

# Thoughts on Coming Apart and the Coming Great Reset



Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer

**Kit Webster**

## Themes and Theses

### Why I'm Contemplating Out Loud

(Initially formulated in the early 90s, following decades of reading history, philosophy, religion, psychology and a lot of contemplation, particularly on the subject of cycles. In the end, this is a relatively straightforward story about human nature and of history rhyming.)

The US will enter a period of crisis in the early 2000s. In the late 90s, I incorporated Strauss' and Howe's terminology of the Fourth Turning (without incorporating their generations paradigm) and agreed with Howe that the end stage of the crisis began with the Great Financial Crisis and would last into the early 2030s. We are now at the beginning of the end stage of the crisis.

The crisis will be serious and could be existential.

**Internal strife will increase, up to and including secession and civil war. International conflicts will increase as the vacuum created by the weakening of the US is filled by other players.**

**There will be many threads to the crisis, but the primary thread will be debt, deficits and entitlements. Other factors include, eg, demographics, a loss of meaning and myth and a loss of self-discipline.**

**Politics will move leftward as citizens look for some refuge from the chaos. The US will become increasingly susceptible to a (man) on a white horse, who can come from either the left or the right.**

**Inflation, as the most likely way to address debt since austerity is not politically acceptable, will significantly lower standards of living, exacerbating the civil crises.**

**Eventually, the dollar will be inflated away and lose its reserve status. Once the old rot is cleared out, and assuming continuity, there will be the basis for the establishment of a new order.**

**There will be what Strauss and Howe calls a First Turning . It will be constructed out of the physical infrastructure, wealth, energy sources, thoughts and values in the culture at the time. At this point in time, those components are unknowable. We can anticipate that the next future will be increasingly chaotic. We can anticipate that there will be destruction, and then reconstruction from some level. We cannot yet anticipate the form of the reconstruction or the level from which it will begin.**

**(Added in the early 00s) While humans are contributing to global warming, policies implemented to address manmade global warming will create a significant energy crisis, probably toward the end of the Fourth Turning.**

**(Added around 2020) The loss of faith by our youth in our founding principles means that the new order will at least partially be based on new principles. As yet, I have no visibility as to what those principles might be.**

**(Added in 2023) The lowering / elimination of standards in education, the judiciary, law enforcement, the military and other segments of our**

society will create a population unable to adequately comprehend, do or respond to the challenges of democracy and culture.

(Added in 2025) China has won - at least for the next 5-10 years. The US is dependent on China for the materials it uses to create defense items. We literally cannot fight China without China's help. China's industrial base is impressive; the US has to rebuild. China is out-innovating the US. China is turning out more engineers and scientists than the US by far. This does not mean that China does not face challenges - demographics perhaps being its primary challenge. The US military remains stronger than China's, but in an age of drone warfare, that statement means less than it has historically. The US still has bargaining chips and will need to use them to maintain any kind of status quo.

(Added in 2025) AI has the potential to profoundly affect human culture. However, AI faces several significant hurdles, including the demand for massive amounts of electricity, which may not be available, and a cultural revolt against its existence. Since it could be existential, and since China is pursuing it, the US has no alternative, at least in the short term.

(Added in 2026) Maneuvering for control of critical materials will be a primary driver of geopolitics for at least the next decade.

**"All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone."**

**May 22, 2026**

**Quotes to Contemplate**

We're rapidly approaching a common knowledge moment where everyone knows that everyone knows that China has supplanted the US as a global hegemon and the indispensable partner of every country on earth. - Ben Hunt

**Chaos was the law of nature; order is the dream of man. - Henry Adams**

**If I don't go to the hospital for a whole year, where is my money? Why don't you give me the money back? - Whoopi Goldberg**

## **Summary of Primary Thoughts To Contemplate In This Issue**

**The world continues to grind down - this is bad and getting worse.**

**The level of corruption in the Trump administration is becoming so large and pervasive as to be unimaginable.**

**Humans' nature works to undermine stability, and ultimately to undermine success.**

**Mixing metaphors, we are in the midst of an Emperor's-New-Clothes moment inside of a Greek Tragedy as the illusion of the United States is laid bare.**

### **So, You Say You Want A Revolution?**

**> From X - "If you think the nuclear industry is stuck in slow motion, look at China. They just announced a jaw-dropping capability: they can now construct up to 50 nuclear reactors simultaneously. To put their absolute dominance into perspective, here is what the scoreboard looks like right now: 60 Reactors already up, running, and powering the grid. 36 Reactors actively under construction—which accounts for over half of the entire world's total nuclear builds. 7 More scheduled to be commissioned and turned on before the year ends. How Are They Doing It? This isn't luck; it's a massive industrial playbook execution. China has turned nuclear deployment into a streamlined assembly line using: Standardized Designs: No re-inventing the wheel with every build. Mature Supply Chains: Every part and piece arrives exactly when and where it is needed. Decisive Execution: Unwavering state momentum to deliver massive, clean, reliable baseload power at scale. The Wake-Up Call: Nuclear isn't just a viable alternative for a clean energy transition; it**

**is entirely essential for a high-energy future. The West needs to match this raw ambition or risk falling permanently behind in the global energy race."**

**> CNN poll - 76% of black voters want voter ID Along with 82% of Latinos and 85% of whites.**

**> Universities are increasingly in crisis as the baby bust comes their way.**

**> After the Supreme Court decision on redistricting my revised probability is that it is now >50% probable that Republicans will retain control of Congress.**

**> On Saturday, the World Health Organization declared the current epidemic of Ebola virus in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda "a public health emergency of international concern," but said it does not meet the criteria for a pandemic.**

**> Grant Williams discussing a theory that is on a lot of minds (not mine, but I wouldn't rule it out)**

**"In A Method in the Madness, I examine the seemingly chaotic events unfolding across Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine and Iran and ask whether they are really isolated crises — or part of a broader strategic effort to secure American dominance over global energy markets and, in doing so, reinforce the dollar's position at the centre of the global monetary system."**

