DUTY

'Every Culture Has a Version Of a Sloppy Joe'
Whip up this one in 30 minutes **D9**



FASHION | FOOD | DESIGN | TRAVEL | GEAR

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

*** Saturday/Sunday, December 21 - 22, 2024 | **D1**



MAGDALENA RIVER, COLOMBIA |
A new cruise offers an introduction to this central artery of culture, commerce and unbridled nature.

WHERE TO GO IN 2025

To compile our annual to-go list, we considered every traveler: the relaxer and the adventurer; the culture hound and the outdoor cat; the road tripper and the frequent flier. For all these, here are 10 places deserving of precious vacation days this year.

MADHYA PRADESH, INDIA | The state draws safari aficionados in search of elusive Bengal tigers, but luxury accommodations were scant until now.



NISEKO, JAPAN | Word is out about this ski area in Hokkaido. Go now before everyone else does.



MALTA | A delicious Mediterranean meal in the backyard of an old pottery workshop? Only in Malta.

Amsterdam

It will shock no one that Amsterdam, a long-favored stop on the bachelor-party and backpacking circuits, knows how to throw down. To commemorate its 750th anniversary, the Dutch capital will spend 2025 in the throes of a never-ending party. For starters, celebrate the solstice on June 21 with other revelers on the eight-lane A10 ring road, which, for the first time in more than 50 years, will be closed to traffic. In August, some of the world's most impressive ships will crowd the city's fairy-tale waterways for the 10th edition of the nautical festival SAIL Amsterdam.

For more intimate soirees, keep an eye on the 24 Hours project. It

gives each district in the city one day to show off with street parties, concerts and panel discussions.

Hotels are getting in on the action too with exclusive celebratory packages. The most over-the-top offering: the Conservatorium Hotel's Ultimate Amsterdam 750 package, which starts at \$139,425. That gets you five nights in the hotel's I Love Amsterdam Suite, unlimited on-property food, drinks and spa treatments, and a personal portrait session with photographer Bastiaan Woudt, who has shot for the likes of Chanel and Viktor & Rolf.

Madhya Pradesh, India

Instead of a whirlwind trip that

Please turn to page D5

Inside



THIS ASTON MARTIN IS ASTONISHING

Dan Neil drives a refined monster **D4**



'SMELLS LIKE... CHRISTMAS?'
New Yorkers try to identify trendy pistachio scents **D2**



WITH OR WITHOUT HUE

Her favorite color was green, until a renovation challenged that belief **D6**



BRAND AID

How do insiders spend less on high-quality menswear? 'Private labels.' **D2**

STYLE & FASHION

Great-Value Judgements

Want a hack to score designer-quality menswear gems for less? Opt to buy private-label pieces from high-end stores.

By ALISON S. COHN

FOR terrific-value smoked salmon or olive oil, there's Kirkland Signature. For terrific-value men's cashmere coats, sleek wool-gabardine blazers and superfine poplin shirts? Colbo, Smock and Mr P. have you covered. These private labels from high-end fashion stores are to style-savvy men what Costco's beloved line is to grocery shoppers across America. You'll find in-house

Though still pricey, they cost far less than a name brand.

brand Mr P. at Mr Porter, the luxury e-commerce site, while Smock belongs to Mohawk General Store, a Los Angeles emporium of cool, and Colbo shares its name with a Manhattan boutique. These multibrand retailers are just a few that have launched winning menswear lines in recent years. Their private-label pieces are the kinds of things most

guys actually wear. Designed by the stores' own teams, they're typically pared-back, with subtle tweaks. And though hardly cheap, they cost far less than many big-name brands thanks to lower markups. Therein lies the hack: Shopping these low-key labels lets you secure designer-quality garb for hundreds, rather than thousands, of dollars. The pieces often hang alongside designer garments from the likes of Prada, Dries Van Noten and Lemaire that can cost more than double. Think of them as a cooler version of the predictable basics long sold by department stores' in-house lines. Celebrity stylist Michael Fisher, who likes Smock's drapery blazer (\$495) and pants (\$345) in Japanese wool gabardine, considers private labels "an essential resource" for men who prioritize quality and design over brand names. "I hate the term 'elevated basics,' but Smock feels like it's that, in the best way," said Noah Piou, 26, an integrated marketing strategist in L.A. with a soft spot for the label's jackets. New York

investment banker Gabriel Nieto, 33, has zeroed in on Mr P. for "fashion-y" basics such as \$240 tailored cargo pants. Meanwhile, Shane Davis, 37, co-founder of Brooklyn music space Public Records, stocks up on "durable and refined" Colbo items such as double-pleat trousers (\$385) and crinkled cotton dress-shirts (\$275). Bonus: By definition, in-house items—whether \$98 super-soft flannel shirts from

Milwaukee store Milworks or the \$120 streamlined hoodies by Boston's Bodega—can't be found anywhere else. More about markups: By sourcing private-label items directly from factories, rather than third-party designers, stores can keep prices down. Kevin Carney, the co-founder of Mohawk General Store, notes that a 2.3-2.7 times markup is the industry's ballpark range for a profit margin. A shirt that cost \$100 to make might be sold by a designer to a store for about \$250. To ensure its own profit, the store then marks it up by about 2.5 times again, nudging up the final price to \$625. A private-label shirt would simply cost \$250. The store is essentially the designer, eliminating a round of markups. When shopping private labels, says Fisher, look for the same quality you'd expect from any designer product. Seek out "fully fashioned shoulder seams on sweaters, a good quality lining on suiting, great shirt fabrics." With an eye to relative economy, Matthew Trent, 46, an HR executive in New York, pairs Mr P. finds with

ter. Today the brand offers chore jackets in seersucker, linen, wool, corduroy, denim and suede, along with a wealth of shoes, bags and tailoring. Of the 400-plus brands Mr Porter sells, Mr P. ranks in the top five. From a store's point of view, private labels satisfy another agenda, too. If its seasonal lineup from designer brands lacks, say, a white shirt with two pockets, it can just make its own. Mohawk's Carney launched Smock in 2014 to create SoCal staples such as drawstring easy pants and tropical-weight suiting that weren't necessarily available from designers year-round. "Sometimes Smock is the missing link," said Carney, whose brand is made in L.A. Piou, the marketing strategist, loves the \$345 Smock cropped shirt jacket. Cut from black wool gabardine and finished with a two-way zip, it quietly smolders—and, at Mohawk, costs less than half the price of similar styles from designers such as Jacquemus. On TikTok, where Piou posts fit-checks, one recent video featuring the jacket was captioned: "I've never looked this good in my life."



IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD From left: Colbo, a leading multibrand designer store in Manhattan's Lower East Side; standout items from Colbo's in-house label: Silk-Blend Men's Rugby Shirt, \$365; Italian-Cotton Tote, \$195.



Mr P. Shearling-Trimmed Cotton-Corduroy Bomber Jacket, \$570

designer purchases. He'll layer a striped wool tee (\$255) from the private label under Maison Margiela blazers that set him back \$2,000-plus. He said Mr P.'s "reliability factor" keeps him coming back: He bought a striped linen bomber jacket two years ago and the exact same silhouette in navy suede this fall. Mr P. was launched in 2017 to offer staples like "that beautiful chore jacket that you always go to," said Liza Canneford, director of private labels at Yoox Net-a-Porter Group, which owns Mr Por-



Above: The Mohawk Man store in Los Angeles. Left, a look from Smock, Mohawk's in-house line: Wool Gabardine Blazer, \$495; Poplin Shirt, \$275; West Coast Pant in Wool Gabardine, \$345.

A Tough Nut to Crack?

Suddenly, perfumers have seized on the scent of pistachios. We hit the streets to ask Manhattanites what they thought of the green elixirs—and if they could identify the surprising note.

