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F. HARPER

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Editor's letter

It should have been one of 2017's biggest stories. A week before Christmas, *The New York Times* reported that a secret Pentagon-run program had collected compelling evidence about possible extraterrestrial encounters with UFOs. (See Talking Points.) There was a first-hand account and video recording from a Navy pilot who flew behind a strange, lozenge-shaped "craft" that appeared to defy the laws of aerodynamics, and a claim that government contractors had built a warehouse in Nevada to store mysterious metal alloys recovered from UFO sites. The possibility—however small—that aliens might be zipping around the planet and leaving their trash behind should have triggered a flood of follow-up news stories: Was there a non-ET explanation for these encounters? Should we treat the UFOs as a threat? What else is the government hiding? Yet the revelations were greeted mostly with a shrug, and after a brief flurry of stories, news organizations were sucked back into the enormous gravity

field of the Trump presidency—a black hole that swallows nearly all news coverage.

Extraterrestrials weren't alone in being cheated of their moment in the spotlight. Last year, scores of important stories got lost amid the high drama of White House feuds and firings, Trump's tweet storms, and the Russia investigation. The fall of ISIS' self-declared caliphate, the massacre of 58 concertgoers by a gunman in Las Vegas, the murder of 26 people at a Texas church, and the genocide of the Rohingya people in Myanmar would have dominated the headlines for weeks in the pre-Trump era. But those events were quickly forgotten after about a week of coverage. We're only one week into the New Year, but Trump is already ruling the news with his Twitter attacks on North Korea, Pakistan, and Democratic rivals. So if any publicity-hungry aliens are reading, you might want to wait until at least 2020 before announcing your existence.

Theunis Bates
Managing editor

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Exhibit of the week **The Sweat of Their Face:** **Portraying American Workers**

National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C., through Sept. 3

America's labor class finally has pride of place at the National Portrait Gallery, and "what better time than now," said Noah Weiland in *The New York Times*. An exhibition that shares a floor with the museum's paintings of the nation's presidents has gathered more than 75 images of workers, beginning with an 18th-century watercolor of a slave, and many of the figures that follow seem to want to join in the political debates we're having today. A World War II-era poster by Norman Rockwell proves that ash-smearing coal miners were as much heroes of American industry in 1944 as they were during the 2016 presidential campaign. A famous 1942 Gordon Parks photograph of a Washington, D.C., cleaning woman reminds us that the city's white power brokers have long depended on a black working class. Dial the clock further back and you see again and again the "devastating" effects of 19th-century industrialization, and how people struggled to survive before our society established any safety nets.



Frischkorn's Kean, Subway Sandwich Artist

Though the worst days might be behind us, "it's hard to locate any golden age of the American worker in this exhibition," said Philip Kennicott in *The Washington Post*. Despite the curators' decision to include Rockwell's miner and plenty of other images that romanticize physical labor, a more tragic story breaks through. "Seduced into the fiction that work is essential to our humanity" and "beguiled by promises of

rising prosperity," American workers have allowed themselves to be exploited for generations, only to reach this current moment when automation has ended the wealthy's need for them. "One wishes for some kind of utopian image to end the show, something that says: It didn't have to be this way." But instead of pointing out that we could choose an economic system that shares prosperity more evenly, the art mostly delivers more evidence that workers are regarded as disposable—and more cause for anger.

Don't expect to see many images of cubicle jockeys, suburban office parks, or modern service-industry workers, said Louis Jacobson in the *Washington City Paper*. The exhibition "defines laborers in the most traditional sense, as workers whose sweat pours out due to heat and physical exhaustion." Still, amid the familiar century-old images from such celebrated muckrakers as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, you will find "a few welcome surprises." Winslow Homer's *Girl With Pitchfork* creates a hero out of a young hay baler leaning on a towering farm tool, and Shauna Frischkorn has done the same, more than a century later, by creating a 2014 photo portrait of a Subway sandwich shop worker that gives him the dignity of a modern Rembrandt.