

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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C O N T E N T S

FROM THE EDITORS

Global affairs – from the Chinese perspective1

NEWS: DISPATCHES

Why so many lawmakers are leaving Congress1

World cities made strides against air pollution2

Epstein scandal prompts universities to rethink donor ties . .2

Asian countries react as war closes critical oil shipping
routes2

Desalination plants targeted in Iran war3

Birthright citizenship lands at US Supreme Court3

OUR WORLD4

NEWS: GLOBAL CURRENTS

After a century, Boston Harbor fit for shellfishing again4

New Englanders won't clam up about their chowder6

What's behind the global push to ban social media6

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS8

REPORTERS ON THE JOB.8

ON THE COVER

In Trump era, China sees an opportunity to advance its long
game9

THE EXPLAINER

War shakes the Middle East – and the US budget11

PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Mainers in need of basic household goods find
a community overflowing with generosity12

EDITORIALS

Students and AI: Mastery, not misuse13

An oil crisis as an opening for ingenuity.13

Britain scores a win for equality14

READERS RESPOND14

THE HOME FORUM

The animals who find us14

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE15

CULTURE

Kindling curiosity, the out-of-this-world still draws us in . .16

BOOKS

An everyman and a scholar, wrapped in an epic tale17

BEST BOOKS OF MARCH18

PUZZLES.20

Global affairs - from the Chinese perspective

During my decades reporting in China, I've watched the country's relationship with the United States unfold from a local perspective.

In the golden era of the 1980s, China was newly opening to the world and curious about all things American. Many Chinese citizens admired the United States and wished to travel there. "America's moon is rounder than China's," went one popular saying. China's leaders sought to benefit from American know-how and investment.

The mood here today is different. Chinese people once inspired by the United States are now questioning it, given the Trump administration's disruptive actions at home and abroad. And Chinese nationalists, for their part, sound more confident than ever in predicting U.S. decline. On Chinese social media, a common nickname for the American president is "Build-the-country Trump" – because, many here believe, Donald Trump is making China stronger.

I recently ran into an old friend at a conference in Beijing whom I hadn't seen for a couple of years. "Things are getting harder for the U.S., aren't they?" he asked. A staunch Chinese patriot, he knows I love my country, too, and on that basis, we have candid conversations on world affairs and the fierce U.S.-China competition. But he posed this question with an almost sympathetic tone.



By Ann Scott Tyson
Staff writer

In another encounter, a taxi driver battling traffic in an eastern commercial center volunteered his perspective on current U.S. politics. "Oligarchs have taken over," he said. China now will surely surpass America, he predicted. "But after that happens," he said consolingly, "everything will go better."

To be sure, China faces its own challenges, including a slowing economy, a rapidly aging population, and mushrooming local government debt. Many countries are wary of Beijing's demonstrated coercive use of its economic power, as well as its illiberal values. And the United States has enduring strengths, not the least its wealth, democratic institutions, and military superiority.

Nevertheless, China's leaders convey a growing sense of inevitability about China's rise, in part because they have pursued a decadeslong, grand strategy to achieve this.

Beijing believes Mr. Trump's second term marks a major opportunity to advance this global agenda. My story this week explores how. ■

Why so many lawmakers are leaving Congress

Montana Republican Sen. Steve Daines stunned lawmakers when, minutes before the March 4 filing deadline, he announced he would not seek reelection. Days later, California Republican Rep. Darrell Issa, who has served in Congress for more than two decades, said he also would not run again, in a district that was recently redrawn.

Their announcements add to a list nearing record length. About 1 in 8 lawmakers – 55 in the House and 10 in the Senate – say they don't plan to run for reelection, shaking up congressional seats ahead of November's midterms in which majorities in both the House and Senate could be in play.

Twelve members, including 10 Republicans, are running for governor in their home states. Most of the others are retiring from public service.

While it's common for members to retire ahead of congressional elections, this year's number is particularly high. Experts say the exodus is a sign of a deeper trend, as members of Congress face challenges ranging from partisan deadlock to increasing safety threats.

Forty of the 65 House members not seeking reelection are Republicans. That matches a trend in which members of the political party in power are more likely to leave ahead of a midterm election, when the president's party usually loses seats in Congress.

Redistricting could also be a factor. When Representative Issa won reelection in 2024, his district leaned heavily Republican. By the time he announced he wasn't running, Democrats were proclaiming confidence they could win there after California redrew many of its congressional districts.

Redistricting – or gerrymandering, as it's called when districts are redrawn to benefit a certain party or candidate – typically happens only once every 10 years, after a census. That changed last summer after President Donald Trump urged lawmakers in Texas to redraw the state's congressional districts to gain as many as five new Republican seats.

In response, California Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom pushed a ballot measure to create new state maps that could give his party five extra seats. Since then, four states have redrawn their maps, and four others are considering legislation to do so.

That's left some members, like Representative Issa, in districts they no longer recognize – and no longer think they can win.

Additionally, the slew of departures could mean that many congressional seats are more competitive in November than they would have been with an incumbent running.

Incumbents usually have the advantage of better name recognition and fundraising networks. When they choose not to run for reelection, that can leave two unfamiliar candidates vying for voters' support – raising the odds of a surprise outcome.

Democrats hope to take back control of the House of Representatives in November.

The Senate, where Republicans have a 53-47 majority, would be harder for Democrats to flip. But some think they have a pathway to do so.

– Caitlin Babcock / Staff writer

World cities made strides against air pollution

Nineteen cities in nine countries, including Beijing, London, Paris, San Francisco, and Poland's capital Warsaw, have shown reduced levels of fine particulates and nitrogen dioxide in comparison with 2010, according to Breathe Cities, a clean-air initiative launched in 2023 by Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Clean Air Fund, and C40 Cities.

All 19 urban hubs saw reductions of more than 20% since 2010, The Guardian and others reported, with some reductions exceeding 40%. Reductions in coal-powered heating and a rise in electric transport were among the factors cited. Researchers have also credited lower pollutant levels to the implementation of electric vehicles, bike lanes, and stricter restrictions on vehicle emissions.

"Cities can move faster when they collaborate and share proven solutions," said Priya Shankar, of the environment program at Bloomberg Philanthropies. "The 19 leading cities identified in this report show what's possible. Through Breathe Cities, we're connecting cities with the data, technical support, and peer networks to implement what works. The examples of action in this report demonstrate the pathways cities can take to cleaner air and healthier communities."

– Staff

Epstein scandal prompts universities to rethink donor ties

The Justice Department's release of 3.5 million documents related to Jeffrey Epstein has unveiled more details about the deceased financier's relationships with university researchers, professors, and presidents. In some cases, the files show that high-profile figures in academia maintained ties to Mr. Epstein long after he became a registered sex offender through a plea deal in 2008.

Since these revelations, Nobel laureate Richard Axel has stepped down from leading a research institute at Columbia University. Harvard University announced that former President Lawrence Summers, on leave from his teaching role since November, would not return to the classroom. Faculty at Bard College have called for a transition plan for the school president over his Epstein ties.

A common theme among faculty and administrators caught up in the web of the Epstein scandal is funding, prompting schools like Harvard to rethink how they engage with private donors.

There is typically a protocol for schools to seek and accept large gifts. Most colleges or universities with offices of research or advancement have clear guidelines around donor relations. But several faculty members entangled with Mr. Epstein were securing funding by themselves.

"Universities love it when somebody's entrepreneurial and finds funding," says Chris Lubienski, director of the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy at Indiana University. "You get somebody like an Epstein, who's known to be wealthy and handing out cash, and I'm not surprised that you get some academics that are chasing after his money."

Mr. Epstein made donations – sometimes through his chari-

ties – to several universities, including Harvard, the University of Arizona, and the University of British Columbia.

According to the Harvard Crimson, Harvard expanded its internal probe into professors and donors mentioned in the Epstein files.

The widened probe reportedly includes major university donors such as real estate magnates Andrew Farkas and Gerald Chan. Mr. Chan, along with his family, gave Harvard its second-largest donation on record, \$350 million for the T.H. Chan School of Public Health. He and Mr. Epstein had explored creating a Boston-based branch of Tsinghua University. Mr. Farkas chairs Harvard's Hasty Pudding Institute, which received at least \$375,000 from Mr. Epstein. The two men exchanged thousands of emails and vacationed together. Mr. Farkas told The New York Times that "at no time have I conducted myself inappropriately."

MIT says it has donated \$850,000 it received from Mr. Epstein to local nonprofits and has strengthened guidelines for faculty members fundraising outside of traditional means.

– Ira Porter / Staff writer

Asian countries react as war closes critical oil shipping routes

Thousands of miles from the bombardment of Iran, Asia's emerging economies are absorbing blows of another kind, as fuel shortages threaten to throttle a region that is a main driver of global growth.

Asian countries are heavily dependent on oil flowing from the Middle East through the Strait of Hormuz, a key choke point through which about 20 million barrels of oil flowed a day before it was effectively shut down by the Iran conflict.

More than 80% of the crude oil and liquefied natural gas passing through the strait was bound for Asia in 2024. Nearly 70% of that went to India, Japan, China, and South Korea, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

With supplies abruptly cut off to much of the region (Iran is reportedly allowing some Chinese ships to pass) residents and businesses across the region are feeling the pinch – from restaurateurs in India to Filipino jeepney drivers. Net oil-importing nations such as India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, and the Philippines are being hit particularly hard, analysts say.

"The Asian economies' GDP will definitely suffer," says June Goh, a senior oil market analyst at Sparta Commodities in Singapore.

Asian petrochemical and refining businesses are invoking what is known as a force majeure clause to break contractual obligations in the face of oil shortages. If the flow of crude oil doesn't resume, the entire supply chain could collapse, says Ms. Goh.

Asian governments are adopting a variety of measures to mitigate the oil shock. South Korea has introduced an oil price cap for domestic fuels for the first time in 30 years. Fuel rationing is underway in Bangladesh and Myanmar.

To reduce energy use, Vietnam and Thailand have imposed work-from-home policies, and Bangkok urged bureaucrats to skip the elevator and take stairs. Pakistan has closed schools and required universities to go online. And the Philippines is going to a four-day workweek for government employees.

– Ann Scott Tyson / Staff writer

Aakash Hassan and Mark Saludes / Special contributors

Desalination plants targeted in Iran war

The closure of vital shipping lanes for oil and natural gas in the Persian Gulf is rattling the global economy. But there's an even more vital resource coming under threat from the Iran war: water, drop by drop.

Nearly two weeks into this war, the damage to precious sources of clean water was not extensive. Still, all sides in this conflict are showing a willingness to strike at these sources.

The weaponization of water is not entirely new. In recent years, the Houthis in Yemen have targeted Saudi desalination facilities, while Israel has shut off water supplies to Gaza and damaged most of the water infrastructure in Gaza. During the first Gulf War, Iraq destroyed Kuwait's desalination infrastructure.

But since the U.S. and Israel started bombing Iran at the end of February, missiles and drones have hit water supplies in the Arab Gulf states and inside Iran, putting entire populations at greater risk of going dry.

"We have seen minor damage to desalination plants, some appeared to be targeted and there is a lot of indirect damage that could be done," says Natasha Hall, an associate fellow at Chatham House. She adds that Gulf states "very well know how vulnerable they are."

In mid-March, Iranian drones struck a water desalination plant in Bahrain, while Iran said the U.S. attacked a desalination plant on the Iranian island of Qeshm. And in Kuwait, debris from the interception of an Iranian missile damaged another desalination facility. These incidents have highlighted the parched Gulf's dependence on desalination, a process that involves pressuring, filtering, or heating up seawater to make it fit for consumption.

There are 400 desalination plants along the coasts of Gulf countries, providing a total of 100 million cubic meters of water per day. Many of those facilities are only tens of miles from Iranian territory. Desalination accounts for 99% of the drinking water supply in Qatar, according to Al Jazeera.

Statistics published by the Saudi Arabia-based Gulf Research Center estimate that 95% of drinking water in Bahrain, 90% in Kuwait, 86% in Oman, 79% in Saudi Arabia, and some 40% in the United Arab Emirates comes from desalinated seawater.

