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JAN. 25/FEB. 1, 2021

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Huddled masses:
An aerial view of the Kutupalong camp in Ukhia, Bangladesh, for Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in neighboring Myanmar, December 4, 2020.



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COMMENT / JAKE BITTLE

Saving the Mail

IN A YEAR THAT SHATTERED ASSUMPTIONS, EVEN THE TRUSTWORTHY US POSTAL Service found itself at the center of a political scandal. Months after the pandemic delivered a gut punch to the already beleaguered agency, its workers became pawns in a partisan attempt to suppress voting by mail. Louis DeJoy, the Trump administration's handpicked postmaster general, busied himself with sticking his fingers in the daily operations of the USPS, leading to dramatic disruptions in mail delivery ahead of the election.

Thanks to an unprecedented public pressure campaign, DeJoy was forced to suspend these changes, and tens of millions of people voted by mail without incident (or fraud). As a result of those votes, Donald Trump will soon leave office. Yet the Postal Service itself remains in dire need of reform. The agency's long-standing structural problems are more apparent than ever, and DeJoy is poised to move ahead with his draconian efforts to slash delivery costs. It will be an uphill battle for President-elect Joe Biden to restore the USPS to its former glory—but as the past year has shown, the survival of our democracy literally depends on it.

Biden's first obstacle will be the agency's governing structure. DeJoy has no fixed term limit, and only the board of governors has the power to replace him. All six of its current members were appointed by Trump, which allowed the board to ram through DeJoy's nomination last spring. Biden has pledged to appoint Democrats to fill the remaining vacancies, but he will still need more appointments to the nine-member board before his party has a controlling majority. That could take until 2022, and until then he won't have the opportunity to oust DeJoy.

The road to any Biden-era postal reform, then, may run through Capitol Hill. The Constitution grants Congress broad authority to regulate the Postal Service, but lawmakers over the past decade have all but abrogated that power. At the onset of the pandemic, they restricted postal aid in the first CARES Act to a \$10 billion loan from the Treasury, refusing to provide the direct cash infusion that USPS leaders said they needed. However, the second coronavirus aid package forgives this loan, which shows that lawmakers may have more appetite for direct aid now that Trump is fading from view.

Once the Covid-19 pandemic is over, Biden must urge Congress to take immediate action to help the Postal Service get back on its feet. The first and most important task is the repeal of the pre-funding mandate, a 2006 law that requires the USPS to fund retiree health benefits up to five decades in advance. A one-line amendment to revoke this mandate, which has proved disastrous for the agency's finances, would free up billions of dollars overnight.

Other bills could allow the Postal Service to raise revenue through measures like offering low-interest bank accounts to the

general public. Such accounts, which would provide security to poor families who don't otherwise have access to credit or financial services, should become a priority for progressives.

Yet even with Nancy Pelosi holding the speaker's gavel in the House, Biden will need support from Senate Republicans if he wants to pass any of these measures. Fortunately for him, there are indications that the GOP's few remaining moderates, such as Senators Susan Collins and Steve Daines, are keen to take action on postal reform. Given the nature of gridlock in the Senate, though, it will take more than a little nudging from Biden.

Thus he should take a cue from Trump and use the presidency as a bully pulpit for the Postal Service. When Trump wanted to nix voting by mail, he threatened to veto any aid package that included money for the USPS, and Biden can adopt the same hard-line stance for the opposite goal. The

president-elect can fulfill the values he espoused as a candidate with reforms that will strengthen crucial voting infrastructure and provide key protections for thousands of postal workers. Biden may not have immediate authority to direct postal operations, but his position on the agency will help steer the next four years of policy.

The spotlight thrown on the USPS by a pandemic election provides the perfect opportunity to fix an institution that millions of Americans rely on every day. It will be up to Biden to ensure that this opportunity does not go to waste. **N**

Biden must urge Congress to take immediate action to help the Postal Service get back on its feet.

Jake Bittle is a reporter who lives in Brooklyn.

COMMENT / JULIAN BRAVE NOISECAT

A Native Triumph

With Deb Haaland's appointment, we have turned a page—not because the insiders wanted it, but because the people fought for it.

ON A DECEMBER SATURDAY, AT A PRESS CONFERENCE broadcast from the city of Wilmington, in a state named for an English lord—Thomas West, the 12th Baron De La Warr, who rebuilt Jamestown in 1610 after a period of starvation and cannibalism and was appointed captain-general and governor for life of the Virginia colony—President-elect Joe Biden introduced his climate team of White House officials and cabinet secretaries.

Standing among the nominees was Representative Deb Haaland, of New Mexico and the Laguna Pueblo. In a speech describing climate change as “the existential threat of our time,” Biden was quick to acknowledge the significance of her presence. “After today, our cabinet won’t just make one or two precedent-breaking appointments but 12, including today’s long-overdue appointment of the first Native American cabinet secretary,” he said, looking over his shoulder at Haaland. “Welcome, welcome, welcome.”

“I’m proud to stand here on the ancestral homelands of the Lenape tribal nation,” Haaland began, recognizing a people whom colonists once also called the Delaware, now exiled to far-off reservations in Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and Ontario, Canada. “This moment is profound when we consider the fact that a former secretary of the interior once proclaimed his goal to ‘civilize or exterminate’ us,” she said, her eyes welling up and her voice quivering. “I’m a living testament to the failure of that horrific ideology. I also stand on the shoulders of my ancestors and all the people who have sacrificed so that I can be here.”

I’ve had a front-row seat following Haaland’s pathbreaking career. In 2018, this magazine assigned me to cover her campaign to win a seat in the House of Representatives. And on the first day of the 116th Congress, I had a standing-room spot in the lower chamber’s press gallery. I’ll never forget the image of Haaland, tearful as she hugged Sharice Davids, a Kansas representative and citizen of the Ho-Chunk Nation, after the two had been sworn in as our first Native American congresswomen.

In July, I added Haaland’s name to a fantasy-football-style list of progressive cabinet secretaries curated by Data for Progress, the lefty think tank where I work. Even though I’d watched her historic rise in politics, I honestly didn’t think much would come of it. Our list was, in truth, not particularly realistic. We named my representative, Barbara Lee, for defense secretary because she was the only legislator to vote against the Authorization for Use of Military Force after 9/11. We suggested Keith Ellison for attorney general because—well, wouldn’t that piss off all the right people? And as I recently joked to Haaland, we might as well have named the Lorax to head the Environmental Protection Agency.

I put Haaland on that list because she didn’t fit the profile of the industry-friendly former businessman, lifelong bureaucrat, or retiring

western politician usually appointed as interior secretary. She was a single mother who at times had relied on food stamps and struggled with homelessness. Her prior employment included stints as a cake decorator and small salsa-business entrepreneur. She started in politics as a volunteer organizer getting out the Native vote, and when she ran for Congress, she and her daughter were still paying off student loans. A Green New Deal cosponsor and Medicare for All supporter, she went to the camps erected in the path of the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016 and cooked green chili stew and handmade tortillas for the families. She was never the establishment’s choice to lead a department that manages tribal affairs as well as the public lands and natural resources taken from First Peoples.

But her story was simply too good to deny. Even before Biden was elected, tribal leaders, environmentalists, and progressive activists believed Haaland would make a wonderful interior secretary because of who and what she stood for. We organized, strategized, researched, tweeted, memed, and did everything in our power to make that happen.

Against the many objections raised to her candidacy—that she was too inexperienced or too liberal, that she wasn’t close enough to Biden, or that House Democrats couldn’t afford to lose her seat—the community and coalition behind Haaland would not be denied. And ultimately, even the Democrats’ shrewdest party bosses could not deny her either.

It’s often hard not to be cynical as a progressive, as an Indian, and especially as a progressive Indian. Much of this nation’s history was written by thwart-

ing justice and killing Natives. Even in those brief moments when the oppressed and disenfranchised have finally begun to receive their due, the Indigenous have often been forgotten. Even in historian Jill Lepore’s masterly *These Truths*, for example, Native Americans appear just once after the year 1900.

With Haaland’s appointment, we have turned a page—not because the insiders wanted it, but because the people fought for it. “This historic moment will not go by without the acknowledgment of the many people who have believed in me over the years and had the confidence in me for this position,” Haaland said in her acceptance speech. “I’ll be fierce for all of us, for our planet and all of our protected land. I’m honored and ready to serve.”

N

Julian Brave NoiseCat, a fellow of the Type Media Center, is vice president of policy and strategy at Data for Progress.

“I stand on the shoulders of my ancestors and all the people who have sacrificed so that I can be here.”

—Representative Deb Haaland

DATELINE

ANN ARBOR, MICH./PETER LINEBAUGH

Reading the Pandemic

Two musty books provide a look at the capitalist dynamics in Michigan that brought us to the edge of catastrophe.

THE PANDEMIC HAS FORCED US TO SLOW down, if not to stop in our tracks. Locked inside, I read a lot. So when I was asked for a dispatch from Michigan about the past year, it was books I wanted to write about.

I asked a friend in his 80s what I should read on the state. With the libraries at limited capacity because of the pandemic, he went to his garage and picked out a couple of musty volumes. The first, *Michigan: A Guide to the Wolverine State*, was compiled during the Depression as part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project. The book's worker-writers, the introduction says, were "forgotten men—slightly frayed and sometimes hungry." They used pencil stubs and wastepaper to record what they learned. "Thinly clothed and with belts pulled in," they were without cars and "thumbed their way to their rendezvous with their source materials." And they created a bold WPA guide that was radical in its materialist orientation.

The land, according to the book, was stolen over a cask of rum. "The dignity of the savage," write these frayed, forgotten men, "was shaken by the white man's most potent bargaining asset"—booze—and "the rape of the Michigan forests was on." The joists, rafters, posts, and beams of Midwestern cities were made of Michigan lumber, from which the timber barons amassed vast fortunes. The book argues that the state's next economy "for contribution, exploitation, and, perhaps, error was in its minerals." I like that choice of words: *perhaps, error*.

The material basis of Michigan's capitalist dynamics was first in fur, then in timber, next in minerals, and finally in automobiles. In each of these periods, the working-class composition was different. In the 17th century, it primarily comprised bands of Ojibwe, Ottawa, and Potawatomi; in the 18th, colonial settlers from New York and New England; in the 19th, migrants from Scandinavia, Ireland, and Southern and Slavic Europe; and in the 20th, African Americans from the South. Just as one period was replaced rather than destroyed by another, so it was with the composition of the Michiganders. After these constellations of the labor market passed away, their culture and ideas persisted.

My friend's second recommendation was Ernest Hemingway's *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories*, published in 1938. During the summers of his early years, from 1899 to 1920, Hemingway, the son of a Chicago doctor, vacationed in Michigan's

Northwoods. The book's Nick Adams stories tell about it. These coming-of-age tales are a testament to growing up with the privileges and silences of a white man during successive recompositions of capitalist relations. Prison, the hobo jungle, the woods, and the prize ring are where lost, wandering, traumatized people meet in transition times.

Adams learns a way of love from an Ojibwe woman, who also teaches him not to kill a rival. The woman's name is Prudence Mitchell. One of his friends blithely says that she smells like a "skunk." She breaks Adams's heart, and suddenly the famous declarative reticence of Hemingway's prose bursts with possibility. In the last story, "Fathers and Sons," he writes:

Could you say she did first what no one has ever done better and mention plump brown legs, flat belly, hard little breasts, well holding arms, quick searching tongue, the flat eyes, the good taste of mouth, then uncomfortably, tightly, sweetly, moistly, lovely, tightly, achingly, fully, finally, unendingly, never-endingly, never-to-endingly, suddenly ended, the great bird flown like an owl in the twilight, only it was daylight in the woods and hemlock needles stuck against your belly. So that when you go in a place where

Indians have lived you smell them gone and all the empty pain killer bottles and the flies that buzz do not kill the sweetgrass smell, the smoke smell and that other like a fresh cased marten skin.

After these constellations of the labor market passed away, their culture and ideas persisted.

The cascade of adverbs falls into a disappearing world. But pay attention to what he says: *skunk, marten*. These are creatures from that first period of Michigan history. And even now they're not finished off. As for sweetgrass, the Potawatomi botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer explains the herb and its fragrance in *Braiding Sweetgrass*: "Its scientific name is *Hierochloa odorata*, meaning the fragrant, holy grass. In our language it is called *wiingashk*, the sweet-smelling hair of Mother Earth. Breathe it in and you start to remember things you didn't know you'd forgotten."

Yes, that would be the commons: the earth to share—with delight—not ravage again in error. **N**

Peter Linebaugh, a historian, is the author of Red Round Globe Hot Burning.

Objection!

Elie Mystal



Time to Deliver

Biden promised to do something about the scourge of racist police violence. Here's how he can fulfill that promise from Day 1.

I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT JOE BIDEN, SOON THE 46TH president of the United States, is a “creature of the Senate” so many times that I’m starting to wonder if there’s some kind of spawning ground beneath the Dirksen Senate Office Building. Biden, we are told, can work with Republicans, make legislative deals, and usher in a new era of comity and bipartisanship just on the strength of his Senate experience and relationships.

But I’m not so sure. That’s because I know that a body in which Mitch McConnell holds any kind of power will frustrate the plans of even the most adroit Democratic leaders. I know, too, that any bipartisan “problem solver” caucus will solve none of the actual problems facing this nation. And I know that watering down legislation until it’s palatable enough for Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema to drink will drown any meaningful liberal agenda.

If Biden is to keep his campaign promises, especially the ones he made to the Black voters who saved his campaign and installed him in office, he will have to do so through executive action.

As of this writing, Donald Trump has signed 204 executive orders during his four years in office. By comparison, Barack Obama signed 276 during his eight years as president. I’m no mathlete, but any Republican who complains about an “imperial presidency” can help themselves to a warm glass of shut-the-hell-up.

Biden needs to adopt a Trumpian pace for executive orders. We’re facing a health crisis and an economic crisis that will have metastasized into a food crisis and a homelessness crisis by the time he takes office—largely because of Senate inaction and callousness. I expect Biden will do whatever he can with a stroke of a pen to manage the health crisis, not least because it is still, rightly, dominating the news cycle. But what’s fallen out of the news, at least in most white media circles, is the ongoing crisis of police terrorism and racism directed at members of the Black community.

Biden promised to do something about this. Now that he finally can, he must not be allowed to ignore these desperate calls for justice, as Democrats normally do the minute they regain power. Instead, he needs to grab his pen and begin implementing change through executive action.

I spoke with Alicia Garza, a cofounder of Black

Lives Matter, and she had an idea that would allow Biden to bypass an inert Senate: declare a state of emergency around “racialized policing.” She said such a declaration would allow him to withhold policing monies from states that have cognizable racial disparities in police outcomes. He could instruct states to adopt antibiotics and de-escalation measures and training. He could even instruct police to develop use-of-force protocols. Most policing is strictly in the purview of state law. Yanking on the purse strings is one of the only tools the federal government has.

This is not an idea invented by activists. Former US attorney general Jeff Sessions had the same thought—and tried to implement it—when he threatened to punish sanctuary cities by withholding public safety grants. Back then, I didn’t hear a peep from Republicans worried that Sessions was trying to “eliminate” the police. I assume they would therefore support this use of executive power from the Biden administration, unless they’re hypocrites.

Speaking of hypocrisy, it is worth remembering that Trump declared a state of emergency when Congress wouldn’t fund his border wall. He then misappropriated billions of dollars from the defense budget to start construction on it. If Trump can steal billions of dollars to pay for his racist fantasy, Biden can certainly withhold billions until police departments figure out how to stop killing Black people.

Then there are the things Biden can do immediately to change the actions of federal law enforcement. I spoke with Radley Balko, a journalist and police reform advocate, and he suggested establishing national use-of-force guidelines and transparency requirements. Those new rules, he said, could be imposed directly on every federal law enforcement agency, from the FBI to the Drug Enforcement Administration to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. They could include immediately banning the use of no-knock warrants and choke holds at the federal level, as well as imposing reporting guidelines and racial-data collection requirements throughout the federal government.

Balko also offered a suggestion that would really change how the federal government treats police officers

accused of brutality or malfeasance: instruct the solicitor general to stop defending the police in brutality and qualified-immunity cases in federal court. Traditionally, when issues are litigated at the federal level, the solicitor general represents the government, which in police misconduct cases means the cops. But

If Biden is to keep his campaign promises, especially the ones he made to Black voters, he will have to do so through executive action.

that's not a law; it's a norm. "Biden's solicitor general could sit those cases out," Balko said. "Or, God forbid, even weigh in on behalf of people abused by police."

This is what the Obama administration did for gay rights: It refused to defend the Defense of Marriage Act when the law was challenged in federal court. Eventually, the Supreme Court ruled DOMA unconstitutional in *United States v. Windsor*. What the government chooses to defend—and what it deems indefensible—matters.

Then there's the low-hanging fruit that Biden can deal with on his first day in office. The Trump administration restricted the use of consent decrees, which have been used

by the Justice Department to force localities to adopt better policing standards to avoid federal civil rights litigation. Biden's attorney general could bring them back. Biden could also reinstate Obama's executive order restricting the sale of excess

military equipment to local police. That way, the next time the cops kill an unarmed Black person, the protesters who rise up might not be met by police in armored personnel vehicles who are decked out for war.

Because there will be a next time. And a time after that. The cops are not done killing us. The scourge of police violence against Black and brown communities is not going away.

Neither, however, are elections. Soon, in 2022 and 2024, Democrats will go back to Black voters, demanding our support and arguing that they've done all they can to stop paramilitary forces from terrorizing our neighborhoods. When they do, I'll want to see the receipts. I don't want to hear Democrats despairing over which "slogan" people use; I want to see them addressing this crisis with actions.

Biden can change the guidelines for federal law enforcement and put immense economic pressure on state law enforcement with his signature. He said, "Black lives matter." Now he has to prove it. **N**

The cops are not done killing us. The scourge of police violence against Black and brown communities is not going away.

Subject to Debate Katha Pollitt



The Weight on Women

Covid-19 has been a burden for everyone, but women most of all.

SOMETIME IN THE 1990S, A FRIEND TOLD ME WE DIDN'T have to worry about progress for women: "Feminism is in the drinking water now." She wasn't entirely wrong. Despite all the complexities and counterexamples, for a while it looked as though women were finally making real progress—in the workplace, in the home, in government, in the way they saw themselves.

Well, thanks to Covid-19, you can forget all that. In less than a year, women's equality has rolled back down the hill as fast as Sisyphus's rock. According to a report by the Century Foundation and the Center for American Progress, "even a 5 percent decline" in mothers' economic participation "would undo the past 25 years of progress."