**> From X. This is why Russia cannot be cornered or face a loss, just like the US cannot in Iran. At some point, the loser has to change the rules of the game -**

**"Prof John Mearsheimer warns that Moscow will no longer allow the West to "use Ukraine as a battering ram against Russia." Strategists are now floating a terrifying escalation where "countries in Europe that**

**support the Ukrainians should be struck with conventional weapons"—even NATO members. If conventional strikes fail, Mearsheimer notes that "a limited use of nuclear weapons is called for" to halt Western aid. The goal is "largely for demonstrative purposes" to signal that Russia will not tolerate further intervention. This is a high-stakes gamble to force the West to stop its U.S. strategy of attrition before a total collapse occurs. The window for a diplomatic exit is closing as the Russia-Ukraine war enters its most dangerous phase."**

**> Literally unimaginable levels of corruption - The DoJ now says: the IRS is "forever barred and precluded" from pursuing "examinations" of Trump, "related or affiliated individuals," and related trusts and businesses. The waiver specifically encompasses "tax returns filed before the effective date" of the settlement, which was Monday. The slush fund is an obscenity.**

**I believe this is so fundamental to culture and "who we are" that I have included a long article at the bottom of this post about "vicemaxxing." Yes, Biden was corrupt. Yes, politics includes endemic, low-grade corruption. But this is the institutionalization of vice and grift and providing permission for it to infiltrate all levels of our culture.**

**I am tempted to put corruption in my list of long-term trends, but I hope that there will be a backlash and that this will be temporary.**

**> Disgusting - Trump endorses Ken Paxton. Beyond the moral bit, this risks Texas Republicans losing a Senate seat. Another own goal, which Trump has a habit of doing.**

**> This was inevitable - ObamaCare was always a game of hide-the-ball. Trump accelerated the process as the increase in governmental subsidies ended.**

**When the Democrats come back in, it is likely that the subsidies will increase. No one cares about the deficit ... until we all really, really do. My strong and consistent opinion is that our medical system must be torn down and rebuilt on a new foundation.**

**Enrollment in the Affordable Care Act marketplace is projected to fall by nearly 5 million people this year as rising premiums and higher deductibles force many Americans to reconsider whether they can still afford health insurance coverage, according to a new analysis from healthcare nonprofit KFF.**

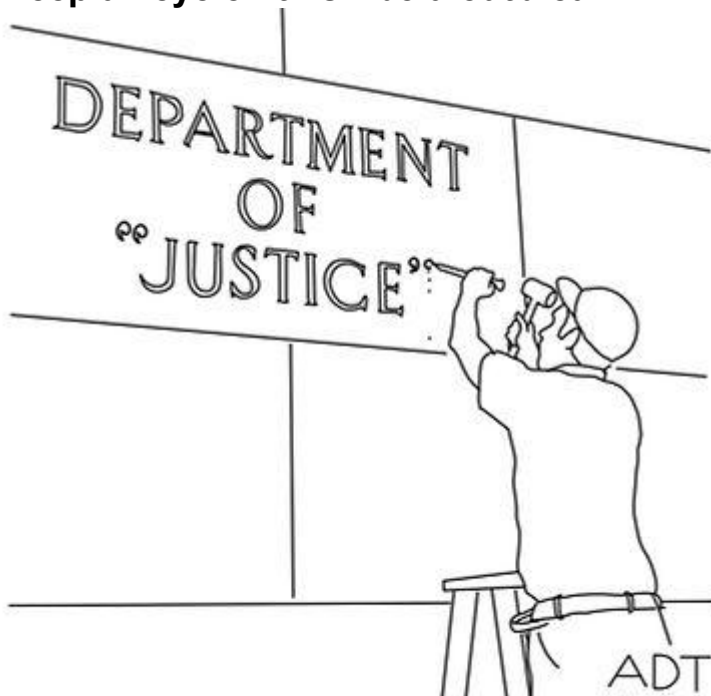
**> Faculty members at Harvard University approved a new cap on the number of A grades professors are allowed to hand out: 20 percent of each class size, plus four additional students. It had gotten to the point that one class had 48 valedictorians.**

**> It's complicated - individual consumers want companies, eg, Costco, to give them their share of tariff refunds.**

**> Reporter: Are you attending your son's wedding?**

**Trump: He'd like me to go. I'm going to try. I said, this is not good timing for me. I have a thing called Iran and other things. He's a person I've known for a long time.**

**> Keep an eye on this Ebola outbreak.**



## **"All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone."**

(I wrote the first draft of this essay and Claude helped me polish it. This is a longstanding, I assert very important, concept that I have used to describe human behavior. I turned to Claude because I have failed in the past to communicate the concept properly. Hopefully, we can make it work this time. The key concept to grasp is that we must fill up time and space in order to fill a void; the second concept is that our compulsion for novelty gets us into trouble as we change one thing and then one more, and pretty soon we have taken every trend too far.)

In the seventeenth century, Blaise Pascal wrote the most prescient sentence in the history of leisure: "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone."

He was not warning about smartphones. He was not predicting Netflix or TikTok or LinkedIn. He was describing what he believed to be a fixed feature of the human condition — a flight from the self that he called *divertissement*, diversion. The aristocrat hunting his rabbit did not, Pascal observed, particularly want the rabbit. He wanted not to think about the silence the rabbit's absence would impose.

Three and a half centuries later, the diagnosis holds and the marketplace has been industrialized. Every minute of stillness is now contested by a trillion-dollar attention economy whose entire business model is to ensure you never sit quietly anywhere again. The puzzle is not that we are restless. The puzzle is what we built once restlessness became a market.

### **The Supply Revolution**

The conventional story is that modernity made us anxious. The better story is that we were always anxious, and modernity simply solved the supply problem.

