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Honoring Progressives
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Mahmood Mamdani's Uganda
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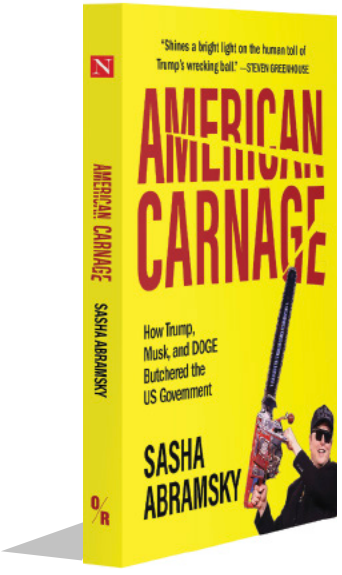
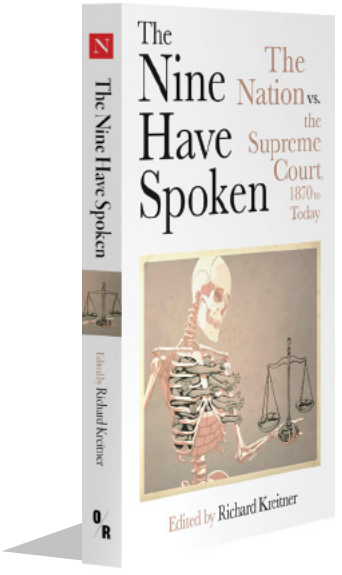
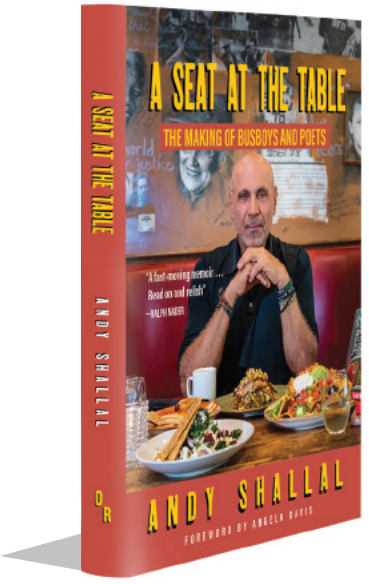
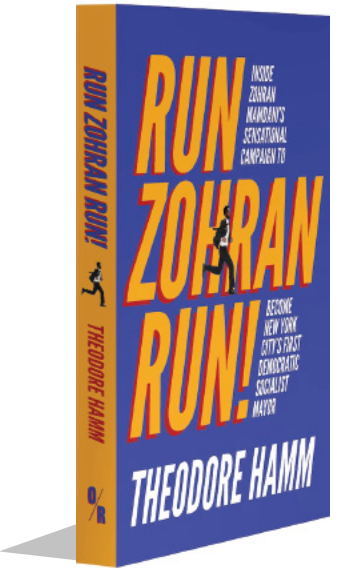
What we can learn from a great American city's refusal to bend to Trump's invasion.

BOOKS FOR THE HERE AND NOW.









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EDITORIAL/KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL AND JOHN NICHOLS

Victory From Defeat

DEMOCRATS HAVE DEVELOPED AN UNCANNY SKILL FOR SEIZING DEFEAT FROM the jaws of victory in recent years. That didn't happen, though, in the December 2 special election to fill a US House seat in Tennessee. While progressive Democrat Aftyn Behn fell short in her quest to flip a radically gerrymandered Republican district, she made up so much ground that smart Democrats have already begun to redo their calculations—and reconsider their strategies—regarding the midterm elections.

If they reconsider those strategies boldly enough, they could seize a national victory in 2026 from the jaws of Behn's narrow defeat in 2025. By dramatically expanding the map of House and Senate races in which they invest resources, by recognizing the need not just to run against Donald Trump but to run *for* something, and by embracing the progressive economic policies that have boosted turnout for candidates as diverse as Behn and New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, Democrats could secure midterm victories that are about much more than partisan point-scoring. They could disempower Trump's MAGA movement sufficiently to check and balance the corruption, economic plundering, cruelty, racism, xenophobia, and authoritarian overreach that has characterized the most dangerous administration in modern history.

The stakes are so high—and the threats to democracy so real—that many progressives still refuse to allow themselves to hope. Yet the spirit of resistance is alive in the land. And it is growing in a manner that tells us that 2026 can and should be seen as a critical juncture for a country that can no longer accept the backward politics of Trump and his MAGA satraps.

The spirit of resistance is alive in the land. And it is growing in a manner that tells us that 2026 can be a critical juncture.

The past year, for all its frustrations and disappointments, drew the outlines of opposition. Courageous progressive activists and electeds stepped up from the start of Trump's term with a boldness and clarity of vision—as this year's *Nation* Honor Roll (page 46) illustrates. As the months went on, the reach of the resistance became ever more inspiring—and visible. Americans turned out by the millions for "No Kings" rallies in June and October, filling the streets of great urban centers as well as the town squares of rural communities to protest everything from ICE raids to assaults on science to Republican schemes to fund tax cuts for the rich by gutting Medicaid and anti-hunger programs. Then, on November 4, the resistance flooded polling places nationwide. Democrats swept gubernatorial races in Virginia and New Jersey by far wider margins than predicted and secured overwhelming control of the legislative chambers in those states. They also won breakthrough victories for candidates in red states: flipping Georgia Public Service Commission seats and grabbing enough legislative posts to end Republican supermajority control of the Mississippi state Senate. And in Seattle and New York City, voters rejected right-wing demagoguery and centrist Democratic caution to choose dynamic young democratic socialists as their mayors.

The 2025 fightback against Trump, in the streets and at the polls, has been unprecedented. But will it be sufficiently powerful in 2026 to upend the Republican control of Congress that enables Trump, Stephen Miller, and their MAGA wrecking crew? An answer can be found in the results of Behn's race and other 2025 campaigns that rallied a new generation of voters with an aggressively progressive affordability agenda.

In a Tennessee district where the party's national ticket was on the losing side of a 60–38 split in 2024, Behn narrowed the margin to 54–45 in a special election that saw surprisingly robust turnout. That result wasn't an outlier: In every special election for open US House seats since Trump began his second term, emboldened Democrats have, on average, outrun the percentages for the party's 2024 presidential ticket by roughly the same 13-point swing that Behn achieved. "Whether you go from the suburbs of Washington, DC, all the way to the Southwest in Arizona, whether you're looking at Texas, whether you're looking at Tennessee, whether you go down to Florida, we are seeing the Democratic out-performance of Kamala Harris happening across the political map," said Harry Enten, CNN's veteran number cruncher.

Republicans and their amen corner in the

DC pundit class can claim that special-election results tell us nothing about how upcoming midterms will go. But they're wrong. "We actually have history to show that what happens in special elections doesn't just stay in special elections; it spills over to the midterm results," explained Enten. "When a party outperformed in special elections since 2005, five out of five times they went on to win a majority in the US House of Representatives. What happened…in Tennessee is a very, very bad omen for Republicans and a very, very good omen for Democrats."

How good? A 13-point swing from Trump in 2024 to the 2026 midterms could flip more than three dozen GOP-held seats to the Democrats—a swing similar to the 2018 "blue wave" that disempowered Trump two years into his first term. Even Republicans acknowledge that the narrow GOP advantage in the House is now exceptionally vulnerable. And some worry that the party's three-seat Senate majority might suddenly be threatened, with Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) describing the Tennessee results as a "dangerous" indicator that disdain for Trump has become "a powerful motivator" even in red states.

If Democrats are looking only for a confidence boost, then they can thank Behn and the party's other 2025 special-election candidates—some of whom were elected, others of whom closed the partisan divide by as much as 28 points—for a collective bump to a party that currently lacks the ability to restrain or counter Trump, not least on Capitol Hill, where the Democrats have struggled with the basic demands of mounting a credible opposition to a president whose mismanagement of the economy, personal scandals, and chaotic and corrupt approach to governing has decimated approval ratings for both Trump and the GOP.

Americans are ready to give Democratic candidates enough support to get the party back into the fight politically. But the Democrats—whose own approval ratings are nothing to get excited about—should not be satisfied with merely offering an alternative to Trump. It is true that the president is unpopular and that his policy stances—even on issues like tariffs and immigration—have been massively discredited in the eyes of the electorate. But Trump hates to lose.

The president, who still refuses to accept the results of the 2020 election, has devoted his energy in recent months to rewriting the rules before the 2026 elections. In addition to schemes that gerrymander the House district lines of red states like Texas and Missouri, he's calling for federal and state pressure to upend structures that make it easier to vote, declaring: "No mail-in or 'Early' Voting, Yes to Voter ID!" And he will not stop there. Count on the president to enter the new year with fresh "flood the zone" schemes to take back momentum from the Democrats. Expect him to keep targeting "blue cities" with violent immigration raids and federal occupation strategies—and to ramp up attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion and the trans community. Who knows how far he will take his lawless threats against Venezuela, his tariff adventurism, or his nuclear brinkmanship?

Democrats need to recruit and support dynamic young and progressive candidates in purple and red states.

Ultimately, Trump's desperation will lead him to try and compete with Democrats on the most compelling of domestic issues: the escalating affordability crisis. Democrats such as Mamdani, who promised to rein in the cost of living, won big in 2025. Trump will try to muddy the waters in 2026 with convoluted healthcare-pricing interventions, cynical pledges of targeted tax cuts, and dangerously ill-conceived proposals to deregulate AI. He'll have a hard time getting proposals through a US House in which Republican Speaker Mike Johnson appears to have lost control of his caucus. But bet on the billionaire class, corporate interests—especially those for AI and crypto—and AIPAC to spend record amounts of money to try and save the GOP.

Against Trump's willingness to abuse his authority obscenely and the willingness of his allies to spend just as obscenely, Democrats can't afford to run cautiously. They need to recruit and support dynamic young and progressive candidates in purple and red states. And they can't fear primary fights—as long as those fights nominate contenders who are prepared to go big in November.

What does going big look like? Democrats must offer voters an affordability agenda that:

- expands access to healthcare and offers a path to the Medicare for All reforms that polls show most Americans favor;
- replaces the minimum wage with a living wage;
- puts forward comprehensive strategies for affordable childcare that follow the lead of New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham;
- creates a Marshall Plan for the construction of affordable housing nationwide; and
- offers an AI regulatory agenda that addresses the real fears that Americans have for their jobs and the social costs of a technology that prioritizes tech-bro profits over humanity.

Democrats should also have the courage to acknowledge that Americans are horrified by the genocide in Gaza, the prospect of war in the Caribbean, and Trump's nuclear brinkmanship.

Above all, the party must, as California Representative Ro Khanna argues, "understand the political moment we're in." That won't be easy for party leaders who are addicted to caution. But the results from 2025 tell us that a Democratic Party that is prepared to fight everywhere—and not just against Trump, but for an inspired vision of an affordable and humane America—can win a mandate in 2026. If it does so, it will help pull our country back from the brink. N

COMMENT/MARK HERTSGAARD

COP-Out in Brazil

The UN summit in Belém left the climate fight at a disappointing, even infuriating, standstill.

THE COP30 CLIMATE CONFERENCE CONCLUDED ON November 22 with a disappointing—even infuriating—agreement. In a diplomatic black eye for the host country, Brazil, what had been promoted as a summit of "truth" and "implementation" delivered little of either. At a time when climate change is already imposing terrible suffering, when emissions are still increasing, and when 80 to 89 percent of the world's people want governments to take stronger action, COP30 left the climate fight standing still, if not sliding backward.

Money—who has it and who needs it—has been the sticking point at virtually every UN climate conference since such negotiations began at the 1992 Earth Summit, and it remained so at COP30. Divisions between the haves and the have-nots were as stark as ever, as was the power of fossil-fuel interests. The result was an agreement that does not remotely align with science and leaves millions of people in frontline communities "exposed to the worst impacts and with few options for their survival," said Oxfam Brasil executive director Viviana Santiago.

The COP30 climate agreement was condemned as a failure on scientific, legal, and moral grounds.

Two years ago in Dubai, the world's governments endorsed "a transition away from fossil fuels"—the first time that fossil fuels, the primary driver of global warming, were explicitly named in a final COP text. But the phrase *fossil fuels* was missing from the COP30 agreement, which failed to endorse a "road map" for phasing out their use, as more than 80 countries, including Colombia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, demanded. Saudi Arabia, perhaps emboldened by Donald Trump's contempt for climate action, led a group of petro-states that refused to sign any agreement targeting fossil fuels. And since COP negotiations are governed by UN rules that require consensus, this petro-state resistance prevailed. Instead, countries can voluntarily join an effort outside the COP process to devise a road map, starting at a conference Colombia will host next April.

Also missing in the final text was a road map for halting deforestation, the second-most-potent driver of global warming. Brazil hosted the talks in Belém, a gateway to the Amazon, precisely to underscore the urgency of protecting forests, which absorb some of the carbon dioxide that fuels global warming. Brazil also pushed for language respecting the knowledge and rights of Indigenous peoples—the most effective means of preserving forests. But in what *The Guardian* called "either an awful diplomatic blunder or sabotage by the Brazilian foreign ministry, which has long had a focus on selling the country's oil abroad," the deforestation road map was placed in the same part of the text as the fossil-fuel phaseout, and the petro-state opposition killed both provisions at once.

The COP30 agreement's one partial bright spot is a call to triple the amount of money rich countries provide to help poor countries adapt to the increasingly frequent and deadly heat waves, storms, droughts, and other impacts of rising temperatures. Adaptation funding is set to increase to $120 billion a year, but there's a catch—two, actually. First, the deadline to deliver such funds was set to 2035, rather than 2030 as the poor countries proposed. Second, given that the rich countries have repeatedly failed to deliver the funds as stipulated in previous pledges, it's questionable whether they will do better now.

Representatives of civil society condemned the COP30 agreement as a failure on scientific, legal, and moral grounds. "Rich countries cannot make a genuine call for a road map if they continue to drive in the opposite direction themselves," said Mohamed Adow of Power Shift Africa, referring to the fact that some nations who urged phasing out fossil fuels are nevertheless increasing production at home. "COP30 gave us some baby steps in the right direction, but considering the scale of the climate crisis, it has failed to rise to the occasion."

The upbeat rhetoric voiced by some countries and businesses can make it appear that they're genuinely changing course, Santiago pointed out. But they aren't willing to change the practices that keep emissions climbing, she added—maintaining industrial farming over regenerative agriculture, for example, or the $7 trillion in annual global subsidies to fossil fuels. "They want to change things, without changing things."

A ruling by the International Court of Justice this past July legally requires all countries to honor the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global temperature rise to 1.5°C, said Erika Lennon of the Center for International Environmental Law. But the lack of "decisive action" at COP30 leaves the earth heading for at least 1.7°C of temperature rise, said Johan Rockström, director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. That will push structures like the polar ice caps toward irreversible tipping points that can unleash yet more catastrophic warming. Humanity can avoid this nightmarish future only by "phasing out fossil fuels in an accelerated, orderly, and just way," Rockström said. After COP30, that task is more urgent than ever—but it still awaits the heroes who can make it happen. N

Mark Hertsgaard is the environment correspondent of The Nation *and the executive director of* Covering Climate Now.

COMMENT/CHRIS KROMM

Rising Up in Charlotte

North Carolinians organized to protect their communities amid Trump's latest anti-immigrant crackdown.

THE US BORDER PATROL GAVE CITY LEADERS IN Charlotte, North Carolina, just two days' notice before unleashing "Operation Charlotte's Web" on November 15, the latest stop in President Trump's immigration-crackdown road show targeting Democratic cities. Secrecy and confusion seemed to be core to its plan. After the crackdown spread to Durham and Raleigh, the mayors of both cities said they had no idea agents were coming. And Democratic Governor Josh Stein wrote to the Department of Homeland Security a week into the raids to declare that, "despite requesting information from the federal government, state officials have received no notice of planned immigration enforcement actions since these operations began."

North Carolinians may have been largely kept in the dark about the immigration-enforcement operations, but Siembra NC, a Latino group founded in 2017 during Trump's first term, was ready.

Siembra NC was at the center of an uprising against the raids in churches and neighborhoods across North Carolina. The day before the Border Patrol arrived in Charlotte, the group launched a website—Ojo Obrero, or "Look Out, Workers"—that became the go-to source for tracking Customs and Border Protection (CBP) activity. It also quickly trained an army of volunteers to defend immigrant communities. The day that the Border Patrol arrived, Siembra NC drew 400 people to its first "Safe to School, Safe to Work" training, teaching volunteers how to identify agents, organize neighborhood patrols, and de-escalate conflict. A week later, more than 4,000 volunteers packed trainings at Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches and online. "People go to a training, take a shift, become shift leads, and train other people," said Nikki Marín Baena, the daughter of Colombian immigrants and a codirector of Siembra NC. "Lots of people are suddenly able to take action quickly to help people get home safely, to help kids get home from school."

The Trump administration seemed eager to bring its anti-immigrant, law-and-order crusade to the battleground state of North Carolina after its high-profile incursions in Los Angeles and Chicago. Although Charlotte's violent crime rate has plummeted in recent years, Trump turned the fatal stabbing of a Ukrainian woman in Charlotte this past summer into a national MAGA cause célèbre, painting the genteel banking city as a lawless war zone, attacking its Black mayor, Vi Lyles, and declaring that "the woman's death is now on the hands of the Democrats."

Charlotte is a microcosm of North Carolina's fast-changing demographics. The city dominates Mecklenburg County, which has seen its Latino population grow more than 50 percent and its Asian communities swell by 83 percent since 2010. In 2018, the county's newly elected sheriff, Garry McFadden, pledged to keep federal immigration officials out of local policing; McFadden told NPR that the CBP operation was payback, because "we were very vocal about protecting our citizens and residents here." (This year, North Carolina's Republican Legislature passed a bill requiring localities to cooperate with federal immigration agencies.)

Leading the Border Patrol's Charlotte operation was Greg Bovino, who grew up in western North Carolina. Bovino is known for his bombastic hype videos, like the one released on X the day his team came to Charlotte: "This is our fucking country," Bovino bellowed. "Nobody tells us where to go, when to go, how to go in our fucking country."

The Border Patrol's freewheeling, combative approach was on full display in Chicago in September. Though it claimed to be targeting dangerous criminals, the Department of Homeland Security's own records showed that 97 percent of the 614 people arrested in Chicago had no criminal record. In a 233-page ruling, US District Judge Sara Ellis debunked many of the claims that the DHS had made to justify its heavy-handed tactics, including pepper-spraying peaceful clergy and tear-gassing children. In one case, the Border Patrol claimed that protesters had thrown fireworks at its agents; video footage later revealed that the explosions were from the agents' own flash-bang grenades. "At some point," Ellis concluded, "it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to believe almost anything that [the DHS claims]."

While North Carolina waits to see what the DHS will do next, communities are left to navigate the fallout. A DHS document obtained by CBS News found that of the 270 people arrested in the state, fewer than a third had criminal records. At the height of the Border Patrol's "surge," more than 84,000 student absences were reported in Charlotte, Durham, and Raleigh. Workplaces emptied and stores closed.

Siembra NC is still training safety patrols for future raids. It has also recruited 200 employers to sign on as Fourth Amendment Workplaces, part of a national movement to protect workers from warrantless searches and arrests. Ultimately, the group has its eyes on a bigger prize: changing the political landscape. Siembra NC says that in 2024, it registered more than 5,000 voters and knocked on more than 125,000 doors in the run-up to the elections. Mobilizing North Carolina's 327,000 registered Latino voters will be critical in the 2026 midterms, which include a marquee US Senate race.

"We have to do the work of taking care of our people, and we have to do the work of helping them navigate the system," Marín Baena said. "And we also want to build the kind of political power to ensure that this does not happen again." N

Chris Kromm is the executive director of the Durham-based Institute for Southern Studies and publisher of its online magazine, Facing South.

COMMENT / THE EDITORS

Accountability Now

The passage of the Epstein Files Transparency Act is a big step—but its champions are keeping the pressure on.

"THE SURVIVORS WON!" ANNOUNCED REPRESENTATIVE Ro Khanna (D-CA) after he and Thomas Massie (R-KY)—with a late assist from Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA)—secured a remarkable 427–1 vote in the House of Representatives for their Epstein Files Transparency Act. The November 18 vote was immediately followed by unanimous approval in the Senate, in a rare assertion of authority by an otherwise dismal 119th Congress. Yet instead of taking a victory lap, Khanna and Massie kept talking about what had been accomplished by the courageous survivors of the child-sex-trafficking abuses perpetrated by the late financier Jeffrey Epstein, his accomplice Ghislaine Maxwell, and their elite associates.

It is not often that members of Congress steer attention to others. But Khanna and Massie did just that. Long before the unlikely legislative partners made their bold decision to take on both Donald Trump—who had long sought to downplay his ties to Epstein—and the disinclination of both major parties to launch a political fight that was likely to reveal bipartisan wrongdoing, survivors were demanding the release of Justice Department and FBI documents and investigative materials regarding Epstein and those with alleged ties to the deceased sex offender.

Instead of taking a victory lap, Khanna and Massie kept the focus on the courage of the Epstein survivors.

These congressional votes were correctly understood as rebukes to Trump and House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA), who for months had used every tool in his legislative toolkit to prevent the House from considering the transparency act. Trump finally buckled, as did a grumbling Johnson, after it became clear that Khanna and Massie were not letting up—and after Democrats released a tranche of e-mails that suggested Trump had closer ties to Epstein than was previously known. The votes showed that, in Khanna's words, "We do not have to be supplicants to Donald Trump…. [Congress] is a coequal branch of government." By "taking on the Epstein class who have been shielded for too long," the California Democrat argued, Congress had taken "a step toward changing our rotten system." But that step was only possible, Khanna reminds us, because the survivors had the courage to reveal the extent of the rot and the vital importance of addressing it.

The Epstein Files Transparency Act mandated the full release of the files by December 19. But survivors are still speaking up, knowing the fight is far from over, as a group of them explained in a powerful letter, titled "What We're Bracing For," that we produce below.

THANKS TO THE BRAVERY OF SURVIVORS, ADVOCATES, AND CHAMPIONS in Congress, we have won an important victory: the passage of legislation to release the Epstein files. But our fight is far from over. As the release of these files approaches, we want the public to understand what survivors are bracing for—and why your support is needed now more than ever.

1. Attempts to Blame Victims Instead of Perpetrators

For decades, Epstein escaped accountability by portraying his victims as "bad girls" or unreliable witnesses. We know this tactic will be used again to protect his enablers. Some of us were neglected or vulnerable children. Some were manipulated into recruiting others our own age. These were deliberate strategies used by Epstein, Maxwell, and all sex traffickers. These tactics reflect on the predators—not on us. We refuse to be blamed for the abuse committed against us.

2. Incomplete or Selective Disclosures

Aside from redacting victims' names, we are demanding full transparency. Survivors and the public deserve access to all Epstein-related files—not selective releases designed to shield the powerful. We call on our allies in Congress and beyond to keep fighting for complete disclosure.

3. Escalating Threats to Our Safety

Many survivors have already received death threats and other forms of intimidation. We expect these threats to intensify once the files are released. We are asking every federal and state law-enforcement agency with jurisdiction to investigate these threats and protect the survivors who have come forward.

4. Efforts to Divide and Discredit Us

We are already hearing attempts to pit survivors against each other—especially through the false claim that anyone who was over 18 "wasn't really a victim." We reject this outright. Some of us were 18, 20, or 22 when we were exploited. Some were vulnerable due to childhood trauma or poverty. Some were assaulted using intimidation, manipulation, or force. Age does not undo vulnerability, nor does turning 18 make someone "fair game" for a pair of wealthy, calculated predators.

Epstein and Maxwell targeted girls and young women using a range of tactics, but the outcome was the same: devastation that many of us still carry today. As adult women now, we stand united—and we refuse to let anyone divide or diminish us.

Signed by: Maria Farmer, Annie Farmer, Courtney Wild, Anouska de Georgiou, Rachel Benavidez, Jess Michaels, Marijke Chartouni, Danielle Bensky, Liz Stein, Marina Lacerda, Ashley Rubright, Sharlene Rochard, Teresa J. Helm, Lara Blume Mcgee, Sky and Amanda Roberts, Haley Robson, Jena-Lisa Jones, Wendy Pesante, and 10 Jane Does N

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It happened on our last trip to South America. After visiting the "Lost City" of Machu Picchu in Peru, we ventured through the mountains and down the Amazon into Brazil. In an old village we met a merchant with an impressive collection of spectacular, iridescent emeralds. Each gem was tumbled smooth and glistened like a perfect rainforest dewdrop. But the price was so unbelievable, I was sure our interpreter had made a mistake.

But there was no mistake. And after returning home, I had **49 carats of these exquisite emeralds strung up with 14K-gold clad beads** and wrapped as a gift for my wife's birthday. That's when my trouble began. She loved it. Absolutely adored it. In fact, she rarely goes anywhere without the necklace and has basked in compliments from total strangers for months now.

So what's the problem? I'm never going to find an emerald deal this good again. In giving her such a perfect gift, I've made it impossible to top myself.

To make matters worse, my wife's become obsessed with emeralds. She can't stop sharing stories about how **Cleopatra cherished the green gem** above all others and how emeralds were **worshiped by the Incas and Mayans** and prized by **Spanish conquistadors and Indian maharajahs.** She's even buying into ancient beliefs that emeralds bring intelligence and good luck to anyone who wears them. I don't have the heart to tell her that I'm never going to be lucky enough to find another deal like this.

Our elegant necklace features **49 carats of smooth, round emerald gemstones, hand-wired together with delicate 14K-gold clad beads.** Each natural polished emerald bead is unique and a beautiful representation of the precious stone. If you are not thrilled at this rare find, send it back within 30 days for a full refund of the purchase price. But remember, we have only found enough emeralds to make a small, **limited number of necklaces at this low price.**

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Objection!
Elie Mystal

Hidden Injustice

The Supreme Court's abuse of the shadow docket is upending the rule of law.

COURTS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN AUTHORITARIAN regimes. They legitimize the actions of despots by declaring them "legal" or "constitutional." They ensure institutional compliance with the regime's rules. And they make politically unpopular decisions that align with the authoritarian's goals while giving the authoritarian political distance from those goals. Quite simply, you can't instigate a strongman takeover of a constitutional democracy without having a robust judicial power that's willing to play along.

In the United States, Donald Trump's regime has found its willing wingman in Chief Justice John Roberts and the other Republicans on the Supreme Court. The Roberts court is game to do everything Trump wants it to do and, as an added bonus, to do most of it in secret, under cover of what's known as the shadow docket.

The "shadow docket" is the colloquial term for the court's emergency docket—those cases for which the court, at the request of a litigant, issues expedited rulings and does so without a full briefing from the lawyers involved or a full hearing on the issue at hand. The emergency docket is supposed to be used for, well, emergencies: cases that require an immediate response to avert irrevocable harm. The classic emergency-docket case is a death-penalty appeal. A person set to be executed in the morning cannot wait for the court to consider their appeal in a year and a half.

Technically, shadow-docket rulings are supposed to be temporary, pending a full hearing by the court on the merits of the case. In reality, many are final, because the harm the Trump administration does in the interim cannot be easily undone. If the court temporarily approves Trump's right to fire you or cut off your food or bomb your boat, it's hard to undo those actions a year later, when the court considers the merits of your unemployed, starving, charred case.

Many court watchers have sounded the alarm over the Supreme Court's use of the shadow docket in recent years—notably, since 2017, when Trump arrived at the White House. Until then, it was exceedingly rare for a president to make an emergency appeal to the Supreme Court. During their respective terms (for a total of 16 years), George W. Bush and Barack Obama each made only eight emergency appeals. Trump, by contrast, made 41 in his first term. Joe Biden made 19 over his four years in office, a number that the second Trump administration matched in just its first 20 weeks. Trump uses and abuses this process so much that some people now call it the "Trump docket." Anytime he gets a lower-court ruling he doesn't like, he runs to the Supreme Court asking for emergency relief. And he usually gets it: As of this writing, Trump has received decisions in 23 cases on the shadow docket. He's won 20 of them.

In its rulings for Trump, the Supreme Court is doing something more sinister than handing him policy victories; it's upending the rule of law itself. Don't just take my word for it—listen to one of the shadow docket's loudest critics, Justice Elena Kagan. "Our emergency docket should never be used, as it has been this year, to permit what our own precedent bars," she wrote in a dissent from one shadow-docket ruling. "Still more, it should not be used, as it also has been, to transfer government authority from Congress to the President, and thus to reshape the Nation's separation of powers."

It's worth noting that, in ruling for Trump, the court has completely ignored the definition of *emergency*. It's not an emergency when a lower court forces the Trump administration to follow well-established precedents or laws that are decades old. It's not an emergency when a court forces the government to apply due process. It's not an emergency when Trump doesn't get his way. By granting Trump emergency relief, the court is telling him that every law is a mere suggestion that he is free to ignore until the Supreme Court finally weighs in.

The Supreme Court is not supposed to be the only judicial authority in the country, but its use of the shadow docket effectively voids the authority of every lower court in the US. The shadow docket is not just a power grab for Trump; it's a power grab for the court as well. With it, the Supreme Court—and only the Supreme Court—can tell us which laws matter and which can be ignored.

And all of this supreme decision-making is happening in secret. That is another key feature of the authoritarian playbook. Recall that public courts were a democratizing innovation. Our system is supposed to be transparent: People have a right to go to almost any court they want (including the Supreme Court) and watch the hearings. The evidence presented to the judges can be seen by everybody. Judges are supposed to explain their rulings, and if those explanations are

Many court watchers have sounded the alarm over the Supreme Court's use of the shadow docket since Trump arrived in the White House.

JOE CIARDIELLO

unpersuasive, future judges are more or less free to overrule them and tell us why.

None of that happens with the shadow docket. Why did the Supreme Court overrule a 90-year-old precedent that should have prevented Trump from firing commissioners appointed by his predecessor? I don't know. Why did the court believe that Trump could withhold food from hungry people during the government shutdown? I can't say. Why can Trump kidnap people and send them to Uganda without a hearing? Beats me.

This lack of explanation is not just a problem for pedantic eggheads who want to write law-review articles. It causes practical chaos in the administration of law, because the Supreme Court expects everybody else to treat these unsigned, unexplained decisions as precedents. Yet if the court doesn't explain itself, then lower courts have nothing to go by when the next, slightly different version of the same issue crops up. This puts lower courts in the unenviable position of either blindly acquiescing to whatever the Trump administration wants or having to stop Trump again, triggering yet another appeal and yet another unexplained shadow-docket ruling.

All of this helps the long-term project of authoritarianism—and of the Supreme Court itself. We are now being governed by the whims of six people who don't have to explain themselves and can never be voted out of their positions of power.

People say that the wheels of justice move slowly. Maybe that's still true. But the shadow docket makes sure that the wheels of injustice move at warp speed. **N**

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FROM TOP: JOE CIARDIELLO; ARNOLD GOLD / GETTY IMAGES; LEONARDO MUÑOZ / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Morbid Symptoms
Jeet Heer

Epstein and the CIA

We won't know the full truth about his crimes until the extent of his ties to US intelligence are clear.

ON NOVEMBER 18, DONALD TRUMP SUFFERED A MAJOR political defeat when the House of Representatives passed the Epstein Files Transparency Act by a nearly unanimous vote: 427–1. But while emphatic, the House measure included a significant proviso that might yet prevent a full reckoning with Jeffrey Epstein's crimes.

Trump had fought for months against the bill, which was drafted by a bipartisan coalition created by California Democrat Ro Khanna and Kentucky Republican Thomas Massie. In the end, the strong public revulsion for Epstein's crimes made opposing the bill untenable. But the final version specified that the Department of Justice must make public "all unclassified" documents on Epstein.

The word *unclassified* potentially gives Trump and the CIA wide latitude to hold back Epstein-related materials that they claim are too sensitive to release. In this, they have the support of House Speaker Mike Johnson, who insisted that US intelligence agencies be allowed to "protect their critical sources and methods. It is incredibly dangerous to demand that officials or employees of the DOJ declassify material that originated in other agencies and intelligence agencies."

Johnson's words stand in stark contrast to the remarks by Marjorie Taylor Greene, one of four dissident House Republicans who forced Trump to abandon his opposition to the Epstein bill. "The real test will be: Will the Department of Justice release the files, or will it all remain tied up in investigations?" she asked in a November 18 press conference. "Will the CIA release the files?" Greene—perhaps feeling too bruised by the clash with Trump, who attacked her repeatedly over her Epstein heresy—subsequently announced that she will be retiring from Congress. But her words still cut to the heart of why getting the whole truth about Epstein is so difficult.

Epstein almost certainly had "close ties to [US] intelligence agencies and Israel's intelligence agencies," as Massie put it to reporters on November 19. The fact that the American and Israeli security states appear to have worked with so toxic a figure is deeply disturbing, embarrassing to those in power, and a major reason why the full extent of Epstein's activities continues to be concealed.

People have linked Epstein to the spy world for years. In 2019, Vicky Ward, writing in *The Daily Beast*, reported that Trump's then–labor secretary, Alex Acosta—who, as a federal prosecutor, had cut a notorious sweetheart plea deal with Epstein before his trial in 2008—had made some

startling comments about Epstein when he was being vetted for his role in the first Trump administration. As Ward noted, Acosta claimed that he had "cut the non-prosecution deal with one of Epstein's attorneys because he had 'been told' to back off, that Epstein was above his pay grade. 'I was told Epstein "belonged to intelligence" and to leave it alone,' he told his interviewers in the Trump transition [team]."

Asked about these comments in a House Oversight Committee hearing on September 19, Acosta denied having made them and said that he had "no knowledge as to whether [Epstein] was or was not a member of the intelligence community." But the statement originally attributed to him chimes with the facts that have since emerged about Epstein's intelligence ties.

