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EST. 1865
JULY/AUGUST 2025

160th Anniversary Double Issue

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Fifty Writers and Artists Report

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People power: Aztec dancers mark the fifth anniversary of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis on May 25.

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FEATURES

Cover illustration: **BRIAN STAUFFER**

B&A BOOKS & the ARTS

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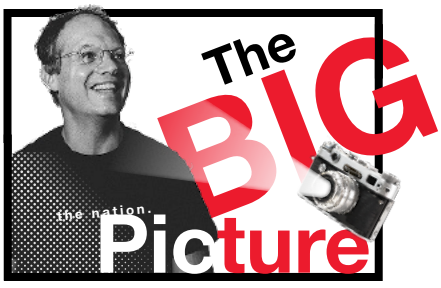

Happy 160th!

IN JUNE OF 1863, IN THE WAKE OF CONFEDERATE victories at Chancellorsville and Winchester—when the issue of whether a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal could long endure seemed far from certain—the journalist Frederick Law Olmsted made a pitch to potential backers laying out his "dream of an honest weekly paper."

By the end of the night, Olmsted had raised $1,000 in capital; by the end of the week, he had trustees, a fundraising committee, and an editor. Though Olmsted himself would soon be temporarily distracted by his duties on the United States Sanitary Commission (a precursor to the Red Cross), his editor, an Irish immigrant named E.L. Godkin, kept the project moving forward, and on July 6, 1865, the first issue of *The Nation* rolled off the presses.

Godkin's *Nation* promised "greater accuracy" than is "now to be found in the daily press," while striving "to bring to discussion of political and social questions a really critical spirit." It would promote "a more equal distribution of the fruits of progress" and promised "sound and impartial criticism of books and works of art." As testament of the new magazine's refusal to pander to its readers, the debut issue led off with this summary of the news: "The week has been singularly barren of exciting events."

As we mark our 160th birthday, it seemed more useful to look outward than backward or inward.

In 2025, we suffer a surfeit of exciting events, from the depredations of Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency to Donald Trump's latest authoritarian excess—or naked scheme for corrupt self-enrichment—to the most recent revelations about the Democratic Party's ongoing failures of leadership. But as we mark our 160th birthday, it seemed more useful to look outward than backward or inward (though readers curious about how *The Nation*'s history runs alongside the country's can consult the magazine's official biography). Despite the daily barrage of dispiriting headlines, we choose to keep faith in this nation's promise of liberty and justice for all—and in Olmsted's belief in the liberating power of simply telling people the truth.

So we have asked 50 of the country's leading writers and artists for (mostly) ground-level dispatches (though some are images or poems) of the view from where they stand. And since the other constant in this magazine's history has been skepticism of the dreams of empire, we asked Viet Thanh Nguyen to reflect on America's relations with the rest of the world. The result is one of the most profound and provocative essays I've had the pleasure to publish—an unsparing account of the costs, at home and abroad, of pursuing the chimera Nguyen calls Greater America, a gruesome national doppelgänger built on conquest and leaving a trail of blood and ruin from the killing fields of Cambodia to the prisons of El Salvador.

Double vision also animates John Nichols's report on what the governors' races in New Jersey and Virginia tell us about the future of the Democratic Party. Michele Goodwin meditates on how the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision, which has deprived women in 19 states of the right to control their own fertility, has rendered them subject to the "Jane Crow" of court-sanctioned discrimination.

Our critics this month include Atossa Araxia Abrahamian on the relations between shipping and capitalism; Jorge Cotte on the series *Deli Boys*; Karrie Jacobs on Norman Foster's edifice 270 Park Avenue; Evan Kindley on the poet James Schuyler; Samuel Moyn on Quentin Skinner and the politics of freedom; and Libby Watson on Brian Goldstone's deep dive into the housing crisis.

Finally, a personal note: After many years as London correspondent, I began a deeper involvement with *The Nation* when Katrina vanden Heuvel asked me to coedit our 150th anniversary special issue (with a great deal of assistance from a young staffer named Richard Kreitner). Four years later, I took over as editor. So it is both fitting and a great pleasure to mark this, my last issue as editor, by again working with Ricky to put together the 50 states package that graces our 160th anniversary issue.

Editing *The Nation* these past six years has been demanding and rewarding in equal measure, but I am tremendously proud of the journalism we've published, and of our entire editorial team. And, of course, grateful to Katrina and Bhaskar Sunkara—and our donors and subscribers—for their support. I'll be back in the fall as a special correspondent.

Thanks for reading! N

D.D. GUTTENPLAN
Editor

EDITORIAL / MICHELE GOODWIN FOR *THE NATION*

The Era of Jane Crow

IN A NIGHTMARE SCENARIO STRAIGHT OUT OF DYSTOPIAN SCIENCE FICTION, A brain-dead woman in Georgia has been forced to serve as a human incubator for over 100 days, in what amounts to the state-sponsored desecration of a deceased person. Yet this horrific situation isn't fiction; it actually exists, in a state with one of the most draconian abortion bans in the nation. Indeed, it is because of Georgia's abortion ban that hospital officials have taken control of Adriana Smith's deceased body, acting without any regard for her grieving mother's wishes.

Sadly, Adriana's case reflects the new "Jane Crow" era, when the state in which a woman resides, becomes pregnant, and dies now determines whether she will be accorded basic civil and human rights. Since the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* ruling overturned *Roe v. Wade*, which protected abortion rights in the United States, in June 2022, 19 states have passed laws that ban abortion altogether or place inordinate burdens on the ability to terminate a pregnancy—even in cases of rape or incest.

These new laws have unleashed a tidal wave of horrors: 10-year-old children forced to travel to the nearest state to terminate a pregnancy caused by sexual assault; women charged with abusing corpses or other offenses for having miscarriages; women forced to gestate dead fetuses or those missing a skull; women forced to bleed for days before receiving care, if they receive it at all. In Idaho, pregnant women have been airlifted out of the state to receive the medical care they are denied there.

Adriana's case reflects the horrific double bind of race and sex in the United States. An African American nurse and mother, Adriana was declared brain-dead in February after seeking medical treatment. Tragically, a blood clot hadn't been caught early in her pregnancy, during a medical visit in which Adriana complained of discomfort. Her mother, April Newkirk, believes that if her pain had been taken seriously, Adriana's death could have been prevented. Standard tests that should have been performed to detect the clot and prevent her daughter's death were not done, Newkirk said. Sadly, medical neglect is far too common among Black women, whose pain and medical complaints are often ignored or inadequately treated.

The state in which a woman resides now determines whether she will be accorded basic civil and human rights.

At least two Black women have died of preventable causes in Georgia since the state enacted its abortion ban. Black women were already three to four times more likely to die during pregnancy than white women. Now we are witnessing how the combined tolls of racism and sexism burden Black women even in death.

Brain death is the legal and medical standard used in the United States to determine death. It is the common standard used to determine when tissues can be harvested for organ transplants. Hospital officials, however, are using Adriana's body to continue gestating her fetus because, they say, they have no other choice under Georgia's abortion law. They claim her case exists in a legal gray area, requiring them to keep her on mechanical support until there is sufficient fetal development for a forced cesarean section. Their actions also raise issues regarding the health of the fetus, which reportedly has hydrocephalus, or fluid on the brain—a condition that is often fatal or severely debilitating.

Bent on ignoring human rights and civil liberties, antiabortion lawmakers also flagrantly disregard the costs to women, their children, and their families. Nor have they demonstrated any concern about preventing pregnant women's deaths, let alone expanding the social welfare safety net to improve the quality of life, housing, childcare, food, and the environment for women with children. On the contrary, lawmakers in Georgia and other antiabortion states have sought to reduce such services, making it more and more difficult for women with children to live with dignity.

In this new era of Jane Crow, antiabortion states are now poised to deny that dignity even in death, in the blatant service of legislators' reproductive interests. More tragedies will continue to unfold. This dystopia is not confined to bad dreams; it is a present reality—one that April Newkirk has described as torture, where choice is not only a question of bodily autonomy in life, but even in death. N

Michele Goodwin is a law professor at Georgetown University and the author of Policing the Womb.

EDITORIAL / *THE NATION*

For Zohran Mamdani and Brad Lander

New Yorkers deserve better than Eric Adams and Andrew Cuomo.

Though the city of New York has been operating under that name since 1664, it has been electing mayors only since 1834. Cornelius Van Wyck Lawrence, the winner of that first election, was a Democrat; so was Robert Anderson Van Wyck, the first man elected by voters in all five boroughs. So were most of the others, though the greatest man (regrettably, so far they have all been men) to hold the office was undoubtedly Fiorello La Guardia, who during his long career in national and municipal politics ran on the Socialist, Republican, and Fusion party lines.

La Guardia's example reminds us that this is an office that, in the right hands, can achieve remarkable progress—a fact easily forgotten in our present diminished circumstances. A historian would have to reach all the way back to Jimmy Walker, who resigned in disgrace in 1932, to find a mayor who can match Eric Adams's capacity for living large and acting small.

Now, after four years of corruption and chaos, New Yorkers have a chance to end Adams's compromised tenure—and, in his place, choose a mayor truly worthy of leading the country's largest city. On June 24, Democratic voters head to the polls to select their party's nominee—a choice that, in this Democratic city, is often tantamount to choosing the next mayor. When they do, they will use a ranked-choice voting system that, if the ballots are cast strategically, can deliver a mayor who reflects this city's progressive vision and values.

New Yorkers are fortunate to have two strong contenders who are poised to meet this moment: Zohran Mamdani and Brad Lander. Mamdani is a state Assembly member from Queens who has energized voters across the city with his disciplined, brilliantly executed, and genuinely inspirational campaign; Lander is a housing advocate turned politician—a City Council member for 12 years, now the comptroller—whose long record of progressive coalition-building and savvy policymaking has made the city a fairer, gentler place. Both would make principled leaders—mayors dedicated, wholly and without compromise, to the welfare of all New Yorkers, not to their cronies, their careers, or their personal comfort. Both would be fierce defenders of *all* residents against the predations of Donald Trump. And both would push a vision of New York that is affordable, inclusive, forward-thinking, and just.

It is for these reasons that *The Nation* is endorsing the two of them, and urging New Yorkers to rank Mamdani as their first choice and Lander as their second.

Both would make principled leaders—mayors dedicated to the welfare of all New Yorkers.

When Zohran Mamdani announced his candidacy for mayor, he was few people's idea of a front-runner. At just 33 years old, he was widely dismissed as too left, too aspirational, too young. Yet during the months of his campaign—and, for those paying attention, his time in the Assembly—he has proved himself the rarest of political talents: a politician whose ability to communicate, connect with constituents, and articulate vital truths has the power to energize and even mobilize.

And now here he is, leading all the other progressive candidates in the polls and steadily gaining ground against the front-runner, Andrew Cuomo. He's currently running more than 10 points ahead of Lander, and he's raising more money ($8.4 million from contributions and matching funds as we went to press) from more donors (currently over 20,000, compared to 7,600 for Lander and 5,400 for Cuomo) than any other candidate. Like Bernie Sanders's two campaigns for president, Mamdani's candidacy is built on the power of small donors and large numbers.

It is also built on a candidate whose brief record of legislative achievement has been amplified by large measures of moral courage and personal charisma. In a city where unthinking and unstinting support for Israel has long been seen as a requirement for politicians, Mamdani is an outspoken supporter of the Palestinian cause and a fierce critic of Israel's operations in Gaza. His "Not on Our Dime" bill would bar tax-exempt charities operating in New York from funding Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. For these principled positions, as well as his Muslim faith, Mamdani has endured smears that are as predictable as they are contemptible—all of which makes his immense personal charm all the more important. So, too, his abilities to build alliances and to stay the course—first demonstrated when he joined the city's taxi drivers in their 15-day hunger strike for debt relief.

Building on his bases—his Astoria district, the Democratic Socialists of America, and the city's South Asian community—Mamdani has summoned a generation of otherwise disillusioned young activists back to battle. But anyone tempted to dismiss him as a latter-day "Bernie bro," or his supporters as simply "cool kids," should take a look at the map of his donors, which shows that his appeal already reaches from Riverdale and the South Bronx to Brooklyn's

Bay Ridge and Sunset Park—and even into New Dorp and Great Kills on Staten Island. It may not yet add up to a movement, but it already has the ingredients of a new urban politics.

It helps that the issues he's running on—freezing rents for stabilized tenants, making all city buses fast and free, and providing free childcare for working parents—have broad appeal. It could be argued that the money spent on sending free buses down Fifth Avenue might be more effectively used to repair the city's rotting infrastructure. But while the details can be debated, Mamdani's disciplined focus on cost-of-living issues demonstrates a commitment to making New York a city that all its residents can thrive in, afford, and even enjoy.

That's a commitment that Lander shares—and one that has been the driving focus of his career for over three decades. From his earliest days as the executive director of the Fifth Avenue Committee—a community-based affordable housing organization—Lander has been a dedicated warrior in New York's progressive trenches. A prescient critic of gentrification, he worked tirelessly in the City Council to counter the Bloomberg administration's gilded vision for New York City—and he has been an effective politician on causes ranging from paid sick leave (which he got passed over Bloomberg's veto) to fossil fuel divestment. Crucially, he has always understood that the only way to build a more progressive city is to build long-term power—which is why he cofounded the City Council's Progressive Caucus during his first term.

On issue after issue, Lander has done the work and put in the time. The evidence is reflected not just in his past policy achievements but in his campaign commitments—among them his promise to advance workplace fairness and union power through a Mayor's Office of Workers' Rights and his vow to declare a housing state of emergency that will enable the city to build 500,000 new, affordable units. As a liberal Jew who has long called out Israeli apartheid, Lander has shown courage and leadership on even the most contentious issues. And his experience as comptroller is arguably the best training for an aspiring mayor.

Indeed, in distinct contrast to the current mayor, Lander has shown real boldness in opposing the Trumpian onslaught. After discovering that DOGE had grabbed $80 million from municipal bank accounts in February, Lander succeeded in pressuring the city to sue the Trump administration. And Mamdani has also stepped up, famously confronting border czar Tom Homan and demanding, "How many more New Yorkers will you detain?" Again and again, both Mamdani and Lander have proved themselves to be among the city's most reliable defenders.

They also offer the clearest alternative to another would-be strongman looming over the city: Andrew Cuomo. Of all the candidates, Cuomo poses the biggest threat to the shared progressive vision that Mamdani and Lander have put forward. Yet name recognition and money have made him the leading contender. Sadly, it appears that more people remember the former governor's reassuring daily press conferences during Covid than the thousands of New Yorkers who died in nursing homes because of his policies—deaths that he directed his aides to cover up. They also seem to have forgotten the determination—by both New York Attorney General Letitia James and the Biden Justice Department—that Cuomo abused his power as governor by sexually harassing 13 women. Both of these scandals make the former governor unworthy of office; in fact, they make it crucial not to rank him at all.

Fortunately, New Yorkers who wish to fill out all five slots on their ranked-choice ballot are lucky to have additional worthy choices to add to their roster, including three candidates who came into *The Nation*'s office for interviews. Zellnor Myrie, whose focus on affordable housing and public safety appeals to the concerns of working-class New Yorkers, also has a record of fighting for voting rights in Albany. Jessica Ramos has been a champion of the city's immigrants and has a strong labor record in the state Senate. And Scott Stringer was a progressive comptroller with a streetwise savvy reminiscent of his aunt Bella Abzug. While *The Nation* was not able to speak with Adrienne Adams, her record of holding the line against the current mayor as speaker of the City Council has won her respect.

Indeed, if there's a lesson to be gleaned from this primary season, it is that the dream of a kinder, more humane city—one where "the government's job is to actually make lives better," as Mamdani has said—is strong among our elected officials. Another New York is possible. On June 24, by voting for Zohran Mamdani and Brad Lander—and strategically ranking Mamdani first and Lander second—New Yorkers have a chance to reclaim our beloved city. N

IN OUR ORBIT

Congratulations!

Prizes and recognition for Nation *contributors.*

The Sidney Hillman Foundation honored justice correspondent Elie Mystal with the prestigious Hillman Prize for Opinion and Analysis Journalism for his "indispensable legal analysis of the many ways in which the courts fundamentally shape American democracy." Contributing writer Mohammed Mhawish received the Izzy Award for his "numerous first-hand accounts from the front lines of the conflict [in Gaza], documenting his lived experience, and the dangerous toll it has taken on his people and him personally." Presented by the Park Center for Independent Media and named for the legendary left-wing journalist—and former *Nation* Washington editor—I.F. Stone, the award recognizes outstanding achievements in independent media. *Nation* senior editor Lizzy Ratner's podcast ***Blindspot: The Plague in the Shadows***, which takes listeners on a journey through the early days of AIDS, won a Peabody Award.

Also, Alexander Zaitchik's "The US-Mexico Tortilla War" was nominated for a James Beard Award. Yangyang Cheng's "Grieving Tiananmen as US Cops Crush Campus Protests" received an Honorable Mention for the Asian American Journalists Association's Excellence in Commentary Award. And Natasha Hakimi Zapata's "The Recent Riots in the UK Should Be a Warning to Kamala Harris" was a finalist for the Los Angeles Press Club's SoCal Journalism Award in the immigration reporting category. N

COMMENT/BRYCE COVERT

Terrible Work

Republicans are trying to ram through some of the most harmful anti-welfare policies in living memory.

THE GOP'S SO-CALLED BIG BEAUTIFUL BILL, PASSED by the House in May, comes with an ugly surprise: It would force poor people into work in order to prove that they are worthy of life's basic necessities. House Republicans, to help pay for their main goals—giving the wealthy even more tax breaks and ramping up the Trump administration's brutal anti-immigrant regime—not only plan to force all states to institute work requirements in their Medicaid plans, but will also allow them to impose the harshest such rules ever. Their bill orders nearly all childless adults without disabilities to certify that they were working, volunteering, or going to school in the month before enrollment. But states could require people to show they've been working for as much as a year before they can be enrolled. Anyone who fails to submit the proper paperwork, meanwhile, would be barred not just from Medicaid but also from receiving subsidies for coverage obtained in the Affordable Care Act marketplace.

These changes would kick as many as 14.4 million people off Medicaid within a decade, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Republicans have claimed that they're not going to cut Medicaid. "The president said over and over and over, 'We're not going to touch Social Security, Medicare, or Medicaid,'" House Speaker Mike Johnson said in February. "We've made the same commitment." The program, which turns 60 this year, has become integrated into American life. It covers 83 million people—nearly a quarter of all Americans—and Republicans don't want to be seen as taking it away from their constituents.

But work requirements have been included in the bill only because Republicans know they will reduce Medicaid enrollment and, therefore, spending. A look at the fine print shows this clearly: The bill estimates that Medicaid work requirements will save $273 billion, which can be used to help pay for the GOP's tax cuts and its crackdown on immigration.

Attempts by states to implement work requirements prove that they are merely cuts by another name. When Arkansas implemented a Medicaid work requirement during the first Trump administration, more than 18,000 people lost their coverage. The work requirement, despite its name, "did not increase employment," according to a 2020 paper.

Things have been going just as poorly in Georgia, which in 2023 created a new Medicaid offering with a work requirement. The state estimated that 50,000 people would enroll in its first year, but only about 5,000 had signed up a year and a half in.

The House bill would also force more people to meet work requirements in order to receive food stamps, applying them to everyone under 65 as well as people with children age 7 or older, and would also limit a state's ability to waive the requirements during periods of high unemployment. The Urban Institute found that these changes would eliminate or reduce food stamps for 5.4 million people. The work requirements that already exist in the food stamps program have been found, just as in Medicaid, to deny people benefits they need without increasing the number of people who work.

The idea that poor people should be forced to work for meager government assistance is not a new one. President Ronald Reagan successfully whipped up resentment toward poor and Black people with his stories about welfare queens who supposedly lived large off of government checks. Bill Clinton ran for president on the promise to "end welfare as we know it." He succeeded, ending a right to cash assistance for poor mothers and turning the process of qualifying for the program into a series of hoops for recipients to jump through, which many conservative states promptly lit on fire. One of the hoops was the requirement that people regularly prove that they were working or searching for work.

Attempts by states to implement work requirements prove that they are merely cuts by another name.

A lot of people don't make it through. Today, just one in five poor people receives cash assistance, and an increasing number have neither cash benefits nor income from work. People subjected to welfare work requirements, meanwhile, are no more likely to be employed five years after they were instituted, and those who are employed tend to have unstable work that doesn't last.

Back in the 1980s and '90s, work requirements were applied to "welfare," which was understood to mean cash assistance. But Republicans have worked hard to force almost any government program under the welfare umbrella. In a *New York Times* op-ed, four high-ranking Trump officials recently wrote that Medicaid, food stamps, and even housing assistance are "welfare" and called for establishing "universal work requirements" in all such programs.

It was always a stretch to imagine that Americans were able to live lives of luxury off of cash assistance and so needed to be forced into paid employment. It's impossible to claim the same about programs that are merely meant to guarantee that no one goes without the very basics of life: food, health, and housing. These programs are not "the dole." They help ensure that, in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, people aren't left to starve, suffer homelessness, and die. N

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Town Called Malice

CHRIS LEHMANN

The Civilization Myth

The Trump administration's rhetoric echoes the same old fantasy of racial purity that animated the 20th-century right.

On an otherwise unremarkable spring day, the Trump administration's lawless assault on the rights of immigrants was interrupted by a government-chartered plane landing at Dulles International Airport. In a revealing reverse-image set piece, some 50 white Afrikaner immigrants from South Africa had arrived, in pursuit of an array of generous resettlement provisions. In February, Trump had signed an executive order granting them streamlined refugee status and a smooth path to US citizenship. The newcomers were feted with welcoming statements from the president, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and scores of MAGA-aligned commentators and pundits.

The same day that the Afrikaner "refugees" were getting the red-carpet treatment, the Department of Homeland Security announced that it was ending temporary protected status for immigrants from Afghanistan—many of whom had assisted the US war effort there and would thus face potential reprisals from the Taliban should they be deported. At a press conference after the Afrikaners' flight landed, a reporter asked State Department spokesman Christopher Landau about the vast disparity in treatment between white immigrants with dubious claims of violent persecution in their homeland, and a group of their nonwhite counterparts who were exposed to real personal and political danger. Landau replied that "one of the criteria" in assigning refugee status to an immigrant population is making sure they can be "assimilated into our country."

There's a world of hidden presumptions in Landau's response, but its core logic keys into a long-standing obsession on the MAGA right: the notion that the members of America's leadership caste are the righteous guardians of a Western civilization in imminent peril of contamination from within and siege from without. The exchange was reminiscent of a similar outburst from the proto-Trumpian presidential candidate Pat Buchanan in the early 1990s: "If we had to take a million immigrants in—say Zulus, next year, or Englishmen—and put them in Virginia, what group would be easier to assimilate, and would cause less problems?"

Buchanan was drawing on a strain of white reactionary thought that dates back to the late 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century, when the overlapping scourges of mass immigration and race-mixing haunted the American patrician mind. Madison Grant's unhinged yet enormously influential 1916 diatribe, *The Passing of the Great Race: or, The Racial Basis of European History*, makes an argument that is effectively indistinguishable from Trump's continual plaint that if the barbarian hordes aren't subdued and/or banished by any means necessary, "we won't have a country anymore."

As the subtitle of Grant's tract suggests, the case for racialized exclusion, discrimination, and eugenic guardianship has always rested on the myth of a sanitized and glorified racial past. The notion of the imperiled West seized the right-wing imagination with acute force in the 1920s; as the cultural historian Warren Susman observed, that decade's "great fear" was "whether any great industrial and democratic mass society can maintain a significant level of civilization, and whether mass education and mass communication will allow any civilization to survive." The non-white and foreign-born populations then migrating into American cities were the all-too-vivid face of this threat for the self-appointed guardians of white European civilization, leading to the enactment of harsh new immigration restrictions and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan.

The case for racialized exclusion, discrimination, and eugenic guardianship has always rested on the myth of a sanitized and glorified racial past.

The rationale for the Afrikaner refugee policy is likewise steeped in the argot of civilizational peril; in announcing the arrival of the immigrants, Trump dubbed them victims of a genocide, reprising an empirically vacuous 2018 broadcast from then–Fox News host Tucker Carlson about alleged racial terror campaigns against white South African farmers. (Such rhetoric is especially grotesque for an administration imprisoning and seeking to deport critics of the actual genocide that Israel is carrying out in Gaza.) According to *The Washington Post*, a State Department memo referred to Afrikaner farmers who were said to "have witnessed or experienced extreme violence with a racial nexus," even though, the *Post* noted, the episodes cited concerned "home invasions, murders or carjackings that took place up to 25 years ago."

But as the Madison Grants of the world have made clear for a century now, confirmable facts play no role in grand narratives of civilizational peril. Hence the spectacle of reformed Never Trumper

JD Vance extolling the need for native populations to outbreed the foreign-born competition and offering a Buchananite gloss on the phony Haitian invasion of Springfield, Ohio: "Should we drop 20,000 people from a radically different culture in a small Ohio town in a matter of a few years?"

MAGA's crown prince of declensionist civilization rhetoric, however, is South African centibillionaire Elon Musk. Musk, together with the other key South African–aligned Trump minions, David Sacks and Peter Thiel, is a sworn foe of all things woke, DEI-inflected, and otherwise irksome to light-hued Silicon Valley edgelords. He's also a hard-core connoisseur of civilizational doomsterism.

"I listen to podcasts about the fall of civilizations to go to sleep," Musk said in an interview with the Trump-pardoned Wall Street felon Michael Milken. He urged Milken's MAGA-loyal listeners to adjourn briskly to procreate at least three times, expanding his own personal breeding project—as of publication, the count was 14—on a vaster scale. The threat to civilization, Musk went on to say, is at the root of his obsession with colonizing Mars. "If you don't become a multi-planet civilization, then you are simply waiting around until you die from a self-inflicted wound or some natural disaster," the self-described history buff exhorted.

If Musk had bothered to learn any actual history, he'd recognize that rhetoric as the paranoid fantasy of right-wing eugenicists from a century ago. To cite another well-worn MAGA refrain: Sad! **N**

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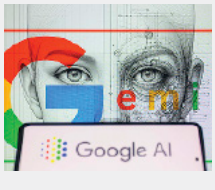

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FROM TOP: JOE CIARDIELLO; JOHN P. JOHNSON / HBO; JONATHAN RAA / NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Anti-Monopolist Zephyr Teachout

Lost in the Cloud

When we treat IT and AI as neutral tools, we obscure our ability to see—and resist—power.

We understand, almost intuitively, that geography is not an afterthought to politics, but the substrate on which political life is built. The flat, fertile land along the Hudson River enabled large estates and semifeudal tenant farming in the 18th and 19th centuries, which in turn led to hierarchical systems of local government. The stony hills of Vermont, by contrast, discouraged such consolidation and lent themselves to smallholder farming, Congregational churches, and democratic wrangling through town meetings. The geographies themselves didn't have meaning, but they were not side issues: They created the material conditions that made it easier for certain systems to flourish while others faltered.

The same is true for information technology. And yet too often, we treat IT as abstract and neutral, obscuring our ability to see power itself and to fight the necessary battles we need to govern ourselves.

A decade ago, most businesses stored their data on-site; today the majority of all business data is stored off-site. The same is true for personal data—remember when your e-mail was on your computer, not "out there"? The amount spent on off-site data storage could soon approach $1 trillion (we are just shy of $700 billion already).

While the word *cloud* suggests something ephemeral, the reality is as physical as dirt. Data stored on the cloud is physically located on servers, typically at large data centers, or server farms, which require enormous amounts of energy to maintain. Just three companies—Amazon, Microsoft, and Google—control over two-thirds of this critically important market.

A recent report, "Engineering the Cloud Commons," by the Open Markets Institute shows how the big three have used a series of aggressive tools to protect their cloud dominance. They use opaque pricing, charge different amounts to different customers for the same service, make it unnecessarily difficult to switch providers, and exploit their power on other platforms to push users toward their own services. They are also leveraging this dominance to foreclose competition in one of the most dangerously concentrated technologies: artificial intelligence.

These anticompetitive techniques are the kinds of abuses that antimonopoly law is designed to prevent. And they are particularly dangerous with the cloud because, as the report details, there are "innate characteristics of the market"—massive barriers to entry, huge capital requirements—that already make concentration very likely, though not inevitable.

By treating the cloud as neutral, we have exposed ourselves to great danger. Concentration significantly increases the risk of widespread

system failure. If just one of the big three tech giants collapses, societal mayhem could follow: hospital closures, data breaches, business disasters. Even without a collapse, we have put ourselves in a position of radical dependency greater than that of society on the big banks. Not only has Big Tech become too big and too embedded to fail; the firms know they can use that power to dictate policy. Some of the democratic risks are more direct: Amazon, Google, and Microsoft have already shown themselves willing to suppress certain speech and amplify others. Ownership of the cloud is also ownership over speech-related data.

If just one of the big three tech giants collapses, societal mayhem could follow.

The Open Markets report proposes an immediate remedy: Cloud providers should be required to operate in the public interest, offering fair and equal access to infrastructure, with public oversight and rate regulation. Second, since such essential services cannot coexist with monopoly ownership, the big three will have to divest their interests.

Reporting on AI often treats it as an abstract force, separate from the physical architecture that makes it possible. We talk about AI as "doing things," with no reference to the physical infrastructure it requires or the corporate systems it serves. We erase the layers. We treat models, chips, and data centers as immaterial when, in fact, they are as structured, owned, and governed as a factory or a plantation.

We also treat technology, and by extension the architecture of information, as neutral. The novelist William Gibson famously observed, "Technologies are morally neutral until we apply them." Barack Obama repeatedly described digital technologies as "tools," neutral in themselves, whose effects depend on their use. Noam Chomsky made a similar argument: "Technology is basically neutral. It is like a hammer. The hammer doesn't care whether you use it to build a house or…to crush someone's skull."

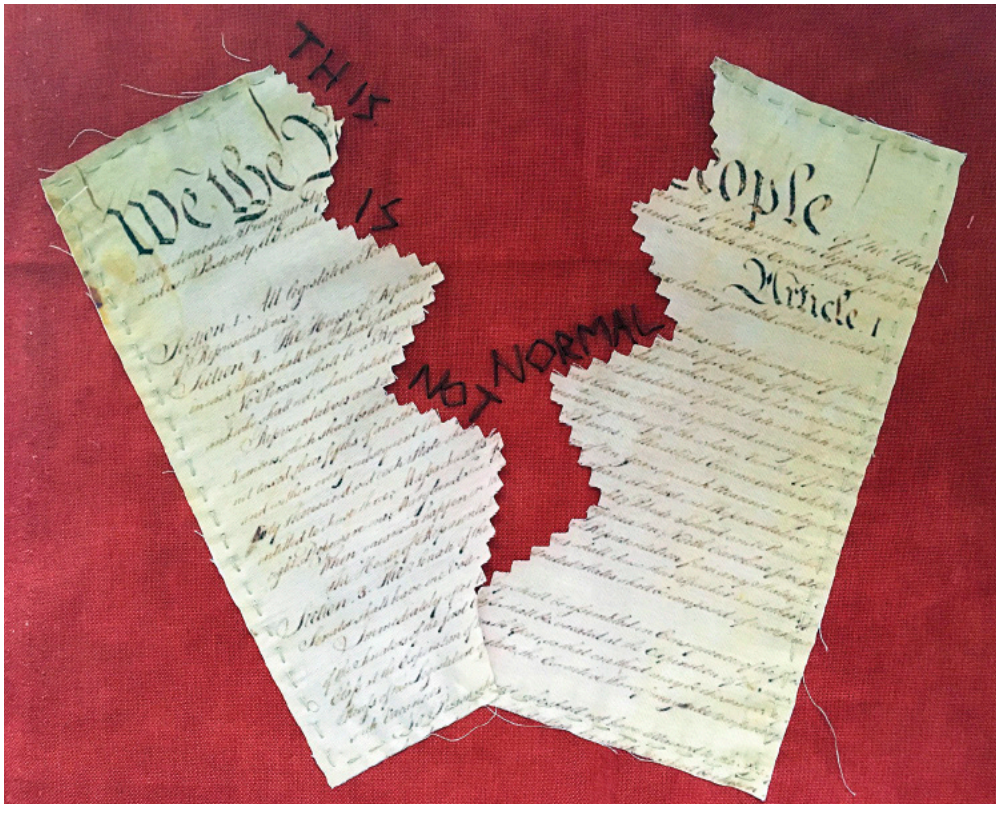
Both abstraction and neutrality perform a dangerous social function: They obscure power. "Established power always seeks to obscure or outright prohibit thinking about the organization that upholds their power," the writer Joe Costello recently observed, writing about information systems. The organization of information is one of the most consequential forms of power in modern society, giving those in power a potent incentive to use the language of neutrality and abstraction to hide it.

Information lives in supply chains, fiber-optic cables, content-moderation protocols, chip designs, algorithmic hierarchies, and server farms in Virginia and Arizona. You don't have to understand how all of these relate technically to understand that allowing corporations to both own the infrastructure and run the services that depend on it sets up an untenable conflict of interest at the heart of our society.

As the Open Markets report documents, the big three corporations that control the infrastructure also dominate AI, advertising, retail, and government contracting. They are getting billions of dollars of privileged access to the most valuable input of the 21st-century economy—information—which they then use to control us. A functioning democracy cannot depend on Microsoft's goodwill.

Today, the most consequential terrain of political and economic power is no longer land. It is information. And just like geography, the structures that shape and control information shape the conditions of freedom. **N**

OPPART/INDIA TRESSELT



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The Last Days of Discourse

John Ganz

Back to the Future

Much of Trump's appeal stems from the way he combines restoration and revolution.

DONALD TRUMP AND HIS MOVEMENT MIGHT SEEM like the quintessential example of backward-looking politics. Their motto, after all, is "Make America Great Again." Precisely when it was great isn't exactly clear; sometime in the past, before all those minorities got so uppity (or became majorities), when women knew their place and America built things. Nostalgia seems to animate Trump's mind. Was it merely a coincidence that *Escape From Alcatraz* was on TV the night before he tweeted about reopening that doleful island for business? Trump knows what he's doing, saying it's "a sad symbol, but it's a symbol of law and order." If he could make John Wayne head of the Department of Homeland Security, he would. Trump himself is another "sad symbol"—of chintzy 1980s glamour that the swells believed had gone out of fashion. No such luck.

So past-focused is Trumpism's appeal that some writers have concluded that it lacks any positive vision of the future. In a recent essay, Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor identified Trumpism with what they called "end times fascism," a bunker mentality: "The average voter is offered only remixes of a bygone past, alongside the sadistic pleasures of dominance over an ever-expanding assemblage of dehumanized others." That's not exactly wrong, but perhaps it's only part of the story. In 2016, when Trump carried the over-65 vote, the idea that he was a pure throwback might have been more plausible. But this time around, he attracted support from more young people—who have more of a future than a past—than hidebound Republicans usually do. And then there's the fact that Silicon Valley oligarchs—who believe they have been called to build the future—gravitated to him.

Rather than simple nostalgia, Trump's appeal derives in large part from the way he combines past and future, classic and modern, restoration and revolution. One of his earliest Silicon Valley investors, Peter Thiel, picked up on this back in 2017. "There are reduced expectations for the younger generation, and this is the first time this has happened in American history," Thiel said. "Even if there are aspects of Trump that are retro…a lot of people want to go back to a past that was futuristic—*The Jetsons*, *Star Trek*. They're dated but futuristic." Futuristic but familiar, though more "Meet George Orwell" than "Meet George Jetson." In his 1990 book *Surviving at the Top*, Trump identifies himself as highly conventional and even somewhat staid, "a man with very simple tastes—not in building design, perhaps, but in most other things." Manhattan, with its topless towers, always represented an escape from Fred Trump's retro-drab Queens, with its squat lower-middle-class duplexes and Jamaica Estates' faux-Tudor stodginess.

The Trump administration may have decreed neo-neo-Classicism for federal architecture, but Trump's own taste in architecture has never favored the antique. His signature projects—the renovation of the Commodore Hotel and the building of Trump Tower—involved replacing Olde New York landmarks with the modernist architect Der Scutt's imposing glass-and-steel mirrored boxes. (Trump was notoriously unsentimental about the Bonwit Teller building's exquisite Art Deco friezes.) His unrealized plan for Television City—a name that already sounded retro-futurist in the 1980s—was to employ Helmut Jahn, a Mies van der Rohe protégé who earned the sobriquet "the Flash Gordon of architecture." And as his Atlantic City casinos sagged into the sea during one of his close calls with bankruptcy, he reportedly considered hiring the postmodern pioneer Philip Johnson to spiffy them up. Today, the skyscraper itself is a discarded symbol of a lost order, representing 20th-century capitalism at its most powerful. Indeed, you could sum up the Trump aesthetic in the contrast between sleek modernism on the outside and monarchical kitsch on the inside—a combination that happens to fit very well with Thiel court philosopher Curtis Yarvin's notion of a techno-feudalism.

Trump's fantasized American industrial rebirth also has this future-past character. Even the mechanism is a throwback: 19th-century protectionism to rebuild a 21st-century nation. The historian Jeffrey Herf has called this fetishization of technology and industry alongside an authoritarian government and the reimposition of a hierarchal social order "reactionary modernism"—a label that fits both Trump and his Silicon Valley supporters to a T. Lenin once said that "communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country." Reactionary modernism, Herf wrote, is "electrification minus the Enlightenment." Herf coined the term while studying the ideological progenitors

He may have decreed neo-neo-Classicism for federal buildings, but Trump's own taste in architecture has never favored the antique.

JOE CIARDIELLO

of the Third Reich. Conveniently for the tech oligarchs, the reactionary modernist agenda requires the alignment of state and capital to facilitate the construction of its monumental projects. Thiel frankly calls for a monopoly capitalism to protect technological innovators. In his recent book *The Technological Republic*, Alex Karp—the CEO and cofounder (with Thiel) of Palantir—calls for a union of state and industry to build arms and surveillance tech with the Manhattan Project as its model. But nothing is more emblematic of Trump 2.0's reactionary modernism than the bizarre "Freedom Cities" initiative, which involves the construction of futuristic conurbations, replete with flying cars, on federal land to compete with China's gleaming megalopolises.

Since Trump is involved, we can expect America's foray into reactionary modernism to take on aspects of a scam and a boondoggle, but the tragic history is still a stark warning: Fascism 1.0's architects of doom promised new wonders but left only ruins and rubble. Let's just hope that Trump's aftermath is more Atlantic City 1992 than Berlin 1945. **N**

SNAPSHOT
Alfredo Estrella

Mexican Teachers Striking

Teachers camp at the Zócalo, Mexico City's main square, on May 21, blocking access to the presidential palace. Tens of thousands of teachers are on strike to demand higher wages and better working conditions from President Claudia Sheinbaum.

By the Numbers

57
Number of children in Gaza who died from malnutrition between March 2, when Israel imposed a blockade on humanitarian aid to the region, and May 12, according to the Ministry of Health

1 in 5
Proportion of people in Gaza facing starvation

31
Number of people massacred by Israeli forces while seeking aid at a distribution site in Gaza on June 2

17K
Number of pregnant and breastfeeding mothers in Gaza at risk of acute malnutrition over the next 12 months

40
Number of days in May and June that 600 people organized by Veterans for Peace are fasting to demand that humanitarian aid resume in Gaza and that the US stop arming Israel

FROM TOP: AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; MOIZ SALHI / ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

CALVIN TRILLIN
DeadlinePoet

Trump Says He's Punishing Harvard for Antisemitism

From what we're reading daily in the news,
The prize for chutzpah isn't hard to choose:
The MAGA king with quasi-fascist views
Proclaims himself protector of the Jews.

COMMENT/JOANN WYPIJEWSKI

You Gotta Serve Somebody

Blowing the big story.

STAFF PROTESTS FLECK THE HISTORY OF THIS MAGazine. I recall one especially, a small, unstoried objection in Reagantime that raised a big though unintended question. Two women from the business side, who monitored expenses and regarded editors requesting more than one pencil as profligate, had a complaint. They were tired: of pages dominated by proxy armies, allied tyrants, US-backed atrocities from Sabra and Shatila to the killing fields of Central America and southern Africa, etc. This is *The Nation*, they said; it should cover the nation.

Their wordplay remains provocative. In an imperial state, with force projection everywhere on the earth, what is "the nation"?

Surely it's not merely the people or the country, the land-of-liberty aspirations, or even illusion that inspired the magazine's name in 1865. One can love the mongrel, damaged country; the nation is something else: full-blooded, a war machine in the imperial order and imagination—the material reality everyone in power agrees on. If it were not, life expectancy would be a "national security" crisis: lowest among rich countries (worse than the Northern Marianas); lower for Black people (comparable to Guatemala); lower still for Native people (comparable to Eritrea). As is, the nation ignores human insecurity, or heightens it. For journalists, empire presents a choice: You are an agent of the war machine, or a witness for humanity.

The "biggest story of the year" illustrates the problem. Sitting in a supermarket parking lot on March 15, Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic* had made his choice long before. He'd been an advance man for one war crime, pushing the Iraq weapons-of-mass-destruction lie after 9/11; now he had advance warning of another on his phone. In two hours, the US would begin bombing Yemen. No one on the Signal group chat claimed imminent threat, or even debated a delay. This was preboarding for an act of aggression—the supreme crime under international law, lest we forget.

Yet Goldberg's concern was national security. Civilians would die—the "Target Terrorist" of the first strike was attacked as he entered his girlfriend's building; it collapsed with all inside—and would keep dying. Goldberg left the chat, still fretting about national secrets, but he had his story. Neither he nor his media admirers described the Signal bombardiers and their cheering section as lawless psychopaths. (Tulsi Gabbard: "Great work and effects!") In an *Atlantic* Zoom session, subscribers asked where Goldberg had shopped on the 15th. In the TV appearances I saw, no one related the attacks to the Houthis' aim to thwart the US/Israeli genocide in Gaza. No one asked, "Did you ever think you had a duty to disrupt this nation's death plans?"

The question would have been rhetorical. Worse, it appears to be unthinkable. An editor with an audience at high levels of state had two hours to sound an alarm about an imminent war crime. His stated fear for the safety of US troops—thin gruel given the 36,000-plus dead or injured soldiers he had waved into the meat grinder of Iraq—assumes that the US military has no intelligence and no contingency plans. Maybe an outcry wouldn't have grounded the planes. We'll never know. A month later, an *Atlantic* crew was at the White House. The president congratulated Goldberg: "You were successful, and it became a big story.… You got it out very much to the public." Next, Trump will be leaking to him.

The Nation has long believed that publishing is a tool for showing the nation plain. If we invoked international law a lot, it wasn't because people win their liberation through it but because, as Craig Mokhiber, an international human rights lawyer, says about the duty to confront genocide, "This is a struggle, and any tools we can use are necessary." History is a tool. These days, when so much peace talk is corrupt, I remember Alexander Cockburn eviscerating some US deal for Central America and quoting Calgacus on the Romans: "They make a desolation and they call it peace."

Our "peace" for Central America eventually crossed the border, and now the nation is at war against the beloved mongrel country.

In 1960, six months before the Bay of Pigs invasion, *The Nation* reported that the CIA was training counterrevolutionaries "for an eventual landing in Cuba." Editor Carey McWilliams called on the bigger-foot press to investigate and for public pressure to force "the administration to abandon this dangerous and hare-brained project." Some newspapers followed up; some spiked their stories; *The New York Times* trimmed its sails on the CIA's role. After Cuba smacked the US proxies down, President John F. Kennedy confided to a *Times* man that more reporting might "have saved us from a colossal mistake." McWilliams was wiser: The press does its job so public pressure might too.

