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1455

# Movable Type

The Political  
Imperative

A BI-MONTHLY  
PUBLICATION  
**CREATED FOR  
WRITERS**



ISSUE NO.

3

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## DIRECTOR’S NOTE

Reading writers who have helped change the world changes *you*. You come to appreciate what William Carlos Williams meant when he wrote “It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.” Certain seminal works alter your perception of the big picture: cause and effect, agency vs. incapacity, and history vs. ideology.

Writing from different cultures and different times inevitably denotes truths (even if couched in fictional narratives) that are outside of time and agenda. It is, then, easier to make connections between Irish immigrants who worked the coal mines in Pennsylvania, Lithuanian immigrants who worked in the meatpacking plants in Chicago, and Mexican immigrants—especially the illegal ones—who labor in sweltering kitchens and frigid fields all across our country. It’s impossible not to put human faces and real feelings alongside this suffering and start connecting the dots that define how exploitation works. We discern the uneasy lines connecting our shared histories and possible futures. And then, at last, there’s a chance for recognition, empathy, culpability.

Why bring politics into it, one might ask (and a certain political party reliably does)? Short answer, duh. Longer answer, courtesy of the ever-reliable (and prescient) George Orwell: “The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.” As someone who writes fiction and poetry but also reviews and champions art, I’m cognizant of my status as a straight white male, while also feeling the desire to showcase traditionally under-represented voices is imperative, and consistent with the mission of any critic with integrity: broaden dialogue and celebrate marginalized voices. If we’re made to see others it’s possible we’ll see ourselves. Bearing witness requires listening as much as speaking out. This is one meaningful way writers can hold others—and themselves—to account. Without engagement none of this is possible and, in 2021, it seems not only irresponsible, but immoral to look away.

Tara Campbell, as a writer and advocate for writing, is an artist whose work often deconstructs the here-and-now. Her collection, *Political AF: A Rage Collection*, is a timely and necessary addition to contemporary discourse, and we are honored to showcase her as this issue’s Featured Writer. Her essay “Write, Edit, Act” sets the ideal tone for the pieces that follow, and her original poem, “In Contradiction to the Commander’s Standards and Wishes,” functions as statement of purpose and rallying cry. Matthew Davis muses on the relationship between democracy and imagination, while Tom Kapsidelis explores rites of passage and the politics of gun rights. Bethanne Patrick recalls the Watergate trial and her introduction to political controversy, and Kathleen McInnis advocates for more women with roles in national security and policy. Justen Ahren poetically explores his recent experience working with refugees, and my essay goes back to the future with a proposition that understanding—and exploiting—the power of narrative is perhaps the most effective way to influence hearts and minds to bring about necessary and overdue policy.

Orwell, again: “It seems to me nonsense, in a period like our own, to think that one can avoid writing of such subjects. Everyone writes of them in one guise or another. It is simply a question of which side one takes and what approach one follows.” I hope you find the writing that follows enlightening and inspiring. We will need all the support and solidarity possible in the months and years ahead.



Be well and stay safe!

**Sean Murphy**  
Executive Director, 1455



# Write, Edit, Act

Tara Campbell

*So here we are—wherever that is. I type this now having no idea where we’ll be by the time it’s published.*

You don’t need me to tell you that it’s been a devastating year: almost 400,000 dead of COVID-19, once-in-a-lifetime fires and floods now occurring on an annual basis, a dangerously partisan DOJ, a Postmaster General hindering the capacity of the USPS to deliver ballots in an election that was contested even before it began, and of course the painful irony of a brutal law enforcement response to protests against police brutality.

Add to that the increasing visibility of white supremacy and unchecked posturing by armed militias, a census count compromised by both the pandemic and an administration intent on intimidating immigrants, which will have repercussions for the next decade, and an unprecedented number of conservative judicial appointments, topped off by three SCOTUS seats filled under supremely unethical circumstances.

It’s enough to make crises like opioid addiction, veteran suicide, and gun violence seem like woes from a distant past in a faraway land.

*It’s all almost too much to bear.*

And the question we all ask ourselves is: What can I do? As a writer, is it my duty to “get political?” And what can one person accomplish anyway?

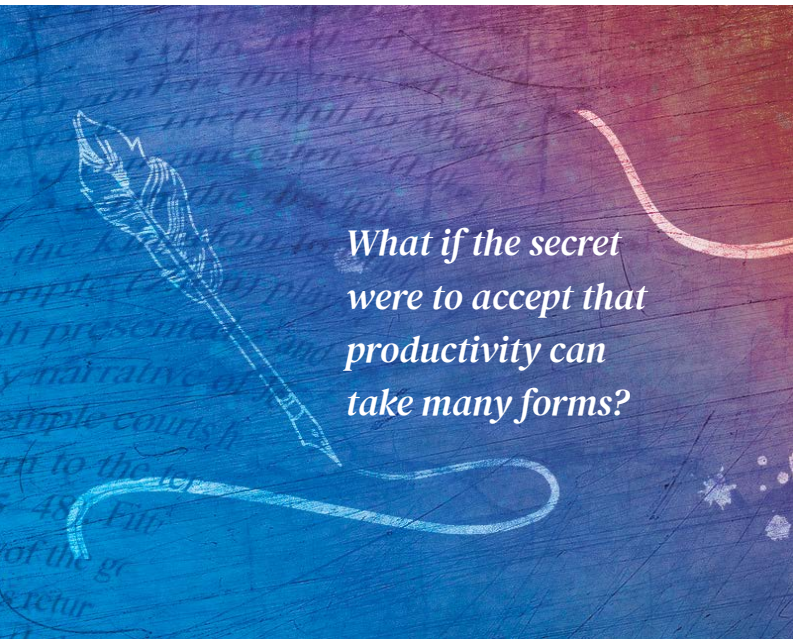
First: take a breath. Focus on the word almost—it’s almost too much to bear.

And yet, if you’re reading this, here you are. Hanging on. Finding a reason to keep going, keep reading and writing your truth.

Your truth may be overt, calling out a specific injustice by name. It may be less overt, taking the form of witness. Both are important. We need to remember all of the ways in which human beings choose to destroy one another, no matter the outcome of a specific election.







The most profound political art helps us understand the world around us, invites us to interrogate how we wound up where we are today—without necessarily feeding us a solution. Political writing can lose its potency if it’s too polemical or prescriptive, just like science fiction is less satisfying when it’s more about gizmos and plot than an emotionally rich story. In both cases, the key is not only the what, but also the what it means. And that’s what we writers are good at: noticing a detail and seeing its connection to the larger world—using the specific to get at the universal.

As writers, especially when we’re writing politically-oriented material, it’s our duty to inform ourselves about those details, to challenge our biases with research, to dig into facts, even when they wind up frustrating our initial artistic intention by leading us toward a different conclusion than we anticipated. There is no substitute for the certainty of intellectually honest work.

*But the acquisition of knowledge too often leads to despair.*

News diets and a social media hiatus can be helpful in preventing burnout. So can resisting the impulse to place the entire burden of dealing with our world solely on our craft.

Consider this: what if the secret to continued productivity for writers in the face of crushing reality were to accept that productivity can take many forms? What if we allowed ourselves not only to write, but also to break things down and find small, concrete actions we could take to follow our truths? For some of us it could mean marching; for others, writing to the USPS Board of Governors, or donating to organizations doing the work we believe in, or giving information to an acquaintance who may be going down a conspiracy path, or figuring out how to vote in

November, or writing postcards to voters in swing states. Or teaching our children to be kind.

As writers, we capture the world. But we must also give ourselves license to live in it, to muddle through it without yet knowing how the story ends.

