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## Editor's Note

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## Editor's Note

***Padraig O'Malley***

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Since this is the first “new” issue of the journal, which we re-launched last spring, I glanced over a few of the special issues we published between 2005 and 2010, on women, poverty, climate, and war. Our two-volume issue on war was later published by the University of Massachusetts Press as *Sticks and Stones: Living with Uncertain Wars*.

What struck me was that few of the aspirational recommendations and the policies advanced in these issues for progressive social and economic change were ever implemented—one small indicator of our regression at the state and federal levels.

The campaign to abolish abortion and severely curtail women's reproductive rights is largely succeeding. In 2010, Nebraska passed the country's most restrictive abortion law, which bars abortions after twenty weeks. By March 2013, twelve more states had passed equally restrictive laws. Abortion up to five weeks is legal in all states. North Dakota, however, has enacted a six-week ban; other states are set to do the same, and restrictions on abortion clinics have caused many to close. In four states, however, the courts have blocked laws with harsh abortion clinic restrictions.<sup>1</sup>

A higher proportion of the population exists under the poverty line: 12.5 percent in 2007, 15 percent in the past three years. CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have accelerated despite a series of scientifically authoritative studies indicating that we are edging closer to the point of irreversibility, that is, the point where even if all CO<sub>2</sub> emissions miraculously stopped, the earth would continue to warm, feeding exponentially on itself. Almost weekly we experience an “extreme” weather event, whether a Sandy or scores of tornadoes sweeping across the Midwest and wiping out dozens of communities; and yet, we ignore the multiple signals screaming at us to take drastic actions before the planet as we know it undergoes irreversible change.

Following the typhoon that killed thousands in the Philippines in November 2013, a routine international climate change conference in Warsaw turned into an emotional forum with developing countries demanding compensation from the worst-polluting countries for damage they say they are already suffering. The great irony of climate change is that there is consensus among scientists that the countries that contributed the least to the problem will be hurt the most. Be assured: there are climate wars ahead.

Iraq cost us \$1.7 trillion and an additional \$490 billion in benefits owed to veterans.<sup>2</sup> It taught us nothing, so we decided we should give it another try in Afghanistan. (Actually we went to Afghanistan first to search for Bin Laden, put that action on hold while we dismantled Iraq, and then, with Iraq behind us, returned for a full-court press in Afghanistan.) We called Iraq a success, justifying the body bags. Levels of sectarian violence today are approaching the peak levels of 2006–7, and the slide into full-scale civil war slowly engulfs the country. We put our money on Nouri Al-Malaki, who is now a dictator in all but name (surprised?); the Kurds kissed Iraq good-bye, sealing a deal to sell oil and natural gas directly to Turkey via two pipelines; Iraq is an Iranian satellite, sides with the Assad regime in Syria, and sells Iraqi oil to China. China plays its cards very close to its chest and in small whisperings has wrapped up most of Africa.

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As for Afghanistan, the Pentagon expresses its outrage after the longest war in U.S. history—which, to date, has cost a mere \$642 billion—begins to wind down with the corrupt Hamid Karzai berating us for our “abuse of human rights” and the devastation we have wrought on his country.<sup>3</sup> The CIA props up the his regime with tens of millions of dollars delivered every week in cold cash to corrupt officials to keep the patchwork of dysfunctional government from disintegrating. Thank God for greed. It trumps ideology every time. But when we leave we will propagandize our accomplishments and propagate the myth that we have laid the groundwork for “representative democracy” to blossom. Within weeks of U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban will likely be back in business and you can count the months—not years—before it has retaken the country. The good news is that we no longer have to put our troops in danger; drones are making “boots on the ground” irrelevant. This is progress.

And Syria? We are beginning to see the new picture of war—states versus nonstate actors with the nonstate actors developing a level of sophistication to match the military capability of states. Our “geopolitical strategists” have the unique distinction of getting it wrong on practically every issue of significance in the past decade. And though Washington, D.C., is awash in institutes, centers, think tanks, strategic consulting firms, and the usual scoundrels who are in one way or another cogs in the geopolitical industry, not one foresaw the Arab Spring, not one knew what to do in its wake, except to rush in with our democratic toolkits and get our butts kicked out.

