

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

*"The object of the Monitor is to injure no man,
but to bless all mankind."*

— MARY BAKER EDDY

WEEK OF JUNE 1, 2026 | VOLUME 118 – ISSUE 28

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The Monitor view of ‘newsworthy’

I recently had the opportunity to read the inaugural issue of *The Christian Science Monitor*, published in November 1908. The front page of that broadsheet is chock-full of news stories. And while it looks just like many of the gray, text-heavy newspapers of the day, I was struck by the story selection.

Those early Monitor editors took a clear-eyed view of the day’s events, running stories about the troubled Balkans, about troops called to quell student protests in Rome, about Andrew Carnegie not wanting to testify about tariffs. But there are also pieces about how a firefighter saved a family from a New York City apartment blaze, about a rare book collection going to the Boston library, about 37,000 turkeys headed for Thanksgiving dinner. The approach is expansive, curious, and genuine – a needed redefinition of what is “newsworthy.”



By Stephanie Hanes
Print Editor

This week’s Monitor is in that tradition.

It has you shredding the waves of West Africa and waiting for a minibus taxi (maybe even a quiet, electric one) on the streets of Nairobi, Kenya. It brings you back to your first apartment (the laundry room is where?) and into outer space. (We’ll leave it to you to make conclusions about whether UFOs exist – but we’ll tell you all about the newly declassified 161 files of government documents focusing on that possibility.)

Other stories wind through the housing markets of South Korea and the American South, and into Mexico City, where a puppet show for kids has captured grown-up attention. We go to Kosovo, where a group of women has defiantly claimed lives of joy and agency in the years since they lost their husbands in war. And we stop in Tybee Island, Georgia, where teenagers are making their own claims to the towns and streets where they live – in a way that’s presenting both challenges and opportunities for communities.

The stories in our magazine this week are timely and news relevant. And together, they paint a portrait of global humanity that’s different from the image of division and discord regularly portrayed by media headlines and social media feeds.

This is the Monitor’s view of the world. ■

International grad student enrollment plummets in US

The University of New Haven in Connecticut, which grew its graduate student enrollment with popular programs in engineering, business, and public health, has lost some 3,000 graduate students from abroad over the past two years. When new international graduate students arrive this fall, they will number only in the dozens rather than the hundreds.

A variety of factors conspired to force this major shift in the school’s student body. The Trump administration’s goals of restricting legal immigration and pushing back against critics on U.S. college campuses combined to reshape who is filling college classrooms across the country, experts say.

Nationwide, new international student enrollments – undergraduate and graduate – were down 17% last fall, according to the Institute of International Education and 10 partner higher education associations. The surveyed schools said that visa application concerns and travel restrictions were the leading factors.

DePaul University in Chicago suffered a 30% overall decline in international students, including a 62% drop in first-year international graduate school enrollment last fall. As a result, the school laid off staff and implemented salary and hiring freezes. Also facing a sharp decline in international graduate student enrollment, loss of federal funding, and an ongoing structural deficit, the University of Southern California laid off more than 1,000 employees.

At the University of New Haven, the \$35 million hole the enrollment drop created accounted for about 17% of its budget. It led the school to stop contributing to employee retirement accounts, to cut about 10 academic programs, and to eliminate 80 jobs through attrition. Every administrative office was reduced in size.

“Anytime you have to give up that large of a portion of your revenue, you’ve got to make adjustments,” University of New Haven President Jens Frederiksen says.

Dr. Frederiksen had gone to India – the university’s largest source of international students – in 2024 because he heard applications were softening. Even then, before President Donald Trump’s election victory, U.S. consular officials appeared to be tightening up visa availability. “This predates the current administration here in the U.S., but it was almost like the embassies were kind of hedging for a complete shift in the approach to international students,” he says.

– Ira Porter / Staff writer

Tested by Iran war, Qatar still faithful to mission of mediation

The U.S.-Israel war against Iran, which has consumed the Persian Gulf and the surrounding region, and the resulting closure of the Strait of Hormuz have strangled Qatar’s gas exports. Yet Qataris say their energy-rich country’s other lifeblood is still flowing strong.

From Russia and Ukraine, to the United States and Iran, to Africa, the tiny Gulf peninsula country is brokering peace – even

while under attack.

Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the emir of Qatar, “was very clear when he said Qatar will be an ‘energy provider and peace facilitator,’” says Majed al-Ansari, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson and special adviser to the Qatari prime minister.

“It is an identity issue for us, a national pride for us as a country,” he says.

In an age where mediators are increasingly targets, Qatar is doubling down on its mission – albeit with an increased focus on its security needs.

The small maritime state has long advocated dialogue and mediation to ensure the stability and peace of the region – and by extension, its own national security.

By maintaining ties with all, Doha has transformed what officials describe as a “curse of geography” into what they see as a strength, creating a quiet yet pivotal mediator of disputes around the globe.

However, no mediation effort has tested or ensnared Qatar quite like the U.S.-Iran war.

Only hours before the war broke out in late February, Qatar was playing a critical behind-the-scenes role supporting U.S.-Iran nuclear talks mediated by Oman, using its ties with both Washington and Tehran to facilitate communication.

Yet maintaining cordial ties with Iran and pushing for peace did not prevent Qatar from becoming a target.

After it was struck by the U.S. and Israel, Iran pounded Qatar with hundreds of missiles and drones, targeting Qatar’s Hamad International Airport, grounding its national carrier, and attacking universities and residential centers in Doha. The damage to Qatar’s liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructure and gas fields alone is estimated to be in the tens of billions of dollars.

Officials estimate that Qatar has lost 17% of its LNG exports for the next five years; its production of ammonia, helium, and urea, a key component of fertilizer, has been decimated. The World Bank projects that Qatar’s gross domestic product is set to contract 5.7% this year due to Iran’s attacks.

Nevertheless, in recent weeks Qatar has emerged once again as a critical facilitator, supporting the Pakistan-led U.S.-Iran mediation, with Doha holding separate dialogues among the U.S., Pakistan, Iran, and other regional players such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

– Taylor Luck / Special correspondent

New Fed chair faces balancing act

As Kevin Warsh steps up to lead the world’s most powerful central bank as chair of the Federal Reserve, he faces two formidable forces: the dragon of inflation and pressure from President Trump.

It’s a stark choice. Taming inflation would mean keeping interest rates high, perhaps even raising them. Caving to the president would mean lowering rates.

The consensus among market analysts is that Mr. Warsh, who took over as the new Fed chair May 15, will address the dragon and ignore the president.

Consumers, homebuyers, and investors are watching closely. They all have a stake in the decision Mr. Warsh, a former Fed governor, Morgan Stanley executive, and economic adviser to President George W. Bush, makes.

“He’s coming in at a very interesting time, because right now

we’re finding out that inflation is a lot more than a lot of people thought it would be,” says Michael Bordo, an economic historian emeritus at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution. “I don’t see him making any radical changes.”

Wall Street appears to agree.

“We no longer expect the Fed to cut rates this year,” Bank of America Securities said in a May 8 note to investors. The investment firm, like many others, now expects those cuts to come next summer or fall, at the earliest.

The reason is simple: Inflation is now roaring while the labor market remains resilient and may be gaining steam. Mr. Trump’s tariffs and the Iran war have raised the cost of everyday items, including many imported goods, for Americans. To curb inflation and cool the economy, the Fed raises interest rates. But that shift can make home mortgages more expensive. Alternatively, when the economy is in recession, the Fed lowers interest rates to spur economic activity.

In his first stint as a Fed governor, he was viewed as an inflation hawk and served as a key adviser to then-Chair Ben Bernanke.

He also served as a liaison with Wall Street during the 2008-09 financial crisis. But he broke with Mr. Bernanke and resigned his post in 2011 over the Fed’s move to buy \$600 billion in U.S. Treasury debt to stimulate the economy.

“The overall inflation picture, no matter how you look at it, is not screaming for a rate cut right now,” says Mark Spindel, founder of Potomac River Capital, a Washington-based investment firm, and co-author of “The Myth of Independence.”

– Laurent Belsie / Staff writer

Lebanon’s first responders under fire from Israel

First responders in Lebanon have faced a record death toll during fighting between Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah, since fighting renewed between the two March 2.

As of mid-May, 110 emergency responders had been killed by Israeli airstrikes and drone attacks, even while a U.S.-brokered ceasefire has been in place. The latest wave of fighting began after Hezbollah launched rockets into Israel to avenge the assassination of Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. That triggered a sweeping Israeli air and ground campaign on Lebanon to uproot Hezbollah. While battles between Israel and Hezbollah have flared for decades, never before have first responders been struck at such scale.

Lebanon’s Ministry of Public Health says the high toll among paramedics is part of a deliberate attempt by Israel to undermine health infrastructure in the Shiite communities of south Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut, where Hezbollah has built its strongholds. By mid-May Israeli strikes had also damaged 131 emergency vehicles, caused the closure of three hospitals, and damaged 16 others, according to the ministry’s tally.

The Israel Defense Forces denies specifically targeting medical teams. In a statement to the Monitor, the IDF said it struck “only military objectives,” and that “medical teams are afforded special protection, so long as they do not carry out actions outside their humanitarian role.”

Mohammed Suleiman, director of the Nabatiyeh Ambulance Service, says his team has seen their first deaths since the group's founding in 2002 – a clear indication to him of how Israel's target list has broadened. He lost his son Joud, at 16 years old a rescue assistant, when he and a volunteer paramedic were riding a motorcycle March 24, just minutes after leaving the first responders' hilltop base adjacent to a hospital. Both were wearing the group's distinctive blue uniform.

Concerned by the high death toll that Israel inflicted upon Gaza rescue and health workers, Lebanon's first responders take precautions to prove their work is purely humanitarian. Medics of the Nabatiyeh Ambulance Service, for example, wear GoPro body cameras to record their work at strike sites, as well as inside their vehicles before and after arriving at a scene.

The Nabatiyeh Ambulance Service is politically unaffiliated, unlike some other local first-responder networks that have Hezbollah or other party ties.

– Scott Peterson / Staff writer

Enforcement insider takes helm at ICE

An immigration insider – with ties to a detention contractor – will oversee arrests and deportations as the new leader of Immigration and Customs Enforcement after months of public blowback against the agency.

David Venturella, a longtime official and former private prison executive, is expected to take over as acting director at ICE in June, following a period of chaotic Department of Homeland Security raids that generated negative publicity.

Mr. Venturella inherits ICE in a period of searing public scrutiny. Immigrant advocates have labeled the agency's practices unconstitutional, while MAGA hard-liners continue to call for more deportations – at least 1 million a year following an unprecedented spike in illegal immigration during the Biden administration. (White House border czar Tom Homan has reported 800,000 deportations so far during the second Trump administration.)

President Donald Trump's campaign promise of mass deportations has snagged on court challenges, logistical hurdles, and internal disagreements within the administration over how to execute it. After aggressive arrests and fatal shootings of two U.S. citizens by DHS personnel in Minneapolis, the administration scaled back high-profile immigration enforcement surges. DHS Secretary Markwayne Mullin has said he wants his agency, which includes ICE, to retreat from headlines.

The secretary – like his predecessor, Kristi Noem – comes from a political background, and was expected to lower the public backlash while continuing the deportation push.

Mr. Venturella understands the full deportation process at a “very technical level,” says John Fabbriatore, a former ICE field office director and recent Health and Human Services official.

With Mr. Venturella, “You're getting somebody that can lead right out of the gate,” Mr. Fabbriatore says. “People in ICE know him. They respect him.”

The incoming ICE boss has worked in both Republican and Democratic administrations. During Barack Obama's presidency, Mr. Venturella led ICE's Secure Communities program, which immigrant advocates accused of overreach. He later worked as an

executive at The GEO Group, an ICE detention contractor, before returning to ICE last year.

