

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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15 years on, Joplin's civic updraft

Much of the country met Joplin, Missouri, on the city's worst day: May 22, 2011. That's when an EF5 tornado tore through the metropolis of some 50,000 people, shredding a path several miles long and three-quarters of a mile wide. More than 150 people died. It was one of the deadliest tornadoes in U.S. history.

In this week's magazine, you will meet Joplin again – but through a very different lens. Fifteen years have passed since that disaster, and writer Harry Bruinius, as part of his summerlong project traveling Route 66, spent time in this Midwest community to explore what it means to “rebuild.”

This can lead to profound questions. How does a place “come back” and how do people “come back” to a place? What is shelter? And how does a community change, evolve, and embrace the new when the old landmarks of life are – literally or metaphorically – blown away?



By Stephanie Hanes
Print Editor

Some answers run through this issue in Harry's story, and in others. Taylor Luck writes of a new sense of resilience and community pride forming within the United Arab Emirates in the face of attacks from Iran. Contributor Noraldin Jadat writes from Sudan about how a war-torn society reconstructs its artistic heritage after – and despite – conflict.

For Harry and his editor, Scott Blanchard, Joplin has a special resonance.

Scott was there before, back in 2011. About two months after the tornado, he volunteered to help the local newspaper, The Joplin Globe, as it covered the disaster. Scott recalls driving toward the city, wondering when he would see the damage.

“It was fine for several blocks and then it's right in front of you,” Scott remembers. “I can reconnect with that feeling now. It was all laid bare.”

When Scott joined Harry in Joplin for some of the reporting for this week's story, he tried to place himself – deciphering where he walked 15 years earlier and how that connected to where he was today. The built landscape, of course, had totally changed. He finally oriented himself by the cross of a church at the top of a hill – a cross that was still standing after the tornado.

What hadn't changed, Scott and Harry found, were the hearts of the people in Joplin. Their first stop was the office of the newspaper with which Scott had volunteered – and where the editor was now eager to help Scott and Harry with their work.

“Nearly everyone in Joplin agrees,” Harry writes in his story. “The tornado left a legacy of commitment to one another.” ■

Trump priorities shape midterm elections

President Donald Trump has been talking for months about the SAVE America Act, a bill that would impose new proof-of-citizenship requirements on people registering to vote. First, he tried to pass the requirements as an executive order, which was blocked by the courts. Then, he tried to convince Republicans to use an unpopular “talking filibuster” to overcome the 60-vote threshold that's preventing the legislation from getting through the Senate.

Most recently, Mr. Trump canceled at the last hour a signing ceremony for a landmark housing bill that his administration helped get through Congress. He said he wouldn't sign it unless the SAVE Act was passed. When he didn't veto the housing legislation for 10 days, the bill became law without his signature.

The president has directed public attention to the bill, but his administration has taken multiple actions in the last two years that could affect midterm voting.

Courts have blocked most of the administration's priorities; however, some of Mr. Trump's efforts could influence outcomes in November. Democrats are expected to flip the House, but the odds are not overwhelming. Republicans are narrowly favored to maintain a majority in the Senate.

Redistricting is the “biggest single impact of the administration” on elections, according to Justin Levitt, a professor at Loyola Law School in California. Redistricting wars this year have given Republicans 10 additional competitive seats compared with last summer.

An April Supreme Court decision raising the bar for what constituted illegal racial gerrymandering meant that Republicans increased their prospects in 16 congressional districts, while Democrats increased theirs in six.

Mr. Trump has repeatedly cast doubt on the trustworthiness of U.S. elections.

He directed the FBI to investigate the results of the 2020 presidential election, including seizing more than 600 boxes containing 2020 ballots and voter rolls from a warehouse in Fulton County, Georgia, in January.

“The idea that people whose candidates lose the election still accept the election was legitimate, that's a really basic tenet of democracy,” says Rick Hasen, director of the Safeguarding Democracy Project at UCLA School of Law.

The Trump administration has even cut election security funding and programs from the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, which has provided election security support to states since 2018.

In 2025, Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency slashed CISA's workforce from about 3,500 employees to 2,500. The administration also ended or reduced funding for threat-sharing programs and allowed a \$1 billion cybersecurity grant program for states to lapse.

The administration said it cut areas in which CISA had overstepped its intended role and that more pressing concerns, such as China, should take priority.

The Trump administration also issued two executive orders that would have restricted mail-in ballots and required states to use

federal lists to purge their voter rolls, among other things. Federal judges have blocked the government from implementing the major provisions of both orders.

Recent Supreme Court decisions have represented a split outcome for Mr. Trump. The court's decision in *Watson v. Republican National Committee*, which held that states can count absentee ballots postmarked by Election Day but received later, was a major setback in the president's efforts to curtail mail-in voting. The availability of mail-in voting has not broadly changed since Mr. Trump took office last year, though some states have tightened their rules around it.

But another June court decision removed spending limits for party committees when coordinating directly with a candidate. Mr. Trump and Republicans celebrated the decision as a victory, given that the RNC currently has more than a \$100 million cash-on-hand advantage over its Democratic counterpart.

– Caitlin Babcock / Staff writer

Netanyahu raises the stakes in standoff with court

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government has been attacking Israel's judiciary for years, but for the first time, it has said it would defy a Supreme Court ruling, moving the country closer to a possible constitutional crisis.

The government's unprecedented move sparked condemnations across the political and legal spectrum, sounding the alarm that Israel was becoming a country whose executive no longer felt bound by the rule of law.

"Disobedience to court orders is the final nail in the coffin of democracy," read a statement by all of Israel's living former chief Supreme Court justices. "It completely disrupts the order of government and justice in the country, leading to anarchy and the concentration of all state power in the hands of a single body," they said.

The stakes are high because, in Israel's parliamentary system, the judiciary – traditionally seen as the defender of the public and private good – is the only check on the government.

At issue is a Cabinet resolution rejecting a Supreme Court decision regarding the composition of Israel's commercial broadcast regulator. The decision would allow the regulator to continue to operate, but with fewer members than originally mandated. Government ministers called it a case of judicial overreach.

On the surface, it's a rather technical dispute, but larger issues are at stake. In addition to the Netanyahu coalition's attempts to overhaul the judicial system – including the office of the attorney general, the government's watchdog – it is seeking to curtail the independence of the Israeli media.

The broadcast regulator, known as the Second Authority, oversees commercial channels, among them the highly watched Channel 13. Critics say the government wants to block the regulator from allowing the channel's sale to a group from Israel's high-tech sector, which is seen as critical of Mr. Netanyahu.

The fight is about whether Israel will remain a liberal democracy or just "retain the veneer of a majoritarian democracy without commitment to liberal rights," says Adam Shinar, a law professor at Reichman University, near Tel Aviv.

The controversial decision has put back on the front burner the

government's quest to check the authority of the Supreme Court, which it says has amassed outsize power.

In January 2022, just after Mr. Netanyahu returned to office, his government launched an aggressive legislative push that it termed "judicial reform." Opposition lawmakers and other critics said it constituted a de facto coup.

It sparked 40 weeks of the largest and most-sustained street protests in Israel's history and the creation of a self-described pro-democracy movement, whose mass demonstrations managed to stem some of the government's efforts. But the protests came to an abrupt halt with the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel and the war in Gaza it triggered.

"People are tired, exhausted from the protest themselves," says Dr. Shinar. "Then there was Oct. 7 and then the war, the plight of the hostages, and then the next two wars with Iran, the occupation of Lebanon and the Gaza war not ending, the toll on the economy and reservists. ... It's hard to motivate people to come out even if they do care."

The government's vow to defy the court comes as Israel prepares for elections at the end of October. It coincides with a raft of legislation that is highly contentious but intended to keep current coalition partners loyal, including the ultra-Orthodox bloc battling to keep its youth exempt from the military draft.

– Dina Kraft / Special correspondent

Touchdown: Japan launches and lands first reusable rocket

The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries have conducted a first test flight for their reusable rocket.

The RV-X rocket lifted off on July 11, and comes as the country seeks to achieve the technology key to lowering launch costs to compete in the global space market dominated by SpaceX. RV-X is 1.8 meters (about 6 feet) in diameter and 7.3 meters (about 24 feet) long, and is equipped with an enhanced-durability engine and four shock-absorbing legs for landing. The "hardworking" engine has so far withstood 165 combustion tests.

The flight is a step forward for Japan in achieving the technology needed to develop a lower-cost successor to the country's current mainstay, the single-use H3 series. The test came one day after China's state media reported the achievement of the country's first successful recovery of the first stage of a rocket after liftoff.

– Staff

Italy's Meloni takes on Trump, not out of spite but savvy

The Giorgia Meloni of the past few weeks has come as a surprise to everyone.

For about a year, the Italian prime minister was seen as the best friend of President Trump in Europe – a “Trump whisperer.” Now, she is lobbing firebombs at him on social media.

In one recent spat, she quipped, “As for my popularity, being your friend has certainly not helped it, nor does it depend on my relationship with you.”

Then again, Italy's first female prime minister has been a surprise from the beginning. Ms. Meloni was expected to steer a far-right path, in keeping with her Brothers of Italy party's platform. Instead, “the main story of her four years is that she pivoted to the center,” says political commentator Francesco Costa.

“She's a very expert and ruthless politician,” says Mr. Costa, editor of online daily *Il Post*. “She's been in politics since she was a student. She gets how politics works in Italy.”

So far, Ms. Meloni has succeeded not by instituting a radical agenda, but by bringing stability. In a political culture steeped in “tax and spend,” as well as scandal, the Meloni government has been notable for responsibility and fiscal restraint. On one hand, it is hard to point to any particular achievement. On the other, Italians have enjoyed a period of unusual political calm.

Already, her government has lasted longer – four years – than any in Italy's post-World War II history. Her party also has the distinction of being the only modern Italian party to gain popularity while in office. Brothers of Italy is polling near 27%, up from 23% at the last election.

In the end, a recent failed attempt to amend the constitution to restructure the judiciary was little more than a hiccup. The reform was always more important to Ms. Meloni's allies than to Ms. Meloni herself. The only fallout might be that new parliamentary elections are moved up to next spring rather than the scheduled date of September 2027.

Ms. Meloni's real vulnerability is on the right. Except for harsh new laws against migration and LGBTQ+ rights, the right-wing revolution never happened, which means the extreme-right National Future party is on the rise.

But all this potentially suits Ms. Meloni. If the extreme right gains in power, they will need her to form a government. The centrists, meanwhile, will likely need her to hold the National Future at bay. “She's the only one who is the winner in any case,” says Dario Quattromani, a political scientist at Link Campus University in Rome.

So, in a time-honored Italian political tradition, she is using her last months in office to pass election laws to solidify her position. “Meloni's idea is to bring to the opposition more problems than they have,” says Dr. Quattromani.

But she will have a decision to make. Will she pivot right to work with National Future, or will she pivot further to the center and ally with one of her current coalition members, Forza Italia?

In either case, picking a fight with Mr. Trump can only help. For a time, she saw her relationship with Mr. Trump as a sign of strength. But the deep unpopularity of the Iran war here, as well as the thorough defeat of Trump ally Viktor Orbán in Hungary, revealed the scant political benefits of being Mr. Trump's friend. So, when Mr. Trump claimed that Ms. Meloni was “begging” for

a photo with him at the Group of Seven summit, she fired back. “I don't know why the president of the United States behaves this way toward his own allies,” she said. “But there's one thing he must remember: Neither I nor Italy ever beg.”

– Mark Spappenfield / Staff writer

Le Pen enters French presidential race despite court battle

Far-right leader Marine Le Pen has decided to enter the presidential fray in 2027, despite an embezzlement conviction and an ongoing court case. She announced her candidacy the same day an appeals court upheld an earlier verdict against her.

In a case that has captivated France for the past year and could also decide its political future, Ms. Le Pen was found guilty last year of misusing European Union funds. The courts fined her €100,000 (\$114,000) and rendered her ineligible to run for public office for five years. Though the court upheld its guilty verdict on July 7, it shortened the election ban on Ms. Le Pen to 45 months, of which 30 months are suspended and the remaining 15 she must spend under house arrest with limited time outside while wearing an ankle monitor.

