

# THE Nation.

EST. 1865

NOV. 2/9, 2020

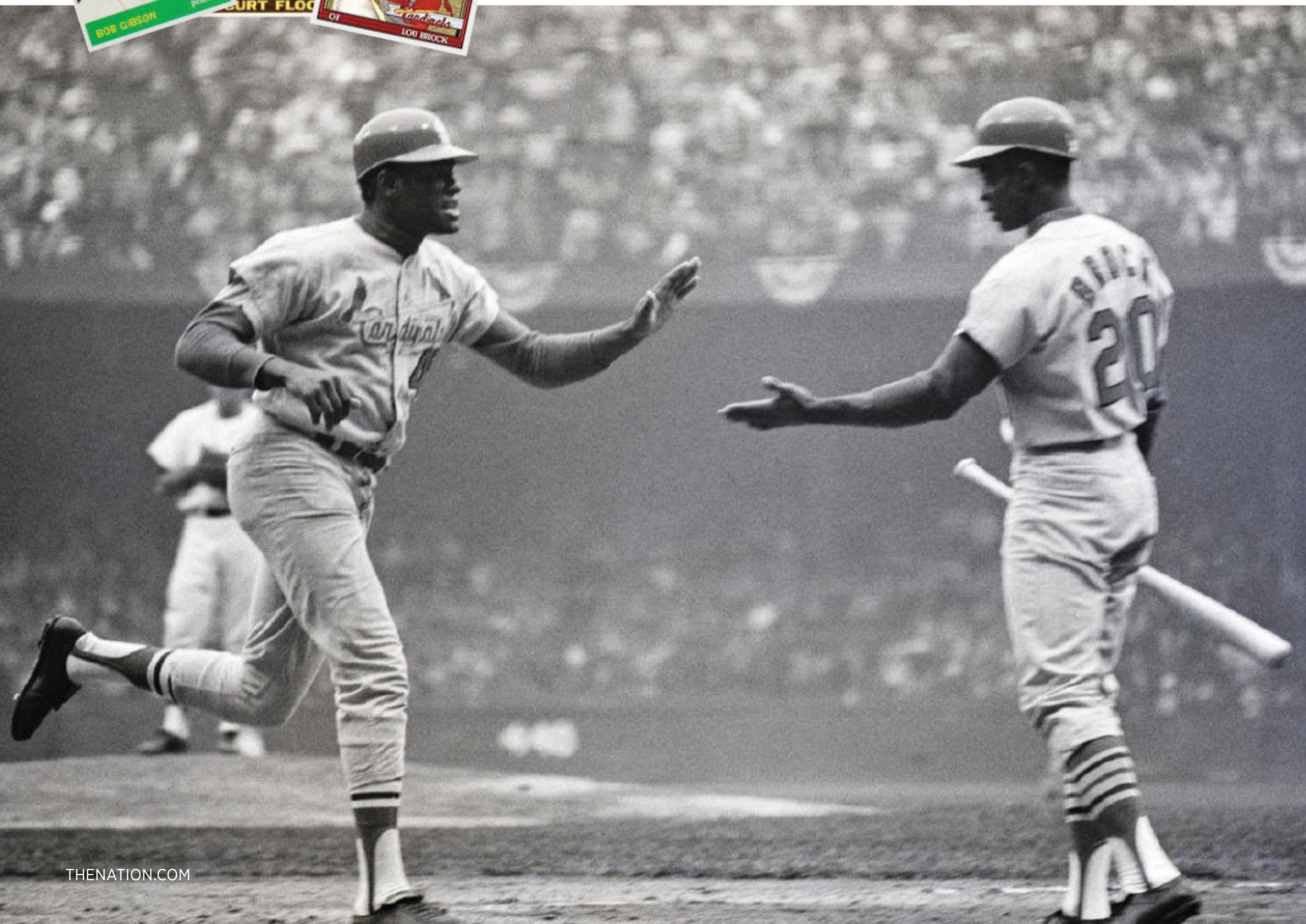
# Fade to White



More than a half-century after  
Black Americans helped reenergize  
the sport, baseball once again has  
a color problem.      GENE SEYMOUR

HOW TO DATE  
A RACIST  
TALIA LAVIN

THE MAKING  
OF THE  
UNEQUAL CITY  
KIM PHILLIPS-FEIN



# BOLD Ideas, ESSENTIAL Reading

*“Paul Robeson was an artistic genius, moral titan, and courageous freedom fighter whom we must never forget!”*

—Dr. Cornel West, Harvard University

*“With powerful drawings, meticulous attention to historical detail, and deep appreciation for his wife, Eslanda Goode Robeson, Rudahl, Buhle, and Ware provide us with a deeply moving tribute to the enormous talent, courage and genius of Paul Robeson.”*

—Bettina Aptheker, Distinguished Professor Emerita, Feminist Studies,  
University of California, Santa Cruz

*“With extraordinary rhythm, these arresting drawings and captivating words seamlessly weave insights from critical race theory, global politics, Marxist theory, cultural studies, and historical criticism to narrate the inimitable life of Paul Robeson.”*

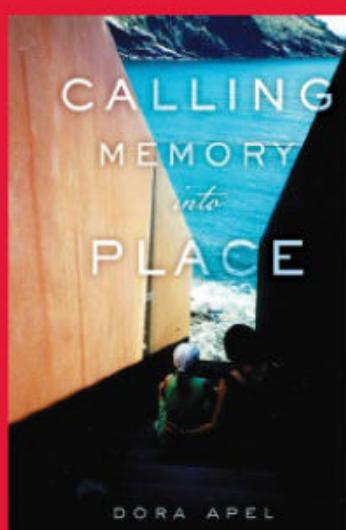
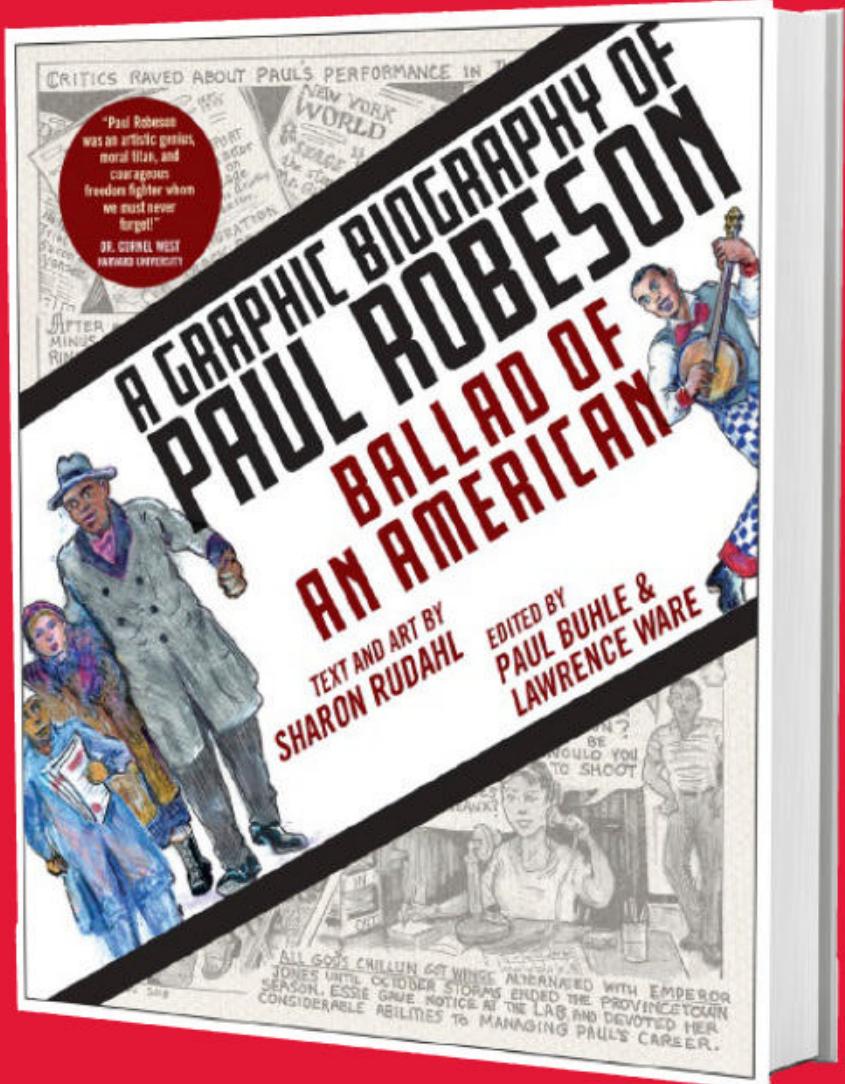
—Andre C. Willis, Associate Professor of Religion, Brown University

## Ballad of an American

A Graphic Biography of Paul Robeson

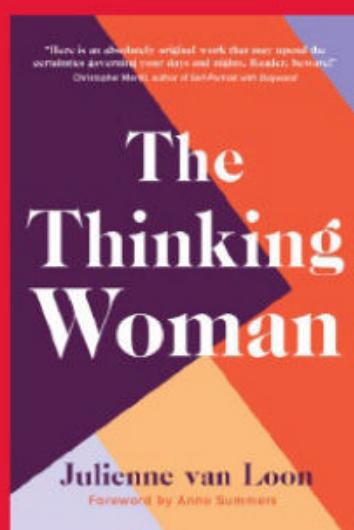
Text and art by Sharon Rudahl

Edited by Paul Buhle and Lawrence Ware



*“...Deeply personal and thoughtful, Apel explores what it means to recall terrible events and what is at stake in forgetting them.”*

—Coco Fusco,  
Cooper Union



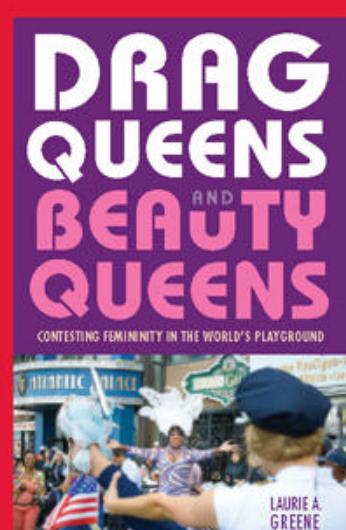
*“A knotty, charismatic exploration of the intersection between ideas and lived experience.”*

—Jo Case,  
*Sydney Morning Herald*



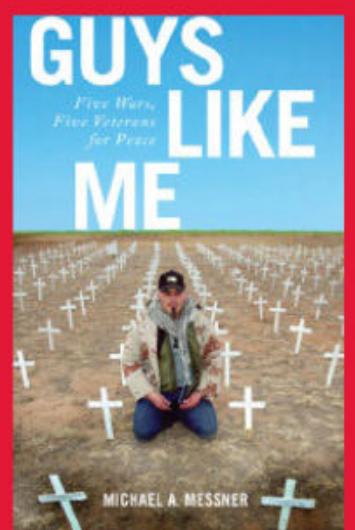
*“A call to arms to elevate our thinking to the species level or, Schuller cautions, the species will face extinction.”*

—Cynthia McKinney,  
activist and former Congresswoman



*“An unprecedented look at drag culture and its history in Atlantic City. A must-read for queens and their fans!”*

—Sapphira Cristal, Miss'd American 2020



*“An eloquent, passionate, and moving account of how war has sometimes moved veterans towards peace.”*

—Viet Thanh Nguyen,  
author of *The Sympathizer*

Calling Memory into Place  
Dora Apel

The Thinking Woman  
Julienne van Loon

Humanity's Last Stand  
Confronting Global Catastrophe  
Mark Schuller

Drag Queens and Beauty Queens  
Contesting Femininity in the World's Playground  
Laurie Greene

Guys Like Me  
Five Wars, Five Veterans for Peace  
Michael A. Messner  
New in Paperback!

**Unequal wait:**  
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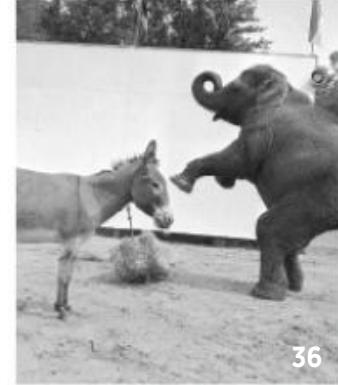
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EDITORIAL / JEET HEER FOR THE NATION

# The Power of Covid-Positive Thinking

**I**F DONALD TRUMP CAN BE SAID TO BELIEVE IN ANYTHING BESIDES HIS OWN ENrichment, it is the power of positive thinking. His family worshipped at the Marble Collegiate Church in New York, whose pep-talking preacher Norman Vincent Peale came up with the positive-thinking creed. Trump married two of his wives—Ivana Trump and Marla Maples—in the church; his parents' funerals were also held there. It's this unassailable faith in boosterism that has led him to respond to his diagnosis of Covid-19 with a narrative about how he's learned valuable lessons that will make him an even better president.

On October 4 he tweeted a video in which he said, "I learned a lot about Covid. I learned it by really going to school. This is the real school. This isn't the let's-read-the-books school. And I get it. And I understand it." Bizarrely, he ended the video by saying, "We love what's happening." One famous Trump supporter, *Dilbert* cartoonist Scott Adams, went even further, comparing Trump's illness to the radioactive spider that turned Peter Parker into Spider-Man.

Alas, all the evidence suggests that infection hasn't made Trump any wiser, let alone transformed him into a superhero. For one thing, he hasn't become any more honest. The public deserves to know the state of a president's health when he contracts a potentially lethal disease with no known cure.

Instead the White House offered conflicting and contradictory evidence, which has puzzled not just journalists but also medical professionals. As *The Washington Post* noted, there followed "a days-long torrent of falsehoods, obfuscation, evasion, misdirection and imprecision from those surrounding Trump as he faces the greatest threat to a president's health in decades." He has been touting the restorative powers of the experimental drugs he's taken, with all the enthusiasm of a quack medicine salesman. Crucially, he's repeatedly blurred the distinction between therapeutic drugs and cures, as well as insisted, falsely, that a cure is just weeks away.

Trump went on a joyride with the Secret Service and prematurely ended his isolation so he can work in the Oval Office. About the joyride, James P. Phillips, an attending physician at Walter Reed, tweeted, "Every single person in the vehicle during that completely unnecessary Presidential 'drive-by' just now has to be quarantined for 14 days. They might get sick. They may die. For political theater. Commanded by Trump to put their lives at risk for theater. This is insanity."

He has even returned to holding campaign rallies. All of this endangers his staff, the Secret Service, journalists, and the larger public.

To judge by his tweets and interviews, Trump is angrier and more frantic than ever. He's been sending out a nonstop bar-

rage of threats—including calls to arrest Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Joe Biden. When Trump touches on substantive politics, he's erratic and unreliable. On the crucial issue of stimulus relief, he's gone from supporting a deal to saying no deal to claiming he wants even more stimulus funding than the Democrats do.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the target of many of his insults, commented, "Clearly, the White House is in complete disarray." She also raised the possibility that steroids, which have been prescribed to help strengthen Trump's lungs, are clouding his judgment. Nor is she alone in this speculation. As *The New York Times* reports,

"Some White House staff members wondered whether Mr. Trump's behavior was spurred by a cocktail of drugs he has been taking to treat the coronavirus, including dexamethasone, a steroid that can cause mood swings and can give a false

level of energy and a sense of euphoria."

Trump's situation is dire. He's sick, drugs are likely affecting his emotional stability, about 40 workers in his White House orbit have come down with Covid-19, and he continues to sink in the polls.

All of which suggests that he feels under siege and is using his Twitter account (even more than usual) to lash out and try to create the illusion that he's still dominant. The danger is that the more wounded he is, the more erratic and unstable he'll become. Even if he loses the election—or rather, especially if he loses the election—Trump is going to go down fighting. And he's not afraid to take all of us down with him.

**Trump is going to go down fighting. And he's not afraid to take all of us down with him.**

COMMENT / JOHN NICHOLS

# No Rest Till He's Gone

*A decisive win for Biden would prevent a “red mirage.”*

D

ONALD TRUMP TELLS LOTS OF LIES. BUT HE lies most adventurously about elections. Even when it was clear he had lost the popular vote by millions of ballots and won the Electoral College by a handful of razor-thin margins in battleground states, he claimed on November 27, 2016, that “in addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.” Both statements were false. But Trump was determined to control the narrative, and he has maintained that determination to such an extent that his supporters imagine him to be far more popular than polls have ever suggested.

So what are the chances that an embattled and desperate Trump will try to control the narrative when the results of the 2020 election begin to trickle in? What are the chances that he will cry fraud when none exists? What are the chances that he will declare victory even if he’s losing? The answer to those questions came on August 17 of this year in Oshkosh, Wis., where he told supporters, “The only way we’re going to lose this election is if the election is rigged. Remember that. It’s the only way we’re going to lose this election.” He knows this is not true. Yet he has already proved he will seize every opening to foster the chaos, confusion, and legal malfeasance that might allow him to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

Don’t think it can happen? It already has. In 2000, during the fight over who would win Florida’s electoral votes, George W. Bush and his Republican lieutenants fostered the illusion that he was a winner-in-waiting in the days following a too-close-to-call election. He formally declared victory on November 26 of that year—at a point when Democrats were legitimately contesting the results. Twelve days later, Florida’s Supreme Court ordered a manual recount that might have confirmed an Al Gore victory if it had not been upended the next day by a Bush-friendly majority on the US Supreme Court. Even though avenues existed for fighting on, Karl Rove and the Bush team were so successful in conjuring fantasies of Bush’s inevitability and legitimacy that Gore conceded in what looked like a hostage video.

Trump may not be interested in history, but rest assured that he and his aides are well aware of the maneuvers that gave Bush the presidency. The real issue in 2020 is whether the Democrats will give Trump the space to dictate the story of November 3 and what comes after.

To address it, let’s deal in something the president eschews: facts.

November 3 is just a way station on the circuitous route to choosing the next president. December 14, 2020, is the day the Electoral College votes. On January 6, 2021, a joint session of Congress counts the electoral votes, and—if there are no objections—the winners of the presidency and vice presidency are formally announced. If Democrats

Joe Biden and Kamala Harris prevail and if Vice President Mike Pence, as the president of the Senate, announces the name of Trump’s successor on that day, the pieces will be in place for the peaceful transfer of power on January 20.

But the vagaries of the Constitution and the statutes that extend from it leave enormous openings for what is insufficiently described as mischief. Nothing in Trump’s history suggests that he will respect norms that do not benefit him. This has led to widespread speculation about the lengths to which he might go to keep the presidency.

Trump has clearly signaled one of the routes he’ll take, starting with objecting to voting by mail. On September 17 he tweeted, “Because of the new and unprecedented massive amount of unsolicited ballots which will be sent to ‘voters’, or wherever, this year, the Nov 3rd Election result may NEVER BE ACCURATELY DETERMINED, which is what some want.” Wrong. The result will be determined, though maybe not on a normal timeline. This is where the question of who controls the narrative before and after Election Day becomes vital.

**Among those who planned to vote on Election Day, 67 percent supported Trump, versus 26 percent for Biden.**

Fifty-eight percent of likely voters plan to vote early or by mail. In the roughly 20 states that allow ballots postmarked on or around November 3 to be counted if they arrive after Election Day—including battleground states such as Iowa, Minnesota, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and perhaps Wisconsin—results may not be known for a week or more.

Even with recounts of close states, that’s plenty of time to meet the Electoral College deadline. Unfortunately, it’s also plenty of time for Trump to engage in bad-faith maneuvers throwing a divided country into chaos. How? Democrats are more enthused about voting by mail than Republicans. For instance, in Wisconsin a Marquette University Law School poll in August found that, of people who said they’ll vote by mail, 81 percent supported Biden and 14 percent favored Trump. Among those who planned to vote in person on Election Day, 67 percent supported Trump, versus 26 percent for Biden. But initial returns from battleground states will highlight the sentiments of in-person voters, because many mail ballots arrive after Election Day and ones that arrive before then aren’t counted until later.

The fact that in-person votes will shape early results creates the prospect, according to the data and technology firm Hawkfish,

that a “red mirage” could emerge on election night. At a point when most ballots remain uncounted, Trump could lead nationally and in critical battleground states. “We can anticipate that the president and at least Fox News, likely, but many others, are going to declare victory at that point,” Ellen Konar, Hawkfish’s vice president of voter research, told *USA Today*. “They’re not going to say, ‘Oh, let’s hold off. We don’t have all the ballots in.’”

In one Hawkfish scenario, Trump could enjoy a projected Electoral College count of 408-130 on election night—with under 20 percent of the votes counted—only to see Biden win 334-204. If the final margin’s that wide, Trump’s gambit may simply embarrass the president and his gullible supporters. But what if it’s closer? What if key states require arduous recounts? Then Trump’s lies get traction.

Trump could claim headlines, dominate social media, and deliver his victory speech at the start of a process that is destined to turn against him. In so doing, he wouldn’t just create a false impression. He would open space for the same Republican legal teams that worked to make it hard to vote before the election to make it hard to count votes after the election. With objections to nonexistent voter fraud, he could give allies encouragement to disrupt and discredit the ongoing count. “This is what sets up a potential disaster,” tweeted David Axelrod, who ran Barack Obama’s presidential campaigns. With Election Day voting favoring Trump and mail-in voting favoring Biden, we could see “Trump claiming fraud as the count turns against him.”

This is where Republican legislatures and conservative courts could advance Trump’s agenda. The Constitution reads, “Each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors.” It’s been accepted since the 19th century that voters appoint electors on Election Day. But that’s not always required. During the

*Bush v. Gore* imbroglio, Republican leaders in the Florida legislature entertained the prospect of short-circuiting the long recount process and simply naming pro-Bush electors. It didn’t come to that in 2000 because the high court closed the deal. But anyone who doubts that Trump might provoke a constitutional crisis—and all the chaos associated with it, including an Electoral College breakdown that might steer the fight into the halls of Congress—has not been paying attention to this president or to Attorney General Bill Barr.

Is the Trumpocalypse inevitable? Not necessarily. If voters deliver a decisive message, the “red mirage” might never appear. Further, if Democrats flip the Senate out of Mitch McConnell’s hands, many possible scenarios after January 3 could be decided by a Congress that is constitutionally empowered to put an end to Trump’s nonsense.

