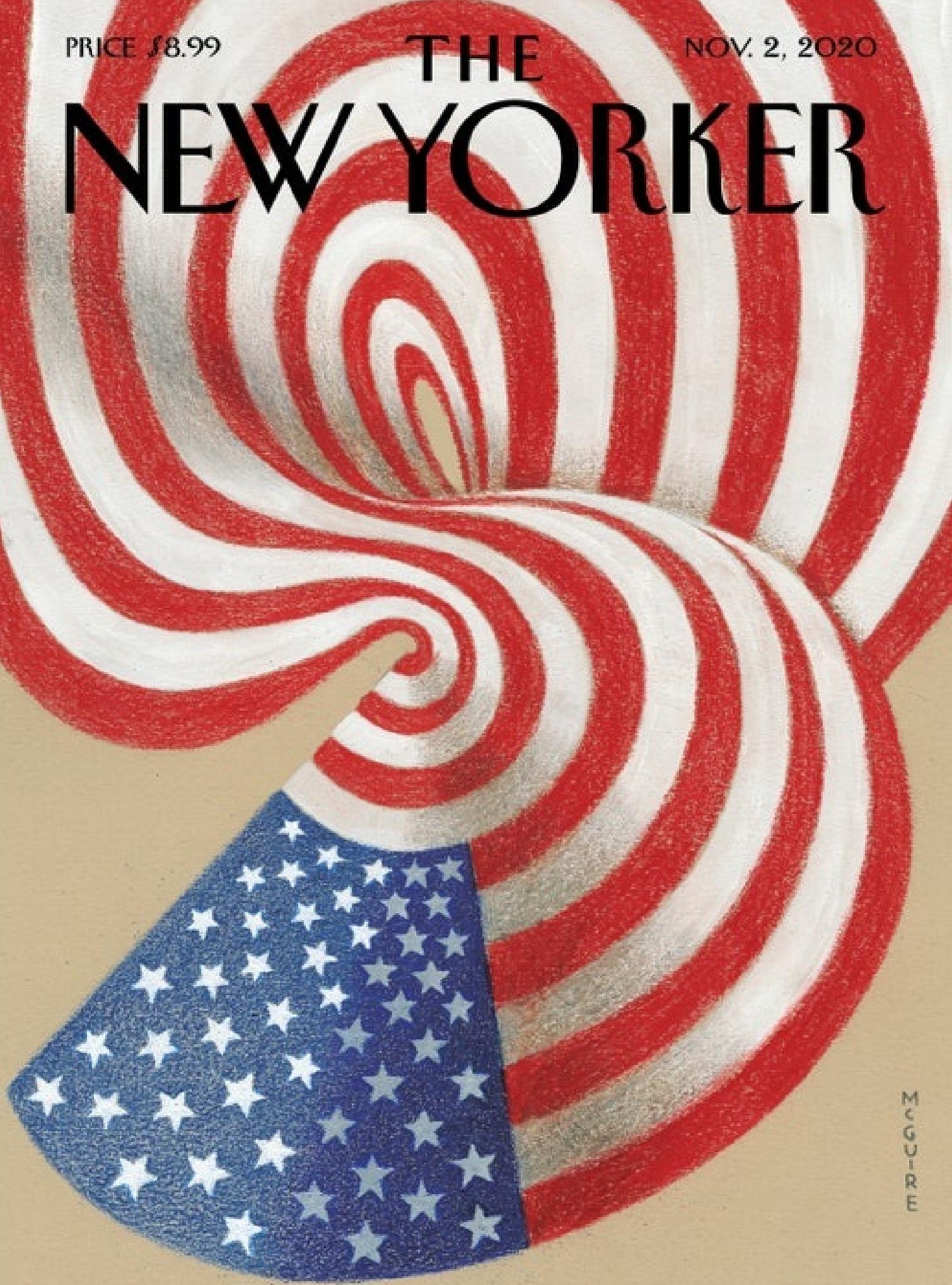


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A President Looks Back on His Toughest Fight

The story behind the Obama Administration's most enduring—and most contested—legacy: reforming American health care.

By [Barack Obama](#)

October 26, 2020



Our first spring in the White House arrived early. As the weather warmed, the South Lawn became almost like a private park to explore. There were acres of lush grass ringed by massive, shady oaks and elms and a tiny pond tucked behind the hedges, with the handprints of Presidential children and grandchildren pressed into the paved pathway that led to it. There were nooks and crannies for games of tag and hide-and-go-seek, and there was even a bit of wildlife—not just squirrels and rabbits but a red-tailed hawk and a slender, long-legged fox that occasionally got bold enough to wander down the colonnade.

Cooped up as we'd been through the winter of 2009, we took full advantage of the new back yard. We had a swing set installed for Sasha and Malia directly in front of the Oval Office. Looking up from a late-afternoon meeting on this or that crisis, I might glimpse the girls playing outside, their faces set in bliss as they soared high on the swings.

But, of all the pleasures that first year in the White House would deliver, none quite compared to the mid-April arrival of Bo, a huggable, four-legged black bundle of fur, with a snowy-white chest and front paws. Malia and Sasha, who'd been lobbying for a puppy since before the campaign, squealed with delight upon seeing him for the first time, letting him lick their ears and faces as the three of them rolled around on the floor.

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A note from our editor about this excerpt, drawn from President Obama's forthcoming memoir.

With Bo, I got what someone once described as the only reliable friend a politician can have in Washington. He also gave me an added excuse to put off my evening paperwork and join my family on meandering after-dinner walks around the South Lawn. It was during those moments—with the light fading into streaks of purple and gold, Michelle smiling and squeezing my hand as Bo bounded in and out of the bushes with the girls giving chase—that I felt normal and whole and as lucky as any man has a right to expect.

Bo had come to us as a gift from Ted Kennedy and his wife, Vicki, part of a litter that was related to Teddy's own beloved pair of Portuguese water dogs. It was a truly thoughtful gesture—not only because the breed was hypoallergenic (a necessity, owing to Malia's allergies) but also because the Kennedys had made

sure that Bo was housebroken before he came to us. When I called to thank them, though, it was only Vicki I could speak with. It had been almost a year since Teddy was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor, and although he was still receiving treatment in Boston, it was clear to everyone—Teddy included—that the prognosis was not good.

I'd seen him in March, when he'd made a surprise appearance at a White House conference we held to get the ball rolling on universal-health-care legislation. Teddy's walk was unsteady that day; his suit draped loosely on him after all the weight he'd lost, and despite his cheerful demeanor his pinched, cloudy eyes showed the strain it took just to hold himself upright. And yet he'd insisted on coming anyway, because thirty-five years earlier the cause of getting everyone decent, affordable health care had become personal for him. His son Teddy, Jr., had been diagnosed with a bone cancer that led to a leg amputation at the age of twelve. While at the hospital, Teddy had come to know other parents whose children were just as ill but who had no idea how they'd pay the mounting medical bills. Then and there, he had vowed to do something to change that.

Through seven Presidents, Teddy had fought the good fight. During the Clinton Administration, he helped secure passage of the Children's Health Insurance Program. Over the objections of some in his own party, he worked with President George W. Bush to get drug coverage for seniors. But, for all his power and legislative skill, the dream of establishing universal health care—a system that delivered good-quality medical care to all people, regardless of their ability to pay—continued to elude him.

Which is why he had forced himself out of bed to come to our conference, knowing his brief but symbolic presence might have an effect. Sure enough, when he walked into the East Room, the hundred and fifty people who were present erupted into lengthy applause. His remarks were short; his baritone didn't boom quite as loudly as it used to when he'd roared on the Senate floor. By the time we'd moved on to the third or fourth speaker, Vicki had quietly escorted him out the door.

I saw him only once more in person, six weeks later, at a signing ceremony for a bill expanding national-service programs, which Republicans and Democrats alike had named in his honor. But I would think of Teddy sometimes when Bo wandered into the Treaty Room and curled up at my feet. And I'd recall what Teddy had told me that day, just before we walked into the East Room together.

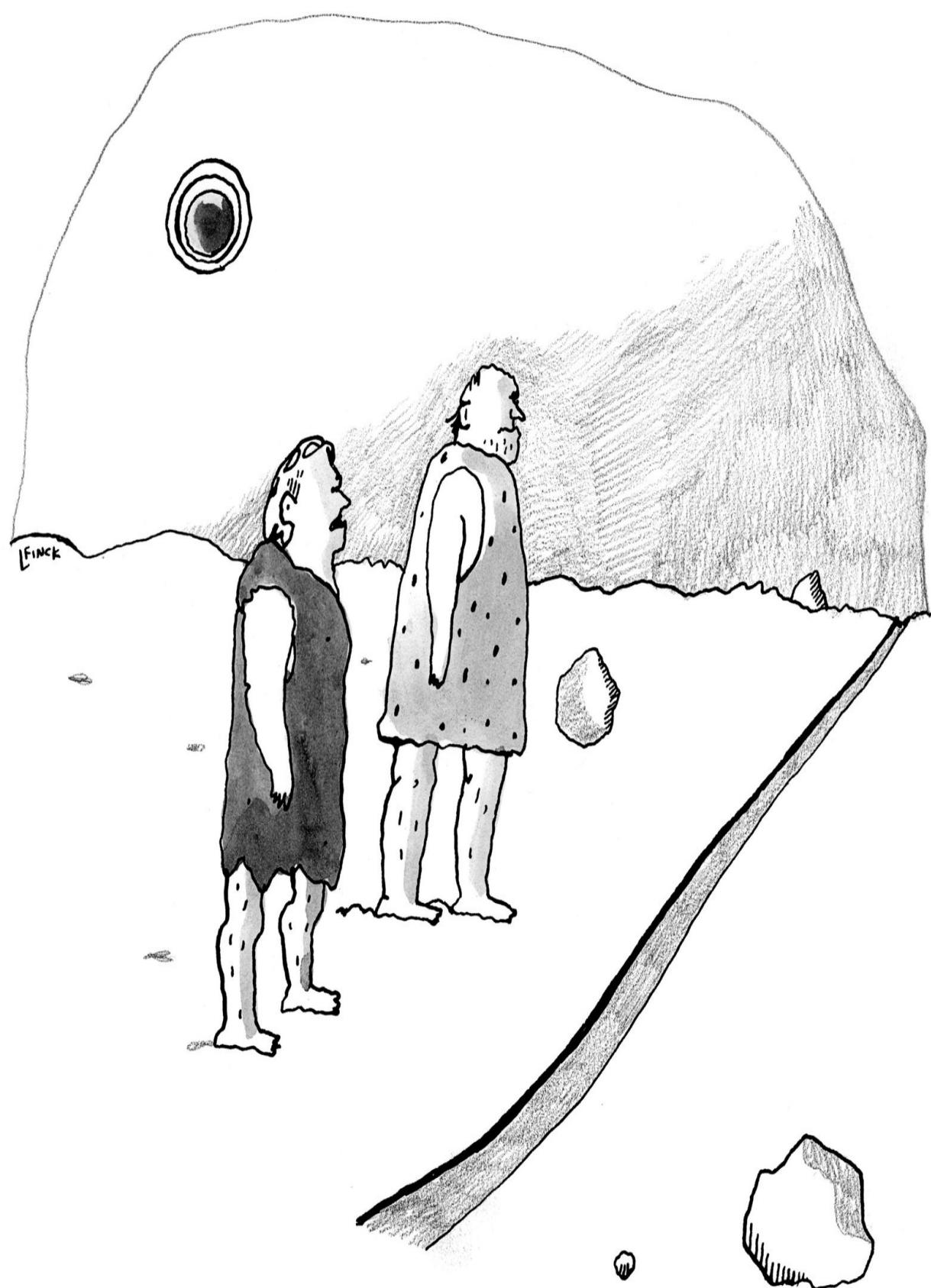
“This is the time, Mr. President,” he had said. “Don’t let it slip away.”

The quest for some form of universal health care in the United States dates back to 1912, when Theodore Roosevelt, who had previously served nearly eight years as a Republican President, decided to run again—this time on a progressive ticket and with a platform that called for the establishment of a centralized national health service. At the time, few people had or felt the need for private health insurance. Most Americans paid their doctors visit by visit, but the field of medicine was quickly growing more sophisticated, and as more diagnostic tests and surgeries became available the attendant costs began to rise, tying health more obviously to wealth. Both the United Kingdom and Germany had addressed similar issues by instituting national health-insurance systems, and other European nations would eventually follow suit. Although Roosevelt ultimately lost the 1912 election, his party’s progressive ideals planted a seed: accessible and affordable medical care might one day be viewed as a right more than a privilege. It wasn’t long, however, before doctors and Southern politicians vocally opposed any type of government involvement in health care, branding it as a form of Bolshevism.

After Franklin Delano Roosevelt imposed a nationwide wage freeze, during the Second World War, meant to stem inflation, many companies began offering private health insurance and pension benefits as a way to compete for the limited number of workers not deployed overseas. Once the war ended, this employer-based system continued, in no small part because labor unions used the more generous benefit packages negotiated under collective-bargaining agreements as a selling point to recruit new members. The downside was that those unions then had little motivation to push for government-sponsored health programs that might help everybody else. Harry Truman proposed a national health-care system twice, once in 1945 and again as part of his Fair Deal package, in 1949, but his appeal for public support was no match for the well-financed P.R. efforts of the American Medical Association and other industry lobbyists. Opponents didn’t just kill Truman’s effort. They convinced a large swath of the public that “socialized medicine” would lead to rationing, to the loss of the family doctor and of the freedoms Americans hold so dear.

Rather than challenging private insurance head on, progressives shifted their energy to helping those populations the marketplace had left behind. These efforts bore fruit during Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society campaign, when a universal single-payer program partially funded by payroll-tax revenue was

[introduced](#) for seniors (Medicare) and a not so comprehensive program based on a combination of federal and state funding was set up for the poor (Medicaid). During the nineteen-seventies and early eighties, this patchwork system functioned well enough, with roughly eighty per cent of Americans covered through either their jobs or one of these two programs. Meanwhile, defenders of the status quo could point to the many innovations brought to market by the for-profit medical industry, from MRIs to lifesaving drugs.



"First he invents the wheel, and then, next thing you know, he's gone."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Useful as these innovations were, though, they also drove up health-care costs. And, with insurers footing the nation's medical bills, patients had little incentive to question whether drug companies were overcharging or whether doctors and hospitals were ordering redundant tests and unnecessary treatments in order to pad their bottom lines. At the same time, nearly a fifth of the country lived just an illness or an accident away from potential financial ruin. Unable to afford regular checkups and preventive care, the uninsured often waited until they were very sick before seeking attention at hospital emergency rooms, where more advanced illnesses meant more expensive treatment. Hospitals made up for this uncompensated care by increasing prices for insured customers, which further jacked up premiums.

All this explained why the United States spent a lot more money per person on health care than any other advanced economy (eighty-seven per cent more than Canada, a hundred and two per cent more than France, a hundred and eighty-two per cent more than Japan), and for similar or worse results. The difference amounted to hundreds of billions of dollars a year—money that could have been used instead to provide child care for American families, or to reduce college tuition, or to eliminate a good chunk of the federal deficit. Spiralling health-care costs also burdened American businesses: Japanese and German automakers didn't have to worry about the extra fifteen hundred dollars in worker and retiree health-care costs that Detroit had to build into the price of every car rolling off the assembly line.

In fact, it was in response to foreign competition that U.S. companies began off-loading rising insurance costs onto their employees in the late nineteen-eighties and nineties, replacing traditional plans that had few, if any, out-of-pocket costs with cheaper versions that included co-pays, lifetime limits, higher deductibles, and other unpleasant surprises hidden in the fine print. Unions often found themselves able to preserve their traditional benefit plans only by agreeing to forgo increases in wages. Small businesses found it tough to provide their workers with health benefits at all. Meanwhile, insurance companies that operated in the individual market perfected the art of rejecting customers who, according to their actuarial data, were most likely to make use of the health-care system, especially anyone with a "preexisting condition"—which they often defined as anything from a previous bout of cancer to asthma and chronic allergies.

It's no wonder, then, that by the time I took office there were very few people ready to defend the existing system. More than forty-three million Americans were now uninsured, premiums for family coverage had risen ninety-seven per cent since 2000, and costs were only continuing to climb. And yet the prospect of trying to get a big health-care-reform bill through Congress at the height of a historic recession made my team nervous. Even my adviser David Axelrod—who had experienced the challenges of getting specialized care for a daughter with severe epilepsy and had left journalism to become a political consultant in part to pay for her treatment—had his doubts.

"The data's pretty clear," he said when we discussed the topic with [Rahm Emanuel](#), my chief of staff. "People may hate the way things work in general, but most of them have insurance. They don't really think about the flaws in the system until somebody in their own family gets sick. They like their doctor. They don't trust Washington to fix anything. And, even if they think you're sincere, they worry that any changes you make will cost them money and help somebody else."

"What Axe is trying to say, Mr. President," Rahm interrupted, his face screwed up in a frown, "is that this can blow up in our faces."

We were already using up precious political capital, Rahm said, in order to fast-track the passage of the Recovery Act, a major economic-stimulus package. As an adviser in the Clinton White House, he'd had a front-row seat at the last push for universal health care, when Hillary Clinton's legislative proposal crashed and burned, and he was quick to remind us that the backlash had contributed to Democrats' losing control of the House in the 1994 midterms. "Republicans will say health care is a big new liberal spending binge, and that it's a distraction from solving the economic crisis," Rahm said.

"Unless I'm missing something," I said, "we're doing everything we can do on the economy."

"I know that, Mr. President. But the American people don't know that."

"So what are we saying here?" I asked. "That despite having the biggest Democratic majorities in decades, despite the promises we made during the campaign, we shouldn't try to get health care done?"

Rahm looked to Axe for help.

“We all think we should try,” Axe said. “You just need to know that, if we lose, your Presidency will be badly weakened. And nobody understands that better than McConnell and Boehner.”

I stood up, signalling that the meeting was over. “We better not lose, then,” I said.

When I think back to those early conversations, it’s hard to deny my overconfidence. I was convinced that the logic of health-care reform was so obvious that even in the face of well-organized opposition I could rally the American people’s support. Other big initiatives—like immigration reform and climate-change legislation—would probably be even harder to get through Congress; I figured that scoring a victory on the item that most affected people’s day-to-day lives was our best shot at building momentum for the rest of my legislative agenda. As for the political hazards that Axe and Rahm worried about, the recession virtually guaranteed that my poll numbers were going to take a hit anyway. Being timid wouldn’t change that reality. Even if it did, passing up a chance to help millions of people just because it might hurt my reëlection prospects—well, that was exactly the kind of myopic, self-preserving behavior I’d vowed to reject.

My interest in health care went beyond policy or politics; it was personal, just as it was for Teddy. Each time I met a parent struggling to come up with the money to get treatment for a sick child, I thought back to the night Michelle and I had to take three-month-old Sasha to the emergency room for what turned out to be viral meningitis. I remembered the terror and the helplessness we felt as the nurses whisked her away for a spinal tap, and the realization that we might never have caught the infection in time had the girls not had a regular pediatrician we felt comfortable calling in the middle of the night. Most of all, I thought about my mom, who had died in 1995, of uterine cancer.

In mid-June, I headed to Green Bay, Wisconsin, for the first in a series of health-care town-hall meetings we would hold around the country, hoping to solicit citizen input and educate people on the possibilities for reform. Introducing me that day was a local resident named Laura Klitzka, who was thirty-five years old and had been diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer that had spread to her bones. Even though she was on her husband’s insurance plan, repeated rounds of surgery, radiation, and chemo had bumped her up against the policy’s lifetime limits, leaving the couple with twelve thousand dollars in unpaid medical bills.

Over the objections of her husband, Peter, she was now pondering whether more treatment was worth it. Sitting in their living room before we headed for the event, she smiled wanly as we watched Peter doing his best to keep track of their two young kids playing on the floor.

"I want as much time with them as I can get, but I don't want to leave them with a mountain of debt," she said to me. "It feels selfish." Her eyes started misting, and I held her hand, remembering my mom wasting away in those final months: the times she'd put off checkups that might have caught her disease because she was in between consulting contracts and didn't have coverage; the stress she carried to her hospital bed when her insurer refused to pay her disability claim, arguing that she had failed to disclose a preexisting condition, despite the fact that she hadn't even been diagnosed when her policy started. The unspoken regrets.

Passing a health-care bill wouldn't bring my mom back. It wouldn't douse the guilt I still felt for not having been at her side when she took her last breath. It would probably come too late to help Laura Klitzka and her family. But it would save *somebody's* mom, somewhere down the line. And that was worth fighting for.

The question was whether we could get it done. Any major health-care bill meant rejiggering a sixth of the American economy. Legislation of this scope was guaranteed to involve hundreds of pages of endlessly fussed-over amendments and regulations. A single provision tucked inside the bill could translate to billions of dollars in gains or losses for some sector of the health-care industry. A shift in one number, a zero here or a decimal point there, could mean a million more families getting coverage—or not. Across the country, insurance companies were major employers, and local hospitals served as the economic anchor for many small towns and counties. People had good reasons—life-and-death reasons—to worry about how any change would affect them.

There was also the question of how to pay for the changes. To cover more people, I argued, America didn't need to spend more money on health care; we just needed to use that money more wisely. In theory, that was true. But one person's waste and inefficiency was another person's profit or convenience; spending on coverage would show up on the federal books much sooner than the savings from reform; and, unlike the insurance companies or Big Pharma, whose shareholders expected them to be on guard against any change that might cost

them a dime, most of the potential beneficiaries of reform—the waitress, the family farmer, the independent contractor, the cancer survivor—didn’t have gaggles of well-paid and experienced lobbyists roaming the halls of Congress.

In other words, both the politics and the substance of health care were mind-numbingly complicated. I was going to have to explain to the American people, including those with high-quality health insurance, why and how reform could work. For this reason, I thought we’d use as open and transparent a process as possible. “Everyone will have a seat at the table,” I’d told voters during the campaign. “Not negotiating behind closed doors, but bringing all parties together, and broadcasting those negotiations on C-SPAN, so that the American people can see what the choices are.” When I later brought this idea up with Rahm, he looked like he wished I weren’t the President, just so he could more vividly explain the stupidity of my plan. If we were going to get a bill passed, he told me, the process would involve dozens of deals and compromises along the way—and it wasn’t going to be conducted like a civics seminar.

“Making sausage isn’t pretty, Mr. President,” he said. “And you’re asking for a really big piece of sausage.”

One thing Rahm and I did agree on was that we had months of work ahead of us, and we needed a topnotch health-care team to keep us on track. Luckily, we were able to recruit a remarkable trio of women to help run the show. Kathleen Sebelius, the two-term Democratic governor of Republican-leaning Kansas, came on as Secretary of Health and Human Services. Jeanne Lambrew, a professor at the University of Texas and an expert on Medicare and Medicaid, became the director of the H.H.S. Office of Health Reform, basically our chief policy adviser.



It was Nancy-Ann DeParle whom I would come to rely on most as our campaign took shape. A Tennessee lawyer who had run that state's health programs before serving as the Medicare administrator in the Clinton Administration, Nancy-Ann carried herself with the crisp professionalism of someone accustomed to seeing hard work translate into success. How much of that drive could be traced to her experiences growing up Chinese-American in a tiny Tennessee town, I couldn't say. I did know that when she was seventeen her mom died of lung cancer. It seems I wasn't the only one for whom getting health care passed was personal.

Our team began to map out a legislative strategy. Based on our experiences with the Recovery Act, we had no doubt that [Mitch McConnell](#) would do everything he could to torpedo our efforts, and that the chances of getting Republican votes in the Senate were slim. We could take heart from the fact that, instead of the fifty-eight senators who were caucusing with the Democrats when we passed the stimulus bill, we were likely to have sixty by the time any health-care bill actually came to a vote. Al Franken had finally taken his seat after a contentious election recount in Minnesota, and Arlen Specter had decided to switch parties after being effectively driven out of the G.O.P. for supporting the Recovery Act.

This would give us a filibuster-proof majority, but our head count was tenuous: it included the terminally ill Ted Kennedy and the frail and ailing Robert Byrd, of West Virginia, not to mention conservative Democrats like Nebraska's Ben Nelson (a former insurance-company executive), who could go sideways on us at any minute. Beyond wanting some margin for error, I also knew that passing something as monumental as health-care reform on a purely party-line vote would make the law politically more vulnerable down the road. So we thought it made sense to shape our legislative proposal in such a way that it at least had a chance of winning over a handful of Republicans.

Fortunately, we had a model to work with—one that, ironically, had grown out of a partnership between Ted Kennedy and the former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney. A few years earlier, confronting budget shortfalls and the prospect of losing Medicaid funding, Romney had become fixated on finding a way to get more Massachusetts residents properly insured, which would then reduce state spending on emergency care for the uninsured and, ideally, lead to a healthier population in general.

He and his staff came up with a multipronged approach in which every person

would be required to purchase health insurance (an “individual mandate”), the same way every car owner was required to carry auto insurance. Middle-income people who couldn’t get insurance through their job, didn’t qualify for Medicare or Medicaid, and were unable to afford insurance on their own would get a government subsidy to buy coverage. Subsidies would be determined on a sliding scale according to each person’s income, and a central online marketplace—an “exchange”—would be set up so that consumers could shop for the best insurance deal. Insurers, meanwhile, would no longer be allowed to deny coverage based on preexisting conditions.

These two ideas—the individual mandate and protecting people with preexisting conditions—went hand in hand. With a huge new pool of government-subsidized customers, insurers no longer had a financial incentive for trying to cherry-pick only the young and the healthy for coverage. And the mandate would prevent people from gaming the system by waiting until they got sick to purchase insurance. Touting the plan to reporters, Romney called the individual mandate “the ultimate conservative idea,” because it promoted personal responsibility.

Not surprisingly, Massachusetts’s Democratic-controlled state legislature had initially been suspicious of the Romney plan, and not just because a Republican had proposed it; among many progressives, the need to replace private insurance and for-profit health care with a single-payer system like Canada’s was an article of faith. Had we been starting from scratch, I would have agreed with them; the evidence from other countries showed that a single, national system—basically, Medicare for All—was a cost-effective way to deliver health care. But neither Massachusetts nor the United States was starting from scratch. Teddy, who despite his reputation as a wide-eyed liberal was ever practical, understood that trying to dismantle the existing system and replace it with an entirely new one would be both a nonstarter politically and hugely disruptive to the economy. Instead, he’d embraced the Romney proposal and helped the Governor line up the Democratic votes in the state legislature required to get it passed into law.

“Romneycare,” as it eventually became known, was now two years old and had been a clear success, driving the uninsured rate in Massachusetts down to just under four per cent, the lowest in the country. Teddy had used it as the basis for draft legislation he had started preparing many months ahead of the election, in his role as the chair of the Senate Health and Education Committee. And, though Axe and my campaign manager, David Plouffe, had persuaded me to hold off on endorsing the Massachusetts approach during my run for President—the idea of

requiring people to buy insurance was extremely unpopular with voters, and I'd instead focussed my plan on lowering costs—I was now convinced, as were most health-care advocates, that Romney's model offered us the best chance of achieving universal coverage.