An editor with an audience at high levels of state had two hours to sound an alarm about an imminent war crime.

Empire disfigures every American—the privilege of knowing that we are unlikely to be bombed here while the nation that takes our name visits that terror freely on others across the world. Fifty years ago, the Vietnamese people taught the empire what it meant to lose, and taught the country, through the peace movement—and especially the anti-war GIs—what might be gained from resistance rather than accommodation. It is some coincidence of anniversaries. N

JoAnn Wypijewski is a former editor at The Nation *and the author, most recently, of* What We Don't Talk About: Sex and the Mess of Life.

If an Authoritarian Trump Seizes More Power, Should Blue States Secede?

Yes!

SANFORD LEVINSON

I AM A LAWYER AND A POLITICAL SCIentist. Were I to answer this question solely as a lawyer, I would easily say yes. The United States was (or were?) born as a secessionist movement from the British Empire. It was not a "revolution" as we understand the word today. George Washington and his armies had no designs on London; those we call "patriots" simply wanted to withdraw from the existing framework of governance. Taking a cue from the founding of the United States, blue states can legally secede from the Union.

Perhaps the most audacious phrase in the Declaration of Independence occurs in the first sentence, when it purports to speak in the name of "one people." Any historian—and, one suspects, most of those in Philadelphia gathered at the Second Continental Congress—knew this was, at best, tendentious if not preposterous. Think only of the Indigenous nations, many of whom understandably supported the British, not to mention enslaved people (and peoples). Puritan sectarians in New England had little in common with Baptist sectarians in Virginia, and both were antagonistic to the Catholics in Maryland. (Though initially settled by Catholics, Maryland banned them from holding office in its 1776 state constitution.)

Everyone knows the declaration's endorsement of "inalienable rights." But just as important is the sentence emphasizing that the "people"—whose "consent" is the basis of any "just powers" in government—retain the right "whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends… to alter or to abolish it." They remain free to "institute a new government…as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness." This expresses the true radicalism of what most people call the American Revolution.

There has never been a singular American people. This is the real meaning of American federalism, which makes sense only if one recognizes the deep diversity within the American populace. That pluralistic reality sets the stage for equally deep political conflicts, not all of them capable of peaceful resolution within the existing framework of government. Consider, most obviously, the American Civil War. I do not support the Confederate secessionists of 1861, but not because they wanted to leave the union. Rather, my opposition

The Debate

No!

TARENCE RAY

BLUE-STATE SECESSION IS A FUN thought experiment—an entertaining form of escapism from the stagnation of US politics—but in practice, such a schism would be costly, debilitating, and ideologically incoherent. Most of all, if the United States is to stand a chance in the face of climate cataclysm and the rise of xenophobic nationalism, the country's working class must remain united across state lines. The Western Hemisphere needs fewer borders, not more.

By itself, a blue-state secession doesn't advance a political vision beyond, perhaps, disapproval of President Donald Trump's authoritarianism. This is a noble cause, of course, but it is not a positive articulation of principles, and as such, it wouldn't be enough to hold a new nation together—and that is assuming a geographically disconnected state could successfully stave off a military siege by Trump's federal government in the first place.

And who would, or even could, lead such a movement? After all, many blue-state leaders want some of the same things that red-state leaders want, just in different measure. California Governor Gavin Newsom is pressing California's cities to ban homeless encampments and has said that it's "deeply unfair" for transgender athletes to compete in women's sports. New York Governor Kathy Hochul has rejected popular demands to increase taxes on her state's wealthiest residents and has failed to implement climate mitigation laws and criminal justice reforms.

Other blue-state leaders, like Minnesota Governor Tim Walz and Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy, have outlined the beginnings of a political vision that is distinct from red-state America's but that also accounts for the experience of living in a red state. They seem to understand that something strange and grotesque is happening in the red states that has allowed for the elevation of a despotic leader like Trump. They can pinpoint deindustrialization, the opioid epidemic, and fiscal austerity, and they usually advocate for a return to New Deal–type social-welfare progressivism to fight back. But such politicians usually come up short on issues like Palestinian and immigrant rights. And this is because blue-state leaders have failed to apprehend the most crucial crises before us.

is based on *why* they wanted to split: the commitment to a vicious and indefensible system of white supremacy and chattel slavery. Appomattox may have settled the issue of slavery; that is not the same as settling the legal issue of secession.

Almost no one opposes every secessionist movement, whether in the distant past—beginning with American secession from the British Empire—or in more recent times, such as the secession of members of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (as allowed by Article 72 of its Constitution), of Great Britain from the European Union, or of Slovenia from Yugoslavia. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes argued, general principles do not decide concrete cases. Context and complexity are all-important. So as a lawyer and an extremely concerned citizen of the United States in 2025, I have little hesitation in suggesting that a peaceful breakup of the existing union would be preferable to a divided polity in which there is neither fraternity nor sorority, but only enmity at those perceived, often accurately, as enemies.

But as a political scientist, I cannot conceive of an amicable separation. A principal reason is that the polarization that distinguishes the United States today is not regional, as was the case in 1860. Take my own state of Texas, which I describe as an extremely blue state—mostly composed of five of the 20 largest cities in the country—that is embedded within an equally committed red state outside of these cities. Similar stories of sharp divisions between urban and exurban or rural areas could be told about almost all of the states. Should Texas attempt to leave the union at the behest of the ultraconservatives who currently dominate the state's politics, an immediate response might well be secessionist movements by the millions of Texans living in Houston and Austin. Similarly, should liberals spearhead secession in "Pacifica," an imagined nation of West Coast states, one might expect a similar counter-response from eastern Oregonians who are already trying to move their counties to the more convivial political atmosphere they identify with Idaho.

A peaceful breakup would be preferable to a divided polity in which there is only enmity.

If we applaud Abraham Lincoln's decision to go to war—and accept what became almost 700,000 deaths between 1861 and 1865—it should be because that war was necessary to end slavery. Had Lincoln merely preserved the union with slavery intact—which, to the disgust of Frederick Douglass, he pledged to do in his first inaugural address—it would not have been worth it. How transcendently important is the preservation of the union today? Any answer lies far more in our political commitments than in the abstract arguments of lawyers. N

Sanford Levinson is a professor at the University of Texas and the co-author, with Cynthia Levinson, of Fault Lines in the Constitution.

The two defining issues of our time are Palestinian liberation and climate catastrophe. Neither can be addressed through secession: Ecological crises recognize no state boundaries, and the Palestinian cause is bound up with US imperialism. The biosphere, the neoliberal system, and the postwar global framework for human rights are all collapsing, ushering in an era of mass extermination and migration.

The global nature of this upheaval is reflected in how the Trump administration is attacking the US Constitution: The White House has launched assaults on free speech as it relates to Israel and on due process as it relates to immigration status. It is no coincidence that the administration is also using these as precedents for challenging birthright citizenship, a right secured in the 14th Amendment and passed during Reconstruction.

Given the scale of injustices under the Trump administration, what is needed now is an abolitionism for the 21st century—not a campaign for secession. Today's abolitionist movement would include three causes: 1) The revival and expansion of Reconstructionist ideals to fight for immigrant personhood. 2) Full reparations and ecological rights for Indigenous populations like Native Americans and Palestinians. 3) A head-on confrontation with the fossil fuel industry.

The best way to strive for a better future is not to cleave the country's working class in two.

Blue-state secession would not offer any of this. At most, it would offer retribution against the red states, which are on the front lines of the nation's preeminent crisis: the fallout from an empire in decline. It is worth noting that the political economy of red states is largely the result of the practices of 20th-century US imperialism—anti-communism, the financialization of the imperial economy, and the subsequent raiding of the Global South's labor and resources—returning home.

These red states even resemble the Global South in some interesting ways. As the United States' primary source of raw resources and cheap domestic labor, red states have seen their relationships with the land and with labor drastically disfigured. Their working class comprises not only undocumented migrants but also US citizens pushed out of the formal economy through deindustrialization and addiction. These workers should not be punished for the sins of their states' bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes, which have opted to drag these states back into the racist, misogynistic ideologies that consolidated the slavers' power 150 years ago.

The best way to strive for a better future is not to cleave the country's working class in two and pit its members against each other; it's to keep working to unite them. Only then will we be able to grapple with the challenges ahead of us. N

Tarence Ray is a journalist and a cohost of the podcast Trillbilly Worker's Party. *He lives in Lexington, Kentucky.*

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VOICES / MOHAMMED R. MHAWISH

What It Is to Starve

What we've been witnessing in Gaza is not a natural famine. It is famine as a weapon of mass destruction.

A YEAR AGO, I WAS LIVING THE SAME NIGHTmare that 2.2 million people in Gaza are currently living: constant exhaustion, dehydration, rapid weight loss.

It had been months since Israel had allowed any food, water, medicine, or gas to enter Gaza, and we were all slowly starving. I remember the way hunger settled into my body—not just as pain, but as a kind of silence. My head throbbed constantly. When I stood up, the room spun. My mouth tasted like metal. My limbs felt heavy, like I was wading through water. I stopped feeling hunger as a craving because it became something else, like a slow shutting down.

I still remember when my parents, my then 2½-year-old, and I were diagnosed with malnutrition. While I was the worst off, nothing hurt more than watching my own child and parents fade before my eyes. Watching them go hungry and knowing I had nothing to offer was its own suffering.

Every day, I would look at my son's face and wonder if I would ever be able to fill his plate or cup again. Would there ever be a night when he didn't cry himself to sleep from hunger? A morning when he woke without that hollow look in his eyes? I did what I could to keep him smiling and slip a little light into his day. Even when joy felt like a lie and safety was just a word we'd long forgotten the meaning of.

Now I watch my friends, family, and colleagues suffer that same slow collapse, knowing exactly what it means and being unable to stop it.

On March 2, Israel once again tightened its stranglehold on the Gaza Strip, systematically blocking the flow of food, water, and medical aid. According to UN reports, only a trickle of humanitarian convoys have been allowed in—far below what is needed to stave off mass starvation. The IPC warns that 93 percent of Gaza's population now faces crisis-level hunger, with famine already taking hold in the north.

Every day begins the same in Gaza right now: with the attempt to make it to the next. People walk through streets of rubble looking for food, wood, or anything to keep their families alive. There's no gas, no electricity, and barely any water. Wheat is gone. People crush animal-feed barley and corn into flour. Even that is hard to find.

Cooking gas ran out long ago; now people dig through the ruins for wood—old doors, broken furniture, anything that will burn. Fires burn in alleys, leaving their odor on everything: hair, skin, clothes. The sharp, sour smell of burning plastic and garbage fills the air. It never leaves you.

Aseel Afana, a mother in Jabalia, looks at her daughter's face every day and feels the crushing pain of being unable to get her enough food or powdered milk. "Almost every night, Sila, who is only 14 months old, cries from hunger," said Aseel, who can't remember the last day her daughter felt full. "I try to keep her happy and maybe make her smile," she added, "even though none of us has a reason to smile right now."

Aseel's voice shook as she described trying to keep her little daughter safe—even though, she noted, there's no such thing as safety in Gaza. "I feel weak, helpless, naive. And the world is watching us die. That's the only conclusion we can reach—that our lives just don't matter much."

***

In recent weeks, there have been repeated flickers of hope. Ceasefire talks have edged close to a deal, aid trucks have been said to be on the move. But each time, the deals collapse, the promises unravel, and the crossings remain sealed. As this story goes to print, the famine in Gaza grows more and more desperate.

What I witness now in Gaza is not hunger. It is starvation. Hunger is a feeling. Starvation is a weapon.

When food is blocked at the border, when aid trucks are stalled, when bakeries are bombed and farmland flattened, it is no longer about denying supplies. It is about denying life. And that is why the world must understand: This is a famine by design.

Truckloads of aid sit idle at

the border, turned away or delayed for weeks by the Israeli government's decisions, while inside Gaza, parents grind animal feed into flour and children scavenge for scraps in the rubble.

The market barely holds together. There's a very limited number of vendors behind makeshift tables, selling scraps: a bit of rice here, a bag of flour there. Recently, a friend of mine saw a starving woman walk up and hand over a gold bracelet, probably her wedding gift, asking quietly for a bag of flour. The seller glanced at her, then looked up at the sky, as if he was wondering how much longer any of them have.

And everywhere, the same soft, worn-out questions pass from mouth to mouth: Where can I find bread? Where can we get water?

In Gaza, more than 3,500 children under the age of 5 are now staring down death by starvation, Gaza's Government Media Office warns. Another 70,000 have been diagnosed with severe malnutrition, their small bodies wasting away.

When we lift our heads, we see a world that has decided we can disappear.

In May, I spoke with AbdulHakim Abu Riash, a journalist reporting from northern Gaza, who hadn't had food or clean water for days. "I can't explain the pain in my stomach, in my bones, in my head," he said. "I feel I can't go on. But I have to go on." His body is breaking, but he refuses to stop speaking. AbdulHakim has lost over 12 kilograms of weight—around 26 pounds—in two months.

Across Gaza, famine isn't just in the empty kitchens. It's in the thinning arms, swollen bellies, and sunken cheeks everywhere. People walk doubled over from cramps. Children's skin cracks from dehydration. Eyes lose their light. And above it all: the constant hum of drones, the sharp crack of artillery, the scream of jets.

I have known hunger—the gnawing emptiness, the dizziness, the body's quiet ache. But what I witness now in Gaza is not hunger. It is starvation. Hunger is a feeling. Starvation is a weapon. Hunger makes you weak. Starvation is used to break you.

We are watching a people, my people, starved in real time.

I remember the small, desperate tricks of hunger: breaking bread into tiny pieces to fool the mind. Drinking salty water just to feel something in the mouth. Splitting one egg three ways. Learning not to ask "What's for dinner?" because it's a cruel joke.

We are telling our survival story because we are either already dead or dying slowly. And we are asking those who still have power, those with voices that can be heard beyond this slaughterhouse, to know: We are being starved. We are sleeping on the streets without shelter. We are scraping at the bottom of life itself, and when we lift our heads, we see a world that has decided we can disappear.

There is a grief here that words can't carry.

***

Even from afar, the ache of Gaza lives in my body. I know the hollow look in my friends' eyes on the screen, the thinness of their voices when they manage to get a message through. I know what it means when they say they are "OK": that they haven't eaten in days, that they are rationing water by the capful, that they are burying neighbors and praying they are not next.

It is a particular kind of torment to watch the people you love endure a struggle you know too well—to recognize every pause, every forced smile, every silence on the line, as a mark of exhaustion and loss. To scroll endlessly through updates, voice notes, and photos of rubble and ash, knowing that no call, no message, no post, will fill an empty plate or quiet a child's hunger.

The helplessness is a weight I carry across every hour. Because when you have survived starvation, you understand that what they are living now is a slow and deliberate crushing of life. And from here, all I can do is bear witness and refuse to let the world look away.

This is what I want people to understand: In Gaza right now, parents are fainting while waiting in bread lines, children are collapsing from dehydration, and infants are dying for lack of formula. Inside overcrowded shelters, mothers are rationing pieces of bread among several children, while fathers scrape the bottoms of pots for leftover grains.

Doctors on the ground report an alarming rise in cases of severe acute malnutrition, describing babies with loose skin over bones, their bodies too weak to cry. Markets have been emptied of food, residents say, and many are resorting to trading scraps of wood or metal in desperate attempts to obtain anything edible.

At water-distribution points, lines often form before dawn, with children standing barefoot for hours, clutching empty jugs in the hope of filling them from damaged taps.

Parents, residents report, are routinely skipping meals because there is nothing left to eat. Some have been forced to feed babies sugar mixed into water, when water can be found at all. Children, once seen playing in the streets, now scavenge through rubble for scraps of food.

Hospitals in Gaza are overwhelmed, with doctors warning that hunger is killing people even before the bombs return. Morgues are at capacity, and aid trucks remain stalled at border crossings, leaving an already dire humanitarian crisis on the brink of catastrophe.

I am no longer able to recognize my city, as it's become a place that's being starved to death in plain sight without immediate and massive intervention. The world is watching a man-made famine. It is looking on as an entire population is being pushed past the edge of survival, and it is doing nothing. N

Mohammed R. Mhawish, a contributing writer at The Nation, *is a journalist from Gaza who is now living in exile.*

VOICES / ANTHONY CONWRIGHT

On Authoritarianism

The Nation *spoke with Newark Mayor Ras Baraka about his arrest for allegedly trespassing at an ICE facility in New Jersey.*

RAS BARAKA, THE DEMOCRATIC MAYOR OF NEWARK, New Jersey, who was arrested by federal agents on May 9, is the latest example of the Trump administration's metastasizing authoritarianism. Baraka was arrested outside Delaney Hall, an immigration detention center in Newark, and charged with misdemeanor federal trespassing. Alina Habba, a counselor to President Trump and the interim US attorney for New Jersey, said that Baraka had "willingly chosen to disregard the law" and "ignored multiple warnings from Homeland Security Investigations to remove himself from the ICE detention center."

Baraka spoke with *The Nation* on May 11, two days after his release, repudiating Habba's characterization of the events and clarifying that he was not at the facility to protest. "I came down there to attend a press conference," Baraka said. "The dispute is with GEO. It always has been with GEO."

The GEO Group is a private prison company that owns Delaney Hall. In February, GEO signed a 15-year contract, estimated to be worth $60 million in its first year, with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement. New Jersey had passed a law in 2021 that prohibits state and local entities and private correctional facilities from entering into agreements with federal immigration authorities to detain noncitizens, but that law was ruled unconstitutional by a federal judge in 2023. New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy and state Attorney General Matthew Platkin have appealed that decision, and a federal court held a hearing in May to determine whether the ruling would stand.

Shortly after the GEO Group announced the contract, Caleb Vitello, the acting director of ICE, made the intent of the deal plain: "The location near an international airport streamlines logistics, and helps facilitate the timely processing of individuals in our custody as we pursue President Trump's mandate to arrest, detain, and remove illegal aliens from our communities."

If the ruling is not overturned, it will set the stage for the federal government to partner with corporate entities to infringe on state sovereignty, defy local ordinances, detain people indiscriminately in private facilities without due process, and deport them.

"I do not think people are seeing what's happening here clearly enough," Baraka told *The Nation*. "We are moving fast into authoritarianism." His warnings are not hyperbolic when one considers the nature of the US government's charging a sitting mayor with federal trespassing, while also charging a US congresswoman, LaMonica McIver, with two counts of assault for attempting to block the mayor's arrest. Habba, who is not just the state's acting US attorney but also Trump's personal lawyer, has targeted other state leaders as well, including the Democratic governor and attorney general, for "get[ting] in the way" of the administration's deportation machine.

Contrary to Habba's allegations, video footage shows that Baraka was arrested after he left Delaney Hall's grounds and was on public property. Even so, Delaney Hall is not federal land. It is owned by a private company, which has allowed ICE to repurpose the former halfway house as a shadow prison. Yet that is precisely the point: Under Trump's regime, there is no land that the president cannot claim to be under his dominion, which renders every American his subject. If Trump can plunder land in Newark and arrest a publicly elected official on public property in broad daylight, in front of witnesses and cameras, is there safety for anyone, anywhere, at any time?

"We can't acquiesce to that," Baraka said. "I think this is an opportunity for states to become labs of democracy, to try everything that we have not tried before. We need to figure out a way to build a democracy outside these folks and their push to dismember democracy in this country."

Indeed, fighting the Trump administration's full-scale desecration of due process and evisceration of the separation of powers between the US government's executive, legislative, and judicial branches will require nationwide collaboration among state lawmakers. Governors, mayors, and members of Congress need to harness financial and legal resources to resurrect and repurpose "states' rights" tactics to defeat our tyrannical federal government.

"This is an opportunity for states to become labs of democracy, to try everything that we have not tried before."

Despite his arrest, Baraka is steadfast in his belief that American democracy still exists and can prevail. "The reality is we've been fighting for a long time to, as Dr. King said, make America live up to what is written on paper. That's really what this is about. And there are people who want to renege on that promise because it doesn't benefit them individually," Baraka said. "There are many of us in this country who disagree with that, who believe that everybody who resides here, who comes here, should have an opportunity to participate in the greatest idea in the history of the world." N

Anthony Conwright is a writer and educator based in New York City. He is currently working on his debut novel, Speak, Blackness.

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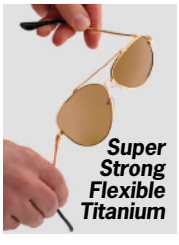

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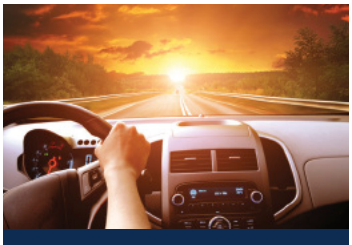

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IN MEMORIAM / GENE SEYMOUR

Singular Instincts

Remembering the formidable former Nation *literary editor Betsy Pochoda (1941–2025).*

I couldn't have been the only person who feared Betsy Pochoda at first sight. She was one of those illuminated beings whose eyes entered a room—or your senses—before the rest of her did. Those wide, pale orbs announced a hot-wired intensity that was at a higher, deeper level than what most people were accustomed to encountering casually. To varying degrees, it was unsettling when Betsy trained them on you. But eventually, you found out (and it usually didn't take very long) that her focus was a gift to you, an acknowledgment that she'd seen something that aligned with her own formidable intellect and comprehensive passions. Such a meeting of minds promised fruitful and gratifying outcomes, especially if you were a writer and were lucky enough to have her as your editor.

Betsy died in her Brooklyn home on May 8, at the age of 83. Her loss has been acutely felt by those of us who worked with her at practically every level of New York print media, including *The Nation*, where she was the literary editor from 1976 to 1982 and from 1984 to 1989, and where she served on the editorial board until her death. After leaving her literary post at *The Nation*, Betsy became a kind of editorial ronin, taking her scholar's rigor, eclectic's curiosity, and sensualist's delight with novelty, humor, and diversity to a truly varied array of publications. Whether it was helping with the 1980s relaunch of *Vanity Fair* or the launch of *Entertainment Weekly* seven years later, Betsy's range of interests—along with her unerring instinct for matching writers with subjects and her reputation as a versatile, incisive editor—inspired devotion in her writers, who followed her wherever she went, benefiting from her solicitousness and enthusiasm toward their individual voices as well as her insights into how to amplify and enhance their work. Her small-c catholic curriculum vitae evoked a small-d democratic sensibility, encompassing the New York *Daily News*, *Mirabella*, the *New York Post*, *Vogue*, *House & Garden*, *Grand Street* (the groundbreaking literary journal that she helped establish), and *The Magazine Antiques*, among others.

Though some of these publications catered to elitist tastes, Betsy was allergic to exclusivity, snobbery, or dogma. She wanted the copy she edited to read well and to be free of jargon, platitudes, and (above all) lethargy. If some of the writers she edited were more dogmatic than she, that was fine as long as their engagement was sound and deeply felt. Still, she could be exasperated at times when a contributor was inflexible in their point of view. "Let many flowers bloom!" I once heard her admonish an especially stubborn writer, who wasn't persuaded, but whom she allowed to carry his biases into print anyway. Her own writing was, as you might expect, witty, wise, whip-smart, and humming with vitality.

As steely and implacable as she could sometimes be, even to longtime friends and colleagues, her enthusiasm and inquisitiveness were contagious. She encouraged me, three years ago, to write a piece for *The Nation* about the Woody Guthrie exhibit at the Morgan Library. There was little to nothing in my professional background, besides my music writing, that would have made me an obvious choice for such a piece. But she won me over by persuading me that Guthrie embodied the possibilities of an American culture in which the artificial boundaries of class, race, religion, and ideology were transcended by compulsive creativity and free-wheeling ecumenism. Such were the spaces she created for those who wrote for her—or, for that matter, hung out with her. For the record, she was enjoyable and knowledgeable company when she tagged along with me to jazz gigs. And as much as anything, I shall miss the online exchanges that we had whenever the University of Connecticut women's basketball team—a shared passion—was playing. Our last digital confab took place in April, despite her illness, as the big three of Paige Bueckers, Azzi Fudd, and Sarah Strong led the Huskies to another NCAA title.

Happy trails, boss. Hope this will meet your standards. N

Elizabeth Pochoda at the IFPDA Fine Art Print Fair preview, 2017.

PATRICK MCMULLAN / GETTY IMAGES

Gene Seymour worked for 18 years at Newsday *as a film critic and jazz columnist. He lives in Philadelphia and has written for* Bookforum, *CNN.com, and* The Washington Post.

Letters

The Radical Self

Re "Trauma's New Look," by Jess McAllen [May 2025]: One of McAllen's central critiques of internal family systems therapy is the lack of research behind it. It's important to note that cognitive behavioral therapy, now widely accepted as an evidence-based treatment, took 20 to 30 years to develop a robust track record of empirical support. And CBT had significant structural advantages: It was developed within academic institutions, supported by large research grants and teams of graduate students. IFS, by contrast, evolved slowly and organically, often refined in informal settings like living rooms throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as early practitioners iteratively improved the model. Only in recent years has IFS gained the visibility and resources necessary to sponsor formal research. The early results of these studies have been promising, pointing to the need for continued investigation. From a clinical standpoint, I've witnessed the profound impact IFS can have—particularly for individuals with complex trauma histories. Since incorporating it into my practice, I've seen clients experience transformation in ways that are both effective and deeply meaningful. These outcomes have reinvigorated my work and offered renewed hope to clients for whom more traditional methods fell short.

While I value rigorous journalistic inquiry and a critical perspective, I urge *The Nation* to approach coverage of IFS with greater nuance—acknowledging both the legitimate need for further research and the growing number of clinicians and clients reporting significant benefits.

Brit Creelman, PhD
Evanston, IL

The writer is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice.

Skepticism toward therapy trends is both understandable and essential, particularly as models like internal family systems grow in popularity and become packaged into high-cost trainings, retreats, and influencer-led brands. However, labeling the model itself or those who practice it as exploitative misses a deeper point. In fact, this critique risks exploiting the very individuals who've found in IFS a source of healing after being failed by other therapy models or individuals.

IFS is about cultivating inner harmony by connecting with Self, an innate state characterized by compassion, clarity, calm, and confidence. This idea isn't unique to IFS, as similar concepts can be found in dialectical behavior therapy's "wise mind" or in mindfulness practices. What sets IFS apart is its radical focus on consent. Nothing is forced. Parts only speak when they're ready, and even "resistant" parts are treated with care and respect. In a society that often emphasizes intellectualizing or suppressing pain, IFS offers a gentler approach: What if even our avoidance deserves to be acknowledged?

Critique of commercialization and accessibility is valid and necessary. But many people turn to IFS not because it's trendy, but because they've been failed by systems shaped by racism, capitalism, and medicalization. For them, IFS isn't about luxury. It's a lifeline, a tool for reclaiming internal space and healing.

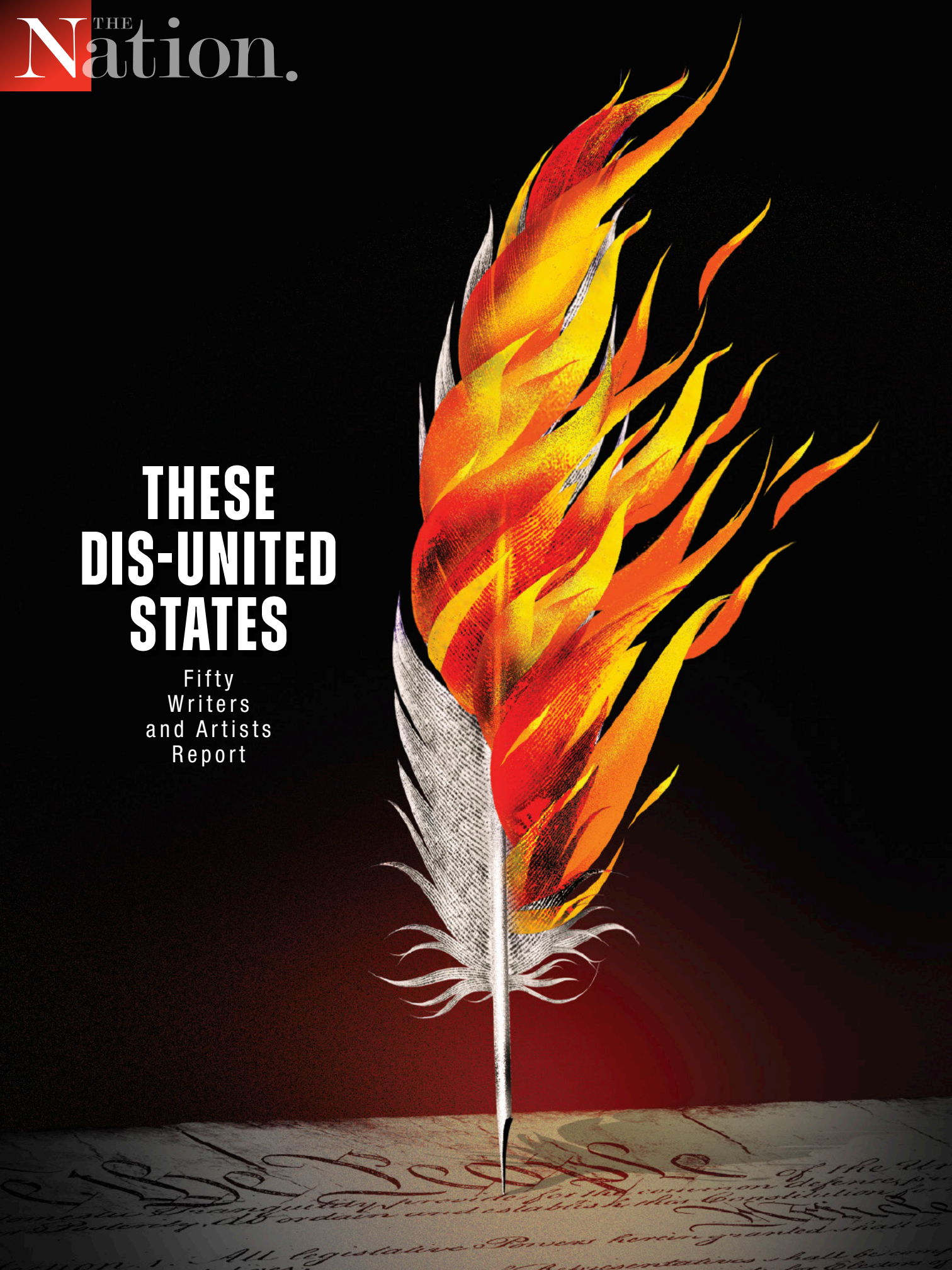
Steven Coletti
Brookline, MA

The writer is a licensed independent clinical social worker in private practice.

THE Nation.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

Fifty Writers and Artists Report



160th Anniversary Double Issue

RICHARD KREITNER

Let's be frank: it's a somewhat presumptuous name for a magazine. Adopting it may have been akin to what philosophers refer to as a "speech act," meant to call into being the very thing referred to. Largely absent from pre–Civil War political rhetoric, which more often spoke of "the union" or "the republic," the word *nation* appeared five times in Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg Address. Two years later, when the first issue rolled off the presses in July 1865, the Confederacy had been defeated and Lincoln murdered, and a fierce fight over whether the "nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," would indeed see "a new birth of freedom" was just beginning. *The Nation* was founded to see that struggle through—and we will.

By the 1920s, there was still something a little incongruous in a magazine so named devoting hundreds of pages over three years to an extensive meditation on each of the separate states. Penned by some of the most illustrious writers of the period—W.E.B. Du Bois on Georgia, Edmund Wilson on New Jersey, Sherwood Anderson on Ohio, Willa Cather on Nebraska, H.L. Mencken on Maryland, Sinclair Lewis on Minnesota, Theodore Dreiser on Indiana—the essays in that series, "These United States," explored the rich history, geography, and character of those minor subdivisions supposedly effaced by the Civil War. The country was often depicted as "one vast and almost uniform republic," the editors observed in an introductory note in 1922. But that left out what made American life interesting: "What riches of variety remain among its federated commonwealths? What distinctive colors of life among its many sections and climates and altitudes?"

In perusing the following dispatches from "These Dis-United States," as we're calling the series this time around, you may well be struck by how similar the experiences of this moment are in many states across this bruised and battered land. Asked to address "the fraying of the ties that once bound us to one another as Americans (or, as often, did not)," 50 of our best writers and artists depict local textures, practices, landmarks, and institutions everywhere being gutted, steamrolled, defunded, eviscerated. Here we get firsthand testimony, from Maine to Hawaii, of the acceleration of a decades-long project to hollow out government at every level—and of the devastating effects of that project on our national life. Among other things, these pieces tell a story of the aggressive erasure of difference. Still, as Judy Chicago puts it in the title of her hand-embroidered contribution, "We're All in the Same Boat"—even if some of us are doing everything we can to keep it afloat, while others, for profit or pleasure, try to capsize it.

The editors' note from 1922 ends with a statement of hope that while "artificial…distinctions" between states would eventually be "assimilated," more authentic differences would remain:

> Though centralization and regimentation may be a great convenience to administrators, they are death to variety and experiment and, consequently, in the end to growth. Better have the States a little rowdy and bumptious, a little restless under the central yoke, than given over to the tameness of a universal similarity.

So, too, today. Many of the pieces that follow portray the states as the necessarily circumscribed plots in which the seeds of some new form of individual and collective liberation might take root—a new birth of freedom, quite different from that imagined by Lincoln and supported by the founders of this magazine, but one that can emerge only from local practices of connection, conversation, organizing, and experimentation—the rowdier the better. We are still calling this nation into being, making an old country anew. N

ILLUSTRATION BY **BRIAN STAUFFER**

Dixie, USA

ASHLEY M. JONES

in alabama, i learned the truth of human duality and i learned the truth of human tenderness. i learned that the river's current is a currency we share but often abuse—think of the old iron bridge at the cahaba—there, above the waters which make us the most biodiverse, waters which literally make space for every little organism to live, eat, make babies, and die in nature's way—there, men of the stars and bars planned to plant bombs, corrupt seeds in the belly of a church in birmingham. faced with so much wonder, the flow of the river filling their ears with the most raucous and peacemaking sound, how did their minds see anything like hate?

what flag makes the shape of this particular paradox?

the very first time the american flag made me swell with pride or fear or love or, if i'm honest, with tears, was the day i saw it hanging, strangely and swinging from the apex of the ladders of the fire truck which carried my father's coffin. that day, a may first i'll never forget, but which i wish would disappear from my memory, i saw the flag flying in the breeze, starkly bright against a gray, cloudy sky, my own body dwarfed in the black suv my cousin drove as we made our way from the funeral to the graveside service. the flag, which let me know my dad was a hero. the flag, which let me know that this country was grateful for his service, for every time he ran into a building's deadly flames, for every time he started an iv, for every time he stopped someone's overdose before it claimed them.

the flag, which also knew he was a black man.

which also knew, as a child, that he was hit by rocks and fists because the white children didn't want integration. which also knew his great pride in his race. which knew his high jumps and joy when he hopped with his que brothers. which knew he had, in his very last job, his retirement job from birmingham fire and rescue as assistant chief, become the first black fire chief in midfield. in 2020. that flag saw me, too—

first black poet laureate of alabama. first person of color poet laureate of alabama. 31 and the youngest poet laureate of alabama. the flag saw me, too, in the alabama state capitol at my commissioning. was the flag there in 1930 when the first alabama poet laureate was commissioned? there we were, masked against a silent, brutal killer. there we were, without our hero in a chamber lined with the larger-than-life white portraits of so many governors who did not stand up for black people,

or, who literally stood in doorways to block us.

there, i was commissioned, little black me, and there was the podium where i gave my speech, and there, right above my sprawling afro, the marble plaque commemorating our state's secession from the union. jefferson davis' ghost slithered in the room. but the court square auction block ancestors were there. and my family was there, and my friends were there, and my father in heaven was there, and my poems were there, and my whole life was there as a testament that the whole confederate history could be swallowed like a piece of unchewed food and i could make use of its waste.

in alabama, i learned that there is something greater than a flag.

Ashley M. Jones is the first person of color and the youngest person to serve as the poet laureate of Alabama. She is the author of four books of poetry, most recently Lullaby for the Grieving.

When Boom Goes Bust

TOM KIZZIA

Greenlanders weighing President Trump's annexation offer might want to consider the present state of America's existing resource colony, Alaska, as it struggles with flatlined budgets, crumbling schools, and an exodus of workers and young families.

We thought we were prepared for this inevitable period of decline in oil production. In 1976, after the discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay, the state created a permanent fund to invest some of the windfall for future generations. Annual dividends paid to all residents profoundly reduced income inequality.

Today, the Alaska Permanent Fund has grown to some $80 billion, and the earnings help pay for the government in a state with no income tax. But the fund doesn't provide nearly enough revenue for both the state budget and the dividends, which remain popular across the political spectrum.

In 2018, Republican Mike Dunleavy strode into the governor's office with a promise to double or triple everyone's dividends. This would have required absurdly deep spending cuts, or general taxes like nearly every other state imposes. But Dunleavy swore to veto any new tax.

The problem is compounded by Alaska's taxation rates on mining and oil production, which have remained low since resource companies effectively captured the legislative process in the 1980s. This year, Alaska expects to shave $600 million off of oil companies' tax bills to compensate for low oil prices. Last year, amid a mining boom, the state actually paid miners more (through tax settlements) than it got back from license tax revenue.

Dunleavy's solution? Ever more resource development projects, promoted by more state subsidies—including drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, building a $44 billion natural gas pipeline, and accessing untapped copper deposits with a 200-mile road along the untrammeled Brooks Range, right through the caribou-hunting grounds of Native villages.

Meanwhile, Native fishing camps sit empty because salmon runs have disappeared, and remote villages collapse as the permafrost melts—problems linked to burning the very fossil fuels whose extraction the state subsidizes. Tourism, a growth industry, has softened the anti-park sentiment that emerged on the right in the 1970s, but the insatiably expanding cruise industry is inspiring new resentments in coastal towns.

One source of optimism is Alaska's ranked-choice voting system, which put moderate bipartisan coalitions narrowly in charge of the Legislature this year. And the state's small population (less than 750,000) allows the kind of face-to-face campaigning that helped reelect US Senator Lisa Murkowski, one of the few independent Republicans in the MAGA-dominated Congress.

Dunleavy predicted a "golden age" for the state with the reelection of Donald Trump, but so far cratering oil

GINA FERAZZI / *LOS ANGELES TIMES* VIA GETTY IMAGES

Sedition swarm: Trump supporters throng Alex Jones as he shouts election conspiracy theories in Phoenix, Arizona, in November 2020.

prices have cost Alaska's budget hundreds of millions of dollars. Deadlock, social decline, and life at the mercy of commodity prices may look unattractive to Greenland's 57,000 residents, but the model evidently appeals to the Trump administration. Trump officials have reportedly considered offering annual $10,000 cash dividends to Greenlanders, paid for out of anticipated resource revenues, to replace the at least $600 million in free healthcare, education, and other annual subsidies that Denmark provides.

Watch out, fellow Northerners—the next "golden age" could be yours. **N**

Tom Kizzia is the author of three nonfiction books on Alaska, including Pilgrim's Wilderness, *and a former* Anchorage Daily News *reporter.*

52% AZ

Political Theatrics

TOM ZOELLNER

When the Arizona Senate's Government Committee met in February to consider a bill mandating that cities and counties assist with ICE raids, state Senator Jake Hoffman (who is also a member of the Republican National Committee) took the opportunity to ham it up for the cameras, ranting about how "mass deportations are wildly popular with people who are in every party."

If Hoffman sounded like he was auditioning for a job in the Trump White House instead of governing, he was only joining a troupe of lawmakers who are exploiting the well-known "C-SPAN effect" that has now arrived at Arizona Capitol Television: the propensity for legislative discourse to become more combative and emotional when it's conducted in front of the cameras.

Say this for times of disunion: They create entertaining theater. In the run-up to the Civil War, congressmen of all persuasions paid close attention to how they were covered in the press. Many made incendiary floor speeches designed not to find solutions but to win the applause of distant audiences. The term *bunk* comes from an 1820 speech about slavery delivered by a representative from Buncombe County, North Carolina, who explained that he was not "speaking to the House, but to Buncombe."

Such is now the dynamic on Arizona Capitol Television, a streaming service formerly watched only by lobbyists and government junkies. In Donald Trump's second term, however, it has become a stage for Republicans to create viral clips that show their fealty to the MAGA agenda. Committee hearings, once restricted to the dull grind of process and the exchange of courtesies, have become noteworthy for their Buncombe quality.

"This year there's a heightened sense of, I don't know what you'd call it… *assholery* by the Republicans," state Senator Analise Ortiz, a Democrat from the west Phoenix suburbs, told me.

While some see that assholery rooted in self-confidence, a better explanation might be insecurity. Arizona Republicans are keenly aware of the price to be paid for failing to live up to Trumpian standards. One of the very first US senators to be ousted from the GOP over such an offense was the seemingly untouchable Jeff Flake, who angered Trump in 2017 by publishing a MAGA-skeptical book called (in a nod to Phoenix icon Barry Goldwater) *The Conscience of a Conservative*. An ensuing Twitter barrage by the president sent Flake's popularity diving and ended his reelection bid. A similar purge of those seen as insufficiently ardent ring-kissers has virtually eliminated moderate Republicans from the Arizona Legislature.

The old-school conservatives who used to compose the ideological backbone of Arizona government have effectively disappeared, offering barely a murmur of dissent to the MAGA takeover of the Legislature—and of Arizona Capitol Television. "It's so transparent what they're doing," lamented Stacey Pearson, a longtime Democratic consultant. "These are scripted clip-and-share moments. The Republicans are hoping their antics go viral, but this performative governing shtick is likely to backfire on them." **N**

Tom Zoellner is the author of Rim to River: Looking Into the Heart of Arizona.

Legislative discourse has the propensity to become more combative when it's conducted in front of the cameras.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

Child, Laborer

ALICE DRIVER

Walk the land in rural towns like Green Forest, Arkansas, down dirt roads among clusters of homes, and you will hear Spanish, Marshallese, Vietnamese, Laotian. A woman from Guatemala will tell you that rent is $300 a month as she sits on a sagging couch in a town of nearly 3,000, where almost half that many people work at Tyson's processing plant.

The children arrived as unaccompanied minors. The children speak Indigenous languages. The children speak Spanish. Teachers whisper about some students, weary from the night shift, who sleep through class. Eventually, many disappear from school, their lives given over to the night shift. These kids live in the shadows, afraid and silent. But if you stay late enough, after dark, you will see them leaving for work, like ghosts in the night, heading to the plant where they will handle skin, fat, bone, and blood.

Politicians say that children will solve the labor shortage. As Project 2025 puts it, "Some young adults show an interest in inherently dangerous jobs."

In 1938, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which imposed restrictions on child labor. Yet my home state of Arkansas has already begun rolling them back. In 2023, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed the Youth Hiring Act. Arkansas no longer verifies the ages of children between 14 and 16 who take a job. Sanders's communications director declared parental permission an "arbitrary burden," so the paperwork that served as a record of the names and ages of minors working in the state no longer exists.

