THE Nation.
EST. 1865
FEBRUARY 2026

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JOAN WALSH

Updike's Many Lives
VIVIAN GORNICK

The "Donroe" Doctrine: Trump Unleashes the Dogs of War

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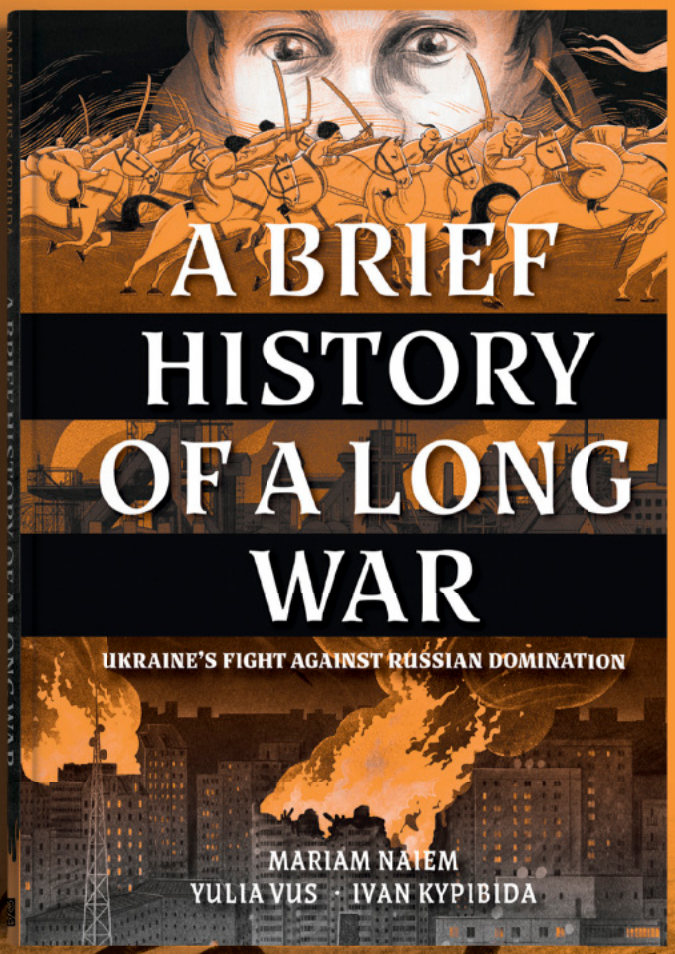

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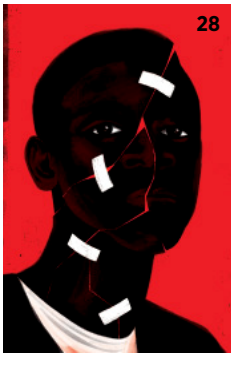

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B&A BOOKS & the ARTS

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

"Donroe" Danger

THE WISEST CONDEMNATION OF DONALD TRUMP'S DECISION TO SEND US TROOPS to the sovereign nation of Venezuela to remove President Nicolás Maduro, as part of the administration's plan to "run" Venezuela in collaboration with US oil companies, came 205 years before Trump announced his "Donroe" Doctrine.

In 1821, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, who played an essential role in crafting the Monroe Doctrine—the foreign-policy position that he and others hoped would guard the Western Hemisphere against the threat of European colonial expansion—explicitly rejected military interventions for the purpose of regime change and economic conquest. "Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will [America's] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be," Adams told Congress. "But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy."

Even where the United States might object to a foreign leader, Adams argued that the country must lead by example and with diplomacy, so that the fundamental maxims of US foreign policy would not change insensibly from liberty to force: "She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom."

Trump, acting very much as a European king of old, attacked Venezuela as this edition of *The Nation* went to press. His move represents a brazen violation of international law that destabilizes global security and seizes Congress's exclusive authority to declare war. Military force is justified only in response to a clear, credible, and imminent threat to the security of the US or its treaty allies. Venezuela, whatever its internal dysfunctions or its connections to drug trafficking, poses no such threat.

Trump's move represents a brazen violation of international law that destabilizes global security.

Trump's scheming to forcibly determine the political leadership of another sovereign nation represents a grave departure from our best principles—as stated by Adams—and a return to the most discredited habits of American foreign policy. We are not naïve about American history. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, *The Nation* has decried presidential abuses of the Monroe Doctrine as a tool for the creation of corporate client states. But Trump's self-styled Donroe Doctrine proposes a fresh bastardization of US foreign policy that is so extreme—and so dangerous—that it demands an urgent response from Democrats and those Republicans whose oath to the Constitution takes higher precedence than their loyalty to an authoritarian president and his fossil-fuel-industry donors.

While Trump and his allies tried to justify naked aggression as part of a convoluted strategy to target "narco-terrorism," Representative Pat Ryan (D-NY), a former Army intelligence officer who served two combat tours during the Iraq War, declared, "No matter what they say, it's always oil." Ryan was not alone in recognizing echoes of the WMD claims of former president George W. Bush, and how that blood-for-oil war went so horribly awry. In his first bid for the presidency, Trump positioned himself as something of an anti-war Republican. That was always a cynical gambit, and Trump is now exposed as an economic imperialist who learned nothing from Iraq and who is willing, as Representative Thomas Massie (R-KY) noted, to embark on a career of empire that risks the lives of US troops to make "oil companies (not Americans) more profitable."

No one in their right mind believes that the madness—and danger—of Trump's Donroe Doctrine will halt at the borders of Venezuela. His State Department declared on social media: "This is OUR Hemisphere, and President Trump will not allow our security to be threatened." The American people see through the lies. A Reuters-Ipsos poll found that only 33 percent of Americans approve of the US military action to remove Maduro, while 72 percent worry about further US involvement in Venezuela.

This popular rejection of Trump's territorial ambitions should inspire members of Congress to stand up to the administration—recognizing, as John Quincy Adams did, that if a president seeks to make America "the dictatress of the world," this country will "be no longer the ruler of her own spirit." N

COMMENT/PETER KORNBLUH

Chile's Crossroads

The country's dramatic swing to the far right threatens a return to the dark days of Pinochet's dictatorship.

SOME 35 YEARS AFTER THE END OF THE INFAMOUS military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, Chile will soon be governed by a rabid right-wing Pinochet apologist—President-elect José Antonio Kast. For the 58 percent of the Chilean public who are sold on Kast's Trumpian anti-immigration and pro-security populism, that's great news. But for the 42 percent who voted for the progressive candidate, Jeannette Jara, Chile's swing to the far right is a bitter pill to swallow. As the outcome of the vote became apparent on December 14, a meme circulated on Chilean social media: "*Paso a Paso nos vamos…a la mierda*." ("Step by step we are going…into the shit.")

Given Kast's promises to exercise the *mano dura* (iron fist) as president, there is a deep foreboding among Chileans who are still traumatized by the atrocities of the military dictatorship. Indeed, when Kast is inaugurated in March, his ultra-hard-line government will present a dire challenge to the ongoing efforts to remember, repudiate, and redress Chile's violent, authoritarian past.

Just two years ago, Gabriel Boric, the incumbent president, hosted world leaders to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the US-backed September 11, 1973, military coup as part of Chile's *nunca más*—never again—campaign. His message: remembering the past and renewing the commitment to a stronger democratic future. "Problems with democracy can always be solved," Boric told an audience of thousands who had gathered on the grounds of La Moneda Palace, "and a coup d'état is never justifiable—nor is endangering the human rights of those who think differently."

Boric also used the occasion to launch a government initiative called the Plan Nacional de Búsqueda—the search for the disappeared. More than 1,100 Chileans (and one US citizen, Boris Weisfeiler) remain missing from the era of Pinochet's repression. The mission of the PNB is not only to account for the *desaparecidos* and bring closure for their families, Boric has stated, but to educate the public on the realities of Chile's dark history "so that this does not happen again."

But Kast and the members of his extreme-right Republican Party are the leading purveyors of what the Chileans call *negacionismo* (denialism), repeatedly minimizing or dismissing evidence of Pinochet's human-rights atrocities. The PNB, which operates under the human-rights unit of the Ministry of Justice, is likely to be the first victim of the new president's efforts to close the door on further investigations of Chile's repressive past. "Kast will shut it down," one veteran human-rights investigator predicts with certainty.

The future of the other leading institutions of Chile's commitment to memory and accountability, among them Santiago's iconic Museum of Memory and Human Rights, are also threatened. "If Kast becomes president, we are all in a panic," one human-rights official told me privately before the election.

Mirroring Donald Trump's winning 2024 electoral strategy, Kast campaigned on a platform of "security populism." Like Trump, Kast promised to build a border wall and has vowed to dig trenches to keep migrants from crossing into Chile from Peru and Bolivia. He has threatened to deport hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants. "If you don't go on your own, we'll detain you, we'll expel you, and you'll leave with only the clothes on your back," Kast declared in one campaign video. "Chile First" became a familiar campaign slogan.

When he ran for president four years ago against Boric, Kast broke a taboo of post-dictatorship Chilean politics by openly endorsing the Pinochet regime. Pinochet "would vote for me if he were alive," Kast declared. Perhaps more ominously, he has made a point of visiting Pinochet's convicted henchmen in Punta Peuco, the special prison that was built to house human-rights violators—and even pledged to pardon them for their atrocities.

Kast has made a point of visiting Pinochet's henchmen in prison and has even pledged to pardon them for their atrocities.

"We learned that the same candidate who speaks of using the iron fist against delinquents…now wants to use pardons to liberate some of the worst criminals of our history," the Chilean journalist Daniel Matamala said. "If there is something that distinguishes the delinquents of Punta Peuco, it is the sadism and cowardice with which they committed their crimes."

But just as Trump pardoned the January 6 insurrectionists in order to obscure the history of his own efforts to instigate a coup, a Kast pardon of Pinochet's duly convicted officers would be a mendacious attempt to whitewash, if not erase, the terrorist history of the military dictatorship—in effect providing a posthumous pardon to Pinochet for his crimes against humanity.

That is the ultimate danger of Kast's extremist revisionism—a danger that conscientious Chileans, including those who led the struggle to restore democracy to their country, will no doubt resist. "Without memory, without truth, without justice, there is no certainty that there will not be a repeat of the past," Boric warned in his final International Human Rights Day speech on December 10, four days before Chile's fateful election. "And without guarantees that it will not be repeated, the future will not be peaceful." N

Peter Kornbluh is the author of The Pinochet File *and a longtime* Nation *contributor.*

COMMENT/NOMIKI KONST AND FEDERICO DE JESÚS

Abolish Act 22

An egregious tax-evasion loophole is inflaming the displacement crisis in Puerto Rico.

TWO OF THE BIGGEST NAMES OF 2025—BAD BUNNY and Zohran Mamdani—have more in common than a music career. The day after he won his historic race for mayor of New York, Mamdani flew to the city's sixth borough (Puerto Rico) and proclaimed before the energized crowd at Somos, an annual political conference on the island, "Here we say, '*Puerto Rico no se vende*' [Puerto Rico is not for sale]. In New York City we say, '*Nueva York no se vende*.'" These same ideas are also regularly woven into the songs of one of the world's most famous artists—who refuses to perform in English despite the MAGA campaign to oust him as the Super Bowl halftime headliner.

It's personal for Bad Bunny, born Benito Martínez Ocasio, as he raps about his fears of losing his home to tax-evading Americans. "They want to take my river and my beach, too. / They want my neighborhood and for grandma to leave," he testifies on his *Debí Tirar Más Fotos* album.

What he's referring to is not the run-of-the mill gentrification caused by the usual vultures speculating on real estate. Puerto Rico is experiencing a displacement crisis inflamed by the Act to Promote the Relocation of Individual Investors, also known as Act 22—possibly the most egregious loophole for the evasion of federal taxes available to Americans. Passed by the territory's Legislative Assembly in 2012, the law hurts not only Puerto Rico but also communities across the United States, including Mamdani's "Nuevayol."

The scam artists using Puerto Rico as a tax haven to launder money make Wall Street sharks look like saints.

Act 22 exploits a federal loophole that exempts all Puerto Rico–sourced income from US federal income taxes. This makes the island the only place in the world where an American can "establish residency" and pay Uncle Sam almost no taxes and not risk losing their passport. And in true colonial spirit, these local tax breaks aren't available to existing residents of the island.

The minimal requirement of the law is to buy a home on the island, spend only half of the year there, and make a $10,000 yearly donation to loosely defined "local" charities—with practically no oversight from the IRS or the Puerto Rican government.

Average rents in the territory have skyrocketed 600 percent since 2017 as properties have been bought up by newcomers, making it unaffordable for locals to live on their own Island of Enchantment.

Act 22 is also detrimental to cities and states like New York City and Florida, allowing millionaires and billionaires to stash their money in Puerto Rico tax-free while avoiding local, state, and federal taxes back home. Now localities in the states have less revenue to pay for schools, roads, and hospitals. And the island's Boricuas, already feeling the consequences of austerity under the congressionally appointed fiscal control board that's left the local infrastructure in shambles, are being priced out. This further increases Puerto Rican migration to the states, worsening a brain drain and creating a vicious cycle of despair on both sides of the pond.

Meanwhile, crypto colonizers are corrupting the US financial system and buying off politicians on and off the island to keep Act 22 in place. These tax evaders are among the bad actors who are funding the territory's New Progressive Party, a pro-statehood party that promotes Act 22 and has increasingly become a wholly owned subsidiary of MAGA. Puerto Rico, like other tax havens around the world, is used for money laundering and other schemes that have deleterious effects on local communities in the territory and in the states. These scam artists make Wall Street sharks look like saints.

The newcomers have illegally bulldozed landmark locations and nature reserves, four-wheeled through turtle sanctuaries on the beach, shot at animals, and built walls around their mansion communities to block locals from accessing their own shores. In Dorado, a gated beachfront community, a home was recently being offered for $65 million, the most expensive in the island's history.

The same shady interests fueling skyrocketing housing prices in the Big Apple are making it impossible for Puerto Ricans to live in their own land. The issues and communities are intertwined. As Bad Bunny denounces the displacement crisis, Zohran Mamdani is putting the affordability crisis front and center for New Yorkers.

The irony of Puerto Rico's colonial status is that to give power to the people on the island, Congress must abolish the Act 22 tax loophole. Which means that Democrats must win back the House and the Senate. We know there's no better message for the midterms than prioritizing affordability and taxing the rich—whether in New York, Texas, or Illinois. Abolishing Act 22 will not only help save Puerto Rico's soul; it will revive communities across the continental United States. **N**

Nomiki Konst and Federico de Jesús are codirectors of the Losing Puerto Rico campaign. Konst is a progressive strategist who advised Senator Bernie Sanders's 2016 presidential campaign. De Jesús served as Hispanic Media Director for Barack Obama, Harry Reid, and Nancy Pelosi and was the deputy director of the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration.

COMMENT/EDWARD J. MARKEY

Nuclear Delusions

Donald Trump wants to resume nuclear testing. Is he a warmonger or just an idiot?

It would be a mistake of radioactive proportions to resume nuclear testing. None of the three major nuclear powers—the United States, Russia, and China—has conducted a nuclear test since 1996, when the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty was approved. The CTBT bans all nuclear tests worldwide and has been signed by 187 nations. The only country that has conducted nuclear tests this century is North Korea, which is universally regarded as a rogue state—not exactly the kind of company we should be keeping.

By resuming nuclear testing, the United States would give a major gift to its chief nuclear rivals. China, which has been expanding its nuclear test sites, would welcome the opportunity to conduct tests to develop more sophisticated weapons. Russia would too; President Vladimir Putin announced in November that his country would return to nuclear testing if Washington does.

Instead of deterring foreign nations, renewed testing would be like setting off, well, a nuclear chain reaction, with the US triggering Russia and China to ramp up their own testing, which would then likely trigger other countries to do so as well.

But while Beijing and Moscow may have much to gain from testing their nuclear weapons, the United States does not. The US has already conducted over 1,000 nuclear tests, more than all other nations combined. (By comparison, China has conducted 45 tests). We spend $25 billion each year to sustain the country's nuclear warheads, including funding the Stockpile Stewardship Program, which maintains the weapons without explosive nuclear testing and includes room-size supercomputers, the world's most powerful X-ray machine, and a laser system the size of a sports stadium. No other nation possesses such an extensive array of tools for nonnuclear testing.

By resuming nuclear testing, the United States would give a major gift to its chief nuclear rivals, China and Russia.

Trump's own advisers are confident that our nuclear weapons work—just as they are confident that other countries are not testing their nuclear weapons. Trump's nominee to run the US Strategic Command, Navy Vice Adm. Richard Correll, told Congress in October, "Neither China nor Russia has conducted a nuclear explosive test."

In the face of such facts, Trump changed his story. He said that Russia and China are conducting secret nuclear tests and people "just don't know about it." According to Trump, "You don't necessarily know where they're testing. They test way underground where people don't know exactly what's happening with the test."

What Trump seems to be referring to are *very* small nuclear tests that are hard to detect and are sometimes referred to as "hydronuclear" tests. If Russia and China are conducting them, it would be in violation of the CTBT. But there is no proof that this is happening. Moreover, even if it were, renewed US nuclear testing would still not be justified. Even small US tests would give Russia and China the green light to conduct many large nuclear tests that would be much more useful. A better approach for the United States would be to seek greater transparency of global test sites.

It appears that Trump's utter confusion—not any need to resume nuclear testing—is the root cause of this entire kerfuffle. Russia recently tested two new missiles—the Poseidon and the Skyfall—that Putin has said can evade US missile defenses. Crucially, however, there were no nuclear warheads—the part that goes "boom"—on these missiles. Trump is apparently mixing up the testing of missiles and the testing of nuclear bombs.

Such errors are harmful enough, but Trump has added to the danger by upping the ante in other ways. He continues to insist that he will build his space-based Golden Dome missile-defense system, which would cost more than $3 trillion. Yet scientists say that such missile-defense systems, like Reagan's "Star Wars" boondoggle (or the scenario depicted in Kathryn Bigelow's recent film *A House of Dynamite*), will not work. Instead of Golden Dome, it should be called Golden Sieve—it will cost a lot of money, and it will not be effective. And, once again, instead of reducing tensions, Trump is increasing them: Nations will respond to US long-range-missile defenses by building more offensive missiles.

If Trump actually wants to reduce the risk of nuclear war, as he claims, he should not build the Golden Dome. Instead, he should reach for the Golden Phone. He should talk to Putin and accept his invitation to stick with the New START treaty—the last US-Russian agreement to reduce nuclear weapons—which is set to expire in February 2026. Putin has proposed a one-year extension; the United States has yet to respond.

Is Trump a warmonger or just an idiot? Is he hell-bent on starting a new nuclear arms race, or is he simply confused about the difference between a nuclear bomb test and a missile test? As horrific as it sounds, Trump may be on the verge of undermining US and global security—just so he doesn't have to admit that he was wrong. N

Edward J. Markey represents Massachusetts in the US Senate. He is a co-chair of the bicameral Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control Working Group.

IN MEMORIAM/KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

Remembering Cora

Cora Weiss died in December at age 91. She never stopped campaigning for peace.

Between 1958 and 1970, researchers in St. Louis collected 320,000 baby teeth. Unusual though that image might be on its own, the discovery that came out of it was far more disturbing: Fallout from nuclear weapons tests had made its way into the bodies of the very youngest Americans.

Indeed, the resultant Baby Tooth Survey found that children had absorbed elevated levels of strontium-90—a carcinogenic radioactive isotope. The study attracted widespread attention, including from President John F. Kennedy. The month before his assassination, he signed the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963—the Cold War's inaugural arms-control agreement.

As Kennedy, a young father, said at the time: "The loss of even one human life or the malformation of even one baby—who may be born long after we are gone—should be of concern to us all. Our children and grandchildren are not merely statistics toward which we can be indifferent." That presidential recognition and action came at the urging of not just scientists but grassroots activists such as Cora Weiss, a New York City mother who sent her own children's teeth to be tested and made peace her priority.

Cora, my friend and frequent collaborator, died in December at age 91. She was a champion of the United Nations and its mission to advance peace and women's rights—and along with her husband, Peter, a brilliant international lawyer, she never stopped organizing to save the world from nuclear destruction. Unfortunately, in the last months of her life, that organizing became more necessary than ever.

"I wasn't making a revolution. I was just working hard and long."

—Cora Weiss (1934–2025)

In the fall of 2025, Kennedy's acknowledgment of the dangers of nuclear weapons gained a grim new relevance when President Donald Trump announced that the United States might resume nuclear testing. Exactly what form these tests will take is unclear, but if Trump initiates a new era of explosive nuclear testing, it will constitute a catastrophic break from decades of hard-won restraint.

This move risks restarting a nuclear arms race, and Russia is already vowing to "take reciprocal measures" should the United States resume tests. Trump's saber-rattling ignores the repercussions of nuclear testing that led the world to this moratorium in the first place.

This painful legacy is perhaps most acutely felt in the Marshall Islands, where the United States tested 67 nuclear weapons in the years following World War II. In 1954, the United States detonated its most powerful hydrogen bomb, Castle Bravo, on the archipelagic nation's Bikini Atoll. The blast was more than 1,000 times stronger than those inflicted upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Only after testing, the residents were evacuated and told they could soon return. But they were not allowed home for 15 years—and even then, they were soon re-evacuated from the radioactive island, which remains virtually uninhabited to this day.

In the years since the detonations, Marshall Islanders who were exposed to nuclear fallout have experienced increased rates of cancer, leukemia, and infants born with congenital defects. On one atoll, 20 out of 29 children under 10 developed thyroid cancer. These catastrophic effects have reverberated across generations: More cancers are on the horizon for a community that has already lost so much.

To Trump, this death, disease, and destruction is perhaps a small price to pay for Making America Fearsome Again—and he, after all, will not be paying it.

Senator Ed Markey, a longtime congressional leader in the fight for nuclear disarmament, writes for *The Nation* in this issue: "Instead of deterring foreign nations, renewed testing would be like throwing gasoline on the arms-race fire."

He's right, but can movements be mobilized to avert Trump's march toward madness? Cora Weiss taught us the answer to that question.

It's vital to recall the history of activists like Cora, who found the tools—and the teeth—to prevent nuclear war. In 1961, she joined a local chapter of Women Strike for Peace, a movement to end nuclear testing. Activism that started with sending her children's baby teeth to St. Louis evolved into world-shaping leadership as the United Nations' representative at the International Peace Bureau, and as its president between 2000 and 2006. Cora, who co-chaired the New Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, was a pillar of much of the anti-war organizing—including trips to return POWs, and efforts to humanize the Vietnamese people in the eyes of Americans and to convey the war's impact on women and children.

She would go on to organize one of the largest antinuclear marches in history—1 million people who gathered in New York City's Central Park on June 12, 1982. She also drafted the unanimously approved UN resolution affirming the importance of women's roles in the peace and antinuclear movements.

"I wasn't making a revolution," Cora told the Columbia Center for Oral History in 2014. "I was just working hard and long."

It's time to work every bit as hard and long as Cora did to create a world of peace safe from nuclear accidents, conflicts, or all-out war. It is the least we can do for the generations of people still facing the radioactive fallout of US recklessness. N

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Razing Hell
Kate Wagner

The End of the Line

The Saudi megaproject has now unraveled. Will firms ever learn not to lend their names to these follies?

Of all of contemporary architecture's many sins, perhaps the most pernicious is its continued participation in the follies and fantasies of various undemocratic states. While many architects withdrew from projects in Russia after it began its war of attrition against Ukraine, they have yet to apply such ethical scruples to the Gulf petro-states, each of which has invested trillions upon trillions of dollars in high-profile building projects.

The governments of these countries are guilty of a range of crimes, from unfettered carbon emissions and forced displacements to the use of slave labor and the assassination of journalists. Yet this has not deterred starchitects and their firms from signing their names to various marinas, towers, and shopping plazas. Grand and ambitious architectural projects have largely stalled in the West, but the Gulf states' lack of regulations and endless flows of cash provide the kind of laissez-faire sandbox that most architects—especially those of the technocratic "big ideas" variety—can only dream of.

Unsurprisingly, when Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman proposed building a 110-mile horizontal urban "skyscraper" called the Line near the border of Jordan and Egypt in 2020—the centerpiece of a vast new planned city called Neom—many of the world's most prestigious firms clamored to sign up. These ranged from the usual suspects of neoliberal future-making, like Thom Mayne's aesthetically erratic outfit Morphosis, to firms that inherited the city-building impulses of modernism, such as Peter Cook and an I.M. Pei–less Pei Cobb Freed. All of this, of course, was managed by the notorious architecture-and-construction-slash-defense-contractor AECOM, which also happens to be handling the structural logistics for Donald Trump's ballroom and Benjamin Netanyahu's sinister, Neom-esque Gaza 2035 master plan.

For nearly five years, we beleaguered souls in the design world have had to endure innumerable press releases and puff pieces about whatever zany shit was going on out in the Saudi Arabian desert. This included the Line's supposed sustainability efforts (oh, the oil-funded irony), such as indoor gardens and wind farms, plus a number of gravity-defying proposals that, to anyone with a rudimentary understanding of physics, sounded more like pulpy sci-fi gags (most notoriously, an upside-down skyscraper poised like a keystone over an artificial marina full of stagnant water). Year by year, with little progress made save for the piles prematurely driven into the sand, it became increasingly clear that the damn thing would never be built—that it was what we in the biz call "paper architecture."

This was recently confirmed in a long *Financial Times* exposé detailing how the scope of bin Salman's vision has shrunk to basically nothing. The "chandelier" (the central upside-down skyscraper) was derailed by the fact that the earth spins, the wind blows, and human waste can't be flushed upward. The Line's reflective surface and wind-turbine farm basically created a bird-slaughtering machine along one of the world's most important migratory routes. Meanwhile, amid a culture of secrecy and retribution, architects and planners were basically forced to agree with whatever bin Salman thought was interesting or worthwhile, a process that mostly relied on a nonstop parade of spectacular renderings.

Unlike other paper reveries, the human costs of the Line have been staggering. In 2021, the development occasioned a horrific program of forced displacement for members of the Huwaitat tribe and the imprisonment—even execution—of anyone who dared to resist. A few years later, an ITV documentary revealed that more than 21,000 workers were estimated to have died or disappeared under Saudi Vision 2030, the massive urbanization program that counts Neom as its crown jewel. Human Rights Watch has documented the repeated abuse of migrant workers on Saudi megaprojects. These workers, who are often charged outlandish recruitment fees, have had their phones destroyed and their immigration documents confiscated. Tens of thousands of people have died or suffered abject ruination in the service of a few glossy pictures. The shambolic project that killed or ruined them was made possible not only by a seemingly bottomless supply of oil money, but by the borrowed prestige of some of the West's leading architecture firms.

This shambolic project, which killed so many workers, was made possible by the borrowed prestige of Western architecture firms.

The Line's failure should serve as a warning to other firms seduced by outrageous consulting and design fees—not only for the sheer scale of its barbarism but for the obvious frivolity of its lies. Is it not humiliating to aid and abet a project that is so evidently bullshit? Was it not humiliating

JOE CIARDIELLO

Greed lures architects to countries trying to culture-wash their bad names.

to have to pretend that Saudi Arabia's sustainability goals were legitimate while the construction materials and transportation behind its projects wrested more carbon from the earth than most small countries do in a year?

Architecture is always political. Greed and the promise of creative freedom—which, of course, is always secured at a cost—lure architects toward countries that are looking to culture-wash their bad names through stadiums, cultural centers, luxury shopping districts, and dazzling hotels. The logic behind many of these bad choices is that everyone else is doing the same. Louis Vuitton is doing it. Formula One is doing it. If I don't do it, somebody else will.

Architecture loves to present itself as a liberal or progressive field, shielding itself from reproach with its forays into sustainability and new, more egalitarian forms of living. And it does so all while taking sordid money and grinding its own workers to dust through overwork and underpayment. The ruins of the Line expose a cold truth, which is that these firms and their fountainheads have never been any different from any other capitalist enterprise. Like many others, they have blood on their hands. **N**

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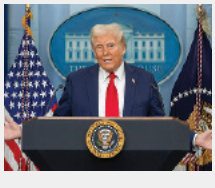

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KALI HOLLOWAY

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM: HU YOUSONG / XINHUA VIA GETTY IMAGES; FORREST ANDERSON / GETTY IMAGES; SCOTT OLSON / GETTY IMAGES

RETHINKING RURAL

ERICA ETELSON AND ANTHONY FLACCAVENTO

The Farmland Revolt

America's farmers are fuming over Trump's tariffs. Democrats need to channel their anger.

AMERICA'S FARMERS ARE STARTING TO REALIZE HOW badly Donald Trump has betrayed them, and they're stewing in anger and despair. These are the ingredients for a populist moment that Democrats can meet by offering an explanation for what has gone wrong and a plan to address the crisis.

As far as what's gone wrong, they can start with Trump's whiplash-inducing announcement of a $40 billion bailout to Make Argentina Great Again. After months of cruel and arbitrary cuts to spending on domestic and foreign aid, the Trump administration is creating an economic lifeline to prop up Argentina's corrupt anarcho-capitalist president, Javier Milei.

Argentina is the third-largest producer of soybeans in the world, behind Brazil and the United States. Seizing the opportunity presented by the US-China trade war, Argentina dropped its export tax and is now

Thankless tasks: US farmers have been devastated by Trump's trade policies. ›

selling shiploads of soybeans to China, a country that used to buy them from US farmers.

Anger about Trump's tariffs—and with it, the prospect of a political reckoning in farm country—has grown so intense that the president announced a $12 billion payout to compensate farmers for what they've lost in the trade war with China. But that Band-Aid bailout amounts to barely a third of farmers' losses in 2025 alone and won't even begin to pay off the $560 billion in debt that burdens US farmers.

It's not just soybean producers who are in trouble. Farmers all over the country are struggling with dramatic increases in input costs (fertilizer, seed, equipment, etc.), even as key markets disappear and the prices for their products stagnate or decline. This is an issue that Democrats should seize on.

America's farmers, inspired by the New Deal, were once reliably Democratic voters. Now they skew heavily Republican. The losses they've

suffered, thanks to Trump's tariffs and other disastrous policies, provide fertile ground for defection. And the bailing out of Argentina, a major agricultural competitor, offers Democrats a golden opportunity. A serious opposition party would be railing nonstop about this. It would be barnstorming every farming community in the country with a message of solidarity: "Trump has left American farmers high and dry. He may have wanted to hurt China with the tariffs, but it's US farmers who are getting punished. He's promising to throw some money at farmers, but we all know where that money's going to end up—with the banks that hold half a trillion dollars in farm debt."

A serious opposition party would be barnstorming every farming community in the country with a message of solidarity.

The message from Democrats should be blunt and politically robust. It should say that this country needs to get behind farmers in a way that it hasn't in decades. Instead of a trade war with China, we need to rebuild our food system for the good of farmers and the 340 million Americans they feed.

If any high-profile Democrat has said anything of the sort, we've missed it. The same goes for the resistance: We've seen almost no pro-farmer signs at the massive No Kings protests.

Instead, Democrats have left the field open to right-wing populists like former US representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, who rightly condemned the Argentine bailout as a betrayal of "America First." This is the same mistake that top Democrats made in 2015 and '16, when they failed to acknowledge the devastating impact of NAFTA on US factory towns, leaving an opening for Trump to do just that in the battleground states. After decades of neglect, the Midwest's "blue wall" finally crumbled.

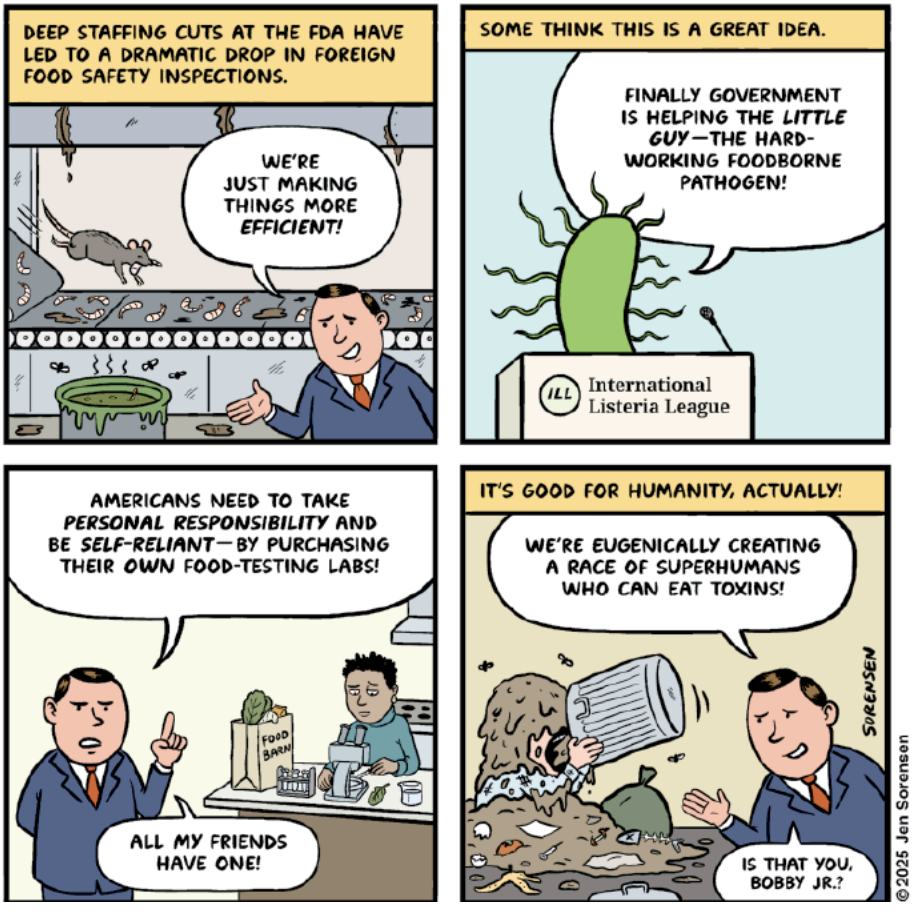
You would think that the collapse of farm country's support for Democrats would be a high priority for those seeking to rebuild the party. But we've actually seen examples of liberal social-media clicktivists mocking the pleas from farmers as "MAGA tears."

