

The Astropoetic School of Soul-Discovery

News From The Astropoetic School Volume 14 Issue 1: July 2025

Greetings from [The Astropoetic School of Soul Discovery](#) unmoored from my sanctuary in the Missouri Ozarks, on a bit of a walkabout year.

Recent Promotions

This past year, I have been working to promote my latest book – *Astrology in the Era of Uncertainty: An Astropoetic Exploration of Psyche and Cosmos* – promotion not being my forte, nor my interest, really. Having said that, I have had a couple of encounters that I am rather proud of, and wanted to share those with you.

The first is with an astrologer from Bali named [Chris Skidmore](#), who has a podcast called [On the Soul's Terms](#) that I would recommend. Chris is a trained holistic psychotherapist and a Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy (BCST) practitioner, with an eclectic knowledge of the interface between astrology, mythology, Jungian and archetypal psychology.

I reached out to Chris, immediately sensing he was a kindred spirit, and suggested we do a podcast, loosely based on my book, or anything within it he felt inspired to want to explore with me. The result is this interesting conversation around the astrology as an exercise in participation mystique, and cultivating a more personal relationship with the archetypes - which you can listen to at any of these venues.

Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/1DxZqwApDU4ljyJNvdgpXS?si=3kBdXCY4Tu-52-7ZsLWG6g>

Apple: <https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/79-joe-landwehr-astrology-in-the-era-of/id1560527739?i=1000677813832>

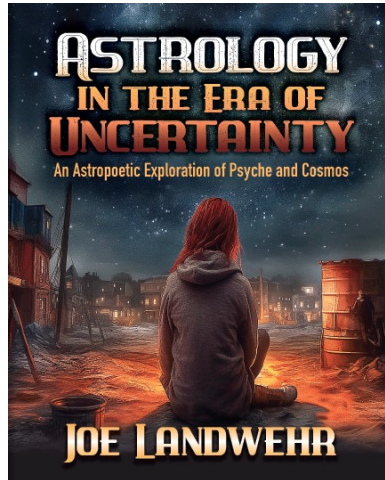
YouTube: <https://youtu.be/6c89DpG3qe0?si=XZLDX1NzPG3vmG9R>

The second promotional effort that I completed earlier this year is with [AstroHub](#), a teaching platform that presents a new astrologer each month to its large membership audience. For my teaching month (Aquarius 2025), I taught a class on the diurnal motion of the planets through the houses of the birthchart as a platform for personal growth, using Bob Dylan and Timothy Chalamet who played Bob Dylan in the recent movie [A Complete Unknown](#) as my chart examples.

Unfortunately, you can't access the video of my 2 1/2 hour class, except by becoming a member of AstroHub. But for those of you that might want broad smorgasbord exposure to a wide range of current teachers out there, it could be a good

investment. I did enjoy my month of interacting with the community, and at my end, the organization was a joy to work with.

Meanwhile, for anyone out there who has still not read my book, and wants to, you can order directly from me on my [website](#).



In the book, I explore the awkward relationship between astrology and science, which had been co-evolving for millennia before diverging in the 17th century. I also show how, in a postmodern era, in which quantum theory and other developments have made science's authority far more tenuous, astrology has a new opportunity to more fully embrace its own identity as a way of knowing radically different than science, but far more useful in exploring the inner landscape of the human psyche.

Lastly, taking this idea further than it normally extends in current practice, I also demonstrate how we might enter into a more exploratory and more numinous relationship with the gods and goddesses whose sacred presence in the psyche is mapped by the birthchart.

The astrology that Joe Landwehr deftly weaves into the pages of his books is not that found in horoscope columns in your daily newspaper or in the many astrological cookbooks readily available at your local metaphysical bookstore. It is a poetic way of observing the world and our place within it that provides an experiential basis for a satisfying relationship to soul and a soulful life - a way of relating to the world that Landwehr calls astropoetics.

Jim Cox, *Midwest Book Review*, January 2024

If you're a student of astrology still trying to figure out how to best apply what you're learning, or just someone like me who knows enough to be dangerous, "Astrology in the Era of Uncertainty" by Joe Landwehr really needs to be added to your reference shelf.

Liz Burton, *Reader Views*, October 2024

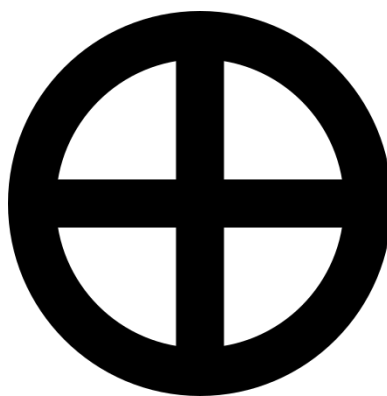
Imaginal Meandering Courting Sacred Intelligence with Slow Astrology



An Excerpt from Chapter One of My Next Book
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The Birthchart as a Symbolic Expression of Wholeness

If we step back, for just a minute, from the detailed information encoded inside a birthchart, we might recognize that the bare-bones structure of the chart itself contains two powerful symbols of totality: the circle and the cross, which in turn represents what Jung called a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a union of opposites: Ascendant and Desendant united within the horizon; Nadir and Midheaven united along the meridian.



This is a timeless symbol, found on burial urns dating back to 1,440 BCE, and known by a number of names: solar cross, wheel cross, Sun cross, and pagan cross among them. It appears as both a sign with simple pedestrian meanings, as well as a symbolic point of entry into deeper mysteries not easily described in simple terms. It may have originally been, in part, a straight-forward depiction of the four-spoked

chariot wheel, which allowed human civilization to move forward, both literally and figuratively, in an eminently practical way.

The wheel, however, also has deeper symbolic associations with the motion of the Sun through the seasonal quadrants of the year, and the Earth around its internal axis in the course of every 24-hour day. For this reason, the solar cross is often readily conflated with solar deities, such as Ra and Horus in ancient Egypt. Christians associate it with the halos around angels and saints, as well as Christ's ordeal on the cross and ultimate triumph over death. Buddhists see it as a symbol for the Buddha's experience of enlightenment. Hindus consider the symbol to represent the four Vedas, believed to be the source of all knowledge, and a pathway to the union of humans and the divine. In Norse culture, where the symbol is known as Odin's cross, it is seen as a reference to Odin's most well-known initiation, hanging upside down from the World Tree Yggdrasil, where he obtained knowledge of the runic alphabet.

For all these cultures, there is a sense within the symbol of a reaching for a higher potential, a sacred state of wholeness, a god-like transcendence of the human condition through special knowledge, an imagined archetypal perfection, sometimes worshipped as the Sun, considered by many early cultures, in perhaps a somewhat simplistic way, to be the source of life on Earth.

Conversely, in astronomical (and astrological) circles, the sun cross has become a symbol for the Earth itself. Along these lines, many Native American tribes saw the same symbol as a depiction of the Medicine Wheel, which denoted the four cardinal directions as well as the four seasons, along with a complex web of additional associations to animal totems, colors, and universal human experiences. In New Age circles, it has become a symbol for spiritual renewal through cultivating a balanced relationship with the four elements familiar to all astrologers: earth, air, fire and water. Likewise, many neopagan sources understand it to be a symbol of alignment with the natural rhythms of the Earth, which in turn becomes the pathway to a more grounded spirituality. There are still more ancient associations of the symbol with the fertility of the Earth, dating as far back as 4,500 BCE, where it appears in stone carvings discovered in Sweden.³

Again, in these more earth-based associations to the symbol, we see the possibility of healing and becoming whole, not as with the solar cultures, through transcendence of the embodied human condition, but through working within it. In both cases, the sun cross - which provides the basic structure of the birthchart - seems to delineate a pathway to be walked and experienced, rather than a description of anything set in stone. It is a possibility, not a given.⁴

As I noted in some detail in my earlier book, *Tracking the Soul with an Astrology of Consciousness*, it is ultimately the consciousness that we bring to the symbolism in the chart that determines what we make of it. I believe the chart itself, however, is an ongoing invitation to evolve in consciousness toward a state of being that is both enlightened and fully embodied - an invitation that is symbolized by the Sun cross at its core.

To approach the birthchart in this way is to understand it as merely the point of entry into a deep, multidimensional and multivalent mystery revolving around the basic question: What does it mean to be a fully embodied human, quickened to life by an in-dwelling Spirit that inherently moves in harmony with the rhythms of the

Earth? And more specifically: What does it mean to be me, as I seek to understand myself as a unique expression of this same Spirit, in this moment of time?

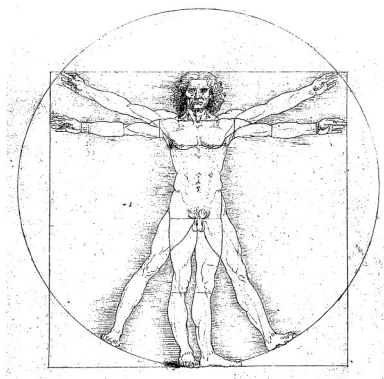
Answering these questions is not possible through an analytical process of merely decoding astrological symbols as signs, because signs necessarily refer to only one dimension of reality (this is a description of x, not y or z), and one possible way of understanding that dimension (x means this and not that). Symbols, on the other hand, point toward the way in which levels of reality interpenetrate, and beyond that to the way in which reality is organized as a coherent whole. Following mere signs, you quickly come to the end of the road, whereas following symbols, you enter a vast field begging for extended exploration.

Within this field are paradoxes in which opposites eventually unite, but only gradually through a meandering learning process of much trial and error. Attaining wholeness is not a twelve-step program, but rather a journey with many forks in the road, each of which eventually leads back to a central reference point in which wholeness is once again recognized, or remembered, over and over again, until there is no one left to forget. This is invariably a process that unfolds through many moments, years, perhaps lifetimes of forgetting.

In the meantime, there is always the possibility of reorientation to wholeness, through one of the fourfold measurements encoded in the maze: east, west, north and south; spring, summer, autumn and winter; earth, air, fire and water. The daily and seasonal rhythms of the Earth, the archetypal patterns that govern the function of the human body and the unfolding of its embodied life, and the evolution of Spirit in human form all represent various ways of saying the same thing: all is perpetually evolving toward Wholeness, within a field that is ingeniously designed to facilitate that evolution.

Da Vinci's Vitruvius Man

The same idea is depicted in the famous fifteenth century Renaissance drawing known as the Vitruvius Man, by Leonardo da Vinci, who in turn was inspired by the 1st century Roman architect Vitruvius.



Vitruvius believed that the human body was a kind of temple housing Spirit:

In the members of a temple there ought to be the greatest harmony in the symmetrical relations of the different parts to the general magnitude of the whole. Then again, in the human body the central

*point is naturally the navel. For if a man be placed flat on his back, with his hands and feet extended,, and a pair of compasses centred at his navel, the fingers and toes of his two hands and feet will touch the circumference of a circle described therefrom. And just as the human body yields a circular outline, so too a square figure may be found from it. For if we measure the distance from the soles of the feet to the top of the head, and then apply that measure to the outstretched arms, the breadth will be found to be the same as the height, as in the case of plane surfaces which are perfectly square.*⁵

Inspired by this idea, "Leonardo envisaged the great picture chart of the human body he had produced through his anatomical drawings and *Vitruvian Man* as a *cosmografia del minor mondo* (cosmography of the microcosm). He believed the workings of the human body to be an analogy, in microcosm, for the workings of the universe," in part because to his way of thinking, not uncommon at the time, both earth and the human body were composed of the same familiar four elements: earth, air, fire and water.⁶

The Birthchart as a Mandala

The implication here is that the human body is an expression of Wholeness, as is the Earth in its relationship to the Sun, as is the temple of an embodied individual life on a physical planet, in which we all strive, consciously or unconsciously, to realize that Wholeness. All of this is encompassed by the birthchart, understood as an elaborate symbol system inherently suited to explore the Mystery encompassed by the sun cross. The merging of the circle and the cross is essentially an imaginal field in which the "squaring of the circle" serves as a pivot point around which microcosm and macrocosm can potentially become One.

*The "squaring of the circle" is one of the many archetypal motifs which form the basic patterns of our dreams and fantasies. But it is distinguished by the fact that it is one of the most important of them from the functional point of view. Indeed, it could even be called the archetype of wholeness. Because of this significance, the "quaternity of the One" is the schema for all images of God.*⁷

Jung is speaking here about the mandala, which aside from its more universal or archetypal function, also serves a therapeutic capacity as a vehicle through which flawed human beings can heal the various wounds and seemingly irreconcilable splits in their being that generate suffering and that keep the experience of wholeness at arms length. Aside from its depiction of God, the archetype of Wholeness, and an ultimate state of Being in which all polarities merge into a unified expression of what Neoplatonists refer to as the One, the same symbol also depicts the human struggle to navigate a complex life, which on the surface of things, seems the antithesis of this blessed state.