We fiction writers sometimes call each other out when we’re letting our protagonists off too easy, when the road to the main character’s goal doesn’t present enough challenges for them to overcome. The year 2021 does not have that particular problem. Now it’s up to us to write a better ending, on and off the page. ■



Tara Campbell is a writer, teacher, Kimbilio Fellow, and fiction editor at Barrelhouse. She received her MFA from American University in 2019. Previous and upcoming publication credits include *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Masters Review*, *Wigleaf*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Booth*, *Strange Horizons*, and *CRAFT Literary*. She’s the author of a novel, *TreeVolution*, and two collections, *Circe’s Bicycle* and *Midnight at the Organporium*. Her newest book, *Political AF: A Rage Collection*, was released by *Unlikely Books* in August 2020.

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## In Contradiction to the Commander’s Standards and Wishes

*I base my poetry on science  
in contradiction to the commander’s  
standards and wishes  
I sing of diverse transgender fetuses  
write evidence-based verse  
in praise of science-based wonders  
rhyme “vulnerable” with “beautiful”  
while capitol millionaires line their pockets  
with non-chlorophyllic green  
and almost forget to CHIP the children  
in their trickle-down amnesia.  
I base my poetry on science  
in consideration with community  
standards and wishes  
based on faith  
in reason  
in empathy  
in data  
in compassion  
in knowledge  
in questioning  
in resistance*



# Democracy & Imagination

Matthew Davis

*When I lived in Syria just before the Arab Spring started, I liked learning from Syrian writers and artists about their relationship to Bashar al-Assad and his ruling family and party.*

Most were attuned to the absurdity and sadness of the Syrian situation: Living and working under an oppressive government with a distorted view of reality and the power to amplify this distortion. Many, reflecting on the centuries-old culture of Syria and the dynamism of its people, called the circumstances of being trapped within the crudeness of this dictatorship



tragic. And this was before the ten-year war that has killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions.

*Before the war, this attenuation and understanding gave many artists a sense of creative purpose.*

Writers and artists understood the stakes of their work, knowing one misstep could force them out of the country, into prison, or in their grave. Many still used their private imaginations to create public works of art, whether these creations were realistic portrayals of life under Assad that were sure to be banned in-country; abstract paintings the ruling party wouldn't understand; or metaphorical stories that could glide under a censor's nose.

I've thought about those artists and conversations a lot during the Trump era, this election season, and in the weeks following November 3rd.

It is clear that we in the United States have entered a period of fractured reality. Millions of Americans follow the cult of a con man and the worldview he, much of his party, and their media

enablers present: Fraudulent elections, inflated crowd sizes, a misplaced ethos of American freedom and history. This fractured reality has put the United States on the razor's edge of a dictatorship, as President Trump considers every conceivable tool to stay in power.

What is less clear is the two-fold problem of how many people actually embrace this reality versus utilizing these false claims for political, economic or egoistic advantages. And then, most importantly, how we address our splintering reality and the democracy that seems to be splintering along with it.

*On December 17, 2010, a 26-year-old fruit vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi lit himself on fire in a Tunisian street.*

His self-immolation, which resulted in his death on January 4th, 2011, was the catalyst for what came to be known as the Arab Spring, a season where many in the Middle East took to the streets to protest their corrupt, dictatorial leaders and demand change.



A month before Bouazizi lit himself on fire, I was arrested by the Syrian Secret Police and deported from the country. I was told when I landed in Jordan that my deportation was a misunderstanding, but it was clearly a result of the writers and artists I was speaking with.

I was sad to leave Syria, but my forced exit allowed entrance across the region, and I traveled widely—to Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and beyond. The spirit of the possible was alive in each of the places I visited. For decades or longer, citizens in these countries had been under the thumb of rulers they did not choose: colonial magistrates, kings, military generals. In the spring of 2011, there was a palpable sense—a hope—that times were different.

Despite the optimism of these first months, the Arab Spring never really blossomed.



Though the people of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt overthrew their dictators, only Tunisia is a democracy, and a fledgling one at that. Syria has become the tragedy of this young century. Jordan is still ruled by a king. Lebanon teeters on the verge of collapse. Whatever dreams of self-rule that had developed in the spring of 2011 have been largely quashed as we enter 2021.

What I remember most from my year-plus living and traveling around the Middle East is the desire of people to be free. To be free not only from their paternalistic, oppressive rulers, but also free from the bleeding of politics into their personal lives, where the fraught reality of their political situations impacted where to shop, who to love, what to wear, what to read. And it is this blurring of the line between the political and personal that has set my alarm bells buzzing during our own crude era in American political history.

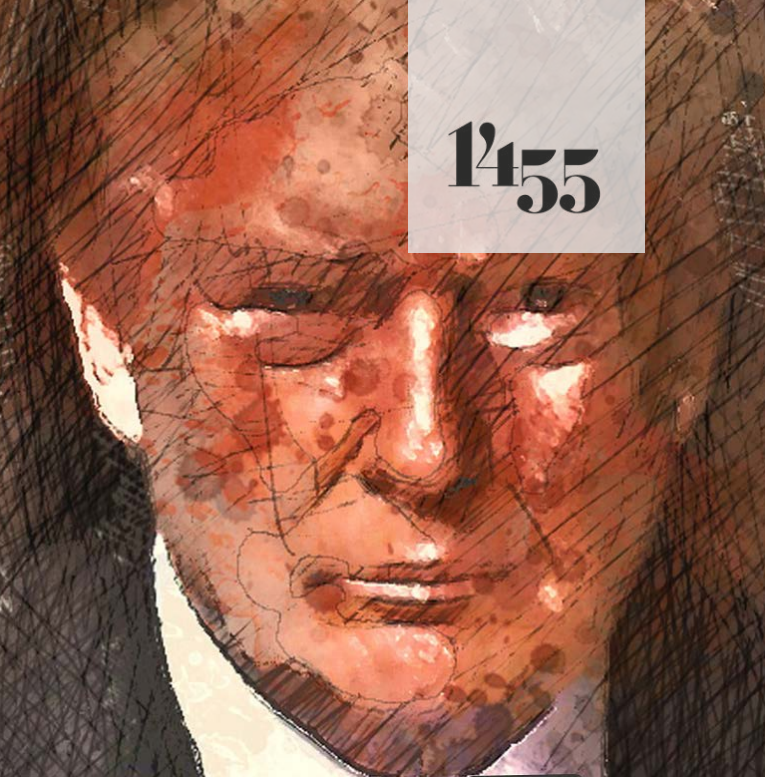
*Like many Americans of a certain political persuasion, it's been difficult to think positively about the color red.*

Every time I see a piece of clothing on the street, especially a hat, that has the familiar gauche, bright red of a MAGA imprint, my stomach curls. (And in a city that loves its Nationals, Capitals and Terrapins, the

sight of a red hat is not infrequent). At the grocery store a couple years ago, I would not have thought twice about what kind of canned beans I bought to make chili. Now, each time I reach for (or, these days, place in my Instacart) a can of Goya black beans, the sinister image of Ivanka Trump, holding a Goya can like a glossy, 1950s housewife, infiltrates my mind.

This is what it means when daily life becomes politicized. The color red and choice of beans are largely inconsequential, but when they serve as markers of political identity, we as a society are in trouble. You can see the impacts of this new reality with the coronavirus. It's not simply a matter of believing the science and facts, it's a matter of who wears a mask, our most important mechanism to protect ourselves and each other from the virus.