We're confident that the vast majority of urban liberals do not relish farmers' suffering. But neither have they busted a gut to learn about or advocate for what would help them: curtailing the power of the big meat processors and other food and nonfood agricultural monopolies; investing in regional food-system infrastructure to enable farmers to diversify their markets and increase their share of the food dollar; reinstating country-of-origin labeling; and passing a "right to repair" law allowing farmers to fix their agricultural implements themselves.

A lack of focus on the plight of farmers has helped solidify the widespread sense in rural America that Democrats and liberals neither understand nor care about us. It's also a huge missed opportunity. The conditions are ripe for an agrarian populist uprising: It wouldn't take more than a 3 percent shift in the rural vote to flip a number of red states and congressional districts. Farmers and their rural neighbors could give Democrats the votes they need. But these voters need a reason to make that shift.

Vague gestures toward middle-class prosperity, and the promise of a return to a "normalcy" that was never that great for farm country to begin with, don't have much meaning for people who are going broke trying to feed America. But an unapologetic agrarian populism that tells farmers that "Trump and those who came before him (Democrats included) sold you out"—and that offers a bold program for investing in rural America—could transform the politics of 2026. **N**

OPPART/JEN SORENSEN



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The Front Burner
Kali Holloway

Falling Off the Cliff

Trump's slash-and-burn economy is hitting Black women with "discriminate harm."

ELECTIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES—AND THEY ARE, unfailingly, most profoundly visited upon Black women. Donald Trump's reelection has had the consequence of Black women being pushed out of their workplaces at astonishing rates. Between February and July of last year, Black women lost 319,000 jobs in both the private and public sectors, driven largely by mass layoffs in education, healthcare, and housing. During that same period, white women gained 142,000 jobs, Hispanic women 176,000 jobs, and white men—wait for it!—picked up 365,000 jobs. In February, Black women's unemployment rate stood at 5.4 percent, but that figure had soared to 6.7 percent by August. In September, the most recent snapshot available because of the shutdown, yet another 0.8 percent of Black women lost their jobs—while just 0.2 percent of white women suffered the same fate that month. All in all, according to the gender economist Katica Roy, roughly 600,000 Black women have been "economically sidelined" since February—which was, not coincidentally, this president's first full month in office.

This has failed to set off alarm bells in a country that has never cared much about the well-being of Black women. Perhaps that's why concerned policymakers and economists so often take such pains to emphasize that Black women's economic distress is a bellwether for everyone else—to underline that their fates, and even their humanity, are connected to the nation's in the hopes that the country might finally care. And it's not just that racism and sexism make Black women the first to be let go when the economy stalls—it's also that Black women power the economy in ways this country often refuses to acknowledge. Nearly 70 percent of Black mothers are the breadwinners in their homes, though they're paid just 34, 44, or 52 cents of every dollar paid to Asian, white, or Black breadwinner dads, respectively. So when they lose jobs en masse, families are left financially vulnerable and local economies are weakened. Nationally, the cost has already surpassed $37 billion in lost GDP.

But it's disingenuous to suggest that Black women are merely hit the hardest during economic slumps when, in fact, they've been targeted for harm by a right wing that is openly committed to undoing their progress. This country has—again—chosen to meet gender and racial advancement with aggressive rollbacks, including dismantling institutions that have provided Black women with financial security and career advancement. It's not a coincidence that the first move of the Trump administration, in partnership with Elon Musk's DOGE, was to vilify and hollow out the civil service—long an engine of Black middle-class stability—where Black women make up 12 percent of staffers, double their portion of the overall workforce. A National Women's Law Center study found that women and people of color made up the majority of the workforce in the agencies that sustained the deepest cuts. The Department of Education, with a workforce of 28 percent Black women, lost 46 percent of its staff. The Department of Justice and the Department of Energy, both of which are about 70 percent white? Cut by just 1 percent and 13 percent, respectively, according to a *ProPublica* analysis.

The Trump administration has also made a show of pushing out high-profile Black women leaders, including Carla Hayden at the Library of Congress, Gwynne Wilcox at the National Labor Relations Board, and the ongoing effort to oust Lisa Cook at the Federal Reserve. Peggy Carr has described her abrupt dismissal after 35 years of climbing the ranks at the Department of Education as a "tragedy" both personal and professional. "It was like I was being taken out like the trash," Carr told *The New York Times* of being escorted out of the building by a security guard, "the only difference is I was being taken out the front door rather than the back door."

Those public-sector layoffs have been accompanied by attacks on private-sector diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, or DEI. NPR reports that roles in DEI plummeted from 20,000 in 2023 to 17,500 in April 2025. Companies too numerous to name have hastily retreated from DEI efforts they had boasted about earlier, and not because they are mandated to, since Trump's anti-DEI executive orders cannot overturn civil-rights laws or dictate the hiring practices of private businesses. A *New York Times* investigation found that the number of S&P 500 companies that include DEI language in their financial filings is down 60 percent since 2024. And for the first time since 2017, the majority of new directors hired at S&P 500 companies this year were white men.

Seventy percent of Black mothers are breadwinners. When they lose jobs en masse, it weakens the entire economy.

Black women have long worked at rates higher than other American women, including as recently as 2024. But even in the best of times, intertwined sexism and anti-Black racism, or misogynoir, consign them to the most precarious jobs in the least recession-proof sectors. Across

ANDY FRIEDMAN

industries, they are paid less than white men with the same—and even, in some comparisons, lower—levels of education; are least likely of all women to be promoted; and leave college burdened with the most student-loan debt. Now Trump has launched what Representative Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) rightly calls a campaign of "discriminate harm" against them. History vividly illustrates what the consequences will be. After economic downturns in the early 1980s, the Great Recession of the aughts, and the Covid pandemic, Black women were the last to recover financially. But this time, the Trump administration has scrubbed race-based employment data from government websites—preemptively erasing evidence of the harms it's inflicting.

When Black women voted against this regime, they were fighting for their lives at the ballot box, knowing they'd be the first to bear the brunt of its damages—and fully aware they wouldn't be the last. It was, of course, not enough to stop a country unwilling to heed their warnings. So once again we're trapped, forced to inhale the noxious fumes no one else notices are poisoning us all. **N**

SNAPSHOT
Luis Tato

Strike a Pose

Students from the Kibera Ballet School perform in Project Elimu's annual Christmas show in Kibera on December 23. Founded by the Kenyan dancer Mike Wamaya, Project Elimu provides free classes for young people in the informal settlement in Nairobi.

By the Numbers

59%
Share of data-center capacity owned by the three leading cloud-computing providers globally: Amazon, Microsoft, and Google

900
Approximate number of data centers run by Amazon

114
Current number of data centers owned by Google

5M
Gallons of water that a hyper-scale data center can consume each day

17.5
Ounces of water used for a 100-word AI prompt

4%
Portion of total US electricity used by data centers

8%
Predicted increase in the average US electricity bill by 2030 because of data centers and cryptocurrency mining

FROM TOP: AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; BRENT LEWIN / *BLOOMBERG* VIA GETTY IMAGES

CALVIN TRILLIN
DeadlinePoet

Maduro's Arrest

Trump talks a lot about the flow
Of drugs that this arrest will foil.
The flow concerning him, in truth,
Is not the flow of drugs but oil.

Q&A

Rowan Wernham and Yasha Levine

At the center of *Pistachio Wars*, a documentary directed by Rowan Wernham and Yasha Levine, is the billionaire couple Stewart and Lynda Resnick. The Resnicks, the biggest farmers in the United States, founded the Wonderful Company, purveyor of airport staples like Wonderful Pistachios, FIJI Water, and that pomegranate juice in bottles shaped like fertility goddesses.

The Resnicks are the type of outlandishly rich characters who exist only in places like Los Angeles. Lynda, the duo's marketing prodigy, is the daughter of the movie distributor Jack Harris, who produced *The Blob*. An activist during the Vietnam War era, she let her friend Daniel Ellsberg use her photocopier to leak the Pentagon Papers. Stewart met Lynda after seeking her out for marketing help at his security firm, which was later charged with smuggling heroin through LAX. Today, they live in a 25,000-square-foot Beaux-Arts manor in Beverly Hills, enjoying an agricultural fortune buttressed by Super Bowl ads featuring Stephen Colbert and PSY of "Gangnam Style" fame.

While *Pistachio Wars* revels in the Resnicks' eccentricities, it's ultimately an exposé of their nefarious business practices. For decades, the Resnicks have sustained their orchards by buying up the rights to vast quantities of California's scarce water, consuming more annually than all of LA and expanding even during the state's most severe droughts. Their thirsty groves often overlook oil fields where pumpjacks nod like dunking birds and canals are coated with a thin, iridescent petroleum skin. The Wonderful Company sometimes acquires the wastewater from nearby drilling to irrigate crops, a potential risk to public health. The US pistachio industry took off soon after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, as a direct result of US embargoes that throttled imports of Iranian products (including pistachio nuts), and the couple have long lobbied to maintain these trade sanctions on Iran.

The Nation spoke with Wernham and Levine about their experience making *Pistachio Wars* and the environmental, public health, and geopolitical perils of privatizing a critical natural resource like water. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

—Lara-Nour Walton

LNW: Only 20 percent of the water used by Californians goes to the residential population; the rest is allocated to agriculture. How does the majority of an ostensibly public resource end up in industry hands?

RW: According to the California Constitution, water is supposed to be a public resource. But when you get into, say, the western Central Valley, what you have is a water district, and the control of that district is based on land ownership. Because the Wonderful Company owns the majority of the land in that area, it has control over the water. So that's one way that water is quasi-privatized.

And then in the 1990s, everything was culturally and politically moving toward privatization. As the Resnicks rode that wave, they set their sights on the Kern Water Bank, an underground aquifer that stores enough water to supply LA. There was a backroom deal at that time, which the Resnicks were involved in, where the state handed over the majority of the water bank. Meanwhile, the Resnicks lobbied to change some of the rules for water in California, to shift them more toward agricultural use and away from residential use. The sum of their lobbying was a system that allowed them to trade water in a marketized way.

LNW: How did the Resnicks become involved in agriculture?

RW: The Resnicks were not from a farming background. After they got together, Lynda started marketing for the companies they would buy. These business ventures tended to sell tacky trinkets like Princess Diana dolls. But there was inflation in the 1970s, so they basically bought land just to park their money as a hedge against inflation.

YL: They bought that land from oil companies for

"The Resnicks became some of the individuals with the most water in the world."

cheap and inherited an agriculture business with different products: citrus, tree nuts, wine. They have this vertically integrated agribusiness with distribution and branding.

RW: They own everything—they are the sole owners of their company, never floating it for shares. That's how they became some of the individuals with the most water in the world.

LNW: The Wonderful Company sells many different products—why focus on pistachios?

RW: We focused on pistachios because the Resnicks single-handedly created and dominated the market in America. The Resnicks are the biggest pistachio producers in the world, so all the problems that result from pistachio production, you can pin it on them. The other reason we focused on pistachios is that when people criticize agricultural water use, the retort is "Well, we need food." But it's hard to make that argument about a snack nut like pistachios.

California's rain is unpredictable: In some years there's a water surplus, and in others a shortage. If there isn't much water in a given year, farmers typically won't plant their row crops. But pistachios take seven years to bear fruit, so once you plant those trees, you must have water, and you will likely apply political pressure to get it. Especially because each pound of pistachios needs over a thousand gallons of water.

LNW: California has the largest dam-and-aqueduct system in the world, and the film exposes how these artificial water networks have triggered extinction events for species like smelt and salmon. The Resnicks have lobbied to extend aqueducts to support their agricultural empire. Beyond water use, how have the Resnicks contributed to environmental and social harms?

YL: Aside from prompting mass-extinction events, water-distribution systems have allowed the Wonderful Company to create massive Central Valley plantations. This terraforming allows residential areas and agribusiness to expand into places where they shouldn't be. So suburban sprawl is now in the hills where fires are a natural occurrence. I wouldn't say that the Resnicks are responsible for recent wildfires, but there's a connection. Artificial water systems have allowed the building of whole neighborhoods and cities in fire-prone places.

LNW: What is the relationship between the Wonderful Company and the oil industry?

RW: The land the Resnicks got was in the Central Valley, where there was a lot of oil industry. There were huge drilled-out fields that were unusable and being sold cheaply. When oil companies are drilling, they pump water with chemicals into wells. Then they end up with something called "produced water" that they must dispose of. They're supposed to reinject it into the ground where the oil was, but that's expensive. So oil companies deal with that by filtering and diluting the chemical water so it can run back into agriculture.

The Wonderful Company has admitted to using this kind of water to irrigate their crops.

"Democrat-controlled California is the supposed bastion of American progress."

LNW: The Resnicks are lauded for investing in the Central Valley town of Lost Hills. Most of its residents are employed by the Wonderful Company, and many live below the poverty line near an oil refinery. What labor concerns does this raise?

YL: Lost Hills is an impoverished town with people essentially sick from breathing dust, pesticides, and fertilizer, living next to an active refinery and working in corporate agriculture. They don't have access to clean drinking water. Meanwhile, the people who control the town's main industry recently listed their secondary house in Aspen for $300 million. Barely any of that wealth goes back to Lost Hills.

It's like a domestic banana republic. A banana republic presupposes that there's an empire that uses the republic as a plantation where things are grown, people are exploited, and resources are extracted for the metropole. Los Angeles is kind of that imperial center—its museums and already well-funded universities benefit from the Resnicks' generous donations. All that wealth is created by Lost Hills residents.

The environmental degradation and labor exploitation are in a faraway region where many workers don't speak English, so there's almost a racialized divide between the Wonderful Company's beneficiaries and those who toil in the field to develop that wealth. The American empire does bad things overseas, but the pattern is replicated domestically, and my critique of some anti-imperial politics is that it rarely looks inward.

LNW: While the Resnicks are employing imperial procedures domestically, they are also propping up American empire abroad. How is the couple implicated in US foreign policy?

YL: American foreign policy created their business: US meddling in Iran and subsequent sanctions created the conditions for California's pistachio industry. Then profits from that industry circulate back into this imperial machine that works to create a consensus in America that Iran is our greatest enemy. When I started reporting on the Resnicks, there were domestic Jewish groups who were lobbying against Obama's nuclear deal with Iran. At the time, the Resnicks were giving a lot of money to those Jewish organizations. Then, over the years, they donated millions to American Friends of the IDF and sat on the board of a hawkish Middle East policy think tank, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. They are recycling their profits into the imperial logic that made their business possible. It's a formula that doesn't really stand out, aside from the fact that the pistachio situation is kind of ridiculous. You can maybe understand starting a war over oil, but launching a nuclear war over pistachios? I don't think people are into that.

LNW: Is there any recourse? What could a better system look like?

YL: We focus on the Resnicks, but they are just the latest manifestation of an entrenched system of industrial agriculture. Without addressing the industrial base of our society, you can't really do much about it. Short of a revolution, I don't think that there is a solution.

RW: Democrat-controlled California is the supposed bastion of American progress. But things are really bad here, so I think people need to look beyond the culture-war bipartisan struggle and realize that there is a deeper systemic problem with the way we're running our society and economy and political system.

ROWAN WERNHAM AND YASHA LEVINE IN SAN FRANCISCO, 2022 (EVGENIA KOVDA)

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HELL CATS *vs.* HEGSETH

Meet the military women who are fighting to win purple districts for the Democrats and put the defense secretary on notice.

JOAN WALSH

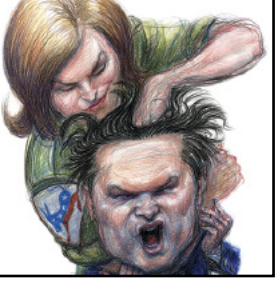
In 2018, they called themselves "the Badasses"—a cadre of female national-security and military veterans running for Congress as Democrats, in what turned out to be a wave of anti–Donald Trump victories and a landslide for women candidates. All five—Michigan's Elissa Slotkin and Virginia's Abigail Spanberger, both ex–CIA officers; New Jersey's Mikie Sherrill and Virginia's Elaine Luria, both ex–Navy officers; and Pennsylvania's Chrissy Houlahan, an Air Force veteran—won their contests in purple districts that year. They emerged as an effective force of center-leaning liberals that challenged Trump and then helped President Joe Biden enact his social-welfare and infrastructure agenda. In 2024, Slotkin was elected to the Senate, and in 2025, Spanberger and Sherrill won landslide victories to become the governors of their states. Only Luria lost her seat, in 2022; she's running again this year and has a good chance to take it back.

In 2026, their counterparts are the "Hell Cats," four female Democratic military veterans seeking to follow the Badasses' battle plan to win congressional seats in purple districts. They are Arizona's JoAnna Mendoza, a retired Marine challenging Representative Juan Ciscomani; New Jersey's Rebecca Bennett, a Navy pilot officer taking on Representative Thomas Kean; and Maura Sullivan, a New Hampshire Marine looking to replace Representative Chris Pappas, who is running for an open Senate seat. There's also Cait Conley, a West Point graduate, former National Security Council official, and Army veteran with six tours overseas and three Bronze Stars, who is up against New York's Hudson Valley Representative Mike Lawler in one of the only three districts won by Kamala Harris in 2024 that is still held by a Republican. They could be key to the Democratic Party assuming control of the House in 2027, since it will need just three seats to flip the chamber.

The Hell Cats are running in the wake of the landmark wins by Slotkin, Spanberger, and Sherrill in the past two years, and they are getting national attention. They began a Signal chat with one another in mid-2025 and branded themselves as the Hell Cats, after a World War I cohort of female Marines who were confined to desk duty but nevertheless wore the uniform and made the same salary as male Marines. "I was a junior in high school on 9/11," Conley says. With her long, dark hair and engaging smile, she looks a little like Demi Moore in the 1997 movie *G.I. Jane* before she shaved her head to join the Navy SEALs. (The veteran unironically confesses that the movie partly inspired her military career.) "I sat there watching those towers fall, just 20-some miles down the river. And being part of communities where we lost a lot of firefighters that day, as well as folks in the finance industry, other first responders, I had the feeling: Someone else got us into this mess. And we are going to fix it." Of course, "we" did not—terrible political leadership led us into disastrous wars.

Conley had a similar feeling in 2024, when Trump careened back into the White House and the pretend centrist Lawler kept his seat. "Coming out of November, to see the country I love be so divided and to feel that division tearing apart communities and

ILLUSTRATION BY **VICTOR JUHASZ**



even families—that is what I'm most concerned about."

Conley and her Hell Cat sisters believe their military experience enables them to reach a wider swath of voters than many other Democrats do and offers a solution to partisan polarization. Data collected by the political group VoteVets bears this out: Democratic military veterans perform 5.8 percentage points better, on average, than Democratic candidates who are nonveterans. Republican veterans, meanwhile, do not enjoy any advantage over their non-vet colleagues. Of course, for all their Badass predecessors' political successes, it should be noted that they were not able to work bipartisan magic in Congress—at least not yet—though their relative centrism probably helped several of them go on to statewide leadership, a much-needed contribution to shoring up democracy today.

"You have this system that helps people up, educates them, forges bonds across divides… and it's funded by taxpayer dollars."

—Max Rose, senior adviser to VoteVets

It's relevant that the Badasses and the Hell Cats came to service and leadership through the military, one of the most integrated institutions in American society, and the one most committed to giving its members the tools to climb economically, from vocational training to college tuition to mortgage assistance, all of which helped create the post–World War II middle class. As Trump shreds social programs and whatever safety net we have left, these female military veterans may be uniquely equipped to argue for a 21st-century opportunity society, and to be seen as credible by a bipartisan voter base that doesn't believe that our current political establishment is serious about addressing the political and economic decline of the past 50 years.

"There's undeniably a leg up that veterans have in the trust-building process. And yes, people honor their service, and that's all good and important," says Max Rose, a decorated Army veteran, former congressman, and senior adviser to VoteVets, which cultivated a group of veterans opposed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to run for office in 2006 and has been helping to build a cadre of Democratic veterans in Congress ever since. "But their military service showed each of them what the potential for America could be. You have this system that helps people up, educates them, forges bonds across cultural, socioeconomic, and ethnic divides like none I've ever seen. It engenders incredible solidarity and ambition to overcome challenges. And that system is funded by taxpayer dollars. It has led to incredible leaders speaking to an incredible message across the country that we need. That's what the Hell Cats bring."

Called to account: Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth arrives for a congressional briefing after military strikes against boats in the Caribbean.

THE HELL CATS AREN'T CARBON COPIES of the Badasses. Elected the same year as the left-wing Squad, starring New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 2018's female military veterans sometimes styled themselves as moderate foils to these progressive women. After the Dems lost congressional seats in 2020 even as Biden won the White House, Spanberger blasted the left wing of her party. "If we are classifying Tuesday as a success from a congressional standpoint, we will get fucking torn apart in 2022," Spanberger said. "That's the reality." She went on: "We need to not ever use the words *socialist* or *socialism* ever again."

At the time, AOC fired back on cue: "You can't just tell the Black, Brown, & youth organizers riding in to save us every election to be quiet or not have their reps champion them when they need us," she tweeted. "Or wonder why they don't show up for midterms when they're scolded for existing. Esp when they're delivering victories."

The 2018 veterans did get slightly higher marks from conservative, "limited government" groups like the Institute for Legislative Analysis than the Squad members did, but they only hovered in the teens, while the Squad was in the single digits. In GovTrack.us's ideology tracker, the Democratic vets all fell within the more progressive 50 percent of the House's 435 members, while the Squad was in the most progressive 10 percent. All were reliable votes on Biden priorities like the Build Back Better bill, which faced early opposition from conservative Democrats in the House (who ultimately supported it) and was torpedoed in the Senate by faux-Democrats Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema.

On one issue, foreign intervention, Democratic vets may be more progressive than their non-vet counterparts, Rose tells me. "I think veterans—and this is certainly the case with the Hell Cats—are much more likely to want to use military force only when it is absolutely required, and to think about it responsibly."

The Hell Cats seem somewhat more ideologically diverse than their Badass predecessors. So far, they haven't picked fights with their party's left, and in my conversations with them, none mentioned New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani (who ignored Spanberger's admonition never to mention socialism, to great effect), for better or worse.

All four Hell Cats are solidly working-class, and they represent themselves that way. Mendoza, the child of farmers, is a queer single mother who joined the Army at 17 and whose family at times relied on SNAP and Medicaid when she was growing up. Conley's parents never went to college. Her mother worked for the US Postal Service and raised three kids; her father was a construction worker,

TOM WILLIAMS / *CQ ROLL CALL* VIA GETTY IMAGES

and her grandfather and great-grandfather worked in the brickyards in Montrose, New York. Sullivan earned a scholarship to go to Northwestern University; while she was there, she worked three jobs to pay for her room and board. Bennett went to college on an ROTC scholarship and worked two other jobs to get through.

Their military background inoculates them against the questions about toughness that women candidates often face, a Democratic consultant points out. (She didn't want to be quoted by name for fear of being seen as perpetuating the stereotype that women leaders are somehow weaker than men.) "Just because you've done the military doesn't mean you're actually a servant leader," says Emily Cherniack, a cofounder of New Politics, which recruits not just military veterans but folks who have served in Americorps, the Peace Corps, healthcare, education, and nonprofit roles. Cherniack is credited by the Hell Cats with introducing the group's members to one another last year.

"In the service experience, they've learned how to lead teams that are diverse," Cherniack continues. "They've had to bring people together towards a mission larger than themselves. And they've been in really difficult situations, whether it's in Iraq, or whether it's in a school that is failing with no resources, or whether they're a first responder bringing relief in a [civilian] conservation corps. My theory was that leadership experience is really necessary in political life."

YOUTUBE / @SENATORELISSASLOTKIN / SHORTS

Standing on principle: Senator Elissa Slotkin, an ex-CIA officer, participated in a video created by Democratic elected officials to tell service members that they are not obligated to follow illegal orders.

For a long time, the recruitment of House candidates was mainly the purview of local Democratic leaders alongside the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. In 2006, the party took back the House, thanks in part to public revulsion over the Iraq War and Republican sex and ethical scandals. That year, Rahm Emanuel, then the head of the DCCC, made a point of recruiting "macho" candidates like former college football star and social conservative Heath Shuler in North Carolina, retired admiral Joe Sestak of Pennsylvania, and decorated Illinois Iraq War veteran Tammy Duckworth, who's now a senator. That same year, Democratic Senate Campaign Committee chair Chuck Schumer, now the Senate minority leader, endorsed the social conservative and former Marine Jim Webb, Ronald Reagan's Navy secretary, to run for the Senate in Virginia. VoteVets, also founded in 2006, launched a major push to recruit veterans into Democratic politics, with the goal of wresting the mantle of pro-national-security party away from the GOP. "Prior to VoteVets' existence, conservatives and Republicans were viewed as the pro-military, pro-security party, for decades," the organization's website explains. "VoteVets helped change that dynamic…. Now, some of the best known veteran elected officials in America are Democrats." That year, VoteVets endorsed Minnesota's Tim Walz and Pennsylvania's Patrick Murphy, as well as Sestak and Duckworth. In 2018, it went all in for the Badasses, and it aggressively backed Spanberger's and Sherrill's runs for governor in 2025. Since then, the group has expanded into local and state races, and in 2024, 143 of its candidates won their bids for city, state, or congressional seats. Recruiting local candidates ensures there's a deep bench of veterans who can move up.

VoteVets has also moved beyond veterans' issues, becoming an active voice for gun-safety legislation, the preservation of public lands, and labor rights. As the Trump administration slashed the federal workforce, of which 30 percent are military veterans, the group emerged as a savvy force pushing back against the cuts. VoteVets is currently endorsing 32 Democratic veterans, many of them incumbents, for Congress in 2026, including all four Hell Cats.

In the past decade, the party leadership's bias for middle-of-the-road candidates has spawned several more initiatives to recruit more progressives. Senator Bernie Sanders's insurgent 2016 presidential campaign inspired the formation of Justice Democrats, which helped recruit the 2018 candidates who would go on to form the Squad, and others. The Collective PAC, which recruits and endorses Black candidates at every level of government through its Black Campaign School, emerged that year as well. Since then, it says, it has helped elect more than 500 Black leaders. Hillary Clinton's defeat by Trump spurred the creation of Run for Something, founded in 2017 to recruit progressive Democrats under the age of 40 to run at the local and state level. Run for Something reports that it either recruited or gave significant help to 1,500 young electeds.

At the same time, EMILYs List, which has been recruiting and developing candidates since its founding in 1985, stepped up its efforts in state legislatures and Congress after thousands of women contacted the group saying that Trump's election had inspired them to seek political office. Several EMILYs List endorsements have also been backed by VoteVets. As we commiserated about the election over lunch in early 2017, EMILYs List's then-president, Stephanie Schriock, told me about Badass Chrissy Houlahan, whom the group was enthusiastically supporting.

Democratic military veterans perform 5.8 percentage points better, on average, than non-vet Democratic candidates.

The Hell Cats: From left, congressional candidates Cait Conley, JoAnna Mendoza, and Rebecca Bennett are using their military experience to make a case for their fitness for office.

Outsider groups continue to emerge: David Hogg, a survivor of the school massacre in Parkland, Florida, cofounded Leaders We Deserve in 2023 to recruit millennial and Gen Z candidates. Hogg's determination to topple Democratic Party stalwarts—some of them liberal women and people of color—irritated even some progressive party leaders and cost him his seat as vice chair of the Democratic National Committee. But his group perseveres. In 2025, the Working Families Party launched a formal effort to recruit and train working-class Democratic candidates, something sorely needed in a party that's been losing its working-class base—including, more recently, some working-class voters of color.

THE HELL CATS MAY BENEFIT FROM ANOTHER FACTOR IN this cycle: the growing national revulsion at Trump's incompetent, unqualified secretary of defense (and former Fox News host), Pete Hegseth, whose vision of the military couldn't be farther from theirs. While it was Trump who fired the Coast Guard commandant, Adm. Linda Fagan, on day one of his administration (since she was a Department of Homeland Security official), Hegseth quickly followed suit in firing other top female military leaders. In his first six months, he removed Adm. Lisa Franchetti, the first female chief of naval operations; Air Force Lt. Gen. Jennifer Short, a senior military assistant to the defense secretary (whom Hegseth referred to as a "DEI hire"); Vice Adm. Shoshana Chatfield, the only female flag officer on NATO's Military Committee; and Vice Adm. Yvette Davids, the head of the US Naval Academy. Many of the terminations seemed motivated by Trump's crackdown on what he deems a "woke military." Hegseth purged a top Black military leader for some of the same reasons.

"People are looking for someone who understands what they are going through and is going to fight for them."
—Rebecca Bennett, New Jersey congressional candidate

In early December, the Defense Department's inspector general reported that Hegseth's use of the encrypted but unsecure texting application Signal to discuss an impending air strike on Yemen last March could have endangered American troops. And his willingness to commit war crimes, much lauded in MAGA world, is increasingly outraging the rest of the country. For months, Hegseth carried out Trump's almost certainly illegal targeting of small boats off the coast of Venezuela, which they both claimed were drug-cartel vessels smuggling fentanyl and other narcotics to the United States, while providing no evidence.

Hegseth was directly implicated in a war crime, according to *The Washington Post*, when he reportedly ordered US forces to "kill them all" in the first Caribbean strike, leading to an attack on two desperate survivors—in violation of multiple US and international codes regarding the obligation to rescue survivors of military strikes, not murder them.

The Hell Cats bring the fire when they talk about Hegseth. He has not only denigrated the qualifications of women just like them, dedicated soldiers who are now derided as DEI hires. "You have a secretary of defense who is unfortunately dealing with so much of his own insecurity that he's not focused on our national security," Sullivan tells me. "He's simply focusing on what people look like or what gender somebody is, or what race, as opposed to: Are they competent? Do they meet the standards? And can they do the job of fighting and winning the nation's wars?" The thought of Hegseth at the helm keeps her going when she gets tired.

JoAnna Mendoza says she was most motivated to run by her 9-year-old son, but Hegseth's appointment has given her another reason. She is appalled by the changes he's made to the protocols for filing sexual-assault complaints. In October, the Associated Press reported that Hegseth signed a memo "ordering the inspector general to identify anyone who makes a complaint instead of letting them be anonymous, to dismiss any complaints the inspector general deems 'non-credible,' and to set new, tighter timelines for complaints to be filed and investigations to be completed." These directives will serve to discourage women from coming forward, she

says, and potentially thwart the efforts to get justice for those who do. "I am concerned especially as someone who was a victim-advocate for the sexual-assault-prevention response program," Mendoza tells me. "I'm a survivor."

Hegseth himself has been accused of sexual assault and paid a settlement to one of his accusers, while not admitting guilt.

Rebecca Bennett vividly remembers what it felt like to be one of the first female Navy pilots, a grueling test that seems far beyond anything Hegseth has experienced: "The TMI version of this is that there's no way for women to go to the bathroom in a Navy helicopter. So we would just have to… we would call it 'tactical dehydration': We just would not drink water. So just imagine, you know, it's 120 degrees in the Middle East, and you have to do a 12-hour mission, and you are basically intentionally dehydrating yourself."

Cait Conley tells me that Hegseth should resign or be fired for his war crimes in Venezuelan waters. "Pete Hegseth is unfit to lead the Department of Defense," she says. "Every reckless decision he makes puts our service members and American families in danger. The honorable thing he can do now is resign and let someone competent lead our troops and keep our country safe."

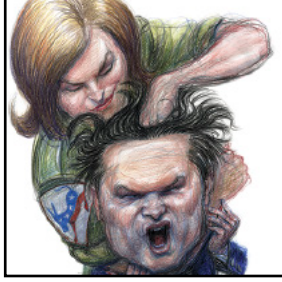
But while Hegseth provokes her, Conley says, her daily motivation is her opponent, Mike Lawler, who espouses moderation while voting for Trump's agenda—including the Big Ugly Bill, which slashed Medicaid while lowering taxes on the wealthy, both of which Lawler professes to oppose. He refused to support a deal to extend the Affordable Care Act subsidies in a compromise bill to end the government shutdown, even though he claimed he wanted to renew them (and backed a separate bipartisan bill that would do that but had no chance of passing).

