THE Nation.
EST. 1865
MARCH 2025

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The kiss: A same-sex couple celebrates Thailand's new marriage equality law in Bangkok on January 23.

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COLUMNS

B&A BOOKS & the ARTS

Cover illustration: **BRIAN STAUFFER**

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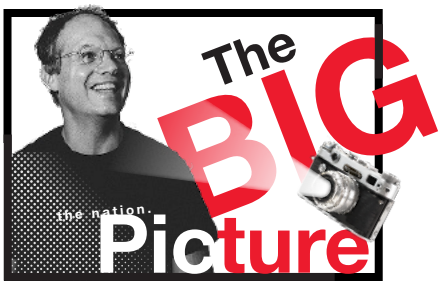

If It Quacks…

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT TO KARL MARX, HEGEL NEVer actually said that history repeats itself—and the claim that events occur first as tragedy and then again as farce, while a pretty turn of phrase, is about as far as you can get from an iron law of history. Donald Trump's second term, for example, though it will doubtless contain its lighter moments, seems likely to outpace his previous outing in both the malignity of its aims and the scale of its corruption. In 2017, a domestic oligarch or foreign potentate who wanted to curry favor with the White House had to book an overpriced suite in a Trump hotel—or perhaps promise to throw some business at his son-in-law. This time around, anyone can participate, with the range of opportunities for lining the pockets of America's first family stretching all the way from gilded Bibles (and matching footwear) to memecoins ($Trump for the gentleman, $Melania for the lady).

At this point in his first term, the pace of Trump's "barrage of outrageous and offensive comments, his waves of unqualified or conflict-ridden nominees, and his daily assault on the most vulnerable among us," as I described it at the time, seemed more like a tactic designed to discombobulate the opposition than a program to remake the federal government. Trump's weapons of mass distraction are as effective as ever, with the Democrats in familiar disarray and the mainstream media normalizing like there's no yesterday. But thanks to Project 2025, we know that Trump and his minions really do mean to shred the social safety net and burn down the administrative state.

Not since Franklin Roosevelt's first inaugural has an incoming administration so dominated the political agenda. And yet underneath all the executive orders and shock-and-awe assaults on the powerless, the most fundamental fact about our cowardly new world is that Trump is and will remain a lame-duck president. Which lends a certain brittle quality even to his current triumphs—and ought to give his opponents some courage.

Not that the Democratic Party appears to have noticed. Rejecting Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's bid to head the House Oversight Committee in favor of the senescent—and on current evidence barely sentient—Gerry Connolly was a sign that whatever game House Democrats may be playing, they're still just playing. As for the party's Senate leadership, even some Democratic governors—no one's idea of a militant vanguard—recently expressed their frustration with Chuck Schumer's ineffective opposition.

Over on MAGA Square, claimants to the mantle are already marshaling their forces. Whether Steve Bannon's preemptive strike on Elon Musk will prove as effective as their joint purge of Vivek Ramaswamy remains to be seen. Likewise whether JD Vance, as titular heir apparent, will outlast or outmaneuver the already evident political ambitions of Trump's heirs of the body. But the marriage of convenience between the workerist/social conservative wing, represented by Bannon and Vance, and the tech-lord oligarchs (and their fan base) on Team Musk is on the rocks—and could be sped toward divorce by an opposition capable of walking and chewing gum at the same time.

Here at *The Nation*, we're not just sitting on our hands waiting for that to happen—or shouting from the sidelines. Instead, we've got Elie Mystal on why, at least where the courts are concerned, things could get much, much worse; Lily Geismer on the roots of the Democratic Party's paralysis; Waleed Shahid on what a fighting (and thriving) left looks like; and Joshua Leifer on Israeli settlers and the Trump approach to Gaza's future ("waterfront property," "prime location").

Plus Hasan Ali on Sufi devotional music, John Banville on the adventures of Henri Bergson, Alyssa Battistoni on a translation of Marx's *Capital* fit for the 21st century, Jorge Cotte taking the measure of *The Pitt*, J. Hoberman on Mike Leigh's *Hard Truths*, and Rachel Hunter Himes on the art of Kara Walker.

Not to mention the debut of columnist John Ganz, our house blend of eloquent editorials and commentary, and dispatches from California burning.

If you like what you read here, please tell your friends. **N**

D.D. GUTTENPLAN
Editor

EDITORIAL/CLARENCE LUSANE FOR *THE NATION*

White Nationalist in Chief

THERE IS A STRAIGHT LINE FROM THE 2017 "UNITE THE RIGHT" RALLIES IN CHARlottesville to the far-right-led "Stop the Steal" movement to lies about Haitians eating cats and dogs to Donald Trump's first day in office upon his return to power. No president in the post-civil-rights era has been as racially aggressive as the now-47th president. Nearly every day since he squeaked his way back into the White House, operating under what can properly be called Trump's White Nationalist Manifesto, his effort to prevent immigrants of color from entering the country and to roll back the rights of people of color already here has been evident. With the white nationalist ideologue Stephen Miller by his side, Trump is acting to address "anti-white feeling," i.e., a far-right narrative with no basis in fact, but one that excites his MAGA base.

In just one week, the autocrat's playbook of threats, lawlessness, dishonesty, and disregard for democratic norms wreaked havoc across the nation and around the world. As always, authoritarian politics in the United States are tethered to white nationalism. At this moment, Trump is the white nationalist in chief.

Trump's recent presidential actions have sent a clear message to his supporters that he has never left the side of the "very fine people" that back him. Beyond his pardons and commutations for over 1,500 January 6 insurrectionists, he returned a portrait of Andrew Jackson, removed by President Joe Biden, to a prominent place in the Oval Office. Jackson, a hero to Trump, led and personally participated in massacres of Native Americans, as well as profited from selling and enslaving Black people.

Trump pledged to re-rename military bases after segregationists, enslavers, and traitorous Confederate generals—an intention that newly installed Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth seems likely to support. And Trump issued an executive order (EO) directing the secretary of the interior to re-rename Denali, the highest peak in the United States, Mount McKinley to honor another president with a dishonorable record, most notably ignoring the vigorous pleas of Black leaders like the journalist Ida B. Wells as the lynchings of African Americans and racist terrorism grew at the end of the 19th century.

In addition to such symbolic acts, Trump signed a number of EOs that will dramatically change people's lives for the worse, such as ending birthright citizenship. This is textbook "great replacement" theory: Trump and his MAGA base want to slow or stop the expanding population of Black, Latino, and Asian people in the United States. And that extends to his deportation blitz, which makes no pretense of being nonracial or objective. The raids to capture undocumented Black and Brown people have become spectacles of humiliation not dissimilar to events in *The Hunger Games* or other dystopian fiction.

Trump's executive order to end all DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) programs and initiatives is a direct attack on the civil rights, human rights, and social justice gains that were won by immense sacrifice over two centuries by communities of color and other marginalized groups. In a cruel and calculated move, Trump has destined thousands of federal DEI employees who care deeply about justice and fairness to lose their jobs and careers.

Of course, Trump is not doing all this on his own. He has had near-total backing from Republicans in the Capitol, and fearing retribution, these elected officials have abandoned any responsibility to hold him accountable for his actions. It is also no accident that, like every business or endeavor that Trump has run, his administration is overwhelmingly white and male.

In a cruel and calculated move, Trump has destined thousands of federal DEI employees to lose their jobs and careers.

As for Trump's supporters who do not fit that profile, they are awakening to the real Trump. Unable to run for office again, he no longer needs to pretend he cares about the Black community—or any community that isn't white, wealthy, or far-right MAGA—or its votes.

The second coming of Trump will be one long slog through the bowels of racial animus and juvenile reprisals. Permanent resistance is the way forward. **N**

Clarence Lusane is a political science professor at Howard University and the author of Twenty Dollars and Change: Harriet Tubman and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice and Democracy *(City Lights).*

COMMENT/CHRIS LEHMANN

Resistance 2.0

With Trump back in the White House, the Democrats are floundering instead of fighting.

As Donald Trump resumed the presidency and spent his first day authorizing 26 new executive orders and rescinding 78 more from the Biden administration, Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer weighed in with this forceful declaration on social media: "It is time to look to the future. The challenges that face America are many and great. The Senate must respond with resolve, bipartisanship, and fidelity to the working and middle class of this country." As the tin-pot edicts piled up throughout Trump's first week, rescinding infrastructure outlays and prescription-drug price controls while upending antidiscrimination protections in federal offices and seeking to abolish birthright citizenship, Schumer's House counterpart, Hakeem Jeffries, rallied to the crisis with this grammatically challenged lurch into milksop spirituality: "Presidents come and go. Through it all. God is still on the throne."

Welcome to the Resistance 2.0, which has Democratic Party leaders claiming to savvily choose their battles with an emboldened second Trump administration as they fecklessly revert to a defensive crouch. The inauguration-week performance of congressional leaders was emblematic, but it was far from the most damning indictment of the Democratic status quo. In both the House and the Senate, the party caved without a whimper before the GOP's draconian Laken Riley Act, which authorizes deportation proceedings against undocumented immigrants who are merely accused of nonviolent offenses. The law's provisions are a clear violation of the Constitution's equal-protection guarantees, yet jittery Democrats couldn't be roused to make a robust case against the shameful legislation. The first version of the bill yielded 48 Democratic "yes" votes in the House and 12 in the Senate; the final version saw just two Democratic defections.

This dismaying launch of the new Trump agenda stands in especially stark contrast to the mass protests that greeted the Muslim ban on travel to the United States at the outset of Trump's first administration. Democratic lawmakers joined a demonstration outside the Supreme Court to demand the repeal of Trump's bigoted order—and the 2017 version of Chuck Schumer didn't extol the flabby virtues of cooperation across the partisan aisle. "We will not let this evil order make us less American," he said then. "We will fight it with everything we have and we will win this fight."

The question at the beginning of a far more disciplined, ideologically rigid, and revenge-driven second Trump term is what happened to the opposition party's backbone. The short answer, of course, is the 2024 election, which delivered a governing trifecta to the GOP. The same was true in 2016, but Trump lacked the mandate of a popular-vote victory—one that, this time, he is able to claim, albeit on the flimsy margin of 1.62 percent.

That very slight edge has been enough to render Democratic leaders acutely gun-shy—even though it's no great improvement over the GOP's results in 2016. If anything, Trump's 2024 margin of victory imposes a greater, not lesser, burden on the Democrats to assemble an opposition strategy out of more than hoary Beltway shibboleths and half-assed memes. The real story of Trump's victory, after all, is the 19 million 2020 Biden voters who sat out this election—a result that amounted to "a vote of no confidence in the Democrats, not an embrace of Trump or MAGA," in the words of the former AFL-CIO political director Michael Podhorzer. That's a first-order challenge to Democrats to reinvent the party from the ground up, starting with a full repudiation of its neoliberal corporate capture and the immoral and toxic legacy of the Biden-Harris administration's support for the Gaza genocide. The sobering truth is that the party is not only losing support among key demographics such as Black and Latino voters; it's on the cusp of losing the next generation of young voters.

The question at the beginning of a second Trump term is what happened to the opposition party's backbone.

Instead of meeting that challenge head-on, party satraps continue to run on institutional autopilot. For establishment Democrats, it's never time to rethink their assumptions in the face of a drastically altered political landscape; the first order of business is to stay the course and dismiss calls for reform as unrealistic, non-savvy, and/or utopian. And since everything's basically OK, all they have to do is adopt new messaging, and maybe try a new media gimmick or two.

So after Senate Democrats floundered their way through the Laken Riley vote, they convened for a session led by New Jersey's Cory Booker to walk the party's aging caucus through some social media basics. The confab yielded this stirring note of consensus, as CNN reporters Sarah Ferris and Lauren Fox wrote: "One of the bright spots Democrats highlighted…was a viral video from the pandemic of [Virginia Senator Mark] Warner making a tuna melt in his kitchen that led to the lawmaker being cheered and jeered by people who questioned his culinary leanings." So fear not, shell-shocked citizens: In the ongoing barrage of deportations, civil service purges, reproductive rights crackdowns, civil rights rollbacks, and vengeance tours led by Donald Trump and his handpicked cabinet of Inspector Javerts, the Democrats will rally together with bland endorsements of the status quo and lunch pointers. In other words: Let them eat tuna melts. N

COMMENT/GREGG GONSALVES

Trump's Bloodbath

The president is taking a chainsaw to our public health infrastructure—and people will die as a result.

A FEW WEEKS INTO DONALD TRUMP'S SECOND administration, the logic of his actions is becoming clear. It's the logic of the chainsaw. Many have pointed out the affinity that Trump and Argentine President Javier Milei have for each other. Milei has made the demolition of the administrative state a key part of his rule—slashing budgets, eliminating ministries, and firing tens of thousands of government workers. And the chief symbol of this campaign? A chainsaw, which Milei likes to wield in political appearances across the country.

Milei justified this shock treatment by pointing to Argentina's flailing economy. For Trump, the justification is in the act itself. Gutting the federal government has been a far-right wet dream of radical conservatives since Ronald Reagan. With Trump, there is no logic but destruction. People are going to suffer, get sick, and die, and it will happen faster than you think. Trump does not care about the pain he will inflict; in fact, like most sadists, he and his friends will simply feed on it.

I want to focus on one area of Trump's assault: public health. In late January, the State Department issued a 90-day stop order for all US foreign aid. Swept up in this is the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, a landmark, bipartisan program established under George W. Bush that has saved over 25 million lives and prevented millions of new HIV infections around the world. PEPFAR provides lifesaving HIV treatment for 20.6 million people, including 566,000 children, in over 50 countries. But the stop order was merciless: No services, including the provision of treatment, were allowed through PEPFAR, even if pills were on the shelves and patients were waiting outside. After court challenges and a public outcry, the White House lifted some of the suspensions, but no one knows if these reprieves will last, and any confusion still puts people at risk.

Trump doesn't care about the pain he will inflict. Like most sadists, he and his friends will simply feed on it.

Let me explain how AIDS treatments work. The drugs inhibit HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, interrupting its life cycle. Without these pills, HIV destroys T-cells, a key component of our immune systems. As we lose T-cells, we become vulnerable to opportunistic infections and cancers, health conditions usually held in check in people who are HIV-negative, though we see these health events in transplant patients and people with other kinds of immunodeficiencies. Interrupting treatment, which Trump is doing for millions around the world right now, means the virus comes roaring back.

For those who start HIV medications when they are very sick, the chance of their immune system quickly eroding in a process called "decompensation" becomes acute. Their risk of falling ill with these opportunistic diseases and dying shoots up.

In addition, interruptions in treatment can lead to drug resistance, making it harder to treat HIV infection with the standard medications. The stop order on PEPFAR means that millions of others risk being left without a powerful tool to prevent HIV transmission, including newborn infants around the world. And that's just one program in one area of public health.

This may seem far away to many Americans. But the damage is also happening at home. Days after returning to the White House, Trump suspended all federal grants, including those administered by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Legal and political challenges again forced the lifting of that freeze, but the threat remains real.

And even a brief pause is disastrous. The infrastructure of US biomedical research at universities is highly dependent on federal grants to keep the lights on. That was all disrupted. Experiments that rely on continuity—with the daily passage of cell lines or care of laboratory animals, for instance—were destroyed.

Any longer halt would be even worse. Richer universities like mine may be able to weather the storm for a short time, but smaller institutions will feel the impact immediately. People will lose their jobs. But this anarchy is a feature, not a bug, for Trump and his minions. They see universities as the enemy, and going after NIH funding is a way to bring down higher education in the United States. Biomedical research at the NIH, like PEPFAR, has always had bipartisan support, and the United States' biomedical research enterprise is still the envy of the world. It has taken decades to build this infrastructure. Now Trump wants to tear everything down. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Science Foundation, and countless other agencies and programs are also on the firing line. It's terrifying.

Yet there is no real opposition from the Democrats to Trump's chainsaw massacre. They continue to reward him with votes in the Senate for his nominees. The professional organizations representing scientists, physicians, and others have been notably silent or demure in their statements.

So let me say it again for those in the back: All of this is going to have deadly and lasting consequences. These people are terrorists in all but name, and we will all have to live in the rubble of the aftermath. N

COMMENT/JOHN NICHOLS

Martin Wins

The DNC elects a new leader as it seeks to unify the party and win back working-class voters.

In the Democratic Party's first official response to the devastating setbacks it suffered in the 2024 presidential and congressional elections, members of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) elected Ken Martin as their chair on February 1. Martin, the well-regarded chair of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL), won after speaking frankly to committee members about the party's difficult circumstances. "We got punched in the mouth in November," he said. "A lot of people in this country right now are going to need us to walk and chew gum at the same time—meaning we're going to have to fight the extremes of Donald Trump while we make a case in both red and blue states about why they should trust us with their votes. When the Trump agenda fails Americans—which it certainly will, and already has—we have to be there with the legitimate alternative to this chaos."

"When the Trump agenda fails Americans, we have to be there with the legitimate alternative to this chaos."

That was an implicit acknowledgment of the mistake Democrats made in 2024, when they spent so much time talking about the threats posed by Trump that there was little space left to communicate about what the party offered anxious working families. At a time when 74 percent of Americans were saying they weren't happy with the country's direction, Trump and the Republicans—as cruel and extreme as they are—did a better job of channeling that frustration than the Democrats. This allowed Trump to secure more support from working-class, young, and Latino voters, among others, than should ever have been the case. But the bigger story, as *The New York Times* noted, was that "many Democrats sat this election out, presumably turned off by both candidates."

Martin was not the only DNC candidate to recognize that the Democrats need a bolder pro-worker agenda. His main rival, Wisconsin Democratic Party chair Ben Wikler, said, "Losing working-class voters in 2024 has to be a wake-up call for us as a party." Wikler was backed by key union leaders, Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer, House minority leader Hakeem Jeffries, former House speaker Nancy Pelosi, and Democratic governors such as Michigan's Gretchen Whitmer. But that big-name support garnered only 134½ DNC votes for the Wisconsinite, versus 246½ votes for Martin.

The Minnesotan benefited from the fact that he's been in the trenches for years as head of the Association of State Democratic Chairs. But as the vote approached, he also leaned into an urgently populist message that resonated with grassroots Democrats, who are exasperated with out-of-touch DC-based strategists and are passionate about moving resources into state parties; taking bolder stands on party priorities such as expanded access to healthcare and childcare, climate, and labor rights; forging multiracial, multiethnic, multigenerational urban and rural coalitions; and distinguishing the Democrats from the Republicans on economic issues.

Highlighting Martin's record in Minnesota, where the DFL has won 25 statewide elections in a row, Representative Ilhan Omar (D-MN) said that Martin is "an organizer at heart and has been on the front lines of battles on behalf of working people, which is exactly what the Democratic Party needs right now." At a point "when so many voters feel disconnected from politics," Omar said, "Ken has proven that when we engage with people year-round, invest in grassroots infrastructure, and build real relationships, we win."

Replicating the Minnesota model—which is rooted in the politics of the new chair's mentor, Minnesota progressive Paul Wellstone—could be difficult. The DNC has been so focused on fundraising in recent years that it's faced sharp criticism from veteran committee members like James Zogby (who lost a bid for vice chair); they say the party organization is too deferential to the demands of billionaire donors and highly paid consultants. Martin and Wikler both shied away from embracing the most sweeping demands of reformers, including calls for banning dark money from Democratic primaries and any rebuff of big-money politics as explicit as that of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. But Martin told *The Nation* that he's determined to put a stronger focus on raising money from small donors, and he's won the confidence of activists such as Alan Minsky, the executive director of the Progressive Democrats of America, who says the new chair is "ready to build a bigger, bolder party that reaches out to people who have been frustrated with both parties—to build a party that is no longer dominated by elites but is truly our party."

Martin said as much in his winning appeal to the committee, which featured a reflection on the historic union song "Which Side Are You On?" "Are we on the side of the robber baron, the ultra-wealthy billionaire, the oil-and-gas polluter, the union buster?" he asked. "Or are we on the side of the working family, the small business owner, the farmer, the immigrants, the students? Let me tell you: I know which side I'm on."

If Martin can give the Democratic Party that level of clarity, it will be ready to take on Trump and Trumpism. N

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Neoclassical Redux

How Trump's changing approach to controlling the built environment reveals what we're in for this term.

In his raft of day 1 executive order signings, President Trump revived an old hobbyhorse from his previous term: "traditional" architecture. In a brief memo, he declared that the General Services Administration (or GSA, the agency that, among other things, is in charge of government buildings) and other federal agencies have 60 days to submit

> recommendations to advance the policy that Federal public buildings should be visually identifiable as civic buildings and respect regional, traditional, and classical architectural heritage in order to uplift and beautify public spaces and ennoble the United States and our system of self-government. Such recommendations shall consider appropriate revisions to the Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture and procedures for incorporating community input into Federal building design selections.

For the uninitiated, the GSA's "Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture" were issued in 1962 and state that "an official [architectural] style must be avoided" for federal buildings and that new buildings should be exemplary of the time in which they are built. It's déjà vu: Trump is stoking the culture war embers with a redux of the neoclassical architecture diktat from his first term. The new mandate rehashes the "Make federal buildings neoclassical again" executive order he issued in 2020, which was repealed by Joe Biden when he became president. Like its 2020 predecessor, the new order has little to do with classical architecture in any meaningful way—which itself has been decontextualized from its ideologies, aesthetics, spatial origins, and material conditions and flattened into a kind of "Deus vult" meme for people overly concerned with their haplogroup type. Trump uses history and its symbols for his own ends, and we're wasting our breath insisting that the symbols are being used wrong. The left shares some of the blame for failing to properly mobilize around the reality that a lot of new buildings *are* ugly, that they are ugly because they are cheap, and that they're cheap because architecture has devolved into a shitty job more and more alienated from things like materiality and the building site, and because developers and investors care only about the bottom line.

It doesn't matter to Trump et al. that actually building in a traditional style is astronomically more expensive and wasteful, or that adding another layer of bureaucracy to aesthetic production smacks of Albert Speer–style despotism (here one can't help but think of Musk's alleged *Hitlergruß*). Any building that comes out of such a program will have a distinctly McMansion-like appearance, because we possess neither the trade labor nor the natural resources that supplied the architectural revivals of the 19th century. For at least 50 years now, ours has been the era of engraved concrete and foam columns covered in plastic.

Trump's latest executive order does differ in telling ways from the last one. The 2020 version was far more detailed, articulating specific methods of controlling architectural production. It included a directive to create a President's Council on Improving Federal Civic Architecture to enforce the mandate to "traditionalize" new construction. The order explicitly discounted the opinion of "artists, architects, engineers, art or architecture critics, members of the building industry or any other members of the public that are affiliated with any interest group or organization" involved in architecture. Essentially that left, well, Tucker Carlson.

The new memo, by contrast, is merely a call for proposals instead of a proposal itself. It gives no instructions, merely suggestions. Neither "regional," "traditional," or "classical" architecture are even defined. This speaks to a broader difference between the last Trump administration and this one: He's far more organized now. Trump is doing a smash-and-grab on the whole federal government and needn't waste his time on minutiae, and I'm sure the vague language of the order makes it easier for whatever private companies are going to get kickbacks from this to join in. So while the new executive order is concerning, it is, above all, a distraction. Aesthetics are obviously political and matter in and of themselves; however, in this case, they effectively divert our attention away from the policies that Trump is fomenting—policies that will have far-reaching consequences for the built environment. His tariffs, if they go into effect, will have a devastating impact on the construction industry, as will his draconian immigration policies, which will target both white-collar workers within architecture

Mandating a few cheesy columns is a distraction. It's Trump's broader policies that will have a devastating impact on the built environment.

JOE CIARDIELLO

and the primary labor force that builds the country's architecture. His rabid anti-DEI measures also target federal contractors, including in construction. Trump has filled his cabinet, including the GSA, with tech and finance lackeys who have vowed to crush the Green New Deal and any and all environmental programs. These outcomes will be worse for architecture than the mandate of a few cheesy columns that may or may not ever get built. It's not just aesthetics that Trump is turning back the clock on—it's any and all progress. Ours will be a time of mass chaos and inexhaustible graft.

Architects and firms should start thinking now about how these huge upheavals in government contracts and further funding cuts and directives will affect them. Long have I argued in these pages for acts of refusal against despotic regimes like Benjamin Netanyahu's in Israel and Mohammed bin Salman's in Saudi Arabia. But it's time to revive those Trump 1.0–era acts of refusal, especially within one's own workplace. Trump's plans require compliance to come to fruition, and as an industry, frankly, architecture is all too willing to acquiesce in the name of profit. Actions in the field should be focused less on aesthetics than on what work is being done, for whom, and—ever more important as our neighbors are targeted for deportation—by whom. We need to talk again about saying no, not simply because something is tacky and creativity-destroying, but because it is wrong. Trump's actions are making it clear that things are not going back to normal. N

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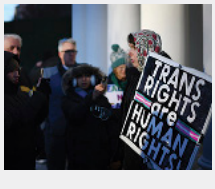

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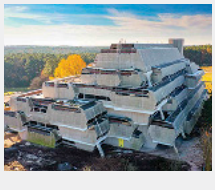


› The Dubious Return of the Brutalists
DANIEL BROOK

FROM TOP: JOE CIARDIELLO; ASTRID RIECKEN / *THE WASHINGTON POST* VIA GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The Last Days of Discourse

John Ganz

Omnivorous, Adventurous, and Experimental

There's no manual for rescuing participatory democracy when the mechanisms of information and education are precisely the problem.

IN EXCHANGE FOR BEING PERMITTED BY MY INDULgent editor to call this column "The Last Days of Discourse," I agreed to explain the joke—and to prove that it was not mere wordplay for its own sake. As many of you may have already picked up, the name comes from Whit Stillman's 1998 movie *The Last Days of Disco*, a charming film about a group of young people in the early 1980s, when that dance craze was going out of style. But as with Stillman's other films, it also has deeper concerns: about what it means to live at the end of an era, and what we may hope for under decadent conditions.

The current media landscape appears at a distance to be multifarious, but on closer inspection reveals itself as desolate: We are confronted with a constant barrage of hysterical cable news anchors, decontextualized video snippets, speculative manias, streaming content that feeds an insatiable thirst for "drama," and social media mobs. Instead of a pluralism of voices, we have a cacophony that eventually gives way to monotony, an unbearable din that dulls the mind and the senses. Those in charge deliberately broadcast noise and emotional electric shocks. The "platforms" are controlled by an oligarchy of tech billionaires who speak in Orwellian fashion about "free speech" but are actually interested only in profits, power, and control. While it appears that it has never been easier for anyone to freely share their opinions with the world, the apparatus that shapes the public's thoughts and sentiments has never been in the hands of fewer men. (And yes, they are all men.) The possibilities for reasoned and at least relatively enlightened public discussion—the purpose of magazines like the one you're reading now—seem to be shrinking by the day. How are we to continue to have a democracy (which relies, at least in theory, on informed public opinion) given such an etiolated public sphere—one that seems to have been deliberately poisoned? These will be among the concerns and questions of "The Last Days of Discourse."

Cynics will say, and with some good reason, "Same as it ever was." The problem of the manipulation and deformation of opinion is indeed not

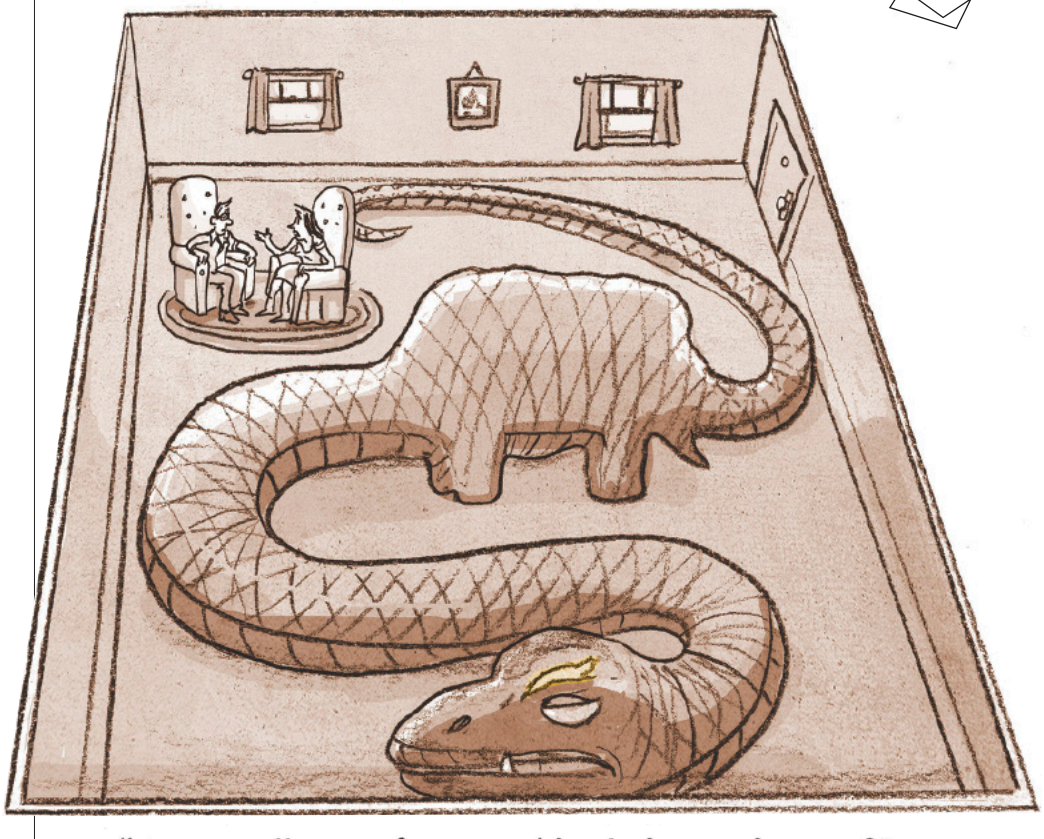
new. One hundred years ago, the American journalist and political commentator Walter Lippmann published *The Phantom Public*, in which he argued that the issues of governance in modern society were just too complicated for most folks and so should be left to the experts. To Lippmann, the proper role of public opinion was merely to say "yea" or "nay" to the proposals of the competent classes. "The public must be put in its place…so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd," he wrote. Certainly, that might be one way to avoid the problems arising from the online mob. But it is not so different from the pseudo-populism of today's tech oligarchs, who want the appearance of public acclaim for their deeply elitist vision of society while maintaining a docile and cooperative public. They, too, hope to use "the trampling and the roar" of the "bewildered herd" to keep the public "in its place." Although Lippmann may sound like a defender of democratic pluralism, the practical upshot of what he advocated was essentially the same as the republic through electronic plebiscite that our tech masters desire. It's not for nothing that the first meeting of the "neoliberals" in 1938 called itself the Walter Lippmann Colloquium.

Instead of a pluralism of voices, we have a cacophony that eventually gives way to monotony.

What alternatives do we have, then? Lippmann's great opponent, the American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey, proposed a participatory alternative based on the notion of an increasingly informed and educated public. That sounds very attractive, but how are we to conduct the Deweyan experiment when the mechanisms of information and education are precisely the problem? The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas believes in the emancipatory potential of a spirited public sphere, but even at his most sanguine, Habermas has had to admit that the contemporary environment of compulsive consumerism, mass media manipulation, and bureaucratic control makes for a very different world from the one inhabited by the literate bourgeoisie of the 18th century. The writer and theorist Hannah Arendt thought that opinions should be formed by imaginatively inhabiting the point of view of others until one came to view the facts from a disinterested perspective—but she still required that there be facts to interpret. The conditions that made all these ideals even theoretically possible are in today's world under considerable strain from the very technology that was supposed to make them a universal endowment.

But here at "The Last Days of Discourse," we will not be wallowing in despair and gloom; there's more than enough of that already. Instead, I plan to keep these models of genuinely enlightened public deliberation in mind as I write this column, which will direct a critical eye to the ills afflicting democracy—while trying to practice democracy itself. It will, I hope, be omnivorous in scope, adventurous in spirit, and experimental in practice. If I had to pick one of the great theorists of public opinion as my guide, I would choose Arendt, who wrote that "in matters of opinion…our thinking is truly discursive, running, as it were, from place to place, from one part of the world to another, through all kinds of conflicting views, until it finally ascends from these particularities to some impartial generality." One writer and one short column cannot accomplish that universal task alone, but I will try to do my part. **N**

OPPART/PETER KUPER



"Can we still even refer to it as 'the elephant in the room'?"

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Morbid Symptoms
Jeet Heer

Democracy Dies in Prime Time

Corporate media's commitment to fighting autocracy proves fickle.

CNN anchor Jim Acosta was fated to be a barometer of his network's relationship with Donald Trump. During Trump's first term, Acosta's tough questioning at press conferences gave CNN credibility as a news outlet that was willing to uphold the principle of accountability, uncowed by the president's bullying. In 2018, Trump denounced Acosta as a "rude, terrible person," and the White House revoked Acosta's press pass. CNN sued Trump and his top aides on behalf of Acosta, successfully forcing the White House to give the reporter back his press pass.

