

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

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

— MARY BAKER EDDY

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Reporting on public lands and common ground

Last summer, a moment of bipartisan pushback broke through the party-line policymaking that often dominates Washington.

It had to do with a provision in a spending bill that would have allowed the federal government to sell off public lands. The opposition cut across not just politics but also identity: conservatives and liberals, ranchers and environmentalists. A flood of social media videos, many posted by outdoorsmen influencers wearing camouflage, urged politicians to protect America's wild spaces. Congress ultimately scrapped the proposal.

"Whether you're a greenie like me who's a mountain biker and loves the outdoors for multiple reasons, or you're a conservative hunter – we all have a shared love of public lands, and we all use them," Michael Carroll of The Wilderness Society told me at the time. "It sounds cliché, but public lands are the common ground for everyone."



By Stephanie Hanes
Print Editor

In this week's magazine, Story Hinckley explores the nuances that exist alongside that common ground.

She and photographer Melanie Stetson Freeman reported from Utah.

In July, President Donald Trump moved to cut by some 90% two national monuments there – a move supported by the state's Repub-

lican leaders.

When President Bill Clinton established Utah's 1.7 million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in 1996, he described the land in sweeping terms.

"God's handiwork is everywhere in the natural beauty of the Escalante Canyons and in the Kaiparowits Plateau, in the rock formations that show layer by layer billions of years of geology, in the fossil record of dinosaurs and other prehistoric life, in the remains of ancient American civilizations like the Anasazi Indians," he said.

President Barack Obama designated the Bears Ears National Monument in 2016, after years of lobbying from tribal nations, many of which have deep ancestral and sacred ties to the area.

During his first term, President Trump moved to shrink both. President Joe Biden then restored them.

Mr. Trump has a pattern of reversing what can be described – depending on one's political perspective – as either the good works or the excesses of prior administrations.

But this political back-and-forth can mask deeper questions – and unity.

It can be hard for people on the East Coast to understand just how much land the federal government owns. More than 90% of U.S. federal lands are in the West, with almost half the land there under federal ownership. There are differing views about how this land should be used and controlled.

But peel away the layers of policy and politics, as well as the debates about ownership and access, and you're left with the soaring red canyons and deep green valleys that Melanie captures alongside Story's writing.

There are many places of beauty around the world. Telling their stories can bring a sense of shared purpose and humanity. ■

NEWS: DISPATCHES

Iran war clouds US strategic reputation

As the United States and Iran trade increasingly ferocious blows, the war is quickly becoming less a test of American military dominance than its limits, a growing number of analysts say.

Critics say the five-month-long conflict has exposed America's strategic vulnerabilities and reflected poorly on the Pentagon's reputation. U.S. firepower, overwhelming though it may be, has so far failed to reopen the Strait of Hormuz or bring the regime back to the negotiating table.

The Trump administration has said it attacked Iran to stop its nuclear program. But Iran gained early leverage by attacking ships in the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20% of the world's oil supply passes. That has stymied efforts to forge a lasting ceasefire.

Still, the administration bears much of the blame for demonstrating a "distinct inability" to see over the strategic horizon, says retired Army Col. Peter Mansoor, a professor of military history at The Ohio State University.

As Iran has continued to absorb attacks and retaliate against American bases in the Middle East, the U.S. military must take responsibility for its strategic shortfalls as well, says Mark Cancian, a retired Marine colonel and a defense analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

This includes the "glaring failure" of the Navy to secure the Strait of Hormuz, he adds.

As the United States has moved into what some analysts call "full-blown reaction mode," the war has also become a test of the credibility of U.S. military deterrence now that the war's aims have shifted from denying the regime nuclear arms to reopening the strait. Meanwhile, Iran – a country that now has no navy due to U.S. strikes – is flexing its previously unexercised power to close the strategic waterway with speedboats and drones.

The U.S. Navy "has been thinking about this problem for 45 years – and I mean that literally," Mr. Cancian says. "And so the fact that we seem to be helpless now that the moment has arrived is astonishing."

Now, the war is at a stalemate, in part because political leaders expected an easy victory and wanted to avoid casualties, which might have limited military planning.

"However, blaming the political establishment alone is too easy. Much criticism must also fall on the military, particularly the Navy," which "has not given senior decision makers acceptable options because of historical, glaring gaps in capability that it has not addressed," Mr. Cancian wrote in a July analysis.

This includes mine clearance – the loss of the skill has long been "bemoaned" in professional military journals, he notes – as well as convoy operations against "asymmetric adversaries in constricted waters."

Were the strait still open, the U.S. could likely live with the current status quo, having "greatly damaged the Iranian nuclear

program, military forces, defense industry, and particularly Iran's ability to manufacture ballistic missiles," he adds. "Time would be on our side."

— Anna Mulrine Grobe / Staff writer

Under fire from Iran, Jordan faces a balancing act

Locked in conflict with the U.S., Iran has directed much of its fire not at Washington's wartime partner Israel, but at one of its most reliable Arab partners: Jordan.

Iranian forces repeatedly struck U.S. military assets in Jordan in July, killing two U.S. troops on a Jordanian air base and targeting a port and airport.

The attacks thrust the kingdom into an ever-difficult balancing act, observers say. Jordan depends on U.S. military and economic support and remains one of America's top regional allies while it downplays that support to offset public anger over U.S. Middle East policy and Israel's war in Gaza. At the same time, it stresses to Iran that it is not party to the war.

That balancing act extends to the government's public messaging. It has said little about the Iran war, its security ties with the U.S., or the location and severity of Iranian strikes on Jordanian soil.

Jordan's reliance on Washington, however, has shown no sign of weakening. Annual U.S. assistance has increased from \$450 million in 2003 to a record \$2 billion in 2026. American military personnel and hardware are present on Jordanian military bases owned and operated by the Jordan Armed Forces; there are no U.S.-run military bases in Jordan.

"The U.S. partnership is a matter of Jordanian sovereignty," says Jawad Anani, a former Jordanian foreign minister. "But we don't want Jordan to be an arena of conflict between Iran, Israel, or anyone else. And we have told the Iranians this a hundred times."

"We are not [at the outset] protecting Israel or attacking Iran, and it is not our interest to enter a war," says Jordanian political analyst Nabeel Ghishan. "But at the same time, we cannot retaliate against Iran. ... We are stuck in the middle."

— Taylor Luck / Special correspondent

A bridge opens, but Canada moves away from US

The Gordie Howe International Bridge linking Canada and the U.S. is now open for traffic.

The bridge, which opened in late July, had been delayed because of unresolved issues between the two nations. Canada rescinded an invitation for American officials to join the ribbon cutting after U.S. President Donald Trump announced new tariffs on some \$20 billion of Canadian goods. The multibillion-dollar bridge — paid for by Canada — is meant to ease reliance on the aging Ambassador Bridge, which annually transports about one-quarter of the trade between the two countries.

The Howe bridge is an indication of just how important the automotive sector and free trade with the U.S. remain for Ottawa.

But it has also emerged as a symbol of Canada's growing efforts to assert its own economic and geopolitical position in the face of U.S. tariffs and other tensions.

The bridge sweeps 1 1/2 miles across the Detroit River. Its main span — the area between its support towers — is the longest for any cable-stayed bridge in North America and among the longest in the world, according to the Windsor-Detroit Bridge Authority. It is modeled to resemble the hockey sticks wielded by the bridge's namesake, a beloved Canadian player who brought the Detroit Red Wings four Stanley Cup titles in the 1950s.

The bridge marks the third major crossing, alongside the Detroit Windsor Tunnel and the Ambassador Bridge, through and over which approximately 8,000 trucks traverse daily. Total auto trade between the U.S. and Canada has climbed from \$32 billion in 1995 — one year after the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect — to almost \$51 billion in 2023.

— Sara Miller Llana and Cameron Pugh / Staff writers

Russia's Olympic win may also create political challenges

After a decade of partial isolation from international sports, Russian athletes and sports fans may finally see their flag flying at an Olympic Games in the near future.

And it might be largely due to a quiet reversal by the Russian government on the inclusion of athletes from Russia-occupied Ukraine within its Olympic programs.

The International Olympic Committee removed the suspension of its Russian affiliate in July, potentially paving the way for Russian teams to fully participate in the upcoming 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles. Though it's far from certain that all Russian athletes will be allowed to compete under their national flag and anthem, some Russians believe that this, along with a decision to remove restrictions on the Belarus Olympic Committee a couple of months ago, signals that Russia's ban is coming to an end.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov hailed the IOC decision as a "great achievement," made possible by a whole team of Russian negotiators working on the issue. Sports Minister Mikhail Degtyarev said Russia would be taking national sports federations to court if they continue to bar Russians, and warned that countries — such as Poland and the Baltic states — that refuse to host Russian athletes might lose their right to hold international competitions.

Sergei Druzhinin, coach of Sokol hockey club in Krasnoyarsk in Siberia, which suffered when foreign players left the team after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine began, says it's high time politics was removed entirely from the world of sports. "Competition should be at the highest level," he says. "Only matching with a worthy opponent enables us to grow, and creates a real spectacle for the fans."

Russia has been in the Olympic doghouse since a massive doping scandal in the wake of the troubled 2014 Winter Games it hosted in Sochi. Harsh scrutiny was focused on the Russian Olympic Committee and led to the exclusion of many Russian athletes, as well as bans on the displaying of national symbols by those allowed to participate.

With the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the ban became universal, and only a few Russians have since been permitted to compete as "neutral" individuals.

But the immediate reason for the IOC's change of heart is an issue that's been little discussed in Russia, and could present a political problem.

The Russian Olympic Committee had been admitting local sports organizations in territories of Ukraine that Russia annexed in 2022 – Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia – under the Russian constitution. An overwhelming majority of countries view Russia's annexation of those territories as illegal, and still considers them to be part of Ukraine. The IOC fully suspended the ROC in response to its actions.

Over the past few years, the ROC has quietly purged those organizations and athletes out of its ranks, bringing them back into compliance with IOC rules: a fact the international body recognized in lifting the suspension.

Andrey Kolesnikov, a Moscow-based columnist for the independent Novaya Gazeta newspaper, says that Russian – and probably Kremlin – eagerness to return to the international stage explains the willingness to exclude people in what are referred to as the “new territories.”

This could come back to bite the Kremlin, because the ROC has effectively disenfranchised people in the occupied regions whom it has recognized as Russian citizens. The decision might have satisfied the IOC, but it opens the Russian government up to political attack from Russian nationalists, who are influential.

– Fred Weir / Special correspondent

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

\$37.5
BILLION

The estimated cost of the U.S. war in Iran, so far, according to a statement by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth during a hearing before the Senate Appropriations Committee on July 21. This is up \$8.5 billion from the Pentagon's May estimate of the war's costs.

50%

The tariff President Donald Trump imposed on many Canadian goods. The new levy, due to take effect on Aug. 19, applies to a variety of goods, including hockey sticks, alcoholic beverages, dairy products, and cement. The Trump administration says the tariffs are a response to what it calls Canada's “discriminatory treatment” of some American goods.

100
MILLION

The number of foreign tourists the Spanish government expects to welcome this year, according to Spanish Tourism Minister Jordi Hereu. Conflict in the Middle East is diverting travel to countries such as Spain, and tourism may also spike after the country's World Cup win. Spain is the second-most visited country in the world, after France.

3
PER MINUTE

The rate at which cooling fans have been selling in the United Kingdom during this summer's heat wave, according to Irish heating and cooling company

Dimplex. Only an estimated 5% of U.K. households use air conditioning, according to 2025 government figures.

