

# Wave the Bloody Shirt



It's not hard to find examples of politicians exploiting tragedy for cheap emotional gain. But it's hard to imagine a more cynical episode than the stunt trump pulled last night during his congressional address.

On January 28, just a week into the trump reign, our Commander in Chief green lighted a military raid in Yemen. By most accounts, the president\* took a cavalier attitude toward approving the mission. He could not be bothered to attend to the mission in the Situation Room, preferring to stay in the residence and tweet about trivialities. Leadership.

During the raid, CPO William Owen died, and six other SEALs were injured. An estimated 29 civilians died in the raid, including children. A \$75M Osprey helicopter was disabled; airstrikes were called in to destroy the aircraft to keep it from falling into enemy hands. No strategic intelligence was attained, no strategic hard target or combatant captured or killed. It was a clusterfuck from start to finish.

This woman, Carryn Owens, lost her husband. Her grief is beyond my imagination.



I'm confident in saying that it is also beyond the president's \* imagination. Or interest, really, in anything other than its value as a show biz gambit that allowed him to bask in one minute and forty-four seconds of standing ovation tribute, tribute that may have been intended for Mrs Owens and her late husband, but which he treated as his due. He even made her stand up a second time, this woman consumed in mourning and public grief, reduced to a prop in a sick game to let this sick man believe himself to be a popular leader.

Watch the tape. She wants to go away and hide. Now look at trump: the sick bastard is beaming, smiling, waving thumbs up as though he had just had a protester dragged out of one of his rallies. The world is just a reality show set to him. He could care fuck. all. about human feelings, about suffering, about yearning. Give him an applause line and everything is fine.



This is what sociopathy looks like<fn>And isn't Speaker Ryan the cutest little puppy dog?</fn>

Trump quoted the Bible. Trump said "Ryan" was looking down from heaven, and "he is very happy because I think he just broke a record" for the ovation. Huzzah.

Now, take a look at the Joint Chiefs of Staff during this revolting spectacle.



RETWEETS  
2,023

LIKES  
3,965



Ever since the botched mission, trump has swung between claiming everything went great to blaming the failure on Obama. And then a few days ago, he tried to hang it around the necks of the military.

*"This was something that was, you know, just – they wanted to do," Trump said. " And they came to see me and they explained what they wanted to do, the generals, who are very respected."*

*"And they lost Ryan," Trump continued.*

Not one of those generals would deny their responsibility for CPO Owens' death. It's part of the role of leadership. (And by the way, Don, to you his name is Chief Petty Officer Owens. His friends call him Ryan.) The look of disgust on these faces is telling.

Trump, a pretend leader, is never to blame, never culpable for any failure. When things are going well, it's all to his credit, just as when an audience is on its feet cheering, it is because of his magnificent greatness.

FWIW, CPO Owens' father has refused to meet with the president\*, claiming that the questions surrounding the approval and execution of the raid make it impossible for him to face trump. He has called for a full investigation, saying, "Don't hide behind my son's death to prevent an investigation."

The schmuck from Queens went one step further. Not only will he hide behind CPO Owens' death to avoid an investigation, he is waving a good man's bloody shirt to wrap himself in applause and adoration.

It's difficult to imagine a more revolting manipulation of genuine grief. Somehow, though, I think we have a long way to go before we hit bottom with this guy.

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# It Did Happen Here



We took down our Clinton sign yesterday.

I accept what is. I'm beyond denial and bargaining. No Fairy Unicorn is going to swoop in and alter the Electoral College. No White Knight from the FBI is going to clap irons on the Trump cabal for back channel dealing with Russia. There is no miracle in the wings.

President Trump. Get used to it.

But even with acceptance, the anger and depression remain.

I'm angry at those who voted for an obvious fraud, a man of low morals and boundless greed, a man who plays footsie with racists and bigots.

I'm angry with a press corps that enabled this two-bit grifter in their quest for ratings, that spent more time and ink on Clinton's email server than on every other policy issue combined. And today I am infuriated by exhortations that I should reach out to Trump supporters, to try to understand and respect their reasons for voting the way they did.

Well, I'm trying to understand. The respect part will have to wait for someone to articulate a reason that is not bound up in abject falsehood, logical fallacies, or outright racial animus. So far, not a single Trump voter I've listened to has

even come close.