FOOD-INSPIRED perfumes (aka "gourmands") typically rely on notes of vanilla and coffee bean. Lately their creators have glommed onto pistachio. "The vanilla crowd started looking for [something] a bit more unconventional," said Emma Haberl, brand manager of Vilhelm Parfumerie, of the trend. One example, D.S. & Durga's Pistachio, is the third-best-selling scent in that brand's 16-year history, says co-founder David Moltz. The appeal? Nutty fragrances are "cheap to make, enormously powerful and go on forever," said veteran perfume critic Luca Turin, calling the attraction "preordained." —Christina Middleton

Maoai Henriques, 26
Travel Agent, New York
Perfume Sprayed: Obvious Une Pistache
Do you wear perfume? Every day. I love perfume.
What is your favorite type of scent? Miss Dior, so floral.
What's this one smell like? It's very fresh. Maybe the ocean? It smells good.
Are you surprised that pistachio is the dominant note? It doesn't smell nutty at all. I would expect a pistachio perfume to smell bad.

Amanda Botros, 36
Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner, New York
Perfume Sprayed: Hermès Un Jardin à Cythère
Do you wear perfume? Yes, I like YSL Black Opium. I don't wear it daily because I work in a hospital.
What's this smell like? Christmas.
Are you surprised that pistachio is the dominant note? Totally. I wouldn't have guessed.

Would you wear it? I don't know if I would, but it smells like a winter daytime scent—great [for] the office.
Ali Carson, 23, and Jordan Wilson, 26
Fitness Coaches, Northern Ireland
Perfume Sprayed: Obvious Une Pistache
Do you wear perfume/cologne? Ali: Just a little bit every day. Jordan: No. I never remember to put any on.
What is your favorite type of scent in the winter months? Ali: Unisex woody scents.
What's this smell like to you? Ali: Maybe almond?
Are you surprised that pistachio is the dominant note?

Jordan: Yes, it smells like an air freshener. Or maybe a nice room somewhere.
Toyosi Olanrewaju, 29
Finance, New York
Perfume Sprayed: Vilhelm Parfumerie Faces of Francis
What is your favorite scent in the winter months? I like fresh, crisp scents.
What's this one smell like? I don't know. Could it be a dessert?
Here's a hint, it's a nut. Pistachio?
Bingo! Would you wear it? For dinner, I would layer it with a woody or warm fragrance for a cozy vibe—probably Penhaligon's Cairo.



PISTACHIOS WITH PANACHE Five of our favorite gone-nuts spritzes. From left: D.S. & Durga Pistachio Eau de Parfum, \$210; Hermès Un Jardin à Cythère Eau de Toilette, \$156; Obvious Une Pistache Eau de Parfum, \$140 at Aedes Perfumery; Le Monde Gourmand Pistachio Brûlée Eau de Parfum, \$25 at Ulta; Vilhelm Parfumerie Faces of Francis Eau de Parfum, \$275

STYLE & FASHION

1. Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, model and fashion entrepreneur

Huntington-Whiteley designed a collection of luxury essentials with Wardrobe.NYC.



What she's giving Courtney Applebaum Seeded Glass Catch-All "I have loved Courtney's work for many years. This beautiful hand-poured seeded-glass catch-all is worthy of any coffee table or desk."

What she wants to receive Andrea Marron Supervea Clutch "The Supervea Clutch merges function with elegance, encasing all your essentials in sleek compartments, and when not in use, transforms into a sculptural tabletop object."

2. Eli Zabar, grocer

Zabar owns New York's Eli's Market, Eli's Table and E.A.T., which turns 50 this year.



What he's giving Golightly Cashmere Watchcaps "I've been wearing these knit hats forever, and I like to give them to people who care about staying warm. Also, if you invite me to dinner in December, I'll bring a white truffle and some French butter. Then you just need to decide if you want scrambled eggs or some noodles with them."

What he wants to receive GSI Outdoors Collapsible Fairshare Mug "My son Oliver already gave this to me, but it's the best gift I've ever received. It folds flat as a pancake. I keep it with me and can make coffee anywhere."

3. Jimmy Choo, footwear designer and professor

Choo co-founded the fashion label Jimmy Choo and founded the design school JCA London Fashion Academy.



What he's giving Lucy Caylin by Lucy Moser red bag "Mosey is one of our second-year students at the JCA London Fashion Academy. This bag is cool, fun, chic and red so it brings luck everywhere you go. Every girl needs a red bag for a pop of color in her wardrobe."

What he wants to receive Aesop Invigorating Citrus Trio "I received this as a gift for my birthday from my niece and I've loved it ever since. The scent lasts me all day and I enjoy the way it feels."

4. Donovan Mitchell, basketball player

Mitchell, a Cleveland Cavaliers guard and NBA All-Star, founded SPIDACARES, which awards grants and scholarships to underprivileged students.



What he's giving The Prisoner Red Blend "Like a lot of guys in the NBA, I'm a huge wine guy, so I'm planning on giving friends bottles of the Prisoner Red Blend. The brand has sup-

My, What Great Taste You Have!

The presents that designer Tory Burch, basketballer Donovan Mitchell and more are giving (and hoping to receive) this year



By KAYLEEN SCHAEFER

NO MATTER who you are, or how much money you make, finding the ideal gift can be a struggle. So in the spirit of togetherness, we asked a selection of high-profile taste arbiters—comedians, chefs, actors, athletes and models—what they're giving (and would love to receive) this holiday season.

From a sculptural clutch to a yoga mat that feels like lying on a bed of nails, their answers might just reinvigorate your own shopping list.

ported the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison with me, which is dedicated to expanding access to quality higher education for people who are incarcerated."

What he wants to receive Ugg Tasman "I'd love to get a pair of Ugg Slippers. I'm on my feet a lot and always traveling for games, so I need to be comfortable. I'm a huge fan of the Ugg Tasman, especially the collaboration with Gallery Department."

5. Tory Burch, designer

Burch founded Tory Burch, which recently launched Sublime, a new fragrance.



What she's giving Tory Burch Good Luck Trainer "They're hand-woven with stretch webbing and are also both

sleek and super comfortable." **What she wants to receive** Shakti mats "I asked my boys for these. They reinterpret the ancient Indian 'bed of nails' yoga practice. Painful, but worth it."

6. Jim Gaffigan, comedian

Gaffigan's new special, "The Skinny," is airing now on Hulu.



What he's giving Seelbach's 50 States of Bourbon "Since the pandemic I've become obsessed with bourbon. I still have tons to learn, but as I travel the country doing my stand-up shows I make a point of trying the local bourbon from the state I'm visiting, which are almost universally amazing. No matter what state you are in there is a local distiller doing great stuff. I'd love to give everyone a bottle of bourbon from every state."

What he wants to receive Buffalo Trace Antique Collection Complete Line Up "As I've gotten more and more into bourbon I've started a small collection. I'm just starting out, but I'd love to get my hands on the Buffalo Trace Antique Collection. However, I don't think I know anyone who would be willing to spend \$6,500 on a Christmas present. I think that might be even out of Santa's price range, but who knows maybe he's a bourbon guy?"

7. Judy Greer, actor and philanthropist

Greer is known for "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever" and "13 Going on 30."



What she's giving Belletrist x Tertulia book club subscription "I'm an avid reader and have loved the Belletrist monthly book selections. They have great taste."

What she wants to receive Charitable donations to Project Chimps and the International Medical Corps "Project Chimps is a chimpanzee sanctuary I am on the board of. We are getting closer and closer to rescuing the last of the chimps living in labs. I am a global ambassador for IMC and have seen firsthand the incredible humanitarian work they are doing all over the world."