Women are more likely than men to get Covid-19, because so many work in dangerous essential jobs like health care, but they are less likely to die from it. So there's that. On the downside, four times as many people who have lost their jobs are women. Some of this is because of the fields women are concentrated in: child care, for example, an almost entirely female job category, as well as retail, travel, hospitality, housecleaning, caregiving, and other jobs requiring extensive social contact. These lines of work have all taken huge hits. But some of the job loss was because of the less visible work women were already doing. Many quit or were fired because of the difficulty of combining work with caring for their children, at home because the schools and day care centers were shut down and nannies and sitters were at home caring for their own kids. This was true even for women who theoretically could work from home—try keeping up with your job while your toddler has a meltdown or your grade-schoolers rebel over yet another day in Zoom school.

In theory, working remotely could have led to more equal roles for mothers and fathers. But in a forthcoming paper in *Gender & Society*, sociologists Allison Dunatchik, Kathleen Gerson, Jennifer Glass, Jerry A. Jacobs, and Haley Stritzel review literature suggesting that it has done the opposite:

Zamarro and colleagues (2020) [report] that 64% of college-educated mothers said they had reduced their working hours at some point by early June, compared to 36% of college-educated fathers and 52% of college-educated women without young children. In early April, 1 in 3 mothers reported that they were the main caregiver compared to only 1 in 10 working fathers. Lyttelton, Zang and Musick (2020) found that mothers were spending significantly more time doing housework and caring for children during their working hours in April and May than they did in the pre-pandemic period. And children spent more than twice as much time with their

SYSTEM CHECK

With **Melissa Harris-Perry**
and **Dorian Warren**

The latest podcast from *The Nation*

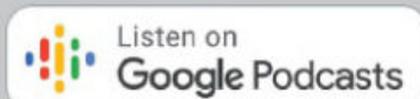
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telecommuting moms than with their dads. Telecommuting fathers had increased their child care on telecommuting days, but not their housework.

Another study notes that women, especially mothers, senior-level women, and Black women, “report the most ‘stress and burnout.’” Single mothers continue to have the hardest time of all.

In their own study of families during the pandemic, Dunatchik and her colleagues found that while both parents were doing more housework and child care, women were doing far more of it than their male partners and were shouldering much more of the homeschooling. Most strikingly, working women bore a greater burden. “Being employed did not appear to reduce mothers’ share of responsibility for housework, childcare, or home learning within couples,” the researchers concluded. “To the contrary, 77% of employed mothers report being mainly responsible for housework, 61% report being mainly responsible for childcare, and 78% report taking the lead on helping with their children’s remote learning.” When only

Women, it turns out, are the safety net—for society, for children, and for men as well.

the mother worked remotely, she shouldered the vast majority of domestic labor; when only the father worked remotely, he did not.

Clearly, the ability to work from home is not going to be the magic solution for domestic inequality that some promoters of flextime hoped it would—gendered behavior is too baked in. And that will have serious implications for the future, as women lose promotions, job opportunities, credits, and seniority due to Covid-related time away from their jobs. *Inside Higher*

Ed reports that “female academics are taking extended lockdowns on the chin, in terms of their comparative scholarly productivity.” While the submission of academic papers increased for both sexes, men’s increased far more, and senior-level women’s declined—probably because they are more likely to have children than younger women. That leaves men with less competition for coveted publication slots.

It makes me wonder to what extent women’s progress is dependent on prosperity, personal liberty, and, of course, support systems like day care, schools, and after-school programs.

When things are going well, middle-class and professional women can just about manage, and some even thrive. A lot of inequality can be papered over by hiring a weekly cleaner and a nanny, to say nothing of eating out. But when those factors are removed, when money is tight and time is tighter, the basic structure of male supremacy shows itself to be remarkably intact. Women, it turns out, are the safety net—for society, for children, and for men as well.

The fact that men usually earn more is part of it, but one reason he earns more is because she steps back. He has the benefit of her domestic labor, which his female coworkers do not have; domestic and workplace inequality work together. And although we often make it seem terribly complicated, a matter of preferences, habits, comfort, and even biology—I’m always hearing that women prefer doing the chores themselves—it isn’t really that hard to explain. Men do less at home because they can. Women do more because someone’s got to do it. This is true whether he earns more, she earns more, or they both earn around the same. He may have put down his scepter, thanks to over 50 years of modern feminism, but he’s still got an invisible ermine cloak.

What would happen if women simply stopped letting themselves be taken advantage of by someone who supposedly loves them? Would the world split open then? **N**



OPPART / PAMELA ENRIQUEZ-COURTS
MOTHER OF EXILES



Was President Trump a Fascist?

Yes

MABEL BEREZIN

IN CONTRAST TO HIS MULTIPLE BUSINESS failures, Donald Trump's presidency spurred at least one growth industry: commentary on fascism. Academics, public intellectuals, and influencers on sites from Twitter to TikTok have been laser-focused on Trump's resemblance to a host of past and present unsavory leaders with a weak attachment to democracy.

At the moment, Trump is simultaneously a dangerous and a pathetic figure. Sequestered in the White House with only a fringe group of loyalists around him, he spends his time tweeting and mounting improbable legal challenges to the election. Trump resembles a third-rate autocrat planning a failed coup, while becoming ever more unhinged in the process. His power has always come from his combination of triviality and cruelty. Both characteristics made it difficult to imagine that he could win an election, and when he did, these qualities made him a source of endless media fascination. Trump is not out the door yet, so postmortems are premature. But it is not too soon to ask if fascism is the correct lens to understand the political meaning and consequences of the last four years.

Trump is a classic authoritarian personality with a fascist rhetorical style. That alone should ring alarm bells. Yet the label "fascist" can sometimes hide as much as it reveals about the illiberal tendencies in contemporary American politics. Trump's presidency exposes the fissures embedded in our democracy, and concentrating only on his fascistic actions ignores the unstable political landscape that led to his rise in the first place.

As a concept, fascism tends to serve as a metaphor for evil, violent, and authoritarian behavior, and Trump is certainly guilty of all three. His MAGA rallies and disregard for government norms and practices also evoke aspects of interwar fascist politics and practice. Even so, I and other academics who have explored the similarities readily acknowledge that, whatever his dictatorial proclivities, Trump's administration was not a fully realized fascist regime. Our preference is to focus on the dangers posed by his fascist behavior.

In its original conception, fascism was a collectivist system of government based on what Benito Mussolini called an "ethical state." Giovanni Gentile, a philosopher and Mussolini's minister of education, laid out the details in *Foreign Affairs*. Fascism, he wrote, aspired to community, coherence, and

No

SAMUEL MOYN

THE ABSOLUTE HEIGHT OF FASCISM talk in recent US history took place at the beginning of June, in the aftermath of George Floyd's killing. It occurred amid America's largest-ever popular mobilization against white supremacy and racist police violence. Allegations of fascism inadvertently testified to the possibility of change; it had been generations since so many people demanded an end to American state brutality. Those same charges of fascism, however, provided no help in effecting that transformation.

It is undeniable that Donald Trump's presidency gave the notion of fascism cultural prominence in American politics. In the last 15 years, the term had entered public discourse only three times before this past summer: when Trump's candidacy broke through among Republicans in March 2016; after he beat Hillary Clinton and took office in January 2017; and when the disgusting Unite the Right rally was held in Charlottesville, Va., in August of the same year.

This shows that *nothing Trump actually did* sparked the discourse—unless one counts the rhetorical fuel he added to the fire of outrage and violence set off in Virginia by several hundred punks. The fascism frame was a choice that activists, commentators, and politicians made, and June 2020 proved it again and conclusively. No comparable talk—especially about Barack Obama—happened in response to the police slaying of Michael Brown on the streets of Ferguson, Mo., in August 2014. So the real questions are: Why did we make that choice? And are there better ones now?

Asking them is not to deny that America experienced fascism during the Jim Crow era, that fascism in one of its varieties across the world could return, that America could host it, or even that fascism is latent so long as injustice lasts. All true, but so what? To insist on hypothetical possibilities or eternal fascism is to dodge the obligation to provide a responsible inquiry into contemporary American politics. Instead, most people who have denounced fascism over the last four years wish to return to the status quo ante Trump and restore the failed policies that provided him the opportunity to win the White House.

A factual approach to the Trump years shows that those crying "fascism" tended to rely on the first half of every frightening news cycle. But the second half showed Trump shying away from any fascist endgame, chang-

The Debate

eliminating the boundaries between the state and the person. Liberalism, with its soulless individualism, was as much its enemy as Marxism. Trumpism, with its affinity for isolationism and free trade and its antipathy to government regulation, has no common cause with collectivist isms—even the fascist ones.

Yet Trump's style, if not always his substance, *is* fascistic. His attraction to violence to deal with dissent, his flagrant disrespect for the law, his affinity for making up his own facts, and his taste for public spectacle easily fit the fascist behavioral template. Thankfully, Trump is not a talented politician. Any astute aspiring autocrat should immediately have recognized the opportunity to consolidate power that the Covid-19 pandemic afforded. Even a half-hearted attempt to control the coronavirus in March could have erased Joe Biden's margin of victory.

Still, Trump managed to do much damage during his four years in office. He has encouraged and given new legitimacy to networks of armed paramilitary "patriots" who intervene in local and national politics. Paramilitary groups are not new, but they have existed on the margins. Trump invited them into politics, and they will not leave when he does. Charlottesville was the beginning, not the end, of a new genre of organized racism. Mussolini cleverly used armed squads (*Squadristi*), which

roamed the Italian countryside fomenting violence and fighting socialists, to advance his own political ends. There is nothing more terrifying, or fascist-like, than Trump telling the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by" or inviting his supporters to convene in Washington, DC, to "Stop the steal."

At the same time, the fear that, although we dodged a bullet this time, a shrewder and craftier version of Trump may be in our future is overblown. Josh Hawley, the right-wing Republican senator from Missouri, is a name that frequently comes up on Trump 2.0 lists. He is active in the National Conservatism movement, an international group of politicians, academics, and media people that aims to restore exactly what its name promises. In July 2019, Hawley delivered a keynote speech to the group that was notable for its surface erudition and antiglobalist rhetoric. But even with his decision to challenge the presidential vote certification, he is defined by his nationalism and conservatism. He is hardly a fledgling fascist.

Trump and Trumpism have revealed a willingness among many leaders and citizens to capsize our long-established, if flawed, democracy. Trump's phone call to Georgia's secretary of state was more Don Corleone than Il Duce, but it should warn us of the fragility of our institutions, norms, and values. The last four years ought to remind us that our democracy will always require our vigilance. **N**

Mabel Berezin is a sociology professor at Cornell University and the author of Making the Fascist Self.

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ing his mind under pressure, or finding himself blocked by his own servants. And that was before any heavier weaponry in the American system came into play, as during his parodic "coup."

I am more sympathetic to the claim that fascist elements in civil society became emboldened with Trump in charge. But racist militias are anything but new, and the white boys of Charlottesville and the Proud Boys hardly constitute a fascist uprising. (In the March on Rome, Benito Mussolini had tens of thousands of Blackshirts at his command, while in 1933, Adolf Hitler had personal goons in the millions.)

We need theories that capture both the Trump years' continuity with the past as well as their novelty. But the allegations of fascism distract us from the need and possibility for America to diverge from the trajectory that led to them.

The Trump administration's most serious evils were either rhetorical and symbolic, or came in adjusting the already obscene American immigration regime in an even more exclusionary direction. Trump's national security record, based on that same unchecked executive power, is more mixed. Under Trump, America killed fewer foreigners overall than it did when his two predecessors were in office. Even as he extended some of their worst choices and made grievous new mistakes, there was no resemblance to the hyper-imperialism of historical fascism.

None of this is to say that Trump wasn't a terrible president, let alone that "the system" worked. Just the opposite: The same system that often rendered Trump harmless continues to fail most Americans. The most graphic proof of this lies in the latest election returns, which embarrass the fascism paradigm. The most shocking thing about them is that, after four years of delegitimation, Trump increased his support among the presumed victims of fascism, while the Democratic Party faltered. Joe Biden broke through, thanks to the wealthy and powerful. The state where I live, Connecticut, is among the most unequal, with some of the country's worst poverty. Biden fared worse among urban workers, including Blacks and Hispanics in my city of New Haven, than earlier Democrats—but far, far better among the wealthy denizens of Greenwich and Westport.

If we are lucky, the fascism debate will become a historical curio, allowing Americans who want to overcome structural injustice and political impasse to focus where it matters. Far from reflecting any real intellectual dilemma, it marks a missed opportunity. It also poses a risk for a future in which too many progressives spend their time fretting about the end of American democracy, allowing the mainstream to shirk responsibility for its enduring flaws and the right to keep on fooling too many of its longtime victims. **N**

Samuel Moyn teaches law and history at Yale. His most recent book is Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World.

There is nothing more fascist-like than Trump telling the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by."

The same system that often rendered Trump harmless continues to fail most Americans.

debate The Debate



SNAPSHOT

'Tisn't the Season

Protesters burn a Christmas tree in front of the Albanian prime minister's office in Tirana during clashes in December. Police fired tear gas at hundreds of demonstrators enraged by the killing of a young man who broke a coronavirus curfew. Chanting "We want justice!" and hurling stones and firecrackers, the crowd demanded the resignation of the country's interior minister.

By the Numbers



2.7B

Number of people around the world who have received zero government assistance to deal with the economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic

41%

Covid-19 government support, globally, that came as a one-time payment

88–115M

Number of people pushed into extreme poverty by the pandemic

\$9.8T

Amount that the wealthy G-20 countries have injected into their economies to cope with the effects of the pandemic

\$42B

Amount that 39 lower-income countries have injected into their economies

\$695

Average additional spending per person on social protection programs, like cash assistance, in 28 rich countries

\$4–\$28

Additional spending per person on social protection programs in 42 low- and middle-income countries



CALVIN TRILLIN

DeadlinePoet

SILVER LINING

The market is hitting record highs, even as the virus surges and millions go hungry.

—*The Washington Post*

Though others have suffered, the Wall Street guys got

The bull-market profits to which they aspire.

Will even more sickness be grim news for all?

No, not if it means that the market goes higher.

MOST VALUABLE
PROGRESSIVES2020
HONOR
ROLL

BY JOHN NICHOLS

C OVID-19, MASS UNEMPLOYMENT, POLICE violence, a burning planet, and a defeated president refusing to concede made 2020 the year Americans couldn't wait to end. Yet 2020 also saw a heroic pandemic response by frontline workers, mass protests against systemic racism, and a growing recognition of the necessity for big agendas: cash payments to the unemployed, Medicare for All, and a Green New Deal. The most valuable progressives of 2020 kept hope alive with activism, ideas, and music to inspire transformational change in 2021.

DEMOCRATIC VISIONARY

Stacey Abrams



When Abrams announced on December 14 that Georgia's 16 electoral votes had been cast for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, applause erupted for the first Democratic presidential win in the state since 1992—and for Abrams, the 2018 gubernatorial candidate who had argued all along that voter mobilization could flip swing states against Donald Trump. With her group Fair Fight, Abrams championed voter registration and mobilization drives in Georgia, Wisconsin, and other battleground states. They figured out how to draw new Black, Latinx, and Asian American voters to the polls, circumvent voter suppression, and

navigate the challenges of a pandemic election, with a savvy emphasis on mail-in voting, early voting, and safe in-person voting on Election Day that will be a national model going forward. That merits applause. And the cheering will be even louder in 2022 if, as many suspect, Abrams runs for (and wins) Georgia's governorship.

THE BOLDEST BATTLER

Bernie Sanders



The senator from Vermont didn't receive the Democratic nomination in 2020, as seemed possible after his New Hampshire and Nevada wins briefly made him the front-runner in the primary race. Sanders did, however, play a critical role in securing the presidency for the Democrats—working with Biden to establish unity task forces that framed the party's agenda, and arguing relentlessly that Trump was an “existential threat” to democracy who must be removed from office. Sanders closed the year with a

courageous effort to secure \$2,000 checks for Americans who are struggling to get by in a pandemic-ravaged economy. That fight will continue in 2021, and Sanders will no doubt continue to be the Senate's boldest battler for economic, social, and racial justice; for the planet; and for peace.

THE HOUSE'S SYSTEMIC
CHANGEMAKER

Ilhan Omar



As the representative from the Minneapolis district where George Floyd's death during a brutal arrest in May sparked nationwide protests, Omar immediately recognized that this police killing of a Black man was part of a broader crisis. “We are not merely fighting to tear down the systems of oppression in the criminal justice system,” she announced. “We are fighting to tear down systems of oppression that exist in housing, in education, in health care, in employment, in the air we breathe.” Trump staked his bid to win Minnesota on a campaign that viciously attacked Omar's challenge to systemic racism. The congresswoman responded with a turnout drive that boosted Democratic numbers in her district and helped Biden sweep the state.

EXPANDING CIVIL
RIGHTS PROTECTIONSRashida Tlaib's
Justice for All Act

A civil rights lawyer with Detroit's Sugar Law Center for Economic & Social Justice before her election to Congress, Tlaib wants to put the teeth back into civil rights laws that “have been undermined by conservative courts determined to give corporations and the government a license to discriminate if they just use the right code words and proxies for race,

gender, and other aspects of who we are.” The Michigan Democrat's new Justice for All Act seeks to guarantee that victims of discrimination can vindicate their rights in the courts by restoring and expanding the protections of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. National Lawyers Guild president Elena Cohen says legislation like Tlaib's is “sorely needed in order to protect all people of this country.”

ANTI-FASCIST
ATTORNEY GENERAL

Josh Kaul



When Trump threatened to use federal agents to crack down on Black Lives Matter protests in cities like Milwaukee, Wisconsin's attorney general decried the president's “fascist tactics, including his demonization of immigrants, his attacks on communities with large minority populations and the elected representatives of those communities, the blatantly illegal use of force against protesters near the White House, and the deployment of secret federal police” to Portland, Ore. He pledged to “take any appropriate legal action” to prevent agents from “interfering with peaceful protests,” stating, “I don't use the phrase ‘fascist tactics’ lightly. But there is no more accurate way to describe this administration's repeated resort to and incitement of racism, xenophobia, and violence.”

EVERY NATIVE VOTE COUNTS

Native Vote,
Menikanaehkem

“Voting is sacred. My people know that. We were not universally granted the right to vote until 1962,” said Representative Deb Haaland, a tribal citizen of the Pueblo of Laguna in New Mexico who is now

Biden's nominee for interior secretary, speaking at the 2020 Democratic National Convention. Grassroots organizing by groups working in tribal communities and outreach by Every Native Vote Counts, a national campaign of the non-partisan group Native Votes, boosted turnout in swing states like Arizona and Wisconsin. Wisconsin's Menikanaehkem focused on Menominee County, which shares boundaries with the Menominee Indian Reservation. In November, the county saw the sharpest swing to the Democratic ticket of any in the state and produced the highest support for Biden—82 percent. Increased turnout by Indigenous voters mattered in Wisconsin, where Democrats won by just 20,682 votes.