\$50.1
MILLION

The record-breaking price that an unidentified bidder paid for “Gus,” a 67-million-year-old Tyrannosaurus rex fossil auctioned by Sotheby's in New York in mid-July. Gus is the most expensive fossil ever sold at auction, surpassing the previous record of \$45 million for a stegosaurus fossil in 2024.

– Kelenna Onukwugha / Staff writer

Sources: The Associated Press, Military Times, Al Jazeera, The New York Times, Reuters, The Guardian, U.K. Department for Energy Security and Net Zero

OUR WORLD

“We want to build local but dream global.”

That's what artificial intelligence strategist Chinat Yu told the South China Morning Post as a diverse group of AI innovators, scientists, and entrepreneurs gathered in Hong Kong in July to explore how international collaboration could transcend deepening geopolitical rifts. While Beijing and Washington focus on their strategic rivalry over AI, this group contended that commercial and productivity incentives for AI adoption are so immense that they would pull the global industry toward integration. The experts said AI growth should not be a zero-sum game, but rather, expand the world's economic pie.

– Ann Scott Tyson

Medieval masterpiece arrives in London

For the first time since it was embroidered in the 11th century, the approximately 224-foot Bayeux Tapestry is on English shores. The artwork depicting a key moment in England's history – the 1066 conquest by the French duke of Normandy – has long resided in the town of Bayeux in northwestern France, but is now on loan to the British Museum in London. “It's incredibly exciting,” the museum's director, Nicholas Cullinan, told The Associated Press. The tapestry will be displayed from September until July 2027.

– Kelenna Onukwugha

Starlink outmaneuvered in South Africa

After three years of stalled efforts by Elon Musk to bring Starlink to his native country of his birth, rival Amazon has announced that its new satellite internet service, Leo, will launch there next year. Mr. Musk has said he will not adhere to South African regulations requiring foreign communications companies to give a minority share of their local subsidiary to Black or other nonwhite owners. Amazon's deal makes South Africa the first market for Leo in Africa, a continent where less than half the population has internet access.

– Ryan Lenora Brown

Burrito behemoth enters Mexico's food scene

Chipotle, a U.S.-based fast-casual restaurant chain, is taking its first steps into the Latin American market, opening an eatery in the northern Mexican city of Monterrey. Whether Mexicans – accustomed to the ubiquity of taco stands and freshly made tortillas – will bite is the big question. Other Mexican-inspired food chains have tried their hands south of the border before, including two attempts by Taco Bell, without much success.

– Whitney Eulich

NEWS: GLOBAL CURRENTS

MONTEVIDEO, URUGUAY

Uruguay has an answer to the global housing shortage

An iconic cooperative model is gaining new attention as part of a “toolkit of solutions” to a shortage of affordable dwellings.

By Constance Malleret / Contributor

As a young couple with three children in the 1970s, Teresita Palomeque and her husband thought buying a house was an unattainable dream.

So, when they were invited to join a housing cooperative – an emerging model at the time – they scrimped to pay the entry fee alongside colleagues from the bank where they worked.

Construction lasted four years, and in 1975, the family of five moved into a compact three-bedroom apartment in a development of redbrick tower blocks on one of Montevideo's main avenues. Ms. Palomeque still lives there to this day with a thousand other co-op residents.

Collective housing is a model gaining attention across the globe as affordability and housing crises grow. Although collective home ownership exists from Sweden to Chile and Denmark to Canada, Uruguay's cooperative housing policy has been enshrined into law since 1968 and is recognized as a way of giving lower- and middle-class Uruguayans access to dignified, affordable housing.

“The Uruguayan case is iconic. It has been and continues to be an inspiration,” says Elkin Velásquez, regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean at UN-Habitat, the United Nations agency for urbanization.

Cooperatives, and community-centered housing more generally, are part of a “toolkit of solutions” to the global housing shortage, estimated at 288 million homes, Mr. Velásquez says. It's top of mind for people around the world, as concerns around affordability grow. The United States Congress passed a housing bill to boost supply, signed into law in early July. The 21st Century Road to Housing Act was one of the rare pieces of legislation to win bipartisan support in recent years.

It was under similar conditions that the Uruguayan model was thought up in the 1960s, when the country was gripped by an economic crisis and a group of architects saw in co-op-owned residences a solu-

tion to the housing deficit. The idea drew on Uruguay's strong culture of organizing through cooperatives and a working-class tradition of self-building homes, says Alina del Castillo, a professor at the University of the Republic's Faculty of Architecture, Design, and Urbanism.

There are now over 70,000 co-op-owned homes in Uruguay – 5.1% of the country's total housing stock, according to the 2023 census. Some were built from scratch, sometimes by the residents themselves, while others repurposed existing buildings, all with state loans and technical support from a government-vetted group of experts.

Uruguay's law, which viewed an individual's ability to work as a form of capital, was “very pioneering,” says Dr. Del Castillo.

“Was it worth it?”

Sandra Cáceres has a before-and-after photo of an abandoned bakery in Montevideo's Old Town hanging by her front door. She put in 30 hours a week for eight years to restore the once crumbling structure in the 1990s. Today it's a residential building with 34 apartments, one of which is hers.

“The ovens were made of very long, large stones. The stones had to be removed; it was a huge amount of work,” she says. “It was tiring, but was it worth it? Of course it was.”

The building's transformation helped revitalize the rundown neighborhood and ward off real estate speculation. It also created a new sense of community.

The societal “norm is for you to not know anything about who lives next door, above, below,” says Matías Paparamborda, who grew up in the same housing complex as Ms. Palomeque, Complejo Bulevar, and returned in 2021 after starting his own family. “Here, everyone knows who you are.”

Residents' children get priority to join the cooperative at Complejo Bulevar whenever a spot opens up – usually after someone dies.

“We were convinced that this was the best place in the world to raise a kid,” says Mr. Paparamborda, as his son plays in the leafy central courtyard with other children. The complex isn't closed off, which means communal spaces like a playground and a library have always been open to the wider neighborhood.

Mr. Paparamborda is a writer and filmmaker and puts his social mobility – his father was an electrician and his mother a schoolteacher – down to the diversity of people he knew growing up in the co-op.

But he says collective living has its challenges, too. “In general, the decisions that are taken during the assemblies are not what I would do,” he says. “But I've learned to embrace this, because one of the most important things that you learn with community living is that life is not about doing what you want.”

Ms. Cáceres compares it to a marriage, where a couple must learn to compromise and cohabit.

Changing times

The number of co-op-owned homes more than doubled in Uruguay between 2011 and 2023. But the housing deficit has remained steady, at 400,000 homes.

More than 60 years on from the national housing law, Dr. Del Castillo believes the system's current rigidity may be holding it back. Rules around government funding for housing means that new cooperatives can no longer build commercial areas, or leisure spaces such as a soccer pitch, as part of a residential complex.

“Regulations have become very restrictive. Projects are evaluated according to a checklist ... there's no case-by-case study,” she says. “The law contains incredible values and for its time it was very innovative,” she says. But to meet the needs of a modern, growing

society it may be time for the system “to be revised.”

There’s no need to “copy-paste” the Uruguayan experience, Mr. Velásquez says. But if adapted to the specific conditions of each country, it can serve as an inspiration for other nations trying to navigate affordable, quality housing. ■

IRPIN, UKRAINE

In Ukraine, a city waits to rebuild a symbol of resistance

Instead of rushing to repair a war-damaged university, policymakers decided to wait. They gained international support – and a new future.

By Howard LaFranchi / Staff writer

Within a year of being pummeled by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Irpin’s prestigious State Tax University had been mostly repaired.

But not its main building. The symbol of an institution that for decades has prepared many of Ukraine’s top public finance officials and ministers sat bomb-blasted and unusable.

University and city leaders had decided that the building’s reconstruction was a special case requiring special treatment. They wanted a rebuild that would serve as an example for the country’s broader national reconstruction, incorporating elements of sustainable and inclusive construction they hoped would exemplify an advancing and more democratic Ukraine.

But that kind of reconstruction project would take more time, and more money – something the national government could not even consider with the war monopolizing resources.

“There can be two approaches in a case like ours. There is the quick rebuilding, like replacing blasted windows, which we did with some buildings,” says Dmytro Serebrianskyi, rector of the State Tax University, known widely as STU, that sits northwest of Kyiv. “But then there is strategic rebuilding.”

University leadership “decided we wanted not just a rebuilding of the old structure but something symbolizing a new future first for our university,” he adds.

But how to even start such a broader rebuild project, with the war continuing and resources required for that effort?

Enter Build Forward Ukraine.

Half a world away, in San Francisco, an organization bringing together Ukrainians, Americans, and others interested in promoting elements of sustainability, inclusivity, and democracy in Ukraine’s vast rebuilding effort were looking for what could be a demonstration project for their vision.

The search led to a collaboration between Build Forward Ukraine and STU that aims to culminate in a rebuilt – and reimagined – main building.

Moreover, cooperation blossomed when both sides realized they were engaging with partners who shared a vision for the qualities and values that should underpin Ukraine’s reconstruction.

“The amazing thing was our realization that we all wanted this project to go beyond rebuilding a university building to advancing the values Ukrainians want for their national reconstruction and

future,” says Margie O’Driscoll, CEO of Build Forward Ukraine.

“We realized this when we heard from Ukrainians themselves that rebuilding institutions like STU also had to serve the purpose of forming new leaders to implement the road to democracy and European Union accession.”

Build Forward Ukraine’s inspiration to foster reconstruction even with war raging came from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, says Ms. O’Driscoll. She recalls that just six weeks into the full-scale invasion, Mr. Zelenskyy was urging the nation to start rebuilding.

“We were struck by a leader talking about defense and rebuilding at the same time; it inspired us to think there could already be a role for us.”

The Build Forward Ukraine team was also aware of Irpin and the special role the city had played in the dark early days, repelling the Russian ground offensive aimed at taking Kyiv, 14 miles south. They would learn later that Irpin’s university had held the line between the 30% of the city that fell under Russian occupation and the 70% that remained free.

“The first victory in the Kyiv region was in Irpin, and our university played an important role in halting the Russian advance and saving Kyiv,” says Oleksandr Markushyn, who was Irpin’s mayor in 2022. “I recall seeing the main building burning,” he adds, “so I feel strongly about rebuilding it as a symbol of a free Ukraine standing firm on the Western values we aspire to.”

Once the Russian troops retreated, Mr. Markushyn oversaw the “quick” type of reconstruction of Irpin’s damaged and destroyed residential buildings. But he would later meet with Build Forward Ukraine representatives and Dr. Serebrianskyi to discuss the rector’s vision of a “strategic” rebuild at the university.

Ms. Driscoll and several others from her organization visited Ukraine in the summer of 2023 – a tour that included Irpin – and then invited a group of Ukrainians, including Dr. Serebrianskyi, to San Francisco. There they met with experts in such areas as sustainable building practices and efficient energy systems from Berkeley, Stanford, and other Bay Area universities.

The experts shared what worked or not in other international reconstruction projects, including Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. Once Build Forward Ukraine decided on the Irpin university main building as its demonstration project, it was Dr. Serebrianskyi who insisted that the building’s redesign plan be selected from among entries in an international competition and not just awarded behind closed doors to a handpicked design group.

“It was Dmytro who remarked to us that opening up the selection of an architect and making it part of a public process of reconstruction would really change the way buildings were built” in Ukraine, notes Ms. O’Driscoll. Project planners realized transparency would be an important element in a country battling a long heritage of corruption.

They also realized that they were now part of not just one building’s reconstruction, but a process where following and instilling democratic practices and acknowledging cultural sensitivities was going to be just as important as the final product.

