

# The AMERICAN INTEREST Publicity Copy

Vacation (July/August) 2015, Vol. X, No. 6

The following article, in whole or in part, may not be copied, downloaded, stored, further transmitted, transferred, distributed, altered or otherwise used, in any form or by any means, except:

- one stored electronic and one paper copy of any article solely for your personal, non-commercial use; or
- with prior written permission of The American Interest LLC.

To subscribe to our online version, visit [www.The-American-Interest.com](http://www.The-American-Interest.com)

To subscribe to our print version, call 1-800-767-5273 or mail the form below to:

The American Interest  
P.O. Box 15115  
North Hollywood, CA 91615



BEST OFFER! Yes, send me two years (12 issues) of THE AMERICAN INTEREST for only \$69\*. I'll save 23% off the cover price!

Yes, send me one year (6 issues) for only \$39\*. I'll save \$5.75 off the cover price.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Address 2 \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_

Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Country \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Credit Card \_\_\_\_\_

Exp. \_\_\_\_\_

Name on Card \_\_\_\_\_

Tel. No. \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

\*Please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery of first issue. Add \$14 per year for delivery to addresses in Canada and \$33 per year for delivery to addresses outside the U.S. and Canada.

Payment enclosed  
 Bill me later

A28PPC

# A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

## A Decade On

**B**efore your eyes is the sixth and final issue of the tenth volume of *The American Interest*. This means, plainly put, that we've been at this now for ten full years. During our first decade we've had the same singular publisher (Charles Davidson), the same editorial board chairman (Francis Fukuyama), and the same editor (me). A few key staff members have been with us from the outset as well.

Certain other stabilities stand out, too, and we feel that those most loyal readers who have been with us from the beginning, in particular, deserve to know of at least some of them. The downtown Washington building housing our office has not changed. And the rule concerning alcoholic beverages I established in May 2005 has not, to my knowledge, ever been breached: straight stuff only, no mixed frilly swill. We take it straight, and we tell it straight.

*TAI*'s official motto, devised by Francis Fukuyama, has also served us well throughout the past decade: to explain the world to America and America to the world. Our editorial board has consisted throughout of about half U.S. nationals and half non-U.S. nationals, the better to operationalize our mission of bringing the best thinking and writing about American policy, politics, and culture to our readers. Nor has our orientation to the subject matter changed: We remain a non-ideological, non-party line magazine. We take a problem-solving approach to challenges both domestic and international based on the belief that the conceptual and linguistic baggage inherited from the past is sometimes irrelevant and more than occasionally an obstacle to clear thinking. We have always loved historical approaches, but history leaned forward. We have always been biased, as well, toward analyses that abrade against significant policy judgments, when we can get them. This issue is, in that regard, no different from the 57 that have preceded it.

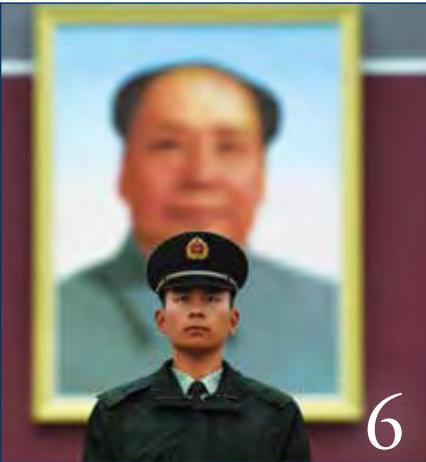
And what of the nation and the world these past ten years? At the beginning of that span, George W. Bush had recently commenced his second term; today Barack Obama is approaching the home stretch of his second term. In that time, mistakes have been made. The mistakes of the past decade cast into doubt, first, the sagacity of American judgment and, then, quick on its heels, the resolve of American power and purpose. This withering combination has now brought us to the point that the world's three main revisionist powers—Russia, China, and Iran—threaten, in mostly uncoordinated but still interacting ways, the structure of the post-World War II international security system. The U.S.-led alliance system that is the core of this structure, and that in turn remains the backbone of the liberal international economic order, is in jeopardy. Allies no longer know whether in the gusts of sudden crisis Washington will act as an ally or as a mediator. Some do not know which mode to fear most.

