THE Nation.
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Jesse Jackson's Long Rainbow
JOHN NICHOLS

Industry's Fictitious Capital
JORGE COTTE

SPECIAL SECTION

Trump's New World Disorder

His stranglehold is producing planetary chaos and destruction.

"Rules-Based Order" Is Gone
ROBERT L. BOROSAGE

War With Iran
KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

Trump's War on Terror
SPENCER ACKERMAN

The New Face of the West?
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Marco Rubio: Shape-Shifter
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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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EDITORIAL / KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL FOR *THE NATION*

Embrace Restraint

BEFORE DAWN ON FEBRUARY 28, THE UNITED STATES AND ISRAEL LAUNCHED what Donald Trump hailed as "major combat operations in Iran" but was, in fact, an undeclared, unauthorized, and unconstitutional regime-change war. As the bombs rained down on at least 14 cities, the death toll included Iran's 86-year-old supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and at least 153 people—most of them young girls—at a primary school. The president said the mission was "eliminating imminent threats." In reality, it killed children, provoked counterstrikes across the Middle East, and threatened the region with another of the "forever wars" that Trump once campaigned against.

The attack on Iran represents the latest manifestation of an increasingly belligerent foreign policy that has seen US military interventions topple two government leaders in two months. The president who in 2024 declared, "I'm not going to start wars," is now starting wars of aggression, threatening invasions, abandoning treaties, and creating chaos with such abandon that, in the words of former Obama administration adviser Ben Rhodes, "Trump's second term has been the worst-case scenario."

The Nation opposes Trump's latest war, as do most Americans. But we are concerned that the response of many commentators to the Trump catastrophe is to hope for a return to a failed old order—a system of "rules" and strategies so unpopular that voters have already rejected them. That naïve longing ignores the need for this country to take a new look at its place in the world.

This issue of *The Nation* takes that new look from a perspective rooted in our values, experience, and history. If there is a through line in *The Nation*'s 160 years, it is that building a healthy and secure democracy is incompatible with an endless quest for global dominance. We know that Trump is reckless and wrong, but there's more to our crisis than the mad ranting of an aging autocrat.

US foreign policy is adrift between an old order that is rapidly dying and a new one that is yet to be born. Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election, his reelection in 2024, and the robust debates between centrists and progressives within the Democratic Party tell us that the foreign-policy establishment's bipartisan consensus no longer exists. Americans are rejecting assumptions that guided decades of US engagement with other countries—in particular, the idea that an international "rules-based order" backed by US military hegemony is worth maintaining, no matter the cost.

Trump's "America First" agenda, however, has never offered a viable way forward. Mistakenly labeled "isolationism," it is better understood as what the Harvard political scientist Stephen Walt calls "predatory hegemony": a vision of the United States unbound by rules and unabashedly self-interested. Fueled by Trump's vainglory and paranoia—his fever dreams about getting "ripped off" by allies such as Canada and by African children who need USAID programs to survive—this approach replaces diplomacy and international aid with a neo-imperial worldview in which the powerful take what they can and the weak suffer what they must.

Trump is wrong. But putting a new coat of paint on the old "rules-based" order is not the alternative to toxic Trumpism—not for the United States, and not for a world where most people long ago recognized that the rules are written to benefit multinational corporations, arms dealers, and the politicians who serve them.

Putting a new coat of paint on the old "rules-based order" is not the alternative to toxic Trumpism.

This issue of *The Nation* approaches the search for thoughtful, reasoned alternatives with a sense of urgency, seeking to counter the rush by elites in both parties toward an agenda of great-power competition, in the vain hope that political unity can be reforged around hostility to China or Russia.

In today's deeply interconnected world, where challenges such as climate change and pandemics are global in scope, policymakers need to offer more than the prospect of new cold wars. This begins with the recognition that it is not in the best interests of US security and prosperity to export insecurity to countries we refer to as "partners."

The pursuit of US global military hegemony, whatever the cost, is not the answer—whether it is advanced by Trump or by an elite

foreign-policy establishment. Competing for dominance abroad invariably neglects urgent domestic needs and infringes on American liberties.

There is a better way: a new and affirmative US foreign policy that embraces restraint as an essential component of our own security and prosperity. An approach that insists that keeping Americans safe does not require spending more on defense than the next 10 countries combined. One that is clear about the genuine threats facing our country but refuses to be drawn into debates over which candidate, or which party, is tougher on China or Russia. One that tackles the mutually reinforcing challenges posed by domestic and global inequality and the grievances nurtured by both. One that recognizes the need for new alliances to address the climate crisis, the dangers of nuclear war, and the existential threat posed by unregulated artificial intelligence. One that understands, finally, that our futures on this planet are bound together.

Trump is orchestrating the destruction of the old international order. But he hasn't a clue about how to preserve our security in this new era. That vacuum offers an opportunity for fresh thinking. This issue offers a modest contribution to that process by reviving the idea that another world is possible. N

IN MEMORIAM / JOHN NICHOLS

Jesse Jackson (1941–2026)

The civil-rights activist and founder of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition changed what's possible in politics.

THE REV. JESSE JACKSON NEVER STOPPED CAMPAIGNing. Even in the last years of his life, when he was suffering from the progressive neurological disorder that slowed his steps and his speech before his death on February 17, at age 84, the reverend kept calling his Rainbow PUSH Coalition together for one more mission, one more crusade for justice. He did so with an urgency that belied his condition and drew old allies and young protégés into fights that were righteous and necessary and, frequently, prescient.

Such was the case in January of 2024, at a point when few political figures were prepared to call out the Israeli assault on Gaza that has now claimed more than 75,000 Palestinian lives and has been identified as a genocide by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Association of Genocide Scholars. In the aftermath of the Hamas attack on Israeli kibbutzim and a music festival, there was a tentativeness to the discourse about how to break the cycle of violence. Yet here was Jesse Jackson, on a frigid morning after a winter storm swept through Chicago, pulling together Muslims, Christians, and Jews, grassroots activists and faith leaders, scholars and members of Congress, to pursue "immediate action to bring an end to the crisis," preaching about the need to "build upon the historical legacy and current global movements for peace, justice, and liberation."

His voice may have been halting, but it still rang out with moral clarity, as it had for the better part of 70 years, from the days when Jackson was an essential aide to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., to when this son of South Carolina built street-level movements to tackle poverty and corruption in his adopted city of Chicago, began to travel the world as a strikingly successful citizen-diplomat, and, eventually, ran twice for the presidency as the leader of a multiracial, multiethnic "rainbow" insurgency that would forever transform the Democratic Party—clearing the way for the candidacies of Barack Obama, Bernie Sanders, and so many others who were inspired by his courage.

The Nation was one of the few publications that endorsed Jackson's 1988 campaign, embracing his offer of "hope against cynicism, power against prejudice and solidarity against division."

"The Jackson campaign is not a single shot at higher office by an already elevated politician," the editors wrote. "Rather, it is a continuing, expanding, open-ended project to organize a movement for the political empowerment of all those who participate."

The reverend appreciated that description of his campaign as more than just a candidacy, even if the Democratic Party struggled to wrap its head around the concept. After he delivered one of the greatest addresses in the history of American politics at the 1988 Democratic National Convention, Jackson's formal bids for the presidency were done. Yet as his longtime aide Robert Borosage observes, "His greatest legacy is that the mission, strategy, message, and agenda of those [1984 and 1988] campaigns remain directly relevant four decades later."

That didn't just happen. Jackson kept that vision relevant by mounting new campaigns—not for high office, but for higher ideals. To a greater extent than even his friend and longtime supporter Bernie Sanders, Jackson leveraged the status he'd earned as a contender for the presidency to champion causes on which presidents (and most candidates for the job) were unwilling to spend their political capital. He raced across the country at a moment's notice to join union picket lines, stood with farmers to save their homesteads, and rallied with Black Americans who knew the civil-rights struggle was unfinished, with women seeking gender equity, with LGBTQ+ couples who wanted to marry, with peace advocates in the far and forgotten corners of the world, and with Palestinians who sought a homeland.

When Jesse Jackson looked at America—and at the world—he saw a gorgeous mosaic of humanity. He wanted the rest of us to see it as well. So he kept campaigning for the day when the storms of cynicism, prejudice, and division would begin to pass, and we might all recognize the promise and the power of the Rainbow. N

COMMENT/KALI HOLLOWAY

Nothing to See Here

MAGA's reaction to the Epstein files is the latest indication of the movement's amorality.

I'M NOT SURE WE'RE TERRIFIED ENOUGH ABOUT the American right's scrapping even its own scant moral boundaries. Every segment of the Trump-backing right wing—America First nationalists, Trump loyalists, and rank-and-file MAGA activists—has unsubscribed from the idea that there is any such thing as right and wrong, much less that wrongdoing should result in consequences. In effect, there is no behavior Trump's GOP sees as too wrong to vote for. In late July 2025, almost half of Republicans said they would keep voting for Trump even if he were "officially implicated in Jeffrey Epstein's sex trafficking activities." Crime is legal, where right-wingers are concerned, however heinous the crime is.

At least for themselves. The right still has morals for days when it comes to Black folks, immigrants, and trans people. Its moral code has always been rigorously enforced and mercilessly punitive toward "outsiders" and "others," but generally indifferent to even the worst acts by those who fall on the right side of whiteness and power. Wilhoit's Law—coined by the music composer Frank Wilhoit in a now-famous 2018 comment on a political-science blog—neatly captures this truth: "Conservatism consists of exactly one proposition, to wit: there must be in-groups whom the law protects but does not bind, alongside out-groups whom the law binds but does not protect." Now it's ditching even its in-group protections.

The right's reaction to the Epstein files is the clearest evidence of this. For the better part of a decade, conservatives lurched from one pedophile-focused moral panic to the next, proclaiming themselves the true saviors of children. They didn't mean all children, of course; these are the same people who gave nearly $850,000 in crowdfunded donations to a white woman for calling an 8-year-old autistic Black boy the N-word. Their concern was always reserved for the white children they saw as fully human. They insisted that pedophiles were hiding in pizza-parlor basements; waved signs calling for us to "#SavetheChildren" and "Stop Child Trafficking"; and pushed anti-LGBT "groomer" hysteria. In a 2020 survey, roughly half of Trump voters said they believed elected Democrats were running child-sex rings; a majority of 2020 Trump voters told pollsters that Trump was actively working to take down "an elite child sex trafficking ring involving top Democrats." White lives mattered to conservatives, at least in theory.

And at least as long as they thought their political opponents were responsible. But the more we know about Epstein, the less they care. The portion of Republicans who said the Epstein files mattered at least "a little" in their assessment of Trump's presidency dropped from nearly half in July 2025 to just 36 percent in November. Faced with at least one allegation in the files that Trump sexually assaulted an underage girl, along with the well-documented associations between their leader and Epstein—as well as other alleged sexual predators—the right isn't just overlooking the implications; they're abandoning the principles they supposedly stood for. The right has "gradually de-emphasized" the Epstein issue, CNN reports, choosing to "largely move on."

And while there's no disqualifying behavior as long as you're on their side, by the same token, everyone else is the enemy. The right's reaction to the killings of Renée Good and Alex Pretti—the relish that political element seemed to take in blaming them for their own deaths—makes this painfully clear. Vice President JD Vance declared Good's death "a tragedy of her own making." And the right-wing political commentator Matt Walsh, who wrote that it was "retarded" to compare Alex Pretti and Kyle Rittenhouse—whom the right lionized after he fatally shot two people at a Black Lives Matter protest with a gun he was neither licensed nor old enough to carry—declared that Pretti "got what was coming to him. Simple as that."

While there's no disqualifying behavior as long as you're on their side, by the same token, everyone else is the enemy.

Everyday right-wingers did their part by donating nearly $800,000 in crowdfunded dollars to Good's killer. It confirms what so many of us have long suspected: that the right's obsession with "crime" and "law and order" was less about an actual moral code and more about weaponizing those concepts against perceived outsiders.

Trump's name, according to Maryland Representative Jamie Raskin, appears "more than a million" times in the unredacted Epstein documents. NBC reports that "at least a half-dozen top officials in the current Trump administration have connections to" Epstein. But Rupert Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* is, at this moment and without irony, still finding space for op-eds insisting that it's Black America who needs a "moral rejuvenation"—chastising them for "black-on-black violence" and suggesting they stop "whining about racism."

For MAGA and its empowering media, "morality" isn't about principles or lines you refuse to cross; it's just a cost-benefit analysis between options that maintain power. That's how authoritarian movements work—they put hierarchy, dominance, and power above all else. And while some of us were always held as collateral to be damaged by the right, the abandonment of even its most cynically held limits is more terrifying still. Where nothing is disqualifying, everything is permissible. And a politics with no bottom should frighten us all. N

COMMENT/MICHELE GOODWIN

A Lawless DOJ

The weaponizing of the department to do Trump's bidding has dangerously undermined its credibility.

THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE IS IN A CRISIS, AT A level that hasn't been seen in decades, if perhaps ever. Not since 1975, when US Attorney General John Mitchell was prosecuted and convicted for conspiracy and obstruction of justice related to Watergate, has there been a more toxic and chaotic environment at the department. Today, under Pam Bondi, the DOJ shows a flagrant disregard for the rule of law and contempt for the Constitution. A once-exalted institution that was integral to the protection of civil rights now resembles an elite agency that serves the private interests of a president rather than vulnerable Americans.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of this state of affairs is how we got here. In January, after Renée Good, a 37-year-old mother in Minneapolis, was shot and killed by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent, the head of the DOJ's Civil Rights Division, Harmeet Dhillon, said that the department would not investigate whether the agent had violated any federal laws. US Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche claimed there was "no basis for a criminal civil rights investigation," despite clear video evidence showing otherwise. "We don't just go out and investigate every time an officer is forced to defend himself against somebody," Blanche added. "We investigate when it's appropriate to investigate."

At the same time, the DOJ began pressuring its prosecutors to investigate the victim and her wife. Six attorneys resigned from the department in protest, including Minnesota's second-in-command at the US attorney's office, Joseph Thompson.

Around two weeks later, the same day that Border Patrol agents in Minneapolis killed Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old intensive-care nurse, by shooting him 10 times at close range, Bondi sent a threatening letter to Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, offering a chilling quid pro quo framed as "common sense solutions." Bondi demanded that Walz provide access to voter rolls, end the state's sanctuary policies, and release sensitive records on Medicaid and Food and Nutrition Service programs, including data from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. In exchange, Bondi claimed that those "simple steps" would "help bring back law and order to Minnesota."

These actions not only mark a radical shift at the DOJ but also expose how compromised and corrupt the department has become.

Yet it is not the DOJ's response to ICE's lawless conduct in Minnesota alone that raises serious alarm. The department has been severely tarnished by unlawful appointments and the politically motivated prosecutions of officials who have criticized Donald Trump. The failed criminal cases against New York Attorney General Letitia James and former FBI director James Comey come to mind. US District Court Judge Lorna Schofield disqualified the acting US attorney, John Sarcone III, ruling that he had not been lawfully appointed when he issued the subpoenas against James. Bondi had appointed Sarcone as a "special attorney" and given him an "indefinite term" inconsistent with lawful DOJ appointments, which are made by the president with "advice and consent from the Senate" and are four years in length.

Months earlier, US District Court Judge Cameron McGowan Currie had dismissed the cases against James and Comey, explaining that the prosecutor, Lindsey Halligan, had been unlawfully installed by the department. "All actions flowing from Ms. Halligan's defective appointment…were unlawful exercises of executive power and are hereby set aside," Currie ruled.

Not surprisingly, the DOJ's shameful abuse of power has pushed career lawyers to leave. The Justice Connection, a network of former DOJ employees, estimates that roughly 6,400 workers across the department have been terminated or left their positions voluntarily. Dena Robinson, a former lawyer in the Civil Rights Division, said that under Bondi, the job has changed from fact-finding investigations to finding "facts that would fit the narrative."

Hundreds of military officers from the Judge Advocate General's Corps are now filling in, some temporarily serving as immigration judges and others as special assistant US attorneys—a role that "DOJ policy once barred…outside a military base," *Defense One* reported, which raises serious ethics concerns.

Today, the DOJ no longer reflects the role that Congress intended it to play: that of securing America's democracy during the Reconstruction era. Principally, that meant upholding the rule of law and enforcing the Constitution and federal laws in the aftermath of slavery and civil war. In the ensuing decades, that also included playing a vital role in investigating and prosecuting hate crimes. Now, however, the DOJ pursues a different mission: one that regards Americans as subjects rather than citizens.

The steady weaponizing of the DOJ to do Trump's bidding has weakened its integrity, tarnished its trustworthiness, and dangerously undermined its credibility. For now, Congress should heed the demands of the civil-rights organizations calling for more oversight of the Department of Justice—before it's too late. N

These actions mark a radical shift at the DOJ and expose how corrupt the department has become.

Michele Goodwin is the Linda D. & Timothy J. O'Neill Professor of Constitutional Law and Global Health Policy at Georgetown University.

COMMENT/SUMMER LEE

Fight for the Planet

The Trump administration's destructive environmental policies will cost us all. But we must not give up.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER DONALD TRUMP WAS SWORN IN to his second term in the nation's highest office, he launched an aggressive rollback of critical environmental-justice protections. In just one year, his administration has eliminated the 2009 endangerment finding, the scientific and legal basis for regulating greenhouse-gas emissions; weakened pollution limits; and offered industrial polluters exemptions to the rules that were designed to protect the environment and public health. Who is Trump and his Environmental Protection Agency doing this for?

I can tell you it is not for our kids. Not for working families. Not for the communities already bearing the brunt of pollution and climate disaster.

They are doing it for the oil and gas executives who bankrolled Trump's reelection campaign, contributing over $75 million after he promised he'd grant their policy wish list if he won. Polluting fossil-fuel companies are receiving a fast pass for project approvals while reaping tens of billions of dollars in tax breaks and other government incentives. In a gross misuse of presidential power, Trump is making sure his donors see major returns from his policies. Take Energy Transfer and its executive chairman, Kelcy Warren, for example: They've contributed $25 million to Trump since he took office and are benefiting from his reinstituting exports of liquefied natural gas, which will allow them to extend operations and increase profits. Occidental Petroleum, which donated $1 million to Trump's second inauguration, is now benefiting from the administration's One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which offered tax breaks and subsidies to energy corporations.

Trump and his officials have made it easier for polluters to profit off our families, our public health, and our planet. As they continue to gut environmental funding, offices, and programs, we will see cancer risks rise. As they repeal essential safeguards, including limits on climate pollution and other toxic air emissions, asthma cases will increase.

In western Pennsylvania, which includes the district that I represent in Congress, we've seen the dangers of the climate crisis firsthand: more frequent flooding, stronger storms, and greater damage year after year. We suffer from some of the poorest air quality in the nation, and our families struggle with higher-than-average rates of asthma, cancer, heart disease, and exposure to toxic chemicals.

This doesn't happen in a vacuum, either; it's part of a cost-of-living crisis, and a reality for many of our neighbors. Dirty air means more trips to the doctor. Unsafe water means families have to dip into their paychecks to purchase bottled water. Extreme weather leads to lost homes, lost jobs, and prolonged recoveries.

But there is another way.

We can either keep letting polluters rig the rules and line their pockets, or we can stand up and demand better.

Our communities can work together to build a future in which no one has to choose between their health, their home, and their livelihood. We can reject these harmful policies and practices and reimagine safer and healthier neighborhoods.

When I served in the Pennsylvania legislature, I fought against these same destructive policies to prove what is possible. It's the same fight I brought to Congress. That's why I led the Pennsylvania Democratic delegation in fighting the EPA's efforts to repeal the endangerment finding, which would erase our government's responsibility to act against climate pollution. With the elimination of the endangerment finding, our loved ones and neighbors are now exposed to more pollution, more extreme weather events, and heightened public-health risks.

In Congress, I am working with my colleagues to launch the first-ever House Environmental Justice Caucus. Environmental justice often sounds more complicated than it is, but it simply means ensuring that every person who calls this country home has clean air, clean water, and a safe, healthy community. With those values, I will continue fighting alongside frontline communities for policies like the A. Donald McEachin Environmental Justice for All Act, which addresses the disproportionate impact that toxic-waste sites and pollution-causing fossil-fuel infrastructure have on communities of color and low-income communities, and to ensure that we are shaping the work ahead together.

When it comes to environmental issues, Trump's second term has been even more destructive than his first. But we cannot fall into despair. We must continue to disavow special interests and look to the people who have been on the ground for decades to remind us that there's a different way to legislate. Because the work doesn't happen only in the halls of Congress or in statehouses. It happens in our homes, our union halls, our houses of worship—everywhere our neighbors gather to discuss the lived experiences that shape the priorities we set and the solutions we fight for.

We can either keep letting polluters rig the rules and line their pockets, or we can stand up for our communities, organize, and demand better. I know what I am choosing: people over profit. Health over harm. Our planet and the health of our people must never be put up for sale to the highest bidder. N

Summer Lee is the US representative for Pennsylvania's 12th Congressional District.

JUST RELEASED!

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No coin embodies the spirit of America more than the Morgan Silver Dollar. From the Comstock Lode discovery that provided millions of ounces of silver to make them, to outlaws robbing stage coaches in the Wild West to pay for their bar tabs and brothel visits, the hefty Morgan Silver Dollar holds a special place in American history.

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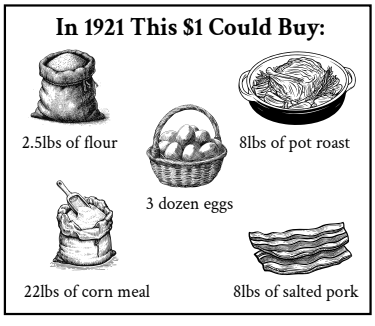

Prized Last-Year Coins

Collectors love "lasts" as no collection is complete without the last coin struck. Last year coins are often hard to find and always in demand. Little did master engraver George T. Morgan know the legacy he was creating when he designed what has become known as "The King of Silver Dollars" but it came to an end 104 years ago with the last-year 1921 Morgan Silver Dollar, the most beloved coin in American history.

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Objection!
Elie Mystal

Irregular Justice

Why does the Supreme Court continue to treat Trump like a "normal" president?

"THE GREATEST TRICK THE DEVIL EVER PULLED WAS convincing the world he didn't exist." Apparently, this famous quote was written by the 19th-century French poet Charles Baudelaire, but I first heard the line in the movie *The Usual Suspects*. I think about it often, as it encapsulates Donald Trump's relationship with the Republicans on the Supreme Court.

The Donald Trump who exists in the real world—the racist, fascist sexual predator who happily tweets out the illegal and unconstitutional motivations for his policies—does not exist according to the Supreme Court. Instead, the court has invented a different Trump, one who does not speak, does not lie, and adheres to the well-established norms regarding the use of executive power. It has dreamed up a normal US president, grafted this creation onto Trump's legal filings, and then ruled as if this fiction were reality.

There is a legal doctrine that explains what I believe the Supreme Court is doing: the "presumption of regularity," which dates at least as far back as 1926. This doctrine instructs courts to assume that members of the executive branch have acted properly and in good faith. An administration is presumed to have bona fide reasons for its actions, and those actions are assumed not to be "pretextual," meaning that courts are not supposed to act like the administration has invented a plausibly legal reason to justify its plainly illegal actions. The presumption of regularity is afforded to members of the executive branch and no one else. Only they can waltz into court and expect people to take them at their word.

We hear the Supreme Court invoke the presumption of regularity all the time, especially during oral arguments, when the justices talk about giving "deference" to the administration. This administration deserves no deference, because it lies all the time. But the presumption of regularity instructs the court to defer to the administration and assume it is telling the truth.

The result is that the court presumes Trump had a good reason for shutting down DEI programs, even when there is clear evidence of the flagrant racism behind such actions. It presumes the administration tried its best to follow the rules before taking a chainsaw to the administrative state—even though it was a private billionaire who did the cutting, in violation of all the rules. And it presumes there's a real national emergency simply because the president said so—never mind that the only national emergency is the armed goons invading our cities.

In embracing this doctrine, the Supreme Court is asking us to do something patently insane—and one of the many ways we know this is that many other courts are refusing to fall for the trick. A study released by the digital law journal *Just Security* last November found more than 60 cases in which lower courts called out the Trump administration for basing its arguments on misinformation, and it cited numerous instances of lower-court judges castigating the Trump administration for "bad faith" conduct, "manifestly unreasonable" or "contrived" legal arguments, and supplying the court with "mischaracterized," "misleading," or "intentionally false" evidence and information.

Lower courts have, in essence, rejected the presumption of regularity. They are no longer treating this administration as normal. But the problem is that they are consistently overruled by the Supreme Court.

This, however, may be changing. The Supreme Court has played Trump's game for a decade, but two recent cases suggest that even Trump's handpicked justices might be getting sick of his treating them like idiots.

In December, in an unsigned "shadow docket" opinion, the Supreme Court rejected Trump's attempt to deploy the National Guard to Chicago. Trump argued that he should be allowed to deploy the Guard because the regular police forces in Chicago couldn't uphold the law. The majority didn't buy his argument—which predictably pissed off the justices who think Trump should be treated as a god-king. In dissent, Justice Samuel Alito (joined by Clarence Thomas) wrote: "[T]he President said unequivocally that he had 'determined that the regular forces of the United States are not sufficient to ensure the laws of the United States are faithfully executed…in Chicago.'… Not only is this statement sufficient on its face, but *under the presumption of regularity, the Court must presume that the President properly arrived at his determination*." (Emphasis mine.)

The Supreme Court has dreamed up a normal US president, grafted his image onto Trump's, and then ruled as if this fiction were reality.

Not long after, the court heard a case challenging the firing of Lisa Cook, a member of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors. During oral arguments, alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh, of all people, pointed out that Trump's stated reason for firing Cook (that she lied on a

JOE CIARDIELLO

mortgage application) was pretextual. He suggested that the administration had made up a reason for firing her since it couldn't admit it was doing so because of policy disagreements. (Fed commissioners can only be fired "for cause.") Kavanaugh described the administration's process as tantamount to "let's find something, anything, about this person, and then we're good."

As of this writing, the court has yet to rule on Cook's firing, so Trump could still win this one. But whatever happens, the question of whether the court continues to treat Trump as normal will be the defining issue of all the legal fights involving the administration—from tariffs and birthright citizenship this term to whatever else Trump tries to pull, including rigging the midterm elections. How the court chooses to answer this question will determine whether it will try to sane-wash Trump and allow him to rule over the republic like a dictator—or try to stop him.

If the Supreme Court would just start treating Trump as the real person he is instead of the fake person it wishes he were, it might also encourage other institutions that Trump has cowed to do the same. We are in a full "the emperor has no clothes" situation. The most impartial thing the Supreme Court could do at this moment is simply to acknowledge it. That's what is happening, in fact, in many other courtrooms across the country.

If I were on the Supreme Court, I'd start every hearing by saying: "Your client is naked, Mr. Solicitor General. Let's talk about that before we get to why he wants to light the Constitution on fire." N

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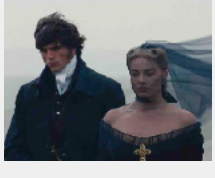

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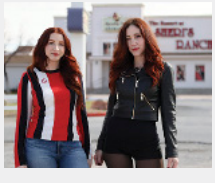

› How Brothel Workers in Nevada Just Made Labor History
KIM KELLY

FROM TOP: JOE CIARDIELLO; COURTESY OF WARNER BROTHERS; IAN MAULE / AP

Morbid Symptoms
Jeet Heer

Is AIPAC Doomed?

The hard-line pro-Israel lobby is facing more opposition than ever before. But fully defanging it won't be easy.

ONE THING THAT AIPAC AND ITS CRITICS HAVE USUALLY agreed on is that the hard-line Zionist lobby group is fearsomely powerful, a kingmaker that can boost or destroy political careers. In the wake of the 2022 midterms, AIPAC crowed: "More than 95% of AIPAC-backed candidates won their election last night! Being pro-Israel is good policy and good politics!"

This chest-thumping is designed to scare off critics. In an influential 2006 essay, the political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt noted that "AIPAC prizes its reputation as a formidable adversary, of course, because it discourages anyone from questioning its agenda." But the scholars also gave credence to the idea of a nearly unbeatable pro-Israel lobby, claiming that AIPAC has "a stranglehold on the U.S. Congress."

Mearsheimer and Walt might have had a point in 2006, but in 2026, AIPAC increasingly looks like a paper tiger—one that, despite its still-considerable reach, is regarded with growing skepticism and even disgust by voters.

The diminishment of AIPAC's power has been a long time in the making, with the Gaza genocide accelerating a longer trend against AIPAC's ultra-hawkish pro-Israel politics. According to *Politico*, a Quinnipiac poll in August 2025 found that "half of the voters surveyed, including 77 percent of Democrats, said they believe Israel is committing genocide." In addition, "60 percent of voters disapprove of the U.S. sending military aid to Israel."

And as Branko Marcetic noted in *Jacobin*, AIPAC's claim of a 95 percent victory rate is disingenuous, given that it mostly endorses candidates who are overwhelming favorites to win and "meekly back[s] out of races where they're likely to lose, to avoid putting a blemish on their record." While AIPAC did win significant victories against progressives such as Jamaal Bowman and Cori Bush in 2024, it was aided by extraneous factors (such as the redistricting that gave Bowman a less-friendly district).

More recently, AIPAC and the broader pro-Israel lobby have suffered some stinging defeats. For instance, Bill Ackman, Michael Bloomberg, and other billionaires—many of whom are hard-line Zionists—donated more than $40 million to the efforts to tank Zohran Mamdani's New York City mayoral campaign.

These groups made Mamdani's criticism of Israel and defense of Palestinian rights one of the hot-button topics in both the primary race and the general election, blanketing the airwaves with fearmongering ads and smearing Mamdani as an antisemite to anyone who would listen. But voters rejected the propaganda, and Mamdani won by a landslide in both races.

In February, AIPAC suffered an even more significant boomerang defeat in a Democratic congressional primary in New Jersey. The lobby spent more than $2 million to defeat Tom Malinowski, a centrist Democrat with a hawkish record whom AIPAC sought to punish for suggesting that conditions might need to be put on US aid to Israel. The spending blitz helped knock Malinowski out of the race, but not in the way AIPAC wanted. The group's preferred candidate, Tahesha Way, came in a distant third. Instead, the seat was won by Analilia Mejia, an unvarnished progressive who isn't afraid to say that Israel has committed genocide in Gaza. Because the district leans Democratic, Mejia stands a good chance of winning the upcoming special election.

AIPAC increasingly looks like a paper tiger—one regarded with growing skepticism and even disgust by voters.

AIPAC's Pyrrhic victory against Malinowski was carried out by tellingly deceptive means. Because the public has soured on Israel, AIPAC has become the lobby that dares not speak its name. In ads against Malinowski, the group didn't mention Israel (since his more independent stance was likely to win him support) but rather focused on his past support for ICE funding. This kind of subterfuge has become standard practice for AIPAC.

Defeating Malinowski to elect Mejia is by any standard a perverse outcome from AIPAC's point of view. Not only is it likely to push Congress further away from pro-Israel extremism, but it may also alienate the moderate pro-Israel Democrats like Malinowski who have been a main pillar of the lobby's power. *Politico* observed that "even [AIPAC's] steadfast allies are frustrated" by the fact that the group flexed its muscle to destroy a centrist Democrat. One prominent centrist, Matt Bennett, a cofounder of the center-left think tank Third Way, derided AIPAC's crushing of Malinowski as "one of the greatest own-goals in American political history."

After his defeat, Malinowski voiced a criticism of dark-money spending that could easily have been made by a progressive: "The outcome of this race cannot be understood without also taking into account the massive flood of dark money that AIPAC spent on dishonest ads during the last three weeks."

Summing up the New Jersey race, Democratic Representative Mark Pocan, a longtime critic of AIPAC, took a victory lap, posting on X: "Sending condolences to @AIPAC for killing any usefulness of their PAC after the monumental failure of their effort in the NJ special election. Their money is so toxic that the very people they are trying to help are now hurt by their involvement, no matter how well disguised."

But if even deceptive funding no longer works, blatant censorship might. The watchdog group Track AIPAC has played a major role in informing Democratic voters about the dark-money spending of the pro-Israel lobby. On February 10, Instagram suspended the Track AIPAC account, which had 137,000 followers at the time. This was allegedly done because of an intellectual-property violation. (The account was restored after Track AIPAC cried foul.) Similar cases of censorship are occurring on TikTok.

