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Fair Observer
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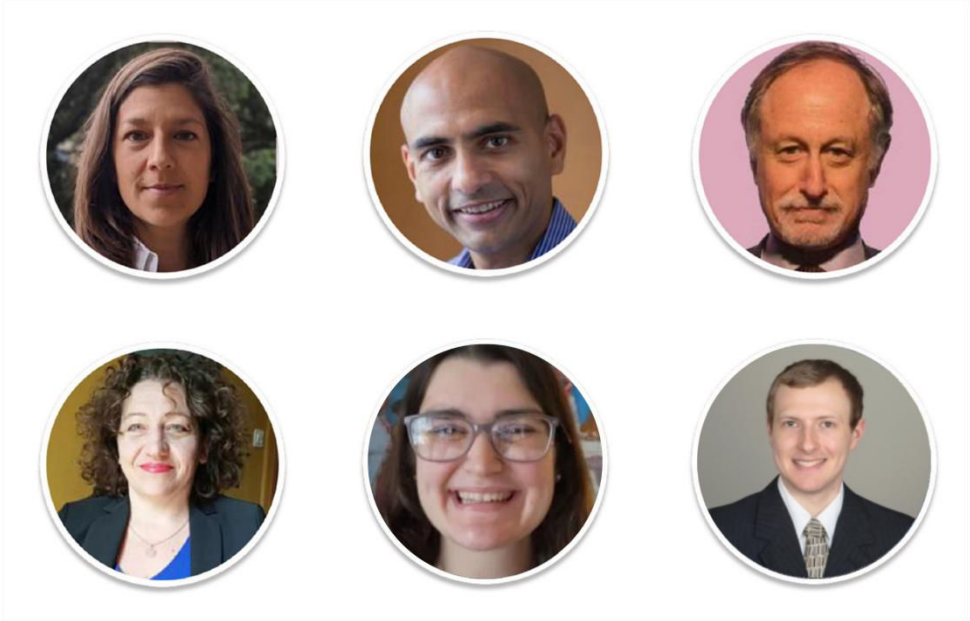

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Our digital media platform has more than 3,000 contributors from 90 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

Our education arm runs training programs on subjects such as digital media, writing and more. In particular, we inspire young people around the world to be more engaged citizens and to participate in a global discourse.

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Why Talking About Israel and Gaza Feels so Taboo in the Best US International Affairs School

Liv McAuslan
November 01, 2025

The most pressing foreign policy issue goes largely undiscussed by students at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. If students at the best international affairs school fail to confront the taboo behind the Israel-Hamas war, the United States will lose inquisitive, thoughtful and discerning future leaders who speak with the courage of their convictions.

The last four years at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, my peers and I coexisted within an elite sphere of the most influential foreign policy minds, US diplomats and international correspondents. We aspired to join these ranks, contributing to a better and safer world guided by American leadership.

From the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, I witnessed international affairs unfold in real-time that challenged my ideas about the US-backed global order and tested the very theories taught in my International Relations courses. Our Georgetown community reeled together through current events. With discussion and transparency, we always found a way through with open conversation, even if the lack of precise explanations of global calamities by trusted adults unsettled me.

The war between Israel and Hamas undoubtedly marks the biggest foreign policy conundrum of my time at Georgetown. Georgetown's School of Foreign Service is widely regarded as the best undergraduate international affairs school in the country, with a mission that values free speech, critical thinking and mutual respect. Why then did it feel so taboo to talk about Gaza?

The taboo about Gaza

The general consensus on campus agreed with US support and defense of Israel following October 7, but with new daily headlines of mounting civilian casualties, the restriction of humanitarian and food assistance and the possibility of starvation in Gaza, there seemed to be a reluctance to openly discuss US policy.

The Biden administration matched Israel's escalated offensive with increased arms sales and military assistance to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and I entered my junior year at Georgetown. My peers and I witnessed this foreign policy play out in real time. US strategy mirrored what we largely believed: Israel is our strongest and most vital Middle Eastern ally, whom we must support to ensure democracy, security and stability across the region.

However, as the civilian death toll increased and multiple violations of international humanitarian law came to light in Gaza, many people began to wonder if there was a red line in US support for Israel.

Many students at Georgetown grasped the complexities behind the Israel-Hamas war. Hamas is a terrorist organization that has weaponized civilian infrastructure, yet Israel has bombed hospitals and schools. Israel has blocked humanitarian aid and food into Gaza, engineering a

man-made famine that Hamas has exacerbated by not releasing the hostages.

The United States, under both former President Joe Biden and current President Donald Trump, has supplied billions of dollars in military assistance and arms sales to Israel. This assistance has contributed to nearly 70,000 deaths, especially women and children, in Gaza as of October 2025, yet skepticism persists over the reported casualties by the Hamas-run Health Ministry.

Instead of talking, a taboo emerged when it came to the ongoing conflict. Why did it feel bold to question the actions of the Israeli government, while also condemning October 7th and the terrorist attack by Hamas? Why was it so uncomfortable to contemplate unrestricted US military assistance to the IDF, while also supporting Israel's right to defend itself and affirming the US responsibility to stand by its strongest Middle East ally?

The foreign policy hot potato

The irony of the taboo at Georgetown to talk about Israel and Gaza is that Georgetown intends to create future policymakers, strategists and diplomats, yet discussing the conflict felt like a foreign policy hot potato. Students avoided the topic as if it were an active land mine or a political trip wire. Rather than fostering discussion, the complexity behind the war seemed only to foster a culture of silence.

During the spring of 2024, Georgetown's campus remained eerily silent while widespread protests took over numerous elite universities around the US. Georgetown students held some small protests, but they paled in comparison to the widespread encampments and sit-ins seen at Columbia University, University of California, Los Angeles and more.

This omerta was self-inflicted. In reality, Georgetown's faculty provided ample educational opportunities through the Center for Jewish Civilization and the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, including the Gaza Lecture Series, a Conversation with Families of Hostages in Gaza, guest speaker events and related classes to learn about the ongoing conflict. Still, a lack of free, open discussion among the student body persisted. Unlike other foreign policy issues my peers and I confronted during our time at Georgetown, Israel's war in Gaza seemed to blur lines of good and evil, right and wrong.

Understanding the taboo

Fear of saying the wrong thing inhibited students from saying anything at all. The anticipated lack of empathy and understanding behind discussing the conflict, as well as the potential career repercussions of public opinion, drove the silence at Georgetown.

On campus, the pervasive fear of being called anti-Semitic prevented much of the criticism of the actions of Israel's government. In the hyperpolarized and tense atmosphere relating to the ongoing conflict, any criticism against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was feared to be taken out of context as criticism against the Jewish people themselves. Speaking out against Israel's offensive, the civilian death toll and the starvation in Gaza could result in being labeled a sympathizer of Hamas.

At the same time, the rise of anti-Semitism across the US posed a real threat to many students' identities and comfort level to speak their minds. Many students were afraid to express their support for Israel, for fear of being met with anti-Semitism or being labeled as heartless and immoral because of the crisis in Gaza.

There appeared to be no middle ground or safe space to reach a common understanding. Social media and mainstream news had whittled the image of student protestors for Palestine into American-flag-burning, angry anarchists unable to have a conversation but more than willing to pitch a tent and protest. Criticism against the incursion in Gaza and ongoing international law violations seemingly grouped one in with the latter.

I remember one professor recommending that my class not join any protests. The long-standing, revered instructor of both introductory and seminar classes respected students' rights to assemble and speak freely, but warned against the repercussions of doing so and being part of an unpredictable crowd. To him, we all had bright futures in policy and government, and one photograph at a protest gone wrong was not worth the risk.

The recent politicization of the federal government under the Trump administration further raised the risk of speaking up and out. For the many students at the School of Foreign Service who aspire to work in government, taking a public opinion that differs from the current administration's could jeopardize future professional opportunities due to new hiring loyalty tests and heightened examination of social media activity.

The cost of silence

The sad truth is that this taboo isn't unique to Georgetown. When I shared my idea to write an article about the taboo of talking about Gaza, many of my friends from Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania and George Washington University immediately resonated with my thinking. I heard about a student from Columbia University who thought of writing a similar article, but ultimately feared having their name attached to any opinion piece traceable to the ongoing conflict.

If students at the highest-ranked international affairs schools in the US shy away from discussing Israel and Gaza, we will lose many thoughtful leaders who speak with the courage of their convictions. The mission statement at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service includes "educating future leaders who will make the world safer and more equitable, prosperous and peaceful," but if we are too afraid to speak up and have real, genuine and difficult conversations, we are doing ourselves and our country a disservice.

The United States needs bold, thoughtful and courageous leaders now more than ever. The failure to speak truth to power comes from the failure to speak openly, honestly and respectfully within our communities. At Georgetown, this starts by confronting the taboo behind talking about Israel and Gaza. We cannot be so afraid to speak that we say nothing at all.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Liv McAuslan is serving in the Peace Corps in The Gambia, West Africa, where she plans to be until December 2026. She is a recent graduate of Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service, where she received her B.S. in Foreign Service, studying International Politics and International Law. During her time at Georgetown, Liv interned with the US Agency for International Development, where she worked alongside their civil-military disaster response team. Inspired by the power of the US to do good in conflicts and crises, Liv took a leave of absence during her junior fall semester to volunteer on the Colombia-Venezuela border, assisting Venezuelan refugees and migrants. Upon returning to

Georgetown, she worked with the United Nations Refugee Agency in the nation's capital.

Belém, the Climate Crossroads: The "A Side" of Adaptation for the Global Future

Luiz Villares
November 04, 2025

Governments face a mounting climate bill after decades of failed mitigation. COP30 in Brazil is more than a conference; it is the last call for a planet in crisis, where climate adaptation has become an urgent priority for the survival of all. Financial systems and political will must align to fund prevention, resilience and equity before life itself becomes unaffordable.

In 2008, my first Conference of the Parties (COP) on Climate Change in Poznan, Poland, revealed a world that was mobilized but focused on greenhouse gas mitigation and energy transition. Climate adaptation — humanity's ability to adjust to inevitable changes — was the "B side" of the discussions, a secondary issue. The hope in Copenhagen (COP15, 2009) for a broad consensus on emissions reduction dissipated into a fiasco. The wave of fresh air in Paris (COP21, 2015), with its 1.5°C target, is proving to be short-lived. Today, that ceiling has been temporarily breached.

We will arrive at COP30 in Belém in Pará, Brazil, this November, with the planetary budget for greenhouse gas emissions rapidly reaching its limit in less than five years. We are rapidly approaching the 2°C limit — a "very uncomfortable" scenario for human life and the survival of countless species. Tipping points are just around the corner, and adaptation, once secondary, has risen to the "A-side" of the climate crisis.

The cost of inaction and the urgency of adaptation

In 30 years of exhaustive COPs, nations have failed to do their mitigation homework. Now, climate adaptation needs to be addressed first, and this is happening in a context of renewed climate denialism, in favor of an economy still dependent on fossil fuels. The costs of neglecting mitigation, transition and adaptation have escalated dramatically.

In 2008, the renowned Stern Report estimated the need for just over $500 billion annually for mitigation and a few billion for adaptation. Almost 17 years later, the costs exceed $9 trillion per year, with $5.4 trillion for mitigation, $3.4 trillion for climate transition and "only" $300 billion for adaptation — a figure that, according to experts, will be $1.35 trillion annually by 2035.

We missed a historic opportunity to pay a "payable bill" 15 years ago. Today, climate costs, especially for adaptation, fall on governments. Who will invest in renovations and construction to accommodate billions of people in scorching temperatures? Who will pay for coastal fortifications against rising sea levels? Who will bear the exponentially increasing damage from "climate disasters"? How can we invest in infrastructure without a financial return?

The introduction of the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and other funds is commendable, but they fall far short of what is needed. If the oil industry, with its net worth of over $100 trillion in reserves, had contributed significantly in 2008, the drama of

climate finance would be much less. We would be at COP30 celebrating a world below 1.5°C.

Brazil and COP30: a decisive moment

COP30 in Brazil emerges as a crucial turning point. Adaptation takes center stage in climate negotiations. Those who understand and work toward this idea will adapt more easily to the world that awaits us. We need to understand the interest-bearing nature of governments and appropriate the best knowledge from the risk industry and multilateral funds.

Capitalism, especially neoliberal capitalism, demands returns, even if they are patient and combined with philanthropy. The basic assumption is always profitability. So who will invest in retaining walls, rebuilding public roads and repairing flood damage? Governments. But financial markets demand austerity, and public debts, such as Brazil's, already commit a large part of budgets to honoring financial commitments.

We have a paradox: governments need to allocate more resources to adaptation, but their debts and climate costs continue to grow. There is no money today, much less tomorrow, for climate adaptation needs.

Given the scarcity of resources, climate financing must be structured with a view to risk avoidance, prioritizing costly and scarce public and private efforts over remediation in the future. Investments in prevention and the construction of resilient structures are much cheaper than paying the bill after the damage has been done. Insurance experts say that prevention today costs five times less than repair. This ratio may soon be 15 times more expensive, given the exponential increase in climate events.

Modeling future scenarios can no longer be based solely on the past. The climate events ahead are unknown. Climate science has competently predicted a 1.5°C increase as a viable ceiling for a decent life, but it also warns that increases above 3°C will not allow human life on Earth, except perhaps for a billionaire elite.

The challenges of climate finance have become the main item in the negotiations. The viability of our life on the planet requires a commitment to remain between 1.5°C and 2°C at most. The deadline for this is eight years or less. If denialist governments and industries continue to generate high emissions and invest minimally in sustainable solutions, we will see an increase in inequality and unpredictable impacts on the living conditions of the majority.

In another fifteen years, we will have a world that is financially rich in the hands of a few, but poor in biodiversity, with nature and ecosystems devastated, under indebted governments incapable of caring for their people. This is not the climate adaptation scenario I hope for our home, Planet Earth.

I still believe that global rentier capital can understand that adaptation is for everyone. An environmentally and socially possible world is challenged in its resilience by every tenth of a degree increase in temperature. Adaptation must come first and foremost as a chance for future generations to live a possible life here on Earth.

The paths are still possible. They involve understanding the need to make investments now and forever, with less profitability and an unconditional love for the lives of all planetary beings. There can only be one side of life for everyone on Earth. It is "Side A" of climate adaptation.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Luiz Villares is an environmentalist and project expert with 20 years of experience in the Amazon. From 2008 to 2023, he was the CFO of the Sustainable Amazon Foundation, the largest Brazilian organization for social and environmental projects in the Amazon, with an emphasis on supporting the bioeconomy, local entrepreneurship, education, citizenship and health for forest communities. He holds the title of Master of International Management "With Distinction" from the Thunderbird School of Global Management. Villares is also the author of articles published in the Stanford Social Innovation Review and academic articles, including "Blockchain and Conservation: why does it Matter", August 2020, "Environmental Management and Data for the SDGs", April 2021 and "Cryptocurrencies Effectiveness for Nature", August, 2022.