8. Gigi Burris O'Hara, hatmaker

Burris O'Hara founded Gigi Burris Millinery and the nonprofit Closely Crafted, which supports American artisans in the fashion industry.



What she's giving Guild of Hands Silk Bow Bag "Crafted by a New York-based atelier, this evening pouch with bow detail is perfection for holiday parties."

What she wants to receive Kindred Black Sleeping Beauty oil "Each of Kindred Black's handcrafted oils is placed into a beautiful glass vessel. I can already envision the Sleeping Beauty oil on my bedside table."

—Answers have been edited and condensed for clarity.

► Holiday presents so perfect, or so awful, that their recipients will never forget them. See Review, pages C5-C6

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GEAR & GADGETS

RUMBLE SEAT / DAN NEIL



SHARK ATTACK The silhouette of the 2025 Aston Martin Vantage signals the redesign's enhanced performance.

MAX EREY/ASTON MARTIN



A Refined Aston Martin Coupe That’s Burning With Aggression

TORRENTIAL RAINS along Interstate 85 between Greenville, S.C., and Charlotte, N.C., last month slowed traffic to a crawl. Ask me how I know.

Up ahead, 18-wheelers vanished into their own misty contrails. Some motorists pulled to the shoulder or sought refuge under bridges; most cars’ windshield wipers couldn’t keep up with the roaring, rattling downpour.

But the 2025 Aston Martin Vantage Coupe is not most cars. These wipers—running in countersync, that is, intersecting each other, because British—are designed to operate at up to 202 mph, the car’s purported top speed. Black and thin and aesthetic, like violin bows, these super-wipers cycled in a refined frenzy—*dumpa-dump-pa-dump-pa-dump-pa!*—slashing a hole in the rain for me to see through.

Experientially, the new Vantage is much harder, edgier and rowdier.

I’m not suggesting the *wünder*-wipers are worth the \$292,500, as tested. But I feel strongly that any car costing that much ought to have them.

Redesigned for the 2025 model year, Vantage is a core product for Warwickshire-based Aston Martin, second only in unit sales to the DBX performance crossover. Fundamentally, it’s the same car it’s been for two decades: an intimately sized, front-engine/rear-drive grand touring coupe, built on a bonded aluminum monocoque structure, noted for its light weight, high torsional rigidity and 50-50 weight distribution.

But as the competition from Ferrari, McLaren and Porsche has gotten faster, the Vantage has been obliged to increase its adrenaline content. Both dynamically and experientially, the new car is a much harder, edgier and rowdier presence—a job right from the box, snarling at proper authority. Banishing memories of softer, sweeter *gran turismos* of the past, the latest Vantage is a “hardcore sports car,” according to the marketing department, “forged in the fires of the limit.” Yikes.

The blacksmithing begins with more power. While the Vantage retains the services of a twin-turbo 4.0-liter V8 supplied by Mercedes-AMG, the engine has been extensively modified to meet Aston Martin’s Olympian specifications. Aston-specific tweaks include larger turbos, a more aggressive cam profile and optimized compression ratios, which together push output to a freakish 656 hp and 590 lb-ft of twist—30% and 15% more, respectively, than the outgoing car. The higher torque load also required the use of the eight-speed automatic transmission packaged in the rear transaxle.

With greater power comes...greater responsibility? Sorry, no. The need for more cooling. And thus the Vantage’s blissed-out catfish smile, admitting 29% more air than the previous design.

Flaring dramatically to enclose meatier Michelin tires and wider track, the rear quarters have grown positively callipygian. The swole Vantage is about 30 mm wider across the hips than the old car. The more aggressive exterior styling calls to mind a baby Aston Martin Vanquish.

Refinement is so 2024. For example: In order to access more sen-

2025 ASTON MARTIN VANTAGE COUPE



Base price \$191,000	4.0 liter DOHC V8; eight-speed automatic trans-axle; rear-wheel drive with torque vectoring	Power/torque 656 hp/590 lb-ft	0-60 mph 3.4 seconds
Price, as tested \$292,500		Length/wheelbase/width/height 177.0/106.5/83.6/50.2 inches	Fuel economy 15/22/18 mpg, city/highway/comb.
Powertrain front mid-mounted, twin-turbo-charged and intercooled	Curb weight 3,538 lbs.		Luggage space 12.2 cubic feet

sitivity in the steering at the limit, the engineers mounted the steering column directly to the structural bulkhead without any kind of vibration-damping isolator. This solid mechanical connection creates a pathway for fine-grained road feel to reach the driver’s hands. If the steering was laconic before, the new tiller practically overshadows.

Reflecting Aston’s experience

building track-day toys, the vehicle dynamics suite has more maps than City Hall. In addition to the five drive modes (including “Wet”), sub-menus allow drivers to dial up wheel spin or dial down stability interventions, for their drag-racing and drifting pleasure. Equipped with active/adaptive Bilstein dampers and incorporating a slip-limiting, torque-vectoring e-differential, the Vantage offers all kinds of powertrain and chassis adjustability, with the exception of soft.

I do have some notes: In order to handle the 30% increase in power, the monocoque structure had to be reinforced. This included a new tubular element, exposed and unlovely, mounted between the rear dampers like some aftermarket roll cage. For a car costing nearly \$300,000, that seems like a shortcut.

Even after all the tuning and hot-rodding, the Vantage is still not world-historical quick: 0-to-60 mph acceleration is clocked at a comparatively leisurely 3.4 seconds. Like-priced Porsche 911s can do the deed in around 2 seconds. Given its front-engine/rear-drive layout, the Vantage will always be at a disadvantage getting power to the ground, compared to mid- or rear-engined cars.

But once it’s out of the starting blocks, the Vantage stands up nicely. The romp from 0-100 mph goes by in a raging hurry—6.6 seconds, according to Car and Driver’s stopwatch. Out on the interstate, when the Vantage overtakes some-

body, they tend to stay overtaken.

While I appreciate all the next-leveling of performance, more often it was the little things that eluded the Vantage, ordinary things that ordinary cars do well, like connecting to my phone.

For my fantasy money, the biggest year-over gains are found in the newly swank, techno-posh cabin. For years these cars made do with archaic infotainment, switch-gear and displays cobbled together from other luxury carmakers, namely Mercedes-Benz.

The emotional focal point of the new cabin is its exquisite banked center console—ours trimmed with a dull, lustrous carbon-fiber fascia—hosting a quartet of well-weighted rotary controllers, as well as the leather-padded gear selector and the glassine Start button. A 10.25-inch TFT touch screen display, integrated into the fully upholstered mid-tier, handles the telematics. While the new system wirelessly connects to Apple and Android devices, it is still pretty sluggish at startup and while executing some navi functions.

And leather, acres of leather—“supple, aromatic hand-stitched Bridge of Weir hides,” the company intones, bringing together the most well-bred bovines in the realm.

As the rain continued, so did I. I switched over to the “Wet” drive mode, for maximum stability, turned on the fog lights and set the mega-wipers to maximum. The Vantage came on like the HMS Ark Royal.

Lovely weather we’re having.



The 2025 Aston Martin Vantage pushes output to a maximum 656 hp, 30% more than the previous model.

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

Your Vacation Plans for 2025



TRAVERSE CITY, MICHIGAN | A grilled short rib with house-made giardiniera at Modern Bird, one of the spots propelling Traverse City’s restaurant scene.