We “liberated” Libya from the monster Muammar al-Gaddafi, the only dictator with a nuclear capacity who voluntarily handed everything over and dismantled his nuclear facilities and thereafter was lionized in the West—some of our most respected academics from some of our most prestigious universities were well paid by the U.S. government to take short trips to Tripoli to stroke “the great man” —until the Arab Spring numbered his days. Libya is now a country of tribal enclaves where powerful clans and tribes carve out their own areas of governance. (Gee! We forgot that such things as tribes and clans exist in the postmodern era, and when they managed to attract our attention we derisively dismissed them as archaic societal structures and discounted their significance.) Those who got their hands on Gaddafi’s vast armory, more than sufficient to arm not just jihadists but all comers with cold currency for decades to come, probably have bulging accounts in sleaze banks like JP Morgan. And Hillary got Benghazi.

Jihadists are spreading their wings, turning up in the most unexpected places, and we are left pondering why so many young Muslims, ordinary young men from a broad cross section of countries—including many developed countries—have made their way to Syria to take up the jihadist cause, ready to put their lives on the line with rudimentary knowledge of how to fire a mobile missile or handle a Kalashnikov. And if somehow a conference on the future of Syria takes place, do we leave the jihadists on the sidelines? Do we keep state actors, even one like Hezbollah who can tip the scales of war and peace, out of the peace-making game because they do not share our societal norms and values and start taking advice from Syrian exiles in London and elsewhere who have not set a foot in Syria for decades but nevertheless are gung-ho to form a “government in exile”?

When will we accept the reality: nonstate actors, jihadists or otherwise, are stakeholders in many conflicts, warfare is changing, civilians are now the primary targets in the killing fields, and you never will reach a stable peace anywhere if you leave nonstate stakeholders who are part of the problem out in the cold. How you bring them in is, of course, another matter.

It's sovereign-state narcissism—the outdated belief that nation states alone should broker peace in conflicts where they are often peripheral actors and have the hubris to put constraints on who should be in the negotiating room and who should be left outside. Think of the absurdity: you want to broker some kind of peace but you bar one of the main protagonists, often the one that is indispensable to peace, from participating in whatever talks you are trying to arrange. (Hopefully one day Bashar al-Assad will stand in the dock of the ICC, but he still has a hand to play, a stronger one now than a year ago.) Now one of the protagonists may be envisioning a united Syria as the endgame; others may be thinking in terms of a caliphate; still others, like the Kurds, want autonomy. You cannot open the door to one and slam it closed in the face of the other.

We have to understand why jihadists behave as they do, what their underlying motivation is, what they seek, and how they see themselves as part of a global society. And we have to figure out how to develop a process that is inclusive. None of this “you must denounce violence first” piety. You may argue that even the idea of talking with them is superfluous because we know what they want. But in reality we assume we know what they want, and so much ill-informed literature about jihadists has proliferated you may conclude that in the light of our postmodern values and their varied interpretations of sacred religious texts, the twain will never meet, so why go to the bother of even trying to talk with them? We forget: they are human beings; they have families and children; they are ‘us’ wired differently. They are a reality, just as drones (which they will soon get their hands on) are a reality. Iran will eventually get its nuclear bomb, that is, it will get enrichment to a level where a bomb can be assembled within weeks but with some ironclad monitoring. The interim six-month agreement reached in Geneva in November 2013 is a gamble. In the Middle East the interim has a nasty habit of becoming the permanent. “Bibi” Netanyahu splutters with rage and there is more talk about red lines. But in the end Israel will accept the reality of the situation. Israelis do not believe that Iran is dumb enough to fire a nuclear device in their direction when Israel itself can as quickly retaliate and rely on massive airstrikes from the United States. There is no doubting, however, that the tentative opening of the United States to Iran will result in a different set of power alignments in the region. It's the Saudis who are most fearful of a nuclear Iran.