India's Deepfake Dilemma: The World's Biggest Democracy Tests the World's Newest Technology

Manish Maheshwari
November 05, 2025

India is pioneering a fourth model of AI governance, one grounded in democratic trust rather than state control or laissez-faire self-regulation. India's early legislation on synthetic media signals its intent to shape national policy and global norms around truth and technology. The world's largest democracy may become the first to regulate the world's newest threat to democracy itself: AI-generated deepfakes.

If the 20th century was about who controlled oil, the 21st will be about who controls truth. India, the world's largest democracy, has just entered this race.

On October 22, India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) released draft amendments to the Information Technology Rules (2021) that propose regulating synthetic media, including deepfakes and AI-generated content. The draft, open for public consultation until November 6, introduces a legal definition of "synthetically generated information" and mandates clear labeling of any content created or modified by algorithms.

If adopted, it would make India one of the first major democracies to legislate the blurred boundary between fact and fabrication. The proposal, according to media reports, would require platforms that enable or host synthetic content to display disclaimers covering at least 10% of an image or the first 10% of an audio clip. Large platforms, i.e., those with over five million users, would need to deploy automated detection tools and collect user declarations identifying AI-generated media.

Those who comply retain safe-harbor protection under India's IT law; those who don't could lose immunity for user content. The government's intent is clear: stem AI-driven misinformation, impersonation, and national security risks before they destabilize institutions or elections. Yet this ambition exposes a fundamental tension: how can a democracy encourage innovation while protecting reality itself?

A fourth path emerges

The world's three main AI governance models have already diverged. The EU's AI Act is rights-driven, emphasizing privacy and watermarking. The United States relies on self-regulation and voluntary industry pledges. China enforces state control through sweeping "deep synthesis" rules.

India is charting a fourth path: governance built on trust. By regulating synthetic media before it triggers a national crisis, New Delhi is attempting something rare: preemptive, proportionate regulation at scale in a democracy.

With over 900 million internet users and some of the world's fastest-growing AI startups, India's regulatory design will inevitably shape how emerging markets approach digital truth. In this sense, the draft is less about compliance and more about geopolitical signaling. It tells Washington, Brussels and Beijing alike that the Global South will not remain a passive consumer of tech rules set elsewhere.

From data sovereignty to truth sovereignty

India's digital policy evolution — from data localization to AI regulation — reveals a larger pattern: the assertion of digital sovereignty. What began as a debate over where data should reside has become a question of who decides what is real.

In practice, "truth sovereignty" means protecting the informational integrity of a billion citizens in an open, multilingual and highly polarized media ecosystem.

It's also a matter of soft power. If India can demonstrate that democracies can regulate AI media without resorting to censorship, it could export a new "Bangalore Consensus": an innovation-friendly, rights-respecting and transparency-rooted approach.

The global stakes

AI-generated misinformation is already a transnational problem. A deepfake robocall in the US used AI voice clones to suppress voters. Market shocks in Southeast Asia have stemmed from manipulated videos. In an era where influence can travel at the speed of an upload, governance must catch up with the generation.

Against this backdrop, India's experiment is a test case for the world: can regulation steer the digital future without strangling it? Failure would reinforce the view that only authoritarian systems can effectively police AI. Success would show that open societies can adapt fast enough to remain resilient. Either way, what India builds or breaks will resonate far beyond its borders.

The new arms race: trust

As the US and China compete over chips, India is competing over credibility. India's true export won't be semiconductors; it will be standards: frameworks for watermarking, provenance and responsible AI disclosure.

This is where India's deepfake regulation transforms from policy to diplomacy. A coalition of democracies around shared principles of digital integrity — an Indo-Pacific Charter on AI Authenticity — could be as influential as the Paris Agreement was for climate change.

Because in this century, trust is the new strategic resource.

If India gets it right

If done right, these regulations could do for information integrity what Aadhaar did for digital identity: provide the infrastructure for authenticity at scale. If done wrong, they could entangle innovators in red tape and push creativity underground. Either way, the rest of the world should pay attention.

India is not just regulating technology. It is redesigning the contract between democracy and truth. And if it succeeds, the next export from the world's largest democracy won't be software or services; it will be trust.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Manish Maheshwari is General Partner at BAT VC, a New York-headquartered venture capital firm backing AI, Fintech and Enterprise SaaS startups. He previously led Twitter India as Country Director and headed global new market expansion until its acquisition by Elon Musk. Earlier, he co-founded Fanory.ai (acquired by JetSynthesys), helped scale Flipkart before its $17 billion acquisition by Walmart and served as CEO of Network18 Digital. A Mason Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School and Wharton MBA, Manish served on the Governing Council of The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI). He writes about AI, innovation and policy and its implications on business and entrepreneurship.

Europe's Ambitions vs. Sobering Reality: What the Numbers Reveal

Emir Hadzikadunic
November 06, 2025

Europe confronts a sobering loss of global power as its economic, military and technological influence wanes. Once a model of integration and prosperity, the EU now trails the United States and China economically, while India and ASEAN rapidly close the gap. Without visionary leadership, Europe risks becoming a spectator in a multipolar world it helped create.

On October 16, the Jacques Delors Friends of Europe Foundation held a conference under the motto "Europe matters: now or never," underscoring both the EU's relevance and the urgency of the moment.

Just a month earlier, the current President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, had called for Europe's "Independence moment," warning: "Battle lines for a new world order based on power are being drawn right now." Yet when the EU looks squarely into the geopolitical mirror it so often avoids, what does it see? How does it measure up against the great powers shaping the twenty-first century, the United States, China, Russia and India?

In the year marking the centenary of visionary European architect Jacques Delors, the answer is stark. The numbers are unambiguous, and what they reveal is sobering: Europe's share of global power has long been in decline, and it continues to shrink rapidly.

Europe's decline relative to China, Russia and India

When Delors became President of the European Commission in 1985, the combined Gross National Product of the European Community was around ten times larger than China's. Today, the two economies are roughly equal in size, and within the next 25 years, Europe's economy is projected to be only half the size of China's.

This is not merely the story of an "old economy" losing ground; it reflects profound transformations in regulatory agility, innovations, digital sovereignty and the very architecture of the global order. Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's veteran diplomat, scholar and member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, calls it an unprecedented structural shift, something the world has not witnessed in 2,000 years.

Russia tells a different but equally revealing story. Its economy cannot be compared to the European economy as a whole; it is roughly equivalent to a single major European economy, such as Italy. Yet long-term dynamics are not promising for the EU either.

In 2000, Italy's nominal GDP was four times larger than Russia's. Today, they are neck and neck. Even more concerning is that European defense capabilities are falling behind those of Russia. Russian military expenditure is rising so rapidly that, when measured in purchasing power parity terms, it now exceeds the combined defense spending of all European countries, despite their efforts to boost budgets and rearm.

The troubling dynamics of the EU's relative decline are equally apparent with India. In 2000, France's economy ($1.36 trillion) was three times larger than India's ($468 billion). Today, it is smaller. The economy of the United Kingdom, then still a member of the EU, was nearly four times larger than India's, but it has now fallen behind.

In just a quarter-century, India has overtaken both France and the UK — a worrying trend for two permanent members of the UN Security Council. This raises an increasingly pressing question: as their relative power declines, how much longer can France and the United Kingdom retain their privileged status in the UN?

Across Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) bloc of ten countries has set itself up to become the world's fourth-largest economy, driven by integration, demographics and trade agility. In 2000, Germany's economy was three times larger than ASEAN's; today, they are roughly the same size, and by 2050, Germany is expected to be only half as large.

The projected growth for ASEAN in 2024 is 4.6%, significantly outpacing the EU's growth rate. If the current trends continue, their economies could be on par within the next 40 years. Ironically, Europe, once the model of regional integration, is now watching others perfect its own idea.

In America's shadow

The story of the EU–US relationship is one of symbols and numbers, of political dependence and growing economic imbalance. They enjoy a special political and security relationship, yet they remain economic competitors. In that competition, the EU once held the upper hand: in 2008, its economy was nearly $2 trillion larger than the US's. Today, the EU's economy has shrunk to roughly two-thirds the size of America's, with the US now boasting a nominal GDP around $10 trillion higher.

On a per capita basis, Europeans now produce roughly half as much as Americans ($46,000 versus $89,000). Europe's defense industry, too, depends heavily on American technology and equipment. Nearly 80% of European military procurement goes to foreign suppliers, with EU countries still relying on the US for software, strategic enablers and major platforms.

The imbalance is not only material but symbolic. In what many described as an embarrassing display of subservience, European

leaders, including British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, French President Emmanuel Macron, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Secretary-General Mark Rutte, sat around US President Donald Trump in the White House "like schoolchildren."

Even Arab and Muslim states reportedly avoided such optics during Gaza truce negotiations. The Independent called it an image of "unruly schoolchildren," while American commentator Benny Johnson dubbed it "the single most powerful image of 2025." To cap it all, NATO's Secretary-General reportedly referred to Trump as "daddy."

And now, "daddy" has imposed a new transactional strategy for Europe and Ukraine — no more aid, only arms sales. European allies are now expected to buy arms from the US to sustain Ukraine's defense. From Berlin to Tallinn, capitals are pledging purchases. Cynics could argue that Washington's strategy risks not only fighting Russia to the last Ukrainian, but also draining Europe to the last euro.

Searching for a new Delors

Three decades after Jacques Delors defined Europe's purpose, that purpose is faltering. The United States sets its security agenda. China and India define the scale of global growth. Russia dictates the pace of rearmament and challenges the European security order. ASEAN demonstrates what dynamic regionalism can achieve.

In the current digital realm, China commands WeChat, TikTok and a market of over three billion users in Asia, while the United States leverages Silicon Valley, Elon Musk and unmatched global reach. Overregulated Europe, by contrast, has little digital sovereignty and struggles to turn regulation into global innovation.

Reversing this decline will require greater European sovereignty, stronger leadership and a rediscovery of Europe's soul. Mario Draghi, former Italian Prime Minister and former President of the European Central Bank, warns in his report that the EU must increase annual investments by €800 billion ($930.9 billion), reduce bureaucracy and curb its digital dependence.

Delors guided, strengthened and united Europe as the world shifted from a bipolar to a unipolar order. But who, today, in Europe, can navigate the rougher seas of an emerging multipolar world?

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Emir Hadžikadunić brings together academic and professional expertise in diplomacy, foreign policy and international affairs, supported by extensive experience as a professor, researcher and diplomat. He is currently an Assistant Professor at the Sarajevo School of Science and Technology (SSST), a Visiting Professor at Albukhari International University (AIU) and a member of the Institute of Geopolitics, Economy and Security (IGES). His publications include two authored books, contributions to edited volumes published by Springer (Palgrave Macmillan) and others, as well as numerous articles in peer-reviewed academic journals. He is also a regular contributor to *Fair Observer*, *TRT World*, *Al Jazeera* and other leading media outlets in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He previously served as Bosnia and Herzegovina's Ambassador to Iran (2010–2013) and Malaysia (2016–2020), and worked with the EU, the US Agency for International Development (USAID)

and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) on post-war peace-building missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Unseriousness of Young Revolutionaries

Tara Yarwais
November 08, 2025

Young protesters across the world use humor, memes and pop culture to confront failing governments and rigid institutions. Their decentralized movements turn digital platforms into tools for organizing and resistance. This approach signals a lasting shift as Generation Z transforms protest into a global, creative challenge to authority.

Forget everything you think you know about revolution. The old model with stern-faced guards, manifestos and uniforms is obsolete. The new generation is taking action, and they're not waiting for a leader to tell them what to do. They're creating their own approach, using humor and cultural references like anime that catch the old guard off guard.

This isn't a lack of seriousness. It's a new kind of seriousness, an "unseriousness". Generation Z isn't just protesting power; they are trolling it into irrelevance.

Look at the imagery. In the 2025 Nepalese protests, one piece imagery is the closest you'll get to a uniform. In Morocco, as Gen Z demonstrators demand education reform and accountability, their social media is a blend of protest footage and pop culture. This isn't a coincidence. It's a deliberate signal.

Using anime and meme culture creates an immediate visual language that sets them apart from the political establishments they reject. They're fighting for a future they feel has been stolen.

Radicalization through shared language

The methods used to radicalize this generation are the same methods they use to organize. The pipeline isn't through dusty political pamphlets; it's through TikTok think pieces, virality and coded discussions in Discord servers and Telegram channels.

This generation is digitally native and globally connected (RIP Vine). They see Nepal's fight against a TikTok ban not as isolated but as part of the same struggle they're waging in Morocco for education or in dozens of other countries for climate justice. Algorithms don't respect borders, and neither does their solidarity, so even someone like me, who's never seen One Piece, knows what that hat means or what the flag looks like.

They're not radicalized by one ideology but by a shared experience of broken systems. The methods are the same because the medium is the message. A viral meme explaining complex policy is both education and a call to action. A shared anime screenshot signals alliance faster than any slogan. This decentralized, culturally fluid approach makes them incredibly resilient. You can't erase an idea if it's dressed as a cartoon.

Tactical frivolity as shield and weapon

This unseriousness is their smartest tactic. When Moroccan youth stage a sit-in, they frame it with the same humor they use online. Nepalese

protesters recreated couples' trends in the midst of smoke.

This does two things. First, it shields them psychologically. Facing police batons and a bleak future is crushing. Memes, music, shared aesthetics — they're connections. They build community and keep morale alive under overwhelming pressure. "This is why we're risking our lives to protest," shows that the stakes are real, but they're just being handled with jokes.

Second, it's a weapon that confuses those in power. State security knows how to handle angry mobs but has no playbook for naked protests or dance challenges, so when violence starts, it looks absurd and unnecessary.

The protesters aren't just winning the streets; they're winning the narrative by refusing to protest the way the state expects. Keep in mind, these are the same kids that dealt with recessions, school shootings and a whole pandemic. They're told they are lazy and have it easy, and are often looked at as a joke, so they became the comedians, staging a global roast of the powerful. Madagascar succeeded in forcing its now former President Andry Rajoelina to run away after facing crippling water and electricity shortages. Peru has been in unrest since September, and Nepal built a revolution on Discord.

At the same time, Morocco's Gen Z protesters, organized by an anonymous group called GenZ 212, used TikTok, Instagram and Discord to coordinate demands for education and healthcare reform. Their tactics spread to Kenya, Indonesia and the Philippines, decentralized, digitally coordinated, culturally rich and connected across borders. Why create a new game plan when those already worked?

The psychology of the frivolous fight

This shift runs deep. For a generation facing overlapping crises, old-school solemnity leads straight to burnout. Humor becomes a weaponized coping mechanism, a way to deal with the unbearable without being consumed.

It's also a hard truth. In an attention economy, you must capture the algorithm to capture the moment. A grim speech might get a 15-second news clip. A brilliantly absurd street act or viral dance for a cause can garner a million views on TikTok. It's a decentralized, self-spreading media strategy that old power structures can't control.