During the past ten years too, and hardly incidentally, the U.S. political economy crashed hard and has yet to fully recover. Neither the economic-structural deficiencies that the Great Recession laid bare nor the plutocratic wave washing over our political institutions can be separated from the function and perception of American power in the world. It may be unkind, but it is hardly inaccurate, to note that as we enter into a new cycle of presidential electoral competition not one candidate, whether announced as such or not, has articulated a persuasive diagnosis for what is wrong or offered up anything approaching serious programmatic ideas for putting things right. The rest of the world cannot help but notice.

But do not despair. America repairs itself in due course. It has done so many times before and will do so again, because our advantages for the long haul far outweigh our shortcomings. The business of *The American Interest* during the decade ahead will be to advise, chart, encourage, and of course to analyze the recovery of American self-confidence, broadly shared prosperity, and institutional verve. A reinvigorated foreign policy will follow. We invite you to stay with us for the ride. 🍷

# CONTENTS

THE AMERICAN INTEREST • VOLUME X, NUMBER 6, VACATION (JULY/AUGUST) 2015



---

## ASIA'S GAME OF THRONES

### 6 **China's Place in U.S. Foreign Policy**

*by Karl W. Eikenberry*

An effective U.S. China policy is best built on a thorough assessment of the context in which Sino-American relations exist and operate.

### 18 **Burma in Play**

*by Rena Pederson*

Burma is newly enmeshed in Asia's Game of Thrones, a development far more important than the topics Western media typically choose to focus on.



---

## DEFEATING ISIS

### 24 **Go Local**

*by Howard Gambrell Clark*

Feckless, strategy-less bombing campaigns cannot defeat the Islamic State. We need an approach that recognizes and engages local social realities.

### 33 **Crash Their Comms**

*by James Van de Velde*

Jihadi use of the internet and social media has become increasingly sophisticated and dangerous in the dawning era of cyberwar. We must close down their websites, not write reports on them.

### 41 **Deploy Satire**

*by Michael Rubin*

Radical Islamists, earnest to a fault, have no sense of humor. It's a shortcoming we should exploit.



---

## IT'S THE ENERGY, STUPID

### 47 **Crude Story**

*by Arthur Herman*

How the United States can leverage the domestic energy boom to help our allies and stymie our adversaries.

# AI

The  
AMERICAN INTEREST

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, *chairman*  
CHARLES DAVIDSON, *publisher & CEO*  
WALTER RUSSELL MEAD, *editor-at-large*  
& *director, The American Interest Online*  
JOSEF JOFFE

ADAM GARFINKLE, *editor*  
DANIEL KENNELLY, *senior managing editor*  
NOELLE DALY, *associate editor*  
RACHEL HOSTYK, *associate editor*  
DAMIR MARUSIC, *associate publisher*  
R. JAY MAGILL, JR., *illustrator*  
*cover art by ARTIST TK*

## EDITORIAL BOARD

ANNE APPLEBAUM, PETER BERGER,  
ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI, ELIOT COHEN,  
TYLER COWEN, ROBERT H. FRANK,  
WILLIAM A. GALSTON, OWEN HARRIES,  
G. JOHN IKENBERRY, STEPHEN D. KRASNER,  
BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY, SEBASTIAN MALLABY,  
MICHAEL MANDELBAUM, C. RAJA MOHAN,  
ANA PALACIO,  
ITAMAR RABINOVICH, ALI SALEM,  
LILIA SHEVTSOVA, HIRO AIDA,  
MARIO VARGAS LLOSA, WANG JISI,  
RUTH WEDGWOOD