It is a reality that most Americans have never lived through in meaningful ways. Part of leading the United States is structuring a narrative around the President and his—always his—administration. These narratives and the messages they engender are part of our political infrastructure, even if the messaging is faulty, like George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech on the USS Abraham Lincoln, or squishy,



like Barack Obama's red line in Syria that turned into a red mirage. Regardless of how wrong or damaging these messages and narratives, they are familiar to Americans as part of our political reality.

But when the President of the United States stands at the White House and tells Americans that the coronavirus will just disappear or that the election has been rigged in favor of his opponent, that is not a problem with messaging or narrative. That is a fabrication of reality the likes of which no one in this country has lived through. It is staring totalitarian power in the face and knowing—much like my Syrian friends did—that despite its absurdity and its sadness, it exists.

When I was younger, I was fortunate to live and travel overseas a great deal. One of my favorite parts of traveling was exploring the literature of the places I would soon inhabit.

*I came to see a country's literature as the best stethoscope to measure the heartbeat of its culture.*

This was especially true with the Middle East. Before I even got to Syria, I had befriended the great Syrian writer Khaled Khalifa. I have written about that friendship previously, but it was through him that I began to learn about the complexities of modern Syria, and how its totalitarian tentacles reached into all aspects of society. As Khaled once told me, he—a literary celebrity—was no different than a fruit vendor (This was before Bouazizi lit himself on fire) in how the state impacted their lives. This reality forms the foundation of Khaled's works of fiction: In his latest novel, *Death is Hard Work*, a family struggles against the war and the state to achieve the mundane though profound activity of burying its patriarch.

Since leaving the region in the fall of 2011, my interest in the literature from the Middle East—and how it reflects the last tumultuous decade—has only grown. More and more of its literature is being translated from Arabic, French and Kurdish into English. And to my mind, there is no better way to understand the ethos of a region struggling against the specter of authoritarianism than by reading what is coming from its writers. Many—like Egyptian writer Ahmed Naje—have had to flee for their safety. Some, like Khaled, have chosen to remain. I am the founding director of an international literary center that strives

to put narrative and story at the heart of our international dialogue. I firmly believe that writers of the world, and the stories they tell, offer insights into cultures and communities different from our own, insights that have the power to create empathy and understanding. It is a hopeful mission, but it is also a deeply political one, as often—as is the case with writers from the Middle East—it is imagination that tells a counter-narrative to the dominant story offered by those in political or economic power.

In 2018, the writer Masha Gessen gave an address to the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona to honor George Orwell Day. She was responding to Orwell's canonic essay "The Prevention of Literature." In her address, Gessen says: "We live in a time when intentional, systematic, destabilizing lying—totalitarian lying for the sake of lying, lying as a way to assert or capture political power—has become the dominant factor in public life in Russia, the United States, Great Britain, and many other countries in the world. When we engage with the lies—and engaging with these lies is unavoidable and even necessary—we forfeit the imagination. But the imagination is where democracy lives. We imagine the present and the past, and then we imagine the future."

During one of our many conversations in Damascus a decade ago, Khaled took issue with American writers. He mocked our MFA system, when young writers, mostly young writers of privilege, come together to learn writing and how to be a writer. He looked at

*We live in a time when intentional, systematic, destabilizing lying has become the dominant factor in public life.*

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me from his familiar spot at our familiar bar and opened his arms to the world—this is my classroom, he said. He didn't mean the bar or its inhabitants, though certainly that is where he often worked. Rather, he meant his country, his world, the circumstances he struggled against to become the kind of writer he has become.

It's easy to quibble with Khaled's statements and opinions. More than ever, American publishing is open to a more diverse range of writers who have had to struggle mightily against the country's and the publishing industry's sexism, racism, and classism. These are writers whose imaginations have been under siege by the United States for centuries, much as Khaled's imagination has been under siege his entire adult life.

*And yet, as Americans, as American writers, we have never faced a moment quite like this one.*

Our country survived an existential threat during the Civil War, and every 70 years, it seems, brings a new generational struggle, when the tectonic plates of American politics, culture and identity grind hard against one another to produce profound changes, mostly for the better.

Still, it is difficult not to believe that Americans and American literature faces its crucible in the aftermath of Donald Trump. Now that Trump has lost and will—presumably—leave office,

his influence and the totalitarian tendencies he has unleashed from the highest rungs of American power must be dealt with. They must be dealt with in the political sphere, to be sure, but they must also be dealt with in the imagination. I've learned from my friends in the Middle East that literature and creativity is not panacea to a totalitarian regime or to the daily injustices that dog a life lived in a fractured body politic. The region has not become what so many millions had hoped for a short decade ago, though the spirit of these movements lives on in the diverse voices of its writers and people.

Yet, I do believe Masha Gessen when she writes that "the imagination is where democracy lives." The stories of our American literature the next decade will go a long way in determining whether we can overcome the split-screen of our national reality. These stories and the writers who tell them will indicate the strength of both our American democracy and our American imaginations. ■



**Matthew Davis** is the founding director of the Alan Cheuse International Writers Center at George Mason University. He's been an Eric and Wendy Schmidt Fellow at New America, a Fellow at the Black Mountain Institute at UNLV, and a Fulbright Fellow to Syria and Jordan. His work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic*, and *Guernica*, among other places.

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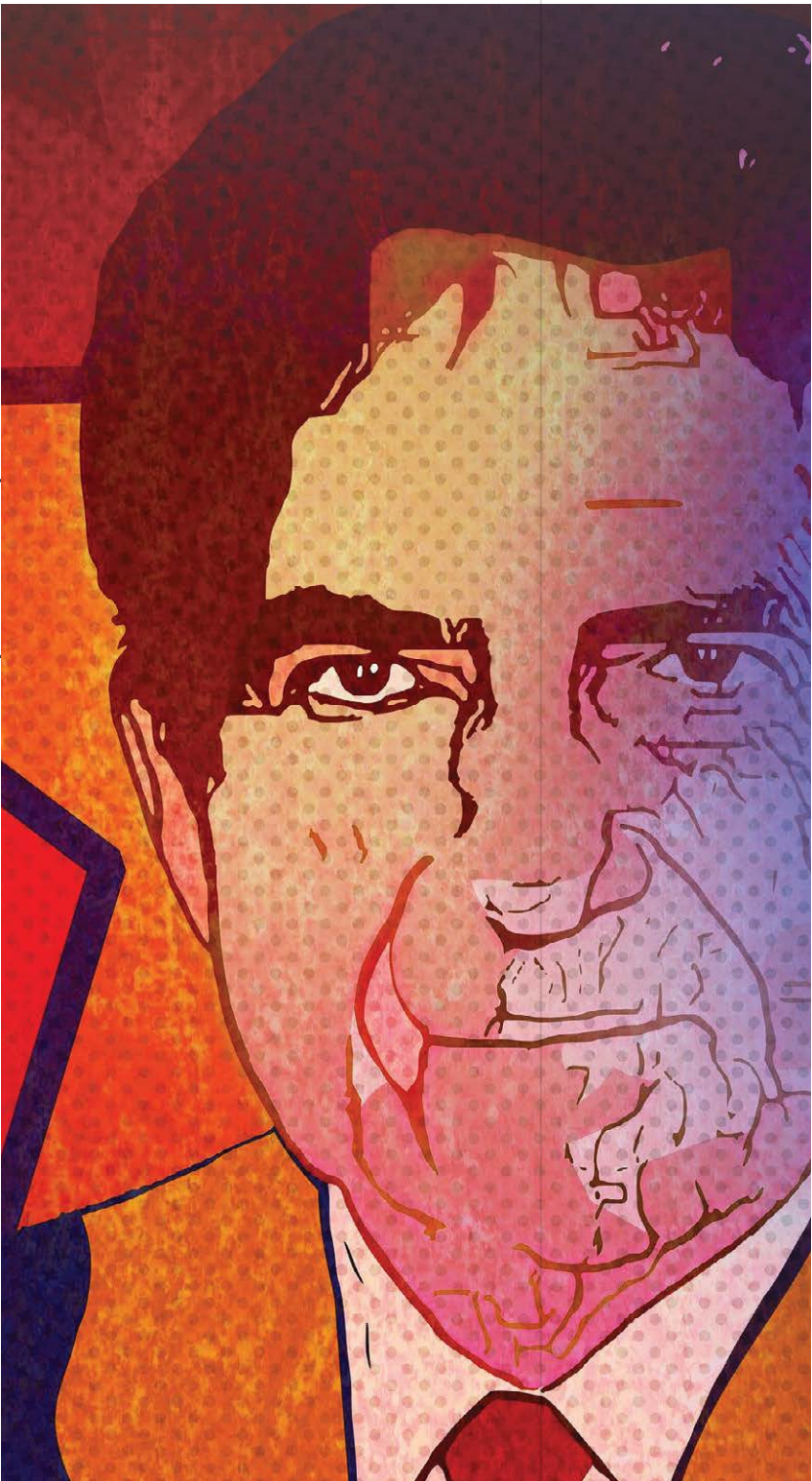