I am angry that such a simple choice was shrouded in overthinking and fantasy. It really should not have mattered who the Democratic nominee was. Decent people vote against a racist, misogynist, lying fear monger. Period. How goddam hard is that?

Back in 1991, when David Duke first took off his pointy white cap and ran for governor of Louisiana, convicted felon Edwin Edwards ran against him. The bumper stickers read: "Vote for the Crook. It's Important." The voters understood. Anything was better than a Klansman. Edwards won.

This year, David Duke crawled out from his rock and ran for Senate. And endorsed Trump. And crowed that "Trump's agenda is our agenda". Trump winked and nodded and claimed to not know who David Duke was. The Klan endorsed Trump. The neo-Nazis, the alt-right, they endorsed Trump. Trump was Taking America Back, just like they have been trying to do all these years.

And the KKK is holding a Trump victory parade this weekend in North Carolina. In 2016. Welcome to Trumpland.

All this country needed to do was vote against the racist and his enthusiastic followers. That was apparently too much to ask. No matter the rationale, this is who the Trump voter endorsed:





And these folks:



I am angry because people I know, and people in my family, voted for these people. The rationale may be gussied up in talk about values, or economic insecurity, or because Obama was coming for their guns. Maybe people just don't "trust"

Hillary Clinton because emails something Benghazi. But that's all noise masking the real signal: these voters, including many of my friends and family, have given the hate crowd a resounding thumbs up.

Worse: these knuckle draggers know it, and they are ready to act on their long-held and cherished beliefs about their "heritage". The mask is off. The meanest among us need no longer fear the jackbooted thugs of political correctness, a term that seems to really just mean "don't be such a dick to people", but which the throwback crowd finds an intolerable intrusion on their God-given right to "say what they really mean".



Already, the first glimmers of life in Trumpland are coming into focus. It ain't pretty. A rough beast has been set loose. School children are chanting "build that wall" in class. Children of color are being told to "start packing [their] bags" to "go back where you came from". It's happening right here, in my little island of liberal sanity. It's happening all over the country.



My anger is impotent. Nothing about it feels empowering or productive. "We" are outnumbered and the balance of power is exaggeratedly against the values we hold dear. It just feels depressing. Their anger has been given license. A savage darkness is upon the land.

"Time" executed its annual "fall back" maneuver over the weekend. Not yet 5 p.m. and dusk is creeping in. The days are shorter. Trees are going bare, plants browning and withdrawing. The weather here in the Panhandle has turned decidedly brisk, dry and dusty with predominant cloudiness.

We are deep into the autumn, the season aka Fall, and there is a heartless winter close on its heels. It is the twilight of a year that has been filled with capricious cruelty from the start, laying low a parade of heroes and legends, a reaper's roll call that framed this election with an appropriately morbid echo. This week, hope died for millions of people. It is the greatest loss yet.

Today is Veteran's Day, a day where we thank those who have served for all they have sacrificed for this Nation. It's a day to remind us that we have, collectively and historically, faced many dark hours and survived – some of us – to tell the tale.

It is also a day to recall that many did not survive, that some events are so benighted that we can be sure people will suffer and die. The calendar will cycle round, but I fear that the political climate is going to get much worse before it gets better. Coming off of eight years of actual progress, this is a bitter damn pill.

I hope I'm just being a drama king here. I hope that some spark of inclusiveness, tolerance, and kindness emerges in the nation's Trumpian soul, but we know none of that is coming.

Wednesday evening we went out for a bite and found ourselves among friends (and not the Trump-voting kind). It reminded us

that we are a part a very fine community, that we are not alone where we are. This is a comfort, not at all small. But it's not enough to cocoon in our safe zones. Too many people out there do not have this luxury.

It falls upon us to expand our notion of community, to ensure that people who need a safe harbor know where to find one. To do what we can at the local level to work for social justice, to help protect our neighbors from cruelty. To call the powerful to account, and to put ourselves on the line in solidarity with people whose lives are on the line because 49 million people put them there.

This is our call.

I'm pissed.

I'm depressed.

But I am not beaten, motherfuckers. Who's with me?

