

## THE SICK SOCIOPATH OLIGARCHY OF JEFF BEZOS

Where in the pantheon of American commercial titans does Jeffrey Bezos belong? Andrew Carnegie's hearths forged the steel that became the skeleton of the railroad and the city. John D. Rockefeller refined 90 percent of American oil, which supplied the pre-electric nation with light. Bill Gates created a program that was considered a prerequisite for turning on a computer.

At 55, Bezos has never dominated a major market as thoroughly as any of these forebears, and while he is presently the richest man on the planet, he has less wealth than Gates did at his zenith. Yet Rockefeller largely contented himself with oil wells, pump stations, and railcars; Gates's fortune depended on an operating system. The scope of the empire the founder and CEO of Amazon has built is wider. Indeed, it is without precedent in the long history of American capitalism.

Today, Bezos controls nearly 40 percent of all e-commerce in the United States. More product searches are conducted on Amazon than on Google, which has allowed Bezos to build an advertising business as valuable as the entirety of IBM. One estimate has Amazon Web Services controlling almost half of the cloud-computing industry—institutions as varied as General Electric, Unilever, and even the CIA rely on its servers. Forty-two percent of paper book sales and a third of the market for streaming video are controlled by the company; Twitch, its video platform popular among gamers, attracts 15 million users a day. Add *The Washington Post* to this portfolio and Bezos is, at a minimum, a

rival to the likes of Disney's Bob Iger or the suits at AT&T, and arguably the most powerful man in American culture.

I first grew concerned about Amazon's power five years ago. I felt anxious about how the company bullied the book business, extracting ever more favorable terms from the publishers that had come to depend on it. When the conglomerate Hachette, with which I'd once published a book, refused to accede to Amazon's demands, it was punished. Amazon delayed shipments of Hachette books; when consumers searched for some Hachette titles, it redirected them to similar books from other publishers. In 2014, I wrote a cover story for *The New Republic* with a pugilistic title: "[Amazon Must Be Stopped](#)." Citing my article, the company subsequently terminated an advertising campaign for its political comedy, *Alpha House*, that had been running in the magazine.

Since that time, Bezos's reach has only grown. To the U.S. president, he is a nemesis. To many Americans, he is a beneficent wizard of convenience and abundance. Over the course of just this past year, Amazon has announced the following endeavors: It will match potential home buyers with real-estate agents and integrate their new homes with Amazon devices; it will enable its voice assistant, Alexa, to access health-care data, such as the status of a prescription or a blood-sugar reading; it will build a 3-million-square-foot cargo airport outside Cincinnati; it will make next-day delivery standard for members of its Prime service; it will start a new chain of grocery stores, in addition to Whole Foods, which it already owns; it will stream Major League Baseball games; it will launch more than 3,000 satellites into orbit to supply the world with high-speed internet.

Bezos worries that in the coming generations the planet's growing energy demands will outstrip its limited supply. "We have to go to space to save Earth," he says.

Bezos's ventures are by now so large and varied that it is difficult to truly comprehend the nature of his empire, much less the end point of his ambitions. What exactly does Jeff Bezos want? Or, to put it slightly differently, what does he believe? Given his power over the world, these are not small questions. Yet he largely keeps his intentions to himself; many longtime colleagues can't recall him ever expressing a political opinion. To replay a loop of his interviews from Amazon's quarter century of existence is to listen to him retell the same unrevealing anecdotes over and over.

To better understand him, I spent five months speaking with current and former Amazon executives, as well as people at the company's rivals and scholarly observers. Bezos himself declined to participate in this story, and current employees would speak to me only off the record. Even former staffers largely preferred to remain anonymous, assuming that they might eventually wish to work for a business somehow entwined with Bezos's sprawling concerns.

### [From November 2018: Alexa, should we trust you?](#)

In the course of these conversations, my view of Bezos began to shift. Many of my assumptions about the man melted away; admiration jostled with continued unease. And I was left with a new sense of his endgame.

Bezos loves the word *relentless*—it appears again and again in his closely read annual letters to shareholders—and I had always

assumed that his aim was domination for its own sake. In an era that celebrates corporate gigantism, he seemed determined to be the biggest of them all. But to say that Bezos's ultimate goal is dominion over the planet is to misunderstand him. His ambitions are not bound by the gravitational pull of the Earth.

**B**efore Bezos settled on Amazon.com, he toyed with naming his unlaunched store MakeItSo.com. He entertained using the phrase because he couldn't contain a long-standing enthusiasm. The rejected moniker was a favored utterance of a man Bezos idolizes: the captain of the starship USS Enterprise-D, Jean-Luc Picard.

Bezos is unabashed in his fanaticism for *Star Trek* and its many spin-offs. He has a holding company called Zefram, which honors the character who invented warp drive. He persuaded the makers of the film *Star Trek Beyond* to give him a cameo as a Starfleet official. He named his dog Kamala, after a woman who appears in an episode as Picard's "perfect" but unattainable mate. As time has passed, Bezos and Picard have physically converged. Like the interstellar explorer, portrayed by Patrick Stewart, Bezos shaved the remnant strands on his high-gloss pate and acquired a cast-iron physique. A friend once said that Bezos adopted his strenuous fitness regime in anticipation of the day that he, too, would journey to the heavens.

When reporters tracked down Bezos's high-school girlfriend, she said, "The reason he's earning so much money is to get to outer space." This assessment hardly required a leap of imagination. As the valedictorian of Miami Palmetto Senior High School's class of 1982, Bezos used his graduation speech to unfurl his vision for humanity. He dreamed aloud of the day when millions of his

fellow earthlings would relocate to colonies in space. A local newspaper reported that his intention was “to get all people off the Earth and see it turned into a huge national park.”

Most mortals eventually jettison teenage dreams, but Bezos remains passionately committed to his, even as he has come to control more and more of the here and now. Critics have chided him for philanthropic stinginess, at least relative to his wealth, but the thing Bezos considers his primary humanitarian contribution isn't properly charitable. It's a profit-seeking company called Blue Origin, dedicated to fulfilling the prophecy of his high-school graduation speech. He funds that venture—which builds rockets, rovers, and the infrastructure that permits voyage beyond the Earth's atmosphere—by selling about \$1 billion of Amazon stock each year. More than his ownership of his behemoth company or of *The Washington Post*—and more than the \$2 billion he's pledged to nonprofits working on homelessness and education for low-income Americans—Bezos calls Blue Origin his “most important work.”

He considers the work so important because the threat it aims to counter is so grave. What worries Bezos is that in the coming generations the planet's growing energy demands will outstrip its limited supply. The danger, he says, “is not necessarily extinction,” but stasis: “We will have to stop growing, which I think is a very bad future.” While others might fret that climate change will soon make the planet uninhabitable, the billionaire wrings his hands over the prospects of diminished growth. But the scenario he describes is indeed grim. Without enough energy to go around, rationing and starvation will ensue. Over the years, Bezos has made himself inaccessible to journalists asking questions about Amazon. But he shares his faith in space

colonization with a preacher's zeal: "We have to go to space to save Earth."

At the heart of this faith is a text Bezos read as a teen. In 1976, a Princeton physicist named Gerard K. O'Neill wrote a populist case for moving into space called *The High Frontier*, a book beloved by sci-fi geeks, NASA functionaries, and aging hippies. As a Princeton student, Bezos attended O'Neill seminars and ran the campus chapter of Students for the Exploration and Development of Space. Through Blue Origin, Bezos is developing detailed plans for realizing O'Neill's vision.

The professor imagined colonies housed in miles-long cylindrical tubes floating between Earth and the moon. The tubes would sustain a simulacrum of life back on the mother planet, with soil, oxygenated air, free-flying birds, and "beaches lapped by waves." When Bezos describes these colonies—and presents artists' renderings of them—he sounds almost rapturous. "This is Maui on its best day, all year long. No rain, no storms, no earthquakes." Since the colonies would allow the human population to grow without any earthly constraints, the species would flourish like never before: "We can have a trillion humans in the solar system, which means we'd have a thousand Mozarts and a thousand Einsteins. This would be an incredible civilization."

Bezos rallies the public with passionate peroration and convincing command of detail. Yet a human hole remains in his presentation. Who will govern this new world? Who will write its laws? Who will decide which earthlings are admitted into the colonies? These questions aren't explicitly answered, except with his fervent belief that entrepreneurs, those in his own image, will

shape the future. And he will do his best to make it so. With his wealth, and the megaphone that it permits him, Bezos is attempting to set the terms for the future of the species, so that his utopia can take root.

