WIRED

THE POLITICS ISSUE

NOV/DEC 2025 ▪ DEMOCRACY DIES IN DARKNESS

TECH WENT ALL IN.

NOW WHAT?

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THE MOONWATCH IN WHITE

Inspired by its history of space exploration, the most iconic chronograph on Earth now has a white dial. The Speedmaster Moonwatch has borrowed its latest look from the colours of astronaut spacesuits, while adding a glossy lacquered finish for the very first time. The white dial and red touches are also a tribute to the ALASKA I prototype that OMEGA produced in 1969, creating an authentic link to the Speedmaster's pioneering past. Worn on a comfortable and vintage-style bracelet, this stainless steel Moonwatch shines the spotlight on a new era of adventure.

OMEGA

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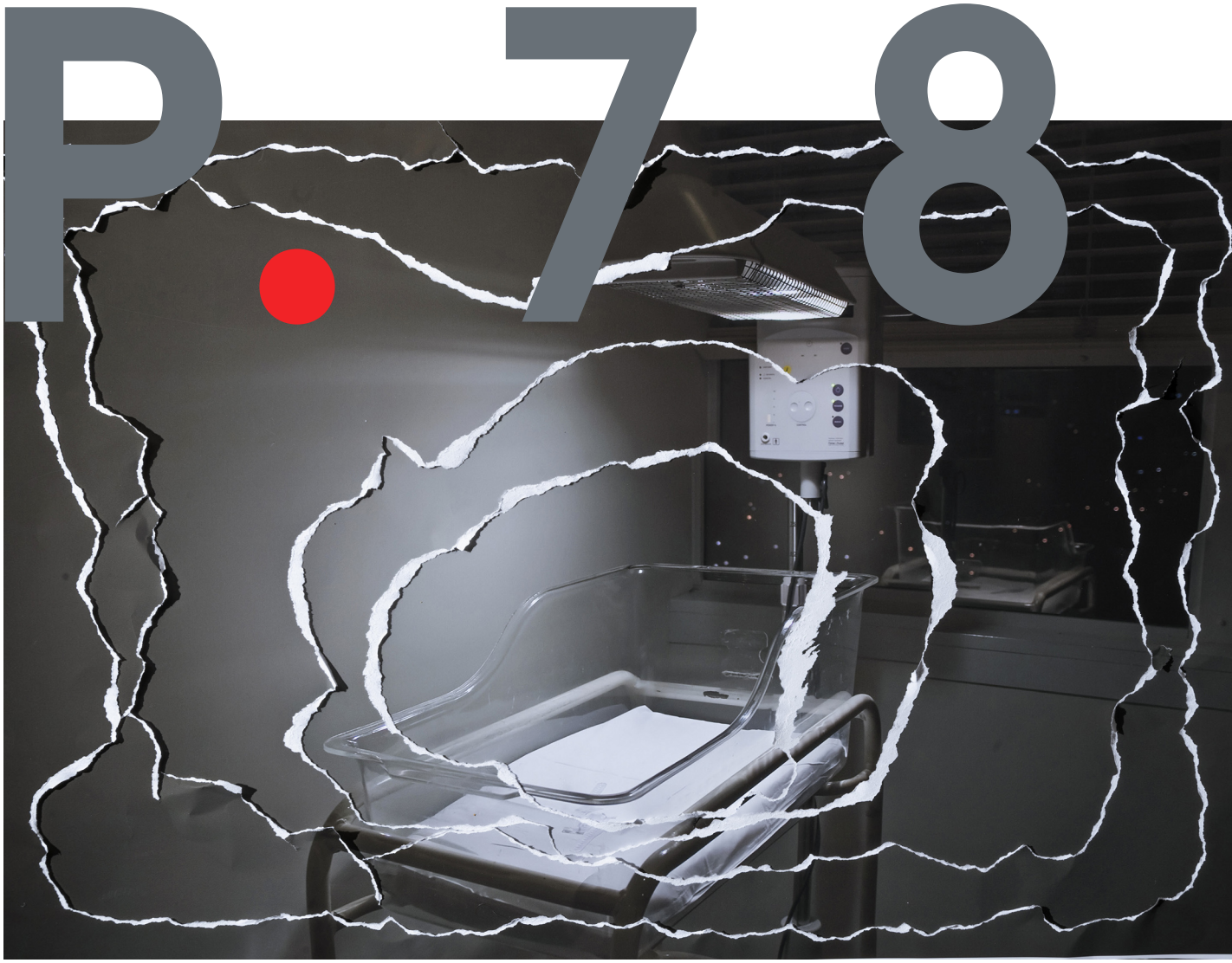

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The Fight of Her Life

Surrogate pregnancy is all the rage in Silicon Valley and beyond. What happens when it goes horribly wrong?

by Emi Nietfeld

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Tech billionaire Mike Lynch made probability his life's work, until his wildly unlikely death at sea. Now, friends and associates are speaking about what happened for the first time.

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On the Cover

"Let's make our version of *Dogs Playing Poker*!" our features director joked during a breezy afternoon Zoom. That joke turned semi-serious in about five seconds—and thus the cover of our Politics Issue was deliriously, gloriously born. But could the illustrator, **Phil Galloway**, convincingly portray Trump and his tech-lord enablers as doge-style Shiba Inus? Let's just say we're overjoyed with the result. Even if Sam Altman-inu does look strangely hot.

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At 26 years old, Kat Abughazaleh thinks she's uniquely qualified for Congress. But running for office is a different sort of influencing.
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Elon Musk controls thousands of internet satellites and more than half the world's rocket launches. Can anyone stop him?
by Noah Shachtman

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: RUI PU; GETTY IMAGES; JUSTIN METZ; JOVANA MUGOSA

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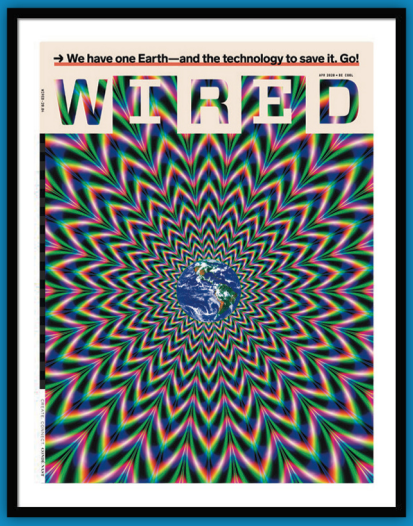

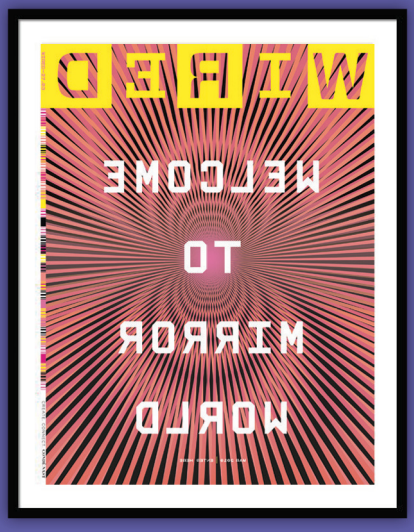

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QUEEN OF CHIPS

Lisa Su has built AMD into a chipmaking phenom. And as the US–China tech war rages on, she's at the center of it all.

A PIECE OF advice if you're meeting with Lisa Su: Wear sneakers.

Su, the leader of AMD, moves fast. To hear her and everyone else in semiconductors talk, the US is in an AI *race* with China—and Donald Trump keeps changing the rules. She travels often to Washington, DC, to grease the wheels. All while steering her firm to seize the moment: AMD's new AI chips, she says, beat out those of her main rival, Nvidia.

As CEO, Su took on a struggling firm and executed a remarkable 10-year turnaround. She embraced chiplets, went big on high-performance computing and data centers, and struck deals with top firms (OpenAI, Meta, Google). Under her watch, AMD's market cap rose from around $2 billion to nearly $300 billion.

Su was born in Taiwan and raised in Queens, New York. Her father was a statistician; her mother an accountant turned entrepreneur. Su earned a doctorate in electrical engineering from MIT, then went to Texas Instruments, IBM, and Freescale Semiconductor. After joining AMD in 2012, she quickly rose to COO. As Su tells it, six months in, the chairman of the board called and said, "It's time, Lisa." Su's response: "That seems kinda quick."

Aside from her well-known bona fides (she's also a distant cousin of Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang), less is known about Su herself—what drives her, what irritates her, where her politics lie. This is what I hoped to learn on my visit to AMD in Austin, Texas, in late June. Our conversation kicked off with geopolitics.

What would you like Trump—and the public—to understand about your AI chips?
That limiting the number of users in our ecosystem is bad, not just for AMD but for the US. The idea that somehow, if *we* don't ship chips to the rest of the world, that AI progress is going to stop—it's not going to stop. AI progress is going to continue, and we'd rather it develop on us than someone else.

There's lots of talk about reshoring chipmaking. What's the hardest part of that?
We absolutely should bring manufacturing back. Absolutely, 100 percent.

Why?
Because it's such a critical part of national security and the economy. We had an ice storm in central Texas a couple of years ago. For days nothing moved around. A couple of fabs were shut down. For good business practice, you want diversity.

To bring manufacturing back will take time. The thinking went from "Oh, you can't do leading-edge manufacturing in the US" to today, how in TSMC's Arizona fab we're running some of our latest server processors, and it's looking really good. It requires a change of mentality, that you don't always go for the lowest-cost thing.

With the current administration, do you feel more pressure to weigh in on geopolitical and social issues?
It certainly has changed. You won't see me weighing in on social issues, because I don't think that's where my value-add is. But on technology policy and semiconductors in the world, yes. I wouldn't call it increasing pressure. I'd call it increasing *responsibility*, because we want the rules to be written right.

A longer version of this interview is available on WIRED's website.

You're one of the most prominent women leaders in technology. You don't add value?
It's more like, my personal opinion might be interesting, but frankly, it's much more important that we get the policy correct, based on what I consider facts.

You're working with big names—OpenAI, Meta, Tesla, xAI. But the reality is that companies love their Nvidia GPUs, and AMD is an "also." Do you want to get to the point where you're the primary partner?
Of course. That's where we are in CPUs. I think many of those companies would say that AMD is their strategic CPU partner. And absolutely, we expect to be there in AI as well. I'm not impatient with this.

You don't want to put a time stamp on it.
Look at it this way: When I first joined AMD in 2012, Microsoft was an early partner for us in gaming. Over the past 10-plus years we've built a lot of trust. Microsoft announced they're using AMD not only for their next-generation Xbox consoles but across their entire cloud. Our work with Meta has been absolutely the same.

What do you make of Mark Zuckerberg reportedly offering AI talent up to nine figures to go work for Meta?
I can't say I have direct experience with it, frankly. Competition for talent is fierce. Money is important, but it's not necessarily the most important thing. It's important to be in the zip code [of those numbers], but then it's super-important to have people who really believe in the mission. Because the ride is what we're trying to attract people to. It's the ride of, "Look, if you want to come make an impact, you're not just a cog in the wheel, but you're going to drive the future of our road map, then you want to be at AMD."

Do you envision ever offering nine figures?
I don't think so.

Because you'd have to answer to shareholders or make a case to your board?
Because it's not about one person.

What is "superintelligence" to you?
The idea that AI can make all of us superintelligent is a wonderful vision, and we're still in the very early innings of it.

One area that I'm passionate about is health care, because I've had experience with it, and it should be much, much better than it is. To stitch the pieces together to go from drug discovery to therapeutics to inpatient care, all of that is ripe for—let's call it transformation. I don't know if you call that "superintelligence."

There's this idea that AI will become so smart that it'll eventually be able to delete humanity. How do you think about such predictions? Do you believe in AGI?
I do believe in AGI, but I don't believe that AI will be smarter than people. I'm not a big doomsday person. I mean, technology is great, but it's as great as the people who build it and channel it in the right direction. So I find those conversations a little bit esoteric. And our focus is, "The tech is good, but it's not great yet. How do we make it great?"

How do you measure "great"?
Having AI solve hard problems is when it gets great. We talk about agents as one of the next big things. Agents right now are doing, let's call it, relatively more of the mundane tasks of the world.

Putting things in your shopping cart.
Right. There's two directions AI goes. One is pure productivity, how do I remove some of, let's call it the menial work that people do. The other is when AI can solve really, really hard problems. It normally takes us three years to design a chip. What if I could do that in six months?

Does humanity not keep up at some point?
I don't know. I would bet on humanity being OK.

Technology can be a bit overwhelming now.
But Lauren, I think that's the point. When technology is good, you don't have to think about it. When you go and ask—what's your favorite, ChatGPT or Grok?

I use ChatGPT, yeah. Not every day, but—
Often?

Often enough.
Yeah, but you still have to make sure, "Hey, did it give me the right answer?"

Absolutely, especially as a journalist. I don't use it for my writing in any capacity.
But you use it for research.

Sometimes, but the hallucinations are concerning.
That's the point, it's not good enough. At some point, it will be. You want to take your AI at face value.

You mentioned health care. When we're older and infirm, will the folks who are treating us be ChatGPT doctors?
I would *like* there to be a generation of folks treating us who have the vast data that ChatGPT will have, so that they're better informed to make diagnoses.

When you think about AI philosophically, is it like the internet? Or more like an operating system? Is it electricity? Is it *fire*? I think Sundar Pichai compared AI to fire.
The internet is not a bad comparison, but I think AI is much more. The internet was about moving traffic. AI is about something foundational in productivity. Some people compare it to the Industrial Revolution, and that's not a bad comparison.

With other revolutions we weren't so concerned with what was true versus not.
You can choose two ways. One is you try to hold back AI because it could be dangerous, or you try to go fast but put the right lens on the information. I'm a big believer in the second camp. I don't believe that you're not going to need lots of people. Because in the end, people are the judge of what truth is. We're still hiring more and more engineers, because they're the final arbiters of our engineering.

I am hopeful that humanity will figure it out.
It will be like the internet, which is you take it for granted. We shouldn't evaluate the technology based on this point in time. We should evaluate it on the slope of what we're going to be capable of doing.

I don't believe that you're not going to need lots of people. Because in the end, people are the judge of what truth is.

You seem a little concerned about AI. Are you just playing devil's advocate?

I tend to think the people who stand to benefit from AI can afford to be more optimistic. In medicine, we're going to see biases emerge, people getting denied health care or insurance coverage.
Health care, for me, is personal, because my mom was quite ill. For a while. And I realized it doesn't matter who you are. You can't guarantee the best health care, because it's really an art right now. It should be a science.

Why do you think it's an art?
The body is a complex system. You have a heart specialist or a kidney specialist, but not that many generalists to pull it all together. And that, to me, is a travesty. I'm like, come on—this is solvable.

That's what we do in tech, right? We put together complex systems and make them work. If technology can pull all of that expertise together, we'll treat people better. So, anyways, in my next life—

You'll be a doctor?
I won't be a doctor, but I hope to bridge the divide and use technology for what it's actually capable of.

You could do that in this lifetime.
I have a few things to do right now.

Was your mother able to recover?
No, unfortunately.

I'm sorry.
But you know what I mean? I just realized that—wow.

How do you personally stay resilient—is it Starbucks? I noticed you had one at your AI event in June.
Yes, this is a passion tea lemonade, it does a lot for me. I'm not a big caffeine drinker, so this and a bit of exercise does it for me.

What's your preferred form of exercise?
I like to box. I have a trainer who comes to the house, and he lets me hit him. Well, not him, but mitts.

How long have you been doing that?
Seven, eight years, something like that.

So after you became CEO, you were like, "I need to work some stuff out here."
Yes.

How much do you sleep per night?
Five, six hours. Six is a really good number. On weekends, I might be seven.

What impresses you most about someone?
Passion for what they do. Things always go wrong, but if you're truly passionate about what you do, I think you shine.

What irritates you?
What irritates me?

Yes.
Well, I can't say people who ask about Jensen being my cousin?

You can totally say that.
To tell the truth, it doesn't irritate me, it's more like, "*Really*? Is that the most important thing we have to talk about?"

What do people not know about you, that they should?
I feel like people know me. No? Well … I get up every day because I believe our products can change the world, and they can make the world a better place. There's always noise—this, that, export controls, whatever. Those are noise.

LAUREN GOODE *is a senior correspondent at* WIRED.

SKELETON CREW

Somewhere out in the countryside, hidden behind a copse of trees, are fields full of dead human bodies. These corpses have been strategically laid out in rows, naked as the day they were born, and left to the mercy of the elements until all that's left of them are bones.

It sounds like a scene out of a horror film, but these places are real. They're called taphonomic research facilities, or sometimes "body farms"—sites where forensic scientists study how the human body decomposes. (Don't worry, the bodies are all donated.) By observing how fast cadavers break down in a controlled setting, investigators can learn more about decomposition and better pinpoint exactly what happened to dead bodies that are found in the real world.

There are only a handful of body farms in existence, and most are in the US. Employees spend their days answering emails, cleaning bones, and leaving corpses out in the sun. WIRED spoke to one researcher and instructor in the US about their job—the good, the gross, and the pungent.

GETTY IMAGES

"IT MAKES ME laugh on TV shows where they're like, "Oh, well, this body was here for exactly three months." Decomposition is such an individualized process for each donor. It depends on the person's size, were they taking illicit drugs, were they undergoing chemotherapy or radiation at the time? Cancer treatments will limit certain scavengers coming to the body, because those remains are going to smell different to those animals. I have placed donors next to each other at the same time, who could have died within days of each other, and one is going to skeletonize faster than the other. One might mummify. It is just such an individual process. Each donor teaches us something different about decomposition, contributing to our understanding of how the body breaks down with time, seasonality, temperature, and body composition. But that doesn't make good TV.

We took more than 40 bodies into our care last year, and more than 50 in 2023. But more typical for us is 20 to 30 donors in a year. When a body arrives, we take photos, we take DNA swabs, if they consented to that when they were alive. And then we find a place for them.

Most of our donors will go out to our outdoor surface enclosure, where they are laid out unclothed, just on the ground. The enclosure follows the natural topography of the area and is double-fenced. We have some PVC and chicken-wire cages that we place over the remains at some point, to limit scavenging. We did recently have some turkey vultures that wiggled themselves under the cages and got caught. We also usually have several donors that we will bury in the natural soil within another enclosure. Those are only exhumed after

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHANNA GOODMAN

several years, when they are expected to be skeletonized.

We run classes at least twice a year, for our law enforcement and fire investigator partners. Donors who have consented to trauma research will be placed in a room that is set alight. We'll let the donors cool for two days, and then the investigators practice moving a body to look for evidence that might have been shielded under a body and preserved. We also track the damage to the bodies, like how bones broke, and that can be really helpful for crime scene investigations.

Forensic anthropology in the US is becoming more female-dominated. Most of our students are female. Those of us running these facilities are mostly female. It is probably like a 9:1 ratio of women to men amongst our students here. We get drivers that are bringing donors to us that are like, "Oh, who are all these ladies?" We are not here for you to ogle at, we are scientists!

We are always checking in with our students, because sometimes it's hard to see a person go through that decomposition process. Or, when we get a new donor, we don't know necessarily what we'll find when we remove that sheet or open that body bag. I've only had one student who changed majors after being at our facility, though. Most of them thought they'd be the ones puking or passing out, and they're not.

You can love what you do and still realize that the smell of decomposing bodies is not great. There's almost this sweetish smell to it, but it is very pungent. You can differentiate human decomposition from animal decomposition, when you get more familiar.

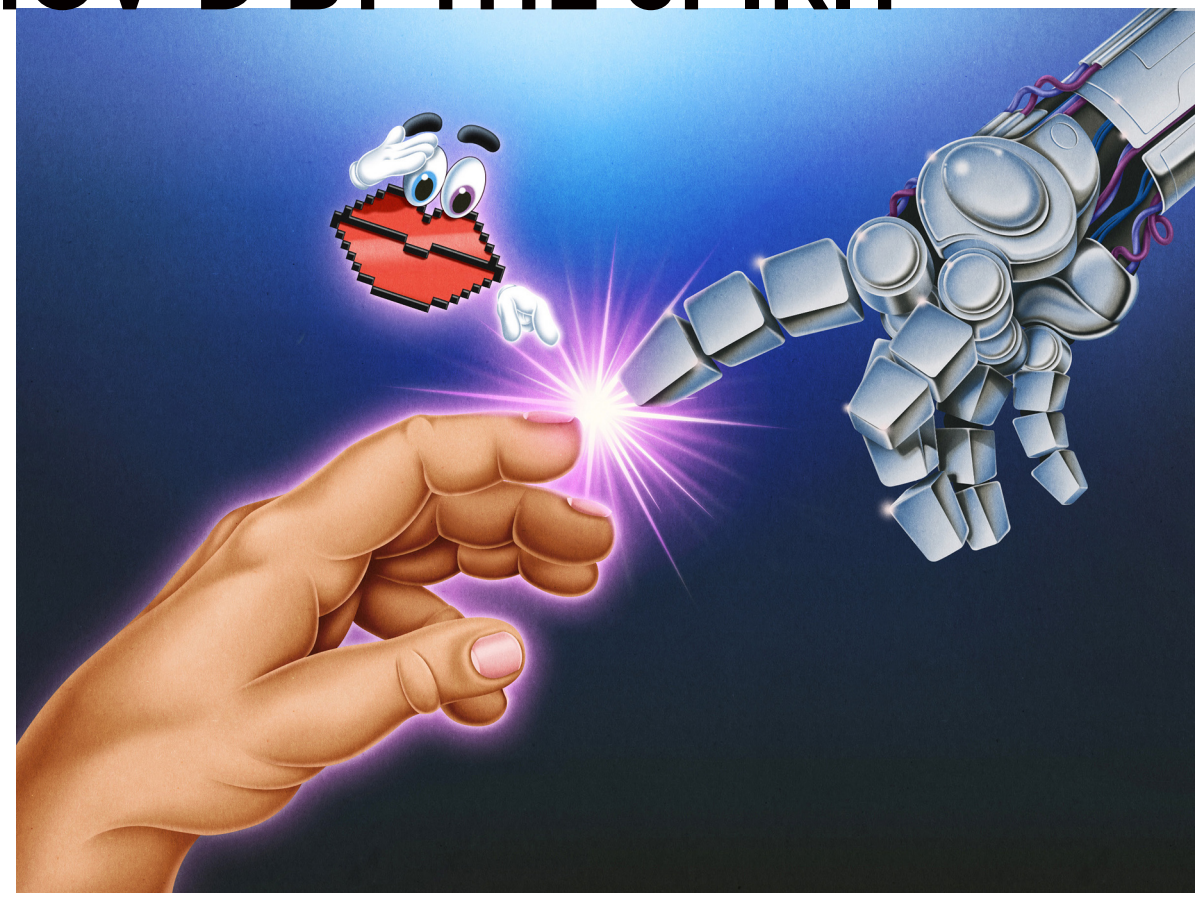
The hardest part of this job, though, is that you have to talk to family members who either just lost a loved one or are actively losing a loved one. We often speak to donors' families multiple times: before or after a donor has passed, as well as in the time after a donor is in our care. There are several families that check in regularly or even visit their loved ones in the skeletal collection. Sometimes you cry with them, you laugh with them, and then you have to go off and teach a class, or there's another phone call or an email. You have to be able to compartmentalize. That can be a little difficult.

We understand that this job relies on the generosity and trust of other people, and that is something that we always try to instill in our students. It's a privilege, and it's not something we take for granted.

I would choose to donate my body. It's kind of exciting in a way: You get to live forever. Some of the pre-donors I talk to, that's what's really exciting for them, too. They kind of have a life afterward, after they're done with their bodies. I don't want to be cremated. I don't want to be embalmed and shoved in the ground somewhere. I would much rather my corporealness go off and be put to good use somewhere.

As told to **JESS THOMSON**, *a freelance writer covering science and culture.*

MOV'D BY THE SPIRIT



Whether your chip runs an old computer game or a new DeepSeek model, it'll reward you for speaking its native tongue: assembly.

ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON wasn't the most fashionable computer game out there in 1999. But if you took a look beneath the pixels—the rickety rides, the crowds of hungry, thirsty, barfing people (and the janitors mopping in their wake)—deep down at the level of the code, you saw craftsmanship so obsessive that it bordered on insane. Chris Sawyer, the game's sole developer, wrote the whole thing in assembly.

Certain programming languages, like Python or Go or C++, are called "high-level" because they work sort of like human language, written in commands and idioms that might fit in at a poetry slam. Generally speaking, a piece of software like a compiler transforms this into what the machine really reads: blocks of 1s and 0s (or maybe hex) that tell actual transistors how to behave. Assembly, the lowest of the "low-level" languages, has a near one-to-one correspondence with the machine's native tongue. It's coding straight to metal. To build a complex computer game from assembly is like weaving a tapestry from shedded cat fur.

Why would anyone do this? I recently asked Sawyer, who lives in his native Scotland. He told me that efficiency was one reason. In the 1990s, the tools for high-level programming weren't all there. Compilers were terribly slow. Debuggers sucked. Sawyer could avoid them by doing his own thing in x86 assembly, the lingua franca of Intel chips.

We both knew that wasn't the real reason, though. The real reason was love. Before turning to roller coasters, Sawyer had written another game in assembly, *Transport Tycoon*. It puts players in charge of a city's roads, rail stations, runways, and ports. I imagined Sawyer as a model-train hobbyist—laying each stretch of track, hand-sewing artificial turf, each detail a choice and a chore. To move these carefully crafted pixels from bitmaps to display, Sawyer had to coax out the chip's full potential. "*RollerCoaster Tycoon* only came about because I was familiar with the limits of what was possible," he told me.

Working within the limits? A foreign idea, perhaps, in this age of digital abundance, when calling a single function in an AI training algorithm can engage a million GPUs. With assembly, you get one thing and one thing only, and it is the thing you ask for—even, as many a coder has learned the hard way, if it is

wrong. Assembly is brutal and beautiful that way. It requires you to say exactly what you mean.

EXPIRED	TIRED	WIRED
Elon vs. Trump	Elon vs. Sam Altman	Peter Thiel vs. the Antichrist
Foundation season 1	*Foundation* season 2	*Foundation* season 3
GPT-4o	GPT-5	GPT-4o
Work-life balance	996	Bring your whole self to Slack
TED Talks	"Welcome to my TED Talk"	Silent retreats

I'VE DONE ASSEMBLY'S creators a disservice. They wanted things to be easier, not harder. I imagine they were tired of loading up punchcards and flipping switches on their steampunk leviathans. Perhaps they dreamed of a world like ours, where computers can do so much with such minimal guidance.

The first assembly language, created in the 1940s by Kathleen Booth (though she has not always gotten her due, surprise surprise), hardly resembled language. Codes stood in for codes. To tell the machine to perform an operation—say, "0,0111" in machine code—you'd instead employ a series of letters and symbols, which a new piece of software, called an assembler, would translate into binary. Soon, the commands got human-friendlier mnemonics like "MOV."

To know assembly was to know the CPU itself—what it could do and, even more, what it couldn't. A chip's physical design, how the circuits connecting the logic gates of AND and XOR are actually laid, defines how it works. Its functions are pretty basic, breaking down instructions into elementary steps: Fetch something from memory and put it in a temporary cubby, known as a register. Decode it there. Perform some operations, like comparing two values, or adding them. Ship it back off the memory.

As chips advanced, new dialects of assembly evolved. The code that landed the first human on the moon was assembly—designed for only one chip, the Apollo 11 Guidance Computer. If you want to read the leaked source code of the Furby, you'll need fluency in 6502. To hack your Ti-83 calculator, you'll need z80. Learning the language of one chip—say, Intel's x86—and then moving to Arm is like studying Arabic in Beirut and then trying to get by in Tunis or Khartoum. Good luck.

I learned x86 assembly in college as a refugee from math. Where my classmates seemed to enjoy the drab incantations of Java, I loved the logic game that was assembly. It was easy to fail, but to fail in ways that were explainable if you looked at the circuits and registers. How masterful I felt coding in the simple commands of this not-quite-language; how fragile I knew that mastery to be. To say, put these bytes there—no, there, at that register, in those capacitors. Remember this. Forget that. To grind away, painting each figurine, one by one.

IT'S TRUE THAT there's no longer much point in using assembly in the day-to-day work of coding. High-level languages are so efficient that their abstraction is almost always preferable. Even assembly's inventor moved on to other ventures; one of Booth's final papers, in the 1990s, used neural networks to match seals with their barks. Sawyer switched over too. He's been dabbling in home automation recently—lights, temperature sensors, sound systems, and the like, coded on Raspberry Pis using Python, which he initially found "quite off-putting," he told me. But even on that tiny processor, it gets the job done just fine.

Then along comes something like DeepSeek to remind you that humans can still communicate better with our hardware. Earlier this year, the Chinese company that made these incredibly efficient AI models upended the narrative that AI advancement can come only from more chips and more energy. Assembly was one surprising reason. DeepSeek's engineers reached into the subfloor of Nvidia's chips, commanding each individual machine to compress data from 32 bits to 8 bits—sacrificing precision for efficiency—at precisely the right moments. Observers were stunned. You could do that? The DeepSeek engineers had tapped an art most others had forgotten.

I was similarly taken when, in 2023, researchers at DeepMind taught a machine x86 assembly, then asked it to improve on the long-standing sort() function in C. The AI made strange, unintuitive choices, performing odd jumps between registers, and in the end cut precisely one step. A fraction of a millisecond saved, perhaps. But happening countless times a day, now that the new algorithm has been officially adopted.

To me, it was a reminder that we humans created these machines, and even as they appear to spiral into complexity beyond our comprehension, they remain under our command. We can always make them work better. It was like what Sawyer said when he recounted his recent Raspberry Pi–enabled home coding experiment. It was probably just his imagination, but the display had been a little laggy, he thought. He'd redo the code if he could, he said. But alas, Sawyer and the machine did not speak the same assembly language.

GREGORY BARBER *is a journalist in San Francisco who previously covered energy and climate for* WIRED.