People still differed on the details of what a national version of the Massachusetts plan might look like, and a number of advocates urged us to settle these issues early by putting out a specific White House proposal for Congress to follow. We decided against that. One of the lessons from the Clintons' failed effort was the need to involve key Democrats in the process, so that they would feel a sense of ownership of the bill. Insufficient coördination, we knew, could result in legislative death by a thousand cuts.

On the House side, this meant working with old-school liberals like Henry Waxman, the wily, pugnacious congressman from California and the head of the Energy and Commerce Committee, which had jurisdiction over health care. In the Senate, the landscape was different: with Teddy convalescing, the main player was Max Baucus, a conservative Democrat from Montana, who chaired the powerful Finance Committee, and had a close friendship with the Iowa senator Chuck Grassley, the Finance Committee's ranking Republican. Baucus was optimistic that he could win Grassley's support for a bill.

"Trust me, Mr. President," Baucus said. "Chuck and I have already discussed it. We're going to have this thing done by July."

Every job has its share of surprises. A key piece of equipment breaks down. A traffic accident forces a change in delivery routes. A client calls to say you've won the contract—but they need the order filled three months earlier than planned. No matter where you work, you need to be able to improvise to meet your objectives, or at least to cut your losses.

The Presidency was no different. In the course of the spring and summer of that first year, as we wrestled with the financial crisis, two wars, and the push for health-care reform, another unexpected item got added to an already overloaded agenda. In April, reports surfaced of a worrying flu outbreak in Mexico. The flu virus usually hits vulnerable populations like the elderly, infants, and asthma sufferers hardest, but this strain appeared to strike young, healthy people—and was killing them at a higher than usual rate. Within weeks, people in the United States were falling ill with the virus: one in Ohio, two in Kansas, eight in a

single high school in New York City. By the end of the month, both our own Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization had confirmed that we were dealing with a variation of the H1N1 virus. In June, the W.H.O. officially declared the first global pandemic in forty years.

I had more than a passing knowledge of H1N1 after working on U.S. pandemic preparedness when I was in the Senate. What I knew scared the hell out of me. Starting in 1918, a strain of H1N1 that came to be known as the “Spanish flu” had infected an estimated half a billion people and killed as many as a hundred million—around five per cent of the world’s population. In Philadelphia alone, more than twelve thousand died in the span of a few weeks. The effects of the pandemic went beyond the stunning death tolls and the shutdown of economic activity; later research revealed that those who were in utero during the pandemic grew up to have lower incomes, poorer educational outcomes, and higher rates of physical disability.

It was too early to tell how deadly this new virus would be. But I wasn’t interested in taking any chances. On the same day that Kathleen Sebelius was confirmed as H.H.S. Secretary, we sent a plane to pick her up from Kansas, flew her to Washington to be sworn in at a makeshift ceremony in the Oval Office, and immediately asked her to lead a two-hour conference call with W.H.O. officials and health ministers from Mexico and Canada. A few days later, we pulled together an interagency team to evaluate how ready the United States was for a worst-case scenario.

The answer was that we weren’t at all ready. Annual flu shots didn’t provide much protection against H1N1, it turned out, and, because vaccines generally weren’t a moneymaker for drug companies, the few U.S. vaccine-makers that existed had a limited capacity to ramp up production of a new one. Then, we faced questions of how to distribute antiviral medicines, what guidelines hospitals used in treating cases of the flu, and even how we’d handle the possibility of closing schools and imposing quarantines if things got significantly worse. Several veterans of the Ford Administration’s 1976 swine-flu response team warned us of the difficulties involved in getting out in front of an outbreak without overreacting or triggering a panic. Apparently, President Ford, wanting to act decisively in the middle of a reëlection campaign, had fast-tracked vaccinations before the severity of the pandemic had been determined, with the result that more Americans developed a neurological disorder connected to the vaccine than died from the flu.

“You need to be involved, Mr. President,” one of Ford’s staffers advised, “but you need to let the experts run the process.”

My instructions to the public-health team were simple: decisions would be made based on the best available science, and we were going to explain to the public each step of our response—including detailing what we did and didn’t know. Over the course of the next six months, we did exactly that. A summertime dip in H1N1 cases gave the team time to work with drugmakers and incentivize new processes for quicker vaccine production. They pre-positioned medical supplies across regions and gave hospitals increased flexibility to manage a surge in flu cases. They evaluated—and ultimately rejected—the idea of closing schools for the rest of the year, but worked with school districts, businesses, and state and local officials to make sure that everyone had the resources they needed to respond in the event of an outbreak.

Although the United States did not escape unscathed—more than twelve thousand Americans lost their lives—we were fortunate that this particular strain of H1N1 turned out to be less deadly than the experts had feared. News that the pandemic had abated by mid-2010 didn’t generate headlines. Still, I took great pride in how well our team had performed. Without fanfare or fuss, they not only helped keep the virus contained but strengthened our readiness for any future public-health emergency—which would make all the difference several years later, when the Ebola outbreak in West Africa triggered a full-blown panic.

This, I was coming to realize, was the nature of the Presidency: sometimes your most important work involved the stuff nobody noticed.

The slow march toward health-care reform consumed much of the summer. As the legislation lumbered through Congress, we looked for any opportunity to help keep the process on track. The good news was that the key Democratic chairs—especially Baucus and Waxman—were working hard to craft bills that they could pass out of their respective committees before the traditional August recess. The bad news was that the more everyone dug into the details of reform, the more differences in substance and strategy emerged—not just between Democrats and Republicans but between House and Senate Democrats, between the White House and congressional Democrats, and even between members of my own team.

Most of the arguments revolved around the issue of how to generate a mixture of

savings and new revenue to pay for expanding coverage to millions of uninsured Americans. Baucus, given his interest in producing a bipartisan bill, hoped to avoid anything that could be characterized as a tax increase. Instead, he and his staff had calculated the windfall profits that a new flood of insured customers would bring to hospitals, drug companies, and insurers, and had used those figures as a basis for negotiating billions of dollars in up-front contributions—through fees or Medicare-billing reductions—from each industry. To sweeten the deal, Baucus was also prepared to make certain policy concessions. For example, he promised the pharmaceutical lobbyists that his bill wouldn’t include provisions allowing the reimportation of drugs from Canada—a popular Democratic proposal that highlighted the way Canadian and European government-run health-care systems used their immense bargaining power to negotiate much lower prices than Big Pharma charged in the United States.

Politically and emotionally, I would have found it a lot more satisfying to just go after the drug and insurance companies and see if we could beat them into submission. They were wildly unpopular with voters, and for good reason. But, as a practical matter, it was hard to argue with Baucus’s more conciliatory approach. We had no way to get to sixty votes in the Senate for a major health-care bill without at least the tacit agreement of the big industry players. Drug reimportation was a great political issue, but, at the end of the day, we didn’t have the votes for it, partly because plenty of Democrats had major pharmaceutical companies headquartered or operating in their states.



In conversation with Representative Paul Ryan, while hosting a bipartisan meeting on health-care reform. Photograph by Pete Souza

With these realities in mind, I signed off on having Rahm, Nancy-Ann, and my deputy chief of staff, Jim Messina, sit in on Baucus's negotiations with health-care-industry representatives. By the end of June, they'd hashed out a deal, securing hundreds of billions of dollars in givebacks and broader drug discounts for seniors using Medicare. Just as important, they'd gotten a commitment from the hospitals, insurers, and drug companies to support—or at least not oppose—the emerging bill.

It was a big hurdle to clear, a case of politics as the art of the possible. But for some of the more liberal Democrats in the House, where no one had to worry about a filibuster, and among progressive advocacy groups that were still hoping to lay the groundwork for a single-payer health-care system, our compromises smacked of capitulation, a deal with the devil. It didn't help that, as Rahm had predicted, none of the negotiations with the industry had been broadcast on C-SPAN. The press started reporting on details of what they called "backroom deals." More than a few constituents wrote in to ask whether I'd gone over to the dark side. And Waxman made a point of saying he didn't consider his work bound by whatever concessions Baucus or the White House had made to industry lobbyists.

Quick as the House Democrats were to mount their high horse, they were also more than willing to protect the status quo when it secured their prerogatives or benefitted politically influential constituencies. For example, more or less every health-care economist agreed that it wasn't enough just to pry money out of insurance- and drug-company profits and use it to cover more people; in order for reform to work, we also had to do something about the skyrocketing costs charged by doctors and hospitals. Otherwise, any new money put into the system would yield less and less care for fewer and fewer people over time. One of the best ways to "bend the cost curve" was to establish an independent board, shielded from politics and special-interest lobbying, that would set reimbursement rates for Medicare based on the comparative effectiveness of particular treatments.

House Democrats hated the idea. It would mean giving away their power to determine what Medicare did and didn't cover (along with the potential campaign fund-raising opportunities that came with that power). They also worried that they'd get blamed by cranky seniors who found themselves unable to get the latest drug or diagnostic test advertised on TV, even if an expert could

prove that it was actually a waste of money.

They were similarly skeptical of the other big proposal to control costs: a cap on the tax deductibility of so-called Cadillac insurance plans—high-cost, employer-provided policies that paid for all sorts of premium services but didn’t improve health outcomes. Other than corporate managers and well-paid professionals, union members made up the main group covered by such plans, and the unions were adamantly opposed to what would come to be known as “the Cadillac tax.” It didn’t matter to labor leaders that their members might be willing to trade a deluxe hospital suite or a second, unnecessary MRI for a chance at higher take-home pay. And so long as the unions were opposed to the Cadillac tax, most House Democrats were going to be, too.

The squabbles quickly found their way into the press, making the whole process appear messy and convoluted. By late July, polls showed that more Americans disapproved than approved of the way I was handling health-care reform, prompting me to complain to Axe about our communications strategy. “We’re on the right side of this stuff,” I insisted. “We just have to explain it better to voters.”

Axe was irritated that his shop was seemingly getting blamed for the very problem he’d warned me about from the start. “You can explain it till you’re blue in the face,” he told me. “But people who already have health care are skeptical that reform will benefit them, and a whole bunch of facts and figures won’t change that.”

Toward the end of the month, versions of the health-care bill had passed out of all the relevant House committees. The Senate Health and Education Committee had completed its work as well. All that remained was getting a bill through Max Baucus’s Senate Finance Committee. Once that was done, we could consolidate the different versions into one House and one Senate bill, ideally passing each before the August recess, with the goal of having a final version of the legislation on my desk for signing before the end of the year.

No matter how hard we pressed, though, we couldn’t get Baucus to complete his work. As the summer wore on, his optimism that he could produce a bipartisan bill began to look delusional. The Republican Minority Leaders, McConnell and John Boehner, had already announced their vigorous opposition to our legislative efforts, arguing that they represented an attempted “government takeover” of the

health-care system. Frank Luntz, a well-known Republican strategist, had circulated a memo stating that, after market-testing some thirty anti-reform messages, he'd concluded that invoking a government takeover was the best way to discredit the health-care legislation. From that point on, conservatives followed the script, repeating the phrase like an incantation.

Senator Jim DeMint, the conservative firebrand from South Carolina, was more transparent about his party's intentions. "If we're able to stop Obama on this, it will be his Waterloo," he announced on a nationwide conference call with conservative activists. "It will break him."

Unsurprisingly, given the atmosphere, the group of three G.O.P. senators who had been invited to participate in bipartisan talks with Baucus was now down to two: Chuck Grassley and Olympia Snowe, the moderate from Maine. My team and I did everything we could to help Baucus win their support. I had Grassley and Snowe over to the White House repeatedly and called them every few weeks to take their temperature. We signed off on scores of changes they wanted made to Baucus's draft bill. Nancy-Ann became a permanent fixture in their Senate offices and took Snowe out to dinner so often that we joked that her husband was getting jealous.

"Tell Olympia she can write the whole damn bill!" I said to Nancy-Ann as she was leaving for one such meeting. "We'll call it the Snowe plan. Tell her if she votes for the bill she can have the White House—Michelle and I will move to an apartment!"

And still we were getting nowhere. Snowe took pride in her centrist reputation, but the Republican Party's sharp rightward tilt had left her increasingly isolated within her own caucus.

Grassley was a different story. He talked a good game about wanting to help the family farmers back in Iowa who had trouble getting insurance they could count on, and when Hillary Clinton had pushed health-care reform, in the nineties, Grassley had actually co-sponsored an alternative that in many ways resembled the Massachusetts-style plan we were proposing, complete with an individual mandate. But, unlike Snowe, Grassley rarely bucked his party's leadership on tough issues. With his long, hangdog face and throaty Midwestern drawl, he would hem and haw about this or that problem he had with the bill without ever telling us what exactly it would take to get him to yes. Phil Schiliro, who ran the

White House's legislative-affairs department, thought that Grassley was just stringing Baucus along at McConnell's behest, trying to stall the process and prevent us from moving on to the rest of our agenda. Even I, the resident White House optimist, finally got fed up and asked Baucus to come by for a visit.

"Time's up, Max," I told him in the Oval during a meeting in late July. "You've given it your best shot. Grassley's gone. He just hasn't broken the news to you yet."

Baucus shook his head. "I respectfully disagree, Mr. President," he said. "I know Chuck. I think we're this close to getting him." He held his thumb and index finger an inch apart, smiling at me like someone who's discovered a cure for cancer and is forced to deal with foolish skeptics. "Let's just give Chuck a little more time and have the vote when we get back from recess."

A part of me wanted to get up, grab Baucus by the shoulders, and shake him till he came to his senses. I decided that this wouldn't work. Another part of me considered threatening to withhold my political support the next time he ran for reelection, but since he polled higher than I did in his home state of Montana, I figured that wouldn't work, either. Instead, I argued and cajoled for another half hour, finally agreeing to his plan to delay an immediate party-line vote and instead call the bill to a vote within the first two weeks of Congress's reconvening in September.

With the House and the Senate adjourned and both votes still looming, we decided I'd spend the first two weeks of August on the road, holding health-care town halls in places like Montana and Colorado, where public support for reform was shakiest. As a sweetener, my team suggested that Michelle and the girls join me, and that we visit some national parks along the way.

I was thrilled by the suggestion. It's not as if Malia and Sasha were deprived of fatherly attention or in need of extra summer fun—they'd had plenty of both, with playdates and movies and a whole lot of loafing. Often, I'd come home in the evening and go up to the third floor to find the solarium overtaken by pajama-clad eight- or eleven-year-old girls settling in for a sleepover, bouncing on inflatable mattresses, scattering popcorn and toys everywhere, giggling non-stop at whatever was on Nickelodeon.

But, as much as Michelle and I (with the help of infinitely patient Secret Service

agents) tried to approximate a normal childhood for our daughters, it was hard, if not impossible, for me to take them places like an ordinary dad would. We couldn't go to an amusement park together, making an impromptu stop for burgers along the way. I couldn't take them, as I once had, on lazy Sunday-afternoon bike rides. A trip to get ice cream or a visit to a bookstore was now a major production, involving road closures, tactical teams, and the omnipresent press pool.

If the girls felt a sense of loss over this, they didn't show it. But I felt it acutely. I especially mourned the fact that I'd probably never get a chance to take Malia and Sasha on the sort of long summer road trip I'd made when I was eleven, after my mother and my grandmother, Toot, decided it was time for Maya and me to see the mainland of the United States. It had lasted a month and burned a lasting impression into my mind—and not just because we went to Disneyland (although that was obviously outstanding). We had dug for clams during low tide in Puget Sound, ridden horses through a creek at the base of Canyon de Chelly, in Arizona, watched the endless Kansas prairie unfold from a train window, spotted a herd of bison on a dusky plain in Yellowstone, and ended each day with the simple pleasures of a motel ice machine, the occasional swimming pool, or just air-conditioning and clean sheets. That one trip gave me a glimpse of the dizzying freedom of the open road, how vast America was, and how full of wonder.

I couldn't duplicate that experience for my daughters—not when we flew on Air Force One, rode in motorcades, and never bunked down in a place like Howard Johnson's. Getting from point A to point B happened too fast and too comfortably, and the days were too stuffed with prescheduled, staff-monitored activity—absent that familiar mixture of surprises, misadventures, and boredom—to fully qualify as a road trip. But in the course of an August week we watched Old Faithful blow, and looked out over the ochre expanse of the Grand Canyon. The girls went inner-tubing. At night, we played board games and tried to name the constellations. Tucking my daughters into bed, I hoped that, despite all the fuss that surrounded us, their minds were storing away a vision of life's possibilities and the beauty of the American landscape, just as mine once had; and that they might someday think back on our trips together and be reminded that they were so worthy of love, so fascinating and electric with life, that there was nothing their parents would rather do than share those vistas with them.

Of course, one of the things Malia and Sasha had to put up with on the trip out

West was their dad peeling off every other day to talk about health care. The town halls themselves weren't very different from the ones I'd held in the spring. People shared stories about how the existing health-care system had failed their families, and asked questions about how the emerging bill might affect their own insurance. Even those who opposed our effort listened attentively to what I had to say.



"That's good, let all that anger out."
Cartoon by Karen Sneider

Outside, though, the atmosphere was very different. We were in the middle of what came to be known as the “Tea Party summer,” an organized effort to marry people’s honest fears about a changing America with a right-wing political agenda. Heading to and from every venue, we were greeted by dozens of angry

protesters. Some shouted through bullhorns. Others flashed a single-fingered salute. Many held up signs with messages like “OBAMACARE SUCKS” or the unintentionally ironic “KEEP GOVERNMENT OUT OF MY MEDICARE.” Some waved doctored pictures of me looking like Heath Ledger’s Joker, in “The Dark Knight,” with blackened eyes and thickly caked makeup, appearing almost demonic. Still others wore Colonial-era patriot costumes and hoisted the “DON’T TREAD ON ME” flag. All of them seemed most interested in expressing their general contempt for me, a sentiment best summed up by a refashioning of the famous Shepard Fairey poster from our campaign: the same red-white-and-blue rendering of my face, but with the word “HOPE” replaced by “NOPE.”

This new and suddenly potent force in American politics had started months earlier, as a handful of ragtag, small-scale protests against bank bailouts and the Recovery Act. A number of the early participants had apparently migrated from the quixotic, libertarian Presidential campaign of the Republican congressman Ron Paul, who called for the elimination of the federal income tax and the Federal Reserve, a return to the gold standard, and withdrawal from the U.N. and NATO. The group was now focussed on stopping the abomination they called “Obamacare,” which they insisted would introduce a socialistic, oppressive new order to America. As I was conducting my relatively sedate health-care town halls out West, newscasts started broadcasting scenes from parallel congressional events around the country, with House and Senate members suddenly confronted by angry, heckling crowds in their home districts, and Tea Party members deliberately disrupting the proceedings, rattling some of the politicians enough that they were cancelling public appearances altogether.

It was hard to decide what to make of all this. [The Tea Party](#)’s anti-tax, anti-regulation, anti-government manifesto was hardly new; its basic story line—that corrupt liberal élites had hijacked the federal government to take money out of the pockets of hardworking Americans in order to finance welfare patronage and reward corporate cronies—was one that Republican politicians and the conservative media had been peddling for years. Nor, it turned out, was the Tea Party the spontaneous, grassroots movement it purported to be. From the outset, the Koch brothers and affiliates like Americans for Prosperity, along with other billionaire conservatives, had carefully nurtured the movement, providing much of the Tea Party’s financing, infrastructure, and strategic direction.

Still, there was no denying that the Tea Party represented a genuine populist

surge within the Republican Party. It was made up of true believers, possessed with the same grassroots enthusiasm and jagged fury we'd seen in Sarah Palin's supporters during the closing days of the Presidential campaign. Some of that anger I understood, even if I considered it misdirected. Many of the working- and middle-class whites gravitating to the Tea Party had suffered for decades from sluggish wages, rising costs, and the loss of the steady blue-collar work that provided secure retirement. George W. Bush and establishment Republicans hadn't done anything for them, and the financial crisis had further hollowed out their communities. And so far, at least, the economy had grown steadily worse with me in charge, despite more than a trillion dollars channelled into stimulus spending and bailouts. For those already predisposed toward conservative ideas, the notion that my policies were designed to help others at their expense—that the game was rigged and I was part of the rigging—must have seemed entirely plausible.

I also had a grudging respect for how rapidly Tea Party leaders had mobilized a strong following and managed to dominate the news coverage, using some of the same social-media and grassroots-organizing strategies we had deployed during my own campaign. I'd spent my entire political career promoting civic participation as a cure for much of what ailed our democracy. I could hardly complain, I told myself, just because it was opposition to my agenda that was now spurring such passionate citizen involvement.

As time went on, though, it became hard to ignore some of the more troubling impulses driving the movement. As had been true at Palin rallies, reporters at Tea Party events caught attendees comparing me to animals or Hitler. Signs turned up showing me dressed like an African witch doctor with a bone through my nose. Conspiracy theories abounded: that my health-care bill would set up "death panels" to evaluate whether people deserved treatment, clearing the way for "government-encouraged euthanasia," or that it would benefit illegal immigrants, in the service of my larger goal of flooding the country with welfare-dependent, reliably Democratic voters. The Tea Party also resurrected an old rumor from the campaign: that I was not only Muslim but had actually been born in Kenya, and was therefore constitutionally barred from serving as President. By September, the question of how much nativism and racism explained the Tea Party's rise had become a major topic of debate on the cable shows—especially after the former President and lifelong Southerner Jimmy Carter offered up the opinion that the extreme vitriol directed toward me was at least in part spawned by racist views.

At the White House, we made a point of not commenting on any of this—and not just because Axe had reams of data telling us that white voters, including many who supported me, reacted poorly to lectures about race. As a matter of principle, I didn't believe a President should ever publicly whine about criticism from voters—it's what you signed up for in taking the job—and I was quick to remind both reporters and friends that my white predecessors had all endured their share of vicious personal attacks and obstructionism.

More practically, I saw no way to sort out people's motives, especially given that racial attitudes were woven into every aspect of our nation's history. Did that Tea Party member support "states' rights" because he genuinely thought it was the best way to promote liberty, or because he continued to resent how federal intervention had led to desegregation and rising Black political power in the South? Did that conservative activist oppose any expansion of the social-welfare state because she believed it sapped individual initiative or because she was convinced that it would benefit only brown people who had just crossed the border? Whatever my instincts might tell me, whatever truths the history books might suggest, I knew I wasn't going to win over any voters by labelling my opponents racist.

One thing felt certain: a pretty big chunk of the American people, including some of the very folks I was trying to help, didn't trust a word I said. One night, I watched a news report on a charitable organization called Remote Area Medical, which provided medical services in temporary pop-up clinics around the country, operating out of trailers parked at fairgrounds and arenas. Almost all the patients in the report were white Southerners from places like Tennessee and Georgia—men and women who had jobs but no employer-based insurance or had insurance with deductibles they couldn't afford. Many had driven hundreds of miles to join crowds of people lined up before dawn to see one of the volunteer doctors, who might pull an infected tooth, diagnose debilitating abdominal pain, or examine a breast lump. The demand was so great that patients who arrived after sunup sometimes got turned away.

I found the story both heartbreakng and maddening, an indictment of a wealthy nation that failed too many of its citizens. And yet I knew that almost every one of those people waiting to see a free doctor came from a deep-red Republican district, the sort of place where opposition to our health-care bill, along with support of the Tea Party, was likely to be strongest. There had been a time—back when I was still a state senator driving around southern Illinois or, later,

travelling through rural Iowa during the earliest days of the Presidential campaign—when I could reach such voters. I wasn’t yet well known enough to be the target of caricature, which meant that whatever preconceptions people may have had about a Black guy from Chicago with a foreign name could be dispelled by a simple conversation, a small gesture of kindness.

I wondered if any of that was still possible, now that I lived locked behind gates and guardsmen, my image filtered through Fox News and other media outlets whose entire business model depended on making their audience angry and fearful. I wanted to believe that the ability to connect was still there. My wife wasn’t so sure. One night, Michelle caught a glimpse of a Tea Party rally on TV—with its enraged flag-waving and inflammatory slogans. She seized the remote and turned off the set, her expression hovering somewhere between rage and resignation.

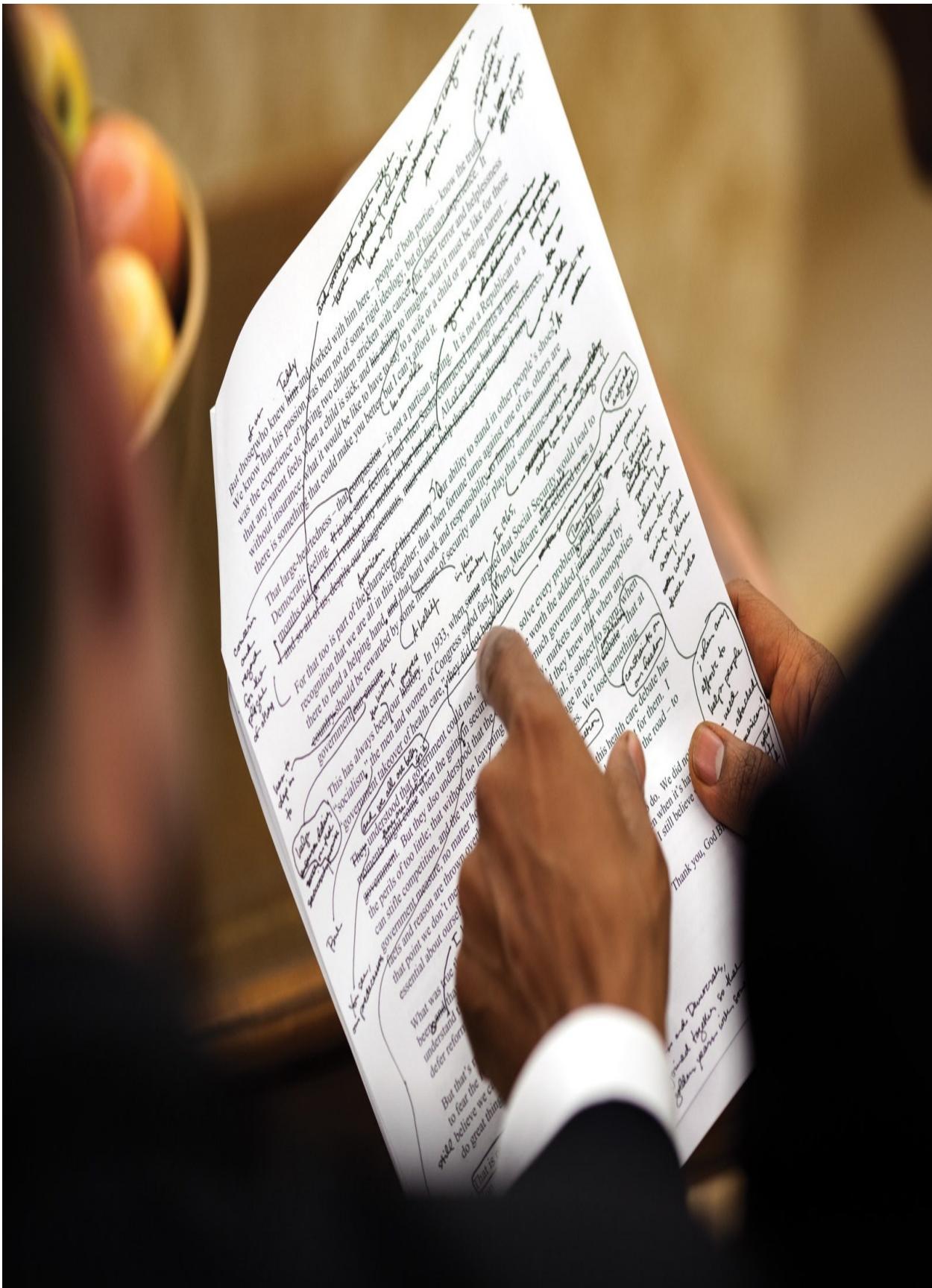
“It’s a trip, isn’t it?” she said.

