THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

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

– MARY BAKER EDDY

WEEK OF FEBRUARY 9, 2026 | VOLUME 118 – ISSUE 12

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Chatting with Ben about his – and our – challenges

It's not every day that a reporter gets an email from Ben Franklin.

In the course of reporting a story on historical reenactors from the American Revolutionary War period, I was in regular email contact with two Ben Franklins, one George Washington, and an 18th-century tavern owner from the British colony of New Hampshire. One of the Bens invited me to read his Substack column. It reads exactly like Ben Franklin would have written it if he did, in fact, live in a society that had capitalized on the newly discovered energy source of electricity, taken a magical carriage ride through the Industrial Age to the computer age, and ditched typeset printing tools for digital publishing.

Why would a Monitor reporter do any of this? The answer is right there in the headlines we read – or avoid reading – every day. Americans are grappling with an onslaught of issues that call into question just what holds us together as a nation, and they are doing this at the very moment the country is preparing to celebrate the 250th year of its independence. Taking a look at the issues that America's founders, who met in Philadelphia to argue, negotiate, compromise, and finally write the Declaration of Independence, offers a chance to see how far America has come as a democracy, and how far it has yet to go.

By Scott Baldauf
Staff writer

Many of the issues that beset us today also seemed unsolvable in 1776. So, the Founding Fathers did what anyone would do: They did the best they could, cobbled together the best solution they could, and moved on to the next issue. As Americans debate modern problems of immigration, taxation, foreign policy, or personal choice, it is reasonable to question what the founders would have done. More than one of the historians I talked with quoted Thomas Jefferson:

"I am certainly not an advocate for frequent & untried changes in laws and constitutions ... but I know also that laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind ... we might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy, as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors."

We hope you find this brief step back into the 18th century useful in understanding the origins of the 21st-century world we live in today. ▪

IRAN

After violence, Iran tries to change the narrative

In the wake of a brutal crackdown on protesters, analysts say, Iran's leaders are engaged in a broad effort to create an alternative narrative.

The mass demonstrations, which were triggered by economic grievances, turned into vehicles for antiregime anger throughout December and January. The government response was violent, eyewitnesses say, with state actors killing thousands of protesters.

But leaders now say it was not the state that was responsible for this repression. Instead, they blame "terrorist elements" for the violence.

Iranian state television's prime-time "Eyewitness" program, for instance, is telling the story of legitimate street protests hijacked by armed agents of the United States and Israel bent on boosting the death toll – and hastening the regime's collapse.

The program now broadcasts daily on state TV, while an internet blackout continues to throttle other news sources.

There is a "long-standing pattern of airing false statements and forced, torture-tainted confessions to blame killings and injuries on nonstate actors," says Raha Bahreini, a human rights lawyer and Iran researcher for Amnesty International.

The latest crackdown by Iranian authorities has been "far more shocking" than previous rounds of nationwide protests in 2017, 2019, and 2022, she says, and should prompt the United Nations' referral of Iran to the International Criminal Court for crimes under international law.

Iranian officials have declared more than 3,000 people dead. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, blamed U.S. President Donald Trump – whose social media posts encouraged Iranian protesters and promised to come to their "rescue" – for the "thousands" killed by "enemy agents."

The U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency, which has collated accurate data in the past, on Jan. 23 reported 5,002 confirmed deaths, with 9,787 others "still under investigation." Officials say more than 100 security force members also died.

Still, Iran's security organs have advanced their narrative by using public comments made by Mr. Trump and Israeli officials, who explicitly stated that Israel's Mossad intelligence service was active in Iran.

The day after protests began on Dec. 28, for example, Mossad posted on its Persian-language X account: "Let's come out to the streets together. The time has come. We are with you. Not just from afar and verbally. We are with you in the field as well."

– Scott Peterson / Staff writer

WORLD

Gold breaks a record, passing $5,000 per ounce for the first time

Gold prices hit a record high last month, surpassing the U.S. dollar as the largest global reserve asset. Silver also reached a historic high, reaching $110 per ounce. The rise in precious metals and parallel weakening of the dollar, which has now fallen to a record low against the Swiss franc, reflect rising global economic uncertainty, analysts say.

Many investors consider gold a "safe haven" asset that retains its value during market instability. Analysts point to a number of reasons for economic anxiety, from the potential for more U.S. tariffs to rising inflation. Small investors as well as larger financial institutions are purchasing gold, according to news reports.

The price of gold surpassed $5,000 per ounce in January. That comes after a 64% increase in 2025, according to multiple market price summaries. A number of large investment banks, including Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank, have predicted that value continues to rise in 2026.

– Staff

UNITED STATES

Testing the independence of military paper Stars and Stripes

For more than a century, the newspaper Stars and Stripes has published stories of deep interest to troops and their families. In recent years, stories have delved into everything from black mold in military housing to child neglect in base day care centers to U.S. agreements with host countries that thwart military spouses' ability to work.

Partially funded by the Department of Defense, the soldier-produced daily has long operated free from Pentagon censorship. Until now.

The Trump administration has announced plans to exert control over the newspaper to "refocus its content away from woke distractions that syphon morale, and adapt it to serve a new generation of service members." That's according to a social media post from Pentagon press secretary Sean Parnell.

The Trump administration tried to shut down the newspaper in 2020, during the president's first term. But the move was met with protest, including from a bipartisan group of senators who called the publication "an essential part of our nation's freedom of the press that serves the very population charged with defending that freedom."

President Trump then reversed course and weighed in, tweeting that the U.S. would not be cutting funding to Stars and Stripes "under my watch."

The paper has not just informed American troops over the years. It has also spoken for them, advocates say. The Trump administration's announcement, as a result, is prompting concerns that service members could be denied the support such reporting provides.

Going forward, Mr. Parnell wrote, the newspaper will "be custom tailored to our warfighters" with a focus on "war fighting, weapons systems, fitness, lethality, survivability, and ALL THINGS MILITARY."

– Anna Mulrine Grobe / Staff writer

UNITED STATES

Immigration boosted Trump. Now, it may drag the GOP down.

Immigration was a winning campaign issue for President Trump in 2024 and undergirded his approval ratings early in his presidency. But what had been a source of political strength might now be turning into a liability for the president – and, potentially, for Republican lawmakers who back his hard-line policies on sending federal agents to cities to hunt for immigrants with statuses under scrutiny.

Tumult in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, where Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers have fatally shot two residents, has further eroded Mr. Trump's poll standings. While his approval rating on immigration is still higher than that of Democratic President Joe Biden in the final year of his term, a growing percentage of citizens disapproved of Mr. Trump's approach, according to a batch of recent polls.

A Reuters poll in late January found that 39% of Americans approve of Mr. Trump's immigration policies. In December 2024, 26% of Americans approved of Mr. Biden's immigration policies.

Voters are still broadly in favor of securing the southern border, and many give Mr. Trump credit for achieving that in the first months of his presidency.

But as federal agents continue to surge in cities far from the southern border, the violence around deportation-related arrests appears to be reframing the issue for many voters. Even some people who support a tough line on deportations have growing concerns about how federal agents are acting, says Dante Scala, a politics professor at the University of New Hampshire.

"Looking at what's happening in Minnesota, [voters are being] confronted with the idea that this force called ICE appears to be deployed against them, or people like them, and that, I think, changes things," says Professor Scala, who studies presidential voting patterns.

Podcaster Joe Rogan, a political independent who has in the past expressed support for Mr. Trump, was scathing about ICE's conduct in Minnesota, comparing it with the Gestapo. "You don't want militarized people in the streets just roaming around, snatching people up, many of which turn out to actually be U.S. citizens that just don't have their papers on them," he said.

– Simon Montlake and Sarah Matusek / Staff writers

UKRAINE

Ukrainians want justice for Russian abuses. They sense an era of impunity.

Ukrainian soldier Oleksandr Kovalchuk was first taken prisoner in the Kharkiv region of Ukraine in April 2022. He survived beatings and torture, the psychological abuse and acute weight loss, until he was released in a prisoner exchange in June 2025.

Now back home in Kharkiv, Mr. Kovalchuk is adding his testimony to the long and growing list of cases of alleged war crimes and human rights abuses committed against Ukrainians – civilian and military – by Russia both before and during its invasion in February 2022.

The Ukrainian government says it has registered close to 180,000 claims and verified cases of Russian war crimes and human rights abuses committed over the course of the war.

Those cases range from the high-profile – the summary executions in Bucha outside Kyiv in 2022, the mass graves of Izium, and the mass abduction of Ukrainian children from occupied territories – to the increasingly common drone and missile attacks on civilian infrastructure. Widespread but less attention-grabbing cases of military prisoner torture and executions have been recorded as well.

Some experts say that Russia's use of drones to terrorize Ukrainian civilians and destabilize communities should be considered a new kind of war crime.

Mr. Kovalchuk says he wants to help establish the record and that he hopes to someday see the perpetrators punished.

Along with his son Dmytro – an army truck driver who was captured and held prisoner for more than three years – Mr. Kovalchuk is working with a human rights group to establish the record of his imprisonment and abuse.

Many international affairs analysts say the world is witnessing a new impunity, especially for the most powerful leaders, as a postwar international justice system erodes in the face of mounting pressure from major powers.

Mr. Putin has responded to his 2023 indictment by the International Criminal Court over the abduction of Ukrainian children with warrants for the arrest of ICC staff.

– Howard LaFranchi / Staff writer

CHINA

As China's retirement age rises, 'perceptions of unfairness' grow

Facing a rapidly aging population, which threatens to bankrupt the country's pension system, Beijing last year started implementing its first increase in retirement age since the 1950s.

Younger workers will be affected most, with the retirement age for men gradually increasing from 60 to 63 over the next several years.

The retirement age for women will rise from 50 to 55 for blue-collar workers, and from 55 to 58 for white-collar workers.

Though China's statutory retirement ages are low by global standards, the change represents a hardship, especially for those who are engaged in physical labor or who face greater job insecurity. Workers' required contribution periods – or the amount of time the workers or their employer must pay into the pension system in order to reap the benefits – will also increase from 15 to 20 years between 2030 and 2039.

About 22% of China's population is over age 60, a figure projected to rise to 28% – or 402 million people – by 2040. The trend is driven by longer life expectancies and declining birth rates, exacerbated by China's decades-long one-child policy that lasted until 2016.

"If the pension age is fixed and people are living longer, pensions are going to get more expensive, and eventually the system is going to blow a gasket," says Nicholas Barr, an economics professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

A 2019 report by the state-run Chinese Academy of Social Sciences predicted that, without reforms, the main state fund that finances future pensions would be depleted by 2035.

"There has to be an increase in the state pension age," says Dr. Barr, who advised China on pension reforms from 2005 to 2010. "But that leaves a lot of other problems unsolved," including deep inequalities in China's pension system, and hard economic tradeoffs needed to sustain its funding.

The decision to raise the retirement age sparked criticism online, where discussions on pension reform are full of "disagreement regarding ... responsibility and cost sharing" between workers and corporations, says Xian Huang, an associate professor of comparative politics at Rutgers University, who researches China's social welfare system.

Some comments suggested the change is unrealistic and penalizes young people. They also questioned whether private companies would employ older workers, noting how Chinese tech companies regularly lay off workers over the age of 35.

"Tell me," asked one netizen, "what are we supposed to do for the remaining 30 years of our lives?"

But when it comes time for that next generation to retire, their pensions will depend largely on where they were born and live.

Of the more than 1 billion Chinese who participate in the system, about 534 million fall under a plan for urban employees and retirees that, in 2023, paid recipients about 3,742 yuan, or $537, a month.

Yet another 538 million people – rural residents, including migrants and unsalaried urban workers – qualify for a far less generous plan that in 2023 paid about 223 yuan, or $32, a month.

This reflects a fundamental inequality in Chinese society between rural and urban communities.

Civil servants and other government employees receive larger pensions, currently estimated at 6,000 to 7,000 yuan a month, according to a 2025 report by the Berlin-based Mercator Institute for China Studies.

