

New Nonfiction: “Underground” by Mark Hummel



Hands at the Cuevas de las Manos upon Río Pinturas, near the town of Perito Moreno in Santa Cruz Province, Argentina. Picture taken by Marianoceowski (2005).

In my childhood, television was a great unifier, for there existed a limited choice of three television networks, discounting PBS. But even if we were watching the same programming, television had begun to shape and change all of our lives—and our democracy—for the Vietnam War was broadcast into our homes every night as was the coverage of Nixon’s downfall and resignation. Politics reached beyond the nightly news and entered drama and comedy. Programming like *All in the Family* provided a shrill echo of conservative politicians in its portrayal of bigoted Archie Bunker as he faced an America that looked, in his eyes, nothing like the one he had known before. *M*A*S*H*, a laughter-heavy depiction of an army surgical unit set on the frontlines of the Korean War began airing in 1972 and offered a not-so-subtle editorial about the folly, politics, and dehumanizing effects of the real war still raging in Vietnam.

Hogan’s Heroes, an altogether different slapstick television-vision of war with no pretense of condemnation, ended the year before *M*A*S*H* began. That it is a regular presence on Nick-at-Nite and in YouTube videos offers a sure sign I’m getting old. The comedy held a vision of a time when enemies were still identifiable, choosing as its setting a prisoner-of-war camp in Nazi Germany. Written and released within an America that emerged as the savior of Europe, it broadcast clear allegiances. My own childhood fascination with *Hogan’s Heroes* had little to do with bumbling Colonel Klink and “I see NOTHING” Sergeant Schultz and the other Nazis made to look

like incompetent fools. My interest was with the hidden tunnels and the secret underground chambers dug by Allied prisoners. I was fixated on Colonel Robert E. Hogan, the obvious star, in his leather bomber jacket and perfect hair (and on all those busty blond turncoat spies he seduced). The show started in 1965 and lasted two years longer than US involvement in the actual war it spoofed.

The era of its airing goes back. Back before we knew Bob Crane, who portrayed Hogan, was a sexual misfit, back long before someone murdered him, way back before they made a movie about him. You know about all that, right? Those underground stories, that Bob Crane was obsessed with pornography, watching it and making it, recording his sexual conquests over women for posterity, even laying soundtracks over his videos? Crane was murdered, bludgeoned with his own tripod in his Arizona condo in 1978. After his death, the details of his surreptitious life began trickling out, as did the videos in which he documented his sexual conquests dating to the days of *Hogan's Heroes*. Many of his secrets only became widely public in 2002 with news stories accompanied the release of a biopic titled *Auto Focus*.

Today we might shrug at a television star proving to be a misogynist and sexual deviant, but such behind-the-scenes information was kept strictly behind-the-scenes in those days. No hot-mics or soundbites. No cable channels or 24-hour news cycles. News, like entertainment, entered our lives on a decidedly different trajectory in those days. There was no such thing as streaming services or binge-watching. You showed up at your television at 7 PM on Sunday because that's when *The Wonderful World of Disney* aired. As a child I could never have imagined a Disney streaming platform or that they would own sports and television networks, no more than I could imagine funny, handsome, smiling Bob Crane was a sexual deviant. There were no television or internet radio venues for future presidents to discuss their wealth, ex-wives, or sexual

interests. That sort of talk was kept strictly in the underground. And discussions of global pandemics weren't yet the plotlines of movies, the metaphors of Zombie apocalypses on our television screens, and certainly not our lived reality. We hadn't yet fractured into political divisions you identified by where you received your news. We didn't air our beliefs or our dirty laundry to a network over social media. In those days, if you wanted to avoid the lives of those beyond your neighborhood or ignore world events, you didn't need to construct an underground bunker, for the network gatekeepers already provided cover. I suppose entrance to the right Manhattan cocktail parties, Senate offices, or newsrooms would have gotten you every manner of uncensored stories, but public spectacle on a grand scale seldom appeared under the bright lights.

I've been thinking about going "underground" for years now. Maybe it's a sign of aging and reveals a nostalgic longing for a childhood where I dug a lot of underground forts and passed exorbitant hours playing in my parent's crawlspace. Or perhaps it's a reaction to the daily surrealism of life during a global pandemic, when the desire to "stick one's head in the sand" becomes something approaching literal and has resulted in a lot of Netflix. Or maybe my underground thoughts have been brought on, much to my bewilderment, because America has survived a president who was so locked inside his own nostalgic yearning for the era of his youth that he built a political agenda out of it.

My own nostalgic longings are, like most things, complicated. I turned twelve in 1974. At twelve I reached an age when playing with model tanks in a dirt crawlspace was beginning to seem uncool. Which is also to say that I had reached an age where I had begun to care what might pass for "cool," if there is such a thing in junior high. I was also awakening to a wider, above-ground world, which largely entered my

consciousness through television. I read a lot, but I wasn't the sort of twelve-year-old who perused *The New York Times*, and I stuck to headlines in the paper I delivered, *The Cheyenne Tribune*.