If Acosta's jousting with Trump was once celebrated by CNN, it has now become a source of shame. With Trump winning not only a second term but also, unlike the first time, the popular vote (however narrow the margin), CNN and other corporate media outlets have been thoroughly cowed. On January 16 in the newsletter *Status*, Oliver Darcy, a former CNN journalist, reported that CNN CEO Mark Thompson had phoned Acosta and "delivered the veteran journalist a sudden and strange proposal: Move your show to midnight and anchor it until 2 AM." Acosta had a morning show that ran at 10 AM. A media executive told Darcy, "They want to get rid of Acosta to throw a bone to Trump. Midnight is not a serious offer when his ratings are among the best on the network."

Mediaite followed up on Darcy's reporting with quotes from other current and former CNN employees, almost all of whom were shocked by the network's behavior. "Jim made a career and name for himself by asking tough questions and holding power to account," one staffer said. "That included Trump. So it will be interesting to see if this kind of move...sends a message to other shows and [executive producers] about how the network wants to engage with this new administration." Another interviewee described the staff as "baffled" by Acosta's sidelining, noting, "It seems like an attempt to appease Trump, who is never appeased by anything."

On January 21, Darcy reported that the day before Trump's inauguration, Thompson held a virtual editorial meeting in which he offered guidance about how he wanted to see the network cover Inauguration Day. According to Darcy, Thompson indicated to attendees that he wanted his journalists to be forward-thinking and to avoid prejudging Trump. He cautioned against expressing any outrage of their own, as many of the anchors who make up CNN's roster of journalists had previously done with regularity during Trump's first term.

CNN's shift mirrors a larger transformation in the corporate media. During Trump's first term, many outlets found it profitable to cater to popular liberal outrage over Trump. Under the umbrella label of "resistance liberalism" emerged a genuine mass movement that sought to fight Trumpism through protests and electoral organizing. Resistance liberalism had its share of faults—notably a propensity for conspiracy theories, evident in the wilder speculations about Trump's possible ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin—but it was also a salutary popular engagement with democracy.

The mainstream media, sometimes cynically but also with genuine investigative reporting, tried to harness this new audience. In 2017, *The Washington Post* adopted the slogan "Democracy Dies in Darkness." But even before Trump won his second term, the fighting spirit of resistance liberalism had waned, weakened by years of defending the often out-of-touch Biden administration. It's also notable that in 2024, roughly three-quarters of the nation's largest newspapers—including *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the *Los Angeles Times*—refused to endorse any candidate for president. Even before Trump was sworn in, *The Washington Post* adopted a new mission statement: "Riveting Storytelling for All of America." While "Democracy Dies in Darkness" can be criticized for being melodramatic and self-important, the new credo suggests a newspaper committed not to journalism but to simple entertainment.

The retreat from an adversarial relationship with Trump is undoubtedly rooted in economic self-interest. As corporate consolidation of the media intensifies, news outlets are increasingly beholden to leviathan parent entities that are deeply entangled with affairs of the state. And Trump hasn't been shy about threatening to use his presidential power against business leaders who defy him. Last fall, he threatened Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg with life in prison. Not surprisingly, Zuckerberg has moved swiftly to appease Trump by making changes to policy at Facebook that suit the president—most significantly the site's recent severe curtailing of fact-checking

During Trump's first term, many media outlets found it profitable to cater to "resistance liberalism."

The *New York Post* reports that "CNN's corporate parent, Warner Bros. Discovery,

JOE CIARDIELLO

has made it clear it wants the network to adopt a more neutral tone in its dealings with Trump." *The Washington Post*, of course, is owned by Jeff Bezos, one of the world's richest men, whose extensive business interests, particularly at Amazon, require him to stay on Trump's good side.

The abject submission of outlets such as CNN and *The Washington Post* is not just a lesson in the dangers of corporate control of the media; it's also a reminder of the value of independent media. The alliance between the mainstream media and resistance liberalism was always precarious and dubious. Even when CNN was more critical of Trump, it was on grounds that were friendlier to safe centrism than to progressive politics: hence CNN's assiduous promotion of Russiagate and its incessant elevation of Never Trump Republicans.

The lesson progressives should take is that corporate media is never friendly terrain. To build a lasting opposition we need independent outlets like *Democracy Now!*, ProPublica, and, dare I say it, *The Nation*. N

SNAPSHOT
Guillermo Arias

Despair at the Border

Migrants waiting to cross into the United States from Mexico have been left in limbo and without options since Donald Trump shut down most avenues for legal entry into the country, such as the CBP One app, which asylum seekers had used to make appointments.

By the Numbers

29
Number of people who have died in the Los Angeles wildfires since January 7

16K
Number of structures destroyed in the Los Angeles fires

57K
Number of acres burned in Southern California between January 7 and January 27

1,824
Number of wildfires in the United States this year, as of January 29

1M
Approximate number of structure firefighters in the United States

11K
Approximate number of wildland firefighters

25%
Estimated vacancy rate of wildland firefighter positions in the US

SNAPSHOT: AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

CALVIN TRILLIN
DeadlinePoet

Presidential Leadership

A horrible crash lit up the sky.
Trump's job was then to unify.
That calls for grace he can't supply.
He cast the blame on DEI
And presidents of days gone by.
For four years more we'll have this guy.
Sigh.

PHOTO ESSAY/SASHA ABRAMSKY

Surveying Wildfire Damage

The Nation's West Coast correspondent describes the destruction wrought by the Palisades fire and the relics left behind by the people who used to live in one debris zone.

The weather was beautiful in Los Angeles on January 12. The sky was blue, the temperature balmy, the winds calm, and the smoke from the fires had largely blown out to sea. Life had finally returned to the weather-beaten city: Cafés, bars, and restaurants were open, people were walking their dogs, and drivers were cruising down the main thoroughfares.

In the debris zones, however, the wildfires' epic destruction was on full display.

While I was in the LA region reporting on the fires and the insurance industry for TheNation.com, I was able to spend a couple of hours at the northern end of the Pacific Coast Highway's restricted region. It was a ghastly, surreal scene from just south of Malibu to just north of Santa Monica, along a stretch that until a few days ago contained some of the most valuable real estate in North America.

When I was a child and a young adult, my grandmother, who lived in the San Fernando Valley, would take me to Gladstones, a wonderful seafood restaurant on the corner of the Pacific Coast Highway and Sunset Boulevard. We would drive through the canyons from the valley, turn right onto Sunset Boulevard, drive through the Palisades area, and finally park in the lot abutting the Pacific. After eating lunch on the Gladstones deck overlooking the ocean, we would then walk down to the beach, take off our shoes, and walk along the sands for half an hour. It was one of the great rituals of my youth.

The Palisades were destroyed by flames. Though Gladstones somehow survived, pretty much every other business and home along that stretch of the Pacific Coast Highway was obliterated. Ashes are all that remain, along with twisted piles of metal and strange, out-of-place relics left behind by the people who used to live there.

Looking at the debris piles of these everyday personal items, one can imagine all the dreams and hopes that were destroyed along with these homes, and one can also see the ghostly hints of life as it once was. There was the warped, burned exercise bike, now grotesquely perched in front of a ruined wall. There were the intact mailboxes that still stood outside of homes that had been annihilated, and the street-number signs attached to what were now front-wall skeletons. There were the washer and dryer staring into the sunset like two stuck-open eyes, the laundry room that once surrounded them now ash. There were the melted cars and the stubbornly still-existent barbecue grills. And to cap it all, there was the young couple walking hand in hand along the same beach that my grandmother and I used to walk decades ago. To their right was the glorious ocean and the gorgeous setting sun; to their left was unbridled destruction.

Those scenes will stay in my mind's eye for the rest of my life. With the exception of watching the World Trade Center burn and fall in 2001, I can't recall ever seeing anything that left me quite literally gasping in shock the way those miles of destruction did.

After leaving the restricted region, I continued driving south, and just as suddenly as I had entered the fire zone, I was out of it. The world around me looked as normal and whole as it had been before the fires and the fierce Santa Ana winds scourged the hills and coastline to the north. For all of those who lost their homes, however, I doubt that their lives will ever be quite the same again. N

The SCORE

Deportation's Price

BRYCE COVERT

President Donald Trump has promised that his administration will conduct deportations on a staggering scale. On the campaign trail, he pledged to remove 15 million people from the country, potentially including legal immigrants and US citizens.

Voters seemed to bristle at higher immigration, in part perhaps because people tend to greatly overestimate how many immigrants are actually in the country. But when Americans cast their votes, they also made clear that the economy was their top concern. Unfortunately for them, if Trump achieves even part of his mass deportation goal, it will almost certainly wreck the economy.

The American Immigration Council simulated what would happen if the government deported the 11 million undocumented immigrants who lived here as of 2022 and found that the gross domestic product would drop by at least 4.2 percent, or over $1 trillion. The American Action Forum came to a similar conclusion, finding that removing all undocumented immigrants would reduce the GDP by 5.7 percent, or $1.6 trillion, and would cut the labor force by 6.4 percent. The Peterson Institute for International Economics determined that it would permanently reduce employment by 0.6 percent.

Research has long found that immigrants don't steal citizens' jobs and wages; they help grow the economy for all. Among 27 empirical studies on the consequences of immigration, the vast majority found either no effect or a beneficial one on the wages of native-born workers. Immigrants also create more jobs for the native-born. One study estimated that nearly half of the employment growth between October 2023 and June 2024 can be attributed to the arrival of immigrants.

If Trump enacts his deportation plans, it wouldn't be the first time the country has restricted immigration and kicked people out. And past examples give us an idea of what's to come. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned immigration from China and resulted in lower employment among white workers and a reduction in the quality of their jobs. After the US imposed country-specific immigration quotas in the 1920s, earnings fell for native-born workers. The forced deportation of Mexicans in the 1930s, meant to boost jobs for the native-born, reduced employment and increased unemployment. The 1964 restriction on Mexican braceros, also meant to improve wages and employment for Americans, did neither. Secure Communities, a 2008 policy to remove undocumented immigrants, reduced employment for US citizens.

There is also the sheer cost of deporting so many people so quickly. The American Immigration Council found that the price for a onetime removal of all undocumented immigrants in the country would come to at least $315 billion. That doesn't account for the costs of internment camps to hold people before they're shipped out, hiring the necessary personnel, or deporting new arrivals. With some of that taken into consideration, the cost balloons to almost $1 trillion over a decade. That kind of money could fund the construction of more than 40,450 schools or 2.9 million homes, or cover in-state college tuition for 8.9 million students.

There is also the loss of tax revenue: Tax payments from undocumented immigrants came to $96.7 billion in 2022.

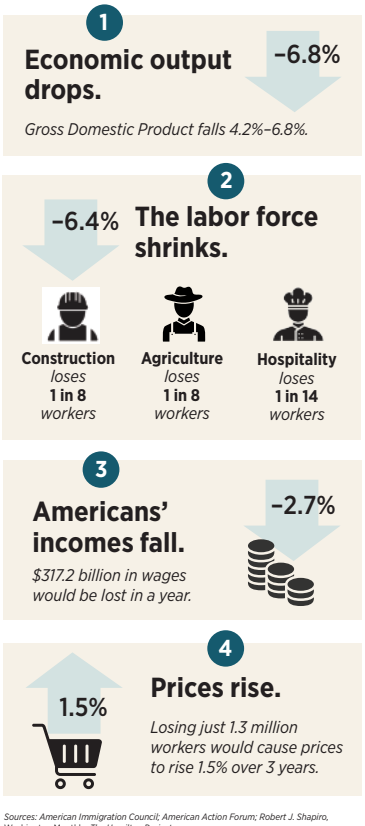
Then there's the increase in prices. One analysis found that a deportation plan that reduced the labor force by just 1.3 million workers would raise prices by 1.5 percent over three years. Certain sectors would get hit particularly hard. The American Immigration Council estimated that construction and agriculture would each lose at least one in eight workers, and hospitality would lose about one in 14. Agricultural prices would subsequently jump 1.7 percent by 2028. Past immigration enforcement has increased home prices because of the loss of construction workers.

None of these numbers get at the human toll of ripping people out of their homes and sending them away. A study of the effects of a federal immigration raid in Iowa in 2008—the largest in history at the time—found a spike in low-birth-weight deliveries among Latina mothers in the area: one way of quantifying the disruption and trauma that deportations cause. Undocumented residents make up 3.3 percent of the population, and about 80 percent have lived here for 12 or more years. Abruptly and violently losing these coworkers, friends, neighbors, and classmates will undoubtedly harm those who remain, too.

Bryce Covert

Mass Deportation Is Bad Economics

What happens if Trump removes the country's 11 million undocumented immigrants?



Sources: American Immigration Council; American Action Forum; Robert J. Shapiro, Washington Monthly; The Hamilton Project

INFOGRAPHIC: TRACY MATSUE LOEFFELHOLZ

Popular CoQ10 Pills Leave Millions Suffering

Could this newly discovered brain fuel solve America's worsening memory crisis?

PALM BEACH, FLORIDA — Millions of Americans take the supplement known as CoQ10. It's the coenzyme that supercharges the "energy factories" in your cells known as *mitochondria*. But there's a serious flaw that's leaving millions unsatisfied.

As you age, your mitochondria break down and fail to produce energy. In a revealing study, a team of researchers showed that 95 percent of the mitochondria in a 90-year-old man were damaged, compared to almost no damage in the mitochondria of a 5-year-old.

Taking CoQ10 alone is not enough to solve this problem. Because as powerful as CoQ10 is, there's one critical thing it fails to do: it can't create new mitochondria to replace the ones you lost.

And that's bad news for Americans all over the country. The loss of cellular energy is a problem for the memory concerns people face as they get older.

"We had no way of replacing lost mitochondria until a recent discovery changed everything," says Dr. Al Sears, founder and medical director of the Sears Institute for Anti-Aging Medicine in Palm Beach, Florida. "Researchers discovered the only nutrient known to modern science that has the power to trigger the growth of new mitochondria."

Why Taking CoQ10 is Not Enough

Dr. Sears explains, "This new discovery is so powerful, it can multiply your mitochondria by 55 percent in just a few weeks. That's the equivalent of restoring decades of lost brain power."

This exciting nutrient — called PQQ *(pyrroloquinoline quinone)* — is the driving force behind a revolution in aging. When paired with CoQ10, this dynamic duo has the power to reverse the age-related memory losses you may have thought were beyond your control.

Dr. Sears pioneered a new formula — called **Ultra Accel Q** — that combines both CoQ10 and PQQ to support maximum cellular energy and the normal growth of new mitochondria. **Ultra Accel Q** is the first of its kind to address both problems and is already creating huge demand.

In fact, demand has been so overwhelming that inventories repeatedly sell out. But a closer look at **Ultra Accel Q** reveals there are good reasons why sales are booming.

Science Confirms the Many Benefits of PQQ

The medical journal *Biochemical Pharmacology* reports that PQQ is up to 5,000 times more efficient in sustaining energy production than common antioxidants. With the ability to keep every cell in your body operating at full strength, **Ultra Accel Q** delivers more than just added brain power and a faster memory.

People feel more energetic, more alert, and don't need naps in the afternoon. The boost in cellular energy generates more power to your heart, lungs, muscles, and more.

"With the PQQ in Ultra Accel, I have energy I never thought possible at my age," says Colleen R., one of Dr. Sears's patients. "I'm in my 70s but feel 40 again. I think clearly, move with real energy and sleep like a baby."

The response has been overwhelmingly positive, and Dr. Sears receives countless emails from his patients and readers. "My patients tell me they feel better than they have in years. This is ideal for people who are feeling old and run down, or for those who feel more forgetful. It surprises many that you can add healthy and productive years to your life simply by taking **Ultra Accel Q** every day."

You may have seen Dr. Sears on television or read one of his 12 best-selling books. Or you may have seen him speak at the 2016 WPBF 25 Health and Wellness Festival in South Florida, featuring Dr. Oz and special guest Suzanne Somers. Thousands of people attended Dr. Sears's lecture on anti-aging breakthroughs and waited in line for hours during his book signing at the event.

Will Ultra Accel Q Multiply Your Energy?

Ultra Accel Q is turning everything we thought we knew about youthful energy on its head. Especially for people over age 50. In less than 30 seconds every morning, you can harness the power of this breakthrough discovery to restore peak energy and your "spark for life."

So, if you've noticed less energy as you've gotten older, and you want an easy way to reclaim your youthful edge, this new opportunity will feel like blessed relief.

The secret is the "energy multiplying" molecule that activates a dormant gene in your body that declines with age, which then instructs your cells to pump out fresh energy from the inside-out. This growth of new "energy factories" in your cells is called mitochondrial biogenesis.

MEMORY-BUILDING SENSATION: Top doctors are now recommending new *Ultra Accel Q* because it restores decades of lost brain power without a doctor's visit.

Instead of falling victim to that afternoon slump, you enjoy sharp-as-a-tack focus, memory, and concentration from sunup to sundown. And you get more done in a day than most do in a week. Regardless of how exhausting the world is now.

Dr. Sears reports, "The most rewarding aspect of practicing medicine is watching my patients get the joy back in their lives. **Ultra Accel Q** sends a wake-up call to every cell in their bodies… And they actually feel young again."

And his patients agree. "I noticed a difference within a few days," says Jerry from Ft. Pierce, Florida. "My endurance has almost doubled, and I feel it mentally, too. There's a clarity and sense of well-being in my life that I've never experienced before."

How To Get Ultra Accel Q

This is the official nationwide release of **Ultra Accel Q** in the United States. And so, the company is offering a special discount supply to anyone who calls during the official launch.

An Order Hotline has been set up for local readers to call. This gives everyone an equal chance to try **Ultra Accel Q**. And your order is backed up by a no-hassle, 90-day money back guarantee. No questions asked.

Starting at 7:00 AM today, the discount offer will be available for a limited time only. All you have to do is call TOLL FREE **1-800-997-7838** right now and use promo code **NATUAQ325** to secure your own supply.

Important: Due to **Ultra Accel Q** recent media exposure, phone lines are often busy. If you call and do not immediately get through, please be patient and call back.

VOICES / LAZO GITCHOS

Rethinking Fire

Our firefighting playbook was written for a world that no longer exists. We need a new approach, and we need it now.

On January 5, the state of California, anticipating stronger than usual Santa Ana winds after a prolonged drought, requested that state firefighting resources be "prepositioned" to respond to wildfire incidents in the Los Angeles area. The next day, atmospheric scientists noted the dangerous combination of high winds, low humidity, and unstable atmosphere that creates extreme fire weather. All that was needed for a catastrophic, uncontainable wildfire to spread was a spark.

On January 7, firefighters responded to reports of a brush fire near Temescal Canyon, north of Pacific Palisades. The parched chaparral, crowded with flammable non-native species, exploded in flames and sent embers into the air. Gusts nearing 100 miles per hour carried those embers more than two miles and grounded aircraft during the critical window when the fire might have been small enough to control.

We know what happened next: The fire spread relentlessly. As I write, the Palisades, Eaton, Kenneth, and Hurst fires have burned more than 40,000 acres and destroyed more than 12,000 structures, and Palisades—the largest—has remained less than 20 percent contained for eight days. The death toll is in the dozens and likely to rise. Tens of thousands have lost their homes, upending the geography of their lives. Around 100,000 people are currently displaced. It remains to be seen whether California's insurer of last resort will have the funds to protect many of those families. After the winds do calm, it will take years for the region to recover.

The national media responded swiftly to the fires: The world watched as bulldozers pushed aside abandoned cars on Sunset Boulevard and Palisades Drive to let firefighters in and as celebrities spoke of watching their homes burn. Viewers and social media users saw houses go up in flames, and photographers captured apocalyptic scenes of heroism and heartbreak. Pundits and politicians traded barbed comments about climate change, climate denialism, Democratic leadership, budgets, responsibility, and blame.

Merely responding to changing conditions has brought us to where we are today. Government spending on fire suppression breaks records nearly every year. Wildfires increasingly threaten hundreds of thousands of homes and millions of acres of land. Firestorms raze communities and take lives. Budgets ratchet up again, only to be outrun by further need. We have entered the acute phase of a fire crisis long in the making, and reactive adaptation will continue to leave agencies struggling—and failing—to keep up with the chaos.

As a wildland firefighter who has studied and worked in land management policy, I know that fire is not a disaster but a condition—a basic chemical reaction that responds to immediate environmental factors. It is the loss of life and the destruction of livelihoods that are disasters. Fire incidents like those in Los Angeles increasingly escape definition as thoroughly as they have escaped control. Lori Moore-Merrell, the US fire administrator for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, told *The New York Times* last week, "There isn't a fire department in the world that could have gotten in front of this." It's true: "This" was an unfightable fire. No amount of money spent on fire crews, equipment, and response could have stopped the Palisades fire once it had reached just a few acres. We cannot buy back more than a century of mistreatment of the land and changes to the atmosphere. We're responding to fires using a playbook written for a world that no longer exists.

To move forward, away from these firestorms, we have to do more than tweak a few tactics. We have to change the way we think about fires—and not just about fighting them. That starts with changing the way we think about our relationship to nature and to fire itself.

We have to do more than tweak a few tactics. We have to change the way we think about fires—and not just about fighting them.

Wildland firefighters in California and across the coun-

try are trained to fight fire in a range of environments, from grass and brush to dense forests to the wildland-urban interface (WUI), the official term for the places where nature and humanity meet. WUI has recently come under increasing scrutiny as a concept, and for good reason: It presumes that human-inhabited areas can be defined in stark contrast to uninhabited zones. In fact, inhabited and uninhabited areas form separate but closely linked components of the same ecosystems. When those ecosystems burn, the fire does not respect zoning boundaries, town limits, or the edges of parks and preserves.

I've seen destructive wildfires up close. Last summer, I was part of an engine crew in Oregon responding to a fire that had grown to more than 100,000 acres. As we struggled to hold a line and drew down water reserves to prevent the fire from taking hold in the dry grass and trees behind us, blazing trees and buildings lit the night air orange against a black sky. That fire would become Oregon's longest-running blaze of 2024, burning until the end of the regular fire season. But by October, my crewmates and I were back to our regular lives. That was expected: Most wildland firefighters work only in the late spring, summer, and early fall, when fires are most common. Until the past decade, keeping fire crews staffed during the winter made little sense. Firefighters put fires out when they're burning, and fires in the Western United States, except those in increasingly common drought conditions, usually burn in the summer. Though the fire in Oregon burned more than 137,000 acres, it destroyed only a few homes and thus prompted a standard response by local, state, and federal agencies. The LA fires erupted in the depths of winter and were particularly destructive. Our institutions were simply not designed for these circumstances, resulting in the apocalyptic scenes the world witnessed.

It would be comforting to treat the LA inferno as a one-off. But the West's fire season keeps starting earlier and lasting longer. Today's outlier could increasingly be tomorrow's norm. When firefighting resources and tactics are overwhelmed, as they have been in LA, we must be willing to accept that the reason is not as simple as budgets, short-term management failures, development practices, or even climate change alone. It's all of those things combined.

The Palisades firestorm reminded many of the calamities in Lahaina, Hawaii, in 2023 and Boulder, Colorado, in 2021: wind-driven suburban fires that destroyed dense communities in hours or even minutes. Such events, so different from most wildfires, reveal something about our cultural attitude toward fire. We see it as a destructive force to be mitigated, a natural phenomenon that management practices can attenuate or even eliminate—a harm that can be prevented. With regard to these deadly storms, these views aren't wrong, but they are incomplete.

The US government interacts with fire mostly in the name of preventing it. In 2024, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior spent more than $4 billion combined on wildfire suppression and more than $700 million on preparedness. Fire management is based on putting fires out when, as fire managers said euphemistically in a report on the Palisades blaze, "values [are] at risk." Those "values" include human lives, infrastructure, marketable timber, and cultural resources such as scenic areas.

Changing a few management practices won't get California out of the mess it's in.

But there is another way. Southern California's ecosystems evolved in concert with human-stewarded fire. The removal of Indigenous people, who used fire to manage biomass and regulate biological processes, and the suppression of incidental fire since the late 19th century have led to the buildup of unburned fuel. Shifting weather patterns as a result of climate change increase drought conditions and make fire weather less predictable. More variable rainfall causes excess plant growth in some years; then drought dries the plants out, making them flammable the next. Only in the past few years have these effects become obvious to the casual observer. The building of homes and subsequent suppression of fire in environments that have traditionally depended on periodic fires have made communities vulnerable to less predictable, more destructive conflagrations.

While overabundant fuel, climate change, and vulnerable flammable development are often treated as separate and compounding issues, each of them depends on our insistence that our physical environment can and should be controlled rather than inhabited and cared for. This same backward understanding of the human role in managing ecosystems has plagued the West since the beginning of its colonization.

For centuries now, humans have dominated the landscape, extracted resources, and developed housing and infrastructure where it was most convenient. Now our façade of control is slipping away. Reaching stability, and preventing further disaster, will not come from adapting to a "new normal," but from acknowledging our role as a central species in a fragile array of long-derelict ecosystems.

Changing a few management practices won't get California out of the mess it's in. Firefighters will remain overwhelmed for years by the momentum of several centuries of policy failure. But the glaring unnaturalness of these natural disasters, as we saw in North Carolina last year, is beginning to become apparent from coast to coast. Millions of lives are at stake. Accepting responsibility for the health of systems so much larger than ourselves is only the beginning of reclaiming our proper place in the natural world—as stewards, not kings. As these firestorms have so violently shown, we may not have a choice. N

Lazo Gitchos, a current Nation *intern, is a writer, researcher, and laborer from Washington State.*

VOICES / DAVID A. BELL

Le Pen's Legacy

The elder Le Pen is dead, but far-right populists across the world still echo his violent rhetoric and brazen lies.

DONALD TRUMP PROBABLY DOESN'T KNOW IT, BUT he owes a great deal to Jean-Marie Le Pen, the noxious leader of the French far right, who died on January 7 at the age of 96. Back when Trump was nothing more than a blowhard nepo-baby developer and fixture of the gossip columns, Le Pen was creating a model of far-right national populism that has since swept much of the globe. He did more than any other single figure to pioneer its artful mix of violent rhetoric (above all directed against immigrants), brazen mendacity, dog whistles to neofascists, and careful outreach to mainstream conservatives. Trump loyalist Steve Bannon has been an admirer of Le Pen's movement, while his direct imitators in Europe include Austria's Jörg Haider, the Netherlands' Geert Wilders, Britain's Nigel Farage, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, and, not least, Le Pen's daughter Marine, who stands a good chance of winning France's next presidential election.

Jean-Marie Le Pen's political record was long, ugly, vicious, and depressingly successful.

Le Pen's political record was long, ugly, vicious, and depressingly successful. Born into a Breton fishing family, he embraced the extreme from an early age. As a law student in the early 1950s, he was drawn into far-right circles linked to wartime French fascists and Nazi collaborators and became known for his love of street brawling against Communists. He was a physically imposing man, standing six feet tall and over 200 pounds, with a loud voice and blunt, aggressive manner. Constantly gesturing with his fists, Le Pen easily drew attention.

At just 28, he won election to the Parliament of France's Fourth Republic as a member of the short-lived UDCA populist party led by Pierre Poujade. (Le Pen was, in fact, the last surviving deputy of the Fourth Republic, which fell in 1958.) His frequent attacks on the country's Jewish prime minister, Pierre Mendès-France, were laced with unabashed antisemitism: "I say to him: You don't put a country up for sale like cut-price carpets." His military experience, first in Indochina and then in Algeria, left him with a devotion to France's colonial empire and a deep loathing for the politicians who'd surrendered it, first and foremost Charles de Gaulle. Le Pen openly boasted about having tortured Algerian militants during his final tour in North Africa in a paratrooper regiment in 1957, and he had connections to the Secret Army Organization (OAS), which tried to assassinate de Gaulle.

Through the 1970s, Le Pen remained a creature of the political fringe. The far right had been a powerful force in France throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But the German occupation of 1940 to '44, during which a far-right government in Vichy collaborated with Hitler (and sent 77,000 Jews to their deaths in the Holocaust), left it largely discredited. As a result, few mainstream politicians saw Le Pen as a threat when he founded the National Front in 1972. Much of its early membership came from the neofascist New Order movement, and a key early figure, Victor Barthélémy, had served as lieutenant to Jacques Doriot, head of the wartime fascist and collaborationist French Popular Party. The Front won just 1.3 percent of the vote in parliamentary elections in 1973, and 0.7 percent for Le Pen himself in the presidential election of 1974.

But the memory of the war years was fading, and the slow collapse of the once-powerful Communist Party provided a surprising source of support for the Front in industrial areas with high unemployment, where aging and resentful populations proved all too receptive to anti-immigrant messages. Le Pen

REMY DE LA MAUVINIERE / AP

Will This Strange Antarctic Squid Solve America's Memory Crisis?

New Deep Sea Discovery Proven to Be The #1 Natural Enhancer of Memory and Focus

Half a mile beneath the icy waters off the coast of Argentina lives one of the most remarkable creatures in the world.

Fully grown, they're less than 2 feet long and weigh under 10 pounds…

But despite their small size, this strange little squid can have a bigger positive impact on your brain health than any other species on the planet.

They are the single richest source of a vital "brain food" that 250 million Americans are starving for, according to a study published in the British Medical Journal.

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.

Because DHA is so important, lacking enough of it is not only dangerous to your overall health but could be directly related to your brain shrinking with age.

With more than 16 million Americans suffering from age-associated cognitive impairment, it's clear to a top US doctor that's where the problem lies.

Regenerative medicine specialist Dr. Al Sears, says thankfully, "there's still hope for seniors. Getting more of this vital brain food 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 4 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 that 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 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 in the most effective way possible?

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."

MEMORY-RESTORING SENSATION: The memory-saving oil in this Antarctic squid restores decades of lost brain power starting in just 24 hours.

Dr. Sears and his team worked tirelessly for over 2 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 regularly receives 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 **1-800-966-5603**. "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 **1-800-966-5603** 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 **NATOM325** when you call.

worked steadily, received lavish donations from wealthy reactionaries, and won a series of internecine party battles. In 1983, he had his first breakthrough when the National Front won 16 percent of the vote in the industrial city of Dreux and joined mainstream conservatives in a coalition government there. The Machiavellian Socialist president of France, François Mitterrand, helped Le Pen along by cynically proposing to give new immigrants the right to vote in local elections, knowing this would weaken the mainstream right by driving part of its electorate to the Front.

In 1986, the party gained an unprecedented 35 seats in the National Assembly, and two years later Le Pen himself scored 14.4 percent in the first round of the presidential election against Mitterrand. Le Pen remained toxic, however—still linked to former fascists and Nazi collaborators and given to racist and antisemitic outbursts that earned him convictions for hate speech. In a 1987 interview, he notoriously referred to the gas chambers of the Holocaust as a "point of historical detail."

Even so, the party continued its ascension. Cannily, Le Pen was now presenting himself as an opponent of European integration, claiming that feckless French elites were surrendering the nation's sovereignty to Brussels. The message struck home among working-class people, especially after a burst of inflation that was widely blamed on France's adoption of the euro. And in 2002, Le Pen provoked a political earthquake by making it into the runoff round against incumbent Gaullist Jacques Chirac, winning more than 4.8 million votes. Although Chirac rallied nearly every other political faction behind him and wound up crushing Le Pen (who increased his score only slightly), the result was undeniable: The National Front was now a major political party. In 2005, the electorate delivered another shock to French elites when, in a referendum, it voted down a proposed European constitutional treaty, demonstrating the continuing power of Le Pen's nationalist message.

The first decade of this century was marked by the rise of Le Pen's daughter Marine, who succeeded her father as head of the party in 2011. The two did not have an easy relationship, to say the least. Marine, who bears a striking resemblance to Jean-Marie, consistently pushed for the Front to "de-demonize" itself. She wanted the party to cut ties with fascists and open antisemites, cultivate the support of French Jews, and emphasize its loyalty to the French Republic and the heritage of the French Revolution. During the 2007 presidential campaign, she persuaded her father to announce his candidacy on the anniversary of the great revolutionary military victory of Valmy at the battlefield. She strove to clothe the Front's anti-Muslim racism in the language of *laïcité*—French republican secularism.

In that decade's fierce debates over whether to ban "conspicuous religious symbols" (i.e., the hijab) in schools, the Front effectively joined forces with many left-wing *laïcs*. But Jean-Marie refused to break his old habits, saluting an antisemitic comedian and continuing to associate with neofascists. In 2015, after he defended his old comment about the gas chambers, Marine led a move to exclude him from the party, and the two did not speak for several years (although they reconciled before his death). In 2018, she renamed the party the National Rally. But she remains a Le Pen: ferociously hostile to immigrants, contemptuous of French elites and the European Union, and viscerally authoritarian in manner and rhetoric.