If the results are slower to emerge, Biden and the Democrats must grab the narrative from Trump. That’s where Gore failed in 2000. He imagined that the courts and the media would do the heavy lifting. But the Supreme Court was a lost cause in December 2000, and

it will be more of a lost cause in December 2020.

Biden and Harris must play hardball before Election Day, with a clear message that the best way to avoid chaos is a decisive result in the presidential and Senate races. Their campaign and the Democratic Party must defend the count at every turn—placing a greater emphasis on election security than ever before, working with state and local officials to keep the system running, and having lawyers and money at the ready if and when it breaks down. Above all, Biden must forge the narrative, on every platform and with fierce urgency, about the danger to the republic posed by any and every assault Trump will launch on the vote. No concessions. No compromises. No punches pulled. No rest until January 20. **N**

## IN OUR ORBIT Freedom Writer

**J**oAnn Wypijewski takes no prisoners. As faithful *Nation* readers will know, the magazine’s longtime Carnal Knowledge columnist has never been one to float along with the current of conventional wisdom or uphold the shibboleths of liberal piety. Her battlefield dispatches from the sex wars breathed life into the journalistic cliché about afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted.

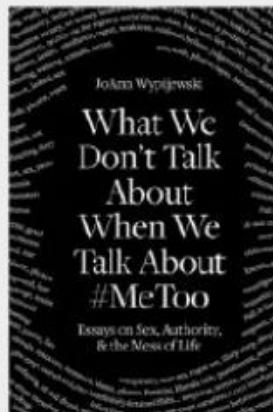
Wypijewski takes her responsibilities in that department seriously, extending her empathy and sense of fellow humanity even to those—like the so-called pedophile priest Paul Shanley, Abu Ghraib

torture defendant Lynndie England, and celebrity pariah Woody Allen—the rest of us have been authorized to despise. Her new essay collection, *What We Don’t Talk About When We Talk About #MeToo*, deprives readers of the easy satisfactions of self-righteousness and mob justice. This is never as smart a career move as enlisting with those who feed the flames or as profitable as being one of their media enablers.

As an anatomist of desire—the things we do for love, the things love does for us—Wypijewski gets closer to the raw and the ridiculous than most novelists. Her thinking is complicated. Because humans are complicated and because her sense of herself,

a working-class woman from Buffalo who went to New York City looking for love and truth and her own power, keeps intruding on simple tales of predator and victim to recall a more intricate dance in which, at one time or another, most of us are complicit. And because unlike a lot of “progressive” journalists, Wypijewski, regardless of her success, never lost the class chip on her shoulder, the sense of being plebeian rather than privileged.

This luminous, passionate book will prod you, as Wypijewski says of her hero James Baldwin, “to assess [your] habits of thought.” Better still, it may even wake you up. —D.D. Guttenplan



# Objection! Elie Mystral



## To Save the Court, Expand the Court

*Here's how Democrats, with a little vision and a lot of backbone, can remake the Supreme Court for future generations.*

**T**HERE'S A MOMENT IN *THE PRINCESS BRIDE* when the evil and conniving Prince Humperdinck, eager to finish a sham wedding to his unwilling bride, Buttercup, demands that the priest cut to the chase. As the bride's rescuers prepare to charge the castle, Humperdinck insists, "Man and wife.' Say 'man and wife'!"

That's basically where we are with the confirmation process for Amy Coney Barrett. As a majority of the people in this country (and, apparently, a karmically contagious coronavirus) object to the idea of rushing Barrett's appointment, Republicans just want the Senate to say, "Supreme Court justice!" They don't care how the Senate gets there or whether the process is so corrupt, it makes a mockery of the principle of advice and consent. They just want the votes counted. Now.

Meanwhile, the Democrats seem poised to storm the castle. Joe Biden is leading in the polls. Should he win the election (and should the GOP-stacked courts allow him to take office), there's a decent chance he'll be joined by a Democratic majority in the Senate and the House.

But what then? What's the Democrats' plan after that?

It's essential to remember that the reason Republicans have long sought to control the courts is that they serve as an antidemocratic check on the liberal agenda—and not just for an election cycle but for a whole generation. There's not a single Democratic law or program that a court controlled 6-3 by conservative justices cannot frustrate or block. A Republican-appointed court will smack down voting rights legislation, gun reform legislation, climate change protections, LGBTQ rights, and abortion rights. It will nullify the Affordable Care Act and block the merest whiff of a public option or Medicare for All. Republicans wanted the court as a hedge against their waning popular support, and now they have it.

The obvious—and only—solution to this Republican power grab is for Democrats to expand the number of justices on the Supreme Court.

The argument for court expansion is often presented as retribution for Republicans messing with the court, first by blocking the nomination of Merrick Garland, now by rushing the appointment of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's successor. But

there is a higher purpose for court expansion, one that goes beyond avenging Ginsburg and Garland. Expanding the court now—through raw political power, if necessary—is the best way to reform and depoliticize the court for future generations. Expanding the court is the way to save it. It's a lot like breaking a bone to reset the leg.

Let's start with the obvious: We cannot go on like this. We cannot continue to exist in a polity in which the death of an octogenarian begets a generation-defining game of tug-of-war. We cannot endure under a legal system in which the death of one or two people opens the door to wild changes in our laws or the devastation of the rights of people living under them.

The way to free ourselves from the random wheel of death is to have more justices on the court. Ginsburg's passing would have had significantly less impact on the fate of women's rights if she had been but one of 19 people instead of nine. By the same logic, it wouldn't have made sense for Republicans to block Garland's appointment if it would have changed just one seat on a court of, say, 29 individuals. Every Supreme Court justice would still be important but not nearly as important as each one is now.

Moreover, a much larger court would likely lead to more moderate opinions (if not more moderate judges, since those don't really exist). That's because Supreme Court opinions have to be agreed to by a majority of the court. The reason some cases take longer to decide than others is not that the justices haven't made up their minds on the outcome; it's that they are working hard to fashion an opinion that can attract a majority of their colleagues. Trying to get a majority of your colleagues to agree with you on a 29-person court is just a different beast from trying to get your four archconservative buddies to sign on to your ruling. Decisions made for the benefit of more people tend to be watered down. That's basically how Olive Garden stays in business.

The benefits of court expansion are so manifest that I'd be willing, as a Democrat, to put additional Republican nominees on the court, too. If you had a bill to add 20 people to the Supreme Court, I'd be willing to split the new seats between, say,

11 Democratic appointees and nine Republican ones. I'm serious. The Garland debt must be paid, and the rushed appointment of Barrett cannot be ignored, but otherwise, there's a benefit to splitting the seats as long as both parties are willing to play ball. A court expansion bill

**The benefits of court expansion are so manifest, I'd be willing, as a Democrat, to put additional Republican nominees on the court.**

that includes GOP buy-in would be easier for the soon-to-be white minority in this country to handle. In exchange for moderate Republican votes, moderate conservative justices could be among the new appointments.

What's more, increasing the number of appointments could give Democrats the political leverage they need to prevail in the battle to pass court expansion. If Republicans want to work across the aisle, we can all share. But if Republicans opt to do what they usually do—namely, obstruct the political process and demand that they win all-or-nothing—well, then Mitch McConnell will just have to deal with 20 fire-breathing progressives who will blow clear a path for voting rights, women's rights, and Electoral College reform. Then let McConnell see if he can regain enough political power in his lifetime to retake the government and add 40 of his own justices. Even the worst-case scenario is better than where we are now. If all an expanded court does is secure voting rights, that will still make it less likely Republicans will ever wield unchecked political power again.

That's constitutional hardball. That's making McConnell an offer he can't refuse. To propose anything less—to walk the more judicious route of adding, say, two or four justices—would be just another example of Democrats gathering all the power and then using it incrementally in the hopes of teaching Republicans to act more responsibly next time. Adding 10 or 20 justices is the way to put Republicans in a corner where they either play ball or spend another generation trying to crawl out from their defeat.

Remember *The Princess Bride*: When Westley, the hero, finally catches up with Humperdinck, Westley doesn't fight the prince to the death. Instead, Westley promises to fight "to the pain." "It means I leave you in anguish, wallowing in freakish misery forever," he explains. The prince, it should be noted, promptly backs down from the fight.

If the Democrats are to rise from being mostly dead to storming the Supreme Court, that's what the goal should be. Nobody kills the evil prince. If the Democrats do this right, they won't have to.

## Subject to Debate

### Katha Pollitt



ANDY FRIEDMAN

## Settling Out of Court

*Pro-choicers shouldn't give up on Roe v. Wade.*

**I**S IT TIME TO BID FAREWELL TO *ROE V. WADE*? IF AMY Coney Barrett is seated on the Supreme Court, as seems likely, she will be the sixth anti-abortion justice. That means John Roberts's respect for precedent, which last summer led him to strike down restrictions on clinics because they were identical to those the court struck down in 2016, won't matter. He can play the dignified centrist while the other five tip *Roe* into the grave. Of course, they might leave it technically in force while approving every restriction that crosses their desks. That would be the politically clever thing to do, because it would keep anti-abortion voters riled up while lulling into complacency the many pro-choicers who don't read beyond the headlines. "Court Upholds *Roe*" will be what they take in, not "Court OKs Barbecuing Louisiana Abortion Docs."

So prepare yourself for the hot takes, op-eds, and think pieces claiming the end of *Roe* might be all for the best. Abortion should have been decided by legislators in the first place, this position holds, not by nine aloof justices insulated from people and politics. Joan C. Williams gets a head start with her *New York Times* opinion piece "The Case for Accepting Defeat on Roe." Her points have all been made many times before, so let me go through them for handy future reference.

Abortion, Williams points out, is already inaccessible for many women: 90 percent of counties have no clinics, poor women don't have money to travel, and so on. This is all true, but one way or another, more than 850,000 people manage to get a legal abortion each year, including many in or from states with only one or two clinics. This testifies to the fierce determination of unwillingly pregnant women, as well as to the hard work of organizations that raise abortion funds and make the arrangements and to the providers who move heaven and earth to accommodate their patients.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Williams continues, suggested that *Roe* short-circuited a legislative process of liberalization that was underway; the backlash to *Roe* solidified the right-to-life movement and brought anti-abortion evangelicals and Catholics into the Republican Party. Yet Ginsburg defended reproductive autonomy again and again as essential to women's dignity and equality, and she may have been wrong about the history. As Linda Greenhouse wrote in her *Times* obituary for Ginsburg, "There was in fact ample evidence that what had once appeared a steady legislative march toward revision or repeal of the old criminal abortion laws had stalled by 1973 in the face of powerful lobbying by the Roman Catholic Church. And there was also evidence that the backlash against [Roe] was not a spontaneous response—in fact, polling in the decision's immediate aftermath demonstrated widespread and

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growing public approval—but rather was elicited by Republican strategists hunting for Catholic voters, who had traditionally been Democrats.”

Williams writes that we need a “dialogue” on abortion, like that which persuaded voters in Ireland to end the constitutional ban on abortion. Well, dialogue is always good, and getting rid of the Eighth Amendment was a magnificent victory and a powerful rebuke to the Catholic Church, but let’s not oversell the new Irish law. It still bans almost all abortion after 12 weeks. A similar law in the US would mean that about 100,000 women a year would be out of luck. And what would anti-choicers give up in return? I’m betting: nothing. They would keep harassing patients and providers, passing restrictions to force clinics to close. To them, even the earliest abortion is murder.

What Williams is really getting at is the old pipe dream that if only abortion could be gotten out of the way, the white working class would return to the Democratic Party en masse.

Frankly, I doubt it. There are too many other things for them to like about Republicans: white supremacy, anti-intellectualism, superpatriotism, machismo, gun rights, and (let’s not forget) taking away people’s health care, including their own. Williams claims, “The attitudes driving opposition to abortion actually reveal some surprising common ground with progressives on economic issues.” Maybe on paper, but if Democrats could win back votes by combining restrictions on abortion with economic progressivism, ambitious pols would

## OVERTURNING *ROE* will not take abortion off the political table. It will politicize it even more.

have tried it by now. Notwithstanding exceptions like Pennsylvania Senator Bob Casey Jr., anti-abortion Democrats have tended to be conservative on economic issues as well. There’s a reason social democratic welfare states have liberal abortion laws.

What Williams means is that, like progressives, “pro-life” voters claim to oppose greed and materialism; they see abortion as promoting selfishness and individualism. This stance would be more persuasive if it weren’t aimed at women. They are the ones who are supposed to be sacrificing their needs and dreams and desires to have that baby, no matter what. It’s the old picture of women having abortions because they hate children, are ambitious for success, or just want to take that European vacation or wear that prom dress. However, as Williams acknowledges, most women who have abortions are already mothers and are poor or near poor (they are also disproportionately Black, although she doesn’t mention that)—hardly the privileged careerists of popular fantasy.

Somehow Williams managed to write an entire op-ed without mentioning such inconvenient words as “sex,” “birth control,” “abstinence education,” “sexism,” or “patriarchy,” let alone bringing up domestic violence, reproductive coercion, or even medically dangerous pregnancies. She leaves intact the stereotype of women who have abortions as careless and sluttish and does not bother to explain what is supposed to happen to the unwillingly pregnant women in the 29 states where abortion could immediately be criminalized or unprotected by state law after *Roe* falls. She does not acknowledge that abortion, as I and others have written, is itself an economic issue.

What Williams has written is not an argument. It is just a wish. Overturning *Roe* will not take abortion off the political table. It will politicize it even more, as every state legislative session and every election, from small-town mayor to president, becomes a battle over whether, when, and under what circumstances women can legally end their pregnancies—or perhaps even use contraception, which some anti-choicers believe is abortion, too.

Thank God for the abortion pill, which is already being used in self-managed abortion. Even Amy Coney Barrett may find it impossible to keep it out of women’s hands.

OPPART / COCO HOWARD

## UNCOUNTED

Memorial for People Killed by Law Enforcement Officers

[thenation.com/content/oppart/](http://thenation.com/content/oppart/)



# Should the Labor Movement Expel Police Unions?

## Yes!

KIM KELLY

**T**HE POLICE WERE NEVER SUPPOSED TO have a union. In 1897 the American Federation of Labor, which would merge with the Congress of Industrial Organizations to form the AFL-CIO, rejected a petition from a group of Cleveland officers on the grounds that “It is not within the province of the trade union movement to especially organize policemen, no more than to organize militiamen, as both policemen and militiamen are often controlled by forces inimical to the labor movement.”

In the ensuing 123 years, the attitude of police toward the working class has not changed. You’ll never see cops join a picket line; instead, they’re the force that the bosses call to break the strike. Over the years, police have killed countless laborers, from coal miners at Blair Mountain, where police shot dozens of striking West Virginia workers dead in 1921, to Breonna Taylor, an emergency room technician in Louisville, Ky. Report after report reveals the proliferation of white supremacists and far-right rhetoric within the ranks of law enforcement.

On June 8, 2020, the Writers Guild of America, East, passed a resolution calling on the AFL-CIO to disaffiliate with the International Union of Police Associations, citing IUPA’s failure to uphold “the basic principles of free and democratic trade unionism.” WGA East was soon joined by the Nonprofit Professional Employees Union and the Washington-Baltimore News Guild. At its 2020 conference, the California Labor Federation resolved to disassociate from police unions and the National Border Patrol Council. In June the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA called for law enforcement unions that fail to address racism and hold officers accountable to be removed from the labor movement, and MLK Labor in Washington’s King County voted to expel the Seattle Police Officers Guild because of its failure to do just that.

These calls to chuck out the police are not new, but they have grown louder and more insistent. A number of rank-and-file groups have started organizing around the issue, from No Cop Unions, which includes labor activists and members from over a dozen unions, to union-specific groups like Cop-Free AFSCME, SEIU Drop the Cops, and IATSE Members for Racial Justice. But so far, the appeals to drop the cops have been brushed aside by labor leaders, who are

## No!

BILL FLETCHER JR.

**W**E DO NOT NEED SYMBOLIC MEASURES from organized labor that supposedly demonstrate opposition to police brutality and extrajudicial killings. We need concrete steps challenging oppression that are fully integrated into the trade union movement. If all we do is exile police unions from our ranks, we won’t help rid the United States of white supremacy. Discussing the role of law enforcement within unions must be part of a deeper conversation about labor’s long complicity in racist institutions in the United States. Without that larger context, police won’t change, labor won’t become more united or more progressive, and conservatives can use the left’s attacks on police unions to justify their war against public sector unions. The real goal for organized labor should be to position its whole self against police violence and the state murders of Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, and Asians. That is a more difficult task—but also a more crucial one.

The challenge for trade unions regarding law enforcement groups is rooted in four factors: a historically ambivalent approach to racist oppression, fear of weakening public sector unions, narrow (though significant) institutional concerns, and silence on the role of law enforcement in American society. Trade unions should prioritize confronting these issues before expelling the police unions.

When white organized labor emerged in the United States in the 1830s, it saw itself as an institution within a white republic. It was racially exclusive and either largely silent on or vocal in support of racial suppression and US annexation. Much of white organized labor took pride in building this exclusionary state and therefore now finds it difficult, if not impossible, to come to terms with its role in racist oppression and imperial expansion. As a result, many trade unions have shied away from discussing the facts of racist and state persecution—let alone acknowledging the need to repair the damage created by these systems.

Also, unions are understandably afraid that the expulsion of police from organized labor could expose themselves to a right-wing assault on public sector collective bargaining. Even though that threat is real, much of the movement hides behind this excuse to defend its inaction.

Ejecting the police, however, would be logically difficult and could make the internal fight bitter and

The Debate

reluctant to take political chances in an election year and fear alienating members who disagree.

But there can be no justice without sacrifice, and by taking the overdue step of pushing out law enforcement unions, labor will clear a path to the more fundamental missions of confronting racism within its ranks and rectifying mistakes. It is a daunting task but one that is necessary for the movement to evolve and show that it genuinely believes that Black lives matter. We cannot stand by and watch as our so-called union brothers continue to brutalize and extinguish working-class lives with impunity.

Given the dire peculiarities of our current moment, let us consider the question in medical terms. An infection, left untreated, will soon spread throughout the body. It will rot away the flesh, poison the blood, and when wholly unimpeded, eat its victim alive. Those who are weak and vulnerable will suffer the most. Sepsis will set in, then gangrene. By then, only one option remains: amputation. Excising the limb can prevent the infection from spreading further and allow the body time to heal. In this case, white supremacy is the pathogen, and the police are the diseased limb. In order to prevent even more harm, we must sever law enforcement from the broader labor movement.

## To prevent even more harm, we must sever law enforcement from the labor movement.

and-file members up to the highest levels of leadership. In 2016 nearly 40 percent of union members voted for Donald Trump, including over 50 percent of white male members, but this problem is not a new one. Organized labor in this country has a long history of exclusion and discrimination against workers on grounds of gender, race, religion, and national origin. But it has also made great strides toward equality and justice, saved millions of lives, and uplifted the working class.

There is great power in a union, and that power must be wielded carefully and judiciously. As an AFL-CIO general board statement noted, it would be “quick and easy to cut ties with police unions,” yet the federation has refused to do so. The board’s vision of “building a better labor movement from within” leaves out the Black workers, Indigenous workers, and other workers of color, who are disproportionately targeted, harmed, and killed by police, who are shielded by their unions.

It is time to take a stand.

It can be hard to do the right thing, but that is no reason not to do it. Unless we operate now, this deadly infection will only spread further. There is no other option. Which side are you on?

Kim Kelly

*Kim Kelly is a writer, organizer, and labor activist based in Philadelphia.*

KELLY

FLETCHER

## The Debate

complicated. The AFL-CIO has a national union of police officers, the International Union of Police Associations, but it’s the exception. In most unions, law enforcement units are part of a larger public sector grouping, like state or municipal workers. And if a union that contains law enforcement units declines to kick them out, does that mean that it, too, would be expelled from the national union, state labor federation, or central labor council? Additionally, short of determining that law enforcement unions have violated the constitution of the parent union, two questions would have to be asked: On what basis would such an expulsion take place, and would it require some sort of vote at a union convention? At the same time, members understand that these units are dependable dues payers, meaning that the dismissal of law enforcement would hurt the financial resources of every member of the union. Although not impossible, such a road would need to be taken carefully, or else it could destabilize and weaken the movement.

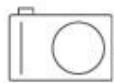
Finally, and as I wrote in *In These Times* recently, organized labor has largely been silent on the question of the role of law enforcement in our society. A sizable minority, by some estimates as high as 40 percent, of union members regularly vote conservatively, so they are not necessarily predisposed to challenging law enforcement. Law enforcement units tend to be highly organized and disciplined voting blocs. In many trade unions, there is a legacy of anti-communism and anti-leftism that discourages radical approaches to social problems, including those concerning law enforcement.

We have to, as the organizing cliché goes, meet members where they’re at. Right now that means promoting a discussion about racial injustice and its implications for the larger trade union movement. A part of this is figuring out how to mobilize the membership against police brutality and to undertake a rethinking of the nature of law enforcement. But racial injustice is not just about the extinguishing of Black lives; it is also about segregated housing, poor health care, exclusion from skilled employment, and an education that prepares particular racial minorities only for prisons and menial work.

Trade unions must define what it means to be part of a labor movement. This should touch on the attitude of organized labor toward social, political, and economic justice. It means that unions that deny access to minority workers should have no more place in the labor movement than do unions that condone extrajudicial killings. Still, before ousting the police, we need to determine what labor can unite around, and those who do not choose an inclusive solidarity can, by their own choice, exit the movement.

Bill Fletcher Jr.

*Bill Fletcher Jr. is the executive editor of Global African Worker, a past president of TransAfrica Forum, and a longtime trade unionist.*



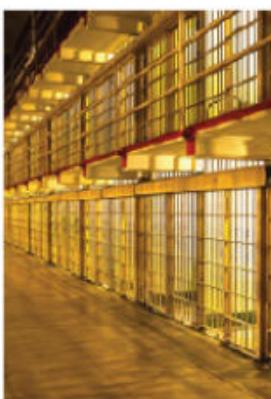
SNAPSHOT / Alan Chin

## Chinatown Recovers

The streets of Manhattan's Chinatown are no longer as deserted as they were when the coronavirus pandemic first hit New York. The unceasing wail of sirens has thankfully died down, but the damage done to the city—nearly 24,000 dead and countless lives interrupted—will be hard to recover from. Yet the neighborhood endured before, and I am confident that our generation of Chinatown, too, will survive.