In 2023, a US Department of Labor investigation found six children between the ages of 13 and 17 working at a Tyson plant in Green Forest. In 2024, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families published a report noting that child labor violations in Arkansas increased 266 percent between 2020 and 2023. In October 2024, a woman in Green Forest filed an anonymous complaint to alert authorities to child labor problems. The woman, a mother of middle schoolers, overheard children between 11 and 13 discussing their employment at the Tyson chicken processing plant. The night shift is also known as the cleaning shift, when hazardous chemicals are used to clean the large, sharp machinery. The complaint said she allegedly heard the children discussing whether they could get their paychecks from the ATM.

These children who move through the Arkansas night, their small, strong hands doing dangerous jobs, should haunt us. N

Alice Driver is the author of Life and Death of the American Worker: The Immigrants Taking on America's Largest Meatpacking Company.

Teachers whisper about some students, weary from the night shift, who sleep through class.

Magic and Survival

JULIAN BRAVE NOISECAT

"Our culture is our superpower." That's what my friend, the Cook Island artist and voyager Numangatini Mackenzie, told me before the lights went down for the world premiere of *Shrek* translated into Te Reo Māori, the first language of Aotearoa (New Zealand). Kids bustled around the gymnasium, which had been converted into a theater for Māoriland, an Indigenous film festival held northwest of Wellington, New Zealand. All around, the hum of Māori, with their tattooed arms and faces, their long hair and high buns, and their bodies adorned in bone, shell, and greenstone, speaking that percussive, vowel-strewn Eastern Polynesian tongue, *te reo*, or "the language."

To me, this feels like a dream. I spent the last year and a half promoting my film *Sugarcane*, which documents the atrocities and intergenerational traumas wrought by the segregated missionary school where my family was sent to unlearn our Indian language and ways. Virtually all Indigenous peoples across North America were torn from our cultures and one another by similar institutions. "Kill the Indian, save the man"—that was the idea, according to the American architect of the policy. My travels with *Sugarcane* took me from Indian reservations in Canada and the United States to the Canadian Parliament, the White House, and the Academy Awards, before it landed me in Aotearoa. It was, at times, a hard journey, and not just because it was so personal. How do you convey to audiences who know nothing of this history that there was a national—no, global—conspiracy to wipe Indigenous peoples and cultures off the face of the earth? That the last of these schools didn't close until 1997? That this is why we don't understand our elders, our languages, and ourselves? That it could happen again? That maybe it already is?

As I write this, my flight from Aotearoa is touching down in Los Angeles, the American factory of global popular culture, built on western tales of gunslinging cowboys slaughtering savage Natives. California epitomizes many quintessentially American phenomena: Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and killing Indians—the last of which arguably no state in the union did better. Between 1769 and 1800, the gulag conditions in Spanish missions cut the coastal California Indian population in half. Not to be outdone, during the first decade of American rule in the 1850s, Californians subjugated as many as 20,000 Natives, including 4,000 children, using them as farmhands, domestic servants, and sex slaves. Through 1873, the state bankrolled militias that, according to historian Benjamin Madley, murdered as many as 16,094 Indigenous people. When the forty-niners came to

pan for gold and hunt Indians, there were some 90 languages spoken in the state. Today, half of those are endangered. The other half are extinct.

Sometimes, I don't know how our people survived. And I'm never certain how we should proceed. But my friend Numa down in Aotearoa has his theory. "Our culture is our superpower," he said as we sat in a room full of Indigenous peoples who were supposed to be culturally dead, lit up with laughter as a magical story told in a language they were supposed to forget unfolded on the big screen. N

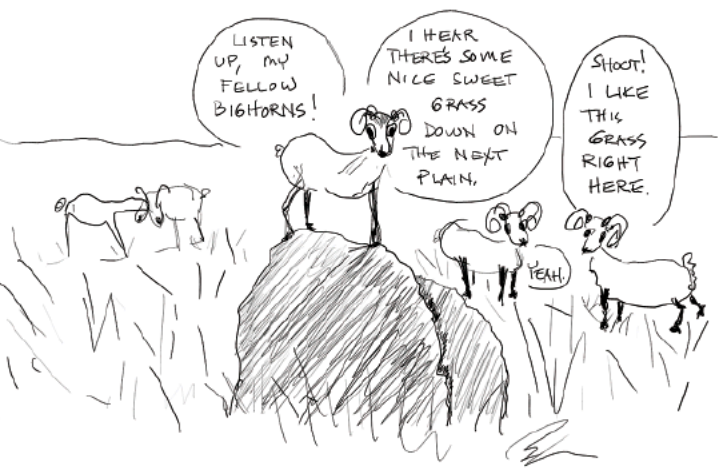
Julian Brave NoiseCat's first film, Sugarcane, *was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary.*

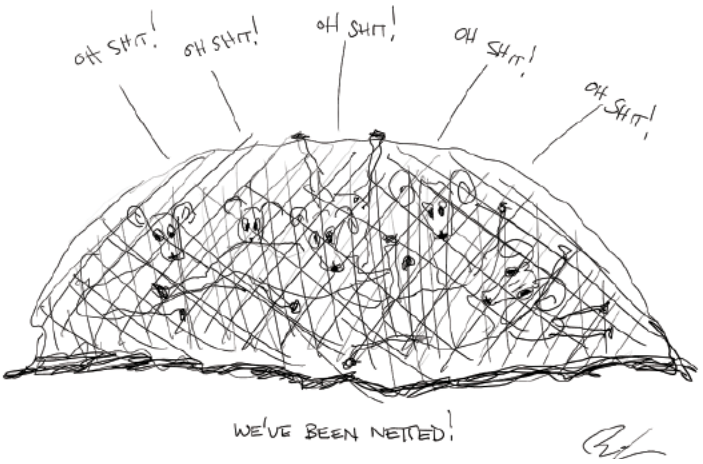
54% CO COLORADO

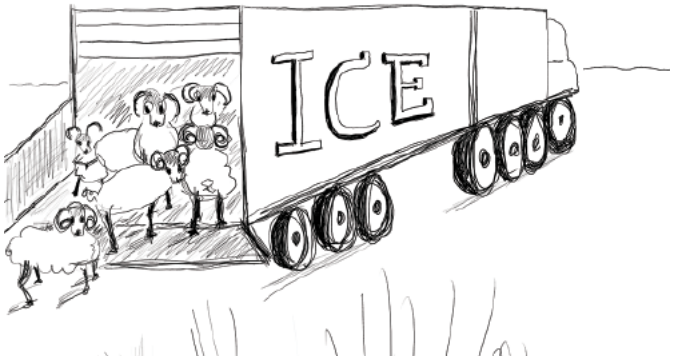
The Bighorn Trap

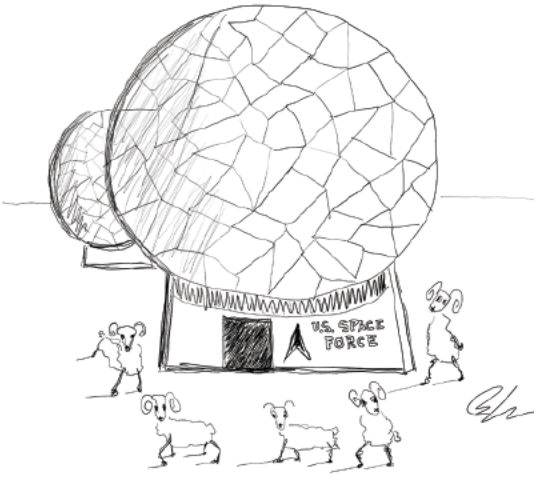
SARAH BOXER

A couple months ago, I watched a local newscast about efforts to revive and disperse the population of Colorado's state animal, the bighorn sheep. The Department of Parks and Wildlife lured









THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

Virtually all Indigenous peoples in North America were torn from our cultures and from one another.

the bighorns near Colorado Springs with tasty treats, dropped a net on them, and took them to a distant plot of land. The video was upsetting. It showed the hapless bighorns freaking out in the net before being wrestled to the ground and loaded into trucks for the trip to a former burn scar west of Pueblo that's now grassland. But when the sheep got to their new home, I have to admit, they looked pretty darn happy.

Still, the video left me with a sinking feeling. Something about those bighorns in the net reminded me of another endangered population two hours north. Shortly after Trump's second inauguration, the Pentagon designated Buckley Space Force Base in Aurora as a "processing center" for undocumented immigrants. By April 2025, Colorado Public Radio reported, Immigration and Customs Enforcement had broadened its efforts in the state, and many immigrants with no criminal record were being "caught in a wide net." I know this analogy between trapped animals and trapped humans is imperfect and unsettling in its own right. But a net is a net. And as disturbing as that bighorn video was, it's much more disturbing to realize that Colorado's immigrants are being treated less thoughtfully than the freaked-out sheep. Another key difference: All the bighorns were soon set free. N

Sarah Boxer is the cartoonist behind In the Floyd Archives, Mother May I?, Hamlet: Prince of Pigs, *and* Anchovius Caesar.

Getting Back to Work

DAVID BROMWICH

For the past 25 years, we have been divided in an alternating pattern of roughly 51 percent majorities, and the same mistake is made by each successive winner: Go all the way with your program while you can—implement now, explain later. What the winners have forgotten is that you cannot govern for long without the consent of the 49 percent.

Democratic lawmakers for the time being are stunned, scattered, and immobilized, in a region between bewilderment and dismay. The more serious among Republican lawmakers have shown themselves docile in obedience to the edicts of a president who is acting more like a dictator than most people, even in his own party, seem to have thought possible. But the serial enormities of Donald Trump's first 75 days form a pattern that is not built to last. A few Republican lawmakers—it only takes a few—will come to oppose the most clearly anti-constitutional of his orders; and Democrats will relearn a language that does not triangulate the mental habits of Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and Wall Street.

As surely as Joe Biden was self-deceived when he thought no one would notice three years of uncontrolled immigration and the conduct of new wars two at a time, Donald Trump will overstep the limits of popular sentiment with exorbitant tariffs, the capture and transportation of US residents to foreign prisons, and the firing of government workers where the loss can be felt and resented by millions of ordinary people on the other end. What tactics can Americans who want a saner society use?

Speak in a language that is political rather than therapeutic. Do not expect people to believe that "trauma" is a daily risk for all Americans who are not white. Try, in fact, to speak to all Americans—not as the sum of their racial, ethnic, religious, and gender-identified parts, but as people who want to get on with their lives unmolested and reasonably healthy. For the purposes of democracy, recognize that lawfare was a shortcut to political power that deserved to fail. As for "resistance": The job of an opposing party is opposition. As soon as it acquires a double identity as half party, half movement, anyone who objects to either half will be tempted to give up the whole.

A few obvious maxims follow for the defenders of liberal society. Be specific in your criticisms of policy. Stake out two or three positions of principle—on free speech, or government by law, or freedom from cruel and unusual punishments—and state the practical effect of those positions. For example: "You should never lose a job for an idiocy you published online under the age of 18." Refer steadily to acts and the officials answerable for those acts, and wherever possible, omit the shorthand "Donald Trump"; it may seem like a labor-saving device, but it has failed before, and it is time to get back to work. It is not self-evident, nor should it be, that you are the people who deserve to govern. Those who would govern have a responsibility to persuade. N

David Bromwich teaches literature at Yale University.

New World Sourdough

JOANN BALINGIT

Since the 2024 presidential election, I have bought no bread. It's not a fast. Not grief. Not "some weird penance," as a friend described her failure to sing in the shower since Election Day. It's a freedom.

"Mother Delilah," as I named my sourdough starter, is soothingly predictable: She behaves just as the baker Bryan Ford said she would in his book *New World Sourdough*. She's ritual, a prayer.

Since November: sourdough boules, bagels, waffles, English muffins. Sometimes two baking days a week. We make music, poems, syllabi, Facetime calls, gardens, love. We make meals for loved ones. The youngest member of this household dances and does his own laundry.

JOE RAEDLE / GETTY IMAGES

Stonewall spirit: Demonstrators at a Florida Pride parade protest Governor Ron DeSantis after he passed a raft of anti-LGBTQ laws.

As I stretch the fabulous mass in my hands, turn the bowl a quarter, stretch and turn again, I wonder: When I circle the wagons in this way, do I isolate myself from others? Am I embracing reality, or ignoring it?

It's hard to ignore disunity, living in Delaware. My state embraces having been the first to ratify the Constitution and enter the Union. Less often do we share that it did so as a slave state and continued to hold people in bondage through the Civil War, while almost 12,000 Delawareans fought for the Union. An estimated 2,000 Delawareans fought for the Confederacy meanwhile.

I think of "Red Hannah," the whipping post displayed at the Sussex County Courthouse until 2020, when protests forced it down. The last public flogging was in 1952, and Delaware had corporal punishment on the books until 1972, long after it was banned in other states. Cut almost two centuries ago, the Delaware & Chesapeake Canal splits the state into northern and southern halves, and that water continues to roughly delimit the social and political divisions in the state today. Delaware has more to do with the history of American disunion than we like to think.

With the blade of my palm, I flip the dough onto the counter and press my bench knife through its soft center to create two loaves.

The word *disunited* makes me think of little plots of forested land surrounded by developments of tract homes and many-laned roadways. And it makes me think of our Delaware subspecies of Eastern box turtle. I used to see them all the time. Fifteen years ago, one lived in our yard and migrated across the road into our neighbors' shrubs each morning, then back to our house each evening. Now I have not seen a common box turtle in five years. Since 1968, the box turtle has declined 75 percent in the Ecology Woods, a University of Delaware 35-acre research site, indicating that it is vulnerable to extinction statewide. Its habitat is being torn apart.

In my kitchen in northern Delaware, this defiant bread is already rising. Amid fragmentation, I am here for those who need me, here for those whom I need: family, friends, artists who matter so much to me. We keep us safe.

New world, I think. Future. Hang on, threatened trees. Hang on, sacred rock. Hang on, sturgeon. Hang on, hatchling turtles. I love you, cypress springs. Hang in there when I am gone, my beloved granddaughters.

Living in isolated patches, confined to itself, a species cannot survive. Hang on. **N**

JoAnn Balingit served as Delaware's poet laureate from 2008 to 2015. Her poems and essays appear in Poetry, The Common, McSweeney's, *and elsewhere.*

Sunshine Nightmare

LAUREN GROFF

Floridians who have been paying attention predicted the current coup that's taking place in Washington, DC. After all, we in the Sunshine State have been slowly crushed under similar

Living in isolated patches, confined to itself, a species cannot survive.

Blue lines crossed: Stop Cop City protesters march in Atlanta in a tribute to slain activist Manuel "Tortuguita" Terán, June 2023.

Floridians who have been paying attention predicted the current coup that's taking place in Washington, DC.

authoritarian forces for years. Ron DeSantis is only the most recent of Florida's leaders who have been proudly and loudly hostile to their own citizens, eliminating DEI programs, choking out public education, and waging wars on books and people's uteruses and the LGBT community and the environment. DeSantis has maniacal dreams of developing our super-fragile protected ecosystems into golf courses and hotels—of all the idiotic things to sacrifice the manatees to. I live in Gainesville, in the north-central part of the state, home to the University of Florida, and for years the school has been shedding brilliant academics who couldn't bear the inanity of trying to teach here. Meanwhile, my friends who work in the nonprofit sector are anguished because even progressive nonprofits, to punish Floridians for their choice of leaders, are starving the state of philanthropic funds—which, of course, ends up hurting not the leaders but the people who can no longer be served. Our state has been bleeding out. We have gone wan and dizzy with it. This confuses non-Floridians into believing that wan and dizzy is our natural condition.

That said, not all Floridas are the same. Geographically, this state is larger than Greece or South Korea; if it were a European country, it would be the 10th-largest in terms of population, just behind Poland. This state is so large, so unruly, that our realities will always be fractured. This past March, my younger son and I went to Miami Beach for spring break. It is always discombobulating to go from the scrub pines and swampy subtropics of north-central Florida to tropical Miami, with its man-made beaches, its signs in Spanish and Haitian Creole, its masses of tourists with blistering sunburns. But this trip showed me a stark divide: The feeling of doom I'd carried around in the north, constantly upheld by my righteously enraged neighbors, vanished in the city of hedonism. There was no protest graffiti, nobody marching, no billboards—no indicators at all of the crisis the country is in. I was startled enough about this that I asked my food-tour guide, a Macedonian immigrant named Faruk, about the situation. He said gently, "In Miami, nobody cares about anything that happens outside of Miami." When I asked him why, he smiled and said, "Money." N

Lauren Groff is the author of five novels and three story collections, including Brawler, *which will be published in February 2026.*

Not So Divided

HANNAH RILEY

Nowhere does the current state of disunion seem more evident than in Georgia, home to the widely protested Cop City, a $120 million–plus police militarization center. Years of sustained

COLLIN MAYFIELD / SIPA VIA AP

opposition had worked to block its construction in a Metro Atlanta–area forest: Land defenders lived in the trees they hoped to save; protesters destroyed machines that were to be used to raze the forest; a coalition tried to block construction through a democratic referendum.

The state's response was swift and harsh. It brought a sweeping RICO prosecution against 61 people, criminalizing acts of mutual aid and labeling protest as terrorism. A forest defender was killed by police, shot 14 times in their tent. Millions of dollars were wasted, the referendum was mired in an appeals court, and acres of forest were drowned under concrete. The end result? The facility was built. The movement fractured.

That's one way to see it.

But, ultimately, to frame this story as one of a movement unraveling is to miss what's happened. The intensity of the state's repression correlates to the intensity of the popular opposition. It proves that we are not as divided as those in power need us to be.

If the people of Georgia wanted Cop City, its backers would not have needed to meet protesters with riot gear and police dogs. They would not have needed to treat a march in which people carried puppets and planted seedlings as a military confrontation, responding with flash-bang grenades and tear gas. The state would not have sent armed police to raid the encampments, to tear down kitchens and gardens and mutual aid tents. They would not have set up surveillance cameras outside protesters' homes.

The overblown response came because the opposition to Cop City pulled back the veil on what policing is, revealing to more and more people the ways in which public money is funneled into expanding state violence while communities go without basic needs. People began to understand that the police state is not a response to chaos but a machine designed to manufacture it, to ensure that people remain fractured, isolated, and unable to build the kind of power that threatens the status quo. Cop City became a national flash point, uniting us across struggles and geographies. Residents of other cities began to draw connections to their own fights, recognizing that the same narratives were playing out in their hometowns, too.

As this country descends further into fascism, police will not be there to prevent harm or address these crises. At every site of resistance, from eviction blockades to deportation defenses to demonstrations in the streets, police will defend capital and state power with military-grade weaponry and surveillance technology. The Stop Cop City movement was more than just a protest and bigger than Atlanta: It was the convergence of many different struggles. It made clear that we are not breaking apart; we are holding together. N

Hannah Riley is a writer and activist based in Atlanta.

Outlying Islands

TOM COFFMAN

For reasons that are both historical and intensely contemporary, Hawai'i feels increasingly out of place in a discussion of the 50 federated states.

First, consider its separate history. Settled by Polynesians between one and two millennia ago, its disparate islands were slowly united into a complex chiefdom, while enduring a demographic cataclysm on contact with the West. Penetrated by Christian missionaries in the early 19th century, Hawai'i evolved into a constitutional monarchy. Beleaguered by the seagoing imperialisms of Britain, France, and Russia, it was taken over step-by-step by the United States. Retooled into an armed fortress, Hawai'i became the target of the attack that clinched the United States' participation in World War II, during which it was placed under martial law. In the aftermath, a radical union movement and the Democratic Party took control of Hawaiian politics. Pulled by the imperatives of the civil rights movement, pushed by the Cold War, Hawai'i became, in 1959, the first island state of the US and the first majority Polynesian- and Asian-ancestry state.

Since the mid-1960s, Hawai'i has been perpetually conflicted by the speed and scale of development in the state and the degradation of its intangible resources. Partly as a response, partly from an instinct for survival, Native Hawaiians began making a startling resurgence in the mid-1970s. Lands and lifestyle have been protected by widespread protests. Suppressed history has been unearthed and popularized. Cultural practices have been retrieved, revalued, and normalized. The Hawaiian language has been rescued from the brink of extinction, and Indigenous rights have been incorporated into state-level common law. In a stunning project that has gone global, ancient practices of oceanic voyaging by non-instrument navigation have been revived.

Today, Hawai'i is one of the bluest states. But it is also a semi-separate outlier with a sturdy core of shared values. Against this history, Donald Trump emerges from stage right as an oddball caricature of the United States at its worst. When he invokes President William McKinley as his role model, he cites the bumbling man who, to the dismay of Native Hawaiians, signed the resolution of unilateral annexation. When he speaks of the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a time of great wealth, he reminds islanders of their long fight against the corporate stranglehold on the territorial economy. When by executive order he declares English the country's official language, he challenges Hawai'i's constitutional designation of both English and Hawaiian as official languages. As he pursues his war against diversity, equity, and inclusion, he attacks the core values of Hawai'i.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

People have begun to understand that the police state is not a response to chaos but a machine designed to manufacture it.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

Turn any stone. In matters ranging from the plummeting numbers of Canadian and Japanese tourists to the rise in sea levels and the protection of species, Hawai'i is predisposed to—is being driven toward—a greater self-sufficiency, not unlike other small countries around the world. N

Tom Coffman is an author and documentary producer working on Hawai'i politics, Hawaiian nationalism, and the Asian diaspora.

Vouchers vs. People

LUKE MAYVILLE

Earlier this year, for the first time in state history, Idaho lawmakers enacted a school voucher law that siphons funding from public schools in order to subsidize private school tuition. It was a tragic moment for the state's public school system and an even worse moment for the state's democracy.

House Bill 93—Idaho's tax-credit-based voucher scheme—was overwhelmingly opposed by the public. In the first hearing on the bill, hundreds of Idahoans submitted testimony; citizens against the bill outnumbered those in support by a 10-to-1 margin.

The pattern continued after the bill arrived on Governor Brad Little's desk. Before signing it into law, Little received tens of thousands of calls and e-mails, with 86 percent opposed to the bill. He signed it regardless.

What mattered more than the will of the people was the influence of billionaires like Betsy DeVos and Jeff Yass, who have financed aggressive smear campaigns against pro-public-education legislators in both parties.

What do these billionaires want? Beyond the push to privatize education and to save children from secular, liberal "indoctrination," there's also what the journalist Jennifer Berkshire and the scholar Jack Schneider describe in their book *The Education Wars* as an attack on the basic ideal of free and equal citizenship—"part of a broader effort to undermine the American commitment to educating every child, no matter their circumstances." The anti-slavery politician Thaddeus Stevens once called public education "the great equalizer." The oligarchs would prefer that we not be equalized.

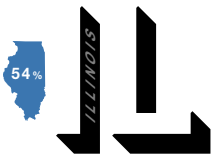
In Idaho, the people's fight against vouchers isn't over. Pro-voucher groups have made clear that their next goal is to remove all guardrails from the new law and to expand the program from its current $50 million per year to an estimated $339 million per year—enough to decimate funding for public schools.

Yet the ground is fertile for a countermovement. In the wake of the bill's passage, with an unprecedented level of public awareness and outrage tied to the issue, supporters of public education planned town halls in every region of the state and launched a movement to demand "Not a Dollar More"—no new tax dollars for an expanded voucher program. At a town hall in rural Payette County, a local superintendent predicted that House Bill 93 would turn out to be "our Pearl Harbor moment, when we wake up and we see the danger."

One can only hope. In Idaho and in every other state being steamrolled by the billionaire-driven voucher agenda, it will take a reinvigorated movement to protect the integrity of our public schools. That movement will need to be cross-partisan, and it will need to span the urban/rural divide. Most importantly, it will need to be a movement that doesn't merely defend the status quo but reclaims the highest purpose of public education—in the words of the writer Marilynne Robinson, "the old project of creating a free people." N

Luke Mayville is a cofounder of Reclaim Idaho, an organization that has spearheaded successful campaigns to expand Medicaid and increase funding for public schools.

In every state being steamrolled by the billionaire-driven voucher agenda, we must protect the integrity of our public schools.



Blue Island

CHRIS WARE

In retrospect, driving with my 12-year-old daughter from our home near Chicago to an empty cornfield in southern Illinois to see the 2017 total solar eclipse, I should've been a little more alarmed by the number of Confederate flags we counted along the way. Four years later, when the pandemic seemed to have eased and we wanted to just go somewhere, anywhere, a day trip through central Illinois took us past not only more Stars and Bars but also "Trump 2024" placards and Trump-as-Rambo banners flapping over apartment balconies, as well as "Piss on Pritzker" lawn signs—all of which seemed a little overdone, given how laughably Trump had emceed the pandemic. (Also nasty, since I'd thought Governor JB Pritzker's daily briefings were a heartwarmingly awkward spectacle of human anxiety and vulnerability, the corn-fed answer to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's officious, patronizing scolding.)

Illinois basically has two regions: Chicago and "downstate." Dense Chicago is reliably Democratic, whereas downstate skews conservative, but rarely enough to flip the electoral switch. (The last time Illinois voted for a Republican president was in 1988.) A fragment of a street called Blue Island Avenue still runs southwest from Chicago toward the town of Blue Island (the name apparently inspired by the low moraine that early-19th-century travelers could see gently bellying up from what Frederick Law Olmsted called the "flat, miry and forlorn" Illinois landscape), a place that was then a day's wagon ride to the city, where beleaguered immigrants could stop for a rest and a beer. Overlaid on the scar of a Native American trail, the route endures as a diagonal slice of space-time through the gridlocked blocks of Chicago and its suburbs.

KEREM YUCEL / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Homegrown tradition: Fans cheer at the annual Indianapolis 500 automobile race.

"Blue Island," however, could just as easily describe our state, bordered to the north by purple Wisconsin and to the east by reliably red Indiana. Illinois has the second-highest property taxes in the nation, and my painter and sculptor friends who migrated to Indiana over the past few years didn't do so because of the weather. We're losing population at an alarming rate: Between 2010 and 2022, Illinois disgorged more people than any other state (and, embarrassingly, many of them were African American, in a sort of reverse Great Migration to a more affordable—and less Chicago-level-policed—South).

Nowadays, my drive to the empty eclipse-viewing cornfield seems ominous. I find myself second-guessing my words, my thoughts self-braking. Did downstaters feel the same way during "cancel culture" and "woke" DEI? How can it be that nearly half of the American population voted for all of this?

I'm originally from Nebraska, and I love the Midwest. The brown-and-gray humility of its homes and streets, its flat talk averaging out from all corners of the world. I realize I live in a blue state, if not a blue island. But how did we all let ourselves get so red with anger at one another? N

Chris Ware is an artist, writer, and regular contributor to The New Yorker. *A traveling retrospective of his work began at the Centre Pompidou in 2022 and concludes this year at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona.*

Who's Here?

SOFIA SAMATAR

In the national imagination, Indiana is a place of comedy and horror. The lovable oddballs of *Parks and Recreation* make their home here, as do the children of *Stranger Things*, whose small town is menaced by an alien intelligence. This makes sense, as Indiana is closely associated with home: the exasperating home you ran away from, the vulnerable home you want to protect. It flickers in the heartland, where candlelight gleams through the sycamores.

Snow is falling on the first day of spring in the town where I was born. I walk with my head down, plowing into the wind, the Indiana stride. Sour joy at the toughness it takes. Other people have placid weather; they're spoiled, shiftless—they wouldn't last two weeks in this cold and cloudy dark. In her apartment in the retirement home, my mother picks out hymns on her electric keyboard. Over a jigsaw puzzle, we reminisce about the lost. Remember my cousin, who died a few years ago:

I live in a blue state, if not a blue island. But how did we all let ourselves get so red with anger at one another?

Civil War in miniature: A 1905 depiction of "Bleeding Kansas," a series of violent political confrontations over slavery in the 1850s.

Waiting for superhero solutions to arrive and save us can diffuse our commitment to the daily actions that make our lives bearable.

his exuberance, his love of NASCAR, the noise and hot metal smell of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, eating fried chicken, tossing the bones about—that really got him, the schoolboy delight of throwing your trash on the ground. Remember my father, gone for a decade now, and how when I was a baby his coworker at the rubber factory called the cops on this African immigrant, accusing him of cannibalism. The officer pulling my dad from the line, the stares, the questions, the comedy and horror.

Of the many folk etymologies of the nickname Hoosier, my favorite traces it to "Who's here?"—supposedly the call of early settlers when a stranger came to the door. It holds the echo of a knock-knock joke and the jumpiness of a scary movie: Who's here, who's already inside?

In the dining room of the retirement home, we eat delicious ribs that fall apart in your mouth and overboiled broccoli that falls apart on your fork. Pensioners pass with walkers, nodding their bleached, benignant heads, talking of church, crochet patterns, the granddaughter coming to fix the e-mail, and suddenly I wonder if there's something profound in the TV versions of Indiana, a truth that can take form only in this folksy atmosphere. The modest job in the parks department with benefits, vacations, and the prospect of a dignified retirement—it's not a joke, I realize, but a national nostalgia. The horror show, too, speaks to our common crises, dramatizing mental illness, experiments on children, a rotting landscape, and a predatory virtual world.

After dinner, snow is still whirling outside my mother's window, bright in the beams of the back-door light. The bell rings. It's her students, a middle-aged immigrant couple she volunteers to help with English once a week. Smiling, deferential, they brush off their coats. A lesson begins at my mother's table, words detached and striving to find their grammar, soft, insistent flakes of language filling the air like snow. "I am." "He is." "She is." "They are." "We are." **N**

Sofia Samatar is a writer of fiction and nonfiction, including the memoir The White Mosque, *a PEN/Jean Stein Award finalist.*

56%

IOWA

Shrink the Aperture

KAVEH AKBAR

The evergreen question of "How shall I live?" can feel immobilizing amid the calculated chaos of a despotic regime. So, too, can the unsatisfying mundanity of the only authentic answer: One moment at a time.

When the aperture on living gets too big, my instinct is to escape. Drugs and booze were great for that, allowing me to hover in blissful repose above my life's unmanageability. But in recovery, I've lost my

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privileges to such luxurious flight.

What I have now is the ability to shrink my aperture. What I want is to arrest global fascism in its tracks and melt down every gun and instrument of war. But first: I will finish typing this sentence. If even that feels like too much, I can breathe in, then breathe out.

There is a desire now, I think, to find proportionally big, monolithic solutions to the big, monolithic evils of our murderous age. But waiting for superhero solutions to arrive and save us can diffuse our commitment to the trillion tiny, unsexy daily actions that actually make our lives bearable. Yeats on the Irish Civil War: "We had fed the heart on fantasies, / The heart's grown brutal from the fare."

I live in Iowa and teach at a big state university directly in the crosshairs of the Trump regime. I've not witnessed any capitol-storming insurrections yet, but I have stood with a small group of earnest undergrads in front of our state Legislature as they read each other Palestinian poetry and chanted in the rain. I've not witnessed anyone step in front of a tank, but I did see a young hijabi at a different action respond to an anonymous challenge about the group's stance on antisemitism—taking the mic, she confidently asserted that antisemitism has no place in any serious freedom movement.

Once, when asked by a young man for a solution to the political crises in her writing, Octavia Butler replied simply, "There isn't one." "No answer?" the student asked. "You mean we're just doomed?" Butler responded, "There's no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There's no magic bullet. Instead, there are thousands of answers—at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be."

Other answers I have seen: A colleague who runs an international writers' program, on hearing that the Trump State Department had gutted the program's funding, immediately began organizing to protect current and future students. When four of Iowa's international students also lost funding, our community rallied on their behalf; eventually, a federal judge reinstated their visas. Also: a young recovery fellow showing up to the home of a sick friend to fold laundry and wash dishes. My spouse saying goodnight every night to each of our animals and then to a box of our beloved cat's ashes. My sister-in-law teaching my little nieces how to make zines.

I'm skeptical of anyone selling solutions that sound too big or too certain. Real action needs doing, not selling, so it's motion I trust. When I stall, it means my aperture's gotten too wide.

Yesterday my neighbor cooked me chile relleno and told me about painting in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Today I went over to a friend's house, chased their little kids around the yard, and laid in the grass. When I finish writing this essay, I'll put some shoes on, call a recovery newcomer, and take my dog to walk in the setting sun. One thing, then the next. For a long, long time. N

Kaveh Akbar is the author, most recently, of the novel Martyr! *Born in Tehran, he teaches at the University of Iowa.*

The New CSA

KEVIN WILLMOTT

A little more than 20 years ago, I wrote and directed *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America*, a film that told an alternate history in which the South had won the Civil War and shaped the country in its own image.

Making the film alerted me to how Confederate ideology continues to influence American society. Although the South lost the Civil War, it was not until the 1960s that substantial changes occurred in Southern society. Ever since, the United States has been divided between those who accept the results—the enshrinement of equality in the Constitution—and those who don't. Call them the USA and the CSA. Recently, the two countries have merged into one: The Confederacy has gobbled up the Union.

Lawrence, Kansas, where I live, was, like *The Nation*, founded by abolitionists. Our historic Massachusetts Street is named after the home state of its earliest settlers, who moved here in the 1850s to keep slavery from spreading to the Western territories. The fighting that followed, in the period known as "Bleeding Kansas," was an early warning of the nationwide conflict that would come just a few years later.

The city has long celebrated this heritage. My children attended Free State High School. But after the Union victory in the Civil War, Lawrence became segregated, as did much of Kansas. It was, after all, the Topeka Board of Education whose resistance to integration compelled the Supreme Court to intervene in 1954. The free state became segregated because the South won the peace. Now the entire nation is capitulating to the new Confederate States of America.

The old CSA romanticized antebellum Southern life, as in *Gone With the Wind*. The new CSA also aims to return to an earlier period: the 1950s of Donald Trump's youth, when white men were dominant, women were homemakers, African Americans held "Black jobs," LGBTQ+ individuals were in the closet, and Latinos faced deportation.

The new CSA differs from the old in its nationwide presence. Unlike its predecessor, the new CSA ideology is both blatant and subtle. It can attract far-right hate groups as well as growing numbers of African Americans and Latinos.

The Trump administration's ongoing attack on the federal bureaucracy and wholesale cancellation of government programs; the quest to remove diversity, equity, and inclusion policies; the erasure of Black history; and the reinstatement of Confederate names on military bases are all clear attempts to revive the white supremacy of the CSA. So is the clearly unconstitutional attempt to revoke birthright citizenship, as enshrined

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

The entire nation is capitulating to the new Confederate States of America, whose ideology is both blatant and subtle.

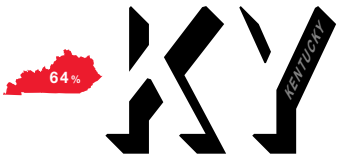
THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

In the wake of disasters, one finds efforts toward mutual aid and communal solidarity, knitting together new social bonds.

in the 14th Amendment, drawn up and ratified by the victors of the Civil War.

Promoting *C.S.A.* in Memphis shortly after its release, I sat for an interview at a Fox station where the Black anchors were shocked by the film and quietly warned me about showing it in the city. As I left the studio, a receptionist, an older white woman, told me, "The South will rise again." Indeed, it has. N

Kevin Willmott won an Academy Award for cowriting BlacKkKlansman. *He has directed numerous feature films.*



Blood and Bluegrass

TARENCE RAY

On the morning of September 7, 2024, Joseph Allen Couch, a former Army Reserve engineer, walked into a gun store in London, Kentucky, and purchased a semiautomatic Cobalt AR-15 with a mounted sight and 1,000 rounds of ammunition. He then took position on a cliff ledge overlooking Interstate 75 and proceeded to spray live rounds into cars passing on the highway, injuring five people. Afterward, Couch disappeared into the surrounding woods and turned the gun on himself, while the state shut down its schools for days in the belief that the shooter was still on the loose.

How did Kentucky come to be the font of such despair and the scene of such carnage? To some extent, it has been this way from the beginning. Just over 250 years ago, settler pioneers like Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton summited the Appalachian crest and began streaming into the land south of the Ohio River Valley, a land sacred to the Shawnee. The Shawnee had obtained promises from the colonial authorities that this would never happen, and yet here were strange white men making strange markings on trees to denote a strange new concept: private property. The Shawnee leader Tecumseh recognized that if the white man was willing to break his promise to never settle the sacred wilderness of Kentucky, he would not stop until he reached the farthest regions of the continent.

A century later, Kentucky was at the center of another national transformation. Slavery and "slave breeding" had become widespread in this so-called border state—Kentucky, in fact, had over 200,000 slaves by 1850—and yet Abraham Lincoln promised to keep the practice intact in exchange for the state's loyalty to the Union during the Civil War. This exemption from the Emancipation Proclamation meant that Kentucky became the second-to-last state to adopt a constitution outlawing slavery. In the decades after the war, white supremacist paramilitary groups like the Ku Klux Klan terrorized free Black people. The promise of racial equality was abandoned. It's not a far leap from there to the 1954 prosecution of the white journalist Carl Braden on trumped-up charges of sedition—for the crime of helping a Black couple, Andrew and Charlotte Wade, buy a house in their Louisville neighborhood—and, more recently, to the murder of Breonna Taylor inside her own home.

In the decades after the Civil War, Kentucky sold off its numerous natural resources to corporate interests, all premised, in some way or other, on vice, alienation, and environmental rot: coal mining, tobacco farming, car manufacturing, horse racing, and bourbon. This made the state vulnerable to "natural" disasters, from floods to fires, sinkholes to tornadoes. But this may, paradoxically, provide the only hope for a brighter future: In the wake of such disasters, one finds efforts toward mutual aid and communal solidarity, the knitting together of new social bonds amid the wreckage of the old. It may be that such bonds are the only hope Kentucky has of reversing the tide of history and becoming sacred once again. N

Tarence Ray is a cohost of the podcast Trillbilly Worker's Party. *He lives in Lexington, Kentucky.*

The Big Uneasy

SARAH JAFFE

When people in the United States talk about disunion, they often refer to the Civil War, instinctively pitting the South against the rest of the country. The backward South, the story goes, is still fighting the "War of Northern Aggression." It is the reservoir of all the nation's racism.

I see some truth to this. Born in Boston and raised partly in South Carolina, I currently live in Republican-dominated Louisiana, where I can't get a legal abortion and union membership ranks 44th in the nation. But I also live in New Orleans, where 80 percent of voters backed a workers' bill of rights in the 2024 election, where union nurses have struck three times for a decent contract in recent months, and where a Palestine-themed Mardi Gras parade has rolled two years in a row.

That workers' bill of rights had to be carefully written so as not to run afoul of state preemption laws—a problem familiar to people in the South, where Republican-dominated state legislatures ban localities from doing everything from raising the minimum wage to regulating traffic stops by police. Last year, I covered the struggle by organizers in Memphis to pass reforms after the brutal police killing of Tyre Nichols; once the Tennessee Legislature came back into session, it prioritized undoing the local ordinance. Governors and other state politicians have interfered in union elections in Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee. Jeff Landry, our Republican governor, sent state troopers to clear homeless encampments in New Orleans even before a former soldier barreled his car down Bourbon Street early on

JOHN EWING / *PORTLAND PRESS HERALD* VIA GETTY IMAGES

Blight of beaching: A whale carcass washes ashore in a state park in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, in 2012.

New Year's Day. After the crackdown, Landry seemed gleeful about his ability to over-police Mardi Gras.

It often feels like those of us in Southern cities are under attack by our own state governments. And yet I also recall this feeling from my time living in Northern cities. New York's Fight for $15 campaign had to battle then-Governor Andrew Cuomo in order to raise the minimum wage, and Pennsylvania continues to block Philadelphia from enacting gun control.

Indeed, the way a state swings in presidential elections usually depends on whether the major urban areas—strongholds of Black people and immigrants, union members, and LGBTQ people—are populous enough to counterbalance the rest of the state. Georgia, the epitome of the Deep South, has become a key presidential battleground by virtue of Atlanta's booming population.

When it's a matter of going to war against their own populations, liberal mayors and city councils have plenty to answer for as well. The movement to stop the construction of Atlanta's Cop City, a $100 million–plus police training complex, was thwarted by a Democratic mayor and city council. In his time as mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel—fresh from the Obama White House—tried to break the Chicago Teachers Union. When that failed, he closed 50 schools, leaving long-term pain in his wake. And need I repeat the whole sordid Eric Adams saga in New York City?

Perhaps we're not as disunited as we think: In red and blue states alike, we can all relate to seeing the popular will trampled by careerist elected officials, whether at the municipal, state, or federal level. The disunion is coming from inside the house. N

Sarah Jaffe is the author of From the Ashes, Work Won't Love You Back, *and* Necessary Trouble.

Tangled in Tradition

KATE CHRISTENSEN

These days, political differences often come down to how you feel about destroying nature for the sake of profit. The gamut runs from can't-hurt-a-bug bleeding hearts to kill-for-fun, drill-baby-drill psychopaths. Most of us fall somewhere in between. We have to live, after all.

When it comes to conservation, our nation is increasingly divided between two opposing views: the belief that the web of life is sacred and interconnected and must be protected for the good of us all, and the belief that unchecked, unregulated growth is a red-blooded American birthright and that anyone who threatens it is an impediment to progress.

Here in Maine, no enterprise is more symbolic than the lobster industry. The lobsterman is our cultural icon: the hardworking man who chugs out in a boat at dawn and pulls a rugged sustenance from the sea. And there is no more iconic representation of New England's economic and maritime history than the North Atlantic right whale. Hunted to near-extinction in the 19th century, they rebounded in the 20th century during a period of rising conservationism. But since the deregulations of the Reagan era, when environmental protection became politicized, the pendulum has swung hard right, even in the face of looming catastrophe. Today, right whales are once again gravely endangered—as

In red and blue states alike, we can all relate to seeing the popular will trampled by careerist elected officials at every level.

Breakdown of civility: In 1865, pro-slavery Representative Preston Smith Brooks (D-SC) infamously caned abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner (R-MA).

of last count, there are fewer than 370 of them left.

Entanglement in fishing gear and strikes from ships, often lobster-fishing vessels, are the primary threats to the whales. In the Gulf of Maine, the whales' migratory path takes them through a thicket of 400,000 lobster-fishing lines, vertical buoy lines that run from the surface down to traps on the ocean floor. When whales become entangled, they critically injure themselves or starve to death. Because of rising ocean temperatures, the lobster population in the Gulf of Maine has exploded in recent years as it's plummeted in southern New England. But scientists are projecting an imminent decline in the gulf as well due to the lobsters' ongoing northward migration, since the Gulf of Maine is the fastest-warming body of water on Earth.

In the face of their own looming obsolescence, and despite the damage their gear does to these endangered whales, the lobstermen have been doubling down. Instead of pivoting as an industry to oyster or kelp farming, they're fighting for their right to keep catching lobsters the same old way. Lobster harvests in the Gulf of Maine reached an all-time high in 2021 but have been declining ever since. In 2022, a major ocean conservancy group put Maine lobsters on its do-not-eat "red list" to call attention to the plight of the whales, prompting the lobstermen to sue for defamation. Industry spokespeople claim that ropeless fishing, which uses acoustic modems and remote-deployed trap recovery methods, would cost a prohibitive $375,000 for a lobsterman fishing a full allocation of traps in eight-trap trawls. There is no practical solution at present beyond the lobstermen voluntarily suspending fishing during whale migration.

Meanwhile, whales keep dying from getting entangled in lobster-fishing lines, and the industry evidently intends to keep pulling lobsters out of the Gulf of Maine until they're all gone. This is the only way of life the lobstermen know. Their identities are inextricably connected to it.

