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May 18, 2025

With public
health under
attack,
Bill Gates
is announcing a
plan to end
his foundation.

What is
he thinking?

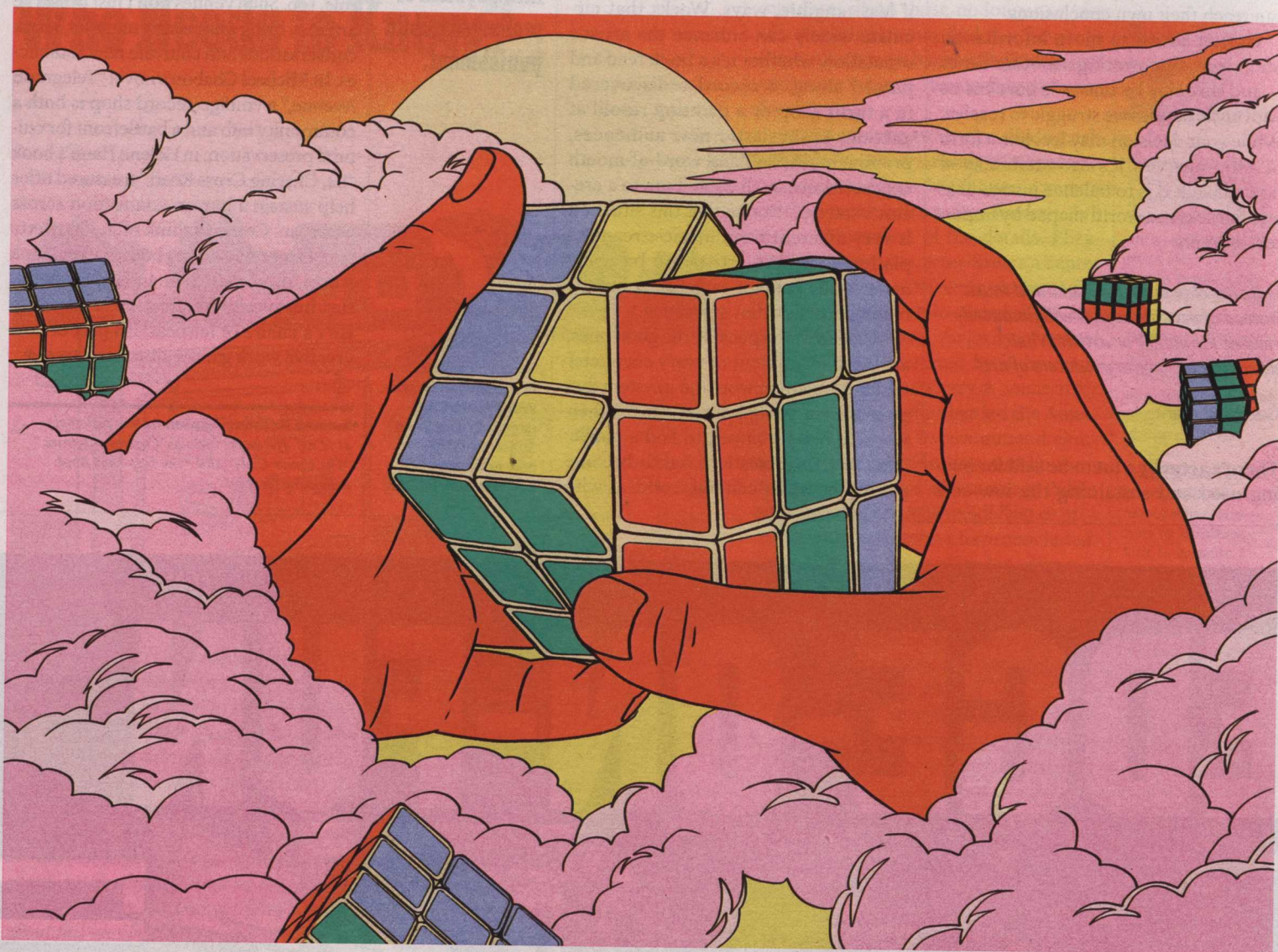


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An interview with
DAVID WALLACE-WELLS

Rubik's Cubes

By Samantha Mann



Puzzling, to me, has always been an activity for people who lack legitimate hobbies. The thought of assembling 500 jigsawed pieces of cardboard to recreate the “Mona Lisa” has never been my idea of time well spent. And word games? I’d rather scrub the F train clean with a dirty sock than try to decipher the riddle “What’s a five-letter synonym for ‘amalgamation’?” Remember the O.G. Windows puzzle game Minesweeper? I clicked aimlessly at those gray squares until the board exploded.

But then I had children, and navigating your way through a problem is a primary activity of parenting. In some ways I had to become the ultimate puzzle master. Bring me a hungry tummy or skinned knee, and I can conjure a solution. If my 5-year-old son was bored, I could remind him of his ongoing Lego project, or hand him an empty Amazon box to decorate. If he was scared, I could hug him and tell him the Jim Carey version of the Grinch is fake and lives only inside the TV. I’d grown accustomed to these

How a familiar puzzle changed my perspective on parenting.

straightforward needs. Then, one day, he added a literal puzzle to my never-ending to-do list: a Rubik’s Cube.

“Mommy, solve this,” he demanded, assuming I could do so. I took the cube from his hand and noticed that his fist was significantly less doughy than it was a year earlier. “Of course I can fix it,” I said. For a few minutes, I twisted the layers around and around, listening to the plastic clicking and clacking. Naturally, none of the colors lined up. “Let’s see if someone can help,” I said, opening my

laptop. My son snuggled up close to me on the couch with his ever-lengthening limbs. I searched for remaining spots of baby fat on him as I researched Rubik’s Cube tutorials on YouTube. A pimply teenager walked us through “The Easiest 10-Minute Rubik’s Cube Lesson,” demonstrating specific processes to tackle each side. Over and over, I fumbled the righty and lefty algorithms. I replayed the video at least 50 times, but by bedtime I hadn’t made any headway.