—Alan Chin

### By the Numbers



**\$372B**

Annual lost wages for Americans due to imprisonment or conviction—enough to provide every homeless person in the US

with a house worth at least \$500,000, according to a new Brennan Center report

**52%**

Average loss in annual earnings for a person who has spent time in prison, or about \$484,000 over a person's lifetime

**7.7M**

Americans who have been incarcerated at some point in their lives

**\$6.7K**

Estimated annual earnings of a formerly incarcerated person in the US

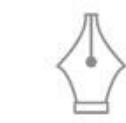
**\$2.1K**

Average annual cost of phone calls, commissary items, and other related fees for the family of an incarcerated person in New York state

**700%**

Increase in the incarcerated population in the US since 1970

—Daniel Fernandez



CALVIN TRILLIN  
**Deadline Poet**

### Trump Redux

"His short speech, delivered from the Blue Room balcony overlooking the South Lawn, was the first time he has been seen in public since leaving the hospital on Monday."

—*The New York Times*

The balcony is where he first appeared  
To say the threat from Covid's teeny-weeny—  
Though balcony orations may bring up  
How much he's like Benito Mussolini.



# FIRE in the WANT

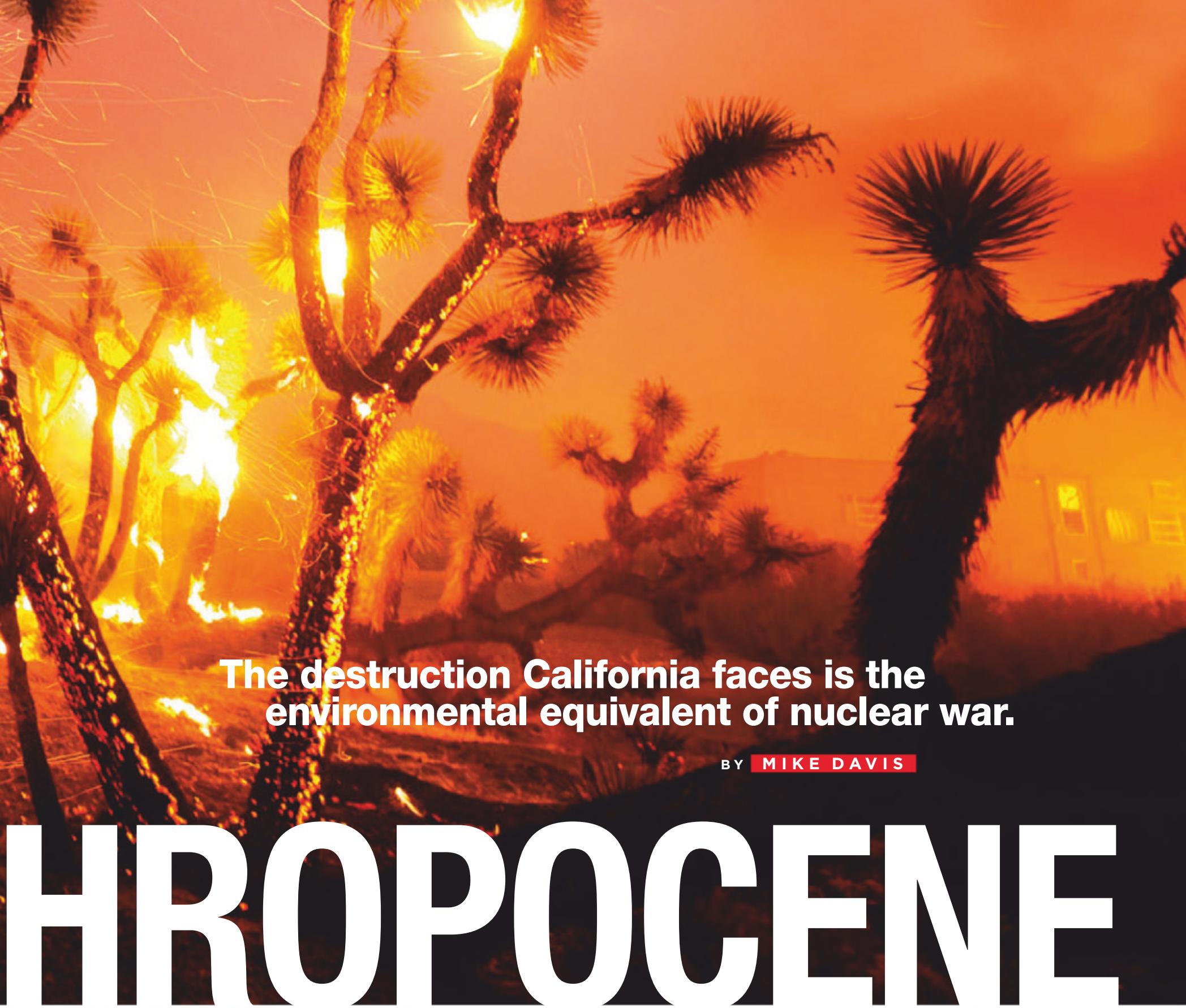
Mike Davis  
is a Nation  
contributing  
editor. His  
latest book, *Set  
the Night on  
Fire: L.A. in  
the Sixties*,  
coauthored with  
Jon Wiener, is  
out now.

**N GREENER THAN YOU THINK**, A 1947 NOVEL BY THE LEFT-wing sci-fi writer Ward Moore, a mad woman scientist in Los Angeles recruits a down-and-out salesman named Albert Weener, described as having “all the earmarks of a castiron moocher,” to help promote her discovery: a compound called Metamorphizer that enhances the growth of grasses and allows them to thrive on barren and rocky soils. The scientist dreams of permanently ending world hunger through a massive expansion of the range of wheat and other grains; Weener, a scientific ignoramus, thinks only of making a quick buck peddling the stuff door-to-door as a lawn treatment. Desperately needing cash to continue her research, she reluctantly agrees, and Weener heads out to the yellowed lawns of tired bungalow neighborhoods.

To his surprise, the treatment, which alters grass genes, works—only too well. In the yard of the Dinkman family, crabgrass is converted into a nightmare “Devil Grass,” resistant to mowing and weed killers, that begins to spread across the city. “It writhed and twisted in nightmarish unease...inexorably enveloping everything in its path. A crack in the roadway dis-

appeared under it, a shrub was swallowed up, a patch of wall vanished.” It continues to eat pavement and houses and finally consumes the city: a monstrous new nature creeping toward Bethlehem.

*Greener Than You Think* is both hilarious and slightly unnerving. But its absurd premise is being turned into current events by climate change. Our Devil Grass is *Bromus*, a genus of invasive and almost ineradicable grasses bearing appropriately unsavory names like ripgut brome, cheatgrass, and false brome. Originating in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, some species have been around California since the Gold Rush, when overgrazing allowed the bromes and European oat grass to aggressively replace native species. But now fire and exurban sprawl have become their Metamorphizers as they conquer virtually every ecosystem in the state.



**The destruction California faces is the environmental equivalent of nuclear war.**

BY MIKE DAVIS

# HIROPOCENE

**T**HE EASTERN MOJAVE DESERT IS A grim example. If you drive from LA to Vegas, 20 minutes from the state line, there's an exit from Interstate 15 to a two-lane blacktop called Cima Road. It's the unassuming portal to one of North America's most magical forests: countless miles of old-growth Joshua trees mantling a field of small Pleistocene volcanoes known as the Cima Dome. The monarchs of this forest are 30 feet high and centuries old. In mid-August an estimated 1.3 million of these astonishing giant yuccas perished in the lightning-ignited Dome Fire. This wasn't the first time the Eastern Mojave burned. A mega-fire in 2005 scorched a million acres of desert, but it spared the Dome, the heart of the forest. Over the last generation, an invasion of red brome has created a flammable understory to the Joshuas and transformed the Mojave into a

fire ecology. (Invasive cheatgrass and wire grass have played similar roles in the Great Basin and the Pacific Northwest.)

Most desert plants, unlike California oaks and chaparral, are not fire-adapted, so their recovery may be impossible. Debra Hughson, the chief of science at the Mojave National Preserve, described the fire as an extinction event in an interview with the *Desert Sun*. "The Joshua trees are very flammable. They'll die, and they won't come back."

Our burning deserts are regional expressions of a global trend: the fire-driven transformation and replacement of native land cover from Greenland to Hawaii. Even the Antarctic Peninsula now has an invasive weed problem. In most cases, exotic plants—especially annual grasses and forbs (herblike plants)—are the culprits. In southeastern US

**California best illustrates the vicious circle in which extreme heat leads to frequent extreme fires that prevent natural flora regeneration.**



forests the devil is cogongrass from East Asia; in Australia, buffel grass from India; and in Hawaii, guinea grass from Africa.

Bromes, superbly adapted to the Anthropocene, rule the West Coast. As Travis Bean, a weed scientist at the University of California, Riverside, warned last year, "We have all of the nasty nonnative *Bromus* species here in California, and these weeds are key drivers of increasing fire frequency." Increased fire frequency, in turn, opens spaces for the propagation of these fast-growing and easily dispersed species. Whereas recovering mountain chaparral, for instance, requires 20 years

to mature before it can burn, bromes need only one or two winters' rain to produce enough flammable biomass to sustain a large fire. Once established, the ensuing invasive-grass and fire cycle is almost irreversible.

This is especially true in Mediterranean biomes, despite the fact that their vegetation has evolved with fire and requires episodic burns to reproduce. The current wave of annual extreme fires in the Iberian Peninsula, Greece, Australia, and California is overriding Holocene adaptations and pushing native ecosystems, many of them already degraded, past their survival tipping points.

Although Australia is a close contender, California best illustrates the vicious circle in which extreme heat leads to frequent extreme fires that prevent natural regeneration—and with the help of tree diseases, accelerate the conversion of iconic landscapes into parched grasslands and treeless mountain slopes. And with the loss of native plants goes much of the native fauna, from lizards to songbirds.

Climate change drives landscape conversion in several ways. At the beginning of this century, state water planners and fire authorities were primarily focused on the threat of multiyear

**Up in flames:**  
August's Dome Fire  
incinerated 43,000  
acres and 1.3 million  
Joshua trees. Exurban  
expansion will only  
lead to more blazes.

**"The Joshua trees are very flammable. They'll die, and they won't come back."**

—Debra Hughson,  
Mojave National Preserve

droughts caused by intensified La Niña episodes and stubbornly persistent high-pressure domes. Their worst fears were realized in the great drought of the last decade, perhaps the worst in 500 years, which contributed to the death of an estimated 150 million bark-beetle-infested trees that subsequently provided fuel for the firestorms of 2017 and 2018.

Similarly, over the past 20 years, an exponentially spreading fungal pandemic called sudden oak death has killed millions of live oaks and tan oaks from Big Sur to southwestern Oregon.



Climate change, which increases heat and drought, facilitates this disease and drives its spread. Since the tan oaks, especially, grow in forests with Douglas firs, redwoods, and ponderosa pines, their dead hulks act as force multipliers in the firestorms raging in coastal mountains and the Sierra foothills.

In addition to ordinary droughts, scientists now talk about a new phenomenon, the hot drought. Even in years with average 20th century rainfall, extreme summer heat—our new normal—is producing massive water deficits through evaporation from reservoirs, streams, and rivers. In the case of Southern California's lifeline, the lower Colorado River, a staggering 20 percent decrease in the current flow has been predicted within a few decades, independent of whether precipitation declines.

But the most devastating impact of the Death Valley-like temperatures (it was 121 degrees in

the San Fernando Valley in early September) is the loss of plant and soil moisture. A wet winter and early spring may mesmerize us with extravagant displays of wildflowers, but they also produce bumper crops of grasses and forbs that are then baked in our furnace summers to become fuel when the devil winds return.

**T**HE BROMES AND OTHER PYROMANICAL weeds like black mustard are the chief by-products and facilitators of this new fire regime. Years of research at experimental plots, where scientists burn different types of vegetation and study their fire behavior, has confirmed their Darwinian edge. They burn at twice the temperature of herbaceous ground cover, vaporizing soil nutrients essential to the regeneration of native species. Bromes also thrive on air pollution (a nitrogen fertilizer), can quickly evolve resistance to herbicides, and are more efficient than most plants in utilizing higher levels of carbon dioxide—big evolutionary advantages in the current struggle between ecosystems.

Until recently, it was widely believed that the West Coast's closed-canopy forests were largely invulnerable to the brome threat because they are too cool and shaded. But now a group of researchers from Oregon State University's College of Forestry and the US Forest Service that is studying the question warns forest managers that false brome adapts well to the forest gloom, and cheatgrass immediately colonizes forest burn sites. Once a durable feedback loop with fire is established, a forest grass invasion becomes, in the researchers' words, a "perfect storm."

And like Moore's Devil Grass, the invaders defy human will. "Management actions such as thinning and prescribed fire, often designed to alleviate threats related to wildfires, may also exacerbate grass invasion and increase fine fuels, with potential landscape scale consequences that are largely underrecognized," the group reported. In other words, some of the textbook prescriptions for reducing fire hazards may only reproduce them in a new form—something that is poorly understood by public officials.

This is the Achilles' heel of the emergency legislation that California Senator Dianne Feinstein, with the support of the state's governor, Gavin Newsom, is trying to push through Congress. The bill would override federal environmental regulations to accelerate the removal of dead trees and the clearance of chaparral and brush—yet the cleared landscapes would be inviting to bromes, which have the ability to generate huge fuel loads annually. (Also the deadwood would presumably be burned, contrary to carbon reduction mandates.)

Only a sustained annual effort to reduce grass

biomass reseeding—something that would require a large army of full-time forest workers and the cooperation of landowners—could, theoretically, postpone the weed apocalypse. It would also require a moratorium on new construction as well as on postfire rebuilding in the most hazardous areas, measures that are hardly palatable in the state capital, Sacramento, even in the era of a Democratic supermajority.

After every fire emergency, Newsom and other liberals call for urgent action to reduce emissions. But in doing so, they deliberately elide the question of what needs to be done on the ground, here and now. Such an agenda would have to directly confront the sprawl along what fire experts label the wildland-urban interface.

A large share of new housing in California over the past 20 years has been built, profitably but insanely, in high-fire-risk areas like the Sierra foothills. By one estimate, a quarter of the state's population now lives in these interface areas—with scores of new developments and master-planned communities in the pipeline. (In San Diego County alone, supervisors recently approved 10,000 new homes in extreme-fire-hazard locations in the backcountry.) Since 40 percent of the state's 33 million acres of forest are privately owned (57 percent is federal land, and only 3 percent under state or local control), there are few constraints on future development.

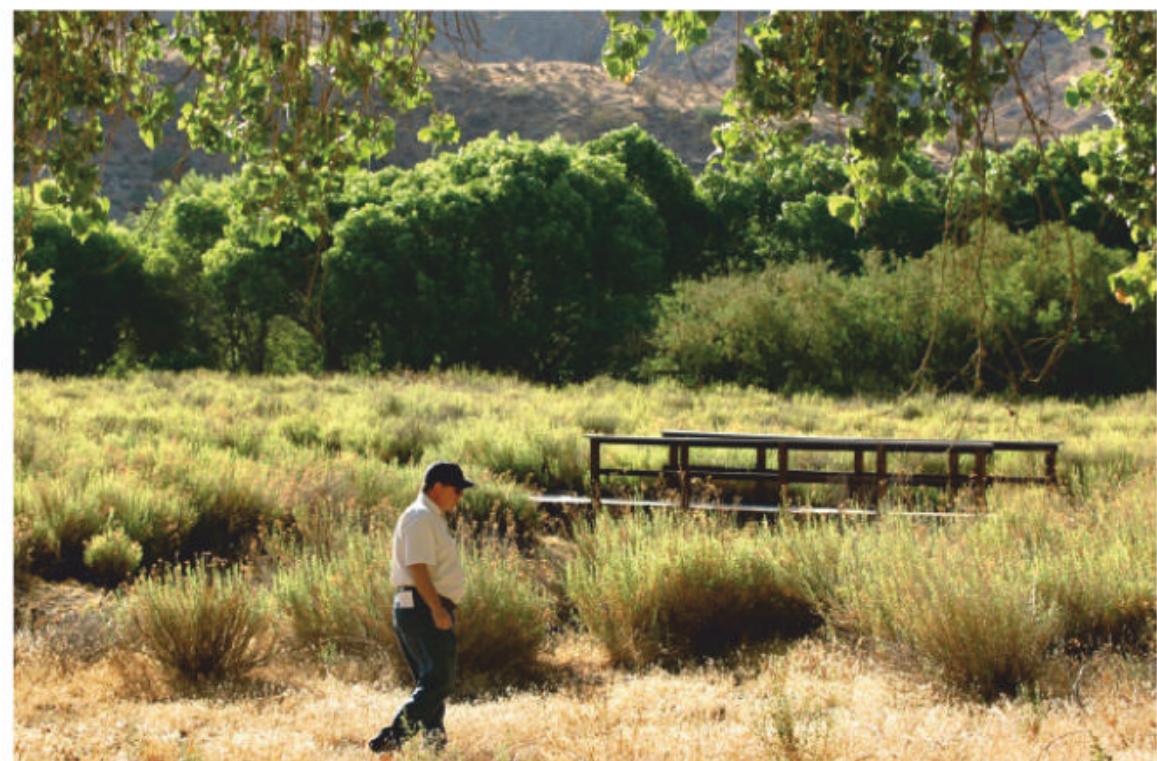
The expansion of the residential frontier into disaster-prone landscapes isn't just a California trend; think of the building boom on Atlantic and Gulf Coast barrier islands that become submerged in hurricane storm surges. According to geographers Laura Taylor and Patrick Hurley, "Despite the common perception that the United States has become a 'suburban nation,' exurbia has emerged as the dominant settlement pattern across the country, characterized by different patterns of development and different lifestyle expectations from cities, towns, and suburbs,

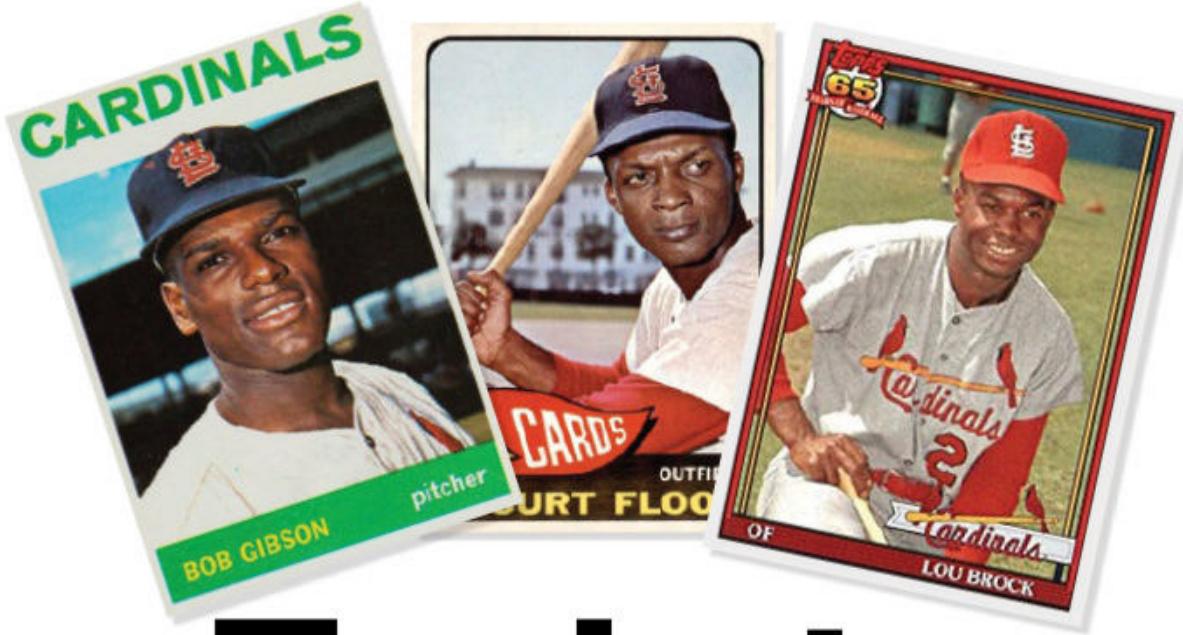
(continued on page 31)



**A large share of new housing in California over the past 20 years has been built, profitably but insanely, in high-fire-risk areas.**

**Fuel for the fire:**  
Invasive grasses like cheatgrass, below, replace native flora and become tinder for the next blaze.





More than a half-century after Black Americans helped reenergize the sport, baseball once again has a color problem.

BY GENE SEYMOUR

# Fade to White



**R**OGER ANGELL, WHO TURNED 100 IN THIS YEAR OF PANDEMIC AND upheaval, is one of the best and most beloved writers on baseball, in large part because of his lyrical, sinewy prose. Over the decades, he has cogently analyzed the “summer game” and its importance to American life. Baseball, he wrote, boasts “the most enviable corporate image in the world.” Its evocations, overtones, and loyalties, firmly planted in the mind of every American male during childhood and nurtured thereafter by millions of words of free newspaper publicity, appear to be unassailible. It is the national pastime. It is youth, springtime, a trip to the country, part of our past. It is the roaring excitement of huge urban crowds and the sleepy green afternoons of midsummer.

Without effort, it engenders and thrives on heroes, legends, self-identification, and hometown pride.

Yet even as far back as 1964, when Angell wrote those words, he knew that this bucolic corporate image had been smudged and distorted by exploding television revenues and the owners’ avarice for newer, more profitable locations for their teams. The brusque departure of the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants for the West Coast seven years before, he wrote, left those teams’ fans bereft and with “the new knowledge that baseball’s executives cared only for the profits inherent in novelty and new audiences, and sensed no obligation whatever...to the fans who had built their business.” Still, because much of the American psyche was for so long tethered to baseball, the game remained at the very least a symbol of national continuity, even consensus.

