THE Nation.
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INTERVIEW: BERNIE SANDERS ON DEMOCRATIC DISARRAY

ELIE MYSTAL FOR THE DEFENSE (OF THE REPUBLIC)

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WHAT WAS THE CYBERTRUCK?
MAYA VINOKOUR

AMERICAN MARXISM
ROBIN BLACKBURN

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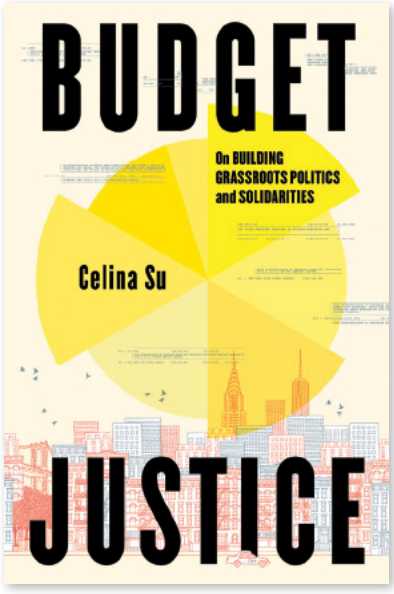

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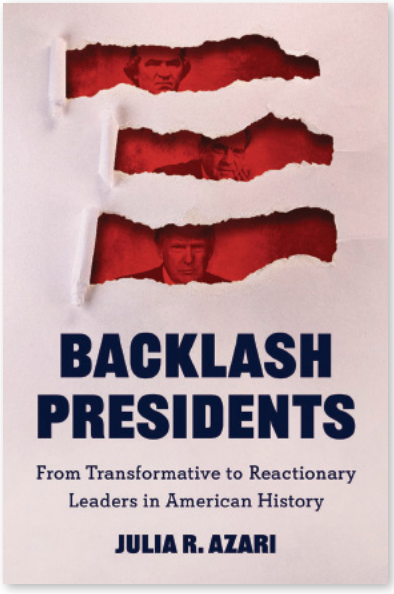
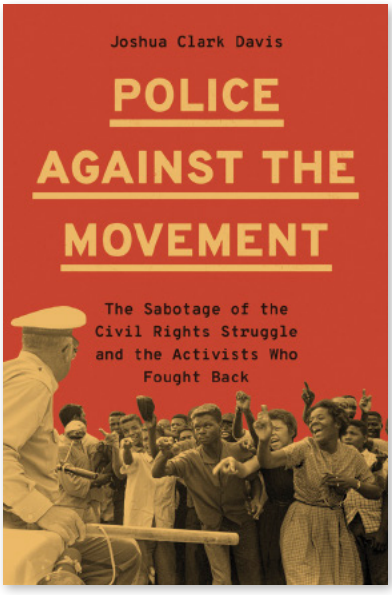
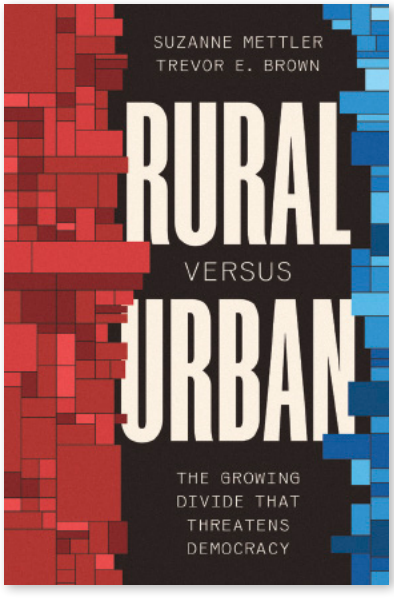


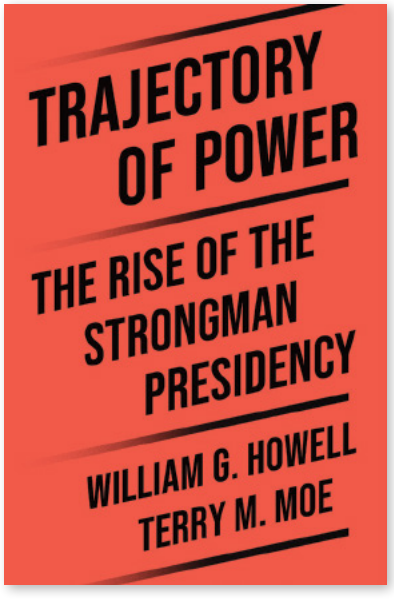
How most presidents avoid upsetting the racial status quo—and why those who do pave the way for lawless, norm-violating successors



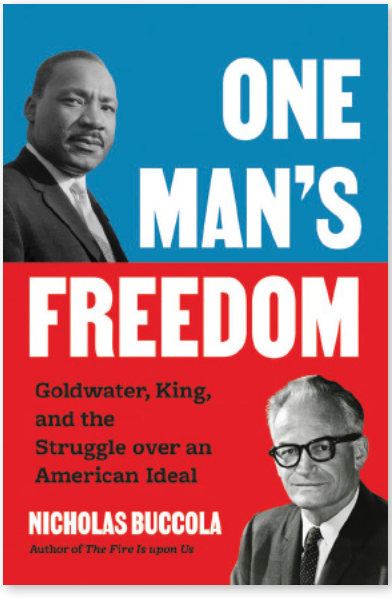
A bold retelling of the 1960s civil rights struggle through its work against police violence



How the urban-rural divide drives partisan polarization



A penetrating account of how, over many decades, conservative backlash to the administrative state led to the rise of a strongman presidency that threatens American democracy



The dramatic untold story of Barry Goldwater and Martin Luther King Jr.'s decade-long clash over the meaning of freedom—and how their conflicting visions still divide American politics

Song and dance: A statue of Donald Trump and Jeffrey Epstein erected on the National Mall in September.

KENT NISHIMURA / GETTY IMAGES

FEATURES

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EDITORIAL/KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL AND JOHN NICHOLS FOR *THE NATION*

Defending Our Freedom

AFTER 160 YEARS OF SUFFERING THE SLINGS AND ARROWS OF OFFICIAL OBJECtion to this publication's mission of speaking truth to power, it's easy to get jaded about attacks from politicians. Yet we were still surprised when Vice President JD Vance used a mid-September podcast from his vice-presidential office to go after *The Nation*.

We appreciated that Vance described *The Nation* as a "well-respected magazine whose publishing history goes back to the American Civil War." We were less appreciative, however, of his clumsy critique of our coverage of the death of Charlie Kirk, which elided the fact that our columnists condemned the political violence that took the conservative activist's life while pointedly criticizing his record. And we wish the vice president had gotten his facts straight before inaccurately painting *The Nation* as a tool of "George Soros's Open Society Foundation…and many other wealthy titans of the American progressive movement." We respect Soros's efforts on behalf of democracy, but he's not funding our reporting and analysis of the Trump-Vance regime. The essential support for this magazine comes from readers who value our independent journalism, our commitment to economic and social and racial justice, our relentless advocacy for taxing "wealthy titans," and our determination to expose and thwart this president's crude authoritarianism.

If Vance's attack were an isolated incident, or simply the latest expression of a prickly administration's discomfort with a dissenting publication, we'd move on to the next issue. Unfortunately, destroying press freedom is a core focus of the Trump administration's agenda. In the same week that Vance attacked *The Nation*, President Trump called *The New York Times* "one of the worst and most degenerate newspapers in the History of our Country," while his lawyers filed a $15 billion suit against the newspaper for publishing articles that documented the president's "lifetime of scandals" and inclination to "rule like a dictator." A Florida federal judge immediately rejected the suit as "decidedly improper and impermissible"—not to mention "tedious and burdensome."

We know from experience that America's witch-hunt fever has been broken before.

But that was just the beginning. Enraged that ABC late-night host Jimmy Kimmel had dared to comment on the crude politicization of Kirk's death by Republicans, FCC chair Brendan Carr threatened ABC in language that was the stuff of Hollywood cliché: "We can do this the easy way, or the hard way. These companies can find ways to change conduct, to take action, frankly, on Kimmel, or there's going to be additional work for the FCC ahead." Unsettled by the prospect that the licenses of network affiliates could be revoked and that regulatory negotiations with the vindictive Trump administration could go awry, ABC opted for the "easy way"—announcing Kimmel's indefinite suspension.

That made Kimmel the most public target of the astonishing assault on free expression that was carried out by Trump's MAGA devotees in the days following Kirk's murder. Journalists were fired, teachers dismissed, and students expelled, merely for exercising their First Amendment rights. Trump declared that news reports he considered "bad" were "no longer free speech" and advocated for the firing of late-night hosts whose comedy offended his delicate sensibilities.

Few Republicans dared challenge the authoritarian overreach—until Kimmel was actually knocked off the air. Suddenly, Kentucky Senator Rand Paul was decrying Carr's comments as "absolutely inappropriate," while Texas Senator Ted Cruz compared them to something "right out of *Goodfellas*. That's right out of a mafioso coming into a bar going, 'Nice bar you have here. It'd be a shame if something happened to it.'"

Americans agreed with Cruz that the Trump administration's attempts to silence Kimmel were "dangerous as hell." Within days, Kimmel was back on the air. And as Trump presided over a shutdown of the federal government, Kimmel got the last laugh—telling his newly expanded TV audience, "I was recently the victim of a government shutdown. They are reversible."

Kimmel won that round. But the First Amendment is still in danger, and it still needs defending—especially by those of us who know

that a robust, free, and independent press forms the vital underpinning of democracy. Decades of media consolidation, cost cutting, and layoffs have obliterated much of this country's local journalism. Social media delivers a slurry of disinformation. Cable-channel talking heads offer scant insight and even less diversity of opinion—as has been agonizingly demonstrated by the failure of so many outlets to entertain even basic debates about Israel's genocide in Gaza. Once-bold news networks are now owned by multinational corporations that are inclined to cut backroom deals with a president who has a history of dismissing the press as "the enemy of the people." No wonder Trump and Vance think they can make the American media amenable to autocracy.

But we've seen their kind before. During the anti-communist Red Scare of the 1940s and '50s, American dissenters were blacklisted, fired, censored, and deported. The damage done by McCarthyism extends to this day. Victor Navasky, the longtime editor and publisher of *The Nation*, warned that "stigmatizing people with the red brush had deprived the rest of us of interaction with people…whose advocacy, intelligence, passion, and information might have brought us to an improved understanding of the political and cultural situation, and perhaps even have transformed it."

It's easy to feel despair about what looks like a new age of McCarthyism. But being around for 160 years gives you perspective. This magazine is old enough to have fought McCarthyism the first time, alongside great journalists such as the CBS broadcaster Edward R. Murrow, who counseled Americans not to be "driven by fear into an age of unreason."

We were on the side that won that fight. We know from experience that America's witch-hunt fever has been broken before—and we proudly take the side of muckraking journalists, constitutional lawyers, and undaunted jurists, of the artists and actors who are fighting for their creative freedom, and above all, of the Constitution-defending citizens who will not yield until Trump, Vance, and Brendan Carr are consigned to the same dustbin of history that Joe McCarthy so ignobly occupies. N

COMMENT/COREY PEIN

Nepal's Revolution Wasn't Televised, but It Was on Discord

The country's Gen Z uprising illustrates both the promise and the limitations of online-brokered protest.

SOMETHING BIG IS HAPPENING IN FARAWAY NEPAL—the first revolution not only powered by network technology but also in many respects about it. In a week-long blaze of fury, young protesters belonging to a movement known simply as "Gen Z" burned the Parliament, the Supreme Court, multinational businesses, and the homes of disfavored politicians, some of whom were chased down and beaten by mobs. The Brahmin Communist prime minister, KP Sharma Oli, resigned, and the movement's leaders entered into discussions with the army, which has historically answered to the monarchy, to form a new government. On September 15, one week after the start of riots that claimed at least 72 lives—most of whom were protesters killed by police—the dead were honored as "Gen Z martyrs." The new regime is headed, for now, by Sushila Karki, a septuagenarian former Supreme Court justice and anti-corruption crusader who isn't affiliated with any party and has become the country's first woman prime minister.

"The Parliament of Nepal right now is Discord," the chat app popular with young gamers, said Sid Ghimire, a 23-year-old online content creator from Kathmandu, speaking to *The New York Times*. The comment was typical of the enthusiastic international press coverage. You may be forgiven if it triggers your Silicon Valley BS detector. Yet, amazingly, it wasn't hyperbole—Karki defeated four other short-listed candidates in a vote held in a Discord chat room with 160,000 members, organized by a Nepali nongovernmental organization (NGO) that was involved in the negotiations with army leaders. Although Internet technology has played a key role in recent revolutions—memorably during the Arab Spring as well as the so-called color revolutions—the facsimile of direct democracy held in an online chat room is something rather new.

Initial reports framed the Gen Z uprising as a response to a draconian ban on social media and online messaging platforms. But that spark ignited on tinder composed of more traditional grievances about wealth inequality, corruption, and representation. "What this group is demanding is an end to corruption, [as well as] good governance and economic equality," Karki said after she was sworn in. "We must work with the Gen Z mindset." Exactly what that means, especially in the Nepali context, seems nebulous. Obviously, no generation has uniform politics, but what the press has declined to ask is who this vague new "mindset" leaves behind.

Nepal's latest, and rather remarkable, revolution underscores just how important the Internet has become to the structures of governance, not only in wealthy countries but also in some of the poorest. It's also an instructive example of how control of the Internet can be a double-edged sword for the ruling class. In dominant economies such as the United States and China, governments and private-sector investors are pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into the promulgation of artificial intelligence, even beginning the process of outsourcing military targeting decisions to networked computers that are

accountable to no one. AI represents the pinnacle of computerized managerialism in wealthy countries, serving not only as a tool to disempower labor and the intelligentsia but also as a mechanism for automated social control. Nepal's Discord parliament provides, perhaps, a counterexample, showing that technology can still enable change from below.

The pseudo-parliamentary Discord chat is currently closed to new members. Hami Nepal, or We Are Nepal, the NGO that organized it, was founded after the devastating 2015 earthquake by Sudan Gurung, a 38-year-old former DJ and nightclub owner who lost his child in that disaster. Hami Nepal used social media, including Instagram and YouTube, to disseminate demonstration routes and advice on safety and strategy to the protesters, such as wearing school uniforms to appear more sympathetic. Despite a pledge of transparency, the NGO's website doesn't list its funders.

Mechanically, the Discord parliament works like any other online chat, with relentless argument among virtual strangers overseen by moderators who may be anonymous. "People were learning as they went," said Regina Basnet, a 25-year-old law-school graduate who joined the protests as well as the Discord chat, speaking to *Al Jazeera*. "Many of us didn't know what it meant to dissolve parliament or form an interim government. But we were asking questions, getting answers from experts, and trying to figure it out together." Although some in the chat advocated for the elevation of Kathmandu Mayor Balen Shah, a former rapper, "Hami Nepal moderators informed the participants they could not reach Shah, who later posted his endorsement of Karki on social media," *Al Jazeera* reported. Others, branded as "infiltrators," advocated for the restoration of the monarchy.

Still others cast suspicion on the moderators, which is perhaps justifiable. Who drew up the short list of candidates and set the terms of the vote? Who selected the moderators? Who ensured that the same people didn't use separate accounts to vote multiple times? Who had the authority to ban accounts, and on what basis? What exactly happened here?

The relative silence on such fundamental questions demonstrates that elections held in a proprietary online chatroom are not "more effective" than a traditional democratic process, as some participants claimed. It's also hard to believe that rural Nepalis, many of whom are impoverished and speak local languages, were as well represented online as urban students and relatively well-off dissidents living abroad.

Gagan Thapa, the general secretary of Nepal's liberal Congress Party, has complained that the process by which the new government was formed was unconstitutional. The Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist)—the ousted prime minister's party—has expressed the same sentiment, calling for the protection of the republic and the achievements of the Maoist movement that won a decade-long civil war in 2006. How could it be otherwise? Mere thousands of participants in a Discord chat cannot speak for a population of 31 million.

Even an app designed with the best of intentions lacks the power to address structural problems like inequality.

Which is not to say that Gen Z lacks legitimate grievances. The former government's clumsy Social Media Bill of 2025 would have put the digital platforms that people rely on under authoritarian government control and complicated life for those who work in Nepal's vast informal economy, which increasingly runs on platforms like WhatsApp. In a better world, unaccountable megacorporations like Meta wouldn't be in the middle of every online conversation and transaction. But neither, necessarily, would the government.

The ousted Communist government claimed that the Social Media Bill was about regulation, not censorship, but nobody was buying it—especially since memes tagged #nepobabies and #nepokids were circulating ahead of the protests, contrasting the lavish lifestyles of the country's elite youth with the grueling conditions of everyday life for many Nepalis. If the outpouring of rage on the streets demonstrated anything, it's that Communist leaders have, like their predecessors, failed to satisfy the public's demand for material improvements.

As the journalist Aditya Adhikari noted in his 2014 book *The Bullet and the Ballot Box: The Story of Nepal's Maoist Revolution*, the continuing shame of successive Nepali governments has been their failure to provide a level of employment that would make it unnecessary for people to seek work abroad. When I visited Kathmandu this summer, the most enduring image I saw was not at a tourist attraction but rather outside the airport at the end of my trip, where a crush of humanity spilled from the boarding gates out into the parking lot. In that crowd, families bade tearful goodbyes to their young breadwinners, destined for long periods of servitude in the Gulf states—or worse, as mercenaries in Russia's war on Ukraine.

The influence of tech was visible to me as well. I was charmed by inDrive, a popular taxi-hailing app that, in contrast to Uber's algorithmic predatory pricing model, allows riders to negotiate directly with drivers for a price acceptable to both. But upon reflection, I realized we were haggling over what was, to my Western wallet, small change. Even an app designed with the best of intentions lacks the power to address the structural problems of inequality, disenfranchisement, and corruption. Parliament by Discord is no solution to any of that. Nevertheless, Gen Z's achievement has left many Nepalis more optimistic. "This is a moment of political reckoning for the Nepali youth, and also a moment for Nepali political parties to change their ways," the Kathmandu journalist and author Amish Raj Mulmi told me. "If this process ends with the end of impunity—not just in corruption cases but also in other aspects of society—and leads to a more responsive and inclusive political class, I'd call this movement a success." **N**

Corey Pein is the author of Live Work Work Work Die: A Journey Into the Savage Heart of Silicon Valley.

COMMENT/JUDITH BUTLER

Kafka-land at UC Berkeley

The storied California institution—famously the birthplace of the 1960s free-speech movement—has sent an ominous message to critics of Israel in its ranks.

Editor's note: Recently, 160 people at the University of California, Berkeley, were notified that their names had been sent to the Trump administration—specifically, the Department of Education and its Office for Civil Rights—as part of a federal investigation targeting "alleged antisemitic incidents." The people named included faculty, students, and staffers, although none were informed of any specific allegations against them. "We're in Kafka-land," observes Judith Butler, who learned in September that they were one of the people on the list. The internationally renowned philosopher, who for decades has been among the most prominent members of UC Berkeley's academic community, is also one of many Jewish scholars who have been sharply critical of the Israeli government's assault on Gaza. Upon learning of the university's actions, Butler wrote a stirring response, which they shared with *The Nation* along with a brief account of their exchange with UC Berkeley's chief counsel.

ON SEPTEMBER 4, 160 MEMBERS OF THE UNIversity of California, Berkeley, community received a letter from the university's chief counsel, David Robinson, informing us that files containing our names had been forwarded to the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights in response to its investigation of antisemitism on college and university campuses. When I received the notification, I had not been aware of how many of us were included in these files, since the UC Berkeley administration had assured the university community that it would engage in only minimal compliance. At the time, I was writing about Kafka and the law, so I wrote to the chief counsel about how my work and his missive appeared to converge. Below is a slightly edited version of the e-mail I sent to him and UC Berkeley's legal offices on September 7.

Dear David Robinson,

I am not sure if we have met, but I wanted to introduce myself as a retired faculty member, currently engaged in grant-funded activity at UC Berkeley and appointed as a Distinguished Professor in the Graduate School. In my comparative literature seminars over many years, I taught seminars on Kafka and the law. They very often focused on the way that the suspension of due process and the normalization of indefinite detention were cast in fictional terms that resonate with actual legal practice. As you may know, Kafka was not only a great German-language writer, but a member of the Czech Jewish community who was engaged in debate on the traditions of Jewish law. Trained as a lawyer, he spent most of his adult life adjudicating claims of physical injury suffered by workers on the job. He made sure procedures were honored and that hearings were fair. In the evenings, and especially on Sundays, he tried to write. His parables, in particular, investigate whether we can still expect justice from the law, or whether the legal process diverges so dramatically from the path of justice that now we can only tell stories about how the expectation of justice is vanquished by legal proceedings. That is the subject of my present scholarship, and I hope to have a completed manuscript by the end of 2025.

Some of what I am arguing can be found most dramatically, however, in his well-known novel *The Trial*. That novel begins with an office worker named K. who is awakened one morning by two gentlemen who claim to represent the law but who seem to be from his place of employment. Their status is ambiguous. In any case, they inform him that there is an allegation against him, and he reasonably asks: What does the allegation consist of? They explain that they cannot say, and it actually seems that they do not know. They are ominous emissaries who do not know or will not say what the allegation against K. is. When he asks them how he can discover the substance of the allegation, they send him down various paths in a city that resembles Kafka's own Prague to a building whose doorways are impassable. K. tries to find someone who can inform him of what he has been accused, but he can find no one. He is supposed to prepare for a trial, but how can he without knowing what he is accused of? After many pages of waiting and inquiring without result, it becomes clear that this process of waiting to find out what has been said against him is the trial itself. He is waiting for a fair procedure to start, but it never does.

K. is supposed to prepare for a trial, but how can he without knowing what he is accused of? It becomes clear that this process of waiting for answers is the trial itself.

One of K.'s problems is that he still believes that due process and established procedures governing complaints, grievances, and accusations are in place, that the right to know and to counter the charges against him will be part of that procedure, and that his own defense will be taken into account before any action is taken. He tries to find legal counsel, but the lawyers he meets are equally confused by the arbitrary and ominous character of the process.

As someone trained in the US legal tradition, you will recognize that K. is hopelessly expecting that he will be afforded the equivalent of the protections offered by the Sixth and 14th Amendments of the Constitution, namely the right to a lawyer, the right to an impartial jury, and the right to know who your accusers are and the nature of the charges and evidence against you. But these protections are doubtless also familiar to you because they are the stated policy of the Office for the Prevention of Harassment and Discrimination (OPHD). That policy is the following:

> For complaints of any form of discrimination and harassment, OPHD follows the resolution process that is established in the UC systemwide policy and corresponds to campus implementing procedure. These processes are developed so that every case is reviewed and addressed in a consistent way. Our aim is to work with those who bring allegations of misconduct, those who respond to those allegations, and anyone else who contributes information to the fact-gathering process, in a way that is as transparent and respectful as possible for everyone involved. OPHD's role focuses on delivering a fair and objective resolution process, as opposed to supporting one party over another.

Indeed, this policy is meant to make sure that people in K.'s position are contacted, informed of the complaint, and invited to a meeting and apprised of the resources available to them, including complaint resolution that does not involve engaging the court system. The warning in your letter that there may be a need for the "production" of new materials does not indicate whether you are asking for disclosure of additional information or for additional forms of unfounded and unadjudicated allegations.

Of course, I am not K., but I find myself uncannily identified with his predicament. For in your letter, you and your offices have informed me only that you have sent a file or report "related to alleged antisemitic incidents" that includes my name. Two aspects of this communication stand out to anyone who has read Kafka's work. The first is that you imply, without stating it, that I have been accused of antisemitism or that my name is associated with an incident of that kind. But you are also actually more careful, since you say that the incident of antisemitic harassment or discrimination is "alleged," which means simply that the allegation was neither reviewed nor adjudicated but left to stand on its own.

Will I now be branded on a government list? Will my travel be restricted? Will I be surveilled? Have you no compunction about denying due process?

Instead of treating the report according to procedure, as you are obligated to do under both US constitutional law and University of California policy, you forward the allegation, unadjudicated, to an office of the federal government. Whether the allegation is fair is of no consequence, it seems, for there has been an allegation, and that appears to be sufficient to forward my name to the DOE's Office for Civil Rights (clearly not my civil rights), where it will be on a list and used in whatever way that office and that federal administration deems appropriate.

Will I now be branded on a government list? Will my travel be restricted? Will I be surveilled? Have you no compunction about submitting the names of "member[s] of the Berkeley community," as you address us in your form letter, without having complied with basic rules of due process institutionalized in both US law and UC policy? In addition, adjunct faculty, whose academic freedom is not protected, and students on visas are among those whose names were passed along. As we know from actions taken against students at Columbia, Harvard, and Tufts, to name a few, they are all at risk of being detained, deported, expelled, harassed, fired, even abducted on the street.

I am a relatively privileged person who will find a way to survive whatever actions the government may take against me, but the idea that you have subjected a number of faculty, staff, and students to widespread surveillance is a breathtaking breach of trust, ethics, and justice. I urge the OPHD to insist on exercising its powers and refuse to cede to federal demands. I also urge the OPHD to take up a principled position in favor of due process, fair review, and the procedures that have guided UC Berkeley prior to this unprecedented intervention into what should be a matter of self-governance. Let us not sacrifice our integrity as an institution to legalistic forms of state bullying and extortion.

Like K., I would like to think that we live in a world where allegations are not treated as true until they are subjected to proper procedures, and where we do not jeopardize an individual by sending an unfounded and unadjudicated allegation to the federal government at this time in human history. Perhaps I am a fool and can only live in the world of parables. Lucky that I still have my books. But it cannot be utterly foolish to resist injustice when you so clearly see it, as, I presume, you must.

Sincerely,
Judith Butler

Judith Butler is a professor in the Department of Comparative Literature and Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author, most recently, of Who's Afraid of Gender?

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Construction Follies

The University of Chicago is eviscerating its humanities programs, but won't slow down its building spree.

In August, the University of Chicago shocked the academic world by announcing that it would be pausing PhD admissions in nearly all of its world-famous humanities programs. While the ongoing crisis in the humanities—that is, the deliberate marginalization and even elimination of humanities programs by neoliberal administrations in order to reorient schools toward more lucrative business, engineering, and tech programs—is not unique to UChicago, the extent of the damage is especially jarring. What *is* distinct about the university is its staggering indebtedness. According to Clifford Ando, a professor of classics who has been reporting on the crisis for years, the university's debt ballooned from $2.2 billion to $5.8 billion between 2006 and 2022—an increase of more than 250 percent, and the equivalent of 68 percent of the university's total assets. Tuition from 85 percent of the student body is needed just to service this debt. It's not surprising, then, that UChicago has hollowed itself out by repeatedly robbing Peter to pay Paul. (It is somewhat more surprising, however, that it also gambled—and lost—$20 million on cryptocurrency.)

Just for decoration: In UChicago's Mansueto Library, the bookstacks are all underground and unbrowsable.

Hundreds of millions of dollars of that debt consists of massively overleveraged bonds to finance construction. Yet the university has pledged $1.2 billion toward two new buildings. Building while in debt is not a new phenomenon. Beginning in 2007, UChicago went on a building spree involving some of the most famous architects in the country. The ovular addition to the Mansueto Library, designed by Helmut Jahn, was the first of these projects to come to fruition, costing the university $81 million. The numbers only ballooned from there. The towering Logan Center for the Arts, by Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, cost $114 million.

At least those were academic buildings (and, incidentally, the most architecturally worthwhile). But two of the university's most recent architectural expenditures have nothing to do with learning and everything to do with prestige. The $100 million Rubenstein Forum was ostensibly built to solve a $4 million problem—the cost of having to host large meetings and conferences downtown. Built by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the forum's six zinc-colored stacked boxes loom over 60th Street and cannot be breached without an appointment. It is, essentially, an evil lair. Meanwhile, the most expensive of these projects, at $148 million, is Jeanne Gang's Campus North dorm. It's built in what we in the biz disparagingly call the "Dutch style," after the penchant for irregular forms and seemingly pixelated façades pioneered by Dutch architects in the early 2000s. In addition to being an eyesore, the dorm is sited in such a way that the passageway beneath the two parts of the building creates a notorious wind tunnel. It only adds insult to architectural injury that the university constructed such luxury dorms after selling existing ones to—you guessed it—pay off some of its debt.

But now the fun is over and it's time to pay up. According to Ando, $900 million of the university's debt will come due over the next five years, forcing it to refinance at much higher interest rates. One must ask: If the university was in such dire financial straits, which only worsened as the years went by, why did it continue to undertake such construction follies? Especially given the fact that the quadrangle—the collection of Collegiate Gothic buildings that house most of the humanities programs—needs $1 billion in deferred maintenance? The answer lies in rank elitism.

The average undergraduate student in the United States pays more than $12,000 for room and board each year. These facilities are a key part of how universities compete against one another in important ratings like the ones provided by the Princeton Review. The University of Chicago may be up to its eyeballs in debt, but hey, you can live in a dorm designed by a famous architect! As many elite universities become less about learning and more like tech incubators with a school attached (or, at worst, elevated diploma mills), buildings like the Rubenstein Forum and Campus North help disguise

Architecture, like the university, was once a public good. Now it most often seems like a marketing ploy.

FROM TOP: JOE CIARDIELLO; RAYMOND BOYD / MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES / GETTY IMAGES

this sordidness with a patina of prestige. Even a building like the Mansueto Library conveys certain priorities: The stacks are all underground and unbrowsable, so that the reading materials need to be retrieved electronically—rendering the visible half-domed building little more than something interesting to look at.

For most of its history, the university as an institution was a public good. But thanks in part to the good old boys in the UChicago economics department, it is now little more than a generator of real and human capital alike. An education is no longer primarily about the perpetuation of human knowledge, but rather an investment one makes (with increasingly diminishing returns) in order to secure higher wages. Meanwhile, university administrators continue to make things worse for students and researchers by cutting majors, recklessly expanding the student population, threatening to teach languages via ChatGPT, and immiserating an army of underpaid adjuncts.

Architecture, like the university, has historically been a public good, something to be evaluated based on whether it contributes to human flourishing. Now it most often seems like part of a marketing ploy. It's not the fault of the architects that these buildings have been used to starve what little humanity remains of a once-illustrious institution, but it's a travesty all the same. The University of Chicago's architecture once paid homage to the medieval trivium and quadrivium—the bedrock of the liberal arts. Now it pays homage only to money. **N**

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Anti-Monopolist Zephyr Teachout

The Media Oligarchy

Trump's attacks on the First Amendment are empowered by the concentration of media ownership.

THERE'S A CORRUPT SCHEMER BORN EVERY MINUTE, and US history is filled with presidents who have pressured businesses to serve their political agendas. The fact that Donald Trump is epically brazen and selfish only underscores the need for real anti-corruption measures. We cannot just rely on hope, shame, or anger to curtail such abuses; the protections must be structural.

After late-night TV host Jimmy Kimmel criticized Trump and his followers last month for seeking "to score political points" from the assassination of Charlie Kirk, Brendan Carr, Trump's chair of the Federal Communications Commission, threatened retaliation: "These companies can find ways to take action on Kimmel," he said, "or there's going to be additional work for the FCC." ABC quickly suspended Kimmel, and only after a massive public outcry did the company reverse course.

One story we could tell about this episode is that democratic resistance worked. But the more important story is that the Trump administration's censorship-corruption cabal was made possible because of choices made by Republicans and Democrats over three decades to allow media power to be concentrated in just a few hands. That's the only reason Carr could even attempt something so shameless.

Twenty years ago, many big-city markets had multiple, independently owned network affiliates. Now, because of relaxed oversight and increasing consolidation, apparent "competitors" often share resources or even combine operations.

The big picture is even more daunting. In 1983, the media scholar Ben Bagdikian warned that with just 50 corporations dominating the media landscape, democracy was under threat. Now Comcast, Paramount, and Disney form a tight club of oligarchic media "rivals." Comcast owns NBC, Telemundo, Universal Pictures, Illumination, DreamWorks Animation, Focus Features, Universal Television, Universal Parks, Fandango, Peacock, MSNBC, CNBC, USA Network, Bravo, Syfy, E!, Oxygen, Sky News, Sky Sports, and Sky Cinema. Disney owns ABC, ESPN, FX, Freeform, the Disney Channel, Disney Jr., Hulu, Pixar, Marvel Studios, Lucasfilm, 20th Century Studios, Searchlight Pictures, *National Geographic*, Hollywood Records, and Walt Disney Studios. Paramount owns CBS, Showtime, Paramount Pictures, Paramount Television Studios, Nickelodeon, MTV, Comedy Central, BET, VH1, CMT, Pluto TV, Pop TV, the Smithsonian Channel, and AwesomenessTV. Who do we expect to speak up in what has become an oligarchic public square?

The Goliaths of Big Tech, who just a few years ago were heralded for

promising to stand up to Trump, are now gushing over his leadership, as the president grants them tariff exceptions and carries their agenda into global negotiations with the European Union. That isn't a result of any character flaws in Mark Zuckerberg; that's the result of a structural flaw in our system.

The bad news is that this concentration is extreme. The good news is that it can be addressed—by electing a Congress that's prepared to repeal the 1996 Telecom Act and revive laws that allow for democratic, decentralized media ownership, and more immediately, by getting state attorneys general to block media mergers and by mobilizing opposition to Big Tech data centers.

Sure, boycotts can sometimes make a difference, but consider the level of public anger it took to get Disney to reverse course on something so obviously corrupt.

Concentration isn't just an abstract economic issue. It corrodes our dignity by enabling a small group of people to decide whose voices are heard and whose are erased. It exacerbates inequality by giving a handful of executives control over the stories that shape our common life. At its core, it is a moral crisis that feeds immoral decision-makers and makes it harder for true public discourse to exist.

Breaking Trump's corruption requires breaking the structures that enable it. The obsequiousness of national broadcasters and large tech corporations says less about Trump than it does about the structure of power. As long as oligarchs control our public square, censorship and corruption will go hand in hand. The cure is clear: break up Big Media, Big Tech, and the finance system that binds them together. N

COMMENT/GREG GRANDIN

Murder on the High Seas

What's behind Trump's Caribbean killing spree?

