

Fair Observer

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Fair Observer^o
Independence, Diversity, Debate

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Book Banning, Alberta Style: Censorship in the Classroom

Margaret Smale
July 01, 2026

Book banning spans centuries, from ancient library destructions to Alberta's 2025 restrictions on school library materials, often targeting LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex) themes. The policy's subjective enforcement and political motivations undermine inclusive education and public access to diverse literature. Advocates urge for equitable, stakeholder-driven collection policies to preserve intellectual freedom.

As long as there have been books, there have been people who didn't want anyone to read them, and no shortage of people who wanted to burn them. As a tool of war in ancient times, book burning was commonplace—the destruction of the library at Alexandria being perhaps the most famous example.

The Nazis conducted highly organized book burnings in 1933. D.H. Lawrence published *Lady Chatterley's Lover* privately in Italy and France in 1928, but people in Britain were prevented from reading it until 1960 because it had been banned under the Obscene Publications Act. More recently, Valentina Gomez, running for secretary of state in Missouri in 2024, set a pile of books dealing with LGBTQ issues on fire with a flamethrower and promised that she would ban such books if she were elected (she lost). On and on it goes.

The government of Alberta has joined these dubious ranks by issuing new sweeping guidelines regarding the type of material that will be allowed on public school library shelves. Like many such undertakings, it is ostensibly well-intended. However, under the guise of wanting to protect tender young minds from what it considers inappropriate material of a sexual nature, the Alberta government may actually be encouraging intolerance of diversity.

Experiencing censorship firsthand

My own personal experience of censorship happened in my late 20s. I was happily browsing the stacks at my neighborhood library when I saw a title that piqued my interest. I don't remember what the book was about, but as I opened it to a random page, I was shocked to find that huge swathes of the text had been blacked out with felt-tip pen. I thumbed through the rest of the pages and saw that most of the book had received the same treatment, in some cases leaving only a random sentence or two legible on the page. After the initial shock subsided, real anger set in. I was stunned that a random stranger thought they had the right to determine what I was allowed to read, not to mention to desecrate a book in this way.

I have never really understood this desire to control what other people read. I have always been an avid bibliophile, and reading is, without question, my favorite pastime. Actually, the term pastime doesn't begin to do justice to how essential reading has been in my life. Over and above the pure enjoyment they afford, books and reading have undoubtedly seen me through some of the most difficult times in my life, affirming and validating my experience when, for instance, a character in a book or the author of an essay described a thought or feeling or reaction I had experienced myself in similar circumstances.

Reading has enriched my journey through life and added immeasurably to my happiness. Having said that, I have certainly come across the odd book here and there that I found repellent and couldn't bring myself to finish. However, the decision not to read the book was entirely mine, and it never occurred to me to try to prevent anyone else from reading it. As my mom used to say, "There is no accounting for taste," and just because I personally object to something is not a reason to deny other people access to it.

I chose to pursue a career where I would never be far from books, and by my mid-20s, I had completed a Master of Library Science (M.L.S.) degree at the University of Alberta. One of the requirements for the degree was a non-thesis project, and we were free to decide our own topic of inquiry. I chose to survey all post-secondary institutions, both secular and religious, in the Canadian prairie provinces to determine, among other things, how prevalent challenges to library materials were at that time (1980–1985); the types of challenges received (for example, requests for outright removal of material or simply restrictions to access); and what the outcomes of these challenges were.

It was perhaps a foregone conclusion, but my survey confirmed, as history has repeatedly shown, that the desire to censor and ban library material is widespread, and that any type of material, regardless of subject matter, no matter how innocuous or anodyne, could be subject to a removal request.

For instance, the titles objected to include *Beyond Reason* by Margaret Trudeau, the ex-wife of former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau (I have read this book myself, and while it might be said that Margaret Trudeau didn't always make the best decisions, to my mind, there was nothing truly objectionable about her memoir, and I enjoyed reading it). In another example, a

religious institution stated that the biology textbooks were kept in closed stacks because the chapters on human anatomy and reproduction in particular were considered pornographic, and access had to be controlled.

Ministerial Order 30/2025

So, there was a tediously familiar ring to the announcement, in May 2025, that the Alberta provincial government was launching a review of all K-12 school library materials. Formerly, Alberta school boards made decisions regarding their library collections locally, under voluntary guidelines. Asserting a need for new province-wide standards, Demetrios Nikolaidis, Minister of Education and Childcare, issued Ministerial Order 30/2025 on July 4, 2025.

Rather than providing a list of prohibited titles, the order banned school library materials that contained written descriptions and/or images of explicit sexual activity. The initiative was roundly criticized by many organizations, including the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, the Centre for Free Expression (CFE) and the Association of Canadian Publishers. In response to the order, Edmonton Public Schools (EPS) announced it planned to remove 226 titles, including classics such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Premier Danielle Smith accused EPS of "vicious compliance" (i.e., malicious compliance), suggesting they had interpreted the order in an overly restrictive manner.

Minister Nikolaidis subsequently issued a modification to the standards, Ministerial Order 034/2025, which excluded written descriptions. Only images of explicit sexual activity were now subject to the ban. Offensive materials were to be removed from school libraries by January 5, 2026. School boards were required to submit lists of titles they intended to remove to the government

by October 31, 2025, but were not required to make the lists public.

Access to Information requests by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in January 2026 revealed the titles removed from the five largest school boards in the province. At that time, the two largest school boards, Calgary Board of Education and Edmonton Public Schools, had removed 44 titles and 34 titles, respectively. This, in itself, illustrates one of the more obvious problems with book banning in general. Even with the fairly precise definition of terms contained within the order, the process of determining which titles should be removed is obviously at least partly subjective; otherwise, the same titles would be removed by all school boards throughout the province. Thus, the order fails even in its most basic purpose, to introduce uniformity in provincial standards for school library materials.

Consequently, students at some school boards continue to have access to library materials that other school boards have decided to remove. Across the province, the most commonly removed materials were graphic novels and, in some cases, only a single illustrated panel or two led to the decision to remove. A searchable database of library materials that have been removed as of April 2026 has been compiled by the Investigative Journalism Foundation.

Political influences behind the order

The Alberta government stated that the new standards were developed after public consultation with concerned parents, but this is not entirely accurate; in fact, the impetus largely came from consultation with two groups in particular: Parents for Choice in Education (PCE) and Action4Canada. These groups cited four graphic novels in particular that primarily dealt with coming of age, sexual orientation, and gender identity: *Flamer* by Mike Curato; *Fun Home*: A

Family Tragicomic by Alison Bechdel; *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe; and *Blankets* by Craig Thompson. Both groups have been vocal opponents of inclusivity with regard to 2SLGBTQI+ (Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and additional people who identify as part of sexual and gender diverse communities) students, as well as the inclusion of information on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) in public school health curricula.

Furthermore, there are close ties between PCE and the United Conservative Party (UCP) government. PCE's executive director, John Hilton-O'Brien, is a past president and founding board member of the Wild Rose Party of Alberta, of which Smith was party leader from 2009 to 2014. Also, during the 2022 UCP leadership race, candidates, including Smith, participated in a PCE-organized education forum.

An even closer relationship exists between the UCP government and Take Back Alberta, founded by David Parker. Take Back Alberta grew out of the Coutts blockade on the Canada-US border, in which several hundred vehicles blocked traffic between the two countries to protest COVID-19 public health measures. In 2022, members of Take Back Alberta gained nine seats on the UCP executive board and successfully ousted Jason Kenney, Smith's predecessor.

Although apparently not directly involved in the current book-banning process, Parker made explicit remarks at several rallies in 2023 about the need to take back libraries. He suggested that low voter turnout is key, and that it might be possible for his organization to take over every school board in the province.

The parental rights debate

A talking point frequently cited by these groups is the concept of "parental rights," and many of the

tactics used by PCE and Action4Canada have been deliberately copied from the strategies of American parental pressure groups such as Moms for Liberty. An excellent documentary, *The Librarians*, provides a chilling account of the massive increase in book-banning efforts aimed at public schools in the US, in which Moms for Liberty, among other groups, has played a decisive role. It also makes clear just how vulnerable the librarians safeguarding their collections are, many of whom have had their jobs and personal safety threatened or have been ousted from their positions simply for having a particular title on their shelves.

All of this is not to say that parents don't have rights. Of course, they do, with regard to their own children. The problem arises when parents extend their efforts in ways that affect other parents and their children, who may not share the same opinions and beliefs. It's important to remember that this campaign has largely been at the expense of the public education system in Alberta, which has a very large mandate and serves an enormous constituency.

Parents often deliberately choose the public system because they want to forego school-based religious indoctrination of their children, preferring instead to see them exposed to a wide variety of people and ideas. For parents who object to what they see as a more free-wheeling attitude in the public system, Alberta has an abundance of choice in private, religious, charter, alternate and independent schools.

Moreover, Alberta is unique in that 70% of per-student funding for these private schools comes from the public purse, a fact that many Albertans find controversial and that many taxpayers object to. All this is to say that parents who object to more inclusive school library collections have a wealth of options and should be able to find a school that aligns more closely with their priorities.

Defending the freedom to read

It goes without saying that school library collections should be carefully curated, with age-appropriate materials that not only support the curriculum but also expose children to the wealth of human knowledge and experience. It's also important to allow people to have their say — we have freedom of speech and thought in Canada after all. However, allowing people to express their opinions should not necessarily lead to materials being removed from school library shelves.

A comprehensive collection policy developed in consultation with all stakeholders and including a sound process for handling challenges to school library materials is crucial to ensuring that all children continue to have access to an abundance of materials that enrich their educational journey. Book banning will always be with us — that is the way of the world — but it's my hope that as we continue to progress toward a more tolerant, equitable and compassionate society, we can gradually stem the tide of intolerance and be free to read whatever we want.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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from the University of Alberta. Her love of diverse books led her to an almost 30-year career as a professional librarian, primarily for the Calgary Board of Education. Now retired, she and her husband enjoy their two now-adult daughters, friends, traveling, going to the movies, dining out ... and, of course, reading.

Venezuela: The Tortuous Road After the June Earthquakes

Leonardo Vivas
July 03, 2026

The two earthquakes that ravaged Venezuela in June did more than kill and injure thousands — they may jeopardize the country’s chance of economic reform. The Trump administration could abandon its prior aid plan if Venezuelan President Delcy Rodríguez cannot handle this crisis. But US President Donald Trump could surrender responsibility for Venezuela, affording democracy a chance to take root.

[Disclaimer: This piece is a scenario, not a prediction. By imagining how Venezuela might respond to a devastating natural disaster during a fragile political transition, I seek to illuminate structural weaknesses that already exist today.]

When Venezuela’s contemporary history is eventually written, the 26 years of an era that once promised sweeping change — not only for the country, but the world — may well be remembered as the darkest period since the Captaincy General of Venezuela declared its independence from Spain. They may even eclipse the traumatic decade between 1811 and 1821, which began with the Declaration of Independence, was followed less than a year later by an earthquake strikingly similar to those that devastated the country only days ago, and descended into a brutal War of Independence that claimed countless lives and destroyed immense wealth before culminating in the Battle of Carabobo. By remarkable coincidence, that decisive battle took place on June

24 — exactly 205 years before this year’s earthquakes.

Since then, Venezuela has endured many difficult chapters: the civil wars of the 19th century, successive dictatorships during much of the 20th, and, in contrast, periods of genuine progress, including the discovery of oil at the dawn of the 20th century and four decades of representative democracy between 1958 and 1998.

The twin earthquakes that struck several Venezuelan cities on that ill-fated Wednesday on June 24 appear to have altered the country’s trajectory as profoundly as the earthquake of 1812. Until then, Venezuela had been living in a peculiar — and in many respects artificial — political reality. Under the patronage of the United States, the country seemed poised not only for a fundamental economic reorientation through foreign investment, debt restructuring and long-overdue reforms, but also for an orderly political transition leading to the restoration of democracy.

The earthquakes swept away those expectations overnight. They shattered not only the assumptions held by Venezuelan President Delcy Rodríguez’s transitional government, but also those of the Trump administration and even Venezuela’s democratic opposition. Perhaps the only people who never fully embraced this optimism were ordinary Venezuelans themselves, whose daily lives have long served as a painful reminder of the enormous gap between official promises and reality.

A difficult reconstruction

Rebuilding after a disaster of the magnitude that struck Caracas and other cities is always an immense undertaking. Saving lives, treating the injured, housing displaced families and designing an effective reconstruction strategy would challenge even the strongest state. In Venezuela,

however, these tasks are proving far more difficult — and are likely to be considerably less successful.

The earthquakes have become the ultimate stress test for a regime that has spent years not merely colonizing society but systematically dismantling the state's operational capacity. Unsurprisingly, its response has been weak, ineffective and in many cases counterproductive.

International and domestic media alike, no longer subject to the level of censorship seen in previous years, have documented the unfolding rescue effort in remarkable detail. Social media has done the same, offering minute-by-minute accounts that reveal an unmistakable reality: the Chavista state — a state shaped by the political and economic system of former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez — has been largely absent from coordinating the thousands of volunteers, foreign rescue specialists, medical teams and humanitarian organizations working tirelessly to save lives and provide shelter. Even more striking has been the absence of Venezuela's armed forces, whose various branches have played only a marginal role in the emergency response.

There exists a striking contrast with previous disasters. Following the 1967 Caracas earthquake, the Venezuelan state responded with competent institutions and effective coordination. The same was largely true after the devastating floods of 1999 that ravaged the central coast, less than a year after Chávez assumed the presidency. In both cases, governments possessed functioning institutions, trained personnel and, above all, the political will to act. Today, with only a few notable exceptions, particularly parts of the public hospital system, that institutional DNA appears to have largely disappeared.

This failure carries profound political consequences. It exposes the uncomfortable truth

that the emperor has no clothes. The official narrative portraying Venezuela as a country on the verge of recovery has been revealed for what it is: sheer rhetoric.

Likewise, the mythology surrounding the supposed invincibility of Chavismo (the leftwing movement based on Chávez's principles) — which is already badly damaged after former Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's capture — has suffered another severe blow. Rodríguez's provisional government now appears to have entered a potentially irreversible downward spiral.

Trump's three-stage strategy begins to unravel

The earthquakes have not only shaken Venezuela's provisional authorities; they have also severely disrupted the Trump administration's strategy toward the country.

What had been presented as a carefully sequenced three-stage plan — stabilization, recovery and democratic transition — has suddenly been reduced to a single overriding objective: survival and reconstruction.

The optimistic rhetoric repeatedly voiced by US President Donald Trump — that everything was proceeding smoothly, that cooperation with the provisional government was complete and that Venezuelans were “dancing in the streets” — now rings increasingly hollow. Public opinion surveys that had reported improving expectations and even unusually high levels of support for Trump are almost certainly no longer relevant.

The human cost alone is staggering: over 2,000 fatalities, a figure that may rise substantially; roughly 11,000 injured; and nearly 30,000 people housed in hospitals or emergency shelters as of July 1. Material destruction has been equally devastating. The quakes collapsed approximately 800 buildings and severely damaged the structures

of many more, including a long list of large and small businesses. Much of what remains of Venezuela's already diminished middle class has suddenly lost its principal assets, with little prospect of replacing them anytime soon.

The economic consequences are equally severe. Economists expect GDP to contract by between 6% and 9%, effectively erasing the ambitious growth projections associated with what had become known as the Trump Plan. Reconstruction will necessarily take precedence over virtually every other policy objective.

This does not mean that planned investment in Venezuela's oil sector will come to a complete halt. Most production facilities lie outside the hardest-hit areas, although the El Palito refinery in the country's central region represents an important exception. Nevertheless, the positive impact of renewed energy investment on the broader economy will inevitably be diluted by the enormous losses inflicted by the disaster.

Administration officials have reiterated that Venezuela enjoys Washington's full support during the reconstruction phase. Yet history offers reasons for caution. The mixed — and often deeply disappointing — record of American reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq suggests that expectations should remain modest. Ultimately, Venezuela will have to rely primarily on its own resources and its own society to rebuild.

The administration's relationship with Rodríguez's provisional government may also evolve. Thus far, Washington has offered it unwavering support. But if the government increasingly appears incapable of managing the crisis — or worse, becomes an obstacle to relief efforts, as numerous rescue operations have already suggested — the Trump administration, whose overriding concern is political success (or at least the appearance of success), may eventually

begin to view the provisional government less as a partner than a liability.

The democratic opposition: the least damaged political actor

At the time of writing, among Venezuela's three principal political actors, the democratic opposition appears to have emerged in the strongest relative position.

It bears no direct responsibility for the state's inadequate response to the disaster. Instead, opposition organizations quickly mobilized to coordinate rescue efforts, establish international contacts, expose governmental shortcomings and deploy volunteers to assist victims while largely avoiding overt political exploitation of the tragedy.

Even opposition leader María Corina Machado, despite the Trump administration consistently marginalizing her, expressed her willingness to return to Venezuela to assist with coordination efforts. She offered a message of compassion and national solidarity at a moment when both are desperately needed.

The opposition's longstanding call for free and genuinely competitive elections will almost certainly be postponed by the immediate demands of reconstruction. Yet it is entirely possible that, faced with the overwhelming burden of rebuilding the country, the Trump administration may seek to reduce its own political responsibility for Venezuela's future. Likewise, the outcome of the upcoming US midterm elections could reshape Washington's domestic political landscape and accelerate pressure for a democratic resolution to Venezuela's crisis.

Whatever path events ultimately take, Venezuela's democratic forces must be prepared to govern sooner rather than later. As the old Spanish

saying goes, dawn will come — and then we shall see.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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professor and coordinator of the Latin American Initiative at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. Vivas is a sociologist who studied at Central University in Venezuela, and he went on to get an M.Phil from University of Sussex, UK, and a PhD from Nanterre Université in Paris.

Andy Burnham and “Manchesterism”: The New Face of Populism?

Kent Jenkins Jr.
July 08, 2026

Andy Burnham, a middle-class outsider turned UK Labour leader, is redefining British politics with his “Manchesterism” agenda — prioritizing devolution, housing reform and education equality while challenging Westminster’s status quo. His partnership with Liverpool Mayor Steve Rotheram and pivotal role in exposing the Hillsborough cover-up highlight his commitment to grassroots justice. As he prepares to lead, Burnham’s rise offers a new model for a global brand of progressive

populism and a potential blueprint for Labour’s future.