Even so, "belonged to intelligence" doesn't fully capture the scope of those ties, since it suggests that Epstein was an underling or a minor player. This is similar to the language used by *Jacobin*'s Branko Marcetic, who speaks of Epstein as an Israeli intelligence "asset."

The fact that both the American and Israeli security states appear to have worked with so toxic a figure is deeply disturbing.

This view rests on the excellent reporting done by Ryan Grim and Murtaza Hussain on *Drop Site News* concerning Epstein's extensive work on behalf of Israel—often alongside former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak—as well as earlier work done by Matthew Petti in *Reason*. As Marcetic notes, this reporting shows Epstein, among other activities, "repeatedly hosting an Israeli military intelligence officer and Barak aide who was in the United States to conduct official business; working with Barak to secure actions against Israeli adversaries, whether a US bombing of Iran or Russian backing for regime change in Syria; [and] brokering security agreements between Israel and Mongolia and Côte d'Ivoire."

Marcetic is right to emphasize that Epstein was tightly entwined with Israel, a fact that, despite mountains of evidence, the mainstream media has almost entirely ignored. But "asset" doesn't quite describe how Epstein operated, which was not as an agent carrying out orders but as a shaper of policy.

Epstein was a power player in global politics, a kind of diplomat without portfolio with better access to the wealthy and politically powerful than most real ambassadors. One way to understand him is as a product of a hyper-privatized neoliberal age. Just as much of the policing of the American empire is now done by private military companies (notably Constellis, formerly known as Academi and Blackwater), billionaires like Epstein have their own private foreign policy. Whatever work Epstein did with the CIA or the Mossad would have been as a peer rather than an employee.

In a 2014 e-mail to Barak about their shared journey into the worlds of cybersecurity, cyberwarfare, and surveillance, Epstein expressed excitement at the spread of global chaos, writing: "with civil unrest exploding in ukraine syria, somolia [sic], libya, and the desperation of those in power, isn't this perfect for you." Barak responded, "You're right [in] a way. But not simple to transform it into a cash flow."

Epstein and Barak were masters of what Naomi Klein and others have called disaster capitalism, profiting from the "desperation of those in power." But it is unlikely they could have done this without the complicity of American intelligence. That's why Epstein's intelligence ties are central to understanding his crimes. **N**

SNAPSHOT
Telmo Pinto

Privation and Protest

Thousands of people in Paris demonstrated against President Emmanuel Macron's austerity budget during a day of strikes in December called by three trade unions.

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The Last Days of Discourse

John Ganz

The GOP's Groyper Civil War

The perilous politics behind the elevation of Nick Fuentes.

At long last, President Donald Trump's grip on the GOP is slipping. There's no Götterdämmerung, no dramatic denouement, no operatics in the dictator's bunker. Trump is being dragged down by normal politics: He's simply unpopular, dogged by a sex scandal and a lousy economy. The laws of gravity, it turns out, apply on Planet Trump. He's a lame duck, and he's just plain old. After dominating the news for a decade, he finds himself yesterday's man. And like the little Nazi in *Cabaret*, Nick Fuentes and his army of groyper toads are croaking out "Tomorrow Belongs to Me."

Brown dawn: Nick Fuentes and Tucker Carlson talk politics.

Vice President JD Vance and edgelord podcaster Tucker Carlson seem to agree. Carlson is welcoming Fuentes and the groypers on board, while Vance refrains from criticizing them. He deplores "infighting" and tries to get people to refocus their hatred on the "30 million illegal immigrants" who are supposedly hogging all the housing and social-welfare benefits. Vance's position is particularly humiliating and low: As Fuentes and the groypers call him "fat boy" and attack his Indian American wife, Vance holds his fire. He apparently thinks he cannot afford to alienate the white-nationalist caucus that he views as integral to his likely 2028 bid for the White House. Vance is in a tricky spot: He's trying to cultivate the extreme right, but he's also the candidate closest to Peter Thiel and the tech-bro contingent. And for reasons both populist and antisemitic, Fuentes detests the ascendancy of the tech oligarchs in the GOP. "Most of them are immigrants, most of them are either brown or Jewish, many of them are gay, and all of them are non-Christian," he wrote on Telegram, in a text that also advises: "YOU FORGOT THE NUMBER ONE RULE OF POLITICS: DETERMINE WHETHER THEY ARE JEWISH." And until now, they've also stood in the way of Fuentes's bid to storm the commanding heights of the Republican Party.

Fuentes may not have much use for the tech oligarchs, but they clearly view him and his followers as useful in some way. Remember, it was Elon Musk who allowed Fuentes and the other creepy-crawlies back inside when he all but extinguished content moderation on X. To understand why, it helps to remember the political functions of antisemitism. One is its deployment as a tool in a factional battle for control over a political party. Think Stalin versus Trotsky: Present the other guys as alien interlopers, the puppets of foreign and unseen powers. We can see that tactic clearly in Fuentes's campaign to take over the GOP.

But another key use of authoritarian antisemitism is to create a coalition of the top and the bottom—an alliance of the elite and the mob. As Benjamin Ginsberg writes in his neglected book *The Fatal Embrace*, antisemitic appeals "are used by forces that attempt to mobilize the masses while avoiding threats to the interests and property of elite strata. Thus, anti-Semitic ideologies are typically espoused either by radical populists who court elite support or by a segment of the upper class seeking to arouse and mobilize a mass base for an assault on the established order." Now, who might want to be able to manipulate the masses without serious threats to their interests and property? Maybe the industrialists who want to seize the state and raid its coffers for their high-tech armaments business?

All fascist movements involve a combination of populist rowdies and a section of the ownership class that thinks it can use them as thugs.

Fuentes, too, might be clever enough to modulate the antisemitism when it suits his ascent. He recently said, "We've reached a stage in the adoption of antisemitism… where now it actually might

FROM TOP: JOE CIARDIELLO; THE TUCKER CARLSON SHOW

be time to start to refine. Because now it's just attracting a lot of idiots, and…I will not be held hostage by idiots that don't know what they're talking about." So maybe Fuentes will now decide who is a Jew. He's already rolling his eyes at fans who bring up the Peter Thiel–driven Palantir conspiracy theories that Fuentes helped propagate in the first place.

All fascist movements involve a combination of populist rowdies and a section of the ownership class that thinks it can use them as thugs. The arrangement has perils for both sides. The thugs may bite the hand that feeds them. And the bigwigs might decide to purge the more anti-establishment elements of the mob that threaten their power. Young Fuentes would do well to remember the fate of Ernst Röhm and the other brownshirt leaders. N

SNAPSHOT
Roni Bintang

World's Largest Coal Port Sees Red

Members of the Red Rebel Brigade, an international performance-activist group, demand action on fossil fuels and climate change during the People's Blockade of the Port of Newcastle in Australia on November 29.

By the Numbers

24
Number of people who are victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) in the United States each minute

56%
Share of American Indian and Alaska Native women who have experienced sexual violence

54%
Share of transgender and nonbinary people who have experienced IPV

$33M
Amount of federal funding that was allocated to the LGBTQ youth suicide hotline before Trump terminated the program

30%
Size of the cut in funding for the Office on Violence Against Women in Trump's 2026 budget

$15M
Amount of federal funding awarded to StrongHearts Native Helpline to operate the first National Indigenous Domestic Violence Hotline

FROM TOP: GETTY IMAGES; ANNA MONEYMAKER / GETTY IMAGES

CALVIN TRILLIN
DeadlinePoet

A Happy Decision for Trump

Republicans in Texas look to gain
Five House seats by some drastic gerrymandering.
This latest nod from SCOTUS means that they
Can run five pols well-qualified in pandering.

Are Cell Phones to Blame for the Youth Loneliness Epidemic?

Yes!

DAVID LANDES

CELL PHONES ARE TO BLAME FOR THE youth loneliness crisis—but not in the way you might think. We can't fault cell phones alone; they are tied up with too many social phenomena for that. But they are emblematic of a way of life—one isolated yet always connected—that so many of us want to escape. Cell phones are portals to monetized digital worlds that depend and feed on loneliness. Teasing out their roles in these complex social dynamics can help us understand how to confront the youth loneliness crisis.

The prehistory of cell phones provides clues on where to begin. The solitary individual in mass industrial society has long been a research subject of academics and a theme in pop culture. David Riesman's 1950 sociological study *The Lonely Crowd*, Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 film *The Conversation*, and Sherry Turkle's 2011 book *Alone Together* all explore how extending our communicative capacity creates a double bind: We gain something—say, the ability to reach farther and faster—but also lose something, such as memory and in-person conversations. Cell phones accelerate this trend. Astonishing capabilities have been shoehorned into one hand-sized object, but the trade-offs are steep.

You probably know many of the arguments about how cell phones cause loneliness: the habit-forming, attention-extractive designs; the disembodied digital identities and parasocial relationships; the echo chambers and cultural homogeneity; the hyper-visibility of oneself without control of one's audience; the data collection and surveillance; the algorithms that determine tastes and fates; the separation from the physical environment; the fleeting consumable pleasures that will never fulfill deeper human needs; and the tech oligopoly's "enshittification" business model.

But even these critiques miss something, because we tend to use yesterday's terms to talk about today's tech. Our language is awash in the logic of old media: YouTube is like TV; Facebook is like a book. Cell phones are mostly not phones at all; they're supercomputers that contain an app imitating a phone. We are building our technological world more quickly than we can understand it. To navigate what social media are doing to us, we need to update the language we use.

I study the forms of attention that we use with new media but that we don't have words for yet. I do

No!

KIMBERLY HASSEL

AS PUBLIC PROJECTS SUFFER FROM A lack of funding in the United States, we are seeing a decline of "third places"—locations, such as libraries and parks, that are neither work nor school yet provide opportunities to socialize. Gentrification, rising prices, and the overreliance on cars mean that a simple social outing can burn a hole through our pockets. Overpolicing, gun violence, and the criminalization of youth activities—in which hanging out becomes stigmatized as "loitering"—also work against young people's efforts to socialize. So who can blame young people for staying home and turning to their devices for social connection? The loneliness epidemic was not caused by cell phones; it is a symptom of late-stage capitalism and a society that is unable to support or protect its youth.

I am a sociocultural anthropologist and digital ethnographer who specializes in digital culture, youth culture, and identity in Japan. And my research on young people's use of social media and cell phones shows that in Japan there are clear conceptions as to what constitutes "proper" or "good" use of digital technologies. There, analog and face-to-face interactions remain privileged over digital ones. Japan has been a leader in mobile communications since the 1990s, and cell phones with Internet have been embedded in the social lives of Japanese youth for decades. This makes Japan a valuable case study in thinking about the perceived relationship between cell phones and the youth loneliness epidemic.

Japan has been facing its own loneliness epidemic for a while and so became a hot spot for the literature on loneliness. Indeed, news and books on solitary death (*kodokushi*), youth suicide, and Japan as a "relationless society" (*muen shakai*) emerged in the early 2000s and have proliferated over the years. But the main cause of this epidemic was the bursting of Japan's bubble economy in the 1990s, which led to a recession and a decline in stable employment.

Those conditions linger, as young people on the cusp of entering the workforce and becoming *shakaijin* (literally "members of society") realize that they don't enjoy the same career paths as the previous generation—such as a lifetime job in a corporation—and instead must navigate a landscape of precarious employment. The demands of securing work create a profound sense of loneliness. The phrase *deai ga nai*,

The Debate

this at the Strother School of Radical Attention and at Duke University's Dialogue Laboratory, where I help students research their phoneless encounters. Together, my students and I examine forms of attention—like those at the root of loneliness, miscommunication, and habit—and try to remake them into practices that yield better alternatives. Through this work, I've learned that the youth loneliness crisis, like so much else, flows through our phones, but that simply telling young people to use their phones less is not practical. Phones are the basic infrastructure of our work, leisure, and social lives. So we should ask a more manageable question: In what ways can young people engage with phones so as not to perpetuate the loneliness that phones help create?

Since loneliness is a subjective experience, self-reports make for good starting points. Many people say they want to be on their phones less but feel unable to disconnect *individually* and also that they relish being in well-designed phone-free spaces. In other words, we want *group* de-phonification.

When we do create these environments, people stop just consuming and start creating experiences together. The key here is attention and using it in the plural: *attentions*. The attentions used for swiping through TikTok videos are different from the ones you use to talk to a person, write a letter, or contemplate art. The way out of the youth loneliness crisis begins with young people enjoying the types of attention that occur offscreen and then experiencing that with others. This teaches people to see as others see, to listen as others listen.

If using a cell phone is like pointing a fire hose at our face, then we are not drowning alone.

These shared attentions create a shared experience, which is natural, fun, and intimate. Kids do it in spontaneous role-playing. We do it with our pets. Interacting with each other through our favorite types of attention is how we create shared worlds and reconnect in new ways—things that cell phones inhibit.

So how do we reclaim that kind of shared attention in practice? For starters, we can negotiate how we're allowed to use our phones. In cell-phone stacking, for example, people place their phones in a pile and whoever grabs their phone first pays a consequence, such as picking up the tab for everyone.

If using a cell phone is like pointing a fire hose at our face, then we are not drowning alone. So many of us are struggling with worlds experienced chiefly through our phones. Let's use that: Communalizing the struggle against the cell phone can reduce loneliness. If we blame cell phones constructively, we can reengineer the kinds of attention that create what we want and need. Removing or changing technology on its own won't solve youth loneliness, but generating punkish DIY methods for coming together without screens can. N

David Landes is a professor at Duke University, an affiliate with the Strother School of Radical Attention, and the coauthor of Attensity!

or the inability to meet people, frequently appeared during my conversations with college graduates. High school and college students, meanwhile, enjoy robust social lives, since their social connections are mediated by their schools.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, high schoolers, college students, and postgrads told me that cell phones should supplement in-person social interactions—not replace them. Their views shifted during the pandemic. Because in-person interaction was prohibited, they recalibrated their relationship with the digital. They understood many of the drawbacks of relying on screens for connection, but they also recognized that phones and social media were the key means of finding solidarity during the pandemic. Since then, young people have been using hashtags and platforms to build community. In my research, for example, I have documented how social media has allowed Black Japanese youths to connect with each other and participate in the global movement for racial justice. Social media is crucial in helping people with marginalized identities—for example, queer and trans youth—feel less alone.

Classroom visits in Japan challenged my views on digital sociality and what I—a millennial who grew up in the United States—have taken for granted as "normal" digital practices. Students asked me questions like "Why do Americans show their faces online? Isn't that dangerous?" and "Why do Americans debate and argue with each other online if it won't change anything?" One student even commented judgmentally about my screen time (which, admittedly, was excessive). My conversations with young people in Japan show that it is possible to grow up with cell phones and the Internet and still prioritize in-person interactions.

It is possible to grow up with cell phones and the Internet and still prioritize in-person interactions.

This is a result of factors such as parenting and Japan's extensive public-health infrastructure. For example, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications has an online portal dedicated to "wise" and "safe" Internet interactions, with scenarios that demonstrate how the digital can negatively affect social connections. When seeing the portal, my students at Duke remarked that they wished they had a similar resource growing up. The US would benefit from developing more educational resources that teach young people media literacy and how to "get along" (*tsukiau*) with the digital in their lives.

I don't want to frame Japan as unique or perfect in all this. Japan has its own issues regarding youth mental health. But I do think Americans can learn from Japanese youth. It is hard to be young, especially in the wake of a pandemic. Instead of blaming technology, we can—and should—work toward building the better society that young people deserve. N

Kimberly Hassel is a sociocultural anthropologist and an assistant professor of Asian and Middle Eastern studies at Duke University.

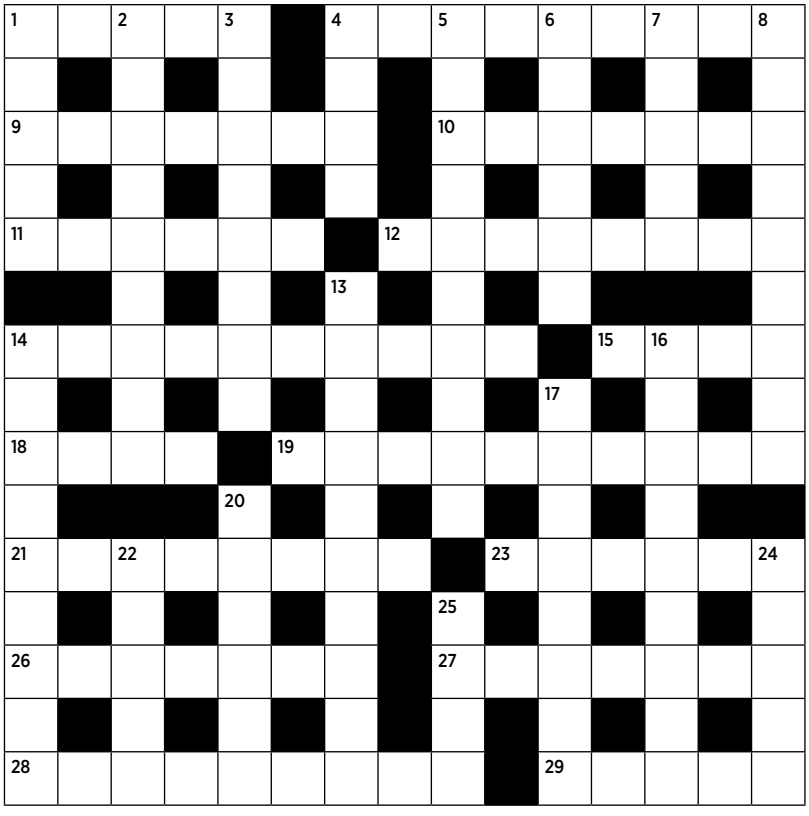
PUZZLE / JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

Big Event

Happy birthday, Sandy!

Back in the 1980s, a long-haired word maven found his way to *The Nation* and promptly offered his skills in the journalistic fight against Reaganism. He hailed from the mountains of West Virginia and called himself Sandy. As his colleagues would quickly learn, he was brilliant and utterly himself—an autodidact with a mind for crosswords, a love of French, and a knack for the twisty rules of English grammar. To this day, he works his magic on the magazine's website, copy-editing our errors out of existence and saving us from our worst, ungrammatical instincts.

Now Sandy is about to celebrate a milestone. A birthday. And what better way to honor our resident word wizard than with his very own puzzle? All hail Sandy!



For the solution, please visit TheNation.com/article/society/big-event

Across

1 A little drunk? That's the point! (5)

4 For example, bell hooks is expected back over in the afternoon (9)

9 A trick, almost lecherous (7)

10 Linger past time in dilapidated auto (7)

11 Retro term for "nodding off" (6)

12 Salamander runs into lake by the last of June, according to the Gregorian calendar (3,5)

14 Unspoken innocence (10)

15 Protein in cereal, nearly complete (4)

18 Electronics corporation is working (4)

19 Strauss and Puccini ultimately contributed to high point? In retrospect, there's no question about it (10)

21 Like some winds coursing through Greater London (8)

23 Dwarf's skin seen in the mirror (6)

26 Blanchett beginning to exhibit opalescent gem (4-3)

27 British politician leading Holland—that could be a headache (7)

28 Turn flawed revamp into accurate topographical representation, for instance (6,3)

29 Pieces of each Across entry omitted from its wordplay, and from the title, for this puzzle's dedicatee (5)

Down

1 Baseball legend Williams, playing inside, delivered a shock (5)

2 Ill-advised plan to arm cop (9)

3 Bargain hunter's destination already reorganized to stock salt (4,4)

4 Choose an implement for a guitarist (4)

5 Self-absorbed, Eric gets permission to proceed with Penny (10)

6 Hate tamed steed at heart of western (6)

7 Tut is decomposing in New York? Crazy! (5)

8 Buddy Holly song ("Thirty-One Days") on second-rate album's third cut in online auction site (5,4)

13 Engineer colors the western edge of Muslim Quarter (6,4)

14 Crest elements widely reproduced in ancient coins (9)

16 Giving order to a tenor, Eve's fallen prey to gluttony (9)

17 Cultivated damp soil yields evidence of growth for many? (8)

20 Peaceful tune eliminated from commercial? Just the opposite! (6)

22 Celebrity maintaining the first stringed instrument (5)

24 Delicious pastry finally, er, belonging to the author (5)

25 Perhaps accept Irish VIP? There's nothing odd in that (4)

JOE CIARDIELLO

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Global Connections Television (GCTV) is an independently produced, privately financed talk show that focuses on international issues and how they impact people worldwide. Global Connections Television features in-depth analysis of important current issues and events including climate change, environmental sustainability, economic development, global partnerships, renewable energy, technology, culture, education, food security, poverty reduction, peace and security, and gender issues. Episodes are broadcast worldwide through cable, satellite, public-access television, and the World Wide Web. GCTV provides inside perspectives from the United Nations and other important organizations that showcase how these groups impact the daily lives of people around the world.

Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues.

He is the Principal of Miller and Associates International Media Consultants, which created the Global Connection Television concept.

Bill developed an interest in international issues and the UN when he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. In his first year he worked as a community developer in a remote rural area; his second year he was Professor of Social Work at the Madre y Maestra University in Santiago, the country's second largest city.

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Letters

Malice Aforethought

I congratulate John Ganz for what is probably the best meditation on the Trump regime so far [“From the F-Word to the T-Word,” October 2025]. Denouncing “isms” is a trap. Accusing people with whom you disagree of being infected with an enemy ideology implies that a purge of minds, and perhaps bodies, is necessary. Ganz points to this dynamic but finds it “hollow,” when it is actually programmatic. This is exactly the threat that Trump and his supporters use to drive people into his followership. “Woke” is not an insult; it is an accusation of fanaticism. The “isms” are also easily defused. Trump can get enough minority and women followers to prove that his camp is not so prejudiced as his critics frantically insist it must be.

In *Kings or People*, Reinhard Bendix wrote, “Arbitrariness is an instrument of rule, for it provides the ruler with an effective test of instant obedience…. A dictatorial regime cannot achieve stability, because to do so would require it to refrain from being arbitrary.” Trump’s clownish gloss may provide shlock entertainment, but the core of his project is well-executed malice. Our opposition should be focused on the autocracy we see rising before us, not just here but across the globe.

If we can get past the futile name-calling, we can focus on anticipating the next move. Is it not clear that the troops in the streets are intended to block voting and ballot-counting in 2028?

Scott Corey
Quincy, CA

Sheep Throat

Re “Encased in Amber” [Fall Books, October 2025]: Kudos to Matthew Duss for opening his review of the new book *War* with Joan Didion’s sweet takedown of one of the US government’s master politicians, operators, climbers, stenographers, and public relations gurus. A picture of the book’s author, Bob Woodward, hangs in my personal Journalism Hall of Shame, next to that of Judith Miller.

Gene Roman
Bronx, NY

Standing Room Only

In his article on the state of US train travel, Julian Epp notes the lack of seating in New York’s Moynihan Train Hall [“End of the Line?,” September 2025]. From what I understand, this was an intentional design choice to discourage the presence of homeless people.

Ann Rae Jonas
New York, NY

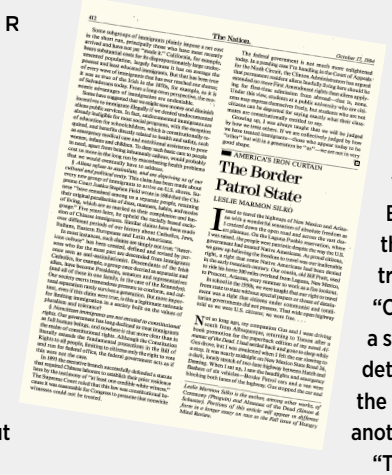
Correction

“Starting Over in Mexico,” by Rebekah Sager [December 2025], incorrectly stated that the US Refugee Admissions Program focused on rescuing victims of sexual exploitation. Rather, prevention in this area was the focus of the former USRAP worker who was interviewed for the article following Donald Trump’s executive order suspending the federal program, not the focus of the program itself.

OUR BACK PAGES/RICHARD KREITNER

Border Land

How the Border Patrol created a police state.



In recent months, as the Trump administration has grown frustrated by the pace of deportations organized by ICE, it has sicced the even nastier Border Patrol on American cities—first Los Angeles, then Chicago, and now Charlotte. The move is the vicious culmination of a decades-long trend of hyper-militarized immigration enforcement.

In 1994, *The Nation* published “The Border Patrol State,” an essay by the Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko about the increased presence of the Border Patrol far from the actual border. Silko grew up on a reservation and knew how the US government had mistreated Native peoples. Even so, this didn’t change the “wonderful sense of absolute freedom” she felt as she “cruised down the open road and across the vast desert plateaus.”

That sense of freedom was destroyed, however, by an incident when she was driving with a companion from Albuquerque to Tucson. They came across a roadblock set up by the Border Patrol. The officers told them to step out of the car. “I will never forget that night beside the highway,” Silko wrote. “There was an awful feeling of menace and violence straining to break loose. It was clear that the uniformed men would be only too happy to drag us out of the car if we did not speedily comply with their request (asking a question is tantamount to resistance, it seems).”

It was also clear that travelers were being racially targeted. The Border Patrol “exercises a power that no highway patrol or city patrolman possesses,” Silko wrote. “Other law-enforcement officers need a shred of probable cause in order to detain someone. On the books, so does the Border Patrol; but on the road, it’s another matter.”

“This is the police state that has developed in the southwestern United States since the 1980s,” she added. Now, 31 years later, that police state has gone national.

Even at the time, though, Silko understood where it was headed: “Manifest Destiny may lack its old grandeur of theft and blood—‘lock the door’ is what it means now.” How darkly ironic it was, she reflected, that just a few years after the Iron Curtain came down in Europe, the US government had begun building a steel wall on the border with Mexico. “It is no use; borders haven’t worked, and they won’t work,” Silko concluded. “The great human migration within the Americas cannot be stopped; human beings are natural forces of the Earth, just as rivers and winds are natural forces.” N


THE FIERCE AND JOYOUS FACE OF T
LA RESISTANC
What we can learn from a great American city's refusal to bend to Trump's invasion.
ICE OUT of LA
LOS

ILLUSTRATION BY **EDEL RODRIGUEZ**

THE Nation.

The New York *Nation*, as some called this magazine in its early years, has always kept one eye on Los Angeles. Even if the magazine suggested in an 1869 essay on "The New West" that "not everything is lovely there," our writers have over the past century and a half been drawn to the sprawling city—with all its energy and possibility, along with its share of sordid realities and inequalities—and the broader story of what would come to be known as the Left Coast.

We return again with this issue, which features a multifaceted examination of LA's bold resistance to the Trump administration's assault on the city itself, and on the rich diversity and democratic promise that Los Angeles represents. Bill Gallegos, a veteran Chicano activist who is a member of *The Nation*'s editorial board, sets the stage with his examination of the remarkable coalitions that pushed back against Trump's decision to send federal troops to the city last spring. LA Mayor Karen Bass offers her perspectives on resisting Trump and Trumpism. And author and music-industry veteran Danny Goldberg contributes a moving reflection on the linkages between the racial-justice protests of the past and our current struggles.

This package begins an expanded focus by *The Nation* on Donald Trump's assault on the blue zones of a nation he is bent on tearing apart. Beginning with the resistance in California makes sense because *The Nation* has so frequently turned to the state for political inspiration.

In 1934, when the socialist novelist Upton Sinclair ran as the Democratic nominee for governor there—under the slogan "End Poverty in California," or EPIC—*The Nation*'s editor and publisher, Oswald Garrison Villard, hailed him for building a grassroots movement of unemployed and working-class voters who were desperate for change during the Great Depression. Sinclair's campaign fell short, but its advocacy for state-run cooperative industries and relief for the poor struck a chord in a state—and a nation—that was seething with labor unrest and economic discontent.

Two years later, the novelist John Steinbeck brought the conditions of California's agriculture workers to national prominence in a *Nation* article. "It is fervently to be hoped," wrote the author of *The Grapes of Wrath*, "that the great group of migrant workers so necessary to the harvesting of California's crops may be given the right to live decently, that they may not be so badgered, tormented, and hurt that in the end they become avengers of the hundreds of thousands who have been tortured and starved before them."

During World War II, the magazine denounced the internment of Japanese American citizens—who were overwhelmingly from California, as well as Oregon and Washington—as a national catastrophe. Portraying the detention of patriotic citizens as "mass hysteria," *The Nation* observed: "Discrimination against citizens because of their racial lineage cuts straight across the American tradition."

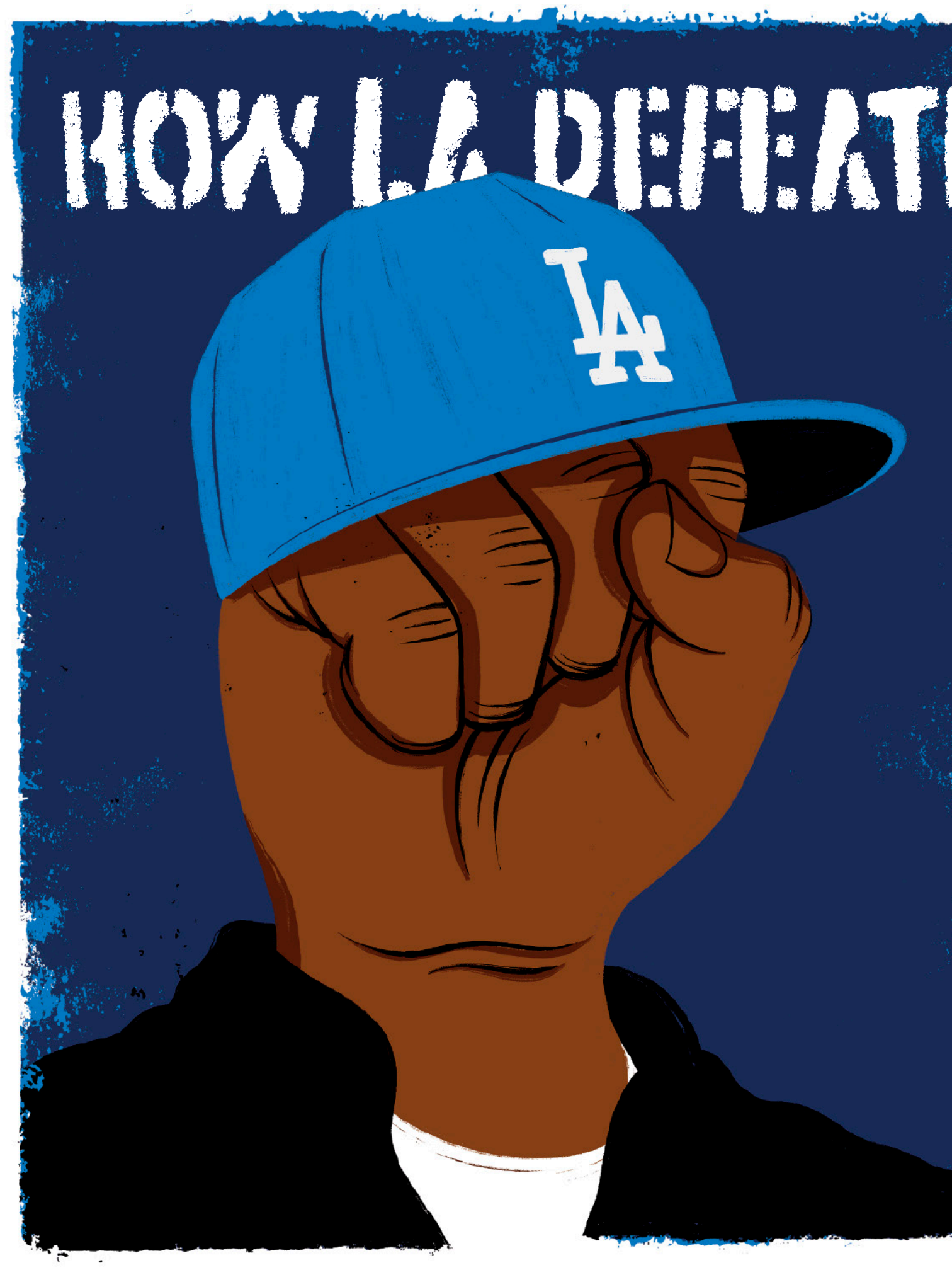
Carey McWilliams, the LA writer who published one of the first books decrying the mistreatment of Japanese American families during the war, edited *The Nation* from 1955 to 1975. One of California's greatest historians, writing books like *Factories in the Field* and *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, McWilliams chronicled the state's transformation from an agricultural frontier to an economic powerhouse, exposing the human cost of its sunshine image.

During the 1950s Red Scare, when loyalty oaths and blacklists rocked Hollywood and much of the rest of the country, McWilliams and *The Nation* defended LA writers, directors, and artists who'd been accused of subversion. The magazine's exposés of the House Un-American Activities Committee's witch hunts provided a platform for voices that would otherwise have been silenced, in a fight that another *Nation* editor, Victor Navasky, chronicled in his remarkable 1980 book *Naming Names*.

In 1965, Hunter S. Thompson told the story of California's motorcycle gangs for *The Nation* and expanded that article into his bestselling book *Hell's Angels*—ushering in the era of "gonzo journalism." Mike Davis, the great California-based historian and social critic, also began to contribute groundbreaking essays to *The Nation*. Writing in the mid-1990s, Davis chronicled the dire effects of racial capitalism in Compton, called out California's mass incarceration crisis, and explained the origins and consequences of the state's "natural disasters": the fires, earthquakes, and floods that raised profound questions about everything from overdevelopment to climate change. Davis, like so many other great *Nation* writers on the California experience (Robert Scheer, Amy Wilentz, Jon Wiener, and Rebecca Solnit among them) treated the state not as a sun-drenched exception, or as an American West of Eden, but as its truest self—a place where the nation's inequalities, contradictions, and possibilities have been laid bare.

This month's package of articles on resistance and coalition-building in our second-most-populous city continues in this great *Nation* tradition of looking west—of searching not only for the sources of this country's turmoil but also for clues to how we might yet forge a progressive future in which another LA, another California, and another America are possible.

