OF MOHAMMED KHALID

We lock up terrorists, then forget about them. Is there a better way? BY ASHLEY POWERS
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Mohammed Khalid’s Redemption

He was one of the youngest people charged with terrorism in U.S. history. His story can teach us a lot about deradicalization — and what we’re getting wrong. 18

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As part of a horde of journalists who swarmed Kuwait in early 2003, I knew it was inevitable: The United States was going to war with Iraq. But until it happened, we were impatient for stories, and the military tried to sell us one: Pay attention to the logistics. I went to a desert staging ground to hear a brigadier general talk about unsexy stuff — how to move an army, the basics of feeding, billeting, equipping, transporting.

“Amateurs talk tactics,” the general said. “Professionals talk logistics.” That well-worn principle turned out to be right: The occupation of Iraq imploded in part because, although the United States provided support for its troops, it failed to provide fundamental logistics to the populace, including electricity, clean water, relief supplies and security.

Nearly two decades later and half a globe away, the same maxim about logistics would apply to the Great Occupation of Washington of 2021. No war was fought in D.C. last month, of course. But the National Guard’s display of overwhelming force certainly played some part in keeping any insurrectionists at bay. For locals and beyond, it was hard not to be awed while watching the streets of Washington overflow with a division of soldiers — starting with about 300 before the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol, swelling to 10,000 afterward, then to nearly 26,000 before the inauguration. That is roughly the number, a Guard spokesman pointed out to me, of U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula.

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somewhere while off duty. Some used cot-equipped spaces in the Capitol or Library of Congress as resting areas, but more likely you would see them at one of the hotels in the District, Maryland or Virginia. Soon I started finding them … hanging around the Watergate complex.

The iconic Watergate Hotel, it turned out, was one of the luxury hosteries where the troops were lodging — largely a contingent from Maine. The splendor of the $400-per-night digs (pre-pandemic price) and amenities, such as maid service, king-size beds and (though off-limits) the lush whiskey bar, were not lost on the young citizen-soldiers. Some told me they had never seen anything like it. And it sure reeked of political power — a remnant of the Watergate scandal that still haunts the hotel.

For the hotel, a week-plus of having 200 rooms booked by soldiers was a boon. The inaugural festivities usually fill up local hotels, but the pandemic had hammered tourism overall, and the storming of the Capitol scared away any other would-be visitors. The Watergate and other hotels — like the posh Park Hyatt in D.C.’s West End — could hardly sniff at the business, even if government per diems were not close to usual rates. But the incongruity could not have been greater.

“What about the historical connection of staying in the scandal-redolent hotel, synonymous with Nixon-era depredations, to protect a city against the dark forces unleashed by a later president whose name history also will not remember fondly? I brought it up, being a Watergate geek, but soldiers don’t talk politics — publicly anyway.

For the hotel, a week-plus of having 200 rooms booked by soldiers was a boon. The inaugural festivities usually fill up local hotels, but the ceremony this year was mainly virtual, a tourism bust; also, the pandemic had hampered tourism overall, and the storming of the Capitol scared away any other would-be visitors. The Watergate and other hotels — like the posh Park Hyatt in D.C.’s West End — could hardly sniff at the business, even if government per diems were not close to usual rates. But the incongruity could not have been greater.

“Usually we have people in nice ballgowns getting ready for an event, not in camouflage fatigues, so it’s quite a different picture,” Pascal Forotti, the Watergate Hotel’s managing director, told me. “We wanted them to feel as welcome as possible.” The hotel made available its Kingbird restaurant (which was closed to the public), where the soldiers could enjoy prepackaged, military-provided meals — three a day, hot and cold. I will tell you, as someone who has gone through training with troops, the food is admirably nutritious. But I also kept running into soldiers in search of snacks at the CVS closest to the hotel. “I can’t believe they’re out of chocolate milk,” one was shocked to realize.

Some stats: According to a Guard tally, from Jan. 6 through Jan. 28, the troops required 140 military flights inbound and 107 outbound. Upward of 400 vehicles were in use. For the massive operation, soldiers brought sleeping bags, uncertain where they would end up. The vast majority landed in hotels — 176 of them. Some bunked in three public schools closed because of the pandemic. Lining up food and sleeping quarters was a “Herculean effort in such a short time,” said Wayne Hall, a spokesman for the National Guard Bureau.

Several hotels usually packed with conventioneers had boots in their lobbies. Thomas Penny, president of Donohoe Hospitality Services, which owns or manages a dozen area hotels, including Marriotts, Holiday Inns and Hyatts, said his properties were happy to have the Army if only for psychological reasons. “The troops’ presence added security for team members who wanted to feel safe,” he told me. “And the opportunity to just have people back in the building — hotels that are usually bustling have been ghost towns — gave the staff a sense of life and purpose.”

In Georgetown, it was common — and pleasant — to hear the melange of accents spoken by troops from the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. I ran into soldiers clustered at outdoor restaurants and the Starbucks overlooking Washington Harbor, spending off time. One Virgin Islander, asked her impression of D.C., said it looked as if a hurricane were coming — all the boarded-up businesses were “surreal.”


The wind whipped up frosty whitecaps on the Potomac as I made my way back to the Watergate. I had overlooked gloves, of course. I noticed the Virgin Island troops walking nearby wore them. Logistics.

The Maine troops, meanwhile, would soon depart for even chillier climes. They were sent off with a letter from Forotti. “I would like to personally thank you for being our guests at The Watergate Hotel,” he wrote. “You traveled from your home states near and far to ensure the safety of our citizens during this historic, yet challenging time in our beloved city of Washington D.C. Your work ensured a peaceful 2021 Presidential Inauguration event for the United States of America.” He added, “It was our pleasure to host you, and the hotel team and I hope that your stay was comfortable.” I suspect it was.

Richard Leiby is an articles editor for the magazine.
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“Everything that we’ve accomplished in the last four years is wiped out in the violence that happened [at the Capitol]. We have to start over. We need to rebuild our nation. We need to rebuild our party.”

Rep. Nancy Mace

INTERVIEW BY KK OTTESEN / PHOTOGRAPH FROM MACE CAMPAIGN

Nancy Mace, 43, is the newly elected Republican U.S. representative from South Carolina’s 1st Congressional District. Mace was the first woman to graduate from The Citadel and is the author of “In the Company of Men: A Woman at The Citadel.” She was most recently a member of the South Carolina House of Representatives.

You have talked about your life as a series of second chances.

Yeah. My life has been a series of successes and failures. As much as I have succeeded, I have also failed. I dropped out of school when I was 17. And I had no hope for the future. My first job at that time was as a waitress at a Waffle House on the side of the interstate. My parents said if I was going to stop going to school, I had to start going to work. If I was going to live in their house, I had to live under their rules. I learned some very tough lessons during some very tough times. The reason I dropped out was because I was sexually assaulted by someone at my school. And I lived for a very long time with that ghost in my closet and could not talk about it to anyone for 25 years, essentially. Back in those days — that was the mid-’90s, and if you came forward with such an accusation, you were dragged through the mud. You were judged. It was a frightening, terrifying, traumatic experience — I was 16 at the time. And I refused to go back to school.

I think it’s important to share some of those stories because, oftentimes, I think people are put on a pedestal, especially when you’re the first woman to graduate from The Citadel. And it’s, like: No, I’m totally imperfect. And so that makes me a perfect messenger for all of our failings as human beings, right? In a way, President Trump changed the paradigm in American politics where you could be more, I think, true to yourself and authentic. I mean, that’s important to relate to the American people, especially in times of struggle. I think people want to hear that honest voice. That rawness, that realness. No matter how flawed it is.

Your very first week in D.C. as a member of Congress was marred by the pro-Trump mob attack on the Capitol. What did that change for you?

The priorities are different now. I think that we need to take a real hard, strong look and reconcile some of the things that happened. The fact that we went back into that chamber and continued to object and debate voter fraud allegations on a ceremonial vote on January 6th after hundreds of people stormed the Capitol, where five people died — it was the wrong time, the wrong place, the wrong message. As Republicans, we need to have a higher standard if we want people to be able to trust us again. Everything that we’ve accomplished in the last four years is wiped out in the violence that happened. We have to start over. We need to rebuild our nation. We need to rebuild our party. But we can’t do it if this division continues.

Did you see anything in that day, that night, or its aftermath that gives you hope that maybe people are willing to come together and tone down the rhetoric?

I’m grateful that we did not object to any more [fraud allegations] after Pennsylvania. I think that was a good start. But it should have ended before that. I wanted to see more unity and less division, particularly after what had just transpired. And I want to be part of the conversation within my party on how we move forward and how we earn back the trust of the American people. How we ensure that we communicate our conservative ideas and policies in a way that shows just how compassionate they really are.

But we’re in a situation now where we have a Democratic president. And because of the rhetoric, we lost the Senate in Georgia. We don’t have a majority in the House. We’re going to be very hamstrung. It’s going to be an enormous challenge for us to be able to do that now. And so we really reap what we sow. But I’m going to work hard and try to seek out moderates and build relationships. That’s what it’s going to take. And both parties need to recognize that there is a problem and take responsibility. Moving forward, we can’t have a vacuum of radicals on the left or the right. We’re never going to get anywhere if we do.

KK Ottesen is a regular contributor to the magazine. This interview has been edited and condensed. For a longer version, visit wapo.st/magazine.
Just Asking

“Everything that we've accomplished in the last four years is wiped out in the violence that happened [at the Capitol]. We have to start over. We need to rebuild our nation. We need to rebuild our party.”

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Two years later, ‘she’s still my girl,’ he says

Last Valentine’s Day, when we could still gather in public, the team behind Date Lab hosted a live Q&A session and dating game show for 500 attendees at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. An hour before we went onstage, our emcee, Tanya Ballard Brown, said she wanted me to give the audience an update about one of our rare success stories: Willie Gray and Renee Coley.