Ms. Le Pen has announced that she will appeal the latest ruling to the Court of Cassation, France's highest court for civil and criminal cases. According to Ms. Le Pen, her new appeal will suspend the ruling and allow her to campaign without the ankle monitor. She said she would only run for president if uninhibited by electronic tagging.

“When you are a presidential candidate, you must be completely free to move about,” she said in an interview with French media. “I can't depend on a judge to let me hold a rally in Romorantin.”

Ms. Le Pen's future is still contingent on a judge's decision. The timing of the Court of Cassation's decision could allow her to campaign for several months without restrictions – potentially enough time to convince the French of her presidential worthiness.

“The French are much more ready now for a far-right president,” says Douglas Webber, professor emeritus of political science at the business school INSEAD.

Ms. Le Pen pushed away speculation that her young successor and National Rally party leader, Jordan Bardella, would run for president in her place. Instead, she spoke of them forming a “solid, winning pair,” with Ms. Le Pen as president and Mr. Bardella as her prime minister.

In 2017, she received 33.9% in the second round of elections against the current president, Emmanuel Macron. In 2022, she received 41.45%. The race next year is expected to be even tighter.

– Colette Davidson / Staff writer

Turkey bridges gap between NATO, Middle East

With the largest land army among European NATO members and a robust defense industry, Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has expanded its global influence.

It has offered to mediate a peace deal after the joint U.S.-Israeli military campaign was launched against Iran in late February. And after years of warming relations with Russia, Mr. Erdoğan has begun to tilt Turkey back toward NATO.

“He’s definitely positioned Turkey as an indispensable partner to the East and West, primarily for NATO, but also for some regional countries, including Iran,” says Aslı Aydintaşbaş, director of the Turkey Project at the Brookings Institution in Washington. “The way Turks have done it is by a very nonbinary understanding of international relations.”

One measure of the ascendant regional power was on display at the NATO summit in the Turkish capital, Ankara.

Before the summit, Mr. Erdoğan described how Turkey had become a major player in a moment of global instability. Barely mentioned anymore, as Europe and the United States look to enlist a strong regional partner, are decades of democratic backsliding and human rights issues.

“With our silent revolutions, we have brought Turkey into a new era,” Mr. Erdoğan said during a speech in late June, referring to decades of significant economic growth and careful diplomacy.

Mr. Erdoğan’s chemistry with President Donald Trump is a culmination of years of flexible maneuvering amid regional change, including more than a decade of civil war in Syria that created an unlikely connection between Turkey and Russia.

They were on opposite sides of the contest over the brutal but weakening regime of Moscow- and Tehran-backed Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad. And they had a distinct falling out over Turkey’s 2015 downing of a Russian fighter jet that had strayed into Turkish airspace.

But Russia, the dominant outside power in Syria, also permitted a Turkish incursion into northern Syria in 2016 that targeted Kurdish groups seen as a threat by Ankara. And Turkey limited its support to rebel forces, backing some jihadist groups but opposing powerful U.S.-backed Kurdish factions in northern Syria.

“Isolated by the West, [Russian President Vladimir] Putin increasingly relied on the Turkish president, who refused to join Western sanctions. Turkey became a hub for Russian trade, investment and energy flows, and Ankara found itself with greater leverage,” Gönül Tol of the Middle East Institute wrote in a June analysis. When Mr. Assad fell and fled to Moscow, “Russia was left in the position of negotiating with a government staffed with people it had bombed relentlessly for years,” noted Dr. Tol. “And Turkey, which had supported the rebels, emerged newly dominant.”

“The global climate is changing. ... Russia and Iran are weaker, and now a friendly Trump administration is in power, so Ankara is clearly recalibrating,” says Ms. Aydintaşbaş at Brookings.

“It’s not exactly pivoting 100% to NATO, but it is ... bending a little more towards the West.”

– Scott Peterson / Staff writer

A surprise benefit of melting glaciers on deep-sea biodiversity

Scientists have linked melting icebergs in the Fram Strait, a passageway between the Greenland Sea and the Arctic Ocean, to changes in deep seafloor biodiversity.

Dropstones, bits of rock that fall out of melting glaciers, can provide a firm foundation for deep-sea corals and sea sponges to live on, they discovered. The organisms can then become homes in which other deep-sea creatures flourish.

“These stones are really important habitats for certain animals that like to settle on hard substrates,” Melanie Bergmann, a marine biologist at the Alfred Wegener Institute and one of the study’s authors, told The New York Times. “Of course, this then changes the biodiversity on the seafloor.”

The discovery is an unexpected positive outcome of glacial melting caused in large part by global warming. Researchers are now hoping to see whether other areas in the Arctic that have glacial instability also possess higher levels of biodiversity.

– Staff

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

57,000

The number of jobs U.S. employers added in June, significantly less than the 110,000 to 115,000 jobs economists had predicted. Some economists attributed the employment slowdown to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, which has raised gas prices and inflation.

20

The number of states where the minimum wage remains at the federal floor of \$7.25 per hour. Some of these states have no state minimum wage law, so the federal rate automatically applies. The federal minimum wage has not increased since 2009.

3,320

Kilometers (roughly 2,060 miles) covered in the 2026 Tour de France, the 113th edition of the race. The prestigious bicycle race took place from July 4 to July 26, featuring 21 stages from Barcelona, Spain, to Paris.

74 MPH

The sustained wind speed threshold at which a named storm becomes a hurricane. NOAA National Weather Service forecasters predict a 55% chance of a below-average Atlantic hurricane season this year, with an estimated three to six hurricanes between June 1 and Nov. 30.

68

The percentage of Americans who say it wouldn't feel like summer without a vacation. Seventy-nine percent plan to take at least one trip this summer despite higher travel costs.

— **Olivia Fletcher** / Staff writer

Sources: The Wall Street Journal, Reuters, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Conference of State Legislatures, U.S. Department of Labor, Amaury Sport Organisation, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Priceline

OUR WORLD

China's robot race is on - with risks

Manufacturers of humanoid robots are proliferating rapidly in China, with 140 firms making more than 330 products as of late last year, according to official data. But as with electric vehicles and other emerging technologies, fierce competition and price wars in the race to get ahead could make many of these robot firms unsustainable. When China's government targets advanced industries for policy support, it often attracts a rush of investment and startups. This can spark overcapacity, price cuts, and a survival-of-the-fittest contest that bankrupts many firms, reports Chinese financial news outlet Caixin.

— **Ann Scott Tyson**

"I like my job too much."

That's what Paul Santino, a school principal in Juba, South Sudan, told The New York Times when asked why he continues working even though he has not been paid in more than a year. In the world's youngest country – which also has one of the world's youngest populations – no public educators are currently receiving salaries. Its government blames cuts in international aid. For its part, the U.S. State Department says South Sudan's leaders are stealing oil revenue destined for public services and that foreign assistance is not a "substitute for governance." Some parents are trying to keep schools afloat by paying teachers what they can out of their own pockets.

— **Ryan Lenora Brown**

"Please carry water with you in hot weather."

Transport for London, which runs the Underground subway system, recently put up that reminder. It's a good one, as this summer has been a sizzler. And because many of the London train lines have no air conditioning, it has been even hotter on the Tube. June was the hottest on record in England, with temperatures on some trains reaching as high as 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit). Authorities want to add more air conditioning. But the system is old and the tunnels are deep, which makes it difficult to keep things cool. Adding AC systemwide is likely to take decades, according to the Financial Times.

— **Matthew Bell**

Driver's trek reveals Russians' pain at the pump

According to independent Russian news outlet Bereg, a man named Vlad started a cross-country drive in late June just as Russia's fuel crisis, caused by Ukrainian drone strikes, was intensifying. The trip through several time zones to Vlad's hometown of St. Petersburg became a nightmare shortly after he picked up his new car in the Pacific city of Vladivostok. Many stations had no gas at all, and in the eastern Siberian city of Chita, he spent 39 hours waiting in a nearly 2-mile queue. By early July, Vlad was in Irkutsk, in central Siberia, and still had more than 3,600 miles to go.

— **Fred Weir**

NEWS: GLOBAL CURRENTS

JOPLIN, MISSOURI

Joplin lost 'things you remember.' Its civic bonds endure.

Fifteen years ago, a tornado razed a mile-wide swath of the city. But it did not carry off the knowledge of community building that is nurturing a restoration.

By **Harry Bruinius** / Staff writer

The first time Joplin called out to Charles Timothy Peay, it called from the ruins.

He, like so many Americans, saw the reports of the mile-wide tornado that tore through this southwest Missouri city on Sunday, May 22, 2011. It was one of the most devastating tornadoes in American history, killing 161 people and leaving a scar of splintered neighborhoods, wrecked schools, a hospital jolted off its foundation. He was stunned.

Mr. Peay – people call him Tim – is a veteran of Operation Desert Storm, a soldier who came home from war carrying memories that made civilian life difficult. Yet he is drawn to service. "I grew up a preacher's kid," he says. "You get more out of helping people than you do standing by looking."

So, he saw the television images and answered Joplin's call, driving down from St. Louis to put his hands on the wreckage. He was one of more than 100,000 volunteers who would come to Joplin and join people already working to mend their own wounded city, together creating a legacy of community building that reverberates 15 years later. Some of them stayed for years. Some came for a week, a day, an afternoon. Mr. Peay came for as long as he could.

So much of the city seemed to him erased. People were moving debris and still trying to find survivors. He remembers hearing animals that were trapped or injured somewhere in the wreckage.

The scene was like the urban battlefields he knew too well. Perhaps worse. "Other than going to war, I hadn't seen that kind of devastation on a city," he says.

He had to leave earlier than planned, after just two days.

■ ■ ■

THE SECOND TIME JOPLIN called out to Mr. Peay, it was through his own need to be restored.

In the Marine Corps, he was an anti-tank assaultman, “a tank killer,” he says. He served in the heart of front-line combat. After the war, he could not quite get himself together. He could not go places. He could not talk to people. It was hard to hold down jobs.

“I got off into alcohol and drug use,” he says. He kept spiraling after his experience in Joplin. “That kept me out for a while.”

By 2013, two years after the tornado, he was trying to find a way back into his life. He got help in St. Louis. An organization directed him to Joplin, this time for sober living at The H.O.U.S.E., Inc. and HVAC training at Franklin Technology Center. The arrangement, as he remembers it, was simple: He could live there for a modest rent, go to school, and refrain from drinking and taking drugs.

“I said, well, I can do that,” he says.

He didn’t choose to come to the city where he had volunteered, and it felt a bit confining. But he stayed sober, and he graduated a few months later. Then he quickly left. And he was glad to. “Joplin looked so good in my rearview mirror when I was leaving after HVAC school,” he says. But the place still carried bad memories. “Get away, get away!” he thought as he drove off.

■ ■ ■

THE THIRD TIME JOPLIN called out to Mr. Peay, it was through a newborn child.

After his recovery, he lived and worked in the Chicago area for a while. After a relationship there did not work out, he went back to St. Louis by way of Springfield, Missouri, where he spent some time with a friend. There, he met the woman who would later become his wife. By 2018, he had a son, “Little Tim.”

“Well, I guess he’s not that little,” he says of his 8-year-old, holding up a palm to show his height. “I have to call him ‘Medium Tim’ now.”

Back then, he was thinking about the best place to start a new life with a family, about schools for Medium Tim. He considered the Chicago area. He considered St. Louis. Then it struck him: Move to Joplin, the city that had first looked to him like war and then given him a place to recover from his own.

Joplin was quieter. It felt safer. The schools and ball fields were new. “Everything’s state of the art there,” he says of the rebuilt city. And it sits right in the middle of four states, close enough to Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and the rest of Missouri. A person could be somewhere else quickly.

“So I said, ‘OK, well, I’ll just plant it here,’” he says. Still, he struggled at first.

“When I first got here, I couldn’t go to Walmart – I couldn’t be around a lot of people,” he says. “But the first time I talked myself into going, I had a big basket of groceries, and somebody tapped me on the shoulder – you a veteran? I had my veteran hat on. She said, ‘Let me get in front of you.’ And she paid for my groceries. It’s happened maybe four times since.”

He went to work for The H.O.U.S.E., Inc., serving as a substance abuse counselor for the organization that helped him restore his life. In a different way, it was happening again. “It’s worked out really well for me, just being able to help and give back, especially to those who went through what I did,” he says.