The above-ground world mostly entered through snippets from my father's ritual of watching the ten o'clock news, though like most kids at twelve, I'd have a hard time finding synthesis in the relationship between my experiences and what was broadcast into our family room. I grew up in Cheyenne, Wyoming, a place remote enough and small enough that it offered, and suffered, insularity. Reality, and the outside world, crept in mostly through our televisions and newspapers. With the benefit of hindsight, I can now see that in the isolation afforded by living in Wyoming—and in those pre-globalization, pre-internet days you could be quite isolated—the social tensions of pro-Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War arrived years later than elsewhere in the nation. What might take an hour to arrive from the coasts now might take a year or more then. Yet Cheyenne, apparently, was not isolated from realities like economic woes, and the 1973 – 1975 recession arrived right on schedule. In my narrow experience, local economics were manifested in the 3rd floor of our school being condemned, so the building could not accommodate the entire student body. As a result, my first year of junior high was defined by our school operating on a split schedule where half the school attended between 7:00 AM and 12:00 PM and the other half from 12:00 PM to 5:00 PM. I was on the afternoon shift, which meant athletic practices took place at the high school (also condemned) in the morning and riding the bus home from school in the dark on winter days to deliver newspapers by flashlight.

In 1974 a new school building opened. The atmosphere of fresh paint and new carpet and a functioning cafeteria were marred by locker searches that frequently turned up weapons and a near daily early dismissal due to bomb threats. Delayed

incidents linked to war protests and backlash against national civil rights organizing were fueled by a community within an almost entirely homogenized state that found unexpected diversity in its schools through the presence of the children of airmen and airwomen with skin tones decidedly not white. Unfocused, misplaced anger and confusion had fueled the broader tensions also resulted in riotous skirmishes in our city's schools and something akin to perceived class wars sparked between the children of educated professionals and those of blue-collar workers. There were frequent fights, often at scale. Mostly there was more threatening than fighting, and typically I hightailed it for home, now in walking distance from the new school. I no longer had to wait for a bus, which is where most of the trouble happened, when insults were hurled and fights erupted.

The world that entered my twelve-year-old world through the television screen was every bit as contentious and bleak. 1974 was the year Richard Nixon resigned. A year later, Saigon would fall and the last American troops would retreat from an unethical war. My dad regularly took his turn waiting in around-the-block lines to put gas in the family Buick.

The 45th U.S. president turned twelve in 1958. I suspect that he may have never pumped gas in his lifetime. The year was marked domestically by escalating tensions from court mandated school integration and racist responses. The Supreme Court ruled in *Cooper v. Aaron* that fear of social unrest or violence, whether real or constructed by those wishing to oppose integration, did not excuse state governments from complying with *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Popular culture in 1958 mostly cast misogyny and racism as harmless and conformity as patriotic. The following year our future president would be sent away to boarding school. Based only on his self-confessed adult habits, my guess is that he watched a

good deal of television as a child. What I am certain of is that, like every twelve-year old, he believed the world revolved around him. The difference? He never stopped behaving like he was twelve.

Forgetting the narcissism, the hyperbolic tweets, and the actions that led to his two impeachments, the closest thing to a coherent political vision the 45th president (or perhaps that of his advisors) articulated is a vestige from the middle of the last century, a simple-minded view of lapsed American greatness best conveyed in his “American Carnage” inauguration speech:

This vision of America is derived from a uniformed backwards glance that neglects a great deal of economic and technological transformation and that is inextricably intertwined with misogyny, racism, and convenient, actionless patriotism. With unidentified and unexamined nostalgia guiding political action, we entered a geopolitical fantasyland where down is up and anyone who disagrees is cast aside as un-American or lying. The promise that a nation could unilaterally disentangle the complexities of a global economy that American capitalists seeking cheap labor largely constructed is laughably naïve. It is a promise that emerges from a nostalgic view held by someone born into wealth, specifically wealth originally derived from charging poor people rent. Who wouldn't like more American made products or better paying jobs that don't require an education or patriotism where you only have to wear a lapel pin, stand for the national anthem, and send someone else off to war? Easy right? Like reality TV easy. If instead we recognize the inherent complexity of living in an age where everything is global—marketplaces, resource allocation, human migration patterns, climate change, viral transfer—the intellectual demands are exhausting. Safer to listen to the guy at the end of the bar and nod along complacently. Safer to go looking for subterranean refuge.

I expend directionless energy wondering if our culture can be repaired. Is it possible to reeducate multiple generations with the critical thinking skills required to distinguish truth from lies? To distinguish nostalgia from history? Can we again learn what it means to participate in a civil society?

It would be so much easier to dig a big hole and hide.

I should likely go searching for non-political explanations for my current underground obsession. After all, I'm clearly guilty of my own nostalgia, whether my politics originate in it or not. Could my desire to withdraw be as simple as not sleeping well? It's true that I have been awakened by "upside-down" dreams prompted by Netflix addictive viewing of *Stranger Things* and *The Leftovers*. Or is there a through-line present here as well? Is a desire for a return to an older vision of America real or imagined?

I didn't watch a great deal of television as a child, growing up in a time and place where my friends and I had the freedom and safe environment to play without supervision and the space to explore. There were family television rituals that united me to other kids of the same era of course: *The Brady Bunch* on Friday nights, *Emergency* on Saturdays, *The Wonderful World of Disney* and *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* with requisite popcorn on Sundays. Outside of that, there wasn't a lot of connective tissue to kids from elsewhere. Wyoming was a place so foreign and typecast by most that when my family traveled on summer vacations, kids I met in motel swimming pools would ask if we rode horses to school. Their vision of the West I lived in was more formed by *Gunsmoke* than textbooks or Yellowstone vacations. Of course, I knew no more of their homeplaces than they did of mine.