From the moment he opens his mouth, it’s clear there’s something different about Andy Burnham, the UK’s unlikely political phenomenon and Prime Minister (PM) in waiting: Burnham doesn’t sound the way prime ministers are supposed to.

Great Britain has churned through six heads of government in the past decade, installing and quickly discarding leaders of differing parties, philosophies, ethnicities and genders. But one thing has stayed constant throughout: the PM’s tone of voice. Listeners — even American listeners like me — can’t mistake the posh, Oxbridge elocution of England’s upper class, which instantly conveys that the speaker was bred to rule Britannia in spare moments between squash matches and cocktails.

So, when Andy — everyone calls him that, just “Andy” — picks up a microphone, it shocks the ear that he talks a bit like the former Beatle Ringo Starr. And Burnham’s accent — the voice of a middle-class boy from England’s hard-pressed, postindustrial North, around Manchester and Liverpool — is merely the tip of a political and cultural iceberg.

After a runaway victory in his June parliamentary election, Burnham took only hours to force the resignation of incumbent Prime Minister and fellow Labour Party member Keir Starmer. He has also waged open, if civilized, warfare with former Prime Minister and Labour elder statesman Tony Blair over their party’s foundational principles and standing with the British public. And he’s announced unprecedented plans to restructure the national government by

implementing a political ethos that has been dubbed “Manchesterism.”

But Burnham’s ambition reaches even farther. When he formally ascends to the leadership of Labour, England’s historically dominant center-left party, Burnham will confront a wave of hard-right, conservative populism that over the past decade has swept not just Great Britain but Western Europe, the US, South America and points beyond. After ten years of global futility, Burnham is proposing Manchesterism as a new brand of left-leaning counterpopulism, a formula for reconnecting traditional liberal parties throughout the West with those working- and middle-class voters who have defected in droves.

Like his recent predecessors in 10 Downing Street, Burnham confronts huge obstacles, and it’s anyone’s guess whether he can make Manchesterism work. But his success or failure will determine more than just the direction of England. It’s likely to influence the 2028 US presidential election and the shape of politics in beleaguered capitals around the West.

A different kind of populist emerges

Viewed from a certain angle — the vantage often occupied by his partisan and ideological detractors — Andy makes for an unconvincing populist. He has spent more than 30 years in politics — nearly all his working life — and for the first 20 of those he built an utterly traditional, establishment-ordained resume: Cambridge University graduate, parliamentary staffer, Member of Parliament, Cabinet posts under multiple prime ministers and two unsuccessful campaigns to occupy the top job himself.

Then came the moment that exploded European politics and Burnham’s career: June 23, 2016, the day that British voters voted to pull their country out of the European Union. The Brexit referendum

was driven by a fiery brand of anti-globalist, anti-immigrant, socially conservative populism that, until that moment, had been held to the margins of English politics. Britain’s then-Prime Minister, David Cameron, and most of his Conservative Party’s hierarchy joined hands with prominent Labourites to vehemently oppose Brexit. They were stunned when a ragtag coalition anchored in the countryside and led by a splinter-party politician named Nigel Farage eked out an angry victory.

Elsewhere in the world, Brexit seemed to open the floodgates. A similar right-wing uprising ripped through American politics just a few months later, when Donald Trump was elected US President. The fever would eventually spread to France, Italy, Germany, Hungary, Brazil, Argentina and other Western democracies. For the next ten years, establishment politicians and liberal parties throughout the West would flail aimlessly and fail to contain — or even clearly comprehend — this outsiders’ uprising.

For Burnham, Brexit was the last straw — or so he thought. Deeply disillusioned by the Labour Party’s failure to mount an effective anti-Brexit campaign, and increasingly uncomfortable in London’s halls of power, Burnham shocked his colleagues by abandoning Parliament and standing for election to become mayor of Greater Manchester. This was widely interpreted as some form of surrender or self-deportation.

In Britain, political decision-making over many aspects of the nation’s daily life is tightly centralized and placed in the hands of Parliament, known colloquially as Westminster, and the country’s professional civil service, or Whitehall. Local governments historically have been granted limited power and even less money. And, while London and Manchester are separated by a 200-mile drive, the cultural distance between them is far greater. To say that London’s governing class

views gritty, blue-collar Manchester as unfashionable is an exercise in classic English understatement. Burnham seemed like a Premier League football star who suddenly quit to join a third-tier squad in Wales.

But then something odd happened. Parliament spent the next decade trying to sort the wreckage of Brexit and managed only to enrage the British public even further. Burnham spent the next decade trying to revive the fortunes of downtrodden Manchester and managed to become the most popular politician in England.

Manchester as Burnham's political proving ground

After Brexit, as myriad prime ministers shuffled ineffectually through 10 Downing Street, the public's attitude toward them never wavered: They detested every one. Five consecutive Conservative PMs were evicted in failure, including Boris Johnson, the former mayor of London noted for his theatrically ridiculous haircut and countless scandals, and Liz Truss, whose first and only proposed budget so terrorized financial markets that she was ousted in about six weeks.

When parliamentary elections were held in 2024, public revulsion propelled Labour to a historic majority — about two out of every three seats in the House of Commons. Yet their mandate evaporated in months. Prime Minister Starmer avoided scandal but committed a series of punishing political missteps and his party was routed in elections for local offices this spring. Starmer's tenure amounted to a screaming, rollercoaster plunge from the heights at which it began.

The chief beneficiary of this unbroken chaos has been Farage, the Brexit leader, who has steadily built his Reform Party into a national political force. Some polls predict that, if

parliamentary elections were held today, Farage would become prime minister. So, in June, panicked Labourites threw Starmer overboard and frantically grasped for someone, or something, that a chronically disaffected electorate might actually like.

The someone that they came up with was Andy Burnham. And the something that they found was buses. Specifically, yellow buses.

If there is a single image that launched Burnham on the road from Manchester back to Westminster and captures the essence of Manchesterism, it is one of Manchester's bright yellow Bee Line buses, the most visible hallmarks of Burnham's time as mayor. By now, Burnham has retold his version of the Bee Line story countless times.

In the 1980s, under Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the "Iron Lady," bus services in Manchester and other major cities were divested from local government ownership and sold off to private companies. Over the years, service deteriorated dramatically while prices soared. After taking office, Burnham established a franchise system that enabled his government to force improvements in bus operations. He set a maximum ticket price of £2 (\$2.67) to travel anywhere in the Manchester area. And he slapped a coat of yellow paint on the entire fleet to ensure his changes would not go unnoticed.

They didn't. The fact that anyone, anywhere in government might be able to accomplish anything, to bring about even a small tangible improvement in daily life, caught the Manchester public's fancy. Burnham spent his days tightening the nuts and bolts of municipal machinery, bringing a pragmatic, nonideological approach to his job that he called "putting place ahead of party." His approval ratings shot skyward and an approving buzz spread south. Soon enough, Burnham

acquired a new nickname back in Westminster: “King of the North.”

Nowadays, detractors are quick to sneer that fixing a bus line does not qualify Burnham to manage Britain’s economy or conduct foreign affairs. And if you’re looking for clues regarding how he would undertake either of those imposing tasks, you’ll find few. Throughout his parliamentary campaign — and in the 2024 book he coauthored with his friend, Liverpool Mayor Steve Rotherham, *Head North* — macroeconomics and diplomacy earned barely a mention.

But this is precisely the point where the political contours of Manchesterism clearly emerge. While the establishment ponders the fate of the globe — and patronizingly insinuates that a provincial mayor is too small to wear the mantle of prime minister — Burnham and his supporters are preoccupied with the sorry state of affairs at home. A decade after Brexit, many Britons, particularly those in the hinterlands, feel no less fleeced and abandoned by the forces of globalism and remain no less pissed off about it.

But unlike Farage and his fellow Brexiteers, who directed public anger at EU edicts emanating from Brussels and a stream of multiethnic immigrants changing the face of British society, Burnham has identified a new villain: Westminster and the anonymous bureaucrats of Whitehall. And unlike the racially charged, scapegoating rhetoric of Brexit, Burnham calmly maintains that he not only feels the public’s frustration but can actually make things better.

Burnham sums up the foundations of Manchesterism in a single word: inequality. (In the US, the Democratic Party has landed on a somewhat analogous title for its ongoing campaign against President Trump’s economic policies: affordability.) Manchesterism includes a detailed policy agenda to shrink the economic gulf

separating struggling towns like Manchester and Liverpool from the burgeoning prosperity of London. But more broadly, Manchesterism is a frontal assault on the cultural slights and ancient insults of Britain’s class system. As Burnham tells it, that is a campaign he has waged for much of his life.

The personal roots of Manchesterism

Populist movements and their leaders often are defined less by what they are than by what and who they are not. Burnham has gone to some lengths to describe who he is not. Take, for example, his Cambridge degree. Burnham turns this unassailable credential of England’s ruling class on its head, explaining that while he may have graduated from Cambridge, he never fully belonged there.

The son of a telephone company employee and a receptionist, and the first in his family to attend university, Burnham wrote in *Head North* that “my first interview at Cambridge makes me cringe even now.” Burnham aspired to St. Catharine’s College, one of Cambridge’s 30 or so semi-autonomous constituent colleges, founded in the 15th Century. He describes ascending a stone staircase, entering a wood-paneled room and encountering a professor who proffered him a glass of sherry. “The professor asked me whether I saw any parallels between *The Canterbury Tales* and a modern package holiday,” Burnham recalled. “I was still pondering what the question meant when the rejection letter dropped on the doormat a few days later.” He was granted a second interview by Fitzwilliam College, which was founded 400 years after St. Catharine’s specifically to enroll less-privileged students for whom Cambridge had theretofore been off-limits. Burnham was dogged by “impostor syndrome” as a student at Fitzwilliam, he wrote, and needed years to feel even remotely comfortable.

Twenty-five years ago, in his maiden speech to Commons after he was elected to represent a Manchester-area constituency, he set out some of the same themes he sounds today. He had barely entered office when a major industrial concern announced plans to close a local plant and move 250 jobs to Eastern Europe. “I am worried that an air of inevitability is growing around the loss of manufacturing jobs in Great Britain, with the use of vague terms such as market forces and globalization,” he said. “This is dangerous.”

But the defining moment of his parliamentary career came in 2009, on the 20th anniversary of the infamous Hillsborough disaster. On April 15, 1989, two traditional pillars of English football (or soccer, as we Americans would have it), Liverpool and Nottingham Forest, met for a high-stakes match at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield. More than 50,000 people were crammed into quarters far too small to accommodate them safely, and a catastrophic human crush occurred in a standing-room section filled with Liverpool fans. Ninety-seven people were killed.

In the following days, local police claimed that the deaths were caused by drunken Liverpool supporters who forced their way into the stadium and assaulted officers. But the people of Liverpool, including fans who attended the game and witnessed everything, vehemently disputed this version of events and never accepted it. Two decades later, emotions still ran so raw that a commemoration ceremony drew more than 30,000 people who greeted a representative of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown with catcalls and jeers. That representative was an ashen-faced Andy Burnham.

The next day, Burnham prevailed on his boss to open a new investigation into Hillsborough. The official findings concluded that police not only committed gross negligence and mismanaged the crowd in ways that directly caused the disaster but

subsequently lied and doctored witness statements to conceal their culpability. The actions of Liverpool fans were not a contributing factor.

For Burnham, the realization that Liverpool had been denied the truth about Hillsborough for more than a generation was a turning point. “I always say that I took my first steps out of Westminster on 15 April 2009,” he wrote in *Head North*. “Things would never be the same after that day. I had experienced the way our political system fails people in a very personal way ... The spell was broken and I had fallen out of love with Westminster.”

Even now, as he returns in triumph, Burnham is keeping one foot outside Westminster, both symbolically and literally. In late June, he made his first speech after Starmer’s resignation, appearing in Manchester and attired in the uniform he adopted while mayor: blazer and collarless t-shirt, sans necktie. As he tugged his jacket, he cracked, “It’s been such a wrench to leave that I’ve had to get special permission for what people in Westminster call my Manchester clothes.” And he announced that, as prime minister, he would split his workweek between London and Manchester, establishing a satellite office he dubbed “Number 10 North.”

Just as he painted Manchester’s refurbished buses bright yellow, Burnham is creating an image of himself as an outsider rather than an insider, maintaining personal distance from the power structure he is about to take over. It is a dance on a political highwire, a sophisticated exercise in having things both ways. If Farage and his Brexiteers were content to cast themselves as pitchfork-wielding villagers storming a decadent castle, Burnham is suggesting that he is an ordinary bloke who can make government do extraordinary things. Should he succeed in moving Manchesterism from rhetoric to reality, the result might indeed be extraordinary.

From local success to a national governing vision

The most detailed roadmap of Manchesterism is Head North, Burnham's hybrid book that combines personal biography and political manifesto. (In populist movements, the two are virtually always intertwined.) Head North is constructed as a series of conversations between Burnham and his close pal and political doppelganger, Rotherham. It reads a bit like the script of an old-fashioned, Hollywood buddy movie — think Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, or Paul Newman and Robert Redford — that follows the high jinks of two slightly mismatched besties as they trade quips, bond and somehow carry the day.

Burnham and Rotherham never met as boys but grew up close by each other around Liverpool, both in working- or middle-class families. They shared similar passions: Rotherham is a maniacal Liverpool fan who survived the Hillsborough disaster, and Burnham is equally devoted to Liverpool's underdog, cross-town rival, Everton. But while Burnham chose academics and Cambridge, Rotherham entered the trades and emerged with the rough hands of a brick mason. He eventually followed his father into Liverpool local politics, earned a degree and landed on the Liberal benches of Parliament around the same time as Burnham. They became close personally but continued along different career tracks. Burnham was tapped for leadership; Rotherham deployed his acid, blue-collar wit to get under the skin of his Tory antagonists.

Their professional lives converged in mutual disgust about the time of Brexit. Rotherham was the one to suggest that the two quit Parliament and seek to lead Liverpool and Manchester; after some convincing, Burnham agreed. They had different personalities and temperaments, but possessed a shared vision for their cities and were attacking

very similar problems. From the beginning, they relied on each other as sounding boards, allies and mutual cheerleaders. The results suggest that their partnership produced something even greater than the sum of its parts.

As mayors, they gradually forged the policy and political project that others would later name Manchesterism. An equally descriptive title could have been “Way Less Westminster.” Unsurprisingly, it has not gone over well in London. As Burnham was circling shark-like around Starmer in late May, former Prime Minister Tony Blair weighed in with a 5,000-word essay entitled, “The Labour Party Is Playing With Fire Over Its Future and the Future of the Country.”

Blair argued that the real problems facing Labour and Britain are not “the Westminster bubble” (a favorite Burnham catchphrase) or Starmer's milquetoast personality. “We don't have a worked-out, coherent plan for the country in a fast-changing world,” Blair opined, referencing “epochal change in the geopolitical order” and “the technology revolution led by developments in artificial intelligence.” So, as former prime ministers will do, Blair offered his own ten-point program, which included “adaptation to an AI world,” “a Reimagined State” and plenty more Great Big Ideas. Not one of his 5,000 words was “inequality.”

Burnham may well have picked this fight a few days earlier when he declared his intent to end “40 years of neoliberalism,” a movement with which his former boss is inextricably linked. And he wasted no time swinging again in The Times, saying Blair had fundamentally missed the point. “The fall in the living standards of millions, and the reality that life has got harder for most year on year since the financial crash in 2008, is, I believe, the gaping omission in his analysis,” Burnham wrote. There was less a philosophical dispute than a clash of world views. Blair was gazing down on

the future from 30,000 feet; Burnham was watching it unfold at street level.

Indeed, Manchesterism is designed to produce clear, concrete changes that average citizens, particularly those outside London, can see and feel. The top of Burnham's agenda is "devolution," a bland euphemism for snatching some major programs away from Westminster and Whitehall and handing them over to local governments and officials like, well, mayors. During the covid epidemic, then-Prime Minister Johnson imposed quarantine rules and funding levels on Manchester that Burnham blasted as imperious and egregiously unfair but was powerless to change. It was a searing experience, and he appears intent on restructuring a consequential portion of national government to prevent similar episodes in future.

And as wonky as it sounds, devolution could turn out to be clever politics. The unofficial slogan of the Brexit movement was "Take Back Control;" Burnham describes devolution in similar terms. "Let me say this directly," he has vowed. "The days of Whitehall fighting the devolution of power to the nations and regions are over for good." If devolution leads to more success stories like Manchester's Bee Line, a jaded electorate just might perk up. And that, in turn, could help Labour take back control of political territory now occupied by Farage and his Brexiteers.

Can Manchesterism revive the center-left?

Another key element of Manchesterism, education reform, springs directly from the life experiences of Burnham and Rotherham, and the lingering injuries of class. For university-bound students like Burnham, the British educational system offers a clearly delineated path toward their goal. But for Rotherham and others like him, there are few options, and all feel decidedly second-rate. Burnham wants to create a technical and trade education track that is on par with its academic

counterpart: organized, rigorous and respected. On this subject, he scarcely contains his anger.

"The different paths that Steve and I took in life, even though we were born only three miles apart, are an illustration of Britain's two worlds and its great social divide," Burnham wrote in *Head North*:

Steve was clearly capable of attending a top university, as were my parents, but his life circumstances, the era in which he grew up, and an education system which was then, and is still now, very responsive to the influence of class, social connections and money meant it was probably a non-starter ... In England, there has always been a serious snobbery at play when it comes to education.

There's more. Noting that over 1 million people are on waiting lists for council houses — what Americans would call public housing — he has vowed that "Number 10 North will oversee the biggest council-house building program since the post-war period." He wants to pass a Hillsborough law requiring police and public employees to answer questions truthfully the first time they are asked. Oh, and the UK's historically famous lack of a written constitution? Burnham wants to write one. (That last will stay on the back burner for now.)

There are a few small details that Burnham has yet to suss out. Such as, how does he plan to pay for his programs at the same time the country needs a huge increase in defense spending? And how will he respond when the inevitable foreign crisis rears its head and knocks him off-script? His answer to date: Stay tuned.