Katrina vanden Heuvel and John Nichols


HOW L.A. DEFEAT
LA

D TRUMP

And how the rest of the country can too.

BILL GALLEGOS

DONALD TRUMP HATES LOS ANGELES—AND FOR GOOD REASON. LOS ANGELES is a deep-blue city that regularly backs Democrats at every level of government. It is a strong union town in a nation where the labor movement is treading water. It is majority Black and brown, with whites representing only 28 percent of its nearly 4 million residents. And it must particularly gall this president, who has made his name by attacking immigrants, to have to acknowledge that almost 35 percent of the population of one of the wealthiest urban centers in the world came from a different country. The City of the Angels was one of the first of America's sanctuary cities, and it remains defiantly proud of this status—refusing cooperation with the ICE and Border Patrol thugs that Trump has unleashed to terrorize the nation's Black, brown, and Asian neighborhoods.

It is this resistance—and the ever-growing, diverse, militant, and creative ways it is challenging the government's ethnic-cleansing campaign—that Trump hates above all. The movement was unrelenting from the moment of his second inauguration, with near-daily actions at workplaces, churches, schools, courthouses, detention centers, and the hotels that were housing ICE agents. For all these reasons, Trump decided to escalate his war on LA. In June and July of 2025, he ordered more than 4,000 National Guard troops and 700 Marines to invade the city. With this absurd re-creation of storming "the halls of Montezuma," Trump hoped to crush all resistance, terrorize immigrants, and send a potent message to other cities that were proud and protective of their diversity.

But Trump failed. LA refused to bend. And by the end of July, almost all of the 5,000 troops were gone. "President Trump is realizing that his political theater backfired," announced California Governor Gavin Newsom. "This militarization was always unnecessary and deeply unpopular." What Newsom said was true. But it is important to remember that it took fierce and effective local opposition to bring about this realization. The story of that opposition offers a lesson for communities across the country.

Above all, Trump hates the ever-growing, diverse, militant, and creative ways that the LA *Resistencia* is challenging him.

THE LA *RESISTENCIA*, ALREADY mobilized to oppose deportations, was ready when Trump's troops marched in. Large rallies were organized at a downtown detention center on June 6.

That same day, SEIU California president David Huerta was injured and arrested while documenting an ICE raid in downtown Los Angeles. In a statement released from his hospital bed, Huerta said, "What happened to me is not about me; this is about something much bigger.... Hard-working people, and members of our family and our community, are being treated like criminals. We all collectively have to object to this madness because this is not justice."

Huerta's beating and arrest kicked the resistance into warp speed. The Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, one of the largest union federations in the country, went into action. On June 9, a labor-led demonstration drew thousands to the city center to demand Huerta's release and an end to the city's occupation. Unions organized rallies and demonstrations, joined other immigrant-defense actions, and added the voices of tens of thousands of workers to the demands to get the troops out of LA and end the horrendous ICE raids.

The unions were vital not only because of their size, resources, and reach, but also because so many of their members are either immigrants or the descendants of immigrants. The threats from ICE are real and dangerous for these workers, their families, and their communities, as well as the local businesses, social groups, churches, and even youth sports teams that are essential to their neighborhoods. This concern connected labor with a broad multi-sectoral coalition that included key social forces. In many ways, this remarkable coalition represented the necessary anti-fascist united front in embryo.

In addition to the union movement, worker centers and immigrant-rights organizations joined in. The faith community stepped up too: Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice and the Holman United Methodist Church—one of the largest African American churches in the city—jointly offered "know your rights" seminars and training for nonviolent resistance. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Los Angeles, with its huge presence in Latino and immigrant communities, also played a part.

The legal battle was equally important. Governor Newsom sued the Trump administration in June 2025 over its deployment of the National Guard, and organizations like the Immigrant Defenders Law Center, the American Civil Liberties Union

Bill Gallegos is a longtime Chicano activist and a member of the editorial board of The Nation.

ILLUSTRATION BY **ADRIÀ FRUITÓS**

Instead of kowtowing to Trump, an incredible range of Democratic elected officials lined up against him.

of Southern California, the National Lawyers Guild, and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) took vital legal action as well. In one especially crucial ruling, US District Judge Charles Breyer determined that the National Guard deployment violated the Posse Comitatus Act, which limits the use of the military for domestic law enforcement. Breyer's powerful 52-page ruling found that the administration had willfully violated federal law. Warning that Trump appeared to be intent on "creating a national police force with the President as its chief," the judge barred the Pentagon from "ordering, instructing, training, or using the National Guard currently deployed in California, and any military troops heretofore deployed in California," from "engaging in arrests, apprehensions, searches, seizures, security patrols, traffic control, crowd control, riot control, evidence collection, interrogation, or acting as informants." The courts continue to wrangle with these issues, but Breyer set a standard that members of Congress can adopt in demanding a say about Trump's deployments.

The spark that lit the flame: The arrest and beating of SEIU California president David Huerta kicked the LA resistance into overdrive.

Legal rulings get a lot of attention from the media. But art and culture warriors get attention on the streets. And they were another critical sector of the resistance. Musicians like Ivan Cornejo and Junior H, along with other artists, helped raise funds for immigrant-rights organizations and to cover the legal fees of immigrant families. Stars like Olivia Rodrigo, Becky G, Finneas, Chiquis, and Tyler, the Creator publicly condemned the federal actions; will.i.am, who grew up in the East LA Estrada Courts projects, put out a killer track, "East LA", with his Black Eyed Peas bandmate Taboo. At the same time, Los Angeles artists used murals, protests, street art, and exhibitions to resist and condemn the ICE raids and military deployment that had begun.

Strikingly, one of the most important sectors of the anti-fascist front were liberal and neoliberal Democrats. Instead of kowtowing to Trump when he threatened to cut off federal aid if they didn't support his ethnic-cleansing project, an incredible range of Democratic elected officials lined up against him, including Newsom, California's two US senators, nearly all the Democrats in the California congressional delegation, and the Democratic supermajority in the California Assembly and Senate, as well as LA Mayor Karen Bass, the City Council, the school board (and school superintendent), and the powerful county Board of Supervisors. This broad support from Democratic politicos not only strengthened the resistance but pushed the mainstream media—including important outlets like the *Los Angeles Times*—to provide consistent coverage of the opposition to the troops and strong editorial support for the demand to pull them out of the city.

Not surprisingly, the ICE raids and troop deployment caused serious problems for the Los Angeles business community. Construction companies (including those working on rebuilding from the wildfires in Pacific Palisades and Altadena), hotels, restaurants, garment factories, and small- and medium-size businesses that depend on immigrant customers lost revenue. Immigrant workers feared going to work because of possible ICE raids, and customers with the same fear stayed away from restaurants and local businesses. LA's economy took a real hit because of Trump's ham-fisted effort to compel the city to "bend the knee." Consequently, the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce and the Los Angeles Business Council were among the "nontraditional allies" that spoke out against the troops and the ICE raids.

Support even came from the city's mostly white middle-class suburbs. One unexpected example was when residents of Topanga Canyon took the initiative to distribute fliers at local farmers' markets, letting people know why they should oppose the ICE raids and how they could support farmworkers who had previously been targeted by *La Migra*. That was a potent illustration of why we should recognize that all resistance is precious.

There are several key lessons to take away from the LA *Resistencia*.

Build on your organizing foundation. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Many of the groups that repelled the deployment of federal troops had been organizing for years and had a base that could immediately step up when the military stepped in. Even before the troop deployment, unions such as Unite Here Local 11, which represents hotel and restaurant workers, and United Teachers Los Angeles, with educators who teach in large immigrant communities, had been active in opposing the ICE raids. Movement stalwarts like the Pilipino Workers Center, the Los Angeles Black Worker Center, and the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance have long been organizing low-wage workers of color, many of them immigrants, in the city's home healthcare, restaurant, construction, and garment industries. Aquilina Soriano Versoza, the executive director of the Pilipino Workers Center, explained: "We grew the LA Rapid Response Network, launched protests and vigils, a Summer of Action that had daily actions, organized community events that integrated culture and care to reclaim our streets, and met with key legislators to document and expose how the federal government was lying and at the same time violating our constitutional right to not be arrested or grabbed off of the streets or from the

MARIO TAMA / GETTY IMAGES

workplace without probable cause. To not be racially profiled or targeted because we are low-wage workers."

When the ICE raids intensified in June of this year, a citywide coalition of unions, immigrant-rights organizations, worker centers, and other organizations began sending members to Home Depots, a favored gathering spot for day laborers. They deployed to restaurants, car washes (a fairly recent focus of union organizing, led by the CLEAN Carwash Worker Center), swap meets, churches, and immigrant neighborhoods. Everywhere that ICE sent its thugs, the people were there—documenting and protesting their actions, distributing "know your rights" cards and information on how workers could access mutual-aid support. It was the critical bedrock for the effort to remove the troops.

Have a clear goal. The consistent theme from the unions, the other worker-based organizations, the Democratic electeds, and all the participants in the resistance was: Get the troops out now and end the ICE raids. This provided overall guidance to all sectors of the united front and created the much-sought-after "consistent and compelling message" that our movements frequently lack.

Unite all who can be united. As I wrote earlier, the broadest of broad fronts came together around these clear goals. Having such a wide range of forces actively speaking up not only positively influenced mainstream media coverage; it gave a type of protection to the "street forces" who mobilized thousands of Angelenos. USC professor Manuel Pastor spoke about the importance of coalitions having depth and strength. "An untold part of the story: Many business leaders were appalled by the deportations of their workers," he noted, "and from that came some unusual allies. So a lesson: Keep the anti-ICE coalition as broad as possible." Pastor also mentioned another important lesson: "If you have sympathetic public officials on this issue, put aside differences you have on other issues to have them be part of the face of resistance."

The left knows how to do this. The Los Angeles experience demonstrates that the left can indeed work constructively and without the sectarian problems that have long plagued protest movements. With such a wide array of forces in the struggle, the risk of clashing egos, power struggles, and showboating was high. Even when different coalitions were working on similar issues—such as immigrant defense, food assistance, and "know your rights" training—everyone kept their eyes on the prize. None of the coalitions sniped at or attacked the others. There was none of the sectarian "this is my turf" idiocy that so often weakens and even destroys movements. Each group had its own distinct politics, each had its own set of priorities, but they all had a common message: Get these storm troopers out of our city and stop the fascist ICE raids.

When we unite and fight, we can win! Before Trump's Gestapo got the boot from LA, he tried to claim that he had "saved the city from burning down." The next sound you heard was that of millions of Angelenos laughing their asses off at this absurd assertion. Then a strong, broad anti-fascist front forced the president to withdraw the Guard and Marines. Suzi Weissman, a widely respected local political commentator, summed it up nicely: "The militarization was a provocation, and Trump's opening act on his war on 'the enemy within.'"

Trump has since sent troops to Washington, DC, and threatened Chicago, Memphis, and Portland—blue cities, often with African American mayors—calling them "war-ravaged" and apocalyptic. But LA showed the country that resistance and solidarity work: When people organize and stand firm, even a president bent on repression can be pushed back. If Trump thought Los Angeles would be the model for his authoritarian power grab, what he got instead was the template for defeating it.

Shutting it down: LA protesters took over the 101 freeway, a major artery of the city, in defiance of local and national law enforcement.

The struggle is not over. ICE has continued and even accelerated its horrendous raids in LA and throughout the US, offering a powerful reminder that the defense of immigrants must remain an absolute priority for those who are determined to crush the threat of fascism and to renew and expand democracy. Much more remains to be done, including developing a national strategy for defeating MAGA, one rooted in the lessons from LA and other resistance cities that can unite labor and other essential social movements and that can effectively build the strength of the resistance while weakening our enemies. But LA shows us not only that this must be done, but that it can be done—and that we can win.

The defense of immigrants must be an absolute priority for those who are determined to crush the threat of fascism.

As we say in the Chicano Liberation Movement, *Sí Se Puede!!!* **N**

MARIO TAMA / GETTY IMAGES

MAYOR OF L.A. TO AMERICA: "BEWARE!"

Trump has made Los Angeles a testing ground for whether Americans will tolerate military intervention on our streets. Mayor Karen Bass says her city has become an example of how to fight back.

GAIL REED

CALAMITY HAS DOGGED THE POLITICAL CAREER OF Karen Bass since her years in the California State Assembly. In 2008, she became the first Black woman to head the Assembly—or, indeed, the legislature of any state. But no sooner had she taken up the gavel than she was thrown into a budget standoff with then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, as the nation's worst recession in decades threatened California, the world's fourth-largest economy. Bass went on to represent her congressional district in Los Angeles, often winning with more than 85 percent of the vote, but her election to the House in 2010 coincided with the peak of the Tea Party backlash. And after she was elected as chair of the Congressional Black Caucus during the early days of Trump's first term, Covid struck.

Making her way back to Los Angeles in 2022, Bass defeated billionaire Rick Caruso to become mayor of the country's second-largest city. Then wildfires struck in January 2025, leading to an effort to recall her as mayor and nearly upending her drive to tackle homelessness, the focus of a citywide state-of-emergency declaration she signed on her first day in office. The recall effort eventually failed, but then it was January of 2025 and Trump was headed back to the White House.

I spoke with Bass recently in Los Angeles. As we drove through the Skid Row encampments of unhoused Angelenos, drank brew at the Coffee Company, and stopped by a community organization's anniversary bash, the mayor talked about the state of the city she serves and the country we live in. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Gail Reed

***The Nation*: Los Angeles has been thrust onto the national stage and into the headlines more than once this year.**

Karen Bass: The first part of the year, we had the worst natural disaster in California's history. And we were in our recovery period when, on June 6, out of nowhere, the ICE raids started. ICE descended on multiple locations at the same time and just took people away day after day. They drove regular cars but with darkened windows, sometimes no license plates. They would jump out of the cars, fully masked, armed with rifles. They would literally snatch Latinos off the street, which is why, in our city, we refer to it as "the hunting of Latinos." And this sowed absolute terror. An immediate protest started because, in our city, we are fortunate to have a well-established immigrant-rights infrastructure with organizations that are over 40 years old.

Supposedly to respond to the protests, the very next day, on Saturday, June 7, President Trump ordered 2,000 National Guard troops to Los Angeles, later increasing that to 4,000. He seized power from [Governor Gavin Newsom],

Gail Reed is a journalist whose work has appeared in BusinessWeek, MEDICC Review, *the* San Francisco Chronicle *and on NBC News and MSNBC.*

ILLUSTRATION BY **LILY QIAN**


FAMILIES BELONG TOGETHER
OTECT YOUR
EIGHBORS

MAYOR OF L.A. TO AMERICA: "BEWARE!"

who is commander in chief of the California National Guard. None of us asked for that. The National Guard arrived on Sunday morning. But hours before, Trump said to the world that he stopped Los Angeles from burning down because he had [already] deployed the National Guard.

Los Angeles is 500 square miles. The protests where there was some vandalism happened over four blocks. That was it. A riot never happened here. So you deploy 4,000 National Guards, 700 Marines, for what in our view amounted to unrest like you see after the Lakers win a championship—when 100 people hang around afterwards and set police cars on fire and graffiti up places.

The vandalism that did take place, in my mind, was egregious. Iconic locations that celebrate immigration were vandalized: Olvera Street, the first street in Los Angeles, which is essentially a tribute to Mexican culture, because this [land] was Mexico at one time. Then the Japanese American Museum, which sits on hallowed ground because it's the very location where the Japanese were interned. A mural of Cesar Chavez had "F ICE" scrawled on it.

"Trump is dosing the American public. In LA, we got a dose on immigration. Will Angelenos tolerate it? We did not."

I'm not trying to sugarcoat the vandalism. The vandalism was bad, but it was not a riot, and the city was not burning down. The Los Angeles Police Department, with support from the county sheriffs, managed the vandalism. The National Guard were never needed here. They were used as props, and LA—a city that celebrates immigrants—was being used as an experiment.

The Nation: **How large is Los Angeles's Latino population?**

KB: LA has 3.8 million people, and close to 50 percent of the population are Latinos. Most Latinos here are from Mexico, plus a significant number from Central America, then South America. Sectors of our economy are completely dependent on immigrant labor, including key industries like fashion, construction, hospitality, tourist venues. After the fires, we need to rebuild the Pacific Palisades. It's estimated that at least 40 percent of the construction industry [in the city] is Latino, so the raids can absolutely affect rebuilding.

The Nation: **Now the raids have moved on to other cities. What's the takeaway?**

KB: In LA, they never stopped, just slowed down. [Border Patrol commander Gregory Bovino, who led the Los Angeles raids,] moved on to Chicago. My point to the country is: Beware! This is being tested in liberal Los Angeles because, if they can get away with this here, then you can imagine what they could do in places where the mayor might be a Democrat but the state is Republican.

If you look at the cities in the president's crosshairs, they are overwhelmingly governed by African American mayors. In my opinion, it was an attempt to drive a wedge between African Americans and Latinos, even though there are plenty of Black immigrants. In fact, the raids in Miami primarily targeted Haitians. We have a lot of Black immigrants here from Central America, South America, the Caribbean, and African countries.

The administration argues that they don't need probable cause to pull someone over. Their probable cause is that you might be an immigrant; you might look Latino. They were testing what happens. Will the American public tolerate military intervention on our streets? There are not supposed to be military on our streets, and in fact, there is the Posse Comitatus Act, which specifically forbids military intervention for domestic problems.

The Nation: **Now President Trump is threatening to invoke the Insurrection Act.**

KB: Yes, and he would use that authority to seize complete control of a city, militarize it, and take over local law enforcement. Given that nowhere are we facing an insurrection, that would be a gross misuse of the power of the presidency.

The last time the act was invoked was in 1992 in Los Angeles, to quell the unrest that erupted after the police were acquitted in the beating of Rodney King. That was characterized as the most damaging civil unrest in recent US history and certainly doesn't describe what is happening now.

The Nation: **It's clear that you draw from experiences that go beyond your city or one period in history. How would you characterize the crisis we're facing in the US today?**

KB: We need to look at how profound this moment is. I have said to young people that 40 years from now, you will remember this moment. In my opinion, we are facing the greatest threat to our democracy since the Civil War.

We've certainly had horrible things happen, like the internment of the Japanese, COINTELPRO, the murders of Black activists from the Panther Party and other militant organizations. But this is society-wide. When the president took office, the first thing he did was declare a war on racial justice, on DEI—diversity, equity, and inclusion. And who were the culprits? Essentially African Americans. He went out and fired African Americans who were in leadership, leaving a pall over the country that if you are an African American and in leadership, you're suspect. You're suspected of being incapable, unqualified, and that you only got there because of your race. Some 300,000 African American women were affected by DOGE cuts and other federal layoffs. And then [the administration] moved on to immigration.

Tackling the crisis: Bass speaks with unhoused people living in tents behind the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures.

IRFAN KHAN / *LOS ANGELES TIMES* VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Nation: **How do you see the administration's policies playing out across the country?**

KB: Trump is dosing the American public. In LA, we got a dose

on immigration. Will Angelenos tolerate it? We did not—Angelenos stood strong. Our city was more united than I have ever seen it. We stood strong, we stood together, we were morally outraged as a city.

Then [Trump's forces] moved on to other cities. They gave Washington, DC, a dose on crime and homelessness. The National Guard [was deployed] to "clean up homelessness and to address crime." I can only imagine that the young people swept up were overwhelmingly African American, and they absolutely targeted juveniles. Right after, [the administration] wants to lower to 14 the age at which young people can be tried as adults.

Next, you go and you dose Chicago on immigration and crime. One of the most egregious interventions was a raid on an apartment building at 1 AM, where they literally deployed from a Blackhawk helicopter, kicked in doors, pulled people out on the street—whether they were clothed or not—zip-tied them. They did this to the Black and Latino residents in that building, under the guise of looking for Venezuelan gang members. The Black people might have been of multiple nationalities, but most were US citizens.

You had people in Los Angeles, and I'm sure other cities, who were in the country legally. You had US citizens who were pulled over and detained. When they were swept up off the street, their families had no idea where they were, because they weren't allowed to have any contact with family members or legal counsel. This was a dramatic departure. Immigration enforcement has always happened, but people had ready access to their families and to legal counsel.

***The Nation*: We're also seeing sweeping changes in how the federal government approaches higher education, the media, nonprofits—moves that enhance the power of the government and particularly the White House. When, during his first term, Trump referred to African nations as "shithole countries," you spoke before African diplomats, assuring them our institutions constituted a bulwark strong enough to stand up to any one man's outrageous opinions. What would you say today?**

KB: I was deeply offended. But I did assure them that [Trump's first] administration was an anomaly and that they should rest assured our institutions were strong.

But I was wrong: He has shown that our institutions are not strong. We never imagined an administration that would just slash and burn them.

It used to be in practice, but now [only] in theory, we have three coequal branches of government. We have the judiciary, which is no longer independent. We have both houses of Congress—yet, in my opinion, this speaker and the head of the Senate took their gavels over to Pennsylvania Avenue and surrendered them to the White House. And then we have the administration. Right now, we have one branch of government with all the power, and that is the executive branch.

***The Nation*: If the American public gets fed up and wants to elect a more progressive brand of Democrat in our cities, then, A, is it possible? And B, what kind of support do you need for that to happen?**

KB: Well, and C, what are the consequences of it? I think the verdict on that is still out. We don't fully know. You can have somebody elected to office with a strong progressive agenda who is going to be very vocal against the president. And they risk a cutoff of federal resources. They also risk punitive actions against them as leaders, but also against their city.

On the other hand, they risk that if they do nothing, or even if they try to get along. You risk getting punched in the face for existing. So I imagine that some people running, like in the New York [mayoral] race, are probably willing to take that risk. And everybody is terrified, wondering how on earth they will respond when it's their turn.

Taking it to the streets: Protesters confront LAPD officers during an anti-ICE protest in downtown Los Angeles on June 8, the day after the federal immigration raids had begun.

"Many of the things that we're seeing happening all at once, if you pick them apart, they've happened before."

***The Nation*: What can we expect next?**

KB: They've been clear—criticize the administration all you want, but they did give us a play-by-play script. They put it in writing and told us everything they were going to do. We need to read that book by Project 2025.

Today, I think the fundamental thing happening is psychological: It's getting us to accept and normalize. "Well, yeah, OK, the National Guard is here." No! We should go, "Oh, my God, the National Guard is here!" "Oh, my God, you had the Marines in Los Angeles, and there was nothing going on!"

Interestingly, after the assassination of Charlie Kirk, you

(Reed, continued on page 59)

BENJAMIN HANSON / MIDDLE EAST IMAGES / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

BREAKING THE LAPD'S CHOKE

Worth a thousand words: A still from the video of the 1991 police beating of Rodney King.

How the late-20th-century battles over race ar

On the afternoon of March 3, 1991, Los Angeles police Chief Daryl Gates was at the White House, where President George H.W. Bush called him an "all-American hero." That evening, in the Lake View Terrace section of LA, a plumber named George Holliday was awakened by the sound of a police helicopter flying over his apartment building. From his window, he saw several policemen surrounding a Black man. Holliday reached for his recently acquired camcorder and videotaped four Los Angeles Police Department officers as they beat the unarmed Rodney King, hitting him 56 times with metal batons and kicking him as he writhed on the ground in pain while 23 other cops looked on.

The fillings were knocked out of King's teeth, and he sustained a crushed right eye socket, a broken cheekbone, 11 fractured bones at the base of his skull, and a shattered ankle. He was not charged with a crime. The night after the beating, an 82-second excerpt of Holliday's video was broadcast on KTLA, a Los Angeles TV channel. CNN aired it the following morning, and over the next 24 hours it appeared on virtually every national TV news show. In the eyes of millions of viewers, Rodney King posed no plausible threat to the officers, and the ferocious beating had no legitimate law enforcement purpose. It was sadistic street justice, and few believed that a white man arrested under similar circumstances would have been treated the same way.

Despite dramatic changes in politics and technology since the 1990s, many of the psychological and political factors connected to the King beating and its aftermath are eerily relevant in the America of the 2020s. The intersection of race, politics, and policing is still a source of painful headlines. That decade's struggle for democracy between a multiracial majority and a powerful conservative minority foreshadowed many of the struggles of the Donald Trump era.

Danny Goldberg is a former music industry executive and the author of Liberals With Attitude: The Rodney King Beating and the Fight for the Soul of Los Angeles.

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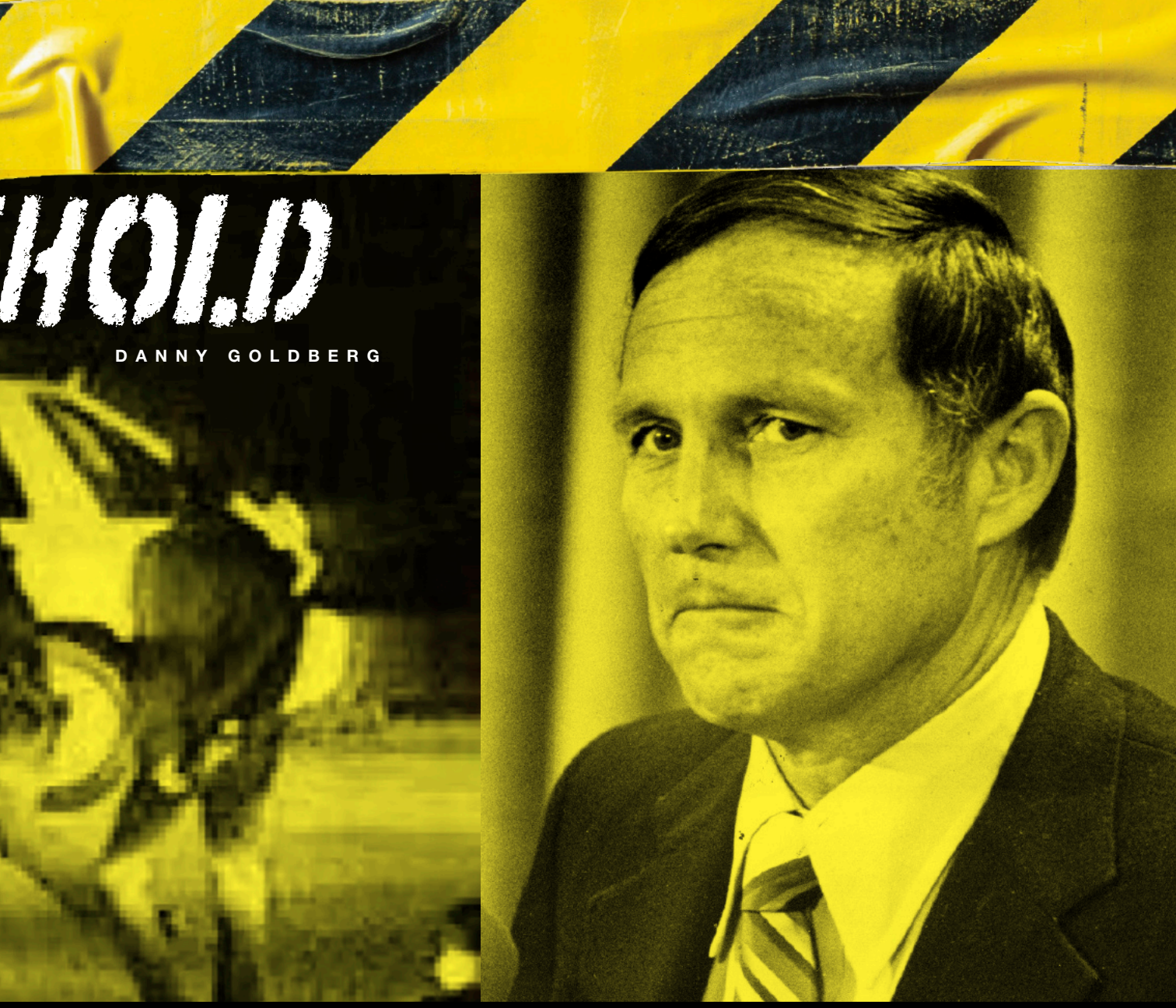


nd policing in Los Angeles foreshadowed the Trump era.

Inexpensive home video technology was brand-new in 1991. In 2020, after the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer was captured on a cell phone, Al Sharpton would refer to the grainy black-and-white images of the Rodney King beating as "the Jackie Robinson of police videos," because it was the first time that a citizen's recording of police brutality was broadcast to a national audience. The footage of King's beating attained an iconic status almost immediately. Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X*, which was released at the end of 1992, begins with a rendering of a speech Malcolm made in the 1960s over an excerpt from the King video.

That video was the culmination of a decade-long battle between Daryl Gates and the local chapter of the ACLU and its allies, who blamed the chief for the culture and policies that led to the beating and many others like it that had not been captured on camera.

The 16-month effort to force Gates out of power was led by Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, one of the first Black mayors in the country and a former LAPD officer himself. Bradley and Gates had known and detested each other for 40 years. Bradley was a risk-averse political centrist, but after the King video surfaced, the mayor knew that his legacy depended on finally confronting Gates head-on. As part of his strategy, Bradley reached out to leaders on the left like Representative Maxine Waters (D-CA) and the ACLU, while also recruiting allies from the LA business community.

At the time, I was the chair of the ACLU Foundation of Southern California, a role that I had taken several years earlier at the suggestion of Stanley Sheinbaum. Stanley's wife, Betty, had inherited a large part of the Warner Bros. fortune from her father, Harry Warner, and the couple deployed her inheritance

The enforcer: LAPD chief Daryl Gates defended the department's racist police regime until he was forced out in the wake of King's beating.

"We know who the bad guys are in the department. We just don't do anything about it." —former LAPD assistant chief Jesse Brewer

on behalf of progressive causes and candidates. The Sheinbaums frequently hosted events at their home where politicians like Ted Kennedy, Jesse Jackson, and Bill Clinton mingled with journalists like I.F. Stone and Joan Didion and movie stars like Barbra Streisand, Sidney Poitier, Jane Fonda, and Warren Beatty.

I had a day job in the music business and was initially attracted to the ACLU because of its long-standing defense of free speech in the arts. Then Ramona Ripston, the legendary executive director of the ACLU of Southern California, explained to me that the group was involved with a wide array of social-justice issues and that one of its priorities was dealing with the police-brutality complaints lodged against the LAPD.

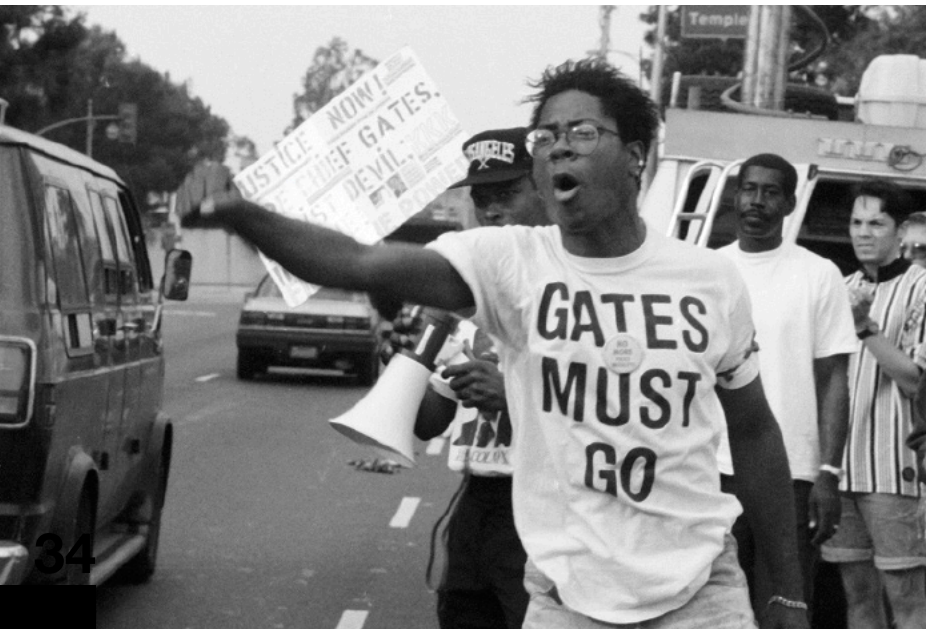
After the King video was broadcast, Gates attempted damage control by referring to the beating as an "aberration," but the department's detractors at the ACLU recognized that it was business as usual. The previous November, six LAPD officers had been called to arrest a 33-year-old Black man named Tracy Mayberry, who was accused of being a drug dealer. They beat him to death with the same type of batons that had been used on Rodney King, but the incident wasn't videotaped, so there was no means to challenge the officers' contention that they had done so in self-defense.

Justice denied: A protester outside the LAPD's headquarters after the King verdict was announced.

Neither Ripston nor I thought that most LAPD officers behaved like those that had beaten Mayberry or King. But there was a reason why none of the 23 officers who watched their colleagues pulverize a helpless Rodney King didn't do anything to stop it. The department had a culture that strongly discouraged criticism of fellow officers, the so-called code of silence.

In Walter Mosley's novel *Farewell, Amethystine*, Black private detective Easy Rawlins explained the syndrome: "The LAPD…was a cult…. [T]he greatest sin among them was turning a brother in blue over to the justice system." Jesse Brewer had been the LAPD's highest-ranking Black officer when he retired as assistant chief a few weeks before the Rodney King beating. Shortly after leaving the police force, Brewer lamented, "We know who the bad guys are in the department; we just don't do anything about it."

Maxine Waters joined the US House of Representatives two months before the King beating. She had confronted Daryl Gates 12 years earlier as a member of the California State Assembly. Her district included South Central Los Angeles, where a 39-year-old Black woman named Eula Love had been shot to death by LAPD officers in front of her two children. The cops claimed self-defense, a characterization that Waters angrily disputed, since Love was 5-foot-4 and weighed 175 pounds. The police were at her home because she had yelled at employees of the local electric company when they tried to collect on an unpaid bill for $22.09. She was "armed" with a kitchen knife, which she ineffectually tossed at the two officers, missing them by a wide margin and causing no injury, not even a scratch. She was killed by 12 police bullets.