He was encouraged to apply for a house through Habitat for Humanity. He was skeptical, but his family was approved to purchase a new home – one that was being made with specially designed concrete forms on a lot that had been in the tornado’s path.

During construction, neighbors came around to watch. The concrete walls were something of an experiment, part of a grant partnership with the National Ready Mixed Concrete Association and Habitat for Humanity to build structurally resilient housing.

Today Mr. Peay surrounds his home with patriotic flags – the Stars and Stripes and the Marine Corps’ scarlet and gold – a perimeter of red, white, and blue around a house he says he’s so proud to own. “It’s the 250th birthday of the U.S. of A., and we can thank veterans for that,” he says, standing on his front lawn, an outspoken patriot in his neighborhood.

A few years ago, there was another tornado scare. A woman came first, walking toward his door with a baby in her arms.

“She said, ‘Did you say this was a concrete house?’” Mr. Peay recalls. “I said, ‘Yes, it’s OK.’”

Then, five more neighbors came over.

The man who had once found it so difficult to be around people opened his door so that his home, sitting on Joplin’s erstwhile scar, became a safe house on the block.

■ ■ ■

MR. PEAY’S HOUSE IS ONE ANSWER to what Joplin became after the tornado: a city where recovery was measured not only in what rose again, but in who found shelter there. That shelter did not appear by accident. It came from volunteers, churches, private donors, and federal aid. Local institutions, too, were suddenly tasked to do more than they ever had. Leaders had to look at the ruins and imagine the machinery of repair.

On May 23, 2011, the day after the tornado destroyed a third of the city, Scott Clayton was one of those leaders, standing on a hill on 22nd Street, disoriented and beset with self-doubt.

He had been born and raised just outside Joplin in a small town called Oronogo, and for the past year and a half, he had been the director of the local Habitat for Humanity affiliate. The office he took over had built one, maybe two, houses a year since its founding in 1989, for a total of 29 in 22 years.

He was at a friend’s house, or what was left of it, on high ground that should have been hemmed in by rooflines, oak canopy, and the ordinary scenes of a city he had long lived and worked within. Instead, it lay open to the horizon. In the one tree still standing beside him hung a Habitat for Humanity trailer, carried whole into the branches.

“It wasn’t just one simple thing,” Mr. Clayton says, describing the questions swirling in his mind: the loss of life, the people he knew, and, mostly, what he and Habitat for Humanity, as a housing nonprofit, needed to be doing – right now.

“I think the main thing I thought personally at the beginning was, ‘Am I the right person for this?’” he says.

For several months he felt overwhelmed, as many did. The need was too large to fit the old Habitat rhythms. The tornado damaged nearly 7,500 residences and 553 business structures. More than 3,000 residences were heavily damaged or completely destroyed. As Mr. Clayton surveyed his city, it was a place where thousands of families had lost not only roofs and walls, but their familiar landmarks by which they had known where they were.

But he went to work, and took it one day at a time. Most of the initial work was simply slow and steady cleanup. Mr. Clayton was scheduled for meetings he did not feel up to, but he went anyway. He worked 60- and 70-hour weeks, took calls on Sundays, and tried to turn grief into structure – creating schedules for volunteers, lists

of donated funds, and plans to build new houses. The hours took their toll, until his oldest son, then a child, told him plainly that he needed to be home more.

As he struggled to find balance, however, what came next still astonishes him. His Habitat affiliate became something of a clearing-house for the kindness of the whole country. Joplin was beginning to rebuild in many ways, with hundreds of millions of dollars in federal aid arriving through multiple streams. But for private donors, corporate partners, and thousands of volunteers eager to contribute, too, Habitat for Humanity – and Mr. Clayton – became a focus of their efforts to help the city rebuild the housing that was lost.

“I was Scott, the Habitat tornado guy,” he says.

His job, really, became being “a professional volunteer workday coordinator” for the next three years. He worked with local churches, which turned themselves into supply depots and volunteer centers. Habitat’s affiliate in Tulsa, Oklahoma, came to town and made news with a plan to raise 10 houses for 10 families in 10 days, which ended up being 16 days.

Then the rest of the country arrived with its sleeves rolled up: State Farm, Home Depot, and the Salvation Army helped fund or build homes. Baseball players from the Kansas City Royals and St. Louis Cardinals framed houses alongside retirees. A work crew arrived from the United Arab Emirates. Mr. Clayton and his staff were running crews of a hundred across five build sites at once.

Mr. Clayton’s small affiliate built 36 houses in 2012. Thirty-two the year after. By October 2015, it had built 100 after the storm.

Reporters came, too. They wanted to talk about devastation. Mr. Clayton understood why. But he wanted them to see the story from the other side of the storm.

“To us, it wasn’t the devastation that was important,” he says. “It wasn’t a story of, everything’s gone. It’s everything we’re doing to rebuild. It’s everything we do that’s positive.”

“It wasn’t about May 22nd,” he adds. “It was about May 23rd and everything that followed.”

■ ■ ■

BUT REBUILDING JOPLIN was not the same as restoring it.

The tornado did not merely knock down houses. It changed the city’s housing math. Official recovery documents counted 3,422 units completely damaged or destroyed. The Department of Housing and Urban Development later estimated that the storm destroyed about 1,800 rental units and damaged another 1,500, leaving Joplin’s rental vacancy rate below 1%.

Many of those homes were not grand. Some were old, imperfect, and easy to overlook. But they were also part of the city’s lower-cost housing stock.

Mr. Clayton saw that from the builder’s side. “Before the tornado, pretty much half of the town was in a rental situation,” he says. “So you have a lot of aging housing stock that maybe had cost-effective rental that was taken away.”

In the years since, costs have only climbed. When he first started at Habitat, a housing lot might have cost them \$4,000. Later, \$10,000 began to feel like the edge of the budget. Now, he says, lots can run \$20,000 or more. A recent Habitat home cost \$165,000 to build and appraised for \$250,000.

The work is still necessary. But it is no longer the same work.

“We’re trying to do affordable housing in an increasingly unaffordable world,” he says.

Which is why, 15 years after the tornado, Mr. Clayton is asking

what kind of shelter people actually need.

At a new Habitat project in town, he walks past the frame of a 10-unit rental complex for veterans: six one-bedroom apartments, four two-bedrooms, all low-cost rents. Habitat has built houses for veterans – including Mr. Peay’s concrete home on a lot once crossed by the tornado. But homeownership is not always what veterans ask for.

They listened, Mr. Clayton says, and what they heard was specific: Veterans wanted smaller units, rent instead of a mortgage, a place in town. The new project is meant to give veterans not only lower rents, but a little of the camaraderie that can be hard to carry from military life into civilian life.

Mr. Peay’s concrete house was one answer to what shelter could mean in the Joplin that came after the storm. The veterans complex is another. At first, Joplin had to build quickly. Over time, it had to learn to build more carefully – around the lives people were trying to rebuild inside the walls.

■ ■ ■

TWENTY YEARS AGO, just as Joplin had once called to Mr. Peay and Mr. Clayton, it had beckoned Nicole Brown, too.

She and her husband were riding the professional rodeo circuit then, a part-time passion as both pursued careers in education.

Joplin made practical sense for the couple. It was close enough to Oklahoma, Kansas, Arkansas, and Texas to follow the rodeo circuit, while still offering a lovely place to build a life. “It’s kind of the same reason like why you have trucking and things here,” she says. “You can be anywhere relatively quickly.”

That has always been part of Joplin’s claim on the American map. Before it was a Route 66 town, it was a mining boomtown in the traditions of American capitalism after the Civil War, drawing thousands to mine the massive lead and zinc fields of the Tri-State district. Later, the old road made it a working crossroads: a place to stop, repair, refuel, and regroup.

Ms. Brown, who has a Ph.D. in higher education administration, began working for a local university, building a career helping students find their next step. Joplin fit a habit of mind she already had.

On May 22, 2011, Ms. Brown and her husband were in the basement of their century-old house in Duenweg. The tornado was flattening Joplin and heading their way. Acquaintances from her husband’s workplace were returning from the Joplin High School graduation when raining debris sent them to the Browns’ house.

“You’ve just never heard a house groan like that in your life,” she says. “The entire house is over 100 years old and it was very well built – you could hear the pressure coming in on the house.”

Her house survived with minor damage.

That left her, like many, in a strange emotional category.

“There was a lot of trauma in our community,” she says. “People fell in one of two camps: You either were directly impacted and you were working your way through that, or you had survivor’s guilt because you weren’t.”

But nearly everyone in Joplin agrees: The tornado left a legacy of commitment to one another, a profound experience of organizing volunteers and coordinating civic services.

One Joplin, the organization Ms. Brown now leads, emerged from that legacy and now preserves the collaboration the disaster had forced into being. It does not run a shelter or build houses. It connects people who do.

“The magic of One Joplin a lot of times happens in the hallway

conversations,” says Ms. Brown, executive director of the organization for the past five years – a career change as she begins to raise two young children. “It gets people out of their offices, gets them in together, and it builds trust across those organizations.”

That may be the less visible story of Joplin’s recovery. The city did not merely replace buildings. It learned, under pressure, how to connect churches, nonprofits, businesses, and civic leaders around shared needs.

But Ms. Brown is careful with the language of recovery. Some losses, she says, were hidden inside what outsiders might have called improvement.

It can be easy, from a distance, to say the tornado cleared away old houses and that newer, better homes rose in their place. But she asks: “Who lived in those houses?” she asks.

For families with insurance or savings, recovery could mean rebuilding. For those who lost a cheap rental and perhaps the job that paid for it, recovery could mean displacement.

“The tornado created a dividing line of what their reality was for recovery for many families,” she says.

■ ■ ■

NED MAYES, A LIFELONG JOPLIN NATIVE, a Navy veteran who served more than two decades, and the designer of some of the city’s Route 66 exhibit materials, marks not only what returned, but what did not.

He’ll never forget how the people of Joplin responded after the tornado. “I don’t know that there’s been much of a change in that spirit of the city today,” says Mr. Mayes, retired but still a part-time assistant at the Joplin History & Mineral Museum. “Because so many people got together and helped each other, and still do.”

But the map of memory changed.

“The thing that really hurts is the things you remember, like your grade school, your junior high, your high school, the neighborhood you grew up in, the store you first worked at,” he says. “You know, when you were a teenager. All that’s gone.”

At the museum, he helps arrange the fragments Joplin has kept: Route 66 artifacts, Bonnie and Clyde exhibits, memories of native son Langston Hughes, the writer, as well as the ore that made fortunes and left scars.

The work is nostalgic, but not only nostalgic. It is a way of saying that change does not have to erase a place entirely, as long as someone is still willing to name what used to be there.

That is the harder meaning of recovery in Joplin. A city can come back, but it cannot return unchanged. It can build stronger walls and still lose affordable rooms to rent. It can remember the volunteers, the houses, the days after, and yet still carry voids where private histories used to stand.

Along Route 66, America has long told stories about motion: leaving, arriving, and starting over somewhere down the road. Joplin’s tornado story asks a slower question: What makes people stay? What calls them back? And when they return, what kind of shelter is waiting?

For Mr. Peay, it was a concrete house in the tornado’s old path, a door he could open when neighbors came. For Mr. Clayton, it became a lifetime of building homes around new needs. For Ms. Brown, it is the patient work of keeping people in the same room long enough to hear what the city needs next.

Fifteen years after the storm, they and others still hear the call that came first from the ruins. They can’t solve all challenges at once,

nor for everyone equally. But door by door, meeting by meeting, wall by wall – they are still asking, and answering, how to make a place strong enough for those looking for a way back. ■

DUBAI AND ABU DHABI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Targeted by Iran, this Gulf nation emerges stronger

Outsiders might view the United Arab Emirates as a place for tourists and expats. But the UAE is developing a new sense of national pride.

By **Taylor Luck** / Special correspondent

The ballistic missiles and attack drones that Iran has fired at the United Arab Emirates punctured a long-held perception of this country as an oasis of safety. Yet people here are already emerging from the conflict with confidence.

Some might even call it swagger.

Tourists from Asia and Europe are starting to come back. Cafés and restaurants are full. Shopping malls are bustling. Most of all, the diverse peoples and nationalities that have settled in the UAE to live and work – 90% of the population of 11.5 million are foreigners – say they have a newfound relationship with their host country and a different sense of belonging.