Continued from page D1
crums in the palaces of Rajasthan, beaches of Goa and more, slow down in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, a place of dense tropical forests that host an elusive and regal resident: the Royal Bengal tiger.
In-the-know travelers have come here to spot the cats for years, but two new properties from Oberoi, an Indian luxury brand that affluent travelers love, now promise to make your tiger safari experience far more comfortable. The Oberoi Vindhyavilas Wildlife Resort, Bandhavgarh, is set to open in February as a tented camp, while the Oberoi

mounds of Japow (that’s skibum for “Japanese powder”) and majestic views of the Mount Yotei volcano.
Act quick. Niseko’s inclusion in the Ikon pass network in 2018 has made it more popular with Americans every year since. With a similar avalanche-like momentum, many shiny hotels are slated to join the main luxury players in town, a Park Hyatt and Ritz-Carlton Reserve, in the next few years. For now, overcrowded slopes remain a rarity and varied accommodation options include the affordable Ki Niseko, with ski-in/ski-out access to the slopes at Grand Hirafu; and Zaborin, an

The last two fingers of Michigan’s famous mitt beckon visitors with the peninsulas’ bucolic vineyards and pristine shorelines.

Rajgarh Palace, Khajuraho, will debut in the spring in a 200-year-old palace. Both hotels offer safaris in partnership with renowned outfitter Micato Safaris. No guarantee, of course, that you’ll spot a tiger, but it’s a given you’ll be spoiled rotten.

Niseko, Japan
Hokkaido, Japan’s northernmost island and prefecture, draws visitors seeking Zen, fresh seafood, R&R and adventure-packed days on its eminently skiable mountains. The ski set holds one resort town, Niseko, in particular esteem, thanks to indulgent

elegant 15-room ryokan 10 minutes from the daring tree runs of Hanazono.
Magdalena River, Colombia
Colombia’s major cities might have experienced a tourism renaissance in recent years, but to truly get to know the country, you need to venture into the wilds. Beginning in March 2025, when AmaWaterways launches the first major cruise along the Magdalena River, which cuts across the country, visitors to Colombia will be able to experience its natural bounty in style.
Starting in either Barran-

quilla or Cartagena, the 30-stateroom AmaMagdalena will sail for eight days down the Magdalena, with stops at relatively untouristed towns steeped in history and culture, like Santa Bárbara de Pinto, Mompo and Magangué.
In Cartagena, stay at the Four Seasons Hotel & Residences Cartagena, opening in 2025 in the charming Getsemani neighborhood and savor everything this historic colonial city has to offer. But on the other end, spare a few days for exploring Barranquilla too, which hosts the second largest Carnival behind Rio. Long dependent on the Magdalena, the city has been building a 3-mile linear park along its banks since 2017 and earlier this year inaugurated a portion of it featuring a statue of famous native daughter Shakira.

Traverse City, Mich.
Outgoing transportation secretary Pete Buttigieg has publicly said that a desire to be closer to his husband’s family triggered his 2022 move to Traverse City, Mich., but we suspect other factors were also at play. The city’s restaurant scene is shining bright. Nearby, the Leelanau and Old Mission peninsulas—the last two fingers of the state’s famous mitt—beckon visitors with bucolic vineyards and pristine shorelines. Within a short drive of downtown, visitors have their pick of more than 50 wineries, and an ever-growing list of microbreweries, cideries and distilleries. Mammoth, for instance, has embarked on a mission to resurrect a rare heirloom rye, aiming for a 2026 unveiling. Meanwhile, try the bourbon and aquavit at Northern Latitudes, which opens its tasting room in early 2025. At Farm Club, servers work the same fields that supply the kitchen, and at the fledgling Modern Bird, the local bounty is transformed into creations like lake-caught walleye with celery, apple and vadouvan.
Though Traverse City can feel surprisingly cosmopolitan for its size, nature is never far. Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore with its towering sands and azure water is a 30-minute drive away and Downtown’s newly redone Grandview Parkway feeds into a regional bike trail network of more than 60 paved miles.

Malta
If Americans know Malta at all, it’s likely thanks to its fascinating and telegenic history. A who’s who of imperial powers, from the Phoenicians to the British, colonized the Mediterranean archipelago, which was first settled some 8,000 years ago, before it



SOUTH CAICOS, TURKS & CAICOS | Fish Cay, an uninhabited corner of South Caicos, which has avoided the rapid development on other islands.

Most know the Turks and Caicos for the stunning beaches and sprawling luxury hotels on the main island of Providenciales. But around 50 miles away, coastal cliffs overlook crystalline bays, and, in quiet seaside villages, horses and donkeys roam free. South Caicos, one of the least-known of the archipelago’s eight inhabited islands, is an 8-square-mile haven of world-class bone-fishing, kite surfing, scuba diving, snorkeling and birdwatching.

Bypassing the crowds of Providenciales will become much easier beginning in February, when American Airlines launches the first-ever flight to South Caicos from the U.S.—twice a week from Miami. Lodging options currently consist of three decent hotels, but when Salterra, the Marriott Bonvoy Luxury Collection property, debuts early next year, it will effectively boost the cushion quotient—and, with its 100 guest rooms, mark the first new resort on the island in eight years.

gained independence in 1964. No wonder it became a favored backdrop for silver-screen set pieces (“Gladiator II,” “Napoleon,” “Game of Thrones”). Now, the European-Union nation has begun flexing its modern-day cultural bona fides. In October, the country’s first contemporary art museum, the Malta International Contemporary Arts Space (MICAS), opened in the fortified town of Floriana, housing an impressive collection of art and sculpture from around the world.

Further burnishing Malta’s sophisticated shine? The arrival of chef Simon Rogan (of L’Enclume, in Britain’s Lake District), who opened the country’s first two-Michelin-star restaurant, ION Harbour. Next summer, the 23-room Romégas Hotel will welcome guests to its 16th-century palazzo, swathed in traditional terrazzo flooring and overlooking the heart of the capital city of Valletta. Meanwhile, Maltese designer Suzanne Sharp is set to open her own palazzo hotel, Casa Bonavita, early in 2025. Sharp’s daughter, Sophie Edwards, tends to the island’s oldest pottery works, the quirky Villa Bologna Pottery, beloved for its pineapple lamps and fish jugs, not to mention its sun-splashed trattoria set beside a lush garden.

Maui, Hawaii
The fires that devastated the Hawaiian island of Maui in August of 2023 sparked contentious conversations about the effects of overtourism and unchecked development on the island. In the disaster’s wake, tourists were initially discouraged from visiting but, more than a year later, they’re increasingly seen as vital to its continuing recovery. As vacationers return, though, they are being urged to interact with the local culture in ways that foster respect rather than resentment. *Kokua* is Hawaiian for help, and much is still needed.

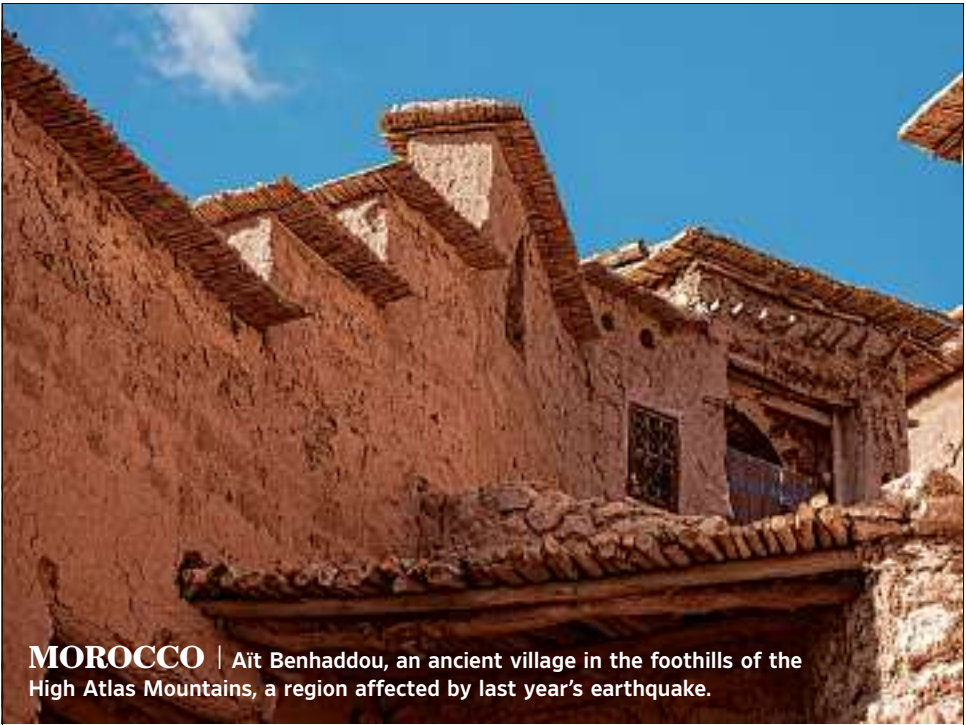
Local organizations offer more options than ever to combine volunteer work and vacations. Tourists can help remove invasive plants with the Friends of Haleakala National Park, clean coral reefs with BlueAina and even walk dogs for the Maui Humane Society. At the overhauled Fairmont Kea Lani in Wailea, guests can interact with indigenous folkways—and learn a ditty or two on ukulele—by stopping at the beachside Ha-