"We have seen ... increasing perceptions of unfairness," and declining faith in China's meritocracy, Dr. Huang says. People believe regional disparities determine their economic well-being, the tax system, and other factors – rather than how hard they work, she says.

Frustration has led pensioners to protest local government cuts to their health care benefits in recent years.

Aware of the political sensitivity of pension reform, China's leaders have moved slowly to address it, despite mounting demographic and economic pressures. Beijing first floated the idea of raising the retirement age more than a decade ago.

Beijing's goal is to replace the decentralized, regional management of pensions with a national system by 2035.

– Ann Scott Tyson / Staff writer

UNITED STATES

Judge barred FBI from examining reporter's devices

Following the raid of Washington Post reporter Hannah Natanson's home in January, U.S. federal Judge William Porter temporarily blocked federal prosecutors from reviewing materials collected in that search.

The Washington Post had asked for the return of Ms. Natanson's phone, laptops, and other items, saying the seizure would have a detrimental effect on journalists. The Washington Post argued that the FBI's actions violated protections guaranteed under the First Amendment, such as free speech and freedom of the press.

Authorities said the search was part of a probe into a Pentagon contractor who was accused of illegally obtaining classified material – specifically, national defense information. However, Judge Porter ruled the FBI could not look over the materials until the case is reviewed in February.

"The outrageous seizure of our reporter's confidential newsgathering materials chills speech, cripples reporting, and inflicts irreparable harm every day the government keeps its hands on these materials," The Washington Post said in a statement announcing its legal challenge.

Free-press groups said the search of a journalist's home marked an escalation of the Trump administration's actions against the news media and could discourage newsgathering activity.

Former Washington Post Editor Marty Baron criticized the FBI's actions in a LinkedIn post, stating it is "a clear and appalling sign that this administration will impose no limits on its aggression against an independent press."

Attorney General Pam Bondi said that federal agents executed the search at the request of the Defense Department to protect U.S. national security. President Donald Trump's Justice Department last year reversed a policy that had barred prosecutors from seizing records from reporters in most circumstances.

– Staff, Reuters

OUR WORLD

'The number of billionaires has surpassed 3,000 for the first time. ...

"Meanwhile, one in four people globally face hunger." That's the conclusion of a survey of global inequality released by Oxfam. Its research shows a record number of billionaires were created last year, their collective wealth has grown by 81% – $8.2 trillion – since 2020, and that this money could end extreme poverty 26 times over.

– Ryan Lenora Brown / Special correspondent

Russia looks to India amid wartime labor shortage

The war in Ukraine has created a severe labor shortage in Russia, as workers move to wartime industries or go to the front line. Fears of terrorism have led to crackdowns against migrant workers from Central Asia, most of them Muslims. The solution, Russian media reports say, has been to recruit workers from India. Employment agencies are promoting the influx of Indians, about 70,000 of whom serve as janitors, builders, and workers in light industry. Up to 800,000 are expected.

– Fred Weir / Special correspondent

China sees itself as 'locomotive' of global trade

Despite tariffs imposed by the United States, China generated a world-record trade surplus of nearly $1.2 trillion in 2025. Its exports to the U.S. dropped 20%, but the country boosted exports with the rest of the world – especially Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America – for a 5.5% gain overall compared with 2024, according to Chinese customs data. The growth buoyed China's economy overall, feeding into official narratives touting its resilience amid U.S. pressure. The data underscores China's "role as both locomotive and stabilizer of the global supply chain," the state-run Global Times says.

– Ann Scott Tyson / Staff writer

'The world will dance'

Bad Bunny promised this in a toe-tapping trailer previewing his scheduled Feb. 8 Super Bowl halftime gig. The Puerto Rican reggaeton superstar sings almost exclusively in Spanish, but his music is conquering the English-speaking world, outpacing the likes of Taylor Swift and Beyoncé in Billboard rankings. He skipped the continental United States on his latest tour, citing fears that Immigration and Customs Enforcement would target his fans.

– Whitney Eulich / Special correspondent

RIO DE JANEIRO

Brazil's Lula is on the left. So how has he avoided Trump's scorn?

President Trump is creating a new regional order in Latin America, broadly drawn along ideological lines.

By Constance Malleret / Contributor

In a new regional order that U.S. President Donald Trump has imposed on Latin America, Brazil has emerged as something of an outlier.

The divide has broadly been drawn along ideological lines in the region, with the Trump administration viewing conservative leaders as potential partners, and leftists as enemies.

But Brazil, led by a social democrat, is the only country in South America that stood up to Mr. Trump's threats and was able to re-establish a working relationship as a result. This speaks to Brazil's decades-long tradition of pragmatic foreign policy, focused on maintaining good relationships with all partners and staying out of conflicts.

The approach was cultivated by left-wing President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, commonly known as Lula, over two previous terms in office.

"Brazil has this position of a cautious foreign policy: seeking to always avoid confrontation, insisting on nonintervention and [national] sovereignty," says Marsílea Gombata, a senior researcher in international relations at the University of São Paulo. But, she adds, this isn't game over. In the wake of the United States' Jan. 3 military incursion in Venezuela and the ouster there of President Nicolás Maduro, "now is a very delicate moment for Brazil."

The Brazilian government announced that Lula is expected to visit the White House this month.

Trump's 180

Last July, Mr. Trump used 50% total tariffs and sanctions to try to pressure Brazil into dropping legal charges against former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. The far-right populist, sometimes nicknamed "The Trump of the Tropics," faced trial for attempting a coup after losing reelection in 2022. Lula's government refused to bend, and Mr. Bolsonaro was sentenced in September to 27 years in prison, while Brazilian diplomats and business leaders sought a negotiated way out of the tariffs.

Mr. Trump was quick to drop his support for Mr. Bolsonaro after the conviction, speaking of his "excellent chemistry" with Lula just days later. In November, the U.S. lifted the 40% surplus tariffs on a number of Brazilian agricultural products. Sanctions against a Brazilian Supreme Court justice and his wife were lifted the following month. "I like him," Mr. Trump said of Lula after a phone call in December.

Domestically, these events were seen as a victory over both Mr. Bolsonaro and the U.S., boosting Lula's profile ahead of the presidential election this October. He'll be seeking reelection for a fourth nonconsecutive term.

By comparison, in neighboring Colombia, Gustavo Petro has been a constant target of President Trump's ire, even after he backed down and accepted deportation flights from the U.S. in January 2025, following threats of tariffs and travel bans when he first refused them. Mr. Trump has suggested that Mr. Petro could face an end similar to that of Mr. Maduro in Venezuela.

Analysts see several reasons behind Brazil's reversal of fortunes. Brazil had more leeway to negotiate as it is less economically reliant on the U.S. than some of its neighbors, says Maurício Santoro, a researcher at the Brazilian Navy's Center for Political and Strategic Studies. In Mexico, which is heavily dependent on trade with the U.S., President Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo has struggled to balance national sovereignty with maintaining a good relationship with the Trump administration.

Dr. Santoro points also to a miscalculation on Mr. Trump's part in Brazil. Allies of Mr. Bolsonaro lobbying Washington for help probably "convinced Trump that the Bolsonaro family had much more political support than it truly did," he says.

"If there's something we understand about Donald Trump, it's that he doesn't like to be on the losing side," says Thomas Traumann, a Brazilian political consultant. Mr. Bolsonaro was put under house arrest last August and began serving his sentence behind bars in November, prompting more public celebration than outrage. In a Datafolha poll published on Dec. 8, 54% of Brazilian respondents said they believed Mr. Bolsonaro's imprisonment to be fair, while 40% said it was unfair.

Now, "Lula is perhaps the only left-wing president who can claim to have a good relationship with Trump," says Dr. Santoro. He points to similarities between the two men, such as their shared tendency to follow their instincts rather than advice from bureaucrats and to favor personal negotiations.

Where to next?

But Mr. Trump's mercurial behavior casts doubt over any relationship with the United States. Take Venezuela, for instance, where the U.S. president dropped conservative opposition leader María Corina Machado to work with Delcy Rodríguez, a leading figure in Mr. Maduro's regime.

"We've seen that not everything is a done deal, and there's no way of saying the relationship will remain positive," says Dr. Gombata of the victories Brazil notched in its negotiations with the United States in recent months.

Already, Brazil has been hit by sweeping U.S. measures this month, including the suspension of immigrant visa processing and the threat of 25% tariffs on countries trading with Iran.

And the operation in Venezuela reminded Latin America that the U.S. under Mr. Trump is willing to assert control in what he considers to be his backyard.

Across the region, many wonder whether their country could be next, a fear voiced on Jan. 5 by Brazilians protesting the U.S. incursion. "We know that we have resources on our territory, principally our rare earths, which are of international interest," says political activist Rafaela Lima, standing next to signs condemning U.S. imperialism in downtown Rio de Janeiro.

In a poll published last month, 58% of Brazilian respondents said they fear the U.S. could take similar action in their country.

"Venezuela is just the first test of Trump's new national security doctrine," says Dr. Santoro. Though he finds the idea of a U.S. intervention in Brazil "unrealistic."

With elections scheduled for October, and the recent precedent of U.S. electoral interference in the region, nothing is completely

out of bounds.

In Honduras' November election, Mr. Trump backed a conservative candidate who went on to win. In Argentina, the U.S. offered a $20 billion financial lifeline on condition that President Javier Milei's right-wing party perform well in midterm elections in October, which it did.

There is real unease in Brazil, says Mr. Traumann, that similar pressures could be exerted here. Which, he says, makes maintaining good relations with Mr. Trump all the more important. ▪

TYBEE ISLAND, GA

Georgia weighs removing state income tax

As they face mounting pressure from Democrats over affordability issues, some Republican states weigh ending state income taxes in a bid for voter loyalty.

By Patrik Jonsson / Staff writer

As Georgia lawmakers began their legislative session in Atlanta earlier in January, one issue stood out as their priority: voters' wallets.

Republicans have been looking to regain ground on Americans' "affordability" concerns, an issue Democrats have capitalized on nationwide. Newly elected Democratic figures – from Zohran Mamdani, mayor of New York City, to Gov. Mikie Sherrill in New Jersey and Gov. Abigail Spanberger in Virginia – successfully campaigned on voters' cost-of-living worries.

Democrats have started tapping traditional rural GOP strongholds as well. And, in some cases, it's working. Here in Georgia, Democrats recently won two coveted seats on the Georgia Public Service Commission by protesting utility rate hikes.

Now, in a potential counter volley, Republicans in Georgia and four other traditionally conservative states – Missouri, Mississippi, Iowa, and Kentucky – are moving to abolish personal income taxes.

If successful, they would join nine other states with no income tax. Those states – Alaska, Florida, Nevada, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and Wyoming – typically rely more heavily on sales, property, or other taxes for revenue. (New Hampshire, Tennessee, and Washington also tax some investment income.)

In Georgia, state Sen. Blake Tillery of Vidalia, a Republican candidate for lieutenant governor, is leading the push for change. The goal, he says, is to ease stress on family budgets and compete with neighboring states for investment and economic growth.

Following in the footsteps of Alaska and Mississippi

If the bill is enacted, Georgia would join Mississippi to become the first states to begin phasing out income taxes since Alaska abolished them in 1980.

"Republicans in the state have long wanted to cut taxes, so that's nothing new," says M.V. (Trey) Hood III, a pollster at the University of Georgia in Athens. "What's new is putting it under the affordability moniker. And [it] does provide pretty broad tax relief for a lot of people."

The issue is coming up nationally as well. President Donald Trump has hinted at using tariffs to lower or abolish the federal income tax. But amid these tax-cut proposals, state budgeteers are struggling to fill revenue gaps to maintain legislated services.

Since most of the federal COVID-19 funding to states has ended, some states, including Georgia, now face headwinds as the Trump administration moves to curb any additional federal funding for social services, education, and emergency management.

The proposed plan in Georgia is designed to be implemented in $3 billion increments to cover the $16 billion in income tax revenue the state collects annually.

