THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

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

– MARY BAKER EDDY

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New tests of America's founding ideals

The experiment of America rests on enduring ideals. Chief among those ideals is this: that mankind has the potential to self-govern.

Throughout U.S. history, individuals, parties, and a wide gamut of circumstances have stress-tested those ideals, and they have proved resilient. These moments of testing often bring a deeper examination of these ideals, and opportunities to refine our understanding of them.

President Donald Trump's airstrikes on Iran present one such moment, testing the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches.

By Christa Case Bryant
Editor

The first draft of the Constitution empowered Congress to "make" war, but revised it to "declare" war. James Madison, who advocated that change, wrote in his notes that the edit was necessary "to leav[e] to the Executive the power to repel sudden attacks." But the framers left it to Congress – the people's branch – to initiate hostilities.

In this issue, Caitlin Babcock examines why Congress has not declared war since 1942, and how the Trump administration's combat operations against Iran have reignited debate over congressional war powers (see page 16). There is a Madisonian echo in this renewed debate about America's governing framework of checks and balances.

Simon Montlake's companion piece asks why Mr. Trump – after years of criticizing GOP hawks' involvement in foreign wars – pursued sweeping military action against Iran. His administration's answer, in part: Iran has killed hundreds of Americans and increasingly projected asymmetric power against U.S. ally Israel through proxies Hezbollah and Hamas.

We also look at another area where American ideals are being tested: immigration enforcement. Reporter Cameron Pugh and photographer Alfredo Sosa bring us a portrait of Portland, Maine, a community which forged stronger bonds between immigrants and nonimmigrants in the wake of a federal enforcement surge. Cameron talked to Mainers as the country tries to find a balance between enforcement of national sovereignty and adherence to due process.

So far, the governing framework outlined by the Constitution has proved elastic enough to absorb the sometimes jarring exchange of ideas over what America is supposed to be. This includes debates – from the halls of Congress to kitchen tables – over how to bring out these ideals in daily life. ▪

Iran's choice of new supreme leader 'a vote of defiance'

Despite furiously paced U.S. and Israeli airstrikes on Iran with the declared aim of regime change, the Islamic Republic early March 9 signaled defiant continuity by choosing a new supreme leader in wartime.

Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei is the son of the slain hard-line supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who led Iran with the official title of "God's Deputy on Earth" for 37 years. He was assassinated in Israel's first strike of the war.

A shadowy figure with close ties to Iran's military and security apparatus, Mojtaba Khamenei is rarely seen in public, but has intimate knowledge of the opaque ruling mechanisms of the Islamic Republic.

He is widely believed to have imbibed the deep anti-American and anti-Israeli animus of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, and was reportedly wounded in the same attack that killed his father, his mother, his wife, a son, and other relatives.

Regime devotees cheered the leadership announcement and thronged the streets. But video also emerged on social media of Iranians shouting from their apartments, "Death to Mojtaba!"

Israel has said that any new supreme leader will be "eliminated" in a targeted assassination.

U.S. President Donald Trump had singled out Mr. Khamenei as a "lightweight" who was an "unacceptable" choice to lead. Ironically, his criticism may have played a role in selecting Mr. Khamenei, who previously has held no official posts.

The election of Mr. Khamenei "is a deliberate choice to showcase resilience and resistance during war," says Sanam Vakil, director of the Middle East and North Africa Program at Chatham House, a London-based think tank.

Mr. Trump "certainly gave Mojtaba a boost," says Dr. Vakil. His selection "was a vote of defiance, to spite Trump and showcase that the [ruling] system has resolve and will not bend the knee" to U.S. demands.

– Scott Peterson / Staff writer

New leadership, old challenges for Homeland Security

A leadership shift at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security arrives at a moment when members of Congress and the American public are engaged in vigorous debates over the role and future of DHS, following its rollout of an aggressive immigration enforcement campaign that resulted in federal agents killing two U.S. citizens in Minneapolis in January.

Democratic leadership in the Senate has withheld funding to demand agency changes. And public polling shows disapproval among a majority of U.S. adults in Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, one of the agencies within DHS.

After pushing aside controversial DHS Secretary Kristi Noem, President Donald Trump nominated Republican Sen. Markwayne

Mullin of Oklahoma to take the department's helm. The next secretary will wade into the same challenges Ms. Noem faced over how to lead an agency overseeing immigration enforcement, disaster relief, border enforcement, and airline security, at a time of public polarization.

"It's an aggregation of disparate pieces that were put together in sort of a forced marriage after 9/11," says Henry Brady, professor at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley. "Each successive secretary has struggled with trying to manage the whole."

A plumbing business owner, Mr. Mullin also has a ranching background, like the outgoing secretary. During the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, he helped barricade a door in the House chamber against rioters seeking entry. As a senator, he has defended the administration's immigration crackdown.

– Sarah Matusek / Staff writer

Iran war divides MAGA influencers

President Donald Trump, who has vowed to end America's involvement in foreign wars since his first campaign a decade ago, is now engaged in the biggest military campaign of his presidency – and some conservative influencers are not happy about it. Among the accusations leveled by podcast hosts and others: "Massive divisions." "Open betrayal of the MAGA base." "We voted for America FIRST."

The president has brushed off the criticism, saying that his voters love "every aspect" of what he is doing. And to be sure, some prominent voices have praised the Iran operation.

"President Trump is MAGA and MAGA is President Trump," White House spokesperson Olivia Wales tells the Monitor in a statement.

Polling suggests there is some truth to that, with 9 in 10 self-identified MAGA Republicans backing the strikes in an NBC poll earlier this month.

Yet much of Mr. Trump's success over the past decade has come from his ability to attract not just core conservatives but independent voters and nontraditional Republicans, with a coalition bound together by a few core principles.

One of them: a promise to focus on domestic issues and stop spending taxpayer dollars on endless overseas wars aimed at regime change. A perception that Mr. Trump let Israel force his hand on Iran is also exacerbating GOP divisions over the U.S.-Israel relationship.

"The movement will split if this is an extended conflict, because many supporters will feel like the promise of 'no new foreign wars' was violated," says Brian Darling, former counsel to Sen. Rand Paul, a Kentucky Republican. "The midterms will be a referendum on the Republican Party, and if it goes poorly, this conflict will be one of the issues that will be pointed at."

– Story Hinckley / Staff writer

In UK, Green Party woos Labour's working-class base

The Green Party of England and Wales has been on the outside of British politics looking in pretty much from its inception in the 1970s. But it may be set to step away from the fringes and into the mainstream – thanks to a by-election in a longtime bastion of the working class.

The recent election of Hannah Spencer as the new member of Parliament for Gorton and Denton in Greater Manchester has highlighted a potential political shift among voters toward her Green Party. The Greens swept to victory in the Labour stronghold with 40.7%, while Labour was left languishing in third at 25.4%.

Under the premiership of Keir Starmer, Labour has drifted toward the political center, seen by many as an attempt to fend off the growth of right-wing Reform UK.

Most recently, Labour has sought to reshape the country's immigration and asylum laws, making asylum in the U.K. a temporary, rather than permanent, status, and making it harder for those who move to the U.K. to gain citizenship.

But while Labour's rightward shift may appeal to potential Reform voters, it alienated its own voters.

Elizabeth Harding says she felt that Labour, which she supported for years, was pandering to the right. She switched her vote to the Greens. "I'm not a radical. I just want a decent life for people," she says. "I think we need immigration. This is a multicultural area."

The challenge will be whether the Greens can build on their success in Gorton and Denton to create lasting political change.

"The real trend for voters is this sense of frustration and disillusionment with the two main political parties, [Labour and the Conservatives]." says Louise Thompson, a senior lecturer in politics at the University of Manchester. "All the trends point to voters wanting something different."

– Katie Marie Davies / Contributor

Japan is warming up to nuclear power

When Japan decided to restart one of the seven reactors at the largest nuclear plant in the world in January, many of the locals from the nearby village of Kariwa – population about 4,200 – were uneasy about it. Not the mayor though.

Shinada Hiroo expresses unwavering trust in the people who run the nuclear facility. "They are colleagues just like the village's farmers and factory workers," Mr. Shinada says emphatically, referring to the personnel and executives at the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa Nuclear Power Station. The sprawling plant, operated by Tokyo Electric Power (Tepco), is located in Kariwa and the city of Kashiwazaki, about 140 miles northwest of Tokyo.

After a powerful earthquake and then a tsunami triggered a nuclear emergency at Fukushima in March 2011, Japan's government responded by shutting down all 54 of the country's nuclear reactors.

The following year, it announced a plan to phase out nuclear power generation completely. But today, with Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae leading the charge, Japan is slowly putting nuclear power at the center of its national energy policy.

While some remain skeptical, the restart of reactor No. 6 at the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear plant is a key moment for Japan's turn toward nuclear power.

"Though some Tokyo Electric executives used to be called 'emperors,' the company has paid more attention to local matters," Mr. Shinada says.

Japan wants a low-carbon option for power generation in the 21st century. In a poll by Jiji Press from December 2025, 45% of respondents said they support rebooting Japan's nuclear reactors that were mothballed 15 years ago. Another survey by the Asahi newspaper in 2016 found that just 31% supported the restart, with 54% opposed to it.

Now, the process is well under way, with 15 reactors out of a total of 33 back online.

– Takehiko Kambayashi / Contributor

Next-generation nuclear plant approved in Utah

The U.S. issued its first commercial construction permit for a nuclear reactor in eight years – a sodium-cooled nuclear reactor to be built by TerraPower in Wyoming.

The reactor, 130 miles northeast of Salt Lake City, is expected to be completed in 2030. Bill Gates, a founder of the company building the plant, is eyeing next-generation nuclear plants as a power source for the electricity-hungry data centers behind artificial intelligence.

President Donald Trump wants the U.S. to quadruple nuclear power capacity to 400 gigawatts by 2050.

– Reuters

Senate campaign in Texas opens a big US primary season

Voters went to the polls in the first primaries of 2026, kicking off an election season that will determine who controls Congress for the next two years – and shape the direction of the two parties in the final years of President Donald Trump's second term.

In Texas, one of the major U.S. Senate races of the year, the winner of the Democratic primary was James Talarico, a Texas state representative. In what was expected to be a tight race against U.S. Rep. Jasmine Crockett, a member of Congress from Dallas, Mr. Talarico won by a clear margin and avoided a runoff.

On the Republican side, incumbent U.S. Sen. John Cornyn finished slightly ahead of Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton. Since neither candidate won an outright majority, the two will face off again in a May runoff election.

Both parties see Texas' Senate seat as pivotal in the battle to control the chamber. With more than $122 million in ad spending, the two races combined became the most expensive Senate primary in U.S. history.

For national Democrats, the outcome may offer a compelling message from voters for how the party should position itself moving forward. Mr. Talarico and Ms. Crockett are similarly left-leaning on policy, but while Ms. Crockett positioned herself as a candidate eager to battle the Trump administration, Mr. Talarico explicitly campaigned against zero-sum politics, often citing his Christian faith. Democrats hope the Presbyterian seminarian can win over some independent voters and even moderate Republicans in November.

Democrats have had similar hopes before. Former U.S. Reps. Colin Allred and Beto O'Rourke both ran for Senate as moderate Democrats hoping to siphon off Republican votes. Both lost.

In North Carolina, a purple state that could also help determine which party controls the Senate, Michael Whatley, a former chair of the Republican National Committee, will face off against Democrat Roy Cooper, the popular former governor.

– Henry Gass / Staff writer

US job market slows, and unemployment edges up

The U.S. job market showed some signs of weakness even before war in Iran added a new strain on the global economy by pushing up energy prices.

The U.S. economy lost 92,000 jobs in February, surprising many economists who had expected job gains for the month. The early March Labor Department report also cut January's unexpectedly strong gain by 4,000 and revised downward its December figures from a gain to a loss. The unemployment rate edged up from 4.3% to 4.4%.

In all, the economy averaged an 11,300 monthly job gain over the three months from December to February. That's the second-lowest average for those months in the past decade (with the same period a year ago being the weakest).

The latest job losses comes even before the effects of the Iran war began to take hold. In March, oil prices surged, spilling over into energy-dependent industries.

Many economists suggest that the February figures make the jobs market look weaker than it really is. Physicians alone lost 37,000 office jobs last month, mainly because of a strike. Also, population revisions by the Labor Department make comparisons between 2026 and earlier years more difficult.