# The Watergate Dilemma

Bethanne Patrick

*The events of January 6, 2021, when armed terrorists stormed the U.S. Capitol, mean my words that follow sound different than they did when I wrote them on January 4, 2021.*

*I hope that they sound more urgent. The children who saw our nation's most sacred space for government attacked will have questions now and in the future that urgently need to be answered by adults who support freedom, not fascism; the truth, and not a madman's lies. Sadly, as Timothy Snyder wrote in his superb essay "The American Abyss" which ran this past weekend's New York Times magazine, "The lies outlast the liar."*



Recently someone on Twitter asked "What is the first major news event you remember?"

A few people said the Cuban Missile Crisis. Tons of people mentioned 9/11. But a respectable number of us said Watergate, and while any of these events shows a person's age, I believe that those of us who spent formative years glued to TV screens showing Richard Nixon's face again and again have a particular tie to the present, as we wait out these last weeks before Joseph Biden, Jr.'s inauguration as President of the United States.

Ours was the first generation – call us Baby Boomers, call us Generation X, call us nothing at all – that watched our country's leader taken down by lies, denial, and investigation. While our older siblings, cousins, and friends understood that "Watergate" referred to a Washington, D.C. real-estate complex, that Rose Mary Woods was the president's secretary, that John Dean was the White House Counsel, those of us between 5 and 10, those of us who would remember Watergate as our first political event, mostly understood that something monumental was happening.

*The President, the man who everyone trusted, had lied.*

Each evening we gathered around our TVs, and I remember that until 1975, for my family, that meant a cabinet holding a black-and-white RCA television whose various tubes seemed to occupy most of my father's time and wrath. We had one TV; a few of our friends' houses had two, but in 1972, those were in the homes of either the well to do or the gadget obsessed. Most of us were captives to whatever the adults in the household watched. Imagine this, millennials: There were three major networks, the local PBS affiliate, and one channel for reruns and the annual 24-hour Yule Log. So if Mom and Dad wanted to watch the news, everyone watched the news.

In 1972, every adult was watching the news. Previous presidents, even the ones parents didn't like (Eisenhower could be "prissy," LBJ "vulgar") were accorded the kind of respect we imagined the ancient Greeks had for the





gods of Olympus. I pored over my mother's stack of Good Housekeeping magazines, and every year the list of Most Admired Women was topped by the First Lady, in part because of her association with the de facto Most Admired Man, The President.

We baby Baby Boomers/elder Gen X statespeople were too young to know that every U.S. president had his faults; we were too young to even consider that maybe a U.S. president could one day have her faults. Just knowing, from our parents and teachers, that John Fitzgerald Kennedy had been a Roman Catholic was shocking and exciting. Anyone really could grow up to be President! Well, anyone who



was white. And Christian. Because our imaginations were limited by what we saw on those televisions.

Later, when we were in high school and college, we'd find out that television had worked against Nixon in the 1960 election, when Kennedy's youthful good looks and genteel demeanor played better on camera than Nixon's heavy beard and darting eyes. But when we were in elementary school, sitting on sofas and living-room rugs, we made our own judgments. This man said he wasn't a crook, but he didn't look trustworthy.

At school, we'd have playground arguments about President Nixon, about whose parents said he was the president and that was that, they were voting for him in November 1972 regardless of what people said he'd done. In my own fourth-grade classroom that year, only two of us, both with Irish surnames that hinted at Democratic Party loyalties, admitted our parents were voting for McGovern.

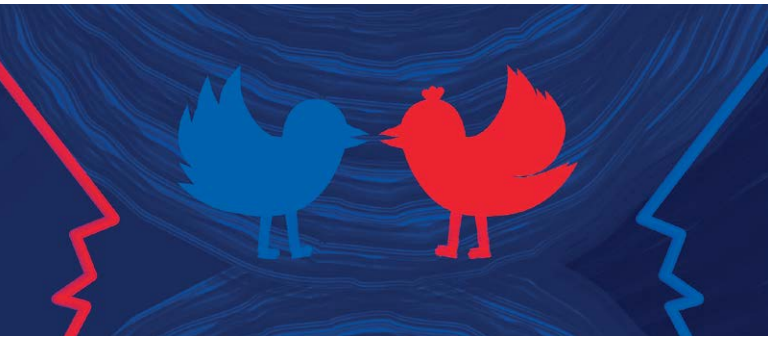
*Nixon would, of course, win in 1972. His smug "V for Victory" gesture delighted his supporters.*

But soon would come disclosure, impeachment, resignation, Gerald Ford stepping in (stumbling in?) to the Oval

Office. We watched as our Most Admired Man became our Most Disgraced Man, and we would never be the same. We grew up looking at those in highest offices skeptically, never experiencing the supportive trust that so many of our elders had for politicians.

I'm able to make huge generalizations about what we saw and what we felt in the early 1970s because there wasn't a whole lot else to see and feel. We were disappointed, saddened, confused, bereft as a nation – a nation that included its youngest thinking members, born in the early to mid 1960s. I wish I could say that our first remembered political event made us savvy, at least savvy enough to have seen, in 2016, that another liar and possible criminal was running for office. But the demographics show otherwise.

Which is why, when I saw that Twitter query, I immediately thought not of my own peers, or those of my twentysomething daughters, but of the seven-to-eleven-year-olds who have been watching and growing and changing during the last four years of political events. Far fewer of them gather around a family TV, now. Screens of all sizes and media of all types populate their days from waking to sleeping. Will they bring



a different perspective to the table the next time a politician turns crooked?

It's impossible to say. What we remember doesn't always affect what we do. (If that were true, more of us would have fewer cavities.) However, I do believe that remembering together (yes, even social media like Twitter counts!) and talking about what we learned and telling stories about what we saw can effect change. Building ways for communities to share experiences may be one way for us to change what major news event a generation to come will remember for the rest of their lives. ■



**Bethanne Patrick** is a writer, author, and critic whose column about hot reads appears monthly in *The Washington Post*. Her books *An Uncommon History of Common Things* (with John Thompson) and *An Uncommon History of Common Courtesy* were released by National Geographic in 2009 and 2011 respectively, and her 2016 anthology *The Books That Changed My Life*.

