Introduction

by Jeffrey Goldberg

WASHINGTON, D.C., JUNE 2020

On a bright May day in 2018, I walked from *The Atlantic*'s Washington, D.C., offices at the Watergate complex to the White House for lunch with Jared Kushner, President Donald Trump's son-in-law. I knew Kushner slightly; he was not fond of me, nor I of him, but he had something he needed to say, and journalism is journalism. Kushner's self-confidence is more impressive than his achievements, but unlike his father-in-law, who is pathologically bored by matters of policy, spherically ignorant, and unequipped for even simple intellectual challenges—all qualities that eventually brought America to the edge of the abyss—Kushner at least has the ability to assimilate new information. Well before Trump was inaugurated, Kushner had become one of the key officials tasked with devising administration policy—*someone* had to do it. During the 2016 campaign, Trump's oldest son, Don Jr., had tried to recruit John Kasich, then the governor of Ohio, to be his father's running mate. Kasich was promised control over foreign and domestic policy. This caused some confusion, there being no other policies to make. The question was asked, What would Trump be in charge of? Don Jr. answered: "Making America great again."

The ostensible subject of my lunch with Kushner that day was diplomacy. Trump had asked his son-in-law to make peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and Kushner had devised a plan, which he wanted to discuss with me. The particulars of the plan were declared off-the-record, but suffice it to say that, as of this writing, Kushner has not brought peace to the Middle East.

The memorable part of our conversation came a bit later. Like many Americans, I had been preoccupied by Trump's moral and intellectual defects since he emerged as a figure of political significance. It was these defects that had prompted *The Atlantic*, a year and a half before my White House meeting with Trump's son-in-law, to endorse his opponent, Hillary Clinton, for president. This had not been, for us, an obvious decision. *The Atlantic*'s founders, including among them such great figures of 19th-century letters as Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, had promised readers that their magazine would be "of no party or clique." Political endorsements across our long history have been rare. The magazine supported Abraham Lincoln's candidacy in 1860 and Lyndon B. Johnson's candidacy in 1964. As we thought through our dilemma, we realized that had Jeb Bush or Marco Rubio (or, really, almost anyone else) been the Republican presidential nominee, we would not have considered making an endorsement of any sort. Our concern was not mainly over Trump's ideas, such

as they were. His manifest character failings were what prompted us to declare for his opponent. We wrote, in an editorial published in October 2016, that Trump

> has no record of public service and no qualifications for public office. His affect is that of an infomercial huckster; he traffics in conspiracy theories and racist invective; he is appallingly sexist; he is erratic, secretive, and xenophobic; he expresses admiration for authoritarian rulers, and evinces authoritarian tendencies himself. He is easily goaded, a poor quality for someone seeking control of America's nuclear arsenal. He is an enemy of fact-based discourse; he is ignorant of, and indifferent to, the Constitution; he appears not to read.

By the spring of 2018, it had become clear that we had understated the case against Trump. As a reporter, I had covered his two predecessors. They were very different men with very different records; one came to office as a direct consequence of the other's mistakes. But George W. Bush and Barack Obama each took the presidency seriously; each man was changed by the office; each viewed himself to be president of all the people. One of Trump's true innovations as president is to feel no responsibility for Americans who didn't vote for him. Unlike previous presidents, he works not for reconciliation but for division. On his best days, Trump is numb to the fault lines that run under America—fault lines of region and religion, of class, ideology, and race. On his worst days, his presidency is an inversion of the motto of the United States. *E pluribus unum*—"Out of many, one"—has become, in our tormented era, "Out of one, many."

Another quality of Trump's, and one I would raise with Kushner, is his bottomless vulgarity. No president since Andrew Jackson—whose portrait now hangs in the Oval Office—has been so devoted to crudeness, both as a weapon and as an art. I mentioned to Kushner in plain terms my feelings about a recent burst of presidential boorishness and noted my view that his father-in-law was bringing discourse in America down to the coarsest level. Kushner, surprisingly, agreed. "No one can go as low as the president," Kushner told me. "You shouldn't even try." He said this with a satisfied smile. It took me a second to realize that Kushner was paying Trump a compliment. To Kushner, Trump's indecency was a virtue. The chasm between us felt, at that moment, unbridgeable. We were in the White House; Abraham Lincoln once lived here, the Lincoln who said, in his first inaugural address, "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection." As I walked through the West Wing with Kushner, my thoughts concerned a White House defiled.

How did we get here? How did our politics become so appalling and dispiriting? How did a system meant to elevate the most qualified among us instead place a grifter in Lincoln's house? How did the gaps between rich and poor, men and women, black and white, immigrant and American-born, become so profound? How did the leader of the richest nation on Earth fail to protect his country from a deadly virus he was repeatedly told was

coming? How could a leader be so thoroughly insensate to certain unforgiving realities of black life?

The story is larger than Donald Trump, and not simply because a grifter is actually powerless without an audience ready to be grifted. America has become unmoored from truths formerly self-evident—from the animating ideas of its creation, as articulated in our country's founding documents.

On the morning after Trump's election, I told the staff of *The Atlantic* that our magazine had a special responsibility in times like these—times of tension, and fracturing, and loss of national meaning. The magazine's 1857 manifesto, the one vowing that we will be of no party or clique, made another promise to our readers: that we would align ourselves with the forces of "Freedom, National Progress, and Honor, whether public or private."

Throughout *The Atlantic*'s long history, our writers and editors have tried to live up to this ideal by pursuing journalism that is true, meaningful, and consequential. Our best writing has explained America to itself, and to the world; has advanced the twin causes of knowledge and reason; and has been a proponent of science, literature, and art. It has had as a guiding principle the idea that America will always be imperfect but is designed with self-improvement in mind. One prerequisite for national betterment is a commitment to debating and illuminating America's meaning and purpose.

The Atlantic was, from its birth, a frank partisan of the abolitionist cause and of the general cause of justice. It published Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," in order to raise the spirits of Union soldiers, and it published Frederick Douglass on Reconstruction and racial justice. Our magazine published Theodore Roosevelt on the need for clean government and John Muir on the case for national parks. It published Jacob Riis on poverty, Helen Keller on the cause of women's empowerment, Alfred Thayer Mahan on the importance of America's global reach, and Albert Einstein on the atomic bomb. In our pages—in 1945—Vannevar Bush predicted the coming of the internet. *The Atlantic* is also where Martin Luther King Jr. published what came to be known as "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," written by hand behind bars after his arrest in 1963.

The pace of *The Atlantic*'s contributions to the national conversation has only accelerated in recent years. That is why we have decided to publish an anthology of some of our best writing about this vexed era. When we first thought to create the book you are now reading, one of my chief worries concerned chaos. *The Atlantic* publishes thousands of articles, in print and online, each year, on a near-infinite range of subjects. Could we find coherence in the cacophony?

The answer is a definitive yes. Our editor at large, Cullen Murphy, expertly led the effort to organize the book along discernible lines. We open with articles about this period of intense, destabilizing social change. We move to the causes of political division, then look carefully at the man who personifies the dangers of the moment. Finally, we explore what recovery might look like, and the virtues that must be rediscovered if recovery is to happen.

I write this in June of 2020, in a Washington coming out (permanently, I hope) of pandemic lockdown, but also under police curfew. The mood in the country is grim,

justifiably. But if a careful reading of *The Atlantic* through the years can teach us anything, it is that hope is as much a salient theme of American life as despair. Only by examining who we are, and by studying the consequences of our actions, do we have a chance of lighting a path out of our current crisis.

I. FALLING APART

There was a moment in American life, two centuries ago, that came to be known as the Era of Good Feelings. Whatever name is given to our own era, it won't be that. Stability, optimism, unity, pride, satisfaction, civility—yes, these qualities in a society can be overrated, and conceal deep flaws. Think of Edwardian Britain. Or America in the 1950s. But a broad retreat from those qualities, as we are seeing now, is no sign of health.

This first section of *The American Crisis* looks primarily not at national politics, the state of democracy, or the person in the Oval Office—nor primarily at the events of the past four years—but rather at underlying conditions of society as a whole that have been deteriorating for decades. The coronavirus pandemic may confirm that Americans still care for one another and still possess an ability to self-organize locally in the absence of leadership and honesty at the top. But income inequality continues to widen, as it has been doing since the '70s. Social mobility in America has not dropped to the levels of feudal Europe, but the best predictor of where you will end up in life is where you started out in life. Saying that there are gaps in the health-care system is like looking at a map and saying that there are gaps between the continents. The chipping away at the Affordable Care Act by politicians and judges—with no alternative in sight—has only made matters worse. Disparities along lines of race are entrenched, even as people in public life use race and ethnicity—maybe in coded language, maybe not—to rile up their followers. On the internet it's worse: White nationalists find one another in dark corners; conspiracy theories such as QAnon flourish everywhere, offering a "post-truth" alternative to reality-based perception. There is no post-truth version of a hurricane or wildfire, but denial of climate change remains more robust than our ability to prevent or pay for the consequences. This general unraveling was the context for a public-health crisis more serious than any humanity has faced in a century.