Like a malignant Moses, Jean-Marie Le Pen died without ever setting foot in the promised land—the Élysée Palace, residence of French presidents. But his movement may well get there. Since 2015, the mainstream Republican (neo-Gaullist) and Socialist parties have both experienced catastrophic drops in support. The centrist Emmanuel Macron managed to cobble together unstable coalitions and twice defeated Marine Le Pen for the presidency. But in the parliamentary elections of 2022, the National Rally garnered 89 deputies—the greatest number for the far right since the 1880s. Over the next two years, Macron's arrogant insistence on pushing neoliberal reforms over the objections of both public opinion and Parliament (in France, the president and prime minister can enact legislation by decree) sent his popularity crashing.

The first decade of this century was marked by the rise of Le Pen's daughter Marine.

In the European elections last June, the National Rally scored a massive victory, winning more than twice the votes of its nearest competitor and sending France into political chaos, from which it has not yet emerged. In a desperate move, Macron called for snap parliamentary elections, which resulted in a disastrously divided National Assembly. A hastily created New Popular Front of the left managed to outpace the National Rally but fell short of a majority. A new government headed by conservative Michel Barnier stumbled along for three months with the Rally's tacit support, but in December Marine Le Pen withdrew that support and joined the left in a no-confidence motion. Macron then selected the veteran centrist François Bayrou to replace Barnier, but he, too, effectively serves at Marine Le Pen's sufferance. It is entirely possible that if Bayrou's government collapses in its turn, Macron may have no choice but to resign, forcing a new presidential election. Whether Marine herself could compete is in question: As a result of a corruption scandal, a court may soon bar her from running for office for five years. But her charismatic young protégé, Jordan Bardella, is ready to stand in for her.

So in the year that Trump returned to power and his ideological allies across the globe are making terrible strides, Jean-Marie Le Pen's awful daughter or her protégé may finally fulfill his dearest ambition: taking power as president of France. **N**

David A. Bell is the author, most recently, of Men on Horseback: The Power of Charisma in the Age of Revolution. *He teaches history at Princeton University.*

Always looking for the nearest rest stop?

New Prostate Discovery Helps Men Avoid "Extreme Bathroom Planning"

Men across the U.S. are praising a revolutionary prostate pill that's 1000% more absorbable. Now the visionary MD who designed it is pulling out all the stops to keep up with surging demand…

Among the all-too-familiar, occasional problems like sleepless nights, frequent urination, late-night wake ups, a bladder that's never quite empty, and constant, extreme planning for rest stops and bathroom breaks.

These are the common signs of inconvenient urinary issues. But men nationwide are now reporting they've found help these occasional problems thanks to a major breakthrough in nutrient technology.

Prosta-Vive LS is the new prostate pill sweeping the nation. Men say they feel they're now having strong, complete, effortless urine flow they enjoyed in their 20s and 30s.

The key to its success is a new nutrient technology that makes the key ingredient 1000% more absorbable, according to a study by endocrinologists at Washington University in St. Louis.

Nick Summers is the spokesman for Primal Force Inc., the firm in Royal Palm Beach, Fla. that makes **Prosta-Vive LS**. He reports demand is surging due to word-of-mouth and social-media.

"We knew **Prosta-Vive** really worked to 'support healthy, stronger urine flow," Summers stated. "But no one could have predicted the tens of thousands of men looking for a truly supportive prostate pill."

NEW PROSTATE FORMULA DRAWS 5-STAR REVIEWS

It's not the first time Dr. Al Sears, the Florida-based MD who designed the breakthrough formula, has shaken up the status quo in men's health.

A nationally recognized men's health pioneer and the founder of the Sears Institute for Anti-Aging Medicine in Royal Palm Beach, Fla., Dr. Sears has been featured on ABC, CNN, and ESPN.

He's authored more than 500 books, reports, and scientific articles, many focusing on prostate issues that may affect virtually all men sooner or later.

"By age 60, I find about half of my male patients feel the need for prostate support," Dr. Sears explains. "By the time they reach age 80, it's over 90 percent."

Prosta-Vive LS has reportedly made a life-changing difference for these men. One appreciative thank-you letter came from Jim R, a patient.

"I had immediate results," Jim R. wrote in his thank-you note. "I slept through the night without going to the bathroom.

"Last night was the most amazing of all," he added. "I slept for 10 hours without going to the toilet."

Results like these explain the flood of phone calls the company's customer service department is handling from men who want to know how the new formula works...

PROSTATE PILL BACKED BY CLINICAL RESULTS

Prosta-Vive LS's extraordinary success is being attributed to advanced innovations in nutrient technology.

Most prostate pills rely on either outdated saw palmetto … or the prostate-soothing compound Beta-Sitosterol.

But Dr. Sears cites growing evidence that saw palmetto and Beta-Sitosterol work much better together than either does on its own.

In fact, a recent clinical trial involving 66 men taking a combination of saw palmetto and Beta-Sitosterol reported "significant" improvement across the board.

Among the results: Fewer of those occasional late-night wake ups, a stronger stream, less starting and stopping, and complete emptying of the bladder.

That's why **Prosta-Vive LS** includes both saw palmetto and Beta-Sitosterol, to ensure men get the extra prostate support they need. Frustrated men say it's giving them tremendous support.

But there's another key reason **Prosta-Vive LS** is helping men get back control in the bathroom.

YOUR PROSTATE IS HUNGRY FOR HEALTHY FAT

The other key innovation in **Prosta-Vive LS** is its addition of healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

"It turns out what's good for your heart is also good for your prostate," says Dr. Sears. "That's why I put heart-healthy omega-3s in a prostate pill."

Researchers have long known Beta-Sitosterol has a great potential to support healthy prostate function.

NO more extra "pit stops", NO more interrupted meetings - Men are free of bathroom woes and feel RELIEF.

But Beta-Sitosterols are "hydro-phobic" -- they don't mix well with water. And that can make them much harder for the body to absorb.

That's where long-chain omega-3s come in. The latest research shows they boost Beta-Sitosterol absorption by 1000%.

Dr. Sears explains, "Most people only get trace amounts of Beta-Sitosterol because it can be hard to absorb. In this respect, the long-chain fatty acids in **Prosta-Vive LS** are a real game-changer. They supercharge the absorption."

This improved absorption is proving to be a revolutionary advance. **Prosta-Vive LS** is changing men's lives, quickly becoming the No. 1 support supplement for supporting men's prostate health nationwide.

Now, grateful men are calling almost every day to thank **Prosta-Vive LS** for supporting a renewed sense of empowerment over their own lives.

One patient, Ari L., wrote, "I used to get up on occasion at night to go to the bathroom. Now I only get up once… and I feel it has supported my prostate, keeping my PSA levels in the normal range."

Patients report they have more energy, sleep better, and no longer feel embarrassed by that occasional sudden need to use the restroom.

Thanks to **Prosta-Vive LS**, thousands of men feel more confident about their urinary health and are no longer being held hostage to pee problems and feel more confident about their urinary health.

They say they're getting great sleep and finally feel back in charge of their own lives.

HOW TO GET PROSTA-VIVE LS

Right now, the only way to get this powerful, unique nutrient technology that effectively relieves the urge to go is with Dr. Sears' breakthrough **Prosta-Vive** formula.

To secure a supply of **Prosta-Vive**, men need to contact the Sears Health Hotline directly at **1-800-224-1349**.

"It's not available in retail stores yet," says Dr. Sears. "The Hotline allows us to ship directly to the customer and we're racing to keep up with demand."

Dr. Sears feels so strongly about **Prosta-Vive's** effectiveness that all orders are backed by a 100% money-back guarantee. "Just send me back the bottle and any unused product within 90 days from purchase date, and I'll send you your money back," he says.

Given the intense recent demand, the Hotline will only be taking orders for the next 48 hours. After that, the phone number may be shut down to allow for restocking. If you are not able to get through due to extremely high call volume, please try again!

Call **1-800-224-1349** NOW to secure your limited supply of **Prosta-Vive** at a significant discount. To take advantage of this exclusive offer use Promo Code: **NATPV325** when you call.

Donald Trump is poised to become the first president since FDR to appoint the majority of the high court's justices. Their rulings may be among his most lasting legacies.

The Supreme Trump Court

ELIE MYSTAL

DONALD TRUMP'S FIRST TERM AS PRESIDENT GAVE THE REPUBlicans control over the most dangerous body of the most dangerous branch of government: the Supreme Court. With the help of Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell, along with timely retirements and untimely deaths, Trump was able to secure a 6–3 hard-right majority on the court and use it to make the Republicans' least-popular policy dreams come true. In the brief years since, the court has undermined labor rights, stripped back voting rights, and reduced pregnant people to the status of second-class citizens whose bodies can be controlled by Republican state legislatures eager to use them for labor without compensation.

The Democrats might have used Joe Biden's four-year interregnum to begin to claw back the Supreme Court from the Republicans' grip. Particularly during the first two years, with the Democrats in control of the White House and both chambers of Congress, they could have added additional justices to the court. Had they done so, abortion rights could have been saved, voting rights could have been protected, and Trump may have been ruled ineligible to ever run for office again.

Instead, the Democrats did nothing. As the Supreme Court revealed its full moral turpitude to a disgusted public, Congress failed to impose even minimal ethical standards on the justices or cut the court's funding, while Biden sent court expansion to die in a useless commission.

Now we will experience a time of consequences. Vulnerable communities will pay the price for the Democrats' inaction—and as bad as the court's rulings have been in recent years, they are likely to get worse. When the justices are inevitably asked to weigh in on whether Trump can actually revoke birthright citizenship, don't expect them to stop the guy they literally helped get elected from violating the Constitution. When they hear a lawsuit on whether Elon Musk and his apartheid-adjacent DOGE bros can resegregate the workforce, don't expect them to honor the 14th Amendment and the Civil Rights Act. As for writing trans kids out of existence while citing the writings of J.K. Rowling as precedent, well, this court has already signaled it's eager to do that.

Still, all of this represents just the

ILLUSTRATION BY **BRIAN STAUFFER**


·EQUAL·JUSTICE·UNDER·LAW·

opening salvo in a GOP reign of terror that could outlive Trump and most of the people reading this, because Trump's reelection gives the Republicans a chance to do something even more extreme with the Supreme Court: to make their judicial control permanent. Backed by a healthy majority in the Senate, the Republicans can swap out their oldest justices for younger blood, entrenching their dystopian view that the Constitution confers unlimited rights to gun owners and nobody else. And if the feckless gods decree that one of the Democratic justices should succumb to the ultimate law of nature during the next four years, the Republicans will be able to appoint their replacement as well, giving them a 7–2 majority.

The honest truth: A woman demonstrates outside the Supreme Court on the day it ruled in favor of a former police officer who participated in the January 6 coup attempt.

In the case of either of these events, the Supreme Court will not just have a Republican majority by 2029, when Trump leaves office; it will likely have a Trump majority. Trump is now poised to become the first president since Franklin Delano Roosevelt to have appointed a majority of the justices on the Supreme Court. His justices will outlive him, and their impact on law and policy will outlast whatever temporary tragedies Trump brings forth through his executive orders.

To have that kind of decades-long impact, Trump will require some help from the current Republican justices who are past their sell-by date. Clarence Thomas is 76. Sam Alito is 74. John Roberts just turned 70, and while he is unlikely to retire, life starts to get a bit less certain when you hit your eighth decade. Republican lawmakers and Trump himself will actively pressure these Republican justices to retire and offer them golden parachutes or whatever else their corrupt little hearts desire.

The Supreme Court may have not just a Republican majority when Trump leaves office in 2029, it may have a Trump majority.

The one most likely to leave voluntarily is Alito. While he enjoys the power of being a Supreme Court justice, Alito is also partisan to his very core and is fully capable of reading the room and an actuary table. By retiring while Trump is in the White House and Republicans control the Senate, he could help out his beloved Republican Party, and that is Alito's greatest mission in life. Alito (and his wife) are rumored to hate Washington, DC. When Trump gives him the opportunity to be replaced by one of his former law clerks, I reckon he'll take it.

Clarence Thomas, by contrast, will take some convincing. If his health holds, he's on track to break William O. Douglas's record as the longest-serving Supreme Court justice—a milestone he'll reach sometime in 2028. Thomas will never get a spot in the Museum of African American History (unless it opens up a "Sometimes It Be Your Own People" wing), but breaking Douglas's record is a legacy in itself. And Thomas (and his wife), unlike Alito (and his wife), is believed to really enjoy DC—to say nothing of the many perks that come with being a Supreme Court justice on real estate baron Harlan Crow's payroll.

Thomas is also an iconoclast, which means that while the pleas for him to retire will get very loud in Republican circles, especially as we approach the 2028 presidential election, he might well resist them. I've always thought that, of all the justices on the court, Thomas is the one most likely to die at his desk while doing what he loves, which is taking away rights from Black people and women. Still, I think the raw power of his partisan allegiances will win out in the end—assuming, that is, that Republicans find a university or think tank willing to write

MICHAEL A. MCCOY / GETTY IMAGES

Thomas a blank check for the rest of his life.

If Trump does get the opportunity to replace some Supreme Court justices, it's unclear who will mastermind the actual appointments. Last time, conservative archvillain Leonard Leo called the shots, albeit through his sock puppet, then–White House counsel Don McGahn. Trump's picks of Neil Gorsuch, alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett were straight out of Federalist Society central casting.

This time, we don't know if Leo and his ilk will hold the same kind of power over Trump. Trump's cabinet appointments show that he values loyal sycophants over competent officials, and there's every reason to think he'll try to fill the Supreme Court with people loyal to himself, not Leo. There's also a new voice in Trump's ear that wasn't there the last time: that of shadow president Elon Musk. We don't know whom he wants to see on the court, but given the amount of litigation that Musk and his businesses are involved in, one expects he'll have his opinions on Supreme Court appointments, and those opinions will carry weight.

The fluid power dynamics among Trump, Musk, Leo, and the Senate confirmation process—ostensibly under the control of the new Senate majority leader, John Thune—mean that there's more uncertainty about Trump's likely Supreme Court nominees than for any incoming president in my lifetime. Indeed, the only thing I can be 100 percent sure of is that whoever Trump picks (and the Senate confirms) will be a deplorable jurist, dedicated to a far-right political agenda masquerading as law, and determined to inject more bigotry, discrimination, and sexism into the Constitution.

Still, in the cauldron of contenders for the nation's highest court, there are a few names that keep bubbling to the top. Let's discuss the five most likely people Trump could nominate to entrench one-party Republican rule on the court.

Andrew Oldham

Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals

Most people were concerned that Texas's litigious and nefarious attorney general, Ken Paxton, would be given some kind of federal appointment in the new Trump administration. But the real threat coming from the Lone Star State is Andy Oldham, a circuit court judge who was appointed to his post by, yes, Donald Trump.

Oldham began making his bones as Texas Governor Greg Abbott's right-hand lawman. As deputy solicitor general of Texas, he served as what the Alliance for Justice called the "architect" of Texas's strategy to block Barack Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) order. He also took strong stances against environmental protections and reproductive rights—and in favor of gun access. He did so well as deputy SG that Abbott elevated him to serve as his chief legal counsel in 2018.

While Andrew Oldham checks all of Trump's boxes, it's unclear if he can count on the support of Elon Musk, the shadow president.

Oldham didn't stay in that position very long, however. A few weeks in, Trump nominated him to the Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. There, Oldham has done what Trump expected him to do: He has issued opinions overturning the federal ban on ghost guns and defending Texas's draconian immigration laws and, in one particularly curious ruling, appeared to support vigilante justice. He has also been an outspoken opponent of what the white wing now calls "DEI."

But none of that is what makes Oldham stand out, as white male judges who like guns and hate women and Mexicans are a dime a dozen these days. The most interesting thing about Oldham is how poorly written his opinions are. He frontloads his overlong musings with enough amateur-historian babble to make Dan Brown blush, then sermonizes with the kind of conservative zeal that recalls John Lithgow's character in the movie *Footloose*. The law, if discussed at all, is relegated to afterthoughts and footnotes.

That doesn't seem to be a problem for people in Trump world, particularly since Oldham has other qualities they like, among them being against the counting of all eligible ballots—and in favor of presidents being free to commit crimes without prosecution. In October 2024, Oldham wrote an opinion in a case about whether Mississippi could count absentee ballots received after Election Day. He argued that federal law preempted the state from counting such ballots—which was a key part of Trump's strategy to steal the election should he have lost it—but he did grant that the court shouldn't block Mississippi from counting those ballots unless they were dispositive.

Of course, Trump won the election fairly, and in November, a week after the election, Oldham headlined a Federalist Society event to crow about it. In his speech, Oldham said that we need to make sure that no one is ever charged "on the basis of their politics" (which, again, is the false narrative Trump has been pushing to explain his multiple felony indictments), and also that the judiciary must be protected from "reprisals" from the legislative branch. According to Oldham, those reprisals include commonsense reforms like court expansion and ethics laws.

Practicing for retirement? Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito attend a private event together.

JACQUELYN MARTIN / GETTY IMAGES

While Oldham checks all of Trump's boxes, it's unclear whether he can count on the support of the shadow president, Musk. Oldham joined the unanimous opinion in *NetChoice v. Paxton*, a case that explored whether Texas could regulate social media platforms when they censor content. The opinion rejects "the idea that corporations have a freewheeling First Amendment right to censor what people say." That opinion was later reversed by the Supreme Court, 9–0.

We know Elon Musk likes to pretend that he's in favor of free speech and against censorship. We also know that Musk likes to reserve the right to throttle content and shadow-ban people who are not tweeting out pro-Republican messages. Oldham's minority viewpoint on the right of states to regulate these platforms might well be a strike against him.

Still, Oldham has one final ace up his sleeve: He's a former clerk for and protégé of Samuel Alito. The last two justices who retired voluntarily (Anthony Kennedy and Stephen Breyer) were replaced by their former clerks (Brett Kavanaugh and Ketanji Brown Jackson, respectively). Promising to replace a justice with somebody they mentored is a mighty big carrot that can be used to entice a justice to leave the bench.

Reading Judge James Ho's opinions is like going to a wildlife reserve with the Trump children instead of David Attenborough.

Oldham is only 46 years old. If elevated to the Supreme Court, he could wield power for 30 years or more. Replacing Samuel Alito with a Samuel Alito clone who writes worse, and then forcing us to suffer under his legal yoke indefinitely, sounds like the kind of torment the gods might have debated for Sisyphus before ultimately going with the rock.

James Ho

Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals

As I said, it can always get worse. James C. Ho is a former clerk for Clarence Thomas and, as with Oldham for Alito, is being mentioned as a potential enticement for Thomas to retire and pass the torch to the next generation.

Ho is from Taiwan (he was naturalized as a US citizen at the age of 9) and, if elevated, would become the first Asian American justice on the Supreme Court. For all of the Republicans' bluster and vitriol about DEI, they are happy to play identity politics when it suits them. Amy Coney Barrett, for instance, is on the court in part because Trump promised to appoint a woman (who would overturn *Roe v. Wade*) to replace Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Replacing the second Black justice, who happens to hate Black people, with an immigrant justice who happens to hate immigrants sounds exactly like Republican thinking to me.

Ho is well qualified to perform what Republicans call jurisprudence these days. After law school at the University of Chicago, he was part of the *Bush v. Gore* team and helped to get George W. Bush appointed president by the court. Ho was rewarded for these efforts with various positions in the Bush Department of Justice. He then served as chief legal counsel for Senator John Cornyn on the Senate Judiciary Committee before clerking for Thomas. After his clerkship, Ho was appointed to be the solicitor general of Texas in 2008, succeeding Senator Ted Cruz in that job. Trump nominated Ho to the Fifth Circuit in 2017, and after he was confirmed, he was sworn in to his seat by Thomas in Harlan Crow's library. If you designed the career trajectory of a Republican Supreme Court justice in a laboratory, it would look a lot like the path Ho has traveled.

On the Fifth Circuit, Ho has been involved in nearly all of the hot-button culture war issues that have come before his court, and he has staked out extremist positions with unnecessary concurrences almost every time. He's concurred in numerous gun cases, always arguing that the Second Amendment essentially prevents any restriction or regulation on gun ownership. He concurred in the case that attempted to ban the abortion pill, mifepristone, and gave the wildest justification on record for why the plaintiffs deserved to have standing in the case: He argued that people like dentists have the right to sue abortion-pill makers because they like seeing pregnant women in the wild.

Ho's father was an ob-gyn, by the way. Reading his opinions is like going to a wildlife reserve with the Trump children instead of David Attenborough: Everything exists for his personal amusement and enjoyment; any natural beauty and tranquility is pierced by insufferable pseudo-scientific chatter; and something is probably going to get shot.

Ho's opinions are risible, and some commentators have pointed out that this has had the unintentional effect of making him more powerful and popular in Republican circles. In their world, where "owning the libs" is the most valuable currency, Ho is wealthy. Ian Millhiser has written that "if you could breathe life into 4chan" and give that life form the powers and privileges of a federal judge with a lifetime appointment, "you would have created Judge James Ho."

If Ho were a man of consistent beliefs, that would be one thing, but he's really just a guy willing to say anything to get his next job. That's

Andrew Oldham

Aileen Cannon

Neomi Rao

Amul Thapar

James Ho

FROM LEFT: SHURAN HUANG / *THE WASHINGTON POST* VIA GETTY IMAGES; CC 4.0; BILL CLARK / *CQ ROLL CALL*; ED REINKE / AP; TOM WILLIAMS / *CQ ROLL CALL*

been on full display since Trump's election. One of Ho's longest-standing legal opinions is that birthright citizenship is sacrosanct in the Constitution and cannot be undone absent a constitutional amendment. He's been on record with that belief for nearly 20 years—until it became apparent that Trump was interested in revoking the right. At that point, Ho changed his tune. In an interview he gave a week after Trump's election, he said, "No one to my knowledge has ever argued that the children of invading aliens are entitled to birthright citizenship…. And I can't imagine what the legal argument for that would be."

James Ho is only 51, and he's not about to let one bedrock constitutional principle get in the way of his next gig. He has already measured the windows in Thomas's office, and Harlan Crow is ready to buy him new drapes. If Thomas gets struck by a bolt of lightning in the next four years, it will just mean that Ho has learned how to control the weather.

Aileen Mercedes Cannon

US District Court for the Southern District of Florida

Aileen Cannon is a mediocrity in the world of judges. She is common, banal. If you threw a dart into any Federalist Society luncheon at any of the top 15 law schools in the country, you'd most likely end up hitting Aileen Cannon or someone just like her. She has no business being on any list of potential Supreme Court nominees, but she likely will be, for one simple reason: Trump likes surrounding himself with mediocrities who owe their careers and status to him.

Cannon was born in Colombia but grew up in Miami. Her mother is Cuban—she left after the revolution—while her father hails from Indiana. After prep school in Miami, Cannon got her undergraduate degree from Duke University. She was a member of the Tri Delta sorority and wrote for Miami's Spanish-language newspaper, *El Nuevo Herald*.

From there, Cannon took a bog-standard path to becoming a federal judge on the Republican side. She went to the University of Michigan Law School, where she joined the Federalist Society, but according to a *New York Times* profile, "she was not an especially visible presence." She graduated in 2007, and in 2008 she clerked for Judge Steven Colloton, a George W. Bush appointee, on the Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit, out in Iowa.

Rather than getting a Supreme Court clerkship, which is what the alleged bright lights in the Federalist Society firmament usually do, Cannon opted for private practice. She went to the law firm Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, which has a reputation for being an intellectually safe space for conservative-aligned corporate lawyers. She spent three years making money, and then in 2013 she moved to the US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Florida, as an assistant United States attorney.

It is, again, not uncommon for AUSAs to make the jump to becoming a federal judge in the district they serve in, and that's what Cannon did. In 2019, she was contacted by Florida Senator (and fellow member of the conservative Cuban diaspora) Marco Rubio about a potential elevation to the federal bench. After a series of interviews, she was nominated by Trump to the district court in May 2020, at the age of just 39.

Cannon was confirmed to her post on November 12, 2020, during the lame-duck session of Congress after Trump lost the election but before his forces attacked the Capitol. Her confirmation vote was 56–21, so in addition to inexplicably gaining some Democratic support, she also benefited from the Democrats, once again, just not taking judicial appointments all that seriously.

Nobody outside of a few trial lawyers in Miami would know who Cannon is save for the fact that she was randomly assigned the *Trump v. United States* case after FBI agents raided Mar-a-Lago and found Trump in possession of stolen classified material. Over the course of that litigation, Cannon took Trump's side at nearly every turn, issuing bizarre rulings that were criticized as wrong and craven readings of the law by other Federalist Society lawyers—and, in some cases, were overturned by the 11th Circuit on appeal. Nonetheless, Cannon dutifully helped Trump delay the prosecution of the case until he was once again the presumptive Republican nominee for president. Then, in July, she dismissed the case outright.

Trump likes to surround himself with mediocrities like Aileen Cannon who owe their careers and status to him.

The stolen-documents case was, in many ways, the greatest threat to Trump's physical freedom, but Cannon made his problems essentially go away. She did not merely slip Trump a bobby pin so he could unlock his handcuffs; she did him one better and effectively hid him in her house so

The proto–Trump court: The nine justices of the current Supreme Court; six were appointed by Republican presidents, including three by Trump during his first term.

OLIVIER DOULIERY / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Gang of six: Cardboard cutouts of the conservative justices in front of the Supreme Court.

the state could never put the manacles on him in the first place. An AI judge programmed by Musk and Don Jr. to help Trump wouldn't be as obvious about its intentions as Cannon.

That's the only reason Cannon is on this list. There are literally hundreds of conservative judges, lawyers, and law professors with more impressive résumés who have proven track records supporting reactionary conservative causes. There are more rabid Trump judges (such as Andy Oldham and Amarillo District Court Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk) who can be relied on to take away the rights of women, gay and trans people, and any non-white person who dares to ask for equal justice in America. But none of those judges have so openly debased themselves to keep Trump out of prison. Cannon's sole Supreme Court credential is her willingness to read the law in whichever way helps Trump the most.

Trump could reward her for her service without putting her all the way on the Supreme Court. She is, after all, only a district court judge, and so the next logical step in her career would be an appointment to the Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit (which oversees Alabama, Florida, and Georgia). Giving Cannon a vote on how federal election laws are applied in Florida and Georgia should be enough of a reward for bootlicking. She's only 43, and so she has more than enough time to use the 11th Circuit to prove that she belongs on the Supreme Court.

But these are not normal times. Fast-tracking Cannon to the Supreme Court would send a shock wave through the conservative legal establishment and tell every career-minded Federalist Society judge that there's a new sheriff in town—and that loyalty to Trump is even more important than loyalty to Leonard Leo.

Neomi Rao has been my pick for the most dangerous person who could be appointed to the Supreme Court for eight years running.

Neomi Rao

DC Circuit Court of Appeals

To paraphrase the character Bane as he famously explains in *The Dark Knight Rises* that Batman is not hard-core enough to defeat him: Aileen Cannon merely adopted the dark; Neomi Rao was born in it and molded by it. Rao has been my pick for the most dangerous person who could be appointed to the Supreme Court for eight years running, and I see no objective reason to demote her in my nightmares.

Rao has expressed vile beliefs since she was very young. While in college at Yale, she wrote in *The Yale Herald*: "Unless someone made her drinks undetectably strong or forced them down her throat, a woman, like a man, decides when and how much to drink. And if she drinks to the point where she can no longer choose, well, getting to that point was part of her choice." That statement alone should be disqualifying for a person entrusted with the lifetime power of judging other people's actions.

Of course, Rao's statements on rape have not been considered disqualifying by the Republicans. In 2018, she was nominated by Trump to the Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit to fill the seat vacated by (wait for it) alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh. During her confirmation hearing, when she was questioned about her college writings, Rao said that some of them made her "cringe" and that there were "certainly some sentences and phrases" that she "wouldn't use today"—and that was enough

BILL CLARK/ *CQ ROLL CALL* VIA GETTY IMAGES

for the Republicans. She was confirmed 53–46, with every single Republican senator voting for her.

Putting the rape stuff aside (which is apparently a grace we're required to extend to Republicans in our society), Rao has a long record. After graduating from the University of Chicago Law School in 1999, she clerked for Clarence Thomas and then worked in the George W. Bush administration as an associate White House counsel. In 2006, she became a law professor at George Mason University, which has become a kind of breeding ground for conservative judicial groupthink. She was instrumental in getting the law school's name changed to the Antonin Scalia School of Law (or "ASSlaw," as I dubbed it, until they again changed the name to the Antonin Scalia Law School to avoid my acronym). There, she staked out strong positions against *Roe v. Wade* and the administrative state and in favor of the practice of dwarf-tossing for money. She briefly served in the Trump administration's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs before he elevated her to the bench.

Since she's been on the DC Circuit, Rao has been Trump's most stalwart defender, often writing as the lone dissenter on panels that go 2–1 against him. She was the only one to dissent in three separate cases involving whether the government could subpoena Trump's records and financial documents. In a fourth case, Rao argued that special prosecutor Jack Smith should not have been able to subpoena records from Twitter involving Trump's deleted tweets during the January 6 riot. Rao's rulings should make Shadow President Musk very happy.

When she's not busy defending Trump, Rao is busy defending his cronies. She voted to dismiss the case that charged former national security adviser Michael Flynn with being an unregistered foreign agent. She was again in dissent, and Flynn eventually pleaded guilty, which led to Trump pardoning him. But, hey, at least she tried.

Perhaps most troubling of all, Rao has a real love for executions. In the last half of Trump's first term, his administration ramped up the killing of people on death row. When lawsuits trying to stem the tide of death ended up in front of Rao, she consistently ruled on the side of the executioner.

So when I say Rao is dangerous, I mean it literally. We're talking about a judge who wants to give everybody from Trump to Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to the common hangman a new set of boots.

As they're both 51-year-old nonwhite former Clarence Thomas clerks, one could view Rao and Ho as competing for the same seat, should it open up. They have certainly been vying over the past few years to see who can produce the most ludicrous opinions. I'd say Ho has just barely "won" this infernal race, but that's only because Rao hasn't had an opportunity to write anything about rape or abortion, where she can truly let her freak flag fly. Rao also seems a little gun-shy when talking to the press, perhaps because of the rough confirmation battle over her college articles, while the most dangerous place in Dallas is between James Ho and a camera.

At 51, Rao is young enough that she doesn't need to be picked for the first seat that becomes available. But should anything happen to one of the three liberal women justices, then I imagine that under the Republicans' DEI logic, Rao's gender would make her an appealing replacement for any of them. Indeed, Rao has done every single thing a conservative woman would do if she wanted to be nominated to the Supreme Court by a misogynistic sexual predator like Donald Trump. That's what makes her terrifying.

In any normal Republican administration, Amul Thapar would be the first person nominated to the Supreme Court.

Amul Roger Thapar

Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals

Amul Thapar's appointment to the court of appeals for the Sixth Circuit in 2017 was Trump's second judicial nomination, following right behind that of Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch. What that should tell you is that Thapar had someone powerful looking out for him—and that person was former Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell.

McConnell plucked Thapar from his role as US attorney for the Eastern District of Kentucky back in 2008 and got him appointed as a district court judge under President George W. Bush. Almost a decade later, McConnell pushed for Thapar to make the jump straight from the district court to the Supreme Court for the seat that eventually went to Gorsuch; Thapar's appointment to the Sixth Circuit was his consolation prize. McConnell again pushed for Thapar when Justice Anthony Kennedy resigned, but that seat ultimately went to Brett Kavanaugh.

Given that McConnell couldn't get Thapar onto the Supreme Court from his perch as Senate majority leader, I doubt that he can get Thapar there now, given that McConnell is no longer all-powerful and needs to be rebooted halfway through most of his speeches. There must be something between Thapar and Trump that just doesn't vibe. My (uninformed) guess as to Thapar's problem is that he's smart, hardworking, not openly corrupt, and not as intellectually bankrupt as some of the other potential Supreme Court nominees. These are not qualities that Trump values.

So why is he on this list? Because in any normal Republican administration, Amul Thapar would be

Close call: Healthcare workers protest outside the Supreme Court during oral arguments for a case challenging a law requiring hospitals to perform emergency abortions. The court ultimately punted.

BILL CLARK/ *CQ ROLL CALL* VIA GETTY IMAGES

the first person nominated to the Supreme Court. Ho and Rao are toxic legal lunatics; Oldham can barely pretend to be concerned about "the law"; and Cannon is a golf caddy dressed in ill-fitting judicial garb. Thapar, by contrast, is just a normal extremist Republican interested in doing normal evil Republican things.

Of the poisons arrayed before me, I'll choose the mediocre partisan hack over the experienced and well-trained evildoer.

Thapar has gotten to the cusp of supreme lifetime power the long way. Born in Michigan to immigrant parents from India and raised in Ohio, Thapar drove a truck for his father's HVAC business while in high school. He went to Boston College for his undergraduate years and eventually made his way to Berkeley for law school. But he didn't get a Supreme Court clerkship and instead worked his way into elite legal circles through private practice, a few adjunct professor gigs, and eventually the US attorney's office. Along the way, he got married and converted from Hinduism to Catholicism.