In a way, Bezos has already created a prototype of a cylindrical tube inhabited by millions, and it's called Amazon.com. His creation is less a company than an encompassing system. If it were merely a store that sold practically all salable goods—and delivered them within 48 hours—it would still be the most awe-inspiring creation in the history of American business. But Amazon is both that tangible company and an abstraction far more powerful.

Bezos's enterprise upends long-held precepts about the fundamental nature of capitalism—especially an idea enshrined by the great Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek. As World War II drew to its close, Hayek wrote the essay "The Use of Knowledge in Society," a seminal indictment of centralized planning. Hayek argued that no bureaucracy could ever match the miracle of markets, which spontaneously and efficiently aggregate the knowledge of a society. When markets collectively set a price, that price reflects the discrete bits of knowledge scattered among executives, workers, and consumers. Any governmental attempt to replace this organic apparatus—to set prices unilaterally, or even to understand the disparate workings of an economy—is pure hubris.

In contrast to the dysfunction and cynicism that define the times, Amazon is the embodiment of competence, the rare institution that routinely works.

Amazon, however, has acquired the God's-eye view of the economy that Hayek never imagined any single entity could hope to achieve. At any moment, its website has more than 600 million items for sale and more than 3 million vendors selling them. With its history of past purchases, it has collected the world's most comprehensive catalog of consumer desire, which allows it to anticipate both individual and collective needs. With its logistics business—and its growing network of trucks and planes—it has an understanding of the flow of goods around the world. In other words, if Marxist revolutionaries ever seized power in the United States, they could nationalize Amazon and call it a day.

[Read: Jeff Bezos's \\$150 billion fortune is a policy failure](#)

What makes Amazon so fearsome to its critics isn't purely its size but its trajectory. Amazon's cache of knowledge gives it the capacity to build its own winning version of an astonishing array of businesses. In the face of its growth, long-dormant fears of monopoly have begun to surface—and Amazon has reportedly found itself under review by the Federal Trade Commission and the Department of Justice. But unlike Facebook, another object of government scrutiny, Bezos's company remains deeply trusted by the public. A 2018 poll sponsored by Georgetown University and the Knight Foundation found that Amazon engendered greater confidence than virtually any other American institution. Despite Donald Trump's jabs at Bezos, this widespread faith in the company makes for a source of bipartisan consensus, although the Democrats surveyed were a touch more enthusiastic than the Republicans were: They rated Amazon even more trustworthy than the U.S. military. In contrast to the dysfunction and cynicism that define the times, Amazon is



the embodiment of competence, the rare institution that routinely works.

All of this confidence in Bezos's company has made him a singular figure in the culture, which, at times, regards him as a flesh-and-blood Picard. If "Democracy dies in darkness"—the motto of the Bezos-era *Washington Post*—then he is the rescuer of the light, the hero who reversed the terminal decline of Woodward and Bernstein's old broadsheet. When he wrote [a Medium post alleging that the \*National Enquirer\* had attempted to extort him](#), he was hailed for taking a stand against tabloid sleaze and cyberbullying.

As Amazon has matured, it has assumed the trappings of something more than a private enterprise. It increasingly poses as a social institution tending to the common good. After it earned derision for the alleged treatment of its workers—some warehouse employees reported feeling pressured to forgo bathroom breaks to meet productivity targets, to cite just one example—it unilaterally raised its minimum wage to \$15 an hour in the U.S., then attempted to shame competitors that didn't follow suit. (Amazon says that employees are allowed to use the bathroom whenever they want.) As technology has reshaped its workforce, Amazon has set aside \$700 million to retrain about a third of its U.S. employees for roles with new demands.

These gestures are partly gambits to insulate the company's reputation from accusations of rapaciousness. But they also tie Amazon to an older conception of the corporation. In its current form, Amazon harkens back to Big Business as it emerged in the postwar years. When Charles E. Wilson, the president of General Motors, was nominated to be secretary of defense in 1953, he

famously told a Senate confirmation panel, "I thought what was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa." For the most part, this was an aphorism earnestly accepted as a statement of good faith. To avert class warfare, the Goliaths of the day recognized unions; they bestowed health care and pensions upon employees. Liberal eminences such as John K. Galbraith hailed the corporation as the basis for a benign social order. Galbraith extolled the social utility of the corporation because he believed that it could be domesticated and harnessed to serve interests other than its own bottom line. He believed businesses behave beneficently when their self-serving impulses are checked by "countervailing power" in the form of organized labor and government.

Of course, those powers have receded. Unions, whose organizing efforts Amazon has routinely squashed, are an unassuming nub of their former selves; the regulatory state is badly out of practice. So while Amazon is trusted, no countervailing force has the inclination or capacity to restrain it. And while power could amass in a more villainous character than Jeff Bezos, that doesn't alleviate the anxiety that accompanies such concentration. Amazon might be a vast corporation, with more than 600,000 employees, but it is also the extension of one brilliant, willful man with an incredible knack for bending the world to his values.

## 2.0

After Jackie Bezos's shotgun marriage to a member of a traveling unicyclist troupe dissolved, she dedicated herself to their only progeny. The teenage mother from Albuquerque became her son's intellectual champion. She would drive him 40 miles each day so that he could attend an elementary school for high-testing kids in Houston. When a wait list prevented him from entering the gifted track in middle school, she wheedled bureaucrats until they made an exception. Over the course of Bezos's itinerant childhood, as his family traversed the Sun Belt of the '70s, Jackie encouraged her son's interest in tinkering by constantly shuttling him to RadioShack.

"I have always been academically smart," Bezos told an audience in Washington, D.C., last year. This was a sentiment ratified by the world as he ascended the meritocracy. At Princeton, he flirted with becoming a theoretical physicist. On Wall Street, he joined D. E. Shaw, arguably the brainiest and most adventurous hedge fund of the '90s. The firm would send unsolicited letters to dean's-list students at top universities, telling them: "We approach our recruiting in unapologetically elitist fashion."

The computer scientist who founded the firm, David E. Shaw, had dabbled in the nascent internet in the '80s. This provided him with unusual clarity about the coming revolution and its commercial implications. He anointed Bezos to seek out investment opportunities in the newly privatized medium—an exploration that led Bezos to his own big idea.

When Bezos created Amazon in 1994, he set out to build an institution like the ones that had carried him through the first three decades of his life. He would build his own aristocracy of brains, a place where intelligence would rise to the top. Early on, Bezos asked job candidates for their SAT scores. The company's fifth employee, Nicholas Lovejoy, later told *Wired* that interviews would take the form of a Socratic test. Bezos would probe logical acuity with questions like *Why are manhole covers round?* According to Lovejoy, "One of his mottos was that every time we hired someone, he or she should raise the bar for the next hire, so that the overall talent pool was always improving." When Bezos thought about talent, in other words, he was self-consciously in a Darwinian mode.

By the logic of natural selection, it was hardly obvious that a bookstore would become the dominant firm in the digital economy. From Amazon's infancy, Bezos mastered the art of coyly deflecting questions about where he intended to take his company. But back in his hedge-fund days, he had kicked around the idea of an "everything store" with Shaw. And he always conveyed the impression of having grand plans—a belief that the fiction aisle and the self-help section might serve as the trailhead to commanding heights.