EDITED BY JEREMY WHITE | WRITTEN BY CHRIS HASLAM

GEAR FOR GOOD

Montane Men's Kamen XT Hooded Down Jacket

Waterproofing down typically involves treating it with nasty chemicals. ExpeDRY infuses the feathers with gold particles to create an electrostatic shield that keeps water droplets from being absorbed by the fibers. This recycled nylon zip-up is stuffed with the quick-drying fluffy stuff, giving you an eco-friendlier alternative for water-repellent warmth. **$566**

COURTESY OF: MONTANE; YES FRIENDS; FLOWER MOUNTAIN; GOLDWIN; TOPO DESIGNS; MARFA STANCE; VOITED UK

Yes Friends Jeans

Shopping ethically almost always comes at a premium. Organic cotton and fair trade practices inevitably push up pricing, but by batch-buying pieces and selling direct to consumers, Yes Friends is bucking this trend. Its range of denim, which is colored with nontoxic dyes, is just as ethical as the competition at only half the price. Set an alert, however, as batches sell out fast. **$83**

Flower Mountain Yamano 3 Uni Kaiso

Established in 2015 by Keisuke Ota and Yang Chao, Flower Mountain sneakers incorporate traditional Japanese craftsmanship—such as intricate decorative details—with a stylish and practical outdoor aesthetic. The Kaiso collection ("seaweed" in Japanese) features a midsole made from blending seaweed with recycled and bio-based materials. The sneakers also incorporate elements derived from corn, synthetic suede, and recycled PET bottles. **$231**

Goldwin Wool x Brewed Protein Wholegarment Crew Neck

This soft and cozy sweater is 75 percent wool and 25 percent Brewed Protein, a synthetic material made by microbes. A sugar fermentation process causes the microbes to produce polymers, and those protein strands are spun into fibers to create a biodegradable alternative to cashmere with a much gentler eco footprint. Wear it proudly. **$380**

Topo Designs Mountain Cross Bag

Topo's durable carry-all is a commuter's dream, with a padded sleeve for a 14-inch laptop, 14 liters of lugging capacity, robust YKK zippers, a removable shoulder strap, and two elastic bottle sleeves. The bag's fully recycled materials show off Topo Designs' signature bold and colorful aesthetic. Also, the company promises to fix any defective bits through its lifetime repair program. **$139**

Marfa Stance Parachute Patchwork Bomber Jacket

This special-edition bomber is made in Treviso, Italy, entirely from surplus recycled materials. Not only is it reversible (with pockets cleverly fitted on both sides), it's also water-repellent and impressively modular. Attach a hood for the winter, add in layers and liners for additional warmth or a change of silhouette, and swap the hood for a collar to give it a more formal finish. **$1,545**

Voited Ripstop 4-in-1 PillowBlanket

Piles of breathable insulation make this blanket indespensable for snuggling under the stars, but the versatile design means it can also transform into a poncho, a pillow, or a sleeping bag (or a huge double if you buy two). It's made from recycled polyester and comes in 23 distinctive, outdoor hipster-adjacent designs. The plant-based finish is both water- and stain-resistant. **$109**

Ambessa DIY Kinetic Flashlight

This super-cool wind-up flashlight kit includes 10 separate parts, and kids 8 and up can follow 16 simple steps to assemble it. No batteries are required—one minute of winding earns you 10 minutes of light—and the kit is designed to be easy to disassemble, offering all ages the chance to learn about electronics and kinetic energy. Ambessa, which translates as “lion”—and also “well done!”—in Ethiopian and Eritrean, launched in 2023 after a successful Kickstarter. For every flashlight sold, the company donates one to a displaced refugee child through partnerships with several grassroots organizations. **$52**

Skullcandy EcoBuds

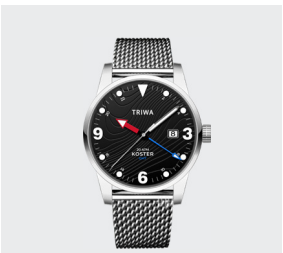
Only 12 percent of small electronics are properly recycled globally; the rest get trashed. In an effort to shrink its carbon footprint, Skullcandy crafted its EcoBuds using less plastic and fewer heavy metals. The buds still feature Bluetooth, touch controls, and fast charging (10 minutes for two hours), but the case has no lid and no battery. Plug in the attached USB-C cable to juice up. **$25**

AiAiAi Unit-4 Wireless+

Made from recycled plastic and held together with screws instead of glue, these reference-quality wireless speakers can be repaired, upgraded, and kept alive indefinitely. The 20-hour batteries, 4-inch woofers, 1-inch tweeters, and wireless electronics can all be easily swapped out if and when the original parts crap out. Run one speaker for mono sound, or pair two together for stereo. **$800 per pair**

Cute Little Fuckers Starsi!

While the brand’s name might not get past your phone’s profanity filter, CLF is a queer-, trans-, and disabled-owned company on a mission to make more inclusive sex toys. Its range of bright and playful toys include those that are particularly easy to hold if you have grip issues. Starsi, for example, is a palm-fitting, five-speed vibrating design, which reflects that not everyone gets their kicks in the same way. **$79**



Triwa Koster

Named after the first and only marine nature park in Sweden, the Koster is Triwa’s first Traveler timepiece. Just like the rest of the brand’s sustainable watches, it’s as stylish and practical as it is eco-friendly. Based around the Ronda 515 24H movement, the semi-brushed 39-mm case and sapphire glass offer 20 ATM water resistance, while the dial is made of plastic rescued from the ocean. **$TBD**

Framework Laptop 12 and Desktop

With almost every component replaceable, Framework’s PCs are among the most ethical computers around. The new laptop adds a shock-absorbing chassis, a 12-inch touchscreen, and i3 and i5 boards. Spare parts are available in spades.
The DIY Desktop is equally modular. Nearly every part is swappable, ensuring it evolves instead of being junked at the next upgrade. **$549 and up**

Robooter E60 Pro-A

With the growth of ebike and scooter battery tech, it's about time the mobility market got in on the fun. The Robooter E60 Pro-A is a folding, all-terrain wheelchair designed to enable its user to get around without being limited to asphalt. It has a maximum load capacity of 331 pounds, tops out at 6.2 miles per hour, and goes up to 19 miles per charge. **$3,699**

The Robooter E60 Pro's 12-inch omnidirectional front wheels and 12-inch pneumatic rear tires offer superior off-road accessibility.

The user can customize the stiffness of the front suspension depending on the terrain to keep the ride smooth and comfortable.

When folded, this go-anywhere mobility vehicle takes up no more space than a medium-size suitcase. Fit it into a car's trunk or back seat.

COURTESY OF: AMBESSA PLAY; SKULLCANDY; AIAIAI; CUTE LITTLE FUCKERS; TRIWA; FRAMEWORK; ROBOOTER

Rcyl Plastic Bike

The bicycle is an inherently "good" product, but the German polymer component manufacturer Igus has gone further, building a bike almost entirely from recycled plastics. This commuter may be large (68.5 inches long, 44 inches high, and 23.5 inches wide) and heavy (37.5 pounds), but it's impervious to corrosion and requires little maintenance. At the end of its useful life, Igus will take it back and recycle it again. **$1,450**

COURTESY OF: IGUS; MUSHLUME LIGHTING; ARPER SPA; CHAMPAGNE TELMONT UK; MOGU; BIG AGNES

MushLume Hemi Pendant

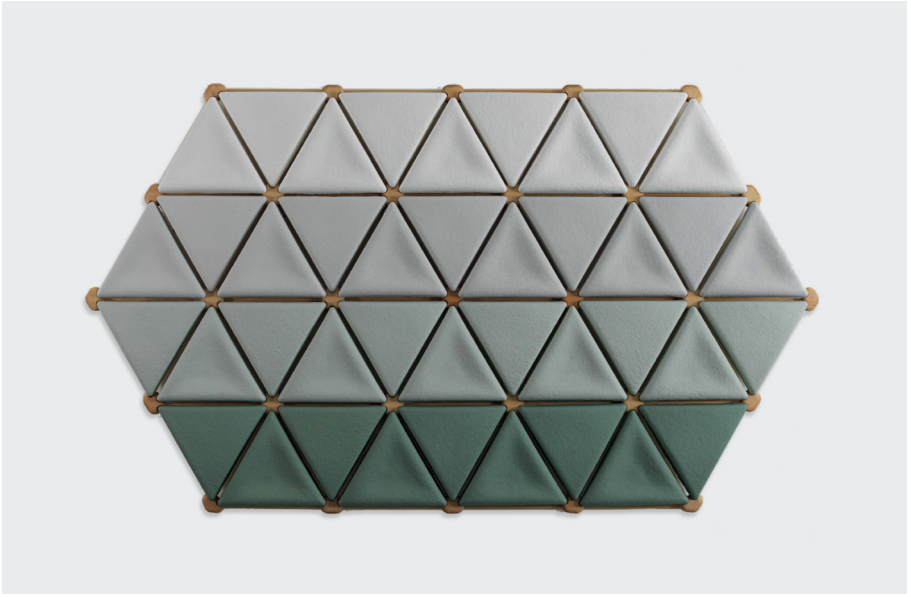
The MushLume lighting collection is grown, rather than manufactured, using a mixture of mycelium and super-sustainable hemp. Over a few days, the mycelium's network of thread-like hyphae binds with the hemp in the lampshade mold. Once dried, it becomes stable, inert, and 100 percent biodegradable. The imperfect texture and natural off-white finish also looks great in all sorts of interiors. **$675**

Arper Catifa Carta

Despite only debuting in 2001, the plastic Catifa 53 chair has already attained "classic" status. This new version ups the eco-ante; it's made with PaperShell, a clever new material that turns cellulose fibers into a strong, lightweight structure that stays rigid and durable. There are multiple options, including armrests, and metal bases with feet, sleds, or wheels. **$500 and up**

Champagne Telmont Réserve Brut

Champagne's secondary fermentation gives it bubbles but requires a heavier bottle capable of withstanding crazy amounts of pressure. A new design by the French producer Telmont weighs 1.76 pounds (800 grams), shaving 1.23 ounces off the standard-weight bottle. This may not sound like much, but it will reduce carbon emissions by 4 percent per bottle. **$76**



Mogu Acoustic Panels

More evidence of the potential for mushrooms beyond the kitchen, these elegant acoustic panels are grown using a mixture of mycelium and textile waste like cotton and hemp fibers. Devoid of synthetic materials, each panel is 100 percent biodegradable. Once the mycelium has worked its magic it creates a foamlike composite material that provides excellent levels of sound absorption, helping to calm loud spaces filled with hard surfaces. **Price on request**

Big Agnes Tiger Wall 2 Platinum Tent

Colorado camping connoisseurs Big Agnes have created HyperBead, a water-resistance technology that's built into its nylon ripstop fabric's structure. The design not only removes spray-on hydrophobic chemicals from the supply chain, it means there's no layer to degrade as with most treated ultralight fabrics. Enjoy the benefits with a friend in this roomy two-person domicile. **$650**

RALPH LAUREN

PINK PONY

Join Us in the Fight Against Cancer

"When someone we love has cancer,
we are all affected—husbands, wives, mothers
and fathers, sisters, brothers, and friends.
This is our effort in the fight against cancer."

Ralph Lauren

Globally, at least 25% of the purchase price from the sale of each item in the Pink Pony collection is directed to an international network of cancer charities; within the United States, proceeds benefit the Pink Pony Fund of The Ralph Lauren Corporate Foundation.

Learn more about the foundation at corporate.ralphlauren.com/cancer-care-and-prevention

POLITICS GETS WIRED

IT'S BEEN ONE year since Donald Trump took back the White House. Much has changed in the United States: The White House's Rose Garden has been paved over, and the Oval Office is covered in gold. As I write this, National Guard soldiers are swarming Washington, DC. In Southern California, meanwhile, ICE cops disguised as construction workers are nabbing day laborers in Home Depot parking lots. Crypto is now king in this country, especially if you're the president or one of his sons, who are amassing millions or billions from, in my view, some of the most corrupt financial schemes imaginable. If you read WIRED, you know. You can feel our democracy short-circuiting, with every AI-generated edgelord meme posted on official government accounts.

One of the most visible changes of the past year, and among the most consequential, is the tech industry's embrace of President Trump. Every day, tech elites seem to find new ways of demonstrating their allegiance to the president with increasingly grotesque displays of submission. (See: Tim Cook assembling a custom glass plaque—24-karat gold base, made in Utah!—during a recent visit to the Oval Office.) So what the hell happened to Silicon Valley? To find out, longtime tech chronicler and WIRED editor at large Steven Levy traveled back to San Francisco, where he first encountered (and learned to love) tech's countercultural renegades in the early 1980s **[p.22]**. For them, Levy asks, is the bid to mollify Trump all one big transactional business ploy? Or is the shadow hanging over Silicon Valley the sign of a much darker ideological shift?

Elsewhere in WIRED's politics package, we're focused on the only question that gives us hope right now: *What comes next?* A new generation of political hopefuls, for one: Senior writer Kate Knibbs followed YouTuber Kat Abughazaleh on the campaign trail as she runs for Congress, to see if Abughazaleh's online fandom translates to votes **[p.40]**. We're also introducing you to 22 rising political stars of the future—the candidates, insiders, media personalities, and commentators who'll define the next era of global politics **[p.46]**. A little less rosy, but sadly timely, is our deeply reported piece about a Texas man's attack on 5G towers, emblematic of this era's muddled, often irrational, strain of political violence **[p.30]**.

Yes, much has changed. And so has WIRED. We once saw ourselves as chroniclers, maybe even champions, of an invigorating industry that somehow seemed to transcend the lowly theater of politics. This year, though, we've been clear about where we stand: We're profoundly concerned about the United States' authoritarian turn and the tech industry's complicity in Trump's actions. We're also firmly, resolutely committed to continuing our coverage.

So committed, in fact, that we decided to take to the streets with it: If you live in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Austin, New York, or Washington, DC, you might've seen the cover of this issue as a mural, a digital billboard, or a wheatpasted poster. We wanted you to see what we saw, over the many months of covering DOGE, ICE, and the rest of it. Tech leaders got what they wanted—a seat at the table with a would-be king and a chance to haggle over the rules that govern their businesses. It's your future, though, that they just might gamble away.

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KATIE DRUMMOND *is the global editorial director of* WIRED.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY COLDWAR STEVE

Tech got what it wanted by electing Trump. A year later, it looks more like a suicide pact.

I WAS WRONG

BY STEVEN LEVY

GETTY IMAGES

FOR DECADES, MARK Lemley's life as an intellectual property lawyer was orderly enough. He's a professor at Stanford University and has consulted for Amazon, Google, and Meta. "I always enjoyed that the area I practice in has largely been apolitical," Lemley tells me. What's more, his democratic values neatly aligned with those of the companies that hired him.

But in January, Lemley made a radical move. "I have struggled with how to respond to Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook's descent into toxic masculinity and Neo-Nazi madness," he posted on LinkedIn. "I have fired Meta as a client."

This is the Silicon Valley of 2025. Zuckerberg, now 41, had turned into a MAGA-friendly mixed martial arts fan who didn't worry so much about hate speech on his platforms and complained that corporate America wasn't masculine enough. He stopped fact-checking and started hanging out at Mar-a-Lago. And it wasn't only Zuckerberg. A whole cohort of billionaires seemed to place their companies' fortunes over the well-being of society.

When I meet Lemley at his office at Stanford this July, he is looking vacation-ready in a Hawaiian shirt. In the half year since he fired Meta, very few powerful people have followed his lead. Privately, they tell him, you go! Publicly, they're gone. Lemley has even considered how he might be gone if things get bad for anti-Trumpers. "Everybody I've talked to has a potential exit strategy," he says. "Could I get citizenship here or there?"

It should be the best of times for the tech world, supercharged by a boom in artificial intelligence. But a shadow has fallen over Silicon Valley. The community still overwhelmingly leans left. But with few exceptions, its leaders are responding to Donald Trump by either keeping quiet or actively courting the government. One indelible image of this capture is from Trump's second inauguration, where a decisive quorum of tech's elite, after dutifully kicking in million-dollar checks, occupied front-row seats.

"Everyone in the business world fears repercussions, because this administration is vindictive," says venture capitalist David Hornik, one of the few outspoken voices of resistance. So Silicon Valley's elite are engaged in a dangerous dance with a capricious administration—or as Michael Moritz, one of the Valley's iconic VCs, put it to me, "They're doing their best to avoid being held up in a protection racket."

Just ask Tim Cook. In May, Apple's CEO took a pass on an 8,000-mile journey to join a presidential entourage in the Middle East. Trump noticed. In Qatar, the president said he had "a little problem" with Cook and the following day threatened a 25 percent tariff on iPhones.

Not surprisingly, when I offered some of the Valley's top executives the opportunity to vent this summer, few took the bait. Vacations seemed unusually long. Calendars were so packed that not a single slot was available for the next three weeks, four weeks, six weeks … *when did you say your deadline was?* One CEO notorious for logorrheic gabbing to reporters told me he was trying to "decompress" on politics. "But any time you want to talk AI or AI agents, please let me know!" he said.

It used to be that when tech's leaders fell short of their lofty values, employees kept them honest. Google workers famously pressured their executives to fight for diversity and avoid military contracts. Implicit was the threat that the activists could easily find jobs elsewhere.

Then Elon Musk came along and fired 80 percent of X's employees, and the app didn't collapse. Across the industry, diversity efforts are down and military contracts are up. In an April 2024 note to Google employees, CEO Sundar Pichai told employees not to "use the company as a personal platform, or to fight over disruptive issues or debate politics." Free expression is also out of favor inside Meta, where an employee says the environment feels like the '90s: "When you went to work, you didn't bring your politics to the office, and you may not like the boss—but you do the job so you get paid," they tell me. "Good luck finding a company that isn't like that now."

What's happened to Silicon Valley? Why did the Ayn Rand–loving heroes of tech become Donald Trump's bootlickers? How did one of the supposedly smartest VCs wind up posting a manifesto

that declared war on "trust and safety," "tech ethics," and "social responsibility"? What was the point of Jeff Bezos buying The Washington Post for civic benefit, as he claimed, and then right before the 2024 election, killing its Kamala Harris endorsement and changing its opinion section to editorials on "personal liberties and free markets"? And speaking of Cook, how is it that the most effective political tactic for the head of a $3.4 trillion company is to march into the Oval Office and solemnly present to Trump a glass-and-gold tchotchke?

This is Apple! Who knows what Cook—a man who has more in common with Martians than MAGA—was thinking as he stood before Trump and unboxed the most dubious, most obsequious product in the company's near-half-century. Would Steve Jobs have done that? My guess: He'd have told his team to send over a gold-plated iPod. Collect on Delivery.

Ever since Jobs began selling the first sleek Apple II's, digital technology has been touted as America's pride and future. In its own geeky way, tech spoke truth to power. But now, says Stanford professor of social ethics of science and technology Rob Reich, "an extraordinarily tiny number of billionaires who control the information ecosystem have made allyship with the most consequential and fearsome political power in the world. There's never been a time in history when those things have been combined."

In a perverse sense this is good news for me—I cover that ecosystem and its oligarchs, so how great is it to be reporting on history? But in every other sense it's wildly disturbing. Obviously, my stories evolved with the industry. But here's something that took me by surprise: how quickly and decisively the visionaries I chronicled aligned themselves with Trump, a man whose values violently clashed with the egalitarian impulses of the digital revolution. How did I miss that? I revisited my familiar turf—which in this era seems suddenly unfamiliar—to find out.

EVEN VENTURE CAPITALISTS SEEMED TO VIBE WITH THE FEELING OF REVOLUTION, AS IF THE WEATHERMEN SWITCHED FROM MAKING BOMBS TO DOING IPO ROAD SHOWS.

FOR THE FIRST 30 years of my life, I did not touch a computer. I viewed those machines—for much of that time, mainframes clacking in rooms I never saw—as a dehumanizing force. I associated them with the war machine in Vietnam and the monotony of corporate life. That all changed in the early 1980s when I took an assignment to write about hackers for Rolling Stone.

To my shock and delight, I learned that the burgeoning PC industry was a nerdy successor to the political and cultural activism of the late 1960s. Some of the first computer startups sprang from the Homebrew Computer Club, organized by an antiwar activist. The club's moderator had led the technology wing of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. Even Bill Gates started out as a dope-toking rebel of sorts; his partner Paul Allen was a music freak who loved Jimi Hendrix. Apple cofounders Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak had barely grown out of their shaggy-haired days selling the "blue boxes" that allowed people to make illegal calls. Screw the Phone Company!

I began a love affair with Silicon Valley. The wizards I met were changing the world with tools designed to uplift us—to give the common person the power of an expert. The electronic spreadsheet was sold as a business tool, but it was ultimately an antiestablishment weapon, because anyone with a low-cost PC could challenge the calculations of the executive suite. When Mitch Kapor, a former teacher of transcendental meditation, founded Lotus Development Corporation, which popularized the spreadsheet in the 1980s, he told his money guy that he valued people more than profits, and wanted to invest in his employees. "I was prepared for him to say no," says Kapor. Fortunately for Kapor, the guy said yes.

In the famous "1984" Apple commercial for the Macintosh, an athlete flings a hammer at a Big Brother figure—she was out to pulverize authority. The headline of my Rolling Stone story about the Mac said it all: "The Whiz Kids Meet Darth Vader." (Meaning IBM. Haha.) This was a righteous battle!

Of course, Silicon Valley was never all flowers and psychedelics. "For all that it might flatter itself with counterculture roots, making money and accumulating power has always been in the mainstream," says Kapor. And of course, the Valley's politics always accommodated a strong libertarian strain.

But even venture capitalists seemed to vibe with the feeling of revolution—as if the Weathermen switched from making bombs to doing IPO road shows. When the internet arrived like a thunderclap, the ideological soundtrack became earsplitting. In his celebrated 1996 "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," my friend John Perry Barlow argued that the internet transcended earthbound

laws and borders. "Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us," he wrote.

Oh my God, did we post our hopes on the internet. When I first met them, Larry Page and Sergey Brin were wide-eyed idealists. Jeff Bezos came on like a buddy, eager to point out that Amazon employees, himself included, set up their computers on repurposed wooden doors instead of pricey desks. After my first conversation with Zuckerberg, he went home to a tiny apartment with no furniture.

And then the giants of the internet scaled up their companies to impose their own concepts of expression, identity, and context. Those once humble leaders reaped unimaginable rewards. Now they can't flaunt their riches enough—multiple homes, yachts, planes.

On a typically pleasant July day, I met up with Russell Hancock, who runs a think tank called Joint Venture Silicon Valley, in the living room of his Palo Alto home. He nabbed it during the 2000 tech crash; now you can't buy a shack in Paly without near-generational wealth. Page and Zuckerberg, unsatisfied with a single homestead, have scooped up nearby properties, transforming once idyllic streets into supervillain compounds.

"The people that are doing fabulously well, they're really having a terrific time," Hancock says. For everyone else in Silicon Valley, the wealth gap is getting more punishing, more absurd. When Apple had its IPO in 1980, Steve Jobs' net worth topped an almost-unheard-of $100 million. Now Zuckerberg is reportedly offering AI researchers that much moolah for a single year's labor. Hancock brings up the Gini coefficient, a measure of inequality that's popular among the World Bank crowd. Since the '90s, "we went from 30 on the Gini to 83," he says. "Those are the conditions for the French Revolution."

Another big change was unfolding. For the longest time, notes Chris Lehane, a former Bill Clinton staffer who has worked for companies like Airbnb and OpenAI, software "was almost like a fourth dimension." Tech leaders could afford to stay out west and avoid politics. But then software products started to break down entire sectors of business. "These products were physically manifesting themselves in taxis, short-term rentals, and food delivery," Lehane says, "bumping up against existing political systems, beliefs, laws." Sometimes people died from that incursion. Old, beloved businesses closed. Local politicians got mad. To game the system, Silicon Valley jumped to the swamp. As one technologist in the current administration tells me, "The Valley now realizes it can't ignore politics, because politics won't ignore you."

No wonder the public took a jaundiced view of the apps they couldn't stop using. By the mid-2010s, people were attacking the big buses that transported tech workers to and from San Francisco, Mountain View, and Menlo Park, where employees pulled lattes in micro-kitchens, enjoyed midday massages, and discussed provocative left-wing politics.

Perhaps the wizards of the PC and internet age were *too* successful. "We overdid it," says Andy Hertzfeld, a programming legend who helped build the original Macintosh. "We were so idealistic in thinking everyone should use a computer and that we should make them lovable and fun." The result, he laments, is a dystopia of phone-addicted teens and even the death of the homework essay.

Essentially, the big tech companies became The Phone Company—pernicious behemoths who enshittify their products to extract more profits. You can't even get a human customer-service person on the phone. In a 2024 survey of Silicon Valley residents, three-quarters of respondents felt tech companies have too much power; nearly as many believe they have lost their moral compass.

That's why, even before Citizen Trump entered the White House in 2017, I found that the narrative in my stories had changed. I used to draw on the tale of David versus Goliath. Now I was writing the Icarus legend. I kept seeing that figure's hubris in the tech elite. And it led them to Donald Trump.

BY DARING TO CHALLENGE THE TECH INDUSTRY, JOE BIDEN THREATENED THE MOGULS' BUSINESS PLANS. EVEN WORSE, HE HURT THEIR FEELINGS.

HISTORY MIGHT REMEMBER Joseph R. Biden as the doddering figure in his last presidential debate. But a shockingly wide range of people in Silicon Valley view him as a progress-hating despot. I was taken aback at the fervor of their antipathy toward Uncle Joe.

Lehane, the former Clinton spokesperson, says that the administration and its agencies neither understood tech nor took much interest in it, "other than potentially trying to stop the technology from being developed." Chief villains of the Biden era included Federal

GETTY IMAGES

Trade Commission chair Lina Khan and Department of Justice antitrust head Jonathan Kanter. They methodically filed suits against Google, Amazon, Apple, and Meta. Khan blocked even modest mergers, threatening the entire ecosystem of smaller startups that now found it harder to negotiate profitable exits.

Biden's people make reasonable defenses—those companies do seem to have monopolies, after all. And look what happened to the design company Figma after Khan's FTC scrutinized its potential merger with Adobe. Two years later it had a spectacular IPO.

But one of Biden's biggest, most avoidable errors may have been his failure to invite Elon Musk to a 2021 event for electric vehicle manufacturers. The apparent reason was to keep the United Auto Workers happy, though the White House later claimed it was a fight over electric vehicle provisions that cost him his seat at the table. Even Reid Hoffman, one of the few tech billionaires who's speaking out against Trump, thinks that was crazy. "You should invite the electric vehicle leader to the electric vehicle summit!" he says. "That was part of the radicalization of Elon."

Or, at least, part of the public narrative about why Musk, who had previously donated to Democratic candidates, went full MAGA. Other theories include radicalization during Covid, after the government stopped work at his California plant; radicalization by way of Twitter and too many sycophantic posts; or just that he was nuts. In any event, he got busy boosting right-wing content on X (especially his own posts), loudly supporting Trump, and of course donating almost $300 million to the Trump campaign. It used to be that "if you were Republican, or you said you were anti-tax, you had to go into hiding," says Ryan Petersen, CEO of the logistics company Flexport. "Elon made it safe for everyone."

Another Biden blunder, in the eyes of the tech elite, was his administration's hostility to crypto. According to one top crypto executive I spoke with, the trouble started when one of the Dems' biggest funders, crypto billionaire Samuel Bankman-Fried, was exposed as a massive fraudster. "It was an enormous embarrassment for the Democrats," the executive told me. "So what do you do when you're humiliated? You overreact."

Before the scandal, companies had engaged in a constructive debate over regulation. But the SBF affair fortified the hard line that the head of the SEC, Gary Gensler, decided to take. (Gensler declined to be interviewed, though he did urge me to "keep up the good work at WIRED!") Crypto people also blame Senator Elizabeth Warren, who many saw as Gensler's supporter.

The crypto industry funneled hundreds of millions of dollars to Trump's campaign. "We were always focused exclusively on what is good for crypto," says Coinbase's general counsel and former federal judge Paul Grewal. By midsummer 2024, Trump, who had earlier called cryptocurrencies a fraud, was appearing at a Bitcoin conference, promising to fire Gensler and make the US "the crypto capital of the planet."

Even Biden's AI policy turned out to be radicalizing. The field's key figures had seemed happy enough as they too debated regulation. But then AI went red-hot, and those companies needed massive investments in infrastructure—and a less restrictive set of rules. Guess who was ready to deliver. "In terms of him as a human being or a visionary, nobody's a big Trump fan," says Peter Leyden, an author (and former WIRED editor) writing a book on "the Great Progression" of technology. "But then AI hits—it's game time. So they decided, 'Fuck it, we're gonna hook our tree to this crazy-ass Trump."

In his podcasts, the venture capitalist Marc Andreessen complained bitterly about Biden's policies on antitrust, AI, and diversity, and he expressed outrage that Biden would not meet with him personally. In his view, Biden—and indeed the general public—had not kept its part in what Andreessen called The Deal.

Here's how he described it to New York Times columnist Ross Douthat: An entrepreneur starts a company, makes a lot of money, and the world benefits from the new technology. "Then in your obituary, it talks about what an incredible person you were, both in your business career and in your philanthropic career. And by the way, you're a Democrat, you're pro–gay rights, you're pro-abortion, you're pro all the fashionable and appropriate social causes of the time … This is the Deal."

By daring to challenge the tech industry, Biden threatened the moguls' business plans. Even worse, *he hurt their feelings*. "It's impossible to exaggerate how offended they were," says Nick Clegg, who was Meta's president of global affairs until early this year. In July 2024, Andreessen and his partner Ben Horowitz announced that they would be donating their dollars to Trump.

Some of Andreessen's gripes were over the top—no Marc, not all young employees lean Marxist—but he wasn't the only one raging over diversity programs and political correctness. Across the Valley, it seemed, the Deal was off. "There's a general sense in tech, even in the center left, that identity politics have gone too far," says Leyden. Trae Stephens, the Founders Fund VC and Anduril cofounder, has

seen it too. “My friends who are Democrats are not switching parties,” he tells me. “They’re just really tired of the Democrats.” Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, had been happily affiliated with the left. Earlier this year, he said on social media that politically he’s “homeless.” Though he seems to spend a lot of time with Trump.

And then there’s Zuckerberg. I interviewed him frequently during Trump’s first term and was convinced he had genuine compassion for immigrants. I can’t recall him saying a nice thing about Trump. Sometime in the past year or so, positive words began spilling out. When Trump literally dodged a bullet on the campaign trail last summer and pumped his fist in the air, Zuckerberg called him a “badass.” Then came visits to the Joe Rogan podcast, where he griped that corporations were insufficiently manly, and Mar-a-Lago, where he reportedly blamed his former COO Sheryl Sandberg—the company’s champion of diversity—for all that unnecessary policing of toxic content and misinformation (a criticism he later denied). Now, Zuckerberg is not so much about immigrants. He and his wife, Priscilla, had funded a school in East Palo Alto, a low-income enclave. They are shutting it down.

“I see Mark as a political shape-shifter whose number one goal is the survival and thriving of the company,” a Meta executive tells me. “Trump is so transactional that you can fight him and get fucked, or you can try to work with him and get a percentage of what you want.”

To tech’s power elite, Trump’s tit-for-tat nature is not a bug but a feature. “A lot of these guys find Trump very familiar,” says Clegg. “You go down to Mar-a-Lago, and he goes, ‘Let’s do a deal.’ That charm of Trump is incredibly intoxicating to Silicon Valley tech bros.”

