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Inside Mark Zuckerberg's Lost Notebook

In the early days of Facebook, Zuck kept his plans for world domination in handwritten journals. He destroyed them. But a few revealing pages survived.

I **FIRST MET** Mark Zuckerberg in March 2006. At the time, I was the lead tech writer at *Newsweek* and was working on a story about what we were calling Web 2.0—the notion that the next stage of the internet would be a joyful, participatory creation of individuals. I'd heard

about a social networking startup that was spreading like kudzu on college campuses. I wanted to learn more about it, perhaps give it a name-check in the story. Luckily, Zuckerberg, its cofounder and CEO, was scheduled to appear that month at PC Forum, a conference I regularly attended, at a resort in Carlsbad, California.

We agreed to meet at the lunch hour on the conference grounds. We sat side by side at one of the big, crowded, round tables set up on a lawn under the bright sun. He was accompanied by Matt Cohler, who had left LinkedIn to join Facebook. Cohler, unable to nab a seat next to us, sat across the table, barely within ear range.



Story Steven Levy

"Levy is America's premier technology journalist."
—Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Washington Post*

Adapted from *Facebook: the Inside Story*, by Steven Levy, to be published February 25, 2020.
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I took it in stride that Zuckerberg looked even younger than his 21 years. I'd been covering hackers and tech companies for long enough to have met other peach-fuzz magnates. But what did shake me was his affect. I asked him a few softball questions about what the company was up to, and he just stared at me. He said nothing. He didn't seem angry or preoccupied. Just blank. If my questions had been shot from a water pistol at the rock face of a high cliff they would have had more impact.

I was flummoxed. This guy is the CEO, isn't he? Is he having some sort of episode? Was there something I'd written that made him hate me? Time seemed to freeze as the silence continued.

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I looked over to Cohler for guidance. He smiled pleasantly. No lifeline.

Stumbling for a way out of the awkwardness, I asked Zuckerberg if he knew anything about PC Forum. He said no, and so, as a resident Methuselah, I explained its roots as the key industry gathering in the personal computer era, where Bill Gates and Steve Jobs would go at each other with smiles on their faces and shivs in their fists. After taking in that bit of lore, he seemed to thaw, and for the rest of the lunch he was able to talk, albeit sketchily, about the company he started in a dorm room and which had grown to 7 million users.

Though I was unaware at the time, I had joined the club of those stunned by Mark Zuckerberg's trancelike silences. Facebook VP Andrew Bosworth once called this stare “Sauron's gaze.”

Zuckerberg and Facebook got four sentences in my cover story, “The New Wisdom of the Web.” If I'd known the things that Zuckerberg hadn't shared with me that afternoon at the La Costa Resort and Spa, I might have devoted more space.

Zuckerberg was entering one of the most productive periods in his life. A few weeks after I met him, he would lay out a ludicrously ambitious vision for Facebook. In a journal with unlined 8-by-10 paper, he sketched his mission and product design and explored how a tiny company might become a vital utility for the world. In detail, he described features called Open Registration and Feed, two products that would supercharge his company.

Zuckerberg found focus in that notebook and others. In his jottings are the seeds of what would come—all the greatness and the failings of Facebook. Over the next 10 years, Zuckerberg would execute the plans he drew up there. Facebook would transform itself from a college student hangout to the dominant social media service, with a population bigger than that of any country in the world, and was on its way to having more members than any religion. Zuckerberg's gospel insisted that more and more sharing was an inherent good. In addition to bringing people together, Facebook became a source of news, entertainment, and even life-saving information. The company monetized its user base with ads, and Zuckerberg became one of the richest people in the world, his name hoisted into the pantheon of PC Forum legends.

And then came the 2016 election. Suddenly, simmering complaints about the service boiled over into anger. Facebook's most cherished accomplishments became liabilities. The enormous numbers of people who connected, “We Are the World”-style, on the service now

became alarming evidence of its excessive power. A platform that allowed the voiceless to be heard also allowed trolls to broadcast bilious provocation at ear-splitting decibel levels. It was a tool for deadly oppressors and liberation movements alike. And above all, it was an egregious privacy offender: Facebook's long-held ethic of sharing was now viewed as a honey trap to snare user data. And that data—information provided wittingly and unwittingly by all of us—was the substance on which Facebook grew fat and prospered.