BOB RIHA JR. / GETTY IMAGES

Waters and 169 Black members of the clergy in Southern California accused the LAPD of "brutality and racism." However, there wasn't any video of the Eula Love killing, and Gates attacked the community group for "a public lynching of the LAPD." The chief determined that the shooting was self-defense, and he declined to discipline the officers. Waters called on Gates to resign, the first of many times she would do so.

Gates's most notorious public moment occurred in 1982, after it was revealed that in the preceding seven years 80 percent of the men killed by LAPD choke holds were Black, even though African Americans made up just 18 percent of the city's population. (Fifteen men were killed by LAPD choke holds during those seven years. Police departments in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Dallas each reported only a single such death over the same period.) Asked by the *Los Angeles Times* if there was systematic racism in his department, the chief indignantly denied it and told the reporter, "We may be finding that in some Blacks, when the choke hold is applied, the veins or arteries do not open up as fast as they do on normal people."

After the uproar triggered by the outrageous remark, the Los Angeles City Council and the Police Commission voted to ban police choke holds. In every other respect, though, the chief's power was undiminished, and as charges of racist policing continued to accumulate, Gates was unrepentant. After the Rodney King beating, he said that if the choke hold hadn't been banned, the officers on the scene could have used it in lieu of pounding King with batons and he would have been better off (assuming he survived).

Serious as the choke hold was to the families and friends of men who were killed by it, the "normal people" comment touched a deeper set of cultural and moral nerve endings. Once there is a category of people who are defined as not "normal," there is no need to view them as fully

Days of rage: South Central LA in the wake of the 1992 riots that broke out after the King verdict.

TED SOQUI / CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

human or to abide by moral codes that apply to the treatment of "normal" people. That characterization of Black people coming from a powerful government official with thousands of armed officers at his command left deep emotional scars.

After the video of George Floyd's murder was broadcast in 2020, Maxine Waters said that the incident reminded her of Gates's comment. "He was saying that we die when 'normal people' wouldn't be dead. He was differentiating 'Black people' from 'normal people.' That has stuck with me for a very long time."

Daryl Gates's public image was animated by a toxic combination of racism and charisma, a persona that Trump would revive on a national level decades later. The Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist David Cay Johnson, who has written extensively about Trump, reported on the LAPD for the *Los Angeles Times* in the 1980s. He told me, "I was fortunate that by the time I met Trump, I had already covered Daryl Gates. They were both megalomaniacs and prone to disregard facts. They both insisted that if they said something, that made it so."

Gates and Trump were demagogues and bullies and vehicles for white grievance, and they both intimidated politicians who should have known better. Decades before Trump ran for office, Gates demonized the news media and coined nicknames for his adversaries. Gates used illegally gathered intelligence to pressure local officeholders. Trump used social media to threaten his critics. Gates told his troops that attacks on him were really "attacks on all 8,300 LAPD officers." Trump told his devotees, "When they attack me, they are really attacking you." Both claimed to be victims rather than oppressors, both clung to power like their life depended on it, and neither man ever made a genuine public apology.

To help him dismantle the political and institutional fortress that had long protected Daryl Gates, Mayor Bradley assembled a unique coalition that included future secretary of state Warren Christopher, local journalists who felt that the reputation of their city was at stake, the "liberal Hollywood" community that I was a part of, local rappers like the members of N.W.A (Gates was name-checked in more than a dozen hip-hop lyrics), community activists who saw the struggle as an essential chapter in America's long-delayed march to racial justice, and Southern California millionaires who had come to see Gates as bad for business. Bradley's coalition also included Stanley Sheinbaum, who was appointed to the Los Angeles Police Commission shortly after the King beating.

Daryl Gates's image was animated by a toxic combination of racism and charisma, a persona that Trump would revive decades later.

Willie L. Williams replaced Gates as LAPD chief in 1992, and the LA City Charter was amended to make the department more accountable to the rest of city government. Those changes would not dissipate the effects of decades of racist public policy in Los Angeles. Nor did they fix the inequities that fueled the riot that exploded in Los Angeles that same year, after the officers charged with King's beating were acquitted by a jury with no Black members in the suburb of Simi Valley. But getting Gates to retire was a vital step in the right direction, and it wasn't easy. Gates benefited from a fear of crime, exacerbated by the crack epidemic and gang warfare. He also held on to power thanks to an elite unit of LAPD officers whose sole job was to gather personal dirt on local politicians.

Still, after a 16-month struggle, Bradley was able to win a rare victory on issues connected to law enforcement and race by forging a center-left coalition that focused on a specific, tangible agenda. That's a strategy that current Democratic Party leaders would do well to emulate. **N**

Adapted from Liberals With Attitude: The Rodney King Beating and the Fight for the Soul of Los Angeles. *Used with permission of the publisher, Akashic Books. Copyright © 2025 by Danny Goldberg.*

THE REMEMBERIN

Some people celebrated renewal. Some mourned loss. Still others just hoped for the comfort of a regular day. One word—*resilience*—kept popping up. That day—August 29, 2025—marked 20 years since the city of New Orleans was flooded after a series of levee failures in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The floods, which submerged 80 percent of the city, killed more than 1,400 people and displaced hundreds of thousands. New Orleanians still struggle to make sense of the catastrophe. They still yearn for what New Orleans once was, and dream of what it should become.

On that day, at 8:29 AM—precisely when, in 2005, the Industrial Canal's concrete floodwall broke, letting loose the torrent that inundated the Lower Ninth Ward—a small group gathered for the annual wreath-laying ceremony at Charity Hospital Cemetery No. 1. Standing in the middle of the Hurricane Katrina Memorial, in front of three mausoleums that hold the remains of 86 unclaimed or unidentified flood victims, Michael White raised his clarinet. Behind him was a black marble tablet inscribed with white letters hailing "the indomitable spirit of New Orleans." White, a celebrated musician and cultural historian who began playing at funerals and parades as a member of brass bands led by the trumpeter Ernest "Doc" Paulin and the banjoist-guitarist Danny Barker, performed a solo rendition of the hymn "We'll Understand It Better, By and By." He leaned into a gently swinging rhythm, bending notes and alternating between sweet and wailing tones. He did what musicians here have done for at least a century, especially at funerals: distill meaning and truth through traditional jazz.

Little in New Orleans is as singular as its culture—except maybe its politics. Ray Nagin, the city's mayor when Katrina hit, was indicted in 2013 on 21 corruption charges; he completed his sentence last year. At the Katrina Memorial this past August, Mayor

Larry Blumenfeld writes about jazz for The Wall Street Journal. *His reporting has appeared in* The New York Times *and* The Village Voice, *among other publications.*

ILLUSTRATION BY **VICTOR JUHASZ**

G SONG

Twenty years after Katrina, New Orleans demands respect.

LARRY BLUMENFELD

LaToya Cantrell, then nearing the end of her second and final term, was making her first public appearance since her federal indictment on charges of using public funds to facilitate a romantic relationship with her bodyguard, a city police officer. She nevertheless stood proudly at the podium. "New Orleans is still here," she said. She spoke of "toiling and giving, being selfless and sacrificing whatever necessary to ensure that New Orleans came back better and stronger than ever before."

The night before, Howard Miller, a different sort of city leader, sat among seven panelists at the New Orleans Jazz Museum in a public forum on "The State of New Orleans Culture: 20 Years After Katrina." Miller is Big Chief of Creole Wild West, one of the Black Masking groups, often referred to as Mardi Gras Indians, whose chants, hand-drummed beats, and elaborate feathered-and-beaded suits have been a fixture of neighborhood life, and an influence on popular music, for generations. "We were promised a bigger and better New Orleans," Miller said. "A lot of us came back only to find out the hard way that it's not better for us."

On October 11, New Orleans got a new leader. Helena Moreno, the Democratic vice president of the City Council, was elected mayor with 55 percent of the vote, outpacing her nearest rival by 33 points. During her campaign, Moreno had devoted considerable attention to quality-of-life concerns, especially the city's shortage of affordable housing and its notoriously crumbling roads. "I really hope that you are not weary," she told a jubilant crowd during her acceptance speech, "because the hard work is actually just ahead."

According to New Orleans & Company, the "official sales and marketing organization for New Orleans's tourism industry," things are on the upswing: More than 19 million visitors spent a record $10 billion last year. Yet the city's pothole-strewn streets make it seem more like Havana than a modern Southern metropolis. No matter how things look from the top, New Orleanians *are* weary. And for those who have made it their life's work to carry on the city's cultural traditions, that feeling is a familiar one.

B-flat all the way: A brass band plays in the Lower Ninth Ward during a parade on the anniversary of Katrina.

ALLEN TOUSSAINT, THE HIT-MAKING NEW ORLEANS pianist-composer-arranger-producer who died in 2015, once said that the city has its own distinct hum: "B-flat all the way." New Orleans shares endemic problems with other cities—budget deficits, failing infrastructure, racial divides, corruption. Yet it is also unique, and largely so because of its local culture, developed by a population that, prior to Katrina, featured the highest percentage of native-born residents of any American city. Here, past traumas, present indignities, and future hopes are best understood through that culture.

In early 2006, I traveled to New Orleans to write about the city's cultural community in the wake of the flood. Back then, Michael White was still living in temporary housing in Houston and commuting to New Orleans's Xavier University, where he held an endowed professorship; he'd lost his home and, with it, a museum's worth of recordings and memorabilia from the jazz legends who'd mentored him. "There's a feeling among many that some of our older cultural institutions, like parades and jazz funerals, are in the way of progress and don't fit in the new vision of New Orleans," he told me when we first spoke. "The message is that these traditions should only be used in a limited way to boost the image of New Orleans, as opposed to being real, viable aspects of our lives." That feeling hasn't changed.

Changing of the guard: New Orleans Mayor Helena Moreno during a debate hosted by the Urban League of Louisiana.

"We're dealing with lost promises," Tamara Jackson, another panelist at the Jazz Museum, said from the stage in August. "Twenty years ago, our culture was under attack, and 20 years later, it is still under attack." Jackson is the founder and president of VIP Ladies & Kids, one of the dozens of groups known as Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs whose Sunday "second-line" parades are essential neighborhood gatherings; she is also the president of the Social Aid & Pleasure Club Task Force, which advocates for these groups in the face of restrictive regulations and seemingly punitive fees. Three weeks earlier, Jackson had organized a "Save Our Secondline Culture" rally. Some 50 club members danced to insistent beats and horn-section calls from the New Groove Brass Band. At issue were daunting new insurance requirements, announced just before the start of parade season. "We are asking for clarity, but also for respect," she said.

I first met Jackson in 2007, when a consortium of clubs took the city to federal court, protesting a near-tripling of police security fees for parades. Given that footage of those first post-flood parades appears in nearly every documentary on Katrina, the circumstance seemed a cruel joke. "Should the law not be enjoined," read the complaint filed in *Social Aid & Pleasure Club Task Force v. City of New Orleans*, "there is very little doubt that plaintiff's cultural tradition will cease to exist." Nothing ceased. Yet Katie Schwartzmann, an attorney who represented the clubs, told me recently, "It's incredibly frustrating and striking to see a culture that we cherish back in the crosshairs, fighting in much the same way it had to in the wake of the flood after Hurricane Katrina."

If there has been a culture war in the city these past 20 years, that's hardly news. In 1918, a *New Orleans Times-Picayune* editorial about a then-nascent jazz culture declared, "We should make it a point of civic honor to suppress it." This year, a city-sponsored "Katrina 20" symposium started with the Free Agents Brass Band marching through Gallier Hall, playing "Just a Closer Walk With Thee" as if at a funeral procession. In 2007, I first met the band's bass drummer, Ellis Joseph, in the Tremé neighborhood. He'd been marching in the funeral procession for a fellow musician when a new resident in the neighborhood called the police, who promptly busted up the memorial and arrested two musicians for "disturbing the peace." "They came in a swarm, like we had AK-47s," Joseph told me then. "But we only had instruments."

Yet this culture preserves the peace. A recent

FROM TOP: BRANDON BELL / GETTY IMAGES; PETER G. FOREST / SIPA VIA AP IMAGES

report from the nonprofit Data Center, "The Politics of Resilience: Civic Engagement in New Orleans 20 Years After Katrina," emphasized the galvanizing effects of Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs and Black Masking groups. "To external observers, this activity might appear frivolous," it read. "These traditional organizations, however, have historically served not only a recreational purpose, but also as social support networks."

These are primarily Black communities, and they are shrinking. When I began documenting post-Katrina New Orleans, the poet and activist Amiri Baraka told me that then-President George W. Bush, whose administration had been suspiciously slow to respond to the devastating flooding in the city, "wants to make New Orleans shriveled and colorless." The city now has 120,000 fewer Black residents than it did before the flood. In the Tremé, long a hothouse for local jazz culture, the Black population has dropped from more than 90 percent in 2000 to roughly 57 percent today. The displacement of residents from tightly knit neighborhoods to outlying areas, mostly because of steeply rising rents, threatens not just this culture but its context.

During the 20th-anniversary commemoration, I spoke with Bruce "Sunpie" Barnes, a charismatic musician who has played professional football, been a park ranger, and is perhaps best known around town as Big Chief of the Northside Skull and Bone Gang, whose members go door-to-door each Mardi Gras morning waking up the neighborhood and, as he put it, "spreading a message of peace." "A lot of things washed away since the storm," Barnes told me. "Libraries of information—the real libraries, the ones that exist in our minds and hearts, the ephemeral knowledge that defines what our culture really is."

Soliloquy: The clarinetist Michael White plays a hymn near the Hurricane Katrina Memorial at Charity Hospital Cemetery No. 1.

The Katrina 20 symposium bore a slogan: "Resilient. Evolved. Empowered." But as public-interest attorney Tracie Washington, who spoke forcefully at an August 29 gathering in front of the Industrial Canal floodwall, explained, *resilience* has become a dirty word. When I'd visited the city in 2010 for the flood's fifth anniversary, signs tacked to lampposts grabbed a quote of hers from a TV interview: "Stop calling me RESILIENT. Because every time you say, 'Oh, they're so resilient,' that means you can do something else to me."

In his autobiography, *Treat It Gentle*, the great New Orleans clarinetist and soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet wrote of "the remembering song," which referred to a philosophy about cultural memory in the city and its liberating effect. This year, some of my closest friends in New Orleans didn't want to think about an anniversary. Before I left town, I visited Ben Jaffe, the bassist and sousaphonist who since 1993 has run Preservation Hall, which was pioneered by his parents, Allan and Sandra Jaffe, more than a half-century ago. He winced when I mentioned Katrina, but then said, "I believe that anniversaries are important. That's something that I grew up with, that musicians taught me—the idea that you have to repeat certain information, or else its meaning gets lost."

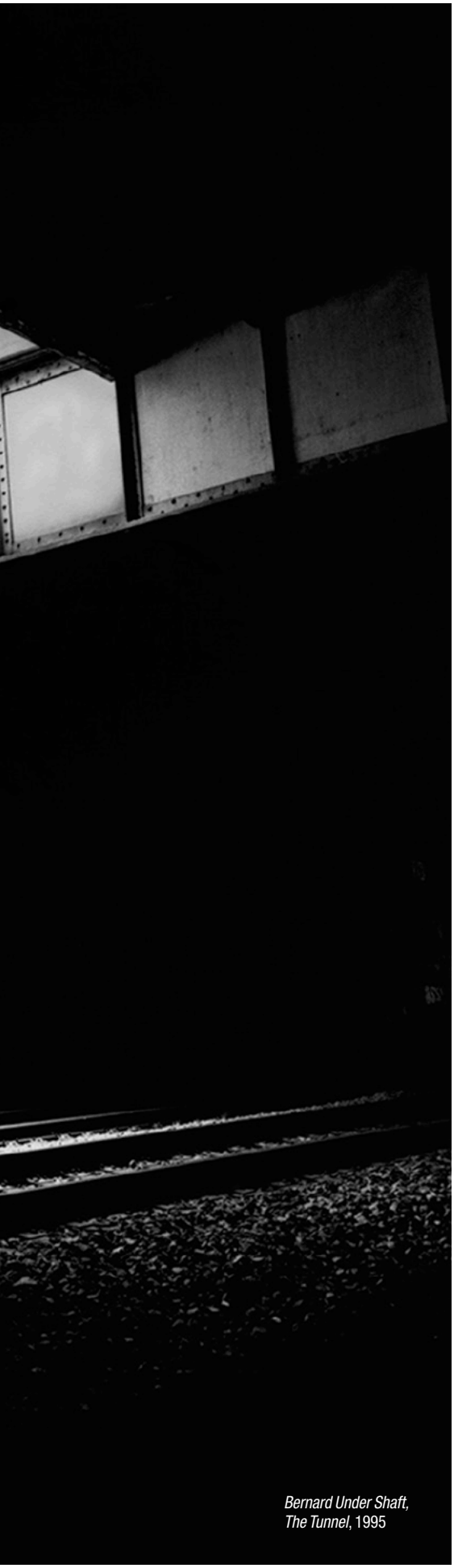
Later that night, I came back to hear the Preservation All-Stars, led by the drummer Shannon Powell. I'll never forget how, months after the flood, with the city not yet half-alive, Powell led jam sessions at the beloved and now-defunct Donna's Bar & Grill. Some musicians had driven from Atlanta or Houston to make the gig. They needed the money, sure, but most of all they needed to play for their hometown crowd. Powell, who lives in the heart of the Tremé, suffered a heart attack and a stroke a year ago and now uses a walker to get to the stage. He has only limited use of his left hand. Yet at Preservation Hall, he didn't miss a beat: His soft snare-drum rolls were as elegant as ever, his bold bass-drum kicks like declarations of authority. And for those listening closely, echoes of parade beats and Black Masking–group chants were embedded within his rendition of "Royal Garden Blues." This wasn't just a demonstration of resilience; it was a New Orleanian who had weathered the storm, who remembers not just the flood but all that came before it.

Helena Moreno, to her credit, defended the Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs regarding the insurance dustup in the run-up to the mayoral election. But for the second time in a row, New Orleans has a mayor "from away," as they say here (Moreno was born in Xalapa, Mexico, and grew up mostly in Texas). During her victory speech, Moreno said she was "ready to take our city in a new direction." Whatever promise that may hold, it is different from remembering. Regardless of her intentions, Moreno will be challenged by a fiscal crisis that one City Council member called, without irony, "a perfect storm." The city's cultural community fears that once the budget is drawn up, the recent promises of support will end up on the cutting-room floor.

In the Tremé, the Black population has dropped from more than 90 percent in 2000 to roughly 57 percent today.

The singular culture of New Orleans was born of resistance and, on some fundamental level, lives in opposition to authority. That is its remembering song. And yet it holds the keys to building coalitions. As the Moreno administration seeks a new direction, it would do well to listen to the past, and to invite to the table those who lived through it. If not, that next brass band may not find its community on a street corner. Shannon Powell might be the last of his kind. And this city like no other will start sounding and feeling more like everywhere else. N

LARRY BLUMENFELD



Bernard Under Shaft, The Tunnel, 1995

The Tunnel Home

In the 1990s, New Yorkers helped pioneer a bold but simple approach to homelessness: Housing First. Trump wants to end it.

PATRICK MARKEE

THE TRAIN TUNNEL RAN FOR 50 CITY BLOCKS, NEARLY THREE miles, under Manhattan streets and parkland. It stretched along the island's far west side, near the Hudson River, from West 72nd Street, underneath Riverside Park, all the way to West Harlem. It was one of those rare places that made you feel both inside and utterly outside the city—as if, for a few moments, you could convince yourself that you'd fled the chaos and noise of New York without ever leaving.

The first time I walked deep into the tunnel, I felt myself steadily, step by step, becoming wrapped in darkness. It was autumn, 1995, and as the sunlight from the southern entrance faded, I could feel my pupils dilating to capture the available light, allowing me to glimpse the grime-streaked walls, the graffiti, and the tracks with their battered wooden ties. I was suddenly aware of the descending silence, the background thrum and clatter of New York City fading away as if the volume knob on an old stereo were being turned down. But gradually, other sounds intruded: rats skittering on the gravel and rails, water dripping from the two-story-high ceiling or a ventilation grate—and then the echo of someone shouting from the tunnel mouth behind me. This dark, muted place, I was reminded, was also a living space, a home of last resort for dozens of desperate New Yorkers seeking refuge.

These men and women were about to be expelled from the tunnel. I was working with the Coalition for the Homeless, the nation's oldest homeless advocacy organization, just starting what would become a 20-year career defending the rights of vulnerable New Yorkers. My role was to help with a multi-organization effort to find safe and affordable homes for these tunnel dwellers. But it was anything but simple.

During the chilly months I spent visiting the tunnel, Rudy Giuliani was finishing his second year as mayor of New York. It was a grim moment. In the face of rising homelessness and immiseration, he had chosen to ramp up a set of harsh and overtly punitive policies, which some of the city's elites were already hailing as "saving" New York. Far better to arrest homeless people, the theory went, or erect bureaucratic barriers to aid, or even kick them out of municipal shelters and back onto the streets, than to find them stable places to live.

But inside the tunnel, working alongside some remarkable people who'd managed to survive some unimaginably trying circumstances, I saw what was possible when both their needs and their hopes were met. Even more, I learned some crucial lessons about the enduring, and pernicious, myths surrounding homelessness, and the way those myths not only warped New York's

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Patrick Markee, a longtime housing advocate, is the author of Placeless: Homelessness in the New Gilded Age.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **MARGARET MORTON**

response to the crisis but shaped the approach adopted by scores of other cities.

Now, all these decades later, I have been horrified to watch as the most extreme versions of these policies make a comeback, this time at the hands of Donald Trump.

No one knows precisely when the first homeless people began sleeping in the Riverside Park tunnel. Once, during an earlier part of the 20th century, the tracks of the West Side Line had served the slaughterhouses of downtown Manhattan and, later, the manufacturing zones in Chelsea and the Garment District. But as competing rail yards popped up in New Jersey and the Bronx, and as manufacturing evaporated from the city, train traffic on the West Side Line slowed and then halted. By the late 1970s, both the tracks and the tunnel had essentially been abandoned—at the same moment that a new form of mass homelessness had emerged citywide.

New York was the original epicenter of the modern homelessness crisis, the place where it exploded into visibility. By 1989, some 25,000 people were sleeping each night in municipal shelters, and thousands more were sleeping rough on the streets. As homelessness worsened, some desperate people sought makeshift shelter in increasingly remote places, including the subway network, bridge abutments, and train tunnels. By the early 1990s, dozens of homeless people were sleeping each night in the Riverside Park tunnel, and many had built shanties and other ramshackle dwellings there, most of them crowded near the southern entrance.

The backlash era: Above, police evict a homeless man from Tompkins Square Park in 1991. Right, homeless New Yorkers and their advocates protest Mayor Giuliani's punitive policies on homelessness.

Though many people felt safer in the tunnel than on the streets, it was still a treacherous place. Rats roamed free, garbage accumulated, there was no running water, and the winter cold and damp threatened death or severe injury by hypothermia or frostbite. But with train traffic virtually halted, many struggling people chose the hazards of the tunnel over those of the subways or of the vast, warehouse-like shelters that the city had hastily created in the first decade of the crisis.

This dark, muted place was also a living space, a home of last resort for dozens of desperate New Yorkers.

Some folks ended up living in the tunnel for years. Joe, a Vietnam War veteran, called it home for more than two decades; during much of that time, he lived with his partner, Cathy, in a sturdy plywood shack with a mattress propped on plastic milk crates. José, who had lost the last of a series of low-wage jobs when a garment factory closed, stayed for 13 years. Bernard, dubbed the "mayor" of the tunnel, lived there for more than a decade in a ramshackle camp he'd fashioned deep underground.

For a brief period in the 1990s, the Riverside Park tunnel dwellers captured the imagination of New Yorkers and even those beyond the city. Tales of the homeless people in the train tunnel were recounted in numerous news articles and nonfiction books, as well as at least one film and one novel. Perhaps the best accounts came from the photographer Margaret Morton's 1995 book *The Tunnel*, which included direct recollections of the tunnel dwellers she knew so well, alongside her austere and luminous photographs. Marc Singer's documentary *Dark Days*, shot over several years on black-and-white 16-millimeter film and memorably set to the music of the hip-hop artist and turntablist DJ Shadow, was a moving and gritty chronicle of life in the tunnel.

But alongside these sympathetic portraits—and far more common—was a harsh, distorted image of homeless New Yorkers, one born of a creeping "compassion fatigue" and the mean-spirited politics of what came to be known as the "backlash era." Among the news media, the rise in homelessness was rarely discussed in terms of actual causes and real solutions. It was seldom recognized as the structural problem it has always been—the consequence of an acute and worsening housing affordability crisis, which was itself the result of broad economic shifts, neoliberal policies, an ascendant right-wing politics, and systemic racism.

Instead, the tabloids spilled thousands of gallons of ink about the "squeegee men" gathering near the entrance of the Lincoln Tunnel and other commuter corridors, or people like Larry Hogue, a homeless veteran dubbed "the Wild Man," who'd suffered a traumatic brain injury during his military service and was prone to erratic, sometimes aggressive behavior. In the ranting world of the tabloids, these few individuals came to stand in for all homeless and poor New Yorkers, creating a cartoonish, menacing picture of homelessness that congealed into a cultivated narrative about New York City's decline and crisis.

In similar fashion, some of the stories and accounts of the people living in the tunnel morphed into urban folklore, or even something worse. Jennifer Toth's 1993 book *The*

FROM TOP: DAVID A. CANTOR / AP; BUD WILLIAMS / NY *DAILY NEWS* ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Mole People became perhaps the best-known account and remained in print for years, unlike similar ethnographic studies. But its stigmatizing title would outlive the book itself, and the term *mole people*—indeed, the idea of some alien species of homeless tunnel dwellers—came to permeate the popular culture of the era.

During my decades of work as an advocate, I fielded countless inquiries about "mole people": news reporters looking to interview or film the "underground homeless"; policymakers convinced that vast numbers of homeless people dwelled under the city's streets; students and others entranced by the absurd idea of tribal communities, with their own exotic rituals, living in near isolation amid a sprawling metropolis. The name conjured up the image of a separate race of beings, like H.G. Wells's Morlocks or the villainous Mole Man's blind minions from the *Fantastic Four* comic books—a race far removed from regular New Yorkers.

These ideas were buttressed by a cruel rhetorical scaffolding built up by Giuliani and his right-wing allies. Homeless New Yorkers were routinely depicted as pathological, crazy, drug-addicted, or violent, even though homeless people were far more likely to be the victims of violence than to commit it and were victimized at a far higher rate than non-homeless people. Likewise, Giuliani and his followers would effectively blame homeless people for their homelessness. They'd portray them as lazy, resistant to work, and lacking "personal responsibility," and would then craft policies supposedly intended to help them address these alleged failings, but that were really designed to deny or cut off safety-net benefits for them. The fact that the vast majority of homeless New Yorkers were Black or Latino only made these stereotypes more pernicious, demonstrating how rooted they were in the wider American legacy of racism and the specific white-backlash politics that Giuliani and his ilk practiced.

EVY MAGES / NY *DAILY NEWS* ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES

IT WAS AMID THIS ANTI-HOMELESS FERvor that my colleagues and I began our work in the Riverside Park train tunnel. In 1991, a rail extension was built to allow non-diesel cars, like Amtrak's passenger trains, to travel to Pennsylvania Station. Amtrak announced that it would begin passenger train service through the tunnel, and in 1995, after the trains had started to run again, the agency prepared to expel the homeless people from the tunnel for good.

Hearing from tunnel residents about the impending eviction, a group of neighbors and activists on Manhattan's Upper West Side raised a ruckus and contacted the Coalition for the Homeless. Coalition staff investigated and, among other things, discovered that during the previous year, in November 1994, the secretary of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Henry Cisneros, had quietly set aside some 250 federal housing vouchers for homeless people living in train tunnels. He had taken this unprecedented action after witnessing firsthand, on a visit to New York, dozens of homeless people sleeping rough in the subway system. However, many months later, only two of those vouchers had actually been issued. The Coalition urged federal officials to halt the tunnel evictions while it worked with another local nonprofit organization to use the vouchers to help move the tunnel dwellers into their own homes.

New York was the original epicenter of the modern homelessness crisis, the place where it exploded into visibility.

This plan was considered audacious. At the time, a widespread myth existed that there was a group of "hardcore" homeless people who simply could not live in homes of their own—that these folks were somehow too sick, too unready, too broken—and the people of the tunnels were seen as prime examples of that mythical group. But to anyone who'd talked with the Riverside Park tunnel dwellers, it was clear that merely offering them a worse alternative—a cot in the shelter system or some other cold public space—would never succeed. What they needed and wanted was real housing.

Cruelty first: Rudy Giuliani, who pushed a relentlessly harsh anti-homeless agenda during his time as mayor, alongside his pal Donald Trump.

When I first visited in late 1995, the work of relocating the tunnel dwellers to their own homes was underway. A young caseworker from our partner organization, Project Renewal, had done an incredible job navigating the byzantine bureaucracy involved in dispensing IDs and other necessary documents for people who'd long lost them or never had them at all, and then completing the paperwork for the federal housing vouchers. My Coalition colleagues had begun rounding up the last holdouts—a handful of tunnel residents who feared leaving the only home they'd known for years or didn't believe Amtrak's expulsion order was real.

At the same time, folks like José, Bernard, Joe, and Cathy, who were all in the process of moving to apartments, had been joined—and in some cases replaced—by a group of recent immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, many of them day laborers who had fallen on hard times. My focus, as a speaker of passable Spanish, was to work with the Latino immigrants to obtain the required paperwork and ease their fears about moving from the familiar tunnel to an unfamiliar home. But I was also lucky enough to get to know, even if only briefly, Bernard and the other longtime tunnel residents and learn some vital lessons.

THE MOST CRUCIAL LESSON INVOLVED THE MEANING OF GENUINE, ENDURing solutions to the problem of homelessness. Since the early days of the modern crisis, advocates and homeless people themselves had argued that subsidized housing combined with support services could create stable homes, even for people with long-term or repeated episodes of homelessness, including those struggling with severe mental illness and addiction disorders. This combination had become known as "supportive housing."

In the 1990s, this supposedly utopian approach to homelessness came to be buttressed by a growing body of empirical evidence. Academic researchers found that the "success rate" of supportive housing—the share of formerly homeless people living with disabilities who remained in their homes—was extraordinarily high. And by the early part of the following decade, the first of many studies on the costs to taxpayers of supportive housing had also found that supportive housing was in fact cheaper for taxpayers than leaving homeless people with health problems to cycle between costly shelters, hospitals, and jails.

A growing number of politicians pushed the myth of "hardcore" homeless people who were simply not "housing-ready."

The other breakthrough in the 1990s came from the pioneering work of a community psychologist named Sam Tsemberis. In talking to homeless men on New York City's streets, he found that although many refused to go to the large municipal shelters, they would be willing to move into an apartment immediately, contrary to the prevalent myth of the "housing-resistant" homeless person. So he tried exactly that, and through his nonprofit organization, Pathways to Housing, he marshaled support services—visits from social workers, access to medication and treatment, and more—to help the men keep their homes. The logic behind this approach was blindingly obvious, confirming what homeless people themselves had long experienced: that it was far more difficult to engage in mental health treatment or recover from addiction while homeless (whether sleeping in a shelter or on the streets) than to do so while living in a real home. Tsemberis called this approach "Housing First," and over time, it was replicated by other groups in New York and across the country.

The way home: A formerly homeless man stands in his new apartment at Huston Commons, a Housing First program in Portland, Maine.

But in its earliest years, Housing First was met with skepticism. A growing number of politicians—including many, like future governor Andrew Cuomo, from the right flank of the Democratic Party—pushed the notion that "hardcore" homeless people were simply not "housing-ready" and needed to undergo therapeutic programs of one type or another before they could be provided with housing aid. This idea came to be formalized as the "continuum-of-care approach," and it would first take hold at the local and then the national level. It was designed to force desperate people to jump through bureaucratic hoops and wait long periods in order—maybe—to secure housing aid. It reflected, at its root, the poisonous notion that homeless people were somehow different, incomplete as individuals, and not yet ready for a home.

But during my months visiting the Riverside Park tunnel, it became ever more clear that this "treatment-first" philosophy was absurd; all I could see were people who could make a home literally anywhere.

BRIANNA SOUKUP / *PORTLAND PRESS HERALD* VIA GETTY IMAGES

Even as the continuum-of-care approach was becoming local gospel, our work with the Riverside Park tunnel dwellers was proving to be one of the early Housing First–style success stories. By the time Amtrak fully fenced off the tunnel in 1996, we had helped some 40 homeless people who'd lived underground move into permanent housing. Almost none of them ever returned to homelessness.

Many tunnel dwellers were helped by the federal rental vouchers that advocates had managed to pry loose from HUD. Others ended up in supportive housing, where they were assisted by social workers and received mental health treatment, sometimes for a brief, transitional period and sometimes for years afterward. These residents included Bob, a longtime denizen of the tunnel who stopped using drugs after moving into a former single-room-occupancy hotel in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood that had been converted into supportive housing with on-site social services. Others, like Joe and Cathy, who lived in an East Harlem walk-up apartment, and Bernard, who moved in with his father in Harlem, were finally able to afford their own homes and avoid returning to the streets.

I saw some of the former tunnel folks in 1999 at the funeral for one of the original tunnel dwellers. José had lived for four years in an apartment in the Morrisania neighborhood of the Bronx with the help of a federal housing voucher, staying there until his death. Seeing the old faces from the tunnel at the memorial—and over the years, from time to time, at the Coalition's offices—I remembered thinking they looked different: calmer, healthier, less gaunt and desperate. But still, and I may have been imagining this, they also looked haunted, as if the years in the tunnel would never leave them.