– Laurent Belsie / Staff writer

In shift, Cubans openly call for change

Like most of Cuba, Reinaldo Hernández has been spending a lot of time in the dark lately.

The lack of fuel and incessant power outages hitting the island of Cuba since the United States imposed an oil blockade in late January have made quotidian tasks like traveling on public transportation, accessing health care, or even keeping food refrigerated, all wildly difficult.

"It's very sad to reach this point in life where one might expect, let's say, some comfort ... some care," he says. "And for all of that to vanish."

Mr. Hernández has lived through a dictatorship, a revolution,

and the various stages of communist Cuba's evolution. That includes the dire economic hardship following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a vital benefactor of the Cuban government. But people today are reaching their limit, he says. The octogenarian's relatives now living abroad pooled their money this year to gift Mr. Hernández with a small generator on his birthday.

"Everyone is starting to agree," he says, seated in a once-grand, high-ceilinged Havana apartment in need of a fresh coat of paint. He shares the place with his daughter and adult grandson. "The people of Cuba – I'm almost shouting this – they need change."

To be sure, Cubans still hold a range of opinions about their government. But one important shift in recent months is a new willingness to speak openly about the need for political change, says Michael Bustamante, a Cuba expert at the University of Miami. This is something that has been building over the past six years – "a slow drip," he says.

"There's a nihilism that's taken root," says Dr. Bustamante. "People are ready for something that's dramatic and that can change the equation, even if it comes with big risks."

Those speaking out against Cuba's communist government risked execution in its early days, and today still face imprisonment or torture.

The social contract between Cuba's government and its people in Cuba was based on government-subsidized education, health care, and culture throughout each citizen's life.

"You were taken care of. And the price was political loyalty," says Katrin Hansing, an anthropologist at the City University of New York who studies migration, inequality, and memory in Cuba.

This arrangement between the party and the people has frayed over time, but it remained nominally intact until recently. Now that public services and access to daily necessities are harder to come by because of U.S. pressure, old inhibitions around speaking out are fading.

"We're paying ... for this incompetence"

The government "hasn't known how to solve the country's problems and they have accumulated over time," says Sergio Almaguer, who works at a nongovernmental organization in Havana. "We're paying the price for this incompetence."

Cubans began complaining publicly in the 1990s, during the so-called Special Period of economic hardship after the fall of the Soviet Union.

"Standing in line and kind of saying something negative about wait time – it was seen as pretty critical," says Dr. Hansing. "People had real problems and there was a collective sense of solidarity in carefully complaining."

But the current economic situation has created a new willingness to openly voice grievances, even if the critiques about the situation are not lodged directly at the communist government. "That's where the nuance lies," says Dr. Hansing.

– Whitney Eulich / Special correspondent
and Rudy Cabrera Arcia / Special contributor

Rolling hills and a roiling controversy

International cyclists flocked to Rwanda in late February for Tour du Rwanda, a grueling race through the East African country's rolling hills. While major sporting event organizers such as Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) have said Rwanda has made a "remarkable journey of transformation," critics see Tour du Rwanda as part of efforts by the government to "sportswash" a national image tarnished by human rights abuses. Rwanda hosted the 2025 UCI Road World Championships, and a "Visit Rwanda" logo has appeared on the jerseys of sports teams, including Arsenal F.C. and the Los Angeles Clippers. Human Rights Watch has said the UCI event provided "easy cover for [Rwanda's] poor human rights record."

– Ryan Lenora Brown

Google Maps is en route to South Korea

Seoul has conditionally approved Google's request to send detailed geographic data to overseas servers, ending a nearly two-decade standoff that has kept Google Maps from fully functioning in the country. The decision marks the first time that South Korea has allowed a foreign company access to such map data, and Google must agree to certain national security safeguards. While the move is expected to ease U.S.-South Korea trade tensions and boost South Korea's tourism industry, it could challenge the dominance of homegrown mapping services run by Naver and Kakao.

– Lindsey McGinnis

READER'S CHOICE

After anniversary, Syria faces new challenges

As U.S. forces quietly withdraw from Syria, a Monitor reader wrote to us from Edmonds, Washington, interested in follow-up reporting on the anniversary of the 2024 overthrow of dictator Bashar al-Assad. Monitor reporters were on the ground after the ouster and have continued to chronicle the country's period of change. Now, as conflict engulfs much of the Middle East, Syria is feeling the impact of gas and electricity shortages across the region despite its efforts to avoid getting directly involved in the fighting, according to the newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat.

– Audrey Thibert

"We need to tell the stories of our heroes."

That's how Algerian journalist Fayçal Métaoui, in an interview with Bloomberg, described Algeria's film industry revival. First in the works is a new biopic dedicated to Emir Abdelkader, a 19th-century religious scholar and one of the country's most celebrated anti-colonial resistance fighters. The industry was vibrant in the 1970s and '80s but began losing momentum in the 1990s, or what's known as the Black Decade, when the government and Islamist rebel groups fought a civil war. Cinemas shuttered, and many actors and directors left the country.

– Audrey Thibert

BROOKLET, GA.

The South is ascendant. So why is her accent fading?

Behind fading Southern accents is a tale of demographic shifts. Newcomers to the South are changing how people speak and live in the region.

By Patrik Jonsson / Staff writer

Every year, the annual Peanut Festival in Brooklet, Georgia, features the ultimate Southern fair competition. With a regional pace that matches its laconic drawl, the "slow tractor race" hands first prize to the driver who crosses the finish line last.

Resident Cristy Malott, who helps her husband, Tony, run Southeastern Trade & Auction, knows Brooklet as a leisurely place where she can pick her own strawberries and buy pork from a local farm. She also says that its Southern pace is picking up.

And nowhere are the changes more evident than in the thinning out of the region's accent and dialect, one of the most recognizable in the world. "Hey y'all," will signal the American South quicker'n a cat on a hot tin roof.

When the most recent shift began

Like many remote small towns throughout the country, Brooklet's population had dwindled well into the 1990s as businesses closed and children left for school or better-paying city jobs.

But over the past 20 years, the U.S. Census reports double-digit growth here. A new Korean auto plant nearby is part of it, but so is a growing migration trend across the country, aided by accessible internet, remote work options, lower taxes, and more moderate weather. All of which has led to the dramatic tipping southward of the nation's demographic center.

The change may highlight the South's assets and opportunities. But it also hints at danger for its unique and salient features – including "that gorgeous Southern drawl," as one local calls it.

In grocery stores and back-to-school nights, the sounds of harder "r's" and "t's" and clipped, fast phrasing of newcomers from other U.S. regions are noticeable.

"There's a lot of change going, so you have to be open and welcoming to that – it's progress," says Ms. Malott as she readies knick-knacks for auction. "But a mesh of all the accents? No."

The ascendancy of the South, and its increasing clout as a growing political, economic, and cultural force, is coming with a price. Census numbers say that the South was the only U.S. region with positive net domestic migration and significant net international migration in recent years. Its accent and colloquialisms – in some ways synonymous with its identity – are fading.

Atlanta has become a hotbed of California expatriates in the state's booming film business. Many of Nashville's new country singers come from Oklahoma. (One favorite resident, Taylor Swift, is from Pennsylvania). Raleigh spills over with New Yorkers drawn by tech jobs and starter homes. Midwesterners flock to South Carolina, the nation's fastest-growing state last year.

For the South as a whole and Brooklet writ small, it's a promising, but disorienting journey. And the fade of the Southern accent – often a self-imposed muting to avoid stereotyping – poses challenges for the South itself, for its values, history, and even future.

"When I came to North Carolina, it's a state that loves itself, loves its landscape, its singers, its writers, its poets, its performers," says Walt Wolfram, a Philadelphia-born linguist at North Carolina State University, in Raleigh. "But I always wonder: Why don't you love your language?"

Language and dialect are often cured and curated in both physical and social isolation. That could be the unique Gullah language on the Sea Islands of the South. Or the cultural islands of American cities, where block-by-block racial and ethnic segregation allows dialects to form and remain unchanged.

Physical migration changes local speech patterns naturally. But social mixing and class marking do, too, linguists say. Indeed, classic brogues in Chicago and New York are fading as speakers face the same forces wearing down the Southern accent: Younger generations sometimes step away from their parents' way of talking, perhaps to create distance from the older generation's circumstances or values.

Taking their place is a pan-regional dialect first discovered in California in the 1980s. **T**he "low back merger shift" (referring to how vowel sounds form in a speaker's mouth) has subsumed local dialects from Chicago to New York, even parts of Canada.

And nowhere is the California accent more evident than in the Carolinas, Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and northern Florida, where increasingly bland city accents contrast sharply with the twangs and sayings still heard out in the countryside.

"The connection to the past or to local culture … that is transmitted through dialect is fraying," says Peggy Renwick, a linguist at Johns Hopkins University who has researched Southern dialects.

When the shift began

The classic Southern accent likely peaked in the mid-1960s, then began its slow fade with Generation X, which began to question the interplay of accent and the South's complicated history.

"Southern accents generally rate high on dimensions of friendliness, solidarity, and hospitality, but in terms of prestige on the national stage, it doesn't rank so high," says Professor Wolfram, referring to post-Civil War, civil rights era, and rural stereotypes. "Practically everybody who came up pretty Southern in their home is corrected not to be so Southern because it doesn't sound smart."

That so-called dialect leveling has translated to building tension in Southern communities.

"The ones born and raised here that's older, they're going to keep [the accent]," says Mark Grimes, an auction attendee. "Now … I don't want to talk about the younger generation. They're going to hogwash. That's a nice way to say it."

Today, people born in Raleigh, North Carolina, where IBM helped the Research Triangle draw academics beginning in the late 1950s, may still speak with a whiff of a Southern accent, like the hint of magnolia over a fence. But 10 miles out of town, the drawl twists and turns, thick as kudzu.

"Your speech is kind of like your clothes: It sends information about who you want to be and how you see yourself and how you fit into society," says Lelia Glass, a linguist at the Georgia Institute of Technology. But, she adds, "homogenization and standardization sometimes go in the direction of people who have more power."

That dynamic is playing out in the Deep South. In Statesboro, Georgia, named for states' rights, a founding ideal of the Confed-

eracy during the Civil War, the Georgia Southern University campus brims with foreign students and urbanites on state scholarships.

Pace Jenkins, a self-help author and Amazon delivery driver, is on campus for a visit, reading on a bench. His unmistakable twang is a geographical happenstance – he grew up on the edge of Statesboro, on a dialect border.

"Like Johnny Cash, I walk the line," he laughs. But even here, "you really have to listen hard to hear the accent," he says. "And the people who still sound that way are consciously holding on to it."

"Real Southern, real quick"

One of the most characteristic features of a Southern accent is the "i" sound, which traces back to Civil War times. The elongated vowel, pronounced "ahhh," can be heard in words like "why" and "fire." Some Southerners lump words together. One example: "Momanem." Say what? "Momanem. Mom and them."

The various Southern accents and dialects are also malleable.

"You have some people who really ham it up, put [the accent] on more. In fact, if you get me mad enough, I can be real Southern, real quick," says Ms. Malott, the auctioneer's assistant in Brooklet. "I can also smile and be sweet as sugar pie and insult you in a hot second, and it'll be so nice," she says, dragging out "sooo naahss."

But for many Southerners, the changing accent represents the conflict between progress and tradition, between growing demographic and economic power, and the gauzy gentility and family-centric nature of the traditional American South.

"This society here is just changing," says David Whitten, who runs the auction's barbecue pit. "People are less friendly. But our whole society is turning that way anyway, where nobody trusts anybody anymore. It's becoming less Southern, I guess, is one way to put it."

The question is if those shifts are irreparably changing the South or whether the drawl might be poised for a renaissance.

Each year at the North Carolina State Fair, Dr. Wolfram hands out 7,000 "dialect buttons" with phrases such as "Bless your heart" and "All y'all."

"People want to be from some place," he says. "We don't want to be the voice of nowhere." ▪

KATHMANDU, NEPAL

Ex-rapper Balendra Shah is the face of Nepal's new guard. Can he lead a country?

Shah, whose party won March 5 elections, is on track to become prime minister. His bold leadership style has helped mobilize young voters, but could be a challenge when it comes to governing a nation.