In the vernacular, Amazon is often lumped together with Silicon Valley. At its spiritual center, however, Amazon is a retailer, not a tech company. Amazon needed to elbow its way into a tightly packed and unforgiving industry, where it faced entrenched entities such as Barnes & Noble, Walmart, and Target. In mass-market retail, the company with the thinnest margin usually prevails, and a soft December can ruin a year. Even as Bezos prided himself on his capacity for thinking far into the future, he

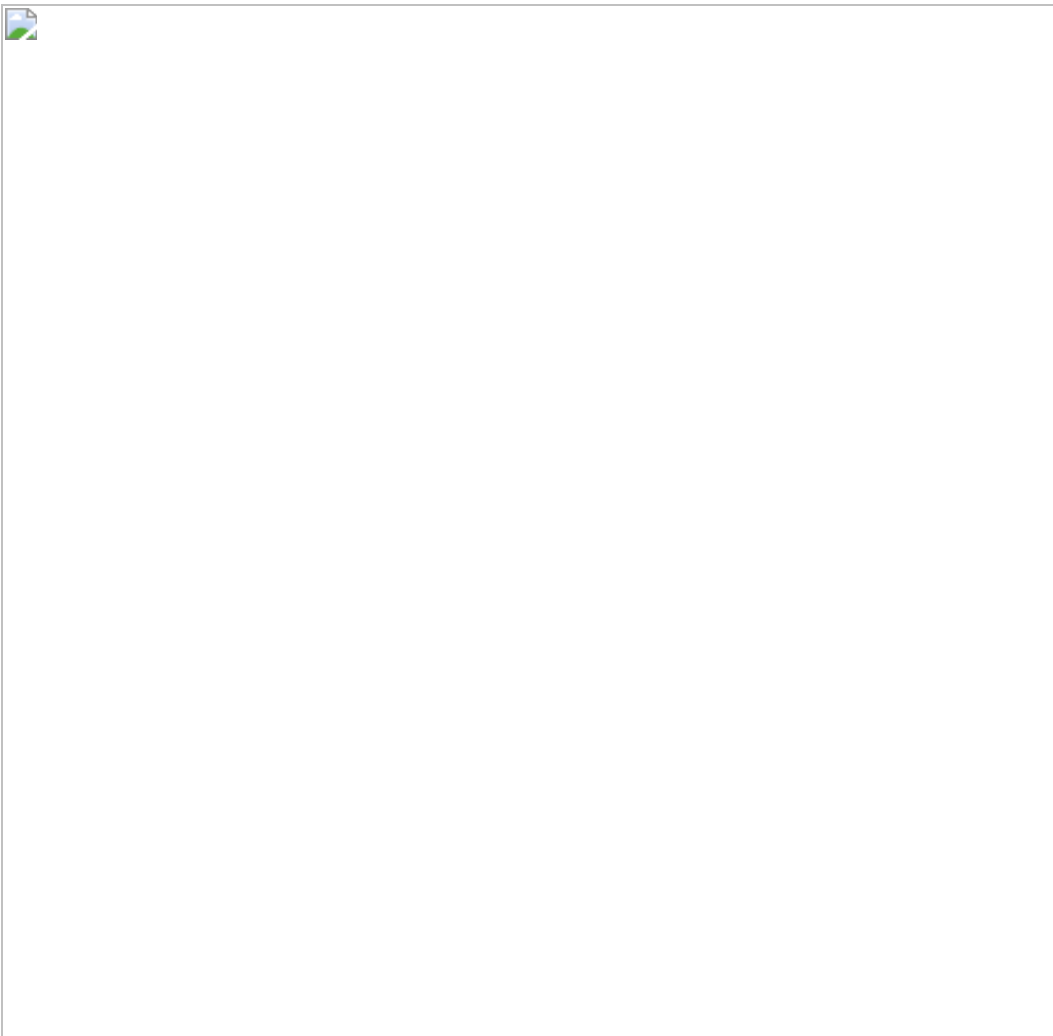
also had to worry about the prospect of tomorrow's collapse. At tightfisted Amazon, there were no big bonuses at year's end, no business-class flights for executives on long hauls, no employee kitchens overflowing with protein bars.

Bezos was hardly a mellow leader, especially in the company's early days. To mold his organization in his image, he often lashed out at those who failed to meet his high standards. The journalist Brad Stone's indispensable book about the company, *The Everything Store*, contains a list of Bezos's cutting remarks: "Are you lazy or just incompetent?" "This document was clearly written by the B team. Can someone get me the A-team document?" "Why are you ruining my life?" (Amazon says this account is not reflective of Bezos's leadership style.) This was the sarcastic, demeaning version of his endless questioning. But Bezos's waspish intelligence and attention to detail—his invariable focus on a footnote or an appendix—elicited admiration alongside the dread. "If you're going in for a Bezos meeting, you're preparing as if the world is going to end," a former executive told me. "You're like, *I've been preparing for the last three weeks. I've asked every damn person that I know to think of questions that could be asked.* Then Bezos will ask you the one question you hadn't considered."

The growth of the company—which already brought in nearly \$3 billion in revenue in its seventh year of existence—prodded Bezos to adapt his methods. He created a new position, technical adviser, to instill his views in top managers; the technical advisers would shadow the master for at least a year, and emerge as what executives jokingly refer to as "Jeff-bots." His managerial style, which had been highly personal, was codified in systems and procedures. These allowed him to scale his

presence so that even if he wasn't sitting in a meeting, his gestalt would be there.

In 2002, Amazon distilled Bezos's sensibility into a set of [Leadership Principles](#), a collection of maxims including "Invent and Simplify," "Bias for Action," and "Have Backbone; Disagree and Commit." To an outside ear, these sound too hokey to be the basis for fervent belief. But Amazonians, as employees call themselves, swear by them. The principles, now 14 in number, are the subject of questions asked in job interviews; they are taught in orientations; they are the qualities on which employees are judged in performance reviews.



Jeff Bezos in Seattle in 1998. It was hardly obvious that a bookstore would become the dominant firm in the digital economy, but Bezos always believed that the fiction aisle might serve as the trailhead to commanding heights. (Rex Rystedt / Life Images Collection / Getty)

Of all the principles, perhaps the most sacrosanct is “Customer Obsession”—the commandment to make decisions only with an eye toward pleasing the consumer, rather than fixating on competitors—a pillar of faith illustrated by the Great Lube Scandal. About 10 years ago, Bezos became aware that Amazon was sending emails to customers suggesting the purchase of lubricants. This fact made him apoplectic. If such an email arrived at work, a boss might glimpse it. If it arrived at home, a child might pose uncomfortable questions. Bezos ordered the problem solved and threatened to shut down Amazon’s email promotions in their entirety if it wasn’t. Kristi Coulter, who served as the head of worldwide editorial and site merchandising, led a group that spent weeks compiling a list of verboten products, which Bezos’s top deputies then reviewed. She told me, “It wasn’t just, like, hemorrhoid cream, or lube, it was hair color, any kind of retinol. They were so conservative about what they thought would be embarrassing. Even tooth-whitening stuff, they were like, ‘No. That could be embarrassing.’”

To climb Amazon’s organizational chart is to aspire to join the inner sanctum at the very peak, called the S-Team (“the senior team”). These are the 17 executives who assemble regularly with Bezos to debate the company’s weightiest decisions. Bezos treats the S-Team with familial affection; its members come closest to being able to read his mind. The group has absorbed the Bezos method and applies it to the corners of the company

that he can't possibly touch. According to James Thomson, a manager who helped build Amazon Marketplace, where anyone can sell new or used goods through the website, "At most companies, executives like to show how much they know. At Amazon, the focus is on asking the right question. Leadership is trained to poke holes in data."

Once an executive makes it to the S-Team, he remains on the S-Team. The stability of the unit undoubtedly provides Bezos a measure of comfort, but it also calcifies this uppermost echelon in an antiquated vision of diversity. The S-Team has no African Americans; the only woman runs human resources. Nor does the composition of leadership change much a step down the ladder. When CNBC examined the 48 executives who run Amazon's core businesses (including retail, cloud, and hardware), it found only four women.

One former team leader, who is a person of color, told me that when top executives hear the word *diversity*, they interpret it to mean "the lowering of standards." "It's this classic libertarian thinking," Coulter told me. "They think Amazon is a meritocracy based on data, but who's deciding what gets counted and who gets to avail themselves of the opportunity? If VP meetings are scheduled at 7 a.m., how many mothers can manage that?"

(Amazon disputes the methodology CNBC used to tally women in its senior leadership ranks. "There are dozens of female executives that play a critical role in Amazon's success," a spokesman told me in an email. He cited the company's generous parental-leave policy, a commitment to flexible scheduling, and the fact that more than 40 percent of its global workforce is female as evidence of its pursuit of gender equity.