Was Biden *really* so bad for tech? Democrats I spoke to who were in the White House or in Congress in those years say they were simply holding an overreaching industry to account—for its own good. “I don’t think we screwed up on policy,” says Tim Wu, who was Biden’s special assistant for tech and competition. “Our goal was to keep the tech industry healthy by forcing it to continue to innovate.”

The strategy doesn’t seem to have worked. In the first months of 2025, the Trump administration lifted regulations that irritated the tech industry. “America’s AI Action Plan” focuses on establishing US dominance. So long, regulation! The crypto bros saw not only the departure of the hated SEC chair Gensler but the passage of a bill that legitimized their industry. And Trump appointees recently overruled the Justice Department’s antitrust division to allow a major tech merger to go through.

Trump’s tariffs, of course, present big problems for business. But it turns out that you can run pretty well on a bended knee. Take Jensen Huang, who heads Nvidia. The administration was expected to take a hard line on selling chips to China. Huang unleashed a full-throttled lobbying effort that took him from Mar-a-Lago to Saudi Arabia. He pledged $500 billion in US investments. He bad-mouthed Biden to a congressional committee. By the time Huang was done, Trump was calling him a friend and easing export controls on his chips. When Trump spoke at an AI Summit in July, Huang was there to celebrate—and wisely not taking credit. When it was Huang’s turn on stage, he got straight to the point. “America’s unique advantage that no other country could possibly have,” he said, “is President Trump.”

Later, Huang learned that the administration would help itself to a 15 percent cut of gross sales to China. Not long afterward, Trump grabbed 10 percent of Intel. It seems that America’s “unique advantage” is relentless in grabbing power for himself, even from those who debase themselves before him. In the long run, these deluded CEOs may realize this isn’t realpolitik. It’s a suicide pact.

GETTY IMAGES

BRADLEY TUSK IS a political consultant for tech companies. Uber and FanDuel have enjoyed his services as they rewrote the rules of their industries, and he’s used to political rough and tumble. As he sees it, Trump’s tactics are the *government* moving fast and breaking things.

When we talk, Tusk rattles off what he views as the components of US tech exceptionalism—independent markets and institutions, freedom of speech, intellectual property protections, strong educational institutions, decent immigration policy. Then his voice gets hard. “Trump is doing the opposite of every single one of those things,” he says. “There is definitely potential that he will destroy everything that makes the US economy unique and successful.”

Start with immigration. Perhaps no group of techies has ridden Trump’s coattails more than the four chatty investor-bros who host the *All In* podcast. Three of the “besties,” as they call themselves, were born overseas. During the election season, two besties, venture capitalists Chamath Palihapitiya and David Sacks, threw a fundraiser at Sacks’ house with tickets as high as $300,000. Soon after, Trump rewarded them by going on their podcast. (Sacks is now Trump’s AI and crypto czar.) Some of the questions were big fat softballs like, “I never understood why the [border]

wall was controversial." But even they couldn't get behind his immigration policy. Didn't Trump recognize that the tech world thrives on foreign-born wizards?

To their astonishment, he not only agreed but promised that in his administration, any foreign student who completes a degree would get a green card. The besties were giddy.

It was too good to be true. Hours later, the MAGA base aflame, the Trump campaign issued a statement negating what he'd said. Now that he's back in the White House, he and his vice president have remained two-faced—assuring tech audiences that they want the best foreign students while making it harder for companies to hire and retain that talent.

TRUMP'S TARIFFS, OF COURSE, PRESENT BIG PROBLEMS FOR BUSINESS. BUT IT TURNS OUT THAT YOU CAN RUN PRETTY WELL ON A BENDED KNEE.

At one point Trump moved to block *any* foreigner from enrolling in America's oldest university. That hasn't happened yet, but this summer the Department of Homeland Security proposed a new regulation that limits foreign student visas to four years—not enough to get a PhD or, for many, even an undergraduate degree. The number of students coming from overseas has tanked.

"We're definitely seeing the chilling effect," says Harj Taggar, a managing partner at Y Combinator. While YC's international founders have so far managed to enter the country, applicants with student visas are more reluctant to leave school to join the program. He's seeing foreign students consider going to London to work or start companies. "They feel it's maybe not as safe to be here," he says. "That makes me really sad."

I've got a few more reasons for Taggar to feel really sad: the mass cancellation of science and research funding, for one. Goodbye, next generation of engineers and computer scientists. "In the name of punishing woke-ism, we're going to absolutely hobble the innovation engine that has created the economic gains of the last 50 years," says Hornik, the venture capitalist.

Then there's the mounting effect of Trump's favor-collecting and favoritism—buying that chunk of Intel, claiming that slice of Nvidia's sales. In corruption-riddled countries, winners aren't chosen by merit but by apparatchiks and strongmen. Those nations are doomed to second- or third-tier status. In his pre-election appearance on the Joe Rogan podcast, Zuckerberg said as much himself. "At least the US has the rule of law," he remarked. "If other governments decide that they're going to go after you, you don't always get a clear shake at defending yourself on the rules." Guess what—now we're like those other governments! Zuckerberg, no dummy, has probably figured this out, but now he's locked into Trumpland, outplayed in a real-life game of Risk.

Many of the people I spoke with for this story are centrist liberals. They are a disheartened bunch, and talking to them was hazardous to my own heart. In interview after interview, I asked them what, if anything, might force the industry to confront its dim longer-term prospects. Their answers were vague. The midterm election? An economic collapse? One Silicon Valley figure suggested, "It could be as simple as 10 Republican senators discovering they actually have backbones."

Or 10 big-time CEOs, I might add. They can unbend their knees and perhaps revive some of the Valley's soul. Or at least stop ripping it apart. And while they're at it, stop making it so easy for the government to usher in an AI-powered surveillance state.

Maybe that's the thing I got most wrong about Silicon Valley. Those Davids I wrote about seemed fearless and full of verve as they challenged what was possible and rode the power of the chip and the net. I mistook this for character. They may believe, as Moritz told me, that submitting to Trump's protection racket protects their shareholders. But tech giants are certainly capable of standing up for the long-term viability of their industry. And for democracy. So far they are doing the opposite. "I think they have made a bad deal," says Tim Wu. "Everyone who thought they could work some deal with Trump ends up getting burned, if not imprisoned."

There will probably be no reckoning. Tech leaders, like all rich people, always have alternatives to life in a declining country. Reid Hoffman has his, as he put it, "contingency plans." Another source for this story let drop that he's getting Portuguese citizenship. Lovely country. But it's hard to imagine myself as a young reporter, roaming the streets of Lisbon and finding the excitement and promise I discovered in California. It's even harder to imagine a young reporter finding that spirit in the industry as it stands today. The way I now feel in Silicon Valley is how Sam Altman described himself politically: homeless.

STEVEN LEVY *is* WIRED*'s editor at large.*

GOVERNMENT IS SLOWLY TR TO KILL OF MANY PEOPLE AS IT CAN! I EEDS TO BE EXPO AST! #COVIDI KE #5GKILL

INSIDE THE MIND OF THE MOST PROLIFIC ANTI-TECHNOLOGY ARSONIST IN AMERICA— AND THE CONSPIRACY-DRIVEN POLITICAL VIOLENCE OF OUR ERA.

FAHRENHEIT 5G

BY BRENDAN I. KOERNER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOVANA MUGOŠA

AS DAWN SPREAD OVER SAN ANTONIO ON September 9, 2021, almond-colored smoke began to fill the sky above the city's Far West Side. The plumes were whorling off the top of a 132-foot-tall cell tower that overshadows an office park just north of SeaWorld. At a hotel a mile away, a paramedic snapped a photo of the spectacle and posted it to the r/sanantonio subreddit. "Cell tower on fire around 1604 and Culebra," he wrote.

In typical Reddit fashion, the comments section piled up with corny jokes. "Blazing 5G speeds," quipped one user.

"I hope no one inhales those fumes, the Covid transmission via 5G will be a lot more potent that way," wrote another, in a swipe at the conspiracy theorists who claim that radiation from 5G towers caused the Covid-19 pandemic.

The wisecracks went on: "Can you hear me now?"

"Free hotspot!"

"Great, some hero trying to save us from 5G."

That self-styled hero was actually lurking in the comments. As he followed the thread on his phone, Sean Aaron Smith delighted in the sheer volume of attention the tower fire was receiving, even if most of it dripped with sarcasm. A lean, tattooed—and until recently, entirely apolitical—27-year-old, Smith had come to view 5G as the linchpin of a globalist plot to zombify humanity. To resist that supposed scheme, he'd spent the past five months setting Texas cell towers ablaze.

Smith's crude and quixotic campaign against 5G was precisely the sort of security threat that was fast becoming one of the US government's top concerns in 2021. Just two weeks after Smith's fire popped up on Reddit, then FBI director Christopher Wray discussed the latest trends in political violence in a speech marking the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. "Today, the greatest terrorist threat we face here in the US is from what are, in effect, lone actors," he said, describing these people as moving "quickly from radicalization to action, often using easily obtainable weapons against soft targets." And an increasing number of these individuals, Wray stressed, were turning violent after marinating in bizarre conspiracy theories.

In the years since Wray first delivered that warning, political violence in the US has continued to evolve much as he foresaw. Numerous recent attacks have been launched by people whose media diets have conditioned them to believe that government oppressors, permissive liberals, or shadowy cabals must be stopped at all costs. "This conspiracy stuff, it's not coming from HitlerLover4Chan88 on Twitter anymore," says Jonathan Lewis, a research fellow at George Washington University's Program on Extremism. "It's coming from a blue check, a gold check, a verified account—someone who, for a lot of people, has legitimacy." He adds that some of those paranoid influencers are even operating in the halls of power. "You've got Groypers running Department of Homeland Security Twitter accounts," Lewis says. "You're getting legislative bills being passed about climate modification."

Once convinced that violence is the only moral choice, lone actors are routinely carrying out hit-and-run attacks against pieces of the nation's technological infrastructure, which remain lightly guarded despite their vast importance. The types of sites being targeted are as varied as the causes that motivate their attackers. In 2022, for example, someone shot up two electrical substations in North Carolina, in a possible far-right effort to disrupt a drag show. Two years later, a Tennessee man was arrested for allegedly plotting to use drones to bomb Nashville's power grid in hopes of hastening a race war. This past July, a member of a militia group that trafficked in weather-manipulation conspiracy theories allegedly smashed up an Oklahoma radar station. And saboteurs with unknown motives have also been severing fiber-optic cables in both California and Missouri since the early summer. (Gauging the true number of infrastructure attacks has become more difficult since the DHS shuttered its Terrorism and Targeted Violence database in March.)

But Smith—who planned and executed his arsons by himself—appears to have been more prolific than any of these other extremists. The blaze north of SeaWorld was the seventh he'd set in 2021; in the seven months that followed, he would burn another 15. I spent the past year talking to Smith at length about the origin and details of his anti-5G crusade. I did so in the hope of learning how and why some desperate souls are being lured into destroying the guts of modern life.

SMITH GREW UP in a three-bedroom trailer in northwest San Antonio, the only child of a carpenter and a nurse's assistant. He entered high school with dreams of making a career in the military, but his life swerved when his father slipped into alcoholism after a construction accident. With his dad lost in the haze of drink and his mother rarely home due to her 12-hour work shifts, Smith searched elsewhere for belonging. He dropped out of high school in the 10th grade to devote himself to a new group of friends whose sole interests were drugs and petty crime. "The attention they gave me inspired a fierce loyalty," he says. "There's not much I wouldn't do for them." At the age of 18, he went to prison for burglarizing a house while blacked out on Xanax. He would spend the bulk of the next six years behind bars after blowing parole and picking up multiple drug and firearm charges; his father died of cancer while he was locked up.

When Smith was paroled from his third prison stint in November 2019, he resolved to make a break with his troubled past. He moved back into his mother's trailer and landed a cooking job at Golden Corral. He also started a relationship with 18-year-old Coley Lane Dupre, a former elite gymnast who'd recently turned rebellious; she had moved next door to Smith after walking out of drug rehab. All was going smoothly until March 2020, when the pandemic shuttered Smith's restaurant and the gymnastics studio where Dupre coached. Their new lives were forced into suspended animation, leaving the couple to fill the days with getting high and scrolling.

During one of those bleary sessions, a videoclip from episode 1,308 of *The Joe Rogan Experience*, which had originally aired in June 2019, popped up in Smith's Instagram feed. The clip begins with Rogan pausing to light a joint, which gives his guest—Eddie Bravo, an anvil-headed jiu-jitsu master known for spouting conspiracies about 9/11 and a flat Earth—the opportunity to pose a question: "What do you think of, um, 5G and all that scare? You think that's legit?" Rogan pronounces himself "terrified" of the wireless networking technology, which was then starting to become widespread in the US. "How much long-term testing have they done?" he asks, without specifying the potential effects he fears. "Zero?" Bravo then urges Rogan to visit a website that contains the government's "400-page plan for the world," a document that he says contains revelations about 5G that will "get your fucking head blown off."

The clip was short on details, but it reminded Smith of a man he'd befriended in prison in 2014. This inmate had been an avid reader of books about magnets and electricity, and he'd often rambled about a sprawling communications "grid" that he said was being built for nefarious reasons. Smith had never paid much attention to these convoluted rants, but the two famous podcasters seemed to be echoing his friend's concerns.

When he plugged queries about 5G into search bars, Smith quickly became alarmed. Social media was awash in posts asserting that 5G towers, which use higher electromagnetic frequencies than their 4G forerunners, had weakened human immune systems, leaving them unable to fend off the Covid-19 virus. (Several nations where 5G was not yet available in 2020, such as Iran, were among the most devastated by Covid.) Prominent figures like the actor Woody Harrelson claimed on Instagram (falsely) that China was dismantling its 5G towers to curb Covid's spread. As Smith's social-media algorithms adjusted to his affinity for these posts, he became aware that arsonists in the United Kingdom had set fire to more than 60 cell towers in the spring of 2020. This spate of violence had been inspired in part by the YouTube sermons of a British pastor and crypto consultant who preached that "the radio frequencies we are being exposed to are killing the people." (The pastor gained legitimacy by claiming to be a former executive at Vodafone; he had in fact been a salesman for the telecommunications company for less than a year, well before the rollout of 5G.)

It all started when a videoclip from episode 1,308 of *The Joe Rogan Experience* popped up in Smith's Instagram feed.

Smith's suspicions only deepened when he noticed that his favorite 5G content often vanished within hours of being posted. "If you said anything connecting 5G with Covid, you were censored, Facebook is taking your post down, it was fact-checking you," he says. "And I'm like, why are they so worried about censoring people on the subject? And that's kind of what resonated with me." Smith concluded that powerful forces were concealing the insidious truth about 5G.

WITH NO SHOT at landing another restaurant gig in the midst of the pandemic, Smith backslid into selling drugs as the spring of 2020 wore on. He roamed San Antonio's eerily deserted streets, delivering cannabis, cocaine, and other intoxicants to customers hunkered down in their homes. During his rounds, he noticed that 5G towers were some of the only structures still being built. He occasionally pulled over to ask construction workers why they were risking illness and death to expand the rollout of 5G. When they told him to scram, he considered their rudeness yet another red flag.

When Smith wasn't out dealing, he was usually alone in the trailer with Dupre—his mother was working even crazier hours than usual at a hospital flooded with Covid patients. The couple would watch videos from *InfoWars* impresario Alex Jones and the British conspiracy theorist David Icke, the

latter of whom is notorious for claiming the world is secretly controlled by reptilian humanoids. These sources were now espousing increasingly dark and elaborate stories about 5G that portrayed the technology as central to a scheme to enslave entire nations. One popular narrative held that governments had unleashed the Covid-19 virus to force people into isolation, thereby giving construction crews the time and space to build out 5G networks. When a vaccine was eventually developed, the radiation from 5G towers would interact with graphene oxide nanomaterials that were integrated into the injections. This would give governments the power to control how their citizens behave or even to annihilate them en masse if they ever revolted. "If 5G continues and reaches where they want to take it," Icke warned in an April 2020 interview, "human life as we know it is over."

This story, often peddled by people who sold garments or knickknacks that purported to repel 5G radiation, made perfect sense to Smith. He'd formerly never had a shred of interest in politics—"My mindset was always, oh, it has nothing to do with me," he says—but the technophobic content he was now consuming had melted his apathy. "The way that China is right now with the technology and the surveillance, I saw America turning into the same thing eventually," he says. "Our freedoms deleted, stuff like that." He made Dupre similarly fearful by showing her several patents that employ the phrase "voice to skull," which the couple interpreted as evidence that the government could use 5G to implant thoughts in an unsuspecting populace. (The patents in question do not make this claim.)

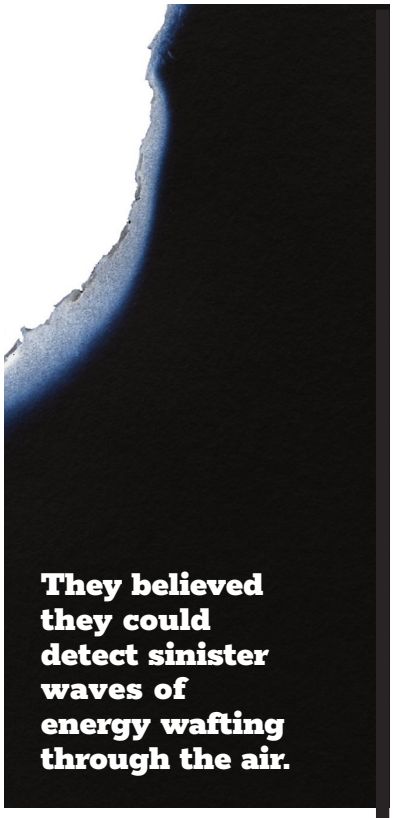
On the evening of Friday, July 17, Smith was en route to a customer's house when the police pulled him over for a routine traffic stop. He was arrested for drug and firearm possession, two charges that seemed certain to result in the revocation of his parole and a return to prison. But Smith realized that he probably wouldn't be cited for a parole violation until court reopened on Monday morning. So Dupre scraped together enough money to bail him out on Saturday, and the couple went on the run.

The grim realities of life on the lam complicated Smith and Dupre's efforts to further their study of 5G. They mostly crashed in local drug houses, where Smith's profession always made him a welcome presence at first. But something would inevitably go awry after a few days or weeks of rooming with mercurial meth abusers. Both were assaulted and robbed at gunpoint, and Smith and Dupre had to flee one toxic situation after another.

As the stress of being a fugitive chipped away at Smith's psyche, he pondered how to recapture a sense of purpose. "I wanted to be a better person," he says. "I'm still doing these things, I'm still in this lifestyle. But part of me was

wanting to help people." In late November, he decided to take a new step: Instead of passively absorbing information pushed to him by podcasters and algorithms, he would investigate a 5G tower in the wild.

Smith and Dupre spent a night combing San Antonio for a tower to explore. Most of the structures were inaccessible, protected by chain-link fences topped with razor wire. But the couple finally found an unsecured tower tucked away in a suburban neighborhood. As they approached the site, they were frightened by its loud and eerie hum. (The noise from 5G towers is generated by cooling fans and electrical components.) They believed they could detect sinister waves of energy wafting through the air. Dupre was so rattled by the tower's aura that she couldn't bring herself to touch it. "Babe, it feels ugly," she said to Smith as she turned away.



They believed they could detect sinister waves of energy wafting through the air.

Smith pressed forward, however, and laid hands on the tower's cylindrical metal base. In that moment, he was overwhelmed by sadness at how many people were ignorant of these monstrosities in their midst. "That's when I really made the decision," he recalls. "I snapped. Like, man, I'm going to do something about this."

NOW THAT THEY'D resolved to swing into action, Smith and Dupre discussed how best to battle 5G. They toyed with the idea of launching their own podcast or educational website. But they settled on producing homemade batches of so-called orgonite crystals, which are touted in alternative-medicine circles as having the ability to dampen electromagnetic fields. In the cluttered kitchens of the drug houses where they were hiding, the couple filled muffin tins with tinted resins and snippets of whatever metal they could find—curls of steel wool, coils of copper wire. These would harden into translucent lumps that Smith and Dupre began placing next to San Antonio's 5G towers, an act of subversion they called "gifting." Dupre took to creating crystals shaped like hearts or flowers, which she handed out to strangers in the hopes of opening their eyes to the horrors of 5G.

But Smith quickly soured on gifting as too tepid an approach. He was becoming increasingly radicalized as he learned about individuals who'd made tremendous sacrifices to oppose mobile technology. He particularly admired John Robert Patterson, an Australian telecommunications technician who believed he'd suffered adverse health consequences from overexposure to electromagnetic fields. In 2007, Patterson infamously stole an armored personnel carrier and used it to ram seven mobile towers in Sydney before surrendering to police. The rampage did nothing to slow the growth of Australia's wireless industry, but Smith liked how Patterson kept preaching about a massive cover-up of mobile technology's hazards even after leaving prison.

Smith also paid close attention to the December 25, 2020, bombing in downtown Nashville, during which a loner named Anthony Quinn Warner blew himself up in an RV. The FBI concluded that Warner was motivated by both suicidal desperation and an incoherent set of conspiracy theories, including his belief that the government has been covering up an alien invasion. But Smith focused only on the fact that Warner chose to detonate his vehicle in front of an AT&T network facility—proof, he thought, that 5G was the real intended target.

In February 2021, a massive ice storm knocked out much of the power in San Antonio for days. Smith took advantage of the blackout to trespass at several 5G towers, using bolt cutters to slice through their fences. He studied the fiber-optic cables that extended out of the facilities' base stations and ran for yards in the open before snaking into the towers' access hatches. He realized it would be easy to set those exposed cables on fire. He imagined the flames racing up the towers' innards and consuming the antennas located a hundred feet or more above the ground, transforming them into torches that would mesmerize San Antonians. "I didn't have any other way to try to get people's attention," he says. "I thought maybe, hey, if I burn this over here, maybe someone will see it and be like, 'Hey, why is someone burning these down?' And they'd look into it."

On the morning of April 10, Smith pulled up to a 5G tower behind a discount eyeglass shop; he'd picked the location so he could make a quick getaway via I-410 across the street. He lit the fuse of a crudely assembled Molotov cocktail and tossed it over the fence. To his dismay, the makeshift bomb landed a bit wide of the cables, causing only minor damage after smashing apart on the ground. Smith fled the scene in such haste that he dropped his lime-green lighter. As he peeled out toward the freeway, he knew he'd have to hone his methods if he was serious about changing the world.

TO BECOME A better arsonist, Smith trekked into a barren corner of the South Texas countryside to run some tests. He tried out grenade-like devices filled with homemade napalm, which he made using a recipe he'd found on the internet. But he ultimately determined that he'd never achieve his desired results by throwing incendiary devices from a fence line—the failure rate would be too high, regardless of the bombs' design. He instead needed to break into the tower sites so he could burn the cables up close. That would mean spending five minutes or more on the scene, thereby exposing himself to detection and arrest.

Smith came up with a simple yet effective modus operandi that would minimize his odds of getting caught. He would scout targets using Google Earth, zeroing in on towers next to wooded areas where he could retreat after setting a fire. He also obtained a wardrobe of costumes he could wear to

make it seem like he belonged inside a tower's perimeter—he stockpiled construction-worker outfits and security-guard uniforms, most of which he acquired in exchange for drugs. As long as he could get away with using his bolt cutters on the fences, no one was likely to question him as he knelt next to the towers and covertly stuffed their cable hatches with accelerant-soaked rags.

Smith became a rather busy arsonist starting that April: Over an initial six-week period, he hit one tower by a tattoo shop, another outside an upscale apartment complex, and a third at the end of a residential cul-de-sac. Dupre accompanied him on the last of these missions, but she couldn't bring herself to shimmy through the hole in the fence that Smith had cut. Unlike her boyfriend, she was scared to dirty her hands with actual property destruction.

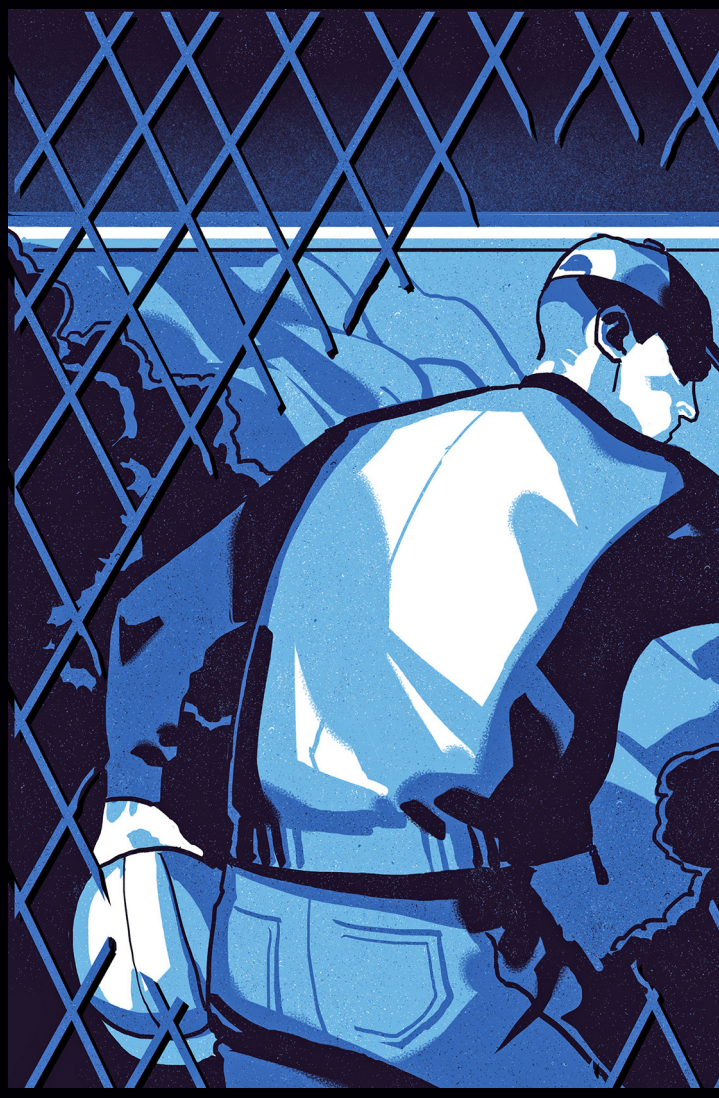
After this nerve-racking experience, Dupre pleaded with Smith to halt his arson spree. She did so in part because things were finally looking up for the couple: Thanks to a reference from a prominent San Antonio rapper he knew, Smith had landed an off-the-books job as a handyman at a small commercial building, and the landlord was letting him and Dupre stay in one of the vacant units. Dupre didn't want Smith to ruin this semi-stable situation by bringing more heat on himself. But Smith was now too deep in the throes of anti-5G fervor. "It gave me meaning," he says of the fires. "It gave my life more of a meaning, being able to fight against something."

In late May, Smith set out to torch a tower in the neighborhood of Oak Hills. Perhaps overconfident after having eluded capture for so long, Smith lingered for a while before lighting the gasoline-soaked rags he'd stuffed in the cable hatch. When he finally flicked his lighter, he accidentally ignited the fumes that had built up in the enclosed space. The flames whooshed back into his face, burning off much of his hair and turning his flesh a cherry red.

Smith stumbled away in agony, knowing that he couldn't go to an emergency room for help. In a panic he called Dupre, who was working the late shift at a 7-11. She grabbed several jugs of water, locked the store behind her, and sprinted back to the apartment to tend to her boyfriend's wounds. The couple eventually felt they had no choice but to call Smith's mother, who put herself in legal jeopardy by coming over to provide care.

For much of the summer, Smith feared that the physical damage he'd suffered was permanent. Yet even before his face regained its normal complexion and his eyebrows began to resprout, he felt compelled to get back to his arson campaign. Now more cognizant of the risk of self-immolation, he looked for safer ways to start his fires. He found good advice on the website for WarriorUp, a "research project" dedicated to sharing "techniques for sabotaging capitalist infrastructure and extractive industries." Taking a cue from an article entitled "How to Destroy Cell Phone Towers," Smith cut up an old tire so he could use the shards in lieu of rags—the rubber caught fire more slowly than cloth. (For the same reason, he also switched to using diesel as his preferred accelerant.)

During one of his attacks, Smith snagged a souvenir that caught his eye: a warning sign that read: "Radio frequency fields near some antennas may exceed the FCC occupational rules for human exposure." The Federal Communications Commission mandates the posting of these signs for the benefit of maintenance workers who must occasionally climb to the peaks of towers. But Smith mistakenly thought this language amounted to a government confession that civilians within a wide radius of a tower are in constant danger. He delighted in showing off the sign when evangelizing to fellow miscreants about 5G's role in transforming the US into a repressive dystopia. He could only hope his audiences were listening more intently to his lectures than he'd listened to his prison friend back in 2014.



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JESSE MONCADA, THE lead arson investigator for the San Antonio Fire Department, wasn't terribly concerned when he inspected the singed 5G tower behind My Econo's $39.95 Optical on April 10, 2021. Whoever had started the fire that morning was clearly an amateur—their Molotov cocktail hadn't packed much punch, and they'd foolishly dropped their lime-green lighter at the scene. His best guess was that the culprit was a vagrant bent on causing minor trouble.

"But then it happened again," says Moncada, who joined the fire department in 2001. "And we started seeing the same pattern and same modes of burning." Curious as to why someone would be fixated on destroying 5G towers, he contacted the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives for assistance. The agency told him about the cell-tower fires that had occurred in the UK in April 2020, a brief criminal epidemic that had made US federal authorities aware that conspiracy-driven terrorism would inevitably be on the rise. "We assess that violent extremists probably will target a range of telecommunications infrastructure," the Department of Homeland Security had warned in a May 2020 memo. "More coordinated attacks by multiple individuals in adjacent areas could amplify these incidents." The document also noted that these extremists were likely to be influenced by a hodgepodge of beliefs: Some would be white nationalists who'd been chattering online about their opposition to Covid restrictions, while others would be radical environmentalists who've embraced the anti-technology manifesto of the Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski.

Now aware that he was likely dealing with a form of terrorism rooted in online disinformation, Moncada had fingerprints lifted off the lighter he'd found at the first crime scene. They matched those of Smith, who had been wanted on a fugitive felony warrant since the previous July. At another burnt tower, Moncada also found a black glove that contained flecks of Smith's DNA. But it was one thing to know the arsonist's identity, quite another to find him: Smith was a ghost drifting through San Antonio's underworld, leaving few if any traces as he cycled through an endless stream of prepaid phones.

