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# A Change of Key

**NURSING  
JUSTICE**  
SARAH JAFFE

**MIKE DAVIS'S  
FORECAST**  
MICAH UETRICH

**END FEDERAL  
MURDER**  
SISTER HELEN  
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# Words Matter

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

—Claudia Sole, Calif.



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EDITORIAL / ELIE MYSTAL FOR THE NATION

# End the Coward's Filibuster

*If the Senate won't abandon the filibuster, its members should at least have to work to exercise it.*

**T**HE US SENATE WAS A MISTAKE. IT'S A FUNDAMENTALLY ANTIDEMOCRATIC INSTITUTION that gives political power to land instead of people, and it was structured that way at the request of slavers who worried about losing their "right" to hold people in bondage. Abolishing it should have been part of the conditions of surrender at Appomattox.

As it is, nothing can be done to change the Senate's antidemocratic structure. (Article V of the Constitution literally mandates that equal representation of the states must be preserved in the chamber.) But something can be done about the Senate's anti-majoritarian nature. Ending the filibuster is one way to make the Senate less beholden to a ruthless minority and more responsive to the majority of its members. It's also the only practical way for Democrats to move their agenda through Congress, because many Republicans just proved they'd rather overthrow the government than work with the Biden administration.

Unfortunately, senators generally like the filibuster. That was made evident at the start of the new Senate term, when minority leader Mitch McConnell staged a week of parliamentary temper tantrums to try to force the Democrats to "promise" they wouldn't end the filibuster. He finally relented when Democrats Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema reiterated their long-standing commitment to keeping it intact.

But what does that promise really mean?

The filibuster refers generally to the ability of any senator to delay or block a vote on a bill. But when people talk about ending the filibuster, what they really mean is reforming the rules of cloture. Cloture is the procedure that ends Senate debate and allows the body to vote on legislation and move forward with the people's business. It's this process that needs to be changed.

The cloture rules have been rewritten multiple times over the course of US history. The current rules have been in place only since 1975. That's when then-Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield, a Montana Democrat, pushed a change to Rule 22—one that allowed the Senate to achieve cloture with a three-fifths majority (60 votes) as opposed to two-thirds (67 votes), which had been the rule since 1917. That would have been fine, but Mansfield's new three-fifths majority applied to the total number of senators (all 100) instead of those who were actually in the building at the time a vote was taken. That massively changed how the filibuster could be deployed. Instead of minority senators having to be physically present for the entire filibuster, only a single one needs to be there. In addition, since 1970, Mansfield had allowed the Senate's work to proceed on "two tracks," meaning members could continue to debate and vote on other bills while one was held up by a filibuster, awaiting cloture. The age of the "talking

filibuster"—think Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*—was over.

One can see why all this sounded very progressive in 1975. On paper, the change made for less gridlock. In practice, it has been a disaster. The use of the filibuster has skyrocketed, largely because it costs the members of the minority nothing. They don't have to talk; they don't even have to be present. And they don't have to explain to the American people why C-Span is showing Ted Cruz reading *Atlas Shrugged* for eight hours a day while Americans suffer and die.

Fixing this doesn't require centrist Democrats

to abandon the filibuster's anti-majoritarian principles in favor of aggressive progressive policies; it simply requires them to go back and fix one of their own mistakes. Let's—to borrow a phrase—make the filibuster great again. Let's require the minority to do something to exercise it. The people

who are against cloture should have to be in the chamber, all day and all night, to vote against it. The Senate should have to stop all other business until one side or the other relents.

Are Manchin and Sinema against that? Do they have a principled reason to support the coward's filibuster?

We don't have to nuke the filibuster (though many of us would still like to). We just have to make senators show up to work and account for their actions. That's not too much to ask. And if it is, well, that's just another reason we should abolish the whole chamber and start over. **N**

**Let's—to borrow a phrase—make the filibuster great again. Let's require the minority to do something to exercise it.**

COMMENT / SISTER HELEN PREJEAN

# “Just Eight Days...”

*Trump’s execution spree laid bare the fundamental flaws in the death penalty. Joe Biden must make good on his promise to end it.*

**I** COME TO YOU HAVING WITNESSED SIX EXECUTIONS and engaged in 35 years of dialogue about the death penalty. I’m on fire to abolish government killing because I’ve seen it far too close-up, and I have a pretty good idea by now how it works—or doesn’t. I wasn’t at all surprised to see Donald Trump order 13 federal executions carried out before he left office: He had the discretionary power, and he used it. He was operating within the hopelessly flawed guidelines for government killing that the Supreme Court set forth in 1976 in *Gregg v. Georgia*, when it reinstated the death penalty. After a national hiatus on executions from 1972 to 1976, *Gregg* renewed our capricious, racist, broken death penalty system, which has caused and is perpetuating unspeakable suffering.

I got catapulted into this debate in 1984, after I witnessed the electrocution of Elmo Patrick Sonnier in Louisiana’s killing chamber. In those days, it seemed almost everyone in Louisiana thought the death penalty was a just and appropriate punishment for murder. Sonnier and his brother, Eddie, had killed two teenage kids—shot them point-blank in the back of their heads, savagely ripping these tender young buds from the tree of life. How dare anyone say that this monster of a murderer shouldn’t pay with his own life for his crime? As a Catholic nun, what did I know about the criminal justice system? I had spent my adult life teaching kids or leading adult Bible groups in a white suburban Catholic parish. “The nun is in over her head,” Tim Robbins quipped as he worked on his film adaptation of my book on the case, *Dead Man Walking*.

And I most assuredly was—but I’ve stayed with the issue, participated in the abolition movement, and rejoiced as state after state shuttered their killing chambers. And year after year, fewer citizens support death as a punishment. A Gallup poll in late 2019 found that, when asked to choose between the death penalty and life without parole, just 36 percent of Americans supported death. In 2020, there were a total of seven state executions, the lowest since 1983. And reform prosecutors, who pledge never to use the death penalty or to seek it only sparingly, are on the rise—even in Virginia, a former slave state that has executed 113 persons since *Gregg* was decided, second only to Texas.

As a society, we are coming to realize that giving government officials authority over the life or death of our citizens is unwise. Since 1973, 173 wrongly convicted death row inmates have been lucky enough to emerge from their death dungeons after the mistakes and lies that put them there were exposed. For every nine of the 1,532 people executed since 1973, one person has been exonerated.

That brings us to *Gregg*’s principle flaw, which makes implementing the death penalty in light of the constitutional requirement of equal

protection under the law virtually impossible. *Gregg*’s fuzzy criterion—that a death sentence should be imposed only on the “worst of the worst”—is impossible to decipher. But over the last 45 years, a profile of the “worst of the worst” has clearly emerged: poor people who cannot afford an attorney to defend them; people who are mentally ill; those who were broken by neglect, abuse, and violence in their childhood; and the most glaring, pervasive characteristic of all, those who killed white people.

*Gregg* bestowed upon prosecutors the power of death selection; if they choose not to seek death, the government will not kill the defendant. Prosecutors and state attorneys general have embraced that power in Texas, which has carried out 570 executions since the 1970s, over a third of the total; five more people are slated to die in 2021. Today there are 205 Texas death row inmates, many of whom are in the last stages of their appeals and at the mercy of the attorney general and the avidly pro-death-penalty Republican governor, Greg Abbott, just as the federal inmates at the United States Penitentiary in Terre Haute, Ind., were at Trump’s mercy.

*Gregg* reinstated this deeply flawed punishment, which is subject to bias and human error and can be wielded by capricious presidents and governors. Thus we come to Trump’s killing spree, which ended a 17-year hiatus in federal executions. Lisa Montgomery’s petition for clemency pleaded with Trump to take into account the violent sexual abuse by

her stepfather and sex trafficking by her mother. Montgomery’s crime was unspeakable: killing a pregnant woman and cutting the fetus from her womb to claim as her own. By any reckoning, that was the act of a crazed person—exactly what her lawyers pleaded in court in efforts to save her life. But the “worst of the worst”? She is, her stepsister said, “the most broken of the broken.”

A lawyer on Montgomery’s team told me that when Lisa learned her death date had been postponed from December to January, she paused and barely whispered, “Just eight days...” Joe Biden would be inaugurated on January 20.

We now have a chance with President Biden, who campaigned on ending the federal death penalty. He can assure death row inmates that they need not fear execution. But I hope he goes further and uses his power to commute their death sentences to life. **N**

**We now have a chance with President Biden, who campaigned on ending the federal death penalty.**

*Sister Helen Prejean is an anti-death-penalty activist and the author of *Dead Man Walking*, *The Death of Innocents*, and *River of Fire*.*

## OBITUARY

**Sheldon Adelson** (1933–2021)*Even in death, the billionaire will keep undermining democracy.*

**B**Y DYING, THE CASINO MAGNATE SHELDON ADELSON did Benjamin Netanyahu one last favor. Adelson had been scheduled to testify as a prosecution witness in the Israeli prime minister's corruption trial. Netanyahu allegedly used Adelson to secure more friendly coverage from a major Israeli newspaper. The complications of the case are too arcane to explain in this limited space, but take it from me: Wherever Adelson went, corruption—be it moral, legal, political, or cultural—was never far behind.

In 2013, when he paid \$47 million to the US government to avoid criminal charges for his role in a money-laundering and drug-trafficking operation, it amounted to just around 0.1 percent of his wealth. Adelson used to brag that he was the “richest Jew in the world.” While not precisely true, it wasn't far off: He died in January with a fortune of nearly \$35 billion.

Adelson was a right-wing extremist whose passion was Israel. “The two-state solution is a stepping stone for the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people,” he told *The Jewish Week*, adding that if that meant “Israel isn't going to be a democratic state, so what?”

Israel has strict campaign-financing laws, so Adelson got around them by launching a free daily newspaper in 2007 called *Israel Hayom*, and he later appointed his Israeli American dual-citizen wife, Miriam Adelson, as its publisher. The Adelsons spent freely on talent, and many of Israel's best journalists could not resist their entreaties. The only political interventions he insisted on involved Netanyahu: The prime minister was to be the hero in all stories in which his name appeared. By 2010, *Israel Hayom* had the highest newspaper circulation in Israel, dwarfing the circulation of the left-leaning *Haaretz* by a margin of more than six to one.

He also bought up newspapers in the United States, including Nevada's largest paper, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, which he purchased using a cutout holding company to hide his identity. He then fired its most honest political journalists following an unsuccessful staff rebellion. Adelson was apparently so desperate to own the paper that he paid \$140 million for it—\$38 million more than its entire parent chain had sold for just nine months earlier.

But more important was the way Adelson bought up politicians in the world's most powerful nation. Former House speaker Newt

Gingrich, believe it or not, was once quite pro-Palestinian. He argued in 2005 that it was “vital to our credibility in the entire Middle East that we insist on an end to Israeli expansionism” and “vital to our humanitarian duty to the Palestinian people that we protect the weaker party from the stronger power.” That was before the Adelsons invested \$20 million in his 2012 presidential campaign, at which point Gingrich decided that Palestinians were an “invented” people who “had a chance to go many places” but apparently preferred a life of refugee camps and military occupation.

In March 2014, as the Republican presidential primary was still in what pundits call its “beauty contest” phase, Adelson summoned the contestants to the Venetian hotel in Las Vegas to have them parade their ideological wares, as each sought to leave with

the multimillion-dollar contributions he planned to bestow. During Chris Christie's plea, the New Jersey governor used the term “occupation” to refer to Israel's occupation of the West Bank. This word, however, was verboten. Learning of his faux pas, Christie rushed back to Adelson and, according to reports, “apologized in a private meeting in the casino

mogul's Venetian office shortly afterward.”

A living, breathing advertisement for strong campaign finance legislation as well as catnip for anti-Semitic conspiracy mongers, Adelson spent more than a half-billion dollars on Republican candidates between 2012 and 2021. In doing so, he transformed our political discourse and essentially became the final authority on Donald Trump's Middle East policy.

There is, however, no reason to celebrate his death. There's that \$35 billion, and the fact that his widow has been, according to many, the driving force behind the couple's political agenda. For all those groups undermining both American and Israeli democracy at the Adelsons' behest, his memory is certain to continue to be a blessing.

**Eric Alterman**



**Doubling down:** In less than 10 years, Sheldon Adelson spent nearly a half-billion dollars on GOP candidates.

# Back Talk Alexis Grenell



## 46 and Done

*Why Joe Biden should be our last president.*

**O**N JANUARY 6, 250 YEARS OF AMERICAN POLITICAL history seemed like it might come crashing down as men cosplaying patriots, armed with zip ties and semi-automatic weapons, laid siege to the Capitol. Watching the terrifying absurdity of traitors filming themselves as they dangled from the building's facade was a reminder of what the framers knew from the start: Factionalism is endemic to democracy—and to its undoing.

“The friend of popular governments never finds himself so much alarmed for their character and fate, as when he contemplates their propensity to this dangerous vice,” James Madison wrote in *The Federalist Papers* (No. 10). Going on to assure the reader that a minority faction can be controlled by “the republican principle, which enables the majority to defeat its sinister views by regular vote,” Madison concluded that “it may clog the administration, it may convulse the society; but it will be unable to execute and mask its violence under the forms of the Constitution.” And so it came to pass in the year 2021, though just barely.

To truly save the republic, we need to level up to a parliamentary system. Joe Biden should be our last president.

The United States is the longest-running presidential democracy in the world, an anomaly in a sea of mostly failed experiments. And it's the only pure presidential system, according to political scientist Arend Lijphart in his list of the 21 continuous democracies since World War II. The vast majority of advanced democracies have converted to parliamentary systems, which have empirically proved to be less contentious and more productive.

Alfred Stepan and Cindy Skach's exhaustive study of emerging democracies, conducted from 1979 through 1989, found that parliamentary systems were three times more likely to succeed than presidential ones, which were more than twice as susceptible to a military coup, at a rate of 40 percent. Their study, published in 1993, analyzed 93 countries that had become independent since 1945 and found that 61 percent of those that chose a parliamentary system could still be considered democracies just a few decades later. Not a single presidential system in that same time frame has survived as a continuous democracy.

And for the duration of their short life, it's usually a shit show. Presidents have a legislative

majority less than half the time, compared with 83 percent in parliamentary states, which produce multiple parties and, often, coalition governments that actually support the work of the prime minister. Governing coalitions require compromise, and since a parliament elects the prime minister—as opposed to the people—the legislative and executive branches have a shared agenda. It's a system of mutual dependence: The parliament can call a vote of no confidence and effectively fire the PM, and the PM can dissolve the parliament.

Presidential systems are dysfunctional by definition. Winner-take-all elections tend to produce only two parties, which battle for an elusive majority in a rarely unified government. The fantasy lasts until the midterm elections, when the voters often tip the scales again. In the far more common scenario of a divided government, opposing parties have zero incentive to support the executive, since electoral success is directly tied to his or her popularity. As in the case of the previously Republican-controlled US Senate, impeachment was rendered useless by the sycophants who'd hitched their wagon to Donald Trump. Eventually all hell broke loose, and former Supreme Court clerks like Senators Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz, who certainly knew better, chose to exploit the ignorance of those who didn't for political gain.

Over the past 20 years, increased factionalism has produced smaller and smaller margins of victory as the Democratic and Republican parties have each consolidated around further extremes. And that trend will only continue, since 74 million people voted for Trump and an astronomical proportion of Republicans believe the 2020 election was stolen—hence the 147 members of Congress who voted against certifying Biden's clear victory. Even the once anti-Trump and non-stupid Nicole Malliotakis, the newly elected US representative from Staten Island, is competing for space with the Lauren Boeberts of the world by spouting utter nonsense she can't possibly believe, because that's the only thing that'll get her reelected. Meanwhile, her former campaign manager and past chair of the Staten Island Republican Party, Leticia Remauro, now a candidate for borough president—a person who used to support same-sex marriage and abortion rights—recently filmed herself shouting “Heil Hitler” while protesting the closing of a bar due to Covid-19. That's one hell of an evolution.

But rather than expecting people who've

**The likelihood of a transition to a parliamentary system is dubious. But so is the future flourishing of American democracy as it stands.**

been red-pilled to put country over party, we need more parties. That way, at least the Nazi-curious incels who live on the Internet can confine themselves to their own club. It also creates space on the left to develop an actual party independent of the Democrats, who should and can coexist with centrist Republicans.

Warning: Ideological purity is not the goal here. Governing in coalition invariably waters down any agenda. After her first term as chancellor of Germany, which was itself a compromise with the opposing Social Democratic Party, Angela Merkel explained her ideology as the head of the Christian Democratic Union

**Ideological purity is not the goal here. Governing in coalition invariably waters down any agenda.**

and a multiparty coalition thus: “Sometimes I am liberal, sometimes I am conservative, sometimes I am Christian Social—and this is what defines the CDU.” Even the Greens, having finally achieved critical mass in the Bundestag, are hoping to caucus with the center-right Christian Democrats and the Christian Social Union, because only through such partnerships can they exercise enough power to actually move policy.

What kind of policies might emerge in the United States from such an unholy alliance? Tuition-free college, state-subsidized child care, generous paid leave, socialized medicine—you know, the hallmarks of the European social safety net that is the envy of every Bernie-loving bro and sis.

Obviously, no system is perfect. The United Kingdom has its own fool in charge at the moment. And the likelihood of the United States transitioning to a parliamentary system is dubious. But so is the future flourishing of American democracy as it currently stands. Trumpism was and is a feature, not a bug. Accepting factions and making space for them in a multiparty, parliamentary system seems more feasible than surviving the next, inevitable attack.

## Morbid Symptoms Jeet Heer



# The Unity Trap

*“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”*

—Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (1930)

**D**ELIVERING HIS INAUGURAL ADDRESS IN A GARRISONED city where more than 20,000 troops from the National Guard were stationed only two weeks after Donald Trump egged on thousands of his followers to attack Congress in order to overturn the election, Joe Biden naturally organized his speech and the day’s festivities around the theme of “unity.” Not that he needed to be nudged in that direction: Biden’s campaign had often harped on how he would be a national healer and unifier who would end his predecessor’s fomenting of divisions.

Trump’s aborted putsch—a sinister event, no matter how clownishly executed—made these pleas more urgent and heartfelt. “This is our historic moment of crisis and challenge, and unity is the path forward,” Biden insisted. He pointedly alluded to a previous moment of national discord by decrying the current “uncivil war.” The president who led the Union during the actual Civil War was recruited as a model by Biden as he stressed these words:

Unity. Unity.

In another January in Washington, on New Year’s Day 1863, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

When he put pen to paper, the president said, “If my name ever goes down into history it will be for this act and my whole soul is in it.”

My whole soul is in it.

Today, on this January day, my whole soul is in this: Bringing America together.

The problem with unity is that by itself, unconnected to a meaningful political agenda, it is a vacuous concept. Unity is as easy to affirm as motherhood or national greatness—precisely because it makes no specific demands. Upholding unity by itself, paradoxically, produces conflict, since it opens the door to competing ideas of the terms of union.