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# A Drop in the Ocean

Justen Ahren

*I couldn't see the road along which we were driving. The fog off the sea formed a sheet that the car's headlights couldn't penetrate. The white pressed against my eyes. I thought I heard voices buried in it.*

Deprived of objects, my mind saw lights, boats. My heart sprang against my ribs, and I shouted to Hussein, a volunteer like myself, except he had experience patrolling, and was, in fact, training me my first night. "There." I pointed into the field of white: "A boat."

It was midnight, an hour into my first 11pm to 7am shift with A Drop in the Ocean, the Norwegian NGO, the only continuously operating refugee rescue group on Lesbos, Greece. Hussein was going over procedures, rules, giving me pointers. "Drive slowly. Roll all the windows down so you can hear boat

engines, or people talking. No playing the radio. Turn off your phone. You can talk but keep conversations to a minimum. Stop every couple of miles and use the binoculars to scan the ocean. There could be people in the water now so always be ready, keep looking and listening, be ready for a landing at any time."

For two years I'd been watching the refugee crises in the Mediterranean unfold. There were times that I all I could do was scroll, click, read, repeat. I'd come to Lesbos to assist with rescues and aid

refugees because I found I needed to help in a tangible way.

This actually was my third trip to Europe. During the first two, in the fall of 2016 and 2017, I'd followed rivers, train tracks, and country roads through Italy and France, documenting the routes refugees traveled. I photographed and wrote about the things they'd left behind: a suitcase in a field, clothes in a ditch, a cooking fire in an abandoned house, a shoe in a puddle. I visited ruined churches where refugees camped and photographed the views from

safe houses. But I never was close to people, or helping in a tangible way.

*I made hundreds of images and wrote more poems than could fit in a book, but I felt increasingly distant from the work.*

I no longer believed what I was doing could change anything, or help anyone. I was close abandoning the project.

Then, one morning in February 2018 driving my 15-year-old son, Jorrien, to school, I told him my doubts. For several minutes, he said nothing. He stared out the window like he hadn't been listening. Finally, he turned to me and said, "Dad, you've been writing about refugees for a long time, why don't you go do something to help them? Maybe it will help you, too."

Two weeks later, I was on Lesbos driving with Hussein in the fog. The car I'd rented was loaded with supplies: two binoculars for spotting boats; a two-ray radio to alert EMTs, Immigration authorities, and other patrols of a landing; a first aid kit; several cases of bottled water; a stack of folded wool blankets; winter jackets, hats, mittens and dry clothes in three plastic bags labeled men, women, children; and a box of hypothermia blankets which looked like large sheets of aluminum foil.





Hussein continued to orient me. Though it was 43 degrees that March night, with all the windows down, I'd sweated through my clothes. Hussein said he doubted there would be a landing in this weather. Still, every moment the possibility of coming across a boat full of people kept my adrenaline pumping.

Hussein knew about crossings, he'd made his own three years ago, when he was fifteen years old. His family had sent him alone to Europe, and for eleven days, he walked from his village in Afghanistan to catch a bus to Iran. From Iran, he took another bus to the border of Turkey. Once over the border, he hired a smuggler to drive him the length of the country. This took three nights. During the day, he hid under blankets in the back seat. Finally, arriving at the coast, he paid another smuggler \$800 for a space on a rubber raft and a chance to reach Lesbos.

Hussein's journey was nearly 4000 km, the equivalent of a trip between New York City and Mexico City. I didn't want to imagine my son making a trip like this on his own. Hussein had never seen the ocean, nor had he ever been on a boat. Yet, the smuggler made Hussein captain of the 24ft inflatable boat, and the 43 people aboard.

"The sight of the ocean terrified me. The way it clawed the stones on the shore and dragged them under, I was sure it would do the same to us," Hussein remembered. "They showed me how to start the outboard motor, how to steer. They pointed across the dark water and said, 'steer for those lights.' The boat was shoved into the waves. It took 4 hours to make it across."

The blue lights Hussein had steered toward marked the runway of Odysseas Elytis airport on Lesbos, which is a few miles south of the island's capital, Mytilini. Patrolling along the 10-miles of coast, we'd pass the airport light eight times during the night.

Hussein and I didn't talk much over the course of 8 hours, but like the small waves I heard washing up, one story, then another, quietly arose. Hussein's family sent him to Europe to find work, get asylum, and send enough money home that, eventually, his parents and two younger sisters could join him.

"We were so poor; we didn't have enough to eat. The spring I left, my sisters and I stood on chairs in the yard and ate all the leaves from the trees."

It was nearly dawn when we passed the airport. The fog had a bit lifted with the sun. I finally could make out features of the coastline.

This was the same coast that filled my newsfeed in October 2015, when refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq began arriving on anything that would float. The coast I saw in 2018 was littered with landing debris. There were rafts--slashed by police so they couldn't be reused--on jetties and beaches; clothes hanging in trees and shrubs, presumably left to dry but never collected; baby blankets, and food tins in the matted grass; inner tubes washed into reeds, and everywhere, those orange life vests.

During the month I was on Lesbos, 4,035 people crossed the sea, and 43 people drowned. Outside the town of Molyvos, in the north of the island, there's a landfill the locals call The Lifejacket Graveyard. I went one afternoon to photograph the small mountains of life jackets dumped in the scrubby, dry landscape. Spray painted on a concrete wall at the entrance to the landfill are the words, 'Borders Kill.'

There are an estimated 90,000 life jackets dumped here. Among the vests are personal items which made the jackets no longer abstractions. There are school notebooks whose covers are decorated with unicorn stickers and hand-drawn hearts. There are bottles of fingernail polish and mascara. Hairbrushes, and family photographs. A baby's rattle. It struck me that each of these vests had carried a person. It had held a life, preserved it. Though sometimes, 4,503 times in the previous year alone, some hadn't.

In addition to rescuing, I worked during the day in a community center run by the same organization. Volunteers served meals, and we got to spend time with people who were living in Moria refugee camp. It is here that I met and talked with individuals who, like Hussein, were attempting to salvage their lives. It was here I heard the stories that transformed my work.

When I saw the images of people filling the ocean, I felt sad, angry. But the problem with the continuous diet of news we are fed is one outrage is quickly supplanted by another, and another. We can't take it all in. We get overwhelmed, numb. The antidote for me was to get involved.

It wasn't comfortable to witness. It hurt to hear people's stories. But I had a better understanding of what was happening and