They had met one year earlier, on Valentine’s Day 2019, on a date where everything seemed to go right. As our photographer took their photo, the two pretended to slow dance. Willie dipped Renee and she kicked up her leg, surprising them both and making them laugh. Over small plates, Renee talked about her love for food and Willie talked about his love for cooking.

I realized they were going places when Renee revealed to me that she and Willie were texting during our post-date interview. A few weeks later, Willie messaged to let me know they were officially a couple. In the comments section of their story, readers seemed pleased that we’d gotten it right for once.

When Tanya asked me how they were doing a year later, I didn’t know. Truthfully, I wasn’t sure I wanted to. Their story had been such a lovely one. Why ruin it by finding out that it had fallen apart? That was a bad reason not to reach out. So, an hour before the event, I texted Willie and asked for an update. I didn’t hear back.

But then, as I was watching people file into the hall, I spotted some familiar faces: Renee and Willie!

They’d come to surprise us — on their one-year anniversary. When an audience member asked during the panel why Date Lab has such a low success rate — a good question, but we’ll save it for another time — I invited the two to stand up. They were greeted with a warm round of applause. It’s one of my favorite memories from the Before Times.

With their two-year anniversary approaching, it seemed like a good moment for an update. So, how are they doing?

“It’s been terrific. He is such a wonderful man,” Renee, now 55, said of the man she calls Tony. (We didn’t know when we set them up that her dad and brother are named Willie and so is his dad, so Renee calls him by his middle name.) “It just feels like I’ve known him all my life.”

“She’s still my girl,” said Willie, now 58. “Every time we get together, I love to see her. We talk every day.”

After their first date, Willie had to leave town to visit family, but he and Renee kept texting. When he got back, they made plans for him to cook dinner for her that weekend. But when the government closed for snow during the week, Willie, a government contractor, asked Renee, a federal employee, on a snow day date. He picked her up in his truck, and they went to a matinee at an empty movie theater. That weekend, Willie made prime rib, which Renee said was the best she’s ever had.

Soon they were talking every day. Renee would text Willie when she got to work each morning at 5:30 a.m., and on weekends they’d get together. They attended soccer, hockey, baseball and basketball games, saw movies and went to the circus. They’d take the Metro into the city for dim sum and Ethiopian food — often getting off at the wrong stop and enjoying the long walks to the restaurant. They traveled in 2019, too: weekend beach getaways and a trip to Jamaica for Renee’s birthday. For Christmas, she gifted Willie a trip to Dallas to see the Cowboys (his favorite) play the Washington Football Team. They went to Nashville for New Year’s Eve.

“Things have just fallen into place with them,” said Robin Browne, Renee’s friend of more than 20 years, who has spent a lot of time with the couple. “They both seem very happy.”

I asked Willie and Renee why they thought the relationship worked. For Willie, it was Renee’s personality. “She’s a very generous person, very kind, very loving, very headstrong,” Willie said. “She’s a good partner. She’s affectionate and just a good person to be around. She keeps you motivated.”

For Renee, it’s Willie’s unconditional care and support. She mentioned a time, not long into their relationship, when he surprised
her by picking her up at the airport after a long, stressful day of travel. Or when he cuts her grass without her asking. “I’m the type of person to hate to ask people to do stuff for me,” she said. “I just love that he will just do stuff without me having to ask him and not complain about it or anything. If I ever need him, I’ll call him and he’ll come help me.”

They’ve been there for each other in hard times, too. When Willie’s mother died, Renee accompanied him to the funeral. And while the pandemic has been difficult on everyone, Renee, who loves to travel and hates being cooped up alone in her house, was having a hard time at first. When she made a half-joking comment about how she was starting to talk to herself, Willie made sure to check up on her more often and visit when she was getting lonely.

After their first date, Willie recounted a conversation they’d had about commitment. He said he wasn’t sure he wanted to get married again. Renee said she was looking for a committed relationship, but she wasn’t sure she wanted to get married either. He liked that — it sounded like they were on the same page. I asked Renee if that had changed in the two years since they met. It was clear they hadn’t talked about it since the beginning of their relationship.

“I don’t know. I think I have backed off of that, and that’s really surprising to me that I even can say that!” she laughed. “He has made me revisit that whole idea of re-marrying.”

When I asked Willie, he became contemplative. “I’m not against marriage,” he said, sounding like he was articulating something that he’s thought about but never quite said out loud. “It could be an option.” In the next few years, he said, he’d probably downsize and the two would move in together. “Once we’re cohabiting in one place, I think that would be the next move that logically would happen. I could see it happening.” He couldn’t imagine moving in and not having some kind of symbol of their relationship — maybe a ring or something else if she didn’t want to get married.

“If the situation presented itself, I would not have any problems with that because I definitely see us together for the long term. … I wouldn’t mind being married to him,” Renee said. But, she said, marriage isn’t necessarily the end goal. “Right now, I’m enjoying this too,” she said. “So either way, I’m good.”

Marin Cogan is a writer based in Washington.
Today’s retirement communities are redefining senior living with top-of-the-line services, well-appointed homes, on-site health care and advanced safety features. They offer an abundance of amenities that not only cater to residents’ comfort but also provide opportunities to stay active, socialize or just relax. It’s all made easily accessible to residents so they can live a convenient, worry-free lifestyle in retirement.

Location is also an important consideration when it comes to finding the right place to call home. That may mean choosing a community that is close to family and friends or located in an environment you’ve always dreamed of living, whether that’s right on the water, in the picturesque countryside or just a stone’s throw from a culture-rich city. There’s an option for every preference, especially in the greater Washington, D.C., area.

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Homewood at Frederick is beginning to take reservations for the next phase of patio homes. These spacious homes feature two bedrooms and two bathrooms. Residents in this community are able to enjoy all of the amenities offered on the campus. These include a woodshop, a library, art and yoga studios, miles of walking trails, a dog park, a performance auditorium and two indoor pools, one of which is a salt water pool. Also located on campus are two full-service restaurants, a bistro and a pub.

For more information, contact Homewood at Frederick at 301-732-6153, email frederickmktg@homewood.org, or visit www.homewoodfrederick.com.

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Residents at BayWoods of Annapolis start every day with an enchanting view of sailboats dotting the Chesapeake Bay. This full-service continuing care retirement community (CCRC) sits right on the waterfront with the largest apartments on the market, ranging from spacious one bedrooms at 1,000 square feet to a penthouse of 2,500 square feet—all of which boast an enclosed balcony area. It’s an ideal living situation for those who love the outdoors. The community sits on 14 beautiful acres and has a boardwalk and pier with a new deck right on the Bay. Historic Downtown Annapolis is only a few miles away.

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The Future Looks Brighter Than Ever at Shenandoah Valley Westminster-Canterbury

Winchester, Va., is a picturesque drive from Northern Virginia, no matter which route you choose. You’ll likely find the slightly slower pace and less traffic a welcome change, so it’s no surprise that many of the nearly 400 residents at Shenandoah Valley Westminster-Canterbury (SVWC) have moved there from the Washington, D.C. area.

Steeped in the charms of the Valley, Winchester’s quaint setting is matched by its colorful history and significant landmarks. The abundance of cultural offerings and diversity of unique retailers, great restaurants and more make it the perfect setting for SVWC, which welcomed its first residents in 1987.

The campus sits on 87 acres, with 2.5 miles of wooded walking trails, gorgeous and peaceful year round. Residents have access to superior amenities and a maintenance-free lifestyle. With a focus on resident comfort, a variety of floor plans fits any need and desire, providing gracious, carefree senior living. Cottages range from 1,563 to 2,550 square feet. Apartments in the main building range from 709 square feet to full-size offerings up to 1,987 square feet. The new Villas will feature one- and two-bedroom residences ranging from 1,186 to 2,036 square feet. All include either a patio or balcony.

In 2021, SVWC will be installing needlepoint bipolar ionization (BPI). The units proactively clean the air by killing 99 percent of viruses, bacteria, mold and smoke.

SVWC’s Lifecare program provides a full continuum of care, all under one roof, from independent living to private assisted living and skilled nursing residences, with memory care and rehabilitation. Residents’ initial entrance fee and monthly service fee ensure access to these services. Lifecare helps you plan because you’ll know your costs in advance—and it may offer residents significant tax advantages.

For more information or to schedule a virtual tour, visit www.svwc.org or call 540-665-5914 or 800-492-9463.

The Providence Fairfax Offers Boutique Senior Living with Hospitality and Wellness in Mind

Seniors looking for renewal rather than retirement will love calling The Providence Fairfax home. Impeccable amenities in this assisted living community rival those you would find in a world-class resort, like concierge services, chef-driven restaurants, a rooftop terrace with firepit seating and a salon and day spa. Private studio, one- and two-bedroom residences in a brand-new, mid-rise building are available on a monthly rental basis. Apartments feature modern kitchenettes, high-end appliances, upscale finishes, tall ceilings and ample natural light. Some include a private balcony.

The community is part of the Elite Collection, exclusively designed through the collaboration of Silverstone Senior Living and Watermark Retirement Communities. This innovative approach to modern assisted living is rooted in hospitality and integrated well-being. Residents can access a creative art studio, tranquil gardens, a state-of-the-art fitness center and courses at Watermark University, a unique program which strives to provide individuals with meaningful opportunities to learn, teach, grow and achieve wellness. Memory care and the
Discover the Beauty of Homewood!