Since 2006 I've been watching Zuckerberg and, over the past three years, have been writing a history of his company. I've spoken to him nine times and observed as he's adapted—and, in some ways, refused to adapt—to the most challenging circumstances. The shift in public attitudes toward Facebook mirrors the reputational fall of the tech sector itself. But Facebook's unique circumstances emanate largely from its founder's personality, vision, and approach to management. To understand Facebook, you have to understand Zuckerberg.

That isn't the easiest task. Even he admits that there's a robotic coolness to his public persona. After many conversations, he got relatively candid with me, but there was always a measure of reserve. He never forgot that I'm a reporter and was understandably protective of himself and the company he built.

But I did find one venue where Zuckerberg was utterly frank and unfiltered about his plans and dreams for Facebook, providing vital clues about the man running the world's most powerful companies. It was in the notebook he kept in the spring of 2006.



Mark Zuckerberg in Facebook's Palo Alto office in 2006, the year he wrote "Book of Change" and opened Facebook to the world. PHOTOGRAPH: ELENA DORFMAN/REDUX

AS A KID growing up in Dobbs Ferry, New York, a bedroom community north of New York City, Mark Zuckerberg loved playing games. One was a PC-based strategy game called *Civilization*, with the tagline "Build an empire to stand the test of time." Gameplay stoked a desire to learn programming. His parents, a dentist and a psychiatrist, hired a coding tutor.

Zuckerberg quickly surpassed his local public school's computer science offerings, enrolling in a graduate course in eighth grade. After his second year of high school, he asked to attend a private school with more AP and computer courses. His parents wanted him to go to nearby Horace Mann, a highly selective preparatory school, but Zuckerberg, once described by his father as “strong-willed and relentless,” preferred the more rarefied Phillips Exeter Academy. Exeter it was.

Zuckerberg thrived at the exclusive New Hampshire prep school, seemingly unintimidated that classes there might include a Rockefeller, a Forbes, and a Firestone. Besides establishing himself as a computer whiz, he was the captain of the fencing team. He was an avid Latin student, developing a fanboy affinity for the emperor Augustus Caesar, an empathetic ruler who also had an unseemly lust for power and conquest. Zuckerberg still indulged in games; his favorite was a successor to *Civilization* set in outer space called *Alpha Centauri*, in which players chose to lead one of seven “human factions” to control the galaxy. Zuckerberg always took the role of the quasi-UN “Peacekeeping Forces.” The spiritual leader of the peacekeepers was a commissioner named Pravin Lal, who opined that “the free flow of information is the only safeguard against tyranny.” Zuckerberg would later use a Lal quote as the signature on his Facebook profile: “Beware of he who would deny you access to information, for in his heart he dreams himself your master.”

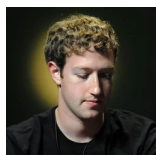
Zuckerberg entered Harvard University in 2002 and immediately ignored the things you were supposed to do at Harvard University. He spent a lot of time at a cheap wooden desk in the common room of Suite H33 in Kirkland House creating software products. He cared about these more than his grades or his classes, which he attended only occasionally.

And then came FaceMash, the “Hot or Not”-like program that encouraged students to rate each others' looks. To populate the picture database, he'd hacked into various protected university housing websites, which led to his investigation by Harvard's Administration Board. He was reportedly one decision away from suspension. People close to him confirm that he was oddly unperturbed by the threat. (At a festive “Goodbye, Mark” party, 19-year-old Zuckerberg met his future wife, Priscilla Chan. The potential suspendee was wearing party glasses with a message that made a coding pun about beer consumption.)

“He had this real self-confidence,” says his classmate Joe Green. Once, while Green was walking to dinner with Zuckerberg and Chan, Zuckerberg impulsively darted into a busy street. “Watch out!” Chan said.

“Don't worry,” Green told her. “His confidence force field will protect him.”

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Zuckerberg avoided suspension. It wouldn't be the last time he managed to skate away from the consequences of his actions. In February 2004, he cofounded TheFacebook. Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss, fellow students who had hired him to help build a social network website, eventually sued. The twins and their partner had been brainstorming for over a year, with apparently little urgency, and charged that Zuckerberg had plundered what would otherwise have been a successful idea. They had probably overestimated their own product, but it is indisputable that Zuckerberg dragged his feet on the project, stalling for around two months while brainstorming his own competing product. (Even now, despite the evidence of his own digital trail, Zuckerberg denies intentional deception: “I think I may have been conflict--avoidant,” he told me.) Facebook eventually had to pay \$65 million in cash and stock to settle the case. But that wasn't until 2008, and by then the settlement was a pittance compared with the company's multibillion-dollar valuation.