When winter forced my brother and idea inside from the prairie, much of it was passed in our crawlspace. Perhaps

inspired by *Hogan's Heroes*, we spent a lot of time excavating under our house in the weak light of a sixty-watt bulb. My best friend and I used the tailings of our excavations as a play space for our painstakingly constructed, authentic reproduction plastic model World War II tanks. The Americans and Brits on one side of the crawlspace dug in with complex forts constructed under the dirt with scraps from dad's table saw, while the Germans positioned the big guns and long-range tanks on the ridge we'd piled against the foundation wall. That pretend World War II of our imaginations was a war we could manage, a clearly delineated war that bore little resemblance to the Cold War we lived daily and never understood or the Vietnam War played out on our TV screens and in our draft board chambers, a tidy war studied in our history books when the enemy wore distinguishing colors and marched under a swastika, not the nebulous, endless "war on terrorism" of our current age.

I was a cold war kid all the way. Not just by historical era but by virtue place. Cheyenne, Wyoming is the home of Warren Air Force Base and the headquarters for the Strategic Air Command, that wing of the US Air Force charged with control over the nation's nuclear warheads. Many of my classmates' fathers were officers who managed the bureaucracy of nuclear missile movement and maintenance. Growing up, we were told that Cheyenne was Soviet target #2, just behind NORAD in Colorado Springs where an incoming nuclear onslaught would be tracked. NORAD inhabits a bunker scraped out of a mountain (eerily named Cheyenne Mountain) and refashioned from concrete and steel.

We lived among daily reminders of nuclear presence in the long, white semi-trailers passing on the interstate pulled by blue USAF semi-tractors. As a teenager I crossed beyond the posted "No Trespassing by Order of the United States Government" signs and chained gates to explore an abandoned Atlas missile base in the inky blackness of a Wyoming prairie

night. We were made to understand that the nuclear missiles and their command had been placed in our midst precisely because we lived in the middle of nowhere—as if one could have a serious conversation about minimalization of causalities in a nuclear firestorm so vast it would literally alter planetary climate. Perhaps the mental instability of our leaders in that age simply took a less overt form than we have come to expect today.

How did one find victory or freedom in a nuclear holocaust or in a political war of competing ideologies? No wonder we needed the predictability of Colonel Hogan. When our teachers directed us in nuclear raid drills, wrangling us from classrooms to interior hallways where we were instructed to sit against walls with our heads resting on our knees, we longed for Hogan's tunnels and our crawlspace. We weren't foolish enough to think the earth offered sufficient protection from a nuclear blast but it seemed a far sight superior to our teachers asking us to assume the position.

With *Hogan's Heroes* I grew up on images of Lt. Louis LeBeau popping his head out of the ground beneath the guard dog's house or lifting an entire shrubbery beyond the prison camp fence. My brother and I had big plans for just such a tunnel. We figured we'd leave from an entrance hidden in the crawlspace, tunnel under the front foundation, and come up in an immense Golden Elder. It was the only damn thing that seemed to grow in the dry, wind-ravaged arctic zone called Wyoming. The tunnel was going to be a thing of beauty. Deep, clean, and precise. We envisioned it clearly. We'd sneak out of the house at will—down through the basement, through the furnace room, through the small hatch door into the crawlspace (that too-small door dad cursed whenever he bent his 6'4" frame to retrieve a storage box each time mom wanted to change seasonal decorations). Through the crawlspace and through the bare stud wall to the other side where dad had piled all of the dirt from his excavations when he'd had the bright idea to

dig out all of one side—a chamber twenty feet long by fifteen feet wide—digging it down three feet and leaving a dirt shelf along the entire perimeter where he could stack the boxes of ornaments and Easter baskets and out of fashion clothes. We'd slip between the bare studs, duck through to the other side, our own beloved dark chamber where we had to kneel or literally crawl over the excavated dirt, down into our secret fort through the tunnel, through the bush, and into freedom.

Never mind that there was a door to the back yard next to the furnace room, unattended, unlit, a direct path to the world beyond. Never mind that we had no idea where we'd go if we did sneak out. Never mind that, had we succeeded, we would have, inevitably, passed the time asking, "What do you want to do?" and responding, "I don't know; what do you want to do?" that mantra a rerun of pre-adolescent summer afternoons. I'm talking about that in-between age, those years when we were too "cool" to play guns ("You're dead." "No, I'm not, you missed me.") or cops and robbers on our bicycles. The age before we found beer and Mad Dog 20/20 and weed and girls. Never mind that our parents were entirely trusting and we lived in a safe place where we could venture into the prairie for whole days of play, stay out until after dark all summer playing kick-the-can or flashlight tag with every kid in the neighborhood. Never mind the back door. The tunnel would have been so much cooler.

We got as far as digging the "secret" fort that we proudly showed our father from the distance of "his side" of the crawlspace, shining our flashlights into its depths. Unfortunately, these excavations were permanently interrupted by my brother discovering girls.

Left to my own devices, the tunnel idea was more forgotten than abandoned and, for a time at least, the new mound of dirt created by our previous industry grew of greater interest to avid model tank builders than the rather grave hole, particularly once my next-door neighbor and I discovered the

simulated bombing realism accomplished by rock throwing, the effects of matches on plastic models, and the excitement generated by tin foil basins buried beneath the dirt filled with lighter fluid. Eventually the hole gave way to more construction on an American tank compound and filled to a point where it marked the "no man's land" between Allies and Germans, a soil fought over for years but oddly never crossed by either army, likely in part due to the fact that the G.I.s eventually discovered nurses (more evidence of Allied superiority over Germans, who never once threw a party). Colonel Hogan would have admired our imaginative industriousness.