The world is on fire. The old guard waits for a revolution that looks like those in history books, preparing for a fight of fists. But the new resistance wins with a dance. They're proving the strongest way to challenge a broken system is to build a more compelling, more joyful world in its shadow.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Tara Yarwais is a Kurdish American. Born in Baghdad, she immigrated to the US in 2007. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology at Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee, and a master's in terrorism, security, and far-right extremism at Richmond University, London, England. It was during her graduate studies that Tara discovered her love of writing. Tara is passionate about understanding radicalization. Studies reveal that radicalization is a process and can turn people to terrorism or manifest in other, less visible forms of radical sentiment. Tara believes that understanding radicalization is the most effective way to counter terrorism.

Is Taylor Swift Really as Great as Shakespeare?*

Ellis Cashmore
November 08, 2025

Taylor Swift dominates global culture as her latest album, The Life of a Showgirl, breaks sales records and cements her influence across media. Critics and scholars debate whether her achievements mark commercial success or artistic greatness. Her music's endurance will test whether today's acclaim can secure her place in the artistic canon.

To those who pay attention to the zeitgeist, Taylor Swift is the defining person of the century, not so much an echo from the past or a harbinger of the future as the pure distillation of the present. She reflects others' lives and identities — restless and shifting — while her own life is mediated and molded by her fans, even as it unfolds. Those fans are not just fans: they are participants.

To everyone else, she's simply a woman who writes songs and somehow rules the world.

Rarefied group

When, in October, Swift's The Life of a Showgirl sold more than four million copies in its first week (the biggest debut since sales tracking began in 1991), industry watchers snatched at superlatives. "The biggest moment in the sales history of the business," said Hits Daily Double, crediting Swift's "ability to be ubiquitous in this ultra-segmented media era." The Financial Times placed her among a "rarefied group" of Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Michael Jackson and Madonna, all artists whose commercial power reshaped popular culture.

It's an understandable and perfectly justifiable comparison. Swift's achievements, in purely quantitative terms, are breathtaking. Her 12th studio album has outsold everything in memory: Adele's 25, Beyoncé's Renaissance, Billie Eilish's Happier Than Ever. Her Eras Tour has grossed more than $2 billion, the highest in history. She has turned record sales, an unfashionable metric nowadays, into a revivalist practice, with fans clasping vinyl, CDs and limited "variants" as if they were sacred objects.

But metrics alone don't make for greatness. Taylor outsells anyone in history. In terms of cultural significance, can she hold her own with the titans of pop music? The more difficult question is whether her cultural significance belongs to another entirely different order: not alongside Elvis and Madonna, but with the likes of William Shakespeare and Pablo Picasso.

Invention and translation

Elvis Presley poured American blues music into the blender in the 1950s, and it came out pureed, its African American essence hardly discernible. Elvis added a splash of vanilla and served it up to white audiences. He still channeled enough raw energy to draw the wrath of broadcasters, many of whom accused him of corrupting America's youth with "jungle music." But, while he frightened adults, he electrified teenagers. And, as we know, nothing electrifies teenagers like a ban. The more stations that banned his music, the more young people wanted to hear it.

Few artists have ever embodied rebelliousness so convincingly as Elvis: his transgressive music and voluptuous on-stage presence made him unsettling. But not for long: by 1960, after two years' service in the US Army, he returned as a

domesticated entertainer, his projects safe, formulaic and designed for the mass market.

The Beatles did something similar but in another register. They not only re-defined the idea of a group — self-writing, self-performing, British — but evolved so rapidly that they seemed to anticipate every new direction of the Swinging Sixties' imagination. They moved from the innocent peppiness of "She Loves You" in 1963 to the dreamscapes of "Tomorrow Never Knows" in 1966 to the meditative Indian-influenced "Within You Without You" of 1967. By 1970, when they announced the breakup of the band, the Beatles had expanded the meaning of pop music and helped establish it as a legitimate art form.

Michael Jackson was the first global star in the post-Civil Rights era. And, of course, he was African American. This is not quite the same as being black: for many, he wasn't black enough. He straightened his hair, lightened his skin, dressed in designer chic and escorted (and married) white women. Aesthetically, Jackson fused the visual and musical into spectacle using the then-emerging medium of the music video.

His groundbreaking 14-minute Michael Jackson's Thriller video was given an unheard-of global TV premiere on December 2, 1983. It didn't just sell albums; it remade MTV, fashion and choreography. It's also worth noting that MTV had a reputation for favoring white artists: Jackson wasn't the first African American to appear on the channel's playlists, but he became a regular.

So did Madonna, who, like Jackson, made a specialty of breaking taboos, in her case mostly relating to sex, gender and religion. Also like Jackson, she emerged when the video was becoming as important as the record, and hence, pop music was morphing into a new type of theater. Madonna proved expert in weaponizing the video, using visual narrative to provoke, annoy and, whenever possible, outrage as many people as possible. In the process, she challenged a culture still governed by patriarchal sensibilities. She was an original: Strategic, self-conscious and protective about her own image.

Can Taylor Swift claim a similar level of originality to Madonna or, indeed, any of the others? Probably not in content or presentation. She extends rather than creates. Her albums heave with heartache, unrequited love and breakups. Critics have accused her latest, Life of a Showgirl, of recycling melodies and even borrowing outright from earlier songs. The Guardian dismissed the album as "dull razzle-dazzle." Her own fans have described it as regression, a product of "brand maintenance." Lyrically, her confessions no longer catch the listener unaware, and her themes seem familiar.

Originality today may be defined less by invention than by translation: the ability to convert private feeling into public industry. Swift's distinction is her capacity to industrialize emotional and spiritual crises while preserving the illusion of intimacy. She sings to millions, yet each listener feels personally addressed, as if a note to the self had become the basis of an entire cultural economy.

Her contemporaries Lana Del Rey, Hozier and Hayley Williams (of Paramore) all command admiration for their lyricism and emotional range. We might also add Joni Mitchell, whose career began in the 1960s, and who is revered artistically and rhapsodized over by successive generations. But while critics as well as devotees laud all these artists, none has been validated so fulsomely as Swift.

Finding a place for Swift in the canon of pop music is hardly contentious. Of course, others might nominate Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, David Bowie or Prince — each pivotal in their

way. Swift appears to represent something different: the fusion of authorship, entrepreneurship and emotional connection on an industrial scale, and perhaps she deserves a place in a different, altogether more magnificent canon.

Transformative

In 2015, the musician Ryan Adams recorded an homage to Swift's 1989 and concluded: "Taylor Swift is like Shakespeare." Within a few years, the comparison became unremarkable.

"We compare her to Shakespeare all the time," acknowledged Elizabeth Scala, a professor at the University of Texas, where a course called The Taylor Swift Songbook analyzed her lyricism and narrative composition. Another scholar, Stephanie Burt, explored formal and thematic continuities between Swift's songwriting and Shakespearean conventions in her Taylor's Version: The Poetic and Musical Genius of Taylor Swift, noting how the emotional subtlety, wordplay and storytelling in Swift's work demand interpretive attention in ways reminiscent of classical literature.

Adelaide Guerisoli of NSS magazine believed Swift might have taken cues from another creative torchbearer: "Pablo Picasso had long foreseen the endless lucrative potential of inserting personal stories into works of art." Lucian Grainge, the CEO of Universal Music Group, also likened her to the prolific painter and sculptor: "Imagine Picasso painting something that he painted a few years ago, then re-creating it with the colors of today," said Grainge about Swift in 2023. She decided to re-record her early music note-for-note.

As part of the Maryland Symphony Orchestra's 2024–2025 Lecture Series, the conductor Kyle Weary explored "how both [Ludwig van Beethoven and Swift] use music to navigate the complexities of human emotion, frame stories of struggle and resolution, and inspire listeners to reimagine what's possible."

Swift is now a subject of serious academic study, her work treated with the critical solemnity traditionally reserved for canonical poets, playwrights and transformative artists. There is a recognition that Swift's capacity to shape narrative, emotion and audience engagement distinguishes her not just as a pop icon, but as a figure in contemporary culture.

Now. How about in 134 years' time? Will people still be listening to her music? I ask because I noticed a new production of Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler has just opened. The play was first performed in 1891. Ibsen died in 1906, and he is one of the world's most performed playwrights, second only to Shakespeare in terms of frequency. I'll start my answer with another question.

Unstable or visionary?

Would the audience that attended Prague's Teatro di Praga for the premiere of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Don Giovanni in 1787 have wondered whether they had heard the most thrilling, heart-stoppingly beautiful music ever created, and whether the gods had blessed the composer with gifts of unique brilliance? Probably not: More likely they, like today's viewers of reality TV, were just enjoying it.

Picasso came to public attention with an exhibition of his and French artist Henri Matisse's work at London's Victoria & Albert Museum in 1945, when he was 64, but his unique virtuosity wasn't recognized until 1960, 13 years before his death. Even Shakespeare was acknowledged as only one of several proficient sixteenth-century playwrights. Some even suspect the Bard took credit for the work of others who, for various reasons, wanted to avoid authorship of their plays. It was the Romantic writers of the nineteenth

century who hailed him as a transcendent artist, a sentiment shared and embellished by successive generations.

Artistic brilliance is rarely acknowledged in its own time. Most artists we now recognize as great labor in obscurity, their originality so unfamiliar that contemporaries mistake it for quirkiness or lack of ability. Austrian composer Franz Schubert, who died at 31, was known mainly as a songwriter to a small circle of friends; the vast symphonic and chamber works that later secured his monumental status went largely unheard until long after his death.

Vincent Van Gogh sold almost nothing in his lifetime and was regarded as unstable rather than visionary. Beethoven, by contrast, was an exception to this tendency: He was acknowledged, debated and even revered while still alive. Even so, his audiences may not have understood the full extent of his innovation. But they recognized his stature, sensing — rightly — that they were witnessing a kind of greatness seldom granted to the living.

Had Swift (b.1989) delivered one of her songs about self-loathing and disordered eating, such as "Lavender Haze" or "You're On Your Own Kid" in 1824 (when Beethoven's "9th Symphony" premiered in Vienna) rather than 2022 (the actual year when her album Midnights, on which these tracks feature, was released), would there have been a response of rapture and veneration, as there was in the 21st century? Doubtful.

Greatness

Greatness is an attribution: it's the action of ascribing a quality as a characteristic possessed by a person. As such, it's a feature of a relationship rather than a property: if audiences recognize greatness, it becomes greatness. Shakespeare and the others are great, but not because of their innate talent — because generations of people recognized, celebrated and responded to their work as extraordinary.

Their audiences agreed, explicitly or implicitly, that the art they produced could only have been created by someone exceptional. This shared belief is precisely what conferred the status of greatness. Without the collective acknowledgment, the works might have been admired, but the creators would not have been idolized.

If greatness is an ascription rather than an innate quality, then the question of Swift's stature becomes less about her talent and more about consensus. Shakespeare, Beethoven and Picasso endure not because their genius is self-evident, but because history has agreed upon it. They occupy the canon — that institutional space where value, once conferred, becomes permanent. The canon stabilizes reputations: within it, artists may be reinterpreted, critiqued, even periodically dethroned, but never truly ejected.

If we extend this relativistic logic to Swift, she already qualifies as great — vast audiences and critical establishments have ascribed greatness to her. The unresolved question is whether she will achieve the same permanence: whether the agreement that now sustains her brilliance will endure long enough to secure her a lasting place among the cultural immortals.Which returns us to our earlier question: Will audiences still listen to her in the 23rd century? Ibsen's plays are masterpieces of literary realism, exploring psyche, emotion and society, timelessly relevant subjects. Swift is known for delivering compositions on love, heartbreak and self-discovery, all universal tropes that will resonate in the future. Her lyrics are intelligent, culturally acute and reflect 21st-century moods rather than inquiries into the human condition.

So, while she commands devotion now, her work lacks the dramatic architecture that keeps masterpieces living. Ibsen's plays in particular seem organic because they expose the moral tensions, social hypocrisies and psychological constraints that remain ordinary and recognizable across centuries; they invite reinterpretation in every era, and this is another key variable.

Successive generations adapt and modify work without losing its significance. Swift already reinterprets her own catalog: The Taylor's Version re-recordings were new acoustic rearrangements and live variations on her hits, which show her work's flexibility and capacity for renewal. But, unlike classic plays or symphonies, most of her songs are unlikely to be covered, adapted or even sampled for years to come, and this may limit their afterlife beyond her own performances.

Swift has already achieved greatness: We, her audience, agree on that. She can hold her own in the esteemed company of Elvis and co. And her material may well be reimagined for decades to come. But is there enough profundity and discernment to guarantee her a place in the artistic canon?

Predicting the future of music preferences is impossible. The ever-changing nature of art and entertainment makes it difficult to determine whether Taylor Swift's music will remain popular next year, let alone in the 23rd century. And yet her colossal impact on the music industry and her ability to adapt to changing times will surely ensure her lasting popularity, though perhaps not her place in the artistic canon.

[Ellis Cashmore's The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson is published by Bloomsbury.]

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Ellis Cashmore is the author of *The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson*, *Elizabeth Taylor*, *Celebrity Culture* and other books. He is a professor of sociology who has held academic positions at the University of Hong Kong, the University of Tampa and Aston University.
His first article for *Fair Observer* was an obituary for Muhammad Ali in 2016. Since then, Ellis has been a regular contributor on sports, entertainment, celebrity culture and cultural diversity. Most recently, timelines have caught his fancy and he has created many for *Fair Observer*. What do you think?

Republicans Test the Limits of Gerrymandering and Voter Suppression

Pooka MacPhellimey
November 14, 2025

Republican lawmakers seek to retain power through aggressive gerrymandering and voter suppression in the US Congress. Their strategy risks backfiring as shifting voter behavior and wave elections could undermine their assumptions as to how safe reshaped districts may be. This approach may weaken Republican control and create electoral losses that reshape American politics in the next national election cycle.

The math is tricky, but Republican gerrymandering (the political manipulation of electoral district boundaries to benefit a party, group or socioeconomic class within the constituency) in the US Congress could be setting Republicans up for an electoral catastrophe.

Assuming they cannot perform sufficient, effective and non-counterproductive vote suppression, there is a risk with extreme gerrymandering (apart from the ethical issues) that you might end up creating more seats vulnerable in a wave election against you than any that you might gain.

How gerrymandering works

Although there isn't active gerrymandering in the UK, as in the United States, the UK uses first-past-the-post electoral districts, and the last elections there are illustrative of what might happen in the US. In the UK in 2019 and 2024, relatively small swings in the popular vote led to a remarkable number of "safe seats" changing hands, first Labour, then Conservative.