By Aakash Hassan / Contributor

Waving to a cheering crowd from a car sunroof, wearing his signature black blazer, T-shirt, and shades, Balendra Shah looks every bit the famous rapper that he is. But he's not visiting the eastern district of Jhapa to perform – he's celebrating a massive election win that has helped pave the way for him to become Nepal's next leader.

This rural area has long been a bastion of support for the veteran communist politician K.P. Sharma Oli, who served as Nepal's prime minister until youth-led protests toppled the government and forced him to resign last year. In the country's first elections since the unrest, Mr. Shah – a rapper-turned-politician widely known as Balen – came to challenge the old guard on its own turf. His confidence paid off.

According to Nepal's Election Commission, Mr. Shah secured 68,348 votes – the highest total ever recorded in a parliamentary race, and nearly 50,000 more than his opponent, marking one of the most dramatic upsets of the election. And with his Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) winning a majority of seats in Parliament, the former Kathmandu mayor is poised to become the country's next prime minister.

His rise reflects a deeper upheaval in Nepal's politics, driven largely by young voters frustrated with corruption, unemployment, and decades of revolving-door governments.

"Young people were attracted to the way he presented himself – direct, outspoken, and willing to challenge the traditional political culture," says Uddhab Pyakurel, professor of political sociology and acting dean of the School of Arts at Kathmandu University.

But governing this democracy of 30 million people effectively will require more than swagger.

"The expectations young people have today cannot be fulfilled overnight," says Dr. Pyakurel. "Leadership requires constant dialogue and consultation. A leader cannot simply impose decisions; they must work with institutions, parties, and the public."

Frustration with the old guard

Nepal's political instability has been persistent. Since the monarchy was abolished in 2008, the country has had more than a dozen governments, and no prime minister has completed a full five-year term.

"Power kept circulating among a small group of old leaders," says Kathmandu-based political activist Nabeen Tiwari. At the same time, millions of young people left the country searching for work abroad.

Frustration boiled over last year when protests – initially sparked by government restrictions on social media – spread across the country and grew into demonstrations against corruption, unem-

ployment, and economic stagnation.

"At that point, there was a political vacuum," Mr. Tiwari says. "Many people were no longer willing to trust the traditional parties."

And Mr. Shah, who'd already established himself as a political outsider who could get things done, was a ready and willing alternative.

The rise of an outsider

Mr. Shah joined Kathmandu's emerging hip-hop scene in the early 2010s, while also pursuing degrees in civil and structural engineering. Performing on city rooftops and in underground rap battles, he built a following with tracks that railed against corruption, poverty, and the country's entrenched political class.

"People supposed to protect the country are idiots," he raps in "Balidan" (or "sacrifice" in Nepali), a song viewed millions of times on YouTube. "Leaders are all thieves looting the country."

But in a rare interview with The New York Times in 2023, he said that entering politics was always part of his broader plan.

Buoyed by his popularity as a musician, Mr. Shah defeated candidates from established parties in the 2022 Kathmandu mayoral race, running as an independent. Once in office, he cracked down on illegal construction and launched efforts to improve urban management – efforts that won praise from supporters who saw him as decisive. But his methods also sparked controversy, including in 2023, when his administration cleared roadside vendors from parts of Kathmandu without providing alternative spaces for them to continue their businesses.

Throughout his tenure, he rarely spoke to the press, preferring instead to communicate directly with supporters through social media. (His team declined repeated interview requests for this story.)

It's through those channels that Mr. Shah echoed protesters' calls for the government to step down late last year. In a social media post addressed to "Gen Z and all Nepalese," he urged the public to remain patient as the interim government took over.

"You are now stepping towards a golden future," he wrote. "Please don't panic at this time. ... This interim government's job is to conduct elections that will give a new mandate."

In January, he announced his decision to participate in those elections, resigning as mayor and throwing his weight behind the RSP, a political party founded in 2022 that had positioned itself as antiestablishment and anti-corruption.

Realities of governing

Rebika Gurung, a 27-year-old casino manager, says she persuaded her entire family to vote for the RSP.

"I don't necessarily support his party, but I voted for [it] because of Balen," she says. "He is not only young but educated, and ... has already delivered as a mayor."

Nepal is still counting votes, but so far, the RSP has secured 183 of the country's 275 parliamentary seats. Like many young voters, Ms. Gurung is frustrated by what she sees as decades of corruption and political stagnation, and hopes that Mr. Shah can use his position as prime minister to help create jobs and keep young people from moving abroad.

But some Nepalis have doubts.

Mr. Shah's critics have described him as uncompromising, opportunistic, and impulsive. A few months ago, he posted an expletive-laden, late-night message on Facebook trashing India, China, and the United States, along with Nepal's traditional parties. The post was later deleted.

For some observers, the episode highlighted uncertainty about how he might navigate Nepal's delicate diplomatic balance between India and China. And although Mr. Shah's party is emerging as the largest bloc in Parliament, he will still need to work with lawmakers from the same traditional parties he's railed against for years, including the Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal, and Maoist factions, which have won dozens of seats in Parliament.

"People want change very badly," says Mr. Tiwari. "But transforming the system will be much harder than winning an election."

Yet this is a gamble many young voters are happy to take.

"If Balen does not deliver, we will again hit the streets and remove him," says Aaditya Karna, one of the Gen Z leaders in last year's protests. ▪

WASHINGTON

Why Congress hasn't declared war since 1942

Trump's strikes against Iran renew questions about a congressional power granted by the Constitution, and how much it limits executive authority.

By Caitlin Babcock / Staff writer

Earlier this month, both the U.S. House and Senate voted against separate war powers resolutions curbing the president's ability to keep attacking Iran. It's the latest example of how Congress has become more of a bystander than a decider on U.S. military operations.

Debates over war powers, experts and lawmakers say, reflect an argument that started with the country's founding: Which branch of government has more authority over military conflict?

The Constitution designates the president as commander in chief of the armed forces. But it gives Congress the power to "declare war."

Congress has not done so since 1942.

Experts agree that, in recent decades, the institution has ceded much of the decision-making about war to the president. Many see that as a sidelining of the Founding Fathers' system of checks and balances, though some think it's more in line with what the founders envisioned.

Clark Neily, the senior vice president for legal studies at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, says Congress does have mechanisms it can use to exert its power. Among them are withholding funds the president needs to take certain actions, or, as a last measure, voting to impeach a president who is overstepping their boundaries.

But, he says, the institution has to be willing to act.

"When Congress is either unwilling or unable to exercise those powers – as ours clearly is – then regardless of what the Constitution says, there's no real practical limit on the president's ability to unilaterally involve us in foreign military conflicts," Mr. Neily says.

Congress' war power over time

Michael J. Glennon, a constitutional law professor at Tufts University, traces the decline in Congress' war power partly to things he says the Founding Fathers didn't predict: strong political parties.

"[The founders] believed that members of Congress would have

an ambition to resist encroachments by the executive, because they'd have a kind of institutional pride that essentially prevails against all else," he says. "And they don't."

Lawmakers feel pressured to fall in line behind their party's president, he adds. With a few exceptions, Democrats oppose the war while Republicans are supporting Mr. Trump.

In the past, Congress has at times tried to reassert its authority in military conflicts.

"In the wake of the Vietnam War, there was a realization," Mr. Neily says, that ambiguity over how war powers should be divided was leading the president to assert more control.

1973 War Powers Resolution

To try to claw back some of that authority, Congress in 1973 passed the War Powers Resolution. The law required the president to notify Congress within 48 hours of military action and barred the deployment of armed forces for more than 60 to 90 days without congressional permission.

The law also directs a president to "consult" with Congress "in every possible instance" before initiating hostilities.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio called some members of Congress to alert them immediately before the strikes began Feb. 28. But many members of Congress – mainly Democrats – say the institution was bypassed.

Mr. Glennon, who in 1973 provided legal advice to Senate conferees drafting the War Powers Resolution, says Mr. Trump violated it when he directed strikes against Iran. "Consultation implies going to Congress for its advice and counsel," the professor adds.

Mr. Trump and some other Republicans have said the 1973 law is unconstitutional.

In recent conflicts, including the global war on terrorism, Congress has passed an authorization for use of military force, or AUMF. It's a way to allow a president to take targeted military action without formally declaring war. In 2002, Congress approved an AUMF that allowed President George W. Bush to send armed forces into Iraq the following year. In 2011, many GOP lawmakers criticized President Barack Obama's decision to conduct strikes in Libya without obtaining a similar authorization. The Obama administration argued those military operations were limited enough that they did not constitute traditional "hostilities."

President Trump did not request an AUMF from Congress when the U.S. carried out strikes against Iranian nuclear sites last June, or when it captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in January. In both cases, lawmakers introduced resolutions demanding the president halt military action and await congressional sign-off. Without enough Republican support, they all failed.

Some say these types of resolutions don't go far enough. Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut has called for Congress to block all other legislation until members debate and vote on an AUMF for the war in Iran. He argues lawmakers shouldn't only vote to stop a conflict, but on whether to start it in the first place.

"If a War Powers Resolution becomes the way we debate war, then the burden is forever shifted," he wrote on social media.

GOP Sen. John Curtis of Utah, who acknowledges Congress has ceded some of its power to the president, said forcing the president to stop the war at this point would be "devastating" and unfair to U.S. troops, including those who have already lost their lives.

Power of the purse

Congress' power to "declare war" has more to do with its ability to control military spending, says John Yoo, a constitutional law expert at the University of California, Berkeley. "Congress is, of course, free to try to stop any military intervention," he says. "But I think the Constitution and historical practice require Congress to do this primarily through its power of the purse."

If Mr. Trump asks Congress to approve additional military spending, it will put that "power of the purse" to the test. ▪

Trump criticized GOP hawks. Why did he choose war with Iran anyway?

By Simon Montlake / Staff writer

In his November 2024 election victory speech, Donald Trump promised: "I'm not going to start a war. I'm going to stop wars." Now he has launched the United States into its most consequential military campaign since the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

President Trump has offered various reasons for ordering airstrikes, from destroying Iran's missile stockpiles to calling for a popular uprising in Iran. But exactly how and why the Trump administration decided to go to war with Iran remains unclear.

In his first term, Mr. Trump pulled the United States out of a 2015 nuclear nonproliferation deal with Iran. In 2020, he ordered an airstrike that killed Iranian military mastermind Qassem Soleimani. But Mr. Trump resisted pressure for broader military operations, including from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who wanted the U.S. to bomb Iran's underground nuclear facilities. Calls to take a tougher line against Iran were also coming from within the White House during the first Trump administration, including from National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, both of whom favored military actions aimed at regime change.

There are no obvious Iran hawks in Mr. Trump's current Cabinet like Mr. Bolton or the neoconservatives in the George W. Bush administration who pushed for a preemptive strike against Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Vice President JD Vance, a Marine, came into the second Trump administration as a prominent skeptic of U.S. military interventions, which he argued came at the expense of domestic programs. Tulsi Gabbard, the director of national intelligence and an Iraq War veteran, built her political career on opposition to foreign wars; in 2020, while seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, she sold "No War With Iran" T-shirts.

To Ryan Costello, the policy director at the National Iranian American Council, Mr. Trump not long ago seemed "among the least likely Republicans to go to war with Iran." Instead, he says, Mr. Trump "is taking the George W. Bush and John Bolton playbook and running with it."

Mr. Costello, whose group is opposed to the war, argues the shift is largely because Israel influences Mr. Trump. He says this military campaign "is more the vision of Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli government to take the fight to Iran."

Others say Mr. Trump's previous criticisms of GOP neoconservatives who launched unpopular wars were politically expedient

but didn't reflect an abiding commitment to peace over war. In his second term, Mr. Trump has launched more airstrikes in a year than his predecessor, Joe Biden, did in four years. This includes the military operation to capture Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife.

Analysts say the success of the Venezuela mission – which Mr. Trump has referenced while discussing his Iran policy – appears to have emboldened the president and might have led him to discount the risks that military strikes on Iran would entail.

In his first term, Mr. Trump was somewhat restrained by senior military officials such as Gen. Jim Mattis, his former defense secretary, who checked some of the president's impulses on U.S. military deployments. Pete Hegseth, the current defense secretary, is a retired infantry officer who hasn't managed complex military operations.