Like the fort and the tunnel, the tanks, dozens of them, all carefully hand-painted and laden with tank tread, gas cans, shovels, sandbags, additional armor plating, and long aerial antennas melted from the thin plastic strips that held the model parts, were abandoned. How we had labored over these weapons of war, ironic given that we were circled by weapons with firepower beyond imagination and our fathers attended service club luncheons alongside the warriors of Strategic Air Command. We built tanks, we could have reasoned, not missiles, as if one means of killing had moral superiority over another, or as if we were oblivious to the ways the world had transformed in the years between the war we carried out under our house and the one our fathers watched on the nightly news. I should have had the consciousness to understand the dangers of such a blasé vision of war as acted out in our play, for my father had landed on Normandy and fought through Central Europe. That is the risk of looking backward as entertainment rather than a living history. We'd constructed models with precise engineering, forgoing their function, a mistake common to engineers the world over.

Having gathered dust for two or three years—and the crawlspace offered nothing but gritty dust that embedded into the plastic in a manner superior to what any airbrush artist could

accomplish—we had created artifacts rather than toys or weapons. I remember the day my next-door neighbor, now sixteen, rang the doorbell where he waited with a big cardboard box. “Hey, man,” he said. “I thought I should probably get my tanks.” On the way out he asked, “Want to party tonight?” We’d stopped our underground play. My brother had submitted his draft card. There now existed a thing called HBO, and it ran dirty movies.

There are any number of euphemisms for the word “underground.” It often refers to things that are “clandestine” or even “subversive,” the usage bringing to mind spies or secretive groups. We use the term loosely to reference those who go into hiding, referring not just to the actions of fugitives on the lam but also to psychological remove from the broader society such as we encounter in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* and the narrator’s descent into ennui. Often the word underground is included in the monikers of those committing the act of “speaking truth to power” as in an underground press. And frequently we apply the word to “things nearly present in plain sight but not acknowledged.” The early punk band The Velvet Underground took their name from a documentary-style book of the same title by Michael Leigh that depicted wife-swapping and kinky sex beyond the white-picket fences of suburbia.

I cannot speak of euphemisms for “underground” when writing about a World War II television comedy without speaking to its starkest inverse, for of course the French Resistance movement to German occupation was dubbed “the French Underground.” Courageous but otherwise ordinary French citizens combatted the Nazis with intricate intelligence networks, underground newspapers, guerrilla warfare tactics, and escape routes that aided Allied soldiers and airmen trapped behind enemy lines. Americans cut from a similar cloth included members of the Underground Railroad, that network of abolitionists operating

in secrecy to secure the freedom of the enslaved.

The lesson both groups taught us: When fascists rise to power, as when capitalists enslave humans to generate labor, those driven underground become the clandestine activists tasked with restoring social justice.

The men and women of the French Underground took actions to try and save lives, to preserve freedom for a future generation. My father was among the Americans who landed in France to ensure their actions and sacrifices were not empty. He, like the men he served alongside, guaranteed I could spend a childhood with the liberty to waste my time watching *Hogan's Heroes* and digging in the dirt.

What freedom we had! The prairie was our second home. One summer my brother risked ruining our father's lawnmower when he embarked on an enterprise of prairie development. The baseball diamond came first. Next, he mowed a football field, clambering through gopher holes and spitting rocks like a machine gun. (Note: the prairie, despite all clichés and claims stating otherwise, is decidedly not flat.) His most ambitious effort: a nine-hole golf course. The greens (rougher than the roughest rough on the municipal course) featured hand-sewn flags and buried tin cans. Like in the crawlspace, we dotted the prairie with underground forts. We played on and under the prairie while boys a few years older than us—Strats, we called them, we civilian kids in an Air Force town—passed long shifts just miles away under that same network of grass roots babysitting lethal nuclear payloads. We played while young men died in Vietnam. Some of them died infiltrating the vast network of underground tunnels the Viet Cong used to launch deadly attacks and to ferry lethal supplies.

Exercising our freedom, we spent a summer jumping bikes out of the abandoned basement excavation of someone's dream home.

They'd never gotten beyond digging the huge square hole. Soon it was crisscrossed with hardened bicycle trails at every possible angle. We'd charge down one side, dropping steeply off the edge, pedal hard up the opposite side and on up where they had moved the tailings from the excavations, the fill mounded to make the steep sides of the once-wanted basement taller, more dangerous. There we would shoot off the tops of these manufactured jumps and take to the air.

I won't say that hole abandoned by some over-extended builder was our inspiration, for maybe it was *Hogan Heroes* that gave us the idea, but digging forts was as regular a part of our summers as spear grass wars. It was mostly my brother and his friends who built the forts, and mostly, the younger kid-brothers were stuck on the outside wanting in. They started small, one room chambers with a single entrance, small enough that a single sheet of plywood was sufficient for a roof. Get the plywood in good and deep, pile it with soil, and within a year the prairie would reclaim the gap. Soon they learned they could dig deep enough to leave the prairie above intact, reinforcing the span overhead every few feet with scavenged 2 x 4s rather like the preserved gold mines every Western kid visited during weekend trips to the surrounding mountains.

Our older brothers were the real engineers. The best forts became ours by inheritance. Our own creations were puny and unimaginative. It was our brothers who had built the fort we were awed by, a fort we only gained rare entrance to by special invitation. Our imaginations made it grander in our minds, just as the activities we imagined they carried off in our absence grew roots in our reverent daydreams. We assumed they held secret rituals, maybe were members of secret societies. Certainly, they must have taken girls down there, and girls were still a mystery to me darker than a fort under the prairie with candles extinguished.