“What is?”

“That they’re scared of you. Scared of us.” She shook her head and headed for bed.

Ted Kennedy died on August 25th. The morning of his funeral, the skies over Boston darkened, and by the time our flight landed the streets were shrouded in thick sheets of rain. The scene inside the church befitting the largeness of Teddy’s life: the pews packed with former Presidents and heads of state, senators and members of Congress, hundreds of current and former staffers. But the stories told by his children mattered most that day. Patrick Kennedy recalled his father tending to him during crippling asthma attacks. He described how his father would take him out to sail, even in stormy seas. Teddy, Jr., told the story of how, after he’d lost his leg to cancer, his father had insisted they go sledding, trudging with him up a snowy hill, picking him up when he fell, and telling him “there is nothing you can’t do.” Collectively, it was a portrait of a man driven by great appetites and ambitions but also by great loss and doubt—a man making up for things.

“My father believed in redemption,” Teddy, Jr., said. “And he never surrendered, never stopped trying to right wrongs, be they the results of his own failings or of ours.”



I carried those words with me back to Washington, where a spirit of surrender increasingly prevailed—at least, when it came to getting a health-care bill passed. A preliminary report by the Congressional Budget Office, the independent, professionally staffed operation charged with scoring the cost of all federal legislation, priced the initial House version of the health-care bill at an eye-popping one trillion dollars. Although the C.B.O. score would eventually come down as the bill was revised and clarified, the headlines gave opponents a handy stick with which to beat us over the head. Democrats from swing districts were now running scared, convinced that pushing forward with the bill amounted to a suicide mission. Republicans abandoned all pretense of wanting to negotiate, with members of Congress regularly echoing the Tea Party’s claim that I wanted to put Grandma to sleep.

The only upside to all this was that it helped me cure Max Baucus of his obsession with trying to placate Chuck Grassley. In a last-stab Oval Office meeting with the two of them in early September, I listened patiently as Grassley ticked off five new reasons that he still had problems with the latest version of the bill.

“Let me ask you a question, Chuck,” I said finally. “If Max took every one of your latest suggestions, could you support the bill?”

“Well . . .”

“Are there *any* changes—any at all—that would get us your vote?”

There was an awkward silence before Grassley looked up and met my gaze. “I guess not, Mr. President.”

I guess not.

At the White House, the mood rapidly darkened. Some of my team began asking whether it was time to fold our hand. Rahm was especially dour. Having been to this rodeo before, he understood all too well what my declining poll numbers might mean for the reelection prospects of swing-district Democrats, many of whom he had personally recruited and helped elect, not to mention my own prospects in 2012. Rahm proposed that we try to cut a deal with Republicans for a significantly scaled-back piece of legislation—perhaps allowing people

between sixty and sixty-five to buy into Medicare or widening the reach of the Children’s Health Insurance Program. “It won’t be everything you wanted, Mr. President,” he said. “But it’ll still help a lot of people, and it’ll give us a better chance to make progress on the rest of your agenda.”

Some in the room agreed. Others felt it was too early to give up. Phil Schiliro said he thought there was still a path to passing a comprehensive law with only Democratic votes, but he admitted that it was no sure thing.

“I guess the question for you, Mr. President, is, Do you feel lucky?”

I looked at him. “Where are we, Phil?”

Phil hesitated, wondering if it was a trick question. “The Oval Office?”

“And what’s my name?”

“Barack Obama.”

I smiled. “Barack *Hussein* Obama. And I’m here with you in the *Oval Office*. Brother, I always feel lucky.”

I told the team that we were staying the course. But my decision didn’t have much to do with how lucky I felt. Rahm wasn’t wrong about the risks, and perhaps in a different political environment, on a different issue, I might have accepted his advice. On this issue, though, I saw no indication that Republican leaders would throw us a lifeline. We were wounded, their base wanted blood, and, no matter how modest the reform we proposed, they were sure to find a whole new set of reasons for not working with us.

More than that, a scaled-down bill wasn’t going to help millions of people who were desperate. The idea of letting them down—of leaving them to fend for themselves because their President hadn’t been sufficiently brave, skilled, or persuasive to cut through the political noise and get what he knew to be the right thing done—was something I couldn’t stomach.

Knowing we had to try something big to reset the health-care debate, Axe suggested that I deliver a prime-time address before a special joint session of Congress. It was a high-stakes gambit, he explained, used only twice in the past sixteen years, but it would give me a chance to speak directly to millions of

viewers. I asked what the other two joint addresses had been about.

“The most recent was when Bush announced the war on terror after 9/11.”

“And the other?”

“Bill Clinton talking about his health-care bill.”

I laughed. “Well, that worked out great, didn’t it?”

Despite the inauspicious precedent, we decided it was worth a shot.

Two days after Labor Day, Michelle and I climbed into the back seat of the Presidential S.U.V., known as the Beast, drove up to the Capitol’s east entrance, and retraced the steps we had taken seven months earlier to the doors of the House chamber, where I’d given my first address to a joint session of Congress, back in February. The mood in the chamber felt different this time—the smiles a little forced, a murmur of tension and doubt in the air. Or maybe it was just that my mood was different. Whatever giddiness or sense of personal triumph I’d felt shortly after taking office had now been burned away, replaced by something sturdier: a determination to see a job through.

For an hour that evening, I explained as straightforwardly as I could what our reform plan would mean for the families who were watching—how it would provide affordable insurance to those who needed it but also give critical protections to those who already had insurance; how it would prevent insurance companies from discriminating against people with preexisting conditions and eliminate the kind of lifetime limits that burdened families like Laura Klitzka’s. I detailed how the plan would help seniors pay for lifesaving drugs and require insurers to cover routine checkups and preventive care at no extra charge. I explained that the talk about a government takeover and death panels was nonsense, that the legislation wouldn’t add a dime to the deficit, and that the time to make this happen was now. But in the back of my mind was a letter from Ted Kennedy I’d received a few days earlier. He’d written it in May but had instructed Vicki to wait until after his death to pass it along. It was a farewell letter, two pages long, in which he thanked me for taking up the cause of health-care reform, referring to it as “the great unfinished business of our society” and the cause of his life. He added that he would die with some comfort, believing that what he’d spent years working toward would now, under my watch, finally happen.

I ended my speech that night by quoting from Teddy's letter, hoping that his words would bolster the nation just as they had bolstered me. "What we face," he'd written, "is above all a moral issue; that at stake are not just the details of policy, but fundamental principles of social justice and the character of our country."

According to poll data, my address to Congress boosted public support for the health-care bill, at least temporarily. Even more important for our purposes, it seemed to stiffen the spine of wavering congressional Democrats. It did not, however, change the mind of a single Republican in the chamber. This was clear less than thirty minutes into the speech, when—as I debunked the phony claim that the bill would insure undocumented immigrants—a relatively obscure five-term Republican congressman from South Carolina named Joe Wilson leaned forward in his seat, pointed in my direction, and shouted, his face flushed with fury, "You lie!"

For the briefest moment, a stunned silence fell over the chamber. I turned to look for the heckler (as did Speaker Pelosi and Joe Biden, Nancy aghast and Joe shaking his head). I was tempted to exit my perch, make my way down the aisle, and smack the guy in the head. Instead, I simply responded by saying, "It's not true," and then carried on with my speech as Democrats hurled boos in Wilson's direction.

As far as anyone could remember, nothing like that had ever happened before a joint-session address—at least, not in modern times. Congressional criticism was swift and bipartisan, and, by the next morning, Wilson had apologized publicly for the breach of decorum, calling Rahm and asking that his regrets get passed on to me as well. I downplayed the matter, telling a reporter that I appreciated the apology and was a big believer that we all make mistakes.

And yet I couldn't help noticing the news reports saying that online contributions to Wilson's reëlection campaign spiked sharply in the week following his outburst. Apparently, for many Republican voters out there, he was a hero, speaking truth to power. It was an indication that the Tea Party and its media allies had accomplished more than just their goal of demonizing the health-care bill. They had demonized me and, in doing so, had delivered a message to all Republican office-holders: when it came to opposing my Administration, the old rules no longer applied.

Despite having grown up in Hawaii, I have never learned to sail a boat; it wasn't a pastime my family could afford. Still, for the next three and a half months, I felt the way I imagine sailors feel on the open seas after a brutal storm has passed. The work remained arduous and sometimes monotonous, made tougher by the need to patch leaks and bail water. But, for a span of time, we had in us the thankfulness of survivors, propelled in our daily tasks by a renewed belief that we might make it to port after all.

For starters, after months of delay, Baucus finally opened debate on a health-care bill in the Senate Finance Committee. His version, which tracked the Massachusetts model we had all been using, was stingier with its subsidies to the uninsured than we would have preferred, and we insisted that he replace a tax on high-value employer-based insurance plans with increased taxes on the wealthy. But, to everyone's credit, the deliberations were generally substantive and free of grandstanding. After three weeks of exhaustive work, the bill passed out of committee by a fourteen-to-nine margin. The lone Republican vote we got came from Olympia Snowe.

Speaker Pelosi then engineered the quick passage of a consolidated House bill against overwhelming and boisterous G.O.P. opposition, with a vote held on November 7, 2009. If we could get the full Senate to pass a similarly consolidated version of its bill before the Christmas recess, we figured, we could then use January to negotiate the differences between the Senate and House versions, send a merged bill to both chambers for approval, and, with any luck, have the final legislation on my desk for signing by February.



March 21, 2010. Watching the House pass the final version of the bill, with Vice-President Biden and others. Photograph by Pete Souza

It was a big if—and one largely dependent on my old friend Harry Reid. True to his generally dim view of human nature, the Senate Majority Leader assumed that Olympia Snowe couldn't be counted on once a final version of the health-care bill hit the floor. ("When McConnell really puts the screws to her," he told me matter-of-factly, "she'll fold like a cheap suit.") To overcome the possibility of a filibuster, Harry couldn't afford to lose a single member of his sixty-person caucus. And, as had been true with the Recovery Act, this fact gave each one of those members enormous leverage to demand changes to the bill, regardless of how parochial or ill-considered their requests might be.

This wouldn't be a situation conducive to high-minded policy considerations, which was just fine with Harry, who could maneuver, cut deals, and apply pressure like nobody else. For the next six weeks, as the consolidated bill was introduced on the Senate floor and lengthy debates commenced on procedural matters, the only action that really mattered took place behind closed doors in Harry's office, where he met with the holdouts one by one to find out what it would take to get them to yes. Some wanted funding for well-intentioned but marginally useful pet projects. Several of the Senate's most liberal members, who liked to rail against the outsized profits of Big Pharma and private insurers, suddenly had no problem at all with the outsized profits of medical-device manufacturers with facilities in their home states and were pushing Harry to scale back a proposed tax on the industry. Senators Mary Landrieu and Ben Nelson made their votes contingent on hundreds of millions of additional Medicaid dollars specifically for Louisiana and Nebraska, concessions that the Republicans cleverly labelled "the Louisiana Purchase" and "the Cornhusker Kickback."

Whatever it took, Harry was game. Sometimes *too* game. Occasionally, he'd dig his heels in on some deal he wanted to cut, and I'd have to intervene with a call. Listening to my objections, he'd usually relent, but not without some grumbling, wondering how on earth he would get the bill passed if he did things my way.

"Mr. President, you know a lot more than I do about health-care policy," he said at one point. "But I know the Senate, O.K.?"

Compared with the egregious pork-barrelling, logrolling, and patronage-dispensing tactics that Senate leaders had traditionally used to pass big, controversial bills like the Civil Rights Act or Ronald Reagan's 1986 Tax

Reform Act, or a package like the New Deal, Harry's methods were fairly benign. But those bills had passed during a time when most Washington horse-trading stayed out of the papers, before the advent of the twenty-four-hour news cycle. For us, the slog through the Senate was a P.R. nightmare. Each time Harry's bill was altered to mollify another senator, reporters cranked out a new round of stories about "backroom deals." And things got markedly worse when Harry decided, with my blessing, to strip the bill of something called the "public option."

From the very start of the health-care debate, policy wonks on the left had pushed us to modify the Massachusetts model by giving consumers the choice to buy coverage on the online "exchange," not just from the likes of Aetna and Blue Cross Blue Shield but also from a newly formed insurer owned and operated by the government. Unsurprisingly, insurance companies had balked at the idea of a public option, arguing that they would not be able to compete against a government insurance plan that could operate without the pressures of making a profit. Of course, for public-option proponents, that was exactly the point. By highlighting the cost-effectiveness of government insurance and exposing the bloated waste and immorality of the private-insurance market, they hoped the public option would pave the way for a single-payer system.

It was a clever idea, and one with enough traction that [Nancy Pelosi](#) had included it in the House bill. But, on the Senate side, we were nowhere close to having sixty votes for a public option. There was a watered-down version in the Senate Health and Education Committee bill, requiring any government-run insurer to charge the same rates as private insurers, but, of course, that would have defeated the whole purpose of a public option. My team and I thought a possible compromise might involve offering a public option only in those parts of the country where there were too few insurers to provide real competition and a public entity could help drive down premium prices over all. But even that was too much for the more conservative members of the Democratic caucus to swallow, including Joe Lieberman, of Connecticut, who announced shortly before Thanksgiving that under no circumstances would he vote for a package containing a public option.

When word got out that the public option had been removed from the Senate bill, activists on the left went ballistic. Howard Dean, the former Vermont governor and onetime Presidential candidate, declared it "essentially the collapse of health-care reform in the United States Senate." They were especially

outraged that Harry and I appeared to be catering to the whims of Joe Lieberman, whose apparent power to dictate the terms of health-care reform reinforced the view among some Democrats that I treated enemies better than allies.

I found the whole brouhaha exasperating. “What is it about sixty votes these folks don’t understand?” I groused to my staff. “Should I tell the thirty million people who can’t get covered that they’re going to have to wait another ten years because we can’t get them a public option?”

It wasn’t just that criticism from friends always stung the most. The carping carried immediate political consequences for Democrats. It confused our base (which, generally speaking, had no idea what the hell a public option was) and divided our caucus. It also ignored the fact that all the great social-welfare advances in American history, including Social Security and Medicare, had started off incomplete and had been built upon gradually, over time. By preemptively spinning what could be a monumental, if imperfect, victory into a bitter defeat, the criticism contributed to a potential long-term demoralization of Democratic voters—otherwise known as the “What’s the point of voting if nothing ever changes?” syndrome—making it even harder for us to win elections and move progressive legislation forward in the future.

There was a reason, I told my adviser Valerie Jarrett, that Republicans tended to do the opposite—that Ronald Reagan could preside over huge increases in the federal budget, the federal deficit, and the federal workforce and still be lionized by the G.O.P. faithful as the guy who successfully shrank the federal government. They understood that, in politics, the stories told were often as important as the substance achieved.

We made none of these arguments publicly, though for the rest of my Presidency the phrase “public option” became a useful shorthand inside the White House anytime Democratic interest groups complained about us failing to defy political gravity and securing less than a hundred per cent of whatever they were asking for. Instead, we did our best to calm folks down, reminding disgruntled supporters that we would have plenty of time to fine-tune the legislation when we merged the House and Senate bills. Harry kept doing Harry stuff, including keeping the Senate in session weeks past the scheduled adjournment for the holidays.

As he'd predicted, Olympia Snowe braved a blizzard to stop by the Oval and tell us in person that she'd be voting no. But it didn't matter. On Christmas Eve, after twenty-four days of debate, with Washington blanketed in snow and the streets all but empty, the Senate passed its health-care bill, titled the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act—the A.C.A.—with exactly sixty votes. It was the first Christmas Eve vote in the Senate since 1895.

A few hours later, I settled back in my seat on Air Force One, listening to Michelle and the girls discuss how well Bo was adjusting to his first plane ride as we headed to Hawaii for the holiday break. I felt myself starting to relax just a little. We were going to make it, I thought. We weren't docked yet—not even close, it would turn out—but thanks to my team, thanks to Nancy, Harry, and a whole bunch of congressional Democrats who'd taken tough votes, we finally had land within our sights. ♦

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Art

- [Virginia Woolf's Ghost at the Met's Costume Institute](#)

[November 2, 2020 Issue](#)

Virginia Woolf's Ghost at the Met's Costume Institute

The British writer is the “ghost narrator” of the new exhibition “About Time: Fashion and Duration,” featuring similar garments made decades apart.

October 23, 2020



Photograph by Pari Dukovic for The New Yorker

Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Not Andrew Bolton, the curator of the Met's Costume Institute, who chose the British writer as the "ghost narrator" of the new exhibition "**About Time: Fashion and Duration**" (opening on Oct. 29). Literary excerpts accompany paired garments (including Viktor & Rolf's haute-couture gown, from 2020, above) that are stylistically similar but were designed decades apart—a chic exploration of what Woolf once described as "the extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind."

Books

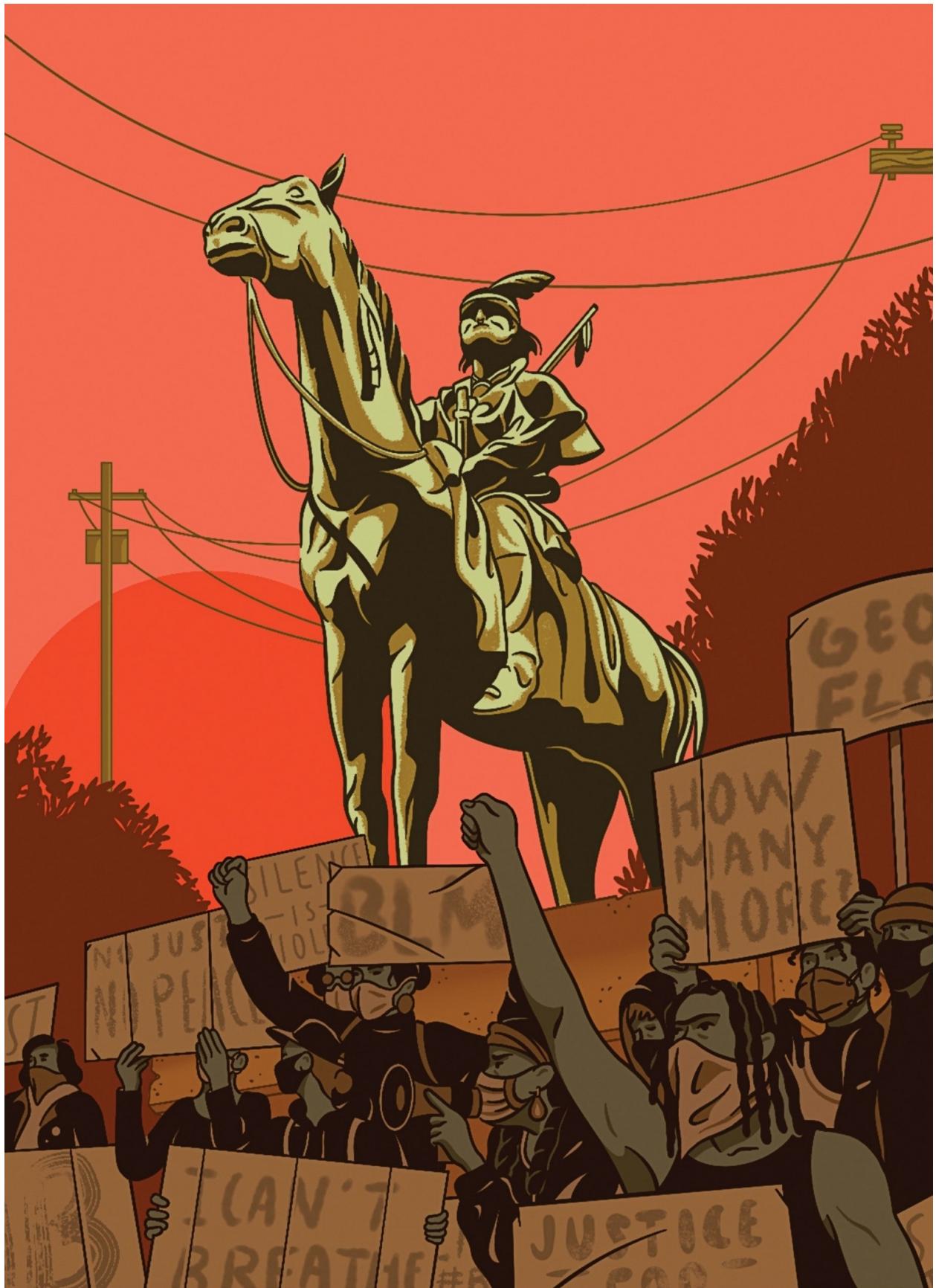
- [What Tecumseh Fought For](#)
- [Misremembering the British Empire](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)

What Tecumseh Fought For

Pursuing a Native alliance powerful enough to resist the American invaders, the Shawnee leader and his prophet brother envisioned a new and better Indian world.

By [Philip Deloria](#)

October 26, 2020



The ghosts of forgotten histories haunt America's heartland, begging to be remembered and exorcised. [George Floyd](#)'s Minneapolis, as we have lately come to understand, has never been a harmless Midwestern town of grains and lakes. The enslaved Dred Scott's eighteen-thirties sojourn at Fort Snelling (now part of the Twin Cities) and his subsequent return downriver to Missouri gave rise to the nation's most notorious Supreme Court decision, *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, which ruled that Black Americans—slave or free—had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” Floyd, who died choking on that assertion, was from North Carolina by way of Houston, and the string of memorials following his death sent a mourning cry out of Minnesota back along Dred Scott's path, downriver to the South before turning east toward the Atlantic and the distant memory of Africa.

In 1811, the Shawnee leader Tecumseh, anticipating the movements of Scott and Floyd, departed the Ohio Country and journeyed two thousand miles across the South, seeking to recruit tribes to a Native confederacy able to withstand the land hunger of the United States. The stakes could not have been higher: Tecumseh's effort marked the last time Native peoples would be able to mobilize in concert with a formidable European military. His British allies—advancing their own geopolitics, to be sure—thought such a confederacy might buttress an Indian state, which, in turn, could serve as a barrier to American expansion. Today, one mountain, a few statues, eight towns, and several streets and schools bear Tecumseh's name; a small collection of myths and fictions tell some version of his story. What he had hoped would be an Indian state, a consolidation of Native power, is now what Americans call the Midwest. And Tecumseh, his alliance, and his war linger only as a trace memory.

To resurrect his story is to recognize that the United States confronts not a singular “original sin” of slavery, threaded through centuries of systemic racism and extending to George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, but two foundational sins, intimately entangled across geographies stretching from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi Delta. The Shawnee homelands were the first epic battleground in the United States' acquisition of new territory, a process characterized by the violent plunder of Native land and its conversion into vast American wealth. After Kentucky militiamen killed him in battle, in 1813, Tecumseh and his dead comrades became fetishes of conquest in the most literal sense (the white men carried off Native belongings and carved long swaths of skin from Indian bodies to make souvenir razor strops), even as the forceful taking of the land came to

seem like a lesser sin, a regrettable but necessary wrong justified by the expectation of American goodness.

As Peter Cozzens points out in a new joint biography, “[Tecumseh and the Prophet: The Shawnee Brothers Who Defied a Nation](#)” (Knopf), Tecumseh’s geopolitical vision was unrealizable without the revitalizing religion preached by his younger brother, Tenskwatawa, a seer and spiritual leader. Between them, the brothers offered a full range of Native social critique—about Indian land loss, cultural degradation, infighting, and spiritual decay—while advocating a program of action aimed at the future. It was not enough to unite against the Americans on the battlefield. Such unity required, Cozzens suggests, “moral cleansing and spiritual rebirth,” personal transformations and fierce resistances that together were meant to create a new and better Indian world.

The Native homeland that Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa fought to protect—the Americans called it the Northwest Territory—encompassed five future U.S. states and the most pressing issues facing the new republic. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787, passed by the Confederation Congress, tried to address those challenges. It prohibited the extension of slavery into the new territories while introducing a fugitive-slave provision that protected Southern property rights in human beings. It outlined an orderly structure through which undisciplined westward colonies could fully join the American empire. It assumed that the land would inevitably become part of the United States, but hypocritically promised to treat American Indian people with “utmost good faith.”

As with so many American laws, it also prompts us to follow the money. The ordinance mapped out an American territorial expansion based on white mobility and demographic growth: if a colonial territory had sixty thousand free inhabitants, it could petition for statehood. In the meantime, the territory would be rationalized through a grid system set forth by the Land Ordinance of 1785. The six-square-mile township and the rectilinear forms of counties and crossroads make up its visible legacy. The laws prescribed a national expansion based on yeoman farmsteads knit into an orderly fabric of small towns and local schools. But the grid also made land into an abstraction, and thus a commodity ripe for speculation. It was an opportunity grasped by many of the nation’s first leaders. [George Washington](#) is today remembered as both a President and a slaveholder, an embodiment of foundational American contradictions. He should also be remembered as one of the most aggressive landowners in the early republic, holding title, at the time of his death, to more than fifty thousand acres

across several states. In that respect, he exemplified the connection between American national expansion and trade in land: the U.S. planned to pay off its Revolutionary War debt with land sales in the Northwest, positioning itself as a real-estate speculator with continental ambitions.

But the United States didn't own most of the lands it hoped to flip. In the 1783 Treaty of Paris, which ended the Revolutionary War, England recognized American sovereignty west to the Mississippi, betraying the Native allies who had supported it in the conflict. This "sovereignty," though, meant nothing to the Miami, the Shawnee, the Potawatomi, and other tribes whose territory it was. Encroaching settlers had no respect for Indian ownership and weren't willing to wait on American surveyors to parcel and sell the land. They squatted where they wished, building frontier stations and clearing land, all the while killing Indians and being killed by them in return.

This was the world in which the Shawnee brothers grew up. When Tecumseh was six and Tenskwatawa was still in his mother's womb, their father died in a 1774 battle with Virginia militiamen. Their older brother Cheeseekau raised them to be uncompromising in their resistance to the Americans. At the age of fifteen, Tecumseh distinguished himself during a raid on American flatboats on the Ohio River. He possessed from the start a remarkable warrior charisma. An American officer later recalled him as "one of the finest looking men I ever saw —about six feet high, straight, with large, fine features." But Tecumseh carried scars, both physical and emotional. At the age of twenty, while on a raid, he shattered a thighbone and acquired a permanent limp. Four years later, Americans killed Cheeseekau in a fight in Tennessee, and two years after that he watched another brother die at the Battle of Fallen Timbers.