ON SEPTEMBER 2, THE US MILITARY SANK A GO-FAST boat in the southern Caribbean off the coast of Venezuela, killing 11. The United States then hit two more boats, on September 15 and 19, killing another six people. The Army attacked another craft off Venezuela's coast in early October, reporting four fatalities on board. Trump has also since notified Congress that the US is in an "armed conflict" with drug cartels in the region.

The murders were premeditated. On the first day of his second term, Trump signed an executive order designating Latin American drug cartels as terrorist organizations. A month later, the State Department added Venezuela's Tren de Aragua to the list. On August 8, *The New York Times* reported that Trump had "secretly signed a directive to the Pentagon to begin using military force against certain Latin American drug cartels." The *Times* also mentioned "sensitive internal deliberations" within the administration over whether the use of the military to kill civilians suspected to be members of cartels would constitute "murder."

Clearly, the United States was on the hunt for something to attack and someone to kill.

A chance came early in September, when US Southern Command apparently spotted an open-air speedboat leaving a small fishing village in eastern Venezuela. A missile, probably fired from a drone, destroyed the boat and killed all on board.

The White House has presented no evidence of drug trafficking on this boat, or on the others the United States attacked. Those executed were civilians charged with no crime, much less a capital offense.

Little or no fentanyl enters the United States from Venezuela; cocaine coming through Venezuela is grown in Colombia. Rather than functioning as a centralized international cartel, Tren de Aragua is a loose confederation of local criminals. Intelligence reports suggest its members aren't equipped to move wholesale amounts of cocaine from Colombia or Bolivia into the US.

But drug interdiction isn't the real point here. The Trump White House is bringing the logic of Gaza to the Caribbean: the use of disproportionate, high-tech violence to murder defenseless civilians with impunity, justified by the broadest imaginable definition of "self-defense." And the killing, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said, will continue.

Retired Adm. James G. Stavridis, a former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, believes that a more proximate motive for these strikes is to send a message to Venezuela's pariah president, Nicolás Maduro, to demonstrate that the administration can destroy an oil tanker as easily as it can a speedboat. The United States is currently engaged in a massive military buildup in the Caribbean, which some fear is intended to produce shock, awe, and ultimately regime change across the region.

The Trump administration can't seem to decide whether to bomb Mexico or assault Venezuela, but there exists an interagency war party—Rubio at State, Pete Hegseth at Defense, Terrance Cole at the DEA, and JD Vance in the vice presidency, among others. This coterie seems to believe that forcing Maduro out will be the first step toward toppling the governments of Cuba and Nicaragua, while intimidating the region's more independent-minded leaders—especially Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, whose government recently convicted his predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, on charges of election fraud.

Trump pushed Lula hard to go light on Bolsonaro and to absolve Brazil's right-wing coup plotters. But Lula balked, and Brazil's Supreme Court sentenced Bolsonaro to 27 years in prison. Such insolence on the part of Latin America is rarely tolerated in Washington—and it may well explain, at least in part, Trump's exceptionally vicious murder spree in the Caribbean. N

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The Front Burner
Kali Holloway

Culture Under Siege

Universities, museums, and media companies are capitulating to Trump, some even before they have to.

On December 7, the annual Kennedy Center Honors will be held for the 48th year, and for the first time, a sitting president will be the host. Having purged all the Democrats from the Kennedy Center's board, replaced them with loyalists, and named himself as chairman, Donald Trump has also made himself the main attraction of the marquee event.

His predecessors in the Oval Office had neither hosted the event nor involved themselves in selecting the honorees, but Trump has bragged that this year's list—George Strait, KISS, Michael Crawford, Gloria Gaynor, and Sylvester Stallone—"all went through me," adding that he rejected a "couple of wokesters." As for the hosting duties, the president claimed that he was reluctant to take the spotlight. "I've been asked to host," he said at an August press event for the gala. "I said, 'I'm the president of the United States. Are you fools asking me to do that?' 'Sir, you'll get much higher ratings.' I said, 'I don't care. I'm president of the United States, I won't do it.' They said, 'Please'…. I said, 'OK… I'll do it.'"

On the one hand, this is just Trump—who once said his "ultimate job" would be as a silver-screen-era studio head; who declared that having a reality show was "like being a rock star"; and who famously opined that "when you're a star…you can do anything"—chasing his lifelong fantasy of joining the glitterati. What he couldn't buy as a real estate developer, Trump can now commandeer as president. "I wanted one, I was never able to get one," he said of the Kennedy Center awards. "And I said, 'The hell with it, I'll become chairman and I'll give myself an honor.'"

But Trump doesn't just want to sit at the popular kids' table—he wants to make it his own. And in that goal, he's backed by a like-minded MAGA movement. MAGA's politics of grievance and resentment have long been fueled by the idea that "the left"—a catchall term for every cultural institution from Hollywood to hip-hop to Harvard—has hoarded all of the country's cultural capital. Now the movement has a chance to crown itself the elite in a way it never could become organically. The goal isn't merely to seize the prestige they've always envied, but to use it to reinforce their hold on power—to rewrite the history that forms our shared public memory, erase the truths that contradict their white-supremacist patriarchal ideology, and ensure that every museum exhibition, TV broadcast, and classroom lesson imparts their worldview.

Just weeks after Trump's reelection, *The Wall Street Journal* published an op-ed, "How Trump Can Rid Washington of Wokeness," coauthored by a contributor to Project 2025. "Retake control of museums, starting with the Smithsonian Institution," the authors advised. "Dissolve the Corporation for Public Broadcasting," they added. In a section that begins, "End woke university practices," they supported the president's plans to "protect free speech," which in conservative-speak means allowing racist rhetoric while punishing dissent.

Done, done, and done! Since the inauguration, the president has criticized the Smithsonian's representation of "how bad slavery was" and purged a number of Black history artifacts from its collection. In July, Congress voted to eliminate funding for public media. And, of course, on college campuses, under the guise of fighting antisemitism, the administration is threatening to withhold federal funds and deporting foreign-born students in response to student protests.

MAGA's cultural takeover isn't just about museums and college classrooms but popular culture, too. Disney, ABC's parent company, yanked Jimmy Kimmel's show after Federal Communications Commission chair and Project 2025 coauthor Brendan Carr objected to Kimmel's remarks about the MAGA movement's politicization of Charlie Kirk's death and threatened to revoke ABC's broadcast license. After a public outcry, Disney reinstated Kimmel less than a week later, but Nexstar, a company that owns 32 ABC affiliates, said it would continue to preempt the show. Nexstar is in the midst of a pending $6.2 billion merger with the broadcaster Tegna that requires FCC approval. For ABC's part, the network had already demonstrated its willingness to fold months earlier, when it settled a baseless defamation lawsuit by Trump for $15 million.

Paramount took a similar course. After Trump sued *60 Minutes* over a preelection interview with Kamala Harris that he didn't like, Paramount forked over a $16 million settlement. When late-night host Stephen Colbert joked that the payment was "a big fat bribe" to ensure the company's merger with Skydance, Paramount canceled his CBS show. Skydance, led by David Ellison, son of Oracle billionaire Larry Ellison, then agreed to install a "bias monitor" to oversee CBS and announced that its acquisition of the right-leaning media company *The Free Press* would include a senior leadership role at CBS News for cofounder Bari Weiss—a conservative whose shtick is pretending to be a disaffected liberal. Meanwhile, as of this writing, TikTok is close to being bought by a consortium made

ANDY FRIEDMAN

up of Silver Lake, Oracle, and Andreessen Horowitz—the latter two of which are owned by billionaire Trump donors. And don't forget that X owner Elon Musk spent more than $250 million getting Trump and other Republicans elected.

So there you have it. America's "liberal media"—as it will surely continue to be called—will soon largely be in the hands of Trump-affiliated moguls. It might seem that these institutions did not have to settle with Trump or cave to his demands, considering that the laws are on their side. But it's hard not to think they're already preparing for a country in which the threat of Trump's retaliation outweighs all else. Fascism, after all, has often been defined as the merger of state and corporate power. And that's what we're seeing now, as Trump and his MAGA movement seize control of institution after institution. In December, when Trump takes the Kennedy Center stage as host, it might seem like a mere vanity project. But know that you're watching American culture being weaponized—one stage, one station, and one late-night TV show at a time. **N**

SNAPSHOT
Prabin Ranabhat

"Wake Up, Nepal"

Young people take to the streets outside of the Parliament in Kathmandu on September 8, condemning the government for its ban on most social media platforms as well as its corruption. More than 70 people were killed, many by police, during two days of protests.

By the Numbers

13.5%
Portion of US households that are food-insecure

6.8M
Number of Americans who experience severe food insecurity

10M
Number of children who live in poverty

$186B
Amount that Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act will cut from food stamps over the next 10 years

4M
Number of people who will lose some or all of their food assistance under the law

7.5%
Portion of Black Americans who are unemployed

3.7%
Portion of white Americans who are unemployed

$892B
Amount of military spending approved by the House in early September

FROM TOP: AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; ALLEN J. SCHABEN / *LOS ANGELES TIMES* VIA GETTY IMAGES

CALVIN TRILLIN
DeadlinePoet

Pete Hegseth's Call to Arms

We won't lower standards for women and such.
And generals must keep in trim.
For standards are vital, so Hegseth insists—
Though lowered already for him.

Q&A

Robert Malley

Robert Malley and Hussein Agha have spent a lifetime immersed in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Agha has been involved for decades in negotiations and efforts to resolve the conflict, while Malley was an adviser to a number of US presidents. Both men participated in the Camp David talks in 2000 that ultimately failed to produce a Palestinian state; the Second Intifada began soon after. In their new book, *Tomorrow Is Yesterday*, they take account of their experiences and all the errors that have led to Israel's genocide in Palestine. Malley, who is now a lecturer at Yale's Jackson School of Global Affairs, spoke with *The Nation* about the book and his views of Israel's actions today in Gaza and the West Bank. This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity. —*Ahmed Moor*

AM: *Tomorrow Is Yesterday* examines past claims about the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, dispelling some myths around Camp David. But why did you write the book today?

RM: There's been a nagging question in the conversation between Hussein and myself for years: how the US, with all this leverage, all its power, with its vaunted intelligence apparatus, could get so much wrong and understand so little about the conflict.

The big lie, of course, is the lie about the two-state solution—that the US has claimed to have tried endlessly to bring it about and determined, at least under the Biden administration, that it was an objective that could not be achieved after the impasse at Camp David, and could only be achieved between Israelis and Palestinians.

The book came out, obviously, after October 7, and we thought, "Let's try to resume that conversation, bring it up-to-date, and ask searching questions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also about the United States' role in acting as if it was solving it, when in fact, at best, [it was] playing a neutral role and, at worst, a negative one.

AM: Was Israel's genocide in Gaza inevitable, in your view?

RM: I don't usually think anything is inevitable—things could always happen differently. Soon after October 7, it was pretty clear that we were heading toward something resembling where we are today. In other words, there was the undeniable desire for vengeance on the part of the Israelis, but also the opportunity that some saw of achieving goals that might not have been achievable under other circumstances, in terms of expelling or ethnically cleansing Palestinians, reasserting full control over Gaza, and taking similar steps in the West Bank.

I can't say that I predicted the degree to which Western nations would be as complicit in what's happening. I don't know that it was inevitable, but it's [not] particularly surprising.

AM: Do you think that sanctions should be levied on Israel at this point?

RM: Sure.

AM: How do you describe or teach moral responsibility to students who are thinking about entering the State Department? And if you hadn't been pushed out of the Biden administration, would you have resigned?

RM: I hope I would have. I teach classes on Israel/Palestine at Yale, and I try to reserve one session for the question of ethical and moral responsibility and the ethics of resigning.

I know all the arguments. The feeling that [by resigning,] you could have an impact is so strong. But for some people, it's also financial. I don't want to dismiss people who, by resigning, may be sacrificing things for their family that are important. There has to be a point at which one tells oneself: "This is beyond my desire to be of some value in shifting policy and making an argument that otherwise wouldn't be heard."

You'll often hear that if everyone who disagrees leaves, the only people who remain are going to be the people who are very happy continuing with the status quo or worse. That argument has to have a limit at some point—when you see...that your role is not having any influence, that you're not changing anything, you're just giving more legitimacy to the administration.

There must also be a point at which even one's personal, financial, or professional interests have to take second place behind the moral responsibility. I'm sure you've read of people in the Biden administration who justified staying by saying, "I could have gone out and written an op-ed, but what difference would I have made?"

At some point, I think you have to tell yourself, "This is just too much." N

"At some point, I think you have to tell yourself, 'This is just too much.'"

KELLEY NORCIA

COMMENT / JACK MIRKINSON

Trans Extermination

As the right accelerates its war against trans people, too many centrists are keeping up their own trans bashing.

CHARLIE KIRK'S ALLEGED ASSASSIN, TYLER ROBINSON, is a cis man. But that didn't stop the right from seizing on early misinformation and the news that he may have been in a relationship with his trans roommate to escalate its war of extermination against trans people.

Saying that the right wants to exterminate trans people is not hyperbole. Republican bigotry has fueled an array of initiatives designed to drive trans people out of public life. But conservatives aren't content with turning trans people into fourth-class citizens: They want the public to see them as enemies of the state—as mentally ill savages pulling the country into the moral abyss. The United States' never-ending gun violence has become a useful tool in this effort. Right-wing commentators are pushing the idea that trans people are "prone to violence" and responsible for a huge proportion of mass shootings. Kirk, who once called trans people "a throbbing middle finger to God," flirted with this idea himself; at the moment of his murder, he had just finished telling an audience member that "too many" mass shooters were trans. Neither Robinson's cis identity nor his roommate's full cooperation with government investigators have done anything to curb this narrative.

Enemies of the state? A Trans Day of Visibility rally in New York City in March.

ADAM GRAY / *BLOOMBERG* VIA GETTY IMAGES

This fascistic anti-trans movement is, of course, based on lies. *The Minnesota Star Tribune*, citing statistics from the Gun Violence Archive and the Violence Prevention Project, reported in August that "less than 0.1% of mass-shooting suspects over the past decade identified as transgender" and that 98 percent of shooters were cisgender men.

No matter. After Kirk's shooting, Laura Loomer, one of the most influential members of the far right, declared on social media, "Trans people are a national security threat. Their movement needs to be classified as a terrorist organization IMMEDIATELY!" Ronny Jackson, the Republican congressman and former White House physician, went on Newsmax to label trans people "domestic terrorists" who have been "bred by the left" to do evil. Donald Trump Jr. ran a poll on X asking whether "trantifa" was the "greatest domestic terror threat facing America." ("No" was not an option.)

This is a civil-rights issue, not something that can be bargained away for perceived electoral gain.

Even more disturbing, as the investigative journalist Ken Klippenstein reported, the FBI is discussing whether to treat trans criminal suspects as "nihilistic violent extremists." The Heritage Foundation, whose Project 2025 initiative has shaped so much of the second Trump term, went even farther, calling on the FBI to create a criminal category for "Transgender Ideology-Inspired Violent Extremism."

This moment demands solidarity with trans people. It also demands some reflection about how we got to such a terrifying place—and it's not just conservatives who need to examine their consciences. Centrist politicians, activists, and media institutions helped lay the groundwork for the right's assault. Unfortunately, signs of such reflection are few and far between.

It's not that centrists have been engaging in the same Nazi-style rhetoric as many Republicans. But the anti-trans hysteria that has swept through the United States over the past few years would never have found so much purchase without the participation of elite liberal political and media institutions. *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic* have published story after story about the supposed dangers of gender-affirming care, particularly for minors, and stoked fears about trans people's participation in sports. These scaremongering campaigns may come dressed in more respectable clothing than a Fox News rant does, but they are similarly grounded in myth.

Transphobes exploited this coverage—after all, if even the liberal *New York Times* was concerned, there must be something going on, right? The

Times' coverage has been used by a wide range of politicians, lawyers, and judges to justify anti-trans policies; Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas cited the paper seven times in his opinion in *United States v. Skrmetti*, one of the most significant attacks on trans rights in recent memory.

The effect of this crusade was predictable. Trans rights, which had been gaining acceptance, became polarized—allowing pundits and politicians, including Democrats, to point to this polarization as a sign of the supposed extremism of the movement. Many centrists then made trans people scapegoats for Trump's 2024 presidential victory.

It's not just conservatives who need to examine their consciences. Centrists helped lay the groundwork.

These days, it seems that not a week goes by without some prominent Democrat bashing trans people—despite the Trump administration's placing a bigger and bigger target on their backs. California Governor Gavin Newsom, seen as a leading potential contender in the 2028 presidential election, infamously declared in a podcast with Kirk that it was "deeply unfair" for trans women and girls to compete with cis women and girls in sports. Former Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel, whose name is also in the 2028 presidential mix, rejected the idea of trans identity completely in a conversation with Megyn Kelly, saying, "Can a man become a woman? Uh, no."

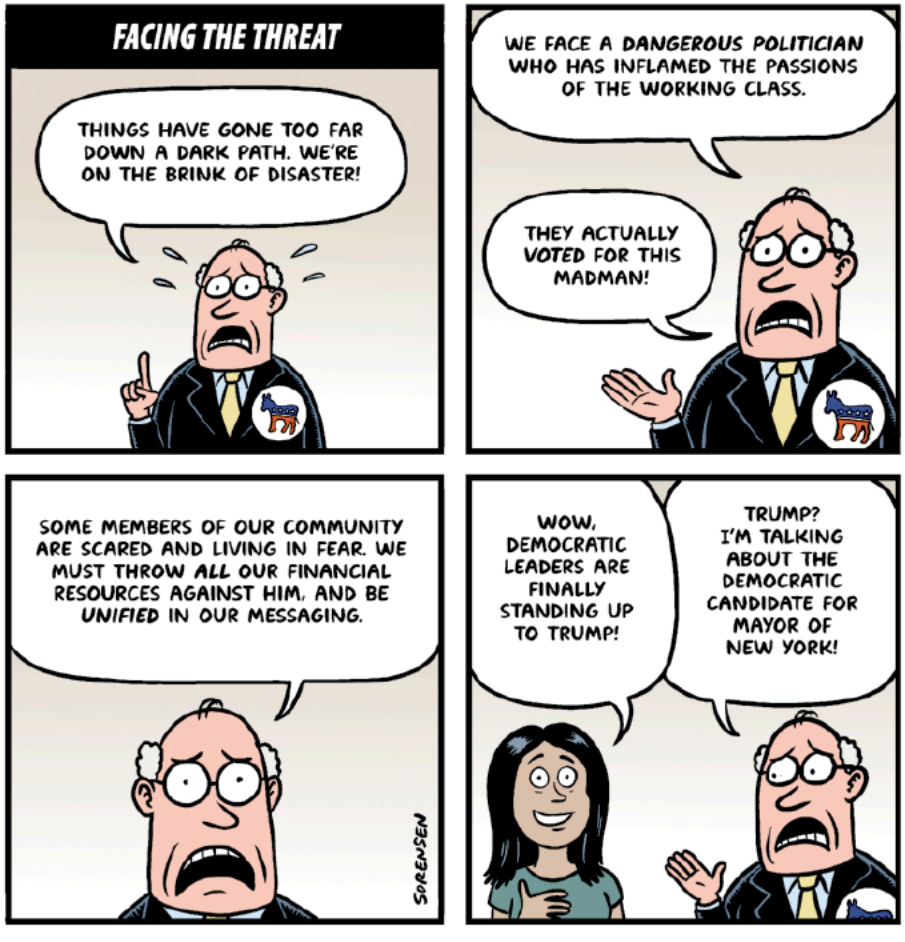
The wave of hatred following Kirk's death hasn't stopped the Democratic transphobia. September saw the launch of the Searchlight Institute, a Democratic think tank headed by John Fetterman's former chief of staff Adam Jentleson. (Naturally, one of the group's public introductions took the form of a splashy profile in the *Times*.) Even as the right ramps up its eliminationist campaign, Jentleson and his Searchlight cofounders have identified trans rights as a key issue for Democrats to run away from. Searchlight vice president for public policy Tré Easton, responding on X to a question about whether Democrats should back anti-abortion candidates, wrote: "Guns, immigration, trans folks in sports would probably have been better for this particular thought experiment."

Jentleson claimed in an interview with *Semafor* that he was actually trying to help trans people, saying, "The people who are throwing trans people under the bus are the ones insisting that Democrats take maximalist positions, even if it causes them to lose elections to Republicans who then tear up these rights."

The implication here seems to be that Democrats can turn a big dial that says "transphobia" on it to some ideal level—that there's a sweet spot of anti-trans discrimination that everyone can be content with. (Everyone, presumably, except trans people themselves.) But the events of the past year should have put that idea to rest. Democrats and centrists *have* been distancing themselves from trans people—indeed, top Democratic figures like Chuck Schumer will barely say the word *trans*—and the only forces that have benefited are the forces of anti-trans fascism. You just can't play these kinds of games with people's lives.

Polls show that Democratic voters have little interest in watching the government destroy trans people's lives. It's time for the party's base to make it clear to its elected leaders that this is a fundamental civil-rights issue, not something that can be bargained away for perceived electoral gain. And it's time for all of us to oppose this war of extermination—and demand that our politicians and media institutions do the same. **N**

OPPART/JEN SORENSEN



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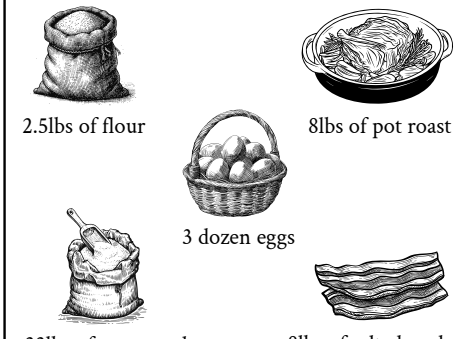

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The Right to Learn

Two professors provide some hard truths about the state of academia and what students should fight for.

DEAR STUDENTS: IF YOU ADD UP OUR TIME IN college classrooms, we've been teaching for more than four decades. We've spent this much time in academia because we believe in the transformational potential, for you and for society, of what one coworker calls your "right to an intellectual life." At the very least, this right should ensure access to every kind of knowledge; the opportunity to learn from experts; the freedom to pursue questions; and, crucially, the material stability to follow your intellectual curiosity.

It can be transformational to explore an academic field on multiple scales, from the subatomic to the interstellar, and in ways that exceed or overturn inherited metrics for comprehending it. In the process of your studies, you will hopefully forge a more sophisticated understanding of how much and what kind of evidence it takes for you to change your mind. When enough people change their mind in any single direction, it can shift the course of history.

But there are those who are opposed to granting you this right. The most obvious case is those who seek to censor knowledge. They do so because this right gives you access to books that can teach you just how often learning—not always from books and often through connection with one another—inspires people to fight for a better world. To quote Assata Shakur, "No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them."

Meaningful protection of the right to an intellectual life ensures that you will have the conceptual tools to overthrow tyrants. These tools will also help sustain the spiritual ones of courage and tenacity; they help distinguish between passion and bluster, between righteousness and snake oil. Right-wing media and politicians (along with their ostensibly centrist apologists) caricature these tools as disconnected from everyday life or as damaging to the pursuit of that life. These folks promote such distortions in order to push forward legislative reforms and federal enactments that will impoverish or eliminate precisely the knowledge that could change your life, that could deepen your sense of how interconnected your well-being is with that of others. And what is even more heartbreaking is that the people charged with protecting your access to transformational education often convey, in word and deed, that you should not want to have it, let alone exercise it to the fullest degree.

The magnitude of the changes confronting higher education defies easy expression or any one news story. The targeting of higher-education institutions by the Trump administration is the grotesque fruit of a multi-decade political movement to erode public trust in universities. The goal is and has been to compromise them as agents for resource redistribution. If the current administration forces universities to bend to its whims, any prospect of a broadly shared and generously funded social commitment to free and widely available education will evaporate. But the blame is not Trump's alone. A perniciously neoliberal and instrumentalist perspective on what university learning is for has accelerated the corrosion of US higher education.

Sometimes this corrosion manifests itself in how people talk about education. Think of the number of studies on which jobs people with different majors get after graduating. That conversation presumes that the only reason to study is to lock in the size of your paycheck. It ignores every other motivation, and maybe even more egregiously, it ignores what and who signs the paychecks as well as the tight grasp the wealthiest have on most of our working conditions. The undermining of education's purpose is apparent in the very structure of educational institutions and, most visibly, in the kinds of people who populate the boards that run universities: They're CEOs of companies,

The magnitude of the changes confronting higher education defies easy expression. But the blame is not Trump's alone.

partners in consulting firms, investment bankers, real estate developers. This structure can be opaque when viewed from off campus, but it matters for what is possible on campus: These boards—not the presidents, not the deans, and certainly not the faculty—are now the final bosses.

But nowhere is the assault on higher education and its associated freedoms more urgently literal and murderously organized than in the ongoing scholasticide in Gaza. Faced with students demanding that universities recognize and rectify their material investments in violence, university boards—in some cases staffed by CEOs of companies that profit from Gaza's obliteration—authorized and oversaw unprecedented crackdowns on student protests. In the process, they betrayed the foundational commitment of the institutions that they steward: to advance knowledge and to empower students in search of new knowledge. At the same time, they took no steps to check or undo the role of their universities in the destruction of Palestinian institutions.

In the face of these assaults, it is hard not to feel powerless. We will be frank with you: We have felt powerless.

In the face of these and other assaults, it is hard not to feel powerless. We will be frank with you: We have felt powerless. The ceaseless drive to build university endowments has warped the image of what we think of as study. After all, when administrators and colleagues profess faith in the sanctity of university endowments—it would be funny if it weren't so debilitating—how is an institution going to model for you the nonfinancial value of education?

But actual, deep, sustained, collaborative studying can build solidarity. This process, which does not happen exclusively inside universities, is what turns personal transformations into social ones. And it is this kind of studying that questions the false gods of capital and financialization. It reveals the motive of profit and the allure of wealth-hoarding as inimical to our collective well-being. Extensive and wide-ranging study helps clarify the difference between ideology and real historical scholarship of the kind that many in our ruling class do not want you to learn.

The term *ruling class* is helpful here: It pinpoints the overriding motivation for obliterating your right to an intellectual life. The goal is to make you desire to be ruled and to have you call that freedom.

Winning the fight for an intellectual life will require solidarity across generations. For that to happen, we will admit that we get frustrated when you undermine your own precious freedom to think richly and expansively. We get frustrated when you instead embrace the most rapaciously consumerist modes of careerist self-actualization. Here is a very short story to illustrate what we mean: We were on a panel together, and one of your peers unwittingly presented their own self-ejection from intellectual life as a clever question: "Why would you choose a life of humanistic study when there were other ways to make much more money?"

No matter the messaging about good careers, the virtues of studying are not reducible to the accumulation of wealth. We have chosen a life of humanistic study because we believe it will bind us more closely to you, to those who have preceded us, to those who will follow, and to the natural resources and land that we rely on. What you probably intuit is that our generation, like the one before it, has for the most part doubled down on the financialization of earth, space, life, and death. This is the true social context that we need to contend with and struggle against.

Let's keep that broader reality in mind as we talk about what you have likely become familiar with in your schools: the tyranny of STEM and the anti-intellectual practice of delimiting STEM as a specific kind of learning isolated from (and valued above) all other learning. Behind the student's snarky question to us was the presumption that humanistic study was incommensurate with the study of STEM and that these more "practical" fields lead to bigger paychecks. Like them, you have no doubt been encouraged to think in terms of what job you might get and to work back from there to determine what you should study.

Here is an actual practical reality: This diminished vision of STEM has helped erode the capacity of institutions of higher education to incubate and sustain the disciplines that are best positioned to make sense of the world around you. The brands of elite private universities may continue to evoke excellence, but their curricular offerings in the interdisciplinary fields of ethnic studies have historically lagged behind institutions that have fared a bit better at retaining the best people, whose research and expertise might help you gain a multidimensional understanding of this world. Those who should prioritize your right to an intellectual life deny you access to expertise, even as they reassure you that yours is an elite education. Meanwhile, those teachers who can make knowledge come most electrifyingly alive for you are marginalized or cast aside.

The keys for imagining otherwise are in your hands. You should remember that students have led or been in solidarity with the most important struggles for a sustainable, equitable world in the 20th and 21st centuries. Students have connected their ability to study the intentions of power to these global struggles. Because of the efforts of students, universities have also become better places. Students have insisted that their education befit the breadth and depth of their curiosity, an education that is current with every branch of making knowledge, both those that are established and those that are still emerging into classrooms. They struggled so that

you could, for example, study race and class in a global context, or forms of dispossession as they are experienced and understood by Indigenous peoples, or the myriad anti-colonial imaginations that gift us glimmering visions of worlds beyond this one, or traditions of interracial and interclass solidarity, or the concurrence of colonialism and ecocide, to cite just some examples. But their victories—your inheritance—are now being stealthily memory-holed.

If we were together in a classroom, we would ask you: What does it mean that "the practical" that has been presented to you as a foregone conclusion is ultimately to the detriment of the planet's well-being? Has power conditioned you to accept "the practical"—this idea of common sense and this limited notion of the possible—precisely because it has created structural realities that echo its interests: keeping you in material and spiritual debt through a life's indenture to careers it deems "practical," while, and so that, the wealthy get wealthier and the world burns?

Our fates are intertwined. Whether you decide to fight for your right to an intellectual life determines much more than the nature of your own jobs. Your decisions, or not, to insist on immersion in every kind of knowledge; on curriculums that include every kind of imagined world; on easy access to every book, no matter its politics or author; and on opposing the censorship of your minds by a profit motive will help determine the future of the planet.

We beg you to fight for your right to an intellectual life that is richer than any acronym.

Contrary to the right-wing caricature of people like us who teach and profess, we won't ever tell you what to think. But in keeping with the best impulses of the traditions of study and solidarity we come from, we will beg you to fight for your right to an intellectual life that is richer than any acronym and much more—urgently and joyously more—than an incidental precursor to a job. It will look different depending on whom you are around and what you decide, but rest assured that there are many more of us—the millennials, the Gen Xers—who are willing to stand alongside you. If we're lucky and relentless and work together, we might even rebuild a society unbound by paychecks. N

Monica Huerta is the author of Magical Habits *and* The Unintended: Photography, Property, and the Aesthetics of Racial Capitalism, *as well as essays in* Artforum, Intervenxions, *and other publications. Dan-el Padilla Peralta is the author, most recently, of* Classicism and Other Phobias.

OUR BACK PAGES/RICHARD KREITNER

Artificial Brains

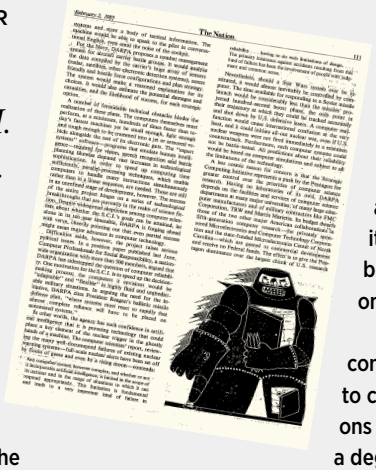
A history of early and very real warnings about AI.

The concept of artificial intelligence, if not the precise phrase, first appeared in *The Nation* in 1958, in a review of the Hungarian-born mathematician and physicist John von Neumann's *The Computer and the Brain*. Published a year after the author's death, the book sketched out a then-novel analogy between the functioning of early computers and the human mind.

The Nation's reviewer, Max Black, praised von Neumann's earlier formulation of game theory as "one of the intellectual monuments of our time." Had he lived longer, Black lamented, the scientist "might have constructed an even more important theory of computing machines. Such 'artificial brains' may eventually transform our culture, but our theoretical grasp of their underlying principles is still relatively crude and unsystematic."

Black did not mention von Neumann's military ties. A fierce anti-communist, von Neumann had played a critical role in the Manhattan Project and later advocated for the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles large enough to carry hydrogen bombs. Had he lived longer, von Neumann would almost certainly have set his own supercomputer-like mind to figuring out how "artificial brains" could best be put to military use.

That was precisely *The Nation*'s concern when it next addressed the perils of artificial intelligence. In a 1983 article, "Previewing the Latest High Tech," Stan Norris, a researcher with the Center for



Defense Information, wrote about cutting-edge tools being developed to give the United States an advantage over the Soviet Union. The CIA was working on getting computers to "process information and formulate hypotheses based on it." Other projects aimed to build robots that could replace human beings on "twenty-first-century battlefields." "As these examples show," Norris concluded, "new technology continues to create new forms of terror.... Weapons have outrun politics. The search for a degree of common security lies not in the laboratory but at the negotiating table."

Two years later, a graduate student named Paul N. Edwards detailed efforts by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency to effectively "place a key element of the nuclear trigger in the ghostly hands of a machine." That was both foolish and dangerous, Edwards argued: "Computer systems, delicate and programmed by humans, who can never anticipate every conceivable situation, will always be untrustworthy nuclear guardians. The solution lies, as it always has, in reducing the danger of war by putting weapons aside and expanding the possibilities for peaceful interchanges."

As Michael Klare shows elsewhere in this issue, the prospect of using "artificial brains" to replace human judgment and responsibility continues to hold a seductive appeal—creating new forms of terror, and diminishing rather than increasing national security. N

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ELIE MYSTAL FOR THE DEFENSE (OF THE REPUBLIC)

***The Nation*'s justice correspondent explains why the Supreme Court will never stand up to Trump.**

ELIE MYSTAL

AFTER THE SUPREME COURT OVERTURNED *ROE V. WADE* IN 2022 WITH its landmark decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, I hoped that Democrats would finally get a clue: The Supreme Court is not our friend. It has been corrupted and weaponized and functions as an antidemocratic enforcement mechanism of the Republican political agenda. When it's not prosecuting the culture war on behalf of white-wing bigots, it's destroying organized labor, engaging in copaganda, and anointing kings. The revocation of abortion rights was an opportunity for elected Democrats to wean themselves off the anachronistic view that the court is an "apolitical" engine of justice that must be deferred to and respected.