Facebook seemed charmed. Though Zuckerberg knew little about fundraising or running a business, the pieces fell into place. By the end of 2005, Zuckerberg had somehow pulled off millions in financing—his early mentor Sean Parker got things rolling with an introduction to Facebook's first big investor, Peter Thiel. He gathered a team of experienced advisers.

“Whether it's Peter Thiel or Sean Parker, these people thought they were manipulating Mark,” surmises one early Facebook employee. “I remember in hindsight thinking how genius it was that Mark convinced Sean Parker to raise all the money for him ... Mark saw Sean as a useful tool to do the job that sucks the most,” that is, fundraising.

Zuckerberg and Facebook employees at the launch of News Feed in 2006. PHOTOGRAPH: KEVIN COLLERAN/FACEBOOK

THE YEAR I first met Zuckerberg, he was living in a one-bedroom apartment a short walk from the Facebook offices, which were spread among a few buildings in downtown Palo Alto. Always with him was one of his notebooks. Those who visited his apartment, with its mattress on the floor and barely used kitchen, might spot a stack of completed journals. But most of his time was spent in the crowded, chaotic Facebook offices, where he could be seen, head down, scrawling in his crabbed, compact script. He sketched out product ideas, diagrammed coding approaches, and slipped in bits of his philosophy. Page after page were filled with straight lines of text, bullet-pointed feature lists, flow charts.

Zuckerberg was no longer doing much coding; he was focused mostly on the big picture. The notebooks allowed him to work out his vision in detail. When Facebook engineers and designers rolled in to the office, they would sometimes find a few photocopied pages from the notebooks at their workstations. The pages might contain a design for a front end or a list of signals for a ranking algorithm. He was still finding his way as a communicator, and the pages often opened up a conversation between the recipients and their boss. They also imbued Zuckerberg's thoughts with a kind of inevitability. The printed page can't be deleted or altered, or forwarded in infinitely duplicable digital form. Whiteboards appeared in abundance in every Facebook office, and employees couldn't survive without excellent dry-eraser skills. But a Zuck notebook carried the sanctity of a papal decree.

The notebooks have now mostly disappeared, destroyed by Zuckerberg himself. He says he did it for privacy reasons. This is in keeping with sentiments he expressed to me about the pain of having many of his early IMs and emails exposed in the aftermath of legal proceedings. "Would you want every joke that you made to someone being printed and taken out of context later?" he asks, adding that the exposure of his juvenile jottings is a factor in his current push to build encryption and ephemerality into Facebook's products. But I discovered that those early writings aren't totally lost. Snippets, presumably those he copied and shared, present a revealing window into his thinking at the time. I got ahold of a 17-page chunk from what might be the most significant of his journals in terms of Facebook's evolution. He named it "Book of Change."

Dated May 28, 2006, the first page has his address and phone number, with a promise to pay a \$1,000 reward for return of the book if lost. He even scrawled an epigram, a message to himself: *“Be the change you want to see in this world.” Mahatma Gandhi.*

The writing reveals an author with focus and discipline. He dated nearly every page. Some of the entries seem to have been created in a single burst of energy. They cover three or four pages of detailed road maps with neat sketches of sample screens. Nothing is crossed out. This is the work of someone in a maximum state of flow.

The Book of Change outlines the two projects that would transform Facebook from college-and-high-school network into internet colossus. On May 29, he began a page called Open Registration. Up until that point, Facebook had been limited to students, a gated community where only classmates could browse your profile. Zuckerberg's plan was to open Facebook to everyone. He diagrammed how someone could create an account. People would be asked whether they were in college, high school, or “in the world.” He mused about privacy. Could you see profiles of “second-degree” friends in your geographical region? Or anywhere? “Maybe this should be anywhere, as opposed to just your geo,” he wrote. “That would really make the site open but probably not a good idea just yet.”