To break it down, the Conservatives in 2019 surged to 365 seats (of 650), a majority of 35 based on 43.6% of the popular vote, which imploded to 121 with 23.7% losing two-thirds of their seats for a less than half collapse in their vote. Meanwhile, Labour fell to 202 in 2019 with 32.1%, then more than recovered to 411 in 2024 with just 33.7%, more than doubling their seat haul for a mere 1.6% increase in their vote, i.e., a 5% increase in their total. Thus, a small increase in Labour's vote share propelled Labour to a substantial majority, surpassing what the Tories secured in 2019 — indeed, 46 more seats with 10% fewer votes. The central factor, of course, was the collapse of the Tories' vote, magnified by first-past-the-post; Labour didn't have to be popular, just not as unpopular as the Tories. It's not who voters love, it's who the voters are angriest with.

Back in the US, the danger in the Republicans' mathematics is part of how gerrymandering works — it tries to create districts with enough reliable voters for one party, say reliable Republican voters, to ensure that the seat is noncompetitive, that it will only ever return a Republican.

Gerrymandering works by "packing and cracking" — pushing many of the (presumed) consistently Democratic voting demographics into just one potential House-seat of several, and spreading (presumed) reliable Republicans out to create majorities in as many of the remaining districts as possible — the latter also with supposed to be low-propensity Democratic voting groups. The data that gerrymandering depends on is the decennial census combined with voter behavior in the most recent elections.

Dependence on voter behavior — what if the Republicans are very unpopular?

The problem is that the more extreme the gerrymandering, the thinner you have to spread the presumed-to-be-reliable Republican voters, and the more you depend on Democratic voters not turning out. This inevitably reduces many of their "safe majorities." But it also depends on how consistently voters will repeat their previous behavior in the next election — it assumes stability from one election to the next.

In a wave election, those assumptions can break down — gerrymandering might have turned what were believed to be safe Republican seats into marginal ones during a big wave; the "sea-wall/levee is overtopped," leading to electoral collapse.

Moreover, assumptions predicated on voter behavior in previous elections are "carrying a lot

of freight," but if something happens to change that behavior — boom! It also raises the question of whether voter behavior in past elections was atypical or a durable trend — say Hispanics in 2024…

In Texas, a lot seems to be riding on Republican assumptions about how the Hispanic population will vote; in the this month's general and special elections, the gains in Hispanic votes that US President Donald Trump and Republicans secured in 2024 appears to have collapsed (this too may be a long-term problem — running against the Catholicism of former Presidential Candidate Al Smith in 1928 cost Republicans Catholic voters all the way into the 1950s and 60s. How badly and permanently have Hispanics been alienated by the Make America Great Again [MAGA] Republicans' actions and rhetoric?)

In addition to 2024 voting patterns, the gerrymander is also based heavily on data from the 2010 census, which will be six years old by November 2026, in a state with large and rapid population and demographic shifts. Moreover, Texas has historically had unusually low turnout, 56.6% in 2024 versus 63.9% in the US as a whole — were something to "goose" that turnout, such as voter anger at Trump and the Republicans…

Republican strategy and Trump's influence

Although it appears extreme, Republican gerrymandering has, until now, been cautious and carefully calculated to limit the impact of a wave election, but, spurred by Trump's demands, they may be going too far and have massively exposed themselves. That may leave few options except for blatant voter suppression — but this too brings its own risk of backlash, of spiking angry turnout amongst the groups targeted for suppression.

Historically, incumbents — especially those in safe seats — have had a lot of influence over districting and gerrymandering (state parties, too, are happy to keep their safely gerrymandered majorities). They are, in fact, a key effective, if not very visible, opponent of overly increased gerrymandering because it necessarily reduces their safe majority, makes them work harder in elections and puts their seat at greater risk. But Republican incumbents are more terrified of Trump and his backing a primary candidate in their district than they are of their natural antipathy and caution about excessive gerrymandering.

Anyone remotely familiar with, say, Texas politics, or North Carolina (to cite two heavily gerrymandered states) would say that in 2001, the Republicans there already seemed to have pushed the gerrymandering math as far as they safely could get away with.

Trump, in his demand for increased gerrymandering, has nullified and silenced incumbent objections while paying little attention to the mathematics — but those Republicans are obviously more scared of a Trump-backed primary opponent than the general election. That may cost them.

Voter suppression's limits

Notably, a lot of voter suppression relies on making voting more logistically and bureaucratically difficult — through obstacles such as voter identification requirements, registration hurdles, voter record purges and logistical challenges like limiting or banning mail-in ballots or having polling stations that are poorly located with limited hours (which can be hard for hourly workers to find time to vote).

The problem with these voter suppression efforts is that they could disproportionately affect MAGA constituencies, making it harder for Republican voters to cast their ballots. This is especially true because the Republican base within

that group tends to include older voters, hourly workers, workers without a college education and people who will find voter suppression obstacles harder to navigate than younger, increasingly more educated voters who are breaking heavily Democrat.

Moreover, despite Trump's preening, voter suppression has mostly to be instituted at the state level — and, if there is a wave election in 2026, Republican losses in statehouses might preclude effective voter suppression measures by 2028 — even more so if Republicans lose the national House and Senate. Under current law and voting arrangements, states organize and administer elections, even Federal elections, and within those states, municipalities (cities) and counties play a significant role. Even with the current Republican control of Congress and, despite the Supreme Court disgracing itself with obvious political partisanship, voter suppression would be very hard to do at the national level.

A national infrastructure usable for voter suppression simply does not exist and would take time to create (Trump has largely gutted the Federal Election Commission, by firing the Democratic Commissioner and driving two relatively moderate Republicans to resign, it no longer has a quorum, it can't do anything). Ideas Trump is militantly pressing for, like say banning postal voting at the federal level would:

— Likely have to be executed at the state level and predominantly in Republican states;

— Fall heavily on elderly, infirm and rural voters, constituencies Republicans rely on.

— Risk a backlash amongst regular postal voters, like say the US military.

Efforts to intimidate by, say, deploying Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) to polling stations would be predicated on the myth of noncitizens voting; they'd be ineffectual at suppressing these nonexistent votes, but very effective at enraging Latino, Black and other voters. The Army, the National Guard and even the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) are not likely to be sufficiently partisan to be effective or willing to engage in intimidation.

Indeed, the central risk of obvious, clumsy efforts at voter suppression is that it'd turn voting Democratic into an act of defiance, a middle finger extended to the Grand Old Party (GOP). Meanwhile, crude voter suppression and gross gerrymandering may antagonize independent voters — witness the huge majority the "Proposition 50" retaliatory redrawing of California's districts in response to Texas unexpectedly secured — in August 2025, almost two-thirds of those asked in opinion polls opposed it, but it secured a vote of almost two-thirds by November. Voters are angry, but are they particularly angry at Republicans more than Democrats?

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Pooka MacPhellimey (pseudonym) is a member of the devil class. He sits in a hut in the middle of a firwood, meditating on the nature of numerals. He reflects: "Answers do not matter so much as questions… A good question is very hard to answer. The better the question the harder the answer. There is no answer at all to a very good question."

The World Must Act to Save Darfur's Innocents From Further Massacre

Gerald Walker
November 15, 2025

Sudan's crisis deepens as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) battle the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) for dominance across Darfur. The RSF's capture of El Fasher traps hundreds of thousands of civilians and renews fears of genocide. Global powers now face a decisive moment: either enforce accountability and deliver humanitarian aid, or remain complicit.

Sudan's devastating civil war took another turn for the worse after the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) captured El Fasher, the last major stronghold of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in Darfur, triggering reports of mass executions, ethnic cleansing and summary killings. The fall of the city trapped over 260,000 civilians, exposing them to starvation and violence, mirroring the events of the horrific 2003 Darfur genocide when the Janjaweed militias went on a killing spree.

El Fasher under siege

Since May 2024, El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, has endured an RSF siege. SAF carpet bombing and famine conditions created a nightmarish scenario in the city, threatening the lives of civilians there. With its capture of the city, nearly all of Darfur is now under the control of the RSF.

Satellite imagery analyzed by Yale University's Humanitarian Research Lab (HRL) provides chilling evidence of mass killings. According to the HRL, "these observations are consistent with reports of executions … and the killing of people attempting to flee the city…"

The UN Human Rights Office has also reported atrocities against unarmed civilians. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk said:

The risk of further large-scale, ethnically motivated violations and atrocities in El Fasher is mounting by the day. Urgent and concrete action needs to be taken urgently to ensure the protection of civilians in El Fasher and safe passage for those trying to reach relative safety.

Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo leads the RSF and is the successor to the Janjaweed militias responsible for over 300,000 deaths. Sudan's war, raging since 2023, has witnessed repeated rape, burning of villages and ethnic massacres in West Darfur. The deadly power struggle has resulted in 30 million Sudanese in need of immediate aid.

Amnesty International has attempted to make headway in resolving the crisis and getting aid to civilians. It has demanded that the RSF halt its attacks and allow the opening of aid corridors. The UN has taken a different approach, urging pressure on the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — an RSF supporter supplying drones and weapons. Unfortunately, the global community's tepid response and disinterest in this region mean no aid or pressure is forthcoming.

The role of the UAE

The UAE has emerged as a pivotal actor in this devastating crisis as it remains accused of prolonging the conflict and exacerbating the atrocities taking place. The UAE has been accused

of enabling RSF horrors, including the massacres and ethnic cleansing that took place in El Geneina, Masalit, Zaghawa and El Fasher.

Abu Dhabi had invested billions in Sudan's agriculture, mining, and shipping industries, in the hope that it would open a corridor to African resources and serve as a buffer against regional rivals like Turkey and Qatar. But when the conflict erupted in 2023 between the RSF and SAF, the UAE took sides with the former. RSF leader Hemedti controls key gold mines of interest to the UAE. The conflict has become a proxy battle, with Saudi Arabia backing the SAF to balance UAE influence across the Red Sea.

UN panels and leaked intelligence reports reveal hundreds of cargo flights from the UAE to Chad and Somalia, from whence weapons, including drones, ammunition and armored vehicles, are then transferred to Sudan. The UAE is also accused of recruiting Colombian mercenaries to assist in the fighting.

However, the UAE has dismissed these accusations as "politically motivated" and even canceled meetings in the UK over UN criticism. The UAE also challenged Sudan's International Court of Justice (ICJ) genocide complicity case earlier this year. In May, Khartoum severed ties with the UAE.

A call for international action

Today, with the RSF consolidating control over vast swaths of territory, over 260,000 civilians face imminent genocide. Amnesty International, the UN and other organizations are urging an immediate ceasefire, monitored by the international community. They demand the immediate opening of aid corridors to deliver food, medicine and fuel.

The UAE must be held to account for its complicity in the genocide. RSF gold refinery assets should be frozen, and the EU and US should place secondary sanctions on firms complicit in dealing with the RSF.

The US-Saudi-UAE-Egypt "Quad" should move to enforce a 90-day humanitarian truce, a nationwide ceasefire and a path to negotiations. The international community must refer the RSF to the International Criminal Court for genocide, and support Sudan's ICJ case against the UAE for its complicity in the genocide. The UN must also send a fact-finding mission to document the El Fasher crimes to be used for prosecutions.

Chad, Libya and Somalia can assist by sealing their borders and preventing flights from the UAE from landing in the region. A no-fly zone should be enacted to further prevent such activity. In the UK, for instance, Members of Parliament should demand a halt in arms sales to the UAE.

The fall of El Fasher does not necessarily mean defeat. Instead, it should be viewed as a clarion call to the international community to act. Silence equals complicity, and — while yesterday was the time to act — it is still not too late to save those civilians whose lives are in imminent danger.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Dr. Gerald Walker is a prolific writer on world politics and international diplomacy. He splits his time between New York and London and is currently working on writing a book titled *Circuits of Power: AI's Revolution in Global Diplomacy*, which focuses on the emerging intersection of artificial intelligence and global governance. Dr. Walker is invited, on occasion, to

speak as a guest lecturer at government embassies, diplomatic events and academic gatherings. He also worked in advisory roles for grassroots organizations and has assisted the UN in preparing studies on issues related to conflict. He has also been published in *International Policy Digest* and *Modern Diplomacy*.

Lines of Power: Resilience Defines the US and China's Futures

Masaaki Yoshimori
November 20, 2025

US President Donald Trump's latest attempt to balance confrontation and conciliation with Beijing reveals the evolution of US–China relations into a structural geoeconomic rivalry spanning trade, technology and strategic resources. Both nations are redefining sovereignty and eroding post-Cold War norms of economic openness. The contest's outcome hinges on resilience — each side's ability to manage interdependence and sustain power amid volatility.

US President Donald Trump is once again balancing between confrontation and conciliation with Beijing. His recent decision to de-escalate trade tensions after threatening 100% tariffs on Chinese imports reflects a calculated, if precarious, effort to calm markets while retaining leverage in an intensifying technological and geopolitical rivalry. Wall Street reads reassurance; Beijing reads uncertainty. Both are correct.

The tariff threat followed Beijing's move to tighten export controls on rare-earth minerals, which are crucial for manufacturing semiconductors, batteries and defense systems. The US market reacted with sharp volatility, prompting Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and senior aides to counsel restraint. The White House, eager to redirect attention toward Trump's Middle East initiative, pivoted to reassurance. Trump's social media post — "Don't worry about China, it will all be fine!" — was a psychological signal. Yet beneath the optimism lies the structural truth that US–China competition has evolved into a geoeconomic rivalry extending across trade, technology, resources and ideology.

A trade truce that isn't

Both Washington and Beijing have incentives to cool tensions ahead of an anticipated Trump–Xi summit. China's Ministry of Commerce issued a statement pledging to enforce its new export controls in a "prudential and moderate" way — a rare instance of linguistic restraint that analysts interpreted as a tacit admission of overreach. The statement met with conspicuously muted state media coverage, signaling an official desire to avoid escalation.

Still, the structural confrontation remains. Washington demands that China rescind its rare-earth restrictions. Beijing refuses, as it sees control over critical minerals as one of its last asymmetric levers. The result is a managed cycle of confrontation and détente, an uneasy equilibrium that stabilizes markets without resolving the underlying rivalry.

Trump's balancing act targets multiple audiences. Domestically, he projects toughness on China while promising investors that markets will remain orderly. Internationally, he signals flexibility to allies nervous about protectionism. But the deeper shift is strategic: The border

between trade policy and national security has largely vanished. As both powers weaponize economic interdependence, supply chains and export controls, the instruments of globalization have turned into tools of coercion.

The October 30 Trump–Xi meeting in Busan, South Korea — their first in six years — illustrates the point. Trump declared the meeting "a 12 out of 10." In essence, the two leaders agreed to delay new US tariffs and defer China's export-control regime on rare earths for one year. Beijing also pledged once again to limit precursor chemicals used in fentanyl production, while Washington cut associated tariffs from 20% to 10%. China promised to purchase 12 million metric tons of US soybeans this season and at least 25 million tons annually for three years, below the 2020 level of 34 million tons but politically useful to US farmers regardless. Both sides also agreed to "work toward" a resolution regarding the US' ban on the Chinese-owned social media app, TikTok.

