

MARCH 10, 2025

# TIME

## WOMEN OF THE YEAR

NICOLE KIDMAN

PLUS 12 LEADERS  
BUILDING A MORE  
EQUAL FUTURE



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*Photograph by Adam Ferguson for TIME*

### WOMEN OF THE YEAR

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TIME's list of 13 women from around the world who are working to create a more equal future



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# Meeting the moment

WHEN WE SIT DOWN TO THINK ABOUT THE Women of the Year each winter, we ask ourselves the same question: What are the most significant issues facing women and girls around the world right now? Challenges are abundant, from gender-based violence and attacks on women's rights to the dangers of a volatile climate. But everywhere those threats can be found, so too can leaders pushing for change. The 13 women on this year's list are all, in their own way, working toward creating a better, more equitable world.

Two of the stories you'll find in this year's package are about ordinary women who, in the face of personal tragedy, took extraordinary actions. In the fall, Gisèle Pelicot, a 72-year-old grandmother in Provence, found herself at the center of a horrific rape trial, in which her husband was ultimately found guilty of drugging her and inviting more than 70 men to have sex with her without her knowledge. Pelicot's choice to waive her legal right to anonymity made her a hero to survivors across the world as she called for change in France and beyond. "I say it is not bravery," she told the court in October. "It is will and determination to change society."

Like Pelicot, Amanda Zurawski never imagined herself an activist. She was simply a woman excited to become a parent when, because of a complication with her pregnancy, she miscarried and required an abortion. Because of the near-total abortion ban in Texas at the time, a result of the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision, Zurawski was unable to receive treatment until she was in such medical distress that her reproductive organs were left permanently compromised. She sued the state in 2023, only for the Texas Supreme Court to uphold the ban last May. Now prominent in the movement to protect reproductive rights in the U.S., Zurawski remains determined: "It's not in my nature to give up."

This year, we honor women who have identified a problem and vowed to be part of the solution. When actor Olivia Munn was diagnosed with breast cancer, she shared her story

on social media, encouraging others to utilize the screening tool that led her to pursue further testing, despite having a clean mammogram. When Fatou Baldeh, a Gambian activist, learned that her government was threatening to undo protections against female genital mutilation, she doubled down on her fight to uphold them.

AND WHEN NICOLE KIDMAN, who appears on one of our covers, recognized the need for a shift in the balance of power in Hollywood in 2017, she vowed to work with at least one female director every 18 months. In the eight years since, she has produced or acted with 19 in film and TV. It helps that Kidman, who most recently starred in emerging filmmaker Halina Reijn's subversive *Babygirl*, feels a drive to stay busy. Because her participation can move a project to greenlight, she literally creates jobs. Hollywood's status quo can change, she says, "but it can only be changed by actually being in the films of women."

Representation matters, but so does investment. And there was no field that more notably celebrated the strengths and achievements of women in the past year than women's sports. Gymnast Jordan Chiles and WNBA star A'ja Wilson, who each appear on a cover, became fast friends when they met in the lead-up to the Paris Olympics. They reunited

for a conversation about the unprecedented audience engagement and surging financial support that women's sports received in 2024. "It opened up doors for all of us," Wilson says. "What makes it even better is that we win—and we look good while doing it."

Kidman, Wilson, Chiles, and more will join us later this month at our annual gala in Los Angeles, where genre-blending artist Laufey, also a Woman of the Year, will give a special performance. We're thrilled to convene such inspiring leaders, with support from our partners, including Rolex, at what is my favorite event of the year—and we can't wait to hear what they have to say.

Lucy Feldman  
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR



Kidman shot by Petra Collins in Nashville

**Representation matters, but so does investment**



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**TIME in Dubai**

On Feb. 10, at the Museum of the Future in Dubai, TIME hosted its fourth annual Impact Awards gala recognizing leaders in AI. Honorees included musician Grimes (left) and professor Anima Anandkumar (right). Above, guests interact with work by Turkish American artist Refik Anadol, who uses AI to create art. Full recap at [time.com/dubai-awards](https://time.com/dubai-awards)



**On the covers**



Photograph by Petra Collins for TIME



Photographs by Djeneba Aduayom for TIME



Photograph by Adam Ferguson for TIME

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**Honoring Closers**

On Feb. 13, TIME—with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation—hosted an evening of conversations in New York City to celebrate The Closers, a list of 25 Black leaders working to advance racial equity. At left, the Oscar-nominated actor Colman Domingo (*Sing Sing, Rustin*) strikes a pose on the red carpet. “We will all win when we look at our fellows and see them thriving,” he told the audience. See the full list at [time.com/closers](https://time.com/closers)



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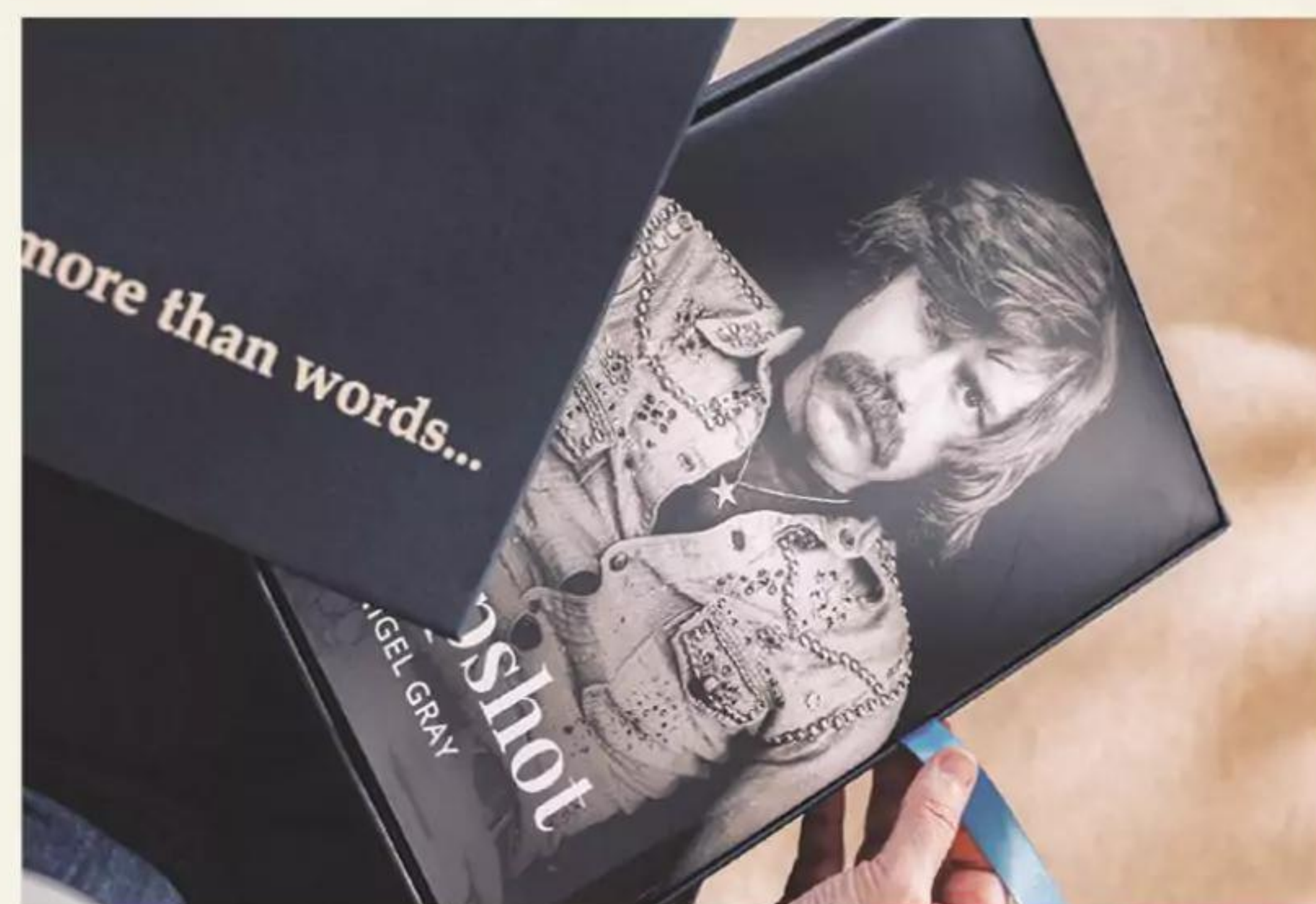
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# The Brief



## THE RISE OF GERMANY'S FAR RIGHT

BY SIMON SHUSTER/BERLIN

Alice Weidel's AfD party is making gains— with a boost from the Trump Administration

INSIDE

WHAT THE FAA LAYOFFS  
MEAN FOR AIR SAFETY

THE 'APOCALYPSE OF  
AMERICAN SCIENCE'

HOW TO GET A MEDICAL  
APPOINTMENT FASTER

## THE BRIEF OPENER

**T**HE TWEET FROM ELON MUSK ARRIVED A FEW days before Christmas, and it felt like a gift from heaven to Germany's far-right political party, Alternative for Germany (AfD). It consisted of six words: "Only the AfD can save Germany." The party's leader, Alice Weidel, assumed it must be a hoax. Refreshing her feed, she stared at the message and checked its source: @elonmusk. Then she called an aide to make sure he could see it too. After that, Weidel recalls, "I actually almost fell from my chair."

The AfD, founded in 2013 on a promise to slash spending, close Germany's borders, and forsake the European Union, had never earned such a powerful endorsement. It had always been on the fringe, with about a tenth of the seats in Parliament and no role in the federal government. Ahead of elections on Feb. 23, polls show it has the support of about a fifth of voters. The rest would sooner expect the AfD to embarrass Germany than to save it.

The country's main intelligence service has labelled some branches of the AfD as extremist groups and placed several of its leaders under surveillance. In the European Parliament, an alliance of right-wing groups expelled the party last spring for being too radical. One AfD official had suggested the Nazi SS were "not all criminals." Another has called the Holocaust a mere speck of "bird sh-t" on the glorious sweep of German history.

None of this has stopped the Trump Administration from embracing the AfD. In mid-February, Vice President J.D. Vance met with Weidel during his first official tour of Europe. The cornerstone of his trip was an appearance at the Munich Security Conference, an annual gathering of leaders from around the world. As an establishment outcast, the AfD was not invited, and Weidel was not allowed in the venue. So her meeting with Vance took place in the basement of the Westin Grand, where he spent the night.

Vance's message, Weidel says, amounted to a "wake-up call" for the German establishment: the U.S. would no longer allow Europe to keep the far right out of its politics. Vance delivered that message to the diplomats gathered in Munich the same day. "Shutting people out of the political process protects nothing," he said from the stage. "In fact, it is the most surefire way to destroy democracy."

For Europe's leading political parties, the speech was startling. Some called it a blatant act of interference in the German elections, which were then about a week away. The AfD was projected to take second place, its best result ever, and this time it would enter Parliament with a clear nod of support from the Trump Administration.

Weidel still finds it hard to fathom, let alone explain. "It's unbelievable," she says a few days after the Vance meeting, sitting in her narrow, book-strewn office with its bank of windows overlooking the Reichstag. "One of the greatest moments for us." When asked about the reasons for the Administration's support, she lowers her voice as though preparing to offer a psychic reading. For Trump, she says, "there might be something personal behind it." His grandfather, Frederick Trump, immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1800s from Germany. Those blood ties, Weidel says, may



*Weidel speaks at an AfD meeting after being picked Jan. 11 to lead the party in elections*

have prompted the U.S. President to look across the ocean and wonder, "What's going on with the continent of our grandparents?"

An easier way to explain the Administration's fondness for the German far right would be the vein of resentment they both tap. Much like Trump and many of his global imitators, the AfD promises a return to national greatness with no guilt and no apologies. It laughs at the wagging fingers of liberal elites and seeks to strip them of power, much as the MAGA movement has in the U.S.

Trump has other reasons for undermining the German establishment, which he scorns for decades of low military spending within NATO and high levels of immigration from the Muslim world. Musk harps on a different complaint with Germany's leaders—their alienation of the AfD. In a striking feat of doublespeak, he frames the issue in the language of freedom and democracy, as though the nation that perpetrated the Holocaust



violated its own values by building what Germans call a political “firewall” around the far right.

Weidel says she heard the same message from Vance in the basement of the Westin: “We need to break down the firewall,” she says. “Open up the corridor for freedom of speech!”

**A FEW DAYS** after their meeting in Munich, this corridor indeed began to open up for Weidel. She became the first AfD candidate for Chancellor ever invited to a TV debate on Germany’s public broadcaster. On stage with her three male rivals, she looked defensive and aggrieved, seething when they tried to gang up on her.

The leading candidate, Friedrich Merz, a conservative who has adopted many of the AfD’s hard-line positions

on immigration, used his closing statement of the debate to promise his voters that he would never allow the AfD into his government. Under him, he said, the firewall would hold.

Weidel was indignant. “He just copies our program,” she says two days later in her office. “But he can’t implement it, because he needs to govern in coalition with leftist parties . . . And they do not let him do anything.” On such topics, her tone carries a kind of righteous mockery, at once light and condescending, as though she is tossing out snark at the haters on social media. But other subjects, especially those related to German history or her party’s ties to the radical right, reveal a tense and guarded quality in Weidel. She often reverts to a repertoire of practiced lines to defuse or preempt any suggestion of bigotry in the AfD.

This has long been her role within the party, and it helps explain her rise. Worldly and style-conscious, with a doctorate in economics and a résumé that includes a stint at Goldman Sachs, Weidel, 45, looks nothing like the gruff, tattooed stereotype of the right-wing goon. Thanks partly to her polished image, the AfD has been able to claim a veneer of modernity despite its retrograde stances on gender, immigration, national identity, and just about everything else. The official platform of the AfD defines a family as a “father, mother and children.” Weidel’s does not fit that mold. Her partner is a woman, the Sri Lankan-born filmmaker Sarah Bossard, with whom she has two sons, both of whom go to school in Switzerland, where the family has a home.

Weidel does not like to talk about that. She prefers to reminisce about her childhood in the small town of Harsewinkel, in western Germany, where many of her core beliefs were forged. As a teenager, Weidel recalls, she was afraid to go to the public swimming pool, because groups of immigrant boys would harass blond

German girls like her. “Even in my little village, we had a problem already with Muslim migration, and it was quite painful for us,” Weidel says, asking *TIME* not to print the insults she says were hurled at her. “I came to the conclusion that a proper, peaceful life with a high proportion of Muslims is not working out.”

That conclusion underpins her party’s platform. On immigration, AfD calls for closing Germany’s borders to asylum seekers and for the mass expulsion of immigrants, especially those from the Muslim world. Describing its plan for a “comprehensive repatriation offensive,” the platform avoids using the German word *Deportation*, which is uncomfortably resonant of the transfer of Jews to Nazi death camps during World War II.

In the language and culture of Germany, such mementos of the Holocaust have created awkward stumbling blocks along the AfD’s path to power. Like millions of Germans, Weidel feels the moral weight of what her relatives did during the war. Her family’s links to the Nazis are closer than most. Her paternal grandfather, Hans Weidel, was a member of the SS and served as a military judge in German-occupied Poland, an appointment granted by order of Adolf Hitler himself. The job required him to send enemies of the Nazi regime to concentration camps, where millions of people—most of them Jews, but also communists and other political prisoners—were murdered during the Holocaust.

Near the end of the war, as the Allies pushed the Nazis back toward Berlin, Weidel’s father, then around 6, had to flee his home region of Upper Silesia with his mother and siblings. Most of that region became a part of Poland after the war, and Gerhard Weidel, now 86, never went back to his childhood home. But the experience of losing it haunted him throughout life.

“He was completely traumatized,” his daughter says. After the family escaped Upper Silesia, she says they got stuck in the town of Kassel during an Allied bombing raid, and they took shelter in a bunker. When they emerged, the entire city was burning,

**‘We need to break down the firewall . . . for freedom of speech!’**

—ALICE WEIDEL, SPEAKING TO *TIME* ON FEB. 18

an image that followed Weidel's father into adulthood. "He would sometimes have these nightmares," she recalls. "I had to wake him up, because he was screaming."

The family rarely discussed these events. "It was something he wanted to exclude emotionally," Weidel says. But around Christmastime, after a couple of beers, her father would sometimes recall the awful months of hunger during the winter of 1948, and the waterlogged basement room where he and his family lived as refugees.

Weidel's elder son Paul, who is 12, recently began to ask about the war, and his mother has trouble finding the right ways to tell him about it. "We go back to history," she says. "But I start very early in German history," reaching far beyond the wartime years to make sure her son realizes how much more there is to his country's past.

Melanie Amann, a German journalist who wrote a seminal book about the AfD, says a surprising number of the party's leaders share the experience of wartime dispossession. They are known in German as *Vertriebene* (the displaced) and some of them have long complained that their suffering is treated as a forbidden subject, along with most appeals to German victimhood during the war. "They live with this intergenerational trauma," says Amann. "And for a long time they were not supposed to talk about it." But in the politics of the AfD, Amann sees an underlying sense of grievance over the way Germans were treated after losing World War II. "It's a kind of revenge," Amann says. "They want to break free of all these taboos they see around them."

**MANY OF THOSE TABOOS** have been written into German law, which criminalizes the use of Nazi slogans and symbols. The publication of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is banned, as are various forms of hate speech, which the German authorities tend to police with greater vigilance than their European peers—and certainly their American ones. The desire to suppress any resurgence of the far right gave rise to the *Brandmauer*, or firewall, that excludes the extremist fringe from Germany's governing coalitions.

The biggest target of this ostracism has been the AfD. Even as its public support has grown over the past decade from less than 5% to around 20% in the polls, the party has remained a pariah in Parliament. When Weidel first took a seat in that chamber in 2017, she says her fellow lawmakers refused to ride in an elevator with her, let alone sit down to talk about legislation. "That's what the firewall means," she says while walking through the halls of Parliament on a recent afternoon, passing stone-faced guards and politicians in the corridors. At first it upset her. "They would not even say hello to me." But then she remembers finding a response: "Look," she would say, "You can insult me. You can throw all the bad things at my head. But it doesn't hurt me. It hurts my voters."

Last spring, she got a chance to complain about this to Musk. Left-wing activists rallied to protest the expansion of Musk's automotive plant in the suburbs of Berlin, setting fire to an electricity cable and disrupting the power supply to the Tesla Gigafactory. Weidel reached out to Musk's team and offered her support. He did not respond



▲  
Neo-Nazis march against the police in Dortmund, Germany, on Dec. 14

➤  
A tattoo artist covers up a client's neo-Nazi ink

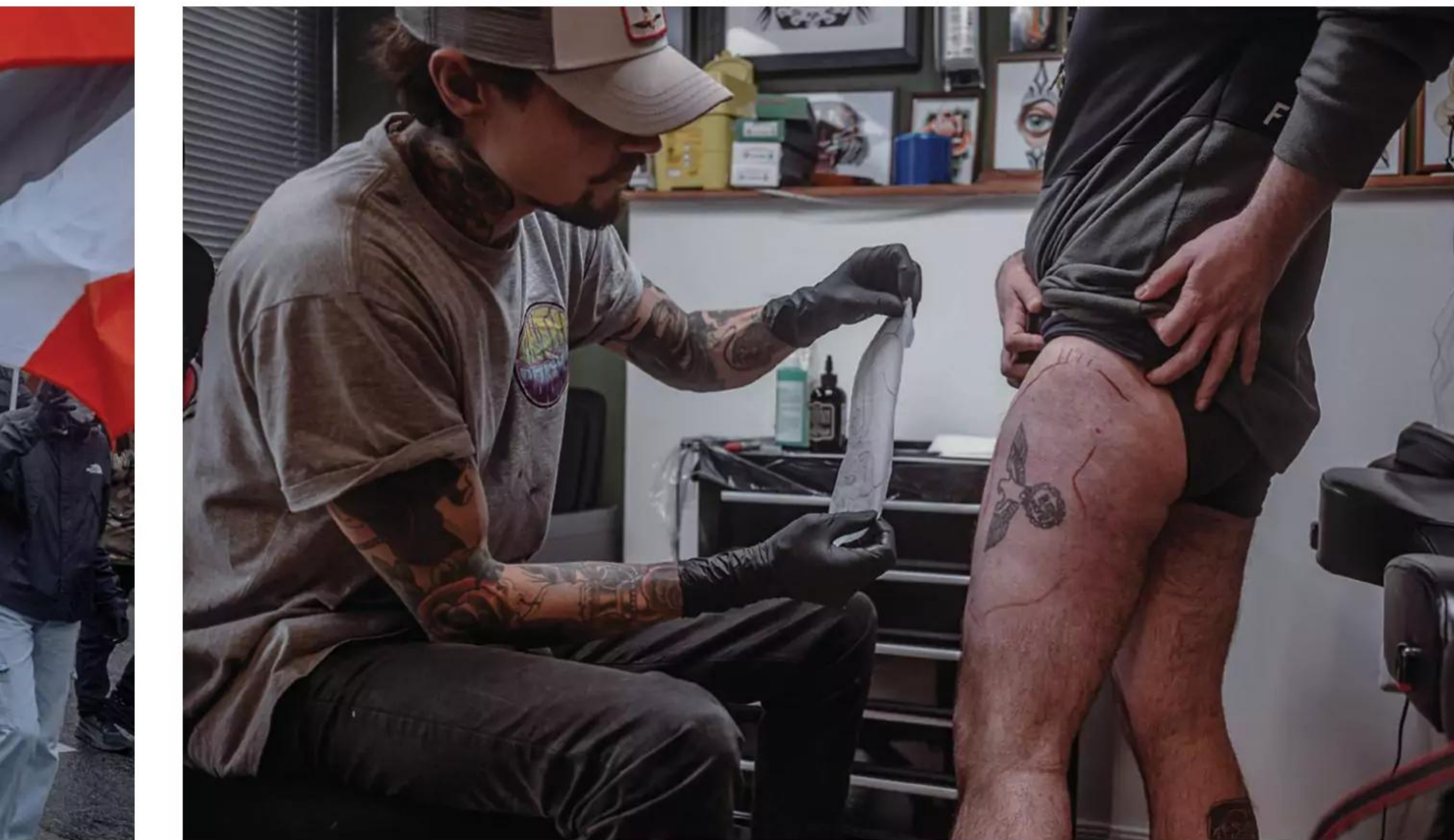
to her directly, she says. But by the end of the year, the firewall in German politics had become one of Musk's obsessions.