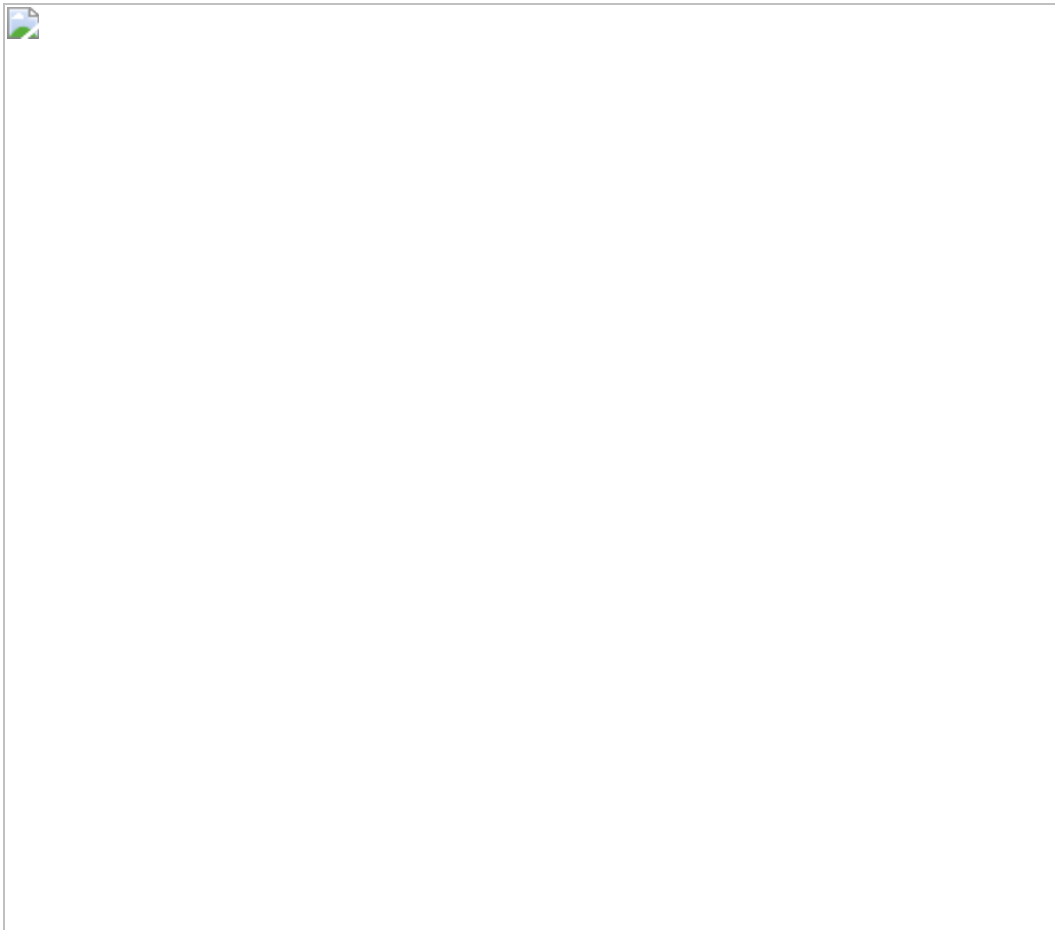
He also said that its Leadership Principles insist that employees “see diverse perspectives.”)

The meritocrat’s blind spot is that he considers his place in the world well earned by dint of intelligence and hard work. This belief short-circuits his capacity to truly listen to critics. When confronted about the composition of the S-Team in a company-wide meeting two years ago, Bezos seemed to dismiss the urgency of the complaint. According to CNBC, he said that he expected “any transition there to happen very incrementally over a long period of time.” The [latest addition to the group](#), made this year, was another white male.

**Bezos** built his organization to be an anti-bureaucracy. To counter the tendency of groups to bloat, he instituted something called “two-pizza teams.” (Like Bezos’s other managerial innovations, this sounds like a gimmick, except that advanced engineers and economists with doctorates accept it as the organizing principle of their professional lives.) According to the theory, teams at Amazon should ideally be small enough to be fed with two pizzas.

In its warehouses, Amazon has used video games to motivate workers—the games, with names like MissionRacer, track output and pit workers against one another, prodding them to move faster. The two-pizza teams represent a more subtle, white-collar version of this gamification. The small teams instill a sense of ownership over projects. But employees placed on such small teams can also experience a greater fear of failure, because there’s no larger group in which to hide or to more widely distribute blame.

Amazon has a raft of procedures to guide its disparate teams. Bezos insists that plans be pitched in six-page memos, written in full sentences, a form he describes as “narrative.” This practice emerged from a sense that PowerPoint had become a tool for disguising fuzzy thinking. Writing, Bezos surmised, demands a more linear type of reasoning. As John Rossman, an alumnus of the company who wrote a book called *Think Like Amazon*, described it, “If you can’t write it out, then you’re not ready to defend it.” The six-pagers are consumed at the beginning of meetings in what Bezos has called a “study hall” atmosphere. This ensures that the audience isn’t faking its way through the meeting either. Only after the silent digestion of the memo—which can be an anxiety-inducing stretch for its authors—can the group ask questions about the document.





Taylor Hill / Getty

Most teams at Amazon are hermetic entities; required expertise is embedded in each group. Take Amazon's robust collection of economists with doctorates. In the past several years, the company has hired more than 150 of them, which makes Amazon a far larger employer of economists than any university in the country. Tech companies such as Microsoft and Uber have also hired economists, although not as many. And while other companies have tended to keep them in centralized units, often working on forecasting or policy issues, Amazon takes a different approach. It distributes economists across a range of teams, where they can, among other things, run controlled experiments that permit scientific, and therefore effective, manipulation of consumer behavior.

*Relentless* might be the most Amazonian word, but Bezos also talks about the virtues of wandering. "Wandering is an essential counterbalance to efficiency," he wrote in a letter to shareholders this year. When I spoke with workers based at Amazon's Seattle headquarters, they said what they appreciated most about their employer was the sense of intellectual autonomy it allowed. Once they had clearly articulated a mission in an approved six-pager, they typically had wide latitude to make it happen, without having to fight through multiple layers of approval. The wandering mentality has also helped Amazon continually expand into adjacent businesses—or businesses that seem, at first, unrelated. Assisted by the ever growing consumer and supplier data it collects, and the insights into human needs

and human behavior it is constantly uncovering, the company keeps finding new opportunities for growth.

What is Amazon, aside from a listing on Nasdaq? This is a flummoxing question. The company is named for the world's most voluminous river, but it also has tributaries shooting out in all directions. *Retailer* hardly captures the company now that it's also a movie studio, an artificial-intelligence developer, a device manufacturer, and a web-services provider. But to describe it as a conglomerate isn't quite right either, given that so many of its businesses are tightly integrated or eventually will be. When I posed the question to Amazonians, I got the sense that they considered the company to be a paradigm—a distinctive approach to making decisions, a set of values, the Jeff Bezos view of the world extended through some 600,000 employees. This description, of course, means that the company's expansion has no natural boundary; no sector of the economy inherently lies beyond its core competencies.

## 3.0

In late 2012, Donald Graham prepared to sell his inheritance, *The Washington Post*. He wanted to hand the paper over to someone with pockets deep enough to hold steady through the next recession; he wanted someone techie enough to complete the paper's digital transition; above all, he wanted someone who grasped the deeper meaning of stewardship. Graham came up with a shortlist of ideal owners he would pursue, including the financier David M. Rubenstein, former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, and Bezos.

The last of the names especially enticed Graham. That January, he had breakfast with his friend and adviser Warren Buffett, who also happened to be a shareholder in the *Post*. Buffett mentioned that he considered Bezos the "best CEO in the United States"—hardly an unconventional opinion, but Graham had never heard it from Buffett before. After the breakfast, Graham set out to better understand Bezos's ideological predilections. "I did a primitive Google search and found nothing, as close to nothing for somebody with that kind of wealth. I didn't know what his politics were," he told me. This blankness suggested to Graham the stuff of an ideal newspaper owner.

Graham dispatched an emissary to make the pitch. It was a polite but hardly promising conversation: Bezos didn't rule out the possibility of bidding for the *Post*, but he didn't display any palpable enthusiasm, either. The fact that he dropped the subject for several months seemed the best gauge of his interest. While Bezos ghosted Graham, Omidyar, the most enthusiastic of the bidders, continued to seek the prize.

Bezos's past pronouncements may not have revealed partisanship, but they did suggest little appetite for stodgy institutionalism. Like so many CEOs of the era, Bezos figured himself an instrument of creative destruction, with little sympathy for the destroyed. "Even well-meaning gatekeepers slow innovation," he wrote in his 2011 letter to shareholders. He was critiquing New York book publishers, whose power Amazon had aimed to diminish. But he harbored a similarly dim view of self-satisfied old-media institutions that attempted to preserve their cultural authority.