This is human nature, the American way. The tension between conservation and exploitation has always been tricky to balance. In the struggle between lobstermen and the right whale, there are no winners. And as Maine goes, so goes the nation. **N**

Kate Christensen is the author of two memoirs and 11 novels, most recently Good Company, *forthcoming in the summer of 2026.*

Democracy on Trial

MADISON SMARTT BELL

The ultimate question is whether the United States will become an autocracy or remain a nation of laws.

For me, as for many, the ultimate question is whether the United States will become an autocracy or remain a nation of laws. In the latter case, the object of the game is to discover and enact what citizens actually want; to that end, laws are created by the national legislature, implemented by the executive, and tested by the courts with reference to the US Constitution, a document that has been revised from time to time, usually for the better. The risk now is that, for the first time in our history, it may be disregarded—or even jettisoned altogether. That would make the United States one of the most dangerous autocracies in the world, alongside Russia and China.

Since 2016, most legislators on the right have cravenly capitulated to executive overreach. Preemptive compliance happens in the futile hope that caving in

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advance of absolute compulsion may protect a group from being noticed or harmed.

The despotic intention of the executive no longer bothers to mask itself. If the legislature continues to do nothing to oppose it, the next recourse is the courts. So far, the judiciary has mostly held up, likely because anyone who has made a career in the legal profession believes very firmly in the rule of law. There may be exceptions, including a couple on the Supreme Court—although at the time of this writing, it seems the majority of the highest court does follow the rule of law.

The next test will be whether the executive will simply flout court orders, a thing some have already declared it will do, and which is already beginning to happen.

After that, the test will be whether the midterm elections in 2026 will actually be free and fair—which may not happen without struggle.

The next test will be whether the military, which has supported the rule of law up to now, can be corrupted from the top down, something which has certainly happened elsewhere. That possibility takes us to a very dark place. As a Southerner, I have an atavistic memory of what it's like to lose a civil war, and the conditions for another one have been present for a long time. We have the most heavily armed civilian population on the planet, and for now, the arms are mostly in the hands of the right wing.

The Calvert family founded what became the state of Maryland on a principle of tolerance—religious tolerance at first, because the Calverts were closet Catholics in an age of compulsory Anglicanism. But tolerance of other kinds of difference expanded to become part of both the state and national culture, including the political culture—though not without being aggressively challenged, time and again. In this area we have lately been failing, as much on the left as on the right. The left has been wrong in dismissing its opponents as ignorant, backward, deplorable.

To practice real tolerance, one must try to understand the motives of those who think and act differently, which in turn requires the difficult operation of entering into the point of view of the other. One of the appeals of autocracy is that it allows such difficulties to be evaded, because difference can simply be stamped out or driven underground. N

Madison Smartt Bell is the author of numerous books, most recently The Witch of Matongé.

Our Oldest Rift

GEORGE SCIALABBA

Massachusetts and South Carolina have a troubled history. Before the Civil War, Massachusetts was probably the most vociferously anti-slavery state, and South Carolina probably the most ardently pro-slavery. John C. Calhoun, slavery's most implacable and articulate defender, was a South Carolinian; the best-known abolitionist journal, William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, was published in Boston. Massachusetts insisted on tariffs to protect its manufacturers; South Carolina bitterly resented the effect of those tariffs on its agricultural exports.

On May 20, 1856, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner delivered a scorching anti-slavery speech that contained particularly harsh criticism of South Carolina Senator Andrew Butler. Two days later, Butler's younger cousin, South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks, approached the elderly Sumner in the chamber and beat him senseless with a cane. Sumner was severely injured and was absent from the Senate for three years, but Brooks's action was popular in South Carolina: Hundreds of people sent him canes to replace the one he had broken in his assault on Sumner.

When the war came, Massachusetts Governor John Andrew agitated for an African American regiment. President Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton were reluctant, but Andrew persisted. Finally, the regiment was formed; to train and lead it, Andrew tapped 25-year-old Robert Gould Shaw, the son of a notable Massachusetts abolitionist. At first, the regiment was kept out of combat and confined to support services. It was eventually allowed to spearhead the assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina. The regiment took heavy casualties, and one of the first was Shaw. It was customary on both sides to return the bodies of officers to their families for burial. The Confederates made an exception for Shaw, whom they despised for leading Black troops. He was thrown with his soldiers into a mass grave. His abolitionist father called that the highest honor he could have wished for his son.

Today, Massachusetts and South Carolina are as far apart as ever. This time there is no prospect of either armed conflict or secession—the plutocracy will not allow it. An independent North and Pacific West would likely evolve into a social democracy, as the whole country might well have done if not for the South's stubborn resistance to civic equality, organized labor, and the welfare state. The plutocracy is wholly dedicated to preventing any evolution toward social democracy, or even a return to New Deal liberalism.

What could begin to undermine this deep-rooted sectional mistrust? Short of winning back control of all three branches of government, which may take a while, perhaps a little cultural exchange would help. What if every Massachusetts high school student had to spend a year in South Carolina, and vice versa? It undoubtedly wouldn't turn a whole generation of South Carolina's youth into wild-eyed radicals or Massachusetts's youth into pigheaded reactionaries. But they might b.e slower to reach for that cane. N

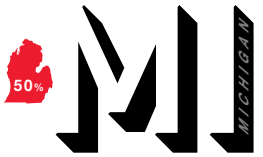
George Scialabba's most recent book is Only a Voice: Essays.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

In today's dis-United States, there is no prospect of either armed conflict or secession—the plutocracy will not allow it.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

This country was built on the violent foundation of "separate but equal," and in many towns we may love, this is perpetuated still.



How Water Divides Us

ANNA CLARK

In times of groundlessness, I come back to the water. In Michigan, it can't be helped.

My native state is split across two peninsulas stitched together by a five-mile-long suspension bridge and bordered by four of the largest lakes in the world. I'm the type that boasts to oceanside friends of the majesty of the Great Lakes: their frigid depths; their thousands of miles of shoreline; their store of nearly all the fresh water in the United States. Poured over the lower 48 states, it would settle at a depth of more than nine feet. Even well beyond this inland coast, Michigan's abundance of lakes, streams, and rivers means you're never more than six miles from a natural body of water.

So goes my Middle West patriotism. It's a common sort, across all corners of this swingiest of states. But water is revelatory. It forces us to be honest. And the truth is, our water is a weapon as much as it is our shared wealth.

It wasn't long before *The Nation*'s founding that the river between Detroit and Ontario—a final crossing on the Underground Railroad—divided people between enslavement and freedom. "Thanks be to Heaven that I have got here at last," wrote one who got free. "On yonder side of Detroit river, I was recognized as property; but on this side I am on free soil."

Nearly 200 years later, the water still wrenches us apart. I grew up at the outlet of the St. Joseph River into Lake Michigan. All my life, and long before, that river has been a shorthand for the divide between two very different towns: St. Joseph (largely white, well-off) and Benton Harbor (largely Black, poor). For many, the river was itself a source of fear—and crossing it was out of the question. I may have grown up working-class, but living in St. Joe privileged me with vastly different prospects than those of a kid in a similar family just a mile or so north. This country was built on the violent foundation of "separate but equal," and here, in towns I love, is one more place where it is perpetuated still.

Then, too, Michigan is home to the Flint water crisis. It began in 2014, when the choices made by those who held power over a poor city of nearly 100,000 people turned their drinking water toxic, especially with lead and deadly *Legionella* bacteria.

In 2016, when I was working on a book about the water crisis, a poet in Flint opened her home to me. The city was still reckoning with the fallout. The poet's ringing question haunts me: "Can water be made holy again?"

I find my words meandering like the ghost streams of Detroit, buried long ago under the city streets. But this is the point: Michigan's waters demonstrate the cause and effect of our choices in an uncomfortably literal way. Our past flows into our present. We must meet it to meet each other. There is no other way. N

Anna Clark is a Detroit-based investigative journalist with ProPublica. *She teaches creative nonfiction at Alma College in its MFA program.*

Learn From the Land

DAVID TREUER

My homelands, my Ojibwe tribal homelands, are an intimate place, somewhat devoid of grandeur, but to me and my kin indescribably beautiful. These homelands are studded with lakes. Some, like Lake Superior, Lake Mille Lacs, Leech Lake, and Red Lake, are so vast they can't be seen across. Others, mere dips in the land, are so small they have no name at all. But all remind me of Joseph Conrad's description of the ocean, which "seemed to pretend there was nothing the matter with the world."

But, of course, there was. And here in the western Great Lakes region, there is: the series of treaties we, the Dakota, and other tribes signed with the US government between 1805 and 1867, which resulted in the state of Minnesota imposing its sovereignty like a poorly folded blanket over the corpse of our great Native Nations—the most premature of burials.

It began even before statehood in 1858 but accelerated with European settlement. Swamps and bogs were filled in to make way for plowed fields. Forests were cut down. Over the past 150 years, Minnesota has lost roughly half of its wetlands and half its forests. Prairies have fared even worse: Some 19 million acres have been reduced to around 58,000. Bison and elk went extinct east of the Mississippi. All that remains of the original forests are 144 acres of old-growth red and white pine just north of my reservation, known as the "Lost Forty."

But despite those losses, our Nations did not die out. We survived and grew. We have remained alive, profoundly so, enough to curb the appetites and shape the behavior of our younger civic brother, the state of Minnesota. We have welcomed our new Somali and Hmong relatives. We shape our governments and keep them true to their ideals.

In 2023, the Minnesota Legislature passed—and Governor Tim Walz signed—new laws guaranteeing 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave, free public college tuition for lower-income Minnesotans, a new child tax credit, free lunches for all public school students, driver's licenses for all state residents regardless of immigration status, stronger unionization, the restoration of voting rights for convicted felons, protections for abortion rights, and a "trans refuge" law that protects transgender children traveling to Minnesota

DAILY EXPRESS / ARCHIVE PHOTOS / HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

to receive gender-affirming care from states that would punish them. Legislation was also passed that set 2040 as the goal for Minnesota's electricity to be carbon-free.

Back in the treaty days, our leaders would often refer to themselves as children and to the United States or the president as the "Great White Father." This was a rhetorical strategy used to placate an insecure but powerful opponent. The truth is now clear: Our civilizations are older, we've been here longer, we have been the "father," and Minnesota, all the other states, and the Union itself are our children.

At least compared with its neighbors—Iowa, South Dakota, and North Dakota, where the seeds of liberalism have largely died back or never took root—Minnesota remains committed to all three words in the official name of its dominant political party: "Democratic," "Farmer," and "Labor." The state is perhaps not unlike the Lost Forty: grown up, somewhat alone, but ready to reseed the political land around it with something that will actually grow. N

David Treuer is Ojibwe from the Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota. His latest book is The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America From 1890 to the Present.

Freedom Fight, Redux

MAKANI THEMBA

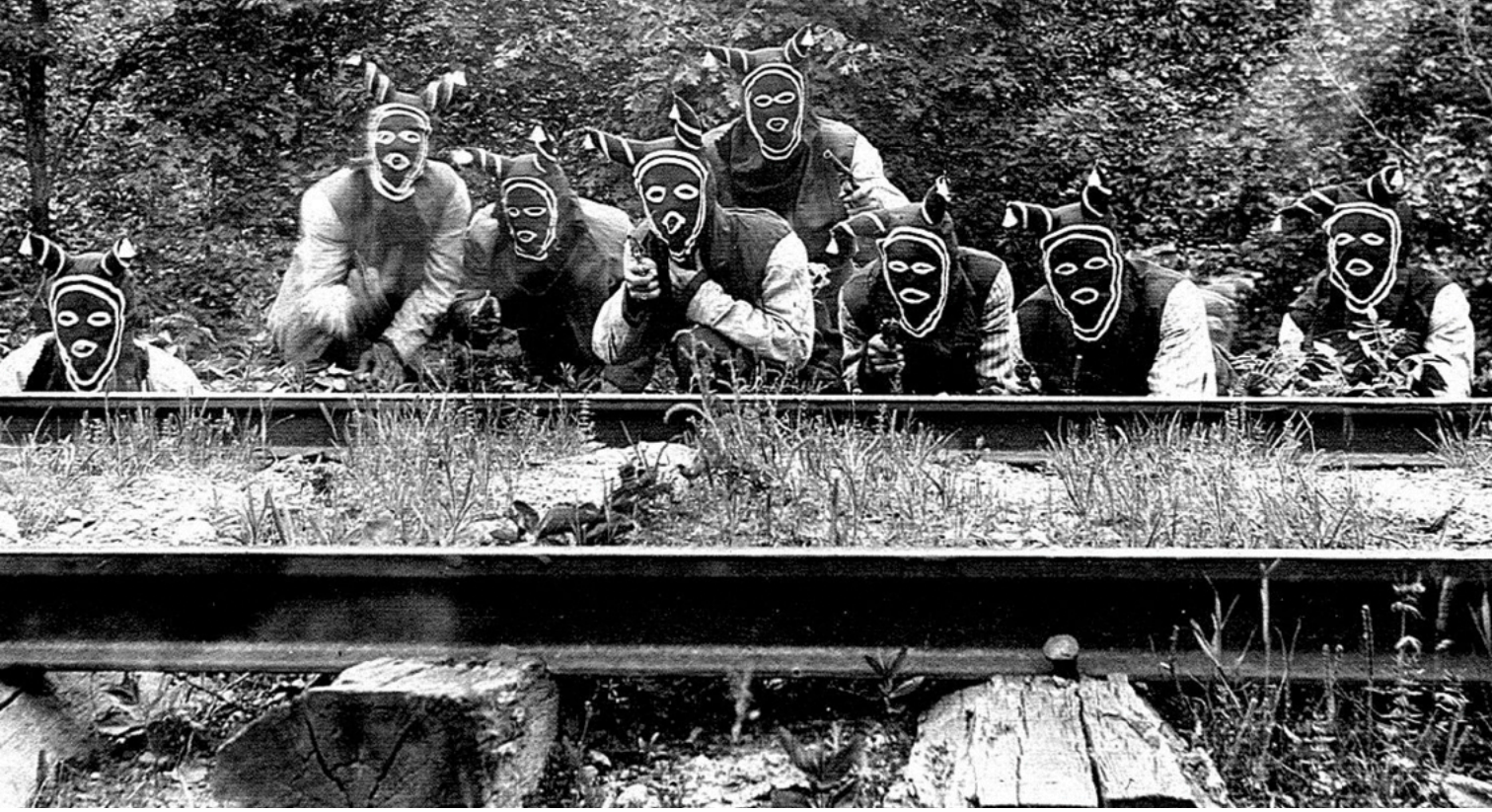
In the late 1990s, a group of anti-poverty activists in Idaho told me that one of their most compelling arguments was to tell legislators that their state was in danger of becoming Mississippi.

Nobody wanted that.

Mississippi tends to hover at or near the bottom of every quality-of-life ranking. The state continues to embrace its particularly brutal history of chattel slavery and Jim Crow rule. For liberals, Mississippi presents a troubling exception to the story of a kind and fair America, the same story that makes it difficult to comprehend Trumpism. This is not "supposed" to happen in America, only in places like Mississippi—the backward, anachronistic outlier that no state wants to become. However, as with any stereotype, the real

Enforcing integration: The Freedom Riders disembark from their bus en route to Jackson, Mississippi, to use a "whites only" waiting room at a bus station in 1961.

States imposed sovereignty like a poorly folded blanket over the corpse of Native nations.



Ozark outlaws: A portrayal of the late 19th-century vigilante group the Bald Knobbers in the lost 1913 film *The Baldknobbers in Missouri*.

The truth is that Mississippi has always been the state where this country's deepest divisions are continually contested.

story is more complicated. The truth is that Mississippi has always been the state where this country's deepest divisions are continually contested.

During Reconstruction, Mississippi was a bellwether of a different kind. Its 1868 constitution was progressive for its time, including voting rights provisions for Black men, the abolition of slavery, and property rights for married women. However, once Southern Democrats recaptured power (helped in large measure by the federal government), a new constitution was ratified in 1890 that reversed most of the advances of 1868 and established the state's Jim Crow framework.

Of course, the mostly Black Mississippians who were the architects of Mississippi's Reconstruction did not go down without a fight. The protracted struggle for the soul of this state has forged some of the nation's most tenacious and brilliant freedom fighters. By the 1960s, organizers were able to focus global attention on their struggle: Songs were written about it, and people came from all over the world to stand with them in solidarity. It was this human rights movement that made Mississippi a pox on America's "free country" image and forced the federal government to intervene.

Sixty years later, there will be no feds to the rescue. The state is a pariah no longer. In a recent stump speech, Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann claimed that he'd had a conversation with Elon Musk that may have inspired DOGE:

> So, he [Musk] said, "You're telling me that you've cut the number of people that actually work for the government?" I said, "You ought to try that. I think that would go over pretty big in Washington. You can tell President Trump, our President Trump, he can use this." He [Musk] said, "Well, that's kind of a miracle." And I said, "Yes, sir. It's a Mississippi miracle."

The "Mississippi Miracle" has been nothing short of devastating. Billions of dollars in Medicaid expansion funding, as well as funds to address food insecurity for children, have been refused. In March, the governor signed a law that will eliminate the state income tax by 2037.

Mississippi was once a poster child for the politics of the past. Now the state is a harbinger of our potentially dystopian future. But there's still that "other" Mississippi, fighting for a state—and a world—where we all are free. Don't count us out just yet. **N**

Makani Themba is a writer and organizer based in Jackson, Mississippi.

Dying Inside

SARAH KENDZIOR

Missouri invented the American Dream. Hannibal's Mark Twain wrote the Great American Novel; Marceline inspired Walt Disney to conceive his animated adventures; in St. Louis, Chuck Berry created rock and roll. Missouri showed America the hamburger and the hot dog and the ice cream cone at the 1904 World's Fair, held when St. Louis was the fourth-largest city in the United States. Missouri is not North or South, not East or West. It is simply American.

Missouri destroyed the American Dream. Born from a bad bargain—Missouri was admitted as a slave state in 1821, balanced out by free Maine—it was promptly plunged into violence. In the east, enslaved Black people crossed the Mississippi River to escape white mobs. In the south, Native Americans died walking the Trail

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THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

of Tears. In the west, Mormons were massacred. In the north, Missouri militias battled Iowa in the so-called Honey War. And that was just the 1830s.

In 1857, the Supreme Court declared Dred Scott, a man enslaved in Missouri, as well as all Black Americans, ineligible for US citizenship. The case helped precipitate the Civil War, in which Missouri declared itself "neutral," which is Missourian for everyone getting targeted, just like "compromise" is Missourian for everyone getting screwed.

After the war, southern Missouri was overrun by a vigilante gang called the Bald Knobbers. The state became an outlaw hideout, with rich racists like Jesse James lurking in caves. Today's rich racists lurk in the statehouse.

Missouri excels at turning violence into entertainment. The state that birthed Twain's tall tales became the stronghold of Cape Girardeau's Rush Limbaugh. As for the Bald Knobbers, they got an amusement-park attraction in Branson. Because why not? Missouri is the capital of "why not." Drive the huckster ruins of Route 66 and see for yourself.

In the 21st century, Missouri has become a petri dish for the end of the American experiment. Missouri used to be the bellwether, picking the winner of the presidential election for a century. That changed in 2008, when the winning candidate was Black and dark money turned the middle ground into quicksand.

Missouri is the Show-Me State: Residents demand proof before respecting authority. We never get proof, so no authority is respected. The entire spectrum of political protest runs through Missouri, which birthed both the Tea Party and the 2014 Ferguson uprising. Even its geography is a microcosm of the nation: big cities at the borders, small towns in between, farmland in the north, swampland in the south. Coast dwellers could learn a lot from Missouri—if they ever noticed that it existed.

Missouri is the most beautiful place on earth. Our rocks are ancient and our streams are clear and our people have been abandoned. Missouri is the broken heartland and our rivers are the arteries, spreading glory and poison nationwide. We are the bellwether of decline, but I'm not leaving. In Missouri, you see America dying from the inside. N

Sarah Kendzior is the author of The Last American Road Trip. *She lives in Missouri.*

From Purple to Red

GABRIEL FURSHONG

"I'm heartsick," Marc Racicot told me after he returned from a 560-mile trip to address the town hall meetings held by Indivisible in Bozeman and Billings. "Heartsick that we've come to this point in the country. And, of course, we could see it coming, which makes it more difficult."

This confession leads to an important question for those who wish to remedy American disunion: How long *should* we have seen it coming?

A former Montana attorney general (1989–93) and governor (1993–2001), Racicot was a "close friend" and powerful surrogate for George W. Bush after the contested 2000 election. His reassuring voice, an echo of Bing Crosby's, informed C-SPAN viewers that there was something "terribly wrong" with the manual recounts in Democratic-leaning Florida counties. A talented prosecutor, Racicot became chairman of the Republican National Committee and helmed Bush's 2004 reelection campaign.

Given this record of partisan service, Racicot's consistent and creative opposition to Donald Trump was newsworthy. It was also ineffective. The Montana GOP formally rebuked Racicot in 2023, and Trump supporters now occupy every statewide office in this once-purple state.

In late March, I visited Racicot at his new home in an upscale Helena subdivision. At 77, he believes the country has declined since he ran the RNC. He cites the hollowing-out of the economy, the unlimited campaign spending, the hyper-partisanship, and the Internet's amplification of untruth. But when I asked whether Trump is the cause of our disunion or a consequence of the divisive forces that came before him, Racicot denied a connection between the party he directed and the one he's rejected.

"Trump is not a product of anything other than his own genetic composition," he argued. Yet the truth is far more grave. Our current state of disunion cannot be cured by a single election; it is a symptom of chronic disease. And like most Never Trumpers, Racicot shares responsibility for advancing this affliction.

He knows that 2,000 Palm Beach County votes were misdirected from Al Gore to Pat Buchanan 25 years ago, tipping the election to his friend. He knows the Bush tax cuts ballooned federal deficits to enrich the wealthiest 1 percent. He also knows the United States killed at least 433,000 people in Afghanistan and Iraq, and he backed President Bush, who said, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists"—a clarion call for those who abhor dissent, eschew evidence, and reject international law. Certainly, then, he understands the politics of avarice and exceptionalism that made Trump possible.

"I'm not hysterical," Racicot concluded, "but I worry about violence, and if it starts, I don't know where it stops." Montana, now a deep-red state with rapidly growing income inequality, is a place where such violence might commence—or, rather, compound. If we wish for a different future, then we must admit that our problem isn't one person or one party. We must acknowledge that our problems emerge from a past that most politicians would prefer to forget. N

Gabriel Furshong is a freelance journalist based in Helena, Montana. His stories and essays can be read in The Nation, High Country News, Montana Quarterly, *and other magazines.*

Our current state of disunion cannot be cured by a single election; it is a symptom of a chronic disease.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

When students are shielded from entire chapters of the American journey, they inherit divisions before they can even understand them.

Nuance Under Siege

JOSEPH "JAZARI" KUAL ZAKARIA

The nonpartisan spirit that once set Nebraska apart appears to be fading, swallowed by the ooze of hyper-partisanship that is now seeping through the marble halls of our nation's only unicameral legislature. What was once a chamber of neighborly debate now echoes with the talking points of national operatives. State senators find themselves under pressure from beyond our borders—urged to rewrite our electoral process, not for Nebraska's sake but to tip the scales in favor of one man's return to the White House.

Since 1992, Nebraska has split its Electoral College votes, a quirk it shares with only one other state (Maine). Each of our three districts awards a single electoral vote independently, while two others go to the winner of the state's popular vote. Adopting this system was a quiet act of defiance and nuance in a nation addicted to binaries, an acknowledgment that no state is truly monolithic.

Now national political figures want to erase that complexity, forcing uniformity where there's diversity. GOP leaders have expressed frustration over the Second District's Electoral College vote being awarded to Kamala Harris. Yet the target isn't just a single swing-district vote—it's the idea that contradiction can coexist with democracy.

Between the wide skies of the rural west and the faster-moving cities of Lincoln and Omaha (at the center of the contested Second District), it's not just geography that separates Nebraskans but access to healthcare, broadband, civic power, and educational opportunity. The divide isn't new, but it is deepening.

Education once served as a unifier. We took pride in our public schools, local control, and university system—a shared story that crossed county lines. Now education has become another battleground. Rural schools are consolidating or closing because of population loss and budget cuts. In urban classrooms, the curriculum has become a flash point, as debates over what we're allowed to teach—and who gets to decide—play out as proxy wars in national ideological battles.

There was a time when we believed in teaching the full story of our nation's past, from its darkest sins to its brightest ideals. We trusted that honesty was a form of honor. Today, some seek to shield young scholars from entire chapters of the American journey, as if ignorance could substitute for pride. Students are left to inherit these divisions before they can even understand them.

Nebraska matters—and not just because the Second District's whims could potentially determine the president. We mirror the country's deeper crisis: How can we remain one nation when we no longer share the same lived reality?

As a young lawyer, long before the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln warned that if destruction ever came to America, it wouldn't come from a foreign army; it would come from within. The fraying we see in Nebraska isn't just regional tension—it's a warning. If we can't find ways to honor difference and protect nuance, then the disunion we fear may already be here. N

Joseph "Jazari" Kual Zakaria is a journalist and the host of The Jazari Kual Show. *Based in Lincoln, Nebraska, he covers politics, culture, and community issues from the Midwest to the global stage.*

The Mirage

NICHOLAS RUSSELL

There's an eerie silence squatting in the rural valleys of Nevada, a dead, smothered pause mistaken for peace.

In 1922, Anne Martin, a Nevada suffragist who was the first woman to run for the US Senate, wrote in these pages, "She [Nevada] is the despair not only of reformers but of case-hardened lawyers, who must be agile indeed to keep pace with the rapid and contradictory changes in laws made every two years by servile legislatures, at the command of the selfish interests which elected them." You can't make sense of Nevada's place in the union, Martin suggests, without acknowledging the contradiction always lurking in the background in this country.

Throughout its history, something more compelling than morals has had to rule in Nevada: a desperate hope to escape America's crushing machine, which churns on more ruthlessly now than ever.

Larger in area than all but six other states, with over 85 percent of its land owned by the federal government, rich in minerals, growing quickly in population, legally permissive on certain issues, politically and socially conservative on others, drying out fast along with its Southwestern neighbors, Nevada fits easily into a vision of American wiliness—the desire for money, power, and influence—and the all-American impulse to be left alone. It's the distillation of the frontier West, settled by Americans looking for space, chance, and choice—though what is meant by "settled" and who is meant by "Americans" remains unstable. The drive was and continues to be the possession of wealth and abundance, the dream that there is room enough for everyone, that enterprising ambition can make water spring from rock.

Patrick Blanchfield recently wrote in *n+1* that "the only thing holding our empire together is the collective fantasy that somebody, anybody is dynamic, cogent, and, above all, in charge enough to lead and make sense of the machine." There are bodies caught in the gears and beneath the wheels of this apparatus: those disappeared by law enforcement agencies deporting

NANO CALVO VIA AP

Industrial skyline: Power stations glow along the highway on a cloudy night in Las Vegas.

critical or inconvenient voices, those destroyed by American weapons gifted to genocidal regimes, and those dispatched domestically by faraway drones like those piloted remotely at Creech Air Force Base, just outside Las Vegas.

Once again, America is donning settler boots, firm in a zealous belief in its own omnipotence, its would-be masculine psyche, its immense power. In the sense that the country is a geopolitical entity, it is whole and cohesive. But its rugged posture—an adjective marshaled liberally throughout the Western states—belies an assumption of hard-earned isolation. It's a philosophy of the frontier that by striking out into the desert, one endeavors to find nothing, no one else, a vacancy waiting to be claimed, raw material to be shaped, with blighted strangers to be driven out. Start walking toward the infinite horizon and you may begin to feel deluded into thinking you're in a land apart from everything else, where there are no enemies or allies, only a world that is wild and must be made to yield. N

Nicholas Russell is a writer and critic from Las Vegas. His debut novel, Observer, *is forthcoming from Ecco.*

In Nothing We Trust

MATT HONGOLTZ-HETLING

New Hampshire clings to Mount Monadnock, the mountain in its southwestern corner that juts defiantly skyward, a lone rocky resister to the forces of erosion that wore everything else away.

Rugged, individualistic, idealistic, the "Live Free or Die" state was a cradle of the American Revolution and has long been the grave of administrative ambition, featuring neither seat-belt laws for adults nor a general sales tax. It has a vibrant secessionist movement and the highest rate of machine-gun ownership in the nation.

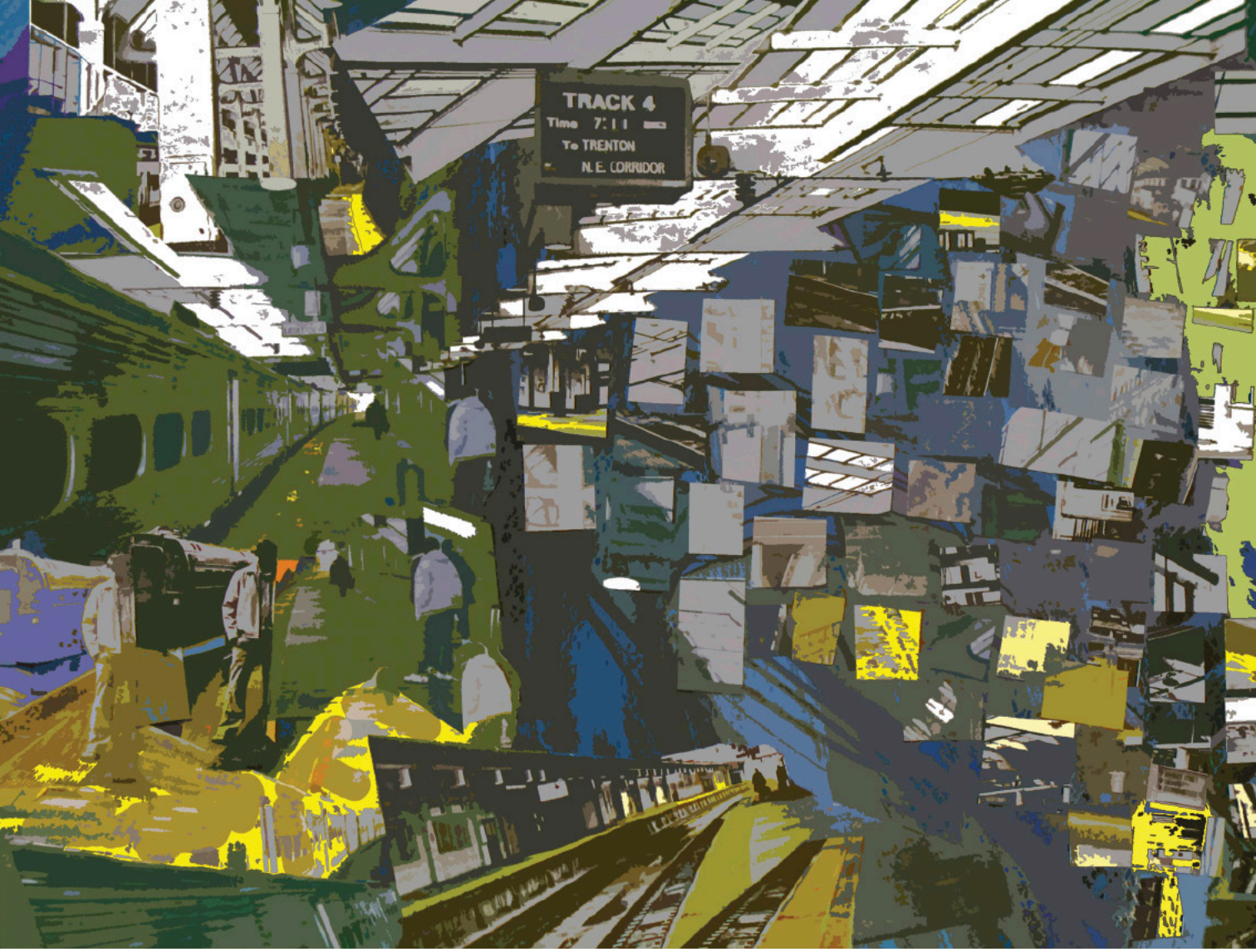
Individualism reigns—or so we are told—even as large swaths of the southern part of the state have been turned into charmless concrete strip malls. In Somersworth, a small cemetery is bombarded all day and night by the distorted voices emanating from a loudspeaker at a KFC/Taco Bell franchise, which casts a ghastly purple pall over the graves.

Sure, there are nods, of a sort, to the past. Along the Seacoast, there have historically been few lobstermen (accounting for less than a third of a 10th of a percent of the economy) and roughly zero pirates, but tourists are bombarded with lobster-festooned paraphernalia and fake pirates carrying fake parrots and shouting "Ahoy, matey!" over and over. "Nostalgia without history is a decorative fraud," wrote the poet Donald Hall, who died in 2018 at the age of 89 in his Wilmot farmhouse.

Until recently, New Hampshire burned with visions of a strange and wonderful future. The dreams were varied, often collective, and frequently whimsical, as when Keene held a 2013 pumpkin festival that set a world record for the most lit jack-o'-lanterns (30,581). Or when the millionaire businessman Roger Babson, the author of the essay "Gravity—Our Enemy Number One," gave Keene State College a stone monument to encourage resistance to this immutable law of nature. (Babson's Gravity Research Foundation, founded in New Hampshire in 1949, persists to this day.)

But sometime around 2010 or so, New Hampshire saw a large influx of libertarians who purported to adhere to a pure Thoreauvian individualism but who

Once again, America is donning settler boots, firm in a zealous belief in its own omnipotence, its immense power.



Tribute to transit: Nell Painter created this collage while commuting daily in New Jersey, as an homage to Newark Penn Station.

Once a cradle of the American Revolution, New Hampshire is now the grave of administrative ambition.

behaved more like a gang of whiny crypto-geeks. Mischief abounded; misinformation flourished. Already ranked dead last in per capita support for higher education, the state cut spending in half. In the ensuing belt-tightening melee, the University of New Hampshire, the state's premiere public education institution, accepted a $500,000 grant offered on the condition that its football team would have to run tackling drills with no helmets on.

The Granite State (which, incidentally, is actually made up mostly of schist and gneiss) is now a national leader in distrust of government, distrust of media, distrust of church, and distrust of neighbors. The glue that bonded communities together has been washed away in an acrid tide of individual rights and crappy commercialization.

The year after Keene set the jack-o'-lantern record, attendees at the annual festival began smashing pumpkins, then windows. They flipped cars, set fires on the street, and attacked cops. "USA!" they chanted. "USA!" Full of dreams of wilderness, and wildness, and violence, New Hampshire has already put one foot firmly back in the cave. **N**

Matt Hongoltz-Hetling's third book, The Ghost Lab, *is about a group of oddball paranormal enthusiasts in New Hampshire.*

What Exit?

NELL PAINTER

These disunited United States? Here in my securely blue state of New Jersey, surrounded by states—or parts of states, in the case of Pennsylvania—also securely blue, my first thought is: "No disunity here!" My second thought is that New Jersey is so diverse, with the largest proportion of foreign-born residents except for California, that such a varied populace surely means disunion. But, no, demographic diversity does not disunite New Jerseyans. What does it is geography.

A little over a decade ago, Rutgers graduate Joe Steinfeld labeled a map of my state, with plain-speaking cruelty, from north to south as follows: "Well-to-Do Conservatives"; "The Melting Pot" (where I live); "Poor Minorities"; "Russians, Polacks, and Toxic Fumes"; "Jews"; "Lawyers Driving Hybrids"; "Old People and Asians"; "Italian Guys in Wife Beaters";

"Pretty Much Alabama"; "Sad Black People and Misguided Tourists"; "Swamps and Toxic Waste"; "Canadians and Philly Trash."

What holds all this together, what unites the varied people of New Jersey, is this: roads. Asking a fellow New Jerseyan "What exit?" is a test, and the answer proves one's Garden State bona fides.

Public transportation also brings us together, especially in North Jersey. (South Jersey, sadly, isn't so well-served.) I'm thinking of NJ Transit's network of trains, light rail, and buses. Years ago, when I was commuting from Newark to New Brunswick for art school, I made a collage in homage to Newark Penn Station, from which you can take trains and buses pretty much everywhere.

But public transportation has also exacerbated tensions between New Jersey and its metropolitan neighbor. The congestion pricing program that went into effect in New York City earlier this year charges automobiles $9 to enter Midtown Manhattan. The money raised will go toward improving public transportation in New York City, not in New Jersey. New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, a staunch Democrat, has begged President Trump to halt the program, which Trump has made clear he intends to do. The debate has deepened the divide between those who use public transportation and those who drive cars. That divide, of course, is bigger than just New Jersey: It's fundamental to the health of the global environment. **N**

Nell Painter's most recent book, I Just Keep Talking, *was a* New York Times *Notable Book of 2024.*

Judy Chicago is an artist, writer, teacher, feminist, and humanist.

From *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time* (2000). Needlework by Mary Ewanoski, assisted by Jacqueline Moore.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

In the decades since the New Deal, New York's upstate tail has too often wagged the urban dog.

Time to Go

D.D. GUTTENPLAN

The rumor of a great city goes out beyond its borders, to all the latitudes of the known earth.
—Vincent McHugh, "The Metropolis and Her Children"

To the citizen of the metropolis, New York State is an abomination and an imposition, a mere collection of geographical facts—capital: Albany; population: 19.9 million; highest peak: Mount Marcy in the Adirondacks; notable attraction: Niagara Falls. Somehow, through various flukes of history (not least the fact that during most of the Revolutionary War, New York City was occupied by the British), the state's vast hinterland came to politically dominate the more populous, prosperous urban south.

At times, it was almost possible to view this subordination as a partnership. Under Governor DeWitt Clinton, a former New York City mayor and failed presidential candidate, the state built the Erie Canal, a 19th-century nautical superhighway that made New York Harbor the new nation's preeminent port. A century later, during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's two terms as governor, the rampant corruption of Mayor Jimmy Walker's administration created an opening for the Fusion candidate Fiorello La Guardia, whose personal honesty and independence from the Democratic Party's Tammany machine made him particularly useful to the newly elected President Roosevelt, allowing FDR to channel federal relief funds to the city without fear of their being diverted into politicians' pockets. From the Lincoln Tunnel and the Triborough Bridge to parks, schools, libraries, swimming pools, and a plethora of arts and theater projects, the result was a thriving social democracy in one city. In 1937, for instance, the Works Progress Administration provided nearly a third of New York City's budget. FDR's successor as governor, Herbert Lehman, did as he was told.

In the decades since the New Deal, however, the upstate tail has too often wagged the urban dog. From Hugh "Society" Carey, a Democrat who seized upon the city's 1975 fiscal crisis to eviscerate social services, forcing an end to a century of free tuition at City College and closing hospitals, cutting school budgets, and raising subway fares to satisfy the bankers, to Andrew Cuomo, who vetoed Bill de Blasio's proposal to fund the city's new universal prekindergarten and after-school programs with a tax on millionaires, Albany's potentates have resisted acting in the city's best interests—and been far too eager to throw their weight around. The possibility that one particular bully—Cuomo, currently leading in the polls for mayor—may shortly become the bullied adds a layer of irony but does nothing to alter the essential calculus.

Which is compelling. New York City's 8.5 million inhabitants would put it in the top 13 states by population—well ahead of Massachusetts, Maryland, and Missouri. If Albany weren't bleeding us of billions in city income and property taxes—and stiffing us on school funding—the city's long-term budget deficit would be a surplus. New York could, once again, become a genuine laboratory for democracy.

The current Democratic mayoral primary has seen a number of ambitious ideas offered by progressive candidates. But none of them are likely to be implemented while the dead hand of Albany holds the tiller.

The self-governing city-state is an idea as old as Athens—and as new, and prosperous, as Singapore. The visionary 1969 campaign of Norman Mailer and Jimmy Breslin was built around independence for the city—an idea whose time has surely come again. N

Enemies: A Love Story

JOHN JEREMIAH SULLIVAN

People say North Carolina is one of the swingiest of swing states. Having lived here for 21 years, I see the truth in it. Republican Legislature, Democratic governor—that's both the persistent reality and a serviceable metaphor. You often find yourself chockablock with your enemies. For us lefties, that means the most atavistic Dixie stereotypes, newly pumped on Trump juice, featuring both the wealthy-racist-snob and hostile-worm-farmer varietals. For those on the right, millions of whom are no doubt poring over this text with open minds, there are the liberals of the Research Triangle, plus small but entrenched bohemian communities everywhere you look (especially in the mountains). Socially speaking, there's no avoiding each other. When we North Carolinians are at our best, we occasionally get along and establish weird pockets of middle ground. But we haven't been at our best in a loooong time. And now everything's darkening so fast.

A couple of weeks ago, I was having a conversation with a younger friend, J.P., who lives in the county adjacent to mine, in a town that has always been a literal and figurative backwater but is now reportedly one of the fastest-growing places in America. Every time I drive out there, new housing developments and the attendant outdoor malls have reconfigured the landscape to the extent that I get physically lost.

We were talking about his neighbors, a middle-aged couple, hard-core Trumpers, flags in the yard. (In town, only a handful of outliers—bona fide aspiring brownshirts—advertise it like that, and they tend to be given a wide berth even by other Republicans. But these folks were country, out and proud.) And the thing was, J.P. said, shaking his head, they were really nice. "Like, shirts off their backs," he said. They'd been his neighbors for a couple of years, and you know how it is: Things happen,

Water protectors: Demonstrators protest the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline near the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota in 2016.

ANDREW LICHTENSTEIN / CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

whether you want to get to know somebody or not. Your dog gets loose, and they help to catch it. You get sick, and they stop by with food. Before you've had a chance to strap on your armor, your humanity has intermingled with theirs, and now you can't unknow it.

Neither of us felt sure about what these nice neighbors *are*, as political animals. Are they still fellow sons and daughters of the republic? Or something else, something new? In the past, Americans have often sought to find out how far they could push their preferred value system while remaining democratic Americans. But these people follow a man who has made it clear that he will simply go as far as he can. Historians remind us that this kind of right-wing radicalism has always been with us, but now it sets the tone. And so the prevailing mood down here, among people I know, seems to be one of anxious questioning: How far will they go? Will they ever come back? And if they won't come back, what's left, and what the hell do we do? N

John Jeremiah Sullivan lives in Wilmington, North Carolina. His essay "Corona" appears in this year's edition of The Best American Essays.

The Empty Bookshelf

TAYLOR BRORBY

North Dakota has often been a testing ground for the country's worst practices and ideas, from the radioactive river water caused by oil and chemical spills to the creation of a reservation system for controlling Native peoples.

This should make it ground zero for writers—if only we could produce them.

At cocktail parties, I'll often ask well-read guests to name a North Dakota writer—just one, any one. An awkward silence will sweep the room as ice rattles against glass, or someone swirls their red wine before taking a swig.

North Dakota? Who even thinks about North Dakota?

And it's true: For most of my life, even close out-of-state friends can't remember where I'm from, saying "South Dakota"—or, worse, lumping the region into some vanilla-flavored mass and, hedging their bets, saying that I'm from the Dakotas.

There should be no shortage of writing prompts in a state where Sitting Bull was forced to surrender his rifle, where we blow up the Badlands to drill for more oil. We even have a lake that doesn't freeze in the winter—and anyone who has experienced a North Dakota winter (or seen *Fargo*) should immediately understand how alarming that is—because its water is used to cool the coal-fired turbine engines of a power plant.