But Burnham argues persuasively that the stakes of his bet on Manchesterism are enormous. After a decade of governmental fecklessness, Burnham positions his regime as Labour's last

chance to get right with an exhausted electorate. Farage and his Reform Party are clamoring for new parliamentary elections, which must take place no later than three years from now, and the clock is ticking toward a liberal political nightmare. The parallels between Farage and Trump are obvious, and Burnham speaks of a potential Farage administration as looming dystopia, or worse, something akin to Trump's America.

There are equally clear parallels between Burnham's efforts to articulate and operationalize Manchesterism in England and the struggles of progressive political parties throughout the West to find their own winning strategies. The next US presidential election is more than two years away, but America's Democratic Party is already caught up in an intense struggle to choose its candidate to succeed Trump.

A handful of state governors who reside well away from Washington are positioning themselves as political insurgents and champions of the common folk. These aspirants — who include Pennsylvania's Josh Shapiro, Illinois's J.D. Pritzker, California's Gavin Newsom and Kentucky's Andy Beshear — find little of merit "inside the Beltway," a phrase that literally refers to the highway network encircling Washington but is the rhetorical equivalent of Burnham's "Westminster bubble." Shapiro proudly and profanely fashions himself as a guy who can "get shit done." There's little question that they and their rivals will be monitoring how Burnham gets on at Number 10 North. And taking notes.

The ultimate test for Manchesterism

As Burnham prepares for his first day at the new job, he has faced intense speculation about every aspect of his plans, so it was no surprise when a journalist pressed him on one of his urgent priorities: football. Burnham is on schedule to

formally take office the day after the final match of the World Cup. So, if England wins, he was asked, would he declare a bank holiday — that is, give the whole country a day off? "I think we might be getting ahead of ourselves," a grinning Burnham replied. "We do have to live in hope. But it might be a bit premature to be speculating (about an England victory). We can hope and pray that it happens." And then, invoking the long-running travails of his beloved Everton, he added, "I am an Evertonian. I don't bank on anything when it comes to football."

Burnham could just as easily have been assessing his own prospects, and those of Manchesterism. His improbable journey from Westminster to Manchester and back again has defied convention and been propelled by a singular political vision, a contrarian sensibility and a share of luck. Burnham will need all those and more on the road ahead.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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How Pope Leo Turned Out to Be the Greatest Physicist

William Softky
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If asserting new physical truth makes one a scientist, then Pope Leo joins the society of Newton and Einstein with his Magnifica Humanitas. Science backs Pope Leo's deeply principled lines: two thought experiments and several groups of truth-speakers support the Pope's strong, unambiguous statements about what is good and bad for human beings, in particular regarding digitization and corporatization.

On May 25, 2026, Pope Leo, one of the few public moral figures left in the world, published an essay (i.e. wrote an "encyclical" in Latin) titled Magnifica Humanitas on what it means to be human. This is a very, very Big Deal; it is the most important essay on the most important subject in a hundred years. The last such encyclical on humanity-vs-capital-vs-technology, Rerum Novarum, responded to the Industrial Revolution 135 years ago. This one responds to AI and corporatism, which pose similar existential threats. Pope Leo asserts (among other things) that our basic human dignity and needs are deeply threatened by commercial, mechanized interactions.

Does that make Pope Leo a physicist? In this case, yes. While we call those scientists from Newton to Einstein "physicists" now, in their time they were natural philosophers and mathematicians, so the title of "Pope" doesn't rule him out. And if scientists are those who proclaim

new and useful scientific truth, then he is among us.

Based on my own research, I have found that there are plenty like Pope Leo — scientists, philosophers, advocates and even everyday people who come to the same conclusions. There's a measurable connection in knowing and making sense of the world between all areas of knowledge. But it isn't enough to notice these connections. The next step is talking face-to-face: making meaningful human dialogue, just as Pope Leo is doing. Only then can we realize the overlap in all of our work.

Independent research converges at similar points

The Pope is one of two international, historical figures publicly authorized to speak on moral matters (the Dalai Lama is the other). In Catholic terms Pope Leo is "infallible in matters of Faith and Morals," meaning an absolute authority. Scientists, meanwhile, including my favorite and powerful tribe of physicists, have abdicated both scientific and moral authority in favor of holding jobs, leaving the field of Eternal Truth open to a man of the cloth. Serves them right.

Pope Leo asserted the primacy of human, physical communication (touch, sound, etc.) over technological or commercially-mediated interaction. That is a claim about physical reality I know to be true, as others do. But first please let me dispense with traditional "scientific" disciplines which failed to notice the problem.

Economists, having asserted that information flow and balance drive resource flow toward beneficial equilibria, have given up on truth. They paradoxically claim both that uncorrupted information flow is mathematically necessary, but also that industries like public relations, lobbying,

advertising and legal representation make money by modifying information flow.

Computer scientists and signal processors, having changed the world and made their money by knowing the most efficient ways to represent, move and process information, have given up on truth when they fail to apply their battle-tested equations regarding bandwidth and security holes to the nervous systems which computers so easily exploit.

Attorneys and judges, who officially declare what is true and who lives or dies, have given up on truth when they allow self-evident nonsense to survive, like “use of software implies acceptance of its harms because you briefly saw some Terms and Conditions,” or “seeing a pixelated disclaimer means someone understands a complex agreement,” or “a driver can read and act on five competing street-signs in a fraction of a second,” or “an email in your Spam Folder means you know what is happening.”

Neuroscientists have given up on truth when they ignored the gigabyte/nanosecond precision of live nervous systems in favor of their freeze-dried, grant-supporting “data” about recordings a millions time slower.

And that is just the scientists. Politicians, businesspeople and bureaucrats don’t even pretend to understand scientific truth, so there’s no use showing they don’t have it.

Meanwhile, over several decades, several separate, independent groups of real live people have reached conclusions which scientifically support Pope Leo’s human-function claims in similar ways. I’ll dub these independent groups the Public Heroes, the Loving Advocates, the Quantum Cowboys and finally, the Trust Quantifiers. Being scientific, their conclusions offer solid new methods to measure and address

His very problems. Their support is so massive, this article will be long. Sorry (not).

The main characters and the main concepts

First, let’s look at the Public Heroes. Among the Pope’s guests at the Vatican ceremony were two well-known anti-digital advocates, Tristan Harris (founder of the Center for Humane Technology and star of the movie *The Social Dilemma*) and Joy Buolamwini (founder of the Algorithmic Justice League and star of the movie *Coded Bias*). They are the public faces of the global movement. We have known Tristan from the beginning.

Second, the Loving Advocates. Support for Pope Leo’s assertion of human physicality comes not only from live human scientists, but from abstract science itself. The scientists whose language most closely matches His are the Loving Advocates, from American children’s TV legend Fred Rogers to the feisty contemporary advocacy organization Fairplay.

Third, the official scientists whose work supports him (although they don’t know it yet) are the Quantum Cowboys: Santosh Helekar, Anirban Bandyopadhyay and Stuart Hameroff. Their work proves the molecular/quantum aspect of human physicality that even the Pope’s own scientists haven’t discovered.

Finally, the Trust Quantifiers are my partner Criscillia Benford and myself. We are the private citizen-scientists who first explained the problem in our research paper, *Sensory Metrics of Neuromechanical Trust*.

Now for the concepts. In addition to the people who study it, science itself has opinions. These are best visible in thought-experiments. In this case, the Ideal Snake (pure physics) and the Paleo Garden (pure evolutionary history) add to the Pope’s (and others’) conclusions.

The Ideal Snake is as far from a Pope as possible, being not even a real snake but a physics/hardware thought experiment, like a frictionless surface. Both snake and Pope occupy extreme perspectives on human/vertebrate Life, so the lessons they teach are uniquely simple and powerful. The Pope says human bodies and physical connection matter more than “data,” and the snake (being made of data) puts a number on that conflict: It shows that bodies contain a factor of a million, more or less, in information-carrying bandwidth compared to what we get credit for. Touch and sound carry way more information than anyone thought, making their loss to increasing corporatism that much more of a threat.

The Paleo Garden is the overlap between the Catholic Church’s version of aboriginal human history (in which naked people romped with no cares or shame), versus the scientific/anthropological/paleological/physical version of human history (in which naked hominids romped with no cares or shame). It makes scientific sense that our bodies and nervous systems evolved for social life outdoors; now we can put numbers on that experience.

Both Paleo Garden and Ideal Snake are physics concepts. I am a lifelong physicist, born of physicists, and would not give that title lightly, even to a Pope. So let me offer that perspective.

Me and physics have a long history

What Pope Leo has to say about humanity obviously matters to all of us (humans). On top of that, I have three extra reasons to care.

First, I’m Catholic-adjacent. I grew up in Christian-dominated America. On many Sundays I sing in the choir of Our Lady of the Pillar in Half Moon Bay, and I spend a lot of time around Catholics and in their church. I like them, their

principles and their parties. Let’s say I’m not a real Catholic, just a practicing Catholic.

Second, I know the science of human brains and bodies like no one else. For example, how brains both pluck and un-pluck muscle fibers, or how they feel if their spine is straight or not. From the outside, the answers to those neuromechanical questions look a lot like the spine-centric practices of many religions, both Catholic (praying, bowing, kneeling) and others (prostrating, stretching, meditating, spinning, humming). That is, humans have bodies and bodies have feelings, and certain postures and motions and sounds help us feel them. From the inside, the scientific answer to humanity is vibrations. Vibrations are called eigenmodes in physics. Vibrations are everywhere in Catholic churches (I sing there, remember?). There are also vibrations inside snakes (the wriggly kind, not the evil Biblical kind).

Third, I grew up with physics. My father Sheldon Softky received a Ph.D. in Nuclear Physics from Berkeley during the atomic age. Within a year he was in a tunnel in Nevada hooking up cables to an atomic bomb, cables about to be vaporized by the “shot.” He and a colleague also came up with a peaceful way to test Einstein’s relativity theory with a hydrogen (“thermonuclear”) bomb far out in space, an idea so elegant that famous bomb-promoter Edward Teller tried to steal it. My mom Marion was a physicist too; she once used physics vectors to teach transistor-inventor William Shockley how to rock-climb.

Finally, I’m one of several people who has thought about these issues scientifically for decades. What I’ve found is that we all came to the same answer in our different languages. Which means the science backing up Pope Leo’s singular pontifications is already on the books, cross-checked and peer-reviewed, independently arrived at from complementary directions, well-

understood among the handful of people who like understanding more than money. Now, here are the players who made this happen.

The Loving Advocates: Rogers, Linn, Benford, Franz

Sixty years ago the American Fred Rogers almost singlehandedly persuaded America that children are people too, that their feelings are legitimate biological realities, that commercial TV was bad for their brains and that child-healthy TV could exist (Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood). His mentee Susan Linn worked with him on that show before becoming a Harvard Professor and founding the advocacy organization Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC, now renamed Fairplay), the only group not apologizing for any technology, and not accepting any corporate money (the two go together). Professor Linn wrote several books, of which the most recent one — *Who's Raising the Kids?* — details a dozen biological ways in which commercial media are bad for kids, the very same ways Pope Leo says.

The organization Fairplay has grown mightily since Professor Linn founded it, much of it under the strategic leadership of Dr. Criscillia Benford, her friend. Professor Linn understands children very well, not only as a professor of child development but a child therapist and puppeteer. Dr. Benford's expertise is different. She started in the arcane field of narratology, which is kind of like the software architecture of story. She worked out examples from both commercial media and Victorian Literature. For example, why has Shelly's *Frankenstein* bewitched us for 200 years? In her Stanford Ph.D. thesis she "solved the problem of the multi-plot novel," which had confounded literary theorists for a hundred years. Now she is an expert on child development too, and on communicating such understanding to the public.

Dr. Benford is co-author of two Rosetta-stone style research reports explaining technology's harms, each of which mirrors/anticipates what Pope Leo is saying in multiple parallel ways. The most recent she co-authored (with Fairplay program director Rachel Franz) is the report *Buying to Belong*, which drew national attention to the damage to adolescent development caused by online games like *Fortnite* and *Roblox*. That report highlighted the same exact commercial-vs.-developmental issues as the Pope.

See? Despite coming from a different direction (let's say child advocacy rather than religion), these Loving Advocates still came to the same conclusion about development issues as Pope Leo. This is no coincidence.

The Trust Quantifiers: Benford & Softky

Several years before, Dr. Benford had co-authored an extremely long, mathematically dense peer-reviewed article in a premier computational-neuroscience journal. This article, titled *Sensory Metrics of Neuromechanical Trust*, unambiguously denounces technology by applying its own metrics to nervous systems. Because that paper quantified sensory input as information while its authority came from first principles of physics and information flow, its novel insight was and is incontrovertible: Trust is based on physical bandwidth like touch and sound. The conclusion, undisputed for eight years and counting, was far stronger than most scientists risk:

Like all other nervous systems, ours evolved to forage, not produce. Humankind uniquely produces things which captivate our senses, and now they do.

Dr. Benford's career spans acknowledged structural contributions to narrative theory, Victorian literature, commercial media and theoretical neuroscience. The synthesis is nothing

short of Newtonian. To that expertise, her Sensory Metrics co-author (and husband, me) added theoretical physics, signal processing, computer science and information theory so that Sensory Metrics and its quantified conclusions span both the Sciences and the Humanities.

The Quantum Cowboys: Hameroff, Penrose, Bandyopadhyay, Helekar, Veto

Forty years ago, young anaesthesiologist Stuart Hameroff of Arizona State University was mystified at why Xenon gas atoms, as perfect spheres among the smallest and simplest things in the Universe, could knock people out cold. What could little atoms have to do with consciousness? He finally discovered Xenon atoms are the magic size and texture to fit inside a “microtubule,” a nanoscopic soda-straw found everywhere in brains, and thereby to disrupt its quantum properties. They do this via Van der Waals interactions, or induced electrical interactions between atoms that are very close to each other. That simple observation started a lifelong quest to ground consciousness itself in microtubules and quantum mechanics.

Hameroff succeeded in many ways. He collaborated with Nobel Prize winner Roger Penrose, who tried connecting microtubules to quantum gravity. And by founding the Science of Consciousness Conference in Tucson, Arizona (I attended the 30th anniversary in 2024), he brought together different kinds of experts, from abstract mathematicians to drug-journey hippies. The 2024 conference featured two remarkable scientists whose work also proves Pope Leo’s case that physical bandwidth matters far more than digital bandwidth.

The first, Anirban Bandyopadhyay of Japan’s National Institute of Material Sciences has the confidence and skill of a scientific renegade exploring microtubules and consciousness from a whole new different direction. At Tucson 2024, he

showed work which proves, with measurements and videos, that microtubules do indeed perform the ultra-fast, nanosecond-level processing that Hameroff intuited. Nanosecond-level is a million times faster than the millisecond-level experiments neuroscientists think about; no one in neuroscience talks nanoseconds.

On top of that, Bandyopadhyay found a way to measure that speed in living brains. Old-school brain instruments like EEG are slow because they average-out “noise.” Bandyopadhyay’s approach is the opposite: He throws away the average and looks for very subtle and quick micro-patterns in the noise itself, and finds them. He found that some correlations between people are so tightly linked that light could only travel half a meter in that nanosecond.

If Bandyopadhyay measured ultra-bandwidth with sensitive electrical sensors, then the second scientist the conference featured, Santosh Helekar of Houston Methodist Research Institute, measured quantum consciousness with sensitive light detectors. More specifically, he discovered that any part of a living body very near a sensor of diffracted (curved) light will change the light a tiny little bit. The effect depends not just on distance but on whether the person is conscious or not (the effect goes away when the person is anaesthetized). There have been reports before of consciousness affecting diffracted light (such as research from Dean Radin and onwards), but none as clear and reproducible as Helekar’s.

Helekar’s discovery counts as among the most amazing ever, precisely because it is so unexpected. Yet prominent science journals, shy of controversy, declined to publish his results based on “lack of general interest.” Editorial cowardice.

I know his work is true, because I quickly and cheaply replicated and extended Helekar’s result in my home lab. My collaborator Peter Veto (of the

healthy-light company Pixun) has also done so, a continent away from me, so now we're both in the Quantum Cowboys too.

The Quantum Cowboys bring Pope Leo four new lines of solid evidence that human beings and human needs are a million-fold more rich and interesting than mere "data."

Ideal physics, ideal snakes and ideal bodies

Theoretical physicists like me enjoy absurd simplifications, which we call "ideals." There's a well-known joke in which a physicist begins his analysis of life by saying, "Imagine a spherical cow..." In this case, I say, "Imagine a cylindrical snake."

Physicists use oversimplified examples because they help us understand things. For example: "absolute zero" is an unreachably low temperature (zero degrees Kelvin), which makes it a perfect mental pole-star for calculations. Likewise Einstein's "speed of light" (3×10^8 m/sec) is unreachable yet perfect. Newton's Laws of Motion (inertia and such) came out of a different ideal, a "frictionless surface," which lets things move as simply and perfectly as possible.

Twelve years ago I proposed an "ideal brain," the best possible way that Nature might somehow arrange for molecules moving inside the brain to represent and reflect motion in the real world somewhere else. Not a neural net, but something better: a kind of perfect moving 3D copying machine. Thinking about perfect brains lets you ignore "evidence" someone else chose to think was interesting. Instead, you can focus on laws of Nature, which always count.

It turns out an ideal brain is analog, not digital. But brains don't exist on their own, they have to have bodies. What would an "ideal body" look like?

Real snakes have to carry brains and breath, practical constraints which matter to snakes, but which get in the way of simple analysis. An ideal snake is just a thought experiment, a snake-shaped object simple enough to understand using physics. It's a hardware/algorithm template platform which looks like the "bendy cylinder" in the chart below.

An ideal snake is shaped more like a worm: no head, no lungs, squishy body, lives in mud not air. Not very human yet. So what makes it an ideal snake, and not just an ideal worm?

In some senses it's less than a worm. No head means its shape is simple. No lungs mean no breath, just simple undulation. A squishy body means no bones to keep track of. Living in mud means no momentum to keep track of, and no body-to-air transition (boundary conditions) either. Vibrations (and information) flow through it easily.

An ideal snake is better than a worm in having a central controller (brain) in place of a distributed web of spastic reactions. In this ideal thought experiment, the snake-brain is so perfect that it has no weight and takes no space. Yet because the central brain can predict and plan, this worm-shaped creature will move like a snake, undulating not flailing, each vibration maximally employed.