“The revolving door between the private prison industry and ICE has never been more apparent,” Aaron Reichlin-Melnick, a senior fellow at the American Immigration Council, posted on X.

– Sarah Matussek / Staff writer

Chavismo movement dwindles in Venezuela

Venezuela is entering a new phase following the United States' removal of President Nicolás Maduro and the appointment of interim President Delcy Rodríguez in January. That is forcing a reckoning within the socialist movement that has dominated the country for almost three decades.

Chavismo, as former leader Hugo Chávez's political movement came to be known, was once defined by promises of inclusion. It is now riven by internal divisions and a growing disconnect between its anti-imperialist rhetoric and its actions, including close cooperation with former adversaries, including the U.S.

This moment “may well mark the end of Chavismo as a political project,” says Edgardo Lander, a sociologist and professor emeritus of the Central University of Venezuela. “The gap between what it says and what it does has become impossible to sustain.”

Under Chavismo, social programs known as *misiones* aimed to bring education, food, and housing to Venezuelans long excluded from the oil-rich nation's wealth. But these projects became increasingly unsustainable over the course of Mr. Chávez's 14 years in office. His government also became more antidemocratic, eroding checks and balances by consolidating control over the Supreme Court, reshaping electoral institutions, and pressuring independent media outlets.

The democratic erosion that began under Mr. Chávez was followed by a drop in the global price of oil after he died and Mr. Maduro took office. That contributed to the collapse of Venezuela's economy. And close to one-third of the population fled the country starting in 2015, as Venezuela faced simultaneous economic, humanitarian, and human-rights crises.

On Jan. 3 this year, U.S. forces captured Mr. Maduro in a military operation in Caracas. The U.S. tapped Ms. Rodríguez, a longtime *chavista*, to serve as acting president. President Trump has called her “terrific” and said she's “doing a great job.” Under pressure from the United States, her government has changed laws to lure American investors, and initiated direct talks with U.S. officials – policies that would have been politically unthinkable even six months ago.

Dr. Lander says these overt changes signal it might be too late to salvage Chavismo. Behind closed doors, party leaders had in many ways already abandoned the movement.

Chavismo “was dismantled long before the Americans arrived,” he says, referring to elected officials' focus on self-preservation and enriching themselves during the Maduro years.

– Tibisay Zea / Contributor

Litter has declined across America over the past 5 years

Keep America Beautiful has found “encouraging evidence that litter is a solvable issue and that meaningful progress is underway.”

In 2020, its researchers examined 700 randomly selected sites, from roadsides to watersides, for litter. They revisited those same nationwide locations in 2025, cataloging each discarded item. Litter had declined by 34%. Of the approximately 35 billion pieces of litter last year, there was a notable rise in cardboard and tire detritus but declines in other categories, including a 62% drop in cigarette butts. In a Harris Poll companion survey, 90% of respondents said it was “their personal responsibility to help reduce litter.”

– Staff

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

42

Percentage decline in visits by Canadians to United States metropolitan areas between April 2024 and March 2026, according to a study by the University of Toronto. The study, which tracked cellphone activity and captured business- and trade-related travel, reveals a significantly larger drop than official border-crossing data, which showed a 25% decline.

57

Percentage of Americans who believe the United States contributes to global peace and stability in 2026, down from 69% in 2023, according to a recent Pew Research Center survey. Among Republicans, the share has risen from 70% to 82%, but among Democrats, it has declined sharply from 72% to 35%.

43

Percentage of Americans between ages 15 and 34 who said in 2025 it was a good time to find a job, according to a recent Gallup survey. That compares with 64% of Americans ages 55 and older who said the same.

3,400

The number of years *ulama*, an ancient Mesoamerican ballgame, has survived. Originating from Aztec and Maya traditions, the game is played with a 7-lb rubber ball that players must strike with only their hips. It is one of the world's oldest continuously played sports. Some Mexicans are reviving the ancient sport as their country prepares to co-host the World Cup next month.

400

The estimated number of truffle orchards in Australia, making it the highest black truffle producer outside Europe, despite the fungi not being indigenous to Australia. Truffles were introduced to Australia relatively recently – the first harvest was in 1999 – but the industry has since mushroomed.

– Audrey Thibert / Staff writer

Sources: The Guardian, Pew Research Center, Gallup, The Associated Press

OUR WORLD

Israel's secret desert base

The Israeli military built a clandestine outpost in a sparsely populated area of western Iraq to aid Israel's air operations against Iran, according to a May report in *The Wall Street Journal*, citing sources including anonymous United States officials. Iraqi forces almost discovered the base in early March after a shepherd reported activity in the area, but Israel used airstrikes to prevent the forces from advancing. That attack left one Iraqi soldier dead. Israel's military did not comment on the *Journal* report.

– Matthew Bell

“Most people don't deposit their money in sofas.”

That's what retired South African judge Dennis Davis declared in May, as one of many calling for the resignation of President Cyril Ramaphosa over his handling of a 2020 theft at his buffalo ranch, in which more than a half-million dollars was stolen from inside a couch. The controversy hinges on the source of that cash and why Mr. Ramaphosa did not formally report it missing. South Africa's highest court recently ruled that Parliament must revive a previously shuttered impeachment inquiry against the president. (Mr. Ramaphosa has denied wrongdoing.)

– Ryan Lenora Brown

AI takes charge at a Swedish café

An artificial intelligence agent nicknamed Mona is the new manager at Andon Café in Stockholm. Created by the San Francisco startup Andon Labs and powered by Google's Gemini, Mona is part of an experiment to “see what ethical questions arise” when AI supervises almost every aspect of a business, an Andon staff member says. While humans still make and serve the orders, one café customer told *The Associated Press* that “it's nice to see what happens if you push the boundary.”

– Audrey Thibert

Fight over resource-rich territory reaches The Hague

The International Court of Justice at The Hague has opened hearings on a long-running dispute between Venezuela and Guyana. Both lay claim to the Essequibo territory, which is rich in diamonds, gold, and oil. The disagreement, which has dragged on for more than a century, heated up when taken to the court in 2018, after new oil reserves were found. Venezuela has claimed the region since Spanish rule, but in 1899, foreign arbitrators drew the shared border along the Essequibo River, giving Guyana most of the territory. Venezuela argues a 1966 agreement nullified that map. The court's decision is expected to take months.

– Whitney Eulich

SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

Property prices in Seoul are now a key national priority

In South Korea, President Lee Jae-myung sees housing affordability as an existential challenge for the future of the country.

By Kelly Kasulis Cho / Contributor

Unlike many in her generation, Woo Ye-wan was able to purchase a sleek apartment in southeastern Seoul three years ago at age 27. But as she cuts a slice of German butter cake into bite-size pieces with kitchen scissors, she laments that it's not the kind of place where she could ever raise a family.

Her minimalist studio flat is just 450 square feet, with a kitchen counter only a few short steps from her dining table, which is only a couple of steps from her bed. Ms. Woo, who works long hours as a nurse, worries that the investment – which amounted to 15 times her annual salary – might not be the launching pad she had hoped.

“These days, I've reached the point where I just hope I don't end up losing money on it,” she says.

Many young Koreans are glum about their future, with housing at the center of a generation's angst. This is why the country's president, Lee Jae-myung, is waging a policy war on the housing market. Throughout his first year in office, he has blamed property speculation and greed for Seoul's runaway housing prices, and promised to do everything he can to fix it.

President Lee even went so far as listing his own Seoul apartment for sale at below market value. The message he wanted to send was that real estate is about finding a home, and is not simply an investment vehicle. He says South Korea has turned into a “property-speculation republic.” And the president vows to “eradicate” the problem, in order to fuel “South Korea's great transformation.”

In a nation with the lowest birth rate in the world, and where many view homeownership as a prerequisite for raising a family, this affordability crisis is seen as an existential problem, jeopardizing South Korea's social and economic stability.

President Lee said in a social media post earlier this year, “Don't you see the blood and tears of millions of young people who are giving up on marriage and childbirth due to the high housing costs?”

Housing in Korea

The number of Koreans in their 20s and 30s who own their homes has reached record lows. And that is hardly surprising in Seoul, where apartment prices rose nearly 19% in just the last year, according to the country's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport. It has also become more difficult for young people to find steady employment in South Korea, where there are just 39 jobs for every 100 job seekers, according to data from June of last year.

This all makes Ms. Woo something of an outlier.

“When I became an adult, I just assumed that once I started earning money, I'd naturally be able to buy a real home where I could raise a family,” she says. But getting into her own place was no easy feat.

Ms. Woo went to after-work real estate study groups to educate herself about the housing market. She whittled down her overall living costs by quitting the gym and ruling out vacations abroad. She also started buying almost all of her clothes from a cheap wholesale market in an underground tunnel of Seoul.

But three years ago, she made the leap, signing up for a monthly mortgage payment that would, on a good month, swallow about two-thirds of her income – so long as she took on extra shifts. Ms. Woo commutes an hour and 20 minutes each way by city bus to and from the hospital where she works at least five days a week.

For decades, many Koreans have relied on a system called *jeonse*, in which landlords offer a residential lease in exchange for an up-front fee from tenants. That fee could be as high as 80% or 85% of the value of the property. The landlord can invest that money during the term of the lease, while the tenant lives essentially rent-free. The full deposit is meant to be returned by the landlord at the end of the term of the lease.

But with property values running so high, the typical *jeonse* deposit for an apartment in Seoul runs into the \$400,000 range. Nowadays, more people are opting to pay monthly rent, to avoid having to come up with such a large lump sum under the old *jeonse* system.

President Lee blames lenders for providing large loans to buy multiple investment properties and wants them to put a stop to the practice. He has also floated the idea of reducing tax benefits for those who own more than one home.

Hyojung Lee, an associate professor at Seoul National University's department of urban planning, says that housing has been young Koreans' go-to investment for the last 30 to 40 years. “Some may call it speculation, but to me, it is a pretty rational and reasonable investment,” he says.

Property prices nationally, for example, rose by about 9% last year. That's a good return on investment, but Professor Lee – no relation to the president – says the government is trying to “freeze” the real estate market, while it scrambles to increase Seoul's housing supply. He himself had to cancel plans to buy a home last year after policy changes caused him to lose access to a loan.

“It's not a good idea in the long term, but it could be a short-term measure to address this speculative approach to the housing market,” Professor Lee says. “To me, the ultimate policy solution is to convince the public that there are better parts of your life than raising your kids in elite neighborhoods and sending them to elite universities.”

Expectations and aspirations

About half of South Korea's population lives in Seoul and nearby satellite cities, their lives anchored to the metropolis that has become the nation's outsize center of economic life. This drives real estate prices up. And surveys show that many Koreans believe buying a home is an important factor in deciding to get married or have children.

Andrew Eungi Kim, a sociology professor at Korea University's Graduate School of International Studies, says it is hardly a surprise that many young people feel under pressure.

“I don't think there is any room for optimism for the younger generations, because the jobs they can look forward to are not that high-paying,” says Professor Kim. “And the housing prices are not coming down anytime soon.”

South Koreans are hardly alone in their housing woes. The World Economic Forum has identified the problem as “a global

housing mismatch” among property supply, demand, affordability, and access. Many young people in India, for example, are finding themselves priced out of middle-class housing. And in the United States, the median age of first-time homebuyers has climbed above 40, according to the National Association of Realtors.

James Lee, a local real estate agent, says part of South Korea’s problem is about expectations.

He says many families – including his own – are trying to save up to buy property in an upscale neighborhood of Seoul, where people are “well mannered” and “somewhere important” in South Korean society. In some of these highly sought-after districts, the cost of an apartment has nearly doubled since 2020.