The Civil War and Reconstruction illustrate the divisiveness of unity politics. Even those who agreed on the goal of unity fought mightily over the terms: Was the nation to be reunited by a return to the status quo ante, with slavery once again confined to the South (as many Doughface Democrats and moderate Republicans wanted)? Or was the abolition of slavery a prerequisite for true national restoration, as the abolitionists insisted? And after the war, was unity to be achieved by securing democracy for the formerly enslaved, as the Radical Republicans demanded? Or did a reintegration of the white South into the Union require abandoning Black



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Southerners to second-class status, as a bipartisan political elite decided in the Compromise of 1877 that ended Reconstruction?

Biden had the right instincts in thinking back to Lincoln, for the same question faces America today: On what terms will a broken nation be made whole?

Biden's inaugural address was itself a divided document, articulating two incompatible ideas of unity. On the one hand, he spoke of unity as comity. "We can treat each other with dignity and respect," he said. "We can join forces, stop the shouting, and lower the temperature."

This is a Kumbaya unity, a backward-looking call for a return to the days of elite cooperation, when everyone talked in their indoor voice in the back rooms where the deals were hammered out.

But Biden also voiced a radically different and more substantial vision of unity as democracy: the idea that unity requires marginalizing the promoters of lies and racism in the interest of creating a more genuinely equal society. In that spirit, he warned of "a rise in political extremism, white

**The consistent message from Republicans was clear: Unity means giving us everything we want.**

supremacy, domestic terrorism that we must confront and we will defeat."

Although he was careful not to mention his predecessor by name, the intent of this call for unity-as-democracy was clearly to divide the Republican opposition. It is an injunction for moderate Republicans to reject the Trumpist wing of their party and work with Democrats on bolstering democracy and fighting racism.

The problem Biden faces is that unity-as-comity and unity-as-democracy are not just distinct but are actually at odds with each other. Republicans have quickly and shrewdly figured

this out and realized that unity-as-comity offers them a language to sandbag Biden's agenda. After all, if the goal is to get the two parties working together, then all the Republicans have to say is that any effort to push a Democratic agenda forward is anathema to Biden's stated goal of unity.

A day after the inauguration, Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton used "unity" to attack Rob Malley, a potential Biden foreign policy appointee whom he regards as insufficiently hawkish on Iran. "Appointing radicals like Malley gives the lie to all of

President Biden and Tony Blinken's rhetoric of unity," Cotton tweeted. The following day Florida Senator Marco Rubio tweeted, "A radical leftist agenda in a divided country will not help unify our country, it will only confirm 75 million Americans biggest fears about the new administration." Utah Senator Mitt Romney even complained that Biden's push to restore the size of two national monuments in Utah "will only deepen divisions in this country."

The consistent message from Republicans was: Unity means giving us everything we want. This cynical cooption of unity talk should lead Biden to junk the counterproductive unity-as-comity rhetoric. He needs to stop his invocation of elite cooperation as soon as possible, since it will make it impossible for him to govern or to fulfill the agenda that won him the election.

Instead, Biden needs to flesh out the idea of unity-as-democracy that he voiced at his inauguration. This means making explicit that the problem with Trump was not that he was divisive; after all, any healthy politics entails a battle of competing agendas. The problem was that Trump sowed division in the service of maintaining white supremacy by agitating racist groups, defining the nation along racial lines, pursuing voter suppression, and ultimately sparking a bungled coup. Until Republicans are made to confront and renounce this legacy, there can be no unity. **N**

OPPART / MIRKO ILIĆ



# Q&A

## Sarah Leonard & Marian Jones

Sarah Leonard and Marian Jones met at the Democratic Socialists of America's socialist-feminist reading group (held in *The Nation's* conference room!) in 2017, after Donald Trump's election prompted a surge in membership in the 40-year-old organization. Now, along with several other editors and an art director, they are members of the *Lux* collective, named for the revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. The first issue of its print magazine hits mailboxes this month. I spoke with Leonard and Jones about the future of left feminism, solidarity versus sisterhood, and why *Lux* is a glossy.

—Emily Douglas

**ED: Is *Lux* trying to elevate women's class consciousness?**

**MJ:** There were periods within the feminist movement when people would try to adopt the slogan "Sisterhood is powerful" and [the idea that] we're all in this together, but Black women and other women of color felt like their own needs were getting erased. One of the ways that Black feminists have historically pushed back on "sisterhood" is the idea that we're all victims of the same thing. If you're a white woman, solidarity calls on you to be aware of the way that you're victimized by white supremacy, but also of the way that you're complicit in it.

**SL:** As feminists, we think in terms of solidarity rather than sisterhood, because we don't necessarily think there's anything organic about all women coming together. You have to build solidarity with intent. Different pieces of identity [act] as bridges to other groups rather than barriers.

**ED: For the past decade or more, progressives and leftists have been repositioning issues like abortion, child care, and reproductive health as economic issues. What is still missing from that conversation?**

**SL:** Whenever the Koch brothers put money behind an opponent of abortion and get that person elected, they get a tax cut, because that's what Republicans do. And we pay for that with our bodies and our lives. And to be clear, obviously, the people whose bodies are being sacrificed are poor and working-class women and, disproportionately, women of color.

Ideas about morality in the family serve capital in very specific ways. All of the things that politicians don't want to pay for, they say, "It's a family problem." So, unless we push back against the

idea that the nuclear family is the home of all morality, we're never going to win on economics.

**ED: You write that *Lux's* vision of feminism is fighting for a world in which "everyone has access to food and shelter, to beauty and pleasure." What excites you about launching a feminist magazine at this moment?**

**SL:** We've gotten very good at criticizing the inadequacies of the right and certain forms of liberal feminism. We also want to be constructing a vision of what we want.

**MJ:** There isn't a *Lux* that already exists. *Lux* is going to be a really pretty magazine—it has to be.

**ED: Why is it important to you that *Lux* looks good?**

**SL:** To me, it was important [that *Lux* be a glossy] because I grew up reading glossy women's magazines. I wanted to build this thing that I had always enjoyed reading, but fill it with socialism.

Publications on the left often take the form of journals that suggest in their tone or their style that you should already be in the know. I want the opposite of that. I want it to be a gate flung open that people feel free to walk through.

There's something radical in the strategic pursuit of pleasure. We've spent decades talking about whether women can have it all, which is actually this kind of depressing idea of working all the time but also doing domestic work all the time. In a sense, it is very unambitious: Can you contort yourself to conform to the unreasonable expectations of this society? One of our taglines is "We want it all," with the idea being, if we really want a good life, fundamental things about how our society is structured would have to be transformed.

**ED: *Lux* was born out of the connections you made doing political organizing. Do you see it going the other way? Do you intend to use *Lux* as an organizing tool?**

**MJ:** I really hope for it to be both an organizing and a consciousness-raising tool. A lot of organizing can come out of reading groups. After you read about all this stuff, you're energized to organize around it. **N**

**"There's something radical in the strategic pursuit of pleasure."**



# The SCORE

## Follow Through

BRYCE COVERT +  
MIKE KONCZAL

**D**uring the Georgia runoff elections for the Senate in January, both Jon Ossoff and the Rev. Raphael Warnock campaigned on a promise to secure large stimulus checks for Americans. With Democrats in control of the Senate, they assured voters, Congress would increase the \$600 stimulus checks to \$2,000 per person, a move that was blocked twice by Senate Republicans. But first they had to be sent to the Senate.

The pledge worked. Both men were elected, handing Democrats narrow control of both chambers of Congress, along with a Democratic president. The party promised bold action: \$2,000 stimulus checks now to help people survive the pandemic and a \$15 minimum wage to raise living standards long afterward. Democrats need to get both done quickly to boost both the economy and their own political fortunes.

It's not going to be easy to make good on those promises. Joe Manchin, one of the most conservative Democratic senators, has already poured cold water on the idea of \$2,000 stimulus checks, saying at first that he was "absolutely" opposed to them and later clarifying that he would only support the checks if they were narrowly targeted to those in need and those who would use them, not save them.

Manchin may be forgetting, of course, that the most recent set of stimulus checks were already means-tested, sent only to individuals earning up to \$87,000 per year or couples earning up to \$174,000—a lower threshold than the first round of checks in the spring of 2020.

We also know that the first stimulus worked the way Manchin wants it to. People mostly spent the money on household expenses, particularly those in the worst financial circumstances. Government assistance, including stimulus checks and other important measures like expanded unemployment benefits, made up for Americans' steep losses in income. These measures briefly kept poverty from rising at a time when millions were losing their jobs, ensuring that far fewer people found themselves in desperate deprivation.

There is now a distant light at the end of this dark pandemic tunnel: Vaccines are being distributed, promising to return us to some semblance of normality. But even before the

pandemic, millions of people worked full-time yet still struggled to make ends meet. Democrats can't leave them in the lurch once the crisis ends.

President Joe Biden has repeatedly backed a federal \$15 minimum wage, which would almost double it after more than a decade of stagnation. Like stimulus checks, this too is a good policy that would improve people's lives without harming the economy. The \$15 minimum wage that the House passed in 2019 would have directly increased pay for more than 28 million workers, handing them an average raise of \$4,000 a year, and indirectly boosted pay for another 11.6 million who already earn \$15 an hour. There is a huge body of evidence that increasing the minimum wage raises pay for low-wage workers without costing jobs. That's true even for big wage hikes, which economists found have an impact on employment rates that is "statistically indistinguishable from zero," even in places where wages were previously very low.

Improving people's financial wellbeing is also good politics. About two-thirds of voters support not just a one-time \$2,000 stimulus check but also monthly \$2,000 installments until the pandemic is over—including, incredibly, half of Republicans. Only 22 percent of Georgia voters, for instance, felt the relief package that included \$600 stimulus checks went far enough.

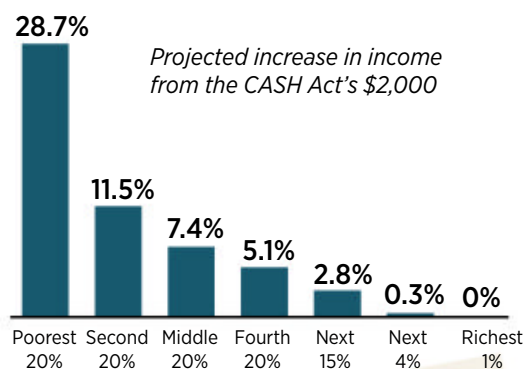
A higher wage has similar appeal. Two-thirds of Americans support raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, including over 40 percent of Republicans. The policy doesn't just poll well; it has an impressive winning streak. When voters have been asked at the ballot box whether to raise the minimum wage in their city or state, they've said yes every single time since 1998.

Biden is already looking ahead two years, to stave off the electoral shellacking that the president's party regularly experiences in the midterms. Democrats have the narrowest of majorities in the Senate and are at risk of losing their control of the House, too. The best way to convince voters it's worth keeping Democrats in power is for them to address Americans' economic needs. It can't be done in a timid, piecemeal, or overly means-tested way. Voters want substantial relief, and Democrats promised to give it to them. Now they just have to follow through.

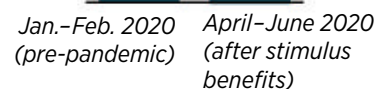
Bryce Covert

### Why Bigger Is Better

Stimulus checks put cash where it's needed most.



Last spring, government assistance, including stimulus checks, kept poverty from rising.



Sources: Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy; Bureau of Labor Statistics; University of Chicago, University of Notre Dame, and Zhejiang University



SNAPSHOT/Olga Maltseva

# Putin vs. the People

Police detain a man during a rally for Russian opposition leader Aleksei Navalny in St. Petersburg on January 31. Tens of thousands of Russians filled the streets that day, chanting slogans against President Vladimir Putin and demanding freedom for Navalny, who was jailed upon his return to Moscow. According to a legal aid group, Russian authorities arrested more than 5,400 protesters.

## By the Numbers



**50+%**

Percentage of Latino immigrants in New York State who experienced Covid-19 symptoms and did not seek care due to fear or a lack of insurance

**75%**

Percentage of New York City frontline workers who are people of color

**14.4M**

Number of people excluded from the CARES Act due to their own or a family member's undocumented status

**40.7%**

Percentage by which Covid deaths would have fallen if the federal government had enacted a blanket moratorium

on evictions from early March through November

**4%**

Percentage of the white population in 14 states that received a Covid vaccine by the end of January, compared with 1.9 percent of Black people and 1.8 percent of Latinos

**43**

Number of states that don't release data on racial disparities in Covid testing  
—María Jesús Mora



CALVIN TRILLIN  
**DeadlinePoet**

## Exit Trump, Sort Of

When he got on that airplane to Florida,  
You could hear a great sigh of relief  
At the prospect of no longer having  
Such a man as commander in chief.

Sure, his lies and his boasts will continue.  
He'll remain in his venomous mode.  
But at least there's one small note of comfort:  
He can't get at a nuclear code.

# HEALING SICKNESS,

# NURSING JUSTICE

Throughout Covid-19, nurses have been at the forefront of the fight not only to treat the sick but also to fix our ailing health care system.

BY SARAH JAFFE



**T**ONIA BAZEL DIDN'T WANT TO STRIKE DURING A PANDEMIC, TAKING TIME away from the patients on the infectious disease floor where she works. Nevertheless, she and the other nurses at Albany Medical Center in New York took to the picket line on December 1. They had been bargaining for two years following their vote to join the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) in 2018, and although wages and benefits had been the source of their initial concerns, conditions during the Covid-19 crisis had become the focus of their action. As a second wave of the virus began to wash over the state, they went on strike to demand better protective equipment and safer staffing levels.

"Staff have been leaving," Bazel explained, adding that their departures have only exacerbated the conditions that prompted them to leave. "The hardship at the bedside has become more stressful for those who are staying. More of us are getting sick."

Of particular concern has been the continued rationing of personal protective equipment. Months into the pandemic, Bazel said, "the mask I'm wearing, the surgical mask, I can find in Walmart all day long. So I'm trying to figure out why I'm rationed to one for a 12-hour shift among Covid patients."

In her 24 years as a nurse, Bazel said, she's gotten used to the fact that nurses are rarely asked what they need to do their jobs well, whether it's more PPE or improved staffing levels. She's used to being treated as though she's replaceable, as though the institutions would rather push out experienced nurses like her and hire newer, cheaper staff instead. But as the caseloads crept up and she went to work day after day in a reused mask she considered unsafe, as more of her colleagues were out sick with Covid-19, and as the hospital refused to budge on nurses' demands for improved conditions—even though those conditions would offer better patient care—it became too much. She and her colleagues decided to strike.

"Every time I walk in, I'm at risk of bringing something home," she explained. "Everybody fears that, but administration doesn't. They never have to enter the floor."

Bazel is one of millions of health care workers doing their best to save lives despite conditions that are difficult at the best of times. Nurses like her have long been the difference between life and death for scores of people, yet their work has often been undervalued and their expertise dismissed. Now, it is nurses like her who are leading the outcry against the inadequacies of the American health care system, challenging us to think about the ways our crumbling patchwork of private institutions propped up by public funds has left us vulnerable to the virus.

**Nurses are demanding that we go beyond the platitudes about "health care heroes" and commit to building a real national health care system.**

The Albany nurses struck for one day as planned, carrying signs that declared, "All I want for X-mas is PPE!!!" and "Protect Nurses and Patients!" At the end of 24 hours, the hospital refused to let them return for two additional days. In a press release, it defended its record: "Safety is Albany Med's top priority. The Medical Center follows all federal and state PPE guidance and maintains an adequate supply of PPE." Nonetheless, the nurses have continued to organize, meeting regularly while awaiting the results of several Occupational Safety and Health Administration complaints.

Nor have they been the only ones to resort to protest and work

stoppages to make their demands felt: Nurses at Montefiore New Rochelle Hospital in New York and St. Mary Medical Center in Pennsylvania, as well as a four-hospital-wide group of nurses in California, are just some of those who have gone on strike in recent months. Around the country, nurses are demanding that we go beyond the platitudes about "health care heroes" and commit to building a real national health care system, so that they are never forced to work in conditions like these again.

**J**ULIE KEEFE IS A NURSE AT Kingsbrook Jewish Medical Center in Brooklyn, and like Bazel and many other nurses, her frustrations with rationed protective equipment, short staffing, and the endless pressure to do more with less have brought her to the realization that the health care system needs radical change. For her, the months of March through May last year were a period of extended stress. "There was a general feeling of anxiety throughout the hospital," she said. At that point in the crisis, the entire hospital was basically filled with Covid-19 patients, and the lack of equipment was getting to the staff.

Keefe has worked in respiratory care at Kingsbrook since her graduation from nursing school in 2012. Like many nurses, she said, she went into the field to help people. "It is a cliché, probably, but it's true." After taking some time off to have a child and be a full-time parent, she returned to the hospital because of the crisis last year. Although the work had never been without its challenges, she was surprised to find a drastically different place than she remembered.

In the earliest, most brutal days of the pandemic, when Keefe and her coworkers arrived, they would each suit up in their one gown and N95 mask for the day. When they needed a break, they would remove that one dirty gown and mask and then carefully put them back on to perform procedures that, Keefe noted, generate a lot of aerosols—the droplets that spread the virus. They planned carefully when they visited patients' rooms, trying to

*Sarah Jaffe is a Type Media Center Fellow and the author of Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted and Alone.*

**If we expect nurses to be self-sacrificing, we shrug off their deaths as inevitable sacrifices rather than failures of preparation.**



**Angels in the ward:** Above, a postcard featuring a Red Cross nurse and a wounded soldier; below, nurses assist with a surgery in 1915.

you yourself would consider to be good or adequate. You're working hard, you're trying your best, you're anxious and tired and overstretched, and you also feel that you're not doing a good job, you're not doing right by your patients. It can be crushing."

**T**O UNDERSTAND HOW NURSES LIKE BAZEL AND KEEFE came to be at the forefront of the fight to save both lives and health care itself, it helps to retrace the evolution of nursing, to understand the forces that have shaped it and the forces against which nurses have long been pushing.

The American health care system has relied on such dedicated women to keep it afloat from the start. That's because hospital nursing has been shaped indelibly by the notion that it is women's work. While men have gradually filtered into the field (in 2019, nearly 11 percent of registered nurses were male, up from 2.7 percent in 1970), gendered expectations continue to define the profession. And as I argue in my new book, *Work Won't Love You Back*, such expectations have increasingly served, as industrial work waned and service work expanded in its place, to pressure more and more of us to work for love, not money.

Modern nursing has its origins in the home, where women were presumed to do the caretaking, as well as the cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing, all out of love. When more and more women began to work outside the home, it followed that they must be doing so for selfless reasons there as well, rather than because they needed or wanted to be paid. "To the doctor," wrote Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English in *Witches, Midwives & Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, the nurse "brought the wifely virtue of absolute obedience. To the patient, she brought the selfless devotion of a mother."

Florence Nightingale, the British reformer who launched modern nursing when she opened the first secular nursing school in 1860, argued that such training would bring a more genteel class of women to the work than those who might do it merely for money. American reformers likewise emphasized the nurse's caring mission in order to "reconcile commitment to paid work with cultural expectations for womanly service," according to Barbara Melosh in *"The Physician's Hand": Work Culture and Conflict in American Nursing*. Women could work, in other words, so long as they didn't expect the same treatment—or wages—as male workers.