Homewood of Frederick offers delicious dining options. In Crumland Farms’ Tuscarora dining room, which offers a full menu, residents overlook a pond surrounded by beautiful gardens and wildlife. At The Lodge, residents are able to enjoy a meal in The View dining room, which also offers a full menu, as they take in the incredible view of the Catoctin Mountains and the pond. Those wishing for a lighter fare have the option of enjoying a meal in the pub or bistro, as well.
Bridge, a neighborhood serving those with mild cognitive impairment, are also available.

“We are thrilled to open our doors in Fairfax and we invite seniors and caregivers to explore our brand-new assisted living community,” says Executive Director Annamarie Mariani-Huehn. “The building is pristine, exquisitely designed and equipped with state-of-the-art features and technology as the safety and comfort of our residents and associates is our number one priority.”

With a focus on residents’ health, The Providence features innovations that reduce or prevent transmission of viruses. These include an enhanced filtration and HVAC system, cold plasma bipolar ionization, relative humidity levels of 40-60% and touchless technology in common areas, among other measures.

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THE REDEMPTION OF MOHAMMED KHALID

He was one of the youngest people charged with terrorism in U.S. history. His story can teach us a lot about deradicalization—and what we’re getting wrong.
The Redemption of Mohammed Khalid

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Story by Ashley Powers
Photographs by André Chung
“Terrorist.” That’s what the boys whispered after he stood up and introduced himself to his ninth-grade class. “Terrorist.” Soft enough that the teacher couldn’t hear, loud enough to sting. The boys smirked, turned back to whatever was happening in English class. Mohammed Khalid didn’t respond. He simmered inside. Mohammed was 13 and had arrived in suburban Baltimore from Pakistan just a few weeks before. He was a wisp of a kid in a collared shirt, with neatly trimmed black hair and oval-shaped glasses that he needed to clearly see the board. He was at the top of his class in Pakistan, but he was also shy, awkward, earnest. Spent a lot of time in his head. He’d talk to you, but only if you said hello first; even then, he’d struggle to meet your gaze. He preferred escaping to Hogwarts or Narnia — book or movie, didn’t matter. Among his chattering American peers, he felt something new and awful: smallness.

Mount Hebron High School was a hulk of brick in Ellicott City, nestled amid the cream-shingled homes and big lawns of real estate brochures. His freshman yearbook bragged that nearly every senior went to college. That’s why his family had rented a townhouse here, despite the (to them) hefty rent: the school district’s sterling reputation. But Mount Hebron was also large: Mohammed’s class in Pakistan had 19 students; Mount Hebron, in total, teemed with more than 1,000. Body spray and mall perfume, slamming lockers, sneakers skidding to classroom doors. Mohammed struggled to navigate the building (in Pakistan, it was teachers who changed rooms), but he was terrified to ask for help; his English was excellent but heavily accented, and now he feared any conversation could devolve into someone mocking him — because, often, it did. The incident in English class was mere foreshadowing. All it took was introducing himself. “People would laugh, make jokes and then just move on like nothing happened,” he told me. The insults lingered in his head, a Greek chorus of diminishment. Mohammed — that’s a terrorist name, isn’t it? Mohammed, you planned 9/11.

This was not the America he had envisioned. Mohammed grew up in the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan. His dad moved to Maryland years before the rest of the family, and in the interim, he and his mom, brother and two sisters saddined into the third story of his grandmother’s home in the pulsating megalopolis of Lahore. Every week, the family huddled around their clunky computer, using a dial-up modem and a scratch-off calling card to talk to Dad. Mohammed’s father hustled as a gas station clerk and a taxi driver, squeezing out just enough money to mail Mohammed Hot Wheels cars and his older brother Encyclopaedia Britannica CDs. Eventually, he started selling cosmetics, which, like all things America, Mohammed pictured as a bigger and grander operation than it was: an emporium as opposed to a table at a flea market.

When the rest of the family arrived in 2007, his dad stocked the townhouse with soda and Hawaiian Punch. Within months, they had to downsize to a cheaper, smaller apartment. Mohammed’s parents slept on a mattress in the living room; his little sisters shared their room with the cosmetics their parents sold. In the room Mohammed split with his older brother, the decor consisted of a mattress, scattered books and a world map they’d brought from Pakistan, their old home shaded in blue and their new one in red. “I wanted to make my parents proud,” Mohammed wrote later. “In Pakistani culture, we refer to this as ‘ma baap ka naam roshan karna.’ Literally, it means ‘brighten the names of parents.’”

He didn’t know that his skin color, his religion, his name would arouse suspicion — even hatred — in many Americans. In 2001, the FBI reported a 17-fold increase in anti-Muslim crimes. By the time Mohammed was at Mount Hebron, an advocacy group had catalogued dozens of instances of harassment and violence in schools: students taunted as “jihad girl” and “little Laden”; a Virginia eighth-grader bullied so badly that he started telling people his name was Roy; a 13-year-old in Florida whose basketball coach asked, “Why do you want to kill Christians?”; an 18-year-old from Staten Island, N.Y., whose classmates broke her nose. She was Hispanic, but she had been wearing a headscarf.

Mohammed was spared physical cruelty, but he too was reduced to little more than his faith. Which was baffling: his family was no more demonstrably religious than Jews who don yarmulkes or Christians who mark their foreheads with crosses on Ash Wednesday. He had grown up studying the Koran, but in Lahore, practicing Islam is as remarkable as the sun rising. Allahu akbars echoed through the city five times a day, announcing it was time to pray; Mohammed knelt and murmured, but so did everyone else. He’d never considered Islam a geopolitical force — he was 7 years old on 9/11 and remembered seeing the twin towers buckle on TV. Maybe some Pakistani commentator said America deserved it? But he hadn’t actually wrestled with these ideas; he was unshaven clay. He told me, “I think I couldn’t make sense of why I was this person who was a terrorist.”

At school, he was involved in chess club, math club and the literary magazine, but he made acquaintances, not friends. No movies, no sleepovers (not that his parents would have allowed sleepovers anyway). Definitely no girlfriends. His inherent shyness was partly to blame, but the taunts further bottled him up. He ate lunch in the computer room and brought sandwiches, not the aromatic Pakistani dishes that could draw unwanted attention. He dreaded gym; what if someone made fun of his hairy legs? He spent weeks trying to convince the boys from English class that Islam was not synonymous with terrorism. They laughed and laughed.

Like many teens, Mohammed’s emotional maturity lagged behind his intellect. He didn’t know how to shrug off name-calling. He didn’t understand the brutal tribalism of adolescence, or that his tormentors probably felt as self-conscious as he did. Perhaps an adult could have helped, but he didn’t tell his family or his teachers. He collapsed into himself. “I also slowly bristled inside, not knowing how to manage the hurt I felt,” he wrote later. Within months, he was scouring the Internet for guidance. Unlike his family or his classmates, Google wouldn’t judge him, wouldn’t sneer: What’s the meaning of Islam? What is terrorism?

He ended up on YouTube, bingeing videos like they were M&M’s. This was years before the platform’s potential as a radicalization
engine was widely known. One in particular lingered: a former Marine, seated with other veterans at a long, blue-skirted table, testifying to atrocities in Iraq. Over the ex-Marine’s words, images of, in his telling, troops gunning down a blue-and-white minaret; the graphic head wound of a 12-year-old boy killed by shrapnel; a man in white shot dead while riding a bicycle. “His body was thrown behind a rock wall, and his bicycle was thrown on top of him,” the former Marine said. This is what’s actually happening in the world, Mohammed thought. He kept watching. Eventually, the bullying, the othering — they made sense. His woes weren’t schoolboy nonsense; they were indicative of something larger and more insidious: The West was at war with Muslims. These are my people, he thought. How do I support them?

We often think of extremists as motivated by ideology, but dogma is usually secondary to something more basic: acceptance. Though each radicalization journey is unique, many would-be terrorists feel alienated, isolated, humiliated or marginalized. They want to belong to a larger group or cause. They want to matter. John Horgan, a Georgia State University professor who studies the psychology of terrorism, told me, “You have to be empathetic towards a community that you feel is being victimized; you have to convince yourself that you are serving a cause that is greater than yourself.”

Like Lucy from his beloved “Chronicles of Narnia” series, Mohammed felt as if he’d stumbled into another realm — one where he could be brave and valiant. His first YouTube username, around 2008, was the oddly formal Protector of Copyright, which he believed would allow him to share videos without repercussions. Over the course of high school, his tastes metastasized from antiwar outcry to titles such as “They Defiled the Qur’aan” and “Saudi Beheader.” He reposted so many videos from extremist accounts that, eventually, he was targeted by Operation YouTube Smackdown, a grass-roots campaign against the platform’s radical Islamist propagators. They got his account suspended. He popped up with another name. The battle started anew.

One of his later profiles, Sustainer of Copyright, was indicative of his online persona. Favorite movie: “Lion of the Desert,” about a Libyan guerrilla resistance to Italian rule. Favorite music: “Music is haraam” — forbidden. Featured video: a hanging of “martyrs” in Iran. “Look at the sons of pigs and swines cursing the companions of your and mine Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him).” Every response from another user was a jolt of validation for his metamorphosis. He told me, “Once I got onto this, this is the only thing I wanted to do. This was my drug.”

Mohammed rarely missed class and brought home A’s and B’s, but school became a grind. There, he was pantomiming ordinariness. How could his classmates, consumed with spirit week and prom, understand? “I did not know if I could — or rather if I wanted to — deal with the real world when the virtual world provided so much satisfaction,” he wrote later. Many days, he walked home, raced through his homework, grabbed a plate of Mom’s biryani, wolfed it down in his room. Finally! Hunched on his mattress, legs folded, bulky Toshiba Satellite laptop open, hours flew by — as many as 40 a week. Without the anxieties of face-to-face conversation, he spent much of the time chatting with online friends. Sometimes they talked martyrdom, sometimes about a girl he liked or how much he wanted a pet cat. After a few months on YouTube, he was invited to join password-protected sites, including the Ansar al-Mujahideen English Forum — the Islamist militant equivalent of the popular kids’ lunch table. “I love it very much,” Mohammed told another user later, “because it was the first place where I saw true islam and the definition of brotherhood that I craved.”