With the cube still unsolved, I tucked my son into bed. No flash of disappointment registered on his face as I apologized for my lack of proficiency in enigmatology. In my own bed I continued manipulating the cube. The process, to my surprise, had an addictive quality. Rotating the sections and occasionally aligning the right colors felt like mastering the right steps in a dance — although, in my case, it was more of a drunken stagger than a waltz.

But I was determined to keep trying, to waltz. After all, I had always been my son’s capable fixer. As he has aged, his needs have become more complex. We’ve transitioned from how to make a boo-boo better to pondering questions like “Where was I before I was born?” and “What if I’m lonely after you and mom die?” He needed me to shift away from the physical stage of parenting to an existential one for which I lacked sufficient answers. Maybe the cube would let me hold onto the concrete for a little while longer.

When he woke up the next morning, he asked if I had solved it. And so, before finishing my first cup of coffee, I picked the cube back up and once again tried to untangle it. I shifted the cube in various directions between running baths and folding laundry. “Are you even watching this?” my wife asked as we sat in bed watching 50-year-old women yell at one another in designer gowns on our favorite show, and I had hardly looked up from the cube. As parents of young children, one of the few moments we have together, just the two of us, is the too-brief hour after they’re in bed and before one of us passes out. The cube was interfering with that sacred time — but I had to get it right.

We were into our second week without a solved cube when, instead of answering a work email, my hands expertly maneuvered and something in my brain

As my son grows, so will his problems. Maybe all I can reasonably hope to do is show up.

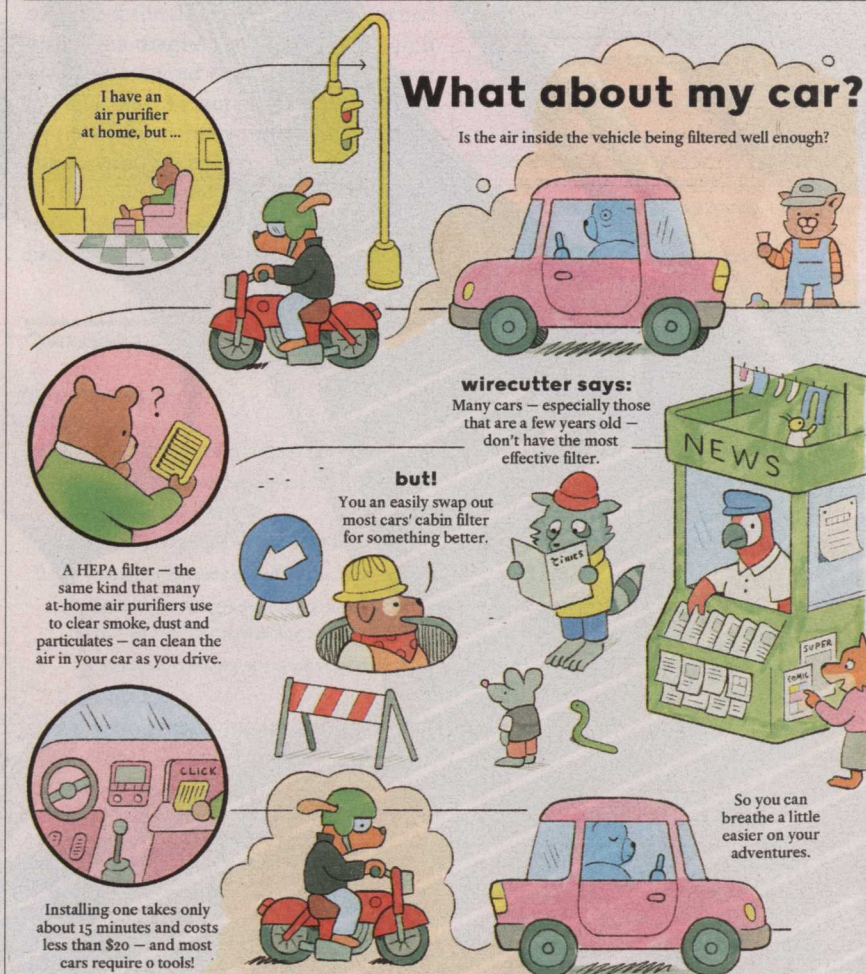
snapped into place. I realized I was finally going to crack it — I was just twists away. I shifted the squares two more times and then, finally: *I solved it.* Stunned and self-congratulating, I picked up my son an hour early from his after-school program with the completed cube in hand.

He beamed and cheered. Then, immediately, he scrambled all my hard work. Within seconds, I watched the perfect coordination dissolve into a primary-color hodgepodge. “Let’s do it again!” he shouted. It was a devastating reminder of a lesson I had already learned: I was a mere stagehand in a production centered on his life. Yes, being a parent means being a puzzle-solver in ways big and small. At times you have to do things that feel hard — hard because you’re tired or lack patience or simply don’t know how. But

being a parent also means that none of it is about you. It’s about scooting over and focusing all that tired mental and physical and emotional energy on someone else. Occasionally it pays off and you do something that previously felt impossible, like getting everyone to bed without yelling — or solving a Rubik’s Cube.

Still, I love working on the cube — beginning with a mess and gradually shaping it into a microcosm of order. Unlike with child-rearing, there is no wondering if I made the right choice. As my son grows, so will his problems, evolving with an intricacy too nuanced for YouTubers to resolve. I won’t be able to fix all of them, but the Rubik’s Cube did unlock a new parenting hypothesis: Maybe all I can reasonably hope to do is show up, try, fail and change course. ♦

Wirecutter’s Life Hacks Illustrations by Giacomo Gambineri



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THE \$200 BILLION GAMBLE

As the Trump administration guts public health, Bill Gates is accelerating his exit from philanthropy. What is he thinking? An interview with David Wallace-Wells / Photograph by Katy Grannan



EARLIER

masse, into extreme debt distress. The share of the world's population living in extreme poverty fell by almost three-quarters between 1990 and 2014, but it has hardly shrunk since.

To hear Gates and his team tell it, this is the time to go all in — given the yawning gaps produced by post-pandemic setbacks and the Trump assault, and given the promise of biomedical tools and other lifesaving innovations now in the development pipeline, and given A.I., a subject Gates returns to again and again. They even talk excitedly about a world in which the Gates Foundation has made itself unnecessary. That world sounds tremendously appealing. But — given the obstacles — can it be built?