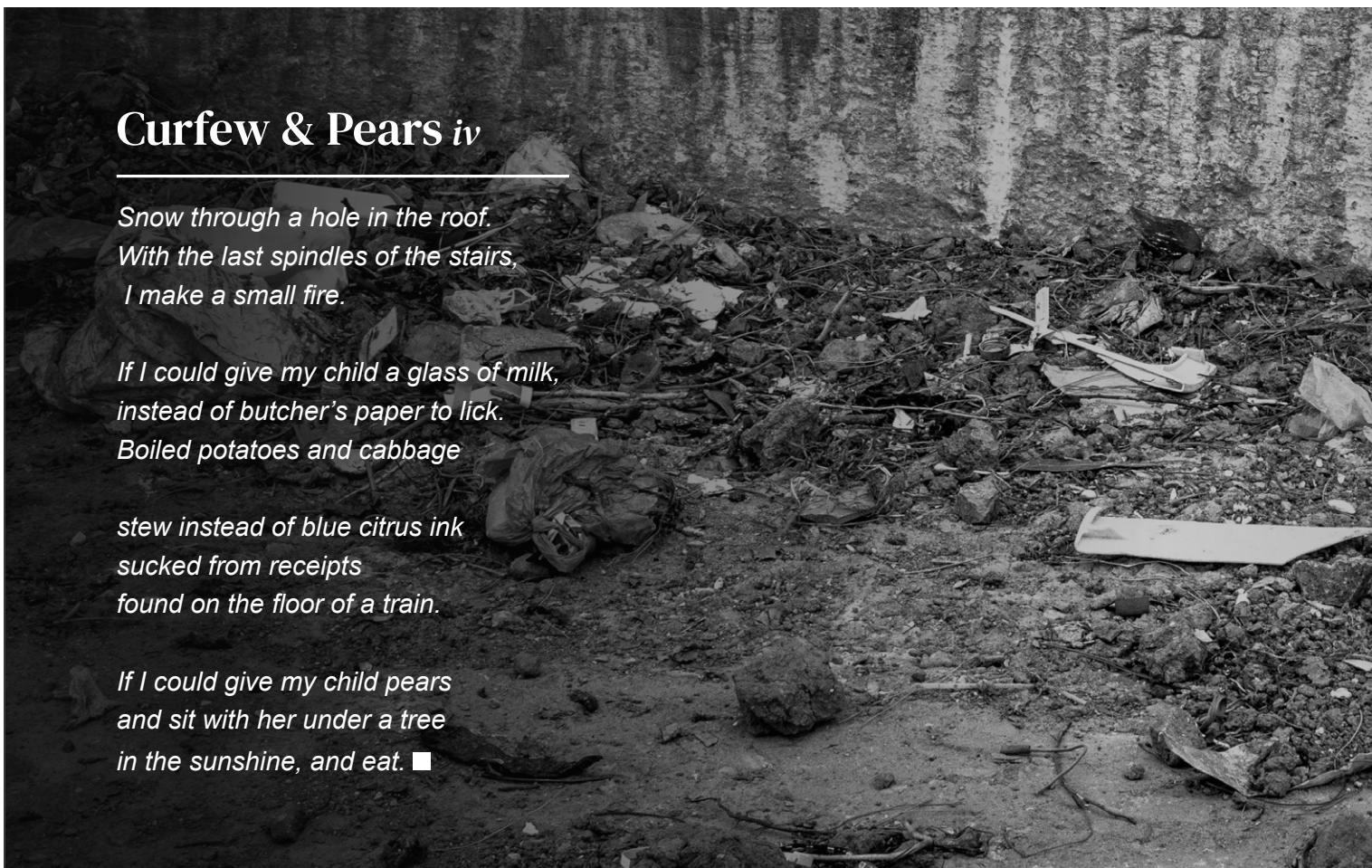




why. And though my contribution as a volunteer was like a drop in the ocean, the work of feeding people, listening to their stories, helping them safely land--was real. It helped.

I was relieved there wasn't a landing my first night. But a few nights later, driving just south of the airport, we came upon sixty people wading in from the ocean. We settled about 60 cold, wet, frightened people on good, dry ground. Some people were crying, others calling for help, for water, to find family and friends. Some were praying. I couldn't understand what anyone was saying. I smelled my fear, and theirs.

In bed afterwards, still in my clothes, I couldn't sleep. I felt the weight of the child I'd carried up to the beach, I felt the shoulders of the man around whom I wrapped a wool blanket. I saw all those people loaded onto a bus and taken to squalid Moria. And I heard Haya, the Syrian woman, a mother of four, I'd served a meal and talked with at the community center, say, "with the last spindles of the stairs I built my children a small fire." ■



Curfew & Pears iv

*Snow through a hole in the roof.  
With the last spindles of the stairs,  
I make a small fire.*

*If I could give my child a glass of milk,  
instead of butcher's paper to lick.  
Boiled potatoes and cabbage*

*stew instead of blue citrus ink  
sucked from receipts  
found on the floor of a train.*

*If I could give my child pears  
and sit with her under a tree  
in the sunshine, and eat. ■*



A Machine for Remembering, **Justen Ahren**'s collection of poems and photographs about the experiences of refugees coming to Europe was published in 2018 by Shanti Arts Press. To read more about Justen Ahren's work visit his website below and be sure to follow him on Instagram [@justenahren](#).

[justenahren.com](#)



# The Long Quest for Healing and Safety

Tom Kapsidelis

*How do gun violence survivors, and by extension the rest of us concerned about safety at every level, persevere in the face of a hostile or indifferent political environment? Who has the most at stake in these debates? And most important, what can we all learn from their perspectives?*



A decade ago I set out on a path that began at a candlelit vigil at Virginia Tech and was followed by gun rights rallies in Northern Virginia three days later.

The questions that I first contemplated three years earlier, on the morning of April 16, 2007, when thirty-two students and professors were killed at Tech, seemed unresolvable.

On the day of the shootings I was assigned to Blacksburg to organize and edit the coverage for my newspaper, the Richmond Times-Dispatch, over the initial days. When I returned home later that week, I sensed a change in the community and thought deeply about what I'd considered on the long drive to campus: Was it possible that this tragedy could bring historic change in how the state and even the nation regard the issue of gun violence?

Over the next three years my assignments at the newspaper varied, though I edited some of the follow-up stories during the protracted quest for accountability on the part of survivors. At the same time, a growing movement for gun reforms seemed to be drowned out by Second Amendment activists emboldened by the Supreme Court's landmark Heller decision in 2008.

But the determination of survivors and their supporters led me to see a broader,

longer-term narrative in a political battle waged on an intensely personal level. Some of those with the most at stake had recovered from life-threatening wounds after being shot.

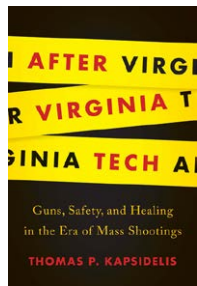
*What would it take to convince lawmakers and a skeptical public?*

Considering this story without an apparent ending, I began research for my book on April 16, 2010, at the third anniversary memorial on campus. Then came the armed Second Amendment rallies. I thought this would give me an immediate immersion in the basics of the questions I wanted to explore.

Looking back at the photographs from that day, the display of weapons seemed modest by comparison to the threatening array of firearms and tactical gear shown off this past year by militant demonstrators in Virginia, Michigan, and







Purchase *After Virginia Tech* by Tom Kapsidelis at [bookshop.org](http://bookshop.org)

other states. There was some camo but the outfitting for many was more casual. Still, the unyielding, aggressive rhetoric and confrontations with counter-protesters mirrored today's troubling encounters.

As I learned more about the struggle of gun violence survivors going up against the NRA money machine, firearms manufacturers and Republicans at the Virginia Capitol, I also saw how some Tech community members were advocating and uniting on different fronts. Together, I considered these to be allied efforts—though perhaps not specifically linked—in the interest of creating safer and more peaceful communities. Likewise, there were twin underpinnings—that the memories of those killed should be honored, and that other families shouldn't have to suffer in this way.

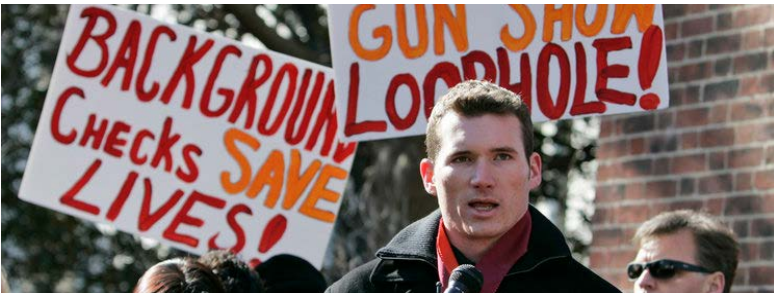
*My new focus would come to be reflected in my book's subtitle, **Guns, Safety, and Healing in the Era of Mass Shootings.***

I learned about Tech graduates who advocated for the needs of survivors and made their expertise part of the training for educators, police and first responders. The mother of a slain student won appointment to a state mental health

board and advocated improved services for young people. And two Blacksburg police chaplains and one of their officer colleagues created an assistance program for police suffering PTSD from what they had seen at the sites of mass shootings as well as the daily community violence that fails to get as much attention. Those were just some of the stories.