In the 21st century, the Housing First approach finally began to break through the wall of myth and bias that had blocked its adoption. Several US cities embraced it, with resounding success. Houston managed to reduce its homeless population by more than half using Housing First programs. Utah cut its population of long-term homeless people by more than 90 percent with Housing First assistance. And since 2010, Housing First programs have helped to reduce homelessness among military veterans nationwide by 55 percent. In New York City, where homelessness has spiked under the Eric Adams administration, Zohran Mamdani has pledged to address street homelessness with supportive housing and community mental health programs.

Research bears out the wisdom of this approach. A systematic review of 26 such studies found that participants in Housing First programs spent 88 percent fewer days homeless than participants in "treatment-first" programs.

But despite the manifest success of Housing First and supportive housing more broadly,

Donald Trump and the Republican Party have set their sights on dismantling these programs and demonizing homeless people. Echoing the invective wielded by Giuliani and his sidekicks in the "backlash era," Fox News and other right-wing outlets now regularly depict homeless people as criminals and addicts. The popular Fox News host Jesse Watters has called homeless people "zombies" and "an invasive species." In September, the *Fox and Friends* host Brian Kilmeade called for the execution by "involuntary lethal injection" of homeless people living with mental illness. Trump himself has embraced this language: In a 2023 campaign video, unsubtly titled "Ending the Nightmare of the Homeless, Drug Addicted, and Dangerously Deranged," Trump promised to arrest all homeless people and remove them to "tent cities" on the outskirts of urban centers.

Now Republicans are making this pledge a reality. Despite Salt Lake City's record of success with Housing First, Utah officials are building a facility on vacant tracts of land outside the city to create a complex where more than 1,000 homeless people will be forcibly locked away. An advocate from the National Homelessness Law Center compared the planned facility to the Japanese internment camps during World War II.

Back in Washington, the administration has stuck closely to the Project 2025 instruction manual that candidate Trump so vociferously claimed to disavow. In July, Trump issued an executive order, crudely titled "Ending Crime and Disorder on America's Streets," that called for eliminating federal "support for 'housing first' policies that deprioritize accountability and fail to promote treatment, recovery, and self-sufficiency." In their stead, the order pushed the punitive and far less effective approach of hinging housing on treatment or counseling, all the while making it easier to arrest and even institutionalize people. In November, the administration went further, pulling federal funding for Housing First programs and redirecting it toward the "treatment-first" model. Advocates say that the new policy risks sending 170,000 formerly homeless people back to the streets.

Even more dangerous, Trump has proposed drastic cuts to federal housing programs—which are already so underfunded that they assist only one in four eligible low-income households nationwide—along with two-year time limits on rental assistance. Such policies will not only harm people who are currently homeless but will inevitably uproot and displace countless low-income families. Indeed, policy experts who reviewed the administration's plans estimate that some 4 million people could lose federal housing aid—at a moment when estimates of the US homeless population (more than 770,000 people per night) are the highest ever recorded.

All of this is dangerous, but none of it is wholly new. Undergirding these political and policy attacks is the same pernicious and racist philosophy that reigned during the "backlash era." It's a worldview that sees homeless people as "broken," dysfunctional, and even pathological—just as the Riverside Park tunnel dwellers were often portrayed decades ago.

Housing last: A rendering of Utah's planned homeless "campus," where people will be required to engage in treatment and work.

COURTESY OF THE UTAH OFFICE OF HOMELESS SERVICES

IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN DIFFICULT TO DESCRIBE THE TUNNEL WITHOUT MAKing it seem either too grim or, strange to say, too beautiful—and it could, indeed, be very beautiful. Often it was both at once.

At the southern end, where most of the shanties were gathered, the scene was chaotic, and the smell—of food, of refuse, of urine, and what I came to think of as a mixture of masculine sweat and despair—was overwhelming. Garbage and rubble, railroad ties and rusted metal, and the usual urban detritus—plastic bags, fast-food wrappers, and soda bottles—were strewn amid the shacks. But heading north, into the darkness, all that changed. There, the most unforgettable part of the tunnel was the unexpected light—diffuse, hazy, and breathtaking.

One early-winter day, around the time he left the tunnel for good, "Mayor" Bernard took me on a walk northward into its depths. We continued past the sprawling settlement, complete with a campfire and makeshift benches, that Bernard had built for himself on the west side of the tracks at a spot where the tunnel's edge widened away from the rails. We talked as we walked, with me asking a dozen undoubtedly naïve questions about daily survival underground, and Bernard answering in his laconic, patient fashion, until we gradually lapsed into silence.

By the time Amtrak fully fenced off the tunnel in 1996, we had helped some 40 homeless people move into permanent housing.

But most remarkable of all were the enormous, slanting shafts of light, descending slowly (if one can say that about beams of light) from the checkerboard grates in the tunnel ceiling. Perhaps sensing my wonder, Bernard paused alongside me and said something like, "I really will miss this place. Sometimes, it's just so beautiful."

Thinking back on that moment, as I have many times in the years since, it struck me that one of the truths about the people in the tunnel was not that they were broken or lost, but rather that they had lost. They'd lost jobs and money; they'd lost family; they'd lost countless belongings; they'd certainly lost homes. And then, being expelled from the tunnel, albeit to safer and more secure dwellings, they lost something again. **N**

Adapted from Placeless: Homelessness in the New Gilded Age. *Used with permission of the publisher, Melville House Publishing. Copyright © 2025 by Patrick Markee.*

RECLAIMING OUR POWER, REDEEMING THE WORK OF FOOLS

These progressives fighting for our democracy know what has always been true: The people have the power.

A year that began with the second inauguration of Donald Trump was always going to be suspect. But 2025 became overwhelming. The president's cruelty and lawlessness, along with his aggressive determination to deconstruct both government and civil society, shocked Americans, whom polls now suggest are deeply dissatisfied with his reckless tenure. This year's *Nation* Honor Roll recognizes activists and artists, pastors, and political leaders who have spoken truth to Trump's destructive power and forged a resistance that is evident in mass demonstrations and election results—and in an emerging hope, as Patti Smith once counseled, "That the people have the power / To redeem the work of fools." *John Nichols*

PROPHETIC VOICE
Mariann Budde

EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF WASHINGTON

After a reinauguration day that saw him fêted by billionaires and right-wing ideologues who hailed the supposed triumph of his MAGA vision, Trump imagined that he would be celebrated once more at the traditional interfaith prayer service at the Washington National Cathedral. But he got something else altogether when the Right Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, the longtime Episcopal bishop of Washington, delivered a homily in which she informed the new president that "Millions have put their trust in you. And as you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy on the people in our country who are scared now." Describing groups that Trump had already smeared with hateful rhetoric and now was threatening from the Oval Office, Bishop Budde explained that transgender children "fear for their lives" and pleaded for immigrants who faced the threat of deportation. "I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away, and that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here." Trump experienced the homily as a rare rebuke and dismissed Budde as a "Radical Left hard line Trump hater." He complained that "She brought her church into the World of politics in a very ungracious way." In fact, Budde embraced the prophetic tradition of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and other faith leaders who have spoken truth to presidential power. "I am not," said Budde, "going to apologize for asking for mercy for others."

ILLUSTRATION BY **BRIAN STAUFFER**

RECLAIMING OUR POWER, REDEEMING THE WORK OF FOOLS

US HOUSE MEMBER
Delia Ramirez

"We are under attack by our own federal government," declared Delia Ramirez, a Democratic US Representative from Illinois, as President Trump's "Operation Midway Blitz" brought a violent and lawless federal immigration crackdown to Chicago. Ramirez was not the only official who spoke up; Illinois Governor JB Pritzker and Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson also called out the vile behavior of ICE and Border Patrol agents in the blue city—one of many targeted by Trump and his minions—with Johnson decrying ICE as Trump's "private, militarized occupying force" and calling for a general strike. But Ramirez, the daughter of Guatemalan immigrants, brought a dynamic combination of experience and passion to the fight.

"They want to normalize violence. They want to normalize cruelty. They want us to be OK with what they're doing so that you won't question what they do next," she told 250,000 No Kings demonstrators on October 18. "But let me be very clear to Donald Trump and all those criminals: You will not break the city of Chicago. Ever!"

"They want to normalize cruelty. They want us to be OK with it so you won't question what they do next."
—Representative Delia Ramirez

What has stood out about the response from Ramirez—a bold advocate for defending the social-safety net, empowering workers and unions, taxing the rich, and cutting the Pentagon budget—has been her determination to bring the fight for her constituents to Washington. She used her position on the House Committee on Homeland Security to demand investigations into the administration's "violent, middle of the night operations that traumatize entire communities and put innocent men, women and children, including U.S. citizens, at risk." Then, in October, when more than a dozen House members joined Ramirez in Chicago to conduct on-the-ground oversight of the Department of Homeland Security's lawless actions in Chicago, she detailed how "our residents have been surveilled, they've been threatened, they've been tear-gassed, they've been hit with pepper balls, they've been shot, they've been subjected to warrantless arrests and precision immobilization-technique maneuvers, and kidnapped and disappeared," and declared, "We will hold them accountable."

DEMOCRATIC SENATOR
Chris Van Hollen

When the senior Democratic senator from Maryland directed a mid-September "*J'Accuse!*" at top New York Democrats—including Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer—for failing to embrace the mayoral candidacy of Democratic nominee Zohran Mamdani as the "kind of spineless politics [that] people are sick of," some observers were surprised that a Capitol Hill veteran would be so blunt in decrying his own party's listlessness. But they obviously hadn't been paying attention in recent years. Chris Van Hollen has rebuked both President Trump and former president Joe Biden for failing to break decisively with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over Gaza; traveled to El Salvador to meet with deported migrant Kilmar Abrego Garcia in an open challenge to the Trump administration's lawless strategy of expelling immigrants without due process; joined colleagues in condemning "President Trump's un-American, unconstitutional transgender military service ban for being a blatant violation of our brave servicemembers' civil rights and weakening our national security"; and worked with Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) on legislation to tax the rich. In November, after Schumer botched the government-shutdown fight, Democratic Senate candidates called for new leadership in the chamber, and liberal groups dispatched a memo that pointed to the Marylander as a potential replacement for the minority leader, arguing that Van Hollen "represents the rare figure who combines experience, credibility, and a forward-leaning vision." Van Hollen's strength is his recognition that, as he put it, "This job is not worth it if you constantly have to be putting your finger to the wind." At a time when Americans are desperate for principled leadership, that's a mantra every Democrat should consider.

ATTORNEY GENERAL
Letitia James

New York State's indefatigable attorney general has, since Trump returned to office, led almost two dozen Democratic attorneys general in fighting Trump 2.0's lawless actions with dozens of lawsuits. This is an extension of the many years Letitia James has spent demanding accountability from the 45th and now 47th president. Vowing to get vengeance, Trump installed a woefully inexperienced US attorney, Lindsey Halligan, to indict James for mortgage fraud. James fought back against this vindictive prosecution, and in late November a federal judge dismissed the charges on the grounds that Halligan's appointment was unlawful.

Through it all, New York's AG has kept fighting for the people of the state and the country. A few days before the administration threatened to withdraw food-stamp benefits from almost 42 million Americans, James and her fellow AGs sued to stop it. A federal judge in Massachusetts sided with them, ruling that the government is "statutorily mandated to use the previously appropriated SNAP contingency reserve when necessary."

At the same time, James and the able lawyers in her state office took on landlords in a rural New York county for discriminating against low-income tenants; won an order protecting teaching about gender identity and trans issues in schools; blocked a cutoff of funding to school-based mental-health services; and set up an election-protection hotline in advance of New York's November election. Remarkably, she did all that in a single month: October. And she's continued to defend abortion providers and transgender people in the face of the right's deliberate attacks. No one can argue that James has taken her focus off of New York and national issues while she fights the man-baby who wants to be a tyrant-king. In fact, she's working harder than ever. *Joan Walsh*

NEW POLITICS
Zohran Mamdani's Campaign

It's been said that Zohran Mamdani is a once-in-a-generation candidate, and there is no question that the 34-year-old democratic socialist's successful mayoral campaign elec-

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: OFFICIAL PORTRAIT; JOHN PARASKEVAS / *NEWSDAY* RM VIA GETTY IMAGES; DMITRY SHEIN CC 4.0; KAYLA BARTKOWSKI / GETTY IMAGES

trified the politics not just of New York City but the entire nation. But Mamdani is the first to say that as a little-known, Uganda-born, Muslim state legislator, he could not have broken through without the remarkable team that came together to help elect him. At a time when everyone recognized the need to stop listening to traditional consultants and pollsters, Mamdani's campaign was guided by idealistic young activists: primary campaign manager Elle Bisgaard-Church (now his mayoral chief of staff), creative director Andrew Epstein, media strategist Morris Katz, and field director Tascha Van Auken, to name but a few. With support from the Democratic Socialists of America, the Working Families Party, and key unions, Mamdani built a campaign that outworked and outsmarted the political establishment and inspired candidates nationwide. If you're looking for the future of American politics, start here.

Katrina vanden Heuvel and John Nichols

ACTIVIST GROUP
Free DC

It's hard to think of an advocacy group with a more timely name than Free DC, as citizens of our nation's capital continue to fight their occupation by ICE and associated federal and military forces. The organization was founded in 2023, as part of the backlash against Mayor Muriel Bowser's veto of City Council–approved criminal-justice reforms that sought to reduce maximum sentences. The whole dismal episode culminated with President Joe Biden caving before a new GOP majority in the House as it demagogued the reforms as criminal-coddling threats to public safety. In reality, the crime fight highlighted the unjust federal strong-arming of local governance in DC, going back to the disenfranchisement of the city's African American population during Reconstruction. The launch of Free DC revived the long-standing crusade to wrest full independence (and statehood) from the district's overseers in Congress, who still have the power to quash policy initiatives while threatening the district with extortionate budget cuts. That shakedown dynamic allowed Congress to effectively steal $1 billion from DC's budget during last spring's vote on the Trump administration's comprehensive tax-and-spending bill. With the multifront authoritarian MAGA putsch facing minimal resistance at the federal level, Free DC's grassroots campaign to reclaim self-rule in our nation's occupied and budget-captive capital represents a key path forward in the crusade to make democracy matter again.

Chris Lehmann

GLOBAL ACTIVIST
David Adler

A political economist who has served on the foreign-policy advisory team of Bernie Sanders and as director of policy for Yanis Varoufakis and the Democracy in Europe Movement (DiEM25), David Adler is now the co–general coordinator of Progressive International, which "seeks to unite, organize, and mobilize progressive forces around the world." That, by any measure, is full-time work. Yet in September, Adler jumped aboard the lead vessel in the Global Sumud Flotilla, a fleet of civilian vessels that sailed to Gaza as "the largest convoy in history to traverse the Mediterranean Sea with a mission to establish a humanitarian corridor to reach the starving people of Palestine." The flotilla's participants—doctors and aid workers, parliamentarians and journalists, lawyers and grassroots activists from around the world—traveled with the "shared conviction that something must be done to halt the destruction of Gaza—and that if governments refuse to do it, then ordinary people will." In a letter published by *The Nation* as the flotilla approached Gaza on the eve of Yom Kippur, Adler wrote, "I joined this flotilla just like any other delegate—to defend humanity, before it is too late. But on Yom Kippur, I am reminded that I am also here because my Jewish heritage demands it.… If Israeli forces intercept us on Yom Kippur, then let them see what true atonement looks like. Not fasting in comfort while starving their neighbors. Not praying in safety while dropping bombs over their heads. Atonement means action." The flotilla was intercepted, and Adler reported being abused by Israelis and taunted by American diplomats. He counseled that his mistreatment "pales in comparison to the treatment that Palestinians endure every single day," yet he argued that it illustrated "how rogue the state of Israel has become in its utter disregard for basic international humanitarian law."

KNOW-YOUR-RIGHTS CAMPAIGN
Win Without War's "Not What You Signed Up For" Project

With the Trump administration putting military personnel at legal, moral, and physical risk through reckless and unnecessary domestic deployments, Win Without War's "Not What You Signed Up For" project has launched a campaign to reach out to National Guard members who have been deployed to DC, Chicago, Memphis, and other cities.

After the Trump administration deployed the Tennessee National Guard to Memphis in violation of state law and against the wishes of local officials, Win Without War posted a billboard advertising NotWhatYouSignedUpFor.org, a website connecting members of the military with information about their rights while in uniform, including how to respond to unlawful orders. (The billboard is visible on Memphis's historic Beale Street, where National Guard troops have recently patrolled.)

Win Without War wants troops to know that someone has their back—because the Trump administration doesn't.

The "Not What You Signed Up For" project highlights the work of principled organizations that are experienced in counseling service members, including About Face, the GI Rights Hotline, and the National Lawyers Guild Military Law Task Force. They want troops to know that someone has their back—because the Trump administration doesn't.

Katrina vanden Heuvel

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF DAVID ADLER; HEATHER DIEHL / GETTY IMAGES

ONLINE ACTIVISM

Track AIPAC / AIPAC Tracker

When Israel's assault on Gaza turned into what Casey Kennedy described as "a live-streamed genocide," the anti-corruption campaigner started asking why so few people were "connecting these dots of why are our officials OK with being complicit in this? Why are we sending American tax dollars to be used for war crimes? Why are we sending American-made weapons to murder women and children and innocent civilians?" Kennedy and Cory Archibald, a veteran leader of the group Brand New Congress who's campaigned for candidates like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Cori Bush, set out to "pull back the curtain" on the role played by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in influencing US policy. Their vehicle is the website Track AIPAC and the related X account AIPAC Tracker, which reveals the money that Democratic and Republican candidates have taken from the billionaire-funded organization that backs Netanyahu's policies. Launched in April 2024, AIPAC Tracker now has almost 400,000 followers. *Breaking Points* host Krystal Ball credits it with playing a major role in making AIPAC "a lightning rod in American politics" and convincing even centrist Democrats to reject donations associated with the organization, while "more and more candidates," Archibald notes, "are running on an anti-AIPAC platform."

SUNDAY-MORNING RADIO

Keep Hope Alive

The Rev. Jesse Jackson has been ailing in recent years, yet his Rainbow Coalition vision echoes across the land each Sunday morning in the form of a two-hour radio show organized each week by Jackson in consultation with his daughter, Santita, a veteran broadcaster. Aired from Los Angeles to Washington, Phoenix to Chicago, St. Louis to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, the program features members of Congress, state legislators, authors, academics, and activists. While there's a sharp focus on domestic debates, the show's great strength may well be its internationalism, as it maintains Jackson's emphasis on diplomacy and peacemaking, with regular segments on the Middle East (featuring guests such as longtime Rainbow aide and activist Jim Zogby, the founder and president of the Arab American Institute) and Latin America. And, over many years, this is where listeners have heard thoughtful assessments of the outcry against Trump's continued threats toward Venezuela.

"Why are we sending American tax dollars to be used for war crimes?"

—Casey Kennedy, cofounder of Track AIPAC

PATRIOT

Bruce Springsteen

The rocker whose name is synonymous with the phrase "Born in the USA" toured Europe just months after Trump and his wrecking crew retook the White House. It could have been a respite from the chaos at home. Instead, Springsteen chose to speak to the world about the "tyranny" that gripped the nation that his songs have chronicled for more than five decades.

"In America, the richest men are taking satisfaction in abandoning the world's poorest children to sickness and death," Springsteen told the crowd in Manchester, England. "And in my country, they are taking sadistic pleasure in the pain that they inflict on loyal American workers, they are rolling back historic civil-rights legislation that led to a more just and plural society. They are abandoning our great allies and siding with dictators against those struggling for their freedom."

Springsteen was attacked on Fox News and by an angry Trump, who dismissed him as a "dried out prune of a rocker" who "ought to KEEP HIS MOUTH SHUT until he gets back in the Country." Springsteen, who recognizes that dissent is a true expression of patriotism, was not intimidated. Believing in the power of music, the heir to Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger told the world—and Americans who were desperate for a resistance message—that "the mighty E Street Band is here tonight to call upon the righteous power of art, of music, of rock and roll, in dangerous times. In my home, the America I love, the America I've written about that has been a beacon of hope and liberty for 250 years, is currently in the hands of a corrupt, incompetent, and treasonous administration. Tonight, we ask all who believe in democracy and the best of our American experience to rise with us, raise your voices against the authoritarianism, and let freedom ring."

POLITICAL HISTORY

Juanita Tolliver's *A More Perfect Party*

Shirley Chisholm's influence on American politics keeps growing. In April, the voters of Oakland elected as their mayor former US representative Barbara Lee, who began her political journey as a Democratic delegate backing Chisholm's groundbreaking 1972 presidential bid. Lee always recalls Chisholm's immense contribution as the Black woman who broke down the barriers of American politics to advocate for economic, social, and racial justice—and peace. But Tolliver, an MSNBC political analyst and a contributor to *TheGrio*, recognized that more Americans need to know about Chisholm's presidential bid. Tolliver tells that story in *A More Perfect Party: The Night Shirley Chisholm and Diahann Carroll Reshaped Politics*, which focuses on a remarkable Beverly Hills party in 1972 at which Carroll, then at the peak of her acting career, hosted Chisholm, Lee, Huey Newton, Berry Gordy, Flip Wilson, David Frost, Goldie Hawn, and dozens of other artists and activists. A brilliant examination of a time when politics and art combined to imagine a more perfect union, this is a book of engaging and necessary political history.

DOCUMENTARY

Steal This Story, Please!

Did you know that the intrepid independent journalist Amy Goodman dotes on her dog, Zazu, who is named for the historic youth movement in France during the German

CLOCKWISE FROM MIDDLE RIGHT: COURTESY OF JUANITA TOLLIVER; CC 2.0; CC 4.0; DIA DIPASUPIL/ GETTY IMAGES

occupation? Or that Goodman's grandfather was an Orthodox rabbi who taught her to "accept all questioning"? Or that she once asked former president George H.W. Bush, to his face, if he was a war criminal? It's all in *Steal This Story, Please!*—an intimate, instructive, and often surprising documentary about Goodman and the power of independent media. Directors Tia Lesson and Carl Deal go behind the scenes at *Democracy Now!*, the independent news outlet Goodman cofounded. The program now airs on more than 1,500 public broadcasting stations worldwide, providing frontline reports on the most consequential stories of our time, from the global climate catastrophe to the war in Gaza. The documentary's great power comes through its deployment of archival footage—from a young Goodman's reporting on a 1991 massacre in East Timor to the days after 9/11 when she and her crew remained in *Democracy Now!*'s Chinatown office so they could give a full report from Ground Zero.

This is the dramatic story of a heroic journalist confronting and overtaking the forces that have sought to silence and even kill her. Also heroic are the featured members of her team, including the pathbreaking Juan Gonzalez, the charismatic Nermeen Shaikh, and the show's correspondent and former *Nation* contributor Jeremy Scahill.

The documentary feels especially poignant and necessary in an era of increasingly profit-driven and consolidated corporate media, when press freedom is under authoritarian assault. Reflecting on media repression today in the closing scene of *Steal This Story, Please!*, Goodman refers to the White Rose, a group of German university students who fought Hitler's regime by distributing anti-Nazi pamphlets. One of the pamphlets declared, "We will not be silent." Goodman concludes, "These words should be the Hippocratic oath of the media today."

UNBOUGHT, UNBOSSED COMMENTARY

Joy Reid

Among the most prominent of the many journalists who've been forced out of their positions since Donald Trump retook the White House is Joy Reid. While all of these capitulations by media companies were unsettling, the decision by MSNBC (rebranded recently as MS NOW) to give Reid and her team pink slips, purportedly as part of a network-wide shake-up, was broadly recognized as a rebuke of Reid for doing what she does best: telling the truth, focusing on the communities most harmed by autocrats and uplifting the progressive voices and lawmakers who are working to bring us closer to a truly pluralist society. Reid's removal came at the same time that we were witnessing mass firings in multiple industries, with Black women taking the hardest hits. Earlier in 2025, MS NOW reported on the stark reality that 300,000 Black women had left the workforce in three months. Ironically, just three months later, CBS News and then NBC News announced the end of their racial-justice teams, as well as the dismantling of sections covering issues centered on LGBTQ people, Asian Americans, and Latino communities. Amid this turmoil, Reid is carrying on with her own *Joy Reid Show* on YouTube, as well as a Substack and a podcast. "I think in this moment, not being a part of corporate media is actually a gift," she told *The Guardian*. "Because from now, on the outside looking in, I don't know that I could live with the kind of restrictions that people in corporate media are facing. So I think—it was a blessing."

Joy Reid is not going anywhere. In the face of attacks from the right and capitulations on the part of corporate behemoths, she has emerged as an unbought and unbossed truth-teller.

Regina Mahone

"We ask all who believe in democracy and the best of our American experience to rise with us, raise your voices, and let freedom ring."

—Bruce Springsteen

BEARING WITNESS

The Hind Rajab Foundation

Named for a 5-year-old Palestinian girl who was killed by Israeli forces after she pleaded for emergency services to rescue her from a bullet-sprayed car in January 2024, the Hind Rajab Foundation pursues litigation against those responsible for war crimes in Gaza. Israel and its armed forces have enjoyed international legal impunity for too long; that's why this donation-based foundation is holding members of the Israel Defense Forces to account. Cofounded by Belgian Lebanese organizers and headquartered in Brussels, HRF would not be possible without the efforts of dozens of researchers and lawyers, some based in the United States. Through painstaking research and coordination, a network of volunteers builds cases against IDF soldiers who commit crimes that have no chance of being prosecuted in Israel.

When low-level members of the IDF, acting either on orders or on their own volition, kill civilians or commit other atrocities, they do so assuming they are all but guaranteed to evade justice. HRF's goal is for these perpetrators to see justice not in international courts but in national ones. There's a legal theory behind this strategy. The International Criminal Court, as a rule, intervenes only after measures in a local jurisdiction have been exhausted, and the ICC is hamstrung for a host of reasons. HRF brings ingenuity and a diligent work ethic to the project of encouraging countries to prosecute these criminals at the national level. The foundation has assembled an impressive team of researchers to track IDF activity on the ground, identifying where units are operating and which international laws they've violated. Soldiers often travel abroad after committing these crimes, and HRF is seeing to it that their breaches of the Geneva Convention are brought to the attention of their host countries. Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now!* has compared the foundation's work to that of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which famously hunted Nazi war criminals. No doubt, the foundation merits the plaudits, but it also needs monetary support, which can be provided at hindrajabfoundation.org/donate. *Rose D'Amora* N

BOTTOM: LEIGH VOGEL / GETTY IMAGES FOR THE CONGRESSIONAL BLACK CAUCUS FOUNDATION

OUR GLOBAL FASHION EMERGENCY

SACHI MULKEY
AND REBECCA MCCARTHY

Fashion is one of the most environmentally destructive industries on the planet.
How did things get so bad?

The Atacama Desert in Chile is one of the most beautiful and forbidding places on earth, so dry that it's sometimes used by scientists to test-run Mars missions. Most years, the area sees less than half a centimeter of rain, but this past September unusually heavy precipitation brought forth a desert bloom, blanketing the ground with delicate purple flowers that disappeared as quickly as they'd appeared.

It was a rare treat for locals used to grimmer ornamentation: Since 2001, colorful mountains of used clothing have been the main feature growing across the Atacama. By the time the largest mound was set on fire in 2022, a witness claimed, it contained some 100,000 tons of discarded fabric, roughly the weight of an aircraft carrier. Today, piles like it continue to grow.

This fashion graveyard has become so large that some outlets have dubbed it the "great fashion garbage patch." It owes its growth to the nearby duty-free port of Iquique, where Chile imports all manner of international goods without customs or taxes—including heaps of used clothing from the United States, Europe, and Asia. While the best items are resold to international markets, overwhelming volumes of cheap, fast-fashion pieces don't make the cut. Instead, they are dumped in the desert—an open secret that the government largely ignores. The burnings, whether they're intended to destroy the evidence or make more space, fill nearby towns with smoky, unhealthy air.

Activists have been fighting against this desert dumping for years, documenting the burnings and suing both the federal and local governments to stop it. But the real blame for Chile's mess lies beyond the country's borders. From the moment these garments are spun up from fibers to the time of their undignified disposal, they are part of a vast global pollution machine—one that has grown massively as the world economy has globalized and factories have begun pumping out ever-cheaper, ever-faster styles to customers half a world away.

This new hyper-vast, hyper-fast fashion system is phenomenally destructive. Today, the clothing trade generates some 170 billion garments a year—roughly half of which wind up being thrown out within that year, and almost all of which despoil the world's land, air, and seas. In the process, it generates as much as 10 percent of all planet-warming emissions, making it the second-largest industrial polluter, while also holding the distinction of being the world's second-largest consumer and polluter of water. When all its many offenses are cataloged and counted, fashion is the third-most-polluting industry on the planet, after energy and food.

When all its many offenses are cataloged and counted, fashion is the third-most-polluting industry, after energy and food.

Things weren't always this bad. While fashion has long left trails of environmental devastation in its wake—just ask the poor snowy egret, sacrificed by the thousands to decorate a generation of women's hats—it was kept in relative check, even as globalization ramped up, by a 1974 trade agreement known as the Multi Fibre Arrangement. This agreement allowed nations to regulate the number of textile and clothing imports allowed into their countries, thereby protecting domestic production. But its expiration on January 1, 2005, essentially heralded fashion's NAFTA moment. Low-cost goods from countries such as China and Bangladesh began flooding the United States and the European Union and undercutting domestic production in developing countries by saturating their markets with used clothing. The loosening of the century-old de minimis loophole in 2016, which allowed packages under $800 to enter the United States without tariffs, allowed Shein and Temu, the notorious Chinese e-commerce giants, to grow exponentially.

Some observers of the fashion industry have speculated that it might be on the cusp of a reckoning. The elimination of the de minimis exemption, together with Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs, has sent shock waves through the industry, rattling American consumers—and with them, major brands like Shein and Temu. Both have already begun to compensate for the drop in US sales by redirecting their efforts toward Europe and Australia while moving their operations to other countries. Other companies, meanwhile, have simply begun offsetting their losses by trimming their sustainability efforts, raising serious fears of an even faster race to the bottom.

All of which raises the question: How did we get into this situation? And, more important, how do we get out?

STEP 1 A DIRTY, BLOATED UNDERBELLY

To understand how our garments got so noxious, it helps to go back to the beginning: to how our clothes become clothes in the first place. Take any item of attire—from Lululemon athleisure leggings to the summer of 2024's viral Uniqlo baby tee, from the swankiest gowns to the most nondescript knockoff jeans—and

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This story is a partnership between The Nation *and* Grist.

the story is almost always the same: Most clothes start their lives deep in the ground, either as seeds of cotton or in the nearly 342 million barrels of crude oil that go into the making of synthetic fabrics every year. Most of the problems start with one of these two origin stories.

Today, synthetic fibers make up nearly 70 percent of all textile production. Polyester has become particularly ubiquitous across styles and brands, whether those brands are fast-fashion behemoths or rarefied luxury houses. Its soft, stretchy nature can mimic traditional textiles or be engineered into modern, high-performance meshes. Its low cost—just half the price of cotton in some instances—makes it an attractive option for brands and suppliers looking to snag profits while offering lower prices to customers.

Most clothes start their lives deep in the ground, either as seeds of cotton or as the barrels of crude oil that go into synthetic fabrics.

But beneath its malleable folds lies a nasty business. Commercialized by the chemical giant DuPont in the mid-1900s, the process of making polyester involves superheating two petroleum-based chemicals—ethylene glycol (also used in antifreeze) and terephthalic acid (commonly used in plastic bottles)—and extruding the mixture through tiny holes to form yarn. In 2015, this process was estimated to produce as much annual carbon pollution as 180 coal-fired power plants. As the resulting polyfabrics are woven, washed, treated, and sewn into garments, they continually shed plastic microfibers.

Meanwhile, plant-based fibers like linen and cotton, which currently make up a quarter of global textile production, come with their own complications. Even when compared with other major crops, cotton is considered a resource-intensive one, earning a reputation among environmental organizations like the World Wildlife Fund and the Environmental Justice Foundation as particularly "thirsty," based on the amount of water it consumes, and "dirty," based on the quantity of chemical pesticides used to grow it. The cotton fiber needed to manufacture a classic jeans-and-tee outfit requires roughly 500 gallons of irrigation water (and an additional 1,500 gallons of rainwater) to grow. And while cotton takes up a little less than 3 percent of all farmable land, its production accounts for some 5 percent of all pesticide sales and 10 percent of insecticide sales.

Other, less common fashion fabrics, such as viscose (made from the pulp of more than 100 million trees per year) come with their own environmental trade-offs—a 2023 report found that nearly a third of those trees came from old-growth or endangered forests. Over the past decade, blended fabrics that mix various types of synthetic fibers and organic ones have become increasingly common, creating an engineering headache for recycling initiatives and spreading plastic's presence ever further.

Fashion statement: Activists in Barcelona protest large brands like Zara, Shein, and H&M on Black Friday in 2023.

MARC ASENSIO / NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

STEP 2 TOXIC TEXTILES

Once the requisite materials have been grown, harvested, or extracted from DuPont's primordial ooze, they're turned into fabric, bleached, and dyed. This is an enormously toxic process that's estimated to be responsible for 20 percent of water pollution worldwide. Pesticides used to grow cotton are flushed into waterways, along with bleach and the heavy metals—such as cadmium, chromium, lead, and arsenic—found in dye. The World Bank has identified at least 72 toxic chemicals involved in the standard industrial dyeing process, and once those chemicals make their way into aquifers, the knock-on effects are dire.

Dark sludge from clothing factories fills nearby lakes and streams, blocking the light needed for photosynthesis and destroying aquatic ecosystems. Even rinsing synthetic fabrics sends microplastics racing down the drain, and experts estimate that about half a million metric tons of microplastics make their way into the oceans each year—equivalent to the weight of 50 Eiffel Towers. Some of this contaminated water is then reused to irrigate local crops, causing health problems for the surrounding community, reducing crop yields, and harming biodiversity.