But one fort surely must have lived up to our mental excavations. They'd dug three rooms, linked by curving narrow

tunnels. It had a distant, protected entrance and a secret escape hatch. (We'd all spent enough time catching gophers and snakes to understand why, at minimum, you had to have a second, secret entrance.) The entrance was covered by a plywood scrap, the kind of weathered board you were required to check under anytime you were in the prairie as a likely source of snakes. It opened onto a long, sloping tunnel that forced those entering to crawl on their elbows. The largest room could accommodate four adolescent boys, and they'd dug a long bench into one wall, rather like dad's dirt storage shelf in the crawlspace. The walls had carved niches to hold candle stubs. Illuminated in the flickering shadows, prairie grasses and sage dropped roots penetrating the ceiling in fibrous tangles. The air was heavy with the rich scent of clay, and the walls were cool to the touch and revealed the smooth spade marks of construction. The excavation tailings were piled to obscure the entrance and emergency exit and were soon overtaken by the weedy growth of a hungry prairie. To stand at the neighborhood fringes and look into the distance you could never know what lay beneath the grass. Surely, some adults must have wondered where those heads of kids disappeared. Or did they? This felt like a different time when kids were free to roam outside the company of adults, a time when I might worry every day that a Soviet nuclear missile was likely to conk me on the head but I never once worried about being abducted.

Within a year of being old enough to have succeeded minimally with my own fort digging, my brother and his friends shifted interests and passed boredom torturing snakes. Their engineering abilities turned to manufacturing execution devices—snake guillotines and battery-powered snake electric chairs, snake death by fireworks ingestion, that sort of thing. We dug in their absence, quickly learning that the real fun, rather like our model-building, was in the construction. Once completed, no matter how ingeniously engineered, a fort quickly became little more than a hole in the ground.

At some point that summer something else shifted too. I don't know if my brother and his friends were all assigned *The Outsiders* for English class or if the crowding and tensions that had yielded protests and marches and incidents of Molotov cocktails at their high school sparked them, but the neighborhood suddenly divided, and those boys living south of Harvard Avenue formed one kind of gang and those north another. They spent half a summer in two packs, one group of rabid mongrels pursuing the other in random courses across the prairie, over the abandoned golf course and up Boot Jack Hill and down across the rooftops of forts both groups had apparently forgotten. There were frequent fights. Maybe it was some other kind of turf war to which I was naïve and they represented a preamble to the tribalism that infiltrated my junior high and that continues in politics today.

The division that happened in my small neighborhood broke roughly along the same economic lines that we experienced in the larger outbreaks of violence that happened at school, or to be more accurate, the perceived differences in economics. The world was chaotic and school mimicked the chaos. I wonder what gaps in our education remain because school was so often dismissed because someone had called in an anonymous bomb threat or a disgruntled classmate pulled the fire alarm. The bomb threats, like the rumors that reached the teacher's lounge, resulted in frequent locker searches. Those consistently produced knives and homemade weapons. We knew something serious had shifted when, near the end of the 1974 school year, a locker search produced gun.

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On the days I'm not reaching for a shovel, I find myself thinking about Mr. White, the neighbor every child feared during my Rutgers Road upbringing. Mr. White—and no, I am not making that name up—lived at the end of our block where a dirt road intersected our paved street. Everyone in the neighborhood referred to road as “the alley” when really it

was the demarcation line between our odd little neighborhood—six blocks named after universities bordering the interstate—and the Wyoming prairie. The alley led directly to the new junior high and offered a quick escape route home. School represented real danger, featuring a population harboring a communal misplaced anger that shadowed that of its parents. The only dangers the alley posed was an open trench being dug for a sewer line, a mean dog that broke its chain with regularity, and unsolicited rebukes from Mr. White.

Mr. White was the neighborhood misanthrope. He made it his business to enforce his strict code of how the world was supposed to behave. The warnings he issued through his front screen door to “Stay off my grass!” were shouted with the venom of taunts at a 21st Century political rally. The signs he posted announcing the unwelcoming terrain of his lawn were written with an incendiary tone, like Twitter tweets lobbed from the safety of cyberspace. The wire he strung taut between green metal fence posts where his front yard met the alley was a visible reminder, a message more than utilitarian barrier.

In sixteen years as his neighbor, I never recall seeing a visiting car fill his driveway. I only knew there was a Mrs. White because she, on rare occasion, answered the doorbell when I collected monthly payments for my newspaper route, a required action that inspired foreboding. From the porch, I glimpsed their living room, which felt like observing a diorama—furniture attired in plastic slipcovers and a console television dating to a previous decade. When Mr. White answered the doorbell in a tank-style t-shirt, he grumbled complaints, remarking when the newspaper had been late or that the fat Sunday edition arrived with too much noise, despite his being one of two houses on my route where, rather than throw the paper to the door—with a precision of which I was proud—I laid the paper on his porch.

Clearly, I either place too much blame on or give too much

credit to Mr. White when I recall his yellow house and his uninterrupted lawn and then try to make sense of our bifurcated democracy. My elderly mother assures me that Mr. White—Herb, she reminds me—was a perfectly nice man, one who hosted milk-can suppers and did body work on neighbor's cars, although she does add, "But I can see why children would have thought he was mean." I'm sure she is right and there were other sides to him. But then I must also recall that all of my friends were decidedly afraid of my mother, and not without reason. As with Mr. White, had they come to know her in her fuller complexity, they may have had a more nuanced opinion.