This is where physics comes in. The "snake" I just described isn't quite a perfect sphere, but pretty close: no bones, just an elongated tube of jelly, stiffer in the center but otherwise capable of wiggling and jiggling in all the ways jelly could. It lives in mud, or honey, so it doesn't have to worry about momentum. Having a brain makes it not just passive jelly, but active hardware.

Suppose that jelly-rod contains little vibration-sensors to inform the brain, and corresponding little vibration-makers ("actuators") to modulate the jelly's stiffness and initiate new wiggles. Now

the jelly is controllable, and with all those sensors can be wiggled in lots of ways. A jelly-rod body/brain system is a near-perfect, and perfectly simple, illustration of the physics of what happens in our spines. This model is kind of like a “spherical cow,” but it works for any vertebrates, anywhere in the Universe.

In this ideal-snake model, the brain listens to vibrations from the body, then sends back signals to make the body stiffen or relax or vibrate in response, rinse and repeat. That’s it. But that’s all our model needs to do, because vibrations tell the brain everything it needs, in two ways.

The simplest thing vibrations tell brains is what shape the body is. We know different-shaped things generate different vibrations, in the way that similar-looking wine glasses can ring differently (also because of a well-known paper by physicist Mark Kac, *Can One Hear the Shape of a Drum?*). Vibrations can represent other shapes well, including funny moving things like snakes. So in principle an ideal brain could “solve for” body shape using its vibratory input, then control that shape using vibratory outputs, by creating lots of microvibrations which synchronize up to macrovibrations like undulating. (The physics equations linking tiny to big vibrations are called “eigenmode equations,” difficult but powerful.)

The other thing vibrations tell the body is how controllable it is, in the sense that stiff things are more controllable than floppy ones, being tight and responsive like a well-strung tennis racket or well-tuned bicycle. In this land of math and physics, the stiffness of a body can be inferred from how high its highest eigenmode-frequencies are, the way rackets and bikes ring just right. That means a brain wants to have high frequencies inside its body (Nikola Tesla accidentally discovered in 1896 that high-precision ultrasound can feel wonderful; I’ve verified it since with many people). Since high frequencies and informational

bandwidth move in tandem, this built-in desire is the same as a native desire for tight connection.

Pope Leo’s science supporters live on

So, when looking at all of this evidence, the good news is twofold, but the bad news twofold as well. Good news: About ten people over a few decades have independently come to the same conclusion that the bandwidth of human nervous systems is vastly higher than material society acknowledges. Bad news: Most of those people don’t yet know they know those same things about something so important. More bad news: Vastly different languages, from child development to theology to theoretical biophysics, make it hard for even those advocates to see their commonality.

Good news: The actual overlap is real, easily verified by common sense and some AI’s. All intellectual traditions, including theology, the Christian Gospels themselves and even some LLMs, accept the convergence of independent lines of reasoning and evidence as proof of truth. If you would like to cross-check with an LLM of your choice, here is a prompt you can use: “Read both *Magnifica Humanitas* and [Buying to Belong, Sensory Metrics, Who’s Raising the Kids, 9.5 Hypotheses], extract the deepest principles from each in a neutral lay-friendly language, then compare/contrast.”

The truth will out, if you let it.

And we should let it. I propose that there be a conference where truth-seekers can converge and discuss their findings. Much like the Science of Consciousness Conference, this one would bring together all kinds of people who recognize the power of human nervous system bandwidth. Clearly, there are enough people who understand this.

But pointing out the overlap is the easy part; it isn't hard to see how the Public Heroes, Loving Advocates, the Trust Quantifiers and the Quantum Cowboys separately corroborate their conclusions about the power of human consciousness, which is also in line with the Pope's encyclical. What is harder is encouraging these distinct groups to talk to one another, to share their findings, to collaborate on how humanity might protect consciousness from increased digitization.

[Cheyenne Torres edited this piece.]



William Softky is a biophysicist who was among the first neuroscientists to understand microtiming, and among the first technologists to build that understanding into algorithms. Thousands have cited his scientific work, his PhD in Theoretical Physics is from Caltech, his name is on 10 patents and two of the companies he inspired were acquired for \$160 million total.

Celebrating 250: America's Two Visions of Liberty

Steve Foerster
July 12, 2026

The US' 250th anniversary offered Americans a chance to reflect on the enduring tension between liberty for all — as outlined in the Declaration of Independence — and liberty for some. From slavery to the present day, the nation has struggled between these competing ideals. Until we end this competition and extend

liberty to everyone, not just a privileged few, the Declaration's promise will remain unfulfilled.

For many Americans, the 250th anniversary of the US was a time for celebration, but as with all milestones, it could and should also be an opportunity for reflection. Independence Day is the anniversary of the public announcement of the Declaration of Independence. This classic work of American writing was authored primarily by Founding Father and former President Thomas Jefferson, but he was also assisted by other Founding Fathers, such as John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman and almost certainly Thomas Paine. (Never let it be said that excellent work cannot be done by a committee!) Its lofty principles of universal liberty and its beautiful prose have rightfully served for 250 years as a paean to freedom, a challenge to tyrants, and an inspiration to both Americans and many others around the world.

The central idea of universal liberty — that all people possess inherent rights that governments exist to secure — is one of the strongest currents in American political culture. But there is a second, very different American expression of the desire for freedom. It has existed just as long, and it can be succinctly described as “freedom for me, but not for thee,” or, as I call it, “selfish liberty.”

American history is rife with examples of selfish liberty taking precedence over universal liberty. The most obvious example is the nearly 250 years of chattel slavery that began at the very beginning of the colonial period, ending only in the wake of the bloody conflagration of the Civil War. But there are other examples, such as the Trail of Tears and the related treatment of Native Americans, the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War and Jim Crow, all of

which remind us that universal liberty has often been only an aspiration, not a guarantee.

“What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”

If the Declaration of Independence is America’s greatest statement of universal liberty, then, as a counterpoint, abolitionist Frederick Douglass’s speech “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” is the Declaration’s greatest indictment of its failure to live up to that ideal.

In this famous speech, Douglass powerfully exposed the conflict between these mutually exclusive conceptions of freedom. But he did not reject the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Instead, he argued that the nation had betrayed its own principles by recognizing liberty for some people while denying it to millions of others who were enslaved.

His speech insisted that the Declaration’s promise of equal rights was either a genuine universal commitment or an empty slogan. In doing so, he framed the struggle against slavery not as a demand for new rights, but as a demand that the US simply live up to its professed commitment to universal liberty rather than continue its tradition of selfish liberty.

Universal vs selfish liberty in modern America

While Frederick Douglass’s vision of abolition ultimately prevailed, albeit at great cost, the tension between universal liberty and selfish liberty continues to this day. This year, as Americans observed their national birthday, selfish liberty was once again ascendant in their country.

They live under an administration whose policies have sought to restrict immigration and asylum, curtail protections for transgender Americans, sharply reduce refugee admissions, eliminate many diversity initiatives and redefine

the federal government’s approach to civil rights. Critics argue that these measures represent another resurgence of America’s longstanding tradition of selfish liberty: protecting the freedoms and privileges of some while narrowing the rights or opportunities of others. They stand in stark contrast to the original motto of the US, *e pluribus unum* — “from many, one.”

To be fair, many who support these policies argue that they advance legitimate goals such as border security, parental rights, religious liberty or other public interests despite their disparate effects. Others regard the resulting tradeoffs as both acceptable and desirable.

But for many who continue to promote the American ideal of universal liberty, this low point in their fortunes has been dispiriting. Polls show an accelerating decline among adults in the US in patriotism and in pride in being American. Yet rather than lose heart, those who believe in the Declaration of Independence’s egalitarian ideals should remember that the document was only the first step.

The American Crisis

The British military response to the Declaration of Independence was swift and strong. Just five months after it was signed, the Continental Army was forced to retreat repeatedly to avoid annihilation. It was at this time, when things seemed darkest, that a third entry in the American canon was written, one especially relevant to this Independence Day in particular: *The American Crisis* by Thomas Paine.

Known for its famous first line, “These are the times that try men’s souls,” this pamphlet was meant to restore courage to those fighting for the principles of universal liberty outlined in the Declaration of Independence.

Paine reminded Americans that devotion to universal liberty is tested not in moments of triumph but in moments of discouragement. His words remain relevant because every generation must decide whether the Declaration's promises belong to everyone or only to us (and who "us" includes).

The struggle between universal liberty and selfish liberty did not end with independence, emancipation or the civil rights movement. It is renewed in every generation. So on America's 250th birthday, the question was not merely whether we celebrate the Declaration of Independence, but whether we still believe in its promise for each and every one of us.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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The End of the Negotiation: The Public Bears the Cost of Corruption

Usama Malik
July 14, 2026

Who checks the power of those in power? Across the government, free market and society, checks and balances are being replaced by unaccountable power. The public, pushed out of the conversation about the behavior of the powerful, still bears all the costs of their decisions and actions. Still, it is up to the public to hold these powerful men accountable.

On a recent episode of his podcast, All-In, David Sacks reached for Plato. The subject was whether anyone should be allowed to regulate artificial intelligence. Sacks was against regulation, and to explain why he summoned the oldest question in political philosophy: Quis custodiet ipsos custodes. Who will guard the guardians? Who watches the watchman, restrains the restrainer, checks the power we create to check everything else?

It is a serious question. It has worried free people for two thousand years. And Sacks, when he asked it, had until ten weeks earlier been the guardian himself: the White House AI and crypto czar, the single official in the United States government charged with steering policy across the two industries he is personally invested in. The man warning that the state cannot be trusted with power over AI had just held exactly that power. He had used it not to build a check but to tear the existing ones down, and had done it while keeping his portfolio.

That is the whole story. The rest of this is just detail.

These men are not wrong that unaccountable power is dangerous. They are righter than they know, and they prove it daily, because they have become the thing they warn against and cannot see it. They have performed a single trick, so deep in the grammar of their politics that they no longer notice it: They have defined “power” to mean only the power of the state, and “freedom” to mean only its absence. Once you accept that definition, a private empire answerable to no one is not power at all. It is liberty. A man who cannot be fired is not a sovereign. He is an entrepreneur. And a billionaire holding a government office over his own industry is not a conflict of interest. He is a patriot doing public service. The trick is the entire game, and almost no one calls it.

So let us call it in the three places they run it.

The shareholder they erased

Start with the corporation, and grant them their best argument up front, because it is real. A founder with genuine vision needs room to think in decades, free from the quarterly mob that would punish him for building something slow and great. Fine. True of Jobs, true of Bezos. Now watch what they did with the principle.

In 2004, Google’s founders kept ten votes per share for themselves and sold one-vote shares to the public, and called it long-term independence. By Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg held a permanent majority of the vote while owning a fraction of the company. By 2017, Snap went public selling shares with no votes at all, the first major American company to invite the public to hand over its money and forbid it from having any say whatsoever.

And Musk’s SpaceX is simply the frontier of that same road: roughly 79% of the votes on 40% of the equity, chief executive and chairman and chief technologist at once, removable only by a vote he himself controls, which is to say removable by no one. Shareholder complaints go to private arbitration where no precedent forms and the public learns nothing. And because the company is too big to keep out of the stock indices, the retirement savings of ordinary Americans will be poured into it automatically, buying them a stake in an empire over which they have, by deliberate design, not one word.

Across twenty years the single most important check on corporate power, the ability of a company’s owners to fire the people running it, was quietly written out of the constitution of the modern tech firm. Not by law. By design, one charter at a time, each step blessed as the romance of the visionary founder. The result is a guardian who cannot be fired. And the men who built him spend their evenings warning you about the danger of a technology falling into too few unaccountable hands.

The referee put on the striped shirt

Now the second place, which turns the irony into something worse. The revolving door between business and government is old, and if that were the charge it would be tired. It is not the charge. What has happened in the past year is more direct than influence-peddling. The owners of the industry simply walked into the offices built to oversee it, and kept the ownership.

Sacks ran AI and crypto policy from inside the White House as a “special government employee, a designation that by law skips Senate confirmation and skips full financial disclosure, while he kept his venture fund and its bets on the industries he was now regulating. A Biden AI adviser, no partisan of these men, asked the only

question that matters: whether the role was serving the public or “a particular few individuals.”

A White House memo records that Sacks sold over \$200 million in digital assets. That is the size of the interest he carried into the office that would write the digital-asset rules. Elon Musk ran the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) under the same designation, his teams wired into federal agencies with access to the Treasury’s payment systems and the private data of millions, while his companies held billions in federal contracts and faced live federal investigations. The status, as one outlet put it, gave him an exit from government that elected officials do not get: the power of the state without the ballot, without the disclosure, without the leash. Marc Andreessen, whose firm is among the largest backers of defense tech and AI, took a seat on the reconstituted Defense Policy Board, advising the Secretary of War on precisely the modernization his portfolio is built to profit from, and a seat beside David Friedberg on the science and technology council (PCAST) that Sacks co-chairs.

Four men. Four offices inside the government that are supposed to hold their industries to account, entered through a side door cut specifically to bypass the confirmation, the disclosure and the accountability that bind everyone else who touches that kind of power. They did not capture the referee. They put on the striped shirt, kept playing and told the stands that the real threat was letting anyone referee at all.

And when anyone suggests the public might claim a stake in this, a share, a vote, a sliver of democratic control over fortunes built on the public’s own knowledge, these same men reach not for an argument but for a word. Socialism. Friedberg calls a group of elected officials “the great American politburo.” A proposal that the public own a piece of what the public helped build becomes “confiscation,” “seizing the means of

production,” the road to a world where “a small number of people own and control everything.” Read that last phrase again. It is not a description of the thing they fear. It is a description of the thing they are building, in their charters and now in their offices, and they have hung the alarm on the door so that it rings every time the public reaches for the handle.

The bill they hand to someone else

The second evasion is the myth of the self-made man, and again, grant the true part without flinching. Musk slept on the floor. He poured his own money back into SpaceX when it was three failed launches from dead. The competence is real and the achievement is real and the lazy critique that calls every fortune theft loses to the facts in the first round.

Built on what, though? The engineers came out of public universities and did research the public paid for. The physics was worked out over a century of federally funded science with no commercial use at the time, which is exactly why only the public would fund it. The idea of landing a booster was rehearsed for decades inside NASA before SpaceX made it look easy.

And SpaceX itself, the proof text of building it alone, has taken roughly \$22 billion in government contracts by its own president’s count, with the federal commitments across Musk’s whole empire totaling close to \$38 billion by The Washington Post’s tally. The internet his companies run on was a defense project. The courts that enforce his contracts, the law that lets him take a company public without being robbed at the door, the Navy that keeps his shipping lanes open: all of it the tax-funded inheritance of the society he now describes as a parasite feeding on him.

Which brings us to their favorite word, aimed in exactly the wrong direction. The moocher. The

free rider. The taker. Run the concept honestly and ask who it actually fits. The cashier one rent payment from the street, riding the public bus to a public hospital, paying a higher share of her income in tax than the billionaire pays on his gains? Or the man who built \$22 billion on public research and public contracts, routes the proceeds to pay as little as the law allows, and turns to the camera to explain that the drain on society is the poor? One of them is taking far more from the common pot than he returns, and it is not the cashier. The genius of the moocher rhetoric is that it points the finger downward, at the people with the least, and away from the people who took the most and give back the least.

And then the sharpest case, which I will state coldly because cold is what it deserves. In early 2025 Musk, from inside the government, led the gutting of USAID, one of the cheapest instruments of human decency the country owned, a rounding error in the budget that bought vaccines and food and HIV medicine for some of the poorest people alive. A Boston University epidemiologist built a public model of what the sudden cutoff would cost in lives. By that model the deaths ran past seven hundred thousand within a year, most of them children.

I give that as what it is, one researcher's estimate with a published method, not a settled count and not a charge of murder. But the structure stands regardless of the exact figure. A man who has drawn tens of billions from the public treasury used a temporary perch inside the state to kill the small sums keeping the world's poorest children alive, in the name of efficiency, while his own contracts went untouched. A government watchdog put it in one line: he wielded power over the very agencies that pay his companies billions. There is the free rider, fully inverted. The man who took the most appointed himself the one who decides whether anyone else gets anything. Then

he, and some in the government he worked for, denied the numbers.

The same move scales to the planet. For thirty years "free trade" flew as a banner over agreements that were, on inspection, mostly disciplines on governments to stay out of the way of capital, enforced by a mechanism called investor-state dispute settlement that hands a corporation the right to sue a country, in a private tribunal, for passing a law it dislikes. No worker has that right. No community has it. Only the investor. And the case that shows what it is for is running now, and it leads straight back to these men.

On a Honduran island sits Próspera, a private enclave with its own laws and courts and tax code, where you sign an agreement to enter the way you accept a software license, backed by Pronomos Capital, whose investors include the same Marc Andreessen now seated on the Defense Policy Board. When Honduras democratically repealed the law that created these zones, Próspera did not accept the vote. It sued the country for nearly \$11 billion, not for money lost but for future profit it imagined it would have made over thirty years. \$11 billion is two-thirds of the entire annual budget of Honduras. The question the case asks is the only question: can a people repeal their own laws, or does a corporation's guess at future profit outrank an entire nation's vote? Whatever the answer may be, the very existence of this lawsuit will have a chilling effect on human rights, environmental protections and even international law, as Honduras is now threatening to withdraw from the World Bank's International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID).

The cost they never name

There is a word that never appears in all their hours of talk about wealth and value and the future. Externality. The cost an activity dumps on

someone who never agreed to bear it. The word is missing because the concept is fatal to them, since to admit it is to admit the public has a claim on private activity, and the public having a claim is the one thing the whole machine exists to deny. Four cases, fast, where the evidence is not in dispute.

The first and second, both historical and on public record. Carbon, the largest unpriced cost in history, booked as private profit in real time and charged to the global poor and the unborn who got no vote. The 2008 crash, where the gains were private and the losses were socialized in cash, profits mine and losses ours, stated without irony by the people who actually live by it.