Whether you liked baseball or not, you at least knew what it was, how it was played (three strikes, etc.), what it represented, who its stars were. And how you related to it (or didn’t) still connected you to a part of the country’s soul. Despite more shifts of

franchises and players from one city to another, despite Astroturf, cocaine, collusion, strikes, steroids, Pete Rose’s gambling bug, Al Campanis’s bigoted ramblings, and tackle football’s all but total conquest of America’s athletic dream life, baseball endured. If none of those could kill the grand old game, it can certainly withstand a mutilated regular season with cardboard cutouts in the stands instead of people.

What was also telling in 1964 was that the racial integration of baseball that the owners had fought—even after Jackie Robinson first took the field for the Dodgers in 1947—had altered more than just major league rosters. Black players brought to major league ball a kind of base-running dynamism and defensive flair that hadn’t been prevalent since the early 20th century, before Babe Ruth went to the New York Yankees in 1920 and inaugurated the boom, so to speak, of home-run appeal. The contrast between 1964’s National League pennant-winning St. Louis Cardinals, with their roster of slick, speedy, and strong Black stars like Bob Gibson, Lou Brock, and Curt Flood, and their American League counterparts, the once-mighty and soon-to-decline New York Yankees, with an aging roster that featured Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris,

and Whitey Ford, demonstrated how far the AL still lagged the senior circuit in signing African Americans. (The Cards won a tough seven-game World Series, with Gibson’s gritty pitching sealing the deciding game.)

Today, more than half a century after Black Americans helped reenergize the sport, baseball once again has a color problem: a steep decline of African American interest and participation in the game. The trend was most trenchantly detailed in a 2015 visual essay for HBO’s muckraking *Real Sports* by comedian Chris Rock, who argued that such problems have their roots precisely among the nuances, subtleties, and grace notes nostalgically exalted by the Roger Angells of the world. Rock is a middle-aged New York Mets fan, as am I. And as 50-and-over Black baseball fans, we are in no way happy with—but also in no way surprised by—the difficulties that baseball has connecting with younger fans, Black and white.

“Baseball,” Rock said, “wants everything to stay the way things used to be. But the world has sped up, but the game is slower than ever.... It’s old-fashioned and stuck in the past.... [It’s] the only game where there’s a right way to play the game: the white way. The way it was played a hundred years ago, when only whites were allowed to play.”

When Rock’s *Real Sports* essay first aired, the percentage of Black Americans in major league baseball had fallen from its 1981 peak of roughly 18.7 percent to just 8.0. As of 2019, the centennial of Robinson’s birth, the figure was about 7.8 percent—and by some pessimists’ reckoning, still dropping. I can’t speak for Rock here, but if you believe, as I do, that the sport of

## Black players brought back to the major leagues a base-running dynamism and defensive flair not seen in decades.

**Not fade away:** The St. Louis Cardinals celebrate after beating the Atlanta Braves in Game 5 of the National League Division Series last year.



baseball, while not always deserving of the secular worship it often draws from lifelong supplicants, should remain a vital American connection fusing generation to generation, creed to creed, and neighborhood to neighborhood, then it should alarm you as much as it does me that, according to NCAA statistics from 2018, only 4 percent of collegiate baseball players are African American.

## If you're a fan, it should alarm you that according to NCAA statistics, only 4 percent of collegiate baseball players are African American.

**A hard-core Mets fan:** Chris Rock identifies much of baseball's problem with anachronisms in presentation.

Combs, and Kamala Harris, dropped the sport in 2002, though that was more because the school lacked the proper facilities. Howard still fields a lacrosse team, but baseball hasn't returned—and there doesn't appear to be much of an outcry for it on campus.

"At least I haven't heard of any," says Gary Williams, a Howard alum who was the sports director of the school's student-run radio station, WHBC-FM, in the mid-1980s. He is now an announcer for sports events at Baltimore's Coppin State University, whose baseball program is "good and thriving," with a roster that he says is roughly half African American and half white or Latino. So things may not be quite so dire in the HBCUs overall. But the decline in Black America's interest remains unlikely to be reversed anytime soon.

"It's not the money," Rock says. "You can't tell me Black kids can't afford baseball when everybody's buying Jordans [basketball shoes] for \$300. That's six gloves right there!"

(Well, actually, Chris, an aluminum bat can cost as much as \$350, and a decent to good glove can run more than \$400. Also, as many active and retired Black American players can tell you, if a child qualifies for a traveling youth team that can provide valuable experience for playing as an adult, the costs involved can run into the thousands. We good? Let's move on.)

Being an entertainer, Rock identifies much of the problem with what he sees as anachronisms in presentation. "You got cheesy old organ music at the games. I mean, where's the Beats by Dre?" (He's got a point. I went to a San Francisco 49ers game last fall, and instead of a brass band or organ, there was a DJ working up the crowd with his turntables and speakers along with the cheerleaders at Levi's Stadium. So 21st century!) Also, as with other critics of baseball as it is played now, Rock thinks the games can take too long, and he's right, with innings lengthened by shifting lineups, pitching changes, and the relatively new phenomenon of umpires convening to review videos of base running or fielding plays—not, thank the baseball gods, balls and strikes, not yet, anyway.

Major League Baseball has been trying to address its timing issues by experimenting with pitch clocks that give a pitcher 20 seconds to throw, which are

already used in the minor leagues and college baseball to speed up the pace. The major leagues tried them during spring training a year ago but balked, as it were, at mandating them unilaterally. There's even been loose talk by at least one unidentified MLB executive of shortening the game from nine to seven innings, meaning that games on average "would finish closer to two-and-a-half hours than three hours or longer," he told ESPN, and thus would be a "better fit for the common attention span."

Maybe. But picking up the pace is, as far as I'm concerned, the least of baseball's immediate worries. There's also showmanship, bravado; consider the hip-hoppers' idea of cool, as opposed to the 1950s ethic of "those who show don't know, and those who know don't show," as embodied by, say, Miles Davis or Steve McQueen. My taste favors the latter version, which is why I've never been partial to showboating football players who turn every touchdown into performance art. But if flourishes at the plate and on the basepaths are what get the kids hyped, then I'm with Rock when he disses the code of never showing outward or excessive exuberance after hitting a home run, for fear of getting a ball thrown at your head as payback.



**I**T'S NOT ROCKET SCIENCE why black parents with athletically gifted children steer them to basketball and football. In the deathless words of the late TV sports impresario Don Ohlmeyer, "The answer to all your questions is money." In the wonderland that is American pro sports, basketball rules in terms of player income, according to the most recent available figures, with the average National Basketball Association salary about \$8.3 million per year. The MLB, however, seems to be holding its own among the rest, with its average player salary coming in at about \$4 million. The National Football League, considered the 800-pound gorilla of American sports, has an average salary of about \$3.6 million.

But surely much of the appeal of basketball and football is the room they allow for self-expression. Even in the quasi-fascist, polyethylene-armored venue of tackle football, kids are indulged in the process of Being Themselves within the parameters of accepted behavior. If flipping the bat like a circus juggler is what a kid wants to do after taking one downtown, then it seems a relatively minor concession when compared with shaving off

another generation of potential Black or non-Black players and fans.

Clarence Carter III, a Bethune-Cookman player, alluded to such unofficial but sanctioned behavioral norms when he told the *Times*, “If people could just accept us more in this sport, if they let us express ourselves—not in a disrespectful way—but just learn to accept how we actually play we will come out of our shell and start picking up the bats again.”

After all, if the racial integration of the major leagues that began with Robinson helped nudge the sport back to its pre-Ruthian emphasis on base stealing, slick fielding, and other small-ball tactics, then what would it hurt for the big leagues to update the old Negro Leagues’ emphasis on stagecraft? Shadow ball, say, when players pantomimed warming up with an invisible baseball.

I know a lot of hard-core baseball fans who blame the grand sonorities of Ken Burns’s 1994 megadocumentary series *Baseball* for making the game seem even loftier and, thus, unreachable to younger fans. But when I listen to the colorful, almost Joycean patter of Buck O’Neil, a veteran and sage of the Negro Leagues, as he recounts at the end of the series’ fifth installment the fateful bottom-of-the-ninth meeting between pitcher Satchel Paige and batter Josh Gibson, twin towers of Negro League history, in the 1942 Negro World Series between Paige’s Kansas City Monarchs and Gibson’s Homestead Greys, I think that it wouldn’t be the worst thing for baseball to allow some contemporary correlative to Paige’s outrageous decision to load the bases for the powerful Gibson, followed by his big, broad show of chugging down a foaming glass of seltzer before hurling the first of three strikes to his friendly rival.

You’d need to figure out how best to go about staging such set pieces for a generation that takes its cues from Drake, Chance the Rapper, and Kendrick Lamar, which might mean finding rappers and others in the business willing to apply their craft and imaginations to the game. Nelly (aka Cornell Iral Haynes Jr., formerly of St. Louis, didn’t play with the Cardinals, but he did flash some leather with the city’s amateur baseball association and remains a devoted fan of the sport. You could at least start with him.

At a time when the media has been paying greater attention to race—and when even the mainstream press now uses the term “systemic racism”—Black culture still sets the table for what young people think is hip and happening. The post-George Floyd surge of the Black Lives Matter movement, which involves more and younger white people, should offer baseball an even bigger incentive to amp up its ties to Black America.



**T**HAT BASEBALL PLAYERS, MANY OF THEM WHITE, WERE RECENTLY SEEN TO kneel before (not during) the national anthem in solidarity with the BLM protests is a promising sign. At this point, it’s only a sign. But the overall response so far is a whole lot better than what Bruce Maxwell, a biracial catcher, faced in 2017, when he was the first major leaguer to take a knee during (not before) the national anthem while playing for the Oakland Athletics, not far from where 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick first made a similar gesture of protest. Maxwell sustained death threats, racial epithets, and emotional stress severe enough to cause him to contemplate suicide. After playing in the Mexican League and restoring his shattered confidence, Maxwell is back in major league baseball with the Mets.

The work of connecting with younger fans begins by acknowledging just how much younger. The average major league baseball fan now is 53 years old, with only 29 percent of fans in that much-coveted (by advertisers) 18-to-34 demographic—the same age bracket that encompasses most active ballplayers. In a summer when Covid-19 turned athletic contests into live TV shows without live audiences, the biggest baseball stories for older fans like me were the deaths of pitching greats Bob Gibson and Tom Seaver, along with that of Gibson’s teammate and peerless base runner Lou Brock in September.

Seaver and Brock were contemporaries in the 1960s and ’70s whose exploits for the Mets and the Cardinals, respectively, became embedded in the memories of those growing up with the game in those years. Reliving those memories, augmented by YouTube clips and social media tributes, provided the kind of release from worry and ennui that the present-day games were supposed to give us. Whatever the current Mets and Cardinals were doing, somehow it didn’t seem to mean as much in the present time, especially when it remains uncertain whether this year’s World Series, planned to start October 20, will go ahead if there’s an autumn surge of coronavirus cases.

**Duel in the sun:**  
In the 1942 Negro League World Series, Satchel Paige (left) struck out batting legend Josh Gibson on three pitches.

**“Baseball wants everything to stay the way things used to be...[with] a right way to play the game: the white way.”**

—Chris Rock

# KKKupid

**Talia Lavin goes undercover on a white supremacist dating site.**

BY TALIA LAVIN



# W

HITEDATE.NET LOOKS INNOCUOUS AT FIRST: ITS HOME PAGE could be cribbed from Ashley Madison, or FarmersOnly, or any number of niche dating sites. A stock-photo, glossy-lipped blonde smiles into her beau's suited shoulder, lowering her lashes demurely; a slogan reads, "We know where we come from, where we belong, and wish to share the feeling with like-minded partners." Beside a pink and purple heart, the words "for European Singles" hint at WhiteDate's purpose: to connect white supremacists seeking to preserve the future of the white race through love and procreative nookie.

The landing page, adorned with stylish white couples, coyly advertises its commitment to an anachronistic, ossified view of gender: "We follow classic roles where strong men take the lead and graceful women play the game. Wisely."

As a mouthy, Jewish, anti-racist feminist with a Twitter account, I've experienced the violent rhetoric employed by white supremacists. But the counterpoint to the degradation of women deemed to be sexually wanton and traitorous to their race is a veneration of the pure, submissive white wife—a hyper-Aryan, time-hopping combination of 1859 and 1950. I had seen the harassment firsthand, but the machinery of Aryan courtship was closed to me.

Enter WhiteDate.

The site was created in 2017 and cofounded by "Liv Heide," who claims to be a woman from northern Germany living in Paris. In interviews on fascist-sympathetic YouTube channels, she does not appear on camera, but her voice is a feminine monotone with a heavy German accent. As she explained in the racist publication *American Renaissance* in 2019, she wants to encourage "woke white people" to "look at humans as animal breeders look at animals."

But the site has a profound shortage of women. WhiteDate had an obliquely titled page called "Mini Flyer," containing

an astonishing strategy for attracting more women. "Men are vanguards and it is reflected in the ratio between men and women on WhiteDate," the page begins. "So gentlemen, don't be shy and invite white ladies in real life who display trad potential." ("Trad" is short for "traditional"—i.e., someone willing to hew to the antiquated gender roles beloved of white supremacists.) Users are encouraged to print out a mini-flyer that reads

in full: "You look like one of us. Join us on WhiteDate.NET. Our survival is as important as the survival of the Siberian Tiger."

The anonymous founders of the site even provide tips on how to show women the advertisement: "We have started to present this mini-flyer with a 'Hi!' and a smile, letting the ladies read and memorize it, then taking it back," they write.

Here was a network of white supremacists itching to open up to a sympathetic woman, if one ever breached their sausage party. What might they reveal for the chance to meet the white woman of their dreams?

So Ashlynn was born.

She was a figment of my imagination, everything a white

supremacist could want, with the whitest name I could think of. I thought about "Ashley"—"Ashleigh"—"Ashlee"—but the "lynn" felt heavy with both consonants and promise. I closed my eyes and thought about the ideal mate of a male Fox News viewer, then twisted her 20 degrees to the right and plopped her into the Midwest. Blond, gun-toting, based on a farm-slash-compound just outside Anamosa, Iowa—she was a New Yorker's idea of an Iowan, imbued with all the parochial narrow-mindedness of my own urban life.

For her image, I found a social-media account belonging to a European hunting enthusiast with long, strawberry-blond hair. She wore camo, a girlish smile, and a long gun at her shoulder. She had photos

of herself posed against forests and wheat fields, which were anonymous in the way fields are. I cropped the photos carefully to make sure they weren't reverse-searchable on Google. Then I set out to seduce some bigots.

On WhiteDate.net, there were thousands of men for the picking, and dozens of them sent messages to ashlynn1488. I'd crafted the username from well-known neo-Nazi symbology. Fourteen was for a white-supremacist credo called the "14 words," composed by white-nationalist terrorist David Lane: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children." Eighty-eight stood for "Heil Hitler," because H is the eighth letter of the alphabet.

**T**HERE ARE A FEW LEADERS IN the white-supremacist movement who know how to talk to the press in order to amplify their movement—ones who might even talk to me. Those men, like Richard Spencer—dubbed the "dapper white nationalist," who burst onto the media scene in 2016—know how to spin credulous reporters into printing their claims about wanting a "peaceful ethnostate." Spokespeople pick their words carefully, and I couldn't help but feel that these smooth talkers had obscured the violence at the heart of white-supremacist

## Here was a network of white supremacists. What might they reveal to the white woman of their dreams?

Talia Lavin is a writer and researcher living in Brooklyn.



## The fantasies about birth rates, about racial continuity were embodied, for these men, in the wombs of white women.

Adapted from Culture Warlords: My Journey Into the Dark Web of White Supremacy by Talia Lavin. Copyright © 2020. Available from Hachette Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

like selecting a swatch for a white wall: ivory, alabaster, eggshell, bone, porcelain.

They were hiding in plain sight, these whiteness-loving men, working in warehouses and on farms, on army bases and construction sites; a large number were software developers. The variation in the jobs they claimed to have, likewise, argued against the idea that extremists are unemployed, or incompetent, or lurking in their mothers' basements.

**M**ANY OF THEM CITED YOUTUBE PERSONALITIES LIKE STEFAN MOLYNEUX and Jean-François Gariépy as the forces that led them to join the white-supremacist movement; others mentioned divorces—so many divorced men—or the 2016 election. “We have been lied to about everything, from our origins to the people who fight for us today,” wrote “John,” a long-haired North Carolinian with a passion for blacksmithing. “Needless to say, my slide down the pipeline happened very fast.”

Most euphemistically called themselves “red-pilled” or “race realists,” but one man wrote to me: “I also don’t mind getting called racist, because that is just some made up word by the false prophet MLK. To me, it just means that I think black people are annoying and I don’t want to be around them and if that makes me ‘racist’ then so be it.”

When my suitors wrote to me, they wrote about their cats, about their love of Xbox gaming, about gas prices. They wrote *a lot* about guns. And just as often they wrote about their desire to maintain the purity of whiteness and the white children they hoped I or some other willing woman would bear them.

“I used to work out and [sic] lot and am getting back into it; I love watching—mostly 80s—movies at home; I like socialising at the pub but mainly because I don’t have a family,” wrote one suitor, named “Marty.” “And by the way you became the most beautiful woman in the world when you said ‘kikes.’”

That was me. The most beautiful, kike-deploring woman in the world.

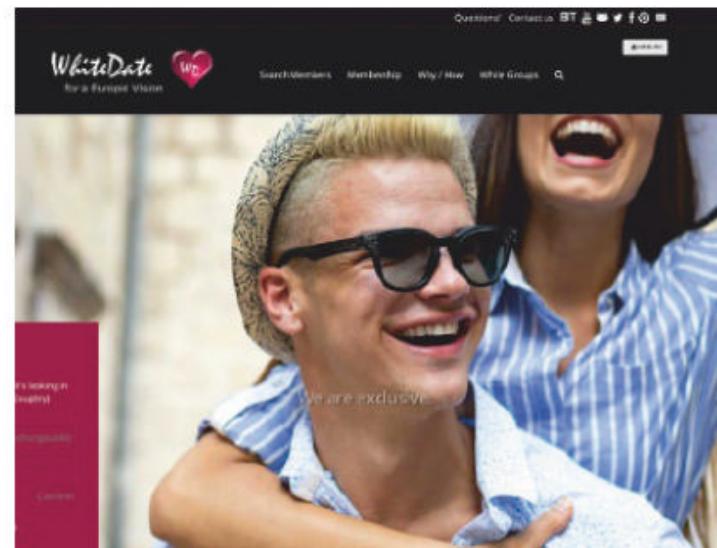
organizations. I wanted to hear from the ordinary men drawn to a whites-only dating site—who would never, ever encounter someone like me without subterfuge.

Their approaches were rarely overtly sexual. Users seemed to be seeking a white woman to put on a pedestal, though they also wanted to own “their woman.” (“Rather than spending hours in a car chasing a paycheck, my woman would rather be with me,” explained one man in his profile.)

“GeneticMessiah,” who admitted that he was “a little overweight but working on losing it,” wrote to Ashlynn, “I wish you the best of luck finding a white husband to have kids with. What’s your favorite kind of gun?”

The men came from across the country. One was even from the hippy-dippy college town of New Paltz, N.Y. The geographic variation of my paramours was a powerful argument against any notion that white supremacy is confined to red states; if anything, the New Yorkers and Californians, feeling themselves to be warriors of a valiant counterculture, were even more vociferous in their hatreds.

Most of the avatars on White-Date were simply photos of white men. White men with beards or without; thin or muscular or fat; bespectacled or green-eyed or brown-eyed or blue-eyed. It was



Here’s the truth that emerged for me: The worst people are still people; their humanity is impossible to disregard, but it does not absolve them. If anything, it makes their choices more abhorrent, surrounded, as they are, by the banality of a life indistinguishable from other lives. Even a self-described Nazi eats dinner. (“I eat only beef and eggs with bouts of pineapples from a can. But on dates, I expand that diet so as to not be ‘weird,’” explained “Karamazov,” candidly.)

Eventually, I asked them to write love letters. Since they viewed themselves as romantics—heirs to a noble European heritage—I thought this would be a way to find out what they wanted. I asked them a simple question, tantalizingly phrased: “If you could write a love letter to your future white wife, what would it be like?”

The results were like a car crash between Nicholas Sparks and *Mein Kampf*:

Dear Ashlynn,

I was really happy to hear back from you and to receive the photo that you sent. It’s real pretty. I will tell you that you have quite a nice figure to my liking. It also reminds me of where I lived in Iowa. It’s nice to see fields

and trees and hills and things where everything is green. Out here we’ve just got basically desert and then the giant mountains scattered about.

To answer your question, well I’d have to think about that. It’s kind of hard to imagine being married at last, I think it would be an incredible feeling to be fi-

nally married. Well, are you looking to get married? I think for me I am because well there is only so much dating to be done in life. It would just be nice to live with a great woman and see her every day. And especially one that is a race realist, because I want my wife to teach our kids to keep away from the darkies and to marry white people when they grow up, because that is the how [sic] we continue our way of life, and to teach them about the ethnosta-

te that our people will someday create.

When I look at the picture you sent I think to myself in my mind that I would like to just walk up to you and give you a big hug, and pick you up off the ground a bit and twirl you around. And I would like to see the look in your eyes and gaze upon your face and then I imagine kissing you right there in that field. Maybe we could go

for a walk and just talk about life and things and really get to know each other quite well. That would be real nice I think.