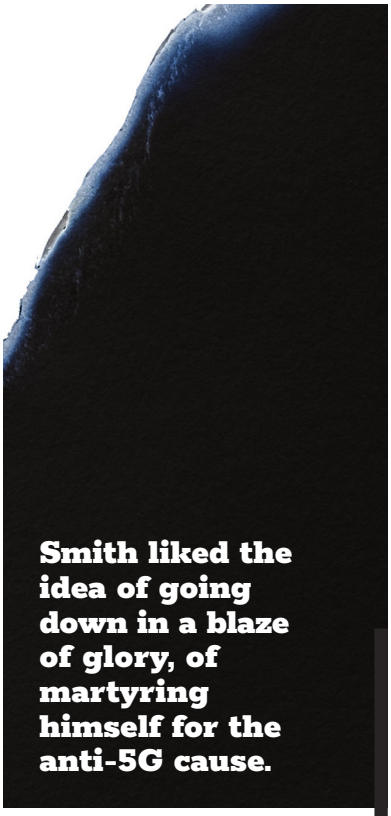
Hoping to glean a license plate number or accomplice's description that might help reveal Smith's location, Moncada contacted the security teams at affected companies such as Verizon and T-Mobile. "But what made it difficult was they didn't want anybody to know that their towers were being damaged," he says. "I didn't get enough help from them. So it was difficult for me to put everything together, because I didn't have any video footage or witnesses."

By the spring of 2022, the number of 5G arsons was nearing 20, and Moncada began collaborating with both the Texas Rangers and the FBI to solve the case. These larger agencies helped process more DNA evidence—at a tower that burned in March 2022, for example, Moncada recovered pubic hairs from a pair of boxer shorts that Smith used to start the fire. But there seemed little chance of stopping the attacks unless Smith made a mistake.

HIS EGO INFLATED by his months of success, Smith took to thinking of himself as an "urban gray man," capable of committing his arsons with supreme speed and stealth. He would often persuade an unwitting acquaintance to drive him to within a block or two of the tower he'd picked to torch. He'd hop out of the car and say he had to make a quick drug sale, then change into the reflective vest and hard hat that he kept in his backpack. He'd snip the fence, start the fire, and slip into the woods as the flames began to swell. He'd then strip off his construction-worker gear, pull a baseball cap low over his eyes, and circle back to the car as if nothing unusual had happened. As they pulled away, he'd peer out the window at the clouds of smoke now rising above the city.

Smith's personal life was growing messy as he became ever more focused on leading the revolution against 5G. He lost his handyman job in early 2022, a development that forced him and Dupre to relocate to a friend's apartment. The

couple's romance was also beginning to falter, in large part because Dupre had tired of centering her life around the use of Xanax and methamphetamine. "I was miserable," she says. "I hated every second of it." Smith, meanwhile, started seeing another woman named Callie Holland, who had recently moved down from Missouri with her daughter. On one of their dates, she watched him burn a 5G tower.



Smith liked the idea of going down in a blaze of glory, of martyring himself for the anti-5G cause.

As he passed the one-year anniversary of his first arson, Smith was feeling nothing short of invincible. On April 29, 2022, he chose to deviate from his usual cautious approach and set fire to a tower next to a heavily trafficked Walmart Supercenter. When Moncada arrived on the scene to investigate, he reviewed the store's security footage and spotted a red 2017 Chevrolet Cruze zooming out of the parking lot moments after the fire's ignition. The car was registered to Holland, who had previously been arrested, though not charged, for a drug violation—precisely the sort of person who might run in the same sordid circles as Smith.

In the wee hours of May 13, the San Antonio police detained Holland as she left a Mexican restaurant. She admitted that she'd loaned her car to Smith two weeks earlier, and she spilled all she knew about her part-time lover's crusade. "Holland advised that Smith stated the US government is out to get him and that the 5G towers give off radiation and control minds," a Texas Ranger wrote in his report. "Holland stated that Smith watches a bunch of videos of 5G towers on YouTube."

Most importantly, Holland provided the investigators with a phone number for Smith that was only a week old—a critical piece of information that Moncada had been seeking for months. By noon that day, Moncada had obtained a warrant to "ping" Smith's phone—that is, to triangulate its location using the same towers that Smith reviled as tools of oppression.

A US Secret Service agent performed the ping, which indicated that Smith was at an apartment complex behind a Lowe's home improvement store. A phalanx of police officers, Texas Rangers, and FBI agents immediately descended on the area in search of the arsonist who had set fire to 22 5G towers since April 2021.

At 1:20 pm that afternoon, Smith emerged from his apartment and hopped into a friend's Cadillac CTS. As they rolled away from the curb, the car was surrounded by dozens of law-enforcement agents with handguns and rifles drawn.

Smith had always known this day would come, and he'd often contemplated how he would react. He liked the idea of going down in a blaze of glory, of martyring himself for the anti-5G cause—there was romance in the concept of becoming a more extreme figure in technophobic lore than the Australian who'd bulldozed the Sydney towers. Given that he was armed with a loaded handgun, that outcome was certainly an option. But in the face of such an awesome amount of firepower pointed right at him, Smith froze.

"THIS IS THE happiest I've ever been."

Smith could tell I looked quizzical when I heard him utter those words, and he quickly qualified his statement by adding, "I know that sounds crazy." The place where we were meeting, the visiting room of a desolate south Texas prison, was entirely devoid of cheer. But Smith, whose forehead still bears scars from a long-ago pistol whipping, explained that despite his grim surroundings, he has never felt better. Drug-free for the first time in ages, he now spends his days studying college-level chemistry, reading the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and listening to political podcasts like *Pod Save America*. He counts himself blessed that he didn't choose to commit suicide-by-cop. "I needed a wake-up call," he says. "I needed to get away from everything and rethink everything and have a chance to sit down and reevaluate."

He also considers himself fortunate to have a shot at leaving prison before his 40th birthday. After he pleaded guilty to six counts of arson in federal court, prosecutors were keen to turn him into an example and sought a 15-year sentence—far longer than recommended by the advisory guidelines. "The sentencing guidelines do not contemplate a 22-tower arson spree meant to shut down the cellphone system to follow a bizarre anti-government philosophy," wrote the lead prosecutor, who specializes in counterterrorism cases. "The increased focus and attacks on this critical infrastructure by extremists and conspiracy theorists like the Defendant has the potential to wreak extensive societal damage and disruption."

Frightened by the prospect of spending a decade and a half in prison, Smith sent handwritten requests for help to several organizations that he thought might be sympathetic to his plight. The recipients included Children's Health Defense, a nonprofit founded by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.; Smith knew that at an anti-vaccine rally in early 2022, Kennedy had declared that 5G was designed to "harvest our data and control our behavior." No one ever replied to Smith's entreaties, but the judge still cut him a break: He was sentenced to 78 months of federal time, to be served concurrently with a state sentence that's currently projected to run until 2030. (When he was arrested in May 2022, the fugitive Smith was carrying a half-pound of cannabis in addition to his handgun; he will be eligible for parole on the state charges next year.)

Dupre was arrested for arson, too, after admitting to Moncada that she'd been with Smith when he torched a tower in May 2021. That case was eventually dismissed, however, and Dupre has transformed her life in the time since. Now clean and sober, she trained to become a substance-abuse counselor at San Antonio College and recently took a job at a recovery center. "I need to correct my karma and help other addicts," she told me.

She has extricated herself from the darkness of her former life, but Dupre remains convinced that 5G poses an existential threat. She is far from unique in holding onto that belief. This past June, for example, arsonists set fire to six cell towers in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Other Covid-related conspiracy theories have endured and mutated, too. In June, a Minnesota man was charged with assassinating a state lawmaker and her husband, later saying he had meant to punish those who supported Covid vaccines; later in the summer, an Atlanta man who believed he'd been harmed by one of those vaccines opened fire on the headquarters of the Centers for Disease Control, killing a police officer.

"I don't know how to say this without sounding crazy, but I just don't trust the technology," Dupre says of 5G. "I don't think that they're just cell phone towers." She also has sympathy for the choices made by Smith, with whom she maintains a close platonic friendship: "I support him 100 percent. I'm not saying what he did was right, but I'm not saying it was wrong."

Smith maintains his vehement opposition to 5G, but the more pressing object of his concern these days is AI—the newest fixation among young extremists now sprouting from the same media ecosystem that radicalized Smith. "It's clear to them that AI will be utilized in order for the government to maintain its control, to enhance its ability to surveil, to monitor, to track, to interfere with our privacy," says Arie Perliger, a professor at the University of Massachusetts Lowell who studies domestic terrorism. Crude individual attacks against AI data centers seem inevitable as the technology increasingly upends the routines of American life. The question is whether such violence will elicit more public sympathy than Smith's fires, even if perpetrated by militants who espouse outlandish political beliefs; the grain of truth in AI paranoia is many orders of magnitude larger than the one at the core of the anti-5G movement.

"If I had one message I could communicate about my beliefs, it would be, 'Why would the most creative and imaginative beings on Earth wish to create something that would make us obsolete?'" Smith told me. Once an enthusiastic supporter of President Trump—he says he nearly went to Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021—he now worries the current administration is glad to let giant AI companies make humans subordinate to machines.

Smith dreams of launching a podcast about the dangers of technology, though he acknowledges that people will be reluctant to listen to someone with his unsavory background. He insisted to me that he deeply regrets setting his fires, because doing so harmed his ability to become a trusted political voice. Yet toward the end of our time together in Texas, Smith asked if I wanted to see something cool. After making sure no guards were watching, he rose from his seat and smiled as he hiked up the left pant-leg of his white prison jumpsuit. Splashed across his entire calf was a beautifully rendered tattoo that he'd recently had inked by a fellow inmate. It shows a 5G tower engulfed in flames. W

KAT ABUGHAZALEH
FOR CONGRESS IL-09
KAT
ABUGHAZALEH
OR CONGRESS IL-09
ALEH
-09
KOOL
KATS

At 26 years old, Kat Abughazaleh thinks she's uniquely qualified for Congress. But running for office is a different sort of influencing.

KAT'S OUT OF THE BAG

BY KATE KNIBBS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NOLIS ANDERSON

KAT ABUGHAZALEH KNOWS HOW to create viral moments online. She's an old pro, in fact, capable of posting clips of herself that can rack up millions of views. But engineering attention in the physical world is a decidedly different challenge—one that Abughazaleh was struggling to solve on an overcast afternoon in July.

The 26-year-old, who is running for Congress in Illinois, was sitting outside her campaign headquarters in Chicago, trying to connect with prospective voters during the area's annual taco crawl. Some people were stopping to chat, but others hurried along in search of their next carnitas fix. On the internet, Abughazaleh can precision-edit a video to maximize eyeballs. On Clark Street, a busy thoroughfare that cuts across the city's northeastern neighborhoods, she had to convince people cruising for excellent Mexican food that she was worth delaying their next bite.

That day, at least, the solution was simple: hot sauce. Abughazaleh got a taste for the stuff growing up in Texas and never let go. She hauled out the collection of bottles she keeps in her office—many of them sent by a supporter—and lined up over a dozen on a table for pedestrians to douse their tacos. Within minutes, locals sloshing to-go margaritas in plastic cups stopped to pepper her with questions, like her stance on organized labor (pro), what her "main issue" is ("antiauthoritarianism"), and her thoughts on contemporary sci-fi and fantasy (*Red Rising* is superior to *A Song of Ice and Fire*). It seemed every other person had a friend who was a big fan. Supporters in cars honked periodically. With help from a volunteer who translated, Abughazaleh explained to a Spanish-speaking family that her office doubles as a mutual aid hub, stocked with free pantry items and open to "everyone except ICE." They took campaign stickers.

An older man with white whiskers and a "Make America Green Again" hat trotted over to the table after locking up his bike. Abughazaleh leaned forward, eager to engage on the issues. Before she got going, though, the man cut her off. "You have terrible posture," he chided her, explaining that he was a physical therapist. "Pull up your breastbone. Shoulders back."

Abughazaleh mimicked the man's movements, squaring her shoulders in her loose jean jacket and doing a heroic job at not looking annoyed. She asked what issues he cares about as he inspected her bearing. Turns out, they had plenty to discuss: ICE raids, the Supreme Court's perfidy. By the end of the conversation, the man was grabbing pamphlets and didn't seem to notice that Abughazaleh had curled herself back into a more comfortable position.

Seeing her deal with even the most condescending of constituents, you wouldn't know that this is Abughazaleh's first time running for office. She is at the forefront of a wave of left-leaning young people who are eager to change what electoral politics looks like in the United States. They are fueled by frustration with the Democratic Party establishment, many of whom have been in office longer than their challengers have been alive. (One of Abughazaleh's first campaign slogans was "What if We Didn't Suck?") Run for Something, a political action committee that recruits young progressives to run in down-ballot races, has seen more than 61,000 people reach out about running for office in 2025, more than the first three years of Donald Trump's first term combined, according to cofounder Amanda Litman.

"I JUST COULDN'T WATCH IT ANYMORE," ABUGHAZALEH SAYS. "I THOUGHT, FUCK IT, I'M GOING TO RUN."

In an intensely divided era, the Democratic Party is a uniting force: Both the left and the right agree that it does, in fact, suck. According to a poll from The Wall Street Journal this summer, 63 percent of surveyed voters have an unfavorable view of the party, its lowest rating since the Journal began its poll in 1989. While Abughazaleh's odds of winning a seat in the House of Representatives are long, her candidacy is one truly of the moment, not just enmeshed with but fueled by the collision between internet culture and mainstream politics.

"I CAN'T REMEMBER a time when I wasn't aware of politics," Abughazaleh says. As a child, though, her political perspective was quite different. Her maternal grandmother, Taffy Goldsmith, was a longtime Republican operative in Dallas, so affinity for the Grand Old Party was woven into the family fabric. One of Abughazaleh's favorite books as a kid was Lynne Cheney's *A for Abigail*, a gift from Goldsmith. In high school, Abughazaleh moved with her parents to Tucson, Arizona. She started drifting left when she saw her classmates struggle financially.

"I had friends that were much smarter and more talented than me who couldn't afford to go to college, even with a full ride, because that meant not being able to help take care of their families," she says. "That was the first crack where I was like, *maybe Ronald Reagan wasn't right about everything*."

Her full conversion was gradual—she wrote an op-ed for her school paper in 2016 titled "Marco Rubio Is My Candidate"—but by the time she entered George Washington University, during Trump's first term, she was a proud, protest-attending progressive. She started doing stand-up as a hobby, with Fox News as a frequent joke topic, inadvertently giving herself a crash course in public speaking. After graduating in 2020, she stayed in DC. She'd originally dreamed of a career as a foreign service officer or diplomat, but when a job as a researcher for the nonprofit conservative watchdog Media Matters for America came up, it seemed like the perfect fit. Now she'd be getting a paycheck for spending way too much

time watching Fox News. It wasn't a particularly big paycheck, so she bartended on the side; her first brush with online fame came not through Media Matters but when she went viral on Twitter in 2022 describing her experience having a drink spiked.

As a child, Abughazaleh taught herself video editing on Windows Movie Maker because she liked to make fan videos combining anime sequences and popular songs. She saw the potential in short-form video early on. "I realized that so many people get their information from video now, that if you want to reach more people, that's where you need to do it," she says. She started recording herself analyzing the antics of Fox News stars like Pete Hegseth and Tom Homan and putting the clips up on social media. She was good at it pretty much immediately. Compact and blonde, with round blue eyes, Abughazaleh is telegenic and quippy. She amassed hundreds of thousands of followers on platforms like TikTok, X, YouTube, and Instagram. She dove even further into working as an independent creator after Media Matters laid her off in the spring of 2024. The nonprofit's finances had been drained by a legal battle with Elon Musk's X, which sued Media Matters for defamation over a 2023 report on ads appearing next to pro-Nazi content.

Abughazaleh attended the Democratic National Convention in 2024 as part of the party's creator outreach program, shortly after moving to Chicago. "Brat" summer was coming to a close, and even people who had wanted an open primary were trying to embrace Kamala Harris as a candidate. "As a Palestinian person, I probably wouldn't have gone if Joe Biden was still the nominee," she says. She'd been hopeful that Harris might address the genocide in Gaza.

During some of the convention, Abughazaleh sat in with protesters outside the United Center, livestreaming their efforts to get Palestinian voices onstage. The DNC refused their requests. It was the moment she became acutely disillusioned with the Democratic Party. "We slept on the concrete," she says. "I got home that night—my whole body was covered in bruises, I'd been wearing the same clothes for like 36 hours—and I just started crying."

Her frustration intensified after Trump took office and the so-called Department of Government Efficiency started slashing federal programs with Elon Musk's help; she was appalled by Democrats' lack of action. "I just couldn't watch it anymore," she says. "I thought, fuck it, I'm going to run."

Abughazaleh launched her campaign for Congress this past March in a roughly two-minute speech posted on social media. "Donald Trump and Elon Musk are dismantling our country piece by piece, and so many Democrats seem content to just sit back and let them," she began, her cadence inflected with the peppy tone of a veteran YouTuber as she pledged to properly fight the MAGA movement. It was a splashy and very DIY political debut.

She was challenging Jan Schakowsky, an 81-year-old who had been representing Illinois' Ninth District since 1999. Abughazaleh's candidacy was framed in the media as the next front in the war between young firebrand progressives and older, establishment Democrats who weren't doing enough to stand up to Trump—in no small part because that's how Abughazaleh talked about it. From the start, she sought to frame her campaign in national terms, in part as a way to explain why she sought to leapfrog from TikTok to Capitol Hill. "There's so many incredible local and state officials here. They don't need my experience. My experience is better used fighting actual

fascists," she tells me. "All the people I used to cover, they don't run Illinois. They run the country, and I'm the only one that's gone toe-to-toe with them."

Immediately, Abughazaleh's campaign garnered far more attention than most Congressional efforts, especially primaries in solid-blue territory like the Ninth. She had zero governing experience, had only recently moved to Chicago, and didn't even yet live in the district she is trying to represent—but she was very good at pitching herself on the internet. A rush of donations poured in, including contributions from Mark Ruffalo and Andrew Yang. Abughazaleh's campaign rejects corporate donations on principle and instead relies on individual supporters. So far, she has raised more than her competitors—upwards of $1 million, with the average donation hovering around $32. Bluesky, she says, is her biggest fundraising platform by far.

Abughazaleh is a distinctly contemporary type of celebrity politician. She doesn't have the widespread name recognition of a more mainstream pundit like Rachel Maddow, but the people who *do* know her are really paying attention. This can be both a blessing and a curse. Abughazaleh's campaign relies on the strength of her online fandom to raise funds and awareness, and she intends to mobilize as many of those people as possible to volunteer and vote. Her heightened profile online, though, means that her moves are closely dissected.

Early in the campaign, Abughazaleh's relationship with former reporter Ben Collins, who became CEO of the Chicago-based satirical newspaper The Onion last year, came under the microscope. When the Chicago Tribune reported that the couple had rented an apartment for $4,000 a month when they first arrived in the city, it was a mini scandal. How dare these coastal elites splash out so extravagantly while Abughazaleh fashioned herself a woman of the people! (She acknowledges that Collins provides her a financial cushion; he's also one of the campaign's largest individual donors.)

The pair have since moved to a modest walk-up near Abughazaleh's office. In an effort to prove that she's not rich, Abughazaleh posted a photo of what she said was her checking account to social media: $4,947. She demonetized her social accounts when she started her run for office, so her only income comes from a Patreon account she set up solely to sell subscriptions for photographs of her orange cat, Heater. It brings in around $650 a month.

Meanwhile, she's trying to turn scrutiny from her ideological foes into an advantage. On the campaign trail, she often brings up how she was deposed by lawyers representing Musk's X Corp. last fall as part of the Media Matters lawsuit. After far-right Trump confidante Laura Loomer ranted about Abughazaleh on X, exhorting her to "cover her cooch," referring to her as a "communist," and implying she was a sex worker, Abughazaleh incorporated the post into a call for donations. In fact, Abughazaleh regularly frames the negative attention as a major selling point for her candidacy. She takes every available opportunity to convey that she's not just willing but eager to tussle with her enemies. In May, she posted a video titled "Republicans Can't Stop Being Weird About Me." "I'm really pissing off all the right people," she says with a smile.

Abughazaleh is good at this kind of messaging, promoting herself in opposition to a rival. But this spring, the original storyline propelling her campaign changed drastically when Jan Schakowsky announced that after 14 terms in Congress, she would not be running again. *Bye-bye, incumbent vs. upstart.* The new dynamics within the race would produce a much messier narrative.

Abughazaleh grew up with close Republican relatives but is now part of a very online left. Here, she meets with people in her Chicago campaign headquarters.

If the first phase of Abughazaleh's campaign was framed as a showdown between the new and old guards, the race for the Ninth District today looks more like a battle royale.

Since Schakowsky bowed out of the race, a dozen more Democrats have jumped into the fray (and some have already jumped back out). There's another Gen Z candidate, 27-year-old Bushra Amiwala, who was at one point the youngest Muslim elected official in the United States. Then there's 36-year-old Illinois state representative Hoan Huynh, who ran a winning underdog campaign back in 2023, as well as 42-year-old Illinois state senator Mike Simmons, who is both the first Ethiopian American member and the first openly gay member of the Illinois State Senate. While they're not getting invited onto national cable news shows like Abughazaleh is, they all have enthusiastic volunteers—not to mention local governing experience and ties to the community that Abughazaleh lacks.

Another competitor has proven openly hostile. Bethany Johnson, a trans woman who is also running on a progressive platform, sees Abughazaleh as an enemy. According to Johnson, Abughazaleh supporters on Bluesky made cruel jokes at her expense, treatment that amounted to harassment. Johnson responded by repeatedly showing up at Abughazaleh's office with protest signs, roller-skating back and forth in her underwear, and deliberately making herself vomit outside its doors. Abughazaleh filed a "stalking no contact" court order against Johnson to get her to stop.

But Abughazaleh's biggest headache is Daniel Biss. A slender, energetic 48-year-old with a fantastic head of silvery hair, Biss is a local progressive sweetheart. During his time as mayor, Evanston became the first US city to offer reparations to Black residents. "Let's take on the billionaire class together," his Instagram bio reads. He has already nabbed endorsements from US senator Elizabeth Warren and several unions. In a poll commissioned by Abughazaleh's campaign, he emerged as the front-runner.

And yet, when I asked Abughazaleh this summer whether she was confident that she'd win, she answered without hesitating: "Extremely." We were sitting on a couch inside her office, surrounded by hand-painted signs made by volunteers and shelves of free items on offer to the community, from books to baby wipes. She didn't want to discuss her opponents.

"We have the momentum," she continued. The campaign was, indeed, on a roll—donations keep pouring in—and she scored her first major endorsement at the end of July from US representative Ro Khanna of California, who called her "the absolute best that the Democratic party has to offer."

She's working diligently on her ground game, too, often hitting three to six campaign stops a day. She hired a fellow Gen Z campaign manager, Sam Weinberg, who lived in Evanston as a child; they're focusing on a series of mutual-aid-oriented programs and events, from picking up garbage at the lakefront and local parks to parties where the cost of entry was tampons, boxes of pads, or supplies for the headquarters' food bank. This August, they handed out hundreds of backpacks filled with school supplies to local children. The reception to this analog politicking has been positive. While visiting her office this summer, I saw people coming in to drop off donations—one guy arrived with a frankly confusing number of computer monitors—and to pick up supplies like tampons and baby food.

Abughazaleh has been compared to New York mayoral primary winner Zohran Mamdani, another young, charismatic leftist with a flair for short-form video. Mamdani's success stemmed from much more than just his internet game, though—he's a lifelong New Yorker who was already a state lawmaker; plus, his opponent was Andrew Cuomo, a true foil with a troubled campaign. In some ways, Abughazaleh's candidacy more closely resembles that of Deja Foxx, another Gen Z content creator who just lost big in the Arizona primary. Like Abughazaleh, Foxx had to go up against a fellow progressive. It's clear that Abughazaleh is trying to draw lessons from campaigns like Mamdani's, as she focuses on meeting as many constituents as possible in person and pays specific attention to people who might not otherwise vote at all.

One afternoon, her headquarters was filled with around 40 people who'd shown up to be assigned to canvass blocks this fall. (More than 6,000 people have signed up to volunteer in total.) Abughazaleh's strategy relies on motivating people who feel alienated from mainstream politics, and many volunteers looked more likely to have lurked in an online forum on the works of Peter Kropotkin than to have previously helped out with a Democrat's campaign.

"I UNDERSTAND FAR-RIGHT NARRATIVES AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN A WAY THAT MANY OF OUR LAWMAKERS DO NOT. I'M THE MOST EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR."

I sat with two men who were organizing merch, including stickers that said "Sluts Vote (for Kat)." They were both fans who followed her on social media—but here they were, in the flesh. Neither had worked on a campaign before, and they both appreciated Abughazaleh's emphasis on mutual aid as a way to participate in politics without feeling gross. "I wanted to do something with my pain and anger that wasn't destructive," one told me as he sliced through a sheet of the stickers with scissors, arranging them into neat piles.

There have been missteps too. In August, the same week that Bushra Amiwala held a prayer service for some of the Democrats trying to block redistricting in Texas, and Daniel Biss marched in a protest against Trump with the same Texas politicians, and Hoan Huynh scored an endorsement from one of them, Abughazaleh spoke at a bizarre, sparsely attended protest against a Popeye's chicken restaurant coming to Evanston organized by a group associated with alternative health businesses. It was her first big whiff of the election cycle.

Why would an aspiring member of Congress meddle in a NIMBYish dispute meant for a local city council? She'd gotten involved, she said, when she'd heard that a payday loan business might potentially be part of the space, but still received pushback, especially since it doesn't appear like that's the case. (Sample Bluesky comment: "I'm a supporter and this isn't a deal breaker or anything, but in this case the critics are right.") Another one of her opponents, state senator Laura Fine, pointed out on social media that Illinois legislators had already passed laws making it difficult to operate payday-loan businesses. The implied message: If Abughazaleh knew more of the district's backstory, she wouldn't have made this mistake. And, well, that's probably correct.

Abughazaleh's viability as a candidate has always hinged on the idea that this race will not be determined by familiarity with Illinois legislative history. She was never going to be the first choice for voters who above all else value deep ties to the area. (She might be last.) Same with governing experience. In a race stacked with progressives, Abughazaleh says that her background interrogating the online MAGA media ecosystem makes her best suited to thwart them in Congress. "I understand far-right narratives and conspiracy theories in a way that many of our lawmakers do not," Abughazaleh says. "I'm the most effective communicator."

It's a theory of politics that fuses online performance with real-world experience, a wager that the candidate most effectively fighting the right wing on the internet is the best one to combat it in person. She's betting that voters, above all else, want a brawler.

KATE KNIBBS *is a senior writer at* WIRED.

BY MAKENA KELLY, JAKE LAHUT, AND ELISA MUYL

Introducing WIRED's 2025 Political Power Users—the 22 very online creators, podcasters, and pundits who will blow up the next electoral era.

ART BY RUI PU

THE OLD

DONALD TRUMP'S SECOND term has ushered in a new era in American politics. It's brasher, crueler, more direct, more super online, and certainly more dystopian.

Democrats and sometimes even Republicans have struggled to compete with Trump's monopoly on the attention market. But the leaders of both parties are only mortal—yes, even Trump—and they're not going to be around forever.

A new generation of political talent is muscling its way onto the scene, armed with new ways of connecting with the masses and original visions of the country they want to live in. Here are the candidates, the influencers, and the insiders on both the left and the right that we think you'll keep hearing from, and why. You might just remember when you spotted a future president in this edition of WIRED.

* THE * DIGITAL NATIVES

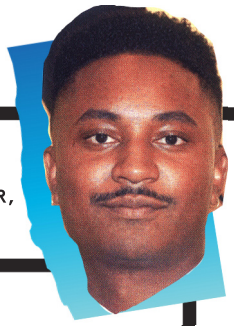
After the shock of the 2024 election loss, some Democrats became convinced of the need for a "liberal Joe Rogan"—someone to appeal to the podcast-bro demographic that helped put Trump back in the White House. But there are already Democrats and progressives who know how to mobilize an online audience—and think they know where the party's communications have gone wrong.

Melted Solids

PRODUCTION AGENCY, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

If you were caught up in the avalanche of content coming from the New York City mayoral primary race, you likely saw a video by Melted Solids, which worked with Zohran Mamdani early on in his campaign. Cofounders Anthony DiMieri and Debbie Saslaw come from advertising and content production backgrounds, not politics. They bring a documentary-style approach focused on platforming regular people. "Listening, not lecturing," as Saslaw describes it. One of their most viral collaborations with Mamdani is a video of the candidate interviewing Trump voters (and nonvoters) in Queens and the Bronx.

But not everyone can nail the essence of a Melted Solids video, or even understand what makes them special. In Andrew Cuomo's unsuccessful attempt at mimicking Mamdani, he's seen hand-shaking and back-slapping potential voters, but their voices remain unheard. You're likely to keep seeing DiMieri and Saslaw's influence on political messaging, though, thanks to Mamdani's upset victory in June.



Chi Ossé

CITY COUNCIL MEMBER, NEW YORK CITY

"Before I am an elected official, before I am a son, before I am a brother, I am a shitposter, and I have always been. I grew up using the internet."

—CHI OSSÉ

"Before I am an elected official, before I am a son, before I am a brother, I am a shitposter, and I have always been," says Ossé. "If there's another language that I speak, it is the internet." The 27-year-old City Council member is the creator of several videos with millions of views on Instagram, including his series "Why Shit Not Working?" that breaks down the most intransigent elements of New York City's dysfunction.

Ossé frequently uses his online presence to galvanize public opinion and even once to pass policy. With one social media call in 2023, he got more than 1,000 people to attend a board meeting on rent guidelines to voice concern about a double-digit percent proposed increase on rent-stabilized apartments. Now other politicians are taking cues from his success, including Mamdani—Ossé says he had to remind the mayoral candidate to post his campaign launch video on TikTok.

Deja Foxx

DIGITAL STRATEGIST, ARIZONA

Foxx's star rose practically overnight in 2017, when the then-16-year-old's exchange with US senator Jeff Flake over his vote to restrict funding to Planned Parenthood went viral. The activist and content creator built a career on that moment, working as a digital strategist for the Kamala Harris 2020 campaign and then appearing as a speaker at the 2024 Democratic National Convention.

This year, the 25-year-old launched her own campaign in a special election for the late Raúl Grijalva's Arizona congressional seat. In a July TikTok video that she filmed with family members, she reminisced about filing campaign paperwork online: alone, in her bedroom, "with no staff, no donor list."

The rest of her social media is just as earnest and direct, featuring front-facing videos that ground her progressive policies in her life experience: Foxx was raised by a single mom, experienced homelessness, and relied on federally funded programs like Section 8 and Title X.

While Foxx ultimately lost the primary to Adelita Grijalva, Raúl's daughter, her digital strategy generated notable momentum in the last few weeks of her campaign. She hit 300,000 TikTok followers and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in small donations. Despite her loss, Foxx caught the attention of younger progressives in the House of Representatives, who say they are excited about her future in politics.