Despite this image of nursing as an extension of women's supposedly innate propensity to care, it "is really difficult cognitive work," said Suzanne Gordon, author of several books on nursing and health care. "It's brain work, not heart work." Yet, she noted, ever since Nightingale moved nursing into the hospital, doctors and administrators have objected to the idea that nurses are knowledgeable. Nurses have had to struggle to be taken seriously as workers, to have all the parts of their job acknowledged as skilled labor.

That struggle has continued into the present, said

anticipate needs so they could make as few trips as possible. At any moment a "code" might be called: the alert that a patient was in need of resuscitation. Those alarms were heard "much, much more frequently" than in the past.

"For so long in our hospital, we've been dealing with understaffing and lack of resources and supplies, but now all those conditions are exacerbated," Keefe said. "It is even harder to provide the type of care that you

sociologist Lisa Huebner, author of *Catheters, Slurs, and Pickup Lines: Professional Intimacy in Hospital Nursing*. To this day, hospital administrators assume that nurses are "naturally caring" rather than skilled workers who have learned what it takes to soothe and cajole the same way they learned to give an injection or administer a nebulizer. The presumption that their work is "a gift, a calling, or a sacrifice" makes many of the skills of nursing invisible. For instance, administrators classify time spent with patients as "nonproductive time," even though it not only helps the nurses do important diagnostic work but also provides the intangible good feeling that hospitals count on to stay in business.

The expectation that good nurses are self-sacrificing is especially dangerous in the current pandemic, Huebner said. "If all we have to draw on is this dominant sacrifice narrative, this selfless image of this woman who is just doing everything she can to care for her patients, then we are not going to make important what it is actually going to take to do that work, including protective gear."

If we assume, that is, that nursing is soft work that just requires having some caring feelings, we miss out on the danger that nurses face when they go to work underequipped. If we expect them to be self-sacrificing, we shrug off their deaths as inevitable sacrifices rather than failures of preparation—failures that come from management and from the state.

**M**ANAGEMENT AND THE STATE— or, more precisely, capital and the state: These are the other forces that have long shaped the nursing profession, molding it to fit the market-based hospital system that developed alongside industrial production.

Health care, Melosh wrote, is "a rationalizing service industry," driven by the cult of maximum efficiency. As it moved into the hospital in the early 20th century, the hospital came to resemble the factory, with efficiency experts and scientific management consultants looking to wring the last dollar from the workers. It was much the same as in any automobile factory, albeit in hospitals, the workers' supposedly altruistic motivation became the excuse to keep wages low.

Yet hospitals are not factories and patients are not widgets. Illnesses, as the coronavirus is reminding us again





and again, are idiosyncratic things, requiring constant innovation and a human touch. And the nurses who have often provided that touch have proved adept not only at providing care but also at agitating for better care—both for themselves and for their patients.

While doctors have tended to resist any threats to their autonomy, nursing quickly became a collective practice, and such collectivity lent itself to organizing. As early as the 1930s, nurses began demanding improvements like staffing ratios, which limit the number of patients a single nurse must care for. And by the mid- to late 1940s, as a nursing shortage gave nurses more power on the job, professional nursing associations began stepping up their activity.

During this period, some rank-and-file nurses turned to unionization, even as most nurses were denied collective bargaining rights; private nonprofit hospitals, which represent the majority of hospitals in this country, were exempted from labor law from 1947 until 1974. Nevertheless, the 1960s saw a wave of nurse organizing. It arrived during the growth in public-sector unions and the expansion of the health care industry—an expansion made possible not only by the creation of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965 (which poured more public money into the system) but also by the health care benefits won by those growing unions. Nurses took action both inside and outside of collective bargaining, and it was their agitation that led to their eventual inclusion in the law.

Part of what defined these early efforts was that, when nurses did try to organize, they tended to focus on changes such as staffing ratios rather than or alongside bread-and-butter concerns like pay—a tendency, Melosh noted, that many labor organizers did not understand. Decades later, this practice would be recognized as a form of “bargaining for the common good,” a strategy in which unions, working with community groups and those they serve, bring demands to the bargaining table that benefit the broader public. As far back as the late 1960s, New York City nurses (along with other heavily unionized hospital workers) fought for staffing, funding, and eventually, during the fiscal crisis, the hospitals themselves, said historian Joshua Freeman, author of *Working-Class New York*. New York’s public hospital system had been a jewel of the city’s welfare state, and its union workers fought for their own interests, yes, but also for the survival of the institutions—a battle that was only partly successful.

More recently, beginning in 2012, nurses in New York City mobilized alongside community groups to save two Brooklyn hospitals, Interfaith Medical Center and Long Island College Hospital. It was Julie Keefe’s first year on the job and also the year that a reform slate took



power within NYSNA, pledging to fight for patient care. The nurses, including Keefe, held rallies, protests, and a “race for care” to dramatize the distance patients would have to travel if Long Island College Hospital closed. Their efforts yielded at least a partial victory: One hospital was spared.

“At Interfaith, they won that battle,” Keefe noted. “They stayed open.”

**I**N THE DECADES BETWEEN NEW YORK CITY’S FISCAL CRISIS AND THE PROTESTS IN which Keefe fought to save two Brooklyn hospitals, the political economy of the United States shifted dramatically. Industrial labor declined and the service economy exploded—and with it, hospitals grew as well. Indeed, as Gabriel Winant writes in his forthcoming book, *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America*, women were drawn into the labor force to make up for men’s lost income, and many of the jobs they found were in health care.

But while the health care system expanded, its growth hasn’t translated into fairer pay, better staffing ratios, or better health outcomes. Instead, while health care programs, according to Winant, “have emerged as by far the most significant stream of public social expenditure,” that money flows into private coffers, as private providers have expanded to keep up.

The problems with this setup have been obvious since early on. Between public programs like Medicare and Medicaid and employer-provided insurance, there was money to be made in the health care field—if you owned the means of care, that is. As that led to ballooning public spending, policy-makers changed the billing models in an attempt to cut costs—a development that led to the rise of managed care.

“Health care workers ever since have been caught between the shearing forces of constantly growing demand—since our institutions still route so much of our social welfare spending through the health care system—and politically imposed constraints on budgets, which health care administrators pass on to workers in the form of wage suppression and understaffing,” Winant explained. “This is how the ‘essential worker’ was invented, the

(continued on page 23)

**Caring amid Covid:**  
A registered nurse helps a patient talk to her daughter on FaceTime in the Covid ICU at UMass Memorial Medical Center in Boston.

**When nurses organized, they tended to focus on changes such as staffing ratios rather than or alongside bread-and-butter concerns like pay.**

# The Case for Blue-State



# Secession

It's the only way to ensure equal representation for all.

ON JANUARY 6, AN ARMED MOB SOUGHT TO OVERTURN AN ELECTION AND INSTALL A president who had lost the popular vote. But this was just a violent version of the pervasive constitutional embedment of minority rule in our country. The Confederate flags waved during the Capitol Hill riot followed planning for the insurrection in a Facebook group called Red-State Secession, amid a wave of demands for secession by red-state leaders and conservative commentators.

It is blue states, however, that have the real case for secession, because American politics systematically tilts money and power to smaller and more conservative states, undermining the interests of the majority of the population.

Twice in the past 20 years, a GOP candidate who lost the popular vote took the presidency—and 2020 came uncomfortably close to making it the third time.



**American politics systematically tilts money and power to smaller and more conservative states, undermining majority interests.**

*Nathan Newman is a writer and professor who teaches criminal justice and sociology at CUNY.*

secession is the only viable route to restoring democracy and equal justice, not just for blue-state residents but for Americans in all 50 states who are hurt by our undemocratic political system.

Covid-19 has transformed an ongoing political irritant into a murderous political indifference that we can no longer ignore. Last year, these dysfunctions in our political system became fatal, with more than 400,000 Americans dead by January and the body count rising rapidly.

On April 3, Donald Trump dismissed New York's requests

BY **NATHAN NEWMAN**

for ventilators, saying, “We have other states to take care of”—something he never would have said about a state that mattered for his reelection. The venal absurdity of our institutions was reflected in the fact that while New York was devastated early on, initial congressional bills disproportionately sent money to hospitals not in New York or other hard-hit areas but to sparsely populated red states like Nebraska and Montana. And this all happened as wildfires raged up and down the West Coast without significant federal help because, according to a former top Trump aide, “California didn’t support him.”

That disparity in Covid relief reflects the broader reality that many blue states send far more in taxes to the federal government than they receive back in public services or other government funding. The Rockefeller Institute of Government found that over a period of five years, New York taxpayers sent \$142.6 billion more to the federal government than they received back in federal spending. New Jersey received a similar 91 cents in federal spending for every tax dollar paid, Connecticut 89 cents, Massachusetts 90 cents, and California 99 cents. Compare that with Mississippi, which receives \$2.09 in

ILLUSTRATION BY **ADRIÀ FRUITÓS**





spending for every tax dollar it sends to Washington, D.C.; Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell's Kentucky, which gets \$2.89; and Senator Lindsey Graham's South Carolina, which receives \$1.71.

Our political system converts right-wing bias in political power into economic transfers that undermine blue states.

**T**HIS IS NOT ACCIDENTAL; IT'S BUILT INTO THE CONSTITUTIONAL FABRIC OF our nation. The fact that our presidential elections are determined by the outcome of the Electoral College vote rather than the national popular vote means Trump knew he would lose nothing by alienating New Yorkers or other solidly blue-state voters: All of their electors would vote for his opponent, so increasing the popular vote against him in those states was irrelevant. Twenty-eight of the 50 states—home to 180 million people—have voted for the same party in the past seven presidential elections, meaning that their voters could largely be ignored by presidential contenders.

**Johnny Reb in the Rotunda:** This Trump supporter was part of the mob that broke into the Capitol on January 6.

The Senate is an even greater affront to democracy. California has 68 times the population of Wyoming, yet it has equal voting power in the Senate. In 2018, Democratic Senate candidates won the popular vote by a margin of 54 to 46 percent, but Republicans gained two seats in the chamber. *Vox* analyst Ian Millhiser calculates that, after a nail-biter 2020 election resulting in parity in the Senate, Democratic senators will actually represent at least 40 million more people than their Republican counterparts.

But it gets worse. Thanks to the Senate's bizarre filibuster rules, 41 senators—who represent as little as 11 percent of the population—can prevent any bill from even coming to a vote. Given that half of those states' voters can elect those representatives and, especially in off-year elections, that often only half of the electorate votes, as little as 3 percent of the voting-eligible national population can block what the other 97 percent might want done.

Political math is rarely that raw, but the possibility means that small states inevitably leverage their advantage to extract federal pay-offs any time their votes are needed to enact legislation. Even within the Democratic caucus, this gives smaller states disproportionate power in shaping legislation. West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, who represents one of the smallest and whitest states in the nation, could now become the deciding vote on most major issues in the country, severely limiting the scope of any progressive change.

The fact is that white supremacy is embedded in US policy, since racial minorities make up 44 percent of the population in the 10 most populous states but just 18 percent in the 10 least populous, which have disproportionate voting power in the Senate.

This combination of undemocratic elections for both the president and the Senate means that Democratic presidents have had a chance to appoint just four out of 17 justices to the Supreme Court since 1970, giving conservative justices a generation of dominance—one that was further deepened by the rushed Senate confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett last fall.

**T**HE POLICY RESULTS OF THIS ANTI-democratic constitutional system are not just financial; 6 million undocumented blue-state residents have spent nearly two decades fearing the knock of ICE agents on their door and have been denied access to legal rights as conservative legislators filibustered to block immigration reform. Orrin Hatch of Utah, the longest-serving Republican senator in US history, said that repeatedly blocking prolabor legislation through

**Democratic presidents have appointed just four out of 17 Supreme Court justices since 1970.**

the filibuster was one of his proudest achievements—a policy that systematically weakened unions and helped expand economic inequality to the extremes we see today. The Senate has remained the graveyard of federal gun control, voting rights, campaign finance reform, minimum wage increases, environmental protections, and every other variety of broadly popular legislation passed by the House.

But it's not just federal legislation that's been blocked. The creation of a right-wing Supreme Court majority by this undemocratic structure means that progressive state policy is regularly struck down as well:

§ Prolabor laws enacted by state governments have regularly been preempted by the court, while state public employees have had right-to-work rules imposed on them based on bogus constitutional arguments.

§ California and other states have been blocked in a decades-long struggle to raise local gas mileage standards above the federal level, despite the existential threat of climate change.

§ State predatory lending laws designed to stop subprime mortgage fraud were overturned by the George W. Bush administration, whose actions were backed by the courts, laying the groundwork for the meltdown of the financial system in 2008 and wiping out a generation of housing wealth in low-income and particularly minority communities.

§ The Supreme Court in 2001 used an obscure 1925 law to give corporations the right to force employees to take any dispute to a private arbitrator chosen by the employer. The result is that half of all employees have now lost their ability to sue employers in state or federal court for violations of sexual harassment, civil rights, or other employment laws. The House has voted to ban such arbitration clauses, but the bill hasn't even gotten a hearing in the Senate, highlighting how undemocratic representation in the upper chamber reinforces the power of an undemocratic Supreme Court to undermine both state laws and state courts.

**W**HICH BRINGS US BACK TO THE threat of secession as the only route to creating a democratic and just politics.

Despite popular conceptions, secession has never been an exclusive preserve of the former Confederacy. As Richard Kreitner details in his book *Break It Up*, the “first popular disunion movement in American history developed in the North, not the South.” It was the abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison who, on July 4, 1854, burned a copy of the Constitution and declared, “The only remedy in our case is A DISSOLUTION OF THE UNION,” arguing that the threat of secession by

the Northern states was the only way to end the tyranny of slavery.

If secession seems extreme, it's no more so than the millions of undocumented families fearing forcible separation by ICE. It's no more extreme than the steadily rising economic and racial inequality we face. And it's definitely no more extreme than the body count we face from climate change—one that, if left unaddressed due to the political malfunctions of our Constitution, will make Covid-19's look minor by comparison.

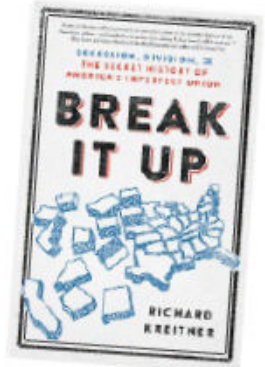
Some argue (including in the pages of *The Nation*) that secession would abandon tens of millions of progressive red-state residents, including large numbers of Black and Latino voters, to the mercies of Republican abuses. Except there is little evidence that the blue states' continued embrace of the current political system is the most effective way to support red-state allies, as the Supreme Court's gutting of Obamacare's Medicaid expansion illustrates. Even during the peak of recent Democratic power in the Senate, in 2009–10, it was nearly impossible to enact national legislation that significantly expanded the welfare state or raised wages in red states.

As a united sovereign nation, blue states would not just be able to immediately improve conditions for their own residents but could also send the hundreds of billions of dollars in new budget surpluses, which they would no longer forward to D.C., directly to blue cities and rural blue counties stranded in a red-state nation. Without the Senate veto, blue states could raise new revenue by increasing tax rates on the wealthy and corporations, and free up funds through lowered military spending. Those funds could bypass GOP filibusters and red-state governments, ensuring that they actually help those in need in local red-state communities.

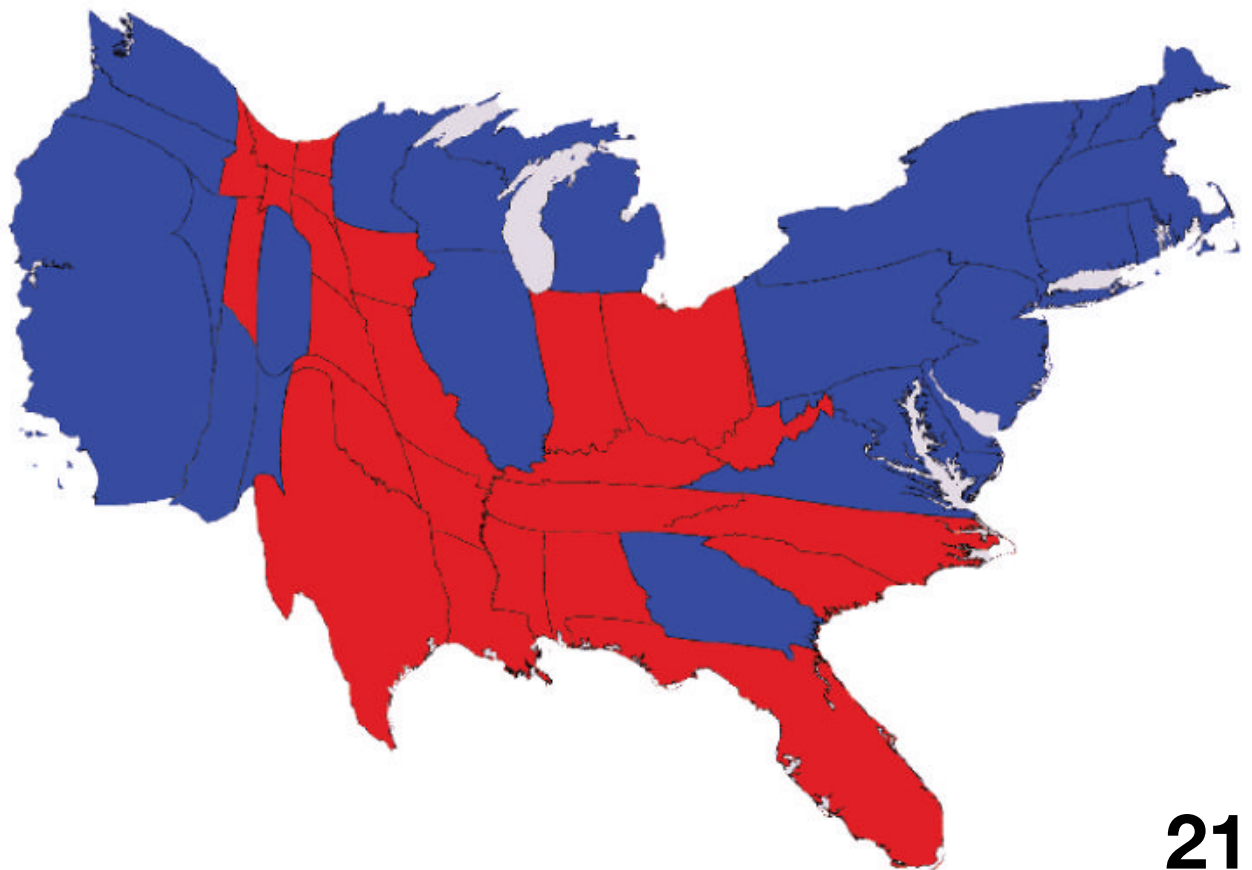
Blue states would also be free to use trade policies to demand improved labor and environmental standards in red states as a condition for importing goods into blue ones. This would be a far stronger tool to force red states to negotiate on such policy changes than current legislative negotiations, under the Senate's malformed rules, allow for. Strengthening labor rights in blue states would give unions greater resources to support the workers organizing in red states, as well as to negotiate



## Despite popular conceptions, secession has never been an exclusive preserve of the former Confederacy.



**Disunited States:** Richard Kreitner's book, above; below, a US map distorted to reflect the relative populations of blue and red states.