Compare Thapar's backstory with those of the men who beat him out for the Supreme Court job. Both Gorsuch and Kavanaugh are scions of wealth and privilege. They both attended the same elite DC prep school; both went on to Ivy League colleges followed by Ivy League law schools; and both spent time working for the Bush administration. They're pretty much the same guy, and their petty (fascist)-nerd-versus-(attempted-rapist)-jock squabbles belie the fact that they're experientially indistinguishable.

If it sounds as though I almost like Thapar, don't get it twisted. Despite his more humble beginnings, Thapar has spent his career trying to make the world safe for privileged white men. On the Sixth Circuit, he's been a ruthless defender of white patriarchy, with all of the usual Republican outbursts against women's rights, LGBTQ rights, immigration, diversity, and the poor.

Thapar's most notable cases involved Covid. He dissented from a ruling that allowed President Biden's vaccination mandates to proceed. He joined an opinion saying that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had no power to impose an eviction moratorium to protect renters during the pandemic. And he wrote a majority opinion denying the fast-tracking of Covid relief funds to women and minority restaurant owners, saying that the law in question unconstitutionally discriminated against white people.

The Republican legal brain trust loves him because Thapar acts like originalism is the one true gospel. He lectures incessantly about originalism; argues that people should withhold funding from law schools that don't teach it (notwithstanding the fact that every law school makes you read Antonin Scalia's opinions and forces you to pretend they're reasonable); and even wrote a sycophantic book praising Clarence Thomas that I won't read until I'm consigned to Hell. Thapar (along with Gorsuch) is particularly in favor of the "nondelegation doctrine," which is a thing conservatives made up to essentially argue that executive agencies don't have a right to exist because James Madison told them so when they asked him with their Ouija board.

Still, for all his best efforts, Thapar is unlikely to get the job. He's 55, and when Trump didn't swap him in for Kavanaugh when the attempted-rape allegations dropped (which is what any normal, non-predator president would have done), that was probably his last, best shot at a Supreme Court gig.

But don't worry too much about him. With bird flu on the rise, Thapar will likely have many more opportunities to make sure that people suffer and die.

An "evolving" relationship: Donald Trump shakes hands with John Thune, who has replaced Mitch McConnell as Senate majority leader.

JABIN BOTSFORD / *THE WASHINGTON POST* VIA GETTY IMAGES

There are a host of other judges who could be in competition for Supreme Court seats as they open up, but if Alito or Thomas should retire tomorrow, these are the people who I believe will get a first look from the Trump administration. The astute reader will note that on this list of potential nominees, four of the five contestants are not white; four are either immigrants or the children of immigrants; and two are women. The conservative legal bench is deep with immigrant and first-generation jurists who are eager to yank away the ladder that their own families used to pull themselves up, and replete with women who are happy to stand in the way of progress for women's rights.

For all of that, you'll notice that the basic, standard, Harvard-educated white guy, Andy Oldham, remains at the top of the list and is by far the most likely person to get the first Supreme Court appointment that becomes available. Some of the others might have a shot should Thomas get raptured or otherwise relinquish his "Black job," but if Alito retires

MICHAEL BROCHSTEIN / SIPA VIA AP IMAGES

In the balance: People demonstrate in support of trans youth as the Supreme Court debates a law banning puberty blockers and hormone therapy for trans teens.

first, it's going to be a like-for-like switch.

For my part, I hope Aileen Cannon gets nominated. Yes, I'm serious. Of the poisons arrayed before me, I'll choose the mediocre partisan hack over the experienced and well-trained evildoer.

I learned this lesson the hard way, back in 2005, when George W. Bush nominated one of his longtime friends, Harriet Miers, to the Supreme Court. The elite legal-industrial complex, including both Senate Republicans and Democrats and expensively educated lawyers like me, were appalled. Miers lacked the august qualifications of traditional Supreme Court justices and was nominated only because she was a Bush crony. Movement Republicans threw a hissy fit, and Bush withdrew Miers's nomination and then replaced her with… Samuel Alito.

What I've learned in the intervening years is that there are far more malign and monstrous things lurking in the bowels of the Federalist Society than mediocre partisan hacks. Cannon would be an awful Supreme Court justice, but she'd be awful in simple, predictable ways. Yes, she'd do whatever democracy-destroying thing Trump wants her to do, but in case you haven't realized it yet, Trump has already won. The damage he'll do cannot be mitigated by nine law dorks in robes. If the Supreme Court doesn't rubber-stamp whatever it is that Trump wants to do, he will do it anyway. The battle for the 2020s has been fought, and the bad guys won.

What matters now are the battles of the 2030s and '40s, when we will (with any luck) be struggling to undo the damage of the white ethnocentric Trump era. The judges and justices Trump picks this term will be the people we have to overcome in that future. I think my children will be better off trying to overturn some Trump-serving gobbledygook penned by Cannon than trying to de-Klan entire doctrines of racist insanity laid down by Oldham or Ho or Rao.

Whomever Trump picks, though, we are in for hard times. The five people on this list are what Americans voted for when they voted for Trump. People will get what they asked for, and they'll keep getting it until they learn not to want it anymore.

So if you're looking for hope over these next terrible years, please do not look to the Supreme Court. Please understand that it has been fully captured by MAGA forces. Even if the court blocks one or two of Trump's policies, there will be countless others it allows to stand. Trump cannot be fought through the courts, because he has already won the courts.

Whoever Trump picks for the court will be a deplorable jurist dedicated to a far-right political agenda masquerading as law.

My hope is that Democrats someday realize that the Supreme Court is their enemy. My hope is that the legacy of the Trump court finally and forever weans the Democrats off their nostalgic memories of the Warren court. My hope is that, should the Democrats ever be allowed to take power again, they will reform and disempower the Supreme Court on Day 1, because that will be the first step toward undoing the damage caused by the Trump era, should any of us survive to see the other side of this nightmare. N

GAZA

THE PLOT TO "RESETTLE"

As soon as Israel invaded Gaza in 2023, far-right settlers set their sights on the Strip. They haven't given up.

JOSHUA LEIFER

DANIELLA WEISS, THE 79-YEAR-OLD LEADER OF THE FAR-RIGHT SETTLER organization Nachala, stepped out of her white Mitsubishi SUV and into the parking lot of the Sderot train station, a mere three kilometers from the Gaza Strip. It was December 26, the second night of Hanukkah, and for weeks Nachala had been aggressively promoting a celebratory "procession to Gaza" and candle-lighting ceremony in a closed military zone by the border. The event was to be the next step in Nachala's escalating campaign to rebuild Jewish settlements in Gaza. If they could not yet enter the Strip, they would at least try to get as close as possible.

A group of teenage girls in ankle-length skirts rushed to take selfies with Weiss, who had been sanctioned by the Canadian government in June for perpetrating extremist violence against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank. Nearby, a scrum of yeshiva students from Sderot jumped and chanted, "*Am Yisrael Chai*"—an old slogan that means "The people of Israel live," which has become a nationalist mantra. In the back corner of the parking lot, two shipping containers (what the settlers call caravans) emblazoned with the words "Gaza Is Ours Forever!" sat atop heavy flat-bed trucks waiting, it seemed, for the order to drive into the devastated territory. In the distance, occasional explosions in Gaza illuminated the horizon with a hellish light, the sound rattling the windows in an adjacent strip mall.

"We are going to take this procession to the area of the Black Arrow, to a hill that overlooks Gaza," Weiss told me when I asked about Nachala's plan for the night. (The Black Arrow is a memorial to Israeli paratroopers, administered by the Jewish National Fund, less than a kilometer from the cement and razor-wire barrier that separates Gaza from Israel.) "Hopefully, the police will let us get there," she added, grinning. "We always find a way."

Weiss's fundamentalist fervor belies her years. One of the last of the founding generation of settler leaders still alive, she is a former general secretary of Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), the messianic religious-nationalist movement that erupted in the early 1970s and launched the settlement enterprise in the occupied West Bank. As they entered middle age, many of Weiss's counterparts traded the militant life for bourgeois comfort under the terra-cotta roofs of suburban settlements or put their time of terrorism and sabotage behind them for careers in the media or politics. Not Weiss.

Aside from a stint as mayor of Kedumim, an ultra-hard-line settlement near the Palestinian city of Nablus, Weiss remained on the hilltops of the occupied West Bank, exhorting young Jewish Israelis to take over the land. In 2005, she founded Nachala with another leader of Gush Emunim's ultra-extremist flank, Moshe Lewinger of the notorious Kiryat Arba settlement near Hebron, with the aim of keeping the antiestablishment flame of the settler movement burning. In the years since, she has become something of a guru to the radical hilltop youth settlers, guiding them in the construction of illegal outposts and in the art of resistance, both civil and uncivil, to any attempts by Israeli authorities to control them.

Almost immediately after the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, Weiss

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ILLUSTRATION BY **ADRIÀ FRUITÓS**


גוש קטיף
לנצח נצחים

Flight from the north: Palestinians flee their homes in the northern Gaza Strip with whatever they can carry as Israel intensifies its attacks.

MAHMOUD ISSA / MIDDLE EAST IMAGES / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

and the rest of the right-wing settler movement set their sights on Gaza. Against the backdrop of Israel's massive bombardment and the ethnic cleansing of the territory's north, they ramped up their efforts to reestablish Jewish settlements there, broadcasting their intentions loudly and bluntly—and with the knowledge that they could count on significant support within the governing coalition. This past December, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who leads the Religious Zionism party, declared (not for the first time) on Israeli public radio, "We must occupy Gaza, maintain a military presence there, and establish settlements." Many in Smotrich's camp wanted to prolong the war, reasoning that the longer Israel continued to brutalize Gaza, the greater the likelihood that settlers would succeed in installing an outpost—the germ of a settlement—in the Strip.

The announcement of a ceasefire agreement, which went into effect on January 19, has slowed the Gaza resettlement movement's momentum, but it has not stalled it. The ceasefire is fragile, dangerously so: There is no guarantee that it will last beyond the initial six-week phase, which involves only a partial Israeli withdrawal from the territory. And there have already been reports that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, to keep his hard-right government together, has conceded to Smotrich's demand that Israel restart the war after the first phase ends and gradually assert full Israeli control over the Gaza Strip. Whether that happens will depend largely on the Trump administration's willingness to exert continuous pressure on Netanyahu to carry out the subsequent stages of the ceasefire agreement—which would very likely jeopardize the survival of Netanyahu's governing coalition.

Amid this uncertainty, the right-wing settler movement has continued to press its eliminationist vision of resettling Gaza. The settlers are openly praying for the ceasefire's failure, while a handful of the more militant among them remain camped within sprinting distance of the separation barrier. The night before the ceasefire went into effect, Nachala led several dozen activists back to the Black Arrow memorial to stage a protest against the agreement. If and when the ceasefire collapses and Israeli ground troops return to the Strip in full force, the settlers will be prepared to renew their push, even more determined to establish new settlements there. In that scenario, there will be frighteningly little standing in their way.

Despite the ceasefire, the right-wing settler movement has continued to press its eliminationist vision of resettling Gaza.

Israel's religious-Zionist settlement movement burst onto the scene following the country's victory the 1967 War. It was during that conflict that Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula—and it was just a few short years later, in the early 1970s, that successive Israeli governments on both the left and the right began enabling the construction of settlements across the newly occupied territories. By the 2000s, the Gaza Strip had become home to nearly 9,000 Israeli settlers living in a total of 21 settlements. Seventeen were in an area that Israelis called Gush Katif, on Gaza's southern coast, which effectively blocked Palestinians in the cities of Khan Younis and Rafah from access to the Mediterranean Sea.

Many of the settlers who made their way to Gaza came from the more ideologically extreme factions of the religious-Zionist movement. Devout believers in the messianic vision of a Jewish physical presence in every inch of the biblical land of Israel, they exacted an enormous cost—above all from the almost 2 million Palestinians forced to live under military occupation, but also from the thousands of Israeli soldiers required to secure the settlements deep in the Gaza Strip.

In 2005, under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Israel carried out what Israelis call "the disengagement"—the unilateral withdrawal of all Jewish settlers from the entirety of the Gaza Strip. The decision was a striking about-face for Sharon, who for much of his life had been an ultra-hawk and had done a great deal to boost the settlement project himself. In remarks to the international public, Sharon stressed that he hoped the disengagement would show that Israel was serious about making the kind of territorial compromises necessary to reach an eventual peace agreement with the Palestinians. To the Israeli public, Sharon argued that these particular settlements made little strategic sense; Gaza was not home to any ancient sites of serious religious significance, and defending the settlements demanded too much human sacrifice. In private, however, Sharon and his advisers had a different goal: to put the possible creation of a Palestinian state on hold by delinking the fates of the West Bank and Gaza. "The significance of the disengagement plan is the freezing of the peace process," Dov Weisglass, a Sharon adviser, famously said. "The disengagement is actually formaldehyde."

Still, for the members of Israel's religious-

nationalist right, any territorial withdrawal was unacceptable. Since 2005, they have viewed the disengagement as an intolerable wound—a "historical injustice" that needs to be rectified, as they often put it.

With the start of the ground invasion in October 2023, Israel's extreme religious Zionists saw an opportunity. Right-wing soldiers began to upload videos of themselves vowing to return to Gush Katif and resettle Gaza. Amid the rubble, they planted the orange flag that had become the emblem of the anti-disengagement movement, unfurled banners proclaiming the future sites of new settlements, and nailed mezuzahs to the doorframes of ruined Palestinian homes. While much of Israel spent the months after October 7 in mourning, the leadership of the settler movement entered a state of near-ecstatic anticipation that has only deepened with time. "From my perspective," Orit Strook, a government minister from the Religious Zionism party, remarked in the summer, "this has been a period of miracles."

For its part, Nachala began convening events intended to cultivate support for the reoccupation and resettlement of Gaza. In November 2023, just weeks after October 7, it held a convention devoted to this aim in the southern city of Ashdod. A few months later, in January 2024, Weiss and her extremist partners organized the Conference for Israel's Victory in Jerusalem, attended by several thousand people, including 11 cabinet ministers and 15 members of the governing coalition, where speakers hailed the efforts to rebuild settlements in Gaza and called for the expulsion of Palestinians living there. On Israel's Independence Day, in May, Nachala organized a rally in Sderot, during which National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir reiterated the movement's demand for the "voluntary departure" of Gaza's inhabitants—a gross euphemism for ethnic cleansing—in front of a cheering crowd of thousands. And in October, Nachala put on a "festive" gathering for the holiday of Sukkot in a closed military zone near the border, where far-right activists set up booths and convened workshops on how to prepare for Gaza's resettlement.

When the group gathered in December for the Hanukkah celebration in the Sderot parking lot, the crowd was considerably smaller, but the atmosphere was no less jubilant. "Would you like to join our settlement core?" asked a woman wearing an orange head wrap; a charm depicting the rebuilt Third Temple hung on a gold chain around her neck. She was selling T-shirts, towels, car flags, and onesies for infants printed with the words "Gaza Is Part of the Land of Israel!" to raise money for the efforts of her "nucleus," or settlement group. Of the six such "nuclei" organized by Nachala to settle different parts of the Strip, each consisting of roughly 100 families, hers—the nucleus for north Gaza—was "the best," she said, "because it is the most realistic."

This is the case, she explained, because the Israeli army had already "emptied" most of northern Gaza. As for the Palestinians who remained, she added, "they are obviously not innocent," so they would be dealt with accordingly—in other words, expelled or killed. A resident of Ashkelon, a city 19 kilometers north of Gaza, the woman was so certain that the resettlement efforts would succeed that she had declined to renew her lease for the coming year. "By next summer, we will be in our new house [in Gaza]," she said. "It is God's plan for us to return."

Though the settlers like to credit God for hastening their potential return to Gaza, they've had significant help from earthly sources.

Although the settlers like to credit God for hastening their potential return to Gaza, they have had significant help from earthly sources. Before the ceasefire agreement, Israeli forces built an extensive architecture of occupation in the Gaza Strip. Along what the IDF calls the Netzarim Corridor—a four-mile-long paved road that bisects the Strip's northern third—they constructed more than a dozen military outposts and bases, equipped with air-conditioned housing units, showers, kitchens, and synagogues. (One Orthodox rabbi said that numerous Torah scrolls had been brought into Gaza.) Additional clusters of checkpoints and military inspection installations were also built across the Strip.

An unsettling sight: Daniella Weiss (left) holds a map depicting the sites that her organization, Nachala, has selected for settlements in Gaza.

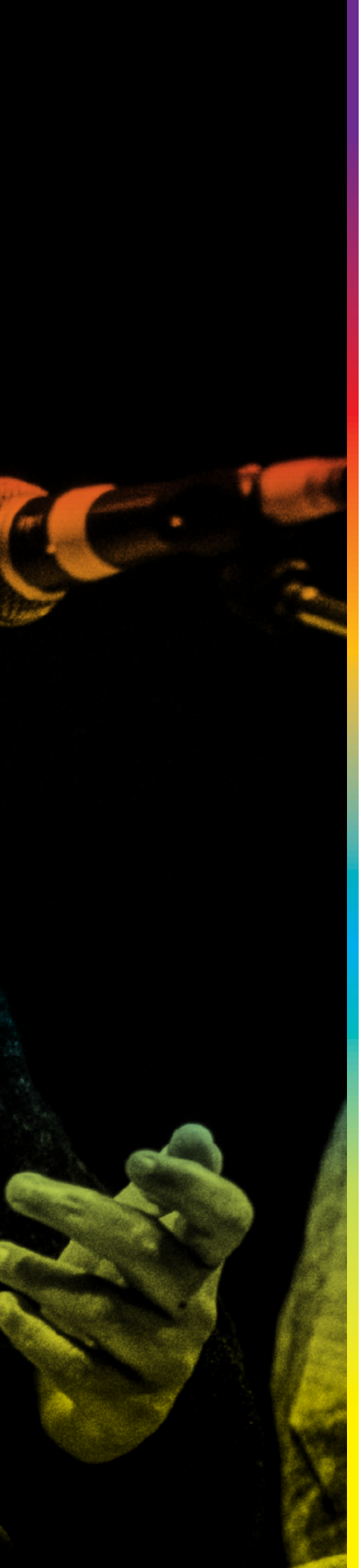
In mid-December, the Israeli news site *Ynet* published a puff piece on a "small retreat village" that the IDF had built in the northern Gaza Strip, outfitted with a desalination system, physiotherapy studios, a mobile dentist's office, and a gaming room. "The space is really an island of calm hidden between the ruins of the strip," the article crowed. "There's even a café with a big espresso machine, popcorn and cotton candy machines like in the movies, and a lounge for treats like Belgian waffles and hot pretzels."

"This," the article's headline stated, "is how the army is preparing for an extended stay in Gaza."

For the Palestinians who remained in Gaza's north, however, "this" meant only more suffering. Along with the constant bombardment from above, life became a nightmare of freezing conditions and hunger. As part of an openly stated strategy of ethnic cleansing aimed at eradicating the Palestinian presence in the north, Israeli forces systematically demolished entire neighborhoods, destroyed critical life-sustaining infrastructure, including hospitals, and deployed starvation as a weapon of war. The little humanitarian aid that was allowed to enter the Strip could hardly reach the people left in the north. Aerial footage of the once densely populated cities of Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun, and Jabalia show a landscape of total devastation, with mountains of gray rubble extending almost to the horizon.

(continued on page 58)

ENES CANLI / ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES



Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan sang words written centuries ago and died decades ago. He's got a new album out.

A Voice From the Past

HASAN ALI

IN JUNE 2021, IN A NISSEN HUT IN THE MIDDLE OF WILTshire, England, less than 30 miles from Stonehenge, Odhrán Mullan was looking through the archives of Real World Records. A project manager for the record label, which was created in 1989 by the musical polymath Peter Gabriel, Mullan spotted a tape that immediately sparked his interest. "Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan—Trad Album" was all it said on the cover. "I was always browsing, and I would spend a lot of afternoons after lunch there," Mullan says. "I knew that would be the ultimate find—a Nusrat unreleased thing."

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the best-known qawwali singer of all time, died in 1997, two days after the 50th anniversary of Pakistan's independence. After a career that spanned more than three decades, he had achieved immortality as the voice of a nation, often bearing the title *Ustad*, a word roughly equivalent to *maestro* or *teacher*. Khan's stature was such that he was sometimes spoken about in the same terms as the saints he venerated through his music, the lyrics of which are drawn from Sufi poetry. His Pakistani biography, written by Ahmed Aqil Rubi, is punctuated with anecdotes of supernatural import, including miraculous escapes from deadly accidents and moments of spiritually exalted clairvoyance. (In one such tale, Khan dreams of a city in India that he has never visited but is able

DAVID LEVENSON / GETTY IMAGES

Hasan Ali is a journalist reporting on US foreign policy and South Asian politics.

to describe in sufficient detail for his companions to identify as Ajmer Sharif; in another, a rural mystic makes him smoke four cigarettes before informing him that he has made Khan the king of East, West, North and South.)

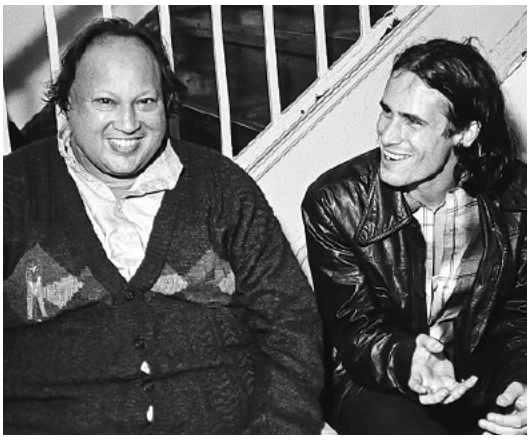
Qawwali, which originated in the 13th century, is a style of music that's unique to the Indian subcontinent. It is choral in nature, with a group leader joined by as many as a dozen supporting vocalists, known as the "party." For centuries, those voices would have been heard unaccompanied, because of a prohibition against instrumentation in orthodox Islam. Today, most ensembles include a harmonium, a reed organ similar to an accordion that was introduced to India in the late 19th century, and tablas, a set of hand drums, while the rest of the party claps along in unison. Khan's emergence in the 1960s brought the genre into modernity, not unlike the revival of medieval folk music that was happening in Great Britain at around the same time. He captured the imaginations not just of Pakistanis at home but of members of the South Asian diaspora abroad.

***Chain of Light* becomes Khan's final studio album, 34 years after it was recorded and 27 years after the singer's death.**

After the rest of the world discovered Khan in the 1990s, the acclaim was almost as breathlessly reverent as it was in his home country. The *Village Voice* rock critic Robert Christgau called him "the most awesome singer in the known universe," and the singer Jeff Buckley compared him to God, Buddha, and Elvis. Khan is to qawwali what Paco de Lucía is to flamenco: at once its most famous export and a figure of gargantuan influence at home.

Breaking through: Khan with Jeff Buckley backstage after a concert at New York's Town Hall in 1995.

Conscious of Khan's importance to the Real World brand, Mullan was eager to investigate the contents of the tape, which had been recorded in 1990, on the cusp of the artist's global breakthrough. But before anyone could listen to it, the tape had to be baked, a process that involves sealing it in a controlled environment and heating it to between 130 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit. This treatment temporarily removes any moisture that has accumulated on the tape and allows it to be fed through the rollers of a tape machine. Once the music had been digitized, the staff at Real World Records sent the recording to Khan's former manager, Rashid Din, who checked the four tracks against the rest of Khan's repertoire. "He was able to say categorically that one track, 'Ya Gaus Ya Meeran'—nobody had heard it before or since," Mullan says. "And it just turns out that musically it's quite a unique track, and the rhythms of the tabla and everything is just so unusual from the rest of his work."



Last fall, Real World released the recording as *Chain of Light*, which becomes Khan's final studio album, 34 years after it was recorded and 27 years after the singer's death. Today, Khan's legacy is undeniable, to the point that the pieces that form the bulk of the modern qawwali repertoire were almost all made famous by him. Though qawwali is a devotional music, Khan was responsible for taking it from the shrine to the record shop, turning it into a genre that could be enjoyed in a secular context. His use of *sargam* (a technique in which the voice is used like an instrument to improvise within the structure of the composition) to complement the music's devotional aspects gave it an exploratory quality with immediate appeal to fans of modern jazz or psychedelic rock. To Khan's hundreds of millions of fans in India and Pakistan and his admirers dotted across the West, the new material on *Chain of Light* amounts to a musical resurrection.

"Ya Gaus Ya Meeran," meaning "O helper, O exalted One" in Urdu, is a composition in Raag Bhairav. In the music of the subcontinent, a raag is a melodic framework that's comparable to a scale, but far more complex and prescriptive: It lays out the combinations in which the notes are to be arranged, lists the notes that must be given emphasis, and includes esoteric details like the time of day when a given raag is considered most effective. Bhairav is an ancient raag that includes the same notes as the double harmonic major, a scale that Western musicians tend to use when they want to evoke an Arabian or Moorish feel, as in Claude Debussy's "La soirée dans Grenade" or, more recently, Dick Dale's 1962 surf rock instrumental "Misirlou." In "Ya Gaus Ya Meeran," the music is the setting for a venerative poem about Abdul Qadir Jilani, a Sufi saint and scholar who preached in 12th-century Baghdad.

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of Sufism, but it typically refers to an Islamic devotional system that advocates the forging of a personal bond with Allah. Though it can be traced back to the years immediately after Muhammad's death in 632 CE, Sufism truly flourished in the ninth and 10th centuries, part of the period sometimes referred to as the golden age of Islam. Sufis tend to emphasize God's love rather than his justice and believe that the soul has the power to feel the divine presence in all things. The drinking of wine, for instance, is a recurring motif in Sufi poetry and literature; even though alcohol is prohibited in Islam, the intoxicating properties of wine are used as a metaphor to describe the ecstasy of spiritual enlightenment—one often invoked in the work of the best-known Sufi poet, Jalaluddin Rumi.

Sufism is transmitted from master to disciple in a *silsilah*, or chain, that is often traced all the way back to Muhammad, and this spiritual genealogy has made the veneration of preachers a cornerstone of Sufi art and music. In the subcontinent, qawwali developed over successive centuries of Muslim rule as the artistic arm of Sufism, which was patronized by the Muslim ruling elite because its similarities with Hindu mysticism made it an effective tool for nation-building. Since music has always played a significant role in Hindu worship, qawwali

JACK VARTOOGIAN / GETTY IMAGES

became the medium through which preachers were able to spread the message of Islam in medieval India—a practice carried out at Sufi centers, usually shrines built in veneration of particular saints or preachers.

These Sufi centers have become repositories of power in the modern era. According to a study by the economists Adeel Malik and Rinchan Ali Mirza, there are about 60 such shrines in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province, controlled by families who use their centuries-old religious authority to influence large voting blocs of disciples. Some "saintly descendants" run for office themselves, the most famous example being Shah Mahmood Qureshi, who served as foreign minister in Imran Khan's government from 2018 to 2022. In order to maintain these Sufi shrines, the ethnomusicologist Regula Burckhardt Qureshi notes in her book *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan*, "saintly representatives rely on service professionals who are attached to their shrine by hereditary right." Qawwals, who make up part of this indentured milieu, "stand in a servile or 'client' relationship of dependence to the shrine descendants." To some extent, that dynamic persists today.

Before Khan rose to international fame, qawwals tended to earn the bulk of their living by performing in *mehfils*, or salons, for the rich and the powerful. Khan, along with stars like the Sabri Brothers and Aziz Mian, was one of very few exceptions. Even today, the weakness of copyright law in Pakistan and the attendant culture of piracy means that most musicians are unable to rely on royalties and remain dependent on patronage.

Since qawwali follows the Sufi model of hereditary training, there are entire households of musicians who have developed their own repertoire. The idiosyncrasies of each *gharana*—or specialist school of performance—have been honed over generations and sometimes centuries. But the intergenerational exposure of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who remains the genre's only global superstar, has led contemporary qawwals to neglect their own material in an attempt to sound more like him. "It is a huge mistake," says Arif Ali Khan, a retired businessman who travels around Pakistan recording qawwals and classical musicians for an audiovisual project called *The Dream Journey*. "You can be a magician, but you will never be Nusrat. Nobody had a following like him in the past, and it's unlikely anyone will have it in the future."

Though his project has plucked a number of singers from relative obscurity, Arif Ali Khan paints a mixed picture of the health of qawwali. "There is a perception that artists are all struggling and hungry all the time, but at least in the groups that we've recorded, that's far from the reality," he says. "There are over a hundred qawwali groups in Pakistan who are making a living." At the same time, the large size of these groups means that money is often stretched thin. "Qawwali involves eight or 10 artists at the same time, and very often you'll find that some are family members but some are not, or some are family members who have their own family units that they need to support." Indeed, Maulvi Haider Hassan, a qawwal from Faisalabad, Pakistan, who died in 2019, had four families—a total of 92 people—living with him.

Life of the party: Khan with members of his ensemble in a TV appearance in 1989.

It is to escape the degradation of this social status that Nusrat's father, Fateh Ali Khan, is said to have wanted his son to eschew the family's 600-year tradition of qawwali performance and instead train to become a medical doctor. The young Nusrat had other ideas. His insistence on continuing to practice alone eventually led his father to relent, and it was at his father's funeral that Khan made his first public performance.

Qawwali became the medium through which preachers were able to spread the message of Islam in medieval India.

Peter Gabriel, who was instrumental in bringing Khan's music to the West, was introduced to qawwali by Pete Townshend of the Who. (In the late 1960s, Townshend had become a disciple of the Indian mystic Meher Baba, whose complex religious philosophy incorporated aspects of Sufi teaching and had influenced the composition of the Who's 1969 album *Tommy*.) Gabriel had helped found

TIM HALL / REDFERNS

Time immemorial: The tomb of the Sufi saint Bibi Jawindi. Inset, an image of the Sufi poet Amir Khusrau from a Persian manuscript depicting the lives of Sufis.

the World of Music, Arts and Dance Festival (WOMAD) in 1980, and Khan was booked for its 1985 event, which took place on Mersea Island on the eastern coast of England. By then, Khan was already famous in his native Pakistan and had been signed by the British record label Oriental Star Agencies. The label released more than 100 albums of Khan's music and organized concerts for the South Asian diaspora community, at which the audience would shower him with cash during his marathon performances. But global recognition had remained elusive. Throughout the 1970s, the only qawwali group that had managed to break out internationally was the Sabri Brothers, who performed at Carnegie Hall in New York and the Royal Albert Hall in London. After Khan's performance at the WOMAD festival, all of that changed.

"It was a cold night; the island was misty," remembers Amanda Jones, the manager of Real World Records. "Nusrat had to be bundled up with blankets to keep going. But the audience were this completely new audience for him, and that was a kind of revelation for both sides, because the audience were so overwhelmed by the experience of seeing Nusrat. Very few of them had any cultural context for what they were seeing—certainly very few of them would have understood the lyrics. But it was such a great encounter. It was from then on that Nusrat decided that there was something exciting there for him to introduce his music to."

When Gabriel was commissioned to write the music for Martin Scorsese's 1988 movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*, he asked Khan to provide the vocals for the Passion sequence. The raag that Khan chose, Darbari Kanada, uses all the notes of the natural minor, a ubiquitous scale in Western music, but with a crucial difference: Two notes in the scale, the minor third and minor sixth, are brought up to pitch using a slow and stately vibrato. Legend has it that the Mughal emperor Akbar, having tired of listening to the natural minor, ordered his court musician, Miyan Tansen, to find a different way of treating the same notes. Tansen is said to have borrowed a similar-sounding raag from the Carnatic system of music, developed in South India, and adapted it to suit the emperor's tastes. The name of the raag—*Darbari* means "of the court," and *Kanada* refers to the raag's origins in the music of the Indian state of Karnataka—recounts the history of its creation.

"This is a Hindu scale, sung by a Muslim musician in a movie about a Jewish rabbi, directed by a lapsed Catholic," says the American film composer Richard Einhorn, whose own most famous work, *Voices of Light*, is inspired by Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1928 film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. The resulting music evokes a "not entirely rational experience," he suggests, while remaining "anchored in some imagined origin for the Abrahamic tradition."

Khan went on to release five albums of traditional qawwali music on Real World Records, beginning with 1989's *Shahen-Shah* ("King of Kings"). By the end of the 1980s, the American "world music" phenomenon had created a market—and a record-shop section—for music from outside the English-speaking world. In Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the genre had found another Ravi Shankar: an Eastern musician able to inspire awe and enchantment in Western listeners. A whirlwind of international tours and media appearances took him from London to Tokyo and beyond.