Over two days in late April, I spoke with Gates about the state and legacy of his philanthropic endeavor, its achievements and disappointments thus far and what lies ahead. What follows is an edited and condensed version of those conversations, in which he was sunny, detailed and confident, sometimes to the point of brusque certainty, that the next few decades would yield even more radical improvements in global development than what he called, in retrospect, “our miraculous period.”

I. 'MILLIONS OF ADDITIONAL DEATHS OF KIDS'

Let's talk about the very present tense, with the Trump administration completely turning its back on foreign aid and leaving not just many millions of people but also most of the world's global institutions in the lurch. How bad is it? You could say this announcement is not very timely. Over the last 25 years, we achieved far more than I — or I think anyone — expected. The world invented new tools, we made them cheap, we got them out. We went from 10 million childhood deaths to five million. Over the next 20 years, can you cut that in half again? The answer is: Absolutely. But then you have this weird thing: In the next four years — or eight years, I don't know — the actual money going into these causes is reduced, and reduced way beyond what I would have expected. On childhood deaths, which over the next few years should have gone from five million to four million — now, unless there's a big reversal, we'll probably go from five million to six million. **Another million kids dying each year.** Now, that's not to say that it'll go back to 10 million. And in the year 2000, when it was 10 million, did people know to feel so bad? Not as much as I wish they would have. You have to go to Africa and see a malaria ward at the height of the malaria season. Or you have to see kids who are stunted. And weirdly, the incredible success of the last 25 years is not as visible to people as it should be. But that also means that when people cut these things, will they notice? They cut the money to Gaza Province in Mozambique. That is really for drugs, so

'The reductions to U.S.A.I.D. are stunning.'

this month, the Gates Foundation celebrated its 25th anniversary by announcing its plans to close up shop.

Established in 2000 — when Melinda French Gates was just 35 and Bill Gates was 44 and the world's richest man — the foundation quickly became one of the most consequential philanthropies the world has ever seen, utterly reshaping the landscape of global public health, pouring more than \$100 billion into causes starved for resources and helping save tens of millions of lives.

For all its pragmatic public-health spade work, the foundation has also served as a kind of valorous abstraction — the seeming embodiment of “the Golden Rule,” in a phrase that Bill Gates likes to use, and the face of an increasingly anachronistic era of elite optimism.

“You could say this announcement is not very timely,” Gates says, but the timeline isn't short: He is committing the foundation to 20 more years of generous aid, more than \$200 billion in total, targeting health and human development. And it comes laced with familiar humanitarian confidence, as Gates and his team now believe that their central goals can be achieved in much shorter time. But it is also disconcertingly definitive: The foundation will close its doors, permanently, on Dec. 31, 2045, at least several decades before originally intended. In the meantime, it will be spending down its endowment, as well as almost all of Gates's remaining personal fortune.

The news comes at a time that will seem to many as a perilous one, given the Trump administration's recent assault on foreign aid and indeed on the idea of global generosity itself. A study in *The Lancet* recently calculated that cuts to American spending on PEPFAR, the program to deliver H.I.V. and AIDS relief abroad, could cost the lives of 500,000 children by 2030. The journal *Nature* suggested that an overall cessation of U.S. aid funding could result in roughly 25 million additional deaths over 15 years.

Donald Trump is the face of these cuts, but the cruelty of his administration is not the only story. After leaping upward in the 2000s, global giving for health grew very slowly through the 2010s. The culture of philanthropy has changed somewhat, too, with the age of the Giving Pledge — in which hundreds of the world's richest people promised to donate more than half of their great fortunes to charity — yielding first to the upstart movement called Effective Altruism and then to a new age of extreme wealth defined less by altruism than by grandiosity. After the Gateses' divorce in 2021, Melinda eventually left the foundation to establish her own philanthropy; Warren Buffett, a longtime supporter, recently announced his plans to leave most of his remaining fortune in the hands of a charitable trust his own children will administer, and to give no additional money to the Gates Foundation beyond his death. After a few years of slow post-Covid decline, this has been the year that foreign aid — as the Gates Foundation's chief executive, Mark Suzman, wrote recently in *The Economist* — “fell off a cliff.”

On the ground, progress has been bumpy, too, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic emergency, when many routine vaccination programs were paused and the world's poorest countries were thrown, en



Bill Gates with a student at an event in Miami in 2001 to announce a series of grants for computer technology and services in South Florida schools.

mothers don't give their babies H.I.V. But the people doing the cutting are so geographically illiterate, they think it's Gaza and condoms. Will they go meet those babies who got H.I.V. because that money was cut? Probably not. And so you say, OK, it's going to be millions — **You mean millions of additional deaths?** Because of these cuts, millions of additional deaths of kids.

Were you surprised by the cruelty? The reductions to U.S.A.I.D. are stunning. I thought there'd be, like, a 20 percent cut. Instead, right now, it's like an 80 percent cut. And yes, I did not expect that. I don't think anybody expected that. Nobody expected the executive branch to cut PEPFAR or polio money without the involvement of Congress. What's going on with H.I.V. research and trial networks, I didn't expect that either. We will do our best to get these things changed. I will be an advocate. But those are real headwinds.

And what's Congress going to do? My history with Congress is that they're very supportive. We've had cases during Trump's first presidency, when he and Russ Vought at the Office of Management and Budget said, We're going to cut PEPFAR. And Congress didn't give it the time of day. But these are different times. And the cuts are so dramatic that even if we get some restored, we're going to have a tough time.

I don't think we're going to have administration after administration who cuts and cuts and cuts these things. I see it as a four- to six-year interruption. And if we zoom out and think about 20 years from now — I do think we'll cut childhood deaths, despite all this, because the Golden Rule was not repealed.