*. . . the severe pattern imposed by a circular image of this kind compensates the disorder and confusion of the psychic state - namely, through the construction of a central point to which everything is related, or by a concentric arrangement of the disordered multiplicity and of contradictory and irreconcilable elements. This is evidently an attempt at self-healing on the part of Nature, which does not spring from conscious reflection, but from an instinctive impulse.*⁸

The birthchart, understood here as a depiction of the sun cross, is, in other words, a map to an archetypal field in which various instinctual possibilities for self-healing - facilitating a gradual movement toward Wholeness - are spelled out in very specific ways that are unique to the individual who feels herself to be anything but Whole. It is a conundrum which contains within it both a statement about pure unlimited potentiality and, at the same time, the nature of the actual challenges and obstacles to the realization of that potentiality. Furthermore, the same symbol offers itself as a pathway (or more accurately as a multidimensional and multivalent constellation of possible pathways) from one end of the paradox to the other. This is not a neatly packaged body of information that the mind can fully grasp, but rather an invitation to understanding that can only be realized as a willing pilgrim walks the path with steadfast determination to learn from her experience over the course of a lifetime during which the wheel keeps turning.

Pluto's Not-for-the-Faint-of-Heart School of Do-or-Die

In the January 2023 issue of **News from the Astropoetic School**, I started a new series of articles called [The Shifting of Our Collective Archetypal Field](#), about Pluto's evolutionary crash course, as it has moved relatively rapidly through the signs since its discovery in Cancer in 1930. I was moved to start this series by the advent of Pluto's passage into Aquarius, which has been taking place in typical back-and-forth motion since March 2023. Pluto's solid sojourn in Aquarius began in November 2024, somewhat ominously with the re-election of Donald Trump, who for better or worse, will likely set the vibrational tone for our evolution - or devolution - between now and March 2043, when Pluto moves into Pisces, not just here in the US, but around the world.

During the transitional period (and now on into the early days of this new era), as I suggested at the beginning of this series, it is our opportunity to revisit Pluto's earlier transit through the signs from Cancer to Capricorn, in order to assess what we have learned or failed to learn so far. As I see it, this is the best possible preparation for what comes next, especially as we each personally commit to lives rooted in the values and enriched by the lessons of Pluto's earlier rites of passage.

In January of 2023, we looked at Pluto's passage through Cancer from 1913 - 1939; in May we took a similar look at Pluto's time in Leo from 1937 - 1958; in September, we explored Pluto's sojourn through Virgo from 1956 - 1972; in March 2024 we covered Pluto's reign in Libra from 1971 - 1984; and in October, we addressed Pluto's transit of Scorpio from 1983 - 1995. Like this current passage into Aquarius, all of these periods generally have a 1-2 year overlap when Pluto moves back and forth between the sign it is leaving and the sign it is about to enter. From January - November 1995, Pluto was moving back and forth between Scorpio and Sagittarius, where it remained until January 2008; from January - November 2008, it made its transition from Sagittarius to Capricorn.

As in past installments, before we look at some of the key events of the Pluto in Sagittarius period, in this series - [Pluto's Not-for-the-Faint-of-Heart School of Do-or-](#)

Die – we will take a closer look at some of the lessons Pluto offered us in Scorpio that now still contribute to the challenges we face as Pluto moves through Aquarius.

Pluto in Scorpio's Quest for Transmutation of Darkness

Even assuming that we, as a global collective, could have mastered the lessons of previous eras - created a world that provided sanctuary (Cancer) and the opportunity for self-determination for all of humanity as well as all beings of the more than human world (Leo); were willing to be accountable to each other (Virgo); and transcended our personal agendas sufficiently to place the greater good of the whole at the top of our list of priorities (Libra), we would still be incomplete without an ongoing commitment to face and somehow transmute the wounds that inevitably continue to fester in the darkness. For the sad, perhaps inevitable truth about our renegade species is that while most of us strive to do the right thing (whatever we conceive that to be) most of the time, some of us simply refuse. What we, as a collective, do about that is Pluto's supreme Scorpionic test.

This challenge is encoded in the mythology of the constellation Scorpius for which the sign of the zodiac is named. In one particularly relevant version of the story, the great hunter Orion boasts to the goddess Artemis and her mother Leto that he would kill every animal on Earth. To prevent this from happening, Artemis and Leto send a scorpion to kill Orion. Zeus then raised both Orion and the Scorpion into the sky as a reminder to humans to curb their excessive hubris - a lesson it appears we have mostly forgotten, especially here in the US, where we have recently re-elected a president who embodies hubris.

Within this myth, the sting of the Scorpion becomes the image of what we, as a culture, do with someone who just refuses to play by the rules, or more importantly from a spiritual perspective, refuses to acknowledge or honor the sacred tenets necessary to ensure the ongoing flourishing evolution of life on Earth. Taken literally, we might equate the Scorpion's often fatal sting with the death penalty. In nature, however, the scorpion's venom serves mainly to paralyze its prey, and death comes later. In this sense, the metaphor extends to whatever mechanism we the people can devise to keep the perpetrator from doing further harm - whether that be through incarceration, deportation, assassination, rehabilitation, truth and reconciliation, economic sanctions, or outright war. Pluto's challenge to us in Scorpio does not dictate what action we take, only that we must mount a response to whatever abuse of power puts the wellbeing of others, our collective wellbeing, and the living vibrance of the planet at risk.

Beyond the practical considerations of harm reduction, Scorpio also raises the question of evil. Does it exist? If so, how do we deal with it? And if not, how do we account for and come to terms with the human capacity - vastly increased since the discovery of Pluto - for violence, for murder, for abuse, for torture, for unleashing the massively destructive horrors of war, genocide and ecocide, for ongoing systemic injustices, and for all manner of unspeakable atrocities that stain our collective history with blood, epigenetic trauma, and cultural miasms that never seem to heal?

Pluto, is of course, ruled by Scorpio, so this is a set of questions that cuts to very essence of the archetype. What Pluto in its own sign demands of us is that we exercise the immense power that we have as human beings in a responsible way.

This power extends not just to ourselves, but to everyone out there we consider to be Other, as well as to all sentient beings in the more-than-human world.

Many years ago, just before Pluto entered Scorpio, the eco-activist Starhawk made the distinction between power-over and power-from-within in her seminal Scorpionic book, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*.

. . . Power-over is, ultimately, the power of the gun and the bomb, the power of annihilation that backs up all the institutions of domination . . . Power-from-within is the power of the low, the dark, the earth; the power that arises from our blood, and our lives, and our passionate desire for each other's living flesh. And the political issues of our time are also issues of spirit, conflicts between paradigms or underlying principles. If we are to survive the question becomes: how do we overthrow, not those presently in power, but the principle of power-over? How do we shape a society based on the principle of power-from-within?

At the risk of oversimplifying the issue, I think it is reasonable to say that the principle of power-over is inherently evil. As most of us have noted at one time or another, "evil" is "live" spelled backwards, just as power-over is essentially antithetical to life. The history of some human beings dominating, suppressing, and repressing other human beings through power-over is evil. The history of humans exploiting and abusing other living creatures, while declaring those creatures to exist solely for human benefit is evil. Patriarchy, racism, sexism, extreme nationalism, gaping systemic economic disparities, endless persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, discrimination based on gender preferences, anthropocentrism and every other human behavior based on a hierarchal assumption of superiority, justifying power-over, is ultimately evil. As long as our world runs on the principle of power-over, senseless death, destruction, entropy, disorder, and mass uncertainty will be the inevitable state of affairs.

This is not a given, but a choice. When individuals, groups of people and nations continuously choose to exercise power-over, rather than power-from-within in the conduct of their affairs, in willful disregard of the adverse consequences of their actions, this is what I consider to be evil. I realize, in saying this, that "evil" is a loaded word, and that calling something evil is strong medicine, as strong perhaps as the sting of a scorpion. And yet, if we are to move forward in our collective evolution as a species, we must be acknowledge the existence of evil, as well as its slippery-tongued justifications, and deal with the issue head on.

To do this well, we must also be careful to own our own shadows, and not simply project them unconsciously onto those that reflect them back to us. Hubris and hypocrisy go hand in hand, as are power-over and pious pretense, and both are sins against the evolutionary demands of Pluto in Scorpio that inevitable lead to evil. This caveat aside, it is also likely that world history often spawns shadow-figures that loom larger than life, just so we can more consciously and intentionally address the capacity for evil that exists in each one of us, as well as at the dark heart of our collective folly.

Pluto was discovered nearly 100 years ago, around the time that Hitler was coming into power, and shortly before humans developed the atomic bomb. Since then, the collective culture has spawned numerous Hitlers and immensely increased our

capacity for self-annihilation, as well as our capacity for decimating planetary life support systems. We do not appear to learning from our mistakes, but through a collective pattern of historical amnesia, institutionalized denial and willful ignorance, compounding them.

We are meant to be powerful beings, but where we derive that power, and how we use it makes all the difference in the outcome we can expect. Power-over leads nowhere any of us really want to go. Power-from-within is a pathway to accessing and cultivating the spark of spirit within as a sacred task, through which we each play our unique part in the evolution of the whole. Exercising power-from-within empowers everyone. No one dominates; everyone has a part to play; all have a vital place within the circles in which our collective power is wielded to make a benefit for all.

Some would call this liberal idealism. So be it. As I see it, the task transcends political labels, which are often wielded as tools of power-over domination. What matters from the point of view of our Scorpionic lessons is that we each cultivate as much power-from-within as we can handle responsibly, and hold those who insist on exercising power-over accountable for their hubris, their hypocrisy, and the damage that they do.

Looking at world history through this lens, the Pluto in Scorpio years saw many attempts to move from power-over to power-from-within, as brutal autocratic dictators such as Slobodan Milosevic (Yugoslavia), Augusto Pinochet (Chile), Alberto Fujimori (Peru), Ferdinand Marcos (Philippines), and Siad Barre (Somalia) were deposed; dominator regimes based on power-over in the Soviet Union, throughout much of Eastern Europe and in South Africa were dismantled; and concerted international effort was made to collectively address global atrocities through the international tribunals, constrain the use and proliferation of nuclear weapons, and construct a world in which cooperative bonds of economic interdependence served as a viable deterrent to conflict.

Such efforts were, of course, incomplete and insufficient, in some places like the former Yugoslavia, carving out victories only at immense cost of bloodshed and horrific suffering; and in others, like Myanmar, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Yemen and Iraq, either failing miserably, resulting in a stalemate, and/or bringing only temporary respite to a powder-keg situation destined to reignite again down the road. Pluto's lessons are not easily mastered, and generally outlive those who struggle against impossible odds to mount the learning curve, as well as those who willfully insist on ignoring them and propagating evil.

The struggle continued, with another layer of challenge added during the Pluto in Sagittarius years.

The Shifting of Our Collective Archetypal Field

In the last issue of this newsletter, we considered Pluto's passage through Scorpio from the years 1983 - 1995 in some detail, along with defining moments in the history of that era that shaped the cultural tenor of a generation. In this installment of this series, we will take a similar look at Pluto's passage through Sagittarius, from 1995 - 2008, including the transitional phases, during which Pluto went back and forth between Scorpio to Sagittarius, and from Sagittarius to Capricorn.

*Pluto in Sagittarius:
Ongoing Death and Mayhem in the Struggle for Self-Determination*

Europe

During the transitional year of 1995, we saw the brutal intransigence of the power-over mentality, refusing to let go in places like Bosnia, where the Bosnian Serb Army killed thousands of men and boys and raped countless women in the Srebrenica Massacre, even as 21 Bosnian Serb commanders and President Radovan Karadzic of Republika Srpska were charged with genocide and crimes against humanity in the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. It took six more years and additional bloodshed in Kosovo for Slobodan Milosevic to be tried for war crimes; and twelve more years for Radovan Karadzic to finally be arrested after a global manhunt. Ultimately 161 people were indicted, 21 of which were ultimately acquitted. The International Court of Justice ultimately concluded that there was no evidence linking Milosevic to the genocide committed by the Bosnian Serbs, but that he had violated the Genocide Convention by failing to prevent genocide and hold those involved accountable. Meanwhile, he died before the trial's conclusion, and never served any time for his crimes.

Hostilities between Russia and Chechnya, a small Caucasian country long dominated by Russia, stem back to at least the 18th century. But during the transition period from Scorpio to Sagittarius, they flared up again in the First Chechnyan War, which was a Chechen bid for independence met with Russian resistance. In April 1995, in the Samashki Massacre, Russian paramilitary troops slaughtered at least 250 civilians, which began a more protracted war that lasted throughout the 1990s. As with most such conflicts, estimates of casualties often diverge widely, but land somewhere between 3-10,000 Chechen military, ten times that in civilian casualties, up to 200,000 wounded and more than 500,000 displaced, plus about 14,000 Russian military deaths.

Russia signed a peace treaty in 1997, then invaded again in 1999 - which should be a warning sign about any peace treaty Russia might sign with Ukraine in the days ahead, especially since 1999 was when Putin came into power. Rogue Islamic extremists from Chechnya had bombed apartment buildings in Russian cities, killing about 300 people. Russia then proceeded to invade Chechnya again, placing it under direct Russian rule in 2000, although the guerilla conflict between Russian forces and Chechnya separatists continued throughout Pluto in Sagittarius, ending at the beginning of Pluto in Capricorn, with another 60,000 dead, Chechnya still under Russian domination, and the separatist movement virtually destroyed.

After a few false starts, several major terrorist attacks, and the assassination of Ulster loyalist paramilitary leader Billy Wright inside Long Kesh prison in Northern Ireland, the long-standing hostilities in northern Ireland gradually ground to a halt after the Good Friday agreement in 1998, with the deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland - the longest deployment in British military history - coming to an end in 2007, toward the end of Pluto in Sagittarius.