AIPAC is clearly wounded. But it still is capable of doing damage, and it still carries considerable weight in Washington. That's why the battleground for its final defeat will not just be in Congress but in the culture at large. Voters who know what AIPAC is up to reject the lobbying group. The question now is whether AIPAC can keep enough voters in the dark to fight another day. **N**

OPPART/PETER KUPER

★★★★★

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— Nancy R.
Peoria, IL

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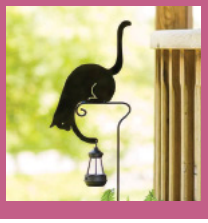

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Oligarch Watch

CHUCK COLLINS

High on the Hog

The largest pork producers in Iowa spend hundreds of thousands to keep the state friendly to their business.

THERE ARE ABOUT 75 MILLION PIGS BEING RAISED ON farms in the United States, with about a third of that total in Iowa, the nation's top hog state. Jeff and Deb Hansen founded Iowa Select Farms, now the largest pork producer in the state, in 1992. The Hansens offer a case study in how regional oligarchs can deploy their wealth, political influence, and charitable giving to defend their enterprises from local, state, and federal regulation. Through their capture of Iowa's political apparatus, the Hansens drive national pork policy.

The pork industry has been consolidating since the 1990s, with a 70 percent decline in the number of farms with hogs, according to the US Department of Agriculture. Large conglomerates have steadily replaced the smaller integrated farms that once used modest amounts of waste from their hogs and other animals as fertilizer.

Watching the consolidation of the poultry industry, the Hansens first became successful manufacturing concentrated animal-feeding operations (CAFOs). Large production sheds, known as "confinements," hold up to 2,500 sows, which are pumped full of antibiotics to help them survive their cramped, windowless existence. CAFOs generate colossal amounts of manure waste, forming gargantuan anaerobic lagoons that foul the air and pollute local water supplies around the farm.

By the early 1990s, the Hansens' CAFO business was bringing in $90 million a year. "After steadily expanding their confinement-building business," writes Iowa native Austin Frerick, the author of *Barons: Money, Power, and the Corruption of America's Food Industry*, "the Hansens decided they could also make money by raising their own hogs." Starting with a herd of 10,000 sows, Iowa Select Farms grew into the country's fourth-largest hog producer, with roughly 260,000 sows.

You can smell these hog-raising operations from miles away, much to the detriment of their neighbors. In 2003, the company settled a lawsuit filed by residents of Sac County, who complained that a farm with 30,000 hogs produced foul odors, noxious gases, and swarms of flies. An expert witness for the plaintiffs testified that the farm produced as much waste as a city of 90,000 to 150,000 people.

The Hansens' wealth has since increased, from $272 million in 2024 to an estimated $1 billion in 2026, according to WealthX. But from their 7,000-square-foot mansion in a leafy, gated neighborhood in Des Moines, the Hansens don't notice the excrement. Nor do they smell the manure lagoons from their private jet (rumored to be emblazoned with the name *When Pigs Fly*).

In 2020, pork prices plummeted as the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the market. Iowa Select Farms responded by exterminating thousands of hogs. According to *The Intercept*, the company shut off the CAFOs' ventilation systems, suffocating and overheating the pigs as ammonia gas from the manure lagoons lingered in the air. Video cameras recorded the death throes of these terrified, sentient animals, and a whistleblower reported being ordered to "euthanize" the surviving pigs with captive bolt guns.

In the 1990s, as the political pressure to regulate CAFOs increased, the Hansens fought to shape legislation in the Iowa Legislature aimed at establishing guardrails for the industry. Passed in 1995, the resulting bill stripped away the power of county boards of supervisors to deny construction permits for CAFOs, a blow to the local control of land use. The law permits CAFOs to be constructed as close as a quarter-mile from residences, a distance that does little to diminish the odor and flies or the environmental harms such as groundwater contamination.

In subsequent years, the Hansens have discouraged the further regulation of CAFOs by donating hundreds of thousands of dollars to politicians. They've contributed over $300,000, for example, to Iowa's Republican governor, Kim Reynolds, making Deb Hansen her top individual donor. They've also worked to keep the state's entire congressional delegation subservient to the pork industry.

As with many other oligarchs, the Hansens' charitable giving serves as a taxpayer-subsidized extension of their private power. In 2019, Governor Reynolds attended a gala for the Deb and Jeff Hansen Foundation, where she auctioned off a private lunch and tour of the Iowa Capitol with her. The winning bid of $4,250 came from Gary Lynch, another Iowa hog baron and GOP donor. (The largest charitable donation listed by the Hansens' foundation in its most recent filing is $317,760 to the Iowa Pork Producers Association. The same year, it gave $25,000 to Children's Cancer Connection.)

Fortunately, some are challenging the Hansens' exploitative brand of agriculture. In 2018, California voters passed Proposition 12, which establishes baseline animal-welfare standards for farms and for products sold in the state. For example, Prop. 12 mandates cage-free systems for hens and a minimum square footage for breeding sows.

The pork industry has sued multiple times to stop Prop. 12,

As with many other oligarchs, the Hansens' charitable giving serves as a taxpayer-subsidized extension of their private power.

but in its 5–4 ruling in *National Pork Producers Council v. Ross*, the Supreme Court upheld the law. The Iowa Pork Producers Association is now attempting to overturn what US Representative Ashley Hinson (R-IA) has called "blue-state bacon bans." In July 2025, she introduced the Save Our Bacon Act, which would prohibit states from passing laws like Prop. 12. All four members of Iowa's congressional delegation are sponsors.

In a 2025 op-ed in *The Washington Times*, Hinson extolled states' rights. "One of the most effective ways to tackle bureaucratic bloat is to decentralize power from Washington and bring agencies closer to the communities they serve," she wrote. But the Save Our Bacon Act enshrines the Hansens' evident lack of concern for public health and animal welfare as the de facto federal standard. Oligarchs and their enablers like to sing the praises of local control—except when it interferes with their power and profits. *States' rights for me, but not for thee.* N

SNAPSHOT
AFP

Doomed Diplomacy

A woman walks past a mural near the former US embassy in Tehran, now a museum of anti-American art, on February 26. Two days later, the United States and Israel attacked Iran, killing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and more than 200 civilians.

By the Numbers

12K
Number of Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers and agents hired between October 2025 and January 2026

$50K
Signing bonus advertised to applicants in ICE's recruitment campaign

$85B
Amount awarded to ICE in Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill, the highest ever for a US law-enforcement agency

75%
Increase in the number of people held in immigration detention facilities as of January

2.4K%
Increase in the number of people with no criminal record being held in ICE detention in 2025

$38B
Amount that ICE plans to spend converting warehouses into detention centers

CALVIN TRILLIN
DeadlinePoet

A Briefing on the War in Iran

In case the briefer really knows,
There is a question I would pose—
A single question, if I dare:
The question is, Why *are* we there?

FROM TOP: GETTY IMAGES; JIM WEST / UCG / UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Q&A

A.S. Hamrah

Over the past two decades, A.S. Hamrah has carved out a peculiar niche for himself in the increasingly bowdlerized world of American film writers: He's an uncompromising critic of not just movies but the systems of power they reflect. The latest collection of Hamrah's work, *Algorithm of the Night: Film Writing, 2019–2025*, includes dozens of his reviews along with longer essays for *Bookforum*, *The Baffler*, and *The New York Review of Books* that reverberate far beyond Hollywood and into the uneasy place that film holds in the post-Covid era. *The Nation* spoke with Hamrah about how the pandemic ruined the moviegoing experience; AI hustlers and rubes; and the cinematic experience of social media, where police violence, fascist propaganda, and pygmy hippos compete for our enfeebled attention spans. Read the entire conversation at TheNation.com. *—Kyle Paoletta*

KP: **In *Algorithm of the Night*, you write that 17 months passed between the last film you saw in a theater before the lockdown in 2020 and the next time you were able to visit a cinema. What kind of lasting damage do you think that long layoff did to the culture of moviegoing?**

ASH: There's the personal level and there's what happened in the film industry. On a personal level, it's a coincidence that the last film I saw was a press screening for the rerelease of *The Conversation* on 35-millimeter that Francis Ford Coppola had put together. After seeing that film, once the pandemic started, I started to live like Gene Hackman does in that movie, which is in an isolated environment by myself—in my case, just listening to people on the phone or on Zoom in my apartment, rarely seeing them in person. And like that character, I was losing my mind. The next movie I happened to see in theaters was M. Night Shyamalan's *Old*, a movie about people trapped on an island who become infected with a mysterious illness that makes them age. That's also how I felt, like I had aged in that period in an unnatural way. When I saw *Old*, it was at a regional art-house cinema in upstate New York, and of course they were showing it digitally. There's a clear kind of degeneration between seeing a movie from the 1970s projected on 35-millimeter and seeing a new movie projected digitally. And that, too, is a form of immiseration.

On the level of the film industry, they've totally given themselves over to this sense of degeneration. Almost everything is projected digitally, which reflects what I think of as this kind of gleeful attitude the studios have about the death of moviegoing. They don't control the theaters, so they would much prefer it if there was only streaming, where they get all the money. They don't care about the experience people have at the movies, because they don't want people to even go to the movies.

"The studios would much prefer it if there was only streaming, where they get all the money."

KP: **What was once a social experience has become the opposite, even as our phones are bringing us into vivid contact with strangers. I found your passage about watching the video of George Floyd's murder quite moving. The feeling you articulated is similar to what we've all experienced over the past two years, as our feeds have been filled with videos of Palestinians being massacred by Israeli soldiers, or even ICE officers killing Renee Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis. We have more access to human suffering all the time in video form, even as our artistic production feels so immiserated.**

ASH: What's so stark is not just the horror of those images, but the contrast between them and these AI videos that Donald Trump shows now, of himself as a strongman or as a fighter-jet pilot dumping shit onto protesters below. It's just so apparent that this form is on the side of repression and injustice, and the other is against that.

I wish someone would just take all the videos of ICE raids—of people being thrown to the ground, dragged out of schools, taken out of their cars, taken out of their places of work, sometimes escaping from the ICE agents—and make them into a three-hour supercut with no commentary and put that in a movie theater. That is the kind of cinema that we need right now. N

LESLEY UNRUH

Should Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Run for President in 2028?

The Debate

Yes!

DAVID FARIS

New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is, by a considerable margin, the most talented, charismatic, and visionary young politician in a party that desperately needs a transformative new national leader.

No one represents the emerging ideology of the Democratic Party better than AOC, and no one is better at articulating that vision in public, on social media, and in Congress. If we hope to build a successful movement for social democracy, at some point the Democrats must give their presidential nomination to someone who both believes in it and can sell it to the broader electorate.

As a former bartender and someone who graduated from college tens of thousands of dollars in debt, AOC better represents ordinary Americans and the future demographics of the party than whatever soulless, consultant-backed concoction the Democrats' elderly leadership will surely try to foist on us in 2028. Unlike most members of Congress, AOC isn't a lawyer, an independently wealthy tech baron, or someone who spent years climbing the rungs of her party's hierarchy. She isn't a product of the well-worn Ivy League–to-district-attorney-to-senator pipeline. Her life experience as a normal human being is a central feature of her national appeal.

She also fixes the chief weakness of the progressive movement's outgoing leader, Senator Bernie Sanders, who often surrounded himself with people who publicly despised the Democratic Party and unwittingly alienated older primary voters who uncritically love it. While she's no "vote blue no matter who" automaton, AOC recognizes that constantly slagging the Democratic Party while trying to appeal to its most dedicated voters is a losing strategy. In Congress, AOC has proved to be a pragmatist who can navigate the byzantine internal politics of the House without sacrificing the core of her ideology or her viral appeal.

Of course, electability fetishists are already fine-tuning their playbook against AOC, and they will surely tell us that the "safe" choice is a moderate white guy eager to bash trans folks and tack right on immigration. Critics will focus on AOC's perceived disadvantages, including her status as a far-right hobbyhorse and her relatively high unfavorability ratings. But her meteoric rise as a political star merely accelerated an inevitable process of demonization at the hands of

No!

DARAKA LARIMORE-HALL

Let me be clear: if Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez decides to run for president, I will campaign for her. She is an extraordinary talent—a politician who can be strategic, inspirational, and principled in equal measure. Most electeds, even those with ties to social movements and solid voting records, focus on legislation and their own reelection, leaving the bigger questions to party leadership. But AOC has always prioritized something else: building a path toward political transformation.

She works hard to get other socialists and progressives elected while articulating a new direction for the Democratic Party. Her vision of a green, social-democratic politics brings together anti-elite populism, structural reform, and a celebration of the diversity of the working class. Crucially, AOC also connects the inside baseball of Congress to the outside world. She mobilizes public opinion behind both short-term policy goals and her long-term agenda. And she has done all of this while avoiding self-marginalization and co-optation.

What the left needs now is a champion who will shift who and what the Democratic Party fights for. This is a multi-year, multi-election project, and it requires leaders who can keep the activist base energized, challenge and defeat deadweight incumbents, and mount an effective opposition to Republicans. No one fits the bill better than AOC.

We need AOC on both offense and defense, in times of advancement and of resistance. That is what congressional leaders can do and presidential candidates cannot. At 36, she could have a long tenure as a Democratic leader, becoming the Nancy Pelosi of the democratic-socialist left—a political powerhouse who can create and coordinate party narratives.

Right now, Congress is broken. Under GOP control, it refuses to defend democratic norms, and both parties have been unable to deliver legislation on the scale required to confront climate change and inequality. We cannot repeat the Obama-era mistake of believing that the White House alone can save us. AOC should stay in Congress, fascism-proofing our national legislature and working to revive the energies of the New Deal and the Great Society.

I understand the impulse on the other side. Presidential campaigns can draw in new activists, candidates, and small donors. The movements around

the right-wing propaganda apparatus. Pete Buttigieg, of all people, showed he understood this best when he said during a 2019 Democratic presidential debate in Detroit, "If we embrace a far-left agenda, they're going to say we're a bunch of crazy socialists. If we embrace a conservative agenda, you know what they're going to do? They're going to say we're a bunch of crazy socialists. So let's just stand up for the right policy, go out there, and defend it."

AOC is the Democrats' best opportunity to escape a self-destructive cycle of worrying so much about what swing voters or wavering Republicans will think that they end up picking candidates whose overmanaged, carefully orchestrated campaign strategies fail to win the very voters that their theory says they should.

A plausible case could be made for AOC to challenge flailing Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer for his seat in 2028 instead of trying to win the presidency as an incumbent member of the House, a maneuver that has not been pulled off successfully since James Garfield did it in 1880. But there's no guarantee that she could take out Schumer or that there will ever be another opportunity like 2028.

If a Democrat wins the 2028 election, his or her vice president will likely have the inside track on the nomination in 2032 or 2036. By 2040, AOC will be in her 50s, presumably with a long track record in the Senate for critics to pick over. And who knows where the zeitgeist will be in 14 years.

The stakes of this election are too high for Democrats to run another focus-group-driven figure.

With the GOP nominee in 2028 most likely to be the slick fortysomething vice president, JD Vance, whose main role in the Trump administration appears to be "social media influencer," Democrats must counter with a youthful, agile, media-savvy politician, someone who can turn out the young and irregular voters that the party would need to win a resounding victory and finally give it the mandate to pursue real progressive change. The stakes of this election, which will include the GOP's chance to consolidate the dysfunctional, autocratic gangster state that it has been building since January 2025, are simply too high for Democrats to run another cautious, focus-group-driven figure who can't turn out the party's base.

Voters elect a person, not a policy platform, and Democrats should at long last offer them someone whose virtues as a human being and a communicator make her palatable to swing voters who prize Sanders-esque authenticity, who is capable of winning a bruising general-election campaign, and who will be up to the herculean task of transforming the United States into the world's first truly multiracial social democracy.

That someone is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. N

David Faris is a professor of political science at Roosevelt University and the author of It's Time to Fight Dirty.

Howard Dean, Barack Obama, and Bernie Sanders contained seeds of enormous change. Likewise, an "AOC for President" campaign would inspire and train future progressive leaders.

But Democratic energy has become too reliant on presidential elections. We need engagement when it is the hardest to mobilize: between presidential cycles, when Congress is in play, policy is made, and a president's record is really established. AOC's work in Congress also depends on seniority, clout, and deep relationships—so the longer she stays, the more her power and influence on Capitol Hill will grow.

My two strongest arguments for AOC staying in Congress are the ineffectual and feckless leadership of Representative Hakeem Jeffries and Senator Chuck Schumer. Instead of running for president, AOC should run Schumer out of the Senate or build toward a bid for speaker of the House. She could reshape politics in either of those roles, and there are clearer paths for her to get there than to the White House.

Imagine a Democratic Party with AOC at the helm of one of the congressional delegations. It would be animated by the Green New Deal and explicit challenges to oligarchy, rather than the minimalist pap the party offers today. Instead of stilted press conferences and stunts like taking a knee in kente-cloth stoles, there would be barnstorming tours, community meetings, grassroots organizing, and walking picket lines. As House speaker or a Senate leader, she could launch an ambitious legislative agenda and then rally people around it with her considerable charisma and communication skills.

Those who dream of a democratic-socialist president should want AOC to lead that work from Congress.

There is a precedent for such a transformational congressional figure. I still shudder thinking about Newt Gingrich's Contract With America. In 1994, Gingrich—then the House minority leader—shaped a powerful, unified political narrative; helped the GOP win 54 congressional seats; and pushed the party to the right. AOC is the only Democratic figure in Congress who seems capable of pulling off a similar realignment from the left.

Standing in the way of this future is a system built on incumbent protection and major-donor fundraising. AOC is committed to pulling down these barriers to a better Democratic Party, but it will require mass organizing. Those who dream of a democratic-socialist president should want Ocasio-Cortez to hold off on running and focus instead on leading that work. For any socialist to be an effective president, we'd need in place stronger movements, party organizations, unions—and a better Congress. Pouring our energy into a 2028 presidential campaign would be a shortsighted attempt at a shortcut to the harder work that must come first. N

Daraka Larimore-Hall is a lecturer in labor studies at UC Santa Barbara and was a vice chair of the California Democratic Party.

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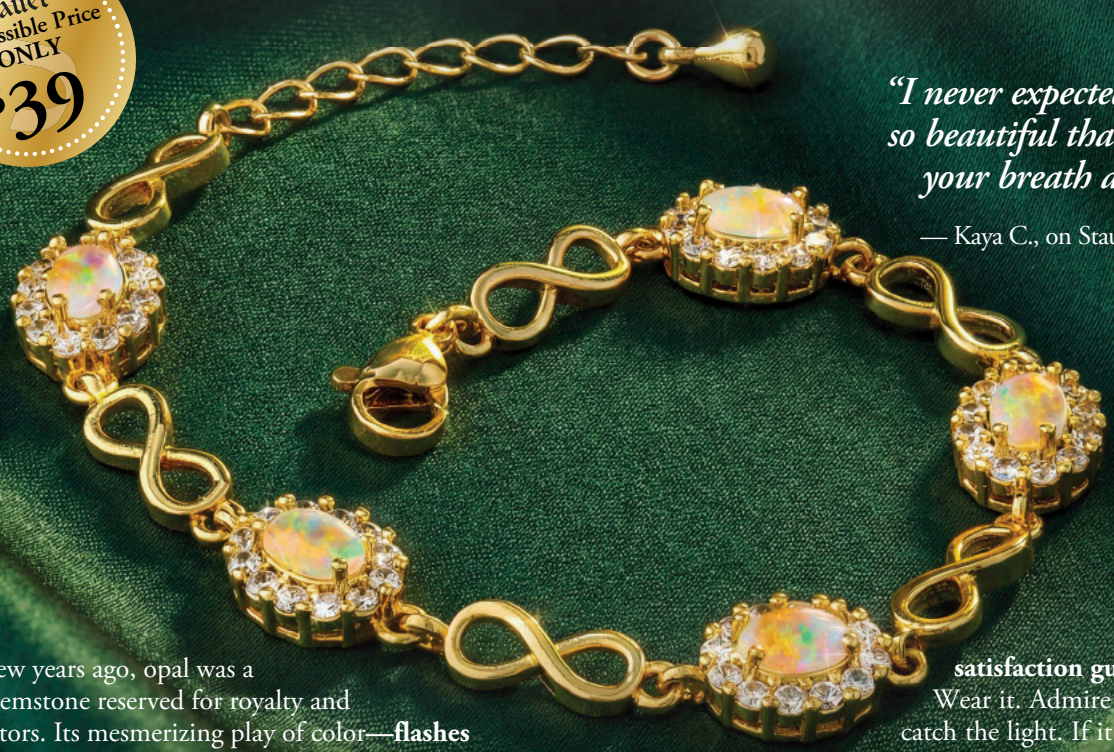

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PHOTO ESSAY/MARY ANNE ANDREI

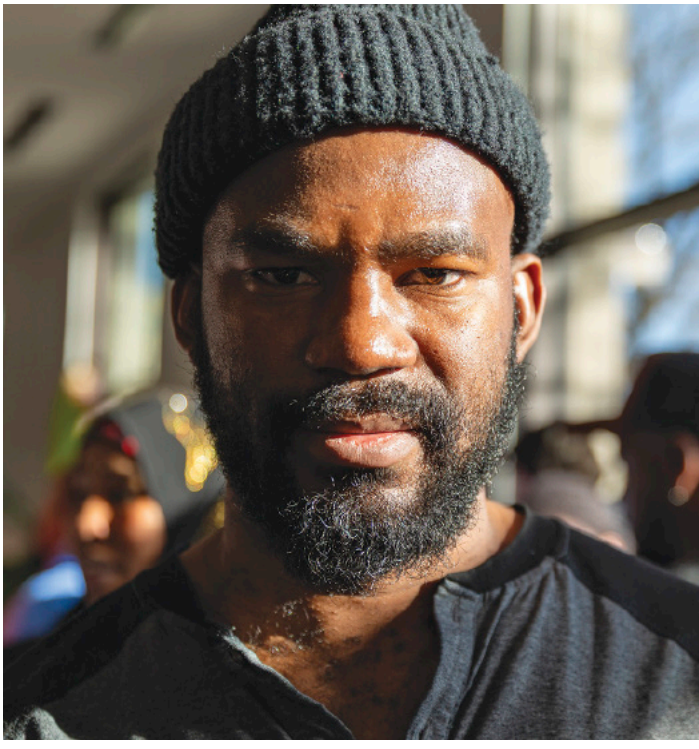
Decision Day

Meatpacking workers—including many Haitians facing deportation—vote overwhelmingly for a strike.

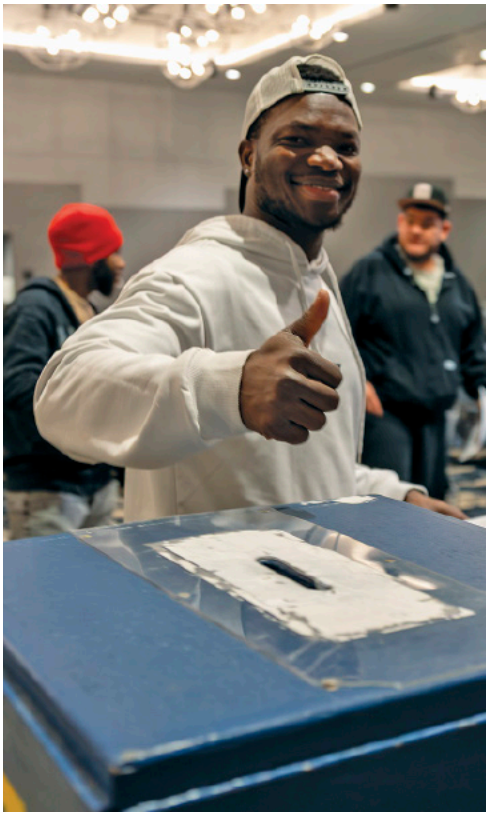
In early February, more than 1,000 Haitian migrants employed at the unionized JBS meatpacking plant in Greeley, Colorado, faced imminent deportation, as the Trump administration fought in federal court to revoke their temporary protected status. Many of the Haitians say they were brought to JBS as part of a human-trafficking scheme concocted by a supervisor in the company's HR department. (A JBS spokesperson told me there was no evidence tying the company to the union's claims.) Among them is Carlos Saint Aubin, who fled from the gangs in Port-au-Prince to Brazil, where he began a harrowing journey on foot—across the Darien Gap between Panama and Colombia, north to the US border. He came to Colorado after seeing TikTok videos promising jobs and housing. Instead, he ended up among the hundreds of Haitians packed more than six to a room at a roadside motel after working long hours. Now Saint Aubin is one of the lead plaintiffs in a class-action lawsuit alleging that the Haitians on the evening shift there were forced to work as much as 50 percent faster than those on the daytime crew. On February 4, less than 48 hours after a federal judge blocked their deportation, 99 percent of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union members at the facility voted to strike in what could become the first sanctioned walkout at a major meatpacking plant in decades.

—Ted Genoways

Mary Anne Andrei is a freelance multimedia journalist. This article was produced in partnership with the Food & Environment Reporting Network, a nonprofit news organization, where Ted Genoways is a senior editor.



After casting his ballot, Carlos Saint Aubin chatted with fellow workers in the lobby outside the ballroom of the DoubleTree hotel where the vote was held.

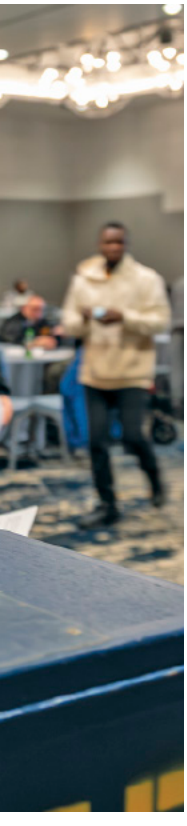


Some 90 percent of the workers at JBS's Greeley plant are migrants. Beyond Haiti, they are from Burma, Somalia, West Africa, and Latin America.

Despite facing threats from ICE—and the anxieties of a potential strike—workers greeted each other with hugs and handshakes.

In the lobby of the hotel, workers were given a blue slip of paper with a simple choice: "Strike / *Huelga*" or "No Strike / *No Huelga*."

Local 7 and JBS resumed talks on February 20 in hopes of avoiding a walkout, but the workers had already assembled 4,000 picket signs.



Rumors circulated that unmarked white vans had been seen circling outside the hotel, raising fears of an ICE raid, but the vote was held without disruption.

Members of Local 7 arrived just before 7 PM to count the votes. Out of the more than 2,000 workers who cast ballots, roughly 25 voted against a strike.

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The Trump administration is aiming a death blow at Cuba by depriving its people of fuel, food and medicine. **Global Health Partners is piercing this cruel blockade by rushing desperately needed medical equipment to Cuban hospitals, and *we need your help!***

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GLOBAL HEALTH PARTNERS

MAKE INTERNATIONALISM GREAT AGAIN

The "Rules-Based Order" Is Gone.

Let's Not Bring It Back.

Trump has destroyed a global system that mostly benefited the rich and powerful. We need to create something completely different in its wake.

ROBERT L. BOROSAGE

When Donald Trump, our mad king, declared that "we are going to do something on Greenland whether they like it or not," because "ownership" is "psychologically important for me," the reaction was immediate and predictable.

The foreign-policy establishment—what the former Obama speechwriter Ben Rhodes dubbed "the Blob"—erupted in fury. Trump was trampling the so-called rules-based international order. "Territorial integrity and sovereignty are fundamental principles of international law," lectured Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission. Trump was endangering what Iraq War champion Bill Kristol called our "relatively benign order," one that, neoconservative nabob Robert Kagan sermonized, was held together in part by "America's reputation for morality and respect for international norms."

There's no question that Trump's erratic, even demented, global policies—"Liberation Day tariffs," dubbing NATO allies the "enemy within," whining about a Nobel Peace Prize snub while bombing seven countries as well as fishing boats in the Caribbean, kidnapping Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, pulling out of international organizations, and more—have stripped the mask off of American predation.

But Trump's manic disruptions should not feed a romantic nostalgia about the "rules-based order." The very same European leaders and anointed members of the Blob expressing outrage about Greenland were largely silent or supportive as Trump bombed Iran and Nigeria, abducted Maduro, and continued to aid and abet Israel's genocide in Gaza.

Nor should Trump's follies whitewash the history of the rules-based order. His villainy may not be masked, but the reality is that the United States has always made the rules—and served as global policeman, judge, jury, and executioner.

Post–World War II America has been at war virtually nonstop, with more than 200 military interventions since 1950. We've launched wars against Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, among others. Barack Obama, that Nobel Peace Prize–winning champion of democracy, ran what was essentially an assassination bureau out of the White House while bombing seven countries.

In 2015, under Obama, the United States supplied arms to 36 of the 49 countries labeled dictatorships by the pro-democracy research institute Freedom House. Over the last decade, the US has imposed unilateral sanctions on more than 60 countries, primarily in the Global South. Since World War II, we've launched regime-change operations—overt and covert—all over the world, from Indonesia to Iran to Guatemala, Chile, Panama, Nicaragua, and Honduras, to name a few.

The rules-based order did create a dense web of institutions to regulate the global economy, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. These largely served the interests of Western multinational corporations and banks, enforcing the free flow of capital and providing protection for property but not for workers.

While defenders of the rules-based order celebrate the rise in living standards in the less-developed world, the predominant source of that increase was China's state-capitalist regime, which played by its own set of rules. The economic prosperity of the rest is best captured by Oxfam's 2026 World Inequality Report, which revealed that fewer than 60,000 people—0.001 percent of the world's population—own three times the wealth of the entire bottom half of humanity.

Trump's rise to power is largely a result of the increasing failure of this order to benefit working people in the US. The "job shock" from the global trade regime wiped out industrial towns

Robert L. Borosage is a progressive writer and activist and a longtime contributor to The Nation.

ILLUSTRATION BY **ADRIÀ FRUITÓS**

The old order has failed Americans. It is time to develop a new way of living in the world. This won't be easy.

across America, and governing elites failed to compensate the victims. Globalization empowered multinationals to undermine wages here and abroad. Endless and futile wars provoked increasing opposition. Global policing came at the expense of investments and reforms that were needed at home. Increasingly, housing, healthcare, education, and retirement security grew less and less affordable for the masses.

At the last World Economic Forum in Davos, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, a former international banker, earned a standing ovation for offering some simple truths. Canadians, he admitted, had prospered for decades while embracing the "story of the international rules-based order," which they knew "was partially false." The strongest "would exempt themselves when convenient." Trade rules "were enforced asymmetrically." International law applied "with varying rigor depending on the identity of the accused or the victim."

Carney termed the rules-based order "a pleasant fiction," a phrase remarkably akin to White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller's scornful dismissal of international law and treaties as "international niceties." Now, Carney continued, the world was in the midst of a "rupture" from the old system—one stemming less from unprecedented lawlessness than from Trump's brazen abandonment of that fiction while targeting not just adversaries or developing countries but the core allies themselves.

As Carney noted, the move toward greater and greater predation preceded Trump: "Over the past two decades, a series of crises in finance, health, energy, and geopolitics have laid bare the risks of extreme global integration. But more recently, great powers have begun using economic integration as weapons, tariffs as leverage, financial infrastructure as coercion, supply chains as vulnerabilities to be exploited. You cannot live within the lie of mutual benefit through integration, when integration becomes the source of your subordination."

Strikingly, Carney compared the decline of the US-led international system to the final days of communism, invoking Václav Havel's famous parable of the Czech shopkeeper who, acquiescing to "the lie," continues to display in his window an authorized slogan that no one believes in. It was time, Carney argued, "for companies and countries to take their signs down."

That advice, which the Canadian prime minister addressed to the "middle powers," is doubly true for Americans. It is time to stop living within the lie. The old order has failed Americans. It is time for the United States to develop a new way of living in the world. This won't be easy.

Shrink the empire: American military personnel at the US naval base in Yokosuka, Japan, during President Trump's visit last year. The United States has more than 750 military bases in some 80 countries.

PHILIP FONG / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

It is almost impossible to imagine the United States as anything other than a global hegemon. Entrenched interests have deep stakes in sustaining the imperial myths. Trump's America First policies are criticized as neo-isolationist even as he sustains the United States' commitment to NATO, expands its presence in the Middle East, pledges to police the South China Sea, calls for increasing the US military budget—already the world's largest, and bigger than the next nine largest military budgets combined—by one-third, and targets Venezuela, Cuba, Iran, Gaza, Greenland, and the Arctic, for starters.