More and more, Mohammed’s faith was his identity. After 9/11, this in itself wasn’t an unusual, or worrying, development for a Muslim teen. Just before Mohammed disappeared into YouTube, a researcher named Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher was interviewing Pakistani American students in New York. She observed that their teachers and peers defined them almost solely by their religion, as opposed to their country of origin. Nearly every student endured the same taunt Mohammed had: terrorist. But they didn’t respond by hiding their Muslimness. They embraced it, even if they weren’t particularly religious. This transformed, Ghaffar-Kucher wrote, “the negative experience of being ostracized into a positive experience of solidarity and group membership with other Muslims, both in their immediate community and globally.”

But Mohammed was immersed in an exceptionally warped interpretation of Islam, less a religion than a justification for bloodshed. The forums were echo chambers. Members didn’t debate as much as bolster one another’s beliefs that their brethren were resistance fighters and their actions just — no matter how savage. “Because the answers were already there, I needed not search any further,” Mohammed wrote later. Forum members translated al-Qaeda propaganda into English. Unlike at school, Mohammed’s background was an asset; administrators routinely asked him to translate videos from his native language, Urdu.
He watched multiple beheadings and sometimes had to solely listen to the audio to finish the translations. But he was a teenager. “I wanted to feel appreciated,” he said. When extremist media outlets shared his work — jackpot. The sheer length of one of his screen names reflected how important he felt: Abdul Ba’aree ‘Abd Al-Rahman Al-Hassan Al-Afghani Al-Junooobi Wat-Emiratee. Hassan, his middle name, for short.

Through this distorted prism, he started to see his parents and siblings as bad Muslims. In his head, he catalogued their sins: They didn’t pray enough or pray correctly — their hands on their waists, not their chests! His dad and brother shaved! His sister didn’t cover her hair! “they are not of the j mindset like me,” he harrumphed online later. J meaning jihad. His family worried about him tuttling in his room. “He stopped talking to us at all and would get angry if anyone would come close to him to look at his computer,” his brother said later. Was he flirting with a girl? Or worse — streaming porn? Deep into his spiral, his close to him to look at his computer,” his brother said later. Was he thinking about college. Leave the forums for your own sake.

His breathing grew shallow. His family called paramedics. Soon, he was back home, back online. Later, after discovering the videos on his laptop, his family asked a mufti to meet with him. The religious leader showed him parts of the Koran that denounced needless killing. Didn’t matter.

Mohammed later told a psychologist, “I would not forsake my online friends.”

Colleen LaRose, the so-called Jihad Jane, with attorney Mark Wilson, right, in a courtroom sketch during her sentencing hearing in Philadelphia in 2014. LaRose was sentenced to 10 years in prison for a failed al-Qaeda-linked plot to kill a Swedish artist.

H e r name was Jihad Jane. Blue eyes, eyebrows like slash marks, the pale bridge of her nose peeking out from a black niqab — that’s what Mohammed saw in a photo on-screen. She was a fellow soldier in the YouTube Smackdown wars and therefore had many noms de guerre: Fatima LaRose, Extreme Sister, Sister of Terror. Under the name Beyond Princess, she introduced herself: “I live in the states (Pennsylvania). It is my dream Inshallah to be a good Muslima & live in an Islamic country. I support the Palestinians & pray they regain their homes & their country & get rid of the parasites that occupy their lands now.” Jane was one of the few women on jihadist YouTube, but she never shied away from blistering online foes. Even her profile taunted, “Do I pose such a threat to you that you have to collaborate to try to get me off YT? First let me tell you, I AM HERE TO STAY!!” Mohammed admired her bravado — the exact quality he lacked offline. They talked almost every day. She told me, “He didn’t want to go back to school because he wanted to stay online.”

In reality, Jane was a woman in her 40s named Colleen LaRose. Her education stopped at seventh grade, and her life had been a blur of drugs and toxic relationships. When she met Mohammed on YouTube, she didn’t have a job, and her live-in boyfriend traveled frequently for his. She was as hooked as Mohammed was on extremist videos; a survivor of child abuse, she was particularly enraged at images of bloodied Palestinian kids. “The blood and the bodies and the children — it was just so much,” she later told the documentary Ciaran Cassidy. Online, she mused that her fair coloring could allow her to melt into Western crowds and seek revenge.

Early in 2009, a user named Eagle Eye, who claimed he was an al-Qaeda operative, contacted Jihad Jane and proposed a real-life target: a Swedish artist whose blasphemy was drawing the prophet Muhammad’s head on the body of a dog. “Go to Sweden,” Eagle Eye instructed. “Kill him.” She told Reuters later, “I just loved my brothers so much, when they would tell me stuff, I would listen to them, no matter what.”

Jane enlisted Mohammed, though she knew he was only a teenager. “I never looked at his age. I looked at his heart,” she told me. He was flattered. “I felt that I wasn’t doing anything for J,” he told a friend online later. “so it was a blessing from Allaah that I took steps to help her.” All of 15, he tried to raise money for the plot online, but he said no one gave him any. He circulated a questionnaire seeking potential recruits: Are you a woman who can travel freely in Europe? “Also if you have any contacts to other sisters [ ] (only the ones whom you extremely trust.!!!!!!), please forward this message to them.” He got few responses. When the FBI questioned Jane, she sought his help, and Mohammed pleaded with forum administrators to scrub her posts “so they can’t use it as evidence against her.”

“but I am not so foolish that I think they are done with me yet not by any means,” she told Mohammed one night.

“insha’Allah, don’t worry as soon as you stay out of this country, our brothers will shelter you,” he replied.

“ok akhi” — brother — “I am going to finish cooking.”

That August, Jane boarded a plane to Europe. She’d already sent Mohammed a package of valuables she feared airport security would confiscate, including her boyfriend’s passport. Mohammed mailed everything to one of Jane’s contacts overseas — almost. He kept the passport, he told a friend online, and “vowed that I would give it to the mujahideen when I joined.” Meanwhile, Jane ended up in Ireland, smashed into a one-bedroom apartment with a user named the Black Flag, another blond American woman and the woman’s young son. And then — nothing. No
training camp, no attempted assassination. In the fall, Jane flew home. She was arrested at the Philadelphia airport.

When Jane’s indictment was unsealed in 2010, her searing stare dominated national newscasts. Mohammed was listed as an undicted co-conspirator: CC #4. As he rode the bus home, a classmate noticed several official-looking adults outside and shouted, “Cops!” Mohammed went into his apartment, sat down to lunch. A knock at the door. The FBI agents outside, he later told a friend, were smirking, “pig-like.” They rifled through the apartment. Asked about Jihad Jane. Despite his sisters pleading, “Hassan, tell them everything!” he stonewalled. The agents came back to interview him about a half-dozen times without his parents present. At least once, they bought Mohammed food from Wendy’s. They grilled him about the identities of his online friends. “They said that by helping them he was helping himself,” his brother said later.

Indeed, when investigators started tracking Jane, they didn’t expect “Hassan” to be too young to obtain a driver’s license. To them, their meetings with him served as a warning of sorts: You’re smart. You’re on the path to college. Leave the forums for your own sake. Mohammed did not. He told a psychologist later, “I tried to give them a false sense of who I am — giving them all sweet sugar — but I had hatred for them. I didn’t like being controlled.”

Online, he wielded the encounters as proof of his devotion, and kept translating jihadist videos.

“I said that I was not the same person that I was before … and those people who are in j forums are misguided and i am an ex-jihadi blah blah,” he told a friend in the fall of 2010.

“…and at one point they” — the FBI — “even got pissed off at me for not revealing anything. HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO BELIEVE YOU IF YOU DON’T TELL US ABOUT SIMPLE THINGS THAT WE KNOW YOU DO! and I just sat silent”

“at another point they even asked me if I would like to go to the jail.”

You could almost see him rolling his eyes.

He woke up. His mother hovered over him. Someone’s at the door, a postman — in the fog of sleep, Mohammed didn’t quite process what she said. He hoisted himself up, put on his glasses. It was July 5, 2011. Nearly two years since Jihad Jane’s arrest. He hadn’t heard from the FBI in forever. Maybe they’d moved on? Mohammed had graduated from high school with a 3.66 grade-point average. Good enough to get into Johns Hopkins University, where he planned to study computer science and writing. His brother said later, “I believe that he thought whatever he did in the past was past.”

Mohammed lazed away the weeks before college. Logged on to the extremist forums, but not as frequently, in the way teens tire of high school haunts. Still in his white undershirt and purply-green pajama pants, he opened the front door. A blast of sticky summer air. A man outside with an envelope like the one his acceptance letter had arrived in. Suddenly, he was pinned to the wall.

Sit, authorities barked at his parents. They rousted his sisters, who joined mom and dad on the couch, he told me. His family was murmuring in Urdu and English and crying, even his dad. Mohammed’s mind stopped working. The agents let him change clothes; they watched as he threw on a school outfit — a striped shirt and jeans — and brushed his teeth. Before they took him away, someone reminded him to tell his family goodbye. Take care of yourselves, he said. His dad made a terrible sound, a sort of heave-cry. That cut something inside him. He looked away.

Outside, the agents sat him in the back seat of a sedan. Neighbors were starting to mill around, and he sank down in hopes they wouldn’t see him. As they drove off, the agents strained to make small talk: Want something to eat? Fast food? No — because it’s not halal? What’s the difference between halal and kosher, anyway? He stared out the window, at his sneakers — anywhere but at the agent beside him. His thoughts drifted to college. Maybe I can still go?