Are you sure? I worry about the humanitarian impulse subsiding, replaced by more mercenary self-interest. My optimism hasn't been shaken. You could say it's not just the last four months. It's certainly post-pandemic. And when did our movement reach its peak — 2008? 2015? But I don't think it's inherent. It's just that some people have focused on other things. If it's brought to them, if they get to see it, people do care about children's deaths. And science — thank God science doesn't go backward as we invent these tools. It's a permanent change: children not being malnourished or women not bleeding to death or girls not getting H.I.V. And the overarching thing here is: Will innovation in the rich world driven by A.I. help bring down some of these health costs so that the scarcity is somewhat relieved, and so that people's basic generosity can come back to the fore? **The moral math is inarguable.** I think there's a logic to solving tuberculosis. I mean, it's criminal *not* to solve TB. It's criminal not to solve H.I.V. It's criminal not to eradicate malaria.

But all of those things were true before the Gates Foundation was founded, and people were doing less about it then, right? Yeah, but the

poor countries that suffer from these things didn't have the resources or the ability to organize that R.&D. effort. It's a huge market failure. We came along and said, Yes, we're going to take this money and put it to this cause. And to some degree, we got some partners to join us, but I don't see that going away.

For a long period there, the world could look to you and Melinda and the foundation as icons of a certain set of values and a model of what to do with great wealth. Then we had Effective Altruism, which was even more aggressive about leveraging each dollar for maximum humanitarian impact, though many of those figures went on to obsess over different sets of questions, like the welfare of the planet's chickens or multiplanetary humans of the 23rd century. Now it's like, Who's the world's richest man? Elon Musk. And he's not giving much away, if anything, to the needs of the world's poor. Well, he's the one who cut the U.S.A.I.D. budget. He put it in the wood chipper, because he didn't go to a party that weekend. **Technically he's still attached to the Giving Pledge, but I haven't seen evidence that he's actually committed to it.** The Giving Pledge — an unusual aspect of it that you can wait until you die and still fulfill it. So who knows? He could go on to be a great philanthropist. In the meantime, the world's richest man has been involved in the deaths of the world's poorest children. **One thing that worries me is that this is not just happening here. The U.S. has been a very large share of global humanitarian aid, and so the Trump cuts are devastating. But there has been a rollback almost everywhere in the world.** Yes, in the U.K., their aid budget was up at 0.7 percent of G.D.P., then it went to 0.5 percent under the conservative leadership, and now — stunningly, as part of going to see President Trump — it's gone down to 0.3 percent. Germany is proposing to cut its aid budget. France has big budget problems. So aid is getting squeezed.

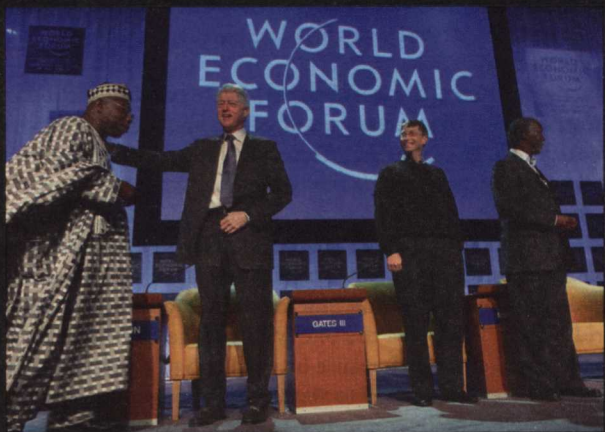
What sense do you make of that? Why is this happening? It's not happening because people are targeting these areas and saying, We don't care about these areas. I almost wish it was, because then we could have a head-on discussion about childhood death and the Golden Rule. But in Europe, they've always had a budget conundrum: In an aging society, your pension and health costs are going to go up, and your willingness to raise taxes is modest, so you're headed toward a big problem. And then you layer on top of that new defense spending because of Ukraine. ...

Take Keir Starmer. A day before he's supposed to fly and see Trump, and he's like, Oh, my God, I've got to show that we're serious about defense spending. He's in some meetings saying, OK, how do I increase defense spending from 2.1 percent to 2.3 percent? And somebody says, We could cut the aid budget from 0.5 percent to 0.3 percent. Nobody says, Hey, what about those kids who won't get vaccines? And that's a center-left government. And it's in the U.K., where civil society is actually stronger on these issues than anywhere else in the world. The Labour Party deserves a lot of credit for building the heyday of this movement. So that one was particularly surprising and a bit disappointing.

And you're right that a single actor who's like, Hey, we don't want to give — collectively, it reduces the will of other people to give. When each country decides, OK, I'm sort of just going to take care of myself, it pushes other countries to at least think about that. So I'm sad to see defense budgets being increased, because that's money that's not going to human welfare either domestically or to help the poorest in the world. It's a tragic thing.

II. 'IT'S VERY DANGEROUS TO SUGGEST THAT THIS WORK IS PLAYED OUT'

Last year, in an annual foundation report, you wrote: “The global health boom is over. But for how long?” Back when I was giving TED speeches warning about the next pandemic, I would have said, Well, a next pandemic would be a terrible thing, but at least people would say, Wow, these



Bill Gates at the World Economic Forum in 2005 with (from left) President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, former President Bill Clinton and President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa.

vaccines are amazing! They'd say, We need to have disease surveillance, and we need to strengthen the World Health Organization. I never would have expected that after vaccines clearly saved tens of millions of lives, the reputation of vaccines and the commitment to health surveillance would be lower than it was before the pandemic.

What sense do you make of that? In America, we tell ourselves one kind of story — about the backlash to science, on one side, or the liberal overreach, on the other. But this is not just an American phenomenon. The measles outbreak in Canada, for instance, is even bigger than ours; in Europe, they've gone from 127 cases in 2022 to more than 35,000 in 2024. Routine vaccination rates went down almost everywhere. What's happening? I don't know. In the U.S., this pandemic, in the end, produced something like 1.4 million deaths. And that's both a large number and a small number. And when you go to people and you say, Drop everything — well, who knows? And the risk to younger people who didn't have uncommon medical problems was very low, particularly once you didn't have an overloaded health system.