But the agenda's narrowing tells another story. Discussions of industrial reform and rebalancing toward domestic consumption have all but disappeared. The draft 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030) emphasizes export-oriented industrial upgrading and strategic autonomy in science and technology. China's household consumption remains only 39% of GDP, compared with roughly 58% in advanced economies. Absent deep reform, its structural trade surplus — and Washington's frustration — will persist.

A more troubling feature of the Busan deal is Washington's decision to liberalize certain export controls at a time of accelerating tech rivalry. The administration reportedly approved limited sales of technology company Nvidia's H20 chips to China, taking a 15% revenue share, and is considering loosening restrictions on some high-end graphics processing units. This approach contrasts with former US President Joe Biden's administration's "small yard, high fence" doctrine and instead reflects a "keep them addicted" strategy: allow enough US chips to maintain dependence but not autonomy. Such pragmatism may buy short-term leverage, but it risks accelerating Beijing's drive for semiconductor self-sufficiency.

Arctic frontiers and the new geography of power

While trade headlines dominate, another front in the US–China–Russia triangle is emerging: the Arctic. As reported by The Wall Street Journal, a Canadian cargo vessel, the MV Nunalik, encountered a violent Arctic storm while supplying the US Pituffik Space Base in Greenland. This underscores Western logistical fragility in an increasingly contested polar region.

The Arctic holds vast energy reserves, rare minerals and new shipping corridors. It is also the shortest ballistic trajectory between Russia and North America. As Russia fortifies its northern infrastructure and China calls itself a "near-Arctic state," Washington and NATO scramble to regain parity. "This is one of the only areas where we cannot go toe-to-toe with our adversaries," warns Troy Bouffard, Assistant Professor for Arctic Security at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Trump's pledge to develop a next-generation Golden Dome missile-defense system reflects a recognition that deterrence increasingly depends on fusing AI, quantum sensing and Arctic surveillance. However, as Bouffard notes, "for the West, this is like starting from scratch." The Arctic race encapsulates a broader transformation: geography, technology and infrastructure have merged into instruments of power.

Legal ambiguity compounds the challenge. Under Article 234 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), coastal states may regulate navigation in ice-

covered areas to prevent pollution. Russia uses this clause to justify restrictive control of the Northern Sea Route, while China's near-Arctic posture challenges conventional interpretations.

The Arctic is becoming a domain of 21st-century sovereignty: geography, climate change, logistics, orbital intelligence and raw materials all converge here, just as land masses and territorial waters once defined greatness. The Arctic race bears striking parallels with space militarization: both domains are dotted with constellations of capabilities — satellites, sensors, missile-shields, icebreakers — rather than settled populations.

Rival blueprints for technological power

If trade and the Arctic are tactical battlegrounds, artificial intelligence defines the strategic high ground. The United States and China are not merely racing to develop algorithms but competing to build alternative civilizational architectures of intelligence.

Washington views the contest primarily as a sprint toward Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) — a self-learning, human-surpassing capability with transformative potential. "China is not years behind us—maybe six months," White House AI and Crypto Czar David Sacks said in April 2025. US frontier models still outperform Chinese equivalents across engineering, cybersecurity and cost-efficiency metrics, but the gap is narrowing.

Beijing's strategy is more applied and systemic. Rather than chase AGI, China seeks to diffuse embedded intelligence — AI and machine learning integration in devices — throughout its industrial base. Its AI + Manufacturing initiative aims for 60% of major firms to use AI systems by 2025 and universal adoption by 2035. This "embodied AI" model leverages China's scale in robotics, sensors and automation — an industrial ecosystem that boosts efficiency and supply resilience rather than headline-grabbing consumer apps.

In effect, the US builds ever-larger models; China builds machines that use models. Both paths hold merit, but only one ensures control over the physical foundations of economic power. As the Atlantic Council think tank notes, "AI competition is as much about ecosystems and standards as about breakthroughs." Whoever dominates the AI stack may shape future warfare, governance, ethics and global norms. Open-source AI becomes a fault line: US institutions worry about Chinese exploitation, while China views openness as an avenue for global diffusion of its standards.

Minerals, markets and the "big square, great wall"

China's rare-earth export controls expose the asymmetry of vulnerability between the two superpowers. Washington can restrict China's access to advanced chips; Beijing can choke US access to the materials needed to make them. China refines 92% of the world's rare earths. Its new measures extend jurisdiction to products containing even trace amounts of Chinese-processed inputs — a "big square, great wall" doctrine that mirrors America's "small yard, high fence" export-control regime but projects power downstream into finished goods.

"This is basically like the United States' Foreign Direct Product Rule, but with Chinese characteristics," observes Rush Doshi, a former National Security Council official. Beijing can effectively weaponize inputs of production just as Washington weaponizes high technology. Recent European automotive disruptions after China's export curbs on gallium and germanium underscore the reach of these dependencies.

For all the rhetoric about "decoupling," neither economy can fully disengage. The US depends on

Chinese materials; China depends on US capital and technology. Each seeks leverage without collapse, a strategy of managed interdependence that now defines global power.

Weaponized interdependence and the erosion of norms

Export bans, sanctions and AI restrictions are pushing the global economy into a legal gray zone. Economic coercion is becoming normalized under the banner of national security, eroding the post-Cold War liberal order that presumed markets and politics could be separated. Both Washington and Beijing are redefining sovereignty through control of data, supply chains and resource corridors rather than borders.

Multilateral governance is struggling to adapt. The World Trade Organization's security exemptions were never designed for algorithmic export controls or cross-border data regimes. As a result, new "minilateral" coalitions — AUKUS, the Quad and even NATO's Arctic coordination — are filling the void. These arrangements promise agility and trust but also accelerate fragmentation.

The Arctic again illustrates the trend. China's self-designation as a near-Arctic state and Russia's invocation of UNCLOS Article 234 highlight a creeping extraterritoriality that mirrors the militarization of space. Sovereignty is extending beyond borders into technological and logistical constellations: satellites, sensors, icebreakers and cloud networks.

From deals to strategy

Trump's China policy defies neat classification as either hawkish or dovish; it reflects a pattern of aggressive pragmatism. His method is inherently transactional, escalating tensions to extract leverage and then easing them to restore equilibrium. This approach underscores his instinctive skill as a negotiator, one who views diplomacy as an extension of deal-making.

However, Trump continues to wager that China's dependence on US markets exceeds America's reliance on Chinese supply chains — a proposition that looks increasingly fragile. Chinese exports to the US have fallen nearly 20% over the past year, yet Beijing's global trade surplus is on track to surpass $1.2 trillion. At the same time, China's dominance in refining critical minerals and battery components gives it a latent form of leverage that Washington cannot easily replicate. The US still controls the financial and technological chokepoints of globalization, but Beijing increasingly controls the material arteries that sustain them.

Resilience as the decisive metric

The contest between the US and China will hinge less on who innovates first than on who best manages interdependence. Dominance may prove fleeting as vulnerability endures. The state that can reduce exposure to coercion while sustaining innovation and alliance cohesion will define the next era's rules.

Deterrence today depends as much on stabilizing markets as on projecting strength. Both Washington and Beijing are discovering that weaponized interdependence cuts both ways. Each side's leverage also exposes its own weak points.

In a world where financial, technological and climatic shocks reverberate instantly across borders, resilience has become more than a measure of endurance. It is the ability that will ultimately decide the balance of power.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

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Australia's Idiotic Social Media Ban

Ellis Cashmore
November 22, 2025

Australia's social media ban for children under 16 is set to take effect on December 10 — becoming the world's first prohibition on youth accounts across major platforms. According to lawmakers, the ban is rooted in concerns over online harms and promises relief for parents. The ban fuels moral panic, sparks teenage resistance and calls for targeted policy.

"More moral panics will be generated … our society as presently structured will continue to generate problems for some of its members … and then condemn whatever solution these groups find"

— Stanley Cohen, Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1972)

Cohen might have been writing about Australia in 2025. By banning every child under 16 from social media — the world's first, due to take effect on December 10 — the Australian government is not protecting youth. It is spooking its own population, provoking widespread anxiety and amplifying scrutiny over teenage behavior.

In attempting to regulate digital life, policymakers have sparked the very fears they claim to contain. This is textbook moral panic, in which misconceived legislative overreaction has generated attention, consternation and, of course, resistance. There are bound to be unintended consequences.

Rationale

Australia's legislation is the culmination of a year-long political build-up of concern over online harms, including cyberbullying, sexual predation, self-harm content, algorithmic manipulation and addictive scrolling. Ministers sold the new legislation as a lifeline for parents. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese puzzlingly suggested the law is about "letting kids be kids." Communications Minister Anika Wells added that parents deserve "peace of mind."

Publicized cases of teenage suicide linked to online abuse, combined with national apprehension about the wider digital world's opacity, created an open goal for decisive intervention. But the intervention was as crude as it will be ineffective.

Nine platforms are affected: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Threads, X, YouTube, Reddit and Kick. They must block new accounts for under-16s and deactivate existing ones. Noncompliance carries fines of up to 49.5 million Australian dollars ($32 million).

Platforms had initially protested, warning that mandatory age verification would be intrusive, inaccurate and pretty easy for a teenager to circumvent. The compromise relies on behavioral age-estimation tools, using engagement metrics such as "likes," with third-party age-assurance apps invoked only for disputes. Teens will receive notices inviting them to download their data, freeze accounts or lose them entirely. The government reckons the measure is fail-safe.

Interestingly, public opinion largely agrees: a poll last November found that 77% of Australians over 18 support the ban. Internationally, the legislation is being watched closely: New Zealand is considering similar restrictions, Florida attempted a comparable law and European countries are experimenting with age checks on social media.

Australia has become a global crucible, potentially setting a precedent for future restrictions elsewhere, though It is unlikely that such a contentious measure would receive comparably emphatic support elsewhere: analogous research from the USA and Europe reinforces the sense that Australia is out of step with global opinion (55% of Americans favor banning children under 16 from using social media platforms, while 42% of Brits aged 18-27 would support, relative to 50% who would oppose such a ban).

Forbidden fruit

The ban rests on a naïve assumption: that teenagers will quietly accept exclusion. History suggests otherwise. Adolescents grow up in a culture in which a ban is not so much a prohibition as a challenge. You don't have to be familiar with Genesis 2:17 to know that anything becomes more desirable once it's not allowed. It's called forbidden fruit.

Young people are wired for risk-taking and boundary-pushing, culturally inclined to resist adult overreach and technologically literate enough to bypass nearly any restriction. Cohen's spiral is already becoming evident: officialdom suppresses, youth respond by circumventing and media attention magnifies both behavior and, by implication, anxiety.

Every generation of adults seems either to forget or ignore what youth entails. This is a developmentally crucial period: experimentation, novelty-seeking and testing limits are essential to forming adult judgement (or at least they were mine). Social media is not simply the communication toy adults assume it to be: It is an organic space, a venue for the formation of identities, connecting with peers and performativity — by which I mean presenting to audiences. Policymakers' assumption of adolescent passivity, that young people are childlike innocents who need to be insulated from "danger," is patronizing and just plain wrong.

Savvy teenagers are inevitably going to find ways around blocks using virtual private networks (VPNs), multiple accounts, peer sharing or app workarounds. Attempts at enforcement will generate not compliance, nor even frustration, but clandestine use, probably promoting the very thing the Australian government is trying to curb. The ban, while intended as a protective measure, will inadvertently amplify attention, defiance and risk.

Australia's discourse around the online dangers of youth often exaggerates risk while underestimating teens' capacity for ingenuity and

critical engagement. Social media is an uneven terrain: simultaneously treacherous and empowering, unintelligent and educational. By understanding it only as a hazard in the hands of the young, policymakers manufacture fear and fuel anxiety, rather than addressing specific harms in a targeted manner.

Wonderworld

Let me declare an interest: as I see it, the internet has introduced us — and I mean everyone with access to a functioning keyboard — to a wonderworld. It might at times appear dystopian, but it is a beguiling, exploratory, shapeshifting encyclopedia-cum-almanac that fascinates us and will continue to fascinate, no matter how hard misguided politicians try to put young people off.

What Australian legislators have ignored is the immense educational and cultural value of social media and the broader internet. For many adolescents, these platforms are not booby-traps but jetpacks to the stars, taking them to places where they can explore identity, pursue interests and access knowledge unavailable in school.

YouTube hosts Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) lectures on physics, creators offer language lessons from Seoul to São Paulo and online communities nurture everything from coding to calligraphy. Teenagers today learn, connect and experiment in ways literally unimaginable to previous generations.

For all the scares surrounding it, social media is not merely a funfair of distraction; it is a gargantuan archive of human knowledge, a site of peer support, creative collaboration and social cohesion. Adolescents do not merely consume content; they negotiate, reinterpret and contribute. The internet has become a vast, decentralized educational system that surrounds and inhabits us. To cordon off adolescents from this is not protection; it is denial, cutting them off from resources essential to their development.

We humans have historically reacted to new technologies with suspicion: the telephone was once accused of distracting women from productive endeavors (like housework); radio of corrupting the young; television of shortening attention spans; film of unleashing delinquency. Every trepidation now seems ludicrous. The hostility to social media follows the same script: a mix of fear of novelty, fondness for stability and conviction that younger generations must be defended from innovation.

Australia's ban will do little to stop young people from navigating the wonderworld. It will only make that navigation more secretive, more fragmented and potentially more hazardous. In attempting to "let kids be kids," lawmakers risk stunting the curiosity so integral to growing up. As Stanley Cohen warned in 1972, "Moral panics, once launched, develop a life of their own, becoming more about the panic than the actual event that started it." Australia is about to learn this.

[Ellis Cashmore is co-author of Screen Society (Macmillan).]

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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His first article for *Fair Observer* was an obituary for Muhammad Ali in 2016. Since then, Ellis has

been a regular contributor on sports, entertainment, celebrity culture and cultural diversity. Most recently, timelines have caught his fancy and he has created many for *Fair Observer*. What do you think?

Nobody's Girl: Virginia Giuffre's Memoir Reached Libraries Six Months After Her Suicide

Laura Pavon
November 23, 2025

Virginia Giuffre's memoir, Nobody's Girl, and life story reveal a network of powerful figures who abused her or were active contributors to her abuse and her long fight for justice. Her suicide and the release of new Epstein-related records reignite public scrutiny of those ties. Her case advocates for institutions to defend truth with greater transparency and accountability.

Virginia Roberts Giuffre — one of convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein's most vocal and prominent victims — was born in Sacramento, California, in 1983, but soon moved with her family to Palm Beach County. When she was 16, her father found her a side job as a towel girl in the spa at the Mar-a-Lago Club, where he worked as a gardener.