## A modern secession campaign would use local referenda to spotlight the just claims of blue states for equal representation.



**Separatism:** Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, above; below, a pro-independence demonstration in Glasgow, Scotland, in September 2014.

companywide contracts that extend higher wages and benefits to red-state workers.

A blue-state secession would also bypass the neo-Confederate drag on US foreign policy, which has pushed for disengagement from international agreements fighting global inequality and climate change. Like Scotland's independence movement in the United Kingdom, whose goal is not a narrow nationalism but to become part of a greater unity with the European Union, blue-state secession would be an escape from narrow American nationalism in favor of greater global alliances, which would benefit red-state residents as well by strengthening solutions to global problems.

Given that blue states have higher growth per capita and disproportionately drive the economic dynamism of the current economy, from technology to medicine to creative industries, a blue-state nation would likely attract parts of the red-state nation from which it had seceded, especially those parts that had formerly been swing states. One scenario would thus be a negotiated reconstitution of the United States along more democratic constitutional lines.

**A**LL THAT SAID, SECESSION WOULD BE THE SECOND-BEST SOLUTION—but the point is to be clear that it's better than the constitutional status quo. Antebellum abolitionists like Garrison argued for Northern secession from the federal "slave power" in all seriousness, but their campaigns were also designed to make ending slavery a key part of national politics.

Similarly, a modern campaign would use local referenda on secession to spotlight the just claims of blue states for equal political representation—arguing for secession, but with the preferred first choice being national political reform. Notably, secession campaigns in Scotland and Quebec have forced concessions to increase equity in the constitutional structures of their respective countries. A blue-state secession campaign would be designed to negotiate an end to the Electoral College and our undemocratic Senate rules.

in all seriousness, but their campaigns were also designed to make ending slavery a key part of national politics.



Abolishing the Electoral College is far more straightforward. States representing a majority of the electoral votes can do so through the National Popular Vote compact, an agreement to have their delegates vote for the winner of the popular vote nationwide—and states representing 196 electoral votes have already committed to doing so. The threat from strong secession campaigns would be a powerful added incentive to get the last few states to approve the NPV compact and ensure that every vote matters to anyone running for president.

The Senate's structure is theoretically unchangeable by constitutional amendment under Article V, but there is a solution: Just as the Senate can vote under its own rules to allow a minority of senators to block legislation using the filibuster, it could also adopt rules allowing the approval of legislation whenever senators representing a majority of the national population support it. This will only happen, however, if there is a credible threat of mass exit by multiple states.

To achieve this goal, alliances of groups that have seen their agendas die in the Senate would need to unite and do serious organizing, state by state. Through meetings, letter-writing campaigns, and public referenda, people would need to demand that state leaders either fight for equal representation for the blue states or threaten secession.

One key strategy would be pushing the House to refuse to approve any federal budget unless the right to secession is included, then using that leverage to lock in reform of minority rule in the Senate. That bill could include a proviso suspending the state secession right as long as the upper chamber changed its rules to allow approval of legislation by senators representing a majority of the population. Such legislation would have to include a clause reinstating state secession rights if the Senate itself or the Supreme Court later eliminated the Senate majority-rule provisions—what is commonly called a "severability clause," but in this case it would sever not just the legislation but the nation itself.

This would be a potent threat to make the Senate and the Supreme Court think twice before trying to reinstate minority rule. The minority could use this constitutionally granted power at any time, of course, but only at the price of blowing up the republic.

We face a mounting constitutional crisis—one that, in turn, amplifies the crises of voter suppression, racial and economic inequality, and climate change—with a majority will that is repeatedly thwarted by minority rule in every aspect of policy. Ultimately, building a serious blue-state threat to secede is the only way to end this crisis and create a nation based on equal representation for all.

(continued from page 17)

figure who is indispensable yet disposable.”

Toward those cost-cutting ends, the industry adopted a policy of “lean health care,” modeled on the auto industry’s concept of lean production. Over the 1990s and 2000s, that meant pressure to do more with less and the same sort of just-in-time production and distribution that sees any sort of redundancy as wasteful, “whether that means stockpiles, whether that means unused beds or reserve facilities that can quickly be reactivated,” Freeman said.

It has also meant more nursing shortages, as conditions have worsened, along with a heavy reliance on immigrant labor: Some 17 percent of health care workers in the country are immigrants, and they tend to be concentrated, Huebner noted, in the spaces in the industry with fewer resources—and likely fewer protections.

All of this set the stage for the disaster that met nurses when Covid-19 struck: the lack of preparedness, the missing protective equipment, and the pervasive understaffing. And all remain enduring problems, the results of a system where the lines between “public” and “private” are constantly blurred, where the drive to maximize revenue exists in tension with the need to produce good health outcomes, and where workers like Keefe and Bazel are caught in the middle.

**W**ITHIN THIS SYSTEM, THE RISE OF MILITANT, politically progressive nurses’ unions has been a beacon of clarity. The California Nurses Association (CNA) won legal staffing ratios in the state in 1999 and led the process of creating

National Nurses United (NNU), merging with United American Nurses and the Massachusetts Nurses Association in 2009. The union now represents some 150,000 nurses nationwide and is a leader in the fight for single-payer health care, or Medicare for All. Unaffiliated unions have also grown more active—since 2012, NYSNA, Keefe’s and Bazel’s union, has changed greatly, playing a key role in the recovery efforts after Hurricane Sandy devastated New York City’s outer boroughs. These nurses’ unions, Freeman said, are “very militant, not intimidated by the expertise of anybody else, [and] often tied to broader left-wing social movements.”

For many years, nurses’ associations were dominated by nurse supervisors and academics, more concerned with professional prestige than shop floor action, explained Mark Brenner of the University of Oregon’s Labor Education and Research Center. But the arrival of lean health care, he said, pushed many nurses to consider a more militant unionism. The success of CNA in California didn’t hurt either, as nurses looked around for solutions to the crunch they were facing. The staffing problem, Brenner added, was a way in for nurse activists to begin talking about the problems of corporate health care, and it led to the kind of activism that NNU is known for on the national level.

But for most nurse unionists, their first motivation remains improving conditions at the patient’s bedside, and it is those conditions that have led nurses like Bazel to strike.

Deciding to walk off the job is a hard choice for most workers; when one’s work is producing not car parts but healthy patients, the decision is even harder. Nurses’ strikes can be frowned on by the public—unless, that is, the nurses do the

work of organizing the community to support them. In this context, the work that unions like NYSNA have done (providing emergency care after Hurricane Sandy, battling to save beloved community hospitals) builds goodwill that helps them improve their own conditions as well—goodwill that is necessary as Covid-19 conditions push more nurses to the brink.

Now these same conditions have expanded the discussion yet again, ratcheting up conversations about the broken health care system. The pandemic drove New York Governor Andrew Cuomo to take control of the state’s hospitals, so that public and private facilities would be “sharing staff, patients, and supplies.” For Keefe and her colleagues, the moment was ripe to consider a real national health care system.

The United States, Keefe noted, spends more money on health care than any other country in the developed world, yet its

health outcomes are among the worst, and the pandemic’s ravaging of the country is a brutal reminder of this fact, with more than 400,000 deaths from Covid-19. It is a moment, Bazel said, when most of the country is focused on health care. Oddly enough, it is also a time when the workers finally feel acknowledged and supported by the public. Our patchwork health care system was built on the expectation that these workers, nurses above all, would cover the gaps with self-sacrifice. But what if the system instead was built on nurses’ understanding of what it takes to provide care?

“Imagine if the response at a local level and even the national level was being figured out by health care providers, in conjunction with health care providers around the world and with the communities and patients and families being affected by this,” Keefe said. “We are finding out that all these things that seemed impossible, it is really just a question of political will, because the money is there and the capability is there.”

As the Covid-19 vaccine rollout began, a Queens nurse became the first person in the United States to be vaccinated. It signaled, perhaps, the beginning of the end of the pandemic, but for rank-and-file nurses like Keefe and Bazel and so many others, their struggle is far from over. When the fog of the pandemic clears, they will still be fighting to patch the holes in our health care system with something other than endless self-sacrifice. After all, as Keefe asked, if we can spend over \$3 trillion on stimulus, why can’t we fix the health care system? **N**



**Saving lives, risking death:** A medical worker enters the ICU of the United Memorial Medical Center in Houston, December 2020.



**Democrats Inherit  
a Broken Senate**

A  
2021



# The Democrats have secured control of the upper chamber by the thinnest of margins.

## The question now is: Can they make it work?

BY JOHN NICHOLS

**T**OM UDALL USED HIS FAREWELL ADDRESS as New Mexico's senior senator to deliver a dire assessment of the chamber in which he had served for 12 years. "The Senate is broken," he said in December. "Our government is supposed to respond to the will of the majority while protecting the rights of the minority. Instead, we have the tyranny of the minority. That minority is superwealthy, politically powerful, and dangerously out of touch with the American people."

"We have to do something to fix this," he said, concluding with a warning to his colleagues: "We do not have any time to waste."

Udall's urgency was well-placed, as was his implicit warning that Senate Democrats must seize every opening to govern boldly if they hope not only to repair a broken Senate but also to save their party and their country. To do this, Senate Democrats must frame a policy agenda that matches and ideally exceeds the ambition of President Joe Biden. As the new Senate majority leader, Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) must empower committee chairs to amplify agendas on issues ranging from racial justice to military spending. Accountability must be a priority—not just when it comes to trying Donald Trump for high crimes but also with investigations into his administration's failed response to the coronavirus pandemic, the profiteering by pharmaceutical companies, and the monopoly crisis that has grown dramatically worse since Covid-19 hit. And they must build better relations with grassroots activists, embracing candidates who can excite and extend the party's base as part of a smarter strategy for building on the Democratic majority in the difficult midterm elections of 2022.

None of this will be easy, as Senate Democrats have no margin for error.

When Udall spoke in December, he was preparing to leave a Senate where a narrow Republican majority had functioned for four years as a rubber stamp for Trump's White House wrecking crew. Yet Democrats failed to achieve their hoped-for gains in the November 3 election. Only a last-minute reprieve—the January 5 Georgia runoff victories by the Rev. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff—positioned Democrats to control the chamber with the barest possible majority.

The Georgia wins eased Biden's burden. Cabinet nominees and judicial picks will navigate a confirmation process defined by Schumer and Judiciary Committee chair Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), a far easier route than if former majority leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), who turned the Senate into what Schumer called a "legislative graveyard," and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), a calculating partisan who is desperate to satisfy his party's

right wing, had retained those positions. Policy proposals have a chance to get hearings, debates, and votes as the new president and his allies seek a \$1.9 trillion stimulus package to address the pandemic and the economic crisis it has spawned.

But the next two years will be a tightrope walk for Schumer and his caucus. They'll control committee chairmanships and have the power to bring nominations and legislative proposals to the floor. But under a disappointing organizational arrangement Schumer and McConnell were negotiating, Republican filibusters would still pose an obstructionist threat. And even when Senate Democrats get floor votes, they will need a boost from Vice President Kamala Harris to break ties. As such, the new majority party will have to be constantly on the watch to avoid defections by its more conservative members, such as West Virginia's Joe Manchin.

That's not just frustrating; it's dangerous. The pressure to limit expectations and to compromise with rigid Republicans and deficit-hawk Democrats will be intense. Senate Democrats will be told to sacrifice their ambitions in order to keep the Biden agenda afloat. But that's a perilous approach that is unlikely to yield the desired results for the new president or for his party.

A Senate controlled by the Democrats, no matter how narrowly, must be more than Biden's governing partner. The United States does not have a parliamentary system; it has a system of shared powers that requires a dynamic legislative branch. And the Senate will not be dynamic unless Schumer and his colleagues embrace Udall's urgent call to fix the broken chamber.

To get things right, Schumer and the Democrats must acknowledge and address the crisis of a mangled institution that has emerged—along with the Electoral College—as the most dysfunctional spawn of the constitutional compromises of 1787. Today's Senate is absurd by design and in practice. The design flaws are on the founders, who revolted against British colonialism and then proceeded to create an American House of Lords. For the first 126 years of the chamber's existence, senators were not even elected; they were chosen in statehouse backroom deals so corrupt that muckraking journalists identified the Senate as a treasonous institution. "Treason is a strong word, but not too strong to characterize the situation in which the Senate is the eager, resourceful, and indefatigable agent of interests as hostile to the American people as any invading army could be," *Cosmopolitan* observed in 1906, in the introduction to the magazine's series on how bribery and influence peddling shaped what was anything but the "world's greatest deliberative body."

Even with the 1913 enactment of the 17th Amendment, allowing for the direct election of senators, the chamber re-

**The pressure to limit expectations and to compromise with rigid Republicans and deficit-hawk Democrats will be intense.**

ILLUSTRATION BY VICTOR JUHASZ

**“If our Republican colleagues decide not to partner with us... we will not let that stop progress.”**

—Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer

**Trading places:** Many activists fear that McConnell (left), the former Senate majority leader, will continue to stymie a Democratic-controlled chamber led by Schumer (right).

mained unrepresentative—as it does to this day. The 48 senators who opposed the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett in October represented 13.5 million more Americans than the 52 senators who voted to approve it. The “tyranny of the minority” that Udall warned of has been baked into the Senate since its creation in 1787 by representatives of small states—including some in the slaveholding South—who feared that the new

United States might actually become a democracy. Today, a senator from Wyoming elected in 2018 with just 136,210 votes can cancel out the decision of a senator from California elected in the same year with 6,019,422 votes. Just as the Electoral College’s fundamental flaws haunt the American experiment in the 21st century, the Senate, too, remains an antidemocratic relic. And its unsoundness is compounded by inbred structures—particularly the filibuster—and practices that militate against honest debate and bold initiatives.

“Time and again,” says Susan Liss, director of the Democracy Program of the Brennan Center for Justice, the Senate fails “to vote—or even deliberate—on bills that could address the serious issues facing our nation. Presidential appointees, federal judicial nominees, legislation addressing unemployment benefits, the environment, disclosure of political campaign contributions, and myriad other critical issues have been stalled or shelved. Why? Because the arcane rules of Senate procedure have repeatedly prevented crucial issues like these from reaching the Senate floor.”

“The reality of the filibuster is paralysis—a deep paralysis,” Udall said. That paralysis will be hard to overcome because, as *The Hill* notes, while the Democrats now have a razor-thin majority, at least five Democratic senators are resistant to filibuster reform.

Even if reforms are initiated, the chamber’s clubby character remains a hindrance to decisive action, as was illustrated at the close of the Barrett confirmation process, when the ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, California’s Dianne Feinstein, hugged Graham and declared, “This has been one of the best set of hearings that I’ve participated in.” Feinstein’s encomium to a rushed and biased process drew rebukes from grassroots groups and pro-choice organizations, including NARAL, which had consistently supported her until then. And though Schumer said he had a “long and serious talk” with her, it’s naive to think of Feinstein as an outlier. Too many senior Democrats are too deferential to longtime Republican colleagues, imagining they can somehow find common ground. As Kevin de León, the California Democrat who sought to unseat Feinstein in 2018, reminded us in October, “Republicans play by their own rules, and if you play by their rules, they will then change them when they want to.”

The question is whether Schumer will play hardball. He did not go to war with McConnell over the organization of the new Senate, to the frustration of many activists. Instead, the New Yorker sought a reprise of the plan that Democrats and Republicans settled on in 2001, the last time the Senate was split 50-50. Adam Jentleson, a former Senate aide whose book *Kill Switch* makes a compelling case for reforming the rules, noted that under Schumer’s plan, Democrats retain “the powers that come with majority control”: committee chairmanships and the ability to advance bills and nominations to the floor for consideration by the

full Senate. But Norm Ornstein, a veteran Senate watcher, argued McConnell wouldn’t have agreed to evenly split committees “if there were a Republican president and a 50-50 chamber.”

A more encouraging signal came in Schumer’s “Dear Colleague” letter of January 12, in which he outlined an ambitious agenda for the new Senate. In addition to goals like holding Trump to account for the incitement of an insurrection and advancing the new president’s Covid-19 relief measures, Schumer wrote, “The U.S. Senate will finally address the major challenges facing our country that have too long been ignored. We will consider bold legislation to defeat the climate crisis by investing in clean infrastructure and manufacturing, which will create millions of good jobs for Americans, regardless of zip code. We will get to work fixing and significantly improving our health care and child care systems and helping caring economy workers that are working overtime during this crisis. To fix our historic income inequality problem, we will fight to restore workers’ rights and fairness in our tax code. To achieve justice for all Americans, we will pursue immigration, democracy, and criminal justice reforms. And that’s just the beginning.”

What was most striking about Schumer’s letter was his assertion that “if our Republican colleagues decide not to partner with us in our efforts to address these issues, we will not let that stop progress.”

**S**CHUMER HAS GOT HIS WORK CUT OUT FOR HIM, in his own caucus and in a Senate where McConnell will be gaming the process at every turn—and looking for the wedge issues that might restore Republican control in 2022. As majority leader, Schumer will have to employ all the tools McConnell utilized during the Trump years—including the budget reconciliation process that can thwart filibusters. But this is about more than the mastery of parliamentary procedure. If he hopes to renew the Senate, Schumer and his colleagues must raise the chamber’s profile as a guarantor of accountability and a generator of ideas sufficient to meet the challenges of the moment.

That’s a tall order, but here are four ways Schumer and his team can begin working to fix a broken Senate:

**1. Define the Left Wing of the Possible**  
The Senate Democratic Caucus needs to reas-



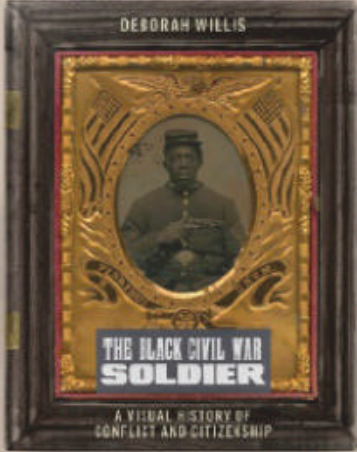
sert itself as a visionary force that is more than just a partisan amen corner for a centrist president. Senate Democrats will take cues from Biden, but they also need to move issues to the top of his agenda. They can start by uniting in support of Delaware Senator Tom Carper's Washington, D.C., Admission Act, which had 42 cosponsors in the last Congress. D.C. statehood is all the more urgent since Trump's abuses revealed the city's vulnerability. Adding a new state is a big deal, and it's something most Democrats support. So is a constitutional amendment to overturn the *Citizens United* decision. So is the For the People Act, with its ethics and campaign finance reform proposals. So is the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which had 47 Democratic sponsors in the last Senate. Hold hearings, force votes, use these issues to frame calls for filibuster reform. And don't stop there. The Senate has historically led on labor and immigration reform, two areas that need urgent attention after decades of neglect. And the chamber should again investigate and challenge the military-industrial complex. Schumer backed last year's push to cut Pentagon spending by 10 percent. With deficit hawks circling once more, Democrats need to renew their efforts to allocate less to military contractors and more to human needs.