A $4,000 jolt to the wallet

The first step of Georgia's multiyear proposal would allow married couples to deduct the first $100,000 of income ($50,000 for single filers). A typical two-income couple making around $120,000 a year would, for example, have nearly $4,000 extra in their checkbook (based on the current 5.19% tax rate, plus a standard deduction). Other states are using an incremental approach to avoid shocking their budgets and risking downgrades from credit rating agencies.

To pay for the first phase of the cut, Senator Tillery pointed to a nearly $1.9 billion surplus from the previous budget year and to savings from financially savvy moves to fund capital projects. The rest, he says, could be gleaned by cutting the state's $30 billion in special interest tax credits by 10%.

In the second phase, lawmakers would trim 10% of the state's $30 billion in special interest tax credits. The final phases would rely on continued revenue from the state's budget surplus, a transition from cash to bond funding for projects, and an economic "multiplier effect" to get to zero personal income tax by 2032.

Some economists see income taxes as a drag on productivity and say that cutting or removing these taxes boosts economic activity. But there are other potential upsides to scrapping income taxes as well, economists say, such as enticing newcomers, particularly business owners and investors, to become residents.

Recent population movements may back up this theory. The nation's demographic center has been shifting in recent years toward the South and away from high-tax states. Some research suggests that tax reforms can be effectively used by states to compete for workers and capital.

"The classic lesson in public finance is simple: Tax things that don't move," says Aaron Yelowitz, a University of Kentucky economist and a fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. "That logic matters a lot for Georgia. Atlanta is far from state borders, so most consumers can't realistically avoid higher sales taxes. By contrast, high-value jobs and investment income are much easier to shift on paper." But it's a risk. For especially poor states, abolishing income taxes could affect public services and raise equity concerns.

Varying state endowments

Under Mississippi's plan, signed into law last year, the top 5% of earners would get 40% of the benefit, according to research by the liberal-leaning Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (ITEP) in Washington. And in Georgia, according to Democratic state Sen. Nan Orrock of Atlanta, over $11 billion of the total proposed tax cuts would go back into the pockets of the state's top 26% of earners. Everybody else would split $4 billion.

"Is that what the citizenry is calling for?" asked a skeptical Senator Orrock during a Senate committee meeting on Jan. 7. "Helping

the rich get richer? I don't think so."

Of the nine U.S. states that don't collect personal income taxes some are specially endowed. Texas and Alaska sit on oil and gas reserves that generate revenue for their coffers. Florida floats its budget on tourist dollars.

"The only state that has ever repealed a broad-based personal tax is Alaska" and they did it after a windfall, says Matthew Gardner, a senior fellow at ITEP. Alaska repealed its income tax in 1980, following the completion of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System. "You can't wish those kinds of unique endowments into existence."

And given federal tax cuts and the prospect of leaner federal grants to states, it feels to some policy analysts like the wrong time for states to take away a critical tool for raising revenue.

Lessons of the cornfield revolution

"It's like getting rid of your umbrella as the rain is starting," says Kim Rueben, a public finance economist in Washington.

Kansas stands out as a cautionary tale. In what was dubbed "the revolution in the cornfield," Gov. Sam Brownback in 2012 brought the tax rate to near zero for many Kansas wage earners. He promised the effort would boost the state economy.

But by 2017, the Republican-led legislature overrode Governor Brownback's veto to scrap some of the tax cuts, which had not improved employment or wages and instead led to missed state payments, a sense of constant fiscal crisis, and unfixed potholes.

Kansans elected Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly in 2018 and re-elected her in 2022.

The political risks are evident in Georgia, too. The state has a robust, diverse economy, built partly on the "new south" model that offers corporate tax breaks, inexpensive land, and social benefits including schools and health care. But the state is also a political battleground, having elected Democrats in statewide elections in 2020. Republican Gov. Brian Kemp has championed cutting rather than eliminating the state income tax, and has indirectly warned lawmakers against repeating the Kansas mistake.

In a none-too-subtle swipe at the plan during his final State of the State speech in January, Governor Kemp said his more modest proposal "doesn't promise to pay for itself years down the road or create future budget holes with today's one-time money."

So far, Republicans in the House and Senate have vowed to work together to lower tax burdens for Georgians. But questions about how and where to shift the burden of funding the commonweal without an income tax remain unanswered. ▪

WASHINGTON

60 years of civility with a side of sausage and eggs

Since 1966, the Monitor Breakfast has promoted healthy discourse between newsmakers and reporters. Here are some highlights.

When I introduce myself as a reporter for The Christian Science Monitor, the response is often: "Don't you do those breakfasts?"

Why, yes, we do. I attended many a "Sperling Breakfast" as a young Washington reporter back in the day, when the event's founder, Godfrey "Budge" Sperling, ran the show. Then, under his successor, David Cook, they became the Monitor Breakfast – but the goal was the same: Invite a newsmaker and a bunch of reporters to sit down for an hour, on the record, with a side of sausage and eggs, and have a conversation.

Our guiding principle, "Light, not heat," also stands.

A new episode of our "Why We Wrote This" podcast celebrates the 60th anniversary of Monitor Breakfasts, and some of the more memorable moments. I'm the current host, and I had fun reminiscing. There was the "crybaby" incident with then-Speaker Newt Gingrich, the "walking around money" scandal with GOP consultant Ed Rollins, and, of course, the four U.S. presidents who joined our table. In an era in which civility is increasingly in short supply, we're proud of the tradition our breakfast represents.

Here are some excerpts from a conversation I had with Dave. They have been edited for length and clarity. You can hear the full, 40-minute exchange on the Monitor's "Why We Wrote This" podcast.

– Linda Feldmann

Linda Feldmann: Feb. 8, 1966, is a red-letter day in Monitor history. The assistant Washington bureau chief at the time, Godfrey "Budge" Sperling, hosted a lunch gathering at the National Press Club with about a dozen reporters for an old friend who was running for the Senate, Charles Percy of Illinois. What Budge didn't know at the time was that he was starting a long-enduring Washington institution, the Sperling Breakfast, now known as the Monitor Breakfast. The other reporters thought it was so great, they suggested that Budge keep doing them, but in the morning, before things got busy. Now, 60 years later, we're closing in on 4,000 breakfasts and a few lunches and coffees.

▪ ▪ ▪

I'd love to hear a bit more about Budge, whom I also knew, but really toward the end of his career. Who was he, and what made him so well suited to take on this role as, effectively, the founder of the Washington power breakfast?

David Cook: Well, he was a relentlessly competitive, ambitious, friendly guy. He was trained first in journalism and then as a lawyer, and went to work for the Monitor after serving in

the Army Air Corps, where in a three-year period he rose from private to major, which sort of tells you something about Budge and his work ethic and smarts after spending a number of years in Boston.

He started actually as a circulation salesperson, going door to door, talking to possible Monitor subscribers. So, after doing that, we owed him something anyway. He went to work in the newsroom and after several years, got sent first to Chicago and then to the New York bureau and then, finally, to Washington. And along the way, he did just a lot of in-the-field reporting.

In 1959, he spent the day sitting with John Kennedy in Kennedy's private plane, called the Caroline, while Kennedy toured the Midwest, deciding about his presidential ambitions, preparing to run for president. [He] interviewed [Harry] Truman at his home in Missouri; spent some time in 1966, believe it or not, in the backseat of Ronald and Nancy Reagan's Chevy as Reagan toured California thinking about running for governor. So, he had a lot of experience [with] in-the-field reporting, and that paid big dividends when he got to Washington because he knew a lot of people, and he knew a lot of the other reporters.

Feldmann: Budge certainly seemed to know everybody.

Cook: There was a lot of affection for Budge. I remember early on in hosting, we were doing a session with Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser, and he walked into the breakfast room, and there was Budge, and he threw his arms around Budge and gave him a hug, which I can tell you never happened to me during my time hosting the Breakfast.

Feldmann: I almost feel like journalists have to kind of thread a needle between being accessible, friendly, with sources – friendly in that the source will feel like they're getting a fair shake, but not too cozy. I'm going to guess that Budge did a good job of finding that balance.

Cook: Yes, a lot of the stories that you read about Budge said that he had sort of genteel questioning abilities, which made people feel comfortable. Budge could go on with a series of questions at the top. But it was always civilized. It was always sort of Monitor-esque in terms of approach, you know. Light, not heat.

Feldmann: Right. And ... I think promising respect, civility – light, not heat – is really the key to the formula, especially in this day and age. So, who were some of Budge's other most memorable guests?

Cook: Gerald Ford had breakfast with him in February of '76. And then, just to talk about Budge's skill at making friends, when Budge's dad turned 103, Gerry Ford called him up and chatted him up. Jimmy Carter did a [Monitor] Breakfast, and then invited Budge and the then-Monitor editor, Earl Foell, to a private dinner in the White House residential quarters.

Ronald Reagan did four Monitor Breakfasts – '83, '84, '85, and '86 – which as someone who's also been in the game of trying to get people to come, that was no mean feat to get our president.

Feldmann: So, Dave, during your tenure – and you did the math – you hosted 672 Breakfasts, which is impressive. What are some of your strongest memories as the host?

Cook: Well, it's an interesting walk down that lane. To be honest, one of the ones that loomed largest was the Budge 80th birthday breakfast. I was, as I say, editor at the time, and I was struck by what he had accomplished. We were standing outside the State Dining Room. [Budge's wife], Betty Sperling, was working the crowd like a pro. There were 40 reporters there. She knew them all. They were all hugging her. And both [President] Clinton and Vice President Gore were there.

Clinton, when the thing ends, hangs around probably for another half an hour chatting up reporters. I remember my dad had been a Monitor reporter way, way back when, and I remember calling him and saying, "I've seen the most really wonderful thing, to see the Monitor and a Monitor staffer treated like that at a White House event."

Cook: What's the major change, in your view? Having TV cameras there?

Feldmann: When there's a camera on, people are performing. So, the Breakfast before Russ Vought was Steve Bannon. And I asked him, do you want me to invite C-SPAN? He did. He's like the MAGA performer. But that doesn't mean C-SPAN is going to come. They only have so many camera crews. And if Congress is in session, their mandate is to cover what's happening in Congress.

Another important thing to know is that the guests cannot dictate which reporters are in the room. I had one Breakfast during the first Trump term where I had a prominent Cabinet secretary and a robust list of reporters. And as we always do, we sent the guest's communications team, the night before, the list of the reporters, who's coming, just as a courtesy. And I heard back. "So-and-so can't be there," from this Cabinet secretary's press person.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because we don't like a story they wrote," they replied.

I said, "Well, I'm sorry, but that's not how we do this." ▪

THE EXPLAINER

BERLIN

Does the US need to own Greenland to be secure? History suggests it doesn't.

Though the prospect of taking it over is legally fraught, the island has been seen as a potentially key part of U.S. power.

By Audrey Thibert and Mark Sappenfield / Staff writers

From the end of World War II, Denmark has repeatedly acknowledged that its self-governing territory of Greenland is an important piece in the larger game of global power and has supported U.S. efforts to use the island for its own defense.

Since his first term, President Donald Trump has been saying

that neither Denmark nor Greenland alone can protect the island against the Russian and Chinese threat in the Arctic. It is that logic that has spurred his campaign to try to buy the island – a move puzzling to many experts because, when viewed through the lens of history, it seems unnecessary.

Q: Why is Mr. Trump suddenly interested in Greenland?

It's not sudden. Greenland has long been seen as a potentially key part of American power and defense.

In the latter half of the 19th century, "some American strategic thinkers thought that by acquiring Alaska on the west and Greenland on the east, it would put pressure on British Canada, the real prize," historian Henry William Brands Jr. recently told Le Monde. U.S. Secretary of State William Seward – who led the purchase of Alaska in 1867 – even commissioned a survey of Greenland.

In 1910, the American ambassador to Denmark proposed an "audacious" exchange, including parts of the Philippines, Denmark, and Germany that would have seen control of Greenland switch to the U.S., though a formal plan never materialized. Then Denmark rejected a U.S. offer of $100 million in gold for the island in 1946.