“You feel like there’s more opportunity for your daughter, maybe, growing up somewhere like that,” he says. Yet for most buyers, that’s not realistic, he adds, which leads to frustration.

Still, some residents have more modest goals.

About an hour away from the tiny studio apartment owned by the nurse, Ms. Woo, Kim Keum-hye, who is the same age, rents a poorly insulated basement apartment in northern Seoul. A former social worker who now bartends part time, Ms. Kim says she has ditched her “naive” goals of buying her own flat in Seoul one day.

“I don’t think I could ever achieve owning a home, to be honest,” she says. “Thinking about Korean society, everything is so hard to afford.”

“I don’t know about having kids, either,” she adds, expressing concern about raising children on her current salary.

At this point, she says, she only dreams about renting a place with some natural sunlight. ■

JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA

How America’s affordable housing boom went bust

Finding a reasonably priced home used to be easy in the South. But soaring home prices have far outpaced wage growth, creating a housing squeeze.

By Patrik Jonsson / Staff writer

Still just in his 20s, Cody Eades is a grizzled veteran of the American housing market.

After he and his wife split up in 2019, the couple sold a home they had purchased in Orlando. They made a small profit. Mr. Eades left town in an RV with a dog and his part of the earnings, working remotely and following the open road.

“Problem was,” he says, “I had no home.”

He had figured he could always buy a new home when he decided to return to the Sunshine State. After all, the South has long been the nation’s epicenter of affordable housing.

He was wrong.

For Mr. Eades and millions like him, Florida’s low home prices long represented a shot at the middle class. But a boom in population has helped push prices dramatically upward, while median household incomes have stagnated.

Today, the average first-time homebuyer in Florida is 40 years old, up from under age 30 two decades ago. Housing affordability

“is a defining challenge for our economy right now, particularly in the South,” says Joey Von Nessen, a research economist at the University of South Carolina in Columbia.

Although Florida is a complicated case – with slowing in-migration, rising insurance rates, new laws that have increased homeowners association fees, and a recent drop in median home prices – the market is still too expensive for many potential buyers.

“Buyers right now are terrified,” says Jon Brooks, a millennial real estate analyst in Jacksonville.

Drive until you find a mortgage

Nationally, even as demand has remained high, housing starts – the industry term for the beginning point of new construction – have slowed, a trend that started right after the Great Recession of 2008. Residential permitting dropped by more than 20% between 2021 and 2022, even without a recession. In South Carolina, housing starts after 2008 dropped to 3% from 5% even as the state added 650,000 people between 2010 and 2020. Qualifying income for a new house has doubled since 2019 and is now over \$100,000 a year, according to CRBE, a Dallas-based real estate investment firm.

Along the Jacksonville beaches, young couples still shop for homes and snap up nice digs. But many have wealthy parents who cover down payments, say real estate agents, so these young house hunters don’t tend to worry much about buying at peak prices or job insecurity. The problem is, “90% of people don’t have rich parents,” says Mr. Brooks.

That’s also true 300 miles to the north, in Hall County, Georgia, near the sprawling chicken processing plants of Gainesville. There are hundreds of homes on the market. What’s missing are homes that new buyers can afford, says Gregg Poole, a Hall County commissioner.

“The biggest problem facing our children is that they’re not able to have the hope and dreams of my generation or the generations before me,” he says.

The mismatch is in part a market failure, but also a failure of American imagination and policy, experts say.

“You can’t abandon entry-level homes and expect to have a workforce and be competitive in a global marketplace. People have to have a place to live and start a family,” says Jeff Brandes, director of the Florida Policy Project in St. Petersburg. “Companies tend to forget the bottom of the market. And what we’re seeing now is kind of a story about what happens when you do: You ultimately find there is no market.”

The trend is causing shifts in how younger Americans think about wealth creation, says Mr. Brooks, who has two young children. “For a lot of young people it’s become a payment economy,” he says. “Instead of paying \$2,500 for a mortgage, we pay \$1,600 for an apartment and then invest the rest in the stock market.”

As Florida’s in-migration slows, South Carolina has become the nation’s fastest-growing state. But it also has housing problems. Of the state’s 47 counties, just 12, mostly nestled along the coast, have driven the growth. Housing affordability “is not a short-term fix,” says Professor Van Nessen. “And affordability can vary greatly depending on the market you’re looking at,” he says, noting the growth of homes in rural Ocala, Florida. “You drive until you can afford a mortgage.”

Homes finally getting smaller

Nationally, the White House has pushed the Federal Reserve to lower interest rates and at one point floated the idea of 50-year

mortgages. States such as California and Massachusetts are working to increase urban density – often to howls of protest from neighborhoods worried about dings to property values.

But there are signs of a market shifting toward starter home sizes as the number of households with children under age 18 has been shrinking since 1980. Square footage for new construction peaked in 2016 at 2,700 square feet and has now eased down to 2,400 square feet. That's still larger than the average starter home, at 1,800 square feet.

So far, most reforms have come at the local level. Charleston, South Carolina, has embarked on a bid to build 3,500 affordable homes over the next decade. In Tampa, Florida, a local law called "Yes in God's Backyard" now allows nonprofit churches to develop land. Atlanta has eased rules on "accessory dwellings" to ease the housing crunch.

While those efforts are important, some of the housing problem stems from national factors, including the way things like tariffs and labor shortages affect construction costs.

"There are so many things going on that are from the national picture that impacts locally, and you can see that," says veteran Jacksonville real estate agent Janie Boyd.

Ms. Boyd also points to unrealistic home-buyer expectations as an issue. Part of homeownership, after all, she says, is accepting some risk to join a community and work to make it better to everybody's benefit. As an example, she cites the quietly gentrifying Murray Hill neighborhood, one of Jacksonville's oldest, which offers hipster eateries, jazz circles, and even a beekeeper store. Median home prices hover around \$240,000.

But many of the homes are older and in need of repair. And petty crime rates in the area worry some. One factor keeping prices down are local complaints about whiffs from a perfume factory nearby. Racial and socioeconomic issues also come into play, adds Mr. Brooks. "People don't want to live next to poor people."

Such realities are part of a trade-off for Tony Suits, a 50-something construction worker who now owns the Murray Hill home where he grew up.

He has raised three sons in the house, and now he worries whether they'll have their own place before they reach his age.

"They're going to be playing catch-up for a long time," he says.

As for Mr. Eades, he has put his home dreams on ice for now. He rents in one of the increasingly popular mother-in-law apartments in a neighborhood where he says he could never afford to buy a home.

Homeownership "is starting to feel far out of reach," he says. Mr. Eades, who manages a pizza shop, says he is pining for his native Louisiana. "I'm ready to give up on Florida," he says. "I'm thinking about going home." ■

BOSTON

For young Bostonians, the apartment hunt is wicked rough

Our reporter jumps into a housing search in one of the most expensive rental markets in the country. He learns that staying on budget is no easy feat.

By Cameron Pugh / Staff writer

Even my friends living in cities known for high rents – New York, say, or Washington – shudder when I describe the housing search in Boston.

While this new hometown of mine might be famed for the stately brownstones of Beacon Hill, or the Victorian-era mansions of Jamaica Plain, most apartments here offer little beauty for eye-popping rent.

During my three years as a Bostonian, I've lived in a room without a closet, faced down a property manager refusing to fix a broken garbage disposal, and been yelled at by real estate agents. And now, with my roommate set to move abroad this summer, I've reentered the arena of Greater Boston's housing search.

Yes, I said, "roommate."

Zumper, a real estate platform, ranked Boston as having the third-highest rent for one and two bedrooms in the U.S. this year, behind only San Francisco and New York. (Apartments.com puts the average rent for Boston two-bedrooms at \$4,500.) Most people I know who live in the city can afford rent only by splitting it between multiple people. When I realized in April that I had to move again, I briefly entertained the idea of renting a studio so I could finally have a bathroom all to myself. But after crunching numbers, I quickly discarded that musing as a pipe dream.

Renters living elsewhere also face unforgiving markets, I realize. Almost half of U.S. renters in 2024 qualified as "cost burdened" – meaning they spent more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities – according to a report by Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies. In the last five years, those burdens have increased in 88 of the country's 100 largest metro areas, where prices were already high.

Yet Boston presents several unique challenges. Between 60% and 80% of leases here, including my current one, turn over on Sept. 1, according to The Boston Globe. That's largely because some 160,000 college students study here each year, and about 40% live in off-campus housing. As a result, leases tend to correspond to the academic term, and prospective tenants often begin looking for a September apartment in early spring.

(Everyone packing up and moving in on the same day also means that Sept. 1 is among the most hectic times in the city – even compared to those days the Red Sox play the Yankees.)

The first apartment I toured, with my future roommate, Nick, intrigued me because of its exposed-brick walls and its location in the vibrant North End, where I currently live happily.

But it also stretched our budget. And it would mean sharing one washer and one dryer with about 20 other people. The current tenants were home when we toured – a boon, because I've learned no one will be more honest about a place than the person moving out of it.

“The only downside is the bathroom,” the tenant said.

Indeed. The bathroom was so narrow that I could hardly extend my arms on either side. Another downside: The laundry room was in the building next door, so washing clothes would require going outside and then descending into a small, dank basement.

As I entered the room, I shouted, “Duck!” so that Nick, who stands at 6-foot-5, wouldn’t hit his head on the sloping ceiling.

We decided to keep looking.

Real estate brokers and agents have an iron grip on Boston’s rental market. Many landlords hire these professionals to market their properties and handle paperwork, meaning prospective tenants often have to work with one, or several, during their search. I’ve had mixed experiences. Some have been consummate professionals, working to get me the best deals for the least amount of money. Others have been more difficult. More than one agent has tried to sell a one bedroom apartment as a two bedroom after the unit’s living room was converted into sleeping space. Greater Boston was one of the last major metros to allow landlords to pass along the broker fee to new tenants. That cost typically totaled a month’s rent. In those not-so-distant days – when new tenants could be required to pay first and last month’s rent, a security deposit, and a broker fee – moving into a place often cost more than \$10,000. Move-in fees for my first apartment ran my two roommates and me almost \$12,000.

Even though the Massachusetts state legislature passed a law last year that prohibits landlords from requiring tenants to pay that broker fee, one leasing agent nevertheless proposed that Nick and I pay half of it.. I raised an eyebrow; he backtracked.

Even without paying the broker, move-in costs can still total three months’ rent. Then add in the costs of a new lock and key, plus renting a U-Haul or hiring movers, and the money adds up. In a survey of Bostonians between the ages of 20 and 30 by the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce this year, 26% of respondents said they might leave the area in the next five years, and 78% said that rent prices were a main consideration in their decision-making. In response, Boston City Council passed a resolution to “support the creation of a committee ... dedicated to maintaining and attracting young adults to the City of Boston.”

Nevertheless, almost a third of Bostonians are between ages 20 and 34, according to census data, and we young people are trying to make it work. Having already found a roommate I like – we’re friends from college – I’ve won half the battle.

As this story went to press, Nick and I were still looking for our next place. While I was drafting this article, a broker texted me that an apartment we’d applied for did not, as we had believed, have a working laundry machine.

“You’re kidding,” Nick said via text, after I told him. Ever an optimist, he still saw a silver lining.

“This’ll be great for your story,” he added. ■

TYBEE ISLAND, GA.

Teens in viral ‘takeovers’ testing communities

A rise in teen takeovers highlights the need for more “third spaces” for young people to safely gather.

By Patrik Jonsson / Staff writer

For Cabriel Lewis, it was an “epic” teen takeover. When he was just 15 years old, he joined tens of thousands of other teenagers to rush onto tiny Tybee Island, Georgia, a barrier island beach town with only one causeway road on and off. They were trying to take part in “Orange Crush,” a controversial, annual spring break beach bash here. Gridlock ensued, people were injured, ambulances got stuck, and mayhem ruled deep into the night.