DEEP CANVASSING

Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA)

Trump won Arizona by more than 90,000 votes in 2016, but he lost it by 10,457 votes in 2020. What changed? *The Arizona Republic* reported that increased turnout among Latinx voters was “critical for Democrats, as 63% of their votes went to Biden and 36% to Trump, according to exit polls.” Many unions and grassroots organizations contributed to the turnout spike. One of the most innovative was LUCHA, a group born in the struggle against anti-immigrant laws, which in cooperation with Seed the Vote and People's Action embraced an innovative deep-canvassing strategy designed to reach out to undecided and conflicted voters and engage in real conversations. It worked.

RECLAIMING THE COURTS

American Constitution Society, Alliance for Justice, Demand Justice

To counter the Federalist Society's relentless drive to pack the

federal bench with right-wing activists, the American Constitution Society, led by former senator Russ Feingold, came up with a plan to jump-start the Biden-Harris administration's judicial selection process. Immediately after the election, the ACS delivered a list of hundreds of qualified prospects that would bring diversity to the courts. The Alliance for Justice, led by nomination expert Nan Aron, and allied groups also provided a list of potential nominees. And Brian Fallon and the crew at Demand Justice were already formulating strategies to get Biden's nominees confirmed.

DERAILING NEOLIBERALISM

Rossana Rodriguez Sanchez



When former Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel, once a key fundraiser and power broker in Bill Clinton's administration, was floated for a top job under Biden, Rodriguez, the Chicago alderwoman and member of the City Council's powerful caucus of Democratic Socialists, penned a scathing letter putting him on a “DO NOT HIRE list.” That letter evolved into a petition to Biden signed by thousands of Chicagoans, which recalled that Emanuel covered up the 2014 police murder of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald and closed 50 elementary schools. The petition stated, “If you want to root out systemic racism, defend democracy, and build a society that leaves no one behind—all worthy goals mentioned in your victory speech—we can think of few people worse for the job than the man who earned the nickname ‘Mayor 1%.’” Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Representative-elect Jamaal Bowman amplified the themes as the outcry went national. The pushback showed how progressives can and must put pressure on the new administration.

DEFUNDING THE MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Representatives Barbara Lee and Mark Pocan and the Defense Spending Reduction Caucus

Faced with a pandemic and an economic meltdown, Wisconsin's Pocan argued in May, “Increasing defense spending now would be a slap in the face to the families of [those who] have died from this virus.” Pocan and California's Lee rallied 93 House votes for a July amendment to cut Pentagon spending by 10 percent; Vermont's Bernie Sanders secured 23 Senate votes. Lee and Pocan then formed the Defense Spending Reduction Caucus. Lee, who was recently honored by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft for her long struggle to “move U.S. foreign policy away from endless war and toward vigorous diplomacy,” has warned that warped budget priorities harm Black and brown people the most. “We can't keep spending billions for weapons while leaving our people defenseless against COVID,” she said.

NETWORKING FOR JUSTICE

Fair and Just Prosecution

The ranks of progressive prosecutors swelled in November with the elections of George Gascon in Los Angeles, Monique Worrell in Orlando, Fla., and José Garza in Austin, Tex. Nationwide, innovative district attorneys are generating fresh ideas for police accountability, ending mass incarceration, reforming drug laws, and addressing systemic racism. Fair and Just Prosecution brings them together to share strategies for “moving away from past incarceration-driven approaches and advancing new thinking that promotes prevention and diversion and increases fairness.”

FIGHTER FOR NURSES AND PATIENTS

Bonnie Castillo



Unions were on the front lines of the pandemic, protecting their members and their communities as Covid-19 swept America. No labor leader battled harder than Castillo, a registered nurse and the executive director of National Nurses United. Starting in January, the union demanded that nurses get protective gear to save their own lives and the lives of their patients. NNU forced hospitals to change policies, demonstrated outside the White House, and kept an eye on the big picture. Explaining that “so much injustice in our society is amplified by Covid-19,” Castillo decried the racial inequities of a for-profit health care system and championed Medicare for All. As legendary United Farm Workers union leader Dolores Huerta said, “Bonnie does not just work to heal patients; she works to heal society.”

AUTHORS OF A NEW VISION

Zephyr Teachout, Jennifer Taub, Stephanie Kelton

Recovery from the many crises of 2020 will require bold thinking, and three great public intellectuals provide it with books that challenge monopoly power, neoliberalism, and corruption. Teachout's *Break 'Em Up: Recovering Our Freedom From Big Ag, Big Tech, and Big Money* (All Points Books) argues for trust-busting as a necessary response to inequality, climate change, the consolidation of economic power, and the systemic disenfranchisement of women, immigrants, and people of color. Taub's *Big Dirty Money: The Shocking Injustice and Unseen Cost of White Collar Crime* (Viking) explains that the crimes of the billionaire class are never “victimless.” Kelton's (continued on page 33)

How America Chose Homelessness

For months, our leaders have known that the Covid-19 crisis could force millions of people from their homes. **They decided to let it happen.**

BY DALE MAHARIDGE

ADVOCATES HAVE BEEN SOUNDING THE ALARMS FOR MONTHS—issuing reports, penning press releases, warning politicians as an increasing number of Americans made jobless by the pandemic have fallen behind on their rent. Now, the warnings unheeded, the United States is facing an unprecedented homelessness crisis, one that is as predictable as it was avoidable.

I first saw signs of this coming catastrophe on May 26, as the markets in New York City roared—the Dow was up 530 points, and the S&P hit an 11-week high. But in San Diego, Rudy and Christina Rico rummaged through a blue recycling barrel set out on the street. The couple, married for 37 years, hoped to scrape together \$50 worth of bottles and cans. It meant dinner.

Rudy and Christina Rico were among the earliest ripples of a crisis that has been looming since the first days of the coronavirus pandemic.

*Dale Maharidge is the author of numerous books, including the forthcoming *Fucked at Birth*. This article was supported by the *Economic Hardship Reporting Project*.*

The Ricos were among the earliest ripples of a crisis that has been looming since the first days of the coronavirus pandemic. As far back as April, after lockdowns jolted the economy to a halt, news outlets began issuing warnings: “31% Can’t Pay the Rent: ‘It’s Only Going to Get Worse,’” declared one *New York Times* headline; “Rent Is Due Today, But Millions of Americans Won’t Be Paying,” blared NPR’s website the following month.

By August, a group of experts representing some of the leading housing rights organizations in the country—including the Eviction Lab at Princeton University, the National Low Income

“I never thought I’d go through trash cans for money,” Rudy told me as I walked down the drive of a friend’s house, where I was isolating. “But you got to eat.” A mockingbird in a Queen palm filled the ensuing silence. Rudy was a landscaper until the pandemic hit and he lost his job. He and Christina were now living out of their car. They’d never been homeless before. Christina thought I’d come to admonish them. “Some people get angry,” she said.

Housing Coalition, and the Covid-19 Eviction Defense Project—arrived at a dire conclusion. In a white paper titled “The Covid-19 Eviction Crisis,” the consortium estimated that “in the absence of robust and swift intervention, an estimated 30–40 million people in America could be at risk of eviction in the next several months.” The authors warned that “the United States may be facing the most severe housing crisis in its history,” adding that people of color “constitute approximately 80% of people facing eviction.”

In the ensuing months, tens of thousands of Americans have been evicted; according to the Eviction Lab, landlords have filed more than 162,500 eviction notices in the 27 cities it tracks. But the worst of the crisis has been averted so far by a patchwork of state moratoriums that have been supplemented, in turn, by a patchwork of federal efforts. In March, Congress passed a temporary eviction moratorium as part of the CARES Act; after that expired, in September, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stepped in with its own temporary moratorium. Most recently, as part of the stimulus package passed in

Government “housing”: A view of a Covid-safe tent encampment outside San Francisco’s City Hall.



While there is no precise date that denotes the birth of modern homelessness, there are numerous markers. One pivotal point is 1980.

Seeking shelter: Gloria and Melvin Perry, part of a new generation of working homeless people, play with children at a shelter in Reno, Nev., in 1987.

late December, Congress provided \$25 billion in rental assistance to states and localities and extended the eviction moratorium to January 31. Renters breathed a sigh of relief.

That relief is likely to be short-lived, however. The end date for the federal moratorium looms in a matter of weeks, while various state moratoriums are also slated to sunset. And the \$25 billion in rent relief provided by Congress, while critical, falls far short of what

advocates believe is necessary. But perhaps the most intractable problem is that a moratorium is not the same as rent forgiveness. This means that, even if the moratoriums are extended again (and then again), tenants will at some point have to pay their landlords all of the accrued back rent. Already, nearly 12 million households owe an average of \$5,850 in overdue rent and utilities, according to Moody's Analytics. That's \$70 billion. How will people be able to repay those sums if they remain jobless? How will they be able to repay them even if they do land a job?

Many advocates believe that only a sustained, robust, and far-reaching intervention by the US government can prevent a full-scale catastrophe. But with Republicans still holding significant power in Congress and Democrats hemmed in by their own party dynamics, few are counting on such an intervention.

California, with its stratospheric housing costs, is expected to be especially hard-hit. Between 4.1 and 5.4 million residents are at risk of eviction, the white paper notes. The next closest states are New York, with 2.8 to 3.3 million; Texas, with 2.6 to

3.8 million; and Florida, with 1.9 to 2.5 million. The most conservative prediction in a report by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia projects a 50 percent increase in evictions in 2021.

The Ricos foreshadow what will happen. They had already faced a difficult choice while they waited a month and a half for Rudy's unemployment benefits to begin: either use the money, whenever it arrived, to catch up on their rent, which had been suspended because of the pandemic but would need to be paid at some point, or make their car payments. They chose the latter, in part because they thought they could move in with family.

"We were staying with my sister," Rudy explained, "but she got the bad liver, and the doctor told her she had to get everybody out of the house." So the Ricos found themselves living in their car instead, sleeping on different streets each night to avoid the cops.

At the time, the couple, both 55, said they would likely be homeless for a long while, even after Rudy returned to work. "It'll cost \$3,000 to get back into an apartment," he said.

That was over seven months ago, weeks after the alarms had first begun to sound.

HOMELESSNESS IS NOT A NEW PHENOMENON. IT HAS BEEN RECORDED AS FAR back as the Bible and has made frequent appearances in literature, a subject of both curiosity and despair. In 1886, Leo Tolstoy completed *What Is to Be Done?*, a nonfiction meditation on poverty inspired by a trip he had taken to the Khitrov marketplace, the skid row of Moscow. A friend told Tolstoy that the poor were an "inevitable condition of civilization." Tolstoy, tears in his eyes, cried out, "It is impossible to live thus...impossible!"

Tolstoy's friend was wrong: Homelessness doesn't have to be inevitable. As enduring as it appears in some times and places, it is scarcely known in others. Japan, for instance, has few unhoused people—just 3,992 were counted in 2018, according to the most recent data from the country's Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare. In the United States, by contrast, the ever-expanding number of the homeless is a choice—one made not by those who live in tents but by politicians, policy-makers, and, of course, the real estate industry.

This choice, like all choices, has a history. It didn't begin with Covid-19, though the pandemic amplified it, dragging it toward the present, extreme precipice. The origins of this choice go back further—past 2017, the year the National Alliance to End Homelessness estimated that there were more than 550,000 homeless people in the United States; past 2008 and the last eviction crisis; past the early aughts and the 1990s; and all the way back to the 1980s, the beginning of a new kind of homelessness.

There is no precise date that denotes the birth of modern homelessness, but there are numerous markers. One pivotal point is 1980, which was also the year I moved to California. After being homeless myself, living out of my Datsun pickup for months, I applied for a job at *The Sacramento Bee*. When I phoned the city editor, Robert Forsyth, the morning after Election Day to hear whether I'd be hired, he told me, "I have good news and bad news." I wanted the bad news first. "Reagan is president." The good: My start date was November 17. I took the pairing of my first

big newspaper staff position with Ronald Reagan's ascent as a sign of how I'd spend the next 40 years as a journalist.

I rented an apartment near the confluence of the Sacramento and American rivers and often walked in the riparian forest where there were secret sleeping spots, with sheets of cardboard or newspapers spread on the ground. Who were these people? I reported a story on them, which ran in January 1981 under the headline "Detox Center Is Home

to Winos." (The word "homeless" was not yet in wide use; the men who sometimes slept "in the weeds" along the river were still deemed "winos.") What I witnessed was the "old" type of homelessness—older people, mostly men, with long histories of mental illness or addiction, who lived in a few concentrated areas, exposed to the elements.

A short version of what came next: Reagan set to work fulfilling the long-held Republican



dream of dismantling the legacy of the New Deal, ushering in the neoliberal era and a growing worship of markets. On the housing front, he slashed the budget for federal programs and shifted the resulting diminished resources away from public housing and affordable-housing construction and into vouchers for people to seek shelter on the free market. These and similar assaults on the social safety net were compounded by growing economic insecurity, born in part from stagnating wages, sharply rising rents, and the loss of well-paying jobs as deindustrialization devastated middle America.

Amid all this, Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker sought to tame inflation by tight monetary policy, causing interest rates to soar. I felt lucky to get a 12 percent rate on a mortgage for a home I bought in 1982. Volcker's policy created what was then the most severe recession since World War II.

This economic slump set the stage for a different kind of unhoused American. In 1982, I rode the rails with a new breed of “hoboes,” many from the Midwestern steel cities. These were formerly middle- and working-class Americans who in the postwar years would never have become homeless. But here they were. In Sacramento, I can mark with precision the week that more of these newcomers began guerrilla camping along the river. A tent city had sprung up across from a rescue mission. The city evicted them.

“Accompanying the closing was a corresponding increase in the number of people camping...along the banks of the American River, much to the annoyance of Sacramento police who have been rousting them over the past week,” I wrote in a story published on June 13, 1982. Ron Blair—typical of the newbies—told me, “I’ve paid taxes all my life. Most guys here work every day. Why treat people like dogs?”

In November 1982, the recession officially ended. A story on the new hoboes assigned to me by *Life* magazine was spiked. An editor told me it was old news—we were in recovery.

BY 1983, IT WAS CLEAR TO LOS ANGELES attorney Gary Blasi that the nation was not in recovery. From his perspective, this was the year that “mass homelessness” became a permanent fixture of the Southern California landscape. The benefits of the supposedly booming economy would not “trickle down,” as Reagan had promised. In the 1980s, Blasi litigated on behalf of these newly unhoused people for the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, where he was a cofounder of its Eviction Defense Center. In the ensuing decades, while a professor of law at the University of California, Los Angeles, he continued working



on homelessness issues as Los Angeles emerged as an exemplar of a new and visible type of street homelessness, with tents popping up beneath freeway underpasses and in the quasi-tropical flora planted at cloverleaf interchanges. There was a much less visible but growing problem of homeless families with children, an issue I covered for the *Bee* in numerous stories.

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, Blasi foresaw a disaster. In late May, he published “UD Day: Impending Evictions and Homelessness in Los Angeles,” a study for the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy. It was written in anticipation of the day when “unlawful detainer” complaints—the legal term for the proceedings leading to eviction—could once again be filed in courts. A statewide moratorium had been put in place that April by the Judicial Council of California, in part prohibiting “a court from issuing a summons after a landlord files an eviction case, unless necessary to protect public health and safety.” The council lifted the ban on September 1. But it was soon superseded by the CDC’s order.

“It just got postponed,” Blasi recently said of the wave of evictions.

Now, however, the city faces a reckoning. Blasi said he used very conservative calculations to determine that, on the high end, “120,000 households in Los Angeles County, including 184,000 children, are likely to become homeless at least for some period.” On the low end, it could mean “36,000 additional homeless households with 56,000 children.” That’s a range of some 100,000 to nearly 400,000 people.

Part of the reason for those five- and six-digit numbers is that Los Angeles, like many major metro areas, has a high rate of rental households—54 percent live in rentals, according to

2019 Census Bureau estimates. (In New York City, renters represent 67 percent of households, while in neighboring Newark, the number jumps to nearly 78 percent.) “On the track we are on now,” Blasi said, “it will be the biggest mass displacement of people in one area of the United States in history.”

The question of what will happen to this multitude haunts advocates like Mel Tillekeratne, the executive director of the Los Angeles nonprofit Shower of Hope. The organization runs one of the “safe parking”

Mother and child: A young mom, who had formerly been homeless, and her son in Portland, Ore., in 2005.

These were formerly middle- and working-class Americans who in the postwar years would never have become homeless. But here they were.



That was then: A family, made destitute by the Great Depression, camps along the American River in this famous 1936 photograph by Dorothea Lange.

programs in the region, which operate secure parking lots where people who live in their cars can pull in and sleep. Tillekeratne told me what other nonprofit service providers are also saying: They are bracing for a deluge of the unhoused.

“From Professor Gary Blasi’s report, what we all know is that there’s going to be a huge influx of homelessness,” Tillekeratne said. “The county of LA—and not just the county, the whole state and this country—has to look at: How do we work towards maximizing rapid rehousing?”

Without a rapid rehousing plan, the tens of thousands cast from their homes will be left to fend for themselves. Some might be lucky enough to land with family or friends, doubled or tripled up in already crowded homes. Others may join some of the nearly 16,000 people already using their vehicles for shelter in Los Angeles County. People cling to their cars, like the Ricos in San Diego and a woman named Aida I met at the safe parking lot, who worked but couldn’t afford rent. While sleeping on the streets is an option, relatively few of the evicted immediately

wind up in a tent. There are many steps to that grim end stage. The descent into the madness of homelessness is a process.

IN 1986, I FOUND MYSELF CRUISING west on Hollywood Boulevard in a 1967 Ford Galaxie 500 with 152,300 miles on the odometer. I was in the passenger seat. It was late fall, and I’d come to Los Angeles for a story on

hunger in California. I had heard about a new phenomenon of people with jobs living out of their cars. I’d just met Wayne at a soup kitchen. He’d been laid off from an oil field job in Texas and came to California seeking work. A fist-sized roll of bread, nabbed from a soup kitchen, sat on the dashboard. In the rear seat were his possessions: two suits encased in clear plastic, shiny black wing-tip shoes, and a painting that had hung in his Houston home.

Each night Wayne parked on a different street to avoid the cops. He had come to California thinking he had enough cash left for rent. “See, in Houston, I could get an apartment for \$250,” he said. “I mean a good place. I went into one place here worse than a rat hole. And they wanted \$850, plus first and last.” So he decided to live in weekly-rate hotels. But by the fall, he was down to his last \$7. He began sleeping in the car.