In her newly published memoir, Nobody's Girl, edited by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House, she recounts that when she started working at Mar-a-Lago, she was determined to leave her previous years as a runaway teenager behind her and give herself another chance. However, just as she was starting to envision a brighter future, the British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell, a regular client of the Mar-a-Lago spa, approached her for the first time.

The Louvre and the hero's journey

Although the book follows a clear chronology, there are numerous flashforwards, as seen in the opening chapter. In this initial passage, 16- or 17-year-old Virginia, who had never traveled outside the US until accompanying Ghislaine and Jeffrey, finds herself at the Louvre. Here, Epstein explains to her what she describes as a magnificent tapestry. She is probably referring to the Richelieu Wing of the Louvre, which has several rooms devoted to 16th-century Renaissance tapestries, many of which once adorned royal palaces.

Several pages later, we see her return to the museum. Over a decade has passed, and she is back in Paris, ready to testify against Jean-Luc Brunel, one of Epstein's closest associates and a French modelling agent.

I think the parallel with the Louvre in these two very different moments in her life marks the hero's journey narrative and the overcoming story she is striving to communicate. In the same hope-filled spirit of triumphing over evil, she dedicated her book to anyone who has suffered sexual abuse.

Megalomania and the shield of self-proclaimed genius

I find it fascinating how megalomaniacs and con artists like Epstein often draw on self-proclaimed genius and academic status to build their social power. Virginia's memoir mentions that she was trafficked to a number of "academics from prestigious universities", and recounts how Ghislaine first introduced Epstein to her as a "genius".

After all, according to the person who hired him for his first teaching job, Epstein, a college dropout, lied about having degrees in mathematics and physics in order to secure a position at the prestigious Dalton School in New York. It was there that he took the big leap. The father of one of his students was a millionaire who was impressed by him and secured him a job at an investment bank.

The weight of trauma and the limits of public belief

When discussing Virginia Giuffre's posthumous memoir, Nobody's Girl, it's important to acknowledge her death by suicide in April 2025, when she was only 41 years old. Symbolically, at the very least, her death highlights the toll that trauma and continued victimization can take on a person.

In the public narrative, her death is inextricably linked to the lasting effects endured by victims of sexual abuse, especially when they are not believed. While no one can claim to fully understand the complex emotional, medical or social reasons that led Giuffre to take her own life, it's clear that confronting some of the most powerful elite groups by pursuing legal cases against deceased pedophile Jeffrey Epstein; Ghislaine Maxwell, who is now incarcerated; and the recently destitute former Prince Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor — to name a few — was extremely difficult.

Disclosing sexual abuse is heroic in any situation, regardless of socioeconomic status. Patterns of victim-blaming tend to prevail whether one is wealthy or poor, as there's typically an added burden of having to prove one's credibility. However, most of Epstein's victims did come from economically challenging and precarious situations, which always adds a layer of vulnerability.

#MeToo and the power of public scrutiny

Giuffre's life story, as told in Nobody's Girl, is both sadly universal and historically unique. In her memoir, she suggests that the 2017 #MeToo movement probably helped raise awareness about Epstein, who was finally imprisoned in early July 2019 and subsequently committed suicide.

It is true that the flood of testimonies led by actresses such as Alyssa Milano brought new light to how sexual violence is institutionalized, how it is part of the economy and how it is a defining characteristic of many powerful businessmen. Specifically in Virginia's case, the added sensation that royalty brings to the media may have increased her exposure.

To the public, Andrew's involvement may have seemed more scandalous and unusual than that of a Hollywood celebrity. British monarchs are still the titular heads of the Church of England since its foundation by King Henry VIII. Like Andrew, born second to the heir, Henry was also the Duke of York. However, after his brother Arthur died, Henry became king, a fate that Andrew has never come close to experiencing. This is far-fetched, but I'm still unsure whether Henry VIII's womanizing and violent tendencies would have been enough to remove him from the throne in the #MeToo era.

Settlements, credibility and the pursuit of justice

Despite having her credibility questioned at every turn, I would argue that Virginia accomplished more than she would have if she had been born ten years earlier. One notable takeaway from the reading is her point that it's unfair to doubt victims who reach economic settlements. She presents several arguments, such as the fact that trauma incurs material costs in the form of therapy or lost work income.

When Giuffre reached a settlement with the then-Duke of York, her team couldn't get a direct admission of guilt from him. However, they did obtain a statement in which he acknowledged Virginia as a victim. For him, this was a concession; for her, it was a means to compensate her for repeatedly dismissing her status as such. He also paid her an undisclosed sum of money. The sense of not being believed or of being unworthy of belief is a central, recurring theme in Nobody's Girl, encompassing the emotional arc of her life.

Cartoonist Ella Baron published a drawing in The Guardian depicting Virginia standing triumphantly on a podium while a caricature of Queen Elizabeth II's son lies on the floor far below her. When disclosing her encounters with the prince, Virginia provided a photograph of the royal holding her waist. This piece of evidence made it nearly impossible for him to deny meeting her when she was 17.

Just a few days before the memoir's publication, King Charles III began the process of removing his brother's titles and honors. Though probably insufficient, this serves as poetic justice. As the cartoon suggests, she emerged victorious while he was expelled from "paradise" — and recently from the palace where he lived.

The tragic connection between Virginia's and Jeffrey's suicides at the end of their lives speaks to an absence of justice from different standpoints. Nevertheless, Ghislaine Maxwell did receive a jail sentence. Giuffre recalls how, at her trial, Maxwell's defense team asked: "Why would an Oxford-educated woman do this?" Although intended as a rhetorical question, it alludes to the elitist delusion that sexual abuse is beyond the reach of intellectual and class prestige.

Along these lines, we could discuss the public corruption of the monarchy as a symptom of the decay of outdated systems based on privilege and kinship. According to a few former employees, Andrew has very specific instructions about the placement of his teddy bears and tends to humiliate and insult his employees for minor infractions regarding this and other matters. As Carol Hanisch once said, "The personal is political."

The mechanics of complicity

In her memoir and in various interviews, Virginia emphasizes that this case is not about two psychopathic monsters. A level of abuse like this can only occur with the participation, silence or complicit approval of countless people, ranging from bystanders to co-perpetrators. This is true for nearly every case of sexual abuse. Perpetrators rely on religious cultures that silence all things sexual and on the complicity of those who look the other way for various reasons, sometimes for their own profit.

Though scarce and delayed, collaborating with Epstein's associates was crucial to the investigation. For instance, one of the pilots provided his flight logs, and the Palm Beach driver confirmed that Maxwell ordered him to stop the car as soon as she saw Virginia enter the Mar-a-Lago spa to start her shift as a towel girl. The driver also mentioned seeing many young female visitors.

In her memoir, Virginia recounts meeting Maxwell. She stresses that no one would suspect the beautiful, posh woman who approached her and spoke with a British accent. It seemed like a stroke of good luck when, out of the blue, she asked if Virginia was interested in interviewing for a job as a travel masseuse for her millionaire friend.

The flight logs, in particular, provided proof that Virginia and other victims had traveled with Epstein and Maxwell. Conversely, the testimonies of victims and bystanders wouldn't be as

compelling if not for their abundance. Together, they are very powerful, as are the striking similarities in the descriptive details, such as the constant presence of underage females entering and leaving the house as described by employees, or the almost identical pattern of grooming retold by all the victims.

Power, denial and the unraveling of truth

The banality of evil — the apparatus and collective organization behind the sexual exploitation of minors — is also evident in British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) journalist Emily Maitlis's account of her visit to Buckingham Palace, during which Andrew granted her his infamous first interview. In it, he denied Virginia's allegations and failed to properly apologize or explain his association with Epstein. When Maitlis retells her first time visiting the palace, she mentions the abundance of cooks, butlers, assistants, guards and cleaners who keep the machinery running, comparing them to a society and a macro corporation.

In the aforementioned BBC interview, Maitlis questioned Andrew about his continued relationship with Epstein after the millionaire was imprisoned in 2006. This information went public because a photo of the two of them walking in Central Park was taken. Andrew did not provide a satisfactory explanation. He conceded he had made the mistake of being too honorable and thinking that he had to end the friendship in person. When asked why, after ending the relationship, he stayed several days as a guest in Epstein's house, Andrew simply said it was a convenient place to stay.

Due to recent revelations from police files, we now know that Andrew continued to email Epstein and express his support until just a few days before that same interview, writing, "keep in close touch and we'll play some more soon!!!!"

When asked by Maitlis about the photo with 17-year-old Virginia, Andrew deflected, saying he didn't remember and that the photo might be altered. He focused on a part of her testimony that referred to the first night they met, when she said they were dancing and he was sweating. Out of the blue, he offered the unsolicited explanation that, after serving in the Falklands War, he had temporarily lost the ability to sweat.

In his book The Kingdom, French writer and Goncourt Prize winner Emmanuel Carrère reflects on the metafictional question of truth in stories, such as biblical ones, where distinguishing historical data from fiction becomes difficult. He mentions a detail from the story of Jesus of Nazareth's arrest by Roman soldiers who take him on the Via Crucis. During the arrest, chaos reigns, and the narrator recounts that one of the disciples drops a handkerchief he is wearing. Carrère calls this type of detail a "detail of truth": something so insignificant that it could have been omitted yet recounted because of the impression it made.

I mention this because, as with the accounts of many other Epstein and Maxwell victims or associates, Virginia's life story contains such details of truth. For example, she specifically remembers Andrew's sweat.

Nonetheless, the arrest and global condemnation of these perpetrators did not result from these narratological characteristics; rather, it resulted from the existence of multiple pieces of evidence, including flight logs that recorded the minors' air travel alongside the millionaires.

After hearing one of the former Buckingham Palace security guards speak on 60 Minutes Australia, I feel compelled to mention Andrew's sweat again. The former guard said he decided to speak out because of the mistreatment he witnessed the royal inflict over the years. He emphasized one scene in which Andrew came in

from playing golf, threw his bag on the ground, and watched as police officers retrieved his balls while a butler handed him a towel to wipe off his sweat.

Justice and the defense of the truth

Given the ongoing debate and controversy surrounding the release of Epstein's files, Virginia's memoir is very timely. New emails were released this week suggesting that US President Donald Trump spent hours at Epstein's house with a victim. However, this information appears to contradict her account of the president in Nobody's Girl; she claims that she did not see him do anything inappropriate. Ultimately, the emails alone will not mean much unless the totality of the files is released and there is an in-depth investigation.

In her memoir, Virginia describes how achieving justice requires a collective effort from lawyers, experts, prosecutors and — in this case — other victims. Most of the time, simply speaking the truth is not enough. For a truth to be considered legitimate, it must be defended.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Corporate Power: From Armies and Cannons to AI

Alfredo Toro Hardy
November 25, 2025

Corporations have evolved from heavily armed colonial enterprises to lean global firms that dispers production across borders. Recent geopolitical tensions, supply chain disruptions and industrial policies are now pushing companies back toward material assets and domestic reinvestment. AI firms signal a different future, where small teams wield outsized power through highly scalable technologies.

In his 1946 groundbreaking book The Concept of the Corporation, Peter Drucker argued that corporations had replaced the Church as the most representative institution of modern society. In 2004, in turn, The Economist made the famous statement: "The company is the most important institution of our day". Following the historical evolution of this institution, thus becomes necessary to understand its meaning and significance.

Materiality

The earliest manifestation of this institution, in its modern sense, dates back to 17th-century Holland. Its main characteristics were a permanent share capital, publicly tradable shares, separation of ownership and management, limited liability for shareholders and a State charter granting it monopoly rights. It wouldn't take long, though, before England emerged as a rival. The Glorious Revolution, which put the Dutch Stadtholder on

the throne of England under the name of William III, was responsible for bringing these new notions to London.

France, however, remained reluctant to the concept of publicly tradable shares. There, the company's capital tended to be state-owned. This resulted from the resounding failure of its first major private company, which John Law founded at the beginning of the 18th century.

However, notwithstanding their publicly tradable shares, Dutch and English companies placed their aims at the service of the grand purposes of the State or the Crown. In this regard, they were not all that different from the French ones. They all became, indeed, implementing tools of the State's mercantilist and imperialist policies.

In the case of Dutch and English companies, the conquest and colonization of overseas territories was entrusted to them through State charters that granted them commercial monopolies. To this end, these companies had their own armies and fleets, administered territories autonomously and waged war against rival countries and companies. All of this, while the State not only retained a significant share of the profits but also had its flag flying over the conquered territories.

The Dutch East India Company (VOC), responsible for the spice trade with the Far East, was the first major global corporation. It boasted 150 ships, 40 large warships, 50,000 employees and a highly equipped private army of 10,000 soldiers. The English and the French East India companies would equal the VOC's size some years later, and the three would vie for control over countries, raw materials and trade routes.

England would eventually reach the top of this competition, bringing this corporate vision of trade and international relations to its highest expression. By 1757, Robert Clive, at the head of the army of the British East India Company (EIC), had conquered a large share of India.

Contrary to the Virginia Company and the Plymouth Company, dating back a century earlier — both English joint-stock companies chartered by the Crown to establish permanent English colonies in North America — the function of government in India remained in the hands of the EIC. Indeed, whereas in the former two cases the Crown retained government, it would take until 1856 for it to assume direct governmental responsibilities over India.

In the final years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the British South Africa Company, a public joint-stock company headed by Cecil Rhodes, also had its own private army. With it, it conquered the territory of what was to be called Rhodesia (present-day Zambia and Zimbabwe). By Royal Charter, this company was entitled to raise its own police, exert control over taxation, make administrative regulations, grant land rights and establish courts. For all practical purposes, it behaved like a private government very much in the same manner in which the East India Company had done before.

If something characterized institutions such as the VOC, the EIC or the British South Africa Company, it was their sheer materiality. This means: armies, war fleets, territories and their capacity to wage wars. To an important extent, they represented the most visible manifestation of the power of their states.

Immateriality

Fast forward to the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st (100 years after Rhodes's exertions in Southern Africa), the nature of the company as an institution changed completely. From its raw materiality, it had evolved into an increasing immateriality. Indeed, globalization led

big corporations to divest from everything that wasn't core to their business, making them more and more bodyless.

The assembly line, which since the time of Henry Ford had become the essence of the manufacturing process, reached such a point of specialization during the height of globalization that it got fragmented. The different components of a single final product came to be manufactured in numerous factories scattered across multiple countries.

Within this model, the large corporation focused on finding the lowest-cost worker for each constituent part of the manufacturing process. Wherever he could be found. But, at the same time, it went on the hunt for the most economical engineer, designer, accountant, financial analyst or customer service representative, also, anywhere in the world. This, of course, required targeting those countries where a higher level of qualifications and lower costs converged for each specific function.

As Thomas L. Friedman argued, with the global economy transformed into a level playing field of sorts, there was little impediment to having not only production, but also design, research or services, broken up and scattered around the world. All of the above, needless to say, implied a massive outsourcing of blue-collar and white-collar jobs.