## ADVERTISING & SYNDICATION

DAMIR MARUSIC  
damir.marusic@the-american-interest.com  
(202) 223-4408

website

WWW.THE-AMERICAN-INTEREST.COM

SUBSCRIPTIONS: Call (800) 362-8433 or visit [www.the-american-interest.com](http://www.the-american-interest.com). One year (6 issues): \$39 print; \$19 online; \$49 for both. Two years (12 issues): \$69 print; \$38 online; \$98 for both. Please add \$14 per year for print-subscription delivery to Canada and \$33 per year for delivery to addresses outside the United States and Canada. Postmaster and subscribers, send subscription orders and changes of address to: *The American Interest*, P.O. Box 15115, North Hollywood, CA 91615. *The American Interest* (ISSN 1556-5777) is published six times a year by The American Interest LLC. Printed by Fry Communications, Inc. Postage paid in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. ©2015, The American Interest LLC. Application for mailing at periodical pricing is pending in Washington, DC and additional mailing offices. Editorial offices: 1730 Rhode Island Ave. NW, Suite 707, Washington, DC 20036. Tel.: (202) 223-4408. Fax: (202) 223-4489.

---

## TECHNOVELTY WATCH

### 53 Your Brain on Screens

by Richard E. Cytowic

Addiction to mediated images is imbecilizing America's youth. The energy-cost functions of our still-Stone Age brain explain both how and why.

---

## TAKE THE MEDS

### 62 A Doctor in the House

by Philip Auerwald

Distributed systems of personalized medicine will deliver higher-quality care at lower cost. Home visits will be a major part of the mix.

---

## HOMO AMERICANUS

### 70 The Waverly Vet

by Jim Remsen

A dozen Underground Railroad travelers returned south from their refuge in Pennsylvania to fight for the Union. George Keys was one of the few to survive the ordeal.

---

## REVIEWS

### 76 Character Acting

by Peter Stearns

David Brooks's latest book highlights a critical theme, but ends up lamenting one form of shallowness by dint of another.

### 81 Paper Machinations

by Russell Crandall

The history of money is more than meets the eye: We shape it and then it shapes us.

### 85 Blues Upside Your Head

by Colin Fleming

New collections of classic works by Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters enable a better appreciation of a beloved but understudied genre of American music.

### 90 The Centralization Paradox

by Patrick S. Roberts

Martha Derthick understood that an over-centralized Federal system can coexist with a relatively weak Executive, concocting a formula for American political dysfunction.

could not be found here after the 1930s, but I very much doubt that this is true. To be sure, it's harder to gain a full vantage point on people still alive, but I think most of us could come up with some candidates—in fields ranging from human rights to science to peacemaking—who could match up well against his sextet. Obviously, a more recent grouping would be more debatable, if only because the blinding dust of the present has yet to settle, but the fact is that Brooks hasn't looked for one. He wants to persuade by implication more than by real evidence, and such an approach must be questioned.

If Brooks's effort encourages readers to take a closer look at the larger body of work that has been done on American character in general, and perhaps add to it, great—but his own book has not in and of itself done the job. There is reason to pay attention to parenting styles and other issues, but it is not at all clear that they inhibit the development of great character any more than the drawbacks of previous epochs did. These are big and important issues, but for the moment, as against Brooks's style of argument, they have to be labeled “not proved.”

Finally, if our character is slipping, both in general and at the pinnacles of virtue, what does Brooks offer by way of remedy? Since he has not dealt extensively with the causes of change, he's hampered in addressing countermeasures. A few asides about more rigorous parenting really don't do the trick. Brooks has to hope that a good set of character studies will by itself begin the process of countering Dr. Spock and all the indulgence-encouraging literature that would make laziness a virtue. This may indeed be a valid place to start. But again, we must look to history: Recurrent efforts over the past several decades to persuade Americans to examine their collective flaws seem not to have done much good. Jimmy Carter's attempt to counter the culture of narcissism, most notably, failed rather loudly. Christopher Lasch won fleeting attention, but neither his efforts nor anyone else's has yet to stem the tide—if there really is one. *If* we really do have a problem, we need to think much more rigorously about more effective responses. An opportunity for personal reflection does not a persuasive

claim for a contemporary tide of moral mediocrity make. 📖

---

**Peter Stearns** is University Professor and Provost Emeritus at George Mason University. He has written widely on the history of emotion in the United States, and on childhood and parenting.