Is that just an American story, or is it how you see things playing out globally? It's not nearly as bad elsewhere. The U.S. is really acute, in terms of, *I don't want to hear about the pandemic*. It certainly didn't bring us together. And there were all kinds of mistakes and things people didn't know. But tragically, global health did not benefit. It was hurt by the pandemic. Government indebtedness was hurt by the pandemic, too. **This is one of the clearest stories of global development of the last few years, that the pandemic really slowed progress — in many cases, reversing it. But when I look at certain measures, I see signs that the slowdown began earlier. Extreme poverty drops by three-quarters between 1990 and 2014, and it hasn't dropped much since. In the worst-suffering places, maternal mortality is still improving, but globally the rates have plateaued for about a decade now. Childhood deaths — according to UNICEF, the global under-5 mortality rate fell from 77 per 1,000 births in 2000 to 44 in 2015 and to only 37 in 2023. Are these just statistical illusions, or did the development miracle shift into a lower gear about a decade ago?** Well, the numbers are complicated. There's a lot of different ways that data is gathered, and there are a lot of different ways of looking at it. But I think it's very dangerous to suggest that this work is played out.

I'm not suggesting that at all. I'm just asking what there might be to learn from recent history. The U.N.'s Millennium Development Goals were announced in 2000, and by 2015, a majority had seen good or excellent progress. It was pretty miraculous — when the U.N. put together its scorecard, it was mostly green. But the Sustainable

Development Goals were announced in 2015, and that has been a much different story. According to the U.N., only 17 percent of them are on track to reach their target by 2030. More than a third are stagnating or regressing. The last scorecard I saw — it was mostly yellow, pink and red. The overall judgment was "severely off track." Well, 2015 is the M.D.G. cutoff, but maternal and child deaths in Africa were still going down pretty well through 2019. The rates in Asia have continued to go down since 2019. The outlier here is Africa. And there, in the last five years, Ethiopia has had a civil war, Sudan has a civil war. Sub-Saharan Africa is very challenged financially and with instability. Just the debts alone! And we should be doing what we did at the turn of the century, which is debt relief for all of these countries, to give them a clean balance sheet. But there isn't the will right now.

There are now 3.3 billion people living in countries where interest payments outweigh spending on either education or health. There will be a time, I hope, when Africa rises back up in terms of people's priorities. And on all these metrics, you have African population growth that's working against you. Where are the babies being born? They're being born in Chad, not Sweden. And it's a mistake — they should be born in Sweden. But that's just not the way it works. Since 1950, the portion of the world's births that are in very poor countries has gone from about 10 percent to about 25 percent. So you have this shift underneath that really affects those top-line numbers.

III.

'I ENDED UP WITH THIS GIGANTIC FORTUNE'

So why now? The Gates Foundation is celebrating its 25th anniversary. What is the value of announcing its plans to sunset at the same time? Well, it allows us to do a lot more because we're not trying to steward our money for some weird legacy thing. If we were trying to be a forever foundation, instead of being able to spend \$9 billion a year, we'd have to drop down to spending like \$6 billion a year.

I've heard this described as a "bolus dose" approach — the medical term for an injection that gets meds into the patient's system rapidly. Normally we're saving lives for \$2,000 or \$3,000. But given the problems that are out there, we're actually now saving lives for less. And this is a miraculous time. A lot of the hundred billion we've spent is to build a pipeline, and the most important stuff the foundation is doing is the stuff that's in the R.&D. pipeline right now. The tuberculosis stuff — compared with what



Melinda French Gates and Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, the wife of the French president, at a hospital in Dangbo, Benin, in 2010.

This page: Eric Feferberg/Agence France-Presse, via Getty Images. Opposite page: Dave Thompson/WPA Pool, via Getty Images.

we've done in the last 25 years, our TB stuff is mind-blowing. We will have a genetic cure for H.I.V., and we should spend whatever it takes to get that done, because that changes the world permanently.

We'll be able to take A.I. into our drug-discovery efforts. The tools are so phenomenal — the way we're going to put A.I. into the health-delivery system, for example. All the intelligence will be in the A.I., and so you will have a personal doctor that's as good as somebody who has a full-time dedicated doctor — that's actually better than even what rich countries have. And likewise, that's our goal for the educational tutor. That's our goal for the agricultural adviser. And so given that I have these resources, what can we achieve? It makes a big difference to take the money and spend it now versus later.

Were you thinking, 25 years ago, that the foundation would eventually sunset? We said at the beginning that the philanthropy would spend all of its money within 50 years after both Melinda and I were dead.

Why was that? The world is going to change very dramatically. Just take A.I. alone, or politics alone. The idea that I could write some set of goals that somebody would either honestly try to interpret or misinterpret 50 years from now — that's kind of silly. And we're not running out of rich people. There will be more rich people, and they will also see what A.I. has done and not done, and what politics and governments have done and not done. And I do think good examples influence other people. I think the rich people today should do more philanthropy, and we have some examples of that. And I think the rich people 20 years from now should do more in philanthropy.

How different is the world of giving today compared with when the foundation was first established? Well, first you have to say it's unusual that one individual would have so much wealth. But Microsoft did super well, and so I ended up with this gigantic fortune, and I was in a dialogue with Melinda, even before we got married, and with Warren Buffett, studying philanthropists.

In your announcement, you cite Andrew Carnegie's line: "The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced." So what should be done with these resources? And it was in the '90s that I studied other foundations and asked questions like, What do children die from? At the time, I didn't know a lot about these diseases. I hadn't been exposed. Microsoft travel had taken me to South Africa, but I didn't go to townships to sell software. Well, actually, I did go to Soweto to install a computer, and I was kind of surprised — Wow, the electricity doesn't work very well here. But I was quite naïve about that part of the world. And in terms of the impact we've had, the partnerships we've built, the deep understandings that have been achieved — we've done extremely well. In a way you can say: Why was that sitting there? Why, when we gave just \$50 million, did we become the biggest funder of malaria work? At the time, that was killing 600,000 children. What a strange world that the incentive system doesn't take these resources and assign them to that human thing. That's a tragedy and a missed opportunity.

'We're not running out of rich people.'



Bill Gates and George Osborne, Britain's chancellor of the Exchequer, at an event in Liverpool in 2016 announcing funding for a program aimed at reducing deaths from malaria.

IV.

'YOU NEVER GET TO ZERO'

So let's talk about the next 20 years. In making the announcement, you've highlighted three major goals. First: "No mom, child or baby dies of a preventable cause." With maternal mortality, how do we get from where we are now to zero? Well, whenever somebody says zero, that's an idealistic thing. You never get to zero. The U.S. is not at zero. But you can get to near-parity — where the poor-country rate and the rich-country rate is within a factor of two. That is very doable.