Many agree that leading up to the U.S.-Israeli strikes on Feb. 28, when a meeting between supreme leader Ali Khamenei and top officials at his compound presented a valuable strategic target, Iran was far weaker than it was during Mr. Trump's first term.

This weakness presented an opportunity for Mr. Trump to "end a war that the Iranians started" in 1979, says Jason Brodsky, policy director of United Against Nuclear Iran, a group with ties to hawkish Republicans. "He's looking at it through the lens of his legacy." ▪

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

$125 MILLION

The amount spent on advertising in the Senate primary race in Texas, according to media tracking firm AdImpact, making it the most expensive Senate primary in U.S. history. Donors have poured cash into the campaigns of incumbent Republican John Cornyn; state Attorney General Ken Paxton, who will challenge Mr. Cornyn in a party primary runoff in May; and state Rep. James Talarico, the Democratic nominee for the U.S. Senate.

19

Officials who have been dismissed by China's top legislative body, the National People's Congress, including nine from the country's military, ahead of its annual session, which opened March 5. Chinese leader Xi Jinping has been launching a series of anti-corruption purges.

154

Women in the U.S. who are billionaires. They include CEOs such as In-N-Out Burger president Lynsi Snyder; celebrities such as Taylor Swift and Kim Kardashian; and philanthropists such as Melinda Gates. Almost 60% of women billionaires are self-made.

10,000

The number of homes in the United Kingdom that can be powered by renewable electricity from Geothermal Engineering Ltd. The company, the first of its kind in Britain, uses geothermal technology to generate energy from hot granite rocks deep beneath the Earth's surface.

3

The remaining number of members of the Amazon tribe, Akuntsu. Due to heavy development of the Amazon rainforest, the Indigenous group in Brazil faces near extinction.

– Victoria Hoffmann / Staff writer

Sources: The New York Times, BBC, The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, The Associated Press

GLOBAL PATTERNS

LONDON

How Netanyahu, with US backing, is intent on reshaping the Middle East

The Iran war is still widening, as of press time. Yet no matter how or when it ends, one thing has become clear: the emergence of Israel as a regional superpower intent on redrawing the politics, and the map, of a transformed Middle East.

By Ned Temko
Connecting key themes in the world's news.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's confidence rests not only on Israel's own military, technological, and intelligence edge over its neighbors.

It's because of another transformation: President Donald Trump's break with previous administrations' efforts to influence and sometimes restrain Israeli policy, and his elevation of America's security alliance with Israel into something far closer to a full military partnership.

The depth of that partnership was underscored by the opening strike in the war on Iran – the joint Israeli-U.S. attack on Tehran Feb. 28 that killed Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In fact, Secretary of State Marco Rubio suggested March 2 that the timing of the war was dictated by Israel, which he said had decided to attack Iran on its own.

Still, just as the war has drawn in other countries, Mr. Netanyahu's vision of a postwar Middle East could face challenges once the bombs and missiles finally fall silent.

Presiding over the most right-wing government in Israel's history, he has recently extended its "security" borders by taking control of an area inside Syria and reinforcing Israel's hold on Gaza.

He moved to reassert military control over parts of southern Lebanon after missile fire from Iranian-allied Hezbollah.

He is also determined to quash any possibility of a Palestinian state, and to push ahead with the de facto annexation of the West Bank as a permanent part of Israel.

And he envisages that key Arab Gulf states, above all Saudi Arabia, will move quickly to establish normal ties with Israel once the war has unrecognizably weakened Iran.

Yet there are potential obstacles as well.

One example: Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf oil states.

Their leaders had been urging Mr. Trump to seek a negotiated deal with Tehran and to avoid war – fearing, rightly, that Iran would respond by firing missiles and drones not just at Israel, but at their countries, too.

They're deeply uncomfortable with the prospect of Israel exercising unfettered regional dominance. That's especially so after the devastation in Gaza caused by Israel's response to Hamas' cross-border killing and abduction of hundreds of civilians in October 2023, and Mr. Netanyahu's ruling out the idea of two-state peace with the Palestinians.

And while the Gulf states are no match for Israel militarily, they can make their voices heard. They have political, military and – above all – economic ties with Washington.

The key imponderable may be Mr. Trump himself.

The U.S.-Israeli alliance has a long history, underpinned by ties between the countries' military and security sectors, and, since the late 1970s, by nearly $4 billion in annual U.S. aid.

Yet the unprecedented level of support and partnership in the past year has been rooted in the relationship between Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Trump. They've bonded politically over a shared, strongman approach to domestic politics and a muscular, "great power" view of the world.

The administration's recent National Defense Strategy called Israel a "model ally." It had proven "able and willing to defend" itself and needed to be empowered, not reined in.

But especially with the Iran war expanding unpredictably, Mr. Netanyahu's ability to set the terms for a postwar Middle East could stumble if his political interests and those of Mr. Trump diverge.

Both leaders face upcoming electoral tests: the U.S. midterms and an Israeli parliamentary election that will determine whether Mr. Netanyahu remains in office.

No matter how the war ends, the Israeli leader can claim to have vindicated his decades-old insistence on the need to confront the theocratic regime in Tehran. He has also secured the greatest level of support from the U.S. in the history of the alliance.

That's a political windfall. He will hope it cancels out many voters' anger at his government's inability to foresee, prevent, or quickly respond to Hamas' 2023 attack.

Mr. Trump's calculus, however, could depend on the path of the conflict with Iran – especially if market turbulence and rises in oil and gas prices persist. There's no political exit ramp in sight, and his political foes raise the notion of a "forever war."

He might then disengage, or pivot to the more politically palatable endgame both he and Mr. Netanyahu cited at the start of hostilities: a wider regional peace.

That would mean moving ahead on the stalled implementation of his 20-point plan for the reconstruction of Gaza. And it could mean the expansion of the main foreign policy achievement of Mr. Trump's first term, the Abraham Accords normalization agreement between Israel and several Arab states.

The problem for Mr. Netanyahu?

Both initiatives would require buy-in from the most influential Arab Gulf state, Saudi Arabia.

And the Saudis seem certain to insist, at least, on Mr. Netanyahu's commitment to keep open the path to a two-state peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

That could pit President Trump's Middle East vision against that of his model ally. ▪

In Maine, 'We watched a community show up'

Many Mainers back immigration enforcement – but also immigrants. In Portland, a federal surge built new bonds between longtime neighbors.

By Cameron Pugh / Staff writer

As federal immigration agents spread across Portland, Maine, during Operation Catch of the Day, which began Jan. 20, Nina, like many other immigrants here, stayed home. Her daughter didn't go to school, and Nina didn't go to work, even though she knew she'd lose pay. But the risk of being detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or another agency seemed too high.

Nina entered the United States from the Republic of Congo on a tourist visa before applying for asylum. In the eight years since, she's worked to support herself and build a life for her daughter. Yet the surge shook her confidence in whether she truly had a home in Maine.

"I thought I finally had a place to, like, put my suitcases," she says, "where I could at least sleep well, and then see my daughter going to school and having her life.

"I didn't expect [it] to be like this," she adds.

Nina, who asked that her full name be withheld because she worries about being targeted by immigration enforcement, was among tens of thousands of "New Mainers" who moved to the state in the last 30 years. Thousands of refugees from Somalia have settled here since the early 2000s, according to news reports. They relocated from larger, warmer, and more diverse locales such as Atlanta, where refugee agencies had placed them, and largely settled in Lewiston, about 30 miles from Portland. Both communities have prided themselves on embracing immigrants.

As word spread that Maine offered safety and strong social services, the immigrant population grew, especially in Portland. Today, about 34,300 immigrants – roughly half of Maine's foreign-born population, according to census data – call Greater Portland home. Maine's immigrants have enmeshed themselves in the community by many metrics: About 50% have lived in the U.S. for 20 years or more, and three-quarters speak English, a report from the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) found.

As January's enforcement operation intensified, Nina and others in Portland discovered – in themselves and in their neighbors – that decades of coexistence had built a deep commitment to immigrants.

Portlanders pieced together networks to monitor enforcement activities, shuttle immigrant children to and from school, and deliver food to those unwilling to leave their homes. After a winter storm dumped a foot of snow on the state Jan. 25 and 26, neighbors shoveled cars out for immigrants who feared federal agents would detain them if they stepped outside. Protesters flooded the streets, braving biting temperatures even by Maine standards, and called for the surge to end.

"I have seen a community show up in ways that I didn't think would happen," Moon Machar says. Ms. Machar's family arrived

in Maine as refugees from Ethiopia when she was a child. She has lived here most of her life.

The surge, she and others interviewed say, built new bonds between immigrants and U.S.-born residents.

"If ICE wasn't here, I don't think some of the people would have come out of their house and made it a point to connect with individuals from our community," she adds.

Yet tension between immigrants and their new home has surfaced, as some have questioned America's commitment to welcoming people from other shores. Similar feelings have ricocheted across the U.S., as President Donald Trump deploys immigration agents to fulfill his vow to deport people living in the U.S. unlawfully – about 14 million people. That number surged by some 3 million under President Joe Biden, who had relaxed some of Mr. Trump's immigration policies. Despite repatriating more immigrants than any president since George H.W. Bush, Mr. Biden's administration could not keep up with migrants attempting to enter the country. U.S. Border Patrol recorded some 7 million encounters at the southern border, compared with about 2 million during Mr. Trump's first term. Such encounters are often used as a proxy for illegal crossings. Although Portland's immigrants saw a flood of support during nine days in January, some now grapple with the realization that many in the country – and in Maine – support Mr. Trump's immigration actions.

"It's become very, very evident that I am 'from away,'" says Ms. Machar, an Army National Guard veteran, using a common term in Maine. "There are individuals who do not want me here, regardless of my military contributions, regardless of all the good I try to do in the community, regardless of how proud I am to represent the state of Maine."

ENFORCEMENT SURGE MAKES ITS MARK

Two weeks after the height of enforcement actions in Portland, Nina still feels a well of anxiety when she leaves her home. If she's arrested, she thinks, she could be sent to a detention facility thousands of miles away, as has been the case in other incidents. What, she wonders, would happen to her daughter?

"I feel like all of us are getting put into the same basket, and they're calling us 'illegal' even though we're not," she says.

Traditionally, asylum-seekers like Nina have been shielded from deportation and allowed to work while their cases move through the system. That process can take years. They can be detained by ICE for a variety of reasons, such as if the agency deems them a public safety threat or a flight risk. The Trump administration has in some cases deported asylum-seekers and, last year, issued a memo pausing asylum applications "pending a comprehensive review."

The number of immigrants in the state swelled from just over 45,600 in 2010 to about 65,800 in 2024, according to census data. Only 4.7% of Maine's 1.4 million residents were born outside the U.S. Since 2022, some 1,748 refugees and asylum-seekers have settled here, according to Catholic Charities' Office of Maine Refugee Services.

Although Maine has drawn national attention for its population of immigrants from countries in Africa, nearly half of the state's immigrants are from Asia or Europe. One-fifth are from Canada. Immigrants from African nations, largely in East Africa, make up roughly 20% of the foreign-born population.

About 8 in 10 of Maine's immigrants reside here legally. Half have obtained citizenship, according to a report from MPI, and another 32% hold either a green card or temporary visa. Though some estimates say about 10% of Maine's immigrants entered the country unlawfully, MPI puts the figure at 18%.

The U.S. government has broad authority to deport people who enter the country unlawfully. But those people can apply for protections like asylum as a defense against removal. Donny Ardell, a Republican state representative, says it's the law, not the public, that decides whom immigration agents can target under U.S. law.

"A permanent resident who has committed a series of violent felonies is just as removable, you know, deportable, as someone who's merely an illegal alien," he says.

As the surge in Portland ,got underway, federal officials reportedly said they were targeting 1,400 of "the worst of the worst criminal illegal aliens" across the state. That came seven weeks after the start of what became a 3,000-agent operation in Minneapolis – a campaign marked by immigration law enforcement fatally shooting Renee Good and Alex Pretti, two U.S. citizens who were opposing federal actions there.

On Jan. 29, Maine Sen. Susan Collins announced that the Department of Homeland Security would end "enhanced operations" in the state. The agency, which oversees ICE, has not confirmed that statement, and uncertainty still lingers in Portland's brick and cobblestone streets. In a statement to the Monitor, DHS said it would "continue to enforce the law across the country."