World War II and its aftermath appeared to largely settle the disputes. During the war, small camps of German troops used Greenland to collect data on weather patterns heading toward European battlefields. U.S. troops helped roust them from the island.

Since then, the U.S. and Denmark have largely been in lockstep.

That includes the construction in 1951 of Thule Air Base, which at one time housed nuclear weapons and is now used for U.S. missile defense (and renamed Pituffik Space Base). It also included Project Iceworm, which would have built train lines under the ice cap to secretly ferry nuclear weapons across the island.

That plan was rejected, but it speaks broadly to the ambitions America has had in Greenland for decades – and Denmark's repeated willingness to give the U.S. wide latitude.

Q: So why does the U.S. say it needs to "buy" Greenland for national security?

The U.S. should be able to accomplish virtually any strategic aim without taking over the island, says Paul Bierman, author of "When the Ice Is Gone," a military and scientific history of Greenland.

That's thanks to a 1951 treaty between the U.S. and Denmark, still in effect, which allows the U.S. to build and operate military bases in Greenland and act with near-total immunity within designated "defense areas."

Michael Williams, an associate professor of international affairs at Syracuse University, says the U.S. used to have over a dozen military bases across Greenland because it was important in terms of defense against submarines and other attacks from the north.

While many experts say Greenland's strategic importance is growing again as the Arctic Ocean becomes more navigable amid climate change, and Russia and China show signs of aggression, the prospect of taking over Greenland is legally and ethically fraught and wouldn't give the U.S. much that it doesn't already have.

Q: The transatlantic rift widened over Greenland's future, with the U.S. and Europe each justifying actions that escalated tensions. How did this play out?

In a social media post on Jan. 14, Mr. Trump said acquiring Greenland is essential to his proposed "Golden Dome," a missile-defense shield that would protect the United States from foreign attacks. "NATO should be leading the way for us to get it. IF WE DON'T, RUSSIA OR CHINA WILL, AND THAT IS NOT GOING TO HAPPEN!" he said in the post.

Mr. Trump threatened tariffs on European NATO members that had sent small deployments of forces to Greenland in January to participate in Danish-led military exercises. However, he later announced he would not impose them after meeting with NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, on Jan. 21. European Union leaders had said the exercise was an attempt to respond to Mr. Trump's concerns that they are not taking Greenland's security seriously.

In a post on X on Jan. 17, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the European Union has consistently underlined its "shared transatlantic interest in peace and security in the Arctic, including through NATO." She added, "The pre-coordinated Danish exercise, conducted with allies, responds to the need to strengthen Arctic security and poses no threat to anyone."

At the same time, the U.S. and Canada sent aircraft to Greenland under the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) for "long-planned" activities, the organization said. It had nothing to do with larger transatlantic tensions.

In a social media post after his meeting with Mr. Rutte, Mr. Trump said the two had "formed the framework of a future deal with respect to Greenland and, in fact, the entire Arctic Region. This solution, if consummated, will be a great one for the United States of America, and all NATO nations." ▪

PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

Casting disappointed gazes, neighborhood 'aunties' patrol gang strongholds in Cape Town

Gang members in this South African city are notorious for violence. But in some working-class areas, they face a formidable foe.

By Patricia Huon / Contributor

On a recent morning in Cape Town, as tourists bronze themselves on the city's white-sand beaches, a small volunteer army of mothers and grandmothers patrols streets that visitors rarely see. The group moves briskly on foot across Rocklands, a working-class neighborhood on the city's edge.

The goal is simple: to protect residents and disrupt the activities of local gangs, which were responsible for nearly 500 homicides in Cape Town between April and September of last year alone. In theory, this should be the work of the police. But many here view officers with suspicion.

In any case, these matriarch patrollers have a weapon the police don't.

Call it the power of the neighborhood "auntie," who like any loving older woman in one's life, is there to protect, nurture, and, when the situation calls for it, make one wither under her disap-

pointed gaze.

"We speak to [gang members]. We respect them, treat them as human beings," explains one of those aunties, Cheryl Driver, her high-pitched voice full of enthusiasm. In return, gang members usually speak to the aunties in the hushed, deferential tones reserved for elders. "We are all families; they are our children," Ms. Driver says.

Fractured communities

Rocklands sits in the Cape Flats, a stretch of sandy and windswept working-class neighborhoods on the edge of Cape Town, where many people of color were forcibly moved decades ago by the apartheid regime. Today's gang violence has its roots in that era, when relocations tore apart families and old social structures, leaving many young people poor, hopeless, and looking for somewhere they belonged.

Gangs offered a sense of community and a means of income where formal jobs were scarce. And with scant police presence in the Cape Flats, they flourished.

Today, groups with names such as The Americans, The Fancy Boys, and The Hard Living clash for control of territory and the Cape Flats' lucrative drug trade. In neighborhoods like Rocklands, it is not uncommon to find bodies lying on the pavement after gang shoot-outs. Residents say they have learned to look away, cross the street, and pretend they saw nothing. Parents warn their children not to play outside, and families lock themselves indoors before nightfall.

Confronted with this violence, community watch groups – including several led by older women – are taking matters into their own hands. Wielding flashlights and wearing yellow jackets, they patrol relentlessly. "When [gang members] see us coming, they leave," explains Amanda February, who is in her mid-50s and one of the founders of the Rocklands community neighborhood watch, on a recent morning patrol. "Being out on the streets every day is disrupting their business."

As she walks, she points to two silhouettes retreating from the patrollers into the dark. "They were up to no good," she says.

"Eyes and ears" on the ground

Ms. February, like many mothers here, knows the pain of gang violence intimately. Her daughter was addicted to "tik" – a local word for methamphetamines, which have flooded the Cape Flats. For months, Ms. February and her husband searched local drug dens to find her. That's when it occurred to her: "We had to act as a community," Ms. February says.

Today, her daughter is in recovery, and Ms. February is on the streets to protect other people's children.

Gangs frequently offer children and teenagers "a bit of money to hide drugs or stand guard, and then it becomes a vicious cycle," explains Carol October, another member of the patrol group. Gangs target kids from homes where "there's no money, no fancy clothes, sometimes no food. The parents, especially the fathers, are often absent," she says. "Then the gangsters come and tell them they're going to buy them stuff. They become role models."

And sometimes, she says, there's nothing the aunties can do to stop that. On a recent morning patrol, she and the rest of the group stand on the top of a hill, looking down at a house connected to the drug trade. "They've seen us; they're hesitating," says Ms. October, referring to two young men approaching the house. They look up several times, eyeing the patrollers. Eventually, a girl comes out of the house holding something in her hand and gives it to the men.

The women can only observe. Once a week, the group patrols alongside the police and other neighborhood watch members. During those patrols, they can intervene when they see a crime being committed. But most days, their role is simply to watch. "We're not armed; we are just the eyes and ears of the neighborhood," Ms. October says.

Still, every morning, they are up at 5 a.m., escorting children to school, and adults to the taxi ranks and bus stops from which they will travel to the city for work.

By 8 a.m., Ms. October must be at her job as a nanny in one of the city's more affluent neighborhoods. She usually returns home after dark, sometimes joining the night patrols.

"My husband thinks I should give myself a break," she says. But she remains determined: "We are all mothers and grandmothers. If we don't try to keep our children safe, nobody will do it for us." ▪

REPORTERS ON THE JOB

Kendra Nordin Beato

WATERVILLE VALLEY, N.H.

Sometimes chasing down an Olympian is an athletic feat in and of itself. When I arrived for the Freestyle World Cup, the afternoon events had been canceled due to rain and fog. I'd have one opportunity the next morning – when the "feels like" temperature on the mountain was 9 degrees below zero – to flag down an athlete. Undeterred and armed with hand warmers, a face mask, ski pants, and metal crampons, I rode the chair lift and then hiked up an icy slope into the "media mixed zone" at the bottom of the mogul course. There I waited for hours. It was too frigid to write, so I recorded interviews using my phone, catching the perfect quote right before the cold drained my battery. I hiked the half-mile down to the base lodge as the sun sank behind the distant mountains.

I had stuck my landing. ▪

Anna Mulrine Grobe

COLORADO SPRINGS, COLO.

My visit to a top-secret operations floor at Schriever Space Force Base in Colorado Springs was paused shortly after I arrived. "Anything related to Iran?" I asked. There was speculation about impending U.S. strikes there, and Guardians, as U.S. Space Force troops are known, did heavy lifting in the bombing of Iran's nuclear sites last June. The officers laughed – no way they'd share that information – and shook their heads. The visit continued, and I learned about the U.S. military's newest service, its founding leaders, and some of the first people to join it as America's presence in space continues to grow. ▪

Story Hinckley

MILAN

As I prepare to spend several weeks covering the 2026 Winter Olympics across northern Italy, I've found myself making a lot of color-coded schedules. These Games make history for their geographical dispersion, which has meant more planning for reporters: calculating train times between Milan and the mountains, and how fast I can move with snow boots and a suitcase full of notebooks.

I've also been making hour-by-hour schedules for loved ones at home, as my family and friends pitch in to help care for my 15-month-old son while I'm away. Coordinating coverage has been an Olympic feat of its own, and I've never felt so much gratitude for the people who help me do a job I love. ▪

Colette Davidson

LA OROTAVA, TENERIFE, SPAIN

In one beautiful moment, everything came full circle.

I met Abdoulaye months ago in my husband's hometown in Tenerife while writing a piece on Senegal's fishermen, thousands of whom migrate to Spain each year by boat. When I told Abdoulaye I was heading to Senegal to complete my reporting, he generously passed me his father's phone number.

In a small Senegalese coastal village, I met 10 members of his family, some of whom I interviewed for the story.

Two months later, back in Tenerife, Abdoulaye and I met again.

We shared a *café cortado* at an outdoor terrace and chatted about his family. He met my husband, kids, and mother-in-law. The world suddenly felt smaller. ▪

ON THE COVER

Portraying America's founders as complicated human beings

As these historical reenactors see it, the Founding Fathers argued with each other, fought battles of ideas, and agreed to compromise – defining a 250-year-old American tradition.

By Scott Baldauf / Staff writer

WILLIAMSBURG, VA.

It's a sunny wintry morning in January, and a man who bears a strong resemblance to Benjamin Franklin is walking the brick-lane sidewalks of Colonial Williamsburg.

In a few months, the streets here will be teeming with tourists eager to meet with historical reenactors like this man, B.J. Pryor, and to learn more about the founding days of the American republic, as the United States celebrates the 250th year of its independence.

Some tourists may be curious about what America's Founding Fathers – or the closest approximation they can find – would have thought about American democracy today, even though interpreters of historical characters meticulously stay true to their time period. But understanding the aspirations – the "original intent" – of the Founding Fathers might not be as simple as it seems.

"Everyone wants to claim the Founding Fathers and use them for their purposes," says Mr. Pryor, who has portrayed Franklin for two decades. "As Franklin, I like to tell people, 'I'm glad we have approved this new Constitution. I think it is the best we could possibly have obtained under the circumstances. And the most important thing about it is we can change it.'"

Even Thomas Jefferson, Mr. Pryor notes, admitted that institutions must adapt to keep pace with the times.

Christopher Brown, a historian on the Revolutionary War at Columbia University and consultant for the Ken Burns documentary series "The American Revolution," says the men who put their signatures on the Declaration of Independence in 1776 agreed on the need to be free of monarchical rule, and little else.

"I think they would be amused by the notion of original intent of the Founding Fathers, not least because the document that they created, the Constitution, was full of compromises," Professor Brown adds. "There were so many intents in the room at the moment that document was written, it would be ridiculous to think there could be one legitimate intent."

As divided as America feels today, there is a glimmer of hope in what Mr. Pryor and other historical reenactors encounter: the shared curiosity in learning more about the roots of America's experiment in democracy.

To capture the essence of those times, Americans need to shake off their tendency to treat the Revolutionary War period as sacred, says Ted Maris-Wolf, a historian and associate director of the Charles Center at the College of William & Mary.

