Before any of us knew who they were or why they had done it or what they might do next, one thing seemed certain: the Boston Marathon bombers were cowards. Overlooking the expressway leading into the city, an electronic billboard flashed the message the day after the bombing, complete with a hashtag: #COWARDS. It felt good to see and say this, a bitter and righteous rebuke to those who would terrorize us. The billboard came courtesy of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 103, and everyone from president Barack Obama to governor Deval Patrick to the management of the Boston Red Sox echoed the sentiment. Something similar had happened a dozen years earlier, when president George W. Bush and many others called the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks cowardly.

Calling terrorists “cowards” felt good for a few reasons. First, the word satisfies the need to lay offenders low with the nastiest term of abuse, and without resorting to obscenity. There is nothing worse than a terrorist, goes the rough logic, and, as long tradition has it, there is nothing worse than a coward. The cowardly begin the book of Revelation’s list (21:8) of those damned to burn forever in a lake of fire, and they are the most despicable souls in Dante’s *Inferno*. The Scottish philosopher Adam Smith and the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard held that no one
was more contemptible than the coward, an idea that figures as
a kind of refrain in the surrealist Russian novelist Mikhail Bul-
gakov’s *The Master and Margarita*. Samuel Johnson asserted that
cowardice is “always considered as a topic of unlimited and licen-
tious censure, on which all the virulence of reproach may be law-
fully exerted,” and it is not hard to find—in just about any age
or place—evidence to support that assertion. Here is how Urban
dictionary.com defines *coward*:

1. One who is not brave
2. One who fears many things
3. The most insulting word known to man

Calling the 9/11 and Boston Marathon terrorists “cowards” also
felt good for the perhaps childish reason that the terrorists had
used the term first. In his 1996 fatwa calling for holy war, Osama bin Laden said that American withdrawals from Vietnam and then Beirut had shown that, if attacked, the United States would abandon its commitments in the most cowardly way. The “most disgraceful case,” he said, came in Somalia in 1993. After seventeen American soldiers were killed and one pilot’s body was dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, U.S. forces withdrew. This was truly cowardly, in bin Laden’s view—but then so was Muslim inaction against American military presence in Muslim countries. To remove the stain of this cowardice, he said, righteous Muslims were obliged to attack Americans wherever they were: “Terrorizing you [Americans], while you are carrying arms on our land, is a legitimate and morally demanded duty. . . . The coward is the one who lets you walk, while carrying arms, freely on his land and provides you with peace and security.” Not attacking the Americans would be cowardly, and because the Americans had shown themselves to be cowardly, bin Laden reasoned, there was reason to hope that attacking them would bring triumph.3

Finally, calling the terrorists “cowards” was comforting. Three days after the Boston Marathon bombing, when the suspects were identified and came out of hiding, armed and dangerous, my family heard the sirens and helicopters. The suspects lived a mile away from us, and that night they killed a Massachusetts Institute of Technology police officer just down the road, then hijacked a car and engaged in a deadly firefight with the police. It was a scary time, but as we followed the orders to “shelter in place”—a phrase we’d never heard before—it was reassuring to think of the suspects as cowardly. If they were cowardly then they were scared too—vulnerable, weak. And thinking them weak somehow made another new phrase—“Boston Strong”—seem more convincingly true.
It felt good to call the terrorists “cowards,” but whether it was accurate to do so was another matter. Applying the label to the 9/11 attackers provoked objections from an ideologically diverse group of commentators, from William Safire to Susan Sontag. Dinesh D’Souza raised his objection on Bill Maher’s TV talk show *Politically Incorrect*. Strictly speaking, the terrorists were not cowards but “warriors,” he said. Maher agreed, claiming that Americans “have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from two thousand miles away. That’s cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building—say what you want about it—it’s not cowardly.” This conversation was broadcast less than a week after the attacks—not a time for speaking strictly. Raw-nerved viewers were outraged, sponsors balked, and soon *Politically Incorrect* went off the air.