GETTY IMAGES; ASSOCIATED PRESS

Manny Rutinel

STATE REPRESENTATIVE, COLORADO

Rutinel, 30, may have invented a new way to campaign online: via heartfelt Instagram photo montages set to pop music, sometimes sung by the man himself. Now he's deploying these videos in the race to unseat Republican representative Gabe Evans in Colorado's Eighth District, which is projected to be one of the midterms' most competitive races.

Rutinel's posts are often deliberately hammy. (He once did a Christopher Walken impression to announce a motion in the Colorado state legislature.) They also consistently deliver his campaign message: that he's a champion for working people because of his own working-class upbringing. (Rutinel did not respond to WIRED's request for an interview.)

In the first six months of 2025, Rutinel raised more than $1.6 million, about half of which came from small-dollar donations. In the crowded field of Democratic candidates opposing Evans, he is the only one who has kept up with the Republican's fundraising. As the race gains national attention, Rutinel's distinct online presence might earn some copycats in years to come.

THE *MAGA* BABIES

Over on the right, some of the youngest members of Trumpworld have iterated on The Donald's playbook, mixing traditional and new media to reach the base and capture everyone else's attention.

Natalie Winters

POLITICAL COMMENTATOR, WASHINGTON, DC

The 24-year-old White House correspondent for Real America's Voice knows how to make an entrance. She's part of the West Wing's new, young, and vocally right-wing press corps, and her outfits alone generated entire news cycles early in the second Trump administration—mostly thanks to the Daily Mail compiling social media scoldings over her more casual attire. Winters leaned into it, dunking on them and using the coverage to keep building her brand.

Winters, who abstains from both alcohol and tap water as part of her wellness regimen, tells WIRED that she thinks the MAHA movement is the new "gateway drug" for the GOP.

Winters also cohosts *War Room* on Real America's Voice with Steve Bannon, her mentor, and has a direct line to the MAGA base heading into 2028.

Anna Paulina Luna

US REPRESENTATIVE, FLORIDA

The 36-year-old Air Force veteran is the apotheosis of the GOP's digital strategy: the nation's first influencer turned right-wing member of Congress. Paulina Luna got there with a canny sense for what works online, and what doesn't.

"If you want to be effective in the future of politics, especially in the next presidential election or the next statewide races, you have to have a presence on social media," she told WIRED. "But it can't be a shit presence. It has to be a legit presence, because people can see right through it."

"It has to be a legit presence, because people can see right through it. And people don't want the cringey content. They want genuine content."

—ANNA PAULINA LUNA

Paulina Luna may have clips of her appearances on Fox News to share, but she says followers would much rather see her extemporize directly to her iPhone for 45 seconds on whatever subject, from UFOs to the culture wars. The House GOP has taken notice of Paulina Luna's success: Her communications director was invited to speak to members about how to use vertical video.

Brett Cooper

MEDIA PERSONALITY, NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

After building a formidable following with her Daily Wire show *The Comments Section*, 23-year-old Cooper struck out on her own earlier this year. Within six months of launching on YouTube, in early 2025, *The Brett Cooper Show* accrued more than 1.5 million subscribers, racking up hundreds of thousands of views each episode.

Cooper doesn't stray far from the politics-meets-pop-culture formula that made her Daily Wire show a success, but she has ditched explicitly partisan rhetoric for more coded cultural commentary. She picks topics that capture the attention of young women, offering a light-touch conservative critique of, say, Blake Lively's lawsuit against Justin Baldoni.

"I never want my content to be a time suck," Cooper says. "I never want it to be like mindless fluff."

> ***"As I grew up, I began to question why so many Hispanics consider themselves Democrats, since the majority of us have been raised with strong conservative values."***
>
> —MAYRA FLORES

Mayra Flores

CONGRESSIONAL CANDIDATE, SOUTHERN TEXAS

The 39 year-old Flores became the first Mexican-born congresswoman in 2022, when she flipped a Texas House seat—the 34th District—in a special election. After losing the next two races for that district, she's now going to try again, thanks to redistricting that has made the area much redder.

Flores aims her candidacy directly at the idea of demographic destiny. "As I grew up, I began to question why so many Hispanics consider themselves Democrats, since the majority of us have been raised with strong conservative values," she says in one of her earliest campaign videos. "The Hispanic community is pro-God, pro-life, pro-family, pro-America." (Flores did not respond to WIRED's request for an interview.)

THE HETERODOX REPUBLICANS

The coalition that helped elect Barack Obama twice—college-educated, young, Black, and Latino voters—cracked in 2016 and fractured completely in 2024. Now a new slate of candidates on the right are trying to prove that it's not just Trump who can broaden the GOP's base.

Amir Hassan

POLITICAL CANDIDATE, MICHIGAN

The Navy veteran is running to flip Michigan's Eighth District as a "proud Muslim" who supports Israel and the America First agenda. If he wins, Hassan would represent his native Flint, the seat of a yearslong water crisis that has shaken residents' trust in government.

Today, the district leans left. But Genesee County, where Flint sits, shifted more than 5 percentage points for Trump in 2024. Hassan sees an opportunity for change.

"Where I'm from, we're raised to think Democrats are the good guys. We've been held culturally hostage for over half a century," the 39 year-old says in a campaign video. "But look around. Flint is what happens when your vote is taken for granted." (Hassan's campaign also declined to be interviewed for this piece.)

> ***"I think the only way we fix the Democratic Party is it's got to be whole new people with new ideas, who are clear on what they stand for and what they're fighting for, taking over the party."***
>
> —SAIKAT CHAKRABARTI

THE MUTINY ON THE LEFT

A growing group of Democratic politicians at different levels of government have challenged their party's fecklessness with plans to address intractable problems like public safety and the cost of living. The most ambitious among them want to completely remake Congress.

Saikat Chakrabarti

POLITICAL ADVISER AND CONGRESSIONAL CANDIDATE, BAY AREA, CALIFORNIA

The 39-year-old Chakrabarti cofounded Brand New Congress—which was aligned with the so-called Justice Democrats, the group that recruited Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. He ran AOC's campaign before becoming her chief of staff in Washington, where he helped write the Green New Deal.

Chakrabarti says he felt compelled to run for Nancy Pelosi's seat in Congress after he watched the House Democratic leader and other Democrats in the wake of Trump's 2024 win, "helpless to really change anything." He has a detailed set of proposals for California's Eleventh District, including the extensive Mission for America plan to transform the US economy through massive mobilization and investment in green technology. The country needs ambition on that scale, he says, to kick it out of its current state of disorder. Chakrabarti hopes to inspire others to run for Congress and remake the Democratic Party.

"It's got to be whole new people with new ideas, who are clear on what they stand for and what they're fighting for, taking over the party," he says.

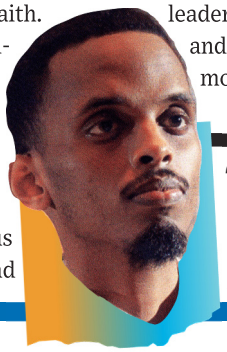
GETTY IMAGES; ASSOCIATED PRESS

Omar Fateh
STATE SENATOR, MINNESOTA

Fateh has been called the "Mamdani of Minneapolis," nominally because he is also a state legislator challenging an incumbent mayor with a campaign focused on affordability and standing up to Trump. But the comparison has been wielded in transparently racist ways, too: Charlie Kirk began fearmongering over the 35-year-old's Islamic faith.

Fateh says the current Democratic mayor of Minneapolis, Jacob Frey, has failed to end homelessness and transform public safety in a city still grappling with the murder of George Floyd. His primary focus is on the city's cost of living, and he's bringing proposals to raise the minimum wage, spur housing development, and implement rent stabilization. But a trail of dueling op-eds in the Minneapolis Star Tribune signals that some consider this race a battle between the democratic socialist wing of the party and the moderate progressives.

"Who does our city trust to lead in the time of crisis?" Fateh says. "Do we want leadership that's rooted in justice and compassion, or do we want more performative politics?"



Brandon Scott
MAYOR, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

While Trump and the right obsess over imagined crime waves in Blue State cities, they have conveniently ignored the real turnaround Scott has overseen in Baltimore. The 41-year-old was elected in 2020 after a handful of corruption scandals involving previous Democratic mayors. Five years and one reelection later, the city has seen homicides drop to their lowest level in a decade, thanks in part to his detailed plan to reduce gun violence.

"Do we want leadership that's rooted in justice and compassion, or do we want more performative politics?"

—OMAR FATEH

Mallory McMorrow
STATE SENATE MAJORITY WHIP, MICHIGAN

The 39-year-old state senator became a minor celebrity among politics nerds in 2022. After a Republican colleague delivered an invocation on the state senate floor, claiming "children are under attack," McMorrow walked out of the chamber. Several days later, that same politician sent out a fundraising email with the baseless allegation that McMorrow wants to "groom and sexualize kindergartners." In a speech addressing the email, McMorrow said, "I am the biggest threat to your hollow, hateful scheme ... Hate will only win if people like me stand by and let it happen." That video, of course, went viral.

McMorrow could have been a flash in the pan, but she managed to make that moment last, becoming a highly sought-after campaign surrogate and featured speaker at fundraising events around the country. Now she's running for US Senate in one of the most competitive races of the 2025 midterms. One of her influences, McMorrow tells WIRED, came from working at Gawker.

"You can talk about policy, you can talk about powerful people, you can talk about something fun, and you can mix and match these things," she says. "That's what I do in my digital presence sometimes: I'm talking about being a mom, and a funny thing my daughter said on Instagram last night."

FROM Viral hits TO POLITICAL * STARS *

It used to be a predictable arc for those who wanted to climb the Democratic Party ranks: Spend a few terms on the back benches of Congress or in a state legislature, gain some seniority, get a leadership role on a good committee, and then, maybe, you could say you had arrived.

Now a whole host of Democrats who grew up online have been able to sustain viral fame and turn it into fundraising and organizing prowess.

Zach Wahls
STATE SENATOR, IOWA

Wahls had his own stand-and-deliver moment back in 2011, when the then-19-year-old spoke at a public forum about how, while he was "raised by two women," his family wasn't so different from other Iowans. After his remarks went viral, Wahls built a community around children of same-sex parents and won a state senate seat in 2019.

"I had no idea the impact that speech would have on my life," Wahls, now 34, tells WIRED. But it revealed something to him. Authenticity has a way of cutting through the noise. Now he's running for Joni Ernst's US Senate seat.

Wahls is also attuned to what's at the core of younger voters' beef with the US economic and political system. "It feels like the ladder is being pulled up," the Democrat says. "So many people can't become homeowners, can't start a career, can't start a family ... those issues affect people in the most personal and intimate parts of their lives." With his focus on economic populism, including campaign promises to break up monopolies and raise the minimum wage, Wahls is charting a potential course for young Democratic hopefuls in redder states.

THE *TEXAS* CORNER

The Lone Star State sits at the crossroads of America's changing political landscape. Over the past few years, a new generation of unapologetically progressive Democrats have challenged the GOP's grasp on politics, threatening to shift the state blue. That fight exploded in spectacular fashion at the Texas statehouse this summer when Republicans tried to force a vote gerrymandering themselves more deep-red districts.

Isaiah Martin

US HOUSE CANDIDATE, HOUSTON, TEXAS

"I do see a blue Texas on the horizon, but it starts with getting our infrastructure right and organizing right now."

—ISAIAH MARTIN

Martin started out in politics as a voting-rights activist at the University of Houston, but the 27-year-old had his breakout moment this year as Republicans attempted to push through their controversial gerrymandering effort. In an act of civil disobedience that went viral online, Martin was arrested and forced out of a public hearing. (The charges were later dropped.)

"I do see a blue Texas on the horizon," says Martin, who is running in a special election for the 18th District this November. But to get there, he says, Democrats need to fight fire with fire. That means more protesting and using similarly controversial tactics, like breaking legislative quorum. "We've tried to hold ourselves to a different moral standard," Martin says. "On the other side, you have Republicans that are going for a jugular."

Texas Democrats fleeing the state to avoid a vote on the GOP's gerrymandering bill is a good start, according to Martin, but the real challenge will be whether they dare to do more.

James Talarico

STATE REPRESENTATIVE, AUSTIN, TEXAS

The 36-year-old former public school teacher went viral with a speech opposing a bill that would require public schools to display the Ten Commandments in classrooms. The clip landed him on Joe Rogan's podcast earlier this summer. The interview, which has nearly a million views on YouTube, shot Talarico to political stardom, positioning him as one of the most promising Texas progressives in recent years.

"People are fascinated by Texas, always have been," Talarico says. "They are excited by our state. They're terrified by our state. Texas is America on steroids."

THE *CONNECT*ORS

Often, the most powerful movers and shakers in Washington, DC, are the faces you see the least (well, anywhere other than their own social media feeds). They're on the phone connecting their politician bosses with podcasters or throwing parties establishing a new political scene.

Alex Bruesewitz

POLITICAL ADVISER, WASHINGTON, DC

As senior media adviser to Trump's reelection campaign, the 28 year-old Bruesewitz was the mastermind behind the president's podcast strategy. By placing Trump on shows like Theo Von's *This Past Weekend* and the NELK Boys' *Full Send Podcast*, Bruesewitz helped young, predominantly male audiences see the president in a new light.

"Whether you're a comedian making people laugh, or you're a frat bro chugging beer and body-slamming a ping-pong table," Bruesewitz says, "you have to lean into your authenticity." Now, Bruesewitz is leading digital messaging at Never Surrender, Trump's leadership PAC, setting the tone for how MAGA Republicans communicate online.

COURTESY OF ISAIAH MARTIN; GETTY IMAGES

CJ Pearson

INFLUENCER, WASHINGTON, DC

The 23-year-old Trump stan may have started out as a social media influencer, but he has quickly become one of the most important people in digital MAGAworld. Pearson helped throw one of the biggest parties during inauguration weekend—sponsored by TikTok—which included some of the trendier names in MAGA politics, such as Riley Gaines and Bryce Hall. Now he's building his own political-influencer marketing company, leveraging the connections he has made online over the years to support Republican candidates and issues.

Andrew Schulz

COMEDIAN AND PODCASTER, NEW YORK

Schulz might claim he isn't political, but the people vying to appear on his show, *Flagrant*, sure are. The 41-year-old had one of the most memorable interviews with Trump during the campaign when they chatted about universal insurance coverage for IVF. More recently, Schulz has ripped Trump for flip-flopping on the issue. He has also criticized Trump on his refusal to release files from the Jeffrey Epstein case, which he said amounted to "insulting our intelligence." Now *Flagrant* is the closest thing to a swing state in the podcast landscape.

Jordan Bardella

NATIONAL RALLY PRESIDENT, FRANCE

With over 1 million followers on Instagram, 30-year-old Bardella has leaned into his reputation as a *beau gosse*—French for a good-looking man—by mixing meticulously edited photos with more casual scenes showing him with his family and glad-handing with voters. Those powerful parasocial relationships make him the perfect 21st-century successor to Marine Le Pen. He knows how to put a TV-ready face on the National Rally, which has gone from a fringe movement in France to the most popular party in the country. With Bardella as its leader, RN has mirrored the GOP and other far-right parties in Europe with its hostility toward supporting Ukraine against the Russian invasion, and continues its long tradition of opposing most forms of immigration. However, sometimes the American variety of fascism is too much, even for him: Bardella canceled an appearance at CPAC—traditionally the biggest conservative confab in the US—after Steve Bannon gave what appeared to be a Nazi salute.

*EXPORTED TO EUROPE

While Trumpism and its more youth-oriented offshoots are remaking American politics, there's a far-right renaissance on the other side of the Atlantic too. A new generation of European politicians and influencers are using their clout to continue improving the prospects of parties and policies that were once seen as too extreme to have any chance of success.

Andrea Stroppa

ELON MUSK FANBOY, ITALY

The computer scientist and prolific poster on X, who is in his early thirties, is called Musk's representative in Italy by local media. Like his role model, Stroppa tries to shape politics through unfiltered posts on social media, whether he's accusing the Italian government of purportedly drafting "anti-Musk" amendments or calling for the resignation of the interior minister. Given the chance, he'd probably put his home country on the DOGE diet to cut down on government bureaucracy and spending.

MAKENA KELLY *is a senior writer at* WIRED *focused on the intersection of politics, power, and technology.*

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY JUSTIN METZ

BY NOAH SHACHTMAN

SPACE EMPEROR

ELON MUSK CONTROLS THOUSANDS OF INTERNET SATELLITES AND MORE THAN HALF THE WORLD'S ROCKET LAUNCHES. CAN ANYONE STOP HIM?

JUST OFF THE Jimmy Buffett Memorial Highway, the hotel's rooftop bar is open late. The bartender passes out shots and turns Ozzy up. It's 11:37 pm on a hot July night in Cape Canaveral, Florida, when our heads all swivel in the same direction. A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket takes off, its orange plume glowing bright, about 12 miles due north up the Banana River. The "Iron Man" riff starts to blast.

It's fun for the couple dozen of us there. When we hear the thud of the sonic boom, most everyone lets out some kind of hoot. But for Elon Musk, it's just another Tuesday. This is SpaceX's 95th launch of the year, one nearly every other day. That's more liftoffs than the rest of the world gets into space, combined.

On this particular night, this Falcon 9 took 28 Starlink internet satellites to orbit. Starlink, of course, is another Musk space venture that dominates its competitors. His constellation has more than 8,000 satellites; its closest competitor, Eutelsat's OneWeb, has about 630 satellites, each supplying less than 1/10th the bandwidth of a Starlink. Amazon is going all in on its own service, called Project Kuiper and led by SpaceX's former satellite chief. The terms of Kuiper's license from the feds require it to get 1,600 satellites into orbit by the middle of next year. So far, the Amazon constellation has 102.

It's hard to quantify, even with those numbers, the geopolitical power that Musk now commands by way of his two space businesses. When Starlink went down for a couple of hours in late July, troops on both sides of the Russia-Ukraine conflict had trouble connecting with their drones—and one another. "Everyone thought it was purely on the front lines, until reports started coming in that he had fallen all over the world," one officer stationed near the city of Kupiansk, along the Oskil River in eastern Ukraine, texts me. That's how central Musk is to modern warfare. Two days after the launch I watched from the hotel roof, another Falcon 9 took off from Cape Canaveral, this one carrying four astronauts aboard a Dragon capsule to the International Space Station. SpaceX's Dragon is currently America's only way to get humans into space, as Musk reminded his one-time ally Donald Trump when the president threatened Musk's government contracts.

It's hard to quantify, even with those numbers, the geopolitical power that Musk now commands by way of his two space businesses.

Now, Musk has a chance to leverage his two dominant positions into a third. For the first time in decades, America is openly working on the weaponization of space, in response to what the Pentagon claims are threats from Russia and China. The Pentagon is investing in spacecraft that can fly up to other countries' satellites and attack. Separately, the president has pledged $175 billion for a program that could eventually entail hundreds and hundreds of orbiting interceptors and even more communications satellites to allow them to work together.

Musk's companies are unlikely to build the weapons themselves. But getting them into space, and getting them to talk to one another, that is most certainly in their wheelhouse. So while Musk may not have open access to the Oval Office like he used to, there's no conceivable way such a buildup won't benefit SpaceX. The open question is, by how much? When the orbiting rifles are handed out, how many gun lockers will Elon have the keys to?

You might be a little numb at this point to the degree of control that billionaires have over our lives. But you've watched Elon Musk stomp and smash and rage his way through politics and policy, even as his companies continue to pull off engineering feats that were once the stuff of sci-fi. So you get what's at stake if he's given an outsize role in the weaponization of space. (SpaceX did not respond to requests for comment.)

"The US government depends upon him very heavily," Victoria Samson, the chief of space security at the Secure World Foundation, tells me. "So even before the election, I had been asking US space officials: 'You have yoked yourself to a very mercurial personality. Doesn't that concern you?'"

GETTY IMAGES

1 ROCKETS

AS RECENTLY AS the early 2010s, getting to space was expensive and slow. The United States attempted fewer than 20 launches per year. Rockets can cost $10,000 per kilogram or more. Musk and now-legendary rocket engineer Tom Mueller broke through, in part, by being scrappy: They'd swap NASA's $1,500 latches for ones made for bathroom stalls that cost just $30, and they'd use commercial air-conditioners for the Falcon 9's payload bay rather than buy a cooling system for an estimated $3 million.

While Musk likes to keep up an anti-establishment image, he very much played the Washington game. He drew on his alliances with like-minded people in the government, such as then NASA administrator Michael Griffin, who advocated for cheaper, easier access to space—especially to low Earth orbit, which starts around 100 miles up. When Musk felt others didn't share that vision, he sued, like the time he alleged that the Air Force had acted illegally when it gave the era's space monopolist, a joint venture between Boeing and Lockheed Martin called United Launch Alliance, an $11 billion contract for 36 rocket cores.

When the suit didn't produce instant results, Musk went jingoistic. A few months earlier, in February 2014, Russia had invaded Ukraine, illegally annexing the Crimean Peninsula and triggering a global wave of condemnation against Moscow. Musk rode that wave in his successful push to get Congress and the Obama administration to wind down use of the United Launch Alliance's signature rocket, the Atlas V, because it relied on Russian RD-180 engines. (The suit was eventually settled out of court.) The combination helped break ULA's grip on government space launches.

Another big leap came in 2017. SpaceX started reusing its rocket cores, which dramatically brought down the price of getting to orbit. (Eight years later, its Falcon 9 and Falcon Heavy are still the only rockets in their weight classes with reusable cores.) But nothing was more important than Mueller's continued development of SpaceX's Merlin engine. It became one of the most durable in aerospace history, even though, as a former employee told me, "performance-wise, it's terrible." Its power and efficiency are nothing special. "We didn't have the resources to do a lot of design and analysis," he adds. "And so we just tested the ever-loving shit out of the engine. We hot-fired it thousands of times. Now they have an engine that's super robust."

Today, thanks in part to its nine reusable Merlin engines, a Falcon 9 can take a kilogram to low Earth orbit for one-third the previous cost; the Falcon Heavy, which uses 27 Merlins, drops the cost nearly in half again. Some 85 percent of Falcon 9 missions go to space with previously used first stages. In 2022, SpaceX jumped from doing around 30 launches per year to more than 60, and last year it hit 138. NASA's space launch and human exploration efforts are now almost entirely controlled by Musk. A whole new space economy has grown up around him, one that relies on his cheap space access to get networks of small spacecraft into low Earth orbit. Take Planet Labs, the satellite imaging company. Hundreds of its spacecraft were carried by Falcon 9.

Really, no one is even trying to catch up; they're just trying to find niches in a Musk-dominated ecosystem. ULA is building rockets optimized to reach geostationary orbits, which are farther out, even as many of its customers follow Musk's lead and keep their satellite constellations closer to Earth. Upstarts like Rocket Lab and Firefly are admired for their ingenuity. But their current operational rockets are *tiny* by comparison—capable of carrying, at most, a couple thousand pounds, versus 140,000 for the Falcon Heavy.

"SpaceX is a cornerstone in the space industry. And then there's other cornerstones, like Firefly. We're very complementary to SpaceX," says Jason Kim, the CEO of Firefly Aerospace. "It's kind of like air, land, and sea. There's no one-size-fits-all kind of transportation method." (Kim's not alone in this thinking; Firefly just went public at a valuation of $8.5 billion; Rocket Lab's market cap is about $21 billion.)

Jeff Bezos has the cash to compete with SpaceX. And he's certainly been at it long enough—his rocket company, Blue Origin, started a quarter-century ago. But it has had, shall we say, competing priorities. It's been hard at work on engines; its BE-4 engine is actually powering the

SPACEX BY THE NUMBERS (APPROXIMATELY)

VALUED AT
$400B

TOTAL PAID OUT FROM GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS
$2.1B

2024 REVENUE
$13B
OF WHICH
$8B
IS FROM STARLINK

TOTAL ORBITAL LAUNCHES
500+

2025 LAUNCH TARGET
170

STARLINK SATELLITES
8,000+

STARLINK CUSTOMERS IT CLAIMS TO HAVE
6M+

first stage of ULA's new rocket, confusingly enough. You may have seen that Blue Origin has a rocket for near-space tourism, the one that recently carried Bezos' wife, Lauren Sánchez, and Katy Perry aloft. But the company's big rocket, the one that's supposed to compete with SpaceX, has flown exactly once. And when I ask Blue Origin's rep what makes their rockets any better—or, at least, any different—from Musk's, he tells me: "I don't have a solid answer for you on that one."

China, which once seemed poised to dominate global launch, has had trouble keeping up with Musk's rising totals, successfully launching between 64 and 68 rockets annually over the past three years. SpaceX is not only launching twice as often, it's carrying more than 10 times the reported mass to orbit. Stoke Space, founded by Blue Origin engineers, has aerospace geeks in a frenzy, but it has yet to put a rocket on the pad. United Launch Alliance, SpaceX's OG competitor, has a powerful new rocket—more on that in a bit—but once again, Musk is ahead. He's working on a truly massive launcher, arguably the biggest ever constructed. Both stages are supposed to be fully reusable (which means, of course, immense cost savings), while neither stage of ULA's Vulcan will be fully reusable. And that, according to a new report from SpaceNews Intelligence, could relegate the one-time monopolist "to niche roles in government or regional and backup contracts, assuming they survive at all."

STARLINK IN WAR ZONES

ISRAEL / GAZA

The Israel Defense Forces got Starlink access after the attacks on October 7, 2023. In August 2025, Starlink began offering basic internet coverage in Israel. Civilians in Gaza have had very limited access.

ISRAEL / IRAN

Musk activated Starlink in Iran in 2022. But after Israel launched air strikes on June 13, 2025, Iran's rulers shut down local internet access, and Starlink usage spiked.

2 SATELLITES

AT THE END of May, at his factory in Starbase, Texas, Musk was in full Mars evangelist mode. "This is where we're going to develop the technology necessary to take humanity," he told his employees, "to another planet for the first time in the four-and-a-half-billion-year history of Earth."

But as he sketched out his soaring vision of this place cranking out 1,000 enormous Starships per year, Musk repeated a more mundane truth. No, not the part about the Starship's uneven test record. The one about funding. "Starlink internet is what's being used to pay for humanity getting to Mars."

The space launch business is a brutal one, and a space launch business with its eye on Mars is even more impractical. Rockets blow up. Customers are constantly late in their satellite deliveries. But supplying internet service? That's a way more reliable source of cash. So in 2015, Musk started recruiting engineers to build an internet in orbit.

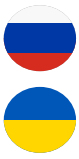
Big, geostationary spacecraft have been providing internet service from 22,000 miles up since the mid-1990s. The idea of replacing them with a constellation of small, low-flying, low-latency satellites has been around for almost as long. But it wasn't until Musk brought down the cost of getting to orbit that those plans became not only feasible but massively profitable. Last year, the company earned an estimated $13 billion in revenue, and Starlink accounted for something like 8 of those billions, according to Payload Research. About 70 percent of the company's launches so far in 2025 have carried Starlink satellites into orbit. Starlink, which started launching in 2019, now claims to have more than 6 million customers, up nearly 50 percent in 12 months. This is why private shares of SpaceX have become highly sought-after investments. (Well, that and the fact that the company seems to pay little or no tax on all that revenue.) As of July, the company was valued at $400 billion, with IPO rumors swirling. SpaceX's dominance now depends on Starlink.

You could argue Starlink is also supplying an equally outsize share of Musk's global influence. The deployment of Starlink in 2022 to Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion is by now well known, as are Musk's decisions to reportedly cut off Starlink over the Kherson region during a crucial Ukrainian counterattack and deny coverage near Russian ships docked in Crimea later that year. Reports of Iranian dissidents getting their hands on Starlink receivers date back to the same period.

On June 13 of this year, Iran's rulers shut down local internet access after Israel began "Operation Rising Lion," its air-strike campaign designed to decapitate and destabilize the Tehran government. That same day, right-wing American pundit Mark Levin posted on X that "Elon Musk can put the final nail in the coffin of the Iranian regime by providing Starlink internet to the Iranian people!" To which Musk, a longtime ally of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, responded: "The beams are on." Iran's parliament quickly passed a measure imposing prison sentences of up to two years for those caught using Starlink. The number of Starlink users nevertheless spiked to more than 100,000, according to one local report. Musk often lets Starlinks run under the table, sometimes as a way of pressuring governments to license the service legitimately. "But in Iran, they're just straight-up flouting the rules," says one knowledgeable observer, "trying to overthrow the government by giving power, giving internet access" to Tehran's opponents.

It wasn't the first—or last—time Musk used Starlink in ways that seemed to support the Israeli government's objectives. As WIRED previously reported, venture capitalists helped the Israel Defense Forces receive Starlink access after the October 7 attacks in 2023. Civilian access in Gaza has reportedly been severely constrained since, with a single hospital being the rare exception. Meanwhile, scam compounds in Myanmar, jihadist networks in the Sahel, and Sudanese rebels have all reportedly had more or less unfettered access to Musk's satellite network.

Musk isn't afraid to use his technologies to advance his politics. We've seen how his tweaks to X have made it more Nazi-friendly, and how his chatbot will start talking about "white genocide."



RUSSIA / UKRAINE

Both sides have relied on Starlink on their front lines. In 2022, Musk reportedly cut off access at a pivotal moment in the war, causing the Ukrainian military to lose contact with its drones.

SUDAN'S CIVIL WAR

Starlink is not licensed in Sudan, but black-market terminals have led warring factions, humanitarian groups, and civilians to rely on it.

GETTY IMAGES

We've seen Musk enable a war effort, and we've seen him deny that aid when it suited him to do so. This has all happened while Starlink is in its relative infancy, before its constellation is complete, before its coverage of the continents is total. The dangers of relying on Starlink have not been lost on geopolitical players: There may be 50,000 Starlink terminals in Ukraine today, but some of the more tech-savvy Ukrainian military units have already weaned themselves off of Musk's service. "Starlink is not our primary, and sometimes not even the alternative, but rather the contingency," one officer in the Kharkiv region tells me.

There's talk in Europe of trying to expand a Starlink competitor. And the Chinese government is working on a pair of low-Earth-orbit constellations—a commercial one for the international market and a government one for the military and intelligence agencies. The plan is to launch 28,000 communication satellites between the two by the 2030s. So far, they've launched somewhere around 170, and an alarming number of those have failed in space.

That could leave Amazon as Musk's most potent rival. The company certainly has the resources. Amazon recently completed a $140 million, 100,000-square-foot facility at the Kennedy Space Center, near Cape Canaveral, to get the satellites ready for launch. It has signed contracts for up to 83 launches from three different rocket companies—several billion dollars' worth of launch services—to get the Kuiper internet constellation into orbit. Almost half of those launches are with ULA, SpaceX's original competitor, which is building a new "integration facility" down the road to prep those rockets for Amazon.