## 2. Empower Democratic Committee Chairs

In the new Senate, the Budget Committee will be chaired by Vermont independent Bernie Sanders, and he is ready to rock. "In the past, Republicans used budget reconciliation to pass massive tax breaks for the rich and large corporations with a simple majority vote," Sanders said. "As the incoming chairman of the Budget Committee, I will fight to use the same process to boldly address the needs of working families." At the Banking Committee, incoming chair Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) plans to review the financial system through a "climate lens and through a racial justice lens." He declared, "We need a banking committee in the Senate that will stand up to [the] corporate interests and work for middle-class people, work for working families." Senator Patty Murray (D-Wash.), a former preschool teacher and an outspoken critic of privatization schemes that "drain the resources from our public schools," will take charge of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. "We now can set the priorities that we're fighting for," Murray says. That's exactly the right attitude, and Schumer should share not just the spotlight but also agenda-setting responsibilities with progressive chairs who are prepared to use their committees to fight corruption and promote economic, social, and racial justice.

## 3. Accountability, Accountability, Accountability

The new Senate has been charged with trying and convicting Trump for high crimes against the republic. Even in the face of overwhelming Republican opposition, this is the essential starting point for Democrats to reassert the chamber's immense authority to examine malfeasance in the public and private sectors. The Senate also has a duty to investigate every aspect of the January 6 Capitol siege, and incoming Intelligence Committee chair Mark Warner of Virginia made a good start by identifying the Capitol as a "crime scene" and asking telecommunications and social media companies to preserve content associated with the attack. But there are plenty of other inquiries that must be launched. For instance, as the pandemic exploded last spring, Senate Democrats urged McConnell to focus on oversight of all Covid-related legislation. "Despite the severity of the COVID-19 public health



**THE BLACK CIVIL WAR SOLDIER**

A VISUAL HISTORY OF  
CONFLICT AND CITIZENSHIP

DEBORAH WILLIS

THE BLACK CIVIL WAR SOLDIER  
A VISUAL HISTORY OF  
CONFLICT AND CITIZENSHIP

"Memorable images abound in [this] historical catalog of American photography. Essential...a book that invites rereading."

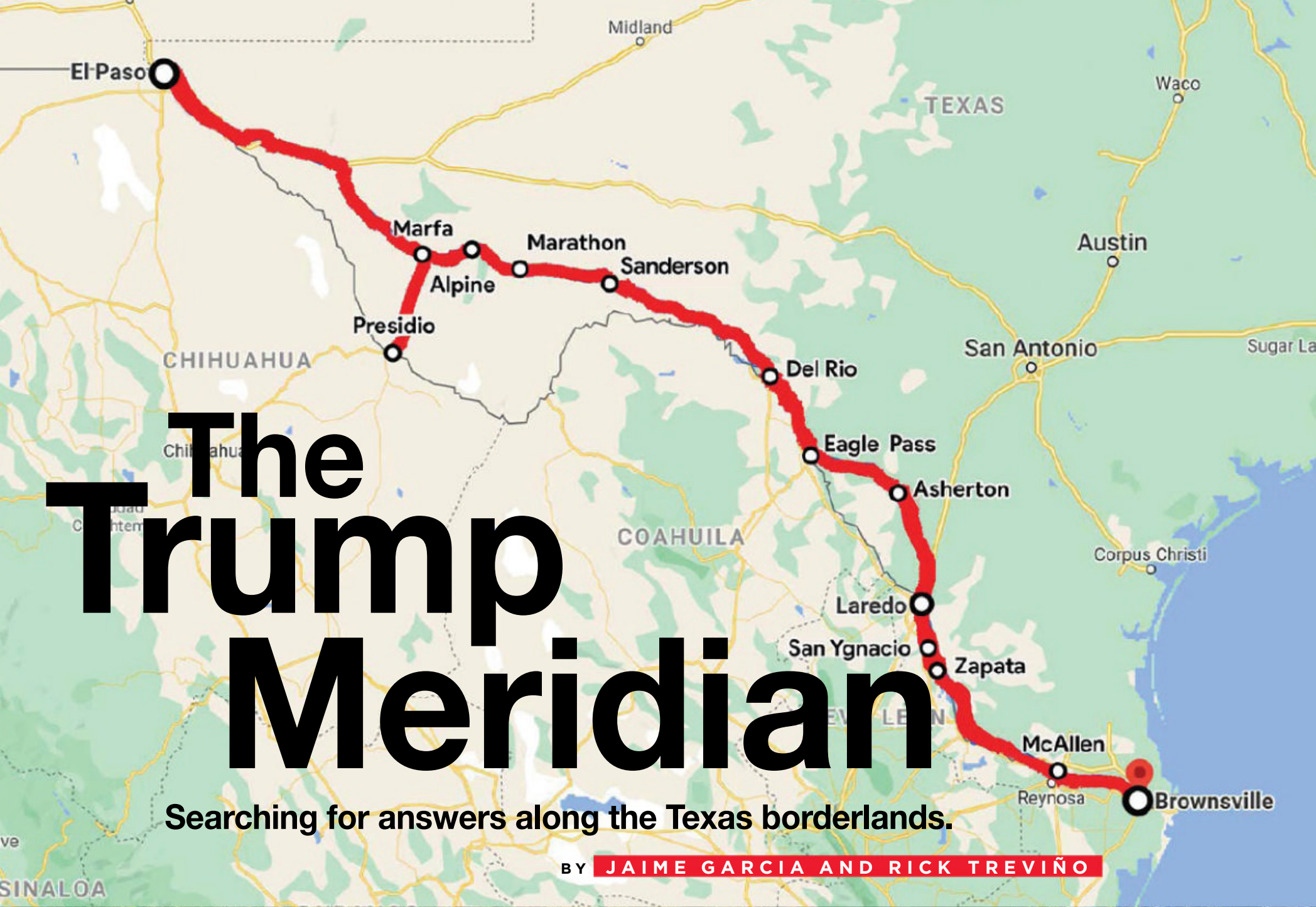
—Kirkus Reviews, STARRED

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and economic emergencies, no legislative or committee business related to the COVID-19 public health and economic emergencies has been scheduled," the Democrats noted in April. Now, they are in a position to provide that oversight, and they should be aggressive in doing so—exposing the Trump administration's deadly record of mismanagement, the self-dealing of Trump aides and Republican senators, and the slow rollout of the vaccination program. Stepped-up oversight isn't just about pinning the blame on Trump's team; it's also about putting pressure on Biden's administration to get things right.

## 4. Expand the Democratic Majority With a 50-State Grass-roots Strategy

Senate Democrats will spend the next two years on the razor's edge. The party stumbled in 2020, when seat gains fell far below expectations; it cannot afford to do so again in 2022. Schumer and other top Democrats must jettison their top-down recruitment strategy, which erred on the side of running bland centrists with records in business or the military rather than exciting contenders who might expand turnout. Warnock and Ossoff were largely exceptions to this rule, and they won. More typical was what happened in Kentucky, where the D.C. crowd's favorite, Amy McGrath, won just 38 percent of the vote against McConnell. All the stops were pulled out to prevent the nomination of a Kentucky progressive, Charles Booker, who had a vision for building a multiracial, multiregional "Hood to the Holler" coalition. As Schumer and his team prepare for 2022, they should focus on helping dynamic candidates like Booker and Pennsylvania Lieutenant Governor John Fetterman. Democrats need to embrace the best lessons from Georgia if they hope to win victories that will empower them to repair a broken Senate and initiate transformational change. **N**



# The Trump Meridian

Searching for answers along the Texas borderlands.

BY JAIME GARCIA AND RICK TREVIÑO



Bound for glory? Texas State Sen. Donna Campbell speaks to hundreds of supporters gathered for a Trump Train Rally in October.

**P**RESIDENT DONALD TRUMP'S PERFORMANCE ALONG THE WEST AND South Texas border in 2020 was nothing short of remarkable. Just five years after he'd called Mexican immigrants drug dealers, criminals, and rapists, the enthusiasm of Latino voters for the 45th president dashed Democratic dreams of a blue Texas, resulting in voting shifts in Texas border counties unseen in over a century. The Democratic Party and its media sycophants blamed the lackluster showing on Covid-19, the "defund the police" backlash, and the specter of socialism.

But for two longtime amigos born and raised in Laredo, the urge to further investigate the cause of this political earthquake was too great to ignore. Rick had firsthand experience in Texas politics, coming up short in a 2018 underdog race as a Justice Democrat in the state's massive 23rd Congressional District. And Jaime's nascent legal career representing school districts from West Texas to Corpus Christi Bay had him meeting *fronterizos* of all backgrounds.

According to the Texas secretary of state, the voting shifts were substantial, with Trump collecting more than 30 percent of the vote in every border county. In a majority of those counties, Trump received 10 percent more votes than he had in 2016, with some, like Starr County, showing shifts as high as 28 percent. Traveling 2,000 miles of Texas highway in seven days, we interviewed several dozen Latino Trump voters in 10 border towns. But after exploring this vast expanse, we came away with more questions than answers—and new Parler and Rumble accounts to stay in touch with those we met along the way.

**"The media puts you in little boxes...if you're a conservative, you're either money-hungry or a racist. I don't have a box!"**

—Cristell Laurel

**"I don't sell snake oil."**

**W**e started our trip at Cristell Laurel's high-end health spa, Skintology, after hours. The Laredoan gave us a quick tour of her establishment and introduced us to some cutting-edge antiaging treatments. "I don't sell snake oil," Laurel declared, expressing her frustration with an industry full of hucksters.

Laurel, 36, voted for Barack Obama in 2008, but she recalls the experience as unfulfilling. Her love

affair with specific, decidedly liberal social causes—gay marriage, the legalization of marijuana—piloted her to the Democratic Party in her early years, but the party's stance toward Latino voters alienated her. She didn't appreciate being told what political ideals she ought to hold. "You're either a Republican or a Democrat, and the media puts you in little boxes, and once they decide where you go...if you're a conservative, you're either super money-hungry or a racist," she told us. "I don't have a box!"

Laurel's frustration with the political discourse on social media and the traditional news networks motivated her to shop around for different news sources, which is how she discovered *The Daily Wire*. They "stopped telling me what I wanted to hear and gave me facts and statistics. I wanted to learn where these stats came from. They don't give an opinion as news."

Laurel's participation in a Webb County Trump Train last year solidified her turn from an Obama liberal to

an "out-and-proud conservative." The news coverage and some locals' reactions to the demonstration brought home for Laurel how divided the country is. "There's a newspaper article saying how bigoted, racist this all was, and how horrible it was and a stain on Laredo.... Why are you writing about something I know is not racist? We're just riding around in our cars!" While she was riding in the Trump Train in her pearl-colored SUV adorned with "Trump" and "Blue Lives Matter" flags, an elderly woman walked out onto her lawn and flipped Laurel the bird. When we asked Laurel to imagine what the woman might have been thinking, she humored us and said, "The old woman saw me as a racist. Just an ignorant dumb bastard with no right or reason." She paused, allowing the sound of meditative waterfalls to fill the room, then added, "What a miserable way of being."

**"Everyone's going to get it eventually."**

**A**s we entered Zapata County, the streets bustled with maskless children at play. On one road, a group of preteen boys raced a pricey-looking dune buggy down the block. A separate trio of young caballeros rode ponies through the barrio. Nearby, a small bilingual sign signaling "Free Covid-19 testing" caught our eye, and we decided to get a test. The virus raged during our travels, taking more than 5,000 lives along the border in 2020 (including 22 here in Zapata County), according to *The New York Times*.

Completing a questionnaire was the only requirement, and participants

**Pressing the flesh:** Coauthor Rick Treviño during his unsuccessful run for Congress in 2018. Treviño made it to the runoff, where he lost to Gina Ortiz, who in turn lost to Republican incumbent Will Hurd.

*Jaime Garcia practices law in Laredo, Tex. Rick Treviño is a former congressional candidate and educator currently attending St. Mary's School of Law.*





then queued up in a large gymnasium. The process moved briskly, and after an oral swab test that was over in less than two minutes, we bumped into a new voter outside—a 23-year-old waitress at one of the amazing Mexican restaurants in this unincorporated town of 14,000. Though she didn’t want to be named, the woman told us her husband was one of the thousands of oil and gas workers laid off during the pandemic. The industry has lost an estimated 80,000 jobs since the end of 2018, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas.

Regular close contact with hungry diners motivated the young woman to take advantage of the free Covid test. “They say Trump got it.... Everyone is going to get it eventually,” she lamented. “It’s better we all get tested so we can get out of these masks!” Before leaving for her second shift, she shared both her hopes for the vaccine and her frustrations with customers who refuse to wear a facial covering. Yet she also seemed comfortable with Trump’s handling of the pandemic. She wanted the election results overturned, she told us, suggesting that “it would help out a lot of people—not just me and my family, but everyone around the world.”

**Family, friends, and neighbors:** The Grand Candela memorial (left) honors victims of the El Paso shootings in August 2019, while the 10-story mural on this water tank in Presidio (right) is a gift from Mexico.

Her confidence in Trump reminded us of a Del Rio nurse practitioner and his spouse, a registered nurse, who both braved a Val Verde County windstorm to share their approval of the president’s handling of the pandemic. The couple had voted for Obama in the past but wished to remain anonymous now, citing “paranoia” and a general fear of retaliatory attacks against Trump voters that alt-right media figures on Parler and Rumble warned them about. Sadly, the couple’s local paper, the *Del Rio News-Herald*, had recently shuttered after 136 years in operation, forcing residents of the small city to seek their news elsewhere.

**“We saw a difference the last four years. Better jobs. Better living for everybody.”**

—a Trump supporter in Presidio

The two bemoaned anti-mask protesters, some of whom demonstrated outside the Texas State Capitol building in Austin this past April to attack business closures, mask mandates, and government scientists. “I’ve seen [Trump] wear a mask; sometimes [he] doesn’t,” the nurse practitioner said. “I don’t know if it’s true, where they are posting that he wasn’t wearing a mask, because they say the same thing about Biden.” The couple never seemed to draw the connection between those protesters, the

news that they consume, and the president they proudly voted for. “In Austin, nurses, they’re dying!” he added. “Protesters were screaming, ‘No mask!’ and they’re attacking nurses, like, ‘You’re the devil!’” He shook his head in frustration. “We take care of the sick, you guys, come on.... I have friends that died at the hospital, and I saw them two days before. And there are people who think it’s a hoax?”

**“We were expecting something weird.”**

**Y**ou take the last lonely stretch of Route 67 south to get to Presidio. The old town of western lore sits on the eastern end of the Chihuahuan Desert, where the Rios Grande and Conchos converge. People of different cultures and creeds have crossed this river junction on their journeys for millennia, and that legacy lives on today. Recently widened to accommodate increases in truck and pedestrian traffic, the Presidio bridge tallied an estimated 250,000 pedestrian crossings in 2018 alone, according to the Texas Department of Transportation, up 165 percent from 2017.

We talked to residents off the town’s main thoroughfare about the uptick in activity, which they’ve noticed. Outside a busy Dollar General, a buckaroo-wearing vaquero in a 2X Stetson said he voted for Trump because of the area’s improved economy. “We saw a difference the last four years. Better jobs. Better living for everybody.”

This economic boost is borne out by the data. When Trump rode a red wave of nativist sentiment to the White House in 2016, Presidio County’s unemployment rate stood at 12.2 percent, according to Texas Labor Market Information’s unemployment statistics. It fell to a low of 5.1 percent by April 2019. Sadly, the pandemic destroyed those gains, and by the time we arrived in this mountainous county of

7,000, the rate had increased to 15 percent, the second-highest of any county in the state.

To our surprise, the vaquero didn't vote for Trump four years back, so we asked what changed his mind. "At the beginning, it was kinda confusing, especially for the border towns," the man said as he swept his hand along the horizon, following the mighty river as it flowed south. "I'm a Latino. We were expecting something weird. But we saw the difference."

### "We can't do a thing about it."

**W**hen the sun dips behind the Franklin Mountains and El Paso's skies turn blood red, the Grand Candela memorial lights up the Cielo Vista Walmart parking lot. Completed in November 2019, the memorial consists of 22 metal panels, each representing a life lost in the mass shooting that took place on August 3, 2019 (a death toll that now stands at 23). Every panel of the 30-foot structure is beautifully perforated with different geometric shapes, stars and crescent moons. The memorial itself is emotionally powerful. But walking through the superstore, with its long lines and crowded aisles, you would never get the sense that this is hallowed ground. In a mall dominated by big-box stores, a Red Lobster, and a Hooters, the shoppers passing through the retail giant's doors on the night we visited could have been anywhere in America.

Yol-Itzma Aguirre, a Mexican American community organizer and native El Pasoan, volunteered to act as our guide, bringing us to the memorial. Aguirre believes the El Paso massacre was motivated by hatred against her people, and it broke her heart to see so many of her "Latino brothers and sisters" vote for Trump.

While waiting for the sunset, we spoke to an older Latino couple in the parking lot about their vote. Like many Americans, Felix and Antonia Garcia were on their way to do some last-minute Christmas shopping. The unassuming couple jumped at the opportunity to talk to us, and they held each other's hand while they spoke. Felix was born in Michoacán and Antonia in Morelos; both now live in El Paso. The two lifelong Republicans voted for Trump in 2016 and 2020. "We are Christians," Felix explained, "and we believe Trump is a strong defender of religious freedoms." When asked for another reason, Antonia cited Trump's defense of "the state of Israel...the base of the Christian faith."

The Garcias are unwavering Christians with convictions as strong as St. Perpetua. Viewed through their eyes, the world—including the 2020 election result—makes sense. Though they believe there was fraud against "Señor Trump," the Garcias also believe that the outcome is out of their hands. Quoting the Book of Daniel, Felix declared, "God in His word says, 'He removes kings and appoints kings'... and if Mr. Biden becomes president, we can't do a thing about it."

The Garcias heard about election fraud through Facebook and other social media platforms. In contrast to the hooting Trumpers who stormed the US Capitol, they seem to have handled the news of the purported theft with grace. As Felix put it, "The Bible says we must respectfully submit ourselves to our government."

Facebook and YouTube use have surged among Latinos, especially during the pandemic. A report by Nielsen last fall found that Latinos were 57 percent more likely to use social media for all their Covid-19 information than non-Latinos. Additionally, of those polled, only 21 percent of Latinos thought that cable news was trustworthy.

We encountered an example of this move to social media—and growing skepticism about traditional media—in Cheo Breñas, a Cuban exile operating a flea-market boutique near the start of the famed Chisholm Trail in Brownsville. His Facebook page, "Donald Trump Para Hispanos," is awash with pro-Trump YouTube clips. The man was still busy on January 6, posting more than 80 times. In one of Breñas's Facebook posts, he says, "A new party for Trumpistas—who is with me?" (After we inter-

viewed Breñas, the page was taken down.)

Before the Garcias departed, we asked about the 2019 mass shooting and whether they believed Trump's notorious rhetoric about their motherland had played a role in it. They didn't. "My wife and I were just talking about it," Felix said. "A lot of innocent people died. In my personal opinion, Mr. Trump was not at fault." Antonia firmed her grip on her husband's hand. "It's people that aren't at peace with God or themselves, and for those reasons, they do evil acts," she said.