He was 17 years old — one of the youngest people charged with terrorism in U.S. history.

II.

Islamist extremists romanticize prison as a noble, and perhaps inevitable, fate. The idea is baked into hymns called nasheeds, such as “Ghuraba, Ghuraba,” which means strangers — as in, what jihadists are to everyone else.

We never care about the chains of prison, rather we will continue forever

So let us make jihad, and battle, and fight from the start
Ghuraba, this is how they live free in the enslaved world

The Berks County Youth Center was in Leesport, Pa., 120 miles from Mohammed’s home. It had the bland maroon-and-beige exterior of a suburban office park, but the young people inside were accursed of everything from gang crimes to homicide. Mohammed was greeted with a duffel bag of yellow jumpsuits and underwear. Correctional counselors escorted him to his cell; instead of bars, it had a sliding door with a window so staff could glance inside. There were two bunks, but Mohammed had no cellmate. The counselors took his glasses — apparently, a potential weapon — and his head started to throb. They asked if he was a student, and he told them he still hoped to enroll at Hopkins. You were accepted to Johns Hopkins? one asked, disbelief clouding his face. What are you doing here?

At first, Mohammed clung to his fundamentalism the way you tighten a winter coat against the cold. He was deep in enemy turf. He said he spent his first night in custody at a rotting adult jail. There were bugs — maybe roaches? He asked for a utensil to eat the meatloafy gunk passing as dinner. Use your hands, the guards said. Like an animal, he thought. By contrast, the juvenile facility allowed movies, volleyball, card games. But Mohammed had no Internet access — no YouTube, no forums, and therefore no fire hose of ideology. He felt pangs of withdrawal. What’s happening online? Are they talking about me? He stewed. Did I really do anything wrong? It’s not like they killed that cartoonist. Late at night, he would kneel and pray and linger on his mat,
Leafing through the Koran while at the youth detention center, he realized the online jihadists had cherry-picked the most incendiary-sounding passages and presented them wildly out of context. He’d been indoctrinated to believe that their interpretation of Islam was Islam. But now, talking to people they’d caricatured, that crumbled.

warring with God. I did everything for you. Everything. Where’s my reward?

He braced himself for cruelty from the staff. He was fortunate: It never came. Andrew Glass was a counselor at the facility, and he told me many staffers saw their role as rehabilitative. Often, these kids messed up because they were so easily influenced; he recalled two brothers whose family draped their Christmas tree in red to show their allegiance to the Bloods street gang. Mohammed’s actual family hadn’t failed him, but his online family had, and in that sense, he was as adrift as the others. He was just quieter. Brainier. Wrote pages and pages of letters that, when Glass skimmed them for security reasons, startled him with their sophistication. “I assumed he’d be ready to fight everybody and not talk to me because I’m an American or whatnot,” Glass told me. “I was expecting a lot of hate and anger, and he didn’t seem to have the hate and anger.”

Mohammed felt whiplashed by the staff’s small kindnesses. The kitchen made him vegetarian lasagna, as close as he could get to a halal, or religiously acceptable, meal. The counselors pulled him aside, asked how he ended up there, and listened — really listened — to his answers. He didn’t think anyone of a different faith would care. They also prodded him to read the Koran in its entirety, something he’d never done in either Urdu or English. Leafing through the pages, he realized the online jihadists had cherry-picked the most incendiary-sounding passages and presented them wildly out of context. He’d been indoctrinated to believe that their interpretation of Islam was Islam. But now, talking to people they’d caricatured, that crumbled. That included his peers in the facility. Still wary of conversation, he eavesdropped as they confided in one another about the traumas they’d endured: beatings, abortions, sexual assaults. One day, another boy blurted to the staff: You guys are the only family I have in the world. As Mohammed shuffled back to his cell, he couldn’t quite believe how lucky he was.

He’d expected his family to disown him. Instead, his parents drove those 120 miles every week in their minivan. They met for about a half-hour, a counselor hovering near the table. At the end of each visit, his mom wrapped him in her arms, holding him a little longer, a little longer, until his father gently separated them. One counselor told Mohammed: Your mom really loves you. “Despite everything that I’d done to her,” he told me, his voice softening. In his darker moments, this was the memory he reached for.

When an extremist’s resolve falters, it’s often because he sees the fallacy of the story he bought into. Reality is messier, more perilous, less rewarding. Michael Jensen is a senior researcher at the National Consortium for the
Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland. He oversees a database of about 300 homegrown extremists who, based on news reports and court records, have not repeated their crimes. If they had strong social ties to fellow militants, as Mohammed did online, their path out often started with befriending a perceived enemy. “They start to question the ideology and the beliefs that they’ve adopted,” Jensen told me. “And that usually causes the initial schism that starts them turning away from extremism.”

Islamist radicals embraced Mohammed when no one else had, though none had reached out since his arrest — and none ever would. But this forced immersion had scrambled his sense of the world. Counselors noticed Mohammed cracking open. He told me, “I wanted to do the right thing, but at the same time, I didn’t want to lose the only belonging or the only sense of support that I felt that I had.”

In the hush of night, he often wondered: What was true? What wasn’t? Who was he, and was that whom he wanted to be? His eyes would well up. He would hear a counselor shuffle by, pause in front of his cell. He’d turn toward the wall, swallowing his sadness.

How could life get any harder? That fall, he turned 18 and was transferred to adult prison. There, he was no longer treated as a kid who could be rehabilitated — he was treated as a terrorist.

Thirteen days after Sept. 11, 2001, Attorney General John Ashcroft went to Capitol Hill to sell the Bush administration’s proposed legislative response to the terrorist attacks. In written testimony, he cleaved the world in two: “On one side of this line are freedom’s enemies, murderers of innocents in the name of a barbarous cause. On the other side are friends of freedom; citizens of every race and ethnicity, bound together in quiet resolve to defend our way of life.” With few exceptions, we still use this either-or framework with suspected terrorists: We arrest, we lock up, we move on.

Since 9/11, the U.S. Department of Justice has prosecuted more than 900 people for offenses linked to international terrorism, according to a database compiled by the journalists Trevor Aaronson and Margot Williams. A relatively small number of people who loom large in our national psyche. More than half faced charges related to providing material support, such as money or training. These cases frequently ensnare the young or hapless — for example, the Virginia teenager and prolific pro-Islamic State tweeter who helped a classmate travel to Syria to join the group.

When researchers at the Center on National Security at Fordham Law analyzed more than 100 Islamic State-related federal cases, they found that the majority of defendants were no older than 25. They were more likely to be American citizens and less likely to have a criminal record than other federal defendants. On the whole, these were not members of sophisticated networks. Mitchell Silber, the former director of intelligence analysis for the New York City Police Department, told me, “They made poor decisions. They were young. They were impressionable. They were vulnerable to being radicalized. They weren’t terrorist masterminds.”

At sentencing, they often face a so-called terrorism enhancement that, in effect, makes it more likely they’ll spend a long time behind bars. The Fordham researchers found that, on average, the Islamic State defendants were sentenced to 14.5 years, triple the average federal sentence. In 2012, Mohammed pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to provide material support. Yet he still faced the possibility of 15 years in federal prison — an extraordinary punishment for someone who had no criminal history and hadn’t committed a violent act. Jennifer Arbittier Williams, who prosecuted him, told me she couldn’t address the specifics of the case. Regarding national security investigations in general, she said: “The hope is to prevent something bad from happening. If there is a terrorism act that occurs, we’ll be able to investigate and hopefully prosecute and convict. But in many ways, that’s too late.”

In a 2017 piece in the Yale Law Journal, legal scholar Sameer Ahmed drew parallels between the war on terrorism and the war on drugs, with young Muslim men treated as “super-predators” (though, since the mid-’90s, the far right has been responsible for the majority of terrorist acts). They’re disproportionately targeted by counterterrorism policies, and many serve lengthy sentences for nonviolent crimes. We treat them in a mostly punitive manner, Ahmed argued, with little thought as to how they might reenter society.

That’s not the case everywhere. There are at least 40 to 50 programs around the globe, mainly in detention settings, that try to help extremists stop participating in violence (“disengage”) and shed their beliefs (“deradicalize”). Many are relatively new and have not undergone thorough scientific vetting, but the most respected efforts try to address the issues that made zealotry appealing in the first place. In Sweden and Germany, voluntary exit programs offer a range of services to former extremists, including counseling and help with job searches.

Compared to Europe, in the United States, such programs have gained little traction. In part, that’s because our need was not as immediate: In the late ’90s, for instance, the United Kingdom and Ireland were already sorting out how to reintegrate members of paramilitary groups imprisoned during the so-called Troubles. But America is also a more carceral society. “I think it’s going to take a change in the cultural mind-set for us to really consider these sorts of programs,” said Horgan, the Georgia State professor and author of “Walking Away From Terrorism.” “It’s fundamentally about rehabilitation, and I don’t think the U.S. does rehabilitation very well.”

In 2016, the U.S. District Court of Minnesota set up a program to train staff to assess extremist defendants and, via an intervention process that in some cases starts after arrest, offer them tailored services similar to what European exit programs provide — the first of its kind in the United States. Though it’s still too early to draw broad conclusions, it has allowed for nuance in how defendants are treated: Of 54 Islamist, white supremacist and anti-government extremists, 27 qualified to await trial at home and only five violated their release conditions. At sentencing, five defendants received probation. So far, no other federal districts have replicated the program. However, some U.S. attorney’s offices have started experimenting with diversion-style programs for young offenders, said Seamus Hughes of George Washington University’s Program on Extremism.