For most of human history, *divertissement* was constrained — by daylight, by geography, by the size of your village, by what your community could plausibly stage. Boredom and solitude were the

default state of evenings, of winters, of long agricultural lulls. Cultures developed elaborate machinery to make that default bearable: contemplative religion, communal ritual, slow-paced craft, oral storytelling, the long conversation. These were not entertainments in the modern sense. They were technologies of stillness.

Industrialization broke the constraint. Cheap print, then radio, then television, then the internet, then the algorithmic feed each delivered a step-change in the per-minute supply of diversion. The twentieth century delivered the leisure hours. The twenty-first delivered the means to fill every one of them. We won the long human war against tedium and have not yet noticed that something was lost in the victory.

What was lost is what Josef Pieper, writing in postwar Germany, called leisure in the older sense — *scholē*, *otium* — the contemplative, receptive state from which philosophy, art, and friendship actually grow. Leisure in Pieper's sense is not idleness and certainly not entertainment. It is the soil. We have radically expanded the unscheduled hours and almost entirely lost the cultural infrastructure that taught us what to do with them. What rushed in to fill the vacated time was consumption — including the consumption of experiences, which is laboring with extra steps.

## **The Novelty Engine**

There is a second mechanism running underneath all this, and it is the one most likely to keep destabilizing whatever we build to replace what was lost.

The human brain's reward system does not fire most strongly on pleasure. It fires on the anticipation of pleasure — and specifically on the prediction error that comes from something new. A familiar good thing produces a smaller dopaminergic response than a new uncertain thing of equal or even lesser quality. This is not a bug. In ancestral environments it was a feature: a creature that kept exploring discovered the new water source, the new food, the new mate. The creature that did not, died.

In an environment of scarcity, the novelty drive pointed toward survival. In an environment of abundance and infinite supply, it points nowhere in

particular, and it never turns off. Every form of stable life that requires duration — a marriage, a friendship, a craft, a place, a long book, a difficult instrument, a child — has to be defended against it. The novelty engine treats commitment as a problem to be solved by switching. This is the deeper reason diversion alone could never be enough. Yesterday's diversion adapts away. The series that thrilled you in 2019 cannot thrill you the same way in 2026, not because it changed but because you did. So the supply side escalates: more variety, faster cycles, shorter forms, sharper hooks, the dating app rather than the date, the trip rather than the home, the new role rather than the mastered one. The novelty hit gets shorter and the search for the next one gets more compulsive. The hedonic treadmill speeds up.

Alexis de Tocqueville saw something like this in America in the 1830s, long before the algorithm. He noted with bafflement that Americans, materially better off than any people in history, seemed permanently dissatisfied — "in the midst of abundance, scarce one contented." He attributed it to the open-endedness of democratic life: when nothing is fixed, every comparison is upward, every choice unsettles the last. He was diagnosing the novelty engine in its earliest industrial form.

The corrosive part is not that we like new things. It is that the capacity to stay has atrophied. Staying with a book past the boring middle. Staying in a marriage past the disenchantment. Staying in a city long enough to have neighbors. Staying with a craft long enough to be good at it. Staying with a child in the unstructured afternoon. Each of these requires the very tolerance that the novelty environment systematically erodes — and each of them, not coincidentally, is where meaning has historically been built.

## **The Self as the Final Product**

Of all the things the novelty engine has consumed, the most consequential is the self.

For most of human history, identity was inherited and slowly built. You were born into a family, a faith, a place, a trade, and the work of a life was to grow into that inheritance — to deepen it, complicate it, occasionally rebel against it, but to be recognizably continuous with it.

The self was something you became through repetition, through the slow accumulation of acts. Even the dramatic conversions and reinventions of earlier eras — the religious awakening, the great career change, the emigration — happened once or twice in a lifetime and were experienced as profound, not routine.

Social media changed the construct. The self is no longer something you become; it is something you publish. And what you publish has to compete with everything else being published, which means it has to refresh, sharpen, escalate. Aesthetics become seasonal — cottagecore one year, dark academia the next, clean girl the year after. Politics become aesthetics. Diagnoses become aesthetics. The vocations announced on LinkedIn cycle faster than the actual training required to do them would allow. The phrase personal brand would have been unintelligible to a literate person forty years ago. Now it is a competency, taught in workshops, required for employment.

The mechanism is the novelty engine turned inward. When the supply of new external content runs thin, the most renewable resource is the self. You can always be a new version of you. You can always have a new take, a new aesthetic, a new origin story, a new declared identity. And because the audience rewards the refresh, the loop tightens. People now burn through versions of themselves faster than they used to burn through anything else.

This is exhausting in a way that is genuinely new. The older problem was alienation from oneself. The newer problem is alienation from any continuous self at all — the experience of being a series of seasonally rebooted characters in a show that never quite cohered into a person. Anxiety and depression at the population level are not surprising under those conditions. You cannot be at peace with a self you have to keep replacing.

## **The Escalation Spiral**

Run the novelty engine long enough and a particular pattern emerges. It is the most important thing to understand about where we are.

The dopaminergic response adapts. What was novel at the first level of intensity becomes ordinary, so the next round has to be at the next

level. Then three. Then four. This is true for content, for sensation, for political rhetoric, for aesthetic provocation, for relational risk, for ideological purity. The system systematically deselects the moderate, the stable, the boring-but-functional, because none of those produce the stimulus the system has been trained to require.

So the cycle escalates until it hits a wall. Political rhetoric escalates until it hits actual violence or institutional breakdown. Aesthetic provocation escalates until it loses the capacity to provoke. Sexual and relational extremity escalates until it produces real harm. Economic risk escalates until something breaks. Personal reinvention escalates until the person can no longer hold a coherent life together. The wall is always there, somewhere, and the engine always reaches it.