Obviously, Amazon has more and better access to consumers than almost any other company on the planet. Kuiper is part of the same Amazon unit that makes Ring cameras and Kindles, and its terminals are designed to be smaller and cheaper than Starlink's. But its biggest advantage might be Amazon Web Services' vast network of data centers. For businesses and security-minded government organizations, "AWS means we can basically give these folks private networking capabilities," a company spokesperson says, meaning they can move their data in secret, "without ever touching the public internet."

But time isn't on Kuiper's side. A public beta test, originally scheduled for early 2024, has slipped to late this year or early next. The original terms of Kuiper's license with the Federal Communications Commission require the company to launch 1,600 sats by the middle of next year. (Maybe Bezos' newfound coziness with Team Trump will give Kuiper room to renegotiate.) Either way, Kuiper can't count on an in-house partnership with a rocket builder like Starlink can. Only about one in eight of the launches by the Bezos-founded ecommerce company are contracted to fly on Bezos' rockets. But the Blue Origin rocket in question has flown exactly once. SpaceX is apparently so unconcerned by the competition that it just carried Kuiper satellites on a mid-August Falcon 9 mission, and it has plans to do so again on two more.

Today, Starlink's 8,000-plus satellites have a total bandwidth of 450 terabits per second. That's comparable to about a third of the bandwidth used across the globe each year, as measured by the consultancy TeleGeography. The next iteration of Starlink satellites, so big they're only capable of being hauled to space in a Starship, could each add vastly more bandwidth. Musk will have the satellite internet business in an absolute hammerlock. And as if that grip wasn't tight enough, Musk is now looking for approval from multiple governments to add as many as 30,000 additional sats to his network.

Musk keeps talking about how his megarocket, Starship, is going to take humanity to Mars. But that's not what the world's first fully reusable multistage rocket is designed to do. Like all SpaceX rockets, it's optimized to go to low Earth orbit—its relatively underpowered engines burn through nearly all of their fuel in just a few minutes. (That's part of why the rockets are reusable. They don't have too far to fall back to Earth.) On its own, Starship is designed to launch a whole bunch of next-gen Starlinks very quickly and very cheaply. Getting any further out means sending up more Starships—yes, plural—to refuel the first one with liquid methane, in what amounts to "an incredible conveyor belt," as one aerospace industry executive put it.

The plan is ornate and over-the-top, different in so many ways from the scrappy old SpaceX days. The Starship relies on 39 Raptor engines, which are on their third major design in nine years. And the rocket is such a clunky way of getting to the moon or Mars that analysts like Lucas Pleney—a Musk admirer at Novaspace, a consultancy based out-

COMPETITORS

INTERNET SATELLITES

EUTELSAT ONEWEB

Founded in 2012, OneWeb launched its first internet satellites in 2019 and is now part of a French company. Its constellation has more than 630 satellites.

PROJECT KUIPER

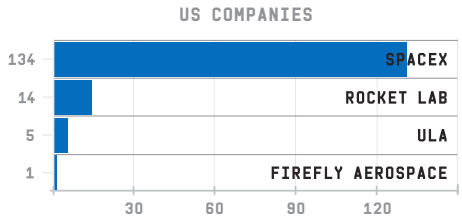
In 2019, Amazon revealed its plan to deploy thousands of internet satellites. The first 27 went up this year, and as of late August it had 102.

LAUNCH PROVIDERS

STOKE SPACE

Founded in 2019 by former Blue Origin and SpaceX folks, Stoke is developing a fully reusable rocket called Nova.

2024 SUCCESSFUL ORBITAL LAUNCHES



BLUE ORIGIN

Jeff Bezos started his space company in 2000. The bulk of its launches have been for space tourism. Its powerful New Glenn rocket reached orbit for the first time in 2025.

ULA

In 2006, Lockheed Martin and Boeing teamed up to create United Launch Alliance. Its main customer is the US government.

ROCKET LAB

Founded in New Zealand in 2006, Rocket Lab later moved its headquarters to California. It specializes in last-minute launches—and has 31 missions coming up.

RELATIVITY SPACE

This 10-year-old company went big on 3D printing to build its rockets. In 2025, former Google CEO Eric Schmidt took over as its chief executive.

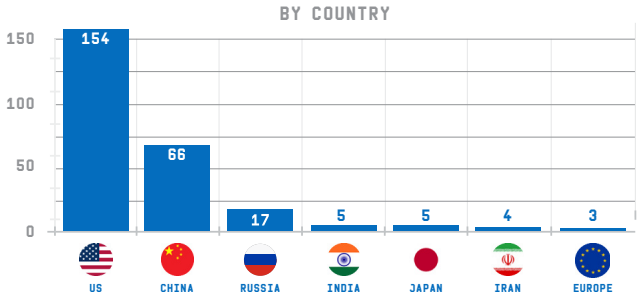
FIREFLY AEROSPACE

Founded in 2014, Firefly builds rockets and spacecraft. In March 2025, its lunar lander (aboard a SpaceX rocket) pulled off the first fully successful commercial moon landing.

ROCKETS AND SATELLITES

CHINA

As of late August, Chinese firms have reached orbit 50 times this year with a mix of government and commercial launches. Some of those were to deploy two internet satellite constellations. Its Guowang constellation had 81 satellites as of late August, and Qianfang had 90 (but several have failed).



side of Paris—wonder whether Musk's Red Planet dream has actually been back-burnered or could even be something of a distraction at this point. Starlink is the preeminent player in what appears to be the global communications infrastructure of the near future. If things continue in this direction, Musk won't just have say-so over who gets connected and how much they'll pay. He might even be able to access their data, too.

"This is really the elephant in the room. And Musk just points at Mars like, 'This is my objective. Don't look at Starlink,'" Pleney tells me. "This is why I'm thinking: Is he really pointing the finger toward Mars and believing in it? Or is he just trying to divert us from the big thing, which is Starlink and how much it will take over?"

3 SPACEWAR

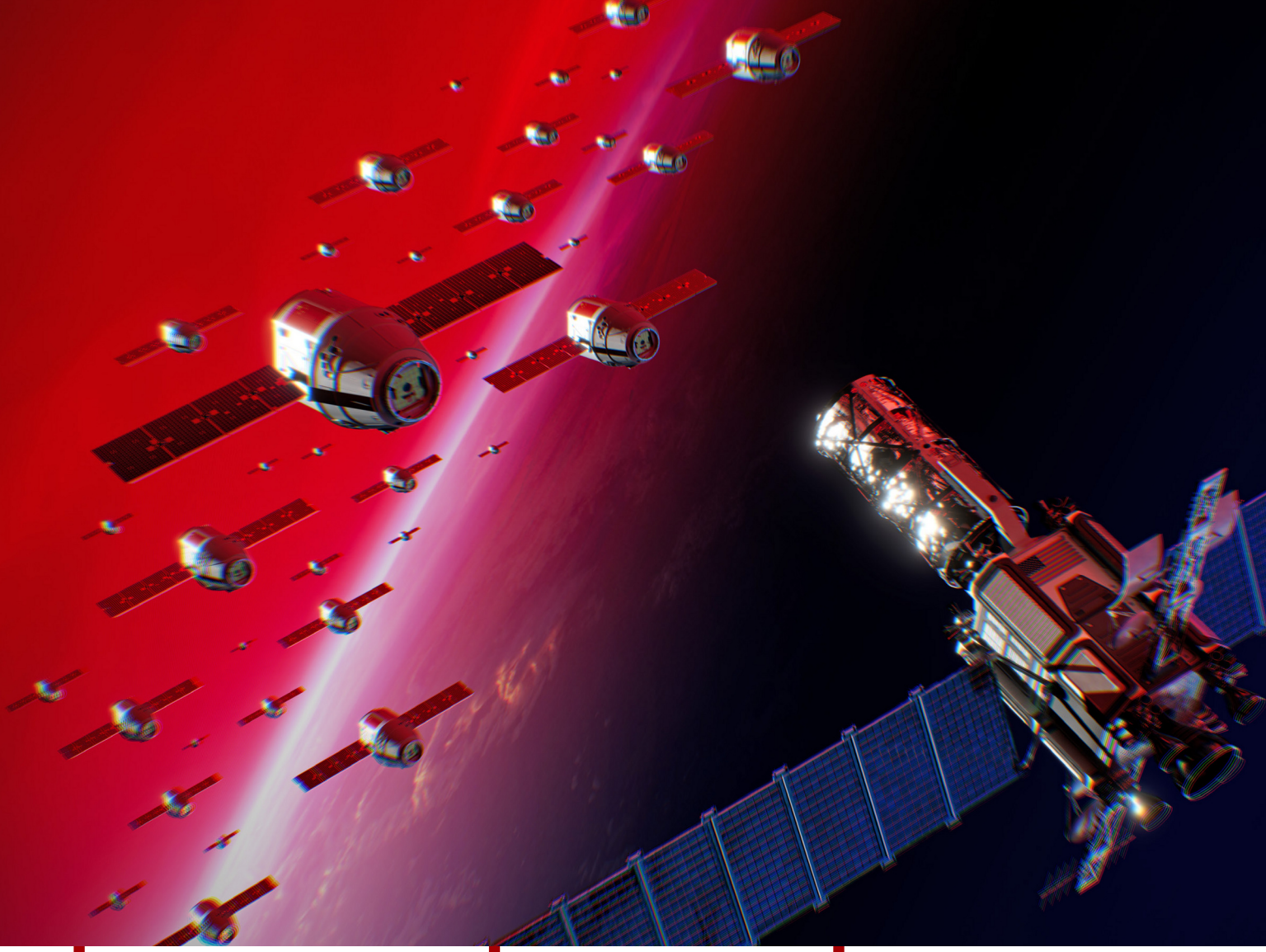
MAYBE YOU'RE OK with the idea of Musk controlling the internet above the sky or deciding what can or cannot get off the planet. The Pentagon is under a different set of orders. "It is the policy of the United States," reads Section 2273 of Title 10 of the US Code, to maintain "at least two space launch vehicles" that can take "national security payloads into space whenever such payloads are needed."

In other words, it's against the spirit of US law and policy for anyone to have a monopoly on military spaceflights. And so the Pentagon has purposely split up its gigantic "national security space launch" program. Blue Origin was awarded over $2 billion in these contracts, even though its big rocket has flown only that single test flight. Rocket Lab says it gets at least half of its revenue from defense and security agencies.

For now, Musk's biggest competitor for military and intelligence missions is his next-door neighbor at Cape Canaveral. Just a mile from SpaceX's launchpad is a 50,000-square-foot warehouse holding 21-story rockets, broken into their component stages. These rockets are rather different from Musk's. The first stage is optimized to go about 100 miles up, two times higher than the Falcon 9's core. The second stage is specifically designed to take a satellite another 20,000 miles. That's the domain of the military's most sensitive communications and spy satellites. It's where the United Launch Alliance, the old monopolist, hopes to rule again. ULA's idea is not just to give the government those God's-eye views but also to help the Pentagon wage war in space.

"Defense of satellites in orbit, that was off the table through all of the Biden administration. You could not have what we call counterforce. You weren't allowed to put a weapon in space, even to defend your satellite yourself," Tory Bruno, ULA's chief executive officer, tells me. "Under this administration," he adds, "we are now allowed."

The Pentagon is candid in its ambitions to try to destroy and disable Chinese and Russian spacecraft—and protect American ones from what they say are similar attacks. In March,



the US military released a report titled "Space Warfighting." It includes high-level plans for "orbital strike," or "actions taken to destroy, disrupt, or degrade adversary space platforms."

While the world's militaries are increasingly eyeing low Earth orbit, ULA is openly pitching its high-flying second stage as a space warfare platform—hiding satellites in orbits where the Chinese can't find them, maybe using the second stage itself to attack enemy spacecraft.

I spoke with several aerospace and defense industry insiders who tell me this might be feasible—but first, ULA has to start getting its rockets up consistently. That hasn't been easy. Depending on whom you ask, the first operational launch of ULA's new Vulcan rocket in mid-August was somewhere between two and five years behind schedule.

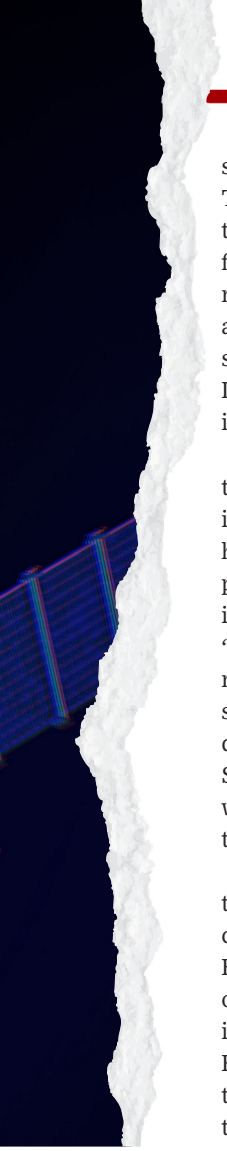
So while the military theoretically wants and needs ULA, Blue Origin, and these other SpaceX challengers to succeed, the reality looks quite different. Musk's competitors say he has been receiving defense contracts that should've been theirs. SpaceX got seven of the nine national security space launches awarded in April, for example, totaling $846 million. Additional national security contracts that were supposed to be earmarked for emerging players wound up being sent SpaceX's way instead.

Musk was poised to have even more on top of that, after spending immense capital to elect the president and then join his government.

In the first weeks and months of 2025, his friends at the Trump State Department tried to strong-arm nations like Gambia into buying Starlink. The Trump White House hit tiny Lesotho with crushing 50 percent tariffs; the country then quickly licensed Starlink as a way of demonstrating "goodwill and intent to welcome US businesses," according to a State Department memo obtained by The Washington Post. Vietnam, Bangladesh, and India all quickly made similar deals after stalled negotiations. American diplomats promote American businesses all the time, but this was something different. "If this was done by another country, we absolutely would call this corruption," Kristofer Harrison, a former State and Defense Department official in the George W. Bush administration, told ProPublica. "Because it is corruption."

Jared Isaacman—who reportedly paid SpaceX $200 million for a private space trip—was initially lined up to run NASA. The president, in his inaugural address, seemed to send a love note to Musk by promising to "pursue our manifest destiny into the stars, launching American astronauts to plant the Stars and Stripes on the planet Mars." In March, the Trump Commerce Department rewrote the rules for a $42 billion broadband program that make it harder for wired networks to get grants—and easier for satellite providers like Starlink to do so. (Musk is already pushing the states of Loui-

SHUTTERSTOCK; GETTY IMAGES



siana and Virginia to give him more money.) The Trump Pentagon, already tilting in Musk's direction, leaned even heavier that way. It reportedly floated the idea of yanking funding for one of its more sensitive satellite communications networks and handing billions of dollars to a Musk-built constellation instead. That's on top of the billions the Defense Department has committed to "Starshield," its private, military-grade version of Starlink.

But all of that is peanuts, potentially, compared to Trump's pursuit of a "Golden Dome" over America, which would allegedly protect it from ballistic, hypersonic, and cruise missiles all at once. Trump picked the top general from the Space Force to lead it and promised that such a defense would include "space-based sensors and interceptors." That would make it a reboot of the Reagan-era "Star Wars" missile defense boondoggle—but with better tech to detect targets, and AI to coordinate the interceptors. Some experts think that gives it a better chance of working this time around—as long as the US deploys thousands of weapons in space.

Here's why: If an orbiting interceptor is going to shoot down a missile as it's taking off, the interceptor needs to be relatively close to the ground. But that means any particular interceptor is only over a particular target for a few minutes. According to analysts like Todd Harrison of the American Enterprise Institute, "it takes about 950 interceptors spread out in orbit around the Earth to ensure that at least one is always in range to intercept a missile during its boost phase." Every additional missile you want to stop means another 950 interceptors. China and Russia both have somewhere between 300 and 500 land-based ballistic missiles in their arsenals.

Even if Harrison's off by a factor of 10, it would still be a monumentally expensive proposition, with a whole other fleet of satellites to coordinate the thing. Trump's allies rammed $25 billion into this year's budget as a down payment, even though there's no formal concept for how such a thing might work. Trump says he's willing to spend $175 billion in three years to get it done. Other defense leaders think the real cost could top half a trillion. And for a minute, it looked like Musk had much of it locked up. "I think that much of the commercial space industry and much of the defense space industry is worried that this could be an inside deal," one executive at a top military contractor told me in May. "He's got unlimited, deep pockets. He's already proven he can put 7,000 satellites up. I think the administration thinks he's the smartest man in the world. Our only hope is that the Department of Defense stands by their principles of fair and open competition."

Musk denied he was interested in Golden Dome, posting on X that he'd rather focus on the Mars mission. But Reuters reported that Musk was not only part of a front-running team to build the anti-missile system but that "in an unusual twist, SpaceX has proposed setting up its role in Golden Dome as a 'subscription service' in which the government would pay for access to the technology rather than own the system outright."

Of course, a subscription is something that can be turned off. Musk would have the kill switch to America's orbiting weapons system. The man behind "MechaHilter." The guy who gave the thumbs up to using his satellites as part of a campaign to overthrow a government and appeared to do very little as hundreds of thousands starved. That dude, with an outsize role in the making and maintaining of an arsenal in space—one in which the guns are pointed down at Earth.

The Trump-Musk alliance, of course, has since blown up, and along with it some of the most grandiose dreams and Bond-villain fears of Musk's concentration of power in space. In early June, Musk briefly threatened to abandon the American astronauts aboard the ISS—SpaceX's Dragon capsule was the US's only way to bring them home—before thinking better of it. The president, for his part, threatened to pull Musk's government contracts, posting that "the easiest way to save money in our Budget, Billions and Billions of Dollars, is to terminate Elon's Governmental Subsidies and Contracts. I was always surprised that Biden didn't do it!"

The Trump administration, according to The Wall Street Journal, did conduct a review of NASA and Department of Defense deals. But finding ways to remove Musk was functionally impossible. "Everybody in DOD was like, 'No, no, no, no, no, no, let's not do that.' Because they're so dependent on SpaceX now, and frankly, becoming increasingly dependent on Starlink," one deeply connected industry observer says. In the end, Musk didn't lose a dime in his existing federal contracts. SpaceX and Starlink were found to be too vital to US interests, too entrenched in our infrastructure even to appease Donald Trump.

Which returns us to the status quo. The space industry—domestic and international, commercial and military—has been thoroughly remade in Musk's image. The US government and the Musk empire can no longer live without one another. They're symbiotic. And the only one who can threaten that is Musk himself. "He's a dickhead," this source adds, "but his tech works, like, way better than anybody else's."

NOAH SHACHTMAN *is a contributing editor at* WIRED. *He's the former editor in chief of Rolling Stone and The Daily Beast.*

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THE IMPROBABILITY

Tech billionaire Mike Lynch made probability his life's work, until his wildly unlikely death at sea. Now, many of his friends and associates—and survivors of the disaster—are speaking about what happened for the first time.

by BRADLEY HOPE
Bayesian
LONDON
Illustration by ANTHONY GERACE

IN THE PREDAWN hours of August 19, 2024, bolts of lightning began to fork through the purple-black clouds above the Mediterranean. From the rail of a 184-foot vessel, a 22-year-old named Matthew Griffiths took out his phone to record a video. The British deckhand was just a week and a half into his first official yacht job, and he wasn't on just any boat. The yacht, the $40 million *Bayesian*, was a star of the superyacht world, considered to be a feat of minimal design and precision engineering. As thunder rolled toward the anchored vessel, Griffiths set the video to AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" and posted it to Instagram. It was 3:55 am.

In the video, the *Bayesian*'s aluminum mast, one of the tallest in the world, is briefly visible against the roiling sky.

Below deck, the yacht's owner, Michael Lynch, had every reason to be sleeping soundly. The boat trip had been organized as a celebration. Months earlier, Lynch had walked out of a San Francisco federal courthouse a free man, acquitted of all charges in one of the largest fraud cases in Silicon Valley history.

Lynch had built his fortune on understanding probability, on turning the unlikely into the possible. He had named his yacht *Bayesian* in honor of the statistical theorem that made him a billionaire, after the sale, in 2011, of his company Autonomy. The British tech giant sold software that could find meaningful signals amid the flood of unstructured data in emails, videos, and phone calls, but it would be better known as the company that allegedly defrauded, and nearly destroyed, Hewlett-Packard.

The cabins aboard the *Bayesian* contained the people who had stood by Lynch through his 13-year-long legal ordeal. Beside him in the master suite was his wife of 22 years, Angela Bacares, a former vice president in the investment division of Deutsche Bank who had caught his eye while working an Autonomy deal. Other cabins housed the Clifford Chance attorneys who had orchestrated Lynch's legal victory, as well as longtime colleagues, their partners, and a 1-year-old baby, all supported by 10 crew members. Also onboard was Lynch's younger daughter, Hannah, 18, who was about to begin her studies at Oxford. Her older sister, Esme, 22, had remained in London.

The day before, their last of the trip, the group had been subdued. They had spent the afternoon in the laid-back coastal town of Cefalù, wandering the plaza and visiting the church. That night, they had gathered for dinner in the saloon of the *Bayesian*, followed by dessert and drinks on the upper deck. Everyone was in bed by 12:30 am. Water taxis were due early the next morning to take them to Palermo for their flights home.

Many of them would not make it. Griffiths' video was to be the final earthly record of the *Bayesian.* Two minutes after he posted it, wind and rain started to buffet the vessel, and the young deckhand hurried to close forward hatches and cockpit windows. At 4 am, he ran down the stairs to wake the captain. This is the first time that details of Griffiths' account, as well as those of many associates of Lynch, are being shared—WIRED interviewed dozens of friends and colleagues of Lynch, reviewed thousands of pages of court documents, and reconstructed events on the *Bayesian* based on accounts, yacht GPS data, and official investigative reports. The *Bayesian* and its human cargo were about to face forces that would test every calculation of the yacht's design, the terrifying and tragic culmination of a series of highly improbable events. To this day, mystery surrounds the final night of Lynch's life, making room for conspiracy theories about spies and secret hard drives that can't seem to be quashed.

MICHAEL KURTZ; GETTY IMAGES

II. THE REVELATION

Today, Bayesian analysis is everywhere—powering spam filters, search engines, medical diagnoses, and artificial intelligence. Silicon Valley engineers casually talk about "updating their priors" as they refine machine-learning models. But in the 1980s, when Mike Lynch was a PhD student at Cambridge, Bayesian inference was still fighting for respectability, dismissed by many statisticians as unscientific because it dared to incorporate earlier beliefs into its calculations.

Lynch had arrived at Cambridge in 1983 to study natural sciences, carrying with him the determination of someone who had started life in the red—minus £4, to be exact, the amount his Irish immigrant parents owed the bank after they got married. His father was a fireman from Cork, his mother a nurse from Tipperary. Growing up in 1970s London as an Irish boy meant learning to navigate prejudice during the height of the IRA bombings. "You had to learn to run fast," he would later say, "but reading the room is a good thing to have as a skill."

He had won a scholarship to Bancroft's School—money bequeathed in the 1700s for the education of "poor boys"—and spent three hours a day commuting to Woodford Green, often hitchhiking and listening to drivers talk about their lives. On weekends, he practiced clarinet and saxophone and worked at his mother's hospital, progressing from mopping floors to serving tea to patients. It was there, talking to the dying, that he learned a fundamental lesson: "Get on with it. Do stuff. Whatever it is you want to do, just do it."

Lynch's path to corporate software began at a distant remove—he wanted to build a digital music synthesizer. (It was the '80s, after all.) Samplers like the Fairlight CMI cost around £18,000 to £30,000. So Lynch, who had been tinkering with electronics since childhood and tried starting bands, created a groundbreaking program for the Atari ST computer that could manipulate sound with "an accuracy of one sample—that's one 50,000th of a second," according to a 1988 interview with Sound on Sound magazine. The software gave musicians capabilities that were normally out of reach at the time. These technical obsessions led Lynch to Peter Rayner's signal processing group at Cambridge, in the engineering department. Lynch had switched from natural sciences to electrical sciences in his third year. "I initially thought he was a bit lazy," Rayner told me, recalling how Lynch often hadn't done the assigned work. "But when we worked through problems in supervision, he showed great insight and came up with sometimes incorrect approaches, but often very interesting ones." Rayner's lab had a distinctly commercial bent, focused on solving real-world problems. Many of his roughly 100 PhD students went on to found companies, becoming, he said, full professors, multimillionaires, and even one billionaire—Lynch.

At Cambridge, Lynch discovered that the same mathematics he was using to clean up audio samples could be applied to any kind of noisy data. At the heart of this approach was Bayesian inference, a way of thinking about probability that had been developed by Thomas Bayes, a Presbyterian minister in the 1700s who died before publishing his findings. They were discovered by a friend who happened upon them when cleaning out Bayes' things.

The power of Bayesian thinking lies in how it handles uncertainty. As Rayner explained to me, using a simple example: "If I gave you a coin and you tossed it and it came down heads, then all you could say based on that one experiment is the probability of tossing a head is 1—certain. But Bayes would say, 'Come on, we know it's going to be around a half.' It allows you to take account of previous knowledge."

This idea, of starting with prior assumptions and updating them with new evidence, seems simple, but Bayesian methods proved extremely effective at pattern recognition in the age of computers. Lynch's doctoral thesis, completed in 1990, applied these techniques to neural networks for pattern classification—"a small step along the road" to modern AI, as Rayner put it. But Lynch saw commercial potential where others saw only academic interest. While supposedly working as a postdoc, he was often absent from the lab, secretly raising money for his first company. "Later on, I said to him, 'Why on earth didn't you come to me, Mike?'" Rayner recalled. "He said, 'I didn't want you to know!'"

That company was Cambridge Neurodynamics, founded after he completed his PhD, and its flagship product was a fingerprint recognition system that could handle smudged or partial prints. After Cambridge Neurodynamics, Lynch founded Autonomy. The new company would take the same ideas even further, applying them to the explosion of unstructured data that businesses were generating but couldn't effectively search or analyze.

The company's breakthrough was IDOL—Intelligent Data Operating Layer—a pattern-recognition engine that could understand the actual meaning within human-generated information. Unlike keyword searches that might confuse different terminology, IDOL could recognize that a document about "automobiles" was relevant to a search for "cars." It could identify concepts, find patterns, and extract meaning from chaos. The name Autonomy itself reflected Lynch's vision: software intelligent enough to operate independently, to make its own guesses about meaning and relevance without human intervention. As Lynch would later explain in a 2000 interview with WIRED, "Bayes gave us a key to a secret garden. A lot of people have opened up the gate, looked at the first row of roses, said, 'That's very nice,' and shut the gate. They don't realize there's a whole new country stretching out behind those roses."

III. THE EMPIRE

Lynch had always been more interested in how people thought than what they knew. I talked to one of his employees, Emily Orton, who still remembers her first interview with Lynch back in 2009. While other executives had asked about her qualifications and experience, Lynch wanted to see how she dealt with the unexpected. He asked her a single question: "Tell me what makes you angry?"

By that point, Autonomy was Britain's largest software company. Its software was being used by intelligence agencies, law enforcement, and major corporations worldwide, and its acquisition, in 2005, of Verity—a search company double Autonomy's size in terms of sales—eventually led to a market value north of $6 billion. Lynch earned the nickname "Britain's Bill Gates."

Andy Kanter, an American lawyer at Autonomy since the late '90s, had watched Lynch evolve from entrepreneur to CEO of a major corporation. He was a perfectionist, says Kanter. When Kanter and a colleague spent weeks crafting the IPO prospectus, Lynch read it, declared it "entirely wrong," then approved it after they changed perhaps 10 words. "If something wasn't right, he would dismiss it as useless," Kanter said. "Ninety-five percent good isn't good enough."

But this harshness—one of his own lawyers told me that "he could be a prick"—came with fierce loyalty. For Christmas parties, Lynch flew the entire UK staff to four-star hotels in European cities—Venice, Prague. And quarter after quarter, the company continued to beat analyst expectations. To the outside world, Autonomy appeared to be exactly what Europe needed: a homegrown technology champion that could compete with Silicon Valley.

But maintaining Autonomy's image of consistent growth required increasingly creative measures. At the center of this effort was Sushovan Hussain, the CFO who had joined in 2001.

Lynch, known as the "British Bill Gates," became a kind of celebrity in England for his successful software companies.

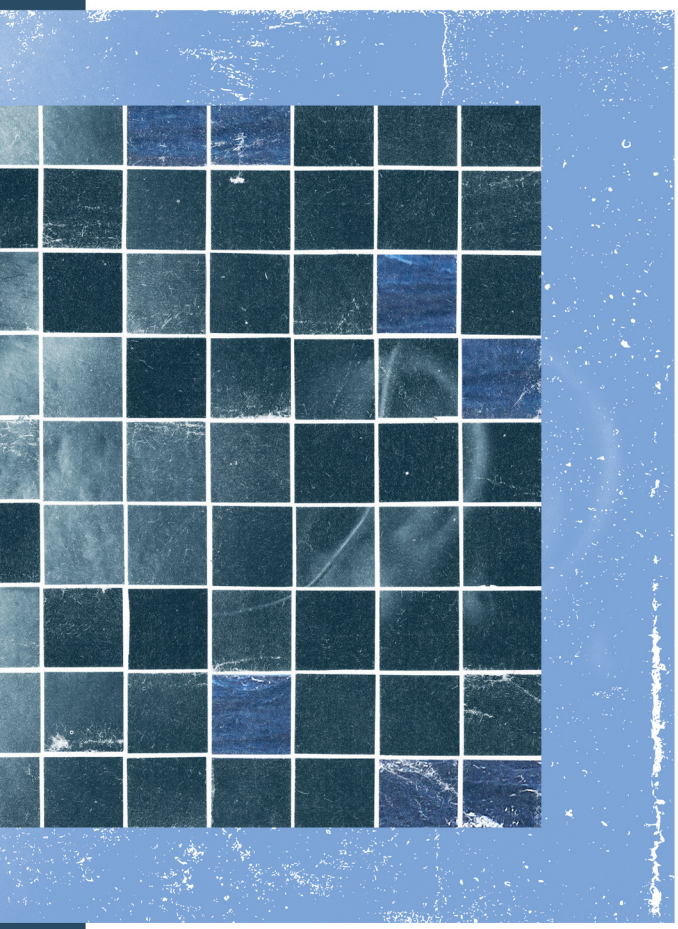
Lynch and Hussain's relationship went back to their school days—though Lynch would later downplay this, testifying that Hussain was merely a "third-level acquaintance" who had arrived at Bancroft's in his final year. Yet they had both gone on to Cambridge and kept in touch over the years, and Lynch had attended Hussain's wedding. When Hussain returned to England after working in the oil industry abroad, Lynch hired him.

Software companies are judged differently than other businesses. Investors expect them to maintain high profit margins, because software costs almost nothing to reproduce—once

"YOU HAD TO LEARN TO RUN FAST, BUT READING THE ROOM IS A GOOD THING TO HAVE AS A SKILL."

you write the code, you can sell it infinitely without manufacturing costs. But, inevitably, some quarters fall short. So Lynch and Hussain developed practices designed to smooth out the randomness.