waiian cultural center. And with much of the island open to tourists, more intrepid types can once again day-trip up the adrenaline-pumping Pi’ilani Highway to Hana, where bamboo forests and cascading waterfalls remind visitors how capably nature can bounce back.

Macon, Ga.
In 2025, Ocmulgee Mounds National Historic Park in Macon is likely to become Georgia’s first national park and the country’s 64th. The collection of excavated ceremonial mounds and fortresses stretch back over 12,000 years to the original Mississippian people who are thought to have arrived after the last Ice Age. The park features a distinctive spiral mound, a restored Earth Lodge where tribal meetings once took place and a warren of woody trails. To honor its heritage, Macon will install bilingual street names in Muscogee and English.

Visitors hungry for more than history should follow the delightfully named Macon Bacon Trail to local delicacies like bacon pizza and a bacon-topped milkshake named after Jimmy Carter. Macon has always been a music hub and this winter sees the opening of the Otis Redding Foundation, which aims to extend that legacy to a new generation. Don’t leave without catching a show at Grant’s Lounge, a friendly dive bar where bands cover classics by Redding, as well as other Macon-bred masters like the Allman Brothers and Little Richard.

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MOROCCO | Aït Benhaddou, an ancient village in the foothills of the High Atlas Mountains, a region affected by last year’s earthquake.

When a 6.8-magnitude earthquake convulsed Morocco’s High Atlas Mountains last year, travel companies were quick to join the rebuilding efforts—and have since launched trips to bring tourism income where it’s most needed. Intrepid’s 11-day “South Morocco Discovery” itinerary will draw visitors into the High Atlas, and the less-visited Anti-Atlas range, where electric-green oases glow from a baked landscape. Abercrombie & Kent’s 10-day “Tangier & the Blue City” trip hits blockbuster stops like Casablanca and Marrakech, but also the vineyards of Meknes and artisan workshops deep in

the Rif Mountains.
Morocco’s rebound comes just as United unveils a new Newark-Marrakech route, the first stopover-free trip for Americans heading to the south. Meanwhile, a constellation of new five-star hotels is taking shape, including the 19-acre resort Park Hyatt Marrakech, which opened in July. A new entry from Royal Mansour, a design-obsessed local hotel brand, came to central Casablanca last spring. In Rabat, new outposts of the Four Seasons and Ritz-Carlton hotel chains have made the long-overlooked seaside capital even more appealing.

VHERNIER
MILANO



Abbraccio ring in rose gold

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DESIGN & DECORATING



HUE BETS The plummy scheme that Lisa Staton Architectural Interiors carried through the Seattle house makes its boldest statement in the living room.

Where Plum Led, They Followed

How an interior designer helped a couple uncover colors that truly resonated, then used those hues to make their house feel like home

By SHEILA KIM

WE WERE moving from a home that was very white and bright,” said Sri-lakshmi Remala, “and I was ready for a departure from that.” So when the senior program officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and her husband, Viren Kamdar, who works in wealth management, bought their family a circa-

Related shades weave a soothing and cohesive story through the house.

1900 craftsman house in Seattle, they sought an interior designer to help them envision life in color. Ask Remala about her favorite hue and she emphatically states it’s green. But the team at Seattle’s Lisa Staton Architectural Interiors felt the color would compete with the site’s copious natural foliage, so they chased a different lead. Namely, the antique maps referencing the Asian spice trade and the Mughal Empire-style art that the Indian-American homeowners had collected. “We have found that by visiting a client’s closet, or looking at artwork or rugs they’ve collected, we

can tease out a color palette for a whole home that will feel pleasing to them,” said Staton. In this case, the jewel tones in the couple’s art and maps stood out to the designers. They proposed a raspberry-based scheme to inform the home’s design and, when it proved too intense for the clients’ comfort, dialed it back to murkier plums and neutrals. That scheme suited the house’s vintage. “When you work on an older home, the client is the client and that old house is also a client,” said Staton. “We wanted to maintain the original stained millwork in parts of the home and looked at [appropriate] historic color palettes.” The kitchen, for instance, called out for Benjamin Moore’s Townsend Harbor Brown. Despite its name, the paint reads plummy and complements the house’s existing mid-toned woodwork. At first the homeowners worried that cabinets so dark would yield a gloomy kitchen. But Staton proposed light finishes elsewhere in the room, relieving their concerns. For the walls and trim, the team took inspiration from the aged paper of the couple’s antique maps and settled on Benjamin Moore Elephant Tusk, a rich ivory. Nearly matching ceramic tiles dress up the range’s backsplash and hood. “We could have added patterned tiles, but we chose to stay restrained,” said Staton. A



From left: The homeowners, Srilakshmi Remala and Viren Kamdar, and their sons. In the primary bedroom, the color story continues with taupe walls, terracotta linens and chromatic relatives of plum in the chair and bedspread.



putty-colored island and countertops in the palest of pink marble round out the mix. One thing everyone concerned wanted to preserve? The living-room fireplace’s earthtoned Batchelder tiles. To respect these heritage ceramics, common in turn-of-the-century houses in the Pacific Northwest, the designers painted walls and ceiling in creamy beiges. Kamdar, a fan of antique rugs, selected a carpet that combined similarly warm neutrals with hints of pink and purple. But the sofas, all agreed, needed to be bolder. The choice: a rich

plum even more dramatic than that of the kitchen cabinets. In other rooms, the team used similar but not matching shades to soothing, cohesive effect. In the primary bedroom, terracotta played the role of “earthy neutral,” while the plum theme shows up as muddled pink for the fringed armchair and a murky red for the bedspread. The rug nods to all three colors. Remala’s favorite, green, drenches the den but in decidedly dusky tints. A sofa that’s giant and welcoming enough for movie night gets purplish-brown upholstery.

And the new craftsman-style oak bar is stained a medium tone to align with the original millwork. The overall goal: colors that resonated with the couple and their two young boys. Remala recalls the moment they realized Staton had nailed the palette: When the couple walked into the completed project, they brought with them a painting purchased during a recent trip to India. The pair had bought the canvas with no consideration of their new home’s palette but quickly saw it could go anywhere. As Kamdar put it, “This house is so us.”



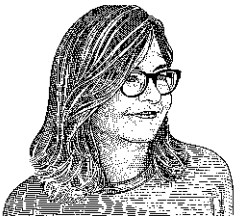
From left: The green walls in the den complement the purply brown of the sectional sofa; in the kitchen, Staton offset the intensity of the plum cabinets with ivory-toned tiles and walls.