"Without desalination, we wouldn't have modern-day Doha, Dubai, or large cities developed in Saudi Arabia," says Raha Hakim-davar, hydrologist and senior adviser at Georgetown University in Qatar. She adds that desalination has effectively powered the Gulf's "boom in the last 20 years and is foundational to the concerted efforts to diversify their economies."

"Unfortunately, desalination is fragile," says Dr. Mohammed Daoud, a senior water resource adviser for the Abu Dhabi government in the UAE who is helping lead the Emirate's emergency response. "But the [collection of Gulf states] is an arid region, we don't have surface water bodies, we do not have lakes or rivers, and renewable water sources are very scarce. There aren't many alternatives."

Another major challenge is the interdependence of water and power generation. Desalination is an energy-intensive process, while access to fresh water resources is critical to oil and gas production.

Iranian attacks that forced Bahrain and Qatar to suspend oil and gas production now risk depriving the Gulf's mega-desalination plants from the fuel required to keep them running. The same goes for transporting food imports, which Gulf countries rely on, and the

ability to irrigate agricultural areas. The fragile food-water-energy balance for the Gulf region is "almost like being on the International Space Station," says Dr. Hakimdavar.

– Taylor Luck / Special correspondent

Birthright citizenship lands at US Supreme Court

In one of the most anticipated cases of the year, the U.S. Supreme Court on April 1 will hear arguments about President Donald Trump's efforts to reinterpret the Constitution's guarantee of automatic citizenship at birth.

Mr. Trump once said that the United States is the only nation that grants citizenship to anyone born in the country, a policy known as birthright citizenship. In fact, about three dozen countries provide for unrestricted citizenship at birth. It is true that many countries around the world have chosen in recent decades to tighten, or get rid of, their birthright citizenship policies.

The case, *Trump v. Barbara*, concerns whether an executive order issued by Mr. Trump – that makes the children of unauthorized immigrants born in the U.S. ineligible for citizenship – complies with the 14th Amendment. ("Barbara" is a pseudonym for one plaintiff, a pregnant Honduran woman, who is part of the class action challenge.) The amendment, enacted after the Civil War, holds that "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States."

The clause has long been interpreted to mean that any child born in the U.S. is automatically a citizen. The Supreme Court affirmed that reasoning in an 1898 decision. Since the 1980s, some have argued that the words "subject to the jurisdiction thereof" provide grounds for narrowing that interpretation. The Trump administration argues that immigrants living in the U.S. illegally are not "subject to the jurisdiction" of the U.S., and that therefore their children are not entitled to citizenship at birth.

In the *Barbara* case, the Supreme Court will be weighing those differing interpretations. Outside the United States, countries have been having the same debates for decades. In fact, many countries in the Eastern Hemisphere have changed laws from citizenship by place of birth to citizenship by parental nationality.

Birthright citizenship laws worldwide

The United Kingdom passed a law in 1981 that replaced birthright citizenship. France did similarly with a law passed in 1993. Ireland made the change in 2004, with 80% of the population voting to end birthright citizenship in a national referendum.

Germany is one of several nations around the world with a combination of the two policies. After declaring itself "not an immigration country" in the 1980s, Germany adopted a limited form of birthright citizenship in 2000.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, almost every country in the Americas has unrestricted birthright citizenship. In many cases those nations have enshrined birthright citizenship in their constitutions. A key reason for birthright citizenship laws "in the 'new world' is precisely that it was thought of by Europeans as the 'new world' – which is to say, largely empty ... and in need of people," says Kim Lane Scheppele, a professor at Princeton University, in an email.

A debate over constitutional principles

But now, in the United States, “the facts on the ground have changed,” says Andrew Arthur, a resident fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies, which advocates stricter immigration policies.

“You no longer need to have that very liberalized [immigration] policy, to promote development, because the United States is largely developed today,” he adds. “This is clearly a trend that has been continuing in Western countries,” such as the U.K. and France, he continues.

The U.S. has not been isolated from the political and ideological forces that have led to legal changes in Europe, says Martha Jones, a history professor at Johns Hopkins University.

“We’ve been debating birthright since the 1980s,” she adds. “You could say it’s part of one broad rethinking of belonging in an age in which, in some quarters, the view is [that changing] demographics needs to be halted, needs to be contained. That’s true in Europe and that’s true here.”

What is different in the United States compared with most of Europe is that, in the view of many legal scholars, birthright citizenship is enshrined in its Constitution, and the U.S. Constitution is notoriously difficult to amend.

“Raising it to the level of constitutional principle does, I think, make [birthright citizenship] more [durable], more ineradicable than a national law” in the U.S., says John Torpey, a sociologist at CUNY Graduate Center.

Thus, the justices will be more focused on the 14th Amendment than on how the rest of the world has been reviewing its citizenship laws, says Mr. Arthur.

“This Supreme Court isn’t going to involve itself in the policy at all,” he adds. “They’re going to be looking a lot at the floor debates [in Congress in 1868] and the 14th Amendment itself.”

– Henry Gass / Staff writer

OUR WORLD

Tracing the ammunition trail

About half of all .50-caliber ammunition cartridges seized by Mexican authorities from cartels over the past 14 years were traced to a single U.S.-government-owned factory outside Kansas City, Missouri, according to a recent investigation published by The New York Times. The cartridges can pierce armored vehicles and down helicopters, and have been used in attacks against the Mexican government. And, of the roughly 18,000 firearms seized from cartels and crime scenes during the current Mexican administration, nearly 80% originated in the United States. Mexico has lodged lawsuits in U.S. federal courts alleging that U.S. gun manufacturers contribute to violence south of the border.

– Whitney Eulich

Africa’s Switzerland moment

Most Africans don’t want to take a side in the Ukraine war, according to a recent survey by Afrobarometer. In 37 of the 38 countries polled, the majority of respondents said their countries should remain neutral in the conflict. The sole outlier was Mali, whose military government is close to Moscow. Private Russian mercenaries have also played a central role in the country’s fight

against Islamist insurgents. Nearly 3 in 4 Malians say their country should side with Russia in Ukraine.

– Ryan Lenora Brown

What’s in a name? Plenty.

The Indian government approved a proposal in late February to change the Indian state of Kerala to Keralam – meaning “land of coconut trees” – in the local language of Malayalam. The move is part of a broader trend of Indian cities and states reclaiming their precolonial names, driven in part by a growing sense of nationalism and cultural pride. Keralam joins a long list of renamings: Bombay to Mumbai, Madras to Chennai, Calcutta to Kolkata, and Gurgaon to Gurugram. As late Indian sociologist T.K. Oommen told the Monitor in 2006 when India was considering another name change, “We are gaining in confidence.”

– Lindsey McGinnis

“We’re giving people this hopeful, utopian feeling ...”

That’s what Ben Myres, the chief executive of a Johannesburg-based game studio, recently told The Guardian about helping the African diaspora imagine what it would be like to have African artifacts restored to their original home. His studio’s new video game, “Relooted,” takes players into fictional European museums to reclaim real-life African artifacts, such as a gold mask plundered by the British from the Asante empire in present-day Ghana. Colonial armies looted hundreds of thousands of artifacts from Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries. The game reflects a movement to repatriate the stolen treasures.

– Ryan Lenora Brown

NEWS: GLOBAL CURRENTS

BOSTON

After a century, Boston Harbor fit for shellfishing again

In 1925, Massachusetts all but banned fishing for clams and oysters in the harbor’s dirty waters. Thanks to decades of cleanup, it is now lifting the ban.

By Cameron Pugh / Staff writer

George H.W. Bush, trying to discredit then-Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis in the 1988 presidential race, christened Boston Harbor as the “dirtiest harbor in America.”

The unsavory title stuck. By the time Mr. Bush delivered his rebuke from a boat in the harbor, Americans nationwide already knew the waterway for its filth. It had, in 1966, inspired the hit song “Dirty Water” by The Standells. In 1989, Boston was pumping some 480 million gallons of raw sewage into the harbor daily. Mr. Bush, then the vice president, gave the harbor another nickname

during the campaign: “The Harbor of Shame.”

“It was embarrassing,” says Jim Costin, a longtime resident of Winthrop, which sits on the harbor. He also owns Belle Isle Seafood, a local eatery.

As of January, Mr. Costin and others can take pride in the harbor.

The Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries has declared parts of Boston Harbor clean enough for recreational shellfishing for the first time in a century. Since many shellfish are filter feeders that pump water through their gills, waterborne contaminants tend to build up in their bodies, making them bellwethers for overall water health. If the shellfish are free of pollutants, it’s a sign the water is cleaner.

Shellfishing will soon be allowed in some areas off the coasts of Winthrop, just northeast of the city, and in Hingham and Hull, two towns on the southern end of the harbor. Residents will have to wait for the towns to create regulations, and shellfishing might still be prohibited during times of low water quality, such as after heavy rains. Still, a region with a legendary reputation for fresh, high-quality seafood has reason to celebrate.

“It speaks a lot to all of the hard work that was done to clean up the harbor, to make quality of life [better] for not only the people that live here, but also the marine life,” says Joanne Coletta-Levine, a spokesperson for Schooner’s, a seafood restaurant in Hull.

Cities and states across the country have worked to clean up waterways since 1972, when the Clean Water Act made it illegal to discharge pollution into water without a federal permit. Between 1972 and 2001, the share of U.S. waterways clean enough for fishing increased by more than 10 percentage points, according to a 2018 study in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* that analyzed some 50 million water samples.

The act also provided cities with billions of dollars to build or improve water treatment facilities. Cities such as Portland, Oregon; New York; and Baltimore have also seen success cleaning up their harbors.

Yet the level of triumph has varied, says Brad Campbell, president of the Conservation Law Foundation in Boston. Though Massachusetts invested billions into cleaning up the harbor, other municipalities have struggled to take care of toxic waste from industrial facilities. Many cities – Boston included – still face challenges from sewage pollution that flows into waterways during storms. Nevertheless, Mr. Campbell says Boston stands out.

“With the cleanup, it’s become an enormously attractive place for people to live, work, and play,” he says.

Decades of work on the harbor

Massachusetts all but banned shellfishing in Boston Harbor in 1925, amid growing nationwide concerns about the safety of oysters. The state limited shellfishing there to specially licensed commercial harvesters. The shellfish had to be purified at a plant in Newburyport, about 40 miles north of Boston, before they could be safely eaten.

For clean-harbor advocates, it’s taken decades to get from that point to cleaner waters. Three lawsuits in the early 1980s attempted to force the Metropolitan District Commission, a state agency that managed water supply and sewage in Boston, to clean up the harbor. At the time, two MDC water treatment plants were dumping some 350 million gallons of minimally treated wastewater into the harbor each day, according to a 2018 study by University of Massachusetts Boston and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

In 1985, U.S. District Judge A. David Mazzone ordered that the

Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, which replaced the MDC in 1984, build a new water treatment facility. Since then, the MWRA has spent about \$6.6 billion cleansing the harbor, says Stephen Estes-Smargiassi, the agency’s director of planning and sustainability. He has been working on the cleanup for nearly 40 years.

The resource authority’s spending includes opening a new treatment plant on Deer Island near Winthrop, cleaning up urban beaches, and building a pipe system to funnel treated wastewater to the ocean where it can be diluted. While other municipalities funded new or upgraded treatment plants with federal grants, the Deer Island plant largely used money from consumers’ water and sewer bills.

The plant on Deer Island now treats about 365 million gallons of wastewater daily. In contrast to prior treatment plants, all of its discharges are treated to legal standards.

Challenges remain, says Chris Mancini, executive director at Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, which has advocated harbor cleanup since the 1980s. Like many older cities, Boston uses a combined sewage overflow system, meaning that wastewater and stormwater collect into one pipe. Normally, this water safely flows to a treatment plant. But heavy rains can overwhelm the system and cause untreated water to flow into nearby waterways.

Still, the cleanup has reduced such overflows and led to quality of life improvements – such as making the harbor swimmable. It has also spurred economic growth, says Emily Schutt, a staff scientist at Save the Harbor/Save the Bay.

“This is a working waterfront,” she says. “People are making their livelihood being on the water, and so having a clean system for them to do that is providing jobs.”

A return to local seafood

And, now, the cleanup has revived the age-old New England tradition of digging up your own seafood.