When we returned to the memorial, dusk was near, and we found Aguirre sitting in her car, crying, thinking about the massacre and her country's future. "How do you win, you know? They are still organizing. They're still planning on 2024." She stopped and fixed her watery eyes on the me-

morial. The sun had set, and the Candela was lit. It was time to go.

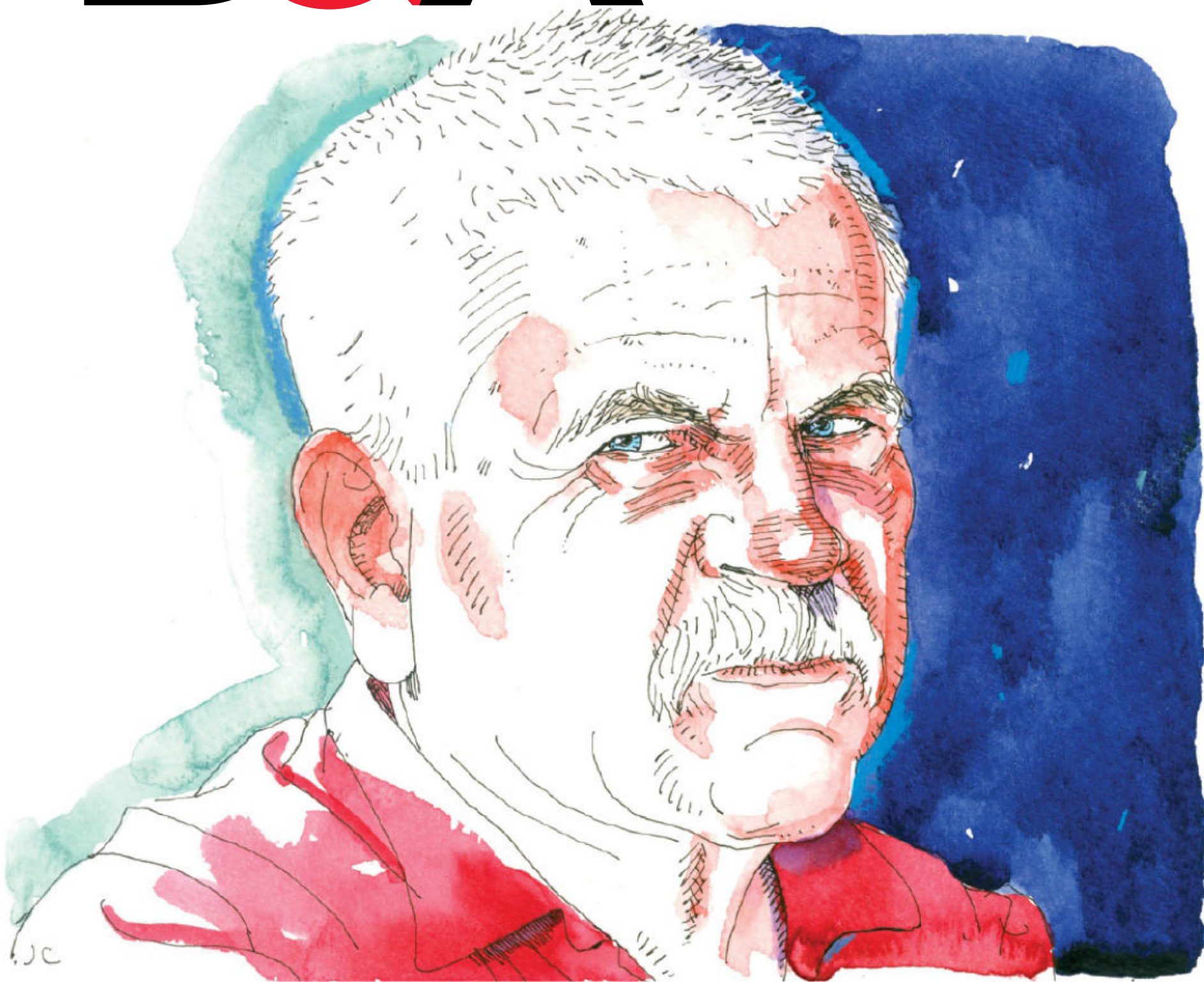
**T**he 10-hour drive back to Laredo gave us time to think about the men and women we'd met. Both of us had expected to hear something different from them, honestly. Hardly anyone mentioned "socialism" or "defund the police." Instead, we heard praise for the economy and for Trump himself. He remains a great favorite with the people we met. They all still believe he won the election and said they'd be comfortable if the results were overturned. In just four years, Trump managed to turn parts of what had been a strong blue border wall for Texas Democrats deep Republican red—truly an incredible feat. As to what lessons we can learn from it... we're still trying to figure that out.

**"How do you win, you know? [The Trumpist right] are still organizing. They're still planning on 2024."**

—Yol-Itzma Aguirre

**Team Trump:** Latino supporters traded memes on social media.





## Amid the Wildfires

*Mike Davis's forecast for the left*

BY MICAH UETRICH



**I**N EARLY 2009, THE HISTORIAN AND SOCIAL critic Mike Davis sat down for an interview with Bill Moyers to discuss what was then the worst economic collapse since the Great Depression. When asked whether, as a socialist, he had anticipated the crisis, Davis said he couldn't have predicted its scale or devastation.

Davis's modesty won out over the truth. Four years earlier, he had, in fact, done just that. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, he laid out the fundamental problems of the housing bubble then underway. Noting its particular precarity in Southern California,

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE CIARDIELLO



he also went on to discuss how it might affect the country and the world: The “national economy may be equally vulnerable to property deflation, with a mild jolt sufficient to end the current American boom, and perhaps throw all the dollar-pegged economies into recession.” Davis wasn’t the only one who saw that crash coming, of course. But in the Moyers interview, he downplayed his clairvoyance with a joke: “People of the left like myself are famous,” he said, for “predicting 11 of the last three depressions.”

While he’s probably right about leftists in the aggregate, Davis’s own track record on sounding the alarm has proved incredibly accurate. Over the course of a remarkable career, he has been resolutely clear-eyed about the nightmares we face as a society and a planet, mostly bearish on the prospects for reversing those nightmares, and always prescient.

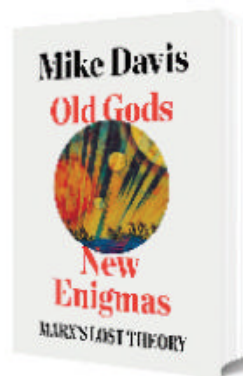
Nearly all of the principal contentions of Davis’s many books have unfortunately proved correct: the continued decline of the American labor movement, the expanding and potentially explosive inequality in urban America, the supercharged global expansion of miserable slums, the disaster of climate change, and—most recently and horrifyingly—a viral pathogen wreaking havoc across the globe.

Davis is a scholar who digs deep into the historical archives and weaves his findings together in astonishingly original and compelling syntheses. But one of his strengths has been his ability to anticipate the future: Many of his books are monograph-length warnings of nightmares yet to come. Even his works of history are implicit or explicit arguments for public action against ongoing or impending disasters. He recognizes that the past defeats of the left and the labor movement can’t be waved away in favor of feel-good paeans to isolated victories and lessons learned for next time, and he makes these arguments not in spite of his lifelong and ironclad commitment to those causes but because of it. He takes those movements seriously enough to tell their participants the forecast isn’t always sunny. The long and continuous record of working-class defeat, he insists, means that the ship is stuck in an ongoing storm and sinking.

Part of the reason for Davis’s pessimism of the intellect stems from the period in which he was radicalized. He chose a rather lonely time to launch a career as a socialist critic and historian: His first book was published in 1986, just ahead of the “end of history” after the Berlin Wall fell and capitalism’s victory was declared complete. But part of the reason is also that he has been among a small handful of prominent writers to keep the flame of socialism and class politics alive in this age of free-market triumphalism.

This clear-eyed sobriety, however, does make his two new books—the essay collection *Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx’s Lost*

*Micah Uetrict is the deputy editor of Jacobin and the coauthor of Bigger Than Bernie.*



### Old Gods, New Enigmas

*Marx’s Lost Theory*

By Mike Davis

Verso.

320 pp. \$26.95

### Set the Night on Fire

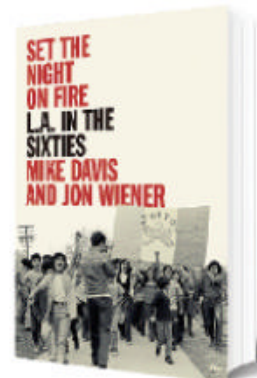
*L.A. in the Sixties*

By Mike Davis and

Jon Wiener

Verso.

800 pp. \$34.95



*Theory* and the long-awaited *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties*, coauthored with the historian Jon Wiener—fairly remarkable. In them, Davis maintains his lifelong probity, cataloging past defeats and eyeing future doom and gloom. But even as he retains all of his signature uncertainty, he has also found a new sense of hope. *Old Gods, New Enigmas* and *Set the Night on Fire* mark a clear departure from his nearly four decades as the bearer of extremely bad news.

One cause for this change may be that Davis has been joined by a new generation of radicals. Since the financial crash, socialism has been reborn in the United States. So has a flourishing of new social movements and radical causes. The catastrophes may still be piling up everywhere we look, but it seems that, for the first time in his career, Davis has allowed himself to see those sunbeams as harbingers of a real change in the weather.

**A**

lthough it’s rare in the contemporary world of letters, Davis comes from the working class. Born in 1946 in Southern California, he grew up in a blue-collar town just outside of Los Angeles. His father was a meatcutter who suffered a heart attack after the family moved to an area near San Diego. After his father’s death, Davis dropped out of high school to work at a meat company to support the family. It was during this time that his radicalization began in earnest, though as he notes, his father had set him on this path several years earlier. In Davis’s introduction to *The Bending Cross*, the 2007 rerelease of Ray Ginger’s biography of Eugene Debs, he mentions that he first read the book in these years: “Thanks to the powder-blue ’55 Chevy that I plowed into a wall while street racing with drunken teenage friends,” he was stuck in the hospital when his father gave him a copy of it.

After returning to school and graduating, Davis landed a full scholarship to Reed College, only to get kicked out for living in his girlfriend’s dorm. By that point, the upheavals of the 1960s were in full swing. Cut loose from college, he moved to Los Angeles and threw himself into activism, burning his draft card in 1963 and joining Students for a Democratic Society in 1964. By the following year, Davis had risen up through the ranks of the organization and was serving as its LA regional organizer.

During this period, Davis’s political education took place on the streets as much as in the library. He was in Watts during the 1965 uprising and narrowly avoided a fascist attack by right-wing Cubans on a movement center that involved the *gusanos* tying up young leftists and spraying oven cleaner in their faces. (Davis usually would have been in the building but was picking up his wife at the time.) He marched against the Vietnam War with thousands of other anti-war protesters, and by 1968 he’d joined the Communist Party, impressed by the LA chapter’s public opposition to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Expelled from the party a year later, after confronting a visiting Soviet attaché—despite joining the CP, he was no fan of the Soviet Union—Davis left full-time political work and returned to his blue-collar roots, driving a big rig and later a tour bus. He was finally

convinced to return to higher education when, during a strike by the tour bus drivers, he found that he was the only one to vote against hiring a hit man to kill the head strikebreaker. (Thankfully, the hit never happened.)

Attending UCLA, Davis finally directed his energy toward history and the study of politics. While studying Irish history in Scotland, he developed a relationship with Perry Anderson and the *New Left Review*. After Davis completed his undergraduate studies and began a PhD in history (which remains unfinished to this day), Anderson offered him a job.

Working out of the *New Left Review*'s London offices, Davis began editing for the journal. It was there that he also developed a reputation as a bit of a loose cannon. As Adam Shatz chronicled in his 1997 profile for *Lingua Franca* (the most complete biographical sketch available), after Davis received a letter from the historian Eugene Genovese complaining about the journal's treatment of his work, he responded with his own letter: "Dear Professor Genovese, fuck you." In another moment of editorial anger, Davis spilled "his atrarium, filled with a garter snake, an axolotl, and a carnivorous African toad...onto the office's lush carpet." He would work out of the journal's London offices for six years before turning his energy toward writing.

**D**avis's oeuvre is wide-ranging, his books varied in tone, topic, and style. His first, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, established his record of candidly examining the prospects for progressive social change and the dismal fate of organized labor in the United States, with its lack of a party or power. The book soon became essential reading for anyone concerned with US unions and their history, even if its conclusions were bleak.

"The smug liberal teleology of US history, with its happy end-

ings in a perpetually self-reforming 'society of affluence,' scarcely accords with the new politics of inequality and social revanchism that have become dominant since the late 1970s," Davis told his readers. The US political system "has managed to repulse every attempt to create an alternative class politics.... In spite of the periodic intensity of the economic class struggle and the episodic appearance of 'new lefts' in every generation since the Civil War, the rule of capital has remained

more powerfully installed and less politically contested than in any other advanced capitalist social formation."

The bulldozing of labor and the New Deal order in the 1980s put Davis in a foul mood—one that carried over to his 1990 book, *City of Quartz*. Incredibly for a pessimistic socialist in an age of go-go optimism, the book was a breakthrough hit. A wildly original analysis of the city on the threshold of the

new millennium, the book synthesized knowledge about Los Angeles's history, politics, culture, architecture, policing, immigration, and more, painting a dark picture that embodied a kind of American urban dystopia on steroids after the nightmare of Reaganism and the "developers' millennium." Davis became an intellectual celebrity: Universities offered him teaching gigs and speaking engagements; urban planners and Hollywood screenwriters called to pick his brain; the MacArthur Foundation awarded him a "genius" grant.

*City of Quartz* described the pressure-cooker atmosphere of extreme racial and economic inequality in Los Angeles and was released just before the Rodney King riots. A South Central activist and friend, Theresa Allison, introduced Davis to her son, Dwayne Holmes, a member of the Crips who was attempting to broker a truce with the Bloods. Davis soon found himself in a new role, advising LA gangs on peace-making deals as well as advocating surprisingly social-democratic solutions to

their members' problems. Making an argument that will sound familiar to today's racial justice protesters, Davis told Shatz that the gang members he was working with had embarked on a "lonely crusade to make jobs—and not more cops—the central issue in local politics.... We can't do anything about the crack economy until you provide jobs and alternative economic resources."

Yet by the time *City of Quartz* established Davis as one of the country's premier urbanists, his interests had grown even more expansive: He was interested in the planet as a whole, in particular its bad weather and environmental degradation, which became the subject of his next book, 1998's *Ecology of Fear*. In it, Davis focused on the violent weather, the natural disasters, and even the killer bees and plague-infected squirrels that made Southern California a place where, as he put it, "cataclysm has become virtually routine." Davis had started his career writing about workers' failed attempts to change the world; now he was insisting on the raw, terrifying power of ecology to shape and reshape that world as it pleases, with little concern for whatever petty exertions humans were engaged in. His political commitments remained the same and his activism continued, but Davis was not holding out hope for the American political scene to turn a corner anytime soon.

**I**n Southern California's foreboding and unforgiving environment, Davis saw something of his own radical politics: The region was characterized by a "revolutionary, not a reformist landscape." In *Ecology of Fear*'s most famous chapter, "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn," he described how the picturesque town, home to movie stars, musicians, and Hollywood executives, was also "the wildfire capital of North America and, possibly, the world." "Periodic firestorms of this magnitude are inevitable," he noted, "as long as residential development is tolerated in the fire ecology of the Santa Monicas," yet Malibu's rich homeowners ("wealthy pyrophiles") were repeatedly permitted to build and rebuild, with the help of cheap fire insurance and generous federal disaster relief funds.

Davis's shift in appreciation and respect for the weather was also evident in his 2000 book, *Late Victorian Holocausts*.



**The catastrophes are still piling up, but for the first time, Davis seems to see signs of real change.**

The book was primarily about the brutal famines that swept India, China, and Brazil from 1870 to 1914, resulting in tens of millions of deaths. These mass deaths were no acts of God; they were killings orchestrated by the conscious choices of colonial powers, which brutally severed their colonial subjects' "smallholder production [by forcing them] into commodity and financial circuits controlled from overseas," thereby "undermin[ing] traditional food security," he wrote. "Millions died, not outside the 'modern world system,' but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures. They died in the golden age of Liberal Capitalism."

But *Late Victorian Holocausts* also features lengthy, intricate sections explaining the science behind El Niño weather systems dating back to the 18th century. Davis took pains to emphasize that the colonists' explanations of mass famine as coming simply from freak acts of nature like El Niño were efforts of delusional self-exculpation; in fact, in the centuries before these countries had their traditional food production systems upended by the colonizers, such famines were basically unknown. In pre-colonial India, for example, many rural farmers took into account "the crucial ecological relationships and unpredictable climate fluctuations of the subcontinent's drought-prone regions." British colonialism smashed the agricultural systems that had struck this delicate balance, replacing them with a system of resource extraction characterized by the blatant and constant theft of cash crops from Indians rather than meeting their basic needs. That theft was the British Empire's sole interest, so it was unconcerned about the weather's awesome ability to turn what were previously routine droughts into some of the most murderous periods in recent human history. "El Niño," Davis explained, "worked in sinister partnership with the world market."

By 2000, the contours of Davis's interests as a writer had become clear. As a socialist, he was interested in the rare leverage points through which social change could be achieved. But his examination of past efforts by organized workers—the classic change agent for Marxists—revealed an almost constant record of failure.

Davis also saw, earlier than many on the left, the raw and unyielding power of weather and the natural world and believed that capitalism was incapable of living in harmony with it, let alone in proper awe and reverence for it. The brutal effects of this capitalist folly, he warned, also fell unequally on the world's working class.

Marx argued that the organized working class could be the "gravedigger" of the bourgeoisie, ushering in a new and better world. Davis warned that a defeated working class would not only fail to win power but might end up losing the planet, too.

**I**n *Planet of Slums*, Davis examined the frightening consequences of this defeat on the ever-growing global population, which had been shunted into massive urban slums where basic infrastructure and economic development were nowhere to be found—over 1 billion people treated as surplus populations in their miserable urbanized holding zones. "Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven," Davis wrote, "much of the twenty-first-century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay." Under such immiseration, one might expect a population of the wretched primed for revolt—and the long-anticipated revolution of the poor and disenfranchised perhaps finally realized. But while individual acts of resistance are everywhere in these areas, Davis observed, collective action is harder to come by, because of the lack of coherent economic development and the growing plans by ruling elites to brutally police these depressed areas.

Along with human agents subjugated, disorganized, and subject to brutal weather in impoverished areas, Davis pointed to another terrifying development within the earth's ecology: plagues, which he examined in his 2005 book on the avian flu, republished in 2020 as *The Monster Enters: COVID-19 and the Plagues of Capitalism*. As he had done with so many other harbingers of impending apocalypse, Davis sounded the alarm about a potential pandemic long before it hit. And as with the El Niño systems in *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Davis didn't just gloss over the science in question. He went into great detail about how coronaviruses spread and mutate, how they interact with other diseases, and how industrial agriculture, globalization, and slum expansion create their perfect breeding grounds.