The opportunity was squandered. The Biden administration not only followed the letter and spirit of the Supreme Court's various rulings, hobbling its own agenda; the president failed to use his bully pulpit to its fullest to turn public opinion against the court. The high court stymied one of Biden's most popular initiatives, student-loan debt relief, and the administration did nothing. *ProPublica* handed the Democrats the largest Supreme Court corruption scandal in US history—the revelation that billionaire Harlan Crow had provided lavish, undisclosed vacations and other gifts to Justice Clarence Thomas—and the Democrats did next to nothing beyond writing a few angry letters and voting to issue some congressional subpoenas that were promptly ignored. Democrats refused to organize around court expansion or any other reform that could have reduced the power of this antidemocratic institution. They continued to prop up the court at the very moment there was an opportunity to cut it down to size.

Anytime I complained about this in print, on television, or at any bar in DC that would still offer me service, I was informed by establishment Democrats, left-of-center lawyers, and even some progressives that protecting the independence and strength of the Supreme Court was necessary. They argued that the public would not accept a Democratic Party that openly defied the courts. They said that a strong Supreme Court was a necessary check against a potential Trump administration.

I told those people they were fools—and events have since proved me right. The Supreme Court has shown time and again that it will provide no resistance to Donald Trump. Quite the opposite, as the court has become an enforcement arm of Trump's illegal, unconstitutional agenda. Meanwhile, Trump flouts and defies court orders he doesn't like without paying any appreciable price in the court of public opinion. The Supreme Court has revealed itself to be a useful tool for legitimizing Trump's policies, and an ineffectual restraint against anything Trump wants to do.

Recall, if you can bear it, the court's last term. The justices refused to stop Trump's various assaults on democratic self-government, prevented poor women from receiving healthcare at Planned Parenthood, tried to eradicate transgender children, and perverted the 14th Amendment into a tool of white supremacy. Those were not the rulings of people who are "just trying to call balls and strikes" or are committed to stopping the rise of fascism. Even in the rare instances when Republican justices might disagree with Trump's policy agenda, they know it is the smart play to give Trump what he wants now, and wait for him to move on or die.

All of which brings us to the first Monday in October, when the Supreme Court returns to work after an extended summer break. Nobody should be under any illusion that this court will stop or restrain Trump in any meaningful way this term. Nobody should imagine that it is interested in doing anything approaching the impartial application of "the law."

This term, the court will continue to prop up the Trump regime. The six conservative justices will use the shadow docket—the name for the cases the court hears on "emergency" appeal, without regular argument or hearings—to fast-track Trump's executive orders without even bothering to explain their reasoning.

They'll remove lower court injunctions to clear the path for Trump's policies. They'll use every procedural trick in the book, and when that's not good enough, they'll either rule for Trump outright or create opportunities for him to get second and third and fourth bites of the same apple until his unhinged administration tweaks its arguments to the court's satisfaction.

When the court isn't playing handmaiden to Trump's particular brand of authoritarianism, it will do what it's generally been trying to do for the past 20-plus years under John Roberts's leadership: continue to suck the life out of the democratic process and crush the rights of anybody who doesn't happen to be a cishetero white man. While Democrats patiently wait for the magical day when the Supreme Court tells Trump no, the six Republicans will bully trans kids and poison the environment for all kids lucky enough to survive the next school shooting.

NOBODY SHOULD BE UNDER ANY ILLUSION THAT THIS COURT WILL STOP OR RESTRAIN TRUMP IN ANY MEANINGFUL WAY THIS TERM.

None of this is speculation. Democrats, liberals, and those who value human decency will lose the highest-profile cases set to be argued in front of the Supreme Court this year. But while I can and will explain how this will happen, I can't explain why so many of us are resigned to taking it. In March, Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer told NBC's *Meet the Press*: "I believe that if Donald Trump should defy the courts, the public will rise up." The public has not risen up, and they likely never will as long as leaders keep telling them all is well and the rule of law is functioning as intended. Leaders must rise up and *lead*; they must explain to the people who their true enemy is.

The Supreme Court is not our friend. And I don't know how often this court has to kick us in the face to get people to realize that. But the answer, for at least another term, appears to be "more."

A banner moment: At Sports Illustrated Stadium in Harrison, New Jersey, before the start of a National Women's Soccer League match.

IRA L. BLACK / CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Little v. Hecox and *West Virginia v. B.P.J.*

Argument date: TBA

The Supreme Court is poised to violate the civil rights of an entire group of people, and this time the Democrats are unlikely even to object. The court is taking direct aim at transgender athletes' participation in sports, but the Democratic consulting class has decided that discrimination against trans people is so popular that Democrats should sacrifice them to the slings and arrows of outrageous cishetero culture.

The first of these cases is called *Little v. Hecox*. In 2020, Idaho became the first state in the nation to ban transgender athletes from participating in women's sports at any level. The law, called the Fairness in Women's Sports Act, also allows any participant in sports to "question" a rival's gender, triggering an invasive gynecological exam to establish "sex at birth." There is no corresponding ban on people who wish to participate in men's sports.

Lindsay Hecox was a student at Boise State University in Idaho who was barred from trying out for the school's track and field team because she is transgender. Another, unnamed student believed that her body type would cause opponents to question her gender and force her to submit to medical examinations. Both athletes sued the state, alleging a violation of their equal-protection rights. They won in front of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, but Idaho appealed to the Supreme Court.

Since then, Hecox has moved to withdraw from the case. She says she no longer wants to participate in sports because of the "negative public scrutiny from certain quarters" as well as illness and her father's death; she also wants to focus on her academics. The request could lead to the Supreme Court declaring the case moot and refusing to rule on it, but the right-wing legal group Alliance Defending Freedom wants the court to keep going. That makes sense, from the conservative perspective. With six conservative justices steeped in anti-trans bigotry, conservatives have a good chance of winning this case—and defeating trans women athletes before they get another turn at bat.

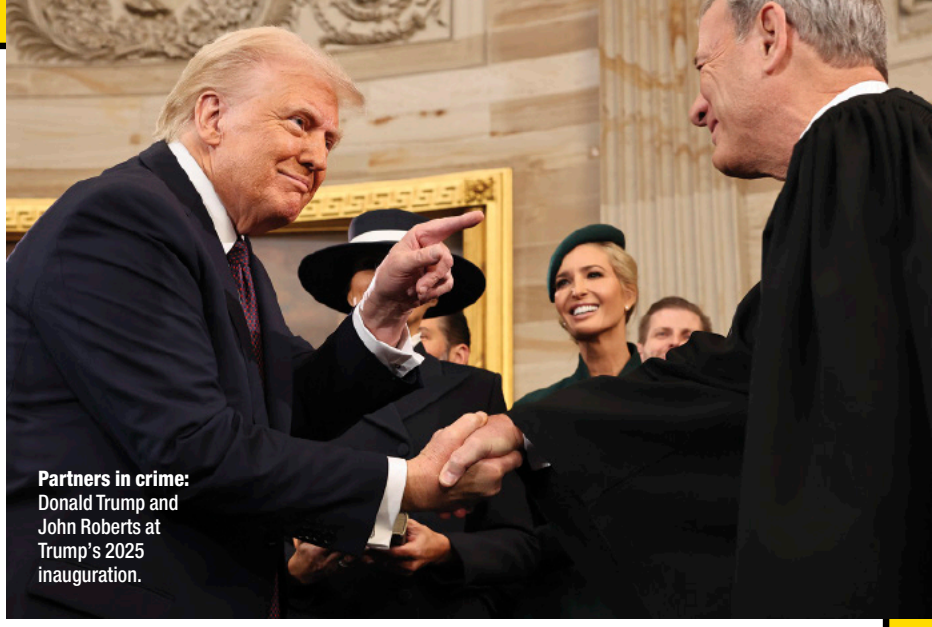
I recognize that it is hard for some people to wrap their minds around the fact of transgender athletes because it requires them to, you know, understand things. You have to understand that there is a difference between gender and sex. You have to understand that being trans is not some kind of societal "contagion" you can catch from watching other people live their best lives. You have to understand that nearly 2 percent of the population is born intersex and simply doesn't fit biologically into the false gender binary that you remember from watching *Friends*. You have to learn, and grow, and the entire Republican media machine is designed to tell people they never have to learn anything they can't noodle out from the vantage point of their own porch.

What I can't understand is when educated people see blatant, unconstitutional discrimination staring them in the face yet decide to not care because that discrimination isn't targeting them at that exact moment. You don't need to be an expert in constitutional law to recognize that a law that treats participants in women's sports differently than participants in men's sports violates any fundamental protection of equality. And you shouldn't need me or anybody else to tell you that a law that requires women, but not men, to drop their pants on someone else's say-so to determine their sex is wrong and disgusting.

The second case the court will decide along these same unconstitutional and vile grounds is called *West Virginia v. B.P.J.* This case involves a 15-year-old trans girl known as Becky, who was banned from participating in girls' track and field

when West Virginia passed a law similar to Idaho's. Becky started taking hormone blockers at age 10 to interrupt the onset of puberty. Taking hormone blockers is one of the things the NCAA and the International Olympic Committee require trans athletes to do in order to compete; in Becky's case, she just wanted to play sports with her friends. The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals sided with her, ruling that West Virginia's ban violated the equal-protection clause of the US Constitution as well as Title IX. But West Virginia appealed to the Supreme Court.

These bans do nothing to help women and girls who play sports, and they clearly violate the Constitution. Nevertheless, I expect that these cases will be decided in favor of the anti-trans bigots, 6–3, with alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh writing for the majority. I imagine some kind of opinion in which he talks about how much he likes coaching girls' basketball and how that gives him the moral clarity to mandate that women athletes take off their underwear and submit to gynecological exams. You know, for their own "protection."



Partners in crime: Donald Trump and John Roberts at Trump's 2025 inauguration.

Louisiana v. Callais

Argument: **October 15**

The Republicans on the Supreme Court do not think the Voting Rights Act should be constitutional. The Voting Rights Act is the most important piece of legislation in American history. It is the law that enforces the 15th and 19th Amendments and thus secures the belated promise of political participation for all. It is *the thing* that makes this country a democracy instead of a white, male, apartheid state.

But Chief Justice John Roberts hates it. He has spent much of his career trying to destroy it. Since he was elevated to the Supreme Court, Roberts has taken shot after shot at the Voting Rights Act, most famously in 2013 when, in *Shelby County v. Holder*, he and four of his conservative colleagues ruled that an entire section of the act was both unconstitutional and unnecessary because they decided that white people no longer need to be stopped from acting on their worst racist instincts. I view *Shelby County* as directly responsible for Trump's election in 2016.

The weight of history: In 1982, civil-rights activists march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge as part of the long campaign to secure voting rights.

Since then, the attacks on the voting rights of non-white people have been nigh unceasing. Red-state governments have closed polling places in Black communities, added myriad voter-ID requirements, and attempted to gerrymander Black people, Latinos, and the Democratic Party out of political significance. The Supreme Court has gone along with every devious plan to take away the political power of non-white people, except one. In 2023, in a case called *Allen v. Milligan*, the court forced Alabama to draw a second majority-minority congressional district. Alabama has seven congressional districts and is 27 percent Black. The state had tried to make one majority-minority district while letting whites dominate the other six. The courts forced Alabama to make a second one (which resulted in 28 percent of Alabama's congressional districts being majority-minority), and the Supreme Court ruled, 5–4, that this was required under the Voting Rights Act and allowed under the Constitution.

At the time, people like me wondered if the case marked a new commitment to racial equality in voting from the Supreme Court. This term, *Louisiana v. Callais* will answer that question with a resounding "no." Instead of ruling as the Voting Rights Act requires, the court is likely to make yet another application of the act unconstitutional.

Louisiana v. Callais is basically indistinguishable from *Allen v. Milligan*. Louisiana has six congressional districts and is around 30 percent Black and Hispanic. White legislators tried to pack as many Black and brown people as possible into a single congressional district, allowing whites to dominate the other five. Courts forced Louisiana to draw a second majority-minority district. Under a straight application of the just-decided *Milligan* precedent, this case should be over. But it's not, because the Supreme Court does not want non-white people to have fair representation in government.

THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PIECE OF LEGISLATION IN AMERICAN HISTORY. BUT CHIEF JUSTICE JOHN ROBERTS HATES IT.

This case was actually argued last term, but the court did not reach a decision. The Republicans seemed unwilling to affirm the precedent they had set down just a year earlier with *Milligan*. Instead, the court asked for the case to be reargued this term, with lawyers presenting briefs on a new set of questions—specifically, whether the Voting Rights Act's prohibitions against racist gerrymandering are unconstitutional.

FROM TOP: CHIP SOMODEVILLA / GETTY IMAGES; BETTMANN ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

To explain that without jargon: The court is asking whether the failure to overrepresent white voters is a violation of white people's constitutional rights against discrimination. They're asking whether the 14th and 15th Amendments *prevent* the state from drawing a racially fair congressional map.

That they're even asking this question gives away the answer they intend to deliver. Again, this case could have been decided in one sentence: "Read *Allen v. Milligan* and stop wasting our time." The fact that they want to reargue the case, and reargue it on this wild ground of white grievance, means that the two people who sided with the liberals in *Milligan*, Roberts and alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh, are eager to resume their campaign against the Voting Rights Act.

American democracy cannot survive the Supreme Court's attacks on the Voting Rights Act, because American democracy did not really exist before the Voting Rights Act. White rule existed. And that is what this court wants to return us to with this case.

Unelected rulers: The nine members of the current Supreme Court in October 2022.

Chiles v. Salazar

Argument: October 7

Conversion therapy, the pseudo-scientific process of trying to change a person's sexual orientation through psychotherapy and religious programming, is a form of child abuse. As of this writing, 23 states and the District of Columbia have banned the practice—for minors.

Predictably, right-wing Christofascists are outraged. They believe they can bully children into being cishetero normies, and they demand the right to try. This term, the Supreme Court will give them their wish and allow the antigay culture warriors to pursue this front in their ongoing war against LGBTQ children.

On the stump: JD Vance campaigning for the Senate in November 2022.

The case is called *Chiles v. Salazar*. It involves a Christian "counselor," Kaley Chiles, who is challenging Colorado's ban on conversion therapy. She claims she has a First Amendment right to tell kids that their sexual orientation is wrong and can be changed. She also claims she has a First Amendment right to practice conversion therapy under the free-exercise clause, which allows her to practice her religion in whatever way she deems fit.

IF YOU UNDERSTAND CONVERSION THERAPY AS A FORM OF ABUSE, YOU UNDERSTAND THAT PEOPLE SHOULDN'T HAVE A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO DO IT.

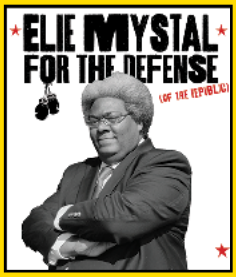
Despite her gross and bigoted desires, Chiles's claims have the contours of a legitimate legal argument. Licensed medical professionals should be given a wide berth to talk about whatever they want to talk about with their patients. And we broadly accept the notion that religious adherents should be allowed to program their kids according to their beliefs.

But parents, religious or otherwise, don't have a First Amendment right to beat their kids as much as they deem necessary. Therapists don't have a religious right to administer medically dubious shock treatments, or shove bamboo sticks under kids' fingernails until they promise to not be gay. If you understand conversion therapy as a similar form of *abuse*, you understand that people shouldn't have a constitutional right to do it.

Of course, the alleged Christians on the Supreme Court do not understand conversion therapy as child abuse. They think of it as just another tool in their arsenal to eradicate LGBTQ children. They will likely declare, 6–3, that Colorado cannot legally ban this practice, because it violates the First Amendment rights of child abusers who are just trying to "help" little Jimmy see the error of his ways.

Conversion therapy shouldn't be allowed under the First Amendment. It should be banned under the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment.

FROM TOP: ALEX WONG / GETTY IMAGES; DREW ANGERER / GETTY IMAGES



National Republican Senatorial Committee v. FEC

Argument date: **TBA**

In 2022, a pre-eyeliner JD Vance, along with Congressman Steve Chabot, the National Republican Senatorial Committee, and others filed suit against the Federal Election Commission over its rules limiting the amount of money that political parties can spend in coordination with federal candidates. They brought the lawsuit several months after a good-government group filed a complaint with the FEC alleging that Vance's Senate campaign had illegally coordinated with his billionaire backer, Peter Thiel. As the FEC did its thing (and ultimately dismissed the complaint), the case wound its way through the courts. Procedural nonsense ensued, with appellate courts in Ohio talking about appellate courts in Colorado in the kinds of ways that would put a 10-year-old on a sugar high to sleep. Eventually, the NRSC, Vance, and others went to the Supreme Court, asking it to change the campaign finance rules—because nothing says "hillbilly" quite like stuffing somebody else's money in your pockets and then begging to keep it.

The rules they all disliked were designed to limit, in some small way, the potential for corruption in politics; the idea was to prevent big-money donors from circumventing the individual campaign contribution spending limits by simply giving all their money to PACs that are wholly controlled by their desired political candidates.

The Supreme Court has upheld these FEC rules in the past, but that was in 2001—before Roberts took over, before *Citizens United*, and before the Supreme Court essentially endorsed the bribery of public officials last year.

Vance and the National Republican Senatorial Committee are now asking the Supreme Court to do away with the FEC's few remaining rules and allow political candidates unfettered access to dark money. There's no earthly reason to think that the six Republicans on the court will say no. Several of the court's justices have themselves been exposed as brazenly corrupt—eager and greedy to accept whatever gifts and vacations come their way from the same group of big-money donors who would like to further infect our politics. The Republican plaintiffs are asking the fox to open the door to the henhouse so all the other foxes can come inside.

When Peter Thiel is sitting in the Oval Office in a few years, with President JD Vance on his lap, some people will ask, "How did this happen?" This case will be one of the reasons why.

Urias-Orellana v. Bondi

Argument date: **TBA**

It wouldn't be a proper Supreme Court term if there weren't a case that allowed the Republicans on the court to do something shocking and cruel to immigrants. This year, that case involves the harrowing life of Douglas Humberto Urias-Orellana.

IT WOULDN'T BE A PROPER SUPREME COURT TERM IF THERE WEREN'T A CASE THAT ALLOWED REPUBLICANS TO DO SOMETHING CRUEL TO IMMIGRANTS.

Urias-Orellana is a Salvadoran national who fled to the United States with his wife and child after a hit man, known in court documents as Wilfredo, vowed to kill his entire family. Wilfredo shot and seriously injured both of Urias-Orellana's half-brothers. Urias-Orellana himself was repeatedly harassed by armed masked men who demanded money and, on several occasions, assaulted him. Urias-Orellana moved repeatedly, but anytime he went near his hometown, Wilfredo's men would find him. In 2021, after spying Wilfredo's masked attackers patrolling the latest town where he was living, apparently looking for him, Urias-Orellana and his family fled to the United States without a visa.

Our collective inheritance: A woman and her son protest outside the Supreme Court over Trump's move to end birthright citizenship.

I am a little bit afraid even to *write* about Wilfredo, and I've only read the summary of facts of the case. According to court documents, the dispute started because Wilfredo's mother and the father of Urias-Orellana's half-brothers were (quoting the First Circuit here) "involved in a relationship of which Wilfredo did not approve." I mean, at least Jean Valjean actually stole something. Urias-Orellana is getting hunted because his mother's ex-lover had an affair with somebody else.

In any event, Urias-Orellana applied for asylum in the United States, as well as protection under the Convention Against Torture, saying that he feared persecution and death if he was sent home. That strikes me as an eminently reasonable application.

An immigration judge disagreed. The judge found that Urias-Orellana could "avoid" persecution in El Salvador as long as he never went back to his hometown and Wilfredo never found him. Urias-Orellana appealed, but the First Circuit rejected his appeal, saying these types of decisions were not reviewable by the courts. Urias-Orellana appealed to the Supreme Court, which agreed to hear his case.

That may sound like good news for Urias-Orellana, because the anti-immigrant Supreme Court wouldn't necessarily take a case in which the plaintiff lost at all lower levels of review if it didn't disagree with those rulings. But the court is

(Mystal, continued on page 35)

DREW ANGERER / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

THE *NATION* INTERVIEW

BERNIE SANDERS EXPLAINS...

WHY AMERICANS ARE FURIOUS AT THE DEMOC

POLL AFTER POLL IN RECENT MONTHS has revealed that, while approval ratings for Donald Trump are tanking and are also down for congressional Republicans, attitudes toward the Democratic Party are even more negative. And, as *The Christian Science Monitor* has pointed out, "One subgroup driving the Democrats' poor ratings [is] their own base. A recent CNN poll found that Democratic voters currently hold far more negative views of their own party than Republican voters do of theirs. At town hall events and in focus groups, frustrated Democrats say they want their representatives to push back harder against the Trump administration." Surveys show a mounting anger on the part of grassroots Democrats with party leaders, who are seen as having failed to mount a coherent opposition to congressional Republicans or to articulate bold positions on the issues of the day.

Senator Bernie Sanders shares their frustration. The Vermont independent and two-time contender for the Democratic presidential nomination has spent recent months traveling the United States with a "Fighting Oligarchy" message that has drawn massive crowds at dozens of events, including in some of the bluest and reddest parts of the country. He has come away from the experience with a powerful sense that the party needs a new direction. To that end, Sanders has been endorsing insurgent Democratic primary candidates, and in states where the party organization has atrophied, he has said he's open to endorsing independents. Among them is 34-year-old democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani, the Democratic nominee for mayor of New York. But even as the senator was enthusiastically campaigning for Mamdani, Democratic Party leaders from New York were refusing to do so.

Sanders spoke with *The Nation* about how his longtime concerns about the leadership of the Democratic Party have been amplified in recent months—and about what he believes it must do to reconnect with working-class voters, expand its base, and appeal to disenchanted independent and irregular voters. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

—John Nichols

The Nation: **You have never been a Democrat and have always served as an independent. But you've caucused with the House and Senate Democrats and worked with many Democratic presidents over the years. And, of course, you came close to being their nominee for president of the United States.**

Sanders: [Laughs] Never been a Democrat—almost their nominee for president.

The Nation: **That gives you a unique perspective on the party. In fact, you've probably thought as much about the direction of the Democratic Party as anyone in American politics. So, at a point when a lot of people are wrestling with the question of what the party stands for and where it is headed, give me a sense of your current thinking about what ails the party.**

Sanders: I think the obvious answer, which has been stated 5 million times, is that they're way out of touch with where ordinary people are. By and large—with exceptions, and each state is a little bit different—the Democratic Party [at its top] is mostly made up of folks who have money and consultants, and politicians who work with folks who have money and consultants. And so, if you look at how many of the "leading Democrats" function, are they out holding electoral rallies, talking to ordinary people? They can't, because people aren't going to come out—there's not much to see. They spend an enormous amount of time raising money.... They're not about to take on the people who provide them with the money.

ILLUSTRATION BY **VICTOR JUHASZ**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I was really surprised—and I didn't really appreciate this until I ran for president—at how weak [the party is in much of the country]. I mean, they really had to go crazy to beat me. And we started at 1 percent [in the polls], with no money, no support, nothing.

I discovered that, to a large degree, the party is a paper tiger. There wasn't anything there. We arranged our schedule, in 2016, to go to Democratic Party events, and we would schedule a rally on the same day. We'd be in the same community—kill two birds with one stone. So in the afternoon I'd go to a rally—it'd be 10,000 people out there. They'd be young, they'd be excited, they'd be really involved. Then in the evening I'd go to the official Democratic Party function. There'd be 200 people, mostly older—businesspeople, lawyers, politicians. It was day and night. It was two different worlds.

"I discovered that, to a large degree, the Democratic Party is a paper tiger. There wasn't anything there."

Obviously, the future is with young people, people of color, union people, etc., etc. But the party leadership doesn't seem to recognize that. I was in West Virginia recently. I met with some of the best people. But they have one [full-time] staffer in the Democratic Party in West Virginia. So it's almost nothing. And that's probably true for, I don't know, five, 10 states in the country, where Democrats have almost no representation in the legislature, don't hold the governor's office, have no representation in Washington. Democratic bodies completely folded in those areas. I think they're also in a lot of trouble in [traditionally Democratic] states like New York, for example, where they have not much to say to ordinary people.

Democratic socialism's silver lining: Zohran Mamdani's affordability-focused New York mayoral campaign has renewed hope among progressives.

If you want to know where the Democratic Party is at, I would say Zohran Mamdani's campaign [for mayor of New York] is a crystallization of that. You would think, if you had a candidate who generated, as I hear, some 50,000 volunteers, enormous enthusiasm, and then wins the Democratic primary despite being heavily outspent, that the Democratic leadership would be excited, enthusiastic. Here is a candidate who is tapping the energy of young people, of working people. Oh, my God—in a day of Trumpism, what a great moment!

But the party leadership is saying, "Oh, we can't support him. We can't support him, because he is saying what 75 percent of Democrats say about Israel: 'No more money for Netanyahu.' Oh, can't support him." I mean, this is beyond absurd. This is beyond laughable. It is pathetic. So you have the leading Democrats in New York State, as I understand it, who have not yet indicated their support for the guy who won an overwhelming victory for the Democratic nomination. That's the crystallization of your Democratic Party. So who are they representing? Are they representing the 75 percent of people who don't want to give Netanyahu any more money? I guess not. Are they representing a significant majority of the people who voted for Mamdani [in the primary]? I guess not.

The Nation: **Why is there such a disconnect between the leadership and their own voters?**

Sanders: They don't want to open the door, and, in fact, they're pretty firm about keeping that door shut.

So the door gets busted open: Don't ask—tell them we're in. And I think the Mamdani campaign is a crystallization of that. And if the Democratic leadership can't support the Democratic nominee, what is the Democratic Party? Who's the Democratic Party?

STEPHANIE KEITH / GETTY IMAGES

The Nation: **There's an interesting dynamic there, because it's a very uneven, very unfair game when it comes to endorsements, right? If a moderate wins a primary, then the message from party leaders to the progressive community is: "You have got to get on board today. You've got to show support, prove to us you're loyal to the party."**

Sanders: Yes, that is right. Again, you're absolutely right. But that [pressure tactic] is no longer going to work. No one believes that anymore. That's over with…. The Democratic Party no longer even can dream of saying to you, you know, "Mary Smith won. You may not like her politics, but she's the Democratic nominee. You, as a progressive, have got to support her." That's over with. No one takes that seriously. If they can't support Mamdani, then, of course, they can't make that request of anybody.

Bottom line: A guy wins his primary with great enthusiasm, grassroots activism, and their response is: "We can't support you." Then who the hell can you support? What do you think the future of the Democratic Party is? Do you think AIPAC is the future of the Democratic Party? I don't think so.

The Nation: **Let's dig deeper into several of the things you've said. You were talking about what you've seen around the country: Democratic parties in some states have virtually atrophied—they're almost nonexistent. My sense is that this is even truer at the county level, the local level. But, in a sense, this is an opening for progressives, isn't it? Because there are places where people could get on the Democratic Party ballot line and be the Democratic Party.**

Sanders: Someone was telling me recently, I think from West Virginia, that in some local elections, Democrats had no candidates—zero candidates. So when you have nothing, when you don't have a party, can anybody who's interested become the candidate? Probably, yes. But it does speak to something else: When you think of a party—maybe I'm old-fashioned and conservative—you think of thousands of people coming together at the grassroots level to nominate and support a candidate, energy coming from the bottom on up. That is not in any way, shape, or form what the Democratic Party is about.

If you want to know who the Democratic leadership listens to, think about this: I remember when Biden dropped out, or just before he dropped out, *The New York Times* was running front-page stories about all these people who are—now, literally, they say it—the donor class. "The donor class has decided that A, B, and C are the right candidates. The donor class says this; the donor class says that." I mean, they don't even hide it anymore. All right, so the money people decide who the candidates are, put in money, and [get a candidate]. Meanwhile, as I said, in five or 10 states, the party barely exists. How do you call yourself a national party if you barely exist in five or 10 states—states in the South, states in the West?

The Nation: **So as we move toward 2026, you are encouraging candidates to run and campaigning for them. These are candidates who, more often than not, aren't on the same page as the leadership. Some are actually running as independents. Do you think we're at a critical juncture for the Democratic Party? What kind of moment should we see this as?**

Sanders: You have got to understand that this is not just an American issue. Centrist parties like the Democratic Party are falling by the wayside all over the world. I was in the UK recently. You know what the leading party is right now in the UK? It's the Reform Party—the right-wing extremist line.

The Nation: **Nigel Farage, who is friends with Trump.**

Sanders: Exactly. They're winning. They're way ahead. The Labour Party is like the Democratic Party: It stands for nothing. And, you know, [former Labour Party leader] Jeremy Corbyn is now starting a new party. You've got similar things happening all over the world.

The Nation: **The traditional centrist parties, the traditional center-left parties, which have governed countries, are beaten down. People are rejecting them.**

Sanders: So you've got the Democratic Party, the Labour Party in England; in Germany, the Social Democrats are in deep struggle. All these centrist-type parties that once had some attachment to the working classes of their country are in trouble. So there's a question, you know, whether even the Democratic Party [will continue to exist as we know it]. It may fall by the wayside completely like the Whig Party. It's possible. But the name doesn't mean anything.

If your question is, "Is it conceivable that good people can take over the Democratic Party and make it a working-class party, a multigenerational party, welcoming diverse points of view?"—that's a possibility. But I think people are now struggling with whether it is worth it. To take on Trump, do they want to take on AIPAC and the Democratic Party, or would you start a third party? That's what they're talking about in England right now. Corbyn is starting that. And I guess he has finally decided the Labour Party is useless. And I think a lot of people are thinking that about the Democratic Party right now. So the choice is whether you take over the Democratic Party, make it into a working-class party, or whether you start your own party.

Fighting the good fight: Sanders drew enormous crowds during his spring 2025 "Fighting Oligarchy" tour.

The Nation: **It's very hard to start a viable third party in the United States.**

Sanders: Very hard in this country, in this context. It's easier in England, I think. [In the US,] you need an enormous amount of money and have to deal with 50 states' rules and regulations, which are against third parties. So that's the challenge.

But I think it goes without saying that the Democratic leadership is way out of touch with where the American people are, and it's almost frightening to see the kind of anger and contempt that people feel toward the leadership of the Democratic Party.

"How do you call yourself a national party if you barely exist in five or 10 states—in the South, in the West?"

The Nation: **You've sensed that anger this year as you've been traveling around the country for your "Fighting Oligarchy" rallies. Clearly, at one point early in Trump's presidency, you decided that a substantial portion of your time was better spent in Omaha, Nebraska, or Iowa City, Iowa, than it was in Washington.**

Sanders: That's right.

NATALIE BEHRING / GETTY IMAGES

The Nation: **You went out there basically to talk to the people. In a way, it's been a real-time experiment to find out where the American people are at with regard to Trump. They clearly showed up in huge numbers for these "Fighting Oligarchy" events. But they're not coming out to say, "Yeah, we love the Democratic Party."**

Sanders: No, they're not. For most Americans now, there is an understanding that the system, broadly described, is broken. Nobody but your most right-wing Republicans thinks that it's OK for Musk to spend $270 million to elect a guy who offered billionaires more money. Everybody knows the campaign-finance system is broken, the political system is broken. They see what crypto does; they see what AIPAC does; they see what the AI people, their super PACs, are going to do. So I think everyone understands that reality. Everyone understands that there are massive and growing levels of income and wealth inequality. Everybody understands the healthcare system is absolutely broken. People understand the housing situation is broken.

A few years ago, the Pew Research people came out with a poll [that asked], "Do you think you are better off or worse off than somebody in your condition, your position, was 50 years ago?" You know what the results of the polling were? Almost 60 percent of the people said they thought that people were better off 50 years ago.

Resisting inhumanity: Demonstrators outside the Capitol accuse the US-and-Israeli-run Gaza Humanitarian Foundation of worsening the crisis.

The Nation: **Fascinating.**

Sanders: It is fascinating, and I asked that question up in Newport, Vermont, recently. And one guy jumps up and says, "Affordability." He said, "When I was growing up, my father owned a bar in Rhode Island. We served five-, 10-cent beers, draft beers, and we could afford things." Another woman gets up there. She grabs the mic and says, "Look, my dad was a car salesman, and he didn't make a lot of money, but my mom stayed home with the kids, and we had a decent standard of living." And then somebody starts talking about the cost of housing. And I thought about this myself. You know, I grew up in a rent-controlled apartment in Brooklyn, New York. My dad never made any money. We were never poor. We ate well and we had a roof over our heads. And we [benefited from] rent control. I did a rough, back-of-the-envelope calculation. You know how much my family was spending on rent in a small apartment—a three-and-a-half-room apartment with four people? Take a guess at what percentage of my dad's income we were spending on housing.

"One of the reasons Mamdani is running a great campaign is precisely his views on Israel and Gaza."

The Nation: **Thirty percent?**

Sanders: Eighteen percent.

The Nation: **Less than a fifth of the income.**

Sanders: Right? And when you spend 18 percent, you have money left over to do things that allow the family to survive. If we were required to spend 30 percent or 40 percent or 50 percent, we would've been out on the streets—couldn't have done it.

And here's the insanity: How the hell, 50 years ago, before computers and cell phones, could one person not making a lot of money have at least a solid, lower-middle-class lifestyle, and you can't do it now?

The Nation: **Do you think the Democratic Party leadership could fashion a platform around that?**

Sanders: They don't even understand it, John. It's not their world.

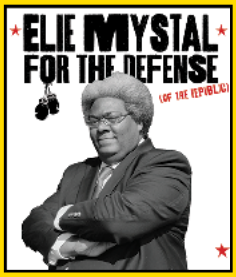
The Nation: **Let me ask you about another issue where Democratic leaders appear to be dramatically out of touch. As you've been out doing this real-time experiment, talking to people, hearing what they actually want to hear about, one of the fascinating things has been your discussion of Gaza. I saw you do it first, I think, in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where you made a very strong statement on Gaza. The people responded with the loudest applause of the night.**

Sanders: John, let me tell you. Let me be very clear. I mention Gaza in virtually every speech. And without exception, whether you're doing it in Viroqua, Wisconsin; Los Angeles, California; Newport, Vermont—wherever you're doing it—it is almost always a standing response. It is a very visceral issue. Now, when the idiots in the Democratic Party say, "Well, we've done a poll. The economy is the first, this is the second, and Gaza is only in 10th place. Yeah, people are worried about it, but it's not really high up on people's list"—they're missing the point. The point is that, even if people don't know much about politics, they are human beings, with strong instincts. And if you cannot trust your leadership to speak out about the unspeakable horrors that are taking place in Gaza today, funded by US taxpayer dollars—if your leadership can't speak out on that, how do you trust them on anything?