The Citarum River, in West Java, Indonesia, is a toxic testament to this process—the transformation of raw fabric into the pretty hues and bright patterns that make our wardrobes pop. Once a pristine waterway that flowed past cozy farming villages and bustling cities, it became a dumping site for hundreds of textile mills in the 1980s. As more and more arose along its banks, they spilled their waste directly into the river and its tributaries, staining them blue, red, yellow, and black and saturating them with mercury, lead, chromium, and other chemicals.

For years, people who live near the river have reported skin rashes and intestinal problems along with more serious conditions like renal failure and tumors—and while the Indonesian government vowed in 2018 to make the river's waters clean enough to drink by 2025, that deadline has come and gone. The river remains one of the most polluted in the world.

STEP 3 HOW FAST IS TOO FAST?

Once the clothes have been manufactured and are ready to be shipped, fashion can generally be sorted into several buckets: fast, faster, and ultra-fast. More traditional brands like Target, Levi's, Gap, and Nike will design a collection of apparel in advance of a season and then commission out the production of their garments down a lengthy supply chain. According to McKinsey, the lag time between design and sale can be as little as 12 weeks. Fast-fashion brands like Zara, H&M, and Forever 21 move through "microseasons" still more quickly, releasing dozens of collections per year. And ultra-fast-fashion brands like Shein, Temu, and Cider can design, manufacture, and ship a new garment in a matter of days.

All this speed means different kinds of waste, depending on which bucket a garment falls into. To know exactly how much of each garment to make, traditional and fast-fashion retailers try to predict demand. But because each individual blouse, skirt, or jacket requires its own bespoke assembly line, factories incentivize retailers to buy in bulk, which lowers the brand's cost-per-item and helps the supplier stay efficient. It's a tricky balance, but with profits and savings in mind, the default is to order too much.

If you're curious about which brands might be overstocking offenders, keep an eye out for frequent sales or steep discounts. In 2022, the apparel giant Asos was left with over $1 billion of unsold stock after sales dropped from the previous year. It struck a deal with a resale company to sell its remaining stock at a heavy discount. In the same year, Gap Inc.—which owns brands like Gap, Old Navy, Banana Republic, and Athleta—went on a discounting marathon, with multiple sales events in a row to trim down its warehouse bloat. Luxury fashion brands, which are known for destroying their excess merchandise to maintain their products' exclusivity and value, are also responsible for the largest Black Friday discounts, with up to 46 percent of stock marked down in previous years.

Available statistics suggest that this global surplus could amount to anywhere between 8 billion and 60 billion garments a year, as reported in *The Guardian*. And that's not including the textiles that never get turned into clothing. The destiny of all that material varies: Some of it is sold at a discount or recycled, but much of it winds up in landfills or incinerated.

ANTONIO COSSIO / PICTURE ALLIANCE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Paradoxically, the new ultra-fast-fashion models embraced by brands like Shein are "more efficient," according to Valérie Moatti, a former professor of fashion supply-chain management and strategy. Shein, for instance, claims to make only 100 to 200 copies of each garment, with unsold inventory in the single digits—thanks, largely, to its data-forward business model, which leverages predictive AI algorithms to identify "microtrends" in fashion. Yet that efficiency creates its own problems. In 2023, Shein nudged out Zara for the title of biggest polluter in fast fashion.

Shein's e-commerce model, while speedy, relies on small-package air shipment, which is highly carbon-intensive, instead of the bulk ocean shipping typically used by fashion brands. With up to 10,000 new items released for sale on its site every day, Shein has flooded the US postal system with as many as 900,000 packages a day. This air shipping accounts for up to 38 percent of Shein's emissions, which nearly doubled between 2022 and 2023 to 16 million metric tons of CO_2. By contrast, Inditex, which owns Zara and uses primarily sea and road shipping, reported that it released a little over 2 million metric tons of CO_2 transporting its products in the same year.

Dark sludge from clothing factories fills lakes and streams, blocking the light for photosynthesis and destroying aquatic ecosystems.

STEP 4 FROM CLOSET TO LANDFILL

Once the spoils of someone's latest shopping spree have found a home in their closet, they likely won't remain there for long. In 2024, researchers found that the average fast-fashion pair of jeans is worn only seven times, giving them a carbon footprint 11 times higher per wear than traditional denim pants. A typical pair of jeans is kept, on average, for four years before being tossed.

RIP: Used clothes in a landfill in the Atacama Desert in Chile.

Even when clothes are donated, they often end up burned or in a landfill, where they belch greenhouse gases, like methane, as they decay. Anything made with synthetic fibers, like stretchy "denim," see-through mesh, and athletic wear, sheds plastic microfibers into soil and waterways. And while California and New York have banned the toxic forever chemicals known as PFAS, decades of their use in waterproofing outdoor wear means that our discarded rain jackets are leaching the pollutants too.

DRESS

Did you know...

The process of weaving, bleaching, and dyeing fabric is estimated to cause 20 percent of water pollution worldwide, second only to the amount caused by agriculture.

Did you know...

The typical fast-fashion jean is worn only seven times before being tossed, giving the garment a carbon footprint that is more than 10 times higher per wear than traditional denim.

Did you know...

The footwear industry accounts for about 1.4 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions—more than half of what the airline industry spews into the atmosphere.

PUFFER JACKET

Quilted jackets stuffed with down—generally goose feathers—have been standard-issue for the last century. But polyester fill has begun to dominate the market, and manufacturers have relied on a toxic group of chemicals known as PFAS to waterproof the jackets. These forever chemicals don't degrade naturally, and they have infiltrated drinking water, farmland, and the human body. Down carries its own baggage: It often involves plucking feathers from birds while they're still alive.

73 lbs of CO_2e per jacket

NEW DENIM JEANS

Denim jeans, traditionally made mostly of cotton, carry many of the same environmental burdens as the cotton T-shirt (see facing page). In recent years, elastic textures made from synthetic blends have added microplastics to the denim equation. Washing a single pair of jeans can release up to 56K microfibers into wastewater systems, and they spread from there into the environment.

73 lbs of CO_2e per pair of Levi's 501 jeans

CLASSIC LEATHER BOOTS

The leather used in shoes and handbags depends on cattle ranching, which is the primary driver of deforestation in the Amazon. Many "vegan leather" options consist of synthesized plastics, which come with a heavy chemical burden.

Soles are often made of synthetic rubber, a fossil-fuel product that produces three to six tons of CO_2 per ton of polymer material. Meanwhile, natural rubber has caused the deforestation of more than 4 million hectares of tropical forests over the past three decades.

176 lbs of CO_2e per pair

NEW PFAS-FREE GEAR

Brands have begun developing alternatives to PFAS in anticipation of bans that went into effect in 2025 in California and New York. Patagonia and Vaude have phased out PFAS use entirely, while Gore-Tex, Fjällräven, and Sympatex all offer PFAS-free options. Patagonia, Houdini, and Cotopaxi have also revamped their process for making synthetic fill in order to use recycled and plant-based materials and produce less emissions.

SECONDHAND JEANS

Buying secondhand jeans can cut carbon costs by 90% while cold-washing and line-drying may reduce the carbon cost by 70 percent compared with machine-washing.

Extending the lifespan of your garments by just nine months can reduce their carbon, water, and waste footprints by 20 percent.

ETHICALLY SOURCED LEATHER

There's a limited number of sustainability-minded shoe brands. Experts say that the most sustainable option for buying leather may be looking for stores that use local small-scale suppliers or source the hide as a byproduct from fair-trade farmers.

In the future, other alternatives may be made from fungi. In 2023, the biotech start-up MycoWorks announced the successful production of the world's first commercial-scale mycelium biomaterial, which has 80 percent lower emissions than cow leather.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **LILY QIAN**

SMART

CLASSIC COTTON TEE

Growing, weaving, dyeing, and manufacturing cotton into a T-shirt can require more than **700** gallons of water—enough for a single person to drink for 900 days. Cotton cultivation also requires heavy chemical use; some estimates indicate the crop accounts for roughly **16%** of all insecticides sold worldwide.

15 lbs of CO_2e *per T-shirt*

EXERCISE LEGGINGS

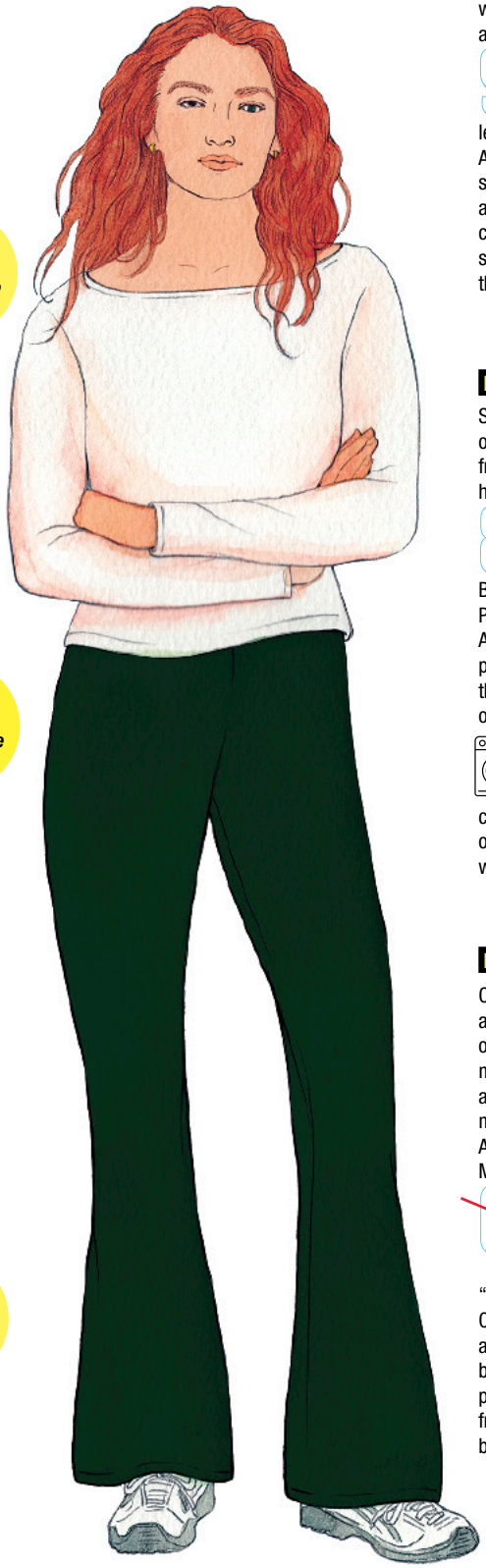
Most exercise leggings are synthetic, generally made up of roughly **85%** polyester and 15 percent Lycra (commonly known as spandex). This means they're a fossil-fuel product and will shed microplastics when washed or worn.

17 lbs of CO_2e *per pair*

RUNNING SHOES

A single running shoe contains as many as **65** discrete parts that require 360 processing steps to assemble, which is often done using coal-powered machines. On average, making a pair of shoes emits the equivalent of 30 pounds of carbon dioxide, over two-thirds of which come from the manufacturing process.

30 lbs of CO_2e *per pair*



HEMP JERSEY TEE

Hemp jersey blends can significantly reduce the carbon footprint of a T-shirt. Hemp has low water needs, requiring as much as **90%** less water than cotton. And because this plant sequesters a lot of CO_2 as it grows, its overall carbon footprint is significantly lower than that of other fibers.

RECYCLED FABRICS

Since 2019, the production of activewear made from recycled polyester has increased by **80%**. Buying from brands like Puma, Patagonia, and Adidas that use recycled polyester may help curb the carbon cost of your outfit. To prevent your clothes from shedding plastic microfibers, the company Guppyfriend offers an eco-friendly washing bag.

INNOVATIVE BIOMATERIALS

Companies like Allbirds are producing new types of "biofoam" materials made from sugar cane and a bioplastic made with methane waste. In 2023, Allbirds introduced its M0.0nshot sneaker, a ~~CO_2E~~ "net-zero carbon shoe." Other companies, like Saye, are also using alternative biomaterials, such as plant-based leathers made from cactus, corn, and bamboo yarn.

Did you know...

Each year, roughly 700,000 tons of America's used clothing ends up being sent to foreign markets in countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Pakistan, and Chile.

Did you know...

Only 1 percent of used clothes are recycled and used to manufacture new clothes.

Did you know...

On average, manufacturing a pair of running shoes consumes the same amount of electricity as keeping a 100-watt light bulb burning for a week.

Figures for emissions are based on the average or typical quantity of CO_2e (carbon dioxide equivalent) per item.

"In the United States, we consume the most apparel in the world, and so we are also the largest exporters and waste creators of fashion," said Rachel Kibbe, who leads American Circular Textiles, a coalition that lobbies for fashion policies that are "sustainable, profitable, and resilient" in the US. "It's a missed opportunity to recapture resources that we've already put a lot of time, labor, energy, water, and chemicals into."

Kibbe's organization is at the forefront of the emerging movement around "circularity," a term that refers to a closed-loop supply chain that continually repurposes clothing. Touted by international nonprofits, major brands, and advocates alike, the word has become the de facto slogan for those promoting clothing recycling. For Kibbe, circularity means extending the life of the materials as long as possible.

Last year, her coalition provided technical feedback on a California bill that requires manufacturers to manage the recycling and reuse of their textiles. The law, which passed in September 2024, mirrors a flurry of similar fast-fashion waste regulations in the European Union. But turning old rags into new garments poses a steep technical challenge. While features like zippers and buttons create their own difficulties for recycling clothes into new fabrics, the bigger issue is the industry's growing reliance on blended fabrics—an intricate mix of synthetic and natural fibers that are difficult to pull back apart.

Although the technology exists to separate these fibers for reuse, it remains in its early stages and is costly to scale. In 2024, Renewcell, a textile-recycling company that partnered with major brands like H&M and Levi's, went bankrupt.

To dye for: Greenpeace activists in protective suits inspect toxic waste discharge from a textile factory near the Citarum River.

"Circularity doesn't just start once the item is being thought of for disposal and then put into a recycling system," said Nicole Rycroft, the founder of Canopy, an environmental nonprofit that helped Renewcell reenter the market as Circulose, the name of its proprietary pulp product. "It's designing the product in the first place so that it can be more easily fed into the production cycle."

At the same time that brands are ramping up their sustainability efforts, many have also begun speeding up production.

The circularity movement isn't an isolated phenomenon. As the outrage over fashion's many environmental faux pas has grown, so have the efforts to force the industry to mend its ways—through protests, the rise of a robust secondhand clothing market, and textile recycling regulations in the European Union and California. And the industry, ever image-conscious, has started to listen. Many historic offenders like Shein, H&M, and Burberry have set voluntary sustainability goals, including using recycled fabrics, reducing freshwater use, limiting packaging, and cutting emissions.

But these efforts have often been slow and stuttering—more greenwashing than greening. And even at their most rigorous, they have come up against a problem that goes to the very heart of the modern fashion industry: speed. At the same time that brands have begun ramping up their sustainability efforts, many have also begun speeding up their production cycle, churning out ever more clothes at ever-faster rates. The result is a fundamental incongruity: an industry hurtling forward at breakneck speed, even as it tries to change course. Or as Kristy Caylor, who has founded several sustainable-apparel brands, including the clothing-recycling start-up Trashie, observed: "We all know people who are doing a much better job, but overall, we're still in the speedy cycle. If we're still consuming at a rapid rate and the materials are better, but we're still throwing it all out, have we really done a better job?"

Lynda Grose, a designer and professor of design and critical studies at California College for the Arts, agrees that it's too easy right now to produce new clothes. Even ethical fashion brands produce a great deal of waste. "I would say that the entire industry adopts fast-fashion tactics," Grose said. "I don't want fast fashion to be used as a scapegoat—the whole industry needs a magnifying glass."

The industry, which remains largely unregulated, also can't really be trusted to police itself. To slow the warp-speed pace of modern fashion requires more than ad hoc efforts by individual brands. Production tariffs, waste quotas, and taxes on waste could all cut down on the fashion industry's seemingly intractable garbage issues. And a handful of places are already trying. In 2024, the European Union introduced rules banning large companies from destroying unsold textiles and footwear, while France recently approved legislation that imposes a mix of taxes, advertising bans, and sustainability standards on fast-fashion giants. And while some brands might bristle, many of these efforts—such as incentivizing clothing repair and recycling—could benefit the companies as well as the consumer.

For Lilah Horwitz, the director of content and marketing at Eileen Fisher Renew, which saves and repurposes old Eileen Fisher clothing, sustainability is about taking responsibility for the full life cycle of the clothes, even after they pass into the consumer's hands. "We will take them back, no matter the condition, and we're going to spend years trying to figure out what is the best thing to do with them," she said. The catch is that "you have to make a good product the first time. You make something that hopefully lasts, and then you build the infrastructure and the systems to keep it lasting." N

TIMUR MATAHARI / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

(Reed, continued from page 31)
had a young Black man found in the South at a university, hanging from a tree. And, of course, it was said, "Oh, that's suicide." Really? Was it? And that was the next week.

The Nation: **You didn't see much about that.**

KB: Of course you didn't. You had Stephen Miller in Memphis talking to a whole room of police officers, saying you are hereby unleashed, unleashed with your guns. And what do you think are the demographics of that city's population?

Progressives can speak out and connect the dots. I think it is especially incumbent on those of us who have achieved elder status to promote history, so that people understand that there was this guy named Joe McCarthy, whose name has become synonymous with a whole era of witch hunts, blacklists, and loyalty oaths. Federal and even many state workers, including California's, had to take a loyalty pledge, swearing they were not now nor had ever been members of the Communist Party or organizations said to be affiliated.

Today, to receive a grant or a contract from this administration, you have to pledge [that you aren't carrying out DEI or sanctuary-city policies]. You essentially pledge that you won't promote people of color and you will cooperate with the hunting of immigrants in your cities. I tie that to [saying] "I am not now nor have I ever been…."

But I think young people would benefit from knowing that many of the things that we see happening all at once, if you pick them apart, they've happened before. This is one reason why I call it the greatest threat to our democracy since the Civil War: This is all happening at once, throughout our country, to everyone. This is the dismantling of our life as we have known it for the last century.

The Nation: **You have talked about LA being a Petri dish for the rest of US cities. Is it also an example of what it means to elect a mayor on a progressive platform? Has your ideology, your vision of what needs to be done in city government, changed over this first period?**

KB: Ideology is my anchor, enshrines my values, and guides my decisions. However, you cannot govern a city by ideology alone. People expect you to fix things. You need practical answers. For example, I ran my campaign calling for city buses and trains to be free. I still believe it's something we should work toward. But then I faced the reality that it's not affordable post-Covid. I could stay stuck in my ideology, or I could make as much of the [transit] system as free as possible. Right now, that means young people and students. And that was doable.

The Nation: **You took office promising that your priority would be housing LA's unhoused and finding long-term solutions to homelessness. How has that fared?**

KB: I ran for mayor because homelessness had exploded. I was having flashbacks to the '90s, when the crack-cocaine epidemic and gang violence exploded. At the time, Angelenos had become angry and bitter, and they just wanted to get rid of these people. They didn't care what happened to them. That led to mass incarcerations and sentencing, which failed to address the root causes of the problems. I could feel that coming again, but this time criminalizing the unhoused population. So on my first day [as mayor], I put the city in a state of emergency, because we had tens of thousands of unhoused people in our city, some dying every day—a humanitarian crisis.

We have been getting thousands of people off the street. We do not have a problem with that. But I found a ton of other administrative problems in a system that was created never to end homelessness, only to manage it—I think with the delusional idea that it was just going to work its way out.

[Since Bass took office in December 2022, street homelessness has dropped by 17.5 percent, declining two years in a row, according to July 2025 University of Southern California data verified by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. And the use of makeshift shelters, tents, cars, vans, and RVs is down this year by 13.5 percent. Bass has been credited for resolving some 100 encampments and adopting a citywide homelessness prevention program while facilitating the construction of more than 30,000 affordable-housing units.]

"Ideology enshrines my values and guides my decisions. However, you cannot govern a city by ideology alone."

The Nation: **What happens to your program for tackling homelessness in the context of the White House's policies?**

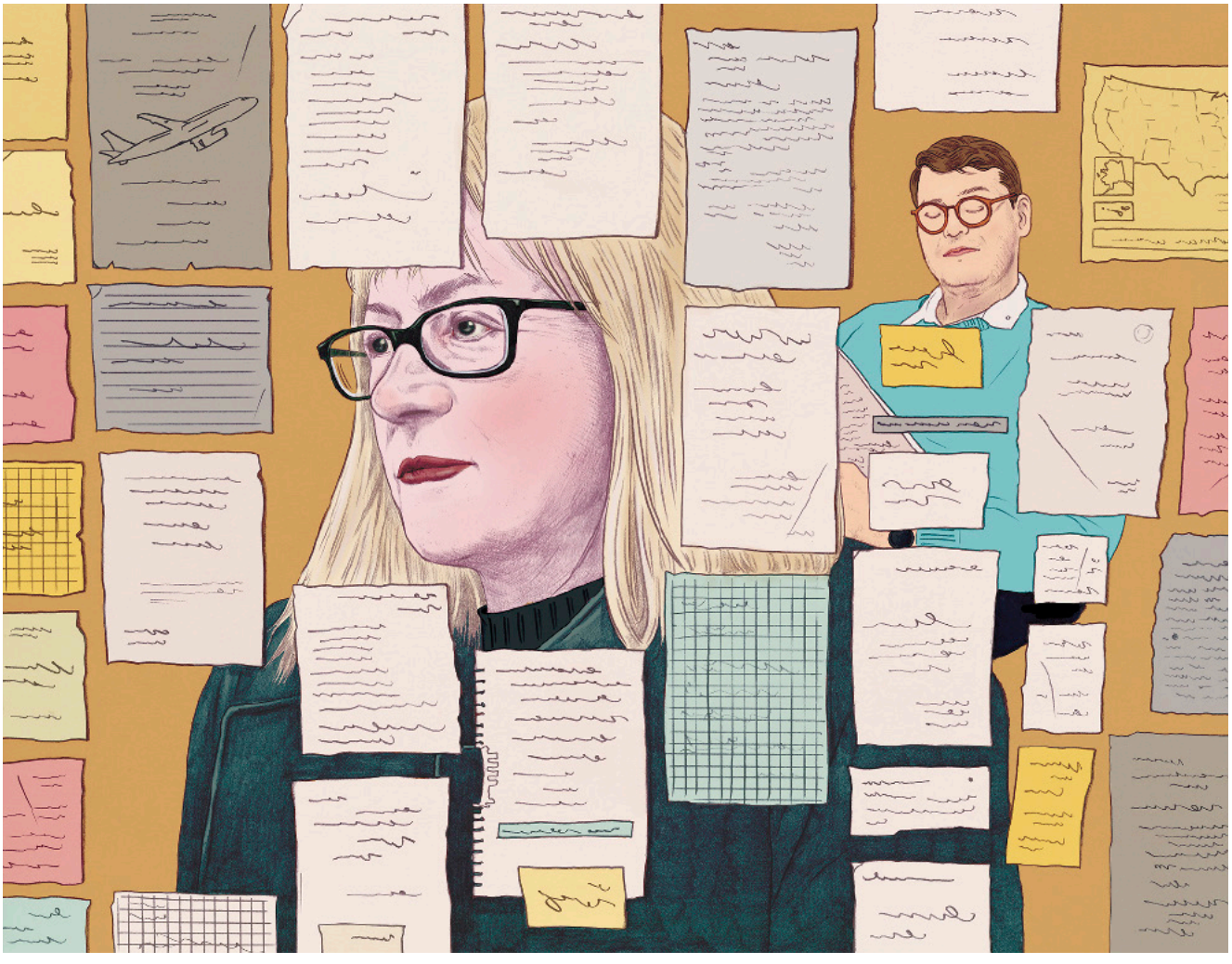
KB: What did Trump do? He issued an executive order on homelessness, basically saying that people should be arrested, locked up. It was their fault, and cities were too namby-pamby in how they were dealing with it.

On our Skid Row, where we have more than 5,000 people living on the street, I can imagine the National Guard coming through and just "cleaning out" that area. I could see a facility like an Alligator Alcatraz being set up on federal property and people just being swept away.

This used to be an issue in a lot of Democratic cities, but now homelessness is everywhere. Yet the only cities Trump talks about are cities where the people who are unhoused are people of color. There are hundreds of thousands of white homeless people as well, but that's not what his focus is.

So when I refer to "dosing," it's also [meant] to get the American population to not be horrified by troops walking up and down their street. It's to get the American people to forget that the military is supposed to operate in foreign lands and not domestically. It's to get the American population to believe that things are so out of control that you need the military to come in and take over because anybody who looks like me or is a Democrat is incompetent at governing. When I saw the pictures of tourists taking photographs with the National Guard, it was horrifying, because that's how normalization begins.

We have three more years of this, but they started off this year with the strategy of "flood the zone," traumatizing people. And that ushers in an agenda to fundamentally restructure the country. We need to pay attention to the restructuring that is going on while we fight these battles one by one. If we just get immersed in the battles or so depressed we can't even think about it, then we have surrendered our country, and we have surrendered our people. N



A Firm Sense of Resolve

Helen DeWitt and Ilya Gridneff's sweeping and experimental anti-war novel

BY JESS BERGMAN

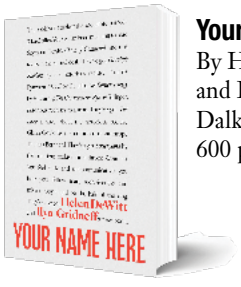
JOHN D. NEGROPONTE, A CAREER DIPLOMAT and national security official, is something of a Forrest Gump figure in the sordid annals of post-war American foreign policy. Having entered the Foreign Service in 1960, he joined the US delegation at the Paris Peace Talks in 1968 as an assistant to Henry Kissinger—where he apparently clashed with his boss over the latter's insufficient commitment to continuing the Vietnam War. As ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985, Negroponte helped cover up the operation of notorious right-wing death squads and played a key role in facilitating US support for the Nicaraguan contras. Later, he threw his weight behind the North

ILLUSTRATION BY LILY QIAN

American Free Trade Agreement as George H.W. Bush's ambassador to Mexico. And in 2005, he was appointed by Bush the younger as the United States' first director of national intelligence, an office in which he inherited a sprawling infrastructure of CIA black sites and the practice of "enhanced interrogation techniques," the latter of which he defended as "not that big a deal" as recently as 2012.

After such an illustrious career as a loyal servant of American empire, one might be surprised by Negroponte's latest incarnation: He has popped up yet again, this time as a minor figure in Helen DeWitt and Ilya Gridneff's collaborative novel *Your Name Here*. Originally released as a PDF on DeWitt's website in 2008, and now available in print for the first time from Deep Vellum and Dalkey Archive Press, the novel is in its own way as ambitious as Negroponte's march through the US State Department. Moving from New York to Berlin, London, and the Middle East, and exploring the nature of collaboration as well as the function of literature in an era of narrowed horizons, *Your Name Here* is an ouroboros: a meandering and digressive account of its own creation by two writers stymied by a parochial publishing industry and the exigencies of making rent.

It is rare for a novel to be cowritten—unlike, say, a work of nonfiction investigating the links between American diplomats and foreign paramilitaries of strategic importance to US interests—and so *Your Name Here* is already an experiment in enlarging our understanding of how fiction might be composed. But by making frequent, jarring reference to the military operations pulverizing Iraq and Afghanistan at the time of its writing, the novel also finds a canny way to capture how the drumbeat of war colonizes our imagination, no matter how far removed we may be from the front lines.



Your Name Here
By Helen DeWitt and Ilya Gridneff
Dalkey Archive Press. 600 pp. $24.95

Over the past two decades, DeWitt has achieved something like cult status among a subset of serious readers. Best known for her indelible 2000 debut, *The Last Samurai*, she has published four other books since then, including the novel *Lightning Rods* in 2011, the story collection *Some Trick* in 2018, and the novella *The English Understand Wool* in 2022. Each has tackled a different if related set of concerns. *The Last Samurai* depicted the relationship between a brilliant but thwarted single mother, Sibylla, and Ludo, her preternaturally gifted son, who—inspired by the Akira Kurosawa film *Seven Samurai*—spends the latter half of the novel searching for a father figure worthy of the title when his biological one turns out to be a disappointment. *Lightning Rods*, meanwhile, plays with ideas about sexual harassment and salesmanship, while notions of fraudulence and connoisseurship animate *The English Understand Wool*, the story of an heiress who discovers that her wealthy parents are in fact kidnappers who embezzled her inheritance.

Acerbic, discursive, and studded with surprising formal choices, the novels frequently break from lyrical realist orthodoxy, even as DeWitt is telling recognizable stories about artists, workplaces, or families. Partly for this reason, many of these titles appeared long after they were completed. Take *Lightning Rods*, a satirical book about one entrepreneur's scheme to dispel excess libidinal energy in the office by allowing men to copulate with undercover sex workers through high-tech glory holes. Though it was written mostly in 1998 and 1999, DeWitt had trouble getting it published after *The Last Samurai* because it was so different from her debut. After the rights reverted to her in the late aughts, 17 publishers passed on the manuscript before the storied independent press New Directions finally bought it in 2010.

There is no doubt that DeWitt's fiction asks more from its readers than most mainstream novels do; that is its genius and a large part of its appeal. The publishing industry has been reluctant to support the kind of intellectually demanding, technically complex work that is her specialty: In addition to numerous foreign scripts, her fiction has incorporated mathematical equations, statistical graphics, and unorthodox typesetting techniques. In fact, the five books that DeWitt has published to date likely represent only a shard of her total oeuvre. In interviews, she has referred to them as "the handful of books by HDW which have escaped my hard drive."

For its part, *Your Name Here*—written with Gridneff, an insouciant young freelancer who has since gone on to a robust career in investigative journalism and policy research—stuck around on DeWitt's hard drive for nearly 20 years. It is to our benefit that Dalkey Archive has finally made it available as a physical object formatted to the authors' specifications. The novel is shaped, explicitly and otherwise, by the dispiriting clashes with publishing gatekeepers that kept it out of view for so long. It also revisits several of DeWitt's other enduring themes, including depression and the vagaries of genius in societies hostile to nonconformity. But more than any of her other works, *Your Name Here* asks how literature should respond to a reality that is equal parts vapid and violent, where the celebration of mediocrity is correlated with an utter disregard for human life.

This latter idea is expressed in *Your Name Here* largely through the omnipresence of the so-called War on Terror, a conflict that hums insistently in the background of DeWitt and Gridneff's project. It is present from the very first chapter, when one of the novel's many second-person narrators notices someone reading a copy of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* on their flight. Only the text seems to have been tampered with to conjure an alternative publishing world in which the CIA funds literary projects covertly designed to increase the number of Arabists in the US population. Instead of corresponding with the physicist Stephen Hawking, as he did in the original novel, Safran Foer's precocious child protagonist Oskar has written to Negroponte in this version, suggesting to him that "national intelligence would be improved if Arabic, Hebrew, Farsi, Pashtu and other so-called 'exotic' languages were to be introduced to a text of comparable popularity" as that enjoyed by *The Lord of the Rings*. As Oskar points out,

Jess Bergman is an editor at Harper's Magazine. *She last wrote for Books & the Arts on Rumaan Alam's novel of class.*

Tolkien's series has sold over 100 million copies, making it theoretically possible for legions of readers to master the dialects of various dwarves and elves while remaining ignorant of the myriad real languages spoken in the Middle East—a skill you'd think the US government might be interested in cultivating by any means necessary.

No single part of *Your Name Here* could be said to capture the novel's entire bewildering scope, but the *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* episode does manage to signal many of its preoccupations: language, the cost of incuriosity, the degrading compromises that are sometimes necessary to fund challenging works of art, and—of course—the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Of the books that DeWitt has published since *The Last Samurai*, *Your Name Here* has the most in common, thematically and formally, with the one that made her name. Like that of Sibylla and Ludo, it is about the relationship between a hopeful neophyte and a mentor inured by experience, and like *The Last Samurai*'s profusion of quest narratives, it is also an assemblage of stories, albeit a more jagged and discontinuous one. Rather than nesting elegantly inside one another, its several distinct components, comprising texts both real and invented, accumulate in a more disorienting fashion. One narrator makes the comparison between the two novels unflatteringly explicit: "You're reading *Your Name Here*, the new novel by Helen DeWitt. You're extremely aggrieved. Instead of the wealth of stories you loved in the last book there are narrative strands which you find hard to follow."

This kind of self-referentiality is one of a few ways the novel seems to anticipate trends in contemporary literary fiction that would emerge after it initially failed to find a publisher, notably the mainstreaming of autofiction, a genre that not only troubles the line between the real and the fictional but sometimes takes as its subject the composition of a work that may, in fact, be the one you're reading. With its frenetic cross-cutting and inclusion of digital ephemera, you could also argue that *Your Name Here* prefigures what's been called the "Internet novel" in recent years: fragmentary texts that replicate something of the experience of scrolling social media feeds while also largely being about scrolling social media feeds. The critic Jenny Turner, writing about the self-published version of *Your Name Here* for the *London Review of Books* back in 2008, observed that reading it was "like catching a flicker of the future."