WHEN THE NEXT PLAGUE HITS

by Ed Yong

[JULY/AUGUST 2018]

Globalization, urbanization, migration, disease vector, climate change, wealth disparity—the terms are coldly clinical, but they capture a world in a state of dynamic crisis. *Atlantic* staff writer Ed Yong's prophetic 2018 article "When the Next Plague Hits" cited all these factors before issuing a warning. "Down through the centuries," Yong wrote, "diseases have always excelled at exploiting flux."

The coronavirus pandemic has thrown lives, societies, and the entire global economy into reverse. The one thing that should have been foreseeable was an outbreak of this scale. Yong portrays an American government that was negligent and unprepared, even as potential risks continued to multiply. He likens turnover in Donald Trump's public-health apparatus to Etch A Sketch drawings. He quotes Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases—now one of the key figures in the battle against the coronavirus—on the state of the public-health system: "It's like a chain—one weak link and the whole thing falls apart." One of the most important links during any epidemic, Yong wrote, is also one thing we do not have: a person in the Oval Office who can provide "reliable information and a unifying spirit."

Ed Yong is the author of *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes Within Us and a Grander View of Life* (2016), about partnerships between animals and microbes, and the forthcoming *An Immense World*, about how animals see, hear, and perceive. His 2018 *Atlantic* article is excerpted here.

One hundred years ago, in 1918, a strain of H1N1 flu swept the world. It might have originated in Haskell County, Kansas, or in France or China—but soon it was everywhere. In two years, it killed as many as 100 million people—5 percent of the world's population, and far more than the number who died in World War I. It killed not just the very young, old, and sick, but also the strong and fit, bringing them down through their own violent immune responses. It killed so quickly that hospitals ran out of beds, cities ran out of coffins, and coroners could not meet the demand for death certificates. It lowered Americans' life expectancy by more than a decade. "The flu resculpted human populations more radically than anything since the Black Death," Laura Spinney wrote in *Pale Rider*, her 2017 book about the pandemic. It was one of the deadliest natural disasters in history—a potent reminder of the threat posed by disease.

Humanity seems to need such reminders often. In 1948, shortly after the first flu vaccine was created and penicillin became the first mass-produced antibiotic, U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall reportedly claimed that the conquest of infectious disease was

imminent. In 1962, after the second polio vaccine was formulated, the Nobel Prize–winning virologist Sir Frank Macfarlane Burnet asserted, "To write about infectious diseases is almost to write of something that has passed into history."

Hindsight has not been kind to these proclamations. Despite advances in antibiotics and vaccines, and the successful eradication of smallpox, *Homo sapiens* is still locked in the same epic battle with viruses and other pathogens that we've been fighting since the beginning of our history. When cities first arose, diseases laid them low, a process repeated over and over for millennia. When Europeans colonized the Americas, smallpox followed. When soldiers fought in the first global war, influenza hitched a ride, and found new opportunities in the unprecedented scale of the conflict. Down through the centuries, diseases have always excelled at exploiting flux.

Humanity is now in the midst of its fastest-ever period of change. There were almost 2 billion people alive in 1918; there are now 7.6 billion, and they have migrated rapidly into cities, which since 2008 have been home to more than half of all human beings. In these dense throngs, pathogens can more easily spread and more quickly evolve resistance to drugs. Not coincidentally, the total number of outbreaks per decade has more than tripled since the 1980s.

Globalization compounds the risk: Airplanes now carry almost 10 times as many passengers around the world as they did four decades ago. In the '80s, HIV showed how potent new diseases can be, by launching a slow-moving pandemic that has since claimed about 35 million lives. In 2003, another newly discovered virus, SARS, spread decidedly more quickly. A Chinese seafood seller hospitalized in Guangzhou passed it to dozens of doctors and nurses, one of whom traveled to Hong Kong for a wedding. In a single night, he infected at least 16 others, who then carried the virus to Canada, Singapore, and Vietnam. Within six months, SARS had reached 29 countries and infected more than 8,000 people. This is a new epoch of disease, when geographic barriers disappear and threats that once would have been local go global.

Last year, with the centennial of the 1918 flu looming, I started looking into whether America is prepared for the next pandemic. I fully expected that the answer would be no. What I found, after talking with dozens of experts, was more complicated—reassuring in some ways, but even more worrying than I'd imagined in others. Certainly, medicine has advanced considerably during the past century. The United States has nationwide vaccination programs, advanced hospitals, the latest diagnostic tests. In the National Institutes of Health, it has the world's largest biomedical research establishment, and in the CDC, arguably the world's strongest public-health agency. America is as ready to face down new diseases as any country in the world.

Yet even the U.S. is disturbingly vulnerable—and in some respects is becoming quickly more so. It depends on a just-in-time medical economy, in which stockpiles are limited and even key items are made to order. Most of the intravenous bags used in the country are manufactured in Puerto Rico, so when Hurricane Maria devastated the island last September, the bags fell in short supply. Some hospitals were forced to inject saline with syringes—and so syringe supplies started running low, too. The most common lifesaving

drugs all depend on long supply chains that include India and China—chains that would likely break in a severe pandemic. “Each year, the system gets leaner and leaner,” says Michael Osterholm, the director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. “It doesn’t take much of a hiccup anymore to challenge it.”

Perhaps most important, the U.S. is prone to the same forgetfulness and shortsightedness that befall all nations, rich and poor—and the myopia has worsened considerably in recent years. Public-health programs are low on money; hospitals are stretched perilously thin; crucial funding is being slashed. And while we tend to think of science when we think of pandemic response, the worse the situation, the more the defense depends on political leadership.

When Ebola flared in 2014, the science-minded President Barack Obama calmly and quickly took the reins. The White House is now home to a president who is neither calm nor science-minded. We should not underestimate what that may mean if risk becomes reality.

Bill Gates, whose foundation has studied pandemic risks closely, is not a man given to alarmism. But when I spoke with him, he described simulations showing that a severe flu pandemic, for instance, could kill more than 33 million people worldwide in just 250 days. That possibility, and the world’s continued inability to adequately prepare for it, is one of the few things that shake Gates’s trademark optimism and challenge his narrative of global progress. “This is a rare case of me being the bearer of bad news,” he told me. “Boy, do we not have our act together.”

Preparing for a pandemic ultimately boils down to real people and tangible things: A busy doctor who raises an eyebrow when a patient presents with an unfamiliar fever. A nurse who takes a travel history. A hospital wing in which patients can be isolated. A warehouse where protective masks are stockpiled. A factory that churns out vaccines. A line on a budget. A vote in Congress. “It’s like a chain—one weak link and the whole thing falls apart,” says Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. “You need no weak links.”

Among all known pandemic threats, influenza is widely regarded as the most dangerous. Its various strains are constantly changing, sometimes through subtle mutations in their genes, and sometimes through dramatic reshuffles. Even in non-pandemic years, when new viruses aren’t sweeping the world, the more familiar strains kill up to 500,000 people around the globe. Their ever-changing nature explains why the flu vaccine needs to be updated annually. It’s why a disease that is sometimes little worse than a bad cold can transform into a mass-murdering monster. And it’s why flu is the disease the U.S. has invested the most in tracking. An expansive surveillance network constantly scans for new flu viruses, collating alerts raised by doctors and results from lab tests, and channeling it all to the CDC, the spider at the center of a thrumming worldwide web.

Yet just 10 years ago, the virus that the world is most prepared for caught almost everyone off guard. In the early 2000s, the CDC was focused mostly on Asia, where H5N1

—the type of flu deemed most likely to cause the next pandemic—was running wild among poultry and waterfowl. But while experts fretted about H5N1 in birds in the East, new strains of H1N1 were evolving within pigs in the West. One of those swine strains jumped into humans in Mexico, launching outbreaks there and in the U.S. in early 2009. The surveillance web picked it up only in mid-April of that year, when the CDC tested samples from two California children who had recently fallen ill.

One of the most sophisticated disease-detecting networks in the world had been blindsided by a virus that had sprung up in its backyard, circulated for months, and snuck into the country unnoticed. "We joked that the influenza virus is listening in on our conference calls," says Daniel Jernigan, who directs the CDC's Influenza Division. "It tends to do whatever we're least expecting."

The pandemic caused problems for vaccine manufacturers, too. Most flu vaccines are made by growing viruses in chicken eggs—the same archaic method that's been used for 70 years. Every strain grows differently, so manufacturers must constantly adjust to each new peculiarity. Creating flu vaccines is an artisanal affair, more like cultivating a crop than making a pharmaceutical. The process works reasonably well for seasonal flu, which arrives on a predictable schedule. It fails miserably for pandemic strains, which do not.