His support for the AfD has since mirrored the tactics Musk used to help Trump get re-elected. German law prohibits foreign campaign contributions, and Weidel says Musk has never given any money to the AfD. But the endorsement he posted on X, his social media platform, was only the start of his influence campaign. A few days later, he published a full-throated defense of the AfD in a German newspaper, calling the party the "last spark of hope" for the country's future. In early January, Musk conducted a lengthy interview with Weidel on X. "If you are unhappy with the situation, you must vote for change," Musk said, "and that is why I'm really strongly recommending that people vote for AfD."

Two weeks later, Musk appeared via video link at the AfD party convention. The focus of his speech was historical memory and the taboos that it created after WW II. "It's good to be proud of German culture and German values, and not to lose that in some sort of multiculturalism that dilutes

**'The bigger they get, the harder it is to block them.'**

—SERGEY LAGODINSKY, GERMAN MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT



everything,” Musk told the party faithful, adding that there had been “too much of a focus on past guilt.”

Projected on a giant screen at the rally, Musk’s face showed genuine sympathy, even kinship, with the weight of inherited guilt that many Germans feel. He was born and grew up in apartheid South Africa, whose racist policies found support among Musk’s family. His maternal grandfather, Joshua Haldeman, expressed sympathy for Hitler and fiercely defended the apartheid regime, which he saw as the vanguard of white Christian civilization.

“We need to move beyond that,” Musk said to cheers from the crowd at the AfD rally. “Children should not be guilty of the sins of their parents, let alone their grandparents, their great-grandparents.”

**THE RESPONSE** to Musk’s speech was muted in Germany. Some politicians called it election interference. Yet Musk was entitled to his opinions as a private citizen. Trump had not yet given him a formal role in the White House, and many in Berlin hoped the speech would not reflect the official position of the incoming Administration. That hope died when Vance appeared in Munich and pushed Musk’s criticism a few steps further.

What most alarmed the Europeans was the link Vance made between “free speech” in Europe and the American

commitment to Europe’s defense.

“If you are running in fear of your own voters,” he said, “There is nothing America can do for you.” The message seemed clear to the German politicians in the audience. As one of them put it: “We won’t defend you unless you accept fascists in your coalition.”

Kaja Kallas, the E.U.’s top diplomat, called an emergency meeting of foreign ministers in response. “It’s somewhat confusing,” she tells TIME of Vance’s speech. To Kallas, it resembled the election meddling that Russia has deployed across Europe, funneling support to fringe parties, including the AfD, that align with Moscow’s interests. “At least the Americans are very public about this,” Kallas says. “The Russians say, Well, it wasn’t us.”

Vance’s speech spurred the Europeans to unite in their indignation. “They really found the pressure point,” says Benedikt Franke, the CEO of the Munich Security Conference. “It freaks us out and makes us act.” The maneuver might have seemed clever, Franke added, “even Machiavellian,” were it not for the strangeness of choosing the AfD as the preferred American partner. The AfD calls for Germany to resume its reliance on Russian oil and gas, which Trump has long opposed. “This party is not aligned with American interests,” Franke says. “If they actually read the AfD platform, they would

see that it’s all, like, ‘Go, China, go!’”

Weidel, who studied Chinese, held regular meetings with the former Chinese ambassador to Berlin. Early in her career, she lived in Beijing and worked for the state-owned Bank of China. Around then, in the early 2010s, Weidel says, she had her political awakening in response to the actions of Angela Merkel, who was then the German Chancellor. A staunch defender of NATO and the E.U., Merkel said in 2009 that there is “no reasonable alternative” to Germany’s support for the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Merkel used similar language—“no alternative”—to defend other bedrock principles, including the decision to welcome war refugees from Afghanistan and Syria.

The Alternative for Germany formed in 2013 as a rebuke to such policies, and Weidel joined that year. She clashed with the party’s extremists as she sought to broaden its appeal. Perhaps the most notorious AfD leader, Björn Höcke, has been repeatedly charged with violating German hate-speech laws. Weidel led an effort in 2017 to have him expelled from the party. But they have since made amends, appearing at rallies this year and embracing on stage.

In these elections, the AfD looks set to double the number of seats it holds in Parliament. It has little chance of joining a coalition government, says Sergey Lagodinsky, a German Member of the European Parliament. “But the bigger they get, the harder it is to block them,” he says. “At some point it does become a question of democracy.”

For Weidel, the collapse of the fire-wall feels like a matter of time. She has already made the debate stage and won the support of millions of voters. Now the White House appears to be on her side. As a symbol of her gratitude, she keeps a red baseball cap displayed in her office, inscribed with the words MAKE GERMANY GREAT AGAIN. She tried it on with a smile during our interview. The Trump Administration, she says, “feel that something is severely going wrong in Germany.” With their help, Weidel intends to set it right. □

WORLD

# How we talk about the Holocaust now

BY MASSIMO CALABRESI/DACHAU

VICE PRESIDENT J.D. VANCE ARRIVED AT THE DACHAU concentration camp under low, gray clouds. He climbed out of his armored Suburban SUV and approached the stucco and cement gatehouse, gravel crunching underfoot. Waiting for Vance beneath a low arch, in front of a gate that had the words ARBEIT MACHT FREI set into its ironwork, was Abba Naor, a survivor of the camp.

Over the course of the next 80 minutes, Vance, 40, toured the site with Naor, 97, at his side. In the first room of the memorial's main exhibition building, a large map displayed the network of Nazi concentration camps that existed at the height of World War II. Gesturing to the map, Naor showed Vance his hometown of Kaunas, Lithuania, and described the route by which he arrived at Dachau in 1944, via the Stutthof concentration camp. On the way, he was separated from his mother and younger brother, who were sent to Auschwitz. "The moment I saw my mother and brother heading toward the train, I realized that was it," Naor told Yad Vashem, Israel's official Holocaust memorial. "I could say 'goodbye' forever." At Auschwitz, and at other death camps like Sobibor, Treblinka, and Belzec, 6 million Jews—2 of every 3 in Europe—were killed.

In the next room, where arriving prisoners were processed, Naor showed Vance the identity card he had been given when he came to Dachau. Naor was dispatched to perform slave labor in the network of Dachau's 140 sub-camps. Dachau wasn't created to exterminate Jews: the Nazis opened it in 1933, soon after Hitler took power, and among the first held there were Communists, Social Democrats, and other political opponents. Of the more than 200,000 people who passed through Dachau, more than 40,000 died. "The subcamps, this was our problem," Naor tells TIME the day after his visit with Vance. "The people couldn't stay long alive." But Naor did, surviving a death march until he was finally liberated by American troops after his captors fled. "This is something you never forget," Naor says. "I told [Vance] it was Japanese Americans who liberated us. He was happy to hear this."

Vance emerged from the camp's museum with his wife Usha and made his way toward a memorial. A wreath of evergreen branches, accented with white roses, lay propped nearby, with a red, white, and blue ribbon reading WE REMEMBER on one end and UNITED STATES OF AMERICA on the other. Vance and his wife picked up the wreath and placed it in front of the memorial. Vance prayed briefly and crossed himself. He adjusted the end of the wreath reading WE REMEMBER so that it was visible.

Then he walked to a large wall nearby, which bore the words NEVER AGAIN in several languages. Vance thanked Naor for sharing his story. "I really am really moved by this



During a visit to the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site in Germany on Feb. 13, Usha and J.D. Vance meet Abba Naor, a camp survivor

site," Vance said to the assembled media and officials of the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site. "While it is, of course, a place of unspeakable atrocity and terror and evil, it's very important that it's here, and it's very important that those of us who are lucky enough to be alive can walk around, can know what happened here, and commit ourselves to prevent it from happening again."

**VANCE'S VISIT TO DACHAU** on Feb. 13 came at a fraught moment for the U.S., for Europe, and for the effort to sustain awareness of the Nazi genocide. As the last survivors die and power passes to leaders who were born decades after the German attempt to annihilate the Jews of Europe, the way we talk about the Holocaust is changing.

Until recently, there was near consensus that the systematic extermination of 6 million lives was above politics. Now, leaders on the right argue that nationalist parties with neo-Nazi ties are being unfairly excluded from the democratic process. Pro-Palestinian activists have adopted "Never again" as part of their campaign to hold Israel responsible for alleged war crimes in Gaza. Left and



**‘Dachau is the truth.’**

—ABBA NAOR, 97

right accuse one another of fueling a rise in antisemitism, incidents of which have doubled in the past year, according to recent studies.

Vance’s visit to Germany on the eve of that country’s Feb. 23 elections spotlighted the politicization. The day after he met Abba Naor at Dachau, the Vice President spoke at the Munich Security Conference, delivering an attack on Europe’s postwar approach to fighting a return of Nazism, including limits on free speech and the exclusion of far-right parties from power in a tacit agreement between mainstream parties called the “firewall.”

“Democracy rests on the sacred principle that the voice of the people matters,” Vance told the heads of state, foreign ministers, and intelligence chiefs packed into an ornate hall at the Bayerische Hof hotel. “There is no room for firewalls. You either uphold the principle or you don’t.” Later, the Vice President met with Alice Weidel, the leader of Germany’s nationalist AfD party, some of whose officials have downplayed the Holocaust and embraced Nazi rhetoric, and which has run second in pre-election polling.

The U.S. has refrained from attacking the German approach, and the speech shocked European leaders.

The next day, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz began his speech to the conference with a retort to Vance. “A mere 20 km separates this conference venue from the National Socialist concentration camp in Dachau,” Scholz said, “where the most unimaginable crimes against humanity were perpetrated by Germans and in Germany’s name.” Preventing it from happening again, as Vance pledged to do at Dachau, Scholz said, cannot be reconciled with support for the AfD.

More is at stake than German politics. For 80 years, the democracies that lived through the war shared a commitment to ostracizing extremists. That consensus has been beneficial on both sides of the Atlantic. Economic and political interests are fickle, but shared values like democracy and humanism endure, and they have provided decades of prosperity and peace. “Like the fish swimming in the water, we may no longer be really aware of how important that environment is for us,” says Democratic Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, who co-led with Republican Senator Lindsey Graham a delegation of American lawmakers to the conference. “But any efforts by the U.S. to degrade that comes with real national-security peril.”

While some European diplomats in Munich feared a rising international alliance of far-right parties led by Trump, others say that behind the scenes they received reassurances of continuing American commitment to shared values from Vance. “Every Administration brings new things to the table,” says Kaja Kallas, the E.U.’s top diplomat. “You’re not seeing a fundamental shift in the way America sees its vision for Europe or its relationship with Europe.”

Yet Vance is at the vanguard of a movement that views itself as turning the page on the establishment consensus on everything from the U.S. Constitution to international trade to foreign policy. That includes the postwar alliance forged in the fight against Nazism. “The foreign policy establishment is obsessed with World War II historical analogies,” Vance told TIME last spring. “Everything is some fairy tale they tell themselves from the 1930s and 1940s.”

**THE DIPLOMATS LEFT MUNICH.** Vance flew back to Washington, where his political ally Elon Musk, an AfD supporter who recently made a gesture during a speech that looked a lot like a Nazi salute, was at work dismantling U.S. aid programs around the world. Naor returned to Dachau. In a room just off the main exhibition space where he and Vance had been four days earlier, he spoke to some 80 students, a laptop open in front of him on a desk. The camp receives around 40 groups a day, and close to 1 million visitors a year. Naor wants to ensure they learn the truth about the Holocaust. “I come almost every day, meet children, and they listen to my story,” he says.

Naor is not particularly emotional about the inevitable passing of the generation of survivors. The Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site itself will endure, he says: “They will have a place in Dachau where everyone will be able to find my story.” As for the meaning of that story for a new generation of leaders, he says, the Holocaust transcends politics. Says Naor: “Dachau is the truth.”  
—With reporting by MELISSA AUGUST/WASHINGTON □



## Canine competition

Bedlington terriers gather at the 149th annual Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show at Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York City on Feb. 11. Known by some as the Super Bowl of dog shows, Westminster is America's most prestigious dog competition. This year, Monty the giant schnauzer became the first of his breed to win the event's top award.

### THE BULLETIN

## Federal Aviation Administration layoffs spark air-safety concerns

THE NATION'S TOP AVIATION REGULATOR was thrust back into the spotlight in February as the Trump Administration fired hundreds of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) employees, just weeks after the midair collision over Washington, D.C., that killed 67 people. The firings, which primarily targeted probationary employees, are part of a broader push spearheaded by the new Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), an initiative associated with billionaire Elon Musk, established to streamline government operations. While no air traffic controllers were let go, the firings have raised concerns about the agency's ability to maintain essential functions at a time when it's already facing staffing shortages and increasing pressure from a recent string of accidents.

**SAFETY CONCERNS** Aviation-safety experts are warning that the cuts could further strain the agency. One FAA safety specialist who was let go and who spoke with TIME on the condition of anonymity says she was part of a team that built and maintained aeronautical maps that aid pilots and air traffic controllers with navigation. She says she and two others—a quarter of the whole team—were laid off, compromising the quality of work that's vital for air safety. "When you over-stress understaffed critical support roles for the public safety, there will be consequences," she warns.

**PROBATIONARY WORKERS** Department of Transportation officials were quick to downplay the significance of the latest cuts, saying they primarily

affected workers with less than one year of service, and did not include air traffic controllers. Yet they come as the agency has faced criticism from President Donald Trump and others about its ability to function effectively.

**WORKFORCE SHORTAGE** According to a report last year from the Government Accountability Office, a congressional watchdog, the FAA has struggled with workforce shortages and outdated technology for years. The report found that more than a third of the FAA's systems were "unsustainable," either because of being outdated or a shortage of spare parts. The GAO noted that the agency has been slow to modernize and, in some cases, lacked clear plans to address certain critical systems. —NIK POPLI



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Kennedy is sworn in as Health and Human Services Secretary in the Oval Office on Feb. 13

CONFIRMED

## Robert F. Kennedy Jr. As the U.S. Health Secretary

THE SENATE CONFIRMED ROBERT F. Kennedy Jr., one of country's most notorious vaccine skeptics, to run the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on Feb. 13, sparking outrage among public-health experts who worry that Kennedy will harm public health and further erode trust in science and medicine.

"I think it's a sad day for public health when someone who is a science denialist, conspiracy theorist, and virulent anti-vaccine activist is [leading] the biggest public-health agency in the United States," says Dr. Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "I think every Senator who voted for his confirmation should be ashamed of themselves for their unwillingness to stand up for the health of the American public."

For years, Kennedy, 71, has spread medical disinformation, including the debunked claim that vaccines cause autism, despite overwhelming research proving that vaccines are both safe and effective. During his confirmation hearings, Senators grilled Kennedy over his antivaccine views, flip-flopping stance on abortion, and previous support for some conspiracy theories, such as his assertions that Lyme disease and COVID-19 were engineered bioweapons. He appeared unfamiliar with certain issues he would oversee as the head of HHS. All the same, Kennedy was confirmed by a vote of 52 to 48, with Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky—a polio survivor—the only Republican who voted against his confirmation.

Health experts fear the influence Kennedy will have over health policies, including vaccines, and how he will respond to emerging diseases. "I think a lot of lives are at risk potentially because of this person running this agency," says Dr. Rob Davidson, executive director of the Committee to Protect Health Care. —CHANTELLE LEE

ORDERED

## The end of the penny Deemed "wasteful"

"For far too long the United States has minted pennies which literally cost us more than 2 cents. This is so wasteful!" President Donald Trump posted on his Truth Social platform on Feb. 9. "I have instructed my Secretary of the US Treasury to stop producing new pennies."

It's unclear what the next steps will be after Trump's social media diktat, but he's not the first to propose ditching the 1¢ coin. Other countries around the world have already done so amid concerns about the rising cost of production as well as lack of everyday utility. But not everyone is on board. Some economists worry that the poor would be hit hardest by a "rounding tax" on cash transactions. Other penny supporters point out that more nickels would need to be produced, and they cost over 13¢ each to make.

—Chad de Guzman



DIED

► South Korean actor **Kim Sae-ron**, at 24. Kim, who was found dead in her home on Feb. 16, struggled to land roles after a 2022 drunk-driving incident. Police said Kim died by suicide.



RELEASED

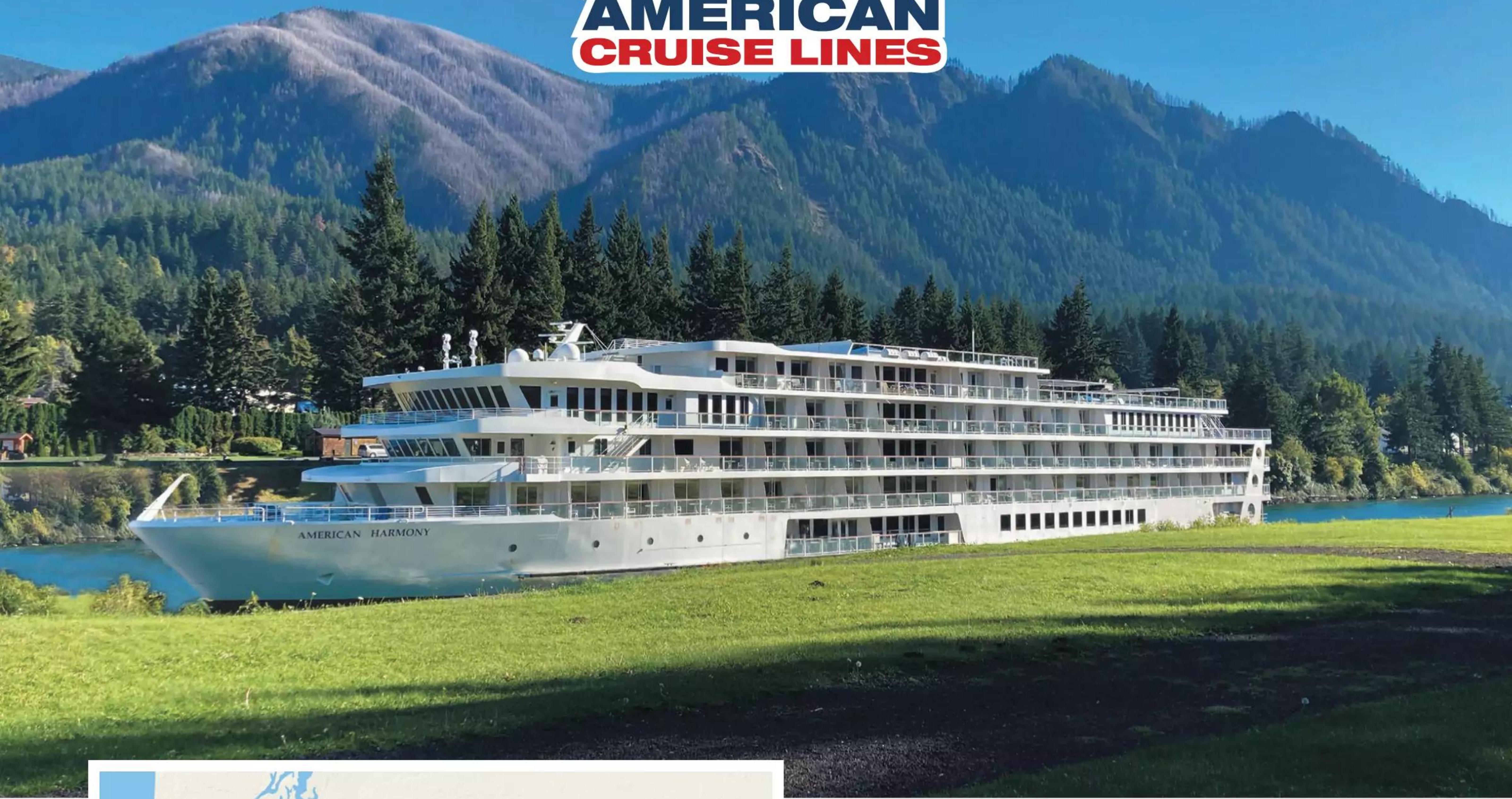
Native American activist **Leonard Peltier**, from prison, on Feb. 18 after nearly 50 years. Former President Joe Biden commuted Peltier's sentence connected to the killings of two FBI agents.

RAIDED

The famous Palestinian-owned **Educational Bookshop**, in East Jerusalem, by Israeli police on Feb. 9. While the store remained open, the raid has sparked concerns over censorship.

ANNOUNCED

The retirement of **Senator Mitch McConnell** next year, in a speech Feb. 20, his 83rd birthday. McConnell has had a 40-year career in Congress and was the longest-serving Senate leader in history.