“Before, we were working and living our lives in the UAE,” says Mohammed Al Omar, a Jordanian citizen residing in the UAE, “but after going through a war where the state protected our lives every single hour, and kept essential services running, we really feel a part of the country.”

“The UAE is no longer an address, it’s our country,” Mr. Omar says.

Modeling resilience

In response to the U.S. and Israeli surprise attack in late February, Iran has since battered the UAE with nearly 3,000 drones and missiles. It was by far the hardest hit by Iran’s attacks, repeatedly closing its airspace, grounding flights, and targeting the skyscrapers and hotels that make up Dubai’s trademark skyline.

Yet the UAE’s defenses – the vast majority are local air defense units, combined with U.S., South Korean, and Israeli systems – were successful in knocking down 97% of Iran’s drones and missiles, according to authorities here.

For months, shipping was blocked through the Strait of Hormuz, where the UAE has its only coastline. But it has continued to be able to import goods by land through Saudi Arabia, while exporting oil via the pipeline that runs through Oman.

The UAE started investing in its own military capabilities in earnest about two decades ago. At the time, the notion that Iran might attack seemed alarmist to much of the public here. But now, Emirati officials say that investment in national defense has paid off. And many here would agree.

Iran targeted the UAE alongside other Arab Gulf states because of their security ties with the United States. That relationship is at the heart of the “UAE model,” which is about building national economic growth, while maintaining a healthy security relation-

ship with Washington. Through the Iran war, that model has been validated, leaders of the UAE now say.

It has garnered more than appreciation from its residents as well, helping to create a sense of national pride. Large Emirati flags are draped from the balconies of high-rise apartments, while tabletop versions of the flag dot stores and cafes.

“Dubai was where we lived, but now it truly feels like home,” says Katherine, a British national working in finance who did not wish to use her full name as her employer prohibits her from speaking with the news media. “Emiratis and foreigners from all over the world have been through this crisis together. No one knows this experience but us. We now feel pride when we say the UAE is home, because we know what it means to belong here.”

“Citizens saw their confidence in the state reinforced,” says Saleem Alketbi, a UAE-based political analyst. “They saw the UAE not merely as a place to work, but as a country capable of protecting the stability on which their lives depend.”

“In a country where people from so many nationalities live together, resilience became a shared civic experience,” Dr. Alketbi explains. “The war strengthened confidence not only in the leadership, but also in the institutional model that has been built over decades.”

Also key to the UAE model: welcoming foreign nationals and building diverse global connections, moderation, and interconnectivity, which, Emirati officials tell the Monitor, stand in stark contrast to Iran’s hard-line, closed-off, and theocratic political system.

In 2008, the government here initiated a campaign to promote “national values,” by enshrining Emirati customs and the Arabic language, encouraging a sense of community, and fostering peaceful inclusivity across the UAE’s diverse population. Observers say this helped build a sense of national identity that has paid off during the Iran war.

The conflict “was a unifying event where the responsibility to maintain the UAE values were shared by all those who were in the UAE,” says Mohammed Baharoon, director-general of the Dubai Public Policy Research Center (b’huth).

“This was a gratifying experience for the UAE, which has established a national identity that is based on values and principles, not on lineage,” he says.

It was also, Emiratis say, an opportunity to show that the wealthy federation of seven sovereign monarchies that comprise this nation, sometimes derided by outsiders as a luxury-obsessed country of style rather than substance, is not easily cowed.

Growing maturity

The UAE still has a long way to go with its postwar recovery.

Hotels are at half-capacity, and the service industry has laid off or relocated a large portion of its workers. Demand for housing is only starting to rebound. And, with the ongoing tensions in the Strait of Hormuz, the UAE’s container shipping traffic is at less than 3% of prewar levels.

Political tensions with Iran and Pakistan, which has been mediating talks with the U.S., are still running high. The UAE deported thousands of Pakistani nationals in recent months. Although government officials here have also gone out of their way to talk about the critical role that hundreds of thousands of Iranian nationals play in the economy of this country that they, too, call home.

“The war did not create Emirati national identity; it revealed how mature it has become,” Dr. Alketbi adds. ■

KHARTOUM, SUDAN

Searching for Sudan’s looted treasures

After three years of war, museums are in ruins. But the hunt for thousands of stolen artifacts is just beginning.

By Noraldin Jadat / Contributor

On a Friday, April 14, 2023, Abdul Hai Abdul-Sawi left his office at Sudan’s National Museum, where he directs the archaeological discovery department.

As he cast a routine glance at the displays in the antiquities exhibition hall, he had no idea it was the last time he would ever see them. The next morning, fighting broke out nearby between the Sudanese armed forces and a paramilitary called the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Soon, the RSF began stationing snipers on the museum’s rooftop. Then its fighters bludgeoned their way inside. There, they found pure gold figurines and gemstones, ancient pottery and murals, 4,000-year-old mummies and Stone Age tools. The museum was being renovated, and many collections were arranged neatly in boxes in a storage room, as though ready-packed for the looters to carry away.

Over the last three years, the RSF and other thieves have plundered at least 20 of Sudan’s museums, stealing more than 8,000 artifacts worth an estimated \$150 million, according to Sudan’s National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums. U.N. investigators say the RSF is smuggling these objects over Sudan’s borders and selling them to international criminal gangs and art dealers. Some of them have even appeared on eBay. The proceeds are then used to fund a war operation that Amnesty International recently called “a stain on the conscience of humanity.”

The theft of history

For many Sudanese, however, the thefts represent far more than a financial loss.

“Artifacts are not merely museum objects. They are the tangible evidence of Sudan’s history and its successive civilizations,” Mr. Abdul-Sawi says. “When they are looted or destroyed, we lose not only archaeological objects but also parts of our collective memory and cultural identity.”

The stolen artifacts span thousands of years of Sudanese history. One of the displays Mr. Abdul-Sawi saw on his way out the door in April 2023 was a collection of ushabtis. These small stone figurines with crossed arms were placed in the tombs of the kings of Kush – often called the “Black pharaohs” – who ruled over a large swath of Sudan and Egypt in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. The ushabtis were believed to accompany the kings to the afterlife in order to perform manual and agricultural labor on their behalf.

When the Sudanese army drove the RSF out of Khartoum in March 2025, Mr. Abdul-Sawi and his colleagues returned to the museum to find the ushabtis, along with thousands of other precious artifacts, gone.

The scenes that greeted them were grim: Display cases were smashed and exhibition halls were emptied. Used ammunition casings lay scattered on the floor, along with cooking equipment

and clothing abandoned by fighters who had occupied the building.

In all, some 60% of the museum's collection was missing, according to museum authorities.

New resolve

But museum authorities were determined not to let that be the end of the story.

When the war began, the Sudanese government was already searching for other precious artifacts stolen from the country. In early 2024, for instance, a joint investigation with the Spanish police uncovered that a pharaonic statue in the collection of a Dutch museum had been stolen several years earlier from Sudan's Jebel Barkal Museum and sold using forged documentation.

When the war began, Sudan's stolen antiquity sleuths, along with officials from Interpol and the United Nations cultural agency, UNESCO, quickly turned their attention to looting of the nation's museums.

Experts say many objects stolen by the RSF and other thieves have made their way along well-known smuggling routes through Sudan's western Darfur region, and then on neighboring Chad and South Sudan. There, they quickly disappear into the black market.

But some have resurfaced. In November 2024, police arrested smugglers trying to leave the country with antique statues, copper judges, and a dagger stolen from the National Museum, according to the Sudan Tribune. Shortly after, several stolen artifacts were located in Juba, the capital of South Sudan.

Many artifacts are thought to be circulating illicitly, but "so far, the artifacts looted by the Rapid Support Forces have not reached international auction houses," says Ikhlas Abdel Latif, director of the museums department at the Sudanese National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums.

In January, there was another glimmer of good news. The Sudanese government announced it had recovered 570 stolen artifacts, including dozens of the Kush funerary statues. The government did not say where or how it recovered the missing artifacts, but Spanish newspaper *El País* reports they were found inside the country.

With thousands of objects still missing – most of them likely beyond Sudan's borders – the saved artifacts represented only a small fraction of what has been lost. But Dr. Latif says the symbolism is significant.

"The recovery of these statues has revived hope to those dedicated to protecting antiquities and heritage," she says. "It marks a first step in restoring a long history that the militia tried so hard to steal and destroy." ■

The fight over wind power gets expensive

Trump directed U.S. government to pay billions to stop wind energy projects from going forward. In response, states have sued.

By Cameron Pugh / Staff writer

President Donald Trump's opposition to offshore wind farms is well-documented. In the early 2010s, he sued the Scottish government when it gave permission for a company to build turbines in sight of one of his resorts. In public testimony over the years, the president has called wind turbines "monstrosities." He has fretted about their environmental impact, decried their noise, and lamented their impact on tourism.

He lost his case in Scotland. Now, as U.S. president, he has more leverage.

Over the past year, the Trump administration has gone to great lengths to undo his predecessor's efforts to establish a wind power industry off the coast of the United States. Since March, he's struck five agreements with private companies to cancel at least nine offshore wind leases – a strategy that rings of Mr. Trump's tendency toward dealmaking and that environmental policy analysts say no president has employed before.

Clean energy advocates have decried the agreements. They argue that blocking wind projects will hobble the country's ability to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions driving a warming climate, while also eliminating a technology that could reduce energy prices. The Trump administration, by contrast, has argued that the president's shift back to fossil fuels will reduce costs and boost energy reliability.

"It's the government saying that we're going to incentivize these developers to voluntarily give up their offshore wind leases, so that they could use that money instead to invest in fossil fuel or conventional energy projects," says Austin Gae, who studies energy policy at Advancing American Freedom, a conservative think tank. "I see this tug-of-war from one administration to the next."

In the first deal, the Trump administration agreed to refund TotalEnergies, a French energy company, \$928 million for two offshore wind leases. In exchange, the company reinvested that money into fossil fuels. Subsequent agreements have followed a similar model, involving wind farms from Maine to North Carolina to California, at various stages of development. In all, the Trump administration has, since March, pledged to refund more than \$2.7 billion.

"These buyouts, which use taxpayer dollars, really hit consumers twice," says Phelps Turner, senior attorney for U.S. energy policy at the Environmental Defense Fund. "They prevent the development of low-cost sources of electricity – that is, offshore wind. And second they're being paid for by taxpayers."

Whether Mr. Trump's new strategy could impact other renewable energy sources remains to be seen, Mr. Turner says. The legality of the approach is unclear, and not all renewable energy projects require lease payments that could be refunded. In general, the president can only spend money that Congress has appropriated.

Taken together, the canceled wind projects could have powered some 7 million homes across the country, according to project documents. All of the leases, which the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management issues to companies to develop renewable energy

in coastal waters, were awarded under President Joe Biden. His administration had set a goal of developing at least 30 gigawatts of offshore wind power, which it called “enough to power 10 million homes,” by 2030.

During its four-year tenure, the Biden administration issued leases for at least 23 offshore wind farms, compared with five during Mr. Trump’s first term and 24 under Barack Obama, according to documents from the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management.

Although the Trump administration has pledged billions to cancel the wind leases, the companies also seem to be losing money. While the agreements say the administration will reimburse companies after they reinvest in “conventional energy projects,” up to the value of their original leases, that doesn’t cover expenses that companies incurred beyond the original lease payment.

For example, an agreement with Invenergy over a farm off the coast of California says the company spent nearly \$27 million for “preliminary project development” and almost \$724,000 for “annual lease payments” that companies must pay in addition to their initial fee. The agreement only requires the government to repay the \$111.7 million Invenergy first paid to acquire its lease.

The reimbursements draw from the taxpayer-supported Judgment Fund, which federal law allows the government to use to settle court cases.

In June, seven states in the Northeast sued the Trump administration, accusing it of violating federal law, in part, by misusing the Judgment Fund. The Trump administration has not yet responded to that suit. That comes after judges ruled against the government in five separate legal cases over a work stoppage it issued to farms off the East Coast last year.