"It's not [just] that he's a Republican. He's the opposite of me," Conley says. "He was a political operative and politician the last 20 years, when I was out there defending America's sons and daughters. I've been delivering for the American people while he's been stoking partisan discord."

Arguably one of the slimiest things that Lawler, or his Republican campaign operatives, did was to support an effort to "ballot-raid" the Working Families Party nomination to take it away from Democrat Mondaire Jones in 2024. His campaign backed former Republican Anthony Frascone in challenging Jones in an unexpected WFP primary, which Frascone then won. Taking a risk—since it needs 2 percent of all votes every two years to keep its ballot line—the WFP told its voters to back Jones on the Democratic Party line. Still, Lawler edged out Jones, 52 to 46 percent (Frascone netted just 2 percent of the vote). This year, although a Republican who recently registered as a Democrat has filed to run in the primary, WFP sources don't expect the same high jinks, since he's running as a Democrat.

Conley tells me she's not sure if she'll seek the left-leaning WFP's endorsement. "I don't know about that now," she says. "We need to figure out how, as a Democratic Party, we can better organize. How do we just engage voters where they are, regardless of how they register?"

WFP sources told me that they've been in touch with Conley's campaign and that they weren't discouraged by her hesitation. The party is looking to see how the next few months will play out.



"Hegseth is focusing on what people look like or what gender somebody is, or what race, as opposed to: Are they competent?"

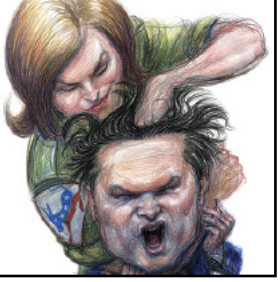
—Maura Sullivan, New Hampshire congressional candidate

Possibly because of the precedent set by the Badasses and possibly because of their own rhetoric, the Hell Cats are still widely considered centrist-leaning—although not disqualifyingly so, according to a prominent progressive activist in NY-17, Lawler's district, who asked to remain anonymous. He says he likes Conley and considers her the front-runner at this point—she's moved ahead of other Democrats in fundraising and surpassed Lawler in at least one poll—but he calls her the "centrist" in the race. Even so, when I ask him to cite a position she's taken that makes the Army veteran—a lesbian who lives with her partner and two dogs in Ossining—more "centrist" than others in the primary, he admits that he can't. "I think it's primarily the military appeal," he says, adding: "Which in this purple district is a good thing." Most of the candidates focus first on affordability—the pandemic exodus from New York City and other factors pushed Hudson Valley's home prices through the roof, and the region's manufacturing base is shrinking, as it is in most places. The NY-17 activist says he'll vote in the primary for the person he believes can beat Lawler, and a lot of folks are thinking that's Conley, he adds.

None of the four Hell Cats like to be forced to define themselves as progressive or moderate. "I do think *moderate* and *progressive* mean different things to different people," Bennett tells me. "At the end of the day, people are looking for someone who understands what they are going through and is going to fight

The Badasses at work: From left, Abigail Spanberger, Mikie Sherrill, Chrissy Houlahan, and Elissa Slotkin meet at the Capitol in 2019.

TOM WILLIAMS / *CQ ROLL CALL* VIA GETTY IMAGES



for them." Three of the four say they would have opposed the Democrats' November vote to reopen the government without getting a deal to extend the Affordable Care Act subsidies. "We are facing an affordability crisis here in New York 17; people are having to make trade-offs between groceries and prescriptions," Conley says. "To then pursue a policy where we are making it more expensive to have healthcare—it's wrong. This is not the time when you take away the [ACA] tax credits." A typical qualifying couple in NY-17 would see their premiums increase by 221 percent, or $1,330 a month, if the ACA's subsidies expire, Conley's office told me, citing research by KFF.

"[Voters] are OK if you're going after drug cartels, but they're not about watching a mother get walked off in front of her 4-year-old daughter."
—Cait Conley, New York congressional candidate

JoAnna Mendoza strongly opposed shutting down the government in the first place. "I don't like to deal in hypotheticals—I mean, what's already happened has happened," she says. But "the fact that there is this strategy to withhold wages from people that work in the federal government, our military, their families—that is so wrong."

Of course, perceived ideology isn't always destiny. The Badasses were decisive in then–House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's decision to bring the first impeachment charges against Trump, after he brazenly threatened to withhold military aid from Ukraine if newly elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky refused to reveal damaging information about Joe Biden. All five women, plus two male Democratic military veterans, collaborated on a *Washington Post* op-ed calling for impeachment that seemed to tip the scales away from Pelosi's former caution.

In late November, Slotkin and Houlahan joined other Democratic congressional vets in an ad titled "Don't Give Up the Ship," reminding military personnel and intelligence officials that they don't have to obey illegal orders from anybody, including the president. The narration alternates among the six veterans: "This administration is pitting our uniformed military and intelligence community professionals against American citizens," they say, concluding: "Our laws are clear, you can refuse illegal orders…you must refuse illegal orders."

In response, Trump exploded on social media. "Each one of these traitors to our country should be arrested and put on trial," he declared, sharing other users' threats, such as "Hang them, George Washington would." Hegseth announced that Senator Mark Kelly, the group's only retired military officer, is being investigated for a possible court-martial; in addition, the lawmakers may be facing an FBI investigation.

At a time when some Democrats are fighting over whether "kitchen-table issues" or "Trump versus democracy" should be their candidates' rallying cry, these women are asking why it can't be both. Maura Sullivan, drawing on her experience in the nightmare of the battle of Fallujah in Iraq, where she and her fellow Marines faced the repercussions of the disastrous policy decisions and clueless leadership coming from Washington, says that Americans don't need to choose between those issues.

"What I saw…as a Marine officer in Fallujah during the Iraq War," she says, "was that leaders in Washington—Republican and Democrats—were totally out of touch with what was going on on the ground. You had leaders who sent a bunch of other people's kids to a war that we never should have been in without a plan to win and without the resources to succeed."

It's also striking that these women came up in a military that was the most integrated institution in American society. Their service alongside people of every race and class (the wealthy, of course, are underrepresented in our volunteer military) appears to have prepared them well in representing their diverse constituencies.

The Trump regime's persecution of immigrants has been a central campaign issue for them. "They're rounding up small-business owners, community leaders, veterans," Mendoza says. "As someone who is a brown woman, it's scary and it's concerning. There's a lot of folks in our communities who are afraid to go to work; they're afraid to go to the grocery store. We have noncitizen veterans who are being deported. These are people who signed up to serve this country, who are willing to die for this country, who've deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Some even had papers."

"People are staying indoors" in the immigrant neighborhoods of her district, Conley says. And some Trump voters, she notes, are having second thoughts. She saw it when she was knocking on doors in the 2025 local elections: "I knocked a ton of them myself. And you could see and feel reactions, because families are split. They're OK if you're going after drug cartels, but you can't tell me the grandmother who's been here for 30 years is an agent of a drug cartel. They're not about watching a mother get walked off in front of her 4-year-old daughter. That is not what they thought they were supporting."

Rebecca Bennett credits the GI Bill and other programs that her military enlistment afforded her for helping her get to where she is today: "I had an ROTC scholarship for my undergrad, and then I worked two jobs on top of that to cover the bills that I didn't have covered by my scholarship, and I used the GI Bill for [other degrees]. The military is one of the things that helps catapult people to be able to build their version of the American dream." As we tear down the economic ladders that were erected during the years between World War II and the early 1970s, many of these entitlement programs still remain in the military. These women can tell a story about how government—and not just the military—can benefit people, in a period when Trump is savaging both.

Cait Conley says she also learned that lesson from her mother, who was a local postal worker: "I remember on Christmas Day, we'd wake up, open a couple of presents, and we'd have to go get our clothes on. We would meet up at a college. And then we'd go out and deliver packages.

"And I was like, 'Mom, I don't get it. The Postal Service is closed.' And she said, 'Cait, this is our responsibility. You never know when this package is the only package a family is going to get.' So we don't just recognize the right thing—we do it. It's not nine-to-five, and it's not holiday hours. It's doing the right thing when it's hard." N

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Giving Black Youth a Reason to Live

Young people are facing an epidemic of mental illness. Here's how one community is rethinking its approach to the crisis.

DANI McCLAIN

WHEN 21-YEAR-OLD DEMARTRAVION "TREY" REED was found hanging from a tree on Mississippi's Delta State University campus in September, the pained public outcry was immediate. The black-and-white image of the "A Man Was Lynched Yesterday" flag, which the NAACP had displayed outside its national headquarters in the 1920s and '30s, filled my social media feeds. Rumors swirled online that the young Black man had been found with broken limbs, proof there was no way he could have died by suicide as official reports suggested. The thought of white supremacists lynching a student while the White House implemented its punishing policy goals at the federal level was too much to stomach. I heeded the advice of a trusted, Mississippi-based movement elder who urged her online community to avoid jumping to conclusions, wait for more information, and join Reed's family in mourning this tragic loss of life.

Having studied the mental-health crisis among Black youth for the past year, I've seen how the public will become more outraged by the possibility of foul play than by the possibility that a young person has found life too heavy a burden to bear and wants out. Whether or not the latter is what happened to Reed, it is a devastating trend. (As of publication time, the results of an independent autopsy had not been released.) Deaths by suicide are increasing for all young people—but at a faster rate for Black children and young adults than for any other racial or ethnic group. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Black youth ages 15 to 24. Even elementary-school-age kids are flailing. Black children 12 and younger are twice as likely to die by suicide as their white peers. This phenomenon predates the first half of this decade, when the Covid pandemic increased isolation and race-based gaps in learning. A 2023 report found that from 2007 to 2020, the suicide rate among Black youth between the ages of 10 and 17 increased by 144 percent.

The person with the largest megaphone in the current debate on the emotional and mental health of American youth is Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and NYU business school professor. His book *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* has become a guidebook for parents who worry that social media—and, by extension, cell phones—have colonized their children's inner lives. But what I've gathered from conversations with therapists, youth development workers, families, and scholars of Black youth mental health is that Haidt's narrow focus on screens and a bygone era of outdoor play doesn't appropriately address what's happening in the lives of Black adolescents.

Dani McClain is an award-winning journalist. This story was produced with support from the Spencer Education Journalism Fellowship at Columbia Journalism School.

ILLUSTRATION BY **ADRIÀ FRUITÓS**

Giving Black Youth a Reason to Live

And it's not just Haidt. Articles appearing in mainstream news outlets tend to focus on this idea of a one-size-fits-all solution to the youth mental-health crisis, ignoring broader cultural, political, and economic forces. Young people are experiencing traumatic events that rattle their psyches and alter the shape of their lives. What's worse, they too often feel that they have to navigate these forces alone, or that their perspectives are ignored when they do seek out help. "There's been a lot of times growing up when I've been told what my needs are," Robby Harris, a recent graduate of Ohio's Central State University, told those of us gathered at a Black youth suicide-prevention summit in Columbus last summer. Over months of reporting, I heard repeatedly from young people and the grownups who work with them that they lack trusted adults and safe spaces where they can create and feel a sense of belonging.

"We're saying the parents aren't doing their part, but the larger 'we' are not doing our job."

—Tynisha Worthy, codirector of Youth at the Center

I WANTED TO KNOW WHAT WAS happening in Cincinnati, where I am raising a Black tween and where I know we are facing a mental-health crisis that mirrors the rest of the country's. The Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center reported in 2023 that "the number of children and adolescents presenting to our pediatric emergency services in mental health crisis doubled" between 2011 and 2017. Cincinnati's population is about 50 percent white and 38 percent Black, and that ballooning in admissions is driven in part by Black children. The hospital's main emergency department sits just northeast of downtown in Avondale, a neighborhood that's been solidly Black since the mid-20th century and was an epicenter of civil-rights and Black Power organizing and uprisings in the late 1960s.

The national data suggests gender, not just race, is a risk factor: Black boys 19 and younger are more than twice as likely as Black girls to die by suicide. That's not to say girls are immune to the crisis: Between 2003 and 2017, Black girls' suicide rate increased nearly 7 percent each year, more than twice the increase for boys. And Black youth who identify as queer, transgender, or gender-nonconforming are among those who are suffering. According to a recent Trevor Project survey, half of Black LGBTQ+ youth had considered suicide and 20 percent had attempted it in the previous year.

Being poor is another risk factor. "A lot of their stressors have to do with the impact of poverty. We've got kids rolling in here who haven't had proper food, clothing, shelter," longtime educator and activist Howard Fuller told me by phone. Fuller is the founder of the Dr. Howard Fuller Collegiate Academy, a Milwaukee charter school that serves middle and high school students, most of whom are Black. "Those are really important stress points in their lives."

To better understand what's happening in my city, I spoke with Tynisha Worthy, who cofounded and codirects a Cincinnati youth development program called Youth at the Center. When I asked Worthy what's weighing on the minds of the Black adolescents and young adults she works with, "violence" was her first response. They're concerned about losing access to their cell phones—and, by extension, contact with parents and the outside world—during the school day. (In the fall of 2024, Cincinnati Public Schools, like many districts nationwide, began requiring students in grades seven through 12 to lock their devices in a magnetic pouch while at school. Some students have raised concerns about not being able to access their phone during a school shooting or other emergency.) Students are also worried about the prevalence of vape pens and marijuana among their peers, Worthy said. "One of the things that caused [young people] stress…was 'my family,' 'my mother,'" she continued, reflecting on the responses from participants in the workshops she'd conducted in the preceding months. (A therapist who works in local schools echoed this, citing family conflict, being saddled with adult responsibilities, and even estrangement from the family as common among her adolescent clients.) "The other stressor was school"—academic pressures—and "needing a job."

Improving family relationships or job opportunities is outside a young person's control, but the youth that Worthy works with are identifying what they need to feel better. Access to safe adults, therapists they can relate to, and third spaces—places to gather other than home or school—top their list.

But instead of meeting those needs, Worthy says, schools, mental-health systems, and other aspects of the city's infrastructure are all contributing to the chronic hopelessness and feelings of being overwhelmed that are driving spikes in adolescent anxiety and depression. "We are diagnosing it as 'The children are the problem.' We're saying the parents aren't doing their part, but the larger 'we' are not doing our job," she told me. What's needed is a genuine collective effort to give Black youth a sense of joyful possibility.

Black Lives Matter street art in Cincinnati affirms the need to invest in Black communities.

THE DAY AFTER THE 2024 PRESIDENTIAL election, I visited Youth at the Center for the first time. The organization is located just northeast of downtown Cincinnati in the Pendleton neighborhood, an unexpected place for a program whose teen clientele is largely Black and working-class. The area is filled with the 19th-century Italianate architecture that has lured high-end developers in recent decades. Average home prices hover around $400,000 and have long been out of reach for low-income Black Cincinnatians and their Appalachian counterparts who used to populate the area.

On that early November evening, a dozen or so young people from all over the city

ERNEST COLEMAN / ZUMA WIRE / CAL SPORT MEDIA VIA AP IMAGES

MICAH HUDGINS

Youth fellows from the HEY! (Hopeful Empowered Youth) mental-health initiative.

and northern Kentucky sat at tables eating pizza and chatting before the facilitated activities began. I signed in and put on a name tag. Shawn Jeffers, the organization's other cofounder and codirector, took a break from cheerily greeting arrivals by name and gave me a tour of the space, which is used to host and provide trainings for a range of programs, including a youth mental-health initiative called HEY!, short for Hopeful Empowered Youth, that develops strategies to improve mental health among young people in the community. White butcher paper from previous gatherings hung from the walls in the main meeting room. At the top of one piece of paper was a prompt for young people to list the issues affecting their neighborhoods and communities. Beneath were answers they had generated. Just as Worthy had told me, one theme appeared repeatedly: "shootings," "violence," "gun violence."

Twice the number of teens were shot in 2023 in Cincinnati than in any other year in the previous decade. In 2022, just over a fifth of the 64 people killed in city shootings were children, and five of those victims were age 9 or younger. The local numbers reflect a national phenomenon. A 2022 study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found that Black youth between the ages of 5 and 17 "experienced the highest prepandemic levels of exposure and the largest increase in exposure to firearm violence during the pandemic." For these children, "exposure to community violence can manifest as collective feelings of hopelessness, disorganized social networks, and altered social norms that can promote further violence," the research found.

Sonali Rajan, an author of the study and a professor of health education at Columbia University's Teachers College, has argued that exposure to firearm violence should be categorized as an adverse childhood experience (ACE), a traumatic occurrence that disrupts a child's brain development and can change the trajectory of their life. The more ACEs a person experiences, the more likely they are to suffer a range of mental-health problems. Providing resources such as grief counseling or other forms of therapy can mitigate the long-term harm. "It's much more effective to intervene right then and there," Rajan told me. "This country has not invested in the resources to do that."

Instead, when national figures weigh in on violence in Cincinnati, it's typically to criminalize Black communities. A late-night fight in July was recorded and went viral on the right-wing account Libs of TikTok, where the blows sustained by a white man and woman were highlighted and framed as evidence of Black lawlessness. Other videos of events leading up to the melee capture the white man slapping a Black man in the face and another white man shouting racial slurs into the crowd. What's come to be known locally as "the brawl" became fodder for national Republican figures, including Vice President JD Vance, Ohio Senator Bernie Moreno, and Ohio gubernatorial hopeful Vivek Ramaswamy, to grandstand and race-bait. This doesn't come as a surprise given how Vance, an Ohio native and former senator, spent the campaign season stoking racial anxieties alongside President Donald Trump, making the false claim that Haitian migrants in Springfield, Ohio, were eating pets.

But when Black people are victims of state or vigilante violence (as opposed to the alleged perpetrators), these same figures are mum or distort the facts. In early May, police shot and killed 18-year-old Ryan Hinton as he and three friends fled on foot from the scene of a car chase. Days later, his father, Rodney Hinton, was accused of running a car into a Hamilton County sheriff's deputy who was directing traffic outside a commencement ceremony. Hinton, then 38, had earlier that day viewed police footage of his son's fatal shooting, during which the teen was shot multiple times as he fled from police. And just several months before Ryan's death, masked neo-Nazis had descended on Lincoln Heights, a historically significant Black neighborhood, carrying guns and banners emblazoned with swastikas. The agitators hung a sign on an overpass in the community that read "America for the white man" before being escorted away (but not arrested) by police.

What's needed is a genuine collective effort to give Black youth a sense of joyful possibility.

You might assume that a young person rattled by news of a peer's death, the presence of gun-toting Nazis in their neighborhood, or the stress of responsibilities at home can find someone trained to give them support at school. But on average, schools have one counselor for every 408 students (the recommended ratio is one per 250) and one

JASON WHITMAN / NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

psychologist for every 1,127 students (the standard is one per 500), according to *The Washington Post*. Cincinnati Public Schools—whose enrollment is 84 percent Black—places a mental-health provider in every school, according to a 2024 report from a local public-health foundation. But that's typically not enough.

Karisma Hazel is the CEO of Poppy's Therapeutic Corner, a Black-owned mental-health clinic that operates in half a dozen schools in the Cincinnati area. Poppy's staff provides therapy, working with the schools' social workers and guidance counselors, who offer more basic interventions. There's a long-standing assumption that Black people are suspicious of therapy and steer clear of it, but the demand for her team's services is high, Hazel told me. "They find it as a benefit," she said of the students, and described what her staffers hear when they walk the hallways to retrieve clients from class for a session: "'Hey, can you come get me too? Can I be next?'"

Young Black people are speaking out against injustices and identifying what they need to feel better, but those needs are not being met.

Teenagers are eager for help, though counseling may be stigmatized in their parents' and grandparents' generations. During an online workshop offered by the Black Emotional & Mental Health Collective (BEAM), I learned what has happened historically in America to make many leery of trusting professionals with our stories and symptoms. In the mid-19th century, the medical director of Virginia's Eastern Lunatic Asylum declared that enslaved Black people were immune to mental illness, because of the relative simplicity of their lives. Around the same time, the diagnosis "drapetomania" emerged as a label for the illness that was said to afflict any enslaved person who tried to escape captivity. And well into the 20th century, highly educated and celebrated white researchers and clinicians debated the size and complexity of Black people's brains.

Black youth need to know not just how to identify oppression but how to resist it.

Today, many Black youth want a good therapist but don't know how to access culturally responsive care, said Qeiara Manuel-Fuller, a program manager at HEY! Outside of a school setting, there's the question of cost, and whether a session is covered by Medicaid or another form of insurance or by a family member who can pay out of pocket. The wait times are often long, and some young people can't find a counselor who sees and supports their racial or gender identity or sexual orientation. "'This therapist does not understand my lived experience, my culture,'" Manuel-Fuller said she hears from the youth she works with, as part of a broad coalition that includes more than 300 educators, policymakers, and healthcare providers focused on adolescent mental well-being in 12 Ohio and Kentucky counties. "'I don't feel connected. This person is cold. They want me to open up and tell them all these things, but they won't tell me what their favorite color is.'"

HAVING A THERAPIST WHO SHARES one's racial background, or who at least has worked hard to understand it, is good for Black youth. So is having access to friends and classmates who are Black. It may seem counterintuitive that having class privilege can undermine well-being, but while reporting this story, I spoke with families who felt that their Black children suffered in part because they attended predominantly white schools in tony suburbs and felt racially isolated. A 2020 study on the mental health of Black youth in Ohio found that children in families with incomes greater than 400 percent of the federal poverty level were more than twice as likely as lower-income youth to experience racial discrimination. A strong relationship exists between young people's reports of racial discrimination and their experience of mental distress.

Relatedly, there's some evidence that students who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities are faring better in terms of mental health. A 2025 study from the UNCF (United Negro College Fund) Institute for Capacity Building found that 45 percent of Black students who attend HBCUs report "flourishing" mental health, compared with 38 percent of those who attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Of those who attend HBCUs, 83 percent report feeling a sense of belonging, compared with 72 percent for Black students at PWIs. The HBCU students face significant financial stress

Giving Black Youth a Reason to Live

and struggle to access mental-health services more than their counterparts at PWIs, according to the study. But on their campuses, they find a stronger sense of community and culturally relevant offerings in which they can take pride.

These findings echo the work of Jasmin Brooks Stephens, a psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, whose work focuses on protective factors, practices that promote self-acceptance and combat traumatic stress in Black youth. In June, I drove to Columbus to see her address a statewide conference on Black youth suicide prevention. She shared research findings on interventions that help young people take pride in their culture and persist in the face of discrimination. Black youth need to know not just how to identify oppression but how to resist it, she said. They need opportunities to tell their own stories and weave narratives to counter the distortions that too often appear in media outlets.

Brooks Stephens talked about Sawubona Healing Circles, an initiative created by the Association of Black Psychologists in which Black people come together in a group setting to process grief and trauma related to their experiences. The BEAM workshop I attended also emphasized the importance of culturally rooted practices and of understanding mental health as something that's pursued and achieved with help from others. Facilitators shared what they called a peer-support and village-care tool, which offers tips such as cooking for one another and texting reminders to take medications. The organization's LAPIS peer-support model offers specific guidance on how someone who is not a mental-health professional can partner with a friend or loved one who is suffering to help ease their feelings of being overwhelmed. One guideline reads: "Listen to see if they are a danger to themselves or to you. If they have made a plan to hurt themselves or someone else, call an emergency hotline, your local mental health crisis unit, or trusted community members for support immediately."

I thought of Nkosi Watts as I listened to Brooks Stephens speak about the resilience and self-acceptance that characterize Black youth who are able to maintain mental and emotional well-being or regain equilibrium after stressful periods. When I met Watts at Youth at the Center, he was 17 and part of the HEY! Initiative. The program's participants were diverse: More than 80 percent identified as Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC). More than 40 percent identified as LGBTQ+, and nearly 25 percent had experience with the foster-care system. I was struck by how self-assured Watts was as he told me about his struggles with social anxiety and previous missteps using cannabis. I later learned that he plans to study business and psychology once he gets to college, and he'd like to do that overseas. Eventually he wants to open a Philly cheesesteak franchise here in Cincinnati, then buy a fleet of semitrucks and employ formerly incarcerated people to drive them. He's confident and has a clear vision for his future. But life's not perfect: He manages ADHD and sometimes struggles academically. He remembers his middle school years, at the height of the pandemic, as a time when he "got big, played video games, [and] got depressed."

Watts has attended a highly regarded, predominantly white suburban Catholic school for boys since his freshman year and plays rugby there. That environment can be disorienting for Black students, he told me. He sees the toll it takes on some of his peers. He's had Black classmates who can't get comfortable there but who also can't quite articulate why they hate the environment as much as they do. Watts thinks he knows what it is. "Something is rupturing his soul," he said of a classmate who wanted desperately to leave and enroll elsewhere. "They act like they bring you in, but they really don't," he said of the school. "They use you, like as a token. It's hard." Watts speaks poetically of soul rupture, a phrase akin to the "spirit murder" that legal scholar Patricia Williams coined more than three decades ago to describe encounters that undermine the Black psyche and obliterate a positive sense of self.

"You've got to learn how to meet these kids where they are. They've seen too much."

—Rashida Pearson-Watts, Cincinnati mom

Watts credits his relationships with his family, particularly his connection to his mother, Rashida Pearson-Watts, for keeping him on track and teaching him to be self-assured. In addition to her parenting experience, Pearson-Watts has professional training. For more than two decades, she has supported the mental-health needs of young people between the ages of 16 and 24. She takes her trauma-informed approach into churches, community organizations, and schools, including Cincinnati Public Schools' out-of-school suspension and expulsion program. Over the years, she's worked on HIV/AIDS education and overdose prevention and learned that hard-line, abstinence-only messages typically don't work. So she takes a harm-reduction approach when it comes to raising Watts as well. "You've got to learn how to meet these kids where they are," she told me. "They've seen too much. We didn't have this phone. So to say no when the whole world is at their fingertips is not effective."

Instead, she's direct and moves with confidence and authority. When she noticed that her son was getting curious about girls, she left condoms on his desk, and then she and his dad followed up to see what questions he had. She said she doesn't understand how parents can be unaware that their kids possess guns. "Where are you?" she said, exasperation in her voice. "I'll shake Nkosi's room up in a minute. I mean, you pay the bills!"

This level of involvement may seem heavy-handed, but many adolescents crave more guidance and guardrails, said Hazel of Poppy's

(McClain, continued on page 51)

Focusing on screens as the cause of the youth mental-health crisis ignores the broader cultural, political, and economic forces at play in young people's lives.

Moms on the March

In the years after the pandemic, a right-wing movement against gender equality traveled from Peru to the United States. Its goal is to win over parents everywhere.

ELLE HARDY

LAST SPRING, THE MAYDAY USA TOUR—a traveling road show of Christian parents'-rights activists campaigning against gender and sexual expression in children—brought its message to five American cities. Each of its appearances, in highly visible public arenas such as Times Square in New York City and Discovery Green in Houston, was something between a political rally, a Christian tent revival, and a college-football tailgate party. Music pulsated from the sound system, hands were held aloft in praise, and speakers assured the crowd that they were a righteous silent majority, fed up and ready to roar. Invoking Jesus's love, activist influencers and charismatic pastors unleashed a barrage of alarmist rhetoric aiming to channel parental anxiety into a broader Christian-supremacist project.

The choreography was amped-up and melodramatic, following a conventional arc: collective prayers, tearful testimonies, calls to protect children from unseen cultural forces. The point wasn't just to feel good, but to feel chosen—a persecuted vanguard with divine backing. By the end of each event, the crowd was buzzing, swapping Instagram handles and embraces, convinced that they weren't simply attending a rally but standing on the front lines of a holy war.

That is, until the fourth of the five rallies brought Mayday USA to Seattle's Cal Anderson Park. The choice of venue was not accidental: The park, named for Washington's first openly gay legislator, sits in the heart of the city's historic LGBTQ+ district. By nightfall, the streets of Seattle were a battlefield, with fists flying and police dragging away 23 protesters. With the eruption came the prize every movement covets: national attention. Seattle's Democratic mayor, Bruce Harrell, condemned the violence, blaming anarchists for "infiltrating" the counterprotest. But his sharpest words were reserved for the Mayday USA rally itself, accusing its organizers of trying to "provoke a reaction" in a city whose values they reject. "Seattle is proud of our reputation as a welcoming, inclusive city for LGBTQ+ communities," Harrell said. "We stand with our trans neighbors when they face bigotry and injustice."

That was the spark that turned the clash into a cause célèbre on the right. Deputy FBI Director Dan Bongino posted on X that his office would "fully investigate allegations of targeted violence" against what he termed "the Seattle concert." Freedom of religion, he added, "isn't a suggestion." The White House Faith

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Elle Hardy is a journalist and the author of Beyond Belief: How Pentecostal Christianity Is Taking Over the World.

ILLUSTRATION BY **MELINDA BECK**


Stop the transgender lobby
His kingdom is coming
America is a Christian nation
Reclaim the republic
Take back our schools

Office weighed in, condemning the "violent disruption" of the event and declaring it an issue of upholding the attendees' constitutional rights.

For Mayday USA's organizers, the national uproar was a gift from heaven. Three days later, they staged a follow-up protest in front of Harrell's office. Dubbed the "Rattle in Seattle," it drew 500 Christian and conservative demonstrators, protected by a heavy police presence and a fence around City Hall. One pastor in a MAGA hat led chants for the police and sneered, "If that makes me a fascist, sign me up."

Ziklag seeks to remake American politics in the service of an oligarch class convinced of its divine right to rule.

The Rattle's organizers were there to issue the Seattle Proclamation, a defiant missive to the city and to their detractors. "His Kingdom is coming," they vowed, proclaiming Christ's dominion over the earth. "And we, His people, will stand brave in this hour." For a movement hungry for oxygen, a seemingly grassroots gathering of concerned parents made for the perfect launching pad. But that image masks the movement's real origin story—one far murkier, and far more revealing, than the spectacle on display.

The matriarch: Once an aspiring fitness influencer and multi-level marketer, Jenny Donnelly has become a leading figure in evangelical circles.

In 2023, a secretive network of ultra-wealthy Christian donors known as Ziklag produced a strategy to return Donald Trump to the White House. In a leaked nine-minute video for members that comes across like the trailer for an apocalyptic film, a graphic is repeatedly flashed with the central message: "Reclaim the Republic."

Ziklag is named for the Old Testament town that was given to David by a Philistine king before the hated Amalekites burned it and seized its people. David's daring defeat of the raiders and his rescue of the women and children was the victory that paved his way to Israel's throne. Today's Ziklag is an invitation-only club for ultra-wealthy Christian donors, including Hobby Lobby's Green family, office-supply titans the Uihleins, and Jockey apparel's Waller family, among a membership that reportedly requires a net worth in the tens of millions. It exists to pool money into projects aimed at reshaping American culture and politics along explicitly conservative Christian lines, even claiming credit for Amy Coney Barrett's appointment to the Supreme Court.

Ziklag was founded after Trump's 2016 election by the Silicon Valley entrepreneur Ken Eldred, who, in the lead-up to Trump's first electoral victory, backed an important meeting between American evangelical leaders and Trump through a faith-based nonprofit called United in Purpose. Eldred had amassed his substantial personal wealth through a mail-order computer-accessories business in the 1970s and '80s and then merged it into a software giant in the 1990s before becoming deeply entrenched in conservative politics, including serving on the finance committee for George W. Bush's 2000 presidential campaign. In the private sphere, he promotes what he calls "kingdom entrepreneurship," encouraging Christian businesspeople to bring Christ into the workplace and spread the Gospel by starting for-profit businesses. He believes that Christians must operate on a "triple bottom line," where economic, social, and spiritual capital are pursued in tandem.

But after Trump's election in 2016, Eldred's political passions were reignited. He wanted "wealthy Christian people to come together," according to a longtime collaborator. The Covid pandemic, he said, was a "gift from God," bringing about His advancing kingdom through "a series of glorious victories, cleverly disguised as disasters," and ensuring that people returned to the Christian faith.

The mission of Ziklag is no less ambitious: to remake American politics in the service of an oligarch class convinced of its divine right to rule. The secret video from its December 2023 "Trailblazers" cultural-engagement summit opens with a booming declaration: "We are boldly pursuing the reclamation of America's founding as a Christian nation." The presentation lays out a plan to target "battleground states, where we need to refocus on values-based voting," distilled into three strategic pillars. The first, "Checkmate," would bankroll "election integrity" groups; the second, "Steeplechase," would mobilize faith leaders and congregations; and the final one, "Watchtower," would prosecute a culture war around "parental rights" and opposition to sexual and gender expression.

For Watchtower and Steeplechase, Ziklag's power brokers handpicked Jenny Donnelly—the wife of a telegenic preacher in Portland, Oregon, a mother of five, and a former multi-level marketer—as its public face. We know little about how she emerged from relative obscurity to become a leading figure in evangelical circles, other than that she and her husband, Robert, launched the Collective Church and Tetelestai Ministries, which oversees Her Voice MVMT as its political arm. A cut-and-paste Christian mom, Donnelly had initially tried to make a name for herself with at-home workout videos. Her sudden elevation as the leader of this Christian social movement followed a script that's familiar in right-wing circles: The pandemic lockdowns—especially church closures—galvanized Donnelly and many around her, while the Black Lives Matter protests in Portland's 2020 "Summer of Rage" pushed them fully into action.