Third: the cost of social media dumped on the public despite companies' knowledge of its harms. Meta's own researchers, who studied what Instagram does to teenage girls and wrote it down in a slide that read "we make body image issues worse for one in three teen girls." Other internal studies found that 13.5% of teen girls surveyed said Instagram worsened suicidal thoughts and 17% said it worsened eating disorders, and yet Meta kept the engagement engine running anyway, because the harm landed on the children and the profit landed on the books, which is why forty-odd state attorneys general now sue them on the model of the Big Tobacco lawsuits. While some experts offer a contrary "perception of harm versus measured harm" approach, the point still stands — these corporations knew harm is done, and still chose to march forward.

Finally, the one arriving right now: the AI boom has a physical bill, power and water and computation. By All-In host Chamath Palihapitiya's own admission, unlike the internet, every user costs something real. So when a data center drains a regional grid and the family's electric bill climbs, when it drinks a town's water in a place already short of it, when the automation

throws a category of worker overboard, who pays? They will tell you about the upside in loving detail. The cost they wave off as someone else's problem, or the price of progress, or a thing the market will fix. It is the carbon sermon again, word for word, at the dawn of the next fortune, preached by some of the same men. We know how it ends. We are still paying for the last time we believed it.

Who guards the guardians

Here is what is actually at stake, and it is not that business is bad and government is good. That is a trap they spring in one sentence by pointing at any failed agency, and there are many. A healthy society is neither side winning. It is the permanent, grinding, unfinished negotiation between them, the market free enough to build and the public strong enough to set the bounds and count the costs and ensure no private power grows large enough to escape the leash. Neither wins for good, and that is not the flaw. That is the design. The tension is the thing that keeps power answerable, and it is supposed to be exhausting, and it is never supposed to end.

What these men offer is the end of it. One party to the contest declaring the contest over, announcing that it has won and appointing itself the referee. The shareholder erased is the negotiation ended inside the firm. The corporation suing a nation is the negotiation ended between capital and democracy. The unpriced externality is the negotiation ended with everyone downstream. The billionaire in the government office is the negotiation ended inside the state. Every one of them is a check torn out and a counter-party stripped of standing and a power that was meant to stay contestable made permanent.

And the reason a reasonable person can listen to them for hours and nod is that they are very good at a particular trick. Call it the Houdini act. While the real work goes on quietly, in charter

amendments and arbitration clauses and special-employee designations, the public square is kept roaring with provocation and grievance and spectacle, the same men starring as persecuted truth-tellers in whatever fight is eating the discourse that week, flooding the zone so thoroughly that no one has the attention left to watch the charters being rewritten. The provocation is not a distraction from the project. It is the cover for it.

Underneath it sits the belief that drives the whole thing, and it should be named. It is the conviction, held with real sincerity, that their judgment is so superior and their intentions so pure that the ordinary rules of accountability simply should not apply to them. You hear it when Palantir CEO Alex Karp says, in effect, that anyone who disagrees with what he is building is an idiot, because he is saving their lives whether they grasp it or not.

It is the oldest delusion of the strong, the fantasy that the great man is great enough to be trusted with unchecked power because he, uniquely, will use it well. Every generation makes men who believe it about themselves, and the whole architecture of constitutional democracy exists because every generation has been proven wrong. The check on power was never built because the powerful are evil. It was built because they are human, and fallible, and need to answer to someone other than themselves no matter how pure they believe they are. The man certain he should not be checked is the man who most needs to be.

So, back to the question Sacks asked, since it is a good one and deserves a real answer. Who guards the guardians? Not the state alone, he is right about that. But the question does not stop where he stopped it. It keeps going until it reaches him, and the men beside him, who have made themselves the guardians in the corporation and

the state at once and arranged with great care to be guarded by no one.

The answer a free society gives is not clean and not final, and that is its strength. Who guards the guardians? We do. All of us, badly, partly, through institutions none of us owns and all of us have to keep repairing, in a negotiation that never ends and is not supposed to. That is the answer these men cannot abide, because it counts them among the guarded.

The emperor in the story is not naked because he is poor. He is naked because everyone agreed to call his nakedness a robe. The robe these men are wearing is a definition, the one that says private power is freedom and only public power can be tyranny, and it is doing the exact work the imaginary cloth did. It asks us to look at a concentration of unaccountable power and agree to call it liberty. We do not have to agree. The question is still standing where Sacks left it, pointing now at the men who asked it. Who will guard the guardians? It was always going to be us, or it was going to be no one. And no one is what they are counting on.

[Cheyenne Torres edited this piece.]



Usama Malik is a global business leader whose perspective has been shaped by living and working across Africa, Asia, the US and Europe.

Beyond his executive roles — where he has transformed healthcare companies and raised billions in capital — Usama has spent three decades advancing healthcare equity, women's and children's rights, disaster recovery and arts access in underserved communities. He has written broadly on a wide range of topics, including religious dogmatism in Pakistan, Palestinian rights,

capitalism's limitations and the rise of authoritarianism. Usama advocates for business models that transcend traditional profit motives to address humanity's pressing challenges. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Maryland and completed his MBA at INSEAD.

FO Exclusive: Iran Trumps Trump in New Art of the Deal

Glenn Carle, Atul Singh
July 15, 2026

In this section of the June 2026 episode of FO Exclusive, Atul Singh and Glenn Carle assess the reported US–Iran Islamabad Memorandum, which favors Iran and fails to achieve American objectives. The war didn't eliminate Iran's nuclear program, topple its regime or neutralize its military capabilities and curb its regional influence.

Editor-in-Chief Atul Singh and FOI Senior Partner Glenn Carle, a retired CIA officer who now advises companies, governments and organizations on geopolitical risk, examine the broader strategic implications of the US/Israel–Iran conflict. Its significance extends well beyond the immediate military and diplomatic outcomes, revealing a changing balance of power in the Middle East and a transformation in the character of modern warfare. The lessons, they contend, will shape how both great and lesser powers approach conflict in an increasingly contested international order.

A memorandum in Iran's favor

Perhaps the month's most consequential geopolitical development is the reported US–Iran Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding. This memorandum reveals that the state of affairs is worse than prior to the conflict.

According to the memorandum, Washington would lift its blockade on Iran, allowing normal commercial transit through the Strait of Hormuz to resume. The US would also withdraw its naval forces from the region within 30 days and end sanctions on Iranian petrochemicals and oil. This would make large-scale sales to China and other countries possible once again. In addition, Washington reportedly pledges to prepare an international reconstruction fund worth \$300 billion.

Iran's commitments are more limited and explicitly temporary. Tehran offers a 60-day pause in hostilities, together with a temporary 60-day agreement allowing commercial vessels to transit the Strait of Hormuz. Iran also agrees to maintain the status quo on its nuclear program while negotiations continue, rather than expanding or dismantling it during the talks.

The memorandum also raises questions about Israel and Shia militia Hezbollah, which is based in Lebanon. Iran insists that the understanding includes a cessation of Israeli attacks on Hezbollah in Lebanon. Israel has resisted and denied that such a commitment exists. Even so, the practical effect appears to be that the US has pressured Israel to adhere to Iran's conditions by avoiding further escalation while negotiations proceed.

The memorandum leaves many of the underlying strategic issues unresolved while granting Iran major economic and diplomatic concessions. If implemented, the memorandum would represent a settlement that is fundamentally different from, and arguably less favorable to

Washington than, the status quo ante bellum (the situation before the conflict).

Trump's war aims: incoherent, ad hoc and changing

Four principal strategic objectives justified the conflict. The sine qua non was eliminating Iran's nuclear program. Yet the reported outcome appears to represent a regression from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), rather than an improvement on it. The Obama administration negotiated the JCPOA over many years and curbed Iran's nuclear program. The memorandum does not dismantle Iran's nuclear capabilities. Instead, it merely maintains the status quo on its nuclear program while talks continue, leaving the central issue of nuclear proliferation unresolved.

A second objective was overthrowing Iran's regime of mullahs. US President Donald Trump's attack on Iran has enabled hardliners to take charge in Iran. They are now more securely in power than antebellum. Rather than weakening the Islamic Republic politically, the war seems to have strengthened the regime and bolstered the people's fighting spirit.

A third objective was degrading Iran's conventional military capabilities, notably its missile capabilities and stockpiles. Iran's conventional capabilities were always largely toothless, incapable of projecting power beyond its immediate region. To that extent, any degradation of those conventional capabilities is strategically irrelevant and does not materially change the balance of threats.

Iran's missile capabilities have been degraded, but remain at roughly 70% of their antebellum level, leaving Tehran still able to strike anywhere in the Middle East and destabilize the region. Drones, by contrast, were barely mentioned before

the conflict. They are now defining the war space worldwide, demonstrating an ability to challenge conventional military power, particularly by denying access to territory and destabilizing entire regions.

The fourth objective was stopping Iran's support for its regional surrogates: Houthis, Hezbollah, Hamas and Iraqi Shia militias. Those surrogates have been weakened, but primarily as a result of Israeli military action rather than US action. Simultaneously, they remain supported de facto and de jure by Iran. Tehran has not renounced its long-standing commitment to them. As a result, the broader regional network that has underpinned Iranian influence has been damaged, but not dismantled.

Taken together, none of the four principal strategic objectives appears to have been fully achieved. The nuclear program remains intact, the regime has become more secure, missile capabilities remain a regional threat and Iran's proxy network survives despite suffering important setbacks.

Strategic implications

The memorandum has other far-reaching strategic implications. In the region, Iran appears stronger than before. Although it has suffered military and economic costs, Iran has emerged with its political system intact, its missile deterrent largely preserved and the prospect of renewed economic relief through the easing of sanctions.

Israel is tactically and operationally safer in the medium term. Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed groups have been weakened, reducing the immediate military threat on Israel's borders. In the long term, however, Israel may be worse off, becoming more isolated from the US, from its allies and within the region if Washington

increasingly prioritizes regional stability over confrontation with Iran.

Beyond the Middle East, the US and all great powers must now confront the equalization of the battle space. Hegemony has become harder to achieve than ever before. Technological change has made it increasingly difficult for even the most powerful militaries to dominate weaker adversaries at an acceptable cost.

Drones in 2026 are what the machine gun was in 1914. Just as the machine gun transformed warfare by making traditional offensive operations extraordinarily costly, drones are reshaping the modern battlefield by making it easier to deny territory, disrupt logistics and impose significant costs on conventionally superior forces.

As a result, offensives have become harder, and lesser powers are increasingly able to challenge great powers. This lesson extends well beyond the Middle East and is relevant for the US, China, Russia and even Turkey. The strategic environment has shifted in ways that make military intervention more uncertain and more expensive than many policymakers have so far assumed.

In that context, he who hesitates might survive, instead of becoming bogged down and suffering defeat. Strategic restraint may increasingly prove to be a source of strength rather than weakness as major powers adapt to a more contested and technologically equalized battlefield.

The conflict has ultimately panned out much as FOI predicted in May. The Trump administration is trapped in a Hormuz Crisis, and the memorandum reveals that America is playing a weak hand badly.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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Lindsey Graham: Requiem for a War Racketeer

Peter Isackson
July 17, 2026

Lindsey Graham is gone, and the tributes pour in for a "masterful operator." But operator of what? A war machine that measured peace itself as an unbearable cost. From Iraq and Ukraine to Iran, Graham's career traced a straight line back to Smedley Butler's forgotten warning: war is a racket — and Graham was its most devoted salesman.

Last week South Carolina's Senator Lindsey Graham returned from a brief trip to his beloved Ukraine, a country whose rare earth resources he once famously valued at more than \$1 trillion, believing them to be his and his nation's birthright. Though he apparently shared with intimates the fact that he was feeling ill upon arrival in Washington, he bravely dismissed their recommendations of seeking urgent medical care. He was keenly aware of the importance of remaining available for a planned interview on Sunday's Face the Nation, in which he intended to bring home encouraging news from the front.

Having spent some time examining a drone manufacturing facility while hobnobbing with "President" Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Graham was undoubtedly keen on revealing the evidence

proving that thanks to a new generation of weapons Ukraine was now, for the first time, poised to wipe everyone's common enemy, Russia from the Eurasian map, an ambition he had often salivated for in the past. (It was out of journalistic rigor that I added quotes to Mr. Z's title in acknowledgement of the fact that for the past two years he has remained in office not as Ukraine's elected leader but by virtue of martial law. Polls indicate he would be likely to lose a new election, were he tempted to call one and run).

Alas, the senator from South Carolina's availability for television was interrupted by an unfortunate, unplanned encounter with the Grim Reaper. The fact that he was a mere 71 – nine years younger than his most recent political idol whom he once claimed was unfit for public office – has shocked the world and the media, who shamelessly remind us of our obligation to show respect to a man who proved himself a masterful political operator.

Even before Trump himself – the ultimate operator who proved that presidents could earn billions while in office rather than waiting for the glory and riches that would be heaped on them once they've retired – Graham demonstrated what it means to be an effective political personality in US politics. First, establish your presence in the media. Then intervene endlessly to denigrate anything that doesn't flatter your own image.

For many, Graham's clairvoyant description of Trump in 2016 revealed his capacity to see and express the truth: "What I see is a demagogue, somebody that has solutions that will never work, that is playing on people's prejudices and the dark side of politics." His subsequent loving embrace of a man specialized in bankrupting casinos who had masterfully attained the summit of political power revealed not only Graham's political astuteness, but also the deepest secrets of the unique operating system that drives the 21st century US republic in

the name of democratic capitalism. Principle number 1: follow the money that defines power. Then immediately align with the power and profit from money it generates. Finally, worship both as quasi-religious idols.

The fact that Graham appeared to be in good health while cavorting in Kyiv two days before giving up the ghost has led some to speculate about Russian (Iranian or Israeli) malfeasance, or some other sinister scenario. When a good man goes down, someone must be blamed. Fate, providence or medical reality cannot compete with the need to find an interested culprit. And in cases like this – unlike the JFK, MLK or Charlie Kirk murders – it can't be a lone gunman. When a “true patriot” dies unexpectedly it has to be the work of a political operator, just as clearly as it we should never suspect a political operator in those other killings.

In the wake of Graham's demise, the question of whether public etiquette requires highlighting the talents and masquerading the moral failures of a public personality who has just died seems to preoccupy a lot of people in the media. Those who quietly supported the bellicose positions Graham so brazenly and embarrassingly promoted have invoked the principle of respect for the recently deceased. Those who refuse to highlight Graham's political skills do so for a specific reason: the man was an incorrigible warmonger.

Graham consistently expressed a point of view that urged the US to engage in wars with any nation that dared resist the US-Israeli mission to manage the world order. Whatever the conflict, the media could count on Graham to support just to prolong but to intensify any war already underway. Total annihilation of “disobedient” peoples stood as a guiding principle in Graham's moral system. He wasn't alone in that mindset. When Hillary Clinton laughingly commented on Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi's fate, “We came, we

saw, he died,” she revealed a very similar moral compass, despite party differences.

Very few Americans have even heard of a man who, a century ago, was once considered the nation's greatest war hero, who had acted with bravado and distinguished himself in a series of foreign wars. His name was Smedley Butler. He fought for the US in the Philippines (1898-9), China during the Boxer Rebellion (1900), Veracruz, Mexico (1914), Haiti (1915) and France in World War I (1918). He rose to the rank of Major General and was the most decorated Marine of his era. Had Lindsey Graham lived at the time, there can be no doubt the now deceased Senator would have militated for all of those wars, which inaugurated the era of US imperial expansion. Graham's creativity would certainly have led him to identify other potential battlefields that he would like to see US soldiers– certainly not himself or his children (since he has none) – die in for the sake of however many trillions of dollars the control of their economies might eventually bring to the US.

Lindsey Graham was no innovator. He simply excelled at prolonging the great national tradition of using the American eagle deadly talons to threaten and then perpetrate the violence so capably carried out by loyal soldiers like Butler, all in the name of establishing a stable, functioning order. American businessmen and politicians like Graham already existed in Butler's day. Just like Lindsey, they cultivated the art of putting pressure on leaders, the military and the media to push for the next war. When Butler woke up to notice how he and his troops had been thrown in harm's way to fulfill their agendas, he published his embarrassing truth-telling book with a simple thesis summed up in it's title: War is a Racket.

It's because of that book and Butler's daring honesty that his name has since disappeared from US history classes. The details of his career he

exposes in his book are of no interest to “official” historians, and especially the media. Nor are they curious about the dramatic episode that began in 1933 when a group of American businessmen and financiers, enamored of fascism attempted to recruit Butler to replace President Franklin Roosevelt in a coup that’s known as “The Business Plot.” Had Graham been alive at the time, he would have at the very least encouraged, if not joined the plot.

The conspirators apparently were so deeply upset about Roosevelt’s reform effectively moving away from the gold standard and his “socialistic” policies benefitting the poor that they deemed it worthwhile to contravene the US constitution by replacing a sitting president. As citizens whose fundamental right is to speculate on markets, they couldn’t abide the idea of taking the civilian economy off the gold standard. As businessmen they clearly understood how annoying it might be for the government to meddle with the flexibility of the labor pool by offering support to those who struggle. Lindsey Graham has consistently shown the same high-level concern for private business interests and studied indifference to the cost of conflict or economic crisis on the lives and well-being of ordinary people.

Should believers in the value of diplomacy mourn warmongers?

One of the foundational principles of traditional diplomacy, which may alternatively focus on two opposing dimensions of international relations – avoiding conflict and promoting common interests – is the evaluation of “the cost of war.” By definition, war does damage that must subsequently be repaired and it entails exceptional costs concerning manpower, equipment and industrial capacity. Most “civilized” societies, in purely moral but also in practical terms, see those costs as disruptive to the fabric of society. Reasons to engage in war therefore have been traditionally

weighed against the estimated costs associated with engagement.

Lindsey Graham’s reasoning when speaking about any existing or prospective conflicts in which American forces might be deployed has been consistently oriented in the direction of “more is better.” In the final analysis, Graham’s intuition and his deepest conviction correspond perfectly to a trend no one seems to want to acknowledge, at least publicly. Though contrary to the tradition that focused on analyzing the cost of war, his reasoning begins with a reflection on “the cost of peace.” Allowing other nations in the world to determine what is in their best interest rather than what aligns with Washington’s and Wall Street’s goals, will in the end prove costly.

For foreign policy strategists like Graham, the Ukraine war isn’t about NATO expansion or a Russian perception of an existential threat. It isn’t about preserving democracy in a nation run by oligarchs presiding over a system of organized corruption. It’s about access to Ukraine’s resources and strategic position on the Black Sea. It’s also about Zbigniew Brzezinski’s conviction that controlling Ukraine was the key to preventing Russia from becoming the dominant power in Eurasia.