But to your point, every place I go and I say, "You know, we're leading the effort to try to end US military support for Israel," people explode. That's what they want to hear, because they're disgusted—profoundly disgusted—by what's going on.

And I'll say this: I think one of the many reasons Mamdani is running a great campaign is precisely his views on Israel and Gaza. That is where the vast majority of people who tend to vote Democratic, and more and more Republicans, are at. The idea that [Democratic leaders] have to toe the AIPAC line—man, it's not only horrible policy, unspeakable policy; it's really bad politics as well. N

MEHMET ESER / MIDDLE EAST IMAGES / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



(Mystal, continued from page 29)
not reviewing the merits of Urias-Orellana's asylum application; it's reviewing how much "deference" appellate courts should give to immigration judges who deny asylum applications. Urias-Orellana argues that courts should be able to review those decisions, just as they can review anything else. Anti-immigration forces believe the decision of an immigration judge should be final. Trump's solicitor general, John Sauer, urged the court to take this case to resolve the fact that some circuits *do* review asylum denials. Sauer wants the Supreme Court to tell those circuits that they are wrong.

The Republican justices almost certainly will. Republicans always like to pretend that every potential non-white immigrant is more like Wilfredo than Urias-Orellana. They ignore the fact that people like Wilfredo are doing quite well in their home countries and have little need to seek "asylum" in the US. Wilfredo ain't the one who needs to leave. But Republican judges have sent immigrants back to their doom in situations even more deadly than the one faced by Urias-Orellana and his family.

Sometimes, I wish Republicans would just read the case histories of asylum seekers. Like, really read them, and imagine themselves in their situations. Of course, that is me being naïve. Republicans can read. What they can't do is care.

Urias-Orellana will probably lose this case, 9–0. The liberals will go along with sending him back to Wilfredo to mitigate whatever unhinged claptrap Sam Alito would write if this case were decided 6–3.

This list of five vile things the Supreme Court will do this term should make us revolt against the Supreme Court as a staff, jurisprudential label, and freaking crew. And yet it probably doesn't capture the worst things the court will do because the court hasn't even slated all its cases yet. It's likely that we'll get a new birthright citizenship case before next June, to say nothing of all the crazy, fascist things Trump will orchestrate in the coming months that will wind up on the court's shadow docket to be approved without debate by the Republican supermajority.

A NEW LEFT-WING POLITICAL APPROACH MUST EMERGE FROM THE SUPREME COURT'S DESTRUCTION OF LAWS AND RIGHTS.

And at the end of the term, next June, we might get the most important decision of all: an announcement from either Samuel Alito or Clarence Thomas that they are retiring and thus giving Trump yet another justice who will hold us hostage for the rest of our lives.

It will be easy to despair as the court's decisions roll in and Trump continues to rack up victories in front of his handpicked justices. But I can only hope that the court's capitulation to Trump and his fascist regime breaks Democrats and the left wing more generally of their institutionalized learned helplessness.

The Supreme Court does not have the final say over how we have to live as a society. We do. The Supreme Court is not even the supreme arbiter of what is constitutional and what is not. We are. By ignoring court decisions he doesn't like and continuing to act regardless of judicial or constitutional approval, Trump has proved that these justices' rulings mean nothing in the face of a committed political party hellbent on having things its way.

A new left-wing political approach must emerge from the Supreme Court's destruction of laws and rights—an approach that doesn't rely on the courts to enforce social progress, but relies on the people to force social progress on the courts. The strategy of suing our way to freedom, equality, and social justice has failed. It's time for a new strategy, one that puts the Republican politicians running the Supreme Court back in their place. **N**

GETTING BACK INTO THE RING

Republicans may think they can achieve salvation through Christ, but they know that they can achieve victory through the courts. Republican voters do not vote for primary candidates who don't focus on the courts, and that is the key reason they have been able to reshape this branch of government in their image.

In contrast, Democrats have dropped the ball on this issue. Democratic voters regularly vote for senators and even presidents who do not care about the courts and are unwilling to challenge their authority. I believe this is largely because of information asymmetry between the parties' voters on this issue. Republican candidates use a tight lexicon to convey where they stand on the courts—think "supports the Second Amendment" or "believes in the original Constitution"—while Democrats are all over the map. Democrats don't even have a consistent jurisprudential philosophy, much less one that can easily be conveyed on a bumper sticker. Our voters do not know the difference between, say, Sheldon Whitehouse and Dick Durbin when it comes to the courts, even though that difference is as stark as an ICBM versus a wet noodle.

I think liberal organizations need to start putting out a "scorecard" that grades Democratic candidates on their commitment to resisting and reforming the courts—some kind of easily digestible shorthand that would help voters know who their friends are and who doesn't have the stomach for the fight. It works for the National Rifle Association: An "A" rating from the NRA is coveted by Republican primary candidates. We should do something similar.

There are a number of organizations that could do this work. I'm a board member of Demand Justice, which is an organization committed to court reform. I also do a lot of work with Court Accountability, a nonpartisan organization that highlights the corruption of the courts. And the American Constitution Society has long attempted to get liberals to take the courts more seriously. There are other groups as well.

The problem for any group trying to hold elected Democrats to a standard for court reform is that elected Democrats will get angry at that group and not invite them to whatever reindeer games they're playing inside the Beltway. Democratic donors, for reasons completely passing my powers of understanding, have generally been reluctant to spend big money on controlling the Supreme Court the way Republican donors have for decades.

But I believe that the left needs this. We need a common, easy way to signal to voters which candidates will take power away from the court and give it back to the people—and which ones just want a better parking space in DC and are content to let the Supreme Court make all the important decisions. *—Elie Mystal*

What Was the CYBERTRUCK?

Elon Musk's car from space offered a vision for a sustainable and autonomous future. All along, it was as awkward, easily bruised, and volatile as the entrepreneur himself.

MAYA VINOKOUR

I SPOT HIM FROM ACROSS THE PARKING LOT AT THE INDIAN Meadow Service Plaza in West Unity, Ohio. In the oppressive heat, his Tesla Cybertruck blends into the scenery, its shiny wrap shimmering in the sun like an oil slick. Clad in a bright-yellow T-shirt reading "DUCATI," he appears to be genuflecting to his vehicle, as if pledging it fealty. When I look again, I realize he is doing squats in front of the Cybertruck's windshield camera. I approach him—white, middle-aged, friendly-looking. He tells me he reserved his Cybertruck for purchase back in late 2019, shortly after its November unveiling in Los Angeles. What attracted him most to the vehicle, he says, was its unique appearance and its durability.

The latter claim strikes me as ironic. At that inaugural event in LA, Tesla's chief designer, Franz von Holzhausen, tried to demonstrate that the truck's windows were indestructible by throwing a metal ball at them—but ended up shattering the glass, twice. Over the next four years, with some 1 million reservation holders waiting in the wings, Tesla repeatedly pushed the Cybertruck's launch date back, while its base price climbed from $40,000 to $61,000. The man I met at the Ohio rest stop was fazed neither by the truck's polarizing design (which he approvingly called "obscure") nor its skyrocketing cost. Having made his $100 deposit, he waited patiently for his car until Tesla called him in March 2024 to upsell him on the tri-motor model for an extra $1,000.

That August, his $120,000 Cybertruck "Beast" was finally ready, and he couldn't have been more pleased ("I don't like it—I love it!"). He is especially enraptured with the feature Tesla calls Full Self-Driving, which he believes is more skilled than "you, or me, or anyone." He's used FSD while drinking a cup of coffee and watching YouTube. I'm quickly reminded of Joshua Brown, the Navy SEAL who died in 2016 when his Tesla Model S, set to Autopilot, collided with a tractor trailer while he watched a Harry Potter movie on a portable DVD player.

I keep my questions short and superficial. At work is a lifetime of female socialization, which speaks against antagonizing strange men. But even more salient is my recent online experience with Cybertruck lovers—mostly male, right-leaning, and with some exceptions, fanatical and aggressive. It turns out that, like many consumer goods, the Cybertruck is less a physical object with clear use value than a symbol. But of what?

Despite its performatively tough appearance, the Cybertruck differs from other male-coded vehicles like the Ford F-150 or the GMC Hummer. The former, a gargantuan pickup truck, is a long-standing customer favorite; the latter, though a gas-guzzling emblem of excess, at least remained true to its hardy roots as the US military's vehicle of choice during the Gulf War. What the Cybertruck promises goes beyond functionality or toughness: a vision of a smooth, sustainable, autonomously driven future, computerized for total convenience and security. Tesla's marketing presents it as a kind of Mars rover, but with "more utility than a truck" and the speed of a sports car. A bingo card of stereotypically masculine wants and fears, it wraps excitement and uncertainty, danger and the possibility of conquering danger, pragmatism and fantasy, all into one fierce-looking metal package.

Since its release in late 2023, it has become clear that the Cybertruck's reality does not live up to its image. Like Elon Musk himself, the vehicle is awkward, easily bruised, and disturbingly volatile—a professional promise-breaker. It can fall apart on the road or, worse, catch fire. Its short range might be impressive on Mars, where the rover's longest trip was 28.1 miles, but not on Earth, where it is easily outperformed by other electric trucks like the Ford F-150 Lightning.

Despite empirical evidence to the contrary, the Cybertruck's fans defend it as the greatest car ever made—some going as far as sending death threats on X to those who disagree. It is this refusal to learn from experience, whether one's own or that of others, that I find to be the hallmark of the Cybertruck devotee. Ever ready to believe the hype, fans exhibit an almost religious

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ILLUSTRATION BY **RYAN INZANA**


DOGE
CCUP
MARS
SWASTICAR

devotion to their purchase, forgiving everything from harmless foibles (inconvenient door handles) to major flaws (a tendency for parts to fly off).

But perhaps we are all duped by something. A willingness to be conned as long as the illusion flatters our sense of self and our image of the future is a defining characteristic of our time. American culture has always favored snake-oil salesmen, but perhaps never more than in the era of Trump, America's most successful con man. Under an administration that was backed, at least temporarily, by the world's richest man—Elon Musk—the performance of innovation has become more important than the substance. The Cybertruck is today's paradigmatic consumer object because it perfects the art of expensive disappointment, pushing buyers into ego-protecting delusion. To survive America in 2025 requires at least a little self-deception, if not about our cars then about the environment, politics, or the general direction society is heading. In a country run by scam artists, all that's left is the illusion of autonomy and control. Why wouldn't people gravitate toward a car that similarly promises, however falsely, to make them powerful and free?

Political baggage: As soon as Trump selected Musk to join his administration, the Cybertruck became associated with MAGA values.

My journey toward understanding the cybertruck as vehicle and concept began with a test drive. In April 2025, I visited a Tesla dealership in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, where I got behind the wheel of a dual-motor, all-wheel drive (AWD) truck. At the time, this model was one of three available variations, including a single-motor rear-wheel drive (RWD) and the tri-motor "Beast." Compared to its RWD counterpart, which has since been discontinued due to low demand, AWD promises better traction and easier steering, although it lacks the accelerating power of the tri-motor version.

Few of Elon Musk's claims about the Cybertruck—"wade mode," a bulletproof exterior, pricing below $50,000—have fully panned out.

A car marketed as the pinnacle of futuristic ease, the Cybertruck is, per Tesla's custom, devoid of traditional physical knobs and controls. Without these haptic conveniences, I am forced to rely almost completely on a single giant screen for all my driving needs. I soon notice another pitfall: There is no functional rearview mirror. Sure, the object itself is there, but as soon as you unroll the built-in tonneau to cover the truck bed—say, if it's raining, or you're transporting something that shouldn't be exposed to the elements—the mirror becomes a useless black rectangle.

A logical fix would be a mirror-mounted rearview monitor, a product that was developed in the 1950s and has been readily available since the late 2010s. Adrian Clarke, who has designed cars for Land Rover and now writes for the car magazine *The Autopian*, tells me that this tweak would have been easy. A digital mirror substitute would maintain the Cybertruck's futuristic vibe while respecting the design principle of heuristics—the idea that we, "as humans, expect things to be how we expect them to be." For most products, adherence to heuristics is simply good customer service, but for a car, it's also a safety issue.

The Cybertruck, meanwhile, funnels the entirety of the driver's attention toward its central touch screen. This display, which looks more like an iPad than a typical automotive "infotainment" system, abounds with options and controls: temperature, suspension, speedometer, "mood lighting." And if the cognitive load of managing all these inputs becomes too much, there is always FSD, the feature that most excited my Ohio rest-stop friend—but which, as I soon learned, is largely fantastical. If, as the owner's manual suggests, "it is the driver's responsibility to determine whether to stop or continue through an intersection," why call it Full Self-Driving? In fact, few of Musk's claims about the Cybertruck—from "wade mode" (which theoretically "allows Cybertruck to enter and drive through bodies of water, such as rivers or creeks") to a bulletproof exterior, to pricing below $50,000, have fully panned out. But if the truck is not an aesthetic or technical marvel, a competent and well-priced utility vehicle, an ersatz spaceship, or a tool for surviving *Mad Max*–esque societal collapse, then what, exactly, is it?

Once I'm behind the wheel of a Cybertruck myself, I start to wonder whether the overwhelm is intentional, meant to push decision-making onto Tesla's dubiously "autonomous" software. You can get in,

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adjust the air-conditioning, put on the perfect mood lighting, and let the outside world melt away. Through the gigantic screen, elements of physical reality, including pedestrians and other vehicles, are transformed into generic gray blobs tooling around on a grid. Inside this video-game-like pod, every other car—and every other human—becomes a non-player character.

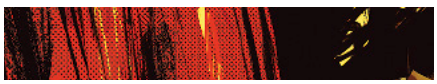
The vehicle's threatening exterior further encourages you to forget what you learned in driver's ed about defensive driving. Ensconced within its "exoskeleton," as Musk has called it, you get the distinct impression that caring about anyone else on the road is optional. In the United States, the Cybertruck has a five-star safety rating from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), part of the federal Department of Transportation. Yet this rating takes into account only those inside the vehicle's metal carapace. In parts of the world where the safety of pedestrians, other cars, and drivers themselves is taken seriously, like the United Kingdom, Cybertrucks are banned—though individual enthusiasts have been caught driving them around anyway.

The American NHTSA rating seems suspect because the Cybertruck has structural problems that make it inherently unreliable. Its glued-on parts, from exterior panels to accelerator pedals, regularly malfunction, while its triangular design cuts off rear visibility and renders it less useful for the utility needs expected of a pickup truck, such as hauling or towing. It is also, apparently, quite flammable. According to a February 2025 report from the independent automotive blog *FuelArc*, the Cybertruck is "17 times more likely to have a fire fatality" than the Ford Pinto.

It's no surprise, then, that nearly all extant Cybertrucks worldwide were recalled in March 2025 because, as Tesla put it, "the stainless steel panel of the cantrail assembly may delaminate at the adhesive joint, which may cause the panel to separate from the vehicle." In layman's terms, this means that the long, sharp-edged pieces of trim that divide the side windows from the windshield may detach and go flying at any time. Under the recall's terms, Tesla will fix the cantrails on existing Cybertrucks for free, and new Cybertrucks will include a redesigned cantrail.

Recalls are not unusual in the automotive industry. But the Cybertruck's flaws—even those that aren't severe enough to prompt a recall—are different. Each new problem gives the lie to some specific marketing claim. It's not just that the Cybertruck can't be used as a boat; it also can't go through a car wash without its warranty being voided. The metal panels on its exterior are so far from forming an "exoskeleton" that they fail even to stay put. And its electronic doors are not just inconvenient but actively dangerous: After a November 2024 crash in Piedmont, California, rescuers were unable to pry them open in time to save three of the people trapped inside.

Perhaps most embarrassingly, the Cybertruck cannot perform anything like Full Self-Driving. I learn more about this feature's limitations on my second test drive, this time in an ultra-powerful Beast. My chaperone riding shotgun, a Tesla sales associate named Imran, proposes that we drive to the IKEA in Brooklyn so I can experience FSD in both city and highway conditions. As we set off, I discover that the feature has three modes: Standard, Chill, and Hurry. According to the owner's manual, "Chill provides a more relaxed driving style with minimal lane changes," while "Hurry drives with more urgency." But is "Hurry" demure and mindful enough for real-world use? Echoing Tesla's marketing copy, Imran tells me that although FSD is completely reliable, it falls to the driver to supervise in case it "tries something funny." The owner's manual agrees: "In rare cases, Full Self-Driving (Supervised) may not appropriately slow down, come to a stop, or resume control for a stop sign or traffic light." Like boring old cruise control, FSD leaves the executive functioning to our puny human intelligence.

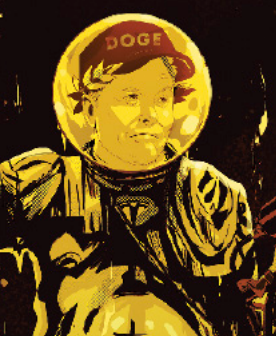


On the Cybertruck's gigantic screen, elements of physical reality are transformed into generic gray blobs tooling around on a grid.

Inside a video game: The Cybertruck's sleek, digital "infotainment" system will look and feel unfamiliar to anyone used to driving a traditional vehicle.

Tesla's advertising repeatedly gestures toward this gap between theory and practice. If the name "Full Self-Driving (Supervised)" is already a bit of a letdown, an advertising e-mail from June 6 is even more equivocal, inviting customers to "Let your Cybertruck do the driving. With Full Self-Driving (Supervised) engaged, your Cybertruck can steer [and] respond to traffic signs and change lanes for you, under your active supervision." This unexciting promise, which one imagines teams of lawyers systematically defanging, ends with an asterisked warning, printed in minuscule text below the ad: "Requires active driver supervision at all times and does not make the vehicle autonomous."

As we approach the IKEA parking lot, Imran describes another putatively autonomous feature called "Summon." Summon is supposed to allow me to live my dream of instantly forgetting where I parked and never paying the price. I can load up on SNÅRSVARDs, emerge from IKEA blissfully unaware of my car's



location, and Summon it to my side with my phone. I express unfeigned enthusiasm, whereupon it turns out that Summon is not yet available for the Cybertruck—although it does exist for the Tesla Model 3, as Dumb Summon and Actually Smart Summon (ASS). Online, people have speculated that Cybertruck's very own ASS may be right around the corner, but as of late June 2025, even die-hard fans were beginning to lose hope.

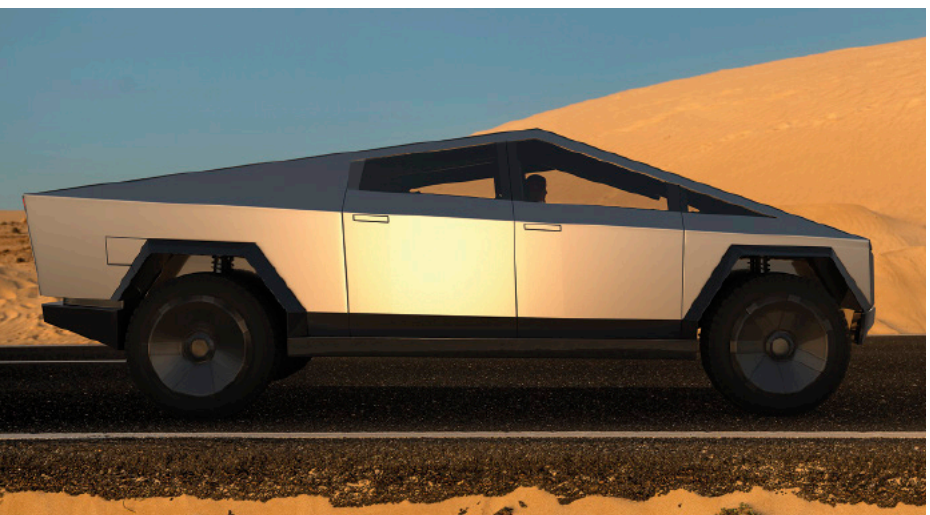
It's heartening to know that if roving bandits try to breach your Tesla-branded pseudo-tank, it can be made impenetrable—except to rain.

Undeterred by our tragic lack of ASS, I watch in wonder as Imran demonstrates the Cybertruck's adaptive air suspension. This feature can lower the car to almost-normal-person height—although children and short kings will still need to clamber—or raise it to hop-on-crushing levels. Unprompted, my companion points out that at its tallest, the truck makes it impossible for outsiders to get in. I ponder possible uses for such a feature in our pre-apocalypse world and come up empty. Post-apocalypse is a different story: It's heartening to know that if roving bandits try to breach your Tesla-branded pseudo-tank, it can be made impenetrable—except to rain.

Mars rover? Tesla's advertising campaigns and ardent fans fantasize about the Cybertruck as a car built for another dimension.

As we make our way back to the Tesla dealership, Imran invites me to try out Beast mode, which lets the Cybertruck accelerate from 0 to 60 in a stomach-churning 2.6 seconds. After we've peeled out several times on the Brooklyn cobblestones, I ask him why he thinks people buy these things. Is it because they're fast, because they're supposed to be able to off-road, because of FSD? "A lot of people don't just drive a car to get from point A to point B," he replies. "Personally, I use what I drive to represent the personality of me." As I would soon learn, the Cybertruck's ability to make its owners identify with it is perhaps its greatest success.

THE CYBERTRUCK'S SHORT HISTORY DATES BACK TO THE MID-2010S, WHEN Musk was still posing as an apolitical tech disruptor rather than a MAGA-aligned oligarch. It took Tesla engineers until November 2019 to transform Musk's original vision of a Ford F-150-style "supertruck with crazy torque, dynamic air suspension, [that] corners like it's on rails," into a demonstration-ready prototype. Despite the window-smashing debacle at the unveiling, Tesla began planning for a projected release in late 2021. Then, in October, the company quietly removed the Cybertruck's specs from its website—without, however, ceasing to take deposits. The launch was postponed to 2022, then to late 2023. In the meantime, Cybertruck hopefuls outside North America learned that they were out of luck—at least at first (after being sold exclusively in the United States, Canada, and Mexico for nearly two full years, the Cybertruck recently launched in South Korea and the United Arab Emirates). Another downgrade was the promised battery life, which was reduced from a fanciful 500-mile range to a more realistic 340, although some real-world users have reported numbers closer to 200.



Before customers ever saw their Cybertrucks, Tesla had already performed a textbook bait-and-switch. Once it was delivered, it turned out that the truck's most "futuristic" attributes, from FSD to ASS, either didn't work or merely rehashed earlier creations. Its stainless-steel construction, for instance, recalls the DeLorean, made famous in *Back to the Future* after its maker went bankrupt in 1982. The Cybertruck's pyramidal form is another '80s throwback. From the outside, it resembles the wedge-shaped Citroën Karin, a concept car that made a splash at the 1980 Paris Motor Show but was never mass-produced. According to Clarke, the Cybertruck is a "mishmash" of dated influences that "call back to an imagined 1985."

Beyond its technological and aesthetic problems, the Cybertruck is burdened with political baggage. At that Ohio rest stop, I'd asked my new friend if he was bothered by Musk's brief association with Trump. He smiled: "It doesn't bother me, because I'm a Trump guy." Besides, back in 2019 when he reserved his Cybertruck, "Elon Musk was more for the left" than for MAGA, he said. Regardless, his decision to buy a Cybertruck wasn't political. He doesn't care about politics or EVs but about aesthetics and functionality, both of which his Cybertruck delivers in spades. After thinking for a minute, he added, "I'm in the middle. You know, I like a little bit from the left, I like a little bit from the right. I wasn't a fan of Kamala, but it is what it is. Everybody has their own opinion."

Since the Cybertruck first went on sale in 2023, responses to it have become increasingly polarized. People have defaced parked Cybertrucks with graffiti or bumper stickers that say things like "Swasticar," which owners have tried to preempt with bumper stickers of their own. In a few cases, anti-Musk sentiment has escalated to all-out physical attacks and even Cybertruck-mediated terrorism. At my first test drive, a Tesla rep told me that haters merely "bring more attention to the brand," thereby, presumably, boosting sales. This statement may apply to Tesla, Musk, or even Trump, but not to the Cybertruck, which has proved to be a worse flop than the Ford Edsel. According to *Forbes*, the Edsel hit just 32 percent of its projected sales target when it debuted in 1958. Judging by the

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number of vehicles affected by the March 2025 cantrail recall (about 46,000), Musk's claims of 1 million Cybertruck reservations and 250,000 projected annual sales also did not materialize.

These and other failures, however, have not shaken the loyalty of the Cybertruck's most ardent fans. Nowhere is the gap between its lackluster performance and its mythic image more apparent than on the forums of the Cybertruck Owners Club, which I briefly joined in hopes of finding owners willing to tell me about their experience. Instinctively, I chose a male pseudonym, "Bob Jones," which I naïvely thought might help me avoid backlash. "Hi everyone," I wrote. "Any current or former Cybertruck owners out there willing to talk to me, a writer working on an article about the cultural impact of the vehicle?" The responses were swift and merciless: GIFs of eye-rolling or disgusted grimacing, followed by calls to "GO AWAY" and "SUCK IT."

But then, almost despite themselves, posters began feeding me information. One person suggested I worry less about the Cybertruck as a cultural phenomenon and more about its impressive technical attributes. When I said I'd test-driven a Cybertruck and found the experience odd, I was told that "it doesn't take more than a 15-year-old with a learner's permit" to understand that the Cybertruck "is the greatest vehicle ever conceived." Even after multiple users pointed out that the thread's hostility could itself become part of my story, the posts kept rolling in. Many praised Tesla and Musk ("Tesla is making awesome vehicles and is almost single-handedly changing the world"; "the Cybertruck is the best vehicle I've ever owned"). Another user wrote that they had considered their 2015 Tesla Model S "the best *anything* [they'd] ever bought" until they purchased a Cybertruck, with the caveat: "As long as the stainless steel panels stay glued."

A few enthusiasts were able to acknowledge that the Cybertruck could be annoying to drive because it attracted negative attention, although blame was generally placed on the finger-pointers and vandals. Critics were dismissed as proverbial blue-haired "libs" or vilified for unfairly targeting what, at the end of the day, was just another consumer product. "If I only purchased from corporations whose CEOs shared my values," someone wrote, "I'd be raising barns with the Amish and making my own pants." A few users rejected the very idea that the Cybertruck was a controversial car to own. "The controversy," one wrote, "is a fabricated construct perpetuated by click-driven media who make a living stoking fear, anger and anxiety."

Epic fail: In 2019, a demonstration meant to show the Cybertruck's indestructibility resulted in some very broken windows.

Over the next few days, demands that I dox myself became frequent and combative. Unsolicited advice about what I "should" be writing about instead of the Cybertruck grew more pointed. Soon, the Cybertruck-owning brethren were attacking one another, duking it out with memes when words proved insufficient. The discussion quickly turned political, until eventually one user speculated that "Bob Jones" was none other than Elon Musk himself.

If we think of the Cybertruck as a means of self-expression, the gulf between its shoddy workmanship and its cultlike fan base starts to make sense. Even those who complain about

"I'm in the middle. You know, I like a little bit from the left, I like a little bit from the right… Everybody has their own opinion."

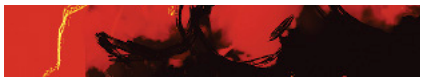
—a Cybertruck owner in West Unity, Ohio

Up in flames: In January 2025, a Cybertruck exploded in front of the Trump hotel in Las Vegas—a metaphor for what the year had in store.

aspects of the truck's performance, from its tearaway panels to its dearth of ASS, seem eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the project as a whole. It's hard to admit you've been had, especially if you've spent more than $100,000 on a famously depreciating asset.

Eric Noble, a car design expert and professor at ArtCenter College of Design, has called the Cybertruck a "failure of empathy"—that is, a failure by Tesla to think about what the typical pickup truck driver might actually want or need. But the Cybertruck lover's devotion represents a further failure of empathy—this time toward themselves. The Cybertruck Owners' Club forum, whose most active users seemed willing to drown their doubts in the soothing ocean of groupthink, reminds me of the viral video of a guy blithely sticking his finger in the Cybertruck's "frunk" as it closes. He is confident that built-in sensors will stop the car from mangling him, but instead it breaks his finger. To me, the most telling part of the video is not the climax but the preamble: Before placing his finger in the truck's maw, the man tries the same thing with a stick—and watches as the frunk breaks it in half. Yet so profound is his faith in Tesla engineering that he disregards his lying eyes and forges ahead with the blood sacrifice.

Initially, I wanted to class the Cybertruck alongside other products whose hostility to the user becomes a badge of honor for a particular kind of rich person. The foot-deforming Louboutin pump or the over-collagened pout is a form of conspicuous consumption that is at once aggressive and self-defeating. "Behold my latest purchase!" the late-capitalist masochist seems to say. "I have spent a small fortune on something that not only brings me no enjoyment, but actively harms me. Take that, peasants!" But the more I learned about the Cybertruck, the more I understood this effect—hostile architecture, but make it fancy—to be a happy accident.



The more I learned about the Cybertruck, the more I understood its hostile architecture to be a happy accident.

The Cybertruck was not intended to be unwieldy and repellent, but had that greatness thrust upon it. A billionaire's vanity project, it substitutes a projection of Musk's specific enthusiasms for more robust measures of consumer desire—and, at least among Tesla fans, totally gets away with it. For today's techno-oligarch, the ability to force one's idiosyncratic tastes down the public's throat is the ultimate prize. To paraphrase the old Yakov Smirnoff bit, in post-neoliberal America, product buys you.

This dynamic is the result of decades of market manipulation. Before the Cybertruck existed, Tesla was already thriving in the hype-driven economy that emerged in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. This was the hopey-changey moment of Obama's first term, when people eagerly bought into the idea of corporations with a social conscience. An important element of Tesla's early success was, accordingly, "emissions laundering," in which EV companies sell regulatory credits to traditional automakers trying to avoid emissions fines. In March 2013, five years after Musk became Tesla's CEO, the practice helped the company post its first-ever profits. By July, it had earned admission to the Nasdaq-100, where it replaced Oracle, the multinational technology conglomerate. Tesla then became embedded in myriad Nasdaq-pegged funds, which further boosted its circulation and caused its stock price to surge by 400 percent in just six months.

Despite its origins in pure speculation, this kind of "growth" has granted Tesla permanent leeway among so-called market experts. Even in Musk's DOGE era, with Cybertruck owners selling their cars or plastering them with defensive bumper stickers, *Wired* reported that analysts don't treat Tesla like other automakers, because its on-paper value is "multiples higher than companies that sell more cars."

In light of these triumphs, it may be tempting to see the Cybertruck as a mere misstep for an otherwise pathbreaking company ushering in a bold, metallic cyberfuture. After all, even with Chinese competitors like BYD catching up, Tesla claimed a larger global market share than any other EV maker in 2024. Beyond this tangible reality lies the fact that, as the *Financial Times* wryly put it, "Tesla is not a car company, but it does a good impersonation." The lion's share of its $750 billion valuation "hangs on things that are yet to exist," from self-driving robotaxis to humanoid helper robots, and its devoted fan base believes each new ruse.

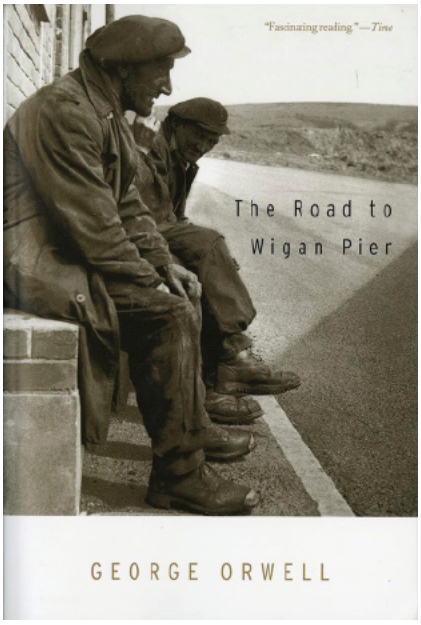
In early 2025, amid plummeting profits and Musk's brewing tensions with Trump, the CEO was reportedly seeking to redefine Tesla as an AI firm rather than an automaker. But was it ever an automaker in the first place? Since 1999, when Musk began the series of investments that would make him the richest man on earth, he has made a habit of "entering an ultracomplex business and not letting the fact that he knew very little about the industry's nuances bother him," writes Ashlee Vance in his biography, *Elon*

ETHAN MILLER / GETTY IMAGES

Musk: Tesla, SpaceX, and the Quest for a Fantastic Future. One reason this strategy has been so successful is that, over the past several decades, the US economy is now increasingly financialized. In other words, its underlying industries—whether cars, solar panels, or online payment processors—have become vastly less important than the financial instruments used to manipulate them. By 2008, Tesla had come to resemble many other American companies in that, as Liz Franczak and Brace Belden's podcast *TrueAnon* explained, "it is mostly a stock company that also sometimes, allegedly, produces things."

Their feud aside, one affinity between Musk and Trump is their skill in spinning purse-string-loosening tall tales. Trump, of course, has now twice convinced enough people that he can "Make America Great Again," the realities of his rule notwithstanding. Writing in *Salon* back in 1999, Mark Gimein described Musk's image as that of "the lucky guy" about to lead hangers-on to "the big score." From early on, the entrepreneur's greatest talent lay in "[making] his backers believe that he is the Brand X, the next superstar."

