

## FINAL WORD ↔ BY JEREMY LOTT

## I, Chicken Sandwich

**A**ndy George, star of the YouTube channel *How to Make Everything*, spent \$1,500 over six months to make a chicken sandwich from scratch. And by “from scratch” I mean growing vegetables, milling wheat, milking a cow, and slaughtering a chicken. The result was ... not great. “It’s not bad. That’s about it: It’s not bad,” he judged after taking a few bites of the sandwich.

One of the ingredients was salt, so the landlocked Minnesotan flew to the nearest ocean, filled up buckets of water and extracted the salt with science. He put the captured sea salt into bags to fly it home in his luggage. The white powdery substance drew the attention of the Transportation Security Administration. His immediate thought was, “I’m going to jail now.”

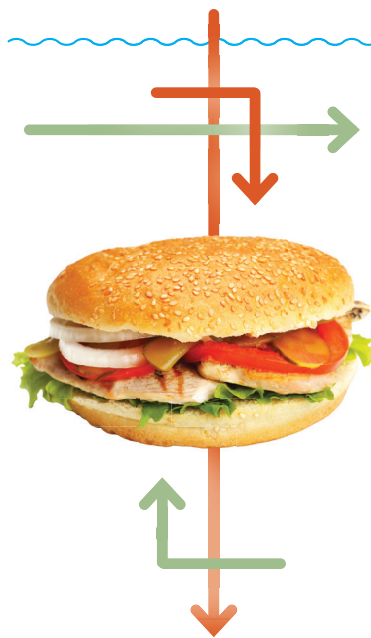
George thought of his chicken sandwich as an experiment in self-reliant living. It was that, but he was also getting a crash course in global supply chains, price signals, and spontaneous order. “It’s crazy to realize that we depend on trade for something as basic as salt,” he complained to *Minnesota Monthly* magazine.

It wouldn’t have seemed so crazy if he’d read Leonard Read’s classic 1958 essay “I, Pencil,” a mock memoir (“as told to” Read, the founder of the Foundation for Economic Education). As the sentient writing implement explains, “I, Pencil, simple though I appear to be, merit your wonder and awe.” In fact, while Pencil may seem like a very simple device, it claims that “not a single person on the face of this earth knows how to make me.”

Take just one component. “My ‘lead’ itself—it contains no lead at all—is com-

plex,” Pencil informs us. Its graphite is mined in Sri Lanka by workers who use tools that are made by others. The mined graphite is then transported overseas on ships that didn’t just spring into existence or operate themselves. “Even the lighthouse keepers along the way assisted in my birth—and the harbor pilots,” Pencil reminds us.

When the graphite bundle arrives at an American factory, the real manufacturing magic begins. The graphite is mixed with Mississippi clay and a lot of chemicals such as ammonium hydroxide to refine the lead and sulfonated tallow as a wetting agent. These are necessary because numerous machines are about to bake the mixture at 1,850 degrees Fahrenheit and spit them out “as endless extrusions—as from a sausage grinder,” Pencil says. Another heated treatment to strengthen and smooth the lead has “candelilla wax from Mexico, paraffin wax, and hydrogenated natural fats.”



Pencil gives a detailed overview of how the raw materials for his wood, metal, and eraser parts are brought to the factory, and what the machines and workers in the factory do to refine them and put them all together. This is a huge knowledge problem that no one person—indeed, no 10 people, or 100, or 1,000—can solve. In fact, “Millions of human beings have had a hand in my creation,” with their labor and their highly specific information.

As with writing implements, so with sandwiches. Though they may appear simple, this is what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called simplicity on the far side of complexity. (Yes, we’re waxing philosophical about a sandwich.) The bread, the vegetables, the cheese, the salt: All those parts resulted from different processes, utilized tools and materials with their own complex histories, and were incredibly hard to coordinate.

*Minnesota Monthly* put the question to George: “The first thing you made from scratch was a chicken sandwich, and it took you six months and cost \$1,500. How was that not the end of the series?” His answer was that he enjoys doing this sort of thing, and that’s wonderful. It’s good to have hobbies. Also, his efforts make for entertaining videos that can help folks understand just how complex seemingly simple things are. Yet imagine if the government tried to impose such a scheme on a massive scale—and then realize you can stop imagining. That’s what’s been happening as the Trump administration tries to bend world trade and domestic production to the president’s will with industrial policy and tariffs.

On the latter, the Supreme Court mercifully struck down the worst of Trump’s tariffs in February (though he quickly slapped on new ones.) In a concurring opinion, Justice Neil Gorsuch addressed the “disappointing” feelings some Trump supporters might have that their president is constrained in his effort to control world trade. Gorsuch could have encouraged those people to instead watch a really cool video about a \$1,500 chicken sandwich. **R**

JEREMY LOTT is the author of several books, including *The Warm Bucket Brigade: The Story of the American Vice Presidency*, *In Defense of Hypocrisy*, and most recently *The Three Feral Pigs and the Vegan Wolf*.