What I set out to document changed, and led to new questions: How do survivors, and by extension the rest of us concerned about safety at every level, persevere in the face of a hostile or indifferent political environment? Who has the most at stake in these debates? And most important, what can we all learn from their perspectives? I followed survivors and their supporters at rallies, meetings and hearings, sensing all the time that it was "news," though not the kind that was summarized through much daily coverage or polls. I knew that to many people on the outside, it appeared that nothing much was going on, and that nothing would ever change. But I already believed that both those outlooks were misguided.

The Second Amendment debate remained the most visible and measurable front through these years. True safety and healing, after all, can't seem to flourish without limiting the easy access to all



manner of weapons in the United States. But the prospect for reforms appeared remote in the years following the Heller ruling, which upheld a right to individual gun ownership. There were more setbacks. Demands for concealed carry on college and university campuses—a movement that developed in response to the Tech tragedy—gained ground in some states. In Virginia, the state's signature gun control law, limiting handgun purchases to one a month, was repealed in the weeks leading up to the fifth anniversary of the shootings. When Congress failed to enact national gun safety measures a year later after the murders of first-graders and their teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School, it cemented the notion that gun rights didn't seem to be in jeopardy by any reasonable examination of the nation's politics.

Throughout this difficult time, survivors pushed on, not only in Virginia but also in other states where the demand for new laws grew even as national solutions





seemed elusive. Outwardly there were more setbacks than victories. Across the country, the death tolls climbed. Forty-nine were killed in the June 2016 shootings at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. Just over a year later, fifty-eight were slain at the country music concert in Las Vegas. Everyone was familiar with the cycle – tragedy, outrage and inaction.

Two tragedies helped refocus attention on the work of advocates nationally and in Virginia.

The students and parents of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School began a sustained fight for change immediately after the murders of seventeen at their school on February 14, 2018, marshaling social media in a way that hadn't been done before. Their work also further validated and amplified the voices from Tech, Newtown and other places where violence has ravaged communities. The Tech graduates profiled in my book said they could see themselves in the Parkland

students, but with a more powerful reach. Seizing on gun safety as an issue, Democrats went on to win control of the U.S. House of Representatives in the midterm elections.

A year later, it was Virginia's turn to act. When twelve people were killed at the Virginia Beach Municipal Center on May 31, 2019, Governor Ralph Northam called the legislature back to Richmond that summer to consider firearms legislation. Republicans in control of the House and Senate shut down the session within ninety minutes. That became an issue in the fall legislative elections as voters elevated Democrats to majorities in the House and Senate, setting the stage for the reforms enacted earlier this year. Those laws included reinstating the limit of one handgun a month.

For Tech families led by Lori Haas and Andrew Goddard, who became gun safety advocates after their children were wounded at Tech, the victory was thirteen years in the making.

The backlash in the run-up to the legislative session was intense and continued after lawmakers convened in Richmond. Many Virginia localities—some with the support of their sheriffs—enacted resolutions as “sanctuaries” or otherwise in support of the Second Amendment.

Armed protesters filled the streets outside the Capitol on the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. During the pandemic, President Trump called on his followers to “liberate” states like Virginia and Michigan, where Democratic governors put COVID-19 restrictions in place. After authorities accused more than a dozen people in a plot to abduct Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, testimony also revealed there was a threat against Northam. Even after the federal case was disclosed, Trump's coronavirus adviser Scott Atlas urged followers in Michigan to “rise up” against restrictions put in place during the fall surge of coronavirus cases.

That the politics of gun rights—which for many means an unfettered right to carry weapons anywhere and everywhere—would intersect with the outrage over wearing masks and restricting businesses comes as no surprise and illustrates the division over the role of science in policy making. Listening to the science applies to the pandemic and gun violence, as public health scholars have applied their expertise in areas ranging from extreme risk protection orders to gun permits.

Amid it all, there is another tie to the Tech community. As president, Joe Biden gets a chance to make good on a promise he made to Goddard's son, Colin, who was shot and wounded at Tech and became a national gun

safety advocate. That promise came in a 2013 meeting at the White House after Goddard had been invited to share his views with a vice presidential gun policy task force appointed following the Sandy Hook shootings.

“When I asked Colin about what he thought we should be doing, he said,

*‘I’m not here because of what happened to me. I’m here because what happened to me keeps happening to other people and we have to do something about it,’*”

Biden recounted. “Colin, we will. Colin, I promise you, we will. This is our intention. We must do what we can now.”

At the time, this struck me as a triumph of empathy, a snapshot of an advocate getting the job done – doing what he could at the moment. And it's an example of how the timeline of journalism can move seamlessly into a history that continues to evolve. ■



**Thomas P. Kapsidelis** worked 28 years as an editor for the Richmond Times-Dispatch before receiving a Virginia Humanities fellowship in 2016-17 to complete his book. He lives in Richmond.

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# Heartbreak, Hope, & COVID-19: The View From the Puzzle Palace

Kathleen McInnis

*The first time I broke down and cried over the coronavirus pandemic was in early March of last year. On Capitol Hill, where I work, whispers had been circulating for weeks that the COVID-19 pandemic was likely to have a big impact on our lives.*

"I think we're going to be teleworking for a while," a colleague said to me in a hushed tone in the margins of a work social.

I remember sitting in my library the next morning, watching the sun filter through the wooden window shutters, and reflecting on what I'd been hearing about the deadly virus emanating from Wuhan. The tears burst forth just as I was about to take a sip of my second cup of coffee. Loud, violent tears. I cried that morning out of grief because as a

national security analyst, I could read the tea leaves and knew what was coming: deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans.

And I cried because as a government national security professional, helping our leaders in their mission to protect Americans and secure the United States is what I do for a living. And in my view, our government failed miserably when it came to COVID-19.



*It's not the first time we've failed.  
Not even close.*

It is easy to blame the Trump administration for national security blunders, especially given its myriad missteps. But to do so is to ignore our own political complaisance and its attendant consequences, particularly when it comes to national security.

Unfortunately, the story of neglect of our institutions begins decades ago. American leaders sought to cut the military at the

end of the Cold War. But when push came to shove, the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) were the institutions that suffered the most in the 1990s. Our ability to do things like counter Russian disinformation, navigate international trade negotiations, and foster democracy overseas began to dissipate. Meanwhile, the military-industrial complex hummed along.





The wars initiated in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks accelerated the institutional decay. Our men and women in uniform, trained to fight and win wars, found themselves in deserts on the other side of the globe and told that they instead needed to fight for, and win, the hearts and minds of the locals. To say that they were unprepared for that task is an understatement. Our service members were supposed to have members of the State Department and USAID on the ground to help them figure out how to build their governments and keep the peace. Except that civilian cavalry never came; there simply were not enough people in either the State Department or USAID to do the job and keep the lights on in embassies around the world.

I remember sitting in a conference in the Reagan building on Pennsylvania Avenue, just before George W. Bush announced the surge into Iraq. Over watered-down

coffee and Otis Spunkmeyer cookies, senior leaders of the State Department told the audience of U.S. government officials that there were more people serving in military musical bands than there were Foreign Service Officers in the State Department. It turns out that statistic wasn't quite accurate, but if the ratios were close enough – and regardless, judging by how many people's jaws dropped at the moment, the point was made. The other national security agencies in government were minuscule in size compared to the Department of Defense behemoth.