The Trump administration has maintained for over a year that its enforcement efforts mainly target people with criminal records. Yet Portland residents say the arrests here often appeared indiscriminate, sowing distrust. Even some native-born residents stayed home, believing that they might encounter immigration agents who would detain them first and ask questions later. School absences spiked. Businesses threatened to close for lack of workers.

It's not that immigration enforcement itself is a problem, says Ruben Torres, advocacy and policy manager at the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition. Immigration agents have sought to enforce laws in Portland and Maine many times, under both Republican and Democratic administrations.

"There is enforcement that should happen. There is enforcement that will happen," he says. "But at the same time, there should be respect for the process, and the people in that process."

Born in California, Mr. Torres says even he worries about being detained by ICE, echoing fears expressed by Nina and others.

Portlanders have particularly criticized the arrest of a corrections officer recruit, whom DHS officials reportedly called "an illegal alien from Angola," in early January. Local officials said that the recruit had cleared a criminal background check and was authorized to work in the U.S. until 2029.

That incident has rankled even those who are sympathetic to immigration enforcement. Kevin Joyce, sheriff for Cumberland County, where Portland is located, questions whether immigration enforcement in Maine targeted those who have broken the law. Cumberland County jails, which the sheriff's department operates, have historically cooperated with immigration officials.

"I've been pretty vocal about the fact that ICE does have a job to do, and that is to get the criminals off the street," he said at a news conference. "I was all set with that. But ... this is an individual who had permission to be working in the state of Maine. We vetted him."

Such arrests have undermined trust not only in the federal immigration system, but also in local police, residents and local officials say.

"I'm watching my kids – [a] fifth grader and an eighth grader – and

they're afraid," says the Rev. Peter Swarr, priest at Trinity Episcopal Church in Portland. "They see a police car, and they don't trust that police car anymore."

MAYOR: TIME TO LOOK FORWARD

Mayor Mark Dion hopes those feelings are temporary. As Portland emerges from the surge, he says the task is to build something new – something stronger.

"We'll get through it, and we'll talk about it," he says, sitting behind a regal wooden desk at City Hall. "It was a hard two weeks. And now, the real work begins."

Throughout the city, much of that work is already underway, as native-born residents seek to strengthen bonds with their immigrant neighbors and rebuild trust. Sheltered from the February cold at The Cathedral Church of St. Luke are the Rev. Swarr and Sarah Borgeson, who co-lead the newly launched Neighborhood Support Network. The goal is to deliver food to some 70 families who remain too afraid to leave their homes.

Packages will include household essentials like toilet paper and also foodstuffs like palm oil, tilapia, and cassava leaves – staples in many East African countries, where many of Portland's immigrants are from.

The emergence of such efforts underscores the spirit of neighborliness that has driven Portlanders to paper telephone poles, buildings, and windows on their snow-lined streets with missives proclaiming love for immigrants in Spanish, English, French, and Portuguese. As people rushed to help one another, new bonds of kinship between immigrants and U.S.-born residents blossomed.

"We are engaging all kinds of networks of support, some of it underground, some of it very explicit in public, so that our neighbors know that we love them and consider them to be part of the community," says the Rt. Rev. Thomas Brown, Episcopal bishop of Maine. "When one of us is harmed, at some level, all of us are."

Such initiatives have been built on an extensive web of support services that already existed for immigrants. Deeper in a building attached to the cathedral sits a small room infused with the smell of potatoes. Here, every Thursday, Mary Brighthaupt and a small group of volunteers shepherd largely immigrant visitors through a small but mighty food pantry.

Some 75% of the neighbors, as Ms. Brighthaupt calls those who get food from the pantry, are New Mainers. Most do not speak English. Volunteers communicate largely through gestures, holding up fingers to convey how many items each neighbor can take. The visitors smile, gratefully, and fill plastic shopping bags with as much as they can. Interest in community aid projects such as this one has ballooned since the surge, Ms. Brighthaupt says.

One such project is Maine Needs, a nonprofit that provides basic goods to Mainers who can't afford them. When they heard about the immigration enforcement push, staff members posted on social media asking for donations of diapers for parents staying at home with their children. The community obliged: In a conference room , stacks of diaper boxes rise from floor to ceiling.

"We watched a community show up. I have chills just thinking about it," says Angela Stone, founder and executive director of Maine Needs. "They might look like boxes of diapers, but that's a community that's like, 'Absolutely not – we're gonna look after our neighbors.'"

LEGISLATOR: A RIGHT TO ENFORCE THE LAW

Pious Ali wasn't surprised by Portland's response. An immigrant from Ghana, Mr. Ali has lived in the U.S. since 2000 and in Maine since 2002. He's spent years as an elected official, rising from the school board to be a city councilor at large. He was the first African-born Muslim elected to public office in the state.

Mr. Ali sees his political career as proof that immigrants can become part of the community. "You need to feel comfortable, you need to feel welcome, you need to feel being part of the society you live in to even think of running for office, right?"

"The support that came out is Portland being Portland, and Maine being what mostly Maine is," he adds.

Mostly.

Many in Maine support President Trump's immigration crackdown. Although Kamala Harris won the state in the 2024 presidential election, most of her votes came from Greater Portland. More rural parts of the state, to the west and north, voted for Mr. Trump.

A poll from the University of New Hampshire in April 2025 found that 45% of Maine residents approved of Mr. Trump's handling of immigration. That's higher than the national 38% approval he received in a February 2026 Reuters poll, which was down from 55% the year before. Although a majority in the UNH poll disapproved of the president's immigration policies, that was starkly divided along partisan lines, with 98% of Democrats disapproving and 96% of Republicans approving.

Mr. Ardell, the state representative, says that the government has a right to enforce immigration law, and he sees Mr. Trump's efforts as routine enforcement, not federal overreach.

"I think the opposition is that President Trump is the chief executive who's directing it," he says.

For decades, both Democratic and Republican presidents have funneled tens of billions of dollars into immigration enforcement. Last year, Mr. Trump's tax and spending bill gave ICE a windfall that made it the most well-funded law enforcement agency in the country: about $75 billion spread over four years, on top of an $8 billion annual budget.

This year, Maine enacted a bill to limit cooperation with federal immigration officials. Supporters of such bills argue that they boost trust between local officials and immigrants, who might otherwise fear that accessing social services or reporting crimes will result in deportation.

Mr. Ardell, who worked in immigration enforcement for 20 years, says those policies make enforcement more dangerous – especially as civilians stage protests. Federal immigration agents lack local policing power, he says .

"The only tool they have is lawful commands, and if those aren't complied with, you have potentially increasing levels of force to ensure compliance," he says.

LEANING ON HER COMMUNITY

As she begins to relax after the surge, Nina wishes Washington would reconsider its position on immigration. She doesn't want criminals on the street, either, and she says that the government has the right to punish those who break the law. But she sees immigrants as a boon for communities around the country, not just in Portland.

"Being [an] immigrant – I don't think it's a crime," she says. "If we're here, it's also maybe because [Americans] need us."

When she read social media comments cheering ICE's arrival in the state, Nina began to think that most of her fellow Mainers

thought differently. "So that means they don't like us?" she wondered, as she scrolled through her feeds on Facebook and TikTok. "They just pretend to like us, but they don't really like us?"

But in recent weeks, the community's effort to come together and support her – from her boss who gave her rides to work to the churchgoers who delivered food – cemented her feeling that she belongs here. Her neighbors, she realized, want her to stay. She's sure, now, that she picked the right place for her family.

"If something happens to me," she says, "maybe my daughter will be protected." ▪

THE EXPLAINER

The state of AI: Swift advances prompt safety debates

The Pentagon's dispute with Anthropic shows how rapid development in artificial intelligence is influencing decisions in government and business.

By Caitlin Babcock / Staff writer

A recent dispute between the Pentagon and the artificial intelligence company Anthropic has brought long-standing tensions between national security and the ethical development of AI into the national spotlight.

It also represents the latest instance in which AI's swift integration into business and government has collided with growing concerns that its development is leaving safety protocols behind.

In late February, Anthropic refused to allow the Pentagon unrestricted use of its technology, insisting on limitations it said were essential for safety. The Department of Defense had used the company's technology in operations to seize Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in January and in the Iran strikes that began on Feb. 28.

The Pentagon responded to Anthropic's demand by designating the company "a supply chain risk to national security." After negotiations fell apart, Anthropic's competitor OpenAI signed a deal with the Pentagon without the restrictions Anthropic had sought. Anthropic has sued the Trump administration, saying its action was "unlawful."

As AI development accelerates, Congress has done little to regulate the technology, and the Trump administration has followed suit. Last year, President Donald Trump issued an executive order limiting states' abilities to set safety guidelines. The lack of government regulation means AI companies are deciding on their own how to address safety concerns while scrambling to keep up with competitors such as China. The companies' differing approaches to safety and guardrails could shape the future of this transformative technology.

Here's a look at the state of AI and the companies at its forefront.

Q: Which companies are the major players in AI?

Two of the most well-known AI companies are OpenAI and Anthropic. OpenAI was founded in 2015 by a group of entrepreneurs, including current CEO Sam Altman, Elon Musk, Greg Brockman, and Ilya Sutskever. The company is responsible for one of the most recognizable AI tools, ChatGPT, a chatbot that uses artificial intelligence to engage in conversation with users and answer their questions.

Despite his early criticism of President Trump, Mr. Altman has had a friendly relationship with the second Trump administration. OpenAI's president, Mr. Brockman, has donated millions to a political action committee supporting Mr. Trump.

Anthropic PBC was founded in 2021 by former OpenAI employees who left that company over concerns it was prioritizing speed over safety, among other disputes. Anthropic's signature tool, Claude, operates similarly to ChatGPT, though it is considered stronger in some areas, like coding.

Anthropic promotes itself as a more safety-conscious company than its competitors. It donates to political groups that support AI regulation and says it wants to imbue its models with moral values. However, it drew criticism in February for dropping a core promise to pause training on AI systems that power things like chatbots, AI robots, and defense systems, unless it could guarantee that risks were properly mitigated.

Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei has made bleak predictions about AI, saying it will probably cause "unusually painful" job disruption and, without proper precautions, could lead to mass death through its potential to help bad actors. But he has also said the United States must stay competitive with countries like China.

"The Anthropic folks seem very genuinely convinced that they are making decisions about the most important technology that has ever occurred in human history," says Bill Drexel, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute who researches AI competition with China.

Q: What safety questions are being raised?

Most AI companies are addressing multiple issues around AI safety, including establishing mental health guardrails, ensuring data privacy, and preventing chatbots from inventing facts.

But whether those efforts will be successful remains in question.

Multiple lawsuits have alleged that in 2025, ChatGPT gave harmful advice to people experiencing mental health crises, including one instance that resulted in a person dying by suicide. Last year, OpenAI made updates it said were aimed at preventing such incidents.

Some states have proposed laws to establish safety parameters for how AI bots interact with children or to ensure the bots can't provide users with information needed to commit a crime, such as instructions on how to build a chemical weapon. But an executive order from President Trump in December pressured states to back off enforcing any regulations the administration deems burdensome. That could mean states don't enforce regulations like one in Colorado that bans algorithmic discrimination, which occurs when AI tools show bias toward certain groups based on factors like race or religion.

The Anthropic dispute also highlighted ethical questions about the military's use of AI. For example, Anthropic did not want its technology used in conjunction with lethal weapons that could target and fire without a human at the controls.

Kay Firth-Butterfield, CEO of Good Tech Advisory LLC, says the use of such weapons raises ethical questions.

"The concept of fighting a war when nobody dies apart from civilian casualties has a moral dimension that I don't think anybody's discussed," she says. "Because, you know, one of the things that stops wars is when we lose people."

Q: Where do companies have red lines?

Anthropic raised two major red lines in its dispute with the Pentagon. Mr. Amodei wanted a legally binding agreement from the Pentagon that would prevent it from using Anthropic's technology to conduct domestic surveillance of Americans or to be used in lethal

autonomous weapons.

Mr. Altman, OpenAI's CEO, publicly backed Anthropic's position that AI should not be used for the two purposes it outlined. But it still signed off on the Pentagon's requirement that its models could be used for "all lawful purposes." The company said it negotiated the right to put technical guardrails on its systems to ensure the military followed its safety principles.

That "all lawful purposes" language had been a stumbling block for Anthropic. Mr. Amodei said current AI systems are not up to the task of powering autonomous weapons because they lack the judgment skills of well-trained human soldiers.