“Every week you say, ‘I’m not going to slide down one more inch,’” he told me. “What happens? Next week, you’re down another inch. It’s hard to admit that you’re living like this, especially when you were in the middle class.... One thing I want more than a place to live is to be able to get my own food. This bread here—even a hard, crusty piece—is good when your stomach gnaws at you at midnight.”

On another day, I met up with Wayne and shadowed him as he sought work. Dozens of help-wanted ads clipped from newspapers rested on the dash. He visited over a half-dozen places. I pretended to be in line at fast-food restaurants as he talked to the managers. He came off smart and sharp.

“I applied for eight to 10 jobs in fast-food restaurants in the last two weeks,” Wayne told me. “They won’t hire a 43-year-old for a minimum-wage job. Here I am, balding and slightly graying. It gets discouraging. Who’s gonna hire me?” Beyond the age bias was another kind of discrimination: He told me he lost two cinched jobs when employers checked and found that his address was a drop-in center for the homeless.

“Believe it or not, this 19-year-old, bombed-out crate with all its scratches and torn interior is a blessing,” he said, referring to his car. “It keeps the rain out, the cold out, the muggers out. I can’t lose it. But I might run out of gas down the road.” He contemplated having to siphon gas. “It’s no hayride. I’m just trying to survive.”

Two weeks later, I returned to look for Wayne, cruising the half-dozen spots that he had shown me. I found his Ford Galaxie 500 and knocked on the window. Wayne had sold his blood for the first time ever the previous week. When he opened the trunk to get something, I saw a rubber hose. There was gas in his tank. He wouldn’t say how he got it.

I tell Wayne’s story from long ago for a rea-

While sleeping on the streets is an option, relatively few wind up immediately in a tent. There are many steps to that grim end stage.

son. His desperate attempt to hang on to his car will not differ one iota from the stories of the people rendered homeless by the pandemic depression of the 2020s. The stories don't change, just the dates on the calendar.

BY THE TIME THE PANDEMIC STRUCK, the country's combined crises of unaffordable housing and wage stagnation had pushed many Americans to the brink. According to the August report by the team of housing experts, nearly half of all renter households in the United States "were already rental cost-burdened," which means paying more than 30 percent of monthly income on rent. At the start of the pandemic, 10.9 million households—one-quarter of all renters—spent more than 50 percent of their income on rent.

Even before Covid-19, "we had a shortage of 7 million affordable apartments available to the lowest-income renters," said Diane Yentel, president of the National Low Income Housing Coalition and one of the authors of the white paper. "For every 10 of the lowest-income renters, there were fewer than four apartments that were affordable to them. Covid only revealed the long-standing housing crisis."

Last summer, the coalition began advocating that Congress approve \$100 billion in emergency assistance to avoid creating "a financial cliff for renters to fall off of when back rent is due," Yentel said at the time. "And it provides the rental income that small landlords need to be able to continue paying their bills and maintaining their property." That funding for small landlords is important: About half of the 47.5 million rental units in the United States are properties owned by mom-and-pop operations, many at risk of foreclosure if they can't pay their mortgages and taxes. Without relief, Wall Street investors could swoop in on a fire-sale buying spree, as they did with single-family homes in 2008, making the housing market even more expensive.

So far, the efforts of the coalition and other housing advocates have met with modest success. While the December stimulus failed to deliver the \$100 billion housing packaging they had advocated, the \$25 billion it did provide "is a very significant down payment towards meeting that overall need," Yentel said.

Going forward, she expects Biden to make rent relief a priority in negotiations with Congress. If he fails, Yentel said, "we're looking at the very real possibility of tens of millions

of people losing their homes this winter during a surge of Covid-19." But even if Biden succeeds, the country will need to embrace a host of longer-term solutions to help tackle not only the fallout from the pandemic but also the structural causes of mass homelessness.

Those potential solutions are many, ranging from wide-scale job creation—especially jobs that pay decent wages—to widespread affordable housing interventions like rent control and subsidized housing. One bold proposal by the grassroots think tank the People's Policy Project, in a paper coauthored before the pandemic by Peter Gowan and Ryan Cooper, calls for the creation of 10 million new affordable housing units in 10 years, funded by a combination of local housing authorities and the federal government.

It's not that radical to argue that the federal government should fund affordable housing, said Blasi, the emeritus UCLA professor. He noted that billions of dollars have been fire-hosed on corporate America. "We could ramp up a wartime production of manufactured housing," he said. "It's just a question of will and money."

In the short term, Blasi is working with legal-aid lawyers, tenant organizers, and software engineers as well as two founders of the Debt Collective, a group of financial activists, formed from the ashes of Occupy Wall Street, who have agitated to cancel student debt by holding debt strikes, flooding the Department of Education with claims against for-profit colleges, and other actions. Blasi and the team have created a website that will allow tenants to electronically file answers to eviction notices within the five days the law allows them. They're also marshaling volunteers to help guide tenants through the process and assembling pro bono attorneys to represent them.

Meanwhile, Blasi is flabbergasted that city and state officials have been doing nothing to prepare for the coming wave of homelessness. He coauthored another study over the summer for the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy that outlines how the government could create refugee camps that would both be safe and allow residents to maintain their dignity.

"It's beginning to look like they're not going to get their act together to be able to do that," Blasi said. "People are still in denial of what's to come."

IF PAST IS PROLOGUE, THEN PRESENT IS ALMOST certainly future.

I returned to Sacramento in the early summer and saw what's to come, in 2021 and beyond, by visiting the places I first reported on 40 years ago. Whereas the homeless

camping spots were scattered, hidden, and temporary back in 1980, with the number of unhoused people measured in the low hundreds, today there are thousands, and in places the camps sprawl as far as the eye can see. There are now three tent cities in Sacramento, the two major ones—the Island and the Snake Pit, the largest—on the American River.

"The camps have kind of developed like cities: You have a downtown part of the camp, and you have little areas off to the side where there'll be eight or nine tents, kind of like subdivisions," said Joe Smith, the advocacy director for Sacramento Loaves &

It reminded me of the images Dorothea Lange took of homeless camps along the same river in 1936 for the Farm Security Administration.

This is now: Joe Smith, of Sacramento Loaves & Fishes, leads the way through a homeless camp along the American River, close to the spot photographed by Lange decades earlier.



(continued on page 32)

China Synd

Resisting the New



From Cold War in Asia

BY JEET HEER

The breakdown of the neoliberal consensus creates an opening for a more progressive China policy—while also increasing the danger of war.

THERE IS A STORY THAT WASHINGTON POLICYMAKERS like to tell about America's relationship with China, a narrative of the betrayal of naive hopes that is closer to a fairy tale than a sober analysis of history. The fable goes something like this: Once upon a time, there was a hermit kingdom called China, poor, angry, and isolated. Two visionary statesmen, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, visited this unhappy land and opened it up to the world. With diplomacy and trade, successive American leaders helped build up China, with the dream that, as it grew richer, it would join the United States in upholding a harmonious global order. But engagement proved a false dream: As China grew richer, it remained despotic, undercutting America with sharp trade practices, repressing its own people, and threatening its neighbors. Suddenly America found itself confronting a monster. Shortly before he died in 1994, Nixon told *The New York Times*, "We may have created a Frankenstein."

Nixon's invocation of the Frankenstein monster reveals the emotions underlying this historical myth: the creation that betrays its creator. To get a glimpse of Dr. Frankenstein at the height of his hubris, it's worth revisiting former deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick's 2005 speech calling on China to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the American-led international order. The paternalistic assumption was that the United States and China had no deep-seated disagreements, and provided China put aside any ambitions to challenge US hegemony, it could evolve into a junior partner in empire.

All myths have a social function. The myth of China-as-Frankenstein is designed to assuage the American conscience: We meant only to improve the world—and created a monster by accident.

A more realistic view would note that the recent history of America's relationship with China, far from being a story of benevolent intentions that misfired, is instead a record of policies that served a narrow economic elite at the expense of broader democratic interests. A bipartisan neoliberal consensus governed China policy from Nixon's presidency to that of George W. Bush. China was not only a marvelous new growth opportunity for corporate America but also, with its race-to-the-bottom wage scale, an excellent tool for taming labor unions and environmental activists. China's adoption of state capitalism and

the ripple effects this had on the global economy were the defining economic facts of neoliberalism.

The embrace of China also served America's strategic interests at the tail end of the Cold War. The United States opened up to China not for China's sake but to foster a counterforce against the Soviet Union. Eager to enrich big business, successive American governments turned a blind eye to China's exploitative labor practices, minimal environmental protections, and lack of democracy. It wasn't excessive optimism about China that prompted President George H. W. Bush's muted response to the 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square, but rather a desire to keep on good terms with a lucrative trading partner.

President Barack Obama also valued integration with China, though he was more mindful of its costs. As he notes in his new memoir, *A Promised Land*, "Back in the early 1990s, leaders of organized labor had sounded the alarm about China's increasingly unfair trading practices." In recalibrating US China policy, Obama and his administration tried "to thread the needle between too tough and not tough enough...by presenting [then-President Hu Jintao] with a list of problem areas we wanted to see fixed over a realistic time frame, while avoiding a public confrontation that might further spook the jittery financial markets." The key tool Obama wanted to use to nudge China was a new US-Asia trade agreement "with an emphasis on locking in the types of enforceable labor and environmental provisions that Democrats and unions complained had been missing in previous deals."

Obama's needle-threading proved too subtle for the public. Donald Trump rode to electoral victory in 2016 in no small part by harnessing anti-trade emotions and promising to get tough with China. As president, Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership that Obama had negotiated, ending the strategy of using agreements with China's neighbors as a way of checking the rising Asian power. Instead, Trump pursued a bilateral trade war, seasoned with xenophobic rhetoric and amplified after the pandemic with tirades against "the China virus."

Trump's buffoonery is easy to ridi-

Jeet Heer is a national affairs correspondent for The Nation.

“China, as a result of the last three and a half years, is in a stronger position [because of Trump], and we’re in a weaker position.”

—Antony Blinken,
Biden’s nominee for secretary of state



Does Xi or doesn't Xi?: President Xi Jinping and then-Vice President Joe Biden in 2015.

since nominated by the president-elect as secretary of state, spoke at the hawkish Hudson Institute, claiming that “China, as a result of the last three and a half years, is in a stronger position [because of Trump], and we’re in a weaker position.” Blinken argued that a Biden administration would have to work to strengthen the United States for competition with China

As Biden unveils his foreign policy team, it’s clear that Blinken represents the new generation of China hawks in the Democratic Party. Jake Sullivan, the incoming national security adviser, is another. In a May 2020 article for the *Foreign Policy* website (coauthored with the historian Hal Brands), Sullivan argues that China is “pursuing global dominance.”

Michèle Flournoy, initially floated as a possible secretary of defense, wrote an article for *Foreign Affairs* in June 2020 arguing that the US military had to be strengthened so it could “credibly threaten to sink all of China’s military vessels, submarines, and merchant ships in the South China Sea within 72 hours.” Even though she wasn’t nominated, Flournoy continues to command respect in Democratic foreign policy circles. Other prominent China hawks in the running for senior policy positions include Jeffrey Prescott, Ely Ratner, and Kelly Magsamen.

There’s every reason to believe that Biden will have more China hawks setting policy in his administration than any president since Lyndon B. Johnson. What makes them all the more dangerous is that they present their arguments in mainstream and even progressive terms that could win a wider popular legitimacy than Trump’s xenophobia.

For progressives, the rise of the Democratic Party’s China hawks poses a real dilemma. On the one hand, there’s no reason to be nostalgic for an economic

cule, especially since his trade war only marginally changed America’s vast web of economic ties with China. But his antics were merely the most visible part of a larger sea change in which the bipartisan neoliberal consensus of ever-deepening ties with China gave way to a new bipartisan get-tough-with-China consensus. This turn went well beyond labor unions, environmentalists, and human rights activists and now includes the national security establishment (which is increasingly inclined to frame China as America’s

leading global rival) and even corporate America (which has been disenchanted by China’s continued commitment to economic nationalism and state-directed enterprise).

As an erratic demagogue, Trump is dismissible. Far more worrying is the extremist rhetoric that became commonplace in his administration. This past July, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered an alarming speech at the Richard Nixon Library that was a veiled but unmistakable call for regime change in China.

Joe Biden’s presidential campaign never challenged Trump’s saber-rattling on China. Rather, in a move that echoed John F. Kennedy’s 1960 campaign accusing Nixon of being soft on the Soviet Union, Biden’s main line of attack was that Trump was too weak to stand up to Beijing. In April, the Biden campaign ran a TV ad arguing that, in praising the success of China’s coronavirus response early in the pandemic, “Trump rolled over for the Chinese. He took their word for it.” In July, Antony Blinken,



order that hurt labor, the environment, and human rights. The end of the neoliberal consensus opens up possibilities for refashioning the global trading order in a spirit closer to Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren than George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton.

Yet trade is only one dimension of the relationship. The China hawks around Biden also see the Asian superpower as a military rival that must be thwarted. The question facing progressives is whether it’s possible to work with them on areas of agreement, like trade, while also resisting a new Cold War in Asia.

ONE REASON TO FEAR THE NEW CHINA hawks is that they habitually engage in the type of hyperbolic rhetoric that has often been a prelude to shooting wars.

China has the world’s largest population and second-largest economy, but it remains very much a regional military power with a global economic sway, not an aspiring global leviathan. In terms of military bases, cultural reach, and alliance systems, China is nowhere near being able to challenge the United States. All the potential flashpoints between China and the West involve either internal human rights problems or disputed territories that have historically been within China’s sphere of influence: Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Uighurs of Xinjiang, and islands in the South China Sea.

Jessica Chen Weiss, a professor of government at Cornell University, tells me that for a Biden administration, “the most difficult issues are going to be in the realm of human rights and Taiwan. These are issues over which the Chinese Communist Party feels very strongly. It is concerned fundamentally about the security of the regime. Threats to national sovereignty are ones where the Chinese Communist Party has basically brooked no opposition. Chinese efforts around the world have really been designed to intimidate dissent on these issues.”

It’s important to understand how tightly circumscribed by “national sovereignty” China’s ambitions are. This is not to deny that these are important issues on which outside nations have a right, and sometimes a duty, to rebuke China. Still, they are all within what we can recognize as China’s national ambit.

Yet to hear the US national security establishment talk, China aspires to world conquest. And it’s not just the Trumpian right: Robert Gates, the secretary of defense under George



W. Bush and Obama, is a pillar of the national security establishment. In his new book, *Exercise of Power*, Gates argues that Deng Xiaoping, who presided over the economic opening of China to American capitalism, had the “objective of unchallenged Chinese dominance in Asia and someday matching and then overtaking the United States in terms of global power.”

Gates lists the Chinese initiatives currently worrying the national security establishment: muscle-flexing in the South China Sea, the Belt and Road Initiative (an ambitious project to build a continent-spanning infrastructure linking China to Europe and Africa), and the robust use of loans and foreign aid to win friends in the Global South. This sort of dollar diplomacy is, of course, no different from what the United States and other Western nations practice. The only novelty is seeing an Asian nation engaged in great-power politics. Gates also seems anxious about the achievements of Chinese high tech, which he credits with “cloning a monkey—and a human.” In fact, no nation has yet cloned a human. But China’s rise keeps policy-makers like Gates awake at night nursing Dr. Moreau fantasies.

In the March-April 2018 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner argue that with China, “Washington now faces its most dynamic and formidable competitor in modern history.” Sullivan and Brands come to a similar conclusion, claiming that China is in many ways a more serious adversary than the Soviet Union, which “never had the ability, or the sophistication, to shape global norms and institutions in the way that Beijing may be able to do.”

Progressive advocates of foreign policy restraint reject this portrait of China as an existential threat to the United States. They note that the main issues of contention with China are in Asia, not all over the world. Progressives ask whether America needs to remain a hegemon in Asia—a legacy of World War II that seems increasingly anachronistic given the rise not just of China but of other, more democratic nations in the region.

“These two powers are jostling for influence,” Stephen Wertheim of the Quincy Institute tells me, “and China clearly has gotten

significantly stronger in its own region in military terms, which to my mind doesn’t threaten the US as such but does threaten the US pursuit of military primacy in East Asia. And that’s why there was such a fuss about China’s claims in the South China Sea.” He adds, “For many political leaders in Washington, it’s OK for the United States to have a sphere of influence that is global. It’s not OK for China to have a sphere of influence that is regional.”

Daniel Bessner, who teaches US foreign policy at the University of Washington, acknowledges that China is a “rampant human rights abuser” but thinks the proper Western response is to open immigration for the Uighurs and for citizens of Hong Kong. These immigrants could be provided with the capital needed to resettle. This is much more likely to be effective than human rights lectures.

“I don’t think the US should retreat without a plan,” Bessner adds. “The United States is simply not going to fight World War III over Taiwan. My goal would be to foster a security transition where the United States helps regional allies like South Korea and Japan to achieve capabilities that allow them to defend themselves from Chinese expansionism. My major philosophical point is that the countries and states [in the region] have a better sense of what’s going on and have much bigger capabilities to decide what to do than the United States.”

Yet foreign policy analysts closer to the China hawks reject the notion that the United States could offload responsibilities to South Korea or Japan. Thomas Wright of the Brookings Institution asks whether Japan going nuclear or becoming more nationalistic would really be a positive development. He argues that an American withdrawal from the region, however calibrated and gradual, will be destabilizing.

But even if we accept the argument that it’s in the United States’ best interests to remain an Asian power indefinitely, such a decision only underscores how limited China’s ambitions are. Its attempt to carve out a sphere of influence in Asia is perfectly normal great-power behavior, especially in light of its size and its history in the region. Far from being the Frankenstein monster of Nixon’s imagination or the would-be world dictator feared by the hawks, China is an ordinary great power. The question remains why so many policy-makers want to inflate it as a threat.

A RISING CHINA IS THE convenient foil needed by the American elite to hold its own increasingly divided nation together. In retrospect, World War II and the Cold War were powerful structuring experiences that helped subsume national divisions. Since the end of the Cold War, the American consensus has been fraying, with the brief exception of a

Nixon in China: The 1972 meeting with Chairman Mao that launched a thousand fantasies of global realignment.

“For many political leaders in Washington, it’s OK for the United States to have a sphere of influence that is global. It’s not OK for China to have a sphere of influence that is regional.”

—Stephen Wertheim, Quincy Institute

“Very valid concerns around human rights are being weaponized by the national security hawks and turned into a rationale for this new Cold War style of politics.”

—Tobita Chow,
Justice Is Global



Where the Apples got made: Some 79,000 workers turn out iPhones on Foxconn’s assembly line in Fengcheng, Jiangxi province.

few years after 9/11. Increased political polarization has in turn led to gridlock.