Initially, Her Voice MVMT had no significant following. It was another slick, one-click-checkout site pushing faith-based courses on living a righteous life—a dime a dozen in the evangelical charismatic world. Ziklag's intervention changed that.

In the "Trailblazers" video, Ziklag outlined its blueprint to turn the parents'-rights crusade into a full-blown political machine, promising to "create a coalition" of like-minded groups, "amplify their efforts," and bankroll them to wage a

JENNY DONNELLY'S OFFICIAL YOUTUBE CHANNEL

culture war more effectively. The wedge issue, it insisted, was government "control over our kids," with parents supposedly forced "to remain silent while the transgender lobby attempts to take over." At the center of this crusade would be Her Voice MVMT, which Ziklag promised would build "300,000 prayer hubs nationwide" by the end of 2024. The prayer groups were designed to be weaponized as frontline organizers, drilled with training materials from Charlie Kirk's Turning Point USA, fire-and-brimstone pastors, and the America First policy stores. The plan was to rebrand conspiracy-theory-soaked paranoia as grassroots moral revival—and to hardwire it directly into electoral politics.

As promised, Donnelly exploded onto the national stage at the end of 2023 with a call for simultaneous prayer rallies in every state capital in April 2024, followed by a million-woman Christian-nationalist march on the National Mall that October, weeks before the general election.

The Mayday USA tour emerged from a partnership between Her Voice and Ross Johnston Ministries. Johnston, affiliated with conservative organizations, is a millennial preacher with the energy of a Twitch streamer and a conversion story tailor-made for his audience. Born via artificial insemination and raised in Los Angeles by two lesbian mothers, Johnston says he grew up with an "orphan spirit"—loved but unmoored, "floating through life and searching for a destiny." In his telling, the Covid lockdowns and the loss of in-person contact drew him to the church—and, in the process, helped him overcome a nine-year porn addiction.

Like Donnelly, Johnston experienced the pandemic as a turning point for a revival of religious liberty. Yet Donnelly offers something more. As a relatable face for a prized political demographic, she embodies both tradition and renewal: political sermons that blend kitchen-table wisdom with the apocalyptic urgency of the charismatic revival, a guardian of family and faith fronting an uncompromising political campaign.

Many in Ziklag's inner circle—including the pastors who elevated her—hail from the neo-charismatic Pentecostal movement and its more extreme edge, the New Apostolic Reformation. With an emphasis on the Holy Spirit and its role as the conduit for a personal relationship with God, it's a strain of evangelicalism that has surged through global Christianity in recent decades. It's the religious current running beneath MAGA, led by figures like Trump's spiritual adviser, Paula White-Cain, and defined by the physical intensity of faith: the laying-on of hands for healing, ecstatic worship, and daily battles with demonic forces.

The shutdowns struck at the core of the neo-charismatics' spiritual and economic models. Without the exuberant intimacy of their worship, they couldn't practice their faith as they understood it; nor could they sustain the ministry circuits and event-based revenues that underpin their institutions. For those like the Donnelly family, pastors with real skin in the game, the threat was spiritual, theological, financial—and existential.

Far-right fracas: Mayday USA's anti-trans event in Seattle was greeted by counterprotesters and devolved into violence.

But while Donnelly's movement may look as all-American as a sawdust tent revival, its playbook comes not from the likes of Phyllis Schlafly or Sarah Palin. It comes from Peru.

In 2016, Christian Rosas—the son of a prominent Peruvian evangelical congressman, a graduate of Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, and an adviser to perennial hard-right presidential candidate Keiko Fujimori—emerged as the face of Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas ("Don't Mess With My Kids"), a slick, media-savvy campaign claiming that gender education in schools was "homosexualizing" children.

The plan is to rebrand conspiratorial paranoia as a grassroots moral revival—and to hardwire it directly into electoral politics.

Several years of poor performance by Peruvian schoolchildren in international tests had pushed education to the forefront of national debate at just the time that liberal sexual and gender reforms to the national curriculum were taking effect.

JENNY DONNELLY'S OFFICIAL YOUTUBE CHANNEL

The authoritarian: Peruvian opposition leader Keiko Fujimori benefits from the country's burgeoning evangelical movement.

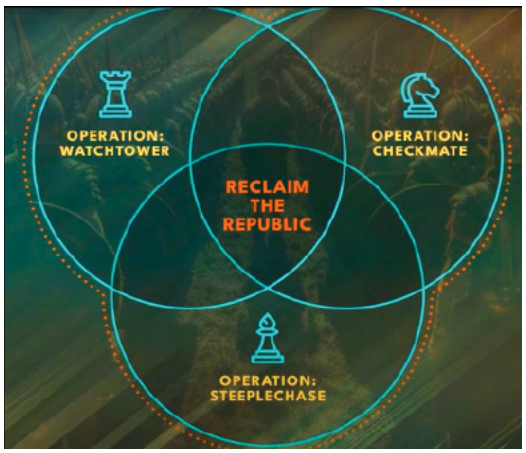
For conservatives, the two issues fused into a single flash point, bringing together a coalition of faith-based groups that were mobilizing against a succession of socially progressive presidents elected between 2011 and 2020.

Under the banner of Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas (CMHNTM), the coalition framed educational reforms as a threat to children and forged powerful alliances between evangelical and Catholic churches and sympathetic politicians. Though it initially lost key court battles, the movement succeeded in mainstreaming a rigid definition of gender in policy debates, galvanizing popular opposition to women's and LGBTQ+ rights.

Education Minister Jaime Saavedra, who had spearheaded the liberal reforms, championed social tolerance and said he wanted "our boys to internalize gender equality." But in late 2016, Peru's Congress, then controlled by Fujimori's right-wing Fuerza Popular party, ousted him on dubious corruption charges—a move widely seen as punishment for imperiling Fujimori-aligned business interests through his reforms of higher education. Donnelly frequently points to this moment as an example of the political power her movement could wield in the United States.

In March 2017, CMHNTM staged its first national rally, which, according to Rosas, took place simultaneously in all 25 of Peru's regions. "It was a vivid example that the church could unite despite their doctrinal differences," Rosas says, proud of the movement's ability to bring evangelicals and Catholics together at a time when they are in strong competition for followers. "By doing so, we were able to bluntly break the law."

Rosas claimed that 2 million people turned out; opponents put the figure at 68,000. The reasons for what followed are contested, but soon after, the Education Ministry made concessions on the curriculum. A year later, President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski was ousted on corruption charges. Unlike Saavedra's removal, his fall had broader causes, but the conservative panic over his administration's "gender agenda" left him politically weakened and more vulnerable to attacks from the right.



The blueprint: A leaked video from Ziklag outlines its plans for a Christian-nationalist "reclamation."

Rallies continued as Kuczynski's former vice president, Martín Vizcarra, took office, with the archconservative Fujimori and Fuerza Popular intensifying their fight against gender- and sexual-education reforms in Congress. After losing both a Supreme Court challenge and the 2019 congressional elections, the protest movement returned to the streets during the pandemic, seizing on discord and chaos and ultimately helping to unseat Vizcarra on corruption charges.

Peruvian politics rarely captures global attention—but then George Soros, an Antichrist figure to many on the populist right, took a personal interest in the bitterly contested battle. Last year, Soros's Open Society Foundations announced the completion of a global restructuring that, according to Rosas, would curtail its philanthropy in Peru. The decision, which *The Nation* could not independently confirm, was credited in right-wing circles to the influence of CMHNTM, with many hailing Rosas as the man who "drove Soros out of Peru." The claim supercharged Rosas's profile among hard-right Christian networks abroad, where activists saw Peru as a model worth exporting. His movement quickly caught the attention of people with the money, conviction, and ability to make its concerns a central issue in American life.

Rosas instructed his new admirers in the United States that there are particular "tricks to the success of the movement." The first is structural: It has no hierarchy and "does not exist formally," making it immune to tax audits and NGO regulations. ("We are a ghost," he says.) The second is strategic: There are no formal rules beyond working within the branding and guidelines, which include focusing on ideology rather than individuals and using "secular wording" so that nonconservatives and non-Christians—especially athletes and celebrities—feel comfortable aligning with the cause.

Harking back to his American education, Rosas leveraged transnational networks like a televangelist, exporting his formula across the region. His slogan and strategy traveled well: In Brazil, it fed into Jair Bolsonaro's culture-war politics; in Argentina, it dovetailed with the rhetoric that would help propel Javier Milei to power. In the United States, it appealed to Ziklag's architects, who saw the potential for a sequel on a bigger and more moneyed stage. Experts believe they brokered the alliance between Rosas and Donnelly, who describes "copy-pasting" his playbook. "What he said to us on the Zoom," she explained to her followers: "'This is where you're headed, America, and you have an opportunity right now to stop it before it gets worse.'"

Calling her new movement Don't Mess With Our Kids (DMWOK) and even using the same stark blue and pink colors that Rosas believed were fundamental to his campaign's everyday appeal, Donnelly hit the road, holding

FROM TOP: STEFFANO PALOMINO / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; ZIKLAG

rallies for suburban "mama bears" in swing-state America. With her active role in the Christian right's campaign for Trump's reelection, Donnelly's transformation was complete. The woman who had spent years trying to spearhead Christian movements with little success was now pictured front and center in a group of prominent evangelical leaders laying hands on Trump two weeks before his reelection.

For Americans used to exporting ideas abroad, a movement imported from a small southern neighbor may sound unusual—but it speaks to a much deeper trend underway. For centuries, missionaries from Europe and North America fanned out across Latin America, Asia, and Africa to spread the Gospel and "civilize" the locals. Today, the traffic is going the other way. In a phenomenon called "reverse evangelism," preachers and political operatives from the developing world are coming to the US and Europe, determined to rekindle the faith of a "post-Christian" West they believe has lost its way. The legalization of same-sex marriage, along with broader gains for LGBTQ+ rights, is often held up as the clearest symptom of Western spiritual decline and moral depravity.

The Peruvian movement is a prime example of how it all works. The country's gender politics have been shaped by a protracted and bitter history going back to the presidency of Alberto Fujimori, Keiko's father, in the 1990s. The conservative strongman, who was later imprisoned for human-rights abuses and corruption, oversaw forced-sterilization campaigns that targeted poor, rural, and Indigenous women. Those abuses turned sexual and reproductive rights into a lasting political fault line—fought over in battles about contraception, abortion, and, more recently, civil unions for same-sex couples.

Fujimorismo, as his brand of populist authoritarianism came to be known, was revived by Keiko, who mounted failed presidential bids in 2011, 2016, and 2021. After her last defeat, her party captured control of Congress, making her the leader of the opposition. Among her most reliable constituencies were conservatives and an ascendant evangelical movement that has supplied the energy to push back against advances in progressive social rights.

Preachers and political operatives from the developing world are coming to the US determined to save a "post-Christian" West.

Although the neo-charismatic Pentecostal movement has been less popular in Peru than in other Latin American nations such as Guatemala and Brazil, where it now rivals Catholicism for followers, charismaticism is gaining ground fast, politically as much as spiritually. Approximately one in five Peruvians now identify as Protestant, by and large evangelical Protestant, and the country's neo-Pentecostal leaders are increasingly plugged into a continental network that pushes the same populist, punitive politics as MAGA in the United States or Bolsonaro's movement in Brazil.

Before Rosas could try his reverse evangelism in the US, CMHNTM had learned to flip the script, casting "gender ideology" as foreign wokeness foisted on unsuspecting nations. "Their enemy is framed in the language of neo-imperialism, since they claim that gender ideology was conceived abroad," says Stéphanie Rousseau, a political scientist at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. "National sovereignty is in question." The movement portrayed itself not simply as protecting children but as defending the people and the country. That inversion of the usual missionary narrative has made it easy to transplant the campaign across borders, highlighting a broader civilizational battle that is being waged.

FOTOHOLICA PRESS / LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES

Reactionary rally: Peruvian Catholic and evangelical sects took to the streets of Lima to protest alleged "gender ideology" in schools.

As Rousseau notes, while sexuality and gender remain the movement's sharpest rallying points, it has proved adept at folding other issues into the mix. Nowhere was that clearer than in Colombia in 2016, when voters narrowly rejected a peace agreement between the government and the leftist FARC insurgency. One of the factors that tipped the balance: a coordinated push by conservative activists who claimed that the deal's provisions on equality smuggled "gender ideology" into national law.

The regional spread of Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas was no accident. While the movement bills itself as a grassroots uprising, there have long been suspicions that a web of dark money and influence has helped to spread the movement across the Americas. And the political dividends have been substantial: This now-multinational movement is an engine of coordinated political—and spiritual—warfare. The goal is not just to counter progressive policy but to target elected officials for defeat, erode faith in democratic institutions, and replace ousted bureaucrats

(Hardy, continued on page 59)

The Future of the Fourth Est

As major media capitulated to Trump this past year,

Since Donald Trump's return to the presidency, student journalists have been instrumental in covering his administration's attacks on everything from the gutting of the Department of Education, to the rollback of diversity and equity initiatives, to the crackdown on free speech and attempted deportation of international students speaking out on Palestine. During this time of increased repression, we remain proud—as well as astonished—to be alone among national news outlets in regularly publishing student perspectives. As the resources and opportunities for emerging writers continue to dwindle, it has never been more important to support the next generation of journalists.

StudentNation published nearly 100 original articles in 2025; we've selected three of these pieces to highlight their extraordinary range and reporting. Read more at TheNation.com/content/studentnation. We're deeply grateful to the Puffin Foundation, whose generosity to the Nation Fund for Independent Journalism makes this work possible.

—Peter Rothberg and Julian Epp, editors of StudentNation

07/29/25

The Great Salt Lake Is a Ticking Time Bomb

BY ADELAIDE PARKER

Utah is the third-driest state in the United States. From the parched Colorado Plateau to the even drier Great Basin, it's almost all desert.

In high school, I rowed with Utah's only club crew team. Each spring, we drove our boats to the Great Salt Lake—the only place for miles with enough water to row on. The lake's salty water stank of sulfur, which made everything it touched stink too. Thousands of brine flies swarmed our docks. They'd carpet my arms so thickly that when I looked down, I'd see more flies than flesh.

JUSTIN SULLIVAN / GETTY IMAGES

ate

student journalists held the powerful to account—both on campus and beyond.

But away from shore, I saw beauty all around. The water stretched so far in every direction that I couldn't see the land beyond. Unless the wind picked up, the lake lay flat, gleaming and blue. Mountains seemed to pierce its surface and clone themselves in the ripples below. They looked like spinning tops—stretching from peaks to flared bases, then winnowing back to sharp points.

I noticed with awe how the lake teemed with life. I'd look down, and what I thought were floating flakes of sediment would begin to swim. They were brine shrimp: crustaceans that carry the Great Salt Lake's ecosystem on their centimeter-long backs. Waterfowl filled the sky, diving to dip their beaks and spindly legs into my wake.

The year I left for college, one of my sisters joined the crew team. I'd hoped we could bond over rowing on the lake. But that November, a former teammate called me. She said our team wouldn't be rowing on the Great Salt Lake next year—that the team might never row on it again. Utah was in a drought, and the lake had shriveled to its lowest levels on record.

The shoreline had receded so much that our docks were unusable. Most of the boats had been hauled out of the water as it crept down their bows. The boats that remained lay beached in a dry marina—a ghost town where, just months before, I'd rowed every afternoon.

The Great Salt Lake lies 20 miles northwest of my house in Salt Lake City. You see it whenever you look at the horizon: a streak of silver separating land and sky.

From its perch, the lake sustains all of northern Utah. Moisture evaporates from its surface and falls in the nearby mountains (mostly as snow, giving Utah fabulous skiing). Come spring, this water trickles through Utah's valleys and returns to the lake. On its way, it hydrates the plants, animals,

Ankle-deep: Wading into the vanishing Great Salt Lake at Antelope Island in 2021.

Without meaningful change, the Great Salt Lake will vanish within my lifetime. This would spell catastrophe for Utah.

Adelaide Parker is a 2025 Puffin student writing fellow for The Nation. *She is a student at Harvard College.*

and people along the nearby Wasatch Front, home to Salt Lake City.

The first time I visited the Great Salt Lake, on a fifth-grade field trip, it covered 1,700 square miles. Though I didn't know it yet, that was half the size it had been 30 years earlier, when my mom was a fifth-grader. In the 1980s, the lake spread over 3,300 square miles—an area larger than Rhode Island and Delaware combined.

Now my youngest sisters are in fifth grade. And again the lake has halved, dropping to 888 square miles in 2022. Without meaningful change, the Great Salt Lake will vanish within my lifetime.

This would spell catastrophe for Utah. State lawmaker Joel Ferry told *The New York Times* that the Great Salt Lake's disappearance would constitute an "environmental nuclear bomb." Water supplies would dwindle, and ecosystems would perish—from the brine shrimp in the lake to the over 10 million migratory birds that refuel in its marshes each year. Utah's population may vanish with them.

Disappearing act: In 2024, people walk on land that just a few years ago was covered by the waters of the Great Salt Lake.

When Utah industrialized, mines began improperly dumping waste, which then leached into the lake, polluting it with heavy metals like arsenic. As a terminal lake, the Great Salt Lake has inlets but no outlets other than evaporation. All the metals that have ever been poured into it have accumulated in its lake bed over time, with no way out.

Now retreating water levels are exposing stretches of cracked, arsenic-laden lake bed. Windstorms have begun to blow across the bed, picking up clouds of poisonous dust. They carry it into the Wasatch Front, which is home to 2.6 million of Utah's 3.4 million residents. Inhaling even ordinary dust can be devastating to health, but arsenic-laced dust carries an extra hazard. As more storms from the Great Salt Lake's dried basin arrive, the air will turn toxic. Millions of Utahans—including my entire family—will breathe poison.

This dust won't kill you overnight, but the EPA links it to "asthma, heart attacks, and premature death." Similar disasters have happened to other lakes, and nearby cities have not fared well. After Owens Lake, a saline lake in California, dried up and toxic dust storms started, cities along its coast emptied. The arid lake bed filled the surrounding air with PM10—tiny particles that have serious health effects if inhaled. Owens Lake became the nation's largest single PM10 source, spreading pollution across the region. The Great Salt Lake is 15 times larger than Owens Lake ever was. Its collapse would be far more catastrophic.

It terrifies me to think about what will happen to my community if the Great Salt Lake vanishes. My younger siblings all have severe asthma, and two live with just 60 percent of normal lung capacity.

When my brother visited the Great Salt Lake on his own fifth-grade field trip, his rowdy class kicked up dust on the lake shore, which plunged him into a severe asthma attack. Fortunately, he had his inhaler with him. But what will happen to my siblings if these dust storms invade Salt Lake City—and the air outside our house? Will my brother be able to survive in a place where he can barely breathe?

My family has the means to leave Utah, and if the lake dries up, I know we will. That's what happened to the cities around Owens Lake: Those who could afford it fled. The less fortunate stayed and dealt with the consequences.

The next few years will determine the Great Salt Lake's fate. Utah faces two options: We can respond with apathy and watch as the lake disappears, along with many of Utah's residents. Or we can wake up to the danger and enact substantive legislation, offer water-conservation incentives, and appropriate money to save the lake.

Saving the Great Salt Lake won't be easy. The University of Utah estimates that the amount of water that flows into the lake must increase by 33 percent for it to reach healthy water levels by the 2050s. This means Utahans will have to make sacrifices. We must curb municipal water use—by getting rid of water-intensive lawns, for example.

Utah's agriculture industry, the largest consumer of water from the lake, must also reduce its intake. It likely won't do this on its own, so Utah's Legislature must pass legislation. And Utah's government must tighten water-use regulations around thirsty crops like alfalfa and invest state funds to lease water rights back from agricultural groups so that more water can flow to the lake.

Such actions will be politically charged and economically costly in the short term. But they will ensure that Utah, its people, and its industries survive far into the future.

I worry that my siblings may never know the Utah I know. My littlest sisters are 10 years younger than me, and a lot can change in a decade. Will they ever ski through lake-effect snow, or find themselves enveloped in the brilliant sunsets that can be seen only when you're rowing on the Great Salt Lake?

I pray they will. But more than that, I count on myself and other Utahans to take action.

01/22/25

The Case for Letting Noncitizens Vote

BY FATIMAH AZEEM

Carlos Perea remembers listening to his mother's stories about dodging immigration raids in the textile factories of Orange County, California.

"There was this interesting dynamic in Orange County at the time, being heavily anti-immigrant

FREDERIC J. BROWN / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

but relying on immigrant labor," Perea said. "It showed me how we're treated as Mexicans, as undocumented people."

Perea, a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient, came to the United States at 14, joining his mother, who had immigrated a decade earlier. He arrived in Santa Ana just as the George W. Bush administration launched sweeping workplace raids targeting undocumented workers across the nation. At the same time, Los Angeles erupted in historic protests, including "La Gran Marcha," where more than half a million people marched for immigrants' rights. A few years later, Perea would become involved in the Dreamers movement, which challenged President Barack Obama's mass deportation policies.

In 2012, after years of pressure, Obama enacted DACA through executive action. But the prospect of more protective pathways to citizenship for millions of undocumented people died in Congress and has never been revived. "A lot of these fights started to sharpen our politics," said Perea, now the executive director of the Harbor Institute for Immigrant and Economic Justice. "Are we going to continue to have our immigrant communities be this chess piece for the Democratic Party or Republican special interests? Are we going to constantly be tossed around and gain no meaningful outcome?"

For thousands of progressives in Santa Ana, the way forward was clear: Power needed to come from the bottom up. Recognizing a "crisis of democracy" at the local level, Perea and others in the Latino and Vietnamese communities of Santa Ana began campaigning for the right to vote as noncitizens.

In November 2024, these efforts culminated in a measure on the Santa Ana ballot that would extend the right to vote to noncitizens in general municipal elections by 2028. The first of its kind to be proposed in Southern California, Measure DD ultimately failed by a margin of 59 to 41 percent. Yet the outcome wasn't all bad: "This was something people thought was impossible to even get on the ballot," Perea recalled. "I think it speaks volumes that there were a large number of people in Santa Ana ready for noncitizen voting on our first try."

Twenty-two localities in the United States already allow noncitizen voting of some sort, including San Francisco, Oakland, the District of Columbia, and several towns and cities in Maryland and Vermont. Each of these municipalities has distinct laws governing noncitizen voting. Many allow only lawful permanent US residents to vote, and most limit it to parents in school-board elections.

Measure DD was one of the boldest and most inclusive proposals to date, with its definition of *noncitizen* encompassing permanent residents, refugees, undocumented immigrants, DACA recipients, and those on school or work permits.

"We established a narrative—now people know what noncitizen voting is," Perea said. "It's going to be our job now to make the case of presenting this as the North Star of the [immigrant-rights] movement. It's going to be a tough battle, but we have nothing to lose."

The right to representation: Members of Santa Ana Families for Fair Elections launch a campaign to expand local noncitizen voting in 2023.

From the country's founding until 1926, 40 states at various times allowed noncitizen immigrants to vote in local, state, or federal elections, according to Ron Hayduk, a professor of political science at San Francisco State University. "History flies in the face of this idea that immigrants never could or never should be voting—that it's improper, that it's unconstitutional, that it's illegal. In fact, history shows that it's the opposite," Hayduk said. "I like to say that it's as American as apple pie and older than our national pastime, baseball."

Noncitizen voting, then called "alien suffrage," was seen as a pathway to foster citizenship and integration. Millions of immigrants from Western and Northern Europe voted, often advancing antislavery and pro-worker causes. But these laws began to change as more immigrants came to the United States from Southern and Eastern Europe—Italians, Slovaks, and Jews—who were often seen as nonwhite or as associated with socialist and anarchist ideologies.

"History flies in the face of this idea that immigrants never should be voting…. It's as American as apple pie."

—Ron Hayduk, professor of political science

Between 1840 and 1900, voter turnout in presidential elections was between 70 and 80 percent of the eligible population. By 1924, however, voter turnout had plummeted to 49 percent, coinciding with broader efforts to curtail both voting rights and immigration. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 marked the beginning of these restrictive policies; it was followed by limits on immigration that reduced annual admissions from as many as 800,000 to 150,000 people. These changes—along with restrictive election reforms such as state poll taxes, literacy tests, and felon-disenfranchisement laws—limited democratic and progressive possibilities for decades. Arkansas was the last state to eliminate alien suffrage in 1926.

Immigrant voting was restored in New York City in a limited way during the civil-rights era, led by African American

Fatimah Azeem is a 2024 Puffin writing fellow for The Nation. *She is a recent graduate of the University of Texas at Dallas.*

and Latino activists as part of a larger movement for community control in school-board elections. In the 1980s and '90s, the sanctuary movement inspired the restoration of noncitizen voting in Maryland.

In 1993, current Representative Jamie Raskin (D-MD), then a law professor, wrote a seminal law-journal article that put immigrant voting back on the map and helped Takoma Park, Maryland, enact noncitizen-voting laws. "He said at the time, 'Immigrant rights are like the civil rights of the day.' And by that logic, noncitizen voting is the suffrage movement of our time," Hayduk said.

In early 2023, driven by Santa Ana's growing immigrant population (according to county data, 29.5 percent of the city's residents are foreign-born, mostly from Asia and Central America), the campaign to restore noncitizen voting found its footing. A coalition called Santa Ana Families for Fair Elections spearheaded the campaign, with support from the ACLU of Southern California.

Learning by heart: An outdoor classroom in Gaza in November 2025.

Mayor Valerie Amezcua strongly opposed Measure DD, citing concerns about the expenses of a new voting system and costly litigation. Additionally, two City Council members, backed by the police union and the Police Officers Association, opposed the measure, and one progressive council member who was running for reelection called it too radical a step.

The coalition pushed back and seized on the centuries-old American slogan "No taxation without representation," framing noncitizen voting as both a democratic and an economic issue. Immigrants in Santa Ana contribute more than $117 million in state and local taxes yet have no political say in how those funds are spent.

"Robust and inclusive political participation leads to more diverse representative bodies, making representatives more responsive to all constituents and fostering more effective public policy," Hayduk said. Studies on immigrant-voting programs in the United States, as well as global studies on noncitizen voting in Sweden, Norway, and Latin America, have found positive outcomes in promoting naturalization and immigrant integration. Over 40 countries on nearly every continent allow for some form of noncitizen voting in local, regional, and even national elections.

The opposition to Measure DD raised more than $1 million, while the grassroots campaign in its favor operated on a budget of just $10,000. Perea said that this level of expenditure on council races or ballot initiatives was "unprecedented" in Santa Ana. "[It] speaks volumes as to who feels threatened by immigrants and refugees having a seat at the table," Hernandez said.

As Measure DD failed in November 2024, voters in eight states—Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Wisconsin—passed constitutional amendments to ban noncitizen voting. The proponents of these measures, like Michael Meredith, a Republican state representative in Kentucky, argued that they were a way to "get ahead of" potential changes to local charters that might enfranchise noncitizens in the future and to safeguard elections for eligible voters.

A surge in election skepticism and anti-immigrant rhetoric accompanied the amendments, driven in part by then-President-elect Donald Trump and House Speaker Mike Johnson. Both perpetuated false claims about noncitizens voting in federal elections. In September, Johnson threatened to shut down Congress if the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act—

ABDALHKEM ABU RIASH / ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

a measure requiring proof of citizenship to vote in federal elections—was not passed.

Even so, the fight to expand voting rights continues. Elsewhere in the state, the California Local Voting Coalition continues to push for local noncitizen-voting initiatives statewide. Similar campaigns are underway across the state and the rest of the country. Meanwhile, the legal challenge to New York City's noncitizen-voting law is set to receive a final ruling in the coming months.

"I think [Trump] is going to radicalize a lot of our community," Perea said. "Many folks are going to become active. If the extreme right is saying the most outrageous things about immigrants, we are going to have to push for the most radical idea."

09/09/25

"We Deserve Life": Students Speak Out From Gaza

BY TAREQ ALSOURANI AND WILLIAM LIANG

At dawn in southern Gaza, Hasan Barghouth wakes to the call of the muezzin. He steps out of the tent where his family lives and makes his way past rows of plastic shelters to the shade of an olive tree, where he has set up a wooden desk. The ground crawls with insects, but here he escapes the mess of daily tent life. He brings a laptop without a battery, wired to a solar panel. ("Something only people in Gaza know how to do," he says.) Before the heat of the sun becomes unbearable, Hasan works through his lessons.

As of May 2025, according to UN agencies, at least 95 percent of Gaza's schools were incapacitated or destroyed, and more than 5,400 students, 261 teachers, and 95 university professors have been killed, with the numbers rising daily. Higher education has been, in the words of the France24 news network, "wiped off the map," as all 17 of Gaza's universities lie in ruins. More than a decade ago, the Palestinian scholar Karma Nabulsi coined the word *scholasticide* to describe the deliberate dismantling of the institutions, people, and processes that make education possible. Today, Gaza is the most complete manifestation of that term.

Hasan should be preparing for the Tawjihi, a high-stakes exam that determines college placement in Palestine, but the war has postponed the test indefinitely. Though versions of the Tawjihi are still administered outside the Gaza Strip, high-schooler Anas AlSous, like tens of thousands of other students, has not been able to take the exam. According to the UN, more than 76,000 students have missed the test during the past two academic years, and UNICEF reports that nearly 40,000 students in Gaza missed it in 2024 alone. A small online session this year reached about 1,500 candidates.

Gaza's shortages are all too familiar: electricity, water, food, and—critically for students—Internet access. Many walk miles to find a signal to download lectures and join lessons, gathering in online networks of students who try to preserve a sense of high school community. Notebooks are so hard to come by that some students solve their math problems on the backs of flyers. Many of Hasan's peers have given up on their lessons, instead spending their days in the search for food. "They drop their pens," he said, "to either eat or get shot."

Even amid starvation and exhaustion, students cling to their books and laptops in an assertion that life itself is still possible.

The right to education is guaranteed under human-rights treaties like the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 50 of the Fourth Geneva Convention also obliges an occupying power to facilitate the proper working of all institutions devoted to the care and education of children. But Israel rejects both, claiming that only the narrower framework of humanitarian law governing active hostilities applies in Gaza, recasting the systematic dismantling of Gaza's education system as the collateral damage of war. Even under humanitarian law, Israel is required to distinguish civilians from military targets and to preserve basic civilian infrastructure, yet it has shown no proportionality or restraint in its assault. Chandni Desai, an assistant professor at the University of Toronto, wrote that such targeting is "a key feature of genocide."

Eighteen-year-old Menna Abu Imara remembers the morning her schooling ended on October 7, 2023. "In a few seconds, everything was paused. The war started, and schools closed their doors," she said. Within days, her house was bombed, killing her father, uncles, and grandparents. She survived, seriously wounded, along with her mother and siblings. Menna has not completed 11th or 12th grade. She earned a scholarship abroad but then lost it—no one can leave Gaza, and even if she could, Menna cannot travel alone, as her right arm remains disabled.

"I feel like I am betraying the dead by pretending life goes on, as if the simple act of studying is a kind of lie," said 18-year-old Yara Nasser, who cowrote the book *Gaza Held in Time* with Tareq AlSourani. "How can I scribble down equations when my neighbor's child was buried yesterday? But to give it up feels like surrender. Like we're giving up the future."

Students told us that hours once used to write essays or prepare for exams are now spent waiting in line for food and water. "My ultimate goal of securing admission to a university turned into a mission of survival," said AlSous.

In weeks of conversations via e-mail and letters, we've heard accounts from dozens of students in Gaza and in exile that are uniformly grim. Yet many continue to pursue their education, apply for scholarships, dream of careers, and imagine futures knowing full well they may never reach them. They understand that to keep studying is to insist on a future the war is trying to deny them.

The word *scholasticide* captures this double reality: the destruction of classrooms and faculty, but also the theft of opportunity. It is a way of ensuring that Palestinians cannot rebuild, cannot produce professionals, cannot narrate their own story. But even amid exhaustion and starvation, students cling to their books and laptops in an assertion that life itself is still possible.

Under an olive tree, Hasan explains why he studies—why, when the food lines eat up much of the day and the chances of using his lessons are slim, he insists on continuing his education. His answer is brief. "We study," he says, "not because we have the privilege to dream, but because it's the only way we can scream that we deserve life." N

Tareq AlSourani is a Palestinian high school student from Gaza and lives mainly in Montreal. William Liang is a high school student in San Francisco and an opinion columnist for The Hill.

How a French City Kept Its Soccer Team Working-Class

Olympique de Marseille shows that if fans organize, a team can fight racism, keep its matches affordable, and maintain a deep connection to the city.

COLE STANGLER

Marseille, France

If you get to the Velodrome, the home stadium of the Olympique de Marseille soccer club (OM), before the crowds arrive on match day, you'll see the blue-and-white graffiti blanketing the front steps that lead to the main gate. You'll probably stumble into a pack of bare-chested young men waving flares. During the match, a firecracker might go off. If you're not invested in what's happening on the field—and that would make you an outlier—it's easy to become hypnotized by the choreographed spectacles unfolding behind each goal: the visual arrangements unveiled just before kickoff, known as *tifos*; the banners that run the gamut from critiques of the team's owners to takedowns of the far-right National Rally party; the call-and-response chants; the Palestinian and Algerian flags fluttering in the maritime breeze.

But perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the Velodrome is the people in the seats. Yes, there are luxury boxes packed with suits tapping away on their cell phones, mainstays of top-tier sporting events from London to Los Angeles. But Marseille's stadium is otherwise filled with the kinds of working-class people who make up the vast majority of this soccer-crazed Mediterranean city—the types of fans whom multibillion-dollar sports franchises tend to celebrate as part of a team's storied past, but who are priced out of attending games today.

That includes people like Robert, a 75-year-old retiree who used to work as a technician in the construction industry. A season-ticket holder since 1992, he pays just €180 for a year of OM matches, the standard rate for the roughly 26,000 seats behind each goal reserved for members of the various supporters' groups. "You'll find everyone in the stands," Robert told me over a beer outside the stadium after the first home match of the year. "There are families, there are young people, there are unemployed people, blue-collar workers, all religions, all colors—that's what Marseille is. It's a cosmopolitan city."

Rates are higher for the roughly 41,000 seats that are not reserved for supporters' groups, but they're still low enough to enable people like Stéphane, a 53-year-old nurse who pays €440 for season tickets, to attend. "I don't want to sound like a *beauf* [French slang for an uncultivated person], but OM is the DNA of this city," he said, as his friend Giani, a 44-year-old prison guard from the island of Réunion, nodded along. "My grandparents used to watch—our whole family did. You can't be unmoved by OM. Either you catch the bug early or, if you don't, then you kind of have to follow because everyone around you does."

The Velodrome's affordability and diversity are the product of features specific to this port city—a place long accustomed to immigration—but they're also a testament to the power that fans have when they organize. And in today's increasingly inaccessible sports world, it suggests that another type of fandom is possible. Through their supporters' groups, OM fans haven't just created one of Europe's most impressive stadium atmospheres; they've used their political leverage to win concessions from ownership. Chief among them: cheap tickets.

Cole Stangler is a journalist based in Marseille covering labor, politics, and culture. He is the author of Le Miroir américain.

ILLUSTRATION BY **RYAN INZANA**


LIBERTE
POUR LES
ULTRAS
ANTIF

EVEN BY EUROPEAN STANDARDS, OLYMPIQUE DE Marseille has a passionate local following. "You don't have to like soccer—maybe you don't care at all about it—but you can't really understand the city if you don't understand why it's important," said Médéric Gasquet-Cyrus, a linguist at Aix-Marseille University, the author of several books about the city, and a member of Commando Ultra '84, one of the supporters' groups in the south stand.

"OM is something that brings people together, and it's a way of integrating people."

—François Thomazeau, author

The OM obsession, Gasquet-Cyrus told me, reflects the city's local character. "By proxy, OM represents Marseille. And in Marseille, there's a strong identity. It's a cliché—you feel more Marseillais than French—but it's true," Gasquet-Cyrus said. "There's this idea of a city that's separate, that's not autonomous but thinks of itself as autonomous and wants to be independent, even if it's not at all realistic."

Political autonomy was not always just a fever dream. Founded by Greek settlers in the sixth century BCE, the city would not be controlled by the French monarchy until more than 20 centuries later. Today, Marseille's distinctiveness is perhaps most synonymous with the diversity of its residents. Large shares of the population have roots outside of France, especially in former French colonies in the Maghreb. As with many other port cities, Marseille's melting pot has produced a culture different from that of its immediate surroundings.

At the same time, the city has battled prolonged socioeconomic distress, with the economy struggling for decades to weather the fallout of deindustrialization. When Marseille makes international headlines, it's often due to drug-related violence in the *quartiers nord*, the isolated and impoverished northern neighborhoods. "It's a rough city, so I think you can have the impression that the team is fighting for you, your honor," Gasquet-Cyrus said. "The more people have a negative image of us, the more it gives the feeling of defending or standing up [for our city]."

The idea that OM represents a downtrodden but resilient city is most apparent in the club's rivalry with Paris, the center of the nation's economic, cultural, and political power—and a place where people still use the term *province* to describe the 98 percent of land in metropolitan France that sits outside the capital region. OM, which is owned by the Boston-born businessman and philanthropist Frank McCourt, isn't exactly a small-market team. But its budget pales in comparison with that of Paris-Saint-Germain (PSG), which is majority-owned by a branch of Qatar's sovereign-wealth fund and paid more than €1 billion to field this season's squad. When the two teams faced off last September, PSG's starting 11 was valued at roughly four times that of OM.

Showing solidarity: OM fans hold a Palestinian flag as they cheer on their team in Marseille in August 2025.

CHRISTOPHE SIMON / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Paris has largely dominated in recent years, but in that match, OM eked out its first home league win against PSG since 2011, and the victory set off scenes of joy that rivaled those of a French World Cup victory. Exiting the Velodrome beneath thundering fireworks, I chatted with a family of four from the *quartiers nord*, all of them wearing OM jerseys. "This is great for the city," declared Cyprien, a construction worker who immigrated from Romania. When asked to describe PSG, he shook his head: "I don't know if you can print what I think." But his daughter Anna, born in Marseille, jumped in: "Paris is the enemy."

Our chat was instructive for another reason too: Marseille's obsession with soccer is intertwined with its history of immigration. "It's been said a thousand times, but OM is something that brings people together, and it's also a way of integrating people," François Thomazeau, a novelist, a former sportswriter for Reuters, and the author of *Marseille: A Biography*, told me over coffee downtown. "It's true in Marseille like it's true in the United States: Sports have been a factor of integration for minorities."

Despite the recent success of France's national team, soccer's status as the de facto national pastime is a fairly new development. Marseille is on the short list of French cities where the game was instantly popular, largely due to immigration from neighboring Italy around the turn of the 20th century. As Thomazeau put it, "Soccer was a religion in Italy well before France, and Italians brought this religion with them to Marseille."

Over the following decades, that faith united believers who initially had little else in common. As immigrants flocked to the city from a growing number of countries—Armenia, Algeria, Tunisia, and the Comoros—they embraced a team whose roster filled rapidly with players who shared their backgrounds. "If you look at the team and see there's three Armenians, you can say to yourself, 'OK, I'm here. I can root for this team, and I'm a part of this city,'" Thomazeau said. "Marseille is a city of immigrants, and soccer enabled people to get their unofficial stamp of being Marseillais. They went to the stadium and found players that looked like them."

Against this backdrop, scores of local teams took root, and the city's talent went on to shine internationally—among them Zinedine Zidane, the son of Algerian immigrants from the *quartiers nord* who led France to its first World Cup victory in 1998. But what pushed Olympique de Marseille's fandom to stratospheric levels was the team's success on the field. After the businessman Bernard Tapie acquired OM in 1986, the team

won a spate of French league titles before taking home the nationally televised European Cup in 1993. As Mathieu Grégoire, the OM correspondent for the French sports daily *L'Équipe*, told me, the European Cup victory made OM a rarity in France: the only club with a passionate following both locally and nationally.

It was a pair of closely related developments in the Tapie era that definitively set Marseille on a course of its own. For one, fans in the Velodrome began to emulate the organized supporters' groups in Italy known as *ultras*, coordinating chants and visuals and incorporating themselves as nonprofit associations. Then, in 1990, Tapie made a decision that at the time seemed to make little financial sense but which ultimately cemented a role for the ultras to play for years to come: He turned over the management of ticket sales at both ends of the stadium to these groups. Under the arrangement, the ultras sold the seats directly to their dues-paying subscribers.

In 2015, OM reached a deal with the supporters' groups to restore the club's monopoly on ticket sales—but it still reserves the 26,000 seats at both ends of the stadium for members of the groups, and it caps the prices at relatively modest levels. This year's €180 season-ticket cost is a fraction of the lowest rates charged by clubs like Arsenal (£921), Liverpool (£713 for adults), AC Milan (€430), and Real Madrid (€370). When asked what would happen if OM abandoned this pact, Grégoire chuckled: "It would be a civil war."

He likened the seven officially recognized supporters' groups to trade unions. "If management isn't strong enough, they can take down the leadership of the team, sort of like how unions can take down the government," Grégoire said. "I don't think there's really an equivalent in France or Europe, apart from maybe Turkey. In Spain and Portugal, you have the phenomenon of the *socios*, where supporters have a say through the election of presidents, but it's more formalized through elections. In Marseille, it's more about informal deals and sometimes about power relations."

If Marseille's ultras are like trade unions, they're closer to the IWW than to the UAW: They don't sign agreements, and they don't shy away from direct action to achieve their goals. In 2021, the groups even managed to force the firing of the unpopular OM president Jacques-Henri Eyraud, a Paris-born graduate of Harvard Business School and a former Disney executive, after he floated the possibility of significantly raising ticket prices for the general public. "There was a bit of a cultural gap to begin with," Grégoire recalled. "At a certain point, Eyraud tried to flex his muscle and say, 'I'm the one who decides, and if I decide to make the stadium the way I want it, you're going to keep quiet.' And the ultras went to war with him."

Tensions peaked in January 2021, when 300 unidentified fans invaded the team's training ground, attacking officers, burning trees, and damaging vehicles. It caused several hundred thousand euros' worth of damage, and owner Frank McCourt bizarrely compared it to the January 6 US Capitol insurrection. In response, Eyraud called on the French Interior Ministry to dissolve a handful of OM supporters' groups and crossed a red line by hinting at opening up ticket sales to the general public for the entire stadium. The ultras fired back by dropping banners calling for his resignation all over the city. And they had an impressive list of allies: Marseille's socialist mayor, Benoît Payan, called on Eyraud to "calm things down" and not punish fans over the actions of a violent minority. In February 2021, OM's ownership finally turned on Eyraud, replacing him with a president who has since managed to maintain more cordial relations with the supporters' groups.

Banner of heaven: OM supporters display a *tifo* reading "Thank You Pope Francis" to pay tribute to the late pontiff in Marseille in April 2025.

"I know a lot of people who are very hardcore antifa, and they show it at the stadium."

—Roger, 33, an OM ultra

The attack on the training ground drew comparisons to the hooliganism that ravaged the UK in the 1980s and '90s. But as Franck Haderer, a sound engineer who's working on a documentary about the OM ultras, stressed, the two have vastly different origins and cultural codes. Unlike the hooligans who emerged in Thatcher-era Britain and engaged in largely spontaneous action in and outside stadiums, the ultra movement has revolved

CLEMENT MAHOUDEAU / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Pride and joy: OM fans celebrate a goal at the Velodrome in Marseille.

around organizations since it gained traction in Italy in the mid-'70s and came to France via Marseille. "There's a willingness to want to scare and shock the opponent," Haderer said. "It's part of this spirit of showing that one is superior to the opponent but also superior to the opponent's supporters." Still, he noted, that shouldn't be confused with a willingness to actually use force.

Indeed, despite the supporters' sometimes tempestuous image, the ones I spoke with were exceptionally friendly—like Swal, a 33-year-old member of Commando Ultra '84 who works in the restaurant industry. Sipping on pastis, the anise-flavored spirit that's the unofficial alcohol of Marseille, he told me that his engagement with the group is as much about supporting the team as it is about finding a sense of community outside the stadium. "We see each other outside of matches too—all the time, really," he said. "But we're always talking about OM. It's always about the next match."

Haderer also drew attention to the ultras' charity work and other activities outside the stadium. One group organizes food and aid deliveries for the homeless. Another, the South Winners, is funding the construction of a temporary residence for the parents of children requiring overnight hospital stays. It has also launched an initiative to help high school students from poor and working-class neighborhoods prepare for entrance exams to France's top schools. Ahead of Pope Francis's mass at the Velodrome, the archdiocese of Marseille turned to the South Winners to prepare a giant *tifo* that paid homage to the head of the Catholic Church.

"When Lyon supporters break out their French flags and ID cards, well, we say, 'We're not racist.'"

—Médéric Gasquet-Cyrus, an OM ultra

More than any other group, the South Winners are responsible for the OM supporters' reputation of being broadly left-wing. Publicly describing themselves as "anti-racist" and "anti-fascist," the South Winners proudly use images of Che Guevara among their several logos. Even their adoption of the color orange originated in opposition to the far right: During an away match against Paris in 1989, members turned their bomber jackets inside out to signify opposition to the radical-right skinheads then dominating the opposing stand, who had adopted the jackets as their unofficial uniform.

Still, ultras told me that many members would bristle at the idea of being viewed as politically partisan. "I know a lot of people who are very hardcore antifa, and they show it at the stadium—they have their Palestinian flags and they have their anti-fascist flags," said Roger, 33, a member of the north-end group Marseille Trop Puissant. "But there's others who might say, 'We don't want politics at the stadium.'"

For his part, Swal told me he wasn't "a fan of politics at the stadium." All the same, he said he cherished his "antifa friendships" with the famously leftist supporters of AEK Athens and Hamburg's FC St. Pauli, with whom the Marseille ultras have close ties. "We don't want people at the stadium who are there to 'eradicate the savages' and hurt others," Swal said. "We want there to be cohesion."

Contradictions notwithstanding, OM ultras do tend to share a general commitment to Marseille as a multicultural city. And that commitment is amplified by the codes of the ultra subculture, in which insults from rivals are often flipped into badges of honor. "When Lyon supporters break out their French flags and identity cards, well, we say, 'We're not racist,' and we become known as not racist," Gasquet-Cyrus said. Or as one of the many slogans of the South Winners proclaims, "Your hatred is our pride."

Still, the limits of the supporters' groups' broader commitment to social justice were on display after OM signed the star Manchester United forward Mason Greenwood in the summer of 2024. (Greenwood had been charged with sexual assault after his former partner made public allegations against him; British prosecutors dropped the charges in 2023.) Marine Pattyn, an OM supporter and a soccer writer for the local newspaper *La Provence*, told me she was disgusted by the relatively warm welcome for Greenwood in Marseille and now avoids sitting with the ultras. "It's not exactly reassuring to be a woman in a crowd of men who are jumping, yelling, and running around," Pattyn said. "And I've kind of lost my love for OM since Mason Greenwood. I tell myself that when I'm at the stadium, I'm surrounded by maybe 60 people who are his fans, who condone the acts of an aggressor."

Still, Pattyn decided to buy season tickets in the main section of the stadium for the second straight season. And, she said, the gender balance at the Velodrome is slowly improving—though it has less to do with Marseille than with a more

Home field: An aerial view of the Velodrome stadium.

TOP: BORIS HORVAT / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

general form of social progress. "Soccer used to be a thing for boys and not for girls," she said. "When you see younger girls at the stadium, it's heartwarming, because it's their passion. They're not just there because their boyfriend took them or they're with family. They're there because they love soccer and because women are playing soccer more and more, even if it's far from perfect and equal. Much like the practice of soccer overall, supporterism is developing for women, too."

OM does have a women's team, Les Marseillaises, though it plays its matches in Martigues, 40 kilometers northwest of the city. In October, the club set a new attendance record with more than 2,000 supporters on hand.

In a city where soccer is so central, it's nearly impossible not to consider the role of the ultras ahead of the March 2026 mayoral elections. Polls project a tight race among the incumbent left-wing coalition, the city's old conservative establishment, and a surging far right that thrives on backlash to immigration and crime.

In the last election, South Winners president Rachid Zeroual reportedly backed Martine Vassal, the influential head of both the département and the larger metropolitan region, who unsuccessfully sought to prolong the right-wing dynasty that had run Marseille since 1995 and who is running again for city hall. But in 2023, Marseille's current mayor, Benoît Payan, was welcomed to the South Winners' section during a match. (I showed up at the South Winners' headquarters to interview Zeroual on three occasions but was told each time that he was unavailable.)

It may seem paradoxical for a man who runs an organization that sells anti-fascist T-shirts to even consider backing a conservative politician. But Christian Pellicani, a Communist and the deputy mayor for the First and Seventh arrondissements of Marseille, pointed to the history of clientelism in the city—a tradition practiced by Vassal and her predecessors. "It's not unimaginable that certain associations might feel like they owe something to certain politicians because they're given generous funding," Pellicani said. "Still, just because the president of an association supports someone, it doesn't mean everyone involved follows along."

I thought back to my conversation with Swal. Although he seemed fairly apolitical, he also knew who his enemies were: the people obsessed with dividing populations according to skin color, religion, or national origins. And at a time when the demagoguery of Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, and their allies is gaining traction just about everywhere, that kind of cultural hostility toward the far right is maybe more valuable than ever. "Being anti-racist in Marseille is important," he told me. "It's important to know the city you're in." N

(McClain, continued from page 33)

Therapeutic Corner. "You will hear a lot of them feeling that they can't come to their parents, or they [themselves] are the adults," she said. "I think you would be surprised by a lot of the independence that they have and a lot of the decisions that they have to make." Pearson-Watts's communication style may not work for every parent, but she's on to something. Former US surgeon general Vivek Murthy and others who tend to young people in crisis say having a relationship with at least one trusted adult can shore up and protect adolescent mental health.

"In order to create a world where Black youth no longer desire to die, we need to give them a reason to live."

—Jasmin Brooks Stephens, UC Berkeley psychologist

At Youth at the Center, I saw another one of those pieces of white butcher paper filled with visual representations of what makes for a safe adult. Cofounder Shawn Jeffers explained the images young people had drawn over the simple outline of a body: The mic in one hand meant this person amplifies youth voices. A pom-pom in the other hand meant they're a cheerleader for youth. The bulletproof vest encasing the silhouette's trunk signified that the adult makes young people feel safe, not by being "strict or controlling," he said, but by offering protection.

Jeffers also told me that the youth he works with lack access to safe and welcoming places outside of home and school, or "third spaces." As the academic year began in 2024, fights among youth had broken out at downtown's Government Square and other city transit hubs where students transfer on their bus commutes to and from school. The police chief then appeared before the city's school board to express alarm over the arrests of 30 youth that had taken place around transit centers since the start of the school year weeks earlier. One cause for the spike was the lack of engaging, positive after-school options for teenagers, Jeffers told me. Stores around the transit centers often posted signs in the windows barring anyone born after a certain date or limiting how many teens can enter at once. Libraries and schools don't offer enough free, varied activities, and the city's recreation centers often bar adolescents from their gyms and other spaces until early evening, before which the programming is geared toward elementary-school-age kids, Jeffers said.

In separate interviews, Jeffers and Tynisha Worthy echoed each other in demanding answers from the city's leadership and institutions that claim to support the city's teens: "Where are they supposed to go?" When Haidt urges parents to give their kids a "play-based childhood," he seems unaware that safe outdoor spaces aren't accessible to everyone. Or that, like most other intractable problems, the youth mental-health crisis can't be solved by simply getting kids off screens while denying their families' realities or what's going on in the communities where they live.

When asked, young Black Cincinnatians regularly say they want safe and accessible places to gather, more contact with adults who will listen to and support them, and jobs. But structural barriers to well-being remain. "We know what young people have told us that they need, and we continue to give $2 million to BLINK or to fund a stadium," Worthy told me, pointing to massive recent public expenditures for a sprawling arts festival and a soccer arena.

I thought of Worthy's call for collective responsibility as I watched psychologist Brooks Stephens's keynote presentation on Black youth suicide prevention last summer. One slide in particular emphasized the need for structural change in solving this crisis. It read: "In order to create a world where Black youth no longer desire to die, we need to give Black youth a reason to live." N

WHY MARTIN NIEMÖLLER DIDN'T SPEAK OUT

In his famous mea culpa, "First They Came," the German pastor lamented his silence during the rise of the Nazis. That was only part of the story.

BARRY YOURGRAU

In the dire months since Donald Trump's return to power, you've no doubt read a version of the famous mea culpa "First They Came"—perhaps woven into the lines of an essay or op-ed, perhaps thumbed out on social media. Part warning, part exhortation, the short text (it's often mistaken for a poem) comes to us as tragically earned wisdom from the rise of the Nazis, alas grimly relevant to the America of today. The variation considered the most authoritative (if not the most commonly cited) reads:

> First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.
>
> Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.
>
> Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.
>
> Then they came for me—and there was no one left who could protest.

In the decades since these words were formulated, they've gradually eclipsed the man responsible for them, blocking his presence so thoroughly that they arrive on a page, in some instances, without so much as an attribution. But even on those occasions when Martin Niemöller does get his due, he tends to be credited only vaguely, as a German pastor who ran afoul of Hitler—his story shorn of its most arduous complexities.

Niemöller was indeed a German cleric, a man world-famous in his day as a defiant martyr for freedom of religion, imprisoned by the Führer for eight long years, until the very end of World War II. In the years after his release, Niemöller began offering piecemeal the lines of what would become his famed text, asserting them in remarks during sermons and speeches in the bombed-out ruins of the Third Reich. While the referents sometimes varied—some versions included people with disabilities or Jehovah's Witnesses, while others omitted Communists—the theme remained constant.

And yet, if the text tolls the bitter cost of indifference and want of solidarity, it also doesn't go far enough with regard to its author. For all its confessional eloquence, it is, in fact, an act of profound obfuscation: an attempt to confess guilt without really coming clean, to claim responsibility while obscuring what was a deep complicity.

Martin Niemöller had supported Hitler. Enthusiastically. Although he was hailed on the cover of *Time* as the "Martyr of 1940" and portrayed in a Hollywood film as having thundered at the Führer, "When you attack the Jews, you attack us all!,"

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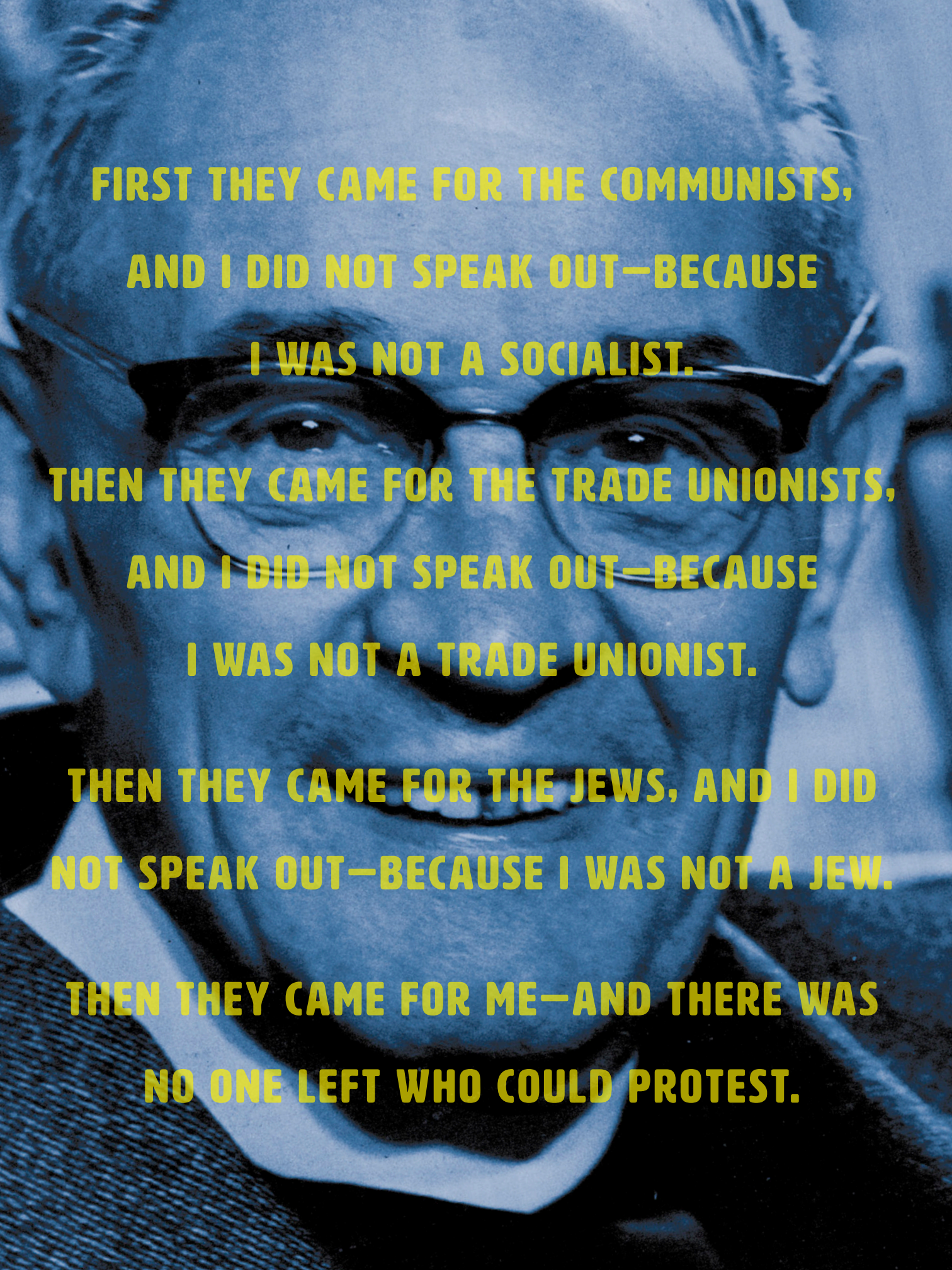
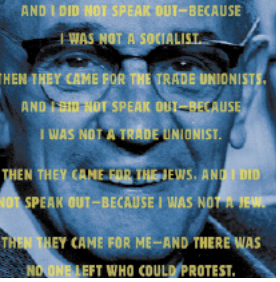

FIRST THEY CAME FOR THE COMMUNISTS,
AND I DID NOT SPEAK OUT—BECAUSE
I WAS NOT A SOCIALIST.
THEN THEY CAME FOR THE TRADE UNIONISTS,
AND I DID NOT SPEAK OUT—BECAUSE
I WAS NOT A TRADE UNIONIST.
THEN THEY CAME FOR THE JEWS, AND I DID
NOT SPEAK OUT—BECAUSE I WAS NOT A JEW.
THEN THEY CAME FOR ME—AND THERE WAS
NO ONE LEFT WHO COULD PROTEST.



the man himself was far from an anti-fascist freedom fighter. A proud World War I hero, he was also an imperialist, an ultranationalist, and an antisemite who only really objected to the aggressions of the Third Reich after the Nazis began intruding into the domain of the Protestant Church. Even then, his objections remained narrow. And while he did eventually undergo an extraordinary transformation into an indefatigable pacifist and devotee of Gandhi, that transformation came years after the war—a redemption wrenched from the contradictions of a very flawed protagonist.

For all its confessional eloquence, Martin Niemöller's famous mea culpa is, in fact, an act of profound obfuscation.

The historian Benjamin Ziemann, one of the two recent biographers who have pierced through the hagiographic shimmer around Niemöller, regards his evolution with something close to a suspicion of hypocrisy, even duplicity. After marshaling troubling evidence of Niemöller's longtime attitude toward Jews, Ziemann offers in his book *Hitler's Personal Prisoner* that he would revise the iconic mea culpa as follows:

> First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out—because I resented the "Godless" Communists for their attacks on Christianity.
>
> Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I believed in the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* [racially pure, united folk-nation].
>
> Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I "disliked" the Jews and denied the legitimacy of their faith.
>
> Then they came for me and detained me for eight long years—yet when I was finally liberated, my views on Communists and Jews had not substantially changed.

Niemöller's other revisionist biographer, the historian Matthew Hockenos, takes a more forgiving approach. In *Then They Came for Me*, he calls Niemöller's early views and actions repellent but commends his courage in later life to change his deeply held beliefs and act accordingly. "In this, Niemöller is to be admired," Hockenos declares, "and his evolution celebrated."

So what are we to make of him? And of the text whose words we quote in these desperate times?

For us, Niemöller's story presents an abiding challenge. Seen in one light, his mea culpa is a compromised but still worthy text, its personal lesson urgent despite its misleading omissions. Seen in another, it's an act of craven concealment hiding behind a show of rueful confession. But there is a third possibility as well: that the text that came to be known as "First They Came" is something difficult in an all too human way—a vital wisdom set within a moral failure. Its full meaning, its uneasy power, requires us to hold it in both lights together.

Long before Martin Niemöller became a renowned international figure—before life's twists and turns would torque him from a fascist sympathizer into an ecumenical citizen of the world—he was, above all, a patriotic German and a nationalistic Lutheran.

Born in 1892 in Westphalia, in Prussia, he was the second-oldest son of a Lutheran pastor in an imperial Germany under the authoritarian Kaiser Wilhelm II. It was a grand Germany back then, a nation of Christian church and state, throne and altar. Obsessed with the Imperial Navy from an early age, by 1918 Niemöller was joyously commanding a U-boat—an especially dangerous posting—having won an Iron Cross First Class for the action he'd already seen. When the war ended with Germany's defeat and the kaiser's abdication, followed by the turmoil of the 1918–19 revolution that gave way to the Weimar Republic, the profoundly conservative Niemöller was appalled and resigned his commission.

After a brief try at farming, he decided to become a pastor like his father, a secure profession in Germany with state funding. But even during his theological studies in Münster, he did not fully retreat into the cloth, as he yearned for the return of Germany's lost imperial glory, abhorred godless Bolshevism, and despised the newly born German republic, its democratic, secularized ways, and its war reparations. He led a unit of the Freikorps, the right-wing militia, to put down a workers' uprising in the Ruhr region and joined various reactionary nationalist groups—including, Ziemann reports, the first fascist mass party in Germany, for which he had to affirm his purely Aryan racial descent.

In 1931, Niemöller arrived as the third pastor at St. Anne's Church, a prestigious congregation in the wealthy Dahlem parish in suburban Berlin. He was 39, dynamic, and good-looking in a sharp-featured Prussian way, married and with a large family. Both of his fellow St. Anne's pastors, Ziemann notes, had received the Iron Cross First Class as well. The congregation included many Nazis and their supporters.

Despite his extreme views, Niemöller never joined the Nazi Party (though his younger brother, Wilhelm, a pastor too and his future first biographer, was a member from 1923 to 1945, Ziemann reports). But he eagerly supported Hitler's policies for national renewal and a promised re-Christianization of the nation. A month after Hitler was appointed chancellor in 1933, Niemöller cast his ballot for the National Socialists. From the pulpit that voting day, he essentially celebrated Germany's reawakening.

Niemöller might have continued along this path, "*Sieg heil!*"–ing his way through the rise of the Third Reich, but only a month later, the events began that would land him in a concentration camp.

Under the leadership of Bishop Joachim Hossenfelder, a rising

Good soldier: Niemöller, shown wearing the uniform of a lieutenant in the German Imperial Navy, earned the Iron Cross First Class for his role in World War I.

ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

movement of German Christians, which he dubbed "Storm troopers for Christ," threatened to Nazify the Protestant Church (two-thirds of Germans were Protestant), melding the swastika with the cross, urging the Old Testament to be dropped from the Bible, and denying Jesus's Jewishness. To this program was added a call for the "Aryan paragraph"—a new article in German law that disqualified Jews from the civil service—to be applied to pastors and congregants who were converted Jews, thereby overruling the sacramental transformation of baptism.

For Niemöller, and for others, submitting to the Aryan paragraph in particular would be heresy, a violation of Martin Luther's fundamental doctrine of two distinct and autonomous kingdoms: the state for earthly governance, the church for spiritual—both demanding fealty and obedience. It constituted an unacceptable interference in the church's realm, notwithstanding German Protestantism's history of being "anti-Judaic" (that is, theologically antisemitic). Jews were held responsible for killing Jesus and thus condemned to their unhappy fate. (Niemöller repeated this from the pulpit.) Nazis, for their part, liked to quote from Luther's virulently antisemitic late-in-life tract *On the Jews and Their Lies*. Niemöller, however, defended the independent authority of his realm, where Jews could be transformed into Christians.

As the *Kirchenkampf* (church struggle) intensified, Niemöller held firmly to this dual—but to his mind, fully consonant—approach. While declaring his earthly trust in Hitler, he emerged as a rousing figure of the ecclesiastic opposition, allying with very disparate others such as the young Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the cultured son of a preeminent German psychiatrist, and the venerated Swiss leftist theologian Karl Barth. Both Bonhoeffer and Barth called for speaking out against the Nazis more forcefully; Bonhoeffer insisted that not only was the church obliged to succor all victims of Nazi persecution, converted or not, but, if necessary, to jam the spokes of the crushing wheel. He was clear-eyed about his sometime ally: "Fantasists and naïves such as Niemöller," he wrote to a friend, "still think they are true National Socialists."

He wasn't wrong. In September 1933, Niemöller replied as follows to a parishioner's request that he publicly condemn the Nazi persecution of all Jews, not just converts: "The Church does not preach to the state, interfering in its powers (exercised justly or unjustly), which also applies to the Jewish question." He continued, "I also affirm the relative right of our people to firmly fend off the exaggerated and damaging influence of Jewry that has existed in my view."

In January 1934, an exasperated Hitler called the disputing church faction leaders to the Reich Chancellery. It was Niemöller's sole encounter with the Führer. He wore his Iron Cross. His conduct at the meeting subsequently became the stuff of popular myth, touted long afterward by Niemöller himself. Supposedly, he declared that neither Hitler nor any other earthly power could usurp the church's God-given authority and responsibility for its separate domain. Ziemann and Hockenos both write that there is no evidence for this heroic defiance. Ziemann calls Niemöller's account a "whitewash" of an encounter that in fact was disastrous from the start: Hermann Göring, who was present, produced the transcript of a phone tap that seemingly implicated Niemöller in conniving to use Germany's president, Paul von Hindenburg, against Hitler on church issues. The stunned pastor struggled to protest, but from then on was snubbed.