How? Maternal death — it's bleeding to death, where we have new tools that are pretty fantastic for that. That's one of our great successes of the last five years. And now that's being rolled out. You have eclampsia, which actually rich countries haven't figured out, either.

My wife went through that. Twice, actually. And so we're doing basic research on how do you do ultrasound to see placental development and see where in the uterus the placenta is, and how it's developing, and how do you intervene to improve that? And do you avoid using C-sections when you shouldn't do C-sections? And doing them at the right time, when you should do them, and doing them the right way? Then, gestational diabetes is this unbelievable thing that not only is it bad for the baby and the mother, but the prediction of the mother's health later on is extremely diminished. Half of those women will get full-bore diabetes within five years, and in these countries, that means they'll die 15 to 20 years younger.

So maternal mortality — it's amazing how little goes into that, even for things like eclampsia that trouble the rich world. And in the 20-year period, we should be able to cut that in half, although that would be an acceleration. We haven't been on a very good rate for that even during our miraculous period.

Do you see childhood mortality in the same way? Yeah, there's not some peak thing going on with progress on under-5 deaths. It's true — they only went down 2.2 percent per year after going down 3.7 percent per year. But we can cut that in half again.

In your announcement, you set a goal that "the next generation grows up in a world without deadly infectious disease." A lot of these diseases, as you reduce the burden, you get huge community benefits. So you don't have to protect everyone. There are a few things like rotavirus — rotavirus is everywhere. You can't suppress it. You just have

(Continued on Page 47)

was like the kids were their own team, and me part of Mom and Dad's team."

Sylvia has never been one to make a big show of things, but she recalls a few times when she went to a counselor's office and cried for two to three hours. "Like full-on meltdowns." She had a scholarship to an all-girls private high school, where most of the students came from "perfect, cookie-cutter families." She had a lot of shame about the connection with L and the kids and didn't tell her parents about it. At home, she says, "I remember sitting in my room trying to do homework, and screaming every night was just deafening. Like screaming with headphones on."

Now Sylvia is finishing college in Los Angeles, studying acting, and my parents make it out to Los Angeles every semester. But money is tight for her, and she works the opening shift at a Starbucks to pay her rent. My brother, Owen, is 29 and studying for a doctorate in piano on Long Island. My brother's come up for his big performances when he was a kid. But it's hard for them to travel regularly. With Owen and Sylvia have talked about a move to New York — the flashes of guilt that come with living far from home, the weeks that pass without thinking about what our parents are going through. We call and hear the news: in or out of jail, in or out of detox, asking for money, showing up unexpectedly, promising to rehab, disappearing with my mom's car keys. My parents are struggling to find a therapist who takes Medicaid. "I don't want to tell Mom or Dad anything crazy or concerning," Sylvia says. "I don't want them to worry."

My dad tells me that for him, "I guess the hardest thing is that there's no solution. That's something I come back to every now and again. Like, there must be a solution. So I'll flip things around in my mind, but I can never actually find one, so I mean, this is the solution. This is as good as it can be."

Perhaps the one sibling who has benefited from being in a "grandfamily" is my sister Julia. She's 21 and has an intellectual disability. Now that the twins are grown up and living far away, having grandkids around keeps her close to the silly, carefree spirit of childhood. And when she's not working in the cafeteria at my dad's university, she helps out with the cooking and babysits; it's her purpose. There are many birthdays in the family, and we celebrate most of them with homemade pizzas, crafted by Julia. "On nights when we have frozen pizzas," she told me, "the twins always say they like mine better."

As the oldest, I have probably struggled the most with how much I should be helping my parents and how much I can expect them to help me. I always imagined that after I gave birth, my mom would come stay with me and my husband for a while to help us navigate the challenges of new parenthood. But now that she's raising four kids

in elementary school, it feels like a lot to ask. We talked about it and agreed that she'll come for a week when the baby is born.

Still, I can't help feeling that the experience of being a new grandmother will be less exciting for her and more like the same caregiving work she does every day. She and my dad have told me how revelatory it has already been to feel all the joy without all the worry. But she also said something that made me wonder how much I was trying to press myself and my parents into a mold we never would have fit, even if none of this had happened.

"I guess maybe I haven't had the luxury of other grandparents who waited a long time for this and it being like the highlight of their life," she said. "But also, Daddy and I have our own projects and interests, so our daughter having a child is not the center of our world. You'll be the same way with your kids."

There was something about this that stung, but it was also freeing. For a couple of years during the pandemic, my husband and I moved to North Carolina to be closer to my parents. Much of this decision came down to a gnawing confusion over my own responsibility. But our time near my family revealed the limits of my capacity or willingness to shoulder the load of care in any consistent, meaningful way. We would pick up the kids for school occasionally or have them over for a weekend every couple of months, but I was protective of my time to work and create. I realized I could love my parents and support them emotionally, but I didn't want to raise my sister's kids. And no one was asking me to. So we moved back to New York. There is a part of me that still sees this act of self-determination as a moral failing. But another part feels as if I'm choosing a life my parents raised me to live.

This past Thanksgiving, I was with my husband's extended family in West Virginia when I began getting frantic dispatches from home. L had been bailed out by the children's father after a month in jail, and my parents had agreed to let her stay at home for a night under the premise of leaving for rehab the next day. But one night turned into three, and by then all the meds she'd been on had worn off, and she became erratic. My dad asked when she would be ready to leave, and she flew into a rage in front of the kids, went up the street to my grandmother's house and used fentanyl in the bathroom. Knocking and getting no reply, my 84-year-old grandmother kicked open the door, found my sister unresponsive with a syringe in her hand and called 911. All of this happened while my dad was on his way to the airport to pick up Owen and his girlfriend, who was coming to meet the family for the first time.

A few days after the overdose, my sister had a court hearing. The judge gave her the most generous possible sentence: one month in rehab, instead of five months in prison, if she paid the \$900 she owed in probation fees. My parents

hadn't bailed her out in years, but they were so buoyed by the sentence that they paid the fees. Everyone celebrated. Then, that night, my dad found her passed out in the basement with a needle beside her and texts from the kids' dad saying he was outside with an eight ball.