“It’s good news for the residents of the town, and also for residents of the commonwealth,” says Kurt Bornheim, Hull’s harbor-master. “This is going to open up a lot of opportunities.”

Harbormasters such as Mr. Bornheim enforce marine laws, manage boat passage, and maintain water infrastructure like docks. They’re primarily responsible for designing a web of rules to regulate shellfishing in their communities. For Hull, that includes developing a permitting process and hiring an additional employee to help patrol the beach.

Mr. Bornheim, who has served as Hull’s harbor-master for nearly three decades, is taking the new challenge in stride. He has enrolled in classes at Cape Cod Community College to renew his certification as a shellfish constable, municipal officers charged with enforcing shellfish regulations. Mr. Bornheim says the primary catch for Hull’s recreational shellfishers will be softshell and surf clams – though he hopes residents will soon be able to cultivate oysters, too.

Hull residents might soon be able to enjoy those same clams in local restaurants. Ms. Coletta-Levine, the spokesperson for Schooner’s, says the restaurant is looking forward to serving more local catch.

“We’d love to support our local economy and the people that live here,” she says. “What’s not to get excited about local, fresh seafood?”

Mr. Costin, the owner of Belle Isle Seafood in Winthrop, doesn’t anticipate the announcement changing how he runs his business. He already sources many clams locally – though, for now, they are treated at a purification plant. Yet, as a Winthrop native, he is excited to see the harbor cleaner than it was when he began working at Belle Isle as a teenager.

Back then, the waters of the harbor were brown, polluted by sewage, and fishless, he says. Mr. Costin envied those living on Cape Cod, who had long waded into the waters of the Atlantic to dig up their own dinner.

Now, he says, his Winthrop neighbors can do the same. ■

BOSTON

New Englanders won't clam up about their chowder

Clear broth or creamy? It depends on where you live along the Eastern Seaboard.

By Kendra Nordin Beato / Staff writer

The cultivation and consumption of shellfish have long been part of New England culinary traditions. Their evolution has incorporated practices from both Native Americans and European colonists, as well as later regional preferences.

Consider clam chowder. In the coastal villages of France, a centuries-old tradition of tossing a share of a fisherman's daily catch into a huge communal copper pot – *la chaudière* – was later shortened to become “chowder” as it made its way to Canada and down into New England. There, it met with the abundant native, hard-shelled quahog clams, which were stirred with onions, potatoes, and salt pork or bacon – a staple on European sailing ships. If dairy cows were available, milk, cream, and butter were added.

But not all East Coast “chowderheads” like dairy mixed with their clams. Manhattan clam chowder has no dairy and adds tomatoes. A Maine state representative once found this so infuriating that he drafted a bill in 1939 to criminalize mixing tomatoes and clams in the same pot. Rhode Island and Connecticut clam chowder bans both tomatoes and dairy from the clear broth soup in those states. This aligns with what some culinary historians maintain is the preferred clam chowder practice of Native peoples, allowing the briny taste of quahogs to shine more intensely.

Jessica B. Harris shares the following recipe in “Braided Heritage: Recipes and Stories on the Origin of American Cuisine” and notes, “The chowder is made with a base of fish stock, and tastes of the salt air that surrounds Aquinnah,” a town on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts that is the ancestral home of the Aquinnah Wampanoag. ■

CLEAR BROTH CLAM CHOWDER

Serves 6 to 8

6 ounces salt pork, rinsed and cut into ½-inch cubes
1 medium onion, finely chopped
½ teaspoon fennel seeds, crushed
2 cups chopped canned clams
1 ½ pounds russet potatoes, peeled and cut into ½-inch cubes
2 cups fish stock, store-bought or homemade
1 ½ cups bottled clam juice
2 tablespoons minced fresh dill
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. In a Dutch oven, cook the salt pork over medium heat, stirring regularly, until browned and crisp, about 15 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the pork to a small bowl.
2. Remove all but 2 tablespoons of the rendered fat from the pot. Add the onions and fennel seeds, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onions are softened, 10 to 15 minutes.
3. Increase the heat to high. Add the clams and cook, stirring constantly, for 2 minutes. Add the potatoes, fish stock, clam juice, 1 tablespoon of the dill, and reserved salt pork. Bring to a boil; then, reduce the heat to maintain a simmer and cook until the potatoes are tender, about 15 minutes.
4. Taste and season with salt and pepper, if needed. Ladle into bowls, garnish with the remaining dill, and serve with crackers.

■ Recipe adapted with permission from Clarkson Potter/Publishers, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

What's behind the global push to ban social media

Measures to protect children are gaining in popularity around the world. But do they do what they're designed to do without extra ramifications?

By Stephen Humphries / Staff writer

Jimmy Kakani surprised his Australian classroom with an unusual pop quiz. He posed a single yes-or-no question to his teenage students: Are you still using social media?

In December, the Australian Parliament banned popular apps such as TikTok, X, and Instagram from hosting users under the age of 16. It was the first such law in the world. Legislative bodies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas are now actively pursuing similar action.

But in the shire town of Murwillumbah, just a kangaroo hop from the Gold Coast on Australia's eastern edge, Mr. Kakani's students had shrugged off the social media ban. Only three teens out of 25 had any of their accounts disabled. Two were on Snapchat and the other was on Instagram.

“The rest had found workarounds,” says Mr. Kakani, a proponent of the ban, via email. “The students who had their accounts disabled waited a while, then made new accounts with ease.”

News reports suggest that this particular group of 14- and 15-year-olds are hardly the only ones to rebel.

Even so, Australia's social media ban kicked off a domino effect, starting a widening regulatory push to restrict social media access for minors.

Polls show broad support from parents. Jonathan Haidt's 2024 bestseller “The Anxious Generation,” which has been translated into 44 languages, has convinced many readers that social media is “rewiring childhood” in harmful ways. Rather than a “play based childhood,” he argues in the book, children have moved to an unregulated and addictive “phone-based childhood.” Citing a number of international and national studies, he argues that excessive screen time diminishes children's imagination, teaches them to expect constant stimulation, and creates harmful social environments, among other ills.

For politicians, the bans are a vote-winning proposition. Yet Australia's experience reveals that it is difficult to make such measures work in practice. It has also fueled debates over whether a technocratic fix is adequate to address something as complex as the mental health and safety of children.

"Governments are moving faster probably than they have the evidence to support that age-gating works," says Ramsha Jahangir, a senior editor at Tech Policy Press, who helped compile a Global Social Media Age Restriction Tracker. It which found more than 40 countries moving toward regulatory approaches.

A kaleidoscope craze?

The move to blame social media for teens' woes has been widespread, with those like Mr. Haidt positing that online platforms are too dangerous for many kids. He has more recently pointed to Meta's internal research, made publicly available through lawsuits, as proof of Instagram's deleterious effects on teens.

It was Mr. Haidt's book that influenced a powerful politician in Australia to kick-start the nation's ban on social media for teens.

Critics of "The Anxious Generation" argue that, in trying to make the case that social media harms teens, it mistakes correlation for causation.

"The data wasn't that good," says Will Dobud, co-author of "Kids These Days: Understanding and Supporting Youth Mental Health." "The way it was presented was pretty cherry picked."

This isn't the first time parents have feared that children were addicted to scrolling on a handheld device. In the early 1800s, a kaleidoscope craze took hold. Adults fretted that children were so entranced looking into the new tubular invention that they were walking into buildings. Later generations feared losing children to comic books and video games. Mr. Dobud says Mr. Haidt's book is fostering a moral panic about smartphone apps.

A 2024 report issued by the Washington DC-based National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, called for better research to clarify the links between social media and mental health. The Committee on the Impact of Social Media on Adolescent Health concluded the report by recommending "a judicious approach to protect youth mental health" rather than broad-based bans. The report said that the benefits of social media to teens shouldn't be overlooked.

Amanda Third, a children's and families expert adviser to YouTube, seconds the idea that the conversation around teenage use of social media should be less fraught and more nuanced.

"There are risks of harm associated with being online, but what we know is that the most vulnerable young people online are the most vulnerable young people offline," says Ms. Third, a research fellow in digital social and cultural research at Western Sydney University.

"You have to self-regulate"

Whatever their effect, tech platforms have long been required to include protections for minors. In recent months, though, some apps have been making headlines for hosting age-inappropriate content. Meta, which owns Instagram, is being sued by a plaintiff who claims that she became addicted to the platform at age 9. The platform's minimum age is 13.

Unsealed documents from 2015 reveal that Instagram was aware that 4 million children below that age were using the platform. The tech company's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, admitted that policing age restrictions is difficult, but Meta has pushed back against the claim

that its product is deliberately addictive.

Tech companies are also on the defensive on the political front. Indonesia recently implemented a ban similar to Australia's. Brazil is introducing new age-based internet access laws this month. When Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez proposed online age-verification laws, he described social media as a realm of addiction, abuse, pornography, manipulation, and violence. "We will protect [children] from the digital Wild West," Mr. Sánchez said in February.

The French National Assembly overwhelmingly voted in January to ban social media for anyone under age 15. It still needs to pass the Senate. During an AI summit in Mumbai on Feb. 19, French President Emmanuel Macron invited India to "join the club" of nations seeking to protect teens from unfettered access to these online platforms.

Indian journalist Sunny Simran hails Australia's law for sounding an alarm. But he also poses the question of whether every moral value needs to be enforced by legislation.

"There are certain principles in this world where you have to self-regulate," says Mr. Simran in a Zoom interview.

Mr. Simran believes India's phone-tethered parents are failing to model restraint, balance, and responsibility. India's family systems have traditionally imparted those virtues. The journalist also worries that Australia's laws were passed in haste. Seat belt laws and smoking bans resulted from behavioral change that was a marathon, not a sprint, he says.

Brooke Shannon, founder of Wait Until 8th, a pledge movement based in the United States that advocates delaying smartphone use until the end of 8th grade, is enthusiastic about the international momentum. But she offers a caveat.

"In terms of effectiveness, age-based guardrails can help reset social norms and provide structural support to families," Ms. Shannon says in an email. "However ... laws work best when they complement parental oversight, rather than replace it."

Potential pitfalls

Some see significant downsides to such laws, even if well-intended. When age gates are implemented, everyone who accesses a social media platform has to enter through them.

"The information that you're submitting in order to prove your age – whether that's biometric information or documentation or some type of token that's on your device – is then going to be shared with several layers of intermediaries that collect and process your information," says David Greene, senior counsel for the Electronic Frontier Foundation. "That raises very serious privacy and speech concerns both for young people and for adults."

Another issue is the use of virtual private networks to fool social media platforms about the location of the user. Some of these new legislative proposals include VPN bans. But VPNs are widely used around the world as online safety tools against hackers and surveillance.

Others see a threat to the freedom of expression that applies as much to children as it does adults. That's why John Ruddick, president of the Digital Freedom Project, is helping two teenagers challenge Australia's social media ban in court.

"The law is unconstitutional," says Mr. Ruddick, who is also a Libertarian member of the New South Wales Parliament. For decades, he says, Australia has had "an established implied freedom of political communication. That has been upheld on multiple, multiple High Court matters."

“What do we want for our kids?”

Whatever happens with the law, Australian mental health expert Will Dobud suggests a helpful thought experiment for its proponents: If elves stole all our internet technology tonight, what would parents do tomorrow? They need to learn how to have conversations with their children. And they can start with a rule of “no phones” at the dinner table.

“But there had better be some good dialogue,” says Mr. Dobud. “Otherwise, ‘no phones’ is going to be equated to boredom.”

Ms. Third, the adviser to YouTube, says that a better approach would be to pressure technology companies to redesign their platforms to mitigate potential harms.

To that end, she says, she’d like to see the European Union and Association of Southeast Asian Nations working together, perhaps in alliance with the Global Online Safety Regulators Network.

“We need to identify those harmful features. We need to identify the aspirations, right? What do we want for our kids?” says Ms. Third. “And then around that, we need to design some international standards that can be legislated in different jurisdictions.” ■

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

45

The percentage of women in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries who graduate from college. That is 8 percentage points higher than men in those countries (37%), though the gap between the two is shrinking.

726

Vermont’s net population loss between 2024 and 2025. That drop, combined with low birth rates and high death rates, left the Green Mountain State with the slowest population growth in the United States.