## Paper Machinations

Russell Crandall

On June 22, 1775, the self-declared Continental Congress issued \$2 million in bills of credit to fund its incipient war of liberation against Great Britain. These bills, known as “Continental”, did not represent the colonies' first experiment with paper notes; the Massachusetts Bay Colony had done the deed in the 1690s. Yet the Continental issuance represented paper money on a far more ambitious scale. The notes, designed in part by Benjamin Franklin, exhibited the likenesses of Revolutionary patriots and the inscription “The United Colonies.” Yet backed by the vague assurance of “future tax revenues” and beset by chronic inflation, the Continentals were anything but a steely store of value.

The cheeky British didn't help matters by issuing counterfeit Continentals to debase the currency. In 1777, \$1.25 of Continentals got one dollar of hard money; four years later it required \$100 in Continentals. As George Washington lamented, “A wagonload of currency will hardly purchase a wagonload of provisions.” Alexander Hamilton, later on the first Treasury Secretary, wrote about the dangers of what we now call “soft money”—paper instruments not convertible into hard assets:

Indeed, in authorizing Congress at all, to emit an unfunded paper as the sign of value, a resource, which, though useful in the infancy of this country, and indispensable in the commencement of the revolution, ought not to continue a formal part of the Constitution, nor ever, hereafter, to be employed, being, in

its nature, pregnant with abuses, and liable to be made the engine of imposition and fraud; holding out temptations equally pernicious to the integrity of Government and to the morals of the people.

Congress ceased issuing the Continentals in 1779, but many states continued printing their own money until it was prohibited in Article I, Section 10 of the Constitution. This set the course for the U.S. dollar to begin as “hard money”, essentially coins made from precious metals or, as in this case, paper backed by them. So the dollar started out as hard money, but it didn’t stay that way for long.

Benjamin Franklin’s dream of a unified paper currency was eventually realized, although not as money backed by land. The conversion from hard to soft occurred during the Civil War, when President Lincoln desperately needed funds to finance the exorbitant expense of sustaining the Union war machine. Lincoln pursued soft money despite his understandable fear that such an action could lead to economic chaos. He signed the Legal Tender Act of 1862, which called for the Federal government to issue non-convertible paper money—or greenbacks, for the green ink used in printing—and required them to be used for all debts public and private. When all was said and done, Washington issued more than \$500 million to allow it to cover its wartime expenses. The Civil War was prosecuted by steel, gunpowder, *and paper*. With the Union victory in 1865, many believed that the Federal government would retire the greenbacks. Instead, the government now had the authority to borrow money, which served as the basis for the embrace of soft money in later eras, including ours.

In his timely, illuminating, and frequently humorous book, *Coined: The Rich Life of Money and How Its History Has Shaped Us*, Wall Street financial analyst Kabir Sehgal takes the reader beyond the early American experience on a biological, historical, psychological, anthropological, and theological whirlwind to get at the heart of the evolution and meaning of money, how it shapes us—and how we shape it. Seared by the 2008 financial crisis, when he witnessed well-educated and compensated Wall Street colleagues hoarding bundles of greenbacks,

Sehgal decided to dig deeper into what turned into this ambitious, eclectic, yet widely accessible survey of this ancient topic.

Sehgal is upfront that his book is a synthesis of other scholarship and thus plows little new soil. He nonetheless argues that the traditional definition of money—a medium of exchange, a unit of account, and a store of value—is incomplete. Relying on examples both modern (Bitcoin) and ancient (cattle were used as an early type of money), he shows us how money has shaped our world and how it will do so in the future, often in ways that are difficult to detect. Sehgal, a talented jazz bassist, uses a multidisciplinary approach to tell his story, embodying Duke Ellington’s adage, “no boxes.”