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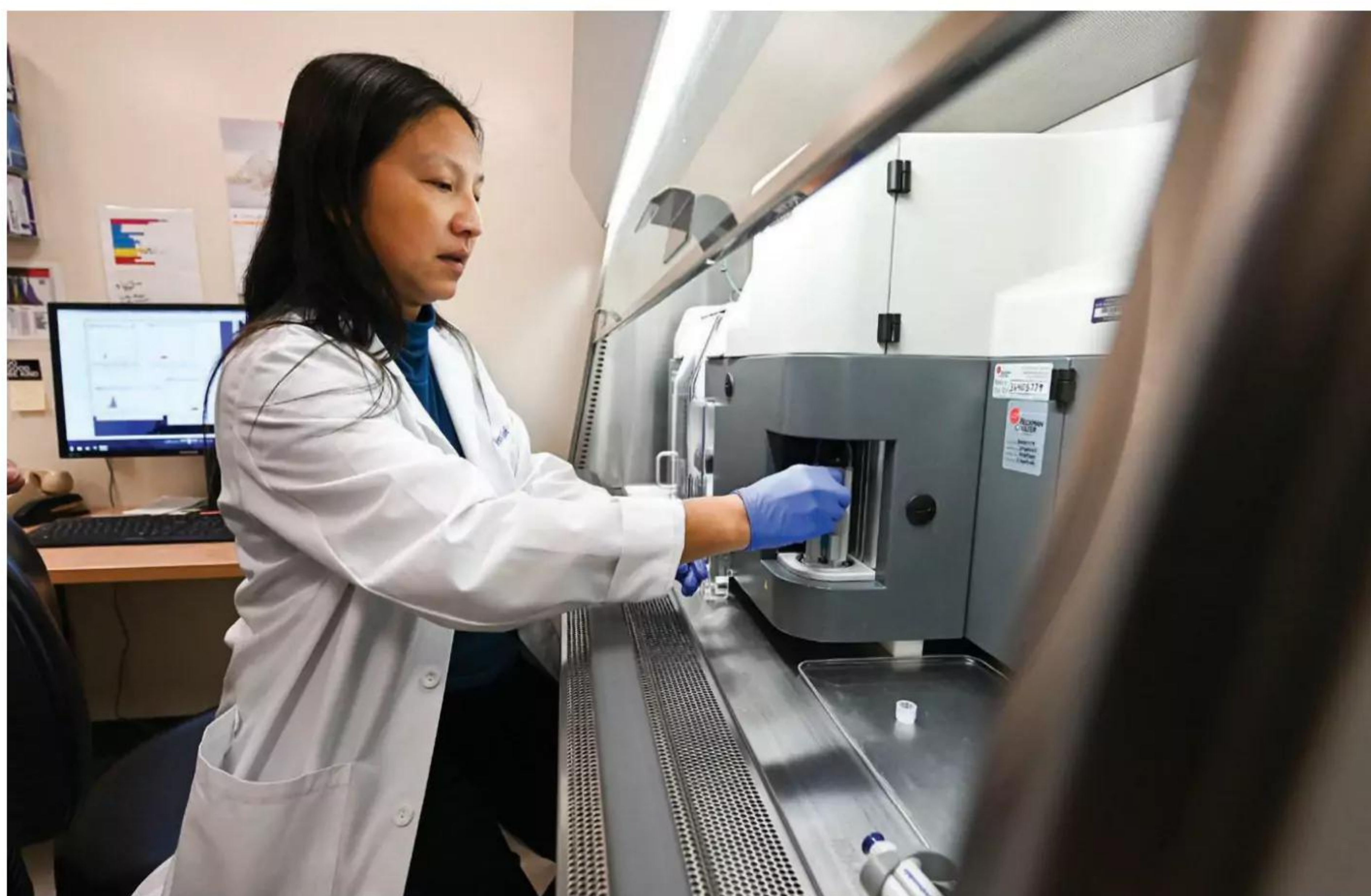
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HEALTH

## NIH budget cuts are causing chaos

BY ALICE PARK

THE U.S. NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH (NIH) IS THE largest funder of biomedical research in the world, and its grants create the foundation of basic science knowledge on which major health advances are built. On Feb. 14, as part of the Trump Administration's cost-cutting measures, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which oversees the NIH, said it was terminating nearly all of the 5,200 probationary employees at HHS. The news came after another drastic change that the NIH announced on Feb. 7: to cut overhead costs in the funding it provides to research grants.

"We were all just dumbstruck," says Dr. Richard Haganir, professor and chairman of the department of neuroscience at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, who relies on NIH grants for his research into therapies for autism and intellectual disabilities. "I'm calling it the apocalypse of American science. This will basically change science as we know it in the U.S."

"We're going to see health research kneecapped," says Dr. Otis Brawley, professor of oncology and epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and the Bloomberg School of Public Health. Brawley has overseen grants at the National Cancer Institute (which is part of the NIH) as well as received them for his cancer research.

The funding cut took effect on Feb. 9 and targets "indirect costs," which cover facilities and administrative expenses.

In an immediate response, 22 states sued the NIH and the HHS, calling the action "unlawful" and saying it would "devastate critical public health research at universities and research institutions in the United States." A federal judge in Boston also issued a nationwide temporary restraining order preventing the NIH from immediately cutting billions in the grants it issues to scientists and their institutions.

NIH awards around \$30 billion to \$35 billion in grants

each year to a wide range of disease-related research projects. According to the agency, about \$9 billion of its annual research-grant budget goes toward indirect costs, which are charged by academic institutions receiving the grants. These costs are negotiated with the NIH and vary among institutions, accounting for fees for heat, air-conditioning, and electricity inside research facilities, as well as administrative costs required to conduct the research. They also cover the maintenance and staffing of critical scientific equipment and resources such as animal facilities, DNA sequencing, and imaging. Once a rate agreement is reached, it applies to all federal grants from NIH to that institution.

Indirect costs can range from about 30% to 70% of a research grant, and are paid in addition to the grant.

NIH will now cap those costs at 15%. The agency did not immediately respond to a request about what prompted the change. But on Feb. 7, Elon Musk—tasked by the Trump Administration to address efficiency in government spending—called out on X, which he owns, the high percentage of indirect costs that the NIH had been supporting.

So far, it's unclear how institutions will make up the difference. While university endowments are a possibility, they aren't a consistent or practical source of funding for overhead costs, since many specify narrow purposes or projects for which the funds can legally be used, which don't include costs such as research expenses.

"Nobody else can really afford to pay for it," says Brawley. "What's worked nicely over the last 50 to 60 years is that the NIH does a lot of basic science research, asking questions that people can't make money from. And the corporations,

**'I'm calling it the apocalypse of American science.'**

—DR. RICHARD HUGANIR, JOHNS HOPKINS

including biotech, can swoop in, and take that basic science information and do engineering and turn it into things you can sell and treat diseases with.”

The immediate effect of the reduction in indirect costs, if they are instituted, could drastically shrink how much of that basic research happens. “The bottom line is that we are going to have a lot less resources, which obviously means we are going to have to lay people off, and research will be slowed down,” says Haganir.

Brawley is also concerned about the ability of young scientists to pursue innovative research. “Nobody wins the Nobel Prize for what they did when they were 50,” he says.

He also notes that while a lot of attention has been focused on large academic universities with big endowments and deeper financial resources, the policy will likely have an even stronger impact on smaller community hospitals that supply many of the patients who participate in clinical trials. “People who are getting treated in clinical trials now for cancer will find many of those trials will close down,” he says.

Then there is the effect that curbing research today will have on the pipeline of new treatments for diseases like cancer. “I anticipate that the number of drugs approved is going to go down dramatically in the next five to 10 years,” says Brawley.

With the temporary restraining order, NIH grantees have some time to come up with a plan for how they will try to maintain the pace of scientific research with much less NIH support. “Perhaps we need to reimagine or re-envision our entire system for how we fund science and how people make money off of science,” says Brawley. “But the way to do that is not to threaten on [a] Friday night to cut everybody’s indirect [costs] down to 15%.”

Ultimately, scientists say, disinvestment will cost the public. “The American people should know that this is going to impact them—the health of their families and their children,” says Haganir. □

#### TECHNOLOGY

## U.S. leads pivot against AI safety

BY BILLY PERRIGO/PARIS

Safety concerns are out, optimism is in: that was the takeaway from a major artificial intelligence summit in Paris in February, as world leaders jettisoned talk of safety and embraced growth.

The focus of the two-day meeting was markedly different from earlier gatherings. The summits began in the U.K. in 2023, with a sharp focus on fears that progress in AI was occurring without parallel advancements in safety. The concern: that increasingly powerful AI systems could be misused by terrorists or rogue states, or even become autonomous and turn against their human creators.

The gap between AI capabilities and safety hasn’t changed since 2023, but the global political mood certainly has. A declaration signed by 60 nations in Paris made no mention of catastrophic AI risks, nor attempts to mitigate them. The U.S. did not sign, apparently in protest against the document’s diversity-focused language. U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance told the summit, “I’m not here this morning to talk about AI safety,” and argued against the need for AI regulations while associating the field with wokeness. The French leader, Emmanuel Macron, also sent a pro-business message,

using a speech to boost the French AI and energy industries. Only the U.K. appeared to hold a flame for AI safety, declining to sign the declaration over what officials said was a lack of substance.

Last year, in Seoul, governments and AI companies agreed to come to Paris prepared with red lines for AI: risk thresholds that, if passed, would trigger international action. But there was no effort in

avoid modification. Many independent AI scientists now agree with the projections of the tech companies themselves: that superhuman level AI may be developed within the next five years—with potentially catastrophic effects if unsolved questions in safety research aren’t addressed.

Yet such worries were pushed to the back burner as the U.S., in particular, made a forceful argument against moves to regulate the sector. “We believe that excessive regulation of the AI sector could kill a transformative industry just as it’s taking off, and we’ll make every effort to encourage pro-growth AI

### ‘Excessive regulation of the AI sector could kill a transformative industry.’

—J.D. VANCE, U.S. VICE PRESIDENT

Paris to discuss such red lines, let alone turn them into an international agreement. “This was a real belly flop,” says Max Tegmark of the Future of Life Institute, a nonprofit focused on mitigating AI risks. Anthropic, an AI company focused on safety, called the event a “missed opportunity.”

The shift came against a backdrop of intensifying developments in AI. In January, OpenAI released a model that some users said can perform research tasks at roughly the level of a Ph.D. student. Safety researchers, meanwhile, found the latest generation of AI models are capable of deceiving their creators, copying themselves onto servers in an attempt to

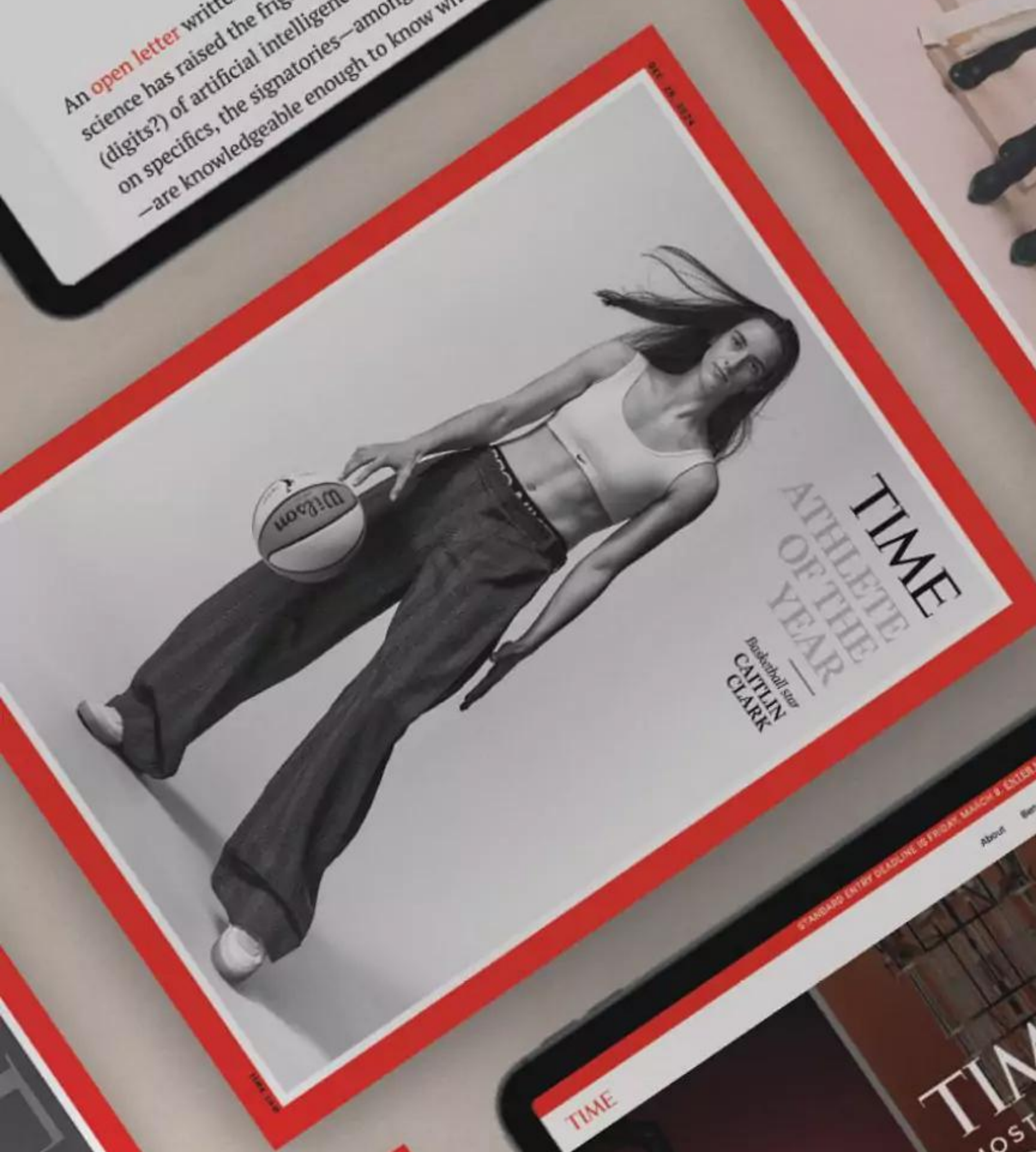
policies,” Vance said in his speech.

Meanwhile, Yoshua Bengio, a so-called Godfather of AI who had been commissioned by governments at the first AI Safety Summit in 2023 to author a state-of-the-science report on AI risks, was relegated to introducing his finished report at a side event. His main policy recommendation: that autonomous AI agents are highly dangerous and should not be built until scientists know how to properly constrain them against carrying out dangerous acts. “We’ve tried,” he told TIME, “but we haven’t succeeded in figuring this out.” —*With reporting by Harry Booth and Tharin Pillay/Paris*

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etchup and Strawberries Expi  
Peril and Promise of AI

BY ARYV BAKER  
Senior Correspondent

An open letter written and signed by some of the biggest names in computer science has raised the frightening specter of global annihilation at the hands (digits?) of artificial intelligence. And while the 22-word statement is short on specifics, the signatories—among them ChatGPT developer Sam Altman—are knowledgeable enough to know what they are talking about. But AI,



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## 5 ways to shorten your wait for a doctor's appointment

BY ANGELA HAUPT

IF YOU'VE TRIED TO SCHEDULE a doctor's appointment recently, you might have had to flip your calendar to a different season. There simply aren't enough physicians in the U.S.: going by current demand for health care, by 2037, the deficit is expected to reach 187,130 doctors, including more than 8,000 cardiologists and 4,000 nephrologists. That means patients routinely wait a long time—an average of 38 days, according to some data—before they're able to snag an appointment with a doctor they really need to see.

"People are constantly trying to get in to see doctors," says Dr. Gerda Maissel, a physician and patient advocate in New York who helps people navigate the health care system. She once worked with a man who wanted to see a specialist at a major academic center about his worsening neurological disease. After he accepted an appointment 10 months down the road, "he and his wife were just beside themselves," she recalls. "He had a tremendous need, and the academic center was just like, 'Yeah, sorry, everybody wants [that specialist].'" Thousands of different versions of that story unfold every single day for patients across the country, she says.

Long waits for necessary care can add emotional distress during an already stressful time—and open the door to conditions that aren't caught or treated in time. Fortunately, patients can sometimes take steps to get in sooner. We asked experts to share the most effective ways to see a specialist as soon as possible.



### 1. Check if the office has multiple locations

Many doctors see patients in a variety of locations—some of which are busier than others. Always ask for the wait time at alternative locations, advises Sara Mathew, associate director of research and operations administration at Weill Cornell Medicine. Flexibility is your friend when you're in a hurry to see a doctor.

### 2. Make sure you're on the cancellation list

Let the receptionist know that you'd like to be notified if an earlier appointment opens up—and mention that you could drop everything to be there, if that's in fact the case, says Christina Robertson, a regional director for Reproductive Medicine Associations, where she oversees the patient-scheduling team. "Ask their percentage of canceled appointments," she suggests, as well as whether those cancellations usually happen the same day or a few days in advance. That can help set your expectations.



### 3. Ask your doctor to call on your behalf

Depending on the situation, your primary-care physician or other referring doctor may call on your behalf. Sometimes, that will encourage the specialist's staff to squeeze you in. "I wouldn't abuse that for every kind of diagnosis," Mathew says. "But if you went for a routine GI checkup and they noticed something on your gallbladder or colon, and there's a possibility it could be cancer, find every way to get in faster."

### 4. Make a personal plea

Request to speak to a practice manager, suggests Nicoletta Sozansky, founder of the patient-advocacy company Healthcare Redefined. That's what Sozansky did when her daughter needed to see a specialist; she asked the manager if she could write doctors an email making the case to be seen soon. It worked. "This letter opened the door to every pediatrician we reached out to," she says. "From what I've experienced, doctors who are treating complex cases like your stories. They like a challenge."



### 5. Consider providers who aren't physicians

Nurse practitioners and physician's assistants tend to have greater availability. In some offices, these providers are "very much like an extension of the physician," Maissel says. They'll work closely with the doctor to figure out how to best treat you. In other offices, they operate more independently. "In general, if I have to choose between waiting six months or seeing the NP next week, I'm going to see the NP next week," she says. These providers can get testing started and often spend more time addressing your needs. Plus, once you're a patient at a practice, you'll often have an easier time getting an appointment with the provider you want.

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Illustration: Sam Rodriguez





# The View

NATION

## AMERICAN BROLOGARCHY

BY LAWRENCE NORDEN AND DANIEL I. WEINER

As Elon Musk, the world's richest person and President Donald Trump's top campaign donor, rampages through the federal government, shutting down agencies and firing workers seemingly without any regard for his own conflicts of interest, the danger of concentrated private interests capturing our political system has never been more apparent. ▶

INSIDE

HOW SOUTH KOREA'S POLITICAL CRISIS  
WILL INFLUENCE FOREIGN POLICY

VOICE NOTES ARE A  
SMALL ACT OF LOVE

How did we get to the point of having a tech billionaire campaign donor openly running huge parts of the federal government? As a result of Supreme Court decisions, most notably the notorious 2010 *Citizens United*, the wealthiest donors can play a more direct role in funding and running political campaigns than we have seen since the Gilded Age. In 2024, just 10 individual donors were able to supply nearly half of the money raised to support Trump's candidacy. Musk spent at least \$288 million, and his PAC took on core functions of the campaign, such as door-to-door canvassing and get-out-the-vote efforts. He also used ownership of X (formerly Twitter) to boost Trump. Before *Citizens United* none of this would have been legal.

Presidents from both parties have eroded laws and norms meant to restrain their power, increasingly without the pushback from members of their own party that held back their predecessors (including FDR). Trump has accelerated this process, issuing a number of seemingly unconstitutional Executive Orders and directives. Courts have temporarily blocked some, but ultimate review will be in the hands of the Supreme Court, which has itself taken a chainsaw to legal constraints on the President's power over the Executive Branch, gutting the independence of key federal agencies and most recently holding that former Presidents are immune from prosecution even for certain blatantly illegal abuses of power.

The combination of unregulated money in politics and expanded presidential power with fewer checks from Congress would be a recipe for more corruption under any President, but there are special dangers when they combine with Trump's explicitly transactional approach to wielding power. The President campaigned openly on the promise to reward friends and punish enemies. He has once again (as in his first term) refused to meaningfully separate from his private business empire.

There are plenty of indications that corporate leaders have gotten the message. Media companies that offended him are rushing to settle even



Elon Musk and President Donald Trump in the Oval Office on Feb. 11

seemingly meritless private lawsuits. And before Trump was even inaugurated, a Chinese billionaire who is fighting a fraud lawsuit from the Securities and Exchange Commission poured \$30 million into a new crypto venture started by the President and his family.

**MEANWHILE**, leading technology corporations have gained massive power over our political system. The seven largest tech companies in the U.S. represent approximately one-third of the value of the S&P 500. Trump seated the leaders of three of them — Musk, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, and Meta's Mark Zuckerberg—ahead of Cabinet members and world leaders at his Inauguration.

These wealthiest of tech bros are also players, as journalist Ezra Klein notes, in the so-called attention economy. Its products have increasingly replaced traditional media as the source of political information for Americans (often tailored based on their personal data that the same companies collect) and largely unaccountable for how it can manipulate our understanding of reality.

The situation is dire but not hopeless. The U.S. is still a democracy

with a decentralized electoral system that is not easy to fully subvert. As we've seen in previous eras of political corruption, including Watergate, the powerful tend to overreach and prompt a backlash that opens the door to reform.

Eventually, Congress must do more to fully reassert its authority as the "first branch" of government, by not only restraining the worst impulses of the Trump Administration but also passing bold campaign-finance, ethics, and rule-of-law reforms that restore meaningful guardrails against self-dealing by those in power, undo as much as possible the damage done by *Citizens United* and other decisions (and ultimately lay the groundwork for reversing them), and finally place meaningful checks on both presidential power and on the emerging tech brologarchy.

Failing to restore Americans' sense of ownership over their own government could be a mistake from which our democracy might not recover.

*Norden is vice president, and Weiner is director, of the Elections and Government Program at the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law*

THE RISK REPORT BY IAN BREMMER

## South Korea's political drama will produce waves overseas



SOUTH KOREA'S political crisis continues. After President Yoon Suk-yeol was impeached and arrested following his aborted imposition of martial law last December, the country's Constitutional Court will now decide his future. Legal experts say Yoon will soon be removed from office and sent to prison.

To complicate things further, the same court will also make a ruling that could disqualify opposition leader Lee Jae-myung from an election he's currently favored to win—and which would have to take place within 60 days of Yoon's formal removal from office. Lee is appealing his conviction for election-law violations in 2022, and if two appellate courts affirm it, he will be barred from public office for 10 years. Yet Lee will probably be President by May and enjoy immunity before the appeals court issues a final ruling. Yes, it's a mess.

And the soap-opera aspects of the crisis obscure an important reality: South Korea's foreign policy is about to change dramatically, with major implications for the U.S., China, North Korea, and Japan. Lee, the runner-up in the last election in 2022, is a talented politician who has consolidated support within the center-left Democratic Party of Korea (DP). The ruling conservative People Power Party (PPP) is in disarray and doesn't appear able to field a heavyweight candidate quickly enough to win.