Like our topsoil, writers from North Dakota eventually get blown into other states: Louise Erdrich to Minnesota; Chuck Klosterman to Portland, Oregon; Louis L'Amour to Los Angeles. As with the extractive industries that define the state, exporting our writers is an act of self-sabotage: It allows other people to shape our stories, to sculpt the cultural narrative of North Dakota.

North Dakota is also sandwiched between two much more literary states. Minnesota produced a Nobel Prize winner, Sinclair Lewis, as well as the author of *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald, while Montana gave us *A River Runs Through It* and *The Power of the Dog*. North Dakota gave us Mr. Bubble

Americans have often sought to find out how far they could push their preferred value system while remaining democratic Americans.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

A modest proposal: I believe the time has come to create, by act of Congress, a hereditary nobility in the United States.

and the wood chipper in *Fargo*.

From our arsenal of nuclear warheads in the north to the clear-cutting along the Red River Valley in the east, whether we are strip-mining for coal in the south or fracking for oil in the west, North Dakota is defined—and hemmed in—by various forms of violence. It is nearly impossible to escape the crushing reality of the state: that it appears to be hell-bent on self-destruction.

Maybe—maybe—if North Dakota finally found a way to invest in its artists, perhaps then it could finally shift the narrative it tells of itself about the glory of plundering the prairie. It's the only narrative available, given the absence of writers willing to tell a different one, but it's time for North Dakota to share in the pressing task of revising the myths we've been telling ourselves about our great country. N

Taylor Brorby is the author of Boys and Oil: Growing Up Gay in a Fractured Land*; Coming Alive: Action and Civil Disobedience; and* Crude: Poems. *He teaches at the University of Alabama.*

A People's Peerage

MICHAEL CLUNE

The United States has, in this millennium, vindicated the predictions of Marx and Tocqueville that under capitalist conditions, the ideal of equality inevitably decays into the pseudo-egalitarianism of the marketplace and culture is leveled down to the lowest common denominator. The equality of all persons irresistibly morphs into the equality of all consumer preferences, and gone is the idea that there's anything higher to aspire to than our money-grubbing days and TikTok-scrolling nights.

To address this problem, I propose a political and social intervention, modest in scale, that might provide a gentle corrective to market egalitarianism. It will, at the very least, encourage us to elevate our gaze above the sordidness of our present moment. In short, I believe the time has come to create, by act of Congress, a hereditary nobility in the United States.

Under this act, each state will name one duke, four earls, and six barons. These titles shall take the names of Americans notable for their literary, scientific, military, or artistic achievements—Frederick Douglass, H.P. Lovecraft, and so forth. The initial families ascending into the nobility will be chosen by lottery, and the title will then be inherited by the eldest living relative. The annual income, guaranteed by the federal government and funded by a tax on billionaires, will vary depending on the rank between $5 million and $300 million.

This solves a few problems. For one, those who have previously sought to counter the dominance of commercial values in our society have often been suspected of acting from mere resentment. Some have parlayed their disdain for naked commerce into extorting money from the working classes. For example, the professional-managerial class that has become the base of the current Democratic Party has given progressivism a bad name from their low habits and grasping attitudes. The alternative to unfettered capitalism modeled by these progressives is the economy of a fussy, bureaucratic dystopia ruled by so-called experts whose primary motivation is to differentiate themselves from the working class on whose behalf they claim to speak.

Social hierarchy, on the other hand, is a time-tested means of disseminating nobler values. The American nobility, like censers placed atop pillars, will diffuse the incense of anti-commercialism throughout the union. These nobles will be prohibited by law from engaging in any business activity whatsoever and will also be barred from social media. All members of the nobility, when traveling abroad or within the United States, will be entitled to protection by a special new branch of the Secret Service, the Nobles' Guard. In this way, we will furnish our great nation with concrete examples of a prestigious form of life securely set apart from our degraded commercial culture. N

Michael Clune's books include the novel Pan *(forthcoming in summer 2025) and the memoir* White Out: The Secret Life of Heroin. *He lives in Chagrin Falls, Ohio.*

The Myth of Unity

J.C. HALLMAN

Oklahoma embodies American disunion as well as any state. It's a geographically peculiar place, not traditionally associated with any of the country's regions—certainly not the Northeast or the Pacific Northwest, and ill-fitted to the West, the Midwest, and the South as well.

It's also a small state, at 4 million people, with two significant metropolises, Tulsa and Oklahoma City. The former is a Southern city, the latter a Western city—a drive of less than two hours separates them.

The far southeast of the state is known as Little Dixie and butts up against the Ozark Mountains; the opposite end, a distinctive strip of land that no one particularly wanted, is about as close to the Wild West as you're going to find in the 21st century. They call it the Panhandle, but that's in Florida; Oklahoma looks more like a butcher knife.

You know Oklahoma from the pop-culture signposts—Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*—and based on literary metrics, the state was transformed from bountiful frontier to ecological apocalypse in the span of a decade.

American disunion may begin there.

But it's older than that. A decade before the wind

55% OR OREGON

Homage to Portlandia

SHAY MIRK

Shay Mirk is a comics journalist, teacher, and zine-maker. They are the publisher of the nonfiction comics press Crucial Comix and are on Instagram as @mirkdrop.

ripped down the plains, Oklahoma was torn asunder by one of the worst race massacres the country has ever known—wrongly called a "riot" for many years, and to be honest, not even "massacre" gets it right: It was a small, lopsided war, featuring the first use of aircraft to launch offensive attacks in the United States.

Before the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, Black Wall Street in the city's Greenwood District was a shining emblem of hope. Was it an expression of union? Perhaps not, but it offered evidence that the toxic history of slavery might one day be transcended.

I live in Tulsa; I live in Greenwood; I live in a building once owned by the newspaper that printed the story that triggered the violence.

To be honest, even fixing the start of American disunion at the Tulsa Race Massacre overlooks the equally horrific massacres and equally fundamental fissures that formed when the Alabama Creeks were force-marched along the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma.

Perhaps a better question than "What now divides the United States?" is whether it was ever united in the first place.

It's chic to say that America is split down the middle on basic facts. Oklahoma may have that covered, too.

Donald Trump began referring to Oklahoma-born Senator Elizabeth Warren, who has claimed some Cherokee ancestry, as "Pocahontas" in 2016.

One year later, Kevin Stitt, in announcing his candidacy for governor of Oklahoma—an office he still holds—made his first public assertion that he was a card-carrying member of the Cherokee Nation.

Graham Lee Brewer, an assiduous Cherokee journalist, fact-checked the claim: Stitt's line traced back to a figure whose Indigenous status had been vigorously challenged by the Cherokee Nation a century ago.

Stitt is a "pretendian."

Which suggests a final answer we may be loath to confront: Rather than losing our country after 250 years, perhaps we have only been pretending to have one. **N**

J.C. Hallman is the author of seven books, most recently Say Anarcha. *He lives in Tulsa.*

Tulsa's Black Wall Street was an emblem of hope, offering evidence that the toxic history of slavery might one day be transcended.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

Star Bolts

BRIAN "BOX" BROWN

Brian "Box" Brown is a New York Times *best-selling cartoonist from Philadelphia.*

Not News

TINA CANE

Sheila said *It's not news, if he's not dead* Cornelius said *A woman is not a slave* amen to all of that even if I'm still sad that Marie Antoinette didn't really say *Let them eat cake* was actually speaking of *brioche* which is bread not the same thing especially to Americans since *brioche* is sweet but free of frosting and roses and explosions of sprinkles and funfetti not as fun as America where everybody's ready to eat cake at the drop of a hat where cake is the answer no matter what the question is on the internet it says Jean Jacques Rousseau penned that quote about brioche making this bit of history the fakest of fake news back when revolution was also an excuse for mass cruelty and words stuffed like rags into a mouth could still gag a callous ass for eternity it shouldn't be fine with me that I prefer the false story to the true but I do because brioche is not cake and a cake can't be killed or beheaded like Marie Antoinette or like the journalist James Foley whose death shook me awake to the horrors of horror in real time repeatedly and eternally and especially today when I heard Foley's mother say *We all lost* when she lost her son that she keeps even his murderer among those in her prayers

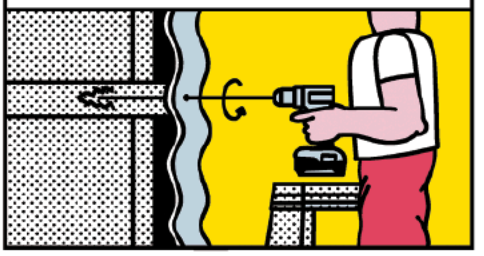
I don't know where Diane Foley gets her news but she's living proof that a space where grace embodies truth can exist and it's a place where her son is never missed

Tina Cane's books include Body of Work, Year of the Murder Hornet, *and* Dear Elena: Letters for Elena Ferrante. *Cane is the founder/director of Writers-in-the-Schools, RI, and served as poet laureate of Rhode Island from 2016 to 2024.*

BRIAN BOX BROWN

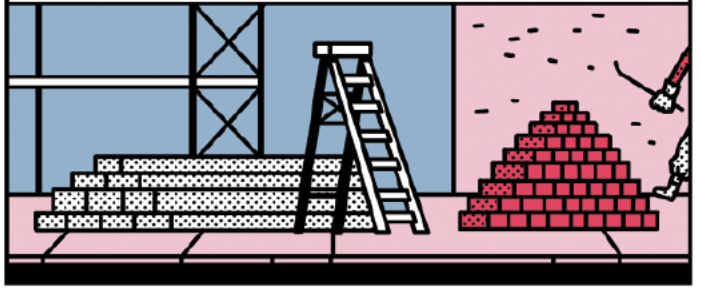
WE HAVE TO FIX OUR HOUSE. THE WHOLE FRONT OF IT IS BOWING AND COULD COME CRASHING DOWN. ALSO THE PREVIOUS OWNERS DID SOME DIY PROJECT TO THE FRONT DOOR WHICH IS CAUSING PROBLEMS.

SO THEY'LL REINFORCE THE FRONT OF THE HOUSE BY CRANKING THESE GIANT BOLTS WITH STARS ON THE END INTO THE INTERIOR JOISTS.

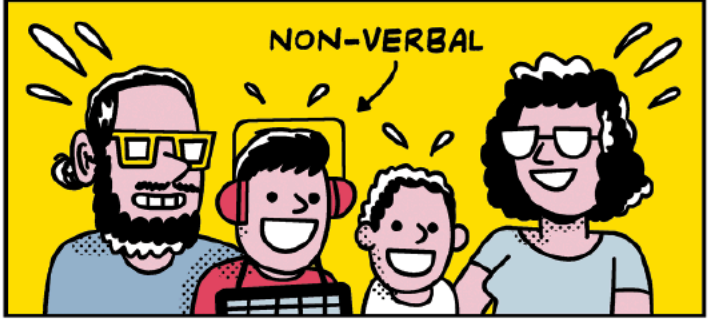


WE PANICKED! THE HOUSE WAS FALLING DOWN. SOME PIECES FELL OFF EVEN.

AMERICA IS IN THIS STATE OF FIGHT OR FLIGHT RIGHT NOW. WHO KNOWS HOW IT'S GOING TO AFFECT THIS PROJECT BETWEEN TARIFFS AND EVERYTHING ELSE.

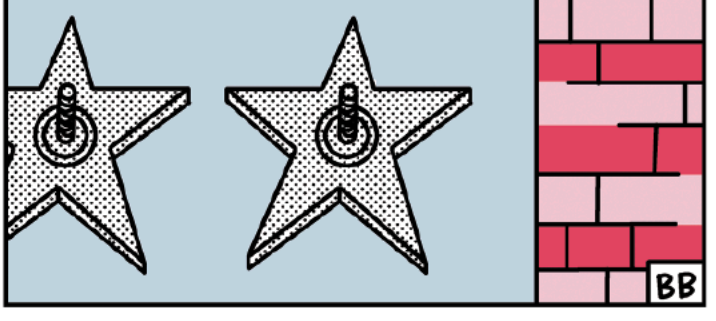


I HAVE A NEURODIVERGENT FAMILY. WE NEED A ROOF OVER OUR HEAD. WE ALL HAVE ANXIETY. WE UNDERSTAND FIGHT OR FLIGHT BETTER THAN MOST.



NOT TO MENTION WHAT ELSE IS IN JEOPARDY: WILL MY SON'S CARE BE ON THE CHOPPING BLOCK AS WELL? WILL GROCERIES AND EVERYTHING ELSE CONTINUE SKYROCKETING? ALSO: I'M A CARTOONIST! NO HEALTH PLAN. NO DAYS OFF. NO RETIREMENT.

BUT, WE GOTTA FIX THE HOUSE. WE LIVE HERE AND WE'RE NOT MOVING. I THINK THE STAR BOLTS WILL LOOK COOL.



Gathering of tribes: Jonathan Swiftbird, from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, joins more than 100 Native nations and tribes protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Going Under

ALBERT SCARDINO

The ocean is rising faster on South Carolina's low-lying coast than almost anywhere else between Canada and Mexico.

The low-lying coast of South Carolina—all 187 miles of it, the home to 1.4 million people—may be a sandcastle on the beach facing an incoming tide.

Satellite imagery shows that the ocean is rising faster and the ground is sinking more rapidly there than almost anywhere else between Canada and Mexico, a combined change of roughly one inch a year that may be accelerating.

Nancy Mace, the member of Congress who represents the region, is determined to keep balls out of the women's stalls on Capitol Hill, as she put it during her campaign against transgender people earlier this year. Mace's district had been competitive before 2020; then the Legislature packed much of Charleston into an adjacent Democratic district, giving her a 14-point partisan advantage.

Representative Buddy Carter, from neighboring coastal Georgia, is pushing a bill to rename Greenland "Red, White and Blueland." Carter's district is sinking, too. His state's Legislature, also dominated by Republicans, did him a similar favor.

The Atlantic coastal crescent here is a movable line. At different moments in recent geological times, it has existed 30 miles farther out or 30 miles farther inland, always a string of sand beaches and dunes never more than 30 feet above the sea. When ocean levels dropped during ice ages, the offshore sandbars grew into barrier islands. When seas rose, the old barrier islands farther inland became new ones again.

The Gulf Stream flows north much farther out along the shallow continental shelf here than it does off Florida or North Carolina, creating a reverse eddy in the shallow pool up against the coast. This eddy carries sand south from one island beach to the next for almost 300 miles, from Cape Hatteras to St. Augustine. There isn't any rock on the surface to hold the sand, only a layer of porous limestone buried under 30 feet of old ocean sediment and another 30 feet of clay.

That layer of porous limestone carries another stream of water, drained from the foothills of the Appalachians. By the time this freshwater arrives 60 feet beneath the coastline, the flow behind it is pushing it through clay and sand to form artesian ponds and freshwater swamps.

These swamps, broad salt marshes, strong tides, and deep estuaries created a pristine wilderness. With abandoned rice and sea-island cotton plantations, the sparsely settled South Carolina–Georgia coast is about the same size on a map as the Grand Canyon, but its deepest points are rarely more than 30 feet below the water in the sounds along the coast, the highest 30 feet on the top of sand dunes above the beaches.

Then came the paper industry. Then the bridges. Then the golf courses. Now the tourists—more than 40 million of them each year. So much water is being pumped from the limestone that the pressure that used to support the sand above it has dropped. The ground is sinking.

In 1893, a hurricane drove up along the coast from Florida. The front edge of the storm pushed against the southward-flowing coastal currents, creating a 16-foot swell ahead of it. More than 2,000 people drowned. The seas inundated much of Hilton Head, the largest of South Carolina's islands. The population of Hilton Head in 1950 was just 300; today, it is 40,000. But in August—the month of the 1893 storm—there may be more than 125,000 visitors who have come for the hard-packed beaches and 26 championship golf courses. The island is accessible by one road over the Intracoastal Waterway. N

Albert Scardino comments in various media on public issues in the United States and Europe. He lives in Bluffton, South Carolina.

HOSSEIN FATEMI / MIDDLE EAST IMAGES / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

63% SOUTH DAKOTA

Life on Stolen Land

REBECCA CLARREN

As a teenager, my great-grandmother Ruth Sinykin rode bareback across the South Dakota prairie. Each day, a new adventure: hail the size of baseballs, prairie fires, rattlesnakes. Once, a surprise blizzard, and she was lost for hours, surviving by drafting off the cows' heat.

These anecdotes traffic in pluck and grit, like every story I heard about my homesteading ancestors when I was growing up. Veracity was less important than the overarching theme that we had survived, even thrived, on the stark, dust-blown plains.

Here is what I know as fact: In the late 19th century, my family was living in Russia, where as Jews they weren't allowed to own land. Ruth's father had been beaten and nearly killed in a pogrom. Fleeing for their lives, they came to South Dakota, where the United States was awarding 160-acre plots for free under the Homestead Act; ultimately, the government would grant nearly 100,000 such parcels to settlers in South Dakota. To keep the land, they had to "prove up," which meant building a house and plowing the sod. By the 1950s, Ruth and her family owned 5,500 acres.

Land ownership, Ruth told her daughters, made her feel free, like a real American. My family, like many other South Dakotans, mortgaged their acreage to start businesses, to chase opportunity, to better their children's odds.

What I didn't know growing up was that our homestead was available only because America broke a treaty that had reserved huge swaths of western South Dakota for the Lakota. By the time my family planted their first crop in 1908, the Lakota had been relegated to an estimated 2 percent of the land they were promised less than 60 years earlier; during that period, the United States had encouraged soldiers and settlers to slaughter millions of buffalo, the animal on which traditional Lakota life depended. While my ancestors proved up, the United States, in an effort to further eradicate Indigenous people's connection to the land, took Lakota children away from their communities, converted them to Christianity, attempted to erase their culture. While my family was speaking Yiddish and praying with the Torah, America made it illegal for Native Americans to speak their languages, practice their rituals, and pass their religion down to new generations. This land dispossession and attempted cultural genocide have left a deep legacy: Four of the poorest counties in America contain Lakota reservations.

Those of us who descend from homesteaders—an estimated 25 percent of American adults—benefit from the intergenerational wealth that we accrued through mortgaging, leasing, and selling our free land. One legal scholar calls the Homestead Act "a huge form of affirmative action for white people."

The foundation of America was never equality, never freedom for all. But by acknowledging our government's theft of Native land, we free ourselves from pernicious myths and acknowledge the responsibility to repair past harms. Despite America's best efforts, the Lakota Nation survives. When I drive over the land where Ruth once rode horses, I tune in to the local radio station and hear the Lakota language. And the buffalo, partly as a result of the efforts of Lakota people, are recovering. When I look out the window, I see the animals' dark, hulking bodies bent to the prairie. N

Rebecca Clarren has been writing about the American West for more than 25 years.

64% TENNESSEE

Stains That Stay

RACHEL LOUISE MARTIN

Hydrogen peroxide is my mama's secret for getting out old blood. Douse the spot liberally, she says, then leave it alone. The chemical bubbles along, picking up the plasma and platelets. Cool water will wash it all away. Here in Tennessee, though, not all bloodstains are to be removed.

When I was a child, I envied a friend who lived in a house with bloodstained floors. She told me how, during the Civil War, her ancestors had graciously allowed the Confederate medical corps to use the building as a field hospital. As surgeons hacked off limbs, the blood pooled on the wooden planks. Since the boards were finished with only a skim of linseed oil or beeswax, the fluids soaked into the grain.

Hers was one of the many homes with similar stories. White families guarded the darkened spots, coating them with polyurethane or sheathing them under plexiglass. Skeptics say these blemishes aren't blood, just age and poor cleaning habits. Never let a homeowner hear that. They will show reports from researchers in Virginia who used similar stains to reconstruct the DNA profiles of the men who bled there. Yes, in Tennessee, some blood remains indelible, even when the person who shed it—their body and their story and their name—is long buried. But what if the bloodstains aren't from soldiers? What if they are the record of the enslaved women who once cleaned the rooms?

Blood saturates our ground. It was the last testament of those who died along the Trail of Tears. It pooled below the feet of lynched bodies. Droplets fell from the brows of civil rights activists. And in the past few years, it has coagulated on the grounds of the Covenant School and Antioch High School in Nashville. All that blood we've tried to blot up.

Blood marks our history. Across Tennessee, activists and government agencies attempt to purge

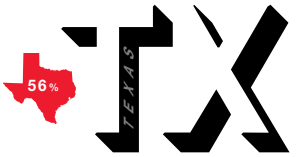
In Tennessee, some blood remains indelible, even when the person who shed it—their body and their story and their name—is long buried.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

the evidence of it from the books in our schools and libraries. Their relentless efforts may sanitize what our children learn, but they cannot expunge the truth of the pain and harm inflicted in the past.

A limestone karst runs beneath much of the state. Every drop that falls on the ground above washes down through the honeycombed rock and into the streams below, becoming the groundwater we drink. Until we are willing to tackle our history honestly, it lives on in us. Only repentance, reparations, and restoration can change that. But first we must learn to say "inequality" and "injustice," here in Tennessee and here in the South and here in America. N

Rachel Louise Martin is a historian and the author of A Most Tolerant Little Town: The Explosive Beginning of School Desegregation, *winner of the inaugural Tennessee Book Award in Nonfiction.*



Lab for Bad Laws

GUS BOVA

Twenty-two years ago, in the thick of the W. Bush years, Molly Ivins warned in these pages: "The whole damn country is about to be turned into Texas (a singularly horrible fate)."

At the same time, Ivins defended her home state: its enigmatic vastness and dizzying diversity, its strangeness and beauty. "It is the place least likely to become a replica of everyplace else," she wrote.

Eighty years earlier, another *Nation* contributor took a crack at defining Texas. George Clifton Edwards, a Socialist attorney from Dallas, heaped scorn on the state's anti-intellectualism, its violent disposition, and the hotbed of KKK activity that was his hometown.

Then, like Ivins, Edwards defended his native state. But he inverted the case. "There are few better places to go," he wrote, because Texas is America writ small. "After all, is it not really just the big Southwestern specimen of American capitalism?"

I was not born in Texas (such disclaimers remain important here). I've lived here for one decade, in liberal Austin, so I don't pretend to represent all 30 million Texans. But what I see here is something like a malign synthesis of the Ivins and Edwards arguments.

Texas remains a "National Laboratory for Bad Government," as Ivins put it, spreading reactionary policies to other states. In 2021, for instance, Texas invented bounty-style anti-abortion laws that weaponize civil litigation against pregnant people. The next year, our governor shifted the whole nation's politics rightward by busing asylum seekers at random to Democratic cities.

Yet simultaneously, national right-wing politics are draining Texas of some of its stubborn uniqueness. Earlier this year, our state Legislature finally passed a private school voucher law, after 30 years of rural Republicans' refusing to back such a spendthrift program that wouldn't benefit their districts. Texas did not lead the school vouchers charge but followed on the heels of other red states.

A majority non-white state expected to become a majority Latino state, Texas also used to resist extreme anti-immigrant politics. In 2001, we were the first state to pass a law ensuring that undocumented college students were eligible to pay in-state tuition rates. We avoided for years measures like Arizona's 2010 "Show Me Your Papers" law. And Governor Rick Perry famously found his presidential ambitions stymied partly because he wasn't anti-immigrant enough. But Trump's influence began to break this dam in 2017 with the passage of a "sanctuary cities" ban, followed by an unprecedented militarization of the border and the passage of Constitution-testing anti-immigrant legislation in 2023. Time will tell how many more legislative sessions the in-state tuition law can survive.

With a recent rightward shift in the Latino electorate, the project of turning Texas blue has no clear timeline for success, so the GOP will likely have many years left to demolish any remaining decency on our lawbooks.

It is true that the United States is in a period of sharp disunion, but what I see emerging is an unholy sort of unity: As America becomes Texas, Texas becomes America, to the detriment of each. N

Gus Bova is the editor in chief of the Texas Observer.

Among Utah's publicly owned landscapes are river-sculpted canyons of Navajo sandstone and strands of quaking aspen.

Beehive for Sale

KATHARINE S. WALTER

A pair of three-foot-tall bronze beehives engraved with "Industry," the state's motto, sit on the steps of the Utah State Capitol, gifts from Kennecott Utah Copper, which operates the world's largest open-pit mine. The honeybee is the state insect of Utah, and its hives—symbols of industry and unity—appear on everything from highway signs and the state flag to the iconography of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The effect of such an unwavering commitment to industry is visible from the Capitol steps: A massive chunk of the Oquirrh Mountains has been ripped away for the Kennecott mine, and Kennecott's chimney—the tallest man-made structure west of the Mississippi River—puffs out plumes of toxic air from the copper-smelting process.

The great gift of living in Utah is that 68 percent of its land belongs to the federal government—more than in any other state except Nevada. Among these publicly owned landscapes are river-sculpted canyons of Navajo sandstone and vibrant stands of quaking aspen, as well as the fragile habitats of the desert tortoise and the California condor. Much of it spans the sacred ancestral homelands of Native communities.

ANDRES LEIGHTON / AP

Enforcement theater: A Texas National Guard soldier inspects the barbed wire on a border fence in El Paso, Texas.

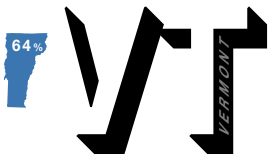
Inside the Capitol building, however, legislators have long wished to unlock the vast stores of carbon underground and the real estate potential aboveground. (More than one-third of them personally profit from real estate.) Last summer, under Governor Spencer Cox, the state of Utah filed a lawsuit seeking to wrench 18.5 million acres from the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the largest holder of public land in Utah. A bizarre and expensive ad campaign—paid for by Utah taxpayers—featured billboards with photos of a smiling climber and the slogan "Let Utah Manage Utah Land." The Ute Indian Tribe called the plan "an existential threat."

Though the Supreme Court dismissed the lawsuit earlier this year, the feds are no longer an obstacle. Promising to "unleash" American energy, US Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum has removed requirements for environmental-impact statements for oil and gas leases on BLM lands in Utah and six other Western states, and he has also rescinded the popular Public Lands Rule, which requires conservation to be considered alongside extraction.

Utah's campuses, once seen as unifying, are now sites of division as well. Last year, the University of Utah shuttered a number of student centers, including the Black Cultural Center and the LGBT Resource Center. New laws prohibit some students from using bathrooms consistent with their gender identity and teachers from hanging pride flags. The University of Utah paid $6 million to McKinsey & Company to find "efficiencies" just months before the state's higher education budget was slashed.

Honeybees are colonists, brought to Utah on some of the earliest pioneer wagon trains, and often outcompete native bee species. Many of the state's ridgelines and rivers have been tarnished irreparably by almost 200 years of industry and colonization. Yet from the Capitol steps, you can also see the glory and grandeur of what has been fought for and is still here, at least for now—to the east, the snowcapped Wasatch Mountains, and to the northwest, a stripe of light reflecting off the Great Salt Lake. N

Katharine S. Walter is an epidemiologist based in Salt Lake City.



Rural Peril

SUE HALPERN

On March 3, around 100 residents of my small mountain town crammed into the community house for a town meeting, Vermont's annual exercise in participatory democracy. After a convivial potluck, a volunteer moderator steered the discussion of the action items posted in the town report that we'd all dutifully brought with us. Did we, for example, want to spend $6,000 on the upkeep of our four local cemeteries? Did we agree that property taxes will be due on November 1? Did we agree to allocate $44,950 to our fire department? It was a fairly routine meeting, with little debate and the "ayes" dominating, until we came to Article 5 on the agenda: "Would the town vote the sum of $25,000 to establish a capital fund for long-term or larger infrastructure projects that townspeople or others could contribute to?"

Why, suddenly, our town—as well as more than two dozen other Vermont municipalities—was asking its residents, who already pay some of the highest taxes in the country, to establish an additional fundraising vehicle to which we, or other generous souls, could contribute tells you all you need to know about the future of rural communities in Trump's America. Two years ago, we suffered a flood so severe that a number of roads and bridges washed away, the power was out for days, and a house was carried off its foundation and crushed in a landslide. We were able to recover thanks to help from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but there was another flood the following year, and no one thinks it will be the last. This is where the capricious whims of Donald Trump, who apparently sees FEMA as an extension of the welfare state, will imperil my town and state and others like them. As the chair of our select board told us that night, repairs from the 2023 flood cost around $1.5 million. Add to that

Donald Trump, who apparently sees FEMA as an extension of the welfare state, will imperil Vermont and rural communities everywhere.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

The founders had no idea the country they created would turn out so rich, so powerful, and yet so morally weak and economically fragile.

the other federal moneys that are distributed through the states for such things as roadwork and energy resilience, and it came to around $3 million. If Trump gets rid of FEMA and cuts off other federal programs, as he has promised to do, we will be in trouble. "If you thought it was a big deal your taxes went up last year by 14 percent," the chair said, "without these grants, every household would have to pay an additional $15,000." It was still winter, our snowiest in a long time, and she joked—sort of—that the town may have to resort to giving everyone a shovel and a box of salt and telling them to clear the roads themselves.

Vermont has reliably voted for Democrats—and Bernie Sanders—for decades. This past election was different. True, the congressional incumbents won, but the Democrats in the state Legislature lost their supermajority—in fact, the party gave up more seats here than in any other state. And now our somewhat moderate Republican governor, emboldened by this and, perhaps, by the machinations in Washington, is pushing to eliminate universal school lunches, to reorganize the school system in ways that will destroy local control, and to rescind climate change mandates.

At our town meeting, Article 5 was finally put to a vote. After an amendment to its wording and an acknowledgment that $25,000 wouldn't cover the cost of even a single culvert, it passed. The social fabric can tear only so much before it is in tatters. N

Sue Halpern is a scholar-in-residence at Middlebury College. Her latest novel, What We Leave Behind, *will be published in June.*

Crater of Democracy

SIVA VAIDHYANATHAN

Here in Virginia, the founders always surround us. Thomas Jefferson's home looms over the University of Virginia, where I work. My office sits on land that once was James Monroe's plantation, where enslaved people toiled to build his wealth. James Madison's estate is a short drive away, and George Washington's plantation remains one of the state's top tourist destinations. More than Massachusetts, where the Revolutionary War began, Virginia, where the war ended and the Constitution began on Madison's desk, can rightly claim to have started the whole story of continental conquest and the slow march toward democracy.

The United States as a global power ruled by a would-be tyrant with criminal convictions and no moral foundation would be unrecognizable to these founders. For all their flaws, they were steeped in the ethic of civic republicanism, a commitment to the greater good through deliberation across differences.

Modern Virginia would also be unrecognizable to the founders. It's diverse, dynamic, cosmopolitan, and global. The military-industrial complex rules the southeastern corner of the state. A limping coal industry survives in the southwest. The northeast is peppered with wealthy white suburbs and striving immigrant enclaves. Richmond grows as a medium-size capital city with a vibrant Black middle class. And rural Central Virginia, where I live, is the place where all these cultures and economies cross and converge at the flagship university of this growing and increasingly Democratic state.

That was the story I used to tell before August 11, 2017, when my hometown was invaded by fascists and white supremacists emboldened by the election—via the fluke of the founders' faulty constitutional design—of one of their own as president. They injured dozens of my neighbors and killed one as police stood by and watched. Ever since, Virginians have known that our democracy is fragile. When, almost 41 months later, another horde of fascists stormed the US Capitol, we were not surprised. The 2017 Unite the Right rally had proved to be a dress rehearsal.

Now my students fear the worst for themselves and their families. Many are immigrants and wonder if their visas or even naturalized citizenship status are in danger. Others, children of immigrants, wonder if their birthright citizenship, guaranteed by the very Civil War that was fought all over Virginia and that ended with the liberation and eventual enfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of Black Virginians, is in danger as well. Mostly, they fear for their futures. Many of their parents have been forced out of federal jobs, while those they hoped to fill themselves after graduation are no more. Elon Musk and his nerdy storm troopers have dismissed and denigrated a selfless federal workforce, the economic foundation of Virginia.

The founders had no idea the country they created would turn out so rich, so powerful, and yet so morally weak and economically fragile. Jefferson's Declaration of Independence now seems hollow. Madison's Constitution is ignored. The US economy is cratering from Northern Virginia outward. As with the Revolution, the Civil War, and now the possible fall of American democracy, everything ends in Virginia. N

Siva Vaidhyanathan is a professor of media studies at the University of Virginia and the author of Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy.

Tear Down Every Wall

RICK STEVES

Walls are a big part of our world. Like any good tour guide, I've embraced the wisdom of the "dual narrative approach" when introducing travelers to such barriers. To really understand a wall,

PAUL NOTH

Paul Noth is the winner of the 2025 Thurber Prize for American Humor. His work appears regularly in The New Yorker.

Faded yesteryear: The tiny West Virginia town of Whitesville was once a coal-mining community.

Perhaps all Americans would benefit by getting out a bit more and exploring our own country. Maybe start by going purple.

you need to talk with people on both sides of that wall—whether Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land or Protestants and Catholics in Ireland. But what about in our own country?

In America, we're grappling with a mighty, if metaphorical, wall dividing our nation—one that we've painted blue and red. And as we search for a solution to the culture war raging around us, the challenge will be to talk to people on both sides of that wall and to employ the same dual narrative approach here at home.

Living in a blue state like Washington, I'm working hard to take this challenge seriously. At a recent Hands Off! rally in my hometown, rather than wear a blue shirt (signifying Democrat), I wore purple and wove the beauty and practical necessity of understanding both blue and red into my message.

The most powerful experiences I've had on the road are when I've ventured into divided lands and crossed walls to better understand the viewpoints on both sides. And that's the broadened perspective every American can gain by venturing metaphorically from red to blue or blue to red within our own country.

Traveling across a wall, whether it's between Tel Aviv and Ramallah or San Francisco and Abilene, can create a sense of foreboding, even fright. But we need to be bold. Fear is for people who don't get out much. The flip side of fear is understanding, and we gain understanding when we venture outside our comfort zones.

I often think about the imperative to "Love thy neighbor." If you believe in a God, then it logically follows that we're all children of that heavenly creator. That means we're all brothers and sisters. And travelers understand that "Love thy neighbor," which is a basic tenet of every monotheistic religion, has nothing to do with proximity. Suffering, need, joy, and hope—they are just as real across the sea as they are across the street.

I'm not afraid of our world. I celebrate it in all its diversity. And when I return home, I pack a treasured souvenir: an appreciation that the world is filled with love, joy, hope, and good people. Sure, it's complicated, and there are serious problems out there. But the big takeaway is that we're all in this together. (And we all enjoy our gelato.)

This philosophy applies to travels within the United States, too. Perhaps all Americans—including myself, a true-blue Washingtonian—would benefit by getting out a bit more and exploring our own country. Maybe start by going purple… crossing the street… and tearing down that invisible wall. **N**

Rick Steves is a public television host, best-selling author, and outspoken activist.

We Were the Future

ANN PANCAKE

West Virginia is generally considered behind the times, stuck in the past. But in truth, we were the future. We're the harbinger and vanguard, the dress rehearsal and training ground.

Our government was designed from its inception to serve capitalism. The oft-repeated narrative about West Virginia being created to protest slavery and the Confederacy is only partly true. A handful of Wheeling industrialists and merchants—one might say an oligarchy—wrested us out of Virginia in the 1860s to serve their own interests, and few states have suffered the scale of resource exploitation that followed. The violent and still-ongoing extraction of coal, oil, gas, and lumber. The profits vacuumed out to benefit other states. The century of poverty left behind. The ripped and leveled earth, the poisoned water.

We're also ahead of the curve on one-party rule. In 2025, our House of Delegates has 91 Republicans and nine Democrats; in the Senate, it's 32 and two. The Board of Governors, appointed by our former Republican governor, dismantled liberal arts at our flagship

ANDREW LICHTENSTEIN / CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

public university two years before the second Trump administration targeted higher education. Our state criminalized protesting against pipelines back in 2020. Fossil fuel magnates have used race and ethnicity to divide us for a century.

West Virginia is a demonstration of how economic inequality breeds support for authoritarianism, how degraded education makes people susceptible to demagogues.

We're also an exemplar of what we might call absentee complicity. West Virginia feeds Americans' endless appetites for fuel, electricity, chemicals, lumber, recreation. We serve up our own land for people who live where they don't have to see the fallout—breathe it, drink it, grieve it, run from it. If you grew up on the East Coast in a house with electricity, you can probably trace the wires back to an Appalachian coal mine.

But you also have to understand this: Because government never prioritized people here, we have had practice in working around government to help each other. We've been doing mutual aid long before that was even a term. Unions are in our DNA. You can find alternative economies here, and not all things are monetized. We know how to grow and forage and hunt for food. We know how to fix things, build things, and make do. We help our neighbors and care for the vulnerable; we value hospitality and courtesy. We're a state where I can live as a gay woman in an ultra-red rural county and not be afraid.

When I look around my community, I don't think "How could they have voted for Trump?" Instead, I think "How could so many have stayed this decent after all they've been through?" We have practice not just in surviving tyranny, but in holding on to our humanity as we try to.

West Virginians are often written about; we've been caricatured, belittled, scapegoated. But understand that we have our own scholars, our own artists, our own journalists, our own organizers and activists. You should have believed us when we told you that *Hillbilly Elegy* was a fraud.

In West Virginia, we were the future, a long-repressed warning. But understand we also know a few things about how to endure—and perhaps even overcome—this awful present. N

Ann Pancake is a fiction and nonfiction writer who has published three books about West Virginia. A seventh-generation West Virginian, she lives in Preston County.

After Equality

NINA MCCONIGLEY

Growing up in Wyoming, you learn that the state has two nicknames: the Cowboy State and the Equality State. But now *equality* is one of the words that the Trump administration has ordered to be struck from government websites and materials. Wyoming was one of the first states to give women the right to vote, the first with women bailiffs, jurors, and even a woman governor. We are not that state anymore. Wyoming has one of the largest gender wage gaps in the country, low representation of women in state government, and low family-planning and college graduation rates.

Instead of equality, the state leans into cowboys. Everywhere you go in Wyoming, there's a silhouette of Steamboat, the bucking horse with a rider on top. The University of Wyoming's mascot is the Cowboy. When you're a kid, you are constantly told to "cowboy up." The so-called Code of the West, or Cowboy Code of Ethics, drills into young people the supposed frontier ideals of honesty, integrity, loyalty, and respect. Yet to cowboy up means not to reach out for help. Wyoming has the third-highest suicide rate in the country. State lawmakers recently voted against creating a trust fund for the suicide-prevention hotline. Wyoming ranks last in access to mental health care, and the Legislature blocked bills to fund behavioral health programs in schools.

Wyoming is also one of the most intensely MAGA-aligned states. In 2024, Trump won with nearly 72 percent of the state's vote, the most in the country. Wyoming is as red as the rocks in Hole-in-the-Wall, the famous old outlaw hideout in the center of the state.

Some in Wyoming do go against the grain. The 28 percent of voters who didn't pull the lever for Trump largely reside in small blue outposts like Laramie and Jackson. This minority works to protect federal lands and national parks.

Wyoming is also the state of former representative Liz Cheney, one of the few Republican leaders who stood up to Trump and defended the Constitution after January 6. The state GOP used to embrace a live-and-let-live philosophy. My own mother was the first person born in India to be elected to a state legislature in the United States—and she was elected as a Republican in Wyoming, without a single other South Asian person in her district. But those days are long gone: Now the Freedom Caucus controls a majority of seats in the state Legislature.

Young people are leaving, the energy industry is faltering, federal jobs are being cut, and the state needs to diversify its economy and its populace. We are still defined by the extraction of coal and the ideology of "Drill, baby, drill!" Every summer sees more intense wildfires, the skies turning smoky and orange. Yet we are also home to the Tetons and Yellowstone, beautiful wild spaces that must be protected.

In Wyoming, one can stand on the prairie and see the horizon—but the horizon is shrinking; that distant view is being obscured. To see farther, we must become the Equality State again and commit ourselves to protecting not only our resources, but all the inhabitants of this land. N

Nina McConigley is the author of Cowboys and East Indians *and the forthcoming novel* How to Commit a Postcolonial Murder.

THESE DIS-UNITED STATES

In Wyoming, we must commit ourselves to protecting not only our resources, but all the inhabitants of this land.

THE Nation.

GREATER AMERICA

EXPORTING DISUNION

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE ROOTS OF TRUMP'S IMPERIAL AMBITIONS, MARCO RUBIO, AND ME—AND WHY SHARING SORROW IS NOT ENOUGH.

VIET THANH NGUYEN

I HAVE LIVED IN AMERICA FOR MOST OF MY LIFE, BUT I HAD RARELY traveled outside of that portion of America that is the United States, except for short trips to urban Canada and to Mexican resorts. That changed this past February, when I went farther south than I had ever been before, to El Salvador. My timing was perfect, for I arrived on the same day as Marco Rubio. The rumor was that Rubio stayed at the Hilton on his first international trip as US secretary of state, while I stayed two miles away at the less glamorous Sheraton. We were both in San Salvador as part of a project that I think of as Greater America: Rubio was there to build it, and I was there to criticize it and to excavate, for myself if no one else, a small piece of it.

Signs of the United States' presence in San Salvador were unavoidable, from the fact that the national currency is the US dollar to the sight of the American servicemen and -women in uniform in my hotel. They were Air Force personnel, part of a band that was there to play at an air show at the nearby Ilopango air base. My hotel was itself enmeshed in the troubled history of the country: It was at the Sheraton in 1981 that two masked Salvadoran Army officers entered the hotel coffee shop and

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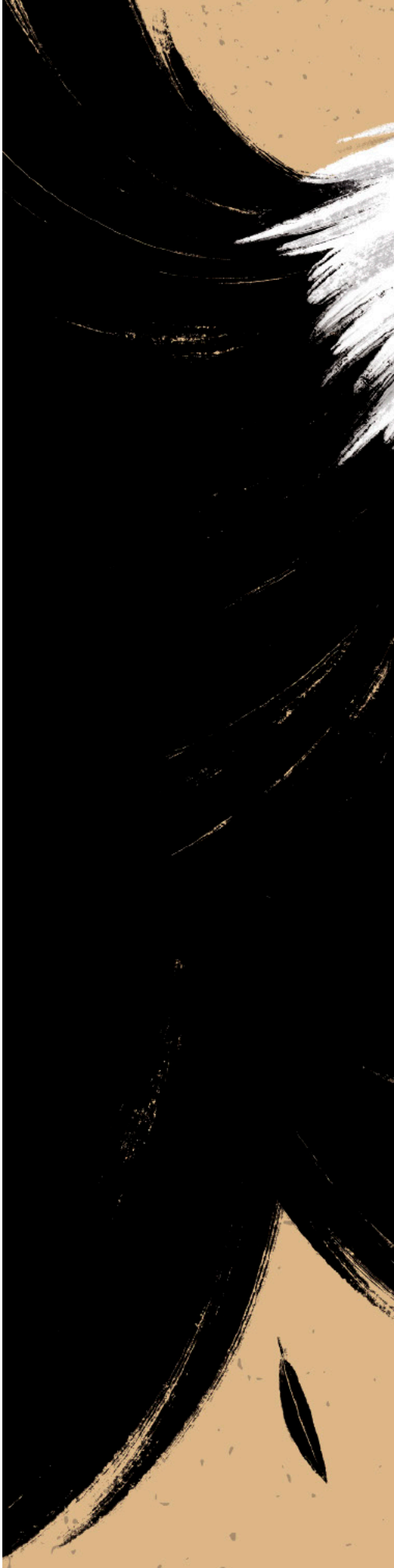


ILLUSTRATION BY **ADRIÀ FRUITÓS**

shot to death José Rodolfo Viera, president of El Salvador's Institute for Agrarian Transformation, and Michael P. Hammer and Mark David Pearlman, two US labor lawyers providing technical assistance for a land-reform effort.