Americans today might recognize hot-button issues that confronted the nation-builders of 1776: What does it mean that all men are created equal? What are the limits of individual freedom, or of the federal government?

But people also struggle to connect the dots between the challenges of America's revolutionary generation and today. Mr. Maris-Wolf argues that historical reenactors can provide a citizens guide to understanding America's foundations in order to map out its future.

"With these reenactors, there seems to be at least an attempt to make those political figures real humans," says Mr. Maris-Wolf. "You can show the vulnerabilities, the failures, in addition to the achievements, the founding of the country."

Ben of Williamsburg

Clad in the black woolen broadcloth jacket and breeches of an 18th-century gentleman, B.J. Pryor has been portraying Ben Franklin for decades, passing along insights from his personal research to visitors, schoolchildren, and tour groups.

When he is dressed as Franklin, Mr. Pryor keeps his personal opinions to himself. But if he is doing his job right, he can give his audience the tools to learn from Franklin's documented beliefs and actions to help people understand the principles on which the United States was founded.

"Whenever I hear a sentence that begins, 'The Founding Fathers thought,' I think, OK, that sentence is bogus, because there is nothing that the Founding Fathers all thought the same about, or hardly anything," Mr. Pryor says. "They disagreed, they fought, they bickered, they hated one another."

Today, people might recognize the same thing amid political hyperpartisanship. Indeed, tensions back then sparked armed conflict between Colonies. Connecticut and Pennsylvania fought not one but three wars over disputed territory along the Susquehanna River. Even when they were united against the British, some of the Colonies were reluctant to give up sovereignty to a national government.

Any document signed in these conditions was bound to be a work in progress.

"They did not think that they were drawing up a document that would last for 200 years," Mr. Pryor says, back at his modern town

house, showing off his collection of books and magazines from the Colonial period. "You know, they assumed that this was a good system and it would work, but times would change, and no doubt, something different would be needed down the road."

In short, the Founding Fathers wrote a remarkable document that made independence appear not only possible, but also inevitable. Along with a Constitution written a decade later, they built a foundation for a system of self-government that would continually need repairs and improvement.

Today, some constitutional scholars say the latter document is under threat from a Trump administration that interprets it as giving broad powers to the head of the executive branch – a stance the U.S. Supreme Court has largely upheld. Mr. Pryor, drawing on his knowledge of the Founding Fathers, says they anticipated there would be conflict.

"The purpose of government cannot be to bring perfect harmony among all people," Mr. Pryor says. "What you do hope a government can do is keep us from slitting one another's throats. Enable us to share a polity without killing one another or inflicting gross harm on one another. If we can accomplish that, we have done something great."

George of Appomattox

Dan Shippey's journey to portray George Washington began shortly after two jetliners struck the World Trade Center in 2001.

Like many Americans, Mr. Shippey was shaken to his core by the event. But he noticed something more: Americans were questioning what it meant to be an American.

"We all come from diverse backgrounds, very diverse thoughts," says Mr. Shippey. "If you take all the things we don't have in common, the one thing we have is the foundational ideas that go back to the Revolution."

Ideas and values such as freedom, equality, and liberty are not static, and they can be in conflict with each other, says Mr. Maris-Wolf at William & Mary. Education specialists at Colonial Williamsburg designed curricula to help students and the general public understand the tensions between values such as unity vs. diversity, law vs. ethics, private wealth vs. common wealth, and freedom vs. equality, which fueled the Founding Fathers' debate on what it means to be American.

"There was no resolution at the time in the debate over these values, and there continues to be no resolution today," Mr. Maris-Wolf says. People want to know what historical figures would say about today's issues, but it's not the same America now as then.

For Mr. Shippey, the best way to teach about the American revolutionary period was to make dusty historical figures come to life. A friend suggested that he portray Washington.

"He said, 'Well, you're tall, and you've got the nose for the job,'" Mr. Shippey recalls.

He portrayed Washington at Mount Vernon for four years, and continues in other venues. With the 250th anniversary of independence, Mr. Shippey sees an opportunity to capitalize on American curiosity for the past.

"We are getting this moment to remind people of the importance of the founding ideals of America," Mr. Shippey says. "These are the ideals that set the foundation of who we are and where we want to be."

Ben of Alexandria

For the record, Barry Stevens never asked to become Ben Franklin. A retired theater teacher in Alexandria, Virginia, he started attending historical reenactments at the suggestion of his son back in 1999. He appreciated the theatrical element of men and women who portrayed Revolutionary War soldiers, artisans, and camp followers, and he found himself drawn in.

Initially, he attended Revolutionary War reenactments, made period-appropriate clothes, and grew his hair out in a ponytail. Then, sometime around 2005, people started calling him "Ben."

"People would come up to me and they'd say, 'Hi Ben, how are things in Philadelphia?'" Mr. Stevens says. "No sign, no name tag, nothing that I did to try and elicit that kind of a response. And after a while, I got to thinking, well maybe there is something in this."

Mr. Stevens threw himself into the role, and recently portrayed Franklin in the 2025 docudrama "The American Miracle," alongside Mr. Shippey as Washington.

Like most historical interpreters, Mr. Stevens enjoys interacting with Americans who have the curiosity to learn about their past. But he stays in character and avoids putting 21st-century opinions into 18th-century Ben's mouth. His Franklin has opinions about the Boston Tea Party, for instance. For the record, Franklin, as America's representative in London, viewed the patriots' destruction of British tea as a dangerous provocation.

But Mr. Stevens says he avoids getting dragged into more modern debates. "I can't say, 'Oh, this White House is something else,' because I have to limit my discussion to what I knew existed up until Franklin's death."

But, Mr. Stevens says, he can reflect the fact that Franklin's views about trade relations, slavery, and the tension between Western expansion and treaties with Native American tribes each changed dramatically over time until his death in 1790.

"I feel an obligation to present the truth of it all," Mr. Stevens says, after a recent presentation to a gathering at a senior center in Alexandria. "You don't necessarily have to take a line and say, well, Franklin would have been against this or not. But it certainly can stir your thought and say, that issue sounds familiar, and we're still dealing with it, or it's come back."

Tavern-keeper in Portsmouth

In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, you can walk through a neighborhood once called Puddle Dock, now managed by the Strawbery Banke museum. The streets still feel part of the 18th century, full of role players dressed for revolutionary times.

Nancy Dickinson, an Air Force veteran and former elementary school teacher, portrays Katherine Stavers, an 18th-century tavern-keeper at Strawbery Banke. Stavers built the tavern, Portsmouth's largest, in 1766 with her own money, Ms. Dickinson says, and she and her husband ran it.

The questions visitors ask can be quite sophisticated. Some people want to know more about the rights of women in 18th-century America; others ask about the differences between rich and poor people in America, or about the legacy of slavery and race.

All three of these questions reverberate today, reflected in court fights over abortion, growing tensions over income inequality and issues of affordability, and the current administration's campaign against diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education and in the workplace.

"We are modern people, and some people have difficult ques-

tions to ask," Ms. Dickinson says. She has occasionally come out of character if people become emotional about a particular topic.

"I talk with them, and they feel more comfortable," Ms. Dickinson says. When she talks about slavery, "This is something that people should know about. We can acknowledge that it is awful. We can't say it never happened."

Ultimately, people who come to historical sites like Strawbery Banke are curious learners, who also carry with them a lifetime of biases and experiences that shape how they view the world.

The key is to build on that curiosity, Ms. Dickinson says, and to show that "some of the challenges back then have not been resolved. As we get into 2026, the question is, How are we going to be talking about this period? Will it just be marching bands and speeches?" ▪

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

4,543

Words in the U.S. Constitution, including signatures. It is both the shortest and oldest written constitution still in effect.

27

Versions of the American flag that have been created since 1777. The original version sported 13 stars and 13 stripes for the 13 Colonies. The current flag is the longest-running version and has been unchanged since its last alteration in 1959.

231,771

The total number of soldiers who served in the Continental Army throughout the Revolutionary War, though they seldom numbered over 20,000 at any one time. Additional militia forces totaled 164,087.

2.56
MILLION

The population of the newly independent United States in July 1776, about half a million of whom were enslaved people, according to U.S. Census Bureau and historian estimates. During the first U.S. Census, conducted in 1790, the population had surged to nearly 4 million residents.

56

Delegates to the Continental Congress who signed the Declaration of Independence. The signers came from all 13 Colonies and vastly different backgrounds, including lawyers, merchants, plantation owners, farmers, physicians, and even a musician.

– Victoria Hoffmann / Staff writer

Sources: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, National Constitution Center, National Flag Foundation, Encyclopaedia Britannica, U.S. Census Bureau, American Battlefield Trust, Harvard University

EDITORIALS

Defining peace in a Trumpian era

From Greenland to Ukraine to Venezuela, President Donald Trump has relied on a dizzying diversity of definitions for peace over the past year. They range from "peace through strength" – using tariffs or troops – to shaky ceasefires. He has brokered deals that offer security if the United States gains natural resources or that assume economic integration between rivals can alone ensure tranquility.

He sees himself as a "president of peace," deserving of a Nobel Peace Prize. One of his definitions relies on capital investment. His new Board of Peace, set up to stabilize the Gaza Strip and fulfill his vision of turning the Palestinian enclave into "the Riviera of the Middle East," invites nations to contribute $1 billion each to gain a permanent seat on the board. The writ of this body may now extend to all global conflicts.

Many countries have either pushed back against Mr. Trump, agreed with him, or capitulated on his disparate prescriptions for peace. Some decry a loss of "norms" or an erosion of a "rules-based world order."

A few leaders, however, have reflected anew on the kind of peace that is not merely an absence of violence or something transactional in nature but rests on what Maryam Bukar Hassan, a Nigerian poet and current U.N. global advocate for peace, calls "the presence of understanding."

In Ukraine, for example, the people have shored up their defenses by improving integrity in government, encouraging creativity for engineers to design innovative weapons, and amping up truth-telling against Russian misinformation.

In Venezuela, the pro-democracy opposition leader, María Corina Machado, says the freedom that ensures peace requires "moral, spiritual, and physical strength."

In a manifesto last year, Ms. Machado stated, "No regime, political system, or tyranny has the power to rob us of what is divinely ours: the right to live with dignity, speak freely, create, dream, and prosper as individuals."

After a confrontation over control of Greenland, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told Politico, "Of course, our relationship to the United States has changed. Why? Because we are changing."

"And this is so important that we keep in mind: What is our position? What is our strength? Let's work on these. Let's take pride in that. Let's stand up for a unified Europe."

Paths to peace vary, and Mr. Trump may succeed in many of his. Yet the type of peace that is inherent within individuals may be the most enduring. Or as a 1986 U.N. statement declared, "War is not in our genes, and we need not accept human aggression as a fate." ▪

How cities rebuild two-way trust

A new poll finds 45% of American voters identify as independents, not aligned with either party that dominates politics. That is the highest rate on record for the United States. Political polarization, it appears, is contributing to citizens' party disaffection and thus, potentially, to civic disengagement.

At the same time, cities around the world – from Mexico City to Montreal, from Boston to Bengaluru, India – are managing to cultivate a feeling of local belonging that fosters civic involvement and trust. They're doing this by setting aside a portion of city funds and entrusting residents, including children, with proposing and choosing projects to spend on for the good of the community.

This idea of organized "participatory budgeting" emerged in the late 1980s in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre. Within a decade of the city giving its citizens a say in directing budget resources, the number of schools quadrupled, public housing soared, and sanitation greatly improved.

Today, the city of Paris reportedly allocates the largest annual "participatory budget" in the world – around €100 million ($118 million) a year. Since 2014, residents of the French capital have submitted more than 21,000 ideas to city hall, which assesses feasibility before putting projects to a public vote.

Last fall, presented with 261 options, Parisians chose 104 projects to be implemented in 2026. These include expanding parks, urban gardens, and community kitchens. People in New York City (ages 11 and older) opted for similar priorities in 2025 for a $30 million share of the Big Apple's budget. They chose upgrades to school libraries and science labs, as well as neighborhood sports and health facilities.