Yoon's government greatly

improved the country's long-troubled relationship with Japan, its former colonial master, and has worked closely with Washington on East Asia security strategy. For now, Lee, running as a centrist, is insisting that the U.S.–South Korea alliance must remain the “rock foundation” of South Korea's diplomacy, national security, and economic development. But Lee's persistent criticism of Yoon's pro-U.S.



Supporters of impeached President Yoon Suk-yeol attend a rally near the Constitutional Court in Seoul on Jan. 23

emphasis suggests friction with the Trump Administration over trade, security cooperation, and engagement with North Korea. Lee has already proposed the creation of a bipartisan committee that would focus on preparation for the “highly likely trade war” with the U.S., signaling a much more confrontational approach to Washington.

Lee has also called for new diplomatic talks with North Korea to ensure that South Korea isn't pushed to the side if President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un stage new talks. At the first

Trump-Kim meetings in 2018 and 2019, former center-left South Korean President Moon Jae-in was excluded.

IN A RECENT foreign policy speech, Lee said little about relations with Japan and China, but here too his intense criticism of Yoon's engagement with Tokyo signals a different approach. Lee accused Yoon of ignoring the crimes Japan committed against South Korea in the 1930s and

'40s and of bowing and scraping before Japan's current government. We should also expect Lee will support deeper economic and diplomatic engagement with China. National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik, an ally and confidant of Lee's, visited China in February and met with China's President Xi Jinping. Woo used the trip to reassure Xi that a DP government in South Korea would privilege better relations with his country, and Xi's decision to meet with Woo personally signaled just how happy China is to hear this. In

the unlikely event that a court blocks Lee's candidacy, Woo would be a formidable replacement.

Meanwhile, Yoon faces a separate criminal trial on charges of insurrection. If convicted, he could face the death penalty, but even a prison sentence will be enough to further enrage pro-Yoon protesters, who rioted in January when he was first arrested. Watching from the sidelines, policymakers in Washington, Beijing, Tokyo, and Pyongyang are focused on both the dangers and the opportunities that South Korea's political turmoil will create. □

SOCIETY

# For the love of voice notes

BY RAINESFORD STAUFFER

SOMEWHERE IN THE BLUR OF 2020, AS I SLIPPED OUTSIDE with a mask and running shoes in the early morning to walk around the block, the lilting drawl of a friend's "Hiiiiii" nearly stopped me in my tracks. It was the first voice note I remember clicking play on: a friend from our shared home state, Kentucky, talking me through a life update as we lived and worried and wondered about reaching out to one another from opposite sides of the country—me in D.C. and her on the West Coast. It felt like the surprise of an unexpected letter because we normally didn't communicate that way, mixed with the convenience of a text—a compromise for people who wanted to catch up but whose schedules rarely matched.

At the time, I only sent voice notes sporadically. Stage fright would kick in, as if I was concerned my rambling would be rated like a podcast episode. I worried—more than I did with in-person or phone conversation—that I'd say the wrong thing, or that others would experience the same full-body cringe upon hearing a recording of my voice that I do. I think better in writing, I'd tell myself, clinging to my texts.

But recently, I've found myself recalling how my friend's chatter broke through loneliness—hers and definitely my own. Particularly during a season that's supposed to be all about love, I think about all the ways that can look—specifically, how we reach out to loved ones and connect. As I've sent more random voice messages to loved ones, it's become obvious how much I was craving this point of connection, finding solace in their voices even if I couldn't see their faces.

If anything, I'm a late adopter of voice messaging. A 2023 poll by YouGov found 30% of Americans communicate with voice messages on a weekly, daily, or multiple-times-a-day basis. Fans cite it being a needed break from typing on a screen, says reporting from the *Washington Post*, or how flexibility makes it more accessible, absent the anxiety some feel about phone calls and with more clarity than texts, according to NPR.

In 2024, a man's TikTok on his weekly routine with friends—sending short videos every Wednesday to keep one another posted on everything from struggles to milestones—went viral. Meanwhile, even dating apps, like Hinge, or work-focused platforms, like Slack, have voice options, according to Axios in 2023. Reporting by Vox outlines that by hearing someone's voice, we get "paralinguistic cues" that can't come via text. There's a level of closeness that comes with this kind of listening.

If we think of a voice message as existing between a phone call and a text, it "allows the richness with [the] understanding that we can't always talk right in the moment,"



says Natalie Pennington, assistant professor of communication studies at Colorado State University. When we hear someone's voice, we get a better understanding of their emotional state, she says. A phone call is rich in social cues and synchronicity, so we're getting immediate reactions. Meanwhile, with video calls, you can experience a drop-off, feeling as if someone was there with you when they weren't, all while having to look at yourself, she explains. "There is really that value of this sweet spot that voice sort of captures," she says.

Research by marketing and psychology professor Amit Kumar and behavioral scientist Nicholas Epley in 2021 found that voice, including phone, video chat, and voice chat, created stronger social bonds than text interactions, and that voice can create understanding or connection.

Connection is what I found in hearing not just my loved ones' voices, but also the sound track of their lives



**‘For us it’s  
a never-  
ending  
phone  
call.’**

—GREG MANIA, VOICE-  
NOTE ENTHUSIAST

playing in their two-minute recordings: kids playing, how joyful someone sounded walking back from a good first date, the clatter of cooking utensils, gossiping about work. In fact, it was listening in on moments like this—realizing that hearing them made it feel more like I was with my loved ones—that nudged me toward sending more voice notes of my own.

**FOR A LONGTIME LOVER** of the random catch-up phone call, this was the asynchronous step toward a different way of showing up, even if that meant getting over my nerves that I’d ramble. Listening to them move through their lives made me want to be vulnerable in that way too.

Others mentioned the feeling of “being there” as a reason to love voice messaging. Greg Mania, 33, developed a routine with his best friend, Tara, of “voice noting from sunrise to sundown.” With a voice note, you can take time to formulate a response,

reply when you can, and pick right back up where you left off, they say. You can also keep a voice note, Mania says: sometimes, they both say things that inspire the other, and they’re able to listen to those notes whenever needed. “For us it’s a never-ending phone call, and a vital part of our days, and our relationship,” Mania adds.

Danielle Mathias, 32, has a lot of long-distance friendships and says that “being able to hear their voice is really special to me,” adding that she thinks hearing someone makes her feel more involved in their lives. “It almost feels like they’re there with you in your apartment while you’re listening to their voice note, which can be really nice when you’re missing somebody that’s really far away.” Draea Johnson, 47, echoes that: through social media, she sees loved ones’ lives evolve, but that feels like watching from the outside. “I know that many, many of my friends and acquaintances feel similar, many are very disconnected, so anytime I can send a little love their way via voice notes, I do,” she says.

In the thick of all this is the fact that loneliness was declared a public-health epidemic in 2023, and a poll found that when Americans feel lonely, about 50% opt for a distraction, like TV, podcasts, or social media. Based on how many people describe getting a voice note as a personal, mini podcast, getting to listen to one another is a meaningful way to stay in touch that liking an Instagram story just isn’t.

Still, voice notes remain somewhat divisive: Though many apps have a transcription feature for voice notes, communicating this way isn’t accessible to everyone. Some wonder about the etiquette (or how to follow best practices with them); others find them intrusive, stressful, or even self-centered—the idea that someone wants to hear your monologue.

**BUT THE THING IS:** I do; I’ll take the rambling and awkward pauses that might come with closeness. I think of voice notes as just one part of the ongoing conversation of phone calls and texts and endless Instagram memes and, fingers crossed, in-person hang-out time. Sometimes, someone replies to a voice note with a text or opts to call instead, but it’s all part of the same catch-up. Different relationships have different communication preferences. But I cherish getting to listen in as friends narrate their grocery trips, vent about their bosses, or just want to hear what’s up lately. It’s a small act of love, I think, to want to talk to someone—however you choose to do it.

The day after I sent a voice note to a childhood friend just because something reminded me of her, I got an unexpected voice note from my younger sister, a former passionate hater of voice messaging. She’d just sent her first one to someone, she told me, and was surprised by how freeing it felt. “It kind of makes me want to keep talking,” she said.

I was just glad I got to hear about it.

*Stauffer is the author of All the Gold Stars. She’s a freelance writer and Kentuckian*

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CLIMATE

# Net Zero Is Not Enough

AUSTRALIAN MINING BILLIONAIRE ANDREW FORREST'S  
GREEN CRUSADE **BY JUSTIN WORLAND**

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*Andrew Forrest at a Fortescue  
iron-ore mine in Western  
Australia on Dec. 5, 2024*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
ADAM FERGUSON FOR TIME



IT DOES NOT TAKE LONG AT LUNCH with Andrew Forrest for him to start seeming less like an Australian mining billionaire and more like a climate activist—meets—zealous prosecutor. His rugged features quickly appear not to reflect the arid expanse of Western Australia’s Pilbara region, home to the core operations of his \$38 billion Fortescue iron-ore business. Rather, they appear the result of a succession of high-stakes court battles. When we meet at a luxurious Paris brasserie, he speaks passionately about a client that he’s been representing for several years: the planet. His case? Corporate bosses must act now—and act fast—to tackle climate change, an argument he delivers with force and the unrivaled credibility that comes from decades in the carbon-spewing industry.

Then, his soup turning cold, he grabs me by my lapels and rattles off the facts as he sees them: fossil-fuel industry executives are “culprits,” doing all they can to resist a transition to a cleaner economy. In other heavy industries, bosses have been “lazy” and shortsighted, focused on quarterly returns while the world burns. It’s time for businesses to stop talking about long-term targets, he tells me, and completely ditch fossil fuels in the coming years rather than in the coming decades. “If you think you can’t go green, then you’re right,” he says of his industry colleagues. “It’s time for you to get off the stage and learn from someone with more talent, more conviction, or initiative than you who can lead your company.”

Critically, this isn’t simply talk. At Fortescue, the mining behemoth he founded in 2003, Forrest has begun just such a transformation: he’s building renewable-energy projects, purchasing a fleet of electric mining trucks,

and trying to catapult green hydrogen to market. “It’s about character. It’s about leadership,” he says.

Central to Forrest’s pitch is a cutting dismissal of the corporate fixation on quarterly returns. His preferred yardstick is the medium term—a long enough time period to make meaningful change but soon enough so that he will actually be around to judge the results. Fortescue’s \$6 billion green investment, for example, is meant to transform his company into an environmentally friendly powerhouse by 2030. “We’re taking long-term bets, which accrete value on the way,” he says. “I make it sound simple, but it is actually pretty simple.” And then, just as quickly as he had begun, our lunch still unfinished, he stops himself almost midthought: “Is this enough to start?” With his opening argument delivered and a slap on the back, he’s gone in a flash—off to his plane, which was waiting to whisk him to Munich for an engagement with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

That was last February. In the year since, I’ve watched Forrest take his argument global, traveling with him to Las Vegas, where he announced a \$3 billion investment in electric mining trucks, and catching him at conferences in New York and Switzerland where he cajoled other executives to come aboard his climate quest. The image that emerged is of a rare private-sector voice literate in both climate science and financial markets—and one willing to make the business case for climate to any audience. The biggest challenge for Forrest isn’t one of technical feasibility. If all goes according to plan, actually decarbonizing Fortescue will be the easy part. To succeed, he must convince investors, employees, and, perhaps most importantly, other CEOs that going green is worth the risks—financial, reputational, and otherwise.

The task couldn’t come at a more important time. A wave of populist sentiment has led political leaders to take a step back on climate action even as the effects of a warming planet become ever more apparent—and grow ever more dire. It is a complex needle to thread:

▲  
Forrest founded the mining firm Fortescue in 2003 and plans to decarbonize operations by 2030



companies can act on their own, of course, but to do so they need to be sure they will make money. If he succeeds, Forrest and his project to transform Fortescue, where he serves as chairman, would

become more than a forceful case for saving the planet—they would become a powerful case study for generating financial dividends by decarbonizing. Failure, on the other hand, would discourage other business leaders already nervous about the current political climate. “The dangerous part about what we’re doing is that if we’re not successful, the inspiration for thousands of other companies won’t be there,” he says. “And if we lose money on this in the long term, people say, well, that’s philanthropy.”

**FORREST’S TALE BEGINS** with a warning: “It’s not a pretty story.” We’re sitting at the dining table of his company jet en route to Las Vegas



## **‘We’re staying the course. Real zero is completely bankable.’**

—ANDREW FORREST,  
FORTESCUE CHAIRMAN

in short, a sort of Damascene conversion, transforming a mining industry veteran into a climate campaigner.

Since then it’s been a whirlwind. The Munderoo Foundation, founded in 2001 and co-led by Forrest and his wife from whom he is separated, has come to fund everything from efforts to address lethal humidity to climate migration. And he has committed deeply to the cause of protecting the oceans. While many of his billionaire counterparts buy yachts to party, Forrest bought one and turned it into a research vessel for ocean scientists. M. Sanjayan, the CEO of Conservation International, talked to Forrest as he fundraised for a new initiative aimed at protecting 5% of the world’s oceans. In their phone conversation, Forrest realized that he was soon going to fly over Sanjayan’s office in Washington, D.C., so he directed the plane to land. A few hours later they had dinner near the airport, and Forrest became a top contributor to the \$125 million initiative. “He’s just larger than life,” says Sanjayan, reflecting on that first meeting.

Forrest’s biggest climate initiative, though, is what he’s doing with his own company. Under the mantra of Real Zero, a play on the increasingly controversial phrase *net zero*, Forrest has said his company will ditch fossil fuels in its land-based operations entirely by 2030. To make it happen, in 2022 the company launched a \$6.2 billion capital investment plan to decarbonize its primary mining operations in Australia’s Pilbara region. That money has funded everything from efficiency to renewable energy generation.

When we arrived in Vegas, I saw the unveiling of the effort’s crown jewel. Shortly after entering the Las Vegas convention center, the exhibition area

turned dark. Triumphant music blared as drummers and dancers performed. The curtain dropped to reveal a massive electric mining truck capable of hauling 240 metric tons of material. In Forrest’s phrasing, his plane could fit inside the truck’s bed. It wasn’t hyperbole: even at my height of 6 ft. 3 in., I had to look up to see the top of one of the truck’s tires. Forrest said Fortescue, which partnered with a Swiss manufacturer called Liebherr to develop the trucks, had already placed an order for 360 vehicles. The deal, valued at nearly \$3 billion, sent shock waves across the industry. “It’s metamorphic for Fortescue, and it’s a turning point for the world mining industry,” Forrest tells me. “Shareholders are going to say this company’s going green and saving us money.” The cost savings switching from diesel fuel to electric mobility is expected to total in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually.

The work has garnered the praise of big wigs in the climate community. In New York, I watched as Forrest traded compliments with leading climate scientists; in Davos, I sat in as he convened the likes of Al Gore and former U.S. climate envoy John Kerry. “This guy is willing to make really big bets, and sometimes they pay off, and probably more often than not, they pay off,” says Sanjayan. “I’m glad he’s making it on something that could be transformative for the planet.” Yet many remain skeptical—and it’s easy to understand why. Mining is one of the dirtiest industries, contributing upwards of 5% of global carbon emissions. And then there are the local effects, including air pollution that harms nearby communities and concerns about land-use rights given mining often happens on Indigenous land.

Forrest’s penchant for spectacle and disarming warmth can be helpful in making the climate case—but it has also raised some eyebrows in the wider environmental community. He’s the type of person who will greet you cheerfully, no matter who you are. In January, at the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, a right-wing provocateur chased him down to press him for an interview. Forrest gracefully put his arm around him and disarmed him, saying, “Get rid of that mic, and I’ll

from New York last September, and I’ve just asked him to recount the story of how he became a climate advocate. Between bites of chicken wings, he rewinds the clock to 2016. He was hiking in a remote part of Australia known as the Kimberley when he fell off a cliff into a gorge. In gory detail, he described how his leg was reversed, stuck pointing in the opposite direction, when someone pulled him out of the water. He survived, but it would take years to recover. Forced to take a break from his hectic day-to-day CEO life, he decided to pursue a Ph.D. in marine ecology. That opened his eyes to the alarming realities of how climate change is harming the oceans: the acidification that is killing marine ecosystems and the looming risk that oceans will not continue absorbing carbon at the same rates, meaning faster growth of carbon in the atmosphere. He says that the deeper understanding steered him to “do everything we can to stop global warming.” It was,

talk to you. I quite like what you're doing." He jumps on Fox News, keen to make his case even to the most incredulous of audiences. When we arrived in Vegas, Gene Simmons, the rock star and KISS front man, was there to greet him. From Vegas, Simmons joined Forrest on some TV hits to Australia. At the 2023 U.N. climate conference in Dubai, where companies rented out hotel ballrooms and event spaces to promote their climate programs, Forrest brought Fortescue's 246-ft. ammonia-powered ship to the harbor and invited dignitaries on board for cocktails. Indeed, the man is so amiable, so good at making a splash, that it forces you to pause and ask, "What's the catch?" When Forrest wanted to endorse an organization pushing for a "fossil-fuel nonproliferation treaty," the organization's leaders were unsure how the backing of a mining boss would be received. So they commissioned a study of Fortescue's climate and environmental practices, assessing its plans and performance against 63 criteria, including its impact to local communities, laid out by the U.N. The report found the company to be exceptional, with quibbles so minor that explaining them here would require a crash course in the dense lexicon of climate reporting. "He's the real deal," says Tzeporah Berman, who runs the treaty initiative.

**IF YOU FOLLOW** Forrest around long enough, you'll notice he returns to some of the same arguments and language. In settings with other business leaders, he likes to cite his company's financial returns. "For those who don't know me, my name is Andrew Forrest," he said at a September climate forum. "I founded a company which has Australia's highest shareholder return in history." For climate advocates, Forrest citing his mining company's financial performance might sound a bit crass coming from a billionaire who hops around the world on a private plane. But the message is a critical one: Forrest's financial credentials signal credibility to the private sector. And it is precisely what makes Forrest so unique among his peers. Not only does he articulate a financial case for decarbonizing an industrial company,

➤  
*Forrest speaks to Fortescue employees about his ambition to make "green iron ore"*

but he also emphasizes it will happen in the next five years. That's not a goal, he says, but a hard deadline. He has told facilities managers that if they haven't figured out how to ditch fossil fuels on-site by 2030, he will shut down their plants. And he has parted ways with many senior executives who paid lip service to his climate ambition but didn't feel committed to executing it. "We had people that said they were for going green," he tells me, "but actually thought it was the dumbest idea ever."

Let's just be clear here. The 2030 deadline puts Fortescue in a class of its own. Apart from big technology firms (which are easier to decarbonize), large industrial companies that have engaged in the climate conversation have set midcentury targets. And it's assumed these targets will be met with some reliance on offsets, where companies pay others to cut emissions rather than doing it themselves. Fortescue will not use offsets, Forrest says. And when I ask him what Fortescue will look like in 20 years, he rejects the question out of hand. "Twenty years, it's really someone else's problem," he says, so brusquely that he later apologetically acknowledges his harsh tone.

Making such a bold commitment to climate at a publicly traded company requires a bullish financial case, and there are several components to his argument. For his electrification drive—think of the mining trucks or mining-site operations—the promise is savings as the up-front cost reduces fuel usage over the long term. It also brings with it a knock-on financial benefit: creating

**'If we're not successful, the inspiration for thousands of other companies won't be there.'**

—ANDREW FORREST







▲  
A railway transports iron ore at Cloudbreak, a Fortescue iron-ore mine in Western Australia

“green iron ore” and “green steel” will give Fortescue a leg up selling its product, as its customers look to decarbonize their own products. And doing the legwork now

in developing this technology will create a new revenue stream for the company as it sells it to others. The most significant of those technologies is green hydrogen, a fuel created by splitting water into hydrogen and oxygen using an electric current powered by renewable energy; this green fuel can replace fossil fuels in heavy industry and transportation. The company is spending hundreds of millions of dollars a year to build out green-hydrogen production facilities in Australia, the U.S., Norway, and Brazil.

More than any of his other green ambitions, it's Fortescue's hydrogen goals that attract the most attention of investors. Over the past five years, the hydrogen sector has been on a roller-coaster ride as companies committed billions to mega projects designed to bring green hydrogen to market. But a series of hiccups—from a lack of infrastructure to support it to policy challenges—have led companies to rethink their investments. Fortescue is not immune. Last year, the company laid off 700 workers as it down-scaled its hydrogen ambitions. Many climate activists interpreted the hydrogen pullback as evidence that Forrest lacks sincerity. And yet, for better or worse, there is perhaps no better way to convince the financial community of a commitment to delivering a return than layoffs and reorganization. So how does the market assess Fortescue's climate goals?

In finance lingo, Fortescue has a price-to-earnings ratio similar to, if slightly below, those of its mining peers. That's a standard metric that financial analysts use as a shorthand to

assess the growth prospects of a publicly listed business. Fortescue does a little better than its peers on the price-to-net-asset-value ratio, a key mining-industry metric because it shows how much investors are valuing the core assets of a company, in this case mines. But there's little to show that the company's climate commitment is responsible for its financial performance. On earnings calls, analysts probe Fortescue executives about various green initiatives, but the traders whose actions determine the stock price are more concerned that they will make a profit in the short term.

“The main thing driving share prices of mining stocks at the moment is their payouts,” says James Whiteside, head of corporate, metals and mining at Woods Mackenzie. And therein lies what is perhaps Forrest's biggest challenge—more than the state of the hydrogen business, more than the staff turnover. To persuade executives to spend billions on bold bets to take their companies green, they will want to know that their valuations will be rewarded. And, right now, the market seems unsure, to put it mildly. You might even say it seems uninterested.

**WHEN I LAST CAUGHT UP** with Forrest in January, the global mood around climate had shifted dramatically since we first met a year prior. Donald Trump was back in the White House, and the private-sector enthusiasm around all

things climate—already tapering last year—had become even more muted.