In the wake of the dispute, major defense companies have issued directives to stop using Anthropic's technologies, though many technologists in Silicon Valley have supported the company's decision.

Q: How is AI changing?

For most people, AI is rapidly becoming more integrated into daily life. The technology's latest development is something called agentic AI – a machine learning model that can complete multistep tasks on people's behalf.

An AI agent can make decisions on its own and then adapt those decisions or behavior based on a designated goal. For example, it might plan a vacation and book hotel reservations and plane tickets for someone based on that traveler's preferences.

As these models become more advanced, experts predict they could change companies' workflows and consumers' experiences. Major businesses like Walmart and JPMorganChase are already using AI tools to do things like detect fraud or interact with customers.

Many companies are racing toward what they see as the next frontier in AI: something called artificial general intelligence, or AGI. This refers to technology that could, in theory, meet or surpass human intelligence. Most AI today is confined to a specific type of task, such as an AI chatbot that answers questions. If achieved, the newer AGI could apply knowledge across different subjects and adapt to new situations. Imagine a customer service bot that anticipates problems and tailors its responses, or an advanced self-driving car that adapts in real time to weather events.

A large portion of a $50 billion investment by Amazon in OpenAI could be contingent on the company achieving AGI, reports The Information, a publication covering the tech, finance, and media industries.

Experts say these new developments will raise even more questions about safety.

"Everybody's chasing AGI, but what we don't necessarily know is whether AGI will be safe," says Ms. Firth-Butterfield. "We don't know what it will be capable of doing." ▪

REPORTERS ON THE JOB

BROOKLET, GEORGIA

Patrik Jonsson

Reporting tends to pressure-test stereotypes. While covering the fading Southern accent, I visited tie-dye-clad auctioneer Tony Malott in a small auction house gilded in knickknacks. Mr. Malott shattered two clichés in one visit: that the Southern accent is a monolith and that "Southern" means slow. His particular Georgia drawl was, indeed, leisurely, but his backhanded wit and rapid banter sold trinkets at a dizzying clip. Challenging stereotypes while honoring cultural identity is a balancing act for all reporters. Taking time, even on a tight deadline, to observe Mr. Malott walk (and talk) that line revealed a more meaningful story. ▪

WACO, TEXAS

Henry Gass

It's difficult campaigning in a state twice the size of Italy. In 1948, Lyndon B. Johnson employed a helicopter for his U.S. Senate run. Tasked with covering the U.S. Senate campaign in Texas – specifically, the Republican and Democratic primaries – I had only my 2015 Nissan Sentra. Urkel, my trusty sedan, has ferried me far over the years, but that week in late February might have been a record breaker. Austin to Waco for a James Talarico event: 100 miles. Two days later, Waco to Denton for a Wesley Hunt event: 240 miles, round trip. Two days after that: Waco to another part of Denton for a Ken Paxton event: 250 miles, round trip. Almost 600 miles in five days? Keep your helicopter, LBJ. I've got Urkel. ▪

TEL AVIV, ISRAEL

Shoshanna Solomon

Reporting while running in and out of a safe room for protection from Iranian ballistic missiles is challenging. Thankfully, my safe room, with reinforced walls and a heavy metal door that clunks when closed, is in my basement. Taylor Luck, my colleague in Amman, Jordan, told me that he and his two kittens take refuge in his bathroom as loud blasts sound overhead.

On the first day of the Iran war, I took a short walk. When a missile alarm sounded, I had 1.5 minutes to get to safety. I ran. The fastest I could. As I reached my front gate, I looked at the skies. Above me were two fighter jets racing after a possible drone, leaving zigzagging contrails. Breathless from the run but also the sight, I raced inside. ▪

NAPLES, FLORIDA

Ken Kaplan

How do you get Mom to understand your job as Middle East editor? Let her lurk on Zoom. Before I flew south to visit her, there was the possibility that the United States and Israel would attack Iran. So I brought a laptop.

On Day 1 of the war, our team gathered virtually from Toronto; Washington; Hershey, Pennsylvania; Boston; London; Tel Aviv, Israel; Amman, Jordan; and ... Naples (not Italy). Two colleagues were facing the threat of missile fire as I moderated the symposium of our in-house experts: what was happening, and why, and how we should write about it. Mom (in the kitchen) was impressed.

Now when I tell her, "Ma, I'm busy," I think she gets it. ▪

NEW DELHI

Aakash Hassan

Despite having access to a press gate, I entered India's AI Impact Summit with the general public. I had skipped Day 1 after hearing about the crowds. In India, you learn quickly when *not* to show up. Ahead of me, a group of friends vibrated with excitement, determined to find their favorite South Korean gamer for a selfie.

Many here attend events just for the vibe. The resulting crowds can be frustrating, blocking my way to contacts I need to interview. But they're often part of the reason I'm there. This summit, with

international tech leaders and nearly half a million attendees, was the first of its scale in the Global South. And spending an hour in a crowded line brought a dash of humanity and humor to my story. ▪

EDITORIALS

French deterrence for European partners

French President Emmanuel Macron has put his leadership legacy on the line by explicitly offering to share the country's nuclear defenses with key European allies. Speaking at the home port of France's nuclear missile fleet in Brittany on March 2, Mr. Macron declared plans to increase France's nuclear warhead stockpile (currently about 290) and place some of those in partner countries.

This marks "the most important revision to France's nuclear doctrine in a generation," the Financial Times wrote, calling it "indispensable for Europe's defence."

Since the days of Charles de Gaulle, who doubted the United States would defend Europe from a Soviet nuclear attack, France has pursued its own nuclear weapons program. "Would you trade New York for Paris?" General de Gaulle demanded of President John F. Kennedy in 1961.

Mr. Macron's move is likely to bolster Europe's military position at a critical time. But it also points to opportunities to forge new and more enduring approaches to safeguarding the sovereignty and security of nations and individuals – using means that go beyond the military might of missiles.

International laws and norms governing global relations have been severely jolted by Russia's war in Ukraine and U.S. trade and geopolitical pressures on Europe. The U.S. and Israel launched attacks on Iran on Feb. 28. And the New START arms control agreement between the U.S. and Russia expired in February, even as China is rapidly growing its own nuclear arsenal.

This is the context in which eight European nations will participate in France's "deterrence" plan. They include Europe's only other nuclear power, Britain; Germany; Scandinavian countries; Greece; and Poland, which borders Ukraine.

Some of these countries have previously supported nuclear nonproliferation or even disarmament. But now, as an analyst wrote in Foreign Policy magazine last March, nations wishing "to forge new nuclear arms control agreements will need to be nuclear powers themselves. If Europe wants to promote nuclear arms control, it paradoxically needs to go nuclear first."

In the current geopolitical context, this view carries some weight. But, it is also worth recalling that Europe is fortified with a long tradition of democratic values and institutions. The demand on its governments and citizens is to maintain and adapt these core principles and foundations to help forge a new world order. ▪

Nepal climbs its Everest of honesty

In the thin mountain air of Nepal, the results of the March 5 national elections are breathing new vitality into hopes for clean and effective governance in one of the world's least-developed nations.

The relatively new Rastriya Swatantra Party has swept some 75% of the 165 directly elected seats in the legislature. Its success positioned Balendra Shah, the capital city's youthful mayor (and ex-rap star), to become prime minister.

Nepal is the third South Asian country in recent years – after Sri Lanka and Bangladesh – to demand both democratic and generational change in political systems characterized by entrenched leadership, nepotism, and inefficiency. In all three nations, youth-led street protests resoundingly called for honesty and accountability, and ousted longtime political leaders.

"People want change very badly," a political activist told Monitor contributor Aakash Hassan. "But transforming the system will be much harder than winning an election," he noted.

An engineer by training, Mr. Shah has often indicated that he wants to overhaul, if not overturn, "the system." As a teenage rapper, his songs such as "Sadak Balak" (street child) and "Balidan" (sacrifice) called out corruption, pervasive poverty, and lack of services in this landlocked nation. Nepal ranks in the bottom 25% of the United Nations Human Development Index. And more than 10% of its nearly 30 million people work in other countries.

Last month, Mr. Shah's party issued a "Citizen Contract," tying itself to a "100 Days, 100 Works" list of rapid actions to be taken on assuming office.

The Nepal News portal noted that this document differs from typical election manifestos that lack "robust ways to ensure compliance and continuation." The contract, the outlet said, outlines public updates and progress assessments, putting a "spotlight on openness and verifiable accomplishments."

"I would love to be remembered as an honest guy, rather than a musician, an engineer, or a mayor," Mr. Shah had emphasized in an online interview in 2024.

Even as some critics are concerned about Mr. Shah's go-it-alone style, his direct approach and focus on transparency – along with the relatively peaceful election process – inspire hope among many young Nepalis that deeper change is possible.

"There is huge potential in our country," youth activist Yujan Rajbhandari told the Monitor just before the national vote. "Our only real hope is democracy in the true sense." ▪

Sifting fact from fiction during the Iran war

A very old type of information warfare – spreading false narratives to rattle an enemy's population during a conflict – now has a new and vital adversary: fact-checkers.

On March 3, for example, a video went viral showing Israel's second-largest city, Tel Aviv, in flames from strikes by Iranian missiles, four days after the start of the Israeli and American attacks on Iran. It attracted more than 14 million views.

"The video is AI-generated, and features multiple errors consistent with AI clips," posted BBC Verify senior journalist Shayan

Sardarizadeh. "It's not real."

After spotting many similar fake images, Mr. Sardarizadeh concluded: "This war might have already broken the record for the highest number of AI-generated videos and images that have gone viral during a conflict."

"Welcome to our brave new world of AI misinformation," he wrote.

Civilians in countries at war these days face a much higher burden to discern the accuracy of information designed to mislead or panic them, perhaps to sow distrust of leaders. The modern battlefield is now as much digital as it is physically armed. Traditional journalists, along with other credible experts, can only do so much to counter the effects of an opponent's falsehoods.

"As we fight against Iran" said Democratic Rep. Brad Sherman, a senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, "we should reflect that the most powerful force we have in the United States is not our aircraft carrier groups, but the truth."

Individual intelligence during the digital fog of war

Artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming cyberwarfare, perhaps even making cyberdisruption of public opinion as important as military strikes. Software such as Google's reverse imaging can sometimes help people detect fake images, yet even that can often fail. Individual intelligence remains essential in the digital fog of war to counter psychological operations – and that starts with consumers of war news.

"Try to assess, not just the message, but the incentives behind the message," Professor Alan Jagolinzer, co-chair of the Cambridge Disinformation Summit, told The Independent.

During times of war, "We should stop for a moment and use our healthy judgment: Who published it, and where? If it's only from one place and it's not from a reliable source, I would be suspicious," Roi Soussan, the director of public affairs at FakeReporter, an Israeli organization that exposes disinformation, told Haaretz last year.

The digital age and its effects on 21st-century wars have helped reaffirm an ancient Greek warning: "In war, truth is the first casualty." Yet when confronted with falsehoods during a conflict, no one need be gullible. There's nothing fake about the individual capability to sift fact from fiction. ▪

READERS RESPOND

Communities taking back skiing? How uplifting.

I loved the article "Lift tickets too expensive? Try a community ski hill." from the Feb. 2, 2026, issue of the Monitor Weekly. I grew up in New England in the 1940s and '50s learning to ski with my family at our local town rope tow. Skiing Cannon Mountain, Wildcat Mountain, and Tuckerman Ravine is now mostly a fond memory for me.

One element left out of the terrific article is that for many of us, our parents or friends' parents had been in the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division, which inspired us to race through the woods on the old, narrow Wildcat and Sherburne trails. In addition to people like instructor Hannes Schneider and his colleagues telling everyone to "bend zee kneez," part of the rapid rise in Alpine skiing, especially in the western United States, must be credited to many 10th Mountain Division veterans coming out of World War II. Sadly, many of those ski areas are ones that have left the general public behind with their astronomical prices.

It is wonderful to see communities taking back local skiing in spite of all the challenges. The article was filled with hope and the love of being outside in the winter.

E.R. Elliston
Milford, Ohio

THE HOME FORUM

Call your mother? LOL.

A professor's unconventional solution to texting in class turns discipline into something tender.