32.6%

The percentage of United Nations member states that have had a woman leader. Women have led, or currently lead, 63 of the 193 U.N. member states, including Sri Lanka, Barbados, Mexico, and Japan. That figure has been rising steadily since 1990.

10

The percentage of U.S. adults who say they are a caregiver for a parent over age 65. Women and lower-income adults are more likely than other groups to be caregivers.

18

The percentage increase in sulfur dioxide emitted last year from power plants in the U.S. Overall pollution from the plants was up in 2025, including rates of nitrogen oxide and carbon dioxide. The rise coincides with the Trump administration’s promotion of coal and rollback of Biden-era environmental regulations.

– Audrey Thibert / Staff writer

Sources: The Economist, VTDigger, U.S. Census Bureau, Pew Research Center, The Wall Street Journal

REPORTERS ON THE JOB

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY



Ira Porter

How do you cover a hip-hop class at Princeton University? Readers might have preconceived notions of a reporter sitting in a classroom, stomping his feet alongside students while a tweed-clad professor blasts rap music from a loudspeaker.

The reality was different when I sat in on lecturer Chesney Snow’s course, *Miss-Education: The Women of Hip-Hop*.

First, to chronicle what I saw for an Instagram reel, I walked around the historic campus – the setting a far cry from what hip-hopers typically sing about. Then, from the back of a studio in the Lewis Center for the Arts, I watched as eight students in Mr. Snow’s class shared skits based on personal obstacles. They didn’t listen to or play any hip-hop, but they did act out dramatic scenes with a piano background. They were actively learning, not one breakbeat heard or a thread of tweed in sight. ■

MEXICO CITY



Whitney Eulich

I’ve been trying since January to get a visa to report in Venezuela, whose government is undergoing a historic transition. As of press time, my efforts aren’t going well.

My email to the Venezuelan Embassy in Mexico City, where I live, bounced back. “User busy,” my telephone’s screen informs me each time I call.

After a reporter friend told me in early March he was on his way to Caracas, I asked, “How did you do it?!” He passed me a phone number for someone from a U.S. government office in Colombia. For me, it was another dead end.

Venezuela and the United States have since announced they have reestablished diplomatic relations, so maybe this will turn out in my favor – or maybe not. My bureaucratic adventure continues. ■

LONDON



Scott Peterson

Ready for war, again, I had packed my body armor and helmet, charged my camera batteries, and readied satellite communications – to report from the front line in Ukraine. The Monitor had just bought an updated drone detector, for safety amid Russian drone attacks.

But the trip from my home base of London to Ukraine – which would have been my 13th visit during this current conflict – was put on hold. Just before my planned departure, the United States and Israel mounted a massive attack on Iran and declared regime change their goal.

I have made 45 visits to Iran and have written a book about the place – so my editors thought me well suited to refocus my reporting on the Islamic Republic.

“Sorry about Ukraine,” Ken Kaplan, my editor, said. “Keep your bags packed.” ■

BALTIMORE



Scott Baldauf

Some stories take longer than others to write, and sometimes this allows events to occur that enrich the story. In Baltimore, I explored how the city managed to reduce violent crime by half in a very short time, using a strategy that pairs tough enforcement with interventions and help for those

at risk of committing violent crime. During the reporting for this forthcoming story, one of the former criminal offenders went from part-time jobs to landing a steady gig at the Baltimore docks – a personal breakthrough for him that helped me show how the crime reduction effort was working. ■

ON THE COVER

In Trump era, China sees an opportunity to advance its long game

Trump policies – including the trade war resulting from U.S. tariffs – have been a gift for Beijing, which aims to become the preeminent global power.

By Ann Scott Tyson / Staff writer

DANZHOU, CHINA

At bustling Yangpu Port on China's southern island of Hainan, ships carrying crude oil and petrochemicals ply briny, blue-green waters – a snapshot of the growing trade that is energizing Chinese workers on Hainan, now the largest free-trade zone in the world by area.

Luo Bin, a Hainan native who has worked at the port for a decade, says China's trading heft and Hainan's zero-tariff policies will allow it to weather the turbulence that U.S. President Donald Trump's tariff onslaught has created for global commerce.

"The port is full," says Mr. Luo, wearing a hard hat as he surveys crane operations on one dock at the facility, which handles millions of containers each year on 63 routes covering Asia, Australia, the Middle East, Europe, the Americas, and the rest of China. The port's throughput is growing rapidly, with new construction expanding its capacity, port officials say.

"The impact [of the trade war] hasn't been as big as we imagined. We have confidence," says Mr. Luo.

Indeed, when Mr. Trump makes his anticipated trip to China this spring, he'll find a country emboldened by a trade clash in which it held its ground and, many would argue, came out ahead.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping matched Mr. Trump blow by blow in the trade war last year, leveraging his country's dominance over rare earths and other vital supply chains to force the United States to a truce. The country opened up new overseas markets to increase total exports, racking up a trade surplus of \$1.2 trillion in 2025. China's exports surged a whopping 21.8% year on year in the first two months of 2026, far outpacing expectations. Criticizing U.S. protectionism, Beijing has used the opportunity to cast itself as the new world champion of free trade.

Overall, Mr. Trump's second term has proved to be a gift for Chinese leaders, whose long-range goals include upsetting U.S. hegemony and elevating China as the preeminent global power. Every time the Trump administration chips away at the existing world order – by withdrawing U.S. aid or backing out of climate agreements, for instance – it gives China the chance to present itself as a more reliable defender of the global system. The trade

war is perhaps the starkest example.

On that front, Washington seriously underestimated Beijing's determination and readiness to fight back, experts say.

"China flexing its rare earth muscle was a game changer in the relationship and frankly in China's position on the global stage," says Elizabeth Economy, senior fellow and co-chair of the Program on the U.S., China, and the World at the Hoover Institution, a public policy think tank at Stanford University.

"The trade negotiations were bungled," says Dr. Economy, who served in the Commerce Department during the Biden administration. "The United States dug a hole; then we basically managed to crawl ourselves back out."

The upshot, in Beijing's view, is a clear victory for China in the power dynamic between the two countries.

"This is a tipping point in terms of strength," says Wang Yong, director of the American Studies Center at Peking University. For China, he says, this translates into "a new window of opportunity."

"THE EAST IS RISING"

China's leadership deliberations are often described as a black box. In contrast to the openness and dynamism of the U.S. and other Western democracies, with their rapid churn of leaders, policies, and campaign pledges, tight-lipped Chinese officials stick to the script of tedious, multiyear plans.

But what it lacks in agility, China's government gains in continuity. Historical research into high-level Communist Party speeches, documents, and media reports reveals that the government's overarching goal hasn't changed for decades: Rebuild China's power, displace the U.S., and reshape the world order to better serve its interests.

To achieve this, China's post-Mao leaders have doggedly and skillfully pursued the country's economic, technological, diplomatic, and military rise, while at the same time working to blunt American influence, says Rush Doshi, director of the China Strategy Initiative at the Council on Foreign Relations.

"China had to pitch basically a perfect game to break into the ranks of the top industrialized countries, and it did it," says Dr. Doshi, author of "The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy To Displace American Order."

Under Mr. Xi – considered one of the most powerful Chinese leaders since Mao Zedong, who led the revolution to found Communist China in 1949 – the push to eclipse the U.S. has become more aggressive.

Since coming to power in 2012, Mr. Xi has wielded China's trade and manufacturing dominance to punish other countries and coerce them to cooperate with Beijing's agenda.

He has also used carrots such as Hainan Free Trade Port, a plan he announced in 2018, to deepen trade ties with the world, along with reduced tariffs and other measures. This year, for the first time in decades, China's average tariff level dropped below that of the U.S. (measured by tariffs on the rest of the world, excluding each other). The shift helps legitimize Beijing's claim to replace Washington as protector of the world trade system.

"China should become ... a leader of global trade rules," says Cai Qiang, director-general of the Hainan province Finance Department.

China's global military reach still lags behind that of the U.S., as underscored by Washington's war with Iran, which Beijing has largely watched unfold from the sidelines. But it's catching up

quickly. China has massively increased its defense budget in recent decades, nearly tripling it to \$277 billion – second only to that of the U.S. – under Mr. Xi’s tenure.

In recent years, Mr. Xi has repeated a four-character phrase that speaks to China’s confidence about the future: *Dōng Shēng Xī Jiàng*, or “The East is rising; the West is declining.”

Dr. Doshi, who served as deputy senior director for China and Taiwan affairs at the National Security Council during the Biden administration, says China has succeeded in gaining a dominant position in Asia, and is now advancing its vision for a China-centric world order.

China is now so powerful, he says, that efforts to counter Beijing’s influence would require “collective action” with U.S. allies. “This is about keeping the U.S. at the leading edge, staying ahead, and even, in some cases, catching up,” he says.

But China is courting those allies, too.

RALLYING THE GLOBAL SOUTH – AND EUROPE

In a gigantic, gleaming conference center in northern Beijing, hundreds of officials and scholars from around the world gathered in November for the Global South Modernization Forum.

With soaring musical introductions for each speaker, lavish banquets, and award ceremonies for friendly foreign dignitaries, Beijing promoted itself as a stable, responsible, and peaceful world leader – in contrast to Washington. It claimed to uphold core tenets such as sovereignty and free trade, and promised to make the world order more democratic, namely by giving Global South countries a bigger voice.

“No matter how the international landscape evolves, China will always be a member of the Global South, [and] keep the Global South in our heart,” Li Shulei, a member of the Communist Party’s powerful ruling Politburo, told the audience. Calls for developing countries to unite against the U.S. and West were also common at the conference.

“Global economic governance mechanisms have been killed by MAGA,” said Jiang Shixue, a senior research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, referring to Mr. Trump’s political movement during a panel session at the conference. “Developing countries need to speak with one voice to counter the U.S. attempts to drive a wedge.”

Beijing is also lobbying hard to win over European countries, with some success, calling for them to practice “strategic autonomy” in a bid to divide the traditional Western alliance.

Leaders from France, Britain, Germany, and Canada have flocked to China in recent months, despite concerns over China’s industrial dominance and support for Russia in Ukraine.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney met with Mr. Xi in Beijing in January and struck a deal to reduce tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles in exchange for reduced Chinese tariffs on Canadian farm products. Days later, Mr. Carney warned at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, of the demise of the “old order.”

For observers in China, the speech was evidence that the global tides were turning.

Davos marked “the death of the Global North” as a concept, wrote Zheng Yongnian, dean of the School of Public Policy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in Shenzhen, in an online Chinese publication following the summit. Western allies were “beaten awake” by Mr. Trump, and “the old order has collapsed,” said Dr. Zheng, a leading Chinese expert on the U.S.

China is waging a relentless propaganda campaign, both at home and abroad, to portray Mr. Trump’s policies as proof of the hypocrisy of U.S. diplomacy and the bankruptcy of American democracy.

Triumphalist commentaries in China’s state-run media have dubbed the U.S. a “failed state.”

Mr. Trump’s actions have “ripped away Uncle Sam’s splendid robe, leaving the empire’s disgrace exposed and making the world suddenly realize: So this is America – this is the real America,” said a commentary in the official Beijing Daily in October. “The halo is a mirage; the myth is fragile.”

WHAT KIND OF WORLD LEADER WOULD CHINA BE?

Yet China is not as beneficent or benign as its propaganda suggests, experts say. Beijing has not stepped up to fill the void left by the U.S. in areas such as foreign aid, climate policy, and global security, preferring to focus on its narrow interests.

“China likes the rights of being a global superpower, but not really all of the responsibilities,” says Dr. Economy. “It is not interested in bearing the burden of global security and development, so it’s not prepared to be the sole superpower ... the way the United States has been.”

Even China’s espousal of free trade is closely tied to its status as a manufacturing juggernaut. Beijing has relied upon overseas exports to drive its growth, especially following the collapse in 2021 of its property sector, and few countries can keep up with its manufacturing prowess.

Mr. Xi has been explicit in laying out this strategy: “We must leverage our strengths ... tightening the dependence of international industrial chains on our country,” he said in a 2020 speech.

China can make most products “better, faster, and cheaper than anyone else,” says Deborah Elms, head of Trade Policy at the Hinrich Foundation in Singapore. “They are such good living proof of the use of trade for economic growth and development, they’ve made it harder for everyone after them to follow a similar path.”