Driving down the promenade in Davos, Forrest betrayed some frustration with his counterparts who have used the zeitgeist shift as cover to change course. At many firms, climate and ESG—short for environment, social, and governance—strategies were being rebranded using more palatable terms like *resilience* or *energy security*, even as the core of the work continues. At others, those commitments have been walked back entirely to save money and face. “It's letting the wolves out of the cages who never wanted to do anything for the climate anyway, and they're saying that they now don't have to,” he says. “Well, all right, let's just see how that works out for you.”

Forrest remains defiant. If the Republican-controlled government in Washington nixes clean-technology tax incentives, “you'll see hundreds of billions of dollars extracted out of the U.S. economy, including ours,” he tells me. And he has the backing of political leaders in Australia, where Fortescue is headquartered. “It's absolutely critical,” says Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese of Forrest's climate efforts. But, while policy shifts may change the dynamics of specific projects, the direction of travel won't change. Fortescue's plan is rooted in sound economics, he says, and that's not changing. “We're staying the course,” he tells me. “Real zero is completely bankable.”

No matter what President Trump does, global markets are changing, increasingly favoring products that are cleaner and resilient to climate risks—whether they are created by the physical world or by our response to them. But assessing the speed of those changes—and then shifting your business to reflect that speed—is a very challenging task even for the most climate-savvy executive. Forrest's bet is that being first will pay huge dividends. It's a simple concept, but few have been bold enough to spend billions to test it. For the sake of the planet and everyone who lives on it, let's hope he's right. —*With reporting by* CHARLIE CAMPBELL/CANBERRA

*TIME* receives support for climate coverage from the Outrider Foundation

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A M E R I C A ' S

A G I N G

W O R K F O R C E

WHY THE PROMISE  
OF RETIREMENT  
IS SLIPPING  
OUT OF REACH

BY ALANA  
SEMUELS/  
WAITSFIELD, VT.

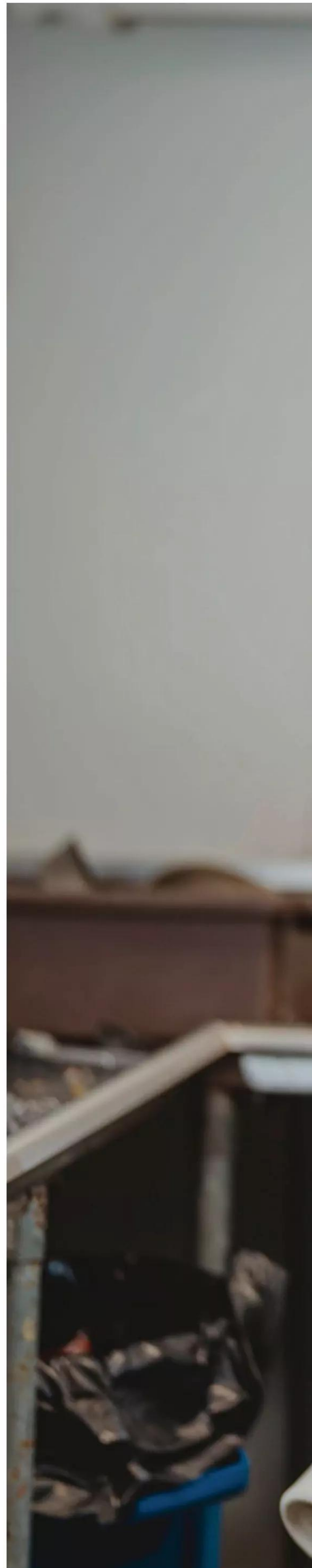
WALTER CARPENTER WALKS ACROSS THE SKI RESORT'S DINING room on a knee that needs to be replaced and a hip that's going bad. Lumbering into the kitchen, he deposits a brown bin of dirty dishes on a counter before heading back out to collect more bowls of half-eaten tomato soup and plates littered with sandwich crusts. "One foot in front of the other," he jokes to kitchen prep worker Kim Hopper, 72, as they pass each other.

Carpenter, 69, has worked winters at the Mad River Glen ski area in Waitsfield, Vt., for the past 15 years. Four times a week, he clocks in around noon, and makes \$20 per hour carrying dishes up and down the three flights of stairs in the "base box," as the kitchen and bar area is called, putting plastic food baskets and metal tongs and soup ladles in their rightful place, loading the industrial dishwasher with cups and bowls. He has peripheral neuropathy, which can leave him without feeling in his feet or legs. Some days, his phone tells him, he walks more than five miles during his shifts.

He never thought he'd be on the job at this age, but without much in retirement savings, Carpenter has no plans to stop. "I'm broke and poor and still working at 69," he says as he once again ascends the carpeted gray stairs with a bin full of dishes, his shoulders slightly stooped, his gray mustache and hair hidden under a baseball cap, a scruffy Einstein with a slight Boston accent. "But at least I'm still here."

▶ WALTER CARPENTER,  
69, ON THE JOB AT  
MAD RIVER GLEN,  
THE SKI RESORT  
WHERE HE WORKS  
FOUR DAYS A WEEK

PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY JOHN TULLY  
FOR TIME







▶  
**KIM HOPPER,  
 72, WORKS AS A  
 PREP COOK AT  
 MAD RIVER GLEN**

Mad River Glen, where a daily adult lift ticket costs \$115, couldn't run without staffers like Carpenter. If you include part-timers on the ski patrol, the kitchen crew, and the employees at the retail shop, about half its workers are over 65, according to marketing coordinator Ry Young. That's not entirely surprising in Vermont, where about 26% of residents 65 and older are still working—the highest share in the U.S. The state is at the forefront of a national trend: as birth rates decline and the country ages, older people are staying in the workforce longer. Today, about 19% of people 65 and older in the U.S. are still working, up from 10% four decades ago.

They do it for a variety of reasons. Some, like John Mandeville, 75, the executive director of the Central Vermont Council on Aging, find fulfillment from their jobs and want to keep going until they can't anymore. Others, like Hopper, the prep cook, have ample retirement savings but still want to be around people, and work part time to stay connected. But about half of workers 65 and older are people like Carpenter, according to Craig Copeland, director of wealth-benefits research at the Employee Benefit Research Institute. For one reason or another—an illness, an investment scam, a lifetime of jobs without a pension or means to save for retirement—they have no choice but to keep working to pay the bills.

For these people, the finish line can feel miles away, and every time it draws closer, something moves it back again. Maybe they thought they could get by with their retirement savings until inflation started climbing. Or perhaps they were on track to quit at 65 until the stock market took a dive. Many are like Carpenter, who has worked for 55 years, doing construction, picking apples, running ski lifts, and managing parking lots, but can't retire because most of his jobs were low-paying, with meager benefits.

There will likely be more of these Americans in the years to come. Half of babies born in the U.S. in 2007 are projected to live to 103, according to the World Economic Forum. As lifespans lengthen, wages are not keeping up with inflation, and even a decent nest egg may not go far enough. That's especially true as employers have shifted the burden of retirement savings to employees, offering 401(k)s rather than pensions that promise a certain benefit every month. As a result, millions of Americans are going to have to keep working longer. "The issue more than anything is the high cost of living," says Mandeville, the Council on Aging director. "It's really strained people's retirement budgets."

The growing class of people who want to stop working, but can't, represents a crack in a social compact that assured citizens who worked hard that they could take it easy when they hit 65, if not before. As that crack grows, it will put economic strain on younger generations who have to care for family members, contributing to a growing burden of debt that includes student loans and homeownership. Retirement savings will become one more discouraging thing that young workers can't afford as their costs grow but their wages do not. Forty years ago, a teacher or a municipal worker or an employee on a manufacturing line was guaranteed a good retirement after putting their time in. Today, more people are working in service-industry jobs, but longtime workers like Walter Carpenter cannot afford



retirement. "I just have to keep working," he says as he clears away dirty dishes. "Right now, retirement is a distant dream."

**IN THE MORNINGS**, Carpenter sits down at a desk in his rent-subsidized apartment in downtown Montpelier and writes letters. He sends missives to newspaper editors about the need for single-payer health care, the problems with the private insurance market, and the importance of gun control. Evidence of his political advocacy adorns the otherwise bare walls of his spartan apartment. There's a picture of him with Senator Bernie Sanders taken on the steps of the Vermont state capitol; a letter from former Senator Patrick Leahy; a commendation from former Governor Peter Shumlin. Carpenter spends hours sitting at his big desk, the main piece of furniture in his couchless living room, writing about the flaws of the American economy. "What will happen when, as a friend so aptly put it, I become 'too frail to work and too poor to live?'" he wrote in one 2017 letter advocating for state-sponsored retirement benefits.

Carpenter became a health care advocate in 2006, he says, after he became seriously ill from a liver disease caused by gallstones in the bile ducts. His health-insurance company wouldn't preapprove blood work and radiology tests that were needed to figure out what was wrong, he recalls, forcing him to spend hours and hours on the phone with them, advocating for his own treatment. The illness



◀ **RON ANDERSON, 81, HOLDS DOWN A CASHIER'S JOB AT THE RESORT**

summers at Vermont's Waterbury Center State Park, where he is a park attendant for \$22 an hour. The pay isn't bad, but the cost of living in Vermont is higher than the national average. Even with a rent-subsidized apartment, Carpenter's finances are tight. There's the \$235 he has to pay monthly for his Medicare supplement, and the \$184 deducted from Social Security for Medicare Part B, plus hundreds of dollars on groceries, his cell-phone bill, and expenses for his car, which he drives about 50 miles per day to get to and from work in the winter. The salt does a number on the undercarriage of his 2015 Subaru Forester. One year he had to dip into his retirement savings to get it in shape for its annual inspection.

Carpenter's situation may sound like bad luck, but it's a reality for many older Americans. About 1 in 5 people over 50 have no retirement savings at all, according to the AARP. The problem is getting worse over time. A 2023 government survey found that 20% of low-income workers had a retirement-account balance in 2007, but only 10% had one in 2019.

Carpenter has had a colorful life—a self-identified hippie, he's studied the flute at the Berklee College of Music, taken trains across Canada, lived in Israel, and survived the eruption of Mount St. Helens in Washington State. The hospitality industry found him when he moved back to the East Coast to care for his aging father, a professor, and started working odd jobs. This, too, is a common problem: as more people are thrust into caregiving for aging parents, they'll either have to spend much-needed money for that care or scale back their own work, compromising their fragile finances even further.

Carpenter sometimes wishes he'd thought about retirement earlier, back when he was traveling the world and working part-time jobs. It can be hard sometimes to go to

events like his high school reunion and see old schoolmates who are retired and financially secure. He's worried about what will happen over the next decade. That's why he scrimps and saves now, eating the half-priced food at Mad River Glen whenever he can, subsisting on deli meat from the kitchen. "There's going to be a time when I can't do this anymore," Carpenter says, wiping his hands on the dirty rag tucked into his pants. "So for now, I have to save as much as I can."

forced him to take a 12-week absence from his job at Stowe Mountain Resort, which was owned by a different company than it is now. He'd worked there since 1995, in a series of jobs that had health insurance and a 401(k) and paid \$10 to \$12 per hour—not a huge sum, but well above a state minimum wage that sat at \$7 at the time. But when Carpenter was ready to return to work, he says, the company had gone through a restructuring, and his job was gone. He applied for other full-time gigs with benefits, but no one seemed to want to hire a 52-year-old man with a history of health problems.

When people lose good jobs in their 50s, it's common for them to struggle in their 60s and in retirement, says Lisa Berkman, a professor of public policy and epidemiology at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health who has studied older workers. The 50s are a fork decade professionally, Berkman says. Around half of Americans are not working full time throughout them, and the odds of those people being able to find good jobs in their 60s are low. In contrast, about 80% of people who work full time through their 50s go on to work in their 60s. "When you get to be 60, all the inequality that has accumulated over your lifetime comes into Technicolor," Berkman says.

So it has been for Carpenter. Since his illness, he has been a seasonal worker, spending winters at Mad River Glen and

'RIGHT NOW, RETIREMENT IS A DISTANT DREAM.'

—WALTER CARPENTER

**THE SUN IS SETTING** at Mad River Glen one December evening, and the cafeteria is closing. Customers clomp across the vast dining room in their ski boots, ready to go home. In the kitchen, things are slowing down; workers mop the floor as a boom box blasts the Grateful Dead. Carpenter tosses a green bag of sopping compost into a bin, then bends over to pick up a black plastic bag filled with trash. "You have to know how to lift things in this job," he says, gesturing to the rolling cart full of trash bags and compost.

Donning his jacket, he rolls the cart to the elevator, takes it to the ground floor, and drags it outside. It's about 10°, but Carpenter is cheerful as he hoists the trash, recycling, and compost, and tosses them in the proper bins. It is a job for a younger person. When it eventually becomes too difficult, he may ask to become a cashier like his colleague

Ron Anderson, 81, who retired from a career in advertising decades ago, then decided to come back to work for camaraderie and the free lift ticket given to all employees.

As the nation ages, workers like Carpenter and Anderson will play a greater role in the economy. The Census Bureau predicts that the 65-and-older population in the U.S. will leap from 58 million in 2022 to 82 million by 2050, when the group is projected to make up more than a quarter of the country's population. The share of people in the workforce who are 55 and older is growing, while the proportion of people 16 to 54 has been shrinking since the late 1990s, according to a recent report by the Employee Benefit Research Institute. Older workers are becoming more prevalent as the youngest contributors to the economy—people 16 to 24—no longer work as often as they once did, instead pursuing school or other interests.

With its high proportion of older workers, Mad River Glen—and the state it serves—offer a glimpse of America's future. Vermont is the third oldest state in the nation; the number of residents 65 and older has nearly doubled during the past two decades, according to the Vermont State Data Center. The cost of living deters some people from moving here and often sends locals in search of an exit. As employers report worker shortages, state officials are beginning to look for ways to support older workers willing to fill the gaps, says Mandeville, the 75-year-old Council on Aging director.

That's how a business like the Trapp Family Lodge, a resort in Stowe, Vt., came to put out an ad in 2022 that targeted retirees: "Are you retired and looking for a part-time job to get you out of the house/make play money?" it asked. Bob Schwartz, the resort's marketing director, said the idea came as management looked for the "low-hanging fruit to beef up our workforce."

Flexibility is one of the biggest demands from older workers, says Jena Trombly, director of human resources at the Clara Martin Center, a nonprofit mental-health facility in Vermont. The center has cobbled together a staff by hiring many older people for part-time jobs, agreeing to give them ample time off to travel or visit their grandkids. The center has kept on some longtime workers by allowing them to transfer from full time to part time, keeping their knowledge in the organization. "It's a win-win all the way around," she says.

Japan is a good model for what America might look like if its workforce is increasingly made up of older people. About 80% of Japanese workers want to continue their jobs after retirement, according to the World Economic Forum, and about 1 in 4 people 65 and older were still working in 2022.

The country has encouraged companies to help by employing older workers and raising the mandatory retirement age above 60. Technology helps too. Some companies have used robots to help elderly workers continue at jobs that their bodies might not otherwise be able to do.

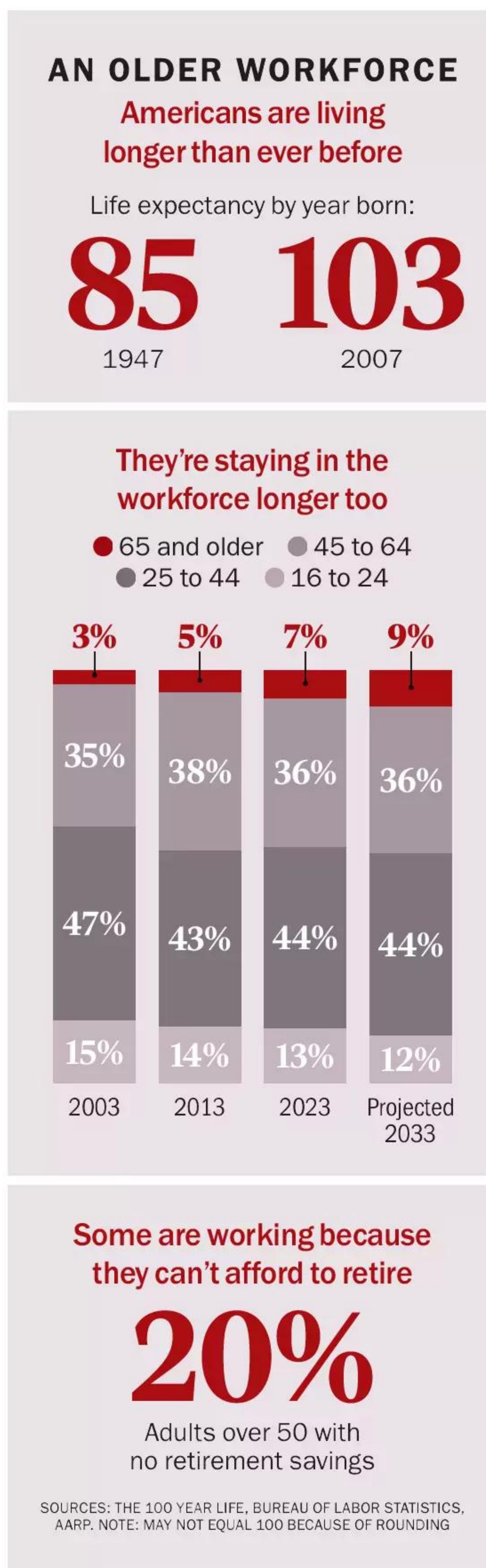
**BUT HAVING EVERYONE** work longer isn't the only option. A new type of savings plan spreading around the U.S. could help more people put aside money for retirement. Called an auto-IRA, the plan sets aside money from people's paychecks, which it then invests in stocks and bonds. The program costs employers nothing; their only responsibility is to inform workers about it. "This means that people who, for the most part, never had a chance to save can do so," says David John, a senior policy adviser to the AARP who helped invent the concept. Vermont passed a law allowing auto-IRAs in 2023, and 17 other states either have operational auto-IRAs or are putting plans in place. In some states, like California, almost all employers have to participate.

The program appears to be helping workers grow their retirement savings in the states where it's already operational, according to the Pew Charitable Trusts. More than a million people have amassed more than \$1 billion in assets through such plans since 2018, according to John. In one Pew survey, nearly two-thirds of low-wage workers participating in an auto-IRA plan in Illinois said they were satisfied with it.

Walter Carpenter supports the idea. In one of his letter-writing campaigns in 2017, he penned a missive to the online publication VT Digger advocating for Vermont to support state-sponsored retirement plans. In the letter, Carpenter referred to himself as "someone who knows what it means to lose any hope of retirement through circumstances beyond my control."

Employers in Vermont can now start offering this type of plan. But unfortunately, Carpenter is unable to avail himself of the benefits now. It's too late for the contributions he'd make at this point to amount to much. He reflects on this as he sits in the basement staff dressing room at Mad River Glen, pulling off his apron, swapping his work boots for snow boots and his jeans and sweatshirt for something clean.

"Someone who has worked for 55 years like me should be able to retire," he says. Instead, he keeps going—one foot in front of the other. He's cleaned the kitchen counters with dish soap, taken out the trash, and stacked chairs on tables. He's ready to go home for the night. But he'll be back tomorrow, and for many days after that.



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# NICOLE KIDMAN

Championing women  
on both sides of the camera

By Eliana Dockterman

IN THE DAYS AFTER GIVING BIRTH, NICOLE KIDMAN found herself unable to breastfeed. “I was so terrified, asking, What just happened? Where’s my milk?” she says. “I remember standing naked in the shower, and my sister helped me. She was my source of strength. She’d had five children—she had the wisdom to pass on.”

Kidman and I are curled up in chairs beside a fireplace inside a historic Nashville home, not far from the house the Oscar winner shares with her husband Keith Urban, their two daughters, and a serene poodle named Julian. Kidman is warm and disarmingly inquisitive: she wants to hear about my postpartum experience too.

Perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised by the ease of this conversation about vulnerable moments in our lives as women. Kidman, 57, has emotionally exposed herself on screen for decades. On the drama *Big Little Lies*, she huddled under a towel between shooting scenes of domestic violence. In her latest film, *Babygirl*, she growled while masturbating on the floor. She marks all her scripts with notes about her characters, coded for privacy. Then she shreds them: “It’s too personal. I want it gone.”

Filmmakers adore her rawness. “People believe if you have power, you don’t have to go to a place of vulnerability,” says Oscar-winning director Jane Campion, Kidman’s longtime friend. “A lot of actors won’t do that because it’s uncomfortable.” For Kidman to be truly open with a director requires a leap of faith. She describes herself as trusting to a fault. “It’s how I approach all of my relationships. I’ve been hurt because of that, but I’m still not jaded,” she says. “I’m delicate, but I’m very giving. The emotions I offer are very, very real, so I need to know that if I’m giving that to you, you value it.”

She has found that women behind the camera often offer a support reminiscent of how her sister cared for her in those early days after childbirth. And Kidman has made it her mission to use her immense star power to shine a light on emerging directors like Halina Reijn, who helmed the bold *Babygirl*, about a CEO who submits to an intern in a dominant-submissive affair. Many actors called out the dearth of opportunities for female filmmakers in the #MeToo era, but few followed through on promoting talent. Kidman pledged in 2017 to

work with a woman director every 18 months. She has far exceeded her promise, partnering as a producer and actor with 19 in film and TV over the past eight years.

In 2023, fewer than 15% of films released theatrically were directed by women. For those who do receive funding and support, Kidman says, there’s undue pressure to “be perfect” on the first outing. “It can be changed,” she says, “but it can only be changed by actually being in the films of women.”

**WITH CURLY, STRAWBERRY-BLOND HAIR** and a preternaturally intense stare, Kidman stood out among the 14-year-olds in the Sydney-area youth acting school that a 27-year-old Campion once visited to cast her student film. Kidman won the part but dropped out, fearing she’d look silly in the stocking she had to wear on her head for the costume—now one of her biggest regrets. But the two stayed in touch, and Kidman consulted Campion after making the jump to Hollywood where, at first, her newsmaking marriage to Tom Cruise in 1990 threatened to overshadow her work.