In 2009, the vaccine for the new pandemic strain of H1N1 flu arrived slowly. (Then–CDC director Tom Frieden told the press, "Even if you yell at the eggs, it won't grow any faster.") Once the pandemic was officially declared, it took four months before the doses even *began* to roll out in earnest. By then the disaster was already near its peak. Those doses prevented no more than 500 deaths—the fewest of any flu season in the surrounding 10-year period. Some 12,500 Americans died.

The egg-based system depends on chickens, which are themselves vulnerable to flu. And since viruses can mutate within the eggs, the resulting vaccines don't always match the strains that are circulating. But vaccine makers have few incentives to use anything else. Switching to a different process would cost billions, and why bother? Flu vaccines are low-margin products, which only about 45 percent of Americans get in a normal year. So when demand soars during a pandemic, the supply is not set to cope.

American hospitals, which often operate unnervingly close to full capacity, likewise struggled with the surge of patients. Pediatric units were hit especially hard by H1N1, and staff became exhausted from continuously caring for sick children. Hospitals almost ran out of the life-support units that sustain people whose lungs and hearts start to fail. The health-care system didn't break, but it came too close for comfort—especially for what turned out to be a training-wheels pandemic. The 2009 H1N1 strain killed merely 0.03 percent of those it infected; by contrast, the 1918 strain had killed 1 to 3 percent, and the H7N9 strain currently circulating in China has a fatality rate of 40 percent.

"A lot of people said that we dodged a bullet in 2009, but nature just shot us with a BB gun," says Richard Hatchett, the CEO of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations. Tom Inglesby, a biosecurity expert at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, told me that if a 1918-style pandemic hit, his hospital "would need in the

realm of seven times as many critical-care beds and four times as many ventilators as we have on hand."

That the U.S. could be so ill-prepared for flu, of all things, should be deeply concerning. The country has a dedicated surveillance web, antiviral drugs, and an infrastructure for making and deploying flu vaccines. None of that exists for the majority of other emerging infectious diseases.

Anthony Fauci's office walls are plastered with certificates, magazine articles, and other mementos from his 34-year career as NIAID director, including photos of him with various presidents. In one picture, he stands in the Oval Office with Bill Clinton and Al Gore, pointing to a photo of HIV latching onto a white blood cell. In another, George W. Bush fastens the Presidential Medal of Freedom around his neck. Fauci has counseled every president from Ronald Reagan through Barack Obama about the problem of epidemics, because each of them has needed that counsel. "This transcends administrations," he tells me.

Reagan and the elder Bush had to face the emergence and proliferation of HIV. Clinton had to deal with the arrival of West Nile virus. Bush the younger had to contend with anthrax and SARS. Barack Obama saw a flu pandemic in his third month in office, MERS and Ebola at the start of his second term, and Zika at the dusk of his presidency. The responses of the presidents varied, Fauci told me: Clinton went on autopilot; the younger Bush made public health part of his legacy, funding an astonishingly successful anti-HIV program; Obama had the keenest intellectual interest in the subject.

And Donald Trump? "I haven't had any interaction with him yet," Fauci says. "But in fairness, there hasn't been a situation."

There surely will be, though. At some point, a new virus will emerge to test Trump's mettle. What happens then? He has no background in science or health, and has surrounded himself with little such expertise. The President's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology, a group of leading scientists who consult on policy matters, is dormant. The Office of Science and Technology Policy, which has advised presidents on everything from epidemics to nuclear disasters since 1976, is diminished. The head of that office typically acts as the president's chief scientific consigliere, but to date no one has been appointed.

Organizing a federal response to an emerging pandemic is harder than one might think. The largely successful U.S. response to Ebola in 2014 benefited from the special appointment of an "Ebola czar"—Ron Klain—to help coordinate the many agencies that face unclear responsibilities. How will Trump manage such a situation? Back in 2014, he called Obama a "psycho" for not banning flights from Ebola-afflicted countries, even though no direct flights existed, and even though health experts noted that travel restrictions hadn't helped control SARS or H1N1. Counterintuitively, flight bans increase the odds that outbreaks will spread by driving fearful patients underground, forcing them to seek alternative and even illegal transport routes. They also discourage health workers from helping to contain foreign outbreaks, for fear that they'll be denied reentry into their

home country. Trump clearly felt that such Americans *should* be denied re-entry. “KEEP THEM OUT OF HERE!” he tweeted, before questioning the evidence that Ebola is not as contagious as is commonly believed.

Trump called Obama “dumb” for deploying the military to countries suffering from the Ebola outbreak, and he now commands that same military. His dislike of outsiders and disdain for diplomacy could lead him to spurn the cooperative, outward-facing strategies that work best to contain emergent pandemics.

Perhaps the two most important things a leader can personally provide in the midst of an epidemic are reliable information and a unifying spirit. In the absence of strong countermeasures, severe outbreaks tear communities apart, forcing people to fear their neighbors; the longest-lasting damage can be psycho-social. Trump’s tendency to tweet rashly, delegitimize legitimate sources of information, and readily buy into conspiracy theories could be disastrous.

THE BIRTH OF A NEW AMERICAN ARISTOCRACY

by Matthew Stewart

[JUNE 2018]

The pandemic that Ed Yong foreshadowed—the global coronavirus outbreak—did not affect everyone in the U.S. equally, a subject that *The Atlantic* explored from many angles. Just look at employment: Many workers could continue their jobs remotely, without interruption; those whose employment was bound to the physical world were hit hard, and immediately. Essential workers—in hospitals, convenience stores, delivery trucks—were likely to be low-paid and unprotected. The pandemic threw class divisions and inequities into sharp relief.

Social mobility has long served both as a social glue and as a moral justification for the system we have. Is America a place where the ordinary person gets a fair shake and a pretty good chance to move up the ladder? Or is it more often the case that people born with advantages of wealth and privilege pass those advantages to their descendants? The first idea is embodied in rags-to-riches stories from the 19th century and in self-help books from our own time. The second is summed up by a familiar saying about being born on third base and thinking you've hit a triple. There has always been a tension—some would say a contradiction—between these views of American life. The notion of "meritocracy" lies at the center of the argument. One side says: Anyone can succeed who can jump through the hoops. The other side counters: Generation after generation, a small group gets help.

The philosopher Matthew Stewart called this small group "the 9.9 percent" in a 2018 *Atlantic* cover story, "The Birth of a New American Aristocracy," abridged here. Stewart, the author of *Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic* (2014) and *The Management Myth: Why Experts Keep Getting It Wrong* (2019), focused intently on this central fact: Social mobility is at a low point and economic inequality at a high—and mountains of data from many countries underscore the relationship between the two phenomena. In particular, Stewart summarized the findings of the economist Alan Krueger: "Rising immobility and rising inequality aren't like two pieces of driftwood that happen to have shown up on the beach at the same time… They wash up together on every shore." The class divide in America, Stewart warned, is fast becoming unbridgeable.

Let's talk first about money—even if money is only one part of what makes the new aristocrats special. There is a familiar story about rising inequality in the United States, and its stock characters are well known. The villains are the fossil-fueled plutocrat, the Wall Street fat cat, the callow tech bro, and the rest of the so-called top 1 percent. The good guys

are the 99 percent, otherwise known as “the people” or “the middle class.” The arc of the narrative is simple: Once we were equal, but now we are divided. The story has a grain of truth to it. But it gets the characters and the plot wrong in basic ways.

It is in fact the top 0.1 percent who have been the big winners in the growing concentration of wealth over the past half century. According to the UC Berkeley economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, the 160,000 or so households in that group held 22 percent of America’s wealth in 2012, up from 10 percent in 1963. If you’re looking for the kind of money that can buy elections, you’ll find it inside the top 0.1 percent alone.

Every piece of the pie picked up by the 0.1 percent, in relative terms, had to come from the people below. But not everyone in the 99.9 percent gave up a slice. Only those in the bottom 90 percent did. At their peak, in the mid-1980s, people in this group held 35 percent of the nation’s wealth. Three decades later that had fallen 12 points—exactly as much as the wealth of the 0.1 percent rose.

In between the top 0.1 percent and the bottom 90 percent is a group that has been doing just fine. It has held on to its share of a growing pie decade after decade. And as a group, it owns substantially more wealth than do the other two combined. This is the new aristocracy. We are the 9.9 percent.

So what kind of characters are we, the 9.9 percent? We are mostly not like those flamboyant political manipulators from the 0.1 percent. We’re a well-behaved, flannel-suited crowd of lawyers, doctors, dentists, mid-level investment bankers, M.B.A.s with opaque job titles, and assorted other professionals—the kind of people you might invite to dinner. In fact, we’re so self-effacing, we deny our own existence. We keep insisting that we’re “middle class.”