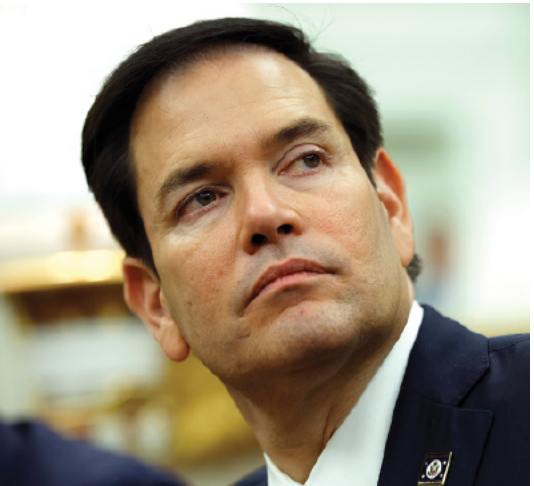
My vicarious sense of being immersed in history evaporated, however, when my translator told me that Rubio's Hilton had once been a Sheraton, and it was there that the murders took place. So did a siege in 1989, carried out by leftist guerrillas of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in their final offensive against the government during the civil war that ran from 1979 to 1992. That siege trapped civilians and a contingent of US Special Forces on "temporary duty," who would eventually escape after the Catholic Church reached an agreement with the guerrillas.

"These extremists preach the doctrine of a 'revolution without frontiers.' Their first target is El Salvador."
—Ronald Reagan

I was disappointed not to be closer to the history that I had come to investigate—a bloody and terrible one of which land reform was a part. But at least I arrived in time for an event whose full historical import has yet to be determined—but whose immediate impact has already been felt: Rubio's signing of a deal with the country's president, Nayib Bukele, to use a Salvadoran prison to incarcerate alleged criminals from the United States. The agreement already seemed ominous, for Bukele had been reelected in 2024 with nearly 83 percent of the vote after he imprisoned more than 81,000 people without due process as part of a campaign against gangs that began in 2022. While crime had plummeted, the price had been a tightening of Bukele's authoritarian grip via what the Catholic bishop of El Salvador called a reign of terror. Not to mention that many of those imprisoned were not actually gang members: At least 7,000 were later released, but many more are said to be innocent.

Less than six weeks after Rubio and Bukele signed the deal, the United States sent 238 alleged Venezuelan gangsters to El Salvador, where their heads were shaved and they were frog-marched by heavily armed and masked prison guards into a massive detention facility reserved for gang members. Most of these men had no criminal records; none had been given due process. At least one was a gay hairstylist caught up in the sweep—possibly because he was brown and tattooed.

ALL OF THIS MIGHT HAVE SEEMED TRAGICOMIC IN A JOSEPH HELLER kind of way, but it wasn't funny, because the hairstylist and all the others remain trapped in their own Catch-22, dispatched by a US government exercising absolute authority—but now claiming it had no power to get them back from Bukele's prison. And though 36 years have elapsed since the Sheraton siege, the thought of the American advisers, barricaded at the end of their hotel corridor, lost its comic aspect when I recalled that not long after that farce, US-trained Salvadoran armed forces murdered six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter at Central American University (UCA)—only four miles from the old Sheraton.



Birthright citizen: When Secretary of State Marco Rubio (below) was born in 1971, his parents, who'd returned briefly to Cuba after the revolution, had not yet become US citizens.

The Salvadoran military tried to frame the FMLN for those murders, but that fiction did not last. I visited UCA to see the modest house where the Jesuit priests had been awoken early in the morning, taken to the garden outside, made to lie face down, and shot in the head. The Centro Monseñor Romero next door had a small gallery dedicated to the memory of the priests; among the items on display were the blood-stained clothes they were wearing when they were murdered. A young undergraduate volunteer showed me a slideshow of photographs of the dead priests that were taken on the morning they were found. I knew then that I would never forget what a rifle bullet does to a human face.

I had heard about the murders of the priests when they happened, just as I had heard about the murder of Archbishop Óscar Romero in 1980 and the rape and murder of four American churchwomen that same year, all carried out by the Salvadoran military. A somewhat precocious child, I read *Newsweek* at the dentist's office, which is where I learned about the Iranian hostage crisis, the Iran-contra affair, and the El Mozote massacre. I remember Ronald Reagan describing the Soviet Union as an evil empire and calling for a Star Wars missile defense shield, although I do not remember whether I read about the 1983 speech in which he said El Salvador was on the front line of a communist encroachment into Greater America.

"The problem," Reagan said, "is that an aggressive minority has thrown in its lot with the Communists, looking to the Soviets and their own Cuban henchmen to help them pursue political change through violence. Nicaragua, right here, has become their base. And these extremists make no secret of their goal. They preach the doctrine of a 'revolution without frontiers.' Their first target is El Salvador."

"A revolution without frontiers" is a good way to describe the project of Greater America as well—a world in which the American revolution turns the United States into the Greatest Country on Earth. Such greatness justifies the American prerogative to transgress the borders of other countries at will, as happened when the United States took over France's colonial mission in Indochina after the Viet Minh defeated the French in 1954. Reagan cited Laos as a country where the US pressure on the Laotian government to negotiate with the Pathet Lao in the early 1960s had been a fatal mistake. The Pathet Lao were "the armed guerrillas who'd been doing what the guerrillas are doing in El Salvador…they didn't rest until those guerrillas, the Pathet Lao, had seized total control of the Government of Laos."

The falling dominoes of Indochina, toppled by communism, had extended to Central America. Here, Reagan continued, "we had a common

KEVIN DIETSCH / GETTY IMAGES

Justice deferred: A memorial to the 1981 El Mozote massacre, when Salvadoran soldiers murdered over 1,000 men, women, and children.

heritage. We'd all come as pioneers to these two great continents. We worship the same God. And we'd lived at peace with each other longer than most people in other parts of the world. There are more than 600 million of us calling ourselves Americans—North, Central, and South. We haven't really begun to tap the vast resources of these two great continents."

Reading this speech more than 40 years after its delivery, I had not expected Reagan to proclaim an American unity across borders, premised on Christianity, capitalism, and anti-communism. Many people living in Central and South America have certainly asserted their claim to being American, but usually by arguing that they were overshadowed by a United States that had seized the name of America for itself, not because they were willing to be led by Reagan in a Greater America.

Trump's rhetoric about annexing Canada, Greenland, and Panama can also be understood within this idea of a Greater America, which is what drove the creation of the United States, built on conquest, from the 13 Atlantic coast colonies to the Manifest Destiny of expanding to the Pacific and the Rio Grande, to the seizure of Guam, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and, for nearly five decades beginning in 1898, the Philippines.

Marco Rubio's country of ancestry, Cuba, is a part of this project of Greater America as well. The United States had dominated Cuba in the first half of the 20th century, and Fidel Castro's revolution against the plantation class in Cuba was also directed at the US. Rubio's parents, who had been living in the United States before the Cuban Revolution, returned to Cuba briefly under the Castro regime. However, they quickly came back to the US, where they were not naturalized until 1975. This makes Rubio, born in 1971—the same year as me—a birthright citizen and the son of noncitizens.

Trump is now flirting with eroding or ending the very right that allowed Rubio to be born a citizen. Birthright citizenship is arguably part of what makes the United States great, and whatever greatness the US might claim is premised at least partly on documents like the Constitution and its amendments. American greatness also stems from our willingness to say:

> Give me your tired, your poor,
> Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
> The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
> Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
> I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Emma Lazarus wrote those words for "The New Colossus," the Statue of Liberty given to the United States by the French, and they apply as much to Rubio's parents as to mine—and to me personally, since I was born in Viet Nam and came to the United States as a homeless refugee from the tempest of war and colonialism, communism and anti-communism.

But in Greater America, the new colossus is the strongman, foreshadowed by Reagan and embodied fully by Trump, determined to extinguish the lamp that had brought too many migrants, documented and undocumented, into the United States. Many of them came from El Salvador, and in

Separated at birth? Like Marco Rubio, the author (below) was the son of refugees.

FROM TOP: MARVIN RECINOS / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; KYUSUNG GONG / AP

visiting that country, I wanted to understand more intimately how the United States had gone from fighting communism in Viet Nam to doing the same in Central America, and how this global counterinsurgency effort was intertwined with my own journey from Viet Nam to the United States of America as a refugee. This war against communism had ultimately produced me as an American. What had it done to Salvadorans?

Souvenirs of battle: Vehicles and weapons on the grounds of the War Museum Cambodia in Siem Reap.

A DRIVER AND TRANSLATOR TOOK ME ON THE FIVE-hour trip from San Salvador to El Mozote, the site of the most infamous anti-communist attack carried out by the Salvadoran Army, when its soldiers killed about 1,000 unarmed peasants, many of them women and children. Most of the people living in the villages of El Mozote had not expressed any support for the FMLN, but the army was in a scorched-earth mood, intent on eradicating civilian support for the guerrillas. Extermination was not a new policy: The oligarchs who controlled the government had been so fearful of communism that when communists and peasants rose up against their rule in 1932, the army and oligarch-sponsored militias killed tens of thousands of people, including much of the Indigenous population. The event is known simply as *La Matanza*—The Massacre.

The words on the Statue of Liberty apply to Rubio's parents as to mine. They both came to the US as refugees from communism.

State and oligarchic harshness against the peasants, political opposition, and land reform was so extreme in the late 1970s that President Jimmy Carter tried to pressure El Salvador into improving its human rights record. El Salvador responded by renouncing US military aid in 1977, with Israel helping to make up the shortfall. Israel played a key role in assisting Central American governments in suppressing insurgencies in the 1970s and '80s, selling weapons and providing advisers, surveillance technology, and a counterinsurgency strategy modeled on its ongoing suppression of Palestinians—used to most terrible effect in the Guatemalan state's genocidal campaign against Indigenous peoples. From 1975 to 1979, Israel supplied about 83 percent of El Salvador's military needs, including the French-made airplanes that would take off from Ilopango air base to drop American-made bombs.

An American Mk-82 500-pound bomb was displayed at the Museum of the Revolution in nearby Perquin, which reminded me of the humble War Remnants Museum I had visited in Saigon in the early 2000s and the ramshackle War Museum Cambodia in Siem Reap that I saw a decade later: no air conditioning, single-story buildings, lots of captured weaponry, and curation that appeared crude by Western aesthetic standards, including blurry reproductions of newspaper photos and captions that were untranslated or rendered in faulty English. But what was evident in all these museums was a sincere desire to tell their country's history from the point of view of the guerrillas and the survivors—in direct contradiction to the narratives of Greater

GARY LEE TODD

America, found in the Hollywood movies and slick presidential speeches that portray American interventions in Southeast Asia and Central America as endeavors to defend freedom and democracy.

By the time the Carter administration restarted military aid in 1980, three weeks after the murder of the American churchwomen, El Salvador's civil war was already brutal. It pitted the oligarchy, its army, and its death squads against an alliance of leftist guerrillas and would kill at least 80,000 people, most of them civilians. The US government was well aware that the vast majority of the atrocities were being committed by the Salvadoran Army that its advisers were training.

Americanization was why the Salvadoran troops that came to El Mozote were kitted out to look exactly like American troops in Viet Nam, which is also how South Vietnamese troops—like my father-in-law, a lieutenant colonel of the paratroops who trained at Fort Benning—were outfitted. Whether they were Americans, South Vietnamese, or Salvadorans, the troops wore olive-green fatigues and M1 steel-pot helmets, wielded M16 rifles, and were transported by Huey helicopters. Photographs of Salvadoran Army operations amid the country's beautiful green mountains depict scenes that look almost exactly like episodes from the American war in Viet Nam.

In the central square of El Mozote, 44 years after the massacre, I sat with three men, survivors, two of them about my age. While I was reading about El Mozote in *Newsweek* as a teenager, they were running for their lives with their family members, many of whom were killed. Wearing gray polo shirts with the logo of their survivors' association, they told me about their quest for justice—reparations, yes, but also the criminal prosecution of those responsible for the massacre. Financial reparations to survivors have been slow in coming, while convictions of the killers and their commanders have not happened.

The paved road running through the center of town and the cement plaza we were sitting in were some of the most concrete government responses to the decision by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights that the Salvadoran armed forces had committed the massacre and that the state owed reparations. Next to the plaza was a dignified memorial to the victims. Plaques bearing the names of the dead are mounted on a curved stone wall, faced by cutouts of a family of four—two parents, two children—holding hands. A sign in front of the memorial reads: "The remains of 140 innocent children under the age of 12 were found at this site. They are currently buried beneath the monument in El Mozote Square."

I had read about the horrors of the killings, and so I did not ask the men to recount what happened, and they did not offer to. I took pictures of the memorial, as I had taken pictures of the memorials to massacre victims in the Choeung Ek killing fields of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and in the villages of Ha My and Son My in Viet Nam—the latter better known as My Lai. Refugees fled from those countries, as they also fled from El Salvador; many made their way to the United States. Some of the Cambodian refugees who came as children never got their US citizenship, committed crimes, and were deported back to a country that most of them barely remembered and whose language they could not speak. Some of the Salvadoran refugees became gangsters and were deported starting with the Clinton administration, returning to a country that they barely knew and which was unprepared to deal with them. It was likely some of these gangsters whom Bukele would throw into prison en masse while proclaiming himself as the "world's coolest dictator."

"There are more than 600 million of us calling ourselves Americans—North, Central, and South."

—Ronald Reagan

Bukele must have been influenced by Trump, as Trump himself now seems to be influenced by Bukele. Sitting before the cameras with Bukele for a White House chat, Trump said that he would like to send "homegrown" Americans to Salvadoran prisons. Neither president mentioned that those prisons already hold criminals forged by the tempestuous violence of a Greater America, from revolution and counterinsurgency to gangsterism and deportation. If the United States of America is the name for the best version of the country that its citizens can imagine—a nation bound by laws and uplifted by ideals—then Greater America is the doppelgänger that has also always existed, feeding on the desire for power and profit.

AP

His master's voice: Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele, who calls himself the "world's coolest dictator," meets with Donald Trump in the Oval Office in April.

If the country feels changed beyond recognition, that is due to the distinction between a United States and a Greater America.

If the country feels divided now, and even feels changed beyond recognition for many Americans—whether they be on the left or the right—that, too, is due to this Jekyll and Hyde distinction between a United States and a Greater America. The glory of the United States was built on possessing this Greater America, but the danger for the United States is that it has now been possessed by this Greater America—and everything it represents in terms of domination, doom, and potential self-destruction. This current moment of triumph for the right and crisis for the left in the United States is the logical outcome of a long history of the country exercising imperial power to disrupt other countries, unleashing the very forces that have now returned to unsettle the United States.

Rubio coming to court Bukele, and Bukele coming to pay his respects to Trump, are just the latest but perhaps the most visceral illustrations of this feedback loop that has now turned the long-standing US support for authoritarianism against itself. The list of dictators we have supported is long: from the shah of Iran and President Marcos of the Philippines to the generals of Cambodia, Viet Nam, South Korea, Indonesia, Chile, Guatemala, and Panama. While the United States has sometimes done its own dirty work in conquering and absorbing the lands of others, it has more often preferred—particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries—to delegate that dirty work to the dictators of allied countries. Usually that has been done discreetly, so that the American citizenry is not too disturbed by incidents like the Indonesian mass killings (1965–66) or the Gwangju massacre (1980) or the Guatemalan genocide (1970s–80s).

While American-supported leaders and militaries carried out these atrocities, they appeared to be separate from American domestic life. If Americans had been subjected to things like state surveillance through the COINTELPRO program of the 1960s, or mass incarceration as Japanese Americans during World War II, or segregation and lynching as Black Americans, or mass deportation as Mexicans or Mexican Americans in the 1930s, those episodes appeared to be purely domestic eruptions, rather than tragedies overlapping and reverberating with the practices of a Greater America.

But the forced removal of Indigenous peoples and their incarceration on reservations foreshadowed what would be done to Japanese and Mexican Americans, while COINTELPRO in the United States operated at the same historical moment as the Phoenix Program in Viet Nam. COINTELPRO was aimed at the Black Panthers and other domestic insurgents, and the Phoenix Program targeted the Viet Cong; as James Baldwin put it in *No Name in the Street*, "The Panthers thus became the native Vietcong, the ghetto became the village in which the Vietcong were hidden, and in the ensuing search and destroy operations, everyone in the village became suspect."

Trump, in his eagerness to conduct search-and-destroy operations against the terrorists he proclaims to see everywhere—from alleged Venezuelan gangsters to alleged Mexican migrant rapists to pro-Palestinian students—has now adapted the techniques and the rhetoric of America's dictator allies. Where the United States once kept its dictators at a polite distance, Greater America has brought our dictators closer to home—too close for the comfort of many Americans, who can now clearly see that the fate of renditioned brown men, disappeared into a Salvadoran prison, might foretell their own.

That Rubio is the secretary of state overseeing this is ironic—but not surprising. While Rubio's parents initially left Cuba in 1956 when the dictator Fulgencio Batista was in power, his grandfather left under the Castro regime. As an undocumented immigrant to the United States,

Reagan's legacy: Right, President Ronald Reagan in 1982; below, Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated in March 1980, and the four American Catholic missionaries murdered in the same year by the Salvadoran National Guard: Maura Clarke, Jean Donovan, Ita Ford, and Dorothy Kazel.

TOP: MICHAEL EVANS / THE WHITE HOUSE / GETTY IMAGES; MIDDLE: BETTMANN; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF THE MARYKNOLL SISTERS (4)

his grandfather was almost deported, but this does not seem to have produced any empathy in Rubio for the deportable. Perhaps he views his grandfather as a legitimate refugee from the Castro regime—even as his parents were not—and therefore someone who should be saved. Or perhaps he is cynically simplifying his family narrative to fit into the story of Cuban exile, the pursuit of freedom from communism, and the aspiration to belong to a Greater America. I know some Vietnamese refugees feel the same way, believing that they were the good refugees, unlike the ones coming from the southern part of Greater America. Some of those good refugees made their way to Washington, DC, on January 6 and waved a South Vietnamese flag in front of the Capitol dome. Their anti-communism aligns with Rubio's, and that anti-communism remains a part of Greater America—a belief in which the ends justifies the means.

If Trump is intent on erasing the memory of January 6 as a criminal insurrection and transforming it into a patriotic uprising, then my work is the opposite. I want to remember all the ways in which my existence in Greater America connects me with those who also want to remember, rather than to forget or distort. So, after my visit to the memorial of El Mozote, I accepted the invitation of one of the survivors to visit his home in the outlying village of La Joya. The victims of the massacre committed there included many of his relatives, and Señor Martinez wanted me to see his own private memorial, so we drove the next afternoon into the countryside on an unpaved road, following a pickup truck with two dozen schoolchildren standing in its bed.

They were returning home from school in their white shirts and blue pants or skirts, hanging on to the welded-on frame around the bed until the pickup paused and let them off by twos and threes in front of their homes. After half an hour, we reached a small gray house of stone walls and a tiled roof. A picture of Archbishop Romero hung on the front of the house next to a rack of potato chips, which indicated the convenience store inside; it was run from a single room, all the goods stacked on a table.

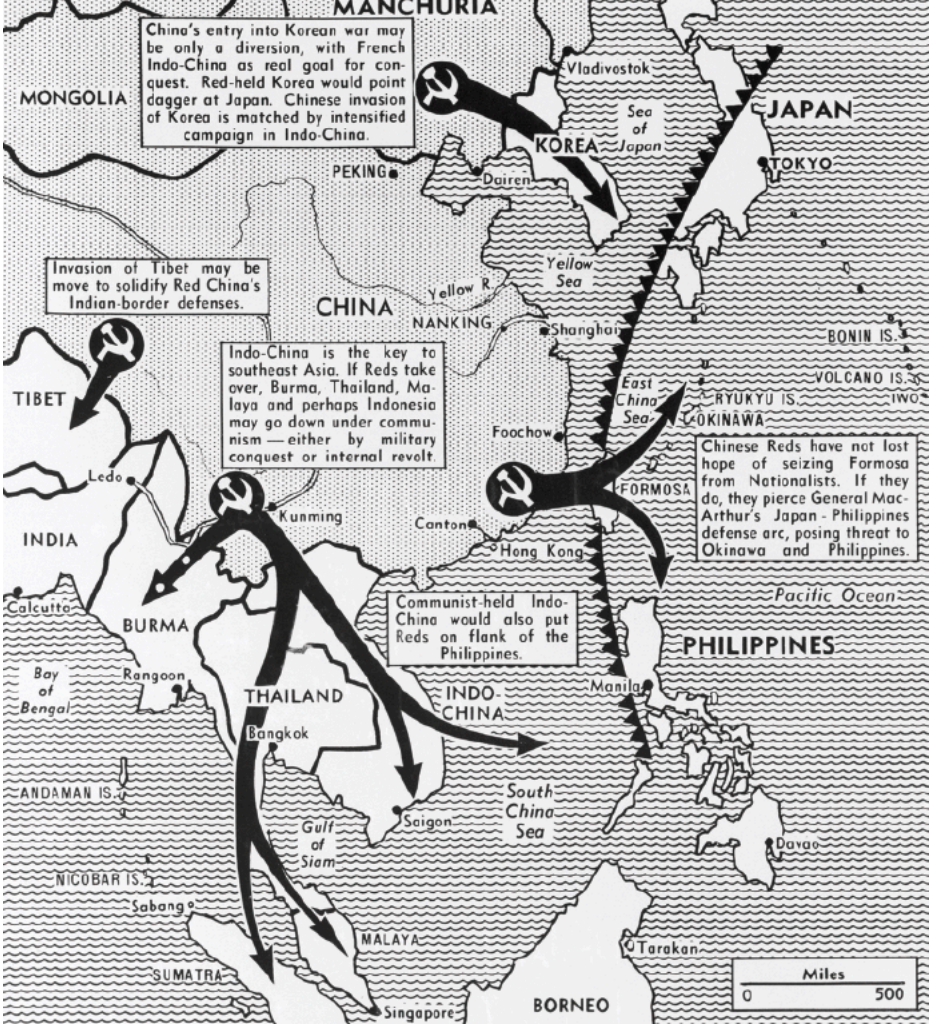
Next to the house, behind a chain-link fence, is the memorial that Martinez built under a corrugated tin roof. There is a stone wall, and on it are a crucifix with Jesus Christ draped in a loincloth and 17 black plaques bearing dozens of names of the dead. Martinez tells me of how 24 of his relatives had been killed, pointing to their names. Among them is his mother.

I see someone as old as 76, a child of 2, another who is zero—killed in the womb. I do not know what to say to Señor Martinez, so I tell him of the Vietnamese saying that we utter when confronted with another's grief. I tell him that we like to *chia buồn*. To share sorrow.

My translator translates. Martinez nods. We are quiet, and then I give him all the American dollars I have on me as a donation to his memorial.

Sharing sorrow is not enough, but it is a beginning—as well as an obligation for all those Americans who would like to believe that there is something great in America, a greatness that would allow us to unite America rather than to divide and conquer it. That greatness would be based on grief rather than profit, on sharing sorrow rather than monopolizing power.

I think of how there are not enough memorials in the world, of how many massacres have no markers to commemorate them, no survivors to remember the dead, all amounting to an untold history of massacre. Martinez is one of the lonely keepers of these memories of massacre, of whom there are so many scattered throughout Greater America. For those Americans of the United States who would like to save their country, I would suggest that we listen to the stories of Martinez and those like him. Their reminder of the inhumanity done in our name forces us to prove our humanity, rather than to assume that it already exists. They are the witnesses to the worst of us, and for their existence and persistence, we should be grateful. **N**



Domino theory: This map from 1950 depicts the supposed threat posed by a communist Viet Nam—today one of the United States' major trading partners.

Sharing sorrow is an obligation for all Americans who would like to believe that there is something great in America.

BETTMANN

TURNOUT OR BUST?

Forget the midterms. The fight to take down Trumpism runs through the 2025 elections.

JOHN NICHOLS

YASMINE TAEB LIVES IN THE GREAT EXPANSE OF SUBURBAN COUNTIES that spreads out to the south and west of Washington, DC, to form NoVA, the most populous region of Virginia. NoVA (short for "Northern Virginia") is where counties and cities are named for the dukes and earls of colonial times—Prince William, Fairfax, Culpepper. It's where the plantations of founding fathers and presidents are now tourist sites and where Civil War battlefields remind us of the bloody fight to address the original sin of the founders' "American experiment." But NoVA's contemporary political reality is shaped less by its heritage than by the fact that it is home to one of the largest concentrations of federal government employees in the United States. And it's these people that Taeb, a veteran progressive activist and the first Muslim woman elected to the Democratic National Committee, has her eye on when it comes to this November's off-year elections. "Given the Trump effect, I think you're going to see a very large turnout," she says. "Trump and Musk eliminating agencies, making irresponsible decisions impacting thousands of workers in Northern Virginia—that's going to have an impact. It's palpable."

In an era when even elections in other countries double as referendums on President Trump and his cultish followers in the Republican Party, "the Trump effect" is destined to have consequences this fall—all over the country, but especially in NoVA, where the chaos in neighboring Washington, DC, is a local crisis.

Along with New Jersey, Virginia occupies an unusual position on the American electoral schedule. Both states elect their governors and legislators in the first year after new presidents are chosen. Historically, that allowed the people of Virginia and New Jersey—along with the residents of many of the nation's major cities and voters in smaller communities across the United States—to elect officials on their own timelines, which were at least somewhat independent of national political patterns. But in an era marked by the 24/7 intrigues of a never-ending national political calendar, voters in states with odd-year elections no longer have such an escape. In 2025, they will be asked to deliver a real-time assessment of the country's direction. Never has that assessment seemed more freighted with consequence than now, when President Trump has packed his administration with extremists who are bent on dismantling basic services; sent shock waves through the economy with his trade wars; stomped on civil liberties; and generally upended governance in ways that threaten the very future of American democracy.

Trump's approval ratings have tanked, and protests over his administration's attacks on science, healthcare, immigrants, judges, and anyone else who gets in his way take place nearly every day. While the turn against Trump and Trumpism is glaringly evident, it is equally evident that this president is a master of self-deception. And while Trump has a history of denying election results, Republicans won't be able to spin their way

ILLUSTRATION BY **TIM ROBINSON**


MINNEAPOLIS
ST. PAUL
MILWAUKEE
CHICAGO
DETROIT
TORONTO
BUFFALO
CLEVELAND
PITTSBURGH
COLUMBUS
INDIANAPOLIS
CINCINNATI
WASHINGTON D.C.
PHILADELPHIA
BALTIMORE
NEW YORK
KANSAS CITY
OMAHA
DENVER
Midwest
Lake Michigan
Lake Huron
Lake Erie
Lake Ontario

out of serious electoral setbacks if they come in 2025. In Virginia, where Republicans won every statewide race in 2021, control of the House of Delegates is up for grabs. If Democrats win there as part of a broader sweep of New Jersey and the rest of the country's odd-year election map, it will send a devastating message to the administration. "There's no doubt about the energy that you see out there," says Ken Martin, the chair of the Democratic National Committee. "We saw similar energy [in the 2017 odd-year elections, which Democrats swept] after Trump was elected the first time. And that energy was translated into huge victories in 2018." The elections of 2017 and 2018 produced successive blue waves that saw Democrats extend their grip on statehouses and take control of the US House, effectively checking and balancing Trump in the final two years of his first term. Now comes an even greater test—one that allows voters in places like NoVA, where Elon Musk's wild assault on federal agencies, programs, unions, and workers has become a huge issue, to emerge as critical players on the national stage.

"Virginia is the first opportunity for any state to answer back about what's going on in Washington."

—Dr. Fergie Reid Jr., Virginia organizer

Fired up: DNC chair Ken Martin says that "there's no doubt about the energy" that grassroots Democrats have to fight Trump in 2025.

Virginia Democrats know what's at stake. For the first time since 2013, they united behind a single gubernatorial candidate, former US representative Abigail Spanberger, before the state's spring primary. And for the first time in decades, the party has fielded candidates in all 100 races for the state House of Delegates. One of the reasons for this is a concerted organizing effort by Dr. Fergie Reid Jr., a retired physician and the son of Dr. William Ferguson Reid, the pioneering civil rights activist who in 1967 unseated a segregationist to become Virginia's first Black delegate since Reconstruction. The senior Reid turned 100 in March and urged Virginia Democrats to honor his longevity by filling ballot lines in every legislative contest. But it was more than nostalgia that helped them achieve a full slate. As Reid Jr. told the *Virginia Mercury*, "Virginia is the first opportunity for really any state in the United States to answer back to what's going on in Washington right now. It's going to send a big, loud message to the rest of the country and to the world that not everybody in America is with Trump."

That cry of dissent is likely to resound most loudly from NoVA, where, Taeb says, voters are agitated. "A lot of people are determined to send that message, a powerful message about what Trump's doing," she says. "If they hear not just an anti-Trump message but a proactive progressive message, this is a huge opportunity for Democrats to come out in full force." Even voters who are frustrated with the Democratic Party, Taeb says, can be mobilized if Democratic candidates offer them an opportunity to reject complacency and unapologetically challenge Trump's lurch to the extreme right.

Virginia pollsters and political analysts tend to agree, suggesting that surging Democratic enthusiasm—which has been spotted all over the country in recent months—is likely to boost Spanberger, who stepped down as a centrist member of the US House to mount the high-stakes gubernatorial bid. Spanberger has succeeded in uniting a party that has a long history of contentious primaries. Though she's hardly a progressive populist in the tradition of the great Virginia rabble-rousers of the past—such as former lieutenant governor Henry Howell, who in the 1960s and '70s built a multiracial working-class coalition around an anti-corporate promise to "keep the big boys honest"—Spanberger has sharply criticized the current administration's assault on federal employment and its disregard for women's rights and civil liberties. Progressives like Taeb are disheartened that, even as she has attracted the endorsements of major unions, Spanberger has not come out against the state's 78-year-old "right to work" law. But they're enthusiastic about her denunciation of "Republican lawmakers [who] are willfully threatening Virginians' access to care by putting Medicaid funding in the crosshairs." And about Spanberger's determination to make abortion rights a central issue in a race with the anti-choice GOP nominee, Lieutenant Governor Winsome Sears. Noting that "more than 20 states have further restricted reproductive care" since the US Supreme Court's 2022 *Dobbs* decision overturned *Roe v. Wade*, Spanberger tells voters, "Virginia is the last bastion of reproductive freedom in the South—and Virginians want it to stay that way." With so much at stake, Spanberger told an April Democratic gathering in north-central Virginia's Albemarle County, "the rest of the country, and in some ways the world, will pay attention to what it is that we do here in Virginia in 2025. We are a bellwether state, and I don't want to just win. I want to crush it."

"Crushing it" in Virginia means retaking the governorship and the posts of lieutenant governor and attorney general, as well as running up margins in legislative chambers that are now narrowly controlled by Democrats. In New Jersey, it means retaining the governorship that Democrat Phil Murphy has held for two terms (though he was only narrowly reelected in 2021), building up legislative majorities, and winning dozens of downballot races. Even as a crowd of credible Garden State contenders battled one another for the party's gubernatorial nod, they all read from the same anti-Trump playbook—while debating concrete responses to education, healthcare, and transportation issues. For New Jersey Democrats, delivering a

FROM BOTTOM: SIPA VIA AP; ASHLEE REZIN / *CHICAGO SUN-TIMES* VIA AP

strong showing in 2025 is especially significant because, just last year, as President Joe Biden's reelection campaign was stumbling, Trump and the Republicans made a play for the state, where his Bedminster country club serves as something of a northeastern headquarters for the MAGA movement.

Toxic twosome: The partnership between Donald Trump and Elon Musk has galvanized Democratic voters.

New Jersey and Virginia are the most important electoral dominoes in 2025. If they fall to the Democrats, and if other contests this November follow suit, that could significantly boost Democratic recruitment, fundraising, and organizing prospects in the 2026 midterm races for control of Congress. "If there's an unmistakable blue wave this year, it's got the potential to change a lot of things going forward," says Representative Mark Pocan (D-WI), a former cochair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus and a House Appropriations Committee member who has played an important role in recruiting and supporting 2026 Democratic House candidates. More immediately, Pocan and other progressives, such as Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), are holding out hope that a critical group of embattled congressional Republicans could be spooked enough by the 2025 elections to break with Trump on key issues for the remainder of the 119th Congress.

Pocan believes the 2025 and 2026 election cycles offer Democrats an opportunity to break with the narrow "battleground state" thinking of party strategists who focus on a handful of tightly contested states and districts. The collapse in Trump's approval ratings, and the numbers seen in "generic ballot" surveys that show Democrats with widening margins against Republicans in hypothetical House races, creates an opening for such a politics, the Wisconsinite says.

Martin, the DNC chair, is on board with the idea of broadening the party's map in 2025—a year in which, he notes, 100,000 state and local races will be decided, many of them in regions that have experienced "years of neglect" by Democratic leaders who abandoned former DNC chair Howard Dean's old "50-state strategy" and wrote off too much of the country as unwinnable. The goal, he says, is a juggernaut that begins with "marquee race" wins in Virginia and New Jersey and then goes wide and deep across America.

To do that, Martin says, Democrats will move resources into not only Virginia and New Jersey but also high-stakes mayoral races, from New York, Boston, and Detroit to Minneapolis, St. Paul, Seattle, and dozens of other major city and regional contests—many of them in red states—nationwide.

With the political media obsessively searching for every indicator of Trump's strength or vulnerability, a Democratic sweep of these contests could produce precisely the sort of "Trump Rebuked" headlines that point to a shift in voting patterns—and that could scare at least some of Trump's GOP enablers to question whether they want to go down with the ship in 2026. That's the Democratic dream.

But Martin warns his fellow partisans to guard against the overconfidence bordering on hubris that led to so much disappointment in 2024. Trump is down politically right now, and "special government employee" Elon Musk has become a serious drag on GOP prospects. But the approval ratings for Democrats in DC are about as dire as Trump's. Republicans also retain the power of the president's bully pulpit, and they've got a right-wing media apparatus that is increasingly influential as the traditional media infrastructure collapses (particularly in states like New Jersey) and as the administration attacks PBS and NPR. They can also rely on massive fundraising boosts from corporate cronies and the considerable fortunes of Trump's billionaire-class allies like Musk.

"You've had prominent Democrats saying we should sit back and do nothing, and we'll win. That's bullshit."

—Ken Martin, chair of the DNC

Even as polls and results from some of the first contests of 2025 provide encouragement, Martin says he wants Democrats to run as if they are behind. "You've had some prominent Democrats saying we should just sit back and do nothing, and we'll win. That's bullshit," he says. "The reality is that if you don't channel that energy the right way, you could lose just as easily. We're focused on making sure we capture that energy."

Capturing that energy is about more than just showing up, says Antoinette Miles, a veteran labor and political activist who now serves as director of the New Jersey Working Families Party. "Trump looms large over New Jersey, and so does the question of how the Democratic Party is going to push back against him in 2025 and 2026," she says.

High-stakes bid: Democrats will rejoice if former representative Abigail Spanberger manages to win Virginia's gubernatorial race this fall.

FROM TOP: MATT ROURKE; SIPA VIA AP

Never-ending vote: "We have elections every Tuesday," says Heather Williams of the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee.

Like Taeb in Virginia, Miles argues that it is vital for Democrats to offer a real alternative not just to Trump but to the often unfocused political debate that has allowed Trumpism to make inroads in states that were once cemented into the party's "Blue Wall."

When I traveled to New Jersey this spring to talk with Miles and watch the competition in the Democratic gubernatorial primary race—which was still unfinished as this issue went to press—the extent to which the top contenders had embraced an aggressively anti-Trump message was striking. US Representative Mikie Sherrill rolled out ads promising to "fight the Trump-Musk madness that's wrecking our economy." Teachers' union head Sean Spiller asserted that "we need a governor who is tough enough to protect New Jerseyans from bullies like Donald Trump" and outlined a plan to prevent the administration's efforts to gut the federal Department of Education from undermining education in the state. Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop offered tangible evidence of how vigorously he opposes Trump: Standing on a rooftop near a pair of glass skyscrapers, he announced, "See that building? I blocked the Trump family from getting tax breaks to build it." Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, a Working Families Party–backed progressive, was arrested and briefly detained in mid-May by federal agents when he came to examine conditions at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facility in the city. Baraka used his 2025 State of the City address to warn that Trump and Musk pose an "existential threat" and a "danger to us all, no matter what we look like." And in his campaign messaging, Baraka promised to "make the wealthy pay their fair share."

"Republican mega-donors are on the march. But the Democratic grassroots donors are on fire."

—Ben Wikler, chair of the Wisconsin Democratic Party

That sort of clarity about the need for a potent anti-Trump message that also incorporates pro-working-class policies pleases Miles, who told me, "For people who want to see what happens next in our country, New Jersey really is going to tell us a lot." And as in Virginia, it won't just be at the gubernatorial level.

The fights for control of Virginia's House of Delegates, with its 100 contests, and New Jersey's General Assembly, where 80 seats are up for grabs, may be key to the Democratic Party's 2025 strategy, but the competition isn't limited to those two states. Legislative special elections are being held in blue states like Washington, where nine seats will be filled in November, and in red states like Mississippi, where court-ordered redistricting has set up 10 elections in November.

Heather Williams, the president of the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, sees this bigger picture. "We have elections every Tuesday," she explains. When Trump was celebrating his first 100 days in office in late April, the DLCC rained on his parade by noting that during that period, Democrats won five contests that secured the party's control of state legislative chambers, flipped seats in Iowa and Pennsylvania districts that Trump had won by double digits, and dramatically outperformed their 2024 numbers in contests across the country.

PROBAL RASHID / NURPHOTO VIA AP

The year's most notable election so far came not in a legislative contest, however, but in the race for an open seat on the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Wisconsin Republicans had been confident that they could swing the race—and with it, political control of the court—in their favor. The state had just voted narrowly for Trump, and their candidate in the technically nonpartisan court race was the Trump-aligned former Wisconsin attorney general Brad Schimel, who had mounted two high-profile statewide campaigns and had regularly won local elections. In contrast, the progressive candidate, who was backed by the state Democratic Party and labor, environmental, and community groups, was Dane County Circuit Judge Susan Crawford, a former lawyer for unions and Planned Parenthood who had never run for statewide office. The Republicans decided to make the Wisconsin contest a referendum on Trump's tenure. Trump made a high-profile endorsement of Schimel, and Musk poured at least $25 million into the project. The billionaire even flew to Wisconsin on the eve of the April 1 election to give away $1 million checks.

But Musk's meddling backfired spectacularly. Crawford won with 55 percent of the vote, in an election that saw high turnout and a swing toward the progressive contender in each of the state's 72 counties. Part of what made that result possible was a dynamic that Ben Wikler, the chair of the Wisconsin Democratic Party, says is emerging in states all over the country. "Republican mega-donors are on the march," he acknowledges. "But the Democratic grassroots donors are on fire. Democrats who are running in the states are going to have the resources—and the popular support—to fight back."

Going into what is likely to be the most expensive and most closely watched New Jersey gubernatorial election in history, Antoinette Miles takes encouragement from Wisconsin's voters. "When you see Trump and his circle get involved, it can backfire, as you saw in Wisconsin," she says. "Trump and Musk bet wrong in Wisconsin, and I think they'll find that it doesn't make sense for Republicans to bet on New Jersey."

The same goes for Virginia and other states across the country, Taeb says. "This is a Trump election, absolutely. People are ready to fight back. And if Democrats give them something to fight for, they're going to turn out in huge numbers." N

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Free From What?

Quentin Skinner and the contested history of liberty

BY SAMUEL MOYN

"FREE FROM WHAT?" FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE has his counterprophet ask rhetorically. He isn't interested in the answer. "What does it matter to Zarathustra! Your fiery eyes should tell me: free for what?" The distinguished British historian Quentin Skinner, now in his 80s, has spent the latter half of his career insisting that we have suffered a grievous loss over the past few centuries of politics and philosophy in the West: the loss of a republican vision of freedom from domination, as opposed to the more modern and libertarian notion of freedom from interference that prevails today. And yet, much like the townspeople in Nietzsche's, philosophical fable, Skinner has never shown much interest in what freedom is *for*.

ILLUSTRATION BY **TIM ROBINSON**

One of our leading historians of ideas, Skinner has written works of intellectual history that are awe-inspiring. From early on, he crossed over into other disciplines, won an unusually broad audience, and helped revolutionize political theory. Beginning in the 1990s, he also pivoted away from the antiquarianism of his earlier scholarship to champion the relevance of his studies to our own day—though even in that effort, Skinner has remained almost stubbornly enamored with an ancient vision of freedom in the republican tradition.

Freedom is once again the central theme of Skinner's new book, *Liberty as Independence*. A work of history that seeks to pinpoint exactly how long the older republican notion of liberty prevailed before being displaced by a more modern and liberal one, it also reassesses the current importance of the struggle against domination for the left. Yet in focusing primarily on this older notion of liberty, the book remains blind to the ways that modernity has redefined the terms of emancipation.

Liberty as Independence
The Making and Unmaking of a Political Ideal
By Quentin Skinner
Cambridge University Press.
332 pp. $44.99

Born near Manchester in 1940, Skinner grew up in a family with Scottish origins. His father served in the Royal Navy before becoming a colonial officer in West Africa, and his mother soon followed him there. Left behind by his parents, Skinner attended boarding schools and established himself as a star from his earliest days as an undergraduate at the University of Cambridge. Unlike today's students, who write dissertations but don't get jobs, Skinner never even had to earn a doctorate: His promise was so self-evident that he was made a don at the age of 21.

Skinner owed much of his subsequent academic fame to "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," an astonishing broadside, published in 1969, against historians of political thought who either failed to consider the intellectual context of classic texts or reduced them to their material circumstances. Allergic to what he viewed as the reductive approach of Marxist historians, Skinner forbade relating the study of ideas to material concerns and thus refused to contemplate a general social theory; even more, he insisted on rigorous strictures against "presentism" when it came to the history of ideas. "More crudely," he argued in the essay, "we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves."

That broadside established him as a leader of the Cambridge School of the history of political thought, which was dedicated to Skinner's methodological precepts. He expanded his early focus on 17th-century England to encompass the entire early modern era, most notably in his 1978 classic *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, which he wrote during his half-decade at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. He then returned to Cambridge, where he went on to serve as a professor for decades. After his mandatory retirement from the highest position in his field—the Regius Professorship of Modern History, which is appointed by the monarch—Skinner moved to Queen Mary University of London, where he continued to teach and write before retiring again in 2022.

Though the early years of his long career were defined by an opposition to both materialism and presentism, Skinner would by the middle years had begun to relax some of these prohibitions. Ideas mattered, he explained, because they either helped legitimate the political order or served as proposals to change it; thus, they were related to the world around them in one way or another. Skinner also abandoned his hostility to presentism: Ideas from the past matter now, he concluded, at least for anyone who would like to think beyond their preconceptions and imagine an alternative future.

Among such older ideas, Skinner was most attached to the history of "republicanism" and its ideal of liberty—a tradition, both ancient and modern, that makes freedom from domination and dependence its highest goal, and that Skinner revived for his contemporaries to reconsider.