“By the time she was married to Tom, people in America didn’t understand Nicole had a whole career in Australia that was revered,” Campion recalls. “They just thought she was riding on his career. She was in despair about the roles she was being offered, and wondering how she could change her trajectory.” Kidman jumped at opportunities to work with directors she admired. A series of performances in the late 1990s, in Gus Van Sant’s *To Die For*, Campion’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, and Sam Mendes’ staging of *The Blue Room* in London, proved her bona fides.

Kidman has since worked with auteur after auteur. When certain directors call, she doesn’t even read the script before saying yes: she gleefully signed onto Lars von Trier’s 2003 avant-garde thriller *Dogville*; Yorgos Lanthimos’ unsettling 2017 drama *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*; and Robert Eggers’ bloody 2022 fable, *The Northman*.

And, of course, Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut*. Reijn has said that *Babygirl* was, in part, inspired by Kidman’s performance. In the 1999 movie, her character shares a sexual fantasy that triggers a crisis of masculinity for her husband, played by Cruise. Reijn fantasized about Kidman’s character carrying out the imagined affair. It’s the kind of evolution Kidman hopes to encourage by opening doors for women: “Stanley was dealing with it from the male perspective, and Halina chose to reinterpret it as a woman.”

*Babygirl*, released on Christmas, capped a year of stories about women’s sexuality in midlife. Miranda July’s best seller *All Fours*, the Anne Hathaway romance *The Idea of You*, the Laura Dern movie *Lonely Planet*, and another Kidman



**‘WHAT  
MAKES HER  
HAPPY IS  
HER WORK.’**

—Director  
Jane Campion





project, *A Family Affair*, all featured women in their 40s and 50s entangled with younger lovers. “It’s always been there—it just hasn’t been told. Maybe it’s threatening,” Kidman says. But she is, as TIME’s film critic Stephanie Zacharek posited in her *Babygirl* review, in her “don’t give a f-ck” era. Kidman doesn’t swear, but she admits, giggling, that the sentiment resonates. “I have the philosophy to never fight anything,” she says. “Surrender.”

She’s come a long way from the teen who was embarrassed to wear a stocking on her head, Campion says. “That was a lesson to her later: be brave.”

**WHEN WE MEET**, Kidman has spent the previous day filming the crime series *Scarpetta* with Oscar

▲  
Kidman  
in Nashville

winner Jamie Lee Curtis in Nashville and will fly to Berlin in the evening to wrap Season 2 of *Nine Perfect Strangers* before turning around to promote Mimi Cave’s thriller *Holland* at SXSW in Austin in March. Last year alone, she starred in *A Family Affair*, the Lulu Wang-directed *Expats*, Susanne Bier’s beach-set *The Perfect Couple*, and the CIA drama *Lioness*—all before *Babygirl* hit theaters.

Kidman is able to partner with so many female directors in part because she never stops working. “People go, ‘You’re a superwoman,’” Kidman says. “I hate it.” She doesn’t feel super—she gets fatigued like anyone else—but she’s a lifelong people pleaser. She fretted over bringing home perfect grades. If she can’t think of the exact right response to a text, she’ll ignore it for weeks. She’s often compelled to say yes to roles because doing so creates jobs. “People work when Nicole works,” Curtis says. “I’m working because Nicole is working.”

And she knows it’s a privilege. She remembers times when she contemplated quitting: “When there was nothing exciting or relevant coming my way, when there was massive criticism or bullying, when your self-esteem is shattered, when you’ve been hit with some massive loss or grief and go, ‘I don’t want to get out of bed. It’s too frightening.’”

Campion has witnessed Kidman pull herself out of moments of strife. “She’s always been a star, and that star has come up and come down, but Nicole knows that in itself is not what makes her happy. What makes her happy is her work.”

Kidman has been on a run of producing and starring in projects about privileged matriarchs whose lives unravel when a secret comes to light. It’s not that she’s particularly attracted to her glamorous yet guarded characters—those just happen to be the stories that get greenlighted. “I am so open to starting something completely a mess and shattered,” she says. “Where is it? Give me the material.”

But the part works. Audiences eat up her rich, icy characters. Campion, art house to the core, concedes there’s value in Kidman’s ability to tap into a hungry, predominantly female audience. “You can’t have power without being commercial,” she says. “You have to make money. Women want material that fits them, not just macho superheroes.”

And there’s something deceptively progressive in those stories. Prestige roles for women often involve playing the supportive wife. But in her projects, Kidman is the star, with accomplished male actors—Alexander Skarsgard, Liev Schreiber, Antonio Banderas—bolstering her performances. When she says her onscreen husbands have been egoless, I can’t help but raise an eyebrow. “I’ve worked with some of the greatest male actors in the world, and they’ve been so generous. All of them. Is that crazy?” Kidman laughs. She wasn’t intending to flip a trope on its head. She just did it.



**‘THERE’S  
SO MANY  
WOMEN  
OUT THERE  
JUST LIKE  
ME ... AND  
IT MAY BE  
TOO LATE  
BY THE  
TIME THEY  
FIND OUT.’**

# OLIVIA MUNN

Raising awareness  
about breast cancer

*By Jamie Ducharme*

WHEN OLIVIA MUNN WAS DIAGNOSED with breast cancer in 2023, she struggled even to tell her family. Her now husband, comedian John Mulaney, had to break the news to her relatives because “the words got stuck in my throat,” the actor says.

Later, she found her voice in a big way. In a March 2024 Instagram post, Munn detailed her winding health journey. Just months before her diagnosis, she had a clean mammogram and tested negative for numerous genetic signatures associated with cancer. It wasn’t until her ob-gyn used

the Tyrer-Cuzick Risk Assessment Calculator—a simple tool that concluded Munn had a 37% chance of developing breast cancer—that she pursued additional testing, which revealed fast-growing cancer in both breasts. She had a double mastectomy shortly thereafter, and subsequently had her uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries removed to stop production of hormones that could feed her disease.

It was because her diagnosis was so unexpected that Munn decided to speak out. “I look at videos of me laughing with my son, running around in the park, feeling and looking healthy—all the while having this really aggressive, fast-moving cancer spreading through my breasts,” she says. “I thought, ‘Man, there’s so many women out there just like me.’ They might have no idea. And it may be too late by the time they find out.”

Munn’s candor has had a tangible impact. After she came forward, the National Cancer Institute saw an

uptick in use of the type of screening test she took, and at least one person—journalist Alison Hall—has gone public about being diagnosed as a result. “It was everything that I had hoped would happen,” Munn says.

Although Munn, 44, is still recovering, taking a range of medications and weathering the effects of medically induced menopause, she is also easing back into work, co-starring in the forthcoming Apple TV+ drama *Your Friends and Neighbors*. These days, Munn says, she has a simple barometer for roles: “If something comes around that makes me really happy, then I will do it.”

She’s applying the same philosophy to life. Conscious of the pivotal role hormones play in her health, she’s lowering her stress levels as much as possible. In difficult situations, “the first thing I ask myself is, ‘If this stress feeds any cancer that could possibly be in my body, would it be worth it?’” Munn says. “The answer is always no.”

## Fatou Baldeh

Fighting female genital mutilation

By Chantelle Lee

For Fatou Baldeh, the past year was critical in the fight to end female genital mutilation. A survivor and the founder of the organization Women in Liberation & Leadership (WILL), Baldeh, 41, is a leading activist fighting against the practice in Gambia. Although FGM has been banned in her country since 2015, it still happens: about 75% of women and girls ages 15 to 49 have been cut, according to the United Nations Population Fund. FGM can lead to long-lasting health effects and is internationally recognized as a human-rights violation. Advocates say the law banning the practice is poorly enforced. “We continue to have those issues where we will have a case, we go to the police and report, and the police would be like, ‘This is our culture, this is our tradition.’ So they do not see it as a crime,” Baldeh says.

This past year, Gambian parliamentarians considered a bill to overturn the ban. “This was an attack on women’s rights,” Baldeh says. She and WILL worked with other organizations to fight the bill. They connected with survivors, who shared their experiences with parliamentarians, and discussed the issue with religious leaders. They conducted a nationwide study to document the health impacts of FGM and brought that evidence to politicians. And they succeeded: in July 2024, Gambia’s parliament rejected the bill.

Baldeh says this past year has opened up the conversation: “People are talking about it, and that is a positive thing because we cannot end the practice if we don’t talk about it.” Baldeh says news of the bill has brought the issue of FGM back “in the limelight”—not just for Gambia, but for the rest of the world too. “It’s 2025, and little girls are being pinned down and their genitals are being cut in the name of culture and tradition,” she says. “When this whole issue happened in Gambia, it really made people pay attention.”



## Raquel Willis

Standing up for bodily autonomy

By Erin McMullen

Raquel Willis isn’t afraid to take risks. She has organized large-scale marches to protest violence against Black trans lives and rallied outside the Supreme Court to support the trans youth at the center of the ongoing case *U.S. v. Skrametti*, which will decide whether gender-affirming health care bans for minors are constitutional. Last December, Willis was arrested at the Capitol for staging a bathroom sit-in in defiance of a proposal to ban trans women from women’s restrooms on federal property. The title of her 2023 memoir, *The Risk It Takes to Bloom*, underlines her fearlessness.

But to Willis, “a proud Southern, Black, trans, queer woman” from Augusta, Ga., the riskiest thing she’s done so far is choose to live authentically. “Our society is not primed to honor queerness or transness,” she says.

Willis, 33, is the co-founder of Gender Liberation Movement (GLM), the grassroots collective responsible for the Brooklyn Liberation Marches that drew thousands of people in 2020 and 2021. In 2024, GLM organized an inaugural Gender Liberation March in Washington, D.C., in an effort

to highlight the ways in which the fights for abortion and trans rights are connected. “For us, gender liberation is about bodily autonomy, self-determination, the pursuit of fulfillment, and collectivism,” she explains. “We want to be the glue between these different fights and get people talking about how restrictive ideas around gender impact us all.” The way Willis sees it, restrictions on choices surrounding our bodies pose a danger to everyone, no matter how you identify.

“Many institutions have failed us and will continue to do so,” she says. Since President Trump’s Inauguration, a number of Executive Orders targeting trans and gender-nonconforming people have already been signed—one states that the U.S. will recognize only “two sexes, male and female.” But thinking of the long road ahead, Willis is trying to maintain a sense of calm. “We have to remember that communities on the margins have experienced struggles and hardships in every era. We’ll figure out solutions that serve us.” And, perhaps unsurprisingly, she adds, “I’m going to find ways to take risks to move us closer to collective liberation.”



# LAUFHEY

Refreshing bygone  
musical styles

By Andrew R. Chow

THERE'S ONLY ONE SINGER IN THE WORLD WHO has their jazz scat solos sung back at them note-for-note by arenas filled with adoring fans. That would be Laufey, a Gen Z artist who transcends genre and medium. The Icelandic 25-year-old (pronounced *Lay-vey*, full name Laufey Lin Bing Jonsdottir) draws inspiration from Ella Fitzgerald recordings, Schubert impromptus, and Taylor Swift bridges; she excels performing alongside solemn symphony orchestras as well as in lighthearted TikTok videos. While her untraditional approach has engendered backlash from genre gatekeepers, Laufey has learned to embrace opposition.

"I used to think that was such a scary thing: that nobody had walked that trail before me," she says, taking a break from recording her upcoming third studio album in New York City. "But I now realize that when you're the one determining which steps to take next and which branches to pull to the side, that's when you know you have something good on your hands."

Laufey's music most closely aligns with the Great American Songbook: swinging, debonair midcentury pop written by the likes of Cole Porter and Jerome Kern. While she comes from a classical-music family and learned to play classical piano and cello at an early age, she veered toward jazz standards as a teenager. "The Great American Songbook is my bible," she says. At the Berklee College of Music in Boston, a hotbed for rising jazz prodigies, Laufey honed a singing voice tailor-made for the genre: low, rich, and honeyed, with traces of Peggy Lee.

When the school sent students home in the spring of 2020, Laufey returned to Iceland and began posting videos of herself recording mid-century classics. These comforting, cozy videos drew an audience during a time when solace and escapism were badly needed. "I want people to enjoy the music without feeling like they have to be super educated on its history," she says. "Like any other kind of music, it can be something that lifts you up or accompanies you on a sad day."

Laufey could have turned this success into gigs on the jazz circuit, performing familiar repertoire. Instead, she started writing her own material: songs in the style of those old standards, but imbued with modern slang and conveying big, relatable feelings, especially the throes of unrequited love. "Listening to you harp on 'bout



some new soulmate/ 'She's so perfect,' blah, blah, blah," she sings on "From the Start," which now has 600 million streams on Spotify. "How I wish you'll wake up one day/ Run to me."

**WITH THEIR COUNTERINTUITIVE MIX** of influences and nostalgic quality, Laufey's songs earned her fans of all ages, but especially Gen Z. On TikTok, she has displayed a cunning social media fluency, posting acoustic versions of pop songs, outfit pics, and memes to her 7 million followers. Her dance moves were imported into the video game *Fortnite*, and she's made fast friends with other Gen Z rebels like Olivia Rodrigo and Beabadoobee. "There are a lot of young women who connect with each other—and me—through this feeling of being the outcast," she says.

She's also thrived performing in front of audiences who love orchestra arrangements and earned the plaudits of older artists who have also blended jazz and pop, like Norah Jones and Jon Batiste. Last year, she won her first Grammy for Best Traditional Pop Vocal Album, typically a stodgy category, for *Bewitched*.

Laufey's rapid ascent has led some to anoint her as jazz's savior. This, in turn, has angered jazz musicians who feel she isn't doing enough to engage with the genre's varied history or

**'I WANT PEOPLE TO ENJOY THIS MUSIC WITHOUT FEELING LIKE THEY HAVE TO BE SUPER EDUCATED ON ITS HISTORY.'**



boundary-pushing present. Laufey brushes off both the crown and the criticism. While she says that “90% of the music on [her] albums is not jazz,” she fiercely defends her right to engage with the genre. “It’s really easy to point at a young woman and say she doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” she says. “But I know I’ve studied this enough to understand exactly what it is.”

While *Bewitched* relied on classical and acoustic instruments, Laufey says her upcoming record will be more “daring,” mix genres more fluidly, and expand her sonic palette with newer sounds. “I want to see if I can keep the integrity of my music but also allow myself to try out a bit of what modern technology allows,” she says.

Plenty of artists have gotten in trouble with their fans for expanding their sense of self and trying new modes of expression. This sort of experimentation might be especially challenging for some Laufey fans who view her music as purely a nostalgia act. But if there’s anything she has learned in the past few years, it’s the importance of refusing to be boxed into categories. “The fact that the jazz and classical worlds seem to struggle with the idea of an artist being both commercially successful and musically interesting—it breaks my heart a little,” Laufey says. “Why can’t I be both?”

LAUFHEY: BJ PASCUAL; BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: COOPER NEILL—THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

## Claire Babineaux-Fontenot

Serving the hungry

By Solcyré Burga

Claire Babineaux-Fontenot, CEO of Feeding America, began to work at the country’s largest domestic hunger-relief organization—overseeing a network of more than 200 food banks and 60,000 partners—two years before the COVID-19 pandemic shook the global economy. Many people assume that food insecurity rates peaked in 2020, when those facing hunger became more outwardly visible, Babineaux-Fontenot says, but the problem is now more pressing than ever. “When all of those long lines of cars and the people that they represented went back to the insides of buildings, it’s like they disappeared from the American consciousness,” she says.

In 2023, an estimated 13.5% of households, or 1 in 7, were food insecure, up from 10.5% in 2020, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The price of food in the country has risen by nearly 28% since 2019. And while that rate has recently slowed, the emphasis on the economy in the 2024 election showed just how urgent an issue the cost of living has become for Americans.

Babineaux-Fontenot, 60, embraces the nonpartisan nature of her work. “No matter what your political positions are in this country, people consistently believe that people deserve to have access to nutritious food,” she says. Her purpose as a nonprofit leader has been deeply informed by her untraditional upbringing in a family with 108 children (connected via biology, fostering, and adoption), and by her Catholic faith, instilled in her by her devout parents.

Last year, her dedication to service earned her the University of Notre Dame’s prestigious Laetare Medal, previously awarded to Presidents Joe Biden and John F. Kennedy. “To have been bestowed the highest honor bestowed to an American Catholic and to know how imperfectly I walk presented a bit of a challenge to me,” says Babineaux-Fontenot. “There will be nothing I’m asked to do in this work that will ever be anywhere near as difficult as what tens of millions of people in this country are asked to do every day. And I’m privileged that I get the chance to be their partner in this.”



# JORDAN CHILES & A'JA WILSON

Changing the game

By Lucy Feldman

JORDAN CHILES CLOCKED A'JA WILSON RIGHT away at a Nike event in the run-up to the Paris Olympics. The gymnast had watched the WNBA star for years, and they became fast friends. “We were vibing out,” Chiles says.

The mood is upbeat and jokes are flying when Wilson, 28, and Chiles, 23, reunite for a conversation about a landmark year in women’s sports, which in 2024 received unprecedented attention and surging investment. The WNBA and National Women’s Soccer League enjoyed record-breaking viewership. Athletes signed massive sponsorship deals. And for the first time in the history of the Olympics, an equal number of women and men competed.

Throughout it all, Wilson and Chiles reached individual career highs. Coming off back-to-back championships with the Las Vegas Aces in 2022 and 2023, Wilson set new league records for points and rebounds and picked up her third MVP title. She helped lead the U.S. Olympic team to gold in Paris and was named tournament MVP. Chiles, meanwhile, helped her team reclaim gold after a silver in Tokyo. And she was awarded bronze for her Beyoncé-inspired routine in the individual floor-exercise competition, a twist ending after her coach filed an inquiry with the judges that resulted in an updated score. (That medal has been rescinded, which Chiles and USA Gymnastics have contested.)

The athletes spoke about women’s sports’ big year, the pressures they face, and future plans.

**You both had a stellar year, but there have also been lows. A’ja, you wanted a third straight WNBA title, but it didn’t happen. How do you cope with that disappointment?**

**Wilson:** Not getting the three-peat was hard. The regret is the hardest part that I’ve had to

deal with in this offseason, because I’m like, “What could I have done differently to get a different outcome?” When in reality, it just wasn’t our time. But it’s part of the game—it’s the healthy balance that you’ve got to fight through.

**Jordan, you’ve been in headlines about the controversy over the bronze. I know that was a huge heartbreak. Where are you with that?**

**Chiles:** At the beginning, it was hard. I had to just push through and see where it would go. I’m in college now, and I have the ability to perform my life away at UCLA. People are always coming to me and just being like, “You’re always gonna be loved.” So I’m now just able to take what I have, let everybody do the outside work, and just push myself forward.

**You can’t talk about specifics since the case is ongoing, but A’ja, you can say whatever you want. Did Jordan deserve the bronze?**

**Wilson:** Stop playing me. What kind of question is that? Yes. It’s a no-brainer. And I was pissed. Honestly, I prayed for you.

**Chiles:** Thank you.

**Wilson:** I know those moments are hard—and here I go, about to cry—you worked your ass off to get to that.

**A’ja, you became the first WNBA player to score 1,000 points in a single season—**

**Chiles:** Moment of silence, please!

**After that game, you told your teammates there are times that you hate being A’ja Wilson. Later, you said you were talking about some of the challenges that come with being a Black player in the league. Can you take me back to that moment?**

**Wilson:** Being a professional athlete, people assume that you’re supposed to be this perfect human being, you have no worries. I needed my teammates to understand that there are days where they may see me and they’re like, That’s our captain, but there are also days where I’m faking it, because I know that I have to show up for them. There’s days where I’m struggling. It’s moments where, no matter how hard you work, it still feels like you’re not getting the recognition. I needed them to understand that they help me in more ways than they’ll ever know.

**Chiles:** I cried watching the video, and I watched it over and over again. It’s really cool to know that you are able to speak your vulnerable self.





**We're constantly told to be vulnerable, but doing so also invites feedback that can be tough. How do you navigate that?**

**Chiles:** If I had the choice, I wouldn't share anything about my life. But then I wouldn't be able to give the younger generation something to look at. How I think of it is, if you're gonna sit there and critique somebody, try to get underneath

Chiles and Wilson reunited post-Olympics in Las Vegas

their skin, then it's something that's inside of you that you're not OK with.

**Wilson:** I'm the complete opposite. I talk back. I like to be petty, because if you got time, then I'm gonna have all the time in the world.

**Caitlin Clark got blowback from something she said in a recent TIME story. Essentially, she acknowledged she has certain privileges as a white player and wants to do what she can to help ensure Black players, who have built the league, get more visibility and investment. How does that resonate with you?**

**Wilson:** It's powerful to me. As a Black woman in the WNBA, we have our struggles in showcasing who we really are. You work so hard, but you still have to work 10 times harder just to be seen. When we can have our counterparts speak up, it speaks volumes to me, because they're in spaces where my path is never supposed to go. It's crazy that we're talking about that in 2025, but it's real.

**Jordan, you, Simone Biles, and Brazil's Rebeca Andrade all received medals for floor exercise and made up the first all-Black podium in gymnastics. How have you seen the sport evolve since you started?**

**Chiles:** The diversity in our sport has obviously changed a lot. That all-Black podium was just the beginning of something that will hopefully continue. It's always going to be in history books, no matter what, and I really appreciate knowing that I was a part of that.

**A'ja, what would it take for there to be true equity between the WNBA and the NBA?**

**Wilson:** A lot. We would have to switch body parts. It will take a shift of society to understand that we are all, both leagues, great at what we do. We can't worry about constantly having to work to be equal. We're gonna do it with what we have now. Yeah, I would love for my bank account to look like an NBA player's, but realistically, will it ever get there? I don't know. But what I do know is what I got now and how I can continue just to spread that out to young girls, so then when they get up and want to play in the W, maybe the accounts will look the same.