Pakistan, however, is assuaging their fears, ready to sell the necessary nuclear technology. And Egypt? Is there such a creature as an “Egypt” expert? In less than two years, repression has replaced repression; the people are used to it—life on life's terms. And why is it that in all these matters we are talking only about the United States and the West? Where are the BRICS?<sup>4</sup> Oh, and the United Nations, that most efficacious upholder of the doctrine of the sanctity of individual human rights? Are we witnessing the West/United States playing its last innings? (Yes, I am a believer in Gibbons's decline and fall.)

Power has shifted. In the coming decades, the voices from the east will have their day. But because the dispersal of power is so multifaceted, the days of the solitary emperor are done with. An individual relying on nothing more than the Internet can assemble and detonate a dirty nuclear bomb. So, what is power?

## **II**

One could go on, but the domestic front/western fronts provide more fertile pickings. The euro crisis has turned the West into a basket case from which it will not emerge for a few decades. We

are witnessing the death throes of neo-colonialism. The era of the United States as global “superpower” is over. It may take some years for it to wind down, but decline and fall are in the natural order of things. *Look to the age distributions of populations and follow the numbers.* They will tell you more about the future than any soothsayer.

The financial meltdown in the United States brought us the Great Recession, which crossed the Atlantic with lightning speed (highlighting just how interdependent we are in this small village) and recession brought Europe to its knees. Unemployment rates of 20 percent and above in European countries are common. It will take the EU at least a decade to get back to where it was in 2008.

Five years on, unemployment in the United States is still above 7 percent, high by historical standards. The stimulus package Obama asked Congress to legislate in 2009 was grudgingly passed (we were at the beginning of the era of “veto anything Obama proposes”) but has proven woefully insufficient to overcome the drag on the economy. Banks have stopped lending and are hoarding cash. Obama’s job proposals languish in Congress. Congress talks itself into knots about the lack of jobs. The financial sector has rebounded and the Goldman Sachs of Wall Street are back in business accumulating huge profits (and bonuses to executives to match). The concept of “too big to fail” has become the new orthodoxy. And though the Dodd-Frank Act has brought some regulatory sense to the markets, thanks to the banking lobbyists it lacks the necessary provisions to ensure that what happened in 2008 will never happen again.

Then, to add some real insanity to the situation, the Tea Party representatives in Congress discovered the “debt ceiling” and exploited what used to be pro forma increases every year. (The debt increase is asking Congress to pay for the expenditures Congress has already incurred.) Shenanigans in 2012 resulted in sequestration—across-the-board cuts in all government services, which decreased demand for goods and services and hampered a tepid recovery. And in 2013 a standoff between the administration and Congress resulted in shutting down government for three weeks, inching us to the date on which the United States would run out of the money to meet its day-to-day obligations. Then, its status as the world’s reserve currency would become problematic, interests rates would spike, markets would tumble, and off we would go again.

What is important to keep in mind is that all these near “over the fiscal cliff” poker games are self-inflicted, the result of a Republican party going still more conservative, potential candidates for the 2016 presidential race trying to outdo each other in fiscal madness without regard for its consequences domestically or internationally. The international community watched with “shock and awe.” (Yes, George, we eventually provoked it, though not quite in the way you had intended.) The public put the onus on the Republicans, and for a month or so Democrats were beginning to talk about retaking Congress in the 2010 midterms. Obama’s favorable rating held firm and then the administration decided to score an “own” goal (soccer parlance for when you kick the ball into your own net, scoring for the other side).

And our values? The Newtown massacre reduced a nation to tears, but talk of some background checks on people purchasing guns or limiting magazine capacity sent gun sales soaring. Newtown was definitely good for business. Although a majority of the country favors background checks and even a majority of the members of the NRA favor background checks, the NRA went to work and legislation never even made it to the floor of the House. To whom are we beholden? Yes, we cried for the little ones gunned down, lit candles, attended memorials; but not one damn thing changed.

The euro remains in a limbo of sorts but will probably devolve into a two-tier currency system. Otherwise the weaker countries, unable to match competitiveness with productivity, will never escape their economic entrapment. The EU worked while Europe prospered, though by most standards, growth was endemic for over a decade, other than in Germany. Allowing each country to run a GDP/budget deficit ratio to whatever level it wanted and have little trouble borrowing to cover its deficits worked well, too well, encouraging the use of debt to pay for current expenditures and the belief that this practice could be continued indefinitely because, as with climate change, no one cried wolf, or because no one paid attention to the party poopers crying wolf.