As of 2016, it took $1.2 million in net worth to make it into the 9.9 percent; $2.4 million to reach the group’s median; and $10 million to get into the top 0.9 percent. (And if you’re not there yet, relax: Our club is open to people who are on the right track and have the right attitude.) “We are the 99 percent” sounds righteous, but it’s a slogan, not an analysis. The families at our end of the spectrum wouldn’t know what to do with a pitchfork.

We are also mostly, but not entirely, white. According to a Pew Research Center analysis, African Americans represent 1.9 percent of the top 10th of households in wealth; Hispanics, 2.4 percent; and all other minorities, including Asian and multiracial individuals, 8.8 percent—even though those groups together account for 35 percent of the total population.

One of the hazards of life in the 9.9 percent is that our necks get stuck in the upward position. We gaze upon the 0.1 percent with a mixture of awe, envy, and eagerness to obey. As a consequence, we are missing the other big story of our time. We have left the 90 percent in the dust—and we’ve been quietly tossing down roadblocks behind us to make sure that they never catch up.

Let’s suppose that you start off right in the middle of the American wealth distribution. How high would you have to jump to make it into the 9.9 percent? In financial terms, the measurement is easy and the trend is unmistakable. In 1963, you would have needed to

multiply your wealth six times. By 2016, you would have needed to leap twice as high—increasing your wealth 12-fold—to scrape into our group. If you boldly aspired to reach the middle of our group rather than its lower edge, you'd have needed to multiply your wealth by a factor of 25. On this measure, the 2010s look much like the 1920s.

If you are starting at the median for people of color, you'll want to practice your financial pole-vaulting. The Institute for Policy Studies calculated that, setting aside money invested in "durable goods" such as furniture and a family car, the median black family had net wealth of $1,700 in 2013, and the median Latino family had $2,000, compared with $116,800 for the median white family. A 2015 study in Boston found that the wealth of the median white family there was $247,500, while the wealth of the median African American family was $8. That is not a typo. That's two grande cappuccinos. That and another 300,000 cups of coffee will get you into the 9.9 percent.

None of this matters, you will often hear, because in the United States everyone has an opportunity to make the leap: Mobility justifies inequality. As a matter of principle, this isn't true. In the United States, it also turns out not to be true as a factual matter. Contrary to popular myth, economic mobility in the land of opportunity is not high, and it's going down.

Imagine yourself on the socioeconomic ladder with one end of a rubber band around your ankle and the other around your parents' rung. The strength of the rubber determines how hard it is for you to escape the rung on which you were born. If your parents are high on the ladder, the band will pull you up should you fall; if they are low, it will drag you down when you start to rise. Economists represent this concept with a number they call "intergenerational earnings elasticity," or IGE, which measures how much of a child's deviation from average income can be accounted for by the parents' income. An IGE of zero means that there's no relationship at all between parents' income and that of their offspring. An IGE of one says that the destiny of a child is to end up right where she came into the world.

According to Miles Corak, an economics professor at the City University of New York, half a century ago IGE in America was less than 0.3. Today, it is about 0.5. In America, the game is half over once you've selected your parents. IGE is now higher here than in almost every other developed economy. On this measure of economic mobility, the United States is more like Chile or Argentina than Japan or Germany.

The story becomes even more disconcerting when you see just where on the ladder the tightest rubber bands are located. Canada, for example, has an IGE of about half that of the U.S. Yet from the middle rungs of the two countries' income ladders, offspring move up or down through the nearby deciles at the same respectable pace. The difference is in what happens at the extremes. In the United States, it's the children of the bottom decile and, above all, the top decile—the 9.9 percent—who settle down nearest to their starting point. Here in the land of opportunity, the taller the tree, the closer the apple falls.

All of this analysis of wealth percentiles, to be clear, provides only a rough start in understanding America's evolving class system. People move in and out of wealth categories all the time without necessarily changing social class, and they may belong to a different class in their own eyes than they do in others'. Yet even if the trends in the monetary statistics are imperfect illustrations of a deeper process, they are nonetheless registering something of the extraordinary transformation that's taking place in our society.

A few years ago, Alan Krueger, an economist and a former chairman of the Obama administration's Council of Economic Advisers, was reviewing the international mobility data when he caught a glimpse of the fundamental process underlying our present moment. Rising immobility and rising inequality aren't like two pieces of driftwood that happen to have shown up on the beach at the same time, he noted. They wash up together on every shore. Across countries, the higher the inequality, the higher the IGE. It's as if human societies have a natural tendency to separate, and then, once the classes are far enough apart, to crystallize.

Economists are prudent creatures, and they'll look up from an analysis like Krueger's and remind you that it shows only correlation, not causation. That's a convenient hedge for those of us at the top because it keeps alive one of the founding myths of America's meritocracy: that *our* success has nothing to do with *other people's* failure. It's a pleasant idea. But around the world and throughout history, the wealthy have advanced the crystallization process in a straightforward way. They have taken their money out of productive activities and put it into walls. Throughout history, moreover, one social group above all others has assumed responsibility for maintaining and defending these walls. Its members used to be called aristocrats. Now we're the 9.9 percent. The main difference is that we have figured out how to use the pretense of being part of the middle as one of our strategies for remaining on top.

Krueger gave his findings about immobility and inequality a name: the Great Gatsby Curve.

Money can't buy you class, or so my grandmother used to say. But it can buy a private detective. Grandmother was a Kentucky debutante and sometime fashion model (kind of like Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, weirdly enough), so she knew what to do when her eldest son announced his intention to marry a woman from Spain. A gumshoe promptly reported back that the prospective bride's family made a living selling newspapers on the streets of Barcelona. Grandmother instituted an immediate and total communications embargo. In fact, my mother's family owned and operated a large paper-goods factory. When children came, Grandmother at last relented. Determined to do the right thing, she arranged for the new family, then on military assignment in Hawaii, to be inscribed in the New York *Social Register*.

Sociologists would say, in their dry language, that my grandmother was a zealous manager of the family's social capital—and she wasn't about to let some Spanish street urchin run away with it. She did have a point, even if her facts were wrong. Money may be

the measure of wealth, but it is far from the only form of it. Family, friends, social networks, personal health, culture, education, and even location are all ways of being rich, too. These nonfinancial forms of wealth, as it turns out, aren't simply perks of membership in our aristocracy. They define us.

We are the people of good family, good health, good schools, good neighborhoods, and good jobs. We may want to call ourselves the "5Gs" rather than the 9.9 percent. We are so far from the not-so-good people on all of these dimensions, we are beginning to resemble a new species. And, just as in Grandmother's day, the process of speciation begins with a love story—or, if you prefer, sexual selection.

The polite term for the process is *assortative mating*. The phrase is sometimes used to suggest that this is another of the wonders of the internet age, where popcorn at last meets butter and Yankees fan finds Yankees fan. In fact, the frenzy of assortative mating today results from a truth that would have been generally acknowledged by the heroines of any Jane Austen novel: Rising inequality decreases the number of suitably wealthy mates even as it increases the reward for finding one and the penalty for failing to do so. According to one study, the last time marriage partners sorted themselves by educational status as much as they do now was in the 1920s.

For most of us, the process is happily invisible. You meet someone under a tree on an exclusive campus or during orientation at a high-powered professional firm, and before you know it, you're twice as rich. But sometimes—Grandmother understood this well—extra measures are called for. That's where our new technology puts bumbling society detectives to shame. Ivy Leaguers looking to mate with their equals can apply to join a dating service called the League. It's selective, naturally: Only 20 to 30 percent of New York applicants get in. It's sometimes called "Tinder for the elites."

It is misleading to think that assortative mating is symmetrical, as in city mouse marries city mouse and country mouse marries country mouse. A better summary of the data would be: Rich mouse finds love, and poor mouse gets screwed. It turns out—who knew?—that people who are struggling to keep it all together have a harder time hanging on to their partner. According to the Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, 60 years ago just 20 percent of children born to parents with a high-school education or less lived in a single-parent household; now that figure is nearly 70 percent. Among college-educated households, by contrast, the single-parent rate remains less than 10 percent. Since the 1970s, the divorce rate has declined significantly among college-educated couples, while it has risen dramatically among couples with only a high-school education—even as marriage itself has become less common. The rate of single parenting is in turn the single most significant predictor of social immobility across counties, according to a study led by the Stanford economist Raj Chetty.