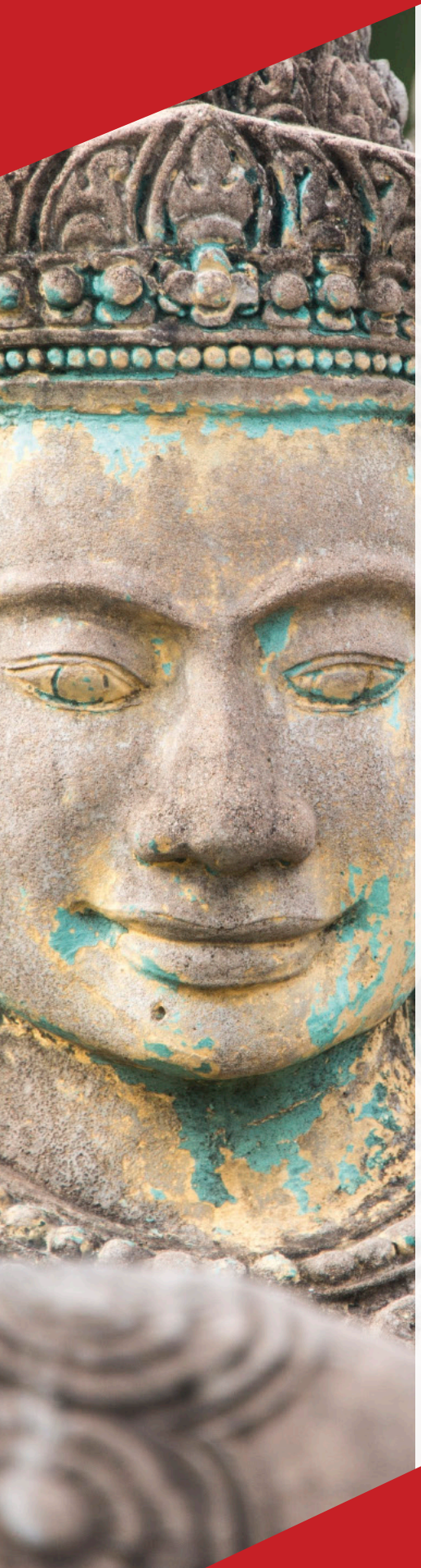
Nearly 20 years on, however, *Your Name Here* is less striking for its ability to channel the future than for illuminating the ways we're stuck in the past, living in a world fundamentally shaped by the wars that are constantly intruding on DeWitt and Gridneff's text. These interruptions come not only in the form of cameos like Negroponte's but also as apparent non sequiturs, delivered by a voice that seems to issue from nowhere: "Patrick has also solved the first puzzle but did not understood the clue!!!!!!! Should he go to a magnet school? 80 people are dying a week in Iraq." It's difficult to read such lines today and not think about the vast numbers of Palestinians who, because of Israel's genocidal siege, have died and are continuing to die in Gaza—a place that is mentioned at least four times in *Your Name Here*.

Your Name Here's porousness has a way of bringing repressed truths to the surface.

With US-backed bloodshed in the Middle East once again forming the substrate of our age, and so many of the other injustices suffered by DeWitt and Gridneff's characters (austerity, inanity) now chronic phenomena, *Your Name Here* points to how fiction writers might engage with such realities beyond traditional representation. The novel's sometimes maddening porousness has a way of bringing all kinds of repressed truths about contemporary existence to the surface, whether or not they have anything obviously to do with *Your Name Here*'s ultimate subject: itself.

If the late 2000s were marked by all sorts of difficulties for DeWitt in publishing her fiction, the early 2000s were not easy years for her either, despite how charmed her entrée into the literary world might have looked from the outside. *The Last Samurai* was undeniably successful—it sold 100,000 copies in English and was nominated for prestigious awards, including the Orange Prize for Fiction—but releasing it ushered DeWitt into a state of profound depression. Her contract had guaranteed her final approval on the text, yet she nonetheless found herself facing off with a recalcitrant copy editor, a time-and-energy-consuming burden that impeded her ability to make progress on other manuscripts. This was no mere inconvenience; as she put it on her blog in 2011, "There is a genuine risk of suicide if too much work is disrupted and destroyed." The demands involved in promoting the book proved to be a similar drain. She described it this way: "So if you publish a book you have to go back and eat your own vomit. Then the physical object is available for sale, you're expected to give interviews and go out and tell everyone how nice it tastes." DeWitt wasn't speaking only metaphorically: Her early experiences in the publishing industry literally made her sick, to the point of suicidal ideation and at least one failed attempt that was intrusively reported on by the New York media.

This dark period is, in some sense, where *Your Name Here* begins. When we meet "the reclusive Rachel Zozanian," DeWitt's fictional mirror, she has been alienated to the point of aphasia by the release of her novel *Lotteryland*, a satire about a society in which everything—not just goods but also qualities like "FIRM SENSE OF RESOLVE"—is distributed via lottery. Hospitalized after a breakdown, Rachel struggles to communicate with the well-wishers who call her incessantly on the phone; she picks up, and "sounds pour into her ear in the shape of words." The only sentences she can bear to absorb are the exuberantly chaotic ones in an old e-mail written by a young stranger whom she once met briefly in a bar. The message—detailing, in roundabout fashion, romantic misadventures and a three-day bender—is from "Alyosha Popovitch Pechorin," one of multiple joking pseudonyms for the novel's Gridneff character that are derived from Russian literature and politics. (Alyosha Popovitch is a folkloric trickster; Pechorin is the protagonist of Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, the archetypal superfluous man.) Rereading the e-mail makes death seem less appealing to her.



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When Rachel has recovered enough to relocate to Berlin and resume work on her next novel, she has two creative epiphanies: "What if the book becomes Kaufmanesque in its self-absorption (and so destined to be a cult classic)" and "What if I bring in a voice, that crazy anarchic voice, the voice that calls back zombies from the undead, the voice that dispels the anomie of the alienated third person orphan in schwarzweiss Kansas and hurls us Over the Rainbow into the glorious Technicolor of the first-person singular?"

That voice, of course, is Alyosha's, and soon their collaboration is born. At first, Rachel tries to solicit commitments to publish Alyosha's work from her industry contacts based on the strength of his wild e-mails, as if by doing so she might spare him the kind of spiritual damage she's endured trying to make a living as a working writer. When this fails to pan out, Rachel offers him a flat £1,000 fee to use the e-mails in her own book; an adventurous reporter who funds trips to the Middle East by hunting down celebrity gossip for British rags, he always needs cash. But as the novel progresses, Alyosha (and Gridneff's other avatars, like "Alexander Chatsky") becomes a less passive muse and exerts more and more influence over the shape of the project.

This meta plot, much of which unfolds through e-mail exchanges between DeWitt, Gridneff, and their fictional counterparts, is parceled out piecemeal, alternating with the novel's more obviously made-up strands as well as some ready-made ones. In addition to the aforementioned second-person sections, which attribute to the reader an array of disgruntled reactions to *Your Name Here*, there are also excerpts from *Lotteryland* (a real manuscript that DeWitt wrote 65,000 words of before it became part of *Your Name Here*); flashbacks to Rachel's stint as an accidental sex worker at Oxford University; tabloid journalism by Alyosha; puzzles in Arabic that readers are invited to complete; and on and on. The War on Terror may seem at first an unlikely motif for such an extravagantly metafictional book, but it is in fact central to the conditions that *Your Name Here* implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—attacks.

Much of DeWitt's fiction has protested against the learned helplessness that stymies contemporary intellectual life: the widespread tendency of people to recoil from difficulty or to accept defeat by unfamiliar concepts in advance, be they linguistic, mathematical, or scientific. Her books often contain pedagogical exercises designed to counter this inertia; as Sibylla teaches Ludo to read the Greek alphabet in *The Last Samurai*, DeWitt also teaches us. At the same time, she is attentive to the material obstacles that prevent people from engaging with, let alone producing, great works of art. Sibylla spends most of her days transcribing old British trade magazines like *Horn & Hound* for £5.50 an hour to keep herself and Ludo fed; she thinks wistfully of superb works of scholarship that she can't afford to buy, and which she would not have the time to read carefully even if she could. In *Your Name Here*, a college-age Rachel discovers that "after a while you find the people you know are shadows of their possible selves," blocked from the life of the mind by seemingly immovable forces. "What happens if you fight against being a shadow?" she wonders.

What happens, *Your Name Here* seems to suggest, is that you may wind up prostituting yourself, whether literally or metaphorically. Rachel's youthful dalliances with johns are paralleled by her relationship with "wheeler-dealers" in the publishing and film industries, who sign her to supposedly "friendly" deals that strand her work in limbo in exchange for straightforwardly exploitative fees. Alyosha's work as a gonzo paparazzo is framed as a similarly dirty compromise, even if he claims he's only "making up stories that hurt no one and perpetuate the complexities of our post-modern melange." The idea that you could make a living through art alone is a recurring punch line in the book: "And there's always the novel, ha ha ha ha ha, there's always the novel, ha ha."

Your Name Here is a refreshing examination of how art relates to politics.

But in comparison with some of DeWitt's other works, her and Gridneff's *Your Name Here* makes clear that a culture that encourages ignorance and mendacity has consequences that go far beyond the aesthetic realm. It is a culture that apportions value as irrationally as the one in *Lotteryland*. A culture so used to dishonesty that it is primed to accept egregious lies by heads of state. A culture that would rather send young people to war than pay to educate them. A culture that rewards the architects of "national security" for knowing nothing about the languages or history of the regions they carpet-bomb. A culture that encourages serenity in the face of far-flung mass death but exhorts consumers to "Be brave!" in their choice of lipstick. As Turner writes in the *London Review of Books*, "DeWitt's pedagogical daydreams lead to questions of fundamental human rights." The blending of these registers suggests that a less insipid world might also be a more just one.

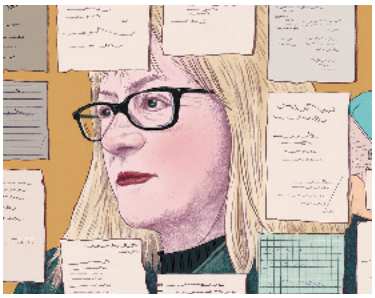
This is not to suggest that the novel's repeated references to the War on Terror add up to something programmatic. On the contrary, this material can be outraged but also opaque, blithe, idiosyncratic, or uncomfortably tongue-in-cheek, much like *Your Name Here* as a whole. The book is refreshing not for being a particularly effective anti-war novel, but for dramatizing the feedback loop between a work of art and the political forces that shape its composition—even if the results only partially succeed.

One of the most perplexing passages in *Your Name Here* concerns a young Israeli woman of Iraqi Jewish descent named Noga Barakh Ohayon. She is one of the novel's many disappointed "you"s: "You're reading *Your Name Here*, the new novel by Helen DeWitt. You don't like it as much as the last one because it has quite a lot of bad language." Noga received a scholarship to Harvard at 18 but was not permitted to attend because "the paperwork had to go through Israel, who said No, no Harvard, you have to go into the Army. Now you're commander of a sniper unit."

In DeWitt's work, not being able to attend Harvard is always a fateful event, the thing that, in *The Last Samurai*, dooms Sibylla's father to life as a provincial motelier. Why Noga did not consider conscientious objection—the punishment for which was often a

short jail sentence—during a period rife with high-profile refuseniks is not explained, but it makes the kind of empathy compelled by second-person narration far more difficult, especially from the vantage point of 2025. It also makes her less persuasive as an illustration of the preference among the world's great powers for killing over thinking. Only one of this short chapter's assertions felt impossible not to agree with: "When you close your eyes you see dead children"—both a disturbing echo of contemporary testimony from surgeons in Gaza that Israeli military snipers are indeed deliberately targeting kids, and an accidental commentary on the unbearable images of corpses that are today a constant presence on social media.

"You're a romantic at heart. You want writers to be rebels, revolutionaries."



The Noga chapter is far from the only aside in *Your Name Here* whose point (and success) is unclear. DeWitt has in the past evinced some skepticism about the value of editors: not so much in their curatorial capacity, but in their ability to improve a manuscript through useful changes and comments. In an interview with the Institute for the Future of the Book, she said that an editor should be "someone with strong tastes which do NOT simply replicate mine. Someone with profound knowledge of material relevant to the book under consideration." She doesn't seem to think she's met many who fit that description, but the bigger problem is that, in DeWitt's telling, the publishing industry's typical procedures don't allow authors to get a full picture of their various editors' "intellectual profiles" in advance. ("My Heart Belongs to Bertie," a story in her *Some Trick* collection, depicts precisely this dilemma.) As a reader, though, it's hard not to wonder if *Your Name Here* could have benefited from precisely the kind of editorial meddling she deplores.

In a way, the novel prompts this hypothetical itself. Several of the excerpts from *Lotteryland* featured in here concern the scheme of a down-and-out hustler named Ephraim to turn his luck around by writing a bestselling memoir (truthfulness not necessarily required). He meets a woman named Gaby with contacts in the publishing world who offers to serve as his go-between, but her friends keep turning him down, dismissing his proposals as "not interesting enough" or "insincere and calculating." Until, that is, Ephraim has a brilliant idea: While writing, he'll use his lotto-monitor, a kind of personal computer that allows the characters in *Lotteryland* to enter giveaways and check highly specific odds, "to see whether each new sentence [has] maximised my chances of appealing to the maximum possible audience." This strategy results in a series of ruthless subtractions: From his current manuscript, he takes out the lottery—the institution that most directly structures his reality and that of his readers—as well as a number of recognizably DeWittian flourishes, like "advice about maths and English" or even "talking about the book with Gaby," a mirror of the kind of conversations that *Your Name Here* contains in spades.

Dispiritingly, Ephraim's gambit appears to succeed: The most insincere and calculating version of the book is the one that finally catches publishers' attention. This allegory of how an increasingly risk-averse industry encourages homogeneity among writers by forcing them to sand down whatever is deemed too ambitious, original, or noncommercial in their work may be unsubtle, but it is also strangely poignant. Reading it, I saw *Your Name Here*'s missteps and excesses—which a more traditional path to publication would have tried to stamp out—in a new light. I thought about the reader in DeWitt and Gridneff's book with whom I had most identified: "You're a romantic at heart. You want writers to be rebels, revolutionaries, you want them to break the machine or be broken." It's hard not to conclude that, right now, the machine is winning. But *Your Name Here*'s brokenness is a testament to the virtues of putting our bodies upon the gears. N

The Power Sweepstakes

Uganda and the contradictions of decolonization

BY HOWARD W. FRENCH

As a wandering freelance reporter in West Africa at the end of the 1970s, I followed the lurid spectacle of Jean-Bédel Bokassa, a former sergeant major in France's African colonial army. A veteran with the Free French Forces during the liberation of France from German occupation in 1945, Bokassa returned home to his native Central Africa shortly afterward and rose with irresistible swiftness after it achieved independence in 1960. By 1964, he was the commander in chief of his country's 500-man army and its first colonel. Two years later, he overthrew the Central African Republic's civilian president and embarked on a long period of erratic and power-hungry rule.

This culminated in Bokassa's self-proclamation as the country's president for life, and then even more grandiosely in 1977 as imperial majesty of a newly renamed realm that he dubbed the Central African Empire. Throughout this rise, Bokassa's superpower had been knowing how to ingratiate himself with the French. He granted France—as well as the United States, the Netherlands, and Israel—control of Central Africa's diamond trade. He also hosted private game-hunting outings with France's then-president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. In fact, their relations became so close that Giscard d'Estaing called Bokassa "a friend and family member."

France, in turn, helped underwrite Bokassa's lavish coronation as the newly minted emperor of a poor country. It was reputed to cost a third of the national budget, and French artists and jewelers helped with designs for the ceremony and regalia, said to be modeled after Napoleon's. The French Navy orchestra even helped support the band that played at the crowning.

Bokassa's utility to France soon proved to have a limit, though. His government's violent suppression of student riots caused France to weaken its support for a regime that it had so recently propped up. And when Bokassa responded by flirting with new foreign allies,

IDI AMIN IN KAMPALA, 1975 (JEAN-CLAUDE FRANCOLON / GETTY IMAGES)

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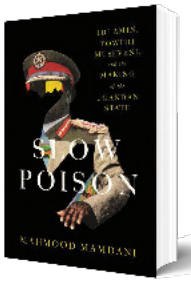
including Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, France backed a successful coup to overthrow him in September 1979.

Soon afterward, the French pictorial weekly *Paris Match* ran an explosive report claiming that Bokassa was a cannibal, including photos that purported to show the refrigerator where he stored the bodies of victims awaiting consumption. This was just months before I moved to West Africa fresh out of college in December 1979, but it initiated another kind of education for me: one about the readiness—or, better, zeal—of the Western press to traffic in the worst stereotypes of African primitivism and savagery on the flimsiest of pretexts.

Bokassa was by no means a wise or even passingly good leader, but the story about his cannibalism seems to have been nothing more than that: a narrative promoted by France after it decided to disencumber itself of him and then eagerly spread by the international media. Although Bokassa was eventually tried publicly for a variety of crimes in Central Africa, he was never convicted of the consumption of human flesh. When I interviewed him in the capital, Bangui, in 1996, he serenely rebutted the accusation and said, "I would prefer not to pass judgment on my own rule. That is for the Central African people, and I would invite you to ask them about me." Years later, even though the taint from this never-proven charge persisted in the West, he was posthumously rehabilitated in his own country, where he was called a "son of the nation" and recognized as a "builder."



Slow Poison
Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni, and the Making of the Ugandan State
By Mahmood Mamdani
Belknap Press.
352 pp. $32.50

Recently, I was reminded of Bokassa while reading a serious and compelling contrarian depiction of an equally infamous African leader of the same era: Uganda's Idi Amin. Like Bokassa, Amin was a power-hungry opportunist who reveled in the theatrical and sometimes absurdly comic possibilities of authoritarian leadership in a newly independent but skeletal state. As Bokassa had been with France, Amin was initially a protégé of his country's former colonizer, Britain, and then became a thorn in its side. By a remarkable coincidence—or was it?—he, too, was slandered as a cannibal during London's concerted effort to overthrow him for what were mostly geopolitical reasons.

Amin and the Ugandan dictator who succeeded him, Yoweri Museveni, are the twin subjects of a new book, *Slow Poison*, an extraordinary work of postcolonial history by the eminent Ugandan American scholar Mahmood Mamdani. Mamdani declares his book's biggest challenge at the very outset, when he asks the reader to shed media-driven preconceptions about Amin as a cartoonish and tyrannical buffoon, even a sort of African Hitler, albeit one whom Western portrayals have rendered in comic tones steeped in the worst racial stereotypes of Africans. Mamdani immediately makes clear how high the stakes are in this revisionism, not only by challenging the prevailing Western narrative about Amin but also by undermining what has become a stock depiction of his treatment of the country's South Asian population, whose mass expulsion he ordered in 1972. Here, the standard narrative has been one of Black racism coupled with rampant brutality and venality.

Mamdani's credentials on this subject go far beyond the merely academic. His own ethnically Indian family were members of this expelled class, and the author himself later returned to the Uganda that he has always considered home. Amin, he writes, "invited his adversaries to underestimate him, even to think of him as a buffoon. His rhetoric included Hitlerite proclamations (including actual praise of Hitler), but that was not the same as committing Hitlerite atrocities. The Asian expulsion is said to have been a Hitlerite act. Yet, as we shall see, even as Amin ethnically cleansed Uganda of Asians and expropriated them, he did everything in his power to spare Asian lives."

Getting us to reconsider Museveni, the book's other central figure, is a more subtle challenge, but by no means a simple one, given the decades of support the United States has provided to Amin's successor, a corrupt and unprincipled, dyed-in-the-wool authoritarian who seems bent on fulfilling the Bokassa dream of ruling his country for life. Yet taken together, Mamdani's bracingly contrarian portraits of Amin and Museveni provide strong grounds for a long-overdue reappraisal of the two men, not on the basis of the geopolitical needs and racial fantasies of the West, but in light of their own records.

Mamdani begins his book with a careful examination of how Amin overcame difficult origins. He hailed from a loose and disadvantaged multiethnic cluster in the north of Uganda known as the Nubi. Driven by the shabby, pseudoscientific notions that were common in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Frederick (Lord) Lugard, a major figure in British colonial history, had identified the Nubi as "the best material for soldiery in Africa," and Amin soon entered this profession. In 1939, at the age of 11, he began working in the kitchen on a seafaring ship serving the King's African Rifles, a British colonial army. By the age of 18, Amin had been inducted into the Rifles. According to one account, this was the result of a chance encounter: Working as a bellboy at the Imperial Hotel in Kampala, Amin approached a Scottish officer and declared his interest in becoming a colonial soldier. "All right, jump in the truck," the officer is said to have responded, noticing the then-17-year-old's strapping physique and facial scars typical of Lugard's description of this martial race.

After completing a training course in 1957, Amin was catapulted to the rank of *affande*, or officer, in 1959, the highest then available to an African. That very day, he exhibited the kind of defiant attitude toward domination by whites that would long characterize him: "Amin walked past the sergeants' mess, where he was expected to go as a Black officer," Mamdani writes, "and instead strode straight into the 'Whites Only' officers' mess in the 1st Battalion and ordered a drink." When the bartender refused to serve him, "Amin pulled him over the counter and landed a sharp right on the Englishman's chin. The room full of

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white officers were shocked into hushed silence. In a few days, the authorities scrapped the rule and the officers' mess was desegregated."

Amin soon distinguished himself in other ways that impressed the British, notably in his use of brutality in the late-colonial counterinsurgency campaigns that he was assigned to against the pro-independence Mau Mau uprising in neighboring Kenya and elsewhere. "Terror, he was taught, was a legitimate weapon so long as you achieved your assigned objective," Mamdani notes, and mastering this lesson assured Amin's continued rise. In 1961, the British promoted him to lieutenant, the highest rank of any African in the army, and the following year to captain, just three months before Uganda's independence.

Just as Bokassa had been for France, the British-trained Amin became an attractive solution for London in maintaining its neocolonial control over Uganda. The country's early post-independence leader, Milton Obote, had turned toward socialism and dictatorial rule in the late 1960s, a time of rampant corruption and food shortages. But when Amin seized power in 1971, overthrowing Obote's government while Obote was attending a Commonwealth conference in Singapore, he promptly toed the British line on foreign policy, notably in calling for "reconciliation" with the apartheid government of South Africa.

This fueled widespread and lasting speculation that Britain had helped organize or at least supported Amin's takeover. Others, too, had motives. Mamdani's book supports the long-standing view that Israel played an important role, either alone or in loose concert with Britain. As I documented in my own book *The Second Emancipation*, Israel maintained a highly active foreign policy in Africa in the 1960s. Its interest in Uganda, according to Mamdani, was due to its "periphery doctrine," under which Israel sought to build partnerships with states bordering the Arab world.

As the southern neighbor of Arab-dominated Sudan, Uganda fit this bill, and Mamdani builds a case that during his time as commander of the Ugandan Army under Obote, Amin ferried Israeli supplies to a rebel group in South Sudan known as the Anyanya. Mamdani also notes that Israeli intelligence operatives later warned Amin of Obote's plans to sideline him and then actively advised Amin on how to seize power. These circumstances, if not proof in themselves, certainly favor a conspiratorial view. Either way, once he was in power, Amin did appear more open to British and Israeli interests than he might have been otherwise. When he made his first overseas trip, it was to Israel, and around this time he also rejected criticisms by other African nations of Britain's arms sales to South Africa. Those vehemently opposed, he said, should "give priority to putting their own house in order."

But while it seems likely that Amin's rise to power was aided by Britain and Israel, his relations with both countries fell apart with remarkable swiftness. The proximate cause from the Ugandan side seems to have been Amin's frustrations with the limited arms supplies and other military support they provided to secure his rule and thwart a threatened invasion from Tanzania, where Obote had established himself along with a significant portion of the Ugandan Army.

By early 1972, Amin had radically retooled his foreign policy, completing a rapprochement with Arab states that had been engineered by Libya and denouncing British support for minority white rule in southern Africa. That March, Israel announced the withdrawal of its military experts from Uganda, after which Israeli diplomats and businesspeople were asked to leave the country. "From here on, Israel would look for ways to effect a regime change in Uganda," Mamdani writes.

Press reports at the time began to depict Amin as a gullible dupe of Gaddafi. In Mamdani's portrayal, though, however unsavory his rule became, Amin was no ignoramus, but rather a shrewd and deliberate politician who reveled in turning the tables on his antagonists. He incorporated the Anyanya into his own army to defend against Obote. He won support from the Arab world to replace much of what he had lost from Israel. And he made a particular sport of humiliating the British, just as colonial rule had demeaned Africans.

Bokassa had wounded France's amour propre by revealing how susceptible its politicians were to the corrupting blandishments of supposedly inferior Africans. France went so far as to order the destruction of the entire print run of a Bokassa memoir in which he claimed to have arranged sex with local girls for Giscard d'Estaing during their safaris together. Likewise, Amin's revenge took other, more theatrical forms. In 1972, for example, during a British economic crisis, he asked his countryfolk to donate whatever they could to the former colonizer. People came to the airstrip designated for this aid with goats, chickens, maize flour, and groundnuts. In 1975, when Britain sent its foreign secretary to Uganda to secure the release of a citizen who had criticized Amin as a "village tyrant," the British official was forced, Mamdani writes, "to 'bow' to enter a 'hut' with a low entrance, a gesture Amin had televised and broadcast."

After Amin's downfall, Britain's then–foreign secretary, David Owen, likened him to Pol Pot for the alleged scale of the bloodletting in his country, but Mamdani finds scant basis for this comparison. He notes that the single largest atrocity committed under Amin, a barracks massacre during the overthrow of Obote, implicated both the British and the Israelis, whom he says encouraged it. Although Amin's regime engaged in plenty of corruption, Mamdani contends that Amin was not personally venal, and that his government, though often slapdash, was not bereft of merit. Although Amin exempted himself from its judgment, he created one of the world's first truth commissions to investigate the growing number of civilian "disappearances" in Uganda, and he saw to it that the expulsion of South Asians from the country was "orderly and humane, without a free-for-all of theft by the military."

Mamdani's portrait of Museveni stands in sharp contrast to his portrait of Amin. Museveni had entered the power sweepstakes in Uganda in the early 1970s as the head of one of the military insurgencies aiming to overthrow Amin. In the end, a larger group led by the former president, Obote, who was strongly backed by Tanzania and Britain, prevailed. But after claiming that Obote had rigged the national elections in 1980, Museveni and his fighters returned to the fray, plunging the country into a renewed civil war that they ultimately won. My first visit to Uganda was during

the terrifying final months of Obote's rule in 1984, when extrajudicial executions and disappearances were rife. Mamdani, then unknown to me, was a university instructor, someone deeply plugged in to the turbulent political scene in the capital and the surrounding region.

When the Museveni-led insurgency finally seized power in 1986, Museveni espoused a vaguely progressive third-worldism—but Mamdani, who knew him in these early days and has encountered him repeatedly since, says that any idealism Museveni might have possessed quickly gave way to a strategy of unprincipled survivalism. He emerges in Mamdani's book as a kind of East African Machiavelli whose politics gradually boiled down to a simple essence: Stay on the right side of the United States by servicing its regional national-security needs and embracing its global economic strategies in general. Whereas Amin had incarnated the rebellious former acolyte, aiming his calculated taunts at the West, Museveni instead played the good pupil, someone who repeatedly ingratiated himself with the West in order to secure his own interests and those of his closest followers.

After gaining power, Museveni initially sought economic help from the socialist world. But when this was not forthcoming, he wholeheartedly embraced—in a turnabout as dramatic as Amin's shift in foreign policy—a program of structural adjustment and privatization of public assets pushed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This helped enrich the people in Museveni's circle of power but enfeebled the state itself, turning its ministries into "ghost institutions" and weakening their role in many basic services, such as healthcare and education. Had this led to an economic takeoff, as the so-called Washington Consensus predicted, it might have been an acceptable outcome, but divestment in this case proved instead to be a dead end for national development.

Lacking the means to develop his country further, Museveni busied himself as a regional warlord instead. This began, Mamdani writes, with his crucial support for the Tutsi rebel forces that seized power in neighboring Rwanda following the anti-Tutsi genocide there in 1994. Since then, Museveni has repeatedly turned to the armed pillaging of Congo, Uganda's western neighbor, and its vast resources. This began alongside Rwanda and Uganda's successful joint efforts to invade Congo and overthrow its longtime dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, in a war that I covered for *The New York Times*. Informed speculation has long held that this war was prosecuted with the encouragement and support of the United States.

Rwanda and Uganda invaded Congo a second time in 1998 to overthrow Mobutu's successor, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, who quickly shifted from being a pawn of his neighbors to a truculent and independent-minded actor. Along the way, however, something unexpected happened: The invaders fell out violently over a division of the spoils, which consisted of their much larger neighbor's rich stores of gold, diamonds, and coltan, a scarce mineral vital to the manufacture of cell phones.

Bit by bit, by fomenting instability in the region, Museveni had begun to turn into a nuisance for some Washington policymakers. The Ugandan Constitution limited the presidency to two terms, and in the 2000s, Mamdani notes, citing the work of the journalist Helen Epstein, that the US ambassador, Jimmie Kolker, told Museveni to withdraw his forces from Congo and prepare a credible transition at home. "Retire from office in 2006," Kolker reportedly said, "and we'll help find you lucrative work as a UN negotiator."

Museveni had presided over not only the looting of Congo but also the perpetuation of strife there.

But the ever-resourceful Museveni found a way to reinvent himself once again. To elude any constraints on his behavior at home, Mamdani continues, Museveni "offered to join the global War on Terror in return for an assurance of impunity." In practice, this has meant becoming America's expeditionary proxy, which began with an offer to help the United States in its war against the Islamic militants of al-Shabaab in Somalia.

By this time, Museveni had presided over not only the looting of Congo and the perpetuation of strife there, but also his government's pilfering of money contributed by the United States to George W. Bush's President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), as well as from a global fund to combat other diseases. Among those implicated, Mamdani notes, were Museveni's brother, Salim Saleh, and Saleh's wife.

The most recent instance of Museveni's bending to the needs of Washington in order to preempt any scrutiny of his self-perpetuating rule came late this summer when he signaled to the Trump administration that Uganda would accept people deported from the United States, irrespective of where they came from.

Had the United States taken Museveni at his word, none of this would have come as a surprise. Mamdani writes that the Ugandan leader felt so confident in his approach to power—and in his support from the West—that he publicly stated, in 2022, that "there was nothing wrong with official corruption so long as the beneficiaries kept the loot within the country."

When Museveni took over as Uganda's president, he announced in his inaugural address, "The problem of Africa in general and Uganda in particular is not the people but the leaders who want to overstay in power." Now he seems to be openly testing the proposition that establishing family rule over Uganda—think Central Africa's Bokassa without an imperial coronation—will face no serious opposition overseas so long as the state can continue to find new ways to service the needs of the United States or the West more generally. Museveni's 51-year-old son, Muhoozi Kainerugaba, who is commander of the armed forces, has made plain his intention to succeed his eighty-something father. In a post on X in July, he said, "In the name of Jesus Christ my God, I shall be President of this country after my father!" *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Kainerugaba had taken to social media that month to brag about the torture of Edward Ssebuufu, the bodyguard of Uganda's main opposition leader. Ssebuufu said that he was beaten in the groin with a baton, waterboarded, and electroshocked. Kainerugaba has trained at the US Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the British Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

The final contrast that Mamdani draws between Amin and Museveni involves their treatment of ethnicity, a topic that traverses nearly all of his writing and scholarship on Africa.

Mamdani has long contended that many of the entrenched divisions between ethnic and linguistic groups (often reductively referred to "tribes") on the African continent today were manufactured by the colonizers for the purposes of administrative convenience and control. Yet no matter how recent or artificial its origins, this legacy has bedeviled many African nations from the earliest days of independence. The deadliest example is the civil war that Nigeria experienced. But at one time or another, such divisions and grievances based on notions of tribe have plagued the politics of much of sub-Saharan Africa in the postcolonial era.

This was also the case in Uganda, where Obote, Amin, and Museveni, in different ways, all mobilized support along ethnic lines. Embracing a racially based nationalism and, at times, pan-Africanism, Amin sought to paper over the differences between Uganda's British-defined tribes, and yet he did so, in part, by casting the country's South Asian citizens as an alien "tribe" to be expelled from the new Uganda. Mostly the descendants of people who had been brought to the country as indentured servants by the British, they served as an obvious target for Amin's racial populism, and in 1972, he expelled Uganda's South Asian citizens and then seized and redistributed their property.

This was a dark period in Uganda's postcolonial history, which Mamdani narrates with precision and detail. That he can write about such a traumatic episode with objectivity and scant emotion is remarkable, for Mamdani was one of the Ugandans expelled from the country by Amin. By a historical fluke, Mamdani was born in India, where his father (who was born in modern-day Tanzania) had gone to study. But in every other way, Mamdani had a normal Ugandan Indian upbringing in Kampala.

Indeed, when Uganda became independent in 1962, the young Mamdani went to the United States on a scholarship to become an engineer and help his country on its march toward the construction of a new nation. Studying at the University of Pittsburgh, he also became politicized there. Mamdani relates a chance encounter with recruiters for the Freedom Rides conducted by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and describes how he volunteered on the spot to travel with others by bus to Alabama to demonstrate on behalf of voting rights and an end to the segregation imposed on African Americans in the South.

Along with his experiences in his native Uganda, this seems to have further put Mamdani on a course toward an internationalist, anti-imperialist progressivism. But upon returning to Uganda, he found a very different country: Just as Mamdani was settling back into his life there, Amin embarked on his campaign against the country's South Asian population.

The story of Amin's expulsion of Ugandans of Indian and Pakistani descent received enormous coverage in the West at the time, and this injustice became a principal justification for Britain in its drive to overthrow him. But as rigorous as Mamdani is in his treatment of this topic, and despite his own close proximity to this part of the story, he is no less careful to note that no matter what one makes of Amin's misrule, what followed was at least as troubling, even if it never captivated the imagination or the attention of the international press. For in the aftermath of Amin's overthrow, another kind of misrule took hold in Uganda, one bent strongly toward the appeasement of Western interests in East Africa while skimping on the public-welfare needs of Uganda's citizens and rigging the country's electoral system to eliminate any real competition.

The British had helped create Amin and opened up the space for him to eventually take power. When they wearied of him, they then supported his overthrow, much as France had done with Bokassa. But it was the United States, after Museveni finally took over, that gradually became the most important foreign architect and sponsor of a regional order in East Africa. Unable to cobble together a coalition of ethnic groups to perpetuate himself in office, Museveni pursued a continuation of the British colonial divide-and-rule strategy. Remarkably, as Mamdani writes, this has meant creating ever more tribal identities in Uganda, exploding established groups into finer and finer subgroups, each with its own local political and property rights, in order to sustain his rule. By promoting a narcissism of small differences on a district-by-district basis, Museveni has, Mamdani posits, made it all the more difficult for any figure with national credibility to emerge and challenge his power.