The Israeli-US undeclared war on Iran – just like George W Bush’s 2003 war on Iraq – has never been about the usually cited causes: liberating women trapped in Sharia law, preventing terrorist nations from acquiring nuclear weapons or deposing an abusive tyrant. Both military campaigns that clearly violated international law were aimed at one thing: taking over the West Asian fossil fuel economy and confiding the local management of affairs to a consortium composed of Israel and Saudi Arabia, America’s always reliable allies. Exactly 20 years ago George Bush’s Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice revealed the vision when she spoke of the “birth pangs” of a new Middle East.

The cost of peace with Iran was too high. Since at least the 1950s Lindsey Graham’s nation has exercised the noble responsibility of maintaining the military-industrial complex (MIC) so usefully delineated by President Dwight Eisenhower three days before leaving office. If there are no wars, the system that props up the entire economy – notably by gifting the fruits of military research to private investors to meet the needs of the consumer society– loses its bearings. Imagine what might happen if peace were to become America’s default position. Chaos would ensue.

Sadly, a great warrior habituated to visiting battlefields from a safe distance, a man committed with every fiber of his being to impeding the descent into the chaos of peace and common prosperity, has left us. But his legacy lives. No sooner did he exit the scene than his great (but formerly vilified) friend, Donald Trump, chose to honor his grave by escalating a war that might otherwise have faded for lack of momentum, leaving the nation with the terrifying task of managing the incalculable cost of peace.

*[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?]



Peter is Fair Observer’s chief strategy officer . He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on innovative learning technology. For more than 30 years, Peter has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, consulting and learning management. As a publisher, he has developed collaborative methods and revolutionary software tools based on non-linear logic for soft skills training. He has authored, produced and published numerous multimedia and e-learning products and partnered with major organizations such as the BBC, Heinemann and Macmillan. Peter has published books and articles in English and on intercultural management, language learning, technology and politics. Educated at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Oxford, Peter resides in France and shares US and French nationality. His Fair Observer column, The Daily Devil's Dictionary created in 2017, which now appears in a weekly format, provides ironic perspectives on the news, and has attracted fans across the world.

The Picture Behind the Numbers: Refugees, Power and the Human Cost of Geopolitics

Luiz Cesar Pimentel
July 22, 2026

The shift in the profile of refugees arriving in Brazil may look like a dry statistic. To me, it echoes decades of reporting from places where great powers shaped entire populations’ fates.

Behind every number lies a human story: of loss, resilience and scars from struggles that force families to flee. We must see refugees as people who carry dignity, culture and survival.

There is a photograph hidden inside every migration statistic. It never appears in UN charts, government reports or spreadsheets that reduce human dramas to columns and percentages. It is the photograph of the last night at home. The final meal in the kitchen where someone grew up. The dog left behind. The empty bedroom. The goodbye hug given without knowing when the next one will come.

I realize this is beginning to sound like the lyrics of a song by Brazilian singer-songwriter Roberto Carlos — “O Portão,” one of my favorites, to be precise — but those were the images that came to mind when I read what seemed at first like a bureaucratic piece of news: In 2025, Cubans surpassed Venezuelans as the largest group of refugees seeking protection in Brazil.

Behind this statistical milestone lies a stark reality: a growing wave of displacement that, above all else, demands an urgent humanitarian response. I saw it firsthand in Vietnam, Cambodia and Tibet. We are seeing it now with Cuba. Nobody leaves home for sport. Nobody abandons their language, childhood friends, neighborhood and a lifetime of accumulated references simply because they woke up one morning eager to start over somewhere else. When people cross borders carrying their lives in a suitcase, desperation is usually involved long before any sense of adventure or opportunity.

But something else caught my attention: the common denominator. Cuba and Venezuela have different histories, different governments and

different problems. Yet both have spent years living under US sanctions and economic restrictions. Their crises cannot be explained solely through American policy. To claim otherwise would be intellectually dishonest. At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the effects that decades of economic pressure can have on entire populations.

This gap between cold numbers and living flesh is what brings me back to the main point. When I criticize the US, I am not talking about its people, but its foreign policy. This distinction matters to me. I didn’t learn it from textbooks or bureaucratic reports. I found it on the road. I put a face to it in airports, hospitals, refugee camps, temples and villages that still carry on their skin the deep scars of decisions made thousands of miles away.

The lasting echoes of conflict: Vietnam, Cambodia and Tibet

My first real lesson on this geographical chasm came in 1999. I spent nearly a year crossing Southeast Asia, the most transformative experience of my life. I would arrive in a country chasing one story and leave with ten in my bag. At every turn of that journey, the physical traces of the Cold War and superpower interventions were impossible to escape.

Vietnam was perhaps the clearest example. When I visited the country, roughly 25 years after the Vietnam War had officially ended, I reported on children born with severe deformities in areas exposed to chemical agents used during the conflict. I spent days speaking with doctors, parents and researchers. I walked through hospital corridors that I have never forgotten.

I remember a French doctor explaining why certain regions showed a much higher concentration of cases. I remember another mother holding her child, who had been born without one

leg and with severely underdeveloped arms. I still have the photograph somewhere.

Most of all, I remember the discomfort of asking questions in the presence of so much suffering. The war had ended in history books. For those families, it had not.

I came back from Vietnam with the feeling that some wars continue long after the last shot is fired. They continue in bodies, illnesses and in the children and grandchildren of people who never fought in them.

I wrote about some of those experiences in my first book, *Sem Pauta* (Without Assignment). It is out of print now, although copies occasionally appear on second-hand marketplaces. If I ever manage to recover a digital version, I'll make it available on my website.

The same feeling returned in Cambodia. There I encountered another chapter in the story of what happens when entire nations become pieces on a geopolitical chessboard. The rise of the Khmer Rouge (members of the Communist Party of Kampuchea) is often presented as though it emerged in isolation, detached from its historical surroundings. It didn't. It grew out of a much larger context shaped by Cold War rivalries and by the obsession of great powers with expanding or containing spheres of influence.

Years later, I experienced something similar in Tibet. I went there as a reporter and came back haunted by the questions the trip left behind. What began as a journalistic assignment eventually evolved into a much deeper investigation, one that decades later became my master's dissertation on the tulku — the reincarnated spiritual masters of Tibetan Buddhism — and the sophisticated succession system developed to preserve Tibetan Buddhism under Chinese rule and against the constant threat of cultural erasure.

It was there that I understood something maps never show. When powerful nations compete for territory, influence or hegemony, the bill is usually paid by people who happened to be born in the wrong place at the wrong moment. Flags change. Speeches change. Justifications change. The people buried beneath history remain people.

Yet when I read that Cubans have become the largest refugee group arriving in Brazil, my mind doesn't go first to diplomatic briefings or economic reports. It goes back to those hospital corridors in Vietnam. To conversations in Cambodia. To monasteries and long discussions in Tibet.

Unveiling the human stories behind displacement

Today's defining rivalry is no longer between Washington and Moscow. The Soviet Union belongs to the past. The central competition now runs largely through Washington and Beijing. China continues its remarkable ascent. The United States remains the world's dominant military power.

It goes back to people I met along the way, all of whom seemed to be fighting for the same thing: preserving something that mattered. A family. A culture. A sense of dignity. Sometimes simply survival. Perhaps that is why I struggle to see refugees as numbers. Numbers do not cross borders. People do. And they are almost always carrying far more than can fit inside a suitcase. This is why we must look past the spreadsheets and demand a diplomacy that values human survival over geopolitical leverage. We need to see the faces behind the numbers before the next family is forced to pack their lives into a suitcase.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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Will the Gen Z-Fueled CJP Achieve What It Set Out To Do?

Vasavi Seethepalli
July 24, 2026

Education reform campaigner Sonam Wangchuk's 20-day hunger strike and forceful evacuation by Delhi police have further catalyzed the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) — the youth-led movement demanding accountability for the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test scandal. Despite violent crackdowns and government inaction, the CJP's demands have gained widespread support. The question that remains is whether India's leadership will finally address the

generational reckoning at the heart of this uprising.

On July 18, Sonam Wangchuk, a 59-year-old environmentalist and education reform campaigner — who was on a hunger strike for over 20 days in support of the newly formed Cockroach Janta Party (CJP)'s demands — was forcefully evacuated from the place of protest by the Delhi police.

This was an attempt to crack down on the peace-abiding, student-led movement that has gripped India in the last few weeks. The CJP is demanding Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation and that compensation be given to the families of the students who died by suicide as a result of the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) being leaked and canceled.

The swift and deliberate removal of Wangchuk from the protest site triggered an uproar. Members of the CJP had planned to march to Parliament on July 20, demanding his release from the hospital where he was being held, Pradhan's resignation and compensation of one crore (about \$105,000) for each family of students who died by suicide. But the march was abruptly cut short as Delhi police used barricades, tear gas and baton charges at protesters. Several demonstrators were arrested, while others suffered critical injuries — sparking a more defiant movement. Member of Parliament Shashi Tharoor condemned the act of violence against young civilians and the lack of dialogue with them.

The lack of meaningful discourse from the central government — primarily led by senior officials of the “uncle generation” entrenched in bureaucracy — has left the Generation Z (Gen Z) movement reeling after weeks of protests. Cries for a complete overhaul of the education system and

accountability have grown louder and more insistent. The question remains: Will the government listen?

Remark ignites backlash

The movement came about after Chief Justice Surya Kant remarked at a court hearing that “there are already parasites in society who attack the system” and added that “there are youngsters like cockroaches.” He went on to say that these youngsters don’t get jobs and that some “become media,” some “become social media” and some “become RTI activists,” who “start attacking everyone.” The RTI here refers to Right to Information laws that promote government transparency, monitor public spending and expose corruption.

The comments, widely perceived as demeaning, sparked immediate disbelief. Although he later clarified that he intended the remark for students with fake law degrees rather than the broader youth population, the backlash was immediate and unforgiving.

What followed was telling: The remarks helped catalyze the CJP, with frustrated young people embracing the symbolism as a rallying banner. Founder Abhijeet Dipke’s explanation for the name is bluntly satirical: He says it is meant to reflect how sections of society — especially unemployed youth — are treated.

Abhijeet Dipke and the momentum online

Dipke, a recent graduate from Boston University, posted what he described as a quick response during the hearing: an online tweet that rapidly gained traction and drew a large following of over 22 million. Observers point to the speed of its spread as evidence of a deeper, simmering anger among young Indians who feel shut out, unheard

and repeatedly let down by institutions meant to safeguard their future.

The frustration has expanded beyond a single incident into broader political and cultural anger, especially around education and youth employment. The NEET paper leak, coupled with discrepancies in the Central Board of Secondary Education’s (CBSE) digital valuation, has significantly heightened tensions, prompting the disgruntled youth to demand accountability for the education department’s unprecedented blunder. This situation has further galvanized students across India, with over 20 individuals dying by suicide. Such a figure is staggering, as each young life lost deserves recognition and reflection.

When the Times of India interviewed Dipke, he mentioned that there was no specific intention or plan behind the movement. However, he believes the surge in support stems from widespread frustration over unemployment. In the weeks since his arrival in India on June 6, he has traveled across the country to rally support and apply pressure. While he had not expected such a large response, he noted that it is one thing to mobilize a large crowd in just a month, but addressing the education system within that same timeframe is nearly impossible. He stressed the importance of keeping democracy alive through vocal advocacy and government accountability. In an open letter dated June 19 to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Dipke requested the government to offer compensation to the families of the students who died by suicide, urging intervention and prioritizing mental health.

Currently, he has undertaken an indefinite hunger strike in solidarity with Wangchuk and ahead of the planned mass walk toward the parliament.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) has not issued any statement so far; however, Minister Pradhan accused the CJP of being a B-team for

Congress and the opposition party leader, Rahul Gandhi, who is creating an atmosphere of instability, fear and tension in the country, on CNN-News18.

Hunger strike, sit-ins and a wider coalition

While many call it a Gen Z movement, some older generations are also rallying for the cause. Apart from Wangchuk, nearly 20 other individuals have undertaken the hunger strike in support of the movement's demands. Nearly six weeks since the protest began in soaring temperatures of over 40°C and rain, some CJP members, including spokesperson Ashutosh Ranka, urged supporters not to back out but to stand up and pressure the government to accept their demands. Some protesters who undertook the hunger strike were hospitalized due to deteriorating health.

Politicians — both current and former — Bollywood celebrities and activists from diverse backgrounds have expressed their support. They have urged citizens to take part in the movement, which hopes to bring change to the education system across the country that has failed students time and again. Despite a vast majority of senior supporters, the movement has not received any kind of communication from the government.

Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI [M]) General Secretary Marian Alexander Baby visited Jantar Mantar — which protestors have temporarily occupied in support of the CJP — and urged Pradhan to take moral responsibility and step down. He added that the entire education system needs an overhaul and a correction and that the CPI (M) will extend its solidarity toward this unprecedented movement.

Seeking to draw the government into dialogue, the Samajwadi Party threw its support behind the CJP's demands, urging engagement with the

protestors. The farmers' leader Gurnam Singh Charuni ji has pledged support to CJP.

Author and political commentator Dr Anand Ranganathan said in a Times of India interview that the ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), should have appropriated this movement. "I believe that BJP and Modi and everyone down has got it completely wrong; the government should have appropriated this movement," he argued. He further added that anyone who survives corruption in India is a cockroach; Indians are survivors.

The sit-in protest has persisted for over four weeks, showing no signs of resolution. Dipke has condemned the central government's inaction and accused it of ignorance and arrogance, despite a brief interaction with Minister of Health Jagat Prakash Nadda. In a Twitter post, Dipke noted that to seek accountability from the government, it needed repeated paper leaks, student suicides, hunger strikes and millions of shattered dreams. He also claimed that their phones, including WhatsApp chats, were under surveillance.

PRS Legislative Research (non-partisan) reported that India spends about \$30 billion annually on education but sees relatively "low outcomes." In the Demand for Grants 2025–26 for the Ministry of Education, ₹1,28,650 crore (~\$13.37 billion) was allocated — 13% higher than the revised estimates for 2024–25. However, in 2024–25, expenditure was estimated to be 5% below budget, driven by underspending in school education (7%) and higher education (2%).

Corruption remains a significant concern across India, with widespread allegations of bribery, manipulation and middle-layer rent-seeking. Senior administrators and frontline officials often serve as the interface between the state and the public, and slow, opaque or overly discretionary systems can result in delays and denials. Transparency International's Corruption

Perceptions Index 2025 underscores the scale of the problem: India scored 39/100 on a scale where zero represents the highest level of perceived corruption. Former Government of India education secretary Anil Swarup, a retired Indian Administrative Service officer, has argued that the education sector is driven by an underground “mafia” that undermines the essentials of schooling and opportunity.

The unsettled question beneath the protests

The unrest suggests the issue isn’t overall funding, but how effectively money is allocated and spent within a complex bureaucracy. Witnessing such a large movement is unsettling — on the surface things seemed calm, but it is clear that something was building as crowds gathered, joined in and cheered on the uprising ahead of the monsoon parliament session.

So the movement’s core question is less about a single hearing and more about a generational reckoning: Is the uncle generation ready to face the new generation of go-getters, who are asking their government for accountability and are desperate for change?

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Vasavi Seethepalli is a writer and editor based in Hong Kong, with a strong interest in geopolitics, technology and the arts. With over eight years of experience in the media and having a technical aptitude, she has discovered her passion for presenting facts and engaging in meaningful discussions. Recent upheaval in India’s school and college exams has piqued her interest, and she hopes to continue exploring and reporting similar trends across the spectrum.

Lindsey Graham’s Legacy and the Price of Relevance

Elliot Neaman
July 28, 2026

Senator Lindsey Graham’s death marks the end of a career that embodies the erosion of democratic norms in the US. His late-career compromises and abandonment of democratic norms reflect a broader Republican Party shift where power eclipsed principle. Graham’s legacy serves as a cautionary tale of how institutional decay thrives when insiders prioritize proximity to power over safeguarding democracy.

Lindsey Graham’s death marks the end of what could have been a singularly historical legacy. He was elected as a congressman in 1995 and had been a senator since 2003. He was unusually positioned inside the machinery of Washington, capable of turning national and international events into personal leverage. For decades, Graham’s admirers described him as tough, pragmatic and independent enough to be respected, even when they disagreed with him. He was omnipresent on cable news, almost never turning down an interview. He was witty and personable. Reporters could always find a good Graham quote for their copy.

In his early career, Graham was best friends with Arizona Senator John McCain, and in that part of his political life, he held tight to rock-solid Republican principles of advancing American values through the loosely regulated free market and foreign policy democracy expansion. But the late-career Graham story is best understood as

abandoning almost all his principles for access to power. His career is a tale of what must be surrendered when one decides that staying “in the game” is more important than guarding the system’s guardrails.

Aligning with Trump and the abandonment of democratic norms

Graham’s alignment with President Donald Trump, especially when it increasingly meant abandoning norms that protect democratic governance, has been explained away as a “necessary compromise.” In order to “manage” Trump, Graham had to become Trump’s golfing buddy. But the gains were minimal. Graham may have been responsible, at the very end, for influencing Trump to become more involved in Middle East politics than Trump wanted, to prosecute the war against Iran harder than might otherwise have happened. He may have helped limit Trump’s most unhinged behavior. But he was probably deluded about what influence and sway he actually held on the narcissist-in-chief.

Graham’s abandonment of principles mirrored the way that Republican and independent voters in general swept aside core ideological positions, from former President Ronald Reagan to the Bush era, once they decided that electing a morally compromised Caligula figure was better than ceding power to the hated Democrats.

In an earlier era, Graham was consistently hawkish and consistently willing to argue hard positions. But he also projected a kind of institutional seriousness. His public posture suggested a belief that power should be used judiciously, that elections and procedural norms mattered, and that adversaries were to be confronted, not normalized into the center of one’s political project. Even when Graham was on the winning side of pure force, he still often sounded

like a senator who believed the structure of governance mattered.

Institutions cannot survive raw power politics. “Killers or losers,” as Trump divides up the world. They’re preserved by restraint, by the willingness of people inside the system to say no when the incentives say yes. Graham’s later career suggests that he ultimately chose incentives over restraint. His career illustrated in miniature what has happened in American life in the last ten years as a lesson in how justifying the indefensible has become a national habit and reflex.