At the wall, the only remaining "new" move is destruction. Tear it down. Burn the institution, end the marriage, leave the city, abandon the career, repudiate the prior self, declare the old framework irredeemable. The destruction registers as bold and transformative. It is the highest-intensity stimulus the system can produce.

Then, briefly, a reset. The cleared ground. The fresh start. The new framework. And then — because the engine is the same engine — the escalation begins again, from a slightly different starting point in a slightly different direction, but on the same trajectory.

The pattern is visible at every scale. In fashion, where each cycle of extremity collapses into a brief normcore reset before the next escalation begins. In political culture, where each generation's radical rejection becomes the next generation's establishment, to be rejected in turn. In personal lives, where people who keep starting over with a new partner, a new city, a new identity tend to discover, eventually, that the common variable in all the wreckage is themselves. In ideology, where revolutionary movements promise transformation and deliver, mostly, repetition with new names.

The deepest point is this: the tear-it-down impulse looks like change but functions as a treadmill. Destruction without the capacity to sit still does not produce a different life; it produces another lap. The real radical move, in a culture organized around perpetual escalation toward

collapse, is to stay — to refuse the seductive narrative that the answer is to burn it down and start fresh, because that narrative is the disease wearing the costume of the cure.

This is the deepest implication of Pascal's diagnosis. It is not only that we cannot bear silence. It is that, in the limit, we would rather burn the room down than be in it.

## **The Casualties**

Three things in particular have been hollowed out, and the loneliness numbers are downstream of all three.

The first is solitude. Not solitude as suffering — solitude as the capacity to be alone without immediately reaching for a device. This was, until very recently, the unremarkable background of most human lives. It is now a skill so rare that adults will pay for retreats to practice it for a weekend. The desert monks had a name for the inability to bear one's own quiet presence: *acedia*, the noonday demon, the restless need to suddenly walk somewhere or check on something or find another monk to talk to. That is the diagnostic ancestor of doomscrolling at eleven at night. The impulse is constant. The cultural environment used to discipline it; now it amplifies it.

The second is the civic middle layer — the leagues, lodges, churches, unions, PTAs, bowling teams, volunteer fire companies, and amateur clubs that Robert Putnam documented thinning out across the back half of the twentieth century. These institutions were how leisure used to be social by default. Their disappearance is why leisure is now private by default. The hours that used to be spent in low-stakes communal ritual are now spent alone with a screen, and the loneliness epidemic that follows is not a mystery — it is arithmetic.

The third is the unscheduled child, and this is where the helicopter-parenting story belongs. Parents who cannot tolerate their own unscheduled time will not tolerate it in their children either. The justifications shift — safety, college admissions, enrichment, developmental advantage — but the underlying horror of unstructured space is the same. The result is a cohort that has never been bored, never been unsupervised, never had to invent a Saturday afternoon out

of nothing. Removing the structure does not free them; it strands them. The collapse of college mental health is partly the collapse of a generation that has no operating system for empty time.

## **The Optimization Trap**

Byung-Chul Han argues that we have moved from a disciplinary society — which said forbidden — to an achievement society, which says you can, therefore you must. The packed calendar is voluntary servitude. The overscheduled executive and the overscheduled eight-year-old are the same phenomenon at different ages, and neither feels they have permission to stop. Optimization replaces obedience as the engine of self-exploitation, and the novelty engine supplies the constant flow of new things to optimize for — new productivity systems, new diets, new identities, new side projects, new platforms.

This is why the obvious advice — just put down the phone, just take a walk, just be present — does not work. The phone is not the problem. The phone is the symptom of a vacuum where a culture of stillness used to be, and a marketplace happily expanding to fill it, and a brain whose reward system is permanently tilted toward whatever is next.

## **What Recovery Looks Like**

The answer is not Luddism. It is not the rejection of diversion — diversion is not the enemy; a great deal of what we love in life is technically diversion. The answer is the deliberate reclamation of a capacity, against the grain of an environment that no longer trains it. Three pieces, roughly.

The first is boredom tolerance, recovered as an adult skill. The willingness to be in a line, a waiting room, a quiet evening, a long drive, without immediately filling the space. Most people now find this physically uncomfortable. That discomfort is the muscle to train. It is also what you have to be willing to feel before anything interesting happens in your own head.

The second is durable forms — commitments deliberately chosen because they resist optimization. A marriage you intend to stay in past the disenchantment. A craft you intend to be bad at for years. A place

you intend to know. A friendship that is not transactional. A self you do not feel obligated to refresh for an audience. These are not romantic gestures; they are structural defenses against the novelty engine. They require accepting that the dopamine response will be flat for long stretches, that this is the price of having anything that lasts, and that the recurring option to tear it down and start over — the option the culture will keep offering you, in increasingly attractive packaging — is almost always the disease wearing the costume of the cure.

The third is communal ritual that resists being optimized — the dinner that happens every week regardless, the service that does not innovate, the team or league or congregation that is boring on purpose. The civic middle layer cannot be rebuilt by app. It can only be rebuilt by people willing to keep showing up to things that are not, by the standards of the attention economy, interesting.

For your children, the move is smaller and harder: leave gaps. Refuse to fill the Saturday. Tolerate the complaint of "I'm bored." The complaint is the work. Boredom is the precondition for invention, and inventing your own afternoon is the precondition for inventing your own life.

## **The Quiet Room**

Pascal's room is, in 2026, a luxury good in reverse. Every person reading this can afford a quiet room. The hardware has never been cheaper or more available. The question is whether you can still sit in it — and whether your children, raised inside an attention economy engineered to make sure they never have to, will be able to sit in theirs. I am not optimistic.

## **The Iran War**

> We have a long way to go in this war and many changes yet to come. Having said that, Trump's attack on Iran and Iranian pushback have the potential to be one of the most important geopolitical and economic actions in our history. It can be that big.