In New England, which has emerged as the country’s epicenter of offshore wind, advocates and climate researchers have argued the technology is crucial to reducing high costs and improving reliability. In February, a study by the Union of Concerned Scientists found that two offshore wind farms would have reduced the risk of demand-driven blackouts by 55% during the winter of 2024-25, when energy needs spiked for heating. Massachusetts leaders have said that Vineyard Wind, a farm operating near Cape Cod, would save Bay Staters some \$1.4 billion over the next 20 years. ■

THE EXPLAINER

The US needs more electricity. Can the grid deliver?

Efforts to modernize the aging electric grid, amid surging demand for power, are running up against challenges, including bureaucratic delays.

By Laurent Belsie / Staff writer

In many ways, America’s bureaucracy-laden electric grid has been like an old farm wagon – slow-moving, showing its age, and still operating under the assumption that electric demand grows slowly and consistently. Now, industry and government want to hook that wagon up to a Ferrari.

The artificial intelligence industry is building power-hungry

data centers across the country in a race to keep ahead of surging AI demand. At the same time, non-AI sectors, such as electric vehicles and new construction, are also dialing up demand. That dynamic is shaking the electric power industry to its core.

Yet the biggest obstacle to meeting that demand is not more electricity generation. It’s modernizing the regulatory and infrastructure choke points that are slowing the construction of new power plants and keeping already available energy from reaching the people who need it most.

Q: How big is the challenge, and what are the obstacles?

Upgrading the electric grid is a major challenge. The United States last year installed 53 gigawatts of new electric power capacity, the biggest annual increase since 2002, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. This year, that number could reach a record 86 GW. Still, such increases might not be enough to meet the surging demand, and obstacles remain.

Many Americans don’t want power plants built or electric lines strung near their homes. And building a traditional power plant is costly. So electric power companies and regulators are cautious, hesitating to construct plants unless future demand is guaranteed.

The AI industry, by contrast, turns on a dime. And while it’s booming now, there’s no guarantee that the boom won’t turn into a bust if the industry consolidates into one or two winners. Perhaps the biggest challenge of all is bureaucratic delay in modernizing the grid, which can cause planned energy projects to be canceled altogether.

Q: What’s being done to add capacity?

Power plants are being built rapidly. In some cases, AI companies are building their own plants to power data centers, bypassing the grid entirely. To get local approval, they’ve also signed pledges that their projects won’t raise local utility bills.

The Trump administration is moving to ease environmental and other regulations so that power plants can be built more quickly. For the first 11 months of 2025, the nation installed some 4.2 GW of gas-fired generating capacity, more than double the capacity from the same period a year earlier, according to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. That is enough electric capacity to power millions of homes.

Another potential winner is nuclear power in the form of small and midsize plants that can be built more quickly than traditional big power plants. “Nuclear is having this amazing wave of investment,” Evelyn Wang, an engineering professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former director at the federal government’s Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy, said at a Houston energy conference in March.

But the biggest winner might be green energy, despite the administration’s attempts to slow or kill such projects. Many companies have embraced solar and wind power installations because they are quick and relatively easy to put up. In that same 11-month period last year, the nation added 10 times more solar than natural gas capacity, and wind was double the natural gas total. The demand for power is such that wind and solar are shifting from serving as alternative sources of energy to being part of the nation’s energy core.

Industry analysts say it’s still early days, and it’s not yet clear which of the competing technologies will emerge as winners.

Q: Isn’t green energy fickle, producing power only when the sun shines and the wind blows?

Yes, solar and wind are intermittent energy sources. But power companies are getting around that by deploying battery storage to capture that power when it's produced and feed it onto the grid when it's needed. In states like Texas and California, the speed of battery deployment "is truly extraordinary," says Sally Benson, a Stanford University professor who served as chief energy-transition strategist at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy during the Biden presidency. Since 2019, California's battery storage capacity has exploded by some 2,000%. On many nights, from about 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., the state's No. 1 source of electricity is stored energy from lithium-ion batteries, she says.

Q: When will capacity catch up to demand?

Delays connecting new power plants to the grid are hampering progress. At the end of last year, planned facilities totaling more than 2,060 GW of power and storage had hookup applications pending. The queue is long, and the approval process is slowing.

Because of that delay, most of those plants won't get built, concluded the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in a recent report. Of power developers' applications filed between 2000 and 2019 to connect projects to the grid, only 13% of the proposed new capacity had reached commercial operations by the end of 2024. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the average wait time for approval has doubled to more than four years.

A related problem: insufficient transmission lines to carry the energy from where it's produced to where it's needed. Various estimates suggest that in the next four years, the nation will have to expand transmission systems by 60%, the Department of Energy reports. By 2050, the nation might need triple today's capacity.

"The grid is old, and it needs to be fixed," says Roger Diwan, a vice president for S&P Global Energy. "And there is a little bit of pain in doing that. [But] the fact that we have large customers who are merging, who want [more energy] faster, but also are capable of providing the capital for it, is very important. And in a way, it will solve a lot of the problems." ■

REPORTERS ON THE JOB



Caitlin Babcock

MEDORA, N.D.

"POTUS finished remarks at 2:31," I typed with my thumbs as I sprinted up the amphitheater stairs, rushing with other reporters to an awaiting motorcade. It was my first time being a "travel pooler," the reporter responsible for recording in real time what the U.S. president says and does.

Pooling boils down to the purest form of reporting: getting the who, what, where, when, and why. It was a busy schedule, with a day trip to North Dakota that involved plane and helicopter rides, a tour of a new Theodore Roosevelt museum, and multiple speeches by the president. We also experienced the maiden voyage of the new \$400 million Qatar-donated Air Force One. I captured as many details as possible about the plane ride, from the massage chairs to a new curtain blocking the press's view of the rest of the plane. ■



Whitney Eulich

MEXICO CITY

Doing "vox," or approaching strangers on the street for quotes, is among the most dreaded tasks of a journalist. Rejections abound. But sometimes, serendipity strikes. Whitney Eulich was milling around the crowds in Mexico City gathered ahead of a World Cup event, when she saw a group of older women wearing soccer jerseys. She tapped one on the shoulder. It turns out they were the Pioneers, an all-women's team that proved women's sports were worth watching during the unofficial 1971 Women's World Cup. "It's this historic amazing story from Mexico," says Whitney. "A lot of times you go and report and end up with a bunch of 'meh' quotes. This was just gold." ■

— Sara Miller Llana / International editor



Patrik Jonsson

CHARLESTON, S.C.

For a story on semiquincentennial celebrations, I traveled to Charleston, a wealthy Colonial port town where key moments of the Revolutionary War played out and where the tumult of wartime politics and crossed allegiances can still be sensed today. At a tucked-away tea store that features Colonial-era blends, the clerk recalled the power of nostalgia in homemade costumes and parades. My bike taxi driver turned out to be a young military veteran from Texas, concerned about the meaning of citizenship but hopeful that there is more in common in the American idea than what divides. By maintaining a sense of perspective and noting the modern narratives etched in the cobblestones of history, I found a nation calmer and more confident in its founding than the grind the news cycle sometimes makes out. ■



Sara Miller Llana

TORONTO

The international team works closely to get stories ready for publication. Editors review one another's copy and help sharpen story ideas. Africa editor Ryan Brown and Latin America editor Whitney Eulich have worked together for years. But when the World Cup kicked off, the tournament's opening match featured the national teams of Ryan's home base in South Africa and Whitney's in Mexico. Both showed up to the morning meeting wearing their team's jerseys. Ryan spent kickoff good-naturedly teasing Whitney. But when the final whistle blew and South Africa had lost, the desk's trademark teamwork quickly returned. Until South Africa faced Canada, where I'm based. Then she started goading me. ■

MUMBAI, INDIA

Amin Sheikh serves up sips and skills

Many of the employees at Mr. Sheikh's café were once homeless. Now, they have steady work and the space to chase their dreams.

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues / Contributor

The 10 people seated together one recent morning in the Bombay to Barcelona Library Café have the hearty laughs and easy banter of a close-knit family. Though they are not related, a sign over the cozy eatery's entrance – “Run by street girls and boys” – explains what unites them.

Amin Sheikh, who founded the café 10 years ago in Andheri, a bustling suburb of Mumbai, calls these young people his children. Many at the table, including Mr. Sheikh, lived on the streets at some point in their lives. Today, they are part of the café's operations team.

Having run away from an abusive home at age 5, Mr. Sheikh started the café to empower young people who experienced a difficult start to life, just as he did.

“I want to create a better world because I never had it,” he says.

“Nobody judged anybody”

By 10 a.m., patrons start trickling into the brightly lit café, which includes a well-stocked library. One of the earliest visitors is filmmaker Sharmista Nag, who says she frequents the eatery often. “What is unique about the café is the menu they have for the underprivileged,” she says.

Since its opening in August 2016, the café has offered hot beverages and certain food items, including sandwiches, at discounted prices to anyone who cannot afford the full cost. And unlike most other coffee shops in urban India, the café always has its doors open to homeless kids from the neighborhood, who receive free food and drinks.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, an estimated 18 million children live on India's streets, accounting for nearly one-fifth of the global population of street children. Most resort to begging, performing on the streets, doing manual labor for low pay, scavenging for scraps, or selling drugs.

Back at the café, the tables fill up with laptop-toting professionals, groups of friends, couples on dates, and a few international tourists familiar with Mr. Sheikh's life story. In his 2012 self-published book, “Bombay Mumbai: Life Is Life, I Am Because of You,” the eatery founder described enduring horrific abuse on the streets, being rescued at age 8 by a Catholic nun, and growing up in a Jesuit orphanage.

In his early 20s, Mr. Sheikh was a chauffeur for a generous employer, who sponsored him to take a trip to Barcelona in 2003. In that Spanish city's coffee shops and restaurants, the young chauffeur was welcomed and given a seat at the same table as everyone else – unlike in India, where drivers are often asked to wait outside. For the first time, Mr. Sheikh felt seen and respected in public.

“Nobody judged anybody,” he says.

Inspired by his experiences in Spain, he dreamed of opening a café in Mumbai, where everyone – irrespective of their financial and social standing – would be treated equally. He used the proceeds from his book sales to fund the café.

“Opening the café was one of the best days of my life,” Mr. Sheikh says.

Encouragement and pride

Currently, about 15 young people work in the café as cooks, baristas, and servers. Most are orphans and have lived on the street. Some are single mothers, Mr. Sheikh says, while others escaped prostitution.

“I'm so proud of them,” Mr. Sheikh says of the team. “They give me the strength to continue doing what I do.”

While Mr. Sheikh says he doesn't take a salary from the café – his wife, music teacher Sara Mampel Vallvé, supports their family, which includes two young children – the rest of the team is paid equally, symbolic of their equal contribution to the café's success. The eatery also funds rented accommodations nearby for team members, and for many of them, this is their first experience of a stable home.

“Earlier, I lacked confidence and would cry if I had to talk to strangers,” recalls Khushboo Ali, who now confidently manages the day-to-day operations of the café.

“Amin made me believe that I can achieve anything,” she adds. “He has done more for me than my own family.”

Mr. Sheikh takes his role as a mentor seriously. Each year, he sponsors one team member for a trip to Barcelona in hopes that they will be inspired by what they experience there.

He also encourages employees to chase their dreams, alongside working at the café. Ms. Ali designs clothes, which are displayed at the eatery and available for purchase. Through an agreement with Charles & Ron, a leading Maltese fashion brand, Mr. Sheikh had arranged for Ms. Ali to complete a three-month internship with the label and for barista Jyoti Yadav to model its clothes.

Some other team members have left the café to pursue their passion, including former barista Sairaj Babu Methari, who is now a rapper and an author. Over the past decade, the eatery has trained more than 130 young people in café work, Mr. Sheikh says.

Mr. Sheikh helped former café public relations staffer Alumelu Bahadur to follow her dream of opening a school for children from lower-income families. After taking out a bank loan, Mr. Sheikh rented a former butcher shop and transformed it into an early learning center. Little Gurus' Nest, inaugurated in January 2023, uses the Montessori and Waldorf methods to educate children under age 5 – free of charge.

“We give them a chance to be themselves,” says Ms. Bahadur, who explains that the 29 currently enrolled children learn language, math, and culture.

“We get the kids ready [for elementary school],” she adds. “No matter which school they go to next, they can easily adapt.”

In early April, the tiny tots were rehearsing for their annual celebration, swinging their arms and stomping their feet cheerfully to children's songs, including “The Singing Walrus.”