It may seem mysterious that Musk continues to be heralded as an entrepreneurial wizard despite failures like the Cybertruck. One possible clue lies in what tech analyst Mike Ramsey, speaking to *Wired*, has called a "reality distortion field" surrounding Tesla. As Walter Isaacson recounts in his Musk hagiography, when it came time to craft the Cybertruck, the CEO's overwhelming desire to "build something cool" overrode the "few dissenting voices suggesting that something too futuristic would not sell." Musk allegedly concluded one brainstorming session by saying, "I don't care if no one buys it," a sentiment that extends to many parts of his business empire. Writing for *The Drive* in 2018, Edward Niedermeyer observed that, "at its core, the Tesla phenomenon is a cultural one," based not in quality or profitability but in "a story that millions of people have chosen to believe."



When Trump was elected to the White House in 2016, and again in 2024, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* enjoyed a sudden increase in sales. But an earlier, lesser-read Orwell title may be more relevant to our condition of right-wing techno-oligarchy: *The Road to Wigan Pier*. It is astounding to open a book from 1937 and discover that, long before the advent of grocery store self-checkout, AI customer "service," and TikTok brain rot, it was already apparent that technologizing everything in sight would "make a fully human life impossible." Superimposing categories like "artificial intelligence" or "techno-optimism" onto Orwell's text gives a precise description of how tech boosters think about their preferred ideology of post-singularity abundance: "Machines to save work, machines to save thought, machines to save pain, hygiene, efficiency, organization, more hygiene, more efficiency, more organization, more machines," until, at last, we arrive at what Orwell calls "the paradise of little fat men."

"I don't care if no one buys it." —Elon Musk

It's now 2025, and while we seem to be hurtling at full speed toward the terminus Orwell described in *Wigan Pier*, we are still some distance away. And yet, we are constantly bombarded with strident techno-futurist propaganda that demands allegiance to automation for its own sake. This is the Cybertruck's native clime: Here is a vehicle that looks designed to crush enemies in an inhospitable environment. It is a mobile panic room, a place to make you feel strong when you are weak. At the same time, it nudges you to accept that, however strong you may be, you cannot surpass the machine. So why try?

Gesturing toward both the future and the past, the Cybertruck betrays a contradiction at the heart of the technological advancement Elon Musk pretends to represent. As Orwell wrote, while the dream of progress is to create an environment that is "safe and soft," attaining it requires a "striving to keep yourself brave and hard." This means that the "champion of progress" is "at the same moment furiously pressing forward and desperately holding back," like an imaginary "London stockbroker" who goes to his office "in a suit of chain mail" and "insists on talking in medieval Latin." The Cybertruck, too, imprints buyers with the tech oligarchy's backward-looking tastes—not only for *Blade Runner*, but also for ancient Rome and monarchism. To drive a Cybertruck is to partake in the fantasy of a premodern lawlessness in which the mightiest warlord made his own rules, unencumbered by legislation or moral stricture.

Orwellian prophecy: More than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Road to Wigan Pier* captures the essence of our mechanized moment.

The truck's most impressive feats have nothing to do with appearance, functionality, or even Tesla stock. Slotting itself seamlessly into an already intensely polarized political discourse, it has made getting scammed feel like an achievement. Tesla fans become willing marks who mistake their gullibility for enlightened contrarianism. In the end, what the Cybertruck's owner purchases is not the car itself, or even a sense of rugged individualism, but a tiny share of the scam economy. A simulacrum of a car produced by a simulacrum of a car company, the Cybertruck is perfect for this mask-off moment in our culture, when the titans of American politics and industry have stopped even pretending to care about the common good. Its faux-bulletproof exterior and pretend-high-tech innards exude contempt not for the human being as consumer—although it is certainly an object lesson in caveat emptor—but for the human being as such. N

WHEN CONSCIENCE DISA

The Congressional Black Caucus has stayed silent on the Gaza genocide, thanks to its longtime dependence on support from AIPAC.

ANTHONY CONWRIGHT

More than a year has passed since the International Court of Justice, the United Nations' highest judicial body, issued its first order in the landmark case brought against Israel by South Africa, which contends that Israel has been committing acts of genocide in its war in Gaza. The ICJ found that "with respect to the right of the Palestinians in Gaza to be protected from acts of genocide…and the right of South Africa to seek Israel's compliance," South Africa's case was "plausible." *Plausible*: a restrained word that, in this context, fails to convey the harsh truth of the war Israel has been conducting. Palestinians are being starved, displaced, and slaughtered. More than 60,000 Palestinians have died, and 1.9 million are being brutally displaced, in a manner eerily similar to the dispossession of their forebears in the Nakba of 1948. By the end of September, according to a group of international food-aid organizations, more than 600,000 Palestinians would be experiencing famine, a completely preventable calamity marked by extreme food deprivation, acute malnutrition, and starvation-related deaths.

Since the International Court's ruling, a growing number of genocide scholars and human-rights advocates have concluded that the genocide in Gaza is not merely plausible but actual. In early September, an overwhelming majority (86 percent) of the voting members in the International Association of Genocide Scholars voted to endorse a declaration that "Israel's policies and actions in Gaza meet the legal definition of genocide in Article II of the United Nations Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948)." The UN's own Commission of Inquiry reached the same conclusion a few weeks later. Rabbis and Israeli human-rights groups—B'Tselem and Physicians for Human Rights—have testified that their own nation has betrayed the solemn pledge "Never again." Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other groups have witnessed the appalling deaths, displacement, and famine in Gaza and issued the same indictment: Israel is committing acts of genocide.

Yet to this day, the Congressional Black Caucus—the long-standing corps of lawmakers dedicated to safeguarding civil rights (and known as "the conscience of Congress")—has not issued a formal declaration condemning Israel; it hasn't even produced a statement calling for a ceasefire. The CBC's silence isn't accidental: More than half of its current 61 members have been endorsed or funded by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the powerful US lobbying arm for Israel's agenda. In the 2023–24 election cycle alone, AIPAC endorsed 26 of the caucus's members, raising $4.6 million for them and another $3.5 million for Black Democratic candidates.

By accepting AIPAC's endorsements and money, CBC members are, to use a biblical turn of phrase, selling their birthright for a mess of pottage. AIPAC readily sets aside the political concerns of the CBC in its efforts, spending lavishly on campaigns for GOP members of Congress targeting measures on racial equality, which totaled more than $17 million in the 2023–24 cycle.

AIPAC—together with its two political action committees, AIPAC PAC and United Democracy Project—has one purpose: defending Israel at all costs. "We support candidates… based on one criteria [sic]—their commitment to strengthening the US-Israel relationship," AIPAC spokesperson Marshall Wittmann told *Politico* in 2024.

This single-issue litmus test means that the CBC is now beholden to a group that is far more concerned with the state of Israel than it is with the caucus's core mission. And the CBC's resulting silence not only damages its credibility but also jeopardizes its ability to advocate for the interests of Black Americans, many of whom recognize an ethnonationalist campaign

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ILLUSTRATION BY ADRIÀ FRUITÓS


PPEARS

to eliminate a people. One glaring example of this clash of interests is AIPAC's targeting of Black lawmakers such as Cori Bush of Missouri, who lost her seat in 2024, for speaking out against Israel's crimes against humanity.

This posture predates the start of the war on Gaza in 2023. During the 2022 midterms, AIPAC endorsed candidates with white-supremacist views and Republicans who refused to affirm that Joe Biden had won the 2020 election. The group also targeted Black Democratic lawmakers like Pennsylvania Representative Summer Lee, who spoke out against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. (Lee survived that AIPAC offensive, but now, like other congressional critics of Israel, she has to be prepared for AIPAC-funded primary challenges each time she runs for reelection.)

"When you go against one of [AIPAC's] pieces of legislation… they will stop you from even being able to do your job."

—former New York congressman Jamaal Bowman

This has been AIPAC's standard mode of intimidation in a political system ruled by money and the need to continually raise funds—a total of nearly $4 billion in the 2024 congressional cycle alone. Over that same period, more than 80 percent of lawmakers in Congress received money from AIPAC. What has rendered the Democratic Party such an impotent voice in combating the Gaza genocide, in other words, is a matter of fundraising math. A single-issue lobby reliant on strong financial backing from GOP donors has successfully managed to keep Democratic critics of Israel out of Congress.

Recruited and abandoned: Jamaal Bowman says AIPAC tried to influence his first congressional campaign, only to later help unseat him.

As one example, look at what happened to Jamaal Bowman. In May 2023, while serving as a Democratic representative from New York, Bowman cosponsored a resolution seeking to ensure that US funds to Israel would not be used to harm Palestinian children. This would seem an uncontroversial aim—but not for AIPAC and its allied PACs. "Our ancestors were enslaved and endured the Black codes, Jim Crow, and housing discrimination," Bowman said in an interview with *The Nation*. "As people who come from that, we have the moral authority to push back on AIPAC's agenda. We are against genocide. We are against the starvation of children. We are against harming innocent people in any context."

But Bowman learned the cost of speaking truth to the spending power of AIPAC. "When you go against one of their pieces of legislation, depending on what it is, they will e-mail you, relentlessly call you, relentlessly protest outside of your office, and stop you from even being able to do your job," he continued. And this coordinated campaign was merely a prelude. In the 2023–24 election cycle, AIPAC spent $100 million—much of it raised from Republican megadonors—targeting Democrats it deemed hostile to Israel. That included an unprecedented outlay of $15 million in a single House race by the group in its successful primary challenge against Bowman. He was replaced on the Democratic ticket by the AIPAC-endorsed former Westchester County executive George Latimer, a white candidate with a record of racist remarks.

Bowman was not alone. Pro-Israel groups spent millions to defeat other Black members of Congress, including Bush and Lee as well as Maryland Representative Donna Edwards. These CBC members all championed Medicare for All, expanded affordable housing, and other initiatives that would directly benefit Black communities. Lee is the only CBC member in that cohort of Israel critics who's still in office.

The 2024 purge represented a dramatic upsurge in the group's battle against Black progressives. Records indicate that AIPAC did not spend any money against Bush or Bowman during the 2022 elections. After Bush sponsored a resolution in October 2023 that called for de-escalation and a ceasefire in Gaza, AIPAC spent $8.6 million to replace her on the Democratic ticket with Wesley Bell, who abandoned his bid to become Missouri's first Black senator in order to supplant Bush in the House. According to OpenSecrets, spending against Bush in 2022 only reached $170,602—which means that AIPAC boosted anti-Bush and pro-opposition spending by nearly 5,000 percent in the 2024 cycle. AIPAC's anti-Bush and pro-Bell cash offensive also worked out to four times the $2 million that the progressive PAC Justice Democrats contributed to Bush's primary campaign and anti-Bell efforts.

Progressive organizations urged Hakeem Jeffries, the CBC's highest-ranking member in the House of Representatives and the Democratic minority leader, to intervene against AIPAC's campaign to defeat House critics of Israel. But Jeffries and the CBC's seven-person leadership team said nothing as pro-Israel interests primaried its members. It's not hard to see why: Jeffries and every member of the current CBC leadership have received money from the pro-Israel lobby—and AIPAC is endorsing Jeffries, as well as five of the seven members of the CBC leadership, in the upcoming 2026 midterms. (The two members of the CBC's leadership not endorsed by AIPAC are Louisiana Representative Troy Carter and California Representative Sydney Kamlager-Dove. Kamlager-Dove nonetheless garnered the endorsement of the Democratic Majority for Israel, a pro-Israel PAC that spent $1.1 million to oust Bowman and Bush.)

Jeffries and all seven members of the CBC's leadership voted to send military aid to Israel; none cosponsored any bills or resolutions to limit such aid or block US arms sales. (Four of the six CBC members who currently serve on the House Foreign Affairs Committee have a similar record of eloquent silence on Israel's relentless war on Gaza and US support for it.)

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The brute fundraising logic here means that the CBC members who hold the most political weight are muzzled by AIPAC money. So when Bowman, for example, began to dissent from the caucus's party line on Israel, he was isolated from the support of Congress's most powerful coalition of Black legislators.

Bowman was not always on AIPAC's enemies list. Indeed, AIPAC set out to recruit him at the beginning of his political career. "Even before I was a viable candidate, before there was any polling that had me within 20, 30 points, AIPAC had reached out to me for a meeting," Bowman recalled. "But they didn't reach out to me through AIPAC. They came through a very well-regarded organization in New York City called 100 Black Men."

Bowman agreed to meet with a representative of 100 Black Men, believing that the discussion would involve the group's mission of collaborating with political leaders to realize meaningful gains for the Black community. "I told him clearly, 'I don't want to meet with you and talk about AIPAC,'" Bowman said. "He agreed to that. We met and had a long conversation, but at the end of the conversation, he still gave me a packet of information to take with me about AIPAC. And I'm sure they reach out to all promising candidates across the country to try to get them to support AIPAC's agenda before they even get to office."

AIPAC appeals to Black candidates by exploiting the proud tradition of Jewish American support for the civil-rights movement. But that display of moral and political solidarity was not a covenant with Black Americans to turn a blind eye to apartheid or genocide.

"I've heard it before to my face," Bowman said: "'We were there for you. We were there for you during the civil-rights movement. We were there for you during the Black Lives Matter movement. Be there for us.'"

THE ISRAEL LOBBY'S SUPPORT FOR BLACK lawmakers has always rested on their uncritical backing of Israel. On January 30, 1972, Representative Charles Diggs, chair of what was then a 13-member caucus, announced plans for a national Black political convention to take place March 10–12 in Gary, Indiana, "to identify and ratify [a] national black political agenda for 1972 and beyond."

More than 10,000 Black Americans—Black nationalists, intellectuals, civil-rights groups, and the CBC—met in Gary and published a 55-page "National Black Agenda" containing resolutions and recommendations for measures to promote Black equality and racial justice.

Debate swirled around several measures considered for the platform, including economic empowerment, the possible formation of a third party representing Black Americans, and whether the agenda should endorse busing to achieve integration in public schools. But the contentious debate devolved into irreparable rupture when it came to the question of Israel and Palestine. Black nationalists demanded a resolution to cut US aid to Israel, return Palestinian lands, and affirm Palestinian self-determination, but members of the CBC recoiled. Facing pressure from Jewish organizations, the CBC denounced the resolution, affirmed its support for Israel, and refused to endorse the "National Black Agenda." Instead, the caucus drafted its own platform, which plotted a decidedly moderate course, especially in foreign policy. One year after its inception, the Congressional Black Caucus chose alliance with the Israel lobby over the support for Palestinians advocated by politically independent pro-Black organizations—a choice that continues to define the CBC's politics today.

Historic judgment: The International Court of Justice hears the case brought by South Africa against Israel's genocide.

It's true that the Democratic Party writ large was fiercely pro-Israel throughout the postwar years—in fact, it was a Democrat, Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson of Washington, who was the political godfather of the belligerently Zionist neoconservative movement. Yet even in that context, the CBC's staunch support for Israel is striking—particularly given its self-appointed mission of serving as the conscience of Congress and its principled opposition to the Vietnam War.

During Israel's successive military campaigns in the 1980s—including the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the suppression of the Palestinian intifada in 1987—CBC members reliably voted to continue sending US aid and military support to the Jewish state. After a 1987 US State Department report found that Israel had violated the UN ban on providing arms to South Africa's apartheid regime, some CBC members did start to denounce, in scathing terms, America's lavish support for Israel and its status as the leading recipient of US aid. In response, AIPAC brokered a deal with CBC leaders to prevent members of the caucus from "singl[ing] out" Israel for selling military systems to South Africa "on a regular basis."

The CBC's silence damages its credibility and jeopardizes its ability to advocate for the interests of Black Americans.

In 1990, Michigan Democratic Representative and CBC member George Crockett signed a February "Dear Colleague" letter urging support for Kansas Senator Robert Dole's proposal to cut the $3 billion in aid that the United States was

MICHEL PORRO / GETTY IMAGES

sending to Israel each year by 5 percent. Ten of the CBC's 24 members signed the letter, including Ron Dellums of California. (Dellums later had a change of heart after meeting with AIPAC representatives.) When the CBC presented an alternative budget to Congress in March of that year, Israel's full $3 billion allotment remained intact.

THE DYNAMIC THAT TOOK HOLD BETWEEN THE CBC AND AIPAC DURING those early years hasn't changed, but now it's enforced through astronomical amounts of campaign money from the lobby and the threat of political retaliation via primary challenges. As of this writing, only 14 of the 57 House members of the CBC have cosponsored HR 3565, a bill to limit defense materiel and services to Israel. (Not surprisingly, just one of those 14 was endorsed by AIPAC.) And just six members of the CBC cosponsored HJ Res. 83, a resolution "providing for congressional disapproval of the proposed foreign military sale to Israel of certain defense articles and services."

Opening arguments: Jesse Jackson speaks from the floor at the 1972 National Black Political Convention, which was riven by Middle East politics.

This track record stands out in especially high relief against the CBC's relative outspokenness on other genocides and atrocities. The caucus spearheaded the legislative fight against South African apartheid, sponsoring more than 15 bills opposing the white-supremacist regime there. (The last of these measures was cosponsored by all 20 members of the caucus.) The CBC's anti-apartheid bills called for economic sanctions on South Africa, including bans on new investments, while requiring the president to report on progress toward the dismantling of South Africa's apartheid regime.

In 2005, 41 of the CBC's 43 members cosponsored the Darfur Genocide Accountability Act. In 2019, 50 of the CBC's 55 House members voted to recognize the Armenian genocide. Most recently, 10 of the CBC's 57 House members agreed that Russia has committed acts of genocide in Ukraine; by comparison, only seven went on the record to acknowledge Israel's acts of genocide in Gaza.

The brute fundraising logic means that the CBC members who hold the most political weight are muzzled by AIPAC money.

Yet in July 2023, 44 of the CBC's 51 members voted in favor of a resolution declaring that "Israel is not an apartheid state." (Bowman and Bush were among the six who voted against the resolution.) When it comes to Palestine, the CBC has consistently faltered in its support for human rights and its repudiation of genocide. The pattern is unmistakable: Israel operates beyond the radar of the CBC's own conscience.

THIS DOUBLE STANDARD CANNOT be understood apart from the US role in shaping the definition of genocide—a role that Israel is now leveraging in its efforts to suppress the opposition to its genocidal war in Gaza. During the drafting of the 1948 Genocide Convention, the US State Department insisted that the United Nations include an "intent" clause so that lynching, Jim Crow laws, and systematic racial terror could not be prosecuted as acts of genocide under international law. That way, America could claim that government officials were not intentionally engaged in acts of genocide, since states had laws against lynching and murder.

These efforts to gin up an elastic definition of genocide that wouldn't apply to the United States were successful. In 1951, the Civil Rights Congress, a racial-justice group with ties to the Communist Party, published *We Charge Genocide*, a 240-page document that cited more than 500 examples in which the US government violated Articles II and III of the Genocide Convention. The CRC's 1951 campaign to appeal to the United Nations was an attempt to finish the work of the NAACP, which in 1947 unsuccessfully petitioned the UN for legal redress for the United States' denial of basic human rights for its African American population. When the NAACP submitted its petition, genocide had not been codified in international law. In 1951, the CRC attempted to do what still has yet to be done: legally hold America accountable for its own crimes. But the United States thwarted this effort by orchestrating a smear campaign to discredit the CRC's document, ensuring that it never was taken up for a vote at the UN.

The unresolved internal tensions fueling the Congressional Black Caucus's conspiracy of silence on the Gaza genocide came to the fore once again during Senator Cory Booker's 25-hour speech on the Senate floor in March. Booker's performance broke the previous filibuster record set by white supremacist Strom Thurmond's day-long speech against civil-rights legislation in 1957. Booker's speech cataloged nearly every abuse against democratic governance and constitutional order perpetrated by the second Trump administration—but contained no mention of its uncritical support for Israel's apartheid regime, or its continued financial and military backing of the genocide in Gaza.

As it turns out, the politics of genocide also supplied the backdrop for Thurmond's 24-hour filibuster. Six years before he rose to block the

JIM WELLS / AP PHOTO

civil-rights bill, the CRC had named him in *We Charge Genocide*. The group charged that Thurmond had violated Article III of the Genocide Convention by engaging in direct and public incitement to commit acts of genocide against Black Americans. And Thurmond's filibuster did more than stall the 1957 Civil Rights Act. It also delayed the swearing-in of Wisconsin Senator William Proxmire—the man who, over the course of 19 years, would give 3,211 speeches on the Senate floor urging the United States to ratify the Genocide Convention, which would make genocide a federal crime in the United States. Thurmond, who died in 2003, also opposed the Genocide Convention Implementation Act and sought to obstruct its passage—a natural extension of his white-supremacist politics.

Unlike Thurmond, Booker was not trying to eradicate official recognitions of genocides altogether, just looking to evade the political demands of acknowledging the one in Gaza. That, however, isn't a moral distinction worth making. Booker's evasion, like much of the rest of the CBC leadership's stance on this defining issue of basic justice and human rights, represents the outcome of a cold cash transaction. The most prominent CBC member in the Senate, Booker has received $871,313 from pro-Israel PACs and individual donors during his time in office. And once again, they got what they paid for: Booker voted against Senator Bernie Sanders's March measure to prevent the sale of thousands of 1,000-pound bombs to Israel, along with the guidance kits that would turn them into precision-guided weapons. (The three other CBC members in the Senate supported Sanders's resolution.)

When Booker broke Thurmond's record in March, he framed it as a triumph over the ghosts of white supremacy: It "just really irked me," he said, "that…the longest speech, on our great Senate floor, was someone who was trying to stop people like me from being in the Senate."

Yet Booker left out a big part of the story: Thurmond's tirade was not simply against the principle of Black political representation or the Civil Rights Act of 1957, but against the notion that the suffering of Black Americans deserved any recognition or intervention from the federal government. In his own marathon speech, Booker never once uttered the word *genocide* in relation to Gaza. That silence unwittingly extended the logic behind the very tradition he sought to conquer.

This paradox is emblematic of the Congressional Black Caucus today. The CBC claims the mantle of civil-rights advocacy in Congress. On Palestine, however, where famine, displacement, and mass killing have earned the Gaza siege the designation of a genocide, it has largely been mute.

This omission raises a pivotal question: Whose "conscience" does the CBC actually represent? Not that of Black Americans—who, according to survey data, sympathize with Palestinians. A December 2023 Carnegie poll showed that 95 percent of Black Americans "rejected the idea of showing 'unwavering support' for Israel." Black Americans disapprove of Benjamin Netanyahu at a higher rate than any other demographic voting bloc and believe, by a 10 percent margin of the sample size, that "Israel's attacks on Gaza are unjustified and harm too many innocent Palestinians." Nearly half of Black Americans believe that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinian people. A 2024 Carnegie poll showed that 68 percent of Black Americans would have liked to see the United States call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

A ceasefire resolution that refrains from naming genocide doesn't reflect a politics grounded in conscience.

Two years into the Gaza genocide, there has been some progress: More than half of the members of the Congressional Black Caucus now support a ceasefire. But while a ceasefire is a step in the right direction, it will do nothing to end the occupation that Palestinians continue to suffer under. A ceasefire resolution that does not name genocide does not reflect a politics grounded in conscience—it is an expedient political cover of the lowest order.

There are words we inherit like heirlooms, words that come to us wrapped in the pain of centuries. *Genocide* is one of those words. It does not simply encompass death on a mass scale. It evokes the auction block, the terrorist legacy of Jim Crow, and the smoke that curled above the camps in Nazi-occupied Europe. What is happening before our eyes in Gaza belongs on the same tragic ledger. And the leaders of the CBC—claiming to be the descendants of a history that their ancestors paid for in blood—are refusing to call Israel's crimes by their true name.

This is the moment when the CBC can present itself as the conscience of Congress with honor—by leading the effort to guide this country through a key moral test of the 21st century. It's true that demanding an end to US aid to Israel on the grounds that it's advancing a genocide would likely expose legislators to yet more retaliation from AIPAC and the Israel lobby. But it's equally true that the CBC must meet the genuine challenge of this historical moment. Adopting a position of unyielding defiance to Israel and its genocide in Gaza would lead both the CBC and the Democratic Party in a new direction that both organizations desperately need to follow. Instead of trying to wish away the atrocities committed by Israel, the Congressional Black Caucus could build and lead a multiracial coalition of resistance to a lobby that betrays the caucus's mission, besieges its members, and injures its constituents. By resisting with a unified voice, the leaders of the CBC can make a difference. It is time to stand up. N

Figure of speech: Cory Booker's historic filibuster stressed racial injustices, yet he continues to back US aid to Israel.

TASOS KATOPODIS / GETTY IMAGES

TRUMP'S Oppenheimer Moment

MICHAEL T. KLARE

What evil will be unleashed by Trump's AI deregulation?

DURING THE SUMMER OF 1945, THE leaders of the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, New Mexico, faced a momentous decision. The original motive for developing the atomic bomb—the need to counter a possible German A-bomb—had evaporated in May with the end of the war in Europe, and many atomic scientists were opposed to the use of such a weapon on Japan (then already on the brink of surrender). Nonetheless, top officials at Los Alamos, led by J. Robert Oppenheimer, chose to accelerate work on the bomb, enabling the fateful attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In doing so, they knowingly ignited a global nuclear arms race that persists to this day.

We might think of this deeply consequential decision sequence as an "Oppenheimer moment"—a time when senior officials choose to unleash a powerful and potentially cataclysmic new technology on the world without knowing the consequences of doing so or having adopted rigorous safeguards beforehand.

Now, in perhaps the most significant Oppenheimer moment since 1945, President Donald Trump has chosen to unleash another powerful and potentially cataclysmic new technology on the world: superintelligent artificial intelligence. On July 23, at the "Winning the AI Race" summit in Washington, DC, Trump released his administration's "AI Action Plan"—an official blueprint for the unfettered corporate development of "frontier" AI models with vast but unknown capabilities. Claiming that the United States is in an existential struggle to achieve AI dominance before its rivals do—language long used with respect to nuclear weapons—he insisted that the US must "win" the AI "race," no matter the risks or the costs.

"America is the country that started the AI race. And as president of the United States, I'm here today to declare that America is going to win it," Trump announced. "My administration will use every tool at our disposal to ensure that the United States can build and maintain the largest, most powerful, and most advanced AI infrastructure anywhere on the planet."

To attain this objective, top industry and government officials believe, the United States must lead in the development of advanced or "frontier" AI models—those capable of feats far surpassing the ones achieved by the original ChatGPT. Such models are expected to duplicate or outperform human cognition in many respects, such as by analyzing vast troves of data, identifying significant patterns, and devising (and then carrying out) responses to any identified threats or problems. These capabilities, it is claimed, will enable scientists to find cures for diseases and discover novel solutions to climate change—as well as equip robots with a capacity to locate and attack enemy forces on their own.

But the development of these frontier AI models poses two major challenges: the need for giant data centers and other computing infrastructure, along with massive amounts of electricity and water to keep them running; and the risk that the technology will fail, with unforeseeable but potentially calamitous consequences. Neither of these challenges was addressed in any meaningful way in the administration's AI Action Plan, but they require our careful attention.

The need for mammoth computing capabilities (or "compute," in industry lingo) derives from the fact that the large language models (LLMs) that will be used to develop advanced AI must be fed enormous amounts of data (think: everything ever posted on the Internet) in order to "train" them to recognize and respond to patterns in speech, writing, visual imagery, and so on. Storing all this raw data and enabling AI systems to sift through it millions and millions of times during the training process requires giant data centers with enormous banks of computer servers arranged in stacks, linked by endless miles of cables.

To improve on existing LLMs, the leading

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AI firms will need vastly increased compute power—which will require the construction of many more and substantially larger data centers. Many of the giant centers now being built by Google, Meta (Facebook), Amazon, Microsoft, and OpenAI are the size of a small airport, and some in the planning stage are said to be the size of a small city. Powering all of these stacked servers requires enormous amounts of electricity and water (to cool the machines). OpenAI, for example, plans to build five giant data centers with a combined electrical demand equivalent to 3 million households (which is roughly the number in the entire state of Massachusetts.)

OpenAI plans to build five giant data centers with a combined electrical demand equivalent to 3 million households.

Those five companies are expected to spend $320 billion on new construction in 2025 alone. Yet hundreds of billions more will be needed to ensure that there will be enough compute power to underwrite the next big advances in AI. And then there are the potential limitations on the availability of energy and water. According to a recent report from the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, AI data centers could account for as much as 12 percent of total US electricity consumption in 2028.

To acquire all that electricity, AI firms are seeking every available source of energy, including coal, natural gas, nuclear power, and renewables. But domestic energy production is not keeping pace with this rising demand, and the Trump administration is obstructing the expansion of renewable energy capacity, so the scramble for advanced AI is likely to result in both rising carbon emissions (as these firms consume more fossil fuels) and increased competition with states and municipalities for electricity, leading to higher consumer prices.

Unleashing havoc: Trump proudly displays a signed executive order that will stymie all AI regulation.

Proponents of advanced AI models, both in government and industry, claim that future systems will endow the United States with unprecedented wealth and health. "AI will enable Americans to discover new materials, synthesize new chemicals, manufacture new drugs, and develop new methods to harness energy," the AI Action Plan asserts. Whether AI will actually achieve all these outcomes remains to be seen: Google, Meta, Amazon, and Microsoft are not in the business of solving our health problems or developing new (presumably climate-friendly) energy sources; rather, their overriding objective is to sell business products and services in order to recoup their colossal investments in compute power. But whatever the intended use of frontier models, we can be sure of one thing: AI will remain an unreliable, error-prone technology.

The public release of ChatGPT in 2022 generated wonder around the world, as ordinary citizens found themselves having human-like conversations with seemingly thoughtful machines. However, the more that ChatGPT and other LLMs were put to the test, the more they demonstrated a propensity to produce false and nonsensical answers—called "hallucinations" by computer scientists. Engineers at OpenAI, the creator of ChatGPT, have struggled laboriously to correct these tendencies, with little success. Hallucinations, it turns out, are an inherent property of the method of statistical analysis that powers LLMs: It gets things right a lot of the time, but it often gets tripped up by unfamiliar topics or imprecise prompts, causing it to fabricate answers. To compound the problem, LLMs are unable to explain how they derive particular outcomes, so efforts to diagnose and correct errors often prove fruitless.

These shortcomings are merely inconveniences if you're simply asking AI to summarize a document or create a dinner recipe, but they become deeply worrisome when AI is being used to steer automobiles in traffic or—gasp—control nuclear weapons. AI-enabled self-driving cars, such as Teslas equipped with Autopilot, fail on occasion, sometimes causing fatal injuries. AI-governed weapons systems have also been known to fail: In June, an unmanned naval vessel started behaving erratically near a California harbor, capsizing another boat and sending its captain into the water (fortunately, there were no serious injuries). For these reasons, many AI experts have warned against the hasty adoption of advanced models.

"Deploying AI is an ongoing process that holds tremendous promise—and equally tremendous danger," write Zachary Arnold and Helen Toner, of Georgetown University's Center for Security and Emerging Technology, in *AI Accidents: An Emerging Threat*. "Today's cutting-edge AI systems…often lack any semblance of common sense, can be easily fooled or corrupted, and fail in unexpected and unpredictable ways."

Can we expect more advanced systems—with far greater capabilities—to be exempt from these kinds of failures? No one can answer this with certainty, but many computer scientists have warned that superintelligent AI could cause unpredictable and catastrophic harm, such as diverting all available electricity into further computing (with the resulting collapse of human civilization) or precipitating an unintended nuclear war. In March 2023, for example, more than 1,000 prominent AI developers signed an open letter calling for a pause in the development of advanced models, warning that in the absence of meaningful restraints, such systems pose "profound risks to society and humanity."

At the extreme end of those risks is a *Terminator*-like scenario in which superintelligent AIs choose to eliminate human beings or, *Matrix*-like, reduce them to slaves. But other, more down-to-earth risks abound, such as the elimination of white-collar jobs (including the coding tasks that make AI possible) or the collapse of entire industries (and the livelihoods

CHIP SOMODEVILLA / GETTY IMAGES

of the workers they sustain). Many AI systems have also been found to display racial and gender biases (a product of the unrepresentative nature of the data sets fed to advanced algorithms during their training phase) and to amplify hate speech.

In response to such concerns, President Joe Biden's administration adopted a number of measures aimed at ensuring government oversight of frontier AI models. In October 2023, Biden signed Executive Order 14110, "Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence," with this in mind. Warning that the "irresponsible use [of AI] could exacerbate societal harms such as fraud, discrimination, bias, and disinformation; displace and disempower workers; stifle competition; and pose risks to national security," the order required AI companies to conduct "red-teaming," or harsh testing of their advanced AI models, to identify (and correct) any potential failures.

TRINITY ATOMIC TEST SITE VIA WIKIMEDIA

Now we come to Trump's Oppenheimer moment: the decision to eliminate all restraints on AI and to facilitate the development of superintelligent models. President Trump demonstrated his intent on January 23, when he signed an executive order rescinding Biden's October 2023 measure and authorizing the unbridled development of advanced AI. The Trump order also mandated the development of an AI action plan within 180 days, resulting in the blueprint he embraced in July.

As Trump made clear when he announced the plan's adoption, his administration will seek to eliminate all obstacles to the development of advanced AI. As part of this effort, he explained, the administration will work closely with the major AI firms to facilitate the rapid construction of giant data centers, regardless of environmental restraints, zoning provisions, or local regulations. "To ensure America maintains the world-class infrastructure," he declared, "I will sign a sweeping executive order to fast-track federal permitting, streamline reviews, and do everything possible to expedite construction of all major AI infrastructure projects. And this will be done."

To make sure that state and local officials do not stand in the way of this imperial edict, Trump indicated that his administration will punish any state or municipality that imposes limits on AI, such as those being considered by the California Legislature. "You can't have a state with standards that are so high that it's going to hold you up," Trump told the industry officials in the audience. "You have to have a federal rule and regulation. Hopefully, you'll have the right guy at this position [i.e., Trump] that's going to supplant the states."

Trump also made it clear that he is undeterred by talk of AI risks and AI biases. "As with any such breakthrough, this technology brings the potential for bad as well as for good, for peril as well as for progress," he said. "But…it's not going to be a reason for retreat from this new frontier. On the contrary, it is the more reason we must ensure it is pioneered first and best. We have to have the best, the first pioneer."