The most straightforward was hardware reselling. When software sales fell short, Autonomy would purchase servers from manufacturers like EMC, Dell, and Hitachi, then resell them to customers—often at a loss. This wasn't unusual; many software companies bundled hardware with their products. What was distinctive, according to later court findings, was how Autonomy accounted for these transactions. Instead of recording all the hardware costs as "cost of goods sold," which would have devastated those crucial gross margins, portions were allocated to "sales and marketing expenses." This preserved the illusion of a pure software company while pumping up revenue.



The company also developed complex, opportunistic arrangements with resellers. During analyst calls, when hedge funds would try to trip up Hussain with coordinated questions about the numbers, Lynch would protect, and at times coach, his CFO.

So business stayed booming, and Lynch lived the life of a quirky multimillionaire. He had moved his family to a sprawling 69-acre farm he owned in Suffolk, complete with gardens, parkland, paddocks, and woodland. He restored a water mill and began breeding rare animals—"cows that became defunct in the 1940s and pigs that no one's kept since medieval times," as he would later describe them. He loved dogs, especially the rare Otter Hound. His dogs were all named after engineering parts: Switch, Tappet, Pinion, Valve, and Cam.

Politicians sought out his advice for Britain's technological future, and he was a popular speaker at events and in the business media. Everything Lynch touched, it seemed, turned to gold.

IV. THE HAIL MARY

Leo Apotheker had been CEO of Hewlett-Packard for less than a year when he announced his vision to transform the technology giant: It was time for HP to pivot from its roots in hardware manufacturing to become a software and services company. It was March 2011, and Apotheker needed a flagship acquisition to demonstrate this new direction. By July, Lynch and Apotheker were meeting in Deauville, the French seaside resort.

HP initially proposed acquiring Autonomy for between £24.94 and £26.94 per share in late July 2011. When market volatility drove down Autonomy's stock price in early August, HP attempted to renegotiate lower, but Lynch held firm, refusing to accept anything below £25. Within weeks of that first proposal, the companies settled on £25.50 per share—approximately $11.1 billion total, a 64 percent premium over Autonomy's market value. HP's due diligence was, as Andy Kanter would later describe it, shocking in its brevity: "Having run billions and billions of dollars of acquisitions," he told me, "I'd never seen anything like it." The exact duration would become a matter of dispute—Lynch's lawyers would claim it amounted to just six hours in conference calls, while HP described hundreds of people involved and consultations with Deloitte, Autonomy's auditor.

On August 18, 2011, HP put out what Kanter called "some of the five craziest corporate things all at the same time." In a single press release, the company announced the Autonomy acquisition, revealed it had missed its numbers, lowered guidance, wrote off previous acquisitions, and disclosed plans to potentially split the company and

exit the PC business. The stock price plummeted. The Autonomy acquisition, meant to herald HP's transformation, instead became the symbol of a company in chaos.

HP's board, watching their share price crater, seemed to panic. About a month after the announcement—before the deal had even closed—they fired Apotheker and replaced him with Meg Whitman. The acquisition closed in October, but by then Autonomy had already become, in Lynch's words, "the unwanted stepchild." By May 2012, Whitman fired Lynch and reshuffled most of Autonomy's senior leadership. Six months later, HP was writing down $8.8 billion of Autonomy's value, with $5 billion attributed to what it called "serious accounting improprieties, disclosure failures and outright misrepresentations" at Autonomy.

From Lynch's perspective, the narrative was clear: HP had thrown a Hail Mary, the market had punished the company for it, and now it needed someone to blame. HP saw it differently. In its telling, it had been systematically deceived, the victim of a sophisticated fraud that had inflated Autonomy's value. The battle lines were drawn. HP sued Lynch in the UK for $5 billion. The US Department of Justice launched a criminal investigation. Lynch countersued, claiming HP had destroyed his reputation and mismanaged the acquisition. What had begun as a transformative deal had become one of the most bitter corporate disputes in recent history.

V. THE JUDGMENT

When HP announced its write-down in November 2012, Lynch had a choice. He could remain silent, let lawyers handle negotiations, perhaps reach a settlement. Instead, he went on Channel 4's main business program and blamed HP for running a broken company. "In a year, they destroyed that value that was created over 10 years," he said.

That drove HP to double down even more. It made a criminal complaint in the US and filed a civil case in the UK. Against the advice of his legal team, Lynch insisted on fighting the UK civil case first. He had his team build new software to analyze the more than 11 million documents in the case. At times, he'd gather his legal team aboard the *Bayesian*—purchased just a year earlier—for strategy sessions.

Lynch also continued to hobnob with British politicians and founded a new venture capital company, Invoke Capital, in 2012, assembling about 60 former Autonomy employees. Most of the money in the fund came from his personal fortune from the HP sale, about $800 million. Invoke's portfolio spun out multiple highly successful companies, with traces of Bayesian inference in each one. Darktrace became a global force in AI-powered cybersecurity, valued at nearly $5 billion in its 2024 acquisition by Thoma Bravo. Featurespace's fraud-detection technology became standard for major banks, with a proposed £700 million acquisition by Visa. Sophia Genetics went public in 2021 at a $1.14 billion valuation.

In this way, his wealth grew, but the legal threats hovered above him, an axe yet to drop. In 2018, Hussain, who had fought his criminal case first in the US, was convicted of conspiracy, wire fraud, and securities fraud. It was a bad omen to have a jury decide criminal liability, a much higher bar than a civil ruling.

Lynch's civil trial ran for 93 days, and what emerged was deeply troubling. The court found that when Autonomy's US finance chief Brent Hogenson raised alarms in 2010 about suspect sales, Lynch's response was not to investigate but to suppress. He forwarded Hogenson's concerns with instructions to use "the usual encryption," warned that "emails have been known to escape," and ultimately plotted to fire Hogenson—indicating that Lynch knew the allegations were true.

The court delivered a devastating judgment in January 2022. In a 1,700-page ruling, the judge found that Lynch had been "aware of improprieties in Autonomy's accounting practices" and had been "dishonestly involved in manipulating the accounts." The systematic accounting practices weren't just aggressive. They were, the judge concluded, a deliberate

scheme to mislead. American prosecutors, who had been waiting for the UK proceedings to conclude, now had the ammunition they needed. Extradition proceedings, already in motion, gained momentum.

VI. AGAINST ALL ODDS

Lynch's forced travel to the United States in May 2023 marked the beginning of an extraordinary ordeal. Federal prosecutors in San Francisco charged him in a 16-count indictment that included conspiracy to commit wire fraud, wire fraud, securities fraud, and conspiracy. If convicted on all counts, the 57-year-old faced up to 25 years in prison—effectively a life sentence.

Despite US prosecutors promising the English court that Lynch wouldn't be incarcerated pretrial, Judge Charles Breyer immediately sent him to jail upon arrival, his lead attorney Reid Weingarten recalled. "That was probably the lowest moment." He ended up in jail for only one day, though, after posting a $100 million bond. The mathematics of his situation became Lynch's obsession. "What are the odds?" he would constantly ask his friends and lawyers, especially Weingarten, who found it maddening. "It was the stupidest question ever," he would later recall. "There's just too many variables." At the same time, he respected Lynch's genuine curiosity—"there was nothing he didn't know about or didn't want to know about," from astrophysics to politics, culture, music, even American baseball.

The trial began in March 2024, with Lynch joined by his former VP of finance Stephen Chamberlain as codefendant. From the start, it was clear that Lynch's team had it easier. Hussain's conviction had taught them the playbook of US prosecutors, and they'd had years to ready a new defense. Each night, Lynch and his legal team would work out who the prosecution was going to bring the next day. They also hired a "shadow jury"—a barman and a clerk paid to sit through all 11 weeks of proceedings and register independent impressions.

Most white-collar defendants stay silent; Lynch insisted on taking the stand. He presented himself as a down-to-earth British entrepreneur who had been victimized by American corporate incompetence. He walked the jury through his working-class background, his academic achievements. When prosecutors pressed him on specific transactions, he deflected skillfully—these were matters for the finance team, he was focused on technology and strategy.

One of the most effective moments came when Lynch described the experience with HP. "I watched them take this beautiful company and just wreck it," he told the jury, emotion creeping in. "And then they had the audacity to blame me for their incompetence."

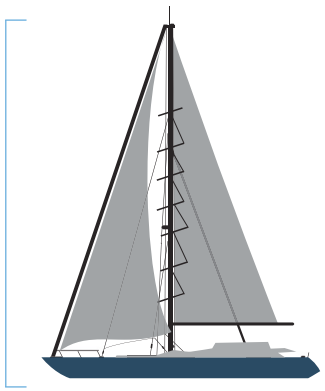
The verdict came on June 6, 2024. As the jury foreman read "not guilty" to all remaining charges, Lynch cried. So did his wife. Chamberlain was also acquitted on all counts. Speaking to journalists later, Lynch reflected on what he'd endured: "It's bizarre, but now you have a second life," he said. "The question is, what do you want to do with it?"

VII. THE CELEBRATION

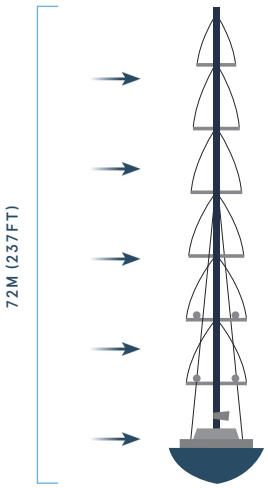
As part of his recovery process, Lynch planned a long summer aboard the *Bayesian*, full of friends and celebration. For one particular outing in August, he invited along everyone who stayed close to him during the darkest period of his life. Christopher Morvillo, the Clifford Chance partner who had helped quarterback the US legal strategy, was there with his wife, Neda. Jonathan Bloomer, the Morgan Stanley international executive who had served as a character witness, had accepted the invitation along with his wife, Judy.

The yacht itself was a 56-meter sailing vessel with a dark blue hull and a minimalist Japanese-style interior, later referred to by The Times of London as a "masterpiece of engineering and opulence." The yacht's original name was *Salute*; Lynch rechristened it the *Bayesian*. The vessel was magnificent but also an anomaly: It had a single, towering aluminum mast.

THE BAYESIAN



The $40 million *Bayesian* featured a 72-meter aluminum mast—one of the world's tallest—that gave the 56-meter vessel her elegant profile but created a critical vulnerability. With the keel raised and no sails set, the yacht became vulnerable to capsizing in winds exceeding 60 knots, a threshold crossed when the downburst struck.



When the downburst struck at 4:06 am, hurricane-force winds exceeding 70 knots hit the Bayesian's towering mast like a lever, causing the yacht to heel hard to starboard. The vessel capsized within 15 seconds and sank in just 18 minutes, settling 50 meters below on the seabed off Porticello, Sicily.

The following account is drawn from official investigation reports, videos, photos, and people familiar with the accounts of the crew and survivors. The August sailing was planned as a leisurely tour of Sicily's northern coast and Aeolian Islands. The group started in Milazzo, then spent four days exploring the volcanic archipelago. They anchored off Isola di Vulcano one day for a few hours to watch the active crater glow against the sky, visited Panarea, and enjoyed the crystal clear waters around Dattilo. It was exactly the kind of relaxed, intimate celebration Lynch had envisioned. It was also a send-off for Hannah, an aspiring poet. The two loved to spar over meals, arguing about politics and world events, with Lynch playing the contrarian.

That weekend, Lynch received two devastating calls from Andy Kanter about Stephen Chamberlain, his Autonomy codefendant. The first call, on Saturday, Lynch answered with a happy hello—laughter and cheer audible in the background—before Kanter delivered what he called "the gravest news": Chamberlain, a middle-aged soccer fan and avid runner, had been struck by a car while jogging and suffered a traumatic head injury. By Sunday's call, the news was worse: The hospital was turning off life support. The group aboard the *Bayesian* lit a candle for Chamberlain in the church at Cefalù.

Weather forecasts for that night had mentioned possible thunderstorms, but nothing unusual for August in the Mediterranean. The five-day trip had been blessed with perfect conditions—clear skies, warm temperatures, and gentle winds. Lynch and his wife told the captain to move the *Bayesian* farther west to the village of Porticello to make the commute to the airport the following morning easier, in the event of rain.

The crew settled into their nightly routines. The *Bayesian* sat at anchor around 300 meters from shore, her distinctive silhouette dark against the night sky.

VIII. FOUNDERING

Even as people turned in for the night, the flashes of lightning had been visible for some time—flaring from the west, far offshore where a dense cloud tower brooded—but nothing hinted it would reach the anchorage. Thunderstorm alerts were in force for Sicily's north coast, yet forecasters expected only scattered cells. In Griffiths' Instagram video, lightning flickers in the clouds, the flashes outlining their depths.

Meteorological analysis later showed a perfect, if unlikely, recipe for disaster: Tyrrhenian surface water near 29 degrees Celsius—2 to 3 degrees above the norm—pumped moisture aloft like fuel into a furnace. When that hot air collided with colder masses higher up, it produced a rotating updraft—a supercell.

As Griffiths ran to shut the forward hatches, the wind was already past 30 knots; 5 miles away, it was recorded at 41 knots. By 3:57 am, the *Bayesian* began to drift under pres-

METEOROLOGICAL ANALYSIS LATER SHOWED A PERFECT, IF UNLIKELY, COLLECTION OF DISASTROUS ELEMENTS.

sure from the wind, dragging its anchor. The yacht's chief engineer, Timothy Parker Eaton, who had sleeping quarters near the engine, felt the movement. He made sure all three generators were operating and headed to the wheelhouse—the yacht's enclosed main control room.

The vessel was lurching, but boats, of course, are always moving. Only some passengers woke up in the dark night. Key crew members—chief officer Tijs Koopmans and chief steward Sasha Murray among them—dressed hurriedly and made their way out of the crew's quarters. Bacares pulled on her dressing gown and went to the saloon to check what was going on. Charlotte Golunski and her husband brought their baby there, too, to avoid waking the other guests. On deck, the crew worked to secure the vessel against the building storm, closing windows and securing cabinets. Above, on the fly deck, the chief steward met a wall of rain that she'd later describe as unlike anything she'd ever seen.

Meanwhile, the chief officer climbed to the flying bridge, where Captain James Cutfield, just roused, ordered him to wake the rest of the crew. Below, a crew member passed the galley: Chef Recaldo Thomas was stowing pans. "Good morning!" he called, as if greeting just another squall.

By now the yacht was sliding south-southeast at 1.8 knots. The yacht's 72-meter aluminum mast—taller than a 20-story building—caught the wind like a lever, and the boat started to heel. The chief officer confirmed with the chief engineer that engines and pumps were ready to reposition the boat.

At 4:04 am the onboard CCTV caught the flying-bridge awning shredding in an instant, obliterated by the force of the gale. Just moments later, as Captain Cutfield grabbed the helm to swing the bow into the wind, the downburst struck. A shaft of cold air dropped from 30,000 feet and hit the sea like an invisible fist. Wind leapt from 30 knots to more than 70 knots, a hurricane-force gust that struck the *Bayesian* with devastating power. The weather service's review of satellite data would later suggest bursts over 87 knots, or nearly 100 miles per hour. The yacht began to tip hard to starboard. Within 15 seconds it capsized, generators cutting out as the side hit the water. It was 4:06.

People, furniture, and glass hurled sideways as battery lights flickered on, and then off. Bacares, the Golunski family, and a steward slammed into a wall—now the floor—and were cut by shattering glass. Griffiths, thrown from the flying bridge into the sea, clawed back aboard. Records indicate that the alarm was never pulled; no one had time.

Below, guests Matthew Fletcher and Ayla Ronald escaped their forward cabin by pulling out drawers as steps. Their cabin was farthest from the stairwell—the stairwell being a pivotal location, a straight shot to the saloon, which was the best way to exit the ship. Water poured over the rails. The yacht was flooding fast.

In the saloon, a desperate human chain formed to pass people up toward the open air. The chief officer shoved Bacares up toward the central stairway, where water was now cascading down in a torrent, and another crew member pulled her up onto the side of the flybridge above. Together they handed up Charlotte Golunski and the baby, passing them person-to-person through the flooding, tilted interior. But the situation was fast evolving. Three of them were momentarily trapped in an air pocket behind the wheelhouse door—James Emslie tried to force it open from outside but couldn't, due to the pressure of the rushing water. Eventually, one of the crew members got it open when the boat had filled with enough water for the pressure to equalize.

The chief officer, lowest in the chain, was suddenly swept back into the main saloon before he could climb after the others. The ship, at this point, was slanted on an angle and the officer was in a corner on the upper part of the slant. He surfaced in a small air bubble there: The ceiling was on his side, the wall above him. His first escape attempt failed in the black water, which was clogged with cushions and broken bits of the once-lovely interior. Finding another small air pocket, he was able on the second attempt to feel his way along the debris-filled space to the heavy glass doors at the back of the saloon, braced his feet against the tilted door frame and hauled them open wide enough to squeeze through into the open sea. He later told Italian investigators he was sure he was going to die.

The remaining passengers and crew clung desperately to whatever they could find. At this point it was clear that there would be no saving the boat, only surviving its sinking. The storm, though, was over. The wind, on the surface of the water, was quiet. Outside in the water, Captain Cutfield tried to organize the abandonment of the superyacht, telling survivors to swim clear of the mast and the boom, which could drag someone down with it. Murray counted heads and Griffiths improvised a tourniquet on Emslie's arm. The baby balanced on a cushion, absurdly, precariously. Then the group finally caught a break: Koopmans, the chief officer, surfaced and cut one life raft free right as other crew members were trying, and failing, to get to another one. He ferried it to the bobbing group and inflated it.

AT THIS POINT, IT WAS CLEAR THAT THERE WOULD BE NO SAVING THE BOAT, JUST SURVIVING THE SINKING.

From the raft, the group watched the *Bayesian*'s bow rise up and then plunge down. By 4:24, the boat was gone, drifting 50 meters down to the seabed. From the time the full storm struck the yacht, only 18 minutes had passed.

Ten minutes later, the chief engineer fired a red parachute flare, but higher-altitude wind carried it sideways. He fired a second, and a crew member aboard the 42-meter steel-hulled schooner *Sir Robert Baden Powell*, anchored nearby, spotted it and alerted the skipper. The downburst had struck like a scalpel; the other vessel, barely 100 meters away, lost nothing more than an awning frame.

Its tender reached the raft and recovered 15 survivors. Bacares was among them, injured but alive. Her husband, daughter, and five others—Jonathan Bloomer, Judy Bloomer, Christopher Morvillo, Neda Morvillo, and Recaldo Thomas—remained inside the sunken yacht. Thomas—the chef who had called "Good morning!"—was found dead later that day.

IX. THE AFTERMATH

Rescue boats eventually arrived, too late to do anything about those stuck inside the sunken boat. By 6 am, as survivors reached the dock at Porticello, villagers began throwing clothing out of their windows for the barely clad group. Andy Kanter, who was due to join Lynch with another set of lawyers on the *Bayesian* the following week, flew to Sicily immediately upon hearing the news. As Lynch's close friend and business associate, he found himself coordinating with authorities and helping Bacares navigate the bureaucratic maze that follows disasters. The man who had called Lynch just hours before the tragedy to tell him about Chamberlain's life support now faced the impossible task of managing the aftermath of both men's deaths. In an unforgettable coincidence, Chamberlain passed the following day—meaning both men had died from freak accidents, thousands of miles apart, roughly within 24 hours of each other. This would fuel wild conspiracy theories online for months.

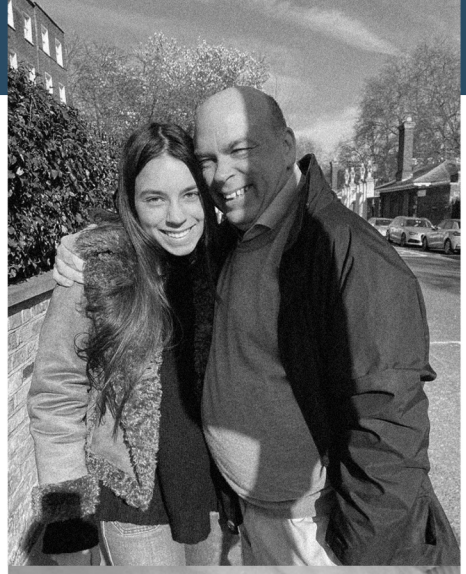
The scene that greeted Kanter was surreal in its intensity. The media had descended on the small Sicilian port with overwhelming force. The hotel where survivors were staying shut down reservations for five days to accommodate the press invasion, says Kanter. Reporters were climbing into ambulances, desperate for any scrap of information. Italian media speculated wildly about encrypted hard drives in the yacht's safe, with tabloids suggesting connections to Western intelligence services. The lack of verifiable information didn't stop the stories: One newspaper made up an interview with Charlotte Golunski, where she'd said she momentarily lost her baby for "two seconds." In truth, she hadn't spoken to any journalist. In one particularly bizarre moment, while survivors were ensconced at a resort hotel, a 12-foot-tall minion walked by—a jarring reminder that normal life continued even as families dealt with unimaginable loss.

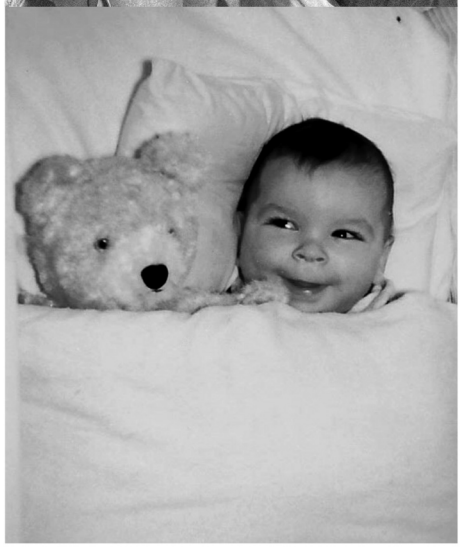
Even before the bodies were recovered, the blame game began. The yacht's manufacturer initially filed a €222 million claim against Lynch's wife and crew members, though it was quietly withdrawn. Insurance companies began their own investigations, with potentially $150 million in claims at stake. Quickly, Italian prosecutors opened an inquiry, initially focusing on potential charges of negligent shipwreck and manslaughter. Captain Cutfield faced particular scrutiny—questions about the keel position, open hatches, and whether adequate warnings were given. The prosecutors moved swiftly, interviewing everybody during those first five days. Since the boat's party were all witnesses, not subjects, they were required to sit for their interviews, even though they were literally still shaking from their trauma.

The recovery operation took days. Divers worked in dangerous conditions, navigating the yacht's flooded interior to reach the victims. Mike Lynch, the Bloomers, and the Morvillos—Christopher and Neda—were found clustered together in one cabin on the port side, suggesting they had sought shelter together as the yacht went down. Hannah was discovered in another cabin on the same side, by herself.

The following Sunday, townspeople organized a memorial service that culminated in a candlelight vigil where people released wreaths into the water. Still, the boat sat at the bottom of the sea. In May 2025, a Dutch diver working for a company trying to recover the yacht died, adding another life to the toll. Finally, in June, the yacht and mast were recovered and brought to a terminal nearby for further investigation. By this point, the crew had dispersed across the world and have mostly stayed quiet about the event. Griffiths, for his part, still plans on working in the yachting industry.

In July, UK High Court judge Robert Hildyard ruled that Lynch's estate and former Autonomy CFO Sushovan Hussain owed Hewlett-Packard more than £700 million ($940 million) in damages from the Autonomy acquisition. In a postscript to his judgment, Hildyard expressed his "sorrow at this devastating turn of events, and my sympathy and deepest condolences, having come to know and admire Dr Lynch (notwith-





COURTESY OF LYNCH FAMILY

Left: Lynch with his daughter Hannah, who was about to start her first year at her dad's alma mater, Cambridge. Below: Lynch as a baby. The son of Irish immigrants, he grew up in London.

standing my findings against him) over the course of a very long trial." The ruling, which represented a significant reduction from HP's original $4 billion claim, nonetheless reportedly threatened to bankrupt the estate, estimated to be worth around £500 million. Hussain, now out of prison, has started a company to help former criminals find work.

The final reports on the *Bayesian* sinking have yet to be released. The UK's Marine Accident Investigation Branch published an interim report in May 2025 that focused on design and environmental vulnerabilities—though Italian prosecutors are separately investigating the captain and two crew members for manslaughter and negligence. What has emerged through the various investigations, and through press accounts, is a critical flaw in the Bayesian's design. The single-mast configuration that gave the yacht her elegant lines—unique among the boat designer's sought-after series of similar vessels—also dangerously affected her center of gravity. The MAIB analysis, conducted by the Wolfson Unit at Southampton, found that with the keel raised and no sails set, the yacht became vulnerable to capsizing in winds exceeding 60 knots—a threshold crossed in seconds when the downburst struck. The other yachts in the same series as the *Bayesian* had two masts, not one. This problem might have been noticed earlier except for one other factor: Elite luxury yachts don't have to comply with the same robust safety rules as commercial ones. The International Safety Management Code is voluntary for boats registered for private use.

What are the odds of all this happening? As I spoke to people about Lynch, I became obsessed with the probability of all these untethered events. I tried to find some way to quantify this. Consider his trajectory: Perhaps only one in 500 working-class boys win elite scholarships; one in 10 of those reach Oxbridge; one in 12 of those earn PhDs; one in 10,000 of those become centimillionaires—multiply it out and you're already at one in 600 million. White-collar defendants are either acquitted or dismissed about 15 percent of the time, but when the CFO is already convicted? Lynch was one of the few CEOs in the past 25 years to walk free from a criminal conviction after his other subordinates had already been convicted. Then that final night: Severe downbursts strike Sicilian anchorages perhaps once every 14 years, but for one just 75 meters wide to bull's-eye a 56-meter yacht while missing the schooner 100 meters away? Probably on the order of once in 2,300 years. And Stephen Chamberlain—a jogger's daily risk of fatal collision is about one in 9 million; multiply by Lynch's yacht-disaster probability and you get roughly one in 760 billion for both dying the same day.

But if you look at things from a different angle, not everything seems up to chance. Lynch was an unruly thinker from his college days and a perfectionist boss who pushed everyone around him to their limits; was it inevitable that he would end up in court eventually, defending his risky decisions? In the same way, the *Bayesian*'s flaw is the most obvious thing about it. Standing at 72 meters, the aluminum mast was about as tall as the wingspan of a jumbo jet. The physics were baked into the design. Of all the events in Mike Lynch's improbable life, his death turned on something that was, actually, quite knowable.

—With research from Charlie Barlow and Rania Raj

BRADLEY HOPE *is the New York Times bestselling coauthor of* Billion Dollar Whale *and a cofounder of the production company Brazen. He lives in London.*

THE FIGHT OF HER LIFE

Surrogate pregnancy is all the rage in Silicon Valley and beyond. What happens when it goes horribly wrong?

BY
EMI NIETFELD

PHOTO COLLAGES BY
TAM STOCKTON

CINDY BI IS **NOT SUPPOSED** TO BE TELLING ME THIS STORY.

First, there's the confidentiality clause. When Bi, a venture capitalist who claims to have invested in a dozen unicorns, hired a surrogate to carry her only male embryo in 2023, both parties agreed to keep the details private and away from the media. Then there's the restraining order against Bi, followed by a court-ordered agreement saying she would not so much as mention the "surrogate" involved in Baby Leon's stillbirth. Finally, there are social norms to consider when publicly attacking the woman who says she almost died carrying your child.

Still, Bi is talking to me. She sends me a nearly 3,000-item folder filled with legal filings; reports to professional organizations, insurance companies, employers, and the police; emails with her attorneys; and correspondence between her and the "Egg Whisperer" influencer, Dr. Aimee.

Bi considers herself a whistleblower out to protect "unborn children via surrogacy." Her website invokes scripture: "Establish justice in the courts. Amos 5:15." Indeed, Bi has racked up nearly a million dollars in legal bills since 2024, in what she views as a fight to honor her son. "I want the surrogate to be known for what she did, to be set as an example," Bi tells me. "I hope she goes to jail." Ideally, for murder.

AMERICAN SURROGACY IS an enormous industry, taking in approximately $5 billion in 2024, and the practice is expected to explode globally almost tenfold in the next decade. It seems especially popular in Silicon Valley, where a growing cadre of investors and executives, from OpenAI's Sam Altman to Dropbox's Drew Houston, have used it to grow their families. More than a dozen big tech companies provide five-figure subsidies to any employee who needs or wants to outsource gestational labor. A shocking number of techies now believe growing a baby can be a straightforward business transaction.

But intended parents and gestational carriers—IPs and GCs, as they're somewhat dehumanizingly known—are often uninformed about the dearth of regulation and completely unprepared for what can go wrong. Only one state, New York, requires agencies to be licensed. Although America is the world leader in surrogacy, it's also the developed nation with the highest maternal mortality rate and one of the highest stillbirth rates, a situation described by many as "a public health crisis." Compared to natural conception, carrying a genetically unrelated fetus more than triples the risk of severe, potentially deadly conditions, a statistic surrogates are rarely given. IPs do not always have to disclose complete medical information, including histories of certain conditions that may harm their GCs. They don't have to be honest about how many kids they have, why they are hiring a surrogate, or how many other surrogates they have simultaneously pregnant. Do you really know who is carrying your child—or whose child you are carrying?

Meanwhile, the US is torn over who controls a pregnant woman's body. The increasing acceptance of "fetal personhood" means that, in many states, losing a pregnancy can be charged as a felony and potentially punished with life in prison. This is thorny enough when it's a woman's own baby. It's exponentially more fraught when the carrier isn't the parent.

Many of the issues Bi and her surrogate encountered on their "journey" are likely far more common than you'd ever imagine. But you haven't heard about them. They won't influence policy or case law, because they tend to unfold in private, shrouded by confidentiality clauses and handled in closed arbitration proceedings. A stark power differential means that intended parents often have the means to file lawsuits and wage yearslong campaigns, while surrogates who feel screwed are forced to rely on free legal help and GoFundMe.

The case of Bi and her surrogate shows how, in an environment with little regulation and extreme inequality, the miracle of life can mutate into a death sentence.

CINDY BI MET her future husband on April Fools' Day, 2016. It was a warm Friday night at Molly Magees, an Irish pub-slash-discotheque in Mountain View, California. Jorge Valdeiglesias spotted Bi on the dance floor: heart-shaped face, long black hair, snatched size-zero waist. He brought over shots of Don Julio. Bi, a Chinese immigrant and founder who'd later appear on a list of "30 of the Most Successful Early-Stage Startup Investors," inspected his Google badge to make sure it was real. "I'm older than you," Bi told him. She was 36 to his boyish, rumpled 28. "But it's OK, I froze my eggs." Valdeiglesias was shocked by Bi's forwardness—he was just looking for a fun night—but it worked.