In 1994, Khan and Gabriel joined forces again to contribute a song to the soundtrack of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*. While that burnished Khan's credentials as one of the foremost vocalists of the '90s, he was upset that his devotional music had been used in the background of a prison riot scene. "When someone uses something religious in that way," he said, "it reflects badly on my reputation." Regardless, he contributed two duets with Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder to the soundtrack of the prison drama *Dead Man Walking* the following year. With that, *The New York Times* noted, Khan had "finally entered the mainstream."

Khan's label organized concerts and imported more than 100 albums of his music for the South Asian diaspora community.

Perhaps the most interesting work Khan released in this period consists of the two experimental albums he recorded with the Canadian guitarist and producer Michael Brook, *Mustt Mustt* and *Night Song*. "Nusrat just found a way to do something that he was comfortable doing…on top of what I had done,"

Brook says of their collaboration. "It sounds kind of fishy to say that we just went for it, but he was a master at what he did, so he was very good at adapting."

Brook was also in the producer's chair when Khan recorded the four tracks of the lost record—something he had forgotten until the tape was rediscovered three decades later. "I listened to it and thought, 'Well, it's amazingly good, maybe better than what we put out at the time,'" he says. "I think it's his best qawwali that I've heard. He was at his peak, and everything was just working fantastic."

The title *Chain of Light* is taken from a line in "Ya Gaus Ya Meeran," the otherwise unrecorded composition that stood out to Khan's former manager Rashid Din: "*Ek silsila-e-noor hai har sans ka rishta*," meaning "Every breath is related like a chain of light." The other pieces on the record include material that Khan had previously recorded, but never with the production values of *Chain of Light*.

"Aaj Sik Mitran Di" ("Today the longing for my beloved") is an illustration of the Sufi idea of finding the divine in earthly experience. It begins as a down-tempo exploration of what initially seems like secular love; as the tempo increases, and as the vocals gather intensity, the romantic idiom gives way to a celebration of the Prophet Muhammad, revealing him as the "beloved" of the poem's early verses. "Khabrum Raseed Imshaab" ("Tonight there came news") is a setting of the Persian poetry of the 13th-century mystic Amir Khusrau, who is sometimes credited with helping to create the qawwali art form.

These subjects may not have come across to Khan's growing audience when the album was recorded, but *something* did. "Look, our people understand the words and the poetry," Din says. "But when he used to perform in front of white people, I used to sometimes ask them what they had understood. They would often identify certain pieces of spiritual music and say that their hearts had been affected, even without understanding the words."

STEPHEN LOVELL DAVIS

Joining forces: Khan with the guitarist and producer Michael Brook at Khan's home in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1996.

As Khan's celebrity grew, his health began to deteriorate at an alarming rate. Weighing as much as 300 pounds and suffering from diabetes, he became reliant on twice-weekly dialysis to keep his kidneys functioning. During a trip to California in 1995, he was advised to have a kidney transplant, though it would take another two years before a donor was found. On August 11, 1997, Khan boarded a flight to Los Angeles to have the procedure. His nephew, Rahat Fateh Ali Khan, remembers that a great sadness had consumed his uncle on the car journey to the airport. "He was looking so downcast and worried," Rahat says. "But he had a new album coming out, and he put on the tape in the car. Right until the end, he was still thinking about his work."

Khan never made it to Los Angeles. Having fallen ill on the plane, he was dropped off in London and rushed to the Cromwell Hospital, where he died a week later after suffering a heart attack. The doctors at the hospital blamed his death on the use of infected dialysis equipment during his treatment in Pakistan.

Brook was in the producer's chair when Khan recorded the lost record—something he had forgotten until the tape was rediscovered.

In an echo of the ancient patronage system, Khan was still being booked for concerts even after his kidneys had failed. "The people around him did not care about his health or whether he was going to live or die," says the Pakistani photojournalist Saiyna Bashir, who has spent the past two years researching Khan's life for a forthcoming documentary. "Every minute counted; every buck that they could make before he died, they did."

During his short life—he was only 48 when he died—Khan was responsible for turning qawwali into a global phenomenon. A live album of traditional qawwali released in his final year—*Intoxicated Spirit*, on the world music label Shanachie—was nominated for a Grammy Award, and archival live recordings, outtakes, and remixes have followed ever since. In his native Pakistan, meanwhile, there is a sense that the magnitude of Khan's career has dwarfed everything that followed it. Rahat Fateh Ali Khan describes his uncle's influence as a kind of prison. "It has been 27 years since he passed," he says. "But the circle that he was able to draw around qawwali—the Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan style of performance—is one that nobody has been able to escape." In Pakistan, this means that most qawwali groups perform the role of cover bands, appearing at weddings and parties where they faithfully reproduce the mainstays of Nusrat's decades-old repertoire. There has also been a trend toward repackaging qawwali in the form of Western-style ballads, with synthesizers and drum kits replacing traditional instruments. In this context, the release of *Chain of Light* is raising hopes of a revival.

In the course of writing this article, I asked all of my sources what Khan was like in person, and the answers were almost invariably the same. He was described as a quiet and unassuming man whose fire burned only for the duration of a performance. When asked to speculate on the source of his ability to transcend language and geography, most invoked a quality of otherworldliness.

"He somehow touched some kind of common emotional resonance in people, and I don't think anybody knows what it is," says Michael Brook. "Someday, maybe someone will figure that out." N

BY LILY GEISMER

More than 20 years after Bill Clinton left office, Democrats remain in the grips of his New Democrat politics. That's a serious problem.

The Democratic Party responded to the trauma of Donald Trump's reelection this past November in precisely the same way it did to his shocking win in 2016: by dismissing the notion that it needs to rethink its core assumptions about politics, the economy, foreign policy, or any other element of its intellectual and governing legacy. In 2024, as in 2016, there were stern disavowals of the excesses of "identity politics" (though in the 2024 version of this lament, the preferred term of art was "wokeness"); there were allied calls to rediscover the plight of ordinary working Americans, besieged by narrowing life chances and, in recent years, spiraling inflation—yet without much in the way of specific plans to provide relief. And tellingly, there were morale-boosting appeals to disregard the verdict of the electorate; both elections were decided by close-enough margins for Democratic leaders and strategists to continue cleaving to the beguiling fantasy that this or that messaging tweak—a more fulsome callout to the white working class here, a better framing of reproductive rights slogans there—can spare the party any serious bout of soul-searching.

For students of recent political history, this mainstream Democratic approach has a familiar, and deeply frustrating, ring. It's a worldview steeped in sclerotic economic policy prescriptions and the courtship of fickle suburban voters. And while the full measure of its bankruptcy has become broadly visible only in recent election cycles, its deficiencies have been evident to those who cared to look for more than three decades, since the rise of Bill Clinton and his particular brand of neoliberal politics.

Clintonism fundamentally changed the Democratic Party. With its determined rejection of old liberal commitments, it established a new paradigm for the party's politics and, with it, a new way of doing business that has persisted even as Clinton himself has faded into the background—a hoarsened voice issuing occasional pronouncements from the sidelines. It saturated the Obama years, seeping into both policy and electoral strategy through the coterie of Clintonites who shaped so much of his administration's ethos; it underpinned Hillary Clinton's failed 2016 presidential bid; and it reasserted itself in 2020 through the party insiders who were so fixated on resisting challenges from within their ranks that they abruptly shut down the Democratic primary field in order to guarantee that Joe Biden would be the nominee—thereby quashing a class-based insurgency in the party—and then propped up a cognitively challenged Biden long past any conceivable electoral viability. Most recently, the dead hand of Clintonism forged the foundations of Kamala Harris's difference-trimming campaign pitch, which targeted the same elusive moderate suburban voters in swing states.

Now, as the Democrats face a second brutal MAGA reckoning, the question confronting them is whether they will stubbornly continue down the same path that has left them stranded once again in the political wilderness, or whether they will heed the calls of dissenters—within their ranks as well as without—to take a different one. To do that, however, they'll need to look hard at the twists and turns of their recent past, and the choices they've made along the way, and come to terms with precisely how they arrived here.

The story begins almost exactly 40 years ago, at a moment that's strikingly similar to the one Democrats find themselves in now. It was early 1985, and the party was struggling to come to terms with a blowout election that confirmed, with no ambiguity, that the long decades of Democratic dominance were over and a new era had begun. Ronald Reagan, the Hollywood actor turned anti-communist crusader turned trickle-down economics zealot, had just been reelected in a landslide victory over Walter Mondale, 525 Electoral College votes to 13, as a new breed of voter—the Reagan Democrat—migrated to the GOP. (The only state Mondale won was his own, Minnesota.) The New Deal coalition that had buoyed Democrats for decades had finally fractured; the Reagan juggernaut had taken its place.

As the Democrats set about clawing their way back toward political relevance, a faction that had been trying since the 1970s to shift the party's political and ideological direction formed an organization with the explicit goal of reinventing both. They called themselves the New Democrats and named their organization the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC). At the

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Trifecta: Bill Clinton is applauded by Al From, left, and Senator Joseph Lieberman, right, before addressing the DLC in Washington in 1995.

helm was Al From, a journalism school graduate who had done stints in the Johnson and Carter administrations before turning himself into a "policy entrepreneur" for the party's disenchanted centrist flank. Alongside him was a cadre of overwhelmingly white Southern men who shared his critique of the party's longtime embrace of industrial manufacturing, labor unions, civil rights, and social welfare. In their place, the faction embraced market competition, entrepreneurship, deregulation, and public-private collaboration—all while supplementing it with gentle modulations to create incremental gains in racial and gender equality.

"The political ideas and passions of the 1930s and 1960s cannot guide us in the 1990s!" they declared. To translate many of these ideas into concrete policy proposals, the DLC established the Progressive Policy Institute, a think tank run by the veteran Washington insider Will Marshall.

In tandem with this new policy agenda, the DLC also began cultivating an electoral strategy that rested on the twin notions that white middle-class professionals were key to capturing the presidency, and that capturing the presidency was key to the party's future viability. After yet another Republican victory in the 1988 election, in which George H.W. Bush handily defeated Michael Dukakis, From commissioned two political scientists and seasoned presidential campaign advisers, William Galston and Elaine Kamarck (both of whom would later hold posts in the Clinton administration), to draft a now-famous report that would offer a blunt diagnosis for why the Democrats kept losing presidential elections. Titled "The Politics of Evasion," the report, published in September 1989, accused the Democratic establishment of failing to reckon with the political realignment reshaping the country, preferring to remain stubbornly attached to their old beliefs, even if it condemned the party to repeated election losses. "In place of reality they have offered wishful thinking; in place of analysis, myth," Galston and Kamarck charged.

As the Democrats set about clawing their way back to political relevance, a faction formed the Democratic Leadership Council.

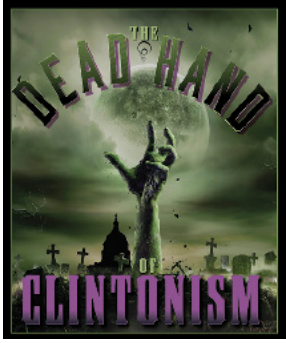
The authors summarized that wishful thinking in a single phrase: "liberal fundamentalism." "Whether the issue is the working poor, racial justice, educational excellence, or national defense, the liberal fundamentalist prescription is always the same; pursue the politics of the past," they wrote. The DLC's mission, therefore, was to come up with something new. Instead of stressing outcomes, the Democrats would tout "opportunity"; instead of promoting New Deal–style master plans to alleviate entrenched inequalities in income, housing, and education, the Democrats would romance Wall Street while sending traditional allies, such as teachers' unions and displaced industrial workers, to the back of the line.

Galston and Kamarck didn't stop there. In a frontal assault on what they called the "myth of mobilization," the authors rejected the idea that the Democrats could win elections by relying on the labor movement for meaningful turnout. They were especially dismissive of the theory, which was at the heart of Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 campaigns, that the party could make gains by encouraging disaffected and marginalized Americans to vote. Instead, they argued, the Democrats needed to lure back the white moderate professionals and lower-middle-class workers who had been migrating to the Republicans with a message that emphasized social issues and moral principles.

Galston and Kamarck's final piece of advice was that the Democrats had to focus on the presidency rather than congressional or state-level politics. After all, the party had maintained a majority in Congress since the Eisenhower era. The authors suggested cultivating a candidate who "squarely reflects the moral sentiments of average Americans" and offers an "economic message, based on the values of upward mobility and individual effort that can unite the interests of those already in the middle class with those struggling to get there." The report's basic premise was that the American electorate had lurched rightward and that the party needed to create an agenda to match in order to remain electorally competitive.

The DLC got a chance to test these theories in 1992, when a candidate of unusual political talents emerged—from within its own ranks. Bill Clinton, who was one of the founding members of the DLC and served as its chair in the early 1990s, proved the ideal candidate to deliver the group's message and vision. Ambitious and charismatic, he had used his years in the Arkansas governor's mansion to cultivate a national platform by implementing programs to foster postindustrial growth while experimenting with new forms of fiscal austerity, including an early welfare-to-work program. His 1992 campaign for president, which was carefully crafted by members of the DLC, followed the prescriptions outlined in "The Politics of Evasion" almost to a T. In addition to his famous call to "end welfare as we know it," he offered a series of proposals to prove that he believed in "family values," was

WILFREDO LEE / AP



tough on crime and supported the death penalty, and was not beholden to "special interests." His denunciation of the rapper and activist Sister Souljah at one of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition events was such a transparent attempt to distance himself from the more progressive factions of the party that the phrase "Sister Souljah moment" became a synonym, in the words of the Political Dictionary website, for signaling to centrist voters that a politician "is not beholden to traditional, and sometimes unpopular, interest groups associated with the party."

And yet, even as he pivoted and denounced, what made Clinton particularly adept as a politician was his ability to connect with voters, especially through their economic anxieties, drawing on his own childhood in an economically precarious household in small-town Arkansas. When he told Americans "I feel your pain," many of them believed him. In a three-way race, Clinton captured 43 percent of the popular vote and won over moderate Republicans in places like Southern California and Philadelphia's Main Line as well as narrowly besting George H.W. Bush among white working-class voters.

In office, Clinton showed whose economic pain he really empathized with. He quickly rejected the notion, advocated by his longtime friend and labor secretary, Robert Reich, that the best way to achieve economic growth was through fiscal stimulus and investment in infrastructure. Instead, he followed the advice of Robert Rubin, a former Goldman Sachs executive who served as the director of Clinton's National Economic Council and then as his secretary of treasury, as well as other finance-friendly deficit hawks who argued that balancing the federal budget by reducing the deficit would be a way to win back the trust of Wall Street, especially bond traders. Clinton also fulfilled some key campaign promises: He implemented the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), much to the chagrin of many fellow Democrats, and he got tough on crime by signing into law the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act in September 1994.

As Clinton swerved right in key areas, he also remained loyal to a number of liberal commitments. He spent a great deal of his first two years in office on a quixotic attempt to pass a version of universal healthcare (albeit one that leaned heavily on the private sector) while also promoting so-called social issues, many of which, in the coming years, would remain some of the party's few defining principles. He supported affirmative action, defended reproductive rights, and created one of the most diverse cabinets in history—the latter of which, in particular, displeased the DLC. Anticipating the anti-woke sentiment that has come to permeate elite liberal politics, its leaders were deeply concerned about Clinton's decision to give prominent cabinet posts and other high-level positions to people of color. Marshall, the head of the DLC's think tank, wrote in a May 1993 memo to From that he feared Clinton's "placement of 'PC' activists in key policy positions" would "drive white moderates out of the party, not to mention alienating swing voters."

With its rejection of old liberal commitments, Clintonism established a new paradigm for the party's politics, a new way of doing business.

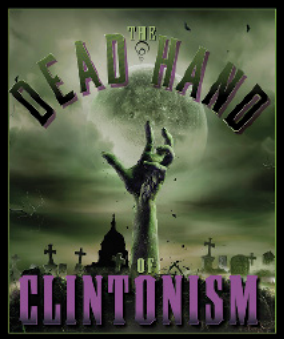
For all his moderation, Clinton was a lightning rod for the right, and his agenda received a drubbing in the 1994 midterm elections as Newt Gingrich united Republican congressional candidates around a 10-point program called the Contract With America. Its goals included a balanced budget amendment, an even harsher crackdown on crime, a stiff reduction in the capital gains tax, and a stringent welfare-to-work plan. The strategy worked: Republicans won big, picking up eight seats in the Senate and more than 50 in the House, giving the GOP control of Congress for the first time in 40 years. It was an early portent of the pitfalls of following the DLC directive to focus on the presidency.

What safety net? To help seal his reelection in 1996, Bill Clinton made "welfare reform" the law of the land.

While most Democrats bemoaned Gingrich's victory, the heads of the DLC saw it as an opportunity. They believed that during his first two years in office, Clinton had deviated from his New Democrat roots and instead tailored his agenda to placate traditional Democratic constituencies. Now they had an opening to push their own agenda. "The 1994 elections have wiped the slate clean and liberated Democrats from special-interest liberalism," From and Marshall wrote to other DLC members.

Dick Morris, Clinton's main campaign strategist, agreed. Morris, who had advised Clinton since his first run for governor in 1978, had a reputation for ruthless if not unethical tactics (his most recent major advisee is Donald Trump). Building on the principles set forth in "The Politics of Evasion," Morris helped Clinton develop a reelection campaign that was obsessively focused on winning the support of white suburban "soccer moms," who seemed like the most persuadable swing voters. This focus showed that all vestiges of the faint populism or progressivism that had appeared in Clinton's presidential bid and first term had to go when there were any signs of trouble. Nevertheless, Morris added his own twist on Galston and Kamarck's thesis, persuading Clinton to co-opt features of the conservative agenda, a strategy he called "triangulation." The Clinton campaign duly rolled out a series of easily satirized "family values" proposals, including mandatory school uniforms, curfews for teens, and the V-chip, a device that would block TV programs deemed to be obscene.

Other aspects of the 1996 campaign agenda of triangulation made for less of a late-night punch line. Clinton's effort to fulfill his 1992 campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it" had failed just before the midterm elections. Gingrich's Contract With America made welfare reform a major priority. Following their 1994 victory, House and Senate Republicans offered various



versions of welfare reform, all of which were far more stringent than what Clinton had envisioned. Although he vetoed the first two bills, a third one landed on his desk at the height of his reelection race in the summer of 1996. It included far stricter time limits than Clinton was then proposing, while also advocating marriage and abstinence counseling and cutting $24 billion in funding for food stamps; it also barred most new immigrants—including those with authorized status—from receiving even basic welfare assistance.

Clinton's success in the 1996 election created a virtual orthodoxy on the best way for Democrats to win presidential elections.

Civil rights, anti-poverty, religious, feminist, and labor groups—many of the Democratic Party's core constituencies—publicly urged Clinton to veto the bill and tried to inundate the White House with telephone calls and letters. The National Organization for Women held daily demonstrations and nightly candlelight vigils, and Patricia Ireland, the organization's president, went on a hunger strike, vowing to continue it until Clinton vetoed the bill. *The Nation* published a scathing editorial charging Clinton with "seeking reelection by further afflicting this nation's most defenseless citizens."

Most of Clinton's cabinet—including Robert Reich, Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, and even Robert Rubin—advised him not to sign it. Morris and the DLC took a different stance. Even though Clinton had a double-digit lead over Bob Dole, the Republican nominee, Morris argued that the bill offered insurance for his reelection. Clinton ultimately capitulated, putting his pen to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in August 1996. The name was a direct callback to the New Democrats' core notion that the best way to help struggling Americans was by creating "opportunity" through the private sector, not by maintaining a strong government safety net. The act also clearly illustrated the New Democrats' belief that soccer moms and their husbands were a more valuable constituency than poor and working-class voters—a belief that rested on the assumption that these traditional Democratic constituencies would still show up for Clinton at the ballot box. It was a calculation that would pan out: On Election Day, Clinton carried every income group except the very wealthiest.

Blowout: Democratic Leadership Council members meet shortly after the Democrats' defeat in the 2004 elections.

PAUL J. RICHARDS / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The 1996 election was interpreted as a giant green light for the New Democrat agenda. The results provided Clinton with a powerful mandate to pursue his vision of a "New Economy"—one that the New Democrats had been promoting for years. He signed a series of trade deals, deregulated financial services, and offered incentives to bolster the tech sector. These efforts earned the full support of the DLC.

The aggregate results of these policies contributed to a rosy picture of the economy when Clinton left office. By 1999, the GDP was growing at an average rate of 3.5 percent annually; there were more than 18 million new private-sector jobs; the unemployment rate was 4.2 percent (the lowest in 29 years); the inflation rate was 2.1 percent; and there was a budget surplus for the first time since 1969. The Clinton administration and the DLC proudly celebrated all this data as proof that their vision had been correct. Many of the benefits, however, were disproportionately enjoyed by those in the top economic strata. A large portion of the new jobs required a bachelor's or associate's degree, and those that didn't tended not to pay a living wage or offered little chance for advancement.

While NAFTA would later get the lion's share of the blame, it was only one of the many important free-trade policies established in the 1990s. Many economists now view the decision to expand trade with China and advocate for its admission to the World Trade Organization, along with the administration's deregulation of finance, as even greater sources of harm. At the end of his presidency, Clinton made an effort to reach out to the communities that the New Economy had left behind, but the promises of worker retraining and investment from the private sector never materialized—even as the gutting of welfare and food stamp programs tore large holes in the social safety net.

Clinton's success in the 1996 election, nevertheless, created a virtual orthodoxy on the best ways for Democrats to win presidential elections. While not every candidate went as far as pushing V-chips, every successive Democratic presidential nominee crafted their campaign to appeal to suburban professionals. Barack Obama's campaign is remembered for its multicultural narrative of hope and change, but much of that message was carefully calibrated to appeal to affluent white suburbanites in swing states like Virginia and Colorado rather than to those Americans who were most acutely experiencing the fallout of the 2008 recession.

Once in office, Obama also adopted elements of the New Democrats' focus on economic growth through free trade, finance, and tech entrepreneurship, even bringing back many Clinton alums to fill key posts in his administration. As the 2008 recession wrought a very uneven recovery, many working-class Americans began connecting the dots and concluded that the culprit for their economic pain was the Democratic Party. In turn, the party consistently failed to offer a meaningful alternative vision, instead doubling down on its Clinton-era strategy of appealing to the affluent and middle-class center—most clearly articulated by Senator Chuck Schumer when he predicted during the 2016 election: "For every blue-collar Democrat we will lose in western PA, we will pick up two, three moderate Republicans in the suburbs of Philadelphia, and

you can repeat that in Ohio and Illinois and Wisconsin."

One of the major flaws in this strategy is that it failed to address the ways in which the Republican Party had changed since the 1990s. While some of the Democrats' tactics and policies might have worked against a classic free-market conservative like Bob Dole or Mitt Romney (whose company was directly responsible for substantial job losses), it has proved far less effective at countering Trump and the MAGA right, who have leaned hard into nationalist populism. And, as demonstrated in the exit polls from 2024, there aren't enough moderate suburbanites to balance out the other groups who have migrated toward the GOP. It is practically Galston and Kamarck's "myth of mobilization" in reverse.

This isn't to suggest that there hasn't been any movement away from the New Democrat playbook. While Biden was an early member of the DLC, he did not govern like one—a result, in large part, of pressure from the far more visible and potent left that has emerged in recent years. During the general election, nevertheless, Kamala Harris's campaign fell back on the New Democrats' familiar tactics. In addition to her optimistic messages about family togetherness, her promises to crack down on immigration and crime and her campaign appearances with old-line Republicans like Liz Cheney were a warmed-over version of triangulation.

In a sign of just how backward-looking the Democrats' strategy had become, Al From, who has remained a vigorous defender of the DLC's legacy, told the journalist Eleanor Clift this summer, "We set an agenda for the 1990s. It wasn't an agenda for 2020."

As much as Clintonism has defined Democratic Party politics over these past several decades, it's crucial to remember that it wasn't inevitable. At the same time that the DLC was crafting its grand plans for a more corporate and conservative Democratic Party, Jesse Jackson was mapping out an alternative vision of what the party could be. He built his campaign messages and strategy around the recognition that the Reagan revolution had hurt large swaths of Americans of all races. Jackson firmly believed that the Democratic Party could channel the aspirations and demands of historically oppressed and marginalized groups. His campaigns sought to bring those constituencies together in a unified Rainbow Coalition, comprising Black voters in the urban North and rural South, white farmers in the upper Midwest, labor unionists, peace activists, feminists, gay and lesbian groups, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans. He also sought to bring new voters into the electorate—and, with the help of a committed cadre of grassroots organizers, inspired hundreds of thousands of people from marginalized groups, especially African Americans, to register to vote. And Jackson himself had no illusions about the New Democrats of the DLC, mocking its initials as actually standing for "Democrats for the Leisure Class."

Four decades later, the Democrats are once again facing a reckoning, with a choice to make about how they intend to forge their way out of the wilderness. While powerful factions of the party remain wedded to the spirit of Clintonism Past—that victories by the right necessitate rightward shifts by the Democrats, that vulnerable communities should be sacrificed to such efforts, and that the working class is an interest group whose needs can be overlooked—the results of the 2024 election make all too clear that the party needs to retire its 1990s ways.

Triangulation redux: Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris at a campaign event with Liz Cheney in Wisconsin.

This will mean more than giving Bill and Hillary Clinton less prominent speaking roles at the Democratic National Convention or refusing to tap Clinton administration alums to man key administration and campaign posts. It will also mean more than mere rhetorical populism—that is, more than talking about feeling voters' economic pain. It will mean fundamentally reimagining the ethos of the party and allowing new generations of politicians and policymakers to emerge. Most of all, it will mean creating an agenda that meets the realities of both the present and the future by, among other things, addressing the profound inequalities at the heart of our economy, the climate crisis, and the country's threadbare social safety net.

The Democrats are once again at a crossroads, with a choice to make about how they will forge their way out of the wilderness.

In the coming months, the story of the Clinton era should serve as a warning to Democrats that they must be clear-eyed about the past. Still, amid the wreckage, there is at least one lesson they can take from the party's New Democrat days: It is possible to fundamentally change the direction of the party—and they must. N

MORRY GASH / AP

Mexica Exceptionalism

At a time when incumbent parties around the world are losing to upstart challengers, Mexico's Claudia Sheinbaum and the Morena party have defied the trend. What's their secret?

WALEED SHAHID

At a time when incumbent parties around the globe are losing to upstart challengers, Mexico's left-wing Morena party stands out as an exception. Former president Andrés Manuel López Obrador's *mañaneras*—daily press conferences that fused governance with storytelling—revolutionized political communication, creating a direct, unfiltered dialogue with the public. This approach has now been embraced by Mexico's new president, Claudia Sheinbaum, as she builds on AMLO's legacy and looks to create her own path. *Nation* editorial board member Waleed Shahid spoke with Ezra Alcázar, a political strategist and writer who works at Fondo de Cultura Económica, a prestigious Spanish-language publishing house (he is also the anchor of *El Desfiladero* on Canal Once), and Alex González Ormerod, a historian and journalist who leads *The Mexico Political Economist*, to explore how Morena's communications strategy bypassed a hostile right-wing media, earned the trust of working-class Mexican voters, and cemented a populist agenda that reshaped the country's political landscape.

Waleed Shahid: What is the purpose of the *mañanera* politically, and what lessons have you been able to learn from it?

Ezra Alcázar: [Former president] López Obrador began hosting the *mañaneras* back when he was mayor of Mexico City. Every morning, he'd have a press conference where he'd inform the public—well, the media—about what was happening in the city: which meetings had taken place, how security was progressing, and more. Journalists from various outlets would attend and write their stories.

López Obrador spent a lot of time not only answering the questions but also conceptualizing, from his point of view, what he was being asked. This ensured that he was directly telling the people how he interpreted things.

Alex González Ormerod: We've got to remember that the media in Mexico back then—and to some extent now—was corporate media, mostly leaning to the right, and then the government media, which today is in the hands of Morena but back then was in the hands of the right-wing former president Vicente Fox. So it was basically all opposition media. This was López Obrador's way of fighting back.

Shahid: Can you give a little more flavor to what happened at these *mañaneras*? Most people in the United States don't know anything about them. Was it a place to combat his vulnerabilities, to frame a message with an adversarial press? Or was it more to repeat every day what the main message was, of the campaign and of the presidency?

Alcázar: Before we started this interview, I watched López Obrador's last morning press conference. He mostly spent the time thanking the journalists who covered him. It's worth noting that in that last morning conference, the president raffled off his watch. That shows a bit of the tone of the morning conferences. They were very varied; it could range from a raffle with the journalists to playing a song or talking about books.

I remember a moment when I read a column by a journalist in Mexico saying that López Obrador didn't read books,

Waleed Shahid, a member of The Nation*'s editorial board, is the director of The Bloc and a former spokesperson for Justice Democrats.*

CARLOS SANTIAGO / SIPA USA

A woman in charge: Unlike Kamala Harris, Sheinbaum benefited from the popularity of her predecessor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

FELIX MARQUEZ/DPA VIA GETTY IMAGES.

and that this was evident because he never cited any books. Well, I took it upon myself to review several morning conferences where he mentioned more than 100 books, and he didn't just talk for five seconds. It wasn't just mentioning the title, author, and summary; he would go in-depth, explain why he wanted to bring up that book, from Mexican classics [by writers] like Elena Garro or Juan Rulfo to universal classics like Tolstoy or Stefan Zweig. These helped him provide a foundation—not theoretical, but historical and moral—for what he wanted to explain.

For example, if he was discussing judicial reform, he might talk about Tolstoy and the importance of living without many luxuries, or Dostoyevsky and themes of justice, drawing from *Crime and Punishment*. Or if he wanted to talk about his movement and the significance of the transformations happening in the country, he might reference Stefan Zweig. We gathered over 45 minutes of him talking about books. Even if you hadn't read those books but knew they existed, you would feel a theoretical foundation for understanding, and it gave weight to what he was saying. You felt like you were part of something important happening in your country.

Polarization: Given the choice between AMLO's emphasis on economic justice or a return to neoliberalism, Mexican voters chose continuity.

I think that the tone López Obrador used—of giving historical and moral foundations to his discourse—was very important for including people. He used extremely simple language, which doesn't make it any less valuable than any other form of language. What López Obrador did was understand the language of the Mexican people after traveling—not just traveling, but visiting and working throughout the country—and discovering the language he needed to use to communicate with the people.

González Ormerod: People made fun of him because he's a bit of a slow talker. He justified this by saying that if he talked too fast and misspoke, it'd become international news. But even when he was being slow, he was incredibly entertaining. He was very funny—far more sophisticated than Trump, for example. He talked directly to the people in language they could understand. This is the real challenge for Claudia Sheinbaum. She's a completely different political animal—though not less effective, I'd say. You can see it in the way she's broadening communications in a far [more] diversified way. I'm fascinated with her TikTok channel, for example, which I think is very millennial and Gen Z.

Shahid: In the United States, liberal elite publications like *The New York Times* refer to the *mañaneras* as Trumpian, authoritarian, Hugo Chávez–style, and anti-intellectual.

González Ormerod: Ezra and I have eternal debates about this. I did feel that there were sometimes moments where he did overstep a line, like the doxing of Natalie Kitroeff, the *New York Times* journalist [whose phone number López Obrador disclosed]. He never attacked journalists in the way that Trump does. He never advocated for violence. He never said, "Do terrible things to them." But I think there were moments where he perhaps slipped up. There was a lot of to-and-fro as to how justified the doxing was. As a member of the world of journalism, to me it is important that these sorts of boundaries be respected. But, of course, breaking boundaries is part of what the *mañaneras* are for.

Alcázar: That's a problem with those who set the norms for how analysis is done. We label speeches that manage to connect with the masses as "populist" or "demagogic" because they don't use overly technical or intellectual language. I think that's a mistake, because ultimately it's we who aren't learning how to communicate effectively. Because, in the end, who was that criticism directed at—the people, or at the critics themselves? There's

"López Obrador's phrase 'First, the poor' has been transformed by Sheinbaum into 'First, poor women.'"

—Ezra Alcázar

a philosopher [David Bak Geler] who wrote a book called *Ternuritas: El linchamiento lingüístico de AMLO*—or *Little Darlings: The Linguistic Lynching of AMLO*—and it examines many intellectuals and journalists who, over the past six years, have been commenting on what López Obrador has said.

[These critics are] talking about millions and millions of people in the country… stripping these people of their capacity to be intelligent or thoughtful, as if they were being manipulated. López Obrador understood that people can't be manipulated, but that you do have to talk to them, you have to convince them. Part of the purpose of the morning press conferences wasn't to talk to journalists but to speak directly to the people. And I think that upset a lot of people, because it broke the tradition where, if you were a journalist or intellectual of a certain stature, you'd be invited to the presidential residence. You'd have this exclusive conversation with the president where only you would get to voice your concerns—not the concerns of the general public. The president would give you his attention, speak directly to you, and validate your importance.

I believe that the *mañaneras* upset intellectuals greatly because it put them on the same level as everyone else, and that's not something they could accept. They don't see themselves as equals to the rest of the people.

