Dear Reader,

One of President Donald Trump's favorite rhetorical motifs is warning that members of a murderous gang from El Salvador, called MS-13, intend to cross our southern border in force and wreak violent havoc on American society. It's an inaccurate scenario, and also an ironic one: MS-13 is much better understood as the product of an American invasion of El Salvador than of an El Salvadoran invasion of the United States.

In *State of War,* William Wheeler, an intrepid and fearless young reporter, tells the real story of MS-13, and more broadly of how El Salvador has descended into violence and corruption. In the 1980s, the U.S. supported the Salvadoran government in its brutal civil war with left-wing guerillas. Many Salvadoran families fled the war and came to America—especially Los Angeles. Salvadoran teenagers in poor neighborhoods there founded MS-13, which became one element in a multi-ethnic gang culture. Then, in the 1990s, the American government responded to rising anti-immigrant sentiment by deporting many Salvadorans back home. That was how MS-13 became a Salvadoran gang.

MS-13 and its rival gang, Barrio 18, flourished in El Salvador. During the twenty-first century, the government there has alternated between attempting, never quite successfully, to crack down on the gangs, and accepting them as an interest group to be accepted and negotiated with. The gangs today are stronger, richer, and more influential than ever, and El Salvador is intermittently the most violent country in the world.

Through path-breaking original reporting in El Salvador and Los Angeles, Wheeler has pieced together the entire history of the gangs for the first time. He has also produced chilling, unforgettable up-close portraits of the people he encountered: gang members, frustrated reformers, crime investigators, and government officials. The story he tells in *State of War* is the opposite of President Trump's, but it is no less dramatic. It also has the advantage of being true.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Lemann