DESIGN & DECORATING



NATHAN HACKETT

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DECOR / MICHELLE SLATALLA



The True Spirit of Giving, as Taught to Us by Our Pets

GUESS WHO probably won't care that I rushed out at the last minute to buy their holiday gifts? My dogs.

That's one of the many things I love about my tiny papillons. I also love that if Pigeon feels I haven't scratched him long enough, he gently pushes my hand back into position with a tiny cottonball paw. As for Larry, who is 15 years old and mostly blind and deaf, I love that he nevertheless manages to do a little happy dance for his breakfast, leaping in the air and throwing his head back like Snoopy. This is pretty amazing because if one dog year equals seven human years, as some dog gerontologists believe, he's 105. I doubt even Jimmy Carter, who is only 100, gets as excited at mealtime.

But what to get a dog who has everything? My dogs, possibly like yours, are spoiled. More than 52% of dog owners in this country—and 41% of cat owners—plan to buy pets a holiday gift this year, according to a recent survey by the American Pet Products Association in Stamford, Conn.

In fact, said Peter Scott, chief executive of the association, these pets average six gifts a year—including on their birthdays—at about \$30 per gift, which goes a long way toward explaining the \$150 billion in pet expenditures he says the industry expects this year.

By the time the holiday season rolls around, what's left on their wish list? And

am I insane for worrying about this?

"Will my dogs even notice if they don't get holiday gifts?" I asked Brian Hare, an evolutionary anthropology professor at Duke University I phoned for advice.

"Oh, dogs absolutely understand gifts—and they like to give them as well," said Hare, who plans to buy his Labrador retriever, Neutron, a plush toy this year.

"But how do we know Neutron—or my dogs—understands the concept of gifts?" I asked.

"Dogs evolved from wolves, and wolves forage as a group and bring food back to their den to feed their puppies and the pack member who stayed home to watch the puppies," said Hare, co-author of "Puppy Kindergarten: The New Science of Raising a Great Dog" (Random House 2024).

"Today we find that behavior even in free-ranging dogs throughout the world who find something, then bring it 'home' as a gift to share. Not all animals do that."

Dogs (and cats who deposit mice on the front stoop) also give gifts to humans. "They bring toys to humans to enrich their relationships with you," he said. "And they give humans the gift of social attention—like when dogs are so happy to see us that they can barely control their wagging bottoms when you come home."

How should I show appreciation to my Notorious P.I.G.

and Lay Lay? Maybe with a matching pair of plush reindeer ears? Or tiny tuxedo hats to wear on New Year's Eve? Or a new "dripless" water bowl to keep the kitchen floor dry?

"Those would be gifts you would like, but I'm not so sure about your dog," said Scott, of the pet products association. His mini golden-doodle, Tucker, "looks mortified when we try to dress him up. And if I tried to do that to a cat? That cat is just going to walk out of the room."

A better solution? Adhere to the same guidelines you follow for any other holiday gift: Choose something you think the recipient will like. So think chewable, chaseable, climbable.

Within limits, of course. For instance, my dogs would probably most love a skunk carcass they could roll around in. But how would that look on my living room rug? The trick is to find a gift your pet will love without downgrading your decor.

"We're seeing more and more people buy gifts for their pets that look good in the house, or at least don't make your house look bad," said Jennifer Kovacs, vice president of design, collaborations and omni experience at Petco. For instance, I opted to buy my dogs small plush toys—a pair of reindeer bounce toys that have (blessedly) removable squeaky balls—which can live out of sight in a basket when not being

actively chewed.

Edible gifts—which by definition will be temporary additions to your interior design—are another option.

"Cookies will disappear, I promise," said Aimee Colletti, who owns Bing's Barkin' Bakery in Staten Island,

N.Y. Every holiday season she bakes themed dog cookies—including gingersnap Rudy Reindeers, iced oatmeal snowflakes and peanut butter candy canes (sold out for this year; Colletti is accepting preorders for 2025). "They smell so good that

people ask all the time, 'Can I eat it?'" said Colletti. "Yes, if you like a dry cookie. I sent a girlfriend back to California with a big bag, and by the time she got home, well, there was not the same number in the bag. I said, 'Oh, my God, Larissa, what did you do?'"

What about decor-approved gifts for cats? "Replace the ugly cat tree," said Mario Arbore, a Viera, Fla., architect whose Square Paws custom cat-furniture line includes a 6½-foot-tall, climbable Catmas tree.

Made of plywood with carpeted "tree limbs," pre-drilled holes for hanging catnip-filled ornaments and a fuzzy tetherball tree topper

Will my dogs even notice if they don't get holiday gifts?

designed to be batted around, the tree is an investment at \$2,650, Arbore acknowledges. "I built it as a permanent replacement for the Christmas tree you spend \$150 buying every year but your cat isn't supposed to climb," he said.

For budget-conscious cat lovers, Arbore also sells a set of plans (for \$30) for DIYers who want to make their own climbable Catmas trees.

Of course, the great thing about pets is they aren't materialistic. "Honestly, wrapping up a stick from your yard and giving it to a dog who loves to play fetch is not a bad idea," said Hare, who apparently comes from my husband's school of gift giving. "I think what they understand about gifts is the most important idea—that you as a family pack member gave them something they can enjoy together with you, to further their bond with you. And in the end, isn't that what a gift is?"

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EATING & DRINKING

BAR TAB / A COCKTAIL AUDIT

Spiced Old-Fashioned
Total Time 10 minutes
Makes 1 drink

For the special syrup:
¼ cup Demerara sugar
¼ cup water
1 cinnamon stick, broken in half
5 green cardamom pods
5 Marathi moggu buds, partially crushed
For the drink:
2 ounces Old Grand-Dad Bonded Bourbon
5 dashes peach bitters
2 dashes wormwood bitters
Heavy ⅓ ounce special syrup
Orange and lemon twists

1. Make the syrup: In a pot over low heat, combine sugar and water and cook until sugar dissolves. Add remaining ingredients and simmer 5 minutes. Remove from heat. Strain out spices. Will keep in refrigerator for 2 weeks.
2. Make the drink: In a mixing glass half-filled with ice, combine liquid ingredients. Stir until chilled, about 15 seconds. Strain into an Old-Fashioned glass over 1 large ice cube. Express orange and lemon twists over surface of drink. Drop twists in glass.



HOT TAKE Left: Fred's Old-Fashioned is headily infused with warming spices and brightening bitters.

OLD-FASHIONED INNOVATIONS



FEE BROTHERS PEACH BITTERS
Fee Brothers, a family-owned company based in Rochester, N.Y., has been making bitters for more than 150 years. Theirs is probably the most widely available peach bitters in the country. **\$10**



COCKTAIL KINGDOM WORMWOOD BITTERS
Straight wormwood bitters are hard to find, but New York-based Cocktail Kingdom, which sells bar equipment, has one, made by Berkshire Mountain Distillers. **\$17.**

one of them. "It's the best bitters. I don't think anyone would ever deny that," Warren said. "I was just trying to change up the flavors."

The first Old-Fashioned served at the Warren when it opened in 2017 featured cherry bitters. When the brand became unavailable, Warren switched to peach bitters. "I'm like, 'I'm never changing this again.' It brightened it up so much," he said.

Warren paired the peach with wormwood bitters, flavored with a hyper-bitter plant that also plays a role in absinthe and vermouth. This gives the cocktail a yin-and-yang accent that lands between happy and harsh.

Bottled in Bond

The simple part of the Fred's Old-Fashioned equation: the liquor. "You have to have a high-proof whiskey," Warren said. "Eighty-proof bourbon kind of disappears. That's why we use a bonded." Bonded bourbon, by law, must be 100 proof. He chose Old Grand-Dad Bonded Bourbon, a widely available, affordable and, honestly, undervalued brand.