Earlier this year, an international jury of architects and construction experts chose the design entry from Canadian company Stantec out of 49 entries from 18 countries for the STU project. Then, in April, the Build Forward Ukraine team brought together representatives of Stantec and Ukrainians in a London conference that included visits to the area’s great universities.

Project planners estimate it will still be at least three years before

the STU main building reopens, because of the time it will take to finalize the design, line up financing, and carry out the construction. Both the World Bank and European Bank of Reconstruction and Development have expressed interest in participating in the project.

Meanwhile, the process by which Irpin's university joins in the larger project of rebuilding Ukraine will continue, the project's enthusiasts say.

"Of course we are anxious to see our beloved main building open and serving our university and our community once again," says Dr. Serebrianskyi. "But the great universities we visited, including Oxford and Cambridge, were not built quickly. We understand," he adds, "that the steps we are taking to reach that final goal are an important part of building the new Ukraine we all want." ■

LONDON

In Britain, a comedy candidate plays political spoiler

The U.K. electoral system has long featured parody also-rans. But now Britain's foremost far-right leader could find himself upended by a man wearing a bin.

By **Mark Rice-Oxley** / Contributor

For decades, they were the jokers in the electoral pack, an oddball lineup of jesters and opportunists in bizarre outfits who brought a dash of the surreal to British elections.

In 1987, when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was reelected to her north London constituency, she did so against a man with a bucket on his noggin. Thirty years later, Lord Buckethead was at it again, trying – and failing – to unseat the prime minister of the day, Theresa May.

In 2015 meanwhile, a man in a large red Elmo costume ran against then-head-of-government David Cameron. Two years later, a giant fish finger won 300 votes in a Scottish constituency.

And in June, when Andy Burnham triumphed in a by-election on his way to becoming prime minister just a month later, he was flanked in victory by a 6-foot furry fox and a man in superhero spandex.

So far, so satirical.

But the joke is about to get serious. In an Aug. 13 by-election in the constituency of Clacton-on-Sea, southeastern England, Britain's most influential – and divisive – politician of recent years faces a moment of truth.

Nigel Farage, perennial leader of the populist right and erstwhile friend of U.S. President Donald Trump, risks losing his parliamentary seat.

Not to a mainstream candidate, or a single-issue campaigner.

But to Count Binface, a man with a towering garbage bin on his head.

"This is where the joke gets serious because there is a possibility that Binface will win," says Jon Tonge, a politics professor at Liverpool University. "I don't think he will, but it can't be discounted."

Britons love a wry joke at the expense of the establishment. But the battle with Binface also speaks to a mood of protest in British society today. "The country doesn't rise up in the same revolu-

tionary ways as Americans do," says Erich McElroy, a U.K.-based American comedian and podcaster, "but it has these little protests to stick it to the Man."

The perils of brawling with a bin

Professor Tonge puts the likelihood of an upset at around 30%. A recent national poll found one-third of Britons wanted the comedy character to win, against just one-fifth for Mr. Farage. But of course, only the roughly 78,000 living in Clacton actually get to vote.

Even if Mr. Farage prevails, it may not prove triumphant for the man who won Clacton in 2024 with more than 46% of the vote. "The danger for Farage is that it's a Pyrrhic victory because even if he wins, all he's done is beaten a bin," Professor Tonge adds. "Arguably the biggest British political figure of the 21st century looks like a fool because he is spending the summer debating with a bin."

There is added irony in that Mr. Farage has brought this upon himself. As the sitting member of Parliament for Clacton, he resigned his seat amid a mounting clamor over his finances and a parliamentary investigation.

The plan was to seek a renewed mandate to show that he has strong public backing, regardless of funding questions. But it backfired when none of the mainstream parties put up candidates. Instead, his principal rival from a field of 33 is Binface (aka comedian Jon Harvey) whose absurd policies include nationalizing Adele and "building at least one affordable home."

The by-election has propelled Binface to national prominence – and a frenetic schedule. Aides said he had had hundreds of requests for interviews and that he would be unable to speak to the Monitor before we went to press.

But in other public appearances, he has wittered gamely about his plans. "I might go [to Clacton], but the current incumbent seems to spend more time in Washington, D.C., so maybe I should go there," he said on the BBC: a jibe at Mr. Farage's trips to hobnob with Mr. Trump and his allies.

He has refused to be drawn out on whether, if elected, he would remove his headgear, as Parliament requires. (Perhaps the institution could take a lesson from Colombia's Congress, which allowed recently elected Luis Carlos Rúa to be sworn in July 20 while wearing the white elephant costume that he campaigned in.)

Loonies and McBoatfaces

The anarchic trend in British politics dates back to the days of a man named Screaming Lord Sutch, who founded the Official Monster Raving Loony Party in 1982 as a magnet for protest voters.

Mr. Sutch has since been succeeded by Howling Laud Hope, and the party is a standard feature of British elections, though it never gets more than a few hundred votes. In Clacton, as well as Mr. Hope, the party is fielding Nick The Incredible Flying Brick and Baron von Thunderclap.

Mr. McElroy, the American comedian, says he was initially perplexed at all the costumes and hats at election time.

"The first time I saw the Loonies, I thought, 'What on earth is this?'" he says. He notes that it's easier for joke candidates in the U.K. than elsewhere because of the relatively low barrier to entry. It costs just £500 (\$670) to register as a candidate in an election. "If you stump up the deposit, then you get on the stage."

"There is something very British about it," Mr. McElroy adds.

Four years ago, a newspaper bought a lettuce and wagered that it would last longer than the then-new prime minister, Liz Truss. It did.

And when the public was asked in 2016 to vote for a new name

for a polar research vessel, the popular – if sardonic – choice was “Boaty McBoatface.”

It seems no one can resist a pun on this occasion, too.

“For the people of Clacton, this is a great opportunity to recycle leadership,” quipped Mr. McElroy.

And in his last parliamentary intervention before handing over to Mr. Burnham, outgoing Prime Minister Keir Starmer kept a straight face when offering his advice to the people of Clacton: “Put your vote in the bin.” ■

JOHANNESBURG; AND NAIROBI, KENYA

On the youngest continent, a push for kid-friendly cities

Africa is the fastest urbanizing region on the planet. A growing movement of planners and parents wants to make its cities safe – and fun – for children.

By Ryan Lenora Brown / Special correspondent
and Harriet Akinyi / Contributor

Peninah Ndegwa spent years studying urban planning, but one of her most instructive moments in the field occurred far from a classroom. In 2018, she was walking through downtown Nairobi with her baby strapped to her back when, suddenly and urgently, her daughter needed a diaper change. Ms. Ndegwa scanned the streets around her, but there was nowhere to go – no clean public toilets, no public changing stations.

“That was an awakening,” Ms. Ndegwa says. She realized that her city wasn’t built with her – or her child – in mind.

That is a problem of continental proportions. Sub-Saharan Africa has both the most rapidly urbanizing population on Earth and the youngest. By 2050, one in four people on the planet will be African, and two-thirds of them – about 1.4 billion people – will live in urban areas. But although nearly half the region’s population is under age 18, its cities are often unfriendly places to grow up – crowded, poorly planned, and unsafe. Fixing that, many say, should be an urgent priority.

“If cities are safe for children, they are safe for everyone,” says Ms. Ndegwa, who now runs a social enterprise focused on child-friendly city planning called Wow Mom Kenya. “Designing cities through a child’s lens meets everyone’s needs.”

Urban disadvantage?

Ms. Ndegwa’s experience of scrambling to find a changing station led her to approach the city government of Nairobi and work with officials there to install diaper-changing stations in public toilets and markets.

But when she began to take the changing stations to those crowded, noisy markets, she quickly saw a bigger problem. The reason there were so many children there to begin with was because their mothers, who worked as hawkers, had nowhere else to leave them.

“I saw babies laid on cartons in tiny rooms next to toilets,” Ms. Ndegwa recalls. “It was shocking.”

Her next project was born, and she began setting up daycares in markets across the city.

For trader Winnie Njoroge, having access to such a space has been so transformative that she travels 25 miles each day to hawk stationery in a downtown market instead of in the neighborhood where she lives.

“One of the hardest things for us is to find a safe place where we can leave our children,” she explains. “Where I live, the apartment has no space for children to play. We live close to the road, and it’s unsafe for them to be outside.”

For decades, the conventional wisdom has held that cities are objectively better places for the world’s children to grow up in than rural areas – what experts call “the urban advantage.” The argument is simple: Urban areas have more of nearly everything, from schools and hospitals to jobs and infrastructure.

But the unplanned sprawl of African cities is poking holes in that theory.

“For those who live in planned neighborhoods, who have adequate housing, cities are still usually better,” says Sarah Sabry, founding chair of the Cities4Children alliance and the global lead for urban issues at Save the Children. “But if you look at the conditions that many children in these cities live in, it’s clear why urban life is not always better.”

For instance, more than half of African city dwellers live in slums, meaning their homes are impermanent, overcrowded, and often without easy access to water and toilets. In at least 10 African countries, that number tops 70%, and in Mali and South Sudan, it is more than 90%.

Evans Otieno knows firsthand that these neighborhoods are hard places to grow up.

Finding places to play

Eight miles from central Nairobi, the air over the Dandora landfill is gauzy with the acrid, chemical smoke of burning garbage. The city’s largest dump borders a densely populated neighborhood of modest concrete homes and apartment blocks, with small shops woven into the spaces between them. It was here that Mr. Otieno spent his childhood. Orphaned at the age of 6, he ended up joining one of the area’s notorious gangs, which fights violent battles for control of the landfill.

After nearly being killed during a robbery in 2009, Mr. Otieno decided he wanted out. And he began considering what had pushed him to join the gang in the first place. “Peer pressure, crime, and unsafe environments shaped [my] daily life,” he says. When he looked across his neighborhood, he was struck by how few places there were for kids to go – almost no playgrounds, parks, libraries, or sports fields. He thought of how his own childhood might have turned out differently if he had access to safe play spaces.

“Growing up here was dangerous,” he says. The “unsafe environment shaped daily life” and pushed him toward the gang, he believed, because it was the only place he felt secure.

For children, “playing is fundamental,” says Anacláudia Rossbach, executive director of UN-Habitat. Not only a source of entertainment, play is also central to how children learn to navigate the world, from developing their motor skills to teaching them how to interact with their peers. And if kids don’t have ready-made places to play, “they create them,” she says.

So along Dandora’s drainage channels and on the edges of busy roads, children improvise. After school hours, makeshift football pitches appear suddenly on dusty patches of land while small clearings and undeveloped plots become informal playgrounds.

“Many children in our community grew up without dignity. But

green spaces can change that. They give children a place to feel like children, a place where they can play, interact, and enjoy life in a safe, positive environment,” says Mr. Otieno.

In 2014, Mr. Otieno founded a small community organization called the Believers Transformation League. His team began clearing out an informal dump site, eventually transforming it into a community garden. More gardens followed, and recently, the organization inaugurated the Dandora Community Park, which hosts several sports fields and a children’s arena.

For Princess Adhiambo, a high school student and soccer fanatic, having access to a soccer pitch for the first time has been life changing.

“I’m happy because I can ... develop my talent,” she says.

Ms. Sabry of Cities4Children views stories like Mr. Otieno’s as a reminder that while the challenges of making African cities better for children are enormous, they are not insurmountable.

“If governments would use the energy that so many young Africans have, there would be a million positive things happening in a very short time,” she says.

She also sees hope in the fact that the African cities of the future are, in many ways, a clean slate. The United Nations estimates that of all the urban areas in the world that will exist in 2050, more than half have yet to be built.

“We have to start by fixing what isn’t working now,” she says. “But then, going forward, we can start fresh.” ■

ESCALANTE, UTAH

In Utah’s canyons, new echoes of an old debate over public lands

The U.S. government is slashing two renowned national monuments here. What happens next could shape the future of the West’s vast public lands.