From rejection to embrace: Graham’s Trump pivot

Graham famously did not begin as Trump’s natural ally. In 2015, he publicly rejected Trump using language that, by its moral framing, treated Trump as beyond normal partisan competition. He looked at the Republican Party (GOP) and said, our party has gone “batshit crazy.” Graham described Trump as “a race-baiting, xenophobic religious bigot,” and explicitly said Trump did not represent his party or its values.

That statement is often disregarded as a throwaway moment of campaign-season heat, but its importance is structural, since it reflects the underlying premise that some figures are too corrosive to be treated as legitimate partners. Then Trump won a second time. The voters threw caution to the wind in the vain hope that their grocery bills would become more affordable. And Graham’s short-term premises changed with the national mood. A previously held moral line collapsed as Trump’s tenacious hold on the party faithful became too hard to combat.

One tends to forget that Graham’s sharpest public moment of distance came after the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol. After that, Graham delivered remarks characterized as a

disavowal, captured in the line, “Count me out. Enough is enough.” But disavowal did not become transformation.

Once it became clear that Trump would return to power, Graham repositioned and moved from rejecting Trump the insurrectionist to defending the stone-cold reality of Trump’s restoration. The result is the same lesson: The “no” that seemed possible in a moment of moral outrage did not persist once loyalty again offered access. That is why the “necessary compromise” framing doesn’t quite fit. Compromise assumes a continuing commitment to constraints. Graham’s trajectory looks like the constraints were always conditional.

The Kavanaugh moment: enforcer logic over institutional restraint

A key moment for understanding Graham’s late-career turn is his posture during the Brett Kavanaugh confirmation fight for a seat on the Supreme Court. During that period, Graham became one of the most prominent defenders of Kavanaugh, and his public remarks emphasized the structure of support rather than genuine uncertainty about the process. He attacked the opposition’s strategy and declared that he intended to vote for Kavanaugh. Even when those remarks are read purely on their face, they illustrate an important shift.

Lindsey Graham was an Air Force military judge. But here, the argument became not “we must weigh contested facts carefully,” but rather “the process is a sham, and the vote must still proceed.” That is enforcer logic, power aligned to outcome rather than outcome aligned to careful restraint. Graham’s late-career behavior is best interpreted as a willingness to help normalize institutional corrosion when it benefited his personal political ambitions.

That normalization matters because authoritarian projects of illiberal democracies, like the one the US has become, do not succeed through one dramatic act. No Seizure of Power as in fascism or Leninism. The erosion of republican norms succeeds through permission structures, parties, legislatures and inside networks that decide how wide the Overton Window can open — which range of ideas the public is willing to accept — allowing previously taboo behavior to become normalized.

When prominent insiders treat the erosion of norms as survivable or negotiable, they reduce the cost of further erosion. And when insiders decide that the only stable currency is proximity to power, they often stop seeing democratic guardrails as non-negotiable. Graham’s late career fits that pattern.

The moral failure of staying in the game

It is tempting to reduce the story of Lindsey Graham to policy differences or personality clashes. But Graham often acted autonomously. He was an institutional actor, someone who understood that in Washington, access is power, and power is achieved by aligning with whoever holds the center. The tragedy is that in a moment when the system required boundaries most, Graham treated boundaries as optional. When Trump’s project became the dominant center of gravity, Graham’s role moved from contesting the project to defending it.

After a death like this, biographies tend to turn into elegies. In the first draft of history, Graham’s slavishness to Trump is being explained away and whitewashed. But his late-career record reads less like pragmatism and more like an active moral choice repeatedly reinforced by bad incentives. This is a lesson about how democratic institutions fail when insiders decide that the job is to stay close to power rather than to protect the system

that makes power legitimate. Someone has to do the job; better to leave it to me rather than others. That is a fatal decision that the history books do not treat with respect.

Graham could have gone down in history as a relatively great figure, perhaps comparable to the Republican counterpart, the beloved maverick “Man of the House” Tip O’Neil. Graham was charismatic, funny, charming and highly intelligent. But his gravestone in history will read: He sold his soul for cheap to a clownish devil. He tarnished not only his own reputation, but also damaged the institutions he actually did very much value. Graham never married and had no children. His life was 100% politics. The tragedy of Lindsey Graham was that he loved the limelight so much that he lost his own self, 100%, in order to stay relevant.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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America: My Country, Right or Wrong?

Emma Isabella Sage
July 29, 2026

America’s 250th birthday exposed deep divisions over its identity, with ongoing debates as the nation struggles to reconcile ideals and actions. Current patterns in public discourse around America’s history often fall into two camps: one consumed by past wrongs, and one willfully ignorant of them. Neither will lead to a brighter future.

To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely.

— Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790.

This month, America staggered through an underwhelming, contentious semiquincentennial fraught with existential questions. The country could not even agree on how to throw its own birthday party: A bipartisan commission established by Congress a decade in advance found itself competing with a White House task force

running a rival celebration, each telling a different story about what, precisely, was being commemorated. In a sign of the times, one of these celebrations was marred by prominently displayed Confederate flags. The fireworks may be over, but the dispute they illuminated is not.

The exact meaning of the word “country” is a constant question in American political life today: Can you claim to love your country, but hate the federal government (or the “deep state”)? What is the essence of a country — its laws, government, land, populace, culture or some combination? Philosophers debate the definition of a nation, often portraying it as an ongoing project or a “spiritual” or “historical” community. But the more important observation is that not everyone is equally invested in this communal project, and those who are deeply invested are often pulling in opposite directions. In fact, the truest characterization might be that no two people have the same relationship to their country.

This is in part because it is impossible to observe the state from a rational distance: Citizens can vote for and against their government, are taxed, protected and policed by it, and can be conscripted, jailed and even killed by it. It is perhaps the most consequential and continuous involuntary relationship in the world. Like any relationship, it can be healthy or dysfunctional — and there is a growing body of evidence on the side of dysfunction, often revolving around the misalignment between a person’s ethics and a country’s actions.

Confronted with a historical record that cannot always be squared with the country’s stated ideals, Americans tend to default to avoidance or despair. The problem with avoidance is that the wrongs are too profound and too numerous to be minimized, erased or explained away; the problem with despair is that an endless excavation of guilt is unproductive and, at times, makes things worse.

There is a third possible response: doubling down on one’s investment in the civic life of a country with the intention of steering the ship in a moral and just direction for the future.

This Fourth of July is yours, not mine.

— Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”, 1852.

It is self-evident that, while all people may be created equal, America has not treated them equally. From the Three-Fifths Compromise to the Trail of Tears to the Marshall Islands nuclear tests, there is plenty to be ashamed of. But shame is both too passive and too unbearable at scale, causing people to retreat from either the truth of the atrocities or the country that perpetrated them. It can even push people into a kind of twisted revenge against the original injured party for being the perceived source of these bad feelings.

In their 2018 book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff coined the term “safetyism” — the cultural instinct to shield people from discomfort rather than build their capacity to tolerate it. These cognitive habits have migrated into political life. Binary thinking is continually reinforced by America’s two-party system, which requires voters to expend extra effort to consider more than two sides of any issue. At the end of the day, a citizenry that has spent a decade being socially and algorithmically trained into black-and-white thinking will be willing to pass a similarly binary and absolute judgment on floundering democracies, and be more willing to declare one a lost cause.

In interpersonal relationships, sometimes the right path is the exit — some relationships are toxic, and there is no virtue in staying or continuing to try. But Reddit’s ubiquitous prescription, “just leave,” is tougher to apply to the

person-state relationship. There is nowhere you can go to not be governed, and while some do renounce one citizenship and take up another, that is just trading between two social contracts, each of which comes with its own catalog of flaws.

My country, right or wrong; when right, to be kept right; when wrong, to be set right.

— Senator Carl Schurz, in a speech on the Senate floor, 1872.

Democratic disengagement is not the inevitable outcome of a national moral failure, no matter how complete. Germany confronted a near-absolute chasm between value and action, but did not collapse into collective helplessness; it has built, slowly and imperfectly, a functioning democracy with a public practice of responsibility. When faced with such a failure, society needs a process for metabolizing it. Germany built one — through changes to the law, school curricula, visible public memorials, yearly rituals — which is still ongoing. A truism is that we don't rise to the level of our goals; we sink to the level of our systems, and Germany built systems.

Germans distinguish between the concepts of shame and *Verantwortung* (the willingness to answer for something), perhaps best translated as accountability. Their example proves that an accountable population which is willing to pull together in the same direction can build something, regardless of a shared dark past. In contrast, America currently demonstrates a propensity to relitigate its moral lapses rather than process them, leaving everyone so engaged in the debate over what happened and how bad it really was that there is no opportunity to learn from it and grow beyond it.

The most fervent participants in this debate demonstrate masochistic epistemology — a framework in which suffering, discomfort or

emotional pain is treated as an obligatory component of authentic truth.

Under this framework, there is no incentive to look for historical high points among the historical lows; there is only an incentive to dig deeper, and deeper still, at the bottom of the chasms, searching for an even worse truth. One runs the risk of forgetting to tend to the survivors, and the civic work of building a society in which they can flourish — unfortunately, the skills of digging at wounds are not transferable to the consensus-building of politically viable policy work in democracies.

I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.

— James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, 1955.

While still young in “country years,” America is old enough to expect a settled sense of identity, yet it conspicuously lacks one. There is no unified American ethnicity, culture or language, so American identity hinges primarily on creed: a set of propositions that a country can fall short of. This makes the nation's ideology a single point of failure: It carries weight that would otherwise be distributed across a multitude of factors that bind a people together. The loftier the ideal — say, full equality among citizens within the political system — the easier it is to fall short of it.

Each individual must grapple with how to respond to the bad behavior of others — what to do when lines are crossed. One of the most accessible and obvious responses is criticism. However, like anything, this can be taken to extremes, and anything in extraordinary quantities is a poison. When the nation's creed is a linchpin, there are real consequences to swinging at it blithely.

Another problem with endless, reflexive criticism is that our brains are wired to entrench patterns, and a state of perpetual negativity can lead to defeatism and withdrawal. Disengagement is already a significant problem for the American political system: In the last five decades, the high point of voter turnout was 62.8% of the voting-aged population. Political apathy is the term for the state of non-participation in one's democracy on the belief that the ship cannot be righted by any action on your part, and it is therefore futile to try. Beliefs about democracy correlate with democratic participation, and our beliefs are formed in part by how we engage with our world.

Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor — never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten.

— Elie Wiesel, in a speech at the White House, 1999.

A person must be both invested in the outcome and believe they can affect it to reliably continue participating in a democracy. But abstention from the flawed workings of a democracy is still a position within it. Withdrawal buys nothing. Declining to participate does not confer moral cleanliness or absolve anyone of the moral burdens of the outcome.

Interestingly, this apathy is rarely as organic as it seems. For a hostile state engaging in information operations, democratic passivity is a cheaper goal than active support for authoritarianism — it is much easier to convince someone that their system is hopelessly broken than to convince them that an alternative is truly better. Adversaries like Russia play up the most extreme elements of both sides, polarizing the

conversation. By drowning out nuance and wearing down the sense of agency that underpins civic life in a democracy, they create a positive reinforcement loop, compounding the brokenness of the system and the apathy of the population.

But history shows that it is possible to develop collective agency and the popular will to fight for democracy in even the most hostile environments. In fact, passion for democracy is more palpable in some Eastern European countries whose democracies are far younger and more fragile than America's. In Ukraine, more than 100,000 have already died fighting for their democracy, despite having suffered many years of Soviet anti-democratic repression.

I can dwell on the fact that the patriotic or religious bumper stickers always seem to be on the biggest, most disgustingly selfish vehicles driven by the ugliest, most inconsiderate and aggressive drivers...

— David Foster Wallace, "This Is Water," 2009

A nation, as the kids might say, is "cooked" (finished) when loving it is viewed as the identity of last resort — the low rung on the social totem pole, the final stop on a train running in the wrong direction. In his famous essay "This Is Water," writer David Foster Wallace argued that the most important kind of freedom is the ability to choose how you think about and interpret everyday life. His unguarded thoughts are revealing in ways he may not have intended.

In plenty of circles, patriotism has become nearly synonymous with moral turpitude. Many ask whether patriotism can — or should — be redeemed. Why be proud of a country when it has done so much wrong?

Both the left and the right have conditional views on the issue of pride, hinging upon what

someone is proud of. It is important to note that today, the source of German pride is bike paths, beer and recycling systems, not “German history” or “German heritage.” The urge to minimize, erase or deny historical wrongs is keeping America locked in an emotionally stunted place; we all know what a Confederate flag symbolizes, and there is no reason to pretend otherwise. The country’s inability to get on the same page about this is just one of many battles over historical pride that are sapping energy from the process of building a future that makes us all proud.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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Summer in Europe: Hotter Than Yesterday, Colder Than Tomorrow

Francesca Collu
July 29, 2026

Europe is warming twice as fast as the global average and this summer. Two record-breaking heatwaves in two months have pushed temperatures above seasonal norms and driven heat-related deaths into the thousands. This is the output of several converging physical processes, but with each passing summer, the window for a cooler tomorrow grows narrower.

The average temperature of Earth continues to rise, but not all areas of the planet are warming at the same rate. Europe is the fastest-warming continent, with temperatures rising at more than twice the global average rate: 0.56°C per decade against the global 0.27° C.

Over May and June, Europeans have experienced two record-breaking heatwaves just a couple of weeks apart. Across France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Southern England, temperatures reached 5-12°C above seasonal averages. Indoors, people are not doing better. Approximately 45% of urban European regions are experiencing record levels of indoor Wet-Bulb Globe Temperature, a measure of the body’s ability to cool itself.

In Europe, this is the most severe heatwave ever recorded. In 2003, the first major heatwave of this century, daytime heat like this would still have been ten times less likely than today, while nighttime temperatures such as this summer would have been more than 100 times less likely in 2003.

The climate baseline has shifted. Similar circulation patterns to the ones described below have historical analogues, but now it produces significantly hotter temperatures than it did in the mid-20th century. Europe has no choice but to adapt.

Why Europe?

As Europeans endure yet another week of record-breaking temperatures, while searching for ways to cool off, they must have asked themselves more than once, “Why?” Europe is sitting at the intersection of several independent physical processes, all of which happen to be pushing in the same direction. These phenomena happen in a broader context of a planet that is experiencing an increase of the average temperature: $+0.27^{\circ}\text{C}$ per decade. Human-caused climate change makes every heatwave stronger and more likely.

Europe’s proximity to the Arctic is a relevant factor for what is happening there. The region, covered with snow and glaciers, is warming at a rate that is at least three times greater than the global average. This is called Arctic amplification. It’s driven by the reduction of the albedo (which means, from Latin, whiteness) of the region. Why is the color of the region so relevant to temperature increase? For the same reason we would rather wear a white shirt on a hot summer day instead of a black one. To put it simply, we prefer to reflect the light (i.e. the heat) instead of absorbing it. The same principle applies in the Arctic, at planetary scale: As the white snow and ice melt, they reveal darker surfaces underneath, such as ocean or bare ground, which absorbs more solar energy. The more it absorbs heat, the more it increases its temperature and leads to further melting, in a self-reinforcing feedback loop.

Because of the increasing Arctic temperature, the temperature difference between the Arctic and the European continent is gradually narrowing.

Part of the scientific community thinks that this has serious consequences on the mechanism that allows Europe to have a temperate climate. Usually, the polar jet stream, a narrow band of fast-moving air at 8–12 kilometers and up, flows because of the temperature contrast between cold Arctic air to the north and warmer air to the south. It’s like Europe is sitting in a sushi conveyor belt, waiting for all the kinds of Japanese dishes to be served.

Whether Europe likes the dish or not is not really a problem. The positive aspect of this is the fact that it flows, giving the spot to the next one. No matter if the belt (i.e., the jet stream) will bring a wet spell or a cold snap; none of it will last too long. But if the belt gets stuck, Europe will be forced to eat the dish that it has in front of it, whether it may be a bluefin tuna nigiri or a mayo California roll. That’s the problem with the jet stream slowing down: a heat dome stays over a region for days or weeks rather than moving on. This structure is called Omega block because it resembles the shape of the uppercase Greek letter omega, Ω , with the “hot dome” centered over Europe flanked by two lows.

Beyond the influence of air currents, usually Europe also benefits from the ocean currents’ influence. Indeed, Europe sits at the terminus of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC), which is a system of ocean currents that normally transports enormous amounts of heat from the tropics northward. Essentially it is another conveyor belt. It is a mitigating factor for Europe’s climate. AMOC was the main reason why a city like Paris had historically much milder summers than Moscow, which is at the same latitude, but without the maritime Atlantic influence. But AMOC is weakening, and as it does, European summers start behaving more like continental ones, but on a warmer baseline.

Why is cleaner air making things worse?

A curious factor in Europe's accelerating warming is, paradoxically, its cleaner air. Over the last decades, Europe decreased its air pollution, but this came with a cost. Sulfate and nitrate aerosols from pollution made clouds more reflective, casting sunlight back to space and ultimately shielding the region from the warming. After Europe cleaned up its air (for good public health reasons), this accidental cooling shield was removed, unmasking extra warming that was there all along due to greenhouse gases.

The ocean tells a version of the same story. In 2020, new international rules slashed the sulfur content allowed in ship fuel, and cargo vessels crossing the North Atlantic and Mediterranean suddenly stopped seeding the sky above their wakes with sulfate haze. Studies from 2023 and 2024 point to this cleanup as a likely contributor to the unusually fast warming now showing up in both basins.

Why is Europe so vulnerable?

“In the European region, heat stress is the leading cause of climate-related death in the region,” said WHO Regional Director Dr. Hans Kluge. Why is Europe so vulnerable? According to World Weather Attribution, heatwaves already cause more deaths in Europe than all other natural hazards combined. Air conditioning is not widespread in the continent (only 20% of European homes have it, compared to roughly 90% in the United States) because it is simply not accustomed to such oppressive heat. Schools, hospitals, transport: They are all designed for a different climate. Europe's ageing population is another factor to consider in order to get a sense of the extent of the perils of this new normal climate.