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## **Validation is Not Just a River in Egypt**



Validation. Some people crave it. Some could care less. Most of us probably fall in the muddy middle, swinging willy nilly between craving and caring less.

Sometimes, Your Narrator is reasonably content – yea, even

fully satisfied – to do something well and enjoy the doing for its own sake. A well-written post. A nicely turned phrase. A lyrical, melodic line on the guitar. Mastering a new tune. That sort of thing.

Sometimes, YN is r/c – yea, even f/s – with a household chore done well. A clean toilet. A well trimmed hedge. Freshly cut grass. And so on.

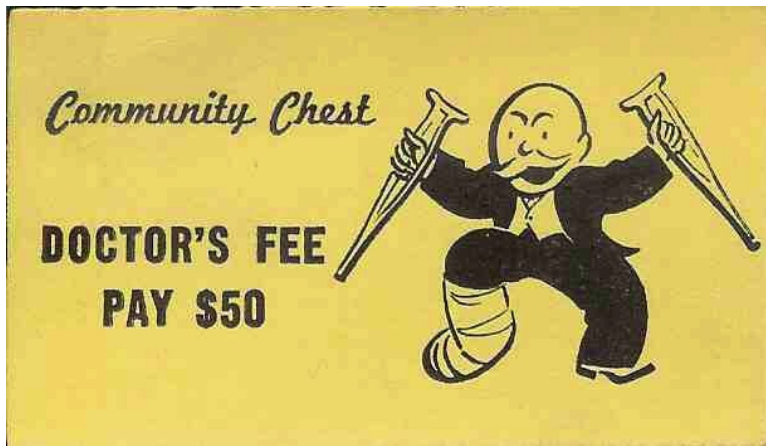
Doing something well truly offers its own rewards. Really. No, really.

Usually.

Other times, invisibility seems to have taken over. The good post, the nicely turned melody, the simple chore...if a positive act falls alone in the forest, has it really happened? And even if it has...so the fuck what? Somebody pay attention!

So knowing well that the doing should be sufficient, what swings me to the opposite pole of neediness, of craving the validation? Is this a fundamental weakness? Or is a core need to be *seen* – and dog forbid, maybe even appreciated – a natural part of the human condition, something as inevitable as hunger or thirst or lust or a desire to lay on the sofa and watch old movies with bags of chips and such?

Whichever is true, the need for validation combined with an ongoing absence of validation is one of my triggers, that set of conditions that puts you off your game, in a funk, down the hole, around the bend, {your preposition here} the {wherever}. And then it gets dark.



It's been a rough year. The remnants of that damned tick have at last receded into the memory mist, but employment remains elusive. (The news stories we've heard about how tough it is for someone over 50 to get work are not fairy tales. It just plain sucks out there.) Some plans and hoped-for outcomes fell to the ground. Other plans and h/f/o hang like undropped shoes. Hope began to feel banal and futile; at best, hopelessly naive. Pessimism became its own reinforcement.

The prescribed remedy – go ahead and do the work anyway – is easier said than done. Some people always seem to be able to muster the energy to persevere. (Or perhaps it only seems that way?) I'm not one of them. Sometimes, despair wraps its bony fingers around my neck and stops me in my tracks.

But.

Things are looking up, it's always darkest just before the dawn, I can see clearly now, &c. The feelings of dread pass, and of course they always have, so no big surprise there. It's not as though I've been lying on the floor counting ceiling tiles. Life has been pretty busy. There is an article commission – a musicological exposition that has never been made in such detail or with such care – that has occupied most of my writing time. It's going to be pretty great. I know this because I've had two good readers give me the reality check. Validation! I knew (or thought) it was good, but the doubt crept in. The Greek Chorus knew just which tune to call

to undermine confidence.

I really sweat blood on this article. A true labor of love, very important to me in so many ways. And now that it's turned the corner, I've got my belief back. I can't wait for everybody to see it.



Along with that, a couple of other h/f/o have turned my way. And even though none of it amounts to a nickel of income – yet, anyway – there are glimmers of light down the tunnel that might not be an oncoming train. Not gonna get too far out on the optimist limb just yet, but there might be, dare we even whisper it...hope.

Maybe even for the i2b blog. Or maybe not.