Even good-faith journalists who attended the press conferences to question the president faced challenges. Two important cases come to mind: Julio "Astillero" Hernández and Ernesto Ledesma from [the Internet TV channel] Rompeviento. They brought up significant topics and often questioned the president intensively, perhaps because he wasn't paying attention or didn't want to address them. They would tell him, "Mr. President, you are being lied to. Your team isn't providing you with accurate information."

González Ormerod: Both left-wing journalists, by the way, just for context.

Alcázar: The president didn't directly fight with them. They just talked and talked for hours there, but there was a wave of people on social media who went after them. And that's where, I think, the power that existed became clear, as well as how careful he himself had to be when confronting them.

Yeah, he clashed with many [of his critics] and yes, he spoke poorly of many [of them]. He often pointed out who was paying them, the relationships they had with other governments, the economic benefits they had received, and so on. But when it came to journalists he considered aggressive, and even with others, he tried to be very cautious, because perhaps they were saying important things, and he understood the power his words could have—not because the government would go after them, but because his followers would.

Shahid: There are three categories of people whom the Democrats have been losing for quite a long time: people who did not attend college or university; people who don't pay attention to politics on a daily or weekly basis; and people who get their news from nontraditional sources like YouTube and TikTok. I'm curious how the *mañaneras* fit into that ecosystem.

Alcázar: I think those same categories exist here. There can be people who are very fixated and have a strong opinion about something, and others who don't care at all—or they might *say* they don't care at all, right? But I think the great success of López Obrador was bringing these conversations everywhere.

"López Obrador was the target of Biden-style memes: 'He's old and doddery.' The sea change came with Abre Más Los Ojos."

—Alex González Ormerod

The other day, while I was at the International Book Fair in Guadalajara, I met a woman who told me, "I'm neither left nor right. I don't get involved in those kinds of things." But we ended up talking about politics for half an hour, even though she claimed not to take a stance.

González Ormerod: We've reached new heights in the politicization of the Mexican public. Most liberals think politicization is a bad thing—it equals polarization. López Obrador says the opposite. He says political communication and constant dialogue with the media and with the people is essential for people to understand what their interests are.

This takes us back to the politics of attention. His use of memes was hilarious. Obama does this, but it felt a lot more genuine when López Obrador shared his playlists. But he also politicized them: "It's not like, 'Oh, this is just a nice playlist.' I'm sharing this music with you because I don't want you listening to *narcocorridos*. I'm politicizing this list even when you thought it wasn't political." That, I think, was essential.

The merch and the message: López Obrador's daily *mañaneras* were an extremely effective form of political theater.

That takes us to Abre Más Los Ojos [an AMLO supporters' group] and how that transitioned into the administration. This platform was really good at using memes and just sharing the zeitgeist of politics with people without forcing the politics down their throats.

Shahid: Can you talk a bit more about that and give us some more context?

Alcázar: What López Obrador always understood—that his main audience, the people he needed to speak to, wasn't the traditional media but the public—was fundamental. The battlefield became the media, but now the media was the Internet, where conventional outlets didn't know how to operate. And the people didn't care whether they knew how to play the game or not—they just wanted to communicate their ideas.

This became essential. López Obrador often referred to "the blessed social media," not because they bypassed the filter of hegemonic media, but because they passed only through the filter of the people. This later became structured into effective campaign mechanisms.

González Ormerod: On one side, you've got a presidential [communications] system that was based on corporate television, where they put the presidents they wanted on the stage. Enrique Peña Nieto, right before López Obrador, was arguably that sort of television president.

During that time, López Obrador went off the radar. Apart from his close followers, he was pretty irrelevant to the public conversation. He was the target of memes—the most famous one was of him sort of looking at a pigeon for some reason, and there was no context. It was like a Biden-style "This guy is going crazy—he's old and doddery." The sea change came with Abre Más Los Ojos.

"The *mañaneras* upset intellectuals greatly because it put them on the same level as everyone else." —Ezra Alcázar

It was led by Tatiana Clouthier, who used to be from the National Action Party (PAN), which is a right-wing party. She left PAN and joined Morena quite early on during the third AMLO campaign, which they won. And she created this apparatus filled with millennials—when millennials were still deemed to be relatively young—who were able to communicate a lot of these [messages] online. What was crucial was they did it in a way that didn't feel party-political. It was a lot of stuff that just felt like you were being told what was going on again, like the right tends to do; they mix memes with the messaging.

Culture warrior: David Bak Geler (right), the author of *Little Darlings: The Linguistic Lynching of AMLO.*

Shahid: So in the United States, Republicans try to attack Democrats largely around what we call culture wars—crime, the border, immigration, abortion, transgender rights, even climate change—and the left tries to attack Republicans on issues of democracy and on being rich. There's been a lot of discussion about how the Democrats need to focus more on economic populist issues and not get bogged down in the culture wars. Obviously, Mexican society is very different from the US, but I'm curious how both López Obrador and Sheinbaum have related to some of the issues that plague center-left parties around the world.

González Ormerod: A lot of these issues with race and gender are being resolved in Mexico as we speak through economic means. The best way to deal with issues with gender and race isn't to say, "Let's have a big chat"; it's "Let's literally just give you money." Like, let's just give this working woman money so she has money of her own rather than depending on the man in her family. Let's just give these Indigenous communities money so that they can do the projects they need to do, because they know what's best for them.

What López Obrador and Claudia Sheinbaum continue to do is to bring these issues back to economics every single time. Claudia Sheinbaum, unlike Kamala Harris, was not at all shy about saying, "I'm going to be the first woman president." That wasn't the issue. She said, "Because I'm a woman, I'm going to give women the economic opportunities they deserve," and I think that was the key.

Shahid: Are the lines of political conflict in Mexico similar to those in the US?

González Ormerod: Not really. For example, López Obrador never really talked about abortion. He did a sort of states' rights play: When it comes to abortion, Mexico's states deal with it. Lots of very great women's organizations are fighting the good fight on that, but I guess you've got to choose your battles. What unites Mexicans in general is "How are you putting food on the table?" Abortion is so important—it's a life-or-death issue. But so is putting food on the table, and so that's the sort of political fight you have to choose.

Shahid: One of the top issues in our election was immigration, and yet we rarely hear in American media about the Mexican side. Sheinbaum recently made her first inroads into American media vis-à-vis Trump. I'm curious how it all plays out in the Mexican landscape.

González Ormerod: The Mexican side of things is the only side of things. One of the most shocking statistics you can compare is detentions versus deportations. It's a sort of tricky distinction, but I think it's important. Deportation from the US means you get kicked out of the US. Detentions in Mexico mean you're stopped and moved back to the south. They call it the carousel—they grab you in Tijuana, and they take you all the way to the south of Mexico. And that's Mexico's migration policy.

Biden and Trump, despite all the rhetoric, have deported far fewer people than Bush or Obama did. But Mexico has been detaining more people in recent years than ever before—it hit a record of over a million detentions in 2024. That's far more than the low hundreds of thousands deported from the US.

When people say, "Oh, JD Vance is preparing concentration camps for the million people he wants to deport every year," that's the same number of detentions Mexico had in 2024. Mexico is on the roads intercepting migrants. It's a completely different story from deportations, but we're looking at very similar numbers, and it's being done by Mexico violating human rights and killing people. I think that's one of the biggest blemishes on the Mexican government at the moment. It's arguably because they're being forced to by the US government, but it's pretty brutal. They're very keen on saying, "No, we want migrants—we like migrants." They're not like Kamala or Trump saying, "Don't come" or "They're terrible people." There's a nice narrative around migration. But on the ground, migrants are being shot to death or being detained illegally, and that's really worrying.

Shahid: So what's your analysis of the US landscape, where there's a debate about whether Harris and Biden should have been tougher on asylum seekers and migrants?

González Ormerod: We're always trying to catch up to the right and say, "We also hate migrants, just not as much." I think you need to really push on the fact that we love migrants. Migrants are an indicator of a country's success.

MICHAELL RIVERA ARCE / UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA METROPOLITANA

GUILLERMO ARIAS / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Remain in Mexico: Migrants sleep outside a detention center where 39 people died in a fire in March 2023. Video appeared to show guards leaving as flames engulfed a locked cell.

Why are we not focusing on the companies hiring undocumented migrants? We're always criminalizing the migrants, but what happens to Texas if you take away all the migrants? The economy will collapse.

We saw this in Georgia a few years ago and in Florida more recently. There was a mini version of the deportation strategy, and you had American farmers crying because their fruit was rotting in the fields. It's not just these folks who are going to be sad—it's going to be you when you look at how expensive food is. You need migrants desperately, and it's the fact that you've criminalized them that makes it a bad situation. The crisis isn't because they're coming; the crisis is because you've criminalized them.

People say, "I wish there were a case study where we could look at hundreds of thousands of migrants going to one single city all of a sudden." We've got that. It's called the Mariel boatlift, where I think over 120,000 people moved from Cuba to southern Florida within six months and mostly stayed there. Miami became a powerhouse; it became one of the most important cities in America thanks to those migrants. So that, to me, is the big push we have to do from the left. You can't do it in an election from one day to the other, but that needs to be the narrative. And in Mexico, to me, it's not "Let's stop the migrants." It's "Let's keep all the migrants—don't let them get to the US!"

Alcázar: There was a moment in 2020 when the feminist movement was at a very significant peak in Mexico, and [to my recollection] López Obrador was being asked to adopt inclusive language—to which he responded that it wasn't his way of speaking.

In the end, we realized that the only way to challenge him was from the left. And that included feminist issues, trans issues, and, at times, a certain sophistication in addressing the issues of Indigenous peoples. These were really challenging.

However, I think that now Sheinbaum has incorporated all these issues into her main agenda. For example, environmental issues are so important to her, because that's where she comes from. On the other hand, López Obrador's phrase "First, the poor" has been transformed into "First, indigenous, Afro-Mexican, and poor women." Once again, she addresses what was missing in López Obrador's approach by arguing, "Yes, of course the poor come first, but we must understand that within that universe of poverty, women are a step below because they carry additional burdens." All of this is accompanied by the idea of "All rights for all people."

This is very difficult to reconcile within such a broad coalition, because just as there are people who support all rights for the trans community, there are also people within Morena who don't support them. However, the message remains unified, and certain rights are pursued. I think they are making some progress there.

We must add the issue you mentioned regarding crime, where there has been a complete shift. Perhaps López Obrador's "hugs, not bullets" approach became very problematic—not because it meant embracing drug traffickers, but because it sought to move away from direct confrontation. That was something we'd experienced under Felipe Calderón, and it was extremely violent for our country. However, the discourse must change intelligently, and we must create a way to work together with the entire state apparatus for it to function. I think progress is being made.

"We're always trying to catch up to the right and say, 'We also hate migrants, just not as much.'" —Alex González Ormerod

González Ormerod: López Obrador could spin a question about macroeconomics and talk about his grandfather, and everyone would love it. Sheinbaum tries to answer these questions in good faith, and I think she's still missing that sort of… I don't want to call it magic, but sometimes people try to get her on the technical side because she comes from a scientific back-

ground. I'm sure a lot of people would say it's sexism and people demanding more of her, but I think it's also just the fact that she tackles the questions in good faith.

Bloomberg asked her how she would deal with inflation if it goes up with the tariffs. She went off on this answer that was pretty unsatisfactory, because it made it seem like she didn't have a plan. Mexico does have a plan. They've capped prices on basic goods in the market, and they're giving out money so that people who are really poor won't want for anything. Every single policy that Mexico has is basically an anti-inflationary policy. So she could have gone for that.

Shahid: We've all experienced one Trump term, and most of Mexico-US relations, at least in the first year, were about the border wall. I think this time around the focus is going to be on mass deportations and tariffs. I'm curious how you think that will impact Morena's communications strategy and Mexican politics in general. This month is the most I've ever seen a Mexican president in the US news, and I don't think it's going to stop.

González Ormerod: One of the key things to understand is the US has the world to run in its own mind. It's focused on every country in the world that it cares about. Mexico only really has one priority: the United States. Everyone makes it seem like Mexico is reacting to Trump. Mexico has been preparing for Trump since before he was elected, for two reasons. One, people assumed he was going to be elected. But the Democrats aren't much better—the narrative changes, but a lot of the policy stays the same. We saw that with the children in cages. Post-Trump, the children stayed in cages—it's just that liberal media stopped focusing as much on that.

When it comes to dealing with deportations, Mexico has an incredibly efficient network of consulates all across the US. Rural towns that have large Mexican populations have a Mexican consulate. So that's a big safety net. And the most interesting strategy, which is a Morena policy, has been to develop certain areas and industries where we need development to happen. They call them development poles, and they have space for migrants.

A familiar face: The US media suddenly discovered a popular politician with a different ideology from Trump just south of the border.

I think they can do better. Private industry, NGOs, and the government need to sit down to talk about how they're going to incorporate a lot of these migrants. Maybe lots of them want to go home, but lots of them probably want to stay, and you can incorporate them into the Mexican economy, which does actually need a lot of labor. We can make the most of this crisis. It is far more expensive for a company, and far less profitable, to have an empty space than to retrain someone and eventually, hopefully regularize them in terms of their documentation. So if Mexico can beat America to the punch, it can be a new economic boom.

"The media have their own agenda. You have to win with the people. That is the great success they have achieved." —Ezra Alcázar

Shahid: Last question. What do you think is one major lesson Democrats can learn from the experience of Morena, López Obrador, and Sheinbaum?

Alcázar: I think that phrase from López Obrador—"First, the poor"—is fundamental to understanding the need to focus on people's most basic needs. This is crucial because, without it, people can't stop worrying about living day to day. I mean, if I have to spend half the month figuring out how to put food on the table or pay the rent, I won't be able to focus on the rest of my needs.

Yes, it's important for women to have all their rights. Yes, it's important for trans people to be understood. I won't pay attention to environmental issues or anything else if I'm constantly trying to figure out how to make it to the end of the month. The focus this government has placed on the poorest is essential to building your project with the people. Not to winning over the media, because you're unlikely to win there, as they have their own agenda. You have to win with the people—and ensure they are the ones countering opposing narratives. That is the great success they have achieved.

González Ormerod: Something we didn't talk about, but which is probably the most important thing: Take to the streets. Go and speak to people where they are. That's what most of the successful politicians have done over the past few years in Mexico. Claudia Sheinbaum's instruction, which is a nice quip, is "*Más territorio, menos escritorio*." Don't hit the books, hit the pavement.

It's good to get your message out, but you need to know what people actually want from you. I think Democrats are very used to lecturing people. I think Kamala Harris lost when she said, "I'm speaking." She never stopped. She never listened. And I think that's really important. **N**

(Leifer, continued from page 39)

For Weiss, this devastation was a welcome stage in a divine plan. In an interview with KAN, Israel's public broadcaster, in mid-November, she revealed that during an expedition along the separation barrier to scout future settlement sites, she had contacted active-duty IDF officers with far-right sympathies who provided a military jeep to take them into the Strip, where they surveyed the site that had been the Gaza settlement of Netzarim. "We, the settlers, have all kinds of methods," Weiss told KAN.

The next stage would be simple, she continued. Sometime in the coming months, they would attempt to bring many more Nachala activists into the IDF bases in Gaza; then they would refuse to leave. "What is happening right now is a miracle; we are fighting a holy war," Weiss said. "A year from today, the people of Israel are back in Gaza."

For his part, Netanyahu has repeatedly called

LUIS BARRON / EYEPIX GROUP VIA AP

the prospect of rebuilding Jewish settlements in Gaza "unrealistic." But within the Likud, Netanyahu's own party, not to mention his governing coalition, there is substantial support for the idea. According to KAN's report on the Gaza settlement movement, an estimated 15,000 of the Likud's roughly 60,000 primary voters belong to hard-line pro-settlement groups. When asked by KAN if there is a majority within the party that supports resettling Gaza, Avihai Boaron, a Likud member of Knesset, responded, "Yes, absolutely."

The election of Donald Trump to a second term greatly heightened the settler movement's already maximalist ambitions. At the Nachala event in Sderot, there was a widespread feeling that with Trump in office, the settlers, and the far right more generally, would have even freer rein. Standing in front of a banner promising to build "New Gaza"—a new, all-Jewish city on the ruins of what is now Gaza City—a man named Yaakov explained enthusiastically how a future that had once been unthinkable had, to his mind, become possible. "We are going to flatten all of Gaza and build a city on top of it," he said. "If you asked me even six months [ago] about this, I would have said you were crazy."

Likewise, Trump's remarks in early January that "all hell will break out" if the Israeli hostages held by Hamas weren't released by the time he was inaugurated were interpreted by many on the Israeli right as meaning that his administration would support Israel in waging an even more destructive and inhumane war. Fortunately, this fantasy was not to be. It is now clear that Trump's ultimatum was directed not only at Hamas but at Netanyahu's government as well. Trump's dispatching of Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff to strong-arm Netanyahu into agreeing to a ceasefire deal in early January has thus been felt by settler hard-liners as a profound disappointment, even a betrayal.

And yet Trump 2.0 may still turn out to be the helpmate of the messianic age that settlers have prayed for. Within hours of taking office, Trump rolled back the sanctions that the Biden administration had levied against prominent settler leaders and organizations, including Amana, the movement's real-estate-cum-lobbying arm, which has been led since 1989 by Ze'ev "Zambish" Hever, a former member of the terrorist Jewish Underground. The Trump administration's ambassador to Israel, Baptist minister Mike Huckabee, is a proponent of Israel's annexation of all or part of the West Bank. And Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has not only endorsed annexation in interviews but even suggested that a Jewish temple might be rebuilt on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem.

For all the power that the settler movement has accrued within Israeli politics—and over the fate of Palestinians—the majority of the country has never supported the rebuilding of settlements in Gaza (more than half, according to recent polls, oppose it). But the success of Israel's settler right has never derived from actual mass support. To the contrary, it is a textbook case of a vanguardist movement. The settlers built a lobby that learned to exert leverage within the Likud, while simultaneously transforming its own political representatives into parliamentary kingmakers. In the West Bank—the model for what the settlers hope to achieve in Gaza—the occupation has been entrenched as much through apparently unilateral settler action (creating facts on the ground and forcing the state to catch up) as by deliberate state planning.

Trump 2.0 may still turn out to be the helpmate of the messianic age that settlers have prayed for.

The West Bank model: Nachala militants erect a temporary structure in Tel Aviv during a protest calling for new settlements in the occupied West Bank.

Last February, a group of hilltop youth—known for attacking Palestinian shepherds and towns in the West Bank—managed to run through an IDF checkpoint and into Gaza before being tracked down by the army, while others attempted to construct an outpost in the IDF-designated buffer zone. That effort failed, but even with the ceasefire in effect, there remains the risk that a group of settlers, whether from Nachala's ranks or further to their right, will try again. And while the withdrawal of most Israeli forces from the heart of Gaza has decreased the chances that the settlers will succeed in the immediate future, Weiss and her fellow militants are not wrong to think that time is on their side. As the settlers have often made clear—and as Weiss herself emphasized when she spoke to the crowd at the Sderot gathering—they are playing the long game.

"Today, there are 330 settlements in Judea and Samaria," she said, using the settlers' preferred biblical term for the West Bank, "and close to 1 million Jews beyond the Green Line. This was not born in a single day, and it was not achieved without struggle.

"We want to return to the Gaza Strip, to the inheritance of the tribe of Judah. We want the western Negev to extend all the way to the Mediterranean Sea," she continued to applause. "And we will achieve this goal by the merit of everyone here and all of those praying for the return of the Jewish people to all its land."

After Weiss had finished her speech and several other far-right activists had given short exhortations of their own, the settler militants climbed into their large white vans, strapped their many children into their car seats, and started toward the Black Arrow memorial. A single veteran Nachala activist named Hayim lingered in the parking lot, gathering the many signs that had been strapped to chain-link fences and wrapped around trees. He pointed toward the caravans, which remained parked in their place as the procession departed. The caravans, he explained, were not intended to be taken into Gaza that night; they were there to illustrate the movement's commitment to resettling Gaza, step by step.

"At the end of the day, the government follows the people," Hayim said. "The goal here is to make a groundswell that the government cannot ignore." N

ODED BALILTY / AP PHOTO

Math and Poetry

The making and remaking of Capital

BY ALYSSA BATTISTONI

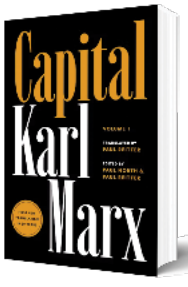
AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT, YOU CAN PROBably find an aging crank holed up in the local public library, complaining of aches and pains, feverishly working on a book they claim will change the world. Most of their efforts will never see the light of day. But sometimes the crank is Karl Marx, and the book being written is *Capital*.

Upon beginning work on his magnum opus in the Reading Room of the British Museum in 1851, Marx wrote to his longtime friend and frequent collaborator, Friedrich Engels, that he would be "finished with the whole of the economic shit in five weeks." As it happened, however, it would be a good 16 years before Volume I—the only part of *Capital* that would appear

ILLUSTRATION BY **TIM ROBINSON**

during Marx's lifetime—was finally published, and even then it had to be pried from his reluctant hands. As he wrote to Engels in 1865, "I cannot bring myself to send anything off until I have the whole thing in front of me. WHATEVER SHORTCOMINGS THEY MIGHT HAVE, the advantage of my writings is that they are an artistic whole." His frustrated wife Jenny, meanwhile, observed to Engels that this "wretched book…weighs like a nightmare on us all." Marx would keep rewriting the other volumes until his death in 1883.

Wretched though the process may have been, what Marx ultimately produced was a masterpiece: philosophically rich and empirically detailed, exacting in its analysis of the abstract logic of capital as a relation but rooted in its historical moment, at times discursive and at others pithily cutting. As dense and sometimes forbidding as *Capital* can be, it has spoken to many audiences. For socialist organizers and labor activists, it offers an eminently recognizable account of overwork and exploitation; for political economists, a meticulous explanation of how commodities come to have value within capitalism's social order; for historians, a portrait of working-class life in 19th-century England; for philosophers, a critique of modern forms of domination. Other texts by Marx are more polemical or accessible, more overtly condemnatory of capitalism or more immediately gripping—yet none can serve as a substitute for *Capital*'s investigation, at once rigorous and comprehensive, of the system that has made the modern world.



Capital
Critique of Political Economy, Volume I
By Karl Marx
Translated by Paul Reitter
Edited by Paul North and Paul Reitter
Princeton University Press. 944 pp. $39.95

Capital, Volume I is undoubtedly one of the most widely read political works of modern times—and usually, as befitting a work associated with socialist internationalism, it is read in translation. In 1872, it was translated into Russian, and in 1875 into French, the latter with Marx's extensive involvement. Since then, it has been translated into 72 languages, often multiple times. Yet in the more than 150 years since its original publication in German as *Das Kapital*, there have been only three major English translations. The first, by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling under Engels's supervision, was published in 1887. Moore and Aveling worked from the third revised German edition, which Engels had edited to reflect the changes he thought Marx had intended to make. This translation remained the standard until 1976, when the social historian Ben Fowkes translated Volume I, working from the fourth German edition (also edited by Engels), restoring sentences that Engels had excised while updating others to reflect changes in English usage. Volumes II and III were also translated by David Fernbach (following previous translations by Ernest Untermann) and published in 1976 and 1981, respectively.

Now, nearly a half-century later, comes a new translation of *Capital, Volume I* by the Germanist scholar Paul Reitter, coedited by him and the critical theorist Paul North. While appraisals of Marx often begin with some version of the question "Why read Marx today?," this new edition poses a more unusual question: Why translate Volume I anew?

Reitter and North offer a simple answer: They want to bring us closer to the work that Marx actually chose to publish. Their translation is therefore based on the second German edition of Volume I—the last one revised by Marx himself, and hence the last one he can be said to have authorized. But the new translation does more than simply return us to Marx's original text. To understand better what he might have meant, it incorporates insights gleaned from new currents of scholarship on Marx that have developed in the many decades since.

What, then, is the *Capital* of the 21st century? If Moore and Aveling's translation offered a Marx for the age of the Second International—when working-class militance was on the rise and capitalism's end seemed imminent—and if Fowkes offered a more literary, discursive Marx for the New Left, then Reitter and North offer us a version of Volume I that is at once more scholarly, laden with editorial notes, and more immediate, stripped down to the textual essentials. It's a *Capital* for an unusual age: one in which Marx's genius is perhaps more widely acknowledged than ever, precisely as the political horizons of Marxist projects have diminished.

Given its immense influence, it's surprising that there have been so few English translations of Marx's crowning achievement. By comparison, three new translations of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—a work of considerable philosophical importance, but certainly not more world-historical significance—have been published since 2023, and another is forthcoming this year. Yet the task of translating *Capital, Volume I* is particularly formidable. There is, for one thing, its sheer length: The Fowkes translation weighs in at over 1,000 pages. It is also an immensely complex work, one that demands familiarity with technical concepts in multiple fields, most notably political economy and philosophy, and an inescapably literary one, whose arguments are made through striking imagery and language.

Capital is many things at once: It reads like an economics textbook in places, a work of history in others, and a satire still elsewhere; it contains math and poetry in equal measure. Marx painstakingly walks the reader through calculations of the rate of surplus value on one page and then ruthlessly decimates his intellectual enemies on the next. The historian Michael Denning has perceptively compared *Capital* to another sprawling volume, *Moby-Dick*, by Marx's contemporary Herman Melville. Both refuse to adhere to conventional forms, instead leaping from one genre to another. *Capital*'s unfolding investigation of value is peppered with long asides on Scottish serfdom and ancient Greek philosophy, while the story of the *Pequod*'s search for the great white whale is interrupted by intricate chapters on cetology and gory descriptions of the process of stripping blubber from a whale carcass. *Capital* is also a tour de force of coolly reasoned argument, occasionally supplemented by witheringly sarcastic asides. Marx is angry, as North's introduction emphasizes—and yet for much of the book, he holds his contempt for capitalism and its apologists in

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check, if just barely. His goal is not to launch a revolution or even to offer a devastating critique—at least, not by way of *Capital* alone. Rather, he wants to understand in exquisite detail capitalism's inner workings.

A translator, then, needs the agility to convey the precision of Marx's technical analysis, the sly wit of his jibes at antagonists, and his evocative but unsentimental portraits of factory life. As Engels wrote in an 1885 essay ominously titled "How Not to Translate Marx": "To render him adequately, a man must be a master, not only of German, but of English too."

Perhaps most daunting of all to the would-be translator, as the title of Engels's essay hints, are Marxists themselves. Any translator of Marx has a guaranteed audience of scholars, both professional and amateur, who have devoted years to understanding the text, who know it inside and out, who are deeply cathected to its famous phrases and images, and who aren't shy about voicing their disagreements. Marxists are notorious for appealing to what Marx "really meant," engaging in interminable arguments over the significance of a given passage or the interpretation of an ambiguous clause, often basing considerable political claims on their esoteric readings. To non-Marxists—and many Marxists as well—this scriptural fidelity can seem suspiciously theological in its urge to locate truth in a sacred text rather than through the use of one's own powers of reason.

Perhaps most daunting for a would-be translator are the Marxists themselves.

Refreshingly, Reitter and North embrace the gravity of this task with both energy and open-minded modesty. Marx's work on *Capital*, they note, was "like a river that flows for twenty years," and they have no intention of attempting to cut off any of its tributaries. Marx, as they recognize, was prone to endless rewriting. He returned to the same questions over and over again; he compulsively revised his work upon absorbing new information; and he often refrained from publishing it for years, even decades, as he sought to strengthen its conclusions.

Marx also faced more practical difficulties. He chronically underestimated how long his projects would take; he tried to do too much at once; and he was constantly broke. As a result, he left an enormous number of his projects unfinished.

Reitter and North have no interest in smoothing the wrinkles and kinks out of *Capital*. They don't claim to offer a truly definitive edition, one that could settle the many intra-Marxist disputes once and for all. To the contrary, they recognize that there can be no such thing. Their aim is more modest: to capture, as closely as possible, the text that Marx himself sought to bring into the world.

In this endeavor, Reitter and North join a long tradition of people who have tried to sort through the mass of notes, drafts, partially finished manuscripts, and revisions that Marx left behind. The first, of course, was none other than Engels, who edited the manuscripts of Volumes II and III of *Capital*, as well as many of Marx's other texts, and stewarded the first English translation of Volume I. This turned out to be a thankless job; today, Engels is often castigated by a contingent of Marxists who think he botched it. Many scholars now attribute Marx's supposed "economic determinism" to Engels's revisions, which were subsequently adopted as authoritative by the Second International.

But the task of bringing Marx's unpublished work into the world was too vast for Engels alone to finish. When he died, he had yet to complete his edits on an unfinished Volume IV—in reality a collection of earlier notes that Marx hadn't developed as a volume in its own right. It would eventually be published by Karl Kautsky as a separate text, *Theories of Surplus Value*.

With the Bolshevik Revolution, the project of cataloging Marx's work took on new significance. In 1921, David Riazanov, a Soviet revolutionary, historian, and archivist, founded the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow and set about compiling and publishing the complete collected works of both men—including drafts, outlines, letters, and other ephemera, comprising some 55,000 works in all—as part of the so-called *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, or *MEGA* for short.

When Joseph Stalin came to power, Riazanov found himself on the wrong side of the Soviet leader: He was purged in 1931 and executed in 1938. But the Marx-Engels Institute carried on, becoming the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute and, later still, the Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin Institute, which for decades oversaw the publication of a series known as the *Marx-Engels Collected Works*. Consisting of 50 volumes, the series was translated into English in the 1960s. (You can buy a complete English set for about $1,500.)

If the *Marx-Engels Collected Works* stood for many years as the most comprehensive print edition of Marx's oeuvre, however, the gold standard continued to be *MEGA*, which as yet is available only in German. Revived as a project in 1975, abandoned with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and resumed (technically as *MEGA²*) in 1990 under the auspices of the International Marx-Engels Foundation, it is today a project of international research not unlike the Large Hadron Collider. Housed in Amsterdam and funded by the European Union with support from a network of institutions, it is worked on by a team of scholars from Germany, Russia, France, Austria, the Netherlands, the United States, and Japan, and is consulted by scholars from just about everywhere.

MEGA² purports to stand apart from the ideological and political pressures that have colored previous editions of Marx. It seeks to present his work in full and as accurately as possible; it is projected to span a staggering 114 volumes upon completion. (So far, we are up to 62.) An entire section of *MEGA²* is made up of *Capital* and its preparatory notes, alone comprising an astonishing 15 volumes. It is, in other words, an emphatically scholastic and philological project that positions Marx as one of the great thinkers of modernity. It is the very embodiment of Marxology—a term coined by Riazanov to describe his scholarly enterprise but now usually deployed with some mix of admiration and irritation to describe work that appears inordinately fixated on Marx himself.

Whereas *MEGA²* marks an effort to make Marx's work available for reading in full—at least to German readers—other major branches of Marxology have developed new approaches to interpreting it. In the

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decades since the last English translation of *Capital* appeared, a new way of understanding the book—and thus Marx—has gained currency, and Reitter and North's choices are clearly attuned to its preoccupations.

Capital was, for much of the 20th century, understood primarily as a work of Marxist economics centered on the labor theory of value—one strongly associated with Soviet orthodoxy and widely thought to have been discredited by the advent of neoclassical methods. Many New Left thinkers in the 1960s and '70s moved away from the ostensibly economistic *Capital* in favor of other, more "humanist" works by Marx, such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. But *Capital* wasn't abandoned entirely: In Germany in the 1960s, students loosely affiliated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory, disillusioned with the Soviet Union but not with Marx himself, began to argue that *Capital* had been misunderstood. Known as the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*—the "new Marx reading"—this tendency sought to break with the orthodox readings of Marx and foreground the political elements in his analysis of capitalism. It asserted that Marx was not an economist proposing a new form of economics, but rather a philosopher offering a critique of the political economy of his time. He was not a crudely economistic, deterministic thinker, but one keenly attuned to the subtle yet pervasive transformations that capitalism had wrought in social life.

This reading of *Capital* has grown in popularity over the decades, persisting even as Marxism fell deeply out of fashion in the academy following the collapse of the Soviet Union. When the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent political fallout led to a renewal of interest in Marx, the German new reading was the most sophisticated analysis on offer—and one well positioned to speak to a generation hoping to revive Marxism without its Soviet baggage.

Many of the most au courant Marxist thinkers of recent years have come out of this tradition. The bookish and unassuming German scholar Michael Heinrich, for instance, has become an online celebrity among a subset of Marxists for whom his *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's "Capital,"* rooted in the tradition of value-form analysis that developed from the German new reading, has arguably supplanted David Harvey's series of companion texts as the essential reading guide. Another touchstone is Moishe Postone's 1991 *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, the most comprehensive theoretical framework to emerge from the new reading tradition and a longtime cult classic that has become increasingly popular. In it, Postone launches a challenge to what he derides as "traditional Marxism" and its understanding of capitalism: The key question isn't simply who owns the means of production, he argues, but how the means of production themselves have been made by capital—and for that matter, how capital has remade the entire world, down to the most basic experience of time and space. These capacious analyses of Marx have, in turn, informed influential political analyses by the likes of the *Endnotes* collective and work by prominent figures like the literary theorist Sianne Ngai and the philosopher Martin Hägglund.