None of which is to suggest that individuals are wrong to seek a suitable partner and make a beautiful family. People should—and presumably always will—pursue happiness in this way. It's one of the delusions of our meritocratic class, however, to assume that if our actions are individually blameless, then the sum of our actions will be good for society. We may have studied Shakespeare on the way to law school, but we have little sense for

the tragic possibilities of life. The fact of the matter is that we have silently and collectively opted for inequality, and this is what inequality does. It turns marriage into a luxury good, and a stable family life into a privilege that the moneyed elite can pass along to their children. How do we think that's going to work out?

The skin colors of the nation's elite student bodies are more varied now, as are their genders, but their financial bones have calcified over the past 30 years. In 1985, 54 percent of students at the 250 most selective colleges came from families in the bottom three quartiles of the income distribution. A similar review of the class of 2010 put that figure at just 33 percent. According to a 2017 study, 38 elite colleges—among them five of the Ivies—had more students from the top 1 percent than from the bottom 60 percent. In his 2014 book, *Excellent Sheep*, William Deresiewicz, a former English professor at Yale, summed up the situation nicely: "Our new multiracial, gender-neutral meritocracy has figured out a way to make itself hereditary."

The wealthy can also draw on a variety of affirmative-action programs designed just for them. As Daniel Golden points out in *The Price of Admission*, legacy-admissions policies reward those applicants with the foresight to choose parents who attended the university in question. Athletic recruiting, on balance and contrary to the popular wisdom, also favors the wealthy, whose children pursue lacrosse, squash, fencing, and the other cost-intensive sports at which private schools and elite public schools excel. And, at least among members of the 0.1 percent, the old-school method of simply handing over some of Daddy's cash has been making a comeback. (Witness Jared Kushner, Harvard graduate.)

The mother lode of all affirmative-action programs for the wealthy, of course, remains the private school. Only 2.2 percent of the nation's students graduate from nonsectarian private high schools, and yet these graduates account for 26 percent of students at Harvard and 28 percent of students at Princeton. The *other* affirmative-action programs, the kind aimed at diversifying the look of the student body, are no doubt well intended. But they are to some degree merely an extension of this system of wealth preservation. Their function, at least in part, is to indulge rich people in the belief that their college is open to all on the basis of merit.

The plummeting admission rates of the very top schools nonetheless leave many of the children of the 9.9 percent facing long odds. But not to worry, junior 9.9 percenters! We've created a new range of elite colleges just for you. Thanks to ambitious university administrators and the ever-expanding rankings machine at *U.S. News & World Report*, 50 colleges are now as selective as Princeton was in 1980, when I applied. The colleges seem to think that piling up rejections makes them special. In fact, it just means that they have collectively opted to deploy their massive, tax-subsidized endowments to replicate privilege rather than fulfill their duty to produce an educated public.

The only thing going up as fast as the rejection rates at selective colleges is the astounding price of tuition. Measured relative to the national median salary, tuition and fees at top colleges more than tripled from 1963 to 2013. Throw in the counselors, the

whisperers, the violin lessons, the private schools, and the cost of arranging for Junior to save a village in Micronesia, and it adds up. To be fair, financial aid closes the gap for many families and keeps the average cost of college from growing as fast as the sticker price. But that still leaves a question: Why are the wealthy so keen to buy their way in?

The short answer, of course, is that it's worth it.

In the United States, the premium that college graduates earn over their non-college-educated peers in young adulthood exceeds 70 percent. The return on education is 50 percent higher than what it was in 1950, and is significantly higher than the rate in every other developed country. In Norway and Denmark, the college premium is less than 20 percent; in Japan, it is less than 30 percent; in France and Germany, it's about 40 percent.

All of this comes before considering the all-consuming difference between "good" schools and the rest. Ten years after starting college, according to data from the Department of Education, the top decile of earners from all schools had a median salary of $68,000. But the top decile from the 10 highest-earning colleges raked in $220,000—make that $250,000 for No. 1, Harvard—and the top decile at the next 30 colleges took home $157,000. (Not surprisingly, the top 10 had an average acceptance rate of 9 percent, and the next 30 were at 19 percent.)

It is entirely possible to get a good education at the many schools that don't count as "good" in our brand-obsessed system. But the "bad" ones really are bad for you. For those who made the mistake of being born to the wrong parents, our society offers a kind of virtual education system. It has places that look like colleges—but aren't really. It has debt—and that, unfortunately, is real. The people who enter into this class hologram do not collect a college premium; they wind up in something more like indentured servitude.

So what is the real source of this premium for a "good education" that we all seem to crave?

One of the stories we tell ourselves is that the premium is the reward for the knowledge and skills the education provides us. Another, usually unfurled after a round of drinks, is that the premium is a reward for the superior cranial endowments we possessed before setting foot on campus. We are, as some sociologists have delicately put it, a "cognitive elite."

Behind both of these stories lies one of the founding myths of our meritocracy. One way or the other, we tell ourselves, the rising education premium is a direct function of the rising value of meritorious people in a modern economy. That is, not only do the meritorious get ahead, but the rewards we receive are in direct proportion to our merit.

But the fact is that degree holders earn so much more than the rest not primarily because they are better at their job, but because they mostly take different categories of jobs. Well over half of Ivy League graduates, for instance, typically go straight into one of four career tracks that are generally reserved for the well educated: finance, management consulting, medicine, or law. To keep it simple, let's just say that there are two types of occupations in the world: those whose members have collective influence in setting their own pay, and those whose members must face the music on their own. It's better to be a member of the first group. Not surprisingly, that is where you will find the college crowd.

From my Brookline home, it's a pleasant, 10-minute walk to get a haircut. Along the way, you pass immense elm trees and brochure-ready homes beaming in their reclaimed Victorian glory. Apart from a landscaper or two, you are unlikely to spot a human being in this wilderness of oversize closets, wood-paneled living rooms, and Sub-Zero refrigerators. If you do run into a neighbor, you might have a conversation like this: "Our kitchen remodel went way over budget. We had to fight just to get the tile guy to show up!" "I know! We ate Thai takeout for a month because the gas guy's car kept breaking down!" You arrive at the Supercuts fresh from your stroll, but the nice lady who cuts your hair is looking stressed. You'll discover that she commutes an hour through jammed highways to work. The gas guy does, too, and the tile guy comes in from another state. None of them can afford to live around here. The rent is too damn high.

From 1980 to 2016, home values in Boston multiplied 7.6 times. When you take account of inflation, they generated a return of 157 percent to their owners. San Francisco returned 162 percent in real terms over the same period; New York, 115 percent; and Los Angeles, 114 percent. If you happen to live in a neighborhood like mine, you are surrounded by people who consider themselves to be real-estate geniuses. (That's one reason we can afford to make so many mistakes in the home-renovation department.) If you live in St. Louis (3 percent) or Detroit (minus 16 percent), on the other hand, you weren't so smart. In 1980, a house in St. Louis would trade for a decent studio apartment in Manhattan. Today that house will buy an 80-square-foot bathroom in the Big Apple.

The returns on (the right kind of) real estate have been so extraordinary that, according to some economists, real estate alone may account for essentially all of the increase in wealth concentration over the past half century. It's not surprising that the values are up in the major cities: These are the gold mines of our new economy. Yet there is a paradox. The rent is so high that people—notably people in the middle class—are leaving town rather than working the mines. From 2000 to 2009, the San Francisco Bay Area had some of the highest salaries in the nation, and yet it lost 350,000 residents to lower-paying regions. Across the United States, the journalist and economist Ryan Avent writes in *The Gated City*, "the best opportunities are found in one place, and for some reason most Americans are opting to live in another." According to estimates from the economists Enrico Moretti and Chang-Tai Hsieh, the migration away from the productive centers of New York, San Francisco, and San Jose alone lopped 9.7 percent off total U.S. growth from 1964 to 2009.

It is well known by now that the immediate cause of the insanity is the unimaginable pettiness of backyard politics. Local zoning regulation imposes excessive restrictions on housing development and drives up prices. What is less well understood is how central the process of depopulating the economic core of the nation is to the intertwined stories of rising inequality and falling social mobility.

Real-estate inflation has brought with it a commensurate increase in economic segregation. Every hill and dale in the land now has an imaginary gate, and it tells you up front exactly how much money you need to stay there overnight. Educational segregation

has accelerated even more. In my suburb of Boston, 53 percent of adults have a graduate degree. In the suburb just south, that figure is 9 percent.

This economic and educational sorting of neighborhoods is often represented as a matter of personal preference, as in red people like to hang with red, and blue with blue. In reality, it's about the consolidation of wealth in all its forms, starting, of course, with money. Gilded zip codes are located next to giant cash machines: a too-big-to-fail bank, a friendly tech monopoly, and so on. Local governments, which collected a record $523 billion in property taxes in 2016, make sure that much of the money stays close to home.