Their citizenries, which had never heard of such a thing as sovereign debt, went along for the ride, encouraged by rapacious banks that handed out mortgages like pieces of candy to children at Halloween. The German-imposed prescription for assisting countries defaulting on their sovereign debt (Germany was the only country that enjoyed sustained growth and kept its GDP/budget deficit within a comfortable zone) was severe austerity. Countries that had lived beyond their means had to learn to live within their means; austerity, however, kept lowering what “within their means” meant. Economic contraction did not resolve indebtedness. The German domination of how countries should run their affairs in return for covering the extent of their default evoked ugly images of a Germany that conquered Europe during World War II. Of goodwill and common purpose there was little.

In the face of large-scale unemployment, taking money out of the economy (i.e., reducing demand, i.e., purchasing power) at the precise time when you need to create demand and hence employment results in further layoffs and economic contraction. You do not have to be a master mathematician to understand that if I ensure that there are fewer goods and services in my store, there is less for you to buy, so I need fewer employees to handle falling sales, and as layoffs add to the purchasing power you take out of the economy, thus further reducing demand, there is a multiplier effect—and off we go! John Maynard Keynes turned in his grave.

In the United States, the financial meltdown rewarded those who were responsible for it; unemployment is pervasive—anyone over fifty-five years of age who is unemployed has little chance of working again; the self-destructive actions of Congress are truly breathtaking. Voter discrimination is back with a bang. Because of gerrymandering, the Republicans’ control of Congress does not rest on a popular mandate (Democrats got 54,301,095 votes while Republicans got 53,822,442). Republican-controlled states in 2010 redistricted in a way that guarantees the election of the maximum number of Republicans with the minimum number of votes. And therein is the worm. In the 2012 elections, Democrats won 50.59 percent of the two-party vote but just 46.21 percent of House seats, leaving Republicans with 234 seats and Democrats with 201. This is the representative democracy we are so anxious to export.

The power of money to bankroll election campaigns has skyrocketed since the Supreme Court lifted the ban on what individuals, corporations, PACs, and Super PACs can contribute. As a result, because of the extent to which Tea Party congressional representatives hold the key to congressional action and Speaker John Boehner’s unwillingness to challenge its influence, nothing with the name “Obama” attached to it will pass the House in the next three years, even if the legislation is solely in the interest of Republicans. Obama, of course, has not helped himself with the ineptitude of the Affordable Care rollout, compounded because the president and key officials in his administration were told that the computer-based registration website was riddled with problems and a rollout should be put on hold. But hubris won that day too. What Obama lost was the trust of the American people for the first time in his presidency, and trust once lost is

hard to regain. If rollout problems continue to plague the system, Democratic congressmen and senators in vulnerable districts for the 2014 midterm elections may begin to desert the president. Unfortunately, Obama has never taken to heart advice given ad nauseam that he must work Congress, reward the good and punish the “wicked,” play hardball, twist arms, and have an enforcer. You cannot draw on attributes you have not cultivated or perhaps what you are incapable of or find distasteful. Two things that might help: fire someone and read Robert Caro’s magisterial biography of Lyndon Johnson. A presidency gives you power; how you use it is a different matter. Oratorical gifts do not compensate for an innate aversion to exercising it.

What is most disturbing is that at the moment—and I stress those last three words—Obama’s travails could hand both House and Senate to the Republicans in 2014. If rollout problems are satisfactorily resolved, if people start signing up and the system hums, public attitude, given the public’s attention span, will reverse itself. (Or is that wishful thinking?)

JP Morgan racked up close to \$17 billion in fines in 2013, yet Jamie Dimon is still lionized on the Hill and on Wall Street. I mean, what is a little \$17 billion here or there? The middle class lose their jobs and homes. Things happen.

Indeed they do: the figures Nicholas Kristof, in his November 17 column in the *New York Times*, not for the first time, draws attention to what a mean and amoral country America is becoming, or more accurately, one of the two Americas that now exist—the Red states and the Blue states.