Enduring echo: A sign riffing on Niemöller's celebrated text at a protest against Mahmoud Khalil's detention in 2025.

"This time the U-boat commander has torpedoed himself," an ally complained.

After this performance and in the wake of the wiretap, the Gestapo arrested Niemöller on numerous occasions and held him for questioning. He was required to periodically report to the authorities. The newly formed Nazified Reich Church repeatedly suspended him for defying its edicts.


Wary friend: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and anti-Nazi dissident who occasionally worked alongside Niemöller. He was executed in the spring of 1945.

For the next several years, Niemöller danced a dangerous two-step, shifting boldly between his double loyalties.

In May 1934, he and the embattled opposition finally split away as the Confessing Church, proclaiming it the true Protestant Church of Germany. Its manifesto, as it were, was the Barmen Confession, written by Barth. The Nazi state was emphatically told that it had no jurisdiction in the realm of Jesus Christ. Yet that very summer, Niemöller was once again reaffirming his nationalist bona fides, writing and quickly publishing *From U-Boat to Pulpit*, a memoir of his submarine exploits and his struggles against the Weimar Republic. By the end of 1934, it had sold 60,000 copies. Hockenos observes that the author sent it to Joseph Goebbels with a note saying it was written in the "spirit of the Third Reich." At the Dahlem church, remarks Ziemann, the pastor would receive the "*Sieg heil!*" salute from parishioners, and acknowledge it.

Long before Niemöller became a renowned international figure, he was above all a patriotic German and a nationalistic Lutheran.

FROM TOP: DAVID DEE DELGADO / GETTY IMAGES; ARCHIV GERSTENBERG / ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

Still, Niemöller was now speaking out ever more forcefully on the church issue, drawing overflow crowds to his sermons—and gaining international press attention. Come 1936, having well realized that National Socialism was not re-Christianizing the country, he was openly mocking figures like Goebbels. The Gestapo was ever-present: Fellow Confessing Church pastors were routinely arrested, some sent to concentration camps.

Around this time, Niemöller also added his name to a brave—albeit strictly confidential—plea to Hitler (mostly drafted by others in the Confessing Church) that called out the Gestapo and the concentration camps and even antisemitism more broadly. It was ignored. On July 1, 1937, the Gestapo arrived yet again at the graceful brick Dahlem parsonage and detained him. This time, Niemöller would be held until 1945.

While his arrest provoked international outrage, his well-wishers and the press would have been disturbed if they'd witnessed his defense at a closed trail seven months later. There, Ziemann reports, after noting his war service and Freikorps doings, Niemöller claimed (falsely, says Ziemann) to have voted for the Nazis even back in the 1920s, as well as stated that Jews were "alien" to him and that he "disliked" them. He also cited his congratulations to Hitler in 1933 for withdrawing from the League of Nations.

During the mid-1930s, Niemöller danced a dangerous two-step, shifting boldly between his double loyalties.

Niemöller was cleared of all charges except one, whose time he'd already served. But Hitler had no intention of letting such a formidable antagonist get loose. At his order, his "personal prisoner" was immediately sent to Sachsenhausen, the main concentration camp for the Berlin region. He'd remain there until 1941, when he was transferred to Dachau, near Munich, until the end of the war.

A pattern now entrenched itself: the international veneration of Niemöller as a defiant hero, to be jolted by the exposure of ugly contradictions.

It needs emphasizing how lionized a symbol of Nazi resistance Niemöller had become. Just in the United States, for example, churches all over the country set their congregations praying for the "fighting pastor." One Brooklyn clergyman restaged Niemöller's arrest on his pulpit, then delivered his sermon from behind mock Sachsenhausen cell bars. *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine issued regular updates on his fate. *Time*, as noted, put him on its cover as the "Martyr of 1940."

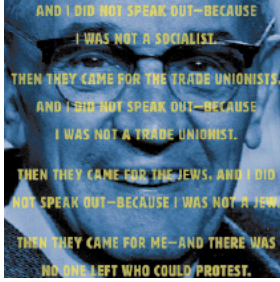
That same year, the first movie inspired by Niemöller's heroism, *Pastor Hall*, was released in England, adapted from a 1939 play by the German Jewish exile Ernst Toller. (Ironically, Toller had led the very short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic during the German Revolution, which the Freikorps helped crush). *Pastor Hall* was brought to America by James Roosevelt, who got his mother, Eleanor, to read a foreword for the US release. The film shows

Pastor Hall being brutally flogged in wretched concentration-camp conditions. This was pure invention: Niemöller was never physically abused or punished with forced labor in all his eight years of imprisonment. The Nazis didn't want to enhance his martyr status.

The hosannas that year occurred despite the shocking news that had followed the invasion of Poland in 1939: From Sachsenhausen, Niemöller

The myth, the legend: Top, a London artist spray-paints a statement adapted from Niemöller's famous quote as part of a World Press Freedom Day installation. Right, a lobby card for the 1940 film *Pastor Hall*.

FROM TOP: VUK VALCIC / SOPA IMAGES / LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES; LMPC VIA GETTY IMAGES



had petitioned the Nazi navy to serve again. His request was declined.

Still, his myth swelled. In 1944, Paramount Pictures made *The Hitler Gang*, a taut, noirish portrayal of the Nazis' rise, using real names, told as if Hitler and his henchmen were gangsters. The film was directed by John Farrow (Mia's father) and written principally by the Oscar-nominated team behind *The Thin Man*. It featured the one-on-one confrontation scene mentioned earlier, with Niemöller now upbraiding the foaming Hitler about the Jews, after having excoriated him: "Do you think we're really so contemptible that we would surrender the sacred faith given to us by God and accept a political program in its place?" More invention.

Between these two films, a book appeared: *I Was in Hell With Niemöller*, by "Leo Stein," who claimed to have shared a Sachsenhausen cell with the pastor and recorded his humane bravery and his regrets about Hitler. It's still cited today; it was a fake, from cover to cover.

Niemöller was actually in solitary at Sachsenhausen, though he was allowed occasional brief, heavily monitored visits by his wife. In Dachau, he also received visits. He was housed there with three German Catholic priests in a separate facility for "special and honorable" prisoners, along with foreign inmates with whom he could mingle and share meals. On Christmas Eve 1944, he conducted a profoundly poignant service in a makeshift cell chapel for six fellow Protestants whose countries Germany was besieging or occupying. In the war's chaotic final days—shortly after Bonhoeffer was stripped naked and gruesomely hanged at Flossenbürg camp for his connection to the plot to kill Hitler—Niemöller was rushed away with select others into northern Italy by SS troops, according to Ziemann to be either murdered or held as a bargaining chip. Hockenos argues for the latter. Niemöller was at last liberated on May 4, 1945, to international jubilation.

DID THE YEARS OF INTERNMENT CHANGE him? In the immediate aftermath of his liberation, it was not entirely clear that they had.

At a press conference arranged by US occupation forces, the celebrated symbol of Nazi resistance defended his newly revealed attempt to volunteer for military service from Sachsenhausen: "If there is a war, a German doesn't ask, is it just or unjust, but he feels bound to join the ranks." He declared—not as a critique—that the German people weren't suited for democracy, longed rather for authority. He did not say he opposed Hitler's political programs, averring that as a cleric he hadn't been "interested" in politics. *The New York Times* grimly assessed that, though admirable in certain ways, the fighting pastor was a "singularly ineffectual figure in a country and a world crying out for justice." An appalled Eleanor Roosevelt, Hockenos notes, wrote in her newspaper column that Niemöller's remarks were "almost like a speech from Mr. Hitler."

But then, another turn: Hitler's "personal prisoner" was "stunned," he told an Allied interrogator, after learning from American newspapers what had "really happened" with the slaughter of Jews. That October, at an Evangelical Church conference in devastated Stuttgart (in Germany, *evangelical* just means Protestant), Niemöller helped formulate the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt. German Protestants, he sermonized, were guiltier than the Nazis for not having spoken out. "We are responsible," the Stuttgart Declaration confessed, "for millions and millions of people being murdered, slaughtered, destroyed, thrown into hardship and chased out to foreign lands, poor human beings, brothers and sisters in all countries of Europe." Even so, Ziemann notes, there was no specific mention here of Jews.

Did his years of internment change Niemöller? In the immediate aftermath, it was not entirely clear that they had.

A few weeks later came the moment that Hockenos credits for instigating the extraordinary evolution that Niemöller would undergo.

It was at Dachau, where he stopped to show his wife his old cell. There was a plaque commemorating the many thousands who perished at the camp (despite it not being a dedicated extermination facility)—starting back in 1933. The two visitors were shaken to the core. As Niemöller would go on to repeat to audiences, 1933 was four years before he was compelled to silence and ignorance by imprisonment. Four years when he should have spoken out.

Niemöller didn't resume his pastoral duties at the Dahlem parish. Instead, he toured the country, expressing guilt for not speaking out. Such expressions of guilt were not well received by his countrymen. Especially when he pressed the matter further, calling on Germans now to collectively take responsibility for the Holocaust, declaring in a May 1946 sermon, according to Hockenos: "Six million Jews, an entire people, were cold-bloodedly murdered in our midst and in our name.... We have to accept the burden of that legacy." It was during this time that Niemöller's famous credo began to emerge in bits and pieces.

All the while, more Niemöller contradictions. He railed about the treatment of the German people by the occupation forces. He fiercely opposed denazification

From hawk to dove: Martin Niemöller at a vigil protesting the deployment of missiles near Dortmund, Germany, in 1959.

ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

Perhaps this committed nationalist was finally changed by his contact with the wide, multi-faith, multifaceted world.

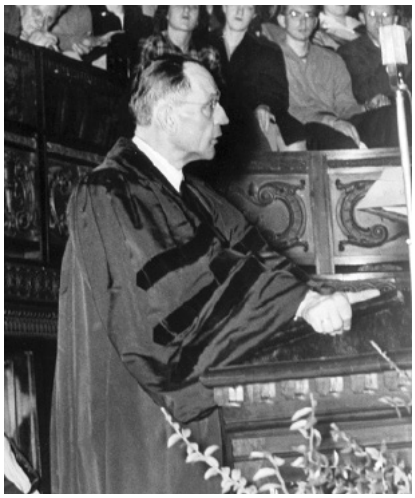
as far too blunt and punitive an instrument, insisting it would only further victimize suffering Germans. "There is a new antisemitism in Germany," he contended in a statement quoted by Ziemann. "It is caused by the Americans letting Jews carry out the denazification." There were other such ugly outbursts.

Even so, America was clamoring—over the objections of some prominent figures—for him to visit. In late 1946, despite vehement disapproval from Eleanor Roosevelt, leading rabbi Stephen Wise, and others, Niemöller and his wife arrived for an American tour—the first prominent German civilians to be granted US visas after the war. For five months, Niemöller barnstormed the country, addressing overflow audiences in English. In New York, he met Reinhold Niebuhr; in Hollywood, John Farrow, the director of *The Hitler Gang*, and Bing Crosby, whose priestly turn in *Going My Way* he admired. He was often on the radio. He recited "First They Came" only once, at his lone appearance before a German-speaking audience. His overriding concern was to lobby for American aid to his shattered, starving homeland. His tour was a great success personally, as well as financially for Germany.

Road show: Martin Niemöller delivering an address at the First Presbyterian Church in Seattle in 1946, during his postwar speaking tour of the United States.

Back in the misery of his homeland—where he found himself denied victim status by the German Association of the Victims of the Nazi Regime, in large part for his statements following his 1937 arrest—Niemöller became the first president of the newly formed Evangelical Church of Hesse and Nassau, which included Frankfurt. There, he fought ferociously against denazification. At the same time, as the chairman of the Evangelical Church's foreign office, he began to travel widely, then more widely, trying to reestablish to the world the religious legitimacy of the German Protestant Church after the horrors of Nazism.

For this writer, Niemöller's globe-spanning travels were a major factor in his evolution. From here on, the compass of the last four decades of his long life would swing by degrees in an increasingly radical—one might even say miraculous—direction. Perhaps the committed nationalist was finally changed by his contact with the wide, multi-faith, multifaceted world (an exposure that built on his ecumenical fellowship behind the barbed wire of Dachau, which Hockenos sees as a deeply affecting experience). Or perhaps, once the gears of self-reflection and regret began to turn, especially after his visit to Dachau, he did what few people do: He let them turn and keep turning, pushing him ever harder in the direction of justice.



Bitterly opposed to the 1949 partition of Germany, Niemöller visited churches in the Communist GDR, and then even Orthodox ones in Russia, for which he drew harsh criticism not just in West Germany but in the US, and which led to his ousting from the church foreign office in 1965. Still, he continued. He traveled throughout Asia and Africa, coming to regard the Global South as true Christianity's future. He became a co-president of the World Council of Churches from 1961 to 1968, resigning midway as president of the Hesse and Nassau church and eventually turning away from institutional Christianity. He attempted, he said, to act in imitation of Christ in the world—declaring in 1975, "Like my Lord and Savior Jesus I stand by those who have been abandoned by everyone—including the communists—the outcasts, the wretched, the famishing, and the starving." (He even said at one point that pastors could be Communists.)

He became celebrated as a global "ambassador of God," one who openly intruded now into the realm of the state, an Iron Cross hero turned high-profile pacifist (after a harrowing 1954 conversation about the hydrogen bomb with the Nobel Prize–winning nuclear chemist Otto Hahn) and Gandhi admirer—a vocal exponent of social justice, anti-nationalism, anti-colonialism, and anti-racism and an opponent of apartheid. He shared a stage with Martin Luther King Jr., met with and praised Ho Chi Minh during the Vietnam War. He became a prominent fixture of the international anti-nuclear movement and accepted the Lenin Peace Prize. A constant critic of West Germany and its rearmament, he backed the country's youthful upheaval of 1968.

"Aged 90, I am now a revolutionary," he told *Stern* magazine in 1982, two years before his death. "If I live to be a hundred, maybe I'll be an anarchist."

While Hockenos salutes the extraordinary transformation of this German ultraconservative, with his "repellent" early views, into someone with the courage to change deeply held beliefs, Ziemann is not so forgiving. He traces unsettling continuities, with particularly acute sensitivity to Niemöller's behavior regarding Jews. In all his globe-trotting, for instance, the ambassador of God somehow never set foot in Israel. Ziemann indicts Niemöller for remarks such as saying in 1963 that he couldn't hold it against Arabs if they felt "threatened and under attack" by the Jewish state. Or, in 1967, privately expressing that if he were an Arab, he'd be "antisemitic" about an "alien people founding a state on his soil."

One might agree with the gist of Niemöller's remarks (though Ziemann doesn't), but given his history, there remains a lingering odor of antisemitism.

How, then, do we weigh the case of Martin Niemöller? Certainly he remains… "complicated." Contradictions unresolved. For all the bravery he showed and the good he promoted, for all the ways he evolved, he remains flawed. A challenge.

And yet this challenge is instructive.

When the current age of cruelty finally comes to an end, some of its enablers will no doubt proclaim their regrets. Perhaps they'll lament

BETTMANN

that they didn't understand the full import of Trump's actions. Or that they failed to resist because they didn't see themselves reflected in MAGA's victims. Or were afraid they'd be next. But whatever their explanations, we would do well to remember Niemöller's example and attend not only to their words but to what's left unsaid and unacknowledged. To what, we should ask, are they actually confessing? For what are they apologizing? And, most crucial of all, what will they then do about it?

Nor should we stop there. Martin Niemöller's story also demands something of us—we who nod righteously as we read his mea culpa, satisfied in the knowledge that we are not silent, that we understand. As we now know, Niemöller's story is a warning not merely about indifference but about the sneaky, self-deluding power of complicity. It is a reminder to question the real strength of our empathy, and to resist the lure of complacency. Most of all, perhaps, it is a prod, a spur to do the explicit thing the German pastor mentions only figuratively when he laments his failure to "speak out." We must act. **N**

(Hardy, continued from page 39)

with loyalists. From Rosas's playbook, Donnelly borrowed the idea of simultaneous rallies in every state, a tactic designed to project ubiquity and inevitability. She overhauled her personal brand to match: sleek Instagram-friendly visuals, stripped of overt religious imagery, with a message broad enough to pull in people who aren't particularly interested in politics or religion, while dog-whistling to those who are already engaged.

Donnelly initially partnered with controversial groups like Moms for Liberty, whose explicitly right-wing image, combative gatherings, and flair for controversy ended up clashing with DMWOK's preferred style as a softer, pastel-hued community of concerned mothers. DMWOK churns out shareable memes and infographics for social media that bypass traditional gatekeepers. Complex debates are distilled into emotionally charged slogans about protecting children.

Another important part of the movement—one that Rosas proudly boasts about—is that it sidesteps pastors and traditional church hierarchies, cultivating the feel of a popular uprising against church leaders. This "army," as Rosas calls them, are "just leaving their military base, meaning they're just leaving the church to express themselves publicly after many decades." Elected and appointed officials might be cast as the enemy, but they can just as often become key allies: CMHNTM posted a message on X crediting Casey DeSantis, the wife of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, with launching the #ConMisHijosNoTeMetas (#DontMessWithMyKids) movement in the United States as a part of her mobilization of conservative mothers. Rosas's sister Dorcas Hernandez, who cofounded CMHNTM, runs a company that connects Latin American business leaders and officials with US tycoons and politicians.

For André Gagné, a professor of theological studies at Concordia University, the Christian right's long-term aim of merging the political and the spiritual is evident in DMWOK, which sees itself as fighting back against "an attack on what they view as the normal family," he says. "Since the days of Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, the Christian right has framed everything as a defense of the family." Challenging traditional sex and gender norms "disrupts what they view as the divine order of things—if you attack the family, that leads to a breakdown of society."

In Rosas and Donnelly's message, Gagné hears an unmistakable biblical register. "It's rooted in Old Testament warfare narratives," he says: "'We got the land—but now we've got to take on the giants.'" It's a battle cry that collapses the distinction between politics and prophecy, turning the defense of the family into a holy war. Meanwhile, it also ignores allegations that have called Rosas's own family values into question. In 2021, his wife accused him of physical and psychological abuse—charges that he waved off as merely "subjective" and "interpretive."

Where the evangelical old guard was defined by gray-suited patriarchs like Falwell, this new wave taps into a different current on the religious right—a celebration of sisterhood, without the feminism. With slogans like "If you silence a woman, her children become vulnerable to the enemy," Donnelly's rise epitomizes a new kind of militant maternalism, in which a growing cadre of ultraconservative women marry soft-focus personal branding with hard-line reactionary politics.

It was this uncontainable momentum that vaulted Jenny Donnelly past veteran female prophets who had spent years grinding on the charismatic circuit. She emerged fully formed: polished, camera-ready, and perfectly suited to fill a vacancy—the religious right's answer to Glennon Doyle or Cheryl Strayed, reframing hard-right politics through the approachable lens of a suburban mom with good hair and an easy warmth. While traditional social media influencers sell aspirational wealth, Donnelly sells something more attainable: the fantasy that you, too, can be a culture warrior in yoga pants.

The new evangelical wave taps into a different current than the old guard—a celebration of sisterhood, without the feminism.

That's how a reactionary movement born in Peru helped shape the terms of the 2024 US presidential election. The politics of protecting children cuts cleanly across party lines. Women with little prior political engagement are drawn in by Donnelly's PTA-mom framing, only to find themselves in MAGA's slipstream—suburban swing voters nudged rightward by the soft power of relatability. Think of it as a moral Tupperware party: deliberately decentralized, built on loose online networks that can harden into communities without ever looking like a formal political machine.

By last November, gender and education were no longer just talking points—they had become defining wedge issues in American politics, driving a manufactured moral panic over children that the religious right has expertly deployed. Now it's spread far beyond the hard-liners protesting outside city halls to become a staple issue in the mainstream media. In turn, it has helped to refocus a growing number of American Christians, shifting support for Trump from political calculation to spiritual conviction. In his first term, Trump was King Cyrus, a flawed ruler who was not one of God's people but who served God's plans—a biblical analogue that could be used for political ends. In the second Trump administration, he is cast as a divinely appointed leader in a cosmic battle. After all, only people driven by demonic forces could object to protecting children. **N**

The Last in a Line

The life and letters of John Updike

BY VIVIAN GORNICK

ONE DAY IN THE FALL OF 1951, WHEN HE was a 19-year-old Harvard undergraduate, John Updike sat down to write a letter home. "Dear Family," he wrote, "I received Mother's letter today and was concerned to discover that I have not been handling my correspondence properly. Under the impression that I have been the most diligent of scribes, it startled me to be informed that the controversy had expanded beyond the family circle…and perhaps I had better tackle it." Not only had young John not written as much as he thought he had; his mother (who was his true soulmate) was now feeling self-conscious because she had written three letters to his every one. Two perfect paragraphs follow these opening sentences,

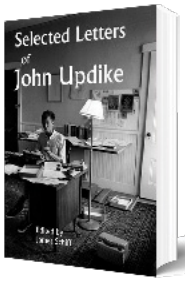
ILLUSTRATION BY **JOE CIARDIELLO**

addressing the situation as John has been led to believe the folks back home are experiencing it, after which he writes:

> In re-reading my letters I am conscious of an overwordiness that might strike you as supercilious, but believe me it is only the attempt of an over-Latinized vocabulary trying to express itself rapidly. In fact that very sentence sounds pretty obnoxious, but I didn't mean it that way.

Then comes a three-page account of his student days at Harvard, all of it written in sentences that sound just like the ones I've quoted.

Updike wrote this letter for the next 50 years. He wrote it to his family, his first wife, his magazine editors and book publishers; he wrote it to his children, his fans, his friends and acquaintances, his fellow writers. What I mean by that is this: The tone of voice in which these letters are written is singularly overriding; because of it, regardless of the content or the recipient (whether young or old, famous or obscure), they all sound pretty much alike. As the years went on, this voice achieved ever greater ease with itself. It became open, amiable, self-assured, wonderfully lucid, and brilliantly organized; it was also emotionally impenetrable. At almost no time, in reading these letters, do we stumble on a risky bit of soul-searching, a disheveled piece of self-knowledge, an inappropriate confession. At all times, we are in the presence of a writer who never loses sight of his gift for composition.



Selected Letters of John Updike
By John Updike
Edited by James Schiff
Knopf.
912 pp. $55

John Updike was born in 1932 in the country town of Shillington, Pennsylvania. His father was a gentle soul who taught high-school math, his mother a woman who grew up on a farm not far from Shillington and was possessed of literary ambitions. When John was 13 years old, she made the family move back to the farm where her parents still lived and where John, adored beyond measure by all four adults, would live until he left for Harvard.

At school, Updike embraced his gift for writing, already long in evidence, developing it with a steady stream of poems, stories, and criticism. He also met and married Mary Pennington, a Radcliffe art student with whom he would live for 21 years and father four children. In these years, he also made his initial contact with *The New Yorker*, the magazine that would become his permanent publishing home.

A year after graduation, John and Mary lived in New York while he worked for *The New Yorker*, but after less than two years they moved to Ipswich, Massachusetts, a coastal town 45 minutes from Boston, where they spent the rest of their years together and Updike discovered the environment in which he would flourish (middle-class Protestant suburbia) as a man and a writer—especially as a writer "giving the mundane its beautiful due."

In his mid-40s, Updike underwent a crisis of sexual restlessness that led to a series of suburban adulteries that resolved themselves when he fell into a passion for Martha Bernhard, an Ipswich neighbor, and left Mary to marry Martha, with whom he would live for the next 30 years in a town not far from Ipswich. During these years, Updike wrote 23 novels, 18 collections of short stories, 12 of poetry, and 14 of nonfiction. He also collected some 30 or 40 awards and prizes that anointed him a major American writer. And, of course, he also wrote the 800 pages that make up *Selected Letters of John Updike*.

Updike's pose of self-assurance, from an astonishingly early age, is really remarkable. Sometimes it makes him wise; mainly it makes him pompous.

At the age of 20, preparing to marry Mary Pennington, a young woman of superior character who has assured him that, young as they are, together they can manage a responsible married life, Updike writes to her:

> You are very brave, Mary, but no amount of courage can make a hothouse flower a scrub oak. [I read this sentence twice.] Do not expect of yourself feats of endurance and drudgery, we must look to the children of misery for those admirable qualities. Nothing nags me more than the realization that I shall have to demand some of both from you; let's pray to God I ask no more than you have.

Although the subject here is the young John's anxiety, he in fact sounds like a Puritan father instructing a daughter as the *Mayflower* is about to land. Oddly enough, by the same token, a year later, at 21, he writes a letter to the family in which he repeats in detail a destructive critique of his poetry—a teacher is telling him his poems lack authenticity—but ends, a bit smugly, "I don't think criticism gets much fairer, or more perceptive." Throughout his life, Updike sent his family detailed reports on almost every bit of attention his work received, negative or positive, because he himself couldn't get enough of it (the attention, that is), and he knew they certainly couldn't.

Updike often said that, like most people, he wanted to know himself more openly and honestly than he did, but in fact, again like most people, it wasn't true. In 1964, while traveling in Bulgaria, he admits to Joanna Brown, an ex-lover whose good opinion he badly wants,

> My purpose was, I suppose, to give me some perspective on myself, to strip myself of my usual armor of habit and work and family and survey my life from what may, more or less, be the mid-point. Alas, I am the same bundle of vague impulses and good-natured stupidity in Sofia as in Ipswich.

That's telling himself!

To the very largest degree, there isn't a sentence in these letters that couldn't be read from the steps of City Hall. The bulk of them are the highly composed, newsy accounts of daily life he writes weekly to the family. Then there are the ones written to William Maxwell, his *New Yorker* editor, or Alfred Knopf, his book publisher, these essentially all business. Then there are those

Vivian Gornick is the author of, among many other books, Taking a Long Look.

written to or about fellow writers—Philip Roth and Norman Mailer in particular—often playfully snarky, although sometimes not so playful. To Mailer in 1988:

> I honestly don't remember being on television in the last six months or saying that any of your work is trashy, but if it was and I did I must have had *Tough Guys* and the Monroe book in mind, as being trashy in a kind of cheerful and robust way.

Then again, in 1997 he writes Roth a letter of extravagant praise for *American Pastoral*, only to write the literary critic William Pritchard the very next day:

> I read *American Pastoral*; it's like some marvelously carved German public clock, all the apostles and devils rotating in and out of view on the limestone balcony, as the bells toll, melancholy and out of tune.

The letters you could not read from the steps of City Hall are those he writes in the 1970s to Martha Bernhard during the steamiest part of their illicit affair. It is here that we get a glimpse of the dirty-minded Updike. During this decade, suddenly famished for the satisfying sex life he'd never had with his wife, Updike sleeps with nearly every woman who comes his way, while documenting (with varying degrees of success) his erotic hunger in the sex-in-suburbia novels (e.g., *Couples*) that made him, in equal measure, famous and infamous.

It was when he began sleeping with Martha that Updike hit pay dirt. Her body was "glorious," and his spirits rose to heights of sexual boldness he'd never before imagined himself capable of. Here, in 1974, in answer to a raunchy letter of Martha's, he writes:

> I read [your letter] sitting there… and had I been a rooster I would have crowed. Your fantasy of having some of my sperm to lace your tea makes me wish I was all cock—all cock, balls, and prostate gland—instead of being only a tiny fraction cock. You, in truth, are all cunt—your mouth is a cunt and your eyes invite me in…. And your cunt is somehow your soul.

And this letter repeats and repeats itself for days and weeks and months, even a few years.

Interestingly enough, after Updike divorces Mary and marries Martha, there is not another word, at least in the letters in this volume, about either sex or Martha herself. Once she stops being all cunt, Martha becomes invisible. For the next 30 years, she is mentioned only through the phrase "Martha and I," as in the innumerable letters that begin "Dear Jim, Martha and I were delighted to have dinner with you and your wife…." Never—ever!—a word about the marriage itself: What was it like? Was it happy? Unhappy? Were they actually suited to one another? Did Martha get along with her mother-in-law? What did she and Updike argue about? On all this, silence. To commit such intimacies to the written word was, it seems, beyond him; in fact, unthinkable.

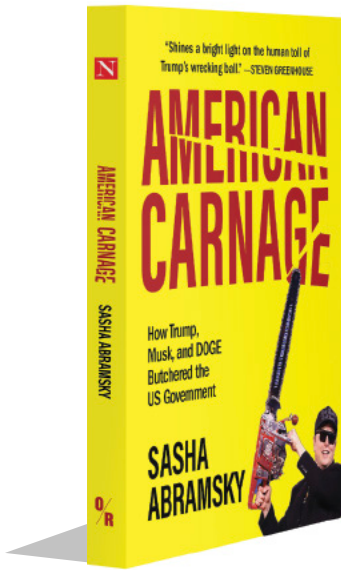
However, one letter alone contains an invaluable moment of psychological openness, a letter he wrote to his good friend Warner Berthoff (a teacher of literature at Harvard) in 1989, when Updike was nearly 60 years old. His memoir *Self-Consciousness* had been published, and Berthoff had written Updike not once but twice about the book and the often negative reviews it was receiving—in particular, those that concentrated on the chapter called "On Not Being a Dove," Updike's account of his execrable anti-peace-movement position during the Vietnam War. In this letter to Berthoff, he writes condemning himself, while at the same time wondering about the "curious masochistic determination that led me to drag out of the buried past my discreditable views and feelings about Vietnam, and get them shellacked all over again by my dear liberal friends from you to Christopher Hitchens." But "I was trying to express what I felt then, as best I can remember," and yes, he sees now,

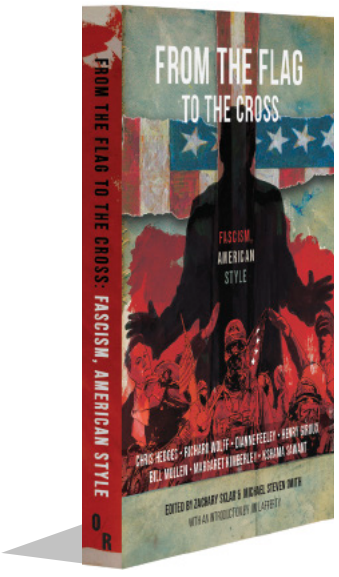
> There was something irrational in my resentment of the anti-Vietnam movement, which I freely confess and try to explore. The 'peace' movement threatened me…. Heaven knows why. To the many reasons I offer I maybe should have added my sense of sibling rivalry when Shawn [the famed *New Yorker* editor Wallace Shawn] turned the sun of his love toward [Jonathan] Schell and a number of other younger-than-I former schoolmates of his sons and away from (I felt) me…. In my letters to you and the *Times* I, of course, was trying to be as intelligent as my education and acculturation let me be; but underneath boiled a redneck hardhat rage. If a button nuking Dr. Spock and his mob had been placed under my thumb, I would have pressed it.

This letter was revelatory. Suddenly, I knew why the *Rabbit* books are the most authentic of Updike's work; and in that moment, I felt both pity and pain for Updike and American literature alike.

John Updike was perhaps the last in a long line of writers—white, male, Protestant—who dominated American literature for a couple of centuries because essentially America remained a country that reflected their narrative experience. This wasn't the experience that produced the dark profundity of a Melville or a Hawthorne; it was the experience that produced a William Dean Howells, that hardworking middlebrow novelist of the late 19th century whose subject was often the emotional power struggles that undergirded middle-class American life but whose deeply accessible prose assured his readers there was nothing much to worry about, no social revolution on the horizon.