When she and Valdeiglesias were ready to start a family six years later, surrogacy was the obvious choice. At 43, Bi felt she was too old to be pregnant; she also said she was on a medication that could lead to complications. Bi didn't grieve the decision. In a Facebook group for future IPs, she wrote: "I've been prepared for this for almost a decade."

At first, Bi and Valdeiglesias considered implanting two embryos at once to have twins. Bi's fertility doctor strongly discouraged that because of risks to the babies and surrogate. Instead, Bi and Valdeiglesias settled on "twiblings" gestated by separate women but born a few weeks or months apart. They'd have a protective big brother and a sweet little sister, fortuitously born in the year of the Dragon, the most auspicious sign of the Chinese zodiac.

They signed up with a Southern

California–based agency, Surrogate Alternatives Inc. According to their psychological consult, Bi took an SSRI for PTSD spurred by work-related stressors, but hoped to wean off soon. SAI quickly matched the couple with a college-educated bank manager in Virginia. "She was perfect," Bi told me. "Tall, healthy, young, good job. I showed her off to my friends. The only thing I was concerned with was she's a single mom, but I saw past it."

REBECCA SMITH WAS a former professional athlete who became interested in surrogacy after watching a close friend struggle to conceive. (Although Smith's real name is public, I'm using a pseudonym to protect her privacy. She declined to be interviewed on the record, citing the confidentiality clause and ongoing litigation.) The 34-year-old wanted to help a family who couldn't carry their own child. As she put it in a Facebook post, she wanted to give them "the same love I found in becoming a mom."

In her profile photos, the pale, lanky Smith mugged in denim jackets and athleisure with her 6-year-old biracial son, whom I'll call Ellis. Smith had previously dated but told her psych evaluator that "it doesn't work when you are a single mom." She spent her free time coaching her son's sports teams; she ran errands on weekends when Ellis was with his dad, who remained a good friend. She was the type of person who preferred cooking at home to eating out, who made sure to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Ellis was an almost 10-pound baby. The pregnancy had been unremarkable but for the fact, perhaps, that her belly hadn't shown until she was seven months along.

Smith signed up with SAI, a well-regarded agency founded by a surrogate more than two decades earlier. She liked that it offered its GCs numerous safeguards: IPs went through thorough vetting, including psychological screening, and all had a medical reason for pursuing surrogacy; a detailed contract between the GC and the IPs would dictate the terms; a third-party escrow would hold the money and pay Smith; she'd get allowances and reimbursements for housekeeping and maternity clothes; if Smith had to be hospitalized or miss work, she'd receive payments for lost wages and childcare. Also, Smith's employer-provided insurance would treat the pregnancy as if it were her own baby—a major boon. Although directly paying a woman to carry your child is technically illegal in Virginia, Smith's contract specified that all payments were "reimbursements." She planned to use the $45,000 "reimbursement" to pay off her student loans and build an emergency fund.

Smith met Bi and Valdeiglesias in a standard video call facilitated by SAI. In her psychological evaluation, Smith seemed smitten with the couple, calling them "amazing." The therapist wrote, "She feels they are '100% compatible.'" In the summer of 2023, Smith and Ellis flew out to San Francisco for the embryo transfer. Bi put them up in a nice hotel for 12 days, close to her apartment, and planned a detailed sightseeing itinerary. Smith didn't even request reimbursement for her lost wages.

A doctor implanted Bi and Valdeiglesias' only male embryo inside of Smith. Everyone was elated when it stuck. Bi asked Smith for permission to share a photo of the test result on Facebook, and Smith quickly agreed, inviting Bi to tag her. Bi and Smith texted all the time: Smith shared her happy nausea and impressions of Baby Leon; Bi detailed her constant travels and her search for a second GC. Smith tried to recruit her own sister for the job, then a coworker. When scary but benign early bleeding brought Smith to the ER, Bi sent her a DoorDash gift card.

But in the wake of the bleeding, Smith found something out. Bi had been posting about Smith's health in Facebook groups, sharing test results and crowdsourcing suggestions for her treatment. Bi didn't refer to Smith by name but included distinctive details that allowed members of the tight-knit community to identify her, which violated their contract.

Smith alerted SAI but didn't confront Bi, perhaps calculating that it was better not to risk tainting their rapport. After all, the surrogacy relationship was unlike almost any other. Once you were pregnant, there was no going back. A new human had been—had to be—created.

IN LATE 2023, a little more than halfway through the pregnancy, Bi got a Facebook comment that scared her. She had posted about Smith getting a new, better job; the COO of ART Risk Solutions, an insurance agency, replied, suggesting that Bi double-check whether Smith's new policy would cover the pregnancy. Outreach like this wasn't uncommon: The Facebook groups often teemed with industry professionals peddling their wares. The ART Risk COO offered to look into it.

While SAI's standard process had determined that Smith's new insurance would cover the pregnancy, ART Risk disagreed. Bi was spooked by what she saw as SAI's oversight on a major issue: Pregnancy complications could rack up five- or six-figure bills. To Bi, the people she had paid to ensure her only son's healthy birth seemed asleep at the wheel. Since Bi alleged SAI had "made a mistake," she demanded they pay for Smith's backup insurance policy. When it stood by its assessment and refused, Bi was irate.

She began posting about SAI, sometimes multiple times a day, to warn other IPs. Sometimes she said that Smith had told her about the job change, other times she claimed that Smith hadn't notified her. She didn't want to burden Smith. "It's not your fault," she assured Smith, trying to protect her from the stress while keeping her in the loop.

COURTESY OF CINDY BI

It seemed like they were on the same page. "I just hate that it all happened!" Smith texted Bi. "I was so excited thinking the new job was surrogate-friendly." Bi was sure that if Smith had known otherwise, she wouldn't have taken the job.

It wasn't about the money. Smith's new, subsidized Affordable Care Act plan, at $391 a month, was a drop in the bucket compared to the estimated $200,000 Bi had budgeted for the pregnancy. Bi told Smith that they would lay low until Leon was born and then go after SAI: "I want to show them what justice should look like."

"I WILL **FOREVER CARRY THE MEMORY** OF YOUR BABY BOY, HOW HIS FAVORITE PLACE TO KICK/PUNCH WAS MY RIGHT RIB."

ON DECEMBER 15, a day on which Bi sent her more than 50 texts about the insurance, Smith felt liquid between her legs. She was 26 weeks pregnant and afraid her water had broken. The emergency room sent her home, telling her it wasn't amniotic fluid. She should've been relieved, but she soon had another text from Bi: One of Bi's lawyers wanted Smith "to sign a few forms." Smith had already signed a power of attorney giving Bi and Valdeiglesias the ability to make decisions for Leon. Were they now asking for control over her body? (Bi declined multiple requests to show me the forms in question.)

Smith confronted Bi gently. "I guess I'm a little confused," she said. Bi and Valdeiglesias hadn't been calling into any of the prenatal appointments where they could ask questions. "What's changed?"

"After your ER visit, I have tons of questions," Bi replied. "For example, was it due to the stress of Friday's insurance discussion? If not, what can we do to prevent such episodes so baby can grow to full term?" By this point, Bi and Valdeiglesias had found a second GC for Leon's younger sister, and that process, Bi told Smith, was going much more smoothly.

That day, Smith was back at the clinic for follow-ups on the leaking. She'd already started taking precautions: sleeping on her left side and drinking a gallon of water a day. Again, they told her it wasn't amniotic fluid and that stress might have been a contributor.

On January 1, 2024, 29 weeks pregnant, Smith texted Bi that she was in the ER again. This time, doctors confirmed that her water had broken. Smith was admitted to the hospital for IV antibiotics, monitoring, and steroids to help develop the baby's lungs. She was to stay there until Leon was born.

Bi and Valdeiglesias had just celebrated New Year's Eve in New York City. A few days later, Bi ordered Smith a tower of boxes from Amazon: coconut water, freeze-dried cantaloupe slices. But Bi also pestered Smith with questions: Why was she in the hospital, instead of just on bed rest at home? Was she submitting lost wage requests? Meanwhile, on Facebook, Bi claimed that Smith had broken their contract by not notifying her before changing jobs. A breach claim was serious. It meant that Smith was on the hook for any bills that insurance didn't cover—potentially million-dollar-plus sums that Bi acknowledged could bankrupt Smith. (Technically, Smith *had* notified them: She had a text from Valdeiglesias congratulating her.)

The situation reveals one of the fundamental imbalances of surrogacy: When a surrogate breaks contract, her IPs can stop paying her *and* stop paying the medical bills for her pregnancy. But if an IP breaks contract—say, by sharing their GC's private information online or withholding compensation—a GC typically has to hire a lawyer. No matter what, IPs get the baby at the end. Anything else would be considered baby selling and human trafficking.

BI STARTED TO believe something was wrong with Leon because of photos Smith posted. She looked slim, despite being months along. *You hardly look pregnant!* a commenter wrote, approvingly. To Bi, this wasn't a compliment. Everyone knew pregnant women had big bellies.

A few days into Smith's hospitalization, Bi got news that seemed to push

GETTY IMAGES

her over the edge. Smith phrased it like it was a good thing: Despite the premature rupture of membranes, her doctors had told her that Leon was healthy, and a growth scan estimated that he was in the 30th percentile. That didn't sound right. The 30th percentile meant most babies measured bigger than Leon. Smith was tall—shouldn't that make a bigger baby, Bi wondered? She had expected her son to be above average in all things.

Smith maintained that the doctor told her everything looked great. But Bi's motherly intuition was going off. Something didn't seem right with her son. She pressed on: Was Smith eating enough? Had she gained enough weight? "Small belly by itself, I brushed off," Bi wrote. But "30th, water leak, small belly, is Leon being suffocated and become defective already?"

Since Bi did not have Leon in her body, where she could protect him and keep him safe, she had to do everything she could from across the country. She turned to Facebook groups and Google for second, third, and fourth opinions. On January 13, Bi emailed SAI asking for copies of Smith's medical records.

Bi—a direct communicator who prided herself on her candor—asked her husband if she was out of line. Valdeiglesias assured her she wasn't. "You're just caring for your baby," he said. "Like just what any other mother would do."

THE HARDEST PART of being hospitalized, Smith told Bi, was saying goodbye to her son, who cried whenever she had to leave. Bi had suggested that Ellis could stay in the hospital. Ellis spent the night just twice in those weeks, sleeping on the recliner meant for new parents.

On one of those mornings, January 21, Smith woke up in the same room as her sweet, protective, now 7-year-old son. Nurses came in and did morning monitoring. Leon had no heartbeat.

WHEN BI GOT the Facebook message from an unknown woman, she thought it was a prank: "Call the hospital asap," the woman wrote. It was Smith's sister. "This is an emergency."

Bi recorded her conversation with the hospital. The doctor gave her condolences: She thought she'd seen a flicker in one of Leon's heart valves and so rushed Smith into an emergency C-section. But Leon was already dead. The placenta had separated from Smith's uterine wall, depriving Leon of oxygen. "Typically that leads to vaginal bleeding," the doctor explained, "which she had not been having. She did about 10 days ago." They'd followed the standard of care by trying to keep Leon inside Smith until 34 weeks gestation. But, she said, "these things just happen sometimes. I don't think we'll ever know exactly why, unfortunately."

Later, Bi got a call from Smith, who had recently woken up from general anesthesia. Snotty-nosed, crying, Smith told her she last felt Leon moving that night. Bi was confused: Smith had told her that Leon was moving more during the day and less at night. The call button was right there, Bi thought. If Smith felt Leon move, why hadn't she alerted the nurses?

Bi and her husband arranged for flights to see their son's body. She emailed SAI: Could the medical records be ready when she arrived at the hospital? "I didn't sleep," Bi said, "I was contacting attorneys."

SMITH, MEANWHILE, HAD spent several hours in surgery. Placental abruptions are a major cause of maternal mortality. According to court filings, she "lost a lot of blood and nearly died."

Now awake, sliced through her core, she held baby Leon. He weighed 3 pounds, 12 ounces—almost exactly average for his gestational age. The child that she'd carried for seven months lay dead in her arms.

WHAT SHOCKED BI, when she arrived at the hospital, was the joy she felt with her stillborn child. "He was a white boy, just like his dad." He had light hair, a cut near his left knee, and hard-looking fingernails. Bi photographed Leon in a white gown and diaper, holding a blue crocheted heart. Bi would never know the color of his eyes.

A nurse told Bi that Smith was being discharged but wanted to speak to them. Bi said no; it was her time with her son before his autopsy. She did ask for a list of Smith's medications.

Eight days after Leon died, Smith emailed Bi and Valdeiglesias. She understood they might not want to talk, but her heart was breaking, thinking of them. "I will forever carry the memory of your baby boy," she wrote, "how his favorite place to kick/punch was my right rib and how he danced up a storm whenever Ed Sheeran came on."

BACK HOME IN San Francisco, Bi felt empty. She wandered the sidewalks where she should've been pushing a stroller. Things were bad at home. She couldn't sleep, couldn't work. Instead she dedicated all of her time to taking screenshots and organizing folders of evidence to wage a medical malpractice lawsuit.

She also hired psychics to give her answers. As she tells it, they all blamed Smith. One suggested that an ex-boyfriend of Smith's had turned her against Baby Leon. Another claimed to see traumas on Smith's belly and said she was clearly having rough sex. He warned: "She has something to hide." When Smith refused to release her medical records unless nonpregnancy information was redacted, Bi saw it as confirmation that Smith was hiding crucial details.

Bi contacted SAI, claiming that Smith had breached contract by not informing her about the insurance change on time, not taking her vitamins, and not alerting her before the C-section. "Our contract specified a 'well-baby' that didn't die," she reminded them. Bi ordered the escrow to stop paying Smith or reimbursing her medical expenses. A few days later, Bi re-listened to the recording of the worst news of her life. She noticed a detail she'd missed: Smith had bled 10 days prior to Leon's death. No one had told her.

SAI countered that there was "no documented bleed" on the date in question but clarified that there was "some light pink fluid which the doctor was not concerned about." SAI said Smith asked the doctors to tell Bi directly, and that the contract gave Smith two weeks to tell Bi. "That's emergency information," Bi said.

"She should have told me right away." If Bi had been told, she believed that Leon would be alive. She would've insisted on a C-section immediately.

Many stillbirth advocates believe that American doctors do not take the risk of stillbirth seriously, that the standards of care are often woefully inadequate, and that calculations about when to deliver a baby ignore risk factors. After losing a baby, women are often told, as Bi was, that these things "just happen." Stillbirths take about 21,000 American children per year—more than guns, car accidents, sudden infant death syndrome, cancer, and fires combined.

Leon's death "was 100 percent, 1,000 percent preventable," Bi told me, anguished. Searching for meaning, she started attending Epic Church (known for hosting high-profile VCs). At one discussion, participants talked about "when God gives you a mission." Bi sobbed. "I don't want this mission, I want my son," she thought. Upon reflection, though, she became hopeful. She thanked God for giving her trauma, because He believed she could handle it. "I will do my best to make sure it won't happen to other people," she promised herself. She would become her son's voice. "I'll make sure other unborn children are protected."

IN HER GRIEF, Bi pieced together her version of events: During the pregnancy, Smith had engaged in "lots of unsafe sex." A bout of "forceful sex" led to her leaking in mid-December. More sex eventually necessitated her hospitalization. Smith had let her "adult-sized" son sleep in her bed, where he'd probably kicked her in the stomach. Smith may have even *intentionally* given birth early, mistakenly believing she'd receive full compensation.

At the advice of her lawyer, Bi hired a private investigator. A reverse address lookup suggested a man shared Smith's address—whose name Bi was sure had to be Smith's (supposedly ex) partner. He was Black, and the PI's report described him as having been charged with two misdemeanors. Bi believed Smith should have never been a surrogate with an "undisclosed live-in boyfriend with #felony JAIL TIME record," as she put it online. The PI dug up a flyer advertising a New Year's Eve party listing the man as one of the DJs, seemingly confirming Bi's lawyer's suspicion about what Smith had been doing the night before her hospitalization.

Bi was ready to approve an in-person surveillance operation when another detail froze her blood: Smith had gotten a speeding ticket on a day she was inpatient at the hospital. As Bi would claim online, on January 13, Smith had "snuck out" with her son, gone 40 miles per hour in a 25-mile-per-hour zone, then "snuck back into" the hospital. The very next day, Smith had experienced "profuse vaginal bleeding" for "at least five hours." In hindsight, Smith's behavior appeared "weird" and "defensive": The day after the bleed, Smith had asked Bi to stop posting.

Bi understood how far-fetched her allegations sounded. "If it were not for all the hard evidence, it's too shocking to believe [Rebecca Smith] did what she did to kill my son," Bi wrote on Facebook, using Smith's real name. Perhaps a kind friend could have suggested to Bi that there were other explanations. Instead, Bi had a set of legal adversaries and a supportive echo chamber. On Facebook, GCs and IPs alike expressed sympathy for Bi's tragic posts: Everyone knew bad surrogates existed, and based on Bi's claims, it sounded like Smith was one. Aimee Eyvazzadeh, a Bay Area fertility doctor and influencer, called Smith "a criminal" and "a psycho." Bi's $1,275-an-hour lawyer, Elizabeth Sperling, wondered whether digging through social media posts might show Smith engaging in "strenuous activity" that could explain the death.

Bi's husband focused on stabilizing the family, a move he credits with saving their marriage. He blamed the hospital, not Smith, but told me that the litigation is "her grieving process." He tried to stay out of the legal stuff so that Bi couldn't blame him too.

SMITH HAD PLANNED to go back to work shortly after giving birth. Instead, she couldn't stop bleeding. Even though SAI had determined she hadn't breached the contract, the escrow stopped paying, leaving Smith reliant on disability benefits as she faced an increasing pile of terrifying bills.

When Smith was finally cleared to return to work, a month after Leon died, Bi emailed Smith's HR department to ask about her health plan. Bi also reported Smith to a federal agency, claiming that Smith was committing fraud. The stress on Smith was already high: Her supervisor at work had found her crying on and off for a day.

Smith hadn't heard from Bi since her terse reply to the condolence email. Then, Bi texted her a screenshot of a Facebook post about another GC who'd had an abruption at almost 32 weeks—but that GC had called 911 and the baby had lived.

Next, Bi iMessaged a photo of Leon's corpse to Smith's 7-year-old son's iPad.

EMI NIETFELD *is a journalist who covers fertility technology and is the author of* Acceptance: A Memoir.

IN THE MONTHS after Leon died, Bi: Called the FBI 12 times. Reported Smith, SAI, the hospital, and Clarity escrow to more than a dozen state and federal regulators and numerous professional organizations. Launched a new round of her $30 million venture fund, backed by Marc Andreessen and David Sacks, President Trump's "AI and crypto czar," on Leon's due date. Posted Leon's ChatGPT-written endorsement from heaven, offering his "eternal blessings" for her work. Created TikToks, Instagram Reels, Facebook posts, X threads, LinkedIn Updates, and a website for her advocacy. Posted Smith's full name, photo, employer, mortgage license number, son's first name, and a link to her address. Asked her husband, again and again, how it was possible that Smith had carried her son but felt "nothing" about his death.

Bi has abandonment issues that she traces back to her twenties, when her father divorced her mom for the mistress who'd conceived his long-awaited son. She got on lithium for her bipolar disorder in early 2021 and began looking for surrogates as soon as she stopped feeling "sedated." I spoke to the therapist Bi hired to consult with her and Valdeiglesias. She told me that, of the 792 intended parents she has evaluated for surrogacy or gamete donation in the last decade, she has declined to recommend only about a dozen. "I'm not gatekeeping," she said. When it comes to serious mental illness, she added, it's up to them to disclose. One of Bi's fertility doctors, meanwhile, told me it's not his place to scrutinize intended parents. He defers to the recommendation of the psychological interviewer.

If an intended parent gets turned down, they can usually find another therapist, another clinic, another agency. But without anyone questioning her plans, Bi seemed betrayed by the challenges of third-party reproduction. "Surrogacy is supposed to be the safest route," she wrote on Instagram. It wasn't just Leon's death that pushed Bi into her spiral of legal action and social media posts. It was the apparent lack of control of having her child inside another woman's body—the most basic fact of surrogacy.

ON FACEBOOK, STRANGERS started calling for Smith to rot in jail and lose custody of her son. She and her family feared online vigilantes would search out the woman Bi portrayed as a profit-minded baby killer. Smith's parents bought security cameras for her car, then Smith moved back in with her son's father, then moved again. She changed jobs, hoping to spare her small office the chaos. Bi contacted Smith's next employer too, saying Smith had been fired for fraud and lied on her application. Smith's sister feared violence.

Smith had suicidal thoughts. She wondered if her son would be better off if she were dead, if that meant Bi would never send him another disturbing message.

In June, Bi sued Smith and the other parties she blamed for Leon's death. When a judge ruled that Bi had to follow the original contract and do private arbitration instead of a public lawsuit, she spent $25,000 appealing the decision. One day at work, in front of her new colleagues, a man served Smith papers naming Bi and Valdeiglesias as Leon's parents. Smith's pro bono lawyer advised her to acknowledge the papers without realizing that Bi's lawyer—the husband of Bi's psych consultant—had added a section forcing Smith to release her medical records. After another court battle, the judge threw out that requirement.

Whatever loophole existed, Bi would find it. If Smith relaxed, she would take

advantage. "The *only* goal she had was to destroy my life," Smith wrote in a court document: to get her fired from her job so she couldn't support her son. To have her behind bars. To bankrupt her. To make it so Smith could never be at peace while Leon was dead.

IN THE FALL of 2024, Bi was served papers. Smith had filed a restraining order. Smith maintained that she'd been single and lived alone with her son; she'd never "snuck out" of the hospital—nurses permitted her to go home to pick up an obscure vitamin Bi had asked her to take; the doctors had advised her not to create extra stress by telling Bi about the minor bleeding; she'd asked SAI to inform Bi about it. Smith's supporters said that after the stillbirth, she'd volunteered at the Ronald McDonald House for the NICU, sponsored a gold leaf on a tree for angel babies, pumped and donated her breastmilk to feed fragile babies in Leon's honor.

Bi found these claims ridiculous. "She kidnapped and killed my son."

"I am the victim here," Bi told me repeatedly. Being a "single mom," she said, "doesn't give you the right to kill another son. You don't have that victim card to play." She was almost screaming when she said it. Bi explains over and over her belief that surrogates hold all of the power. There are far more intended parents than surrogates—between three and 10 times as many—and IPs are, as Bi put it online, in "such a disadvantaged position." Once a GC has the embryo inside of them, they can harm the baby. Therefore, IPs are at their whim.

Bi sees a model for surrogacy in the antiabortion laws that "recognize and protect the right of a fetal life." The baby, she believes, should come first. Bi thinks that when doctors see surrogates go against medical advice, they should report it to the police.

Bi isn't anti-surrogacy—in fact, she frequently advises other investors who are pursuing it and sends me links to startup after startup. Sheel Mohnot, a venture capitalist colleague of Bi's who wanted twiblings, said the problem is that information is siloed when "each agency has their own database of wombs." In this model, surrogates are the gestational equivalents of Uber drivers or Amazon warehouse workers. "There should be a database of carriers allowing us to filter on what we want: age, BMI, willingness to abort the fetus," Mohnot said.

SIX MONTHS AFTER Leon's death, Bi's daughter was born. In an Instagram announcement, Bi sits in a hospital recliner wearing a medical gown, clutching a newborn to her chest. Bi often compared her two surrogacy experiences—"I had the world's worst GC, and the best"—and told me for months that everything with Chelsea Sanabria had been easy and smooth.

Not quite. Sanabria told me she had a great relationship with Bi but a pregnancy plagued with placental issues: first, gestational diabetes; then placenta previa, where the placenta blocks the cervix, which led to a hospitalization and a scheduled C-section. When doctors removed the baby, they found that the placenta had grown too deeply into her uterine wall, a condition known as placenta accreta. Once they removed the placenta, Sanabria began losing blood. As a nursing student and patient care technician, she knew what was going on as they called out numbers of blood loss—ultimately an astounding 5.4 liters. "The weirdest part was being awake" while she was dying, she said. An emergency hysterectomy saved her life. She woke up nine hours later, intubated, in the ICU.

A 2024 survey found that naturally conceived pregnancies carry about a 2 percent risk of several adverse maternal events. A surrogate pregnancy increases that to almost 8 percent. Nobody had talked to Sanabria about these risks. Now, she posts online to educate other surrogates.

"IF I CANNOT PROTECT MY SON AND HAVE SOME SENSE OF JUSTICE, HOW CAN THE INVESTMENT FOUNDERS SAY **'CINDY, YOU'RE THE BEST'?"**

As Bi pointed out repeatedly in her quest to get Leon's placental slides, the placenta comes from the DNA of the biological parents—hers and Valdeiglesias'. In fact, Bi's mother and sister developed diabetes while pregnant, an issue stemming from the placenta, and remained diabetic. Valdeiglesias told me that his aunt had her water break early, but everything was fine.

But Bi and Valdeiglesias' family medical histories were not disclosed to their surrogates. This is normal. If Bi and Valdeiglesias have a third child, they almost certainly won't disclose their pregnancy complications.

"IMAGINE A JOURNEY being treated like a human incubator and not like a person," Smith wrote in a Facebook group for GCs. "Imagine a journey where the intended parents leave you to pay all of the medical bills."

Hundreds of thousands of dollars of medical bills are in Smith's name, which could wreck her credit. Smith's employer-provided insurance initially agreed to pay but revoked coverage after Bi emailed them alleging fraud. Now, the plan Bi bought isn't paying out either. Bi maintains that Smith is responsible. Just as Bi warned in a Facebook group, the bills could bankrupt Smith.

During a Zoom hearing last December, Bi considered mercy. Perhaps Smith had suffered enough; perhaps Bi had already achieved a form of justice. Inspired with grace, Bi said she made an offer: If Smith dropped the restraining order and allowed Bi to talk freely about her, using her full name, Bi wouldn't pursue criminal charges.

Smith's lawyer refused, so Bi contacted local police. (In Virginia, police have investigated pregnancy losses and put a stillbirth mom behind bars.) If that fails, Bi hopes to nail Smith for perjury based on the "lies" in her restraining order application. In order to avoid a permanent restraining order, Bi signed a court-enforced confidentiality agreement not to talk about Smith. But Bi now views that agreement as toothless. It appears nothing—not even the specter of being found in contempt of court—will stop Bi from sharing her truth. Though it's highly unlikely, Bi could even go to jail: There's an arrest warrant out for Bi in Virginia for doxing Smith.

So far, Bi has worked with nine different attorneys. She racked up almost $750,000 in legal bills in 2024 but paid less than half; the law firm where Elizabeth Sperling works, owed $200,000, said it "intends to initiate a proceeding"; her appeals lawyer, also owed $200,000, keeps threatening to send her to collections. "I cannot pay you because if I do, then I cannot get another lawyer," Bi explained. She needs the money to pay her next retainer. Lawyers never ask Bi about money: "They see my profile and they assume I can pay."

But Bi tells me she's cash-poor. Although Bi had an eight-figure net worth before Leon's death, most of it was illiquid stakes in companies. She has rent to pay ($10,000 a month) and childcare (her sixth live-in nanny). She had to withdraw her management fees for her investment fund much faster than planned. Bi hasn't worked much since Leon died, but she doesn't know how she can continue as a venture capitalist if she backs down. "If I cannot protect my son," Bi says, "if I cannot give him honor, sue the hell out of these people, and have some sense of justice … how can the investment founders say 'Cindy, you're the best'?"

Just when it seemed like Bi might not be able to stomach, or afford, more lawsuits, she found someone who would represent her without charging hourly. "Pitbull attorney" Doug Rochen has the kind, open face of a Midwestern pastor. He's gotten eight-figure payouts for abused foster children and mistreated prisoners and specializes in sexual abuse cases. Bi says Rochen will sue the doctors and the hospital for malpractice and pursue arbitration against Rebecca Smith, SAI, and other parties in exchange for 40 percent of Bi's winnings.

Meanwhile, Bi and her husband have been hunting for their third surrogate. In the spring, Bi emailed with The Biggest Ask agency about "a great surrogate profile": another single mother, of two, who lives with her parents. But she hesitated: Should she give her daughter a little sister or use the money to "pursue justice" for her son? "I just can't pull the trigger," Bi told me. Not yet.

COLOPHON

Antidotes to doomscrolling that helped get this issue out:

Playing *The Sims*, all cheats, all mods; riding motorcycles, carpentry, gardening, and dog training; reading Anthony Trollope novels I'd been avoiding due to their boring-sounding titles, like *Ralph the Heir* and *Is He Popenjoy?*; learning how to knit and making a cardigan; putting puzzles together with a preschooler; losing the afternoon at a daytime rave; questioning my sexuality while binge-watching *The Hunting Wives* on Netflix and then being reassured while watching *Project Runway*, season 21; N/A—I'm an enlightened being, averaging less than one hour per day of phone use; trying elaborate new recipes and pickling veggies from my garden—eating my way through the terror; so much fucking yoga.

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THE DOGE DAYS ARE NOT OVER

WIRED was among the first outlets to chronicle the workings of Elon Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency—the Silicon Valley–style takeover, the arrival of the DOGE boys, the building of a master database to track and surveil immigrants. Since then, we've collected testimonies from more than 200 current and former federal workers for a sweeping oral history, published on WIRED.com. (Most of the interviewees requested anonymity to protect themselves from retaliation.) Here is a preview.

—LEAH FEIGER AND ZOË SCHIFFER

"I kept comparing it to a **NATURAL DISASTER**. But it wasn't natural."

—CDC EMPLOYEE

"I was **SUPER EXCITED** at first."

—GSA WORKER

"We're used to every little thing done by regulation, and now we're just getting **CRAZY EMAILS** straight from Elon."

—DEPARTMENT OF LABOR EMPLOYEE

"This used to be the best job I've ever had, the best environment I've ever had, the best culture I've ever had—and they **fucking RUINED IT.**"

—FEMA EMPLOYEE

"We've been instructed to bring our own **TOILET PAPER** for the time being. I wish I were joking."

—FEMA EMPLOYEE

"This administration has made a **LIAR** out of me."

—SSA EMPLOYEE

"Years of dedicated service, reduced to a **PUBLIC HUMILIATION**."

—DEPARTMENT OF LABOR EMPLOYEE

"Most of us are veterans, and we've already sacrificed so much, just to be treated like a **WASTE OF SPACE** or a **PARASITE** by people who don't even know what we do or how we work or how this system worked."

—AIR FORCE EMPLOYEE

"This was the **TRAUMA** that they wanted, that they planned, that they promised us. And, for once, they did a great job of delivering."

—CDC EMPLOYEE

"This was me—and many, many, many other Americans—just **DELETED WHOLESALE**."

—FEDERAL EMPLOYEE

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