China hawks often talk about how the Chinese government sees America as a nation in crisis. As Campbell and Ratner note in their *Foreign Affairs* article, “This strategic distraction has given China the opportunity to press its advantages, further motivated by the increasingly prominent view in China that the United States (along with the

West more broadly) is in inexorable and rapid decline. Chinese officials see a United States that has been hobbled for years by the global financial crisis, its costly war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and deepening dysfunction in Washington.”

It’s possible that the China hawks share this bleak assessment of American prospects but hope a new Cold War with China might help reverse the decline. Bessner says, “I see the turn to China as a result of the failure [of the] Global War on Terror to actually construct an enemy appreciably existential enough to justify the continuation of all these structures. China is the existential threat *du jour*.”

In the September/October 2020 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Campbell and Sullivan fantasize about a “Sputnik moment”:

The notion of a new “Sputnik moment”—one that galvanizes public research as powerfully as seeing the Soviet Union launch the world’s first satellite did—may be overstating the point, but government does have a role to play in advancing [US] economic and technological leadership. Yet the United States has turned away from precisely the kinds of ambitious public investments it made during that period—such as the Interstate Highway System championed by President Dwight Eisenhower and the basic research initiatives pushed by the scientist Vannevar Bush—even as it faces a more challenging economic competitor. Washington must dramatically increase funds for basic science research and invest in clean energy, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and computing power. At the same time, the federal government should scale up its investments in education at all levels and in infrastructure, and it should adopt immigration policies that continue to enhance the United States’ demographic and skills advantage. Calling for a tougher line on China while starving public investments

is self-defeating; describing these investments as “socialist,” given the competition, is especially ironic. Indeed, such strange ideological bedfellows as Senator Elizabeth Warren, Democrat of Massachusetts, and Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, are making a convincing case for a new U.S. industrial policy.

This is perhaps the final and most powerful temptation of the China hawks, a dream that even some progressives might fall prey to: that China can serve as the convenient enemy America needs, a foe serious enough to rally the nation. Gridlock in Washington would end, opening the way for much-needed spending on infrastructure and education. As in the Cold War, battles over culture would be subsumed under the imperatives of national unity.

This fantasy, of course, is based on a rosy depiction of Cold War America. Just as the original Cold War ushered in McCarthyism and Cointelpro, it’s not hard to imagine a new Cold War fueling its own instances of horrific xenophobia—some of which we’ve already seen in the scapegoating of Asian Americans during the pandemic.

IF THE MORE MILITARIZED FORMS OF CHINA hawkishness can and should be rejected, that still leaves genuine areas of dispute. The draconian national security law imposed on Hong Kong and China’s ruthless suppression of its Uighur population are among the major human rights crimes of our time. As Jessica Chen Weiss notes, these are areas where, “unfortunately, the US and other external actors have relatively little leverage. I think you’ll see a prospective Biden administration doing more to draw attention to these concerns, but hopefully without leading to the same kinds of veiled or not-so-veiled calls for regime change in China.”



Tobita Chow, the director of Justice Is Global, worries that “very valid concerns around human rights are being weaponized by the national security hawks and turned into a rationale for this new Cold War style of politics.” Under Trump, Hong Kong became the “site of a proxy struggle,” with the United States using it “to build anti-China nationalism” and President Xi Jinping using it “to build anti-Western nationalism.”

“These two things are mirror images of each other,” he adds, arguing that an aggressive stance on China will only polarize the relationship in a way that supports the reactionary forces on both sides.

There are alternatives to this embrace of conflict. Chow cites the example of Sanders, who “took very clear stances against the Cold War style of politics with China, Russia, and Iran,” instead emphasizing “the need for international cooperation around climate change.” And apart from climate change, a host of other issues, ranging from pandemics to nuclear proliferation, require the two largest economies on Earth to work together much more closely than ever before.

Cooperation and competition define the two poles of the Democratic policy debates over China. If doves like Chow worry that cooperation on climate change will be sacrificed by hawks making cynical use of human rights, the hawks worry that human rights will be sacrificed in a futile search for cooperation.

Tarun Chhabra, former director for strategic planning on the National Security Council and a senior fellow at Georgetown’s Center for Security and Emerging Technology, is a leading advocate for prioritizing human rights.

“Human rights cannot be ‘put aside,’ as Beijing recently proposed, or otherwise compartmentalized in the US-China relationship,” Chhabra insists. “The deepening horror of Beijing’s atrocities in Xinjiang, the betrayal of its commitments in Hong Kong, and the development and export of the surveillance state will drive the US-China relationship as well as [fuel] China’s plummeting relations with the broader free world. It is also galvanizing cooperation among democracies on issues from trade to security to technology. And it will, and should, circumscribe a broad array of interaction and cooperation with China, in ways that many on both sides may not yet have come to terms with.”

Coming from different ends of the spectrum, Chow and Chhabra share the underlying assumption that cooperation and competition are an either/or choice. However, there’s a third path that, instead of treating China policy as a holistic

entity requiring a single approach, sees a range of issues that can be separated. This was Obama’s approach, which combined a military pivot meant to restrict China’s rise in Asia with negotiations on climate change that paid off with the Paris Agreement.

The Brookings Institution’s Thomas Wright is a leading proponent of the idea that cooperation and competition can be combined. Best described as a moderate hawk, he argues that selective economic decoupling would allow China and the United States to more cautiously engage each other.

Decoupling is often seen as a policy advocated by protectionists like Trump. But in the age of Covid-19, decoupling—or disconnecting supply chains, especially for pharmaceuticals and medical equipment—is simply prudent policy. Rather than concentrate industries in one country, there is a sound rationale for distributing production more evenly around the world so that supply chain bottlenecks don’t form.

With decoupling, Wright thinks, the United States could work “cooperatively and in a coordinated way with China,” based on the recognition that “interdependencies produce vulnerabilities” and that both sides need to “strategically disentangle.” Such a policy would be “rooted in accepting the reality that there are these differences.” The end result would be “equilibrium” or “like détente.” In the future, he adds, “one could imagine a sort of point where the two systems are

engaged, but maybe less so than currently and [with a] better sense of the red lines on both sides. Each side is a little bit more independent of the other.”

The precise mixture of competition and cooperation depends on China also agreeing to compartmentalize its relationship. But what if one side demands a trade-off? What would happen if the Chinese government says, “We really want to cooperate on the pandemic—but if you pass this sanction on Xinjiang, then all bets are off”? Wright acknowledges, “That’s a big dilemma.... My answer is, ‘These are things we’re going to proceed on regardless, [things] we feel really strongly about. If you want to hold that in jeopardy, then we’ll proceed with others and hope you come back, because it’s in your interest to do so. But we’re not going to sit down and talk to trade off one against the other.’”

WRIGHT’S IDEA OF SELECTIVE COOPERATION OFFERS a useful model for how progressive foreign policy advocates could handle the China hawks. There’s no need for progressives to sanction everything Biden’s hawkish team

does, and there’s plenty of room to criticize them on threat inflation. But on selective areas like human rights, environmental protections, and labor rights, progressives should take advantage of the fact that they’ll have willing partners in the White House.

The most important role progressives can play is to continue offering a realistic view of China, in contrast to the myths that dominate the national security establishment. China was never going to be the mimic of America that neoliberals dreamed of, but neither is it a Frankenstein monster out to rule the world. Rather, China is a great power with a range of ambitions and flaws. If progressives can keep emphasizing these facts, then the path will remain open for an American foreign policy grounded in reality.



Behind the mask: A rally in Hong Kong protests Beijing’s treatment of China’s Uighur minority.

“One could imagine a point where the two systems are engaged, but maybe less so than currently and [with a] better sense of the red lines on both sides.”

—Thomas Wright, Brookings Institution



Masking fears:
People protest against wearing face masks outside the Gallatin County health department in Bozeman, Mont., on October 2.

What happens when too many people don't care about saving lives.

BY GWEN FLORIO

IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE PANDEMIC, A WHITE-COATED PHYSICIAN from Kalispell, Mont., stood at a podium and issued a dire warning about Covid-19's death rate.

Except Dr. Annie Bukacek called it the "so-called death rate."

"Based on inaccurate, incomplete data, people are being terrorized by fearmongers into relinquishing cherished freedoms," said Bukacek, a pink stethoscope dangling below her double-strand pearl choker, in a YouTube video viewed 870,000 times.

Flash-forward to November, at a county health board meeting in Ravalli County, about 135 miles to the south. In a scene reminiscent of the *Before Times*, people packed the room on folding chairs inches apart, barefaced and sometimes shouting out their objections to masks and other possible restrictions ("Freedom! Freedom!"), heedless of the flying microbes.

In early December, this time at the copper-domed Montana State Capitol in Helena, a legislative committee met to determine rules for the session that starts in January. In the ornate chamber dominated by Charles Russell's nearly 12-by-25-foot painting *Lewis and Clark Meeting Indians at Ross' Hole*, Republican lawmakers—most unmasked—hugged, shook hands, slapped backs.

When a mask-wearing Democratic representative, Sharon Stewart Peregoy, spoke emotionally about Covid-19's toll on her Crow Indian Reservation district, her GOP colleague Barry Usher—unmasked—delivered a verbal smack-down. "It's ridiculous," he said. "It's a waste of my afternoon. I could be trying to make my business survive through this. Instead, I gotta be up here listening to you guys cry."

That same debate rages around the country as people flout government-issued directives and advisories, often secure in the knowledge that they won't be enforced, even as the case numbers climb and health care professionals plead for help.

Some version of "We aren't the mask police" has been voiced by law enforcement and by state and local governments and agencies in places from

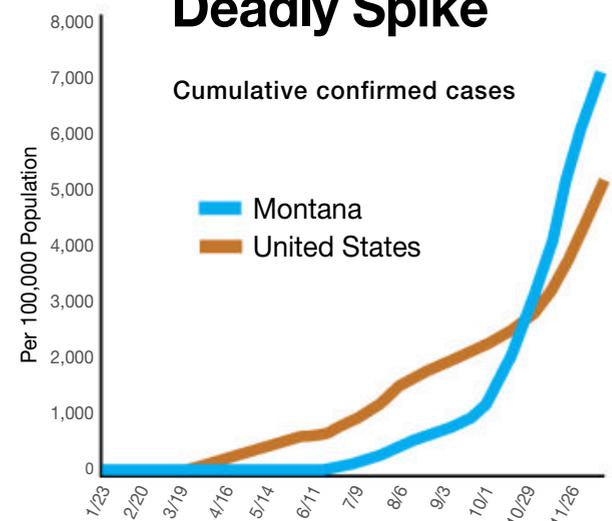
South Dakota to Michigan to Florida, where Governor Ron DeSantis recently extended a ban on penalties and fines for not respecting mask requirements.

When Idaho's Republican governor, Brad Little, imposed new restrictions in October, the state's lieutenant governor, Janice McGeachin, pushed back, brandishing a Bible and a handgun in an ad sponsored by a group called the Idaho Freedom Foundation.

But Montana provides a particularly poignant example of what happens when enough people decide that shrugging off or outright opposing preventive measures is preferable to saving lives.

Montana once boasted one of the lowest case rates in the nation. Daily infection cases among the state's 1 million residents didn't nudge past 100

Deadly Spike



until July 10—a day when neighboring Idaho saw 454 new cases and states like California (7,989) and Arizona (4,164) logged thousands.

Then, in a merciless about-face that holds up a mirror to the national crisis, Montana soared for several weeks recently into the ranks of the top 10 for per capita cases.

"Virtually every hospital in Montana is above 80 percent occupancy," said Montana Hospital Association CEO Rich Rasmussen when we spoke in mid-November.

People packed the room on folding chairs inches apart, barefaced, sometimes shouting their objections.

Gwen Florio is the former editor of the Missoulian newspaper and the author of seven novels.

LEFT: WILLIAM CAMPBELL / GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

So many health care workers have either been infected with or exposed to the virus that the state contracted 200 nurses and respiratory therapists from around the country to ease the strain, and National Guard teams stepped into nonmedical roles at hospitals and the state prison.

The coronavirus “is here, and we are in the fire,” Tara Lee, a nurse at the Kalispell Regional Medical Center, told a county health board deadlocked for months on imposing new restrictions. “We needed help two steps ago. Please.”

Validation: For conspiracy theorists, Dr. Annie Bukacek’s YouTube videos substantiate their fears of a lockdown.

FOR THE LONGEST TIME, MONTANA WAS A PALE ISLAND on the national Covid-19 map, even as hot spots flared in surrounding states.

In late April, Democratic Governor Steve Bullock—then in the midst of an ultimately unsuccessful bid to unseat Republican US Senator Steve Daines—sounded a congratulatory note as he lifted a stay-at-home order and announced a gradual reopening of nonessential businesses and places of worship. “There are very few states in the country that can say they have seen the number of positive cases decline over these past weeks,” he said.

Although Bullock would mandate masks in mid-July, he had eased the restrictions on businesses just in time for the magical 16-hours-of-sunlight days that make Montana a summer vacation paradise. Initial fears that Covid-19 would strike a blow to the state’s vital tourism industry faded as people from places hard-hit by the virus flooded in, packing state parks in record num-

“[The coronavirus] is here, and we are all on fire. We needed help two steps ago. Please.”

—Tara Lee,
nurse at the Kalispell Regional Medical Center

bers, to the point where the locals grouched about being shut out.

By the end of June, Covid-19 had killed just 22 people in Montana. Few places seemed safer—so much space, so few people! Locals and tourists alike took to the rivers, trails, and campgrounds. For a few heady weeks, life felt almost normal there.

In Gallatin County, health officer Matt Kelley likened that early-summer grace period to the initial stages of a flood. “You go through a period where you can kind of keep out the floodwaters with sandbags,” he told me. “At some point in time, the floodwaters seep through.”

In Montana, the sandbags failed in mid-July. The long, flat line on the graph charting Covid-19 cases edged ominously upward.

Bill Burg, chair of the Flathead County Health Board, calls himself “a numbers guy.” When the retired CPA uses the term “exponential” to refer to the growth of Covid-19 cases, he’s speaking literally. State data show the leaps and bounds of active cases in Flathead County: September 1, 114; October 1, 585; November 1, 883. Burg predicted the number would hit 2,000 by mid-November. He was off by a few days. On November 20, the county saw 2,095 active cases. By December 1, 47 percent of the state’s cumulative 63,693 cases had occurred within the previous 30 days. (Daily cases have fallen steadily since.)

“We’re pushed to the limit,” said Rasmussen, who spent years in Florida before coming to Montana. “In my career, I’ve had to participate in 258 tropical events”—hurricanes, floods—and I’ve never seen anything like this.”

RASMUSSEN SAID HE’S AT A LOSS TO understand why the same people who cheerfully don blaze orange during big-game season so they won’t get shot by other hunters object so strenuously to wearing a bit of cloth so they won’t get a deadly virus.

Tamalee Robinson, then the interim health officer in Flathead County, offered an explanation: “Montanans are fiercely independent, and that doesn’t always bode well for public health.”

Flathead County includes Kalispell, where Bukacek—who goes by “Dr. Annie” and who termed the city’s April emergency declaration “martial law”—practices. She is part of an opposition faction that has paralyzed the county health board, shooting down proposed measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19. (Bukacek did not respond to several requests for comment.)

The board, hobbled by a 4-4 split, has twice tried and failed to limit gatherings to 500 people, even with a holiday craft show scheduled.

“As a health care worker, I feel like I’m getting stabbed in the back by half of my community and half of the health board,” said Lee, the Kalispell nurse, speaking at the board’s November meeting.

The acrimonious divide runs like a fault line throughout the state. Ravalli County’s health officer quit in July, saying she had been put in a “no-win situation by the locally elected officials’ decision to disobey the Governor’s directives [on masking] without my input.” She later put her resignation on hold until a new officer could be recruited.

In August, Powell County’s health officer left after a group of residents—upset over the cancellation of a fair and rodeo—confronted her at the hospital where she worked, waving copies of the Constitution and blocking patients from entering.

Then the entire health department in Pondera County resigned in November, citing inadequate pay for the long pandemic hours, a lack of support from the county commission for efforts to prevent the virus’s spread, and “negative talk” in the north-central Montana community.

In Gallatin County—home to Bozeman, the fast-growing college town derisively nicknamed “Boze-angeles” for the influx of moneyed outsiders—health officer Kelley has held his ground despite near-daily protests outside his home. “From where they’re standing in front of my house, they can see the hospital where we have 20 people [with Covid-19], some in intensive



care,” he said. “It can be frustrating.”

And on the day after Thanksgiving, Robinson handed in her resignation as Flathead County’s interim health officer, citing a “toxic environment” that prompted the departure of several department staffers. Widespread opposition beyond the dissident health board members made it impossible to carry out her mandated duties of protecting the community’s health, she said. “The sheriff’s department has come out and said they will not do anything other than education. The county attorney’s office says [the regulations] are unenforceable. The [county] commissioners have come out publicly against all of it, and the health board has voted against it.... There’s no support for the department at any level.”

AS THE NUMBERS TRENDED UPWARD in Montana, the chasm between the factions yawned wider and deeper.

In November, Bitterroot Valley emergency room doctors issued pleas for people to wear masks and follow other precautions, saying, “We are on the brink of disaster.” That same day, the county health board meeting ran for more than three hours as unmasked residents railed against such measures.

Among those in attendance were Alan and Terri Lackey, who have become a fixture at county meetings, protesting masks and restrictions and citing Internet research they say proves these measures ineffective. Alan Lackey, who drives a white 1996 Isuzu Trooper flying two American flags and with a “Make America great again” sign on the door, questioned the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s mortality statistics at the meeting. He said he wanted “just to get back to reality here in Ravalli County,” adding, “I just don’t see people falling, the bodies stacking up.”

Terri Lackey shares her husband’s skepticism about Covid-19’s toll. “I have so much common sense, it oozes out my ears,” she said. “Old people in nursing homes, that’s what they usually do. They die.”

Earlier in the meeting, municipal leaders sought the health board’s support for action on preventive measures, only to be rebuffed. “At what point would there be more enforcement? Is that even on the table?” asked Hamilton City Councilwoman Claire Kemp.

“For me personally, it’s basically status quo... or we pull the trigger on a mandate with citations associated with it, and I’m not in favor that,” a health board member responded.

In Flathead County, when the state tried to take action against five businesses it accused of repeatedly violating the governor’s mask directive, a judge threw out the case. Now those businesses are suing the state.



THERE’S A LOT OF “NOT MY JOB” WHEN IT COMES TO ENFORCING THE DIRECTIVES meant to protect Montana’s residents, and a lot of frustration as a result.

“I’d say any time local political officials are deliberately avoiding their responsibilities to citizens, you’ve got a real challenge to the rule of law,” said Raph Graybill, the governor’s chief legal counsel.

Flathead County Attorney Travis Ahner points a finger back at state government. “With regards to [the governor’s] directives...it doesn’t really specify whether or not there’s any sort of seniority in terms of enforcement,” he said.