A sensible way to begin would be to discard established shibboleths and apply common sense to rethinking the purpose of our national-security policy. Obviously, such a policy should serve to protect Americans and our democracy from actual threats to our security.

So what are the real security threats that Americans face? Clearly, the obscene and growing inequality within our country and the decline of the middle class drive American insecurity. That inequality also threatens our democracy itself, as big money undermines free elections.

This reality calls for a foreign policy that allows us to focus on domestic reform, as well as on the resources needed to rebuild vital public infrastructure and invest in the well-being of our people. President Joe Biden's "foreign policy for the middle class" hinted at that promise but was quickly subordinated to US efforts to police the world, take on China and Russia, and aid, abet, and arm Israel's genocide in Gaza. The foreign-policy establishment, embodied by groups like the Council on Foreign Relations, pays ritual tribute to the need for a robust domestic economy to support our role in the world. But that frames the issue upside down.

What we need desperately is a foreign policy that strengthens our democracy at home, not an economy that supports our imperial pretensions abroad. This means reducing, not reinforcing, our global footprint—particularly our empire of over 750 military bases in some 80 countries—and elevating diplomacy over military intervention. One measure of progress would be whether we return to having more embassies than military bases around the world.

Of the foreign threats that actually impact the security of Americans, catastrophic climate change—which poses an existential threat while causing more destruction each year—must be at the top of the list.

Similarly, global pandemics present direct and growing threats to life, as the loss of more than 1 million Americans to Covid-19 demonstrated. The combination of untrammeled AI and an untrammeled nuclear-arms race threatens to extend ever-increasing perils in an era of great-power jockeying. In January, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* moved its Doomsday Clock closer to midnight than at any time in its

MANDEL NGAN / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

history—reflecting the spiraling nuclear-arms race, the collapse of arms-control agreements, and the cascading violence and instability gripping so much of the world.

Isolationism isn't the answer to dealing with these threats. Neither is Trump's America Alone imperialism. They require greater, not less, international engagement. While curbing the corrosive effects of inequality must begin at home—with progressive taxation, revived antitrust enforcement, regulating finance, and removing the grip of big money on our politicians—empowering workers across the globe is needed to deal with the real and present dangers we all face.

TRUMP'S ACTIONS, PERVERSELY, ARE exacerbating each of these security challenges. He's eviscerated federal programs addressing climate change while withdrawing from any international cooperation on this critical issue. He's gutted already inadequate US public-health and global-aid programs while withdrawing from the World Health Organization, which monitors and coordinates responses to pandemics. He's ramped up the nuclear-arms race; turned his back on extending New START, the last nuclear-arms accord with Russia; and launched his Golden Dome fantasy, which will kick off a new arms race in space. His economic agenda, both at home and abroad, seems designed to increase inequality rather than decrease it, while ushering in a new era of brazen corruption. As Trump pulls the country from 66 international agencies, his risible Board of Peace, designating him as permanent leader of the world, may further weaken the United Nations, but it won't replace it.

Reversing Trump's misrule is necessary but surely not sufficient. A dramatic reordering of American priorities and policies and a rethinking of national security and the political economy are inescapable if Americans are to deal with the polycrisis we now face. Can we build rules around the global economy that work for working people and not just for capital? Can we engage the Chinese in a collective effort to address catastrophic climate change and join them and the Russians in beginning to dismantle nuclear arsenals?

Collective guilt: Presidents from both parties have maintained the United States' role as global policeman, judge, jury, and executioner.

Trump's erratic policies—what Carney called the "rupture"—have insulted our allies, torn up our international commitments, weakened the dollar, and exposed the lie of the rules-based order. The question is whether this rupture will inspire us to begin a turn to a more sensible security framework that addresses the real threats before us.

Trump's assault on our democracy must be stopped, but a return to the old order offers no way forward. The change won't come from entrenched interests or established voices, from politicians or elites. It will come from creative thinking, hopefully by a new generation aroused by the reality it confronts, but only if popular movements—on climate, on democracy, on countering inequality and empowering workers, on rebuilding America—force the change.

The change won't come from entrenched interests. It will come from creative thinking and popular movements.

The odds against this are as long as the interests against it are formidable. But in previous times of "rupture"—the Civil War, the Great Depression, the battle against Jim Crow, the war in Vietnam—popular movements pressured, and then empowered, bold leaders to change course and chart a better path. And that, at the very least, provides the basis to keep hope alive. **N**

MAKE INTERNATIONALISM GREAT AGAIN

The New Face of the We

As the American world order collapses, Canada's Mark Carney has become the tribune for a middle-power neoliberalism.

JEET HEER

On January 20, Canadian prime minister Mark Carney emerged as an unexpected hero, at least among those looking for an alternative to Trumpism, in an unlikely place: the World Economic Forum at Davos. Normally, Davos is a snooze-fest where the global elite exchange self-congratulatory clichés celebrating the status quo. But Carney broke from that dismal tradition by offering both a radical analysis of the failed present and a plausible alternative for the future.

Carney's speech was delivered on a continent where the response to Donald Trump's erratic and destabilizing return to power has consisted mostly of degrading supplication. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, for instance, nicknamed Trump "Daddy" when discussing the president's mediation between Russia and Ukraine. Rutte then compounded his shame by saying, "Daddy has to sometimes use strong language." Of course, putting yourself at the mercy of a capricious and abusive "Daddy" is not only debasing but an invitation to further bullying, as Trump showed when he mocked Rutte, quipping, "I think he likes me: 'Daddy, you're my daddy.'"

Against this background of European humiliation, Carney's speech was a breath of fresh air. He candidly described how Trump's lawless, zero-sum foreign policy has prompted the death spiral of American global hegemony, upended the liberal international order, and created a system of "intensifying great-power rivalry, where the most powerful pursue their interests, using economic integration as coercion." But it also acknowledged the "fiction" of that order, which always had one rule for the US and its allies and another for everyone else. More important, Carney's speech sketched out a new path for "middle powers" such as Canada to move outside the shadow of US domination by forging new alliances and trade relations.

Against Trump's nihilistic vision of a world dominated by great-power imperialism, Carney advocated a much more inviting future, arguing that "intermediate powers like Canada are not powerless. They have the capacity to build a new order that encompasses our values, such as respect for human rights, sustainable development, solidarity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity."

The speech won Carney a standing ovation at Davos and lavish praise in the international press. *Der Spiegel* described it as "the speech the world has been waiting for." *The Washington Post* hailed Carney as "the star" of Davos. *The New York Times*' Ezra Klein celebrated it as "the most important foreign policy speech in years."

But it wasn't only the avatars of centrist conventional thinking who were heartened by Carney's words. Anti-imperialists and anti-interventionists found themselves cheering his bracing critique of US domination. The Quincy Institute's Trita Parsi enthused that he "never thought we would hear this level of honesty from a Western leader" and said Carney's words would "be warmly welcomed in much of the Global South." Other figures not normally given to extolling the Davos utterances of former central bankers, such as the libertarian Glenn Greenwald and the leftist Hasan Piker, were similarly impressed.

In purely rhetorical terms, Carney's speech deserved the applause it received. It was bold and far-reaching, grappling honestly with political choices that will shape humanity's common future. Yet the very fact that the speech was praised by both establishment stalwarts such as Klein and rabble-rousers such as Piker should give us pause. While both centrists and radicals could welcome Carney's critique of Trump's neo-imperialism, it's far from clear what sort of "new order" he has in mind for the middle powers to build.

That's because Carney's speech actually contained two very different models of middle-power internationalism. One in effect promises neoliberalism, re-creating a 1990s-style world where economic growth is driven by international trade, domestic deregulation, and austerity.

The other model—glimmers of which are evident in Carney's stress on human rights and sustainability as well as his critique of the hypocrisy of the old order—would be much more radical. It is a vision of a new international order committed to the idea of global equality, one that calls to mind the Bandung Conference of 1955, where African and Asian countries tried to assemble a nonaligned pact outside the destructive polarity of the Cold War. While the Bandung project failed, the current fraying of US hegemony raises the possibility of a renewed push for a multipolar system whereby smaller nations would work together to tackle pandemics, inequality, and climate change—and also, when necessary, unite to counter lawless great powers. This would be a project of middle-power social democracy: a world united to create a more equitable planet.

Carney is fascinating precisely because his vision contains both of these strands. He's a political figure divided against himself, one whose signature move is to combine radical critique with conservative solutions. He is both

FLORIAN GAERTNER / PHOTOTHEK VIA GETTY IMAGES

a central banker and an antiestablishment thinker, a globalist who is also aware that neoliberal globalization is in a deep crisis. He has an outsider's analysis of where the world has gone wrong, but he yearns for new institutions and policies that would essentially re-create a discredited old order. Carney's Davos speech thus offered not a solution but a pressing question: What is the best path forward—middle-power neoliberalism or middle-power social democracy? And if Carney is the best alternative we currently have to Trumpism, what version of middle-power internationalism is he most likely to pursue?

Globe-trotter: Long accustomed to traversing the world stage, Carney is now trying to carve out a role for himself as a middle-power leader.

POLITICAL AMBIGUITY RUNS DEEPLY THROUGH Carney's biography. He was born in 1965 in the far north of Canada, in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. ("The permafrost that underpins the land where I was born is now melting," he reflected with rare melancholy in his 2021 manifesto, *Value(s): Building a Better World*.) When Carney was 6, his family moved to oil-rich Alberta, which he describes as "my home province." Alberta is the most politically conservative province in Canada, with strains of evangelical Christianity, populist rage, and big-business boosterism that align more with the United States' contemporary Republican Party than with Canada's more traditionally sober conservatism. (It's not a surprise that Trumpists such as Steve Bannon and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessant have recently tried to encourage Alberta's growing separatist movement.) But his father, Robert Carney, was an educator at both the high-school level and at the University of Alberta and was also active in the Liberal Party of Canada. The Liberal Party has always been a multifaceted alliance, with both a conservative business wing and a progressive wing. Yet being a Liberal partisan in Alberta was a lonely and contrarian vocation.

Carney is a political figure divided against himself, combining radical critiques with conservative solutions.

Thanks to a hockey scholarship, Mark Carney went to Harvard, where he attended life-changing lectures by John Kenneth Galbraith, a fellow Canadian of Scottish descent and the foremost liberal economist in the United States. Impressed by Galbraith, Carney switched his major from math and English to economics. Broad themes from Galbraith's work still echo in Carney's thinking, notably a wariness of laissez-faire boosterism, as well as the awareness that capitalism rests not just on individualism but also on institutions. After Harvard, Carney went on to Oxford, where he completed a doctorate in economics in 1995, focusing on competitive advantage in international trade.

This was followed by 13 years at Goldman Sachs, during which Carney became a true globe-trotter, working at desks in Tokyo, London, New York, Boston, and Toronto. His portfolio at the investment-banking firm included emerging debt-capital markets. He helped negotiate South Africa's reentry into the bond market after the end of apartheid. If you want a shorthand for the contradictory nature of Carney's worldview, you could do worse than to describe it as "Galbraith plus Goldman Sachs."

Even as he rose in the world of high finance, Carney always nursed an ambition to succeed in Canadian politics. Central banking provided him the pathway; he became a deputy governor of the Bank of Canada in 2003, rising to become its governor in 2008. In 2013, he crossed the pond to become the governor of the Bank of England, serving until March 2020.

As he ascended the ranks of government, Carney had a front-row seat at the major crises of the 21st century: the global economic meltdown of 2008, Brexit, the pandemic of 2020, and the worsening climate catastrophe. During the Great Recession, his Goldman Sachs experience put him at the forefront of coordinating the development of new regulations to tamp down on speculation. Because Canada's staid and prudent banking system was able to weather the storm better than those of most other wealthy nations, Carney emerged with a reputation as an adept crisis manager.

CARNEY HAS KEPT HIS EYES OPEN AS he and his fellow elites grappled with the polycrisis engulfing the planet. He seems to know as well as any Marxist that neoliberal globalization has failed. There are many passages in *Value(s)* that could easily have been written by Naomi Klein, Greta Thunberg, or Greg Grandin. The major theme of the book is that

SEAN KILPATRICK / THE CANADIAN PRESS VIA AP

there is a radical disjunction between ethical and economic values—one that threatens to undermine the very health of the social system.

Carney argues that we are living through "a crisis of value in which the values of the market are usurping those of humanity" and that "politicians who worship the market tend to deliver policies that hurt people." He quotes the economist Branko Milanović, who has been at the forefront of highlighting the dangers of global economic inequality, in stating that we are creating a "utopia of wealth and a dystopia of personal relations." (This sentence is itself a variation on Galbraith's warning in *The Affluent Society* that capitalism leads to "private opulence and public squalor.")

Carney insists that the financial system has to "fulfill its role as a servant, rather than master, of society." This chimes with his tenure as the United Nations secretary-general's special envoy on climate action and finance from 2019 to 2025, during which he pushed for policies that would, in his words, "create a financial system in which a company's contributions to climate change and climate solution are fundamental determinants of its values."

Intriguingly, *Value(s)* doesn't locate the crisis of US hegemony with Trump but rather with the 2008 crash. Carney recalls a G20 meeting in 2008 when President George W. Bush told his fellow world leaders, "We need you to get behind this. We will be stronger together." While praising Bush's "humility," Carney also notes that his "much wiser colleague" Mario Draghi, an economist who would later serve briefly as prime minister of Italy, compared the United States to the USSR under Gorbachev, a superpower now in need of assistance. This leads Carney to ask: "Could the system survive without a hegemon?"

These sections lend *Value(s)* a radical sheen. Yet at its core, it is a fundamentally conservative book, one that offers as a solution to the depredations of neoliberalism the hope that the ruling class can become more enlightened. For instance, Carney argues that the best way to deal with the banking crisis was not to fundamentally change the system but rather to "get the right people around the table." As the Canadian journalist Luke Savage noted in *The Baffler*, "We are finally—and confusingly—left with a vision for reform that revolves mainly around elite cooperation and the fostering of a more ethically minded business class."

At the end of the day, Carney remains an establishment figure. He has also emerged as something of an arch-traditionalist. Carney insists that his staff use British spellings (*catalyse* rather than *catalyze*, if you please) and has pushed for closer ties with the monarchy that Canada shares with Britain. He has described Canada as "the most European of non-European countries." After becoming prime minister, he imposed a strict dress code on his staff; as Stephen Maher reported in *Maclean's*, Carney "wanted people to be punctual and dress as they would in a bank, with black shoes for the men. He told even the most senior public servants that their days of coming to the office in open-necked shirts and blazers were over." These cultural affectations point to a hierarchical view of the world whereby elites should be enlightened and restrained while subalterns should be obedient. It's perhaps not an accident that Carney is a notoriously hard-driving and domineering boss.

Since he took office, there's been little sign of radicalism, or even social democracy, from Carney.

This fusion of radicalism and traditionalism is profoundly Canadian. Because of its loyalist past and ties to the British Empire, Canada has long nurtured a particular political tradition called "Red Toryism," which combines a mixture of social consciousness and skepticism of US empire with Anglophilia and a reverence for the institutions, rituals, and social forms created by the UK-leaning gentry who rejected the American Revolution. While the Red Tory tradition has had little purchase in the popular imagination, it has existed as a persistent strain among the elite, making them more amenable to supporting state-building projects, including national healthcare. The great 20th-century thinker in this tradition was George Grant, whose 1965 book *Lament for a Nation* both decried US Cold War militarism and extolled Canada's British ties.

In the Red Tory synthesis, the Tory part (nationalism and hierarchy) can easily overwhelm the shades of red. Historically, Red Tories coalesced in conservative parties, but as the Canadian right becomes more populist and pro-American, the Liberal Party has emerged as a haven for this strand of thought. Carney won in 2025 in part because progressive voters, scared by Trump's threat to annex Canada, shifted from the social-democrat New Democratic Party (NDP) to the Liberals. Carney appealed to those voters not just by saying he has the skills to engage in tough negotiations with Trump but also by promising a return to the robust government-sponsored housing program that Canada enjoyed after World War II.

But since he took office, there's been little sign of radicalism, or even social democracy, from Carney. He's governed as a national-unity leader with significant overtures to the right—notably on climate, where he has tossed his principles overboard. In *Value(s)*, Carney wrote, "Effective public policies include carbon prices such as Canada's legislated path to $170/tonne in 2030 with the proceeds rebated to Canadians." In office, Carney has canceled this carbon tax. This is no doubt motivated in part by a desire to curb Alberta separatism by foreclosing the idea that the federal government is harming the oil industry.

And the actual policies Carney advocated in his Davos speech were notably conservative: He promised to double defense spending and took pride in the fact that his government "cut

HARUN OZALP / ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

Rupturing the calm: Despite its many contradictions, Carney's Davos speech was hailed as a decisive critique of the flawed global order.

taxes on incomes, on capital gains and business investment. We are fast-tracking a trillion dollars of investments in energy, AI, critical minerals, new trade corridors, and beyond." This plan of investment in "energy" and "critical minerals" includes a push to build a new oil pipeline connecting Alberta to the Pacific coast. In other words, far from offering an alternative to Trumpism, Carney is in fact pursuing the same fossil-fuel nostalgia embraced by the GOP. Yet unlike Trump, Carney is not a climate denier—indeed, he is eloquent on the existential threat that climate change poses for humanity—which makes it all the more scandalous that he is doubling down on environmentally suicidal resource extraction.

The Canadian journalist Nora Loreto told me, "Nothing that he's done as prime minister of Canada suggests that the [Davos] speech was anything more than a good performance. He's defunding Canada's social services to fund our military in the name of protecting our sovereignty, even though it would serve us much more to have a strong social-safety net, well-funded cultural production, and a domestic economy that doesn't rely so much on Canada exporting oil to the US."

The impact of Carney's Davos speech could transcend his own mixed record as a politician.

In Davos, Carney called for new alliances that are "principled and pragmatic" and noted that "not every partner will share all of our values." On the plus side, this has meant new trade agreements with South America and China. (Significantly, Canada is opening up to electric vehicles made in China.) The downside of this is less emphasis on human rights and international law. Carney has been muted in response to Trump's neo-imperialism in the Western Hemisphere, including the push for regime change in Cuba and the kidnapping of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro. And he strongly supported Trump's illegal and unprovoked war on Iran. Not only are these policies wrongheaded, but they run counter to what the world actually needs: a broad alliance of middle powers to pressure the great powers to obey international law.

Northern revolt: Carney is riding high on a wave of Canadian patriotism and anti-Trump sentiment. But his Red Toryism poses political risks.

Currently, Carney is riding high in the polls on a wave of patriotism and anti-Trump sentiment. But his Red Tory governance risks alienating important voting blocs. Frank Graves of EKOS Research Associates, a pollster who has often advised Liberal campaigns, told me that right-wing populism remains an "extraordinarily powerful force" in Canada, one with a strong appeal to young people priced out of the housing market. Graves also thinks that progressives who voted for the Liberals in 2025 are being "orphaned." Carney's politics risks splintering the left wing of the Liberal Party, especially if the NDP adopts a more economically populist stance, as might happen if the journalist and activist Avi Lewis wins the NDP leadership race in March. Lewis has articulated a particularly trenchant critique of Carney. He acknowledges that Carney is "a smart guy" who is "very popular" because he "has a diagnosis about where we are in history." But Lewis also notes that Carney's solution would mean turning Canada into "a militarized petro-state, a junior arms dealer on the world stage."

Branko Milanović, whom Carney quoted in his book, said in an e-mail that the Davos speech amounted to a policy of "national market liberalism" that consists of "the deepening of neoliberal reforms at home with the creation of new international economic links." Milanović is unsure whether these policies are sufficient to create a new international order. More likely, he suggests, Carney has adopted stopgap measures to survive Trumpism until the United States elects a saner president.

But the impact of Carney's Davos speech could transcend his own mixed record as a politician. There is no need to accept his conservative solutions, since his radical analysis points in other directions.

A more radical Carneyism would see middle-power internationalism as a matter of more than just trade alliances to foster economic growth. Instead of middle-power neoliberalism, we could have middle-power social democracy. The middle powers—including the nations of the Global South—could bind together to find ways to counter the bullying of the great powers. They could start taking seriously all the issues raised in *Value(s)*—inequality, pandemics, climate change—and create new treaties to address them, even if it means sidestepping the United States. Middle-power social democracy could challenge the hypocrisy of the United States' treatment of Cuba and Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. This would be a middle-power internationalism that is closer in spirit to the Bandung Conference than to Carney's goal of a neo-NATO.

In Canada, there might well be a market for such a middle-power social democracy if voters become disillusioned with Carney's middle-power neoliberalism. For that matter, as a candidate in 2028, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez might do well to argue that the United States should give up imperialism and join the ranks of middle-power social democracies. **N**

ARTUR WIDAK / NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Shape-Shifter

How Marco Rubio went from neocon golden boy to Trump's top foreign-policy lieutenant.

MATTHEW DUSS

A FEW DAYS AFTER DONALD TRUMP WAS REELECTED, I traveled to Berlin for a series of meetings with political analysts and Bundestag members about the implications of the US election. I joked that I was there to assist in their grief therapy. Not only were they in shock about Trump's return to power, but their own governing coalition was also in the process of collapsing.

Amid the general despair, I was struck by how many of them had latched on to Marco Rubio's just-announced nomination for secretary of state as a source of hope. Rubio may be a right-wing conservative, they offered, but he believes in the sort of internationalism we all believe in, doesn't he? He comes to the Munich Security Conference. He's part of the Serious Foreign-Policy Club, right?

Abandon hope, I told them. Rubio's nomination isn't a sign that Trump might be a normal president; it's a sign of how effectively Rubio has been housebroken.

The hope that Rubio would bring some sanity to a second Trump administration wasn't limited to the conference hotels of Europe, of course. Rubio was confirmed unanimously by the Senate after sailing smoothly through his hearings. This is partly explained by the body's notorious clubbiness and the fact that, as one of Trump's earliest nominees, he benefited from the "honeymoon" period that all new presidents get. But Rubio also got a boost from the belief that he would be "the adult in the room."

That hope has largely been demolished. Far from being a savior of the "rules-based order," Rubio has established himself as one of the second Trump administration's most consequential cabinet secretaries, skillfully serving as MAGA's face on the global stage.

Rubio first? Donald Trump's secretary of state and national-security adviser, Marco Rubio, gives the thumbs-up.

YURI CORTEZ / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

His recent address at the 2026 Munich Security Conference, which I attended, was a perfect showcase of Rubio's new, Trumpier approach. A year after Vice President JD Vance's right-wing populist harangue at the conference—in which he warned that the greatest danger facing Europe was "the threat from within"—Rubio offered merely a kinder, gentler version of that rant. He spoke of the "old friendship" between the United States and Europe and declared, "We are bound to one another by the deepest bonds that nations could share." But undergirding these nostalgic appeals was a paranoid vision of a white, Christian West against the rest, a menacing narrative of impending "civilizational erasure."

"We do not want our allies to be weak," Rubio warned, "because that makes us weaker. We want allies who can defend themselves so that no

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adversary will ever be tempted to test our collective strength. This is why we do not want our allies to be shackled by guilt and shame. We want allies who are proud of their culture and of their heritage, who understand that we are heirs to the same great and noble civilization."

Rubio's message was classic MAGA, but his softer delivery, coupled with the occasional love bomb, was enough for many in the audience. Having been conditioned for over a year by the Trump administration's impetuous cruelty, they lapped it up, giving Rubio a standing ovation. On a panel immediately afterward, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared herself "very much reassured."

Far from being a savior of the "rules-based order," Rubio serves as MAGA's face on the global stage.

A number of attendees told me later, though, that despite being adorned in the language of the High Foreign-Policy Church, Rubio's speech was more or less the same message they've been hearing from the United States since Trump resumed office.

It's a remarkable turn for Rubio—a man who, in the 2016 presidential primaries, was seen as the New and Improved Neocon. It was an impression that Rubio himself cultivated with his campaign slogan, "A New American Century"—a clear reference to the Project for the New American Century, the infamous neoconservative organization that pushed for war with Iraq in the late 1990s and early 2000s. A longtime cheerleader of that war, Rubio seemed ready to claim the aging John McCain's mantle as the faction's main avatar.

A dutiful friendship: Rubio passes a note to Donald Trump during a meeting with oil executives days after the ouster of Nicolás Maduro.

Rubio's defenders argue that his late conversion to Trump's America First cult was less dramatic than it seems because he was never a full-fledged neocon. While they acknowledge that the pose did have its uses—it helped him maintain the support of the Cuban diaspora as he managed his political rise—they insist he was not a committed ideologue. This may well be the case, but there's also another interpretation: that not much real difference exists between neoconservatism, which uses human rights and democracy as a fig leaf for the application of US military power, and Trumpism, which sees no need for that fig leaf.

The term *neoconservative* tends to be used promiscuously, but the truest expression of its ethos, at least when it comes to foreign policy, was offered by the historian and ideologue Michael Ledeen, as paraphrased by the writer Jonah Goldberg: "Every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business." Although articulated in 2002 in reference to Iraq, this is a good description of Trumpist foreign policy. When you understand that, for the neocons, talk of human rights, democracy, and freedom was always window dressing for an ideology supporting the unconstrained application of American power, you understand that the distance from neoconservatism to MAGA is actually very short.

Rubio bridged this distance gradually—and then rather suddenly. He spent Trump's first term as a dependable vote in the Senate for the administration's agenda but was by no means one of its most visible champions. An unmistakable sign of Rubio's shift was his 2023 manifesto, "My Plan for American Renewal," a trimming of his neoconservative sails in a more populist-nationalist direction, published in one of that faction's key journals, the Pat Buchanan–founded *American Conservative*. He was also one of the Senate's most vocal China hawks, often on the basis of human-rights concerns, during Trump's first term and then the Biden presidency, but he has largely backed away from that in the past year, in keeping with Trump's more conciliatory approach.

One of the most indelible images of the first few months of Trump's second term was that of Rubio slumped down on an Oval Office couch, looking miserable as Trump and Vance berated Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. At the time, many saw this as a sign of Rubio's powerlessness. A year later, though, his stock seems to have risen. He has become the first person since Henry Kissinger to serve as both secretary of state and national-security adviser simultaneously. (Until recently, he also served as acting archivist of the United States, whatever that is.) "Rubio is really good at one important thing," I was told by someone close to the administration. "He's really good at husbanding and spending political capital

AL DRAGO / *BLOOMBERG* VIA GETTY IMAGES

on things he cares about, on not getting in needless fights when it doesn't serve his top priority, which is the Western Hemisphere."

This has required Rubio to be cold-blooded about his priorities. He stood by unconcerned as Elon Musk and his DOGE goons dismantled USAID, which has already resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths. And he oversaw the mass layoffs of more than 1,000 career diplomats as part of the so-called Reduction in Force process—one of the most staggering acts of strategic self-harm in American history.

According to Dexter Filkins's recent profile in *The New Yorker*, Rubio changed his story about DOGE's foreign-aid cuts three times. He first told US embassy workers that he hadn't known about the cuts and disagreed with them. Then he testified before the Senate Appropriations Committee that he'd made the cuts himself. Later, he privately assured senators that he would try to reverse them.

Whatever Rubio's true feelings about the cuts, he was clearly not willing to endanger his political future by openly criticizing them. He has been willing, however, to stake that future on Latin America policy, for reasons both personal and political. Rubio reportedly played a key role in torpedoing a potential US deal with Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro early last year, elbowing Trump adviser Rick Grenell out of the way in order to push for regime change. While that deal wasn't struck with Maduro, it now seems to have been struck with his deputy, Delcy Rodríguez—a result far short of installing the anti-Chavista opposition that Rubio desired. And though he's managed to keep his distance from the administration's worst messes, Rubio now finds himself holding the bag for a policy of outright imperial extraction, which is not exactly an inspiring basis for a future presidential campaign. But if he can guide this policy toward regime change in Cuba, as he appears to be doing, this could provide a strong argument for his own presidency.

Rubio's defenders argue his transformation was less dramatic than it seems because he was never fully a neocon.

Rubio has said publicly that if JD Vance runs for president—which, in the absence of an earth-destroying meteor strike, he will—Rubio would support him. But no one should put any stock in that. Rubio surprised everyone when he ran against his early political mentor, Jeb Bush, in the 2016 primaries. And declaring his support for a Vance candidacy is a smart way to keep things cool in the White House and tamp down Washington journalists' incessant score-keeping.

The truth is that Rubio has always been a shape-shifter. In a *Tampa Bay Times* profile published just before Rubio lost the 2016 primaries to Trump, journalist Alex Leary wrote, "The traits of Rubio's success, as they often are in politics, make up the foundations of his failings. Impatience. Ambition. Opportunism." The article quotes Tony DiMatteo, a Florida Republican who was instrumental in Rubio's rise, and who summed him up this way: "He is extremely skilled and ambitious. He is also extremely not loyal." N

MAKE INTERNATIONALISM GREAT AGAIN

Trump's War

SPENCER ACKERMAN

The president's embrace of resource imperialism abroad and ICE's emergence as a death squad at home have a common ancestor. Only the total abolition of the DHS can restore freedom.

In January 2026, Donald Trump's foreign and domestic policies achieved a certain synergy.

Following a months-long naval buildup off the coast of Venezuela, US Special Operations forces invaded the country, kidnapped its president, Nicolás Maduro, and decapitated his authoritarian socialist regime. Then Trump kept US weapons trained on Caracas to pressure Maduro's vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, into giving him control over some of the world's largest oil fields. These acts of naked imperialism were a reversal of Trump's repudiation of US regime-change efforts as a presidential nominee. But only a few on the right, such as Senator Rand Paul, expressed any discomfort with this blatant about-face. Trump immediately made it clear that he would not stop at Venezuela. "We have a big armada next to Iran," he said to reporters in late January as the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* moved into position in the Middle East. "Bigger than Venezuela." On February 28, Trump used that armada to launch, alongside Israel, an illegal, unprovoked war of aggression against Iran, with the aim of destroying the Islamic Republic.

Trump has also advanced US designs on Cuba, Gaza, and Greenland. He bombed Somalia repeatedly in January, continuing an onslaught that began in 2025 and has received far less media attention. And as the administration's foreign policy grows more openly acquisitive, its domestic policy grows more overtly aggressive as it carries out what amounts to an occupation of Minnesota.

A task force consisting of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection has invaded the Twin Cities, in defiance of state and local elected leadership. ICE and CBP agents demand that nonwhite residents prove their citizenship, kidnap children as young as 2 years old, and murder citizens who get in their way, all in the name of "law enforcement." They have shown that they will refuse to be bound by any law or tradition that inhibits their agenda. The architect of Trump's mass-deportation agenda, White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller, described Alex Pretti, a nurse whom five Border Patrol agents had subdued before a sixth shot him in the back, as a "domestic terrorist," repeating what Kristi Noem, the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), said of Renee Good, whom an ICE agent had killed in Minneapolis two weeks earlier.

Calling people who seek to protect their neighbors "terrorists" provides a crucial clue to the lineage that has led to Minnesota, Venezuela, and now Iran. The so-called War on Terror, a period many think of as having ended, shapes and enables Trump's aggressions in ways both structural and direct. The Delta Force raid on Maduro's fortified compound followed on decades of experience—and increased budgets—conducting similar raids in Iraq and Afghanistan. The ICE and CBP agents who have descended on Minnesota are kitted out in the kind of military-style camouflage and body armor that Iraqis and Afghans would recognize. The operation's initial targets—Black immigrant Muslims from much-bombed Somalia—represent a trifecta of cohorts that were villainized by the nativist politics that the War on Terror revitalized. Both supporters and critics of the Minnesota deployment have compared it to a counterinsurgency campaign. Miller, who was also behind the kidnapping of Maduro, began his rise to White House deputy chief of staff through the ranks of the far right as a campus activist against Islam. Like Trump, Miller has long understood how to take post-9/11 fearmongering about Muslims and direct it toward nonwhite immigrants more broadly.

While many elements of the War on Terror shape Trump's actions, the significance of the backlash against American power that the War on Terror inspired has, dangerously, not sunk in. After Trump demanded that Denmark cede Greenland to the US as imperial tribute, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney drew a rare ovation at the World Economic Forum in Davos for a speech abandoning the "pleasant fiction" that the "rules-based international order" was anything other than a vehicle for US prerogatives. Carney told Europeans horrified at being treated as the sort of foreign possession they themselves used to seize, "We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition." But with an insurgency yet to develop in Venezuela, and with NATO hustling to secure a deal to prevent a US move on Greenland, Trump has encountered little to deter him from his mode of imperialism. We are now seeing the consequences of that in Iran, and it's ominous for the region—and beyond.