This process not only involved outsourcing manufacturing and service operations to other countries but, even more significantly, outsourcing them to other companies. Increasingly, manufacturing and services were not performed directly by the multinational corporations themselves, but were outsourced to local companies in the countries involved. That is, smaller companies were scattered across the most diverse latitudes. As a result, big corporations were able to rid themselves of labor obligations that had traditionally burdened their finances.

Following this trend, the large corporation of the early 21st century tended to strip itself of everything that was not core to its business. Ultimately, the corporation jealously guarded brands and patents, its two fundamental assets, while outsourcing as many functions as possible. Hence, corporation's notorious contrast with the Dutch or the British East Indian companies, whose materiality runs counter to the disembodiment hereby pursued.

Materiality or immateriality?

Recent but fundamental changes, though, have brought back materiality into the life of big corporations. The resurgence of geopolitics, the disruption of global supply chains brought about by COVID, the reduction of production costs in developed countries driven by technology, and, most recently, US industrial policies and increasing tariffs, have profoundly undermined globalization.

Under these circumstances, divesting itself from noncore functions lost its meaning. Nowadays, companies are integrating vertically once again, strengthening themselves by adding functions and, above all, returning home.

Is this newfound materiality, thus, the prevailing trend within the corporate world of our day? Not necessarily. Jointly with it, immateriality is the main characteristic of the most consequential technology shaping the future: Artificial Intelligence. A technology based on data, algorithms and computing. Meaning, soft assets that can be shared or duplicated without depletion. AI companies, indeed, do not depend on the accumulation of people or of huge assets, beyond those necessary to make their ethereal nature

functional: energy, computer hardware, and networking and data storage infrastructures.

Let's just consider the event that took place on November 23, 2023, inside OpenAI, the pioneer of ChatGPT. Reacting against the dismissal of its President and founder, Sam Altman, by the board of directors, 70% of the company's staff rebelled, threatening to resign. Indeed, 738 of the company's 770 employees forcefully demanded the reinstatement of Altman and the departure of the board members. In other words, a company that was revolutionizing the modern economy had a workforce of fewer than 800 employees.

Since then, OpenAI has somewhat grown. As of 2025, it has 3,000 employees. Meanwhile, Anthropic, one of its main competitors, valued at $61.5 billion, has just 1,097 employees. Mistral AI, with a reported value of $12 billion, has 150 employees, while Thinking Machines Lab, also with a valuation of $12 billion, has even fewer personnel: just 50 employees.

The main characteristic of companies like these is that they have very leveraged teams. Meaning, a small group of people that produces an unusually large amount of output, economic impact or value. Within them, each employee can generate high amounts in revenue, as, by its own nature, AI is scalable. That is, able to grow significantly without needing a proportional increase in costs or efforts.

However, the scalability of Artificial Intelligence is not limited to the companies that produce it. As countless corporations in other fields are in the process of engaging with AI for their own business purposes, jobs will undoubtedly be lost to it. The implications of this are clear: Increasing immateriality could be the sign of the corporate world of the future — a very costly immateriality, indeed, when measured in human terms.

The gigantic level of power that can be attained through immaterial algorithms (including machine learning or pattern-recognition ones) is something that Robert Clive, despite his soldiers, war fleets, weaponry and huge territories under his control, could never have imagined possible.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Europe Endorses Assisted Dying: Its Own Suicide

Peter Isackson
November 28, 2025

European leaders are now invoking "existential threats" from Russia to justify military spending, a trend Shakespeare seems to have adumbrated in Hamlet. Europe's suicidal embrace of military Keynesianism mirrors the play's themes of manufactured crises and self-destructive choices driven by misguided leadership rather than genuine necessity.

According to your ethical stance, suicide is either a deliverance or a mortal sin. Hamlet's girlfriend, "the fair Ophelia" drowned in a river, apparently by choice. According to the priest who presided over her funeral, she should "in ground unsanctified [have] been lodged till the last trumpet." He disapproves of giving her the dignity of a Christian burial, which he believes should be reserved for "peace-departed souls."

Earlier in the play, Hamlet himself reminded the audience "that the Everlasting had… fix'd his canon 'gainst self-slaughter," which, translated into modern English means "God outlawed suicide." For centuries Christian Europe considered suicide a particular case of homicide. Today, things are very different. A wide-ranging debate exists concerning the right to end one's life through medically controlled procedures. A significant number of countries now permit some form of assisted dying.

Was Shakespeare engaged in that debate? A mistaken tradition, aggravated by the creativity of Laurence Olivier in his 1948 movie, maintains that Hamlet's famous solyloquy beginning with "To be or not to be…" is a meditation on suicide. Olivier tracks Hamlet climbing up a long series of stairs to a rampart poised above a cliff overlooking the austere coast where waves relentlessly pound against dark jagged rocks. In a voice over Olivier shares with us those unforgettable words as he mentally "takes arms against a sea of troubles." Will he leap to his death? At one point, as his meditation develops, he draws a sharp knife (his "bare bodkin") apparently tempted to stab himself in the heart.

Olivier -- Britain's most celebrated Shakespearean actor and a genuinely brilliant director – was, at least in this instance, betraying the Swan of Avon. That scene overlooking the Baltic's threatening surf definitely is not the one Stratford's Bard had imagined. A glance at the play's text informs us that Hamlet is in comfortably meandering around one of the main rooms of the castle when he stops to launch into his soliloquy. It ends when he is interrupted by the entrance of Ophelia.

"To be or not to be" is indeed Hamlet's meditation on death and the extinction of consciousness and identity. But it is clearly not an expression of a suicidal wish. Translated into modern English – and specifically today's geopolitical English – Hamlet's awareness of the effects induced by "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" took the form of what we would call today an "existential crisis." He felt overwhelmed by external threats, not his own emotions.

The new existentialism

Hamlet's existential crisis makes the Danish prince a modern hero. Who hasn't remarked that European nations no longer have simple border disputes, sovereignty issues or even armed conflicts? The problems they worry about are now systematically framed as "existential threats" requiring the suspension of all our critical faculties to support a massive military response.

Earlier this year, Europe's foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas – the woman who admitted that "it was 'news' to her that China and Russia were among the victors who defeated Nazism and fascism." As a student of history (principally via Hollywood movies?) Kallas was convinced that it was the Yanks and Brits who won the war pretty much on their own. That gives an indication of how seriously we should take her when she declares: ""Russia poses an existential threat to our security today, tomorrow and for as long as we underinvest in our defense."

Let's give her some slack. Even though she has no understanding of the past, we can't yet prove she has no grasp of the future. She was, after all, expressing an informed consensus, the established UE talking points clearly laid out in the script she has dutifully read and memorized. French President Emmanuel Macron provided an even stronger version when he insisted:"Russia is an existential threat to us. Not just to Ukraine, not just to its neighbors, but to all of Europe." Lisbon and why not, Compostello are in Putin's sights. (After all Putin is a Christian, not a communist).

Who should be more sensible to existential threats than a leading existentialist? Most people remember Jean-Paul Sartre as the leader of the influential existentialist movement that for several decades held a dominant position in European philosophical circles. Sartre personally adhered to Marxist economic and political theory, though in his later years he fiercely criticized the Stalinist culture of the Soviet Union. He deplored the USSR's aggressive actions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia and supported self-determination as a matter of principle. It worried him that the Soviets' actions provided bad PR for Marxism. But for all his hatred of the Soviet regime, Sartre would have laughed at the idea that Russia, even under a despotic Stalin, posed any kind of existential threat to Europe, political, military or otherwise.

In contrast, Hamlet had good reason to be alarmed. His truly existential crisis was immediate and personal. It existed at the core of his own family. He knew it would inevitably lead to a showdown and the stakes were mortal. His uncle Claudius had murdered Hamlet's father, the legitimate king of Denmark. To consolidate his claim to the succession, Claudius hastily married Hamlet's mother. The usurper turned out to be more interested in "swagg'ring upspring reels" at his nightly "wassails"– the modern equivalent would be rave parties – than good governance. Hamlet himself should have been a candidate for succession to the throne, but the young man had been away studying at a German university, and in any case lacked his uncle's unbridled ambition. The prince also expressed his convinction that something was rotten in Denmark, and worse than that – on a more "existential" plane – that "the time is out of joint."

Later in the play Hamlet fortuitously encountered Fortinbras, the prince of Norway, Denmark's enemy, who was calmly leading a powerful military force into Poland "to gain a little patch of ground." A Norwegian captain explained to Hamlet that the oblast in question, far from being existential for Poland or Norway, "hath in it no profit but the name." Hamlet appeared legitimately bemused by Fortinbras's decision making. He describes the prince as a man "whose spirit with divine ambition puffed" is ready to expose "what is mortal and unsure to all that fortune, death, and danger dare, Even for an eggshell."

Europe's fascination with eggshells

What was Shakespeare trying to tell us? If he were around today, I expect this might offer the following explanation. After analyzing the facts available to him, Hamlet failed to understand the deeper logic of Norway's military-industrial complex, an institution that needed to make a show of exercising its muscle in foreign lands to justify his kingdom's disproportionate allocations for the nation's army. If the soldiers buy into it and the population backs it, go for it. Some eggshells have hidden value.

In the play's final scene, with his "dying voice" Hamlet casts his vote to elect Fortinbras king of Denmark as the entire power structure of the nation lies bleeding on the floor at Elsinore. It's worth noting that the name Fortinbras translates from French: strong-in-arm. The play ends with

the Armstrongs conquering Denmark. Hamlet sensed that military Keynesianism might be Europe's future.

Hamlet achieved his "quietus" in Act V but he did not commit suicide. The logic of a literally rotten and murderous state ended his life and lives of his loved ones. It was Claudius – aided and abetted by his chief of intelligence, Polonius – who suicided his own nation, leaving it in the hands of the heir to Norway and future King Strongarm of Denmark.

To sum up, Hamlet was a precocious critic of the latest "existential" trend observable in European politics in the 21st century: military Keynesianism. John Lanchester pithily summarized its workings with this description: "However little money there is for anything else, there's always enough money for a war'." It's a system that generates economic activity monopolistically, to support the cause of present and preferably future war, while effectively keeping the population quiet about the austerity measures imposed on them in the name of patriotism and national solidarity.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 surprised everyone outside of Washington's State Department. The event had been carefully choreographed by a series of US administrations, but most actively by the Biden White House when, in late 2021, it refused to discuss a framework for European security on the grounds that that issue could be summarized in four letters: NATO. The Russian invasion provided what appeared to be an ideal framework for a new wave of military Keynesianism that could now engulf all of Europe.

As NATO members, eager to maintain a strong relationship with the US that Trump 1.0 had threatened to weaken, European leaders quickly bought into the new conflict, faithfully following Washington's lead. Their incapacity to think independently about Europe's and the nations of Europe's interests, they remained blind to an essential reality, that unwinnable wars in which one has no direct stake bring austerity and potential collapse without providing the deep psychological satisfaction that a "patriotic" and truly "existential" war can bring.

It isn't because Kallas and Macron are now promising us that a future existential war launched by Russia is inevitable that Europe's population will begin believing in the value of eggshells. Especially after losing so many of one's own eggs in the process. Kallas may be regularly featured in the media, but she remains an unelected ignoramus and Macron has an approval rating of 11%.

In contrast, Hitler and Mussolini were wildly popular, capable of producing rhetoric and the right kind of kitsch symbolism. They had the talent to get away with it. US Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower had the political and to some extent the moral prestige to get away with it, especially after their nation had become unified by the experience of World War II and the exceptionally favorable outcome it produced for a nation designated as "leader of the free world." Military keynesianism was a recipe for success, which they refined by transferring its monopolistic ethos to the consumer market thanks to technology.

Europe's Black Friday

Today's European leaders are lost. They believe that the postwar US model can be applied to Europe, but there is so little resemblance in their respective situations that it appears closer to a clown show than a Shakespearean tragedy. Unlike Hamlet, Europe today has chosen to "take arms against a sea of troubles," largely of its own creation, though with some significant input from NATO's overlord, the US.

But what has that produced in the way of action or spectacle? Last week, Macron put on the stage one of his character actors, military chief of staff General Mandon, charging him with instructing the nation's mayors to stop worrying about the minor question of austerity and prepare heroically to "accept the loss of your children." Ironically, at the very moment that saw Mandon strutting and fretting "his hour upon the stage," Europe's overlord in Washington was cooking up the peace plan that risks piercing every illusion about the holy war these leaders are counting on just to keep themselves in office.

It is Europe that has climbed to the top of Olivier's ramparts, surveying the waves crashing upon the rocks, and wondering whether suicide isn't a "consummation devoutly to be wished."

*[The Devil's Advocate pursues the tradition Fair Observer began in 2017 with the launch of our "Devil's Dictionary." It does so with a slight change of focus, moving from language itself – political and journalistic rhetoric – to the substantial issues in the news. Read more of The Fair Observer Devil's Dictionary. The news always we consume deserves being seen from an outsider's point of view. And who could be more outside official discourse than Old Nick himself?]

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Reflections from Hiroshima: Eighty Years After the Atomic Bomb

Durshun Singh
November 28, 2025

It has been 80 years since the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The author's personal encounters in the city reveal a human story that challenges national justifications for past decisions, encouraging reflection on war, memory and responsibility. This reflection urges American readers to place human dignity at the center of public service and global engagement.

I've had the unique opportunity to visit Hiroshima three separate times within the span of nine months. Each visit had a purpose and took place within a personal and professional

context distinct from the others. If not for the plaques, memorials and, of course, the Genbaku Dome, it would be hard to believe such a serene city would be the site of "hell on earth" 80 years ago.

Seeing humanity in everyday Hiroshima

When you walk the streets of Hiroshima, you'll never be able to guess if the grandmother with a poor gait passing you was the sole survivor of her family in the bombings, or if the gray-haired man was in utero during the bombings. The middle schooler in uniform may come from a family that experienced discrimination due to their exposure to A-bombs, and her mother may harbor resentment toward the Japanese government for never acknowledging the pain inflicted on Koreans who were involuntarily brought to serve a nation that denies their dignity.

Experiencing the ordinary in an extremely unordinary city shifts your perspective on the history of human atrocity. What we so often gloss over in history books and mass media, occurring 80 short years ago, appears in the rhythm of daily living with an overwhelming mundanity and a horrifying profundity.

When I see the habits and mannerisms of my own grandparents in these brave, merciful Hibakusha (survivors of the atomic bomb), the unconscious rationalizations that help me justify the bombings as an American citizen are overridden by the power of human connection and compassion. Citizens are treated like pawns in any militaristic society, sacrificed in atrocious ways, often not for their country's common good, but the corrupted aims of their leaders and generals.

Leaning into the humanitarian within me

What Hiroshima taught me is to lean into the humanitarian within me and implore my friends, family and community to do the same. As an aspiring public servant and diplomat from the United States, I wish to remember the human component in all of my professional endeavors. This task is easier said than done.