The episode provoked considerable debate about freedom of speech and patriotism. Much less discussed was the question central to the controversy: What is cowardice? The *New York Times* made short work of the matter. Noting that linguists agreed that *cowards* was not the right word for the 9/11 terrorists, the newspaper cited *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*’s definition of the word *coward*: “a person who lacks courage, especially one who is shamefully unable to control fear and so shrinks from danger or trouble.” The importance of fear to the idea is reflected in the root of the word, the Latin *cauda*, meaning “tail.” The cowardly creature “turns tail” to escape danger, or “puts its tail between its legs” in fear and submission. The cowardly lion of the film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) dramatizes the coward’s tail problem in comical fashion when he tries to run even from the wizard, who is supposed to give him courage. “I’d be too scared to ask him for it!” says the lion, fiddling anxiously with his tail, wiping tears away with its brushy tip. Dorothy and the scarecrow stop him from fleeing:
DOROTHY Come on.
LION *(absently tugs at his tail with his paws and gives a wail of fear)*
Ow-oo!
SCARECROW *(as they turn)* What happened?
LION *(bawling)* Somebody pulled my tail!
SCARECROW You did it yourself?

Yet simply having a tail is not regrettable. A tail helps one maintain balance; it can signal danger to one’s mates. Fear itself should *not* be feared but valued as a natural, adaptive response to danger. It is *excessive* fear that makes the coward. Before passing *cauda* on to English, the Old French added the usually pejorative suffix *-ard*.

That cowardice manages to pull its own tail frustrates the effort to come to a clear schematic understanding of it. Aristotle says that the coward is both excessively fearful and deficient in confidence; the reckless person has the opposite problem (not enough fear, too much confidence); the courageous person observes the mean in situations that inspire fear or confidence. It is tempting to visualize the vice–virtue–vice continuum as in this table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>recklessness</th>
<th>courage</th>
<th>cowardice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>too little fear</td>
<td>fear/confidence properly proportioned</td>
<td>too much fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>too much confidence</td>
<td></td>
<td>too little confidence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But, blurring the left end of the table, Aristotle also observed that reckless men are usually in fact cowards; they pretend to courage, ardently hoping for danger to come—only to shrink when it does. On the right side of the table, the Earl of Rochester’s eighteenth-century observation that “all men would be cowards if they durst” turns cowards into the envy of the brave. Yes—giving in to one’s
fears can sometimes be said to require real daring. Suicide, the ultimate act of cowardice in the opinion of some, is in the opinion of others the ultimate act of courage.\textsuperscript{10}

Kinds of cowardice can conflict, too. The Roman general Fabius Maximus was mocked for his strategy of keeping to the hills, near enough to Hannibal to threaten him, but never engaging him directly. When Fabius’s friends advised him to take the fight to the enemy, he said, “In that case, surely, I should be a greater coward than I am now held to be, if through fear of abusive jests I should abandon my fixed plans.”\textsuperscript{11} Excessive fear of being or seeming cowardly can lead to cowardice.

Both Aristotle and the dictionary underemphasize the fact that, unless one’s responsibilities require one to face danger, avoiding it may not be cowardly but instead prudent. Military codes such as the one articulated in the American \textit{Manual for Courts-Martial} remedy this vagueness by defining cowardly conduct as the “refusal or abandonment of a performance of duty before or in the presence of the enemy as a result of fear.”\textsuperscript{12} The emphasis here is my own: the term \textit{duty} specifies a standard against which we can judge alleged cowardice. The coward fails to do something he is supposed to do.

Duties can themselves conflict, of course. One might be called to duty as a patriot to take up arms to defend one’s country, and also as a pacifist to refuse to do so, for example; and what to one person is a sacred duty—to engage in civil disobedience, say—is to another a crime. But the idea of duty can help us detach cowardice from courage. Some philosophers have argued that the terms occupy “different ethical matrices,” that while a courageous act is by definition “supererogatory”—done beyond the call of duty—cowardice must be understood \textit{within} the context of a corresponding duty.\textsuperscript{13} The U.S. military follows this thinking in its definition of cowardice and in stipulating that the Medal of Honor should
be given only to someone who has “distinguished himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty.”

Keeping cowardice in mind also helps us understand the common tendency to label the “mere” fulfillment of certain duties as courageous. We seem to do so when we refrain from calling those who do not perform such duties cowardly. Consider, for example, the actions of the New York City firefighters and police who went into the World Trade Center on 9/11. Because we do not call the firefighters and police who left the World Trade Center cowards, we can call those who remained inside courageous. Their performance of their duty was, if not technically supererogatory, nonetheless extraordinary.