In the main, Updike's work belongs to the Howells class of American writers—these are definitely his people—but Updike himself, hardly a Protestant patrician, was something of an intermediary between the suburban liberals of whom he usually wrote and the working stiffs he incarnated as Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom. Readers long suspected that deep within, in a place he didn't visit openly, Updike not only sympathized with Harry; he *was* Harry, possessed of those same primitive feelings of rage and resentment, scorn and deprivation, the same loudmouthed patriotism that drove the Rabbit. And, indeed, the Berthoff letter confirms the suspicion. Angstrom is that part of Updike that the rest of his work papered over, the part that allowed him to dive as deep as he could go as a writer. The bloodlessness—that is, the lack of felt life—that characterizes Updike's *New Yorker* stories and suburban novels disappears in the *Rabbit* books, and the writing sinks to the level required for literary depth. *Selected Letters of John Updike* needed more of Harry Angstrom and less of William Dean Howells to become memorable. **N**





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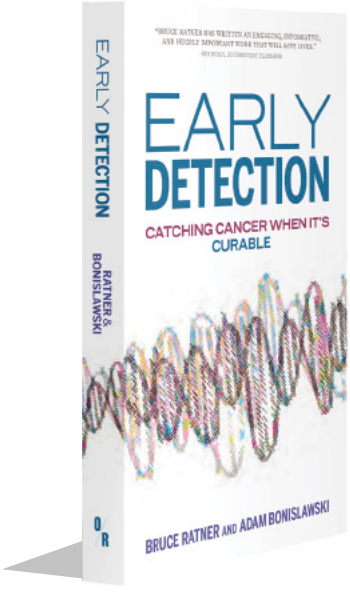

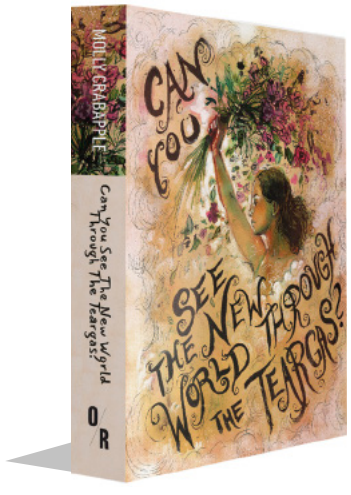

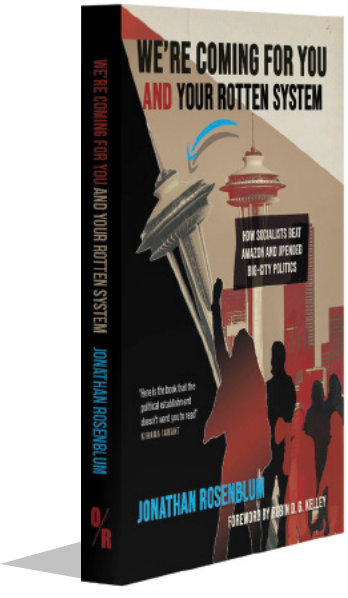

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Struggles for the Future

How has the idea of revolution changed?

BY PETER E. GORDON

HERE'S A PUZZLE: MUST REVOLUTION ALWAYS MEAN change? Does it require innovation, or can it bring back what is old? If it does not bring novelty but simply restores the past, is it truly a revolution at all?

In his insightful new book, *The Revolution to Come*, Dan Edelstein offers some surprising answers to these questions and explores how the idea of revolution has changed over time. What was once called a revolution, he argues, did not signify a break with the past; it meant something more like a return to political origins. This older meaning, commonplace in Greek and Roman thought, would survive into the 18th century and would only recede when the Enlightenment's idea of revolution as progress swept away the classical idea of cyclical time.

Edelstein, an accomplished professor of history at Stanford, is best known for his writings on the French Revolution. His 2009 book *The Terror of Natural Right* plunged into the most turbulent controversies about the revolutionary terror. It argued that the idea of natural right nourished an attitude of extreme political hostility: The Jacobins saw their political opponents not simply as rivals but as "enemies of the people" or *hostis humani generis*. By grounding their politics in nature, the French revolutionaries spawned an intolerant and ultimately lethal species of thinking—Edelstein called it "natural republicanism"—that would reshape politics well into the modern era. In the book's conclusion, he argued that we can detect the themes of natural republicanism in the worst excesses of our time: It helped to justify Leninism, Stalinism, and Nazism, and it also furnished George W. Bush with the warrant he needed for the War on Terror.

In his new book, Edelstein pursues a similar argument, though he no longer places the blame on anything as specific as natural republicanism. His new thesis is considerably more ambitious and expansive in scope. Ostensibly an exercise in intellectual history, *The Revolution to Come* traces "the idea of revolution" as it developed and changed over the course of nearly 2,000 years. And yet this is hardly history in the conventional sense: It is argumentative and idiosyncratic, and readers will be confounded if they try to place it on the conventional map of left-to-right political opinion.

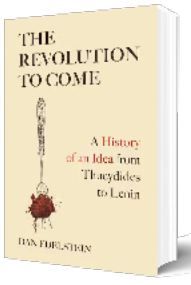
Always confident and alive to complexity, Edelstein brings to his new study a capacious knowledge of European history and an admirable facility in many of the relevant languages. He also knows how to tell a joke; his book opens with a spirited jibe at communism that, I suspect, he must have honed to perfection after years at the lectern. (I'm not going to repeat it for you here—sorry.) It is the kind of study that concludes with a fat set of endnotes and a no-less-formidable bibliography that spans the alphabet from Arendt and Aristotle to Voltaire and Zola, and it is a study that seeks to shatter old myths and offer new insights about political debates that many of us may have felt were settled long ago. But it is also the kind of book that raises far more questions than it can answer. Its arguments multiply and tumble over one other in such profusion that some readers may find it hard to tie them all together.

THE STORMING OF THE BASTILLE (GETTY IMAGES)

The premise of Edelstein's book is not one that had been previously unknown. The word *revolution* once meant a cycle or a return to origins. As applied to politics, revolution in this older sense implied that regimes

travel an organic path that eventually brings political arrangements back to their point of departure. This meaning was closely allied with ancient cosmology and the classical understanding of cyclical time. At some point in the 18th century, however, this older meaning was displaced. When Enlightenment *philosophes* such as Condorcet introduced the notion of historical progress, it became possible to break out of the temporal cycle, and history became an open horizon. The word that had once described an eternal return now signified the irruption of difference, a departure from previous patterns in politics and history.

This semantic shift is familiar to historians, but they have often quarreled over just why it happened and when it occurred. In his 1957 study, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, the Russian-born philosopher of science Alexandre Koyré located the pivotal moment in the 16th and 17th centuries, when the discoveries of Copernicus and improvements in the telescope combined to shatter long-held beliefs about the cosmos. Edelstein is less interested in revolutions in science; he is chiefly concerned with the idea of revolution in politics (though he would admit that science and politics are often intertwined), and he argues that this shift in meaning occurred somewhat later and in a more ambiguous manner. He locates the decisive change in our concept of political revolution somewhere in the 100-year time span between the late 17th and late 18th centuries, and he hastens to explain that not all of the later 18th-century revolutions subscribed to the same model of temporal progress. In fact, in his view, the revolutions in France and in the American colonies were quite distinct: The French revolutionaries saw themselves as breaking from previous patterns of history, while the revolutionaries in North America wished to restore their polity to its point of departure.



The Revolution to Come
A History of an Idea From Thucydides to Lenin
By Dan Edelstein
Princeton University Press. 432 pp. $35

To make his case, Edelstein suggests that we must look back to Polybius, the Greek historian from the Hellenistic era (circa 200–118 BCE) whose monumental *Histories* of Rome described political history as a cycle, or *anacyclosis*, that passes from one constitutional order to another. Polybius subscribed to what Edelstein calls a "tragic vision of history": Each order tends to degenerate—kingship gives way to tyranny, aristocracy to oligarchy, democracy to ochlocracy, or mob rule. The only way to avoid this otherwise inevitable cycle, Polybius believed, was to adopt a "mixed" constitution after the Roman model, since the mixed constitution would combine the best of all three kinds of rule: Consuls fulfill the function of kings; senators act as aristocrats; and all officeholders hold their posts thanks to popular election.

According to Edelstein, the Polybian notion of cyclical history would inform the classical model of revolution. With scrupulous attention to the details of language, he shows us how Polybius's use of the Greek term *anacyclosis* was eventually translated into the various languages of Latin Christendom. Like a theme with variations, *anacyclosis* became *revolutio*, *rivolgimento*, *rivolutioni*, *révolution*, and, in English, *revolution*. The earliest instance of the term in Italian, Edelstein tells us, is found at the end of a 1540 book published in Venice, which contained "Two Fragments from the *History* of Polybius, on the Diversity of Republics, Translated from the Greek into the Vulgar Language."

From that point onward, Edelstein writes, the Polybian idea of cyclical revolution gradually emerged as "a technical term in political thought." Like the Protestant Bible in the age of print, the good word of revolution spread across Europe and transformed the way in which political theorists conceived of historical and political change. To prove his case, Edelstein says that we should treat these classical terms as if they were "genetic markers." Deploying the painstaking methods of historical philology, he demonstrates how we can trace "the dissemination of Polybian thought" across time and space.

By the later 17th century, these markers were appearing in works by a great variety of political thinkers from Locke to Montesquieu. They also inspired political actors, especially in the American colonies. When one reads the writings of American founders such as Madison and Adams, for example, one finds frequent homages to Polybius in particular and allusions to ancient Greek history in general. This prompts Edelstein to argue that the American Revolution was not truly a revolution in the modern sense, since it was not an attempt at political novelty but a reprisal of classical ideas. The architects of the American Constitution were (in his words) "the last of the Polybians."

In arguing this case, Edelstein seeks to overturn the work of the historian Gordon Wood, who characterized the drafting of the American Constitution in 1787 as "the end of classical politics." Edelstein believes that this is mistaken. By ascribing to the American founders the modern idea of revolution as a rupture, Edelstein thinks that we have fundamentally misread their intentions. "They did not hope for or imagine a future society that differed dramatically from the present," he writes. "Some may have dreamed of a time when slavery was abolished, but none believed that less offensive forms of inequality would disappear. Rather than transforming their world, they wished above all to preserve the state." Like the English during the Glorious Revolution of 1688, when they welcomed William of Orange to the throne, the revolutionaries in the American colonies wished for restoration, not social progress or dramatic change. For them, the word *revolution* did not signify a break from the past; it meant a return to what was there before.

With this argument, Edelstein has placed himself squarely on one side of an ongoing debate over the meaning of the American Revolution. Was it a revolution in the full sense of the word, or was it something more benign, less riven by conflicts of wealth or class? Edelstein gives little credence to the "economic interpretation of the American Constitution" first presented more than a century ago by the progressive historian Charles Beard, who argued that the Constitution reflected the rival class interests of two factions, mercantile and landed. (The American Revolution, Beard concluded, was therefore not really a revolution at all; it was a counterrevolution that secured the propertied

Peter E. Gordon teaches at Harvard University. His latest book, out in 2026, is Walter Benjamin: The Pearl Diver.

interests of the founding fathers.) Nor does Edelstein devote much space to a discussion of religious factors. Against intellectual historians such as Karl Löwith, who once argued for the Christian and distinctively eschatological background to the modern idea of progress, Edelstein denies that the Christian longing for a millennium played a motivational role in 1776. For Edelstein, the American Revolution was neither economic nor religious; it was animated first and foremost by the Polybian idea of a mixed government that was thought to provide a bulwark against extremism or seismic political change.

Yet if the American Revolution was not a revolution in the modern sense, then what was? Here Edelstein turns to the turbulent world of the French Revolution and its modern aftermath. It was during the French Revolution, he argues, that cyclical time yielded to time as progress, and the salutary ideal of mixed government yielded to the muscular ideal of a final revolution that cleared the way for tyranny. As the book follows this narrative, the reader can discern a subtle shift in tone. In its earlier sections, Edelstein writes in a style of curiosity: The votaries of Polybius appear in a gentle light. But when he shifts his focus to the French Revolution, admiration gives way to judgment. Perhaps this should not surprise us, since Edelstein now finds himself on the terrain that he knows best. Unfortunately, his distaste for the revolutionaries in France often moves him to polemic.

Of course, this shift in tone is hardly unusual, since few topics arouse greater controversy among historians than the French Revolution. At least since Tocqueville and Michelet, historians have debated the question of whether the bloody events of the Terror marked the culmination of the revolution or its betrayal. For Tocqueville, an aristocrat by origin but a liberal in political disposition, the French Revolution could only be judged from the standpoint of its ironic denouement: The Jacobins may have wished to abolish monarchy, but they succeeded only by centralizing a state that then served as an instrument of autocracy. Opposing such arguments were the historians and political theorists (many of them—though not all of them—Marxists) who wished to defend the idea of revolution and who argued that the 1789 revolution does not stand under the sign of the guillotine: One could be for the French Revolution but against the Terror.

In the later 20th century, some historians sought to challenge the Marxist interpretation and appealed for assistance to the liberal interpretation associated with Tocqueville. Among the most consequential contributors to this debate was François Furet, who argued that the Terror could not be dismissed as an aberration; it was an event intrinsic to the revolution itself. According to Furet, the Marxists were also mistaken in their economic analysis, since the revolution had little to do with class conflict; it was essentially a contest over competing ideologies—one egalitarian, the other authoritarian.

Edelstein's study of the idea of revolution reads something like an homage to Furet. Like his liberal predecessor, Edelstein seems to harbor a strong distaste for political extremisms of any sort, and he also argues, like Furet, that the French Revolution opened the way to even worse excesses to come. Edelstein, however, puts a distinctive stamp on the argument. To understand what is so dangerous in the modern idea of revolution, he insists, we must appreciate how much it draws inspiration from the Enlightenment philosophers of history who developed the modern concept of progress. This shift in the concept of time radically changed our concept of revolution, for if, in the past, history was conceived as pursuing a cycle among political regimes, with the French Revolution history became a forward line. Politics was no longer a Polybian contest among citizens in a pluralistic order; it became instead a mortal struggle over the meaning of revolution itself, and all opponents or moderates became counterrevolutionaries, enemies of the future who must be either subdued or killed.

What had once been called a revolution did not signify a change but instead a return.

Edelstein seems to believe that this new kind of revolutionary reasoning flows from the modern idea of progress itself. "Revolutions that embrace a modern vision of history," he contends, are "highly susceptible to the kinds of political terror that marked so many revolutions from 1789 onward." It is here that Edelstein seems to resurrect arguments from Hannah Arendt and various Cold War liberals, who argued that a path leads directly from the 18th-century Terror to 20th-century totalitarianism.

In fact, when reading *The Revolution to Come*, one can often hear the echoes of *On Revolution*, Arendt's 1963 comparative study on the differences between the revolutions in America and France. Like Edelstein, Arendt insisted on a sharp contrast: Where the Jacobins were bent on a thoroughgoing makeover of "the social," the American founders were satisfied with the more moderate and pragmatic task of reshaping "the political." Much in the spirit of Arendt, Edelstein argues that the revolutionaries led France "from democracy to dictatorship" and thereby furnished a general model for revolution in the centuries to come.

But Edelstein gives this argument a singular spin. The idea of progress, he contends, encouraged a kind of determinism in both theory and practice, since it gave revolutionaries the highest claim on the unfolding of history, as if its movements were like those of an organism: metabolic, not political.

This argument is no doubt fascinating. But to accept it demands a rather teleological reading of intellectual history in which bad ideas prepare the way for future horrors. By treating ideas as "genetic markers," Edelstein does not mean to adopt a method of determinism. But it is hard to escape the impression that he thinks of ideas as vehicles for a bacillus that will infect its host. The irony, of course, is that this way of understanding history looks suspiciously like an inversion of the philosophies of history that Edelstein finds so objectionable: Progress has become regress, good ideas losing out to bad.

No one should fault Edelstein for trying to paint on a broad canvas. But when he turns to the post-revolutionary period, one can sense his impatience. The shapes of history grow impressionistic, and details are drafted for the purposes of polemic. Edelstein may find little to admire in European liberals (since they upheld strong property restrictions and

nourished dreams of empire), but he has even less sympathy for Marxists and other exponents of socialist revolution, all of whom, in his eyes, are guilty of thirsting for dictatorship. In fact, Marxism seems to illustrate everything that he finds wrong in the modern idea of revolution. For Edelstein, the Marxist idea of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" becomes only one instance of a general delusion that has afflicted revolutionary movements throughout the modern era. "The choice of dictatorship" was not predetermined, he admits: It was a "temporal shortcut" that only emerged as a likely option once the revolutionaries came to believe in the possibility of a "perfected future."

This belief in a golden age to come helped inspire the genre of utopian novels that projected our collective fantasies into an idealized time that always lay just beyond our reach. Edelstein adds, in a rather brilliant aside, that such ideas capitalized on the "future perfect," the grammatical tense that offered the soothing thought that someday all will have been justified. Hiding in the idea of utopia, however, was the dangerous prospect that struggles for the future might be enlisted to justify violence in the present, while those who did not share the revolutionaries' political convictions were to be condemned as counterrevolutionary. "By opening up the future as a space to be colonized by a just society," Edelstein writes, "the modern doctrinaires of progress encouraged their followers to value the world to come so highly that they were willing to accept the temporary suspension of democratic beliefs."

Edelstein wishes us to understand the idea of "colonization" as more than just a metaphor. Colonizing the future in the political sense would be, in his eyes, analogous to colonizing other lands. But in a book that is otherwise overflowing with insight, this claim strikes me as tendentious. The equation, though no doubt ingenious, obscures an obvious difference: In the imperial imagination, the unfortunate souls who fall prey to the *mission civilisatrice* are expected to feel only gratitude, since they are being lifted up—by force, if necessary—to a higher plateau of historical development. But the language of empire was never more than a mask: It was used to conceal and to justify the most brutal practices of expansion, exploitation, and compulsion.

The idea of progress, however, cannot be so easily dismissed. Whenever human beings wrest themselves free of inaction and seek to change their fate, they must believe that their conduct might just possibly bring about an improvement in their lives. Most revolutionaries cleave zealously to this belief—but then, so too do most other political agents. In fact, the idea of progress in this sense animates most human action, and it can be abandoned only in the most extreme circumstances, when our behavior seems altogether without actual effect and we yield to fatalism.

Like many other recent critics of progress, Edelstein seems to believe that the idea itself is irredeemably tainted because it has too often served as a warrant for imperialist atrocity. But this verdict makes little sense. If atrocity is bad, then we should strive for its elimination, and yet bringing it to an end would surely count as an improvement. Adorno once tried to compress this argument into a single aphorism: "Progress occurs where it ends." Yes, progress is of course an ideology—but it is not only an ideology, or we could not yearn for a world better than it currently is.

Yes, progress is an ideology, but it is not only an ideology.

This may explain why Marxists of nearly every stripe have been so reluctant to abandon the idea of progress, whatever its flaws. It is not because they wish to "colonize time," nor is it because, as Edelstein would claim, they all adhere to the utopian vision of "permanent revolution"; it is because they see the historical future as the only theater in which it would be possible to realize our freedom.

Curiously, Edelstein devotes less energy than we might have expected to Marxist theory. In an edifying book on revolution that stretches to nearly 300 pages, only about 40 are dedicated specifically to Marx, and most of those concern his writings on French history.

I would not blame Edelstein for this choice, were it not for the fact that his attitude toward Marxism reflects a broader attitude of indifference toward methods of inquiry beyond the bounds of the historical profession. He seems to think that most social scientists do not take ideas seriously, so in pursuing a history of ideas, he concludes that he does not need to take social scientists seriously. In the introduction to his book, he writes that "much of the social scientific literature on the topic [of revolution] is not particularly relevant." Why? Because "much of the social scientific literature" on revolution adheres to the "fundamental premise" that "political thought is mostly irrelevant." Most social scientists apparently believe that ideas are mere epiphenomena or froth on the waves. To prove this point, Edelstein refers to Marx, who ostensibly thought that "only material considerations have an impact on political events," while "ideas and culture are merely smoke and mirrors deployed by the ruling class to stay in power."

One need not boast any expertise in Marxist theory to find this inaccurate. Marx was seldom so reductive, and if he truly believed that all ideas were "merely smoke and mirrors," his own exertions in theory would have had little purpose. The slip is unfortunate, since it arouses the concern that Edelstein may be tilting at windmills. When a book is so thoughtful in other respects, one might feel inclined to excuse its flaws, and yet I fear that this hostility toward Marxism may be the symptom of a deeper problem. Edelstein has crafted a genuinely powerful narrative that illustrates what psychoanalysts would call "splitting": It enlists historical argumentation for the purposes of a mythic contest between two ideas of revolution, one bad, one good—progress here, *anacyclosis* there; the French revolutionaries on one side, the American revolutionaries on the other.

Edelstein seems confident that we can immunize ourselves against the bad while embracing the good: We can be Polybians without permanence, and progressives without progress. But if we follow the implications of his book, we might conclude that it would be best to forsake our modern notions of progress altogether and turn back to the ancient idea of cyclical time. The strange conclusion of this brilliant but at times puzzling book is that we are confronted with only two options, militancy or complacency. But history is not forcing us to choose. N

Silicon Island

How Taiwan became the chipmaker for the world

BY YANGYANG CHENG

WHEN DONALD TRUMP NOMINATED ELBRIDGE COLBY AS the undersecretary of defense for policy, the news stirred headlines in Taiwan. Colby, who has since been confirmed, had repeatedly stated on social media that if China ever invaded Taiwan, the US military should destroy TSMC, the world's most important chip manufacturer, to prevent it from falling into Chinese hands. The provocative suggestion has been echoed by Democratic Representative Seth Moulton, as well as in a paper from *The US Army War College Quarterly*, which argued that the vow to level TSMC would deter Beijing from annexing the territory by force. By this logic, the vibrant island democracy where 23 million people live has little value beyond its ability to produce an estimated 90 percent of the world's most advanced semiconductors.

Even as the Chinese military escalates its acts of intimidation against Taiwan, Beijing wasted no time in pointing out Washington's hypocrisy. "As the DPP [Taiwan's ruling party] authorities are trying their best to pander to the United States and giving away TSMC submissively, the company has become a piece of tender meat on the chopping block," said a Chinese government spokesperson.

As tensions rise between the world's two superpowers, with Taiwan caught in the middle, the jingoistic rhetoric around TSMC also reflects a common tendency to mythologize technology. Instead of recognizing technological advancement as a dynamic, incremental process that cannot be confined to a particular geographic location, the national-security establishments of both the United States and China routinely portray state-of-the-art capabilities as a finite resource that can be isolated, stockpiled, and denied from others. To become a dominant superpower means dominating technological development and production as well. The heads of leading chip manufacturers and other tech companies only reinforce these notions of scarcity and exclusivity. For them, market dominance is a zero-sum game. To gain an edge over their competitors, the tech executives have also seized on the narrative of great-power rivalry,

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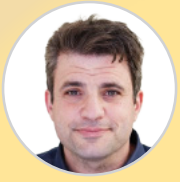

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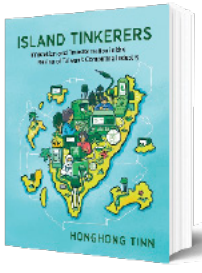
painting the world as a ruthless battlefield on which their products are not just indispensable to national strength but cannot be replicated anywhere else.

Against all the saber-rattling, myth-making, and visions of world domination, Honghong Tinn's new book, *Island Tinkerers: Innovation and Transformation in the Making of Taiwan's Computing Industry*, offers a timely intervention and powerful antidote. Tinn grew up in Taiwan and is currently a professor of history at the University of Minnesota. Her book draws from both direct knowledge of the island and deep archival research to explore its long history of manufacturing and technological development. For Tinn, Taiwan has long been a place for tinkering: a process of learning, dissecting, and remaking technology through "acts of imitation, emulation, experimentation, and innovation." As a latecomer to the electronics industry compared with the United States and Japan, hobbled by the island's limited resources and situated in a complex geopolitical environment, Taiwan has nevertheless carved out a unique path and claimed its place as not just a maker but also an innovator in the high-tech sector. Its success was not predetermined and relied on the timely alignment of various policies and players. Unlike a lot of scholarship and commentary on economic development in East Asia that focus on the state, *Island Tinkerers* traces the birth and growth of the computing industry in Taiwan as a project that involved many nonstate actors as well: Tinn's "tinkerers" are university students, corporate engineers, assembly workers, and homegrown entrepreneurs. Determined and resourceful, they navigated material constraints and Cold War politics, rallied domestic and international support, and made the manufacturing and development of technologies that had originated elsewhere into their own. Their accomplishments in reshaping the Taiwanese economy and the electronics industry globally came about by demonstrating, she argues, just how false the cliché is that "the West innovates and the East imitates."



Island Tinkerers
Innovation and Transformation in the Making of Taiwan's Computing Industry
By Honghong Tinn
The MIT Press.
448 pp. $60

Tinn's story begins in the early 1950s. The Communists, led by Mao Zedong, had claimed victory over the Chinese mainland, and the Nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-shek, retreated to Taiwan. The island had just emerged from a half-century of Japanese colonial rule and now had to endure the martial law implemented by the Nationalists, who still harbored dreams of taking back the mainland. Over 1 million Chinese people followed the Nationalist government in its move to Taiwan, joining the territory's 6 million–plus population of Chinese and indigenous descent. Among the new arrivals from the mainland were 1,000 or so alumni from Chiao Tung University (CTU) in Shanghai, the "MIT of the Orient." The graduates tried to reestablish their alma mater on the island and identified the burgeoning field of electronics as a promising opportunity. They lobbied the Nationalist government, linking electrical engineering to national defense, and reached out to overseas alumni networks for donations, stressing Taiwan's position as "Free China" and on the front lines of the Cold War. As Tinn points out, while the students had fled the Communist takeover on the mainland, their personal views on national and international affairs were in fact complex, as were the reasons for their flight. Embracing some of the Cold War's rhetoric should be understood first and foremost as a political necessity and a persuasion tactic.

Establishing a new institution of higher education is never an easy feat, but after a series of setbacks, the CTU graduates and their supporters founded the National Chiao-Tung University (NCTU) in 1958. Its Institute of Electronics offered the island's first graduate program in science and engineering. By 1962, NCTU had become home to Taiwan's first mainframe computer. The IBM 650 was acquired through a United Nations technical-aid program, followed by an IBM 1620 two years later. By the end of the decade, teams of students from NCTU and two neighboring universities were working to build their own minicomputers.

To realize their aspirations for a homebrew computer, the enterprising teams of students sourced components from the newly established export-processing zone in Kaohsiung, where foreign firms had set up electronics production plants to take advantage of the region's cheap labor and favorable tax policies. In the summer of 1971, the Taiwanese press announced the birth of the first domestically made "electronic brain"—*diannao*, as computers are commonly called in Chinese—at NCTU. Tinn notes that the report overstated the capacity of the device, which would be more accurately described as a programmable calculator than a general-purpose computer, and the campus experiment did not lead to "an immediate path" to mass production. Yet the university that received a second life through tireless advocacy by its alumni was an indispensable cradle, where many leaders in Taiwan's electronics industry began their initial foray into tinkering.

The year that Taiwanese media celebrated the island's first "native" computer, a 27-year-old Stan Shih graduated from NCTU's Institute of Electronics. After working for several years at local firms that specialized in mass-producing calculators for export, Shih founded Multitech in 1976. By combining advances in microprocessor technology with Taiwan's increasingly impressive manufacturing capability, Shih and his fellow entrepreneurs sought to turn a decades-long dream of mass-producing computers on the island into reality.

In 1981, Multitech unveiled the Micro-Professor I, which won acclaim from consumers and the press in the United States, Japan, and Germany. Its successor model was partially compatible with the Apple II computer at a fraction of the cost and featured a novel Chinese-language display. Inspired by the overnight success of the American firm Compaq, Shih's team began developing IBM compatibles as well. In 1986, Multitech released one of the world's first 32-bit computers using the Intel 386 processor, only months after Compaq's debut.

Apple and IBM defended their monopoly by mounting patent litigation against the makers of clones and compatibles,

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both at home and abroad. But while the founders of Compaq were celebrated as daring entrepreneurs who defied IBM and helped make the personal computer better and more affordable, the computer makers at Multitech and other Taiwanese firms were maligned in the US media as "scoundrels who stole IBM's technology" and then profited by undercutting prices. During a 1983 congressional hearing on the impact of illicit trade on US enterprise, the government's witnesses cited outlandish estimates on the number of Taiwanese counterfeits with no attribution and meanwhile mixed up facts about Multitech with those for other firms (one confused the biography of Multitech engineer Jonney Shih with Stan Shih's).

"The ignorance reflects the presumption of a lack of innovation in the fledgling computer industry in Taiwan," Tinn notes. Under an Orientalist gaze, computer makers from the Far East were viewed as a horde of copycats and counterfeiters who had infiltrated Western markets. Yet while narratives from the United States exaggerated the nature and the size of Taiwanese counterfeits, an increasing number of US firms were recognizing the manufacturing capacity of computer makers from the island and began hiring them as subcontractors. Multitech proved to the world that Taiwan could make computers that were just as good as or even better than those manufactured in the West.

Further Orientalized caricatures encouraged this movement of manufacturing eastward too, where the racial hierarchy mapped onto the divisions of labor. Industrial production under capitalism separated the design and manufacturing processes and deemed the latter as lower-skilled, hence less valuable. Not all manufacturing was regarded the same, though, and some products were seen as more difficult to make than others. In a place like Taiwan, Western firms first saw "industrious" and "efficient" Asian workers who could fabricate simple commodities like calculators and keyboards at a fraction of the cost. As Taiwanese workers proved themselves in higher-end manufacturing as well, they were entrusted to make more complex products, such as motherboards and personal computers.

These artificial hierarchies and false dichotomies between mental and manual labor, between lower- and higher-end products, and between innovation and imitation elide the fact that going from a prototype to mass production demands much more than naïve copying. Improving yield, scaling up output, and optimizing supply chains all require skills and vision. Taiwan's early dominance on the periphery of the electronics industry facilitated its advancement to the core. Stan Shih, after all, began his career making calculators. Mass-manufacturing these relatively simple products helped build up a rich supply chain and a skilled workforce that were all local to the island. Western tech firms, on the other hand, were more than happy to outsource the labor and component demands to Taiwan so they could focus on the so-called pinnacle of the profession: the design process.

Compared with computers and other electronic appliances, the separation between design and manufacturing took place a little later in the semiconductor industry. Leading chipmakers like Intel both designed and built their products in-house. As the equipment and labor costs to make one's own chips were prohibitive for most newcomers, industry leaders and policymakers in Taiwan saw a historic opportunity. TSMC pioneered the pure-play foundry model in semiconductor manufacturing: It only produces other people's designs; in other words, it is a subcontractor. As more clients utilized TSMC's services, the Taiwanese firm was able to perfect its manufacturing process through practice.

As equipment and labor became expensive, chipmakers looked toward Taiwan.

TSMC's innovative business model took inspiration from the long history of electronics manufacturing in Taiwan. Its success was built on earlier companies like Multitech. In 1987, the year TSMC was founded, Multitech was renamed Acer. By the mid-1990s, Acer had become one of the largest personal-computer makers globally. Taiwanese companies also produced most of the world's laptops and "held over half of the world market share of most computer components," Tinn writes. In 2006, *Time* magazine recognized Stan Shih as one of its "Asian Heroes." The CEO of Intel at the time credited Shih with helping "spread computing power to the masses": "He's a big reason why your PC costs $1,000 and not $10,000."

Shih may have helped spread computing power to the masses, but the gains from Taiwan's electronics industry were not shared equally. One of the strengths of *Island Tinkerers* is its attention to the gendered dimensions of labor. Before the advent of electronic computers, young women fulfilled the role of manual calculators. The term "kilo-girl" was coined in the 1940s to measure the computing power of machines against that of 1,000 women workers. With the invention of mainframe computers, the operators were also predominantly women. At NCTU, two women worked on the IBM mainframes provided by the UN aid program. They were referred to as "girls" by their male colleagues and in official reports. The slight was a form of linguistic de-skilling, Tinn notes, where the women's professionalism was erased.

In 1966, the Taiwanese government established the Kaohsiung export-processing zone to attract foreign investment. A sculpture marked the entrance to the zone, featuring a Herculean man pushing a giant wheel; its inscription read "Production builds the nation." However, as Tinn highlights, it was mainly women who worked on the assembly lines and propelled the region's economy. They built transistor circuits, magnetic-core memories, and electrical appliances for the overseas market, tinkering with the process to enhance production. However, the skills of these workers garnered little acknowledgment and were dismissed as innate, an extension of physical attributes like "good eyesight" and "nimble fingers."

The women workers lived in cramped company dorms and received meager pay. Sneaking in snacks to the factory floor became a form of rebellion. At times, their employers offered token benefits, such as a free bottle of milk a day at the Dutch firm Philips. Some workers fell ill from the chemicals used to treat metal; several died of acute poisoning. While their male colleagues with engineering degrees rose to managerial positions and were encouraged to start their own firms, the women had little access to higher education or capital and saw few

opportunities for career advancement. The gender gaps persist half a century later. At TSMC, women make up three-quarters of its frontline fabrication staff, but few work in research or management positions. As the company automates its production process, the share of women employees has decreased.

Island Tinkerers grew out of Tinn's doctoral dissertation, which covered the years from 1959 to 1984. While the book extends the timeline to the present day, the sections on the most recent decades feel a bit more rushed than the excellent history and analysis that precede them. One wishes there was more about how Taiwan's own manufacturing processes became globalized too: The book contains only scant mentions of how Acer and its peers' global rise was also marked by production expansion into other parts of Asia and Latin America, where the subcontractor began subcontracting and even more layers of exploitation were put into place.

This included Taiwan's use of labor on mainland China. After martial law was lifted in Taiwan in 1987 and China began to abandon socialist planning to embrace global capitalism, many Taiwanese firms started to look across the strait for a vast worker and consumer market. The resumption of trade with the mainland took place alongside the process of democratization and decolonization in Taiwan. The island became more politically and culturally independent from China, even as the two regions grew closer economically. Over the past few years, as Beijing steps up its threat of annexing the self-governing island and Washington pressures its allies to "decouple" from China, the economic ties between Taiwan and China have become a touchy subject. Yet one finds that across the national and geopolitical divides lies a similar process of extraction and exploitation.