Also on a positive note, throughout the Pluto in Sagittarius years, the European Union (formed in 1993 at the end of Pluto in Scorpio with the Maastricht Treaty) began coalescing as a major experiment in international cooperation. In 1995, the

Schengen agreement, easing cross-border travel in Europe, went into effect. By 2002, the euro became the standard currency for all EU countries. By the end of Pluto in Sagittarius, Greece, Cyprus, Malta, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Croatia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania had all joined the union, adding 14 additional countries to the original 12.

Central & South America & the Caribbean

After nearly 200 years of political turmoil, the Caribbean nation of Haiti experienced its first peaceful transfer of power since it gained independence from France in 1804, in 1996, when the US sent 20,000 troops to secure peaceful democratic elections that returned Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power, in exchange for his promise of free market reforms favorable to US corporations. Aristide went in and out of power throughout Pluto in Sagittarius, as well as in and out of favor with US politicians, finally being ousted in 2004, after being kidnapped by US forces - an assertion the US government denies. Meanwhile, amidst ongoing and never ending political turmoil, Haiti was ravaged toward the end of Pluto in Sagittarius and beginning of Pluto in Capricorn by no less than four tropical storms, leaving over 300 dead and 800,000 in need of humanitarian aid. The impact of the storms, coupled with rampant inflation, a food crisis, and political unrest, has led to Haiti's continued unraveling, culminating in virtual anarchy and increased control by gangs and armed militias.

In Guatemala, a civil war that had raged since 1960 finally came to resolution in 1996. The war was fought over longstanding land distribution, with wealthy Guatemalans and foreign corporations like the US company United Fruit, backed by the Guatemalan government pitted against leftist rebel groups seeking more equitable distribution. With the training and support of the CIA, the Guatemalan government committed genocide against the Mayan people through massacres, forced disappearances, torture, summary executions, and destruction of Mayan villages when they were viewed by the government as siding with insurgents. In addition to Mayans, political activists, suspected government opponents, returning refugees, critical academics, students, left-leaning politicians, trade unionists, religious workers, journalists, and street children all became enemies of the state. It is estimated that 200,000 were killed and another 40,000 were "disappeared," that is to say, abducted and taken to undisclosed locations, upon which the state refused to acknowledge their fate or whereabouts. The government routinely denied responsibility or accountability, placing the blame on right-wing paramilitary death squads, also trained by the CIA. In addition to US complicity, Israel, Argentina and South Africa all gave support to the Guatemalan government throughout the atrocities.

Elsewhere in Central America, in 2002, there was at least some accountability, as Salvadoran generals Jose Guillermo Garcia and Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova were found liable for torture in an American court. Likewise, in South America, former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet was indicted in 1998 for human rights violations by a Spanish magistrate and placed under house arrest by British authorities during his medical treatment in the UK - a leading example of the law of universal jurisdiction, which allows war criminals to be prosecuted in any country in which they are apprehended.

In 1998, Hugo Chavez, considered one of the most influential and controversial politicians in Venezuelan history, came to power. Initially, Chavez nationalized key

industries such as oil and gas production, and established social programs to expand access to food, housing, healthcare and education. As oil revenues began to decline, however, Venezuela's economy began to falter, with inflation and poverty increasing. Meanwhile, Chavez increasingly resorted to authoritarian practices, suppressing the press, manipulating electoral laws, and arresting government critics and/or forcing them into exile. In 2002, a failed military coup was launched against him, after which he remained in power until his death in 2013.

In Columbia, Pluto in Sagittarius saw an increasing involvement of FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia) with the increasing drug trade, discussed in the last issue of this newsletter. Navigating a complex mix in which state-sponsored terrorism, right-wing paramilitaries, and left-wing guerillas all vie endlessly for power, FARC arose in the early 1960s from peasant self-defense groups promoting Marxist ideology and guerilla warfare as a counterbalance to capitalist exploitation of farm workers. By the end of Pluto in Sagittarius, FARC had risen to about 18,000 members, and had been cited by numerous groups, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the United Nations as well as by the Colombian, U.S. and European Union governments, for the usual litany of human rights violations. In 2008, as Pluto was transitioning to Capricorn, massive civil demonstrations against FARC were taking place in Columbia, while Venezuela and Ecuador were sending troops to the border with Columbia after the Colombian government executed a raid across the border against FARC inside Ecuadorian territory.

In Peru, former dictator Alberto Fujimoro fled to his home country of Japan in 2000, faxing his resignation after widespread protests against an authoritarian regime marked by corruption, extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, human rights violations and crimes against humanity. Peru subsequently requested his extradition from Japan to be tried for his abuse of power, but Japan refused. In 2005, he was arrested while traveling to Chile, and then returned to Peru to stand trial. In 2007, toward the end of Pluto in Sagittarius, Fujimoro was sentenced to 25 years in jail. In 2017, he was unlawfully pardoned by then Peruvian president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, sparking protests throughout Peru, followed by court battles going back and forth between pardon and return to jail, ending in 2023 with his final release.

In Argentina, former junta leader Leopoldo Galtieri was arrested in 2002 for the kidnap, torture, and murder of 20 leftist guerillas during the Dirty War, an era of state-sponsored terrorism from 1974 - 1983, in which left-leaning political dissidents were routinely killed or disappeared.

Africa, Bloody Africa

In Africa, the Algerian Civil War, known in Algeria as the Black Decade, began in 1992 with Pluto in Scorpio, and ended in 2002, half way into Pluto in Sagittarius. The war was triggered in 1992 after an Islamic electoral victory was negated by a military coup to preempt the possibility of an Islamic Algerian state. Starting slowly, as the coup initially appeared to be successful, Islamic rebel groups continued fighting what became referred to as "the dirty war" for the targeting of journalists and foreigners, and particularly by the use of children as human shields. Casualties numbered somewhere between 44-200,000. The war officially ended in 2002, after a series of brutal massacres, when the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the main rebel faction was defeated, but since then a splinter group aligned with Al-Qaeda has picked up the slack, as part of a larger Islamic insurgency that has spread

throughout the Mafhreb region of North Africa (which in addition to Algeria, includes Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia).

Elsewhere in Africa, civil war in Angola, a former Portuguese colony, raged intermittently from 1975-2002, pitting communists backed by Cuba and Russia, against anti-communists, backed by the US and South Africa, with 500-800,000 people killed and more than one million internally displaced. From 1993-2005, longstanding ethnic tensions between Hutus and Tutsis erupted in violence after the first multiparty elections in Burundi, since its independence from Belgium in 1962, and left another 300,000 dead. In Guinea-Bissau, another former Portuguese colony, a shorter civil war from 1998-1999, killed hundreds if not thousands, and displaced hundreds of thousands.

In Liberia, two civil wars (the first from 1989 - 1997 and the second, from 1999 - 2003, left over 50,000 dead, and displaced thousands more, as the rebel group the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy fought against the regime of criminal warlord Charles Taylor.

From 2003-2010, the War in Dafur, erupted as rebel groups accused the government of Sudan of an apartheid-style oppression of non-Arab minorities in the country. The government responded by conducting a campaign of brutal ethnic cleansing of non-Arab minorities in Dafur, aided by the Janjaweed, a militia mostly composed of various African Muslim factions. The government continually denied supporting the Janjaweed, but the international evidence shows they supplied money and guns, and coordinated joint attacks, resulting in the death of several hundred thousand, from combat, starvation and disease, as well as the displacement of about two million others. This war was part of a larger, ongoing conflict in Sudan that rages to this day. A new flare up of hostilities began in 2023. Since then, thousands more have died, with a 2025 estimate of 8.8 million internally displaced, and more than 3.5 million others that have fled the country as refugees.

Next door to Sudan, the former French colony Chad, plagued since 1960 by its own civil war between Arab-Muslims in the north and Sub-Saharan Christians in the South, became inundated in 2003 with Sudanese refugees, who joined Chadian civilians seeking to escape rebel violence to fill the refugee camps to overflowing. Chadian rebels were receiving support from the Sudanese government, while Sudanese rebels were receiving support from the government of Chad, who was also being supported by Israel and Ukraine, in what was a mind-numbingly complex international tangle of competing factions. Meanwhile, the refugee camps, which have housed hundreds of thousands of refugees at a time for twenty years, have been subject to horrific internal violence, mass starvation, lack of clean drinking water or adequate sanitation, and rampant disease.

In Somali (discussed in the last newsletter), a guerilla war against the totalitarian government of Siad Barre, also raged on throughout Pluto in Sagittarius. In 2006, after a UN intervention, and the temporary restoration of order, Somali was invaded by Ethiopia, and then in 2011, by Kenya, as various Islamic factions vied for dominance in a fragile state struggling to maintain its democracy. In the meantime, from 1991-2022, it is estimated that 350,000-1,000,000+ people were killed, with up to 4,000,000 displaced, not counting the 50-200,000 that were killed during the systematic state-sponsored genocide of the Isaaq civilians under the Barre regime. Another 200,000-300,000 people were killed "indirectly" by widespread environmental destruction, drought and famine that raged throughout the country.

As horrific as all this is, however, by far the bloodiest war in Africa (a perpetually plagued continent) during the Pluto in Sagittarius years was the combined First and Second Congo War (with a one-year break between them), known as Africa's World War, raging from 1996-2003. The First Congo War (from 1996-1997) saw the collapse of Zaire under the dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko, who was overthrown and replaced by rebel leader Laurent-Desire Kabila. The Second Congo War took place a year later, as Kabila turned his back on his former allies in Rwanda and Uganda, and his allies retaliated. Kabila rallied a coalition of countries to his defence, and the war eventually drew in nine African nations and about 25 armed militias. By the time the war had officially ended in 2003, an estimated 5.4 million people had died, mostly from disease and malnutrition; some dispute this figure, saying many would have died anyway, regardless of the war, which they claim only killed 3 million. Either way, this is generally considered the bloodiest conflict on the planet since World War II.

The issues underlying the conflict are complex, and remain unresolved, as tensions remain high, and violence continues to erupt periodically. Rebel groups often trade illegally in rare minerals in order to support their efforts, and this practice - and the violence it perpetuates - is likely to intensify with Pluto in Aquarius as the rise of AI and increasingly sophisticated technologies raise demand for these minerals. Children are often routinely conscripted into these African conflicts, with Amnesty International estimating the global count at about 300,000 under 18, with many under 15. These horrific conditions were depicted in the 2006 film Blood Diamond, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Connelly and Djimon Hounsou.

Asia

In Asia, the Sri Lankan Civil War, which began at the beginning of Pluto in Scorpio, also raged throughout Pluto in Sagittarius, finally ending in 2009 at the beginning of Pluto in Capricorn. As with the ongoing wars in Bosnia and Chechnya, this was an attempt by separatists - in this case, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam - to carve out an independent state for persecuted minorities - in this case, the Tamils. In an all-too familiar playbook, Tamils were denied equal opportunities in education and employment, forbidden to speak their language and religion, and often attacked by racist mobs, who operated with impunity and the tacit blessing of the Sri Lankan government. For a while the rebels were aided by India, whose involvement temporarily shifted the balance of power to the Liberation Tigers, but India withdrew its support after the assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, considered to be against the Tamil movement, by a female suicide bomber.

The war continued in fits and starts for over a quarter century, leaving more than 100,000 civilians and about half that number of military personnel from both sides dead, with another 350,000 displaced people, who were held against their will in barbed wire camps for about three years. After the war, the country was heavily contaminated with about 1.6 million land mines, which are still only slowly being removed. The economic cost of the war was estimated at \$250 billion.

In Indonesia, the military dictatorship and New Order regime of Suharto, backed by the US, came to an end in 1998 after a period of mass violence and civil unrest that left 1000 dead and \$260 million in damage. Suharto was credited with making Indonesia into an economic success story, but condemned for authoritarian abuses of power, corruption, and extensive human rights violations, especially repression of

Chinese culture within Indonesia. With the support of the US, Suharto had also intervened in a civil war in East Timor, a former Portuguese colony, annexing the country in 1976, a messy campaign that left another 100,000 dead. After annexation, Suharto's New Order regime waged an ongoing genocide against the Timorese people, killing an additional 200,000 - 300,000 people, with the army at times indiscriminately shooting women and children in the streets. Women were also routinely raped and subjected to ongoing sexual abuse. Others died of starvation after the Indonesian army deliberately destroyed farms and targeted the food supply. After Suharto was removed from power, a referendum was held in which nearly 80% voted for East Timorese independence. The referendum was followed by more violence as pro-Indonesian forces clashed with civilians. In 1999, the UN intervened and set up a transitional government, with independence finally granted in 2002.

Another perennial hot spot in Asia, flaring up again now, as I write this, is the ongoing tension between India and Pakistan, which stems at least as far back as British colonial rule, when both countries were part of British India. After World War II, the larger colony was divided into the present-day states, displacing 15 million people, and resulting in the deaths of up to one million more, as Hindus on the Pakistani side of the line attempted to migrate to India, while Muslims on the Indian side of the line attempted to flee to Pakistan. When all was said and done, India remained a primarily Hindu country with a large Muslim minority population, and Pakistan remained a primarily Muslim country with a large Hindu minority population, most of which it lost in 1971, when eastern Pakistan succeeded and became the independent country of Bangladesh.