Campaigning, political compromises, utilitarian decision-making and diplomatic negotiations can often trivialize the multitude of human stories that even the most minute policy outcomes will impact. In this cynical world we live in, I often ask myself how I can advance each human being as an end in themselves, rather than as a means to an end that benefits me professionally and politically. I refuse to accept that entering the political sphere requires a degradation in moral character.

"The real problem of humanity is the following: We have Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions and godlike technology. And it is terrifically dangerous, and it is now approaching a point of crisis overall." — Edward O. Wilson

People in my life ask, "Why diplomacy?". Our human family has advanced rapidly in the last few centuries; yet, we collectively never seem to realize the limitations (and power) placed upon us by our emotional wiring. Technological innovations will bridge critical gaps in industries such as engineering, nuclear medicine and cloud computing. It will never solve the subjective difficulties of embodied human dialogue, which have consequences in interpersonal, inter-community and international relations.

I consider myself blessed to have not one, but three separate opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue with students, activists and Hibakusha in the inspiring city of Hiroshima, Japan.

Holding onto hope in global conflict

Many people, including myself, feel despair when reading the news about the conflicts in Ukraine,

Gaza, Sudan and other places. Individual action is seemingly minuscule compared to political summits, diplomatic negotiations and military exchanges. However, conversations between groups, irrespective of nationality, foster understanding and build unimaginable connections between thoughtful individuals around the world.

We cannot lose hope in these times, for a lack of hope now will render us powerless in the most hopeless of times. A reminder to my fellow Americans who may be reading this: our country has the privilege to govern itself directly and indirectly, and we still have a multitude of issues. Now imagine people in countries and territories who cannot afford to dissent, and pay with their lives for speaking truth to power.

It is overused, but people are not their governments. If Hiroshima has taught me anything, it is this simple lesson. I conclude this reflection with the profound words of Nelson Mandela: "The best weapon is to sit down and talk."

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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The "Conservative Art" Trap: Reactionary Conservatism Misses the Values That Make Art Great

Joey T. McFadden
November 30, 2025

American conservative efforts to promote "classical realist" art have led to the promotion of kitsch that lacks the innovation that defines great Western art. Instead, the Trump administration and conservatives should support existing art institutions that embrace classical values and contemporary evolution. They should recognize that the Western artistic tradition has been defined by building upon the past.

Earlier this year, a controversy erupted over a portrait of US President Donald Trump in the Colorado Capitol building. This incident is a recent example of the president's interest in the arts. Despite his notoriously garish taste, he was correct to point out that Sarah A. Boardman's portrait of him was flat and lifeless. In President Trump's opinion, she "lost her talents," inspiring the president to ask for the portrait to be taken down and replaced.

Boardman's portrait of President Trump, as well as her paintings of other public figures, showcase the aesthetic challenges that so-called "conservative art" faces as the Trump administration influences the direction of the arts in America today.

To understand the challenges faced by art in contemporary America, we need to define "conservative art." This type of art is not formally associated with President Trump or the Republican

Party. Instead, it is a sentimental imitation of past art movements that lacks the substance of those movements while appealing to grievances about contemporary art. There is some overlap with kitsch art or academic art, but it is more superficial and politically adjacent.

While I am skeptical of political prerogatives in the arts, political conservatives are finally taking the mantle of leadership in the visual arena. The Trump administration recently reviewed works of art and exhibitions at the Smithsonian that it found politically "objectionable." It also instituted enormous funding cuts against the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) that target art embodying progressive values. It is clear that the "woke" or progressive vision, as it manifests in the arts, is a target for elimination by the Trump administration.

What is less clear is what will replace that vision. There have been attempts by the Trump White House to promote a patriotic vision in the arts. The administration launched the America250 Initiative, encouraging states to create cultural projects and develop grants that support patriotic themes in celebration of the country's 250th anniversary. States such as New Jersey, Nevada and Mississippi are awarding hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants for projects that are fairly politically neutral, such as murals and other public displays focused on the American Revolution.

The conservative media organization PragerU launched a rather banal Founder's Museum as part of the initiative in the Eisenhower Building in Washington, DC, featuring reproductions of historical paintings of the founders. In typical conservative fashion, the exhibition is not very original. It features no new paintings of the Founding Fathers. However, it does have visual AI displays that bring the founders to life to tell their stories — hardly the innovative spirit that has defined American creativity for generations.

"Conservative" art still misses the mark

Despite political conservatives' distaste for progressive visual art that brings racial themes into stories about the colonial period and America's founding, such works tend to display a level of imagination and complexity that "conservative art" almost never matches.

In 2022, African American artist Simone Leigh's sculptures of colonial slave women, cowrie shells and black female sphinxes adorned the interior of the US pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The colonial building that houses the US' contribution to the biannual "art olympics" was decorated with a thatched roof to resemble a 1930s West African palace. In contrast, "conservative artists" would hardly ever create works of art this conceptually sophisticated.

The Trump administration has unfortunately fallen into the "conservative art" trap of rejecting newness in its arts policy. In January, President Trump signed an executive order promoting traditional architecture while vehemently rejecting contemporary styles. This was accompanied by the allocation of millions in funding for a National Garden of American Heroes, which will feature lifelike statues of great Americans in traditional sculpture materials (including marble, bronze, copper, granite and brass).

Aside from this narrow exception and the adjacent architecture policy, political conservatives have failed to provide a conceptual vision for any visual arts policy beyond purging "improper ideology" from cultural institutions. This leaves a gaping vacuum for a coherent aesthetic sensibility to define the federal government's vision for the visual arts, in other words, a "conservative" vision.

One organization that is almost perfectly designed to fill that vacuum is the Art Renewal Center (ARC). The ARC is an ultra-conservative arts organization known for promoting "classical realism" in the fine arts as a rejection of modern and contemporary art. Founded by Fred Ross in 1999, the ARC positions itself as the guardian of the Western artistic tradition, championing a return to 19th-century French academic painting and valorizing its epitome, painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau, over what Ross famously called the "Great 20th Century Art Scam."

However, much of the art that the ARC promotes through its competitions and featured galleries demonstrates the fundamental flaws of "conservative art". The ARC prizes an idealized and whimsical imitation of neoclassicism that is sterile and unimaginative, reminiscent of yearbook photos and cheesy "fan art."

While most of their featured artists have superb technical skills — though a handful do not — the ARC takes something meant for a very specific context (art created during formulaic academic training) and insists that a formula meant for teaching should be applied to all art outside the academic setting. Instead of utilizing and building upon the tools of classical training, the ARC's focus is stuck in this structure. Thus, it results in the promotion of forcefully constructed, highly centralized compositions that are difficult to relate to because they do not reflect the deep spaces and dynamic figures we interact with every day.

These defects, and the ARC's smug sense of superiority about them, are precisely why the ARC was called the "xenophobes" of the art world and why former partners of the ARC, like the Laguna College of Art & Design, now reject them.

Jonathan Keeperman, founder of far-right publishing house Passage Press, identifies "conservative art's" flaws as being overly moralistic, self-consciously sentimental and grievance-oriented. These shortcomings define the ARC's preferences and precisely position the organization, as well as people who share its reactionary views, to take a significant place in the Trump administration as the government carves a path for a "conservative" revitalization of the arts.

The current direction is the wrong direction

President Trump has demonstrated some aesthetic discernment, such as in the Boardman portrait controversy. However, his tastes are still brash and unrefined. After the death of the notoriously sentimental painter Thomas Kinkade in 2012, he tweeted, "I happen to love his beautiful paintings". Trump has also shown approval for the conservative propaganda artist Jon McNaughton, who creates flawlessly executed yet tacky paintings of conservative politicians and pundits that resemble political cartoons more than high art. This is not to mention the ornamental details across the White House that Trump had painted gold, and the decorative appliques that observers compared to polyurethane Home Depot decorations.

Among my friends and peers in the art world, there is skepticism about my concern that "Classical Realism" or a similar kitsch vision will overtake the visual arts through federal intervention — an intervention that thus far has been mostly punitive and lacking in creativity. However, my peers have a point. Progressives dominate the art world, and that is not going to change anytime soon just because President Trump is in the White House.

Instead, the impact of whatever style is promoted by the administration will be about establishing a kind of political legitimacy to the public. Conservative art will not only be legitimized, but the administration will also use this art to justify its policies through idealized

imagery. For instance, the Department of Homeland Security posted a picture of Thomas Kinkade's painting Morning Pledge in early July, associating the Trump administration's controversial immigration policies with an idealized and nostalgic Americana aesthetic.

The saccharine scene features misty morning rain, 1950s cars, a church steeple and an American flag to match. This is not to mention Kinkade's characteristically high-chroma palette and crudely painted foliage. This exact aesthetic, which supposedly promotes the time-honored tradition of technical excellence while neglecting the very techniques that create subtlety and depth in the depiction of objects, is reflected in some of the less technically proficient art the ARC promotes.

Classically trained artist and head of The Society of Figurative Arts in Texas, Michael Mentler, is a long-time critic of the ARC. We spoke on the phone about "conservative art" and the current direction of the representational arts. Mentler and I shared our mutual surprise that the ARC has not been more involved with the administration's arts policy despite its perfect fit for the moment, especially given its peripheral connections with the administration.

For example, SpaceX will be launching copies of the ARC's recent Salon winners' paintings to the Moon. In addition, PragerU made multiple videos featuring an ARC member. Mentler thinks that the reason the ARC has not taken up this initiative is that the organization may be concerned about alienating the many liberals who associate with the ARC.

Regardless of the subject of conversation, Mentler always veered back toward discussing craft, composition and his encyclopedic knowledge of art history. His most insightful critique of the ARC's sensibility was that they prize the "fine mimicking [of] surface detail" (an apt description of Sarah A. Boardman's portraits) instead of valuing the structure of the figure and its placement in dynamic space (like Edward Hopper's famous 1942 painting Nighthawks, which displays this dynamism). The term "surface detail" stuck out to me and is essentially what differentiates great art that celebrates tradition from kitsch art that reproduces a superficial imitation of the brilliance of great artists of the past.

The path forward lies in a substantive — not superficial — appreciation of the past

Impressionism, which the ARC considers to have some merit, is still seen as the beginning of the end of the heyday of classical values in the arts by Ross & Co. However, El Greco and the late work of great masters such as Jacobo Tintoretto, Paolo Veronese, Rembrandt van Rijn, Titian, Diego Velázquez, Francisco Goya, Eugène Delacroix and other titans often display qualities that are proto-impressionistic, suggesting that the modern sensibilities the ARC derides are actually artistically advanced.

Titian is perhaps the best-known Renaissance painter to have loosened up his style as he aged. His late painting, The Flaying of Marsias (1570s), and his final painting, Pietà (1576), show a stylistic development reminiscent of the arc of Western art history. His earlier work was cleaner: skin was smoother, brushstrokes were less visible and the edges of objects were harder. As he felt more comfortable in the stylistic and technical conventions of his time, he became looser in his paint and less conventional in his methods.

Western art had the same evolution when Modernism challenged the conventions of the French Academy by building on previous examples in art history, not by rejecting them, as Fred Ross erroneously claims.

Many political conservatives doubt the continued existence of a figurative tradition that embraces standards of excellence, which Mentler sees as the result of an insufficient study of art history. In my conversation with the notable conservative cultural commentator Heather Mac Donald, she implied that such institutions are almost extinct. She suggested that Larry Kudlow's wife's painting atelier is among the only schools still teaching representational art. However, there are many schools, museums, galleries and self-taught artists that support the great artistic tradition of Western civilization — even if they do not make headlines or inflame the culture war.

One such institution is New York City's Art Students' League. The League offers courses in representational painting, drawing, sculpture and even abstract painting without denigrating or discouraging the stylistic flexibility that allows the arts to grow and change over time.

The League is not alone, with some art schools and apprenticeships remaining that offer similar skill-based instruction, as well as numerous ateliers that adhere to a more traditional approach. If conservatives are going to have an arts policy, they should replace their punitive war on wokeness with a propping up of the existing figurative tradition hiding right under their noses.

The combination of classical values and contemporary forms is not exclusive to institutions. An underappreciated figurative art movement called "disrupted realism" has adorned gallery walls with fragmented bodies, shifting faces and distorted spaces for decades. Great living figurative artists such as Jenny Saville, Alex Kanevsky, Phil Hale, as well as my close personal friends, paint in this movement. They are well-versed in art history, deeply admire the Renaissance and, like the great masters of the past, build on what their predecessors created instead of stagnating and merely copying styles popular at one specific time in history to "preserve" an art history tradition that, in reality, never stopped evolving.

Change defines the Western tradition

In modern society, we typically associate radical innovations with young start-up founders and inventors. In the pre-modern visual universe, radical innovation often belonged to the old who built on their experience. The imperfect and noncentral compositions that create narrative and movement exemplify the most sophisticated old master paintings.

The ARC demonstrates its own lack of sophistication by valorizing some of the least dynamic William-Adolphe Bouguereau paintings — paintings that Bouguereau himself said were composed under significant market pressure to conform to buyers' tastes. Bouguereau's earlier work, rich in saturated colors and dynamic figure poses, ironically shows stagnation over time in contrast with the growth typically associated with a decades-long career.

That same stagnation killed Boardman's portrait of President Trump in the Colorado state Capitol. It may seem promising that the president was tantalized by the portrait that replaced it. However, while the Vanessa Horabuena painting that replaced Boardman's may have been more realistic, it still maintained the same kind of superficiality that holds back "conservative art". Just as kitsch creates a superficial sense of enchantment, "conservative" political art creates a superficial sense of authority defined by the dishonesty of a generic image.

President George Washington's presidential portrait by Gilbert Stuart is striking because its volumetric rendering creates a believable sense of dimensionality, complemented by soft, subtle brushwork. President Ronald Reagan's portrait in

the White House is warm, with bright colors and thick brushstrokes. President Barack Obama commissioned Kehinde Wiley — who fuses the Western tradition with his own African-American culture — to bring together realistic portraiture with his unique floral backgrounds for his official portrait in the National Portrait Gallery. Yet, the newest portrait of President Trump by Vanessa Horabuena, which was merely more technically proficient than the previous one in the Colorado Capitol Building, is still empty. The painting is more of an imitation of the photograph it was copied from than an authentic rendition of a president.

The difference between these past presidential portraits and the more recent ones of President Trump demonstrates what happens when the Western artistic tradition is embraced in its fullness — and when it is not. If political conservatives believe in the value of that tradition, they should accept the fact that the Western artistic tradition is not defined by stillness, but by a cascade of influence, with one period and movement after the other building on the last.

Furthermore, if political conservatives truly believe in their Western heritage, instead of using art as a political tool or disregarding its finer particularities, they should point their efforts toward supporting arts institutions that serve no explicit political purpose. Such a strategy would have a much more constructive impact on our culture, making today's conservatives patrons of our heritage rather than saboteurs.

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