At the same time, Beijing has grown more bellicose under Mr. Xi, a quality that could complicate China’s ascent.

Take Japan’s Takaichi Sanae. Soon after making history in October by becoming Japan’s first female prime minister, she sparked Beijing’s ire by suggesting that her country could offer military support to Taiwan if China were to invade the democratically ruled island.

Beijing, which views the island as part of China, demanded that Ms. Takaichi recant her statement, and unleashed a scorched-earth campaign to punish Japan when she refused. This included a return to “wolf warrior diplomacy” that saw a Chinese envoy literally call for Ms. Takaichi’s head to be cut off, as well as a slew of economic sanctions.

Ms. Takaichi held her ground, winning fresh public support and a landslide victory for her Liberal Democratic Party in snap elections earlier this year, cementing her power at home. Mr. Trump – who has generally been ambivalent on the issue of Taiwan – endorsed Ms. Takaichi as a “strong, powerful, and wise leader,” and the pair have worked to deepen Japan-U.S. relations.

The ongoing conflict with Japan illustrates the harsher reality of China’s rise, as developing and advanced countries alike feel the bite of Beijing’s diplomatic, economic, and military coercion – and highlights the ways China’s boldness could backfire.

Yet, even in the case of Taiwan, Mr. Trump’s return to office has opened new opportunities for Beijing.

Last year’s tariff war forced China to play the rare earth card, and

revealed just how much power China's supply chain dominance gives it. Beijing now seeks to maximize its choke hold over rare earths, semiconductors, and other supply chains, to use them as leverage in other situations, including Taiwan.

"Rare earths is a very effective tool, and they intend to keep it," says Dan Wang, China director for the Eurasia Group. "It's not just to fend off the threat from the U.S., but also the threat from Japan, Australia – all the other countries that potentially could go against China if something happens in Taiwan."

China could also conduct an economic blockade of Taiwan – a military exercise it has actively rehearsed in recent years – to test the Trump administration's will to intervene.

"China's top leadership wants to take advantage of the time when Trump is in office," Dr. Wang explains. If Mr. Trump's response is "inadequate," she says, it would give China's leadership confidence to "do things that are unexpected." ■

THE EXPLAINER

War shakes the Middle East - and the US budget

The U.S.-Israeli attacks on Iran have had wide impacts on the Middle East and beyond. They've also burned through a costly chunk of U.S. weapons stockpiles.

By Anna Mulrine Grobe / Staff writer

More than twice the area of the state of Texas, Iran has been on the receiving end of a great deal of U.S. military resources and firepower since Feb. 28.

War costs sustained by the United States started high and grew by the day, analysts say. Those costs can be measured in the price of replenishing stockpiles of weapons expended, in damage to U.S. base infrastructure in the region, and also in the impact on global markets.

One example: The Department of Defense is one of the largest consumers of fuel in the world, and though the fuel on which its operations rely includes a mix of long-term contracts and stockpiles, a \$10 increase in the price of a barrel of oil can raise overall Pentagon annual operating costs by an estimated \$1.3 billion.

Lawmakers are demanding that the Trump administration give a clear rundown of the costs of its military operation against Iran, which has been conducted in collaboration with Israel.

"It is strategically important for Americans and Congress to understand the costs of war, the scope of U.S. military operations, and what impacts this conflict is having on the safety and finances of every American," Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed, the ranking Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, said in a March 11 statement.

"Americans are being forced to pay higher prices in the near term for things like fuel, as well as [in] long-term costs from this conflict, such as health care for veterans," he added.

There is also the cost in lives. In its first two weeks, the war killed some 2,000 across the Middle East, including 13 American service members.

Q: How much is the U.S. spending every day for the war?

Trump administration officials estimated that the first six days of the Iran war cost the United States roughly \$11.3 billion, according to attendees leaving a closed-door congressional briefing. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has described the effort as delivering twice the airpower as the "shock and awe" campaign against Iraq in 2003.

Defense analysts say \$11.3 billion isn't a total price for those early days. Even before hostilities began, repositioning a dozen U.S. Navy vessels and more than 100 U.S. military aircraft to the region since the end of December cost U.S. taxpayers roughly \$630 million, according to estimates by Elaine McCusker, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

Broken down, the cost drivers in the war's opening days included some \$5.6 billion each for interceptors and missile strikes, as well as \$2.3 billion for air operations and \$310 million for the replacement of three F-15 fighter jets, according to Ms. McCusker's analysis.

Drawing on Congressional Budget Office estimates of operating costs for each unit, defense analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies projected costs going forward.

Munitions expenditures are huge. Using past air campaigns as a guide, it will cost billions to replenish the U.S. munitions inventory, with the expense increasing by as much as \$760 million a day.

Considering that 200 fighter jets are conducting operations, air operations run about \$30 million daily. Costs for the Navy, with its two aircraft carriers and 14 destroyers, among other ships in the region, come to about \$15 million daily, the think tank says.

Costs for the 582 soldiers permanently stationed across the Middle East, along with those deployed to the region, average about \$1.6 million every day. An estimated \$10.5 million daily goes toward hazard pay and family separation allowances.

While some of these costs are already budgeted by the Department of Defense, many are not. The Pentagon will likely make a supplemental request to Congress for what could be as much as \$50 billion. The request is meant "to address both the overall strain on the force and deficiencies in stockpiles, the reconstitution of which could take years," Ms. McCusker said.

The request is likely to prompt a heated debate in Congress.

"You've got to be able to provide us with information, as requested, [and] justification," Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, who sits on the Appropriations Committee, warned Pentagon officials on March 12. "Don't just take for granted that Congress' role is basically just to write the check."

Q: How much has this depleted U.S. stockpiles?

Lawmakers have expressed concern that the war with Iran has depleted "years worth" of U.S. weapons stockpiles at a time when defense companies have struggled to keep up with demand.

Exact weapons stockpile figures are classified, but some reports suggest that the U.S. used close to 2,000 munitions, including missiles and air defense interceptors, in the first days of the war.

That amounts, by the estimates of some experts, to roughly 10% of cruise missiles and a quarter of all Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile interceptor weapons that have been used in the first days of the conflict. Some analysts warned that continued hostilities could consume half of the U.S. interceptor stockpile within the first four to five weeks of the conflict.

Mr. Hegseth has said the U.S. has "no shortage of munitions."

At the same time, U.S. stockpiles are being depleted in part to destroy Iranian weapons supplies. As of March 13, Mr. Hegseth reported that Iran's missile volume was down 90% and its one-way

attack drone shots had decreased by 95%.

The U.S. has also destroyed an Iranian drone-launching ship roughly the size of a World War II aircraft carrier.

The ultimate U.S. military targeting aim, Mr. Hegseth has said, is to destroy all of Iran's defense companies, including "every company that builds every component."

Q: Are America's new low-cost drones helping bring down the price tag of the war?

The U.S. debuted its Low-Cost Uncrewed Combat Attack System, or LUCAS drone, during the war in Iran. It is an answer to Iran's Shahed-136 one-way model, which has become ubiquitous on the battlefields of Ukraine.

"If I just walk back a couple of years, do you remember what you used to always hear, that we're shooting down a \$50,000 drone with a \$2 million missile?" said Adm. Brad Cooper, the head of U.S. Central Command, which runs U.S. operations in the Middle East, in a March 5 briefing. Then the U.S. retro-designed one of the Iranian drones, he said. "We captured it, pulled the guts out, sent it back to America, put a little 'Made in America' on it, brought it back here, and we're shooting it at the Iranians."

The low cost of LUCAS is relative, but at \$35,000, it's far cheaper than a \$2.5 million Tomahawk cruise missile. ■

PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

PORTLAND, MAINE

Mainers in need of basic household goods find a community overflowing with generosity

Angela Stone's nonprofit began as a Facebook group aiding immigrants. It now helps tens of thousands of other people – with volunteers lining up in droves.

By **Cameron Pugh** / Staff writer

On a blustery afternoon, volunteers and staff members at Maine Needs, a nonprofit on the outskirts of Portland, hustle between shelves stacked high with toilet paper, cookware, and spray bottles filled with cleaner. Wielding clipboards, they jot down notes and organize mountains of donations that will soon be piled into blue bags for distribution to families who need them.

For many Mainers, basic personal care and household items are too expensive. When faced with a choice between good breath or a full stomach, many have to choose the latter.

Angela Stone, founder and executive director of Maine Needs, hopes to solve that problem. What began in 2019 as a Facebook group has grown into a statewide powerhouse that provides essential goods to any Mainer in need. Last year, Ms. Stone says, the organization reached some 77,000 people across the state.

"We all wake up needing the same basic things," she says. "If we can really start to see one another and lean into that in actionable ways, we're unstoppable."

Some 40% of households in Maine struggled to afford essentials in 2023, according to the ALICE report, a project by United Way that measures hardship. That figure includes not only those below the federal poverty threshold, but also almost 178,000 households who earn too much to be officially considered poor but not enough to feel secure.

Federal initiatives such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, better known as SNAP or food stamps, can help families afford groceries. But these benefits can't be used for nonfood essentials, including feminine hygiene products and soap. The average price of personal care products rose 12% between March 2020 and January 2026.

"We've had mothers burst into tears because this is what they were asking for," Ms. Stone says. "A way to clean their clothing, their bedding, wash their dishes – clean their space."

Ms. Stone's staff members and volunteers dole out bags of clothes, diapers, and other supplies to make achieving such tasks possible. Volunteers put together "mini warmth kits" for homeless people, replete with hand warmers, lotion, lip balm, and Dunkin' gift cards. They also assemble gift kits for mothers, who Ms. Stone says need "a little bit of joy."

"It's really quite extraordinary what she has created," says Sarah Borgeson, a Portland resident who runs St. Elizabeth's Jubilee Center, a pantry that gives out essential goods. "They have figured out how to identify, throughout the state of Maine, where the pockets of needs are."

No stigma

Standing in what's dubbed the overflow room – housing clothes and other donations that staff and volunteers can't immediately find homes for – Ms. Stone says she never planned to take on a project of this scale. It began as a much smaller effort to help asylum-seeking mothers settle into their new lives in the United States.

In 2018, while Ms. Stone and her family were living in Chicago, the Trump administration announced it would separate children from their families if they crossed the border illegally. The administration billed it as a "zero tolerance" policy to deter unauthorized immigration.

As she moved her family to her home state of Maine, Ms. Stone started calling nonprofits to see how she could help. An interior designer, she figured that she could offer her services to immigrant-owned businesses or aid newly arrived immigrants as they settled into their homes.

She found a different kind of want. About a third of immigrants in Maine earn less than 200% of the federal poverty level – the cutoff for being considered "low income" for many government programs – compared with 24% of native-born Mainers. Ms. Stone started collecting supplies through Facebook and delivered them. In 2020, she incorporated the group into a nonprofit distributing essentials to anyone in Maine.

Taking care of whoever needs it, without stigma, is a driving principle for the organization. Unlike many government programs, Maine Needs doesn't ask for proof of income. Instead, it relies on a network of some 550 people – including social workers, teachers, and nurses – in every county in the state. They identify people in need, coordinate with Maine Needs staff, and help give out supplies.

"You can take care of everybody at the same time," Ms. Stone

says. “I don’t think one baby deserves diapers more than the other.”

“Doing good for people”

Maine Needs also builds a sense of community among its workers. On a Friday in February, volunteers and staff members mill throughout the headquarters, where bookcases are full of donated children’s books and rooms are stocked with diapers and toiletries.

Doreen Jamieson, who has volunteered with Maine Needs since its doors opened, has watched the organization grow and change. What has stayed the same is its purpose. She tried out a few volunteer gigs after she retired to the Pine Tree State. But her first visit to Maine Needs stood out.

“It just felt like you were doing good for people,” she says by phone. “You get emails from caseworkers with real people, and ... it just really touches your heart.”

Demand for volunteering spots at Maine Needs has surged recently, Ms. Stone says. It takes some three months to get a shift. Last year, about 7,000 people volunteered.

Maine Needs has also grown quickly on social media. Every month, the organization gets between 4 million and 7 million page views across its platforms, Ms. Stone says. Last year, the staff relocated to a headquarters about four times larger than its old one.