Since World War II, ethnic tensions and territorial disputes over the heavily militarized border between India and Pakistan have resulted in three major wars, and one undeclared war, leaving tens of thousands more dead. Most of the world tends to focus on another hotbed of ethnic tension in the wake of British colonial rule - namely that between Israel and Palestine (more about that later) - forgetting that both India and Pakistan are nuclear powers, and that at a certain level of intensity, the conflict could rise to apocalyptic levels of global catastrophe. Thankfully that has not happened yet, and hopefully never will. But is not unlikely to assume that sometime during Pluto in Aquarius - one half cycle from the Pluto in Leo years, during which both modern states of India and Pakistan came into being - this powder keg stand-off could come to a head.

During the Pluto in Sagittarius years, terrorist activity across the border intensified, while nuclear tensions also flared. New nuclear tests in India triggered a flurry of parallel tests in Pakistan, prompting the US, Japan and other nations to impose sanctions. Meanwhile, India began accusing Pakistan of providing covert support to terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, as Pakistan claimed it only wished to provide political and moral support to successionist groups seeking to escape Indian rule in the northern provinces of Kashmir and Jammu. The thin-line between Indian separatists and Muslim jihadists became thinner during Pluto in Sagittarius resulting in dozens of terrorist attacks, including an attack on the Indian parliament itself in 2001. A massive stand-off ensued with troops amassed on both sides of the border, and raised the spectre of nuclear war. International diplomatic effort eventually ended the stand-off in 2002, but ultimately did nothing to resolve long-standing conflicts. As in the Middle East, tensions between the two countries have become chronic, remain high, and are passed from generation to generation.

Aside from their own border skirmish, both countries became involved in the ongoing civil strife in neighboring Afghanistan, each supporting separate factions throughout the Soviet-Afghan war from 1979-1989, three civil wars from 1989-2001, and the US occupation of Afghanistan from 2001-2021. The Taliban emerged toward the end of Pluto in Scorpio as a movement of militias and students that began in Pakistan, and spread to Kabul in 1996 at the beginning of Pluto in Sagittarius, where they established a totalitarian Islamic state based on sharia law, resulting in the brutal repression of many Afghans, especially women, numerous massacres against Afghan civilians, the denial of UN food supplies to starving masses, and the destruction of tens of thousands of homes. The Taliban were roundly condemned internationally, and were temporarily removed from power after the US invasion in 2001, only to return 20 years later, shortly after the US withdrew its forces. Since then, human rights have deteriorated with an estimated 2.6 million Afghans remaining refugees, mostly in Iran and Pakistan, with another 4 million internally displaced.

Middle East

In 1993, just prior to Pluto's entry into Sagittarius, a series of secret meetings between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators led to the Oslo Accords, ostensibly discussing the conditions necessary for a future Palestinian state, but ultimately failing to grant Palestinian autonomy, and as Noam Chomsky put it, allowing "Israel to do virtually what it likes." While there were some "transfers of power and responsibility" in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank from Israel to Palestine, Israel maintained a strong military presence. Justified by the Accords, Israel also created a patchwork of Palestinian enclaves, permanently separated by Jewish settlements, security checkpoints and military installations, instead of a bona fide Palestinian state.

After the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, during the transition period into Sagittarius by a radical right wing law student who opposed the Oslo Accords, the decades-long peace process that produced them virtually ground to a halt. This sea change was underscored by the election of Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996, the same man who is responsible - with US complicity - for the ongoing genocide in Gaza that now marks the beginning of Pluto in Aquarius.

At that time, Netanyahu's tenure lasted only 3 years, during which time he furthered the agenda of the Zionist State through the implementation of the Hebron and Wye Agreements, ostensibly about continuing the peace process outlined in the Oslo accords, but in fact, further entrenching the Israeli presence in both Gaza and the West Bank. The Wye Agreement in particular was criticized by human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International for its encouragement of human rights abuses in the occupied territories. Meanwhile, Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories were expanded under Netanyahu's watch, increasing tensions between Israeli settlers and Palestinians.

In 2000, US President Bill Clinton convened a peace process at Camp David between PLO President Yassar Arafat and Netanyahu's successor, attempting to parse a mutually agreeable demarcation in Gaza and the West Bank between Palestinian self-rule and Israeli occupation, settlement and control for security purposes. The proposal was rejected by Arafat, and negotiations went round and round, going nowhere throughout the remainder of Pluto in Sagittarius. Moderates on both sides were often outflanked and sabotaged by extremists, and every concession on either side was met by protest, often violent protest, on the other side.

While leaders in Israel, Palestine, the US and the Middle East were earnestly seeking peace, albeit often with competing and contradictory agendas, generally small-scale terrorist activity continued unabated and, then as now, was met with a disproportionately brutal response by the Israeli government. The First Intifada (or uprising) began during Pluto in Scorpio in 1987, approaching the 20-year anniversary of Israeli occupation, and continued up to the Oslo Accords in 1993. Throughout this period, mostly peaceful Palestinian protests, civil disobedience, and strikes were met by excessive Israeli violence. Israel deployed 80,000 soldiers, who used live ammunition to quell riots, beat protestors with clubs, and wound up killing over 1,000 Palestinians, about a quarter of which were children. In addition, an additional 800+ Palestinians believed to have been Israeli collaborators were executed by the Palestinians themselves.

The Second Intifada, from 2000 - 2005, resulted in similar violence, triggered in part by frustration with the stalled peace process at Camp David, and in part by Israeli right-wing opposition leader Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the Temple Mount in East Jerusalem, a holy site claimed by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. Throughout the Second Intifada, Palestinians fought with stones, guns, rockets and suicide bombs; Israel responded with targeted killings, tank attacks and air strikes. In the end, another 3,000 Palestinians, 1,000 Israelis and about 64 foreign nationals were killed.

While Yassar Arafat and some Israeli leaders were voices of moderation throughout this period, eschewing violence and attempting to negotiate in good faith, terrorist groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and others undermined the process, justifying in turn the genocidal agenda of right-wing Israeli factions against the Palestinians, as well as periodic attacks on terrorist bases in Lebanon and Syria. This was a vicious spiral that continued worsening throughout Pluto in Sagittarius. By the end of this period, Hamas had assumed control in Gaza, while the more moderate Fatah maintained control of the West Bank, both parties claiming to represent the Palestinian people. Meanwhile, Netanyahu had regained power by the beginning of Pluto in Capricorn, thus setting the stage for the current genocide and decimation of Gaza.

Jihad, the Rise of Al-Qaeda and the Bombing of the Twin Towers

Along with the rise of Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Taliban in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda became a global terrorist presence during Pluto in Sagittarius. As noted in my last newsletter, all these groups had their start during Pluto in Scorpio, but came into power and greater prominence during Pluto in Sagittarius. While many of them have had a more localized scope, Al-Qaeda was formed by Saudi-born Osama bin Laden and others to serve as a pan-Islamic spearhead for jihad around the world.

Jihad is an Islamic word that means "exerting, striving or struggling," associated with all efforts to align one's personal and collective life with the will of Allah. Although most often used to denote open warfare by Islamic terrorists against Western infidels, whose supposed values, and political agendas are perceived as a threat to Islamic culture, the word also refers to an internal struggle against evil within oneself, as well as an attempt to remake society according to Islamic principles. It can be noted here that, from an astrological perspective, this is a particularly acute

manifestation of Pluto in Sagittarius, through which religious principles become the basis for death and destruction, as well as for self and societal transformation.

Throughout Pluto in Sagittarius, Al-Qaeda pursued a particularly violent approach to jihad throughout the world - not just in the Middle East, but also in Bosnia and Herzogovenia, Spain, Indonesia, Morocco and Kenya, among other places. Al-Qaeda also had a particular interest in the US, who seemed to embody everything they were fighting against, not just in their cultural decadence, but in their long history of meddling manipulation of Middle Eastern politics.

In 1996, at the beginning of Pluto in Sagittarius, Osama Bin Laden wrote "The Declaration of Jihad on the Americans Occupying the Country of the Two Sacred Places," calling for the removal of American military forces from Saudi Arabia. In 1998, he issued a second fatwa (decree) condemning US support for Israel. In both decrees, Bin Laden asserted that Muslims were obligated to attack American targets until they reversed their coercive and hostile policies toward Islamic states.

In the year 2000, Al-Qaeda attacked the USS Cole, a guided-missile destroyer, while it was refueling in Yemen. And on September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda orchestrated the bombing of the Twin Towers in New York, killing nearly 3,000 people and causing at least \$10 billion in infrastructure and property damage, in what remains the deadliest single terror attack in world history. It was also the first time since Pearl Harbor during World War II that the US had directly been attacked by a foreign agent, and it was one of those seminal moments in US history, the defining moment of the Pluto in Sagittarius generation, that changed everything - with Saturn in Gemini opposed Pluto in Sagittarius.

In response to the attacks, US President George W. Bush declared a global war on terrorism, vowing to eliminate terrorist groups and hold countries sponsoring them accountable. Because the CIA informed Bush that the attacks were the work of al-Qaeda under the leadership of Osama bin Laden, then being harbored by the Taliban in Afghanistan, Bush invaded Afghanistan, beginning a 20-year war - the longest in US history - that would not end until 2021, under the Biden administration. As noted above, the Taliban were temporarily removed from power, but Osama bin Laden eluded capture until 2011, under the Obama administration, with Pluto in Capricorn, when he was killed during a military raid on his compound in Pakistan, another state known for offering support and sanctuary to Islamic jihadists. Bin Laden also denied responsibility for 9/11 until 2004, when excerpts of a taped statement by him were he released by *Al Jazeera*.

The Second Iraq War

In 2003, Bush launched the Second Iraq War, as part of a coalition with the UK, Australia and Poland, with a bombing campaign of "shock and awe." His rationale for the attack, part of his War on Terror, were false claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was supporting al-Qaeda. Both claims were debunked by a 9/11 Commission in 2004, after which then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared the invasion illegal under international law.

Meanwhile, the quick fall of Saddam's regime led to premature declaration of victory, and a power vacuum, after which a sectarian civil war broke out between Iraq's Shia

majority and Sunni minority requiring continuous US involvement for eight more years. In 2008, Bush agreed to withdraw US combat troops, a process that was eventually completed by Obama in 2011, during Pluto in Capricorn. In the intervening years, it is estimated that somewhere between 150,000 and a million people died, including more than 100,000 civilians.

The situation leading to his debacle did not begin nor end with Bush, but rather stems back to at least 1990, when international opposition to Saddam's regime began to mount after his invasion of Kuwait. As documented in my last newsletter about Pluto in Scorpio, this eventually led to the First Iraq war, a short one-sided affair during which a US-led coalition of 42 states easily ended the occupation. After the war, the US pursued a policy of containment, involving economic sanctions, enforced no-fly zones, and ongoing inspections to ensure that Iraq destroyed existing biological, chemical and nuclear weapons facilities and did not develop new ones.

Over the course of the next decade, this became a cat-and-mouse game in which Iraqi officials harrassed and obstructed UN inspectors, and sought to evade inspections, a stand-off known as the Iraq Disarmament Crisis. By 1998, when Iraq refused to cooperate with inspectors at all, whom they said were spying for the US, an allegation which later proved to be true. In the meantime, it became official US policy, under the Clinton administration, to remove Saddam Hussein from power. One month after the Iraq Liberation Act was passed by Congress, the US and the UK launched a major bombing offensive called Operation Desert Fox, aimed mainly toward weapons facilities, but also designed to weaken Saddam's regime.

When Bush, Jr. came to power in 2000, the Republican party platform included a clause calling for a more aggressive pursuit of regime change as outlined in the Iraq Liberation Act, seizing the opportunity to act on that intention, in the wake of 9/11 as part of Bush's War on Terror. Bush tried to suggest that Saddam was somehow involved in the attack on the Twin Towers, and that Iraq was a state sponsor of al-Qaeda, calling it part of an Axis of Evil. Bush' own intelligence community found no evidence for either assertion, nor could they find convincing evidence for weapons of mass destruction, and concluded that Iraq posed no real threat to the West.

In what has since become an all-too-familiar modus operandi of the Republican Party, Bush's Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld simply dismissed the intelligence community's assessment, and came up with a convenient set of "alternate facts" which they presented to the international community as their rationale for war. There was considerable opposition both within the US, and within the UN, but by February 2003, despite still no credible evidence produced by inspections or intelligence, a CBS poll noted that 85% of those polled believe Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, while 64% supported using military action to remove Saddam from power. That same month, US Secretary of State Colin Powell, warned by British and German intelligence that his information was false, nonetheless made the case for war before the UN, and a resolution for war was mounted, and then withdrawn when faced with certain vetoes by France and Germany. One month later, a "Coalition of the Willing" - 40 nations providing various levels of troops, equipment and support, led by the US - launched the invasion without a formal declaration of war.