Still, speaking strictly about these matters has always been very difficult. In Plato’s *Laches*, after discussing the many and sometimes contradictory ways men can be courageous or cowardly, Socrates says, “Then what are cowardice and courage? This is what I want to find out.” But the protracted conversation about courage that follows proves inconclusive—“Then we have not discovered,” Socrates says toward the end of the dialog, “what courage is”—and cowardice is not even mentioned again. Paradoxes abound in discussing both the virtue and the vice, and the vice may be all the more difficult because the attribution of cowardice often results from the perceived lack of some other quality (courage, as the dictionary says, or a sense of duty, honor, or shame). Surely William Ian Miller is right when he asserts that the idea of cowardice may be so various in its manifestations, and in the judgments they provoke, “that a unitary concept can never be sufficiently refined to get the moral call right.”

But it is possible to settle on a working definition: A coward is someone who, because of excessive fear, fails to do what he is
that the idea has lost currency is shown dramatically by a Google Ngram graph that depicts the declining use of the word *cowardice* as a percentage of all words appearing in books in the Google corpus in English between 1800 and 2008 in figure 0.2. The downward slope of *coward* is less steep, falling by half instead of 80 percent, suggesting that the insult— #COWARDS, as the billboard read—endures more strongly than discussion of the idea supposed to do. As we dig into military examples as well as artistic and philosophical explorations of cowardice, this definition will be challenged in just about every way. We will see a form of cowardice characterized by too little fear. We will see duty deemed absurd. We will occasionally see cowards to whom we cannot refer with the masculine pronoun. Like a good coward, though, this baseline formula will give way and live to fight another day, and it will help us see how the idea of cowardice has endured—even as it has lost currency.

That the idea has lost currency is shown dramatically by a Google Ngram graph that depicts the declining use of the word *cowardice* as a percentage of all words appearing in books in the Google corpus in English between 1800 and 2008 in figure 0.2. The downward slope of *coward* is less steep, falling by half instead of 80 percent, suggesting that the insult— #COWARDS, as the billboard read—endures more strongly than discussion of the idea...
behind it. Many nearby terms have fallen into almost complete disuse. The 1864 edition of Noah Webster’s dictionary offered an elaborate taxonomy that sounds, to twenty-first-century ears, antediluvian: “Coward denotes literally one who slinks back like a terrified beast with tail between the legs. A craven is literally one who begs off, or shrinks at the approach of danger. A poltroon is a mean-spirited coward. Dastard has become one of the strongest terms of reproach in our language.” The Google Ngram graphs for craven, poltroon, and dastard slope down toward nothing, and the latter two terms today seem cartoonishly archaic.

As the graph shows, mentions of cowardice have risen over the last decade, and the uptick for the term coward is sharper still. My suspicion is that these increases come from instances of the kind we saw after 9/11 and the Boston Marathon bombings. This is a time-honored way of speaking—linguist H. W. Fowler lamented in 1926 that “the identification of coward & bully has gone so far in the popular consciousness that persons and acts in which no trace of fear is to be found are often called coward(ly) merely because advantage has been taken of superior strength or position”—and if enough people misuse a term for long enough, the misusage becomes usage. But a shift in usage suggests that it is not only the currency of cowardice in the sense of circulation that has fallen; the value of that currency has also been debased.

Good riddance, one might say. Cowardice is not the worst thing; reflexive contempt for it is. Too often, conduct is wrongly judged cowardly when it is really prudent or even courageous. Such misjudgment has done terrible damage, most obviously in the undeserved punishment of those men (it is almost always men) who have suffered, even unto death, for their alleged cowardice. Less obvious but far more pervasive harm has been caused by those
who fear being judged cowardly and so behave recklessly. Were it not for such fear, history would be a much less bloody affair.

“Cowardice,” which in this skeptical view needs quotation marks around it, is an instrument that the powerful use to get the less powerful to do awful things to others and to themselves. The powerful are subject to the force of this instrument too. The fear of being or of seeming “cowardly” has led to savage acts and terrible blunders. Witness the tyrannically sure sense of cowardice that helped the 9/11 terrorists steer their way to slaughter. They were sure that Americans were cowardly and that to turn from battle against them would be cowardly too. The U.S. government’s response reflected a similar feeling: the terrorist acts were cowardly, and such cowardice meant that the terrorists and their associates (the people and even the countries who “harbored” them) could be subdued if they were attacked—and it would be cowardly not to attack.