Historians will spend decades debating the exact moment when the US empire discredited itself and irrevocably hobbled

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ILLUSTRATION BY **BRIAN STAUFFER**

on Terror

The tools of the War on Terror must be destroyed before Trump uses them to finish building his world order.

the international law that it masquerades as. Carney marked it at the Greenland crisis. Many others mark it at the beginning of Israel's US-sponsored genocide in Gaza in October 2023. I would offer that it's the War on Terror—corresponding as it does with all but the first 10 years of US global dominance—that defines American power during its period of supremacy. It is an era in which the United States inflicted sustained violence throughout the Global South and called it "order." But the waves of resistance that US actions generated exposed American weakness. Resentment over the agonies of the War on Terror played an enormous role in Trump's rise to power.

Every historical era is shaped by its predecessor. The War on Terror was shaped by the Cold War, and it now shapes the empire Trump is constructing. That makes the path of resistance to this new era of imperialism clear: The tools of the War on Terror must be destroyed before Trump uses them to finish building his world order, at home and abroad.

Stifling dissent: The Trump administration has justified ICE's violence against those it deems its enemies by labeling them as "terrorists."

Trump's unpopularity, both nationally and globally, is no constraint on his administration's ambitions. Secretary of State Marco Rubio delivered for his Miami-based Cuban American milieu by ousting Maduro. Venezuela's oil subsidies to Havana make it the crucial domino to topple in pursuit of the Cuban émigrés' supreme aspiration since 1959. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the administration seeks to do exactly that this year.

Notwithstanding the recent talk about his "Donroe Doctrine," Trump does not confine his imperial project to what the State Department recently called "our hemisphere." On January 27, Trump threatened to end US aid to Iraq if that country's parliament restores the troublesome Nouri al-Maliki to power, right after the Iraqis agreed to take thousands of Islamic State prisoners who were being held by the collapsing US-backed Kurdish forces in Syria.

Decapitating and coercing a regime instead of overthrowing it is a departure from recent modes of US imperialism. But Trump is also pursuing the familiar versions. His "Board of Peace" proposal places him atop a new, US-selected international coalition—one that includes Israel—that will govern Gaza like a 21st-century version of the British Mandate that gave Great Britain control over Palestine. Not only will Palestinian survivors of the Israeli genocide lose what remains of their sovereignty, but according to documents acquired by Sharif Abdel Kouddous of *Drop Site News*, they will be concentrated into "planned communities" built to monitor every aspect of their lives through "biometric surveillance, checkpoints, monitoring of purchases, and educational programs promoting normalization with Israel." The Board of Peace also has value to Trump beyond the Levant: It's being floated as a program to replace crucial functions of the United Nations and further undermine the creaking international institutions that Trump considers unfit for the new era.

Another Trumpian innovation has been a lack of interest in manufacturing consent for any of this. One reason is the persistent rhetoric of the War on Terror: Trump simply called Maduro's government a "terrorist organization," much as Noem and Miller did to justify the executions of Good and Pretti, and much as Trump did in his first term when describing the protesters who marched against the killing of George Floyd in 2020. When Pretti's status as a gun owner wobbled conservatives' faith in ICE, MAGA strategist Steve Bannon, who occasionally postures as an opponent of endless war, doubled down on the "terrorist" rhetoric on his podcast. All of it attests to how durably the politics of counterterrorism has stifled dissent, intimidated opposition, and enabled state violence—and to how well Bannon, Trump, and MAGA learned from the ever-shifting targets of the War on Terror that, ultimately, the terrorists are whoever the powerful insist they are.

Of course, Trump can also rely on a pliant media to color inside the lines he draws. After the Caracas raid, mainstream news outlets breathlessly foregrounded its tactical acumen and backgrounded the reality that the US had once again overthrown a sovereign head of state to seize that country's oil resources. As the US sent sea and air forces to the Middle East in preparation for military action against Iran, the coverage was as bellicose and hidebound as during the buildup to the Iraq invasion. "Before Any Strike on Iran, U.S. Needs to Bolster Air Defenses in Mideast" read a typical *Wall Street Journal* headline. You didn't learn anything in that article about what would happen in the aftermath of an attack on Iran—an omission reminiscent of the disinterest that 2003-era journalism had in what would happen after George W. Bush overthrew Saddam Hussein.

It has become fashionable to speak of Minnesota as the War on Terror coming home. The truth is that the War on Terror was always being waged simultaneously at home and overseas. Federal forces targeted non-Muslim immigrant communities along with Muslim ones as soon as the Twin Towers fell on 9/11. Not only were ICE and CBP created in that climate, but as early as the multi-state raids on Swift meatpacking plants in 2006, ICE was terrorizing working-class immigrants at scale. What is happening now is that US citizens are getting a taste of the treatment previously reserved for noncitizens—and for marginalized communities who live the vulnerable reality of conditional citizenship.

JOHN MOORE / GETTY IMAGES

ICE has all but announced that it is beyond the reach of the law. In addition to the slayings and the roundups—if such things can be set to the side—the agency has declared that it needs no judicial warrant to enter someone's home. On January 28, a judge identified at least 96

court orders that ICE had violated in that month alone.

ICE agents seem gleeful about inflicting the "reckoning and retribution" that Trump promised. One muttered "Fucking bitch" after executing Good; another applauded after Pretti was shot. According to a lawsuit, ICE delivered a detainee with a "catastrophic" head wound to a Minnesota hospital and claimed that he "purposefully ran headfirst into a brick wall." After an agent filmed a protester in Maine—apparently as part of an effort to feed a growing number of watch lists, according to the journalist Ken Klippenstein—he taunted, "We have a nice little database and now you're considered a domestic terrorist. So have fun with that." Good's killer, Jonathan Ross, is another example of the dialectical advance of the War on Terror: He joined the Border Patrol two years after returning from a combat tour in Iraq.

No amount of retraining can reform agencies that consider Americans an internal enemy. They must be abolished before they kill at greater scale. But the dominant faction in the Democratic Party is doing its best to avoid recognizing ICE for the threat that it is.

ICE is predicated on the post-9/11 idea that the civil offense of being undocumented ought to be met with a deportation force on the hunt in the interior of the country. Such operations cannot be divorced from nativist politics. Similarly, whatever legitimate border-control functions exist cannot be carried out by what the former Border Patrol agent Jenn Budd has called a "notoriously corrupt and racist federal agency." Alongside abolition must come accountability for the crimes that federal agents have committed during this crackdown. A central lesson of the War on Terror is that impunity for one atrocity—the "absolute immunity" that Vice President JD Vance falsely declared ICE agents to possess—is a green light for the next.

And it's not only the DHS. Months before Maduro's kidnapping, when the US military was blowing up fishing boats in the Caribbean, Adm. Mitch Bradley, then the commander of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), approved the shocking "double-tap" strike on survivors clinging to the wreckage of a boat that the US had just destroyed. Killing the shipwrecked is as blatant a violation of the Geneva Conventions as exists. The Pentagon's own manual on the law of war uses "orders to fire upon the shipwrecked" as an example of a "clearly illegal" command that service members have an affirmative duty to refuse. *The New York Times* reported that one of the aircraft involved in the strike was painted like a civilian plane. That is known as the war crime of "perfidy," and it's the central charge before the military commission trying the Guantánamo Bay detainee Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, accused of blowing up the USS *Cole* in 2000.

JSOC, the signature military command of the War on Terror, did not descend to this level overnight. Nearly 25 years of relentless deployment has resulted in a grisly moral rot that has recently been documented in books like David Philipps's *Alpha*, Matthew Cole's *Code Over Country*, and Seth Harp's *The Fort Bragg Cartel*. A command structure that orders the shipwrecked killed cannot be tolerated by any military that postures as lawful, to say nothing of honorable. Special operations must be reconfigured under one that can be trusted to obey the law.

These are only the most urgent tasks; there will be much abolitionist work beyond. The Patriot Act, Section 702, and the rest of the post-9/11 surveillance authorities have decimated privacy and accelerated a surveillance-capitalist industry that has spawned companies like Palantir that build AI tools for ICE. But even with public outrage coalescing around Minnesota, the Democratic leadership cannot bring itself to call for the abolition of ICE. Its objections to Trump's imperialism have been just as weak. At Davos, California Governor Gavin Newsom, a likely presidential hopeful, implored the Europeans to "have a backbone" against Trump, but Newsom also opposes abolishing ICE. New Hampshire Senator Jeanne Shaheen, a senior member of the Armed Services Committee, rejected the Pentagon's recent National Defense Strategy not for its unapologetic imperialism but for not "taking China seriously as the pacing challenge to our nation." Her Vermont colleague Peter Welch said that he supports "immigration enforcement, not these widespread roundups," as if the widespread roundups are not the fruit of immigration enforcement.

Backlash: The reactions to Trump's Greenland threats were swift, but they have not stopped the president from seeking to expand US territory.

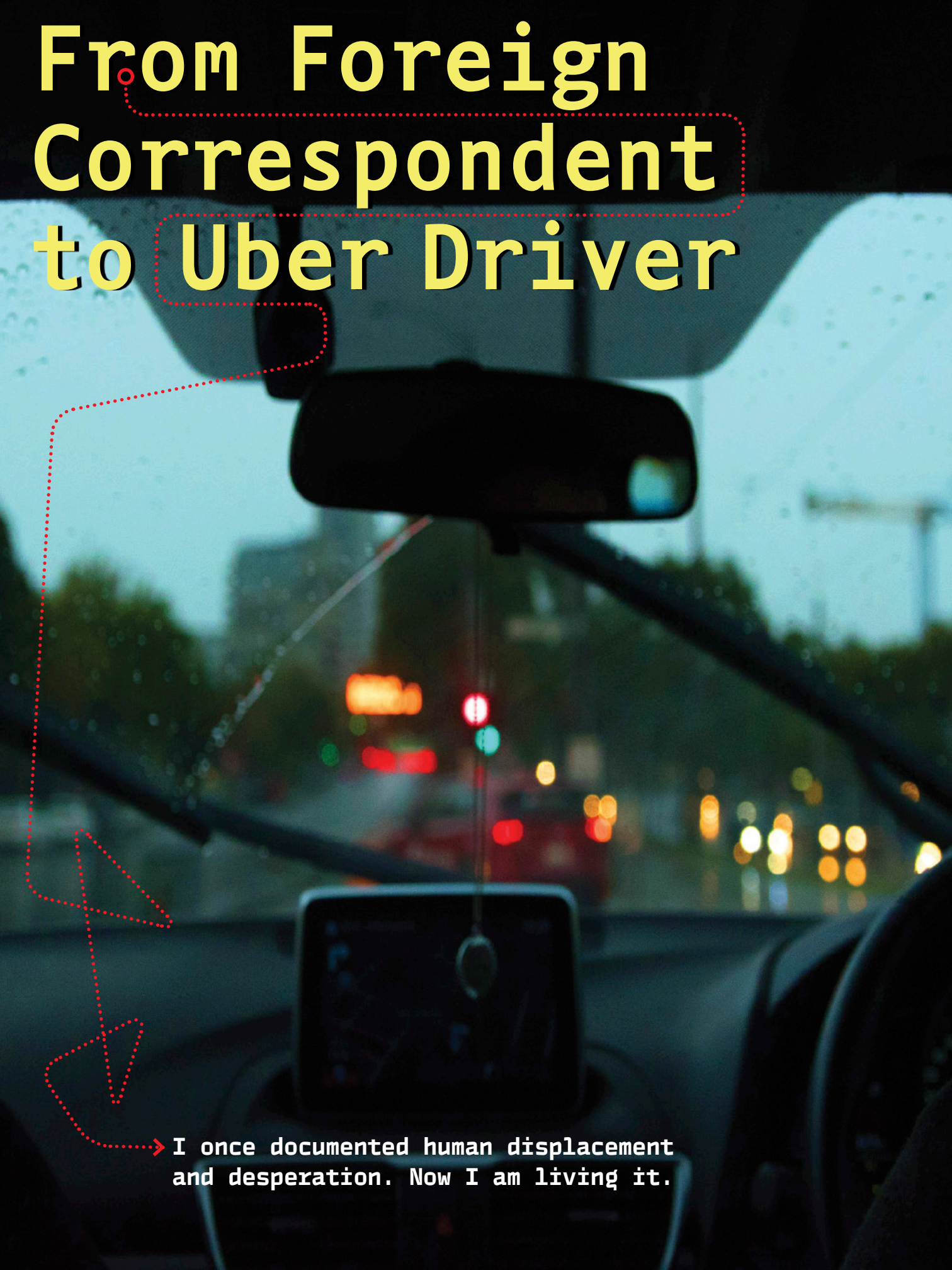
Trump's actions are reminiscent of the erratic bellicosity of collapsing empires. But the current Democratic Party cannot imagine a new order; it defaults to its Biden-esque preference for restoring a failed one. Representative Delia Rodriguez of Illinois is the rare Democrat who recognizes that the DHS "needs to be dismantled." She reflects the explosion in public support for abolishing ICE, at which the party leadership rolls its eyes. It is tragic and typical for the Democratic Party to cling to the politics of security at a moment when the security services—not Venezuela or Cuba or Iran—pose the greatest threat to American life and liberty.

No amount of retraining can reform agencies that consider Americans an internal enemy.

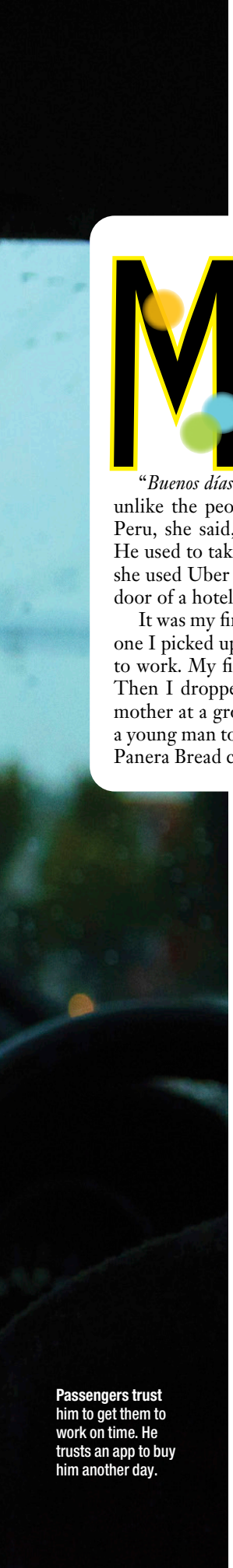
Through every stage of the War on Terror, the establishments of both parties and within the security bureaucracy rejected the argument that their enterprise threatens the very freedoms they claim to defend. They succeeded in banishing from respectability the calls to abolish the institutions, authorities, and ever-metastasizing operations derived from the War on Terror. The results of their victory are on display from Minnesota to Venezuela. Never again can America afford the delusion that what it does abroad is cordoned off from what it does at home. But that is a lesson for after the destruction of this latest phase of the American empire. N

ALESSANDRO RAMPAZZO / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

From Foreign Correspondent to Uber Driver



I once documented human displacement and desperation. Now I am living it.



Passengers trust him to get them to work on time. He trusts an app to buy him another day.

STEVE SCHERER

My phone beeped, alerting me to a ride. I clicked to accept, and a few minutes later I pulled up beside an older lady in a parking lot in Fairfax, Virginia, about half an hour outside Washington, DC. She exchanged a few words in Spanish with the man who was waiting with her in the early-morning darkness and then slid into the back seat of my Subaru Outback. The fare was going to earn me less than $7.

"*Buenos días*," I said. She said the same to me and was chatty, unlike the people I had picked up earlier. She was born in Peru, she said, and her husband had died two years ago. He used to take her everywhere and now he was gone, so she used Uber to get to work. I dropped her at the front door of a hotel.

It was my first morning as an Uber driver, and everyone I picked up was Latino or South Asian and heading to work. My first three customers were schoolteachers. Then I dropped a young woman at a hospital and her mother at a grocery store that had yet to open. I brought a young man to a large auto mechanic's garage, another to a Panera Bread chain restaurant, and a woman to the open back door of a strip-mall diner.

I made $130 in a little less than five hours. Since I'm 55 and have the bladder of a 3-year-old, I had to find a place to pee three times. "Welcome to Donald Trump's America," I muttered to myself as I whipped into a city park to take a leak behind a tree.

I didn't know the immigration status of any of my clients. But I wondered: How is the misguided and aggressive targeting of the very people who serve us breakfast, teach our children, fix our cars, clean our hotel rooms, and comfort our sick "making America great"?

I have had a lot of questions since I returned to the United States to live and work on July 4, after having been away for 28 years. After serving as Reuters's Ottawa bureau chief for five years, my job was eliminated in a cost-cutting drive. I wanted to stay in Canada, where I owned a home and my kids attended the local schools, but I was unable to find a new job that would allow me to. Crossing the border didn't feel like a homecoming. America is as foreign to me today as Italy had been in 1998, when I started working there as a foreign correspondent.

It is a darker place now. In January, a mother of three and an intensive-care nurse were shot and killed on the streets of Minneapolis as they observed the federal agents seeking to deport hardworking people who dream of making a better life for their children. Instead of bringing murder charges against the shooters, the Department of Justice brought charges against two prominent Black journalists who were covering the protests.

Steve Scherer was a foreign correspondent for Bloomberg and Reuters for 26 years, based mostly in Rome. He is from Muncie, Indiana.

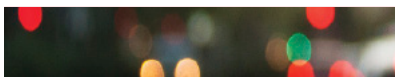
As a correspondent who covered politics on two continents, I have seen politicians in other countries use immigrants as scapegoats. It's always a deadly approach, especially for the immigrants. But Trump needs scapegoats to distract from the gaping wound that is the relentless shrinking of America's once-great middle class. That social grouping once included me. But not anymore.

In Canada, I made about $130,000 a year. In America, driving for Uber, I'm unlikely to exceed the $38,680 a year that is the federal poverty guideline for a family of five, and it takes twice that much to live comfortably in Northern Virginia.

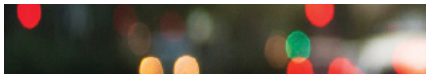
In my previous jobs, I interviewed prime ministers and CEOs and documented humanitarian disasters for media organizations with a global reach. Now I provide a basic service, and I wait for my phone to beep.

For most of my life, my movement has given me both agency and freedom. Now, other people's movement is a means for my survival.

I see my own fragility reflected in the people climbing into my back seat: widows, migrants, parents—workers stitching together lives on the margins. We are all improvising, all one broken transmission or missed paycheck away from



Trump needs scapegoats to distract from the gaping wound that is the relentless shrinking of America's once-great middle class.



I am no longer observing this precarious world from the outside. Now I'm inside it, dependent on an algorithm to find me passengers.

something even worse. For the first time in my life, I am not observing this precarious world from the outside, notebook in hand. I am inside it, dependent on an algorithm to find me passengers and map my destinations, measuring my worth in $5 increments.

As a journalist, I depended on taxi drivers to help me do my job. When Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau visited the White House in November 2021, I took an Uber to Pennsylvania Avenue. When Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi testified during his corruption trial in May 2003, I took a cab to the Milan courthouse. When I interviewed Romano Prodi ahead of Italy's 2006 national election, in which he narrowly defeated Berlusconi, I took a cab to party headquarters.

After years of documenting other people's deadly migration journeys, the author is closer to understanding that kind of desperation.

For several years, I covered the deadliest migration route in the world, across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy or Malta from the northern coast of Africa. An estimated 26,000 people have died attempting this passage since 2014—roughly half the number of Americans who died in the Vietnam War. It is also where there have been the most disappearances. Only Neptune, the Roman god of the sea, knows how many.

During the time I was documenting the contours of human displacement, I didn't really understand what would drive a person to attempt such a dangerous journey, especially with children in tow. Now I am closer to understanding that kind of desperation.

In 2014, I sailed on the *San Giorgio*, a 436-foot Italian Navy vessel. The *San Giorgio* was part of an Italian rescue mission with the Latin name *Mare Nostrum* (Our Sea), which began after a shipwreck near the Italian island of Lampedusa killed more than 360 men, women, and children. The operation saved 150,000 people, but it was suspended after a year under pressure from countries including France, Germany, Britain, and the Netherlands—where most of the migrants settled after being rescued. Right-leaning, anti-immigrant parties were gaining ground.

Nongovernmental organizations took over maritime rescues after that. In 2017, I boarded the *Aquarius*, which was run by two NGOs. It was a busy time for sea crossings. In one morning, within sight of the Libyan coast, the *Aquarius* picked up 560 people in six massive rubber boats reinforced with a plywood floor. They hailed from at least a dozen countries, including Nigeria, Sudan, Morocco, and Bangladesh.

After everyone was safely out of the dinghies, the crew announced in various languages, "Libya is over." The migrants cheered because for most of them, Libya had been hell on earth. Libya descended into chaos after Muammar Gaddafi's ouster in 2011, allowing people smuggling to take root among the rival factions and making it a popular transit point to Europe. Migrants were often detained there for months, crowded into warehouses and given little food and water. Men were forced to work without pay. Sometimes gangs of smugglers sold migrants to other smugglers like slaves. The men were beaten and sometimes shot to death if they tried to escape. Women were raped and arrived on board the rescue ships pregnant. I know all this because I talked to them and they told me their stories, which I published.

They literally had nothing but the clothes on their backs—not even shoes. Among the children rescued was a 5-year-old girl, the age of my oldest daughter at the time. She was terrified and crying when she was lifted from the rubber boat, but she quickly relaxed on board the *Aquarius*, and her eyes lit up when the crew gave her fruit, snacks, and a stuffed animal to cuddle.

After the migrants had got some rest, and after they'd had time to understand that the most dangerous part of their trip was over, the lights twinkling on the Sicilian coast came into view. Pointing and shouting, they erupted into cheers and then song. Beating on drums furnished by the ship's crew, the migrants sang and danced well into the night. As I watched the celebration, I couldn't wipe the smile off my face.

ARIS MESSINIS / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

This story was copublished with and supported by the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, a nonprofit journalism organization.

We docked in Calabria, and I caught a flight back to Rome. As the taxi sped through the city, I couldn't wait to see my 3-year-old twins—a boy and a girl—and my slightly older daughter. When I walked through the front door, they rushed to me. "Papa!" they shouted. I hugged them tight. I'd never felt so lucky in my life.

AFTER REUTERS transferred me to Canada in 2019, I realized a professional dream. I had become a bureau chief in a country in the G7, which is the bloc of wealthy nations that seeks a common stance on the main economic and political challenges facing the world; Italy and the United States are also members. A couple years later, I convinced my Italian wife that we should apply for permanent residency, which would give us both the right to work in Canada indefinitely. All I had was a work permit allowing me to work for my news agency.

I hired an immigration lawyer to put everything together and I waited for an invitation to apply. Canada's immigration process is governed by a point system and is by invitation only.

A few months later, I was fired amid budget cuts in the struggling news industry. I was not alone. For the better part of a decade, as newsrooms were downsized, I received farewell e-mails from dozens of colleagues. I drafted my own such message in March of 2024. With a note of bitterness, I urged my coworkers to "take care of yourselves so that you can take care of your loved ones.… In the blink of an eye, my children grew into teenagers, and I realized I'd been 'on call' their entire lives."

South of the border, in the United States, more than 10,000 journalists lost their jobs between 2022 and 2024, according to *Nieman Reports*. Last year, the trend continued with 2,254 cuts, according to Challenger, Gray & Christmas. Google, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok have gobbled up the advertising dollars, and campy 30-second videos by influencers now deliver what passes for news on social media.

Trump and members of his administration regularly attack credible journalists for spreading "fake news," undermining society's trust in journalists and in facts—both of which are vital in a functioning democracy. Jeff Bezos, a billionaire who cut nearly half of the newsroom of *The Washington Post*, one of America's most important newspapers, has put money and currying favor with Trump ahead of democracy.

At the time, losing my job slammed the door on my wishes to stay in Canada. It weakened my immigration status, and I would never be asked to apply for permanent residency. The great and kind Canada, the country where I thought I would live at least until my children were adults, had chewed me up and spit me out. I couldn't even drive for Uber.

When I lost my job, my entire family lost access to Canada's publicly funded healthcare coverage, and there is virtually no private health insurance there. We had no family doctor, and, God forbid, if any of us had to go to the hospital, it would have to be paid for out of pocket. Despite having good local contacts, I couldn't find an employer willing to sponsor me. The clock was ticking on our legal right to reside in Canada. We were no longer welcome.

America is a darker place today than it was when the author left to work in Italy, with deadly clashes in the streets between ICE and protesters.

In June 2025, I sold my house, the first I had ever owned. Not knowing how long it would take me to find a job in Washington, I put my family on a plane in Montreal. They flew to Italy, where they could live rent-free in a family member's home, where they'd be covered by state healthcare, and where the kids could go to high school. After I said goodbye to them, I wept uncontrollably in the airport parking lot, not knowing when I would see them again.

After a life spent both crossing borders and freely reporting on those who struggled to overcome them, I didn't expect one to rise up beneath my feet.

After a life spent crossing borders, I didn't expect one to rise up beneath my feet.

I HAD LEFT THE STATES TO teach English and work as a freelance journalist in Romania in the summer of 1997, when Bill Clinton was in the White House. *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *ER* were the most-watched TV shows. *Men in Black* was a summer blockbuster. The Internet barely existed and was used mainly for e-mail. Business executives had car phones, but no one I knew had a cell phone. Back then, I shared an apartment in Colorado Springs with my best friend from college, and we each paid about $300 in rent.

(Scherer, continued on page 59)

STEPHEN MATUREN / GETTY IMAGES

Natural Man

Russ Feingold is on a new mission: preserving nature to save the planet.

JOHN NICHOLS

TOM WILLIAMS / *CQ ROLL CALL* VIA AP IMAGES

Russ Feingold has seen the headlines about how the Trump administration is abandoning the struggle to save the planet. Each one is more dire than the last: "Trump's Latest Plan to Undo the 'Holy Grail' of Climate Rules: Never Mind the Science"; "Trump's Anti-Green Agenda Could Lead to 1.3 Million More Climate Deaths"; and "One Year After Trump's Inauguration, the Damage to Environmental Policy Is Unprecedented." The former US senator from Wisconsin, who served for almost two decades as one of the chamber's most ardent advocates for climate action, publicly rebuked Trump's January 7 withdrawal of the United States from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC): "Nothing in the Constitution grants the president any such power." That cry of frustration echoes the sentiments of many environmentalists in a moment when the Trump administration seems to be reversing all the progress that Feingold and others fought to achieve after the awakening that Americans experienced on the first Earth Day in 1970. Not only has the president distanced the country from global initiatives to battle climate change and other forms of environmental degradation, but politically and economically powerful figures, such as Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates, have been sending mixed signals about existential environmental issues. Feingold refers to the current state of affairs as "this horrible nightmare that we're going through."

Yet he has not given up on the prospect of building international coalitions to save the planet. In fact, he is actively forging them as a globe-trotting citizen diplomat on behalf of one of the most underreported yet strikingly successful environmental initiatives of our time. As the chair of the global steering committee of the Campaign for Nature—an international effort based on the tenet that "the rapid loss of biodiversity threaten[s] the very existence of humanity on Earth"—Feingold has emerged as a high-profile advocate for the ambitious agenda outlined in the somewhat clumsily named yet vital Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). This framework was agreed to in 2022 at the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. The GBF, which aims to formally protect at least 30 percent of the world's land and water by 2030, has been described as the "Paris Agreement for nature"—a reference to the better-known 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, the landmark international treaty that pledges "to limit the [global] temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels."

The history on all this goes back a long way, to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, where 108 heads of state and government laid the groundwork for what they hoped would be sustainable environmental development. That meeting outlined the UNFCCC and the Convention on Biological Diversity, and it began the discussions that led to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), proposals that were designed to address the interconnected concerns of what has been described as a "triple planetary crisis" of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. These agreements did not represent the end of the fight for sustainability, but rather the beginning of processes that would seek the formal ratification of treaties and the international buy-in to implement them. In the wake of the Paris Agreement

"Somehow *nature* still has not become a dirty word. They managed to turn *climate* into a dirty word."

—Russ Feingold

and the work that extended from it, progress on climate change would grab headlines for many years. But now the headlines announce, as *The New York Times* did on February 9 of this year, "Trump Allies Near 'Total Victory' in Wiping Out U.S. Climate Regulation."

While many climate activists despair at how Trump and his international allies are stymieing serious responses to the climate crisis, the Campaign for Nature and its allies have had considerable, if far from complete, success in pursuing the GBF's global target.

The campaign was founded in 2018 in partnership with the Wyss Campaign for Nature, a $1.5 billion conservation project under the umbrella of the Swiss billionaire Hansjörg Wyss's eponymous foundation. (Wyss is one of the world's most prolific donors to environmental causes.) The Campaign for Nature has focused squarely on efforts to get world leaders to support and fund the "30 by 30" goal—an ambitious target at a time when only 16 percent of the world's land and 8 percent of its seas are under formal protection. It has also emphasized the importance of including Indigenous peoples and local communities in these initiatives, a longtime concern of Feingold's. The campaign's organizers and allies are not naïve. "If we are to meet the 30 by 30 goal," the group explains on its website, "world leaders need to dramatically increase and expand protected and conserved areas, ramp up funding and ensure the full inclusion of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in conservation measures in order to protect the natural world."

And yet they must continue to advance toward the goal by attracting support not just from more historically progressive nations with records of leading on environmental issues but from countries that—even if they do not embrace Trump's most extreme stances—have been uneven in their commitment to address the climate crisis.

A rolling stone: Feingold has been on a whirlwind tour to gather signatories for a groundbreaking international climate treaty.

How can the cause of nature be advanced at a time when efforts to address interconnected environmental crises are being so aggressively blocked by right-wing politicians and fossil-fuel-industry apologists? "Somehow *nature* still has not become a dirty word, believe it or not," Feingold told me. "They managed to turn *climate* into a dirty word. And, of course, they are interrelated, and they are both essential. But there is an interesting way in which a lot of people feel comfortable working on the nature issue who may be edgy about the climate issues. So our goal is to link the two."

To that end, Feingold is doing what he used to do in the Senate, where he became well-known for his rapprochement with conservatives despite his progressive bona fides. Capitalizing on the fact that "nature is still something that crosses not just party lines but ideological lines," Feingold leads a steering committee that includes progressives such as former Irish president Mary Robinson along with Iván Duque, who served as the president of Colombia from 2018 to 2022 and whom Feingold rightly describes as "very conservative." Malcolm Turnbull, the former prime minister of Australia, is another, moderately conservative member of the committee, along with Lord Zac Goldsmith, who served in the cabinets of British Conservative Party governments led by Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, and Rishi Sunak—not exactly the credentials of a "woke" internationalist.

Feingold has worked with the campaign for Nature since 2019, but he stepped up his involvement, and his global travels, after leaving his previous position as president of the American Constitution Society (a progressive counterpart to the Federalist Society) in the spring of 2025. As a roving ambassador for the campaign over the past year, he has maintained a grueling schedule of meetings with world leaders to persuade them to sign on to the efforts to achieve the GBF's 30-by-30 goal. And it's working.

At a moment when Trump has shocked world leaders with talk of grabbing Greenland and annexing Canada as part of his scheming to dominate mineral-rich lands and the Arctic waters adjoining them, Feingold and his allies are working to ratify and sustain an agreement that could "counter, potentially, what Trump wants to do in terms of scooping up the oceans."

That agreement, known as the High Seas Treaty, outlines a groundbreaking strategy to protect ocean life in international waters. The plan was finalized under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea by an intergovernmental conference at the UN in 2023. It was part of a broader global effort to protect marine biodiversity and maintain the integrity of ocean ecosystems in an era of overfishing, climate change, and ever-expanding resource demands. Greenpeace hailed the initiative as "the biggest conservation victory ever." But to seal the deal, the treaty needed to be formally ratified by 60 countries in order to come into force. The process moved slowly, and by February 2025, only 18 of the 60 countries required had signed on.

That's where Feingold and his colleagues on the global steering committee stepped up, along with other members of the High Seas Alliance, an international coalition of environmental groups (including Greenpeace, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Environmental Defense Fund) that focuses on protecting what it calls "the 50 percent of the planet that is the High Seas—the global ocean beyond national jurisdiction."