My first post at this little bloggy vineyard went up around a year ago. My last post went up about two months ago. Up until that last one, Your Narrator had been doing pretty well, keeping the entertainments rolling and the rants roiling. And then...

And then, the well just seemed to run dry. The Writer could not. Or did not. It's unclear.

One of a thousand cuts: it seemed that there was no real interest in the blog. A handful of visitors here and there, the gears wouldn't catch. Attention must be paid!



Mostly, the blog has been a great experience. My writing improved week to week, and at its (my) best, the knowledge that I had to generate something more or less reasonably kind of readable and interesting triggered me to be more engaged with the world, always on the eagle-eye to spot another cool story.

But dammit, now I needs me some validation.



Who? Lil ol me?

I had to turn off the Comments function on the blog because I was getting 50-60 spam comments on every post. Actual reader comments averaged well below one per post. Not validating!

But strangely enough, the most validating of all comments ever posted here actually came from a spam bot. To wit:

*What i don't understood is in reality how you are not actually a lot more neatly-appreciated than you may be right now. You are so intelligent. You know therefore significantly in terms of this subject, made me in my view consider it from a lot of various angles. Its like men and women are not fascinated except it is something to accomplish with Girl gaga! Your individual stuffs excellent. At all times care for it up!*

That was from Tanya3756dc from Uzbekistan. God, how I miss her unwavering support.

Eventually, I added a **Donate** button to allow grateful readers to show their love – measured in dollars, naturally. That generated exactly zero responses. Zee. Row. Along with the other rejections and dead ends (real and perceived), it all just felt pointless. I was a young Alvy Singer facing the inevitable outcome of an expanding universe. Homework? What's the point?

But I'm open to reasonable persuasion. This is your chance to ensure that the hard-hitting social commentary and enlightening cultural musings that you've grown accustomed to over the past year keep on coming. After all, as Tanya3756dc reminds us: "At all times care for it up!"

Do you, patient reader, love me the way my T3756dc does?

If you send me an email (rob at jakelegg dot com) – imploring me to, for god's sake, don't stop the blog, the world will be a bitter and barren place without it – I will take your plea under advisement and perhaps send you a commemorative tote bag. (No, I won't.) The more you beg, the more you fawn, the more your vote will count.

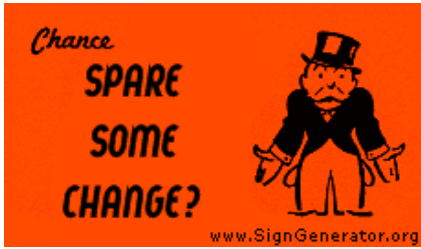
If you really want your vote to count, click on that **Donate** button at the top of the right column and drop a few shekls in the tip jar, I will come to your house and recite a blog post written specifically for you while I massage your neck and shoulders with essential oils. (Much as I'd love to, no. Not really.) Remember, the more you give, the more you truly love me.

I've done some calculating, and I figure if ten of you donate about \$5000 each – or if 50 of you donate \$3246 (that's less than ten dollars a day!) – everything is gonna work out fine, the blog will continue, my dog will get to eat again, and I can get a new coffee mug that does not leak.

Give, or the blog gets it.



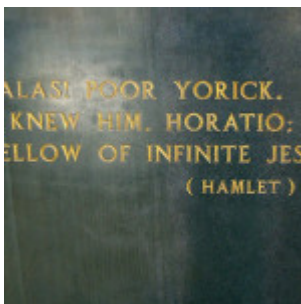
Operators are standing by.



Actually, the jangle of coins makes me nervous. Quiet folding money only, please.

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## Infinite Quest



Sept 12 – David Foster Wallace died 7 years ago today. Maybe died isn't the right word, though it's at least partly true. He killed himself; took his own life. This fact still makes me sad and angry and scared all at once.

The best way to counter these feelings is to read some of his work.<fn>If for no other reason than that his work is the only

part of him that we have any legitimate claim to. Angry at the guy? Shit. I owe *him*. His essay from the January, 1996, issue of *Harper's*, which became the title piece from his collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, is the single funniest and most "readable" Readable here connoting 'something not too weird or difficult'. In fact, everything I've read by DFW – which is pretty much everything that's been published plus a glimpse of a few of his notebooks at the Whitney Biennial – is terrifically readable and worth every second it takes to look up unusual words, refer to yet another footnote, or just to re-read certain sentences over and over because they are just too wonderful to take in at once. piece in his entire output. I've just finished it for the eleventieth time and it's got me hungry for more. "*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*" is up next, and it's sort of an essential piece for anyone interested in culture and the challenge of retaining our humanity amidst a dazzling array of shiny objects.