In 2024, Mr. Sheikh started the Street Angels Foundation to be able to receive donations to fund various projects, including the preschool. Through a government program, the nonprofit also partially funded six one-bedroom apartments to house members of the café team, and received the keys to the units in early June.

Mr. Sheikh is now fundraising to meet his next goal – expanding the school and the coffee shop.

“I don’t give up,” he says. ■

EDITORIALS

The First Amendment’s ‘trust’ in young adults

A federal appeals court has ruled that the First Amendment’s freedom of speech principle protects the right of academics in Florida to discuss topics in class that some might view as discriminatory or even offensive.

The 2-1 decision on July 7 struck down Florida’s 2022 W.O.K.E. Act, which sought to regulate teaching of “divisive concepts.” Supporters said the law prevented teaching that could promote discrimination against students for actions “committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, national origin or sex.” Critics saw it as an attempt to quash candid inquiry into issues around race and rights.

Debate between the two sides is likely to continue. Yet there is one point in the ruling worthy of bipartisan respect: the assertion that young adults should have the right to decide for themselves what ideas or concepts they agree with.

Florida, U.S. Circuit Judge Britt Grant wrote, recognizes classrooms as “centers of inquiry ... where students are trusted to puzzle through ideas that are good and bad, easy and hard, ideally getting ever closer to the truth.”

Whether or not the state agrees with those ideas, she averred, “The First Amendment trusts students to figure it out for themselves.”

The vast majority of college students – 84% – view the right of free speech as “extremely or very important to democracy,” according to a 2022 survey. And 59% believe “colleges should allow students to be exposed to all types of speech.”

Academic freedom is under pressure globally. Per one 2026 report, 50 countries have experienced a decline in academic freedom over the past 10 years.

As the Monitor noted this year, a core purpose of higher education is “equipping young people with the civic skills of open inquiry, free speech, and mutual respect, all essential to a thriving democracy.”

College campuses are ideal spaces where today’s students – who are tomorrow’s voters and decision makers – learn and practice freedom of thought and expression. The court ruling appears to accord them this opportunity. ■

Rebuilding the bedrock for NATO security

In early July, the heads of NATO’s 32 member countries gathered in Ankara, Turkey, for the transatlantic alliance’s annual summit, amid a rather fractious atmosphere. About the same time, in Geneva, thousands of representatives from around the world were attending the first all-nations Global Dialogue on AI Governance. Their search for shared approaches – to safeguard against potentially negative impacts from artificial intelligence – was more collegial.

Also that same week, it emerged that quiet coordination among 59 countries had produced yet another successful crackdown on global human trafficking. The BBC reported that 1,024 people were arrested and at least 2,070 were aided through an operation led by Interpol, the international law enforcement network.

The results “demonstrate what can be achieved when countries work together ... and strengthen cooperation across regions,” said Valdecy Urquiza, the secretary-general of Interpol. The sweep involved law enforcement across five continents and built on months of data-sharing and communication across national and language boundaries.

Similar sustained efforts by other multilateral bodies – those governing civil aviation, maritime movements, telecommunications, and safe agricultural trade – are what keep the global economy and international relations humming along.

Trustworthiness and trust-responsiveness

Their efficacy reflects long-embedded tenets of trust, reliability, and reciprocity, values that seem in short supply within NATO. The United States and Europe are at odds over resource allocations for shared defense. European leaders have increased spending and are expanding their militaries. But they are rattled by U.S. threats to withdraw forces and armaments, especially as Russia continues its war on Ukraine. Refashioning the alliance for the future will require more than billion-dollar deals and verbal diplomacy.

Effective multilateral cooperation, according to Frédéric Ramel, a professor at Paris’ Sciences Po, requires both trustworthiness and trust-responsiveness. One demonstrates reliability and commitment; the other aligns actions with expectations and promises.

“[NATO’s] members must have trust-based commitments beyond strategic interests to function well,” Professor Ramel wrote for the Global Governance Forum last year. Not just “understanding” but “conviviality” among leaders and delegations is important, he said. And so is a mindset “that prioritizes trust, inclusiveness, and shared responsibility.”

Battlefield readiness and better weapons systems are important. But joint security also rests on a more reliable bedrock – that of common values and respectful communication. ■

Ingenuity and faith deepen the AI design discussion

GPT-5.3-Codex, Gemini 3.5 Flash, DeepSeek-V4-Pro, Claude Fable 5, Voxtral TTS, and Realtime ... This hodgepodge of names and numbers captures only some of the many new or upgraded artificial intelligence models released in the first half of 2026.

The technology, it's clear, is moving by leaps and bounds.

In parallel, AI firms are taking smaller but arguably just as significant steps to incorporate core principles of moral and religious reasoning into model development. Some companies have hired in-house "philosophers" to help with complex questions of design ethics at the human-AI interface. Google DeepMind reportedly has 10 such individuals on staff, and Anthropic's Amanda Askell has been featured in multiple media reports.

But the scope of AI creators' inquiry is expanding beyond the humanities and human philosophizing to deeper spiritual questions of what differentiates wisdom from intelligence or factual knowledge from character. In May, Anthropic reported on "first conversations ... with people from religious, philosophical, and cultural communities that have a long tradition of thinking about virtue, character, and what it means to live a good life." What the company is after, it said, "is careful, accumulated thinking on how good character actually forms."

Differentiating true wisdom from tools

"The more powerful the technology, the greater the need for discipline and discernment," according to John Dyer, a Dallas Theological Seminary professor and technology creator. "It can be tempting to see these statistical models as having true wisdom," but they are just useful tools, "mere blocks of silicon," he cautioned in a January online post.

In March, Anthropic hosted a workshop with 15 Christian leaders from business and academic backgrounds. Several participants told The Washington Post that they were impressed with the sincerity and humility of the AI firm's staff in discussing both ethical and spiritual implications.

According to one participant, Dr. Greg Cootsona, head of the consulting firm AI and Faith, the tone of the discussion expressed a prevailing "feeling ... that an entirely secular framework reaches points of insufficiency as it tries to respond to the depth of questions raised."

DeepMind co-founder and chemistry Nobel laureate Demis Hassabis has repeatedly called for a societal and spiritual reckoning with AI, especially when it comes to questions of purpose and meaning in life. Describing himself as "a cautious optimist," he told The Guardian last year, "I think we'll get this right," through "human ingenuity" and adaptability.

But for Professor Dyer, the deeper demand is "to be faithful stewards of ... these technologies." And that, he has written, is a task "we cannot do ... without the wisdom of God's word." ■

Bringing the stars to Earth - and back

Catching fireflies and then releasing them into the summer sky results in an exuberant display of light.

I grew up in a large New Jersey city in an era predating environmental awareness. I recall factories standing shoulder to shoulder, their smokestacks belching who-knows-what into the air in an age when children spent most of their time outdoors. The result was something I didn't know enough to lament back then: There were few stars in the nighttime sky because the pollution obscured their light.

When I say that I didn't lament it "back then," I'm being mindful of the truism that we don't miss the things we never knew. (In other words, who grieves for the dodo?) But it was my father who gave me and my friends a gentle reminder of the sky he had known as a boy. Looking up one summer evening as we sat with him on the front porch, he remarked that a solitary star had managed to shine through. Then he added, in his abbreviated way, "There used to be more."

That's when it struck me that, at the age of 11, I had never seen a starry sky. Then I leveled my gaze at the neighborhood and noted the winking of fireflies - stars come to Earth. They were flitting everywhere. I had always taken them for granted because, throughout my childhood, they had been part of the landscape. But my dad's wistful comment had me regarding them with new eyes.

In quick order, five or six of my friends and I each had an old jelly jar in hand. Then, we set out and ran the length of the street, scooping up fireflies on the wing, whooping and hollering with every capture of their pure, cold light. After indulging our joy for about an hour, and tuckered out from our exertions, we gathered on my front porch and squatted in a circle around the jars. It's hard to describe the otherworldly scene of like-aged boys staring in silence at the collection of fireflies, our faces awash in their glow. My father looked on but didn't say anything for the longest time. Finally, he must have felt that we had had the fill of firefly light to which we were entitled, because the only thing he said was, "Stars belong in the sky."

We knew what to do. Picking up our jars, we assembled on the stoop. "One, two, three!" I counted, and in synchrony we lifted the lids and released the fireflies. They instinctively flew upward, gradually spreading out in a display of what I can only call exuberance. I sensed, with the perception of a philosopher, that this was a moment I would carry into the life that lay ahead of me. Eleven years old is a springboard into adolescence, and by the following summer, I had lost interest in catching fireflies. Life somehow became a tad more challenging, relationships grew more complicated, and the prospect of high school began to be discussed in whispers.

And yet, it's childhood memories that have the most staying power, perhaps because childhood is the only time that others are responsible for our happiness. I think that's why my father stayed mum as I hunted down those fireflies. He was bearing

witness to my joy, and he was the only one who could have denied me that moment, which he chose not to do. Instead, he had counseled, “Stars belong in the sky.” I know he was right about that, and now I find myself wondering if I had filled the sky with stars for him – reinforcing his own childhood memory of New Jersey skies so clear that you could see the Milky Way. That’s how good the view used to be.

– Robert Klose

Fireflies and lanterns: Twilight across cultures

From twinkling insects to golden-hour glow, the themes of light, beauty, and innocence carry through distant lands and centuries of artworks.

Robert Klose’s essay in this issue prompted me not only to reminisce, but also to search for art on the subject of fireflies. Turns out it was a significant theme in Japanese woodblock prints between the 17th and 19th centuries. Landscapes with tiny lights at dusk and images of graceful figures often bore names referring to fireflies. In “Catching Fireflies,” a late-1700s print by Kitagawa Utamaro, women and children collect the whimsical insects in paper lanterns.

The print reminded me of one of my favorite paintings by American artist John Singer Sargent, which depicts Japanese lanterns and children. Was he inspired by this or a similar print? We’ll never know, but we do know that newly opened trade in the 1850s created a fascination among Europeans with Japanese art and design. The French even had a name for it: *Japonisme*. This interest fostered new developments in Western art, particularly among the French impressionists.

Living in Paris at the time, Sargent felt this influence. Much has been written about Japanese art’s flattened depth, botanical patterns, open space, and asymmetrical compositions. But what I find alluring are the qualities in both the woodblock print and Sargent’s painting – elegance, childlike beauty, and an appreciation for nature at twilight – that go beyond these formal considerations.

Sargent spent two summers creating the masterful oil painting. Soon after a move to England in 1886, it was related by a friend accompanying him that Sargent caught sight of hanging “Chinese” lanterns one evening, inspiring him to create the painting. Staying true to the impressionists’ aim of capturing a specific light, he painted the child models and glowing Japanese lanterns outdoors for just 25 minutes each evening. He chose children whose fair hair would reflect the enchanted golden-hour light. The lilies, another popular motif in traditional Japanese art, recede into the background with an ephemeral, cooler shade of white that sets off the warm glow from the lanterns reflected on the girls’ faces. The painting hangs in Tate Britain.

– Julia Miner / Editor, The Home Forum

Being present in this moment

Around the globe, there are seminars, websites, and books devoted to teaching people how to live more in the moment. We’ve all witnessed something so good, so stirring, that we become determined to be fully present.

For really living in the now, I have become more intentional lately about considering what’s happening spiritually. This takes me beyond feeling like I’m drifting along a string of mortal moments. And surprisingly, it’s not as difficult as expected to feel appreciation for the present reality that God is causing.

What is the specific nature of this present reality? God, whom the Bible names Truth, Spirit, and Love, is exclusively good. Christian Science teaches that divine Spirit creates us all as its ideas. We are the direct result of Spirit, so we are, in truth, no more physical than God, divine Love, is. This seems a bit startling, yet it makes sense when we consider how like produces like. God is nonmaterial, so to be God’s creation means we possess a solely spiritual and perfect identity.

Because he so clearly comprehended that there is only the single, timeless version of creation, Jesus showed his followers a useful path for addressing worry: “Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes” (Matthew 6:34, Eugene Peterson, “The Message”).

Jesus proved the validity of these concepts on an occasion when he was in a ship with his disciples. “There arose a great storm of wind” (Mark 4:37), and his disciples were terrified. Instead of focusing on the possibility of a shipwreck, Jesus, knowing in that moment the peace and power of God’s presence, commanded the sea, “Peace, be still.” Then, the Bible tells us, “The wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mark 4:39).

The founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy, had a lot to say about paying attention to the goodness we have as divine Love’s creation. In her book “Miscellaneous Writings 1883-1896,” she counsels, “Never ask for to-morrow: it is enough that divine Love is an ever-present help; and if you wait, never doubting, you will have all you need every moment” (p. 307).

What Love is causing us to be and do can gain and have our full attention. Spirit’s action is seen in intelligence, grace, pure affection. So, whether we’re designing a rocket ship or rescuing a worm drying out on the sidewalk, the oneness of Spirit’s magnificent presence, to the degree we choose to express it, will enrich us and enable us to help others more effectively.

In the Bible, “now is the accepted time” hints at the ever-presence of God’s purely good moment (II Corinthians 6:2). As Spirit’s self-expression, we exist to express God’s changeless, perfect nature. Joyfully and willingly, let’s pause to experience what’s happening spiritually here and now.

– Mark Swinney

Sigrid Nunez's stories surprised even her

The author of the novel "The Friend" felt a burst of energy that culminated in a short story collection. Her prose is warm, powerful, precise, and shattering.

By Sky Davis / Contributor

Sigrid Nunez declares that none of the short stories in "It Will Come Back to You" is autobiographical.

"There's a certain amount of autobiographical material in my novels," she tells me. "Often the narrator is a writer, but in these stories, there's very little of that. They're completely invented."

On the page, she's known for her simple, warm-but-powerful prose, which is by turns hilarious and devastating. Her full-length works often feature people, especially women, holding their ground and deviating from societal expectations, which creates dissonance between their internal and external worlds.

"It Will Come Back to You" is her eleventh book but her first collection, after producing nine novels and a memoir. The stories are plucked from different periods in her decades-long career. The majority were initially published in the last 15 years, but some go back farther. Of the 13 stories in the collection, the latest was published in 2025; the earliest came out in 1992.

Initially resisting calls for a story collection

Nunez never thought that she would publish a book of short stories. She'd been asked if she was going to do so, and was even queried by her literary agent, but she always set the possibility aside. Like a character on a hero's journey, Nunez initially resisted the call. But after finishing her last novel, "The Vulnerables," which follows a writer living through the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City, she felt an unusual burst of creativity.

"I wrote a story, and then to my surprise, I had another story pushing right after it, and I wrote that, and then yet again there was another one," she says in a video interview. "This was all pretty unusual, and somehow the stories had tapped into something. That's why I could have the collection."

Nunez's other books include "Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury," which imagines the life of Virginia Woolf's real-life pet marmoset; "Sempre Susan," a memoir about the time she lived with Susan Sontag; and the novel "The Friend," in which a woman inherits an enormous Great Dane after the death of her colleague and mentor. "The Friend" won the 2018 National Book Award for fiction, and was named by The New York Times as one of the 100 Best Books of the 21st Century. And it was adapted into a film starring Bill Murray.

Drawn to family relationships

It was surprising to hear that she had never considered putting together a collection of her work. In "The Vulnerables," there's a passage where the writer-narrator waxes poetic over the beauty of another writer's collected stories, wishing she could have something similar. As a reader, it seemed to me like an unconscious longing

for that kind of work, or even a kind of premonition.

But Nunez assured me that wasn't the case. The two impulses were discrete and unrelated.

"That was a very specific thing in 'The Vulnerables,'" she says. "Having all of your oeuvre in one beautiful volume, a very good volume. It just seemed to me like a very, very elegant thing. And I did envy that."

Nunez has an encyclopedic knowledge of her characters in this collection – what seems from the outside like an eidetic memory for their histories and motivations. When asked about any given story, she could tell me what was happening inside and out, like she was seeing it behind her eyelids. This was paired with an extraordinary practicality in the art and craft of storytelling. When asked about the connective tissue of her work, her own preoccupations, she named family relationships. Nunez is particularly intrigued by mother and daughter relationships (most notably and explicitly in one story, aptly named "Mother-Daughter Story"), and the function and dysfunction evident within those.

I asked, with the assurance that I wasn't trying to ambush her, about some of the through lines of her work that I had noticed, including class dynamics and characters experiencing shame. It was the only time I saw her bristle slightly.

"That's too abstract," she replied. "That's more of an idea. Which stories were you thinking?"

Then she took me through some of the stories, one by one, that I mentioned, telling me exactly which ones were which and setting me straight about them in the process. This was not in the tone of a haughty professor, but with the voice of a master craftsperson showing me the gears beneath the surface – or someone showing you how the sausage is made.

Characters that feel more remembered than made up

Our conversation illuminated a cast of characters who are very different from each other but seem to hold a related spark. In "Curiosity," a young woman becomes fascinated with a neighbor whom she suspects is a sex worker; in "Airport Story," a woman coming to terms with aging finds herself in a Kafkaesque dream following a missed flight; in "The Plan," an insidious, entitled man finds himself beset from within as he plots to murder his wife; in "The Rabbit's Foot," a cleaning woman thinks back to a shocking and intriguing encounter as her children grow ever more upwardly mobile.

Despite these being far from Nunez's own experience, there is something about the quality of them that feels like a memory. There is something about the depth and texture of the characters' interior lives moving against and in tandem with external forces that feels real, feels remembered. And maybe there is another reason on top of that reason. So many of the characters themselves are in a state of reflection, meditating on the wide swaths of time that are behind them.

"There is quite a bit of that memory in the whole collection," she says. "People are always looking back."

Perhaps that is why she can't seem to beat the autobiographical allegations. On "Philosophers," the opening story in the collection, Nunez recalled a reading she gave when the story was published in *Conjunctions*, a respected literary magazine. "It is in the first person and takes place in the '70s, when I would have been the age of that character, and it was introduced as a memoir, and I thought, 'Well, why would you just assume that?' I didn't say whether it was a story or memoir, but it's not at all a memoir."

“As memory fails, imagination steps in”

These stories are like flip charts of possibilities, each one beckoning you in a little closer, waiting to whisper in your ear. Is the world what you thought it was? they ask. If it was just a little different, if you were more or less than you are now, who might you have become? What have you centered in your life, and should you have? Do we really know the people we love?

In the titular story, we learn where the collection name comes from. “If it was important, it will come back to you,” the narrator hears from people around her, as things slip her mind. The narrator isn’t sure if she agrees with that statement. “Maybe, maybe not ... as memory fails, imagination steps in.”

Nunez tells me she worries that some readers will take the title as a threat of some sort, like the way a parent might scold a child or some kind of karmic vengeance. But that’s not the case.

Something about that concern makes me think back to her description of her process, a form of iterative construction, changing her plan as she goes, reimagining as necessary. While she tells me that she invented these characters whole cloth, I suspect there might be more of herself in them than she realizes. But I’m sure that she would disagree. ■

BEST BOOKS OF JULY

What Monitor book reviewers like best this month.

FICTION

An Infinite Love Story

by Chanel Cleeton

Vivian, a journalist-turned-astronaut’s-wife, wakes up in 1968 to learn that her husband Joe’s spacecraft has lost contact with Mission Control on its way to the moon. What happened to the ship, why mysterious clues about the voyage keep popping up, and whether a grieving Vivian will demand answers or quietly carry on propel the story. So, too, does a dual timeline that rewinds to the early days of Joe and Viv’s relationship. Bestselling author Chanel Cleeton delivers a moving tale of dedication, sacrifice, and, yes, the possibilities of infinity.

Country People

by Daniel Mason

“Country People,” Daniel Mason’s first contemporary novel after a string of historical fiction including “North Woods,” is a playful romp that explores the power of storytelling, family, and community. It tells the story of a family that moves from northern California to rural Vermont when the wife, an English professor, accepts a prestigious one-year visiting position. The husband, who’s supposed to be finishing his long overdue dissertation on Russian folktales, instead gets distracted by a local historical society investigation, in which a group of amateur historians digs into a 19th-century report of a purported entrance to a spectacular underworld nearby. Mason highlights – with levity and humor – how erroneous ideas, gullibility, and blinders can lead even people who should know better down rabbit holes.

Someone To Cook For

by Maiko Seo

Yuko is a sweet-natured Japanese girl who experiences different “parents” in her life after her mother dies and her biological fa-

ther moves away. Watching her grow, while being raised by these caring and quirky individuals, feels life affirming. In the novel’s second part, Yuko, now grown, goes with her fiancé to each “parent,” seeking their blessing. The book simmers with joy, wisdom, and delectable cooking.

City of Widows

by Nadia Hashimi

In her latest novel, Nadia Hashimi brings readers inside the experiences of Afghan women in the lead-up to the Taliban’s August 2021 takeover. It is grim indeed. Will a pregnant Marjan, named after the lion statue guarding the entrance of the Kabul zoo, survive after escaping her warlord husband? The options for a young woman and infant girl on their own are few and fraught, yet Marjan persists working odd jobs, finding shelter, and eventually joining the Female Tactical Platoon that assists the U.S. Army. The lengths she goes to secure a safe life for her daughter are extraordinary. Hashimi’s tale of unflagging effort amid wretched inequality astounds.

Cool Machine

by Colson Whitehead

Colson Whitehead caps off his Harlem Trilogy with “Cool Machine.” Set in New York City in the 1980s, an era of explosive capitalism alongside daunting poverty, it continues the story of Ray Carney, the successful Harlem businessman who sometimes fences stolen goods. With his keen eye and remarkable prose, Whitehead explores the circumstances and motives of his characters, revealing how the truth might be buried under layers of hidden experiences.

McKenna’s Guy

by Mike Lawson

When mild-mannered widower and government worker Roger Smith unwittingly kills a home invader, an exhilarating cat-and-mouse chase ignites, with Washington, D.C., detective Grace Lillenthal bent on solving who wants Roger killed and why. Add in Roger’s jovial friend named McKenna, who owns a bar that’s a den of thieves, and various other colorful characters, and this thrill ride is first-rate entertainment.

The Cloak and Dagger Club

by Jackie McMahon

Golden Age mystery writers of the 1930s convene at London’s Ritz Hotel, where The Cloak and Dagger Club’s tyrannical president is murdered. Author Jackie McMahon’s tribute to Agatha Christie’s real-life Detection Club finds the formerly engaged Lucy Hubbard and Frank Murray racing to unmask the killer before Frank is arrested. Swirling with humor, beguiling suspects, and an endearing second-chance romance, this crime puzzle is utterly irresistible.

Song for Another Home

by Bora Lee Reed

Bora Lee Reed’s historical fiction details a North Korean family’s escape to Seoul during the 1950s Korean War. Reed’s fully drawn characters are a wonder, wielding hope and transforming through separations, hardships, and heartbreak, while cherishing their dreams and discovering unexpected found family. Courageous and immersive, this is magnificent, emotional storytelling.

NONFICTION

The Yahoo Boys

by Carlos Barragán

After journalist Carlos Barragán's mother gets targeted by a romance scammer, he sets off to Nigeria in search of the man who duped his mother. Though Barragán fails to find him, his reporting results in "The Yahoo Boys: Love, Deception, and the Real Lives of Nigeria's Romance Scammers," a nuanced, compelling look at the young men perpetrating romance scams, their victims abroad – and the loneliness that unites them all.

The Traveler

by Andrea Wulf

In his heyday in 18th-century England and Europe, naturalist George Forster was a popular figure who influenced scientists, poets, and other thinkers. He's largely forgotten today, but in "The Traveler," author Andrea Wulf argues that he shouldn't be. In a sprawling narrative that takes readers to the bottom of the planet, tropical islands, and the salons of the Old World, Wulf celebrates Forster as an early champion of tolerance – what Wulf calls "his unshakeable belief in humankind."

The Nord Stream Conspiracy

by Bojan Pancevski

In September 2022, the pipeline network that transported cheap gas from Russia to Germany under the Baltic Sea was destroyed. Award-winning journalist Bojan Pancevski set out to discover who was responsible for the largest act of sabotage in modern history. His gripping and meticulously researched book tells the story of an audacious operation by charting the exploits of both the perpetrators and the investigators.