The former senator traveled exhaustively to capitals and conferences around the world in 2025, visiting South Korea, Singapore, Guyana,

JD LASICA

Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, and other locales. It was an exercise in international diplomacy that was designed to jump-start the work of getting governments to sign on. In country after country, on continent after continent, his simple yet direct message was "OK, let's get this thing ratified."

Feingold goes out of his way to emphasize that he was part of a broader initiative, one that relied on the many networks built over many years by conservation and environmental groups. Unlike other political figures, he does not suggest that he was the only force for progress. Yet he brought something powerful to his conversations with the elected and appointed officials who needed to be brought on board. He wasn't meeting with them as an environmental expert or a scientist, but as a former legislator and diplomat who spoke the language of geopolitics and used humor and even references to the historical and cultural ties between particular countries and his home state of Wisconsin to build relationships. At the heart of every conversation, though, was an emphasis on how essential the treaty was to those countries whose support was needed to ratify it: "Two-thirds of the surface of the earth wasn't regulated at all by international law. There was no treaty. There was the Law of the Sea, which we [the United States] are not a party to, unbelievably, but that really only has to do with extraterritorial waters around the country, about 200 miles."

Feingold brought this sense of urgency to every one of his meetings with environmental and finance ministers, spelling out how, after two decades of negotiations and piecemeal progress, it was time to get cracking. "And sure enough, we went from 21 countries ratified when I went to Korea [in the spring of 2025] to getting to the 60 needed to ratify [the treaty] at [the UN General Assembly] in September."

Four months later, on January 17, in what UN Secretary-General António Guterres welcomed as a "historic achievement for the ocean and for multilateralism," the High Seas Treaty became a legally binding international agreement. When Feingold and I spoke a few days later, he was enthusiastic about the news that the treaty had gone into force. But he was not taking a victory lap. In fact, he was headed for New Zealand and Australia—still working, with his allies in the Campaign for Nature and the High Seas Alliance, to broaden the international coalition. "In the last few months," he said, "we've been working together and managed to get up to 83 countries, and we think we can get to over 100 before the first conference of the parties, COP. It'll be COP1 for the High Seas Treaty."

COURTESY OF RUSS FEINGOLD

Getting broad buy-in for the treaty, and for other components of the GBF, is vital, Feingold adds, pointing to the need for increased financing to support the GBF's ambitious targets—which include mobilizing at least $30 billion annually for developing countries by 2030. These efforts need to accelerate because, as Tom Dillon, the senior vice president for environment and crosscutting initiatives at the Pew Charitable Trusts, explains, "Achieving the global 30-by-30 goal requires not just ambition but equally bold investment in nature."

The United States is unlikely to help with the financing or to ratify the High Seas Treaty anytime soon. But many countries whose leaders have often allied with Trump, such as Hungary and the Philippines, have signed on, which Feingold sees as a critical accomplishment.

After all, he knows a thing or two about unexpected political and policy breakthroughs. Feingold made a name for himself during three terms in the Senate as the rare politician who understood how to overcome partisan and ideological divisions. Born into a progressive Wisconsin family, the Rhodes Scholar and Harvard-educated lawyer was elected to the state Legislature at age 29. Ten years later, he defeated an incumbent Republican to win a US Senate seat in 1992. Over the next 18 years, he developed a reputation as an ardent defender of civil liberties (he was the only senator to oppose the Patriot Act in the days following the September 11 attacks) and a stickler for ethics. Often regarded as a maverick, Feingold formed a cross-party alliance with the Arizona Republican Senator John McCain in the 1990s and led a national movement to regulate money in politics that culminated in the passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (better known as the McCain-Feingold Act).

Cooperating on climate: Feingold and Guyanese President Mohamed Irfaan Ali at the Global Biodiversity Alliance Summit in 2025.

"Two-thirds of the surface of the earth wasn't regulated at all by international law. There was no treaty."
—Russ Feingold

As his efforts to reach across the aisle grabbed headlines, Feingold gained a reputation within the chamber, and among environmental groups, as a champion for clean air, clean water, and conservation who was determined to take on the fossil-fuel industry. Proud to hold the seat once occupied by Gaylord Nelson, the founder of Earth Day, Feingold brought Nelson's conservation ethic into the 21st century. He took a leading role in Senate efforts to prevent oil drilling in the

(Nichols, continued on page 51)

TAKING AIM AT OVERPAID CEOs

Landmark ballot initiatives in San Francisco and Los Angeles seek to hike taxes on corporations with huge gaps between CEO and worker pay.

SARAH ANDERSON

THE ESPRESSO MACHINE IN STARBUCKS CEO BRIAN NICCOL'S PERSONAL office in Newport Beach, California, retails for $14,000—almost as much as the $14,674 annual wage of the coffee giant's median worker, a part-time barista.

In other words, nearly half of Starbucks's 361,000 employees would have to spend every dime they make over an entire year to buy just one of these deluxe caffeine-delivery systems. In 2024, Niccol pocketed $95.8 million in compensation. With that windfall, he could have purchased 6,843 units of his favorite coffee maker—more than enough to luxuriously outfit every single elementary-school teachers' lounge in the state of California.

So go the absurdities of our ever more unequal world.

Ordinary Americans across the political spectrum have been fuming about the obscene disparities in pay between corporate America's CEOs and workers ever since those gaps began to soar in the Reagan years. But today, with budget cuts threatening the food and medical aid that so many working families depend on, the corrosive social cost of this exploding inequality has come into particularly sharp relief.

At many of our nation's largest employers, median salaries have fallen below the $36,777 family-of-three income threshold for Medicaid benefits. Those employers, our research at the Institute for Policy Studies finds, are familiar names to most Americans: Starbucks, Home Depot, Autozone, Chipotle, Target, Walmart, and other corporate giants.

Fair? Starbucks CEO Brian Niccol made $95.8 million in 2024.

RIGHT: EUGENE GOLOGURSKY / GETTY IMAGES

Pay practices at big businesses like these don't just shaft workers. They allow corporations to shift their employees' basic living costs onto taxpayers, which means we're all subsidizing Brian Niccol's ocean-view lattes—and the corporate jet he uses to commute to the company's headquarters in Seattle.

All of us are also subsidizing the $47 billion that Lowe's has spent on stock buybacks over the past six years, an outlay that artificially inflates its CEO's stock-based pay. And don't forget those three DoorDash cofounders: They've each become billionaires while their "Dashers"—the workers who deliver the food—earn an average of $12.23 an hour.

How can we crack down on all this executive excess? A greater union presence in the United States would certainly help: Countries with higher unionization rates tend to have narrower corporate pay gaps. But decades of fierce union-busting have reduced the share of union members among US private-sector workers to a mere 5.9 percent.

That reality has the US labor movement and its allies eyeing taxes as a tool for narrowing the pay divide—while at the same time raising much-needed revenue at every level of government. The basic idea: Companies with huge gaps between CEO and worker pay should pay more in taxes. And the wider their pay gap, the higher their tax bill should be.

Progressives in Congress have introduced legislation along these lines, such as, most notably, the Tax Excessive CEO Pay Act and the Curtailing Executive Overcompensation (or CEO) Act. A number of state legislatures, including in Michigan, have similar bills pending.

But the best opportunities for addressing this worker-pay injustice are opening up at the city level, with imaginative campaigns now underway in San Francisco and Los Angeles that are bringing the scandal of CEO pay straight to voters.

A decade ago, Portland, Oregon, became the first city to adopt a CEO-pay-related tax measure. Companies that operate there pay a higher local-profits tax if their CEO earns more than 100 times their workers' median pay, whether they're Walmart or Wells Fargo. This pioneering tax has generated an average of $5 million a year, and there's talk of increasing the rates.

Voters in San Francisco followed suit in 2020 by overwhelmingly passing a ballot measure to adopt their own tax on companies with a CEO/worker pay gap of more than 100 to 1. This Overpaid CEO Tax is a surtax added to the existing levies on a company's local "gross receipts," or total sales. The tax generated higher-than-expected revenue in its first years before business interests succeeded in watering it down via a broad tax "reform" in 2024.

In 2026, with federal funding cuts projected to blow a $220 million hole in San Francisco's budget, Stand Up for SF, a coalition of local advocacy groups and over a dozen unions, is aiming to substantially raise the rates that companies pay under the Overpaid CEO Tax. Signature-gathering is on track to qualify the proposal for the June 2 primary ballot. If approved, the strengthened Overpaid CEO Tax will likely generate at least $200 million in additional annual revenue.

But what if the measure is not approved? Brittany Hewett, a nurse at San Francisco General, fears for her patients. San Francisco General is a "safety net" hospital where well over half of the revenue comes from Medicaid, and the Trump administration's cuts in federal funding appear likely to cause as many as 3.4 million Californians to lose their Medicaid insurance. If that revenue is not replaced by money generated by the Overpaid CEO Tax, the hospital will face even tighter budget constraints. "Even if they don't cut nurses, what about the support staff? What about the people who clean hospital rooms?" asks Hewett, who is also a union

As budget cuts threaten food and medical aid, the social costs of massive pay gaps have come into sharp relief.

Sarah Anderson directs the Global Economy Project at the Institute for Policy Studies and is a coeditor of the IPS website Inequality.org.

steward with SEIU 1021. "The wait time to move out of the ER and into a room where my patients can get the specialized care they need can already be many hours, if not days. Especially for the elderly, longer waits mean longer recoveries."

In LA, a campaign led by organized labor to put a similar Overpaid CEO Tax on the November ballot is also gaining momentum. "The federal government is doing everything in its power to enrich billionaires and corporations while squeezing working-class families for every dime," says Víctor Sánchez, executive director of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy. "If our national leaders won't make these overpaid CEOs pay their fair share, then we will."

Like tobacco taxes, taxes on outrageous pay gaps curb a harmful practice while raising revenue for public services.

As in San Francisco, the Los Angeles proposal would impose a surtax on the local gross-receipts tax, kicking in at a lower CEO-to-worker pay ratio of 50 to 1. The campaign's researchers estimate that the Los Angeles Overpaid CEO Tax would generate more than $500 million in annual revenue, with the funds going to affordable housing, after-school programs, and expanded access to healthy food.

LA labor advocates are feeling confident about the initiative's chances. They're coming off of a May 2025 ballot victory for hotel and airport workers, whose minimum wage will rise to $30 an hour—the highest in the nation—by July 2028, in time for the start of the Los Angeles Olympic Games.

"In Los Angeles, we've shown again and again that when workers and community come together, we can win monumental victories—and the fight to pass the Overpaid CEO Tax will be no different," Sánchez says.

Overpaid CEOs, of course, are not taking this lying down. In both San Francisco and Los Angeles, they've deployed lobbyists to crush the labor-backed ballot campaigns. The San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, for its part, has amassed a $1 million war chest to push a "poison pill" ballot measure that would undercut the Overpaid CEO Tax under the guise of providing "small business tax relief." Never mind that the tax already exempts businesses with $1 billion or less in US gross receipts or 1,000 or fewer US employees.

The Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce and other local corporate lobbying groups, meanwhile, are pushing a ballot measure that would repeal the city's gross-receipts tax altogether, a nuclear option that would gouge an $800 million crater in LA's budget.

Corporate-friendly forces are also charging that the proposed tax increases would foist crushing burdens on companies, leaving them no choice but to cut jobs for workers and raise prices for consumers. That's a ludicrous argument. Companies would have a clear choice: either narrow their CEO/worker pay gaps to avoid the tax, or continue with their status quo and contribute more to the public services needed for a strong local economy.

Taxes on outrageous pay gaps are similar to tobacco taxes: They act as a curb on a harmful practice that has high social costs while also raising revenue for public services. Taxes related to CEO pay can even benefit corporations: The more that companies narrow their CEO/worker pay gaps, the more efficiently—and profitably—they can operate. Extensive research shows that extreme pay gaps lower employee morale and increase costly turnover rates.

In short, a tax on excessive CEO pay is a win-win-win for workers, corporate bottom lines, and the public at large. Yet corporations continue to threaten to pass the costs of such taxes on to consumers. Hewett, the San Francisco nurse, finds that "disgusting."

"This city is already a very expensive place to live," Hewett says. "If these corporations are not paying employees enough and are not paying their fair share of taxes, they're just contributing to the problem."

Lisandro Preza works at LAX as a cashier for Paradies Lagardère, a company that operates retail stores and restaurants at airports around the world. He works full-time and still feels just "one rent increase away" from losing his apartment.

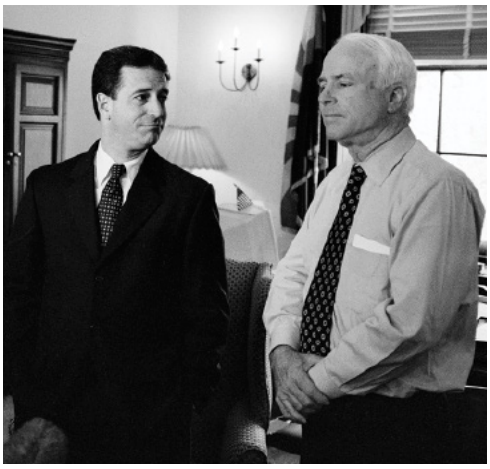
"Between skyrocketing housing costs and paying for the medication that keeps me alive, there's nothing left at the end of the month," Preza says. "If an Overpaid CEO Tax means big corporations finally pay their fair share so workers like me can afford housing and healthcare, that's not radical—that's survival." **N**

Put it to the voters: Supporters of the Overpaid CEO Tax initiative in Los Angeles rally in West Hollywood.

GENARO MOLINA / *LOS ANGELES TIMES* VIA GETTY IMAGES

(Nichols, continued from page 47)

Alaskan wilderness and championed the protection of pristine regions in the Lower 48, such as Minnesota's Boundary Waters, Wisconsin's Apostle Islands, and Utah's wilderness. Feingold eventually organized the Senate Wilderness and Public Lands Caucus, drawing both Democrats and Republicans into the conservation fight—often appealing to senators based on their personal and regional attachment to endangered lands. "I've had the good fortune to sea kayak the Apostle Islands, to canoe the Boundary Waters, and to hike in Utah wilderness," he once told *Grist* magazine. "My interest was always there." And as his work as a legislator and a diplomat took him to more remarkable natural places, Feingold recalled in our own conversation, nature "became an enormous passion for me. I always think of that line in [John Denver's] 'Rocky Mountain High': 'He was born in the summer of his 27th year, comin' home to a place he'd never been before.' And that's what it felt like—it felt like home, but I had not been there. And to me, it's about the most positive thing you could be doing right now at this very, very horrible time. So it does fit in with what I consider to be some of the favorite parts of my career that I was lucky enough to have." It also gave him a perspective on how to build unexpected alliances with his more conservative colleagues, at least some of whom shared his passion for protecting these places. That's a lesson he would eventually carry into his work with the Campaign for Nature.



Differences aside: Feingold and Republican John McCain sponsored a landmark bill on campaign-finance reform.

After Feingold lost his bid for reelection to the Senate in 2010, he went on to teach and lecture on law at Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, serving for a time as a senior fellow at Yale's Jackson School of Global Affairs and for five years as president of the American Constitution Society. But it was Feingold's diplomatic service that drew the attention of the Campaign for Nature. Then–Secretary of State John Kerry, who had noticed Feingold's work on the African-affairs subcommittee of the Foreign Relations Committee while he was in the Senate, tapped the Wisconsinite to serve as US special envoy for the Great Lakes region of Africa during the later years of Barack Obama's presidency. The connections Feingold made on the continent interested strategists looking to forge genuinely global and grassroots-focused networks for the protection of unspoiled wilderness and oceans.

"It was a combination of having had a high profile in Africa as a senator and then doing this work as an envoy," Feingold says. "And that's why this Campaign for Nature contacted me, because they said, 'OK, we don't really know enough people in Africa. We understand you can help us.' So the first thing I did was get them through to people like [former president] Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and [former president Olusẹgun] Ọbasanjọ of Nigeria and [former prime minister] Hailemariam [Desalegn] of Ethiopia. It started with me trying to help get those folks on board. And that worked out. And then they asked me to do a more global assignment, which is what I've been doing ever since, and it's what I'm doing now."

Brian O'Donnell, who previously worked with the Wilderness Society and the Conservation Lands Fund and now serves as the director of the Campaign for Nature, says, "Russ has made a real difference in helping us broaden our reach and message beyond scientists and environmental advocates to the decision makers who can make land and water protection a reality."

That will be even more important in the months and years to come, as Feingold works to get more countries to ratify and support agreements. Noting that "much of the world's remaining biodiversity is located in developing countries who will bear a disproportionate share of the responsibility and costs of saving precious biomes," the Campaign for Nature is pushing developed countries to contribute "their fair share of an internationally agreed commitment to provide $20 billion per year in biodiversity finance to developing countries."

As Mary Robinson, Feingold's colleague on the steering committee, has said, "The world is already spending $1.8 trillion each year on subsidizing industries that are destroying nature. The pledge of $20 billion a year is equivalent to only 1.1 percent, or about four days, of those subsidies. Wealthy governments have no excuse but to act with greater urgency."

Feingold shares this view, even as he recognizes that the United States is very much on the sidelines at this point. He maintains contact with many current and former US officials, such as Kerry and Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI), who are enthusiastic supporters of environmental causes. But he knows that's not where the powers that be in Washington are currently at; he acknowledges that getting US buy-in for nature or the climate is "still obviously a great struggle." At the same time, he holds out hope that progress on the international front—and perhaps US election results—could influence even some Republicans to come to the "commonsensical" conclusion that Trump's approach is not just shortsighted but isolating—and dangerous—for the United States.

"I'm appealing to people of all kinds who think of this as our common home."
—Russ Feingold

"I'm not a scientist [or a] leading environmentalist. But what I do know how to do is connect people [despite their] different philosophies—especially when they come together on something like nature," Feingold says. "Pope Francis had an encyclical—*Laudato si'*—10 years ago, where he referred to nature and the planet as our common home. And that's sort of my byword for this work: I'm appealing to people of all kinds who think of this as our common home." N

DAVID HUME KENNERLY / GETTY IMAGES

ELLA FANGER

the Salt Revival

A secretive labor-organizing tactic is going mainstream.

When you apply for a job as an "associate" at an Amazon warehouse, you don't have to attach a résumé or supply references. All you have to provide is your name and your Social Security number, and the automated hiring system conducts a basic background check within minutes. If you clear that, congratulations—you got the job! Next you're invited to a "hiring appointment" at a nondescript office building, where you shuffle into a line with dozens of other new hires, surrounded by banners in Amazon's signature blue emblazoned with the company's "Leadership Principles": "Bias for Action," "Learn and Be Curious," "Customer Obsession." You are photographed, drug-tested, and told, verbally, what your start date and schedule will be.

At no point are you asked, "Why do you want to work here?" When I went through these steps in the fall of 2022, my answer would have been "I want to build a union at Amazon." I was a "salt," a worker who gets a job in order to organize their workplace. Salting is a long-standing tactic of labor activists who seek to spark organizing from the shop floor. The origins of the term are debated—some say it connotes pouring salt in the wounds of capitalism to aggravate its contradictions. It could also derive from "salting a mine" to extract its valuable minerals (in this case, the collective potential of workers).

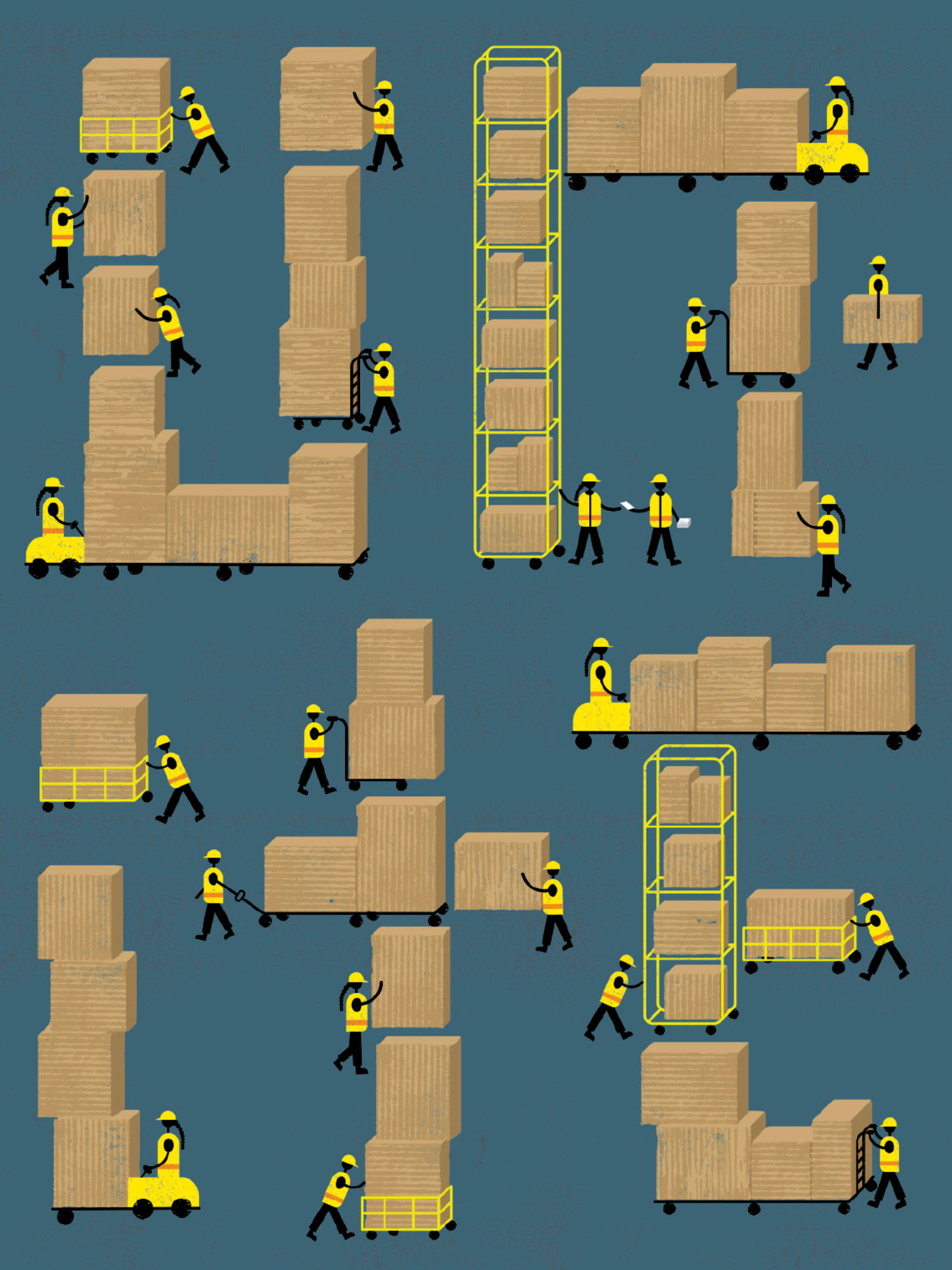
I first learned about it the week before my college graduation, over coffee with a classmate who had worked at an Amazon warehouse while taking time off from school during the pandemic. Now she and other organizers with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) were trying to recruit motivated individuals to get jobs in nonunion workplaces they saw as vital sites for building working-class power. I didn't know what I wanted to do when I got out of school, but I couldn't think of anything more worthwhile than to help build a union at one of the biggest and most powerful employers in the United States.

My first shift at Amazon that fall was 1:05 AM to 11:50 AM, the overnight so-called megacycle that makes one-day shipping possible. I worked at a delivery station, a smaller warehouse that employs around 150 associates (more during the peak periods before Prime Day and Christmas), where we scanned, pushed, and sorted packages according to the individual routes that drivers would take the next morning. In the early months of my time there, my "organizing" involved building relationships with my coworkers through bleary-eyed conversations over the mechanical churn of the conveyor belts or during our 5:15 AM lunch breaks. We talked about TV shows, dating, our families. My coworkers ranged in age from their late teens to their 60s, and there was a pretty even gender split. Some were immigrants; most were Black or Latino. They had ended up at Amazon for a number of different reasons. The night shift allowed people to take care of their kids or go to school during the day (sacrificing sleep, of course). The gig-ified way of picking up shifts and transferring between facilities via the employee app gave people flexibility—one of my coworkers liked that he could work at different sites around the country while living out of his van (like a less idealized version of *Nomadland*).

What we all shared were the hours working alongside one another night after night. We bonded over our frustrations with the workflow, or the company's clumsy attempts to boost employee morale, like the "Thanksgiving dinner"

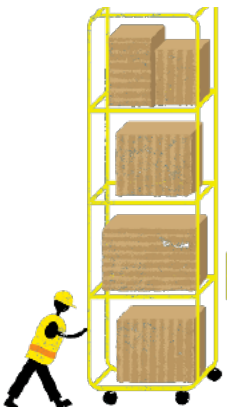
Ella Fanger is a writer and researcher based in Brooklyn.

ILLUSTRATION BY **MELINDA BECK**



The resurgence in salting comes at a time when just 11.2 percent of US workers are represented by unions.

served at the end of the 12-hour shift (we ate boxed mashed potatoes and wobbly slices of canned cranberry, and the turkey carcass sat in the break-room fridge for weeks afterward). And then there were the manifold—and often absurd—safety hazards. I'll never forget the soggy package that came rolling menacingly down my lane soaked in canned chili, the streaky red-brown bean mixture clinging to the metal cylinders of the conveyor belt and dripping onto the floor below.



This was my first experience as a labor organizer, though I had spent the fall of 2020 working on Democratic campaigns in Iowa (we lost nearly every race). Unlike electoral work, organizing my coworkers felt satisfying for how direct it was—I wasn't trying to persuade people to believe in a candidate, but in our own collective power. Between shifts, I would meet with a small cohort of other DSA members who were organizing their own workplaces to discuss how to identify potential leaders among our coworkers and support them through their fears about organizing. We read *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*, a manual produced by the publisher of the left-wing magazine *Labor Notes*, and role-played conversations to assess how our coworkers might feel about a petition or a walkout.

I didn't broach those conversations for months; instead, I focused on learning the mechanics of the job and getting to know my coworkers. Still, knowing I was there to organize changed my approach to work. I pushed myself to be more outgoing than I would normally be, which made work a genuinely social space with people I was excited to see each day. In our DSA cohort, we discussed what it meant to be a good worker, not from the perspective of producing value for the company but in solidarity with our fellow workers. At the warehouse, I tried to keep up a solid pace of work so as not to make things more difficult for the people in front of or behind me on the conveyor belt. Before we had even begun to discuss taking action, I thought about the impact that building solidarity could have on me and my coworkers: not just winning better conditions but transforming the workplace itself.

Of course, I'd have to start with a much simpler task—inviting my coworkers to grab lunch or a coffee or come to a barbecue, where I would push through my fear and ask, "What do you think we could do to make this workplace better?"

The spark: Jaz Brisack, one of the original Starbucks salts, now co-leads the Inside Organizer School in upstate New York.

LIBBY MARCH / *THE WASHINGTON POST* VIA GETTY IMAGES

My decision to salt came amid the broader resurgence of a practice long deployed by labor activists in unorganized workplaces, from the upsurge of unionization that produced the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s to the Vietnam-era wave of wildcat strikes. In the past few years, young socialists, disillusioned college graduates, and activated rank-and-file workers have become a sort of reserve army ready to get jobs and organize alongside the millions of nonunion American workers employed in logistics, services, auto manufacturing, and beyond. Salts played a key, but often unseen, role in the successful union drive at Amazon's JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island and in the spate of organizing victories at Starbucks.

Rand Wilson, a longtime labor organizer who has been evangelizing about salting for years, said he's seen a renewed interest in the practice after a less active period in the 1990s and early 2000s. "People didn't see the labor movement as a viable response to corporate greed and inequality," he told me. But now, young people coming of age in the era defined by Bernie Sanders's—and, more recently, Zohran Mamdani's—class politics see their workplaces as a crucial frontier in the fight for a better future. The resurgence in salting comes at a time when a historically low proportion of US workers are represented by unions—just 11.2 percent in 2025. The economic and political headwinds that threaten worker power, from automation to corporate consolidation to gig work, also make organizing for fair wages and safe conditions more critical than ever. "Employers are getting really good at keeping people very atomized—tons of people who don't know any of their coworkers," Wilson said. "It's that special bond with your coworkers that is so critical to having a union."

Activists dedicated to reinvigorating the labor movement believe the stakes are too high to rely on salts finding their way into the movement like I did—through word of mouth—and filtering into ad hoc organizing projects. In recent years, unions, leftist groups, and workers' assemblies have begun to build more formal pipelines to recruit, train, and place salts in strategic workplaces. The Inside Organizer School (IOS), based in upstate New York, produced the salts who sparked the unionization movement at Starbucks. And in the past couple of years, projects like DSA's Workers Organizing Workers (WOW) and the Rank and File Program at the Southern Workers Assembly (SWA) were formed to recruit salts from their respective networks of socialists and unionists.

Recruiting and supporting salts has always required a delicate balance between secrecy (to

MICHAEL NAGLE / *BLOOMBERG* VIA GETTY IMAGES

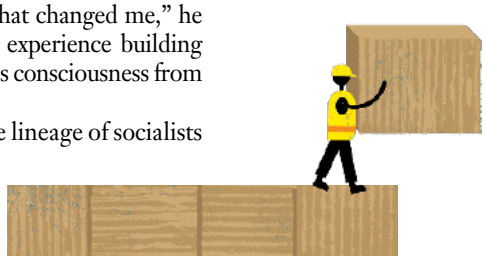
The new frontier: As Amazon has grown, it has become a major target for salts seeking to kick off unionization campaigns.

avoid tipping off employers) and accessibility (to find the activists willing to commit their working lives to organizing). "The reason why salting projects haven't until recently taken the form of WOW or Inside Organizer School is that there was an assumption that you had to keep things really hush-hush, because you didn't want companies to know you were salting them," said Eric Blanc, a professor of labor studies at Rutgers University who serves on the WOW organizing committee. "There's been a shift in thinking, because the reality is the companies that are facing organizing drives are already generally on watch." Groups like WOW, the SWA, and the IOS can play an important role as clearinghouses to connect activists to existing organizing projects that may not yet be public.

Salts can provide kindling for a unionization fight, but their goal is to make themselves replaceable by developing their coworkers' organizing abilities. "Your job is to build relationships with people who are in the workplace and help them realize the leadership qualities and the courage to take on the fight that they already have," said Jaz Brisack, a former Starbucks salt who now leads the IOS. Advocates see salting as necessary to counter the boss's propaganda, which insists that workers can't and shouldn't ask for more. "Without a union, workers have zero say, zero voice, zero control," Brisack said. "And we're conditioned to just accept that that's the way it is. Salting can help people question what we've been conditioned to believe."

While they may not have always used the term *salting*, radical workers (socialists, in particular) who got jobs in order to organize their workplaces have long driven the US labor movement into new sectors of the economy. Organizers from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) embedded themselves in factories and sweatshops for years, culminating in the 1934 general strike of Teamsters, autoworkers, and others. "There was still a huge number of radical workers in those workplaces, some of whom just happened to be working there, but a lot of them more or less consciously got jobs in particularly strategic places," Blanc said. "It was not purely spontaneous and leaderless in the way that people assume it was." One notable early salt was Powers Hapgood (yes, that was his real name), a wealthy Harvard graduate who went on to organize coalfields with the United Mine Workers. In the 1970s, Rand Wilson asked the legendary union leader Tony Mazzocchi how he could get involved in the labor movement. "Get a fuckin' job," Mazzocchi answered. And so Wilson did, at a precious-metals refinery in what he called a "disgusting hell hole in Waterville, Connecticut," that was a strategic target for the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers union. Wilson was part of a generation of militant union organizers at auto plants, ports, coal mines, and more. "Salting is what changed me," he recalled. "That transformed my life—my experience building the union, uniting workers, teasing out class consciousness from my coworkers, and trying to be a spark."

The DSA is now working to extend the lineage of socialists building the labor movement in the United States. In 2023, it launched WOW to recruit members and anyone else interested in getting a job to organize in strategic industries. Before WOW formalized the community of DSA salts that I joined in 2022, "it just felt like so many people were slipping through the cracks," said Shayna Elliot, a co-chair of the DSA's National Labor Commission. "We wanted to make it a one-stop for people who might want to join the labor movement in this way." Up to 400 people have gone through WOW's series of Zoom workshops (nearly 200 attended the most recent session in September alone). "Our biggest source of salts…is young people who are feeling disillusioned about



"Our biggest source of salts…is young people who are feeling disillusioned about professional-class jobs."