I grew up before there were cellphones. I look on in wonder, and bewilderment, as seemingly everyone around me is focused on their devices. Even young children seem absorbed in the things, perhaps following the lead of their parents.

I'm sensible enough to know that I can't change what the world has become, that I can't compel a person scrolling next to me on the train to share a few words of friendly conversation. But as a college teacher, I can exert hegemony over my classroom.

First of all, when it comes to cellphones, I've learned that one cannot be punitive about students using them in class. I once had a colleague who tried this, threatening punishment for infractors. The result: The class mutinied. The rest of her semester was, in a word, unhappy.

But neither do I think it productive to take a laissez-faire attitude toward students who are texting friends while the poor teacher labors, ignored and neglected, at the blackboard. I knew a professor who tried this approach in his math class. One day, I ran into some of his students on campus. I asked them who their math teacher was. Their response: "Some guy." It was clear that the professor and his students were operating in two separate worlds, each ignoring the other.

Both of these vignettes suggested to me that there must be a middle way. And so I came up with one. It goes like this: On the first day of class, I strike a friendly but purposeful tone with my students, telling them, "If I catch you looking at your phone during the class discussion, you must immediately call your parents and tell them that you love them."

I deliver this intelligence with a twinkle in my eye, and my students chuckle good-naturedly. Then I follow up with my end of the bargain: "This means that when you come to me with a question or concern, I promise not to text or look at my phone. I will focus all my attention on you."

When delivered in a concerned and caring way, but with seriousness of purpose, my students are on board.

Well, mostly. There's always an outlier. In my case, his name was Paul. He liked to test the waters of classroom decorum, such as coming to class in his pajama bottoms and slippers. One day, during an animated discussion of "The Odyssey," I caught Paul looking down at his phone and pecking away. "Excuse me," I interrupted. "Odysseus is about to do battle with the Cyclops. Are you texting?"

Paul was immediately flustered, but I didn't have to go head to head with him, because the rest of the class, serving as my

proxy, cried out, "Call your mother!"

To my surprise, Paul complied, putting his phone on speaker. When his mom answered, she asked, "Aren't you supposed to be in class?" To which Paul dutifully replied, "Yes, but I'm just calling to say, 'I love you.'"

I couldn't have been prepared for what happened next. The class continued to be invested in Paul's success by shouting, "And we love you, too, Mrs. D.!"

I think it is too easy to forget how good-hearted these students are. They mostly want to do well. They want to succeed. Banning cellphone use in my class while acknowledging that the devices are an extension of their bodies is a delicate dance. The trick is to communicate to my students that I care about them, and when students know that you care about them, they will go to the ends of the Earth for you.

I'm sure Mrs. D. appreciates my approach.

– Robert Klose

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Claiming our perfectibility

When my grandmother gifted someone a dish with the inscription, "It's hard to be humble when you are perfect," I was sure she meant it to prompt change. But the recipient kept the dish displayed, apparently thinking it described him accurately. Later, he became a humble man.

If you feel that claiming perfection sounds presumptuous, even preposterous, you aren't alone. Prevalent assumptions claim that the influences of environment, heredity, and chance govern us, with limitations – not perfection – as the outcome.

Clearly, material so-called causes have not brought the freedom that the most perfect example of manhood, Christ Jesus, taught and demonstrated. His teachings include this instruction: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Jesus identified every individual as the child of God – the infinitely perfect Mind.

"Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures" by Mary Baker Eddy, a follower of Jesus and the discoverer of Christian Science, reasons that everyone must, in reality, be as perfect as God is. It explains this about man (meaning all of us, men and women, in our true nature as God's spiritual offspring): "In divine Science, man is the true image of God. The divine nature was best expressed in Christ Jesus, who threw upon mortals the truer reflection of God and lifted their lives higher than their poor thought-models would allow, – thoughts which presented man as fallen, sick, sinning, and dying. The Christlike understanding of scientific being and divine healing includes a perfect Principle and idea, – perfect God and perfect man, – as the basis of thought and demonstration" (p. 259).

Rather than accepting as real the apparent condition of man as "fallen, sick, sinning, and dying," Science and Health points to "man's perfectibility" (p. 110). Claiming our perfectibility is about understanding and demonstrating our true identity as the perfect, intact, spiritual likeness that God created.

Jesus demonstrated this perfectibility. Bystanders witnessed restoration of sight to the blind; reformation of people living immorally; and life restored to the dead. Through openness to the Christ message, we all can rise, humbly, to a truer understanding of our spiritual selfhood. This is not human perfectionism, which paralyzes and demoralizes. Rather, the practice of Christian Science challenges perfectionism and imperfection, and establishes a greater sense of self-worth and freedom.

To drop material beliefs requires patience. But consistently holding to the fact that the divine Mind made man in God's image, as the Bible asserts, brings to awareness that we exist because Mind is "thinking us." The outcome, as healings shared in this column attest to, is improved health and character.

In living the Christliness that Jesus taught, everyone can progressively demonstrate spiritual perfectibility. The greater conviction that comes as we heal limitations in our lives supports the discovery, step by step, of man's enduring perfection.

– Suzanne Riedel

BOOKS

Five mysteries for the spring season

This batch of novels involves a locked taxicab, a crime-fighting lepidopterist, an accused Welsh terrier, and a nosy aunty. The plots keep readers guessing.

By Yvonne Zipp / Contributor

Ah, the perfect murder. It's the quest that keeps mystery writers plotting and readers turning pages. Our spring roundup offers five novels designed to keep you guessing, including many homages to the Queen of Crime herself, Agatha Christie.

The Midnight Taxi *by Yosha Gunasekera*

A New York City cabbie picks up a fare heading to the airport. When Siriwathi Perera arrives at LaGuardia, the man is dead in her back seat. Police are convinced the young woman is the only one with opportunity, and they aren't too bothered about looking for a motive. "We were in a locked, moving vehicle," Siri says, confronting the nightmare she finds herself plunged into. "The man was alive when I picked him up and dead on arrival? Who else could have done it?"

Enter Amaya Fernando, a fellow Sri Lankan immigrant and public defender whom Siri had given a ride to earlier that day. With her court date approaching, Siri and Amaya have five days to figure out who really killed the guy in the back seat. Author Yosha Gunasekera, herself an attorney, has written a terrific debut, with a heroine to root for, a clever plot, a clear-eyed look at the legal system, and odes to both New York and the unsung workers who keep the city running. One caveat: Sharp-eyed readers might not solve whodunit, but the "whenithappened" isn't too hard to puzzle out.

A Ghastly Catastrophe *by Deanna Raybourn*

If the idea of a lepidopterist challenging Bram Stoker to dueling hatpins makes you smile, I have good news: Veronica Speedwell is back. "We had fallen into the habit of murder – the sleuthing and not the committing," Veronica confides about herself and her

partner, Revelstoke Templeton-Vane, better known as Stoker. The 19th-century natural historians find themselves enlisted to solve a "suicide" and an exsanguination that Scotland Yard was ordered to cover up by the dead men's own powerful families. Deanna Raybourn uses this 10th outing to bring in her first pair of 19th-century sleuths, Lady Julia Brisbane and her husband, Nicholas. And if longtime readers see certain similarities between the pairs, so do Veronica and Lady Julia when they compare notes.

"A Ghastly Catastrophe" is a romp from start to finish, including plenty of moments of an exasperated Stoker emphatically declaring that vampires (obviously!) do not exist. "Mock as you wish, but it is strange, and that which is strange must be explained," Veronica returns. "A Ghastly Catastrophe" is not the best place for newcomers to jump in, but the book is tailor-made for Raybourn's fans. And Veronica's wit is still as sharp as her hatpins: "It was always so irritating when handsome young men were discovered to be liars."

No One Would Do What the Lamberts Have Done *by Sophie Hannah*

A beloved family pet is accused of a crime, and his family takes him on the run in Sophie Hannah's latest. The Lamberts' beloved Welsh terrier, Champ, has been accused of biting a teenage girl. Sally Lambert, her two kids, and her reluctant husband, Mark, head out in the dead of night to prevent a miscarriage of justice.

"No One Would Do What the Lamberts Have Done" is a book within a book, with plenty of metafictional twists and turns. And it's got a higher-than-expected body count for what starts as an English cozy mystery set in Swaffham Tilney, the kind of newly moneyed village in which people name houses things like The Hayloft.

Author Sophie Hannah has been entrusted with continuing the Poirot mysteries, and she knows her Agatha Christie cold. In this book, the local Christie book club disbanded after a fight about whether to include a Mary Westmacott title (Christie's pen name). Faction No. 1 says that since Dame Christie herself wrote them, of course the Westmacott books count. Faction No. 2 says that Christie herself didn't think they were Christies, therefore they are out. There are unreliable narrators and characters regularly concealing things (including a couple of bodies) from one another and the reader.

There is a simple test to see if this book is for you: If you think Furbert Herbert Lambert, the family's previous dog, is an adorable name for a pup, dive right in. If it strikes you as overly precious, you are going to be too annoyed by the main character to enjoy the twists. Nota bene: To find out what (probably) happened, read to the very last page.

Murder at 30,000 Feet *by Susan Walter*

A high school baseball team, a wedding party, a rock star, and a U.S. marshal board a flight bound for Puerto Rico. After turbulence severe enough to turn the flight attendants' faces gray, one passenger is found dead in the bathroom. The marshal has to keep everyone calm and try to figure out who did it before the plane lands.

Susan Walter isn't the first to set a murder in "a flying tin can." Christie did it first – and better – in "Death in the Clouds." The idea that no one on a crowded plane heard someone being murdered in a tiny bathroom, even with severe turbulence, stretches credulity. But "Murder at 30,000 Feet" moves at a fast clip, and Walter makes the most of the claustrophobic atmosphere. She also comes up with entirely plausible motives for several passengers, involving both recent crimes and a years-old miscarriage of justice back at sea level. Even better, Walter doesn't take herself too seriously, including a moment late in the book where I laughed out loud.

Detective Aunty *by Uzma Jalaluddin*

If, like me, you missed this delight when it was published last year, run to your nearest library or bookstore. Uzma Jalaluddin ("Ayesha at Last") follows fellow authors Sherry Thomas and Jennifer Ashley in skillfully making the move from romance to mystery.

Kausar Khan has always been a noticing sort of person, but her husband and children prefer that she keep her observations to herself. So, aside from clearing up a few school-based mysteries, she has limited her sleuthing to the stacks of Agatha Christie paperbacks by her armchair. Then, a year after losing her husband, she gets the "second-worst phone call of her life." Her daughter calls from the police station: A man has been stabbed, and she is the prime suspect. Kausar, who hasn't been able to return to Toronto since a family tragedy, catches the next flight back to the Golden Crescent neighborhood to either clear her daughter's name or "help her get away with murder," as her best friend, May, says.

Kausar and May have excellent taste: They bonded over their love for Louise Penny mysteries. And May, a retired teacher, believes Kausar deserves to keep living. "There's more to life than sitting alone in your house surrounded by ghosts and memories."

"Jack Reacher in a dupatta" is perhaps a stretch. But fans of Jesse Q. Sutanto's "Vera Wong's Unsolicited Advice for Murderers" will love watching Kausar forge a new second act for herself as she tries to save her family. And in even better news: The second book in the Detective Aunty series, "Moonlight Murder," comes out May 5. ▪

The trio of women who redefined journalism

Hahn, West, and Gellhorn wanted readers to "grasp the significance of events," not just the bare facts.

By Mackenzie Farkus / Contributor

Just after Christmas in 1930, young Midwesterner Emily "Mickey" Hahn was holed up on a ship to what was then called the Belgian Congo. Her belongings consisted of a suitcase and a contraband gun given to her by a Corsican soldier; she had no travel documents to enter the country. This may seem like the trappings of a spy story. But for Hahn and her contemporaries, Rebecca West and Martha Gellhorn, this was just another day in the life of a reporter.

The lives of these three intrepid journalists and solo travelers come to life in the pages of Julia Cooke's "Starry and Restless: Three Women Who Changed Work, Writing, and the World." It offers readers a whirlwind tour behind the headlines and a fresh angle on the origins of literary journalism.