The drink's garnish is "rabbit ears"—twists of both orange and lemon. The result of these many small choices is a minor miracle. I have sampled

hundreds of Old-Fashioneds since beginning research on my book "The Old-Fashioned: The Story of the World's First Classic Cocktail," published in 2014. The Fred's is easily one of the very best and certainly one of my favorites.

Another miracle? The price. For all that work, a glass of the stuff goes for only \$11.

At Your Home Bar

When I tried to recreate Fred's Old-Fashioned at home, the whiskey was easy: Old Grand-Dad Bonded can be found everywhere. And the bitters are easy to order online.

The syrup, however, is a bit of a bear. Home bartenders shouldn't aim to exactly recreate the Warren Bar and Burrow's recipe, but to come up with something a couple steps beyond simple syrup that adds a little complexity.

Warren sent me a sample of the syrup. To me, the flavors that announced themselves most adamantly were cinnamon, cardamom and a hard, dark bud used in Indian cooking called Marathi moggu. (Find it in Indian markets or online.)

I crushed five of the buds with a pestle, split a cinnamon stick in half and threw five cardamom pods into an equal-parts solution of Demerara sugar and water. I simmered the mixture for five minutes, let it cool and strained out the spices. The flavor was notably close to Fred's.

If you're a perfectionist, however, and want to get the Fred's Old-Fashioned exactly right, sit tight. Warren plans to sell the syrup commercially sometime in the near future. Indeed, he is remarkably open when discussing the secrets behind his bestselling cocktail. "It never tastes as good at home as it does in a bar or a restaurant," Warren said, "no matter what the drink."

Not So Very Old-Fashioned

It's arguably the most classic of the classic cocktails. This Pittsburgh bartender has found a way to riff on the recipe without undermining its fundamental charm.

By ROBERT SIMONSON

WHAT MAY be the first known definition of "cocktail" in print, published in the Balance and Columbian Repository newspaper in 1806, reads, "a stimulating liquor, composed of spirits of any kind, sugar, water, and bitters." The most direct modern-day descendant of that original mixed-drink dinosaur is the Old-Fashioned.

Over the years—and especially in the last 15, with the rollout of the classic cocktail revival—bartenders have toyed around with that simple formula, plugging in every

sort of spirit imaginable.

Spencer Warren, owner of the Warren Bar and Burrow in Pittsburgh, was more interested in tweaking the drink's supporting players for his house Old-Fashioned, called Fred's Old-Fashioned after Pittsburgh's own Mister (Fred) Rogers.

Sweet and Bitters

As Warren sees it, bartenders too often treat the sweetening agent in an Old-Fashioned as an afterthought. "[Many] just go with a standard simple syrup or Demerara," he said. "It's just there to help sweeten the bourbon, as opposed to bringing out the flavors in the bourbon."

The syrup that sweetens

Fred's Old-Fashioned is made of more than a half-dozen elements, including cinnamon, cardamom, cloves and mace, measured by weight to ensure consistency. The bar makes the syrup in bulk; it needs to. Fred's Old-Fashioned is its top seller in hot weather or cold.

Given the complexity of the syrup, one might imagine it was the work of weeks of trial and error. It was and wasn't.

"Honestly? It took about 30 minutes," said Warren. But long experience played a role. "I've done other Old-Fashioneds for places where I was consulting. I knew the flavors I wanted to do. I'd been playing a lot with mace, stuff like that. I wanted some kind of black pepper in there. I had an

idea where I wanted to go."

Warren uses two different bitters in the Fred's Old-Fashioned; Angostura, the standard for the cocktail, is not



MIX MASTER At the Warren Bar and Burrow in Pittsburgh, owner Spencer Warren mixes the Fred's Old-Fashioned.

POWER BREAKFAST

Ridiculously Delicious

The name may elicit giggles, but toad-in-the-hole is a breakfast with serious fortifying power

By SARAH KARNASIEWICZ

SOMETIMES YOU must be ruthless about relaxation, and never more so than in mid-winter. Holiday sparkle dims quick if you don't insist on a breather now and then. Why not begin at the breakfast table?

Whether welcoming house guests or easing the aftereffects of an office party, seize the opportunity for a leisurely start. The food needn't be fussy—that's just more work—but it should feel special and stick-to-the-ribs. I find a riff on an old-fashioned toad-in-the-hole never fails.

Is the absurd Anglophilic name, evoking Dickens and damp December days, part of the charm? You bet. But this classic dish of skillet-seared sausages swaddled in a puffed Yorkshire pudding offers both substance and style. None of the components are taxing. Thin, gently seasoned chipolata sausages are a classic choice, but bratwurst or Italian sausage stands in ably. With a blender, the tender batter—akin to the sort you'd make for popovers or a Dutch baby—whirls up in a jiff. And a jammy chutney of curry-spiced cherry tomatoes lends a punch of out-of-season sunshine.

Watch lazily through the oven window while the batter puffs playfully in the pan. Pour yourself another cup of tea...or maybe some bubbly? After all, it is the holidays.

Skillet Toad in the Hole With Quick Tomato Chutney

Serves 4
Total time 1 hour 10 minutes

For the chutney:
16 ounces cherry tomatoes, halved
1 small yellow onion, finely chopped
3 tablespoons cider

vinegar
2 tablespoons brown sugar
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
¼ teaspoon cinnamon
½ teaspoon allspice
½ teaspoon curry powder

For the toad in the hole:
4 large eggs
¾ cup whole milk
2 teaspoons Dijon

mustard
1 tablespoon chopped fresh herbs, such as rosemary or thyme, plus more for garnish, if desired
1 cup all-purpose flour
4 large bratwurst or 8 thin chipolata sausages
2 tablespoons butter, cut into small pieces

1. Make the chutney: In a medium skillet over medium-high heat, combine all ingredients. Sauté, stirring often, until tomatoes and onions are soft and mixture is jammy, 15-20 minutes. Turn off heat and set aside.
2. Make the batter: In a blender, combine eggs, milk, mustard, herbs and

flour. Blend on high until smooth, 30-60 seconds. Transfer blender pitcher to refrigerator and let batter rest for 30 minutes.
3. Preheat oven to 425 degrees. In a large (12-inch) cast-iron or other ovenproof skillet over medium-high heat, brown sausages, turning occasionally, until lightly golden, about 5 minutes. Transfer skillet and sausages to oven and roast until sausages are a deeper brown and skillet is very hot, about 10 minutes. Use thick potholders to very carefully remove hot skillet from oven. Working quickly, add butter to skillet and melt, then pour chilled batter into skillet all around sausages. (It should sizzle.) Quickly and carefully return hot skillet to oven and bake until sausages are deep brown and batter is puffed at edges and golden, about 22 minutes. (Resist the urge to open the oven door during cooking. This can cause the batter to fall.)
4. To serve, bring skillet to table. Garnish with fresh herbs, if desired, and dish out warm portions. Offer a bowl of tomato chutney on the side.



MERRY AND BRIGHT A jewel-red tomato chutney brings a welcome burst of sunshine to this classic British dish.

ON WINE / LETTIE TEAGUE



The Wildest Holiday Party? Your Local Wine Store



THE WEEKS BETWEEN Thanksgiving and New Year’s are the most profitable time of the year, wine retailers tell me. They’re some of the nuttiest times, too. I know this from personal experience: I once worked at a wine store in New York.

I joined the ranks of retail sales associates soon after graduating from college, several decades ago. I wanted to be “in the wine business,” even though I didn’t really know what that meant. The wine professionals I met all told me, “If you want to understand the business, you need to work retail.” And so I did. I started just before the holiday season.