There is a 20-mile stretch of Utah’s Scenic Byway 12, from the small town of Boulder to the other small town of Escalante, where the whole world appears made of sand-colored plateaus dotted with desert brush. In the stillness, birds swoop over slot canyons. The occasional car stops on a crumbling roadside shoulder, its passengers staring into the expanse of green valleys and orange cliffs.

This area of southern Utah is as old as it is sweeping, with pottery shards and campsites still scattered about from when the Ancestral Pueblo people farmed this dry land through the 12th century. Tens of millions of years before that, dinosaurs roamed a landscape that looked utterly different: a lush hothouse whose muddy floodplains have held some of the best-preserved dinosaur fossils in the world, including at least 15 species that have been found only here. This place has taught scientists more about the end of the dinosaur era than anywhere else in the world. All of this richness, from then and now, led President Bill Clinton to sit at a wooden desk on the edge of the nearby Grand Canyon in 1996 and establish roughly 1.7 million acres of public land here as the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

But 75 million years after the dinosaurs, 900 years after the ancient farmers, and 30 years after Mr. Clinton’s designation, Presi-

dent Donald Trump has opened the door for possibly the greatest changes to this environment since rivers carved these canyons. In July, Mr. Trump signed orders cutting the size of Grand Staircase-Escalante and the neighboring Bears Ears National Monument by nearly 90%, removing nearly 3 million of the previously protected 3.5 million acres. While this swath of southern Utah remains public land under federal control, the loss of national-monument designation means this land will now be open to mining for coal, minerals, and uranium.

“We’ve done something that was, I think, very desperately needed,” said Mr. Trump from behind the Resolute Desk in Washington, flanked by Utah’s smiling GOP congressional delegation and governor. “It was very unfair to the people of Utah. And now, fairness has been brought back.”

The question of “fairness” and public lands has animated the American West ever since its states were admitted to the Union, when swaths of federal land became, in many places, the price of acceptance. No state in the modern era has pushed back against this arrangement quite like Utah, whose Republican political leadership sees it as an affront to state autonomy, conservative ideals, and a vision of Wild West independence that endures today. And within Utah, no place has been more emblematic of the power of grassroots support of these places – or the power of dogged policymakers – than Grand Staircase-Escalante, which had been, until July 13, the largest national monument in the 48 contiguous United States. Now, this place – with its canyons and dinosaur bones, as well as its ATV trails and coal deposits – has become the face of not just the GOP’s fight against public lands, but also the future of how public lands could or should exist in the West.

Lands of “historic or scientific interest”

With a map several feet wide by several feet long unfolded atop the register’s counter in his outfitting shop on Escalante’s Main Street, Nate Waggoner uses his index finger to suggest a morning hike alongside the meandering Escalante River. But choose to drive down a dirt road several inches to the left on the map and, well, “You better pack some water and a sleeping bag,” he says. A few specks of rain could turn the red dirt to a hungry mud that will devour even the stoutest four-wheel drive pickup.

That’s what so many locals here, in the small towns dotting the edges of the monument, love about it: It’s unpredictable, difficult, and utterly wild. Compared with national parks, “which are a lot of groomed paths to an overlook” for an Instagram post, says Mr. Waggoner, national monuments such as Grand Staircase-Escalante take a certain kind of spirit. Visitors often check in with local outlets such as Mr. Waggoner’s Escalante Outfitters, which he opened two decades ago and has since expanded to include a popular pizza restaurant and cabin rentals.

“You turn off onto a dirt road, get out and walk for a couple of days, and then boom, you are in it,” he says. “It’s a different kind of wilderness experience.”

National parks might be what comes to mind for most Americans when they think of public land: Yosemite’s granite domes or Yellowstone’s roaming buffalo. But national parks managed by the National Park Service are only one slice of America’s roughly 640 million acres of federally owned land.

Of the four major agencies that manage federal land – including almost half the land of the West – the Bureau of Land Management oversees the most acreage, including Grand Staircase-Escalante. The U.S. Forest Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National

Park Service have their own allotments. National wildlife refuges, national forests, national monuments, and national parks all come with different rules about what's allowed to happen within their boundaries and how they are supposed to be managed.

But of all the federal government's land in the United States, which totals about 28% of the country's land area, national monuments stand out to public-land opponents as the most problematic – and that's largely because of how they are created.

In 1906, amid concerns that collectors were looting Native American artifacts, President Theodore Roosevelt signed a law that allowed presidents to unilaterally set aside public land as national monuments. The Antiquities Act, Roosevelt and other supporters said, would protect American landmarks or objects of “historic or scientific interest.” Since Roosevelt, every president (including Donald Trump) has used this power, except for three. Today, there are 168 national monuments, including marine areas.

From the beginning, opponents worried the Antiquities Act could lead to government overreach. That one person can determine the future of an area larger than the state of Delaware, with merely the stroke of a pen, feels like a personal affront to many conservatives. The national monuments in southern Utah, created or reexpanded by the three most recent Democratic presidents, stoked this debate as opponents argue these vast allotments go against the Antiquities Act's instruction to reserve “the smallest area compatible” with protection.

“Large monuments are an abuse of the Antiquities Act, and these are two of the worst examples of that,” says Ben Burr, executive director of the BlueRibbon Coalition, a nonprofit that has challenged the legality of these monuments in court.

That fight has been focused here in Utah for two big reasons.

For one, Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears are big. Proponents say their size allows for future and current scientific discoveries, such as the baby duck-billed dinosaur excavated at Grand Staircase-Escalante in June. Tribal nations have also long fought for the protection of these two areas of southern Utah. The entirety of Grand Staircase-Escalante is a cultural and spiritual landscape, says Autumn Gillard, coordinator for the Grand Staircase-Escalante Inter-Tribal Coalition.

The second reason is ... Utah. The federal government owns almost half of the West, but it really owns Utah – about 63%, the greatest share of any state other than Nevada.

Like other Western states, Utah renounced claims to unappropriated land within its borders to join the Union in 1896, something Utah spelled out in its own state constitution. But constitution or not, Utah politicians have waged a “philosophical battle” over public lands almost ever since, says John Rupple, a law professor at the University of Utah and a former policy analyst in Gov. Jon Huntsman's public-lands office. Experts have pointed to a number of overlapping reasons for this: the sheer amount of public land in Utah, the territoriality of longtime Utahns whose Mormon ancestors were outcast here, and the deep conservatism that controls all levels of government.

“In the West, in a place like Utah, an anti-government coalition looks at public lands because they are such a visible representation of federal power,” says James Skillen, a professor at Calvin University in Michigan who has authored several books on public land in the West. The fight against public land becomes about ideology, he says, rather than about economics or even about what local communities want.

During his first term, Mr. Trump instructed his Interior Depart-

ment to review all national monuments larger than 100,000 acres. With the encouragement of Utah's GOP leaders, he picked two to slash. He traveled to Utah in 2017 and signed orders shrinking Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears by about 50% and 85%, respectively. The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) and other environmental nonprofits quickly sued. But before those cases could move forward, Joe Biden won the 2020 election, took office, and restored the monuments.

Utah politicians, however, neither started nor ended there. In 2012, the state legislature passed the Utah Transfer of Public Lands Act to require the federal government to give the majority of federal land back to the state (it hasn't), and in 2025, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear a lawsuit from Utah about the federal government's “indefinite retention” of so much of the state's land. Then-Rep. Jason Chaffetz proposed legislation in 2017 to sell 3.3 million acres of public land in the West but was forced to withdraw after backlash. Similarly, Sen. Mike Lee was forced last year to withdraw a federal land selloff provision from Republicans' tax-and-spending bill after bipartisan backlash from conservation groups and fellow Western lawmakers.

In another, quieter attempt this year, Mr. Lee and U.S. Rep. Celeste Maloy in June failed to overturn a Biden-era management plan of Grand Staircase-Escalante using a filibuster-proof move under the Congressional Review Act.

“The common denominator is Utah politicians. ... They are clamoring for it,” says Steve Bloch, the SUWA's legal director. “Utah envisions itself as the epicenter, as leading the charge against the system of federal lands.”

The economics of national monuments

When Grand Staircase-Escalante was established, it faced local pushback that mirrored elected officials' complaints. Following Mr. Clinton's proclamation, the southern Utah border city of Kanab flew flags at half-staff in protest, and schoolchildren released 50 black balloons as a warning to other states. Since then, however, sentiment on the ground has shifted.

Today, polls repeatedly show Utahns' support for keeping Grand Staircase-Escalante's and Bears Ears' 1996 and 2016 boundaries intact. This transition from reviled to beloved is common for national monuments, many of which end up becoming national parks. Look no further than neighboring Arizona's Grand Canyon, or the national parks near Grand Staircase-Escalante, such as Zion or Bryce Canyon.

“The state government in Utah takes positions on these issues that are far outside the mainstream ... that fly in the face of what the public wants,” says Chris Winter, executive director of the University of Colorado's Getches-Wilkinson Center for Natural Resources, Energy, and the Environment. “Federal public lands, especially in the West, are widely popular.”

And for locals, they can be transformative. Before the monument was established, Garfield County had the state's highest unemployment rate – around 10%, three times higher than the state average. Since 2001, the population in the Grand Staircase-Escalante region has risen by 26%, and jobs have grown by 51%.

Blake Spalding, who moved to Boulder, Utah, in 2000, now employs roughly 60 people in the town of about 230 at her Hell's Backbone Grill & Farm. She moved here because of the monument, and over the past two-plus decades, acclaim for both it and the restaurant have grown in parallel. She has since expanded her business to include a food truck and a hotel.

"I put everything I have into this because I believe we have the ability to open hearts and minds, and to help people fall back in love with the natural world," she says.

When President Trump signed an order shrinking the monument during his first term, Ms. Spalding joined a lawsuit challenging the move. When she learned of the administration's renewed effort in July, she asked her young business partner, Nina Brownell, who first started working at the restaurant in college, whether it would be better if they let this whole thing go. Ms. Brownell responded that it was more important than ever that they keep going.

"Those of us who live here live here for a reason," says Ms. Brownell. "We care about the bees, and we care about the mountain lions, and we care about the wildflowers. There's really this deep frustration and anger for people who live far away and know nothing about this."

"Move-ins" versus longtime locals

Garfield County, home to Escalante, Boulder, and up until July, nearly one-third of the monument, is larger than the state of Connecticut. Neighbors live hours away from one another. This remoteness is beloved by residents and visitors – and also allows for a deep divide among those who call it home.

"What Clinton did in '96 has steamrolled into a catastrophe," says Leland Pollock, chair of the three-member Garfield County Commission who has lived in the area his entire life and praised Mr. Trump's July proclamation. "Our goal is to not get into coal mines and drilling and all that nonsense," he says. Rather, he hopes the Bureau of Land Management will now face fewer restrictions in caring for the land, and be able to take steps such as removing the juniper and pinyon pine trees that have sucked up soil moisture and made life more difficult for those with grazing permits, including himself.

And while the tourism sector has replaced the sawmill jobs that left decades ago, and which had employed a few hundred people ("Which is like 100,000 people anywhere else," says Mr. Pollock), it doesn't replace what was lost, he says. While the unemployment rate during the summer now hovers in the low single digits, it can reach up to 16% during the winter.

"Move-ins love it, longtime locals hate it," as one woman outside the Escalante Post Office summed up the monument divide. She counts herself in the "love it" camp, but declined to give her name for fear of local backlash.