Perhaps, like too many of my fellow Americans, I've become guilty of seeing all events through a warped lens. Who might Mr. White have proven to be had I shown the maturity and courage to shake his hand and engage him in a conversation? Mr. White is long dead. I can't go back in time and try to find the man beyond the transactional exchanges we had when I was a boy.

The neighborhood boys, whether north or south of Harvard Avenue, were united against Mr. White. Perhaps if we could have focused on a common enemy, we could have avoided the tribal divisions that emerged. Or perhaps not. It's entirely possible that the divisions that occurred in our neighborhood, like those that brought such turmoil to our school, was rooted mostly in boredom. In the endless downtime between the neighborhood campaigns, the northern boys would sprawl, listless, across our front yard or spar with one another like dueling dogs. If I hung around them for any time at all, some scrawny high school acquaintance of my brother would test me by picking a fight, which was a mistake because I fought ferociously and without logic, having spent a lifetime fending off the abuses of an older brother. I secretly looked forward to such fights because my brother seemed to like me better after I put one of his friends on his back. But I never joined

in their prairie campaigns. My best friend and I had our own battles awaiting us in the crawlspace, a domain that had become totally our own.

As soon as driver's licenses settled into our brother's back pockets, the gang wars, at least on the home front, ceased, though the trouble seemed to worsen for the boys living south of Harvard and several became real criminals and then convicts. Our brothers' interests shifted. The prairie forts were ours if we wanted them. We entered them on a kind of unspoken dare, like crawling through the drainage tunnel that connected our neighborhood and a borrow ditch near the elementary school on the other side of the interstate. The forts seemed more dangerous, more primitive now that lack of use had fostered thicker spider webs spanning the tunnel entrance and little cave-ins where there were finger holes of penetrating light.

I remember going to the big fort when I was fourteen. It was night and the only light we carried was a cigarette lighter. My tank-building best friend and I had found a nearly full pack of Marlboros on the street. Sucking on someone else's cigarette, sitting, cramped, in the dark of an underground fort dug into the prairie, the talk of girls and parties and high school, I remember thinking I had passed into something. It seemed only a matter of days later when Mr. Johnston bulldozed the fort. The bulldozing felt like a violation, but we'd never liked Mr. Johnston in the first place, didn't trust his son even if he was part of my brother's group, and didn't have any interest in rebuilding. An era had passed. I felt late to the party. In fact, the party had ended. Growing up into the above-ground world felt exciting and scary at the same time, yet even in the midst of change, I was aware that I would not be allowed to go back in time or return to ignorance.

Of course, the fields we played in as children are now lost too, the prairie soil no longer violated by kid's forts but dotted everywhere by the penetrations of actual basements. The prairie has succumbed, like every other part of America it seems, to suburbia, and this little part of Wyoming now—paved over, strip-malled, homogenized—looks exactly like ten thousand neighborhoods in California or Florida. Except for a lack of trees, which stubbornly refuse to grow, the curved streets that make up the place now are lost in place and time. Along the way someone purchased the slowly refilling foundation hole where we jumped our bikes and built their home, though I couldn't identify which house used to harbor this playground, just as selecting the house that stands atop what was once a fort would be little more than an educated guess.

In the years since we have watched the end of the Cold War be replaced with terrorist attacks and nuclear power plant disasters. We have seen the weapons hidden in the Wyoming prairie grow in payload if decrease in number. We still don't know what to do with the waste of the missiles we have decommissioned. We have seen Bob Crane murdered, and now we have watched as celebrities do the killing. Increasingly we elect celebrities and billionaires rather than statesmen and stateswomen, mistaking television figures for leaders and reducing democracy to a popularity contest.

The crawlspace in my parents' home is still there, of course (sans tunnel), for so long as the house exists, the crawlspace exists. My parents lived in the house until they were eighty-seven and eighty-six before moving to an apartment where they had help available. It was only in the final couple of years living in their home that dad finally stopped managing to contort his tall frame sufficiently to retrieve the artificial Christmas tree and its boxes of ornaments.

I have owned two homes of my own with dirt crawlspaces, and while I used them for storage, my primary ventures into them

were for mechanical repair or to retrieve the recycling bin every two weeks, for I had built a chute from the kitchen for that purpose. My children showed no interest in the crawlspaces, finding them dirty and scary.

The home where we raised our children had no crawlspace. It featured a finished walk-out basement. We bought the home, in large part, for the natural light that warmed the basement nearly as well as the main floor. Yet I regularly fantasized about building a secret chamber. I imagined breaching a foundation wall through the garage and under the deck. I wasted good time thinking how I'd dispose of the dirt. I thought about the engineering required to make such a chamber stable. I imagined disguising it, hiding it behind a sliding panel, a secretive entrance to a chamber dug deep into the earth, awaiting my return.

Perhaps that longing arrived out of fear, a desire to escape adult responsibilities rather than a wanted return to the play places of my childhood. Looking backwards is nearly always self-delusional and messy. Memories typically appear purer than the actual times recalled, as if we must filter out the less-pleasant parts of our past, the sadness and embarrassment, in order to move forward into the future. I suppose it is human nature to be nostalgic for the past. We all want to believe times were simpler "then." Yet I would argue that humans have a unique capacity for viewing the past through forgiving lenses or, at the very least, with the full benefits of hindsight that allows us to create documentary style versions of times gone by, events now neatly in context, relationships one to another entirely clear rather than suffering the murkiness of real time. We are all capable of self-deceit. Perhaps that is how we survive, as individuals and as a species. Perhaps it is a biological imperative, something akin to how women's bodies are able to mitigate the memory of childbirth pain. The alternative, to see only the hard times or the ugliness of the past, is a journey into

despair.