By April, it became clear that there were not enough US forces to control the breakdown in order, widespread looting and chaos that ravaged Iraq after the

invasion, nor was there any plan to address it. On May 1, Bush gave his famous Mission Accomplished speech from the deck of an aircraft carrier in San Diego, California, declaring an end to major combat operations. A transitional government called the Coalition Provisional Authority was hastily constructed, and from its inception quickly began to alienate the Iraq people, as well as former Iraqi soldiers who increasingly joined resistance groups that began to attack US soldiers. Violence and terrorist activity increased over the course of the next three years, fueled in part by an insurgency of Islamic jihadists from throughout the Middle East, and by an eruption of civil war between various factions of Shia and Sunni Muslims. By the end of 2006, coalition forces began to once again use air power and artillery in response. By early 2007, Bush had ordered 21,500 more troops to the country, as well as stepped-up efforts to address the chaos US military intervention had produced, while coalition forces started withdrawing from the country.

In August of 2007, the deadliest attack of the war (declared by Bush to be officially over in May of 2003) occurred when 800 civilians were killed in a series of coordinated suicide bomb attacks on the northern Iraqi settlement of Kahtaniya. The US government began releasing reports of decreasing violence that were often refuted by the UN, the Iraqi Health Ministry, and even Congress. In the meantime, as the usual bewildering array of factions using the war as an opportunity to further their own agendas complicated any meaningful restoration of order, ancient ethnic antagonisms between Iraq and Iran, and Iraq and Turkey also began to heat up. The US in turn saw this as an opportunity to sell more military hardware to the Iraqi government, hoping to eventually turn the entire mess it had created with its campaign of regime change back to the Iraqis themselves. By the time Pluto moved into Capricorn, this had not yet happened, and the US still did not have a viable "exit strategy."

There is more to this story to be discussed in the next newsletter, but meanwhile, suffice it to say that after hundred of thousands more dead; estimates of cost ranging from \$1.7 to \$6 trillion, most certainly contributing to the global financial crisis that began Pluto in Capricorn; the looting of large numbers of ancient artifacts from Iraqi museums; the decimation of infrastructure throughout Iraq; the increased incidence of PTSD among US soldiers; and the increased recruitment of new generations of Islamic jihadists; one can only wonder what exactly was the mission that George W Bush and his accomplices hoped to accomplish.

In addition to Iraq, Bush's axis of evil also included North Korea and Iran. In 2002, it was revealed that North Korea had gained access to Pakistan's nuclear technology in the late 1990s. Playing a cat and mouse game with the US and other concerned countries throughout the Pluto in Sagittarius years, North Korea finally withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003; admitted to have nuclear weapons, but vowing to end the program in 2005; then conducting its first successful nuclear test in 2006. In 2007, North Korea again vowed to shut down its program amidst mounting international concern, but by the beginning of Pluto in Capricorn, was confirmed by the International Atomic Energy Agency to be a "fully fledged nuclear power."

The situation in Iran was a bit less clearly defined or understood. Throughout Pluto in Sagittarius, Iran admitted to a uranium enrichment program conducted strictly for peaceful purposes, but denied the existence of any weapons program. Toward the end of Pluto in Sagittarius, however, suspicions began to mount within the US and international community. In 2005, Iran was sanctioned for failure to meet its

obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Safeguards Agreement and its refusal to end its enrichment program. Even though, a 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate concluded that Iran had abandoned all work on nuclear weapons in 2003, the US also declared that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard was a "proliferator of weapons of mass destruction" (sound familiar?) and again demanded the dismantlement of its non-existent nuclear weapons program. Iran countered quite reasonably that "it is incongruent for a country [US] who itself is a producer of weapons of mass destruction to take such a position." Mohamed ElBaradei, Director General of the IAEA at the time, said he had no evidence Iran was building nuclear weapons and accused US leaders of adding "fuel to the fire" with their rhetoric.

This stand-off continues to this day, but is now being grievously exacerbated by Israel's attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, and more recently by Trump's bombastic attack of Iran's nuclear enrichment facilities, illegal by international law. The deadly irony here is that unlike Iran, Israel is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and is widely believed to currently be the only nuclear-armed state in the region. Meanwhile, it is doubtful that the US has completely obliterated Iran's nuclear capabilities and equally likely that it has, inadvertently bolstered its resolve to become a nuclear power - which it may well do before the end of Pluto in Aquarius. Like George W Bush's delusional 2003 claim of "mission accomplished" in Iraq, Trump's equally absurd claim of quick victory in Iran has likely done nothing except poked a hornet's nest that will have stinging consequences in the years ahead.

The US Patriot Act, the Revocation of Domestic Civil Liberties and the Rise of the Surveillance State

Meanwhile, as endless wars were fought during Pluto in Sagittarius in Iraq and Afghanistan to combat terrorism abroad, Bush's War of Terror also became the justification for a series of drastic measures curtailing civil rights guaranteed in the US Constitution and lowering the bar for future autocrats, such as Donald Trump, to assume totalitarian powers.

This disturbing trend began with the US Patriot Act, passed by Congress in the wake of 9/11, with the stated goal of strengthening national security to better fight the threat of terrorism. Included in the law were provisions expanding the surveillance abilities of law enforcement agencies, up to and including warrantless tapping of domestic and international phones, and searching property and records without an owner's consent or knowledge - a clear violation of basic 4th Amendment rights; as well as granting the government the right of indefinite detention without trial for those suspected of terrorism; and increased penalties for an expanded range of activities that would qualify as terrorism under the law.

The law has been challenged in court, and several of its provisions were ruled unconstitutional, although the law itself, originally scheduled to expire at the end of 2005, continued in effect until at least 2020. Parts of the law - such as the massive collection of personal data, readily available to law enforcement agencies, remain intact, and have in fact, become an integral, mostly taken-for-granted fact of digital life in the 21st century.

Meanwhile, routine mass surveillance is one of the cornerstones of a totalitarian government, along with suspension of habeas corpus, and these cornerstones were

put into place here in the US, and on other countries around the world, during Pluto in Sagittarius. According to a 2007 report released by Privacy International (a UK-based non-profit promoting privacy rights) near the end of Pluto in Sagittarius, eight countries were then rated as being "endemic surveillance societies": China, Malaysia, Russia, Singapore, United Kingdom, Taiwan, Thailand and the United States.

In this same year, the American Civil Liberties Union warned that here in the US, we are "in danger of tipping into a genuine surveillance society completely alien to American values" with "the potential for a dark future where our every move, our every transaction, our every communication is recorded, compiled, and stored away, ready to be examined and used against us by the authorities whenever they want" (<https://www.aclu.org/documents/why-surveillance-society-clock>). The report went on to note that this new reality was facilitated by powerful new technologies; weakening privacy laws; the war on terror; courts that are letting privacy rights slip away, a president (George W. Bush) who thinks he can ignore laws against warrantless spying on citizens; and big corporations willing to become extensions of the surveillance state. All of this started coming together under Pluto in Sagittarius, and is part of what is paving the way for our current descent into totalitarianism under Pluto in Aquarius.

Abu Ghraib, Guantamo Bay, and the Department of Homeland Security

A second tenet of totalitarianism, also written into the US Patriot Act - the routine suspension of rights of those accused of being enemies of the state - was put into practice at a couple of notorious facilities that came on line as part of Bush's War on Terror. The first of these was Abu Ghraib prison, outside of Baghdad, seized by the US military during the Second Iraq War. The prison had been used by Saddam Hussein to hold approximately 50,000 men and women deemed enemies of the totalitarian Iraqi state, forced to live under inhumane conditions, subject to torture, abuse and summary execution for no cause. When the US took over, they scarcely missed a beat in adopting these same abusive practices, in relation to an estimated 8,000 detainees held there at peak US usage.

Abuses were documented in 2003 by Amnesty International, and the Associated Press. In early 2004, a official military investigation released as the Taguba Report, found that "numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees. This systemic and illegal abuse of detainees was intentionally perpetrated by several members of the military police guard force." The Report was followed by a 60 Minutes segment, and then an article in *The New Yorker*, including photos, which were picked up and reproduced by the global press. Bush vowed to bring those responsible to justice. Meanwhile, at the end of 2004, the ACLU released copies of internal memos from the FBI it had obtained through the Freedom of Information Act that showed evidence that the use of torture at Abu Ghraib was actually sanctioned by Bush's own executive order. Bush himself was never brought to justice for his human rights abuses, nor for lying about his justification for the war that gave rise to their adoption.

At the same time, also as a part of Bush's War on Terror, Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp (otherwise known as GITMO) was established in Cuba, to deal with "illegal enemy combatants," who were held indefinitely without charge and prevented from legally challenging their detention. The Bush administration claimed that the principles of due process and *habeas corpus* (the right to a fair trial for anyone

accused of a crime, a longstanding principle of justice in the US, as well as in civilized democracies around the world) did not apply to those housed at Guantanamo since it was outside US territory.

Humanitarian groups argued that these policies were not only unconstitutional, but also violated international law. Several landmark US Supreme Court decisions found that detainees did have rights to due process and *habeas corpus*, but were also subject to military tribunals, which are notoriously rigged and unfair. Meanwhile, like Abu Ghraib, GITMO became notorious for unfit conditions, ill-treatment, human rights abuses, sexual abuse, suicide attempts, and the use of torture (euphemistically called "enhanced interrogation techniques" roundly condemned by the UN, ACLU, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the American Red Cross and many others. In 2007, Wikileaks, newly formed in 2006 by Julian Assange, released the standard US protocol for Guantanamo, which brought more international scrutiny to the illegal facility, but ultimately did little to shut it down.

As of January 2025, nearly 800 people from 48 countries had been detained there; 756 had been released or transferred to other detention facilities, 9 died in custody, and 15 remained. Since its opening, both Democratic presidents - Obama and Biden - vowed to close the facility during their terms in office, but failed to do so.

In 2018, during his first term, Donald Trump signed an order to keep the camp open indefinitely; and in January 2025, at the beginning of his second term, he has called for its expansion to house up to 30,000 migrants under detention, in a separate facility to be run by ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement). By the same token, Trump's collaboration with El Salvadorian President Nayib Bukele to house deported Venezuelans and El Salvadorians, accused without credible evidence of belonging to criminal gangs, at CECOT, El Salvador's mega prison, follows this same playbook of outsourcing alleged "enemies of the state" to countries where human rights are non-existent. These despicable tactics to evade legalities and avoid accountability for systematic violation of human rights were exercised with impunity during the Pluto in Sagittarius presidency of George W Bush, and are now being exercised again.

Immigration and the Rise of ICE

ICE itself, the agency responsible for enforcing laws related to customs violations, cross-border crimes, illegal immigration, prevention of terrorism, and human trafficking, was also a product of George W Bush's War on Terror, created in 2003, and put under the auspices of the newly established Department of Homeland Security. The DHS was the largest government agency to be created since the Department of Defense in 1947, incorporating 22 government agencies into a single organization, and charged with the task of protecting the "homeland" from all foreign threats, including undocumented individuals immigrating to the US from other countries.

ERO (Enforcement and Removal Operations) is the part of the agency specifically tasked with this latter task. At the border, they detain undocumented immigrants apprehended by the Border Patrol; while throughout the US, they maintain custodial facilities to house those who are allegedly here illegally, until their status can be established, at which point, they are also the agency that deports those who fail the litmus test.

Enforcement of immigration laws has long been supported by both parties in the US, but in 1995, during the transition from Scorpio to Sagittarius, under President Clinton, focus on immigration was suddenly increased and intensified. Stricter immigration laws were introduced, including those requiring mandatory detention for a broader array of reasons, and engaging state and local law enforcement agencies to work more directly with immigration services. In his 1995 State of the Union address, Clinton specifically explained why his administration "has moved aggressively to secure our borders more by hiring a record number of new border guards, by deporting twice as many criminal aliens as ever before, by cracking down on illegal hiring, by barring welfare benefits to undocumented immigrants." Again in 1996, he reiterated these goals. These intensified efforts continued through subsequent presidencies, with the highest number of deportations occurring during Democratic administrations. Obama was known as the "Deporter-in-Chief" for a record number of deportations, although in part, these were a reflection of a change in the way deportations were counted.

Since the mid 1990s, tens of thousands of people are routinely held in immigration detention on any given day, in hundreds of detention centers, jails, and prisons nationwide. During Pluto in Sagittarius, beginning with Clinton's more draconian immigration laws, the number of detentions soared, with an increasing number of those detentions occurring in private facilities run by large corporations like CoreCivic (formerly known as Corrections Corporation of America) and GEO Group.

As noted by many critics, privatized detention facilities are not subject to the same oversight as those run by the government. They are accountable not to taxpayers, but to investors, and consequently have a vested interest in housing as many inmates as possible in order to maximize profits, a goal that is inherently at odds with the stated policy aim of reducing illegal immigration. Partly through the political influence of the private prison industry, immigration practices are now increasingly driven by quotas, inflated budgets, inflated rhetoric and increased apprehension and mistreatment of people that are no threat to the national security concerns ostensibly addressed by agencies like DHS and ICE.

Furthermore, without adequate government oversight, such facilities have become notorious for mistreatment of detainees - through lack of due process, obstructed access to legal counsel, discriminatory treatment, racism, verbal, physical and sexual abuse, a lack of basic necessities for maintenance of hygiene and health, medical neglect, and preventable deaths (<https://immigrantjustice.org/research-items/policy-brief-snapshot-ice-detention-inhumane-conditions-and-alarming-expansion>). As with Abu-Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, privatized detention of immigrants, and other domestic prisoners, is an outsourcing of responsibility in order to avoid accountability for criminal human rights abuses.