—Shayna Elliot, the DSA's National Labor Commission

professional-class jobs that are so much less reliable than they once were," Elliot said. She estimated that the program has placed dozens of salts in strategic jobs. "Anybody can do it," Wilson told me. "You just have to have the fire in the belly."

Noah learned about salting as a volunteer for Bernie Sanders's 2020 campaign on his college campus. (The names of some of the salts in this article have been changed to protect their identities and organizing projects.) After Sanders dropped out of the race, organizers from the campaign encouraged Noah and other students to get jobs at an Amazon warehouse and start salting that summer. "Bernie was trying to fight for the working class, but the working class didn't have a movement strong enough to win," Noah said about his decision. "So we needed to build that working-class movement if we wanted someone like Bernie to succeed in the future."

Noah spent four years at Amazon, starting in the warehouse and later becoming a driver when the inverted sleeping schedule required by his overnight shift became too taxing. He found delivering packages to be less monotonous than working on the conveyor belt. "I would often go out to this little park on the water and take my break there," he said. "Which was a lot different from the little picnic table in the parking lot at the warehouse where I would sit and look at the moon." Finding work he actually enjoyed was critical to keeping Noah in the movement for the long haul. "If you're going to be effective as a salt, or as a rank-and-file organizer in general, it takes a long-term commitment," he said. "And you can't commit to a job long-term if you hate every time you have to wake up and go to the job."

Solidarity in action: Participants at the Southern Worker Action Summit, convened by the Southern Workers Assembly, in Spartanburg, South Carolina, in June 2025.

Salts sometimes feel anxiety about how much to disclose to coworkers about their reasons for getting the job. Noah wouldn't advertise that he came to Amazon to organize, but he found that coworkers who became leaders in their campaign were receptive when he revealed the tactic. "It's not that crazy of a concept to someone who's thinking on a serious level strategically about 'How do we do this?'" he said. And once salts have been working somewhere for a while, the divide between them and other worker organizers becomes less important. "Especially because we weren't paid [for our organizing efforts]," Noah told me. "We're literally just people who did this on our own—I wasn't sent there by anyone."

David-Desyrée Sherwood got a job at Amazon's JFK8 warehouse two months after the workers there—including at least six salts—won their union drive, the first ever at the company in the United States. When he became involved with the union, Sherwood didn't see a major distinction between himself as a worker organizer and the salts who got a job in order to organize. "We're all working-class people," he said. "Whether or not you come in with the intention to organize, we're in this together."

When Noah and the other drivers at his warehouse unionized with the Teamsters and marched on their bosses to demand recognition, it was "the most satisfying day of my life," he recalled. "[The managers] ran—they literally ran. They scattered." Their warehouse was one of nine Amazon sites to go on strike over the holiday season in 2024, and it was during the organizing for the strike that Noah realized that their campaign had become a truly collective effort. "So many people stepped up to even make that happen," he said. "As a salt, you're always putting in a ton of effort, but then when you start to see other rank-and-file workers step up and match you, it gives you so much more energy." Workers showed up early every day on icy winter mornings to talk to their coworkers outside the warehouse, and they helped run the picket line and manage the egress of vans. "At this point, it's bigger than me," Noah said. "If I was to leave, I would be leaving behind a bunch of people that I recruited."

I talked to Luke when he had just gotten off a 10-hour shift at an electric-vehicle-manufacturing plant in the South. When he and his fellow workers are required to stay for one or two hours of overtime, he asks them, "Do you think that's fair?" As a salt, Luke sees his role as "blowing on those embers of solidarity," he said.

Luke had no labor-organizing experience before he learned from fellow leftists about the Southern Workers Assembly's network of worker leaders committed to building strong rank-and-file-led unions in the region. With new EV plants cropping up rapidly across the South, SWA workers want to make sure they're getting their share of the profits. "We were hearing from a lot of workers and other people that were around [the SWA's local chapters], and there

"The lines are really blurry between 'Are they a salt, or are they a pro-union worker?' And I think they should be blurry."

—Jaz Brisack, Inside Organizer School

COURTESY OF THE SOUTHERN WORKERS ASSEMBLY

was a lot of interest in salting and trying to do that in an organized way," said Ben Carroll, the organizing coordinator for the SWA. In early 2024, the group started its Rank and File Program to recruit and train people like Luke who wanted to get jobs and organize. Over the past two years, around 80 people have attended the SWA's weekend-long training sessions, finding them through local workers' assemblies, friends and family who are union members, and even online ads.

The SWA's training weekends begin with a history of how heavy manufacturing has shaped economic development and worker power in the region. Since the 1980s, foreign-owned auto companies have built their US plants primarily in the South, where they can exploit right-to-work laws, low wages, and low union density. Autoworkers in Southern states are paid less than their counterparts in other regions, with vehicle-parts workers in Texas making a cost-of-living-adjusted median wage of $38,349, compared with $51,681 in Michigan. The Biden administration's incentives for the EV industry and American manufacturing have brought $79 billion in investments and more than 75,000 jobs to the so-called Battery Belt in states like Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. The massive capital investment required to build an auto plant theoretically makes companies reluctant to shut down a facility in the face of a successful unionization drive, giving workers leverage. After years of corrupt, conservative leadership in the United Auto Workers, union president Shawn Fain has announced bold new organizing projects, especially in the South. In 2024, the UAW committed $40 million to organize auto and battery plants like the recently unionized Volkswagen hub in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where workers won a 20 percent wage increase in their first tentative agreement.

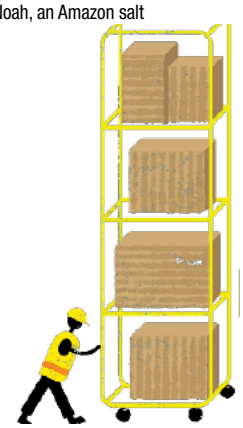
Many salts haven't worked in manufacturing before, but in SWA trainings, they learn how to craft their résumés and prep for interviews, just as they might for any other job. Have you ever been in a high-stress situation? You can talk about that. Do you play any instruments? Highlight your manual dexterity. In an ironic twist, foreign-owned auto manufacturers have traditionally preferred applicants without manufacturing experience in order to keep the UAW out. Carroll doesn't think the auto companies are aware of potential salts, but even if they are, it's illegal for an employer to refuse to hire an applicant because they want to unionize.

Alex had been interested in the idea of salting for a while when he attended one of the SWA's recruitment weekends, but he was nervous to go into a workplace on his own. He had been involved in other forms of left activism, but he'd begun to feel that turning people out for protests wasn't a direct enough way to address the issues facing working people. "Being involved in the SWA seemed like a way to focus on that baseline point of struggle that everyone's going to engage with every day"—their workplace—"whether they want to or not." Alex now works in a section of an EV plant that opened just a couple of months before he was hired, and there are still glitches in the workflow. Robots play a beep-boop version of Eddy Grant's "Electric Avenue" as they roll around the warehouse delivering parts, but they break down a lot, which gives Alex time to talk to his coworkers.

There's a debate among SWA organizers about whether to use the term *salting* at all because it implies a short-term project. This cohort of organizers sees itself more in the tradition of the early radicals in the steel and auto industries who embedded in factories for years. Alex plans to stick around long enough to build a fighting union that helps transform conditions in the whole industry. "How can we [make] this a job that I can actually hold on to for several decades and retire from?" he said. "This could be my life. This could be a good future for me and my coworkers if we fight for it and win it."

"At this point, it's bigger than me. If I was to leave, I would be leaving behind a bunch of people that I recruited."

—Noah, an Amazon salt



Like wildfire: The campaign to unionize Starbucks stores spread rapidly across the country.

Perhaps the most well-known salt is Jaz Brisack, who helped kick off the historic wave of unionization at Starbucks from their store in Buffalo, New York. "The way that we were able to build a really large organizing committee across many stores before the company knew what was going on probably would have been impossible without salts," Brisack said. Though there were only 10 salts working at stores in the Buffalo area, Howard Schultz, then the CEO of Starbucks, tried to paint the entire campaign as an astroturfed effort by outside agitators. But after the initial wave of stores organized, the campaign rapidly expanded across the country, with people getting jobs to organize independent of the original salting effort. "The lines are really blurry between 'Are they a salt, or are they a pro-union worker?'" Brisack said. "And I think they should be blurry."

Today, Brisack co-leads the Inside Organizer School with another former Starbucks salt, Casey Moore. The IOS uses the term *inside organizer* rather than *salt* because it wants its workshops to serve both people getting jobs with the goal of organizing and people already at a given workplace. As Brisack explained it, "Inside organizing basically means you're organizing your own workplace instead of organizing from the outside," as generally happens in campaigns led by union staffers. Brisack and Moore were both trained in early iterations of the IOS in upstate New York supported by organizers from the Amalgamated Transit Union, Workers United, and the hospitality union Unite Here, which has a long history of deploying salts in its organizing. The IOS's three-day in-person training retreats have now expanded nationwide and cover a range of organizing topics in depth, from how

VICTOR J. BLUE / *BLOOMBERG* VIA GETTY IMAGES

to inoculate coworkers against management retaliation to facilitating organizing-committee meetings. The IOS estimates that since its founding in 2018, more than 1,000 people have gone through the program. "Me and all the other Starbucks salts were trained in this model and practiced this model," Moore said. "So it can work. We just need to be doing it more and committing more resources."

Leo was salting before he'd ever heard the term. He's tried to organize at nearly every job he's had, from a now-shuttered Brooklyn ice cream factory to an also-shuttered Manhattan café chain. Last year, he helped to unionize his Starbucks location in Soho, but it too was shut down in the wave of store closures in late 2025. "I have a djinn haunting me," he joked.

The ice cream factory was "the worst job I ever had," Leo told me. The managers were aggressive and the freezers lacked proper safety mats, so workers would often slip. He reached his breaking point one night when an ice cream machine malfunctioned, spewing sugary sludge while the managers were off the floor in some eternal meeting. "I was like, 'I'll walk out right now,'" he recalled telling his coworkers. "'I'll do it if you do it.'" He couldn't persuade them to walk off the job that night, but he started thinking about what collective action might look like. Before he could get serious about organizing, though, he was fired for attendance issues.

A seat at the table: Three Starbucks salts, including Casey Moore (right) and Jaz Brisack (second from right), discuss their efforts to unionize Buffalo-area stores during their campaign in 2021.

At the café, Leo tried to launch a petition after management enabled tipping and reduced hourly wages, telling workers they were now technically tipped employees. He took shifts at different locations to meet as many coworkers as possible, keeping track of people's attitudes toward organizing on his phone. He noted how many workers were on each shift, and how many would need to walk off to shut down a store for the day. But then Covid hit and everyone was laid off. Still, he was hooked from that first swing at organizing. "It wasn't that hard," he realized. "I like to talk to my coworkers."

When Leo got the job at Starbucks a few years later, he hit the ground running. In the years since Brisack and Moore organized their stores, Starbucks Workers United hasn't actively recruited salts. But the phenomenon of the autonomous, independent salt has continued, with workers like Leo and another barista at his store, Maya, taking it upon themselves to get jobs and organize. Maya had been involved in college with YDSA, the youth section of the Democratic Socialists of America, and was looking for a way to get shop-floor organizing experience before starting nursing school.

"This job could be my life. This could be a good future for me and my coworkers if we fight for it and win it."

—Alex, a salt at an EV plant

Maya and Leo planned bowling nights and escape rooms and even asked a coworker to sign a union card at a casino. In June 2024, they won their union election 18–1. When management refused to address the persistent flooding that coated the store's basement in raw sewage, the newly unionized workers walked out on five different occasions. The company shut down Leo and Maya's store a little over a year later, but it was the union that pushed Starbucks to follow New York City's Fair Workweek Law, giving workers the opportunity to get their jobs back at other locations and winning a $38 million settlement.

Leo didn't return to Starbucks, but he's already trying to organize at his new job. He still feels conflicted over whether he considers himself a salt, and he bristles at the notion of young college graduates seeing it as a short-term stint. "Other people are going to work at Amazon until their body breaks," he said. Leo believes in the tactic "100 percent"; he just wants people to take the commitment seriously. "At some point, the people that we have in these left-wing organizations, they need to merge with the great majority of people who live in America, and the only way to do that is actually by being there," he said. "You have to be in that warehouse all the time. That's your life, the same way it's the life of millions of people."

Lately, the bleakness of our political moment can't help but seep into the day-to-day at Luke's EV plant. Workers were outraged when federal immigration agents raided Hyundai's EV plant near Savannah, Georgia, in September 2025 and detained nearly 500 people. Some have family members who lost their food stamps during the government shutdown a month later. A phrase that Luke often repeats could apply to the broader political landscape as much as to the plant's workplace dynamics: "This is a dictatorship, not a democracy." Coworkers have started saying it back to him.

When I left Amazon after a year, worn down by the overnight shift, I hoped that the sense of solidarity we had built through meetings outside of work would stay with my coworkers. "I've seen this fight transform people who were previously apolitical or didn't care about unions. I've seen them become very dedicated and passionate political activists," Noah said.

A sentiment that was expressed to me over and over again by the salts I spoke with was that organizing their workplaces was their best shot at building a better world. It was, they sensed, the only real lever they had to do so. "I've given up—I've given up multiple times, and I've tried to find other work. And I just always end up recommitting," Noah told me. "Because I didn't just want any job. I wanted a job where I could make a difference. And I never found something better than this." N

CAROLYN THOMPSON / AP PHOTO

(Scherer, continued from page 43)

This past July, I moved into an Airbnb apartment in Virginia, in the basement of a town house I shared with an elderly Latina woman who spoke little English. It cost me $2,000 a month. My three decades in Romania, Italy, and Canada have so far failed to impress recruiters.

When I lost my job, I told myself, "If all else fails, I'll drive for Uber." Well, here I am, and it's not as comforting as I thought it would be. I used to think I was different from the migrants I wrote about—protected by a passport, a salary, a press badge. But the past two years have stripped away that illusion.

That said, I am still relatively lucky. I'm a middle-aged white guy with a US passport, so I'm not likely to be snatched off the street by ICE. I have some savings and people to lean on.

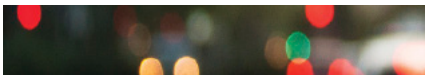
Eager to get my family back late last year, I looked for a larger rental. After two rejections, because the landlords were understandably worried that I wouldn't be able to pay the rent, my octogenarian father cosigned a lease with me for a place in Fairfax—$3,000 a month.

My middle-class habits die hard. I still want my three teenage children to have what they desire for Christmas, even if it's an expensive computer. I still want each of them to have their own room. I still want them to get the kind of education that in America is found mainly in middle- or high-income communities, and I'm willing to pay extra rent for it.

My wife remains in Italy, where she has healthcare and feels more secure after our disorienting departure from Canada. She also fears being deported if she were to join us in the US, something that has happened to other foreign spouses of Americans. Fortunately, my children are now here with me, attending an American high school for the first time. I feel like I'm building something in my newest city. I'm optimistic for the first time in a long time, but I also realize that optimism isn't the same thing as security.

In the 1980s and '90s, my teachers and mentors in high school and college in Indiana and Illinois encouraged me to be open to new cultures and languages. My favorite books then, including but certainly not limited to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, hinted at the knowledge and understanding that can be unlocked only by exploring the unknown.

At 15, I applied to be an exchange student and ended up spending my junior year in high school in Italy. Fully immersed in the home of a warm family, I learned the language and adapted to the culture. The self-confidence I gained from that experience was a springboard to my success as an adult. My Italian host family remains close to me. The mother has been a third grandmother to my children. Being open and not afraid of "the other" has enriched my life. But it seems to have done the opposite of making me rich.



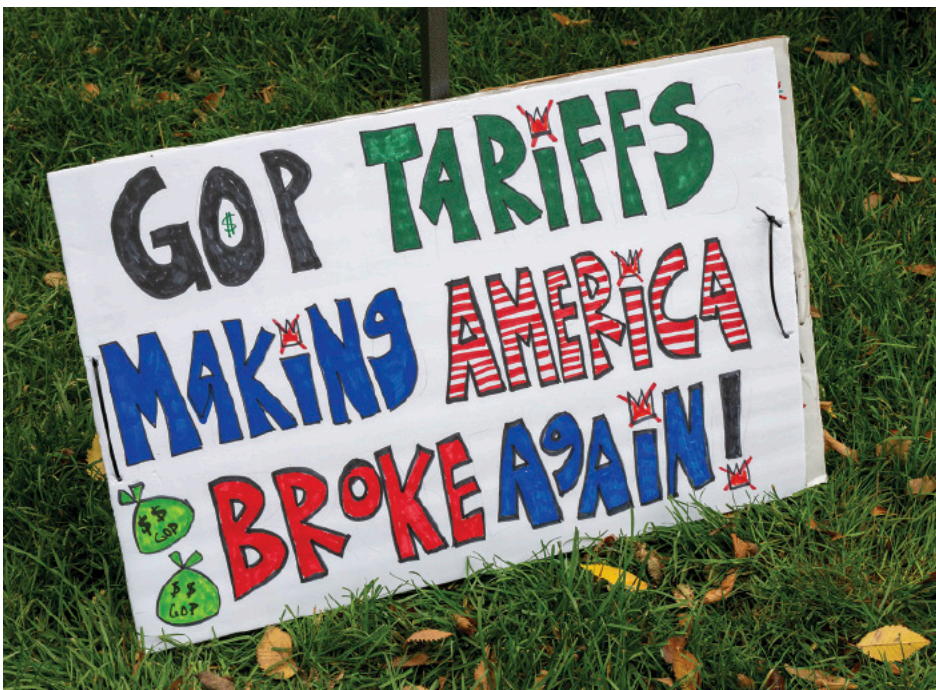
My wife remains in Italy, because she fears being deported if she were to join us in the US.

Today in America, my international experience seems to have little value. Worse, it feels anathema to the values promoted by the ruling class, which is now empowering armed agents to prowl the streets of our cities in search of "the other" and encouraging voters to fear them.

I do not fear different cultures or languages. I'm fascinated by them. The truth is that we all have a lot in common. Most people, no matter their nationality, fall into two categories: parents who want to help their children succeed in life, and youth chasing their dreams.

What I do fear is the economic squeeze that is coming. The job market is already a war zone. Trump's tariffs will inevitably continue to force up prices and slow growth. Setting monetary policy from the White House will lead to disaster. The shrinking middle class is going to shrink faster. It won't be a sudden collapse, but a drift toward it.

The people I am driving around are, like me, trying to navigate that drift. They are people who get up before dawn to feed their families. They trust me to get them to work on time. I trust an app to buy me another day. None of us has any real leverage. Like the migrants who braved the deadliest border crossing on the planet, we are all at the mercy of the sea. **N**



The economy is a war zone, as Trump's tariffs drive up prices and workers face layoffs across many industries.

FROM TOP: HYOUNG CHANG / *THE DENVER POST*; MICHAEL SILUK / UCG / UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

CONSTRUCTING THE KNICKERBOCKER VILLAGE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT, 1933 (GETTY)

A Worker's City

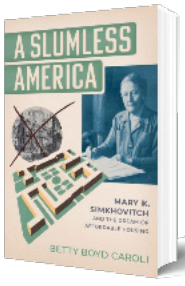
Mary K. Simkhovitch and the effort to create housing for all in New York City

BY JOSHUA FREEMAN

TODAY, MARY K. SIMKHOVITCH IS LITTLE remembered. But in the first half of the 20th century, her name was everywhere. As an advocate for New York's poor and a friend of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, she appeared often in the press. As a leading member of the settlement-house movement alongside Jane Addams, Lillian Wald, and Florence Kelley, she founded Greenwich House, a bustling social-services and arts center. As the author of numerous studies on urban poverty and slum conditions, she became a prominent advocate for government-supported housing and helped launch New York City's public housing system. Upon her death, *The New York Times* noted

that she'd "occupied an important place in the life of this city for fifty years." The NBC Radio Network broadcast a play reenacting her funeral, with a crowd of children standing outside the church, in rain and sleet, to pay their respects.

Greenwich House is still going strong, but the ideas that once animated the settlement-house movement no longer have much purchase in a world of neo–social Darwinism and radical critiques of capitalism. In her new biography of Simkhovitch, *A Slumless America*, Betty Boyd Caroli attempts to recover the life of this formidable figure. Her book provides a window into a set of views that seem both hopelessly archaic and yet still useful in thinking about our future. We can learn much from the strengths and limitations of Simkhovitch's approach to social change. For all her accomplishments, Simkhovitch's efforts nevertheless left in place the social structures that continue to undermine further advances.



A Slumless America
Mary K. Simkhovitch and the Dream of Affordable Housing
By Betty Boyd Caroli
Oxford University Press.
288 pp. $34.95

Like many settlement-house workers, Simkhovitch—née Mary Melinda Kingsbury—came from an old-line Protestant family, one not rich but thoroughly respectable. Born in Newton, Massachusetts, during the Reconstruction era, she lived into the early days of the Cold War.

Simkhovitch's commitment to reform stemmed from her religious belief. A devout Episcopalian, she attended church almost every day of her adult life. As a 14-year-old, she first witnessed urban poverty when she volunteered at a Sunday school that her church sponsored in an African American neighborhood in Boston. During a post-undergraduate year she spent at the Harvard Annex (later Radcliffe College), Simkhovitch embraced the Social Gospel: the belief that religion had to go beyond a relationship with God to encompass helping others in need.

She began to put this idea into practice working at Denison House, an early settlement house in what is now Boston's Chinatown. One of her Harvard Annex classmates, Gertrude Stein, went in a very different direction, but both represented a cohort of young women trying to carve out careers and identities independent of men. Settlement houses were meant to help poor city dwellers with education, social services, and cultural enrichment. But equally important, they provided an opportunity for adventurous middle-class women, who otherwise would have been restricted to domestic life, to live with their peers in female-led, cosmopolitan communities, secular orders for social reform.

A year spent at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin from 1895 to '96 broadened Simkhovitch's political perspectives. There, she was exposed to a brand of socialism centered not on revolution but on the expansion of the existing state to provide needed services to the citizenry. Rapid industrialization and urbanization had led to poverty, overcrowding, and unsanitary conditions in many parts of Europe. State action, a growing number of German socialists argued, could alleviate suffering and stabilize society by providing housing, transportation, and recreation. Simkhovitch, after touring some publicly financed housing of the kind that the United States wouldn't have for another four decades, declared that "the municipal socialism of Berlin" was "well worth copying."

It was at university in Berlin that the young American also met her future husband, Vladimir Gregorievitch Simkhovitch. Caroli devotes as much attention to Simkhovitch's personal life as she does to her professional activity. In many ways, Simkhovitch—even as she embraced a politics of radical reform—remained remarkably conventional, true to her proper, middle-class, New England upbringing. Her marriage to V.G., as his friends called him, was the one big exception. Of Russian and Jewish background, Vladimir lived a life of grand gestures, some of them outside his means. Though he was very different in temperament and lifestyle from Mary, the couple remained loyal to one another, even in difficult times.

In 1902, after moving to New York City, Simkhovitch founded Greenwich House in what is now the West Village. It was far from the first such establishment in the city, and in many ways it was typical of the 400 settlement houses that would eventually spring up in the country. (Four hundred!) Located in what was then a poor, predominantly Italian immigrant neighborhood (and which, these days, you must be rich to afford), Greenwich House provided social services, a kindergarten, a wide array of clubs and classes, vocational training, and recreation to community residents. Like most settlement houses, it embraced a paternalistic ethos, with the assumption being that the poor needed to learn how to maintain a household, raise their children, and navigate society properly. Also, after initially serving white and Black community members, it succumbed to the norm and operated on a whites-only basis.

Simkhovitch, an able administrator and fundraiser, built Greenwich House into a powerful institution, with multiple buildings, a music school, a world-renowned pottery program, and much more. At the same time, she plunged into reform movements of all kinds, including women's suffrage, the suppression of prostitution, improved maternal and children's health, and support for labor organizing, widows' pensions, and public housing. Meanwhile, Vladimir secured a position teaching economic history at Columbia University and became a well-known art collector and dealer as well. For long stretches, the couple kept their own living quarters and traveled separately, but they still seemed to draw sustenance and support from one another.

Simkhovitch's career, interesting as it was, would not be very notable if hadn't been for her deep engagement with housing, which Caroli foregrounds in her book's title. Even before she founded Greenwich House, Simkhovitch had come to believe that government action was needed to reduce the cost of housing. Some reformers thought that government regulation would lead the private sector to eliminate slum conditions and address the severe shortage of affordable homes in cities like New York.

Joshua Freeman is a historian and the author, most recently, of Garden Apartments: The History of a Low-Rent Utopia.

Simkhovitch argued that it would take more; she believed, in Caroli's words, that "safe, affordable housing was a human right, like water and air, and government had to provide it since private investors could not."

One of Simkhovitch's early involvements in housing came when she helped mount an exhibit documenting living conditions in the slums. Progressives of Simkhovitch's generation believed that exposing social ills was the first step toward solving them: "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants," as Louis Brandeis famously wrote. Photography, especially the work of Jacob Riis, exposed the dangers of poverty, congestion, and tenement life to the better-off. Exhibits were another favored medium: The 1900 "Tenement House Exhibition" contributed to the passage the following year of a New York State law regulating tenements. In 1908, the Committee on Congestion of Population, which Simkhovitch founded with Lillian Wald and Florence Kelley, cosponsored an exhibit at the Museum of Natural History that featured photographs, charts, and full-scale models of tenement rooms. In 1934, the Museum of Modern Art reprised the effort with its "Housing Exhibition of the City of New York," which juxtaposed photographs of existing housing for the poor with model rooms, put together by Macy's, showing what was possible instead. It is hard to imagine the Museum of Natural History or MoMA mounting an exhibit to expose housing ills today—say, the subdivided units and basement apartments in Queens and the Bronx crammed with undocumented immigrants—but perhaps they should.

Throughout the 1910s and '20s, Simkhovitch continued to demand state action on housing, mobilizing the networks of female reformers and settlement houses in which she played a leading role. But the results of these efforts were modest: The United States still didn't have a single unit of public housing.

Then the Great Depression and the New Deal changed everything. Massive unemployment in the construction industry created an opening for reformers to push for government-funded housing as part of a national recovery program. Simkhovitch was well positioned to play a crucial role. For one thing, in 1932, she assumed leadership of the newly created National Public Housing Conference, a left-liberal alliance that included Socialist Party head Norman Thomas, Lillian Ward, and Fiorello La Guardia. For another thing, she had personal access to the White House.

Simkhovitch had known Franklin Roosevelt since he was a teenager—her family summered in Maine near the Roosevelts' home on Campobello Island—and she'd also become friends with Eleanor Roosevelt, who numbered Simkhovitch among the women who were "a constant inspiration and help to me." Working with New York Senator Robert Wagner, Simkhovitch and other advocates succeeded in getting a housing program included in the massive 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act. The upshot was the first federally funded public housing in the United States, starting with Techwood Homes in Atlanta, which opened in 1936.

Simkhovitch believed that exposing social ills was the first step toward solving them.

Yet achieving a permanent federal housing program—not a temporary one as part of the recovery effort—proved a heavier lift. In spite of the lobbying by Simkhovitch and many others, such a program did not emerge until the passage of the Housing Act of 1937.

Some housing advocates had pushed for a capacious program that would fund homes built not only by the government but also by nonprofits and cooperatives serving a broad income range. Simkhovitch had backed a more modest plan, but what ended up being enacted, after fierce pushback by the real estate industry and its allies, was something even less extensive. Under the new law, federal funds for housing could go only to local government authorities for projects intended to serve low-income people, built to relatively low standards. Unlike broad or universal programs, such as Social Security and (later) Medicare, public housing ended up without a large natural base of political support.

When the New York City Housing Authority was established in 1934, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia appointed Simkhovitch as its vice chair. She and her colleagues moved with dispatch, picking the sites for the first two federally funded NYCHA projects in just six weeks, something unimaginable today. By the time Simkhovitch left her post in 1947, there were public housing projects in every borough of the city, including the Queensbridge Houses, the largest housing project in the country, with over 3,000 units.

Simkhovitch brought elements of settlement-house paternalism to New York's public housing. Housing assistants collected the rent in person each week and also acted like social workers to deal with perceived family problems, an arrangement the residents intensely disliked. (Such practices were not restricted to New York; in New Orleans, "home counselors" conducted annual inspections of public housing apartments.) More positively, Simkhovitch pressed for including community and health centers in public housing. When my younger daughter was small, she attended a day-care center in a purpose-built space in a nearby NYCHA project.

The title of Caroli's book comes from a letter that FDR wrote to Simkhovitch in 1943, about how much he anticipated working with her after the war to achieve "a slumless America." The term *slum* has since gone out of fashion, but the reality of inadequate, overcrowded, and unhealthful housing has not disappeared. For a vast number of Americans, the dream of affordable housing remains just that: a dream. To understand why, it is useful to consider the limits of the strategies—particularly coalition politics—that Simkhovitch employed.

It is striking how permeable the lines once were between the left and more mainstream liberal reformers. Simkhovitch was not a socialist, but she sometimes voted for socialist candidates, had no qualms about allying with socialists in coalitions for particular causes, and was greatly influenced by them as far back as the 1890s. She saw no contradiction between calling for extended social rights and public services, including public housing, and remaining friendly with leading financiers and capitalists, who provided much of the funding for Greenwich House.

The Cold War led to rigid barriers between socialists and communists, on the one hand, and liberal forces, on the

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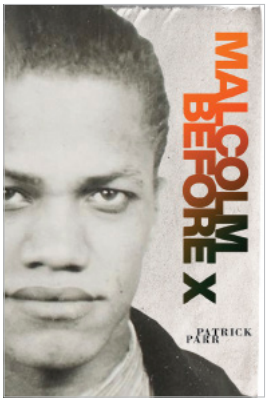

Malcolm Before X

BY PATRICK PARR

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Drawing upon interviews, correspondence, and nearly 2,000 pages of never-before-used prison records, *Malcolm Before X* is the definitive examination of the prison years of civil rights icon Malcolm X.

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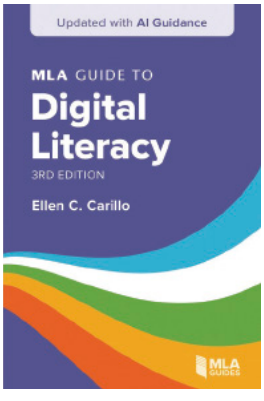

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Third Edition

BY ELLEN C. CARILLO

Updated with AI guidance, this classroom guide helps students understand why digital literacy is a crucial skill for their education, future careers, and participation in democracy. Offering practical guidance for assessing information online, this guide provides students with the tools to locate reliable sources among the clickbait and viral videos that pervade the web.

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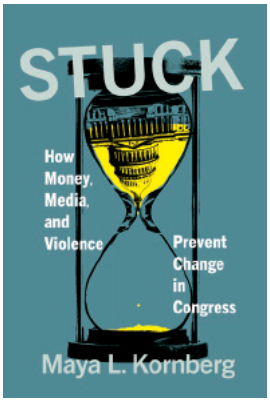

Stuck

How Money, Media, and Violence Prevent Change in Congress

BY MAYA L. KORNBERG

Congress, the central democratic institution in the United States, is hanging on by a thread. On January 6, 2021, a violent attack on the Capitol Building left five people dead, and attacks against politicians are on the rise. In *Stuck*, Maya Kornberg chronicles the efforts of congressional reformers over the last 50 years and documents the forces that have kept their reforms from creating change.

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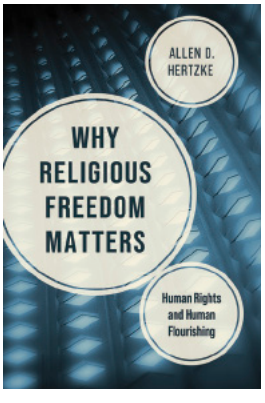

Why Religious Freedom Matters

Human Rights and Human Flourishing

BY ALLEN D. HERTZKE

Marshaling unprecedented global scholarship, Allen Hertzke demonstrates how religious freedom is pivotal to democratic, peaceful, and flourishing societies.

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A Native Punk Mixtape

BY THOMAS MICHAEL SWENSEN

Stage diving with the Friends of Cesar Romero, the Bastard Fairies, Lozen, and Postcommodity, *Where Next, Columbus?* conducts readers on a journey that engages familiar punk maxims like DIY ethics, disruptive artistry, humor as critique, and the relentless questioning of authority figures—arriving at a kaleidoscopic vision of sovereignty through Native sounds and visual arts.