Congress is debating the Food, Farm, and Jobs Bill—which among many of its provisions amply pays farmers for not growing certain crops. The food stamp program is attached to the farm bill. In the spirit of reciprocity, the Senate version of the bill would cut the food stamp program by \$10 billion over ten years; the House would cut the program by \$40 billion. More than 90 percent of the benefits go to families living below the poverty line and nearly two-thirds are children, elderly or disabled. To keep perspective, at least fifty billionaires qualify for farm subsidies. Some forty-seven million Americans receive food stamps.

This is your Congress. This is the America we are becoming or maybe we are there already. Within these broad strokes across the domestic and international landscapes, the global issues that demand our attention are dissected, refined, and concretized into more manageable forms. In the United States, at least, these issues invariably wend their ways through the labyrinths of federal bureaucracies and end up within the purview of state and local governments, which have increasingly asserted themselves in social and economic areas once in the domain of the federal government. Some issues fall within the natural remit of state government and some end up there because of the permanent gridlock in Congress that has stymied legislative initiatives on almost all fronts since 2009. Obama came to Washington and gridlock followed, in hindsight not all that surprising.

On the day of Obama’s inauguration as president, January 21, 2009, Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell was asked by a reporter for one of the ubiquitous cable TV stations what was the Republican Party’s legislative agenda for the following four years and McConnell unhesitatingly responded, “To destroy Obama’s presidency.” In Washington, D.C., Republicans have spent the past five years feverishly trying to accomplish this goal.

One result is that progressive legislation is dead before it reaches the House floor. In Massachusetts, with the Democratic Party in control of the House and the Senate and members in both chambers virtually entrenched for lifetime tenures, a progressive governor such as Deval Patrick can accomplish at the state level what Congress cannot at the federal level. One issue, which is anathema to Republicans in D.C., is any legislative action that might help the poor;

indeed, as Kristoff's column so vividly illustrates, their agenda seems focused on dismantling every social and economic network federal and state agencies put in place over decades to provide some minimal safety net for the poor and vulnerable and defund the agencies that assist them. They have for all practical purposes declared war on the poor: reward the minions of wealth and the "too big to fail" banks that saddled us with the deepest recession since the Great Depression and punish those who lost jobs and homes as a result of the recession that followed. It appears to be designed to augment the inequality gap between the 99 percent victims and the 1 percent.

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This issue of the journal publishes the proceedings of the two "Youth at Risk" seminars the Family Impact Institute conducted at the Massachusetts State House in April 2012 and March 2013, for state policy makers, including legislators, legislative aides, the governor's staff, and agency representatives. What makes these seminars unique is that they focus researchers' attention on what policy makers want and not on what researchers think they should want.

Among the hardest hit by the recession were the poor, whose numbers swelled when tens of thousands of the new jobless and their families joined them. Many of these families, who were previously among the middle class, had lost their homes. And among these families, children and young people were most vulnerable to the deleterious impact of economic free fall, the most difficult to protect, and, for those who were employable, the hardest to find economic opportunities for. The articles in this series address the overall well-being of youth, youth unemployment, online sexual predators, transracial adoption of children in foster care, food insecurity among children, and homeless children and their families. At first glance, these subjects may not all seem to be related, but the authors skillfully weave the findings of their research in these areas to pinpoint the interrelationships.

All six articles explore the uneven impact of the current recession, which has been hardest on young people between ages sixteen and twenty-four, with minorities—Latino and African American—bearing the brunt. Labor force participation rates have dropped dramatically and unemployment has reached as high as 30 percent in some states. In Massachusetts, more than half a million children (15 percent of all children) live in poverty, 30 percent of all children live with parents who lack secure employment, and 41 percent live in households with high housing cost burdens. Because many homeless families move in with relatives and friends—solutions that are usually temporary and therefore unstable—the public has little awareness of the pervasiveness of child homelessness and the profound effects of homelessness on Massachusetts children and youth. Poverty, hunger, homelessness, low-wage work, and low-income families' access to public work supports are not separate policy domains and must be dealt with holistically. In the wake of the economic crisis in 2008, the number of Americans experiencing food insecurity—defined as limited access to sufficient nutritious food necessary to lead an active and healthy life—rose to 48.9 million in 2012, 15.9 million of whom were children. Although, at 14.9 percent, Massachusetts falls below the national average for low food security (also referred to as household food insecurity), in 2012 almost 11.4 percent of households in the state dealt with low food security, including 4.2 percent that dealt with very low food security.