Trump has obviously increased both detentions and deportations in his second term, and the private prison industry is salivating at increased business. "We are entering a period when our government partners — particularly our federal government partners — are expected to have increased demand," Damon Hininger, CoreCivic's CEO, said in a statement. "We anticipate continued robust contracting activity throughout 2025 that will help meet their growing needs" (<https://ir.corecivic.com/news-releases/news-release-details/corecivic-announces-resumption-operations-south-texas-family>).

Meanwhile, immigration - due to famine, political unrest, natural disasters, climate change, war, genocide and minority persecution - has increased around the world, quadrupling since the 1960s, approximately one half Pluto cycle ago. There are now an estimated 281 million global migrants, or about 4% of the current population, enough people to comprise the 4th most populated country in the world, if they were all in one place (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/top-statistics-global-migration-migrants>). Over half these migrants wind up in the US or Europe, where their rapid influx has given rise to a right-wing backlash, and the rise of autocratic and xenophobic government over-reactions.

Immigration was a major factor in the re-election of Trump in the US, fueled by a rise in white nationalism, spouting the Great Replacement Theory - the idea that global liberal elites are intentionally replacing white people with ethnic minorities. The Great Replacement theory has also taken hold in Europe, where it has contributed to the rise of right wing parties in Germany, France, Italy, Greece, Hungary and even Switzerland, to name just a few of the most egregious.

It can be argued that this xenophobic movement was also given a tremendous boost with Pluto in Scorpio and Sagittarius, with the rise of Islamic jihadist terrorism, although of course, the full scenario is far more complex than that. In any case, from a strictly astrological perspective, the increased global mobility of people around the world, both fleeing dark forces at home and seeking a better life elsewhere, can be understood as a phenomenon that fits the symbolism of Pluto in Sagittarius, as can the racist, fear-based reaction to it.

Education Reform and the Rise of the Charter School Movement

Another area that can be symbolically associated with Sagittarius is education, which we might guess would be ripe for transformation with Pluto in Sagittarius. Indeed during the mid 1990s and early 2000s, there was a strong movement toward a standards-based, test-driven curriculum that shifted the focus of education from teacher-student interaction, free-form discussion of ideas, critical thinking skills and the cultivation of interdisciplinary creativity toward rote regurgitation of "correct" answers to prepackaged questions designed to foster conformity.

Conformity is obviously a trait conducive to authoritarian rule, as is the dumbing down of education. Many have written about this over the past thirty years or so, although the roots of using the educational system as a tool for indoctrination and control go much farther back, probably at least to the beginning of the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism, when the focus became cranking out willing and compliant worker drones to fuel the economic machinery by which a few already wealthy business owners became even richer. These ideas gained additional traction in the Pluto of Sagittarius years, as the forces of globalization and neoliberal capitalism began to permeate society, as ubiquitous forces shaping its evolution.

Many of the ideas about education that were adopted during Pluto in Sagittarius were rooted in *A Nation at Risk*, a report released during the Reagan administration with Pluto in Scorpio, that warned that the US' "once unchallenged pre-eminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world" because of the rising mediocrity of our public education system. The cry was taken up by the George H. W. Bush administration,

and then given accelerated momentum during the Clinton administration with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and during the George W. Bush administration with No Child Left Behind. These pieces of educational reform, and others passed during the Obama administration, all pushed the public educational system back toward what used to be called the "normal school" model, in which the goal was conformity, achievement and competition. Teacher autonomy was repressed, and "core" "bread and butter" subjects such as "reading, writing and arithmetic" began to replace a broad exposure to art, music, literature, humanities, liberal arts and the history of ideas.

Closely aligned with these reforms was the rise of the charter school movement. Charter schools are semi-autonomous entities that contract with states and/or school districts to provide an educational alternative to public schools, which are often demonized and felt to be inferior. They are bound to follow state-mandated curriculum, although there is great latitude in how these goals are to be achieved. Like the private prison movement, charter schools represent the privatization of public education, which takes much of what happens behind closed doors beyond public scrutiny or accountability. Many charter schools are exempt from a variety of laws and regulations affecting public schools, as long as they continue to meet the terms of their charters.

The first piece of legislation making charter schools legal was passed in Minnesota in 1991, with the first charter school opening in 1992, when Pluto was in Scorpio. After that the movement began to grow slowly until it was given a major boost with the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, which specified that "under-performing" students could transfer from public schools to charter schools, and that "under-performing" schools could be re-designated as a charter school. The most radical charter school experiment was conducted in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when the entire school system was reoriented toward charter schools. Over the course of the next ten years, all but five schools in New Orleans were reclassified as privately run charter schools. Currently there are about 8,000 charter schools in the US, teaching about 3.7 million students (<https://thehill.com/opinion/education/5296713-charter-schools-challenge-equality/>)

Since their inception, charter schools have sparked controversy for draining funding and other resources away from public schools, being subject to financial mismanagement, hiring inexperienced teachers at substandard pay levels, having sub-optimal facilities and equipment, operating with a lack of transparency and accountability, sometimes employing harsh disciplinary measures, increasing racial polarization and segregation in the school system, and poorly serving students with special needs. Overall, they generally produce results only on a par with the public schools they replace. Generally, for-profit charters perform more poorly than non-profit charters.

In addition, the subject of what gets taught at charter schools is one that initially flew under the radar, with test results being the only considered criteria for evaluating performance. That is changing, in part by design. The Supreme Court recently deadlocked (with Justice Amy Coney Barrett recused) over whether or not it was permissible to use public funds to finance an overtly religious charter school in Oklahoma, with the split decision reverting to the lower court decision upholding the separation of church and state in education - for now (<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/split-us-supreme-court-blocks-religious-charter-school-2025-05-22/>).

It is, however, an explicit intention of Project 25, guiding the current Trump administration to eliminate the Department of Education, completing the complete privatization of education, and the end of government oversight of curricula. In the name of "parental rights" and an intent to "restore the family as the centerpiece of American life and protect our children" - code for the promotion of Christian perspectives, the charter school movement, first rising into prominence during Pluto in Sagittarius, will potentially morph into a privatized system of indoctrination during Pluto in Aquarius.

Aside from a likely erasure of the line between church and state in education, Project 25 calls for deleting a number of terms from educational curricula, including "sexual orientation and gender identity," "diversity, equity and inclusion," and "reproductive rights." Ironically, Project 25 also calls for safeguarding of civil rights, "based on a proper understanding of those laws, rejecting gender ideology and critical race theory" (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/petergreene/2024/07/13/what-does-project-2025-actually-plan-for-education/>). We can already see this agenda unfolding, not just in relation to K-12 education, but also at the university level, as witnessed most dramatically through Trump's ongoing war with Harvard.

In this way, the dumbing down of American education and the rise of charter schools, both accelerated during Pluto in Sagittarius, have helped lay a significant foundation for the autocratic control of education and public discourse in the current age.

The Rise of Social Media and the Proliferation of Disinformation

Another Pluto in Sagittarius phenomena affecting the dissemination of information (and false information) in disproportionate ways today is social media. Much has been written about how social media allows rapid publication and dissemination of ideas, without the robust safeguards by which facts are routinely checked by more traditional or mainstream media. Social media enables a few "superspreaders," including those intent on propagating falsehoods in allegiance to narrow political agendas, to have an outsized influence on public discourse. Algorithms track user engagement in ways that tend to spur negative emotions like anger and outrage, while echo chambers bind and isolate individuals with similar views, thus increasing polarization and all but erasing the middle ground where useful, open-minded conversation can take place.

All of this has real world consequences on how political campaigns are run, how politicians connect with their constituencies, how political narratives are shaped, how financial and ideological support is mobilized, and how elections are won or lost. It can be argued that social media has played a significant role in the rapid swing of political dialogue in the US and around the world to the right. It was also a major factor in Trump's 2016 and 2024 victories, since he intentionally used social media to bypass the normal checks and balances, as well as the more critical scrutiny in general of mainstream media outlets.

The Trump campaign was adept at "creating viral content, often blending humor, controversy, and straightforward messaging" in order to "generate discussions around key issues, mobilize his base, and attract undecided voters," generating a perpetual barrage of input "that kept his campaign at the forefront of public

discourse" (<https://www.frontlinedigest.com/how-technology-and-social-media-helped-donald-trump-secure-victory-in-the-2024-election/>). Coupled with his strategy of disparaging those mainstream media outlets that disagreed with him, Trump was able to position himself as a beleaguered champion of free speech, even as he undermined confidence in old-school media outlets striving to tell the unbiased truth. Undermining public confidence in journalistic integrity is, of course, another standard tactic in the authoritarian playbook, one that is now made eminently possible with the use of social media.

Most of us take all this for granted today, as just the way things are, even while decrying the rapid slide toward totalitarianism that it has helped precipitate. What is generally forgotten in current discussions is that it was not that long ago that social media would have not been a significant factor. It was, in fact, only during the Pluto in Sagittarius years, or about 20 years ago, that social media came online.

The first social networking site to reach a global audience - called Myspace - was launched in 2003, incidently around the same time as 4chan, a social media imageboard site associated with alt-right subcultures. Myspace was quickly superseded by Facebook, initially begun as a social networking platform for Harvard students, in 2004. Youtube was launched in 2005, then bought by Google in 2006, around the same time that Twitter (known now as X, Elon Musk's platform known for its uncensored support of right-wing influencers, conspiracy theorist, and far right activists) came online.

Although not a social media platform, it is also telling that Fox News, now the most-watched cable news network in the US, was launched by Rupert Murdoch toward the beginning of Pluto in Sagittarius in 1996 with the intention to appeal to a conservative audience. Now known for its biased and false reporting, spreading conspiracy theories, disparaging the Democratic party and serving as an openly biased channel for right-wing, Republican propoganda, it nonetheless garners millions of viewers during prime time and has an outsized influence on public opinion.

All of this can be understood as a concentrated attack and deliberate distortion of an unbiased quest for truth, which symbolically is something an astrologer might expect when Pluto moves through Sagittarius, a sign typically known for its passion for the truth. Today the very idea of unbiased truth almost seems to be an oxymoron as the line between well-researched fact and opinion seems horribly blurred, if not obliterated altogether. Again when those who shout the loudest prevail, skillfully using social and intentionally biased media as their bullhorn, the road is paved for convincing con-artists to take charge. Indeed, that is the reality we face today, with seeds for the takeover planted during the Pluto in Sagittarius era, not that long ago.

The Systematic Undermining of Democracy

While neither political party in the US is above reproach, albeit each for different transgressions, the evolution of the Republican party, especially through Pluto's sojourn in Scorpio and Sagittarius is in no small measure responsible for our current state of affairs here in the US, where democracy itself appears to be on the chopping block. This is, of course, not a situation unique to the US, but given the US' long-standing persona as a global champion of democracy, it is a shock to the world order no less traumatic than the rise and fall of Nazi Germany during Pluto in Leo, or the

fall of the Soviet Union during Pluto in Scorpio, with repercussions to be played out through the remaining two decades of Pluto in Aquarius, in ways that can't fully be anticipated now.

In my last newsletter, I explored the rise of the alt-right, Newt Gingrich's Contract With (On) America, and the rise of Tea Party evangelists as factors moving the Republican party toward a darker political style, where hardcore political polarization, non-cooperation, and other radical tactics inevitably escalate to the kind of violent confrontation that we saw in the insurrection and attack on the capital in January 2021.

This trend continued during Pluto in Sagittarius, gradually morphing into an overt effort to change and largely undermine the infrastructure of democracy itself. During Pluto in Sagittarius, Republicans became far less interested in representing constituents, passing laws or even governing, and far more obsessed with assuming absolute control at any cost. They were no longer looking for political victory; they were orchestrating a coup, which has largely already taken place. Politics has always been a dirty game, but it has also relied on certain rules of engagement, which were tacitly if begrudgingly agreed to by both sides. Not so long ago, this was simply considered the price to be paid for a bona fide democracy rooted in freedom from tyranny, and universally accepted as a price worth paying. Now, this is no longer true.

As one veteran columnist describes our current predicament (<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-06-13/republican-party-radicalization-ronald-reagan-donald-trump>):

It seems clear that the antidemocratic drift of the GOP will continue, regardless of Trump's role. He didn't cause its crackup, he accelerated it. He took ownership of the party's base, and gave license to its racists, conspiracists, zealots and even self-styled paramilitaries, but that base had been calling the shots in the Republican Party for some years, spurred by conservative media. Now, emboldened, its activists will carry on with or without him.

The groundwork for this accelerating coup probably ultimately encompasses the Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations of Pluto in Virgo; Watergate during Pluto in Libra; and the Reagan Revolution during Pluto in Scorpio. But the actual breach in the garrison wall took place during Pluto in Sagittarius, starting in earnest with the impeachment of Democratic president Bill Clinton.

A Republican Fishing Expedition

Clinton was only the second president in US history to be impeached. Articles of impeachment were approved by the House Judiciary Committee against Nixon during the heat of Watergate, but never went to a vote, since he wound up resigning before that could happen.

The only other impeachment in US history that did proceed to a vote was against Andrew Johnson, the Democratic successor to Abraham Lincoln. Johnson was impeached for violating the Tenure of Office Act, intended to restrict the president from removing certain officials from office without the consent of the US Senate.