As for the Federal Bureau of Prisons, it does not offer extremists specialized help, preferring, it said in a statement, to use “traditional
In late 2019, it had identified about 500 people in custody as international or domestic terrorists. By 2025, more than a third of them will be released.

The tunnel unfurled beneath Center City in Philadelphia, not far from Independence Hall. It had a gently sloping floor and otherworldly soft light. After Mohammed turned 18, correctional officers escorted him through it to the federal detention center. The sand-colored tower thrummed with hundreds of inmates: grown men in their 20s and 30s — bearded, tattooed, muscled, scarred. Mohammed was No. 67256-066. He stood about 5 feet 11 inches tall and was so gaunt that, when his parents visited, they made him eat vending machine chips and cookies. He was handed a bright orange jumpsuit, the uniform of “the hole”: the special housing unit, or SHU.

His cell was roughly 6 by 8 feet. A bunk bed, but at first no cellmate. There was a narrow rectangle of a window, but some type of covering blotted out the sun, giving the light a mottled and disorienting sameness no matter the time of day. It smelled like unwashed socks. Mohammed slept a lot. He often showered twice because it was something to do. He found himself pacing, and it reminded him of a passage in “The Autobiography of Malcolm X,” a book he’d devoured in the juvenile facility. (“I would pace for hours like a caged leopard, viciously cursing aloud to myself.”) Mohammed kept lucid by reading — mostly forgettable fiction, but it was better than stewing in his own thoughts. He learned to tell time by the rattle of the breakfast-lunch-dinner carts or the jangle of correctional officer keys; after a while, he could even discern gradations in the light. That’s how he knew when to pray.

He spent 23 hours a day in the cell. The 24th hour was recreation time. Each SHU inmate was corralled in his own outdoor pen, but the men could see one another and shouted: Hey! Whatcha in for? Mohammed ignored them. “They just looked dangerous,” he told me. He stopped going outside entirely. He said he met with prison officials to determine if he could join the general population. Sorry, they told him. Can’t move you. Security reasons.

Weeks passed before they relented. “My boss would say, ‘Watch out for him. He’s part of that Jihad Jane case,’ ” said a former employee, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal. “But he was just a very confused child.”

In the general population, inmates nicknamed him Flaco, Spanish for skinny. “He was brilliant in the mind,” the former employee told me, “but the street thugs would prey on him, steal his commissary,” the food he bought from the prison store. Even worse, one cellmate was a brawler. One night, he and Mohammed started bickering over the lights, and his cellmate hopped off the top bunk and lunged at him. Mohammed didn’t fight back as much as try to not get injured.

This was no place for a kid, his attorneys, Jeffrey Lindy and Alan Tauber, believed. After Mohammed’s guilty plea, they asked the court to move him to a secure juvenile facility run by the state of Pennsylvania. The Loysville Youth Development Center housed young men whom a court had deemed delinquent until they turned 21. Therapists proposed a treatment plan for Mohammed that would include cognitive behavior-al therapy, family counseling, meetings with the facility’s imam and the opportunity to take distance-learning college courses. It would allow him to get necessary psychological help, his lawyers argued, and make sure that “he does not return to a life of hostility and opposition to our country.”

The government balked. It didn’t want to pay for Mohammed’s treatment at Loysville, prosecutor Williams said during a hearing in 2012. She suggested that Mohammed’s family hire counselors to visit him at the prison instead — a luxury they could not afford. Mohammed remained in adult prison. He was ready to give up jihad but unsure what to do next. “Overcoming extremism became a problem I had to deal with and that I had to resolve,” he later wrote. Trying to keep from backsliding, he stayed away from more zealous Muslim inmates. If a
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correctional officer ransacked their cells, they grumbled: That guy hates Muslims — a conclusion high school Mohammed might have drawn. Joining these griefs felt like quicksand. Without those transformative months in the juvenile facility, would he have gotten sucked in?

He sought refuge in the kitchen. A few dozen inmates per shift heaving boxes, boiling water, sudsing trays. Mohammed immediately distinguished himself. “Tries very hard to succeed,” an evaluation said. “Last one to leave.” That month, he clocked 150 hours and made $43.50. His bonus was $21. He grew close to his supervisor, a woman who jokingly called herself Mama Bear. “I considered her a second mom,” Mohammed told me. She teased him that he was too skinny, made him tuna sandwiches. She promoted him to vegetable chopper, among the most coveted kitchen roles. “I was just treated as this guy who’s charged with terrorism and who’s super-dangerous and should never be trusted with anything,” he told me. Mama Bear gave him knives, and that gesture meant something: “I lived up to their trust,” he said. “I lived up to their expectations.”

H ead bowed, hands shaking, Mohammed sat at the defense table in a windowless courtroom. It was a spring morning in 2014. He was 20 years old and dressed in olive prison garb, a color he would recoil from for years to come. The reporters arrayed behind him described him variously as “gangly,” “gawky,” “hollow-cheeked.” He clutched two pages of hand-scrawled notes — his sentencing statement. His original draft had been pages longer, but he’d castigated himself so thoroughly that his lawyers told him to pare it down.

Awhile back, a fellow inmate asked Mohammed: Ever heard of Asperger’s? Mohammed asked his brother to find out more. His brother sent him info from the Mayo Clinic website, describing Asperger’s syndrome as a developmental disorder; characteristics included “social awkwardness and an all-consuming interest in specific topics.” When Mohammed met with a psychologist preparing a report for the judge, he brought printouts of the description and said: That’s me. The psychologist assessed him. Poor eye contact, halting mannerisms, rapid speech, emotional immaturity, introversion. The psychologist told him: Bad news, you’re right. Good news, with therapy it’s treatable.

To Mohammed, the diagnosis was a revelation. It explained why he felt so alien next to his high school classmates; before his arrest, he’d envisioned visiting the Hopkins counseling center and asking: What’s wrong with me? “It is perhaps not surprising that he would be more comfortable with the more remote interpersonal contact found on the internet,” the psychologist wrote in his report. “Furthermore, because those with Asperger’s Disorder have trouble discerning social conventions and developing commensurate judgment skills, they can be naïve, credulous, and subject to exploitation by others.”

In a memo to the court, Mohammed’s attorneys asked for a sentence of time served. He’d been locked up for almost three years — long enough. They blamed his crime on “unscrupulous adults” who took advantage of “a socially isolated teenager’s thoroughly misplaced idealism.” Once Mohammed was arrested, he did everything the government asked: met with law enforcement officers about 20 times, tipped them off to terrorism and who’s-super-dangerous and should never be trusted with anything,” he told me. Mama Bear gave him knives, and that gesture meant something: “I lived up to their trust,” he said. “I lived up to their expectations.”

Mohammed was unraveling. After being moved to a prison in Connecticut, he finished his sentence in late 2015, with time off for good behavior. But he couldn’t go home: He was transferred to the custody of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement at a Massachusetts jail while the government tried to deport him. Like the other detainees, he felt stranded: His was a purgatory with no definitive end. Would he be transferred? Released? Deported? If so, when? Because he cooperated with U.S. law enforcement after his arrest, sending him back to Pakistan was tantamount to sentencing him to torture, either by Pakistani authorities or terrorist groups, his immigration attorney, Wayne Sachs, argued. That would violate the United Nations Convention Against Torture. All when, as a government attorney conceded at a hearing, there was no indication Mohammed was a threat. “That uncertainty was enough to kill your mind,” Mohammed told me. His mood darkened.

In the spring of 2017, Mohammed’s parents served, they asked for “less than ten” years. Jihad Jane was sentenced to 10. They said his sentence would deter potential terrorists; that it reflected the damage wrought by his translations, which still lived online; and that, possibility, Mohammed hadn’t entirely abandoned his fanaticism. “Khalid seemed still to take pleasure and even pride recounting his glory days as a jihadi,” prosecutors wrote. At one point, they filed dozens of pages of Mohammed’s online chats. The conversations hovered over the proceedings, a dark cloud of inventive.

“where I live is the hotbed of US agencies,” he had written to a friend about four years earlier. “like nsa, fbi. so I would expect their parents to work there and hate muslims.”

“have u ever considered,” the friend replied, “shooting up ur schooling and taking revenge on those who wronged u?”

“so amazing would it be to spill their filth,” he said.

When it was his turn to speak, Mohammed abandoned his notes; his statement was seared into memory. “The upheavals of my life were distilled into a force of hate so strong that it trapped me in its claws,” he said. He turned to face his family. “I am struck with grief over what I brought you to. Nothing I say today can excuse the mistakes of my past.” His eyes stung. His cheeks burned with humiliation. The judge announced his sentence: five years, with credit for time served.

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In the spring of 2017, Mohammed’s parents
got a call: Congratulations! Your son will be released tomorrow at 11 a.m. His case wasn’t over, but he could await the result at home. That day, the clock passed 11 ... 12 ... 1. Mohammed fidgeted in a courthouse holding cell, convinced the promise of release was as solid as vapor. And by 3, authorities told his parents he was headed back to jail. Though they’d driven more than 300 miles to pick him up, Mohammed said he wasn’t allowed to say hello, or even wave from a distance. Later, he found out they’d decorated his room with welcome-back balloons.

Mohammed once thought of his crime as victimless: Who was really harmed by Internet venom? Then he participated in a victim-impact program. He realized: his family. All these years, they’d never stopped writing letters and taking his calls. He knew it pained them to visit. His parents often asked: When you go back to your cell, will they chain you? “They’d seen me like that in segregation, with the chains, with the waist belt around my waist, and my hands cuffed and everything,” he told me. “I think that image never really got out of their heads.” The victim-impact group would gather in the prison chapel and listen to a speaker: a sexual assault survivor, the mother of a murder victim, and so on. Mohammed sent them follow-up questions through the program facilitator. Speaker No. 4 was a woman whose son had been locked up.