While these women rarely overlapped during reporting assignments, their love of writing, travel, mentorship, and friendly competition united them for seven decades of "bylines and books." West, born Cicely Fairfield, was active in the British suffrage movement and traveled to Yugoslavia in the late 1930s "to see what history meant in flesh and blood"; Hahn, a free spirit known for her pet gibbons and attendance at high society parties, charted a path through

Europe, Congo, and China, eventually becoming The New Yorker's China Coast correspondent; and the Elsa Schiaparelli-clothed Gellhorn wound her way through the front lines of the Spanish Civil War to the beaches of Normandy on D-Day, filing articles while dodging bombs and an increasingly strained relationship with the writer Ernest Hemingway.

The image of the plucky woman journalist entered mainstream culture through plays, movies, and popular adventure novels in the early 20th century. In the United States, tens of thousands of women worked in print from 1930 to 1940, and their numbers doubled in the years following World War II. They were mostly relegated to the "women's pages," writing on beauty, cooking, and home affairs; those who covered hard news – such as the plight of factory workers or criminal trials – were labeled "stunt girls" or "sob sisters."

For West, Hahn, and Gellhorn, breaking away from the women's section often meant self-funding their reporting trips abroad, securing pay and press credentials when they were already on the front lines. Lessons in steely grit and clever thinking abound in "Starry and Restless," whether it was fending off the advances of Serbian guides (West), learning the Shanghai dialect and Mandarin to understand political intrigue and high society gossip (Hahn), or stowing away on a ship to France in pursuit of a story (Gellhorn).

"Each of these women was attuned – even culturally trained – to notice different details than men," Cooke writes. "They peered into corners and pulled up rugs and found different stories."

By the end of World War II, West was filing dispatches from the Nuremberg trials and traveling to South Carolina, where she covered a lynching trial. Hahn fled Hong Kong with her infant daughter to New York, flush with money after the success of her memoirs. There she awaited news of the imprisoned father of her child: Was he alive or dead? Gellhorn, disillusioned with journalism after the decimation of wartime Europe, pursued fiction writing.

While Cooke offers an overview of the lives and careers of these journalists, Hahn's rollicking life story seems to upstage that of West and Gellhorn. The sections on the latter two feel somewhat flatter in comparison, though their lives are still interesting to read about and are worthy of attention.

Cooke makes a compelling case that these women shared a commitment to going beyond merely dry, factual reporting.

"The average reader needed help to grasp the movement and significance of events, to help paint facts into bigger pictures," she writes. The contributions of West, Hahn, and Gellhorn to the emerging genres of creative nonfiction and literary journalism have been overshadowed by male writers such as Jacob Riis and James Agee. Gellhorn is largely remembered for her status as Hemingway's third wife. And seldom are mentions of West, Hahn, and Gellhorn found in the pages of journalism or writing textbooks.

"Where these women are mentioned, it is in ancillary contexts, as if they made a history of their own rather than competing with men for the same column space," Cooke writes.

With "Starry and Restless," perhaps they can be recognized anew. ▪

What does it take for male friendship to thrive?

Andrew McCarthy sets out to reconnect with pals, and finds inspiration from talking with strangers.

By Malcolm Forbes / Contributor

Good travel books do more than just map the lay of the land. The actor turned travel writer Andrew McCarthy is fully aware of this. His books tell of trips that were both geographical travels and personal journeys. In "The Longest Way Home" (2012), he described the various globe-trotting adventures he undertook to help him reflect on, and come to terms with, the twin hurdles of growing up and settling down. In "Walking With Sam" (2023), he chronicled the trek he and his son made along Spain's Camino de Santiago to forge a stronger relationship.

McCarthy's latest book is once again a blend of travel and memoir, discovery and self-discovery. "Who Needs Friends: An Unscientific Examination of Male Friendship Across America" was inspired by a casual question his son asked him at home in New York: "You don't really have any friends, do you, Dad?" Though not meant to wound, the words gave McCarthy pause. He *did* have friends, he told his son, and himself; they were just scattered far and wide. Later, he realized he seldom spoke with those friends and couldn't remember when he had last seen them. Were his friendships still intact?

McCarthy embarks on a cross-country road trip to reconnect. He visits friends in Maryland, Kentucky, Texas, and California, finding the reunions sometimes startling and unsettling, other times joyous and heartfelt.

McCarthy's book isn't only about his efforts to salvage relationships and strengthen ties. He draws comfort from his reunions but gains insights from the discussions with strangers about *their* friendships. In a restaurant in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, Joseph explains that it is taboo to show vulnerability with male friends. In contrast, in a Hardee's restaurant in Brookville, Ohio, Lew and Bobby, friends for 60 years, unashamedly declare that they shed tears together and share their innermost feelings.

Elsewhere, McCarthy meets a group of men who get off the "struggle bus" once a week to enjoy a "Brotherhood Breakfast." He runs across two best friends whose fathers and grandfathers were also best friends, along with a man who claims friendship is about "recognizing in someone else something of ourselves." Another person says of his friends, "When I talk to them, I get me."

One man is more at ease with female friends, another bewails the fact his friends have all left town ("It's Lonelyville now"), while yet another admits that his friends are his enemies. "They don't want me to do better'n them," he tells McCarthy.

"Who Needs Friends" (or, for that matter, question marks) is fascinating and absorbing. It takes many forms: study, travelogue, guidebook, and warts-and-all self-portrait. McCarthy's fieldwork is laudable. He clocked 10,000 miles, traveled through 22 states, and listened to the viewpoints of a range of individuals, from Mississippi blues musicians to Wyoming cowboys, jaded war veterans to rudderless teenagers, journalists to preachers. He encountered men whose friendships have been foundational, situational, and generational.

McCarthy's findings prove illuminating. Most of the men he talks

with have never spoken about their male friendships before and are glad to finally get the opportunity. The younger men have no hang-ups about admitting to being lonely; older generations of men, however, regard such a confession as a sign of weakness. McCarthy is heartened by men who get together regularly, whether in pairs or in groups, to communicate, laugh, and nourish their friendships.

The book is particularly compelling when McCarthy charts his own progress, recording the ups and downs of his grand tour and chronicling his mission "to reclaim what I hope I haven't lost." His travels take him – and us – to some rewarding places. ▪

IN PICTURES

Where dancing is a respite from hardship

Story by Théodore de Kerros / Contributor

GOMA, CONGO

At the end of a dirt alley in Katindo, a working-class neighborhood of Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Jonathan Bitonde waits in front of a metal gate. Soon, a dozen children ages 11 to 17 stroll through it, arm in arm. They smile with the easy camaraderie of those who know one another well.

The group listens intently as Mr. Bitonde, a teacher with Congo Street Breaking Art, starts his address. "Today, we're going to talk about anger and sadness," he says. "And we're going to see how dance can help us express these feelings."

The children, growing up in a city riven by economic insecurity and a violent conflict fueled by the resurgence of the M23 armed rebel group, are there to learn the art of breaking, also known as breakdancing. The dance workshop has been operating since 2008.

For a 15-year-old who calls himself B-Boy Issa, dance has been a lifeline. The teen's father was taken by M23, and he had to stop studying because his mother could no longer afford school fees. He trains in the workshop space every weekday. On weekends, when the space is closed, he helps his mother make food that she sells on the street in hopes of eventually affording school tuition for him.

"Dance is my only hope in life; I hold on to it with all my strength," he says. "I learn dance, effort, painting, sharing, and brotherhood there." ▪

SUDOKU

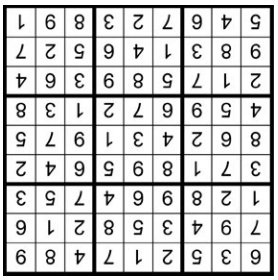
Sudoku difficulty: ★★☆☆

		5	2	1			8	
								6
				6	4	7		3
					5			
	6			3				
4					2	1		
	1		5	8				
	8	3					2	7
					3			

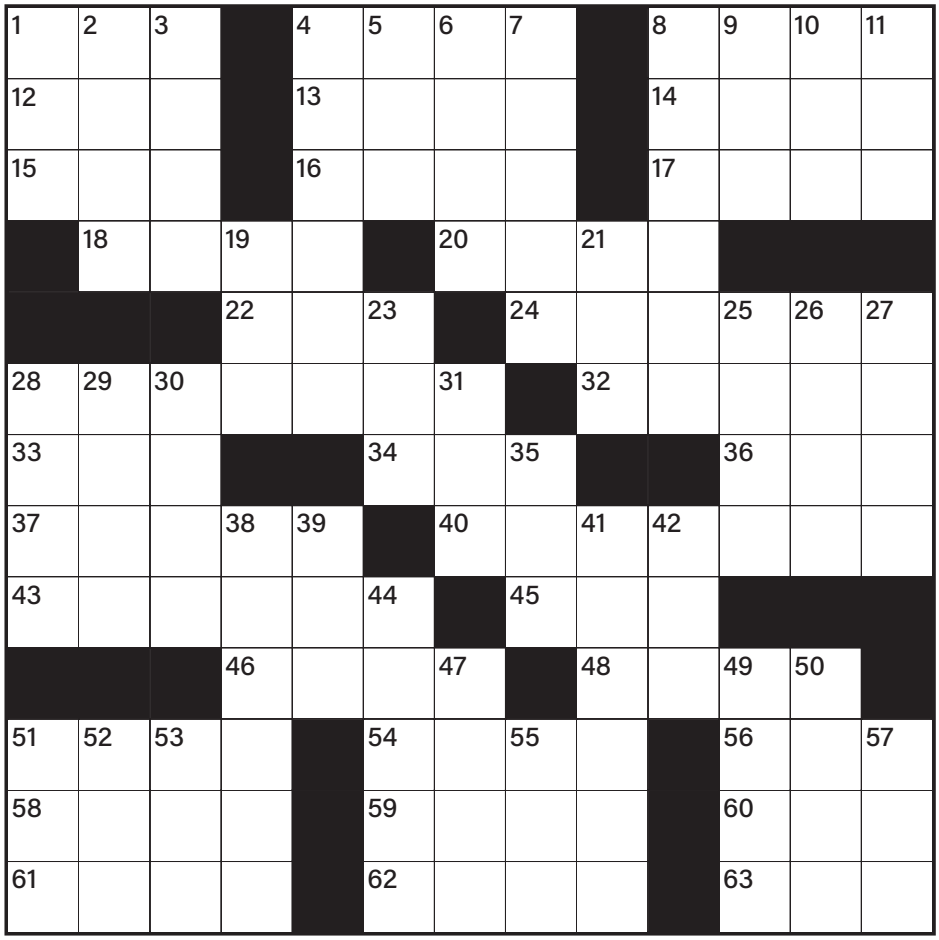
How to do Sudoku

Fill in the grid so the numbers 1 through 9 appear just once ineach column, row, and three-by-three block.

Crossword and Sudoku solutions



Crossword



ACROSS

1. Use a cotton ball
4. Schnitzel base
8. Window or door piece
12. Collegiate climber
13. Opera's Gluck
14. Forte
15. Stovetop vessel
16. Read over hurriedly
17. "___ to My Lou"
18. Traps
20. Race of 100 yards
22. Snappish bark
24. Singer MacRae
28. Cherubic
32. German metropolis
33. Gym apparatus
34. Cuff
36. Blow (off), as steam
37. Oust
40. Hen-pecking specialists
43. Plains homes, once
45. Easter roast
46. Salad-bowl wood
48. Total guess
51. Competitive advantage
54. On Easy Street
56. Dance
58. Rude, crude dude
59. Cosmetic additive
60. Water from la mer
61. Test version
62. Pegs used in quoits
63. Flavor intensifier, familiarly

DOWN

1. Pool experience
2. Declare assuredly
3. Unit of RAM
4. Feudal bondman
5. Grand Teton grazer
6. Betwixt and between
7. Tibetan teachers
8. Pageant wear
9. Rub the wrong way
10. "Blue Hawaii" prop
11. Full circuit
19. Short farewell
21. Filly, but not a billy
23. Word with rolling or bowling
25. Castaway's haven
26. Look that may offend
27. Picnic crawlers
28. Instigate
29. Part of a cathedral
30. Golf club part
31. Campbell's container
35. Scrooge's outburst
38. Part of etc.
39. 3-way junction
41. Slashes
42. London clock setting (abbr.)
44. Soprano Brightman
47. Metric mass unit
49. Contrived cough
50. Jungle squeezers
51. Reflux of the tide
52. ___-eyed
53. Earned
55. Kernel holder
57. Short-bodied dog