Mainers seem eager to help Maine Needs grow.

Ms. Stone stands next to a pile of donated clothes that are yet to be sorted. Soon the garments will be hung on racks or neatly folded into bags for distribution. This particular mound reaches to about knee level.

That’s nothing, Ms. Stone says. Often, the piles tower far higher. To demonstrate, she raises a flat hand to about eye level, then smiles. ■

EDITORIALS

Students and AI: Mastery, not misuse

It took several decades for students’ individual computer access to become the norm in American schools. But it’s taken only about three years for the share of students using artificial intelligence in school assignments to go from zero to 84%.

At the same time, according to a 2025 report by the College Board, only 13% of schools encouraged using such generative AI in all their classes, while 1 in 5 had no policies governing its use.

Educators are racing to keep pace with and use AI in ways that safeguard students’ educational interests and support vibrant classroom relationships. There is concern about repeating what some see as the “mistakes” of having allowed students unlimited access to phones and social media.

But blanket restrictions on AI in schools could be counterproductive, given that it infuses almost every aspect of daily commerce and communication – and is also shaping emerging career paths. Instead, some educators and researchers urge an approach that strengthens individual discernment and ethical decision-making – through broader “AI literacy.”

Building agency over algorithms

The focus should be on “how to build agency over the tech,

not just agility with what it offers,” wrote Substack author Jenny Anderson and Brookings Institution analyst Rebecca Winthrop in *The Washington Post* earlier this month.

More than “prompt engineering,” children “need a holistic understanding” of how AI works, they wrote. Equipped with this, “they develop the capacity to know when AI supercharges their learning and when it stunts it.”

That point was underscored in a 2025 study comparing AI literacy and usage rates in schoolwork: It found that students with lower AI literacy were more likely to use AI tools to help complete their assignments than were students who had higher AI literacy and awareness.

Incorporating discussion of ethics, values, and accountability alongside technical concepts further bolsters AI literacy and critical thinking skills, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, a Paris-based multilateral agency.

Such broad-based literacy, the organization noted, helps ensure that “students know how to evaluate, question, and apply AI responsibly” in school and “beyond the classroom.”

Young people who understand how AI and its algorithms work are more likely to use it responsibly. Their understanding, in turn, can support the effective use of AI tools as a complement to the essential classroom interactions that enhance the education experience. ■

An oil crisis as an opening for ingenuity

In just the past six years, the world economy has been jolted by three sharp rises in oil prices. First, during the pandemic. Then, after Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. And now, a war-battered Iran is blocking the Strait of Hormuz, a choke point for ships carrying 20% to 30% of the world’s petroleum supply.

Such energy crises bring short-term hardship, with higher gasoline prices. Yet they also spark bursts of innovation that might soften the next disruption. One historic model: The 1973 Arab oil embargo led many countries to create strategic oil reserves for release in times of emergency.

With the start of the Iran war, creative responses to the current crisis are starting to show up. “What is needed now is not alarmism but foresight,” wrote Christopher Long, of the security management firm Neptune P2P Group, in *The National*.

Some American farmers, worried about rising prices for natural gas-based fertilizers, are eyeing new types of biological sources, such as nitrogen-fixing microbes or fertilizers made with low-emission hydrogen. The European Union, in mid-March, decided to invest €200 million (about \$230 million) to design and build small nuclear power plants as reliable sources of low-emissions power for a continent that is highly dependent on fossil fuel imports.

And insurers in the maritime industry are coming up with creative ways to lessen fears of loss or damage. The U.S. International Development Finance Corp., for example, has offered a \$20 billion reinsurance backstop to cargo carriers.

The spirit of innovative thinking is never in short supply. Billions of people facing rising energy costs are on a steep learning curve to devise ways to operate more efficiently or switch to non-oil sources, such as solar power. The Iran crisis might accelerate the

energy transition.

Expensive oil, wrote Columbia University business professor Rita McGrath in *Fast Company* magazine, “accelerates the relative attractiveness of dematerialized products and services: software over hardware, streaming over shipping, local services over global supply chains, energy efficiency over energy consumption.”

“Sweet are the uses of adversity,” Shakespeare wrote. Just as sweet is releasing the fetters of material limits by reshaping the world with innovative ideas in energy. ■

Britain scores a win for equality

Britain’s parliamentary democracy, one of the oldest in the world, has its quirks. For over 1,000 years, its kings and queens have presided atop a pyramid of lords, earls, viscounts, and other nobility. Alongside elected members of the House of Commons, titled (and often wealthy) peers have held hundreds of hereditary seats in the House of Lords for centuries.

“Undemocratic, overcrowded, dominated by silly archaic practices and unrepresentative of the British population,” is how one reform-minded member described the chamber.

But all that is about to change: This month, Parliament adopted a bill abolishing the remaining quota of 92 seats that can be automatically filled by the heirs of titled peers. The act fulfills one of Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s election pledges, completing a process started by his predecessor Tony Blair, who removed more than 600 seats in 1999.

The shift signifies a major break with the past. Supporters argue that nobility’s relative independence from electoral politics has provided stability and safeguarded democracy. Some are concerned about Britain’s storied traditions. But it also offers the opportunity to align politics and society with values that acknowledge equality and intrinsic worth of each individual.

Amid increasing cultural diversity and economic inequality, dissolving hereditary privilege might also help dissolve entrenched class divisions and gender disparities dating from feudal times. (Titles have typically passed only to men, limiting women’s presence until the late 1950s, when prime ministers began nominating “lifetime peers” whose titles could not be passed on.)

“The principle of hereditary legislating has now been vanquished,” declared the Electoral Reform Society, which calls for an elected house that “better reflects the country it serves.”

Duty and democratic principles

This sentiment reflects growing demand for more say in effective governing. Recent surveys have shown that 28% of British people were dissatisfied with how government works, and 15% would abolish the monarchy. The royal family appears increasingly responsive to this sentiment. King Charles III has moved to curtail costs and recently stripped his brother Andrew of all titles and benefits, over alleged connections to the Jeffrey Epstein scandal. And Parliament is considering a Representation of the People Bill, to extend the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds and widen the range of accepted voter ID.

“We have a duty to find a way forward,” the leader of the House of Lords, Baroness Angela Smith, said as the bill was passed. The change is not about “individuals,” she said, “but [about] the underlying principle that ... no one should sit in our Parliament by way of an inherited title.”

By its nature, democracy is rarely a “finished” project. It might now be time for ordinary Britons to claim a greater role in shaping and safeguarding their unique governing system. ■

READERS RESPOND

A stamp of approval for human connection

Thank you for continuing to value the human side of humanity, in both your delivery of the news and selection of essays. Danny Heitman’s piece in *The Home Forum* about the simple yet profound beauty of the postcard (“Putting my stamp on a lost art” in the Feb. 23 Weekly) captured my attention.

As a newly minted columnist for my local newspaper, I muse, ponder, and discuss writing matters. Mr. Heitman’s joyful acknowledgment of the postcard’s role for both recipient and writer underscores the growing need that our globally and digitally connected society seems to have for human connection. A handwritten missive is about as personal as it gets.

Coincidentally, my March column addresses the same issue by providing a template for how to write a letter (or postcard), likening it to making a burger for a friend. Sometimes, the fear of not knowing how to do something holds us back from providing something for another. A handwritten letter, as Mr. Heitman notes, becomes a treasure for both.

And, in this day and age, taking the time to personalize a note reminds and assures you and your reader that both of you exist as sentient humans – not AI, but “authentically intelligent.”

Linda Hora
Alamo, California

THE HOME FORUM

The animals who find us

A novice volunteer discovers that the most unlikely creatures – and adopters – often carry the biggest lessons about compassion.

When I submitted an application to volunteer at a local animal shelter, I thought I’d just be walking dogs outside – a good fit for my solitary nature. I couldn’t wait to let them out of their kennels to roam and sniff and enjoy some fresh air. That lasted two weeks.

Because where I was truly needed, it turned out, was the front desk. This was command central of a busy community hot spot, and way outside my comfort zone. I’d be answering phones, helping with adoptions, and doing intake on everything from chinchillas to fallen baby owls to sunburned pigs.

My first hurdle was the phone. I assumed callers’ questions would be along the lines of, “What are your hours today?” or “Do you have any calico kittens?”

I assumed wrong. During any given shift, no two calls were ever alike. They ran the gamut from “Is it legal to shoot a wild boar with a bow and arrow?” to “How do I get a snake out of my garage?” to “There’s a skunk under my house, and I don’t want it to spray. What should I do?” My standard response became, “Hold, please.”

These calls were above my pay grade (which was zero) and sent me running for the nearest vet tech or manager.

One thing I loved about my shifts, however, was never knowing who'd be there when I walked in. Like Delta the pig, who'd been found alone in a park, sunburned, eating weeds. Where else would a city girl like me get a chance to sit and bond with a 200-pound porker?

During the course of one afternoon, Delta knocked over trash cans, destroyed a bookshelf, and tried to eat my shoes. I was enchanted. When she spotted a feisty bulldog in the lobby, she knocked down a gate to come say hello. She ended up getting adopted by a woman who worked at a vet clinic.

I began to embrace my involvement with the community. Several people told me that they'd love to volunteer at the shelter but it would be too sad for them. While it's true that many abandoned animals showed up in bad shape, and heartbroken people called trying to find a lost pet, it's equally true that once we became involved, the animals were on their way to a better life.

Levi, an older cattle dog who was going deaf, had been at the shelter for several weeks when a man came in one day on his Harley. After a trial sleepover, he fell in love with this loyal old mutt and returned to fill out adoption papers. The dog loved riding on the motorcycle's side cart with his new owner, who had a custom leather jacket made for Levi to match his own. I don't know what this dog's life was before, but I'm sure it didn't involve hot wheels and sunglasses.

It was common for people who'd recently had a beloved pet pass to come in and donate their leashes, toys, and food.

One day, an older man who seemed heartbroken came in to donate his dog's belongings. He said he'd never want another dog as he "couldn't go through that again." Just then, an adorable peagle (Pekingese mixed with beagle) came bounding into the front office to go for a walk.

It caught the eye of the man, whose face lit up as he started to smile. "Who is this?" he asked, as the puppy ran over to him. I didn't always know how these stories would end. Sometimes I just got to witness the beginning.

My years spent volunteering at the animal shelter changed my life in countless ways. I'd gone into it hoping to meet some great dogs. But I also met some great people who renewed my faith in humanity.

A retired couple stopped in one day, and the woman said, "Show us the cat who's been here the longest." That was Bella, a sweet black-and-white feline who'd been living in a cage for 18 months. She'd gone on multiple sleepovers with different families but always came back.

As soon as we brought her out, the couple said, "We'll take her." She was adopted that day. They didn't want the prettiest or most affectionate cat or a certain breed or color; they wanted the one who most needed a home. Angels walk among us, I thought.

My home life changed as well. A three-legged French bulldog named Sugar was found one morning in a parking lot and brought into the shelter. She had health issues and poor eyesight. The entire staff fell in love with her and encouraged me to adopt her. I did, and she returned with me each Tuesday to "work a shift" in my lap at the front desk.

Up until then, my family had only had a purebred. But now, three shelter dogs later, I'd never have anything but a rescue. I'm a sucker for a happy ending.

– Courtenay Rudzinski

Easter's message of gratitude and love

As Easter approaches, many think of spring and little children hunting for Easter eggs. As a child, that's certainly what I looked forward to as Easter Sunday approached!

But growing into my teens, I became more aware of the deeper elements relating to Easter. This certainly included the joy of Jesus' resurrection, but also the dark days prior to his resurrection. How can these elements be reconciled?

As a student of Christian Science, searching for a clearer understanding of the Easter message, I found this statement from the discoverer of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy, in the "Manual of The Mother Church": "Gratitude and love should abide in every heart each day of all the years. Those sacred words of our beloved Master, 'Let the dead bury their dead,' and 'Follow thou me,' appeal to daily Christian endeavors for the living whereby to exemplify our risen Lord" (p. 60).

Gratitude and love directly counteract ingratitude and hatred, the elements of thought that put Jesus on the cross and crucified him. Jesus prayed for his enemies, even in the face of his own death. And ultimately, he triumphed over the crucifixion, proving divine Love and Truth, God, to be victorious.