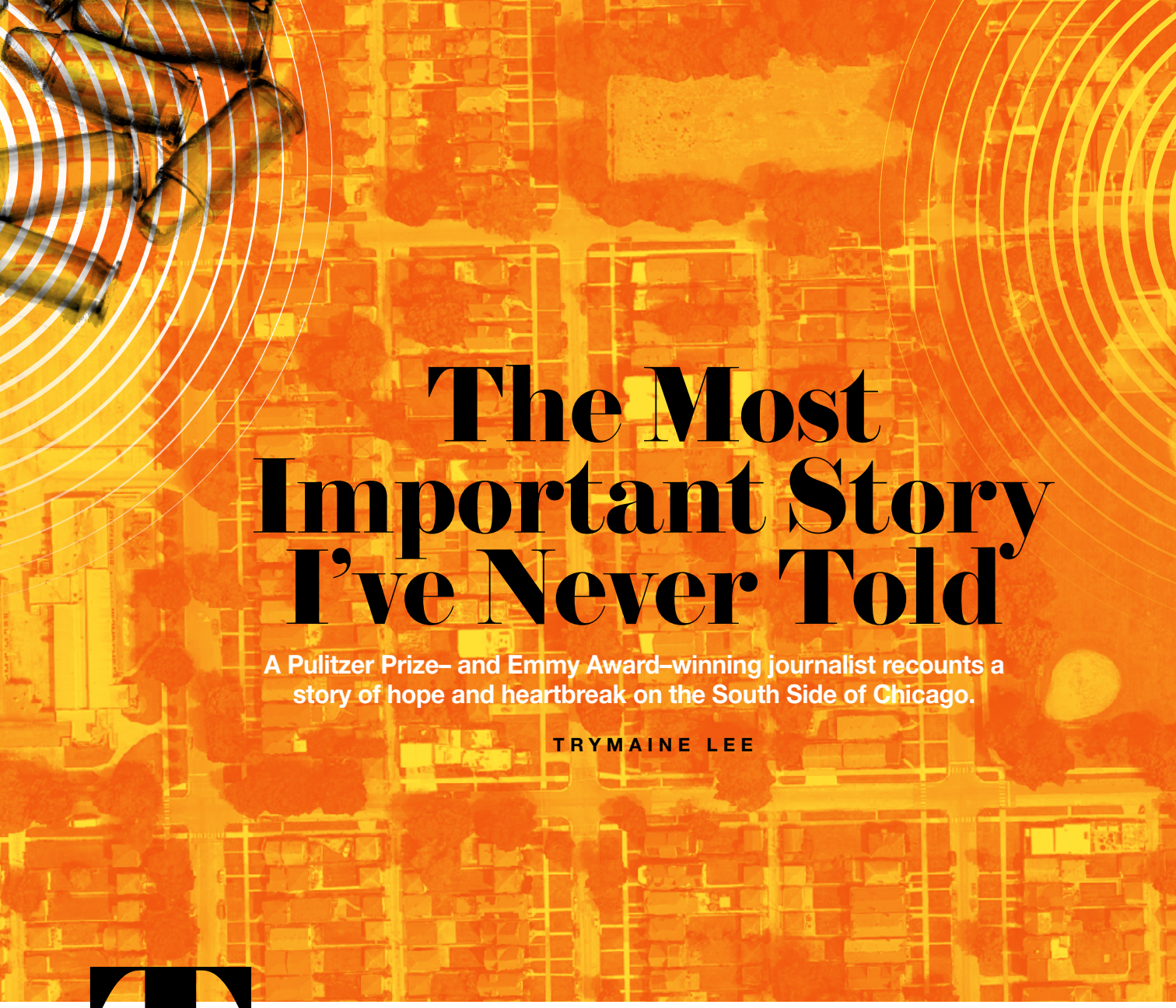
After conducting the first test of an atomic explosive device on July 16, 1945, Oppenheimer and his associates at Los Alamos were aware that they were about to inflict massive death and destruction on Japanese cities and that this act would spur other countries to seek similar capabilities—but this did not deter them from going ahead anyway.

The damage done: J. Robert Oppenheimer (third from left) examines the Trinity test site after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Much the same can be said of Trump's Oppenheimer moment in July 2025. Although Trump and the leaders of the industry know that the creation of frontier AI models "brings the potential for bad as well as for good," this has not deterred them from proceeding with their development. They also know that no matter how many trillions of dollars the US spends on mammoth data centers and other AI infrastructure, America's rivals will be able to match US progress in a relatively short amount of time, and probably for less money. Nevertheless, they insist that the United States must always remain ahead in this AI arms race, no matter the cost.

We must demand adequate safeguards on advanced AI models before they inflict Hiroshima-caliber damage.

We know the long-term consequences of Oppenheimer's fateful choice: a world replete with nuclear weapons, some ready to be used at a moment's notice. What the long-term consequences of Trump's AI decision will be cannot be foreseen, but they are sure to be on an equal scale and to entail comparable perils. And just as we must work harder than ever to prevent future Hiroshimas, we must demand adequate safeguards on advanced AI models before they inflict equivalent damage. N



The Most Important Story I've Never Told

A Pulitzer Prize– and Emmy Award–winning journalist recounts a story of hope and heartbreak on the South Side of Chicago.

TRYMAINE LEE

TIME AND AGAIN, I'VE BEEN DRAWN BACK TO CHICAGO. THE first time I went, more than a decade ago, it was to report on gun violence as a generational curse. I wanted to show how gun violence spread from family to family, neighbor to neighbor. I had come across some research that likened gun death to a communicable disease: The closer you are to a victim of gun violence, the more likely you are to become a victim yourself. Despite the troubling frequency of shootings in Chicago, in particular, the violence was largely concentrated in a handful of blocks in just a couple of neighborhoods. Black folks had migrated here a century ago, and red lines and covenants were designed to keep them there.

In the years when I was in and out of the city, I'd meet a wide cast of people, on both sides of the law, who carried stories of how gun violence had touched them and their families. The young brother paralyzed by a party-crashing gang member. The young sister left handicapped in an attempted hit on her boyfriend. The mother who'd lost one son to gun violence and another son to prison in a separate shooting, her mind racked by the emotional chaos of it all. The wheelchair-bound former drug dealer who turned his life around, but not before his son was shot and left paralyzed. The mother whose daughter was shot and killed in a robbery, whose grief settled so deeply inside of her that to this day she carries the girl's ashes around in a gold urn. The white police sergeant who was so blinded by his blue loyalty that he struggled to separate Black perpetrators from Black victims and Black innocents. The mother who watched a stray bullet crash through the windshield of her parked car and strike her 10-year-old daughter in the head, killing her instantly. The pediatric emergency room chief who's had to stitch the little limbs of preschoolers back together after they'd been torn to pieces by bullets. The teachers who have resigned themselves to the fact that any number of classroom seats will be vacant come the start of the school year because surviving summer is a privilege that too many Black boys and girls in the city aren't afforded. Threaded between all the heartbreaking stories of life, death, and survival in Chicago are many stories

Trymaine Lee is a Pulitzer Prize–and Emmy Award–winning journalist, author, and MSNBC contributor.

of surprising resilience, even by Black American standards of indomitable survival. Here are people who find the will to keep on keeping on in the face of extraordinary hurt.

It's a beautiful city, rich in history and culture and a kind of Blackness that feels essential to understanding a broader sense of American Blackness. The people who poured into the city from the South during the Great Migration of the 20th century brought with them many of their cultural and political sensibilities, which were eventually shaped and molded to their new realities up north.

In the 1930s and '40s, Chicago's Black community began to organize politically. One of the first African American politicians elected to Congress in the post-Reconstruction era was a Chicagoan named Oscar Stanton De Priest, who took office in 1929 and represented Illinois's First Congressional District. Around the same time, after years of struggle and organizing, the city's majority-Black plant workers formed the interracial United Packinghouse Workers of America, one of the first and most powerful unions of its kind, representing a rare cross-racial power play. The organization worked to address issues such as discrimination in housing and employment and helped to lay the groundwork for the civil-rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. In the late '60s and early '70s, Chicago was home to a vibrant Black Power movement. The Black Panthers advocated self-defense against a white political and police system that they saw as an enemy of Black people.

As Chicago—like other major American cities—was being remade by deindustrialization, homegrown gangs were growing in size, influence, and power. The systematic marginalization of the city's Black population, pressed into increasingly poor and overcrowded neighborhoods on the city's South and West sides, created an ecosystem of deprivation and disinvestment that—coupled with the white power structure's sheer brutality—made poor Black communities ripe soil for street gangs to thrive. No longer would the racist Chicago police regime be the sole enemy of a particular class of Black youth.

Black people flocked to Chatham, once called the "Mayberry of the South Side," after World War II, filling well-kept houses on tree-lined streets and building community on a foundation of upward mobility.

Black gangs would emerge as a source of belonging and protection, but also of bloodshed and destruction. Disillusioned Black youths, disenchanted with a society that had time and again cast them aside, found solace within the ranks of these highly organized neighborhood gang networks. With their allure of power, protection, and economic opportunity, gangs became a rallying point for a whole generation of young people scraping to survive.

As the gangs grew in strength and influence, their presence cast an ever-darkening shadow over Chicago's proud but marginalized communities. Largely disconnected from the city's political and economic engines, these young people became trapped in a cycle of violence that haunts the city to this day.

Meanwhile, the gun industry was growing more lucrative and influential.

After the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, the signing of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts of 1964 and '65, and the passage of the Gun Control Act of 1968, the National Rifle Association shifted its focus from hunting and sport shooting to promoting the view that the Second Amendment protects an individual's right to own firearms for self-defense. This message resonated with many white Americans who feared the loss of their white privilege and white power as Black Americans gained access to a fuller kind of American citizenship. At the same time, in the urban North, on the heels of a decades-long influx of Black Southerners and declining investment, the social and economic conditions in redlined slums were growing increasingly volatile. By the 1970s, poverty, crime, and deteriorating infrastructure were hallmarks of many of the communities where large poor Black populations lived. The lack of investment in these communities by the local, state, and federal governments fueled a cycle of poverty and marginalization that persisted over the course of the decade. To make matters even more volatile, widespread police abuses and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sparked fiery riots and rebellions that would tear through some of America's largest cities, east to west. Newark, Detroit, New Orleans, and Los Angeles would all glow in the embers of America's seething war with itself and the never-ending so-called Negro Problem.

I want to believe these stories speak to the humanity of Black folks and the inhumanity of the system.

After the 1967 riots in Detroit, gun sales skyrocketed. The city issued four times as many handgun permits in 1968 as it had in 1965. A white suburb issued five times as many permits. White paramilitary neighborhood protective associations began to spring up along with more explicitly white-supremacist militia groups. They began stockpiling weapons.

In the first half of the 20th century, an average of about 10 million firearms entered into civilian hands each decade. But between 1958 and 1968, the height of the civil-rights movement, nearly 30 million guns were added to the civilian stockpile. In 1969, a federal commission on gun violence found that the steepest increase in privately owned guns took place between 1963 and 1968, "a period of urban riots and sharply rising crime rates," in which annual rifle and shotgun sales doubled and handgun sales quadrupled. The commission's conclusion was that the fear of violence was pushing people to buy more guns. What it didn't say was who were the feared and who were the fearful.

By 1972, the Republican Party's platform supported gun-control measures that aimed to limit the availability of "cheap handguns." But it wasn't the first time the GOP had supported gun-control measures. In 1967, then–California Governor Ronald Reagan signed the Mulford Act, which made it illegal to carry a loaded firearm in public without a permit. The law was part of an effort to disarm the Black Panther Party. That same year, dozens of Black Panthers had taken to the steps of the California statehouse to protest, armed with pistols and shotguns. "The time has come for Black people to arm themselves," they said.

In 1975, however, Reagan—who was preparing to challenge the incumbent president, Gerald Ford, for the Republican nomination—wrote in *Guns & Ammo* magazine that the Second Amendment was clear and left little room for gun-control advocates. By 1980, the GOP platform stated that the right of citizens to own guns must be protected and that the federal registration of firearms should be opposed. As a result, the NRA endorsed Reagan in 1980, the first time it had ever endorsed a presidential candidate.

Over the coming decades, record numbers of firearms poured into America's streets, a seemingly endless supply of which would be siphoned from the pipeline between gun factories and gun

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES COLLECTION / CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM

shops all across the US and into the hands of gunrunners and shooters.

For years, Chicago has been a kind of North Star for me, a guiding light that has allowed me to illuminate some of the darkest places. In hundreds of hours of reporting, I managed to stitch together a portrait of America that most people willfully refuse to acknowledge or, worse, exploit to disparage Black people. Certainly, much of my work reveals the kind of pain that's all too common inside the Black community. But I also want to believe that these stories speak to the humanity of Black folks and the inhumanity of the system.

But there's one story I have never been able to get my arms around—perhaps the most important story I have never told. This particular story takes place in one of the city's most important, traditionally well-heeled Black communities: Chatham. It's a story so thick with pain and emotion that I've had to piece it together without the participation of those closest to it. It's a story that sadly illustrates the brief yet violent timeline of a single gun in America: a matte-silver .45-caliber Smith & Wesson 457s, serial number VJH755. Born out of forged steel in Massachusetts, it crossed to the dark side in Mississippi and fulfilled its fate on the streets of Chicago.

A writer once called Chatham the "Mayberry of the South Side." It was the kind of place that Black families flocked to after the end of World War II. They filled sturdy, well-kept houses on tree-lined streets, joined social clubs and neighborhood organizations. And they built community on a foundation of upward mobility, Black pride, and socioeconomic stability. Chatham was the opposite of the Chicago slums that many other Black Chicagoans were pushed into.

In a previous lifetime, the neighborhood was a suburb of mostly ethnic white immigrants: Protestants and Catholics from Hungary, Ireland, and Sweden, and Jews from Eastern Europe and Germany. But as Black migrants began streaming north to Chicago, communities like Chatham began to transition. Between 1950 and 1960, Chatham's Black population went from 1 percent to nearly 64 percent. These new residents were a blend of professionals and working- and middle-class folks who were employed in union-protected industries, government jobs, and small businesses they built from scratch. Their efforts would bear fruit. There was the Johnson Products Company (of Ultra Sheen fame), and there were financial institutions like Independence Bank and Seaway National Bank, which at their respective peaks were the largest Black-owned banks in the country. Churches, schools, and social organizations nurtured generations of residents proud to call Chatham home—among them, luminaries like the writer Gwendolyn Brooks, the baseball great Ernie Banks, and the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson.

Chatham was an island of the Black middle class in a sea of economic strife and violence.

With its brick bungalows and strong economic base, Chatham was an island of the Black middle class in a sea of economic strife and violence. As Chicago's industrial luster dulled, huge swaths of the city started to decline. Already poor and underserved Black neighborhoods fell further into crime and dilapidation. By the end of the 1990s, Chatham's once-sturdy foundation was beginning to tremble as its population aged and declined, falling from a high of 47,287 in 1970 to 37,275 in 2000. Just as Chatham's protective buffer against the world beyond had begun to erode, it was hit with one of its greatest challenges—the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009.

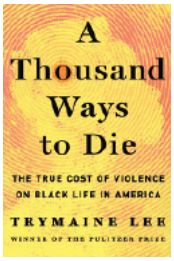
The economic collapse hit Black Americans especially hard, widening the racial wealth gap. Black families lost 53 percent of their net worth, destroying decades of progress. By the end of the recession, nearly 35 percent of Black families had either zero or negative net worth.

The recession plunged Chatham into a free fall from which it is still struggling to recover. Chatham's foreclosure rate was the 14th highest out of 80 Chicago neighborhoods. Local businesses that had thrived for decades were struggling, and some longtime residents, facing unemployment and shrinking retirement funds, were forced to leave. The sense of safety and pride in homeownership that had defined Chatham waned, replaced by a creeping sense of loss. In the shadow of these economic woes came violence.

As I tried to wrap my mind around the connection between violent crime and the economic woes of postrecession Chatham, I stumbled across a name in the *Chicago Tribune*: Thomas Wortham IV. A son of Chatham, Tommy, as family and friends called him, was featured in an article about violence closing in on the neighborhood. Much of it was happening in the vicinity of a popular public park, Cole Park. Tommy was the president of the Cole Park Advisory Council.

SACRAMENTO BEE / TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Black Panthers advocated for Black people to carry guns at the California Capitol in 1967.



Adapted from A Thousand Ways to Die: The True Cost of Violence on Black Life in America, *by Trymaine Lee. Copyright © 2025 by the author and reprinted by permission of St. Martin's Publishing Group.*

"When people think of the South Side of Chicago, they think violence. In Chatham, that's not what we see."

—Thomas Wortham IV

A spate of shootings around the park had sent fear coursing through the neighborhood. Tommy was determined to do something about it. "It's starting to feel like it's expected in this community. When people think of the South Side of Chicago, they think violence," Tommy, then 30, told the paper. "In Chatham, that's not what we see. We're going to fix it, so it doesn't happen again."

Wortham's family is one of those longtime anchor families in the community. His grandfather built the family's home right across the street from the park a half-century ago. And for most of Wortham's life, he had a front-row seat to the theater that was Cole Park. On any given night, when the weather was right, the place would come alive, with neighborhood residents lining the basketball courts to watch the ballers ball. Relatives gathered for reunions and barbecues there. Families pooled beneath the summer sun, and young lovers, hand in hand, stole not-so-private moments in the park that its namesake, the singer and Chicago native Nat King Cole, would have been proud of.

After Tommy graduated from Brother Rice High School in 1998, he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater. A year later, he enlisted in the Wisconsin National Guard. After his first tour in Iraq ended, in 2005, he went back home and joined the Chicago Police Department. In early 2009, he was called back into duty to serve a second tour. After his final 10-month deployment, Tommy was back home in Chicago, picking up where he'd left off. He rejoined the Chicago PD, following in the footsteps of his by-then-retired father, Thomas Wortham III, who had the distinction of serving in the security detail of the legendary Harold Washington, the city's first Black mayor.

Police officers remember fallen service members at the 2013 National Peace Officers' Memorial Service in Washington, DC.

Tommy returned to a community that was grappling with new levels of violence. There had recently been two shootings at the park and a number of others that rang out not far from it. In one incident, a 19-year-old ballplayer was shot on the basketball court after trying to break up a fight. He was one of 15 people shot in the city in a six-hour period. On another evening not long after, a gunman opened fire on a crowd of teens hooping on the same court. One of the teens was shot in the neck, another in the hip and calf. After the second shooting, Freddrenna Lyle, then an alderman for the Sixth Ward and now a state appellate court judge, had the basketball rims removed from the courts. She said that it was unfair to the taxpayers and to the "good kids," but "I had to do it because we can't afford to have another child shot."

If the neighborhood was flinching from the uncharacteristic bloodshed, panic hit a crescendo days later when a 20-month-old girl was shot and killed less than a mile from the park. Little Cynia Cole was in her father's car when a bullet crashed into the back seat where she was sitting with her siblings. Police said the shooter was aiming for her dad, an alleged rival gang member, but instead struck the baby in the back of her head. The father was unhurt, but the shot that took his baby felt like something of a mortal wound to the psyche and soul of the community. During the year before her killing on April 21, 2010, Chatham had seen 16 homicides, double the number of the previous year. A third of them were believed to be gang-related.

In May, Wortham traveled to DC and New York for a pair of memorial events dedicated to police officers killed in the line of duty. During a candlelight vigil, then–US Attorney General Eric Holder addressed the thousands gathered, honoring the 325 men and women who'd been added to the national law enforcement memorial, 116 of whom represented cops killed just the year before. "Unspeakable tragedy may be what brings us here. But our unending appreciation—for the unsung work of law enforcement—is what binds us, and binds all Americans, together," Holder said. "So, while we may grieve, we must not despair."

Two days later, during an event that Saturday, Wortham joined thousands of other officers and their families in front of the US Capitol. They posed for photos and consoled the loved ones of their fallen brothers and sisters. Wortham handed the mother of fallen Chicago police officer Alejandro "Alex" Valadez a patch that he had carried overseas in remembrance of him. Valadez was a fellow graduate of Brother Rice High School who had been shot and killed while on duty the previous summer responding to a call of shots fired. The 27-year-old was an expectant father who had transferred to the troubled Englewood District hoping to make a difference. He had grown up in the heart of a gang-infested Chicago neighborhood and was touched by gun violence long before he was killed: Valadez was 3 years old when a gang leader out for revenge murdered one of his older brothers.

The next day, Wortham made his way to New York for the NYPD's annual memorial run in honor of the more than 860 New York City police officers who had been killed in the line of duty. Days after the race, Wortham was back home in Chicago and eager to tell his parents all about his trip. He spent much of the evening going through his photos, as well as showing off his new motorcycle, a 2005 Yamaha R1.

CHIP SOMODEVILLA / GETTY IMAGES

JUST BEFORE 11:30 PM, Wortham said his goodbyes. It was a clear and cool night. A streetlight shone from its perch above, pushing away the darkness on that stretch of the block. Wortham strode down the steps and toward his motorcycle. At the same time, an older-model red Pontiac Grand Prix crept slowly down the street, stopping not far from the Wortham house. Four men sat inside—cousins Marcus and Brian Floyd along with Paris McGee and Toyious Taylor. They'd spent much of the evening driving around Chatham looking for someone to rob. They found him in front of that tidy, low-slung home on the corner, across from the park.

The Floyd boys got out of the car, lurking as the Pontiac's creeping slowed to a crawl. From his porch, the elder Wortham watched as the Floyds approached Tommy. Beneath the cascade of light, he could see a flash of metal. It was a gun. This was a stickup. They wanted the motorcycle. Wortham's father yelled out, demanding they leave his son alone. Then he disappeared into his house. Clad in her robe, Wortham's mother, Carolyn, watched from the front door. Just then, Tommy yelled out "Chicago police!" and pulled his gun, a 9-millimeter Glock. The next few moments whipped by like a whir in time. A burst of muzzle flashes lit up the night, cracking the Chatham calm. Brian Floyd shot Tommy Wortham over and over. As Tommy returned fire, his father burst into the gunfight from his front door, firing back at his son's attackers. As the Worthams and the Floyds exchanged gunfire, Taylor spun the Pontiac's wheels, he and McGee yelling for the Floyds to get in. The elder Wortham crouched behind a car, firing his gun with one hand and his son's gun, which had fallen to the ground, with the other.

"They're shooting at him!" Wortham's mother said in a frantic call to 911. "My husband's out there too. Oh my God!" The Pontiac finally screeched away, running over a fallen Tommy Wortham and dragging him down the street before he was finally knocked from the car.

"I shot with both hands," his father would say later. When the shooting was over, three men lay bleeding. Brian Floyd, 20, was dead. Marcus Floyd, 19, was critically wounded and clinging to life. Tommy Wortham was fading several yards down the block.

About a half hour later, just after midnight, Tommy Wortham was pronounced dead at Advocate Christ Medical Center. He had survived two tours in the Middle East only to be killed in his hometown of Chicago.

WITHIN 24 HOURS, POLICE HAD ACCOUNTED FOR ALL FOUR SUSpects in Wortham's murder. Brian Floyd was dead, with at least 10 bullet wounds. Marcus Floyd was clinging to life, with at least five of his own. Paris "Payroll" McGee, 20, turned himself in to police. Toyious Taylor, 29, was arrested during a traffic stop.

Police say the Floyds and Taylor were affiliated with the Gangster Disciples. McGee was a Cicero Insane Vice Lord who once boasted on his Facebook page that "I hav no promlem wit pullin da trigger!!!!" and listed his interests as basketball, dice, and "robbin." He'd been out on probation on a previous gun charge when Wortham was killed.

Carolyn Wortham holds a family photo during an event announcing a lawsuit against the pawn shop that sold the gun that killed her son.

Years after the shooting, on December 15, 2015, Marcus Floyd was condemned to life in prison, the same sentence that had been doled out to Taylor and McGee months earlier. At trial, Marcus Floyd insisted that he wasn't the one who pulled the trigger that night. Instead of apologizing, he asked Wortham's father why he'd shot an innocent man. Floyd claims that because of his extensive injuries, he suffered from amnesia and couldn't remember the shooting.

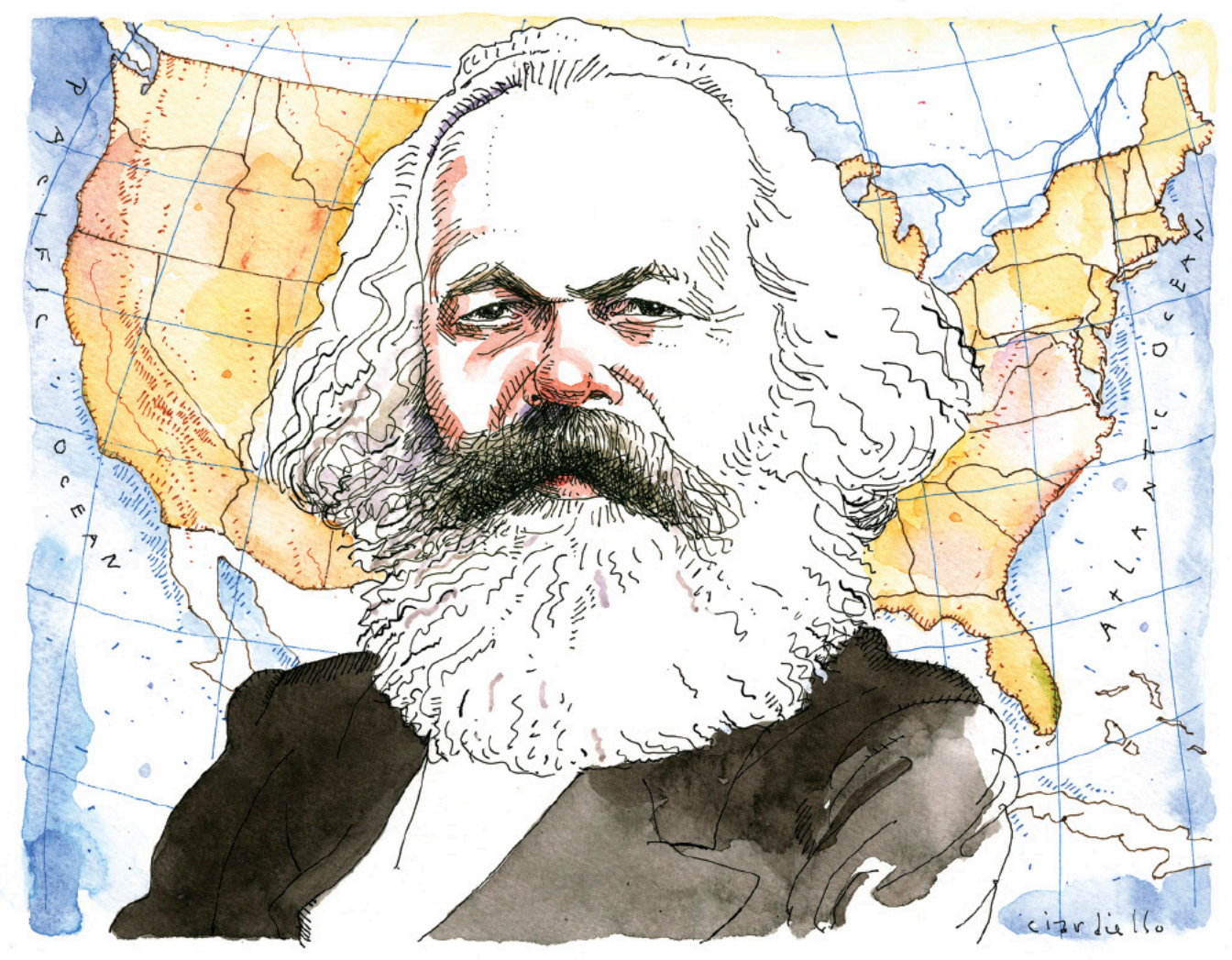
In his victim's impact statement, Thomas Wortham III spoke of his joy at watching his boy grow into a man. "As a father, I could not have been prouder of the man he turned out to be."

Carolyn Wortham lamented that her son "does not get a second chance to do anything—build his career, have children, make a difference in his community, or just enjoy the life he had worked so hard to create. And I will always miss that."

Tommy Wortham survived two tours in the Middle East only to be killed in his hometown of Chicago.

His shooters took so much. But they also left something behind: that gun. Its own dark path would track back more than a thousand miles, and with each of those miles, it would take on a bit more of its own sinister, violent life, until it took the life of Officer Thomas Wortham, badge number 6181. N

SCOTT OLSON / GETTY IMAGES



To Free Labor

The triumphs and travails of American Marxism

BY ROBIN BLACKBURN

KARL MARX NEVER VISITED THE UNITED States, but he was long fascinated by the lure—and contradictions—of American freedom. As a young man, he applied for permission to emigrate to Texas. But he couldn't tear himself away from the debates gripping the Young Hegelians as Europe's old order crumbled in the 1840s. Later, he would correspond with many of his contemporaries who traveled across the Atlantic, including a set of comrades who would go on to publish two of his outstanding early works: *The Communist Manifesto*, coauthored with Friedrich Engels, published in German and French in 1838 and in English in 1850, and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of*

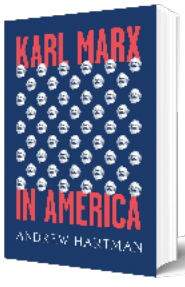
ILLUSTRATION BY JOE CIARDIELLO

Louis Bonaparte, first published in German, in New York, in 1852.

More surprisingly, Marx's gifts as an essayist and social observer led *The New York Tribune* to appoint him as its London correspondent. Between 1853 and 1861, he contributed 487 articles to the *Tribune*, a journal with around 200,000 subscribers in the 1850s, making it the second-most-read American newspaper.

In the years that followed, movements and parties would rally under the banner of his socialist politics. While Marx did not necessarily become a household name in the United States, he would nonetheless motivate generations of radicals to take up the cause of socialism.

In *Karl Marx in America*, Andrew Hartman provides us with a kaleidoscopic vision of Marxism in the United States in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. Responding to Marx's fiercest critics—Mikhail Bakunin, Friedrich Hayek, Leszek Kołakowski, Isaiah Berlin—as well as his staunchest admirers and collaborators—Engels, Jack London, John Reed, C. Wright Mills, Howard Zinn, and Fredric Jameson—Hartman tells the story of how Marx and his followers "put their stamp" on American life and thought. Taking the Civil War as his starting point for this trenchant survey of the American left, Hartman offers us dozens of portraits of Marxism's main protagonists—including Eugene Debs, W.E.B. Du Bois, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Louise Bryant, Harry Haywood, Daniel De Leon, Mother Jones, Claude McKay, Oliver C. Cox, and C.L.R. James—and charts their triumphs and travails all the way up to the present.



Karl Marx in America
By Andrew Hartman
The University of Chicago Press.
600 pp. $39

The North America that Marx once contemplated moving to was defined by industrialization, labor unrest, and the expansion of slavery. The United States of the 1840s was not yet industrialized, but it was moving in that direction with the construction of roads, canals, and railroads and the emergence of a large, mobile, and varied workforce. At the same time, the country's increasingly commercialized agricultural sector—farms as well as plantations, storekeepers as well as merchants, indebted producers as well as addicted consumers—also began to channel a rural labor surplus to the advancing frontier of commodity production and wage labor.

Hartman stresses the impact that slavery in the US had on Marx's thoughts on labor, freedom, and capitalist exploitation. Recent findings by the economic historians John Clegg and Bonnie Martin have also emphasized the connection between slavery and capitalism, explaining how Southern planters were able to obtain ever-larger loans from merchant bankers by offering their slaveholdings as collateral for further investment in the cotton economy. While the boom phase of the cycle spelled more broken families for the enslaved, the bust phase spelled ruin for those—whether planters, farmers, merchants, or storekeepers—who had overborrowed. Merchant creditors had sought to limit losses by persuading British Parliament to enact the Act for the More Easy Recovery of Debts in 1732, which would allow them to seize slaves and land to satisfy delinquent debts of slaveholders. Under these new creditor-debtor relations, the supply of credit increased while interest rates decreased, thereby boosting trade in the colonies. The credit regime installed by the act carried over into the post-colonial era, and while it worked for wealthy planters and the state, who could invest surplus cash into the economy, it led to a new age of speculative fevers and burst bubbles, which both alarmed the heavily indebted slave owners and spurred them—along with all the other colliding factors in the prewar years—to the desperate gamble of secession.

Marx followed this war of secession closely when it arrived. He was convinced that labor in a white skin could not be free if labor in a black skin was still in chains. Marx's ideas became more popular among those wage workers in the North who found that abolition and Reconstruction had not changed employers' virulent hostility to trade unions and strikes. Yet neither had it fully emancipated the workers in the South. The Civil War marked the end of slavery, and the contours of a multiracial democracy began to emerge in its place, with Reconstruction administrations sponsoring public schools, clinics, and even police. But when the Union forces finally departed, they left behind a vacuum that white Southerners, in particular the Ku Klux Klan and the creators of Jim Crow laws, would exploit to reorganize white supremacy in the South.

Working men and women started to look for answers—and one place they looked was in the writings of Marx, in particular his masterpiece *Capital*. Published in German in 1867 and in English in the 1880s, it was the cornerstone of Marx's reputation as a political economist, but it also helped inspire a set of new labor movements and political parties throughout the North Atlantic as more and more workers, frustrated by the modest gains afforded to them under the capitalist system, sought to do something about it.

By the early decades of the 20th century, the United States had two trade union federations, three socialist parties, four socialist publishing houses, at least a half-dozen left-wing magazines, and many scores of American Marxist and socialist authors. First came the Socialist Labor Party, founded in the late 19th century, then the Socialist Party of America, founded in the early 20th century, and the Communist Party of America, which emerged in the wake of the 1917 revolution in Russia. Because of the vast and varied nature of the continental United States, as well as the diverse cultural and religious affiliations of its huge influx of immigrants, the European model of a national social democracy would prove difficult to imitate.