It therefore came as a surprise when, after months of silence, Bezos sent a three-sentence email expressing interest in the *Post*. Graham made plans to lunch with Bezos in Sun Valley, Idaho, where they would both be attending Allen & Company's summer conference. Over sandwiches that Graham brought back to his rental, the old proprietor made his preferred buyer a counterintuitive pitch: He explained all the reasons owning a newspaper was hard. He wanted Bezos to know that a newspaper was a self-defeating vehicle for promoting business interests or any preferred agenda. The conversation was a tutorial in the responsibilities of the elite, from a distinguished practitioner.

Graham didn't need to plead with Bezos. In Sun Valley, they hardly haggled over terms. "We had brunch twice, and at the end we shook hands, unlike almost any deal I've ever made in business," Graham told me. The man who decried gatekeepers was suddenly the keeper of one of the nation's most important gates.

Buying the *Post* was not a financially momentous event in the life of Jeff Bezos. In addition to the billions in Amazon stock he owned, he had quietly invested in Google and Uber in their infancy. The Bezos imprimatur, the young companies had understood, would burnish their chances with any other would-be investor. (Uber's initial public offering alone earned him an estimated \$400 million earlier this year, far more than he paid for the *Post* in 2013.)

But the purchase *was* a turning point in Bezos's reputational history—and realigned his sense of place in the world. On the eve of the acquisition, Amazon's relationship with New York publishing was contentious. The friendly guy who professed his love of Kazuo Ishiguro novels and had created a cool new way to buy books was now seen in some quarters as an enemy of literary culture and a successor to the monopolist Rockefeller. Not long before the acquisition, he had written a memo, obtained by Brad Stone, titled "Amazon.love," asking the S-Team to ponder how the company could avoid becoming as feared as Walmart, Goldman Sachs, and Microsoft. Although he never justified the purchase of the *Post* as a response to his anxieties about Amazon's image—and, of course, his own—the question must have been on his mind as he considered the opportunity. To save a civically minded institution like the *Post* was a chance to stake a different legacy for himself.

Bezos keeps the *Post* structurally separate from Amazon—his family office monitors the business of the paper—but he runs it in the same expansionist spirit as he does his company. He vowed to put every dollar of profit back into the enterprise. In the six years of his ownership, the *Post* newsroom has grown from 500 to just over 850.

Despite his investments in the institution, Bezos's transition to Washington, D.C., was halting and awkward. It took him several months to visit the *Post* newsroom and try to allay rank-and-file nervousness about the intentions of the new owner. When the *Post's* great editor Ben Bradlee died several months into his regime, he decided to attend the funeral only after Bob Woodward explained its spiritual significance. His attachment to the paper didn't seem to acquire emotional depth until he sent his jet to retrieve the reporter Jason Rezaian from Iran, where he'd been imprisoned for 18 months, and personally accompanied him home. The press hailed Bezos for displaying such a strong interest in the fate of his reporter, a taste of how media extol those they regard as their own saviors.

It may have taken him a moment to realize that Washington would be a new center of his life, but once he did, he rushed to implant himself there. In 2016, he paid \$23 million to buy the site of a former museum just down the block from Woodrow Wilson's old home. The museum had joined together two mansions, one of which had been designed by John Russell Pope, the architect of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial. Bezos kept one of the buildings as his residential quarters and set about renovating the other for the sake of socializing, a space that seemed to self-consciously recall Katharine Graham's old salon, except with geothermal heat. *Washingtonian* magazine, which obtained Bezos's blueprints, predicted that, once complete, it will become "a veritable Death Star of Washington entertaining."

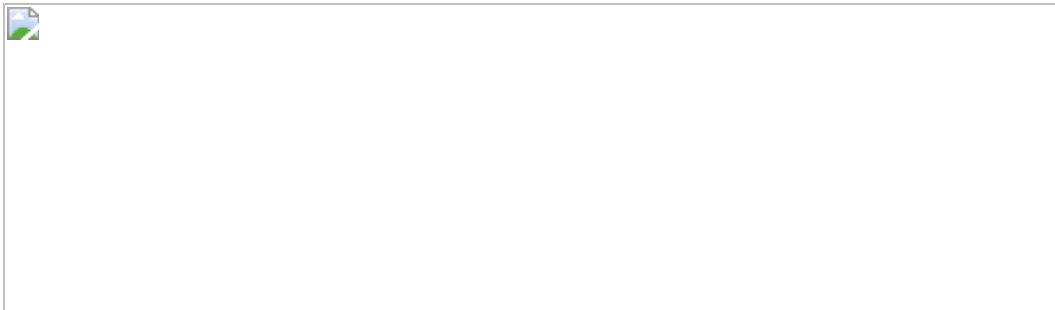
**While** Bezos made himself at home in Washington, so did his company, but on its own terms. The Obama years were a boom time for Big Tech. Executives regularly shuffled through the White House. Visitor logs record that no American company




visited more often than Google. Silicon Valley hurled itself into policy debates with its characteristic pretense of idealism, even as it began to hire Brioni-clad influence peddlers. It was, by its own account, battling for nothing less than the future of the free internet, a fight to preserve net neutrality and prevent greedy telecoms from choking the liberatory promise of the new medium.

As the tech companies invested heavily in policy, Amazon would occasionally cheer them on and join their coalitions. But mostly it struck a pose of indifference. Amazon didn't spend as much on lobbyists as most of its Big Tech brethren did, at least not until the late Obama years. Amazon seemed less concerned about setting policy than securing lucrative contracts. It approached government as another customer to be obsessed over.

Given the way Democrats now bludgeon Big Tech, it's hard to remember how warmly Barack Obama embraced the industry, and how kindly Big Tech reciprocated with campaign donations. But there was a less visible reason for the alliance: As the debacle of healthcare.gov graphically illustrated, Obama badly needed a geek squad. He installed the nation's first-ever chief technology officer, and the administration began to importune the federal bureaucracy to upload itself to the cloud, a move it promised would save money and more effectively secure sensitive material.





Bezos visits the *Washington Post* newsroom in 2016. The purchase of the paper was a turning point in his reputational history, a chance to stake a legacy for himself as a defender of a civically minded institution. (Bill O’Leary / *The Washington Post* / Getty)

Cloud First was the official name of the policy. Amazon had nothing to do with its inception, but it stood to make billions from it. It had wandered into the cloud-computing business long before its rivals. Amazon Web Services is, at its most elemental, a constellation of server farms around the world, which it rents at low cost as highly secure receptacles for data. Apple, the messaging platform Slack, and scores of start-ups all reside on AWS.

If retail was a maddeningly low-margin business, AWS was closer to pure profit. And Amazon had the field to itself. “We faced no like-minded competition for seven years. It’s unbelievable,” Bezos boasted last year. AWS is such a dominant player that even Amazon’s competitors, including Netflix, house data with it—although Walmart resolutely refuses, citing anxieties about

placing its precious secrets on its competitor's servers. Walmart is more suspicious than the intelligence community: In 2013, the CIA agreed to spend \$600 million to place its data in Amazon's cloud.

Amazon has grown enormous, in part, by shirking tax responsibility. The government rewards this failure with massive contracts, which will make the company even bigger.

Other Big Tech companies have fretted about the morality of becoming entangled with the national-security state. But Bezos has never expressed such reservations. His grandfather developed missile-defense systems for the Pentagon and supervised nuclear labs. Bezos grew up steeped in the romance of the Space Age, a time when Big Business and Big Government linked arms to achieve great national goals. Besides, to be trusted with the secrets of America's most secretive agency gave Amazon a talking point that it could take into any sales pitch—the credentials that would recommend it to any other government buyer.

One of Amazon's great strengths is its capacity to learn, and it eventually acclimated itself to the older byways of Washington clientelism, adding three former congressmen to its roster of lobbyists. (Amazon's spending on lobbying has increased by almost 470 percent since 2012.) It also began to hire officials as they stepped out of their agencies. When the Obama administration's top procurement officer, Anne Rung, left her post, she headed straight to Amazon.