Goodness and love emanate from divine Love. They are reflected by God's creation, man. So it's natural for each of us to feel gratitude for God and His constant care for His spiritual offspring.

Jesus embodied gratitude and love and other spiritual qualities, and this led to his resurrection. Through communion with God, Jesus rose from the grave in dominion over the material senses.

None of us is faced with the unique challenges that Jesus faced. But whatever difficulty we may encounter, Christ – the divine nature that Jesus manifested – is here to help us follow in the life-affirming path that Christ Jesus taught.

Many years ago, I knew an individual who was overbearing. Sometimes, I feared even answering the phone, as it might have been this person calling with a torrent of unjust accusations.

Finally, I began to pray about this problem. I thought of the Bible account of Jesus surrounded by a crowd that wanted to throw him off a cliff, yet he passed through them unseen, untouched, and unbothered (see Luke 4:28-30). As God's loved children, we cannot be victims of hatred and anger, which have no place in infinite Love.

Praying to better understand these spiritual truths, I began to see that we're all inherently capable of knowing and feeling the goodness that God expresses in all His children – and of behaving consistently with this spiritual reality. The day did come when I felt a great love toward this person. And going forward, we worked together harmoniously.

We can take heart in the message of Easter, which is not about darkness, but rather about what Jesus proved of the supremacy of God. Step by step, each of us can gain a resurrected understanding of divine Love as always victorious!

– Lynn G. Jackson

Kindling curiosity, the out-of-this-world still draws us in

Aliens began their pop culture journey more than a century ago. The promise of government UFO records, and a new film release, renews the allure.

By **Stephen Humphries** / Staff writer

It was the kind of marketing not even Hollywood money could buy. In February, Steven Spielberg's secretive summer sci-fi movie was unveiled. "Disclosure Day" is about humans discovering that they are not alone in the universe. The trailer features a mysterious crop circle and a character alleging a government cover-up. In another scene, a television weather reporter suddenly begins speaking in an alien language during a live forecast. (Translation: "Cloudy, with a chance of UFOs.")

Eleven days after the "Disclosure Day" trailer aired, President Donald Trump started talking about extraterrestrial life. In a social media post, the president wrote that he was directing government agencies, including the Department of Defense, "to begin the process of identifying and releasing government files related to alien and extraterrestrial life, unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP), and unidentified flying objects (UFOs) ..."

For Mr. Spielberg's latest close encounter of the cinematic kind, it was great timing. Since then, Mr. Trump has said that he doesn't think aliens exist. Federal agencies have yet to release new information. But no matter what the files might reveal, extraterrestrials are a subject of fascination in popular culture. Stories such as "Disclosure Day" and the imminent movie adaptation of the sci-fi novel "Project Hail Mary" invite us to reorient how we think about humankind's place in the universe.

"Movies have definitely opened us up – even more than print science fiction – to the idea that something is out there," says Fraser Sherman, author of "The Aliens Are Here: Extraterrestrial Visitors in American Cinema and Television." "There has always been a feedback loop between popular interest in the subject and movies."

Aliens' path to pop culture

Extraterrestrials first started showing up in fiction in the late 1800s. Most notably, H.G. Wells' "War of the Worlds" (1898) imagined technologically advanced invaders from Mars. They had squid-like tentacles and reptilian faces. In an alien beauty pageant, they'd be stiff competition for Jabba the Hutt.

During the early 20th century, science fiction flourished through new mediums. In 1902, the visually lavish movie "Le Voyage dans la Lune" ("A Trip to the Moon") depicted intelligent, bipedal, insect-like lunar inhabitants. Newsstand pulp publications such as "Planet Stories" featured luridly illustrated sci-fi yarns. Orson Welles' 1938 radio adaptation of "War of the Worlds" panicked some listeners who thought they'd tuned in to a report of an actual alien invasion. Extraterrestrials had become popularized.

"There were numerous places where people could be influenced by what they saw or heard," says Michael Stein, editor of "Alien

Invasions! The History of Aliens in Pop Culture."

Those fictional aliens preceded the first widely reported UFO sighting. In 1947, a pilot named Kenneth Arnold told news organizations that he saw nine flying discs. "Flying saucer" entered the popular lexicon – and science fiction. In "The Day the Earth Stood Still" (1951), the alien ship was shaped like a giant disc. The trope persisted in TV series such as "V" in the 1980s and with the 1995 blockbuster film "Independence Day."

There has been a comparable relationship between fictional depictions of extraterrestrials and the physical descriptions people have given when reporting alien contact. A similar feedback loop extends to alien conspiracy theories – for example, the alleged government cover-up of a 1947 UFO crash near Roswell, New Mexico.

"A lot of the old Roswell mythos and so on, and people's perceptions of it, are shaped by what they've seen on 'The X Files,'" says Jesse Walker, author of "The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory."

Last year, The Wall Street Journal reported that the Pentagon has spent decades spreading UFO disinformation. It created false documents and fabricated images to cover up secret weapons programs at bases such as Area 51 in the Nevada desert. Even so, many UAPs, including accounts of naval pilots encountering wingless objects capable of astonishing speeds and maneuvers, remain unexplained.

Pondering contact with extraterrestrials

But science fiction works best when it invites us to imagine fantastical elements beyond our immediate experience. In Andy Weir's bestseller "Project Hail Mary," for instance (spoiler alert), astronaut Ryland Grace is 11.9 light-years from Earth when he encounters an alien spaceship.

Mr. Weir consciously eschewed tropes of aliens that look like little gray men with egg-shaped heads. His alien resembles a large spider, but with rotating limbs and a stone-like carapace. The species lacks eyes but visualizes objects through sound waves. It lives in a different atmosphere. Ryland nicknames the alien "Rocky." Turns out that Rocky is on a mission, like Grace, to save his home planet.

The author sought to ground his fiction in science. To that end, he asked himself how that species, known in Mr. Weir's book as Eridians, could build a spaceship and leave their planet. That led him to explore ideas about the Eridian language, the formation of its civilization, and their capacity for compassion.

"If everybody in your society has that, then when something happens to me, they all come and help me," says Mr. Weir, whose book has been adapted into a movie starring Ryan Gosling as Grace, and which opened March 20. "Compassion comes from empathy. I find it hard to believe you could have one without the other."

The optimistic outlook about humans and aliens in "Project Hail Mary" is similar to that found in movies such as "Enemy Mine," "Arrival," and "Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country." They aren't engaged in war. Humans and extraterrestrials realize they share qualities in common. A shared "humanity," if you like. The "Star Trek" movie playfully gets at that idea when one of the aliens claims, "You've not experienced Shakespeare until you've read him in the original Klingon."

In "Project Hail Mary," Grace and Rocky share the ability to communicate, empathy, and compassion. Those three things provide "all the ingredients you need for friendship," says Mr. Weir, whose breakout novel, "The Martian," was also made into a film.

Mr. Weir says that if humans made contact with intelligent aliens in real life, it would be "the most important moment in hu-

man history.” The author says that the first thing that a devoutly religious person might ask is whether the aliens have souls. Many have pondered that hypothetical question.

“It will appear as if God had more than one child, so to speak, and I don’t see any problem with that,” says Avi Loeb, author of “Extraterrestrial: The First Sign of Intelligent Life Beyond Earth.” “If you believe in God being capable of creating the universe, definitely creating other siblings in our family would make a lot of sense.”

Mr. Loeb, a Harvard University astronomer, compares such a scenario with the Copernican revolution - the discovery that the Earth revolves around the sun rather than vice versa. We would have to rethink the idea of being at the center of our universe.

In the trailer for Mr. Spielberg’s “Disclosure Day,” a nun expresses a similar thought: “Why would He make such a vast universe, yet save it only for us?” ■

BOOKS

An everyman and a scholar, wrapped in an epic tale

“Son of Nobody” by Yann Martel twins the life of a foot soldier in ancient Greece with a modern-day man of letters. Martel is best known for his breakout 2002 novel “Life of Pi.”

By Sky Davis / Contributor

In Greek epics, no one listens and no one gets along,” says Harlow Donne, the protagonist of “Son of Nobody,” the latest book from Booker Prize winner and “Life of Pi” author Yann Martel.

It’s fitting that the principal character of the novel is someone steeped in the sometimes arcane world of academia. In conversation, Martel has the air of an eccentric philosophy professor, lecturing his students on the secrets of the universe – or maybe a brilliant mystic who has emerged from a long meditation. And it has been a long time since Martel has come out with a new novel: nearly 10 years.

“It’s been exactly 10 years,” he corrects me, “since the release of ‘The High Mountains of Portugal.’”

Martel rose to prominence due to the success of “Life of Pi,” his third published book. That story, about a young man who spends a surreal 227 days lost at sea in a life raft with a hyena, a tiger, and other zoo animals spread rapidly through the collective cultural imagination.

“Life of Pi” not only won him the prestigious Booker Prize, but it also spent more than a year on The New York Times Best Seller list and was adapted into a lauded film. It grossed over \$600 million at the box office, then won a Golden Globe and four Academy Awards in 2013. Later, he released a book collecting his one-way correspondence with then-Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, titled “101 Letters to a Prime Minister,” and two more novels, “Beatrice and Virgil” and the aforementioned “The High Mountains of Portugal.”

His new novel, “Son of Nobody,” features a twin narrative. One belongs to Harlow Donne, a Ph.D. student in classics who leaves his family behind in Canada to pursue a prestigious Greek translation

fellowship at Oxford University. The other follows Psoas, a rank-and-file Greek soldier who is the titular character of “The Psoad,” a lost Greek epic recounting the events of the Trojan War from a commoner’s perspective. Harlow discovers this Iliad alternative in fragments of ancient pottery and scraps of paper discovered in hidden caches, pieced together from his nearly manic travels across the former-Hellenic world.

As Harlow’s relationship with his family grows more fraught, so does Psoas’ growing unease with the war that he signed up for, but has no real stake in. Each protagonist has gone to foreign lands to seek their fortune – one to England and the other to Troy – leaving their families behind. And both mourn a particular kind of loss: the lost time spent with their children.

I asked Martel about the mirroring of these characters’ conflicts, one in love and the other in war. “Most Westerners haven’t been in a war in a long time,” Martel tells me. “So what accurately reflects a war in an individual’s life in the 21st century? A relationship.”

And there is a lot of anger in the novel. Harlow and his wife are at each other’s throats from the very beginning. Psoas’ family doesn’t appear in the novel, but he has another kind of anger: a steady, growing rage toward those in authority during the Trojan War – legendary figures like Odysseus and Agamemnon, who degrade and belittle the everyday Greek soldiers they command.

“The first word of ‘The Iliad,’ famously, means wrath,” Martel says. “The first book ever written down, at least in the West, was all about anger.”

While “The Psoad” is written in free verse instead of dactylic hexameter, the form used by Homer in “The Iliad” (Harlow claims that he doesn’t have the poetic chops to translate the form from Ancient Greek to English), the poetry feels like a Greek epic. Though one from a slightly skewed perspective, from a previously unknown storyteller. Martel has clearly done an extraordinary amount of research in order to construct Psoas’ narrative, and because of it, the meter shines.

That research was part of why “Son of Nobody” took so long to finish; it was work Martel conducted when he wasn’t caring for his four children. To do that research, he immersed himself in the Greek epics and ancient history, flying to Turkey and Greece to dive ever deeper into the project. Slowly, inexorably, he brought the pieces together.

In our conversation, Martel seemed reluctant to discuss Harlow’s part of the novel, and only touched on it when pushed. When Martel described his own visit to where Troy once stood, there was a clue.

“It’s this little dumpy archaeological site,” he says. “There’s some modest walls. Then there’s these sort of mounds. There’s nothing.”

Harlow has a similar observation when he goes to Troy, remarking, “The dolled-up remains of Troy earn no more than a quick, indifferent gander, eliciting from the average visitor no deeper reaction than ‘Really? Is that it?’”

Many times in our conversation, Martel’s thoughts paralleled Harlow’s, sometimes nearly down to the letter, at least when it came to the ancient world. As “Son of Nobody” progresses, the mirroring between Psoas and Harlow becomes so smooth that it becomes unclear whether the narrative of “The Psoad” is real or a projection of Harlow’s mind.