“It was a lot of fun,” says Mr. Lewis, now 18. “But I also feel lucky to have gotten off the island alive.”

Unruly teen gatherings have long been an integral part of American culture (think “West Side Story” or Halloween egg fights). But driven by social media organizing and the potential for viral fame, a new wave of teen “takeovers” is presenting big problems – and opportunities – for communities across the United States.

On May 8, police in Tampa, Florida, arrested 22 people, most of them boys under age 18, in what the agency called a “teen takeover” at Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park after fights broke out. The weekend before, groups of rowdy teens descended takeover-style on Six Flags St. Louis and the Katy Mills Mall just outside Houston, requiring police to disperse the crowds. Another planned takeover in nearby Tomball, Texas, was halted by law enforcement before it could begin.

With such events becoming more frequent, authorities from Alameda Beach, California, to the Navy Yard neighborhood of Washington, D.C., say they are concerned about a restive summer.

On May 5, the D.C. Council voted to extend the police chief’s authority to enforce an 8 p.m. youth curfew zone through 2028, adding enforcement guardrails. Mayor Muriel Bowser has also pledged to expand youth programming.

Like “flash mobs,” in which a group rushes in and performs an unexpected act (like the 4,000-person silent disco in London’s Victoria Station in 2006), modern “teen takeovers” tend to be social media-driven gatherings that happen fast, with kids disappearing into crowds when police arrive.

That makes it hard for authorities to hold the youthful participants accountable for any property damage.

In the Tampa takeover, police made arrests on charges including possessing drugs and resisting law enforcement. One 20-year-old man was arrested on a charge of possessing a firearm while committing a felony. Police seized at least two guns and a vehicle.

Communities are thinking about how to tweak their responses to these often unruly teen takeovers. After all, some city leaders say, hanging out, taking on risky adventures, and prioritizing peers’ attention over possible consequences is normal behavior for teens trying to establish independence. For years, some point out, youth have gathered in malls and parking lots.

“This is the kind of thing we, as teenagers, have always done,” says Jennifer Breheny Wallace, a fellow at the Center for Parent and

Teen Communication at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

"This need to matter"

But times are different, these leaders note, and some teens talk about a sense of irrelevance, whether related to changing media norms; invasive, high-stakes technology; or a polarized political environment – a tricky mix for young people.

"When we are made to feel like we don't matter, we can either withdraw or act out in extremes," says Ms. Breheny Wallace. Teen takeovers "are a collective assertion of this need to matter."

Here on Tybee Island, a teen takeover on the beach pier in early April ended when gunfire erupted. The teens fled and police chased, but no one was arrested and no bullet casings were found. The TV show "Inside Edition" called up Tybee Mayor Brian West for a comment.

"I think [the producers] were expecting this shocked, unprepared small-town mayor who was horrified by all of this," says Mayor West, who, years ago, became the legal guardian to three teenagers who had nowhere else to go. "I said, 'Look, we do this every year. It's a big deal, but we know how to handle it.'" (He says the interview never made it to air.)

While Mayor West has explicitly stated that his goal is to eventually end Orange Crush, citing safety risks, drug and gun concerns, and traffic gridlock, for now, he is focused on creating safe spaces for teens to gather, even as they push boundaries.

Other cities and towns are learning on the job.

The first work is keeping the peace. On April 25 in Orlando, Florida, 30 sheriff's deputies were called in to control a throng of over 1,000 teenagers, some fighting, who had descended on the parking lot of an amusement park. Takeovers in Chicago, Washington, Detroit, and Atlanta have led to fights, gunshots, arrests, and youth running through the streets.

Discipline and accountability

In search of solutions, several cities, including Washington and Detroit, have vowed to strictly enforce curfews. Private businesses like Six Flags have instituted new chaperone policies. Following the chaos at ICON Park in Orlando, the city implemented a chaperone policy requiring park guests under age 17 to be accompanied by an adult age 21 or older.

Other communities are demanding consequences for parents and other responsible adults. In North Carolina, authorities said they plan to file charges against adults who, they claim, recently stood by as teens engaged in a "planned fight" in April that devolved into gunfire that left two teenagers dead.

"You are responsible for knowing where your children are, at all times," Detroit City Councilor Angela Whitfield-Calloway told a local TV station after mayhem broke out during another such teen takeover there in April. "I know where my four were. You know where yours are? Why should we make exceptions? It's not funny. It is a very serious matter, and ... parents are going to be held accountable."

But focusing solely on either curfews or parental accountability can fall short, according to research by Charlotte Gill, a criminology professor at George Mason University, who has found that crime sometimes increases during curfews.

Former Chicago police officer Louis Martinez, now an associate professor of criminal justice at Oakton College in Des Plaines, Illinois, agrees. The call, he says, is to address a mix of needs around discipline, respect, and meaningful relationships in families, schools,

neighborhoods, and communities.

"Most of us experienced [teen years] as a tough time in life. We should be reminded of that. We need some patience," says Mr. Martinez.

A communal response with "balance"

Many communities, in fact, are moving to balance their response.

In Detroit, city leaders created a youth advisory board and vowed to sponsor midnight basketball leagues. Recreational center hours would also be expanded. The city has a new website that will list existing activities in one place, including nighttime gathering spots.

Other communities have countered the teen gatherings with "adult takeovers" that gather near the impromptu teen events to discourage trouble-making.

"Have fun," 2nd District Council member Marquinn McDonald said to teens at a press conference in Chicago announcing one such event. "Come out, kick it, do your thing, but do not destroy."

That communal embrace is critical, experts say, as a 2023 Harvard survey found that 3 in 5 young adults reported feeling a lack of "meaning or purpose." Half said they "lack direction" in their lives.

For his part, Tybee Island's Mr. Lewis attended a nearby city-permitted beach party in April, called "Crush Reloaded," which took place two weeks after the "teen takeover" where shots were fired. The "Crush" fest featured 30,000 young people, raunchy lyrics from a stage, scant swimwear, and glimpses of underage drinking.

But "the vibe was good," says Mr. Lewis, waiting on a friend as the party wound down. "We just really want to have fun and push boundaries, but we also want to feel safe. And I've felt safe today."

Other teens say reactions to such gatherings depend heavily on perceptions, which can fall along racial lines.

"I think people often try to demonize Black and brown youth specifically and try to make them seem like they're doing something mischievous when really they're just trying to have fun," 15-year-old Nahema Konate told a youth forum sponsored by the Black Swan Academy in Washington, D.C., in April.

When asked what adults should keep in mind, another teen, Samir Scroggins, said, "I want them to think about how they can make us better, maybe give us advice."

Tybee Island had dealt with unpermitted gatherings for years. But the 2023 event that Mr. Lewis attended became a turning point. Since then, the city has worked with a new promoter to obtain proper permits for the gathering.

The collaboration, officials say, has resulted in less violence and fewer resident complaints.

At the April 18 event, despite stronger security measures, police did not actively intervene. Instead, they quietly kept watch over the tens of thousands of Orange Crush partiers from the pier. A city councilor, Tony Ploughe, walked the tide line, picking up trash left on the sand by the crowds.

Islanders have also started joining in the festivities with corner "watch parties." Next year, officials say, they hope to have a resident "golf cart brigade" to shuttle teens from distant parking lots to the beach party.

The focus is on ensuring the teens have safe yet fun things to do while on the island, says Mayor West.

"We were all there at one point, at that stage in life where we had to go wild and we didn't know where the edges were," he adds.

"Somebody had to stand at the edges and say, 'This is too far.' ... That's what I hope we can do." ■

In Nairobi, passengers queue for cheaper, quieter electric rides

Kenya has pledged that all new car sales by 2040 will be electric vehicles. The biggest shift, though, might be happening in the informal transportation sector, where two-wheelers are king.

By Vincent Owino / Contributor

Every evening, Anne Kituku queues at a streetside bus park in central Nairobi, waiting for a bus to take her to her home in the eastern part of the Kenyan capital. Nearby, a rainbow of neon-colored *matatus* – minibuses – emblazoned with graffiti art and blasting loud music quickly fill and depart in clouds of gritty exhaust, but Ms. Kituku waits until a sleek white electric bus silently glides up beside her.

For Ms. Kituku, who makes 16,000 Kenyan shillings (about \$123) monthly working as a cleaner, the decision to take the electric bus comes down to cost. The fare is 10 to 20 Kenyan shillings (\$0.08 to \$0.15) less than their gas-powered counterparts depending on the route, a savings that adds up significantly over the course of a month.

Fuel prices in Kenya have risen nearly 40% since 2022, driven by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and, more recently, the war in Iran. The latest surge, in turn, has pushed *matatu* operators to raise fares by 25%. In mid-May protests flared in Nairobi amid a public transport strike over record high fuel prices.

However, over the last four years, electric alternatives have also quietly begun appearing on Nairobi's streets. According to government figures, between 2022 and 2025, the number of EVs in the country rose from less than 800 to nearly 25,000, a 32-fold increase.

Kenya – like much of Africa – is an “early adopter” of electric vehicles. Its government was one of the few on the continent to sign an international pledge to have 100% of new vehicle sales fully electric by 2040. Analysts see transport electrification in Kenya – and Nairobi in particular – as a key way to both lower costs for consumers and help address urban pollution. Government policies waiving import duties on parts and offering cheaper electricity tariffs for EV charging are speeding their adoption.

Some researchers have suggested that transforming the informal transport sector in Kenya – the *matatus* that Ms. Kituku takes and *boda boda* motorcycle taxis that shuttle many commuters around town – is one of the best ways to shift toward electrification.

Indeed, unlike in Europe and North America, where cars dominate the electric market, in Kenya, two-wheelers are king. At least 90% of registered EVs here are motorbikes, and they now make up 40% of all *boda bodas* registered on the ride-hailing app Bolt.

For Jacob Sikunyi, who makes his living as a *boda boda* driver, the decision to switch was obvious. He says he now spends one-third as much on charging as he previously did on petrol. That makes it possible for him to charge 10% to 20% less for the same ride.

Still, the cost savings are not as straightforward as they might appear. The purchase price of Mr. Sikunyi's electric motorbike was twice the cost of one with a combustion engine, an expense invisible to his customers.

The cost of electric vehicles has been a barrier to their adoption

worldwide. In the United States, for instance, new EVs can cost thousands of dollars more than their combustion engine competitors. But lower-cost electric cars, particularly those made in China, are starting to change that. China now has the world's largest market share of EVs, and Southeast Asian countries that import those cheaper Chinese vehicles are some of the world's fastest adopters. Most of Kenya's electric vehicles come from China – although rather than fully built cars, the country tends to import “kits” to build those vehicles locally.

EV proponents point out that even if there is a higher up-front sticker price, it's less expensive to maintain and fuel an electric.

That can be a double-edged sword for entrepreneurs such as Mr. Sikunyi.

“People already believe that electric is cheaper,” he explains. He says that if he tries to offer a fare comparable to what the customer would pay for a standard *boda boda*, they just wave him off. In the case of buses, the difference in upfront costs is even greater.

George Githinji, who operates a fleet of electric *matatus*, said the price of those buses was about seven times as much as what he would pay for combustion engine buses. Though electric bus manufacturers here offer leasing models that lower the upfront costs, Mr. Githinji says the difference is still stark. Even with savings on fuel and maintenance, he estimates the operating costs of electric and combustion engine buses are similar.

“The drop is basically negligible,” he explains.

Charging is also becoming costlier as more electric buses take to the roads without a proportionate growth in charging infrastructure. Electric buses cost 73 shillings (about \$0.56) per kilometer to charge, up by 16% since 2022.

And unlike a petrol tank, which can be filled in minutes, bus batteries take as much as two hours to charge.