Locals, however, appeared largely united in disbelief in the hours after the Oval Office signing ceremony, after listening to the reasons given by their elected officials for slashing the size of these monuments. By establishing these monuments, Presidents Clinton, Barack Obama, and Biden "locked those acres up," said Kate McGregor, the deputy secretary of the Interior. "For nobody to use," added President Trump. "You can't do anything. You can't go hunting. You can't go fishing. You can't do anything. You can virtually not even walk on it."

None of that is true, as even a visitor can attest. Hiking, hunting, and fishing are all permitted. As are motorized vehicles ("You could drive on dirt roads in the national monument for the rest of your life," says Mr. Waggoner, of Escalante Outfitters. Mr. Burr, with the BlueRibbon Coalition, argues that the Biden administration's management plan limited off-road vehicle use and even though "the process hadn't completely unfolded yet," it was coming.) Another regularly repeated falsehood is that the monument stripped local ranchers of their grazing rights. To the contrary, livestock grazing

was grandfathered into the monument's management by the Bureau of Land Management, which operates under a "multi-use mandate." Grazing is permitted on more than 90% of the monument.

The fact that officials are denying the very uses that are now propping up local economies – which were struggling before the monument's designation – worries local business owners. Morgan Sjogren, who just obtained her BLM permit to guide in Grand Staircase-Escalante, has received calls from her first clients booked for this fall, asking whether their trip is canceled.

Ms. Brownell looks out to the foreign visitors perched at her restaurant's picnic tables with cameras and burgers, and notes that the first thing they comment on is the accessibility of natural beauty in America.

"Please tell me who's to benefit from this," Ms. Brownell says of Mr. Trump's order.

One answer to this might be the extractive industry. Documents from the first Trump administration, some made public by The New York Times, show that Utah politicians both encouraged the 2017 reductions and also structured the new monument boundaries to exclude potential energy and mineral deposits.

But many are skeptical of this explanation. There is already enough uranium mining in the West to meet America's demand, says Professor Ruple of the University of Utah. He also points out that it doesn't make financial sense for companies to mine for coal or drill for oil in such an unforgiving landscape, which lacks existing infrastructure such as pipelines, especially when it's almost certain that companies will face constant litigation from monument advocates.

"If you were to find the mother lode of coal in the Grand Staircase, what are you going to do with it?" asks Professor Ruple.

Environmental advocacy groups have vowed to file lawsuits over the national monuments' reductions, and both sides of the debate say the courts might have to finally answer whether the Antiquities Act is a one-way street, or decide that presidents are allowed to rescind (in addition to establishing) preserved land. They will have to rule if this landscape as a whole – its layered staircase of rocks and stones, its tourism, its sites that inspired Indigenous songs – is worth it.

"This one particular geologic formation that we have here, it's amazing, and it's the perfect example of why we have the Antiquities Act because nobody knew," says Mr. Waggoner. "We just set it aside until somebody finds it. And that's pretty amazing." ■

REPORTERS ON THE JOB

ESCALANTE, UTAH



Story Hinkley

Sometimes, the timing of a reporting trip can work out even better than planned. President Donald Trump and congressional Republicans had recently pushed to strip national monument protections from broad swaths of southern Utah.

In July, Monitor photographer Melanie Stetson Freeman and I traveled there to interview residents about what these national monuments mean to their communities. Just as we landed, news broke that Mr. Trump was preparing to sign an order shrinking two of the monuments by nearly 90%. By dint of perfect timing, we were able to speak with locals mere hours after the announcement, capturing their shock and uncertainty in real time. ■



Henry Gass

CORPUS CHRISTI, TEXAS

"It's too dry" are three words that every reporter fears. A "dry" story is too arcane, too deep in the weeds, too boring. When writing about a looming water emergency in Corpus Christi, I knew I needed to make the story relatable by showing how it was affecting the people there. But finding those people – and earning their trust – takes time. For me, that meant an extra trip to Corpus. There, I met Sonya Witherspoon and Monna Lyttle. One feared for the future of her county's groundwater; the other was fighting the construction of a desalination plant in her neighborhood. Their voices gave the story its human center, grounding a complex water debate in the lives of the people living it. ■



Kendra Nordin Beato

SOMERVILLE, MASS.

What happens when a source doesn't return your calls?

I ran into that problem while reporting a story on direct-trade chocolate. The owner of a small chocolate business didn't respond to my interview requests. So, I signed up for a factory tour. After learning about the "bean to bar" process, I sampled as much chocolate as I wanted during the tour's

tasting session. Oat milk quinoa crunch and dark chocolate raspberry crunch were some of my favorites.

When I asked to see the owner, I was told to send an email. But as I walked back to the train, I saw him riding his bicycle back from lunch. I flagged him down, introduced myself, and set up an interview. Sometimes, showing up is the best approach. ■



Taylor Luck

DAMASCUS, SYRIA

"Do you have any weapons?" is the last sentence I hear when leaving Syria. The security gate of Damascus International Airport runs on the honor system. A simple "no," and you are waved through. When I first flew into Syria in early 2025 after the revolution, the unlit airport was in shambles.

Returning in mid-July to report on the country's fragile security situation and new Parliament, I found a very different scene: a gleaming international airport with security scanners, money changers, mobile-phone shops, souvenir stores, and even a café with a Damascene fountain. Flights from Europe and the Middle East arrived every two hours. Even as it battles insecurity at home, Syria is increasingly connected to the world. ■

THE EXPLAINER

Trump administration's plan for federal worker NDAs puts spotlight on speech and transparency

Two million federal civilian employees could be covered by nondisclosure agreements. But the proposal is likely to face legal challenges.

By Victoria Hoffmann / Staff writer

The Trump administration is a step closer to being able to restrict what federal employees can tell the public about their work, though the plan is expected to face opposition in court.

The 30-day public comment period for the proposal recently closed, and the Office of Personnel Management is reviewing nearly 30,000 comments. The policy could go into effect as soon as the end of this year or early in 2027, if it survives potential legal challenges.

"I very much expect these agreements will both be challenged in principle and will be heavily litigated in any instance where the government tries to rely on them," says David Super, a professor of law and economics at Georgetown University Law Center.

Executive branch agencies that employ 2 million civilian workers would have the option to make staff members sign nondisclosure agreements as part of the administration's attempt to stop leaks of information. Other presidents have tried to stop leaks, too, but this proposal is the first and broadest of its kind.

Q: How is the public weighing in on Mr. Trump's plans?

Thomas Lopez, a citizen who weighed in during the public comment period, wrote on the government website that collected comments: "I'm in favor of the proposed NDA policy as is. No changes. It's good for the nation."

From a review of roughly 300 of the comments on the site, the vast majority opposed the proposal. Many who opposed NDAs cited, among other things, existing laws that already ban unauthorized disclosures of information and others that protect whistleblower rights.

"What we need is to protect federal workers from the implicit threat of retaliation for legally and constitutionally protected disclosures, while safeguarding the American public's right to a degree of transparency," wrote commenter Sue Jennings, adding that she had retired after 31 years in the federal workforce.

Q: Why is the Trump administration proposing using NDAs?

The NDA proposal is part of the Trump administration's overall effort to consolidate executive power, including by asserting it has the right to fire heads of independent agencies and to fire federal workers who don't support administration policies.

The administration says leaks have placed government operations at risk – such as news organizations obtaining information about the January U.S. military raid in Venezuela. President Donald Trump has sought to curtail freedom of the press, most recently

when the Justice Department subpoenaed four New York Times reporters over their reporting about Air Force One.

The language in the nondisclosure proposal's template is unusual, says Donald Moynihan, a professor at the University of Michigan's Ford School of Public Policy.

It would essentially bar federal workers from disclosing "non-public, confidential, or proprietary information." The uncertainty of what falls under "nonpublic" could create a chilling effect on employee speech, Professor Moynihan adds. Concerns include that employees could be targeted for talking publicly about routine aspects of their jobs or that they might not report potential waste, fraud, or illegal activity.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) says whistleblower rights are protected. However, the proposal states that employees could face disciplinary action, as well as potential civil and criminal penalties, if they disclose information without authorization.

"Imagine that the policy is in place and you are a federal employee: You are no longer certain about what you can or cannot say," says Professor Moynihan. "This policy to me seems to make it harder for the public to learn about what's happening inside the very government, precisely at a time when we have good reason to believe there is significant corruption ... [and] determination to shut down transparency and oversight of their activities."

President Trump required White House aides to sign NDAs during his first term, and he has also used similar agreements in his private businesses. OPM Director Scott Kapor says much of the private sector uses NDAs and adds "the federal government should not be held to a lower standard."

Q: How does this mesh with other efforts to reform the executive branch?

Mr. Trump is exerting control over the federal workforce in other ways. The Supreme Court's June ruling in *Trump v. Slaughter* said that a president can fire the head of an independent agency at will. Mr. Trump plans to reclassify federal workers' jobs to make them easier to terminate if they do not support the administration.

When federal workers are hired, they have protections that make traditional termination difficult. They are granted advance notice before removal, the opportunity for response, and the ability to appeal disciplinary action to an independent board.

The reclassification puts both career and merit-hired employees into policy-influencing roles, removing those civil service protections.

The administration's efforts aim to "suppress or chill speech, dismantle the non-partisan civil service, weaken democracy, and reward the administration's loyalists at the expense of the American people," an American Federation of Government Employees spokesperson wrote in an email.

Tevi Troy, a senior fellow at the Ronald Reagan Institute and former senior aide under President George W. Bush, says Mr. Trump is trying to cut through the traditional ways that government has worked, following his first-term experience.

President Trump "wants to do more things unilaterally, using executive authority, using executive actions, using things where the president himself can do it without having to wait for other branches of government or wait for Congress," he says.

■ *Staff writer Scott Blanchard contributed reporting for this article.*

PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

EZULWINI, ESWATINI

Bhekisisa Bhembe sees a fairway to opportunity

A golf instructor in the tiny southern African country of Eswatini sees the sport as more than a hobby for young people. It is a ticket to a different life.

By Nokukhanya Musi / Contributor

Only 2 miles separate the manicured greens of the Ezulwini Golf & Country Club and the rocky ground of the rural villages over the hill. But they have long existed as two different worlds.

At the country club, golfers line up their shots on carefully maintained fairways. Meanwhile, in the surrounding community, children are learning the same game on patches of uneven ground where cattle graze. Bottle caps frequently act as golf balls.

On a recent morning, instructor Bhekisisa Bhembe watches one of his students prepare to swing. "Bend your knees a bit," he instructs, gently repositioning the child's hands on the club.

Mr. Bhembe got his start in golf caddying for players at the country club. Now, he is part of a growing movement to expand access to a sport that has historically been the purview of a wealthy, mostly white elite.

In this small southern African country, where more than half of young people don't have a job, golf is more than a hobby.

"There are many people I know who have been sitting at home, wasting away after they finished school," says 14-year-old Olwethu Bhembe, one of Mr. Bhembe's students, and no relation to his teacher. "I can see opportunities and the doors golf will open for me. Golf has given me hope."

Participants, not spectators

Mr. Bhembe's drive to improve access to the sport is personal.

He was a teenager when, in the early 1990s, he first stepped onto a golf course – not as a player, but as a caddie. At the time, Eswatini was in economic trouble. International companies had set up shop to sidestep sanctions on its neighbor, apartheid South Africa. But apartheid was crumbling, and those companies were pulling out. Meanwhile, Eswatini was on its way to becoming the country with the highest percentage of people in the world diagnosed with HIV.

In Mr. Bhembe's rural community in Ezulwini, carrying golfers' bags was one of the few ways a young person could earn an income.

But the pay was so low that for years he went to work barefoot because he couldn't afford sports shoes. Meanwhile, golf was mostly played by Eswatini's tiny white minority, which included many South Africans still steeped in the racial hierarchies of their homeland.