All of these parties were, in one way or another, followers of Marx and Engels, and yet each had its own blind spots and shibboleths. They breathed a spirit of syndicalist resistance and rallied to the defense of strikes, but they also shared a vein of religiosity. They held meetings and social gatherings and circulated magazines and newspapers even as they offered differing views of the same political tradition. Daniel De Leon, the leader of the Socialist Labor Party, lectured on international law

Robin Blackburn is the author of, among many other books, The Reckoning: From the Second Slavery to Abolition, 1776–1888.

at Columbia University, while Eugene Debs was wary of "intellectuals." Some labor leaders condemned slavery and racism, and a few were radical abolitionists, but they often did not encourage Black self-organization and cultural expression.

Meanwhile, some members of the Socialist Party took a different approach: They responded to the social devastation of capitalism by opting for a municipal or "sewer" socialism—a set of reforms that created mini welfare states within cities that might alleviate the deprivation faced by workers. This development caused Vladimir Lenin some concern: He worried that these socialists would leave behind the grand goals of socialism in the midst of all their reformism and would also forget the imperatives of class struggle, writing that in elevating "municipal socialism to a special 'trend' precisely because it dreams of social peace, of class conciliation," they risked diverting "public attention away from the fundamental questions of the economic system as a whole…to minor questions of local self government."

Lenin was, of course, wrong to treat sewers as an unimportant component of public health. In many instances they have doubled life-expectancy, and the Bolsheviks did not neglect sewers and positively gloried in the underground, as in Moscow's magnificent metro. But Lenin's criticism did signal a larger rupture to come. As most socialists directed their attention to opposing the United States' entrance into World War I while also attempting to avoid arrest in the midst of a vicious Red Scare in 1919, a group of younger radicals, inspired by the Russian Revolution, formed what became a unified Communist Party, with a membership reaching around 66,000 in the 1930s.

The Communists mounted imaginative recruiting campaigns among autoworkers, miners, textile workers, and the cultural workforce in Hollywood. They also committed themselves to the cause of civil rights and Black independence throughout the Union. In New York, New Jersey, Chicago, San Francisco, and a few other industrial and proto-industrial enclosures, capitalism was surging ahead, and they were determined to resist it.

As Hartman shows, the term *Marxist* really belongs to the 20th century, but these growing parties and movements were part of several cohorts willing to reinvent Marxist ideas as well as pay homage to their progenitor. Marx insisted that his socialism was "scientific" and that its values were those developed by the workers' movement in its resistance to capitalism, and so in a way it was fitting that his ideas were then adapted to meet the exigencies and needs of labor's continuing struggle against capital. Even the chroniclers of the Roaring Twenties came to find something they could admire in Marx. F. Scott Fitzgerald insisted to his daughter that she read "the terrible chapter in *Das Kapital* on the Working Day, and see if you are ever quite the same."

Even F. Scott Fitzgerald found himself debating *Capital* with his daughter.

Karl Marx in America includes a photo of Leon Trotsky and a brief account of his 10-week stay in New York in 1917. But Trotsky's main influence on America came later. As Hartman observes, it was when he went into exile for the second time, in 1929, that Trotsky was adopted as a guide and authority by a generation of New York intellectuals that included Sidney Hook, Max Eastman, James Burnham, Irving Howe, Mary McCarthy, and many other contributors to left-wing magazines such as *The Masses* and *Partisan Review*.

Hartman charts how a revulsion at Stalin's tyranny motivated many of Trotsky's American followers, who were drawn to his vigorous critiques of the USSR. But as fascism began to spread in Europe, these American radicals also found themselves drawn to Trotsky's eloquent warnings of the mortal threat to democracy that Hitler's rise represented. While the corruptions of "bourgeois democracy" were an unlovely spectacle, Trotsky urged that all sections of the workers' movement should rally to the defense of representative institutions and freedoms. As his biographer Isaac Deutscher has insisted, this was an important clarification, and one that would be elaborated by George Novack and others who remained aligned with Trotsky.

Parallel to the much-heralded New York Intellectuals, another Marxist tendency also emerged in the United States. Raya Dunayevskaya, a Russian émigré who once served as Trotsky's secretary, had a special concern for placing Marx's ideas within the American context. She argued that liberal representative regimes were too distant from the mass of citizens while all too open to the imperatives of capital.

Hartman also examines later Marxists such as Angela Davis, who came of age in the late 1960s, and those who were not Marxists but avowed many of Marx's ideas in their critiques of Cold War and post–Cold War America. Noam Chomsky, for example, cannot be called a Marxist—he has often pointed instead to his anarchist origins and commitments—but he too has been a vigorous critic of corporate liberalism. And Naomi Klein, with her broad scope and admirable tenacity, has also revisited and updated many of Marx's concerns in her critiques of globalization and disaster capitalism.

In *Karl Marx in America*, Hartman sticks mainly to the world of ideas; there is little here on the outcomes of elections, barricades, or battles. But he also considers how Marxism in the United States was both shaped and hindered by more mainstream liberal politics. In a section on the New Deal, for example, he examines how Franklin Roosevelt, a patrician who wanted to "save capitalism from itself," initiated a series of crucial innovations in the United States, most of them aimed at restoring financial stability, that also ended up buttressing a wave of trade union and progressive mobilization.

While perhaps none of the radicals whom Roosevelt had to turn to for support were Marxists, they would eventually hold his feet to the fire and ensure that his Second New Deal of 1935 reached farther than the first. Radicals who were competing for his base of supporters would push him farther to the left as well. The Louisiana politician Huey Long's "Share Our Wealth" program, premised on a radical redistribution of wealth and massive public works spending, spurred Roosevelt to embrace more audacious approaches to economic planning, including the Works Progress

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Administration, which went even farther than his earlier works projects in putting millions of the unemployed to work on infrastructure. Meanwhile, a movement led by California doctor Francis Townsend "helped shape Roosevelt's 1935 Social Security Act," Hartman notes, and "a rapidly growing and increasingly militant labor movement" spurred the Democratic-controlled Congress to pass the Wagner Act, or as it was formally known, the National Labor Relations Act, which "forbade employers from interfering with employee efforts to form unions and included the mechanisms to enforce this."

Hartman describes the Wagner Act as "an unparalleled victory for the American working class." Yet he notes as well that "the 'NLRA' was also a clear means of reducing labor militancy. It brought an unruly working class into the fold of the Democratic Party.... The Second New Deal, even in its most pro-labor form, was by no means Marxist."

For Hartman, this was part of the quandary that Marxists and socialists faced: The New Deal may have uplifted labor, but it disempowered it as well. Those elements of the New Deal that helped labor—the NLRA, Social Security, the welfare agencies—did not place decision-making or the means of production into the hands of the working class. Instead, they were highly complex instruments that required intricate, well-informed, and deliberate coordination by liberal technocrats.

Part of the Marxists' quandary was that the New Deal uplifted but disempowered labor.

A group of Marxists involved with the magazine *Science & Society* warned of the dangers of imagining that there could be an enduring alliance with big business. In 1966, Paul Sweezy and Paul Baran's impressive book *Monopoly Capital* buttressed this argument by situating it within fascinating debates on the history of capitalism.

But socialists and Marxists also faced new challenges that they had not anticipated and could not fully overcome. The Cold War placed additional pressures on the provision of social goods, saw the emergence of a strident anti-communism, and marked the gradual erosion of benefits as classical, as well as neo-national, business competition created openings that both neoliberals and neoconservatives would go on to exploit. In the end, some American socialists had to support what they otherwise might have been critical of: Many ended up defending the welfare state as a progressive and worthy cause, even if it did not lead to the further empowerment of labor.

Upon completing *Karl Marx in America*, I found myself thinking about who else Hartman might have included in a book that already includes so much. William Morris surely had some American followers (and *The Masses* must have had a cover that he devised?), and Raymond Williams as well. These two men were not American-born and did not spend much time in the United States, even if they influenced American thought. Simone de Beauvoir, who has only one mention in the book, also comes to mind, though citations of Juliet Mitchell's and Shulamith Firestone's work help make up for this. Charlie Chaplin could have possibly been given a cameo, and Bertolt Brecht makes only two, fleeting appearances. These artists had the genius to convey the conflicting moods and responsibilities of the period—and to sound the alarm.

There is also the question of where American Marxism fits in today. Hartman sees the extraordinary perils of a new Cold War, of a dead planet, of the imperatives of social justice, and of irresponsible tech companies all lending great relevance to the story of *Karl Marx in America*.

The last quarter of the 20th century saw the country moving away from decently furnished public education and health services and toward outrageous inequality, privatization, and reinvented myths of racial destiny. Yet the first quarter of the 21st century has witnessed great arcs of resistance aimed at rescuing the promise of decolonization, democratization, and public welfare. When the great monopolies and cartels begin to destroy themselves and the creativity of the people is put to the test, we can finally say it is redemption time. N

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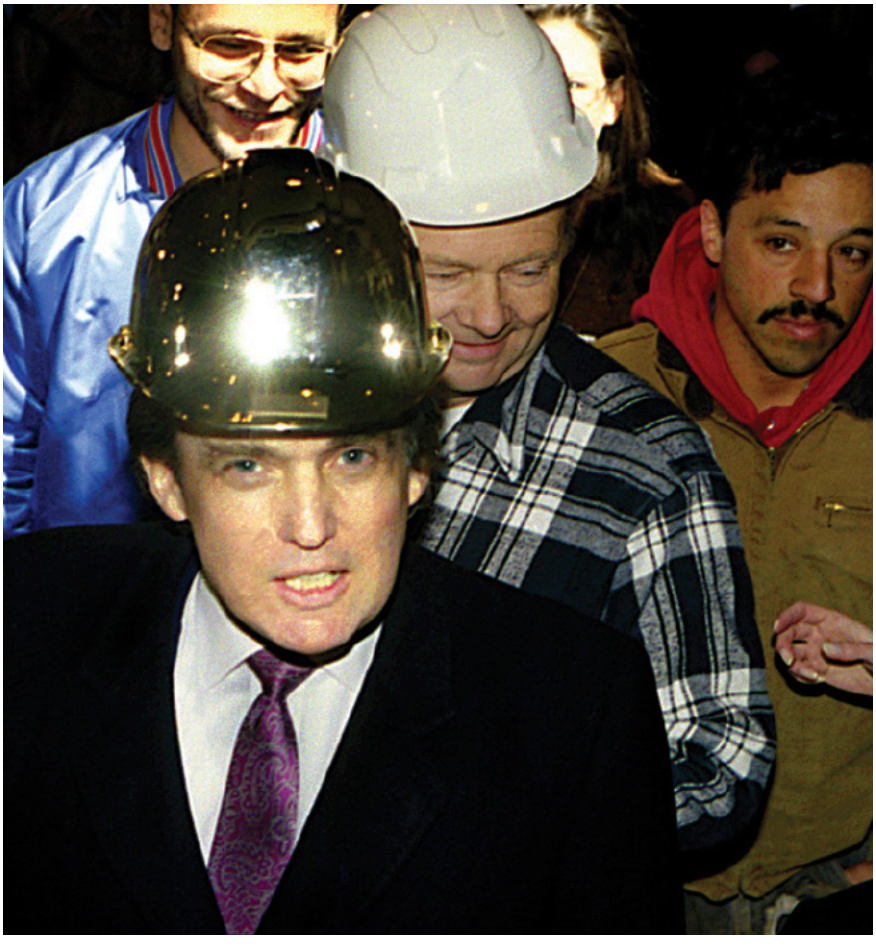

A Family Business

Donald Trump's theory of politics

BY KIM PHILLIPS-FEIN

EVER SINCE DONALD TRUMP'S ELECTION IN 2016, LIBERals and the left have struggled to understand the meaning of his rise, and that of "Trumpism," for American politics. When Trump entered the political scene, he was hard to take seriously. In his first campaign, he seemed—initially, at least—to be a zombie headline straight from the *New York Post*'s "Page Six": a faded reality-TV star, a bankrupt real estate speculator, a huckster, a creep, and a punch line. Even after he won the election, many liberals refused to recognize that he was all of those things and also the president of the United States. Having placed their hopes in Hillary Clinton, they marched to slogans like "Not My President." Trump might be in the White House, but it was unfathomable to view him as an enduring threat. Sure, he spoke for a large minority of Americans—the prejudiced, the left-behind, the economically disadvantaged white working class, the "deplorables" (to quote Clinton herself) who were having trouble adapting to changing racial, ethnic, and sexual norms. Trumpism was a remnant of reaction, an eruption from the past. Accordingly, after 2020, many liberals, and even some on the left, came to the reassuring conclusion that while Trump and Trumpism had been a troubling interregnum, they had been supplanted by a new liberal age—a return to reason, normalcy, and science with Joe Biden at the helm. Pundits depicted Biden as the second coming of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, implying that his election would usher in a new era of public investment and social tolerance.

Then Trump won again. If the first time, he'd lost the popular vote while winning the Electoral College, now no one could deny that he was the legitimate victor and that the coalition he spoke for seemed to be growing—in 2024, Trump was able to command the popular vote and to make strides with Black and Latino voters as well. The quandary of understanding Trump, not as an electoral accident but as something more, has returned with a vengeance. Trump's actions in office the second time around have made matters still more complicated. On one level, over the past 10 months, Trump has acted like any other Republican of the past 50 years, pressing on with the party's long-standing agenda. He has defunded essential welfare programs; he has slashed government spending and undermined government agencies; he has cut taxes for the rich. But in his aggressive use of ICE against immigrants, his campaign against trans people, his sabotage of basic science, his nationalistic belligerence, and his willingness to use government authority against private universities to make them subject to his will, he goes well beyond the conventional free-market Republican mainstream. All of this raises the question: Are Trump and Trumpism best understood as the consolidation of an elite economic program, as a nostalgia-laced brew of prejudice and rage, or as a coherent, forceful new style of authoritarian rule—and if it's the latter, why is this happening now? How has this politics not only made its way into the center of American power but with a near majority, too? Making sense of all this is not just an abstract exercise; it raises important questions about what kind of politics the left will need to counter the nightmarish course we seem to be hurtling along.

When Melinda Cooper wrote *Counterrevolution: Extravagance and Austerity in Public Finance*, she could not have anticipated Trump's return to the White House or the political and intellectual dilemmas it would pose. But

DONALD TRUMP WITH CONSTRUCTION WORKERS AT THE TRUMP PALACE (HARRY HAMBURG / GETTY IMAGES)

Counterrevolution does offer a new way of seeing Trump: It situates him as part of a larger shift in how people generate and preserve wealth, a change in the country's underlying political economy. Whether one agrees with it or not, it offers a striking explanation for how the left might interpret the emergence and persistence of Trumpism.

Cooper argues that the American political economy in the 21st century has been defined by extreme wealth inequality and also, less noted, the accumulation of massive private fortunes. Often, people on the left have blamed neoliberalism—especially deregulation and upper-bracket tax cuts—for the income gap, and Cooper does too. But she goes farther, arguing that government austerity in the public sphere (cuts to welfare-state spending) has been accompanied by policies that encourage financial speculation through low interest rates and the practice of quantitative easing, in which the Federal Reserve uses its prerogatives to effectively support the prices of stocks and other assets.

In many ways, none of this is new. Extremes of wealth and poverty are hardly novel in the history of the United States. But Cooper points to an important difference: If, in much of the 20th century, these economic divisions were produced by major industrial corporations, collectively controlled by a community of shareholders and stock owners that included pension funds, banks, and wealthy individuals, then in today's economy they are produced by private equity funds, financial firms, family trusts, and tech firms owned by a handful of wealthy founders.

Many commentators have been struck by the crude ideological agenda of Project 2025 (especially in regard to gender), the ferocity of Trump's nationalism, the relentlessness of his self-promotion, and the strange combination of wheeling and dealing and brute force that Trump seems to believe qualifies as governance. But Cooper's book clarifies that along with these cultural and stylistic qualities, there is another aspect of Trump and Trumpism that often gets overlooked: What is most distinctive about both is that they reflect the unique characteristics of a political culture and economy shaped by the private wealth and patriarchal whims of a group of entrepreneurs who have been able to wrest free of any of the structural limits that once guided economic life. The financiers, tech bros, and megalomaniacal entrepreneurs of today's Republican Party are no longer accountable to the bureaucratic corps of middle managers that populated the mid-20th-century corporations or to large numbers of external shareholders. The authority of the private executive over the firm that he owns is echoed in Trump's habit of governing by executive order, his penchant for making "deals," and his ability to win the allegiance of tech billionaires like Elon Musk, who also believe in the need to free corporate founders from the hassle of answering to regulators or shareholders. It may even account for Trump's support from the small-business owners and middle-class voters who decided that they identified more with this style of leadership than with the professional expertise represented by Kamala Harris.

Counterrevolution
Extravagance and Austerity in Public Finance
By Melinda Cooper
Zone.
564 pp. $32

As Trump's so-called Department of Government Efficiency continues to assault public-sector workers and their jobs even after Musk's departure, and as Trump's 2026 budget proposal slashes federal spending by more than 160 million next year—targeting programs for health, education, and housing as well as the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities—Cooper's discussion of the privatized wealth of our age captures an economic dimension to Trumpism that often goes unremarked. Trump's politics and his appeal are not only inspired by far-right ideologies, culture-war passions, age-old xenophobic prejudices, and a long-standing Republican animus toward the welfare state; they emerge out of a capitalist order that has ceased to be constrained by any of the institutional, intellectual, or professional limits that defined corporate capitalism in an earlier era. This is what sets the era of Trump apart from earlier epochs of conservatism: When Ronald Reagan took office, for example, he sought to remake the economic world by cutting income and capital-gains taxes, weakening organized labor, and deregulating finance in order to restore the profitability of American corporations. Trump, meanwhile, is bringing the norms, ideas, and practices of family business into the operations of the state. For Trump, the United States is just one large, privately held corporation, controlled and dominated by a few people who perceive themselves as able to do whatever they want. No stockholders, no activist shareholders, no debates or discussion, no annual meetings, no publicly released reports, no room for dissent or deliberation—just a tiny group of owners who enrich themselves while the rest of us stand on the sidelines.

Counterrevolution grows out of Cooper's 2017 book *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. In *Family Values*, Cooper maintained that two seemingly contradictory things—free-market ideology and the self-sacrifice of familial bonds (as well as the maintenance of traditional gender roles)—have always been closely related. On the one hand, capitalism depends on the family to school its members in the work ethic and the social norms that will make them responsible and cooperative as workers and provide them with the emotional and material sustenance they need to show up for work each day. More deeply, capitalism simultaneously creates a competitive, consumerist economic culture and a yearning for relationships that are not infinitely fungible and self-interested. This latter wish for solidarity is what the family comes to stand for: Christopher Lasch's "haven in a heartless world," a unit intrinsically opposed to the ruthlessness of the economic sphere.

There's an old line of interpretation among liberals that treats the alliance between Christian conservatives and the Republican Party as manipulative and opportunistic. Conservative politicians use opposition to abortion to lure voters to support a program that is really all about tax cuts. Economics are the priority, culture the loss leader.

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Cooper sees a deeper affinity. Neoliberal economic policies tear apart public institutions, labor unions, and other forms of social solidarity that mitigate insecurity and protect people's livelihoods. As they do, people turn to the family as an alternative—to bonds that are stable and immutable. In this way, ruthless economic competition and ironclad gender norms can in fact be part of the same political program. People are thrust into an individualistic economic sphere, but they can rely on family relationships as a buffer that protects them from the antagonistic world of work. Men, in particular, benefit from the love, support, and self-sacrifice of women.

In *Counterrevolution*, Cooper carries this discussion of the position of the family in contemporary capitalism farther still. This time, she focuses on its economic importance—specifically how, in a moment of ferocious self-branding, technological change, and outsourcing, the family not only serves as a place of emotional respite but has become a model for a different kind of capitalist enterprise than the one most popular in the 20th century: In place of the bureaucratic, shareholder-owned corporation has come the private patriarchal company.

Cooper's argument turns on a claim about corporate ownership structures that may strike some readers as arcane, but which she believes is important to understand in order to make sense of the world we live in now. After World War II, the most important companies in the United States were large, publicly traded corporations governed by professional managers, owned by thousands of dispersed shareholders. (Although numerically, the majority of businesses have always been privately owned small firms.) After the New Deal, these publicly traded corporations were overseen by a government entity, the Securities and Exchange Commission, which made sure they were not actively engaged in fraud. During the Cold War, this regulated capitalism flourished. When executives sought to maintain social peace by bargaining with organized labor and supporting social welfare, this was not just a pragmatic political response; Cooper argues that it also reflected the structure of the publicly traded corporation, which is accountable to its shareholders through quarterly reports and annual meetings in a way that a privately held company does not need to be.

During the 1970s and '80s, Cooper writes, this form of corporate structure and social compact began to come apart. Shareholders and owners, anxious about falling profits, sought to assert their dominance over management. Hostile takeovers and leveraged buyouts made it clear who was really in control, and with them also reemerged an older form of corporate power: the privately held firm in which the owners were directly responsible for managerial decisions, without external oversight. Even when private companies went public, a variety of ownership structures emerged—private equity, venture capital, family trusts—that privileged owners and shareholders and gave small groups of people greater control over the firms, despite the fact that they were publicly traded.

These entrepreneurial executives, Cooper argues, constitute an underrecognized force driving the rise of the Trumpian right: Privately held firms are often much more politically aggressive and may be more likely to pursue the libertarian and culturally conservative politics that publicly held companies avoid. Family dynasties such as the Kochs and the DeVoses (of Amway fame) have been able to pour so much money into libertarian political causes in part because there is no one warning them that doing so might damage the corporate brand. As Cooper puts it, "S&P 500 corporations are not so much 'woke' as legally accountable to shareholders and constantly vulnerable to the risk of consumer backlash. Private, unlisted companies and their general partners are far less constrained."

For Cooper, this change in patterns of ownership is part of a larger transformation of the economy and our political culture that has taken place over the past five decades. But it is also a distinct shift that has helped to create the ethos and worldview of Trump's political base. Wealthy individuals hailing from the world of private equity, hedge funds, and venture capital, followed by real estate, construction, and oil and gas—all industries studded with large, privately owned companies—have contributed generously to Trump. In 2024, most of the top individual donors to his campaign came from privately owned companies like SpaceX, Hendricks Holding Company (a privately held conglomerate), and Uline Incorporated (which sells shipping supplies).

Trump's first cabinet, in fact, was filled with people from the ranks of private equity, hedge funds, and real estate, from Betsy DeVos (Department of Education) to Steven Mnuchin (Treasury) to Sonny Perdue (Agriculture). Such wealth is even more extremely represented in Trump's second cabinet, from Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent (hedge fund) to Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick (investment bank Cantor Fitzgerald). And the Trump Organization, of course, is privately owned as well. The Trump administration doesn't just embody business interests in general—it embodies a very specific kind of business, one in which the patriarch rules. E-mails demanding that workers justify their jobs or face layoffs; scolding and humiliation of underlings who dare to disagree; drastic cuts to programs just because the boss doesn't like them; arbitrarily lobbing tariffs anywhere he pleases; insisting on payback for those perceived as enemies—these signature Trumpian actions all echo the practices of business owners in their private fiefdoms, who do not have to answer to shareholders or, for that matter, anybody else.

Cooper not only claims that Trump's ascendance is linked to the shift from an economy led by publicly traded corporations to one in which the most active, forceful public representatives often come from the world of privately held companies; she also suggests that this is an important part of his appeal to the white working class. The question of why Trump won substantial support among white working-class voters has been the subject of much analysis since November. Was it the price of eggs? Implacable racism and xenophobia? Was it that people who lack meaningful power over their own lives found themselves drawn to identify with a strongman, gaining an illusory sense of agency from their alliance with the ruler?

Cooper offers a different interpretation. She argues that what looks like working-class support for Trump reflects significant changes in the composition of the working class itself. If we define working-class jobs as those that do not require a college degree, then "blue-collar" jobs (manufacturing, mining, and

construction) represent a small subset of the total, since they employ many fewer people than low-wage service jobs: retail, sales, food service, home healthcare—jobs in which women are still disproportionately represented. In blue-collar industries, manufacturing has fallen as a share of employment while construction has remained fairly steady, though varying from year to year.

Although Trump won 50 percent of the votes cast by people who earn less than $50,000 a year (compared with Harris's 48 percent), Cooper contends that what politicians and pundits are most concerned about when they talk about "working-class" support for Republicans is the political ideology and experience of a much narrower group of people: namely, those in older trades such as plumbing, electrical repairs, and trucking, who are often self-employed or small-business owners. Here, Cooper is drawing on work by the political scientists Vanessa Williamson and Theda Skocpol, who showed that a plurality of Tea Party supporters were self-employed small-business owners, often in real estate or construction or home repairs. (Few backers of the Tea Party were wage workers or public-sector workers, and despite their plebeian image, 41 percent were from the highest income quintile.) These voters transferred their support to Trump in 2016 and remained ardent backers throughout his first term. One-third of the January 6 Capitol rioters were small-business owners or self-employed people. Although in 2024, Trump won more votes from working-class people generally (measured in terms of income level or those without a college degree), the strongest supporters of the populist right, Cooper claims, are these aspiring entrepreneurs rather than people in the many other occupations that make up the modern working class: home health aides, retail clerks, delivery workers, hospital staff, and so on.

Trump's politics are like his companies—no stockholders, no annual meetings, no room for dissent.

For these entrepreneurial types, the private titans and family-business owners with whom Trump has surrounded himself are models to emulate. The tax cuts that benefit the moguls appeal to them as well—whether as an aspirational goal or because small-business owners really do benefit from the same cuts, although not nearly to the same extent. Cooper recalls a 2017 rally at which Trump appeared in front of a sea of big rigs and a banner reading "Truckers for Tax Cuts." (The tax cut then in question, which truckers would receive during Trump's first term and which was just made permanent in the 2025 tax bill, was the "pass-through deduction," which allows companies to pass income directly to their owners, who then pay income tax on it rather than the higher corporate tax while also taking a deduction on that business income.) In the political imaginary of the Trumpian right, the individual proprietor or the small family business has interests in common with the developers, landlords, builders, and hedge-fund billionaires in an alliance that, Cooper writes, joins "the smallest to the most grandiose of household production units."

Cooper even ties abortion politics to the political economy, analyzing a remarkable line of thinking that blames abortion for the rise of the national debt. In 2022, the Republican members of the Congressional Joint Economic Committee issued a report professing to quantify the economic impact of abortion, making the case that its economic cost in 2019 was equal to "at least $6.9 trillion" (a figure derived from ludicrously abusing a methodology that assesses unrelated mortality risk), and that it also deprives Americans of valuable inventions and innovations, shrinks the labor force, and reduces funding for Social Security and Medicare.

This is a new twist on an old argument that linked "socialized medicine" to "welfare chiselers" who would "get 'free abortions' which you will pay for," as Republican Congressman Robert Bauman put it in 1977. It also resonates with the admittedly extreme thought of the economist Gary North, who was an adherent of Christian Reconstructionism, an obscure sect founded in the 1960s that seeks the literal instantiation of Old Testament law in the civil sphere. North blamed the welfare state for eroding family bonds by making parents and children less economically dependent on each other. Universal prekindergarten means that parents are no longer the sole teachers of young children; Social Security means that adults no longer bear total responsibility for caring for their parents in old age. Shorn of these family commitments, citizens—according to North—will cease to be productive taxpayers and so stop generating the revenue that the welfare state needs to survive. Just as abortion cuts off new generations, the debt-fueled welfare state is actually "an agent of social, political, and economic bankruptcy."

There is much that is speculative in Cooper's book, and many places where the reader longs for more hard evidence. The chapter on abortion is one place where her approach feels overly schematic and in which her materialism seems to leave much unanswered, especially when it comes to political organizing. Doesn't the growing importance of abortion in American politics have to do with the power of the evangelical right, or its alliance with Catholics who have long opposed the freedom to choose? Might not the pro-life movement be a grassroots social phenomenon with its own distinct norms, logic, and history—one that has to be understood on its own terms, not folded into the economic right?

Counterrevolution also provides a limited scope for those, left or right, who are interested in resisting the Trumpian right today. In the book's closing pages, Cooper insists that the major political project for the left is to encourage Americans to see public finance as a liberatory tool, which means jettisoning the mindset of austerity. If only we could embrace an expansive political imagination and pursue "extravagant" social spending, as opposed to subsidies for private wealth combined with public austerity, we could lavish funds on such basics as universal healthcare and investments in higher education, public schools, and childcare. What political force would bring into being such a "fiscal and monetary revolution" is never spelled out. Cooper references a medley of disruptive tactics, such as "labor strikes, rent strikes, strategic defaults, urban riots, occupations of public space, and squatting"—but how to move from these diffuse protests to a broader change in the political imagination, let alone political power, goes unexamined.

Cooper's own arguments suggest reasons for pessimism. *Counterrevolution* was written during the Biden years, when it seemed possible that Trumpism was in decline. That it surged back suggests how it may be rooted in broader structural changes in our economic order: the rise of a group of people who see themselves as unconstrained by older democratic norms, and whose conviction grows out of their absolute power in the workplace. Trump's autocratic style is not just a quirk of his personality; it's emblematic of the type of businessman he is.

Among other things, Trump is himself a product of the 1980s and the lasting changes that an earlier generation of conservative political leaders achieved. The hard anti-labor politics of Reagan changed what was permissible for the private sector, setting a new standard. Reagan fired more than 11,000 striking federal air-traffic controllers in 1981, barred them from the industry, and hired permanent replacements. His administration also emboldened private employers to fight their unions and hire strikebreakers. The result was a growing offensive against organized labor that contributed to the destruction of American unions (now just 6 percent of the private-sector workforce).

This offensive took its toll on American politics and, in particular, the base that once tended to vote for the Democrats. By creating an atomized and insecure working class no longer connected to powerful institutions that could foster a class identity, the assault on unions encouraged those harmed by the erosion of working-class power to look for their own answers; some of them would fall prey to the conspiratorial xenophobia of Trumpism.

No matter the fantasies of Trump, society is not divided up into fiefdoms of private enterprises.

Likewise, the undermining of large bureaucratic corporations that sought to draw on expertise and that were compelled, at least some of the time, to respond to public pressure or changing norms (for example, by proactively seeking to adapt to federal antidiscrimination laws, or by adopting measures of corporate success that incorporated environmental goals), and the emergence of privately held companies and funds that mostly did their business behind closed doors, only added to the sense of disempowerment and alienation experienced by working- and middle-class voters. Their economy was quite literally out of control—both their own control and that of many others, too.

Yet in this analysis of the loss of institutions and structures that can hold power accountable, one can find possible ways out of our bleak political present. Although Cooper does not fully develop this in *Counterrevolution*, her focus on ownership and economic structure offers us some hints about a path forward. To really take on Trumpism, liberals and the left will have to think less about restoring a tenuous normalcy by winning particular elections or countering the especially noxious parts of Trump's agenda, and more about how to rebuild those economic and political institutions—unions, tenants' organizations, independent media, political groups—that give people the experience of political power and collective action. Instead of answering Trump's personalistic politics by telling voters to let competent experts back into the White House so that they can take control—let alone responding to Trump's transphobia or anti-immigrant politics by adopting aspects of that language in an attempt to win back the people drawn to him—what we really need is a way to remind many middle- and working-class voters what it actually means to live in a society in which they exercise some measure of agency, and in which the leadership of that society is democratically accountable in a meaningful way.

No matter the fantasies of Trump and others, society is not divided up into fiefdoms of private enterprises and miniautocracies run by a handful of rich men who are simply able to legislate reality as they want it to be. Rather, it is inherently interdependent and reciprocal. Those at the top might appear all-powerful, but they alone do not control the world. We might no longer have the economic structures and collective institutions of the past that helped manifest this basic truth in our everyday lives. But even in the mid-20th century, to the extent that large bureaucratic corporations became marginally more publicly accountable, it was only through organized political pressure, most centrally (though not only) from unions. And unions, in turn, have been able to play this democratizing role because they are institutions that tangibly express the idea that the economy is not a private domain or the extension of a single man's will, but rather the creation of the daily labor of millions of people. (Local politics, too, can provide a beginning point for this kind of politics.)

This is a long-term undertaking, and its outcome is far from certain. But by giving us a vision of Trumpism that is grounded in material relationships and in the structure of our current economic order, Cooper offers us a way of thinking about how we might get from here to there: a hope that by pressing for changes that bring greater democracy to our material lives, we might eventually create a bigger challenge to the barbarism before us. **N**

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The Most Public Intellectual

Walter Lippmann's 20th century

BY GERALD HOWARD

WRITING IN *THE NEW REPUBLIC*, THE MAGAZINE WALTER Lippmann helped to create, Alfred Kazin observed: "Lippmann was one of the most successful people who ever lived.... No other journalist in American history has had so much influence on events, had his hand in so many state papers, been on such equal terms with the great. No other wrote books that became such famous keys to each era in turn, was able to impart to newspaper and magazine columns, with such a magisterial air of cultivation, political intelligence of the coolest and most decisive sort."

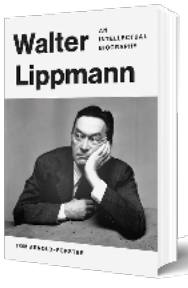
The striking thing about this effusion is that Kazin, hardly the most generous and usually the most competitive of souls, meant it. Also, it is literally true. Proof of concept is Ronald Steel's 1980 masterpiece, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, which prompted Kazin's observations and is still, for my money (apologies, Robert Caro), the best and most engrossing American political biography ever written. In it, we are introduced to a brilliant and influential political journalist who, in a half-dozen different ways and arguably more, shaped the "American Century" with his bottomless energies, his powerful intellect, his gift for clear, incisive writing, and his instinctive comfort (for good and ill) in the precincts of power.

Lippmann was a unique figure in American letters, someone who towers over almost every political columnist who has plied the trade since World War I. He also towers over almost all of his peers in political philosophy, with the possible exception of John Dewey. Lippmann was *the* public intellectual of the 20th century: Few burnished their brainy brand of opinion-slinging in print and, occasionally, broadcast media more prolifically

WALTER LIPPMANN ON THE OCEAN LINER *CONTE DI SAVOIA* (GETTY IMAGES)

and seriously, or with such a depth and breadth and elegance (despite a propensity for memorable mistakes, which we'll get to) in the public square, than he did.