“You did everything to raise your son the right way. Do you still blame yourself for his incarceration, thinking that maybe you missed doing something?” he asked.

“As a mother, what exactly goes on in your head when you visit to see your son in prison? When you have to leave him behind the razor-wire fence? When you talk to him on the phone?”

“Will there ever be relief for you as long as he is incarcerated? In other words, do you feel as if you can move on?”

A week after his snafued release, Mohammed returned to the courthouse. It was May 5, 2017. He was 23, and swimming in a thermal shirt and gray sweatpants. In the holding cell, he told me, he waited with the petrified new arrivals. Finally, a sour-faced woman arrived. Which foot, she snapped. Left, he decided. She attached a bulky GPS monitor to his ankle; ashamed, he stretched his pant leg over it. He was escorted to a waiting area. There — his mom, dad, sister. At the sight of him, his mom teared up. He was too overwhelmed to emote. They walked outside. Overcast sky. Cool air caressing his face. Weird how everyone was lost in their phones. On the way back to Maryland, they pulled into a rest stop. Go inside, his parents encouraged him. He did, reluctantly. Swarms of people, zigzagging to the restroom, to the cash register. Chatter. Babies wailing.

“The upheavals of my life were distorted into a force of hate so strong that it trapped me in its claws,” he said in court. He turned to face his family. “I am struck with grief over what I brought you to. Nothing I say today can excuse the mistakes of my past.”
conditioned to the regimented nature of prison, Mohammed panicked. He ran back to the safety of the van.

The next morning, he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. His bedroom sharpened into focus; it was almost exactly as he’d left it. For nearly six years, his mom had treated it as a sort of Mohammed museum. Folders, notebooks, pencils — she hadn’t touched anything. Even when she noticed a box of M&M’s, she dumped out the presumably stale candy and returned the box to the floor. Like the moments after waking from a nightmare, the sameness reassured him. His mattress somehow felt softer. The air conditioner hummed. He inhaled. No sweat stench, no industrial disinfectant. Not prison. *Home.*

An oppressively hot day in Washington, D.C. Sweat buttered necks and backs. Inside the air-conditioned cocoon of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, Mohammed walked to the front of a room with the gilded lettering and dark wood of a legislative chamber. Though 25, he didn’t look much older than his high school yearbook photo: glasses perched on his nose, Adam’s apple protruding, a dusting of facial hair. He wore a dark suit, a light blue shirt, a striped tie. No more ankle monitor; he’d won his immigration case and become a U.S. citizen.

Mohammed was working with Quilliam, a counter-extremism think tank based in London and a favorite of American conservatives. Not long after his release, the head of its U.S. office, Muhammad Fraser-Rahim, met him at a coffee shop. During a long career in government, Fraser-Rahim had spoken to dozens of extremists. Mohammed wanted to succeed — that much was apparent. He’d already read up on Quilliam’s co-founder, a former extremist himself, and his family’s unwavering support was unusual for a so-called former. But he was navigating a world predisposed to shun him. Later, he posted a poem online called “Once a Terrorist, Always a Terrorist”:

*What would it take: money, honor, or words,*
*To recover the ghost of her previous name,*
*To be rid of this everlasting shame?*

Quilliam offered Mohammed a ballast, and a way to warn others about the risks of fundamentalism. In 2018, he and Fraser-Rahim collaborated on a report that outlined Mohammed’s story and its larger policy implications. He also tiptoed into public speaking. One event was at The Citadel in South Carolina, where Fraser-Rahim teaches in the intelligence and security studies department. The department was hosting a career fair; Mohammed went from booth to booth, scooping up brochures from defense and national security agencies. Unlike employers, but why not? Is that the former? one of Fraser-Rahim’s students asked. Yes, Fraser-Rahim replied. He’s also a human being.

At the Heritage panel in 2019, Mohammed joined Quilliam co-founder Maajid Nawaz and a moderator whose title was the Margaret Thatcher Fellow from Heritage’s Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom. The audience included national security wonks, a writer for a website called Jihad Watch and an aide to a U.S. senator. Mohammed sometimes fumbled for words, but he was clearly no longer the skittish teenager of Mount Hebron High. Not just in age or maturity, but in bearing: back rod-straight, hands clasped, expression deeply earnest. A person with insight to offer.

“Do you think that we are winning the hearts-and-minds, war-of-ideas struggle?” the Margaret Thatcher Fellow asked.

Not entirely, Mohammed said. The online Islamists hooked him without a single in-person conversation. “They were able to relate the grievances that I felt in my life to a larger strategy of radicalization.”

Mohammed is still a practicing Muslim. Amid the loneliness of the coronavirus pandemic, he took solace in reading the Koran and listening to lectures by a Zimbabwean muffin while working out. But his relationship with God is less performative, more personal. No more obsessing over, for instance, whether a woman’s hair is loose. Many of his friends and mentors are of different faiths. “So there’s no way in the world that I can reconcile the notion of a religion being antithetical to those people,” he told me. He tries to focus on the good he can do. Some days, that’s hard. “Why am I not near completing my Ph.D. studies and already happily married like my high school peers who graduated in 2011?” he wrote on his blog. “Why do I obsess over difficulties in life that would not have existed, had I been guided or rehabilitated before facing the prospect of prison?”

He now attends the University of Maryland Baltimore County and said he’s on track to receive his bachelor’s degree this spring. His future is hazy. His major is information systems, but if he applies to government jobs, a background check will scuttle many offers. He vented on his blog, “If I had known that my life would be unpended to perpetually condemn me for my past mistakes, believe you me, I would have already run around the country barefoot with a scarlet letter stamped on my forehead.”

Research by Omi Hodwitz, a criminologist at the University of Idaho, suggests he’s unlikely to reoffend: Of her database of 354 extremists released from prison since 9/11, only 11 have
been rearrested, mostly for minor crimes such as forgery.

I recently spoke to one of Mohammed’s friends, a student named Ethan. They bonded at a cybersecurity internship and took long drives, jamming to Mumford & Sons, pit-stopping at Subway or Wendy’s. About a year ago, Mohammed asked him: Have you Googled me? Ethan had not. He’d heard other students joke that, because of his name, Mohammed was obviously a terrorist. Now Mohammed told him: That’s true. “Like, you think you know a person and then, boom, they hit you with a giant rock,” Ethan told me. As rattled as he was, Ethan also instinctively knew they’d remain friends. The Mohammed of the Jihad Jane case wasn’t the Mohammed sitting next to him. “He’s a good person at heart. I know that. I know that he cares deeply for those around him,” Ethan said. Last year, when Ethan lost a family member, Mohammed showed up at his door with a batch of his mom’s biryani.

Mohammed’s mentors also attest to his transformation. Which, to them, seems less a transformation than a maturation. But his trajectory — it wasn’t a foregone conclusion. The former Jihad Jane now lives in Pennsylvania farm country, where she is a self-described “house mouse.” She told me her beliefs hadn’t budged; she just wasn’t going to commit violence to achieve them. “The issues that were plaguing the brothers back before we got locked up are still plaguing them,” she said. “I believe that what was being done toward the Muslims is wrong, and I believe that they got to do what they got to do in order to get their point across.”

Mohammed told me that, to shed his online self, he probably needed authorities to intervene. But was it necessary to lock him up for years? In adult facilities? With no specialized treatment? The Quilliam report identified several gaps in helping former extremists: They require mental health services, prison rehabilitation programs and a support network of other formers. “What is absolutely crucial,” Quilliam co-founder Nawaz told the Heritage audience, “is to have some form of landing pad or safety net for people like Mohammed who do express a willingness to want to try and move forward with their lives.”

During the blur of the past pandemic summer, Mohammed usually stirred awake before 5 a.m., his phone blaring, “Wakey, wakey, you lay-z.” He groggily prayed, slipped on sneakers he had brought home from prison, and went jogging under a blushing sky. Back in his room, his rainbow lorikeet, Mittu, squawking, he videoconferenced through three classes and worked on graduate school applications, as well as a research project about detecting online radicalization. At night, he drifted off to the om of his Calm app, but — suddenly, fitfully — there he was, back in federal custody. He dreamed of this often: the handcuffs, the terror. This time, authorities accused him of hoarding blankets; they crammed him into a room with other prisoners; they dumped him in the street with a dying cellphone and no wallet. He wandered around, panic mounting, looking for someone, anyone, to help him. 

Ashley Powers is a writer in Brooklyn.
HENRY’S SOUL CAFE 1704 U St. NW. 202-265-3336. Also: 5431 Indianhead Hwy., Oxon Hill, Md. 301-749-6856. henryssoulcafe.com. Open in Washington 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday. Open in Oxon Hill 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, noon to 6 p.m. Sunday. Prices: In Washington, sandwiches $5.15 to $9.95, main courses $10.59 to $13.99; in Oxon Hill, sandwiches $3.99 to $8.99, main courses $9.95 to $13.99. Accessibility: Both locations are too snug to accommodate wheelchairs; a small ramp leads to the entrance in Oxon Hill.

Proving that comfort is always in demand

Henry Smith was not a cook, say his children. But the truck driver turned convenience store owner could identify quality when he tasted a dish — his cousin’s sweet potato pie, for instance — and could figure out how to duplicate someone else’s handiwork even though the recipe was never committed to paper.

Since Smith bought all the ingredients for what became Henry’s Soul Cafe on U Street NW in 1968, he purchased containers for everything that went into Eleanor Harrington’s pie, measuring them before and after the pies were made, a process that made for a same-tasting dessert, says his son, Jermaine Smith. “My father was a perfectionist,” says Smith, 47, who remembers Henry giving him a spoonful of filling — after the pies were made, a process that made for a same-tasting dessert, that went into Eleanor Harrington’s pie, measuring them before and never more — as a child, to identify the pie’s makeup. True story, says the son: “I was 23 when I tasted a complete slice,” at the behest of a friend.