Should the county get involved in enforcement, it could face lawsuits from businesses harmed by the restrictions, Ahner continued, adding that he sees his role as advising health officials on the legal ramifications of their actions. It’s up to the state’s Department of Public Health and Human Services to enforce those rules, he argued.

That’s the agency that went after five businesses in Flathead County for allegedly violating the mask directive, a charge one owner vehemently rejected. “It’s a political witch hunt,” said Douglas White, owner of Your Lucky Turn Casino in Bigfork, a town on the shores of Flathead Lake. White accused the Democratic governor—at the time in the midst of his Senate bid—of targeting “high-profile family-owned Christian conservative businesses,” a contention that Graybill wearily contested. “Public health officials had nothing to do with anyone’s Senate campaign,” he said. “This was not politically popular. It did not help anyone’s Senate prospects.” Taking a case to court, such as the unsuccessful one against the Flathead businesses, is “profoundly the exception.”

That kicks enforcement back to the local health departments, whose orders are only as effective as the businesses’ willingness to acquiesce to them. In progressive Missoula County, for instance, most bars and restaurants eventually complied with health department closures after reports that the directives weren’t being followed.

But the outlying counties are as conservative as Missoula is liberal. Voters in Missoula County went for Joe Biden over Donald Trump by 60 to 36 percent, results that were nearly

Masks off: At a Ravalli County health board meeting in November, people packed the room and yelled objections, heedless of the flying microbes.

“I have so much common sense, it oozes out of my ears. Old people in nursing homes, that’s what they usually do. They die.”

—Terri Lackey

“It’s like a cult, this Covid thing.... I’ll be damned if I wear [a mask]. I will go to my grave before I wear one.”

—Alan Lackey

Idaho politics: In an ad, Lieutenant Governor Janice McGeachin wields a handgun and Bible as she denounces Covid-19 restrictions.

Joint Rules Committee voted along party lines to hold the session that began January 4 in person, without mandating masks, distancing, or tests. “I would imagine we are going to have members who are going to get sick,” said State Senator Jason Ellsworth of Hamilton, in Ravalli County. “It’s a possibility we’ll have members who will die. But that possibility is there irregardless of whether we’re even here or not.”

A day earlier, a group calling itself Stand Up Montana sued Bullock over his mask mandate and other restrictions, citing the loss of business and seeking to overturn his directives. The new governor, Greg Gianforte, has consistently said



that, although he plans to wear a mask at the Capitol, he considers the decision a matter of personal responsibility.

By Thanksgiving, Flathead County had lost 39 residents to Covid-19. Robinson’s voice cracked when she spoke to me in November of a health board member who is adamantly opposed to restrictions. “I would like her to be the one to talk to all [of those] families and tell them this is 100 percent survivable,” she said. (Forty-four Flathead County residents had died of Covid-19 as of December 13.)

In her resignation letter, Robinson decried these intractable divisions. “Finally, it’s clear that the underlying motivation of several members of your groups is more closely aligned with ideological biases than the simple desire to do what’s best for the health of the community,” she wrote.

After submitting the letter, she told me in a phone interview, “I’m here watching people die, and no one at any level will do anything about it.” **N**

evenly flipped in Flathead (where Trump got 64 percent to Biden’s 34) and Ravalli (67 to 31 percent). Statewide, Trump won with 57 percent of the vote, over Biden’s 41 percent.

Walk past the brick storefronts on Kalispell’s Main Street and you might not even know there’s a pandemic. Some stores have signs referencing the governor’s mask directive; others request consideration for fellow customers without

specifically mentioning masks. Some have no Covid-related signs at all. Some people wear face masks; many do not.

The same is true of Stevensville, the Bitterroot Valley town of 2,000 where Alan and Terri Lackey created a group—Stand Together for Freedom—to dig in against the state directives. Alan Lackey calls the health board members “Branch Covidians,” a reference to the apocalyptic religious sect involved in the deadly 1993 raid by federal agents outside Waco, Tex. “It’s like a cult, this Covid thing,” he said, terming masks “a symbol of compliance and control.”

“I’ll be damned if I wear one,” he added. “I will go to my grave before I wear one.”

And there it is: the attitude that makes law enforcement agencies turn their attention elsewhere and health officers throw up their hands and quit.

In Helena, despite testimony from health care workers and community members and the opposition of local health and government officials, the legislature’s Republican-majority

(continued from page 21)

Fishes, a nonprofit that provides homeless services, when he took me to visit them. He said the official count was some 5,500 unhoused people, but in reality, it was more like 10,000.

Our first stop was at the Snake Pit. Dozens upon dozens of tents and tarps stretched into the forest on either side of a levee. Smith pointed beyond the wild almond trees heavy with nuts to patches of brush thick with Russian thistle. “Just going that way, there’s probably 500 people buried in there,” he said. It reminded me of the images Dorothea Lange took of homeless camps along the same river in 1936 for the Farm Security Administration. Using her photographs as a guide, I realized we were passing those exact sites nearly 84 years later.

As we entered, we met George, from Oakland, Calif., who showed me the 100 watts’ worth of solar panels he installed near the door of his tent to power lights and a television; he also charges phones for his neighbors. We spoke for a while, during which he pulled out a scrapbook of his family and happier times, then ascended the levee bank together. There we found Smith talking to another resident, a middle-aged woman who could have come to life from one of Lange’s photographs—she had the same weary face and faraway gaze.

I asked her why it’s called the Snake Pit. “There’s a bunch of snakes here,” the woman answered.

“And they’re not cold-blooded creatures,” George chimed in.

“There are some snakes here that live on the ground,” the woman added, “but most of them walk on two feet.”

Smith said he’s bracing for a massive influx. “There’s a whole new segment of people that are going to go from being housed to unhoused, and it’s going to happen suddenly,” he told me. “It’s going to be very traumatic for them. They can react one of two ways. They can be scared and dysfunctional. Or they can come out here and just be as brutal as they can be—their survival instinct. And I know this because I did this. I was that person,” he added, trailing off. Smith was homeless and slept next to the river some years ago.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, SMITH TOOK ME to the Island. This encampment draws an older crowd that, even before Covid-19, had isolated to keep the residents safe, he said. I followed him down a well-traveled trail flanked by box elder, tangles of wild grape, and plentiful poison oak. The Sacramento River glistened in the noon sun. There was a graveyard for the dogs of the Island. Crosses marked the resting

places for Yogi, Girl-Friend, and Ginger. “Dog bless” was written on two of the crosses. The camp was a stark contrast to the Snake Pit: It was clean, with the ground raked and the tents and tarps widely spaced.

The unofficial head of the Island is Twana James, 50. Her tarp home was tidy. Almost everything in it—from a tiny Jesus to a coiled purple glass heart, a television, a stereo, and a fan—came from dumpsters. James is an upbeat woman who doesn’t like calling herself the leader, but she is that by default. Her accent is typical of working-class whites in the Central Valley—her words fall off and she speaks fast, in a mumble, perhaps a linguistic legacy of the Dust Bowl migration.

“We have movie nights,” James said. “This Saturday we’re going to have *Passion of Christ*. I have Bible study on Wednesdays and Saturdays from 8 to 9.” She also cooks. Tonight’s menu: pigs in a blanket, which she’ll prepare for about 35 of the 70 residents. The rolls of biscuit dough at her feet would be used to wrap hot dogs, which then get baked. Although members of the Island pitch in for the expenses and James solicits donations on a GoFundMe page, she often spends her food stamp allotment, as well as her Supplemental Security Income, to cook for everyone.

“I end up spending it helping the guys and

the elders, because I love them—I do.” She came to tears as she talked about Renegade. “He’s getting up there. He can’t walk in. He can’t make it to the bathroom sometimes. He makes a mess, you know.” Another man was blind. “We take care of our own,” she said.

I thought of this community as a cooperative (or, as Smith calls it, “a collective”) and flashed on Tom Collins’s Works Progress Administration camp in Weedpatch, Calif., which was thinly veiled by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*. That camp practiced self-governance, as the Island does. Scofflaws are evicted; the residents of the Island don’t want to give the cops any excuse. Like their counterparts in the Weedpatch Camp, they have created order in lives that otherwise had none.

I wondered if I wasn’t looking at the future for many Americans who, in a year or two, will lose their apartments or homes in the fallout from the pandemic. Will the federal government be there to help? One has little faith, given the past four decades of American political life. Maybe the evicted will be on their own. Maybe the best they can hope for is to establish collectives hidden in riverine forests. If that happens, if the Democrats cannot prevail over Republican obstructionism and find the political voice to care for working-class Americans, the only question that remains is what these modern-day Hoovervilles will be called: Trumptowns or Bidenvilles? **N**



I wondered if I wasn’t looking at the future for many Americans who, in a year or two, will lose their homes in the fallout from the pandemic.

(continued from page 15)
The Deficit Myth: Modern Monetary Theory and the Birth of the People’s Economy (Public Affairs) provides an antidote to deficit hawks who claim there’s not enough money for Medicare for All and a Green New Deal.

PROGRESSIVE TAXATION

Amy Hanauer



Since taking over in 2019 as executive director of Citizens for Tax Justice and the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, Hanauer has been calling out the economic fallacies that pass for policy in Washington. When Senate Republicans gamed the Covid-19 relief debates, Hanauer warned, “Senator McConnell is circulating a hoax of a plan with...two enormous giveaways to corporations: a liability shield for companies whose policies con-

tribute to their employees getting sick, and a tax deduction for business meals.” Making the connection between regressive tax policies and rising inequality, Hanauer and her team crunch numbers and build arguments for taxing the rich and lifting up the working class.

TRANSFORMATIONAL COALITION

Hood to the Holler

When Louisville Black Lives Matter activists and their allies demanded justice for Breonna Taylor, a Black medical worker shot and killed during a police raid, Kentucky legislator Charles Booker joined them on the streets. He didn’t stop there. Booker took the racial justice message to rural Kentucky, mounting a campaign that almost had him winning the Democratic nomination to run against Mitch McConnell. After the primary, Booker formed Hood to the Holler, a grassroots movement to build

“a new Southern strategy” that breaks down barriers to discussions of racial justice and generational poverty.

MUSIC THAT SHALL OVERCOME

Long Time Passing: Kronos Quartet and Friends Celebrate Pete Seeger

Commissioned by the Fresh-Grass Foundation to celebrate the 2019 centennial of Seeger’s birth, the always innovative string quartet and talented vocalists like Maria Arnal, Sam Amidon, and Aoife O’Donovan reimagined the folk singer’s songbook and added numbers from artists influenced by his radical humanity. *Long Time Passing* (Smithsonian Folkways) is both musically and politically brilliant. Its version of Zoe Mulford’s “The President Sang Amazing Grace,” featuring the Ethiopian American singer Meklit, achieves the rare feat

of being painful, beautiful, and healing at the same time.

ANTHEM FOR A REVOLUTION

Janelle Monáe’s “Turntables”



“Turntables” ignites with the singer’s call for “a different vision with a new dream” and this promise: “We kicking out the old regime.” Written for Stacey Abrams’s voting rights documentary, *All In: The Fight for Democracy*, the song (and a brilliant accompanying video with a spoken-word invocation from James Baldwin) aligns history with a new generation’s demands for systemic change. Its release capped a remarkable year for Monáe, which began with a riveting Academy Awards performance that saw her celebrating Black History Month and pioneering women before declaring, “I’m so proud to stand here as a Black queer artist telling stories.” **N**



Ex-Friends

Anne Applebaum and the crisis of centrist politics

BY DAVID KLION

ANNE APPLEBAUM'S NEW BOOK, *TWILIGHT OF Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, opens two decades ago with a rollicking New Year's Eve party that she and her husband threw at their renovated country estate in Poland to celebrate the triumphant end of the 20th century. Applebaum is a historian of Eastern Europe under communism, the author of *Red Famine* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gulag: A History*; her husband, Radosław Sikorski, is a center-right politician who at various times has served as Poland's foreign and defense ministers. Unsurprisingly, the guest list included many center-right intellectuals, journalists, and politicians from the three countries this

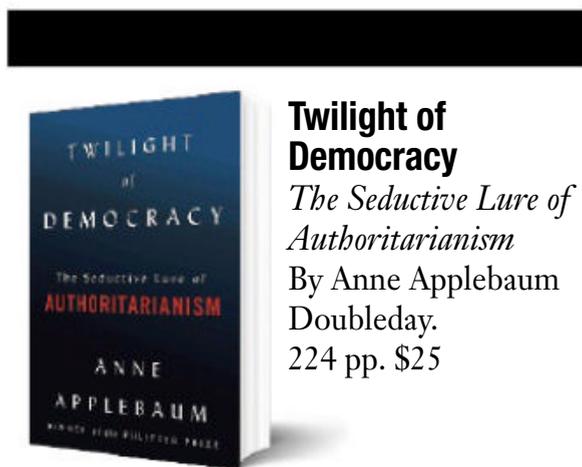
power couple calls home—the United States, the United Kingdom, and Poland. But as we soon learn, in the 20 years since then, many of the guests have migrated from the center-right to the far right. “I would now cross the street to avoid some of the people who were at my New Year’s Eve party,” Applebaum writes. “They, in turn, would not only refuse to enter my house, they would be embarrassed to admit they had ever been there. In fact, about half the people who were at that party would no longer speak to the other half.”

Readers unfamiliar with Polish politics may not recognize names like Ania Bielecka, the godmother of one of Applebaum’s children, who has recently become close with Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the far-right Polish governing party Law and Justice; or Anita Gargas, another of Applebaum’s guests, who now spreads conspiracy theories in the right-wing newspaper *Gazeta Polska*; or Rafal Ziemkiewicz, who now spews anti-Semitic rhetoric on Polish state television. But an Anglo-American audience will likely recognize some of the other people who were once her center-right comrades in arms—from the disgraced conspiracist Dinesh D’Souza and the Fox News prime-time hate-monger Laura Ingraham in the United States to former *National Review* editor in chief John O’Sullivan and current Prime Minister Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom. (O’Sullivan now spends most of his time in Hungary, where he runs a think tank, the Danube Institute, backed by the far-right ruling party.)

For Applebaum, the question is how her peers—all of whom, at the turn of the century, supported “the pro-European, pro-rule-of-law, pro-market” consensus that dominated not only center-right but also most center-left politics after the fall of communism—have come to avow reactionary conspiracy theories, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia and to show a slavish loyalty to demagogues like Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán. *Twilight of Democracy* is her attempt at an answer; in other words, it is Applebaum’s effort to explain why so many of her once-close friends have turned out to be fascists.

Insofar as the book offers intimate portraits of the sorts of intellectuals who have ended up working to empower the far right, it’s a valuable document. Drawing inspiration from Julien Benda’s *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, Applebaum makes explicit that she is not setting out to explain what makes today’s populist strongmen tick nor what makes ordinary voters support them, but specifically why some in her orbit—all highly educated, urbane, cosmopolitan journalists, academics, and political operatives—have joined their cause. Up to a point, her main argument is persuasive: that her

David Klion is an editor at Jewish Currents and writes for The Nation, The New Republic, and other outlets.



Twilight of Democracy

The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism

By Anne Applebaum
Doubleday.

224 pp. \$25

former friends are motivated less by ideological conviction or material suffering than by humiliation and resentment. In particular, they are driven by a sense that their natural talents have been inadequately recognized and rewarded under the supposedly meritocratic rules of a liberal elite that has dismissed them as mediocrities. They are the losers of liberalism’s cultural hegemony—or so they claim—and in the illiberal politics of the far right, they have found a way to win.

It’s a plausible theory, but implicit within it is an unexamined assumption that liberal meritocracy has worked and will continue to work on its own terms. Applebaum’s blind faith in the center-right strains of neoliberalism and meritocratic mobility also conveniently absolves her and her remaining friends of any responsibility for the present crisis. Their success, when they had it, was well deserved; to the extent that they are now powerless against the dangers presented by their estranged cohort, it is only because real merit is no longer being rewarded. It never seems to cross Applebaum’s mind that having had so many erstwhile friends who ended up on the far right might say something unflattering about her own judgment—and more generally about the center-right political tradition to which she belongs.

T*wilight of Democracy* is not a long book. Its six chapters are structured as a series of personal recollections and reporting trips framed by abstract political digressions. From her New Year’s Eve party, Applebaum takes us first to contemporary Poland and Hungary, then to post-Brexit Britain, then to Spain and Trump’s America, and finally back to her Polish country home for another, more recent party—this one attended by a younger, more liberal, and more comfortably post-national crowd, including her sons’ friends from school and university. “No deep cultural differences, no profound civilizational clashes, no unbridgeable identity gaps appeared to divide them,” she writes optimistically, though the possibility that they might not present a socioeconomically representative glimpse of the West’s future doesn’t seem to occur to her.

The most effective moments in these journeys come when Applebaum offers sharply rendered portraits of her far-right subjects. Her contempt for each of them is deeply personal, and she has a knack for understated but cutting observation. Of the director of Polish state television, she writes:

Jacek Kurski is not a radically lonely conformist of the kind described by Hannah Arendt, and he does not incarnate the banality of evil; he is no bureaucrat following orders. He has never said anything thoughtful or interesting on the subject of democracy, a political system that he neither supports nor denounces. He is not an ideologue or a true believer; he is a man who wants the power and fame that he feels he has been unjustly denied. To understand Jacek, you need to look beyond political science textbooks and study, instead, literary antiheroes.

Of the Danube Institute, the think tank run by O’Sullivan:

Hungarian friends describe its presence in Budapest as “marginal.” As a rule, Hungarians don’t read its (admittedly sparse) English-language publications, and its events are unremarkable and mostly go unremarked. But O’Sullivan

sacre. Here Applebaum captures how a nation's deeply felt trauma can devolve into something more sinister:

A kind of hysteria, something like the madness that took hold in the United States after 9/11, engulfed the nation. Television announcers wore black mourning ties; friends gathered at our Warsaw apartment to talk about history repeating itself in that dark, damp Russian forest. My own recollection of the days that followed are jumbled and chaotic. I remember going to buy a black suit to wear to the memorial services; I remember one of the widows, so frail she seemed barely able to stand, weeping at her husband's funeral. My own husband, who had refused an invitation to travel with the president on that trip, went out to the airport every evening to stand at attention while the coffins were brought home.

The crash was ruled an accident, one that initially united Poles and Russians in national mourning. But right-wing Polish intellectuals, including Applebaum's former friend Gargas, soon developed a set of elaborate conspiracy theories to explain it. Applebaum aptly compares the Smolensk theories to birtherism and QAnon in the United States, and she sees in such viral falsehoods a useful tool for autocrats: If adherents can accept one false premise, one "medium-sized lie," then every establishment narrative becomes suspect and an alternative, fact-free political reality beckons them.