Whiteboards appeared in every Facebook office, and employees couldn't survive without excellent dry-eraser skills. But a Zuck notebook carried the sanctity of a papal decree.

He wanted Facebook to be wide open eventually, but on the pages of the notebook, you could see him grappling with the implications. What distinguished Facebook from other social networks was the assumed privacy provided by its gated setup. Open Reg would throw open those gates to the masses. But would people then no longer see Facebook as a safe space? In designing Open Reg, he posted one final question to himself.

“What makes this seem secure, whether or not it actually is?” He seemed at least as concerned about the *perception* of privacy as with privacy itself.

The tension between expanding the boundaries of Facebook and maintaining an appearance of privacy preoccupied Zuckerberg's mind and filled his notebook in other ways. He took three

pages to lay out a vision for something he called “Dark Profiles.” These would be Facebook pages for people who, whether by omission or intention, had not signed up for Facebook. The idea was to allow users to create these profiles for their friends—or really just about anyone who didn't have a Facebook account—with nothing more than a name and email address. Once the profile existed, anyone would be able to add information to it, like biographical details or interests.

As presented in the Book of Change, the dark profiles would serve as a tool to motivate stragglers to sign up, perhaps through email alerts about what people were posting about them on Facebook. Zuckerberg was aware that allowing the creation of profiles for people who had no desire to be on Facebook might stir up privacy concerns. He spent some time pondering how this could avoid being “creepy.” Maybe, he mused, dark accounts might not be included in search engines.

(It's not clear how much of this came to pass. In her 2012 memoir, Katherine Losse, a former Facebook employee, wrote that in 2006 she worked on a project that “created hidden profiles for people who were not yet Facebook users but whose photographs had been tagged on the site.” She told me recently that “it was kind of peer-to-peer marketing at Facebook, directed at people who had friends on the site but hadn't signed up yet.” Another early Facebook employee confirms this, also saying that Facebook brainstormed Zuckerberg's idea of allowing people to create and edit dark profiles of friends, Wikipedia-style, but it was not executed.)

Back in 2006, when Zuckerberg ticked off the potential virtues of implementing dark profiles in the Book of Change, he mentioned user recruitment, the addition of more data to Facebook's directory, and his sense that “it's fun and kind of crazy.” Twelve years later, Zuckerberg would be questioned in Congress about whether Facebook kept tabs on people who had not signed up for the service. He punted the question, but Facebook later clarified. The company said it keeps certain data on nonusers for security purposes and to show outside developers how many people are using their app or website. But, it asserted, “we do not create profiles for non-Facebook users.”

ZUCKERBERG'S OTHER PREOCCUPATION in the Book of Change was a product he called Feed. (Trademark issues meant it would ultimately be branded News Feed.) Feed was a dramatic rethinking of the entire Facebook experiment. In 2006, to browse Facebook profiles, you'd have to jump from one to another to see if your friends had posted updates. News Feed would bring those updates to you in a stream and become Facebook's new front page.

In his notebook, Zuckerberg thought hard about what would appear on the News Feed. His priority was to make it easier for people to see what was important among the friends they had consciously connected to on Facebook. One word stood out as a yardstick for inclusion in the Feed: “interesting-ness.” It sounded innocent. “Stories need context,” he wrote. “A story isn't just an interesting piece of information. It's an interesting piece of information plus other interesting things about it AND why it's interesting.”

Zuckerberg envisioned a three-tier hierarchy of what made stories compelling, imagining that people are driven chiefly by a blend of curiosity and narcissism. His top tier was “stories about you.” The second involved stories “centered around your social circle.” In the notebook, he provided examples of the kinds of things this might include: changes in your friends' relationships, life events, “friendship trends (people moving in and out of social circles),” and “people you've forgotten about resurfacing.”

The least important tier on the hierarchy was a category he called “stories about things you care about and other interesting things.” Those might include “events that might be interesting,” “external content,” “paid content,” and “bubbled up content.” Here is where Zuckerberg sketched out his vision of News Feed as a kind of personalized newspaper. (The idea that Facebook might one day disrupt the news industry itself was apparently not part of his contemplations.)

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Zuckerberg was only getting started with this notebook. Over the next few days he feverishly outlined ideas about privacy and how Facebook would expand beyond colleges and high schools to everybody, old and young. He described the design of a “mini-feed” on the profile page that would track the activities of users—essentially a stalker's paradise. (“The idea is to produce a log of a person's life but hopefully not in a creepy way,” he wrote, suggesting that people should be able to add or delete items from their mini-feeds, “but they shouldn't be able to turn it off.”)