I find it by turns amusing and annoying that DFW is characterized as a fetish object of a hipster crowd way younger than me, that he somehow is the prototypical voice of 'this' generation. This is bullshit: DFW is of my generation. Our lives tracked more or less the same time span, though mine has endured a tad longer. In *Infinite Jest*, he wrote of a future that is more or less now; really, though, he was writing about a *present-then* that was the product of the culture of our childhoods.

It also pisses me royally that *Infinite Jest* is known as *that* book that everybody bought and nobody ever really read, save for a few precious bookish beardos. This tired trope likely arose from critics and other malcontents who felt the need to have/express an opinion but were too lazy to bother reading the actual book – thus inoculating themselves from accusations of laziness, because duuuude, it's like *Finnegan's Wake*, knowwhatimean? Pass the Bret Easton Ellis and the McInerney.

It's easier to chew.</fn> I grant the first 60-80 pages are little disorienting, but after that, it's a roller coaster thrill machine that is every bit as addictive as *The Entertainment* that serves as the book's macguffin. A book about addiction that is thoroughly addicting? Even better, a book that has its characters agonizing over and within their addictions while you, the reader, begin to wonder if maybe you ought to put the book down and eat or shower or go to work or something, but no, screw that, keep reading. That's some badass legerdemain right there, people.

DFW is enjoying something of a mass(ish) cultural *moment* right now. There's that movie with Jason Segal as Wallace, based on an interview transcript from the mid-90s, that has DFW's surviving family suffering their own case of the fantods, suggesting with no small amount of justification that this kind of filmifaction of DFW is exactly the kind of mediated nonsense that he, DFW, would have hated and mocked with relentless passion. But no matter: it is, as the DC punditocracy like to say about every fabricated scandal, "out there", and it thus seems to have generated a strange<fn>Strange because he died only 7 years ago, though it feels much longer, likely because he had been mostly silent for so long.</fn> *renaissance* in DFW fandomry and scholarship.<fn>Which, if you've read any of the scholarly work to emerge so far, is barely distinguishable from the fandomry, save a certain highly recognizable tone of pedantry apparently essential for academic publication.</fn>

Curiously coincident with the movie was the publication this year of an enormous brick – suitable for a guy who wrote the epically brick-like *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* – called *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, which presents around 1000 pages of essays, articles, short stories, and novel excerpts, and, most importantly, a few hundred pages of previously unreleased and obscurely published early works. My favorite part of the book are the notes and class syllabi he used for



teaching. But mostly, I think, the people who bought it were, like me, yearning to place another DFW brick on their shelf, knowing full well that this was the closest we were going to get ever again.

I know there are other writers out there who deserve as much attention as I give Wallace. In fact, there are several who actually do get even more because of the relatively small output Wallace left behind.<fn>Rushdie, Moseley, Delillo to name a few. When do these guys ever sleep?</fn> But there is something about Wallace that drills right into my core.

Years ago, long before his death, someone asked me why I liked DFW's writing so much. I said it was because reading him was like hearing my own voice inside my head if I had a better vocabulary and were much smarter. We were roughly the same age, grew up with the same general atmosphere of teevee, consumption, weird conformist culture, and tennis. Reading him felt like reading myself.

That was a pretty comforting thing, having someone out there grappling with the same kinds of angsty, middle-class, white boy problems, taking things on from a somewhat nerdly perspective but also bringing that weird Carlinesque outlook to the absurdities that our cossetted upbringing seemed to cultivate like mushrooms. Well, it was comforting right up until the day he killed himself. Then it became fucking terrifying.