But Mr. Githinji and other electric bus operators say they aren't depending only on lower prices to attract customers. The buses are also newer, quieter, and have more predictable fares and schedules. A smartphone app also allows riders to pay fares before boarding and see exactly when their bus will arrive.

“We are investing in the efficiency and comfort because we're not sure it'll be possible to offer better prices for long,” explains Mr. Githinji. “It may soon be all that's keeping customers.” ■

REPORTERS ON THE JOB

DETROIT



Simon Montlake

When I went to Detroit to meet Abdul El-Sayed, a Michigan progressive seeking the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate, I wanted to talk to him about his opposition to U.S. military aid for Israel. But he's also a medical professional and former county health director and that, more than

his stance on Israel, resonated with the crowd at his campaign event I joined. Medical students asked him about relief for student debt. I met a healthcare worker from New York who had stopped by to hear him speak. His personal story mattered to them, as much as his policy on healthcare. It was a reminder to me that political reporters sometimes pay too much attention to policy and not enough to the concerns of constituents and readers. ■

Are we not alone? Declassified UFO files reopen debate on government transparency.

The Trump administration makes public 161 UFO files, citing a need for transparency. But critics view the release as a ploy to a conspiracy-curious base.

By Patrik Jonsson / Staff writer

The Trump administration's release of troves of material related to unidentified flying objects – and promises of more – has resurrected a debate about the possibility that alien life exists and that the U.S. government is hiding the proof.

A new Defense Department website with an “X-Files”-adjacent design uploaded a tranche of 161 UFO files to the public May 8. “These files, hidden behind classification, have long fueled justified speculation – and it’s time the American people see it for themselves,” Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth writes on the site.

Americans have been fascinated with the possibility of contact with alien beings since at least the 1940s, following numerous reported “flying saucer” sightings in the summer of 1947. The interest in UFOs ramped up again during the Cold War, when many Americans felt scared and isolated by existential nuclear dangers.

President Donald Trump has long teased a broader release of what might be thousands of documents related to what are now referred to as unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAPs). In what he says is a national bid for transparency, the president has also ordered the release of documents related to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Critics call this push for transparency ironic, given the record of Mr. Trump's previous administration: stonewalling public records, hiding tax returns, and fighting lawsuits over concealed White House visitor logs and nondisclosure agreements. Supporters, meanwhile, view Mr. Trump as a promoter of “radical transparency,” and they point to his direct, unfiltered communication style as authentic and an unapologetic way to expose what he refers to as the “deep state.”

Releasing the files at a time when his poll numbers are low could be, in part, a way to satisfy Mr. Trump's conspiracy-curious base. But in this case, it's also a test of whether Americans more broadly can handle what the government knows about the question of non-Earth-based life.

“Regardless of why [the UFO conspiracy theory] sort of started, it's been with us for a while,” says Joseph Uscinski, a political scientist at the University of Miami. “A lot of people believe that either aliens have landed here or are flying around or the government knows things that they won't tell us.”

Q: What are UFOs, or UAPs, and what did the May 8 tranche show?

Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan were both open about witnessing UFOs, though they drew different conclusions from them. While Carter formally filed a report about a strange, hovering light in 1969, Reagan simply noted a mysterious, fast-

PHOENIX



Sarah Matusek

Boldness builds over time. It took years of journalism, but I've (mostly) overcome shyness with strangers. I still need to gear myself up for marathon mingling at conferences, as I did this May at a border-security expo in Phoenix. But I'm better at tamping down the terror of raising my hand in front of hundreds of attendees at Q&As. That paid off in Arizona. After I posed questions to panels of federal officials, new sources sought me out to offer insights one on one. What you ask is important. Just as important as who's listening. ■

BEIRUT



Scott Peterson

No matter what precautions one takes before a reporting trip, there are no guarantees of safety. I have traveled to southern Lebanon many times and marveled at the information foreign journalists provided Israel in years past to try to prevent attacks on us.

We would share names, a copy of our passports, license plate number, and even pictures of our vehicle, along with an hour-by-hour itinerary, with the United Nations Peacekeeping force, which would pass this on to Israel. At most, Israel would acknowledge this; it wouldn't promise safe passage.

I now look back with nostalgia on those days. The Israeli campaign in Lebanon has been so destructive that even this mechanism for alerting the Israeli military has become a casualty of its war. These days, we journey at our own risk. ■

TYBEE ISLAND, GEORGIA



Patrik Jonsson

My rusty beach cruiser is my favorite reporting tool. It helped me connect with young people recently during a story about controversial “teen takeovers” on Tybee Island, Georgia. (My story ran online and is in this week's magazine.) While I was mixing with the crowd, a young woman asked to borrow my bike.

While she rode, I talked with her cheerful friend Alex, who shattered the stereotype of ne'er-do-well teens at these events. “I'm just here to have fun and make sure everybody gets home safe,” he told me. I remember that uncertain time of life and feel grateful for those who offered guidance without judgment. Alex didn't appear in the story, but on my bike ride home, I realized he could be its heart. ■

moving light while flying in a private plane in 1974.

The May 8 collection of files includes several videos and documents, including an Oct. 14, 1955, intelligence report featuring witness accounts of an “unconventional aircraft in the trans-Caucasus region of the USSR.”

But evidence that such reports and images may be proof of alien life forms has remained scant through the decades. That’s in part why the sightings have been reclassified as UAPs – framed less as an alien invasion and more as potential national security breaches by hostile foreign governments.

Experts have debunked most purported UFO videos and say that most of the blinking lights and flying discs that witnesses say they see in the skies are most likely mundane objects such as commercial aircraft and drones, satellites, camera lens flares, or optical distortions, cloud formations, and stars. Sometimes, atmospheric conditions cause such things to appear to twinkle or change color, and glowing atmospheric gases can create false radar returns and strange visual illusions.

“If you see something that you don’t know what it is, you don’t get to say it’s aliens,” says Professor Uscinski, co-author of “American Conspiracy Theories.”

Q: Given the lack of proof, why do some people believe in aliens?

The fascination with UFOs might be a deep longing to understand the mysteries of the cosmos.

Movie hits such as “Project Hail Mary,” which features interstellar travel and a lovable alien named Rocky, underscore the popular interest. That appeal is often combined with darker notions, prevalent among some Americans, that hidden motives and undercover agents guide the U.S. government.

On a podcast with Joe Rogan, Rep. Anna Paulina Luna, a Florida Republican, said that she has seen evidence of “interdimensional beings.” She suggested that the Pentagon has slow-walked the release of corroborating information.

Ms. Luna, an Air Force veteran who chairs the House Oversight Committee’s Task Force on the Declassification of Federal Secrets, and who says her work is to end the government’s “veil of secrecy,” has urged people to read the Bible’s non-canonical Book of Enoch, which suggests that 200 angels, known as watchers, came to Earth, procreated with women, and shared cosmic secrets.

Proof of aliens or UFOs or not, such beliefs are, in any case, a testament to the human imagination’s ability to bend the unknown into a sense of possibility. They also highlight how the cultural impact of the files on the American psyche might ultimately be greater than the scientific one, says William Henry, author of “Lost Secrets of the Watchers.”

“Where there’s smoke, there’s fire, and there’s a curl of truth in all these myths,” Mr. Henry says. “This is not just about the nuts and bolts of crashed flying saucers. It totally legitimizes the discussion of these mysteries.”

Q: Why is Congress focused on UFOs?

Part of what has driven UFO mania is the notion that nonelected people in government know more than they’re telling. The mysteries at Roswell, New Mexico (C’mon, was it *really* a weather balloon?), and Area 51 in Nevada (Do we now possess alien technology?) are at the top of that list.

Even before President Trump’s directive, the Defense Department had begun to declassify UFO-related files. A 2024 congressional report found no evidence that the government has come

into contact with alien technology. A second report, however, has been promised. The Pentagon agency handling the matter, the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, is now responsible for releasing the documents.

During testimony last year to Representative Luna’s task force, a senior Navy officer described seeing a mysterious object off the coast of California in 2023. That glowing, Tic Tac-shaped object, he said, rose from the ocean and linked up with three similar objects, all of which quickly whooshed away. The officer, Senior Chief Petty Officer Alexandro Wiggins, who worked in radar operations, convinced a doubting radar officer that the craft was not just an atmospheric anomaly. This testimony – along with other accounts of “transmedium” (air-to-water) anomalies – prompted Ms. Luna and the House task force to launch a broader transparency investigation.

Q: What has President Trump said about the release of the UFO files?

Mr. Trump, who is fond of spreading conspiracy theories online, has said government transparency is a hallmark of his presidency. So, the release of the UFO files is providing a needed rally cry.

“Have Fun and Enjoy!” Mr. Trump wrote in a Truth Social post.

But the files are also a potential distraction from the Iran war, the long-running Epstein saga, and economic headwinds for the White House ahead of November’s midterm elections with control of Congress at stake.

On the day the files were released, Rep. Tim Burchett, a Tennessee Republican, said on Mr. Rogan’s podcast that he believed the Trump administration genuinely is interested in transparency. He also doubted whether the UFO files would change any minds about whether nonhuman space travelers exist.

But some, like Mr. Henry, a regular on the History Channel show “Ancient Aliens,” have reached beyond the conspiracy theories and politics to the gee-whiz wonder of it all. The UFO file dump, he said, could reinforce faith not just in government, but also in human knowledge.

“Nobody knows what’s going to happen on the other side” of such revelations, he adds. “It should unite us as a people.” ■

PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

KRUSHË E MADHE, KOSOVO

Kosovo war widows find strength in one another

Fahrije Hoti, founder of the KB Krusha agricultural cooperative, helps women to heal, 27 years after a massacre devastated their village.

By Isabelle de Pommereau / Contributor

The bus full of women from the KB Krusha agricultural cooperative has barely pulled away from the factory when its founder, Fahrije Hoti, rises from her seat. Albanian folk songs – raw and full of longing – crackle through the bus speakers as Ms. Hoti steps into the aisle, takes her young twin granddaughters by the hand, and begins to sing and dance.

“Aren’t we more beautiful than ever?” she calls out.

The women around her – many of them ethnic Albanian widows from the village of Krushë e Madhe in western Kosovo – are more than employees in the cooperative. They are a group bound by grief, survival, and the hard work of rebuilding after the war in Kosovo shattered their worlds nearly three decades ago.

On this March morning, International Women’s Day, Ms. Hoti is taking the women across the mountains to Albania as a gesture of thanks for their efforts and a reminder that loss does not have to define the limits of a life.

Like some of the other women, Besire Duraku steps into the aisle to dance. A widow left with small children after a massacre in their village, she defied her family to join Ms. Hoti’s cooperative and has never looked back. “Work is where we found our strength,” says Ms. Duraku. “It’s where we found each other.”

A difficult journey

Though Krushë e Madhe is a family farming hub known for its fertile soil, Ms. Hoti did not start out in agriculture.

After marrying young, she moved into her husband’s large, traditional household, caring for her daughter and embroidering wedding dresses in gold thread – a craft passed down through generations of village women. By 1989, Slobodan Milošević had stripped Kosovo of its autonomy, pushing ethnic Albanians out of jobs, schools, and public life. “We didn’t really pay attention,” says Ms. Hoti. “As young people, we thought life was ahead of us.”

Then came March 25, 1999, when Serbian forces entered Krushë e Madhe. Men and older boys were separated from women and taken away. In the end, 241 civilians were killed or went missing, in one of the worst massacres of the war. Sixty-four bodies from Krushë e Madhe, including that of Ms. Hoti’s husband, were never found.

Ms. Hoti had fled on foot to Albania with her infant son and young daughter. When she returned three months later, after NATO airstrikes had forced Serbian troops out, the village was unrecognizable: fields ransacked, farm animals killed, tools destroyed. Eleven members of her husband’s family were dead; 16 children were left without a father, including her own. “I had to accept [my husband] did not survive,” she recounts in her office.