At one point, his pen seems to have run out of ink, and he switched writing implements. “Sweet, this pencil works better,” he wrote, and two pages later he was sketching out what he called The Information Engine, along with what seems to be a grand vision for Facebook.

Using Facebook needs to feel like you're using a futuristic government-style interface to access a database full of information linked to every person. The user needs to be able to look at information at any depth ... The user experience needs to feel “full.” That is, when you click on a person in a governmental database, there is always information about them. This makes it worth going to their page or searching for them. We must make it so every search is worth doing and every link is worth clicking on. Then the experience will be beautiful.

Designing Facebook for the future seemed to be pure pleasure for Zuckerberg. But that year he also faced his greatest agony. Yahoo, then an internet giant with considerable power, had offered to buy Facebook for a reported \$1 billion. This was a huge sum—one many founders would have leapt at with little hesitation. Not Zuckerberg. Ever since TheFacebook had exploded at Harvard, Zuckerberg had been decisive, opportunistic, and ambitious. This

decision, though, left him reeling in doubt. He was, after all, still in his early twenties, with little life experience and less understanding of high finance. He didn't want to sell, but how could he be sure things would really work out? Who was *he* to do this? Almost all his investors and employees thought it was insane to turn down that money. Making things worse was the fact that, with the spread to colleges and high schools pretty much reaching its limits, Facebook's growth had slowed. To investors and his executive team, that was another sign that selling was the obvious path.

“I definitely had this impostor syndrome,” he told me in 2018, reflecting on the Yahoo bid. “I'd surrounded myself with people who I respected as executives, and I felt like they understood some things about building a company. They basically convinced me that I needed to entertain the offer.”

He did verbally accept the offer, but then Yahoo CEO Terry Semel made a tactical error, asking to renegotiate terms because his company's stock had taken a downturn. Zuckerberg used that as an opportunity to end the talks. He believed that the two products he wrote about in the Book of Change would make Facebook more valuable.

The executives who had urged him to sell would either quit or be fired. “It was just too broken a relationship,” Zuckerberg says.

AFTER ZUCKERBERG REJECTED Yahoo, he turned to the launch of the key products he had outlined in the Book of Change. After almost eight months of intense preparation, News Feed launched in September 2006. The rollout was a disaster, and the flash point was privacy.

News Feed hit your social groups like a stack of tabloid newspapers crashing on the sidewalk. Every one of your “friends” now knew instantly if you made an ass of yourself at a party or your girlfriend dumped you. All because Facebook was shoving the information in their faces! Over 100,000 people joined just one of many Facebook groups urging the product's retraction. There was a demonstration outside headquarters.

Inside Facebook there were calls to pull the product, but when employees analyzed the data, they discovered something amazing. Even as hundreds of thousands of users expressed their

disapproval of News Feed, their behavior indicated the opposite. People were spending more time on Facebook. Even the anger against News Feed was being fueled by News Feed, as the groups organizing against it went viral because Facebook told you when your friends joined the uprising.

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Zuckerberg did not panic. Instead, at 10:45 pm on September 5, he acknowledged their complaints, albeit in a condescendingly titled blog post: “Calm down. Breathe. We hear you.” For the next few days the News Feed team worked all-nighters to gin up the protections that should have been in the product to begin with, including a privacy “mixer” that let users control who would see an item about them. The rage was quelled, and in a breathtakingly short period of time, people got used to the new Facebook. News Feed turned out to be crucial to Facebook's continued rise.

Zuckerberg seemed to take a lesson from his first public crisis, possibly the wrong one. He had pushed out a product with serious privacy issues—issues his own people had identified. Yes, a crisis did erupt, but quick action and a dry-eyed apology defused the situation. People wound up loving the product.

“It was a microcosm of him and the company,” says Matt Cohler, who left Facebook in 2008 but is still close to Zuckerberg. “The intent was good, there were misfires along the way, we

acknowledged the misfires, we fixed it, and we moved on. And that's basically the way the company operates.”