But proximity to economic power isn't just a means of hoarding the pennies; it's a force of natural selection. Gilded zip codes deliver higher life expectancy, more-useful social networks, and lower crime rates. Lengthy commutes, by contrast, cause obesity, neck pain, stress, insomnia, loneliness, and divorce, as Annie Lowrey reported in *Slate*. One study found that a commute of 45 minutes or longer by one spouse increased the chance of divorce by 40 percent.

Nowhere are the mechanics of the growing geographic divide more evident than in the system of primary and secondary education. Public schools were born amid hopes of opportunity for all; the best of them have now been effectively reprivatized to better serve the upper classes. According to a widely used school-ranking service, out of more than 5,000 public elementary schools in California, the top 11 are located in Palo Alto. They're free and open to the public. All you have to do is move into a town where the median home value is $3,211,100. Scarsdale, New York, looks like a steal in comparison: The public high schools in that area funnel dozens of graduates to Ivy League colleges every year, and yet the median home value is a mere $1,403,600.

Racial segregation has declined with the rise of economic segregation. We in the 9.9 percent are proud of that. What better proof that we care only about merit? But we don't really want too much proof. Beyond a certain threshold—5 percent minority or 20 percent, it varies according to the mood of the region—neighborhoods suddenly go completely black or brown. It is disturbing, but perhaps not surprising, to find that social mobility is lower in regions with high levels of racial segregation. The fascinating revelation in the data, however, is that the damage isn't limited to the obvious victims. According to Raj Chetty's research team, "There is evidence that higher racial segregation is associated with lower social mobility for white people." The relationship doesn't hold in every zone of the country, to be sure, and is undoubtedly the statistical reflection of a more complex set of social mechanisms. But it points to a truth that America's 19th-century slaveholders understood very well: Dividing by color remains an effective way to keep all colors of the 90 percent in their place.

With localized wealth comes localized political power, and not just of the kind that shows up in voting booths. Which brings us back to the depopulation paradox. Given the social and cultural capital that flows through wealthy neighborhoods, is it any wonder that we can defend our turf in the zoning wars? We have lots of ways to make that sound public-spirited. It's all about saving the local environment, preserving the historic character

of the neighborhood, and avoiding overcrowding. In reality, it's about hoarding power and opportunity inside the walls of our own castles. This is what aristocracies do.

Zip code is who we are. It defines our style, announces our values, establishes our status, preserves our wealth, and allows us to pass it along to our children. It's also slowly strangling our economy and killing our democracy. It is the brick-and-mortar version of the Gatsby Curve. The traditional story of economic growth in America has been one of arriving, building, inviting friends, and building some more. The story we're writing looks more like one of slamming doors shut behind us and slowly suffocating under a mass of commercial-grade kitchen appliances.

The political theology of the meritocracy has no room for resentment. We are taught to run the competition of life with our eyes on the clock and not on one another, as if we were each alone. If someone scores a powerboat on the Long Island waterways, so much the better for her. The losers will just smile and try harder next time.

In the real world, we humans are always looking from side to side. We are intensely conscious of what other people are thinking and doing, and conscious to the point of preoccupation with what they think about us. Our status is visible only through its reflection in the eyes of others.

Perhaps the best evidence for the power of an aristocracy is to be found in the degree of resentment it provokes. By that measure, the 9.9 percent are doing pretty well indeed. The surest sign of an increase in resentment is a rise in political division and instability. We're positively acing that test. You can read all about it in the headlines of the past two years.

The 2016 presidential election marked a decisive moment in the history of resentment in the United States. In the person of Donald Trump, resentment entered the White House. It rode in on the back of an alliance between a tiny subset of super-wealthy 0.1 percenters (not all of them necessarily American) and a large number of 90 percenters who stand for pretty much everything the 9.9 percent are not.

According to exit polls by CNN and Pew, Trump won white voters by about 20 percent. But these weren't just any old whites (though they were old, too). The first thing to know about the substantial majority of them is that they weren't the winners in the new economy. To be sure, for the most part they weren't poor, either. But they did have reason to feel judged by the market—and found wanting. The counties that supported Hillary Clinton represented an astonishing 64 percent of the GDP, while Trump counties accounted for a mere 36 percent. Aaron Terrazas, a senior economist at Zillow, found that the median home value in Clinton counties was $250,000, while the median in Trump counties was $154,000. When you adjust for inflation, Clinton counties enjoyed real-estate price appreciation of 27 percent from January 2000 to October 2016; Trump counties got only a 6 percent bump.

The residents of Trump country were also the losers in the war on human health. According to Shannon Monnat, an associate professor of sociology at Syracuse, the Rust Belt counties that put the anti-government-health-care candidate over the top were those

that lost the most people in recent years to deaths of despair—those due to alcohol, drugs, and suicide.

To make all of America as great as Trump country, you would have to torch about a quarter of total GDP, wipe a similar proportion of the nation's housing stock into the sea, and lose a few years in life expectancy. There's a reason why one of Trump's favorite words is *unfair*. That's the only word resentment wants to hear.

Even so, the distinguishing feature of Trump's (white) voters wasn't their income but their education, or lack thereof. Pew's latest analysis indicates that Trump lost college-educated white voters by a humiliating 17 percent margin. But he got revenge with non-college-educated whites, whom he captured by a stomping 36 percent margin. According to an analysis by Nate Silver, the 50 most educated counties in the nation surged to Clinton: In 2012, Obama had won them by a mere 17 percentage points; Clinton took them by 26 points. The 50 least educated counties moved in the opposite direction; whereas Obama had lost them by 19 points, Clinton lost them by 31. Majority-minority counties split the same way: The more educated moved toward Clinton, and the less educated toward Trump.

The historian Richard Hofstadter drew attention to *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* in 1963; Susan Jacoby warned in 2008 about *The Age of American Unreason*; and Tom Nichols announced *The Death of Expertise* in 2017. In Trump, the age of unreason has at last found its hero. The "self-made man" is always the idol of those who aren't quite making it. He is the sacred embodiment of the American dream, the guy who answers to nobody, the poor man's idea of a rich man. It's the educated phonies this group can't stand. With his utter lack of policy knowledge and belligerent commitment to maintaining his ignorance, Trump is the perfect representative for a population whose idea of good governance is just to scramble the eggheads. When reason becomes the enemy of the common man, the common man becomes the enemy of reason.

Did I mention that the common man is white? That brings us to the other side of American-style resentment. You kick down, and then you close ranks around an imaginary tribe. The problem, you say, is the moochers, the snakes, the handout queens; the solution is the flag and the religion of your (white) ancestors. According to a survey by the political scientist Brian Schaffner, Trump crushed it among voters who "strongly disagree" that "white people have advantages because of the color of their skin," as well as among those who "strongly agree" that "women seek to gain power over men." It's worth adding that these responses measure not racism or sexism directly, but rather resentment. They're good for picking out the kind of people who will vehemently insist that they are the least racist or sexist person you have ever met, even as they vote for a flagrant racist and an accused sexual predator.

No one is born resentful. As mass phenomena, racism, xenophobia, anti-intellectualism, narcissism, irrationalism, and all other variants of resentment are as expensive to produce as they are deadly to democratic politics. Only long hours of television programming, intelligently manipulated social-media feeds, and expensively sustained information bubbles can actualize the unhappy dispositions of humanity to the point where they may be

fruitfully manipulated for political gain. Racism in particular is not just a legacy of the past, as many Americans would like to believe; it also must be constantly reinvented for the present. Mass incarceration, fearmongering, and segregation are not just the results of prejudice, but also the means of reproducing it.

The raging polarization of American political life is not the consequence of bad manners or a lack of mutual understanding. It is just the loud aftermath of escalating inequality. It could not have happened without the 0.1 percent (or, rather, an aggressive subset of its members). Wealth always preserves itself by dividing the opposition. The Gatsby Curve does not merely cause barriers to be built on the ground; it mandates the construction of walls that run through other people's minds.

But that is not to let the 9.9 percent off the hook. We may not be the ones funding the race-baiting, but we are the ones hoarding the opportunities of daily life. We are the staff that runs the machine that funnels resources from the 90 percent to the 0.1 percent. We've been happy to take our cut of the spoils. We've looked on with smug disdain as our labors have brought forth a population prone to resentment and ripe for manipulation. We should be prepared to embrace the consequences.

The first important thing to know about these consequences is the most obvious: Resentment is a solution to nothing. It isn't a program of reform. It isn't "populism." It is an affliction of democracy, not an instance of it. The politics of resentment is a means of increasing inequality, not reducing it. Every policy change that has waded out of the Trump administration's baffling morass of incompetence makes this clear. The new tax law; the executive actions on the environment and telecommunications, and on financial-services regulation; the judicial appointments of conservative ideologues—all will have the effect of keeping the 90 percent toiling in the foothills of merit for many years to come.