Through often monthslong public awareness campaigns and multiple community meetings, the participatory budgeting process sparks grassroots engagement. It also improves transparency and can lessen perceived or actual favoritism or corruption among officials. This, in turn, increases trust in institutions.

"It's a way for citizens to build relationships with elected officials," according to governance specialist Hollie Russon Gilman, quoted on the Harvard Kennedy School website.

"It's putting democracy back into the hands of the people." ▪

GLOBAL PATTERNS

LONDON

Can NATO survive the Greenland dispute?

Battle lines were drawn this week in a conflict unlike any in U.S. history: not with America's rivals or enemies, but with its closest allies.

For now, both sides have stepped back from the brink.

They appear to have found a formula by which U.S. President Donald Trump will drop his demand that the United States be allowed to "acquire" Greenland, which is a part of Denmark. It was an ultimatum that Denmark and other European NATO members had unanimously rejected.

BY NED TEMKO
Connecting key themes in the world's news.

Still, the escalating tension, especially after Mr. Trump slapped tariffs on Denmark's European supporters, has sorely tested trust within the Western alliance – to the point where some fear that NATO is in danger of becoming a dead letter.

The tension reached a crescendo against an unlikely backdrop: the snow-carpeted resort town of Davos in the Swiss Alps, site of last month's annual World Economic Forum.

For years, the Davos forum has been a meeting point for political leaders and policy wonks, entrepreneurs and investors, championing cooperative solutions to international challenges.

This year, it became the stage for a war of worldviews.

Since Mr. Trump's return to the White House, Western allies have grown increasingly concerned over his readiness to deploy America's power not just against foes, but to wrest concessions from friends, especially on trade.

Yet his insistence that America must "own" Greenland, implying that he might use force to ensure that outcome, curdled concern into outright alarm.

European leaders warned that such a U.S. takeover would mean the end of NATO.

When European NATO countries joined Denmark in sending a small military contingent to the island last month, they had intended to reassure Mr. Trump of their readiness to help beef up its defenses. The president, though, appeared to see it as a move to oppose any U.S. takeover, and responded with new tariffs on the countries concerned.

That prompted criticism not only from European governments, but even pro-Trump opposition parties.

By the time the president's helicopter touched down in Davos on Jan. 21, European leaders were more hopeful than confident of finding a way to scale back hostilities.

When Mr. Trump strode to the Davos microphone, he said little at first to suggest he was in the mood for compromise.

Mr. Trump extolled American wealth and power. He said allies' sole hope was to ride on America's coattails, and that those who did deals with the U.S. would thrive. He lambasted European leaders for policies on immigration and green energy.

He dismissed the value of NATO, suggesting that only America's allies had benefited from it.

On Greenland, he doubled down on the need for the United States to take control, proposing that NATO, after freeloading off Washington for decades, should grant this one request.

Yet he did retreat from indications he might use force against a fellow NATO state. "I don't have to use force. I don't want to use force. I won't use force," he said,

That, it appears, helped pave the way for NATO's secretary general, Mark Rutte, to work out a "framework" security deal with Mr. Trump covering Greenland and the Arctic region.

The president gave no details. But the arrangements appear likely to involve a greatly increased U.S. military presence in Greenland and effective security control. Those provisions have been possible all along, under a 1951 agreement between Copenhagen and Washington – with the caveat that Danish sovereignty and the views of Greenland's autonomous local government be respected.

And, crucially, Mr. Trump said he was canceling his tariffs.

The key question now is how badly European trust in Washington – the bedrock of the transatlantic alliance – has been damaged by Mr. Trump's explicit insistence that allies should

make his policy priorities their own.

Europe knows it still needs America, especially to ensure that Ukraine can withstand Russia's invasion force.

Yet transatlantic trust has plummeted over the Greenland crisis. The sense that the old bonds were fracturing, maybe forever, was evident among the audience in Davos.

They listened to Mr. Trump's broadsides, aimed at European leaders, in near silence.

But Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's earlier speech, arguing that America had changed and other countries must build new avenues of cooperation and defend international "legitimacy and integrity," was greeted with a quite different response, rare at these meetings.

He received a standing ovation. ▪

THE HOME FORUM

A bittersweet legacy

In good times and bad, the love of chocolate has bound my family together.

My father's love of dark chocolate began in the 1960s, when our family of four would pile into the car and drive an hour to the only local shop that made chocolate from scratch. It was a special outing. My parents would buy a few pounds of the darkest chocolate almond bark, while I hovered, desperate for a free sample that never came. The chocolate was packed in a crisp white box tied with a ribbon.

Back home, my father would ceremoniously open the box, break a few slabs into smaller pieces, and place them in a cut-glass candy dish in the living room. He'd then break off a piece with exactly two almonds – never more – and devour it in a single bite. He ate everything quickly and precisely, famous for his four-bite lunches: two seven-minute eggs, halved and consumed in one bite each. That, I suppose, was the engineer in him.

My mother, more interested in the nuts than the chocolate, would nibble just one almond. I followed her lead. I didn't love dark chocolate – it tasted bitter to me – but I wanted to share in the ritual and feel closer to him.

My father could be stern, sometimes even frightening when he got angry about work or some other frustration. But when he ate chocolate, he softened. His shoulders relaxed, and he smiled – a deep, contented smile I came to crave. I loved that version of him, and chocolate was my window into that gentleness.

After dinner, he'd often say, "I think it's chocolate time," and we'd all drift into the living room for a piece. It was never just about the candy. It was about being together.

Friends and family knew my father loved chocolate, but few noticed how specific his tastes were. He didn't care for sugary or filled chocolates; he liked them strong and unadorned. When gifted boxes of assortments, he would carefully extract the darkest, plainest pieces and leave the caramels, cordials, and buttercreams for the rest of us. We were more than happy to help.

As the years went on, and high-quality dark chocolate became easier to find, he no longer needed to make long trips for his purchases. He began buying bars of Ghirardelli and Lindt from the supermarket. The fancy candy dish eventually disappeared, replaced by a Tupperware container in the kitchen cabinet. But the ritual remained.

My children always adored their grandfather. They saw through his strict demeanor – which had softened with age – and delighted in their own special traditions with him. Their favorite part of visiting was raiding his chocolate stash. It didn't matter that dark chocolate was now everywhere. Grandpa's chocolate was something else entirely. It was sacred.

I, too, continued to raid it – despite having my own supply at home.

After my mother passed away, and I was a divorced empty nester, Dad and I grew especially close. We talked more. Laughed more. And always, we ate chocolate – an indulgence he kept up until the very end of his life.

When my sister flew in from Australia for the funeral, we honored him in the only way that felt right: We ate chocolate together.

Now, my grown children know they can always find an 86% cacao chocolate bar in my kitchen, just like in their grandfather's. Eating chocolate together has become part of our family heritage – a quiet ritual that binds us across generations. It's sweet. It's bitter. It's ours.

A few months ago, my daughter ran the Paris marathon. When she returned home, she handed me a small shopping bag from the city's oldest chocolate shop.

"I brought this home for you," she said.

Inside was a carefully wrapped bundle of *chocolat noir*. My eyes welled up.

It wasn't just the chocolate. It was the legacy. I could almost feel my father standing behind me, smiling his special chocolate smile. And in that moment, it was clear – this was the most enduring kind of love: simple and sweet.

– Nancy Intrator

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

The law that always blesses

Human laws that are established for the good of everyone are too numerous to name. A couple that are pretty universally understood are stopping at a red light and driving on the correct side of the road.

Beyond these kinds of common-sense human laws, there's a deeper, more profound kind of law that I love thinking about: the indissoluble law of good, of God – divine Love itself.

Indeed, we can learn to become more aware of the great blessedness of divine law and say with the psalmist in the Bible, "O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day" (Psalms 119:97). The prophet Jeremiah recorded God as establishing a covenant with His people: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33). What a beautiful expression of God's constant presence, acting on our behalf and caring for us, as much today as in biblical times.

More than two decades ago, I was struggling with chronic aches and pains in my muscles and joints. Though I often felt fatigue, I continued with my normal activities, which included being on my feet most of the working day.

Trusting God and praying as taught in Christian Science had been natural for me for years, and I was consecrated in doing the same for this situation. I prayed to better understand that God, Spirit, is the source of our being, and is our divine Parent, who has established only good for His children. Our true nature is spiritual, pure, and whole, reflecting our purely good divine Creator.

These words from a book called "No and Yes" by Mary Baker Eddy, the discoverer of Christian Science, meant the world to me during this period (and continue to): "Eternal harmony, perpetuity, and perfection, constitute the phenomena of being, governed by the immutable and eternal laws of God; whereas matter and human will, intellect, desire, and fear, are not the creators, controllers, nor destroyers of life or its harmonies. Man has an immortal Soul, a divine Principle, and an eternal being. Man has perpetual individuality; and God's laws, and their intelligent and harmonious action, constitute his individuality in the Science of Soul" (pp. 10-11).

I could see that the core of my identity wasn't held together by muscles, bones, and joints. Rather, my spiritual perfection, harmony, and joy were upheld by God's unchanging laws structuring, holding together, and governing every aspect of my being! Divine law is forever sustaining our oneness with God.

This higher understanding of true spiritual individuality deepened my conviction that material "laws" about our identity, such as those that would say that aches and fatigue are inevitable, are causeless, lacking any authority. Increasingly, I began to feel these laws "written in my heart" and "put in my inward parts" – permeating my thought. The condition began to recede in my thought as well as in my body, until it finally disappeared completely.

Being awake and obedient to God's law – reflecting Love's nature in goodness and purity of thought and action – is as natural as obeying the law to stop at a red light. And it can't help but bless.

– Elizabeth Mata

CULTURE: On Film

'Young Mothers' paints a portrait of teen motherhood

Filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne veer away from easy solutions to the challenges their characters face, while holding room for growth and change.

"Young Mothers," set in Liège, Belgium, is a remarkable fiction film about five teenage women living in a maternity home with their newborns, or with babies on the way. Winner of the best screenplay award at the Cannes Film Festival, it opens up the lives of these women with startling immediacy.

The co-writer-directors, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, are renowned for their naturalistic approach to the everyday, working-class experience. The women, most of them played by actors with limited theatrical training, are portrayed without condescension. The film could easily have turned into a sob fest, or a species of reality TV show. Instead, it is graced with a garland of human moments about the vicissitudes of motherhood, without a trace of melodramatics.

The Dardennes have traditionally focused their attentions on a single protagonist. ("Two Days, One Night," with Marion Cotillard, about a woman desperate to keep her job at a solar-panel factory, is my favorite of their films. It's also one of the few starring a well-known actor.) In "Young Mothers," by contrast, the directors crosscut between the lives of these five women, and it takes a while to get our bearings.

Jessica (Babette Verbeek), whom we meet first, is heavily pregnant and frantically attempting to locate the biological mother (India Hair) who abandoned her at birth. Perla (Lucie Laruelle) fears that, with her wayward boyfriend (Günter Duret) newly released from juvenile detention, she will lose him and become a single mother. She is willing to put the baby up for adoption to keep him.

By Peter Rainer

Ariane (Janaina Halloy) is committed to giving up her baby, even though her mother (Christelle Cornil), who has been living with a physically abusive man, pleads to adopt the baby herself. Julie (Elsa Houben) struggles with sobriety, as does her doting boyfriend Dylan (Jef Jacobs). But they truly love each other and long to live as parents in a place they can call their own.

The fifth young mother, Naïma (Samia Hilmi), is proud of her new job as a train conductor. She does not figure largely in the movie except as a kind of inspiration to the others that they, too, can break free of their past.

With all this agitation on display, you might think "Young Mothers" would be a conglomeration of sorrow. But what is revivifying about the movie is that these women, none of whom considered abortion, are each, in their own way, aching to achieve a better life. For some, that means coming to terms with their origins. The reason Jessica is so focused on meeting her birth mother is because she needs to know why she was, in her view, discarded. Like many of the others, she wants to unlock her past so she can salvage her future.