For a decade, Tecumseh sought to live a Native life in the deepening shadow of colonial advance, marrying twice and fathering a son. By 1810, though, he had seen enough settlements and treaties to have developed not only a sense of urgency but also a strategic vision unmatched among his peers. At a parley, he rose to call out the territorial governor William Henry Harrison: "Since the peace was made [in 1795], you have killed some of the Shawnees, Winnebagoes, Delawares, and Miamis, and you have taken our lands from us, and I do not see how we can remain at peace if you continue to do so."

Tecumseh recognized that colonization followed a pattern that led to war: American interlopers ignored Indian territorial rights and their own

government's treaty agreements. They intruded on Indian land, bringing with them violence and a racialized hatred for Native people forged through generations of colonial conflict. Unable to handle Native self-defense, settlers called for help from the federal government, which sent troops and mobilized militias. Military victories produced treaties of land cession or sale, which then justified the existing settlements and pushed the boundaries farther to the west. Rapacious migrants ignored the new boundary lines and started the cycle once again.

The Shawnee brothers followed a long line of Native people of the Northwest who fought to defend their homelands from American invasion. Indians killed as many as fifteen hundred whites during Little Turtle's War, a conflict that ran for a decade after the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, ending only in 1794, with the defeat of Native warriors at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. Those fifteen hundred deaths were a drop in the bucket compared with the influx of new settlers. In the first half of 1788 alone, the military leader Josiah Harmar reported, more than six thousand settlers passed into the Ohio Country. In 1790 and 1791, supported by state militias, the first American national troops invaded Native settlements there, seeking to punish Indian resisters and force them to relinquish their lands.

Indian people had already developed successful tribal alliances. In 1763, a loose confederation of tribes under the leadership of Pontiac fought the British to a stalemate after the Seven Years' War. When Harmar marched his shiny new American Army into the Ohio Country in 1790, Little Turtle's Western Confederacy routed his forces. Arthur St. Clair tried again the following year, and the results were even worse, with more than six hundred of his command dead and a high percentage wounded. After the defeats, George Washington tripled the size of the Army and committed five-sixths of the federal budget to subduing the Western Indians. Anthony Wayne's victory at Fallen Timbers was made possible because the Americans, out of necessity, threw everything they had at the Indian alliance.

Wayne's victory set the stage for the efforts of Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa to unite an even larger confederacy. The 1795 Treaty of Greenville carved a line across the Ohio lands, reducing Indian territory to the northwest corner of the region. Ohio quickly filled up with sixty thousand free people, and in 1803 it became the seventeenth state (after the thirteen original colonies and Vermont, Kentucky, and Tennessee). Between 1803 and 1809, the U.S. negotiated fifteen

land-cession treaties—some of which its own representatives characterized as farce—relying on handpicked Indian signatories and pushing tribes to sell land that did not belong to them. The land entered the public domain and was then grabbed up by speculators, settlers, and companies as newly privatized property. The wealth of the nation, Americans have grudgingly recognized, was produced through the labor of brutally enslaved people. But that wealth also rested upon formal systems—colonial, military, and fiscal—that alchemized the lands of an Indian continent into American property and money.



SS

"How is it possible to feel too old to learn TikTok dances but too young to be this out of touch?"
Cartoon by Sarah Akinterinwa

Tecumseh vehemently rejected the Ohio treaties and insisted that any Indian land cessions had to be made collectively by *all* Native peoples. When Harrison threatened him with the unified power of the states—the “Seventeen Fires”—Tecumseh said that he planned to respond in kind, creating “a strict union amongst all the fires” of a strong Native alliance. The only way to check the evil of American encroachment, he said, was “for all the red men to unite in claiming a common and equal right in the land, as it was at first, and should be yet; for it never was divided but belongs to all for the use of each.” If the U.S. imagined itself as an irresistible force, the brothers sought to create an immovable indigenous object, rallying and organizing an Indian military response that carried with it the further possibility of a confederated Indian nation.

The result was Tecumseh’s War, which is usefully distinguished from the near-simultaneous War of 1812. Most narratives of 1812 portray Indians as incidental British allies, marauding around the backcountry fringes of an Atlantic conflict. In reality, the United States was waging three intertwined wars at once: the War of 1812, largely concerned with trade restrictions and the impressment of American sailors; the Creek War, which began as an internal Native conflict but also aimed to halt American settlement in the Native South; and Tecumseh’s War, which started in 1811 and did not conclude until 1815—or perhaps later, depending on how you understand a fight for a swath of the continent. Fought across Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, lower Canada, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri, Tecumseh’s War was a struggle not only for territory but also for Native people’s future in relation to the United States.

Tecumseh’s 1811 diplomatic mission rallied the Upper Creeks, but most of the Southern tribes rejected the proposed alliance. As a result, his efforts remained centered in the Northwest, where he drew together Shawnee, Delaware, Miami, Potawatomi, Wyandot, Kickapoo, Sauk, Meskwaki, Ottawa, and Ojibwe, among others. Tecumseh’s failure to build a truly transregional Native confederacy has often been taken as a comparative lesson in American superiority: the Indian people were doomed by their disunity. But it is worth recalling that the “Seventeen Fires” were themselves only tenuously united. Some state militias refused to fight, and commanders wrangled over rank and status. Post-revolutionary rebellions in the backcountry called American governance into question. The ambition of Tecumseh’s effort to renew and enlarge Little Turtle’s alliance reveals his clearheaded diagnosis of the situation and a strategic vision

rivalling that of any American politician. The U.S., he saw, was a continentally ambitious enemy that racialized diverse Indian peoples as one and killed on that basis, while seeking to divide and conquer tribes with gifts, promises, and threats. Such an enemy required a correspondingly continental alliance, and Tecumseh proved tireless in his efforts to expand his confederacy and hold it together.

In this history, Tenskwatawa has often been framed as the inferior, the delusional, the lesser. Everything that Tecumseh was—precocious youth, warrior-leader, strategic thinker—Tenskwatawa was not. He possessed none of the physical qualities integral to Shawnee leadership and success, and he developed a reputation as a whining braggart, a drunk, and an incompetent, at one point accidentally putting out his own eye. In 1805, however, Tenskwatawa fell into a near-death trance and returned with a powerful vision of the spiritual world. Additional visions showed him a rich country made for the Shawnee, and spurred him to forge a hybrid religious movement, in which he encouraged Indians to eschew most white ways—alcohol, nontraditional foods, and technology—and reject intra- and intertribal violence in favor of peace, kinship, and alliance among Native people. Land-hungry Americans, he exhorted his followers, were the “children of the Evil Spirit.”

Regarded now as the Prophet, the “Open Door” between a troubled present and an Indian future, Tenskwatawa emerged as a charismatic figure to match Tecumseh. Cozzens rightly rejects the old stories, arguing convincingly that Tenskwatawa successfully shaped a powerful spiritual doctrine out of nativist resistance. If his brother focussed on stopping the Americans through a military confederacy, the Prophet offered an equally rousing message from the world of the sacred: it was possible to live a good indigenous life, and doing so would produce salvation for the individual and a better world for all.

In 1808, the brothers’ followers gathered to form a spiritually militant community at Prophetstown, near the Tippecanoe River, in what today is north-central Indiana. Tecumseh needed time to assemble the largest possible alliance, but he began his Southern diplomatic sprint with a misstep: he warned Harrison—a formidable enemy who had negotiated many of the contested treaties—that he would return from his recruitment with even more allies. Harrison took advantage of Tecumseh’s absence, showing up at the edge of Prophetstown with a large American force. With few good options, Tenskwatawa and the remaining leaders decided to strike first. Though they inflicted heavy casualties on

Harrison's army, the Indian confederacy ended up in retreat, abandoning Prophetstown to the Americans, who burned it to the ground, destroying the food supplies that would have fed the people through the winter.

Harrison thought that his victory at the Battle of Tippecanoe marked the end of the conflict, and that the chastened Indians would give up. He was wrong. The brothers regrouped around a powerful, though unreliable, ally: Britain, America's opponent in the impending maritime war. Again, however, their ambitions were frustrated by circumstance; still working to build an Indian confederacy, Tecumseh found his hand forced by the War of 1812. For the next three years, the incomplete Indian alliance challenged American armies across the Native homelands. They pummelled the Americans at the River Raisin, took Fort Dearborn, chased settlers out of the borderlands, and orchestrated a three-pronged offensive against the remaining American forts. The British estimated that each Indian warrior was worth three American soldiers, and when their armies marched into battle in their trademark red coats Tecumseh and his soldiers protected their flanks. Tecumseh seemed to be everywhere during those few years: fighting, recruiting, saving prisoners from torture, cajoling the British to maintain food, supplies, and men, and even rallying their troops in the field.

The British failed in almost every aspect of their war. The world's greatest maritime power lost the fight for the Great Lakes, saw its supply lines to the Northwest cut, and, in the fall of 1813, were chased by Harrison and a large American force into a panicked retreat across lower Canada. The British general Henry Procter made a series of strategic blunders before taking an ill-prepared stand near Moraviantown, on the Thames River. In early October, Tecumseh, Tenskwatawa, and some five hundred Indian fighters supported the British lines, but those lines collapsed immediately in the face of an American cavalry charge. A small group of Americans led by Richard Mentor Johnson, a colonel in the Kentucky militia, charged the Indian lines on horseback, hoping to draw fire and thus reveal Indian positions for the next wave of soldiers. Somewhere in the smoke and fury, Tecumseh went down. Johnson, severely wounded, recounted pulling out his pistols and dispatching an Indian—maybe Tecumseh?—who had come to finish him off. Unsurprisingly, Johnson built a political career on the claim that he had slain the mighty warrior.

Tecumseh's death set in motion a series of consequences. Furious about the British failure, many of Tecumseh's allies quickly signed an armistice with Harrison, who then sought to enlist them in the fight against the British. Even as

many American settlers spoke explicitly about the “extermination” of Indian people, their leaders negotiated a series of peace treaties with confederacy tribes. The British confirmed their faithlessness in the 1814 Treaty of Ghent, which ended their war, selling out Indian allies once again.

Without Tecumseh, Tenskwatawa floundered, and he eventually helped the Americans persuade many Shawnees to leave their lands and relocate to Kansas. There, in 1828, he set up a sad little Prophetstown of four remote cabins, where he faded away to a lonely death, less than a decade later. The Battle of Moraviantown produced a considerable array of elected officials, among them three Kentucky governors, a Vice-President (Richard Johnson), and a President (an aging Harrison, who campaigned in 1840 under the slogan “Tippecanoe and Tyler too”). And because Tecumseh died in a British fight, near a river that had borrowed its name from England, his doomed war was easily swallowed up by the War of 1812.

An unrelenting stream of Americans poured into the Northwest Territory, and Indian people continued to fight a string of rearguard and independent actions. Tecumseh’s War presaged the Black Hawk War of 1832, in Illinois and Wisconsin; the deadly removal of Potawatomi people from Indiana to the Great Plains in 1838; and the Dakota Uprising of 1862, in Minnesota. Trace such conflicts back to Pontiac’s Rebellion and what emerges is not a picture of innocent pioneer settlement in the continental heartland but a full century of Midwestern dispossession and fierce resistance.

Generations of Midwesterners have imagined romantic Indian spirits at summer camps and lovers’ leaps, but the ghosts of forgotten histories that haunt the place bring a list of demands. One is to unbury the region’s deep connections to the South and to slavery. Another is to recognize that it was the heart of the first truly American conquest, the place where the United States established the rules of the game for empire, expansion, and a distinct species of white supremacy based not just on slavery but on land plunder as well. After the 1862 uprising, the U.S. mounted its largest mass execution in Mankato, hanging thirty-eight Dakota people, not far south of the city where George Floyd was murdered. Fort Snelling, where Dred Scott lived as an enslaved man, served as a deadly winter concentration camp for some sixteen hundred Dakota people. The American Indian Movement got its start in Minneapolis, in the late nineteen-sixties, in response to police violence against Native people. Draw a long line from the first slave revolt to the Black Lives Matter protests. Next to it draw a second line,

variously paralleling and intersecting, from Alabama to Minneapolis, and stretching from 1492 to the present. On it you'll find Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa, Black Hawk, Little Crow, and many others. In the spaces between those lines, you'll see the footings and foundations of the nation itself. ♦

Misremembering the British Empire

How did the British become so blinkered about their nation's imperial history?

By [Maya Jasanoff](#)

October 26, 2020



On a cloud-spackled Sunday last June, protesters in Bristol, England, gathered at a statue of Edward Colston, a seventeenth-century slave trader on whose watch more than eighty thousand Africans were trafficked across the Atlantic. “Pull it down!” the crowd chanted, as people yanked on a rope around the statue’s neck. A few tugs, and the figure clanged off its pedestal. A panel of its coat skirt cracked off to expose a hollow buttock as the demonstrators rolled the statue toward the harbor, a few hundred yards away, and then tipped it headlong into the water.

The [Black Lives Matter](#) movement has accelerated a reckoning across Europe about the legacies of slavery and imperialism, nowhere more urgently than in Britain, which presided over the largest empire in world history. The Colston statue stood on Colston Avenue, in the shadow of Colston Tower, on Colston Street, around the corner from Colston Hall. Scratch almost any institution with roots in Britain’s era of global dominance and you’ll draw imperial blood—from the Rhodes Trust, established by the fervent expansionist and white supremacist Cecil Rhodes, to the British Museum, whose founding collection was funded by profits from Jamaican plantations worked by slaves, and the Booker Prize, launched by a food company once notorious for its exploitative practices in the cane fields of British Guiana. Every year, the Queen honors hundreds of citizens with the Order of the British Empire. (A 2004 parliamentary committee recommended changing the name to the Order of British Excellence, to no avail.)

Public discussion in Britain about the imperial past has pivoted on a reductive question: Was the empire good or bad? The Labour Party has pledged to “ensure the historical injustices of colonialism, and the role of the British Empire” are “properly integrated into the National Curriculum,” while [Boris Johnson](#), the Prime Minister, decries a “cringing embarrassment about our history.” A March, 2020, poll found that a third of Britons believed that their empire had done more good than harm for colonies—a higher percentage than in other former imperial powers, including France and Japan. More than a quarter of Britons want the empire back.

Asking, today, whether empire was good or bad is, as a historical matter, about as useful as asking whether the Atlantic Ocean is good or bad. When, what, where, for whom? Britons have been left ill-equipped to say. Unlike most other European countries, Britain stops requiring students to study history when they

reach the age of fourteen, which leaves little room for nuance in a national curriculum designed to showcase “our island story.” The public narrative about Britain’s imperial past matters because it is keenly felt to license present injustice. “Our collective amnesia about the legacy of our colonial past is not getting any better,” the writer and broadcaster Afua Hirsch observes in her podcast [“We Need to Talk About the British Empire.”](#) “We’re engulfed in a sense of denial.”

How did the British get to be so blinkered about their own history? In [“Time’s Monster: How History Makes History”](#) (Harvard), a probing new book, the Stanford professor Priya Satia argues that British views of empire remain “hostage to myth” partly because historians made them so. In 1817, the utilitarian philosopher James Mill provided a template when he published his three-volume [“History of British India,”](#) which became a textbook for colonial administrators. Civilization evolves in stages, the logic ran; Britain had reached a higher stage than its colonies; therefore Britain had a moral duty to lift them up. Mill soon got a job drafting dispatches in the East India Company’s London headquarters. (Mill’s eldest son, John Stuart, who at the age of eleven had helped correct the book’s page proofs, joined him at India House as a junior clerk in 1823 and stayed until the East India Company was dismantled, in 1858.)

Satia, whose earlier books described British surveillance of the interwar Middle East and the eighteenth-century origins of a British military-industrial complex, is well attuned to the echoes of historical scripts. Mill’s basic premise that imperialism brings progress reverberated in a series of moral claims. The parliamentary act abolishing the transatlantic slave trade, in 1807, was held up as proof of the British Empire’s commitment to freedom, effacing its shameful past as the largest slave trader in the eighteenth-century world. Colonial independence, in the twentieth century, was depicted as the culmination of a selfless mission to spread democracy, something “given” or “granted” to colonies, rather than something long denied by force. The Second World War became the British Empire’s triumphant last stand as the bulwark of global liberty in the face of fascism, eliding Britain’s violent suppression of anticolonial resistance. “In the end, the British sacrificed her Empire to stop the Germans, Japanese and Italians from keeping theirs,” Niall Ferguson [wrote](#) in 2002. “Did not that sacrifice alone expunge all the Empire’s other sins?”

“Time’s Monster” joins a dense body of scholarship analyzing liberal justifications for empire. By the early twentieth century, critics were growing

skeptical of British claims about progress. Consider Edward John Thompson, who travelled to Bengal in 1910 as a Methodist missionary and befriended the anticolonial poets Rabindranath Tagore and Muhammad Iqbal. The Great War, in which Thompson served as an Army chaplain in Mesopotamia, soured him on the much touted promises of British civilization. He started writing history to expose the unsavory truths that propagandists had left out. In “[The Other Side of the Medal](#)” (1925), a revisionist history of the Indian rebellion of 1857, Thompson described British atrocities passed over in earlier accounts. It was time, he said, to “face the things that happened, and change our way of writing about them.”

In an incisive recent study of anticolonial dissent, “[Insurgent Empire](#)” (Verso), Priyamvada Gopal, a professor of English at Cambridge, places Thompson in a long line of critics of imperialism. She and Satia agree that public outcries against injustice—such as the brutal suppression of the 1865 uprising at Morant Bay, Jamaica, and the 1919 Amritsar Massacre, in which soldiers under British command fired into a crowd of nonviolent Indian protesters—often amounted to a scapegoating of individuals and the laundering of the nation’s conscience. Yet, through a process of what Gopal calls “reverse tutelage,” colonial subjects consistently pressed their British interlocutors to adopt more radical stances against empire. One might see Thompson as a sort of real-life Fielding, the British teacher at the center of E. M. Forster’s “A Passage to India,” who learns from the Indian doctor Aziz that, in Gopal’s words, they “would have to be allies in the project of driving the English out of India before they could be friends.” “[Insurgent Empire](#)” demonstrates how often critics have hacked at the pedestals of imperial pieties, and how consistently voices outside Britain have inspired them. Nine decades ago, the Scottsboro case prompted anticolonial activists to confront racism; five years before Colston tumbled down, Rhodes Must Fall, a [student movement](#) at the University of Cape Town, inspired an affiliated campaign at Oxford to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes and “decolonize” the curriculum.

What happened to this critical strand in the history of the British Empire? Satia finds an unexpected answer in Thompson’s son, Edward Palmer Thompson. As a boy, he saw the stream of writers and activists who passed through the family’s home, outside Oxford—Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, T. E. Lawrence—as a source of exotic stamps for his collection. When he was a young man, returning from service in the Second World War to complete a degree in history, he rebelled against his father’s Byronic ideals and engagement with Indian

affairs. He joined the Communist Party, took a teaching job in Leeds, resigned from the Communist Party, co-founded *The New Left Review*, and wrote about the lives of working-class radicals—to rescue them, he said, from “the enormous condescension of posterity.”

E. P. Thompson’s “[The Making of the English Working Class](#)” (1963) is one of the most influential works of modern history. Its method, “history from below,” has had an incalculable international impact, not least in recuperating the histories of colonized people. Yet, in Satia’s view, Thompson himself personified an insular turn taken by historians of his generation, who, as Britain’s global power waned, focussed intently on the local. Histories that ignored British imperialism, she suggests, contributed to historical illiteracy as much as histories that defended it did.

Insularity, though, hardly describes postwar Britain’s other preëminent historian, Eric Hobsbawm. A secular Jew born in Alexandria and raised in Vienna and Berlin, Hobsbawm, a lifelong Communist, wrote panoramic histories that unfurled the international ramifications of British industrialization. And empire was an ever-present frame for the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, another co-founder of *The New Left Review*, who came to England from Jamaica as a Rhodes Scholar, and argued that “the very notion of Great Britain’s ‘greatness’ is bound up with empire.” In the nineteen-nineties, practitioners of a “new imperial history” (including Hall’s wife, Catherine, a distinguished feminist historian) picked up this thread and stitched the stories of the British Empire and the British Isles together again.

Historians, whether mythmaking or record-righting, draw on sources that are themselves shaped by historical pressures—and these, too, played a role in distorting the picture of the imperial past. For while Thompson and his contemporaries were performing their acts of archival recovery, the imperial officers of the British government were doing their best to leave little for posterity to find.

On a showery Friday in August, 1947, citizens of the new nation of India crammed into the ceremonial avenues of New Delhi to celebrate their first day of independence. “*Jai Hind! Jai Hind!*” they cheered as the new tricolor was run up the flagpole, and a rainbow broke over the clearing sky. But for days beforehand, it was said, a haze of smoke had blanketed the city: the British were burning government documents en masse, lest anything that might compromise

His Majesty's government get into the wrong hands.

At the empire's late-Victorian apogee, Rudyard Kipling had enjoined his compatriots to contemplate the ruins of fallen powers with humility: "Judge of the Nations, spare us yet, / Lest we forget—lest we forget!" In the event, an apter motto for Britain's imperial retreat was "Best we forget." In one colony after another, as the former *Guardian* journalist Ian Cobain details in his 2016 book, "[The History Thieves](#)," the British went down in a blaze of documents. A reporter in Cairo during the Suez Crisis recalled standing on the lawn of the British Embassy "ankle deep in the ashes of burning files." Twelve days before Malaya's independence, in 1957, British soldiers in Kuala Lumpur loaded trucks with boxes of records to be driven down to Singapore and, a colonial official reported, "destroyed in the Navy's splendid incinerator." In 1961, recognizing that "it would perhaps be a little unfortunate to celebrate Independence Day with smoke," the Colonial Office advised the governor of Trinidad and Tobago to get an early start, and told him that he could also pack files into weighted crates and drop them into the sea. In British Guiana, in 1965, two women hovered over a forty-four-gallon drum on the Government House grounds carrying out what their boss described as "the hot and wearing work" of cremating files. What colonial officials didn't destroy, they hid. In Nairobi, nine days before Kenya became independent, four packing crates of sensitive papers were hustled into a plane and flown to London Gatwick, where a government official supervised their transfer into storage. These, along with thousands of other colonial files, ended up stashed behind the razor wire of Hanslope Park, in Buckinghamshire, an intelligence facility dedicated to communications security—that is, to keeping secrets.

"Erasing history" is a charge invariably lobbed at those who want to remove the statues of contentious figures. But taking down a statue isn't erasing history; it's revising cultural priorities. Those who pulled down the Colston statue were, in a way, making history—by insisting that public space reflect the values of postcolonial Britain, just as citizens of former colonies have renamed, removed, and reframed imperial symbols. (In the nineteen-fifties, a British diplomat in India discouraged the idea of sending dismantled monuments to England, wondering "what use a series of somewhat weather-beaten and not uniformly first-class statues could be put to in the United Kingdom. I thought we had too many already!")

Burning documents: now, *that's* erasing history. By eliminating written evidence

of their actions from the archival record, British officials sought to manipulate the kinds of histories that future generations would be able to produce. E. P. Thompson, who struggled for years with the “secret state” to get details about his brother’s death during a covert wartime operation, would not have been surprised by the extent of government duplicity. “Reasons of state are eternally at war with historical knowledge,” he said. Colonial officials in Uganda, rifling through their files to figure out what to destroy, came up with a name for the process of erasure. They called it Operation Legacy.

The secret stash at Hanslope Park was revealed only in 2011, during a lawsuit brought against the British government by victims of torture in colonial Kenya. (The case was based in part on oral testimony gathered by my Harvard colleague Caroline Elkins.) What came pouring out from the so-called “migrated archives” were records of systematic, wide-ranging, stomach-churning abuse. These accounts flew in the face of the popular British myth that—as a Home Office guide for the U.K. citizenship test currently assures us—“there was, for the most part, an orderly transition from Empire to Commonwealth, with countries being granted their independence.”

“The problem with weighing pros and cons is that it presumes there is a point at which the story is over, the accounts are closed, and we can actually tot up the balance,” Satia writes. But the reckoning continues. In 2018, it emerged that dozens of immigrants of the “Windrush generation” (named for a ship, the Empire Windrush, which brought Caribbean migrants to the U.K. in 1948), who had legally settled in Britain between 1948 and 1973, had recently been deported by the Home Office because they couldn’t prove their status. Their landing cards —often the only record of their legal arrival—had been destroyed in a procedural culling of the archives in 2010.

In 2002, the privately funded British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, which aimed to present the imperial age from multiple perspectives, opened in Bristol after more than a decade of planning. In a slant rhyme to the end of empire, it closed its doors six years later and went into liquidation amid sordid reports about the unauthorized sale of loaned objects. The chairman of the museum’s board of trustees said, “I think the time has not yet arrived for the proper story of Empire and Commonwealth to be told.”

Satia joins Gopal, Hirsch, and a growing number of historians—many of them scholars of color—in trying to change that storyline. A fuller history of empire

and its legacies requires, in part, what Gopal calls “a sustained unlearning.” This approach is gaining momentum, at least symbolically. Two days after Colston fell, a crane in London’s Docklands hoisted the effigy of another slave trader off its plinth, as Mayor Sadiq Khan launched a review of all public landmarks. The University of Liverpool announced the renaming of a dormitory commemorating Prime Minister William Gladstone, who was the son of a slaveowner and, in his maiden speech in Parliament, in 1833, had argued in favor of compensating slaveowners for emancipated slaves. The governing body of Oriel College, Oxford, voted to remove the controversial statue of Rhodes that, four years earlier, it had affirmed keeping in place, while Imperial College London, endowed by Rhodes’s South African mining cronies, removed its motto, *Scientia imperii decus et tutamen*: “Scientific knowledge, the crowning glory and safeguard of the empire.”

What shall be learned instead? Satia, taking inspiration from the work of Urdu poets, calls on historians to step away from narratives of moral progress and seek fresh ways to connect the present and the past. A good example of what that might look like in practice is University College London’s Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-Ownership. The center (which Catherine Hall chairs) has compiled a database of every slaveowner in the British colonies at the time of emancipation, in 1833, and has wrinkled the sanctimonious tale of British abolitionism. Its researchers have shown that government payouts to slaveowners following emancipation seeded fortunes inherited by generations of prominent bankers, writers, engineers, and politicians—sustaining slaveowners’ privilege right down to the present. Last year, the University of Glasgow, scrutinizing its own imperial gains, announced a twenty-million-pound project to explore the history of slavery and its consequences, in partnership with the University of the West Indies, whose vice-chancellor, Sir Hilary Beckles, has been at the forefront of the Caribbean reparations movement. A myth countered, a history deepened, and a gesture of recompense. There may never be an end to reckoning, but such beginnings might help historians imagine broader forms of recovery and repair. That, too, could be a kind of progress. ♦

[November 2, 2020 Issue](#)

Briefly Noted

“The Next Great Migration,” “Max Jacob,” “Silence Is My Mother Tongue,” and
“The Cold Millions.”