Foxconn, the world's largest contract manufacturer of electronics, may have been founded in Taiwan, but many of its factories are now all over China, including the world's biggest iPhone plant. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers toil in these "Foxconn cities," where dire labor conditions have led to a series of suicides and uprisings. The computer maker Acer also opened production facilities in China in 1995, as Tinn points out in the book. As early as the 1990s, leaders of Taiwan's nascent semiconductor industry looked for opportunities on the mainland. Their business ambitions sometimes came in conflict with export-control regulations on the island. Seizing new markets while keeping the most cutting-edge technologies to oneself proved to be a tough balancing act, especially with geopolitics in the mix. In the 2000s and early 2010s, when relations between Beijing and Taipei were less charged, groups of TSMC alumni moved to the mainland and established new chip factories there. TSMC itself also expanded operations into Chinese cities and aimed "to become the best partner in the 'Invented/Made in China' arena," according to the company's own press release in 2004. Before the first Trump administration tightened its sanctions against Huawei in 2020, the Chinese telecom giant was TSMC's second-largest client after Apple.

The question of technology is not just "if one can" but also "if one should."

If, in Tinn's first half of the story, one tracks the exhilarating advances of a set of entrepreneurial tinkerers who developed an impressive computer-making industry in their country, what follows in her abbreviated second half is the transformation of those tinkerers into tycoons. The people in Tinn's book seized historic opportunities and challenged conventional wisdom. In the pursuit of their dream to power Taiwan with computers, they have proved a possibility and so deserve celebration. Yet their dream is not the only dream, and what they have created is not all that utopian.

In 2017, five mothers from Hsinchu embarked on a mission to obtain clean water. The best water from the region's reservoirs supplied the Science Park, where TSMC and other leading industries are headquartered. The residents' water, on the other hand, was sourced primarily from a nearby stream that had been plagued by pollution.

After years of grassroots advocacy, Hsinchu passed a referendum in 2021 requiring better water treatment, but the implementation has been uneven and has faced bureaucratic hurdles. Earlier that year, a severe drought swept Taiwan. The government halted irrigation for nearly one-fourth of the island's farmland and compensated the farmers for the lost crops. TSMC, the largest water user in Taiwan, kept its pipes flowing. Ironically, as the historian James Lin has shown, throughout the 1960s and early '70s, before Taiwan became "Silicon Island," agriculture was the territory's most important export. The Nationalist government brandished Taiwan's advancement in agrarian science to construct the image of a modern nation and to bolster its legitimacy both at home and abroad, asserting that "Free China" was also the superior China.

Despite important progress in water-recycling efforts, TSMC is expected to consume more water as it expands production to fulfill rocketing demand. The chip manufacturer has been hailed as Taiwan's "Silicon Shield" against geopolitical peril, but its water and energy usage incurs other vulnerabilities. The impossible choice that the people of Taiwan have to make is an indictment of the world, especially its richest and most powerful actors, who would rather see the planet burn and the people starve than abandon their quest for techno-supremacy.

As Tinn shows in her book, archipelagic and island nations like Taiwan and Singapore can offer a new way to conceive state power, where strength is not tied to land mass but lies in the ability to open up to water, to find new passageways and forge unexpected crossings. One may apply a similar ethos to the relationship with technology. The goal is not the endless conquest of new frontiers, and territories traversed do not have to be claimed and bordered. True, lasting power is not measured by the capacity to dominate or kill, but by the commitment to nourish and sustain life. After all, our world is not a simulation, and people are more valuable than chips. The question about technology is not just "if one can" but "if one should." As the world appears entranced by faster chips and smarter electrical brains, elevating a company like TSMC to mythical status, few are pausing to ponder what the computing power is for—and who powers the computers? N

ANGELO HERNDON, WHOSE CONVICTION FOR A CRIME RELATED TO FREE SPEECH WAS OVERTURNED IN 1935, ARRIVES AT NYC'S PENN STATION (GETTY)

The Power of Words

What are the politics of free speech?

BY DAVID COLE

THE SUBTITLE OF FARA DABHOIWALA'S AMBITIOUS NEW book, *What Is Free Speech? The History of a Dangerous Idea*, raises a question: In what sense is free speech "dangerous"? For autocrats, to be sure, free speech is perilous. It enables subjects to criticize their authority, associate with like-minded others to build an opposition, protest in the streets, and advocate for regime change. For adherents of the status quo, free speech is threatening because it permits critics to press for change. For those with power, it is disturbing because it empowers those without. For religious fundamentalists, it is risky because it protects the right to question orthodoxy. In all these senses, free speech is indeed a dangerous idea—and, for all the same reasons, an essential right.

But for Dabhoiwala, what is most dangerous about free speech is that, at least in the United States, it is *too* free. Speech, he argues in his wide-ranging intellectual history of the idea, can hurt people, enable disinformation and lies, serve greed, appeal to our basest instincts, and shore up the powerful. Spanning many centuries and multiple continents, *What Is Free Speech?* offers a revisionist history of freedom of speech, demonstrating that, too often, it has been only partially realized. But his book is also a deeply polemical work, one driven by his concern about what he views as the dangers of free speech to progressive interests, especially in the United States.

In Dabhoiwala's account, the First Amendment ignores the harms that speech inflicts. It affords the wealthy disproportionate ability to shape public debate. It protects hate speech, which denies equal status to members of minority groups. It privileges individualist notions of liberty over the collective good. It is dangerous, in other words, not for the threat it poses to power, but for the harms it inflicts on the vulnerable. There is undoubtedly some truth to these criticisms. Free speech can be abused and

can inflict real harm. Social media is rife with false and misleading "facts." And billionaires like Elon Musk and George Soros have far greater ability to exercise their speech rights than the rest of us. But Dabhoiwala's critique of free speech in the United States too often attacks a straw man. It describes the First Amendment as "absolutist" when it is not and it hardly reckons with the abuses that reduced protections of free speech could facilitate when power falls into the wrong hands. That is the real danger, and it's one that the Trump administration illustrates daily as it leverages purported concerns about discrimination, disinformation, and violence to target the speech of its critics, from pro-Palestinian activists to the press, universities, the legal profession, and nonprofit groups.

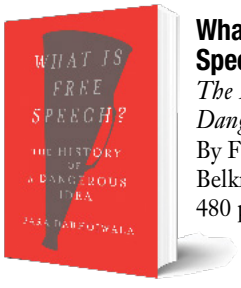
Dabhoiwala begins his narrative with a detailed history of the world before free speech existed, an important reminder that for much of human existence, those in power viewed speech as a threat, not a right, and there was little to stop them from suppressing the speech they opposed.

People could be (and were) prosecuted, imprisoned, and even executed for criticizing their governors or otherwise departing from the reigning orthodoxy. It was not until 1766 that the first law protecting free speech was enacted—and that was in Scandinavia.

When the right of free speech did begin to take root, Dabhoiwala notes, it was anything but free speech for all. Like many other rights, the freedom of speech was initially limited to political elites and often denied to women and members of minority groups.

This history is a useful corrective and indeed underscores the essential importance of robustly protecting free speech. Yet Dabhoiwala's ambition to revise triumphalist accounts of free speech leads him not only to draw different lessons but also to treat the personal flaws and limitations of free-speech advocates as if they necessarily undermine the idea of free speech itself.

Take, for example, his discussion of a series of essays known as *Cato's Letters*, written between 1720 and 1723 by Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard, two London journalists. *Cato's Letters* are, Dabhoiwala contends, the first sustained argument for a secular idea of free speech as a political right, and he helpfully situates the *Letters* within the technological developments and political struggles of the time, including the emergence of the printing press and the demise of prepublication government censorship. But he also dismisses the letters as a "self-serving tissue of deliberate fabrications, glaring contradictions and willful omissions."



What Is Free Speech?
The History of a Dangerous Idea
By Fara Dabhoiwala
Belknap Press.
480 pp. $29.95

Cato's Letters were self-serving, Dabhoiwala argues, because they were written by journalists who made the case for the protection of the press. This self-interested nature is revealed also by the fact that one of the authors, Thomas Gordon, was considerably less protective of speech after he began working for the government.

But many advocates for rights act at least in part out of self-interest. That hardly compromised the efforts of, say, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Thurgood Marshall, Cesar Chavez, or Ruth Bader Ginsburg. And the fact that Gordon took a different position when serving in government than when speaking as a journalist is neither surprising nor discrediting of the ideas he advanced, which deserve to be judged on their merits.

To similar effect, Dabhoiwala condemns the *Letters* as sexist because they emphasize the role of speech in public debate at a time when women were, for the most part, excluded from the public domain—even though nothing in the *Letters* suggests they should be. And he brands the *Letters* racist because the authors "were personally connected to slave ownership in the Americas." (Neither owned slaves, but Dabhoiwala notes that Trenchard invested in a company engaged in the slave trade and that two of Gordon's children moved to Jamaica, a hub for the slave trade.) But again, those unfortunate if not unusual facts of the time do not diminish, on its merits, the argument that *Cato's Letters* makes.

Dabhoiwala is not wrong to observe the limited scope of speech rights at their inception. That women and enslaved people were excluded from the public sphere or otherwise denied the right does not, however, negate the intrinsic value of free speech, any more than the fact that women were not originally protected by the Constitution's equal-protection clause or that women and African Americans were denied the vote negates the value of equality or the franchise. The answer to illegitimately limited speech rights is not to condemn those rights, but to extend them equally to all. Which is precisely what eventually happened—through the demands, asserted through speech, of those initially excluded.

When Dabhoiwala does turn to the merits of the *Letters*' argument, he deems its case for free speech "profoundly flawed" because it downplays the harms that speech can inflict on others. Yet the *Letters* expressly limit free speech to "the right of every man, as far as by it he does not hurt or control the right of another."

John Stuart Mill, the author of another foundational document in the free-speech canon, receives similar treatment. As an agent of the East India Trading Company, Dabhoiwala notes, Mill was unwilling to extend free-speech protections to Indians. Dabhoiwala is not wrong that Mill was a hypocrite in his role as an employee of the trading company. But it's not clear what effect, if any, that should have on the merits of the argument he advanced on behalf of free speech in his book *On Liberty*.

As we move across the ocean to the United States, Dabhoiwala turns to the First Amendment. Here, his critical account of its history rests largely on the claim that American free-speech protections are "absolutist." He notes that the First Amendment states that "Congress shall make *no law* abridging the freedom of speech." But the Constitution's

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speech protections have never barred all regulation of speech. Indeed, for most of its first 100 years of existence, the First Amendment prohibited little more than "prior restraints" of speech, namely requirements that works be approved by the government before being published. And even under its more expansive current interpretations, whole categories of speech are unprotected.

Pursuing this absolutist theme, Dabhoiwala also argues that the American conception of free speech generally ignores the harm that free speech can sometimes inflict. But First Amendment doctrine has taken harm into account. It denies protection to many categories of speech precisely because of the harms they cause: libel, incitement, fighting words, true threats, obscenity, child pornography, and speech integral to criminal conduct. It allows the government to prohibit commercial advertising if it is false, misleading, or proposes an illegal transaction, again because of the harms such speech can cause. Even where speech is otherwise fully protected, the government can regulate it where necessary to avoid harms to compelling public interests, including the right to vote, national security, foreign relations, and equality. So much for absolutism.

Dabhoiwala also criticizes the First Amendment for treating speech as distinct from conduct. In his view, speech is action, and to ignore that fact is to ignore the harms it inflicts. But all concepts of free speech properly rest on the recognition that there are in fact important differences between engaging in conduct and talking about it: Prohibiting murder and prohibiting a novel about murder are two very different things. And there is no logical inconsistency between acknowledging that regulating speech and conduct are different and acknowledging that speech can sometimes cause harm. The First Amendment, for example, allows suits for the injury that defamation inflicts. But because criticizing a government official is different from assaulting him, the First Amendment also limits the tort of libel in ways that it does not limit laws protecting officials from physical attack.

Free speech doesn't take sides, but that's a feature, not a bug.

Speech, Dabhoiwala complains, can be "perpetually manipulated by the powerful, the malicious and the self-interested—for personal gain, to silence others, to sow dissension or to subvert the truth." This is doubtless true. But free speech, he grudgingly acknowledges, has also been used by the well-intentioned, the altruistic, and the vulnerable to advocate for social justice and truth. One can't protect the latter without the risk of the former—by necessity, free speech belongs to everyone, not just those whose views or motives we like. The right to promote vaccination also protects the right to question its risks. Free speech doesn't take sides, but that's a feature, not a bug.

At bottom, Dabhoiwala laments the fact that freedom of speech weighs individual freedom over the collective good. That is indeed true, but again, that is something to praise, not condemn. The point of free speech is to help us determine just what our vision of the common good is. It empowers people to dissent from, challenge, and seek to change prevailing visions and to urge alternatives. For a long time, after all, the "common good" in this country included slavery, denial of the franchise to women, and criminal punishment of sexual relations between people of the same sex. It was largely through activists' exercise of free-speech rights that those visions were altered.

What Is Free Speech? seeks to tell the story of freedom of speech rather than offer a comprehensive philosophy of the right, and on those terms its revisionist history contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the development of free speech in the modern world, warts and all. But the book's more polemical ambitions end up getting in the way. Dabhoiwala opens the book by blaming free speech for the 2016 election of Donald Trump, "a man who appeared to have catapulted himself into the most powerful office in the world mainly by broadcasting outrageous and hateful lies to tens of millions of people on social media." True enough. But free speech also made possible the elections of Joe Biden in 2020, Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, and indeed every president before that.

Free speech is the lifeblood of democracy; it's how "we the people" shape our common destiny, hold government accountable, and advocate for change. It does not guarantee good results, but it is an essential attribute of a democratic society—and the single most important tool we have today in fighting back against Trump's abuses. If the people send him a message with a midterm defeat for Republican candidates, that, too, will be a result of free speech.

More broadly, every expansion of freedom and equality in the United States has been fomented through public advocacy and organized political action—including the abolition of slavery, the provision of suffrage to women, the disestablishment of Jim Crow, the protection of workers, the expansion of civil rights, and the promotion of equal dignity for LGBTQ individuals. If that's dangerous, then I say let's be thankful for the danger. **N**

SEYMOUR HERSH DURING HIS *NEW YORK TIMES* DAYS (WALLY MCNAMEE / GETTY IMAGES)

After Every Clue

Laura Poitras and Mark Obenhaus's Cover-Up *and the scoops of Seymour Hersh*

BY ADAM HOCHSCHILD

Near the beginning of *Cover-Up*, the absorbing new documentary by Laura Poitras and Mark Obenhaus, there's a shot of a Pentagon press briefing during the Vietnam War era. Still cameras click, movie cameras roll, and the auditorium's seats are filled with reporters. Everyone is focused on the man at the podium, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. The scene is a reminder that most journalists practice herd behavior. You write or broadcast what was said at the briefing, because if you don't, your editor will berate you: "Hey, the rival newspaper [or rival network] just reported that McNamara said we're winning the war. Why haven't we heard that from you?" Whether covering City Hall or a state capital or the White House, every reporter worries about getting such a call. Yet in the end, the briefing is seldom the story that matters.

If there has ever been a reporter who refused to practice herd behavior, it is the subject of *Cover-Up*, Seymour Hersh. "When I was at the Pentagon for the AP," he tells Poitras and Obenhaus, recalling his early reporting days during the Vietnam War, "instead of going to lunch with my colleagues, I'd go find young officers. You know, talk a little football, get to know them.... Eventually, Army guys would start saying, 'Well, it's Murder, Incorporated'" over there in Vietnam. Before long, Hersh had parted ways with the Associated Press (he would later do the same with *The New York Times* and would cease publishing in *The New Yorker*), but he was also about to break the story of the My Lai massacre, the deliberate slaughter of several hundred Vietnamese civilians—men, women, and children—in 1968 by US troops. The exposé would provide a huge boost to the anti-war movement. It would also launch Hersh's career as one of the greatest investigative reporters this country has ever seen.

Cover-Up provides a vivid picture of Hersh at work. We learn how he tracks down every clue, whether by showing up at someone's home unannounced, befriending an Army officer or a

CIA agent with a guilty conscience, or taking notes on a document he's viewing upside down, on a lawyer's desk, while the lawyer thinks Hersh is jotting down what he's saying. Skillfully leaping back and forth across decades, *Cover-Up* weaves together archival footage, interviews with an often reluctant Hersh, and shots of him in action, usually on the telephone. We also hear him discussed by others, including President Richard Nixon. ("The son of a bitch is a son of a bitch," Nixon says of him to Henry Kissinger. "But he's usually right, isn't he?") Hersh resisted Poitras's requests to make a film about him for nearly 20 years before he finally gave in—and in the film, we even see him on camera trying to back out later. He comes across as extremely private, prickly, hyper-alert to lies, and relentless.

Cover-Up touches lightly—perhaps too lightly—on the more recent work that Hersh has been criticized for. This includes being soft on former Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad ("I never thought he was Mother Teresa," Hersh admits to the filmmakers, "but I thought he was OK") and several major stories that relied on one or two anonymous sources that couldn't be corroborated, such as Hersh's assertion that the United States blew up the Nord Stream pipelines that delivered Russian gas to Germany. There have been some other questionable moments as well, but in a stellar career that has spanned more than 60 years, they can be forgiven.

***Cover-Up* explores not only the scoops Hersh landed but also how he got them.**

Cover-Up has visual and auditory treats for those of us old enough to remember the days when we reporters wrote on manual typewriters and sent our stories to a newspaper's typesetters in pneumatic tubes. But the film by no means romanticizes the news business; its eye is always on Hersh's resistance to the herd behavior showcased in that early scene. "The biggest trouble I had was managing Sy at a newspaper that hated to be beaten but didn't really want to be first," explains Bill Kovach, the former *New York Times* Washington bureau chief. "The *Times* was scared to death of being first on a controversial story that challenged the credibility of the government."

As it turned out, the newspaper had other fears as well. "That was the beginning of the end with me at *The New York Times*," Hersh recalls, "when I started writing about corporations." To give the *Times* a little credit, it did publish some of those stories. But it is impossible to imagine the stubbornly independent Hersh remaining long at any established news organization that tried to rein him in.

Following Hersh's career from the tiny Dispatch News Service (which published the My Lai story) to *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and the 11 books he's written, *Cover-Up* reveals just how he got crucial evidence for a particularly important story from the 2000s: the one that documented how US troops had horrifically abused and tortured inmates at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Anyone who watched the media then will remember the shocking photographs of Iraqi prisoners—one with a leash around his neck; another, naked and cowering, being threatened by an attack dog; another, hooded, standing on a box with electrical wires attached to his hands; another, bent over and chained to a cell door. "If there hadn't been photographs… no story," Hersh remarks in the film.

How did he get them? On a radio show, Hersh invited people with information to contact him and then provided his telephone number. One woman called. Her name was Camille Lo Sapio, and she goes public for the first time in *Cover-Up*. Lo Sapio explains that she had lent her laptop to a former daughter-in-law who was deployed to Iraq. When the computer was returned, she found those photos on it.

One of the film's final scenes is particularly haunting. Hersh is at home, looking at a table covered with photos of large, rough diagrams, hand-drawn with a thick marker pen, of houses and apartments in Gaza. Some of the diagrams appear to have been drawn on paper, some on walls, and several on sheet metal with bullet holes in it. Hersh is on the phone with the woman who has sent him these images. We hear her voice, lightly accented, as she explains that this is "a record of massacres that we can basically trace back to the units that committed the war crimes." The woman isn't named—is she Palestinian? Israeli? She asks to be identified in anything he will write as merely "a researcher recently returned from Gaza."

At one point, Hersh asks her about the diagrams: "This is all background? I'm not allowed to write any of this?" The woman replies, "For now. But you'll be the person I come to when we're ready."

As admirable as Hersh and this expertly crafted film about him are, in one way *Cover-Up* feels slightly dated, like those manual typewriters and pneumatic tubes we see on-screen. At the time of Hersh's greatest achievements—the My Lai and Abu Ghraib exposés and a dozen other stories in between, such as Henry Kissinger's support for the murderous 1973 coup in Chile—revealing the blatant violation of

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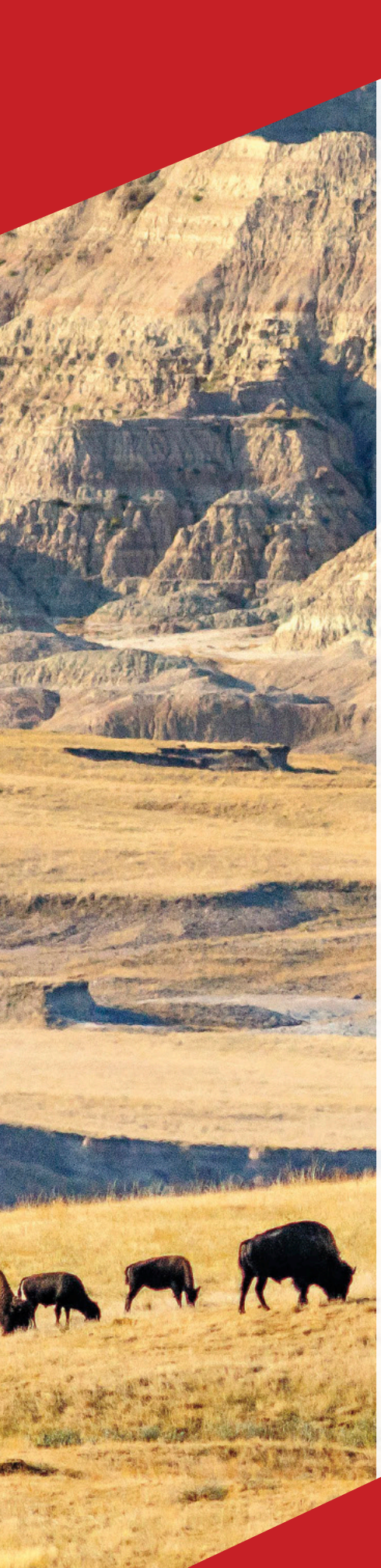

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laws and ethical standards still had the power to shock us, and to spur outrage, demonstrations in the streets, even congressional investigations.

Is that still so today? In the week that I'm writing this, President Trump welcomed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the White House with trumpeters and an F-35 flyover—the man who, US intelligence determined, had ordered the 2018 murder and dismemberment (with a bone saw) of the critical journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. When a White House reporter from ABC asked bin Salman about the brutal assassination, Trump attacked her for trying "to embarrass our guest."

That same week, it was reported that the US Coast Guard would consider the display of the Nazi swastika or the hangman's noose as merely "potentially divisive" rather than as hate symbols. Under criticism, officials later backtracked. Also before backtracking, President Trump called for six Democratic members of Congress to be arrested and executed.

Every week brings similar examples. What once would have shocked us profoundly has been normalized; Trump and the climate he has fostered has hardened us. It is as if the value of shock, of the revelation of evil, has been diminished by runaway inflation.

There is another source of inflation as well. With the proliferation of smartphones and the pictures they take, do images still have the power to shock us and move us to action, as did those of My Lai and Abu Ghraib? We've seen untold thousands of photos and video clips of the destruction of Gaza and the suffering of its people, in painfully graphic detail. Yet we have let this mass murder go on with American weapons, under two presidents, for two years. And finally, today, we all increasingly do not know whether the image or video we're looking at is real or generated.

This does not mean that we shouldn't take inspiration from the life of someone like Seymour Hersh. But it does make the kind of work he's done more difficult than ever. It means not only revealing the injustice that those in power don't want revealed but also telling that story in a way that can break through the newly hardened shell around our hearts. N

A SCENE IN *THE PAPER* (COURTESY OF NBC)

Any Workplace in the World

The Paper *and the return of the cubicle comedy*

BY JORGE COTTE

IN THE PANDEMIC YEAR OF 2020, THE SHOW THAT DOMInated TV screens was not *Tiger King* or *The Mandalorian*, but a show that had ended seven years earlier. In that year of isolation and anxiety, millions of Americans returned to *The Office* for comfort. It was boosted by its availability on Netflix, by then already synonymous with streaming, but also by its cache of over 200 episodes, its deep bench of much-loved characters, and its recognizable style.

The Office was built to spin off. Greg Daniels's version for American TV was itself an adaptation of a British show by the same name, created by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant. As was noted by Michael Schur, a writer for *The Office* who later developed *Parks and Recreation* with Daniels, portability was part of the show's design. Beyond the walls of the series' fictional paper company, "you could do spinoffs that weren't really spinoffs"; *The Office*'s comedic style could work in "any workplace in the world." And it did: More than a dozen adaptations in different countries followed.

The Paper, which premiered on Peacock and also airs on NBC, is yet another realization of that promise of portability. It's a show about a workplace, this time about a ghost newspaper and the people who work there. Also created by Daniels

and employing the documentary-crew framing device, it's a direct spin-off too. But what felt new and innovative about *The Office* now seems tired and worn in *The Paper*. While labor in *The Office* stood as a representative sample of corporate work anywhere in America, the work in *The Paper*, much like journalism in general, should be specific to its location—in this case, Toledo, Ohio. Instead, *The Paper* seems content to exploit the good feels of the *Office* rewatch rather than risk reporting something that could feel uniquely of this time and place and point of view.

The show's title actually refers to two "papers": a floundering, diminished local newspaper, the *Toledo Truth Teller*, which is the subject of the new documentary, and the slyly named paper conglomerate Enervate, which subsidizes and barely tolerates the *Truth Teller*'s existence.

The *Truth Teller*, we are told, is exclusively a venue for clickbait and republished Associated Press articles with no local reporting. It operates on a shoestring budget, and its editor and staff are as frivolous and superfluous as its content. There's Esmeralda Grand (Sabrina Impacciatore), the ostentatious managing editor, who immediately takes to peacocking for the documentary crew's cameras; Nicole (Ramona Young), who works in circulation and simply keeps her head down; Barry (Duane R. Shepard Sr.), the sole experienced reporter, who seems to have retired in every sense but the literal one; and Mare (Chelsea Frei), the compositor, the only other employee with any experience or any zest for real reporting.

It takes a new, idealistic editor in chief to shake things up: Ned Sampson (Domhnall Gleason), a naïve nepo baby with an aw-shucks Midwestern quality. He's a little Ted Lasso and a little Leslie Knope. While Ned is not very experienced or even noticeably competent, he does want to be a real newspaperman, and we get a sense of his cherished fantasy to hop on a desk and deliver the kind of rousing newsroom speech that would be applauded in an Oscar-bait film.

To inject some life into the newspaper, Ned recruits a group of Enervate employees, most of whom are technically not even employed by the paper, to serve as its volunteer cub reporters. If the original staff of the *Truth Teller* are an odd lot,

Fear of Nothing

When I was a child I was terrified
of the space between One and Zero

vast as the ages before my birth
strait as my death—late at night

I heard my parents arguing
lovingly in their locked room,

the angora cat coming home
with a sparrow in her mouth,

and the raindrops on the shingles
counting themselves—how to sleep,

how to cross the empty place
between the name "sparrow"

and that limp thing crying,
adamant, creating me with its cry?

D. NURKSE

Ned's new recruits—including Oscar Martinez (Oscar Nunez) from *The Office*—are even more so. Almost all of them begin with zero reporting experience and no instincts for what makes a story, which immediately becomes comic fodder. In one episode, a class of high school students studying journalism come in to observe the newsroom, but it's obvious that the new members of the *Truth Teller* team have more to learn from the students than the student journalists have to learn from them.

Spotlight, this is not. The bungling newsroom tackles such scoops as a broken water main, changes in a local fishing law, false advertising at mattress stores, and a farmers-market cult. In one episode, Mare covers a beloved drama teacher's impending retirement and Oscar reviews the high school's theater production.

But the goofy reporting escapades land most effectively when we see the direct effects of the issues being investigated. One episode uncovers a catfishing scam that hits close to home; in another, the whole team becomes lab rats for sketchy wellness products, to hilarious effect. And in what is easily the season's best episode, a novel product from Enervate's toilet-paper brand (called "Man Mitts") turns out to not be as flushable as the packaging promises. Clogged pipes displace Mare from her home, and her efforts to report on the plumbing issue pit the paper against its parent company. The characters leap into heroic investigative roles: Mare is the intrepid reporter, and Ned the crusading editor in chief who valiantly stands by her. For a moment, you almost forget that all this muckraking is about how butt-wiping gloves are clogging up sewage pipes.

A more predictable strand of office politics also runs through *The Paper*. When Esmeralda finds that her authority has been displaced by Ned, she throws herself into a frenzy of scheming to recover her lost stature: She cancels the paper's wire service, manipulates Ned's naïveté with misinformation, and delays his attendance to a budget meeting. Meanwhile, a frustrated Enervate executive named Ken (Tim Key) is constantly trying to get the *Truth Teller* shut down or at least returned to its previous lowly status.

There is also, of course, that other staple of the workplace: office romance. Season-long storylines hang not on the question of whether the Truth Tellers will publish a story but on "Will they or won't they?" love plots. The sales rep, Detrick (Melvin Gregg), has a crush on Nicole, but she wants to keep things casual. In an inversion of the typical relationship drama, Nicole demands that Detrick date around.

Then there's Ned and Mare, who feel a mutual spark upon their very first meeting yet find themselves performing a kind of practiced aloofness demanded by the standards of workplace professionalism. But if you're worried about a multi-season storyline in which the two characters orbit each other in an ever-closing proximity, don't be—things move fast at the *Truth Teller*.

Lurking in the background of *The Paper*'s zany reporting antics and star-crossed lovers is a stark reality about contemporary news outlets in smaller postindustrial cities like Toledo. While thousands of weeklies and dailies around the country have simply disappeared, many more have become ghost papers, retaining their names and basic shapes but completely gutted of staff and budget and local news presence. Outside of major markets, it's common for these outlets to publish only material that is not local—or even original. Research in the past decade has found that up to 20 percent of communities have local news outlets that don't publish any local news at all. And on this, *The Paper*, despite its quirky sitcom tone, is almost admirable. After all, its central premise hinges on Ned's defiant and perhaps even absurd belief in the power of journalism.

By the end of its first season, *The Paper* starts to feel like a ghost television show.

But this conceit, in the end, is too much of an empty gesture. While a show about an office-supplies company can be insular without feeling that way to viewers, a story about a newspaper has to deliver something about the world in which it is set. Instead, Toledo is presented as a cutesy, generic Midwestern town where nothing much happens and there's no sense of history or local politics. In *The Office*, the particulars of the show's Scranton setting can be relegated to a few Easter eggs for local residents, but in *The Paper*, the references to the Toledo Mud Hens (a minor-league baseball team) and local stores are not enough for the setting to feel like it really defines what happens on the series or at the *Truth Teller*.

It's not that the show mocks Toledo, but rather that its flyover view undermines the whole purpose and ideal of local news. Perusing local Toledo newspapers online, one finds that plenty is happening in the city that affects its residents, from county politicians fighting against SNAP cutbacks to conflict over a major project to stabilize a street that is sloping due to erosion. There are murders and trials, habitat-restoration projects, the effects of a new congressional map, and debates about the criminalization of loitering. *The Paper*'s scope doesn't have to match *All the President's Men*; that's not its goal. But despite its earnest attempts to show how dire the situation has become for local journalists, the series has little interest in what they might report or the community they serve.

The show's commitment to the mockumentary format and familiar gags of *The Office* makes its lack of specificity even more noticeable. Conversations are shot through blinds; characters acknowledge the camera, and even react to or resist being filmed at points; and talking heads create a conduit between the characters and the audience. But compared with other shows that use this documentary aesthetic for effect—such as *American Vandal*'s ingenious commentary on true crime, or *Rap World* (the funniest film of 2024, which also featured the *Paper* writer and actor Eric Rahill)—*The Paper* only uses mockumentary for narrative and convenience, not to do something new or funny. As a result, *The Paper* is stuck not only in the shadow of *The Office* but in that of the other shows it spawned. *Abbott Elementary* and *What We Do in the Shadows*, to name two, make this latest iteration feel all the more redundant. In this way, if the *Truth Teller* starts out as a ghost paper, then *The Paper*, by the end of its first season, starts to feel like a ghost TV show, rehashing old tropes and jokes, without any of the texture or detail of good reporting. N

Jorge Cotte is a writer and filmmaker based in Chicago. He writes frequently on film and television for Books and the Arts.

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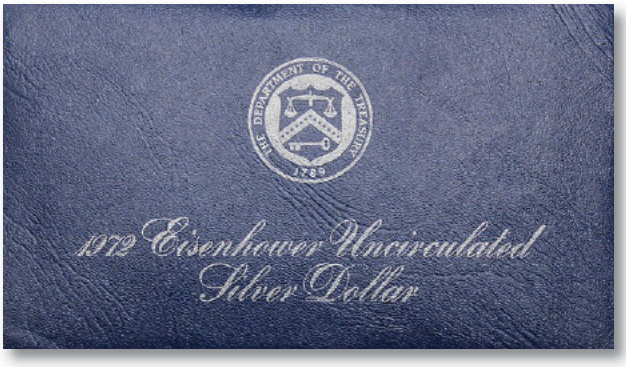

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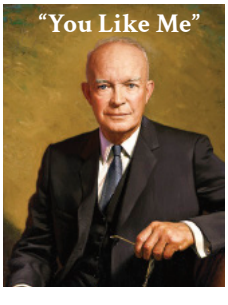

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Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues.

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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