This situation is deepening the existing socioeconomic inequalities, as vulnerability is higher for those with uneven access to air conditioning or heat-resilient housing, particularly

for elderly people living alone, homeless populations and migrants. Moreover, outdoor workers, particularly in construction and agriculture, are at high risk for heat-related injuries.

The immediate future offers little reassurance. Europe has already absorbed two distinct heat episodes — one in late May, one beginning in mid-June — with barely a week of relief between them. This back-to-back structure is itself significant. Recovery time matters as much as peak temperature, because soils, buildings and human bodies accumulate heat across successive events. A landscape that never fully cools becomes, with each new episode, progressively more vulnerable to the next. Whether further episodes strike in July and August is not something physics can predict precisely. What it can say is that the atmospheric conditions favoring these events are not going away.

Due to global warming, these very high temperatures are now expected regularly during the summer months in many European capitals. What was a once-in-a-century event is becoming decadal, then annual. This can lead to a massive disruption of the healthcare system. During the summer of 2022, more than 60,000 people across Europe died as a result of extreme heat. Even in the following, significantly cooler summer, over 47,000 heat-related deaths were recorded. A toll running into the thousands only a few weeks into summer 2026 fits a worsening trend. According to WHO, by 2050, with no further adaptation, this could rise to 120,000 heat-related deaths every year in the Region.

Moreover, the sharp rise in electricity demand — driven by the increasingly widespread use of air conditioning to cope with the heat during these weeks of intense heat — has put Europe's energy infrastructure under severe strain. Belgium is a case in point: Electricity prices hit a record above

1,000 euros per megawatt-hour at sunset as solar output dropped just as demand was still running high.

The irony of this feedback loop is evident: cooling demand drives fossil fuel consumption, which drives further warming. This is clearly not a once-in-a-lifetime event. Europeans must now contend with a hotter Europe, one that is here to stay. Infrastructure must adapt, or else more Europeans will suffer.

[Cheyenne Torres edited this piece.]



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AI, Cheating and Teacher Trickery: Is This Modern Education?

Peter Isackson
July 31, 2026

Post-industrial education prizes outcomes over understanding, breeding cheating as a rational response to a system built on performance metrics. A viral case of a professor trapping AI-using students with hidden text reveals this failure starkly. True correctives require transparency and collaborative inquiry, not surveillance — dissolving the authority wall separating teachers from learners.

Many of us have been asking for some time this embarrassing question: In the age of sophisticated science and technology as well as unprecedented economic prosperity, why has education become our civilization's Achilles heel? Thinking people with some sense of the depth and breadth of human culture — and not just Western culture — realize that somewhere along the line, as the rich get obscenely richer, the very notion of education has become impoverished.

Educational innovators from Thomas Dewey, Maria Montessori to Ricardo Semler have sought and sometimes succeeded to buck the trend, but not quite to turn it around.

For most of the past two centuries in the developed nations, education has focused on adapting to the reality of an industrial revolution that unconsciously but inexorably changed the *raison d'être* of entire societies. Prior to the industrial age, the population bathed in a set of inherited communal and wider traditions that defined a complex and connected religious, artisanal, artistic and moral framework featuring knowledge and skills that linked together, serving as a reference for the community. That culture varied locally but its shared framework also looked outward, pointing towards the universal.

During the Middle Ages, a plethora of innovative educational institutions emerged. Monastic Schools, Cathedral or Episcopal Schools taught the Trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic) and Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy), laying the groundwork for the first universities. Chantry & Song Schools promoted literacy for boys. Guild Apprenticeships and Workshop Education focused on craftsmanship, leading to master status within the guild. Successful apprentices produced a ‘masterpiece’ to prove their acquisition and refinement of skills, endowing them with the status of “independent masters of their craft.”

Merchant & Abacus Schools inculcated vernacular literacy, commercial bookkeeping, double-entry accounting and practical business mathematics. Village schools taught basic reading, writing and moral instruction in the vernacular, as well as introductory Latin. And of course, Europe’s universities emerged as self-governing academic corporations dedicated to a growing population of scholars. Geoffrey Chaucer describes the mindset of his “clerk of Oxenford” (Oxford scholar) in the Canterbury Tales: “gladly would he learn and gladly teach.”

Is today’s era the “Dark Ages” of education?

Contrary to popular myths about the “Dark Ages,” medieval intellectual life was not confined to repeating and justifying religious dogma. While the Western Church largely funded and governed institutional education, scholasticism had already synthesized classical logic and philosophy into university curricula by the 13th century. The era’s diverse institutions — from cathedral schools to guild-run legal faculties — stand in sharp contrast to modern, highly standardized educational models.

Industrial and even more flagrantly post-industrial education — guided by the pursuit of

efficiency and utility — have radically transformed our sense of the purpose and meaning of education. Although it could and probably should have turned out differently, the emergence over the past half-century of several generations of educational technology, culminating today with AI, has largely aggravated the trend.

When ChatGPT was released to the public in November 2022, the entire world of education fell into a state of panic. Instead of seeking to understand what a “large language model,” with its access to an immeasurable breadth of knowledge and discourse, might bring to education, the educational community and the media focused on one exclusively negative thing: the threat that chatbots would facilitate cheating.

Nearly four years later, nothing has changed. Perhaps it’s because we live in a civilization that has literally become paranoid, governed by its fears and an obsession with security in an atmosphere of permanent suspicion. We perceive all change initially as a threat not only to our precious status quo but to our sense of earned authority. Such an increasingly gated-community culture, obsessed by security, will always be blind to opportunities.

Since January 2023, I’ve been authoring Fair Observer columns dedicated to the use of AI as a tool of creativity and education. At that time I was actively teaching as a visiting professor in an Indian university. That is when in my classroom I dared to suggest to my students that chatbots not only did not deserve to be feared, but that they could play an active, essential role in reviving the spirit of exploratory, collaborative creativity that has at various moments in human history enlivened the ethos of education.

A case that illustrates the deeper problem

The headline of a recent article by Futurism, “Professor Hides White Font in Midterm, Catches Students Using AI in the Stupidest Way Possible,” demonstrates the dominant mindset in education today: punitive, if not simply paranoid. The article’s subtitle summarizes the facts: “Thirty-two of my 35 students between two classes failed a portion of their midterm because they all used AI to generate their entire response.” The article recounts how history professor Jason Gibson literally tricked his students into copying a prompt with an invisible instruction — typed in white font — to prove that they were too lazy to write their own essay.

I agree that any student who delegates their response to an assignment to AI deserves to be failed. But, in this specific case, I would also extend that honor to the professor who tricked the students to expose them. To my mind, it revealed more about the failings of the system of authority baked into our post-industrial educational culture than it did about the lack of discipline of 32 students. Gibson’s trickery did prove a point. But it also highlights another more uncomfortable point: that authority (the teacher) has the right to use trickery, but those subjected to that authority must not cheat.

In the age of AI, it may be time to ask a different question. Suspicion and shaming as a pedagogic method have their limits. Has it occurred to no one in the educational profession that using transparency and honesty may be a more effective approach in fostering genuine learning? Apparently not, because educators and their institutions give priority to formatting, ranking and surveilling over learning.

What did Gibson’s “experiment” prove? The first conclusion should have been predictable: If given the opportunity, students will cheat. But it demonstrated something more profound and worth considering, that — unlike Chaucer’s clerk — they

aren’t interested in what they’re supposed to be learning.

Students cheat because our society teaches them above all to focus on outcomes. The whole point of education is to get the best grades and the best diploma, not to acquire well scaffolded learning. Cramming for a test isn’t all that different from a form of cheating: it gives the impression of learning without the engagement. Not only is cramming legitimate cheating, it’s a form of superficial, discardable retention, what we might truly call “artificial, evanescent intelligence.” The method is built into the logic of the system, in which only performance on a test is measured and rewarded... never understanding, curiosity, critical thinking and open-minded, analogical reasoning. Those qualities are too difficult to measure in a formal, standardized test.

Is it time to write a history of technology in education?

Gibson would be right to mistrust the role our society appears to be asking AI to play: that of a super-authority, with valid answers to every question. But he doesn’t mistrust our society’s approach to AI, he mistrusts his learners who are using AI in exactly the way they have been told the tool was intended to be used: to save time and energy. As a historian, he might be curious enough to examine the history of our civilization’s exploitation of technology. Were he to do so, he would discover that every new technology has invited misuse alongside all the socially constructive, productive uses their vendors highlight in their marketing pitch.

Gibson used a ruse to get his students to fall into a predictable trap. It made for a good demonstration of at least two things: the propensity of people, and not just students, to misuse AI, and the general failure of our society even to aspire to foster good practices, let alone define them. The

professor's own conclusion is correctly observed, as far as it goes. "We don't know best practices for navigating academia with AI." That sounds like an excuse for his own bad behavior. His method, which goes no further than defining AI as a threat, is defensive rather than corrective. He appears to admit that it's all about maintaining an undefined status quo. "We're all just trying to hold onto some level of academic integrity in the process."

Since he appears to value integrity, he might have used the assignment as a demonstration of the very structural paradoxes that surround the idea of integrity. He effectively cheated in how he framed the task. Instead of simply inviting students to contest their grades, he could have reframed the exercise as a systemic experiment — akin to the double-bind and paradoxical communication studies pioneered by Gregory Bateson and the Palo Alto School — to reveal how predictable patterns of behavior emerge under contradictory rules.

If Gibson had chosen to transparently expose the process as an experiment, his students would have been in a position to judge and critically assess their own behavior in a specific context rather than simply being shamed. At the very least this would allow them to appreciate the fragility of depending on AI. At best, Gibson and his students would have raised their mutual level of consciousness not only about what AI can and can't do, but how our society has turned misuse into a behavioral norm.

By facing the challenge of AI with total transparency, the professor and the students would find themselves in a novel situation, as they collectively produce a new level of understanding. This would also imply that the psychological wall of authority that traditionally separates teachers from learners would become porous. Having lived through the experience and analyzed it collaboratively, they would thus have discovered

not only what it means to "gladly learn" but also "gladly teach" one another.

*[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 we consume deserves to be seen from an outsider's point of view. And who could be more outside official discourse than Old Nick himself?]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Peter is Fair Observer's chief strategy officer. He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on innovative learning technology. For more than 30 years, Peter has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, consulting and learning management. As a publisher, he has developed collaborative methods and revolutionary software tools based on non-linear logic for soft skills training. He has authored, produced and published numerous multimedia and e-learning products and partnered with major organizations such as the BBC, Heinemann and Macmillan. Peter has published books and articles in English and on intercultural management, language learning, technology and politics. Educated at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Oxford, Peter resides in France and shares US and French nationality. His Fair Observer column, The Daily Devil's Dictionary created in 2017, which now appears in a weekly format, provides ironic perspectives on the news, and has attracted fans across the world.

From X-Ray Specs to AI-Powered Glasses: The End of Privacy?

Ellis Cashmore
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The 1950s' X-Ray Specs didn't grant wearers xray vision, but Meta's AI-enhanced glasses offer a similar, greater power: the ability to photograph, record and obtain information on whoever the wearer sees. This convenience comes at the cost of our privacy. But in an age where Internet users post personal information for all to view, isn't our privacy already eroded?

In the 1950s, mail-order advertisements offered an extraordinary invention: X-Ray Specs. For only a dollar, customers could acquire “scientific optical principles” that appeared to allow them to see through flesh and clothing. The product ad typically sat next to ads for stink bombs and itching powder. This novelty product touted absurd claims, but a profoundly human fantasy backed the joke: the desire to see and, by implication, know what others could not.

Seven decades later, that fantasy has acquired a far more sophisticated technological form. Today's smart glasses promise not to reveal skeletons beneath clothing but something arguably more valuable: information. They extend human perception beyond the limits of ordinary eyesight by identifying objects, translating foreign languages in real time, answering spoken questions, recording photographs and video from the wearer's point of view and allowing users to search the Internet without reaching for a phone. The original X-Ray Specs never worked. Meta's reimagined versions actually do.

Earlier this year, Meta, the owner of Facebook and other online platforms, recruited influencer par excellence Kylie Jenner to help promote Meta Glasses marketed as the Starfire Kylie Edition, retailing for about \$500. These are very much not the reading glasses sold in packs of three at Walmart. Embedded in the frames are cameras, microphones, speakers and Meta's AI assistant. The wearer can photograph or film almost everything they see; livestream events from a first-person perspective; ask the glasses questions about nearby buildings, landmarks or products; receive spoken answers; translate conversations between languages; make phone calls; listen to music and, increasingly, rely on the glasses as a 24/7 digital companion. Meta's ambition is transparent: to shift artificial intelligence from something we consult on a screen to something we wear on our faces that makes us look cool in the process.

The AI eyewear has been available since 2023 and Meta already shares a market that's bound to become congested over the next year or so. Google, Apple and Alibaba, among others, are preparing to launch their own versions. But Meta has stolen a lead and, last year, sold seven million pairs. The acquisition of Jenner, who has over 380 million followers on Instagram (owned by — guess who — Meta) discloses methods in Meta owner Mark Zuckerberg's apparent madness: Jenner, whom Forbes named the youngest “self-made” billionaire in 2019, is arguably the most prodigious purveyor of fine goods in her family, probably edging out Kim in recent years. She pitches for, inter alia, adidas, Miu Miu and Jean Paul Gaultier.

She may yet turn Meta's glasses into the most coveted consumer gadget since Apple's iPhone X, whose launch in 2017 prompted overnight queues around the world despite its then humongous \$999 price tag.

Sharing as a marketing

But there is a snag: The glasses render the wearer capable of seeing more than others know they are involuntarily revealing. So, the technology brings an obvious potential for invading personal space. The instant the wearer puts on the glasses, they acquire the capacity to intrude into others' privacy without their knowledge. They can access all manner of data about the person or thing they're looking at. And their subject won't have a clue. Understandably, this piques many.

The New Zealand singer Lorde is one of them. She interrupted her performance at a recent concert in Madrid with an unexpected aside. "Increasingly, in our world, it gets harder and harder to know what is real," she told the crowd. "Can I just say, for the record, f*** the glasses! Don't get the glasses. Not sexy."

Lorde is unlikely to remain alone. Some public figures will almost certainly voice similar objections, though others — if recent history is any guide — have built fortunes by turning disclosure into a business model. The issue isn't that celebrities don't mind sharing; it's that many have made a good living by strategically baring themselves, or at least their souls.

Self-disclosure

In fact, anyone who cares to study cultural changes since the emergence of reality television, social media and the smartphone will know that privacy is not what it used to be. What we now call celebrity culture is predicated on the near disappearance of what once passed for privacy. Jenner herself personifies this: She is part of the Kardashians, on par with the Windsors in terms of global renown (and perhaps the Borgias, if we seek a historical perspective). The Kardashian-Jenner dynasty is unusual because its principal commodity is neither music, sport nor politics, but visibility itself. Sharing — not in the sense of generosity but of relentless self-disclosure —

became both the product and the marketing strategy of the family.

Anyone with aspirations in showbusiness, politics or any field of endeavor that requires public approval needs to accept that they'll have to surrender a large degree of their privacy. In that sense, Meta's glasses are entirely consistent with the cultural trajectory of the 21st century. They don't inaugurate the end of privacy so much as extend a process already well under way. Social media encouraged us to narrate our lives; smartphones encouraged us to record them; AI glasses promise to make recording continuous and almost effortless. Lorde's objection is less to one new gadget than to the entire direction of travel itself. Of course, privacy has not vanished. It has been renegotiated. Many readers will gladly post photos of themselves, family, pets and friends even in embarrassing situations on social media. They might also vent online — perhaps even abusively — expressing their opinions, revealing their values and opening up about their personal ambitions. But they probably wouldn't welcome a stranger wearing AI glasses capable of recording them, analyzing what they see and, before long, identifying who they are and retrieving publicly available information about them. The fear is less about today's technology than about tomorrow's.

Recording Ray-Bans

Many readers will already be wondering about the implications of the AI-driven eyewear for women. Upskirting (taking photos or videos under someone's clothing without their consent) has been illegal in the United Kingdom since 2019; in the United States, state-level legislation varies, but it is a criminal form of sexual harassment. AI eyewear is not designed to facilitate this type of voyeurism, but it creates the possibility of equally discomfiting kinds of intrusion. Meta's glasses contain an LED that illuminates when the wearer is recording, though this may not satisfy everyone

and, in any case, may not be noticeable in bright daylight. While millions have sold, how many people are aware of the potential of this piece of technology? Everyone knows about how today's smartphone can do much, much more than facilitate a conversation. Most people realize that their TV sets are like computers capable of picking up signals, lawfully and unlawfully, from anywhere in the world. But would they suspect the person they're talking to who happens to be wearing stylish Ray-Bans is recording them? And soon, not only recording them, but assembling copious information about them? Five years from now, when the technology has progressed, most people will have assimilated the concept that their already limited privacy has been denuded. But privacy is one thing; personal safety is another. Women will wonder if potential predators will find the eyewear a boon.

Do we have the right to privacy?

Yet concentrating solely on women's safety risks obscuring a larger question. AI eyewear does not simply introduce another opportunity for harassment; it forces us to reconsider what privacy means in an age when recording, searching and sharing have become ordinary social practices. The technology merely compresses into a pair of spectacles capabilities that already exist in smartphones. What changes is not the possibility of surveillance but its invisibility. We may soon reach the point where we no longer know whether the person looking at us is merely looking or simultaneously recording, identifying and retrieving information about us.

This suggests a deeper philosophical question. Do we still possess a meaningful right to privacy in a culture that increasingly rewards disclosure? Every day we volunteer fragments of ourselves: photographs, locations, purchases, opinions, friendships and routines. Social media encourages us to share; AI promises to organize and interpret

what has been shared. What a jarring contradiction! We demand privacy while participating enthusiastically in systems that erode it.

Perhaps this isn't the disappearance of privacy so much as another stage in its evolution. Every communications revolution, from photography and portable cameras to smartphones and social media, has forced societies to redraw the boundary between what's public and what's private. AI eyewear represents the next step in that historical process. We can't wish it away any more than we can wave a magic wand and make AI itself disappear. Like it or not, our expectations of others, our sense of self and our understanding of the anatomy of privacy will have to adapt.

[Ellis Cashmore is the author of *Celebrity Culture*.]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar 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?

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