I was hired at Morrell & Company, one of a handful of “carriage trade” New York wine shops which seemed to be patronized by rich people who favored Bordeaux and Champagne. And while many (though not all) of Morrell’s customers were wealthy, and some were even quite famous, I don’t recall feeling intimidated. Perhaps it was the hubris of youth, or the

fact that they came to the store because they liked wine, or knew someone who did. I would assist in the quest—never mind that my wine knowledge at that point was minimal. I recall recommending Champagne quite often. (Indeed, Champagne remains a frequent default recommendation, though these days I recommend wines I’ve actually tasted.)



FULL SERVICE Peter Morrell (at right) with customer William Johnston at Morrell & Company.

The holiday season made the search for a good wine that much more personal and urgent, and the number of people who needed my advice increased exponentially. The store was well-staffed, and I was one of several who had taken sales jobs at Morrell & Company in the hope of getting a foot in the door of the wine world. My colleague Isiah Whitlock Jr., meanwhile, wanted to be an actor. For him the sales job was a temporary gig.

Isiah and I both ended up fulfilling our dreams, though Isiah became much more famous starring in shows like “The Wire,” “Veep,” “Law & Order” and “Your Honor” as well as many, many films. Over the years Isiah increased his wine collection and has even made his own wine. When I called him recently to reminisce about those long-ago days, he mentioned he’d just produced 25 cases of his own-label Napa Cabernet.

Did Isiah, like me, have fond memories of working retail during the holidays? “I loved it. I loved all that hustle and bustle,” he re-

plied, with an enthusiasm that surprised me. “It seemed like all of New York City was trying to get into the store.” He recalled the frenzy of customers ordering wine over the phone: “You had to decide who to talk to, the person in front of you or the person on the phone.” The phones rang nonstop, and we were both retroactively amazed at how much business we conducted without computers—just pads of paper and pens and cash registers.

I recalled taking orders from the assistant to Rex Harrison, who lived in the neighborhood. Isiah had talked on the phone with the great comic actress Imogene Coca herself. Invariably things went wrong—sometimes very wrong, especially during the holiday season. Our then-boss, the company’s CEO and wine advisor, Peter Morrell, instructed Isiah to send a case of wine to a long list of people. Except there was a miscommunication: Peter had only meant to send each recipient a single bottle of wine. “He gave me the

job of calling them all and asking them to return 11 bottles,” Isiah said. “Maybe two people said they would return them, but I don’t know if they ever did.”

Peter didn’t recall that particular fiasco when I called him at home in Dutchess County, N.Y. “I don’t remember the problems,” Peter said. He did, however, remember the hectic nature of the holiday months, which often entailed sleeping on the floor of the store overnight, there were so many orders to fill. And that was all long before it was even legally possible to ship wine outside the state of New York.

The store where Peter slept and Isiah and I worked was a sprawling former cigar factory on East 53rd Street. The family relocated the store twice, first to Madison Avenue, then to Rockefeller Center

‘It’s an uplifting kind of stress, helping people find wine.’

where the store still stands, though the Morrell family sold the business 12 years ago. (It is now called simply Morrell Wine.)

Of course, there have been many, many other changes in wine retail, in New York and beyond. Wine lovers don’t have to visit stores in person; some customers might never set foot in their favorite store. Not many would think to place a phone call now that online sales are a critical component of any operation and retailers can ship out of state to all of the places permitted by law.

Still, I find that the human connection Isiah and I both so cherished lives on in many top stores. For example, when I stopped by Astor Wines & Spirits in New York just before Thanksgiving this year, I found a wonderfully busy scene of customers chatting with staff members and even the anachronistic sound of ringing telephones.

I was particularly surprised by the latter. “We get a ton of calls,” said Astor sales manager Alex Malecki, and not only to place orders. “Some people will call with a very specific question about a wine.” Although Astor does a brisk online business and they ship wine all over the city and outside New York, wine lovers still come in person, too, Malecki confirmed, in overwhelming numbers during the holidays.

Many of the phone calls are customers looking to speak with specific Astor staffers with whom they’ve developed relationships. Although Malecki and his colleagues keep very long holiday hours, he has never had to sleep overnight in the store. “It’s a crazy time,” he said. “But it’s an uplifting kind of stress, helping people find wine.”

That was how I felt, too, in those long-ago days—though my friend Isiah may have said it best: “The quickest way to get in the Christmas spirit is to go work in a wine store.”

► Email Lettie at wine@wsj.com.

SLOW FOOD FAST / SATISFYING AND SEASONAL FOOD IN ABOUT 30 MINUTES



The chef
Marco Herrera

His restaurant
Noche Woodfired Grill and Agave Bar in Tulsa, Okla.

What he’s known for Exploring elevated Mexican regional cooking in America’s heartland. Making headlines on the national food scene right out of the gate.

Beef Picadillo With Adobo Chiles and Cilantro-Garlic Rice

FOR MARCO HERRERA, chef at Noche in Tulsa, Okla., the past few years have been career-defining. This fall, his restaurant, which opened in 2023, was recognized by the national food media as one of the country’s best spots. All the more impressive: Until recently, his formal kitchen experience was limited; only during the Covid-19 pandemic did he begin staging pop-ups.

Not that he’s a total culinary outsider. “My parents were born in Northern Mexico and ran a mom-and-pop restaurant in El Paso until I was in college,” he explained. Now, at Noche, Herrera gives the authentic

regional recipes he grew up eating an elevated twist. A version of this classic beef picadillo spooned over herb-flecked rice, his first Slow Food Fast contribution, has been a satisfying staple throughout his life.

Here, spinach is stirred in for freshness. But during his childhood, he explains, the family bulked the dish up with diced potatoes—“to stretch the meal and give it heft.” If you’d like to try that version as well, take care to fully cook the potatoes until they’re falling-apart tender. “Every culture has a version of a sloppy joe,” Herrera said. “This is ours.” —*Kitty Greenwald*

- Serves 4 Time** 30 minutes
- 2 tablespoons canola oil
 - 1 cup finely chopped yellow onion
 - 7 cloves garlic, minced
 - 4 canned chipotles in adobo, roughly chopped
 - 3 tablespoons minced sun-dried tomatoes
 - 1 pound ground beef
 - Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
 - Pinch of ground chile de árbol or red pepper flakes, optional
 - 3 cups thinly sliced spinach or kale leaves, roughly chopped
 - ½ cup chicken stock,

- plus more as needed**
- 1 lime, halved, to season, plus extra for garnish
 - 2 cups freshly cooked white rice
 - ½ cup minced cilantro, plus extra for garnish
1. Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add onion and cook until soft and translucent, 3-4 minutes. Add all but 1 teaspoon of the minced garlic, chipotles in adobo and sun-dried tomatoes. Cook until garlic is fragrant but not colored, 2-3 minutes.
2. Add beef, breaking it up with a spoon while stirring. Season with salt, pepper and

- chile de árbol, if using. Sear until beef browns in spots, about 6 minutes. Add spinach and stir until wilted. Add stock and bring liquid to a simmer. Cover, reduce heat to low and cook until beef is tender and flavors meld, 15-20 minutes. Season with salt, pepper and a squeeze of lime juice.
3. While the picadillo is cooking, gently rewarm the rice. Mix in remaining minced garlic and cilantro. Season with salt and lime juice.
4. Divide rice and picadillo between four plates. Garnish with cilantro and lime wedges and serve.



DAILY GRIND Simple and soulful, this pairing of herb-flecked rice and silky, seasoned ground beef is Mexican comfort food at its finest.

ELIZABETH GOETZ/WSJ FOOD STYLING BY DANA BONAGUIDA, PROP STYLING BY CARLA GONZALEZ-HART, MICHAEL HOEWELER (PORTAIT)



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