**M**oney is of course a human invention, but all organisms from “sea urchins and algae to birds and flowers” rely on exchange to sustain life on this planet. In the natural world, energy functions as a currency. The human species also possesses an innate desire to exchange (my freshly killed meat for your berries). Over time, we recognized that exchange increases our ability to survive. It took millions of years for this evolution to occur, but by the Neolithic era (10,000 BCE to some time between 4,500–2,000 BCE) man’s bigger, more sophisticated brain increasingly relied upon cooperation and symbolic thought. This development led to the first forms of proto-money, such as grains, which facilitated exchanges. Salt, for example, went from simply being an ingredient for preserving food to an item that allowed its owner to obtain more of something else.

Over the centuries perishable goods were replaced by more lasting currencies like weapons and jewelry. Humans also gained the ability to turn money into symbols of value imbued with emotion and culture. Sehgal asks the reader to consider at what point we agreed that you could “exchange a piece of paper for a loaf of bread.” His answer is that it took millions of years in what was a remarkable evolution of man’s increased ability to think abstractly to the point where “we no longer had to see or touch the source of value.”

The use of metal as money originated in the area comprising ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt around 3000 BCE. Herodotus

taught us that the first coinage in the Western world was introduced in Lydia around 700 BCE, in what is today Turkey. Coins were one of the first mass-produced items in history. The Greeks started making coins in Athens around 546 BCE during the rule of Peisistratus, who used the funds to pay mercenaries and to fund his grand building plans, including the Parthenon. The unit of account for the coins was the *drachm*, from the Greek word “to grasp.”

The Roman Empire minted coins to keep pace with the exorbitant spending of some of its rulers. Emperor Nero, for one, ruled during an economic downturn, and in the year 62 CE he enlarged the supply of coins to fund public works, in a move one scholar has called the “New Deal for Romans.” Nero also understood that his coins “were more than just minted metal” but rather a propaganda tool. Early Nero coins bore a likeness of the emperor at age 16, when his reign began.

Given that the Chinese had refined the art of papermaking over several centuries and are believed to have invented ink, block printing, and movable type long before these things came to the West, it is not surprising that paper money emerged in China in the 10<sup>th</sup> century under the Song Dynasty. In 1170, the state honored the *huizi*, a paper currency that had initially circulated among merchants (that is, a medium of exchange) but was also becoming a unit of account. Prices once listed in coins were increasingly listed in *huizi*. One advantage of paper currencies like *huizi* is that, unlike specie such as gold bullion, they helped societies trade more efficiently.

Sehgal deftly shows us how man’s ability to imbue emotion and culture into the physical design of money over the centuries made a difference. Take the U.S. “double eagle”, \$20 gold piece made between 1907 and 1933 and renowned the world over for its beauty. President Theodore Roosevelt desperately wanted to unite the nation around triumphant symbols of American greatness. The redoubtable Roosevelt described the U.S. coins designed

by Charles Barber as “atrocious hideousness.” So in 1904, Roosevelt wrote the Treasury Secretary, asking whether “it would be possible, without asking permission from Congress, to employ a man like [sculptor Augustus] Saint-Gaudens to give us a coinage that would have some beauty?” The Rough Rider explained to his Treasury Secretary that this design project was his “pet baby”, even if he appeared to be a “crack-brained lunatic on the subject.”

The first double eagle had actually been designed in 1849, but was criticized as showing an “imperfectly formed” eagle that looked “ashamed of itself.” Saint-Gaudens’ reimagined double eagle required seven blows from the press to create the stunning relief of Liberty holding a torch in one hand, an olive branch in the other, and soaring eagle on the back. Roughly 5,000 of the MCMVII double eagles are still around today. A 1933 double eagle once owned by King Farouk of Egypt (who had purchased it for \$1,575) sold at auction for \$7.6 million in 2002—the highest price ever paid for a rare coin.