And as our military servicemembers fought and died winning battles in Iraq and Afghanistan, it became painfully clear that they could not win the wars on their own. Wars end when there is a political solution to the underlying conflict. Our military desperately needed support and leadership on the ground from the experts to help them figure out how to build the conditions for peace, but after over a decade of budget cuts, those people weren't there.

In their absence, the war effort became a pickup game. Instead of seasoned anthropologists and social scientists, cultural advisers – called "human terrain teams" – were staffed by kids just out of graduate school. International development advisors were brought in that had little

experience with the Middle East, which is how we ended up with a fish farm in the middle of the Iraqi desert (unsurprisingly, the pond quickly dried up and the fish rotted). The stories of dysfunction are endless. Perhaps that's why these conflicts have become our forever wars.

*Things haven't gotten much better in the past decade. It was during the Obama administration that I first noticed how fatigue and frustration was driving many people to leave U.S. government service.*

The government has hemorrhaged talent over the past four years. Efforts to correct the imbalance between the Department of Defense and the rest of the government stalled due to Congressional complaisance and bureaucratic dysfunction.

After decades of empowering the military at the expense of the rest of the government, it was hardly surprising to watch the U.S. government contort its view of the world in order to justify its use of the military to contend with our national security challenges. The military is pretty much the only tool left in the toolkit, after all. And as the Department of Defense became more dominant in framing national security for the United States, addressing non-military challenges such as climate change and pandemics fell by the wayside.

Which is one of the many reasons I cried in March. These are errors of neglect and mismanagement. The American people, through the Congress, allowed our national security institutions to run on autopilot and we have paid the price in American lives.

And yet: I am hopeful. I am hopeful because so many new voices have joined the fight for our democracy, and a more informed and active citizenry means that the era of complaisance may now be behind us. I am hopeful because of the promise of our own innovation and ingenuity. We developed COVID-19 vaccines in just a year—what else might we accomplish if we apply ourselves to other problems like climate change? And I am hopeful that by sharing my story, you will be moved to act. To call your Congressperson and tell them that you demand that they fix this mess. The work ahead will be hard, of course, but it sure beats the heartbreak stemming from government incompetence. ■



**Kathleen J. McInnis** is the author of *The Heart of War: Misadventures in the Pentagon* and has worked in the Pentagon, UK Parliament, and in think tanks on both sides of the Atlantic. Having earned her PhD in War Studies, she analyzes security and defense issues for the US Congress.

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# Want to Change the Narrative?

## Tell a Good Story

Sean Murphy

*Let me tell you a story.*



A few examples:

“We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” became the rallying cry during The Great Depression.

“Ask not what your country can do for you,” epitomized a national unity that led, less than a decade later, to a man walking on the moon.

*“I have a dream” helped crystallize the Civil Rights movement.*

For good or ill, the Reagan Revolution could be summarized in the masterfully effective manifesto-as-sentence: “government is the problem.”

Gordon Gekko’s “Greed is Good” speech captured the moral void of an entire industry (or emboldened a thousand short-selling stockbrokers).

*Just Do It* and *Think Different* allowed multi-billion-dollar (and very bottom-line driven) enterprises to convey the aura of individuality.

“The Audacity of Hope” helped launch a presidency, and Obama spent eight years trying to match America in a new millennium to that narrative, though some may have hoped for more audacity. And so on.

Our country was founded by expert writers who crafted a series of narratives that became legend. We the People; Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness; City Upon a Hill, etc.

Understanding, and exploiting, the power of narrative is the impetus uniting such unlikely—and ostensibly antithetical—endeavors as Art, Academia, Business, and Politics.

Without the succinct eloquence of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln may not have been able to unify a nation. If he didn’t read Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, Teddy Roosevelt may not have been moved to enact critical regulations within the food industry. Across the pond, did anyone do more than Dickens to inspire reform ranging from programs for the impoverished, including prison, child

labor, and orphanage reform? From Melville’s white whale to Morrison’s escaped slave, and countless stories in between, America has been able to interrogate, critique, and aspire through the power of narrative.

Interestingly, storytelling became more, not less, important once books were complemented by the advancements of radio, records, television, and movies.



It is, then, at once curious yet obvious why the art of storytelling has historically been marginalized, or relegated (albeit celebrated) as the province of uniquely gifted creative types.

*Students and, more impactfully, parents, have been persuaded for the last several decades that business, science, and economics were the key to an education that would lead to successful careers.*

As such, Humanities have been avoided and even villainized; a luxury, certainly not a formula for prosperity or security.

Back when I decided to major in English the first (and only) question I was asked was “Do you plan to teach?” (No, I never said, I was going to practice L.A. Law. Speaking of a good story...)



My subsequent career, ranging from bartender to account manager, tech industry analyst to freelance journalist, all required one indispensable trait for success: the ability to communicate effectively. Sure, a degree in the Humanities invariably equips one to write well, but it also imparts the ability to think critically, and creatively. In an era of info-overload, a proficiency at organizing, researching, and synthesizing disparate sources is ever-appealing to employers.

To be certain, a cursory review of commencement addresses (or arts award acceptances) will reveal that there has always been a small but passionate coterie advocating for the arts. What’s different is that with the advance of the internet, everyone can be a writer, editor, and content provider in 2021. With great power comes great responsibility, it’s said, but with great access comes irresistible temptations. Campaign managers, CEOs, and bloggers all have the potential to shape and make news each minute of every day.

The founding fathers well understood that a free press (and the freedom of expression explicit in the First Amendment) had the power to inform, as well as persuade. They also could never have anticipated the internet and the myriad ways dissemination of content has been democratized—and weaponized.

Needless to say, the ability to understand the craft and execution of convincing narrative is—and always has been—dangerous, particularly to those wary of scrutiny.

Simply put, in an age of Fake News and Facebook refusing to remove provable lies in the form of paid advertisements (because it’s not good business), we’re now beyond affirming the importance of effective storytelling. We’re also grappling with how cynical and outright malicious content is proliferating. The charade of any public official promulgating “alternative facts” would, in a saner time, be subject of bi-partisan ridicule; now we must recognize that these counter-narratives are not intended to negate the truth so much as create a new reality.

If we wish to somehow refute falsehoods, encourage empathy, imitate the best work of those who’ve gone before us, and find ways to stimulate dialogue rather than shut it down, understanding—and promoting—the importance of storytelling is in our collective best interest. And let’s not forget that one advantage of an increasingly digital platform is the convenience of content creation: many traditional gatekeepers have been removed, and good riddance to them. Underserved and less-heard voices now have unprecedented opportunities to make their music, movies, and yes, tell their stories. Through narrative we can cultivate our better angels and

celebrate the diversity—geographic, ethnic, political, personal—that has always defined the American experiment.

*What we say matters, and in some ways what we don’t say (or are discouraged from saying and even told not to say) matters even more.*

Before we get better health care, ensure our drinking water is not contaminated, or restore a world where integrity trumps profits, we need one thing: exceptional storytelling. Those that can tell a story about what you need to know are important; the ones who tell you a story about what you *want* to hear can become immortal.

History, after all, is written by the victors, and those who fail to learn from history are...well, you’ve heard *that* story. ■



**Sean Murphy** has been publishing fiction, poetry, reviews (of music, movie, book, food), and essays on the technology industry for almost twenty years. He has appeared on NPR’s “All Things Considered” and been quoted in USA Today, The New York Times, The Huffington Post, Forbes and AdAge.

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