But the real dilemma is, as with all things, how do we find balance? In this instance, how do we benefit from a more forgiving recall of the past without failing to learn from it? Can we carry fondness for the past without sanitizing it? We must heed George Santayana's famous warning, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." What is that space between definition of nostalgia—sentimental longing—and its origin—acute homesickness? Balance requires distinction as well, that between sentimental longing held by the individual and denial of history carried by a collective. When entire segments of a population accept "alternative facts," whether about an individual's past or a shared history, the road for corruption is already paved. The distance between self-deceit and narcissism is not long.

Ruminating on *Hogan's Heroes*, it is evident that nostalgia is certainly present in television writers' rooms. It seems we have been caught inside a full-throated nostalgic return to the 1970s and '80s as material for artistic rendering for some time. There would seem equal measure of writers of my generation looking back to our shared formative years and the generation of our children examining times they did not live within, likely in an attempt to understand us. The former suggests writers of my generation are as guilty of referencing our past as those political leaders I have accused of longing for an idyllic vision from a previous era. But the latter suggests wisdom in a younger generation to act with intentionality about trying to understand something of how we have, collectively, come to arrive in our current age.

Among the better-known media projects set in the years formative to my generation's worldview are: *Stranger Things*, where a group of adolescents encounter secret government projects and supernatural forces, set with an opening in 1983,

and *The Americans*, where two Russian spies brought to infiltrate the US as a married couple try to steal enough American secrets to sustain a failing Soviet system, the series opening in the early years of the Regan Administration.

Of course, looking into the rearview mirror is also a phenomenon derived from familiarity—the desire to turn away from contemporary events. Or at least a step sideways, like the long run of zombie television fare, which offers a rather obvious mask for the evil we feel present around us and what seems to many as a continuous creep towards end times. For we are living in an age with new sources of fear and new enemies. One cannot predict the nature or the placement of terrorist attacks. Moving, clandestine, ideological warriors are nearly impossible to identify and defeat. In the years since 2001, Americans inhabit a nearly invisible yet omnipresent fear of jihadist attack that has been a regular feature of life elsewhere in the world for decades. And in the United States, we seem to breed our own brand of terrorists with as much regularity as any jihad. We now reference horrific events by shorthand: Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland. To scan interactive maps identifying mass casualty event escalation from one year to the next is like watching a medical contagion take hold in a population. In the span of twenty-two years, we witnessed the obliteration of the Murrah Federal building in Oklahoma City and savage machine gun fire into a concert crowd in Las Vegas. Those two attacks alone account for 226 innocent deaths. No wonder we are forever fearful when death arrives for our neighbors at church, in nightclubs, at work, and in school. If we associate the cold war with those most paranoid among us constructing underground bomb shelters, would we seem so insane as to wish underground retreat today?

For of course those fears that had some of our fathers and grandfathers stockpiling canned goods and batteries within concrete bunkers remain. The presence of nuclear weapons has only grown more tenuous. We have every reason to fear unstable

governments. Just as we have every reason to fear a degrading nuclear arsenal in a place like modern Russia, let alone those lethal devices lost in the dissolution of the former Soviet Union that face internal corruption and jihadist assault. Our headlines are filled with the fear stoked by the emergence of nuclear capabilities in North Korea and Iran. Shouldn't such a world prompt all of us to want to dig a little deeper? After all, the only country to have ever unleashed nuclear weapons on a civilian population were, in television terms, the "good guys." Is it sensible to believe there won't be other entities present on the planet willing to follow our example whether we label them enemies or allies?

Our current political climate would once again suggest that nostalgia does not breed intelligent insight to learn from our past. When we routinely elect those who spurn education and intellectualism, when we promote those who shun books, reject science, and disregard history (recalling that we now have elected those who openly embrace Q-anon to Congress), we fail to heed Santana's warning. And when we choose to follow those who employ bullying as a method of wielding power, we abandon our values and withdraw from a vaunted history of social justice. The stakes could not be higher.

In my Wyoming circa 1974, the warring factions varied. Often it was the self-identified "cowboys" vs. the self-identified stoners. Sometimes, if we were capable of time travel, we might leap forward and find the divisions at a schoolyard fight would parallel the left and right so regularly at one another's throats today. And sometimes, the divisions were remarkably clear between those of us willing to defend Black and Brown friends with our fists and those who attacked them because their "otherness" apparently incited fear.

The near future is being fashioned by divided politics forming two camps incapable of agreeing on rules for a game of Capture the Flag. One camp is rooted in a vision of a 1950s America that afforded unregulated pursuit of material gain without

consequence and that envisioned a culture that was entirely patriarchal and homogenous. Its vision as emblazoned on red campaign hats suggests America is no longer great and that there was some past, perfect moment when it was. This simplistic vision of America never really existed beyond television fabrications. We do not live upon a *Happy Days* set any more than we ever have inhabited the world of *Leave It to Beaver*.

While the 1950s may have given birth to Disneyland, NASA, and the Interstate highway system, it is also the period in which America enabled Joseph McCarthy, joined the Korean War, and authorized a CIA-orchestrated coup to return the Shah of Iran to power. It was a decade notable for, and in desperate need of, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the school desegregation of Little Rock. As suburbs grew and post-war home-ownership rates were sustained, one cannot reasonably believe that rates of spousal abuse, alcoholism, adultery, and other cancers that preyed on families were less common, rather they were more sequestered behind closed curtains and silence. I'm not arguing many social features haven't changed, even changed rapidly and radically in the decades since the 1950s, but I do steadfastly believe that we cannot truly long for something that never existed any more than we can watch reruns of *Hogan's Heroes* and accept it as an accurate, or even an alternative portrayal of World War II. Rather than longing for an uninformed nostalgic view of the past, why not work for the ideals represented in the Declaration of Independence?