Most rehabs don't accept opioid patients who haven't detoxed, so this triggered a weekslong cycle. Once my sister had used, she needed to find an open bed at a detox center. Once she had

detoxed and was set to go to rehab, she would pack and repack, obsessively, for the better part of a day. She would come up with more and more tasks she needed to complete before leaving and blow up at my parents if they rushed her. Then she would relapse.

My mom sat with L for many hours at detox facilities — all night, at one hospital — waiting for beds to open up. At the last one, my mom waited with her for a long time, then had to take care of

something at home, so she left my sister on her own. "I still regret that," my mom said. L left the hospital and disappeared.

My parents were badly shaken by the whole ordeal. When I arrived for the holidays soon after, my dad was particularly despondent. It was the first year he didn't allow my sister to come home for Christmas. He told her that if she wasn't in recovery, having her in the house just wasn't safe for everyone else.

"Grief with an addict child is complicated," my dad said. "We grieve what has actually been lost, and everything that might have been, while also fearing future losses, like our daughter's death. You just learn to live with this overshadowing your life. Loss and hope are all mixed up together, making the future impossible to predict or make peace with."

The one positive — if you can call it that — was that after my sister disappeared, the children



Jane with two of her grandchildren.



Michael teaching three of his grandchildren to play the violin.

which makes it hard for him to communicate. He struggles to control his anger, which can twist into rage toward his sisters or my parents or, worst of all, himself.

One night last year, my nephew became upset after getting caught doing something he wasn't supposed to do. It wasn't that big of a deal — my parents can't even remember what he did — but he refused to apologize. He shut himself in his room and moved his mattress to one side, then gathered up all his carefully curated possessions and piled them up on top of it. When my parents came in, he told them to "give it all away," his face buried in a pillow.

"I'd never seen that kind of deep self-hatred in a child," my dad said.

A few months later, he heard his sisters asking my mom about a friend of theirs at school, who also lives with her grandmother. Child Protective Services had removed her from her biological mother's care, and now the mother was suing for custody, wanting the little girl to testify in court about whom she wanted to live with. This was a terrifying prospect for the girl. My mom was explaining the situation, and as my

nephew listened, he grew increasingly angry. He ran upstairs to my parents' bedroom and started throwing things around. ("Though," my dad said, "I did notice that he wasn't really throwing anything hard enough to break it.") When my dad tried to calm him down, he yelled: "I get it! You don't really want us here. The only reason you're taking care of us is because the police are making you do it!"

When my dad emphasized how untrue that was — that my parents wanted him and his sisters *so much* — my nephew's body slackened, as if the fear were seeping away, and he let my dad hold him.

Moments like this were part of why my parents decided to sue for custody. Aside from the practical obstacles of parenting without legal rights — basic tasks like registering them for school, traveling or taking them to the doctor required tenuous workarounds — they felt that establishing their legal relationship with the children would enable a sense of emotional permanence. Even if the kids didn't know the specifics, my parents did, and it helped them wrap their minds around the future.

"I realized at a certain point, there is no half-way," my dad said. "You have to be all in. And for me, that's been the biggest change. Maybe four or five years ago, my anger was volcanic. I fixated on what had been done to me. But at some point, I just had to say: I can't have it both ways. I can't love them unconditionally and hold on to the anger, because then my love would be begrudging. We choose to raise them and to love them, period. The best way I can resolve the conflict between my roles as father and grandparent is to love and care for my daughter's children when she can't. In doing that, I am also loving her."

There have been moments over the years, when L is sober, that she has expressed gratitude for what my parents are doing. But usually, she exists in a reality of her own making. Either she can't remember events clearly, or they are simply too painful to deal with, so when she is confronted with her hurtful actions, she gets angry and refutes facts or recasts blame.

After the custody hearing, L was especially furious with my mom, accusing her of lying because she said that L hadn't been present enough to care for the children or make decisions



A desk in the Dodds house.

about their lives. What about that time she had toured the kids' school with my mom? It must have been unbearable for her to fathom all the life that happened without her, the countless hours of care that occurred in her absence.

Recently my mom found "The Anger Workbook," by Les Carter and Frank Minirth. "They say that feeling rejected is one of the main reasons for anger," she told me. And with the grandchildren, my mom said, "feeling rejected has been a big part of this whole scenario." My nephew especially, she said, "feels rejected by his parents, so he makes me feel rejected because I'm trying to replace his parents. There's all these layers."

When I was growing up, if we were disrespectful, or did something my mother saw as immoral, her wrath was hot and vicious. She could shrivel you down to size with a few words. I distinctly remember being called "evil" once as a teenager, which would be funny if it wasn't such a loaded word in our house.

Now, though, when people see her with the grandchildren, they often comment on how unflappable she is, an immovable anchor in the storm. "With these kids, I've realized that for

their emotions to be regulated, my own emotions have to be more regulated," she told me. "When the grandkids get unregulated, it's huge compared to what you all were like. I've realized I cannot push their buttons, and when I do, I need to back off and let them calm down. So they're sort of teaching us how to do it differently."

My dad has said that for him, one of the gifts of raising the grandchildren has been a liberation from expectations — both for his own life and the children's. None of this looks the way it was "supposed to," so why hold on to old ideas about what will make him happy or what makes a happy child? He's better at being present than he was when we were young. He has told me that when we watch old home videos, observing his younger self is painful. He can see how distant and distracted he is, weighed down by whatever ambition he was falling short of. I can see the lost moments on those tapes through his eyes: L, 5 years old with a lisp and strawberry blond curls, shrieking with laughter as we take turns getting in the plastic car, while the rest of us rock it over on its side, and then upside down, spilling the person inside onto the grass.

"When you were kids, we never really worried about addiction or the future," he said. "We had really high expectations and hopes for you. And with the grandchildren, it's not that we think they're less gifted or that they can't achieve the same high things. But our idea of what makes a meaningful life is different. It isn't about accomplishment or achieving some career benchmark — teaching at an Ivy League institution or whatever. My idea of what constitutes a good life has gradually shifted. Using your gifts to serve others, having close relationships, living free of addiction. That's success."