Zuckerberg became comfortable as the ultimate decider on all things Facebook. Sam Lessin, a Harvard classmate who later worked as a Facebook executive, says that multiple times he was in a room where Zuckerberg made a decision that conflicted with everyone else's opinion. His view would prevail, and he would be right. After a while, people came to accept that a Zuck decision would turn out to be the wise one.

Zuckerberg wanted growth. As he had outlined in his notebook, Facebook grew when people shared their information, and he believed that, as happened with News Feed, people would come to see the value of that sharing. Facebook did offer privacy controls, but as with all software, default settings rule: Providing privacy controls is not the same as providing privacy. *“What makes this seem secure, whether or not it actually is?”*

At many of those decision points, there were heated internal discussions, with some of Zuckerberg's top lieutenants raising objections. In 2007, Facebook introduced a feature called Beacon, which stealthily tracked people as they bought things on the web and then—by default—circulated the news of their private purchases. His team begged him to make the feature opt-in, but “Mark basically just overruled everyone,” an executive at the time told me. Beacon was predictably a debacle. After that, he hired Sheryl Sandberg as chief operating officer. Zuckerberg would be the lord of engineering—what Facebook *built*—and Sandberg would be in charge of everything Zuckerberg wasn't interested in, including sales, policy, legal, content moderation, and, eventually, much of security. “It was very easy,” Sandberg told me. “He took product, and I took the rest.”

But Zuckerberg was still the final decisionmaker. In 2009, Facebook changed the default settings for its new users from “friends” to “everyone,” and recommended that its existing 350 million users do the same. In 2010, it introduced Instant Personalization, a privacy-busting feature that gave more personal information to outside app developers. Time and again, over internal objections, Zuckerberg chose growth and competitive advantage over caution and privacy-consciousness. The result was a series of hasty apologies, not to mention charges and a \$5 billion fine from the Federal Trade Commission.

“It's within every leader's right to make edicts,” says someone who was in the room for many Zuckerberg decisions. But “leaders fail when they convince themselves that everyone disagreeing with them is a signal for them being right.”

In his notebook, Zuckerberg described the Facebook he was building as “the information engine.” Above, Zuckerberg at a 2008 developer conference. PHOTOGRAPH: AP PHOTO/ERIC RISBERG

IN LATE SUMMER of 2016, I traveled to Nigeria with Zuckerberg. He showed up at a center for tech startups in Lagos and greeted folks there as if he had just popped in from around the corner. “Hi, I'm Mark!” he chirped. He charmed everyone: a local businesswoman selling Facebook-supported Wi-Fi access, Nigerian entertainment stars, even President Muhammadu Buhari, who was particularly impressed that Zuckerberg took a run on the city's public thoroughfares. Zuckerberg was instantly a national hero.

In retrospect, it was peak Facebook. Two months later, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. Over the course of the next few years, it would become clear that Facebook had committed a number of sins: It had been the vessel of a Russian misinformation campaign; it had broken privacy promises to users, whose information was harvested without their consent; it had circulated false information in Myanmar that led to a riot where two people were killed; it had helped destroy the business model supporting independent journalism.

Zuckerberg's initial reaction to criticism was most often defensive. But when misinformation could not be denied and Congress came calling, he clicked back into apologize-and-move-on mode.

At least in public. Inside the company, he was taking a different tack. In July 2018, Facebook's "M Team," which consists of about 40 of its top leaders, held one of its periodic meetings on the company's Classic Campus, former offices of Sun Microsystems. It started out as usual. In M Team meetings, executives do a brief check-in, sharing what's on their minds, both in business and in life. It can get pretty emotional: *My kid's sick ... my marriage ended ...* Zuckerberg always speaks last, and when his turn came, he made a startling announcement.

He had recently read a blog post by venture capitalist Ben Horowitz, in which the author defined two kinds of CEOs: wartime and peacetime. Wartime CEOs are fending off existential threats and must be ruthless in confronting them. This made a big impression on Zuckerberg. Since the election, his company had been attacked by critics, regulators, and the press. In this climate, he told the group, consider him a wartime CEO.

He emphasized one shift in particular. Horowitz put this way: "Peacetime CEO works to minimize conflict ... Wartime CEO neither indulges consensus building nor tolerates disagreements." Zuckerberg told his management team that as a wartime CEO he was going to have to tell people what to do.