The goal wasn't just to win cloud-computing contracts. Amazon sold facial-recognition software to law-enforcement agencies and has reportedly pitched it to Immigration and Customs

Enforcement. Amazon also wanted to become the portal through which government bureaus buy staples, chairs, coffee beans, and electronic devices. This wasn't a trivial slice of business; the U.S. government spends more than \$50 billion on consumer goods each year. In 2017, the House of Representatives quietly passed the so-called Amazon amendment, buried within a larger appropriations bill. The provisions claimed to modernize government procurement, but also seemed to set the terms for Amazon's dominance of this business. Only after competitors grasped the significance of the amendment did a backlash slow the rush toward Amazon. (The government is preparing to run a pilot program testing a few different vendors.)

Still, government's trajectory was easy to see, especially if one looked outside the capital city. In 2017, Amazon signed an agreement with a little-known organization called U.S. Communities, with the potential to yield an estimated \$5.5 billion. U.S. Communities negotiates on behalf of more than 55,000 county and municipal entities (school districts, library systems, police departments) to buy chalk, electronics, books, and the like. A 2018 report by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance documented how a growing share of the physical items that populate public spaces has come to be supplied by Amazon.

At the heart of Amazon's growing relationship with government is a choking irony. Last year, Amazon didn't pay a cent of federal tax. The company has mastered the art of avoidance, by exploiting foreign tax havens and moonwalking through the seemingly infinite loopholes that accountants dream up. Amazon may not contribute to the national coffers, but public funds pour into its own bank accounts. Amazon has grown enormous, in part, by shirking tax responsibility. The

government rewards this failure with massive contracts, which will make the company even bigger.

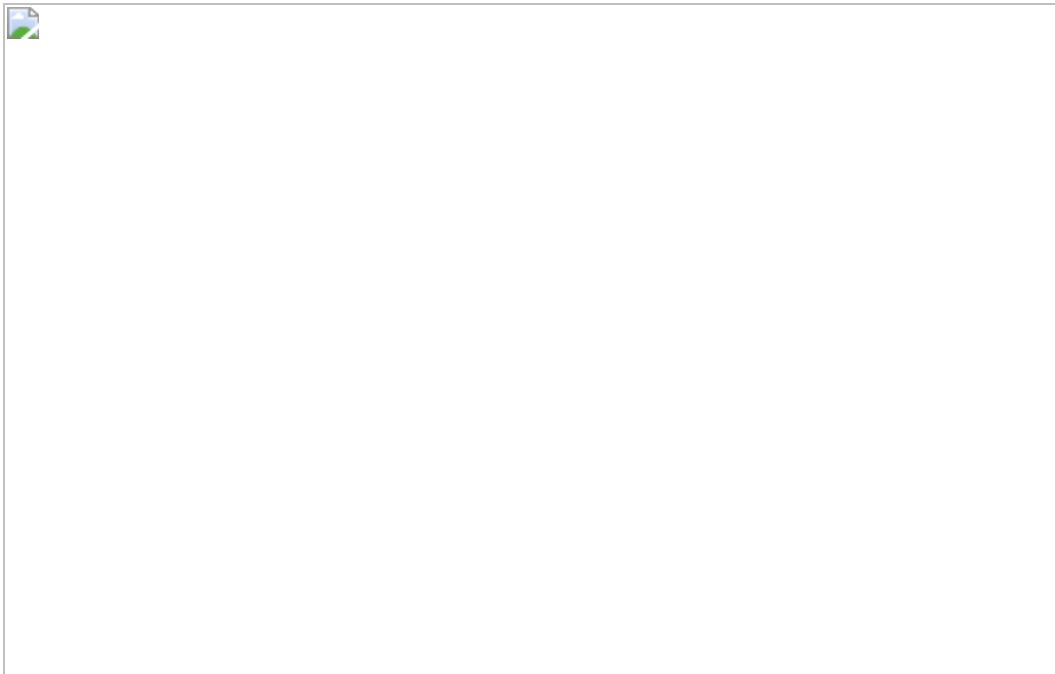
**What** type of ego does Jeff Bezos possess? The president of the United States has tested his capacity for sublimation by pummeling him mercilessly. In Trump's populist morality play, "Jeff Bozo" is cast as an overlord. He crushes small businesses; he rips off the postal service; he stealthily advances corporate goals through his newspaper, which Trump misleadingly refers to as the "*Amazon Washington Post*." During the 2016 campaign, Trump vowed to use the machinery of state to flay Amazon: "If I become president, oh do they have problems." Don Graham's warnings about the downsides of newspaper ownership suddenly looked prophetic.

It's not that Bezos has always whistled past these attacks: In a countertweet, he once joked about launching Donald Trump into space. However, the nature of Bezos's business, with both government and red-state consumers, means that he would rather avoid presidential hostility.

Despite the vitriol, or perhaps because of it, Amazon hired the lobbyist Jeff Miller, a prodigious Trump fundraiser; Bezos conveys his opinions to the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. In 2017, Bezos won a nomination to join a panel advising the Defense Department on technology, although the swearing-in was canceled after Pentagon officials realized that he had not undergone a background check. (He never joined the panel.) One former White House aide told me, "If Trump knew how much communication Bezos has had with officials in the West Wing, he would lose his mind."

In the fall of 2017, the Pentagon announced a project called the Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure, or JEDI. The project would migrate the Defense Department's data to a centralized cloud, so that the agency could make better use of artificial intelligence and more easily communicate across distant battlefields. The Pentagon signaled the importance of the venture with the amount it intended to spend on it: \$10 billion over 10 years. But it has the potential to be even more lucrative, since the rest of the federal government tends to follow the Pentagon's technological lead.

Firms vied ferociously to win the contract. Because Amazon was widely seen as the front-runner, it found itself on the receiving end of most of the slings. Its rivals attempted to stoke Trump's disdain for Bezos. An executive at the technology company Oracle created a flowchart purporting to illustrate Amazon's efforts, titled "[A Conspiracy to Create a Ten Year DoD Cloud Monopoly.](#)" Oracle has denied slipping the graphic to the president, but a copy landed in Trump's hands.



Bezos and his then-wife, MacKenzie, attend the 2017 *Vanity Fair* Oscars party. Bezos has immersed himself in Hollywood culture. (Mike Coppola / VF17 / Getty)

Oracle also tried to block Amazon in court. Its filings spun a sinister narrative of Amazon infiltrating the Pentagon. A former consultant for Amazon Web Services had landed a top job in the secretary of defense's office, but at the heart of Oracle's tale was a project manager who had arrived at the Pentagon by way of Amazon named Deep Ubhi. Even as he worked in government, Ubhi tweeted: "Once an Amazonian, always an Amazonian." Oracle alleged that he stayed true to that self-description as he helped shape JEDI to favor his alma mater. (Amazon countered that dozens of people developed the contract, and that Ubhi worked on JEDI for only seven weeks, in its early stages.) When the Pentagon formally announced JEDI's specifications, only Amazon and Microsoft met them.

Ubhi's role in the project was concerning, but not enough for either a federal judge or the Pentagon to halt JEDI. There was "smoke," the judge said, but no "fire." This victory should have paved the way for Amazon. But with the Pentagon nearly set to award JEDI this summer, the president's new secretary of defense, Mark Esper, announced that he was delaying the decision and reexamining the contract. A Pentagon official told me that Trump had seen Tucker Carlson inveigh against JEDI on Fox News and asked for an explanation. Senator Marco Rubio, who received more than \$5 million in campaign contributions from Oracle during the 2016 campaign cycle, called for the Pentagon to delay awarding the bid, and reportedly pressed the case in a phone call with Trump. (Rubio received a much smaller

donation from Amazon in the same period.) Trump seems to have been unable to resist a chance to stick it to his enemy, perhaps mortally imperiling Amazon's chance to add \$10 billion to its bottom line.

Given Trump's motives, it's hard not to sympathize with Bezos. But Trump's spite—and the terrible precedent set by his punishment of a newspaper owner—doesn't invalidate the questions asked of Amazon. Its critics have argued that government shouldn't latch itself onto a single company, especially not with a project this important. They noted that storing all of the Pentagon's secrets with one provider could make them more vulnerable to bad actors. It could also create an unhealthy dependence on a firm that might grow complacent with its assured stream of revenue and lose its innovative edge over time.