**Are we going to see you at the 2028 Olympics?**

**Chiles:** Why are you looking at me? She asked you!

**Wilson:** She asked both!

**Chiles:** Mine's not a yes and mine's not a no.

**Wilson:** Mine is a better—you better.

**Chiles:** Period.

**Wilson:** She's gonna be there too. See us in L.A.



## Purnima Devi Barman

Saving a species

*By Kyla Mandel*

Purnima Devi Barman remembers the day her life changed. It was 2007, and she got a call that a tree, home to a family of greater adjutant storks, was being chopped down in India's Assam state, where she lives. When Barman arrived, a nest of endangered baby storks was on the ground. Shocked, she asked the man who cut down the tree: Why would you do this? He told her the bird is a bad omen, a pest, a disease carrier. The stork is locally known as *hargila*, or bone swallower, because of its tendency to be found near garbage dumps. Her neighbors were angry at her for questioning the man's actions.

"Everyone surrounded me, started whistling at me," the biologist and wildlife conservationist, 45, recalls. But all she could think about were her infant twin daughters. Like the storks, they were so small. Barman was compelled to rescue the birds. Feeling their heartbeats moved her. "For the first time, I felt the importance—the call of nature," she says. "From that day, my mission started."

At the time, there were an estimated 450 greater adjutant storks left in the region. In 2023, thanks to Barman's work, the stork was moved from endangered status under the International Union for Conservation of Nature's classification to "near threatened." Their population in Assam has soared to more than 1,800.

Barman could not have done this without her "Hargila Army"—a team of some 20,000 women who protect the birds' nests and educate others about the beauty of these imposing, nearly 5-ft.-tall scavengers. The network is ever expanding, not just in Assam but also throughout India and now Cambodia. Schools as far away as France teach students about her work.

Today, Barman proudly dons her traditional dress and shawl decorated with images of the storks woven by members of the Hargila Army who are able to earn a living by selling such items. Be it clothing, songs, or celebrating baby showers for new chicks, says Barman, "this bird is now a part of our tradition and culture."

# GISÈLE PELICOT

Galvanizing survivors of  
sexual violence

*By Vivienne Walt*

WERE IT NOT FOR A SECURITY GUARD IN A small-town supermarket, the world might never have known of Gisèle Pelicot—and indeed, she might have remained in her own mind a mother of three and grandmother of seven comfortably retired in picture-perfect Provence with her husband of more than 50 years, Dominique Pelicot.

Instead, Dominique's arrest in 2020, for surreptitiously filming up the skirts of women as they shopped, shattered the veneer of domestic tranquility, culminating in a 2024 rape trial the likes of which France—and much of the world—had rarely seen. The evidence was as overwhelming as it was chilling: police found more than 20,000 photos and videos on Dominique's laptop and other devices showing Gisèle, drugged into unconsciousness by her husband, being raped on their bed by more than 70 different men without her knowledge over nearly a decade; Dominique marked one folder of videos simply "Abuse."

The horrors, and Gisèle's response to them, made headlines around the world as she defiantly chose to waive her legal right to anonymity. By the time Dominique Pelicot, 72, and 50 others were convicted last December of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault, Gisèle had gone from obscurity to global icon in the campaign against sexual violence, training a deeply unsettling microscope on its darkest corners.

**A DIMINUTIVE PRESENCE** in the Avignon courthouse, clad in tailored shirts and fine scarves, Gisèle, 72, insisted on attending the entire three-month trial and having the horrific footage aired publicly before her attackers. For many French, she defined heroism: an ordinary person taking extraordinary actions. Thousands marched in support. Murals of her face appeared across the country. A banner hung from Avignon's ancient ramparts reading **MERCI GISÈLE**. After the verdicts, she acknowledged her significance, telling hundreds of journalists, "I think of all the other victims whose stories remain untold ... We share the same fight."

And yet, that fight will not be easily won. Amid the detritus of a shattered family, and despite France reeling from the testimony, the





question remains: Will Gisèle Pelicot's act of profound bravery create lasting change?

A French parliamentary study in January estimated only 20% of the country's rape survivors ever press charges. Of those cases, about 94% are dismissed without a trial, according to one study last year. Unlike the U.S. and many countries in Europe, France does not define rape as sex without consent, but rather as intercourse committed by violence, surprise, constraint, or threat. Lawyers say the narrow definition complicates rape cases; the French Parliament is now debating how to change it. Gisèle Pelicot's attackers—many of them fathers and husbands, including a nurse, a journalist, and truck drivers—argued that Dominique's invitations for them to have sex with his unconscious wife seemed as good as having her permission, and 17 have since appealed their convictions. "These men looked at these videos and said, 'That is not rape,'" Gisèle's lawyer Antoine Camus tells *TIME*, shaking his head in dismay. He believes the intense focus on his client might finally force legal changes. "This is the first time in France you have deep thinking on this," he says. "I think there will be a 'before' and 'after' of this trial."

Sexual-violence experts caution that legal measures are just the start. Some fear that making Gisèle Pelicot a hero might absolve

**'SHE DOES NOT WANT MEDALS PINNED ON HER JACKET. SHE WANTS THINGS TO CHANGE.'**

—Anne Bouillon,  
attorney for sexual-  
violence survivors

people from confronting the deeper, troubling truths about her ordeal, including how in 21st century France this could have occurred, and for so long. "She does not want medals pinned on her jacket. She wants things to change," posits Anne Bouillon, an attorney in the French city of Nantes who specializes in representing survivors and has been following the case.

In some ways, change has already come. Gisèle Pelicot's courageous fight against sexual violence has blasted open a sealed door through which other survivors now feel free to walk. "I hear this from my clients who I see every day in my office," Bouillon says. "They mention Gisèle Pelicot as an authorization to speak out. It is amazing."

Gisèle herself said it best, from a place she never imagined being: on the witness stand last October, with the world's attention fixed on her. "I wanted all women victims of rape—not just when they have been drugged, rape exists at all levels—I want those women to say, 'Madame Pelicot did it, we can do it too,'" she said. Her motivation to participate so publicly in her trial, she said, was not simply courage. "I say it is not bravery," she told the court. "It is will and determination to change society." Few can claim to have as credible a chance to do just that.



**‘YOU NEED COURAGE TO START SOMETHING, BUT YOU NEED EVEN MORE COURAGE TO QUIT.’**

# ANNA SAWAI

Breaking barriers onscreen

By Cate Matthews

It was at an early screening for *Shogun* that Anna Sawai realized the significance the historical epic set in feudal Japan would take on for audiences. A young woman approached her and tearfully shared what it meant to her to see Sawai’s portrayal of Lady Mariko, a *naginata*-wielding translator who, amid weighty societal expectations, still lives according to her own moral compass. “I’ve always felt this weird pressure to be a good person and to be easy to work with,” Sawai recalls the young woman saying, a pressure she then tied to the expectations she faced as a

Japanese woman.

Sawai, who has also appeared in Apple TV+’s *Pachinko* and *Monarch: Legacy of Monsters*, is cognizant of the responsibility that she and others in the industry bear as storytellers—especially when it comes to portrayals of Asian women, who have long been objectified and sexualized in Hollywood. “We have so much more inside of us,” says Sawai, a New Zealand-born, Japanese actor. “I want to make sure that the roles that I choose are not going to perpetuate those images that I feel are incorrect, and I want to make sure that they’re very human.”

*Shogun*, FX’s most expensive scripted series of all time, took home a record 18 Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Drama Series, in September—the most that any single season of a television show has ever received. Sawai, 32, became the first Asian woman to win the Emmy for Lead Actress in a Drama, and later

received its sister trophy at the Golden Globes in January.

Following the samurai-era series’ widespread success, Sawai has been approached about taking part in new period pieces. But she’s also excited to try her hand at other genres, including rom-coms and action and adventure. “I want the next role that I find to be something that challenges me, because I haven’t done it in the past,” she says. “I don’t want to keep repeating what I’ve done.”

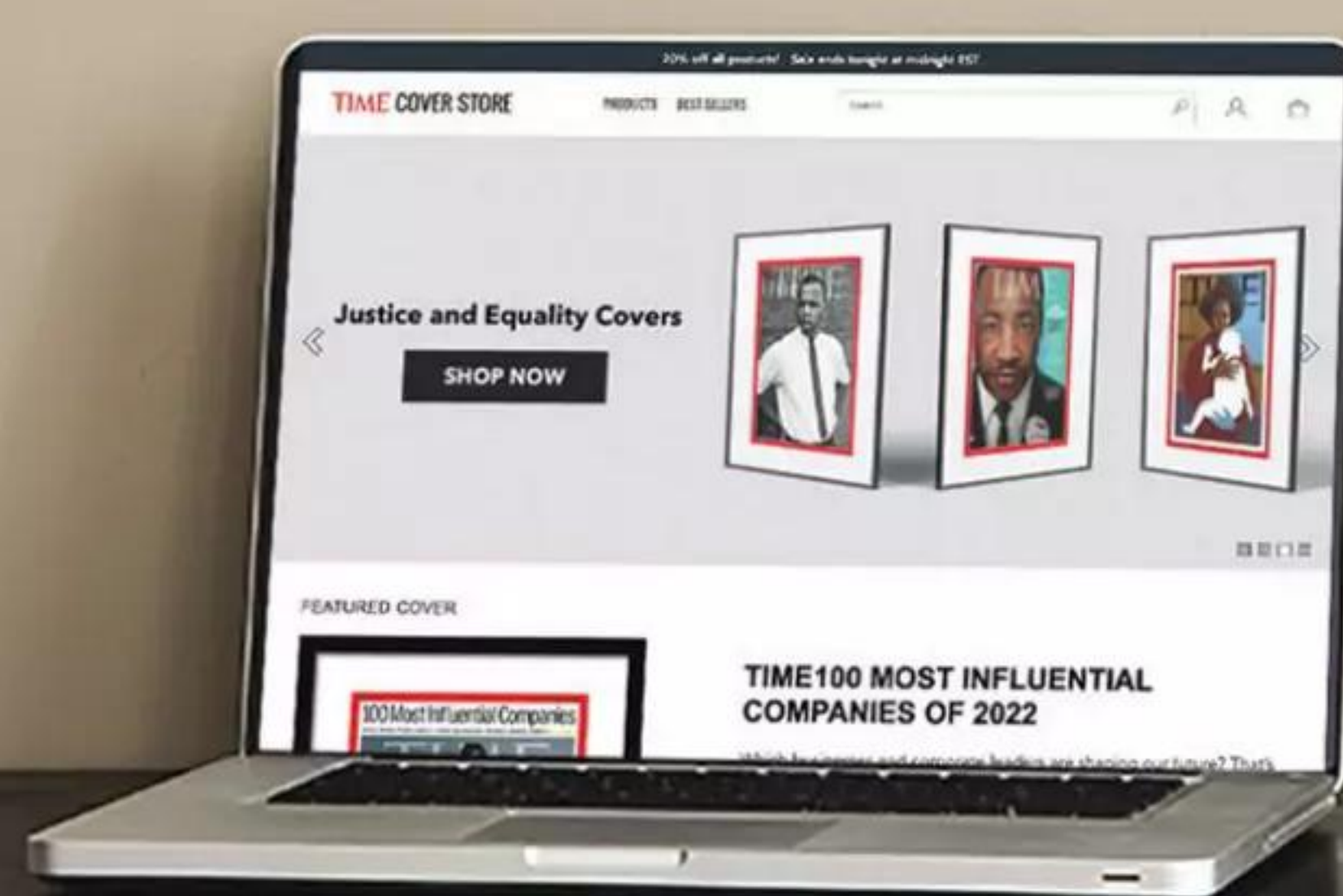
That desire calls back to a crucial decision she made in 2018, when she abandoned her early career as a singer, despite pressure to stay in her girl group, and restart her career as an actor. “You need courage to start something, but you need even more courage to quit,” she says of that leap of faith. “If there is a part of you that’s going to look back and think, Oh, I should have maybe tried something new—then you should do it.”

# TIME COVER STORE



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## Laura Modi

Creating options for new parents

By Eliana Dockterman

Laura Modi, a CEO and mother of four, is intimately familiar with the stigmas around feeding a newborn. When raising money for Bobbie, the organic formula company she co-founded, a visibly pregnant Modi pitched the idea to a male investor who scolded her for discouraging women from breastfeeding. “I went to pure motherly fury. I came back with, ‘What would you say to a woman who wasn’t able to feed their baby?’”

His loss. The market for parents who cannot breastfeed—or choose not to—is robust. Within 18 months of launching in 2021, Bobbie, whose European-style products are sought after because they omit typical additives like corn syrup, surpassed \$100 million in revenue.

Bobbie for Change, the company’s mission-driven arm, pushes for parental leave, gives free formula to moms who have had mastectomies, and has introduced legislation that would bolster U.S. manufacturing to help prevent another formula shortage like the one that created a crisis for millions of families in 2022. When wildfires devastated Los Angeles earlier this year, Bobbie provided formula for families who lost their homes. “I didn’t get into this because I like making powdered milk,” Modi, 39, says. “Becoming a parent makes you an activist.” She believes that Bobbie’s advocacy wins over new customers.

Bobbie also partners with influencers like tennis champion Naomi Osaka, *Queer Eye*’s Tan France, and cookbook author Molly Baz, who recently posed on a billboard in New York City’s Times Square breastfeeding her son while also holding a Bobbie bottle. “We could have chosen to have her on a billboard feeding her baby a bottle, and we didn’t,” Modi says. “We respected that she was a combo feeder, and having her baby on her boob was showing the world it’s not your typical formula company. We paint a picture of all feeding journeys.”



## Amanda Zurawski

Turning personal tragedy into activism

By Charlotte Alter

Amanda Zurawski never set out to be an activist. But in 2022, when she was four months pregnant after years of trying, her life changed forever. She dilated too early, her water broke at just 18 weeks, and suddenly, her pregnancy was in distress. Zurawski’s doctors told her “with complete certainty” that she would lose the baby.

If Zurawski, now 37, had lived in another state, or in another time, her doctors would’ve been able to give her standard medical treatment, in this case an abortion. She would’ve been able to heal and go on to have a healthy pregnancy. But Zurawski lived in Texas in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs* decision. Her water broke the same week that Texas’ trigger law went into effect, banning abortion in almost all circumstances.

Because her fetus still had a heartbeat, her doctors could not treat her miscarriage. “I had to wait until the baby died inside me or for me to be on death’s door before I could get care,” she says. She went into septic shock and was hospitalized for a week. “Now my reproductive organs are permanently compromised,” she says.

After sharing her story publicly,

Zurawski became the lead plaintiff in the Center for Reproductive Rights’ lawsuit challenging Texas’s abortion ban. That lawsuit, *Zurawski v. Texas*, inspired others around the country. Zurawski became the face of the abortion-rights movement, and her story became one of the most prominent examples of the dangers abortion bans pose to women’s health.

In May 2024 the Texas Supreme Court upheld the ban. The decision felt like “a slap in the face,” Zurawski recalls. “It felt like they were trying to take away our voices, erase us from history, and silence us.”

Zurawski refused to back down. She made dozens of campaign trips for President Joe Biden and then Vice President Kamala Harris over the course of 2024, warning about the dangers another Donald Trump presidency would pose to reproductive justice.

After Harris lost, Zurawski was devastated. But she didn’t let herself wallow for long. “The anti-choice movement would want us to be tired, they’d want us to rest,” she says. “It’s not in my nature to give up. It can get worse, and it will, if we don’t continue to fight.”



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# Time Off

## FACING THE ABYSS

BY RACHEL SONIS

Michelle Zauner's new album with Japanese Breakfast explores the many ways in which sadness pervades modern womanhood



INSIDE

ZERO DAY IS A POLITICAL THRILLER MINUS THE POLITICS

A NEW FILM CAPTURES ARTISTS CREATING THROUGH WAR

**M**ICHELLE ZAUNER WANTS TO SET THE RECORD straight: She is not trying to reclaim the label “sad girl music.” Since announcing the title of her highly anticipated fourth studio album, *For Melancholy Brunettes (& sad women)*, the author, director, and front woman of indie-pop band Japanese Breakfast has been surprised to see how divisive the title has become, and the assumptions it’s given way to. Some thought she was writing a collection of sad breakup songs, others that she was taking ownership of a label that has previously been wielded with the intent to belittle or insult.

“I think [the album title] was a little bit tongue-in-cheek,” Zauner says with a chuckle over Zoom in early February. “And it was maybe taken very literally.”

“Sad girl music” is a fraught subject, and Zauner chooses her words carefully. “I don’t want to get into trouble,” she says, explaining that a lot of brilliant women songwriters get unfairly punted into that category. And it’s true: the music industry and the internet have made a nasty habit of reducing songwriting by women that deals with complex emotions in this way—Phoebe Bridgers, Mitski, and Lana Del Rey have had to fend off these degrading designations for years.

Zauner, though, is interested to see what people will say once they’ve had a listen to the project in its entirety. With the album due March 21, Zauner, 35, finds herself in a constant state of “caring, then not caring, and then pretending to care.” Her mood matches the weather outside our windows: “I’m a winter person in the sense that I feel like I must suffer through something to enjoy the coming season,” she says and laughs heartily. The stakes feel high after her past few years. *For Melancholy Brunettes* arrives four years after Zauner’s rise from indie-music darling to literary heavyweight with the release of her wildly successful, gut-punching memoir *Crying in H Mart*, which explored her Korean American identity and her relationship with her late mother Chongmi, who died of cancer in 2014. Written in arresting, empathetic prose, it became an instant *New York Times* best seller and is currently in its 39th printing.

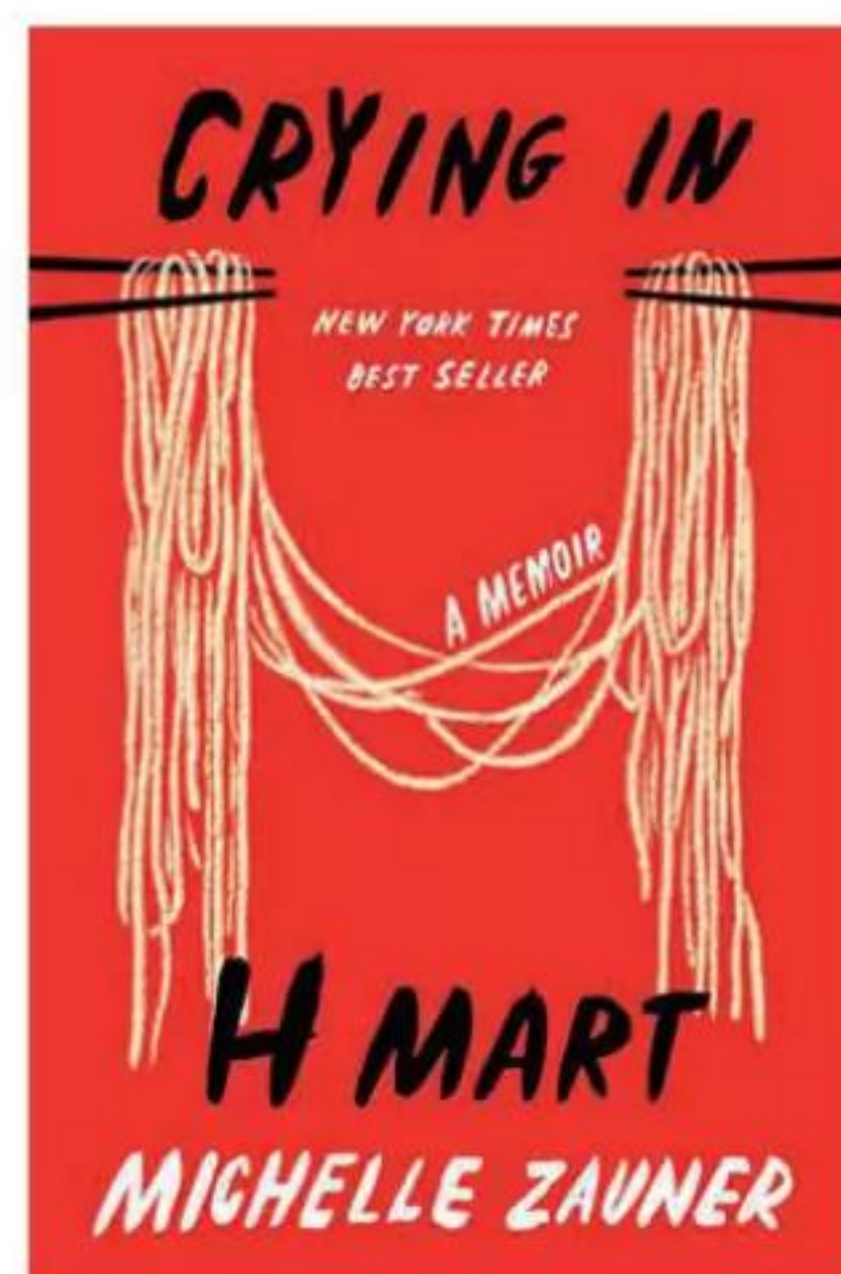
Zauner followed up *Crying in H Mart* with Japanese Breakfast’s third studio album, *Jubilee*. Unlike the book, the album took a sharp turn away from grief into cathartic joy, blending dreamy synth-pop chords with shoe-gaze sensibilities. It was equally met with critical success, earning the group nominations for Best New Artist and Best Alternative Music Album at the 2022 Grammys.

*For Melancholy Brunettes (& sad women)*, though, is worlds away from the sonic landscape of *Jubilee*. It’s not quite in the sphere of *Crying in H Mart*, either. Here, Zauner is exploring something bleaker—crueler and more punishing. She’s trying to see what darkness, of all different kinds, looks like when you stare it right in the face.

**WHEN I ASK** what comes to mind when Zauner thinks of melancholy brunettes, she excitedly whips out her phone to rattle off some references: Paintings like *L’Absinthe* by Edgar Degas, *Tired* by Ramón Casas, and *The Wedding Dress* by Frederick Elwell—all interpretations of women



▲  
Zauner, second from right, performs with Japanese Breakfast



experiencing massive despair—were hugely informative to the record. They were especially important to the album art, which sees Zauner looking like a gothic, Brontëesque character, face down on a table surrounded by a plentiful feast. “I like the idea of being someone just collapsed on a table, surrounded by a wealth of goods. Like a spoiled prince or something,” she explains.