The Small Stuff

by Ian Bogost

Though books about happiness abound, author Ian Bogost explores something less grand in "The Small Stuff," which celebrates the little sensory experiences that give life its flavor. Whether it's a sunset, a bright puddle, or the tinkle of ice in a glass, such physical connections help keep us grounded, he believes. In a world where many of us spend so much time online, Bogost argues that the "sensory enchantment of everyday life" is something we should not ignore.

Spitfires

by Becky Aikman

American women aviators wanted to prove their mettle during World War II, but they were barred, on the basis of gender, from flying for the United States. Britain was desperate for transport pilots to ferry military aircraft, and they trained women for the Air Transport Auxiliary, aka the Atta-Girls! Author Becky Aikman traces the lives of more than a dozen of these women, whose personalities were almost as big as the bombers they delivered. The work was dirty, dangerous, and required extraordinary levels of risk-taking.

Aikman focuses a bit too much on the women's social lives, while in the same breath praising their courage in the cockpit. But her research is solid, and those interested in aviation history – and women's history – will enjoy the book. "Spitfires" joins the recent novel "Where the Sky Begins," by Cindy Dees and Mary Wine, in telling the stories of early women flyers, whose sisterly solidarity could be accompanied by intense competition. ■

A beekeeper muses on the delights of stewarding a hive

In "Dead Bees Still Sting," Susan Cormier draws inspiration from the society of her bee colony.

By Richard Schiffman / Contributor

The first chapter of Susan Cormier's "Dead Bees Still Sting: Tales of Life at the Edge of Nature" begins with the admonition: "Don't keep bees." Cormier, who lives with her husband in a small house on the edge of Vancouver, British Columbia, should know. She is a beekeeper herself. Cormier says that bees can be dangerous (even dead ones can sting, if stepped on, so long as their stinger and venom sac are still intact). Their behavior is more complicated to understand than, say, that of a dog or a chicken, which can make bees seem alien and inscrutable.

Nevertheless, Cormier still insists that a beekeeper's labors are amply rewarded. The essays in the book, which focus on beekeeping and other forms of animal husbandry, invite us to explore creaturely worlds beyond our own, and to recognize our kinship with other living beings.

When around bees, "Listen with your body," she instructs. "Learn the slow, soothing hum of calm and the ramping pitch of outrage." She advises against holding your breath or tensing your muscles. When we are afraid, bees become afraid, and that's when they sting.

If you are a beekeeper, you *will* be stung. Get over it, Cormier says, because beekeepers are privy to rare delights: the hum of a swarm of bees like "the purring of thousands of kittens," the gentle caress of the breeze from their wings, the subtly shifting taste of the honey from year to year as weather and ecological conditions change.

As a beekeeper, you are also granted a glimpse into a society radically unlike our own, a world of harmony where each bee has its own immutable function. Bees are not to be thought of as individuals, Cormier writes. They are more like specialized cells in the superorganism of the hive. The queen lays the eggs, 1,000 a day; the drones' sole purpose is to mate with the queen; worker bees forage for nectar and pollen, as well as build, repair, and defend the hive. The latter are paragons of inexhaustible labor.

A colony of bees flies 50,000 miles and visits 2 million flowers to produce a single pound of honey, she writes. Members consume nine pounds of honey to make a single pound of wax. Worker bees live for only a few weeks, while the queen can survive for years. Each generation prepares the hive for larvae that they will never see grown. Contrary to a popular myth, bees are indifferent to their keepers. They are nobody's pets.

But their life cycle provides ample food for poetic reflection on the meaning of life, on individuality and community, and on loss and the ever-present possibility of renewal. Cormier invites us to view all our fellow creatures with fresh eyes, which allows us to appreciate their mystery and wonder. Animals are multilayered beings, Cormier writes, whose deepest secrets "science has yet to discover or explain."

Beekeepers earn a reputation for toughness, with their nonchalant attitude toward danger and their physical strength. It's not easy lifting 40-pound hive boxes, spending hours in the midsummer sun dressed in canvas suits and mesh helmets that make them look like astronauts on a spacewalk. Yet, for all their exploits, beekeepers pos-

sess tender hearts – they “are people who have chosen a profession centered on stewarding, shepherding and protecting bees.” They are responsible for thousands, even millions of living creatures. It is an enabling and humbling line of work.

Cormier writes about the challenges and rewards of keeping other living beings as well. An apple tree on their property produces no fruit, so she discusses with Bill, her husband, whether to cut it down. That season, the previously barren tree produces one fruit. Had it “overheard us discussing cutting it down ... so it produced a single apple, a Hail Mary held proudly against the sky?” The apple tree is granted a reprieve.

Other creatures reach an inflection point. The author writes about her dog’s final walk “sniffing the ghosts of rabbits and the memory of deer.” Death is neither to be celebrated or shunned.

Cormier considers the possibility that she will eventually flee the slow-motion tsunami of urbanization that threatens her agrarian retreat. Nothing is forever. “We wait for stability, for the disruptions to end – in nature, in our lives, in our human-built global systems – but that will never come,” Cormier writes. “The act of existing is chaotic.”

But the good news is that “the past does not change. The roots of a tree remain stable even when the trunk is broken. Although everything else may alter and shift, our roots hold us up, help us grow.” ■

IN PICTURES

Bats, and hope, take flight in Ukraine

Story by Kang-Chun Cheng / Contributor

POLTAVA, UKRAINE

On a spring evening just before dusk, roughly 1,000 curious residents crowd into a tree-studded park in Poltava in central Ukraine. As part of a demonstration by the Ukrainian Bat Rehabilitation Center, research assistant Ruslan Stohnii gently stretches out the wing of a common noctule bat (*Nyctalus noctula*). He wants to show that for all the fearsome lore about bats, the animals have delicate features and aren’t typically harmful to humans.

The crowd then presses in to watch Mr. Stohnii release fluttering bats, one by one, into a deepening navy-blue sky. When it’s the crowd’s turn, he reaches into cotton bags in which the waiting bats have been kept and places the animals gingerly into a few gloved, outstretched hands.

“I could have never imagined that I would touch a bat like this,” one woman exclaims, her young daughter bursting with excitement as her mother holds a bat heavenward. The bat looks sleepy, perhaps a bit stunned at its sudden portal to freedom. After a few haphazard flops, it flits away into the tangle of tree branches clawing at the sky.

This is not just bats taking flight, but hope itself.

The UBRC staff members are there to demonstrate bats’ feeding patterns and sleeping habits; their critical role in the ecosystem as devourers of pests; and their sensitivity to noise and pesticides. The UBRC has been hosting these nationwide annual releases for years, but thanks to social media, popularity has skyrocketed against the backdrop of a brutal war with Russia, now running longer than did World War I.

Founded in 1999, the UBRC is the only center of its scale and specialization in Europe. It brings together biologists, veterinarians, and volunteers across the nation to care for bats found in critical condition, including many displaced by the conflict. Before Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022, the UBRC cared for an average of 3,000 bats per year. As of December that year, it had rehabilitated more than 32,000 bats.

Though artillery fire, land mines, drones, and missile strikes limit its fieldwork, the 30-member team perseveres to collect insight and data on the nation’s bat populations. All 28 confirmed bat species in Ukraine are protected by law.

The UBRC’s work never ends, Mr. Stohnii says. Bats at the center need daily hand-feeding of mealworms and cockroaches.

“When I first started working here, I dreamed about bats – that there were hundreds that I needed to feed,” Mr. Stohnii says.

■ Tetiana Burianova contributed reporting for this article.

Crossword

ACROSS

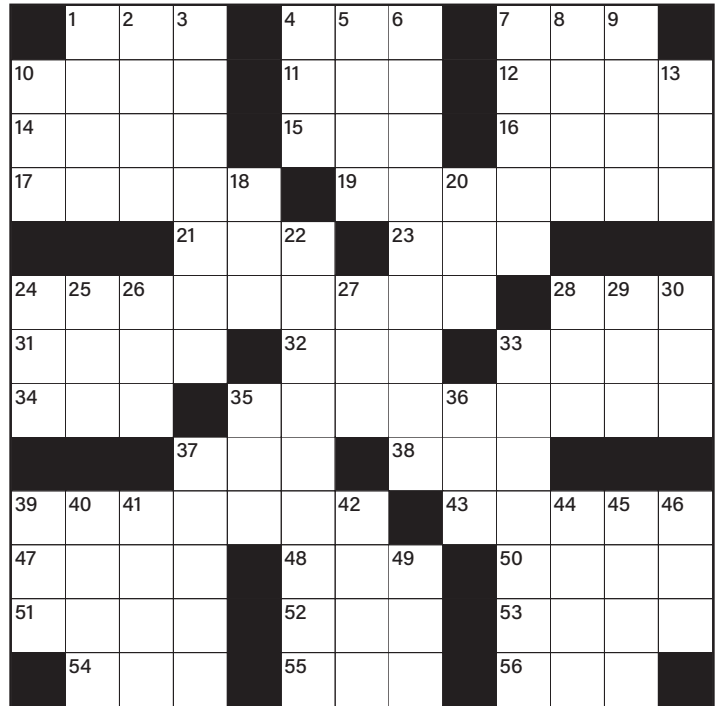
1. News chiefs, for short
4. Peggy follower
7. Disgusted reply
10. Finisher's song?
11. Delivery company
12. Like a certain piper
14. Amounted (to)
15. Kettle's accuser?
16. Appeal to a higher authority?
17. Industrial German city
19. Aircraft-engine enclosure
21. Emmy winner Reiner
23. Cake of soap
24. Word for word
28. Autobahn auto
31. Trudge laboriously
32. Gift at Honolulu airport

33. Passport permit
34. Graphic intro?
35. Premeal prayers
37. Scheduled
38. Bears
39. British play ground
43. Candle cords
47. Hat's place
48. Brown is one
50. Noted Irish lead
51. Suburban sale venue
52. Jacqueline Kennedy, ____ Bouvier
53. Born, for bantams
54. Tissue thickness
55. Colonial crawler
56. Opposite of int.

DOWN

1. Epochs
2. Aswan and Hoover, e.g.

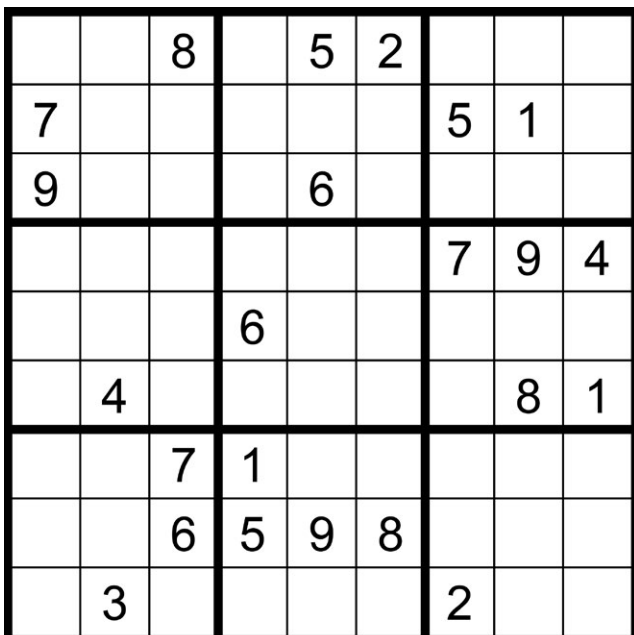
3. Gave a dirty look
4. Take an evening course?
5. Stratford-Avon connector
6. Set up
7. Shoe top
8. Lassie
9. What time can do
10. Wintry coating
13. Tincture
18. Neither fish ____ fowl
20. Florida coastal feature
22. She's on her toes
24. Fuel in a cylinder (abbr.)
25. French island
26. More than enough
27. Nautical side
28. Trash holder
29. Chow mein enhancer



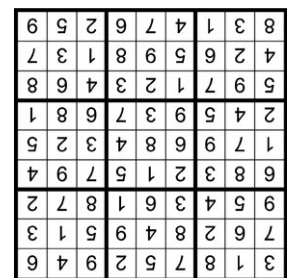
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30. Once existed
33. In plain view
35. However
36. Serrated blade
37. Mommy's man
39. Biblical possessive pronoun
40. Pile, as of rubble
41. Noble title
42. Exactly divisible by two
44. Gently persuade
45. Stitch together
46. Chunk of lawn
49. To this point

Sudoku difficulty: ★★☆☆



Crossword and Sudoku solutions



How to do Sudoku

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