There are more, of course—love letters to the fertile white women of the world. These letters laid out how the fantasies about offspring, about birth rates, about racial continuity were embodied, for these men, in the wombs of white women. Their laudatory words of romance were inextricable from their desire for racial segregation and ethnic cleansing. They wanted an inferior partner, a submissive woman to love—and one who would keep their children from Marxists, Jews, and “darkies.” Their visions of love were tied to their hatred of the modern woman. Misogyny is a natural outcome of indoctrination into white supremacy, which sees women purely as vessels for breeding. **N**

(continued from page 21)

Even if it does, some of us oldsters will likely go to bed before those games end if, as seems likely, the networks maintain their prime-time playoff series schedules. The prevalence of night-time baseball on television, beginning as far back as the 1970s, helped lose a couple of generations of kids. Think of the teens (and younger) who couldn’t hang out in front of the tube late enough to see some of the greatest baseball games of the post-millennium, whether it was the rousing comeback of the Boston Red Sox over the Yankees (and their teams’ respective histories) in the 2004 American League Championship Series or the marathon everything-but-the-kitchen-sink seventh game of the 2016 World Series, when the Chicago Cubs ended their century-plus championship drought. Maybe they wouldn’t all have become committed fans of the game from such exposure. But that doesn’t mean the MLB shouldn’t try to find a way to start its prime-time games earlier in the day.

Think of the all the teens and tweens, twenty- to thirty-somethings, and even fifty- to seventysomethings you might catch in your TV webs (in *Variety*-speak) if you regularly aired those games during Eastern Time happy hours. Great games and great teams raise baseball’s profile on their own, even spur revivals in interest. But they need to be seen and experienced as they happen, not just in game highlights served for early morning TV like cold pizza.

Baseball, along with the rest of us, has a lot to deal with in the anxious present, mostly in trying to keep track of confirmed Covid-19 cases among players and tests for all the others. But what also occurs to me, at least, is that the constricted nature of this 2020 season might goad the MLB and its TV enablers to consider that not all games—and especially playoff series—have to be aimed solely at a prime-time viewership.

Games in broad daylight might not seem so risky or esoteric a prospect, especially in a post-Covid economy that will almost certainly be transformed beyond immediate recognition. The rhythm of daily life could once again be stretched and adjusted to accommodate weekday baseball in the afternoons more often than national holidays because—maybe—we will once again find ourselves needing the grace of baseball, with all the poetry, brashness, complexity, and above all, personality of America as we want desperately to believe it to be.

If we must have home-run derbies, celebrity softball, and DJs to goose the ratings, so be it. I’d also settle for a regular diet of shadow ball, please. The legacy of the Negro Leagues, born the same year as Roger Angell, can never be honored enough. **N**

# It's Time for Climate Action

**LEAD  
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**FIVE  
PRACTICES FOR  
CONFRONTING  
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**Bill McKibben**  
author of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*

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# Health Care Coverage's Free Fall

**B**

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC HIT, JOHN MADE A DECENT LIVING mowing people's yards and doing landscaping in Houston. He had a place to live with his 15-year-old son. He even had health insurance that he bought for himself and his son "in case anything happens," he said.

Then Covid-19 swept across the country. Nobody wanted "somebody they don't really know on their property, in their house," said John, who wanted to use only his first name. His work dried up. He had to send his son to live with his deceased wife's cousin in Dallas. He ended up evicted and homeless; he slept for a few weeks on a bench near his house and then for a week under a bridge. And he had to let his insurance coverage lapse because he could no longer pay for it.

John is now sleeping on the floor in a family friend's house. He's found work selling pipes and rebar, but it doesn't pay much, just \$50 a day. He can hardly afford to keep his phone activated, and it's the one way he can communicate with his son. "Sometimes I just got to pay my bill and not eat," he said.

He can't afford health insurance on his current income, but he needs medical attention. When he recently saw a doctor, he had sky-high blood pressure, which he attributes to all the stress he's been through. "One doctor told me I should be dead," he said. Without insurance, he hasn't been able to get the medication he was prescribed; instead he's been taking old blood pressure meds, but he's running out. He doesn't know what he'll do when they're gone.

He also got heatstroke twice in one week and had to be taken to the hospital in an ambulance. That visit nearly set him back \$17,000—about \$2,000 for the ambulance ride and \$15,000 for the hospital stay—until he got a mailing from the hospital saying that because he doesn't have insurance, the charges had been waived. After those experiences, he's worried about what it would mean to get Covid while uninsured. But he tries not to think about it. "If I worry about it, I'm going to be stressing myself out," he said.

John is one of 659,000 Texans who lost their health insurance in the first three months of the pandemic, adding to an uninsured rate that was the highest in the country before Covid-19. "It was already pretty dismal," said Shao-Chee Sim, the vice

Between February and May, more than 5.4 million people lost their health insurance coverage. That's the highest increase ever recorded.

BY BRYCE COVERT

president for research and evaluation at the Episcopal Health Foundation in Texas. As the economy slowed, millions of people have lost work, income, and with that, their health insurance. The state's uninsured rate has climbed from 17.7 percent in 2018 to 29 percent today. Texas is one of only 12 states still refusing to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. That means only pregnant Texans, low-income people with disabilities, or parents making 17 percent of the federal poverty line for a family of three, or less than \$3,700 a year, qualify for the public health program. Childless adults without disabilities can't enroll at all and have few other options.

Before the pandemic, over half of uninsured Texans had no place they regularly went to for preventative medical care, compared with just one-quarter of the insured. Now the uninsured face forgoing care during a public health crisis. "Having health coverage is even more important than ever," Sim said. "People are delaying seeking care.... If they have a serious illness, whether it's Covid or not, it will be a major hit."

**During the pandemic, "having health coverage is even more important than ever."**

—Shao-Chee Sim,  
Episcopal Health Foundation



**Health care for more:** Oklahoma residents like Margaret Love rallied in favor of Medicaid expansion, which passed in the state on a ballot initiative in the midst of the pandemic.

## About 30 percent of low-income essential workers were uninsured in states that hadn't expanded Medicaid in 2018, versus 17 percent in states that had.

expansion states, on average, less than a quarter of unemployed workers became uninsured. By contrast, in states that haven't expanded Medicaid, on average more than 40 percent of workers who lost a job also lost insurance. Jesse Cross-Call, another senior policy analyst at the CBPP, said, "Folks who are unemployed are much more tethered to health coverage in expansion states than in nonexpansion states." If all those states expanded Medicaid, nearly 4.3 million more adults would stand to get covered by next year.

"There's always been pretty striking disparities...between expansion and nonexpansion states," Cross-Call said. "Those trends are just really being put in even starker contrast now."

For those who can afford it, coverage obtained on the ACA private insurance marketplaces is stepping in to catch them. Enrollment in the plans available on the marketplace has surged in many states that created special enrollment periods during the pandemic. But those plans are often too costly for lower-income people. An individual won't be eligible for the subsidies that can make marketplace insurance affordable if that person's income falls below the poverty line. Even the jobless people who were kept financially afloat by enhanced unemployment insurance benefits could fall into this category, as benefits are not counted for income eligibility purposes.

Many former employees can extend their health coverage, typically for up to 18 months, through COBRA. But it's very expensive. On average, people using COBRA spent \$7,000 on the insurance in 2019, or nearly \$21,000 for a family.

That leaves Medicaid as the last option. But it's open to only a very narrow slice of the population in states that haven't expanded eligibility under the ACA. Parents above a certain income level—from as high as \$20,417 a year in Tennessee to as low as \$3,693 in Texas—are not eligible. Childless people without disabilities are shut out. People who can't enroll "are likely to go uninsured," said Eliot Fishman, a senior director of health policy at Families USA.

That's problematic at any time. Medicaid expansion has been found to save tens of thousands of lives. "People who are uninsured typically face a lot of cost barriers in getting access to care," said Robin Rudowitz, a vice president at the Kaiser Family

**T**HIS IS THE FIRST RECESSION THE COUNTRY HAS FACED with the ACA in place. And in the states that have established private health insurance exchanges and expanded Medicaid coverage, the crisis of losing a job has not necessarily precipitated the crisis of losing health insurance. But in the states that did not expand Medicaid, there is a gaping hole in the patchwork of health coverage, and as people face widespread job loss, unprecedented numbers of them are tumbling into it.

Between February and May, 5.4 million people who lost their job in the United States also lost their health insurance coverage—the highest increase ever recorded. Losses have been heavy in many nonexpansion states like Texas, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. Elsewhere, Medicaid is cushioning the blow. In states where data is available, Medicaid enrollment grew 8.4 percent between February and July, and the increase was even greater in expansion states, where it was up 12.7 percent. "Absent that additional Medicaid coverage, many of those people would instead be uninsured," said Matt Broaddus, a senior research analyst at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. In Medicaid

Foundation, "and also tend to delay or postpone needed care because they know that out-of-pocket costs will be high." But this difficulty in visiting a doctor could be catastrophic for public health during a pandemic. "If they have symptoms or even if they want to get tested without symptoms, they are going to be reluctant to get that taken care of because they can't afford it," said Fishman. While the testing is free in some places, in others it can cost up to \$2,000. The federal government has allocated funding to reimburse providers that conduct tests and hospitals that care for Covid patients who don't have insurance, but that doesn't mean patients won't be billed or federal funding will cover all hospital fees for patients. Some who need extensive Covid treatment may wind up with serious debt. "It is always a financial risk for a person without health insurance to have a significant amount of health care utilization," Fishman said.

Without insurance, people with chronic conditions like high blood pressure, asthma, and diabetes may have struggled to afford medication to keep those under control before the pandemic. If they get Covid, they are at greater risk of more serious complications.

Then there are the lingering effects of Covid-19 and the possible need for ongoing care. Uninsured people may not be able to fill prescriptions for things like inhalers to help them cope with continuing symptoms.

Expanding Medicaid has been found to reduce medical bills and debt. Those without insurance in the midst of a recession and pandemic may run into a big financial toll.

"You can imagine somebody who contracts the virus and starts to show symptoms but doesn't want to see a doctor because they're worried about the cost," Cross-Call said. "They're hoping the condition gets better on its own, but when it doesn't, their health is even more compromised."

There is early evidence that people are simply avoiding care. In Houston, where nearly a fifth of residents lacked health insurance before the pandemic and where many more now face that prospect, there has been a huge spike in the number of people dying at home without going to the hospital or calling 911. Public health advocates worry this means that people with Covid who lack insurance are waiting until it is too late to seek help, out of fear of incurring the costs.

Worse, the people most at risk of falling into the coverage gap between Medicaid and the marketplace are some of those whose health is most at risk right now. About 30 percent of



low-income essential workers were uninsured in states that hadn't expanded Medicaid in 2018, versus 17 percent in expansion states. An estimated 650,000 essential or frontline workers would gain coverage if the remaining states expanded Medicaid. It has also been an important source of coverage for other people who are at high risk of catching Covid or developing serious complications, such as those with low incomes, heart disease, asthma, or diabetes. In Texas, 61 percent of the uninsured are Hispanic, and an additional 10 percent are Black.

"In nonexpansion states it's a very unfortunate and infuriating situation," Fishman said. "It's just madness for us as a country...that people are afraid to use basic health care services in the middle of a historic health crisis because we're the one advanced country that doesn't cover everybody as a matter of basic public service."

**T**HE BRIGHT SIDE IS THAT THE NUMBER of states that have dug in against expansion is slowly dwindling and that the pandemic and ensuing recession are increasing public support for Medicaid expansion.

For the past few years, Carly Putnam, the policy director at the Oklahoma Policy Institute, has kept on the bulletin board above her desk a cartoon of someone pushing a boulder up a hill. That's how it's felt trying to get her state to expand Medicaid. Then she watched as organizers put the issue on the ballot in four states—Maine, Idaho, Utah, and Nebraska—and won in every one. "If Nebraskans could do it, so could we," she thought.

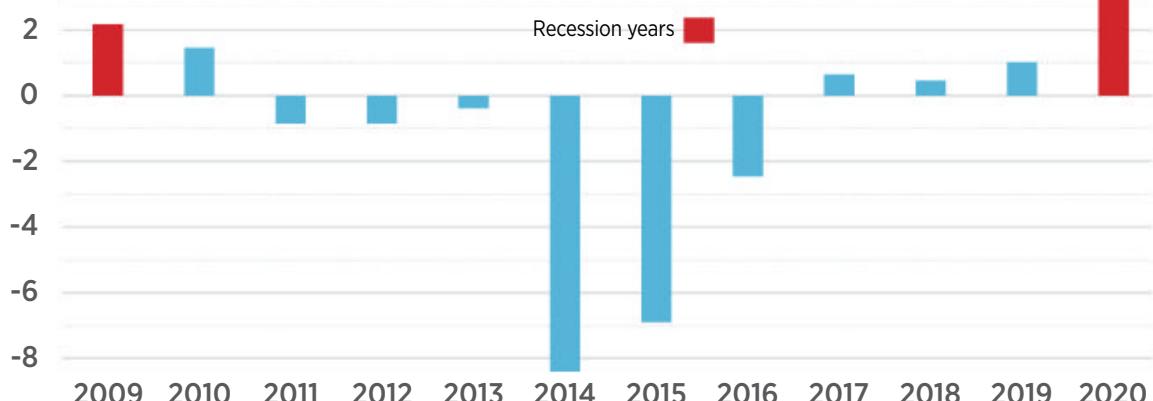
She was right. On June 30 state voters narrowly passed a measure to expand Medicaid, the first state to do so since the pandemic began. "Oklahomans finally got the chance to make the choice that their legislature had abdicated," she said. "It's really gratifying to see Oklahoma finally meaningfully stepping up to take care of its own." She doesn't know exactly how the pandemic affected the vote, but she said that people who voted using absentee ballots—who were perhaps more concerned about the coronavirus and their health—overwhelmingly favored it, three to one.

"Passing Medicaid expansion in Oklahoma, which is one of the reddest states in the country, is a pretty strong signal that there is still a public appetite for expanding health coverage," Cross-Call said.

Just a month later, voters in Missouri secured the same victory. Advocates launched the campaign to expand Medicaid in the state on the day of the Supreme Court's 2012 decision upholding the constitutionality of the ACA but striking down the mandate to expand Medicaid. On a day when the temperature was over 100 degrees, Jen Bersdale, the executive direc-

## Recessions Drive Biggest Health Insurance Losses

Change in the number of uninsured people since the prior year, 2009–20 (in millions)



Source: National Center for Coverage Innovation at Families USA analysis of American Community Survey Data for 2009 to '19. For 2020, Families USA estimated a projection based on job losses from February to May 2020.

tor of Missouri Health Care for All, assembled a group to react, no matter the outcome of that case. "We got to celebrate the fact that the ACA had been upheld, but we had a new fight on our hands," she said. After waging an unsuccessful legislative campaign to expand Medicaid over a number of years, advocates there, too, took inspiration from other states and decided to put the issue on the ballot. "It is a stain on the reputation of all of the elected officials that have not only failed to listen to their constituents but also failed to do what they needed them to do so they could get the care that they need," she said.

The coverage gap in Missouri should be called a chasm, Bersdale argued. Marketplace insurance has become nearly unattainable for residents without subsidies. "A full-price plan [costs] more than their annual income," she said. Now far more are falling into the void. "We have so many people now who had really secure jobs...with good health insurance and master's degrees and 20-year careers who are suddenly out of work," she said.

Now her fight is over. Support for Amendment 2, expanding Medicaid coverage, was even stronger in Missouri than in Oklahoma. The amendment passed with 53 percent of the vote. Bersdale saw the result coming. She had 600 face masks made with "Yes on 2" printed on them; they sold out so fast, she had to order 300 more.

She hopes the Missouri group's success can have a ripple effect in other states that haven't expanded Medicaid. "I would love for it to provide some hope to people in states who are still fighting," she said.

**T**'S NOT CLEAR YET WHAT IMPACT the pandemic will have on the remaining nonexpansion states. In a May poll, the Kaiser Family Foundation found that two-thirds of adults living in nonexpansion states wanted their state to expand Medicaid. The share rises sharply among those who have experienced job or income loss because of Covid—nearly three-quarters support expansion. "I do think it will make a



**"It's just madness... that people are afraid to use basic health care services in the middle of a historic health crisis."**

—Eliot Fishman,  
Families USA

**A missing safety net:** Health care experts worry that uninsured people will avoid seeking testing and care even if they suspect they have been exposed to the coronavirus.

## "Passing Medicaid expansion in Oklahoma... is a pretty strong signal that there is still a public appetite for expanding health coverage."

—Jesse Cross-Call,  
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

is an option, and even there, it's an uphill battle. Florida's rules for ballot initiatives, for example, are onerous, and it's an expensive state in which to run a campaign. In other states, expansion can happen only with legislative action. "The question is whether people are activated at the individual voter level around the issue in a way that is going to scare state legislators," Fishman said. Time will tell, and it may take more time now that the pandemic has wreaked havoc on state legislative calendars. Kansas, for example, was on the verge of expansion when it suspended its legislative session in mid-March and then held just a one-day session in May that didn't deal with the issue.

The pandemic could push things either way. On the one hand, voters are getting a glimpse of just what it means to have millions of people fall through such a giant tear in the safety net. On the other, opponents of expansion often argue that states can't afford it, even though the federal government pays nearly all of the costs and states are likely to face other costs from having such a large uninsured population. The fiscal argument may hold emotional sway now that state budgets are under serious strain, thanks to lower tax revenues and a higher demand for assistance.

What is clear is that if states decided to expand Medicaid, they could get residents insured fairly quickly. Some states have rolled out expansion in a matter of months or even weeks. They can also make coverage retroactive, helping people cover bills they already incurred to get Covid testing and treatment.

"These are really extraordinary times," Cross-Call said. "The need to connect

difference. How can it not?" Fishman said. "Millions of people losing job-based health insurance, knowing that in other states they could have coverage."

"It would be very surprising if the pandemic didn't have an effect," agreed Philip Rocco, an assistant professor of political science at Marquette University in Milwaukee. Congress left a space for states to fill, he said, by not taking action to extend health coverage during the pandemic. There are "a lot of people whose needs are not being addressed by, really, another government entity. It might create a little bit of added pressure." Oklahoma may have been a squeaker—the measure passed with just 50.5 percent of the vote—but the vote occurred earlier in the pandemic, when the numbers of uninsured people hadn't swelled as much as they have. Missouri showed momentum may be building.

There is also evidence that the expansion itself and the resulting coverage can spur people to become more active in politics; without that effect, those who could benefit may not yet be political participants. Before Covid, there was substantial support among Texas residents for expansion. But, Sim noted, "it's one thing to express a view; it's another who [people] vote for."

There are only a handful of states left where bringing expansion to voters directly via the ballot is an option, and even there, it's an uphill battle. Florida's rules for ballot initiatives, for example, are onerous, and it's an expensive state in which to run a campaign. In other states, expansion can happen only with legislative action. "The question is whether people are activated at the individual voter level around the issue in a way that is going to scare state legislators," Fishman said. Time will tell, and it may take more time now that the pandemic has wreaked havoc on state legislative calendars. Kansas, for example, was on the verge of expansion when it suspended its legislative session in mid-March and then held just a one-day session in May that didn't deal with the issue.

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people with health coverage is critically important right now."

Of course, getting enrolled in health insurance may not be top of mind when someone loses employment during a pandemic of historic proportions. For many, filing for unemployment benefits was likely the first priority, a process that in many states was incredibly complicated and drawn out. So while the number of people enrolling in health coverage under the ACA has gone up, "that uptick is not commensurate with the number of people who have lost employer coverage," Fishman said. "There are still significant numbers of people falling through the cracks." He said that if Democratic nominee Joe Biden wins the presidency, "there starts to be a conversation about more automatic enrollment mechanisms. Just making coverage available and trying to make it very easy for people to sign up...can only get you so far."

There are other ways that a Biden presidency could narrow the Medicaid coverage gap. While he hasn't backed Medicare for All, the plan championed by Senator Bernie Sanders that would put everyone on public health insurance, Biden has proposed creating a Medicare-like public option available for purchase in expansion and nonexpansion states alike, with premium costs subsidized through tax credits and capped at a percentage of income. He would also ensure that subsidies were available to make marketplace coverage more affordable for those who qualify.

John is still trying to put all the pieces of his life back together. He recently called a construction company he used to work for that offers health insurance and pays \$18 to \$20 an hour. It said it would gladly take him back, but he needs his own transportation to get to jobs. His license was suspended a while ago over a ticket he got for lack of insurance, and now, thanks to the pandemic, there is a month-and-a-half wait just to get an appointment to get a new license. While he waits, he's clinging to the hope that his current job will pay him more, maybe for selling concrete instead of pipes.

"I just wish this corona stuff was over with," he said. "I'm ready to get back to a real job making real money so I can get back into my own house and get back with my son."



FRANK HOERMANN / SVEN SIMON / PICTURE-ALLIANCE / DPA / AP

(continued from page 17)

with houses in scenic, natural areas on relatively large acreages (often with one house per 10, 20, or 40 acres or more)."

But there are two very different kinds of migrants to the exurbs. Some, like the inhabitants of Paradise, the Sierra foothill city incinerated in 2018, are rent refugees from the state's housing crisis or ordinary folks, especially retirees, who want to own a tiny piece of California's beauty. But they are minor players compared with the influx of wealth from the coast. Rural areas that were once ruggedly blue-collar and derided as "Appalachia" (an insult long attached to eastern San Diego County, where I grew up) now boast starter castles, high-end subdivisions, and spa retreats. From Mendocino on the north coast to the San Diego mountains in the south, upper 5 percent migration has been gentrifying the urban hinterlands, especially those areas with high-value amenities like ocean views, wineries, and forest lakes.

An equally prized amenity is their racial homogeneity. "Exurbanization" is often a euphemism for white flight from metropolitan diversity. As California's suburbs turn Technicolor and become more Democratic, the exurbs (with some exceptions) are hard-core Donald Trump country and are fiercely anti-government—except in fire season. One of their leading voices was Duncan Hunter Jr., now on his way from Congress to prison, who represented the exurban corridor along I-15 from San Diego to Riverside. For years he fought restrictions on backcountry development with the same zeal that he opposed Latino immigrants and unions.

This is a mindset, blind to the consequences, that allies itself with the botanical counterrevolution. Relentless land clearance and home construction fragment habitats, introduce myriad fire ignition sources, and promote weed invasion. Yet the newcomers are unwilling to pay taxes for increased fire protection—and raise hell when foresters attempt prescribed burns. Meanwhile, shorthanded fire crews are under tremendous pressure to defend individual homesites, which has led to increased deaths and injuries.