True, Zuckerberg always had made the final call. But now he seemed to be saying that he would act more expeditiously, even if it meant forgoing the lively conversation, in person and on email threads, that had preceded his decisions. Some in the room thought he was saying that they should shut up and obey his directives. Zuckerberg resists that characterization. "I basically said to people, this is the mode that I think we're in," he told me of the declaration.

“We have to move quickly to make decisions without the process of bringing everyone along as much as you would typically expect or like. I believe that this is how it needs to be to make the progress that we need right now.”

I wondered whether he found the role of wartime CEO more stressful or more fun?

A Zuck silence. Sauron's gaze.

“You've known me for a long time,” he finally said. “I don't optimize for fun.”

NOT LONG BEFORE the July 4 holiday in 2019, I met with Zuckerberg at his home. The person who sat across from me on the couch couldn't have been more different from the 21-year-old I'd met 13 years before. He had sat with presidents and autocrats, been ripped apart by legislators, amassed a multibillion-dollar fortune, started a family, and was financing, through an enterprise led by his wife, an effort to cure all diseases by the end of the century. His company had done the unprecedented: bound almost a third of humanity in a single network. Now he was trying to mitigate the damage.

In another sense, though, he felt an urgency to maintain the optimism and creativity he had in 2006, when things fell easily to him and he could change the world by leaving photocopies of journal pages next to the computers of his developers and designers. He was determined not to let Facebook's attempts to fix itself hamper its ambitions for even greater power.

“You've known me for a long time,” Zuckerberg said. “I don't optimize for fun.”

We'd had several conversations over the course of the year. When I asked him about the company's errors, he was candid about his personal failings. Maybe it was a mistake to distance himself from the policy issues that would cause Facebook so much trouble. Maybe in his competitive zeal to crush Twitter, he made the News Feed too susceptible to viral garbage. Maybe he didn't pay enough attention to the things in Sandberg's domain. The split of their duties made sense originally, as he sees it, but now he is determined to devote more energy to things like content moderation and policy.

But a worse sin, he believes, would have been timidity.

“I just think I take more chances, and that means I get more things wrong,” he told me. “So in retrospect, yeah, we have certainly made a bunch of mistakes in strategy, in execution. If you're not making mistakes, you're probably not living up to your potential, right? That's how you grow.”

When we spoke in July, he conceded that some of those mistakes have had terrible consequences but insisted that you had to look beyond the present. “Some of the bad stuff is very bad, and people are understandably very upset about it—if you have nations trying to interfere in elections, if you have the Burmese military trying to spread hate to aid their genocide, how can this be a positive thing? But just as in the previous industrial revolution or other major changes in society that were very disruptive, it's difficult to internalize that, as painful as some of these things are, the positive over the long term can still dramatically outweigh the negative. You handle the negative as well as you can.”

He added: “Through this whole thing I haven't lost faith in that. I believe we are one part of the internet that's part of a broader arc of history. But we do definitely have a responsibility to make sure we address these negative uses that we probably didn't focus on enough until recently.”

He still believes that Facebook is doing good. “I couldn't run this company and not do things that I thought were going to help push the world forward,” says the man who some think has done as much destruction to that world as anyone in business. Facebook may have to change, but Zuckerberg thinks it's on the right path.

When it was time for me to leave, Zuckerberg walked me to the door. Earlier, I'd told him I had pages from the *Book of Change* he wrote in 2006, and standing on the top of the steps outside his house, he said it would be cool to see it now. I had a scan of it on my phone, and I opened the file and handed it to him.

Zuckerberg gazed at the cover page—with his name and address and the promise of a \$1,000 reward to anyone locating it—and his face lit up. *Yes, that's my handwriting!*

As he swiped through the pages, a rhapsodic smile spread across his face. He had been united with his younger self: the boy founder, unacquainted with regulators, haters, and bodyguards, blissfully relating his visions to a team that would alchemize them into software, and then change the world in the very best way. It was a treasure that seemed irretrievably lost.

He seemed almost reluctant to break the trance and hand me back the phone, but he did, and turned back to his house.

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[Steven Levy](#) covers the gamut of tech subjects for WIRED, in print and online, and has been contributing to the magazine since its inception. His newest column, **Plaintext**, will soon only be available to subscribers; [sign up here](#). He has been writing about technology for more than 30 years, writing... [Read more](#)

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