Not long after Henry Smith opened what his son describes as a glorified 7-Eleven, a source for milk, cigarettes, diapers and canned goods, did he add hot dogs and half-smokes to the lineup. In short order, the entrepreneur bought a grill to make hamburgers and a deep-fryer to serve french fries with the burgers. Fried chicken dinners followed. Pies, including coconut custard, made their debut in 1969. So many people requested the sweet potato pie that it soon became the only flavor sold. Henry Smith, his son says, “built [his business] into what the neighborhood was asking for.”

Henry Smith worked until his son and business partners, including daughter Henrietta Smith-Davis, coaxed him away from day-to-day

Baked chicken with collard greens, mac and cheese, and a muffin at Henry’s Soul Cafe.
duties in 2007. Even after he retired, though, customers came by, chairs in tow, to chat him up outside the carryout. The founder died seven years ago, at 73. But his exacting philosophy lives on at the original location.

Taste the baked chicken and tell me otherwise. The entree appeared on the menu in the 1980s, when customers started asking Henry Smith for food that wasn’t fried. He responded with a fresh, local chicken sprinkled with some herbs and slow-baked to succulence. Tender slices of liver stay moist beneath a blanket of onions and brown gravy made with drippings from the baked chicken. Smith-Davis, 55, remembers her father telling her, “Don’t give anybody anything you don’t want.” The cafe’s response is to dust catfish with cornmeal and flour and fry it to a beautiful shade of gold. There’s a flock of fried chicken around town these days. Henry’s version is striking for its lack of somersaults.

Portioned as if leftovers are expected, the entrees are served with a choice of bread and two sides; a sheet of wax paper separates the meal from muffin (choose between white or wheat cornbread, or a slice of white or wheat bread). The muffins, similar in taste to Jiffy, are baked at the cafe. If the stuffing tastes familiar, it’s because it’s made with muffins. The sides would look at home at a church social. Say “amen” to the creamy orange mac and cheese, nicely seasoned green beans, mashed potatoes flecked with red bits of peel and firm, velvety collard greens. The last get their charm not from vinegar but from smoked turkey wings.

“We don’t try to re-create the wheel,” says Jermaine, emphasizing the tradition-bound cooking, which includes a porky, pepper-stoked bean soup and pork ribs suffused with the smoke of their hickory fire. The ribs are dense, meaty, black in spots and brushed with an assertive tomato sauce, its vinegar sting countered with brown sugar. “Nothing has changed,” he says. “We’re doing things the same way as when I was a child growing up” in the business.

Customers seem to appreciate the consistency. Before the pandemic, it wasn’t unusual for some of them to show up with their own containers or ask staff not to affix
a label on a carryout box, say both of Henry Smith’s children. “I don’t care,” says Smith-Davis, laughing at the memories of people trying to pass off her food as home cooking. “As long as they keep getting it from me!”

A second branch of the cafe was opened in 1997 in Oxon Hill, Md., by Jermaine and onetime sports and entertainment manager Bernard Brooks Jr. Did I hit the offshoot on an off day? A computer glitch resulted in a delayed online order, for which a server apologized with an offer of a gratis dessert and drink. I didn’t mind the wait, as the storefront entertains customers with music outside. Alas, hits from Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder — a patron of the U Street carryout — couldn’t overcome the salty flat salmon cakes, black from the grill; meatloaf with an aftertaste of canned corn beef hash; or oddly sweet collard greens. Salvaging the meal were those tender corn muffins, warm from the oven even after 30 minutes in the car, and a couple of crunchy fried chicken wings, ignited with flame-red hot sauce.

I can understand why Henry’s Soul Cafe sells about 100,000 pies a year. The smooth filling of the signature revels in nutmeg, ginger, vanilla and orange, albeit in amounts that let the sweet potato shine. (The thin crust is an adequate commercial product.) It wasn’t until talk show host Wendy Williams reached out to the Obama White House and asked about his preferences that the owners discovered the former president had eaten their bestseller, and more than once.

Catering is a big part of the Smith family business. A central kitchen on Alabama Avenue SE employs the majority of Henry’s 40 or so workers. Clients have included the Wizards, the Capitals, church groups and D.C.’s homeless.

Henry’s Soul Cafe was never about Henry Smith making a lot of money, says his son, who remembers his father letting some customers buy food on credit and taking meals to folks in need. “He didn’t have a bank of wealth, but a bank of heart.”

The original carryout is free of pictures of the boldfaced names who have enjoyed the fruits of the family’s labors over the operation’s long run. Knowing celebrities have enjoyed your food is nice, Jermaine says, but his father said steady customers were his bread and butter.

“ ‘The really famous people are the regulars who come in,’ ” Jermaine remembers his dad telling him. “ ‘And I don’t have enough space on the wall’ ” for all their photographs.
On display
BY RANDY MAYS

Find the 12 differences in the photo of shelves at a residence in Springfield, Va., in July.

PUZZLE ANSWERS
See them online now at washingtonpost.com/secondglance or in next week’s issue of the magazine.

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**Q, meet W:**
The new Mr. Right

This column is addressed to members of QAnon, the group of uber-patriot citizens who literally believe that they are the last line of defense against a cabal of Satanic, cannibalistic pedophile Democrats intent on placing America under the thrall of Stalinist socialism. QAnon finds its evidence in complex coded messages divined from social media, messages attributed to a shadowy “highly placed government official” well versed in the five-dimensional chess moves of their leader, Donald Trump, whose secret mission is to find all those Democratic child molesters and imprison or execute them, even if in doing so, as a smokescreen, Trump might seem to be a witless, bigoted imbecile. That’s all part of the plan, which ends with his leaping back into power after President Biden is deposed, jailed or executed.

QAnon guys, it’s been a rough time for you. Turns out that many of the revelations you have wagered your lives on were transparent nonsense, despite your exhaustive research involving Internet memes. Example: There was no pizza-place basement dungeon for children because it turns out there was no basement, no dungeon and no children — just pizza, and related garnishes such as anchovies. Also: Pope Francis was not arrested, as you predicted he would be, on felony charges. And Trump was going to hold a military parade that “would never be forgotten.” No such parade happened. And oh yeah: Trump didn’t win in a landslide. Nonetheless, you guys persisted, becoming a major force behind the glorious storming of the Capitol, which resulted in some of you being arrested because, proud of your genius, you posted your treason on social media.

In short, a bad time. But I come bearing good news. Your movement might be dead, but there is a place for you to go. It is WAnon, because W is even further to the right than Q on your sacred canvas, the computer keyboard.

I have been monitoring WAnon and can tell you what’s up.

Where to begin? At the end. Examine the very last public words uttered by Donald Trump as president in a long, windy self-congratulatory speech, where he has encoded his marching orders. Note that Trump did not say “God Bless America,” as most pols do. He said, “Thank you.” What did he mean?

If you convert the letters T-H-A-N-K Y-O-U into numbers on a phone keypad and enter those numbers on Twitter, you find @84265968! A phone number? No! Too many digits. This person hasn’t tweeted since 2011, but... his last tweet was “Although this is my final goodbye, remember that I am never far away.”

Feel that little thrill tickle up your thigh, former QAnonners? He is gone but still here.

We’re obviously on the right track! Now look at that account’s username on Twitter. Normally you would find a username like “George” or “Rebecca112.” Not in this case! It’s another number: 6424235, which is a phone number. It’s the 800 customer-care phone number for Michaels, a crafts store whose main competitor is Hobby Lobby, that righteous, God-fearing patriot store that courageously won the right to deny its female employees insurance for birth control because birth control is evil!

Is Trump telling you to march on Michaels stores with torches and pitchforks? He is not. At least not yet. He is way craftier than that, even if he writes “hamberders” and “covfefe.”

He is telling you to look deeper. Check out Michaels. Its CEO is “Ashley Buchanan,” whoever she is.

Wait. If you search images of Ashley Buchanan you will discover... it’s a guy.

Isn’t that a girl’s name? What’s it mean?

It’s pretty obvious. What male national leader has a girl’s name? Xi Jinping. Xi is pronounced “She”! She Jinping. Trump is a genius. He wants you to act against Xi. But how?

That’s not the right question. Not yet. Trump needs to know the time is right. Now you need to signal the Dear Leader that you have received his message and are standing down, but standing by. But how? He has told you, dummy. He wants you to open your eyes! How do you do that? With cyclopentolate eye drops, the stuff your eye doctor uses to dilate pupils. Cyclopentolate is one step away from cyclops, the one-eyed monster. Who is the one-eyed monster, to Trump? It is Dan Crenshaw, the Republican congressman who was a Trump ally until, after the Capitol siege, he became a fierce Trump critic. He wears a patch over his right eye, which he lost in combat.

Does Trump want you to stave in an eye? Hardly. He wants you to improve an eye, to humiliate Crenshaw. He wants you to wear a monocle, in your right eye. Eventually monocle-wearing will become so evident and publicized it will get back to Trump, who will see we are with him and issue new encoded orders.

You think this is unhinged? Consider this: The best monocles are made in... China. Whooa!

Moron this as it develops.

ILLUSTRATION: ALEX FINE

BY GENE WEINGARTEN  Below the Beltway

THE WASHINGTON POST MAGAZINE  37
You love one-stop shopping because it simplifies your life, and usually saves you money, right? When it comes to insurance, GEICO’s your one-stop shop to help you save when you box up coverage for all your needs — like homeowners, motorcycle, boat, RV insurance, and more. Go to geico.com to see how easy it is to get great savings all in one spot with GEICO.