Opponents of the cowardly label can argue that the logic of cowardice is brutal and barbaric. When it comes to judging alleged cowards, those who are “unable to control fear and so shrink from danger or trouble,” as the dictionary puts it, should not be judged morally but instead helped therapeutically. By definition, they are “unable”—they cannot help it. Cowardice is a misunderstood condition of some kind, often an understandably adverse reaction to trauma. The coward in this light is a victim being crushed by authority, the state, and his peers. The very idea of cowardice is one of his victimizers.

Yet proponents of the contempt for cowardice can say that just because the idea has caused harm does not mean we should throw it out altogether. It asserts the importance of duty, the effi-
cacy of will, and the power—the very existence—of human agency. Properly understood, the idea of cowardice posits a moral self to be held responsible for its choices, and helps clarify and enforce moral thinking. The coward casts a shadow that throws heroes into relief, giving them substance and credibility. In a report describing a battle in which his unit had performed well, Confederate lieutenant general William J. Hardee observed that it would be “unjust to my brave and enduring soldiers, who stood by their colors to the end, if I did not mention that many straggled from their ranks or fell back without orders.” Without the possibility of cowardice, courage becomes a hollow notion, a booster’s term.

Cowardice, in fact, seems to overshadow courage in soldiers’ minds. As combat theorist S.L.A. Marshall noted after World War II, “Whenever one surveys the forces of the battlefield, it is to see that fear is general among men, but to observe further that men are commonly loath that their fear will be expressed in specific acts which their comrades will recognize as cowardice. The majority are unwilling to take extraordinary risks and do not aspire to a hero’s role, but they are equally unwilling that they should be considered the least worthy among those present.” The wish to avoid the imputation of cowardice has led many to do their duty to the larger group, even the most awful duty of killing and being killed. In his study of the motivation of American Civil War soldiers, James M. McPherson notes that in their letters home men “wrote much about cowardice because they worried they might be guilty of it, and they desperately wanted to avoid the shame of being known as a coward—and that is what gave them courage.”

In a similar vein Horace follows his famous testament to patriotic courage—“dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” (it is sweet
and proper to die for one’s country)—with far less famous but no less important lines:

*mors et fugacem persequitur virum*

*nec parcit imbellis iuventae*

*poplitibus timidove tergo*

[death hunts down also the man who runs away and has no mercy on the hamstrings of the unwarlike youth and his cowardly back]²⁵

The ancient Roman poet operates on the same principle as the Union and Confederate soldiers do: the shame of cowardice reinforces the call for sacrifice.

Exactly, says the other side in this debate: that is the problem. Shaming people into sacrifice has caused uncountable horrors.

This debate never ends, and it is joined both in individual cases of alleged cowardice (should we condemn—or sympathize with—the accused?) and in broader debates about peoples and policies. Sometimes the debate occurs within us, in our ambivalence when we struggle to make a judgment about someone’s (sometimes our own) conduct in the face of fear.

Thoughtfully considering cowardice requires not only navigating between the two sides in this debate, but also steering around “cowardly” figures such as terrorists, who are often joined in the public mind by serial killers, rapists, pedophiles, and other predatory criminals. Calling such figures cowardly exploits the contempt we feel about cowardice, but it is also, as we have seen, of doubtful accuracy. The more significant problem this usage presents is that it
makes cowardice seem a rare and monstrous thing. #COWARDS: the flashing billboard applies to them, but not to us.

Sensational villains distract us from thinking about the idea in a way that is both more quotidian and more profound, a cowardice more common but also less commonly contemplated. The classic depiction of those guilty of this sort of cowardice occurs very early in Dante’s *Inferno*. Just past the sign that says to abandon all hope, just after he passes through the gate of hell, Dante hears a noise so terrible it makes him weep. In languages familiar and strange, from voices whispering and shrill, hoarse and anguished, come lamentations and rages, cries and sighs, whimpers and screams; there is also the sound of slapping—an awful, woeful din. Dante learns from his guide Virgil that these are the abject wretches who lived with neither disgrace nor praise. Paradise won’t have any such shades tainting its beauty, and the Inferno is barred lest the condemned have someone to glory over. (This is what makes them the most despicable—in the root sense of being-looked-down-upon—souls in the *Inferno*.) So there the numberless cowards are, not across the Acheron in hell proper, but in the anteroom, hell’s squalid lobby, where they are doomed to wait for all eternity.26