> From The Hormuz Letter - "Iran is rebuilding its military industrial bases much faster than expected and has already restarted its entire

**drone production line during the ceasefire, producing hundreds a day. Two-thirds of all missile launchers are now operational, with Russia and China actively providing major new support including missile and drone components, per CNN. The Iranians have "exceeded all timelines the US had for reconstitution," a US military official said. Iran has also moved a large number of new mobile launchers across the country and kept its coastal cruise missiles largely intact, preserving the ability to strike ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz."**

**> Drawdowns by various strategic petroleum reserves around the world, including the US, are cushioning the effects on oil prices.**

**> China has explicitly informed the US that it recognizes Iran's "exercise of sovereignty" over the Strait of Hormuz, contradicting the White House readout of the Trump-Xi summit that claimed Xi opposed Iranian "militarization" of the Strait and any "toll" for its use, per a source close to Iranian Parliament Speaker Ghalibaf.**

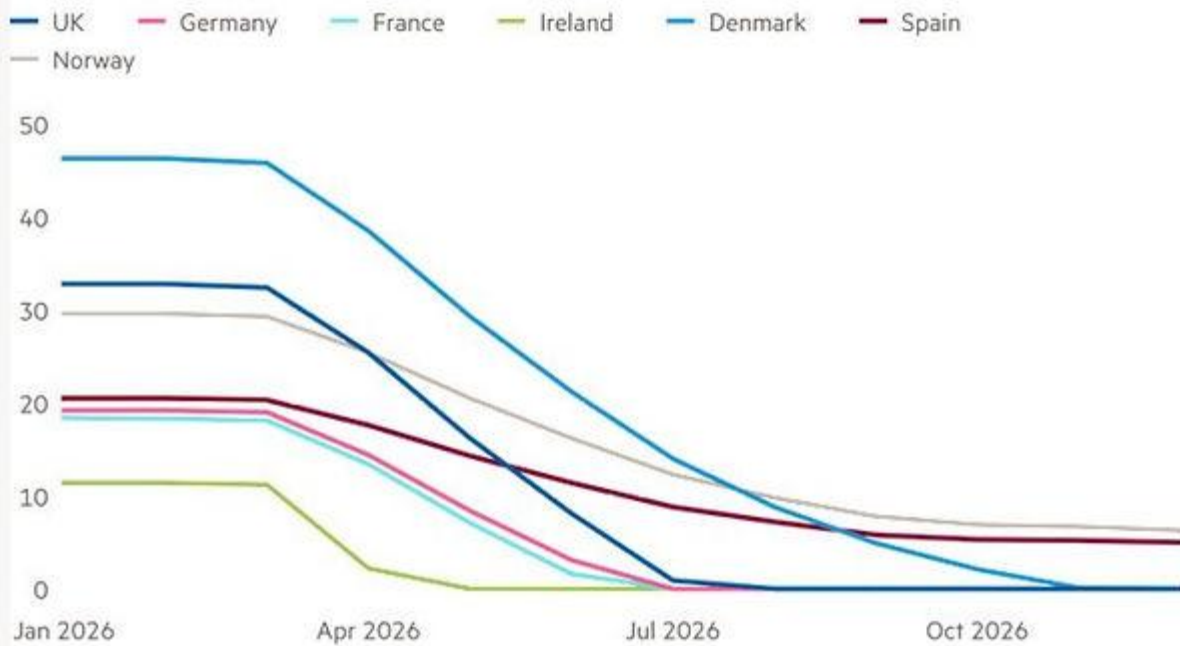
**> Unintended consequences - from the Telegraph - "Ian Ralby, the founder of shipping advisory firm IR Consilium, says Tehran proved that tolls and terror on a narrow strait could "garner attention, gain credibility and provide real leverage in negotiating against major powers".**

**"That is likely to be a strategy and approach that's mimicked elsewhere, and that spells trouble for all of us," he told a Lloyd's List briefing last week.**

**Some countries are already talking openly about imitating Tehran's tollbooth, threatening a new and uncertain cost on global maritime freight."**

## Hard landing

Jet fuel commercial stocks (days of cover)



Source: Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research, IEA, Kpler

## Percentage of Farmers Unable to Afford All Needed Fertilizer

Share of Respondents by Region Unable to Afford All Needed Fertilizer for 2026



 American Farm Bureau Federation

Source: AFBF Fertilizer Availability Survey; Analysis by American Farm Bureau Federation

Source: [Farm Bureau Survey Reveals Real Impact of Fertilizer Availability and Price](#) | [Market Intel](#) | [American Farm Bureau Federation](#)

## Short Takes

**> Food for thought - America Is Just As Unprepared Now For A Giant Monkey Climbing Skyscrapers As We Were In 1933.**

**> Southwest Airlines recently changed their baggage policy after a passenger at Dallas Love Field brought a humanoid robot on a May 7 flight to Las Vegas.**

**The airline's new policy states that no human-like or animal-like robots are allowed in the cabin or as checked baggage "regardless of size or purpose."**

**The robot's owner says they purchased the robot, nicknamed Stewie, his own plane ticket and used an FAA-compliant lithium battery in order to fly.**

**> My man - Filmmaker Nikolaj Arcel is asked why his new movie "The Promised Land" lacks the diversity that the Oscars stipulate and has only Nordic cast members Arcel: "Well first of all, the film takes place in Denmark in the 1750s."**

**> Insane stat of the day: California almonds use roughly 3–5.5 million acre-feet of water per year, depending on methodology. That's ~4-7x more water than all data centers in North America used combined in 2025.**