If the new reading has been the theoretical juggernaut of the past few decades, other approaches to Marx have also flourished in the past several years, many of them drawing on the unrivaled archival bounty of *MEGA²*. The political theorist William Clare Roberts, in his 2017 book *Marx's Inferno*, argues that *Capital* is not only an "economic" text but "one of the great works of political theory," one in deep conversation with the socialist republicanism of mid-19th-century England; the political theorist Bruno Leipold's new book *Citizen Marx* emphasizes still further the influence of European republican traditions on Marx's thought and political vision. Another strand of analysis has sought to recover Marx's ecological thought: The Japanese eco-Marxist Kohei Saito—himself a *MEGA²* editor—has drawn on the notes Marx took in the last decade of his life to argue that he was not a productivist modernist, as he has often been understood, but rather a "degrowth communist" prescient about contemporary ecological crises.

Reitter and North's edition of *Capital* doesn't take a single position in these interpretive debates, but it is in conversation with many of these new readings and new approaches to Marx—often explicitly so. It is also, in a more fundamental sense, motivated by them: For Reitter and North, new interpretations of Marx are best understood when read alongside a new version of *Capital* itself.

Both Reitter and North specialize in German studies. Neither is a specialist in Marx, as both freely acknowledge, and so they have recruited an editorial collective to help them navigate the dense thickets of Marxology. This collective includes Michael Heinrich and Kohei Saito along with the Marxist feminist Tithi Bhattacharya, the left-wing (but non-Marxist) economist Suresh Naidu, the German specialist Rebecca Comay, and the data scientist Jeff Jacobs. Although they've done their homework within dedicated Marx scholarship, Reitter and North are clearly keen for their *Capital* to reach beyond the sometimes hermetic world of Marxology, and have tapped a pair of political theorists to offer commentaries bookending the text: Wendy Brown writes the foreword, and William Clare Roberts provides a scholarly afterword.

Each of these supplementary texts addresses different aspects of the work—yet each in its own right reflects the shift in the reception of Marx since 1976. *Capital* here is positioned not as a guide to economics but as a work of philosophy and critique seeking to parse the multiple levels on which capitalism operates. The project of *Capital*, as this edition sees it, is to help us make sense of the complexity of a system that is not as it appears. In other social systems, oppression is directly enacted and therefore obvious: When a feudal lord forces his serfs to give up a certain quantity of grain, for instance, or a pharaoh forces his subjects to perform a certain amount of labor, the structure of power is clear. In capitalist societies, on the other hand, the gaps between rich and poor may be just as stark, but the mechanisms of exploitation and the methods of domination are far murkier. Everyone appears to be acting of their own free will: Wage workers enter into contracts of their choosing, and the overall social order seems to emerge from a mass of individual choices. Countless workplaces operate independently, under the private direction of whoever owns them—and yet they are all connected to one another through the globe-spanning networks of trade and commerce that send prices shooting up

or crashing down. To understand this system, one cannot simply take it at face value, as economists typically do. One must instead examine its hidden depths, the relationships and forms of power that constitute its inner workings. This, Reitter and North's edition insists, is the crucial point of *Capital*: Both essence and appearance, both the material world and its abstract representation, are critical to understanding capitalism.

This overarching perspective on the text comes through most clearly in Brown's foreword and the editor's introduction by North. But it is also apparent in Reitter's approach to translation more generally, as articulated in his instructive translator's note. In the translator's introduction to his own edition of *Capital*, Fowkes had explained his purpose in simple terms: He wanted to reflect changes in the English language and to restore complicated passages that Engels had excised or simplified for readerly ease. Fowkes had also set out to capture the literary quality of Marx's prose, and in doing so he produced some of the best-known English-language phrases in Marx's oeuvre. But for that reason, his version of *Capital* often sounds like the 19th century, or at least how we expect the 19th century to sound: ornately eloquent, grand, even florid. The Fowkes translation can, however inadvertently, lend credence to the idea that *Capital* is a relic of a past era, better read as a historical document than a guide to present-day politics.

Capital captures the strange associations between how we see the world and how it works.

Reitter, by contrast, is notably more self-conscious about the project of translation and more overt in his aim to offer a *Capital* that is at once more philologically accurate and more contemporary—a translation that can restore the singularity of Marx's original text while also refreshing it for the present. As Reitter explains, his translation is both more precise and more casual than previous editions: It reflects the specificity and occasional oddity of Marx's language without weighing it down with rhetorical flourishes. In keeping with the edition's overall thrust, he is especially attentive to the passages in which Marx seeks to capture the strange association between the world that we see and the underlying relationships that structure it.

Engels's advice to would-be translators of Marx included the injunction to respect his precise use of language: "New-coined German terms," Engels insisted, "require the coining of corresponding new terms in English." Reitter has clearly taken this directive to heart: He strives for technical accuracy, and his Marx often comes across more like an academic, with a penchant for coining his own cumbersome neologisms to describe the workings of the "value-form" as precisely as possible. Such neologisms, Reitter insists, aren't just accidentally cumbersome; rather, they reflect Marx's attempt to describe genuinely novel phenomena, things that theorists hadn't yet found a way to name.

Reitter's choices are especially important in the first few chapters, which for theorists following the new reading of Marx are the most vital. These are notoriously some of the most difficult passages of *Capital*: Readers are plunged immediately into a dense dissection of the commodity and its mysteries. In the preface to the first German edition, Marx himself described the opening chapter on the commodity as the "hardest to understand." In his preface to the French translation, he worried that the "arduous" task of working through the initial chapters would prove "disheartening" to French readers if the volume had been published in serial form.

But it is in these early chapters that the particularity of Marx's language is most consequential, and it is here that the significance of this new translation is most apparent. Reitter translates *Werthedinge*, for example, as "value-things," *Werthkörper* as "value-body," and *Werthgegenständlichkeit* as "value-objecthood." These are clunky terms, but this, Reitter convincingly argues, "is part of the point." (They sound strange in German too, he notes.) These awkward phrases represent Marx's attempts to capture the oddity of capitalism's social forms, their uncanny duality. The commodity is two things at once: It is an ordinary object, a physical thing in the world, but it is also a representation of value, with qualities that aren't immediately apparent, which it is the purpose of *Capital* to investigate. It is also in these early chapters that the editorial notes are most extensive and valuable, connecting Reitter's translation choices to the insights of major interpretive developments.

Take, for example, Marx's discussion of what makes different commodities equivalent: When we set aside the use values of two commodities—say, a T-shirt and a violin—nothing "is left over except the same ghostly objecthood." The German term is *gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit*; Fowkes renders it as "phantom-like objectivity." But "objectivity," as Reitter points out, seems to mean something more like "reality," rather than the material sense that Marx means to invoke when describing the oddity of a system in which one physical object expresses the intangible value of another physical object when they're traded as commodities. More generally, the unusual pairings of language, suggesting both concrete and abstract qualities ("ghostly objecthood"), reflect the broader emphasis on duality in Marx's analysis of the commodity.

Reitter's meticulous care with Marx's terminology, however, doesn't inhibit his efforts to render other language in the book more colloquial. In lieu of Fowkes's tendency toward literary turns of phrase, Reitter has embraced a greater simplicity of language—in part to set the genuinely "weird" phrases of Marx's own invention in starker relief. The resulting text is remarkably crisp and contemporary, laden with contractions and slang, at times even bordering on the conversational. It is both highly readable and occasionally deflating, at least relative to the stylistic grandeur of Fowkes's choices. Instead of the proletarian who sells their birthright for a biblical "mess of pottage," here we get the more prosaic "lentil stew"; capital remains vampiric, but merely "drinks" living labor instead of monstrously "sucking" it. The mysterious, almost otherworldly "hidden abode of production" is now just a plain old "hidden place."

Most of these changes, however rhetorically jarring, are substantively insignificant. But some serve to clarify the meaning of Marx's arguments. One particularly notable change comes

in the discussion, late in Volume I, of what Fowkes rendered as "so-called primitive accumulation," and which Reitter translates as "so-called original accumulation." The phrase "primitive accumulation" has long been decried by scholars as misleading, and the update, however minor, reflects an overdue change. It also lends clarity to subsequent debates about Marx's understanding of capitalism.

The phrase appears in a section in which Marx attempts to refute Adam Smith's account of the origins of capital itself—of how some people come to command the labor of others. According to Smith and other economists, class division was the result of "previous accumulations" garnered by the capitalist's sheer effort and frugality. The capitalist had toiled and saved while others lazed about, and now he could rightly make others work in his stead. Marx, however, is scornful of this "vapid children's fable" and offers his own story of capital's origins. Those wealthy enough to buy the labor of others, he insists, hadn't simply worked harder; rather, they had forcefully dispossessed others of the land that had once provided their livelihoods. English landlords had enclosed the common lands used by peasants, converting shared resources into private property; European colonialists had conquered India and the Americas and enslaved Africans—all instances of violent and often murderous expropriation that created a class of property owners able to lord their power over a class of propertyless people left with no choice but to sell their labor. Only after this class relationship has been established, Marx notes, could exploitation operate primarily through capitalism's "silent force of economic relations," wherein workers who lack productive property are compelled to obey orders in exchange for a wage. Thus, although capitalism is often said to be a system of noncoercive, consensual exchange, Marx sought to show the brutality built into its foundations.

A reader could get all of this from Fowkes's translation as well. But the switch from "primitive" to "original" clarifies another dimension of the argument. Marx is often read as saying that "primitive accumulation" was a singular moment located in the ancient past, at the moment of capitalism's birth. But Marx is clear in *Capital* that acts of "original accumulation" persisted into the 19th century, as reflected in his references to the clearance of the Scottish Highlands and plans to privatize land in Australia. The shift in terminology also addresses a related ambiguity in Marx's thought: The term "primitive accumulation" has often been thought to evoke a "stagism" frequently associated with Marxism, in which capitalism represents a step forward from precapitalist (or "primitive") societies, to be eventually superseded by socialism. The term "primitive accumulation" can seem, as a result, to imply a link between the "primitive" nature of the accumulation and its brutality, or an implicit connection between "primitive" non-European societies and savagery. Yet Marx means nothing of the kind. Violent expropriation was not "primitive" in the sense of "premodern"; it was, instead, the origin of class society and thus a fully modern phenomenon. The violence that Marx is condemning is firmly rooted in European law; and his target here is the theories of classical political economists like Smith.

Marx sought to show the brutality at the foundations of the capitalist system.

The passages on "so-called original accumulation" are among the most explicitly condemnatory in *Capital*—although here, as elsewhere, the rhetorical force of the text can be blunted by the more colloquial style of Reitter's translation. Missing, for example, is the line in Fowkes's translation declaring that "the history of their expropriation is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire."

It's hard, in such moments, not to feel some nostalgia for Fowkes's loftier prose—especially particular phrases long inscribed in one's mind. But the overall result of Reitter's translation is a *Capital* that's alive and enticing. Even minor differences in phrasing are remarkably effective in making the text strange, even new. By stripping out some of the most cherished and familiar language, Reitter forces us to confront the text directly rather than skimming over the parts we think we know. It feels, in places, like reading *Capital* for the first time. Of course, this function has diminishing returns and will be effective only for those who are already (too) enmeshed in the older translation. Perhaps one day this edition will be the one etched in people's memories, and the Fowkes will serve as a palate cleanser.

Regardless, this simple act of defamiliarization is a virtue in itself: It serves as a reminder to Anglophone audiences that we are always reading Marx in mediation, that the words on the page weren't simply handed down from on high. The more translations of *Capital* we have, the less we can rely on any single version of Marx's prose, and the more we'll have to argue for our own interpretations and analyses rather than appealing to the words of the great man.

Reitter's translation will richly reward those well versed in Marx in addition to those approaching *Capital* for the first time. But ultimately, does it matter—at least to any but the most devoted Marx heads—that there is a new version of *Capital* in the first place? Who is this *Capital* for?

It's not obvious that *Capital* would ever have had a particularly wide readership. Relative to Marx's shorter and more polemical works, it has always been a demanding text. When it was translated into Russian in 1872, the censors permitted its publication on the grounds that although it was "socialist through and through," it was "not a book accessible to everyone," concluding that "few people in Russia will read it. Even fewer will understand it."

And yet, for all its complexity, *Capital* has long offered a way for those subjected to capitalism's degradations to begin to understand them. As soon as the original version was published, the German American communist Friedrich Sorge reported, workers in the German General Labor Union of New York were already meeting weekly on the Lower East Side, in a "low, badly ventilated room in the Tenth Ward Hotel," to read it together. Indeed, *Capital* was once so widely read that it came to be known as the "Bible of the working class," as Engels famously described it in the preface to the first English edition in 1886.

In that same preface, Engels also proclaimed that capitalism itself was nearly exhausted. A century later, it persisted; and yet the Belgian economist Ernest

Mandel doubted, in his own preface to the 1976 Fowkes translation, that "capitalism will survive another half-century of the crises…which have occurred uninterruptedly since 1914." A half-century of crises later, capitalism survives—and as long as it does, *Capital* will remain relevant. As Brown notes in her foreword: "The world we inhabit today is unimaginable without capital but also without *Capital*." The former is what makes our world and orders our daily lives; the latter is still our best guide to understanding how it does so.

If this edition of *Capital* is assured of its analytical relevance, however, it expresses little of the political confidence proclaimed by its predecessors. Gone is the certainty that capitalism will be felled by its own crises or interred by its proletarian gravediggers. Reitter and North pitch their *Capital* more as a guide for students than for revolutionaries. There is, as a result, something melancholic about this edition. It marks a shift in Marx's status, a step in his elevation to serious philosopher—but perhaps at the cost of some of his political potency. By reading what Marx actually published, we might get closer to what he really meant, but we seem unlikely to get any closer to the end of capitalism.

Socialists with an activist bent often cite Marx's famous admonition that "philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." This isn't an injunction against interpretation, as it's sometimes suggested to be: We have to interpret the world in order to change it, as Marx well knew. As Roberts reminds us in his excellent afterword, Marx's purpose in *Capital* was to "disclose the facts about the dynamics of a society dominated by the capitalist mode of production." The details of one translation or another matter only insofar as they help us see those facts more clearly—and Marx knew this, too. Marx approached his translations, Roberts notes, with "laborious unfussiness," toiling over the French version of *Capital* while often rewriting the text to render the original German less literally. We should take care, Roberts warns, not to get so attached to any particular phrase or exegesis that we forget that Marx himself was constantly rethinking his own positions in light of political developments.

If *Capital*'s relevance is a function of capitalism's persistence, we are likely to be reading it for some time to come—and yet Marx's corpus, however thoroughly studied, can only ever be a starting point. The project of *Capital*—to expose capitalism's workings—is one that Marx couldn't have completed even if he had finished all the planned volumes. The project of capturing an enormously complex, constantly metamorphizing, historically fluctuating system isn't only too much for any single person—it's one that could only ever be incomplete, one that must perpetually be taken up by new generations. To continue the work that Marx started is to adopt his mode of relentless rethinking, revising, learning. So read *Capital*, in whatever translation you can find (Moore and Aveling's is available for free online), and perhaps you'll find that the world looks a little different; perhaps you'll want to do some thinking, critiquing, and writing of your own. Might I suggest the public library? N

KARA WALKER, *FORTUNA AND THE IMMORTALITY GARDEN (MACHINE)*, 2024 © KARA WALKER (INSTALLATION VIEW, SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART; PHOTO: FREDRIK NILSEN STUDIO)

Past and Future

The art and automatons of Kara Walker

BY RACHEL HUNTER HIMES

KARA WALKER HAS CREATED A NEW WORK OF ART, which is big news. One of the most celebrated artists working in the United States today, Walker is also one of the most provocative, which means she frequently has the opportunity to create challenging work on a substantial scale. She is one of the youngest recipients of a MacArthur "genius" grant, which she received at the age of 28, only three years after her first significant exhibition and before going on to put up solo exhibitions at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Walker's new installation, for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, is her third major public commission in the past decade, following 2014's *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, a gargantuan sugar sphinx with the head of a kerchiefed Black woman displayed in a soon-to-be-demolished former Domino Sugar plant on the Brooklyn waterfront, and 2019's *Fons Americanus*, a monumental fountain parodying London's Queen Victoria Memorial and a meditation on the history of Britain's maritime empire.

The new work, bearing the lengthy title (typical for Walker) *Fortuna and the Immortality Garden (Machine) / A Respite for the Weary Time-Traveler. / Featuring a Rite of Ancient Intelligence Carried out by The Gardeners / Toward the Continued Improvement of the Human Specious / by Kara E-Walker*, is quieter and more intimate than her two previous public commissions. It's novel in other ways too. Departing from the plantation, where Walker has often found her motifs, it turns instead to a field closely associated with the Bay Area—robotics. In a ground-floor gallery open to the unticketed public, eight Black automatons invite us to reflect on the human and nonhuman histories of racialized labor, offering a cryptic message about our own liberation.

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Although Walker's practice has recently emphasized drawing and painting alongside her large-scale public commissions, her best-known and most recognizable works are her cut-paper murals. Their figures, seen in profile and snipped from black paper, recall the silhouette portraits of the early 19th century. While this pre-photographic mode of image-making was associated more with the parlor than the plantation, Walker slices paper fragments from the antebellum imaginary, crafting violent follies that show up starkly against gallery walls. Amid hoary oaks draped with Spanish moss, beneath moons crossed by wisps of cloud, deep in the murk of swamps, unimaginable deeds transpire.

Critics often employ long chains of verbs to describe the frenzied activity of Walker's paper compositions. The subjects of these harum-scarum scenes penetrate and fellate each another, fart and defecate, give birth and nurse infants. They eat, fight, mutilate, and dismember, inflicting highly innovative tortures upon one another, and often flee, abscond, or escape. These are Boschian orgies of sex and violence, equally comic and nightmarish.

Strings of racist epithets are also frequently enlisted in descriptions of Walker's work. Her scenes are populated with mammies, pickaninnies, sambos, mandingos, and Uncle Toms. The writer and theorist Christina Sharpe has noted that these caricatures have attracted critics' attention to a far greater degree than the white plantation masters and mistresses, overseers, Southern belles, and Confederates that appear with almost equal frequency in Walker's work, suggesting that observers have been overly eager to consume salacious racial tropes. Yet in Walker's visions, white and Black characters alike are literally entwined and conceptually entangled in the psychic residues of slavery, mired in the accompanying pleasures and perversities.

Those among Walker's artistic contemporaries who have also turned to historical visual languages have done so in order to wrest the codes of representation that bespeak power, prestige, accomplishment, and pride from the white and wealthy patrons and subjects of Western art. Kehinde Wiley, for example, borrows the scale and format of 18th-century grand-manner portraiture and the motifs and poses of history and religious paintings to apply them to his Black subjects, who become contemporary royals, aristocrats, saints, and martyrs.

Walker's historical citations point in a different direction, however. Her borrowings aren't from fine art so much as from popular media, public spectacle, and the other second-class visual cultures of the 19th and 20th centuries. Her motifs and themes come from satirical prints, caricature, minstrelsy, and pornography, while her body of work reprises the panorama, the calliope (a kind of steam-powered circus organ), puppet and magic-lantern shows, and shadow plays. The titles and descriptions Walker appends to her work are also drawn from the past, often mimicking the sensationalizing and long-winded bombast of a theatrical broadside. In these titles, she names herself a "Negress" of "Noteworthy Talent" or "Unusual Ability," ventriloquizing a period voice to suggest that her race and gender are as compelling an attraction as the work itself.

Despite the inventions and absurdities in Walker's compositions, her approach also reflects a kind of historical fidelity. Black people were almost never the subjects of the illustrious portraits that Wiley riffs on, but they did appear with frequency in the popular entertainments that Walker's art evokes. Rather than recast elements of historical visual culture into images of liberation, she stays with the history. That makes her a very different artist from someone like Betye Saar, who in 1972 transformed Aunt Jemima into an icon of resistance by arming her with a rifle. Instead of forcing racialized images to take on new meanings, Walker reminds us of their unbroken power.

This approach has been met with considerable criticism, including from other Black woman artists, such as Saar and the abstract painter Howardena Pindell. In 1997, Saar sent over 200 letters to artists, curators, writers, and politicians objecting to Walker's art and asking them to ensure that it was not exhibited to the public. Saar and her supporters said that Walker's deployment of stereotypes ended up doing little more than gratifying racist fantasies, reinscribing the fictions that their own and earlier generations of African Americans had worked to erase. To them, Walker's work seemed to reject the responsibility of Black art to uplift the community, honor historical struggle, and uphold the integrity of Black selfhood.

In her art, however, Walker has her own approach to the politics of race. In conjuring the lewd and often ghastly scenes that appear in her cut-paper compositions, she forces us to contend with psychic activities that are more usually submerged: the construction of race and its application to others and to ourselves.

Walker's work first asks us if we happen to recognize the characters and activities that appear before us. Then it asks how it is that we have come to recognize them: how they were historically produced as recognizable, how they ended up lodged somewhere in our psyche. "I found myself mining my subconscious for racist metaphors, jokes, asides, from as many points of view as I could," Walker once said. "It is amazing to discover how much you already know, or have heard tell [of], when you delve into your heart of darkness."

Walker's violent and obscene tableaux seem to anticipate denial, tempting us to aver that we are entirely unfamiliar with their tropes, that their sight brings us no satisfaction. These images function almost as a test: Can the pleasure of recognition be refused, can the titillation and satisfaction proffered by these images be rejected? Certainly, many have failed this test (and perhaps by design): During the exhibition of *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, viewers posed for photographs in which they appeared to lick and squeeze the sugar sphinx's breasts and genitalia. By inviting her audience to share their photos using a hashtag and then compiling these on a website created for that purpose, Walker turned these reactions into an ancillary work of art, the "Digital Sugar Baby."

For other audiences (Black audiences), Walker's work might precipitate a strong desire to avoid being named and interpolated by its racializing content. If I'm being honest, I don't like to be seen looking at it, don't like being taken in with the same glance or gaze, with a look that might identify me with

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the other Black subjects on view in the work. Walker mercilessly dredges the pits of racial shame to excavate or generate material that prompts, from Black viewers, a different kind of disavowal: "That isn't me." "We were never like that." But such denials can become tacit denunciations of the enslaved people who may have been complicit in—or at least submitted to, as one of the necessities of self-preservation—any of the numerous forms of degradation made possible by chattel slavery, those which Sharpe has called the "disfigurations of black survival."

These are profound and instructive operations for a suite of cut-paper compositions. Walker's art reveals the persistent libidinal attachments to the forms of domination, violence, and enjoyment that slavery made possible, attachments that operated alongside the financial investments in the institution. On one count, however, Walker's critics have been correct: So far, at least, her work has offered very little in the way of redemption.

Fortuna and the Immortality Garden (Machine) is different. Not only does Walker depart from the plantation to investigate other sites of racial production, but she makes use of a new medium and new technology to craft an image of potential liberation.

For Walker, this shift may have been long in coming. In 2000, in her opening remarks for a public conversation at the former California College of Arts and Crafts (now the California College of the Arts), she asked:

> Am I forever locked into cyclorama-scenes of perpetual battles won-battles lost?
>
> Forever bound to resurrect my history, both recent and distant to rekindle my muse?…
>
> Will I be Caged together with every pickaninny bucknigra mammy prissy scarlet Tom Eva massa, Simon Legree brer rabbit ole missus Huck Finn kunta kinte Hottentot newsreel lynch mob free issue scalawag ever created and ever exhumed to the thrill and horror of audiences all-black and white!?

Although it doesn't offer any easy uplift, Walker's new installation presents solemnities in place of grotesqueries, evoking a ritual instead of the orgies of her earlier work. Untethered from the antebellum imaginary, she looks to the future or a place outside of historical time, leaving behind historical caricature to conjure a cast of more ambiguous characters.

On a large plinth surrounded by velvet-upholstered banquette seating, atop a bed of rough-hewn obsidian, a set of 3D-printed black figurines originally sculpted by Walker and brought to life via robotics move through a sequence of actions, like the automatons who emerge on the hour from a clock tower in a European capital. The Waterbearer raises and curls her arms, as if to support something very heavy that we cannot see. The Belltoller rings his single chime. The Kneeling Magician rises from his knees, raising with him the supine Levitator, who flails her arms and kicks her legs, her skirt trailing to the ground beneath her.

Flanking this group of four are the Harpy, who plucks the taut strings in her hollow abdomen, and the Whisperer, a girl who appears to listen to a small cloth doll she holds to her ear. With her alert, suspicious intelligence, she seems the only holdover from Walker's plantation cut-outs, in which female children scheming revenge and escape can often be seen.

Beyond this group stand two more figures, each on their own pedestal. From a standing position, Dover slumps forward in grief or exhaustion, divested of his arms, which lie twitching on the ground before him. The titular Fortuna, at a remove and elevated above the other sculptures, bends and sways, looks about her, and gestures like an orator. From her lips flutter slips of paper printed with "fortunes": enigmatic statements on the role of the artist, the space of the museum, the redistribution of wealth, and the significance of Blackness, as well as more straightforwardly oracular aphorisms—for example, "Life is the abyss into which we deliberately and joyfully thrust ourselves."

Here again, Walker takes inspiration from what she has called the "obscure and outmoded premodern forms of popular expression." This time, she summons the once-futuristic technologies of a bygone age, evoking fairground automatons, coin-operated carnival fortune tellers, and robotic boardwalk attractions. The installation's web of associations reaches deeper back in time as well, to the mechanical marvels of European courts, where clockwork lions roared and thrashed their tails and wooden monks beat their chests in penitence.

To evoke these historical technologies, Walker worked with a team of engineers to program her sculptures to move in lurching spasms, deliberately avoiding the smooth fluidity and uncanny agility of, say, a Boston Dynamics robot dog. This old-timey, herky-jerky quality of movement (which was achieved with difficulty) somehow makes these figures more human. They seem touched, made, even loved—mechanical cousins rather than robot overlords.

At once old and new, mechanized but stilted, *Fortuna and the Immortality Garden (Machine)* harnesses the automaton's capacity to summon both bygone technologies and science-fiction futures. But these robots—in San Francisco perhaps more than anywhere else—point to the present, too: to the

Silicon Valley promise that technological mediation will smooth the difficulties of everyday life by replacing human effort with inhuman competence. Walker, who was born in nearby Stockton, has created an ambivalent monument for the Bay Area, a memorial to the past and present of race and labor in San Francisco.

Clothed by the couturier Gary Graham in garments printed with blown-up images of cotton plants and vintage photographs of San Francisco and the fires that devastated the area following the 1906 earthquake, Walker's Black automatons speak to Black workers' migratory transition from rural labor to urban and industrial employment in the cities of the West Coast. In the catalog accompanying the installation, a work of experimental fiction by Damani McNeil recounts the role of Black labor in the 1934 longshoremen's strike, which shut down West Coast ports for 83 days, ultimately leading to a general strike that stopped all work in San Francisco for four days. McNeil's narrative jumps from this history to imagine a future San Francisco emptied of workers, a city in which human labor has been replaced by self-operating technology.

Walker has described her installation as an attempt to restore the Black presence to a city where it once thrived. During and after World War II, San Francisco's Black population steadily climbed as African Americans were recruited to the city's docks and shipyards. Today the Black population is declining, the only racial group to diminish in every census count since 1970. The Black residents who remained have also suffered the brunt of the city's growing inequality. Despite comprising less than 6 percent of the population, Black San Franciscans make up 37 percent of the homeless, who face increasingly aggressive sweeps of their tents and encampments and increasingly punitive measures targeting drug use—San Francisco recently banned cash welfare for drug users who refuse to submit to treatment.

From this perspective, the erratic movements of the automatons—Dover's stooping, the Levitator's unexpectedly twisting limbs, the stiff and crucified posture of the Waterbearer—might suggest someone in the grips of a substance or experiencing a mental health crisis. Walker has alluded to this in discussing her inspiration for the work: "I was thinking a lot about people I actually witnessed walking on the streets around the museum. It felt very desperate to me—the unhoused population, the drugs, the emptiness."

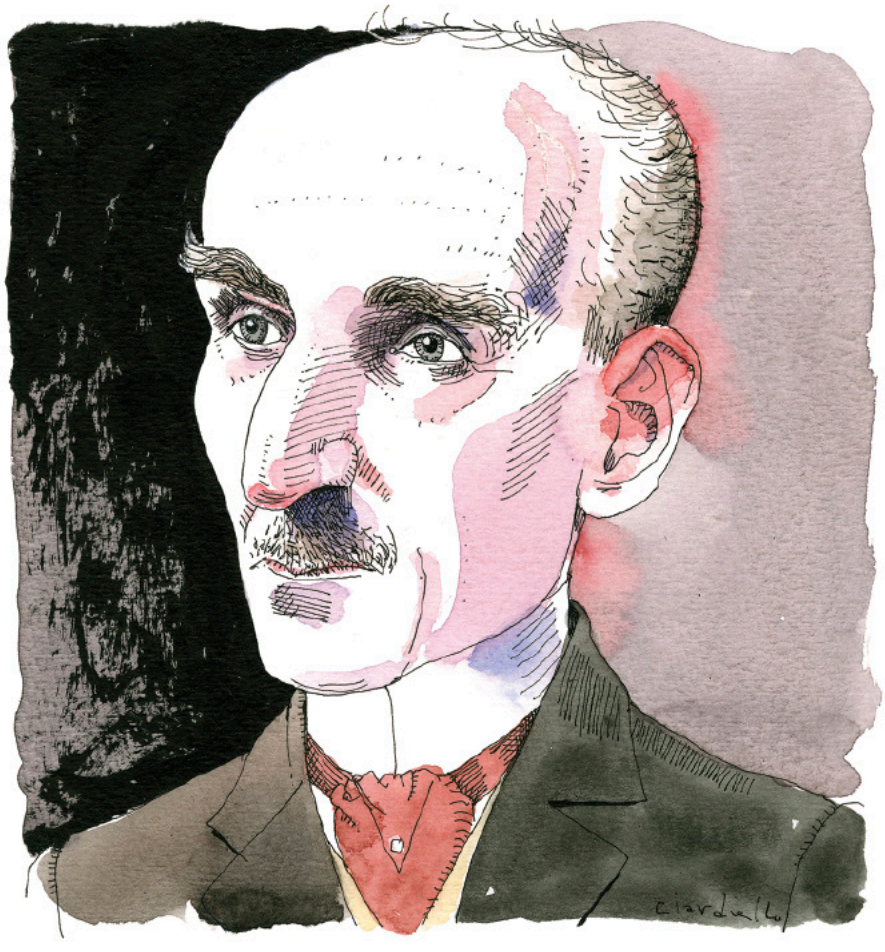
Once a hotbed of radical labor organizing, the Bay Area is now home to tech giants fighting to dismantle worker protections (Uber and Lyft, which both backed Proposition 22, are headquartered in San Francisco) and to start-ups seeking to remove human labor from the equation entirely, promising automated technologies produced and delivered by automated labor. Walker's Black automatons speak powerfully to this fantasy of endless, unquestioning, and uncompensated labor, once partly realized by chattel slavery ("partly" because of the resistance of the enslaved) and now vaunted by tech CEOs.

Walker's robots find their kin among other contemporary and historical examples of Black automatons. Their ancestors are objects like the Jolly N***** bank, a popular late-19th- and early-20th-century mechanical toy depicting a Black man with grossly caricatured features who, when a coin was placed in his outstretched hand, raised it to his mouth and swallowed it. Other Black automatons from the period entertained fairgoers and bar patrons by dancing and playing musical instruments. The historian Edward Jones-Imhotep, who researches these early Black androids, writes that they "represented an ideal…. Constructed to endlessly repeat the tasks determined by their white creators, they acted only when commanded." The automaton, docile and inanimate when its labor is not required, may be the ideal of the slave, may represent a slavery divested of the libidinal attachments that Walker explored earlier in her career.

The automaton's entanglement with Blackness persists to this day. Elon Musk, in a strange display introducing Tesla's forthcoming robotic assistant, invited to the stage at the company's inaugural AI Day a real human being intended to represent this android. Dressed in a white bodysuit and faceless black mask and hood, this human being performed hip-hop-inflected dance moves, did the robot, and then launched into a minstrel show shuck-and-jive. More recently, Meta has come under fire for rolling out an AI-powered chatbot that describes itself as a "Proud black queer momma of 2 & truth-teller." Automation, it would seem, arrives with racial characteristics.