Because here was the crux: here's this guy, representing my mutant tribe of people who grew up inside the privilege and the comfort and the sheer whiteness of it all and *knew* that there was something amiss, that this incessant anomie was no accident, was actually not just a product *but was actually a feature of* the environment. And he saw it and got it and reported on it in a way that let us hold our deformity up for inspection and find some kind of strategy for dealing with the back-and-forth of we-have-no-right-to-complain-but-

jesuschrist-things-sure-are-a-bundle-of-fuck. And in doing so, he won accolades, received a Guggenheim and a truck full of other awards. Had a fucking endowed Roy Edward Disney Chair in Creative Writing created just for him at Pomona College – dude looked like he had the world on a string.

And so one hears the news and goes, damn, that guy had it going on and I'm barely stringing a decent sentence or two together outside of my little whore gigs where I'm crafting allegedly pithy messages that are making the world a safer place for insurance adjusters or some such. And we're the same age and have to wonder, his voice sounded just like my voice (if I were smarter &c.), and my shit's nowhere near as together as his shit (the imagination at this point has its own engine and power source), but he took a look at it all and decided, nope, too much to bear, and took lights out. How do I measure into this equation?

Add to this that so far in that year two of my friends had taken the same way out, and that less than two months later *another* friend – all of us around the same damn age, mind you – made the same choice, and I gotta tell you: I was terrified.

We pretty quickly started hearing about how his was the end battle of a long life struggling with clinical depression, and that his family were not all that surprised by the event. I re-read *Infinite Jest* that fall and was struck by how much sadness was there. It was just bone-breakingly sad to read, so I read it again to see if I had been insane to recall the book as so wickedly funny. Turns out it was both – both incredibly funny and horribly sad and filled with almost too much truth about how we try to deal with a world that serves up both sad and funny in such apparently random and heaping servings. And that – crucially – that the only apparent strategy that made any sense was to find some way of connecting, really, with someone else. And then, to accurately describe how fucking hard that can be, to make that connection, not matter how much

you know you should.

And so what does he – or at any rate, his thoughts that made it to a page – what do these ideas do for me *now*? I mean, crafty fking christ, if the guy who wrote the way you thought you'd like to write ends it all so gruesomely, what's left?

Well, first I was left confused and scared and, frankly, pretty depressed. <fn>His death was not the cause of my depression, per se, but that this should have come along at a time when life was what h/we would refer to as *fraught* made things even more, well, fraught.</fn> But later – and especially after *The Pale King* came out, unfinished warts and all – I saw something else. Instead of thinking I might write that way if I were a “real” writer – and not just some ho for hire – I started to think about maybe, sort of, maybe actually being a real writer, maybe doing the hard work required to figure out if you have anything to say and the ability to say it.<fn>The jury remains forever out on this question. Ask any writer sitting in front of a blank page.</fn> But then time passed and nothing came of it and I ignored this kind of insistently annoying Epiphany-like thing that refused to be ignored. Which of course, the trying to ignore that which refuses to be ignored, only engenders more angsty fraughtness, &c.

And then, I endured *My Apocalypse*, and a couple of weeks after I left hospital, I was lying on the sofa in a dark room when – and I shit you not – when an entire written piece started to appear full-blown on the ceiling.<fn>And yes, there were footnotes on the ceiling, and complete sentences, too.</fn> And I rushed to the computer for like the first time in 4 months and sat down and wrote *The Chronicle* in its entirety and started “publishing” it in pieces on the Facebook machine. And lo, it was rough and sloppy and funny and tender, and my Epiphany-like thing just smiled quietly to itself.<fn>Some of you have read *The Chronicle*. It is under revision, but you got the bloggy first draft blast. You'll tell your grandkids

someday.</fn>

And here we sit, faithful denizens of this here bloggy vineyard – which by no coincidence whatsoever takes its title and *raison d’ecrir* from *The Pale King* – the words tumbling down like a poorly constructed simile on a shifting foundation of soft metaphors. And I thank DFW for his words – his Work, for it was truly some audacious labor – and for his ability to stave off his demons for as long as he did. He gave us what he had. I can miss him and wish he were still writing for us, but I can’t be angry at him for checking out. Just sad. And, oddly and thankfully, a little inspired.

So today, hot on the heels of National Suicide Prevention Week<fn>Which irony would not be lost on D.</fn>, I’ll thank all of you to remember, also, too: shit’s never as dark as it may seem. When the imagination creates it’s own dark engine and gloomy source of power, reach out. Keep going. The quest, it is infinite.