Johnson had fired Lincoln's Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who often sided with Radical Republicans, then hell bent on eradicating slavery, while Johnson, the Democrat favored a more lenient, blind-eye approach to the former Confederate States. The Republicans retaliated with impeachment proceedings, which ultimately failed, but which nonetheless strengthened the balance of powers between the executive and legislative branches, and consequently democracy itself.

How times have changed. One hundred thirty years later, the radical Republicans of our day, infiltrated by white supremacists and evangelical Christians, would hardly ever put their lives or careers on the line to eradicate slavery. Nor are they interested in strengthening democracy.

Although Clinton did not help matters much with his slippery denial of charges, the proceedings against him were a concentrated partisan effort by the Republican party to oust a popular Democratic president, essentially a fishing expedition designed to catch him in a compromising bind.

It began in 1992 with an investigation by Republican Laura Jean Lewis, then a senior investigator for Resolution Trust Company, of Clinton's real estate dealings in Arkansas when he was governor, a scandal eventually referred to as Whitewater. Just before the 1992 election, Lewis made a criminal referral to the FBI naming the Clintons as witnesses in another case involving their business partners. Although the FBI determined that the case had no merit, Lewis continued to pursue it, making several additional referrals between 1992 and 1994, which were also dismissed. She eventually testified before the Senate Whitewater Committee, which failed to find the smoking gun they were looking for that would implicate the Clintons in any wrongdoing.

Later, Lewis was herself investigated for various wrongdoings, including the misuse and mishandling of classified material, secretly recording conversations with her colleagues, and use of government equipment for personal gain, before becoming chief of staff of the Pentagon Inspector General's office in 2003 as part of the George W. Bush administration.

Meanwhile, in 1993, deputy White House counsel, Vince Foster, a childhood friend of Clinton, committed suicide. A number of investigations, including by the FBI, Independent Counsel Robert Fiske, and the US Senate, all confirmed that Foster's death was by suicide. And yet theories of a cover up by the Clinton administration were persistently spread by Republicans, particularly by conservative businessman Richard Mellon Scaife, who spent \$2 million of his own money on the Arkansas Project, created to discredit Clinton by any means possible. The Arkansas Project had also been involved in encouraging continued investigation into Whitewater. Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr, who took over from Fiske, began investigating Foster's death along with Whitewater in 1994. It took Starr until 1997 to also conclude that Foster's death was a suicide.

In 1994, the Arkansas Project also began pursuing a third potential scandal that could lead to Clinton's downfall - a series of reports from Arkansas State troopers that they had arranged sexual liaisons for Clinton during his tenure as governor - an embarrassing spectacle that eventually became known as Troopergate. In 1994, Paula Jones - who first came to light as one of these affairs through the efforts of the Arkansas Project - filed a lawsuit accusing Clinton of sexual harrasment when he was governor of Arkansas, two days before the statute of limitations ran out.

Jones was defended by a Washington lawyer, a self-styled "conservative feminist" named Susan Carpenter-McMillan, who wasted no time smearing Clinton widely in the press while trying the case. The case went through a series of civil suits and appeals, and eventually wound up in the Supreme Court, where it was dismissed for lacking merit. The case was eventually settled in a lower court in 1998.

In the meantime, however, it came to light that Clinton had lied under oath about another affair with Monica Lewinsky, and this eventually became the rationale for an expansion of the investigation into his real estate dealings and Foster's death by Republican Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr. After a series of legal wranglings by Clinton's lawyers failed to have the charges of perjury dismissed, Clinton was impeached by the House on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice, but failed to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority in the Senate to convict him on either count.

The Starr Report was instrumental in laying the groundwork for Clinton's impeachment. Meanwhile, Starr himself was criticized for overstepping his bounds in consulting with lawyers for Paula Jones, advising them in their separate sexual harassment suit, that in his opinion sitting presidents were not immune to civil lawsuits - a clear conflict of interest.

Fast forward to 2020, and Starr was also on the legal team representing Donald Trump at his first impeachment trial. While serving this function on the other side of the political fence, he contradicted various arguments that he had used in 1998 to argue for Clinton's impeachment. He also claimed that he was wrong to have called for impeachment against Clinton for abuse of executive privilege and efforts to obstruct Congress. This is typical Republican strategy of arguing on both sides of an argument when it is politically expedient to do so.

Meanwhile, to finish the story back in 1999, two months after his acquittal, Clinton was cited by Republican federal district judge Susan Webber Wright for civil contempt of court in his "willful failure" to obey her orders to testify truthfully in the Paula Jones case, which just would not die, despite the fact that it had been dismissed when Jones failed to demonstrate any damages. To settle the matter with Judge Wright, Clinton agreed in a plea bargain to a five year suspension of his Arkansas law license, and to pay a \$25,000 fine in exchange for the dropping of criminal charges.

During the proceedings itself, polls showed that two-thirds of the American public essentially saw the blatant political assassination for what it was, and could not support his impeachment or conviction. By the 2000 election, however, after a Republican campaign that continued to question Clinton's moral character, honesty and integrity, public opinion began to swing in the other direction. Clinton's Vice President and Democratic candidate for President Al Gore tried to distance himself from Clinton during the campaign, but could not, and this became a major factor in his defeat.

The Radicalization of the Judiciary

Having said that, although he ultimately lost the election, Gore actually won the popular vote by over half a million votes. The election itself was so close that it came down to one state, where the gap between parties was so narrow that it

required a recount by state law. Florida's Supreme Court had ordered a statewide recount of all undervotes, 61,000 ballots that the tabulation machines had missed, and various pundits and Monday morning quarterbacks have since speculated that depending on how the recount was conducted it could have gone either way. What happened instead was that upon a petition from the Bush campaign, the US Supreme Court voted 5-4 to stop the recount and let the final results stand. With this decision, Bush won the state with slightly more than 500 votes. Then in the winner-take-all system that is the electoral college, Florida's additional 25 electoral votes gave him 1 more than the 270 necessary to win the election.

Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Anthony Kennedy and Antonin Scalia, all voting against a recount, were all appointed by Ronald Reagan; Chief Justice William Rehnquist, also voting against a recount, was appointed by Richard Nixon, and appointed Chief Justice by Reagan to replace retiring Justice Warren Burger, who was appointed Chief Justice by Nixon.

Historically, the long-term track record of the Supreme Court is complex, with justices on the left and the right, at times voting against expectations. And until relatively recently, the Supreme Court has been considered to provide a reasonable source of checks and balances on presidential power, with justices generally voting as their professional consciences dictated. That is changing.

It is changing in no small measure, because generally right-leaning Republicans have appointed more justices to the court. Since Lyndon Johnson, Republican presidents have occupied the White House for 32 years, and appointed 16 Supreme Court justices who were subsequently confirmed; Democrats have held office for over 22 years, and appointed only 5 confirmed justices, less than a third. In 2016, Republicans refused to confirm Obama's appointment of Merrick Garland, arguing that the next president should have that right. In 2020, just before Biden got elected, Republicans argued instead that the sitting president - Donald Trump - should have that right, which he exercised by hastily nominating Amy Coney Barrett, who was also hastily confirmed by a Republican Senate.

This judicial aggression by Republicans has precipitated a rightward drift to the Court, noticeable in cases such as *Bush vs. Gore*, *Citizen's United vs. Federal Election Commission* (in 2010, which opened the door to unlimited corporate spending in US elections), *Shelby County vs. Holder* (in 2013, which struck down portions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965), *Rucho vs. Common Cause* (in 2019, which ruled that claims of gerrymandering of Congressional districts were beyond the jurisdiction of federal courts), *Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health Center* (in 2022, overturning *Roe vs. Wade*, and ending the federal right to abortion); *West Virginia vs. EPA* (in 2022, which limited the EPA's authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions); *Sackett vs. EPA* (in 2023, which narrowed the scope of the Clean Water Act of 1972); *Students for Fair Admissions vs. Harvard University* (in 2023, which effectively ended affirmative action); *Loper Bright Enterprises, Inc. vs. Raimondo* (in 2024, which eliminated the Chevron deference principle and facilitated legal challenges to rules and regulations issued by federal agencies) and *Trump vs. United States* (in 2024, granting broad immunity to Trump and all future presidents from criminal prosecution for all official acts). While the full list also includes some progressive victories, it is easy to see an acceleration of these conservative decisions, which have radically changed the political landscape, in just the last three years (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Supreme-Court-of-the-United-States>).

Federal district court nominations are also skewed by Republican activism. The current federal court system includes 505 justices appointed by Republican presidents, with only 360 appointed by Democratic presidents. Both Barack Obama and Joe Biden were aggressive in trying to rectify these imbalances, but even after their impressive efforts, Democratic nominations to federal district courts lagged behind Republican nominations by about 60-40. The imbalance is especially skewed in the First, Fifth and Eighth Circuit Courts of Appeals, as well as the US Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, and numerous District Courts. These imbalances are likely to increase during the second Trump administration with additional vacancies among federal judgeships certain to occur. (https://ballotpedia.org/Current_federal_judges_by_appointing_president_and_circuit).

While there is no guarantee that a federal judge will always vote the way the president nominating him wishes that he or she would, Trump has been stymied by the courts system, and since his second term began has displayed a troubling pattern of attacking judges and courts for rulings that he disagrees with. This creates an atmosphere of tension within the judicial court system, and further threatens its independence (<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/his-own-words-presidents-attacks-courts>). We can be sure that his administration will take special care to nominate justices he believes will be loyal to him personally, as he has done throughout the executive branch and within all institutions in which he has the power to influence the hiring of personnel.

We will have to see how this plays out, but for the moment, we can note that the attempt to deliberately politicize the appointment of federal judges in a position to provide checks and balances to an authoritarian presidency began during Pluto in Sagittarius (which rules the judiciary). The last Republican president of Pluto in Scorpio - George Bush, Sr. - appointed 10 federal judges; his son - George Bush Jr. - the first Republican president of Pluto in Sagittarius - appointed 111, with federal appointments overall during Pluto in Sagittarius skewed by a factor of 4 to 1 (121 Republican nominations; 30 Democratic nominations).

In the meantime, many of the underhanded tactics used by Republicans to gain unfair advantage in a decreasingly democratic system of government - extreme gerrymandering, voter suppression, the dominance of dark money, the undermining of independent federal agencies, and the granting of presidential immunity for criminal behavior while in office among them - have all been made possible by this rightward surge in judicial balance, begun in earnest during the Pluto in Sagittarius years.

Global Mobilization to Mitigate Climate Change

One unintended consequence of the 2000 election, which some would argue was stolen from Al Gore, who should have rightfully been the 43rd President of the United States, was that it freed him up to pursue an alternate career that was, in the end, of equal if not greater consequence. Since 1989, he had been making flip chart presentations aimed at alerting the public to the threat of global warming. After his lost election, these efforts were ramped up significantly, resulting in a 2006 documentary directed by David Guggenheim called *An Inconvenient Truth*. The film was both a critical and commercial success. It helped to significantly change the

conversation around our current climate crisis around the world, and gave the international environmental movement a much needed second wind.

In 1997, Gore had helped broker the Kyoto Protocol, which built on the previous work of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, signed by 154 nations in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 at what became known as the Earth Summit. The Earth Summit, while a well-intentioned recognition that something must be done, had no specifics, nor did it require specific commitments of its signatories. The Kyoto Protocol went further, and set individual targets for each member country to meet by 2008 - 2012, the first commitment period.

It also established registry systems for reporting and assessment of compliance. It was basically market-driven, intended to stimulate the development of a green economy, which it was hoped would in turn foster improved living conditions and help alleviate poverty in developing countries, as well as more specifically lower greenhouse gas emissions globally an average of 5% below 1990 levels. A fund was also established to help developing countries increase resilience to the effects of climate change. It was, all in all, a rather ambitious undertaking, which including the first transition period, spanned the Pluto in Sagittarius years. At the time, it was hailed as the most significant environmental treaty ever negotiated, although its execution since then has since fallen short of its promise.

During this first transition period, 41 industrialized countries and economies in transition made specific commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The US, the world's leading emitter of greenhouse gases was not bound by the treaty, because the US Senate failed to ratify it. In fact, before the Kyoto Conference itself, the Republican-controlled US Senate passed the Byrd-Hagel resolution by a 95-0 vote. The resolution declared that the United States should not be a signatory to any protocol that mandated the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions unless it also required reductions from developing countries during the same time period. Since the Kyoto agreement was not mandatory, the US, according to this resolution, was not required to do anything to reduce greenhouse gases.

The second largest emitter of greenhouse gases at the time (now the largest), China was considered a developing country, and as such, was not bound by the treaty either. In the minds of many, this made the protocol hopelessly flawed, even with the modest goal of reducing emissions by 5%, which others argued was insufficient to do much to mitigate climate change at all. In reality, even those countries that had set a sincere intention to reduce their emissions within the first transition period, were found to be falling short of their goals a few years later.

Despite all that, it was a beginning which focused the world's attention on a major environmental issue that could only be solved with global cooperation, and those efforts have continued since, albeit with the same checkered results.