As an eyewitness to how these paranoid alternate realities took root among the elites of multiple countries, Applebaum brings a useful perspective, one rooted in her own subject position and not easily found in a political science textbook. But as she moves from one chilling anecdote to the next, the reader may begin to notice a self-flattering

absence haunting *Twilight of Democracy*: Applebaum is willing to skewer her erstwhile friends, but she is unwilling to interrogate her own culpability and that of the center-right establishment more generally. To whatever extent she may now regret some of these friendships with the benefit of hindsight, she does not acknowledge how her past and present worldview—one supportive of neoliberal economics, military adventurism, and elite meritocracy—might also have created the room for the far right.



Applebaum may be well versed in the soap-operatic intrigues of her set, but her grasp of Western political theory is at times superficial by comparison. Typical of the many interchangeable best sellers of the anti-Trump resistance, *Twilight of Democracy* is the sort of book that skips briskly from Plato to Cicero to Hamilton in order to note that elites have always

I need from your love an anesthetic;
come with your morphine kisses to sedate me,
come encircle my waist with your arms,
making a life preserver, to keep the lethal weight
of sadness from drowning me;
come dress me in the clothes of hope—I almost
had forgotten a word like that—,
even if they fit me big as on a child
wearing his father's biggest shirt;
come supervise my oblivion and the gift of
unconsciousness;
come protect me—my worst enemy
and most tenacious—, come make me a haven
even if it's a lie

—because everything is a lie
and yours is merciful—;
come cover my eyes
and say it passed, it passed, it passed,
—even if nothing passed, because nothing passes—,
it passed,
it passed,
it passed,
it passed.
And if nothing will free us from death,
at least love will save us from life.

JAVIER VELAZA
(Translated by Tomás Q. Morín)

been skeptical of democracy, and it dutifully cites Tocqueville, Lincoln, and King in affirming the compatibility of the liberal tradition with American exceptionalism. Meanwhile, she is dismissive and simplistic toward political figures of the past who are still identified with radicalism today. At one point, she goes on a diatribe against Emma Goldman for her anarchist criticisms of American patriotism a century ago, a tradition that Applebaum then traces through to the Weather Underground, Howard Zinn, and parts of the contemporary left.

Applebaum uses these more abstractly political digressions to reaffirm her long-established center-right priors, relying on Cold War-era talking points in an attempt to locate salvageable elements of conservatism amid the current wreckage. Her second chapter, for example, starts off with a bold claim: “the illiberal one-party state, now found all over the world—think of China, Venezuela, Zimbabwe—was first developed by Lenin, in Russia, starting in 1917. In the political science textbooks of the future, the Soviet Union’s founder will surely be remembered not just for his Marxist beliefs, but as the inventor of this enduring form of political organization.”

This is at best a debatable claim, dependent on how one views, for instance, Napoleon Bonaparte, his eventual heir Napoleon III, or any number of Latin American dictators and caudillos of the 19th century. But there’s a reason that Applebaum advances it. As the author of multiple books about the horrors of 20th-century communism and as a defender of the conservative intellectual tradition, she has a stake in holding the left to account while diagnosing the right’s slide into illiberalism: It means she doesn’t have to hold the center, and her center-right flank of it, accountable.

To be fair, Applebaum anticipates this line of criticism. “Although the cultural power of the authoritarian left is growing,” she writes, “the only modern *clerics* who have attained real political power in Western democracies...are members of movements that we are accustomed to calling the ‘right.’” But that acknowledgment notwithstanding, Applebaum is convinced there is a growing “authoritarian left,” which includes many factions that in reality are often fiercely at odds with one another. It’s a left that encompasses Chavismo in Venezuela, Jeremy Corbyn in Britain, the “openly radical, far-left” Podemos party in Spain, “a generation of far-left campus agitators who seek to dictate how professors can teach and what students can say,” and “the instigators of Twitter mobs who seek to take down

public figures as well as ordinary people for violating unwritten speech codes.” (Disclosure: Applebaum has blocked me on Twitter.)



one of this should be terribly surprising, given that Applebaum is among the signatories of the *Harper’s Magazine* letter decrying cancel culture and has backed Yascha Mounk’s like-minded *Persuasion* newsletter. For this increasingly vocal segment of the centrist intelligentsia, the cultural excesses of wokeness are every bit as threatening as far-right politicians wielding actual state power.

But Applebaum’s distaste for the left isn’t just a matter of petty campus and Internet feuds. By drawing parallels between the left and the far right, she is attempting to absolve the center of any blame for its role in the current

crisis, even though it has held a virtual monopoly on political power in the post-Cold War period. Applebaum is eager to psychoanalyze anyone she regards as politically extreme in either direction, but she is far less willing to interrogate her own unconscious assumptions or those of her remaining friends in the center—let alone the material results of their

preferred policies.

To the common charge that the neo-liberal economic order hollowed out the Western working and middle classes via deindustrialization, paving the way for Brexit and Trump, Applebaum writes, “In the Western world, the vast majority of people are not starving. They have food and shelter. They are literate. If we describe them as ‘poor’ or ‘deprived,’ it is sometimes because they lack things that human beings couldn’t dream of a century ago, like air-conditioning or Wi-Fi.”

This line of argument would have been risible even before Covid-19, but *Twilight of Democracy* went to print recently enough that Applebaum was able to include her account of the frantic international border closings last March—which is to say, recently enough that she could have registered that food and shelter may be out of reach for tens of millions of Americans right now and that austerity and neoliberalism bear as much responsibility for this calamity as Trump. Even to the extent that she is right about minimal material needs being met, it’s frankly astonishing that she doesn’t understand how ordinary people—as opposed to her well-connected friends—could be experiencing a crisis of meaning and dignity in a political order that expects them to be satisfied with cheap consumer goods and privatized essential services.

These are concerns not just in the United States or the United Kingdom but in Eastern European nations as well, including the one that hosts her country estate. Civic Platform, the center-right party that governed Poland from 2007 to 2015 and in which Applebaum’s husband served, presided over a staggering rise in economic inequality. It imposed austerity measures in the wake of the post-2009 eurozone crisis, raising the retirement age and phasing out pensions for farmers, miners, police, firefighters, and priests. At the same time, it embraced free trade to attract foreign businesses like Google, and its leaders were recorded flaunting ostentatious new wealth as the impoverished regions in the east stagnated. These regions would become the stronghold of the far-right Law and Justice government, which came to power by campaigning against Civic Platform’s fiscal cruelty. Civic Platform also weathered a series of corruption scandals, none of which get any acknowledgment in Applebaum’s account of Law and Justice’s rise to power.



By drawing parallels between the left and the far right, Applebaum is trying to absolve the center.

Then there's the matter of foreign policy, something Applebaum cares about a lot more. If she rejects the argument that globalization and inequality led to the far-right revival, she doesn't even glancingly acknowledge the argument that the post-9/11 wars and crackdowns on civil liberties might also have played a role. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, which Applebaum supported, is discussed at any length just once, when she mounts a defense of Atlanticism—or at least the version of it championed by her husband at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute, which sought to build ties between the United States and Europe by embroiling both in endless wars in the Middle East. “There was a genuine coalition of the willing that wanted to fight Saddam Hussein, including [José María] Aznar in Spain, British prime minister Tony Blair, Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Polish president Alexander Kwasniewski, and a clutch of others,” she writes approvingly, before noting briskly that the war has haunted politicians like Blair ever since.

For Applebaum, the main significance of Iraq seems to be that it drew the US and Polish governments closer together. Whatever impact it had on Iraqis themselves, on traumatized veterans returning home, and on an entire generation's willingness to trust the very Atlanticist project to which she remains committed escapes her notice. So does the propagandistic disinformation campaign that the Bush and Blair governments deployed to whip up support for the war—essentially a conspiracy theory, and one significantly advanced by Applebaum's current social circle.

O bring up Iraq in part because if Applebaum is going to write a book about the sins of her former friends, it's also worth noting the sins of the friends she still has. According to the acknowledgments for *Twilight of Democracy*, these friends include David Frum, the author of George W. Bush's 2002 “axis of evil” speech;

Jeffrey Goldberg, the *Atlantic* editor in chief who commissioned the essay on which her book is based and who also reported for *The New Yorker* in 2002 about the since-discredited connection between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda; and Leon Wieseltier, who championed the Iraq War and who fell from grace in 2017 after multiple women accused him of sexual harassment during his long tenure as literary editor of *The New Republic*.

Another friend who read drafts of *Twilight of Democracy*, Applebaum proudly tells us, is Christina Hoff Sommers, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute who has been condemned by the Southern Poverty Law Center for her involvement in Gamergate, the far-right online

movement widely seen as a forerunner of Trumpism. At least as recently as 2016, Sommers was an associate of Milo Yiannopoulos, the alt-right provocateur whom even Applebaum describes as a “sad figure” who has “ceased to have much influence in the United States.” The bilious mouthpieces of the far right and the center-right are never all that far apart—indeed, Applebaum's husband has had to deny that he once joked that Barack Obama's ancestors were cannibals.

All of this is to say that if Applebaum was blindsided by the turn that some of her friends have made to the far right over the past decade, she may not be the best judge of which intellectuals carry latent fascist tendencies today, let alone a trustworthy critic when it comes to understanding the ties between her center-right politics and those of the far right.

In her section on US politics, Applebaum describes her own break with the Republican Party. In 2008, she wrote an article for *Slate* explaining why she couldn't bring herself to vote for John McCain for president, a decision she attributes to “the ascent of Sarah Palin, a proto-Trump, and the Bush administration's use of torture in Iraq.” Although she denounced the GOP's slide into illiberalism, at the time she had

mostly positive words for McCain, a fellow Cold War hawk who had spoken at the Washington launch party for her history of the gulag.

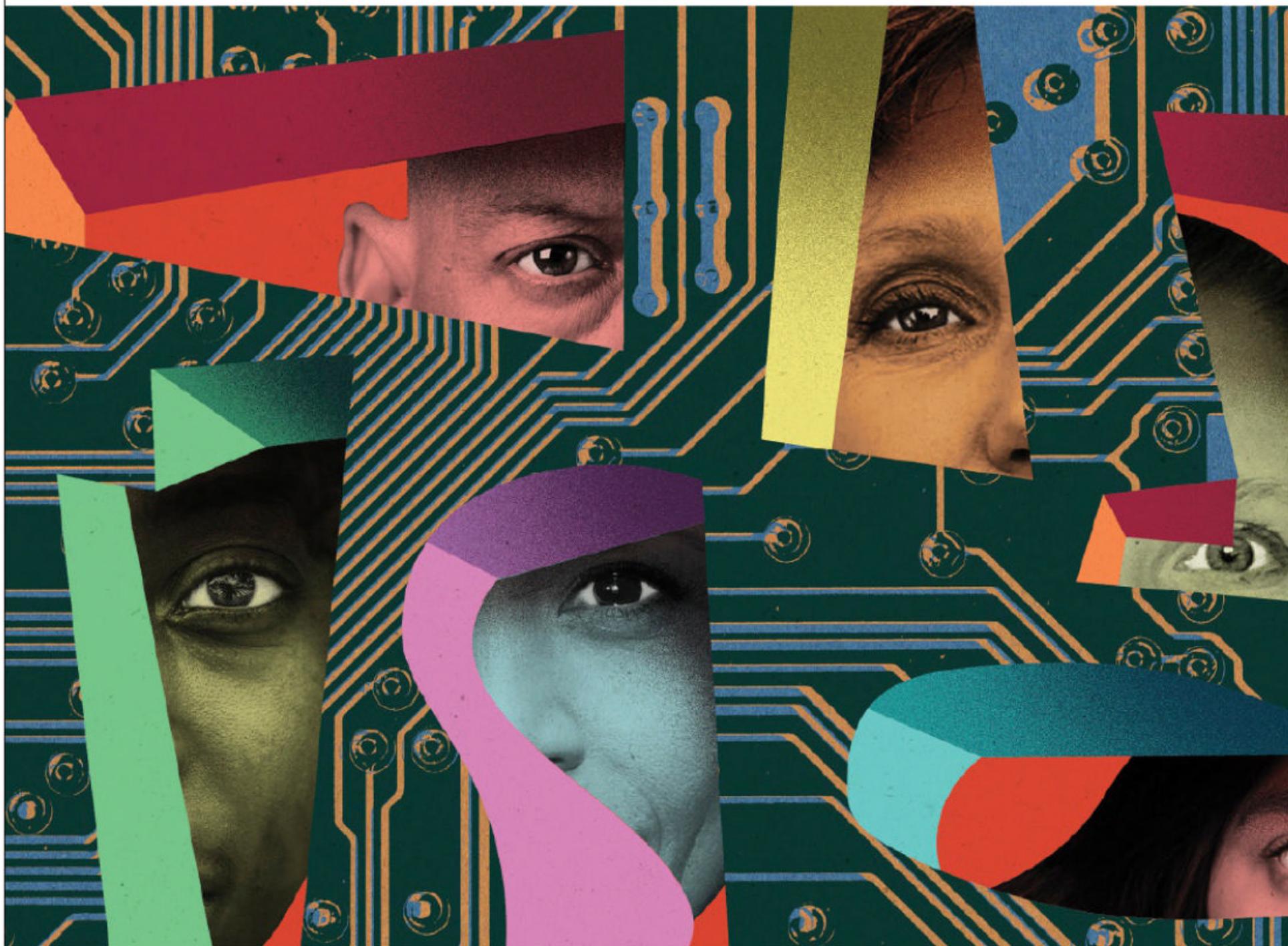
McCain was Applebaum's kind of Republican: a champion of the liberal international order; an occasionally idiosyncratic, self-styled centrist; a friend to countless journalists; and a wisecracking, backslapping establishment elite. Early in the book, she describes her present cohort of center-right intellectuals as aligning with “the Republican Party of John McCain.” But she never fully reckons with how a figure like McCain facilitated the far right's mainstreaming—not only by elevating Palin to national stature but also through other efforts over his long career to dog-whistle to bigots, such as his infamous opposition to Martin Luther King Day. Applebaum notes, tellingly, that after she criticized Palin's selection, McCain never spoke to her again.

Regardless, now that Trump has been defeated by the doggedly centrist Joe Biden—who appointed the senator's widow, Cindy McCain, to the board of his presidential transition team—Applebaum can rest assured: Not only will centrist Republicans never be held accountable for empowering the far right, they will also be actively rewarded by the ascendant centrist Democrats.

Both in *Twilight of Democracy* and in her recent interviews and tweets, Applebaum has insisted that the authoritarian temptation exists on both the left and the right, even if right-wing authoritarianism is the more immediate threat. That's true to an extent, and it's understandable that someone who has studied Stalin's reign of terror in such detail would say so. But it's also a dodge. Today's rising leftists in the United States and the United Kingdom, by and large, aren't calling for a return to Stalinism but for a social democratic model that would seek to repair the enormous human damage done by decades of the untrammelled neoliberalism that Applebaum and her friends have consistently championed.

Unlike her and her centrist peers, these leftists are also offering a constructive alternative to both the far right and the failed status quo—and one that might stand a better chance of saving liberal democracy than anything proposed in this book. Perhaps Applebaum should consider throwing them a party.

Applebaum's new book is her attempt to answer the question of why so many of her once-close friends have moved to the far right.



The Hidden Workers

How Silicon Valley has tried to transform our understanding of work

BY CLIO CHANG

LAST YEAR, I WENT ON TOUR FOR A LIVE JOURNALISM STAGE show, which meant I got to visit a handful of cities—San Francisco, Nashville, Los Angeles—that I hadn't been to in a while. As someone who rarely has an excuse to travel around the United States, I quickly discovered not just a love of touring but also a new scourge that had taken over the country right under my nose: electric scooters.

Ride-sharing e-scooters like those from Bird and Lime had not yet reached New York. But in other cities, the scooters were everywhere. They littered the streets like a high-tech version of chewing gum, smeared on the sidewalks and slowly calcifying into the terrain. This is the future that liberals want, I joked to myself. But the scene was illus-

trative of the kind of future Silicon Valley was creating: scooters lying unused on city sidewalks, blocking the foot traffic, while others zipped around in the public bus lanes. What could easily have been labeled a “broken windows” quality-of-life issue in some neighborhoods was instead hailed as the pinnacle of innovation.

The situation was unsettling. Overnight, these scooters had taken over entire cities, and yet there wasn't a single person involved with their upkeep in sight. In fact, that was the whole point—the technology behind the app was built in offices in California, while the scooters were maintained by a slew of independent contractors working in the shadows and bringing them home to charge overnight. The only thing the public saw were the vehicles themselves, summoned to appear seemingly out of nowhere and ridden for a cool 39 cents per minute.

The scooters are simply one of the more obvious examples of a common phenomenon that has come to define early-

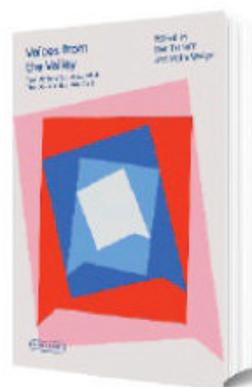
21st-century life. Many products of the tech world are meant to obscure the people who build and maintain them (other than, of course, the founders at the very top). This workforce doesn't just include engineers but also cooks, recruiters, cleaners, shuttle drivers, and technical writers, who are all vital to keeping these companies running. We may see the detritus of this work, and we may benefit from the service it provides, but rarely do we engage with those helping to make and run the products.

In recent years, though, as tech companies have gained more power, the hidden workers maintaining their growing market share have begun to reveal themselves. They are not only pushing for their voices to be heard, whether through unions or by speaking to journalists; they are also demanding more control over the terms of their work. Ben Tarnoff and Moira Weigel's new book, *Voices From the Valley*, is an attempt to put these workers at the forefront. Consisting of seven anonymous interviews with people who work in Silicon Valley, it offers a fuller picture of what is happening behind the scenes of the tech industry. That task is immense, and Tarnoff and Weigel offer just a small glimpse. As they write in the introduction, "This book aspires to be representative. It is not exhaustive. It could not be, because Silicon Valley is now everywhere." But it nonetheless gives us a sharper view into the perspectives of those who shape so much of our world today.

Tarnoff and Weigel interviewed a wide range of workers who, speaking anonymously, talk frankly about both the material and intellectual conditions they face. There's the technical writer who is unappreciated because, despite her title, her job is considered "nontechnical" in an industry dominated by engineers and programmers. There's the massage therapist who describes working on tech employees whose backs feel like "a single slab of marble" and who worries about the women among them, who appear "stressed and sad." (In the course of her job, she develops arthritis, damaging her own body to fix others'.) And there's the start-up founder who has become disillusioned along the way and gives us a candid look into the dynamics of the upper echelons of the industry. As the founder admits, "I wasn't actually solving problems—I was just riding a wave of ridiculous overinvestment in social apps."