The aspiration for that form of freedom had begun among Roman thinkers nostalgic for the republic and jurists staking everything on what it meant to be a free man rather than a slave. Skinner's earlier books on the subject, such as 2008's *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, had focused on his cherished 17th century, in this case seeking to show how Thomas Hobbes had laid waste to the ideal of republican liberty in the name of a new ideal of freedom from interference and restraint. But with *Liberty as Independence*, Skinner wants to expand the scope of his history in order to demonstrate how, in the centuries that followed, republicanism survived the onslaught, only to then be cast aside and replaced.

To make his case, Skinner examines an extraordinarily wide-ranging set of English-language sources. His goal is to probe how long the republican notion of liberty as independence lasted. But he also hopes to meticulously document how the liberal ideal of liberty as noninterference emerged to replace it, though with no "sudden breakthrough" that left it hegemonic.

One figure who still maintained a fidelity to the republican tradition of freedom was John Locke. So often treated as a libertarian founder of liberalism, Locke, Skinner contends, actually cared most about the political conditions that would allow free men to protect themselves from the arbitrary power of the state. Far from anticipating what Isaiah Berlin later called the "negative liberty" of freedom from interference alone, Locke laid the groundwork for the 18th-century idea of a free state—an ideal transplanted to American soil and central to the cause of the American Revolution in 1776.

A free state doesn't accept despotism even when it's beneficent or simply because it leaves people alone. Depriving the people of access to the power to rule—even if that just meant consent to the identity of the monarch from time to time—reduces them to the kind of thralldom that republicans denounced as the very opposite of freedom. Locke put his argument in terms of natural rights and a social contract. But in defending the right to revolution, he wanted people to reclaim their status as free beings who controlled the form of their government.

Samuel Moyn teaches history and law at Yale University.

As Skinner shows, Locke—who died in 1704—was not the only one making republican arguments as the 18th century went on. The Whigs were too; like Locke, they framed their vision of freedom much more in terms of rights and the rule of law than their Roman and Renaissance forebears had. If rights are observed and the law is followed, they argued, then the arbitrary might of one king or another could remain in check.

Very different from this view, Skinner contends, was that of the pioneers of liberalism, for whom rights and the law had no necessary connection to retaining power for a free people. They argued that an enlightened despot might interfere less with his subjects, even if he had the power to impose his will more. Following the work of some of his students, Skinner goes on to show how the American revolutionaries set out to rescue independence from this "counterrevolutionary" and "pro-imperial" ideal of freedom as noninterference.

In part, Skinner is revisiting here a decades-old quarrel among historians of colonial America and the early United States. During the 1960s and '70s, historians like J.G.A. Pocock in *The Machiavellian Moment* and Gordon Wood in *The Creation of the American Republic* argued that the origins of this country were found not in "liberalism," as previous historians had maintained, but instead in republicanism.

Skinner's history attempts to make a similar argument for England, citing not only Locke and the Whigs but also other advocates for the republican ideal of freedom, such as Richard Price and Mary Wollstonecraft. But he also wants to address the question of why this republicanism disappeared. If Pocock and Wood were right, then what went wrong—and when? Why, after the 18th century, did English liberals embrace the notion of freedom as noninterference and abandon the cause of freedom from domination?

Skinner recognizes, of course, that republicanism never entirely died. He acknowledges the radicals who turned to republican ideology in order to contest the oppressions of industrial capitalism in the 19th century. Some of these were working-class agitators and labor organizers, like the Knights of Labor, as Alex Gourevitch has chronicled in *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*. Karl Marx himself had republican leanings, as Bruno Leipold and William Clare Roberts have recently illustrated in their books *Citizen Marx* and *Marx's Inferno*.

But in relation to these more leftist works of intellectual history, Skinner is ambivalent. His intent is to show that, while there is some relationship between capitalism and liberalism (which led many workers to hope to overthrow both together), the choice of models of freedom wasn't just about economic forms. Liberty as freedom from interference "long predated the eighteenth-century rise of commercial society," Skinner writes. Too direct a link between capitalism and liberalism, therefore, would "fail to provide an answer to the main historical puzzle that needs to be solved": Why this "new view of liberty" could "ascend so suddenly to a position of ideological dominance in less than twenty years between the late 1770s and the 1790s."

For Skinner, the idea of liberty as freedom from interference predated the 18th century.

Skinner's solution to this puzzle is to propose that a counterrevolutionary politics prevailed in two different forms during this period. The first was a reactionary version harking back to feudalism and priestcraft, though it was never very strong in the Anglophone world. The second—more prevalent across the Atlantic—was a liberalism that was hostile to the left. It imported Hobbes's counterrevolutionary endorsement of kings into a new world where liberal elites would deprive the masses of self-rule while offering assurances that people would be left alone in their persons and property.

Skinner closes *Liberty as Independence* by championing the current importance of freedom as independence—and understandably so. As he notes, if women or workers are dependent, they are oppressed regardless of whether they are also harmed by "overt acts of coercion or interference." That they are hypothetically free to quit their unfair jobs or divorce their patriarchal mates doesn't take into consideration why doing so is often "dangerous or impracticable." Comparably, the people as a whole suffer dependence without democratic representation or rights, and it is no answer to say that the government is acting in their interest or forbearing from injuring them.

Skinner's is a compelling argument about both the ancient and modern notions of liberty. But in attempting to rehabilitate the precursor to the cramped notion of freedom offered by liberalism, he does not consider that one can ask the same question of freedom from dependence as freedom from interference: *Free for what?* As a concept and an ideal, "liberty as independence" is redolent of an ancient world in which proud masters (relying on the women and slaves they control) may not be subject to the arbitrary caprice of others, because their freedom is secured through the domination of others. But Skinner's focus on reviving the ancient ideals of liberty against the modern ones also ends up ignoring the most inspiring form of freedom that the modern world has offered, in both its liberal and socialist variants.

Having spent the latter half of his career doubting and supplementing Berlin's category of "negative liberty," Skinner doesn't register the significance of Berlin's opposing category of "positive liberty," never telling its story or reconsidering its virtues. Powerful though it is, Skinner's saga of the fall of the republican ideal of self-mastery to "liberalism" neglects the possibility of forging new personal and social meanings, such as those inspired by the French Revolution—and that sought, instead of self-mastery, an ideal of freedom as *individuality* rather than independence. For unlike the American Revolution's vaunted rhetoric of liberty as independence, the French Revolution's emancipatory promises inspired a demand for liberty as self-creation—what the radical writer Marshall Berman dubbed "the politics of authenticity."

Liberalism championed this emancipatory ideal long after the period when Skinner sees freedom from interference triumphing. Whereas Berman ultimately argued that positive freedom required

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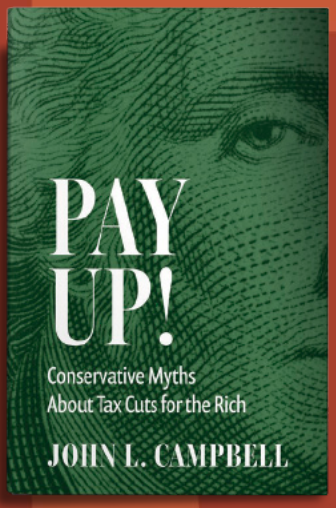

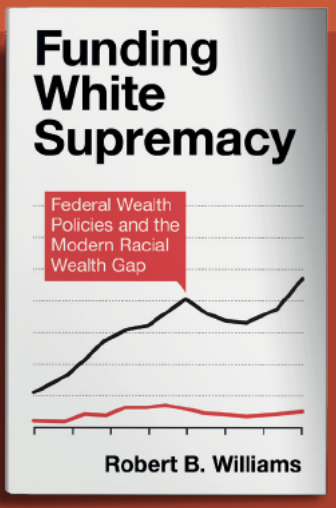

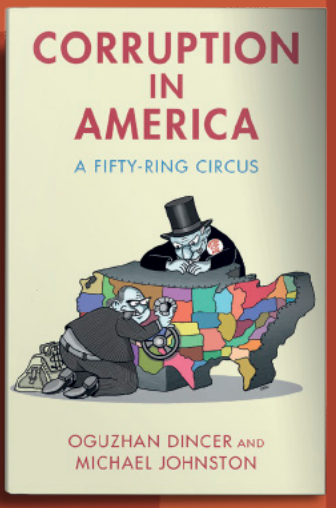

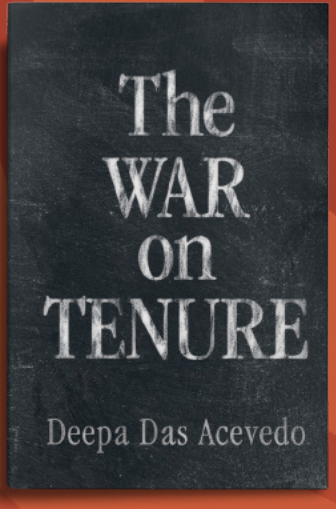

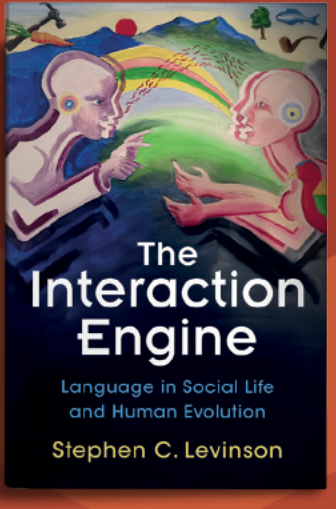

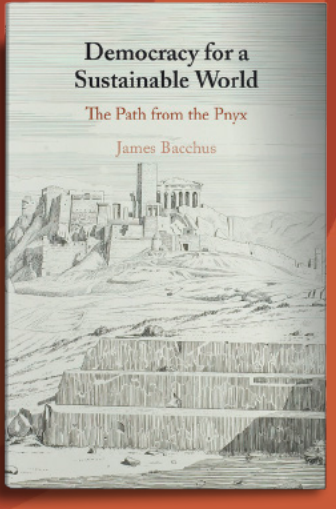

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socialism, his teacher (and one of Skinner's old friends), the Harvard political theorist Judith Shklar, correctly argued that it was only in the later 19th century that liberals fully embraced freedom as the "absence of restraint." That was precisely when Nietzsche concluded that there was no chance of having positive freedom within the framework of what had become of liberal societies, in which the German philosopher saw little more than marketization and mob rule.

The grand story of freedom isn't just about the loss of the ideal of independence.

One reason for Skinner's neglect of the tradition of positive freedom is that it is defiantly modern, and so doesn't appear on his maps of political thought from the ancient world to the Renaissance and its aftermath. Another is that its sources were Christian rather than Greco-Roman, and Skinner has rarely shown much interest in religion. Yet not only can one find the template for self-making in Hobbes's own political theory—he owed much of his framework to Christianity, transferring to humankind the creativity to make the state, much as God had made the world by fiat—but one can also find it in a range of modern thinkers who prized freedom as creativity as the highest secular cause.

John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, with its praise of "individuality," is a classic example. When Skinner mentions Mill, it is solely as an apostle of freedom from interference, but this ignores the deeper freedom in the name of which he declared limits to communal and state power. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is another, idealizing those creators who "undertook to embellish beauty itself" and sought "something better than nature." And if this was a core of liberalism, Marx himself inherited the aspiration for self-making when he argued that the "free development of each is the condition for the free development of all," and vice versa.

To be independent, Skinner concedes, you certainly have to be free to act without interference or impediments as well. In the older view that was supplanted, he says, liberty consisted of being independent enough to be able to make use of the absence of restraint. Fair enough. But from the perspective of freedom as self-making, the same is true: Modern self-creation is impossible with impediments in your way or under the mastery of others alike. But getting rid of either hardly guarantees (or even encourages) what you will do next with your freedom.

Liberals, in short, were not merely the votaries of a cramped noninterference; and if Marx was a republican, that wasn't all he was. Skinner is absolutely right about the contemporary importance of the history of political thought. But if liberals and socialists want to make a bid for relevance now, they may have to be open to the very notion of freedom they once introduced. The grand story of freedom isn't just about the loss of the republican ideal of independence to an ascendant liberalism; it's about the invention of the ideal of free self-creation by liberals and socialists, who continue to squander their contribution even now. **N**

Ports of Call

Ships and the remaking of the global economy

BY ATOSSA ARAXIA ABRAHAMIAN

SHIPS ARE A TRIP. VIRTUALLY EVERYTHING WE USE OR consume, from Apple computers to Chiquita bananas, makes its way to us by sea. Much of what we think of as Western civ was borne on a boat: imperialism, of course, but also epic poetry (*The Odyssey*), modernist literature (*Moby-Dick*), blockbuster cinema (*Titanic*), and even questionable reality TV (*Below Deck*, anyone?). When it comes to the rest of the world, ships are just as central: What would our world look like without ancient Egyptian shipbuilders, Polynesian voyagers, Japanese traders, and Somali merchants? Forget globalization: Would we even have a globe?

In his bizarre book *Land and Sea*, the German political theorist Carl Schmitt went so far as to assert that all of human history was defined by "the battle of sea powers against land powers and of land powers against sea powers." (Schmitt was firmly on the side of the landlubbers.) There is something not entirely human about the maritime realm. Boats are of our world and yet outside it; they are born on land but then spend their lives essentially cast away.

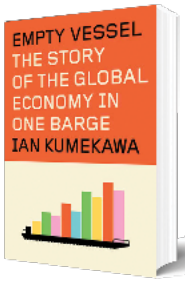
To board a ship has always required a leap of faith: a willingness to face the elements, confront pirates, or drift off course, never to return. Sea voyages also challenge our very sense of physics. The world's largest cruise ship, Royal Caribbean's *Icon of the Seas*, is made of steel beams and weighs a quarter-million tons—and yet somehow, it floats. We take these gravitational marvels for granted. These days, ships are homes and prisons, hotels and offices, lavish vacation venues and toxic industrial sites, hospitals and casinos and even, when abandoned, ghosts. Still, a deck is not to be confused with solid ground. It is a space, but one that's rarely in the same place. That makes it a site of some epistemological consternation. Where is it? What is it? To which nation does it really belong?

In *Empty Vessel*, Ian Kumekawa explores this conundrum through the life and times of a barge called *Jascon 27* (née *Balder Scapa*).

ILLUSTRATION BY LIAM EISENBERG

The ship—"a dumb pontoon without voice, personality or drive" that Kumekawa dubs "the Vessel"—has nonetheless had a complicated life: It was commissioned by a Norwegian company in 1978 and built in a state-owned Swedish shipyard the following year. Designed as a transport barge, then sold to another firm and kitted out with cabins to house offshore oil workers, the Vessel has traversed the globe ever since and, at each stop, made small but substantial contributions to the ongoing expansion of the offshore economy.

By narrating the Vessel's journey from port to port, Kumekawa reminds us how dependent on the maritime world the global economy really is, from the production of energy to the movement of people. But what's new here are his sharp observations about the deterritorialized spaces the ship inhabits, and how these arenas have evolved over time. As the Vessel moved farther into the offshore world, the offshore world itself became deeper, darker, and more all-consuming.



Empty Vessel
The Story of the Global Economy in One Barge
By Ian Kumekawa
Knopf.
336 pp. $29

Kumekawa begins with the ship's prehistory: the decisions and commissions that led to its being built. But the Vessel's first long voyage was to the South Atlantic, where it was sent to aid in England's recapture of the Falkland Islands in 1982. A battleship the Vessel was not: Without an engine of its own, it had to be hauled there on top of another, bigger boat (the humiliation!). Once arrived, it served as a "floatel" for soldiers deployed in the aftermath of Margaret Thatcher's counteroffensive. Such was its storied role in this peculiar conflagration that it made it onto a commemorative postage stamp issued in 1987.

But what looked like a patriotic feat of the British state relied in equal measure on commercial, even mercenary interests. For all the military bluster that surrounded it, the Vessel was never actually under the jurisdiction of the British government: It was registered in the tax-free, judicially independent Channel Islands by a holding company that listed as its address a hotel on the island of Sark, part of the Bailiwick of Guernsey.

So began the Vessel's strange career. After the short Falklands War, it was soon given a new mission: to house auto workers at a Volkswagen plant in Emden, West Germany. The workers' stay was always supposed to be temporary—they'd been recruited from other cities to participate in a training session that would, ironically, aid in automating more of the company's operations—and during the summer of 1988, the Vessel accommodated some 500 people in "cramped" and "stuffy" conditions.

By the early 1990s, the Vessel had changed course again. From holding soldiers and deindustrialized factory workers, it now became a prison ship. It was tugged all the way to New York City, where the Department of Corrections used it as floating housing, an aquatic counterpart to Rikers Island, before it headed across the ocean again to serve as yet another jail—this time off the coast of Portland, England.

In 2010, the Vessel was given one final assignment. Transported to a free trade zone for oil and gas in Nigerian waters, it finally fulfilled its intended function: It housed men who lived and worked at sea servicing the fossil fuel industry.

During these tumultuous times, the Vessel's ownership changed as often as its purpose and location. Its masters included a Norwegian shell company, a British shipping firm, the City of New York, the British government, and subsidiaries of a Nigerian company founded by a Dutch expat. Its flags—and, by extension, the laws on board the vessel—rarely aligned with its physical location, its ownership, or even its assigned mission. Most, like the Bahamian colors, were flags of convenience, leased by countries with the goal of reducing a shipowner's tax and regulatory burden. This created some absurd scenarios: among them, allowing New York City "to literally offshore its prisoners. With its Bahamian flag and its signage still in Swedish, the Vessel brought the offshore world to New York, and global capitalism to local mass incarceration."

The Vessel's metamorphoses are notable in and of themselves: What multitudes a ship can contain! But Kumekawa is more interested in what this ship can teach us about the offshore world and, by extension, everywhere else as well. In this respect, what links the Vessel's many gigs and sinecures is not just the ship itself, or its half-century of residents, but the geopolitical forces that drove it to move and change in the first place.

The Vessel's deployment to the Falklands, for instance, is framed as symptomatic not only of a growing British militarism and nationalism but also of Thatcher's fealty to the free market and her lust for gutting the welfare state in the anxious hangover years of decolonization. "The empire might have won the war, but it would need private foreign assistance in guaranteeing the peace," Kumekawa writes. "Such was the uneasy bargain of Margaret Thatcher's government: globalism and nationalism, a growing state security apparatus, and a privatized economic sphere."

The Vessel's later function as a dorm for Volkswagen workers is set against the backdrop of deindustrialization in Germany. In New York's East River, the Vessel becomes a tool of the carceral state amid "broken windows" policing and the escalating War on Drugs. In a particularly sharp section, Kumekawa compares New York's use of the prison barge to the city's deregulation of Wall Street through rules-exempt International Banking Facilities, or free zones for finance. The parallels, he notes, are "striking": Both were imported from abroad as "artifacts of a shadowy offshore world," remained outside the control of local authorities, and were championed as solutions to the city's fiscal crisis.

Back in England, the prison ship was met with understandable suspicion: The residents of Portland dismissed it as an American import and a stain on their coastal town. Yet the Vessel was ultimately embraced as a job creator in the context of Third Way politics, as well as the site of a not-so-terrible correctional facility (even the people incarcerated there spoke more or less fondly of the food and accommodations). When the Vessel finally left

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Portland, the townspeople, once skeptical, found that they were sad to see it go.

Kumekawa could have written a book that narrates the economic upheavals and political isms of the late 20th century through his ship's journey around the world. And because the ship is such a strong character, he would have pulled it off. Fortunately, though, *Empty Vessel* pushes the narrative further: Rather than merely describing the effects of neoliberal policies on nations and their people, Kumekawa inverts the story and makes it about the interstices occupied, physically and legally, by the Vessel. In fact, the most insightful parts of this book do not take place on the ground or even at sea but in venues that are more or less placeless: in arbitration tribunals, tax havens, free zones, and letterboxes where the ship's physical existence is itself secondary to its corporate one.

In the late 1970s, for instance, the Vessel did double duty as a (physical) barge and a (legal) corporation. This was a ruse: After the Norwegian government set about protecting its shipbuilding industry by allowing taxpayers to write off their investments in the sector, a clever business owner used the loophole to cloak dozens of ships in LLCs that could help over 1,500 "partners"—dentists, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals—avoid their country's 75.4 percent tax rate.

The barge's subsequent legal and commercial entanglements over the course of its useful life likewise shine a light on the complex interplay between the abstract and the material: a pas de deux that animates not only the world of ships but the entire global economy. The Vessel, Kumekawa writes, exists "both as an abstracted artifact of global capitalism and also as a concrete object to be used for local ends." That's because its value stems not from its heft or craftsmanship but from its ability to contain—oil, cargo, bodies—and also to be (selectively) contained: by shell companies, court orders, national laws, and international agreements.

There are many ways to understand the political and economic movements of a globalized age, but ships, it turns out, are an ideal, well, vessel for this line of inquiry. Unlike bearer bonds or orange juice futures, there is no eliding the fact that a ship is a real thing, as opposed to a relationship between parties or a bet on the future. They have a feel, a smell, a presence. Ships, as I learned in my own research, also have dedicated fan clubs. What's more, every vessel of a certain size is given a number by the International Maritime Organization, which means that it is almost endlessly traceable. This is in stark contrast to other financial assets, which can seemingly disappear into the ether with the right combination of accounting acrobatics and secrecy jurisdictions. Ships, too, can disappear into specialized legal fictions, but the charade can only go so far. When you're face-to-face with one, they're impossible to ignore.

All of this baggage—the fans, the journeys, the barnacles—also makes for great stories, and I couldn't help but wish Kumekawa had told us a bit more about not just the Vessel but the people who inhabited it. There's an element of voyeurism in learning about people's onboard adventures, but the absurdities of global capitalism are all the more apparent when you contrast its sterile, dismembered legal scaffolding with the living, breathing, feeling beings that make it run.

We encounter a few of these characters in *Empty Vessel*'s standout moments, but for the most part, when Kumekawa does deal with humans, it is those of another class: the managers who move the ship from one place to another. This is no bad thing—these are, after all, the figures who animate the offshore world. But if this excellent book missed one opportunity, it was to go deeper below-decks and let the seafarers have their say.

Over the past decade, a critical mass of research and writing on the underbelly of globalization has coalesced into an area of inquiry that we might call "offshore studies." Much of it is being written in history, geography, sociology, and anthropology departments, but this work has also been supplemented by economists quantifying the repercussions of financial secrecy, data journalists turning terabytes of leaked records into stories and searchable repositories, and reporters (present company included) writing the first drafts of these histories.

Kumekawa's book is a creature of offshore studies, albeit liberated from some of the field's clunky prose and methodological jargon. A historian by training, Kumekawa provides a lengthy bibliography and plenty of receipts, but like the popular mass-market microhistories that preceded it (half of which were apparently written by Mark Kurlansky), *Empty Vessel* is lucid and engaging. Its structure allows the author some historical digressions—into, say, deindustrialization or the oil markets or the German export economy—but the book also has a clear narrative, a central character, a beginning and an end (though its chronology is a weakness: The book jumps back and forth to the point that it can be hard to follow). Kumekawa's decision to also write about the Vessel's worthy counterpart, which he calls "the Sister Vessel," tends to complicate his mission to explain the global economy through just one barge. But most of his detours help him achieve one of the larger ambitions of his book: illuminating how the offshore economy depends on both world-historical forces and local contingencies, which together produce a universe of their own. "The offshore world, accessible from Oslo, New York, Portland, Onne and Nassau, has not just brought such disparate places closer together," Kumekawa writes, but "has made them fundamentally more alike, hollowing them out in the process."

"Offshore," as Kumekawa reminds us, in opposition to unexceptional, "onshore" territory. It is a vast archipelago of jurisdictions stretching from the City of London to the islands of Vanuatu; a firmament of loopholes, concessions, and carve-outs as small as a diplomatic pouch and as vast as outer space. The Vessel, as a denizen of this universe, is "caught between local and global systems, local and global power structures"—physically removed yet subject to the whims and desires of terrestrial corporations, nation-states, and individuals alike.

But for all of its freewheeling abstractions, as Kumekawa reminds us, "offshore" is a peopled, physical place—one with "norms and customs, its own languages, logics and boundaries"—and *Empty Vessel* contributes tremendously to our growing understanding of this universe. **N**

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Random Splendor

James Schuyler's life in poetry

BY EVAN KINDLEY

ON THE LAST DAY OF FEBRUARY IN 1954, JAMES SCHUYLER looked out his window and wrote a poem. He was living with his friend Frank O'Hara, and from their tenement apartment on East 49th Street they had a view of the United Nations headquarters, constructed only a few years earlier. In his poem "February," Schuyler alluded to the UN building in passing, but his gaze gravitated to more mundane details: "A chimney, breathing a little smoke"; "the boxy trucks roll[ing] up Second Avenue / into the sky"; "a woman who just came to her window / and stands there filling it / jogging her baby in her arms." "I can't get over / how it all works in together," Schuyler marveled, astonished by the casual, random splendor of this scene. The last line of the poem, now also the title of Nathan Kernan's engrossing new biography of Schuyler, was at once matter-of-fact and awestruck: "It's a day like any other."

"Merely to say, to see and say, things / as they are": This was how Schuyler defined his aspiration as a poet. It sounds humble, but for Schuyler this commitment to empiricism entailed a whole philosophy of form. Schuyler was close with the painter Fairfield Porter, who shared his unflagging devotion to the quotidian. "The truest order is what you find already there, or that will be given if you don't try for it," Porter once wrote. "When you arrange, you fail." Schuyler's subjects, like Porter's, were unspectacular—nature, the weather, the quiddities and comforts of domestic life—and his poems, like Porter's paintings, elegant yet effortless. They home in on things like the way "level light plunges / among the layering boughs of a balsam fir / and enflames its trunk," or how "air…billows like bedsheets / on a clothesline and the clouds / hang in a traffic jam." Reading Schuyler, you get the sense of an attentive mind occupying an atmosphere of rare serenity. Little seems to disturb these cozy idylls; the closest we get to dramatic incident is when the poet chases a hornet out of his room or gets up to fix himself more toast.

Yet Schuyler, whose poems exuded such calm, lived an unusually troubled and tumultuous life. Prone to anxiety attacks, nervous breakdowns, morbid depressions, and manic episodes, he was in and out of psychiatric hospitals for decades. His recurrent mental illness—never definitely diagnosed—took an enormous toll on his friendships, his romantic relationships, his finances, and his literary career. Even so, he managed to produce three novels and numerous books of poetry, one of which, *The Morning of the Poem*, won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1981.

Kernan knew Schuyler personally toward the end of his life and has been researching this biography, off and on, for more than 30 years. Drawing from dozens of original interviews alongside reams of unpublished archival material, Kernan provides a wealth of detail about a figure who, while hardly unknown, has long retained an air of mystery. This is partly because Schuyler, his friends, and many of his critics have been understandably reticent about emphasizing his mental illness and the havoc it wrought on his own life and the lives around him, lest it overshadow or distract from the subtle power of his art. Unlike Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and other contemporaries with similar experiences of mental disorder, Schuyler rarely used his ordeals as literary material: He was a poet

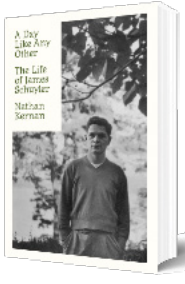
JAMES SCHUYLER IN NEW YORK CITY, 1988 (MICHEL DELSOL / GETTY IMAGES)

of the sitting room, not the sanatorium. "From trauma and mess and 'breakdown,'" Kernan writes, Schuyler "looked away." Many who loved him and his work have been inclined to do the same. And yet trauma, mess, and breakdown were, in large part, the story of his life.

James Schuyler was born in Chicago in 1923. His parents had divorced by the time he was 6, and he spent his adolescence in upstate New York, where he was raised by his mother and a despised, possibly abusive, stepfather. Schuyler was a shy and bookish child. He realized he was gay from an early age, but unsurprisingly for a suburban teenager in the 1940s, he remained in the closet. Under "Ambition" in a questionnaire for his high school yearbook, he wrote: "To go steady with *two* girls at once." (His mother's reaction, when he eventually came out to her, tellingly conflated his homosexuality with his literary interests: "Just because you like Oscar Wilde, it doesn't mean you have to do all those things.")

Schuyler registered for the draft in 1942, shortly before flunking out of Bethany College in West Virginia, and served as a sonar operator on board a naval destroyer, the USS *Glennon*. At the end of 1943, he went AWOL under somewhat mysterious circumstances: From what Kernan has been able to piece together, he accidentally missed curfew after a night of drinking and then floated around Manhattan, paralyzed by anxiety, for nearly a month. After he finally turned himself in, Schuyler was briefly incarcerated in a military prison on Hart Island before being given an undesirable discharge—not for his desertion per se but for his homosexuality, which he confessed during the obligatory psychiatric examinations that ensued. This ordeal exacerbated Schuyler's natural tendency toward nervousness, which now manifested for the first time in involuntary tremors that would recur throughout his life in times of stress.

Soon after leaving the Navy, Schuyler returned to New York and, via the city's blossoming gay scene, found his way into the social circle around the poet W.H. Auden. Schuyler was a close friend of Chester Kallman, Auden's life partner—Auden nicknamed them "Dorabella and Fiordiligi," after the capricious sisters in Mozart's opera *Così fan tutte*—and was apparently the model for the character Emble, a shell-shocked former sailor, in Auden's 1947 book-length poem *The Age of Anxiety*. Auden served as a kind of mentor to Schuyler, though as a young man Schuyler aspired to be a fiction writer rather than a poet: When Auden hired him to type up drafts of some of his works in progress, Schuyler remembered thinking, "Well, if this is poetry I'm never going to write any myself."



A Day Like Any Other
The Life of James Schuyler
By Nathan Kernan
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 512 pp. $35

Schuyler changed his mind about that in the early 1950s, after meeting a few new friends who would form the core of what we now call the New York School of poets: Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Barbara Guest. Schuyler would later reminisce about his first impressions of O'Hara, whom he met in 1951 at a party for the painter Larry Rivers: "His conversation was self-propelling and one idea, or anecdote, or bon mot was fuel to his own fire, inspiring him verbally to blaze ahead, that curious voice rising and falling, full of invisible italics." Before long he moved in with O'Hara, who invited Schuyler to live with him after his former roommate, Hal Fondren, left at the end of the summer of 1952. Schuyler, in return, helped O'Hara assemble the manuscript for his first major book of poems, 1957's *Meditations in an Emergency*.

Falling in with the New York School (Schuyler, like most of the writers to whom it's been applied, never really cared for the term) marked a turning point in his life, the first time he felt "accepted by people of whose work I was absolutely certain." He grew especially close to Ashbery, who said of Schuyler that "asking advice from him is only a step away from consulting oneself"; together they cowrote 1969's *A Nest of Ninnies*, a wry comic novel written in alternating sentences. The New York School poets also palled around with painters like Rivers, Jane Freilicher, Grace Hartigan, and Nell Blaine, with whom they collaborated and by whom they were excited and inspired. "New York poets, except I suppose the colorblind," as Schuyler summed it up, "are affected most by the floods of paint in whose crashing surf we all scramble."

In 1951, Schuyler began his career as a poet. He wrote his first published poem, "Salute," shortly after meeting O'Hara and Ashbery. It's a meditation on ambition and lost time, melancholy yet somehow hopeful: "Past is past, and if one / remembers what one meant / to do and never did, is / not to have thought to do / enough?"

Schuyler wrote the poem in a Westchester County mental hospital, following a frightening episode in which he came to believe that he was Jesus Christ and that the Apocalypse

Evan Kindley is an associate editor at The Chronicle Review. *He is writing a group biography of the New York School poets for Knopf.*

was near at hand. (He also claimed to have been visited by the Virgin Mary, and that she had delivered a box of Du Maurier cigarettes to him.) Concerned friends arranged for him to be admitted to Bellevue Hospital and then transferred to Payne Whitney Westchester, where he remained for nine weeks; the hospital bills were paid by Auden.

This would prove to be the first of many institutionalizations for Schuyler. He had another breakdown in 1961, after accidentally setting fire to his apartment by falling asleep with a lit cigarette, which landed him in Grace New Haven Hospital for three months; this time, the poet James Merrill footed the bill. An even more severe break occurred in the summer of 1971, when he once again claimed to be Jesus Christ and threatened the young son of the poet Ron Padgett. A terrified Padgett called the police: When they arrived, Schuyler greeted them at the door completely naked and covered in rose petals.

Schuyler was a poet of the sitting room, not the sanatorium.

Schuyler's instability made him intensely dependent on his friends, who provided him with emotional and financial support throughout his life. He "had a real talent for being taken care of, and finding people to take care of him," as the curator Kynaston McShine, who worked with Schuyler at the Museum of Modern Art, put it, and he was particularly good at insinuating himself into families, in part because he loved children and had a knack for entertaining and empathizing with them. (His charming first novel, 1958's *Alfred and Guinevere*, about a pair of precocious young siblings spending the summer with their grandmother, exemplifies this affinity.) As Kernan notes, Schuyler "idealized family life" and constantly sought out "stable surrogate families to attach himself to in one way or another"—a response, it seems, to the insecurity of his own upbringing.

The most durable of these attachments was to the family of Fairfield Porter, with whom he lived between 1961 and 1973. "Jimmy came for the weekend and stayed for eleven years," Porter's wife Anne once quipped, and his status in their Southampton home hovered ambiguously between long-term houseguest and permanent family member. Frank O'Hara joked that the Porters had "adopted" Schuyler.

An additional layer of complexity arose from the fact that Fairfield Porter, who was bisexual, had fallen in love with Schuyler. Initially, Schuyler refused his advances, but sometime in the early '60s, their platonic friendship deepened into an affair. The true extent of their relationship was a secret for years, but even those not privy to it could see there was an unusual degree of intimacy between the two. In the evenings, they read Dostoyevsky and Keats aloud to each other; in the mornings, Porter would go into Schuyler's bedroom to kiss him awake. It was only at the behest of Katie, who in her 20s decided that Schuyler's continuing presence in their home was inappropriate, that her father finally asked him to leave, in the fall of 1970. Schuyler replied, "I'll think about it"—and then remained for three more years.

Fish Oil Failure Shines Grim Light on America's Memory Crisis

America's Top Memory M.D. Reveals Why Fish Oil Doesn't Protect You from Senior Moments – and the #1 Alternative

More than 16 million Americans suffer from age-associated cognitive impairment, and according to nationwide research, these numbers are only rising.

Thankfully, anti-aging specialist and best-selling author Dr. Al Sears says there's an easy way to banish senior moments and brain fog for good.

It's a safe, natural compound called DHA – one of the building blocks of your brain. It helps children grow their brains significantly bigger during development. And in adults, it protects brain cells from dying as they get older.

For years, most people thought fish oil was the best available source of DHA…

But industrial fish farming practices have depleted the nutritional content of nearly every fish oil you can buy.

Today, roughly 20 million Americans are wasting their money on fish oils that hardly do anything at all.

And since they think they are addressing the problem, fish oil's failure has led to America's memory crisis continuing to grow practically unchecked.

Fortunately, Dr. Sears says, "there's still hope for seniors. Getting more DHA can make a life-changing difference for your mental clarity, focus, and memory."

Dr. Sears, a highly-acclaimed, board-certified doctor— who has published more than 500 studies and written four bestselling books — says we should be able to get enough DHA in our diets… but we don't anymore.

"For thousands of years, fish were a great natural source of DHA. But due to industrial fish farming practices, the fish we eat and the fish oils you see at the store are no longer as nutrient-dense as they once were," he explains.

DHA is backed by hundreds of studies for supporting razor-sharp focus, extraordinary mental clarity, and a lightning quick memory… especially in seniors.

So, if you're struggling with focus, mental clarity, or memory as you get older…

Dr. Sears recommends a different approach.

THE SECRET TO A LASTING MEMORY

Research has shown our paleo ancestors were able to grow bigger and smarter brains by eating foods rich in one ingredient — DHA.

"Our hippocampus thrives off DHA, and grows because of it," explains Dr. Sears. "Without DHA, our brains would shrink, and our memories would quickly fade."

A groundbreaking study from the University of Alberta confirmed this. Animals given a diet rich in DHA saw a 29% boost in their hippocampus — the part of the brain responsible for learning and memory. As a result, these animals became smarter.

Another study on more than 1,500 seniors found that those whose brains were deficient in DHA had significantly smaller brains — a characteristic of accelerated aging and a weakened memory.

PEOPLE'S BRAINS ARE SHRINKING AND THEY DON'T EVEN KNOW IT

Dr. Sears uncovered that sometime during the 1990s, fish farmers stopped giving their animals a natural, DHA-rich diet and began feeding them a diet that was 70% vegetarian.

"It became expensive for farmers to feed fish what they'd eat in the wild," explains Dr. Sears. "But in order to produce DHA, fish need to eat a natural, marine diet, like the one they'd eat in the wild."

"Since fish farmers are depriving these animals of their natural diet, DHA is almost nonexistent in the oils they produce."

"And since more than 80% of fish oil comes from farms, it's no wonder the country is experiencing a memory crisis. Most people's brains are shrinking and they don't even know it."

So, what can people do to improve their memory and brain function most effectively.

Dr. Sears says, "Find a quality DHA supplement that doesn't come from a farmed source. That will protect your brain cells and the functions they serve well into old age."

Why the 'brain fuel' ingredient in fish oil is slowly drying up.

Dr. Sears and his team worked tirelessly for over two years developing a unique brain-boosting formula called **Omega Rejuvenol**.

It's made from the most powerful source of DHA in the ocean, squid and krill — two species that cannot be farmed.

According to Dr. Sears, these are the purest and most potent sources of DHA in the world, because they haven't been tampered with. "**Omega Rejuvenol** is sourced from the most sustainable fishery in Antarctica. You won't find this oil in any stores."

MORE IMPRESSIVE RESULTS

Already, the formula has sold more than 850,000 bottles. And for a good reason, too. Satisfied customers can't stop raving about the memory-boosting benefits of quality-sourced DHA oil.

"The first time I took it, I was amazed. The brain fog I struggled with for years was gone within 24 hours. The next day, I woke up with the energy and mental clarity of a new man," says Owen R.

"I remember what it was like before I started taking **Omega Rejuvenol**… the lack of focus… the dull moods… the slippery memory… but now my mind is as clear as it's ever been," says Estelle H.

"My mood and focus are at an all-time high. I've always had trouble concentrating, and now I think I know why," raves Bernice J. "The difference that **Omega Rejuvenol** makes couldn't be more noticeable."

And 70-year-old Mark K. says, "My focus and memory are back to age-30 levels."

These are just a handful of the thousands of reviews Dr. Sears receives regularly thanks to his breakthrough memory formula, **Omega Rejuvenol**.

WHERE TO FIND OMEGA REJUVENOL

To secure bottles of this brain-booster, buyers should contact the Sears Health Hotline at **1-888-358-8263**. "It takes time to manufacture these bottles," says Dr. Sears. "The Hotline allows us to ship the product directly to customers who need it most."

Dr. Sears feels so strongly about this product he is offering a 100% money-back guarantee on every order. "Send back any used or unused bottles within 90 days and I'll rush you a refund," says Dr. Sears.

The Hotline is taking orders for the next 48 hours. After that, the phone number may be shut down to allow for inventory restocking.

Call **1-888-358-8263** to secure your limited supply of **Omega Rejuvenol**. Readers of this publication immediately qualify for a steep discount, but supplies are limited. To take advantage of this great offer use Promo Code **NATOM725** when you call.

As a poet, Schuyler was a late bloomer. Though his work appeared intermittently throughout the 1950s and '60s, he didn't publish a collection—the instant classic *Freely Espousing*—until 1969, by which point he was 45, and most of his peers' careers were already well underway. Despite this slow start and his ongoing personal travails, Schuyler managed to build up an impressive momentum in the 1970s, publishing a series of volumes to increasing critical acclaim. In particular, he became a master of the long poem, beginning with 1972's "The Crystal Lithium" and continuing with "Hymn to Life," "The Morning of the Poem," and "A Few Days," all of them among his finest achievements. These loose, diaristic poems, written in stretched-out, Whitman-like lines, combine the sumptuous detail of Schuyler's lyrics with a more expansive philosophical and autobiographical scope, touching on themes of mortality, sexuality, and the passage of time. "The days slide by and we feel we must / Stamp an impression on them," Schuyler writes in "Hymn to Life." "It is quite other. They stamp us."

Yet even as he grew in stature as a poet—culminating in his 1981 Pulitzer, awarded to him by a three-person jury that included his old friend John Ashbery—Schuyler's day-to-day existence remained a struggle. Because of the chaos that engulfed so much of his life, much of *A Day Like Any Other* makes for harrowing reading. The late '70s and early '80s—during which time Schuyler was living in squalor, abusing drugs and alcohol, and experiencing frequent manic episodes—were a particularly depressing stretch. He was in and out of psychiatric hospitals often, racking up bills that he relied on friends (including the Porters) to settle. In 1977, he once again managed to set fire to his apartment by smoking in bed; this time, he ended up in intensive care for almost a month. He developed an obsessive crush on his personal assistant, a poet named Tom Carey, who strung him along while hitting him up for money and pilfering his personal manuscripts, including letters from O'Hara, to sell for drugs. Schuyler's physical health also deteriorated during this period: He gained an exorbitant amount of weight, contracted diabetes, and in August 1984 had to have two of his toes amputated.

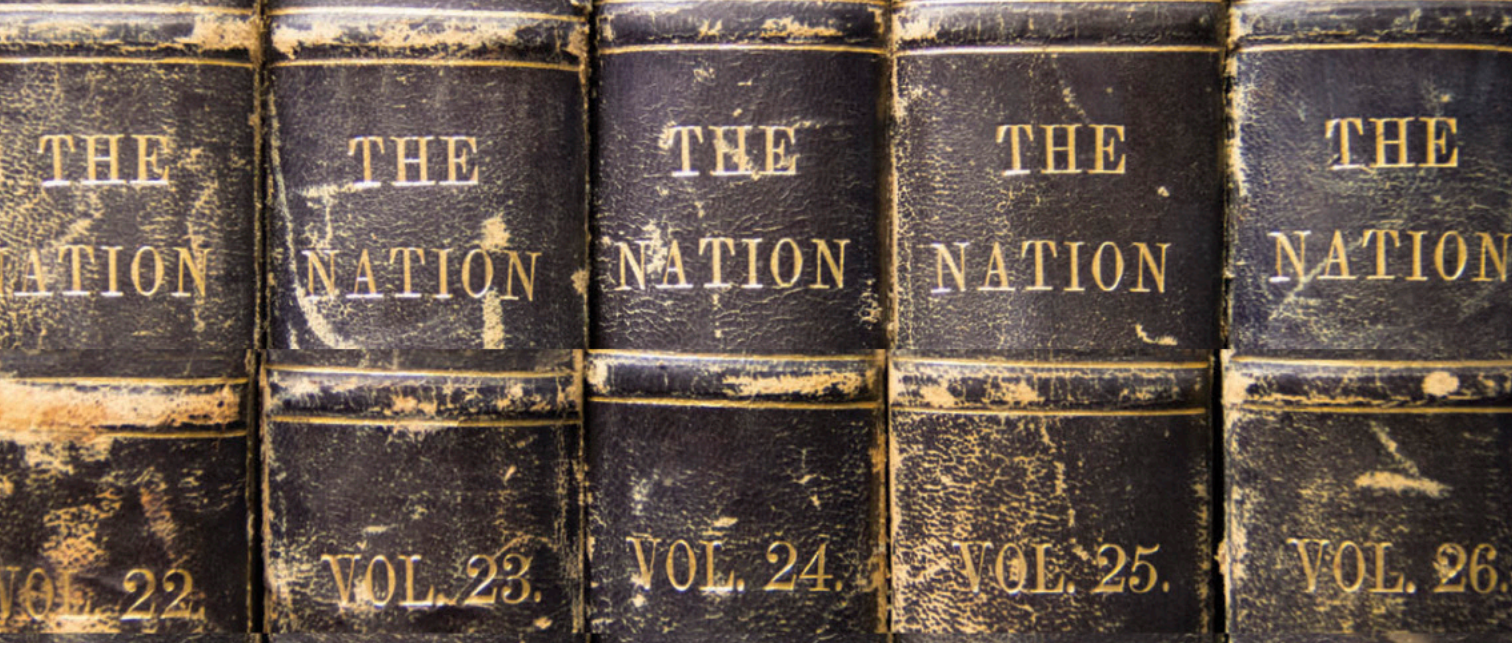
"Poor Jimmy," Ashbery wrote in a letter to a mutual friend in 1977, while Schuyler was recovering from the fire. "During his breakdown…he told me that life had been after him with a sledgehammer, and if it wasn't a self-fulfilling prophecy then it certainly is now." But before he died, of a combined stroke and heart attack, in 1991, Schuyler seemed to have outrun the sledgehammer: The last few years of his life were relatively happy and orderly. After one final hospitalization in the summer of 1985, he stopped drinking and finally found a psychiatric medication regime that appeared to work for him. He began to reclaim many of the daily tasks—buying clothes, cooking, cleaning, managing his finances—that had long been delegated to friends or assistants. He even gave his first public poetry reading in 1988, at the age of 65. These were treated as historic occasions by denizens of the New York art and poetry worlds, who by this point considered Schuyler a living legend. He took justifiable pride in the attention he earned for these events, bragging to a friend after reading to a packed house at the Dia Art Foundation in Soho, "I was a fucking sensation."