By burning the village to the ground, Serbian forces struck at the heart of its livelihood. Anguished over the fate of her husband and the future of her two children, Ms. Hoti faced another battle: the judgment of a deeply traditional community that expected widows to grieve silently, stay indoors, and depend on others.

“The war lasted a short time,” says Ms. Hoti. “But the war after the war, that was the difficult one.”

Ms. Hoti began organizing other widows through protests and campaigns, demanding answers about the fate of the missing and calling on Serbia to reveal their whereabouts. The answers never came.

When she learned to drive – a first for a woman in the village – she was mocked. Going door to door in search of work, she was turned away, she says, because she was dressed in black mourning clothes.

But the group of widows whom Ms. Hoti organized gave her confidence. In 2005, she formed a plan: The widows would produce *ajvar* – a popular Balkan spread of roasted red peppers – in large quantities and sell it. They would earn money to feed their children and, by working together, begin to heal.

At first, many farmers refused to sell peppers to her, believing that it was demeaning to do business with a woman. The immediate postwar climate was also marked by mistrust: Farmers had often

gone unpaid for their produce, and were skeptical that a woman would manage to pay them.

So, Ms. Hoti grew the vegetables herself. When widows facing family pressure hesitated to join her in producing *ajvar* in her house, she urged them to make it at home themselves; she would collect the jars and sell them.

“The hardest part was convincing the community that we were not doing anything wrong,” she says. “Because in the end, nobody was going to come and feed our children.”

Initially, the women displayed jars for sale wherever they could. “Whenever we heard of an event – a street fair, anything – we loaded the van and went,” says Ms. Hoti.

That is how, in 2008, Mustafe Kastrati, an agricultural engineer with the German development agency GIZ, noticed them. Impressed by Ms. Hoti’s “instinct for survival and a determination to learn,” he says, he offered training and equipment. With help from GIZ and, later, other international groups, Ms. Hoti formalized the cooperative in 2010 and moved into her first dedicated workspace in 2014.

In 2019, when a fire destroyed her small factory, Germany was the first to help her rebuild. She calls its support her “pillar of growth.”

In 2021, the cooperative moved into a modern, glass-paneled headquarters. A grant from the European Union covered slightly more than half of the €600,000 (about \$702,000) cost. Securing a loan for the rest was difficult, because like many Kosovar women, Ms. Hoti lacked collateral. She remembers sleepless nights. Then, she says, Albania’s former ambassador to Kosovo talked with banks on her behalf and rallied private investors around the project – support that grew out of a history of solidarity between Albania and the people of Kosovo.

“Change-maker”

Ms. Hoti’s rise is “breathhtaking,” says Faton Nagavci, executive director of the business association Organika, who worked in Krushë e Madhe immediately after the war. “The change-maker in her is that she got women to process, to make things – not just to collect and sell,” Mr. Nagavci explains. What began as “a very sad story turned out to inspire all the other women,” he adds.

Today, 37 full-time female employees and dozens of seasonal workers at the cooperative produce tens of tons of *ajvar* a year. Much of it is bound for Europe and, increasingly, the United States, thanks to a vibrant diaspora. Ms. Hoti has become a “role model on how to build and grow a business from the ashes,” says Hartim Gashi, president of Kosovo’s fruit and vegetable processors association.

By enabling widows to transcend expectations and earn incomes, Ms. Hoti helped open a national conversation about women’s roles in society – a debate gaining momentum, says Shpresonë Grulaj, a Kosovo-born scholar at Charles University in Prague. (Ms. Hoti is running June 7 to be a deputy in Kosovo’s Assembly.)

Women’s empowerment – from access to employment to access to land – has become a priority at conferences and in international aid programs, says Danijella Çoça, co-founder of EcoKosWomen EKW, a nongovernmental organization that supports women and girls in rural areas. In recent years, the number of women-led enterprises has surged, she adds.

Beyond economics, Ms. Hoti “changed the mindset of the whole Krushë e Madhe,” says filmmaker Blerta Basholli, whose 2021 drama, “Hive,” brought Ms. Hoti’s story to global attention. Without Ms. Hoti, she notes, “many women might have remained trapped in isolation.”

Inside the factory

A day before the trip to Albania, the women sit in a bright, high-ceilinged hall, carefully folding fermented cabbage leaves into tight rolls that will be sealed in jars of brine and shipped, ready to be stuffed with minced meat for *sarma*, a traditional Balkan dish. *Ajvar* remains the heart of the business, but Ms. Hoti has expanded to 40 products, including pickled vegetables and pepper spreads blended with yogurt, ensuring work through every season.

Ms. Hoti moves across the floor with energy, joking and laughing as she oversees production.

“We’ve gone through a lot,” says Shqipe Sejfullahu, a mother of six. “We do everything together: singing, crying, sharing difficulties. It helps.”

Nearby, Fadile Hoti (no relation to Fahrije Hoti) – a widow who joined the cooperative early on – speaks with quiet pride. “With my work here, I raised my children, educated them, and married them off,” she says.

Much has changed in Krushë e Madhe since the war. Widows meet for coffee; women drive; small *ajvar* businesses are sprouting, although few are led by women, notes Fahrije Hoti. While change is uneven, she continues to meet with war survivors, women’s groups, and policymakers. When Ukrainian journalists in exile visited her recently, she offered them a message: “I lost my husband. I ran through the forest escaping bullets. And still, life continues.”

Each day, she is the first to arrive at the factory and the last to leave. “I always show up with a smile,” she says.

And each day, the widows of Krushë e Madhe peel vegetables, stir pots, and seal jars. Sometimes, they break for coffee and dancing. But always, they are building a future. ■

EDITORIALS

More civility on campus – and perhaps beyond

In parts of the United States, the arrival of spring has been fickle. But there’s no mistaking that college graduation season is here, with the strains of “Pomp and Circumstance” – and protests over choices of commencement speakers along the lines that reflect the country’s political divides.

Rutgers, South Carolina State, and Utah Valley are among the universities that disinvited speakers after objections by campus activists. Others have forged ahead – as New York University did, with the choice of one of its own: professor and free speech advocate Jonathan Haidt.

Student leaders had objected to hearing from Dr. Haidt, known for his critiques of social media and diversity initiatives, as well as what he views as the “coddling” of young people from having to deal with the friction of differing views.

Despite such protests, a countertrend is quietly taking hold. Increasingly, public and private colleges are establishing study programs and research centers to reduce campus polarization and address sensitivities around controversial topics. According to one source, there are now more than 45 centers of civic education at institutions in 25 states.

Proponents say these initiatives are about recentering a core purpose of higher education – the public good of training indi-

viduals for civic and civil engagement and the exercise of robust, democratic citizenship.

Paul O. Carrese, the founding director of Arizona State University’s School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, sees his school’s role as “restoring higher civics” and upholding the “political-intellectual virtue of moderation – of avoiding extremes and single-mindedness.”

Johns Hopkins University President Ronald Daniels argues that universities owe it to society to educate young people in “the full suite of aptitudes necessary for good citizenship.”

The University of North Carolina’s School of Civic Life and Leadership has seen burgeoning student demand. The Wall Street Journal reported that nearly 1,000 are currently taking classes at the center, up from 85 in the fall of 2024. Stanford University plans to make permanent its pilot program COLLEGE (Civic, Liberal, and Global Education).

As the Monitor’s Stephen Humphries has reported, many universities “see civil discourse as foundational. ... It’s key to an ethos of free speech and open inquiry, rooted in mutual respect.”

These same tenets resound well beyond academia in the daily practice of self-governance and democracy, from town halls to state legislatures. And, perhaps, in the nation’s capital. ■

Taiwan’s tutorial for China on sovereignty

Taiwan officials were not at the May summit between the American and Chinese leaders. Yet the Taiwanese people – or, rather, their resolve to run a free country – were very much there. So much so that one of China’s goals for the summit was to gain the United States’ help in breaking Taiwan’s civic identity of individual freedom and inherent rights.

Despite years of trying to influence the Taiwanese by incentives or coercion, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has not brought the island nation under the control of the Chinese Communist Party. The party fears that its 1.4 billion subjects on the mainland might be influenced by Taiwan’s 23 million people, especially in their rejection of the CCP’s ideology that sovereignty resides with the party and ordinary Chinese don’t know what’s good for the country.

Already, one-third of people in China oppose an armed invasion of Taiwan, according to a 2023 survey. Only 1% support an immediate war.

“The fact that Beijing spares no effort to pressure governments ... into erasing Taiwan’s existing sovereignty makes clear that despite all its power, Xi Jinping’s CCP cannot marginalize Taiwan alone – it requires our help to do it,” wrote Taipei-based American journalist Chris Horton in *Nikkei*.

After more than three decades of democratic rule, Taiwan’s confidence in demonstrating that sovereignty is inherent to individuals, not the state, has made it a global example. “We are ... building what we want the future to look like, where free people and societies are more connected, more united, and more capable, and of course stronger together,” said Taiwan’s vice president, Hsiao Bi-khim.

Taiwan ranks as the world’s 12th-most democratic country, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit. And many of its economic statistics per capita surpass those of China. Its success lies in an understanding that individual dignity and intelligence

are the basis for building a harmonious and caring society.

The founder of this publication acknowledged that “Human will-power may infringe the rights of man.” Yet Mary Baker Eddy also wrote, “Know, then, that you possess sovereign power to think and act rightly, and that nothing can dispossess you of this heritage.” ■

Power sharing as trust building in Hungary

One gauge of a society’s level of interpersonal trust lies in how much the central government shares power – with local authorities, courts, private citizen groups, and others. For the last 16 years in Hungary, such trust has been evaporating. An increasingly authoritarian leader, Viktor Orbán, had been centralizing power and creating “us versus them” polarization around often-fabricated issues.

On May 9, all that changed with the swearing-in of a new prime minister, Péter Magyar.

His broad-tent Tisza party won big in April’s elections. During his inaugural speech, Mr. Magyar pledged not to rule over Hungary but to “serve” it – through reconciliation, inclusiveness, and democratic renewal.

“We are going to remake the constitutional system so that such a concentration of power can never happen again,” he declared. Mr. Magyar also apologized to people who had been marginalized and maligned by the state during Mr. Orbán’s long tenure.

In many countries where authoritarian rulers have recently been turned out, decentralization has become a prime goal, along with curbs on corruption that often accompany an aggregation of power. Hungary’s agenda under a new leader provides a template for such reforms.

Mr. Magyar promises to reinforce judicial independence and restore autonomy to local governments and universities. He has been adamant in ending government controls over Hungarian news media.

He plans to limit a prime minister to two terms – and reactively apply that rule to Mr. Orbán. “I saw how power can destroy a man,” said Mr. Magyar, who once served in his predecessor’s government.

Part of his distribution of power began during his speech to a large crowd in Budapest. He gave credit to the huge majority of voters who elected his party. “You have taught the country and the world that it is the most ordinary, flesh-and-blood people that can defeat the most vicious tyranny,” he said.

He also proclaimed a repairing of societal trust. “What connects us will be stronger than what divides us. Hungary will be home for every Hungarian, and everyone can feel like they have a place in the Hungarian nation. Family, friends and communities will be able to speak to each other again.”

Even before the election, Mr. Magyar was sure of the example that his party would set by winning. At one campaign event, he noted the presence of journalists from a pro-Kremlin Russian newspaper: “I welcome the Russian propaganda media. Enjoy the freedom – and the regime change!” ■

Lose this news

For every point, there’s a counterpoint. Mandy Bundock-Simjian’s letter, “Zooming in on what matters,” in the May 11 Monitor Weekly, expressing love for her “new favorite feature,” Reporters on the Job, made me smile. Not because I agree with her. Quite the opposite.