Expectations are an odd thing, because you don't always realize you have them until they fall apart. At least, that's how it has been for me and my siblings.

My youngest sister, Sylvia, was 16 when the grandkids came to live with my parents, so she went from being the baby of five to a kind of older sister to four babies. Looking back now, she says: "I think Mom and Dad kind of stopped parenting me when the kids moved in. They supported me, but they stopped really telling me what to

U.S. NEWS

Chinese Students To Lose Their Visas

By GARETH VIPERS

The Trump administration will begin to “aggressively revoke” the visas of Chinese students studying in the U.S., according to a statement by Secretary of State Marco Rubio posted to the department’s website Wednesday.

The statement didn’t offer any further details but said the move would include “those with connections to the Chinese Communist Party or studying in critical fields.”

The State Department said it would also revise criteria for future applications from China and Hong Kong and that it was pausing student-visa interviews while it prepared measures to vet applicants’ social-media accounts.

Last month, Beijing cautioned Chinese students against studying in the U.S. following a warning that Washington was preparing to revoke visas for many already there.

On Thursday, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman called the U.S. plan to revoke Chinese students’ visas politically motivated and discriminatory and said it “hurts the lawful rights and interests of international students from China and disrupts people-to-people exchanges between the two countries.”

Chinese students, who often pay full tuition, have been a significant source of revenue for U.S. schools.

One in every four international students in the U.S. comes from China.



Graduates tipped their caps at the statue of John Harvard before the 374th Commencement in Cambridge, Mass., on Thursday. The graduates cheered speakers who emphasized maintaining a diverse and international student body and standing up for truth amid attacks by the Trump administration.

Judge Lets Harvard Enroll Foreigners

By SARA RANDAZZO
AND GRETCHEN TARRANT GULLA

BOSTON—A federal judge Thursday said she would continue to let Harvard University enroll international students for now as the school fights the Trump administration in court.

U.S. District Judge Allison Burroughs said that a temporary restraining order would remain in place and that she planned to issue a preliminary injunction blocking the government from barring interna-

tional enrollment at Harvard. The Trump administration last week said it was revoking the school’s authorization to host foreign students, the latest in a series of attacks against the Ivy League university.

Before the hearing Thursday, the Trump administration had backed off from immediately revoking Harvard’s right to enroll foreign students, instead giving the university 30 days to respond.

“The First Amendment harms we are suffering are

real and continuing,” Ian Heath Gershengorn, an attorney for Harvard, said in court. A few miles away on Harvard’s campus, thousands gathered for commencement.

The court hearing comes as Harvard faces a slew of punitive actions from the Trump administration, which has cited concerns about campus anti-semitism and diversity, equity and inclusion practices that it views as discriminatory. Trump has pulled billions of dollars in federal research funds, threat-

ened Harvard’s tax-exempt status and probed its acceptance of foreign donations.

Around a quarter of Harvard’s student population comes from abroad, with the proportion even higher in certain graduate schools. Trump on Wednesday suggested Harvard should cap its international enrollment at more like 15%.

“Without its international students, Harvard is not Harvard,” the university said in a lawsuit filed last Friday, which argued that the federal gov-

ernment illegally revoked its certification to host foreign students.

Harvard said in a Wednesday court filing that the loss of its ability to enroll international students had caused confusion, fear and mental anguish among its students and faculty.

“Many international students and scholars are reporting significant emotional distress,” Maureen Martin, the director of immigration services in Harvard’s International Office, said in a filing.

Ex-Assistant Testifies Combs Sexually Assaulted Her

By JACK MORPHET

A former personal assistant to Sean “Diddy” Combs testified Thursday that the music mogul sexually and physically assaulted her on the job and sometimes forced her to work for days without breaks.

The former staffer, identified by the pseudonym Mia, said Combs routinely belittled and attacked her while she worked for him from 2009 to 2017. She had to ask permission to leave the Grammy winner’s house, she said during her testimony at Combs’s sex-trafficking case in New York federal court.

Combs was prone to fits of violence and hurled things at her when angry, Mia testified. He sexually assaulted her more than once, she said, in-

cluding at his 40th birthday party at the Plaza Hotel in New York.

“He’s thrown things at me, he’s thrown me against the wall, he’s thrown me into a pool, he’s thrown an ice bucket on my head, he has slammed my arm into a door, and he’s also sexually assaulted me,” Mia said.

Combs, 55 years old, faces charges including racketeering conspiracy and sex trafficking, running what prosecutors have described as a criminal enterprise that included kidnapping, arson and forcing his girlfriends to have sex with escorts. He has denied any wrongdoing and pleaded not guilty.

When Mia went to Combs’s house for the initial interview for the \$50,000-a-year job, he



A courtroom sketch shows Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs listening as witness ‘Mia’ is questioned in New York federal court.

answered the door in his underwear, she said. Combs’s vice president of human re-

sources didn’t stay for the meeting, Mia said.

“She introduced me and

then left,” Mia said.

To stay awake for long periods while working for Combs, Mia sometimes relied on medication to treat her attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, she said.

She said one marathon working session lasted roughly five days, and only ended when she became hysterical from lack of sleep. Combs later promoted her to director of development and acquisition for his production company Revolt Films, for which she was paid \$70,000, she said.

Mia testified that she saw Combs attack his then-girlfriend, Cassie Ventura. In one episode around 2013, Combs slammed Ventura’s head into the corner of a wooden bed frame, Mia said.

“I thought, ‘He’s actually going to kill her,’” Mia testified.

Ventura, the prosecution’s star witness, testified earlier in the trial about taking part in weekly drug-fueled sex parties as her yearslong relationship with Combs turned abusive.

Mia was suspended without pay once around 2012, Mia said, when she and Ventura slipped out of Combs’s suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel to go to a party at the home of music icon Prince.

Combs found them and started to beat Ventura, but Prince’s security intervened, Mia said.

The following day, Mia said, she got a phone call from Combs’s team and was told she had been suspended for insubordination.

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DAYS
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ALLURING OFFERS ON ALL NEW COLLECTIONS

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