While there are some through lines in the book, the interviews themselves don't quite cohere into an overarching message. Instead, they add complexity to the often self-flattering narratives the tech industry tells about itself. The stories offered by the interviewees remind us that Silicon Valley isn't democratic; hierarchies are central to a structure that funnels its returns to those at the top. The industry's fabled "disruption" brings

Clio Chang is a politics reporter whose work frequently appears in Jezebel, The Intercept, and The New Republic.



Voices From the Valley

Tech Workers Talk About What They Do—and How They Do It

Edited by Ben Tarnoff and Moira Weigel

FSG Originals.

176 pp. \$15

about destruction as often as it does innovation. And while it might seem like this structure is immutable, the truth is that there are people working and making decisions behind the algorithms, apps, and scooters that have come to rule so much of our lives.

Perhaps the myth that *Voices From the Valley* most successfully explodes is the idea that some workers are vital to the industry while others are not. As Tarnoff and Weigel write, "The tech industry places a premium on 'technical' skills. But one recurring theme of our conversations is that all work involves technique, whether it is preparing steak for several hundred people or massaging bodies that hours of coding have turned into slabs of concrete."

The most efficient and effective way that companies instill these divisions is by classifying some workers as full-time employees and others as contractors. During the 2020 election, gig companies like Uber and Lyft poured hundreds of millions of dollars into getting Proposition 22 passed in California. The controversial ballot measure, which successfully

passed in 2020, exempts these companies from reclassifying their workers as employees, instead allowing them to be retained as contractors, thus depriving them of benefits and protections. And as *Vice* noted, California was "just the start." In 2019, *The New York Times* reported that Google worked with 121,000 contractors, which is a larger workforce than its 102,000 full-time employees. This isn't an anomaly—contingent labor in Silicon Valley accounts for 40 to 50 percent of the workers at most tech companies. Nor is this phenomenon limited only to blue-collar workers.

Some of the differences in the treatment of full-time and contract employees are materially obvious: For example, the former are entitled to health and retirement benefits, stock options, and company perks, while the latter are not. But as the people in Tarnoff and Weigel's book attest, the hierarchies seep into every aspect of company culture in pernicious ways. The massage therapist describes how, even though contract workers have access to the entire building, they usually sit in a specific place in the cafeteria because "that's where we all felt safe." She recalls a time when she brought her fifth-grade daughter to work because her daughter was interested in coding, and she wanted to introduce her to one of the female engineers. But when they entered the engineering area, everyone began to stare at them. "It felt like I had done something wrong," the massage therapist says. "It made me realize that people can be nice, but that doesn't mean they necessarily want you in their space."

One cook relates to Tarnoff and Weigel how unionizing at their company helped break down some of the divisions between fellow workers. "When people actually realize that they are worth more, it's nice," the cook says of the early changes that took place when workers began to talk with each other. Even before they won their contract, their workplace felt different, with their managers no longer speaking to them "like peasants" but actually "treating us like people." The cook also notes how organizing began to instill solidarity between groups that were normally treated as distinct. "I knew a tech worker who said she was a contractor like me. I didn't even know they had tech workers as contractors at those companies," the cook recalls. "So now a lot of

the tech workers, they're feeling like us."

Even those in full-time positions have started to recognize the negative effects of the tech world's flourishing hierarchies. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, those divisions only became more obvious. At Google, employees sent a memo to the company's leadership in March demanding that it extend benefits such as work-from-home policies and paid time off to contract workers.

While conditions still vary drastically among workers in the tech industry, it

has become increasingly clear that what's detrimental to one class of workers is usually bad for all. As one Google engineer tells Tarnoff and Weigel, their jobs have also become more difficult since companies began hiring people as TVC (temporary, vendor, or contract) employees rather than full-time workers, leading to constant turnover and the regular use of third-party contractors who don't have access to the company's code base. "It makes everyone's life worse," the Google engineer says. "That's the point."



ver the past decade, as more has been revealed about how tech companies work behind the scenes, the industry's altruistic image has started to erode. The interviews in *Voices From the Valley* give us a nuanced range of political views about this shattered image and where the tech world can and should go next. While the contract workers, some of whom are long-time Bay Area residents, are clear-eyed about the dystopian tendencies of the tech companies, other employees still see possibilities for optimism within the industry.

Take, for example, the data scientist who acknowledges that the industry's impact has been far from perfect and that there are many fallacies to its way of thinking, but who continues to believe in many aspects of a tech utopia. "On the one hand, there's no better shepherd for the economy than an engineer," this person contends; "on the other hand, there's no worse shepherd for the economy than an engineer."

The data scientist understands that power in the industry is concentrated among a select few, but their solution fits into an insidious framework popular among the tech elite: "I don't see another endgame other than pretty high taxes plus basic income as the way of making that okay, because I don't think that's going to go away. I'm not even totally sure we should discourage it from happening." While it could be a powerful addition to the welfare state, universal basic income is often cast by policy advocates as a catchall way to redistribute money while avoiding the need to create pre-distributive, systemic regulations to ensure that no single class of individuals can become so powerful.

And then there's the public relations professional who asserts that while tech companies may not always get it right, their innovation is "generally not driven by people thinking about growth or market share in a systematic way" but by "people trying to create value for users." The statement comes across like a classic PR pitch—the only thing I could think of was, "Does it even matter what people's intentions were?"

In contrast, the takeaways that the contract workers provide to Tarnoff and Weigel are more concrete; they offer a clearer view into the actual ways in which Silicon Valley has changed the landscape, both literally and politically. As the cook, who grew up in West Oakland, points

In the Epoch of Bronze

We make the time pass.

See, the devices
laid out on the long tables,
such ingenuity.

This is the wave offering,
this the heave offering.

Waves
of earth passing
over you, into history.

You cling to the branch
the self offers.

It is slender. It is fragile.
Birds
flee from it
when you interrupt them
with your grasping
hands.

Children
die here, you know.
This is their only world.

G.C. WALDREP

out, all they see driving down El Camino now is hotel after hotel, rather than any actual housing. “They’re building those hotels for the tech industry, so all these people can come in and do big business here. But they ain’t let us—the people that’s living here—get no part of the big business,” the cook says.

Perhaps the most candid view of the industry comes from a founder whose start-up was acquired by a bigger company to prevent it from becoming a competitor. “People were becoming founders and investors not because they wanted to solve the problems that would help humanity but because they wanted to be in the Silicon Valley scene,” the founder says. “They wanted the cultural cachet. They wanted to go to the parties.” A generalization, to be sure, but that sentiment as an actual driving force in the industry makes plenty of sense—after all, who doesn’t want to go to parties? I was reminded of a line in Anna Wiener’s *Uncanny Valley*: “Business was a way for men to talk about their feelings.”

The lessons provided in *Voices From the Valley* are more insightful than those in any of the hagiographies we’re usually served up about tech founders. But while we’re getting more and more of these workers’ views, the dominant narratives have only begun to shift. Understanding the people behind an industry that now infiltrates all parts of our world is a prerequisite to making that industry more equitable. As Tarnoff and Weigel observe, “The fact that the people at the top were the only ones allowed to talk to the media reinforced the idea that they spoke for everyone.”

Sharing stories, however, is just the start. What must come next includes things like breaking up the tech monopolies, ending the industry’s rampant misclassification of workers, and organizing unions. But it’s still an important pushback against the tech elite’s preference to erase the people behind the scenes who labor to build their products. It overturns the narrative that algorithms, not people, are in control of what happens and that responsibility is diffuse. Unlike the proclamations of many tech company founders, Tarnoff and Weigel’s book offers no silver-bullet solutions for what comes next. The cook perhaps sums it up best: “The near future is gonna be hard. Really hard.” **N**



A Shimmering Noise

Oneohtrix Point Never’s soundtrack for the American subconscious

BY BIJAN STEPHEN

MAGIC ONEOHTRIX POINT NEVER, THE LATEST ALBUM FROM Daniel Lopatin—who records under the name Oneohtrix Point Never—feels as though it’s been beamed from the antenna of a deep space probe directly into your ears. The album registers like a radio broadcast from another reality, perhaps one parallel to our own, almost inchoate and yet somehow fully formed.

Part of that otherworldliness comes from the way *Magic Oneohtrix Point Never* is structured. It hangs around a series of cross-talk interludes, which are themselves mashed-up FM broadcasts recorded across America. They spin between daytime and nighttime talk formats—morning news chatter and sultry call-in shows collaged with and against each other—and the effect is orienting: The mood of each interlude attunes the listener to new frequencies.

The album progresses in this way, with each track making psychic room for the one that comes after it. The journey was inten-

tional, Lopatin told Apple Music. “You’re in alarm clock territory,” he said. “You’re waking up kind of inside the fucking radio, not listening to it. I really want the setting of the album to be almost within a kind of psychic environment—*Magic Oneohtrix Point Never* as a radio station. So you’re waking up. Time to get on with the day.”

And a salient feature of radio, of course, is that it takes a certain amount of agency away from its listeners: You willingly submit to the songs that are chosen for you. *Magic Oneohtrix*

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YANIS VAROUFAKIS JOAN
WALSH AMY WILENTZ GARY
YOUNGE —Hosted by **Jon Wiener**

Point Never is programmed in the same way; the tracks go from shimmering noise to gonzo pop music and back again. But the slides between forms and genres are always considered, and there is ever-present evidence of a guiding hand at the wheel. It's like listening to an afternoon DJ set made just for you.

Lopatin came up through the Brooklyn noise scene of the mid-aughts before detouring through what the writer David Keenan evocatively termed “hypnagogic pop,” music sleepily refracted through artifacts of '80s nostalgia, like lines from forgotten TV commercials. Lopatin hit the big time with his 2009 compilation album, *Rifts*, which won international acclaim, and has remained incredibly productive since then—*Magic Oneohtrix Point Never* is his 12th studio album, including his film soundtracks—becoming one of the most influential electronic musicians of the past decade. His work has slinked between noise, collage, found (recovered?) sound, and something like classic minimalism. Lopatin's musical corpus is the carefully assembled document of a restless, roving mind. Lately he's been exploring more sonically accessible turf, centered around warm strings and the human voice.

The new record is closer to Lopatin's 2018 record, *Age Of*, than it is to his other recent and arguably better-known work: the acclaimed scores to the Safdie brothers' films *Good Time* (2017) and *Uncut Gems* (2019). These albums all play with mood in the same way, however. The scores are corrosively electronic, a barreling soundtrack to films that never let up. The song “Romance Apocalypse” from *Good Time* is instructive; it's the sound of New York City as a consummated cyberpunk dystopia. *Age Of*, on the other hand, is human-sized, so much so that it mimics being inside Lopatin's head. Intrusive thoughts are modeled alternately as bursts of static and noise, and musical lines feel like they're being deconstructed in real time.

Magic Oneohtrix Point Never sometimes trades its melodies for abstraction, but it's more concerned with propulsion. Between “Auto & Allo” and “I Don't Love Me Anymore,” there's a sense that Lopatin is embracing pop (albeit from that other, wordless place). The midsection of the album, “Bow Ecco” and “The Whether Channel,” has a backbone of palate-cleansing bleeps and buzzing; then

the album resolves into the gorgeous “No Nightmares,” which is basically Lopatin channeling soulful, quiet-storm radio playlists into something wholly his own.

No doubt that's partly due to the influence of singer Abel Tesfaye—aka the Weeknd—who co-executive-produced the album and whom Lopatin worked with on Tesfaye's album *After Hours*. If you're careful, you can catch other collaborators' voices here as well. The electronic songstress Caroline Polachek appears on “Long Road Home” and “No Nightmares,” and you can hear experimental producer Arca's influence on “Shifting,” for which she contributed vocals. The collaborations expand Lopatin's scope; *Magic Oneohtrix Point Never* feels less airless than some of its predecessors. Even so, it doesn't necessarily read as a collaboration—it's sonically coherent in the same way a novel might be, as a contribution from a single voice.

As *Magic Oneohtrix Point Never* nears its close, things become increasingly chaotic. There's more static and more experimentation with voices and sonic textures. “Lost But Never Alone” is a standout—an emotional manifesto that serves as a kind of summation of what's brilliant about the album as a whole. It combines Lopatin's more experimental ideas (noisy guitar scuzz, buried and pixelated vocals) with a beautiful melodic line and a thumping bass beat that wouldn't sound out of place on a power ballad. The effect is hallucinatory.

The other late tracks, on the other hand, are sweeter. “Wave Idea” is adorned with samples of birdsong, and the electric strings sound like the morning dawning after you've been up all night; it's the soundtrack for your walk from the club to an all-night diner. The album's closer, “Nothing's Special,” ends the proceedings on a high note: It's about becoming enchanted with the little things in life again. “With that said, I'm still impressed / At how special nothing gets if you stare long enough,” Lopatin sings.

Despite its beauty, *Magic Oneohtrix Point Never* doesn't seem like a magic trick. Rather, Lopatin has made a piece of art that sounds as if it has always existed, channeled from somewhere in the subconscious of the American airwaves. Which is perhaps why it can stand as a summary of his musical career; more than anything, the Oneohtrix Point Never project feels like it's mapping the magical underside of our workaday lives. It's like turning over a rock and finding a stream of silverfish there, which then burst into flight. **N**



Letters

Better to Tax

🗨️ The problem outlined by Tim Schwab in “Playing Games With Public Health Data” [Dec. 14/21, 2020] is aggravated by the heavy reliance of research in general, and global health in particular, on private philanthropists like Bill Gates. No matter his motivations and sincerity, it would be better if Gates’s \$40 billion spent on health care were taken from him as income tax and via a wealth tax. It could then be channeled through the proper government and international agencies with the same or better efficiency.

DAVID GURARIE

Nuclear Options

🗨️ In regard to Maria Margaronis’s article on the jail sentence given to Martha Hennessy for participating in a disarmament action at a nuclear facility [“Free the Plowshares 7!,” Dec. 14/21, 2020], sending this woman to jail isn’t the right move. As someone who spent 20 of 30 years in the electric utility business in nuclear generation, I disagree with her group’s stand on nuclear power (it can be an important alternative to fossil fuels if done right), but I think trying to rid the world of nuclear weapons is an important goal.

WILLIAM FLYNN

Power Gridlock

Ed Morales’s article, “Privatizing Puerto Rico,” in the December 14/21 issue included many of the talking points of the island’s Popular Democratic Party. This is the party that supports keeping more than 3 million US citizens living under discrimina-

tory treatment by the federal government. Also, the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority operates as a public monopoly burdened by political patronage, lax financial accounting, unresponsive customer service, and antiquated management.

GENE ROMAN
NEW YORK CITY

An Ailing System

🗨️ In “Too Big to Heal,” Susie Cagle spotlights the issue of consolidation in the US health care system [Dec. 14/21, 2020]. This consolidation began under Ronald Reagan, whose administration ignored antitrust laws and appointed judges who favored corporate interests. The result has been a consolidation in every industry, and this has increased costs for consumers and reduced wages for workers.

BRUCE STENMAN

The Progressive Future

🗨️ Jonathan Smucker answers no in the “Debate” article “Should the Left Launch an American Labor Party?” [Dec. 14/21, 2020]. Smucker says that only the crisis of slavery led to the emergence of a successful third party. The current pandemic and the emergent depression that is destroying small businesses and creating near-starvation and homelessness certainly ranks as a crisis on that order. The Bernie Sanders campaigns of 2016 and 2020 were an experimental test of whether progressive Democrats can take over the party. The results definitely show that they cannot.

CALEB MELAMED

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Q&A

Lizz Winstead

A year ago, Lizz Winstead probably didn't expect to be performing on a makeshift stage to fewer than two dozen people in kayaks on a lake in the woods of Minnesota, but then little about 2020 was foreseeable. The *Daily Show* cocreator and former head writer has been doing political comedy for decades, from one-woman shows about the Persian Gulf War of 1991 and 9/11 to a collection of essays that discuss her politicization to a stand-up tour benefiting Planned Parenthood and NARAL. In the midst of last year's protests against racism and police brutality, Winstead filmed two stand-up shows—one in late September and another in November, after the election. They form the basis of her new special, *Corona Borealis*. In it, Winstead talks about the pandemic, racism, and the various ineptitudes of the Trump administration and also features a conversation with Minneapolis city councilwoman and poet Andrea Jenkins, who made history in 2017 as the first Black, openly trans woman to be elected to office in the United States.

—Rima Parikh

RP: How did you negotiate being a white person talking about racism without overstepping?

LW: You hear white liberals say, “Oh, those Karens,” as though they're not responsible for Karens. I really wanted to put out that they are a product of us not calling out the people in our lives who are doing that.

RP: What went into the choice to include a conversation with Jenkins about defunding the police?

LW: The way to talk about George Floyd was, for me, to have Andrea Jenkins drive a conversation where I didn't say much. I wanted to showcase Andrea in that piece to make sure the correct voices are being heard.

RP: You had a lot of older white people in the crowd at the first show who might have been a little more resistant to the idea of defunding the police. Were you thinking about how to reach them?

LW: I think that when people hear that phrase, bristles go up. I feel it's just like saying the word “abortion.” People are like, “Don't say the word ‘abortion.’” And it's like, I'm not going to *not* say words. If we allow the fear of words to stop us and we dance around them, then we end up never talking about the actual thing we need to be talking about.

RP: How do you think political comedy will change in the Biden-Harris era?

LW: Back in the day, every late-night show was like, “We don't want to do a lot of political jokes.” And then every late-night show jumped on Trump because it was buffoonery. So what I'm curious about is: Are they going to go back to, “Oh, now that it's Biden, we're not going to talk about politics anymore”? Or are they going to be brave enough to say, “The best time to talk about politics is when you have somebody who has purported to be someone who will listen to different points of view and listen to change”?

RP: How have your politics and comedy changed over time?

LW: I don't shy away from how I've evolved, because the power structure of our politics hasn't. There's still money in politics—people who come into our political system from a system that is run by money. Trump made it harder to be a political comedian, because basically you're talking about somebody like, “What is *wrong* with this person?” It's like analyzing a sociopath versus doing political comedy. That's what political comedy was for the last four years: the anatomy of a sociopath. That's not political comedy. I'd like to get back to the matter of holding people accountable through humor.

RP: What surprised you about filming this special?

LW: When you film a special in the woods, your natural sound is crickets. So every time I was standing onstage in a normal pause, there would be crickets crickets, so it sounded like I was bombing constantly. Some of that had to be edited so there weren't so many crickets constantly crickets. I think the fact that people were so desperate to want to come and hear anything about the year [surprised me]. People were in such an overwhelmed, emotional state and were still game. I do often think, if you can still laugh, you haven't lost your capacity for hope. **N**

“If you can still laugh, you haven't lost your capacity for hope.”



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