"It was somewhat an unspoken rule that Blacks weren't allowed to play," Mr. Bhembe says. "Although there was no written rule on a plaque or board, we just knew."

Still, the game fascinated him. As he and the other caddies looped the course each day, they learned strategy and technique.

"We knew if the golfer was standing in the right posture or had the right club," he says. "We understood the game, too."

But they still couldn't get into the country clubs to play, Mr. Bhembé says. So, in the mid-1990s, he and a group of other caddies banded together to form the Swaziland Caddies Foundation (now called the Eswatini Caddies Foundation). Backed by a top human rights lawyer and the U.S. ambassador, the organization began negotiating with the management of the top clubs. In 1997, the group hosted the first golf tournament for caddies. They also secured caddies the right to play for free on Mondays - the quietest day of the week - on the courses where they worked.

Members of the organization went on to become some of Eswatini's first Black professional golfers, sparking a wider movement to expand access to golf in the country.

Today, Mr. Bhembé is part of a constellation of efforts to bring more young people into the game. Veteran pro golfer Meshack Zwane trains young golfers around the country with limited financial means and no prior connection to golf. Nobuhle Dlamini - Eswatini's first female pro golfer and the daughter of caddies' rights advocate Johannes Dlamini - organizes youth golf tournaments with reserved spots for players from rural communities. These players - including those who train with Mr. Bhembé - pay a discounted registration fee of 35 emalangeni (about \$2).

In a game once reserved for people who didn't look like them, "these children are becoming participants rather than spectators," Mr. Bhembé says.

Teeing up the future

For Mr. Bhembé, the ultimate goal of these efforts isn't to create champion golfers, but to allow children to begin to imagine their futures differently. About half of Swazis under age 35 don't have a job, and a 2023 index of the quality of life and opportunities for young people around the world ranked Eswatini 155th out of 183 countries. Meanwhile, the country's absolute monarchy leaves young people with few outlets for expressing their concerns about governance.

Mr. Bhembé says regardless of a young player's abilities, he believes the lessons learned through golf - such as discipline, confidence, and strategic thinking - will influence how they approach their lives.

Playing golf alongside children from more affluent communities - and even beating them - "boosted my confidence and showed me that I am good enough, too," says Olwethu, Mr. Bhembé's student.

Ten-year-old Ayetsaba Shiba, who hopes to become a doctor, sees golf as a pathway to accomplishing that goal.

"I believe golf can get me into a good college and connect me with the right people," she says.

For Mr. Bhembé, hearing his students express these ambitions reminds him why access to the sport matters.

As he watches his students practice on a recent morning, he looks out over the hillside at the country club in the distance and thinks about how far he has come. Three decades ago, he was carrying players' bags while secretly falling in love with a game that did not want him.

Now, Mr. Bhembé's students are learning to play out in the open, allowed to dream of a future in the sport - and beyond it. Ezulwini's fairways are still in some ways a different world. But with every competition and every swing, he knows that the distance between the village and the country club is becoming a little smaller. ■

Valuing the modest might of 'microkindness'

Applying research methods more typically used in the physical sciences, academic scholars are exploring how even brief, individual gestures of kindness can inspire a culture of compassion with wider benefits to society.

In a counterweight to the notion of microaggression, two Harvard University researchers highlighted the concept of "microkindness," noting how such acts ripple through communities for the better. If the term sounds "modest," Tim Lomas and Tyler J. VanderWeele wrote, "It is meant to be. Microkindness is not heroic sacrifice ... or major generosity. It is the tiny act of human regard that passes from one person to another in ordinary life."

The two researchers inverted traditional public health assessment approaches by applying a positive lens to how uplifting acts permeate through society, rather than how negative behaviors or illnesses spread.

"Small gestures deserve more scientific attention," the authors wrote in *Greater Good* magazine. "Societies concerned about polarization, loneliness, and distrust should pay closer attention to the brief moments in which people communicate goodwill." These affect individuals and "the wider social environment," they added.

"People think about kindness as a transfer where one person sacrifices and someone else benefits," empathy researcher Jamil Zaki told *Stanford Magazine*. "But happiness and well-being are not zero-sum. ... Kindness and empathy help us thrive."

Multiple studies show that well-being and kindness are reciprocal and reinforcing. "Happier people tend to engage in more altruism, and more altruistic people feel happier," *The Washington Post* reported in 2024.

To illustrate the ripple effects of microkindness, the Harvard researchers use a simple measure: a smile. It's brief and costs little, but communicates much.

A smile often elicits one in return, causing such cues to become commonplace and scale up from one-off acts into social habits. That, in turn, Drs. Lomas and VanderWeele wrote, can positively impact the media environment, shifting it from "outrage, threat, and conflict" to stories of "kindness, not as sentimental distraction, but as part of ... public life."

So, don't underestimate that quick smile, greeting, or thank-you. As the study implies, it can have an outsize impact. ■

EU progresses on expansion and rule of law

The rule of law across Europe is on a "broadly positive trajectory," according to a new Rule of Law Report from the European Commission. Reforms have bolstered justice systems and aligned anti-corruption rules to continent-wide principles.

In a global context, where democratic norms appear to be on the back foot and several governments are flexing authoritarian muscles, this is good news. But the document also strikes a note of caution.

The report found that 47% of its 2025 recommendations for improved rule of law had been acted on. Other data shows that citizens in 17 EU countries perceived judicial independence as having improved or stayed stable from the previous year.

There is a renewed openness to new members joining the 27-country European Union. In July, the EU held talks with Albania and Montenegro, which have completed more than half the requirements to join, and with Moldova and Ukraine, which are starting the process.

“It’s really a super Tuesday for enlargement,” EU Commissioner Marta Kos said of the July 14 discussions. “For more than two decades, we haven’t had four accession conferences in one day.”

The last time a new member joined the EU was Croatia, in 2013. To overcome this expansion inertia, France and Germany had called for “gradual integration,” which would grant candidate countries some trade benefits before all required changes are in place. Albania indicated a willingness to waive voting and veto rights, to speed up inclusion.

The EU supports enlargement, Ms. Kos said, “but only if the candidate countries are delivering” on good governance.

The process has stalled in Eastern Europe over failure to implement reforms. Even EU members such as Slovakia and Hungary have seen declines in rule-of-law indicators. But with April’s decisive vote against longtime autocrat Viktor Orbán, Hungary now signals hope for democratic renewal and recovery.

“A new, active political generation is beginning to unfold before our eyes,” a Hungarian analyst told The Associated Press. Its “strong sense of justice,” she said, is incompatible with “the authoritarian exercise of power [and] the corruption.”

This trend is evident across the region, where voters are consistently protesting corruption and calling for democratic decision-making.

The citizens of Central and Eastern Europe prize the rule of law as much as the rulemakers in the EU. Both forces, together pushing for transparent, honest governance, will likely be hard to resist in the long run. ■

Respecting the dignity of Africa’s refugees

Ethiopia, Africa’s second-most-populous nation, also hosts one of the continent’s largest refugee populations – 1.1 million. The country is now working to legalize and integrate these regional migrants into the national mainstream.

The government recently launched Makatet (Amharic for “inclusion”). This five-year plan intends to fully incorporate refugees into the national education and health systems and enable them to pursue employment and build economic independence.

More broadly, Makatet points to a significant shift in perspective and practice taking hold: Instead of categorizing forced migrants as victims and long-term economic liabilities, governments and humanitarian agencies are increasingly viewing them as potential assets to society and their host country.

That outlook is clearly expressed by Barham Salih, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, who himself fled violence in his native Iraq.

“Behind every statistic is a life, a person with aspiration, with

a right to dignity, with the right to a better future,” Mr. Salih told UN News. “I know first-hand how protection and opportunity can change ... a life.”

Combining protections with opportunity is what Kenya aims to do, too. Its Shirika Plan, launched in 2025, seeks to transform longtime refugee encampments into viable local towns with infrastructure that serves both local residents and refugees.

Shared responsibility for permanent solutions

An increasing number of smaller-scale efforts in parts of Africa are recognizing the legitimate concerns and individual agency of all residents in migration-affected areas, helping lay the groundwork for acceptance and cooperation. A pilot program in Mozambique that trained refugees alongside local residents increased household incomes by 66% and monthly savings by 600%. And, it made hosts “more likely to have refugee friends,” as well as “more willing to share scarce resources such as jobs and government support with foreigners.”

In other areas, refugees are actively repaying the hospitality of host communities. In Mauritania, a group of 200 Malian refugees runs a volunteer fire brigade, to help suppress hazardous bushfires that threaten livestock and livelihoods.

“There is this amazing generosity of the host community,” one Malian told The Associated Press. “We needed to do something to lessen the burden.”

But integrating refugees into host countries requires global support. The Ethiopia program is only 24% funded so far.

“This is not the moment to look away,” Mr. Salih told The Guardian. Africa’s efforts “must not be about shifting responsibility” from the wider international community, he said. “This has to be about sharing responsibility.”

As Mr. Salih has emphasized, “Being a refugee is ... meant to be a temporary condition” – not a permanent way of life. ■

READERS RESPOND

Here’s the scoop on love

A big cheer for staff writer Victoria Hoffmann for the last item in the June 22 Monitor Weekly’s Numbers in the News column, which reported on an ice cream truck in Gardner, Massachusetts. When a young boy could not pay for a cone, the business owner gave it to him for free. The idea went viral, with donations to the ice cream truck coming in from around the world.

All I could think was that this was the world we all deserve and need. I loved the idea of worldwide love for others, especially children. I will look for places where I can make the same kind of difference.

Anne Wold

North Bridgton, Maine

Back to the books

We have known for years that screen learning offers time for scrolling rather than for reading. Now, according to the editorial “Scandinavia’s U-turn on book reading” (Monitor Weekly, May 11), some countries are willing to switch paths and go back to book learning, though they pioneered the use of ed tech in their classrooms more than 10 years ago.

I admire school systems in so many places removing cellphones from the classroom. Maybe more school systems will now follow the

lead of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, especially for young learners. Screen skimming does not belong in the classroom for real learning.

Martha F. Barkley
Menlo Park, California

THE HOME FORUM

Rescue at the library

When the electronic kiosk proved useless, a chatty interaction at the help desk became a refreshing encounter.

Nuts. I was already a mile into my walk to the library when I realized I'd forgotten my card and ID. My book was due today, and I had one on hold to pick up. Well, it's the library, not the Department of Homeland Discourtesy, and I figured they would be agreeable about letting me go home with my new book. They're sweet that way. Besides, I happen to remember my library number. I've had it since 1976.

I haven't really needed it since 1976, but still. I punched it into the checkout kiosk with pride. 211680013879194900. Take that, Declining Attention Span. The kiosk thought about it for a second and then said it didn't match anything in their records. The heck! The kiosk is a whippersnapper. I put it in again. Same thing, and this from a kiosk that probably can't parallel park or read a map.

But this is the library, a place stacked with goodness. I went to search for a person and found two of them upstairs behind a desk with nothing to do. Deb and Tasha, according to their name tags. Librarians really want to help you. They train for that; they live for that. I said I wanted to check out this book. Tasha asked me for my card. I told her I forgot to bring it. Did I have ID? Yeah, I forgot that, too. But I remember my number.

211680013879194900.

"That doesn't match anything in our records," she said, truly sorry. "Maybe you can answer some security questions?"

Sure!

My mother's maiden name? Skari, of Norwegian immigrant stock. Everyone in that family is the salt of the earth. Every other summer, we went to the farm where my mother grew up; I remember the grain silo smelled like toasted sunshine. Mom smiled all the time. I was a teenager before I had my first store-bought bread, because she baked all of ours.

