About the Cover

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The cover image we have selected for Volume 36 of History+Technology depicts a single individual and a single machine: US President Donald Trump mounting the stairs of Air Force One. This picture will grace the cover of all four issues of Volume 36, throughout 2020.

Taken early in 2020, the photograph represents the inseparability of politics, authority and aviation: historically, air transport has brought global geographies within the purview of single states and even of individual figures. We can read, through the travels of Air Force One, the long interweaving of air technologies and nationalism. This is, perhaps, “air power” in ways we do not normally consider in our encounters with daily press reports, but that historians of technology have articulated for us.

Consider that the massive airplane shown reflects not just successful design, ingenious engineering, and well-managed resources; it manifests as well national commitments to US industry, capital and existing social structures. We choose the vantage points from which we consider individual artifacts, and this photograph invites us to move not just outward from this man using this machine on this day–President Trump returning from
a rally in North Carolina–but deeper into time, as well. Donald Trump boards the plane at North Carolina’s Charlotte-Douglas International Airport, a joint civil-military facility established in 1936 with federal funding; it was at that time among the largest projects funded by the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration. Historians of politics and US race relations have made clear that the New Deal directed federal monies towards entrenched white interests rather than black communities, often maintaining the Jim Crow economy. Historians of technology might help us ask: How exactly do our machines, our infrastructures, carry forward our social ideologies in different historical settings? How do our temporalities, our imaginations, guide our vision?

In just the few weeks since we chose this cover image, the significance of this technology for the nation-state has magnified more than most living people could have imagined: The pandemic has hobbled global flows of goods and people even as it has accelerated the global flow of racist fears, nationalist sentiments, and in perhaps fewer but more precious moments, instances of internationally shared concern and caring. Prohibiting air travel now serves immense geopolitical agendas as leaders and their technologies continue, as ever, their world-making partnerships.

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