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A Case for Congress

BY FRANCES LEE

Written in a clear and engaging style, *A Case for Congress* challenges readers to think against the grain and appreciate the Congress we have, not an ideal Congress that never in fact existed. "The bathwater is dirty," the author acknowledges, "but there is a baby in there." It turns out that a complex, polarized, distrustful republic of some 340 million Americans needs Congress more than ever.

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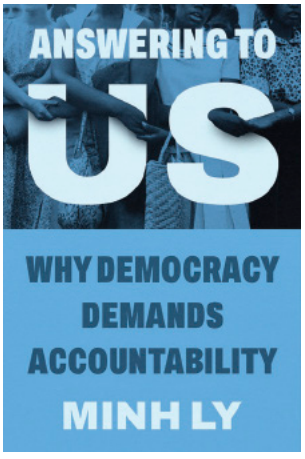
other, the result of a deliberate and effective campaign to isolate the left. But those barriers now seem to be breaking down, ideologically and organizationally. It has often been noted that Bernie Sanders's democratic socialism looks a lot like New Deal liberalism. As the Democratic Socialists of America has grown and, in cities like New York, become an electoral juggernaut, more and more liberal politicians have sought to curry favor with the group.

With new possibilities emerging for liberal-left alliances, we need to be clear-eyed about what they can accomplish. Broad coalitions were critical in advancing the cause of affordable housing in Simkhovitch's day, and they still are. But perhaps they are not enough. Simkhovitch was not a single-issue reformer (a "houser," as some public housing advocates were known). Rather, she engaged with many different issues, from women's suffrage to trade unionism. But she never pressed for a fundamental change in the social system that led to so many of the ills she fought to cure. Arguably, that limited what could be achieved in housing. Without reducing the power of the real estate industry and its allies in finance and construction, public housing was doomed to be a crimped, flawed effort that served only people so poor that it was not possible to build profitably for them.

Yet even that was more than what we have now. In much of the country, public housing has been literally bulldozed away. Simkhovitch's belief that government had an obligation to build good, affordable housing because the private sector wouldn't sounds radical today, when almost no one asserts that so boldly and straightforwardly. However, her model for change faces the same problems now that it did back then. The extraordinary resources and political mobilization of the superrich against the kind of urban reforms that socialists had envisioned all the way back to when Simkhovitch was studying in Berlin suggest that a more frontal attack on class power may be needed.

It is encouraging to note that in several parts of the country, programs have been launched to build "social housing": government-aided, below-market-cost dwellings. Also encouraging is the victory of New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani, who ran on a platform of housing affordability and won despite the tens of millions of dollars spent by real estate and financial interests to defeat him. But if social or public housing is just an add-on to the existing housing market, its impact may be quite limited. As long as the real estate industry, and the financial interests with which it is tightly intertwined, remains a dominant force in urban America, progressive housing programs will remain precarious. Through zoning, the courts, campaign spending, lobbying, media allies, co-optation, and other means, those who profit from the housing marketplace will undermine, push back, and limit efforts to develop nonmarket alternatives. Left unchecked, what the housing expert Samuel Stein calls "the real estate state" will continue to have its way.

It may be that, under current circumstances, providing decent affordable housing for all is a more utopian project than changing the underlying economic system. Mary K. Simkhovitch's lifetime of effort benefited millions of Americans who were able to move into public housing—no small feat. But 75 years after her death, we still have failed to solve our housing crisis. **N**



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BY MINH LY

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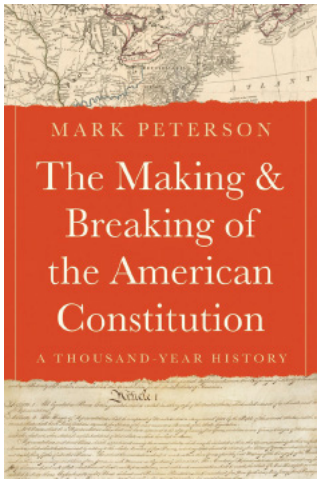

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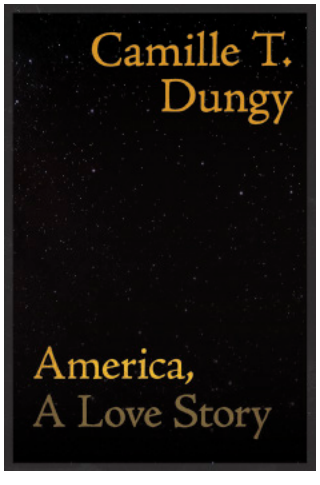

The Dark-Robed Mother

A Memoir

BY RACHEL TZVIA BACK

Back draws on the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the ancient story of loss, return, and the bond between generations, to illuminate her journey through living, writing, and mothering with depression. She explores family history and interviews her children seeking to understand depression's intergenerational mark, confronting the questions: How do we survive seasons of despair? Can we break the cycles that bind us to sorrow?

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The Short Century

George Packer's liberal imagination

BY DANIEL BESSNER

THE SHORT AMERICAN CENTURY, WHICH BEGAN IN 1945 and continued until 2016, was made up of four distinct eras. The first, from the victory in World War II until the student rebellions of 1968, was an era of confidence in which most Americans believed that the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan provided just cause for the United States' domination of the "free world." The second, which lasted until Ronald Reagan's inauguration in 1981, was an era of skepticism—the failures of Fordism at home and the Vietnam War abroad suggested to many that global American "leadership" might not be achievable at an acceptable cost. The third, which comprised the 1980s, was an era of exuberance, as deregulation, financialization, and a renewed American militarism reinvigorated a hegemonic project that the 1970s had almost annihilated. And the fourth and final era, which began with the fall of the Berlin Wall, was characterized by a hubris that insisted the Soviet Union's collapse demonstrated the ultimate triumph of US-style democratic-capitalist imperialism.

Donald Trump's election in 2016 put the kibosh on the widespread consensus that the United States was a New Rome, able to weather any domestic or international crisis. It turned out that the Great Recession and the Global War on Terror had undermined both American society and the "liberal international order," and that the faith in eternal US domination had been misplaced.

In retrospect, it is clear that the populist rage that fueled Trump's rise marked the end of the Short American Century. But for many liberals, it took quite a while to accept this new reality. Liberals spent much of Trump's first term trying to explain his victory as an aberration, the consequence of the anti-majoritarian structure of American politics, or Russian interference, or the innate racism of a foolish American populace who didn't

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE CIARDIELLO

realize, as Hillary Clinton put it, that "America never stopped being great." For them, Trump's election marked a brief but unfortunate departure from the progressive arc that US and world history were bound to trace, and once a Democrat won the presidency again, things would return to normal.

Joe Biden's election in 2020 seemed to confirm this perspective. Liberals concluded that Trump the person, and Trumpism the movement, were anomalies. True, some admitted, Trump had exposed some disturbing fissures in American society, and maybe the economy was more of a problem than they had supposed. But the Biden project was primarily viewed as a restoration—as the president himself declared to European allies soon after he assumed office, "America is back."

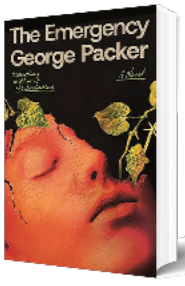
Trump's second victory, however, revealed that this perspective was profoundly mistaken. In the 2024 presidential election, Trump soundly defeated Kamala Harris, winning 312 to 226 in the Electoral College and garnering 2 million more votes than the vice president.

The 2024 results forced liberals to take their heads out of the sand; it turns out that you can only deny reality for so long. Finally, after almost a decade, liberals started to reckon with the fact that the era of unipolarity, globalization, and neoliberal consensus had produced a nightmare instead of a utopia.

If any individual embodies the closing era of the Short American Century, it is George Packer. His résumé reads like an establishmentarian bingo card: Currently a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, Packer was previously a longtime staff writer at *The New Yorker*, a fellow at the Washington think tank New America, a member of the Peace Corps, and a graduate of Yale University. The world that Trump destroyed was to a significant degree Packer's world.

Though best known for his nonfiction—his 2019 biography of the diplomat Richard Holbrooke was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize—Packer has just published a novel, *The Emergency*, which wrestles with the reality of Trump and Trumpism. Described by the author as a "political fable," the book is Packer's attempt "to convey what it feels like today…to watch a world you thought would always be there because it had always been there disappear before your eyes with a speed that you can't begin to fathom." Unfortunately, *The Emergency* makes it clear that while liberals like Packer are finally opening their eyes to the world as it is, they have little to offer when it comes to charting a way out of the crisis, because they cannot admit that it was their own regime that created it.

Daniel Bessner is a historian of US foreign relations and cohost of American Prestige, *a podcast on international affairs.*



The Emergency
A Novel
By George Packer
Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
416 pp. $29

The first thing to say about *The Emergency* is that it is boring. It is not so much poorly written as indifferently written. The prose is workmanlike—"Looking back, Doctor Rustin realized that the Emergency had been a long time coming. This was how empires of old that he had learned about in school fell: imperceptibly, then shockingly"—and the plot twists predictable. Ironically given the title, the novel lacks urgency; it is there to teach you something, entertainment be damned.

The protagonists of *The Emergency* are a family named the Rustins: Dr. Hugo Rustin and his wife, Annabelle, as well as their daughter, Selva, and their son, Pan. The Rustins live in "the city by the river" in "the empire," which has ruled for as long as anyone can remember. This empire has two main social classes: "Burghers," who live in the cities and whose elite embodies the professional managerial class, and "Yeomen," who live in the countryside as peasants and farmers. Since the world of *The Emergency* doesn't seem to have any advanced industry, there is no industrial working class. As such, Packer presents a stark binary between the urban and urbane and the rural and uncultured—the liberal PMC vision revealed.

To be fair, Packer does offer a critique of meritocracy when *The Emergency* addresses "Excess Burghers"—those who do poorly on a series of "comprehensive exams" that Burghers take as teenagers, which "placed them on tracks to positions in their family guilds." If a Burgher does well on these exams, they are afforded a life of dignity; if they don't, they are doomed to live on society's margins. And beyond Burghers and Yeomen are a group referred to only as "Strangers," who speak a different language and are not considered by either Burghers or Yeomen as a part of their shared political community.

Needless to say, everything in *The Emergency* has an obvious analogue to our own reality: The divide between Burghers and Yeomen reflects the divide between the PMC and red-state America; the comprehensive exams and their outcomes reflect the SATs and the sorting that occurs between those who ace them and those who do not; Strangers represent immigrants; and so on.

Indeed, if anything defines *The Emergency*, it is these ham-handed references: Packer may believe that he is writing for the cognoscenti, but he doesn't seem to trust his audience very much. Every point in the novel is underlined in proverbial red ink. For instance, Packer criticizes social media by having young Burghers wear "goggles" that immerse them "in a continuous stream of images that seemed to leave them smiling and optimistic." Meanwhile, Yeomen boys embrace a reactionary ideology called "Dirt Thought," which is essentially the philosophy of the far-right Internet influencer Bronze Age Pervert transposed to a rural setting. The obviousness of these references could be forgiven if they were in service of some greater insight. But they are not. Packer doesn't like social media and he doesn't like the manosphere; it doesn't go much beyond that.

The titular "emergency" refers to the breakdown of the empire. Nevertheless, Packer is extremely vague regarding what exactly led to the crisis, stating only that it began with an "impasse at the top of government," which led to a "standoff" that dragged on "for weeks, paralyzing imperial functions," which was followed in turn by "street fighting in the capital," the flight of "the ruling elite," and the dissolution of the empire. Burghers and Yeomen are thus left in a situation where there is no recognized

political authority, which soon leads to social revolution in the city by the river and causes relations between the two classes to disintegrate.

It is quite strange that a novel about collapse glosses over the reasons for that collapse. The only explanation that Packer gives for the end of this great and mighty empire is that it "died of boredom and loss of faith in itself." The absence of class conflict as an explanation for the empire's downfall is telling and suggests the limits of a novel that attempts to explain Trump's rise without sustained reference to the system that produced him. There are many reasons why Trump won in 2016 and 2024; "boredom" and America's "loss of faith in itself" are not among them.

After the empire's fall, a new social movement takes over the Rustins' city. This movement, which dubs itself "Together," has six rules: "Everyone belongs," "I am no better and neither are you," "No Burghers are Excess Burghers," "No one is a Stranger," "Listen to the young," and "You shall be as gods." Together is a transparent reference to the youth movement of China's Cultural Revolution; suffice it to say, Packer thinks that Together's communalism is both ridiculous and naïve—in an interview, he called it a "flimsy new utopian philosophy." Predictably, Together rapidly degenerates into tyranny, and eventually, in an echo of the infamous Red Guards, a paramilitary youth organization called Wide Awake assumes control over the city by the river.

The Rustin family is directly affected by these developments. Paterfamilias Hugo, much like American liberals in 2016 (in an interview, Packer explicitly referred to Hugo as a "liberal"), refuses to accept that things have changed and soon loses his job as chief surgeon at the local hospital. Hugo then enters a long, dark night of the soul, which forms the spine of the novel's plot. For their part, his wife Annabelle and daughter Selva embrace elements of Together—the former its focus on community and the latter its emphasis on radical equality. Eventually, Hugo and Selva go on a trip into Yeoman country, where they learn that the sureties of imperial life are unlikely to return.

The major outcome of this journey is that Selva becomes the victim of Yeoman violence, which after several twists and turns leads Hugo to abandon his liberal faith in reason and rational exchange. By the end of *The Emergency*, Hugo has rejected the notion "that if we just all sit down and talk to each other…we will understand each other and be able to get along through compromise." Instead, he embraces a gauzy humanism—*The Emergency* literally ends with Hugo, in the middle of a battle sweeping the city by the river, preparing to open his door to help a stranger.

Hugo Rustin serves as a stand-in for Packer, who admits that "a few years ago, I began to lose faith in the power of facts to create any kind of shared reality." But nothing has replaced this disillusionment, save for a general disorientation. As with Hugo, Packer's shift from liberalism to humanism is an evasion masquerading as evolution. Liberalism at least claimed to have answers, whether institutions, norms, or reasoned discourse. Humanism, in contrast, offers only the possibility of individual moral gestures. That this is Packer's answer to the collapse of the empire suggests how thoroughly he has given up on any collective political project that might actually address the crisis he describes. It is hard to imagine a more damning statement on liberalism's present condition.

Even Packer seems dissatisfied with liberalism's rather timid response.

If any emotion defines *The Emergency*, it is bewilderment. Hugo just doesn't understand the new world, and neither does Packer, who repeatedly—and perhaps despite himself—defaults to prejudice in his novel. Yeomen, for example, are nothing more than a collection of liberal anxieties about the white working class: They are drunk, ignorant, bigoted, and violent. The same can be said for Packer's treatment of Together as naïve idiocy. For all his understanding that things have changed, Packer isn't interested in examining the sources of this transformation, as his hurried explanation of the empire's collapse underlines.

On some level, Packer understands that the era of liberalism is over. In an interview with the podcaster Andrew Keen, he remarked that "it seems today as if [liberalism has] run out of gas, as if it no longer has answers for the deep dissatisfactions of Western publics." But this is about as much self-reflection and diagnosis as we get, from Packer and in *The Emergency*.

When Packer was asked by PEN America's Julia Goldberg what "it might take for Americans to demonstrate the same willingness [that Hugo Rustin has] to open their doors to everyone, metaphorically speaking," all he could offer in response is that Americans must "take the risk to go out and encounter, really see, the other," and in so doing "face our country's moral collapse and return to human decency, common humanity—something more basic and universal than politics."

Yet even Packer seems dissatisfied with this rather timid response. *The Emergency* ends with a civil war breaking out between the Burghers and the Yeomen (the Yeomen, of course, strike first, deploying "shitapults"—catapults filled with feces). Uninterested in addressing the causes of social decay or exploring the political and economic solutions that might chart our way out of the morass, *The Emergency* concludes with fantasies of savagery. Like all capitalist realists, Packer can more easily imagine the end of civilization than he can the emergence of an alternative system.

Packer claims that he wrote *The Emergency* because he believes fables are a useful means to illuminate present politics. And *The Emergency* is useful, albeit not in the way Packer intended. The light it sheds is on the limits of a liberal imagination indifferent to both the causes of and the solutions to our current crisis. The Short American Century is over, and while no one knows what comes next, it has become increasingly clear that liberals likely won't be the ones leading us into the future. *The Emergency* is thus less of a novel than it is a confession: that liberalism has nothing useful left to say. **N**

KWAME NKRUMAH (SECOND FROM LEFT) AND OTHER LEADERS OF NONALIGNED COUNTRIES, 1960 (GETTY)

Freedom Struggles

The global politics of Kwame Nkrumah

BY ADOM GETACHEW

ACCRA'S KWAME NKRUMAH MEMORIAL PARK, BUILT ON the site of the former colonial polo grounds, is home to two radically different monuments to Ghana's first prime minister. In the park's center is an eye-catching bronze statue of a larger-than-life Nkrumah, clad in royal kente cloth, with an outstretched hand pointing ahead and one foot in front of the other as if he were advancing forward. Erected on top of a pedestal at the spot where Nkrumah stood to declare Ghana's independence from Britain, it channels the slogan of Nkrumah's political party: "Forward ever, backward never." Though the monument was erected in 1992, the statue itself likely dates to the 1970s, when, after Nkrumah's death in exile, discussions began for returning his body to Ghana and a mausoleum.

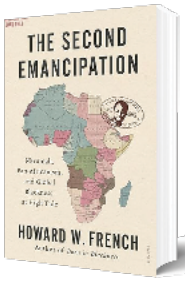
The second statue rests in two pieces a short distance from this gleaming icon. Cast and designed by the Italian sculptor Nicola Cataudella, it is considerably older. Originally erected in 1958 at the Old Parliament House, it depicts Nkrumah in a *fugu*, a smock from the northern region of the country associated with the working class. Here, too, Nkrumah's right hand is extended, but instead of directing forward movement, it waves in greeting. To some, this might seem like a friendly gesture, but from the moment the statue was proposed, critics lambasted it as an indication of the growing personality cult around Nkrumah. In 1961, the statue was badly damaged in a bomb attack, and Cataudella was commissioned to replace it. Then, during the 1966 coup that unseated Nkrumah's government, it was toppled and beheaded. The severed and damaged pieces—Nkrumah's body, minus a right hand and a left arm, and his head—stand on two pedestals next to each other.

These two Nkrumahs are illustrative of the long-standing conflict over the African leader's legacy. In much of the world, Nkrumah is today a forgotten figure from a lost age of decolonization. Across the continent, however, he is widely celebrated as a champion of African independence and unity. In a 1999 poll conducted by the BBC World Service, African listeners voted for Nkrumah as Africa's "Man of the Millennium." And yet closer to home, his memory remains as contested as ever. On the radio and TV, in print, and in everyday conversations, Ghanaians fiercely debate whether Nkrumah was a liberator or a dictator. His own children, Samia Yaba and Sekou, took opposite sides on this question in an impromptu televised interview in 2023.

In his latest book, *The Second Emancipation: Nkrumah, Pan-Africanism, and Global Blackness at High Tide*, the veteran *New York Times* correspondent, Columbia journalism professor, and author Howard French deftly navigates the global amnesia and national memory wars that surround Nkrumah's legacy, while also offering a dazzling portrait of the man himself. Following Nkrumah's unlikely ascent from his birthplace in the western region of Ghana to his success as a national leader and global statesman, French offers us much more than a biography. In Nkrumah's story, he charts the history of African decolonization and the American civil-rights movement "as linked and intertwined like a double helix." His effort to narrate the global struggle for Black emancipation extends the ambitions of his previous book, *Born in Blackness*, to place African and African-descended people at the center of world history. In doing so, he presents Ghana's anticolonial struggle and independence as world-historical events with global reverberations.

In *Born in Blackness*, French suggested that the roots of Pan-Africanism, a constellation of movements that advocated global Black solidarity, could be found in the earliest slave revolts. Moving his readers from the 1574 revolt on the earliest modern plantations in São Tomé to the Haitian Revolution that abolished slavery and created an independent Black state, French examined how rebel slaves recast Blackness as a shared political identity and universalized the principles of liberty and equality. These early efforts generated inspiration and precedent for the later articulation of Pan-Africanism beginning in the late 19th century.

Now, with *The Second Emancipation*, French allows this Pan-Africanism to take center stage. Here he reprises some of the pioneering figures of Pan-African history, including the Sierra Leonean historian James Africanus Beale Horton, who wrote on the political conditions of the Gold Coast, and Edward Blyden, the advocate of African American and West Indian emigration to Liberia. Writing between the 1850s and 1890s, these figures insisted on the unity and solidarity of African and African-descended people and challenged depictions of Africa as a place without a history. French details how this broad commitment to solidarity and shared struggled expanded its reach and gained momentum in the 20th century. As he shows, the transformations of Pan-Africanism from an elite to a more popular politics took place against a backdrop of increased globalization, growing labor migration and urbanization, and two world wars, which facilitated encounters and exchanges among people of African descent, making the idea of solidarity more concrete and realizable by the mid-20th century. Nkrumah and his brand of Pan-Africanism, French argues, were products of this wider context.



The Second Emancipation
Nkrumah, Pan-Africanism, and Global Blackness at High Tide
By Howard W. French
Liveright.
512 pp. $39.99

Even if Nkrumah emerged from this high point of Pan-African politics, French is also careful to capture his singular personality and determination. A very private workaholic with a force of will that surprised his supporters and critics alike, Nkrumah took up the cause of Ghanaian and African independence with an intensity that was unmatched. No other figure of African anti-colonialism made achieving a federation of African states the crux of their political vision. Yet if these traits made him uniquely skilled as a visionary and a campaigner, they also fed his impatience and paranoia, which in turn fueled his authoritarian turn.

French carefully brings these two sides together to provide a rich and complex account of Nkrumah's rise and fall. Along the way, he also inserts himself and his family into the story. In recounting the excitement with which he first traveled to Africa as a college student in the late 1970s, or recollecting the Friends of Ghana Association in which his parents participated, French makes concrete the great hope and enthusiasm that the project of African independence carried for African Americans and for many others, too.

Francis Nwia Kofi Nkrumah was born in the British colony then known as the Gold Coast, in the tiny village of Nkroful, sometime in either 1909 (the year normally given in accounts of his life) or 1912 (the year his mother remembered giving birth to her son). This discrepancy is a testament to the obscurity in which Nkrumah's earliest years remain shrouded. No one could have predicted then that in less than 50 years, Nkrumah—who hailed from the small, marginal ethnic community of the Nzima—would lead the struggle to liberate the Gold Coast from colonial rule. His emergence as an anti-colonial activist and a national leader were far from foreordained. In fact, each step in his meteoric rise was marked by sheer contingency and chance. "Temporal accidents, being in the right place at the right time when the hinge of history swing loudly, are probably commonplace in the lives of major figures on the global stage," French writes. "But their recurrence in Nkrumah's story is nonetheless remarkable."

In Nkrumah's autobiography, published in 1957 to coincide with the independence of the country he now led, such moments were occasions for mythmaking. Each chance opening or encounter was rendered a matter of fate, reinforcing the idea that he was destined to emerge as the standard-bearer for his nation's and Africa's liberation. For instance, Nkrumah tells his readers that during his brief pit stop in the United Kingdom en route to study at Lincoln University, the historically Black school in rural Pennsylvania, he learned from a newspaper boy that Mussolini had invaded Ethiopia. The invasion unleashed in Nkrumah an emotional awakening in which he prayed "the day might come when I could play my part in bring[ing] about the downfall of [colonialism]." The image of an isolated Nkrumah staring at the "impassive" faces of British citizens and vowing his commitment to Africa's liberation has all the narrative trappings of a heroic epic. Yet in truth, as French notes, by the time Nkrumah arrived in the colonial metropole, he had already been exposed to emergent forms of nationalism and Pan-Africanism in which Ethiopia loomed large.

Throughout his account, French deconstructs this self-mythologizing by filling in the gaps in Nkrumah's autobiography with a sustained attention to the important influences that shaped Nkrumah before he went abroad. It was due to the insistence and determination of his mother, Nyaniba, we are told, that Nkrumah enrolled in a one-room Roman Catholic mission school. In 1926, during a routine inspection of that school, he was recruited to study in the capital of the colony and soon found himself at the newly opened Achimota College, an elite high school. While there, Nkrumah was mentored by James Aggrey, the first African teacher at Achimota whose African nationalism and eloquent oratory would become sources of inspiration.

In Accra, Nkrumah was also exposed to Ghana's nascent anti-colonial movement. He saw how, in 1930, cocoa farmers responded to the collapse of prices by refusing to sell their beans to British trading firms and boycotting British imports. He also observed the rising career of the

Adom Getachew teaches at the University of Chicago and is the author of Worldmaking After Empire.

WEST AFRICA
AND THE ORIGINS OF THE SLAVE TRADE

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Nigerian journalist (and later president of Nigeria) Nnamdi Azikiwe, whose speeches and articles enthralled young intellectuals like Nkrumah. Azikiwe also served as the founding editor of the *African Morning Post*, where he promoted nationalist politics and found himself facing charges under new sedition laws. Another important figure of the interwar Gold Coast political scene who inspired Nkrumah was Samuel R. Wood. Wood was a member of the Gold Coast Aborigines' Rights Protection Society, a nascent nationalist organization founded in 1897, and participated in the activities of the African Friends of Abyssinia, which opposed Italy's imperial ambitions in Ethiopia.

In 1935, following the examples of Aggrey and Azikiwe, who had departed from the traditional path of studying in the colonial metropole to pursue an education in the United States, Nkrumah headed off to Lincoln University. He arrived in the United States with little interest in or knowledge of African American history and politics. French notes that in his autobiography, "Nkrumah conveys nothing but the most passing sense of the difficulties of life during the Great Depression, no hint of the politics roiling Harlem [where he had a stopover], or indeed any discussion of Black life in America overall." But this gradually changed as he studied at Lincoln's rural campus and took up odd jobs, including at a shipyard in Philadelphia and aboard a shipping line. During these years, Nkrumah honed his oratorical skills, following the examples of Black preachers and practicing at the regular bull sessions on campus. More than his formal education and the degrees he secured at Lincoln and the University of Pennsylvania, his years in America provided Nkrumah with a lesson about the global color line. His time in the cosmopolitan, polyglot maritime scene contributed to an increasingly broad view of race in the world order. In these years, he developed an expansive conception of Blackness and came to view the diaspora as central to the project of decolonization. This growing realization was facilitated by his connections to key African American intellectuals like the political scientist Ralph Bunche, who had studied the League of Nations mandates in Africa, and William Leo Hansberry, a historian of Africa and an uncle of the playwright Lorraine Hansberry.

But in these years, Nkrumah's most important mentor was C.L.R. James, who tutored him in political organizing and radical politics. A polymath who had written *The Black Jacobins*, the classic history of the Haitian revolution, James emphasized to Nkrumah the importance of building mass organizations and tutored him on the various Marxist tendencies. James also made the consequential decision to introduce Nkrumah to George Padmore, a fellow Trinidadian who had broken with the Communist Party and was at the center of Pan-African politics in London. It was likely that Nkrumah had already encountered the prolific Padmore on the page: His anti-colonial reportage had appeared in African American and African newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* and the *African Morning Post*. But his introduction to Padmore proved to be an important connection for Nkrumah when he moved to London to participate in the burgeoning anti-colonial politics there. Padmore and Joe Appiah, a fellow Gold Coaster, immediately brought Nkrumah into the various organizations in which African and West Indian students, activists, and intellectuals were organizing to end imperial rule. It was in this context that Nkrumah dropped the anglicized first name Francis and adopted Kwame, more befitting the role of nationalist leader that he increasingly envisioned for himself.

Drawn by the promise of an independent Black nation, W.E.B. Du Bois moved to Ghana.

While in Britain, Nkrumah helped to organize the historic Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, which brought leading figures of Pan-Africanism like W.E.B. Du Bois and Amy Ashwood Garvey together with emerging African nationalist leaders like Jomo Kenyatta (from Kenya) and Hastings Banda (from Malawi). In a preview of the political campaigns to come, the congress's "Manifesto to the Colonial Workers, Farmers, and Intellectuals of Africa" declared that "Colonial workers must be in the front of the battle against Imperialism" and argued that "your weapons—the Strike and the Boycott—are invincible."

During these years, Nkrumah also served as vice president of the West African Students' Union and helped to found a group called the West African National Secretariat, which sought to forge a "front for a United West African National Independence." In an early prelude to the secrecy and individualized rule that would become a tragic hallmark of his leadership, Nkrumah also founded a clandestine cell called "the Circle," which aimed to bring together the most radical nationalists of the region under his authority for the purpose of founding a "Union of African Socialist Republics."

French warns that the wording did not reflect "anything like a firm allegiance with the similarly named Soviet Union." Rejecting the racist view that imputed all African resistance to the instigation of communist agitators, and well aware of the Cold War dichotomies that would eventually lead the United States to encourage and support the coup that ousted Nkrumah, he instead reiterates that the connections between Nkrumah and the Soviet Union or communism more generally were overblown: His Union of African Socialist Republics was an idea born out of his own Pan-Africanism and commitment to socialism. It emerged, French notes, from an autonomous intellectual and political tradition that aspired to a universalist project of remaking the world, much like Marxism but also distinct from it.

French is not wrong to make such an argument, though it can inadvertently minimize or obscure some of the deep entanglements between Pan-Africanism and Marxism and even between Pan-Africanism and communism. From the Russian Revolution to the rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union, the East did serve as an inspiration and model for the project of political and social transformation that many anti-colonialists hoped to stage in their own contexts. When figures like Padmore broke with the Soviet Union, disappointed with its failure to more forthrightly support the anti-imperial cause, it is worth noting that they did not fully reject Marxism. The title of Padmore's 1956 book, *Pan-Africanism or Communism*, suggests a dichotomous choice, but what he laid out there and advocated in the last years of his life was a synthesis of both.

It was one thing to dream of and plan for African independence and regional unity from inside Britain or the United States, but Nkrumah soon found out that it was quite another thing to pursue such a vision on the ground in Africa. His chance to try his hand at building a nationalist movement came in 1947, when he was invited to return home and help lead the fledgling United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC), a party started by long-standing figures of Gold Coast politics like the lawyer J.B. Danquah, which sought a gradualist path to national independence.

By his own account, Nkrumah used this moment as another opportunity for self-aggrandizement: He presented himself as the assured, confident hero eager to accept the UGCC's call to action. As French notes, this might not exactly have been the case. For instance, Appiah recalled that Nkrumah was "wracked with anxiety and fear" as he considered the magnitude of the task ahead.

Despite his fears, Nkrumah hit the ground running to transform the UGCC into a mass party. With that aim, he went on a speaking tour of the country, opening party offices wherever he could, signing up members, and collecting dues. His timing was fortuitous: Despite its appearance as a placid model colony, the Gold Coast had undergone dramatic political and economic change in Nkrumah's 12 years away. Rebellion was brewing just under the surface. Over the last decade and a half, the growing cities had increased the ranks of urbanized young people with some formal education, who formed literary clubs and debating societies in which they developed an interest in local and international politics. Meanwhile, economic woes and bad harvests only added to the pressure on the colonial government. When, in 1937, colonial officials responded to an outbreak of swollen-shoot disease by ordering that all contaminated cocoa plants be destroyed, the already politicized farmers staged another boycott, refusing to sell their crops to British companies.

The end of World War II complicated the situation for the British government in the Gold Coast further still. When servicemen returned there after supporting the British war effort around the world, they found that their bonuses would not support the upward mobility that they had been promised. On February 28, 1948, hundreds of veterans and their supporters marched on Accra's Christianborg Castle, the seat of the colonial government, to deliver a petition requesting relief. After a confrontation between the veterans and the police, who blocked the protesters and fired into the crowd, the peaceful march quickly escalated into a riot. Nkrumah and the rest of the UGCC leadership had not been involved in organizing the protest that day, but colonial officials surmised that communist influence via the party had instigated the riot. The main leaders of the UGCC, known as the "Big Six," were quickly arrested.

The Accra riots dramatically sped up the political timeline of decolonization, exposing the fissures within the UGCC and pushing the colonial state to initiate constitutional reforms. The following year, Nkrumah broke with the UGCC and founded the Convention People's Party. Its demand of "Self-Government Now" was circulated at mass meetings and on the pages of its newspaper, the *Accra Evening News*. Inspired by Gandhian nonviolence and drawing on the discussions at the Pan-African Congress in Manchester, Nkrumah outlined a program of positive action that entailed "carefully calibrated…civil disobedience." Soon the CPP was challenging the colonial state's gradual path to what it called "responsible government" and calling for a constituent assembly.