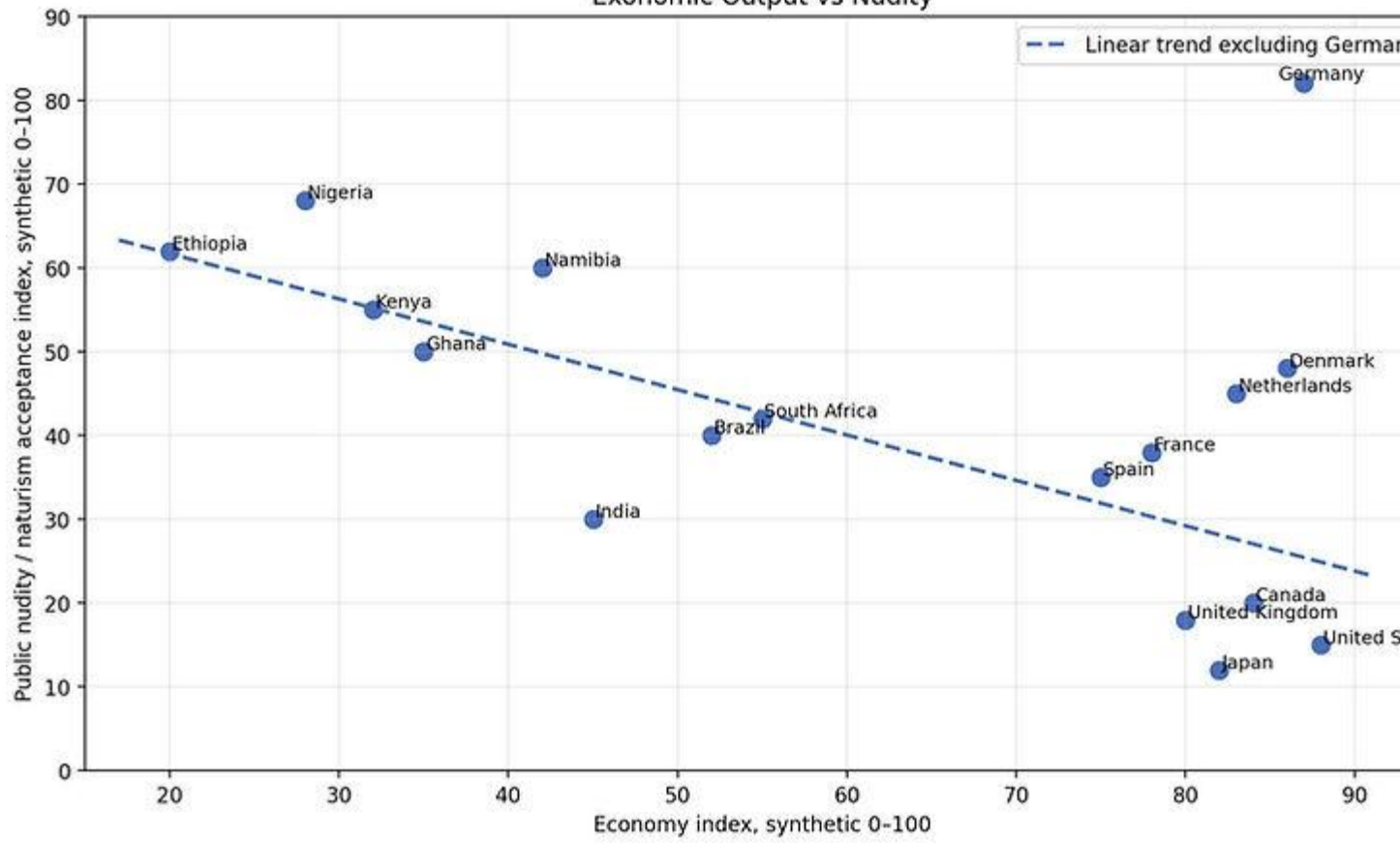
**Precisely,  
You Are Living In A Greek Tragedy**

There is almost a Greek tragedy quality to U.S. actions lately where every move taken to escape one's fate becomes the mechanism that delivers it. The U.S. went to war to reassert dominance - and proved it could no longer dominate. It demanded allies send warships - and revealed it had no real allies. It waged forty years of maximum pressure to break Iran before this moment came - and instead forged the very adversary now capable of meeting it. It started the war in part to have additional leverage over China - and handed the world the spectacle of begging China for help. The prophecy was multipolarity. Every American action to prevent it reveals it instead.

## Gallery

You were wondering why the Protestant Work Ethic was so effective.

Economic Output vs Nudity



Economic Confidence Index, 2020-2026



## Miscellaneous

Reader HW taking down another wonderful childhood myth.



**A roadrunner's top speed is 26 MPH.  
The average coyote can run 42 MPH.**

**Everything in our  
childhood was a lie...**

**CAMPERVILLE**

# **Can America Escape the Cycle of Vicemaxxing?**

**Donald Trump did not invent political corruption. But he may be accelerating something more dangerous: the collapse of universal moral standards into a culture of endless special exceptions.**

**Derek Thompson**

**May 21, 2026**

**Editors note: I really did not want to write this essay. Every time I wanted to write something to address political corruption under Donald Trump, I thought: what is there to say about this subject beyond the fact that it is extremely bad? But I finally broke down when all of the following things happened in a 48-hour period:**

- **An IRS audit of Donald Trump's tax returns, which could have cost him more than \$100 million, was curiously wiped away in an agreement between the president's own Justice and Treasury Departments.**
- **The Justice Department created a \$1.8 billion slush fund that the president can use to pay out to his friends, including lawbreaking January 6 rioters.**
- **The president used his influence over the IRS to guarantee "immunity" from all ongoing tax investigations into his family.**
- **The Wall Street Journal reported on [nearly \\$1 billion worth of suspicious commodity trades](#) made just minutes before Trump's social-media posts about the Iran War caused oil prices to plummet, signaling a possible appearance of insider trading tied to the president's posts.**

**Again and again, the president has taken the federal government in his hands, turned it upside down like a child's piggy bank, and smacked it on the side until billions of dollars poured out of the hole in its back. As Republicans excuse his behavior by alleging misdeeds by the other side, I fear that a warped philosophy of amorality is settling over American politics, where fewer people are arguing for universal**

principles of decency and more people are perfectly comfortable justifying their own side's uninterrupted immorality by insisting on the enduring presence of a greater evil on the other side.