My first pet? Duffy, a green parakeet. Mom lobbied for the parakeet because she thought I should have some kind of pet that was more substantial than a guppy. Daddy had ruled out a cat or dog, even though he'd grown up with an endlessly regenerating supply of cocker spaniels – and also a burro.

My first telephone number? Jackson 2-0056. Yeah, they didn't have area codes then. My number was a bother to my friends because of the two zeros. You'd be halfway through dialing on the rotary phone, and your finger could fall out of the ring for the zero, which was at the end of the circle of numbers. You'd have to start all over. On the other hand, when you called your friends, you didn't have to ask them where they were. If they answered, you knew exactly where they were, within the 10 curly

feet of the phone cord. We had less information at our disposal, but somehow, we knew enough.

My third grade teacher's name? Mrs. Erdman. She was super wrinkly and kind. When the new girl showed up in class and didn't speak any English, Mrs. Erdman gave me the job of neatly printing words on 3-by-5 index cards and taping them to the appropriate items. I don't know how poor Ingrid managed to use her "PENCIL."

I had one elbow on the librarians' desk by then and gazed up at the ceiling, as though that were where my memories lived. I went on.

My dad's middle name? Cable, named after his grandfather. Both his grandfathers fought in the Civil War. Isn't that amazing?

"You're kidding," Tasha said, awestruck. She had quit tapping on her keyboard and leaned toward me with her chin in both hands. Her daughter was just studying the Reconstruction era in grade school now. And since her mama is a librarian, I can bet the child isn't getting the new scrubbed-up government version. "She is not," Tasha confirmed. Her daughter wants to be a marine biologist – or a poet.

"I've got your new account number here," she said. "I mean, it's not new; they were changed over ... When were they changed over, Deb?"

"Before you were born," Deb said, smirking, and leaning back in her chair.

Tasha shrugged. "Anyway, I can't believe you remember that big long number. Do you want me to write down your new one?"

"Nah, I've got you people. Hey, it was great talking with you!" It was. In times like these, I take such interactions and kindnesses in like oxygen.

"Have a good rest of your day!" Tasha said, apparently satisfied my day had been agreeable enough up to now. "Hope to see you again soon," she added.

She will.

I forgot to take my book.

– Murr Brewster

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Soul's harmony unfolds healing

Soul is a synonym for God, or Spirit, and expresses the vast and eternal beauty of holiness, reflected in man and the universe. This week's Bible lesson on the subject "Soul" in the Christian Science Quarterly shows us how yielding to Soul's grace helps us glimpse our own divine nature and dignity and that of all humanity.

I experienced how Soul unfolds harmony and healing when I was visiting family. During breakfast I swallowed a stiff and coarse inch-long piece of lemon grass. It lodged in my throat such that I couldn't remove or swallow it. It was very uncomfortable. As a Christian Scientist, I knew that discord could not interrupt harmony, including precious time with family.

Christian Scientists prayerfully feed themselves with daily inspiration from the Bible and "Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures" by Mary Baker Eddy. That morning my thought

was filled with the vastness of God and His infinite manifestation – a joyful understanding that I am the expression of the eternal All-in-all, God, good. Mrs. Eddy writes: “God is infinite, the only Life, substance, Spirit, or Soul, the only intelligence of the universe, including man” (Science and Health, p. 330).

There were houseguests staying over, and out of genuine concern, they suggested ways to help resolve the problem. But then I had a strong nudge to find a quiet place and pray. Science and Health says: “Spirit, God, is heard when the senses are silent” (p. 89). With a deep desire to yield to God, I felt an urge to listen to the audio recording of that week’s Christian Science Bible lesson, which I had studied that morning. It came to me that healing is not about attaining the grace of God, but about the loving freedom that comes from reflecting God!

This thought strengthened me with such a holy joy. Burden fell away. I was not afraid. I lay down on the carpet drinking in the tender love coming from the spiritual ideas I was hearing.

A Bible story highlighted the importance of gratitude to God for healing (see Luke 17:11-19). My heart opened up, giving gratitude for God’s grace surrounding me. That very moment I coughed, there was an adjustment in my throat, and the piece of lemon grass dislodged. With utter humility I continued to acknowledge and love the healing truth I was hearing.

Mrs. Eddy writes, “Spirit is God, Soul; therefore Soul is not in matter” (Science and Health, p. 300). As the expression of Soul, you and I are spiritual and reflect God’s divine nature. When, in meekness, we wait on God to glimpse who we truly are, we see God’s supremacy in action. Our Soul-filled consciousness purifies, heals, and saves, blessing all whom our thoughts embrace in the reverent love and peace of God.

– Dilshad Khambatta Eames

■ *Learn more about the Christian Science Quarterly Bible Lesson at biblelesson.com.*

BOOKS

Caught in the backlash over AI, book publishers face mounting questions

Authors increasingly use AI tools to craft their work. Readers fret about transparency and quality.

By Cameron Pugh / Staff writer

This spring, controversy engulfed the literary world when Hachette Book Group, a leading publisher in the United States, canceled the release of “Shy Girl,” a highly anticipated horror novel. Hachette picked up the book, which Mia Ballard had self-published in February 2025, after it generated a swirl of online chatter. Hachette had already released “Shy Girl” in the United Kingdom, where, according to The New York Times, it sold 1,800 copies.

It was also, internet sleuths alleged, written by artificial intelligence.

In a lengthy Reddit post from January that has 1,600 upvotes as of press time and more than 500 comments, a user said: “Shy Girl by Mia Ballard. Does anyone else think this was written by ChatGPT?” In a January YouTube video that has now been watched more than 1.8 million times, popular book reviewer “frankie’s shelf” declared “i’m pretty sure this book is ai slop.”

Ms. Ballard denied the accusations in an email to The New York Times, writing that someone she hired to edit the novel had used AI but that she had not. (The Monitor could not reach Ms. Ballard for comment.) But the controversy is among the first salvos in a larger battle sweeping the publishing industry, as AI use ruptures trust between readers, writers, and publishers.

“Until AI, there has been the expectation that no matter what is written in a book, it was authored by a person, or people,” says Vauhini Vara, a journalist and author who has written about technology for more than two decades. “There needs to be new terms in the social contract between reader and writer.”

Other AI-related controversies have consumed the literary world recently. In May, the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, a prestigious award for unpublished fiction, faced allegations that three of this year’s winning stories had been at least partially written by AI. Earlier that month, The New York Times reported that “The Future of Truth,” a nonfiction book about how AI is changing perceptions of truth, contained quotes that were misattributed or concocted by AI.

Those troubles, in an industry that is perhaps among the most vulnerable to AI’s capabilities, have raised questions not only about how many authors might now be using AI for some or all of their writing, but also about how thoroughly publishers check the books they release.

When is AI OK?

Controversies over AI use have struck the publishing industry amid ballooning work and thinning staff. The number of books released by publishing houses in the United States increased by 10% between 2022 and 2025, according to data obtained by Publishers Weekly, rising to 642,242. Yet the number of book publishing jobs fell by 28% between 1987 and 2025, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Given those pressures, a wholesale ban on AI is unreasonable, says Kathleen Schmidt, a publishing strategist who has worked in the industry for more than 30 years. She uses AI for menial tasks, and doesn’t mind if authors do, too.

“I’m not saying that there aren’t instances where it should not be used – like, you should not use it to write an entire book,” she says. “Can you do it to brainstorm ideas? Sure.”

That seems to be the line that many readers draw, says Rebecca Joines Schinsky, chief of staff at Book Riot, an independent publication covering book publishing in North America. “I think a lot of people probably fall into a middle space of, ‘It’s cool to use it for research, but I don’t want to read any sentences in your book that were written by AI.’”

Yet for some readers, the creative process is sacred, from start to finish. In a 2025 YouGov survey that asked U.S. readers whether AI use was acceptable in five circumstances – ranging from “ideation” to “outlining” – majorities disapproved of AI use in all five scenarios. Sixty-one percent of readers said they would feel at least “somewhat” or “much” less fulfilled if they discovered a book they’d read was written by AI. Still, only 28% of readers said that AI use is unacceptable in all of the circumstances presented by the survey.

For Ms. Vara, the journalist, the problem boils down to honesty. When authors hide their AI use, the trust between readers and writers can erode, she says.

“There needs to be some kind of disclosure that makes it possible for readers and authors to have this mutual understanding,” she says. Her recent nonfiction book “Searches” (see our review on page 40) contains several AI-generated passages – but they’re all labeled. “For me, the problem arises when AI-generated material appears in text, whether it’s a book or something else, and there’s no way for us to know.”

In both the “Shy Girl” and Commonwealth prize controversies, social media users pointed out writing habits they saw as proof of AI use – for example, an overreliance on metaphors, only some of which made sense. In “The Serpent in the Grove,” the short story that set off the Commonwealth conflagration, a line reading, “She had the kind of walking that made benches become men,” drew heavy scrutiny.

Some readers also ran the texts through online AI-detectors. One such tool, Pangram, found that “The Serpent in the Grove” was 100% AI-generated. (The Monitor got the same Pangram result.)

The story’s author, Jamir Nazir, told *The Observer*, a British newspaper, that his writing process exclusively uses the text-to-speech function on his Android phone. The Commonwealth Foundation said in a public statement that Mr. Nazir, and other accused writers, denied using AI to write the story, and that the foundation had found no evidence of AI use after reviewing “working drafts, time-stamped documents and notes.”

But there’s no foolproof method of uncovering AI-generated content. Human writing may well contain errors or literary faux pas. Pangram’s creator says it has a false-positive rate – the rate at which it wrongly identifies a human text as AI – of just 0.01%. Yet a 2023 Stanford study said that Pangram was biased against non-native English speakers, who might have more limited vocabularies, and many AI researchers contend that such detectors are unreliable.

Tara Radvand, a doctoral student at the University of Michigan who has studied AI detectors, says they do work – depending on the context. They’re better at identifying AI-fabricated fiction than nonfiction, she says, and reliability improves as text length increases. Nevertheless, she points out that even a false positive rate of 1% is high for an industry like publishing, where an accusation can send a career up in smoke.

Publishers’ AI rules remain murky

Authors debate whether – and how – they should be using AI in their work. Recently, Olga Tokarczuk, a Nobel Prize-winning Polish author, generated an uproar when she said she uses AI in her work. (She later added that she uses it only “as a tool for faster preliminary research.”)

Anthony Horowitz, an English author, made headlines this spring when he said he used the technology “all the time,” though he nevertheless stressed the need to “judge what you’re being told, and also look for a second source.” Coral Hart told *The New York Times* that last year she had published some 200 romance novels using Claude, an AI chatbot created by Anthropic.

In a 2025 poll of more than 1,200 authors by BookBub, a book discovery service, 45% of respondents said that they currently use generative AI to “assist with their work,” compared with 48% who said they do not use it and don’t plan to. Of those who do use AI, more than half said they use it to assist with writing.

Some publishers have sought to establish rules around the

technology’s use, but few, if any, prohibit it outright. Hachette, for example, lists “use cases not requiring disclosure,” including “researching elements of a book,” but says that authors must attest that their work is their own.

Still, publishers’ rules around AI use remain murky in many cases, says Ms. Schinsky, from Book Riot. Few publishing houses have made their screening methods public, she says.

AI companies themselves may hold solutions. In 2024, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that OpenAI created a technology – known as watermarking – that allows content generated by ChatGPT to be detected with 99.9% accuracy. The company has not released the technology because it might decrease the number of ChatGPT users, the Journal reported, and because of ongoing internal debates about how widely to issue it and its reliability.