Schuyler didn't take these victories for granted; he'd had too many defeats for that. "When I think that…I, Jim the Jerk, am / still alive and breathing / deeply," he wrote in 1975's "Trip," one of his few poems to reflect on his history of breakdowns and hospitalizations, "that I think / is a miracle." The miracle, in fact, was his poetry, which is one of the permanent joys of American literature, carved out of a life that had more than its portion of misery. Kernan's invaluable book gives us a fuller sense of just how unlikely that miracle was. N

Take Care

she signed each letter. I carried them with me,
never imagining one day she would be never,
be dream, be archive, be Ziploc full of ash
in a Styrofoam urn. Careful, she carried so little:
the mother who left her, the stepmother
who kept her, a cardigan bright as a cardinal,
nearly four years in a prison camp fenced by pines
whose ragged canopies tore at the sky.
From her I learned to scull diagonally
across precarious water, to write longhand
a handful of words—*mizu*, *obāsan*, *sumimasen*—
an artful way to arrange carnations in a glass.
Have I been careless with the past? How can we caretake
what remains? A closet stockpiled with sardines.
Silver coins squirreled in drawers. A picture of her
at New Year's looking both delighted and sad.
For her, to care was to never be a bother.
To cake concealer over jaundice. To conceal the water
pooling under skin. I caressed her forehead
before they carried her away.

MICHAEL PRIOR



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A Victor Navasky Memorial Fund Event

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NYC 160th Event

October 30, 2025. Venue to be announced.

Featuring Judy Collins, John Nichols, and more to be announced. Hosted by Katrina vanden Heuvel.

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The Other Americans

Where can the overworked and unhoused go?

BY LIBBY WATSON

AMERICANS ARE UNUSUALLY PREOCCUPIED WITH WORK. It is not just that we think about work all the time, that we feel guilty about not working, that we don't take off all of our paid vacation days. It's that we are constantly worrying about how much other people are working. You have surely had that coworker who side-eyed your sick day or complained that others weren't pulling their weight. Maybe you were that coworker. We are all beholden, in our own minds and in the minds of others, to what Max Weber called "the Protestant ethic" of work.

Our new Silicon Valley overlords have taken this mindset to new levels of insanity and fraudulence. They boast about sleeping in their offices and their 120-hour workweeks as they "build the modern world" and then claim that no one else is working at all—an attitude that now dominates the federal government, where a department of dipshit memelords have authorized themselves to root out waste and slackerdom by firing thousands of civil service workers. The specter of undiscovered millions of people getting something for nothing, who can't even write five bullet points describing what they did on the job last week, is very useful for conservatives (and any billionaire who might want cover for plundering the federal treasury). An untold number of government workers, they tell us, are getting paid to do nothing or to do bullshit; worst of all, some of what they're doing is woke. The self-proclaimed watchdogs of DOGE can pretend they're shoring up a system predicated on hard work and merit while actually doing little besides destroying the ability of everyone else to rely on Social Security for their retirement or public education for their children—things that were once ostensibly benefits of living in the land of opportunity.

All of this neuroticism, the judging and the self-congratulation, makes the bitter pill go down a bit more smoothly: You must work, or you'll die. Sometimes even when you do work, you might still risk death or injury; you might also lack healthcare or even a place to live.

ATLANTA DURING A HEAT WAVE IN 2022 (JUSTIN CHAMBERS / GETTY IMAGES)

Indeed, between 40 and 60 percent of those experiencing homelessness are, in fact, working. But this is not the popular perception of homelessness, perhaps because it so thoroughly disproves those core principles of the American ethos.

A new book by Brian Goldstone looks at five families in Atlanta who are in this exact situation—and however thoroughly these people embody the supposed work ethic of this country, it does not save them, nor does it inspire the government to care about what happens to them. The book's title, a quote from one of its subjects, precisely captures the dilemma these people face: *There Is No Place for Us*.

Where do the anti-homeless crusaders want these people to go? I live in Los Angeles, where homeless people languish at the doorstep of Yet Another Small Plates Restaurant With $19 Cocktails, and where the reaction to this daily sight has been growing popular support for repression and forced banishment—to wherever, just not this street, or the next, or the next. Some people end up in the desert, an even more ecologically inadvisable place for large-scale human habitation than Los Angeles. Some end up living in RVs on quiet residential streets, much to the chagrin of Nextdoor users. Some are just pushed from block to block over and over again, often losing their belongings in each euphemistically named "sweep." Others live in their cars or sleep on friends' or relatives' floors, and these people often don't end up being counted as homeless, Goldstone notes. But the "where" isn't really the point, of course; that implies that the Disapproving Class, which ranges from rabid conservatives to NPR liberals, cares about whether the homeless person continues to exist anywhere at all.

Perhaps it's no wonder that many Americans find it so hard to square these concepts—homelessness and working—even if the facts tell a different story: that many people are living in shelters or transient hotels or their cars while working full-time. We don't want to see people living on the streets, but we also really don't want to know that the people serving our McChickens or cleaning our hospitals are homeless too. After all, that means they're just like us.

There Is No Place for Us
Working and Homeless in America
By Brian Goldstone
Crown.
448 pp. $30

There Is No Place for Us gives us five thorough and devastating accounts of what the housing system does and why, under its current organization, it fails so many. Sure, the system seems to work for most, whatever standard of "most" satisfies you. But it also sends people whose houses have burned down to extortionate, predatory hotels with their children. It pushes people unable to make rent to relapse into alcoholism and drives mothers back to their abusive ex-boyfriends. It splits up families and forces others to turn to their families for support, even when those they turn to are barely making it themselves. It erases neighborhoods and wipes out communities. Goldstone follows these five families as they are pushed into homelessness and then details their desperate attempts to hold on. Many of his subjects go through similar trials, though each one showcases a slightly different aspect of the system's cruelty.

We are first introduced to Britt, who is living with her two young children in her great-grandmother's small apartment, waiting for a housing voucher. The voucher eventually arrives, but Britt later loses the apartment that she rents with it when her lease is not renewed after she lets a relative stay with her for a few weeks upon his release from prison. The next place Britt finds, she loses when the building is sold and slated to be demolished to make way for higher-priced condos, retail stores, and restaurants. She and her children spend a tense few months in a friend's living room until that arrangement, too, falls apart—and the next, and the next.

Kara's story of housing instability begins when she is evicted after withholding rent following weeks without hot water, and the judge sides with her landlord. Kara and her four children, one just an infant, spend the night in her car. Her difficulty finding childcare while she looks for housing and decent work is the through line of her story, a situation that worsens with the Covid-19 pandemic. Even when Kara's luck changes and she is approved for housing assistance through Nicholas House, a local nonprofit, another crisis hits: Her DoorDash driver account, her sole source of income, is deactivated after "multiple incidents of extreme lateness" (meaning the order was delivered more than 11 minutes late), and the apartment she was supposed to lease is somehow rented to someone else. In her desperation to secure a home, she decides to forgo the year of rental assistance that Nicholas House would provide (which would have required an environmental review of the new apartment), vowing instead that she will work "two jobs, three jobs, ninety hours a week" or whatever it takes. When we leave Kara, she and her children are housed, but in this precarious situation, with the family's shelter dependent on her maintaining an infinite capacity to do more work—and forced to leave her children unsupervised while she does.

Celeste has been living in a run-down hotel after her house burned down. The landlord "evicted" her from the burned-down property without her knowledge, making it next to impossible for Celeste to be approved to live anywhere else. At this point, she discovers that she has ovarian and breast cancer. She ends up living with her two small sons in a derelict building where individual rooms are rented to homeless individuals and families, which she calls "Hell House": rodent-infested, dirty, musty, with "maggots on unwashed plates." Celeste's weight drops to 85 pounds as the effects of her cancer treatment persist. Her story ends with her packing up her two kids and their belongings and heading off to Tampa, with no idea of what sort of housing might await them there, either.

Maurice and Natalia, whose landlord sells their building, fall behind on the rent at their new apartment, having sunk their savings into securing it in the first place through a company called Liberty Rent, which will cosign leases for tenants with poor credit in exchange for a high upfront fee. The couple are evicted from the new place and move to an Extended Stay hotel, where the monthly rent is $2,200; plus they are still in debt to Liberty Rent for the money the company paid after they were evicted.

Libby Watson is a journalist who covers healthcare, tech, and politics. She has written for The New Republic, Gizmodo, *and* Splinter.

And there is Michelle, a mother of three who loses her home when her boyfriend, the father of her youngest child, loses his job. Michelle's story is also told through the lens of her oldest child, DJ, who is thrust into the role of parenting his siblings as his mother relapses into alcoholism. Michelle quits her job at the Salvation Army, running the desk of the shelter where she once lived, and ends up in the arms of an abusive boyfriend. DJ takes his siblings to his great aunt's place, and Michelle ends up in jail, then sleeping on the street, then fleeing an abusive boyfriend without her belongings, then, finally, on Facetime with her children. Crying, she tells them that she has to go away and get "straightened out." We don't know where or how. And then she is gone. Goldstone doesn't try to bring these stories to a neat or happy ending, in part because none of them have ended yet. We have merely been afforded the opportunity to dip into these lives for a time.

The stories in *There Is No Place for Us* are not just a litany of unconnected Bad Events, though the specific twists and turns are very bad. The book is a powerful narrative of exactly why it is so hard even for people working as hard as they can to get secure housing: shitty landlords, extortionate extended-stay hotels, impossible-to-access social services and housing vouchers. They do everything they can and still end up in Hell. They are products of an extremely abusive and dysfunctional system.

Who is creating and enforcing that system? There are the landlords, of course: from the enormous corporations with their algorithmic rent increases, which own thousands of units at a time and disproportionately purchase lower-cost housing, all the way down to the seedy individuals who gouge on the rent for dilapidated extended-stay hotel rooms. (Overcharging people who have no money is, seemingly paradoxically, remarkably profitable.) There are also the courts and judges who enforce landlord-protecting laws, such as ruling that a renter whose only recourse, whose only mote of power, against an abusive landlord is to withhold rent should not have done so. (This part of the system also includes the police, who enforce these evictions with guns.) And there are the local government employees, such as the one who sighs and seems sympathetic when an incredulous Celeste finds out that her cancer doesn't qualify her for public assistance because her "vulnerability score" isn't high enough, according to the her caseworker: Yup, that's crazy, but it is what it is, and it's the government employee's job to do the crazy thing over and over again. Next, please.

But what else is there for that government worker to do? Nothing. She has no ability to legislate housing or appropriate more funds. She too is just part of the system, and her part is to enforce the limits of the programs. She is a border guard of the welfare state and can only act in that capacity. Even if these programs are ostensibly meant to help those in need, they also serve a different purpose: to get everyone back to work. This system ties work to survival as viciously and plainly as it can. It gives you no choice but to clock in to have your best chance (but no guarantee) of a secure place to live. And it helps when you are surrounded by evidence of what happens if you don't—more and more homelessness, shuttered businesses in declining neighborhoods, people out of their minds with illness or grief or addiction, big new prisons, sirens, glass and blood on the sidewalk, death. It can always get worse.

This unfulfilled bargain is the heart of Goldstone's research: The "working homeless" are a large population of people whose labor is still being extracted by an exploitative system, even as every other supposed benefit of living in this country and working for a living has been denied to them. The economy depends on their labor, and their labor is a direct result of their need to survive, every single day. Without being this close to the knife's edge, they might do something better.

The subjects of the book do attempt to find alternatives, seeking out the remaining forms of public help, which are often impossible to get or to hold onto. Their efforts to survive are barely enough. Michelle sells food stamps for 50 cents on the dollar just to pay the rent on the awful hotel room where she and her children live, one basic necessity of survival elbowing out the others for a moment. Kara uses her food stamps to stock her freezer with meat, but it spoils when her electricity is shut off after months of implausibly high bills—likely due to bad wiring in her apartment complex. Management and the electric company pass the blame back and forth, leaving Kara with no recourse. Without public assistance, and with everyone else struggling too, the only choice is to keep working until you literally can't. The problem here isn't unemployment: It's that the only jobs that Goldstone's subjects can get are terrible, exhaustingly far away, unpleasant, and always underpaid.

The deftness with which Goldstone weaves together these personal tragedies with the details of the systemic cruelties that explain them is remarkable. Celeste gets evicted from her burned-down house because the state of Georgia, incredibly, allows landlords to do that—a policy choice, made intentionally. Even when Britt is briefly able to use an unbelievably rare housing voucher—only 1,674 were issued that year in the entire state—she can't find any landlords who will accept it, because they don't have to and because the market in Atlanta is booming, as gentrification pushes mostly Black families farther and farther out. (Of those 1,674 vouchers, Goldstone writes, 1,055 expired before they could be used.) Britt is later kicked out of a derelict building because investors can make more money selling it. The rippling effects of these policy decisions are felt mainly by those who had no hand in them.

The complexity of these issues has always been the challenge of so-called "policy reporting," at least in my experience of writing about healthcare: How do you tell stories about the impact of purposefully byzantine policies and laws on people's lives when the details are usually so complicated that most people would lose the thread? How can you accurately explain why someone lost their health insurance for bureaucratic reasons, a situation often involving a lot of phone calls or letters or false explanations from customer service representatives, without the reader just closing the tab? Yet Goldstone has managed to do that here for one of the most complicated issues in the country, with wide-ranging causes and consequences that touch on many aspects of modern American life. It is an incredible feat.

In the end, the effect of *There Is No Place for Us* is stunning and bleak. Goldstone tells stories of undeniable injustice, none of them with a happy ending or a victory for the good guys. Each story

is incontrovertible evidence that the American dream is a lie and that hard work, loving your family, getting good grades, or whatever other bullshit this country supposedly reveres doesn't guarantee a safe living. In fact, they have absolutely no bearing on whether you end up OK or sleeping in your car with your three kids.

These stories are not five individually explicable outliers concerning people who were simply unfortunate; instead, they are five out of millions of similar stories. As readers conclude *There Is No Place for Us*, they will feel both the deeply personal impacts of the tragedies explored in the book—the particular beloved children's toys that stung parents' hearts when they imagined them tossed in the trash during an eviction; the foods the families ate or cooked for others; the mornings that our subjects had no sleep and had to take the bus to work—and the horrible breadth of it all. Every tragedy is unique, and yet in some respects it is not; these tragedies are everywhere, all the time, just often hidden from sight.

And what does it mean to have these stories laid out? If there were any justice, it would lead to enormous change. They are stories of people so obviously oppressed by our institutions and forces far beyond their control—people who are not merely unlucky or who have made bad choices—that the need ought to be clear. A book like this ought to be a rallying cry, the 21st-century equivalent of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*.

Our problem, clearly, is not a lack of information in the halls of power. Yet the experience of the first five months of the Trump administration has shown that more information outside the halls of power seems to have a limited impact on whether anything changes, too. Reading this book might not cause any policy to change. But it should change how Americans see each other and themselves, or at least our assumptions about what hard work gets you. If the deal is off—if working hard, following the rules, and scraping together everything you can doesn't ensure a good life for you and your children—perhaps it's time to stop imagining that the source of the problem is some hypothetical layabouts who aren't working as hard as you. Perhaps if enough people realize this, and after enough years of letting it sink in, we might have a cure for America's work mind virus. N

Nothing Survives Without Food

Evolution doesn't care if you're happy.
Genes want survival: sex and cake.

Nothing survives without food,
said the Buddha. You are hungry

for the story you already believe.
You've already waited for God,

in his Judge Judy robe,
to tell everyone you were right.

And maybe you were right. But
you already know how that thought goes,

how it ends. That story
doesn't care about your pain.

Stay with her.
Your pain, I mean.

Your pain is in pain. She is anthropomorphizing
herself. She has nothing to eat but story,

and nowhere to rest.
Stay in the room. Offer her the couch

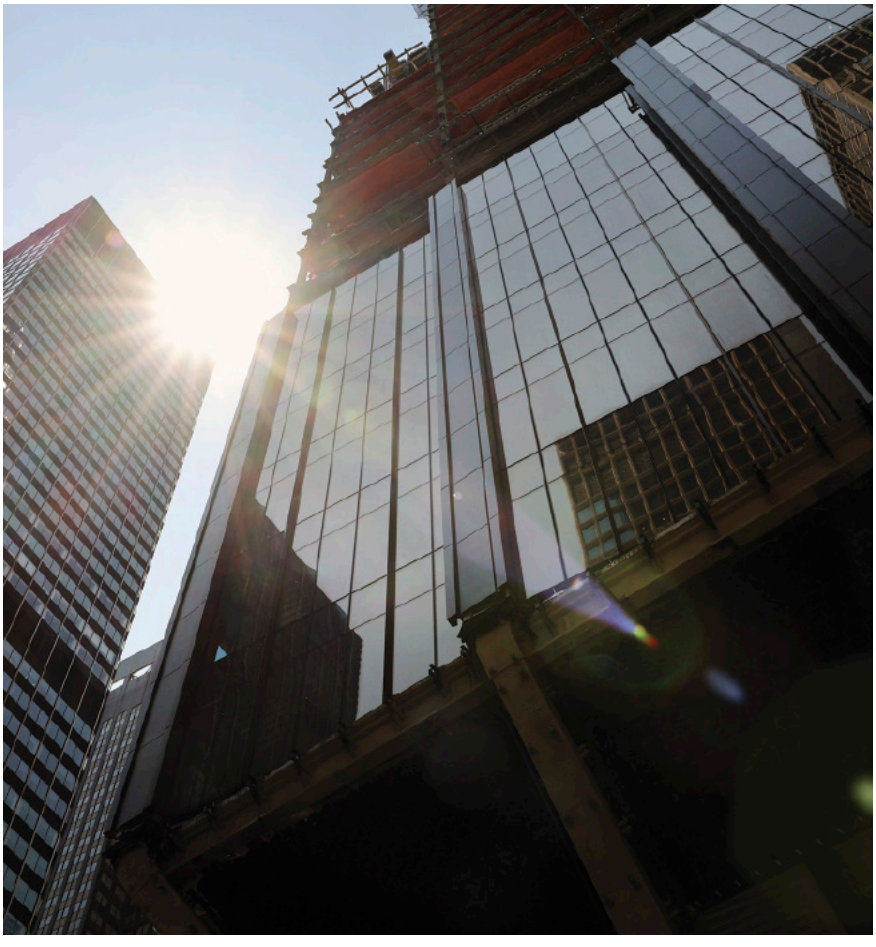
for as long as she needs. You are learning how to listen
to her terrible wailing, how to hear wailing,

though she will want to make it *because*.
How to hold her.

How to listen without telling her
her story,

how to bring her tea, and how
to starve her.

LEAH NAOMI GREEN



Cubicles in the Sky

Norman Foster's 270 Park and the rise of the new office building

BY KARRIE JACOBS

One Sunday morning in Hong Kong, not long before the moment in 1997 when Great Britain handed its former colony back to China, I went for a run around the Peak, a towering hill that provides some much-needed green space in an unbelievably dense city. Afterward, I meandered down toward the Star Ferry dock in Victoria Harbour and was startled by an eerie, unidentifiable sound. It was loud and high-pitched, like an enormous flock of birds.

The sound kept getting louder as I approached the HSBC building, a landmark office tower, completed in 1986, that was famous among the architectural cognoscenti for appearing to be made from an entirely different kit of parts than most buildings of the period. The HSBC building was neither a smooth glass box nor an exercise in postmodernism, festooned with imitation classical ornamentation. Instead, it had an Erector Set aesthetic, with an exoskeleton that looked as though it had been painstakingly crafted by a 10-year-old boy. The building had been my introduction to its architect, Norman Foster, but I'd never quite grasped its appeal. What I encountered that day, however, would turn Foster into a longtime hero of mine.

The 44-story building was a remarkably open structure with offices lining both sides of a full-height central atrium. The tower roosted atop an open-air, ground-level plaza, protecting the space beneath it from Hong Kong's hot sun and tropical downpours. As it turned out, Sunday was the one day off for the nannies and housekeepers of the city. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of these people, freed for a day from childcare or housework, were gathered in the outdoor space beneath the building to partake in communal picnics. The sound I'd heard was that of a massive number of women talking to each other more or less at once. And the scene—something that no architect, even one as clever as Foster, could have anticipated or planned for—endeared the building to me forever.

For a decade or two after, I admired Foster's output: his glass dome atop Berlin's Reichstag, his Bilbao metro system (the glass-arched entryways to the stations are referred to locally as "Fosteritos"), his London City Hall, a sort of glass snail shell with a spiraling interior pathway (Foster said it "expresses the transparency of the democratic process"). I especially liked his first building in New York, the Hearst Tower on West 57th Street. All of them deployed the standard technique of modern architecture, the glass curtain wall, but in ways that were defiantly nonstandard.

The Hearst Tower, completed in 2005, sits above the publisher's 1920s headquarters, six stories of Art Deco splendor topped with more than 40 stories of glass-and-steel triangles. The marriage of old and new was at once harmonious and startling, dismantling decades of rule-making about the proper contextual treatment for a historical structure. The façade is an undulating array of diamonds in a city of rectangles, surprising but also practical. According to the Foster website, the triangular panels represent "a highly efficient solution that uses 20 percent less steel than a conventionally framed structure." My admiration only grew when I learned that Foster had worked closely on several projects with Buckminster Fuller, whose most famous invention, the geodesic dome, was driven by the idea that triangles are stronger and more efficient than rectangles. The Hearst Tower, though alien to the New York skyline, was a welcome addition, because it suggested that the past and present could coexist in harmony, like geological strata, and also suggested a tantalizing future, one

270 PARK AVENUE IN NEW YORK CITY (SPENCER PLATT / GETTY IMAGES)

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in which Fuller's domes found their way into mainstream use, albeit extruded into high-rise form.

Then my uncritical regard for Foster hit a roadblock. In 2008, he was hired by the New York Public Library to do radical reinvention of the main research library, the monumental structure on Fifth Avenue with lions out front (now officially the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building). The NYPL intended to sell off some of its real estate, including the humble Mid-Manhattan Library, housed in the former Arnold Constable department store across Fifth Avenue. The idea was to incorporate a circulating library, something friendly and attractive, into a building that many found intimidating. What Foster proposed was a sleight-of-hand: He would remove the seven levels of stacks that held some 2.5 million books (and also, not incidentally, provided structural support for the massive reading room on the building's top floor) and replace them with… a Fosterito, one of his signature glassy pavilions, which would house a circulating library.

It was one of those moments in which it becomes clear that a starchitect's bag of tricks is perhaps not as deep as he might have thought it was. Or, alternately, that geniuses who have made their name with one big idea often repeat it too many times. New Yorkers who cherished the Research Library, influential writers and scholars among them, signed petitions, filed lawsuits, and held demonstrations on the Fifth Avenue steps. The plan was finally scrapped in 2014, in part because a new NYPL president, Tony Marx, had arrived in 2011 and didn't exactly love the concept he'd inherited from his predecessor, Paul LeClerc. Also, with the change in mayors in 2014 from Michael Bloomberg to Bill de Blasio, the $150 million in funding earmarked for the project dropped out of the city's budget.

A starchitect's bag of tricks is not always as deep as he thinks.

In the end, the Foster plan was scrapped for a less iconic but more deft solution in which the Dutch firm Mecanoo, headed by Francine Houben, artfully renovated both the Mid-Manhattan Library (topping it with Midtown's first truly public roof deck) and the Research Library, a solution that respected the two buildings and their various users.

Meanwhile, Foster's practice grew into an immense enterprise called Foster and Partners, with a majority of shares owned by a Canadian equity firm, Hennick and Company, and the rest held by Foster and his family, along with more than 200 members of the team who work there. Foster and Partners has become a familiar presence in New York City: the Apple stores; an art gallery on the Bowery; and 425 Park, an office tower built on the bones of its mid-20th-century predecessor. When I look at 425 Park, which uses Foster's trademark triangles ornamentally, like the fins on a vintage Cadillac, I see a familiar story in architecture: dazzling innovation that lapses into a signature style.

Nearing completion just a few blocks south is the latest Manhattan office tower from Foster and Partners, the new corporate headquarters of JPMorgan Chase. The building, at 270 Park Avenue, is a 60-story office tower that replaces the bank's previous home, a 52-story gray-glass rectangle that was originally built as the headquarters of Union Carbide. The first 270 Park, completed in 1960, was designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and was the sort of mid-century glass box that exemplified postwar architecture in Manhattan. When Union Carbide moved to the suburbs in the 1980s, the building became the headquarters for a series of banks that ended with JPMorgan Chase, which eventually outgrew it.

So when New York City established more generous zoning for East Midtown in 2017 to encourage the construction of larger, more technically advanced office towers, JPMorgan Chase leaped at the opportunity. The bank's old headquarters was full of outdated systems and inflexible floor plans, but the new one would offer a panoply of improvements. The press releases refer to "net zero operational emissions," the "exceptional indoor air quality" provided by state-of-the-art ventilation systems, "flexible and collaborative space that can easily adapt to the future of work," and lots of "smart technology." The building would also include "a state-of-the-art health and wellness center" featuring, among other things, "yoga/cycling rooms, physical therapy, medical services, modern mother's rooms and prayer and meditation spaces."

Most of all, the new building has room for 14,000 office workers—all breathing better air and basking in wellness—whereas the old one was designed for 3,500. And if it turns out that JPMorgan Chase doesn't need quite as much office space—if warm bodies someday give way to AI—the new tower would certainly be more attractive than the old one to deep-pocketed tenants.

The upgrades, of course, didn't prevent the plan to demolish the old Union Carbide building from becoming immediately controversial. One reason was that it was likely designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's Natalie de Blois, one of the rare female architects working in the mid-20th century; another was that it would be the tallest office building ever to be intentionally demolished in order to replace it with a new and even taller one, which angered those concerned with sustainability.

Karrie Jacobs frequently writes for Books & the Arts on architecture and urban development.

There was another reason as well. In my view, Park Avenue in Midtown is (or at least should be considered) a de facto historic district, the place where a startling new form of architecture took root in the United States: a glassy Modernism made famous by the Seagram Building and Lever House and also by many of their neighbors, including the Union Carbide building. But only a few of these buildings were ever landmarked—and Union Carbide was not among them—so little stood in the way of JPMorgan Chase's demolition plans.

When I first encountered the new building, in the fall of 2021, my uncertainties about the project only grew. What I saw where a gray glass rectangle once stood was a tremendous hunk of metal that resembled a shipwreck. It took me a few minutes to grasp that this wasn't a ruin, a lingering remnant of what had previously been there, but, instead, the underpinnings of the new tower.

Now, as the building nears completion, I am still not sure what to make of it. With massive beams spread like the ribs of a folding fan, the 80-foot-tall thingamajig just above sidewalk level is clearly the building's most audacious design element. The beams could be just another expression of Foster's penchant for acute angles, but that's not their primary purpose: They're there to elevate the occupiable space within the building above the city's infrastructure (especially the train tracks) below. In architect-speak, the device allows "the building to touch the ground lightly," but there's nothing especially light about the armature that holds the building aloft.

Much like the HSBC tower in Hong Kong, 270 Park begins well above street level. But the HSBC building appears to hover effortlessly (perhaps because so much of the interior is atrium), while 270 Park's dramatic feat requires conspicuous structural muscle.

By jacking the whole building upward, the lobby becomes monumental, echoing that other levitating Foster tower in Hong Kong. But while I can envision the lobby of the new JPMorgan Chase mother ship as a fabulous gathering spot, a superlative public space, a rave waiting to happen, that is not, needless to say, what it will be. I'm told by the media contact at JPMorgan Chase that the public space will end outside the lobby doors. We can't go in.

Above the street level, more muscle emerges: broad, mostly rectilinear expanses of glass on the tower's east and west sides. The grid-like façade is carved into sections by massive steel diamonds (which are perhaps what's holding the thing together). The angular shapes read like a familiar Foster refrain, a subdued reference to that spectacular array of steel diamonds over at West 57th Street and Eighth Avenue, and a nod to the long-ago collaborations with Fuller. Maybe they'll light up at night; but then this is Park Avenue, not Times Square.

Seemingly as a consolation, the bank's press materials make much of the added public areas outside the new building—"2.5 times more ground-level outdoor space"—and, in fairness, there is a public plaza (in planner parlance, a POPS or Privately Owned Public Space) on the Madison Avenue side, one that inexplicably involves cladding the lower section of the western façade with a layer of something resembling stone. But viewing this building as it nears completion, it occurs to me that the dissatisfaction I'm feeling with it is less about the metamorphosis of my onetime architectural hero into a reliable corporate servant and translator of power into built form, or even the loss of a cherished example of mid-century Modernism. (And, honestly, it makes me happy that the bank I still think of as Chase Manhattan remains committed to keeping its headquarters here.) But the thing that once made me a Foster fan was the generosity, intentional or otherwise, of that first building of his I encountered—one that seemed to welcome the public in, at least at certain times. And what I keep coming back to now is this: There's not a lot of generosity out there at the moment. I can't even get into my dentist's unassuming building without showing my ID at the security desk and sticking a badge to my jacket. Indeed, there's very little access the public can expect from a new office tower unless, like One Vanderbilt or 30 Hudson Yards or the Empire State Building, it offers an observation deck.

Openness is hard to come by in a post-9/11, post-Covid, increasingly post-democracy world. Realistically, there's no reason to expect the headquarters of one of the world's largest banks to defy that trend. But if it happened once, it could happen again. N

Life and Death

Hulu's new slapstick crime series

BY JORGE COTTE

ORGANIZED CRIME HAS LONG BEEN MYTHOLOGIZED AS the darker side of the American dream—of the drive to hustle and succeed, to create your own opportunities whatever it takes. It's a world with its own codes of honor and family structures, but it still ends with Tony Soprano moving to a McMansion in the suburbs. Film and television have often glamorized crime, lending cachet to a world defined by violence and exploitation, where men can still be men and anyone with a plan has a chance. But particularly in those depictions rooted in ethnic and immigrant communities, organized crime has also been a theme that tracks inheritance and the changing of generations—from debates over old-school methods and drug dealing in *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* to the shifting technology in *The Wire*.

Deli Boys, a new crime comedy on Hulu created by Abdullah Saeed, is of this tradition, and self-consciously so: Its image of organized crime favors a type of empathic and slapstick criminality that's more reminiscent of the Coen brothers' *Fargo* or Steven Soderbergh's *Logan Lucky*. Tossing comedy and ethnicity into a blender with the standard Mafia and drug-dealing tropes, *Deli Boys* is at once a succession story, a riches-to-rags tale, and, perhaps most important, a buddy comedy following two hapless brothers, Mir and Raj, who inherit their father's convenience-store empire only to immediately lose it. The series is really about how they rebuild that business, which turns out to be not at all what they expected, because the stores were merely fronts for the sale and distribution of cocaine.

Deli Boys unfolds through a series of upheavals. We are first introduced to the show's Pakistani patriarch Baba Dar (Iqbal Theba), his company DarCo, and his particular story of immigrant success. Then we meet his two sons, both in their late 30s, each one still holding on to his silver spoon but spoiled in different ways. Mir

ASIF ALI AND SAAGAR SHAIKH IN *DELI BOYS* (ELIZABETH SISSON / DISNEY)

(Asif Ali) is the ambitious one: He wants to be the company's next CEO but has none of his father's swagger (it doesn't help that he's always bringing up his business degree from Drexel University). His brother, Raj (Saagar Shaikh), meanwhile, has inherited plenty of Baba's swagger but none of his drive: He's a party animal who cares only about drugs, auras, his shaman, and her leeches (they're for sucking out any bad juju). You can imagine the conflicts that arise between them. But the two will have to learn to depend on one another, because soon after we meet them, Baba is killed in a golfing accident.

At the funeral, we are introduced to several family friends who will turn out to be key personnel in their late father's business. Baba's boys thrust their "auntie" Lucky (Poorna Jagannathan, flexing some overlooked acting chops) into a maternal role, and she eventually becomes a mentor as she introduces them to the harsh, unforgiving reality of their father's true business. Their "uncle" Ahmad (Brian George) is their other guide, but he's mostly concerned with vying for control of the company in the vacuum left by Baba, a position he feels he has earned. Lucky and Ahmad will spend most of the season locked in a cold war.

Shortly after the funeral, Mir walks into DarCo in Kendall Roy drag, ready to assume the mantle of CEO once and for all. But unbeknownst to his sons, Baba was boosting the company's profits with all sorts of corporate malfeasance. (They haven't learned about the drug dealing yet.) So instead of inheriting an empire, the boys inherit an FBI raid, and nearly all of their corporate and personal assets are seized.

Left with nothing, Mir and Raj turn on each other. But Mir eventually sees a way through: They still have Baba's original convenience store, and they can use it to rebuild DarCo—legit, this time! But as you may have already surmised, it's not going to be that easy, since white-collar crime was only the tip of the iceberg at DarCo. Before the day is through, the boys will have to deal with a complete unraveling of everything they thought they knew about their father—and, perhaps more pressing, the power vacuum he left behind, the money they now owe to a scary local crime boss for drugs they're no longer able to distribute, and, oh yeah, a dead body.

Though familiar crime-drama tropes generally drive the show's plot, the ethnic and cultural milieu of *Deli Boys* is certainly unique. And yet the show deals with this in a specifically millennial way: It refuses any solemnity. *Deli Boys* is not really interested in giving us a message about the immigrant experience or the struggles of Pakistani Americans. The show is diligent about casting Pakistani actors in Pakistani roles, but there is also a conscious rejection of model-minority myths and the

Jorge Cotte frequently writes for Books & the Arts on television and film. His last review was on the workplace nightmares of Severance.

Optimal Stopping

Would that I were a prophet or a secretary,
that at last my unlived experience might be applicable to the problem of endings.
As opposed to my suboptimal hermitage, which never has to my knowledge inspired
a single algorithm, natural or otherwise. Still, I hear no end
in my head. Would that I were a ballad
engaged in a theory of diminishing
returns, wherein paradise, like time, could finally remain
lost as the tungsten rings we once wore to discourage
unwanted advances. Thirty-seven per cent of the time, I don't apply.
Yet the letters keep rolling in, thanking me for sharing my promising work.
My work being to stare forever at the elevator I can't board—
because, for all those numbers narrating the sublime
dependability of counterweights and cables,
which for centuries have softly conveyed our best
efforts to corner offices, I can never plot
a curve I believe in . . . nor trace the parabolic promise of what can stay, standing
like a gnomon in the abject sun, counting the ways, staining the non-slip stairs
with foot-shaped shadows, unable to stop.

DEVON WALKER-FIGUEROA

notion that it has a responsibility to provide positive representation. If anything, *Deli Boys* is committed to its premise of depicting how the diametrically different sons of an accomplished (if criminal) immigrant father prove to be comically incompetent in taking his place. The show is more interested in slinging one-liners, and in the twists and turns of its crime yarn, than in making any sort of high-minded statement.

Indeed, in almost every way, *Deli Boys* feels deliberately structured to avoid this. Though the boys speak fondly of their father, as a character he's mainly a prop: Baba's story of immigration and struggle is presented only so that it can set up his success. When he dies, Mir and Raj are effectively orphaned; the show never gives them a mother or some older relative who could shed light on their family's origins, and it mostly focuses on one sliver of the story—the rise of an entrepreneurial immigrant and the floundering of his coddled kids.

Thus, although *Deli Boys* is informed by the Pakistani American experience, it features none of the typical ambivalence stemming from a hyphenated immigrant identity. No one on the show frets about being "Pakistani enough" or "American enough" or "too American." No one ever misses their home country or yearns to visit the place their parents came from. The show is more suffused by a millennial disillusionment with older generations, with inheriting a world sucked dry of idealism. When *Deli Boys* does make a reference to injustice, it is always for comedic effect and to describe the more generalized irrationality of American society. In one scene early on, Raj says he feels comfortable about the brothers' potential criminal liability because, unlike their father, he and Mir have not committed any crime—to which Mir snaps back, in a biting tone, "Yeah, we'd be the first innocent brown people in jail."

Mir and Raj's eventual struggles to survive and thrive in the world of drug dealing drive the show's plot in classic fashion: Who is going to succeed Baba as the head of "Dark DarCo" (as the criminal side of the enterprise is known)? How do they move product without a network of convenience stores? How can they sell enough—and quickly—to appease the scary crime boss? How do they expand their territory from East Philly to West Philly? Hit men are sent to kill them; there are FBI stakeouts and informants wearing wires. Each episode brings a new obstacle for the Dar boys, which they usually overcome. And there's a pacing to the show's developments that feels almost soap-operatic: Each episode ends with a resolution that is then immediately upended by a twist or revelation before the show cuts to black.

But *Deli Boys* is not completely episodic. The brothers suffer defeats and humiliations from episode to episode, but like true comedic figures, they reliably bounce back from being continually beaten down. Yet while the brothers' problems change from day to day, the FBI is playing a longer game. In fact, the show's real overarching plotline belongs not to our protagonists but to the investigators on their trail, led by Agent Mercer (Alexandra Ruddy), who is determined to find out what the Dar family is up to, and her boss, Director Simpson (Tim Baltz). Over the course of the season, Mercer and Simpson offer a comedic commentary track for the show as they surveil Mir and Raj's activities.

One of the series' strengths is the way its supporting characters buttress the comedic structure. Baltz in particular is a standout as the overconfident FBI agent who is always reliving his former glory, when he went undercover for the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. Newcomer Jake Prizant shines as Baba's loyal servant, a white man who seems to love Baba and his culture even more than his sons do. Also great are Amita Rao as Raj's surprise fiancée and Sofia Black-D'Elia as the scary crime boss's chaotic daughter.

In the end, despite its serious trappings, *Deli Boys* is most interested in being a comedy. No plot ever overstays its welcome: A man is shot, but it's mainly a gag about Raj and Mir being splattered in the face with blood. The show is shameless about putting quips and zingers into any character's mouth, even when it feels forced. But I kept wishing the series would dig a little deeper emotionally and take more risks—I was never worried that Mir and Raj would not turn out OK. When they lose all their money, they loaf around but never struggle materially. They each go through periods of darkness, but their moping is always temporary, only a setup for the next punch line.

With a total of 10 episodes, each less than half an hour long, *Deli Boys* moves fast and goes down easy—but those strengths are also the series' weakness. Even when the brothers are caught up in a life-and-death dilemma, the show opts out of providing any real emotional stakes. In the second episode, the boys are chasing after someone they've been ordered to kill, when they stumble upon some stale pretzels left on a dumpster. Raj has the idea to position the pretzels as an enticing trap for their quarry. Mir is aghast: "You think your pretzel trap is going to work? Life is not a cartoon, Raj." And Raj's response is like the show itself speaking: "Agree to disagree." **N**

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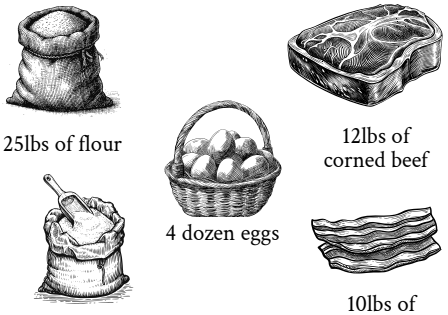

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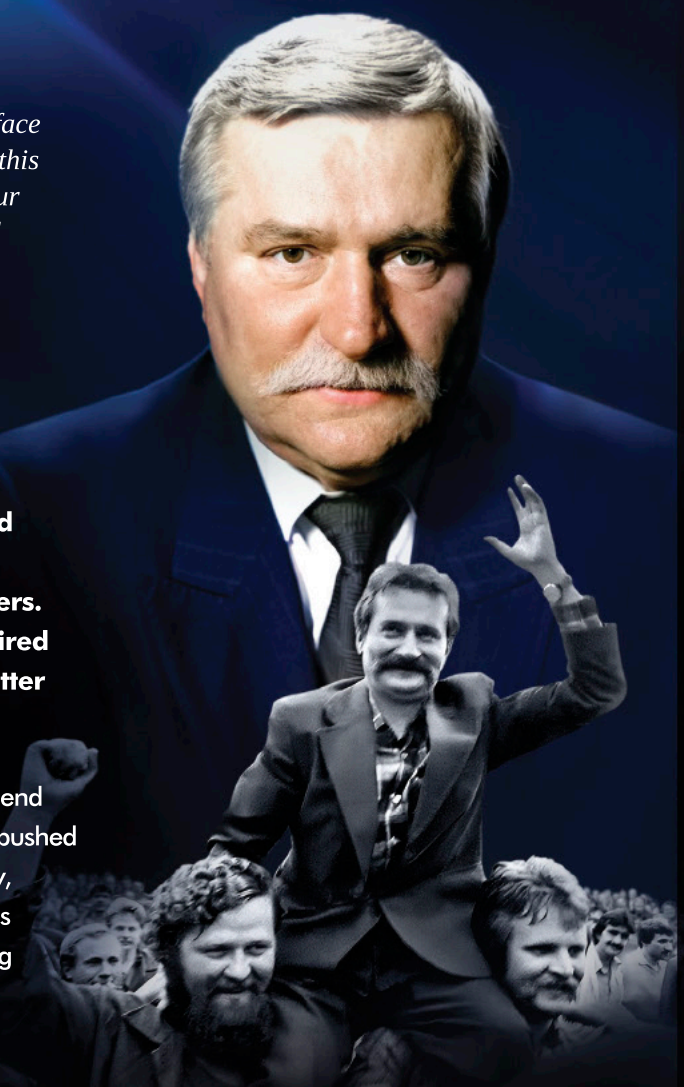

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