This is no way to build a world.

After years of conservatives criticizing the left for “virtue signaling”—that is, cravenly performing a version of virtue for public approval—we now have something even worse than its opposite. The president and his allies are not merely vice-signaling. By empowering a figure who is oblivious to virtue and choosing to ignore his crescendoing depravity, we are creating a mode of politics that openly celebrates the death of morality.

This is the age of vicemaxxing. The question is whether this is our new normal—or, I hope, the sort of cultural overreach that shocks our collective conscience and sets the stage for a more decent politics.

Subscribe

# America in the Age of Vicemaxxing

Photo by [Ana Bórquez](#) on [Unsplash](#)

## 1. People are good

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes that we can discern “the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in” by listening to the funny things people say when they argue with one another.

They say things like “that’s my seat, I was here first.” They say “come on, you promised.” They appeal to a moral principle.

What most interests Lewis about these quarrels is that—unless the fight is happening on a playground among cruel children, or in a prison yard

among psychopaths—the other person in the fight usually accepts the principle. He rarely says, “I stole this seat because I’m stronger than you,” or “I promised, but promises are for losers.” Rather, the misbehaving person defends his behavior, not by arguing against the standard, but rather by arguing for a “special reason” or excuse to depart from the standard. They say, “I thought you’d gotten up from your seat, and now I’m all settled,” or they claim something has changed since the promise was made.

People behaving badly rarely argue that badness is defensible on its own terms. More often, they argue that the moral standard of goodness broadly applies—just not in this case. To Lewis, the basis of faith and goodness balances on the tip of one idea: Deep down, the soul of humanity is endowed with a glowing kernel of decency, a shared understanding of basic right and wrong.

Some might call this thing herd psychology, or culture. Some might call it evolutionary [eusociality](#), or biology. In his book *Mere Christianity*, Lewis calls it god. I don’t know what to call it. But what we call it is not so important as the fact that it exists. Morality presses on us, even when we pretend it cannot touch us. It’s there, even when people pretend that they are too special to hear it. Morality feels real, because it is.

Goodness exists.

## 2. Trump is bad

Donald Trump is not immoral. The adjective is close but several letters off. The better word is amoral, and the difference matters. His calamitous sense of narcissistic victimhood means he cannot see principles in the first place, and he encourages those around him to imagine that the principles are fake. Ethics whizz past Trump the way sonar waves and high-pitched dog whistles evade the umwelts of ordinary people. The left-wing writer John Ganz [put it this way](#): His entire notion of the world comes down to personal relationships and he personalizes every concept and event. If the market goes down, someone is trying to screw you, personally. If it goes up, and you benefit, it’s because you’re smart.

Or consider the testimony of a very different source who came to the exact same conclusion. Here's Steve Bannon from Michael Wolff's 2017 bestseller *Fire and Fury*:

Bannon saw again the essential Trump problem. He hopelessly personalized everything. He saw the world in commercial and show business terms: someone else was always trying to one-up you, someone else was always trying to take the limelight. The battle was between you and someone else who wanted what you had.

Fortified within the armor of his amorality, Trump kicked off his second presidency with an astonishing run of ethically indefensible nonsense:

- Taking crypto money from desperate followers, then taking medicine from dying children: In January 2025, Donald Trump launched \$TRUMP, a cryptocurrency meme coin, which allowed his family to earn more than \$100 million from trading fees even as more than 800,000 investors lost more than \$2 billion, making it one of the most nakedly extractive presidential self-enrichment schemes in history. Three days later, the president signed an executive order freezing all U.S. foreign assistance, resulting in the **estimated death of more than 500,000 people** around the world, most of them children.
- Soliciting billionaire donations in exchange for pardons and tax cuts, while cutting health care for the poor: In March, the Trump family sought an investment from the crypto firm Binance; six months later, the president pardoned the company's founder Changpeng Zhao, whose conviction of money laundering included one of the largest corporate penalties in history. Two weeks later, Trump pardoned the businessman Trevor Milton, who had been convicted of securities and wire fraud, several months after the Miltons donated millions of dollars to his campaign. Four weeks after that, in April, Trump pardoned the Florida tax offender Paul Walczak soon after his wife attended a \$1 million fundraising dinner for the president. In July, Trump signed into law a tax cut that will save the top 0.1 percent of Americans about \$300,000 a

year. The law includes the largest reduction in health care spending on the poor in American history.

- **Gutting government oversight while engaging in blatant corruption:** In May, Trump thanked the largest buyers of \$TRUMP meme coin with a private dinner at a Virginia golf club without lobbying registrations or an ethics review. Trump has fired the head of the US Office of Special Counsel, the director of the Office of Government Ethics, and more than a dozen inspectors general across federal agencies, after handing the FBI over to a conspiracy theorist and personal friend with no record in law enforcement.

In these paragraphs and juxtapositions, one can see Trumpism for what it is—not so much an ideology, or theory of a political economy, or even a political cause, but rather a pure machine of self-enrichment, one that seeks to maximize glory and income for the president, with a casual indifference or outright hostility toward any life form that doesn't present itself as a supine resource for the extraction of wealth and power.

The classic defense of Trump's behavior "...but Democrats are also bad" does not make contact with any ethical principle. It is rather a moral blank check made out to the administration that promises to cover the cost of any transgression.

To point out that Trump's lurid corruption has been bad sounds almost pathetic in its understatement. But I am trying to make a more solid point: I believe that the above paragraphs represent the kind of bad and wrong that everybody knows is bad and wrong. And by everybody, I mean not only progressive Boomers neurally tethered to primetime MSNBC but also the entire MAGA electorate. Everybody knows, in some part of their heart, soul, prefrontal cortex, or whatever, that there is no moral explanation possible for the stories I have just offered you.