The terms Dante uses for these souls have been variously translated as “neutrals,” “trimmers,” “opportunists,” and “nonparticipants,” as well as “cowards.” The last is the best catchall word, for their sin is cowardice in its most basic form: the fearful failure in the duty to live.27 In contrast to those who perpetrated spectacular, evil acts, these souls were cowardly because of what they did not do or say—even because of what they failed to see, or know, or be. Between the spectacular criminals and the tepid, timid neutrals
lies the paradigmatic candidate for the examination of cowardice: the soldier. Aristotle said that the fear of death in battle brings out the truest courage, because battle’s dangers are greater and more noble than any others. Millennia after Aristotle, war is still extraordinarily representative in our imaginations. William Ian Miller asserts that a book about courage that did not pay attention to war would be “hollow at its core.” The same can be said for a book about cowardice. Even though the relevance of cowardice to combat has increasingly been called into question, the cowardly soldier remains the poster boy, so to speak, for cowardice.

Stories of cowardice can be extraordinarily rich in conflict and drama, yet, aptly enough, they have been honored mostly with evasion. It may be the most common and profound human failing, but cowardice remains strikingly underreported and underanalyzed. A Spanish proverb observes, “De los cobardes no se ha escrito nada” (Of cowards, nothing is written). In his long career as a military historian, Max Hastings has noted, “No US or British regimental war diary that I have ever seen explicitly admits that soldiers fled in panic, as of course they sometimes do.” The details of the cases of 306 soldiers executed by British authorities for cowardice and desertion in World War I were kept a state secret for over seventy years. During the recent campaign for pardons for these men, J. Douglas Harvey, an activist in the campaign as well as a memoirist and World War II veteran, wrote that the topic of cowardice is one “that has largely been ignored in the annals of British military history. In fact, to unearth evidence pointing in that direction takes considerable effort and would in the end prove inconclusive, for so many of the pertinent records have vanished or been deliberately
destroyed. Cowardice and its reasons will probably always remain a deeply obscured subject.” The world does not allow cowards any fame, Dante’s guide Virgil tells him, and even Virgil himself, giving the tour of sin that is the *Inferno*, does not want to discuss the numberless cowards who dwell just inside hell’s gate. “Let us not speak of them,” he tells Dante.

Cowardice seems complicit in its obscurity. Kierkegaard, who may have made more of the subject than any other philosopher, noted how it is not “noisy and alarming, but quiet” and that “there must be something wrong with cowardliness, since it is so detested, so averse to being mentioned, that its name has completely disappeared from use.” After war, when victors write history, as they proverbially do, they focus on their bravery and triumphs. If cowardice enters the narrative, it generally does so in the distance, a feature of the vanquished enemy. When war is on, cowardice on one’s own side does not get much attention, except perhaps to note its absence. In the middle of World War II, a German magazine noted that, thanks to the political education of its citizens, “cowards have been abolished. For the cases of cowardly conduct are so vanishingly rare that as exceptional phenomena they can be dealt with with exceptional severity.” Two years later, in December 1944, a front page article in the *New York Times* noted that “not a single American soldier in France has been executed for cowardice ... or any other military offense for which death is mandatory.” It was “a record believed to be unparalleled in modern war....” A little over a month later, U.S. Army private Eddie Slovik was executed for desertion in Saint Marie-aux-Mines, France, the only American executed for a military crime since the Civil War. The *Times* did not mention Slovik’s case until 1954, when a book about it was published.
Being paired with that most dramatic and attractive virtue, courage, helps cowardice hide. Usually vice gets more press than virtue. Pride draws our attention more than humility; lust is obviously sexier than chastity. But courage almost always steals the show from cowardice.\textsuperscript{37} In Siegfried Sassoon’s “The Hero,” a 1916 poem about a woman learning of the death of her son in the Great War, the officer who delivers the news tells “some gallant lies” and leaves the mother feeling proud of her “brave” and “glorious” son. But the officer leaves thinking

how “Jack,” cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he’d tried
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair.\textsuperscript{38}

Thus does courage cover for and cover over cowardice.