As an avid reader of the Weekly print edition who absorbs nearly every article in every issue, I find that the least entertaining and useful pages are those devoted to the vignettes in Reporters on the Job. I know reporters each have professional lives that are, at times, both exciting and meaningful. That doesn’t make their personal stories newsworthy.

Don’t get me wrong; I’m not weighing in against human interest features per se. I thoroughly enjoy The Home Forum, for example. So, it’s a minor disagreement in the grand arena of Monitor feedback, to be filed under “Readers Respond: Food for Thought.”

Dennis Avery

Golden Valley, Minnesota

THE HOME FORUM

Look! A hummingbird!

A common love of hummingbirds nurtures a special bond between the writer and her grandmother.

At the edge of the cloud forest in Ecuador, a hummingbird zoomed out of the misty mountains and landed on the tip of my finger. It was about 4 inches long, with a green, iridescent back, and dark green spots on its white belly. It thrust its beak into the red plastic feeder I held in my palm. After it drank its share of sugar water, it looked at me and then zipped through the fog into the trees.

I had come to Ecuador on a 10-day trip led by an ethnobotanist (someone who studies the relationships between different cultures and native plants). I had taken a workshop with her at a conference in New Hampshire, and the effusive love she offered to all beings – legged, rooted, or winged – inspired and empowered me.

When I learned about this trip, I was a divorced mom who had spent 16 years raising my four kids. My passport had expired years before. My mind introduced its concerns, but my heart had already booked the flight. A few months later, I found myself standing at a railing in light rain, surrounded by a rainbow of hummingbirds: the booted rackettail with its long oar-like tail and furry white leggings, the graceful white-necked jacobin with an iridescent blue head, and the green mountain velvetbreast who stood on my finger. They flew backward, forward, and hovered in midair beside the hanging feeders, their wings flapping in a figure-eight pattern so fast they blurred.

Watching these itinerant jewels, I thought of my grandmother, who kept a hummingbird feeder outside the wide window in her living room, where she loved to preside over a lively conversation with family and friends. Every time a hummingbird arrived at the feeder she would silence the room. “Look! A

hummingbird!” she would say. We would gaze in silence until the hummingbird zipped away.

My grandmother’s home in upstate New York was a migratory destination for the ruby-throated hummingbirds, the only species that breeds east of the Mississippi River in North America. Ecuador, the most biodiverse land for its size, is home to 137 species of hummingbirds – a mosaic of colors, shapes, and sizes.

What an amazing thing, I thought, to experience the abundant energy of hummingbirds in Ecuador, while my grandmother was still with us. I felt grateful to share this world with her at that moment.

Shortly after my grandmother passed, I visited my parents at their house on the lake where my grandparents had spent summers sleeping on a boat. The bushes shook with hummingbirds. I helped my mother clean the hanging feeders, because fungus growth in feeders is cited as one reason the delicate birds’ population is waning. Flower nectar is better food than sugar water, and since they have learned to rely on the feeders, I encouraged my mother to gradually transition to flowers to power their migrations.

In December that year, several months after the ruby-throated hummingbirds had completed their winter migrations to Mexico, I received a box in the mail. The return address was my grandmother’s. Inside I found a glass ornament in the shape of a hummingbird with a note from my mother. She had sorted through my grandmother’s things and knew she would want me to have this. I placed it on our small Christmas tree alongside the ornaments my grandmother had gifted me as a child.

When the snow thaws in spring, I order organic seeds from a trusted company and start seedlings of Mexican sunflower in pots before transferring them to the raised bed in my backyard. Twice a year, the ruby-throated hummingbirds make the nearly 2,000-mile migration. I plant flowers in the dirt to invite them and nourish them, so they survive the long journeys and enjoy their stay here. This is my small role in hummingbird hospitality.

Amid all the coercive pressures of our lives, the call of the hummingbirds can feel as slight as the sensation of tiny feet on a finger. They will never send us a bill for our attention; we pay it voluntarily, or we miss them. We must listen and look, plant flowers, and clean our feeders – and, if we’re fortunate, have someone in our lives who will stop everything to direct our attention to their prismatic, hovering wings, and say, “Look! A hummingbird!”

– Amy Asherah

POETRY

*I climb up the hill
and find another hill
behind it
with mountains far beyond
hidden in the clouds,
farther than I hoped
to go today.
So I climb back down
to the comfort of my garden
to see a Hummingbird
has come,*

*red throat flashing
in the sun,
with new life bursting
from the Earth
in Hosta’s purpled
unfurled leaves.
First bumblebee.
First butterfly.
First scent of Lilacs
in the air,
screen door open
to the charming winds
of May.
Everything I need is here.
When Spring calls
my name,
I cannot look away.
I’ll climb that hill
some other day.*

– Max Payne

LENS AND LIGHT

A HEART FOR BLUE FEET

The Galápagos Islands are full of wondrous creatures: swimming iguanas, jousting albatrosses, and enormous tortoises. But my favorite has to be the blue-footed booby. I mean, who doesn’t love blue feet?

And, boy, do they know how to use them. During mating rituals, the males display them by lifting them up and down while strutting around.

Apparently, they are blue because of their diet: fish. Hmmm. Not sure how that works, but they’ve won my heart.

– Melanie Stetson Freeman

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Finding reconciliation

Over a quarter century ago, Rodney King, a Black man who was a victim of police brutality, made the plea: “Can we all get along?”

His experience did lead to police reform in Los Angeles. And his words still resonate in a world seeking reconciliation among individuals, communities, and nations.

It is clear that bellicose actions don’t bring lasting security, unity, or progress. Effective reconciliation comes from a willingness to commit to good outcomes for everyone. And it includes atonement for wrongs done. Atonement, as expressed in Christian Science, is a process of bringing one’s thoughts and aims into line with God, perfect Truth and Love. This requires recognizing and correcting wrongs committed.

However obvious it may be that other individuals who have acted selfishly or destructively need to both make amends and reform, atonement begins with each of us being willing to reconcile our own thoughts and actions to what is acceptable to God, who is infinite good.

The Monitor's founder, Mary Baker Eddy, wrote, "Jesus aided in reconciling man to God by giving man a truer sense of Love, the divine Principle of Jesus' teachings, and this truer sense of Love redeems man from the law of matter, sin, and death by the law of Spirit, – the law of divine Love" ("Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," p. 19).

We should not, then, be reconciled to the notion that evil and strife are inevitable traits of humanity. Man – a term that includes everyone in our true nature as God's spiritual offspring – is created as the reflection of God's own nature. We are made loving, good, and pure – free from any inharmonious tendency. This is a powerful basis for striving to uphold a standard of good.

The Bible gives examples of people who reversed terrible wrongdoing. The Apostle Paul, once a murderous enemy of Christ Jesus' followers, reversed his course to follow Jesus' teachings and example. And in an era when those wielding power often did so brutally, Paul called for prayer not only for oneself, but "for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:2-4).

Christ Jesus showed the way to live at one with God, who is supreme good. In the Bible's accounts of his life, there isn't a single act that could be described as selfish. He lived to bring healing, and the consciousness of God's power and love, to others.

To bring out more good in society, it helps to keep good models in thought. Above all, that includes holding in thought our true, spiritual nature.

We can, and naturally want to, right wrongs and get along. And step by step, humanity's unity must follow the recognition that each of us is the offspring of one universal God, good.

– Margaret Rogers

CULTURE

MEXICO CITY

Politics and puppets: The enduring appeal of '31 Minutos'

The Chilean children's show has gained an international following, but Mexico is home to some of the most ardent fans of its satirical humor.

By **Andalusia K. Soloff** / Contributor

As the sun set in Mexico City on a recent evening, a mix of mostly adults flowed into the capital's main Zócalo – many wearing distinctive red bunny ears. They turned out to catch the most famous news program in Latin America, "31 Minutos." It happens to be a Chilean puppet show, dreamed up for children at the fall of the Pinochet dictatorship. But, it pulses so strongly with political satire and creativity that it has generated megafans of all ages, including the hundreds of thousands that turned out

for the free show last month. And though the program has gained popularity throughout the Americas, Mexico lays claim to being home to some of its most devoted fans.

"Even though it's Chilean, it connects with Mexico," says Adriana Solis, a filmmaker and professor who specializes in children's media. She came out for the free show in Mexico City on April 30, which drew a crowd of more than 230,000 spectators. The ties to Mexico are in "the irony, the absurdity, and the exaggerated personalities" of the show's characters, she says.

The title "31 Minutos" is a parody of the former Chilean news program "60 Minutos," a key propaganda tool in the 1970s and '80s during Augusto Pinochet's rule. Once the country began the transition to democracy in the 1990s, two journalists, Álvaro Díaz González and Pedro Peirano, set out to design a children's show that they themselves would want to watch – steeped in humor and political criticism, and where children wouldn't be infantilized. They competed for government funding, and launched "31 Minutos" in 2003. The edgy earworm soundtrack was crafted by musicians from the Chilean rock group Chancho en Piedra. Two years later, Mexican public television began broadcasting it, becoming one of the first national outlets outside Chile to air the show.

An ode to creativity

The April performance in Mexico City kicked off with Juanín Juan Harry, a workaholic puppet whose voluminous white fur covers his eyes beneath his emblematic orange headset, and Tulio Triviño, a vain, mercurial, suit-clad newscaster in the form of a sock monkey. Juanín asked Tulio whether he knew what he was doing in Mexico, to which the monkey responded, "I have absolutely no idea." Juanín turned to the cheering crowd and led them in singing "La Desgracia Ajena," or "Other People's Misfortune," rattling off a list of current events and criticizing how the news makes a spectacle of everyday crises.

Celia Martínez, who works for the education ministry, first started watching "31 Minutos" when her son was small. She quickly realized she enjoyed the program even more than he did. "I fell in love with 'Where Does the Poop Go,'" she says of the catchy explainer about the Chilean sewage system. The segment features Juan Carlos Bodoque, a red rabbit and "star journalist" antihero who takes viewers on a very detailed journey about water treatment – signing off from his home bathroom.

The same sketch resonated with middle school Spanish teacher Mario Aguilar, who says the show "instills critical thinking in [children] instead of a moral pedagogy." Bodoque, the rabbit, is his favorite character because "he is cynical and at the same time silly and critical of society." Mr. Aguilar says even his teenage students think the puppet show is cool, something he attributes to the dynamic format and how it touches on real-life themes other programs might avoid.

Nearby, actress Mónica del Carmen is dressed in "31 Minutos" garb – from her hoodie sweatshirt down to her socks – describing how she fell in love with the show as a theater student in the early 2000s. One of her favorite songs is "I Never Watched Television," an ode to creativity, discovery, and living without technology. "One day, the television exploded. And I discovered a very complex world of imagination out there," the puppet chorus sings in that number.

She also appreciates the political commentary, particularly at this moment when tensions between Mexico and the United States are so high. Last October, when "31 Minutos" played a Tiny Desk concert for NPR, the puppets joked that their work visas were go-

ing to expire in 31 minutes. “Political consciousness is what our countries’ present and future depend on,” Ms. del Carmen says. “Especially as Latin Americans.” Kids enjoy the show, too. Fourth grader Arami Fequiere’s mother turned her on to “31 Minutos” last year. She and Bodoque have a shared love for the environment, she says of the rabbit.

“What can we do about this cruel world?”

Creativity, edutainment, and puppets? It might sound “Sesame Street” adjacent, but “31 Minutos” goes a step further, says Ms. Solis, the children’s media professor. She believes the Latin American version of the PBS classic is removed from Mexico’s realities, while the Chilean program reflects children’s lived experiences. For example, in “31 Minutos,” Bodoque once visited a beach that was contaminated by an oil spill – an ongoing reality in Mexico.