October 26, 2020

THE NEXT GREAT MIGRATION



The Beauty and Terror *of* Life on the Move

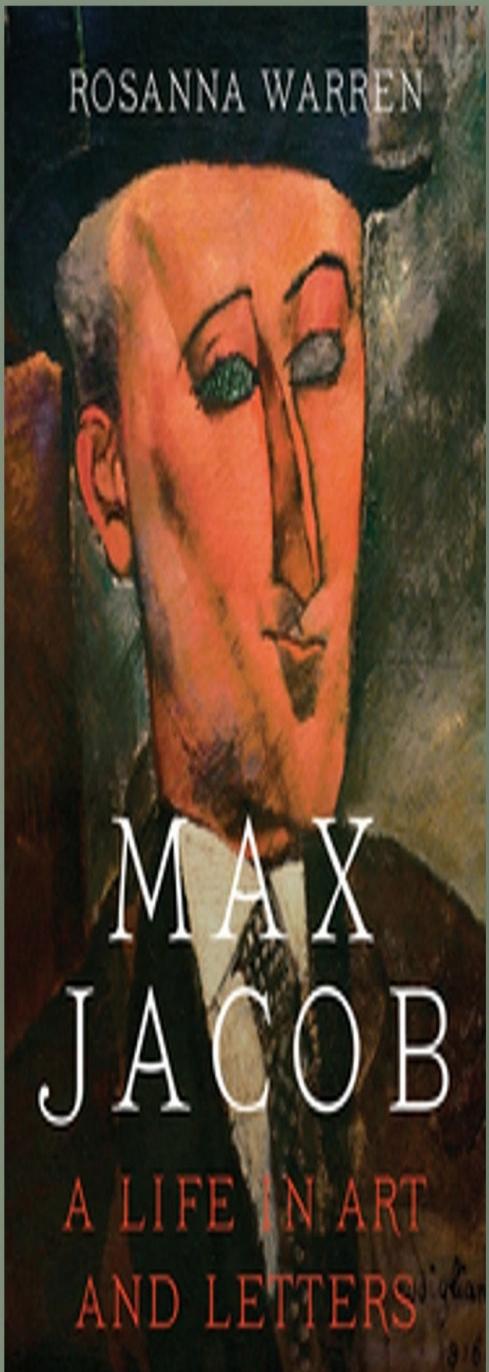
SONIA SHAH

Author of *Pandemic*

BLOOMSBURY

[**The Next Great Migration**](#), by Sonia Shah (Bloomsbury). Countering the perception that today's human and nonhuman migrations represent a global crisis, this engrossing book draws on history, interviews, and a wide range of scientific research to show that migration is "an unexceptional ongoing reality." Shah deftly traces the influence of the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, whose commitment to the Christian idea of a static, divinely ordered world led him to dismiss the reality of natural migration, and whose bigotry led him to reject the possibilities of human migration and of shared ancestry. She shows how Linnaeus's ideas formed the basis for centuries of so-called race science, eugenics, racist state structures, and xenophobia.

ROSANNA WARREN



MAX
JACOB

A LIFE IN ART
AND LETTERS

[Max Jacob](#), by Rosanna Warren (Norton). The poet, painter, and astrologer Max Jacob embodies both the euphoric inception and the tragic demise of European modernism in this lively literary biography. A friend of Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire, and a mentor to Jean Cocteau, Jacob was a Zelig of Paris's bohemian demimondes, but Warren also makes a case for the importance of his ecstatic prose poems and cabaret verse, which appear in her own deft translations. As the aesthetic conflicts between Symbolism and Cubism, Surrealism and Dada give way to the advent of real violence, Warren's account takes on an elegiac tone. Jacob, a devout Catholic who converted from Judaism, died in an internment camp in 1944, two days before his scheduled deportation to Auschwitz.

"Stunning. . . A splendid,
compulsive reading experience."

—Maaza Mengiste

SILENCE IS MY MOTHER TONGUE



SULAIMAN
ADDONIA

A NOVEL

Silence Is My Mother Tongue, by Sulaiman Addonia (*Graywolf*). Caught up in the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Saba, the teen-age protagonist of this enigmatic novel, has been forced to flee to a Sudanese refugee camp with her brother and mother. The siblings' bond sustains them as they navigate the camp, a place of friendship and rough justice, of rigid tradition and sexual awakening. For the refugees, "life itself was suspended, quietly churning like milk in a goatskin," Addonia writes. "Soon it would curdle." When Saba, who had wanted to become a doctor, is pushed into marriage, she makes a choice that carries her far from her brother, believing all the while that "dreams for a woman are no longer inherited but created."

THE COLD MILLIONS

A NOVEL

JESS WALTER

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

Beautiful Ruins



[**The Cold Millions**](#), by Jess Walter (*Harper*). Set primarily in Spokane, in 1909, this masterly novel dramatizes the free-speech riots led by the Industrial Workers of the World, and features such historical figures as the labor organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and John Sullivan, the police chief who put her in jail. The plot centers on two brothers who join “this army of the poor and broken.” Shifting perspectives and sharp plot twists contribute to the richness of the story, bringing a tumultuous time in American history to life. Walter illustrates how injustice can galvanize young men but also wreck them. “We were flies buzzing around the heads of millionaires,” one of the brothers observes. “Fooling ourselves that we had power because they couldn’t possibly swat us *all*.”

Comment

- [Trump's Bitter, Vainglorious Fantasy of America on the Debate Stage](#)

[November 2, 2020 Issue](#)

Trump's Bitter, Vainglorious Fantasy of America on the Debate Stage

Biden's challenge was that the President lies in a manner that is so unanchored to reality that it becomes disorienting for anyone watching.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

October 25, 2020

The America that [Donald Trump](#) described in his debate with [Joe Biden](#) last Thursday night is a strangely destructible place—one that might, in a blink, disappear. In an exchange about [covid-19](#), Trump said, “We can’t close up our nation, or you’re not going to have a nation.” After a few minutes, he repeated that warning, saying, “We have to open our country—we’re not going to *have* a country.” This is not a new move for Trump: the list of things without which, he has previously said, Americans won’t have a country includes a border wall, steel, petroleum, eminent domain, and his reëlection. Later in the debate, he noted that, if a President Biden secured a public option for health care, “this whole country will come down.”



Whether Trump wins or loses on November 3rd, Thursday night was almost certainly the last time that he will appear on a debate stage. He used the occasion to present a bitter, vainglorious fantasy of America, with triumphs invented and disasters ignored. As always, he added a dose of conspiracy theories—“All of the e-mails, the e-mails, the horrible e-mails!”—in an attempt to leave people perplexed about the truth. In contrast with the first Presidential debate, he more or less obeyed the time limits (enforced by microphone muting) and didn’t try to shout down Biden or the moderator, Kristen Welker, which mainly showed that he can prevaricate calmly. One of his bigger lies was that many of America’s greatest common problems are due to what he called “badly run, high-crime, Democrat—all run by Democrat—cities and states.”

Biden’s challenge, which he navigated fairly well, was that Trump lies in a manner that is so unanchored to reality that it becomes disorienting. Never mind, for example, that the Trump Administration’s lawyers are heading to the Supreme Court in two weeks to argue that the entire [Affordable Care Act](#), including its protections for people with preexisting conditions, should be thrown out, and that Trump has articulated no plan for what would replace it. When asked what he would do, he replied, simply, that “preexisting conditions will always stay.” As for the more than five hundred children taken from their families at the border whose parents the government now can’t find, he said that their plight was the fault of “coyotes,” “cartels,” and “gangs.” On the subject of race, he repeated that he had done more for Black Americans than anybody with the “possible exception” of Abraham Lincoln.

Trump’s falsehoods are always harmful, but distinctly so when it comes to the pandemic. The coronavirus, as it is often said, does not respect party or state lines, and because it is so highly infectious confronting it requires a unified community effort. Cases are rising in a majority of states; the official toll of dead Americans is approaching a quarter of a million, and will perhaps reach four hundred thousand by the end of the year—numbers that Biden said should, by themselves, disqualify Trump for the Presidency. Welker noted that the pandemic is entering “a dangerous new phase.” Not in Trump’s view. He insisted that any spikes will soon dissipate—“It’s going away”—and added that anyone who has doubts about his timeline for distributing a vaccine by the end of the year just doesn’t share his faith in the capabilities of the American military to get the job done.

The President used the debate almost as an infomercial to encourage people to court infection. “I got better very fast,” he said. “And now they say I’m immune.” (One of his key pandemic advisers, Scott Atlas, has reportedly pushed what amounts to a pursuit of natural herd immunity, at the likely cost of hundreds of thousands of lives.) Trump claimed that “ninety-nine per cent” of Americans would likewise survive the virus, as if vulnerable Americans were a rounding error, and *covid-19* didn’t have long-term effects on many survivors. Some of Biden’s best moments came in confronting Trump’s attempts to divide and marginalize, as when, speaking about the sites of recent spikes, the former Vice-President said, “They’re the red states, they’re the states in the Midwest, they’re the states in the upper Midwest. . . . But they’re all Americans.” In response, Trump mocked New York’s high death toll.

New York City, by the way, Trump informed the audience, is “a ghost town.” Drawing another dire picture, he told Biden, “Take a look at what’s happening with your friend in Michigan, where her husband’s the only one allowed to do anything. It’s been like a prison.” Trump was referring to the state’s Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, who, according to the F.B.I., was recently the target of a kidnapping plot hatched by members of a militia group—a development that has occasioned no self-reflection on Trump’s part about his personal attacks or his failure to denounce far-right extremists. And although Whitmer’s husband was criticized for mentioning her when trying to get a boat company to expedite some work, he is not the only one allowed to do anything in Michigan. The penal colony on the Great Lakes, like the zombie metropolis on the Hudson, is a place that exists only in Trump’s imagination.

The brittleness that pervades America’s political culture comes, in part, from four years of Trump responding to every problem by deriding someone else. One of his main targets on Thursday was Biden’s son Hunter and his business dealings in Ukraine and China; in recent days, Trump has seized on unverified e-mails that his lawyer [Rudy Giuliani](#) says fell into his hands. (Whatever else the e-mails are, they are not, as Trump maintains, a “smoking gun” that shows wrongdoing by the elder Biden.) The resulting exchange was dizzying, despite Biden’s ripostes about the President’s own dodgy finances. In addition to microphone muting, the debate might have benefitted from subtitles; Trump increasingly speaks in a patois of catchphrases—“eighteen angry Democrats,” “another Russia, Russia, Russia hoax,” “the laptop from hell”—that are hard to decipher.

A plain translation is that Trump is attacking Biden, his family, and any Democrat he sees because he is behind in the polls and is getting desperate. That same impulse underlies his frenetic prophecies of American doom. During the debate, Trump said of Biden, “If he’s elected, the stock market will crash!” But the polls don’t seem to have sparked any fall; Wall Street apparently doesn’t think that America will disappear. Indeed, if Biden wins, some of the country’s values may reëmerge. And Trump is the one who will be gone. ♦

Read More About the 2020 Election

- Why [Joe Biden](#) must win.
- The fall and rise of [Kamala Harris](#).
- When a [sitting President threatens to delay a sacrosanct American ritual like an election](#), you should listen.
- To understand the path Donald Trump has taken to the 2020 election, [look at what he has provided the executive class](#).
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Dept. of Laughs

- [The Comedy Writers Who Try to Make Cuomo Cool](#)

[November 2, 2020 Issue](#)

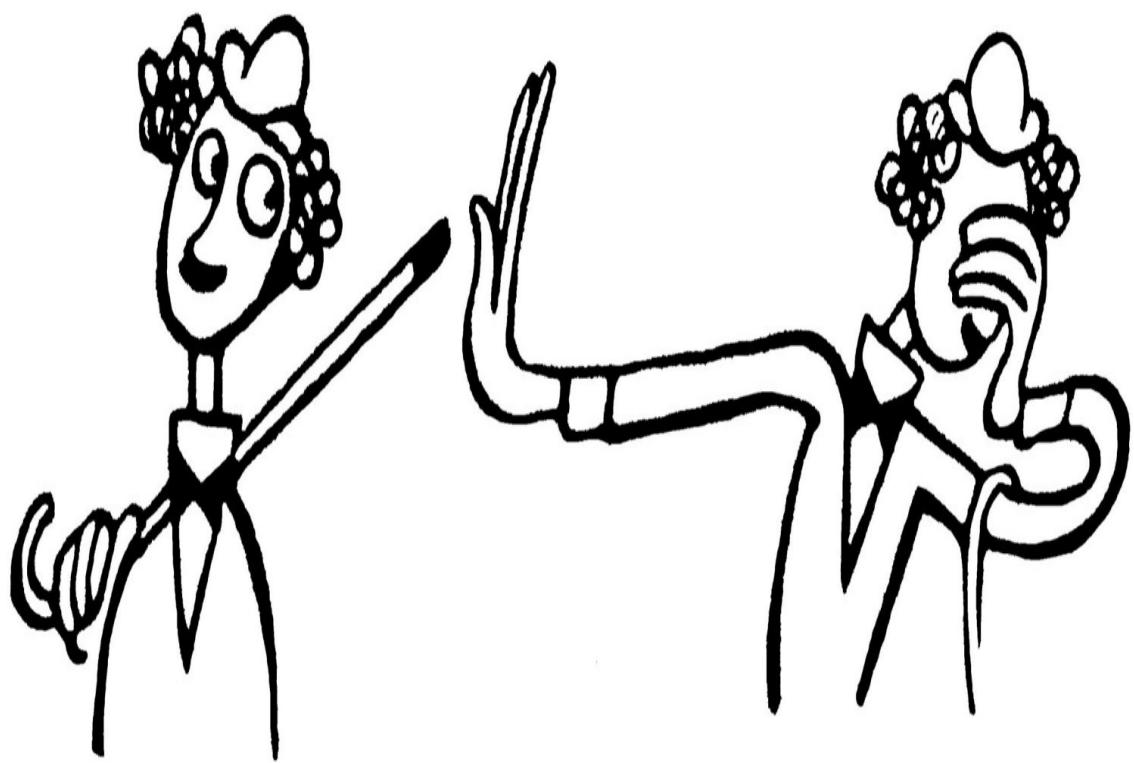
The Comedy Writers Who Try to Make Cuomo Cool

With the help of Paul Rudd, a pair of “Tonight Show” staffers were tasked by the Governor’s office with making a P.S.A. to get millennials to mask up.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

October 26, 2020

Andrew Cuomo isn’t known for his cool factor with young people, or for his comedy chops. But, last month, New York’s governor tweeted out a video that covered both bases: a public-service announcement imploring millennials to wear masks, starring Paul Rudd. “Yo, what up, dawgs? Paul Rudd here, actor and certified young person,” the fifty-one-year-old begins, wearing skater gear. “A few days ago, I was talking on the iPhone with my homie Governor Cuomo, and he’s just going off about how us millennials need to wear masks.” Rudd goes on to mangle youngster slang (“Masks—they’re totally *beast*”), beatbox, and pretend to call Billie Eilish (“You’re wearing your mask? Man, I want to stan you”). The video has been viewed more than eight million times.



The P.S.A., part of Cuomo's "Mask Up America" campaign, is the work of Ben Kronengold and Rebecca Shaw, who are, in fact, certified young people. At twenty-four, they are the youngest writers on the "Tonight Show," where they were hired after graduating from Yale, in 2018. Their specialty is writing sketches for politicians, like a slow-jamming segment for Bernie Sanders. "That was a special one," Shaw said recently, at the apartment she shares with Kronengold, in Chelsea. The two have been dating since their freshman year. They met in Washington Square Park, at an event for accepted students. "This woman walked by who had been feeding the birds, with, like, forty pigeons on her arms," Shaw recalled. "Ben turned to the group and said, 'Do you think she knows?' It just made me laugh so hard."

"And no one else," Kronengold added.

At Yale, they joined rival comedy troupes, the Fifth Humour and Red Hot Poker, and secretly edited each other's sketches. "We were realizing how much we liked making comedy together," Shaw said. During their senior year, they created, for the Yale Symphony Orchestra's Halloween show, a film called "Bulldog and the Beast," for which they wrangled cameos from Allison Williams, Sarah Jessica Parker, and Liev Schreiber. Their breakout hit was a two-hander graduation speech, in which Shaw pretended to dump Kronengold at the podium. Hillary Clinton, the Class Day speaker, cracked up in a seat behind them. "She asked us afterward what our plans were after graduation," Shaw said. "I think it was one of the first times we really put into words 'We want to write comedy.'" A YouTube video of the speech rocketed past five million views, and the couple used it to get an agent.

Shaw said that, a few months ago, "we got a call from our agent, saying, 'Do you guys want to get on the phone with Paul Rudd? He was asked by Governor Cuomo's office to film some sort of P.S.A., and he wants to riff some things out with some sketch comedians.'" They filmed the sketch at the Governor's offices in midtown. (The only note from Cuomo's staff was to cut an expletive.) Now that it had gone viral, they'd arranged to pitch more ideas. On a Monday night, the pair sat on a couch, with a labradoodle named Milo, for a brainstorming session. Cuomo's team had suggested three messaging topics. First: masks. Kronengold proposed a serious, straight-to-camera shot, in which a good-looking celebrity (Ryan Reynolds?) talks about how mask-wearing has robbed the world of his beautiful face. "'We feel bad. We're depriving you in a way,' "

he riffed. Shaw laughed. Could it work for Scarlett Johansson? Timothée Chalamet? “Any hot New York celebrity would work,” she said. Kronengold had another idea: a comedian (Amy Poehler?) has been tasked with finding a vaccine. “You could see her pouring beakers. It’s just a shitshow mess. You see, like, a pig wandering in the background with a ‘No. 4’ on it. At the end, the turn is ‘Don’t worry, guys. I’ve got this. But just in case . . . wear a mask.’ ”

“I would definitely click something like that,” Shaw said.

Next: New York has a contact-tracing app, *COVID Alert NY*. How to convince young people that it won’t track their movements? Maybe Chris Rock ranting, “We’re not stealing your fucking data. Chill out!” Or, Kronengold said, what if, say, Will Ferrell is explaining how to use the app and he gets an alert that he’s been exposed to the virus? “He’s, like, ‘I don’t have the fortitude for this! I know it’s going to take me!’ ”

“Really funny, but too dark.”

Finally: voting in a pandemic. Kronengold pictured a celebrity telling New Yorkers their options. “‘I don’t want to leave the house.’ ‘Great! Absentee!’ ‘I’m going to be busy on Election Day.’ ‘Early voting!’ And then, like, ‘I want to be piggybacked to the polls by John Cena, and I won’t accept anything less.’ ”

“I like that a lot,” Shaw said. They put it down as an idea for Tina Fey. ♦

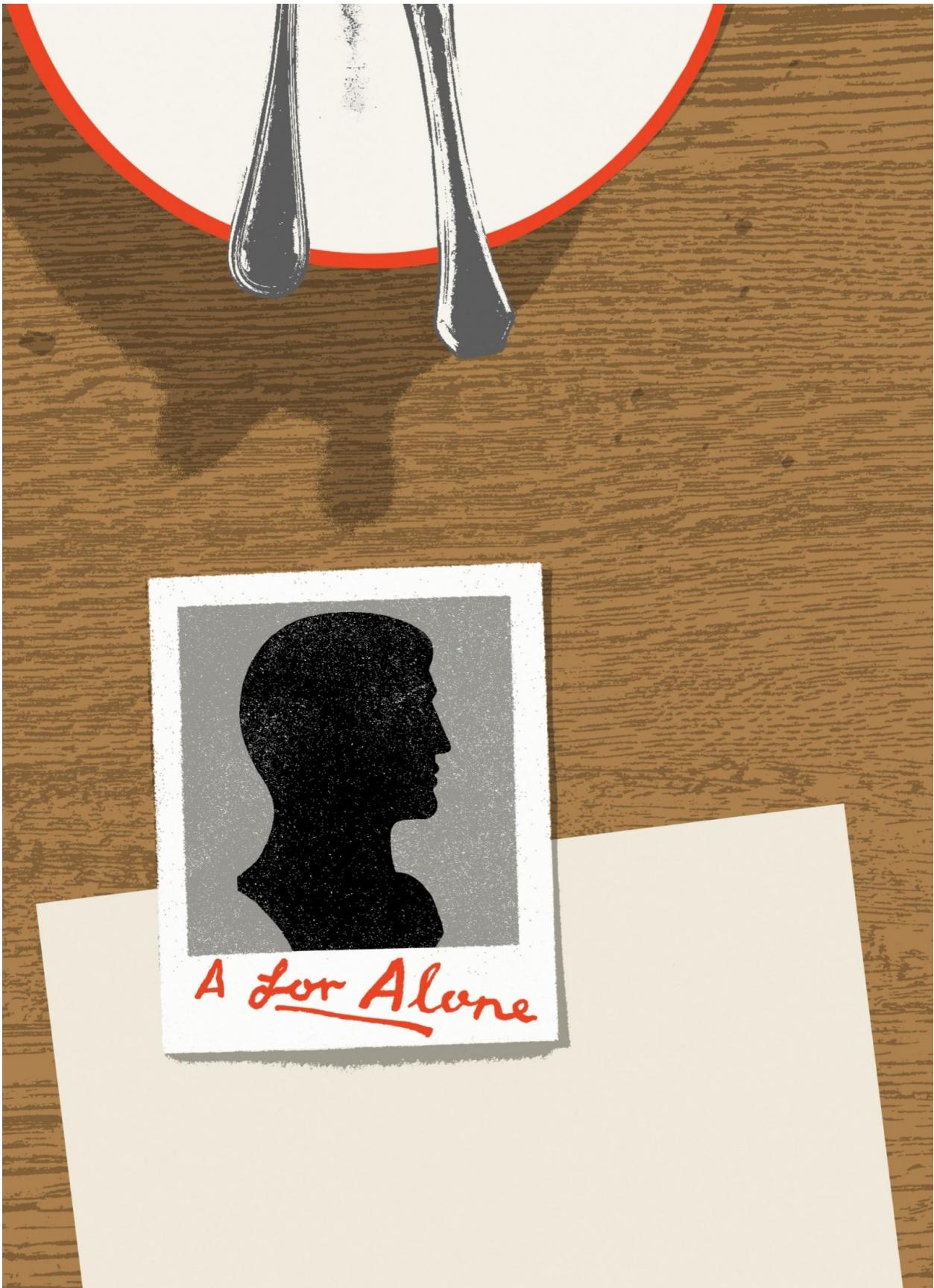
Fiction

- A for Alone

A for Alone

By [Curtis Sittenfeld](#)

October 26, 2020



Audio: Curtis Sittenfeld reads.

Irene's medium, the one in which she has exhibited at galleries, is textiles, but for "Interrogating Graham/Pence" she decides to use Polaroid photos and off-white Tintoretto paper. Even though the questions will be the same for all the men, she handwrites them in black ink, because the contrast of her consistent handwriting with the men's varied handwriting will create a dialogue in which she is established as the interrogator. Before her lunch with Eddie Walsh, she writes:

Date

Name

Age

Profession

When, prior to lunch today, did you last spend time alone with a woman who is not your wife?

Are you aware of the Modesto Manifesto, also known as the Billy Graham Rule, also known as the Mike Pence Rule?

If so, what is your opinion of this rule?

When I invited you to lunch, what was your reaction?

She and Eddie are meeting at a Thai restaurant downtown. Unless it feels organically relevant, she plans to make no mention of the project until after the arrival of the check, which she will pay.

Curtis Sittenfeld on politics and ambiguity.

Almost thirty years ago, as undergraduates at the U, Irene and Eddie both took Introduction to Ceramics. The studio featured two potter's wheels and was open until midnight, and Irene and Eddie spent many more hours there than was necessary—not because of each other but because of the wheels. Over time, as they chatted intermittently, it emerged that both of them would have preferred majoring in studio art—Irene's major was product design and Eddie's was

economics—and that neither of them had parents who would have been O.K. with this. Eddie had grown up on a farm in southwest Minnesota, and Irene was a dentist's daughter from St. Cloud. In the ceramics studio in 1988, a white-paint-splattered radio and cassette player sat on the sill of the huge window overlooking Twenty-first Avenue, and stuck inside the cassette slot was Cat Stevens's "Greatest Hits," turned to side two. Though every so often a person more foolish or enterprising than Irene would attempt without success to remove it, she never tired of the songs.

She and Eddie both took more ceramics courses. After graduation, they lived in group houses two blocks apart in the Kingfield neighborhood and regularly saw each other at parties. Eddie was affable, funny, and good-looking, and always had a serious girlfriend (the third of whom, a woman named Fara, he married). Following college, Irene was hired in product development at Target and Eddie by an investment firm. Irene was twenty-five when she married Peter; they moved to Ann Arbor for him to attend medical school, then to Pittsburgh for his orthopedic-surgery residency, then to San Francisco for his fellowship. By the time they moved back to Minnesota, she was thirty-five and the mother of seven-year-old twin boys. Eddie had started his own investment firm, and he and Fara had a daughter and a son and lived in a gigantic house out on Lake Minnetonka; apparently, though still affable, he had become enormously rich and successful.

Outside the Thai restaurant, Irene runs into Eddie on the sidewalk, and he hugs her warmly.

After the embrace, she says, "Thanks for meeting me," and he says, "Is everything O.K.?"

"Everything's fine." She rolls her eyes. "Trump-fine. Shitshow-fine."

"But—" Eddie hesitates. "You're healthy? You look good."

"Oh, God," she says. "Did you think I was sick? I'm not sick."

"No, it's great to see you. It was great to hear from you. But just—I didn't know—since it's been a few years."

"It hasn't been *that* long," Irene says. "Peter and I were at Beth's high-school-graduation party."

“Well, Beth just started her senior year of college,” Eddie says.

So much for organic relevance. Irene says, “Do you know what the Billy Graham Rule is?”

“I don’t think so.”

“A few months ago, there was an article about Mike Pence that got a lot of attention that said he follows it. It’s that, if you’re a married man, you don’t spend time alone with another woman.”

“Oh, I did hear about that.”

“I’m doing a mixed-media project on it. Because, after the article, there was this brouhaha among liberals about how ridiculous it is—that it’s sexist, it blocks professional advancement for women, et cetera. But then I thought, How often am *I* alone with a man other than my husband? Almost never. I agree that the rule is ridiculous and sexist, yet I’m functionally living in Mike Pence’s world. So I decided to conduct an experiment where I invite men I know to have lunch with me, without explanation—except that I’m explaining everything to you now—and afterward I take their picture and ask them to fill out a questionnaire. You’re my first.”

“I’m glad you don’t have Stage IV breast cancer.”

“That’s weirdly specific.” After a pause, Irene says, “Thanks, though. I’m glad, too.”

They enter the restaurant, are shown to a table, and order: for her, papaya salad and fried tofu; for him, massaman curry. She looks across the table at his kind, lined face and feels a fondness for him that turns out not to be incompatible with finding their conversation boring. Is the boredom a result of the inevitable comedown following their emotional greeting or a reflection of the topics they discuss? The tuck-pointing he and Fara are having done to their house; his involvement in a fund-raising campaign for the U; what they hope for from the Mueller investigation, which of course is what any Democrat hopes for from the Mueller investigation.