To the Dardennes' immense credit, their film is not about villains and victims. Neither is the narrative sugarcoated. When Jessica holds her newborn in her arms, she says, "I feel nothing. I wish I did." Jessica's mother, when she finally agrees to meet with her, reveals her own hurts: If she had kept her baby, she says, she would have felt shamed in her conservative community as a single mother.

Ariane, because of the dangerousness of her mother's lifestyle, appears entirely principled in giving up her baby for adoption, even though the sadness for all concerned is palpable. Perla, initially rejected by her own sister (Joely Mbundu), is bereft. But she bonds with her baby in a way that raises her up. Julie and Dylan hold fast to the dream of a better life. She wants to be hairdresser, he a baker. They have their eye on a modest apartment.

The crosscutting between the stories occasionally fragments the movie and loosens its power. And the Dardennes' mobile camera and exclusive use of natural light is sometimes indistinguishable from what often passes for docudrama-style "realism."

What rescues the film is the quality of empathy on view. What happens feels true, not judgmental. Its conclusion, which

could have been pat, or despairing, is instead, of all things, hopeful. There is no fake uplift. The uncertainty about the future is still very much there. But so, also, is the exhilaration of knowing that, for these women, the challenges of motherhood – of life – represent a bright beacon.

▪ *"Young Mothers" is unrated. It deals with teen pregnancy and addiction, and contains profanity and scenes of substance use.*

BOOKS

The 'clerical rat' who exposed KGB secrets

Gordon Corera's nonfiction thriller traces how a boy from a poor village became an archivist of the Soviet regime's dirty deeds – and smuggled records to Western intelligence.

By Malcolm Forbes / Contributor

On March 24, 1992, a scruffy-looking older man with a duffel bag showed up at the door of the British Embassy in Vilnius, Lithuania, and asked to speak with a member of the diplomatic staff. He claimed he had important information. He had made the same pitch at the U.S. Embassy but was sent away. The British were prepared to hear him out, appearances notwithstanding. He said he lived in Russia and worked for the KGB, Russia's former secret police and intelligence agency. It soon became clear that the documents he was carrying were not the usual dross offered by low-level spooks or fantasists but rather valuable nuggets from a gold mine.

This "walk-in" was Vasili Mitrokhin, the KGB's in-house archivist. He had access to volumes of sensitive Soviet material. He also had two demands for MI6, Britain's Secret Intelligence Service: The first was the guarantee of asylum for himself and his family back in Moscow. The second was a more unexpected stipulation. He wanted his material to be published. Only by exposing the "filth," as he termed it, of the Soviet authorities' dirty tricks and deadly deeds, could he rescue Russia and free its people.

Gordon Corera's latest book, "The Spy in the Archive," gets off to an intriguing start. From here, the journalist and writer, whose books have shone a light into the murky world of espionage, plays to his strengths by telling the remarkable story of both a stunning intelligence triumph and a devastating network of Russian spies in the West.

The book unfolds by way of two alternating narratives. In one strand, Corera traces Mitrokhin's life from poor village boy to custodian of state secrets. Following a checkered career as a spy, whose overseas postings culminated all too often in failure, Mitrokhin was labeled an operational liability and, in 1956, shunted to the KGB archive.

It was while working among the files in the basement of Moscow's infamous Lubyanka building, headquarters for the KGB, and once home to Josef Stalin's torture chambers, that this "clerical rat" first learned about the sheer scale of Soviet crimes. He encountered evidence of how countless lives were compromised or destroyed and history was erased or rewritten. "I was deep in horrors," Mitrokhin later declared.

When he was charged with supervising the transfer of 300,000 files to a new facility outside Moscow, he began covertly making notes of documents in a personal code and smuggling them out in his shoes and socks. Hiding them in milk churns under the floorboards of his country house, he gradually reconstituted his notes, turning them into readable, salable, and actionable intelligence.

Corera's second narrative plays out in 1992, and encompasses the fraught period from Mitrokhin's contact with the British in Lithuania in March to his defection to the West eight months later. We discover how MI6 evaluated Mitrokhin's trove and learned from it the identities of various Russian deep-cover agents, or "illegals," who had burrowed into Western society – and, more specifically, Western intelligence services. MI6 shared Mitrokhin's archive with its "cousins," the CIA. Both agencies were overwhelmed by the amount of leads it yielded, and stunned by the damage caused from the enemy within.

Some readers might already be familiar with this tale. The British historian Christopher Andrew collaborated with Mitrokhin on two books based on his material. However, "The Spy in the Archive" is not a retread. Corera has drawn on a range of different sources to provide a more thorough account of Mitrokhin's life, work, and character.

Mitrokhin emerges as a fascinatingly complex individual. He is taciturn and truculent. But he is also focused and driven, inspired by fellow dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn to speak out and relay the truth. Mitrokhin stresses he is a Russian patriot, not a traitor, and declares his intent to slay what he regards as a dragon with three heads – the Communist Party; the *nomenklatura*, or Soviet elite; and, above all, the KGB.

Corera has mixed success when he veers from Mitrokhin to chronicle episodes from 20th-century Russian history. Some of his detours serve up background that gives useful insight and context; some digressions impede narrative flow.

But, for the most part, Corera routinely impresses. Meticulously researched and elegantly written, "The Spy in the Archive" manages to be, by turns, illuminating and riveting. We read on, rapt, as an increasingly disillusioned Mitrokhin takes stock of the KGB's catalog of insidious cloak-and-dagger tactics against dissenters, whether ruining reputations through smear campaigns, damaging health in psychiatric prisons, or, in one case, hatching a failed plan to break the legs of ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev.

At certain junctures, the book is genuinely thrilling, such as its depictions of FBI agents tracking down and confronting traitors who have been siphoning off secrets to their KGB masters. Even the buildup to the publication of Mitrokhin's book proves suspenseful. But the standout section charts a great, yet perilous, escape. Corera's description of Mitrokhin's high-stakes exfiltration from Lithuania to England – an operation that coincided with the 75th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution – makes for a white-knuckle reading experience.

According to the CIA, Mitrokhin's archive was the biggest counterintelligence bonanza of the postwar period. A tale about such a coup and such a windfall deserves to be compellingly told. Corera has done just that. ▪

‘No-spice’ romance novels trade steamy scenes for courtship, love, and respect

Authors and influencers are finding fresh ways to identify books that emphasize relationship building.

By Stephen Humphries / Staff writer

When Rachel Kanter first contemplated opening an all-romance bookstore two years ago, there were just a few dozen such shops across the country. Now, there are about 150. Ms. Kanter’s Lovestruck Books in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is riding the wave of the most popular category in publishing. In the United States last year, 44 million romance books were sold, a 3.9% increase from 2024, according to Publishers Weekly.

“There are some elements in romance that are really comforting and reassuring to people,” says Ms. Kanter.

Readers – predominantly women –are no longer embarrassed to admit to reading love stories. Yet some are abashed at the steamy scenes that have become commonplace in bestselling titles.

“This is a conversation we have daily with customers,” says the store owner. “People come in and say, ‘I’m looking for something for my 13-year-old daughter. What is appropriate?’”

Lovestruck Books’ 12,000 wide-ranging titles include tales of chaste courtships. A number of contemporary authors are setting themselves apart from the racy mainstream. They’ve created fresh labels to inform readers that their books don’t include spicy scenes. It’s become a new marketing category: “no-spice” romances.

BookTokers,Instagram influencers, and Goodreads community members have sprung up to curate and recommend such romance novels. They’re an algorithmically connected community. Preeminent authors of the genre – including Katherine Center (“The Bodyguard”), Annabel Monaghan (“Nora Goes Off Script”), and Sarah Adams (“The Cheat Sheet”) – boast robust fan bases. PG-level fare doesn’t, of course, appeal to every adult reader. Yet, authors and reviewers say that what ultimately resonates in romance stories is what they reveal about great relationships – and ourselves.

“You don’t need to have sex on the page to have a great romance, and you can have a lot of sex on the page and a mediocre romance,” says Jen Prokop, co-host of Fated Mates, a podcast about romance novels. “Sex is not the X factor. Feelings are.”

It is common for many of the authors to come from a background of faith. Many of their readers do, too. The stories, however, are often secular and aimed at broad appeal.

Courtney Walsh, for example, compares her popular books with romantic comedy movies from the 1990s and early 2000s, such as “You’ve Got Mail” and “While You Were Sleeping.” In Ms. Walsh’s novel “My Phony Valentine,” for instance, the protagonist tries to save her bakery by embarking on a high-profile fake relationship with a hockey player. There’s no tonsil hockey, though.

“I love the falling in love part of a romance novel more so than, like, the physical side of it,” says Ms. Walsh, whose target audience is adult women, though she has teenage readers, too. She is conscious of modeling how women should have high standards and be treated well in relationships. Her stories are about valuing oneself and knowing one’s worth. “I don’t have word count going toward, you know, steamy scenes,” says Ms. Walsh. “So, all of my work has to go to building the relationship.”

Young adult romance author Eva Austin says that leaving out sex scenes doesn’t affect the pacing of her stories. She self-publishes books such as “My Favorite Color Is the Golden Hour” – a finalist in the 2026 Teen Readers’ Choice Awards – so that she has complete authorial control. Her self-described “sweet and swoony” stories are the kinds of books she’d like her own kids to read. “It was difficult for me to find books for them, especially when my girls became interested in romance novels more recently,” says Ms. Austin via email. “I discovered I wasn’t the only parent frustrated by this.”

Many no-spice novels, including those by Ms. Walsh and Ms. Austin, feature the sort of illustrated covers that have become trendy. Gone are the days of “clinch covers” featuring women embracing shirtless men. They now tend to depict cartoon-y couples doing activities such as sitting at a restaurant table, walking near a lighthouse, or reading books in a library. But once you flip past the bright, primary- or pastel-colored covers, some of those stories are closer to “Fifty Shades of Grey,” the erotic trilogy. That’s made it more difficult for no-spice authors to differentiate their books from, say, steamier rom-coms by Emily Henry or Ali Hazelwood.

“Books don’t have ratings like movies or TV shows,” says Caroline Williams, a school teacher in Indiana. The Motion Picture Association not only offers age guidelines but also lists whether movies include profanity, violence, and sex. That’s why Ms. Williams launched her website, NoSpiceBooks.com, and a related YouTube channel. She’s one of dozens of curators who review romance novels and detail exactly what’s in them. Ms. Williams, who has a faith-based perspective, says the no-spice romance community has forged connections among those who want to push back against a “sex-obsessed culture.”

“Other people see, ‘Oh, there’s other people who think the same thing as me, who don’t want to be reading this,’” she says. “We want more privacy, we want more simplicity, we want to just read a good story and not have to skip over or skim or whatever to get through the spice. We just want a good story.”

Anne Bogel, co-host of the literary matchmaking podcast “What Should I Read Next?” often receives requests for recommendations for low-steam romance. “Is it ‘open door,’ or ‘closed door,’ or is it ‘fade to black’? That’s more often mentioned in the reviews in a way that it wasn’t 15 years ago,” says Ms. Bogel, who also writes the blog Modern Mrs Darcy. Consequently, readers have become much more confident about picking up unfamiliar books.

There’s another common label beloved by the no-spice community: “Jane Austen-esque.” Becky Dean, author of books such as “Love Unmasked” and “Picture Perfect Boyfriend,” says Austen understood that what sustains a relationship in the long term is who the people are inside. In Ms. Dean’s “kisses only” stories, one-half of the eventual couple comes to appreciate the other person by observing them doing something that they’re good at. By understanding each other in ways that no one else ever has, they’re unafraid to reveal their vulnerabilities to the other person.

“In the classic ‘Pride and Prejudice,’ Mr. Darcy [thinks] Elizabeth is barely tolerable. ... But once he sees her intelligence and her wit, and the way she loves her family, and that she truly does have good character, then he starts to think she’s beautiful,” says Ms. Dean.

Today’s no-spice authors aspire to emulate Austen’s appeal.