Ms. Solis became a fan of “31 Minutos” as an adult. Growing up in Mexico in the 1970s and ’80s, she was in “an environment where children’s voices were very repressed, we were told ‘stay quiet,’ or ‘you can’t have an opinion, you’re a child,’” she recalls. “31 Minutos” represents the kind of show many of us wish we had growing up – one that is more anarchic, irreverent, musical, and genuinely respectful of children’s voices.”

Behind her, in the vast Zócalo plaza, Cucho Lambretta, an adorable brown bear comes onstage. “What can we do about this cruel world?” another puppet asks him. “*Ríe!*” or “Laugh!,” he responds, breaking into song with an upbeat circus-like tempo that belies its hard-knocks lyrics.

It’s an approach many in Mexico – and Latin America – are familiar with. For decades, political mistrust has been high. And more recent news here, from the U.S. indictment of a sitting Mexican state governor for drug trafficking to the education ministry announcing (then walking back) the last-minute cancellation of an entire month of school because of the World Cup, hammers home this “you either have to laugh or else you’ll cry” approach to life. “Laugh, laugh, laugh” the little bear sings, “because life will always break you. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. And tomorrow will still be cloudy.”

Singing and laughing along, the crowd radiates with joy. ■

ASSOINDÉ, CÔTE D’IVOIRE

The surf is swell in Côte d’Ivoire

By Colette Davidson / Special correspondent

Rokia used to be afraid of the water. She’d heard the stories of people washed away by strong currents. The folklore deity Mami Wata was said to live in these waters, and children were taught to both respect and fear her.

So even though the beach, with its cream-colored sand and swaying palms, was just feet from her doorstep, the teenager would only put her toes in the ocean once in a while.

“I never knew how to swim,” says Rokia, who lives in this coastal town one hour east of Côte d’Ivoire’s capital, Abidjan. “My parents told me, ‘Don’t go in the water, you’ll drown.’”

But a year-and-a-half ago, things changed. She approached local surf star, Souleymane Sidibé, and said she wanted to learn to surf, too. Now, she goes out a couple of times a week and says she has found a new passion.

The fear of the ocean that Rokia grew up with is not unusual here. Despite Côte d’Ivoire’s nearly 300 miles of coastline, many people don’t know how to swim. The World Health Organization estimated that about 1,800 Ivorians drowned in 2021, the most recent year for which data is available.

Now, the country’s growing community of surfers is trying to change that, using their sport to help children learn to love the ocean. At the same time, they are hosting more international competitions and putting Côte d’Ivoire’s waves on the map.

“For a long time, surfing in Cote d’Ivoire was asleep,” says Sylvain Kouao, vice president of the Ivorian Surf Federation. “People here are starting to realize that surfing can be a way out, and offer kids something for tomorrow.”

Making the world bigger

Without surfing, Souleymane Sidibé isn’t sure where he would be. He never excelled in school – he was always better at catching waves.

However, “it took a lot of convincing to get my parents on board” with a life built around surfing, says Mr. Sidibé, on a recent weekday morning at Badro Beach in Assouindé.

Now, Mr. Sidibé runs Souley Surf School, one of a handful of Ivorian surf schools that have opened in the last decade.

“What is this part of the board called? Who wants to demonstrate how we paddle?” Mr. Sidibé calls out during a group lesson. A 10-year-old girl in a hot-pink swimsuit flops down onto a long, blue board to mock paddle, her fingertips brushing the sand.

Although Assouindé and nearby Assinie-Mafia are top spots for wealthy tourists and weekenders from Abidjan, the rural villages that line the coast experience high levels of poverty. Many of Mr. Sidibé’s students come from families who struggle to pay their school fees and give them enough to eat.

That’s why Mr. Sidibé gives his students free lunch every Wednesday after practice. They surf on boards donated by the Swiss-German nonprofit Provide the Slide.

“Most of the kids here don’t have easy lives,” says surfer Nadi Saddy, with whom Mr. Sidibé founded the nonprofit Surf Côte d’Ivoire in 2022. “We teach them about surf culture and how to respect nature, but also, that surfing can help them earn a living.”

The organization encourages children to use surfing as a way to see the world. If they’re good enough, they can travel to surf competitions abroad, or meet traveling surfers when Côte d’Ivoire plays host. Surf Côte d’Ivoire also teaches older students to become surf teachers themselves, so they can make an income offering private lessons to out-of-town visitors.

Putting Côte d’Ivoire on the map

Still, obstacles remain to building a bigger surfing scene in Côte d’Ivoire. There is only one manufacturer of surfboards in the country, The West Factory, which produces only 50-60 boards per year. The vast majority must be imported. Plus, many people still believe Mami Wata is watching.

The water spirit – often depicted with the upper body of a woman and the lower body of a snake or fish – has a strong prominence in many West African cultures.

“Everyone has their own interpretation of what Mami Wata represents, but it’s a big reason why people here don’t swim,” says Mr. Saddy. “We tell people, it’s OK, we’re here to guide you.”

In February, The Africa Surf Tour was held for the first time in Côte d’Ivoire. The competition, run by the African Surf Confederation, brought top-level surfers and visitors from across Africa to

the small town of Assinie. Then, in March, Assinie played host to the Côte d'Ivoire Surf Open, featuring athletes from seven African countries.

Mr. Saddy released a documentary on May 7, "The Rising Dawn," about the burgeoning Côte d'Ivoire surfing scene, the unifying power of surfing, and the communities that line the Ivorian coast.

"When people think of surfing, they think Tahiti, Bali, Hawaii," says Mr. Kouao, of the surf federation. "But West Africa has some really great spots."

"Lots of joy"

Part of Côte d'Ivoire's attraction is the fact that its coast remains relatively unknown to surfers outside Africa.

"The other day when we went out, there were only four of us in the water," says Alexis Claustres, a French surfer visiting Assouindé. "For us, as Europeans who are used to these overcrowded spots, it was precious."

Even within Africa, most surfers think of South Africa or Morocco for surfing long before Côte d'Ivoire.

"But the young generation is starting to change this," says longtime surfer Badro Escobar, who runs a hotel in Assouindé.

Out on Badro Beach, that excitement is palpable. As clouds roll in and drops of rain begin to dot the water, some of the students in Mr. Sidibé's surf class head toward the shelter of a nearby hotel. Then, in an instant, it begins to downpour.

But the weather doesn't stop the group for long. As the rain kicks up foam and spray, Rokia coasts along on her board, standing up and coasting along a glassy wave. After a half-hour, two 8-year-old girls run under the hotel awning, shivering but giddy.

"Surfing brings me joy," says Awa, wrapping herself in a dry T-shirt and sharing a glass of hibiscus juice with her friend, Sali.

"Yes, me too," says Sali. "Lots of joy." ■

BOOKS

Q&A with Victor Mallet, author of 'Far-Right France: Le Pen, Bardella and the Future of Europe'

By Colette Davidson

Victor Mallet, a veteran British foreign correspondent and commentator for the Financial Times, explores how the far right has moved from the fringes to the mainstream in France. In a phone interview, he discussed his new book, "Far-Right France: Le Pen, Bardella and the Future of Europe," and the rise of the National Rally party. The interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Q: The National Rally is often described as a party of extreme viewpoints, and one that exists outside of the mainstream. After all your research, visiting French towns that have been changed by the far right and speaking with voters, how has your perspective changed?

I've been following the far right on and off for 30 years, so it wasn't a surprise to find how powerful the party was and how popular it was with voters. A lot of people in Britain are very reluctant to describe

their own far-right politicians as extremists, but when they look at the continent they think, "Oh yeah, those neo-Nazis in Germany" or "Those fascists in France." They have this perception of people with tattoos who are kind of racist thugs.

But actually, [the far right] is a mainstream party in the sense that 30% or 40% of French people are expressing support for this party, and the people who support them are not the cliché. They could be middle-class people, accountants, public servants, bakers, or butchers. People I interviewed often said, "I'm not so keen on [the far right's] policies toward immigration or race but I really support them because I'm fed up with the [current] government."

Rightly or wrongly, they perceive that this will be a radical shift that will change the government, which they feel has been run by the same kind of people for the last 50 years.

Q: You wrote that Jordan Bardella, president of the National Rally, said that the party's project is "to change everything without destroying anything." Is that possible?

So, first, you have the issue of whether or not they will do what they say they'll do [if they win the presidency]. The signs are that on immigration they will be very tough and quite Trumpian in the way they run the system. They're going to try and change the constitution; they're going to try and reduce the number of immigrants to a trickle; they're going to deprive noncitizens of their rights [like social security benefits], which essentially requires a constitutional change. "Liberty, equality, fraternity," which is a universal idea since the French Revolution, will now be applied purely to French citizens. These are radical changes.

Q: Could institutions in France be disrupted as quickly as in the U.S.?

It is possible, but it will mean the party having control not only of the Élysée Palace but also of the National Assembly. In other words, winning two elections. The National Assembly election will be called almost inevitably by whoever is president, whether it's the far right or somebody else. If [the far right] then got control of the National Assembly as well, which has traditionally happened in France, that gives them a lot of power.

In the case of Germany, for example, if the AfD [Alternative for Germany party] was in government – even if it was the biggest party – it would almost certainly be in a coalition. [Italian Prime Minister] Giorgia Meloni is in a coalition. So, to some extent, those parties are constrained by their coalition.

There is also the matter of whether or not the constitutional court would push back against some of the constitutional changes. I've had people tell me, "Yes, that would be a point of resistance." But the far right wants to change the justice system and the media, which they feel are biased toward the left.

Q: Are the issues that have traditionally been at the forefront of far-right politics still resonating? Is their stance on immigration still relevant? What about the environment?

Immigration isn't always top-of-the-agenda for French voters. For the National Rally, because immigration has always been their calling card – as it was for [President Donald] Trump and Brexiters – they can count on those voters who are angry and concerned about immigration. But what they need to win in the French two-round system is to attract another 15% or 20% of the voters who are not necessarily obsessed by immigration, but are concerned about other things.

Crossword

ACROSS

- 1. Current craze
- 4. Ostentatious
- 8. Barn roof spinner
- 12. Fall behind financially
- 13. Part of AM
- 14. Port-of-call call
- 15. Unagi, in sushi bars
- 16. Dugout access feature
- 17. Fancy fabric
- 18. Uses a shovel
- 20. Questionnaire category
- 22. Cuff
- 24. Paper size
- 28. Paired up
- 32. Parenthetical comment
- 33. Big coffeepot
- 34. Indefinitely long time
- 36. Tommy Jones interrupter
- 37. Fastball clocker
- 40. Punish for plagiarism, perhaps
- 43. Beauty parlor device
- 45. Profile

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58					59					60		
61					62					63		

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DOWN

- 1. Hector, to Achilles
- 2. Shocked
- 3. Cold cutter
- 4. Feudal figure
- 5. Small worker
- 6. Bit of inventory
- 7. Everest land
- 8. Parking meeters?
- 9. Lab exclamation
- 10. Passport info
- 11. Regard
- 19. Economic stat.
- 21. Grassy mead
- 23. Apiary inhabitant
- 25. Scrabble draw
- 26. Genesis garden
- 27. Wind element
- 28. Sidewalk edge
- 29. Nonwritten exam
- 30. Rub out
- 31. Windows underpinnings
- 35. Central point
- 38. Disturbed
- 39. Performer's agt.
- 41. Yellow-brown pigment
- 42. Peas holder
- 44. Adjust, as margins
- 47. Minimal amount
- 49. Phone tone
- 50. Longtime youth org.
- 51. Six less four
- 52. Aries beast
- 53. Juan Peron's first lady
- 55. Become rancid
- 57. Vivacity