He insists on paying, and, because of how rich he is, she acquiesces. Before the waiter brings back Eddie’s credit card, Irene reaches into her bag for the Polaroid

camera and the handwritten questionnaire, which is protected inside a linen folder. He fills it out in less than a minute, then grins gamely for the camera.

As the photo slides out, he says, “Now that you mention it, I’m rarely alone with a woman who isn’t Fara.” Gesturing across the table, he says, “For sure, not like this. But professionally, too. I guess it’s because financial planning is a male-dominated field. Where did you say your exhibit will be?”

QUARANTINE: DAY QUINTY-NEVEN

Have read all books. Watched all shows. Watching bananas ripen.

Maybe I'll make banana



"I'm not nearly that far along," Irene says. "I need to see how the project unfolds." Fleetingly, she wonders if he envies the fact that she's still making art or if he considers her a chump.

This is when, his expression thoughtful, he says, "I listen to a satellite radio station when I'm driving that plays—I guess you'd call it classics. And whenever a Cat Stevens song comes on, I think of the ceramics studio."

"I know!" she says. "A Muzak version of 'Peace Train' was playing the other day at the grocery store!"

They smile at each other, and he says, "This was fun. Let's do it again soon with Fara and Peter. Fara's our designated calendar manager, so probably best if you e-mail her."

In her car, Irene reads Eddie's answers:

Date *September 8, 2017*

Name *Edward Nicholas Walsh*

Age *49*

Profession *Co-founder, Walsh Askelson Capital Group*

When, prior to lunch today, did you last spend time alone with a woman who is not your wife? *Professionally: sometimes work with associate named Megan, albeit usually not alone. Socially: can't even remember . . . 2015? 2008? 1995?*

Are you aware of the Modesto Manifesto, also known as the Billy Graham Rule, also known as the Mike Pence Rule? *N/A*

If so, what is your opinion of this rule? *Seems weird*

When I invited you to lunch, what was your reaction? *Was worried, glad you're good!*

Her original plan was to have lunch with a different man every week for a year.

After making a list of plausible candidates—actual friends, acquaintances from the Twin Cities art world, long-ago Target co-workers, neighbors and former neighbors, fathers of her sons’ friends—she realized that fifty-two was far too ambitious. She got to twenty-one, but, when she subtracted those with whom she suspected even an hour-long lunch would be intolerably awkward, the list dropped to sixteen. Of the sixteen, two were single—one divorced, one never married—and weren’t single men exempt? Another two were gay, which raised a different question: Wouldn’t Irene’s ability not to fall in love with them and vice versa fail to rebut the threat of omnipresent and unbridled heterosexual lust implied by the Billy Graham Rule? On the other hand, how in the year 2017 could she exclude anyone for being gay and not somehow be siding with Pence?

She gave up on scheduling the lunches at even intervals. If she could recall spending time alone with a man in the past, no matter how long ago, she put an “A” next to his name; if he was gay, she put a “G”; if he was single, she put an “S,” though she decided against contacting the single men unless not enough of the married ones panned out.

In the mid-two-thousands, after Irene and her family moved back to Minneapolis, a man named Phillip was the coach of her sons’ hockey team; his own son was also on the team. This was during a period when Irene decided to fight her natural aversion to group activities, and she often signed up to provide team snacks. The seven- and eight-year-old boys met three times a week. Irene didn’t expect to like Phillip, which maybe made it easier to? He was extremely patient and clear when explaining to the kids the rules of hockey and his own expectations.

For lunch, they meet at a grass-fed-burger chain near the suburban office where he’s an insurance adjuster. She arrives first, and when he joins her she can feel immediately that he is confused but that, unlike Eddie, he will not ask why she has summoned him. Either Phillip is too reserved or they don’t know each other well enough anymore. As they make small talk about how their sons are doing at college, Phillip sits stiffly, almost sideways, and doesn’t smile.

This confusion is, of course, the point. And yet she can stand it for only five minutes after they order—if the artist in her is fine inducing discomfort, neither the Midwesterner nor the woman in her is. “So,” she says, “did you wonder why I suggested getting together?”

“I thought there’d be other people,” he says.

“Funny you should say that. Have you ever heard of the Billy Graham Rule or the Mike Pence Rule? It’s that, if you’re a married man, you don’t spend time alone with a woman, because it’s, you know, inappropriate.”

At the same time, she rolls her eyes and he says, “Makes sense.”

As she tries to remember if he’s religious, she says, “But the rule applies across the board, personally and professionally. Don’t you ever have a meeting with a colleague who’s female?”

“There’s a difference between talking to someone in the office and going out for a drink.”

“Do you remember that I’m a visual artist? I’m doing a project about the rule and”—she pauses—“people’s views on it.”

“What does ‘project’ mean?” He’s squinting grimly. “I don’t want to be part of a Facebook post.”

“No, it’s not for Facebook. And I wouldn’t include anyone without their permission. I’m taking photos and having the participants fill out a questionnaire.”

“Yeah, no,” he says. “I’ll take a pass.”

Their food arrives—a turkey burger for him, a veggie burger for her—and after the waiter walks away she says, “So, are you doing anything fun this weekend?”

This is how they get through the next twenty minutes—she is blandly inquisitive, he is standoffish—and then she says, “Regarding my project, if you agree with the premise of the Mike Pence Rule, that’s interesting. It’s interesting to feature some people who agree with it and some people who don’t. Would you be comfortable filling out the questionnaire anonymously?”

“I’ll pass on that.”

“I realize I’m violating the social contract here, but are you—did you—in the election—” Phillip looks at her blankly, and she says, “Are you a Trump

supporter?”

“I don’t care for the President’s rhetoric, but Pence seems like a smart guy. Good ethics, good leadership.”

Once, in the third period of a tied hockey game, Irene’s son Colin scored a goal against his own team. His team lost, and afterward, while the little boys clustered off the ice and Colin blinked back tears, Phillip calmly told the team that everyone made mistakes, and what mattered wasn’t any particular moment or any one game but how they played together over a whole season.

At the restaurant, she says, “I wish I thought Pence was any better, but his homophobia, his abortion restrictions, plus the way he kowtows to Trump—I find it really scary.” Phillip says nothing, and she adds, “F.Y.I., a lot of my extended family is conservative.”

“Yeah, I’m not someone who argues about politics,” Phillip says.

At home, on her list, she writes a “U” next to his name, for unsuccessful.

If Irene’s life were a movie, it would be the third man she has lunch with who represents the breakthrough. The first two would be duds, and the third would change everything. But her life is not a movie. Still, although the third isn’t life-changing, he is delightful. The man is Ken, her former boss at Target, now sixty-eight years old, retired, and living on White Bear Lake. He demonstrates none of Eddie’s or Phillip’s apparent need for justification for why he and Irene are in each other’s presence. Instead, he’s palpably pleased to see her, and the conversation is wide-ranging: his upcoming vacation to Bermuda; their former co-workers; a six-hundred-page novel he just read, which he says left him sobbing at the end; and the very long story of a lawsuit filed by his adult niece against her sister based on the second niece’s claim that their mother had given her an amethyst bracelet before her death, which the first niece said her sister had taken without permission. Irene enjoys very long stories involving lawsuits, sisters, and bracelets, and asks many follow-up questions. Is it relevant that Ken is gay? She has amended his questionnaire accordingly.

While holding up the camera, she says, “You have a tiny bit of—” She runs the tip of her tongue between her own left central and lateral incisors.

“Bless you,” he says, and removes the kale remnant with his thumbnail.

Date 9/25/17

Name *Ken*

Age 68

Profession *Retired in 2015 as Senior Group Director at Target*

When, prior to lunch today, did you last spend time alone with a woman? *I went for a walk over the weekend with my neighbor Sheila.*

When, prior to lunch today, did you last spend time alone with a man who is not your husband? *I had dinner last week with my friend Reggie. (At Acqua, which was delicious by the way—not good for the waistline but a fantastic meal!)*

Are you aware of the Modesto Manifesto, also known as the Billy Graham Rule, also known as the Mike Pence Rule? *Pretending gay people don't exist won't make us go away. This administration is nothing but a bunch of bigots and bullies.*

If so, what is your opinion of this rule? *Utter horseshit. Give 'em hell, Irene!*

When I invited you to lunch, what was your reaction? *What a creative person you are! I'm proud to have been your mentor.*

Troy and Irene met five years ago, when they both had work featured in an exhibit of local artists at a gallery in Northeast; Troy's medium is metal sculpture, usually alloy steel. They hit it off on opening night, after being cornered by a drunk gallery donor, and they began meeting every month or two for coffee. In addition to being the one Black man on Irene's list, Troy is ten years younger, handsome, and married to a woman named Gabrielle, who's a lawyer at a big downtown firm. But Irene rarely sees him anymore. Eighteen months into their friendship, Troy won a MacArthur Fellowship, and suddenly he was never in Minneapolis—instead, he was in Miami or New Delhi or London. When they meet, at a sushi place in Uptown, Irene hasn't seen him in about a year.

The first fifteen minutes of their lunch are great. They gossip enthusiastically

about the owner of the gallery where they met, who has just shared on Facebook that she's a nudist. But then they don't, as Irene had anticipated and despite her efforts, segue into discussing work. This was always Irene's favorite part of having coffee with Troy—that they talked about the incremental progress of their art, his welding and her weaving, in such a nitty-gritty way that it might have been incomprehensible to a person overhearing. This time, when she asks about his current projects, he tells her that he's having a show at a major gallery in Manhattan and also that he's looking for an assistant, if she knows anyone. He asks her nothing about what she's working on, to such a notable extent that she wonders if he believes that doing so would be bad manners, now that his success so overshadows hers.

Eventually, before taking his picture and requesting that he fill out the questionnaire, she describes "Interrogating Graham/Pence." His expression is skeptical.

"What?" she says. "Do you think it's a horrible idea?"

"It all depends on the execution."

"Right," she says. "Of course."

"The part I'm not hearing is where it's transformative. Where's the alchemy? You have some Polaroids, some sheets of paper, and then what? That's regurgitation, not transformation."

He's not wrong. But the way he's saying it—it's both practiced and distant, like there's some invisible but enormous audience, like he's giving a *TED* talk titled "Where's the Alchemy?"

Sarcastically, she says, "Thanks for the encouragement," and he says, "Hey, no one's rooting for you more than I am."

As she waits for him to complete the questionnaire, it occurs to her that she may never, after this, see him one on one—that he won't initiate it, and neither will she.

Date *October 4*

Name *Troy Maxwell*

Age 39

Profession *Artist*

When, prior to lunch today, did you last spend time alone with a woman who is not your wife? *Lunch yesterday with my agent in NY*

Are you aware of the Modesto Manifesto, also known as the Billy Graham Rule, also known as the Mike Pence Rule?

If so, what is your opinion of this rule?

When I invited you to lunch, what was your reaction? *Hang in there, Irene*

Instead of answering the second and third questions verbally, Troy has drawn a self-portrait with one eyebrow raised, his lips pursed in scorn. This is almost endearing enough to make her think they'll remain friends, after all.

Man No. 5 is Abe, the father of a boy named Harry, who in elementary and middle school was the best friend of both of Irene's sons. Irene was unsure whether to put an "A" next to Abe's name, because she has in fact been alone with him many times, but never by design. Before their sons could drive, she stood in all seasons at her door while Abe dropped off or picked up his son at Irene's house, or she stood at Abe's door while dropping off or picking up her sons. They also stood next to each other, very much not alone—sometimes with Abe's wife, Karla—in the bleachers at ice rinks and on the sidelines of soccer fields. All of which is to say that she has no idea if she and Abe know each other well or barely.

When Abe joins her, at a chopped-salad place near his office, his eyes fill with tears as he says that he realizes Karla put Irene up to this, but that she, Irene, is a good friend to reach out. It soon emerges, in such a way that it's clear he's unaware she's learning it in this moment, that, ten days ago, in the basement of a fraternity at the University of Wisconsin, his son Harry attempted suicide. Harry has since entered an in-patient program for depression in the Twin Cities, and is also confronting an opioid addiction, of which his parents previously had no inkling. Irene has the almost overwhelming impulse to call her own sons at their colleges, both to ask if they know about Harry and to confirm that they themselves are O.K.

For the duration of lunch, she murmurs unoriginal but sincere expressions of sympathy, asks if there's anything she can do, inquires about the logistical aspects of Harry's program. She eats her entire salad, and Abe eats almost none of his. She paid for both of them after they went through the line at the counter, so there's no bill to signal the end of their time together.

She retroactively decides that this *was* a lunch where she was checking on Abe and not just including him in "Interrogating." Not for the first time, it occurs to her that perhaps, rather than exploring the customs of married heterosexual socializing, she is inadvertently demonstrating the isolation of modern life. As she drives home, she considers abandoning the project.

In October, the #MeToo movement attracts widespread attention, which means that Irene's project has become more relevant, or more unsavory, or both. She plans to explain the project up front to Jack—Man No. 6—because, of everyone who made the cut, she probably knows him the least well.

Jack and his wife, Lori, are friends of friends. Every New Year's Eve, Irene and her husband attend a dinner party held by a couple on their street named Maude and Carl, both of them political-science professors currently on sabbatical in Prague. Jack and Lori, who don't live in the neighborhood, are the other guests.

Irene sent a joint e-mail to Maude and Carl saying that if they were in town she'd try to cajole Carl into participating in her project, and asking for Jack's e-mail address. Carl replied, "Irene, no cajolery would be required!" Before supplying Jack's e-mail, he described his recent visit to Prague's National Gallery. Maude replied, "Carl and I regularly get coffee or a drink one-on-one with opposite-sex colleagues in our department. Nothing untoward happens, and not only is a certain extra energy part of these encounters but that energy is important. Expecting one's spouse to supply the totality of one's mental and social stimulation is childish. On a more prosaic note, Irene, I see that the temperature in Minneapolis is dropping—could you turn our heat on to 55 degrees?"

Irene has never been in direct, individual contact with Jack, and though she has consistently enjoyed talking to him on New Year's Eve for the past five years, she has never seen him anywhere other than at her neighbors' house. He and his wife live in St. Paul, and Irene would have said he was an engineer, but she learns by Googling him that he's actually a geologist at an engineering

consulting firm.

She e-mails him and suggests meeting at a large brewery in Golden Valley that she knows is near his office. She always arrives at these lunches early, but when she walks into the restaurant he's already seated. He stands as she approaches, smiling broadly. "It was such a pleasant surprise to hear from you," he says. After a tiny hesitation, they hug.

He has ordered a beer, so she does, too; until now, the only man she drank with was Ken, with whom she had a glass of white wine. When the waiter departs, Jack gestures to his phone, which is set face down on the table, and says, "I just read an article about a piece of paper Einstein wrote on getting auctioned for 1.5 million dollars. Apparently he was staying at a hotel in Japan, and when he went to tip the bellboy he realized he didn't have any money, so he wrote down his thoughts about happiness on some hotel stationery and gave that to the guy."

"Hmm," Irene says. "Do I sound cynical if I say that I bet the bellboy would have preferred cash?"

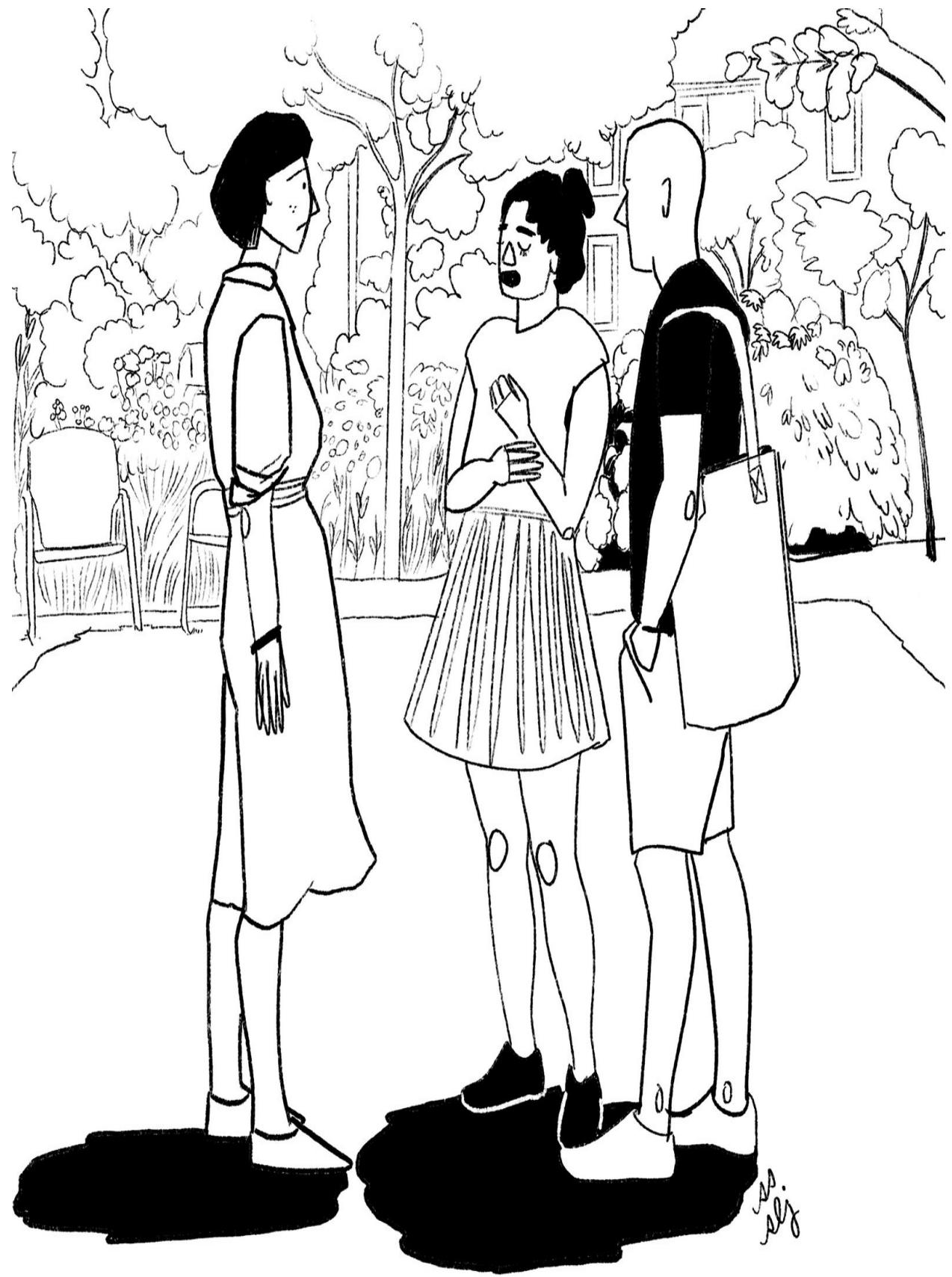
Jack laughs. "That occurred to me, too, although this was right after Einstein learned he'd won the Nobel Prize."

"Then I suppose he was inhabiting his full Einsteinhood by then," Irene says. "Or close to it."

"Also, it's descendants of the bellboy who get the money from the auction. Does that mitigate things?"

"Partly, but it's still so arrogant. It's one degree away from sneezing into a tissue and giving that to someone."

Jack laughs again, takes a sip of beer, and says, "Speaking of genius types, from what I can glean on Facebook, it looks like Maude and Carl are enjoying Prague."



"Both blind dates went well, but Trevor came with a free tote bag."
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

“Yeah, I’m in pretty close touch with Maude, because I’m their house sitter.”

“Are you really?” Jack seems amused.

“Well, I have a studio above our garage, and it literally overlooks their back yard, so it’s not a big deal.”

“But house-sitting is a gig for a fifteen-year-old, and you’re a famous artist.”

“Ha,” Irene says. “I wish.” She raises her eyebrows jokingly. “Are you a big fan of woven-textile design?”

“You’ve had exhibits and stuff.” Jack’s expression becomes self-conscious. “Yes, I’ve Googled you. Is that weird?”

“I don’t think in 2017 it’s weird for anyone to Google anyone else. And you’re probably right that my boys would do the house-sitting if they weren’t away at college. Remind me—do you still have kids at home?”

Jack nods. “Two of the three. Marisa is a sophomore at Carleton, Lacey is a junior in high school, and Annie is in sixth grade.”

“Do you know what an artists’ colony is?”

“I think so, but, in case I don’t, why don’t you tell me?”

“They’re places where artists, including composers or writers, can stay for a few weeks or months and be undisturbed. They’re often somewhere rural, and a chef prepares meals for you and the only expectation is that you’ll be productive. This might sound kind of preposterous, but for years I planned that, when my kids went to college, I would give myself a permanent residency at my own personal artists’ colony. As in, without leaving home. I never applied for a real one because the time never seemed right, but I’d turn my entire life into, you know, the Irene T. Larsen Fellowship for Being Irene T. Larsen.”

“Have you done it?”

“I’m the chef, but yes.”

He raises his beer and says, “Cheers.” After they’ve tapped their glasses, he says, “I don’t know if you remember this, but last New Year’s Eve you recommended a Korean documentary to me. It was about old-women sea divers.”

Irene doesn’t remember mentioning it, though she does remember the documentary.

He says, “I found it very interesting, if you have other recommendations.”

“Well, I watch a documentary every day, so I could give you a list of my top five hundred favorites.”

“Do you really?”

“Not on the weekend, but every weekday afternoon. Usually just on Netflix.”

“Is it part of the Irene T. Larsen Fellowship for Being Irene T. Larsen?”

She laughs. “One of the most important parts.”

Because of the surprising abundance of topics they have to discuss, there’s no obvious moment to mention the project. She orders beet salad and he orders chicken salad and asks if she’s a vegetarian—she is—and they talk about C.S.A.s and a project he’s been working on, on a site in northwestern Minnesota, and more of what his job entails. When the bill comes, he grabs it and says, “This is definitely my treat.”

“You should let me, and I’ll tell you why. Do you know what the Mike Pence Rule or the Billy Graham Rule is?”

“The men-and-women-not-being-alone thing?”

“Exactly. Which—well, my hunch is that you’re not a Trump supporter—”

Jack rapidly shakes his head.

“I’m inviting men I know out for lunch and, if I’m being honest, I’m pretending to neutrally ponder the rule while really trying to highlight how dumb it is. But, at the same time, I think it’s a rule a lot of straight married people unwittingly

abide by.”

“Oh, that’s a great idea,” Jack says. “That’s really interesting.”

Is he being sarcastic?

He continues, “I’m almost sure the last woman I saw one-on-one, before today, was a friend of my cousin Jessica who was about to move to the Twin Cities. We had coffee last spring.”

“Hold that thought. If you don’t mind, I have a questionnaire for you that asks about that. But was the coffee social or more of a professional networking thing?”

“She was in town to look at houses—trying to get the lay of the land on neighborhoods and schools.”

“Have you seen each other since?”

“After her family moved, we had them over for dinner.”

“I think what you’re describing is the exception among people who don’t purposely practice the rule. That you’re allowed to meet with a person of the opposite sex once, and then if you see each other again it’s after you’ve been slotted into a category, whether it’s couples friends or professional acquaintances. But a married man and a married woman can’t form a new, entirely social friendship.”

“Wow,” Jack says. “That’s all so depressingly heteronormative. But, whatever the reason is, I’m happy to get to spend time with you. You’re one of the coolest people I know.”

She experiences a split second of confusion or unsteadiness before saying, “My son Arlo recently told me people don’t use the word ‘cool’ anymore. He said everyone says ‘awesome’ or ‘dope.’ But he undermined the claim because he used the word ‘cool’ a few minutes later.”

“In that case,” Jack says, “what if I say instead that you’re very witty and charming?”

She laughs. "I promise I wasn't baiting you."

"Just out of curiosity," Jack says, "what does Peter think of your project?"

"I haven't mentioned it to him yet."

Though Jack nods, she has the sense that he is taken aback.

She adds, "Not for any particular reason. I don't really discuss my art with him."

"Got it."

"Another part of the project is I'm taking a picture of each man I have lunch with. Are you O.K. with that?"

"I should warn you that I look silly when I smile."

As she pulls the Polaroid camera from her bag, she says, "Did someone tell you that?"

"No, but I see pictures and think, What a goofball."

Holding the camera up, her eye behind the viewfinder, she says, "You don't look silly at all." She has the impulse to say, *You look handsome*. Instead, she says, "You look great."

She realizes while driving home that she forgot to have him fill out the questionnaire; she got distracted by talking about it and neglected to actually give it to him. She'll e-mail him, she decides, and ask if they can meet up again for five minutes in the next few days, perhaps outside his office.

After she pulls into her garage, she checks her phone, and an e-mail from him is waiting. She left the restaurant seventeen minutes ago, and he sent the message ten minutes ago: "Irene, it was very dope seeing you. (Did I do that right?) Let me know if you'd like to get together again. It would be an honor to offend Mike Pence's sense of decency with you anytime. Best regards, Jack."

Instead of her stopping by his office, he suggests that they meet the following afternoon at Wirth Park. As she turns in to the lot off Glenwood Avenue, he is leaning against the driver's door of his car with his arms folded. When he

realizes it's her, he unfolds his arms and smiles. This time when they hug, again after a hesitation, it feels incredibly awkward. He gestures toward Wirth Lake and says, "Do you have time to walk for a bit?"

She's not wearing ideal shoes; perhaps shamefully, she took more care with her outfit than she had the previous day, and she has on heeled suède boots. "Sure," she says. "Although do you mind filling out the questionnaire now? Just so I don't forget again."

She removes the paper from the folder and passes it to him, and as he presses it against the driver's-side window he turns his head and says warmly, "Have I mentioned how impressed I am that you figured out a way to go on dates with lots of men and have it count as work?"

She hesitates for a few seconds, then says, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I know you're critiquing society and all that. But you have to admit that you've found a clever loophole."

She stares at him. "That's very insulting."



"Honey, don't get too close or you'll scare it away."
Cartoon by Arantza Peña Popo

“Oh, God.” He looks genuinely distressed. “I was kidding. Oh, no. I’m really sorry. I just wanted to make you laugh.” They’re both quiet, and he adds, “Really, I’m sorry. I feel like a jerk right now.” When she still says nothing—she honestly doesn’t know what to say—he nods at the piece of paper and says, “What if I finish this, and while we walk I’ll— There’s something I want to come clean to you about. Some context.”

She swallows and says, “O.K.” After he passes her his completed questionnaire, she slips it into the folder and slips the folder into her bag. They head toward the pedestrian path and he says without preamble, “I’ve been very unhappy in my marriage for a long time. We did couples therapy, all that stuff, and I think we just have different personalities. But I can’t see getting divorced with the kids still at home because—and I realize I’m not unbiased here—but I have a strong hunch that Lori would make a divorce as ugly as possible. That she’d involve our girls. Lori isn’t what you’d call even-keeled, nor is she big on boundaries. There came a point about two years into couples therapy where I thought, In order to not lose my mind, I need to give up hope on improving the marriage and accept it for what it is. This might sound defeatist. But she and I were on completely different wavelengths. This was also when I thought, If I ever have the opportunity to have a different kind of relationship with someone else, I’m going to take it. Cheating on my wife isn’t who I planned to be, but I just—I don’t want to die without experiencing love again.”

They are passing an empty beach, not looking at each other, when she says, “And did you find someone else?”