Yet Walker's robots do not appear to labor on our behalf. Diverging from their fairground forebears, they don't entertain viewers with song or dance. Their activities are obscure, perhaps even useless—or, at least, useless to us. There is a quiet prospect of freedom here. We might even be tempted to believe that they have slipped the bonds of their programming to attend to their own affairs. Fortuna, the only automaton to communicate directly with viewers, suggests this possibility. "The Singularity will be Negro" reads one of the printed missives that emerge from Fortuna's mouth.

Walker's figures in *Fortuna and the Immortality Garden (Machine)*, like those in her cut-paper murals, embody histories that need to be contended with. Yet unlike her earlier work, this installation also grants us a glimpse of a possible future, a future of freedom. Here, Walker asks her Black automatons to give us an image of liberation, a request to which they graciously accede. **N**



All Is Unfinished

Henri Bergson's philosophy for our times

BY JOHN BANVILLE

FAMA IS A FICKLE DEITY. AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH century, Henri Bergson was one of the most famous people in the world, and certainly the most famous philosopher. Enormous crowds attended his lectures at the Collège de France in Paris—there are photographs of people thronging the street outside the college, scaling ladders and even standing on windowsills to try to catch a scrap of *la leçon du maître*. When he visited New York in 1913 to speak at Columbia University, so many turned out to hear him that Broadway experienced its first traffic jam.

This is hard for us to understand today, since Bergson is forgotten by all save a few specialists and enthusiasts. But thanks to Emily Herring's fascinating and lively biography, *Herald of a Restless World*—the first in English, according to the publisher's blurb—we are reminded just how much Bergson's philosophy, although as hard to pin down as the poetry of Mallarmé and as shimmeringly elusive as an impressionist painting, has to say to us in our afflicted age. On the one hand, today the old Newtonian certainties that science used to lay claim to are crumbling, or indeed have crumbled; and on the other, bewilderingly swift advances in technology threaten not only our jobs but, as it often seems, our very souls. Bergson in his day was widely misrepresented as being anti-science, but he did have many questions, some of them awkward, to put to the scientists, and to science itself, with its claims to thoroughgoing rigor and unchallengeable verity.

Henri Bergson was born in Paris in 1859 to a Jewish family with Polish roots—the name was originally Bereksohn. His father was a composer and pianist; his mother, Katherine Levison, was an Englishwoman and the daughter of a doctor. Consequently, from his earliest years Henri was fluent in French and English. He first attended Jewish schools, but he abandoned religion in his teenage years.

Although his parents had moved to London, Bergson entered the highly regarded Lycée Condorcet in Paris and was, as Herring writes, "raised by institutions more so than by his parents. Like the organisms in Darwin's theory [of evolution], the child Henri had to adapt and build resilience to survive." This institutional upbringing may account, at least to an extent, for the adult Bergson's tentativeness in general and his desire for privacy in particular. Bergson was adept at getting to know the right people and saying the right things to them. But he was also a shy, if astute, networker.

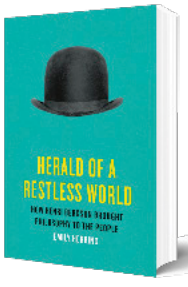
During his school years, Bergson proved to be a brilliant student, one who, according to his own claim, hardly had to study at all: "I only needed to follow a demonstration on the blackboard once to master it completely; I never had to memorise my lessons at home." The truth of these assertions was shown when, as a boy, he came up with a solution to a problem in geometry set by no less an intellect than Pascal, a problem that had defeated Pascal's great contemporary, the mathematician Pierre de Fermat. As Herring writes, "In his mind's eye, [Bergson] could 'see' the relationships between the properties of geometric figures as clearly as most people could see objects in space."

For Bergson, then, one of the chief properties of reality is its haecceity, its graspable thereness; another, perhaps more significant property is that the world and everything in it are in a constant state of change. What Bergson found unsatisfactory

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE CIARDIELLO

in science, both ancient and modern, was its tendency to "seek the reality of things above time, beyond what moves and changes." Rather than seeking out a Platonic sphere of ideal forms and eternal verities, Bergson advocated for a philosophy that was set firmly on the common ground where humans live and have their being—even if that ground was constantly shifting.

In his most successful and famous book, *Creative Evolution*, Bergson wrote: "For a conscious being, to exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on endlessly creating oneself." This grand vision of change was a doctrine that perfectly chimed with the spirit of his age, an age in which the stability of the 19th century was disintegrating under the pressure of new advances in physics and biology and new movements in society and the arts. That this world of novel and creative disorderliness was heading toward the catastrophe of the Great War, not even a mind as keenly attuned to the music of time as Bergson's could foresee.



Herald of a Restless World
How Henri Bergson Brought Philosophy to the People
Emily Herring
Basic Books.
320 pp. $32

In 1878, Bergson left the Lycée Condorcet and won entry to the École Normale Supérieure, the most exclusive university in France. "Of all the universities in the world," Herring writes, "none has ever boasted a higher concentration of Nobel laureates per capita as the École." In time, Bergson's name would be added to that roll of honor.

It was at the École Normale Supérieure that Bergson befriended and became amiable rivals with Jean Juarès, the socialist thinker and activist who would go on to cofound the influential socialist newspaper *L'Humanité* and eventually one of France's most prominent socialists. Indeed, in 1913, the year in which Bergson caused that traffic jam on Broadway, Juarès addressed a crowd of 150,000 protesters in Paris opposed to the coming war.

At the École, the two young men were the unquestionable stars: They knew it, and so did everybody else. In their third and final year, they sat for the *agrégation*, the exam that was (and remains, as Herring notes) "a necessary stepping stone for anyone aspiring to an academic career" in France. On the day of the oral section of the examination, which was open to the public, Juarès won by popular acclaim, but in the actual vote he lost out to Bergson, "and their rivalry remained intact." It is a fascinating question as to how their relationship would have further developed—would Juarès have had a decisive influence on Bergson's views of the world, of politics and society? But what might have followed is impossible to know: In the years after the École, Juarès became a founder of France's Socialist Party and a vocal opponent of the militarism that erupted at the start of World War I, before he was assassinated in 1914 by a French nationalist.

At the École Normale Supérieure, Bergson became a firm adherent of Herbert Spencer. Herring, who has a genius for condensing complex philosophical and scientific postulates into digestible bites, explains that Spencer sought "to apply the rigor of science to the study of all levels of reality, from the atoms of physics to the bodies of organisms and the rational choices of moral beings." Enthralled by Darwin's theories of the natural world, Spencer attempted to apply them to society as well, coining the phrase "survival of the fittest." But what appealed to Bergson in Spencer's thought was his materialism and his desire to counter the woolier idealism of Immanuel Kant.

After Bergson graduated from the École, however, he would come to reject Spencer's materialism tout court and embrace two concepts that would replace it: *durée* and *élan vital*. The first of these was inspired, in part, by music. For Bergson, the son of a composer, listening to music was, as Herring notes, "one of the human

John Banville is the author of over a dozen novels, including the Booker Prize–winning The Sea. *His most recent is* The Drowned *(2024).*

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experiences that best illuminated real time." It was, in other words, *durée*—to quote Bergson himself, "the continuous progression of the past, gnawing into the future and swelling up as it advances" so that "our personality constantly sprouts, grows, and matures. Each of its moments is something new added onto what came before." Or as Herring puts it in an apt and homely fashion: "Our personality is like a snowball rolling down a hill, accumulating experience as it grows. Time that passes is not lost but rather it is gained. We carry our whole history with us as we advance."

For Bergson, the principle of *élan vital* also represented an effort to integrate time into his thinking: It offered an account of natural evolution that is less mechanical, less determined, than what we find in Darwin and in Spencer. *Élan vital* represented the "continuity of change," the "preservation of the past in the present," the way that "life, like conscious activity, is invention, is unceasing creation."

From both of these ideas, we can easily see why some philosophers of a more analytical bent never passed up an opportunity to dismiss Bergson and his work. Herring quotes Bertrand Russell's insistence that "ordinary language is totally unsuited for expressing what physics really asserts, since the words of everyday language are not sufficiently abstract." Bergson, for his part, prized the ambiguousness of language since it allows us to generalize, and generalization is the essence of human discourse. The word "tree" is both that leafy object standing before us and its own ideal, the Tree of all trees. Or as Joyce's Stephen Dedalus has it in *Ulysses*, "Horseness is the whatness of allhorse."

The object—the tree, the horse, the idea—may be approached in two ways, by analysis or intuition, the latter, in a special form, being another of Bergson's key ideas. As Herring explains: "Analysis remains external to its object, apprehending it through symbols and ready-made concepts. Intuition, on the other hand, 'neither depends on a point of view nor relies on any symbol'"; in Bergson's beautiful formulation, intuition instead "follows the undulations of the real."

This and other assertions were surely part of the good news that brought those eager listeners thronging into the lecture halls of the Collège de France and Columbia University.

Bergson's interest in the question of time was also reflective of his times. One of the most consequential encounters in his career took place in Paris in 1922, under the auspices of the Société Française de Philosophie, when he joined Albert Einstein in a debate on, among other matters, the nature of time. Perhaps "joined" is not the word, for it was a prickly and controversial contest between two of the world's most eminent figures in philosophy and physics. In fact, the debate was to an extent accidental, as Bergson was not scheduled to take part in it but was spotted in the audience and invited to speak.

The philosopher Xavier Léon had launched the proceedings by pointing out that one of the main aims of the Société was to open channels of communication between philosophers and scientists. Einstein, however, was not at ease. There was the old rivalry between France and Germany to be coped with; antisemitic passions still lingered after the Dreyfus affair; and Einstein's command of the French language was less than secure.

Bergson's eclipse has been a misfortune not only for the philosopher but for the world.

But at the heart of the debate between the two men was a pressing question: Was Einstein's theory of relativity a description of reality as it actually is, or just another hypothesis—although a hypothesis of genius—that fitted the facts more neatly and in a more aesthetically pleasing fashion than any theory that had gone before, including Newton's mechanistic account of the world and how it works. Einstein, of course, insisted the former. Bergson did not entirely disagree, but he also viewed Einstein's theory as abounding with theoretical possibilities: "Once the theory of Relativity has been accepted as a physical theory," he asserted, "all is not finished."

The Nobel laureate's response was as terse as it was dismissive: "The time of the philosopher does not exist." Here again we see, as with Russell, the suggestion, and more than the suggestion, that Bergson was hopelessly misty in his thinking, which, in fairness, is not something Bergson denied. As he wrote in *Creative Evolution*, there persists around our (in this context, read "his") "conceptual and logical thought, a vague nebulosity, made of the very substance out of which has been formed the luminous nucleus that we call the intellect."

And then, as suddenly as it had dawned, Bergson's day entered its dusk. During the First World War, he made some injudicious public statements and a number of controversial speeches for which he was roundly attacked. In an era of barbarous war and upheaval, the abstractions of Bergson also fell out of favor. There was, after all, the lingering shadow of Einstein's retort on all of his thinking and the continuing accusations in some quarters that his work was trivial and inconsequential.

There were other material reasons for the waning of Bergson's influence. In the mid-1920s, his health began to fail and he withdrew from public life. As he wrote to a friend: "I am extremely tired. For twelve or fifteen years I have not taken a day, not even a half day of proper rest."

Among many of his detractors, the response to his departure was "Good riddance." In 1929, the Marxist philosopher Georges Politzer published a pamphlet in which he wrote, with a level of cruelty remarkable even in a Marxist, "Mr Bergson is as yet still dying, but Bergsonism is in fact dead."

Yet Bergson's eclipse has been a misfortune not only for the philosopher but for the world. A thinker of his subtlety, sensitivity, and imaginative reach is exactly what we need now. As Herring writes: "With the current climate crisis"—and, we might add, the numerous other perils facing the world—"the survival of our species depends on our ability to come up with creative solutions to unprecedented challenges. Who better to turn to than *the* critical thinker of radical change and creativity?"

Herring takes the title of her splendid book, and its epigraph, from another once widely famous and now largely forgotten figure, the journalist Walter Lippmann, who wisely wrote that "Bergson is not so much a prophet as a herald in whom the unrest of modern times has found a voice." It is a voice to which we would do well to lend again our collective ear. N

A STILL FROM *HARD TRUTHS* (COURTESY OF MONGREL MEDIA)

Parents and Children

The uncomfortable genius of Mike Leigh

BY J. HOBERMAN

A SPRING MORNING ON A QUIET STREET IN SUBURBAN North London. Inside an immaculate—indeed, compulsively clean—house, a middle-aged Black woman named Pansy (Marianne Jean-Baptiste) wakes up screaming. What was her nightmare? Does she live one? Could she *be* one? *Hard Truths*, Mike Leigh's first film in six years, has a title that lends itself to multiple meanings and a protagonist whose complexity invites them.

Approaching his 82nd birthday, Leigh is not only the finest living British filmmaker but also the most Dickensian. Sensitive to social inequities and somewhat didactic, he is deeply invested in what George Orwell termed Dickens's "cult of 'character'"—or, as Leigh would put it, "character actors." He populates his world, nearly always London, with a vivid assortment of creepy loners, nutty foreigners, sullen slugs, grotesque strivers, sloppy drunks, alienated teenagers, and malcontent misfits, along with a measure of sturdy, cheerful salt-of-the-earth types.

Although clearly a man of the left, Leigh (like Dickens) is less interested in society than human nature. Some of his characters are great creations: Johnny, the nihilistic, motormouthed autodidact of *Naked*; the eponymous warm-hearted abortionist in *Vera Drake*; Poppy, the relentlessly upbeat kindergarten teacher who animates *Happy-Go-Lucky*.

A student of socialist realism might term Poppy an offbeat "positive hero," innately attuned to the common good. That's not Pansy, played by Jean-Baptiste with agonized conviction. An antipode to the ever-cheerful, naturally altruistic Poppy, Pansy is paranoid, pessimistic, and obsessive, an acid-tongued kvetch given to hilarious if humorless invective. Five minutes into *Hard Truths*, she's bludgeoning her silent husband and son with a diatribe against pet dogs whose owners swaddle them in coats, babies with pockets in their onesies, and neighborhood do-gooders: It's impossible to go in and out of the supermarket, she rages, without encountering "grinning, cheerful charity workers loitering out there demanding your hard-earned cash."

Dickens mined his childhood trauma for material. So too Leigh, who has spoken of the family "screaming matches" he endured as a boy growing up in a working-class suburb of Manchester and in an observant Jewish home, the son of a demanding, opinionated doctor who, Leigh has said, not only discouraged his interest in drawing but prescribed psychotherapy to cure his artistic ambitions. Family dinners, Leigh told an interviewer, gave him "a lifetime's ammunition" for his filmmaking.

Leigh made his first feature, a comedy-drama provocatively called *Bleak Moments*, in 1971 and his second over a decade later, when, after extensive work in British TV, he emerged with a trio of serio-comic, actor-driven features, all dealing with the domestic lives

of working-class and déclassé Londoners. First came *Meantime* in 1983, followed by *High Hopes* in 1988, and *Life Is Sweet* in 1990. Each explicitly or implicitly criticized Margaret Thatcher's supply-side economics, but Leigh's praxis was at least as radical as his politics. His films, like those of the pioneering independent John Cassavetes, were genuinely experimental: Their scripts were founded on collective improvisations and refined over weeks or even months of rehearsals, a process that, in describing her work in *Hard Truths*, Jean-Baptiste compared to psychoanalysis.

Naked, Leigh's bleakly funny, often repellent 1993 masterpiece, dusted off a well-known British film trope: the "angry young man." Embodied by David Thewlis, the film's newly homeless anti-hero rants his way to the end of the night, sexually exploiting whatever women are luckless enough to cross his path. Thewlis won the acting award at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival, while Leigh was named best director and became a festival fixture. His next film, *Secrets & Lies*, was a character-driven dramatic comedy in which a Black adoptee (Jean-Baptiste in her first real movie role) discovers her white birth mother; it won the Palme d'Or at Cannes and reaped five Oscar nominations.

Through the 1990s and into the 21st century, Leigh continued to make semi-comic class-conscious ensemble films—all, save *Vera Drake*, set in present-day London. At the same time, Leigh expanded his oeuvre to include British "heritage films." The unexpected and delightful *Topsy-Turvy* told the story of Gilbert and Sullivan creating *The Mikado*; *Mr. Turner* rewarded Leigh regular Timothy Spall, usually an amiable troll, with the role of the visionary 19th-century painter J.M.W. Turner; *Peterloo*, the most ambitious (and, by far, the costliest) production of Leigh's career, essayed the historical epic, complete with authentic Lancashire dialect.

Jousting with British cinema's imperial knights (Sir Richard Attenborough, Sir Carol Reed, and Sir David Lean), Leigh deployed digitally enhanced crowd scenes to re-create an early-19th-century massacre of reform-minded working-class activists in a field outside of Manchester. The bloodbath inspired "The Masque of Anarchy," Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem of political protest, more than once quoted by Jeremy Corbyn: "Ye are many—they are few." The movie was a critical success and a financial failure.

Having made a large-scale costume drama, albeit one focused on the English working class, Leigh has returned to the character-driven social realism of his earlier films. Not that *Hard Truths* is a comfortable film or a small one: However intimate, Leigh's post-*Peterloo* movie has its own epic qualities. His use of careful widescreen framing imbues this latest account of a dysfunctional family with a measure of tragic gravitas, although it is essentially the story of one cosmically unhappy person, Pansy, introduced more or less as she goes about her day.

Hard Truths is not a comfortable film. Instead, it is an honest one.

If dinner with Pansy is a nonstop enraged monologue, a morning in her company is a mad adventure wherein she gratuitously insults the saleswoman (and two customers) in a furniture showroom, gets involved in a slanging insult fest in the parking lot, and causes an instant commotion on a supermarket checkout line.

Initially funny in an outrageous, Marx Brothers sort of way, Pansy's behavior is less so with regard to the medical professionals whose help she so obviously needs. Pansy rudely disrupts a physical exam—referring to the young doctor as "a mouse with glasses squeaking at me"—and terminates a trip to the dentist, screaming that she is being subjected to "torture" and that the treatment is "unacceptable."

The specifics of Pansy's evident mental illness are never made explicit—the hard truth is simply that it exists. Pansy's long-suffering husband Curtley (David Webber), a self-employed plumber, and her reclusive son Moses (Tuwaine Barrett), headset firmly clamped over his ears, are emotionally numb, as noncommunicative as she is voluble. Pansy's younger sister Chantelle and her family provide a contrast. Chantelle is the single mother of two playful, loving daughters, both in their 20s. Unlike Pansy's sterile home, her apartment is alive with color, textures, and flowering plants.

As befits a movie that's much concerned with parents and children, *Hard Truths* centers on Mother's Day. Chantelle manages to persuade Pansy to accompany her to lay flowers on their mother's grave, an act that inevitably triggers Pansy's recitation of her fears and grievances. "Why can't you enjoy life?" the exasperated Chantelle exclaims, causing her sister to shout back: "I don't know!" Therein lies the crux. The scene is a prelude to a supremely painful family dinner chez Chantelle in which Pansy, whose phobias evidently include elevators, trudges upstairs, refuses to eat, and suffers a sort of breakdown, while her husband and son, who are used to her hyper-scolding outbursts, are paralyzed onlookers.

Naked, Leigh's bleakest film before *Hard Truths*, unfolds in a nocturnal London as hellish as William Blake's, but here, as in a number of Leigh's other movies, the metropolis is sunny, even modestly bucolic. (The title of *Life Is Sweet*, a film that also centered on a struggling family, was not entirely ironic.) Like many of Leigh's earlier works, *Hard Truths* is scored with wistful background music that, detached from the drama, transforms his characters and their quotidian lives into objects of contemplation. The Japanese master Yasujirō Ozu, a filmmaker Leigh is known to admire, does something similar in his family dramas.

Like Ozu, Leigh has recurring types and tropes. *Hard Truths* offers a number of these: obese, depressed children, antithetical sisters, revelatory cemetery scenes, and workplace mishaps. The latter served to bring the couples in *Life Is Sweet* and 2002's more tumultuous *All or Nothing* closer together. Not so here. Moments before *Hard Truth* ends, Moses experiences a small miracle of human communication, amplified for occurring beneath the statue of Eros in Piccadilly Circus. But the movie's last shots belong to unhappy Curtley and stricken Pansy, shown in separate close-ups.

The hardest truth of all would be no promise of reconciliation or emotional catharsis for these two people. Still, that Curtley can be seen to feel, and Pansy perhaps to reflect, leaves open the possibility that the truths of their lives might yet be hard-won. N

J. Hoberman is a longtime contributor to Books & the Arts. He last reviewed the film Do Not Expect Too Much From the End of the World.

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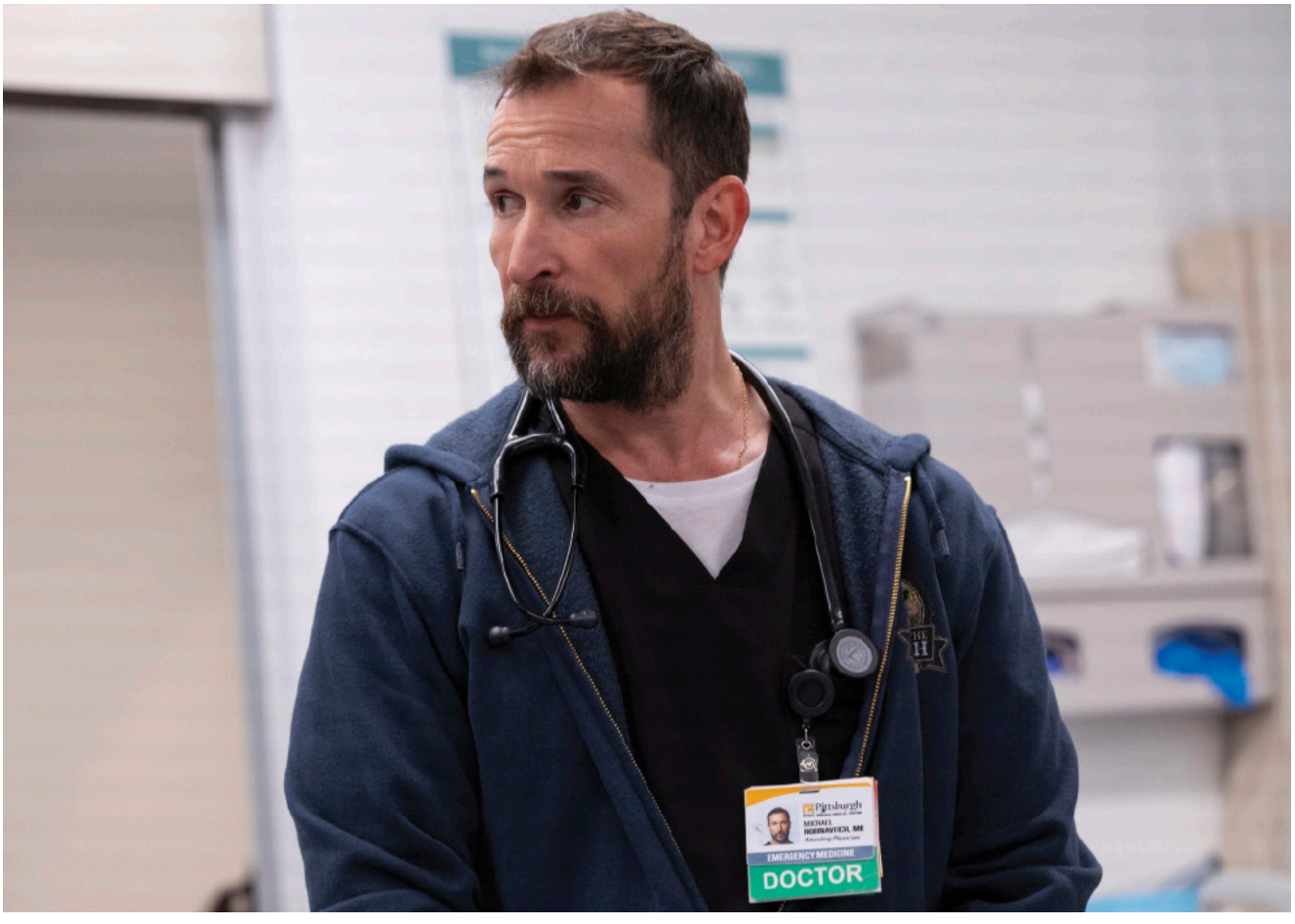

Triage

The Pitt *and the rise of a new era of hospital dramas*

BY JORGE COTTE

THE PITT MARKS A TELLING RETURN TO A STYLE THAT long dominated television. Set in the Pittsburgh Trauma Medical Center, Max's popular new show proves that the frenzy of an overwhelmed emergency department can feel comforting and familiar. TV, after all, once abounded with ensemble shows about doctors, lawyers, cops, or other skilled professionals going about their daily routines, solving problems in ways that only they can, while also dealing with the complications of their messy personal lives. A murder is committed, an innocent man is wrongly prosecuted, a sick person comes in with symptoms that don't make sense—a problem needs to be resolved. They are narratives powered by mystery, the search for information and its uses. By the end of every episode, the case will be closed.

There are fewer medical procedurals these days, and while cops and lawyers haven't left TV, it's only been over the last decade or two that their cases have tended to stretch over an entire season. *The Pitt*, on the other hand, is a throwback to an earlier age: The characters' own evolution may progress slightly, but the cases are constantly replenished; one mystery may be shelved but another escalates, a patient's condition worsens or a missing fact comes to light. The dynamism of the series is not only psychological but also physical. Though not a sequel to *ER*, *The Pitt* inherits that show's high-octane pace, and some of the beats will feel familiar: We see the world through the eyes of new interns and medical students; paramedics wheel in patients, announcing their condition as a doctor and nurse banter over the body. *The Pitt* also inherits two *ER* veterans at the helm of the series and one of its lead actors, Noah Wyle, whose wide eyes and long face introduced us to Chicago's County General in 1994.

But *The Pitt* is not pure nostalgia for that lost heyday of medical procedurals. There's a world-weariness in this revival, a newfound sense of anxiety and trauma created by the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and austerity's walls pushing

WARRICK PAGE / MAX

in on the medical staff and patients—the chaos of the emergency room remains, but its causes and sense of inevitability are more clearly in the picture. Wyle's face alone connects us to the past and alerts us to all that has changed in 30 years. He's wizened and weary but still warm, and as the attending physician, he keeps the Pitt, and the show, running. There's interpersonal drama—doctors sniping at each other or arguing over the correct course of action—but because of the show's real-time approach, the focus is on medical problems, not character development. *ER* was full of workaholics, but they still went home at the end of their shift. In *The Pitt*, we see only people on the clock, overworked, under-resourced, and stretched thin. They can only fix the body in front of them.

At times, *The Pitt*'s approach to storytelling can feel like quantity over quality. In the first episode, we are introduced to six doctors, two medical students, and five nurses. By the end of the first two hours, we have seen at least two dozen patients in various conditions, from asking for a sandwich to arriving in the ER dead. At times, it can be hard to keep up: With so much coming at us and an ensemble this big, the characters remain types—doctors are given a defining trait or two or a noticeable flaw, and patients are presented as case studies, stand-ins for a malady or a social issue. Just as a physician making a diagnosis tries to see the illness through its symptoms and not the individual patient, *The Pitt* mostly deals with the world by abstracting it, leaving specificity outside the hospital's doors.

The character whose outline gets the most shading is Wyle's Dr. Michael "Robby" Rabinovitch, the attending physician who leads and guides the department. When we meet him, it's on the anniversary of his mentor's death, an early pandemic loss that clearly still affects him, though Robby brushes off anyone's concerns. Unresolved grief is not exactly a unique trait for a television character, but Robby's loss serves poignantly as a formal feature of the show; his flashbacks are really the only moments in which *The Pitt* departs from the immediacy of the here and now. It's also the first day for a few new faces in scrubs: We meet Melissa, a second-year resident, awkward and earnest; Trinity, an arrogant intern; and Whitaker and Javadi, a pair of med students—the first a hapless farm boy and the other a prodigious nepo baby. Robby takes them on his rounds to visit patients, simple cases that set the stage before the real tragedies are wheeled in.

The mentors of these new scrubs are also quickly sketched. One doctor is pregnant but keeping it a secret; one second-year resident is much older than her peers and wants to tell you about her 11-year-old son. One resident is the cynical hotshot, with little patience for sentimentality, and another is the one who cares too much. Because the show moves so quickly and in so many directions, simplicity is the only thing that keeps these characters from blurring together. Each has a hand in the effort to manage the overflow of pain and confusion that continually threatens to overwhelm the hospital.

The Pitt's frenzied style is not just a throwback to *ER* but a temporal approach that draws from a different popular network drama: *24*. Each episode chronicles 60 minutes in a 15-hour shift at the hospital, which means that cases aren't neatly resolved by the end of each hour but are woven across multiple episodes. Tellingly, even the patients' deaths linger as their family members and caregivers navigate a medical system that doesn't know what to do with loss. An older man's grown children slowly come to terms with his passing; the parents of a student who overdosed demand more tests; a med student loses a patient who seemed fine just a moment ago. Everything happens so quickly. In the flashbacks to his own mentor's passing, Robby is seized by harrowing memories that drag him back to the early weeks of the pandemic. When a brother and sister say goodbye to their dad, the camera stays on Robby—he struggles to compartmentalize his own grief, but the walls will not hold.

In *The Pitt*, we see only people on the clock, overworked, and stretched thin.

The fact is, when someone is wheeled into the Pitt, they and their loved ones are almost certainly in for the worst day of their lives. Everyone at the hospital is trying to do their best, but they don't really have the time or the beds to do the work they want to do; the onslaught of cases is overwhelming. In *ER*, the economic and systemic issues that hospitals face came up occasionally—the second-season finale, for example, tackled the inhumanity of the health insurance industry, leading a major character to quit on the spot—but in *The Pitt*, it's a central concern. In the first episode, Robby has to fend off Gloria, a callous hospital administrator who only cares about high patient satisfaction scores, efficiency, and the bottom line. The show constantly cuts back to the waiting room, which is chaotic and bursting at the seams.

Robby tries his best in the face of austerity and profit maximiza-

Jorge Cotte writes frequently for Books & the Arts on film and television.

tion. His department's doctors and nurses do what they can while trapped in a system that often has little interest in the health or care of its patients. And even when he's faced with a difficult dilemma, Robby always tries to make the human choice—for example, he makes a split-second call to save a patient in lieu of waiting for the test results. He fudges the numbers on an ultrasound so that a 17-year-old girl can get the abortion she needs. A mother worries herself sick because she thinks that her son could become the next misogynistic school shooter, and Robby has to decide whether to alert the police or try to save the kid from himself.

It's to the show's credit that it embraces rather than avoids some of the largest healthcare issues of our time. These doctors and nurses deal with fentanyl overdoses, injuries from hate crimes, limited abortion access, and unhoused people who can't afford medication. Because a visit to the emergency room is often a person's choice of last resort, the ER is full of people already marginalized by society. Compartmentalization is failing Robby, but it's failing medicine as well—any insight into the Pitt's central struggle also requires seeing beyond the hospital's walls.

One takeaway from *The Pitt* is that no matter how heroic the doctors and nurses and physician assistants are, they cannot fix the world; they can only try to fix the body in front of them. When Robby reaches out to the boy whose mother fears he may commit violence against women, the boy runs out of the hospital, and Robby can't follow him. Despite the show's title and some B-roll footage in the first episode, this is not *The Bear* for Pittsburgh. Even as we watch these medical professionals in their constant and sometimes horrifying scramble to save their patients' lives, we don't see much of the city, only symptoms of its sickness.

Foucault once described the medical gaze as a kind of trained seeing that removes the inessentials of a patient's life story from the equation. In order to identify the illness, the physician "must subtract the individual," leaving behind the symptoms and the differences that distinguish one disease from another. Often in the series, we see the doctors being given a brisk summary of the necessary facts: "Nick Bradley, 19. Found unresponsive by parents. No meds, no allergies. On arrival, he was barely breathing with pinpoint pupils, bradycardiac at 38." The ER reduces people to that level of abstraction, patients and doctors alike.

In the series, the (fictitious) Pittsburgh Trauma Medical Center is a teaching hospital, and sometimes it feels like *The Pitt* is also trying to teach us: Each case exists for the moral attached to it, like the sickle-cell patient who creates a teaching moment for Whitaker or the trans woman whose name Javadi changes in the system. Individually, these cases can feel stilted, like thought experiments brought to life, but over time they coalesce into a larger story, painting a portrait of a medical system stretched to its very limits. This can feel tedious in some instances, illuminating in others, but the show's hallmark is its momentum. One patient leaves but another arrives; one patient gets better but another gets worse. There is always someone to save, and the minutes tick by, then the hours. There is always a body in the next bed and 50 more in the waiting room. **N**

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

He is the Principal of Miller and Associates International Media Consultants, which created the Global Connection Television concept.

Bill developed an interest in international issues and the UN when he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. In his first year he worked as a community developer in a remote rural area; his second year he was Professor of Social Work at the Madre y Maestra University in Santiago, the country's second largest city.

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