When asked about “The Psoad’s” reality or unreality within the narrative, or if that dichotomy matters to him, Martel had another surprising answer. “It doesn’t,” he said. Then he continued: “It doesn’t in the sense that we have no evidence for the Trojan War. If you go, it’s not even called Troy anymore.”

While Harlow is contemplative and verbose, Psoas is less so. For someone that has an epic named after him, well, he doesn't speak all that often.

"After all, he's a commoner," Martel replies when asked. "He's not supposed to speak."

I had a strange moment, where the conversation seemed to warp reality slightly, not unlike the experience of a character in one of Martel's novels. Because commoners don't speak in Greek epics, neither did Psoas. The author spoke with such conviction, seemingly not as the creator of these two characters, but as a discoverer of something that already existed, that for the briefest moment, I found myself wondering: Did Yann Martel, celebrated novelist, actually find fragments of a lost Greek epic? Is he Harlow?

But then, a much more likely, though equally odd notion replaced it. Did the author want to write a Greek epic, but knew that it wouldn't be marketable, so instead wound it tight with the trappings of contemporary literary fiction? Was Harlow's life, with its many tragedies, just a vehicle to publish Martel's own Greek epic?

Either way, "Son of Nobody" touches on many contemporary concerns, even with its roots in classical storytelling and mythology. The ancient world was ruled by elites, a sentiment that is shared by many about our contemporary world. How do we as people take on the great machinery of politics? Who are we in the face of that?

"In 'The Iliad,' there's only one commoner who speaks," Martel tells me. "He's the only one who says something that seems totally commonsensical: Why are we here? What are we getting from this?"

How does one live life within the confines of such a system? Through Harlow and Psoas, readers see many threads wound together in a Gordian knot: grief and rage, both personal and political – and the yearning for justice, for love, and, always, for more time. ■

BEST BOOKS OF MARCH

What Monitor reviewers like best this month.

Son of Nobody

by Yann Martel

"Life of Pi" author Yann Martel again flexes his extraordinary imagination in this latest novel. A Canadian classicist, stalled on his dissertation about Homer's "Iliad," leaves his wife and young daughter (named Helen, of course) for a yearlong fellowship at Oxford. The scholar, Harlow Donne, becomes obsessed by fragments of Greek text on scraps of shredded parchment, which he patches together to create an inventive account of the Trojan War from the perspective not of gods or nobility but of commoners, including a "son of nobody" named Psoas. The pages of Martel's novel are split horizontally. There's the so-called lost epic, which Harlow dubs "The Psoad," on the upper half, and his highly personal commentary below, which links the horror and insensibility of war with the tragic loss of his marriage and young daughter. "Son of Nobody" joins other brilliant novels involving deranged scholars, including Vladimir Nabokov's "Pale Fire." (See author interview on page 40.)

Python's Kiss

by Louise Erdrich

Award-winning author Louise Erdrich follows up "The Mighty Red" with a new collection of short stories teeming with snakes and cats, travelers and troubadours, survivors and secrets. While the speculative fiction wobbles, most of the stories grab and hold.

"The Hollow Children," a haunting chronicle of a bus driver piloting his morning pickup of schoolchildren through a blizzard, and "Amelia," about the friendship between an antsy teenage girl and the stylish customer who frequents the local KFC during her shifts, are standouts.

I Hope You Find What You're Looking For

by Bsrat Mezghebe

In her winning debut novel, Bsrat Mezghebe aims a compassionate eye and skilled pen on the tight-knit Eritrean community in Washington, D.C. Central to the tale are 12-year-old bookworm Lydia; her former freedom fighter mom, Elsa; their generous injera-making neighbor Zewdi; and a newly arrived cousin with big thoughts of his own. As the storytelling shifts between Washington in 1991 and Elsa's rebel days in Eritrea 15 years earlier, each character grapples with family, purpose, and the pursuit of ideals.

The Woman and Her Stars

by Penny Haw

In Georgian-era England, Caroline Herschel is rescued from a life of servitude by her devoted brother, William, and ushered into London's music scene. Her heavenly voice gives her a sense of purpose. When William becomes the king's astronomer, Caroline assists him, and then determinedly becomes the first woman to discover a comet. This charming historical novel, based on Herschel's true story, shines brightly with memorable characters, and an inspiring leading lady realizing her worth.

How To Write a Love Story

by Catherine Walsh

As Ciara Sheridan struggles to write the final volume of her late father's bestselling fantasy series, Sam, her dad's New York-based editor, travels to Ireland to lend support. So much rides on this volume. The two clash, but soon discover they share more than a love of her father's work. Catherine Walsh writes a delightful, believable rom-com tailor-made for book lovers.

Ruins

by Lily Brooks-Dalton

Ember lives 3,000 years in the future, post "Crisis" era, working as an academic in archaeology. When the opportunity finally comes to pursue her foundering research's central questions about pre-Crisis peoples, she jumps, dropping everything to lead the expedition into uncharted waters. Thought-provoking, exciting, and sometimes ugh-inducing (Ember is one selfish protagonist), the story captivates.

The Shock of the Light

by Lori Inglis Hall

This World War II novel centers on close-knit British twins, Tessa and Theo. Recruited by the Royal Air Force, Theo returns home after the war realizing his sister, one of 39 Special Operations Executive women spies, is still missing. Theo devotes himself to finding her. Lori Inglis Hall's thoroughly researched, well-plotted book channels the heartbreak and humanity of wartime, its aftermath, and love's redeeming power.

The Star From Calcutta

by Sujata Massey

Bombay's sole female solicitor, Perveen Mistry, faces a new case in Sujata Massey's latest 1920s whodunit. As monsoon season drags

on, ever-curious Perveen must investigate the death of a British film censor in the wee hours of a glitzy party stuffed with stars, investors, and suspicious hangers-on. There are twists, turns, and jolts of action; still, the unrushed storytelling gives the city's vivid landmarks – from Chowpatty Beach to Malabar Hill – time to glow.

Daughter of Egypt

by Marie Benedict

This gorgeous, suspenseful novel celebrates two captivating women. In 1920s Egypt, Lady Evelyn Herbert; her father, Lord Carnarvon; and archaeologist Howard Carter search for boy Pharaoh Tutankhamun's treasure-filled tomb. Three thousand years ago, Egypt's most successful woman pharaoh, Hatshepsut, disappeared, and signs of her reign were mysteriously erased. The 20th-century tomb-seeking trio add Hatshepsut to their dangerous excavating adventures.

Celestial Lights

by Cecile Pin

Cecile Pin's beautiful and profound novel tells the story of a boy born on the day the Challenger space shuttle exploded and fell into the sea. He grows up to become a legendary astronaut sent by a visionary billionaire on a 10-year mission to the distant moon Europa. As he leaves his cherished wife and son, Ollie examines his life choices in poignant flashbacks.

Railsong

by Rahul Bhattacharya

Rahul Bhattacharya's generous storytelling captures the coming-of-age of Charu Chitol, a railwayman's daughter in newly independent India. Charu dreams of escaping poverty, domesticity, and patriarchal society for modern life in Bombay, and hopes to marry for love. Amid a country undergoing change, Charu forges her future with optimism.

Judy Blume: A Life

by Mark Oppenheimer

Mark Oppenheimer's affectionate biography traces the beloved author's life and work in exhaustive and illuminating detail. Written with its subject's cooperation, the book offers insight into how Judy Blume's background and experiences provided raw material for her classic young-adult novels, including "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret" and "Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself."

Cosmic Music

by Andy Beta

The life of jazz virtuoso Alice Coltrane has often been overlooked in favor of her husband, the late John Coltrane, one of the most influential figures in jazz. But in Andy Beta's comprehensive biography, readers get to know the groundbreaking musician as she finds both musical and spiritual transformation.

The Westerners

by Megan Kate Nelson

Historian Megan Kate Nelson's compelling narrative offers an expansive and eye-opening view of the 19th-century American West. Through the stories of fascinating but little-known people in the region, she demonstrates that white women and Indigenous, Black, Mexican, and Asian women and men were as vital to the frontier experience as the white male pioneers of national myth.

When the Forest Breathes

by Suzanne Simard

Suzanne Simard is a paradigm-shifting researcher in forest ecology. Her first book, "Finding the Mother Tree," argued that trees communicate with one another, share carbon and other resources through mycorrhizal networks underground, and forge cooperative relationships with their own kind as well as with other species in their immediate environment. "When the Forest Breathes" combines personal memoir with descriptions of her scientific investigations. It serves as an impassioned plea for preserving forests and helping them regenerate. ■

Crossword

ACROSS

- 1. Hit the books late
- 5. Vocally expressed
- 9. Kin of "Ee-ewww!"
- 12. Monstrous
- 13. Ceiling fan part
- 14. Regretful herb?
- 15. Deviation
- 17. Sweat shop?
- 18. Toothpaste option
- 19. Go formal
- 21. Ballot caster
- 24. Ominous choice
- 26. Who or where follower
- 27. Awful, weatherwise
- 29. It may be picked up or set
- 33. Round number?
- 34. Bead makeup
- 36. Old Microsoft product

- 37. Supporter of nature
- 39. Pinocchio's bane
- 40. Speed (by)
- 41. Parroted
- 43. Wee
- 45. Hobnobs
- 48. Bound
- 49. Murphy's is one
- 50. Adages
- 56. Balloon filler
- 57. Hiss-maker
- 58. You, to Shakespeare
- 59. Paper towel thickness
- 60. "And God ____ the firmament" (Genesis)
- 61. Promote big-time

DOWN

- 1. Tea in China
- 2. Spices for barbecue
- 3. Mark another birthday

- 4. Join
- 5. Geometric shape
- 6. Turned tail
- 7. Very old (abbr.)
- 8. The Who's "Live at ____," 1970 double-platinum album
- 9. Coax
- 10. People, informally
- 11. Skirt edges
- 16. Unoriginal show?
- 20. Standing on the street?
- 21. Roomy vehicles
- 22. Drop out
- 23. Counter piece
- 24. Legendary Spanish hero
- 25. Epic poet's prop
- 28. Fast-moving wind
- 30. Sharp implement
- 31. Originate
- 32. Cable sports network award

1	2	3	4		5	6	7	8		9	10	11
12					13					14		
15				16						17		
			18					19	20			
21	22	23				24	25					
26				27	28			29	30	31	32	
33				34				35		36		
37			38		39					40		
			41	42				43	44			
45	46	47					48					
49				50	51	52				53	54	55
56				57						58		
59				60						61		

© Lovatts Puzzles

- 35. Perfume ingredient
- 38. It's a welcome site
- 42. Writing by David
- 44. Head of fashion?
- 45. Show one's appreciation
- 46. Frozen drops?
- 47. In an unexpected direction
- 48. Stirred
- 51. Irritant for a princess
- 52. Was holding
- 53. Sheepish
- 54. Linoleum cleaner
- 55. Instigate litigation

Sudoku difficulty: ★★☆☆

	3		7					
8	5	9	4			2		
				9				6
						8		
1		3	5					
	9			1				4
	8	2		7				9
5	6					3		
	4							

Crossword and Sudoku solutions

E	P	Y	H		E	D	A	M		L	P	
U	S	H	T	K	A	L	E	A		R	A	
S	M	S	I	R	O	H	A	P		W	L	
				D	E	W	E	S		C	H	A
				T	E	D	E	P		A	V	
				N	E	N				S	T	
				Z	S	E	L	I		E	M	
				O	S	R	E	A		C	N	
				D	O	S	E	L		N	I	
				P	A	C	E	U		G	L	
				S	E	L	S	E		R	O	
				S	E	S	D	E		L	G	
				M	Y	G	E	R		R	A	
				U	G	H	A	L		O	R	

7	2	6	5	8	3	1	4	9
8	3	4	6	9	2	7	1	5
5	1	9	4	7	8	2	6	3
4	5	7	3	1	2	8	6	9
1	7	3	5	4	6	8	9	2
4	2	5	6	7	8	9	1	3
7	1	4	8	9	2	5	3	6
8	5	9	4	3	6	2	7	1
9	3	6	7	5	1	4	8	2

How to do Sudoku

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