Cowardice is also at a disadvantage against its opposing vice, rashness. One might think they should be equally reviled but, as Johnson pointed out, rashness is “never mentioned without some kind of veneration.”\textsuperscript{39} Apparently it is better to act, even rashly, than to risk being thought cowardly. In ancient Rome, generals were never tried for “tactical stupidity,” but they were sometimes tried for cowardice.\textsuperscript{40} In the run-up to the Spanish-American War, one U.S. congressman noted, “I have no sympathy with those rash, intemperate spirits who would provoke war simply for the sake of fighting, and yet I would rather follow them, and suffer all the miseries and misfortunes their heedlessness would bring than follow those other contemptible and mercenary creatures who are
crying out for ‘peace at any price.” These remarks met with great applause.41

Why such an imbalance in our disregard for these vices? Johnson reasons that rashness is less reviled, and sometimes even venerated, because it can be seen to represent an excess of courage, and because such excess can be checked. A deficiency, such as that of the coward, is much harder to remedy. Johnson also observes that rashness and cowardice pose equal threats to “any publick or private interest.”42 This may not always be so, however, for while the enemy will likely stop the rash soldier eventually, the cowardly soldier can continue indefinitely, seeking his own safety and sowing panic as he goes, the miles of his flight, and the extent of his damage, checked only by the strength of his legs.

Narratively speaking, cowardice typically must content itself to serve as footnote or footman, fit sometimes to begin a story but rarely to feature in it. Henry Morford’s 1864 novel The Coward: A Novel of Society and the Field in 1863 begins as the young Philadelphia lawyer Carlton Brand chooses not to fight for the Union at the Battle of Gettysburg, even though it is the Confederacy’s great attempt to gain a foothold in the North and in his very own state. He confesses to his sister something he had believed about himself all along: he is a coward. But the bulk of the novel depicts Brand performing an amazing variety of brave feats. Every episode of the 1960s television Western Branded opened with the scene of a man being stripped of his insignia, having his sword broken, and being expelled from the Union Army as punishment for cowardice. The rest of the hour depicted this same man’s acts of courage.43

The scarcity of primary source material is easier to understand than the lack of scholarly work on the subject. Every other species of human baseness, it seems, has rated a monograph; the seven
deadly sins have been dissected. Yet no one has devoted a scholarly book or even a substantial article to cowardice in and of itself. Some fifteen years ago, having already written a book about humiliation and then one about disgust, William Ian Miller set out to complete a trilogy of studies of human lowliness with a book about cowardice. He found that he could not do it. His intended subject “gave way,” he wrote; “that’s what cowardice always does.” The book Miller wound up publishing makes many subtle and important points about cowardice, but it is titled *The Mystery of Courage*. A gap in scholarship and general intellectual discourse endures.

Yet although no scholarly book has been devoted to the subject, and although historical records are not plentiful, cowardice has not escaped notice altogether. Military leaders have always grappled with the challenge of preventing and punishing it. Since ancient times, philosophical contemplation of courage has often included the contemplation of cowardice as well; something similar can be said about the explorations of courage in the work of poets, playwrights, novelists, and filmmakers. Rich if comparatively brief traditions in anthropology, sociology, literary studies, cultural studies, and gender studies have examined how moral codes are conceived and applied. Psychologists and neurologists have examined how human beings experience and react to fear and trauma. The campaign for posthumous pardons that occasioned the activist Harvey’s observation that many records about cowardice have disappeared or been destroyed resulted in the release, twenty-five years before their status as state secrets was to expire, of the records of the soldiers executed by the British. Records of American court-martial cases involving cowardice are also available. And though Virgil does not want to speak of them, he does tell Dante to look
at the souls he sees in the anteroom, and when Dante presses him about why they are weeping and wailing so, Virgil relents a little, saying, “I will tell thee very briefly.”