Meanwhile, the consequences of climate change continued to make themselves known in dramatic ways throughout Pluto in Sagittarius, along with the ongoing cost of continuing to rely on fossil fuels for our primary energy source. In 1997, an international air pollution disaster, caused in part by fires in Indonesia (among the three largest fires in the last two centuries) covering an area of more than 1,200,000 square miles, caused about \$9 billion in damages. Among these damages was a deadly airline crash caused by the invisibility of smoky skies, that killed all 234 aboard Garuda Indonesia Flight 152.

In 1999, a blackout in Brazil, caused by a lightning strike, left 75 to 97 million people without power for up to 3 months, at the same time that an investment crisis left little money for spending on maintenance and expansion of the power grid.

In 2000, torrential rains in Africa lead to the worst flooding in Mozambique in 50 years, killing 800 people; Hurricane Michelle hit Cuba, the strongest tropical cyclone to make landfall on the island in 49 years and the costliest at \$2 billion in damage; and Hurricane Catarina, the first ever South Atlantic hurricane landed in Brazil in 2004, destroying 1,500 homes and damaging about 40,000 others.

In 2002, a Greek oil tanker spilled 60,000 tons of oil off the coast of Spain, in the worst environmental disaster in the history of the Iberian peninsula.

Also in Greece, in 2007, in the aftermath of a heatwave in the Balkans, at least 11 people died from heatstroke, while about 200 wildfires broke out nationwide, and the country's electrical grid collapsed due to excess demand.

Meanwhile, here in the US, in 2000, 250 million gallons of coal sludge were spilled in Kentucky, an event that is considered a greater environmental disaster than the Exxon-Valdez oil spill of 1989.

In 2003, a software bug in the alarm system at the control room of FirstEnergy caused a massive blackout in NE and Midwest US and Ontario, Canada - the second most widespread blackout in history, affecting 55 million people.

Also in the US, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, killing about 1,400 people and causing \$108 billion in damages.

All of this occurred in the face of mounting climate change denial, particularly by Republicans in the White House and in both houses of Congress.

The Rise of Genetic Engineering and the Alteration of Our Food Supply

A last theme worth exploring in relation to the Pluto in Sagittarius years is a series of ventures at the frontiers of human knowledge, building on slowly moving discoveries that suddenly accelerated and then within a relatively short amount of time, completely revolutionized various areas of human endeavor.

The first of these ventures revolves around the practice of genetic engineering. While genetic engineering has technically been around for a very long time, known for thousands of years as selective breeding, major scientific breakthroughs in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought the practice into a controversial limelight. Recombinant DNA technologies allowing unprecedented genetic manipulation by humans in the laboratory were used to produce the first transgenic organism in 1973. By 1994, just before Pluto entered Sagittarius, the first genetically modified food - the Flavr Savr, a tomato engineered to extend its shelf life - was released into commercial production by Calgene, a Monsanto company. In 1995, the Bt potato, the first pesticide producing crop, also a Monsanto product, was approved by the EPA and the FDA in the US. By the end of Pluto in Sagittarius, 11 transgenic crops were routinely grown commercially in 25 countries, led by the US, Brazil and Argentina.

Critics and political activists have objected vociferously to GMOS (genetically modified organisms) on ethical, environmental and economic grounds. Scientific consensus continues to affirm the value of genetic engineering, while public opinion remains divided. The US, in particular, has bent over backwards to promote and encourage commercial development and exploitation of genetic engineering technologies in food production, while the European Union has continued to err on the side of caution, with most other countries in between.

Currently, it is estimated that about 92% of US corn, 94% of soybeans, and 94% of cotton (from which cottonseed oil is produced) is genetically engineered, and that upwards of 75% of all processed foods in US supermarkets contain one or more genetically modified ingredients (<https://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/issues/311/ge-foods/about-ge-foods>).

Meanwhile, Monsanto in particular has been quite aggressive in intimidating and litigating against farmers attempting to grow food without its Roundup-ready seed, whose crops have been contaminated by pollen drift or other causes outside of their control. For better or worse, this rapid revolution has essentially altered the way we produce and process food on this planet, all within the span of Pluto's 13-year passage through Sagittarius.

The Rise of the Biotech Industry and Its Attendant Medical Revolution

Along with this transformation, a parallel development occurred as genetic engineering also gave rise to new developments in the field of medicine. As with applications to food and agricultural products, the antecedents for these developments stretch back to antiquity, and yet during Pluto in Sagittarius there was both an acceleration of new developments and a quantum leap in what was becoming possible.

In 1988, only 5 proteins from genetically engineered compounds had been approved as drugs by the FDA (most notably the development of synthetic insulin with which to treat diabetes); ten years later in the middle of Pluto in Sagittarius this number had reached 125, and with that acceleration the biotech industry was born. In 1994, at the beginning of Pluto in Sagittarius, the biotech industry as a whole had generated about \$6 billion; by 2008, that figure was closer to \$750 billion.

As with genetic engineering of food, a great many ethical concerns were raised at the beginning of this curve. After Dolly the Sheep became the first animal to be cloned from an adult cell in Scotland in 1996, the general public began to be aware of possibilities for the manipulation of human genes that were as frightening as they were compelling. In 1997, the Clinton administration banned all federal funding for the research into human cloning, and in 1998, the European Union set even stricter standards for all such future research.

And yet, as with genetic engineering, and with all new technologies - such as is already proving true with AI in the Pluto in Aquarius years - new technologies carry their own momentum which often proves unstoppable. What was considered science fiction in the 1970s was rapidly becoming science in the 1990s.

By 1998, the first line of human stem cells was produced, generating a firestorm of ethical concerns, since human embryos are destroyed in the process of producing

them. By 2001, US scientists had created its first successful clone of a human embryo, and genetic intervention of medical conditions using stem cells was inevitable. In 2009, at the beginning of Pluto in Capricorn, the FDA had approved the first clinical trial designed to test a human embryonic stem cell-based therapy.

At first the main goal of biotech researchers was to produce naturally occurring therapeutic molecules in larger quantities than could be produced by natural sources. But by 2001, the Human Genome Project had published its first draft of the human genome sequence, with the final draft, claiming 99.99% accuracy was published in 2006. Increasingly as the genetic code behind various illnesses began to be revealed, the rapidly emphasis shifted to using this information to intervene at the genetic level, sometimes with biotech medications, at other times by insertion of genes encoding a needed protein directly into a patient's body through gene therapy. Other biotech firms focused on the production of monoclonal antibodies capable of reversing the course of disease. In 2008, by the end of Pluto in Sagittarius, the principles of RNA technology that eventually led to the Covid vaccine controversy of 2020, were in place. The rest is history continuing to unfold in a way that is changing the medical profession as drastically as a more general form of genetic engineering has changed our food system.

The Search for Extraterrestrial Life and Its Implications for the Future of Human Civilization

A last area in which human endeavor seems to have dramatically accelerated during the Pluto in Sagittarius years was in the unlikely area of space exploration. I say unlikely because the conventional wisdom seems to be that our efforts in this area peaked during the Moon walk in 1968, during Pluto in Virgo, one quarter cycle before, and then died in 1986, during Pluto in Scorpio, when the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded a minute into its flight, killing all crew members aboard. This, however, is anything but the truth.

On the wave of the collapse of the Soviet Union during Pluto in Scorpio, there was a rather dramatic period of international cooperation in the exploration of space, at first between the US and Russia, but eventually involving Canada, Europe and Japan as well. The seeds for this were planeted in the decades preceding, but the actual implementation of the vision occurred during Pluto in Sagittarius with the establishment of an international space station. In 1995, the first US astronaut rode into space aboard a Russian launch vehicle and later that same year, the US Space Shuttle Atlantis docked with the Russian Mir space station for the first time. In 1998, the Space Station Intergovernmental Agreement set forth the primary framework for international cooperation among the parties, and since then its entire operation has become an extraordinary experiment involving 15 countries. Following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the future of the program has been put into limbo, although for the moment, the station remains in operation.

In addition to this international experiment, numerous missions by the US and other individual countries were launched throughout the period, to planets in our solar system and beyond. Most of these included a quest for water and/or possible signs of life.

In 1998, a NASA probe around the Moon discovered enough frozen water in polar craters to support a human colony and a rocket fueling station. Numerous NASA

missions were launched to Mars throughout the period, including several exploratory landings: a Pathfinder space probe in 1997, Mars Odyssey in 2001, MER-A and MER-B in 2004, and Phoenix in 2008. In 1996, NASA announced that the Allan Hills 84001 meteorite from Mars could contain evidence of primitive life forms, but further tests were inconclusive.

In 1996, a Galileo Space Probe indicated possible water on Europa, one of Jupiter's moons, and then in 1998, discovered a liquid ocean there under a thick crust of ice.

In 2004, NASA sent the unpiloted Cassini-Huygens spacecraft to Saturn, later reporting a geyser-like emission of vapor, dust, and small ice crystals on Saturn's moon, Enceladus, indicating the possible presence of water.

Also in 2004, NASA sent the unpiloted spacecraft Messenger to study Mercury, with additional fly-bys of Venus in 2007 and 2008; and the New Horizons space probe to Pluto in 2006.

The only sour note to this golden age of rapidly expanding knowledge of the solar system was another disaster in 2003, when the Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrated upon re-entry, killing all seven astronauts on board - a parallel disaster to the Challenger explosion in 1986. As with the earlier disaster, Space Shuttle flights were suspended for two years, while safety corrections were made, before the program resumed.

In addition to US efforts, the European Union, Japan and India all sent exploratory missions to the Moon in 2003, 2007 and 2008 respectively. Japan and the EU sent missions to Mars, in 1998 and 2003 respectively. The EU sent a spaceprobe into orbit with Venus in 2006. Throughout the period, China a series of Shenzhou spacecrafts, modeled after the Soviet Soyuz, after signing a deal with Russia in 1995 for the transfer of its technology. Shenzhou 1 took place in November 1998; Shenzhou 20 is scheduled for November 2025.

In addition to exploration within the known solar system, numerous Kuiper Belt objects, many of them attaining status as dwarf planets were also discovered during this period: Ixion in 2001, Quaoar in 2002, Sedna in 2003, Eris and Makemake in 2005 and Gonggong in 2007, among them. The First extrasolar planet (51 Pegasi b) orbiting a main sequence star was discovered in late 1995. The first atmosphere (of hydrogen) detected on an extrasolar planet was found on Osiris in the constellation Pegasus, 157 light years from Earth in 2001. Gliese 581c, a potentially earth-like extrasolar planet habitable for life, was discovered in constellation Libra in 2007.

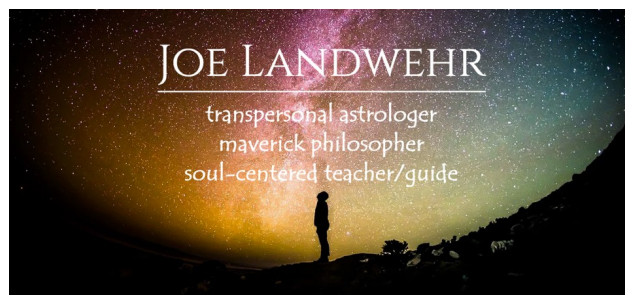
Beyond all these nationally sponsored missions and discoveries, Pluto in Sagittarius also saw the rise of the private space industry. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos formed Blue Origin in 2000; Tesla CEO Elon Musk formed SpaceX in 2002; British business magnate Richard Branson formed the British-American company Virgin Galactic in 2004. These and other companies are changing the nature of space exploration, which used to be the sole province of governments. Many of these companies do have government contracts, but they are primarily interested in for-profit ventures in space tourism, research and infrastructure development that have no direct oversight by or accountability to government agencies.

Of these companies, SpaceX is particularly important in terms of its close ties to NASA (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/musk->

government-contracts-spacex-tesla-taxes-b2703141.html). Even while Musk was supposedly cutting US spending in his quasi-official position at the head of DOGE, Space X and Tesla have been (and continue to be) the beneficiary of nearly \$21 billion in contracts with the US government. Of that money, \$14.6 billion is from contracts with NASA, covering everything from supply runs to the International Space Station to the design and testing of a new moon lander. SpaceX also has another \$5.6 billion worth of contracts with the Department of Defense, of a less defined nature, but possibly linked to the production of spy satellites. The SpaceX subsidiary Starlink and Tesla also have numerous contracts with the US government, most of which are poised to increase, rather than decrease during the Trump era, despite the public unraveling of the bromance between Trump and Musk.

Meanwhile, as other privately owned space companies (including SpaceX), have been focused on space tourism - taking wealthy patrons into space - since 2001, SpaceX also has plans to colonize Mars. Aside from its immense potential profitability, such a venture is also seen as a back-up plan, ensuring the survival of the human race, should conditions on Earth become inhospitable to human life. This has been a long-standing fantasy of Elon Musk, who has the resources to turn it into reality. He plans to launch the first of five uncrewed Starship missions to Mars in 2026 to test whether or not these spacecraft could be reliably landed intact on Mars. Assuming that goes well, he plans to send the first crewed flights to Mars in about 4 years, with a plan for up to 500 missions by the end of 2033. If he is ultimately successful, then it is not unlikely to assume that colonization of Mars could become a defining feature of Pluto in Aquarius, which ten years later ends in 2043.

Stay tuned for the next exciting episode as we look at how the lessons of Pluto in Sagittarius continue to matter today; and how Pluto's passage through Capricorn brings us to the cusp of our current learning curve.



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