Even if we can no longer identify facts when we depend upon social networks for our windows on the actual world, we can still possess enough critical thinking ability to discern what is reality. Or can we? Perhaps it is a worthy reminder that we elected someone to the presidency who entered American consciousness as a reality television "star." Would we ever have acknowledged him at all were this not the case?

Perhaps more to the point, are we at risk of no longer distinguishing between the fiction of dramatic television, no matter its historical setting, and “scripted-reality” television? It is not only the young who long for the idyllic lives and flawless bodies of social media “influencers.” When I become so feeble-minded that I can no longer distinguish Colonel Hogan from Bob Crane, I will not just be someone to dismiss as sad and irrelevant, I am likely either a danger or in danger.

Yet in the last years of the 1960s, the time of Vietnam and street battles for civil rights, when tie-die challenged IBM blue suits and red ties, is there a wonder we wanted the comfort and predictability of *Hogan’s Heroes*? It was understandable, if dangerous, to fabricate a vision where those who had enacted the Holocaust were reduced to buffoons. Would we rather have a sitcom that shows the butchering regime Hitler created as dupes and simpletons playing out recycled plots or the reality of discovering Bob Crane’s body after he was bludgeoned to death in his Scottsdale apartment among his sex tapes?

Maybe I have an unfiltered view of the past as well, yet I have faith that most television viewers in the 1960s could differentiate comedy from real history. I no longer hold such faith. We now inhabit a media space where we are “fed” news. Those news feeds are no longer objectively journalistic, rather they provide a specific viewpoint determined to fit our preconceptions as analyzed by algorithms so complex that only a tiny minority of the populace understand them.

Will you blame me if I long for the predictability of my childhood crawlspace?

Of course, going underground, as the characters of *Stranger Things* can tell us, is inherently topsy-turvy and possesses

its own dangers. When the show takes its characters literally within the earth, they enter the "Upside Down," a bizarre, glowing, creepy, vine-filled underworld that harbors a literal monster that preys upon humans for its meals. As the audience for the show, viewers are challenged with the question: which is scarier, the upside-down world monster or the government that hides knowledge of its existence? Or, like any well-plotted drama might ask, perhaps the real questions are: has the government, in its secrets, *created* the monster? and has it had a hand in creating the superhuman adolescent girl who might save us from it (the monster and the government)?

The entire plotline of *The Americans* creates a different kind of topsy-turvy, upside-down response in which we are likely to find ourselves rooting for Soviet spies and sometimes even aligning with their cause. It's a rather odd response to television depicting our old Cold War enemies infiltrating our culture and battling our government, stranger still in a time when we acknowledge that their real-world motherland has repeatedly subverted our democratic process.

There are reminders and warnings for us in both shows. When we live inside of history and technology that moves so fast that we cannot keep pace, when we participate—or don't—in politics that feel at once insidious and inept, when we encounter global events that require such sophisticated knowledge that we are made to feel overwhelmed and anxious, is it any wonder we may wish to go looking for holes to hide within? In an age when we have all been united by a virus's unwillingness to differentiate between us by gender or race, nationality or ethnicity, political affiliation or wealth status, why shouldn't we long to have identifiable monsters for our enemies and superheroes as our defenders? It gets quite confusing when we begin to cheer for murderers on television while encountering them more frequently in real life and when we wear masks as barriers to infection rather than to hide our identity.

Of course, my own nostalgia for a simpler time, a “wistful affection” dug into the cool womb of the earth, is folly, like all escapist thinking. I cannot pretend to be immune from recalling fondly a childhood where I was left to play with friends or within my own imagination from the time I left the house in the morning until my mom pulled the rawhide cord on the bell attached to the back of our house at sundown. Nor am I not guilty of self-deceit or for wanting a return to a time when politics seemed simpler, communication less fraught with risk, facts were more readily identifiable and more frequently trafficked. The forts I construct today are the indoor variety, which are built alongside my grandchildren using an ingenious framework kit that allows construction of nearly any shape or size, but many of the blankets that cover the frame are handmade by those who passed before me, and the wonder and joy I see in my grandsons’ eyes as they hold a flashlight to their faces when inside their creations is familiar and comforting.

But I have dug no holes, constructed no bomb shelters. I live firmly above ground. Mostly now I am reminded my current residence has a crawlspace only by the regular flush of the sump pump that indicates the snow is melting out of the mountains as spring nears or when retrieving the storage bins filled with toys for the grandchildren when they make an annual visit. Like their parents, when I invite my grandchildren to maneuver the wooden ladder and descend into the crawlspace with me to get their toys, they decline, the two-year-old declaring the space “scary.” That is, I suppose, a normal reaction to the underground.

When I see old pictures of Bob Crane today, in nearly every image taken for *Hogan’s Heroes*, whether screen shots or stills used for marketing, he seems to possess a sly smile, one best described as a smirk. In a 2002 article about the release of *Auto Focus*, *The New York Times* astutely recognized that “decadence and self-destruction make for the best kind of

celebrity” and provided Crane mythical longevity his career would never have allowed him. Maybe I’m thrown off by the jauntily placed hat or the trademark Colonel Hogan bomber jacket, but I still find myself looking at that smile and within those laughing eyes and wondering what other underground secrets they hide.