A variety of touchstone texts and historic figures and episodes illuminate the American conception of cowardice that is the primary though not exclusive focus of these pages. Samuel Davies’s 1758 sermon *The Curse of Cowardice* and Morford’s *The Coward* announce their unusual preoccupation in their titles. Cowardice also figures centrally in Stephen Crane’s 1895 novel *The Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the Civil War*, and in James Jones’s *The Thin Red Line* (1962), a novel Jones said he wrote in order to show that “bravery” and “cowardice” have no “human reference any more.” William Bradford Huie wrote two books that focused on the topic—the nonfiction work *The Execution of Private Slovik* (1954) and the novel *The Americanization of Emily* (1959)—both of which were turned into films (in 1974 and 1964, respectively). There seems to be no such thing as a famous coward, but figures such as Eddie Slovik did achieve a kind of prominence, and men such as Theodore Roosevelt and George S. Patton had famously severe attitudes toward the cowardly. There are even a few heroes in these pages, brave men driven in part by the terrible stigma of cowardice. John Callender, for example, was court-martialed for cowardice at Bunker Hill but afterward fought with great distinction for the Continental Army. Sergeant Georg- Andreas Pogany was briefly infamous when he was accused of cowardice early in the 2003 invasion of Iraq; since that time he has become a relentless advocate for military veterans—a courageous soldier in what William James called the moral equivalent of war.

Ranging widely through such sources and sometimes revisiting them from different angles, while also striving to follow Virgil’s...
example in being brief, this book traces the diminishing significance and enduring power of cowardice on and beyond the battlefield. Chapter 1 surveys how the idea of cowardice has figured in American history, presenting a profile that, from a certain point of view, has not changed in 250 years. What Samuel Davies called a curse in 1758 retains its power to insult and provoke today. Investigating the deep roots in human history and prehistory that help explain this persistent power, chapter 2 considers also why we are so conflicted about cowardice, as well as why human culture addresses this conflict most centrally in its judgment of the conduct of men at war. Chapters 3 through 5 trace the movement suggested by the graph of diminishing mentions of the word. Focusing on duty, fear, and moral agency in turn, these chapters explore how the meaning and utility of the idea of cowardice has, especially in the past century and especially in its archetypal, military setting, faded in significance.

This development is not inexorable or universal—we will see many cases of resistance to it—but it does suggest the possibility that, without its archetypal frame of reference, the idea of cowardice has also become less significant in our everyday, civilian lives. Has a semantic shift impoverished our ethical vocabulary? This is a question that informs this book and a vision—those abject souls flailing and wailing in the Inferno—that haunts it throughout, but that comes into focus in chapter 6, which explores cowardice beyond the battlefield, in the lives of criminals and all-too-law-abiding citizens, in philosophy and religion and love, in society and in ourselves.

This is not the most pleasant topic—maybe another reason it has been avoided. To look at what cowards have done, and what has
been done to them, can be disturbing. And the topic provokes hard questions. Were bin Laden and his followers cowardly, as many Americans thought, or was he right about American cowardice? Does withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan prove his point about American cowardice, a repetition of the pattern established in Somalia, Beirut, or Vietnam? Can this pattern be traced back further, to a history of fickle American foreign policy, a lack of steadfastness characteristic of a commercial democracy largely isolated from the rest of the world, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed long ago? Is the American obsession with security itself cowardly? Far from the literal or figurative battles of geopolitics, cowardice can have an uncomfortably personal relevance. In allowing fear and self-concern to win out over the call of duty, the coward presents a sometimes disgusting case of moral failure; and contemplating others’ cowardice can push us to contemplate our own.

To face such unpleasantness requires courage, one might think. In the *Laches* Socrates urged his companions to persevere in their inquiry, “so that courage itself won’t make fun of us for not searching for it courageously.” But since Socrates died for his philosophy, applying his pronouncement to the present inquiry seems altogether too grand. It may be less grand and therefore more useful to think that cowardice would make fun of us for being cowardly in searching for it. Used well, the idea can function as a goad, humbly helpful in a way that courage is not. When Dante wavers before passing through the gate of hell, Virgil does not “encourage” him; he does not, that is, try to give him courage in any direct way. Rather, he rebukes him:

> Your soul has been assailed by cowardice, which often weighs so heavily on a man—
distracting him from honorable trials—
as phantoms frighten beasts when shadows fall.\textsuperscript{53}

This scolding steels Dante to go on.

Our worship of heroes who brave fear and go beyond the call of duty distracts us from the importance of those who simply (not easily) fulfill their duty in the face of fear—those, that is, who avoid cowardice. If it is a dangerous idea, as we shall see again and again, it is also a bracing one. More abstractly, pondering cowardice illuminates (from underneath, as it were) our moral world. What we think about cowardice reveals a great deal about our conceptions of human nature and responsibility, about what we think an individual person can and should have to endure, and how much one owes to others, to community or cause. Cowardice and cowards have something to teach us. Let us speak of them.