The second thing to know is that we are next in line for the chopping block. As the population of the resentful expands, the circle of joy near the top gets smaller. The people riding popular rage to glory eventually realize that we are less useful to them as servants of the economic machine than we are as model enemies of the people. The anti-blue-state provisions of the recent tax law have miffed some members of the 9.9 percent, but they're just a taste of the bad things that happen to people like us as the politics of resentment unfolds.

The past year provides ample confirmation of the third and most important consequence of the process: instability. Unreasonable people also tend to be ungovernable. I won't belabor the point. Just try doing a frequency search on the phrase *constitutional crisis* over the past five years. That's the thing about the Gatsby Curve. You think it's locking all of your gains in place. But the crystallization process actually has the effect of making the whole system more brittle. If you look again at history, you can get a sense of how the process usually ends.

Westover: I can't answer that question to my own satisfaction. Some of the rhetoric coming out of the right is completely unacceptable. There is no way to justify it. There is no way to rationalize it. The best I can do is try to understand what is behind it.

Prejudice is not new in this country. What is new is that, at the moment when we thought we had at last banished it to the fringe, here it is again, displayed openly in our public spaces. My own view is that economic distress activates prejudice. It makes it lethal. Of course, our country struggled with prejudice before Trump, but I don't think that prejudice had been weaponized to the extent that it is now. Immigration and affirmative action were not the top issues on people's minds. They probably weren't even in the top three.

But in a climate of desperation and economic realignment, of uncertainty about the future, people become tribal. They become vulnerable to narratives that demonize those who are not like them. Most rural Americans don't understand the vast technological and geopolitical shifts that are destroying their way of life. How could they? I don't understand those shifts, and I've been trying pretty hard. It's very easy for someone to come along and tell them that the problem is immigration. That's what happened in 2016. Trump told a more convincing story about what was happening in America than the left did.

Goldberg: So who does the Democratic Party represent?

Westover: It represents the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised people in our country—those held down by the overwhelming forces of structural prejudice. But it is difficult to defend the idea that, in general, it is the voice of the economically disenfranchised. Recently, the Brookings Institution and *The Wall Street Journal* found that in the United States, districts represented by Democrats are responsible for two-thirds of our national GDP. Just think about that. It's uncomfortable, but it might be time for us to admit that as a country we are engaged in a struggle between the haves and the have-nots, and there is a meaningful sense in which many of us on the left are the haves.

Goldberg: And those Democratic districts look very different from where you're from?

Westover: Where I'm from is dying. It's an entire ecosystem in decline. I was with my cousin recently, driving through the county seat where I grew up—a little town of about 5,000 people called Preston, Idaho. We were passing down the main street, and I saw that every single shop we'd gone to as kids was boarded up. But there was a brand-new funeral parlor, bringing the town's total funeral parlors to two. That means the town now has one grocery store and two funeral parlors. My cousin turned to me and said, "You know what? It's getting so the only thing there is to do around here is die."

Goldberg: Do you think of where you grew up as parochial?

Westover: I used to think of Idaho as parochial, and I used to think of cities as sophisticated. And in many ways, I was right. You can get a better education in a city; you can learn more technical skills, and more about certain types of culture. But as I've grown older, I've come to believe that there are many ways a person can be parochial. Now I

define parochial as only knowing people who are just like you—who have the same education that you have, the same political views, the same income. And by that definition, New York City is just about the most parochial place I've ever lived. I have become more parochial since I came here.

It's astonishingly difficult in this city to be truly close to someone who is not in your same socioeconomic group. For me, it's the single most striking fact about living here. Meaningful interactions are difficult to engineer. The divide is deep. And it is largely between those who sit in the front of the Uber and those who sit in the back of it.

Goldberg: Do people in Idaho assume that now that you live in New York, you've really left Idaho in some important way?

Westover: They do assume that, and they are right. At some point, you have to acknowledge that you can't embody your origins forever. At some point, you have to surrender your card. I'm more urbanite now than hayseed. I can't change that, but I certainly feel some grief over it.

Goldberg: So you have not broken charity with your home state?

Westover: I try not to. And a lot of people on the left haven't either. But from time to time you hear a strong tone of condescension emanating from our urban centers. You hear it in the way people talk about obesity rates in the rural United States, or about the lower number of college graduates from rural areas. These are serious problems that are hitting rural America specifically because of devastating shifts in our economic system, because of underinvestment in education, because people in these areas don't have access to decent health care or sometimes to any health care at all. You look at where the holes are in Obamacare—they're in rural areas. You look at where the opioid epidemic hit hard—it's in rural areas. You look at educational outcomes for rural kids—they're troubling, every report. These facts should be the foundation of our empathy, not of our contempt.

RED STATE, BLUE CITY

by David A. Graham

[MARCH 2017]

As a nation, Tara Westover observed, "we are engaged in a struggle between the haves and the have-nots"—a struggle mirrored in the different condition of urban America and rural America. City versus country has long been one of the central divisions in the American life. It is reflected in the U.S. Constitution, which gave the same number of senators to smaller and less populous states as it did to those with large and growing cities. That division is also reflected in most state legislatures, where politicians from nonurban areas have historically fought above their weight. It is a line of demarcation that runs through American literature.

That line has not always tracked neatly with ideology and partisanship. As late as the 1960s and '70s, conservative rural Democrats and liberal urban Republicans, both now virtually extinct, were a force in American politics. A combination of factors—the civil-rights movement; the migration of African Americans to urban areas; and Republican Richard Nixon's "southern strategy," which exploited racial fears to win the votes of white Democrats—brought geography and politics into closer alignment. As David A. Graham, an *Atlantic* staff writer, noted in a 2017 article, the United States is coming to resemble two countries: one rural and one urban, one conservative and one liberal. Reporting from North Carolina, with its urban blue pockets surrounded by a sea of rural red, Graham asked: What happens when city and state go to war?

The United States now has its most metropolitan president in recent memory: a Queens-bred, skyscraper-building, apartment-dwelling Manhattanite. Yet it was rural America that carried Donald Trump to victory; the president got trounced in cities. Republican reliance on suburbs and the countryside isn't new, of course, but in the presidential election, the gulf between urban and nonurban voters was wider than it had been in nearly a century. Hillary Clinton won 88 of the country's 100 biggest counties, but still went down to defeat.

American cities seem to be cleaving from the rest of the country, and the temptation for liberals is to try to embrace that trend. With Republicans controlling the presidency, both houses of Congress, and most statehouses, Democrats are turning to local ordinances as their best hope on issues ranging from gun control to the minimum wage to transgender rights. Even before Inauguration Day, big-city mayors laid plans to nudge the new administration leftward, especially on immigration—and, should that fail, to join together in resisting its policies.

But if liberal advocates are clinging to the hope that federalism will allow them to create progressive havens, they're overlooking a big problem: Power may be decentralized in the American system, but it devolves to the state, not the city. Recent events in red states where cities are pockets of liberalism are instructive, and cautionary. Over the past few years, city governments and state legislatures have fought each other in a series of battles involving preemption—the principle that state law trumps local regulation, just as federal law supersedes state law. It hasn't gone well for the city dwellers.

Close observers of these clashes expect them to proliferate in the years to come, with similar results. "We are about to see a shitstorm of state and federal preemption orders, of a magnitude greater than anything in history," says Mark Pertschuk of Grassroots Change, which tracks such laws through an initiative called Preemption Watch. By the group's count, at least 36 states introduced laws preempting cities in 2016.

State legislatures have put their oar in on issues ranging from the expansive to the eccentric. Common examples involve blocking local minimum-wage and sick-leave ordinances, which are opposed by business groups, and bans on plastic grocery bags, which arouse retailers' ire. Some states have prohibited cities from enacting firearm regulations, frustrating leaders who say cities have different gun problems than do rural areas. Alabama and Arizona both passed bills targeting "sanctuary cities"—those that do not cooperate with the enforcement of federal immigration laws. Even though courts threw out much of that legislation, other states have considered their own versions.

Arizona also made sure cities couldn't ban the gifts in Happy Meals (cities elsewhere had talked about outlawing them, on the theory that they lure kids to McDonald's), and when some of its cities cracked down on puppy mills, it barred local regulation of pet breeders, too. Cities in Oklahoma can't regulate e-cigarettes. Mississippi decreed that towns can't ban sugary drinks, and the beverage industry is expected to press other states to follow suit.

Most of these laws enforce conservative policy preferences. That's partly because Republicans enjoy unprecedented control in state capitals—they hold 33 governorships and majorities in 32 state legislatures. The trend also reflects a broader shift: Americans are in the midst of what's been called "the Big Sort," as they flock together with people who share similar socioeconomic profiles and politics. In general, that means rural areas are becoming more conservative, and cities more liberal. Even the reddest states contain liberal cities: Half of the U.S. metro areas with the biggest recent population gains are in the South, and they are Democratic. Texas alone is home to four such cities; Clinton carried each of them. Increasingly, the most important political and cultural divisions are not between red and blue states but between red states and the blue cities within.