When Zauner began writing *For Melancholy Brunettes* in the winter of 2022, she was clear that she wanted to do something from a more introspective place. As she began piecing the songs together, Zauner was also reading—a lot. She wanted to explore how the concept of melancholy has evolved in stories of love and longing, society and familial relationships over time. She worked her way from European Romanticism to Greek mythology before turning to Gothic Romance classics like *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Frankenstein*, and even modernist staples like *The Magic Mountain* by German author Thomas Mann, which is her husband and fellow bandmate Peter Bradley’s favorite book and directly inspired a song on the album.

She also became increasingly fascinated with works “that could be





categorized as part of the incel canon,” Zauner says—books that the mostly male subculture of self-described “involuntary celibates” has glorified for their depiction of loneliness and manhood—think *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis and *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace. Zauner hoped to better understand why this type of “confused masculinity” and *Joker*-like anger and loneliness emerges; how these aggrieved and occasionally violent men process the world.

“If I look back at my very early work, it’s always been [there]—this fear of men,” she says. “There is this disappointment and fear of men, and these creepy stories—like an ominous thing has happened or is about to happen—that threads the songs together.”

Indeed, listening to the new album feels not unlike you’re Cathy (or Heathcliff) staring at the misty English moors, as impending doom envelops you from all angles: On “Honey Water,” a woman finds herself in a marriage to a slimy, unfaithful man, and equates him to a thirsty bug. On “Mega Circuit,” a lustful spectator watches a gang of incels meander around over a feverish, sinister guitar shuffle. On “Little Girl,” perhaps one of the most devastating ballads on the

record, a father, urinating in a corner of a lonely hotel room, wonders how he became estranged from his daughter. (“Seven years of running at this breakneck speed/ Convalescing cheaply far abroad/ Dreaming of a daughter who won’t speak to me/ Running for her father coming home.”) Dramatic as they may seem, these sentiments are strikingly relatable—feelings of yearning and amorphous despair on an album releasing in the middle of a public-health crisis of loneliness. The lyrics, the storytelling, the sparse, meticulous melodies—it’s all so beautifully punishing, and that is exactly the point.

**AFTER HER MOM DIED**, Zauner says, she “became very work-obsessed.” While work was a grounding force, it came at a cost: “I kind of lost track of any form of self-care or personal life, or family and friends.” Following the release of *Crying in H Mart* and then *Jubilee* (and a much-needed sabbatical in Korea), Zauner found herself thinking about what it means to be a creative working woman in her mid-30s—the price one pays for their ambitions. It was playing on Zauner’s mind a lot as she was making *For Melancholy Brunettes*, especially when she thought about balancing her work with expanding her family.

“There is this anticipatory grief about wanting to become a mother and having to reckon with the creative loss that that will usher in,” Zauner says. “I was thinking about how much I’ve excused men for poor behavior because of their positions of power and the work that they’ve had to do to provide for their family.” Now, as Zauner has grown into her creative career, she questions the elusive balancing act between the “narcissism that

**‘If I look back at my very early work, it’s always been there, this fear of men, this disappointment.’**

MICHELLE ZAUNER

comes with being an artist and [the desire to be] a good human being.”

It’s what drew her to write the album’s lead single, “Orlando in Love.” Inspired by John Cheever’s nod to *Orlando Innamorato*, an unfinished epic poem by the Renaissance poet Matteo Maria Boiardo, the song is equal parts a story about “a foolish, romantic guy” who succumbs to a siren’s call, and Zauner’s personal reflection on success. “You’re pursuing your dreams in a very foolhardy way, and sometimes you’re punished for just how straight you’re going with it,” she says. “Like, if you go too far in your ambitions, it likely will not end well.”

**THE 2025 GRAMMYS** happened a week before Zauner and I spoke, and the internet was still buzzing not only from Beyoncé’s finally winning Album of the Year, but another artist who unequivocally spoke their mind that night: Chappell Roan. Roan, who received the Grammy for Best New Artist, got up to the podium and called out the record industry for not supporting emerging artists with necessities like a livable wage and health insurance. When Zauner heard this, she immediately took to X to congratulate Roan, writing, “f-ck ya Chappell!!!!” That got her in a bit of trouble: some people interpreted “ya” to mean an insulting “you” instead of an enthusiastic “yes.” Zauner couldn’t believe it.

“Let the record show that I thought it was amazing, and I think it’s so ridiculous how much crap she has to endure for all of the good that she’s putting into the world. She inspires me to be a more outspoken, braver artist,” Zauner says. Having been nominated in the same category, she finds it a bit funny that these award shows so aggressively avoid naming the problems that plague the same industry they are celebrating. But Roan, she says, “very eloquently and very courageously said exactly what the problem is.”

Perhaps that’s what *For Melancholy Brunettes (& sad women)* is trying to do, too. Naming the problem—and hoping that despite the scars, the battle wounds, the punishment, and the castigations, we’ll all come out the other end into the light. □

REVIEW

## Zero Day's uncannily apolitical Washington

BY JUDY BERMAN

IN AN EARLY SCENE OF THE NETFLIX THRILLER *ZERO DAY*, a former U.S. President is visiting the site of a deadly Manhattan subway crash when an onlooker starts shouting about crisis actors. A fight breaks out. Barricades fall. The chaos horrifies George Mullen, a revered leader played by Robert De Niro, who has been summoned to soothe the public after a cataclysmic event. “What’s the matter with you?” he scolds the agitator. “If we keep shouting at each other, what are we gonna accomplish? We’re Americans! . . . You’re afraid. And you think if you get worked up over some bullsh-t conspiracy nonsense, that won’t make you afraid? No. You’re not behaving like an American, nor a patriot.”

It’s a cathartic rant, even if you’re aware that it takes more than a stern lecture from an authority figure to cure conspiracy thinking—and especially if you’ve been less than impressed with the moral instincts or off-the-cuff oratory of our last few real Commanders in Chief. Intelligent, principled, and brave, Mullen has all the qualities any reasonable person would want in a President. As an admirer marvels, he was also “the last President in modern memory who was able to consistently rally bipartisan support.” Which raises the questions: What political party does Mullen actually represent? What policies did he champion, and what did he accomplish?

We never find out. Creators Eric Newman (*American Primeval*, *Narcos*) and Noah Oppenheim, a former president of NBC News, are so thorough in their avoidance of naming characters’ parties and positions, it must have been a choice. *Zero Day* is a well-built political thriller, with a superb cast and blockbuster production values. It takes pains to establish an atmosphere of division and distrust that mirrors the present. Yet its evasion of the substance of contemporary American polarization—an increasingly common approach in a Hollywood desperate for hits that will play in red states, blue states, and internationally—undermines that verisimilitude. The show’s extreme efforts to avoid offense, the bromides about truth and liberty it offers in lieu of more specific and potentially controversial insights, feel a bit like a betrayal of its plainspoken hero.

**WHEN WE MEET** President Mullen, he is immersed in the pleasures of retirement. Living in bucolic upstate New York, he goes on leisurely morning jogs with his dog, swims in an outdoor pool worthy of *Architectural Digest*, neglects a long-delayed memoir as his publisher grows impatient. But when the nation is hit with a cyberattack—the power grid briefly crashes, causing accidents that kill thousands, as “This Will Happen Again” appears on every smartphone screen—George is persuaded by the current POTUS (a presidential but underused Angela Bassett) to find the culprit and prevent a second catastrophe.



▲  
*De Niro and Bassett play two American Presidents whose politics remain a total mystery*

A President’s work is never done, even when he’s no longer President. While Russia emerges as the obvious suspect, evidence points elsewhere. George has the integrity to follow it.

There is a sense that in leading the investigative commission, he is resolving unfinished business. A popular single-term President, he declined to run for re-election after the death of his adult son. (You may well notice parallels to a certain recent occupant of the White House.) But, as ethical and sharp as he usually seems, George is still an elderly man with a bathroom cabinet full of prescriptions. Moments of disorientation coupled with what might be hallucinations force him to question the soundness of his mind—and he’s not the only one.

Netflix was clearly invested in making *Zero Day* a hit. Directed by prestige-TV fixture Lesli Linka Glatter (*Homeland*, *Mad Men*), the six-episode series is as stylish and fleet as any feature thriller and smartly deploys its big-name actors. George’s wife, a judge portrayed by Joan Allen, is worried enough about him to beg his hypercompetent former White House



chief of staff (Connie Britton) to join the commission. Lizzy Caplan is George's aggrieved daughter, Alex, a Congresswoman. Alex has found a surrogate father in Matthew Modine's slick House Speaker. Jesse Plemons is George's in-over-his-head deputy. Gaby Hoffmann, Dan Stevens, and Bill Camp have small but crucial roles.

*Zero Day* is, among other things, the ultimate example of the so-called dad show. An oasis for men of a certain age amid a TV landscape full of unscripted soaps, *Bridgerton* clones, and auteur dramedies, dad shows find traditionally masculine, mostly AARP-eligible heroes solving crimes or leading empires or fighting for their families—if not all three at once. Genres vary, from action thrillers like the Idris Elba-led *Hijack* to medical dramas like *The Pitt* to the *Yellowstone* western franchise, starring Kevin Costner and Harrison Ford. The constant is the archetype of one righteous man with the courage to save the day. *Zero Day* does more than most dad shows to humanize this character, a credit to both the writing and De Niro's turn as an august leader

struggling with his own decline and that of a nation where he once wielded supreme power.

It also makes smart and inventive use of 21st century history to conjure a fictional crisis that feels real. George's investigation recalls the closely watched work of Robert Mueller. Supporting first responders on the site of the subway crash, he brings to mind a pre-disgrace Rudy Giuliani reassuring a terrified nation after 9/11. Hoffmann's tech billionaire rings true in the age of surveillance capitalism. One character's fate has echoes of the Jeffrey Epstein case. Even as the plot twists become a bit far-fetched, the world George inhabits remains grounded in our own.

**SO VIVID IS** *Zero Day's* evocation of contemporary corruption and unrest that its evasiveness on political affiliations plunges it into the realm of the uncanny. We get the sense that Americans were agitated long before the attack, though details remain murky. The show leans hard on assumptions viewers across the political spectrum will bring without challenging any one set. It shares with another recent, cautiously nonpartisan Netflix thriller, *The Madness*, an inherently uncontroversial abhorrence of extremists, no matter their agenda. One character rages against "half the country caught up in a fever dream of lies and conspiracy, and the other half... shouting about pronouns and ranking their grievances"—a nod to reality that's also a false equivalence for the ages.

In an era when TV aimed at mass audiences, from Netflix's splashy *The Diplomat* to Amazon's dopey spy franchise *Citadel*, often tries to set stories within governments while avoiding partisan statements, *Zero Day* stands out for taking on American polarization without so much as identifying its characters' parties. This limits our grasp of

their motives and relationships. That Newman and Oppenheim felt they needed to go to such lengths to keep viewers red, blue, and independent rooting for a hero played by De Niro speaks to how ossified our biases have become, or at least how spooked platforms and creators are by them.

It wasn't so long ago—about two weeks into Barack Obama's second term—that Netflix debuted *House of Cards*, the chronicle of a ruthless Democrat's rise to power, as its first big original series, apparently without fear of offending liberals. Nor did anyone blink when Shonda Rhimes set *Scandal* within the White House of a wishy-washy, adulterous GOP President who'd unwittingly stolen an election. Two of Aaron Sorkin's best-loved projects, *The West Wing* and *The American President*, did romanticize Democratic POTUSes. But when the satire *Veep* neglected to mention its titular VP's party, it was for good reason. The point was that the people who occupy our halls of power are too plagued by pettiness, vanity, and incompetence to care about ideals.

Of course, *Veep's* sycophants, buffoons, and backstabbers bear little resemblance to the vanguard of our latest regime. If Trump 45 was a norm-shattering ringmaster surrounded by faceless enablers, then Trump 47 is just one face in an outré, scandal-ridden mix among whom Elon Musk's DOGE and its college-age havoc wreakers have become the breakout characters. None of the professional politicians in *Zero Day* would so giddily court chaos. They make the decisions they make, most of the time, in hopes of preventing it.

Conceived long before Trump took office in January, *Zero Day* couldn't have predicted the details of this new era. Yet its unwillingness to mirror the moment in other basic ways makes it as much a victim of our toxic times as it is a plea for moral leadership in the face of them. The blandly universal dilemma it finally puts before George is whether a need for safety and self-protection must necessarily supersede the confrontation of an unpopular truth. It's a question the creators might have asked themselves. □

**Its unwillingness to mirror the moment makes it a victim of our toxic times**

FEATURE

## Capturing the humanity that war threatens to destroy

BY SIMON SHUSTER

WAR HAS A WAY OF ATTRACTING STORYTELLERS, different kinds at different phases of the story. Usually the journalists get there first, before the authors and historians arrive to place events in a grander narrative. The artists tend to be among the stragglers, though their works, once out in the world, can have the greatest resonance.

The release of *Porcelain War*, the Oscar-nominated documentary about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, shows that the artists have arrived to tell their version, and it is unlike anything the experts and reporters have shown us. For the filmmakers, this was no accident. “My main fear in making the film,” the co-director, Slava Leontyev, told me recently, “was that we would end up capturing something like a reportage.” His partner on the project, Anya Stasenko, puts an even finer point on it: “I refused to make it about the blood and gore and violence.”

Set in the frontline city of Kharkiv, about 25 miles from the Russian border, the film cannot escape the violence of the war and does not seek to sugarcoat it. Russian shells rain down constantly, killing thousands and forcing over a million civilians to flee the area. Leontyev, the co-director, serves in the Ukrainian special forces, and we follow his unit into battle at one point in the film, watching the carnage through the cameras they attached to their uniforms.

But this scene is an exception. The film’s main focus is not on the war itself but its antithesis: the beauty and humanity that war destroys. The action follows three artists: Leontyev and Stasenko, as well as their friend Andrey Stefanov, an oil painter who doubles as the film’s cinematographer. They fight not only with weapons but also through their struggle to continue making art even as the air-raid sirens howl. These acts of creation, Leontyev explains, become a critical form of resistance against the Russians, whose goal in this war is not only to conquer Ukrainian territory but to eradicate Ukrainian culture.

**THE PORCELAIN IN THE TITLE** of the film refers to the figurines Leontyev and Stasenko create, depicting phantasmagorical creatures like a baby dragon and a Pegasus. This is the first film they and Stefanov have made. At the start of the invasion, they relied on their American collaborator,



^  
Artists and filmmakers Stasenko and Leontyev at work

**‘I refused to make it about the blood and gore and violence.’**

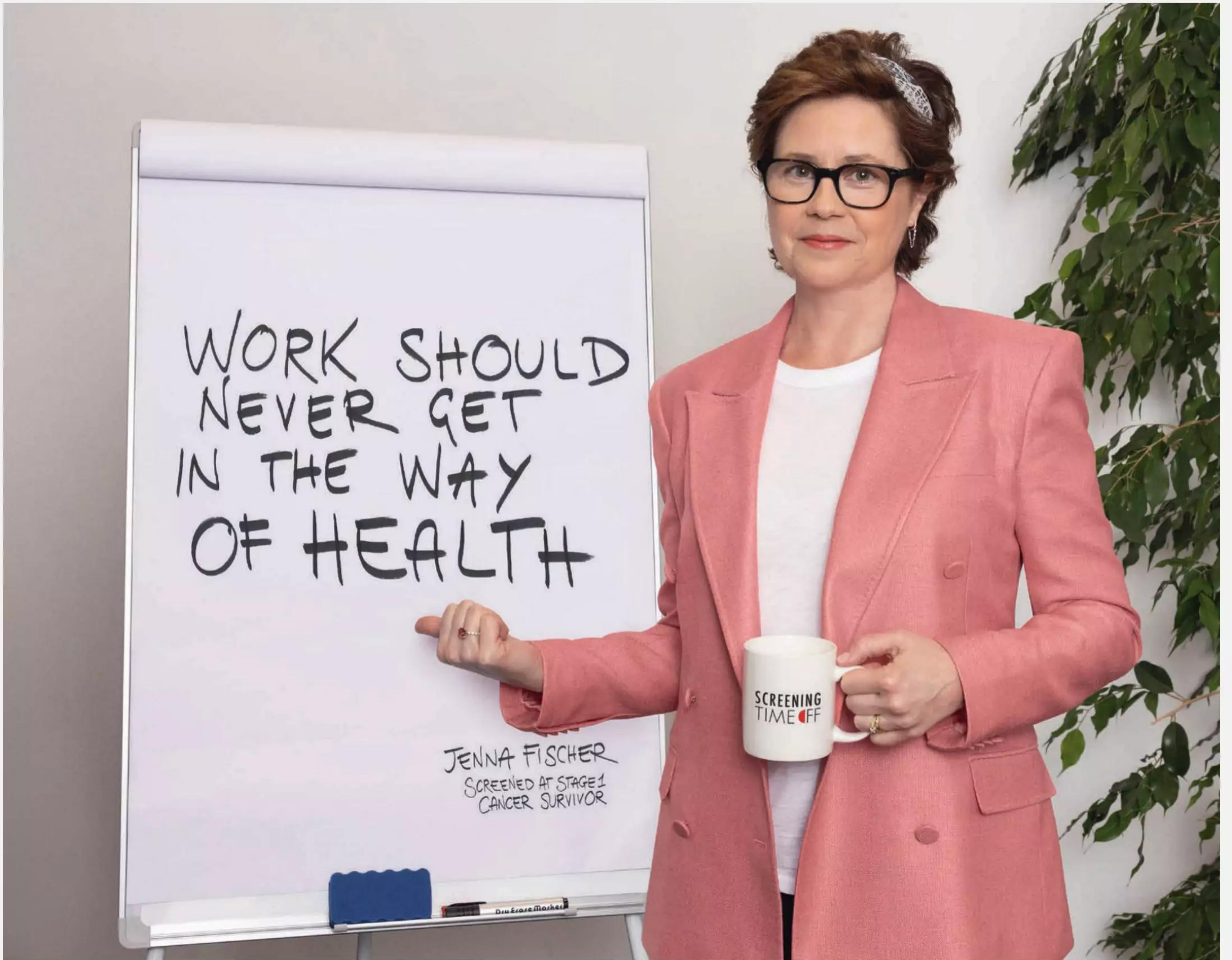
ANYA STASENKO,  
FILMMAKER

Brendan Bellomo, the writer, editor, and co-director of the film, to provide equipment and teach them how to use it via video calls. Bellomo never went to Ukraine to help them. Yet the brilliance of what they captured earned them an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary Feature.

Last year, the Oscar in that category went to another film about the war, *20 Days in Mariupol*, a towering work of journalism made during the Russian siege of that city in southern Ukraine. Its director, Mstyslav Chernov, a war correspondent for the Associated Press, has often spoken of his desire to show the war in all its horror, even as he recognized the risks of doing that.

“To watch people crying, it’s hard,” he said in January 2023. “When you place an audience for 90 minutes into this chaos and this mess and this violence, there is a risk of people getting too overwhelmed or even pushed back by the amount of this violence.” President Volodymyr Zelensky, himself a former filmmaker and comic actor, understands how hard it is to keep the world’s attention as the war grinds on year after year. “It’s a lot of blood, a lot of emotion, and that tires people,” Zelensky told TIME soon after the invasion. He still spends much of his time persuading the world not to succumb to what some pundits call “Ukraine fatigue.”

*Porcelain War*, through its beauty and the magnetism of its characters, offers another way to address this challenge. The film connects in a quieter register, one that only works of art can reach. As the war enters its fourth year, Ukraine needs new ways to tell its story, and artists may turn out to be its greatest messengers. □



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## **Halle Berry** The Oscar-winning actor says there's a desperate need to inform women about menopause. Her new company aims to fill that education and empathy gap

**How did your personal experience lead you to become an advocate for menopause?** The more I started to talk about what I was going through, I started to realize how other women were suffering and how little other women had. I started to see the need to continue efforts in Washington to get a bill passed with substantive dollars [for more research on midlife and more clinical trials for menopause]. I saw the need for more education. I had no answers, no one to turn to. I was floored to find the nothingness in this space—and how little doctors knew. I thought I had the best doctors I could have.

**How are you working to change how we talk about menopause?** We are working on the federal level to get the bill through, and working at the state level too, with governors and leaders. We're talking to them about what programs they might be willing to support in their states to support women.

**Why are more doctors not talking to women about menopause and midlife?** It's not really their fault. It's not something that's made important for them in medical school. But what I hold against doctors today is that now that we are out there talking about it—and screaming that women deserve better—that they don't go back to take it upon themselves to get an education. Every practitioner should know about the menopausal body. Women are living to their 80s, and menopause can start in your 40s. We spend half our lifetimes in it now.

If men went through this time of life in the same horrific way we do [with symptoms of hot flashes, night sweats, and mood changes], there would be lots of answers, research, and a lot of money raised to fund

### How will your new company, Respin, help women in menopause?

Women can get whatever level of support and care they need. A woman in her 30s can get educated about menopause; a woman in perimenopause can get a health coach and devise a plan for her needs; and a woman postmenopause can come for the services she needs too.



studies to help men live their best lives. But because we are women, we suffer sexism and ageism. When we are done making babies, we're left to fend for ourselves. No one cares about us anymore.

**How can women change the current stigma and lack of knowledge about menopause?** There are so many ideas and information and misinformation swirling around. That's why I created Respin. It's a community for women to talk to each other and learn from each other. But there is also a health component with health coaching, nutritionists, and experts to talk about exercise and learning how the lack of estrogen and changing hormones affect our heart, brain, bones, and entire body. I felt like there was something really missing in the market for women in midlife.

**How can the medical system change to be more supportive and knowledgeable?** That's my next crusade. After I get the bill passed in D.C. for more research and clinical trials, I'm going to the universities and put pressure on them too. We need to help them understand why this is important and reimagine their curriculum to make menopause and midlife for women more than one chapter in medical-school textbooks.

And this isn't just for gynecologists. This isn't bikini medicine. Every doctor—every cardiologist, every neurologist, every general practitioner, every rheumatologist—should understand the effect that a woman's loss of her hormones does to her body and every single one of her organs.

We women have to start demanding more. That's who I am today: a woman demanding more. I am demanding more because we deserve more. —ALICE PARK

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