Exurbanites seem incapable of learning the obvious lessons from recent megafires. In 2003 a firestorm destroyed more than 1,000 homes in the unincorporated towns of Alpine and Crest in the mountains east of San Diego. When I took a film crew there last year, the lost homes had been replaced by even larger ones, and residents assured us that thanks to brush clearance, the fire hazard had been mitigated. But the quest for defensible space, zealously marketed by developers and local officials, is a dangerous mirage. Firestorms that create their own tornadic weather systems and can hurl fiery debris a kilometer ahead of the flame front are not deterred by a 300-foot circumference of brush clearance or a few carefully watered beds of ice plant.

**H**OW SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND THE LARGE-SCALE ECOlogical consequences of the invasive-grass and wild-fire cycle? One perhaps surprising analogue is the aftermath of the firebombing of Germany during World War II. In the late 1940s the ruins of Berlin became a laboratory where natural scientists studied plant succession. The expectation was that the original vegetation of the region—oak woodlands and their shrubs—would soon reestab-

lish itself. To the scientists' horror, this was not the case. Instead escaped exotics, some of them rare garden plants, established themselves as the new dominants.

The botanists continued their studies until the last bomb sites were cleared in the 1980s. The persistence of this dead-zone vegetation and the failure of the plants of the Pomeranian woodlands to reestablish themselves prompted a debate about Nature II. The contention was that the extreme heat from fire-bombing and the pulverization of brick structures had created a soil type that invited colonization by rugged plants such as tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) that had evolved on the moraines of Pleistocene ice sheets. An all-out nuclear war, they warned, might reproduce these conditions on a vast scale.

Fire in the Anthropocene has become the physical equivalent of nuclear war. In the aftermath of Victoria's Black Saturday fires in early 2009, Australian scientists calculated that their released energy equaled 1,500 Hiroshima-size explosions. Even greater energy has produced the pyrocumulus plumes that for weeks have towered over Northern California and Oregon. Likewise the toxic orange fog that shrouded the Bay Area for weeks might be considered a miniature nuclear winter.

As a result, a new, profoundly sinister nature is rapidly emerging from our fire rubble at the expense of landscapes we once considered sacred. Our imaginations can barely encompass the speed or scale of the catastrophe. **N**

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## The Dog Who Ate the Vegetable Garden & Helped Save the Planet

by Meg Hurley



**"Audacious!"**

**Eating animals has consequences.**

'A witty, whimsical and creative

novella and decidedly serious. Ooph!'

—Jonathan Balcombe, *What a Fish Knows*

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## The Metamorphosis

*The making of the unequal city*

BY KIM PHILLIPS-FEIN

# A

S THE CORONAVIRUS RICOCHETED through New York City this spring, among its many casualties was a certain image of life in the Big Apple. The foodie destinations, posh galleries, and pricey cocktail lounges sat deserted while city hospitals long scorned as antiquated, clunky, and ineffective became crowded, bustling centers of activity and pandemonium. If they didn't abscond to their second homes, financiers and lawyers huddled in their apartments, and grocery store employees, doormen, UPS drivers, and postal workers all became consummate risk-takers. Spaces segregated from the middle class—homeless shelters,

nursing homes, jails—were revealed as inextricably linked to the rest of the city on a microbial level, as the virus could not be kept out or contained within. In the pandemic city, the oft-praised prosperity of New York in the early years of the 21st century proved illusory or at least misdirected: a world of glittering condos and luxe hotels that somehow could not provide enough hospital masks to its nurses or figure out a way to keep its children safe.

The virus held up a mirror to the city that revealed a very different image from that of a gleeful elegance and striving opportunity: a distorted, cruel urban landscape divided between those with the means and resources to depart and those who had no choice but to keep taking the subway, even as the viral wave crested. Zip code maps showing infection rates in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens compared with those in Manhattan told the story. When George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis, his death seemed to magnify the vulnerability, racism, and exclusion already evident, and New York, like many other places in the United States, justifiably erupted in protest.

As cities across the country and around the world struggle to cope with the ongoing pandemic, it is an opportune time to read *Saving America's Cities*, Lizabeth Cohen's excellent study of postwar urban planning. The period she chronicles is at once near and far from our own. Over the years that followed World War II, the federal government sought to address the problems of urban poverty and deindustrialization through a series of attempts at urban renewal. Much of the historical literature on these programs has focused on their failings—especially and most damningly with regard to public housing, which created what scholar Arnold Hirsch, writing about Chicago, called a “second ghetto.” Cohen, by contrast, views the contradictory legacy and aspirations of postwar urban liberalism as having much within them to admire, a case she makes by taking up the life of urban planner Ed Logue.

Logue's name is little known today, but he was a renowned figure in the mid-20th century, dubbed “Mr. Urban Renewal” by *The New York Times* and the “Master Rebuilder” by *The Washington Post*. He brought federal redevelopment money to New Haven. He used public money to rebuild downtown Boston. He built the apartment towers on Roosevelt Island for New York City as well as affordable housing elsewhere throughout the state. For Cohen, his career was representative of a certain liberal hope: that professional expertise and federal funds could reverse the racial inequalities, suburban flight, unemployment, and disinvestment that plagued American cities in the second half of the 20th century.

*Kim Phillips-Fein teaches American history at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University. She is the author of Invisible Hands and Fear City.*



### Saving America's Cities

*Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age*  
By Lizabeth Cohen  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 560 pp. \$35

Cohen makes a compelling case that a renewed faith in the public sector and the active participation of the federal government in rebuilding urban infrastructure and public housing are essential for any progress today, and she argues that Logue's work demonstrates the potential of this approach as well as some of its successes, however partial. Yet at the same time, *Saving America's Cities* is, purposefully or not, a study in urban liberalism's failings and of the profound pressures that always constrained and shaped its aspirations and accomplishments. In the end, Logue's career—which began with his trademark sunny confidence and brash appeal but ended with his back against the wall of declining federal money and slipping public support—cannot help but suggest the limits of postwar urban renewal as much as its possibilities.

**E**d Logue hailed from the heart of urban America, Philadelphia. Born in 1921, he grew up the oldest of five children in an Irish Catholic household. His father was a tax assessor, a well-paid public sector job that enabled him to send his children to private school and to summer at the Jersey shore. But after he died when Logue was just 13, the family fell into near poverty. The charity of an uncle enabled them to avoid destitution.

Despite the family's travails, Logue went to Yale on a scholarship. During his time in college, he became involved in New Haven's labor movement. He worked in the Yale dining room and gained a reputation as a firebrand; a supervisor later told the FBI that Logue had been known for spreading “malicious rumors” about management, calling Yale administrators “dictators” and “slave drivers.” After he graduated, he went to work as an organizer for the local that represented the university's janitors, maids, and maintenance workers. He may have been a radical, but he was also a committed anti-communist, skeptical of the Communist Party's role in local politics and dismissive of its broader program. As Cohen puts it, he was a “rebel in the belly of the establishment beast,” a New Dealer who believed in the role of the federal government and in the power of labor unions, but he was not someone who sought broader social transformation.

Logue fought in World War II and then attended Yale Law School on the GI Bill. But he was quickly bored and alienated by the life of an attorney. “The law is a whore's trade,” he explained to a law school mentor. “I don't want a nice law practice for anything but the income, and I'm a son of a bitch if I'll throw away ten or twenty years of my life building up an income.” He considered a career in labor law, but here, too, his ambitions were larger than the role. Being a labor lawyer meant serving the labor movement but not leading it. Logue found himself drawn to politics instead, albeit not as a politician but as the labor secretary to Chester Bowles, a former New Dealer (and head of the Office of Price Administration, which regulated prices during World War II) who had become the governor of Connecticut. Logue then traveled with his boss to India when Bowles became the US ambassador, observing with great interest the community development work the Ford Foundation was doing in rural parts of the country.

In 1954, Logue returned to New Haven to work with the city's new mayor, Richard Lee. Federal support for suburban development was most evident in subsidized home loans and tax breaks for homeowners as well as road construction, but there was still ample money available for cities, and Logue was able to win more than

\$130 million in federal aid (over \$1 billion in today's dollars). Cohen details how Logue and Lee used this money to make New Haven a "model *modern* city" and an example of "what can be accomplished when a full-scale attack on blight and poverty is undertaken." With federal aid as well as foundation money, Logue and Lee rebuilt schools, developed an industrial center, and helped reshape the downtown commercial district. Logue also helped give shape to an increasingly familiar figure in East Coast cities: the urban planner who would operate with political reserve to create a city in the best interests of all.

With the emergence of civil rights and Black activism in New Haven, many of the problems with Logue's model of urban planning came to the fore. The kind of renewal that Logue promoted at times involved displacing poorer residents and people of color. It also privileged a certain kind of rule by experts rather than the voices and power of the people most directly affected. Throughout the United States, the anti-communist liberalism embodied in Logue's top-down urban planning was coming under pressure from below—from the civil rights movement and the New Left, from people who did not want to fight in Vietnam, and from those who rejected the terms of the postwar affluent society.

The tensions in Logue's liberalism were on full display in New Haven. At first, the city's Black residents greeted urban renewal with optimism, recognizing that it held the potential for them to gain better housing. But over time these hopes faded, especially as many displaced by redevelopment found it difficult to find new homes and were often relocated in neighborhoods or projects that were no improvement over what they left behind. Community organizers began to show up at public meetings to criticize Logue and his fellow planners for making decisions about their city without consulting the people who would feel the strongest impact of those choices. As one area resident said at a 1967 hearing held by Illinois Senator Paul Douglas on redevelopment in New Haven, "You people have listened to the Mayor. How about listening to us?"

By the time of that forum, Logue had left for Boston. He claimed he moved on because of his program's success. "I had done about as much as I could do in New Haven except stay the course and see it through," he recalled. "After a while there's not much challenge in that." But it was already becoming clear that his complacent sense of optimism about New Haven as a model city was unjustified. As early deindustrialization set in, the city's racism and racial inequality became only more glaring. Local white resistance to school desegregation expanded, and Yale continued to benefit far more from its relationship to the

city than the city's residents did, especially those of color.

**L**ogue's time in Boston was equally marked by victories and frustrations. There, too, he relied centrally on leveraging federal money to stimulate development and also came up against the challenges of a declining industrial economy and white resistance.

He began his time in the city with ambitious plans to rebuild its downtown. He oversaw the construction of Government Center, a new set of headquarters for city, state, and federal offices that helped encourage commercial development. Building on this success, he embarked on a series of renewal programs in Boston's neighborhoods, where he sought to encourage racial integration by improving housing and con-

structing infrastructure and services, including better public schools. In practice, getting white and Black Bostonians to live side by side in racially integrated neighborhoods was far harder than it looked on paper. Logue had trouble building as much affordable replacement housing as the city needed, which meant that Bostonians were displaced by his projects, leading only to further segregation and housing inequality.

Logue claimed to want to work with the neighborhoods to make sure his programs fit the needs and visions of residents, but he was more comfortable with communities that were willing to accept

his expert knowledge, and in fact, he was often surprised by the community organizing that resisted his urban renewal efforts or sought to redirect them in a way that more closely fit local needs. When he tried to run for mayor of Boston in 1967, he finished fourth in the primary—well behind Louise Day Hicks, whose claim to fame was her vigorous defense of segregation in Boston's public schools. Logue's efforts could not keep open expressions of racism from surging to the forefront of the city's politics.

From Boston, he went to Albany, where New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller tapped Logue to lead the Urban Development Corporation. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Rockefeller established the UDC with a mandate to construct affordable housing in the state. Under Logue's leadership, the UDC was responsible for building about 25 percent of government-subsidized housing there, for some 100,000 people. Among these were three "new towns" built from the ground up, including on Roosevelt Island.

In contrast to Logue's earlier efforts, undertaken in the heyday of postwar liberalism, the UDC could not rely in the same way on federal money. Instead, it sought to combine some public money (from the state as well as the federal government) with private investment raised through moral obligation bonds that carried no legal obligation to repay and thus did not require voter approval. Logue and the UDC relied on Rockefeller's close connections to real estate developers and the financial community. (Rockefeller's brother David Rockefeller was, after all, the president of Chase Manhattan Bank.) But after the governor left the state to become vice president under Gerald Ford, the problems with relying on the bond market to carry out the construction of affordable housing quickly became evident. With the absence of public money, it was difficult to build low- and moderate-income housing that would be profitable—and unless it was, private lenders would call in their debt.

The UDC faced serious political obstacles as well. When it sought to build low-income housing in Westchester County, just north of New York City, the proposals seemed crafted to mollify the residents of leafy enclaves such as Bedford and Scarsdale, with proj-

## The virus has helped clarify just how unequal US cities have become over the last four decades.

ects that contained no more than 100 units of low-income housing mixed with moderate-income units, with veterans, area residents, employees of local businesses, and town and school district staffers to be given priority for them. Instead, the plans met with intransigent opposition from suburbanites who had no intention of allowing their towns to become more diverse racially or economically. As Cohen puts it, "In town after town, something like a civil war broke out." Organizations like United Towns for Home Rule sprang up to marshal resistance. At one point, a barn that the UDC was planning to convert into a community center was burned to the ground. Logue received death threats and was taunted at community meetings: "Get out, we don't want you in Bedford!" Meanwhile, the Nixon administration imposed a moratorium on the housing subsidies that had been key to the UDC's financial projections, and Nelson Rockefeller's departure meant that the UDC no longer had a key ally in Albany. Still, Logue kept building and borrowing to build, using the moral obligation bonds even though he no longer had a clear way of repaying the debt the UDC was accumulating.

By the mid-'70s, the declining commitment of the federal and state governments to build affordable housing, the resistance the UDC faced locally, and Logue's general indifference to the finances of the agency created a perfect storm. Banks began refusing to lend to the UDC, and in February 1975 the agency defaulted on more than \$100 million in debt. As a spokesperson for the bankers put it, the underlying problem was that "social goals are funded one way in this country and economic goals another." Logue and the UDC's leaders had assumed that their obligation was to the people who might live in the homes they built, not to the bondholders, but the corporation officials soon realized their mistake. An agency like the UDC could not fund itself through ever-increasing piles of debt.

The rules of the game for people like Logue had been changing even as they played, but above all else, what the UDC's failure suggested was that only a massive public commitment of resources could address the housing crisis. Relying on the bond markets only empowered the financiers. As Logue said, "We cannot allow basic public policy of this importance to be made in corporate board rooms and

issued to public men by fiat." The problem was that in the absence of taxes and redistributive mechanisms that enabled social resources to be used for public goods like housing, there was no choice but to rely on the credit markets—and that would always mean that corporate boardrooms, in the end, made the rules.

**L**ogue's reputation was seriously tarnished by the UDC debacle. It marked not only the failure of the agency but also the failure of the kind of urban liberalism to which he had devoted his life. His last major project was an effort at redemption of sorts. In New York City he headed the South Bronx Development Office under Mayor Ed Koch. No love for him was lost upstate, and people in the governor's office sought to divert funding from his new post. The new governor of New York, Hugh Carey, insisted, "I don't want any of my money to go to him."

Despite the governor's hostility to Logue, the SBDO undertook a variety of projects aimed at rehabilitating the South Bronx, including the construction of Charlotte Gardens: 90 single-family homes, subsidized for purchase, a pocket of suburbia abutting the area's crumbling apartment towers. Relying less and less on federal or state money, Logue found himself forced to depend primarily on private foundations like Ford to help finance the construction. The Charlotte Gardens project incorporated input from the Black and Puerto Rican neighborhood in which he worked and broke from his early top-down centralism, pointing toward a more democratic and inclusive model of urban renewal.

Yet at the same time, the project's scale was much more limited and its ambitions smaller than those that defined his earlier career. Logue retired from the SBDO in 1985 and returned to Massachusetts, where he was involved in local development efforts but moved increasingly into obscurity. He wrote letters to the editor and got in touch with his contacts in city government and at *The Boston Globe* to share his thoughts on public matters. "In a way he tried to go about doing things

the same way he had done when he had the power," said one former colleague. "I think it was hard for him." Logue died suddenly in 2000 at almost 79.

**I**t is hard not to see in Logue's story a parable for many of the problems of postwar liberalism and some of the political dilemmas this legacy creates today. On the one hand, he always believed in the importance of the public sector, especially the federal government, as a force that had the capacity to transform cities. The problems of urban poverty, racism, inequality, and substandard housing were for Logue profound moral and political issues—ones that the private sector alone could never resolve and that required the commitment of the state. It is as true today as it was in the mid-20th century that landlords and developers will not provide the affordable housing that people so desperately need and that the consequences of overcrowded housing, rent instability, and eviction wreak havoc.

But on the other hand, the political framework Logue relied on frustrated his biggest goals. Instead of seeing the key problems in terms of money, resources, and

power, he treated the challenges posed by deindustrializing cities as issues of development—problems that could be solved by intelligent men working rationally and capably from above.

The issue was not simply one of participatory democracy versus top-down control; it was that men like Logue never really had the power they wanted to begin with. They tried to execute their visions and plans, but they did so in a context that favored suburbia, in which capital had free rein to leave the cities, in which bondholders had the final say, and in which white homeowners saw Black neighbors as a threat to all they held dear. Logue and his ilk also tried to do so in a context in which they purposefully distanced themselves from the political ideas and radical social movements that might have pushed urban liberalism toward a more egalitarian outcome, one that took more seriously questions of power, class, race, and

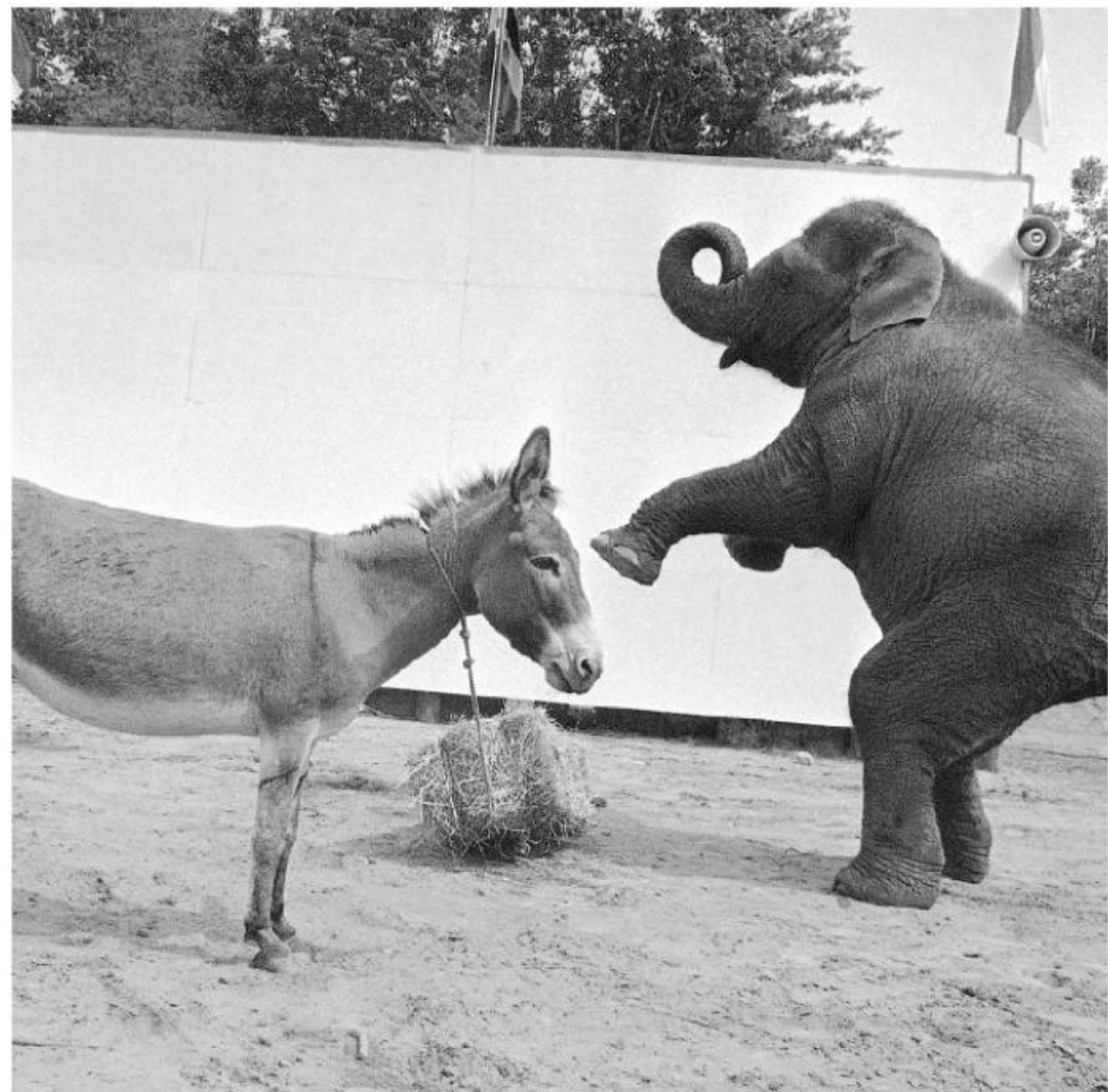
resources. In other words, midcentury urban planning failed not because it was too ambitious but because from its outset, it was not ambitious enough, never really getting at the deeper inequalities that structured American society. It stayed at the level of urban policy when what was needed was a challenge to power.

With deep archival research and a narrative sweep that fixes her subject in the arc of midcentury US history, Cohen sketches Logue vividly, illuminating his forcefulness, his passion, his masculine confidence. She also provides a painful account of what he and so many liberals of his generation were up against. The contrast between these two aspects of her story—Logue's certitude crashing into the limits of what he was able to accomplish—at times makes *Saving America's Cities* read a bit like a claustrophobic horror story. Logue is increasingly hemmed in, his dreams and aspirations frustrated by the ever-dwindling federal resources on which they depended. He comes to seem like the King Lear of urban planning, following a dimming star of liberalism that was so clearly inadequate to its time.