African Americans helped catapult Nkrumah onto the world stage.

Once again, however, popular forces took the initiative. The Union of Meteorological Workers began a strike in late December 1949, and when its members were dismissed from their jobs, the larger Trade Union Council called for a general strike to begin on January 8, 1950. Just two days later, the CPP followed its lead, and Nkrumah urged all nonessential workers to stay home. For this, Nkrumah and most of the party leadership ended up back in jail. In the 1951 general election, organized by the colonial state as part of its gradual process of decolonization, Nkrumah ran for and won a seat on the newly created Legislative Assembly from his jail cell. With the CPP clinching a majority, Nkrumah was released. He would now serve as the leader of the transitional government.

Nkrumah and the CPP won two more elections (in 1954 and 1956) before the country achieved independence in 1957. French details how these years set in motion a central contradiction of Nkrumah's political leadership: Even as his star shined brighter on the international stage, he became increasingly embattled at home. Nor did his international reputation initially emerge through the official platforms of international politics. With the superpowers focused on the Asian and Central American theaters of the Cold War, the small country of the Gold Coast and the momentous arrival of African independence barely registered in the geopolitical battles of the period. This was both a blessing and a curse. It meant that Nkrumah's fledgling government was not subject to the surveillance and covert intervention that hampered other anti-colonial movements. But it also meant that his bold calls for large-scale contributions to African development went unheeded.

In the context of this studious neglect by the major states, it was African Americans who catapulted Nkrumah onto the world stage. Thanks to the extensive efforts of Horace Mann Bond, then president of Lincoln University, Nkrumah received a statesman's welcome to the United States in 1951. Black publications from the *Pittsburgh Courier* to *Ebony* offered extensive coverage of his political rise. In book-length treatments, the journalist Era Bell Thompson and the author Richard Wright chronicled the transformations afoot in the West African country. Drawn by the promise of an independent Black nation, figures like Maya Angelou and W.E.B. Du Bois later moved to Ghana.

"African American interest," French argues, "drove American momentum toward engaging with Nkrumah's government." In February 1953, he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, and in September 1960, he gave a historic address to the United Nations General Assembly. During John F. Kennedy's presidency, Nkrumah received an official invitation to Washington.

African American interest also strengthened Nkrumah's view that African Americans and Africans were engaged in a shared struggle of emancipation. When Ghana declared its independence in 1957, Nkrumah extended the same warm welcome that he had received during his 1951 visit to leading figures of the civil-rights movement, including Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King. Nkrumah hoped that African American engagement would help the new nation forge ahead with economic modernization. He urged African Americans and West Indians to bring their professional and technical expertise to Ghana, and several of them did. The St. Lucian economist W. Arthur Lewis served briefly as Nkrumah's economic adviser; the legal scholar Pauli Murray taught at Ghana's law school and coauthored a book about the new country's constitution. The historian David Levering Lewis taught at the University of Ghana, while the Barbadian poet and historian Edward Kamau Brathwaite worked in the Education Ministry.

Nkrumah advocated a federation of African states for the same reason that many of these Black intellectuals from the United States and the Caribbean sought to contribute to the development of Ghana. Through political integration, African states could overcome their economic dependence by building larger domestic markets and enhancing their bargaining power on the global stage. In making this argument, Nkrumah drew explicitly on the example of the United States. Nkrumah argued that in ratifying their Constitution in 1789, "the American states saw that they could not survive by living separately and managing their own affairs independently." Glossing the title of his 1963 book *Africa Must Unite*, he insisted that the founders of the United States knew that "America must unite."

Nkrumah hoped that his rising international star would summon the African unity he dreamed of and help decolonization transcend the nation-state; instead, he was mostly dragged down into the grubby and intractable politics of attempting to save his own nation-state from even more fragmentation. Almost immediately after the 1951 general election, regional and ethnic opposition parties began forming. First came the Northern People's Party, which advocated "the North for the Northerners," and then came the Ashanti-based National Liberation Movement, which proclaimed "No self-government without federation"; both contested the unitary and developmental state at the center of Nkrumah's agenda. Even as he faced these domestic headwinds, Nkrumah stubbornly pursued his Pan-Africanist project, arguing that Ghana's independence was meaningless unless it was linked to a wider African emancipation and eventual federation. He laid the groundwork for this goal by hosting the Conference of Independent African States in 1958 and forming the hastily assembled Ghana-Guinea union.

For Nkrumah, Ghana's independence was meaningless without wider African freedom.

The entanglements and dissonances between Nkrumah's internationalism and his nationalist project are central to the story of his fall. First, though his vision of a unitary Ghanaian state won out domestically, the sovereignty associated with such a state made it more difficult to achieve the Pan-African federalism that he had championed. Second, Nkrumah's efforts to advance a Pan-African agenda on the international stage, and especially his support of Patrice Lumumba, the martyred young leader of Congo, placed Ghana on the radar of the Cold War's warriors. If, in 1951, American officials barely noticed Nkrumah's emergence on the West African scene, a decade later they openly wondered whether stemming the tide of communism required marginalizing or even ousting him.

Finally, Pan-African federation had been proposed by Nkrumah as an answer to the economic and political weakness of the postcolonial state. Within the domestic context, this weakness—and the potential for foreign interference and subversion—spurred him to view the entrenched opposition as possible foreign agents. This was no doubt intensified by Nkrumah's suspiciousness, which sometimes bordered on paranoia. It is for this reason that one of the first signs of authoritarianism under his rule was the passage of the Deportation Act just five months after independence. Its earliest victim was Bankole Timothy, a Sierra Leonean writer and former Nkrumah supporter, whose crime was critiquing the growing personality cult around the prime minister.

French rightly notes that Nkrumah never enjoyed what might be called a loyal opposition—that is, parties that objected to the CPP's policies while accepting the government's legitimacy. Instead, his critics often adopted the colonial state's language to describe Nkrumah as a communist infiltrator and, in one case, an "African Hitler."

Soon, this bitter and often personalized opposition gave way to assassination attempts and bomb attacks. The government's increasingly harsh responses, including the reintroduction of the colonial-era practice of preventive detention, exacerbated and escalated the conflicts. As Nkrumah and his administration doubled down on their view that the opposition aimed to subvert the government, the political terror intensified.

In 1964, the government officially declared what was already true in practice: Ghana would be a one-party state. But even this centralization of power could not stem the centrifugal forces. Very quickly, members of the CPP leadership were suspected of plotting an overthrow. The party was cannibalizing itself, and Nkrumah's trusted circle grew even smaller. By the time he was overthrown in a coup in 1966, it was hardly a surprise to observers of Ghanaian politics.

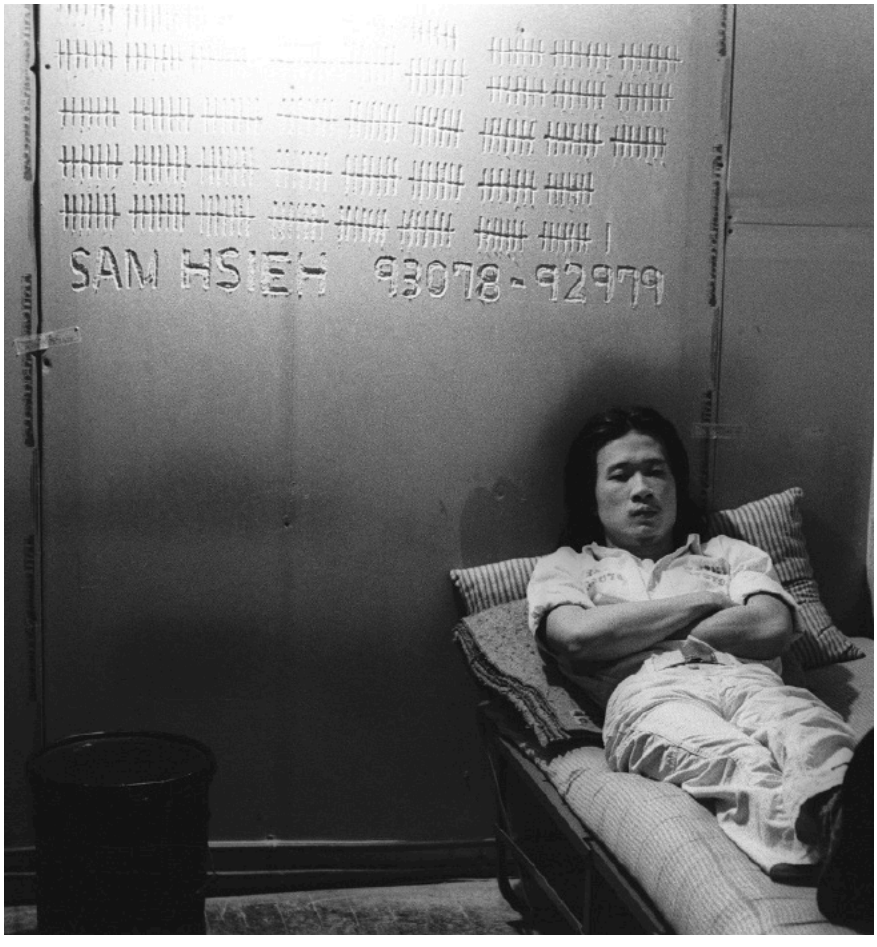
In explaining Nkrumah's authoritarian turn, French masterfully braids together accounts of his propensity for feelings of insecurity and paranoia, the difficulty of founding a new regime, and the colonial inheritance that primed new nations for despotism. "Contrary to the conventional wisdom that European imperial rule had been a healthy finishing school for democracy and good governance," French notes, "it had in fact been an academy of authoritarianism." Not only did Nkrumah and other postcolonial statesmen have a ready-made playbook at hand for repressing dissent through colonial laws like preventive detention, but they also inherited a Frankenstein state in which

the repressive apparatus of the police and the army was overdeveloped, while the mechanisms for building consensus and legitimacy were weak and untested. Especially in moments of crisis, it was easier to exercise the muscles that were already strong than to strengthen other, more democratic capacities.

For this reason, French situates the excesses of Nkrumah's government in a comparative historical context in which a number of postcolonial states across the Anglophone world, from India and Pakistan to Tanzania, instituted similar mechanisms of repression. At times, his account becomes too defensive: For instance, French favorably compares the magnanimity of Nkrumah's government, which suspended the sentences of people who were condemned to death for a spate of bombings in Accra, to the brutality with which Britain used the Special Powers Act in Northern Ireland.

This defensiveness, a charge familiar to many authors who seek to write sympathetically about the project of African decolonization, stems from an aspiration to explain the rise of authoritarianism without pathologizing Nkrumah or Africans more broadly. Through comparison, French is implicitly responding to those who might attribute Nkrumah's authoritarianism solely to his personality or who might find in the rise of one-party rule across the continent a specifically African propensity for dictatorship. His aim is not to sanctify Nkrumah or to cleanse him of flaws and failures. It is instead to register that the tragedy of Nkrumah's fall was not his alone.

Unchecked ambition and political miscalculation took their toll, but this happened in the context of the conflicting aims of nationalism and internationalism, developmentalism and democratization, that were brought together under the umbrella of decolonization. In different ways, these political dilemmas continue to resonate, and not just in the postcolonial world. At the same time, the sense of political possibility and world-historical agency that animated Nkrumah's vision of Pan-Africanism has been lost, leaving in its wake narrower solidarities and more limited political horizons. The world that Nkrumah sought remained beyond his reach, and the one he feared has come to pass. **N**



TEHCHING HSIEH, *ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE 1978–1979* (PHOTO BY CLAIRE FERGUSSON)

Stop Making Sense

The extreme performance art of Tehching Hsieh

BY JILLIAN STEINHAUER

On September 30, 1978, the performance artist Tehching Hsieh had himself locked inside a jail cell he'd built in his studio in lower Manhattan. The space was surrounded by wooden bars and measured just over 100 square feet; it contained a cot, a sink, a mirror, a pail, and a single bare light bulb on one wall. A friend brought Hsieh food and emptied the pail that he used as a toilet. For an entire year, Hsieh did not talk, read, write, listen to music, or watch TV. He thought and paced, slept and ate; he washed his hands and brushed his teeth. Each day, he marked the passage of time by having his photograph taken and carving a single mark into the wall with his nail clippers. On September 29, 1979, he was released.

One Year Performance 1978–1979—or *Cage Piece*, as it's more commonly known—was neither Hsieh's first artwork nor his first performance. But it signaled the start of a period in which he subjected himself to several yearlong feats of endurance in the name of art: After the cage, he would go on to punch a time clock literally once every hour, live outside on the streets of New York City, and tie himself, 24/7, to another artist, Linda Montano. All of these pieces were shaped by strict rules and meticulously documented. Together, they

started to bring Hsieh, who was then an undocumented immigrant from Taiwan, into the avant-garde art world of New York—albeit at a remove, since he wasn't very social and was never quite fluent in English.

By the mid-1980s, many curators, writers, and fellow artists knew what Hsieh was doing—even if, as is so often the case with his work, they didn't understand his reasons for doing it or what it meant. Some were dismissive, but others responded to the extraordinary nature of his art with engagement and respect. In 1980, the poet and performance artist Jackson Mac Low wrote a postcard to Hsieh, asking (sympathetically, he stressed), "Why do you do such performances?… There must be much more to them than is apparent." Two years later, in the midst of *One Year Performance 1981–1982 (Outdoor Piece)*, Hsieh was arrested after an altercation with a man on the street; the judge in the case didn't make Hsieh enter the courtroom, because he'd read an article on the artist's work in *The Wall Street Journal*. "These days anything is art," he commented.

And then, for his fifth and final one-year performance, Hsieh did something truly radical: He dropped out. Beginning on July 1, 1985, he would "not do ART, not talk ART, not see ART, not read ART, not go to ART gallery and ART museum for one year," he declared in one of the trademark typewritten announcements that he posted around Soho and mailed to members of the art community. "Just as he was acquiring a significant artistic profile, Hsieh cut himself out of the picture," the curator Adrian Heathfield writes in *Out of Now*, a monograph coauthored with Hsieh. "He became an artist without art."

Shortly after the year was up, Hsieh announced his next project: For 13 years, he would make art but not show it publicly. Now he would be an artist engaged with art again, but also one without an audience—and without an audience, who is there to care about the art?

Hsieh's followers remained loyal even after he'd abandoned them. His performances weren't much exhibited or written about, but they became legendary nonetheless, first through word of mouth and later thanks to a DVD he made about his work. In a way, the contours of Hsieh's story made him a perfect cult figure: He was an outsider who, without any institutional training or backing, had conceived and accomplished feats that seemed to shift the parameters of performance art. And then, without getting any substantial credit for it, he all but disappeared.

As it turned out, Hsieh was hiding in plain sight: After briefly going west as part of the *Thirteen Year Plan*, he returned to New York, opened an artist residence in Williamsburg, and moved into a loft in Clinton Hill to tend to his archive. At one point, Hsieh opened a café with his wife (it has since closed, and the two have divorced). He sometimes worked in construction. Then, in the late 2000s, he began to receive long-overdue recognition.

The latest iteration of that attention—which includes his representing Taiwan at the 2017 Venice Biennale—is *Tehching Hsieh: Lifeworks 1978–1999*, a retrospective of the artist's performances that opened last fall at Dia Beacon. Adapting a layout designed by Hsieh, the exhibition cleverly uses space and documentation to capture the immensity of his work. Within the first four galleries, which are devoted individually to the one-year performances, materials accumulate: hundreds of photographs, time cards, maps, and cassette tapes. Then you arrive at *No Art Piece*, and the gallery is almost entirely empty. The absence is striking—and it's followed by an even larger void for the *Thirteen Year Plan*. The size of each gallery corresponds to the featured piece's length of time, so the yearlong projects all get the same square footage, while to reach the end of the *Thirteen Year Plan* gallery, you must traverse a huge, evocative space filled only with structural columns. (Even the gaps between the galleries themselves correspond to the amount of time that passed between the works.)

The show, in essence, generates an embodied experience. A year sounds measurable but still abstract, until you're standing in a room surrounded by 365 photographs of Hsieh that could be identical if not for the growth of his hair. What's more, in order to really see that progression, you must move your own body. Ingeniously, and somewhat ironically, all of this physicality serves to dramatize the highly conceptual nature of Hsieh's art.

Yet what exactly are those concepts? In other words, what is Hsieh's work really about? The difficulty in answering that question, and the many attempts people have made to do so, is part of Hsieh's ongoing mystique. (To wit, 770 people showed up for the artist's talk at Dia Beacon on opening day.) *Cage Piece* could be read as a commentary on the severity of imprisonment; *No Art Piece* might be about a creative block. But the retrospective demonstrates that Hsieh's art doesn't have straightforward subject matter so much as a clear, overpowering form. And that form shapes the work's defining paradoxes: It is rigorous yet excessive, philosophical yet irrational. It is simultaneously private and public, life as much as art. Most important, it often seems senseless—and that senselessness is what gives it meaning.

Hsieh grew up in a small town in southern Taiwan as one of 15 children born to a father who had five successive wives. The family's members all lived together and the household was strict, but Hsieh's mother indulged him. Taiwan itself was fairly conservative too, but Hsieh was able to grow out his hair and listen to rock music; he studied painting and, in 1967, dropped out of high school. After he completed three years of mandatory military service, his paintings were exhibited at the gallery of the American News Bureau in Taiwan. But Hsieh was already becoming more interested in the possibilities of art outside the confines of static images. In 1973, he recorded himself jumping out of a second-story window onto a concrete floor; he broke both his ankles and called it *Jump Piece*. He later performed a piece in which he ate fried rice, and then fruit salad, until he threw up.

Hsieh's works were in conversation with performances happening oceans away: In 1971 in Santa Ana, California, Chris Burden conscripted a friend to shoot him in the arm, while in 1974, Marina Abramović offered herself up to an audience in Naples with 72 objects at their disposal, including a scalpel. Artists were using their bodies as a canvas, and their physical limits became aesthetic expressions.

Seeking a more cutting-edge art scene, Hsieh decided to leave Taiwan. He trained as a merchant mariner and, in 1974, took

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Words Matter

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a gig on an oil tanker heading for the United States. When the ship docked in Philadelphia, Hsieh fled and paid a cab driver $150 to take him to New York City. There, he worked low-wage jobs, shared an apartment, and thought about making art. It would take four years for him to conceive and prepare his first one-year performance; it would take another decade for him to receive amnesty and the stability that comes with citizenship. By then, though, Hsieh had already embarked on his *Thirteen Year Plan*, which means he'd already started to disappear.

Most performance art revolves around a single action or event, and even if that event lasts an entire day, it remains comprehensible. There have been long durational works before and after Hsieh—from Joseph Beuys living in a gallery with a coyote for three days in 1974, to Marina Abramović and Ulay walking the Great Wall of China in 1988 to mark the end of their relationship—but Hsieh's art took place on a scale that's difficult for a viewer to conceive. In each case, he arranged for copious documentation: In *Time Clock Piece*, for instance, for every hour that he punched a time card, he also took a self-portrait as a single frame of 16-millimeter film, eventually assembling an entire movie. But even with these things laid out before you, as at Dia Beacon, it's overwhelming—there's no way to take it all in.

What's more, the use of years as a time frame starts to bring Hsieh's work into the realm of the absurd. "It doesn't really matter how I spend time: time is still passing," he tells Heathfield in an interview in *Out of Now*. "Wasting time is my basic attitude to life; it is a gesture of dealing with the absurdity between life and time." Hsieh—who often speaks in statements that read like riddles—highlights that absurdity by taking the conditions of life to the extreme: His performances aren't centered on idiosyncratic gestures or symbolic acts but rather on the repetition and accumulation of quotidian experiences. Nothing really happens; there's no narrative or catharsis. Art becomes the container for an exaggerated version of life, a performance of the passage of time.

Hsieh's art takes place on a scale that's difficult for a viewer to conceive.

This is part of what makes Hsieh's work so tricky to grasp. He wasn't trying to create meaning, as both artists and their critics are wont to do; he was trying to capture it. Take, for instance, *Outdoor Piece*, in which Hsieh ruled that he would not enter any shelter, including subways and tents, for an entire year. It would make sense to assign the work some implicit commentary (on homelessness or urban poverty), and indeed, you can hypothesize that by reading into the resultant black-and-white photos of Hsieh living outside in all seasons, as well as the maps he marked up with his daily routes. But the more you search for meaning there, the less you'll find it. Hsieh's adoption of and adherence to such a strict set of limits redirects our attention to the process of the performance, its harsh repetitions and absurdities, rather than its content. I think this is why he includes so much documentation: to drown out our search for subject matter and emphasize the primacy of form.

Still, there are moments when the inklings of intent shine through. When I look at *Rope Piece*—for which Hsieh and Montano were attached by eight feet of rope but forbidden to touch each other—I see a reflection, however inadvertent, on the fragility of intimacy. Especially because you can track the increasing tension in their relationship by the fact that, on the second day of the project, they recorded 345 minutes of conversation between them (the daily cassette tapes are displayed under the photographs), whereas on a day near the end of the year, they spoke for only 32 minutes.

In this way, if Hsieh's art is about anything, it's about how we, as people, survive: shut up alone, out on the streets, attached to others, visible or not. It is a survey of the basic conditions of existence. As others have pointed out, this makes sense when you consider that Hsieh was undocumented while making these works. It's telling that each of his six primary performances features a deprivation in some way. (With *No Art Piece*, Hsieh refused himself access to his own creative practice, and with the *Thirteen Year Plan*, he lost his audience.) He was still testing the limits of his mind and his body, as he'd done when he jumped out the window—except now he continued testing past the point of pain or even logic.

There is a harshness to Hsieh's performances, and one of its clearest manifestations is the artist's own face. In the daily photographs for *Cage Piece*, Hsieh stares straight into the camera, unsmiling; given the jumpsuit that he's wearing, which displays his name and two sets of numbers (the start and end dates of the performance), he looks like he's posing for a mug shot. In the *Time Clock* images, Hsieh appears equally deadpan but with an added layer of visible exhaustion, since he could never sleep for more than an hour at a time. The stare softens somewhat in *Outdoor Piece*, since the photos are more situational, but aside from some moments of calm, he mostly looks like a man trying to make it to the next day.

Rope Piece, however, is the exception to this rule. Although she's clearly versed in the art of the stare, Montano introduces a new element into what by

then had become a self-sustaining Hsieh equation. In keeping with his previous performances, the pair took a photograph of themselves every day, but the pictures are more like snapshots than portraits. There's an intimate quality to the imagery, as in one photo where Montano and Hsieh lie in their separate beds, leaning on their arms and gazing at each other like chatty roommates in a college dorm. The ends of the taut rope are buried under their sheets, making it seem more like a symbolic tether than a literal one.

On my visit to Dia Beacon, this was the moment when I began to see the playfulness in Hsieh's work, not just its severity. He used the framework of durational art as a means to boil life down to its essence, and that process produced confinement, deprivation, endurance, yes—but also ridiculousness and a different, self-sustained kind of freedom.

Hsieh's time as a practicing artist formally ended on New Year's Eve in 1999. He held a press conference of sorts in Manhattan's Judson Memorial Church to announce that he'd finished the *Thirteen Year Plan* and would now abandon art. At the event, the performance artist Martha Wilson presented a poster that Hsieh had made. Using colorful letters cut out from different publications, it read: "I kept myself alive. I passed the Dec 31, 1999." The poster lists the location of the work as "Earth" and includes an image of the planet.

Whenever I read that statement, my brain trips on the second sentence. I want to insert the word *time*, to make it read the way that I imagine Hsieh might say it in conversation. He has often said that his work is about passing, unfolding, or wasting time. For Hsieh, time was material, subject, and form, and art was the tool he used to make it visible.

But in Hsieh's case, time outlasts art. Art fades away, becomes an empty gallery that's filled with potential but remains empty nonetheless. Then all that's left is keeping oneself alive, or as Hsieh put it, "life as a life sentence." This could be a gloomy sentiment, but in the *Thirteen Year Plan* poster, it's conveyed whimsically—part scrapbook, part ransom note—in another of Hsieh's contradictions. It speaks, I think, to what his art tries to tell us: that while it is serious and often hard work to keep ourselves alive, it is also a cause for celebration. N

Enter Girl With Books

If you'd like to see the city with trees
suddenly walking through it,
visit in the afternoon, the girls
fresh out of school.

With green and white stripes
on their uniforms,
they spread over the earth
like evergreens.

These two girls link arms as they walk,
and look: a row of girls
chained together like plums
in my grandfather's field.

And there is one girl—
this poem is for her—
standing all alone by a bookshelf.

She fears nothing:
inside her is a wedding
and a funeral.

She stares into the alphabet
the way a cypress tree stares into a cloud.
The way a cloud stares into a cypress tree.

DALIA TAHA

(Translated from the Arabic by Sara Elkamel)

Trading Places

The fictitious capital of HBO's Industry

BY JORGE COTTE

In the fourth season of *Industry*, everyone has a story to sell: a neutered fund or loveless marriage, shamed husbands, a life aimless after retirement, a payment-processing firm hampered by its ties to porn and sex work. These labels seem to indicate mistaken priorities or misplaced trust. But they are just narratives to be refined or redefined. Everything is up for grabs if you tell the right story. The right story can justify anything: Lies, fraud, financial malfeasance, corporate espionage, and distraction are all just different ways of telling your story. If your story is good enough, the truth will eventually catch up—or at least that's what *Industry*'s characters believe.

Old narratives, like the older seasons of this show, are just fodder for the new. *Industry*, which remains in the hands of its creators, Mickey Down and Konrad Kay, was once about young, ambitious university graduates out of their depth in a bustling bank at the center of London's financial markets. These days, *Industry* is about seasoned and cynical operators. Gone are the frenetic trading floors; now our heroes operate in lavish hotels and palatial dining rooms. The buzz of ringing phones, shouted prices, and moving trend lines on tick charts has given way to one-on-one conflict. The show's main characters are no longer neophytes; they can move markets with a well-placed word.

COURTESY OF HBO (SIMON RIDGWAY)

Hummingbird in Oil

Have I imagined it? The hummingbird whose beak is stuck in a wall
and entirely covered with black paint, representing oil,
which is also dripping down from where the beak is
lodged. Its wings are extended, but frozen
mid-beating. I thought it was art
but can't identify or locate it anywhere. Like a dart thrown,
an axe in a stump, the image is thrust in me, cleaving
otherwise occupied moments apart. Maybe the hummingbird
is a character in a parable I heard once, one about falling
into idleness or following hunger too far astray, *too far little one*, I can almost hear
his mother's (why always the mother) voice chiding him
for piercing the skin of a human, maybe the wall turns out
to be skin and the oil humans have for blood
smothers the young hummingbird to death. The moral of the story
would be not to pierce us, that oil courses through us more so than anything
we think blood means: family, brotherhood, generational ties.
Or maybe I hallucinated the hummingbird, it came to me while feverish,
or it's a vision, an omen portending the fate
of all hummingbirds, and, by extension, all animals,
and, by extension, not us. How can it bode poorly for us
if we know how to grasp small birds properly—back and closed wings
against the palm, head between index and middle finger,
legs between the thumb and whichever finger is most comfortable
to the handler? Safe practices indicate we are supposed to
use our dominant hand. It won't hurt itself if we keep it from struggling.

CHRISTOPHER KONDRICH

If the early seasons of *Industry* were about those who get chewed up on the ground floor by the voracious beast that is international finance, this season concerns the maximalist mythmaking of market movers. Full of visually striking settings—town houses with intricate wallpapers and plush armchairs, magnificent country estates—the show depicts a set of people desperate to write themselves into the leading roles they think they deserve. Even Nathan Micay's pulsing electronic score is now overshadowed by an incredible volume of needle drops. *Industry* is no longer HBO's neglected stepchild.

In a clear indication that this season will expand the show's palate, the first episode begins with two characters we've never seen before. A journalist and a corporate assistant are circling each other in a nightclub. The journalist is investigating a rising fintech company called Tender that's seeking to become a full-fledged bank—even a "bank-killer," in the words of its CFO. The corporate assistant, although seemingly exploited, is central to Tender's nefarious methods for bending people to its will. In this story about the carrot and the stick, the assistant is a stick dressed in orange.

At the center of Tender is another newcomer to the series, Whitney Halberstram (played by Max Minghella), the hollow core around whom much of this season orbits. Ethnically ambiguous, of allegedly ignoble origins, and with an unplaceable American accent, Whitney seems unflappable and always operates from a position of power. Relentless in his attempts to manipulate, first through flattery, then through advice or legal counsel, and finally through blackmail, he plays *Industry*'s characters much like he does the financial markets. He knows what to promise, how to distract, and the right lie to tell about his upbringing; he crafts narratives intended to mold the world to his aims. When his business partner cautions him against his ambitions for Tender, saying, "That's not our story," Whitney writes him out of the story altogether.

Yet even as these CEOs and CFOs wrestle with each other, the emotional heart of the series lies in two women who started as grads at the investment bank of Pierpoint & Co. in *Industry*'s first season: Harper (Myha'la), an American college dropout who reinvents herself in London through sheer gumption, even if her drive and unscrupulousness get her in trouble as often as they rake in millions; and Yasmin (Marisa Abela), a child of privilege who can speak more than half a dozen languages and relies on her family's wealth and connections—at least until her father's transgressions destroy her own stability. Harper and Yasmin are the real rivals in the show, the mythological figures pushing and pulling each other down: They are sometimes confidants, sometimes frenemies, but ultimately each sees the other as the only person in the world who understands her.

To wage their mortal struggle, Harper teams up with her old mentor, Eric (Ken Leung), and starts a new fund that pursues only short-selling strategies, meaning that she is invested in undermining a particular stock's story, and the company she sets her sights on is Whitney's. Because Harper sees herself in Whitney, she recognizes Tender for the fraud it is—and by taking such an extreme and unpopular opinion, becomes the righteous underdog, justifying any means to expose the company (and make boatloads of money in the process). Yasmin, meanwhile, has pursued a strategic marriage with the depressed aristocrat Henry Muck (Kit Harington). She manipulates the narrative around Henry to push him back on the path to success—albeit only on her terms—and gets him appointed as Tender's CEO. A sad princeling desperate for redemption, Henry proves to be the perfect puppet for Yasmin's schemes—until he starts to believe that he doesn't really need her.

***Industry* is about a world in which companies aren't valued for their current earnings.**

It is telling that both Yasmin and Harper trace their craving for success to their love-starved childhoods. Yasmin wants to be necessary in a world in which everything is bought, sold, or traded; Harper seeks to prove herself at any cost. Their ambition won't ever heal the wound that love was supposed to fill. (Sex is everywhere in this show, but like money, it has little to do with love. Even the saddest men in *Industry* are desperate to buy a new story, one in which a girl happily calls them "Daddy.") While Yasmin and Harper don't exactly want each other's love, their entanglements with Tender eventually bring them together. Their stories finally intersect when their interests do.

When you can no longer rely on the stability of the past, you have to write a new future. But it is easier to unmake an old story than it is to wrangle a new one into shape.

Harper and her team are harsh critics, pointing out the plot holes in Tender's and in Henry's and Whitney's narratives. Yet as the narratives that the characters continuously parrot fall apart, the show itself follows Tender's arc, expanding to cover up a hollow center. The story is a mystery with a sleight of hand at its source. But *Industry* makes this hollowness the point. And the way Harper, Yasmin, and Henry react to the unraveling story and Whitney's efforts to overwrite their suspicions is what propels the latter half of the season.

If not properly supported, though, a plot that revolves around an empty center can cave in on itself. Whitney remains inscrutable, a collection of obfuscations and fabulations. Perhaps we should see him as the profit motive personified, but he is so central to this season's events that his unknowability becomes a hindrance. Conspiracies are introduced that amount to nothing; everything hinges on grand speeches, characters whisper and scream, and the landscape is rearranged around a new starting point. Though all of this may pay dividends in future seasons, the show's cynicism can be so encompassing that it feels like a safety net.

Industry is about a world in which companies aren't valued for their current earnings but rather for their promise, their ability to disrupt the old way of doing things and the profits they might make… someday. And a good business plan is a compelling story. *Industry*'s own story structure, then, may have its own delayed profits. Its showrunners Down and Kay have turned the series into a reinvention scheme, which means what you see is not always what you will get next season. But it still feels like a bet worth taking. **N**

Jorge Cotte, a writer and filmmaker based in Chicago, frequently writes on movies and television for Books & the Arts.

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