He says, “When I got your e-mail, I thought maybe you were the person I’d been waiting for.”

She stops walking, and he does, too. She is genuinely shocked. She says, “When was it that you decided you’d cheat if you could?”

“Six or seven years ago.”

“And, during that time, how many people have there been?”

“None. To be honest, I’ve never seen any kind of opening, nothing where it even felt like a possibility. And no one I was ever that attracted to, other than very

superficially. But it's not just that I got a random e-mail from you, and it got my hopes up. It's you specifically. I'm sorry if this all sounds crazy, but there's one other part I need to mention. Do you remember the first New Year's Eve we all spent at Maude and Carl's, when we went around the table talking about what tattoos we'd get?"

Again, she does remember, but vaguely.

"People were saying things like their kids' names or a rose. I said the state of Minnesota. And then you told a story about visiting your grandmother in Ohio when you were five years old and jumping wildly on her bed, and at that exact moment an earthquake started, so when you stopped jumping the entire house around you and all the furniture was shaking. You said the tattoo you'd get would be a seismogram of that earthquake." Irene laughs, but Jack's expression is earnest. He continues, "Someone at the table said, 'You must have been afraid of your own power,' and very matter-of-factly you said, 'No, I'm just disappointed that it hasn't happened again.' I was sitting across from you, and you were wearing a dark-blue dress that showed your collarbone and a silver necklace with an oval pendant or whatever those things are called, and I just was overwhelmed." He's regarding her with a great, questioning intensity.

This is all still astonishing, every part of it. She glances away before looking back at him, and he says, "But what about you? If you tell me your marriage isn't broken like mine, I wouldn't—well, I'll still feel the same about you, but I'd respect that."

After a few seconds, she says, "When I was in my twenties, I took pride in not seeing life romantically. I don't think I expected Peter to be, you know, smitten with me. We met after he'd applied to out-of-state medical schools, while he was waiting to hear which he'd been accepted by, and I married him almost for the reasons someone decides to be a foreign-exchange student. It was very important to me to not be a person who'd only ever lived in Minnesota." She smiles a little and says, "That's horrible, right?"

"Were you smitten with him?"

"It was more like we both saw each other as—reliable? Something I was naïve about was how much he'd work. Even now, he works seventy-five or eighty hours a week. And when the boys were little, living in cities where we had no

family, it was so hard having twins. Peter and I hadn't decided ahead of time that I'd quit my job, but it made no sense to keep it."

"What about now? Do you guys do things together? Do you sleep in the same room?"

If this is a euphemism for sex, she ignores it. She says, "Because of how much he works, he's very protective of his Sundays. We have a tandem bike, and we go out for long rides. Or, in the winter, he likes to skate on Lake of the Isles."

"Is he supportive of your art?"

"He's someone who thinks in terms of things like bone fractures. So if I say, 'I'm making a fibre installation about the 1878 mill explosion,' of course that seems kind of ridiculous to him. But he doesn't tell me *not* to make art." Jack looks appalled, and—she tells herself that she is kidding—Irene adds, "Do you still think you want to have an affair with me?"

What he says, in as undefended a way as anyone has ever said anything to her, is "I'd love to have an affair with you, if you want to have one with me."

Later, when they are having an affair, neither of them says "having an affair," nor do they use the term "cheat." In spite of the ostensible cultural consensus that what they're doing is slimy, the words they use with each other are the sweetest she's used with anyone besides her children: My beloved. My precious darling. I adore you, I miss you, I love you so much.

The clichés they enact are no less potent for being clichés. They meet in hotels and occasionally in one of their cars, in a secluded parking lot. They communicate via an app she had not previously heard of, which automatically deletes their messages within an hour. She becomes obsessed with her phone. She pauses "Interrogating," even cancelling the lunch she had already scheduled with a man with whom, a decade ago, she volunteered at a food bank.

She and Jack spend exponentially more time discussing their first lunch and their meeting by Wirth Lake than they spent actually having lunch or walking around the lake. Repeatedly, they recount what they were thinking, what they thought the other person was thinking, which of their own remarks they felt most foolish about, and which of the other person's remarks they were most enchanted by.

At first, they see each other once a week, but they grow greedier and more reckless, and once, before Christmas, it is four times in a week, and once in January it is during a weekend. (They don't have to worry about New Year's Eve at Maude and Carl's with their spouses, because Maude and Carl are in Prague until the summer.) In February, when Irene's car is rear-ended a block from the Millennium hotel on Nicollet Avenue, she thinks, This is it—the jig is up, her secret joy ruined. But, when, in order to explain why a loaner car from the Volvo repair place is in their garage, she tells Peter that she was in a fender bender, he doesn't ask her where, let alone why she was in that part of the city at that time; he doesn't ask her anything.

Instead, the jig is up, her secret joy ruined, after Irene e-mails Jack an article about the auctioning of a note Albert Einstein wrote to a young female scientist. Irene gives the e-mail the subject "Our patron saint." The body of the e-mail contains a link to the article and the single sentence "I can't wait to smother you with kisses on Tuesday!!" This e-mail arrives while his laptop is open on the kitchen table, and his wife, Lori, reads it before he does and confronts him. In addition, she calls their oldest daughter at college to describe what has happened. Jack weeps while telling Irene by phone that they must end things. They both say they don't blame the other—Why did she *e-mail* him the article? Well, because she doesn't know how to send a link on the app. But why didn't she realize e-mailing was a bad idea?—and they both say they'd do it again, even given how it's turned out.

Irene and Peter's understanding is that if he's home from work by eight-thirty they eat dinner together, but if he gets home after that she eats without him. At nine-fifteen, he enters the house, washes his hands, reheats the plate of moussaka she has set aside, eats it, wipes his mouth with a napkin, then says, "I got a phone call today at the hospital from Lori Deahl. Whatever you're doing, you need to knock it off immediately." Up to this point, when it comes to Peter, she has alternated between guilt and astonishment at what, for almost twenty-five years, she has settled for. That night, she feels mostly numb but also ashamed. Does Peter know about the smothering-with-kisses sentence? Does Lori and Jack's oldest daughter? For two nights, Irene sleeps on the couch in her studio, then she and Peter proceed as if nothing has happened.

She and Jack communicate a little more, and have an overwrought conversation in his parked car, but it actually has ended. He tells her that he and Lori are reentering couples therapy. If he wanted to leave Lori, Irene would leave Peter.

But Jack has never wavered about not wanting a divorce. And, though she considers leaving Peter anyway, she decides against it. She is certain that, money-wise, he'd dispassionately and meticulously fuck her over. She would no longer have a residency, a studio, health insurance.

The spring is terrible, intolerable, the summer even more so for how lovely the weather is, the pleasant temperatures and sparkling lakes. How strange to think of Jack living his life such a short distance away, his house in St. Paul ten miles from her house, his office in Golden Valley just five. Irene keeps expecting the interlude when she met up with him two or three times a week, the exhilaration and closeness, to seem like a fever dream. But it keeps seeming real; she remembers it clearly.

Several months after their contact has ended, one late morning in her studio, she comes across the photos and questionnaires from "Interrogating." She read Jack's responses after their walk by Wirth Lake, but she doesn't remember them, probably because she was so agitated that day.

Date Nov 6, 2017

Name *Jack D.*

Age 50

Profession *Geologist*

When, prior to lunch today, did you last spend time alone with a woman who is not your wife? *As I mentioned, coffee w/ my cousin's friend last spring.*

Are you aware of the Modesto Manifesto, also known as the Billy Graham Rule, also known as the Mike Pence Rule? Yes.

If so, what is your opinion of this rule? *I'm not on board with it, but it would be disingenuous to pretend I don't understand the logic.*

When I invited you to lunch, what was your reaction? *I was very excited that I'd get to see you.*

She wants his questionnaire to impart some central truth, to give her closure,

and, while it's nice, the niceness pales in comparison with what he said moments after filling it out—"It's you specifically"—or the many ardent declarations of devotion in the months that followed.

In early August, Maude and Carl return from their sabbatical, and, on the patio of a wine bar, Irene confesses everything to Maude. "I still have no idea," Irene says. "Does all of this officially vindicate Billy Graham and Mike Pence? Or does it mean that even a stopped clock is right twice a day?"

Maude's expression is contemplative and not scandalized. "There are, what, almost eight billion people on earth?" she says. "It's so odd that you've decided Mike Pence either does or doesn't get to tell you how to live." ♦

By [Willing Davidson](#)

Going Going Gone

- [Early Holiday Shopping? Bid on Eva Braun's Stockings, Hitler's Cocktail Bar, and a Bible Autographed by Donald Trump](#)

[November 2, 2020 Issue](#)

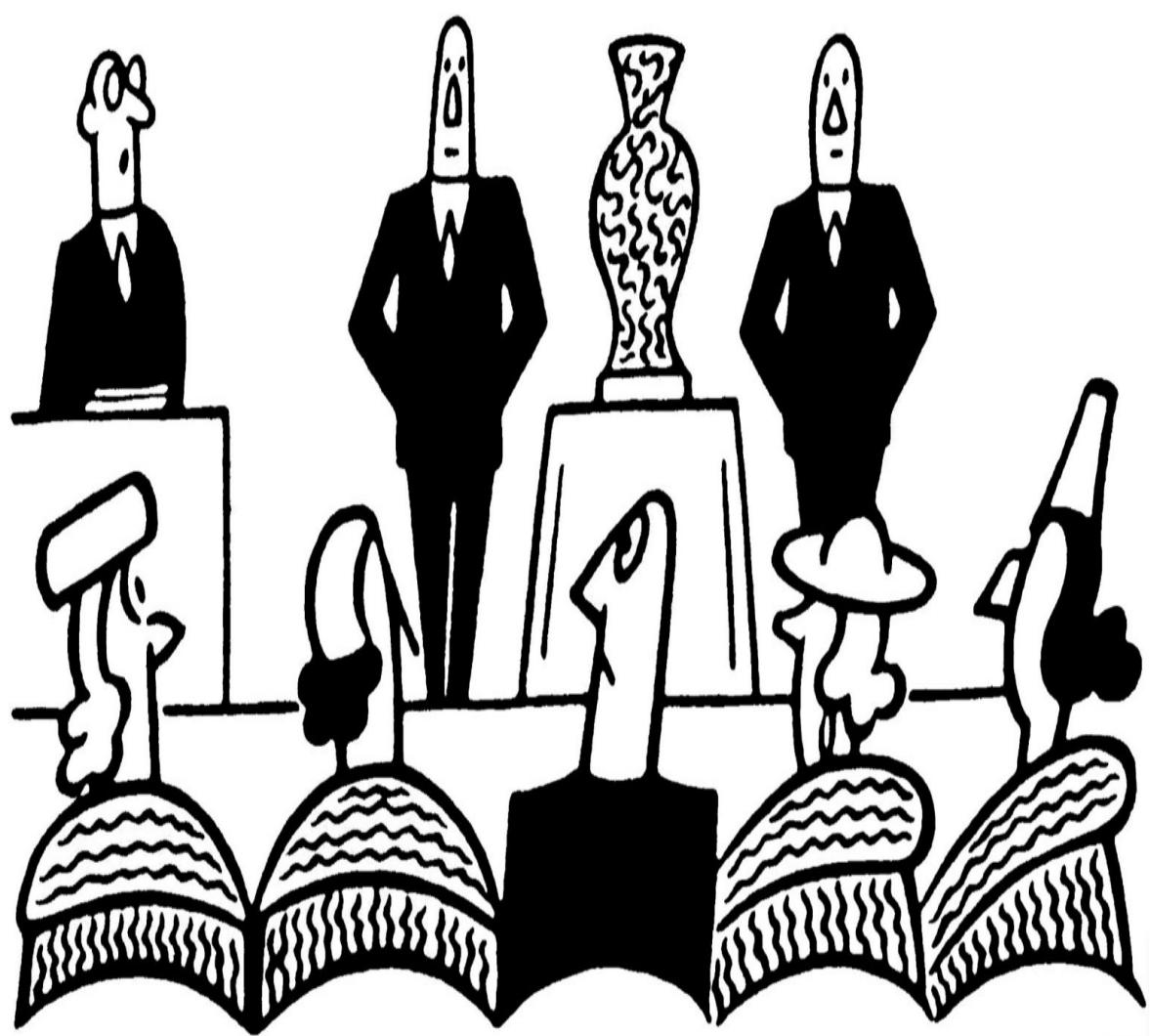
Early Holiday Shopping? Bid on Eva Braun's Stockings, Hitler's Cocktail Bar, and a Bible Autographed by Donald Trump

"I look at it as criminal evidence," the owner of Alexander Historical Auctions says about the wares he peddles, which include memorabilia of the Ku Klux Klan and Josef Mengele.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

October 26, 2020

James Riordan, a semiretired private-equity executive, has a photograph of Churchill, Stalin, and F.D.R., at Yalta, on the wall of his farmhouse, in Maine. It was shot by Riordan's cousin Fin Miller, who had been a member of General MacArthur's security detail. Last year, Riordan decided that he wanted to add to the tableau the signatures of the three men. These so-called signature blocks were easy enough to track down, if not afford, on the historical-document market. Then he thought, Wouldn't it be cool to get something from the loser? He began trolling the Internet in search of a Hitler signature and came across Alexander Historical Auctions, a small operation in Maryland that is known for trafficking in Nazi memorabilia, which almost every reputable dealer in historical documents and artifacts scorns. In 2010, Alexander Historical drew criticism for auctioning off Josef Mengele's diaries.



This is how Riordan found himself on the Alexander mailing list and how he received an alert about an auction, this week, of hundreds of Third Reich items, including Eva Braun's stockings and a giant aluminum cocktail bar, in the shape of a globe, with five brass barstools (estimate: \$150,000 to \$250,000). It had been salvaged from Hitler's private yacht when it was broken up at a boatyard on the Delaware River, in 1951. Another lot was prominently advertised: a Bible signed by Donald Trump. "The 5.5 x 8.5 in. King James version is a 1,002pp. edition published by Christian Art publishers, 2016. The cover and spine are black faux calf, with titles on spine and cover in embossed gold." The blurb mentions how Trump held up a Bible this past spring for his controversial photo op in front of St. John's Church. But this isn't that one. The auction house's opening bid was five thousand dollars.

"To see the Trump Bible next to the Hitler bar and Eva Braun's negligee, as well as Ku Klux Klan memorabilia and some slave-auction receipts, you begin to think these aren't just items of legitimate historical interest," Riordan said last week. "These are touchstones for a global neo-fascist movement." For Riordan, it triggered anxiety about the potential, just before the election, for a Reichstag-fire moment: "When the guy in the White House is actively courting every one of the groups whose memorabilia is being offered for sale, you're tapping into a dark, dark undercurrent."

The man doing the tapping is a sixty-two-year-old native of New Rochelle named Bill Panagopoulos, the owner of Alexander Historical. "Of course I get flak for doing this," he said last week. "I started out thirty years ago, selling letters from Poe, Melville, Manet. But no one knows who they are anymore, because they don't teach that stuff in school. Now people, under forty anyway, only know what's on TV, and that's moving images, which history-wise means World War II." Panagopoulos's father was a veteran of the Greek Navy whose home town of Kalavryta was wiped out by the Germans. "If you ask the average American who Susan B. Anthony or Clara Barton is, no one knows. Heinrich Himmler? Yes, they know."

He went on, "I have a George Washington letter in the auction, where he's writing to order two gross of buttons. That's a lot of buttons. No one would need that many buttons for his household unless they were to clothe his slaves. So it's a great and important letter. But who cares, right?"

Most Nazi material in the militaria market came home with servicemen after the war. As they died, their estates dispersed it, and much of it has been purchased by Jewish collectors. Panagopoulos sold the Mengele diaries to the grandson of a Holocaust survivor and to an Orthodox Jew in Detroit.



"And the award for scariest costume goes to . . . the one guy not wearing a mask."
Cartoon by Daryl Seitchik

"I look at it as criminal evidence," Panagopoulos said of the Nazi loot. "I had a friend, a dealer in New York, who was Jewish, and he told me, 'Every time I get this material, I burn it.' I said, 'Shelly, you're an idiot. This is the only evidence we have.' " Also, he said, "the Germans made material so high quality that people who appreciate the craftsmanship collect it. That sounds like bullshit, but it's not. Neo-Nazis don't have the money or the intelligence to buy this stuff."

Panagopoulos said that if the Trump Bible had been the one from the St. John's photo op he'd have asked for a hundred grand, instead of merely five. Because history. He had urged the consignor to put the Bible up for sale before the election, in the event that Trump loses. Apparently, there is very little official Presidential correspondence signed by Trump in circulation. "He doesn't seem to send any messages at all," Panagopoulos said. There is also, in the auction, a Trump-autographed cover sheet from the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment findings. Someone who knew someone who knew Panagopoulos had presented it to the President at a rally, to be signed. "What that is is a 'Fuck you' to the House," Panagopoulos said. It's also history, and a message, of a kind. ♦

Letter from Portland

- [In the Streets with Antifa](#)

[November 2, 2020 Issue](#)

In the Streets with Antifa

Trump is vowing to designate the movement as a terrorist organization. But its supporters believe that they are protecting their communities—and that confronting fascists with violence can be justified.

By [Luke Mogelson](#)

October 25, 2020



Shortly after noon on September 26th, about fifteen hundred antifascists gathered on the lawn of Peninsula Park, in Portland, Oregon. Some wore black bloc—the monochromatic clothing that renders militant activists anonymous to law enforcement—but the event was family-friendly, and most attendees had dressed accordingly. Booths set up in a leafy grove offered herbal teas and tinctures, arts and crafts, condoms and morning-after pills, radical zines, organic vegetables. Above a stage, a banner read “*EVERYDAY ANTIFASCIST / COME FOR THE ANARCHY / STAY FOR THE SOUP.*” In July, President [Donald Trump](#) had claimed, without evidence, that anarchists were throwing soup cans at police during demonstrations for racial justice. When the anarchists were arrested, he explained, “they say, ‘No, this is soup for my family.’ ” Inevitably, “soup for my family” became a tongue-in-cheek slogan at Portland protests.

Other Presidential statements have been harder to make light of. Throughout the nationwide upheaval set in motion by the police killing of [George Floyd](#), in Minneapolis, on May 25th, Trump has vilified demonstrators as nefarious insurrectionists. Much as adversaries of the civil-rights movement once contended that it had been infiltrated by Communists, he invokes antifascists, or Antifa, to delegitimize [Black Lives Matter](#). A week after Floyd’s death, as [popular uprisings spread from Minneapolis](#) to other cities, the President declared, “Our nation has been gripped by professional anarchists, violent mobs, arsonists, looters, criminals, rioters, Antifa, and others.” As the election nears, he has portrayed Antifa as a grave security threat that the Democrats and their Presidential nominee, [Joe Biden](#), will let destroy the country. During the first debate, after Biden noted that Trump’s F.B.I. director, Chris Wray, had described Antifa as “more of an ideology or a movement than an organization,” Trump scoffed, “You gotta be kidding me.” He told Biden, “They’ll overthrow you in two seconds.”

Such dire warnings are wildly disconnected from reality. Most Americans who identify as antifascists don’t belong to any particular group, and there is no national Antifa hierarchy or leadership. To date, one American has been killed by someone professing an antifascist agenda; right-wing extremists, by comparison, have been responsible for more than three hundred and twenty deaths in the past quarter century. The only known plot to “overthrow” the government in recent months was hatched by right-wing militia members, who, according to the F.B.I., planned to kidnap Michigan’s Democratic governor, [Gretchen Whitmer](#). In June, I stood next to the alleged ringleader, Adam Fox,

during [a rally at Michigan's capitol](#), while a speaker yelled, “We are here demanding peace as these terrorist organizations want to burn down our cities!” Fox carried an assault rifle and wore an ammo vest with a patch that said, “*Si vis pacem, para bellum*”: “If you want peace, prepare for war.”

It is true that, in response to such right-wing events, some leftists have mobilized under the name Antifa, following a tradition with specific principles, among them a willingness to engage in violence. The first speaker at Peninsula Park, a Black activist and hip-hop artist named Mic Crenshaw, was one of the progenitors of this tradition. At fifty years old, he had at least a couple of decades on most people in the crowd. Wearing sunglasses, a backward baseball cap, and a bulletproof vest over a plaid flannel shirt, Crenshaw said, “I used to tell people our motto was ‘We go where they go.’ And there’s a lot of courageous people out here doing the same thing today.” He patted his flak jacket. “I never thought, thirty years ago, I’d be standing up here with one of these things on.”

Crenshaw grew up in Minneapolis, where, as a teen-ager, he became fascinated by the city’s nascent hardcore-punk scene. “I would ride through uptown and see the kids with their cool haircuts and studded jackets,” he recalled when I visited him at his home, in Portland, a few weeks before the Peninsula Park event. In 1986, as a high-school junior, Crenshaw joined with six peers—five of them white and one Native American—to start a skinhead crew called the Baldies. They shaved their heads, found flight jackets at an Army-surplus store, and ordered Doc Martens from catalogues. The British skinheads whom the Baldies emulated were influenced by Jamaican-immigrant culture, and believed in multiethnic solidarity. “We were trying to become the Minneapolis version,” Crenshaw said.

But punk music also appealed to neo-Nazis. Soon after the Baldies formed, a gang called the White Knights began harassing people of color in Minneapolis. Crenshaw threw a piece of concrete through the window of a White Knight leader’s house. “That was the jump-off,” he told me. The act precipitated a “protracted period of street violence”: weekly brawls with bats, chains, pipes, knives, brass knuckles, and pepper spray. “Luckily, no one died,” Crenshaw said. “People were definitely going to the hospital, though.”

The Baldies made pacts with militant leftists and gravitated toward anarchist tenets of mutual aid and community defense. Crenshaw was drawn to Communism. He said of the Baldies, “Our politics emerged from our survival-

based organizing.” Another former Baldie told me, “Although many of us were interested in reading theory, what was driving our action wasn’t adherence to a particular ideology—it was meeting the threat as it needed to be met. It was very *practical*.” For Crenshaw, it was existential: “As a Black kid, I was fighting against people who wanted to kill me.”



SIPRESS

"Not the Verity Brewster? The Verity Brewster who invented sweet-potato casserole with marshmallows on top?"
Cartoon by David Sipress

One hub for young radicals in Minneapolis was Backroom Anarchist Books, which sold revolutionary European newspapers like *Class War*. From these periodicals, the Baldies learned about Anti-Fascist Action, a British organization dedicated to physically confronting racists and anti-Semites. Anti-Fascist Action had revived a legacy in England stretching back to the thirties, when Londoners prevented Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists from publicly assembling. The Baldies effectively chased the White Knights out of Minneapolis, and then resolved to expand their crusade against white supremacy beyond the skinhead subculture. In 1987, they established Anti-Racist Action, or A.R.A., and began recruiting skaters, college students, and Black and Latino gang members. Explaining A.R.A.'s decision to tweak the British name, Crenshaw told me, "To us, the word 'fascist' sounded too academic. But everybody knew what a racist was."

After high school, Crenshaw and his friends followed punk tours around the country, setting up A.R.A. chapters. In 1991, the group convened its first national conference, in Portland. The city had been a center of white-supremacist organizing since the seventies, when Posse Comitatus—a virulently racist and anti-Semitic paramilitary movement—was launched there. The Aryan Nations, a hate group in neighboring Idaho, sponsored neo-Nazis in Oregon who talked of turning the region into an all-white ethno-state. Before the A.R.A. conference, an Ethiopian immigrant in Portland was beaten to death by three acolytes of a group called White Aryan Resistance, or WAR. "Portland was in the national spotlight as a hotbed of racism," Crenshaw said. "We wanted to let our presence be felt, and say, 'We're not gonna stand for that.' "

WAR and the Aryan Nations were eventually crippled by civil lawsuits, and, as other avowed white-supremacist outfits also receded, A.R.A. membership dwindled. When Crenshaw moved to Portland, a year after the conference, he stepped away as well, focussing instead on music and teaching. Both A.R.A. and the Baldies consisted largely of white people fighting white racism in white spaces, and, he told me, "I couldn't do that anymore."

In 2007, neo-Nazis attempting to reinvigorate the vestiges of WAR planned to hold a white-power music festival near Portland. Former A.R.A. members helped local residents pressure the host venue to pull out. Half a dozen of these activists, sensing a need for renewed vigilance, created Rose City Antifa—the

first official antifascist organization in America. For Crenshaw, the evolution of A.R.A. into Rose City Antifa, combined with Portland's centrality in the national protest movement that began in Minneapolis this May, shows that "the two cities are linked in a continuum of antifascist consciousness."

In mid-September, I met with two current members of Rose City Antifa, Sophie and Morgan, in another Portland park. (Asking for anonymity, they used pseudonyms.) Sophie, who is transgender, explained that "some of the A.R.A. groups were pretty strongly in a world of toxic masculinity," but Rose City Antifa has always had "a strong feminist and queer component." A number of its founders were women. Morgan, who identifies as a butch lesbian, said that Rose City Antifa adopted a more nuanced approach: "A.R.A. was street-level confrontation with white-supremacist gangs. We wanted to broaden the scope to encompass more activities that we saw as fascist threats."

Such threats proliferated during the next eight years. The election of President [Barack Obama](#) galvanized the so-called Patriot Movement, composed of hundreds of far-right groups and armed militias hostile to Muslims, immigrants, and the L.G.B.T.Q. community. Though the Patriot Movement was seldom explicitly racist or anti-Semitic, it depicted the federal government as corrupted by un-American forces inimical to white Christians—a resurrection of the Posse Comitatus world view. Despite this troubling ferment, antifascism remained a backwater of leftist activism throughout the Obama Administration, as progressives focussed on the rise of the Patriot Movement's political analogue: the Tea Party.

Then came Donald Trump, buoyed by a wave of white nationalism calling itself the alt-right. In 2017, many Americans were stunned when throngs of white supremacists carried torches and Nazi flags through [Charlottesville](#), Virginia, chanting "Blood and soil!" and "Jews will not replace us!" Antifascists, however, were prepared. Hundreds of them travelled to Charlottesville, in fidelity to the "We go where they go" credo. Clashes culminated in a neo-Nazi plowing his car through a crowd of counter-protesters, killing a woman. The former K.K.K. Grand Wizard David Duke told a reporter, "We are determined to take our country back. We're going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump." Later, Trump said that there had been "very fine people on both sides" in Charlottesville. Duke praised his "honesty" and "courage."

At Peninsula Park, Mic Crenshaw told his audience that "across-the-board

collusion” between the U.S. government and white supremacists was nothing new. In the past, however, “they used to try to lie and cover shit up.” Under Trump, the alliance was on display with “unprecedented transparency.” Now, Crenshaw said, “the question is, How are we going to protect ourselves?”

In 2016, Rose City Antifa joined the Torch Antifa Network, which included former A.R.A. chapters from Illinois, California, and Texas. There are now ten Torch affiliates, which share a commitment to disrupting far-right organizing. According to Rose City Antifa, although affiliates occasionally exchange information and advice, there is little practical collaboration.