For those readers who want a decidedly human experience, many authors remain happy to oblige.

Nick Harkaway, a British sci-fi author who describes himself as a lover of technology, nevertheless remains skeptical. “Ultimately, it doesn’t appeal to me because I love what I do,” he says, of using AI to write books. “I don’t want a computer to do my job.

“If I didn’t want to write, I’d do something else,” he says. ■

Capsule reviews of useful books about AI

Nexus

By Yuval Noah Harari

An uncorrected mistake in the Stone Age could destroy at most a city; in the Silicon Age, it could destroy civilization, argues Israeli historian and philosopher Yuval Harari in this sweeping survey. Starting with the simplest type of “information network,” the story, Harari develops the thesis that information networks are not necessarily about communicating truth but connecting humans based on shared mythologies. AI is a new kind of information network that is more powerful than anything humanity has seen before, he argues. The solution to AI’s risks is not technological but societal and political: Humans must unite to build strong self-correcting mechanisms. To do that, they’ll need to agree on key priorities and trust each other more. – *Christa Case Bryant*

The Age of AI

By Henry A. Kissinger, Eric Schmidt, and Daniel Huttenlocher

As a primer on AI, this book delivers philosophical and practical insights that are approachable and helpful. Humans prize their own abilities to observe, analyze, and arrive at a definition of reality. What if, the authors argue, AI uncovers layers of reality that exist outside of human knowledge? “In many cases, AI will suggest new solutions or directions that will bear the stamp of another, nonhuman, form of learning and logical evaluation,” they write. The implications are far-reaching. In the past, humans developed technologies to serve as tools; increasingly, humans are partnering with AI. And beyond that, governments and industries are creating more autonomous AI systems, whose learning speeds outpace the time needed by humans to evaluate the potential risks. The global security ramifications are discussed in detail. – *April Austin*

AI Snake Oil

By Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor

“AI Snake Oil” offers a clear-eyed parsing of the myths and realities of AI. The authors provide a refreshingly jargon-free explanation of how generative AI works, and how to distinguish between the distinct types and applications of AI. They take a pin to the balloon of AI hype, arguing that inflated perceptions of AI as an existential threat cloud the less dramatic – but very real – dangers the technology poses. The authors seek to empower readers to make their own informed judgments, arguing: “Describing AI as unknowable reduces our agency by positioning AI as something that we can never understand and therefore never challenge.” – *Caitlin Babcock*

The Reverse Centaur’s Guide to Life After AI

By Cory Doctorow

Training his critical eye on artificial intelligence, the longtime science fiction author and activist Cory Doctorow lays out the case for maintaining a society of “centaurs,” or humans aided by machines, as opposed to “reverse centaurs” – people “conscripted into acting as an assistant” to those very machines. Choice is key. Doctorow busts some myths, advocates for creators, considers the potential “residue” of a popped AI bubble, and describes ways AI does – and can – benefit our world. From his opinionated, passionate, and substantiated take, readers can form, centaur-like, their own AI perspectives. – *Erin Douglass*

The Infinity Machine

By Sebastian Mallaby

Google DeepMind co-founder and CEO Demis Hassabis is many things: a Nobel laureate, a chess prodigy, the son of impoverished immigrant parents in North London. Some of his rivals in the AI industry – like Elon Musk – regard him as an “evil genius.” But who is the man who promised “to build a Manhattan Project for AI,” really? Journalist Sebastian Mallaby spent three years chronicling Hassabis and DeepMind, logging about 30 hours with the man himself and interviewing those in his orbit – including his detractors. What results is a breathless biography of one man’s quest for scientific enlightenment in the age of AI. – *Mackenzie Farkus*

The Optimist

By Keach Hagey

Wall Street Journal reporter Keach Hagey traces Sam Altman’s path from his childhood in Missouri, through “the blip” of his 2023 firing and rehiring, to his ascent to the pinnacle of power in the AI revolution. “The person who emerged is a brilliant dealmaker with a need for speed and a love of risk,” Hagey writes. She focuses on the forces that have shaped Altman, such as his tutelage under Paul Graham, the founder of Silicon Valley’s startup incubator Y Combinator, which Altman ran before he co-founded OpenAI. The biography, drawn from interviews with Altman as well as with more than 250 of his friends, family, and associates, casts a balanced portrait of a figure who is by turns self-effacing and cognizant of his unique place in history. – *Chelsea Sheasley*

Empire of AI

By Karen Hao

In this deeply sourced book, readers get a behind-the-scenes look into the beginnings of OpenAI as a small nonprofit research lab in pursuit of AI for the public good to the now-billion-dollar company behind ChatGPT. Tech journalist Karen Hao raises questions

about OpenAI’s secretive and competitive nature in spite of its early emphasis, with a focus not only on internal turmoil but the negative impacts of AI, from the massive amounts of energy needed to power data centers to low wages for data work in the Global South. – *Mackenzie Farkus*

Searches: Selfhood in the Digital Age

By Vauhini Vara

In “Searches,” Vara traces her experiences with AI from adolescence to adulthood, in what is just as much personal memoir as biting social critique. While her initial dependence on technology remains on the periphery, she is soon pushing AI on its potential. How well can it translate her wobbly Spanish into readable English text? Can it untwist the complicated emotions surrounding her sister’s death and turn them into poignant prose? By revealing her own inner turmoil regarding her use of AI and other technologies, Vara touches on broader public sentiment: While ethically or morally she (and we) may not want to use Google or ChatGPT, she does (and we do) anyway because it’s cheaper, easier, and more convenient. In Vara’s telling, readers must decide for themselves. – *Colette Davidson*

Valet

By J.P. Lacrampe

Fiction, dwelling outside the constraints of nonfiction, offers a different prism for considering the what ifs of disruptors and inventions. Here, author J.P. Lacrampe imagines: What could a world shot-through with AI look like? Let Cy, the delightful narrator paint the picture; he’s a Verified Artificial-Learning-Enhanced Techbot, or VALET, with the good manners, wry asides, and sizable skills of a butler of yore, if he needed recharging. Set in a future San Francisco of whizzing drones and autonomous transportation, the story follows Grayson, the slacker son of a wealthy tech entrepreneur; his type A sister who now runs the family business; and the various parties who’d like nothing more than to whisk that business away. It’s ultimately a tale of evolution for both man and machine. – *Erin Douglass*

Culpability

By Bruce Holsinger

Noah’s wife, Lorelei, is a professor of AI ethics. Can we train machines to be good, she wonders, in the same way we train ourselves to be virtuous? That question becomes more than just academic. When their family’s self-driving minivan causes a fatal collision, a hunt begins for who’s to blame: the vehicle’s autonomous programming or the 17-year-old at the wheel. Come for the family drama, stay for the big ideas. “Culpability” examines the consequences of ceding control of everything from AC units to drone warfare to AI. Lorelei observes that “a strict division between human and machine culpability is quickly becoming untenable, creating a landscape where ethical norms strain under unfamiliar weights.” With riveting storytelling, the novel could never have been authored by AI. – *Stephen Humphries*

By sunset, piles of weeds sit drying along the banks of the spring while water moves freely downstream toward villages waiting for the paddy season ahead. ■

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

Crossword and Sudoku solutions

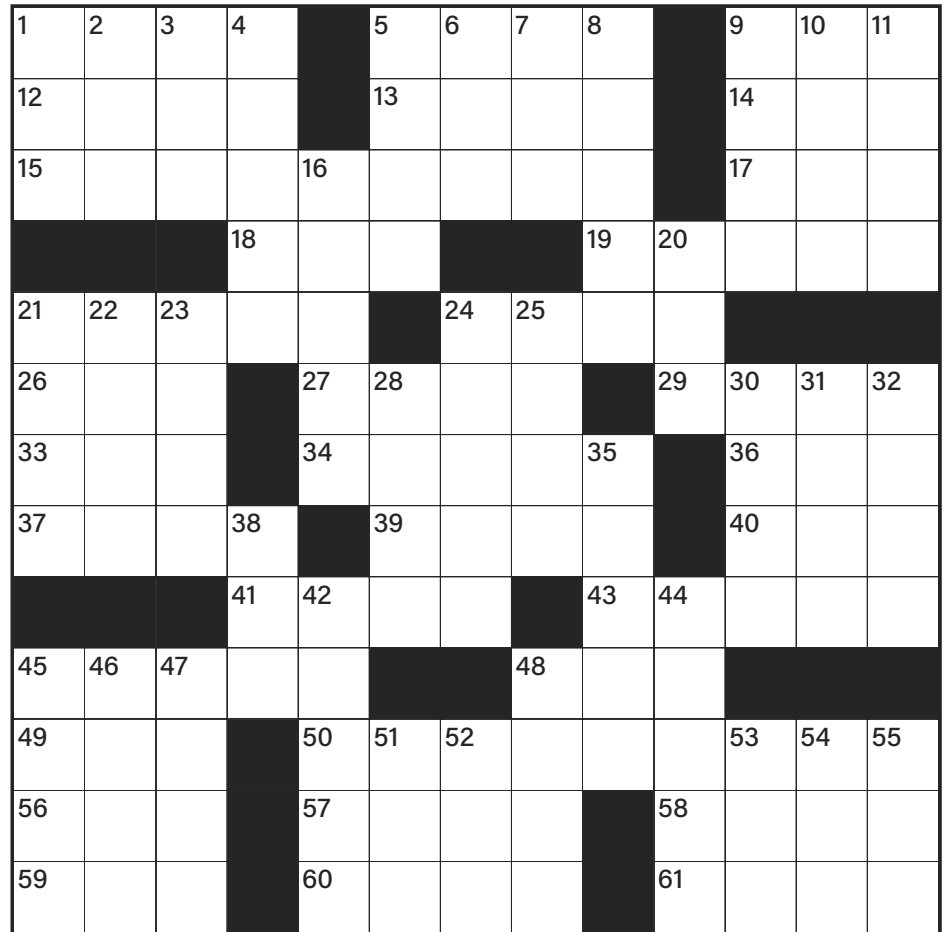
[illegible]

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

Crossword

ACROSS

1. Gets a grip on
5. Heavy hammer
9. Play segment
12. Agenda topic
13. As well
14. Blarney stone loc.
15. Studded with rhinestones
17. Bambi's mom
18. "___ Spot Run" (2001)
19. Expresses astonishment
21. Hot Springs attractions
24. Accordion part
26. Siesta-disturbing sound
27. More ___ enough
29. Bumpkins
33. Hoover or Aswan
34. Rowdy ___ ("Rawhide" character)
36. Sticky stuff
37. Catch glimpse of
39. Suppose
40. Bubble contents
41. Keats' feats
43. Say indirectly
45. Arise
48. Do some aviating
49. Masses' first word?
50. Theater fillers
56. Doorstep welcomer
57. Victorian sort
58. Charismatic glow
59. Pig residence
60. Finishes
61. Cowboy's concern



© Lovatts Puzzles

DOWN

1. Quill tip
2. Banqueted
3. Oyster's place
4. Broadway success
5. Kid's pencil puzzle
6. 100 percent
7. Service
8. Aspen inn
9. Buttresses
10. Trim
11. Caddie's bagful
16. Spicy
20. Bustling commotion
21. Olympic skier Miller
22. Elizabethan lament
23. Impermanent staffer
24. Hotel charges
25. "Les Troyens" role
28. Angle, in geology
30. "And hurry!"
31. Malfunction
32. Surprisingly lively
35. Happy face feature
38. Crossword solver?
42. Window cover
44. Talking black bird
45. Electric measures
46. Jacket
47. Metropolis
48. Cookie fruit
51. Grecian object
52. Accomplished
53. Entrance line
54. Make faux pas
55. Elton John's "___ Songs"