By the end of *Slow Poison*, one realizes much more than the narrow fact of the Western media's frequently ideologically driven treatment of Africa, which has a shallowness far beyond its coverage of most other parts of the world. This is only the first—or the most immediate—target of the bold revisionism that Mamdani's history offers. More important is the way the author reveals how Africa policy in Washington, and in former imperial capitals like London and Paris, remains dominated by short-term calculations and impulses—quick, cheap fixes that pay little heed to understanding the countries these Western power centers easily manipulate and that make little genuine effort to take into account the needs of their populations or, indeed, of democracy.

This was as true of Britain's promotion of Amin during his rise to power and France's support for Bokassa in Central Africa, each in an earlier era, as it has been of the United States' unstinting but see-no-evil support for Museveni. And it holds just as well for Western support of rulers in any number of other African states. Rwanda under Paul Kagame is perhaps the best current example. There, Washington and its European allies have supported a ruthless and domineering authoritarian in the belief that by ruling over his country tightly, Kagame offers the best insurance policy against a resumption of chaos and widespread violence.

Ultimately, though, the lesson one derives from *Slow Poison* is that authoritarians who perpetuate personal power inevitably hollow out their countries' institutions and create vacuums when they die or are overthrown. Any stability they seem to provide is illusory. Someday, Kagame will disappear, and in the inevitable void, then what? In the case of Museveni, by steadily heightening the importance of ethnic identity, he seems to have been piling up the gunpowder that may only take a small spark to ignite someday. If that turns out to be the case, so much for the convenience of the Western local proxy or strongman. N

Worker to Worker

How can unions adapt to a new landscape of work?

BY NELSON LICHTENSTEIN

If you're looking for a bright spot in today's political and social gloom, the union idea seems to be it. Organized labor has rarely been more popular: Gallup reports that 68 percent of Americans "approve" of labor unions, while another poll found that almost 90 percent of people under the age of 30 view unions favorably. Just two years ago, the power of these statistics was put to the test with a series of attention-grabbing strikes and wage increases among teamsters, autoworkers, academic workers, and Hollywood writers and actors. At coffee shops, warehouses, and retail stores, and among cultural workers, nurses, and interns, organizing drives have revived the "labor beat," generating headlines, podcasts, and books celebrating the ambitions of so many "essential workers" during the pandemic years and after.

But even if we're in a moment of renewed interest in labor, the actual number of American workers covered by a union contract has grown but incrementally, with the unionized proportion of the entire workforce in seemingly inexorable decline. Just 10 percent of workers overall are unionized, and it's even lower in the private sector, where only 5.9 percent of workers are union members. And these statistics do not yet reflect the impact of the Trump presidency, which has already abrogated a slew of union contracts in federal employment and begun to staff the National Labor Relations Board—assuming it survives legal challenges from Tesla, Amazon, and Trader Joe's—with an aggressive set of anti-union lawyers and operatives.

In his new book *We Are the Union*, Eric Blanc, a sociologist at Rutgers, argues that the chasm between the popularity of the union idea and the paltry collective-bargaining payoff can be bridged only by a radical decentralization of labor's organizing efforts. Blanc considers the staff-reliant organizing model deployed by most unions, even the most progressive ones, to be the main problem. An issue he first explored in a stirring earlier work, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers'*

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON, 2022 (JASON REDMOND / GETTY IMAGES)

Words Matter

"Shortly after I came from Europe to the US, a close friend gifted me a subscription to *The Nation*. I've been a faithful reader and, when I was able to, supporter of the magazine. **We need *The Nation* now more than ever; its voice needs to be heard.** I like to think I'll help keep it up for the future. It still reminds me of my old friend."

—Claudia Sole, Calif.

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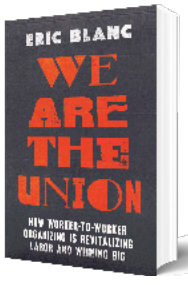
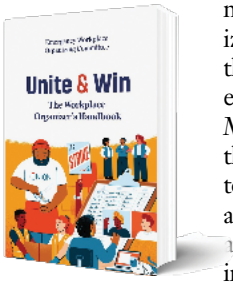
Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics, staff-centered organizing drives, Blanc argues in his current book, are too expensive, too cumbersome, too top-down, and, perhaps most important, are unable to take advantage of the enthusiasm and creativity emerging out of the workforce itself. It's not that the model doesn't work when enough people and money are targeted on a single workplace, but it is not "scalable," Blanc explains. A staff-intensive effort can "win battles, but not the war."

In a typical organizing effort, Blanc notes, most unions employ one staffer for every 100 workers they seek to unionize. This costs about $3,000 apiece, far higher than in the 1930s, when Blanc estimates that in the drive to organize the steel industry, $88 (adjusted for inflation) would do the job for each worker. Even if unions were to vastly increase their economic commitment, devoting 30 percent of their assets to new staff-intensive efforts, union density would improve but marginally. That reality may well have guided AFL-CIO president Liz Shuler in 2022, when she forecast that the unions in her federation would organize 1 million new workers during the next decade. Given the growth of the American workforce, that is an exceedingly modest, even a defeatist goal, and one that would do nothing to stanch labor's relative decline. Blanc's book is therefore a plea for what he calls "worker-to-worker organizing," in which union staffers are marginal to the organizing effort and the initiative lies with on-the-job workers. Only by creating a "new unionization model," Blanc writes, can we "develop a scalable approach to worker power capable of fueling exponential union growth and changing the world."



We Are the Union
How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big
By Eric Blanc
University of California Press.
318 pp. $24.95

Unite & Win
The Workplace Organizer's Handbook
By the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee
Haymarket Books.
52 pp. $10



Blanc's book was inspired in part by his involvement in the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee, a collaboration between the United Electrical Workers and the Democratic Socialists of America that started during the pandemic to support "any worker looking for organizing help… even in small shops." A volunteer project linking, via Zoom conversations, veteran organizers with untutored union enthusiasts, it sought to teach workers how to organize themselves, even when established unions were not involved or interested.

Well informed by such hands-on organizing experience and numerous interviews, as well as his own sociological surveys, Blanc offers readers a set of inspiring narratives that get inside the unionization effort at several companies, including the now-famous Starbucks campaign, when a set of Buffalo "salts" and self-starters began a movement that eventually saw more than 500 coffee shops vote to join Workers' United, an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union.

In the face of intense opposition from a powerful cohort of Starbucks executives, including its founder, Howard Schultz, that organizing drive won national attention late in 2021 when a couple of Buffalo coffee shops voted to join a union. Thereafter, organizing "exploded" across the country, with Starbucks workers filing for more than 250 union elections in the first four months of 2022. Social media was awash with the news, prompting baristas in hundreds of other stores to get in touch with coworkers who were more advanced in the unionization process. "Given the tiny size of Starbucks workplaces," Blanc writes, "a traditional approach was basically off the table." Short strikes and protests were frequent, prompting Blanc to cite Napoleon's military adage "*On s'engage et puis on voit*"—roughly translated, "Jump into battle and then figure it out."

But perhaps even more emblematic of worker-to-worker organizing, if on a smaller scale, was the situation at Burgerville, a fast-food chain in the Pacific Northwest where employees won a collective-bargaining contract with no assistance from any established union. There was nothing formless, however, about these workers' exercise in self-organization. Every step of the way, a set of "hyper-committed" organizers recruited new members and planned strikes, job actions, boycotts, and community events, all the while resisting managerial intimidation and the firing of union activists. "My message to anyone who wants to do this is it does take planning and it does take preparation and organizing work," a key activist explained in 2018. "Those magic, spontaneous moments happen, but there's a lot of hard work behind [it] too."

While the Burgerville workers won a collective-bargaining agreement without any assistance from organized labor, established trade unions did play a part in the other worker-to-worker organizing drives that Blanc highlights. At Colectivo, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers provided vital legal counsel for workers at a set of coffee shops in the Midwest, while at the NewsGuild, a new leadership elected in 2019 revitalized a once-battered newspaper union. In the latter case, the staff played an active educational and organizing role, but a Member Organizer Program emphasized that "workers are capable of learning how to do everything a staff organizer knows and does." Through the MOP, member activists—with some staff input—were put in charge of finding and fielding new organizing leads. "Workers who've organized their own workplace are the best people to spread the gospel and to train new shops," notes Jon Schleuss, the NewsGuild's president, who won his spurs as the rank-and-file leader of a victorious organizing drive at the historically anti-union *Los Angeles Times*. Although employment in the media world has been chaotic, the NewsGuild has organized more than 8,500 new members in 210 "shops" during the last four years, including 600 tech workers at *The New York Times*.

Blanc argues that this kind of decentralized, worker-initiated effort requires that existing unions eschew a strategic focus and "let a thousand flowers bloom by providing as many workers as possible

Nelson Lichtenstein is the editor, with Samir Sonti, of Labor's Partisans: Essential Writings on the Union Movement From the 1950s to Today.

with tools to start self-organizing." This strategy reflects not just his own enthusiastic commitment to the rank-and-file; it is also a hard-nosed evaluation of the 21st-century social and economic terrain on which organizing must take place.

In the 1930s and for decades thereafter, workers lived in dense, work-adjacent communities, and the economy revolved around large, centrally located establishments like steel and auto factories. In the 1930s, General Motors had 69 factories employing nearly 3,500 workers each. The radicals who organized the industrial unions needed a cohort of dedicated workers inside the factories and mills, but they could also hand out thousands of leaflets on the morning shift and reach just about every employee. The famous sit-down strikes of that era were successful because a minority of workers in a large corporation could throw a monkey wrench into the entire operation by shutting down two or three vital worksites.

But today's giant corporations have much more attenuated profiles, as do their workforces. While organizers in the 1930s "could focus their limited resources on a relative handful of big, geographically concentrated targets," Blanc explains, "that's no longer the case." Walmart has 4,600 stores, averaging a few hundred employees each; Starbucks directly runs 9,000 coffee shops, with thousands more owned and operated by hotels and grocery stores in the US and abroad. Other top private nonunion employers—Home Depot, Target, and Amazon, as well as auto factories sited in the rural South—are also multi-unit enterprises whose workers live many miles away from work and from each other. In 1934, more workers in Pittsburgh walked to work than drove, but today the average American commutes over 20 miles to work each way. Trying to unionize contemporary wind technicians in Texas has nothing in common with organizing an older generation of electrical-power-plant workers. As one utility union organizer observes, "Good luck finding these people…they're all over creation."

To cover such a diffuse and difficult terrain, Blanc writes, organizers have come to embrace today's vast array of new communication technologies. Zoom meetings and other social media help bridge the distance, emotional as well as geographic, between organizers and those they seek to energize in collective endeavor. Digital tools also have another advantage: They are cheap, dramatically lowering communication costs so that it's now easier for rank-and-filers to initiate organizing drives or get trained by other workers, even when they live thousands of miles away.

For this reason, the use of digital means of communication became common practice among the organizers at Starbucks. This was also true at the NewsGuild and in the United Auto Workers' successful "stand-up strike" in the fall of 2023, when the union's president, Shawn Fain, proved an exceptionally effective YouTube communicator. Even Littler Mendelson, the notorious union-busting law firm, notes that social media enables employees to "begin organizing on their own in a grassroots fashion [and] allows local organizers to use the collective knowledge of the best organizers around the country."

Blanc's outlook is an implicit critique of the tactics developed by the late Jane McAlevey, who was this magazine's chief

Ars Poetica with Backup from The Clark Sisters

after "Is My Living in Vain?," 1980

There is always music to be written.
After all, life is the sweat of Twinkie Clark,
the product of music, the skilled control
of your organ despite the kinesis of memory.
Like an X-ray, an audience will always focus
on the white center. The barrier between
a bee and its honey stomach.
Somewhere between allergy, elegy.
Somewhere between cascade, casket,
yet I live, the middle ground of gospel
and gossip, wiping off sweat, smearing a kiss.
My mother pronounces killed and kilt
the same way between wiping off sweat
and smearing a kiss. You can be put
in the ground for what comes out
your mouth. Today I searched under the pews
of my life for loose change. Tell me, congregation,
did you give with the fullness
or the foolness of your heart?

KARISMA PRICE

labor correspondent. Throughout *We Are the Union*, Blanc honors the tactical sophistication of McAlevey's approach, including the step-by-step identification of key workplace leaders and the utilization of frequent stress tests—including the wearing of union buttons, attendance at workplace meetings, and the display of worker names and pictures on pro-union posters—in order to measure union strength. But he also advocates for an approach to organizing that is willing to tolerate more chaos, more false starts, and more organizational gambits than McAlevey would in her approach.

Today, Blanc notes, unions win upwards of 70 percent of all certification elections conducted by the National Labor Relations Board, but he contends that this is hardly a statistic to celebrate. For him, it represents a far too cautious approach by organizers who view losing an NLRB election as a black mark and therefore often don't take risks. But what if unions were able to double or triple the number of organizing drives that result in an NLRB election? They might win less than half of those elections, but they would, Blanc predicts, actually organize more workers. Moreover, even a failed effort doesn't necessarily mark the end of a labor struggle at a particular worksite: At the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and among the graduate students at Yale and New York University, unsuccessful drives left behind a set of determined veterans who prepared the way for union victory when the organizing winds turned more favorable a few years later.

To cover such a diffuse terrain, organizers today need to embrace a vast array of new communication technologies.

Although Blanc's book should be read by every aspiring unionist, it is not a magic bullet. Worker-to-worker strategies are hardly foreign to the efforts of existing unions. As any veteran organizer will tell you, union staffers alone can't persuade a worker to sign a union authorization card. That task has to be done by a fellow worker, which is why the establishment of an organizing committee—one that covers every shift and department—is one of the very first steps undertaken in any campaign.

Conversely, even when rank-and-file workers have taken the initiative, the near-certainty of employer resistance before, during, and after an NLRB election requires union activists to seek expert legal and financial help from an established union, even if this centralizes leadership and decision-making. That is exactly what has happened at Starbucks, where the SEIU has played an increasingly heavy-handed role in tandem with the corporation's failure—after 20 months of "bargaining"—to actually sign a contract.

Moreover, when it comes to leveraging union power, some sectors of capital are still more important than others. The UAW "stand-up" strike in the fall of 2023 electrified millions, and not just workers, because they saw how inspiring a successful showdown with one of the nation's most powerful corporations could be. Meanwhile, labor organizing theorists like Kim Moody, Ben Fong, and Peter Olney have argued that today, workers in the logistics industry—at Amazon, FedEx, Walmart, and other firms with big warehouse operations—occupy the strategic terrain once held by workers at the River Rouge and Flint plants in the 1930s auto industry or the trucking barns of Seattle and Minneapolis during the era of the Teamsters' explosive growth.

Blanc agrees that logistics are a connecting tissue for today's economy, but he argues that geographic dispersal and organizational decentralization have made it difficult to target, organize, and strike any truly vital node of commerce that would bring the whole logistics edifice to a standstill. And that's even truer of the nation's vast service/retail/hospitality sector. In response to those who say that most of organized labor's efforts should be focused on logistics or other vital workplaces, he answers: Better to cast the organizing seeds as widely as possible and let a thousand workplace flowers bloom.

But there are some risks involved in this strategy as well. Blanc's proposal may well scatter labor energy and power. By itself, "hot shop" organizing—especially of a single workplace that is part of a larger multi-unit firm—is unlikely to generate much of a long-term payoff. Top management will target the union upstart, and even if it manages to survive, such a small group of organized workers is unlikely to have much bargaining power. In addition, without a larger organizing vision, those efforts to develop worker-to-worker organizing may end up directing most of their energy and resources toward a rather specific set of enterprises and occupations. As of late 2024, more than 5,000 workers had reached out to the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee, and in 2023 alone, this volunteer enterprise handed off 65 workplace campaigns—representing over 7,000 workers—to the more established unions. This was quite an achievement, but a large majority of these campaigns involved workers in academia, cultural institutions, upscale retail work, and healthcare, all of which employ a well-educated workforce comprising just 15 percent of all wage earners. Any initiative that leads to a union revival has to have something to say about the other 85 percent of the working population, most of whom are not now involved in any kind of union drive.

To fully succeed, worker-to-worker organizing will have to start racking up numbers much closer to those of the established unions targeting large workplaces. When the UAW won its NLRB election at Volkswagen, more than 4,300 workers became union members. Likewise, 2,500 joined the UAW after the successful organizing of Ultium Cells in Ohio and Tennessee, with another 1,200 brought in more recently at Ford's Kentucky battery plant. At Corewell Health in Michigan, 10,000 nurses voted to join the Teamsters in November 2024 and the SEIU's Committee on Interns and Residents organized nearly 4,000 hospital workers in January 2025 alone.

Blanc is right that worker-to-worker activism is essential, but it is not enough by itself. Nor is getting rid of Trump and his MAGA operatives. To win, we will need some combination of labor law reform, pressure on the big corporations from an all-out government offensive, a new set of bold union leaders, and, most important of all, the popular realization that the survival of American democracy requires the existence of a flourishing union movement. N

DONALD TRUMP, OCTOBER 2025 (DEMETRIUS FREEMAN / GETTY IMAGES)

Demolition Man

The remaking of Trump's Washington, DC

BY KARRIE JACOBS

THE $300 MILLION BALLROOM THAT FORMER REAL ESTATE developer and current president Donald Trump is building where the East Wing of the White House once stood is many things. The 90,000-square-foot room is a perfect expression of Trump's unfailingly plutocratic worldview. It is a flex of his tragically warped idea of strength, and most of all it is a convenient way for gutless corporate CEOs to pay tribute: Donors to the ballroom construction fund include casino mogul Miriam Adelson's Family Foundation, Amazon, Apple, Altria Group (formerly known as Philip Morris)… and those are just the A's.

The ballroom is many things, but it is not exactly a work of architecture. Yes, it has an architect, a man named James McCrery, and there are models and renderings. Yes, if completed, it will be a building. But if you look past the conceptual artwork that Trump has held aloft for the cameras, it's just a box. You might think of it as the kind of box you see along the highway, a Best Buy or a Walmart. Certainly, the scale is more like one of those humongous stores than that of the White House residence, a far more modest structure where presidents have been content to live, work, and socialize for centuries. However, unlike those retail boxes, the ballroom has a coffered ceiling, arched windows, gold chandeliers, and an exterior seemingly marked by at least two separate sets of Corinthian columns. If the guests to Trump's galas are lucky, the ballroom will also have a mammoth kitchen and sizable restrooms, although there's no sign of those in the images we've seen thus far.

But Trump's ballroom isn't a ballroom. Rather, it's an object lesson, the perfect exemplar of Trump's tendency to get things wrong. The range of things he gets wrong every time he opens his mouth provides endless fodder for late-night comics and the denizens of social media, but his most consistent (and least funny) misunderstanding regards what it is that makes America great.

The ballroom is part of this misunderstanding, Trump's attempt to claw back the American dream. And if you regard it as a symbolic object, it is the antithesis of the Statue of Liberty and emblematic not of our highest ideals, realized or not, but of our basest instincts, a monument not to generosity and opportunity but to corruption and graft. It is a rebuke in bricks and mortar (or maybe just prefabricated, tilt-up walls) to the whole notion of "We the People."

While Washington, DC, has never entirely lived up to this democratic vision, its founders gave it their all. Thomas Jefferson, in particular, was passionate about classical architecture, its formal qualities and its symbolism. After the conclusion of the American Revolution, he was appointed "treaty commissioner" to France and spent much of his time scouting the continent for relics of the classical past to provide his new nation with the iconographic language of columns and domes that he thought would evoke the ancient world's democratic and republican ideals.

Of course, Jefferson—a slave owner—did not exactly adhere to the ideals he famously espoused: His own classically designed home was built by enslaved labor. But he did try in Washington, DC, to create a city of republican and democratic grandeur, one in which the buildings conveyed both the stateliness and the openness of popular government.

With the French-born architect Pierre Charles L'Enfant, Jefferson worked on a plan for the new capital and was instrumental in the creation of a domed building for Congress

that echoed Rome's Pantheon. He also entered (but didn't win) the 1792 competition for the design of the president's residence and offices, a White House that was also topped by a dome and would invoke the notion of self-rule.

Trump has inserted this idealistic vision of public architecture in various texts and executive orders, but he seems unable to practice what he occasionally preaches. For him, DC isn't a city of democracy or popular self-government, but the control room of an empire that bends to the will of its ruler. Trump, a man who affixed his name to every building he's ever built—as well as every golf course—is a bit of a slouch when compared with ancient emperors who preferred to name entire cities after themselves, like Alexander the Great and Alexandria or Constantine I and Constantinople. But, for the moment, Trump is still compelled to rule from a city named for George Washington.

As a New York architecture critic in the 1990s, I did a number of phone interviews with Trump in which he would discuss his current projects and invariably refer to a number of previous ones: Trump Tower, Trump International Hotel and Tower, Trump Wall Street, Trump Taj Mahal, Trump Parc, Trump World Tower, and so on. I would marvel at the fact that he could keep them all straight.

I can think of only one example of something Trump built that was emblematic of anything other than his boundless ego. When he inexplicably erected a miniature Unisphere outside the newly opened Trump International Hotel and Tower (previously the Gulf & Western Building) on Columbus Circle, I learned that the project's investors had persuaded him to hire a feng shui master, Pun-Yin of Tin Sun Metaphysics Corporation, to solve the problem of the "extreme forces" generated by the constant stream of traffic going around the nearby traffic circle. The globe was positioned to "neutralize" those forces, and the rings around the globe, Pun told me, represented the "unity and harmony of the world."

That may be the only time, as far as I can remember, that Trump ever built anything in the interest of unity and harmony. In general, his profligate use of shiny materials has symbolized only one thing: his bottomless appetite for opulence.

Trump's Washington, or at least his White House, has thus far followed suit. The gold trim with which he has festooned the Oval Office makes it look like a scene from a czarist theme park. And his newly remodeled Lincoln Bathroom suggests a very plush mausoleum. While he might invoke the (small-r) republican architecture of the founding fathers in executive orders denouncing Modernist and Brutalist architecture, that does not mean he understands it. In truth, there is only one tradition of which Trump is an adherent: the ravenous, self-aggrandizing culture that's long characterized much of New York City real estate development.

Prior to his hurried demolition of the East Wing, Trump's most infamous destruction job involved a handsome 50-year-old Art Deco building that had been designed by Warren and Wetmore, architects best known for their design of Grand Central Terminal. It housed the beloved but financially troubled department store Bonwit Teller. Long a fashion leader, introducing designers such as Christian Dior and Calvin Klein to New York's carriage trade, the store was also known for its wacky, artist-designed window displays, including a couple by Salvador Dalí (when he was already famous) and many by still-unknown artists like Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg. However, by the late 1970s, Bonwit Teller had lost its luster, and its parent company, Genesco, was having cash-flow problems.

The most alarming aspect of Trump's ballroom is that it appears to be one project of many.

Trump purchased the building in 1979 for $15 million with the intention of tearing it down; it occupied the spot where he planned to build—you guessed it—his first eponymous tower. His architect at the time, Der Scutt, reportedly tried to persuade Trump that the site on Fifth Avenue called for something more sober and, well, traditional. However, as Michael Lisicky wrote in a 2020 account in *Forbes*, "Trump was adamant that he wanted his Trump Tower to be a bronze-colored glass skyscraper. Scutt was unable to sway Trump. In 1980, the architect told *New York Magazine*, 'If Donald hasn't built it, it's not any good. And it has to flash to be good.'"

To add insult to injury, Trump had promised to give the Metropolitan Museum of Art the building's pair of 15-foot bas-relief sculptures of dancing women and a large nickel-plated grille that was mounted over the store's entrance. Yet when Trump's demolition crew arrived, they jackhammered it all into oblivion.

A Trump "spokesman" who identified himself as John Baron (a pseudonym often used by Trump) explained to a *Daily News* reporter at the time that the sculptures weren't worth saving and the work needed to preserve them would have set back the construction schedule by two weeks. Which is to say that Trump's respect for traditional architecture only extends to the point where it gets in his way.

The most alarming aspect of Trump's ballroom, perhaps, is that it appears to be one project of many. Of course, during the first Trump term we were told he was masterminding an ambitious nationwide program of infrastructure construction. That never happened, and "Infrastructure Week" became a running joke.

But this time around, he's not talking about airports or bridges or anything obviously useful. In fact, he's lately taken to defunding significant infrastructure projects (like the new rail tunnel connecting New York City and New Jersey) to punish his perceived enemies. Instead, what Trump is interested in is leaving his imprint on whatever he can, useful or not. For example, he's revived plans floated during his first administration for a National Garden of American Heroes, a sculpture garden stocked, Madame Tussaud–style, with 250 Americans, chosen by a White House task force, including the founding fathers whose ideas he fails to grasp. He also wants to build a triumphal arch at the entrance to Arlington National Cemetery, supposedly to commemorate the 250th anniversary our country's independence, but possibly more emblematic of the end of a pretty good two-and-a-half-century run.

Karrie Jacobs is a veteran critic of urban architecture and development and a strong advocate of conducting research by walking around.

Love Loves

We've traveled to a field with its inner
servings of sand and wolves. The sand is owned and never

appears on a map because the owners want its hard
tender invisible. The space trembles and is built up and seems

eliminated. It has come to rest and I am in a hurry
to listen. Nothing might be more

fragile than smearing infinity around
and waiting dutiful centuries. Sun hovers

every high and low, posing and pointing as necessity.
Eros I once believed could make me

an incredible promise. Sincere, I took it. Of course I
also learned no love

loves a stain. In confidence, we discussed it. Previously. We hid
unattended until finally our settlement of us

decided to stay. To clarify, to celebrate we canopy
in the desert where the sun singing sand on a loop

becomes sensemaking. We are dirty and casual,
the day getting rich quick

on distance. Making a note
about a note and whatever

he says, whatever I forgot to unknot, I tend
to sift through the waning

light. It's another summer bending; it is nearly thirty
years. There's a room here for washing

one's feet. I don't know if you need to be clean.

LAUREN CAMP

The thing that is most unnerving about the arch is that the tradition it evokes is not that of classical republicanism and democracy but rather of a whole other era of bombastic overstatement. It is hard to look at renderings of that massive arch—particularly the way it's positioned on an axis leading to the Lincoln Memorial—without seeing Albert Speer's Germania, Hitler's unbuilt plan to remake Berlin with a monumental Great Hall connected by a broad highway to a gargantuan arch.

People who live in a particular city often have a proprietary relationship with its buildings and learn the hard way, when a favorite is razed by its actual landlord, that their feeling of ownership is an illusion. Think of New York City's famous Pennsylvania Station (with a waiting room modeled on Rome's Baths of Caracalla), demolished in 1963, or Hudson's in Detroit, the tallest department store in the world until it was imploded in 1998.

In Washington, DC, however, that sense of ownership is not illusory. Most of the landmark buildings do, in fact, belong to the public. The White House, for instance—or what remains of it—is owned by the American people. It is maintained on our behalf by the National Parks Service. It has never been the exclusive property of any of its occupants, including Trump. Normally, the construction of the ballroom (and the demolition of the East Wing) would be subject to a complex regulatory process that, in our nation's capital, routinely involves a multitude of agencies and commissions. It is generally difficult to build anything in DC or to destroy publicly owned buildings.

Oddly, the White House sits in a loophole. According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, it is "expressly exempt from the National Historic Preservation Act" and therefore isn't protected from demolition. Not coincidentally, the seven-member US Commission of Fine Arts, which will have to sign off on the design of the ballroom, was purged of its existing members by the White House in October. New members have not yet been announced (although McCrery, the ballroom architect, was appointed to the commission by Trump during his first term).

In a letter dated October 21, the day after the East Wing's demolition had begun, Dr. Carol Quillen, the National Trust's president and CEO, "respectfully urge[d] the Administration and the National Park Service to pause demolition until plans for the proposed ballroom go through the legally required public review processes." But respectful urging is one of those nitpicky things, like the letter of the law, that doesn't seem to mean a lot to our current president. Quillen goes on to point out: "These processes provide a crucial opportunity for transparency and broad engagement—values that have guided preservation of the White House under every administration going back to the public competition in 1792 that produced the building's original design."

In other words, the public process, like the columns and the domes, is a tradition. And, like buildings, a process can be bulldozed. As Robert Moses, one of the mid–20th century's most energetic wielders of the bulldozer and no fan of public process, explained: "You have to hack your way with a meat ax." Which is precisely what Trump just did. **N**

DEV HYNES PERFORMING AS BLOOD ORANGE (ILYA S. SAVENOK / GETTY IMAGES)

Sonic Change

Blood Orange's many moods

BY BIJAN STEPHEN

ABOVE ALL ELSE, GRIEF IS INTENSELY PERSONAL. WHERE hope is a thing with feathers, a flying, beautiful feeling we all recognize, grief is its opposite: a universal emotion that's nonetheless mostly private and impossible to convey in its depths. Grief creates a gulf between you and other people. I find that ironic, given its universality. We'll all lose someone or something foundational, but that certainty doesn't make it any more legible. Though it does resonate; it does produce echoes in others.

The impenetrability of grief is a theme that sits at the center of Blood Orange's fifth and latest album, *Essex Honey*, which is more than anything a collection of laments. Dev Hynes (the artist behind the pseudonym) is often serious and often wistful—see his albums *Negro Swan* and *Cupid Deluxe*—but here the tone is different, simpler and darker. Though the album isn't without its moments of healing, those, too, are personal.

But the thing that I love about *Essex Honey* is its attempt to cross that unbridgeable chasm between Hynes's grief and our own. He pulls us in even if his pain and ours remain separate. *Essex Honey*'s effectiveness is found in its details, in how Hynes is able to take us to the source of his grief; the room isn't sealed, and now he's bidding us enter.

From the beginning of *Essex Honey*, the mood is introspective and transportive. "Look at You" starts with a repeating-triplet synth, Hynes's reverbed voice, and a thumping bass; its first lines allude to a deep loss. "In your grace, I looked for some meaning / But I found none, and I still search for a truth / Hard to look at you," he sings.

In his second song, "Thinking Clean," Hynes croons: "What if everything was taken from beneath? / I don't want to be here anymore / One hundred and eighty-six / Miles per hour, time flows / What if everything

was taken from beneath? / I don't want to be here anymore." He sings these lines so sweetly that it's almost easy to miss his meaning here. But the repetition—it feels like a chant—drives the message home. Some typically melancholic piano stabs emphasize what we're supposed to feel.

Hynes, however, is careful not to let his own gloom fully subsume his music. "Somewhere In Between" is more soulful and bops along beautifully, with a lone electric harmonica floating above the electric bass and plucked guitar. The lyrics are no less sad, though. "And if it's nothing like they said, it's somewhere in between / So I surrender to being just a body with tired limbs / When the world is in your hand you can't be inside of it," Hynes sings, in about as perfect a description of grief as I can think of. And then: "Know I can't pretend to know everything ends / I just want to see again (Oh)." The track dissolves.

Even when his songs are sepia-toned, Blood Orange's lyrics are always to the point.

That dissonance between lyrics and music continues throughout the album. To me, that feels true to the experience of grieving: It's not all sadness all the time—sometimes there's joy, too. In "The Field," Hynes braids a series of voices together, creating a polyphonic chorus singing a multivocal story of nostalgia and faded pasts. Even if it sounds sepia-toned, the lyrics pull no punches: "Hard to let you go / See you and I know why it's always grey (It's always grey, it's always) / Hard to let you go (Oh) / Healthy as we pray (Yeah) for a journey home (For a journey home)."

In "The Field," grief lives in the disconnect between the past and the present, the knowledge that things will never—can never—be the same again. We move forward because they can't. On "Countryside," grief becomes metaphorically embedded in the world around us: "Could it be that you're alive?" a voice—not Hynes's—sings. Are you "in the fields trying to hide"?

I should probably say here that for all its heavy themes and lyrics, *Essex Honey* is marvelously sweet. The production feels honeyed. Hynes plays to his strengths here, letting his voice sink into the guitars and synthesizers. Though that's not always the case: On "The Last of England," the song that deals most directly with the source of Hynes's grief, the first thing we hear is archival audio—a mother, maybe?—saying, "That was so cutting-edge, that's what you did! Now, back then, to be tapping into [unintelligible]…it's a really powerful message." It sounds like a parent appreciating her child's creative achievements.

Then there's a piano, and then Hynes himself. "Nothing more to do but leave / Following the corners of the room / A knitted heart, they gave to me / I wash my hands and stare into the drain," he sings, putting us into the room where it happened. "Sitting in the dusk of the room you fell asleep, anyway / Time has made it seem we can talk / But then they took you away." And then an unexpected sonic change: insistent percussion, a tempo acceleration. Movement, life, heat—it's all still there, even though part of him is still in that room where a loved one died.

And yet, no matter how deeply personal *Essex Honey* can be, it is also a group project. Lorde and Caroline Polachek show up, along with Tirzah, the Durutti Column, and Charlotte Dos Santos. What's the saying? "A sorrow shared is a sorrow halved, and a joy shared is double joy." It's put into practice here, on the incongruously bouncy "The Train (King's Cross)" and on the happy/sad "Mind Loaded" and "Scared of It." Hynes uses his guest stars to wonderful effect; they add texture, life, their own sorrows—and yes, their own joys too.

Essex Honey is a wonderfully vulnerable and occasionally joyous album. It's about loss, but it will make you feel less alone, if you let it. It is about what cannot be recovered; it's also about what fills that new empty space. "Time will change you," Hynes sings on "I Listened (Every Night)." That's the hardest thing to learn about grief: In time, everything will change; nothing will be as it is now. Luckily—or perhaps unfortunately—all we can do is go on. **N**

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

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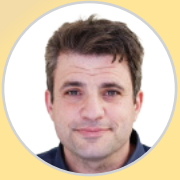

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