Nowhere has this tension been more dramatic than in North Carolina. The state made headlines last March when its GOP-dominated general assembly abruptly overturned a Charlotte ordinance banning discrimination against LGBT people (and stating, among other things, that transgender people could use the bathroom of their choice). Legislators didn't just reverse Charlotte's ordinance, though; the state law, HB2, also barred every city

in the state from passing nondiscrimination regulations, and banned local minimum-wage laws, too.

North Carolina's legislature wasn't new to preemption—previously, it had banned sanctuary cities, prohibited towns from destroying guns confiscated by the police, and blocked local fracking regulations. It had restructured the Greensboro city council so as to dilute Democratic clout. In Wake County, home to Raleigh, it had redrawn the districts for both the school board and county commission, shifting power from urban to suburban voters. The state had seized Asheville's airport and tried to seize its water system too. Lawmakers had also passed a bill wresting control of Charlotte's airport from the city and handing it to a new commission.

HB2 was different, though—it set off a fierce nationwide backlash, including a U.S. Department of Justice lawsuit and boycotts by businesses, sports leagues, and musicians. Since corporate expansions, conventions, and concerts tend to take place in cities, North Carolina's cities have suffered the most. Within two months of HB2's passage, Charlotte's Chamber of Commerce estimated that the city had lost nearly $285 million and 1,300 jobs—and that was before the NBA yanked its 2017 All-Star Game from the city. Asheville, a bohemian tourist magnet in the Blue Ridge Mountains, lost millions from canceled conferences alone.

For Asheville residents, the series of preemption bills felt like bullying. "People are furious. They're confused," Esther Manheimer, Asheville's mayor, told me as her city battled to retain control of its water system. "We're a very desirable city to live in. We're on all the top-ten lists. How would anyone have an issue with the way Asheville is running its city, or the things that the people of Asheville value?"

National mythology cherishes the New England town-hall meeting as the foundation of American democracy, and once upon a time, it was. But the Constitution doesn't mention cities at all, and since the late 19th century, courts have accepted that cities are creatures of the state.

Some states delegate certain powers to cities, but states remain the higher authority, even if city dwellers don't realize it. "Most people think, *We have an election here, we elect a mayor and our city council, we organize our democracy—we should have a right to control our own city in our own way*," says Gerald Frug, a Harvard Law professor and an expert on local government. "You go to any place in America and ask, 'Do you think this city can control its own destiny?' 'Of course it can!' The popular conception of what cities do runs in direct conflict with the legal reality."

The path to the doctrine of state supremacy was rocky. In 1857, when New York State snatched some of New York City's powers—including its police force—riots followed. But after the Civil War, the tide of public and legal opinion turned against local government. Following rapid urban growth, fueled in part by immigration, cities came to be seen as dens of licentiousness and subversive politics. Moreover, many municipalities brought trouble on themselves, spending profligately to lure railroads through town.

CARRY ME BACK

by Drew Gilpin Faust

[AUGUST 2019]

Issues involving race are inseparable from American politics, whether they manifest openly or lurk deep below the surface. Like North Carolina's cities, the urban and urbanizing areas in Virginia—Richmond, Norfolk, Charlottesville, the suburbs adjacent to Washington, D.C.—are majority Democrat. The state as a whole, also like North Carolina, now fluctuates uneasily between Democrat and Republican. In 2017, white supremacists and neo-Nazis demonstrated in the streets of Charlottesville—a show of force that led to the murder of an innocent young woman and injuries to many others when one of the white supremacists drove his car into a crowd. In 2019, the state's governor, Ralph Northam, a Democrat, professed surprise to learn that his yearbook page from medical school displayed a racist photograph—a white student in blackface along with another student dressed as a member of the Ku Klux Klan; he eventually acknowledged that he was the student in blackface.

Those events, still fresh, provided the public backdrop for a personal essay by the historian Drew Gilpin Faust on race and memory in Virginia. Faust, a contributing writer at *The Atlantic* and a former president of Harvard University, was raised in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, where her family had been prominent for generations. In her essay, excerpted here, she reflected on Virginia's "long history of endeavoring to cover its racial inequities with a surface gentility" and also with a mythic story about "the supposed benevolence of paternalism." As Faust emphasized, Virginia's history may possess a particular character, but the core of that history is not Virginia's alone. And it is not merely history.

Faust is the author of *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (1996), which won the Francis Parkman Prize, and *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2008), which won the Bancroft Prize.

We stopped first at the cemetery. My brother had picked me up at the Philadelphia airport, and we had driven south and west from there—to Baltimore and Frederick, then down through the hills of the Blue Ridge, past the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers at Harpers Ferry and into the Valley of Virginia. Civil War country. The route of the Antietam and Gettysburg campaigns. The site of John Brown's incendiary attempt to foment a slave uprising. The place where we grew up.

Apart from one brief drive-through, I hadn't been back in nearly two decades—not since a visit the year after my father died. Now we could see next to his grave the dirt already unearthed to make a place for my stepmother's ashes the next day. We had come for her funeral and in my father's memory.

I had attended many burials here. The family plot houses uncles, aunts, grandparents, and great-grandparents, but no graves nearly as old as those dug soon after the nearby chapel was built in the 1790s. Edmund Randolph, the U.S. secretary of state and the nation's first attorney general, a Virginia governor and a member of the Constitutional Convention, is a few yards away, surrounded by a crowd of Randolphs, Pages, Burwells, and Carters—members of the First Families of Virginia who had migrated to this northern end of the Shenandoah Valley when the children of the 18th-century Tidewater gentry began to seek new lands and new opportunities. Nestled behind what has come to be known as the Old Chapel, in the quiet of an isolated crossroad, the beautiful little cemetery is so small that no one is much more than a stone's throw from everyone else.

My brother and I, the only visitors, wandered, reading epitaphs that called up Virginia's storied past or reminded us of figures from our childhood: the leader of my Girl Scout troop; a teacher from our elementary school; a classmate's mother, who was an extraordinary horsewoman; and my father's drinking buddy and his long-suffering wife.

But I wanted to be sure my brother saw one plaque in particular. I remembered its words dimly and had perhaps even tried to forget them altogether. But now here I was again, and I needed to remind myself. I knew it was at the back of the oldest part of the cemetery, and there I found it, partially hidden by leaves and vines, and covered with lichen that nearly obscured its inscription. But I could still read:

TO THE GLORY OF GOD
AND IN REMEMBRANCE OF THE MANY PERSONAL
SERVANTS BURIED HERE BEFORE 1865.
FAITHFUL AND DEVOTED IN LIFE, THEIR FRIENDS
AND MASTERS LAID THEM NEAR THEM IN DEATH
WITH AFFECTION AND GRATITUDE.
THEIR MEMORY REMAINS, THOUGH THEIR WOODEN MARKERS,
LIKE THE WAY OF LIFE OF THAT DAY,
ARE GONE FOREVER.
I.T.G. 1957

I.T.G. was my grandmother. In 1957, I was 10 years old. We both lived here.

There is a monument to the Confederate dead in this cemetery; there are markers for unknown Confederates killed in skirmishes nearby. That is complicated enough. But what is to be made of this invocation of slavery offered during my own lifetime? Of this tangible link between who we are now and who we were more than a century and a half ago? Between attitudes and practices that were taught to me as a child and the person I could or would become? Between the Virginia of 1957 or 1857 and the one that—on the very day in February 2019 when I stood in the Old Chapel cemetery—was confronting the crisis of a governor whose medical-school yearbook page had just been discovered to have included a repugnant, racist photograph of a man in blackface and another in Klan robes?

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Simon & Schuster
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020
www.SimonandSchuster.com

First Simon & Schuster trade paperback edition September 2020

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Title: The American crisis : what went wrong, how we recover / the writers of the Atlantic ; introduction by Jeffrey Goldberg ; afterword by Anne Applebaum ; edited by Cullen Murphy.
Other titles: Atlantic monthly (Boston, Mass. : 1993)
Description: First Simon & Schuster trade paperback edition. | New York : Simon and Schuster, 2020. | Includes index. | Summary: "Some of America's best reporters and thinkers offer an urgent look at a country in chaos in this collection of timely, often prophetic articles from The Atlantic"—Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020032887 (print) | LCCN 2020032888 (ebook) | ISBN 9781982157036 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781982157043 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781982157050 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: United States—Politics and government—21st century. | United States—Civilization—21st century.
Classification: LCC JK275 .A35 2020 (print) | LCC JK275 (ebook) | DDC 973.933—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020032887