JEDI sits within the context of larger questions about the government's relationship to Amazon. Fears that the public was underwriting the company's continued growth haunted Amazon's attempt to build a second headquarters in Queens—New York government looked like it was providing tax breaks and subsidies to the business that least needs a boost.

While Amazon's aborted move to Long Island City attracted all the attention, the building of a similar bastion just outside Washington, D.C., is more ominous. Of course, there are plenty of honorable reasons for a company to set up shop in the prosperous shadow of the Capitol. But it's hard to imagine that Amazon wasn't also thinking about its budding business with the government—an opportunity that the delay of JEDI will hardly dissuade it from pursuing. According to a Government



Accountability Office survey of 16 agencies, only 11 percent of the federal government has made the transition to the cloud.

The company is following in its owner's tracks. Just as Bezos has folded himself into the fraternity of Washington power—yukking it up at the Alfalfa and Gridiron Clubs—thousands of Amazon implants will be absorbed by Washington. Executives will send their kids to the same fancy schools as journalists, think-tank fellows, and high-ranking government officials. Amazonians will accept dinner-party invites from new neighbors. The establishment, plenty capacious, will assimilate millionaire migrants from the other Washington. Amazon's market power will be matched by political power; the interests of the state and the interests of one enormous corporation will further jumble—the sort of combination that has, in the past, never worked out well for democracy.

## 4.0

Jeff Bezos was with his people, the feted guest at the 2018 meeting of the National Space Society. The group awarded him a prize it could be sure he would appreciate: the Gerard K. O'Neill Memorial Award for Space Settlement Advocacy. After a dinner in his honor, Bezos sat onstage to chat with an editor from *GeekWire*. But before the discussion could begin, Bezos interjected a question: "Does anybody here in this audience watch a TV show called *The Expanse*?"

The question pandered to the crowd, eliciting applause, hoots, and whistles. *The Expanse*, which had been broadcast on the Syfy channel, is about the existential struggles of a space colony, set in the far future, based on novels that Bezos adores. Despite the militancy of its devoted fans, Syfy had canceled *The Expanse*. Angry protests had ensued. A plane had flown over an Amazon office in Santa Monica, California, with a banner urging the company to pick up the show.

Bezos has justified Amazon's investment in Hollywood with a quip: "When we win a Golden Globe, it helps us sell more shoes."

As the Space Society's exuberant reaction to Bezos's first question began to wane, Bezos juiced the crowd with another: "Do you guys know that the cast of *The Expanse* is here in the room?" He asked the actors to stand. From his years overseeing a movie studio, Bezos has come to understand the dramatic value of pausing for a beat. "Ten minutes ago," he told the room, "I just got word that *The Expanse* is saved." And, in fact, he was its benefactor. Invoking the name of the spaceship at the center of

the series, he allowed himself to savor the fist-pumping euphoria that surrounded him. “The Rocinante is safe.”

*The Expanse* was one small addition to Bezos’s Hollywood empire, which will soon be housed in the old Culver Studios, where Hitchcock once filmed *Rebecca* and Scorsese shot *Raging Bull*. Amazon will spend an estimated \$5 billion to \$6 billion on TV shows and movies this year.

When Bezos first announced Amazon’s arrival in Hollywood, he bluntly stated his revolutionary intent. He vowed to create “a completely new way of making movies,” as he put it to *Wired*. Amazon set up a page so that anyone, no matter their experience, could submit scripts for consideration. It promised that it would let data drive the projects it commissioned—some in the company liked to describe this as the marriage of “art and science.”

This bluster about Amazon’s heterodox approach turned out to be unreflective of the course it would chart. When it streamed its second batch of pilots, in 2014, it analyzed viewing patterns, then set aside the evidence. Bezos walked into the green-light meeting and announced that Amazon needed to press forward with the least-watched of the five pilots: *Transparent*, a show about a transgender parent of three adult children. Bezos had read the rave reviews and made up his mind.

The critical success of *Transparent* set the template for Amazon Studios. In the early 2010s, the best talent still preferred to work for cable networks. For a new platform to pry that talent away and attract viewers, it needed to generate attention, to schedule a noisy slate. Instead of playing to the masses, Amazon defined itself as an indie studio, catering to urban upper-middle-class


tastes, although the executives in Seattle were hardly hipsters themselves. One former executive from Amazon's book-publishing arm told me, "I remember when Lena Dunham's proposal was going out, they were like, 'Who is Lena Dunham?'"

As a nascent venture, Amazon Studios was forced to hew closely to one of Amazon's Leadership Principles: Frugality. Executives rummaged through other companies' rejection piles for unconventional scripts. It bought *Catastrophe*, a cast-aside comedy, for \$100,000 an episode. With the BBC, it acquired the first season of *Fleabag* for about \$3 million.

Parsimony proved to be a creative stimulant. The studio's risky projects were awards magnets. Amazon won Golden Globes in all five years it was in contention. When the camera panned for black-tie reaction shots to these victories, the glare of Bezos's unmistakable scalp would jump off the screen. According to his colleagues, these awards provided him with palpable pleasure, and he thrust himself into their pursuit. To curry favor with those who cast ballots for big prizes, he hosted parties at his Beverly Hills property, which had once been owned by DreamWorks co-founder David Geffen.

Reading interviews with Bezos from back in the days of his rapid ascent, it's hard to believe that he ever imagined becoming a king of Hollywood or that leading men like Matt Damon would drape their arms over his shoulders and pose for photographs as if they were chums. When he talked about his own nerdiness, he was self-effacing, sometimes painfully so. He once told *Playboy*, "I am not the kind of person women fall in love with. I sort of grow on them, like a fungus."





Bezos at a Blue Origin event this spring. He funds that venture—which builds infrastructure for extraterrestrial voyage—by selling about \$1 billion of Amazon stock each year. Bezos calls Blue Origin his “most important work.” (Mark Wilson / Getty)

When Bezos attended the 2013 *Vanity Fair* Oscars party, he didn't act as if he owned the room. Still, while Google co-founder Sergey Brin kept to a corner, Bezos and his now ex-wife, MacKenzie, circulated through the throngs. They might have clung to each other, but they also gamely engaged whoever approached them. MacKenzie once admitted to *Vogue* that her introversion made her nervous at such events, but she described her husband as a “very social guy.”

Hollywood, both the business and the scene, is an intoxicant. Just as in Washington, Bezos immersed himself in a new culture. Paparazzi captured him yachting with the media mogul Barry Diller. He got to know the powerful agent Patrick Whitesell,

whose wife, Lauren Sanchez, would later become Bezos's girlfriend. He began to appear at the parties of famous producers, such as Mark Burnett, the creator of *Survivor* and *The Apprentice*. As one Hollywood executive told me, "Bezos is always showing up. He would go to the opening of an envelope."

Bezos has justified Amazon's investment in Hollywood with a quip: "When we win a Golden Globe, it helps us sell more shoes." This is an intentionally glib way of saying that Amazon is different from its competitors. It's not just a streaming service (like Netflix) or a constellation of channels (like Comcast), although it's both of those things. Amazon is an enclosed ecosystem, and it hopes that its video offerings will prove a relatively inexpensive method of convincing people to live within it.

Amazon's goal is visible in one of the metrics that it uses to judge the success of its programming. It examines the viewing habits of users who sign up for free trials of Amazon Prime, and then calculates how many new subscriptions to the service a piece of programming generates. As it deliberates over a show's fate, Amazon considers a program's production costs relative to the new subscriptions it yields. In the earliest days of the studio, nice reviews might have been enough to overcome these analytics. But Amazon has demonstrated that it will cancel even a Golden Globe winner, such as *I Love Dick*, if the metrics suggest that fate.

Back in the '60s, countercultural critiques of television regarded it as a form of narcotic that induced a state of mindless consumerism. That's not an unfair description of television's role in Prime's subscription model. Despite its own hyperrational approach to the world, Amazon wants to short-circuit the

economic decision making of its consumers. Sunil Gupta, a Harvard Business School professor who has studied the company, told me, "When Amazon started Prime, it cost \$79 and the benefit was two-day free shipping. Now, most smart people will do the math and they will ask, *Is \$79 worth it?* But Bezos says, *I don't want you to do this math. So I'll throw in movies and other benefits that make the computation of value difficult.*"

When Bezos creates the terms for his business, or for society, he's no more capable of dispassion than anyone else. To live in the world of his creation is to live in a world of his biases and predilections.