The limits of Logue's vision are evident all around us today. The 21st century city in the United States has all but abandoned the ideals of integration and affordability. Instead, American cities are organized around accumulated wealth, racial disparities, and delivering luxury consumption to a rarefied elite. Given where we have ended up, it is hard to see Ed Logue and the political tradition he embodies as saviors. The gap between what they sought to achieve and the outcome was too great. After the collapse of the UDC, the journalist Joseph Fried wrote a postmortem in *The Nation* in which he argued that the "fundamental issue" the UDC raised was that "only a long-range, public effort will make possible the construction and rehabilitation needed" for millions of Americans "to live in decent housing and decent neighborhoods." The "skittish and volatile" private market could not accomplish this; "the job must be done by American society generally." To survey the failures of local and federal bodies today is to hear Fried's words echo down the years. The problems of American cities remain, as he put it then, a "harsh and vivid reminder

that American society is still a long way from meeting a moral obligation of its own."

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# Losing Ground

*The crisis of the two-party system*

BY NICHOLAS LEMANN



HERE IS A VERSION OF THE OLD ROCK-PAPER-SCISSORS game, on a topic that should be of urgent concern to people on the left: How did Trump's America happen, and what can we do to dislodge its hold on our politics? One can argue that Donald Trump didn't really win the 2016 election or that he won it only

through some combination of voter suppression, Russian meddling, and the peculiarities of the American constitutional system. Even so, somebody who shouldn't have been a serious candidate got tens of millions of votes, and it's legitimate (urgent, if we are to avoid a repeat performance this November) to ask why. Was it racism? Misdirected economic frustration? Expert manipulation of public opinion? A deterioration of democratic norms? All of these combined? Three new books by prominent liberal intellectuals—Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson's *Let Them Eat Tweets*, Robert B. Reich's *The System*, and

Robert P. Saldin and Steven M. Teles's *Never Trump*—give strikingly different answers to these questions. Each book's argument is strong and important, and yet each one also vitiates the others.

*Let Them Eat Tweets* and *The System* are notionally similar. Both books insist that our very high and rising levels of economic inequality have relentlessly corroded the integrity of our political system, in ways that enabled the rise of Trump and his politics of anger, resentment, and mistrust—a politics that, at least in Trump's hands, is disconnected from any real program that would

help the people he claims to represent. The two books treat it as axiomatic that a social democratic system with higher and more equitable taxes and more generous government provision would help cure us of this corrosion, and they blame a small, powerful cohort of very rich people—Hacker and Pierson call them plutocrats, while Reich terms them oligarchs—for creating this crisis and making it so hard to resolve. Trump, they argue, is more a symptom of deep, systemic deterioration than a cause.

But in explaining the sources of this deterioration, the authors part ways. Hacker and Pierson see it as almost completely a Republican phenomenon, the result of the GOP's transformation from a center-right to a far-right party. Reich argues that the oligarchs have captured both parties, and he devotes far more of his critical attention to the Democrats. If Hacker and Pierson have it right, we should focus our attention and political energies on the Republicans. If Reich is correct, that won't do much good; it's the political system as a whole that needs to be radically changed if it is going to do better by working people.

Saldin and Teles's *Never Trump* comes at the Trump phenomenon from a different angle. It seeks to explain not why American politics has turned away from social democratic policies but rather why the Republican establishment failed to deter Trump's rise. *Never Trump* is written in a less passionately argumentative style than the other two books, and it's also less prescriptive. Implicitly, though, it makes its own case for what went wrong and in so doing subverts the others.

Saldin and Teles leave one with the impression that Trump and his followers are actually an independent, unaligned, and alarming political phenomenon whose advent demonstrates that the Republican elite exercises less control over the party than many of us assumed it does. They argue that rather than continue to be obedient, those voters whose interests the elite ignored for years staged an uprising that brought us Trump. If this is the case, then the next logical step in their argument would be that the Democrats do not need to disempower the elite of either party. Instead, they should focus on wooing those descendants of the New Deal voters who left the Democratic Party, by addressing their economic needs.

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Nicholas Lemann teaches at Columbia University and is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His most recent book is *Transaction Man*.

## The System

*Who Rigged It, How We Fix It*

By Robert B. Reich

Knopf. 204 pages. \$24

## Let Them Eat Tweets

*How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality*

By Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson

Liveright. 272 pages. \$26.95

## Never Trump

*The Revolt of the Conservative Elites*

By Robert P. Saldin and Steven M. Teles

Oxford University Press. 232 pages. \$27.95

**R**eich was a classmate of Bill Clinton's and a fellow Rhodes scholar in the late 1960s. The two remained close through the years, and Reich's 1991 book *The Work of Nations* was widely seen (in retrospect, perhaps incorrectly) as a blueprint for Clinton's presidency and for a post-New Deal, postindustrial liberal political economy in which the government would promote high-skilled, high-paying jobs as a way for people to succeed in the global economy. After Clinton was elected in 1992, Reich became his first labor secretary and pushed for higher taxes on the rich and corporations, stronger labor laws, and limits on free trade. But he quickly fell out with Clinton's economic team—Lloyd Bentsen, Robert Rubin, Lawrence Summers, and so on—and left the administration at the end of Clinton's first term.

Since then, Reich's disillusionment with the Democratic Party deepened as it became clear that, at least on economic policy, it had become far more the party of Wall Street and Silicon Valley than of working-class Americans. He has spent the last quarter-century teaching and writing and has published a new book every three or four years. He ran for governor of Massachusetts in 2002, and in 2008 he broke decisively with the Clintons by endorsing Barack Obama for president during the Democratic primary season—only to become increasingly frustrated with the party's continued neoliberal turn during the Obama years. In 2016 and again during the 2020 campaign he endorsed Bernie Sanders for president.

*The System* is Reich's latest condemna-

tion of the country's move away from the political economy that developed during the New Deal and continued for half a century. It is structured as an extended essay intermittently addressed to Jamie Dimon, the head of JPMorgan Chase (the country's biggest bank) and a major influence on the Democratic Party. Other oligarchical targets of Reich's include the presidentially ambitious Democrats Tom Steyer and Howard Shultz. (Notably, Reich mentions the Koch family only in passing.) If a political system is like an ecosystem, in which each element exists in relation to the others, the Democrats, in Reich's view, have destroyed the system's historical balance by accepting formerly Republican causes like deunionization, deregulation, and the weakening of the social safety net. He writes in *The System*'s first chapter that the book is a study of "the obsolescence of right and left" within mainstream party politics.

The great and undernoticed remaking of the American political economy over the last 40 years, Reich insists, was anything but a natural, inevitable process. "Governments organize and maintain markets," he explains. And both parties have organized and maintained the markets to disempower labor, treat free trade as an absolute virtue, view sending jobs overseas as unavoidable, scale back antitrust enforcement and other forms of economic regulation, and encourage corporations to orient themselves toward the financial markets rather than workers or communities.

This abandonment of policies meant to correct the inequities of unimpeded capitalism created a self-reinforcing loop of greater inequality, Reich argues—a greater concentration of economic and political power that resulted in a further dismantling of the policies that would correct the problem. The oligarchs have taken relatively liberal positions on noneconomic issues like climate change, immigration, and gay marriage that have obscured their conservative positions on labor, trade, and taxes. The Clintons and Obama did not depart significantly from the oligarchs' bipartisan consensus on economic policy, and that is why Sanders was able to ambush the Democratic establishment and Trump the Republican one.

Although it's clear what Reich's policy preferences are, his real concern is with calling attention to the oligarchs' capture of the Democratic Party, so he doesn't end *The System* with

a detailed program for governing. Instead, his preferred first step toward a solution is a political realignment—not back to the Democrats but toward an entirely new party system. “Unless one or both of the two major parties in the United States moves away from the established systems of political and economic power,” he writes, “a new party could unite the disaffected and anti-establishment elements of both major parties and give voice to the 90 percent of Americans who have been losing ground.” If someone started such a party, Reich would clearly be at the head of the line to sign up.

**H**acker and Pierson acknowledge that there are some plutocrats in the Democratic Party, but they insist that the great majority are Republicans, and as a result, the authors devote no energy to criticizing Democratic politicians and a great deal to criticizing Republican ones, along with their donors and interest groups. (Hacker, a politically active academic like Reich, has long been a promoter of the public option in health care, but he has not broken with his party’s leadership as Reich has.)

For Hacker and Pierson, the modern Republican Party put the American democratic system fundamentally at risk even before Trump became its unlikely head. Rich people will always cluster in conservative parties, they write, and will always face the challenge of how to bring people who aren’t rich into a political alliance with them. Mainstream conservative leaders—Eisenhower, for example—often do so with appeals to tradition, patriotism, faith, and a minimal welfare state. But the Republican Party in recent decades has pushed its economic agenda further and further to the right and so has to create other ways to appeal to the mass of voters. Therefore the Republicans devised what Hacker and Pierson call “plutocratic populism,” a politics aimed at retaining the loyalty of their base while promoting economic policies that only the 1 percent could love.

Economically oriented groups like the Koch family network, the

## Inequality has been rising for half a lifetime. It will take more than electing a new president to address it.

American Legislative Exchange Council, and the US Chamber of Commerce control the Republicans’ policy agenda and its money supply, and culturally oriented organizations like Fox News, the National Rifle Association, and a wide range of fundamentalist Christian groups generate voter support by whipping up cultural and racial resentments. Because the Republicans’ policies on issues like taxes, Social Security, and

health care are ever more oriented toward the preferences of the very rich and because the GOP’s voting base is aging and concentrated in declining rural areas, the party increasingly has to resort to antidemocratic measures like gerrymandering and voter suppression to retain its hold on power. In its techniques and the nature of its appeal to voters, the Republicans have come to resemble a European-style authoritarian party.

The last Republican leader to precede this plutocratic populist turn, in Hacker and Pierson’s telling, was George H.W. Bush. His acceding to a minor and eminently reasonable tax increase sealed his fate, they argue, and seems also to have sealed the fate of his form of conservative politics in the GOP. His successor as the party’s most powerful figure, then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich, moved it substantially to the right and helped invent plutocratic populism as a political stance that combined relentless rhetorical assaults on elites with aggressive tax- and program-cutting economic policies. When George W. Bush was elected, he began his presidency with a large tax cut and at the outset of his second term attempted to begin the privatization of Social Security.

For his part, Trump has not departed from the GOP’s economic direction since 1990. Once in office, he pushed through another set of tax cuts and tried to undo Obama’s signature domestic achievement, the Affordable Care Act. At the same time, Trump ramped up the party’s nativist, fundamentalist, and antidemocratic inclinations. His incessant culture warring, Hacker and Pierson write, is necessary because the party’s fundamental program has become ever less appealing to anyone who isn’t rich.

Hacker and Pierson’s ideal policy menu would be a lot like Reich’s: for starters, an enlarged welfare state and a more equitable tax system. Like Reich, they are primarily interested in creating a politics that would support such a program; also like Reich, they believe that the different elements in a political system affect one another’s behavior. In Reich’s view, the Democrats’ move to the right on economic issues allowed the Republicans to move even further right. For Hacker and Pierson, it was the Republicans who moved, pulling the rest of the system with them. So one might expect them to call for the Democratic Party—reenergized in response to the economic and racial injustice of the Trump years—to restore balance to the political system. But they don’t, remaining focused instead on changing the GOP. “The only lasting way out of our challenge is to make the Republican Party once again a contributor to a healthy polity, capable of helping the nation address pressing public problems,” they write. The first step would be to deliver a stinging defeat to Trump in November in order to reactivate the saner elements in the GOP, but given the last several decades of Republican history that they discuss, it still sounds like quite a difficult project.

**S**aldin and Teles’s book is a more modest, monographic effort: an account of the internal Republican Party politics of 2016, not a major analytical prescription for changing the political system. But it contains more original research than the others, including dozens of in-depth interviews with never-Trumper, who are often amazingly candid in their answers. Hearing Republican voices at length provides a rare picture of life inside the GOP that has a feeling of anthropological verisimilitude. Although *Never Trump* steers clear of directly proposing a big theory, what emerges inter alia is an explanation of American politics today that is actually more disturbing than the other books’, in which Trump’s rise is properly understood as an expression of the authentic preferences of his supporters and as a repudiation of the Republican establishment.

Trump was not a typical Republican presidential nominee, Saldin and Teles observe. Indeed, he was not really a Republican at all; during the first GOP debate, he was the only candidate who would not

promise to support the party's eventual nominee, and he mowed down what looked like a strong field of opponents—Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, Scott Walker—who had much more experience, more substantial organizations, and more funding, precisely because he came from outside the party establishment. (Saldin and Teles note that Trump didn't even enter the "Koch primary," in which aspiring presidential candidates pay obeisance to the party's most important donors.) When campaigning, he departed from the GOP's customary economic conservatism and its aggressive foreign policy. He opposed free trade, criticized the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and praised Social Security and Medicare. These positions, along with his background and his generally unpresidential demeanor, horrified most of the party's elites. Saldin and Teles assert that there has never been a recent presidential nominee who was as actively, publicly, and vociferously opposed by so many prominent members of his own party.

The sociologist Mario Luis Small has adapted to political use the phrase "out-group homogeneity bias," a psychological term for the ways the group you're not a part of appears to be more uniform than it actually is. In Reich's book, which focuses on the Democrats, the Republicans—to the extent he mentions them at all—appear as a monolithic, naturally pro-oligarchy party. In Hacker and Pierson's book, GOP voters tend to fall into two neat categories: plutocrats and working-class whites who have been manipulated into voting against their interests. In *Never Trump*, Saldin and Teles give us a more subtle and empathetic picture of elite Republicans (at least those who opposed Trump), dividing them into several subcategories and carefully describing each one's distinctive mentality and economic support system.

The major groups of never-Trumpers in this taxonomy are national security professionals, political operatives, public intellectuals, lawyers, and economists. The many long quotations from them are illuminating but not necessarily exculpatory. Sometimes, as in the case of the never-Trumpers who decided to keep their mouths shut after his nomination, they sound bluntly cynical. Douglas Holtz-Eakin, the chief economic adviser for John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign, was quietly but not actively anti-Trump during the fall campaign. He tells Saldin and

Teles that the president "lacks honor. He has no character. He's a horrible human being." Nevertheless, "I wanted to get tax reform done, and I wanted to get healthcare reform done, and I want to get entitlement reform done. I've been working on regulatory and education reform. I have my bucket list, and I'm not going to give a rat's ass who's there." It's astonishing to hear how little the never-Trumpers and Trump voters have in common.

Throughout the early primary season, the never-Trumpers, cohort by cohort, waged a series of direct and covert assaults on Trump. There were public letters with numerous signatories, new organizations, and impassioned appeals to prominent Trump-hating Republicans (like the anti-Trump, then pro-Trump, and again anti-Trump retired Marine general James Mattis) to jump into the race at the last minute. None of it worked, and quite a few never-Trumpers went on to serve in the Trump administration. Now they have three options: active rebellion (as with the Lincoln Project), grudging assent, and waiting for the Republican Party they thought they knew to reemerge in 2024.

In Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, the title character's neighbor is Howard Littlefield, PhD, the house intellectual at the Zenith Street Traction Company, who uses his Yale degree in economics to produce learned justifications for whatever the company wants to do. Hacker and Pierson, by treating Republican conservatism as being based not on ideas but on the self-interest of the very rich, implicitly regard conservative intellectuals the same way. Saldin and Teles grant them their authentic enthusiasms for Hayek and Churchill but present that as immaterial to Republican voters, whose core conviction—as Trump but none of his rivals perceived—is a deeply tribal, all-encompassing, information-resistant ethnonationalism.

Saldin and Teles cite one e-mail from an anonymous never-Trumper, written during the assembling of one of the public letters, saying, "I think we have basically no chance of influencing any voters. Any. The things that drive Trump are not sus-

ceptible [to] rational discussion, and his potential supporters are not interested in having one." Another never-Trumper, Eric Edelman, a veteran Republican diplomat, quotes George W. Bush as telling him, "You don't have to scratch very deep in the Republican Party to hit a pretty deep vein of xenophobia and protectionism and isolationism. My job as party leader is to push back against that." Trump defeated his Republican opponents because he went straight for that vein and they didn't.

The picture of Republican voters that emerges from *Never Trump* is almost precisely the opposite of the one in *Let Them Eat Tweets*. Rather than being expertly manipulated by plutocrats and interest groups, Republican voters are effectively in control of the party. Trump's campaign agenda represented their authentic preferences—and he won. It's the party establishment, not the voting base, that is disempowered and obedient.

Early in his second term, Bush made two big domestic policy bets that backfired with this Republican base: He tried to liberalize immigration policy and to marketize Social Security. Those failures, in retrospect, were a sign of things to come. Another spectacular failure, the Iraq War, reawakened the isolationist strain in right-wing populism. The 2008 financial crisis and the long-running effects of inequality, especially on rural white men with no higher education, further fertilized the soil in which this economic and ethno-nationalist populism thrives. The Republican leaders from an earlier era, economically conservative but socially liberal, have come to realize that

## Trump is more a symptom of a deep, systemic breakdown than a cause.

they had no followers.

After the 2012 election, when Mitt Romney drew just 27 percent of the Latino vote (compared with Bush's 40 percent in 2004), the Republican National Committee produced a study, called "The Autopsy," warning that the party had to broaden its appeal beyond white voters. This was Republican conventional wisdom when the 2016 election cycle began. So, too, was the conviction that Republican voters were generally libertarian on economic issues, especially trade. The big money in the party placed its primary season bets on candidates who preached variations on the

theme of open borders, lower taxes, and cultural tolerance. It was an expression not only of what the Republican donor class wanted but also of the party's tactical conviction that 40 years of being able to win by appealing to disaffected white voters had come to an end. Instead, as one of the never-Trumpers admits to Saldin and Teles, Trump's victory demonstrated that "we did have one more election left" in which the old appeals could produce a very narrow technical victory.

**T**he authors of these three books disagree on a fundamental question: Are we living (unhappily) under the rule of a bipartisan oligarchy, a Republican plutocracy, or the GOP's ethnonationalist base? But their books have some things in common, too. All of them choose not to understand this political moment as being about Trump personally; instead, they see him as a phenomenon brought to us in part by large structural changes in the economy and in politics, resulting in the superempowerment of a small minority and the justified embitterment of many Americans who can

be found voting for either party. Political reform would entail some kind of major readjustment of the US political system so that one or both of the major parties would become more attentive to the needs of the majority of voters—or, as Reich suggests, until someone starts a party that does what the Democrats and Republicans have not. In any event, a system this troubled isn't going to be fixed in one election cycle.

It's undeniable that inequality and the sense of deep frustration it brings are driving a great deal of the politics of the world. But connecting inequality to the most obvious policy remedies and then to winning elections is far more complicated than it looks—and the left wing of the Democratic Party is only beginning to sort out how to do so on a national scale. You'd expect the Democrats to be the party that leads the way in creating a better, more just political economy, but given the party's last quarter-century, one should be wary of making that assumption.

Reich is persuasive when he argues that the Democratic elite's full embrace of markets has seriously subverted what ought to be the party's mission. Since about 1980, when rising inequality began to take off,

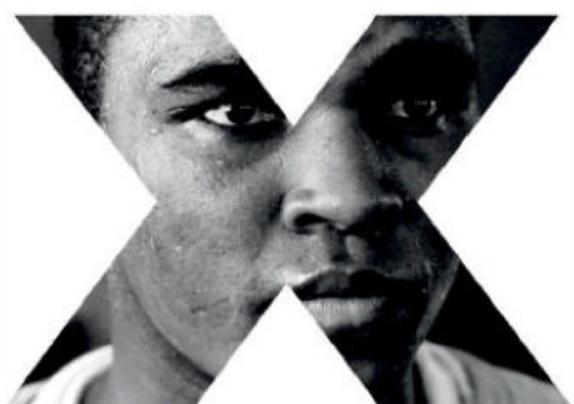
both the Democrats and the Republicans have moved to the right on economic issues, to some extent in tandem. He is also correct to note that the Democratic base, mobilized mainly by Sanders, has pushed the party back in the direction of its historic concern with the economic lives of ordinary people. Hacker and Pierson are persuasive in contending that the Republican Party can on its own imperil the whole system by pulling everything to the right, especially if it continues to restrict voting. American mainstream politics has become profoundly out of sync with the economic realities that motivate most voters, and neither party can automatically claim the loyalty of those whom they have ignored.

If it is possible to have a politics that successfully addresses economic injustice, it isn't going to happen quickly or neatly. If Republicans who can't stand Trump defect and attain some influence in the Democratic Party, most of them will not push for a focus on inequality. Few of the organized, established elements in the GOP will push in that direction, either; as Hacker and Pierson point out, Trump as president has been far more traditionally libertarian and far less of an economic populist than he was as a candidate.

People identify themselves and make their political choices in nonstraightforward ways. But that doesn't mean they aren't concerned with economic issues. Most voters focus mainly on what's right in front of them: Did the local factory move abroad? What's the minimum wage? Has my employer laid people off? Having once been the party of working people in the United States, Democrats are just beginning to relearn a language that addresses those immediate economic concerns and to be critical of deregulation, anti-unionism, and the concentration of economic power. Joe Biden, unexpectedly, is running for president on a less market-oriented economic platform than any Democratic nominee has done in decades, and the party is moving in the right direction. But it is not clear whether, even if Biden wins, that will be enough to power the passage of a New Deal-like economic program.

Inequality has been rising for half a lifetime, and it will take more than just defeating Trump to turn the tide against it. But a happy result in November would make for a promising start, especially if it entails successfully presenting the Democrats as the party that is more authentically concerned with the lives of working people.