Reading his tour through the viral sci-

ence of recent decades is an enraging reminder of how much we knew about the danger of such a pandemic long before it befell us in early 2020. Davis quoted the influenza researcher Robert Webster saying in 2003, "If a pandemic happened today, hospital facilities would be overwhelmed and understaffed because many medical personnel would be afflicted with the disease. Vaccine production would be slow.... Critical community services would be immobilized. Reserves of existing vaccines [and medical equipment] would be quickly depleted, leaving most people vulnerable to infection." Sounds familiar. "Permanent bio-protection against new plagues," Davis added, "would require more than vaccines. It would need the suppression of these 'structures of disease emergence' through revolutionary reforms in agriculture and urban living that no large capitalist or state-capitalist country would ever willingly undertake."

Davis's opposition to capitalism isn't just rooted in its brutal inequalities of wealth and power, but also in its refusal to accept the ecological limits that make history, through everything from earthquakes and wildfires to viral infections. Unlike many of his socialist predecessors, who insisted on a forthcoming communist utopia in which nature's cruelties had been conquered, Davis warned that any future egalitarian system couldn't just redistribute resources; it would have to respect these hard ecological limits, even live in awe of them.

**W**hether writing about Los Angeles in the 1990s or the history of the American labor movement, Davis has often been criticized for going over the top in his doomsday descriptions and predictions. Given how frequently recent history has proved those grim predictions correct, one might assume that Davis (like many of us) would now be sinking further down the spiral of despair. Yet in his two most recent books, both coming in an era in which the ravaging has continued but a simultaneous new sense of transformation has emerged, Davis has embraced a tenuous sense of hope. He hasn't turned away from unflinchingly cataloging the wreckage piling up around us, but his eternally clear-eyed analysis now also recognizes when a political moment pregnant with possibility, from

the Sanders campaigns to the rebirth of the socialist movement in America, has emerged.

To a reader who hasn't worked through his back catalog, *Old Gods, New Enigmas* may appear to be a strange read. Its introduction is classic Davis, tantalizing its reader with stray, entertaining biographical bits. During his high school dropout phase, Davis tells us, he drove a meat truck to a far-flung New Mexican restaurant called the Chicken Shack, where a friend of his dad's named Lee Gregovich

worked as a cook after he'd been blacklisted in the 1950s for his Communist Party membership and union activism. Gregovich would end his conversations with Davis with a slap on the back and an ad-

monition to "read Marx!"—even though he had, in fact, read little to no Marx himself. For Davis, however, the imperative stuck. But "there comes a time when every old student must decide whether or not to renew their driver's license," he writes, and in *Old Gods*, he chooses to renew it, rereading Marx for the old man's own purposes: to figure out how to change the world, in a world that has radically changed.

Even if the book feels like an odds-and-ends collection, covering Marx's theories of working-class agency and his understanding of nationalism, it ends with a coda on climate change and retains many of the best features of a Davis book. Brimming with insights, *Old Gods* is a collection in which he attempts to make sense of how, in the face of crisis and potential disaster, workers can realize their latent power to build a world that respects the implacable demands of ecology and averts climate apocalypse.

For Davis, a central quandary faced by many 21st-century socialists goes back to socialism's fundamentals. Marx saw the proletariat as the universal class that would usher in a new world. Yet we live in an era in which much of that class has seen or is facing down fragmentation and weakness, an "unprecedented crisis of proletarianization," as more and more workers become "superfluous." "The fate of this superfluous humanity has become the core problem of twenty-first century Marxism," Davis writes.

If workers have lost the structural power they once held, who's going to save the world from its myriad ills?

Davis has broached this topic before. In his conclusion to *Planet of Slums*, he asked, "To what extent does an informal proletariat"—the one he had just described as existing in squalor around the world and growing by the day—"possess that most potent of Marxist talismans: 'historical agency'?" He quickly answered his own question: not much. But in *Old Gods*, Davis is not ready to throw in

**If workers have lost the power they once held, Davis asks, then who is going to save the world from its myriad ills?**

the towel quite yet. He insists that workers still hold the keys to change the world. They have "been demoted in agency, not fired from history. Machinists, nurses, truck drivers, and school teachers remain the organized social base defending the historical legacy of labor."

Here, Davis returns to many of the questions about working-class agency that he raised in *Prisoners of the American Dream*. But while he repeatedly emphasized in that book just how bleak the proletariat's prospects were in the 1980s, in *Old Gods* he makes no such claim. The underlying sense is of possibility for working-class action rather than hopelessness.

Turning to the weather, his third chapter focuses not on Marx but on the climatological writings of the Russian prince turned anarchist Peter Kropotkin, who was one of Marx's rivals and spent the late 19th and early 20th centuries discussing the receding of glaciers and the desertification that followed. Kropotkin's life and career are interesting enough, but a reader might be forgiven for wondering where the story is going, until Davis explains that Kropotkin's writings on the environment represent, in his view, "the first scientific attempt to make a comprehensive case for natural climate change as a prime mover of the history of civilization."

This argument is precisely the case that Davis has hinted at in much of his work since *Ecology of Fear*. In Kropotkin's eccentric but visionary writings, Davis sees himself and the politics for our future.

Davis's final chapter on human-induced climate change, astonishingly enough, makes explicit the shift in mood a reader senses in the book's beginning.

Hosting a "debate with myself," he oscillates between despair and hope. The reasons for despair probably don't need rehashing, but Davis chooses to end the book with at least a suggestion of ecological hope—ironically, given his dark writings about urban areas at home and abroad, one to be found in cities. Certainly, cities are far from being environmentally sustainable at present. But "the ecological genius of the city remains a vast, largely hidden power.... Public affluence—represented by great urban parks, free museums, libraries, and infinite possibilities for human interaction—represents an alternative route to a rich standard of life based on Earth-friendly sociality.... The egalitarian aspects of city life consistently provide the best sociological and physical supports for resource conservation and carbon mitigation."

In fact, it is in cities that Davis allows himself to see the hope for the very ecological balance that he has spent his entire career insisting is completely out of whack. In the green socialist city of the future lies the possibility not only for the massive redistribution of wealth but also for "well-defined boundaries between city and countryside," in which "urban growth can preserve open space and vital natural systems, while creating environmental economies of scale in transportation and residential construction." Here, traffic can be better regulated, waste better recycled, public services better designed, as "public luxury replaces privatized consumption."

Davis's past writings on urban areas tended to emphasize the often brutal, nightmarish character of the unequal city under contemporary capitalism. But in the final chapter of *Old Gods*, Davis's doomsday urbanism is transformed into a defense of city life and its possibilities. It's in urban life, he proposes, that the dystopian forces he's spent his whole career describing might finally be defeated. Given his longstanding refusal to offer false consolation, that possibility of a better world actually winning out over the forces of darkness isn't offered cavalierly.

**D**avis's newfound sense of hope also suffuses *Set the Night on Fire*, a sweeping portrait of a city in upheaval in the 1960s. Davis and his coauthor, Jon Wiener, had long been at work on the book. (In a 2003



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interview with Wiener for the journal *Radical History Review*, Davis called it his “day job.”) At just shy of 800 pages, the book captures the strengths of both Davis and Wiener, who is a historian of the 1960s. The pages fly by, and the reading is a joy. But its stories offer something that was missing in Davis’s previous work: a sense of possibility that, despite the vicious repression and inevitable defeats it will suffer, resistance is worthwhile and even occasionally victorious.

The upsurges chronicled in the book are wide-ranging, featuring a mix of historically well-known characters and many others unwritten about in previous histories of the ’60s, from radicals to working people: Congress of Racial Equality activists departing for Freedom Rides in the Jim Crow South, alternative media outlets like the *Los Angeles Free Press* and the radio station KPFK (still on the air today), the Black Panthers, feminist and gay activists, the Los Angeles branch of the Communist Party, Black and Chicano middle and high school and community college students, leftist nuns, Students for a Democratic Society members protesting the Vietnam War, “teenyboppers” fighting cops on the Sunset Strip for the right to hang out, Watts rioters, Stokely Carmichael, Dorothy Healey, Angela Davis, Malcolm X—they’re all here, alongside many others. In nearly every chapter, the Los Angeles Police Department pops up to surveil and brutally suppress them, but we also find in nearly every chapter a refusal to let that repression become defeat.

Most of the book deals with activists organizing against racism in the city, from protests against housing segregation to the birth of a new Chicano nationalism to the politics of Black Power. Student organizing was central too, but unlike other regions of the country, where the student movement was often rooted in elite Ivy League universities and public schools like the University of Michigan and the University of California, Berkeley, the real action in Los Angeles was in the state schools and community colleges.

At San Fernando Valley State College (now California State University, Northridge), a commuter school in a sprawling, nearly all-white suburban section of the city, for example, dozens of Black students were charged after organizing a sit-in in the president’s office in November 1969, demanding a Black studies department. After their arrest, 24 of those students were charged with an astonishing 1,730 felonies for the action. The trial was described by the *Los Angeles Times* as “the first mass prosecution in this country of campus activists on felony charges,” and a majority of those found guilty ended up doing hard time.

Younger students were also active. Middle and high schoolers organized “blow-out” protests in which 10,000 Chicano and 3,000 Black and white students walked out of school, sparked by the principal’s censorship of a popular play and then snowballing to include

a number of student grievances. The protests, Davis and Wiener write, were “genesis events in the emergence of a new, militant ‘Chicano’ identity.”

Most of the upsurges in 1960s LA were defeated, despite their inspiring actions, just as the American labor movement was, as chronicled in Davis’s first book three and a half decades ago. But reading *Set the Night on Fire*, it’s easy to forget those defeats. Here, Davis returns to the city that made him famous through the dark portrait in *City of Quartz*. But gone is his sense of pessimism; of impending disaster from the sky, sea, air, and from fellow citizens; of a suffocating political environment in which little can be accomplished because the forces of evil are

too overwhelming. Instead, the reader gets the feeling that they, too, could go set their own night on fire.

It’s no false optimism, to be sure. A central thread running through all of the tales is the racism, brutality, and red-baiting encountered by every one of these movements. The LAPD is constantly cracking skulls or worse. “The Manson gang,” Davis and Wiener write, “were bit players compared to the institutions of law and order” in Los Angeles. During the Watts uprising, Police Chief William Parker, a central villain of the book up until his death in 1966, described his approach to fighting the neighborhood’s Black residents as “very much like fighting the Viet Cong”; the racist brutality of his officers and the National

Guard—who wantonly sprayed shotgun blasts and high-caliber machine gun fire during the uprising—wasn’t far from the US military’s conduct in Vietnam.

The city’s cops don’t let up. Late in the book, Davis and Wiener recount the LAPD’s assault on a Black Panthers office with tear gas, dynamite, and 5,000 rounds of ammunition. The department hasn’t barraged anyone with that many bullets since, but the cops’ brutality certainly hasn’t dissipated, in LA or anywhere else; from the Rodney King verdict to the suppression of last year’s George Floyd protests, police impunity has remained rife, while inequality continues to expand and military-grade hardware finds its way into cops’ hands.

**S**till, despite the defeats and the many instances in which the forces of reaction are actually stronger now than they were in the 1960s, Davis and Wiener clearly see their book as a means of heartening today’s activists in LA and beyond, just as the activists in the generations after the ’60s took the examples of these struggles as inspiration for their own fights. “The sixties in Los Angeles are best conceived of as a sowing,” they write, “whose seeds grew into living traditions of resistance.” Seeds, of course, often take a while to grow, and their growth is dependent on factors well beyond their control (not least of all, the weather). But Davis, for all his apocalyptic prophesying over the past four decades, has never lost faith in such seeds’ sprouting. In both *Old Gods* and *Set the Night on Fire*, we find him still sober, but putting that faith front and center.

Davis writes in *Old Gods* that the “classical rank-and-file organizer” didn’t spend the bulk of their time on the shop floor hopping up on soapboxes to deliver rousing speeches that sparked their coworkers to revolt against tyrannical bosses. Instead, that organizer was “more like a patient gardener,” daily clearing the workplace soil of the weeds of petty jealousies and rivalries so that eventually, someday, when the time was right, the sprout would pop up.

The same could be said of Davis himself. He’s been patient, waiting, despite all the horrors around us, for the conditions for change to allow for some real sprouts. Now, weather permitting, he’ll get to watch them grow. **N**

**Despite the defeats and a burgeoning right wing, Davis sees some hope on the horizon.**



# Something Like Life

*Can the novel document the present in real time?*

BY RUMAAN ALAM

**T**HE NOVEL IS A SURVIVOR. IN THE CENTURIES SINCE Cervantes turned the endeavor inside out, so many writers have set out to make the form, well, novel. From Proust's long game to postmodern tricksters like Julio Cortázar to the contemporary faction of autofiction writers devoted to blurring the space between fiction and fact, the novel adapts even as it endures.

Throughout her career, the Scottish writer Ali Smith has been interested in the novel's elasticity. Her debut novel, 1997's *Like*, comes in two parts: a story, then a journal by another character illuminating the story just told. *How to Be Both*, from 2014, is likewise made up of two narratives—an artist in Renaissance Italy, a teen in modern-day Europe—but in some editions of the book, the contemporary comes before the ancient. The jump across centuries shocks, no matter which way your edition moves; the reader tries to reconcile these stories, make them make

sense. It's a fun conceit, even if you've already read Cortázar.

Smith's follow-up is a different sort of experiment. Rather than reach back into history, she set out to create a work rigorously interested in the present moment. The aim wasn't to do something with the novel form but rather to dispense with

what has long been understood as the genre's prerequisite: time. The UK edition of *Autumn* appeared in 2016, mere weeks after she delivered the manuscript to her publisher. (The novel was published in the United States a year later.) It tells the story of a young girl and her friendship with an elderly neighbor, one that distilled the political moment even as it was happening. A novel engaged with politics is not surprising; a novel keeping pace with the headlines—in particular, those about the Brexit drama as it unfolded—was.

Readers of *Autumn* may not have been aware of Smith's intentions, but it was the first in a "Seasonal Quartet" that she intended to publish at the same brisk clip—*Winter* in 2018, *Spring* in 2019, and now *Summer*. None of the books is exactly a sequel to its predecessors. In each, we are introduced

to a separate cast of characters making their way through a United Kingdom riven by bizarre domestic politics, reckoning with Europe's refugee crisis, and ruminating on the moment's pop culture and the off-kilter climate of the modern world. This is a work—if we consider the four books a single work, as Smith clearly does—fixed in the contemporary, aspiring to tell us about a world that is still taking form. In *Winter*, the characters fret over Twitter and argue about “the [ice] shelf the size of Wales that’s about to break off the side of Antarctica.” How like life.

By adopting such an approach, Smith has sought to rethink the role that the novel might play in understanding our lives—as they happen, not in retrospect. Think of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, a book that summed up America in the 1990s and appeared only days before 9/11 provided a conclusion to that era. Smith wants her novels to be able to tell us something about the world today; she wants the reader and writer to be engaged (perhaps “distracted” is the better word) by the very same things that engage and distract all of us.

**S**ome critics have pointed out that the order in which you read Smith's Seasonal Quartet doesn't matter. Time passes between the books, but as we don't proceed through the generations of a single family, it's relatively easy to keep our bearings. And any one of these works will teach readers what they need to know about both the imagined and real worlds in which they're set. The larger systems of reference and allusion, the author's stylistic tics (direct sentences, stagy dialogue), the interspersed bulletins from the news cycle—all form the novels' specific backdrop.

Yet from their first pages, the books could be said to share more than just method. *Autumn* begins with Dickens, as does each subsequent volume, sort of, and in each we find studies of odd pairings and intergenerational relationships. In *Autumn*, we meet Daniel Gluck sitting nude on a beach, trying to work out whether he's caught in a dream or dead. Spoiler: It's the former, and for the rest of the book we learn about his waking life, in particular his lifelong relationship with Elisabeth, his neighbor, who was a mere child when they met but who became, as is the case with many of Smith's teens, a wise-beyond-her-years adolescent.

Daniel, once a composer of some note connected to a coterie of midcentury London scenesters, is at the end of his life—the ideal moment for an accounting of one's days. And Elisabeth, grown now, is involved in that project, as she's writing an academic study of one of Daniel's old circle, the Pop artist Pauline Boty.

The books of the Seasonal Quartet, as with Smith's earlier novels, are invested less in plot



**Summer**  
A Novel  
By Ali Smith  
Pantheon.  
400 pp. \$27.95

than in story. Again, it's like life: The characters ponder the news of the world (“All across the country, people looked up Google: what is EU?”), and they talk. The dialogue tries to both approximate reality and approach profundity: “‘See how it's deep in our animal nature,’ Daniel said. ‘Not to see what's happening right in front of our eyes.’”

*Winter* picks up on familiar ground. We get Dickens again, this time paraphrased: “God was dead: to begin with.” And while we no longer listen in on Elisabeth and Daniel's heady conversations, there is plenty of talk between the new characters: this time, an elderly woman named Sophia, accompanied by a spectral presence (a disembodied head, the mystery of which will be solved later), who is spending Christmas with her son Art, her estranged sister Iris, and the young woman Art is paying to masquerade as his girlfriend. As in the previous book, the setup is mostly feint. World events arrive much as they do in reality (“The first headline today in the 20 second news round-up after the 20 seconds of advertising says that there is now 80% more plastic in the earth's seas and on its shores than estimated”), and maybe this is meant to illuminate the things the characters talk, and talk, and talk about. (“I said, Art is seeing things. And your aunt said, that's a great description of what art is.”) Some readers will find that more than enough.

*Spring* takes another pirouette: A filmmaker mourns the death of his longtime screenwriting collaborator and daydreams about a picture he means to make about Rainer Maria Rilke and Katherine Mansfield. In a separate plotline, a woman who works for a national immigrant detention center meets up with a ghostly young girl. There's more about art—Tacita Dean looms—plus a road trip that doesn't make much sense, but the details in novels don't need to hold up in synopsis, necessarily.

Perhaps it's best to think of the first three entries in the Seasonal Quartet as akin to jazz: variations on a theme. The reader tries to chart the connections between the books, and while those exist (the characters do have some vague relationship to one another; a certain corporation is mentioned more than once), they don't yield much. The references—to Dickens, Shakespeare, art, political chatter—are what holds these works together, just as their improvised design creates a common atmosphere. The four novels, it turns out, are not a jigsaw puzzle, coming together in the end to form a satisfying whole and bound by tidy straight lines. Instead, they're a collage—a fitting form for fiction that seeks to reckon with a moment in human history that was (and is) so messy.

**S**ummer shares many of the features of its predecessors. Early on it features a slightly altered line from *David Copperfield*: “Whether I shall turn out to be the heroine of my own life.” Sacha, the protagonist, can't place the phrase, but we know we're on familiar ground: Dickens, a precocious teen, a contemporary Briton poking around on the Internet. Sacha is another of Smith's trademark wise girls, but she also has a younger brother, Robert, seemingly a prodigy. And the two have a somewhat unusual family arrangement: They live with their mom, Grace, who was once an actress, while their dad lives right next door with his new girlfriend, Ashley.

Smith is asking us to do more than suspend disbelief; you're either with her or you're not. Far-fetched domestic arrangements, a grappling with the world we've made (“Not even when they see

*Rumaan Alam's third novel, Leave the World Behind, was published this past fall.*



the pictures of Australia burning do they admit it”), the not altogether illuminating wordplay (the book lingers over the difference between “heroine” and “heroin”)—this is the world of all of the novels in the quartet.