In 1947, Paul Samuelson published *Foundations of Economic Analysis*, which became the intellectual base for the rational market theory. Even today, legions of Economics 101 students learn about *Homo economicus*, the self-interested, rational actor choosing freely among a host of options to maximize individual utility. Problematically, this Samuelsonian orthodoxy was ignorant of what was actually happening in the brain and thus made erroneous assumptions about how the mind thinks about money. In fact, psychologists have long known that our choices are not just rational and irrational but also conscious and subconscious. The subconscious operates on autopilot to make financial decisions even when we think we’re not doing anything of the sort. This explains why we tip waiters more when we’re exposed to sunshine (weather affects our mood).

It might have taken the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, but some former

---

**Coined: The Rich Life of Money and  
How Its History Has Shaped Us**  
*by Kabir Sehgal*

Grand Central Publishing, 336 pp., \$28

---

true believers in the rational market theory have at last been mugged by reality. Writing in 2013, the Yoda of rational market thinking, Alan Greenspan, acknowledged, “Most economists don’t base their theories on people’s actual behavior. They study idealized versions of human behavior, which they assume is optimal in achieving gains.” Sehgal takes this analysis a step further in his descriptions of how we think about and use money—social norms and cultural rituals—as it appears that everyone has his own *idea* of money. Thus, a dollar bill isn’t simply paper with green ink. It’s what you place (or don’t place) in collection bowl at church, or what you stick or don’t stick in a stripper’s g-string, or how you tip or don’t tip a rude waiter.

Today we know better that the brain processes thoughts about money in remarkable and myriad ways. The thought of expected gain, for example, stimulates the *nucleus accumbens*, part of the brain’s reward center. Brain scans of study participants about to receive a dose of cocaine are almost indistinguishable from someone about to receive money. One study examined how participants who donated money experience increased levels of oxytocin—the supposed “love hormone” created in the brain and emitted into the bloodstream in breastfeeding women or in people who give hugs. By contrast, the thought of losing money activates the amygdala, the “fear center.” According to Stanford neuroscientist Brian Knutson, “We very quickly found out that nothing had an effect on people like money—not naked bodies, not corpses. It got people riled up. Like food provides motivation for dogs, money provides it for people.”

Moving to the theological realm, Sehgal shows how religious figures like Laozi, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad implored their followers to give up the false material life for the greater wisdom and spirituality to be found in a more ascetic life. That is, less is more when it comes to money. Believed to be a deity among some Taoists, Laozi warned, “He who is attached to things will suffer much.” Eight of the ten parables in Matthew’s Gospel relate to money or wealth. Or in Mark’s account, “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man,

if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:35-36) Remarkably, some scholars believe that money itself may have helped create religions as it rose in importance in society.

Sehgal cites Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel’s concerns that market values have wittingly and unwittingly penetrated aspects of society formerly immune from such influences—the lamentable Skyboxification of American society. In 2013, Pope Francis voiced similar fears, “We have created new idols. . . the worship of the ancient gold calf . . . has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose.” In Sehgal’s reckoning, how we use money reveals our values. Here in America, this might be best seen in the cultural value we place on the shopping pilgrimage of Black Friday. Just look at the often-empty rows of the cushy “Lexus Club” seats behind home plate in Yankee stadium. Markets first, apple pie later—if that is, it trickles down.

Sehgal concludes *Coined* by looking at the future of money through two distinct “bull” and “bear” scenarios. In the bull case, money becomes increasingly “digital, invisible, and intangible.” New digital currencies like Bitcoin help create an ever more integrated, cooperative, and prosperous world. Contrasting this beatific vision is the bear world—characterized by the hoarding of valuables, the return of commodity money, and the lack of any official entity to issue soft money. This, he says, is where the world might have been headed in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis before the global financial authorities intervened. In other words, Ron Paul’s economic philosophies in action.