How does Trump get away with it?

As Lewis writes, extraordinary efforts to bend morality require extraordinary excuses. While Trump himself may be uniquely amoral—Lewis's frame doesn't seem to quite touch him—the work of excuse-making falls to his followers. To justify the rise of a kleptocratic king,

conservatives have to convince themselves that the threat from Trump's enemies is so existential that it justifies their own side's actions.

And so, they do.

In his new book *The Political Vise*, the Republican operative John Tillman argues that the “radical left” has commandeered America's leading institutions in a despotic attempt to remake the country as a radical woke-socialist dystopia. Like similar conceits—c.f., the Cathedral, “the Flight 93 election”—the construct of *The Vise* serves the purpose of “imagining the Democrats, not as a rival coalition with opposing policies, but as a unified, impersonal force that is always on the precipice of totalitarian control,” the Atlantic staff writer Jonathan Chait [wrote](#). The imminence of this threat leaves Republicans with no choice: They must “destroy that which threatens to destroy them”—and at all costs.

Any time I raise the issue of Trump's corruption online, the first response is invariably something along the lines of “[but Biden was also bad](#).” This is not a tendency limited to online posting. It's the standard response among Republican defenders of the administration:

- Asked about the president pardoning January 6 rioters, Rep. Andrew Clyde (R-Ga.) [said](#): “Look at Biden and his pardons. Are you kidding me?”
- Asked about Trump using his presidency to become a cryptocurrency scion, Rep. James Comer (R-Ky.) [told](#) reporters, “I'll talk to you only about [Biden's] pardons.”
- Asked on CNBC about conflicts of interest in the family business, Eric Trump [said](#), “We're far from Hunter Biden.”

The reasoning “...but Biden was also bad” does not make contact with an ethical principle. It is a moral blank check made out to the administration that promises to cover the cost of any transgression. The presumption that the evils of our enemies can justify any indecency is the opposite of a moral principle. “I think anyone who follows politics can tell there are no principles left in my party,” former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie [said](#). “Even for people who agree with some of the stuff

the president is doing, if you are honest with yourself, you know it is not based on principle.”

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### **3. The post-virtue style of politics**

In his book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argued that the modern world had lost the shared moral language once provided by virtue systems, such as religion. Several months ago, I sat with a reading group to discuss the opening chapters of the book and admitted that I didn’t quite get it. “Were our ancestors really so virtuous?” I said. “If past generations of institutionalized racism, misogyny, bigotry, and violence possessed a language of virtue, of what use is that language?” I still think I was right about the egregious sins of our parents and grandparents. But I now think that MacIntyre was right, too, and it took a dash of C. S. Lewis to see just how right. In this distrustful, anti-establishment, post-institutional age, too many public conversations about right and wrong excuse the behavior of preferred groups rather than articulate a theory of virtue that extends across all groups.

Several weeks ago, the New York Times rocked the Internet with a [controversial interview](#) with the commentator Hasan Piker and the journalist Jia Tolentino, in which they described and tacitly defended the practice of stealing small things from big corporations. Tolentino admitted to pocketing a few lemons from Whole Foods, and Piker approved.

It would be absurd to equate the substance of these comments with Trump’s corruption; a snagged Whole Foods lemon is not a \$1.8 billion pot of public funds to dole out to lawbreaking rioters. I am not interested in piling onto the personal attacks that followed this conversation so much as I want us to listen closely to the precise way they talked about virtue. “The rich don’t play by the rules, so why should I?” the interviewer Nadja Spiegelman said. “I’m pro stealing from big corporations, because they steal quite a bit more from their own workers,” Piker said.

Do you hear it? Surely, C. S. Lewis's ears would have perked up. It's special excuses all the way down. Rather than begin with a universal imperative ("Stealing is bad, and it would be bad if everyone stole all the time"), followed by a personal decision ("therefore, I don't steal"), joined by a public policy recommendation ("therefore, I expect others in society to do the same"), you have a series of private justifications for bad behavior, each excused by the fact that some larger societal force is also bad. Instead of "I Play By the Rules, So I Expect the Rich to Do the Same," the article's headline offered the perfect inversion: "The Rich Don't Play By the Rules, So Why Should I?" Out with **universalist ethics**, and in with individualist excuses for doing what you want.

I am not lumping Tolentino, Piker, and Spiegelman into the same bucket as the spineless corruption-excusers who sit in Congress. I am rather asking that we hear the similarities in the formal logic of their statements: the in-group's bad behavior is justified so long as the out-group's behavior is appropriately condemned.

My fear is that the post-virtue style of politics is here to stay. The moral blank check of "we don't have to argue for our cause, so long as we can argue that our counterparty is worse" might prove too tantalizing for the next generation of conservatives, centrists, liberals, and leftists to resist when they hold the reins of power.

Another way is possible. In April, the political writer Isaac Saul, who has exhaustively documented Trump's corruption, published an essay entitled "**Decency is about to make a comeback.**" "Obscenity feels like it has become the norm," Saul wrote. But just as culture is the continual handoff between trend and countertrend—he notes that the death of malls seems to be reversing itself—perhaps the lurid corruption of our age will inspire a countermovement that successfully returns government to the rule of law. Like a rubber band pulled all the way back, maybe the tensions within vicemaxxing politics will spring us forward in the opposite direction.

What would a revolution of decency look like? I don't know. I am not ready to predict the imminence of a new social gospel that extends itself across American life. I am only ready to hope for it.

**Like Lewis, I think that people know good and bad. A right society cannot build itself on a pile of wrongs, and a country cannot stand on a heap of special excuses that reserve for every insider the right to misbehave on account of some external sin. Maybe one day, when enough people get tired of making excuses for the inexcusable, some leader or group will say the thing that nobody currently wants to say: “We are better than this.” And maybe it will feel good to hear it, too, because it is the rarest thing: the truth.**

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