Tom Arnold-Forster, a historian at Oxford University, has now scrutinized Lippmann's life, his journalism and political thought, and his anxieties about the liberal order he helped establish, in a new intellectual biography that serves as an academic counterpart to Steel's. Arnold-Forster has, as the saying goes, turned every page of every column, book (published text and early drafts), and surviving letter that Lippmann ever wrote. He has also summited the mountain of writing to and about him and thought hard about it all, giving us a portrait of the philosophical Lippmann in full depth and granular detail. At times, it must be said, the author's self-proclaimed method of "ruthless historicization" can mire the reader in the weeds of Lippmann's shifting pronouncements (pronouncing being his preferred rhetorical mode) at the expense of the broader view, and the book lacks the narrative élan of Steel's. Yet in its rigorous fashion, it also offers a hard-to-top history of not just the man but also the liberalism that he was the most visible figurehead of over the decades.



Walter Lippmann
An Intellectual Biography
By Tom Arnold-Forster
Princeton University Press.
368 pages. $35

Walter Lippmann was born on the Upper East Side of Manhattan in 1889 to a prosperous German Jewish family, though he generally regarded his Jewish identity as an irrelevance or an inconvenience. A scholastic prodigy, Lippmann went on to Harvard, where as a member of the brilliant class of 1910 (which included John Reed and T.S. Eliot) he thrived, attracting the attention of such mentors as George Santayana, William James, and even Theodore Roosevelt. Reed would introduce Lippmann, tongue not entirely in cheek, as the future president of the United States. He was, as was the fashion in those days, a socialist until graduation and slightly after, working for a bit as a secretary for the socialist mayor of Schenectady, New York, until politics as praxis paled, and then as a researcher for the famed muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens.

More than any other profession, journalism was Lippmann's natural destination. He was recruited by Herbert Croly, author of the influential "New Nationalism" treatise *The Promise of American Life*, to be one of the founding editors of *The New Republic*. It was the making of Lippmann, as he was the making of it. His skillful writing and editing and his keen sense for the new possibilities and necessities in American politics were crucial to making this low-circulation, high-influence journal of ideas the standard-bearer for a new liberalism that emerged from an older Progressivism.

Few magazines have punched more spectacularly above their weight than *The New Republic* in terms of political influence. It became an intellectual laboratory for the Progressivism of President Woodrow Wilson's administration, and Lippmann its in-house philosopher. This brought him into contact with the highest circles of power, and when the United States entered the First World War, he crossed over to the government side as a member of something called the Inquiry, a colloquy of grandees tasked with formulating a new geopolitical posture for the country and a set of war aims to impose on the Allies. The result was the famous Fourteen Points ("open covenants of peace, openly arrived at," among the other resonant phrases Lippmann may have coined). "A liberal manifesto for self-determination and public diplomacy," in Arnold-Forster's words, it was received with scarcely concealed scorn by the French and the British for its woolly-minded and politically naïve idealism. As a blueprint for peace in the postwar world, it was dead on arrival.

The experience left Lippmann with a bad taste in his mouth and a singed reputation. Having voiced his unwelcome views to anyone willing to listen, he found himself at odds with Wilson and his wartime circle. Toward the end of the war, Lippmann joined the US Army's propaganda unit, writing leaflets urging surrender to be dropped behind the German lines. After his discharge, he remained in France to cover the Paris Peace Conference, coming to share the same dismay and disgust at its botched results that John Maynard Keynes gave memorable voice to in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*.

After the war, Lippmann returned to *The New Republic* and published his landmark *Public Opinion* in 1922. The book was one of the most sustained and influential attempts to square the competing demands of democracy with the complexities of mass society and the requirements for expertise in running it. Social psychology was still in its infancy as a discipline, and Lippmann complained that "political science [is] taught in colleges as if newspapers did not exist." The problem for a democracy under these new conditions, he wrote, was that "the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance."

Lippmann understood that the vast majority of what used to be called citizens could have only a partial or obscured view of the broader reality, if they even bothered to acquire one. "The pictures in our head," as he put it, rarely conform to that reality. Repurposing a term from typesetting, he called these pictures "stereotypes" and argued that the mass of people conduct their mental lives in uninformed and often wildly inaccurate "pseudo-environments," a term prefiguring Daniel Boorstin's later coinage "pseudo-events."

Lippmann framed the problem and its possible solution this way: "I argue that representative government, either in what is ordinarily called politics, or in industry, cannot be worked successfully, no matter what the basis of election, unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions." Democratic politics, he insisted, was at odds with informed and effective governance. To remedy this situation,

Gerald Howard is a retired book editor. His book The Insider: Malcolm Cowley and the Triumph of American Literature *will be published by Penguin Press this fall.*

he floated the vague idea of entities he called "intelligence bureaus" that would be tasked with guiding the policymakers in Washington on the right path. You could argue that the modern, government-funded (at least for now) universities and the many advisory and regulatory agencies that exist (at least for now) have over time realized Lippmann's fuzzy vision.

After eight years at *The New Republic*, Lippmann entered a far wider journalistic arena in 1922 when he became an editor and opinion writer for the *New York World*, a Pulitzer-owned paper seeking to escape its yellow-journalism past. In its pages, Lippmann addressed the problem of public opinion by taking on the task of molding it himself. He became a strong supporter of the Democratic governor of New York, Al Smith, the avatar of so-called urban liberalism in a Republican-dominated decade. In 1931, when the paper was sold, Lippmann moved over to the centrist Republican paper *The New York Herald Tribune*, where his column "Today and Tomorrow" ran until 1962; syndicated, it appeared in hundreds of papers nationwide with a combined circulation of 10 million. The column was a must-read item in the pinnacles of power and also for those of more middlebrow persuasion seeking guidance on the issues of the day (as James Thurber memorably depicted in a 1943 *New Yorker* cartoon in which a perturbed wife looks up from her paper to inform her husband, "Lippmann scares me this morning"). He became a one-man intelligence bureau, you might say, molding public opinion as effectively as and for longer than any other American journalist has.

Over the decades of Lippmann's column for the *Trib*, he never strayed too far from the political center—a congenial place for its moderate Republican positions and readership. Letters praising the paper for its open-mindedness in allowing such slightly alien but still palatable viewpoints in its pages were printed with regularity.

Lippmann helped to reify the Cold War in the public mind by the simple expedient of capitalizing the term in a series of 14 columns on the subject in the late 1940s. (Bernard Baruch and George Orwell had used the phrase earlier in lower case.) But Lippmann was by no means a doctrinaire cold warrior. He took sharp issue with George Kennan's famous containment policy, preferring to hew to a realpolitik position in regard to which fights to pick and which to concede with the Stalin-led Soviet Union.

Arnold-Forster has left almost no thought of Lippmann's unturned in amassing this intellectual biography, and a review cannot do real justice to its capaciousness. It is, however, a good deal easier (and a lot more fun) to focus on Lippmann's mistakes, some of which were real doozies. Probably the most quoted of Lippmann's sentences is this dismissal of Franklin Roosevelt as a candidate for president in 1932: "He is a pleasant man who, without any important qualifications for the office, would very much like to be president." Lippmann changed his mind about FDR for a while as the New Deal took shape, but by 1936 he was endorsing Alf Landon, an oilman and the Republican governor of Kansas, for president. But his worst moment as a pundit came in 1933, when he described a speech by Adolf Hitler as "statesmanlike" and representing "the authentic voice of a genuinely civilized people." He even suggested that the Nazi persecution of Jews was "a kind of lightning rod which protects Europe"; his longtime friend Felix Frankfurter wouldn't speak to him after this for more than three years.

For a philosopher-king of American liberalism, Lippmann ended up displaying a considerable amount of contradiction and inconsistency.

There were other blunders along the way. Earlier, Lippmann had been fully supportive of Harvard president A. Lawrence Lowell when he sought to impose a quota on Jewish students accepted at the university, inveighing against what Lippmann termed those "vulgar and pretentious Jews" who brought obloquy upon themselves; later he also supported the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War.

Lippmann was at odds with Lyndon Johnson over the Vietnam War, which he viewed as a geopolitical disaster, but in 1968—unnerved by the radical and unruly turn its opposition had taken—he endorsed Richard Nixon for president. And he was such a complete snob that he once boasted, "I have not the vaguest idea what Brooklyn is interested in." (That's the old salt-of-the-earth Brooklyn of William Bendix and Betty Smith, in case you were confused.)

For a philosopher-king of American liberalism, Lippmann ended up displaying a considerable amount of contradiction and inconsistency. In accounting for these shifts, Arnold-Forster uses a lot of phrases that feel like oxymorons, among them "liberal imperialism" and "a conservative liberal grandee." Earlier he quotes Herbert Croly's description of *The New Republic*, the place where Lippmann made his bones, as "radical without being socialistic." You could interpret this unkindly, as a descriptor for a thinker whose liberal principles were tropic toward power politics and its perceived necessities. Certainly, no one ever described Lippmann as an idealist.

Early in the book, Arnold-Forster tosses off the term "bathetic" liberalism, one that I've spent a lot of time trying to figure out. I think what he means is that the liberalism that Lippmann stood for, supposedly based on democratic principles but apt to bend or discard them as the circumstances dictated, sufficed as an ideology for decades, especially in the "consensus" postwar period, but in the post-Vietnam period had lost its way and become increasingly sad and incoherent. If so, it is hard to disagree with him; the phrase certainly resonates today.

If I may be permitted to end on a personal note: I spent a lot of time reading around in Lippmann's columns and books, and I have some thoughts. I find him impressive on a literary and intellectual level and fantastically interesting as an actor in American political history. But as a writer and thinker, he can be arid and uninspiring and short on compassion. One of Arnold-Forster's idées fixes is to correct the view of the Lippmann-Dewey relationship

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as an extended elitist/technocratic versus small-d democratic rivalry, since he finds more commonalities than divergences in their political thought. He makes a convincing enough case, but even so, Dewey still gives off far more human warmth, if considerably less intellectual clarity, and is far more persuasive on the core principles and moral imperatives of democracy than Lippmann—a top-down elitist in his bones—ever was.

I've looked long and hard at the photo of Lippmann on the cover of Arnold-Forster's book, head cradled in his hand, casting a sorrowful but detached side-eye on the messy human prospect. He is emphatically not a man you'd care to share a beer with. As a liberal thinker, he represents the limits of cerebral rationalism and the politics of expertise, short on democratic faith and the instincts of the skilled political animals or "happy warriors" that the Democrats used to produce with regularity.

This all hit me with great force when I stumbled across a June 9, 1932, column by Lippmann on the hapless Bonus Marchers, World War I veterans who had descended by the thousands on Washington, DC, to try to collect early on a bonus that Congress had promised them. Lippmann expresses some pro forma sympathy for these men and their economic plight at the start. But then he warms to his real theme, which is that they completely failed to grasp the principles of compound interest in demanding early payment! They were asking for something that Congress had never granted them, you see. Lippmann's "solution" to the whole vexing problem was to explain all this to the Bonus Marchers firmly, offer help to some of them in returning to their far-flung homes, provide "unattractive relief for those who stay on," and refuse to admit any other marchers to the Capitol, despite any constitutional right of assembly to the contrary.

Herbert Hoover, of course, found his own solution to the problem by summoning the US Army under Douglas MacArthur to brutally expel the veterans from their makeshift encampment on the Anacostia Flats, which the Army burned down, and force them back across the river to points north and west. In the end, Lippmann supported this atrocious action, calling the Bonus Marchers "a pressure group."

Some liberal. **N**

The Heat Is On

Chester Himes's Harlem noirs

BY GENE SEYMOUR

ONE IMAGINES CHESTER HIMES AS A SPECIES OF CACTUS lurking along the edges of the literary landscape: arresting, prickly, and resilient, stinging harshly when pressed too hard or approached too indelicately—and yet carrying enough water beneath its tough hide to refresh, even renew the landscape around it.

In a lifetime beset with neglect, struggle, and scorn, that is exactly what Himes did. He wrote and wrote, channeling his anger, taking risks, and leaving behind a shelf of more than 20 books, the best known of which were his detective stories set in Harlem—a place he didn't actually spend as much time in as he had in the Midwest, where he'd begun writing while serving prison time during the 1930s, or in Europe, where he'd moved in the 1950s after a series of personal and professional setbacks in his native country confirmed for him his destiny as a literary outlier, marginalized even within the relatively marginalized status of Black American writers near the dawn of the civil-rights era.

"I get the ass-end of everything on the way to someplace else" is a quote that belongs not to Himes but to a fictional character named Max Reddick, the restive, itinerant, and beleaguered Black American writer at the center of John A. Williams's epochal 1967 novel, *The Man Who Cried I Am*. But it could also have been said of Himes and his often star-

ILLUSTRATION BY **ANDREA VENTURA**

crossed life and literary career. Williams, a friend and confidant to Himes, might in fact have borrowed much of the latter's embittered humor and worldly demeanor in creating Max. One can't know for sure. Yet the more one learns about Himes and reads his fiction, the easier it is to imagine him tossing out, even in casual conversation, a lament like Max's. In many ways, one can imagine it serving as a kind of chorus for the beat-down, rough-edged rhythm-and-blues dirges one finds in what is now known as Himes's "Harlem Cycle" of novels, four of which, from the late 1950s and early '60s—*A Rage in Harlem*, *The Real Cool Killers*, *The Crazy Kill*, and *Cotton Comes to Harlem*—have recently been compiled in an Everyman's Library collection. They, along with 1960's *The Big Gold Dream* and *All Shot Up*, 1966's *The Heat's On*, 1969's *Blind Man With a Pistol*, and the posthumously published *Plan B*, feature the forbidding, irascible, zero-bullshit Black NYPD detectives Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, who use even the most unseemly means at their disposal to manage chaos on their combustible turf. The prose is lean and muscular, and the narrative is spiked with mordant wit and baroquely violent imagery.

Chester Himes was in his mid-40s when he began writing detective fiction at the suggestion of his French translator, Marcel Duhamel, who ran a line of crime novels called La Serie Noire for Gallimard. At the time of Duhamel's suggestion, Himes was likely more than willing to try anything, having arrived at an impasse in his literary career. Born in 1909 in Jefferson City, Missouri, he was the youngest of three sons of teachers working in what was then characterized as the "Negro higher education system" in a racially segregated America. His autobiographical writings, including his 1972 memoir *The Quality of Hurt*, describe a peripatetic childhood fraught with bitter conflict between his parents and guilt over an accident that blinded an older brother. The family eventually moved to Cleveland, where Himes got caught up in the city's underworld and was convicted of armed robbery in 1928. In the Ohio State Penitentiary, he found his calling as a writer and eventually published five literary novels.

The novels had only middling financial success—hence Duhamel's suggestion that he try his hand at something more popular like detective fiction. At the time of Duhamel's recommendation, Himes was just recovering from the ordeal of *The End of a Primitive*, his most recently completed novel, which had been rejected by his editor, who told him that if it were published, "it would bring down the roof on all of us." The chronicle of a destructive interracial romance, it was eventually published in 1955 in expurgated form as *The Primitive* (though later republished, unexpurgated, with the original title), and while it remained Himes's favorite among his books, its raw details, interspersed with surrealistic touches like TV newscasts foreshadowing violent acts involving the book's characters, made the novel a challenging one and opened even its author up to the possibility of finding a more hospitable mode and genre.

The truth is, however, that *The End of a Primitive* was not Himes's only difficult book—almost all of them were, in one way or another. Himes's 1945 debut, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*, whose prose still burns the hands of anyone reading it, recounted four anxious days in the life of Bob Jones, a Black shipyard worker psychically and physically assaulted by his white coworkers and the police, falsely accused of rape, and eventually compelled to join the Army. Drawn from Himes's experiences working in the Los Angeles shipyards during World War II, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go* is a waking nightmare interspersed with bad dreams only slightly more warped than this deeply sensitive Black man's daily existence, infected on the home front by the "tight, crazy feeling of race as thick in the streets as gas fumes."

Even though it was a far cry from his later detective fiction, the novel was a revelation. Himes's astringent style, evoking the headlong ribaldry of a present-day stand-up comic or rap artist, announced itself as its own all-American paradox: at once hard-boiled and thin-skinned, self-pitying and stoic, grimly resigned and boisterously irreverent. But it was also clearly not going to become a bestseller.

Nor was Himes's second novel, *Lonely Crusade*, published in 1947. Following a Black union organizer at a California aviation plant charged with the task of recruiting other Black workers, the novel took chances in its detailed exploration of class as well as racial disparities, Black antisemitism, and the battles and betrayals within the progressive movements of the 1940s. It, too, was a critical and commercial flop. "Everyone hated it," Himes wrote in his memoir *The Quality of Hurt*. "The left hated it. The right hated it. Jews hated it. Blacks hated it." Even some fellow Black authors who were otherwise sympathetic to the risks Himes took did not like it. In a letter to Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison wrote that he found the novel "dishonest in its pseudo-intellectuality," while James Baldwin, reviewing it for *The New Leader*, wrote that the book "probably had some of the most uninteresting and awkward prose I have read in years."

Part of Himes's problem was not of his making at all. The literary marketplace of the 1940s tended to assess fiction by Black authors as sociopolitical tracts ("protest novel" being the familiar euphemism that Baldwin

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By Chester Himes
Da Capo. 203 pp. $18.90

Gene Seymour writes about film, music, and politics for The Nation, The New Republic, *and* Bookforum, *among other publications.*

himself would push back against). There were, of course, plenty of sociopolitical observations in *If He Hollers, Let Him Go* and *Lonely Crusade*, but focusing on them meant the aesthetic elements of Himes's fiction went largely unacknowledged. Back then, his early novels were mostly compared to Wright's, and the comparison wasn't entirely misapplied. But another part of the problem was that Himes had not yet quite hit his mark. His books were bracing, fiercely experimental, and often painful to read. But the tough, callous landscape they described, the brooding despair and gritty realism they evoked, would come into its own in his detective novels. Like Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain, Himes found that once he turned to this genre of writing, he could become one of its great virtuosos.

Before the detective fiction, however, there were other novels. In the frustrating years after *Lonely Crusade*, Himes reached further into his autobiography with *Cast the First Stone* and *The Third Generation*, which were recently released in new editions. The novels were originally published in 1952 and 1954, respectively, but if you're using them to follow Himes's life story chronologically, you should read them in reverse order. *The Third Generation*'s Taylor family is a thinly veiled rendering of Himes's own in the early 20th century. As Himes's father did, William Taylor teaches blacksmithing at various Black colleges in the South. He clashes often with his fair-skinned wife, Lillian, who resorts to what John A. Williams describes, in his introduction to a later edition of the novel, as "stinging, emotional, racial outbursts" at her husband that include denigrating his darker skin. The intense, sometimes violent friction between the Taylors is exacerbated by the Jim Crow segregationist practices of the era, even in the Midwest, where the Taylors eventually migrate with their three sons. Charles, the youngest and most sensitive, is Himes's alter ego: He falls down an elevator shaft while working as a janitor, sustaining several broken bones and a broken vertebra, injuries from which he would never fully recover (an ordeal that Himes also experienced), then drops out of Ohio State University and becomes acquainted with the Cleveland underworld.

Cast the First Stone picks up on what happened next in Himes's life. His protagonist, Jimmy, falls from a scaffold, suffering similar injuries, and eventually robs a couple in their Cleveland Heights home and gets caught. Jimmy is sensitive and fiercely attentive to the inequalities all around him. His time in prison is tautly and harrowingly rendered, and as some of the experimentalism of Himes's prior novels falls away, we begin to see the detective novelist emerge: a careful craftsman with an ear for dialogue and an insider's knowledge of crime.

Cast the First Stone helped Himes work through his own difficult past, but it also began to point him in another direction. Himes's time in New York did so as well: Leaving Europe in 1955, "broke, bitter, defeated," and "utterly chagrined," he moved to New York City, taking odd jobs that, in the words of one of his biographers, James Sallis, "could not have been other than degrading to a man of his age, accomplishment, and past ambi-

tion." One was as a porter for a Horn & Hardart Automat in midtown Manhattan, an experience that would come in handy a decade later for his novel *Run Man Run*, a thriller involving a double murder by a corrupt white cop.

But Himes carried out his most valuable research during that year in New York in his leisure-time forays into Harlem, where he got to know pimps, gamblers, prostitutes, and other hustlers similar to those he'd known in his younger days on Cleveland's mean streets. Thanks to these encounters, he collected the impressions, anecdotes, and story ideas that he would later use in the Harlem Cycle. By then, the Grand Guignol effects that Himes interposed in *The End of a Primitive* had emboldened him to push these narratives beyond the social-realist guardrails and inject elements of folklore, black humor (in more than one sense), and quasi-surrealism into the customary truculent mode of *le genre policier*.

Sometimes, as in the case of *The Crazy Kill*, the plot sprawls, bends, and runs amok to the point where you sometimes wonder how even the implacable Grave Digger and Coffin Ed can remember that the whole thing started with a preacher falling out of a third-story window into a breadbasket containing the body of another man who'd been stabbed to death. Not that it's pertinent, but the sign on the building's window beneath the one that the first man falls from is an ad hyping an ointment that promises "a cure for all love troubles" with the legend "STRAIGHTEN UP AND FLY RIGHT."

In the Harlem novels that followed, the jokes and folks get even wilder. Offering both the bluntness of Hammett's private-eye sagas and the deadpan absurdist comedy of Luis Buñuel's films, they also contain the heedless narrative momentum of William Faulkner, one of Himes's literary touchstones. Despite their sometimes shaggy-dog qualities, they have a centripetal force to them, aligning their scattered elements into something resembling resolution in the manner of a conventional whodunit or a comedic farce, but as most readers conclude the novels, they realize that's not why they're reading them. Most are there for the Wild West chaos that Himes has transposed onto urban terrain. The novels are raucous, ribald, absurd, and yet gritty and realistic. They are full of dark humor and yet also willing to take seriously the travails of life along the margins. They are genre novels but also full of literary ambition and sociopolitical insight.

Himes enjoyed a gratifying wave of rediscovery in the late 1960s and early '70s post-civil-rights era, with the Black Power movement arousing greater attention on African American writers. Three of his books—*If He Hollers, Let Him Go; Cotton Comes to Harlem*; and *The Heat's On* (the last under the title *Come Back, Charleston Blue*)—were adapted into movies. Himes was lionized by younger Black writers such as Nikki Giovanni and Ishmael Reed, himself a writer of metaphysical detective stories like 1972's *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Over the decades, one can also hear Himes's sardonic voice informing those of vinegary, incendiary assailants on racial presumptions like Charles Wright (*The Wig*), William Melvin Kelley (*A Different Drummer*), Cecil Brown (*The Lives and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger*), Darius James (*Negrophobia*), and Paul Beatty (*The Sellout*). Percival Everett cites Himes as an influence on his vast, impudently eclectic body of work, which includes not only *James*, last year's best-selling revisionist take on Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but mystery-horror burlesques like 2021's *The Trees* and slightly bent contemporary westerns like 2007's *Wounded* and 2011's *Assumption*.

And two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Colson Whitehead has his own Harlem cycle of crime novels going with 2021's *Harlem Shuffle* and 2023's *Crook Manifesto*. In his introduction to *The Essential Harlem Detectives*, the award-winning crime writer S.A. Cosby speaks for generations of such peers as Walter Mosley, Gar Anthony Haywood, Paula Woods, Gary Phillips, Charlotte Carter, and Attica Locke when he attests to the "wild and powerful clarion call" of Himes's Harlem Cycle in bringing "Black cops and con men, Black madams and Black ministers" into the wonderlands of mystery and adventure.

It now seems ironic that in narrowing his aspirations to achieve fame and fortune, Himes seemed almost haphazardly

to find his true literary métier and lasting influence: He became "prestigious" for his "pulp fiction." But Himes wouldn't label this development ironic so much as absurd, like so much of his life—a fact that he highlighted in the second volume of his autobiography, 1974's *My Life of Absurdity*. Whatever recognition Himes secured during his lifetime didn't mitigate his pessimism toward humanity in general and race relations in particular. In his last Harlem novel, the unfinished, posthumously published (in 1993) *Plan B*, Himes even went so far as to predict an all-out race war in America, with Grave Digger and Coffin Ed as two of its casualties. Which seems an egregiously sour ending to a series whose astringent tableau of criminality and avarice was somehow always mitigated by the kind of exuberance and raucous humor rarely found in the novels preceding *A Rage in Harlem*.

But however aggrieved that real life would make him, Himes remained faithful to the imperative of dreaming his way out. You can't detect it readily, but I think there's flickering hope to be found beneath the layers of his mordant pessimism. I'm thinking especially of a flashback scene in *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* that seems overwhelmed by the story's brutality, rage, squalor, and peril: Jimmy's reverie about his homeschooling with his mother and how, "out of all those hazy memories, the times which stood out clearest were the times he slipped away with some book or other, usually some ancient Greek or Roman legend, and read and dreamed." Through such legends, "he came to feel that the things he did and the things which happened to him…each absolute within himself, were things which did not count, and were only to be forgotten and passed on to an oblivious past: the real things were the things he read and the things he dreamed and the castles he built and the armies of mail-clad soldiers he led through the forests and along the sunken Mississippi roads."

So as unlikely as it may seem even to his devotees, Chester Himes for much of his life bore the soul of a romantic. A thwarted, combustible, often embittered romantic, to be sure, but the kind of romantic capable even on his worst days of spinning stories about tough, sore men using fair or foul methods to keep—or find—peace. N

RICO NASTY BACKSTAGE AT KNITTING FACTORY, 2018 (JOHNNY NUNEZ / GETTY IMAGES)

Sonic Risks

The punk rock and rap of PUP and Rico Nasty

BY BIJAN STEPHEN

PUP IS BACK. THE CANADIAN PUNK ROCKERS—WHOSE name stands for Pathetic Use of Potential, a sentiment I can get behind—just put out their fifth studio album, evocatively titled *Who Will Look After the Dogs*? And as the title implies, it's about relationships—the bad ones. Those love affairs that curdle, those forms of dislike you can only really cultivate when you know someone a little too well.

PUP has always been forthright regarding what their albums are about—from their breakout second album, *The Dream Is Over*, to their punk-rock classic *Morbid Stuff*. And that's the case here, too. The first verse of this blistering 35-minute record is: "Staring into the void now / You're going down with the ship / You're taking me with you / I don't need to resist, it's just what it is." What's not to like?

It's been just over six years since PUP cemented their place in the punk-rock firmament with *Morbid Stuff*. Before PUP, they were Topanga—named after the character from *Boy Meets World*, their collective first middle-school crush—and put out two EPs that sound a lot like proto-PUP. They're a little less heavy, but the trademark catchy hooks and frenetic

energy are already coming into focus. In 2013, they became PUP, released their first, eponymous album, and then toured for hundreds of dates. That led to 2016's, *The Dream Is Over*, which brought them some real commercial success, and three years later, *Morbid Stuff*.

After that came their 2022 full-length, *The Unraveling of PUPtheBand*, a polished, solid album primarily about dealing with aging, success, and, since they're still a punk band, angst—the real heady stuff. (A representative chorus: "Lately, I've started to feel like I'm slowly dyin' / And if I'm bein' real, I don't even mind / Whether I'm at my worst or I'm totally fine," off of "Totally Fine.")

If there's a common theme threaded through any PUP album, it's the feeling of feeling bad. They write so precisely about not feeling so great, dressing up those low-grade horrors in power-chorded yelps. Somehow, though, through it all, the music remains fun. And feeling those feelings is even better when you inevitably find yourself singing along.

Who Will Look After the Dogs? continues that grand tradition, though I find it more focused than PUP's earlier records because of how carefully the band is paying attention to the infinite feelings that can exist between two people. Young love and its losses are still a theme, but the perspective has shifted: Now they're writing about the travails of young love from the vantage point of old(er) age.

Just about every song has a lived-in specificity; the breakups and makeups feel real, or real enough, and the songs work as an antidote to the gossipy panopticon of social-media dating advice—which has lately been supercharged by how difficult (though "optimized") the search has become. Dating apps hold the promise of finding the perfect person, or at least the perfect person for you; yet those online connections become totally different in real life. In this way, *Who Will Look After the Dogs?* can sometimes feel a little like a relic from an earlier time, one far more analog than the age we find ourselves in now. But, hey—hasn't punk always been a little nostalgic?

And yet the album's less concerned about explaining the past than it is in reliving it, just enough to hurt. "Fuck everyone on this planet / Except for you, except for you / I've been on a rampage / Whatever's wrong with my heart / Must be wrong with yours too," Stefan Babcock sings, reedily and beautifully, in "Hunger for Death." In "Paranoid," the narrator comes to terms with the relationship he had with a person he used to love: "You weren't sure of your choices / So you thought you should give me a ring / The good was good, but the bad was better / And that pretty much sums up everything / I don't know what you wanted or if it was something I could even give / And if I could, I don't know if I would give it / You sound fine and you've seen how I live."

Bijan Stephen is a music critic for The Nation. *His other work has appeared in* The New Yorker, The New Republic, *and* Esquire.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Cancer

Fishy, my mother calls her lymph nodes. She tells me
her voice box is a box full of cancer. She says once
a doctor spilled my brother's tumor trying to take it out.

I search "cancer images" and my screen tiles and fills
with splattered burrs leaking radiance from under
their hems. Each has landed on the surface of a moon.

I think of the man who took the wasps' nests down
from our eaves. I think of the two-sided utensil
with which my mom scooped cantaloupe into marbles—

some taws, some peewees—to suspend in jello. I do not
know whether the surgeon will scoop or scrape
my mother's windpipe clean. But then, nothing rests

on my knowing whether a tumor is more bowl or balloon,
more shadow or lump. For that, there is the Canadian doctor
for whom my mom, at her second appointment,

wore a sweater knit white around a Norwegian Maple leaf.
I wanted to be remembered, she explains, this woman
who can't run an errand without someone thrilling

to see her and trying to rally their kids: It's her, the teacher
I told you about! Of course the oncologist who will take
my mom's voice, exiling wasps, excising orb

from flesh, knows none of this. I can't imagine anyone
forgetting you, I say, and Don't cry, my mother says,
in the voice a stranger couldn't tell from mine.

JANE ZWART

I might call that "dirtbag poetry," but that would be wrong or, worse, imprecise. In any event, what matters is how easy it is to tell that PUP is having fun. And that's what makes their most bitter lyrics sweet enough to go down. In "Hallways," we get lines like "I'm losing the will to keep dragging on / But I can't die yet 'cause who will look after the dog?," and in "Olive Garden" ones like "I'm sorry for what I said / And what else should I say? / If you give me another chance / I'm probably gonna fuck it up anyway." The music is at once propulsive and tender, less embittered than it is reflective. It is, in other words, just about how it feels to be in those situations. Terrible things can happen at an Olive Garden; so can real tenderness.

PUP made their name on the rock scene with their sophomore album, *The Dream Is Over*, which bottles up the band's riotous charm and alchemizes it into something a little more disciplined and narrative-driven. It's a marvel, in one sense, because second albums are extremely tough to make in the first place. Rare is the one that feels focused, concentrated, and expressive; even if you've mastered your sound, pushing it forward artistically is a whole other problem to solve.

There are many reasons for this. As an artist recording your first album, you've had years to hone your craft and figure out a sound and you were able to work at your own pace. But then for album No. 2, a record company suddenly expects you to put out something new that's just as good (or ideally better)—and do it quickly to boot. There's also a natural wish to experiment, to grow as an artist and not to stagnate by making stuff that comes the easiest. Each of these demands would be a challenge on its own. Taking on all of them at once—successfully!—is exceedingly difficult. A third album might be even harder: It's where you begin to secure your legacy.

Rico Nasty has been around for a while now. As the rap world's resident punk-rock star, she's put out a string of great singles and mixtapes, and she dropped her debut album in 2020. It brimmed with promise, just like every other successful debut record. Then came *Las Ruinas*, her second studio outing. It was fairly well received; I personally rocked with the attitude-heavy "Gotsta Get Paid" and "Jungle–Rico Nasty Remix," her Fred Again collab. Now she's back with *Lethal*, her third studio album. It's a brash, energetic romp that manages to take some interesting sonic risks—though I'm not sure all of them pay off. It's also Rico's first album with her new label, Fueled by Ramen, which is best known for its stacked roster of emo bands. That in itself is a thrilling idea; wherever we're going, she seems to say, I'm driving.

Let's start with the highs. "On the Low" is a sweet pop song with tart trap snares and a catchy hook; the verses are absolutely filthy, and the contrast just works. "Teethsucker(Yea3x)" is classic Rico, snarling boasts and threats over rock-star guitars—it's a song for a top-down day in your nearest convertible. "Eat Me!" is wonderfully menacing and cements Rico Nasty's status as one of rap's most enjoyable braggarts. "Crash" sounds like a straight rock song—and, more compellingly, it sounds natural on her; I'd listen to a whole album of Rico rock. Also, more tracks like "Smoke Break," please—it's a pleasure to hear her yell over a wall of distorted guitars.

Less compelling are songs like "Who Want It" and "You Could Never," which feel a little rote, even if each is listless in a different way: With "Who Want It," we get aggression without real menace, and the boasts in "You Could Never" feel like one's heart isn't really in them. And while I like the spirit of exploration in "Can't Win Em All," it doesn't really quite fit here.

But as a third album, I think that *Lethal* is good. And what's more, I think the fact that Rico Nasty is willing to experiment as much as she does augurs even more success in the future. The worst albums, after all, are the ones that feel like retreads—the ones that seem to be composed exclusively of B-sides from the cutting-room floor. Growing as an artist requires breaking past one's creative boundaries, which is what Rico Nasty does here. The fact that many of the rock songs here work as well as they do—on a rap album!—is an achievement.

Third albums end up facing all sorts of challenges. They're where we discover whether an artist has matured and where their career-wide projects begin to come into focus. You don't get *Who Will Look After the Dogs?* without *Morbid Stuff*. *Lethal* promises a new focus from Rico Nasty, because it's that rarest third album that works like a debut—a statement of artistic evolution from one of rap's most inventive rhymers. **N**

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