While well worth reading, *Coined* is not without its faults. For one, some of Sehgal’s “more than 700,000 miles to 25 developing nations” on-the-ground reporting seems a bit forced at times. Does he really need to travel to the Galapagos to snorkel with an American marine biology graduate student (“Rachel met me at the dock, wearing a Carolina-blue UNC baseball hat”) to describe symbiotic relationships? Was the Bronx Zoo closed?

In the end, Sehgal's biggest takeaway might be that it's really not about the money, stupid. Yet given that Wall Street is where greed is thought to be good, why in hell is this idealistic, Grammy-award winning jazz musician wunderkind working at JP Morgan? The answer, or perhaps the lack of one, might help explain our times as much as anything. 📖

---

**Russell Crandall** is a professor of American foreign policy and international politics at Davidson College and the author of *America's Dirty Wars: Irregular Warfare from 1776 to the War on Terror* (Cambridge, 2014). He is currently writing a book on U.S. involvement in El Salvador during the Cold War.



## Blues Upside Your Head

Colin Fleming

Back when I was writing my college thesis, a ragbag work I thought was mostly about the Beatles and how musical art can inform how one lives life, a number of blues luminaries—Robert Johnson, Son House, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf—kept turning up with strange regularity. They seemed to work well within my manuscript though, so I let them have their place, only to realize years later as an adult that if you're writing about how music actually shapes who you are and how you think, you're likely, in a sense, to be talking about some form of the blues.

Blues zealots tend to be especially committed to their passion, launching headlong into searches for vintage 45s at flea markets and estate sales, and jumping down veritable rabbit holes to research the often-patchy backstories of their early 20<sup>th</sup>-century heroes. Spend some time with Son House's 1930 sides, and you are apt to think nothing could be more powerful than that voice and that rhythmic attack. If you don't hear portions of your life in that music, you probably can't recognize yourself standing in front of a mirror.

But the weird thing about the blues is that each time you think you've discovered an artist of matchless power, you happen upon another at the same level or even a level beyond. Loving the blues is like ascending a stairway; music that wants you to wallow, that makes an art of painful emotion, somehow draws you not just onward but upward.

It's the same, it seems, if you're a blues musician. Muddy Waters was born McKinley Morganfield in the spring of 1913 and grew up on a plantation close to Clarksdale, Mississippi. His fluvial stage name indicated Waters's trademark wit; no performer ever made the blues sound flows so smoothly as to touch on the urbane. Waters's stage name worked as a nice contrast to that of his lifelong chief rival and foil, Chester Arthur Burnett, who was three years' Waters senior, also from Mississippi—known to music history as the mighty, feral, Howlin' Wolf.

There are, of course, several strands of the blues, but the dichards usually focus on the acoustic version that came from the Delta. It's not hard to understand why. There is something ghostly, ghastly, preternatural, elemental, and yet real, relatable, and life-affirming in the rudimentarily recorded sides by the likes of House, Robert Johnson, Tommy Johnson, and the man who started it all, Charley Patton. Waters loved House and Robert Johnson, and started out as an acolyte, performing in their styles for that invaluable musical preservationist Alan Lomax and his Library of Congress series in 1941. Wolf was more of a Patton man, digging the force of the rhythm and the unbridled emotion in his idol's scabrous vocals, which chill you no matter how many times you've heard them, like the first wind of winter clawing at the back of your neck.

Alas, Waters, a capable but by no means massively compelling performer in the medium, was no Delta bluesman. Two years after those Library of Congress recordings, Waters lit out for Chicago, where the Wolf would later join him after cutting some exploratory sides in the new style of blues he was formulating at Sam Philips's Sun Studios in Memphis. During the 1950s, in Old Chi, Messrs. Waters and Wolf gave life to a form of the blues that retained the evocative feel of the Delta, but rocked it up with jolts of electric energy and a more modern,