A disproportionate number of children in the child placement system are black and Hispanic. In Massachusetts, more white parents want to adopt than there are white children waiting for homes (this imbalance is also a national reality), and children of color are less likely than white children to be placed in a permanent home.

Victims of “online predators” are likely to be youths who are at risk because of previous abuse or problems in school or at home. The authors identify legislative measures in Massachusetts that have been enacted or that are pending to protect children from online sex offenders. But more is never enough and legislation is often palliative rather than systemic. In a decade plagued with powerlessness among those at the bottom end of the economic spectrum, it is imperative that the emphasis be on the implementation of what is already on the legislative books more than the expectation that legislation that rewrites legislative priorities will prevail.

Statistics do not reveal heartbreak or hopelessness. A caring society should concentrate on eradicating the former and eviscerating the latter. Recession and bad times, however, have accentuated our selfishness. The issues and their underlying causes the authors of “Youth at Risk” identify are not the issues of “others”; the extent to which we address them defines who we are as a society. Midterm congressional elections will take place next year, and their results will say a lot about who we wish to be and what kind of society we want. But few vote in midterms, and those who do tend to be those with more extreme agendas, agendas that will put more youth at risk, ensure more homelessness, and increase the level of poverty. How often have you heard an elected representative of the people proclaim that “America is the greatest country God ever created” and wonder what God would have to say?

But on an upbeat note: Shaun O’Connell has lost none of his touch. In “Home and Away: Imagining Ireland Imagining America,” O’Connell juxtaposes two novels: Alice McDermott’s *Charming Billy* (1998) and Colm Toibin’s *Brooklyn* (2009) and reveals the parallels and contrasts that enrich the discussion of Irish and Irish American identities. Toibin, an Irish writer, would have us see an America, land of the free, as an open, inviting place but exacting in redeeming promises made; McDermott, an American writer, portrays an Ireland that is magical, a little bit of heaven, but finally a closed and bitter place. Each author reveals how an imaginary landscape across the sea affects the sense of place, how “away” redefines “home.”

Finally, Brian O’Connor writes about his father, who was killed in Viet Nam. He methodically documents his father’s battle with Viet Cong forces, recreates the circumstances that led to his death, and describes his unquenchable to-the-death devotion to his squad. Lieutenant Colonel Mortimer Lenane O’Connor, the son concludes, was “a gung-ho infantry officer, a West Pointer with a sense of gallows humor who believed that large-force engagements were the quickest way to conclude the war.” Earlier this year the University of Pennsylvania awarded his father posthumously a doctorate for the thesis he was working on when he put everything aside and did what he thought was the right thing to do. This is O’Connor’s first venture into print and the quality of his “way with words” and descriptive depiction of the hell of Viet Nam suggest to me that we have another O’Connell in the making.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Tara Culp-Ressler, “Four States That Have Tried, and Failed, to Shut Down Abortion Clinics,” *ThinkProgress*, July 9, 2013, <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2013/07/09/2269791/four-states-failed-shut-down-abortion-clinics>.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Trotta, “Iraq War Cost U.S. More Than \$2 Trillion, Could Grow to \$6 Trillion, Says Watson Institute Study,” *HuffPost World*, December 4, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/14/iraq-war-cost-more-than-2-trillion\\_n\\_2875493.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/14/iraq-war-cost-more-than-2-trillion_n_2875493.html).

<sup>3</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *The US Cost of the Afghan War: FY2002–FY2013—Cost in Military Operating Expenditures and Aid, and Prospects for “Transition”* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012), [https://csis.org/files/publication/120515\\_US\\_Spending\\_Afghan\\_War\\_SIGAR.pdf](https://csis.org/files/publication/120515_US_Spending_Afghan_War_SIGAR.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.