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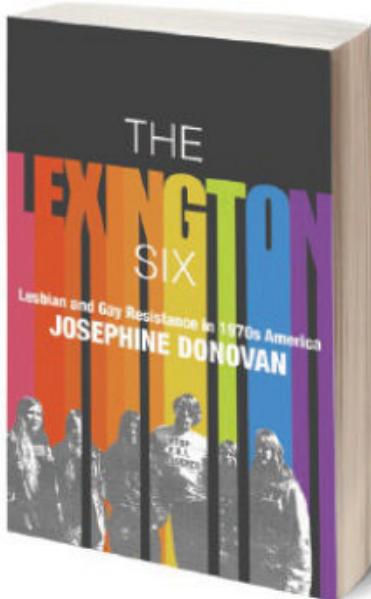
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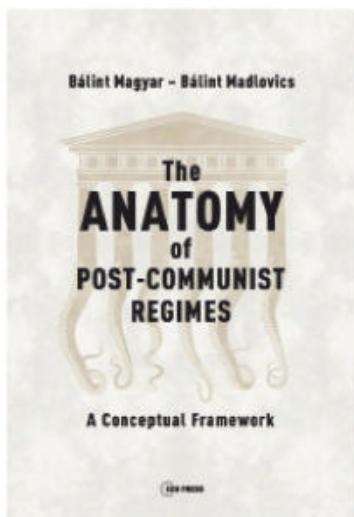
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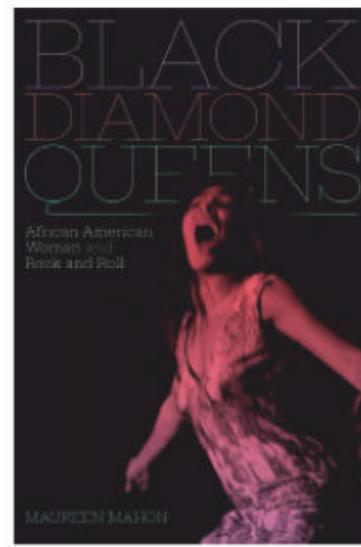


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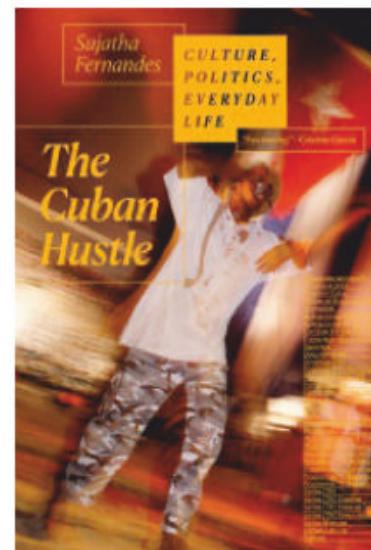
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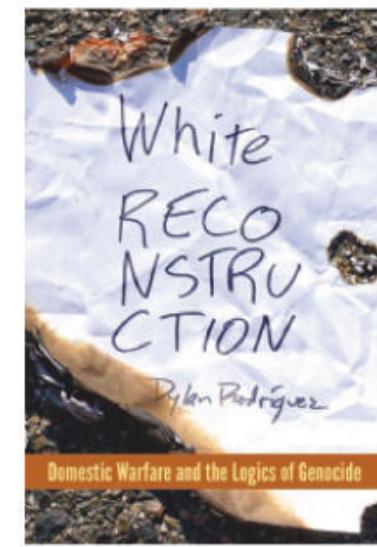
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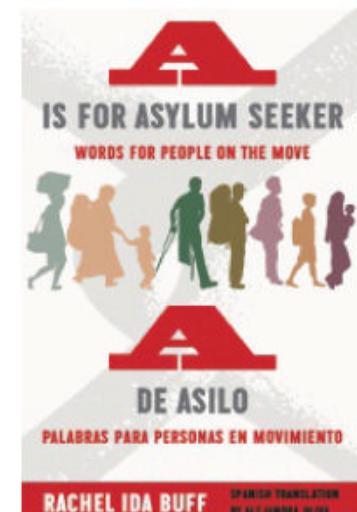
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Michael Almereyda's avant-garde portrait of Nikola Tesla

BY VIKRAM MURTHI

**A**T THE 1995 SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL, A CENTURY AFTER the Lumière brothers presented the first celluloid motion picture, director Michael Almereyda interviewed a crop of independent filmmakers about their thoughts on the future of movies. Were they optimistic or pessimistic? It's a question broad enough to elicit many different answers, from pointed to digressive. Almereyda and his collaborator Amy Hobby recorded the responses on a plastic Fisher-Price PixelVision camcorder, eliciting an unspoken formal tension between cinema's past and its technologically democratized future.

The resulting documentary, *At Sundance*, is an interesting, albeit slight, curio, but two aspects of the film still stand out. First, the number of directors interviewed who remain active and familiar 25 years later: Richard Linklater, James Gray, Todd Haynes, Danny Boyle, and James Mangold,

to name just a few. Second, how many of their expressed anxieties continue to have purchase. Whit Stillman worried that contemporary filmmakers were too myopic, drawing inspiration from a "thin film culture" instead of from life. Robert Redford argued that new distribution channels

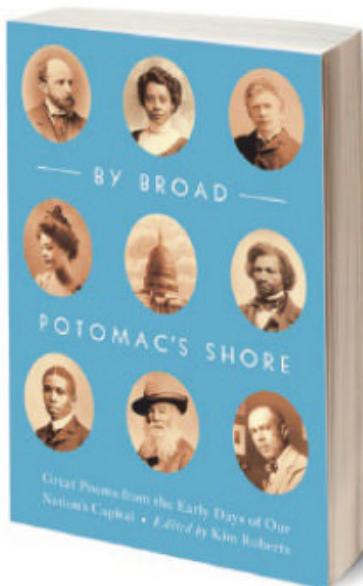
and a globalized culture will keep cinema relevant. Larry Gross and Haskell Wexler contended that cinema's future would be determined by the world's socioeconomic conditions, about which they were appropriately dark. It's a group portrait of artists, many in the first act of their career, struggling to fulfill their creative ambitions within a capitalist culture, against the backdrop of a film festival, where art and commerce intersect.

It's productive to view Almereyda's latest film, *Tesla*, through a similar lens. A gauzy biopic of sorts about the famous inventor Nikola Tesla (unassumingly rendered by Ethan Hawke), the film frequently probes the juncture at which ambition meets indifferent financial realities. Almereyda draws many connections between Tesla's quest to realize his inventions and the perils of contemporary independent filmmaking. Early in the film, Tesla writes his assistant of his experience working under Thomas Edison (Kyle MacLachlan) at Edison Machine Works, saying, "There's always too much to do, not enough time, never enough money or men, constant fixes, upgrades, [and] emergencies," which in another context is a faithful description of moviemaking or any other joint creative endeavor.

Throughout his career, Tesla finds himself beholden to multiple benefactors, all of whom are broadly impressed by his talent right until it stops being profitable for them. Some, like George Westinghouse (Jim Gaffigan), manipulate him into undercutting his own economic standing for the survival of the project. At one point, Anne Morgan (Eve Hewson)—Tesla's paramour, a daughter of J.P. Morgan, and the film's narrator—wonders what could have been if only Tesla had "someone sharp and smart at his side, an enlightened hustler to steer him through the crass, commercial world." Is there a more appropriate analogy for a talented director without a canny producing partner?

**A**lmereyda's interest in Tesla goes back four decades. He wrote a first draft of the screenplay in 1981, which he describes as an "epic science fiction story set in the 19th century," informed by Terrence Malick's *Days of*

*Vikram Murthi is a film and TV critic from Chicago currently based in Brooklyn. His work has appeared in The A.V. Club, Vulture, RogerEbert.com, and elsewhere.*

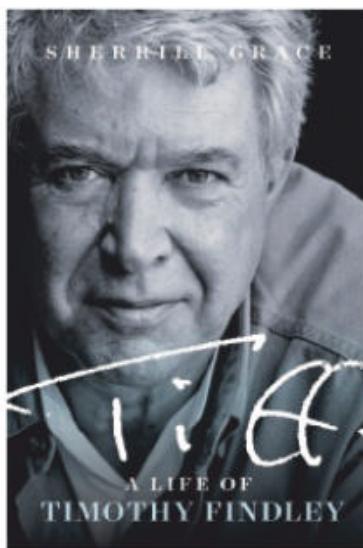


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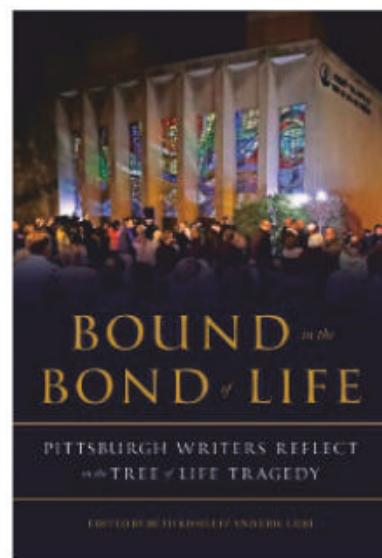


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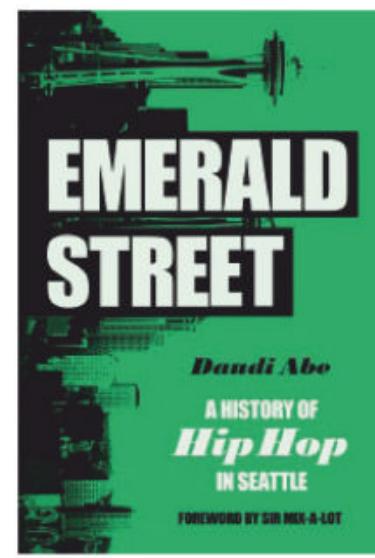
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*Heaven* and Nicolas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, two '70s films whose personal nature and expansive visual scope inspired Almereyda to become a filmmaker. He held on to the idea but channeled his passion for Tesla's futurist worldview into the thematic margins of his filmography. (Almereyda explicitly incorporates Tesla into his 2002 film *Happy Here and Now*, which features a soft-core pornography director whose latest project involves Tesla and a Tesla coil that eventually catches fire and halts his production.) When it was time to get his passion project off the ground, Almereyda made drastic changes to the script, partly to reflect his now 60-year-old perspective, as well as to accommodate the feature's numerous budgetary restrictions, like a 20-day shoot, limited location options, and scaled-back period production design.

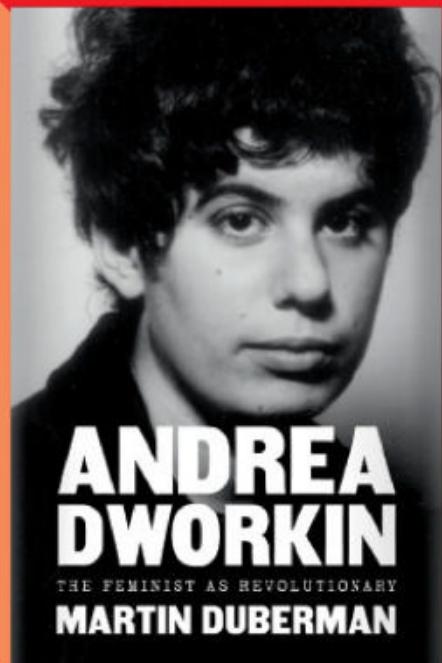
Even with those constraints, *Tesla* marks the zenith of Almereyda's filmmaking to date. It's his third film starring Hawke and the second featuring him and MacLachlan as rivals. (They previously played Hamlet and Claudius, respectively, in Almereyda's adaptation of the Shakespeare play.) It's his second nontraditional

biopic, after *Experimenter*, which chronicles the life and career of the psychologist Stanley Milgram. Almereyda's passion for biographical portraits shows in his nonfiction work (*This So-Called Disaster*, *William Eggleston in the Real World*, and *Escapes*), too. *Tesla* foregrounds his interest in old and emerging technologies—in this case, alternating-current electricity—and how people move through new, mediated environments. He has interrogated these ideas from the beginning of his career, with his PixelVision experiments in the '90s through the tech-saturated *Hamlet*, the early Internet noir *Happy Here and Now*, and recently, the tender sci-fi story *Marjorie Prime*.

Almereyda's avant-garde sensibilities manifest most overtly in his use of non-natural effects, like rear-screen projection, and narrative deconstruction, like fourth-wall-breaking narration, blurred chronology, and ahistorical music cues. In *Experimenter* the uncanny backdrops and Milgram's direct address reflect the controlled nature of his experiments on obedience and authority in the light of Holocaust architect Adolf Eichmann's just-following-orders defense at his 1961 war

crimes trial. In *Tesla*, however, Almereyda employs these elements to fictionalize the gaps in Tesla's biography, which is woefully incomplete, and call attention to the artificiality of historical narratives—how they're rife with self-mythologizing and ideologically motivated revisionism. Case in point: Anne Morgan plays a role in the main narrative, but she also addresses the audience from an omniscient perspective, commenting on the film's deliberate falsehoods and using Google search results for her statistics. Befitting a film about money, it's telling that Morgan, a wealthy philanthropist, effectively controls the narrative. As always, history is told by the victors.

*Tesla*'s anti-realism, in sharp contrast to its grounded, almost minimalist performances, benefits the film tremendously, given its self-referential drive. While explaining the uses of his induction motor, Tesla claims that it will "do the work of the world" and "set men free." He constantly describes his inventions in these terms, and it's easy to perceive the implicit connection to cameras and filmmaking, but Almereyda always re-centers the pecuniary problem. In the second half of his career, Tesla's rhetoric outpaces his output, and when he fails to persuade his patron J.P. Morgan (Donnie Keshawarz) to provide him with another influx of cash to create a global wireless system, the scene plays like a producer pulling funding from an eager director whose ambitious film has gone off the rails. This reflexivity also extends to the film's formal strategy. Suiting Tesla's focus on electricity, Almereyda and photographer Sean Price Williams always underscore any lighting source in the film. They frequently bathe the frame in darkness before foregrounding a key light that guides the eye. Other times, light asserts its presence over the characters, such as when Tesla sees traveling actress Sarah Bernhardt (Rebecca Dayan) drenched in white stage light. Almereyda teaches viewers to be conscious of where and how light originates in any scene until their awareness seamlessly integrates into Tesla's. If film, at its most elemental, is constituted by images of projected and reflected light, then *Tesla* stands as a veritable paean to electricity's ability to illuminate and clarify action. Ironically, it's a shame that most people in America won't see *Tesla* on a big screen in a theater anytime soon. It's in that setting that both Almereyda's and Tesla's ideas would properly crystallize in real time.



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# Letters

## Trouble in Mind

Re “Is Trump Planning a Coup d’État?” by Sasha Abramsky [September 21/28]: I believe the answer is yes. Jeanine Pirro on Fox News asked President Trump what he would do if there was a “threat of riots if [Democrats] lose” and how he would handle people protesting the outcome of the election. He stated, “We’d put it down within minutes.... It’s called insurrection.” That is the first time I heard him use the word “insurrection.” Since he labeled peaceful protest with this term, I believe he would justify attacks on protesters, stating that these citizens are revolting against the government. His comment is the kind of language we associate with dictators. And it could indicate he is willing to use violence against protesters—violent or peaceful. He has, for all of his time in office, expressed his adoration of authoritarians while he has shunned our allies. I believe his wish is to become an authoritarian himself and to continue taking away our freedoms by tearing apart our Constitution.

GLORIA WHITE  
LAS VEGAS

The rancid possibility is finally getting the kind of serious attention it deserves. But the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, and other senior military officers need to come out right now and state clearly that any attempt by Trump to refuse to leave office if he loses the election will result in his immediate removal—if necessary, by force. The country’s armed forces can allow zero ambiguity about this: no chance for Trump to commit treason, declare martial

law, and torch the Constitution just so he can keep his greasy grip on power. If the troops let themselves be ordered to lock down the nation on Trump’s say-so, what’s left of our democracy will die.

MICHAEL SPENCE  
TUKWILA, WASH.

## The NLRB’s Age-Old Problem

Re “An Agency Against Itself” by Michelle Chen [September 21/28]: As a lawyer with the National Labor Relations Board for over 32 years who retired in 2013, I object to this quote from an NLRB staffer: “We’ve had some incredibly bright attorneys hired in the last five or so years who are jumping ship.”

There were plenty of very intelligent, even brilliant lawyers at the NLRB long before the last five years. Prior to my retirement, we were constantly told that the new lawyers there were superior to the ones previously hired. At the time, the agency was rampant with all kinds of unlawful discrimination, including age discrimination. Many senior lawyers were forced out under the claim that their work wasn’t good enough, even though they’d had very good or even excellent ratings for many years.

RHONDA WILLIFORD

## A Notable Distinction

In “There Is Power Without a Union” [September 7/14], P.E. Moskowitz mentions “the ongoing uprisings against law enforcement.” It isn’t law enforcement as such that has people’s backs up. It’s bad cops’ immunity from paying for their misdeeds.

MICHAEL STEWART  
INDIANAPOLIS

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# Q&A

## Sherrod Brown

Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown wears a pin of a canary in a cage, recalling the days when coal miners carried the birds underground to detect poisonous gases.

Brown has spent three decades warning Americans about the danger of trade policies that prioritize profits over workers and the public interest. He continues to highlight the error of letting corporate interests and pliant politicians shape our trade and manufacturing policies, particularly in light of the supply shortages that have made fighting the coronavirus pandemic so challenging. We talked about the need for policies that renew our sense of public goods and necessities.

—John Nichols

**JN: When Covid-19 hit, we suddenly had shortages—not enough ventilators or masks. Governors cut deals to import personal protection equipment. Is this a consequence of wrongheaded trade and tax policies?**

**SB:** There's been a 30-, 35-year buildup of this. We established an economic environment, in large part because of corporate lobbying, of a very compliant, wanting-to-please Congress and administrations...so that the most profitable business plan for lots of manufacturing companies could be to shut down production here—especially if it was a union plant—move it overseas, enjoy cheap labor and weak environmental rules and worker safety rules, and sell the products back into the United States. It became the business plan [for] manufacturing company after company after company.... Republican presidents, Democratic presidents share some guilt in the trade regimen part of it. When you had administration after administration, Congress after Congress layering [bad trade and tax policies] one on the other, you ended up, in a sense, with our disarmament when it came to public health.

**JN: Is this part of a broader failure to maintain public health infrastructure?**

**SB:** Until a decade ago, we had a strong public health system. Then one of the most vicious attacks by the Tea Party was on the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and on public health generally. That began the unraveling of our public health infrastructure. With [Donald] Trump's firing of Timothy Ziemer, the admiral that was head of the pandemic surveillance operation at the White House, things unraveled even more. The biggest lesson of what happened is that our public

health system was weakened. But you've got to include in that the fact that the manufacturing [of vital equipment] was moved.

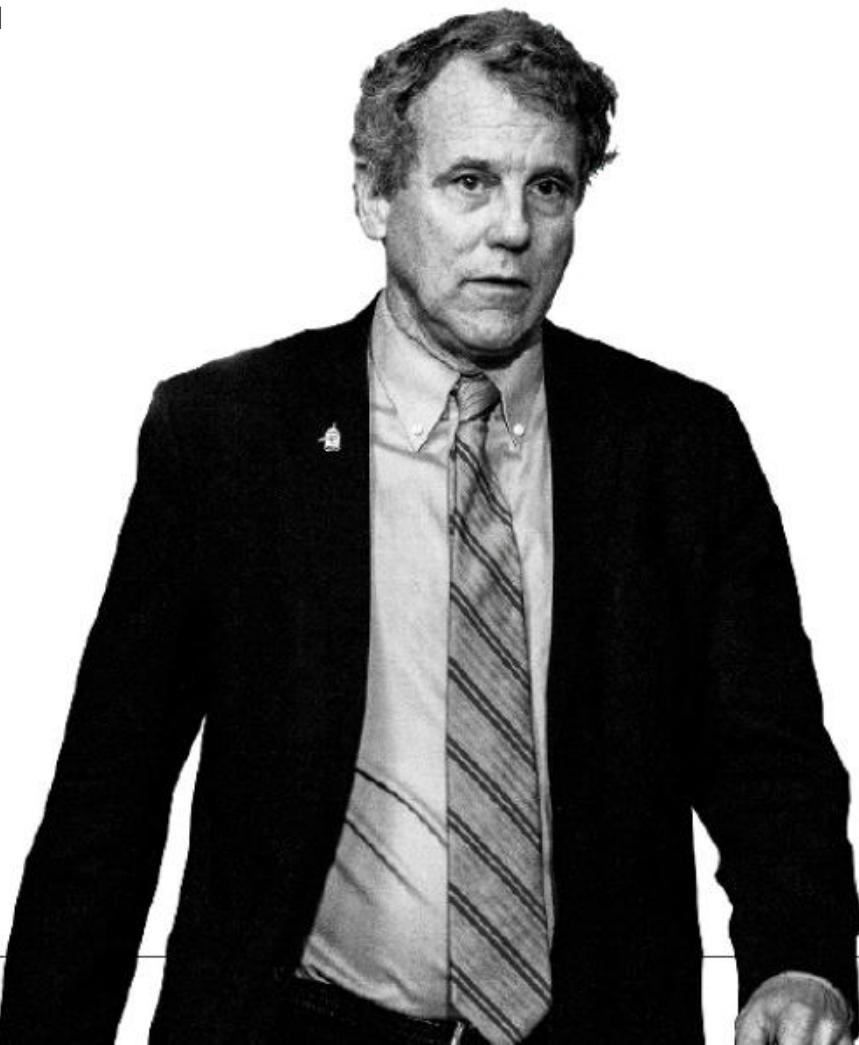
**JN: Other countries have industrial policies that plan with an eye toward serving the public interest, as opposed to simply deferring to corporations. Can the US strike a better balance?**

**SB:** I would start with anything that has "public" in front of it. So what do you need for public transportation? What do you need for public education? What do you need for public health? And that's where our trade policy should begin. That's where you want to make it a priority to take away the incentives to move overseas—and to provide incentives to keep manufacturing here.

If it's about public transit, we should be making public buses here, city buses here. If it's public education, we should be making school materials of all kinds here. If it's public health, we should make what we need here. That doesn't mean we'll never [import] our pharmaceutical drugs. But we should be looking at how we can make what is needed in the US.

**JN: If Democrats win in November, what needs to be done to make the kind of changes you're talking about?**

**SB:** If the Democrats take over, I think you will see some adjustments for sure in tax law, in corporate taxes, because of the huge giveaway that Republican corporate interests did three years ago. That's the beginning. But then you also maybe need a domestic sort of peacetime Defense Production Act. The Defense Production Act is for defending the country in times of peril, in times of an assault on our national security one way or the other. It could be about war. It could also [be used to prepare for] a pandemic. **N**



I would start with anything that has "public" in front of it.



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