When Amazon first created Prime, in 2005, Bezos insisted that the price be set high enough that the program felt like a genuine commitment. Consumers would then set out to redeem this sizable outlay by faithfully consuming through Amazon. One hundred million Prime subscribers later, this turned out to be a masterstroke of behavioral economics. Prime members in the U.S. spend \$1,400 a year on Amazon purchases, compared with \$600 by nonmembers, according to a survey by Consumer Intelligence Research Partners. It found that 93 percent of Prime customers keep their subscription after the first year; 98 percent keep it after the second. Through Prime, Bezos provided himself a deep pool of cash: When subscriptions auto-renew each year, the company instantly has billions in its pockets. Bezos has turned his site into an almost unthinking habit. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and *Jack Ryan* are essential tools for patterning your existence.

As Bezos has deepened his involvement in the studio, it has begun to make bigger bets that reflect his sensibility. It spent

\$250 million to acquire the rights to produce a *Lord of the Rings* TV series. It reportedly paid nine figures for the services of the husband-and-wife team behind HBO's *Westworld* and has plans to adapt novels by such sci-fi eminences as Neal Stephenson and William Gibson. Bezos has involved himself in wrangling some of these projects. He made personal pleas to J. R. R. Tolkien's estate as the *Lord of the Rings* deal hung in the balance. An agent told me that Bezos has emailed two of his clients directly; Amazon executives apply pressure by invoking his name in calls: *He's asking about this project every day.*

### [Why Amazon just spent a fortune to turn 'Lord of the Rings' into TV](#)

As a kid, Bezos would spend summers at his grandfather's ranch in Cotulla, Texas, where he would help castrate bulls and install pipes. He would also watch soap operas with his grandmother. But his primary entertainment during those long days was science fiction. A fanatic of the genre had donated a robust collection to the local library, and Bezos tore his way through shelves of Isaac Asimov and Jules Verne. Describing his affinity for the novels of the sci-fi writer Iain M. Banks, he once said, "There's a utopian element to it that I find very attractive." The comment contains a flash of self-awareness. For all his technocratic instincts, for all his training as an engineer and a hedge-fund quant, a romantic impulse coexists with his rationalism, and sometimes overrides it.

It is perhaps fitting that Bezos's lone brush with scandal transpired in Hollywood. What befuddled so many of his admirers is that the scandal revealed a streak of indiscipline that doesn't mesh with the man who created a company so resolutely



fixated on the long term, so committed to living its values. The expectation embedded in this confusion is unfair. While the culture has sometimes touted Bezos as a superhero, he's an earthling in the end. When he creates the terms for his business, or for society, he's no more capable of dispassion than anyone else. To live in the world of Bezos's creation is to live in a world of his biases and predilections.

## 5.0

I'm loath to look back at my Amazon purchase history, decades long and filled with items of questionable necessity. The recycling bin outside my house, stuffed full of cardboard covered with arrows bent into smiles, tells enough of a story. I sometimes imagine that the smile represents the company having a good laugh at me. My fidelity to Amazon comes despite my record of criticizing it.

When we depend on Amazon, Amazon gains leverage over us. To sell through the site is to be subjected to a system of discipline and punishment. Amazon effectively dictates the number of items that a seller can place in a box, and the size of the boxes it will handle. (To adhere to Amazon's stringent requirements, a pet-food company recently reduced its packaging by 34 percent.) Failure to comply with the rules results in a monetary fine. If a company that sells through Amazon Marketplace feels wronged, it has little recourse, because its contract relinquishes the right to sue. These are just the terms of service.

The man who styles himself as the heroic Jean-Luc Picard has built a business that better resembles Picard's archenemy, the Borg, which informs its victims, *You will be assimilated* and *Resistance is futile*.

Is there even a choice about Amazon anymore? This is a question that haunts businesses far more than consumers. Companies such as Nike resisted Amazon for years; they poured money into setting up their own e-commerce sites. But even when Nike didn't sell its products on Amazon, more Nike apparel was sold

on the site than any other brand. Anyone could peddle Nike shoes on Amazon without having to explain how they obtained their inventory. Because Amazon Marketplace had become a pipeline connecting Chinese factories directly to American homes, it also served as a conduit for counterfeit goods, a constant gripe of Nike's. *Wired* reported that, at one point during this year's Women's World Cup, six of Amazon's 10 best-selling jerseys appeared to be knockoffs. To have any hope of controlling this market, Nike concluded that it had no option but to join its rival. (Amazon has said that it prohibits the sale of counterfeit products.)

Ben Thompson, the founder of Stratechery, a website that vivisects Silicon Valley companies, has incisively described Amazon's master plan. He argues that the company wants to provide logistics "for basically everyone and everything," because if everything flows through Amazon, the company will be positioned to collect a "tax" on a stunning array of transactions. When Amazon sells subscriptions to premium cable channels such as Showtime and Starz, it reportedly takes anywhere from a 15 to 50 percent cut. While an item sits in an Amazon warehouse waiting to be purchased, the seller pays a rental fee. Amazon allows vendors to buy superior placement in its search results (it then marks those results as sponsored), and it has carved up the space on its own pages so that they can be leased as advertising. If a business hopes to gain access to Amazon's economies of scale, it has to pay the tolls. The man who styles himself as the heroic Jean-Luc Picard has thus built a business that better resembles Picard's archenemy, the Borg, a society-swallowing entity that informs victims, *You will be assimilated and Resistance is futile.*

In the end, all that is admirable and fearsome about Amazon converges. Every item can be found on its site, which makes it the greatest shopping experience ever conceived. Every item can be found on its site, which means market power is dangerously concentrated in one company. Amazon's smart speakers have the magical power to translate the spoken word into electronic action; Amazon's doorbell cameras have the capacity to send video to the police, expanding the surveillance state. With its unique management structure and crystalline articulation of values and comprehensive collection of data, Amazon effortlessly scales into new businesses, a reason to marvel and cower. Jeff Bezos has won capitalism. The question for the democracy is, are we okay with that?

On Jeff Bezos's ranch in West Texas, there is a mountain. Burrowed inside its hollowed-out core is a cascading tower of interlaced Geneva wheels, levers, and a bimetallic spring. These innards, still not fully assembled, will move the Clock of the Long Now, a timepiece that has been designed to run with perfect accuracy for 10,000 years, with a hand that advances with each turn of the century. Bezos has supplied \$42 million to fund the clock's construction, an attempt to dislodge humans from the present moment, to extend the species' sense of time. Bezos has argued that if humans "think long term, we can accomplish things that we wouldn't otherwise accomplish."

## **Related Stories**

- [The Amazon Mystery: What America's Strangest Tech Company Is Really Up To](#)

- [Franklin Foer: Paul Manafort, American Hustler](#)

Performance reviews at Amazon ask employees to name their “superpower.” An employer probably shouldn’t create the expectation that its staff members possess qualities that extend beyond mortal reach, but I’m guessing Bezos would answer by pointing to his ability to think into the future. He dwells on the details without sacrificing his clarity about the ultimate destination. It’s why he can simultaneously prod one company to master the grocery business while he pushes another to send astronauts to the moon by 2024, in the hope that humans will eventually mine the astronomical body for the resources needed to sustain colonies. Bezos has no hope of ever visiting one of these colonies, which wouldn’t arise until long after his death, but that fact does nothing to diminish the intensity of his efforts.

[Read: Jeff Bezos has plans to extract the moon’s water](#)

That Donald Trump has picked Jeff Bezos as a foil is fitting. They represent dueling reactions to the dysfunction of so much of American life. In the face of the manipulative emotionalism of this presidency, it’s hard not to pine for a technocratic alternative, to yearn for a utopia of competence and rules. As Trump runs down the country, Bezos builds things that function as promised.

Yet the erosion of democracy comes in different forms. Untrammelled private power might not seem the biggest threat when public power takes such abusive form. But the country needs to think like Bezos and consider the longer sweep of history before permitting so much responsibility to pool in one man, who, without ever receiving a vote, assumes roles once reserved for the state. His company has become the shared

national infrastructure; it shapes the future of the workplace with its robots; it will populate the skies with its drones; its website determines which industries thrive and which fall to the side. His investments in space travel may remake the heavens. The incapacity of the political system to ponder the problem of his power, let alone check it, guarantees his Long Now. He is fixated on the distance because he knows it belongs to him.