“What stands out to me is the number of people that want to read something with their teen or tween daughter or niece,” says Ms. Kanter, the bookstore owner. Many of these books “deal with

an experience of coming-of-age, of those first relationships. It's really special and meaningful, I think, for people to read those with their family members who are going through that." ▪

Q&A with Samantha Ellis, author of 'Always Carry Salt: A Memoir of Preserving Language and Culture'

In her new memoir *"Always Carry Salt," London-based writer Samantha Ellis explores the complexity of reacquainting with – and passing along – her vanishing ancestral tongue. Judeo-Iraqi Arabic filled Ellis' childhood. Spoken by her Iraqi Jewish parents – refugees who eventually settled in the United Kingdom – its consonants and verve resonated throughout the house. So, how could it now appear on UNESCO's list of endangered languages? In her quest to uncover the story of Judeo-Iraqi Arabic and its role in her world, Ms. Ellis confronts grim histories and archaeological blunders, sure, but also gathers anecdotes, expands community, and discovers joy. The Monitor caught up with Ms. Ellis via video call. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

Q: You refer to your ancestral language as Judeo-Iraqi Arabic, but acknowledge that it's not a universal term. What makes it hard to define?

It was mainly an oral language and it was always, I think, seen as quite secondary. In my family, we used to refer to the Arabic spoken mainly by Muslims in Iraq as "real Arabic," so ours was "not real." It always gave me that impression. It hasn't been as studied as it could have been. I've gone with the UNESCO name for it. I just wanted something that felt accurate and that people would get.

Q: Despite suffering terrible violence in the early 1940s, Baghdad's Jewish community was robust during your father's childhood. What changed, and why did he and his family leave Iraq?

There were push-and-pull factors. Some Jews in Iraq genuinely did want to go to Israel once they found out there was a possibility of a Jewish country to go to. And they did remember the Farhud of 1941, which was this sort of pogrom that happened in Baghdad and was horrific. So, some families genuinely thought, "Well, let's go somewhere and we'll be safer."

My dad's family was quite Zionist, I'd say. My mother's family was not and they ended up staying. My grandmother – my mother's mother – lived through [the Farhud] at 11, and all her stories were of being helped by Muslim families: neighbors, the neighbors of her aunt, all these people. Her feeling was, she didn't want to go.

Q: Instead of describing languages as "dying" or "extinct," you favor "sleeping." When did you first consider the distinction?

I love it. It's from Wesley Leonard, who's a speaker of Myaaamia. He's really a keeper and a speaker of that language. He talks about the paradox of speaking in an extinct language. And he coined the idea of sleeping languages, and I found this so powerful.

Languages do come back to life, or some kind of life. I came across this amazing story about these children on the Isle of Man, who were at a private school teaching entirely in Manx. They wrote to UNESCO saying, "If our language is extinct, what are we writing to you in?" I loved that! It's kind of an obvious question, but it needed to be asked. A lot of people do speak languages that are supposedly extinct or endangered.

Q: The core of your memoir involves a metaphor – "building an ark" for your son. How do you describe this project?

I've always loved that story [of Noah's ark]. It definitely felt like an Iraqi story, as well as a Jewish story. I was interested by this idea that the world that [Noah] knows is ending and you put what you can on a boat – in his case, it's the animals two by two. There are many accounts: In one, they take one of each craftsperson to not lose the knowledge – I think that's a Mesopotamian account. And there are imaginings where people are taking seeds. One of the things Noah first does when he gets out on the other end is plant. There is something so powerful in that. You get to a new place and one of the first things you do is you take root. You root yourself.

Q: When did you decide to include recipes and what did you hope to invoke?

I didn't want to include recipes at first. I'm not a cookbook writer. I found it quite hard to do the recipes since these are all things I do by eye. Also, I'm quite often on the phone with my mom – "I'm trying to make *kechri*. Do I put this much rice in? And how do we do the onions again?" To actually have to pin it down was quite scary. I'm very happy that I've done it because, now, I have a blueprint, which is lovely because many of these recipes don't exist in many – or any – places.

The passing on of recipes felt so important. And one of the things that people, not just me, can do is to get your relatives' recipes, record them, and then make them again. Then you are tasting the tastes your ancestors tasted. And you are doing with your hands the things that they were doing.

Q: Why is joy necessary in your work?

[Being Iraqi Jewish] is quite a heavy inheritance. We can't go back to Iraq. Yet, I kept thinking: This can't be all of it, because I have a lot of fun being Iraqi Jewish. I enjoy it! Part of the book came out of having a child and wanting to pass [Iraqi Jewish culture] on to him. And having a huge amount of comfort and conciliation from sharing meals with my non-Iraqi friends, saying, "Here. Try this, you might like this. It's something from my family." So, sharing was a huge part of it – and I wanted things that would be nice to share.

I was also very interested by the idea that, while we all pass on generational trauma, I think we also pass on strategies for survival and resilience. And part of that is joy.

– Erin Douglass / Contributor

IN PICTURES

Purrs in paradise

Story by Jackie Valley / Staff writer

LANAI CITY, HAWAII

The greetings begin as the guests arrive. Soft mews. Exuberant meows. Lyrical purrs.

But these aren't totally selfless acts of hospitality. The cats know the incoming visitors are treat purveyors. The humans who enter their enclosures at the Lanai Cat Sanctuary come armed with

staff-approved goody bags bound to attract affection. The felines saunter up to guests, begging for delicious morsels and maybe some head rubs.

Call it a cat-lover's paradise in paradise. The four-acre, open-air haven exists on the Hawaiian island of Lanai.

"This place is made for feral cats to become friendly," says Joe Adarna, the sanctuary's director of operations.

Its purpose extends beyond the feline population. The sanctuary also helps protect endangered birds living on the island, including the Hawaiian coot, the wedge-tailed shearwater, the Hawaiian stilt, and the Hawaiian petrel. By removing roaming cats from the landscape, there are fewer predators jeopardizing the safety of the birds and their eggs.

"It's kind of rare," says Kathy Carroll, who founded the sanctuary and is now a volunteer. "In a lot of communities, the cat people and the bird people are in conflict."

Don't expect to find much, if any, cattiness here, either. The nonprofit's leaders say fights among the more than 700 cats who live at the sanctuary are rare. There's no need to be territorial. The cats have enough nourishment (120 pounds of dry food and 100 cans of wet food total per day), plenty of room (70,000 square feet of enclosed spaces), and, for those who want it, lots of attention (12,000 or more visitors a year).

The sanctuary facilitates 50 to 100 adoptions each year, with destinations as far-flung as New York and Florida. "As they get older, it's so much better to have a couch and a family," Mr. Adarna says.

In the meantime, there's no shortage of love doled out on a daily basis from staff and visitors alike. Tom and Kristina Rayder, who have three cats at home in Chicago, are here to spend their five-year anniversary at the sanctuary in late October. He is wearing a cat-themed Hawaiian shirt; he and his wife both have cat tattoos.

"We're just crazy cat people," Ms. Rayder says, laughing while surrounded by – you guessed it – cats. ▪

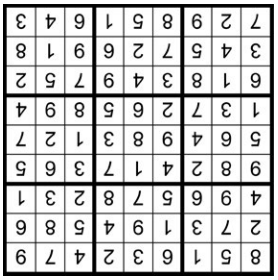
Sudoku difficulty: ★★★★

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

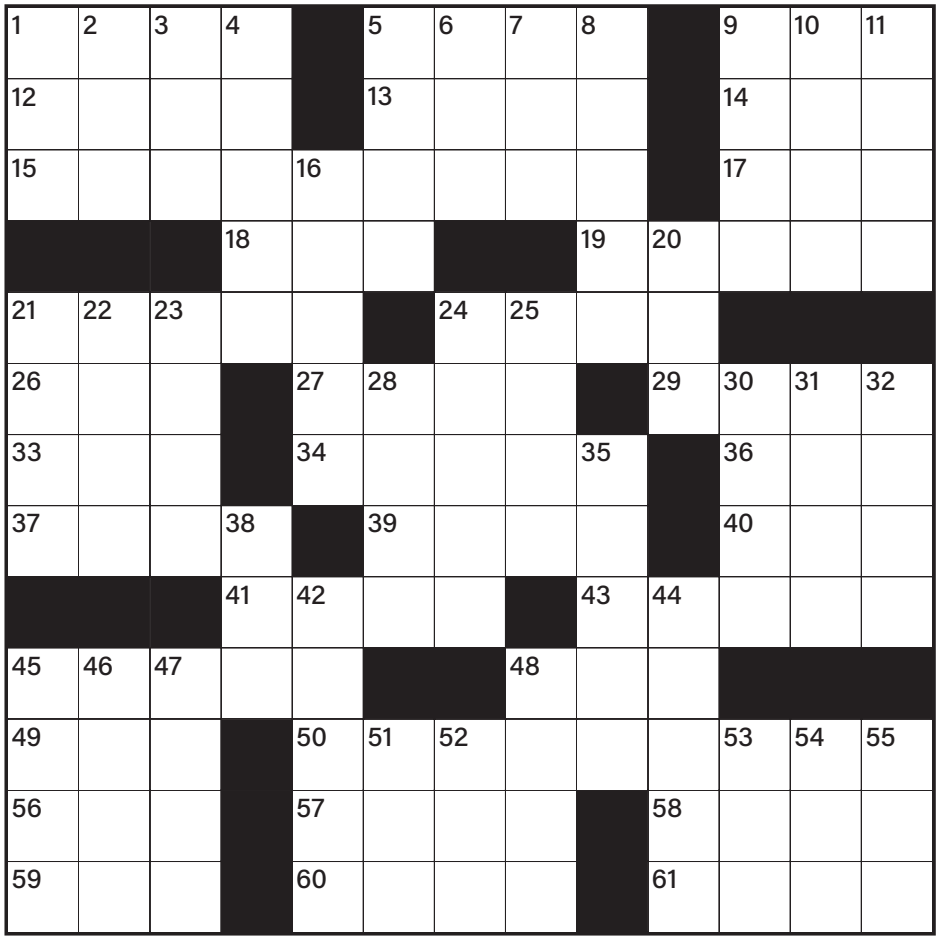
How to do Sudoku

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

Crossword and Sudoku solutions



Crossword



ACROSS

1. Lodgings, such as Joseph and Mary sought
5. Current fashion
9. Draw away from shore, as a tide
12. Snapped, as pictures
13. Peak's peak
14. Styling goo
15. Rigorously binding
17. Wildebeest's alias
18. ___ de trois (dance)
19. Stairstep face
21. It's dismissed
24. What Mark Spitz did
26. Kim Wilde's "___ Town"
27. Handleable
29. The Rat ___ (Frank and the boys)
33. & so on & so forth
34. Defer (to)
36. Prompt an actor
37. Rolltop, e.g.
39. Spreadsheet figures
40. Conduct a trial
41. ___ and done with
43. They may be rigged
45. Hot fad
48. Hack down
49. Solver's shout
50. Banked
56. Cruise or Selleck
57. Old-fashioned pitcher
58. Pay particular attention to
59. Peacock plume feature
60. Parts of a gym set
61. Chew like a chipmunk

DOWN

1. "___ now or never!"
2. Word with waste and want
3. Edvard Grieg's country: abbr.
4. Flees town
5. Threads in shreds
6. Jungle groomer
7. Exod. preceder
8. News special
9. Omelet necessity
10. Nota ___ (mark my words)
11. Mr. Magoo's vision
16. Meanspirited
20. Bothersome bambino
21. Mixed, collegiately
22. It has strings attached
23. Geometric curves
24. Ink mishap
25. Ornamental shoe strip
28. Supportive assistant
30. Drama divisions
31. Hardly garrulous
32. Janitor's noise makers
35. Agatha Christie and Margot Fonteyn
38. Goldfish relative
42. "Star Wars" villain
44. Stupefying
45. Chess-game conclusion
46. Cry from the crow's-nest
47. Eco's "The ___ of the Rose"
48. ___ d'oeuvre (appetizer)
51. Farm animal you heard
52. Vim and vigor
53. Proverbial brickload
54. Approx. landing time
55. Drops on the grass