Smith seems awed by the strange world she has created, and a kind of whimsical smugness occasionally creeps into her writing. Robert, playing a prank on his big sister, superglues an hourglass to her hand. It feels less like an actual prank a brother might play than a setup for the author to break out a pun: “this woz best present I cud imagine from now on u always have time on ur hands,” Robert texts her. Sacha glibly replies, “bonding experience.” Smith, though, isn’t exactly joking; this is also a book about the passage of time.

Smith knows that *Summer* is her quartet’s final act, and she knows that we want some closure. We begin to get a clearer sense of how this all coheres: Art, the son from *Winter*, and his colleague, Charlotte, are walking by when Robert glues

the timepiece to his sister’s palm. The strangers intervene, and these people are thrust together. In another improbable turn, the entire family decides, rather impulsively, to join Art and Charlotte on their journey to Suffolk. Smith takes a moment to remind us of the work’s operating metaphor: “Come too,” Art insists. “You can tell us about your immortal summer. On the way. Summer on the way, even in February.” Well, why not—Grace has fond memories of Suffolk from her youth, Sacha yearns to see the North Sea, and Robert wants to visit a place where Einstein, a hero of his, once set foot.

Art, too, has a task. His mother has died, and he’s been charged with returning a large stone (no spoiler here, but readers of *Winter* will recognize it) to a man she once knew, a composer, now quite elderly (readers of *Autumn* will recognize him). It’s possible that Smith is executing something she’d planned from the start, but these connections, once revealed, feel improvisatory, unlike-

ly, and most of all unimportant. *Summer* does solve some of the riddles posed by the earlier volumes—for example, the mystery of *Winter*’s disembodied head. But where a whodunit must conclude with the murderer unmasked, Smith is more respectful of the literary novel’s own conventions: opacity and, instead of revelation, a slow crescendo toward meaning. *Summer* tells us where that head came from, but the answer might not necessarily satisfy.

In some ways, one wonders if perhaps this is the author’s point. The pressing concerns of our age—climate change, rising nationalism, human migration, the consolidation of corporate power—are so profound and complex that our responses are rarely satisfying. To make sense of these things, and to find a way to live in the midst of them, we fix on everyday life, abandoning plastic straws in some gesture toward saving the world. But looking closely at life reveals its illogic and coincidence. Meaning requires search. A choice like naming a character Art hands

## Provenance

There she was  
     in that lavender dress,  
         in that room,  
 in that apartment,  
     turning around  
         to answer  
 his fist  
     pounding that door  
         in the middle of that day  
 that must’ve been a day  
     in August,  
         the start of that season  
 when all around them,  
     all that could be  
         changed by violence  
 and violently changed,  
     the hills and the valley,  
         the canyons and the cliffs  
 tongue-kissed  
     by the Santa Ana,  
         burst into bright

seams of silver smoke,  
     and though it was  
         unclear how he burst  
 through that door,  
     why her dress fell  
         to that floor  
 like that flame and flash  
     lashing the bed-  
         straw and the sunflowers  
 until the flowers bent  
     their heads from the sun,  
         or what they saw  
 in each other  
     —who was whose  
         horse, rider, ride, reins, neck  
 pulled, pulling, arching, arched  
     back like the curves  
         of that wildfire’s hips,  
 that scorched hour  
     grinding into  
         the next, there,

in that room,  
     in that apartment—  
         my mother and father  
 became my mother and father  
     and, the next spring,  
         for the first time,  
 brought me home  
     through that entryway  
         that was neither  
 a way in nor a way out  
     of that violence,  
         that pounding,  
 that answer,  
     that turning around  
         to discover,  
 so clearly,  
     all that  
         would not change.

PAUL TRAN

us the meaning overtly—art matters! But such decisions read to me as notes to the authorial self. They are the sort of thing a writer might, given time, decide to erase from a manuscript, like footprints from a Zen garden. But the very plan that Smith devised for writing these novels means she doesn't have that particular luxury. Time is on her mind thematically but also practically; she probably feels like she's got an hourglass glued to her own palm.

There's no murderer to unmask, so Smith retraces her themes. Sacha, she wants us to know, is the spiritual heir to Iris, who first appeared in *Winter* as a political radical. But while Iris's cause was nukes, Sacha's will be... everything else. "This new generation of responsible young people will sort it out," her mother declares, and that "it" could refer to impending climate disaster, the ongoing migrant crisis, the self-inflicted wound of Brexit, or any of the other bogeymen that haunt Smith's (which is to say, our) world.

Robert, the prankster brother, is skeptical of most inclinations to be moral. But if he's the counterpoint to Sacha, what do we make of his reverence for Einstein?

Einstein! who called for civil rights in the USA. Einstein! who warned against the nuclear bomb and said if he'd known they would use what he had discovered about quantum and relativity the way they used it he'd have become a cobbler and mended people's shoes all his life instead.

Novels require you to believe that a 13-year-old boy might skip school, head for the local bookshop, and lose himself in a biography of Einstein. Or at least *Summer* does. It's lovely to imagine that the future will be a reckoning between Sacha's vague goodness and Robert's intellectual curiosity. I'm not sure these are really the forces that shape the world, but I appreciate the optimism—I, too, believe the children are our future.

**S**ummer and its companion novels contain so much of interest that they defy easy summary. This is less a matter of their action (here, a family meets some strangers and undertakes a pilgrimage) than their digressions. There are so many references and tangents—in *Summer*, on Einstein and the filmmaker

Lorenza Mazzetti; in *Autumn*, on the artist Pauline Boty and, to a lesser degree, the sculptor Barbara Hepworth; in *Spring*, on Katherine Mansfield. The author's erudition and curiosity are bracing, but Smith uses them to establish the verisimilitude of her own thought, not the world itself.

Smith is doing what her characters do: thinking aloud. Her desire was to write a novel (or four) that was of the moment, and to do so in what we've all come to think of as real time. It can be done; the

**Sometimes Smith's rush to follow the news trips her up, laying bare the truth that the larger endeavor to make a meaningful novel out of this moment might not yet be possible.**



book in our hands is proof. But however diverting the results, the novels—*Spring* and *Summer* in particular—often feel like the first drafts of history, much like the headlines that float in the background. The novels state their concerns (the fate of the woman artist in a misogynist society, what nefarious corporate actors have done to our culture, the maddening fact of injustice, the slow collapse of the planet's health), but they don't really dramatize them the way we might expect a novel to. The books raise questions, vibrate with righteous feeling, but don't actually resolve anything.

Throughout the quartet, Smith's unconventional methods give her an advantage. She surely holds the distinction of being the first novelist to weigh in on Covid-19 (less as a concern than as a bit of scene-setting): "The net is all photos of people in other countries with masks

over their mouths and noses." At another point in *Summer*, Sacha is watching the absurd TV game show *The Masked Singer*, in which a panel of judges must guess the identity of disguised celebrities based on their rendition of a song ("It has struck Sacha that actually everyone and everything on TV is like someone wearing a mask"). It feels dutiful, the novelist dealing with the sudden ubiquity of masks on our city streets in a way that is witty but meaningless.

Smith can't be blamed for her inability to muster anything to say about the coronavirus. Really, we don't yet know how to make sense of the social disruption and human costs of the pandemic. Sacha (and Smith) is like all of us, musing about masks while we hope that we and those we love survive and that the world may one day right itself. We don't know what else to say about masks; only time will tell.

**S**ometimes Smith's rush to follow the news trips her up, laying bare the truth that the larger endeavor to make a meaningful novel out of this moment might not yet be possible. I received a copy of the manuscript of *Summer* in June from the publisher; three weeks later, an electronic galley arrived. In the interim, Smith revised the book to mention George Floyd's death and the protests that followed. She's faithful to the strategy she committed herself to, building a novel against the headlines. Floyd shows up only as an afterthought, when Sacha, in a letter, enumerates her heroes, among them "every single person protesting what happened to George Floyd."

Floyd had been dead less than a month when I encountered those words. I credit Smith for having seen this as a significant moment in the politics of a country in which she herself does not live. But one wishes that more followed from Floyd's mention, and there's nothing here, really, about the United States' racism or violence or the genuine pain that catalyzed these protests. Perhaps Floyd is destined to become a symbol, but it saddened me to meet him here, thus reduced. A newspaper can tell us what is worth thinking about, but a novel should tell us how to think about it. It was inevitable a novelist would one day reckon with Floyd and all his death represents, but I would have been willing to wait a little longer. **N**



# Without Fear

*The bilingual and bicultural pop of Kali Uchis*

BY JULYSSA LOPEZ

**K**ALI UCHIS'S MUSICAL APPROACH IS REDOLENT OF THE past—mostly thanks to the smoky, nostalgic quality of her voice, which often feels like it's being broadcast live from a hazy, tobacco-stained lounge. “La Luna Enamorada,” the opener from her sophomore album, *Sin Miedo (Del Amor y Otros Demonios)*, takes full advantage of her vocals as she purrs over a rich, undulating bolero rhythm. But the song isn't simply a chance for Uchis to show off her singing chops. It's a cover of the Cuban classic “La Luna en Tu Mirada,” written by the composer Luís Chaniveky and performed in 1964 by Los Zafiros, a Cuban *filin* quartet that took inspiration from American doo-wop and harmony groups. Here, it serves as an introduction to the way Uchis explores her Latinx roots on this album, her very first release almost entirely in Spanish.

Uchis, who often visited her parents' native Colombia while growing up, has

always lived in between languages. In an interview with the *Evening Standard*, she explained, “The album is all Spanish with a few bits here and there in English. That's just my writing style. I grew up bilingual, speaking Spanglish in my house, so it would be inauthentic to sing completely in Spanish or in English because that's not how I talk.” Though she's tested out bilingual music before—on her debut album and in a collaboration

with the R&B singer Miguel—her statement did pose questions about how her identity would influence the actual music and what it would mean to excavate her upbringing for inspiration. Uchis isn't a stranger to the minefields and complexities that surround the performance of Latinx identity: Early in her career, she traded ice-blond, Marilyn Monroe-style curls and the soft, pastel pop of her first EPs for darker hair and bolder aesthetics, which some critics contended was a marketing move intended to exoticize Latinx identity.

That history inevitably factored into critics' and fans' conversations around the new album and her announcement that she'd foray more deeply into Spanish-language music. For *Sin Miedo*, Uchis worked with the producer Tainy, generally considered one of the architects of the Latin music industry's current reggaeton and trap styles, which have become commercially viable in recent years. She easily could have given her songs a sudden makeover and pushed deeper into the glossy reggaeton that's in vogue, and she wouldn't have been the first; pop artists like Selena Gomez and Camila Cabello have occasionally gravitated toward these genres and collaborated with the scene's most prominent artists. But such performances, particularly when they're fleeting efforts, can give the impression that artists are embracing Latinidad only when it comes with the promise of commercial success. *Sin Miedo*, instead, is subtle and instinctual, illustrating how much Uchis has learned about the sounds that work for her voice and her own experiences. These tracks, which are more interested in interpreting classics, boleros, and other traditions than in chasing trends, are a clear evolution from her debut, and her Spanish lyrics are natural and lived-in. She largely pulls off this risky undertaking, as the album's name suggests, without fear.

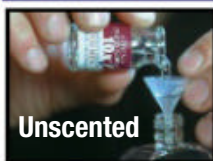
**T**he occasional downside of Uchis's silky, serene delivery is that it can translate as sleepy and a little detached. However, on *Sin Miedo* she explores several avenues in her singing, trying out lustrous beats and adding vocal loops for more dimension. “Fue Mejor” is a dark, sinewy R&B track that plays with cosmic choral tones; a cameo by the Drake-affiliated

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singer and producer PartyNextDoor fits seamlessly into the arrangement. The song transitions almost imperceptibly into “Aguardiente y Limón,” built from her gentle coos over another celestial arrangement. She changes up the pace for “¡Aquí Yo Mando!,” an instantly gratifying, upbeat tribute to unabashed sexuality, which brilliantly enlists the Black and Puerto Rican Maryland rapper Rico Nasty, who drops a couple of lines in Spanish, while amplifying the record’s intensity. Uchis takes her time on the shadowy, down-tempo standouts, including “Quiero Sentirme Bien,” “Telepatía,” and “De Nadie,” all pieces that form a cohesive project as seamless and tight as a plait. On “Vaya con Dios,” adorned with lush strings, she channels the soulful vocals of Amy Winehouse, with whom she was often compared earlier in her career.

This is not to say *Sin Miedo* doesn’t have a few songs that speak to the current pop and reggaeton moment. “Te Pongo Mal (Préndelo)” includes the Puerto Rican duo Jowell y Randy, and though it might be less compelling in the context of a decidedly introspective album, it’s not hard to imagine this one playing at the club when the pandemic is over. A lighter dembow rhythm follows on “La Luz (Fin),” which features the rising Puerto Rican singer Jhay Cortez. What serves as the biggest reminder of the tensions tethered to the Latin music industry is “Que Te Pedí,” a short tribute to the legendary Afro-Cuban singer La Lupe.

On the one hand, Uchis pays heartfelt homage and will likely expose new listeners to a pioneering Black artist who has yet to get her due. On the other, her version does not reach the same emotional heights as the original: Uchis can’t reproduce the rawness of La Lupe’s deep, guttural wails, nor the sorrow behind the unrequited love that La Lupe sings about: “¿Qué no te dí?... Aunque quisiera robarme la luz para tí / No pudo ser.” (“What didn’t I give you?... Although I wanted to steal the light for you / It couldn’t be.”)

Listening to the original, it is also hard to forget the pain and intensity La Lupe constantly evoked in her music, which often reflected her own turmoil as a Black woman

exiled from Cuba who was pushed out of the salsa industry and fell into depression and substance abuse. Uchis’s homage will indeed bring the singer to a wider audience, but the song itself offers us a reminder of how few Black Latina artists are included in the Latin music industry who could interpret La Lupe for themselves.

**S**in *Miedo* isn’t an easy album to pull off; Uchis, as a bi-cultural and bilingual artist, is navigating a dual tension that is hard to ignore here.

To appeal to the Latinx community, her Spanish-language efforts have to be seen as authentic and honest rather than as another way of profiting off Latinx culture.

At the same time, drawing on her own background and representing her identity is something Uchis has also had to defend to Anglo-American audiences. Last year, she noted that some of her fans may reject her turn toward her Colombian heritage and the language on this record. The day *Sin Miedo* was released, she tweeted,

“today i drop another song in spanish which i know means another day of disappointment for my english speaking fans who do not wish to make the attempt to listen to music in languages they can’t understand.”

Yet Uchis nonetheless finds a way to succeed

by following her instincts. *Sin Miedo* is an example of the benefits that come when artists explore a path that’s more idiosyncratic and creative than commercially driven. (Bad Bunny’s rock-and-shoegaze-inflected *El Último Tour Del Mundo* is more proof of an artist guided by introspection rather than trends.)

*Sin Miedo* peaked at No. 8 on *Billboard*’s Top Latin Albums, Uchis’s first Top 10 entry on that chart, but that success seems almost secondary to her. Throughout the record, she makes it clear that she put her own feelings and creative demands first, while balancing the nuances and pressures of two different cultures. On the final song, “Ángel Sin Cielo,” she sings, “Hay que hacerlo sin miedo / La vida es una y a nadie le debo.” Roughly translated, it means, “You have to do it without fear / There’s only one life, and I don’t owe anything to anyone.”



# Letters

## Overtures to Trump Voters

PrAMILA Jayapal says “we must pay attention to why more than 74 million people voted to reelect Trump” [“Biden’s First 100 Days: Congress,” Jan. 11/18]. Trump sponsored huge tax cuts for the rich, attempted to gut the Affordable Care Act, denied the existence of climate change, appointed three very conservative Supreme Court justices, savagely disparaged the Black Lives Matter movement, and brought white supremacy back into the political mainstream. His presidency was a rejection of virtually every value that Representative Jayapal advocates. Democrats need to face up to the fact that a progressive agenda does not pay attention to Trump voters. We should not make overtures to them at all if they are going to be empty ones. **ARTHUR LEVY**

## Paging the Surgeon General

Gregg Gonsalves did not mention in “A New Deal for Public Health” that the US surgeon general has been MIA throughout the Covid-19 pandemic [Jan. 11/18]. Once the head of a mighty corps, as when polio was eradicated, today the surgeon general is apparently a purely symbolic position. We seem to be depending mainly on CVS and Walgreens to carry out the massive vaccination program we currently need. **TIMOTHY HAVEL**

## Post-Progressive Aid?

I find Joanna Wuest’s article on mutual aid puzzling yet illustrative [“Mutual Aid Can’t Do It Alone,” Dec. 28,

2020/Jan. 4, 2021]. Puzzling because I always saw progressive government as an expression of mutual aid. In the United States, we had a progressive-minded government for only a few decades, maybe from Franklin Roosevelt through Richard Nixon. In the meantime, we must do for ourselves. The suggestion that time spent helping your neighbors would be better spent lobbying for a more progressive government is in opposition to lived experience. **TOM CUDDY**  
AUSTIN, TEX.

## Seeing the Work

Re “Now the Real Work Begins” by Jane McAlevey [Nov. 30/Dec. 7, 2020]: While I fully agree with the article about the need to radically transform the Democratic Party, the title and cover picture of Rosie the Riveter, the iconic character who worked in a weapons factory, occlude all the work that women have been doing forever—raising children, taking care of people’s everyday needs, and caring for the sick—which has now resulted in much loss of life for those same women to Covid-19. **JUDITH DEUTSCH**  
TORONTO

## Appreciating Alterman

I will really miss Eric Alterman’s column [“The Liberal Media,” Jan. 11/18]. I am a longtime subscriber in the UK. His column was the first I would read to find out the latest on the US media. **NEIL DARBY**

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PHOTO ESSAY

# Essential Housing

In the Covid-19 era, poverty in California's agricultural counties has become deadly. At end of January, Tulare, a county in the southern San Joaquin Valley with a population of around 466,000, has had 43,574 Covid-19 cases and 542 deaths. Here, poverty forces people to live together and to share rent and living costs, making social distancing more difficult. "Getting better housing has become a survival need at a time when existing conditions make the threat of

the virus much, much worse," Mari Perez, an organizer with the Larry Itliong Resource Center, told me.

Housing has been at the center of the struggle for rural emancipation in the region since the 1965 grape strike in nearby Delano. In Tulare, 40 percent of the housing was built before 1978 and only 4 percent in the last decade. "Housing is a right," Perez said. "But it's also a fight. If we don't organize, we'll never get it." —David Bacon



**If you build it:** Reginaldo and Gloria Lacambacal with their granddaughter, Lhianna, and organizer Arturo Rodriguez. The Lacambacals' house was built as part of the Self-Help Housing movement, which saw farmworkers constructing their own homes.

**Home truths:** Israel Champion and Miguel Ruiz, below, pose in the trailer they live in on Champion's mother's property. There is not enough affordable housing for working families in the area.



**Picking winners:** Maria Madrigal, part of a farm crew of Mexican immigrants, picks persimmons in an orchard in the San Joaquin Valley.





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