The network focusses much of its energy on Internet activism: doing research online, identifying proponents of bigotry, and then publicly exposing—or “doxing”—them. Rose City Antifa spent part of its early years doxing people involved with Volksfront, an international racist gang headquartered in Portland. Whereas A.R.A. would have hunted Volksfront members in the streets, Rose City Antifa publicized their activities to employers, neighbors, and relatives. In 2012, Volksfront’s U.S. chapters disbanded.

Rose City Antifa doesn’t disclose how many members it has, but Sophie estimated that doxing investigations take up about a hundred hours per week. Reports on individuals, Sophie said, must meet rigorous standards: “We do what we can to make it an undeniable fact that the people we are doxing are tied explicitly to violent rhetoric or acts of violence. As muddied as the lines are right now, we don’t want to go after someone for wearing a *MAGA* hat.”

Whenever people deemed worthy of doxing hold gatherings in public spaces, antifascists undertake to shut them down. “Research and action go hand in hand,” Morgan said. In “[Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook](#)” (2017), the scholar and activist Mark Bray writes that, after the Second World War, Jewish veterans created the 43 Group, which stormed fascist assemblies with the aim of knocking over the speakers’ platform. Though conservatives and liberals alike now criticize “no-platforming” as a violation of free speech, antifascists take the 43 Group’s view that incipient fascism tends to metastasize if left unchecked; given that fascist movements ultimately aspire to mass oppression, or even genocide, they must be stifled early.

In the U.S., no-platforming campaigns have roiled college campuses. Three years ago, when the right-wing polemicist and Breitbart editor Milo

Yiannopoulos [was invited to address Republican students](#) at the University of California, Berkeley, antifascists besieged the venue, breaking windows and lighting fires. The speech was cancelled. Shane Burley, a Portland native and the author of “[Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It](#)” (2017), told me that many Americans recoil from such modern incarnations of no-platforming because “it has been extended to people who aren’t consensus Nazis—people who not everybody agrees deserve to be hit.” But Burley argues that antifascists are hardly to blame for this: “It’s the Trump effect. Nazi rallies have merged with the Republican base, and now they’re in the same space together.”



The activist and hip-hop artist Mic Crenshaw co-founded Anti-Racist Action, a precursor to Antifa, in Minneapolis in 1987. Photograph by Philip Montgomery for The New Yorker

Such merging is particularly common, Burley and other antifascists say, in the Pacific Northwest. During the lead-up to the 2016 election, Joey Gibson, a thirty-six-year-old house-flipper in Vancouver, Washington, founded the Christian pro-Trump movement Patriot Prayer. A former high-school football coach, Gibson has an athletic build often accentuated by T-shirts that display his many tattoos, including one of a Spartan helmet and the words “*WARRIORS FOR FREEDOM.*” In a recent phone interview, he told me that he started Patriot Prayer because he felt that his political values had become taboo. He wanted to venture into “the hardest cities to voice your opinion in as a conservative”: places like Berkeley, San Francisco, and—just across the Columbia River from Vancouver—Portland. Gibson carefully avoids endorsing violence or espousing racism; his mother is Japanese, and Patriot Prayer has attracted some people of color. But it has also attracted white supremacists and members of known hate groups. According to Rose City Antifa, which has identified dozens of these individuals at Patriot Prayer events, and published evidence of their allegiances online—from screenshots of racist Facebook screeds to photographs of swastika patches—Gibson offers neo-Nazis cover and provides them with a fertile recruiting ground. Another member of Rose City Antifa, who goes by Ace, said, “The umbrella is broad enough to encompass a huge portion of the reactionary radical right, up to and including neo-Nazis, and that’s why these rallies become such incredible spaces for radicalization.” (Gibson has stressed that Patriot Prayer is a movement without members, and denies that it condones violence or white supremacy.)

Around the time that Gibson launched Patriot Prayer, Gavin McInnes, a co-founder of Vice Media, created the Proud Boys, in New York. McInnes has called the Proud Boys a “gang” of “Western chauvinists”; the F.B.I. classifies it as an “extremist group with ties to white nationalism.” A former Proud Boy organized the neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville—and called the woman who was killed there “a fat, disgusting Communist.” The Proud Boys have been banned from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, but their account on Parler—a social network catering to conservatives—has nearly seventy thousand followers. Unlike Gibson, McInnes has openly celebrated violence against the left. In 2016, when a handful of Patriot Prayer supporters formed a Vancouver chapter of the Proud Boys, they became the muscle at Gibson’s events.

During a Patriot Prayer rally held in Portland in April, 2017—billed by Gibson as the March for Free Speech—a thirty-five-year-old man named Jeremy

Christian was filmed barking racial slurs and wielding a bat. (He was subsequently ejected from the march.) Four weeks later, Christian boarded a train in Portland and accosted two Black teen-age girls, one of whom was Muslim and wore a hijab. When three men intervened, Christian fatally stabbed two of them. He was later arrested, and at his arraignment he screamed, “Get out if you don’t like free speech!,” and “You call it terrorism, I call it patriotism!” The murders took place amid a historic national surge in anti-Muslim hate crimes, which Trump’s critics linked to his pattern of Islamophobic rhetoric (such as when he called for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States”). Nine days after the killings, Gibson led a Trump Free Speech Rally in Portland, which was heavily attended by Patriot Movement militias. Although Gibson disavowed Christian and presided over a moment of silence for his victims, he then introduced a speaker who recounted—to raucous applause—having recently “cracked the skulls of some Commies.”

Patriot Prayer and the Proud Boys began regularly descending on Portland, where altercations with Rose City Antifa counter-protesters were virtually guaranteed. Chaotic fistfights became recurrent events downtown. The purported reasons for Gibson’s rallies varied—“Him Too,” “Gibson for Senate”—but Morgan, the Rose City Antifa member, said, “What they’re really coming for is a fight. They’re coming with weapons, hyped up and ready to throw down with whoever confronts them.”

Antifascist doctrine does not allow for avoiding such confrontations: “They will not pass” is another precept, deriving from the Spanish Civil War. But, in the summer of 2018, several activists in Portland created a new organization—PopMob, short for Popular Mobilization—which aimed to enlist a more diverse, and less militant, league of protesters to counter Patriot Prayer and the Proud Boys. Whereas Rose City Antifa has strict vetting protocols for new members, Effie Baum, a co-founder of PopMob, told me, “Everybody is welcome under our tent, except cops and fascists.” PopMob promotes what Baum calls “everyday antifascism,” not as an alternative but as a complement to front-line combatants in black bloc. “If you’re gonna punch a Nazi, punch a Nazi,” Baum said. “If you’re gonna stand in the back with a sign that says ‘Love Trumps Hate,’ there’s room for both of us.”

The feud reached a head this summer, on August 29th, when hundreds of Trump supporters met in the parking lot of a suburban shopping mall, then drove into Portland together. The route was announced just before the caravan’s departure,

to stymie protesters. That afternoon, I interviewed Shane Burley at a bar on the east side of town; after leaving the bar, I pulled onto a road full of honking cars and trucks bedecked with huge American flags and “Trump 2020” banners. I followed the caravan out of the city, not realizing that dozens of drivers had broken off and headed downtown, where local residents shouted obscenities at them and threw water bottles. Some of the Trump supporters fired paintball guns and pepper spray from their vehicles; others got out and assaulted protesters.

It was dark when I arrived downtown. As I parked on a wide avenue in the shopping district, several people in black bloc sprinted by. Turning a corner, I came upon a small crowd facing a police cordon. Behind the officers, a dead body lay in a pool of light.

The victim was Aaron Danielson, a thirty-nine-year-old supporter of Patriot Prayer. He’d been shot by Michael Reinoehl, a forty-eight-year-old white man who—though unaffiliated with Rose City Antifa or PopMob—once wrote on Instagram, “I am 100% ANTIFA all the way!” Reinoehl later claimed that he had fired in self-defense, and a cannister of bear spray and a telescopic truncheon were found on Danielson. At the time, however, nobody in the crowd knew what had happened or who was involved.

“What are you doing here?” I heard someone say. A man in black bloc, his face concealed behind a balaclava and ski goggles, was addressing a man with a trimmed beard, wraparound sunglasses, and a baseball hat emblazoned with the name Loren Culp—the Republican gubernatorial candidate for Washington. He also wore a hooded sweatshirt that said “Patriot Prayer.”

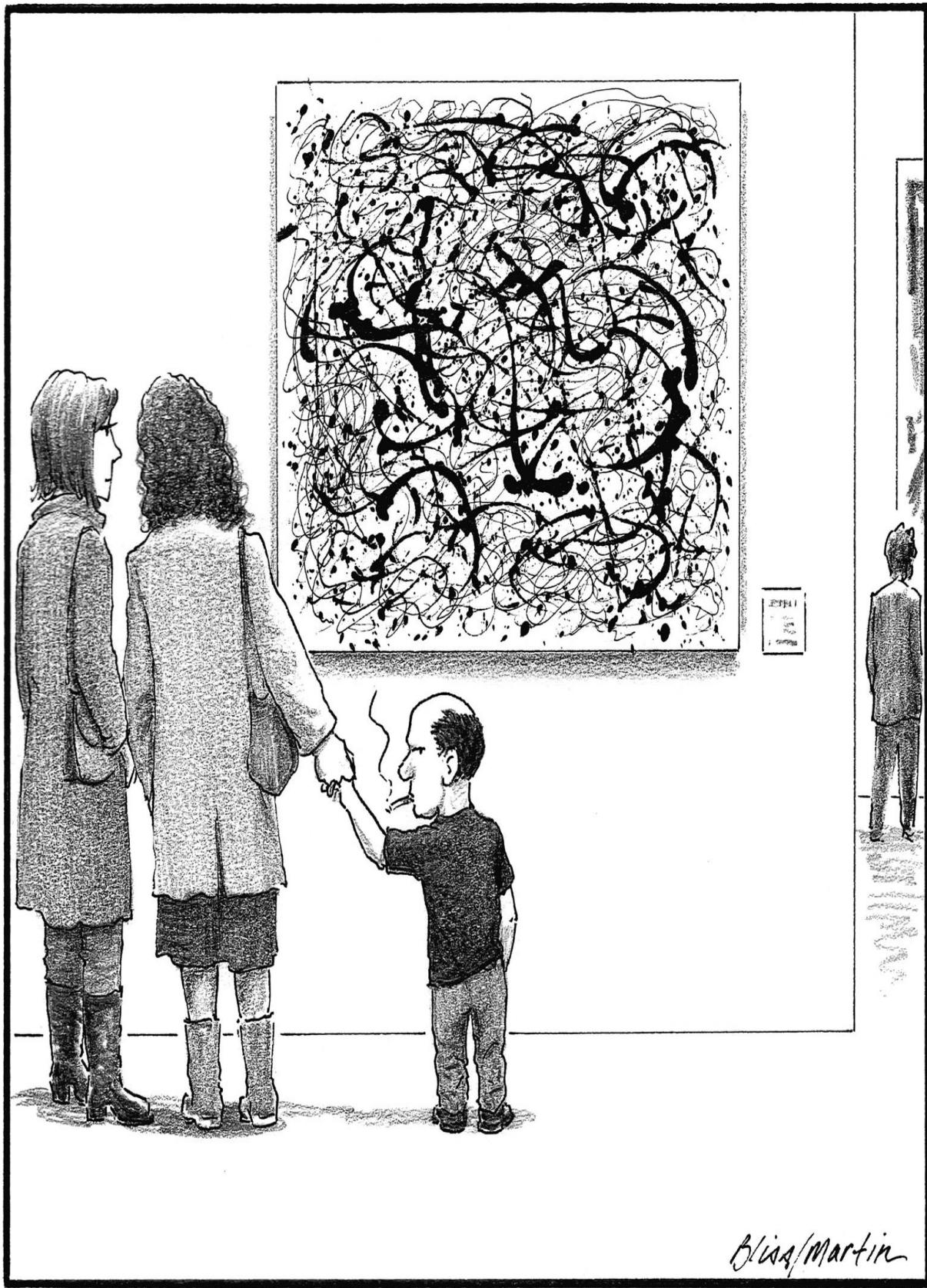
“It’s Joey Gibson!” someone said.

Gibson later told me that he and Danielson had driven into Portland in the same truck. After following the pro-Trump caravan back to the shopping mall, they received messages about the skirmishes downtown, and, separately, they returned to the city. Gibson had happened on the crime scene accidentally, and he had no idea that the corpse thirty feet away was Danielson’s.

Another man in black bloc told Gibson that he’d heard the victim had been murdered by a Proud Boy. This seemed to be the crowd’s prevailing assumption, though neither Antifa nor the Proud Boys had killed anybody before. Affecting a casual posture, Gibson waved dismissively and said, “That’s what they always

be yelling and screaming about—‘Some white supremacist killed someone tonight.’ They say that shit all the time.”

“Because you bring white supremacists to town all the time,” someone said.



"My kid could do that."
Cartoon by Harry Bliss and Steve Martin

"I'm brown," Gibson responded. He rolled up his sleeve and showed his skin tone.

People pressed around Gibson, shouting at him to leave. When he asked, "Why don't you guys stop acting like Nazis?", a man in a Young Turks sweatshirt spit in his face.

"Can we stop with the hate?" Gibson said, making no move to wipe off the saliva.

Protesters continued to arrive, and, as the volume and ferocity of their insults escalated, Gibson turned to a blond woman who'd been standing at his side and said, "Let's go." A mob of at least fifty young people pursued them. Gibson kept up a show of equanimity until his hat and glasses were snatched away. Soon, drinks were emptied on him, objects were hurled at him, eggs were smashed on him, and he was punched and pepper-sprayed. With the blond woman's help, he stumbled forward while someone rang a cowbell in his ears and others strobed flashlights in his eyes.

"Kill the Nazi!" someone screamed.

The mob grew. As far as I could tell, all of Gibson's assailants were white. At some point, several people pushed their way to Gibson and escorted him down the street, keeping at bay the most belligerent aggressors. A short Asian man in a bicycle helmet yelled, "Let him leave, goddammit! Everyone back the fuck off!"

After several blocks, Gibson and the woman ducked into a gas station, and an employee locked the door behind them. The man in the bicycle helmet blocked the entrance, but people smashed the windows and kicked open a side door. Another protester raised his gas mask and pleaded, "He's a fucking Nazi, but are you going to *lynch* him?"

The police arrived, and the protesters fled. Gibson vomited in the bathroom, washed the pepper spray from his eyes, and called a friend to pick him up. A reporter looking to identify the shooting victim texted Gibson a photograph of medics treating Danielson. "I recognized him right away," he said.

After the crowd dispersed, I found the man in the bicycle helmet at a nearby 7-

Eleven. His name was Rico De Vera, and he was a twenty-seven-year-old Filipino-American who studied engineering at Portland Community College. Earlier that day, a Trump supporter had shot him in the face with a paintball gun; the flesh around his left eye was stained neon pink. De Vera had been regularly participating in Black Lives Matter protests since May. Although he remained enthusiastic about the movement, he worried that in Portland it had been subsumed by the city's militant antifascist culture, which he saw as violent and white. "It pisses me off," he said. "People are going to use tonight to say that Black Lives Matter is a bunch of thugs."

We walked a few blocks to a park outside the Multnomah County Justice Center, where people had congregated by a perimeter of concrete barriers and metal fencing. This was where most of the Patriot Prayer rallies and Antifa counter-protests had taken place; more recently, it had become a locus for Black Lives Matter demonstrations. In June, huge crowds had lobbed fireworks, bottles, and other projectiles at the Justice Center, a fortresslike monolith that contains the Portland police headquarters and the county jail. On June 26th, Trump called for the deployment of federal agents to protect government property throughout the country from "left-wing extremists." The Justice Center stands beside a U.S. District courthouse, and in July more than a hundred employees of the [Department of Homeland Security](#) and the U.S. Marshals Service arrived in Portland, ostensibly to protect the federal building. A U.S. marshal shot a twenty-six-year-old protester in the head with an impact munition, fracturing his skull; the protester had merely been holding up a boom box with both hands. Such excessive force drew larger and larger crowds to the courthouse until Chad Wolf, the acting Secretary of Homeland Security, began to relinquish responsibility to the Oregon State Police, in late July.

Now a young woman with a megaphone told the people at the Justice Center that she had an announcement. "I just got word that the person who died was a Patriot Prayer person," she said. "He was a fucking Nazi. Our community held its own and took out the trash. . . . I am not sad that a fucking fascist died tonight."

Everyone cheered.

Although years of antifascist activism in Portland have likely contributed to the extraordinary staying power of its Black Lives Matter movement, white antifascists insist that they've played no role in organizing racial-justice protests.

Sophie, of Rose City Antifa, said, “We don’t feel like, as a group, we should be taking away space from people who have dedicated their lives to this.” However, Sophie added, “we are fully supportive, and many of us attend as individuals.” Effie Baum, the PopMob co-founder, similarly told me, “We’ve been really intentional about not taking the lead on stuff that’s been happening since George Floyd was murdered.” One reason for this, Baum explained, was that “we’re a mostly white organization.”



Rico De Vera, a participant in Black Lives Matter protests in Portland, worries that the movement has been subsumed by the city's militant antifascist culture. After one chaotic protest, he said, "It pisses me off. People are going to use tonight to say that Black Lives Matter is a bunch of thugs." Photograph by Philip Montgomery for The New Yorker

Portland, whose population is six per cent Black, is the whitest big city in America. The historian Walidah Imarisha traces the origin of these demographics to the founding of Oregon, which settlers envisaged as a “white utopia.” When Oregon joined the union, in 1859, it became the only state with an outright ban on Black people. Later, redlining policies and urban-renewal projects displaced many African-Americans, a process reprised by more recent waves of gentrification.

The Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Portland are resolutely non-hierarchical; as a rule, however, white protesters defer to their Black and brown peers, who are usually the only people to use megaphones, deliver speeches, and lead marches. Since the federal withdrawal from the Justice Center, the protests have targeted the Portland police with nightly “direct actions.” Every day, a message circulates on social media announcing a rendezvous point (usually a park); from there, protesters depart to a nearby destination (usually a precinct house). A diffuse, anonymous network, communicating on encrypted messaging apps, chooses these locations. Although [Fox News](#) and the Trump Administration characterize Portland as an apocalyptic war zone, some direct actions attract fewer than a hundred people, and even on well-attended nights their impact is undetectable beyond a few square blocks.

Still, property destruction does occur, and, because the vast majority of protesters are white, this has been a source of tension with some residents of color. In June, after rioting damaged several businesses along Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, in a traditionally African-American neighborhood in North Portland, a consortium of Black community leaders held a press conference to condemn the vandalism. J. W. Matt Hennessee, the pastor of Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church, told white protesters, “Get your knee off our neck. That is what you are doing when you do stuff like this.” Ron Herndon, who led civil-rights campaigns in Portland during the eighties, called the vandals “demented” and said, “Go back to whatever hole you came from. You are not helping us.” On the weekend of Columbus Day, which Portland recognizes as Indigenous Peoples Day, protesters toppled a statue of Abraham Lincoln, shot through the windows of a restaurant owned by a Black veteran, and broke into the Oregon Historical Society, where they inexplicably stole a celebrated quilt commemorating African-American heritage, stitched by fifteen Black women in the nineteen-seventies. (Police found the quilt lying in the rain a few blocks

away, slightly damaged.) The leaders of thirty Native American groups released [a statement](#) comparing the conduct to “the brutish ways of our colonizers.”

Two days after Aaron Danielson was killed, I joined a few hundred protesters outside a luxury building where Ted Wheeler, Portland’s Democratic mayor, owns an apartment. In Portland, the mayor serves as the commissioner of the police bureau, which protesters are determined to see defunded. As a picnic table from a restaurant was dragged into the street and set on fire, I spotted Najee Gow, a twenty-three-year-old Black nurse, leading chants of “Fuck Ted Wheeler!” I’d met Gow the previous week, when several young women had staged a sit-in in Wheeler’s lobby. Gow, who wore a peacoat over a red-white-and-blue tank top, had been incensed that no African-Americans were included in the demonstration. “It’s what they’ve always done,” he’d said. “Hijack Black people’s movements. This is disgusting.”

As I spoke with Gow near the burning table, we were interrupted by shattering glass. A young white man in black bloc was swinging a baseball bat into the window of a dentist’s office on the ground floor of Wheeler’s building. “That makes me want to beat *them* up,” Gow said. Like Rico De Vera, he felt that such behavior benefitted only those who wanted to malign Black Lives Matter, and he also worried that it bred general animosity toward Black people: “They’re putting Black lives at risk. African-Americans are constantly out here telling them to stop, but they won’t. So, at the end of the day, it’s, like, ‘Are you racist?’ ”

A white man with a hammer joined the guy with the bat, and together they breached the office. People entered. A loud explosion echoed from inside, followed by smoke and flames. Gow went over to challenge them. While they argued, a blond woman in a hoodie ran up and spray-painted an arrow on the wall, pointing to the broken window. She then scrawled, “This is the language of the unheard.”

In “Fascism Today,” Shane Burley writes that antifascism is often practiced “as part of a larger revolutionary struggle.” Many of the white protesters in Portland subscribe to a radical political agenda. At one direct action, I met half a dozen antifascists in their early twenties who called themselves the Comrade Collective. They all had on black bloc, and several carried small rubber pigs that squealed when squeezed. Each had adopted a nickname. Firefly, a self-described Marxist-Leninist, told me, “It’s more than just Black Lives Matter. We believe

that racism is built into capitalism, and we want to destroy the system of oppression.”

Spinch, whose mouth was covered with a blue bandanna, said, “It often gets boiled down to ‘Capitalism is the problem.’ Which, like, yes. But also colonialism.” Spinch had been protesting since May, and the experience had been formative: “I’m objectively very young, and haven’t been an autonomous adult for very long, so this is my first real foray into dedicated activism. I got tear-gassed my first night out here. If that doesn’t radicalize you, I don’t know what will.”

A comrade named Brat added that the pandemic had revealed the alarming depth of the government’s ineptitude. “Before [COVID](#), I was trying to get more involved in local politics,” Brat said. “Now I sort of feel like that’s a dead end.”

“I was gonna run for City Council!” Spinch said. “But there’s no point. The system is fucked.”

I asked what the alternative was.

“Anarchism.”

“And one simple way to get us closer to that is defunding the police,” Brat said.



MAGGIEL.

"Once the hat goes on, it can never come off."
Cartoon by Maggie Larson

The animating conviction that America's economic, governmental, and judicial institutions are irremediable distinguishes Portland protesters from others around the country. Many of them view inequality not as a failure of the system but as the status quo that the system was designed to preserve; accordingly, the only solution is to dismantle it entirely and build something new.

In Minneapolis, marchers chanted, "No justice, no peace!" In Portland, they cry, "No cops! No prisons! Total abolition!" Occasionally you hear "Death to America!" The night after [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#) died, I accompanied a march to the Gus J. Solomon U.S. Courthouse, where protesters smashed the glass doors and cut down a flag that had been lowered to half-mast. The flag was brought to the police headquarters, doused with hand sanitizer, and set ablaze. On a boarded-up window, a white man in black bloc spray-painted, "*THE ONLY WAR IS CLASS WAR.*"

Popular chants at the protests include "A.C.A.B.—All Cops Are Bastards!" and "No good cops in a racist system!" (The A.C.A.B. acronym was popularized by British punks in the eighties; when the Baldies emerged, in Minneapolis, they used it as a code word.) Polls indicate that a large majority of Americans of all races oppose abolishing police departments, and the absolutism of some activists has frustrated many advocates of police reform, including members of Black communities with high rates of violent crime. In Portland, however, months of bitter spats with authorities have bolstered abolitionists while sidelining—or converting—more moderate voices. Because the Portland Police Bureau relies largely on a specialized rapid-response team for crowd control, the same sixty-odd officers are invariably tasked with breaking up demonstrations. Team members no longer display their nametags—"to reduce the risk of being doxed," according to a police spokesperson—but the protesters know who several of them are, and the animus on both sides feels deeply personal.

The rapid-response team was deployed at most of the direct actions I attended during four weeks in Portland. Nearly every time, an incident commander announced over a loudspeaker that the gathering had been declared a "riot" or an "unlawful assembly." Certain nights, this came after vandalism or arson; other nights, protesters had simply impeded traffic. The rapid-response team then attempted to disperse the crowd with some combination of arrests, tear gas, stun grenades, and "less lethal" munitions—either solid-foam pellets or plastic

capsules that burst on impact, releasing paint or a chemical irritant. A camper that had been converted into a makeshift ambulance supported a troop of medics embedded with the protesters. Although medics marked themselves with red tape, many had been injured, including one who was hit in the head with a tear-gas cannister, resulting in a traumatic brain injury.

Arrests by the rapid-response team often looked vindictive and gratuitously violent. I saw many officers tackle peaceful protesters and jab them with batons. They kneeled on necks and backs, stepped on faces, and sprayed mace into the eyes of compliant or restrained people. One night, I watched an officer chase an apparently random man, throw him down, straddle his chest, and repeatedly punch him in the face. Oregon Public Broadcasting later [reported](#) that the man, Tyler Cox, was a volunteer medic; after he was arrested, for “assaulting an officer,” Cox was admitted to the hospital where he works as a nurse. The incident is under investigation.

Protesters equipped with cell phones and microphones scrupulously recorded abuse and posted footage of it on social media—and after a while this seemed to have become the primary objective. When I asked people to explain the purpose of the direct actions, a common response was that they forced officers to enact on camera behavior that they otherwise denied or concealed. Graphic evidence of police brutality, it was hoped, would win sympathy for the abolitionist cause. The focus on documentation might explain why people sometimes seemed intent on provoking the officers. Before the rapid-response team dispersed a demonstration, its members typically stood in tight formation, surveilling the crowd. Protesters, their voices raw with anger, would unleash a withering deluge of verbal harassment: “Fuck you, piggies!” “Did you beat your wife last night?” “Stick it in your mouth and pull the trigger!”

Once, a young white woman in a red tank top walked up and down a line of officers, pointing at each of them and shouting, “Bitch!” The officers—some of their riot gear colorfully splattered from previous volleys of paint-filled water balloons—gazed silently through their face shields. In July, a Black member of the rapid-response team, Jakhary Jackson, spoke out about his experience of the demonstrations. In a [video](#) released by the Portland Police Bureau, he claimed that white protesters had taunted him with racially charged insults, including “You have the biggest nose I’ve ever seen!” Jackson, who majored in history at Portland State University, said that it was galling to be attacked by protesters “who have never experienced racism—who don’t even know that the tactics they

are using are the same tactics that were used against my people.”

One mainstay at the demonstrations was a seventy-seven-year-old African-American man named Kent Ford. Easily identifiable in his backward flatcap and red suspenders, he always had an oil painting of [Breonna Taylor](#) with him. Holding the painting high above his head, he would march with long, determined strides. One rainy night, Ford wrapped the canvas in plastic bags; the next time I saw him, it was encased in Plexiglas. In 1969, Ford had opened a Portland chapter of the [Black Panthers](#), and he likened the current direct actions to the multiracial Rainbow Coalition forged by Fred Hampton, the Panther leader.

“They’re trying to get this back in the box,” he told me. “But it’s not going back in the box, not this time.”

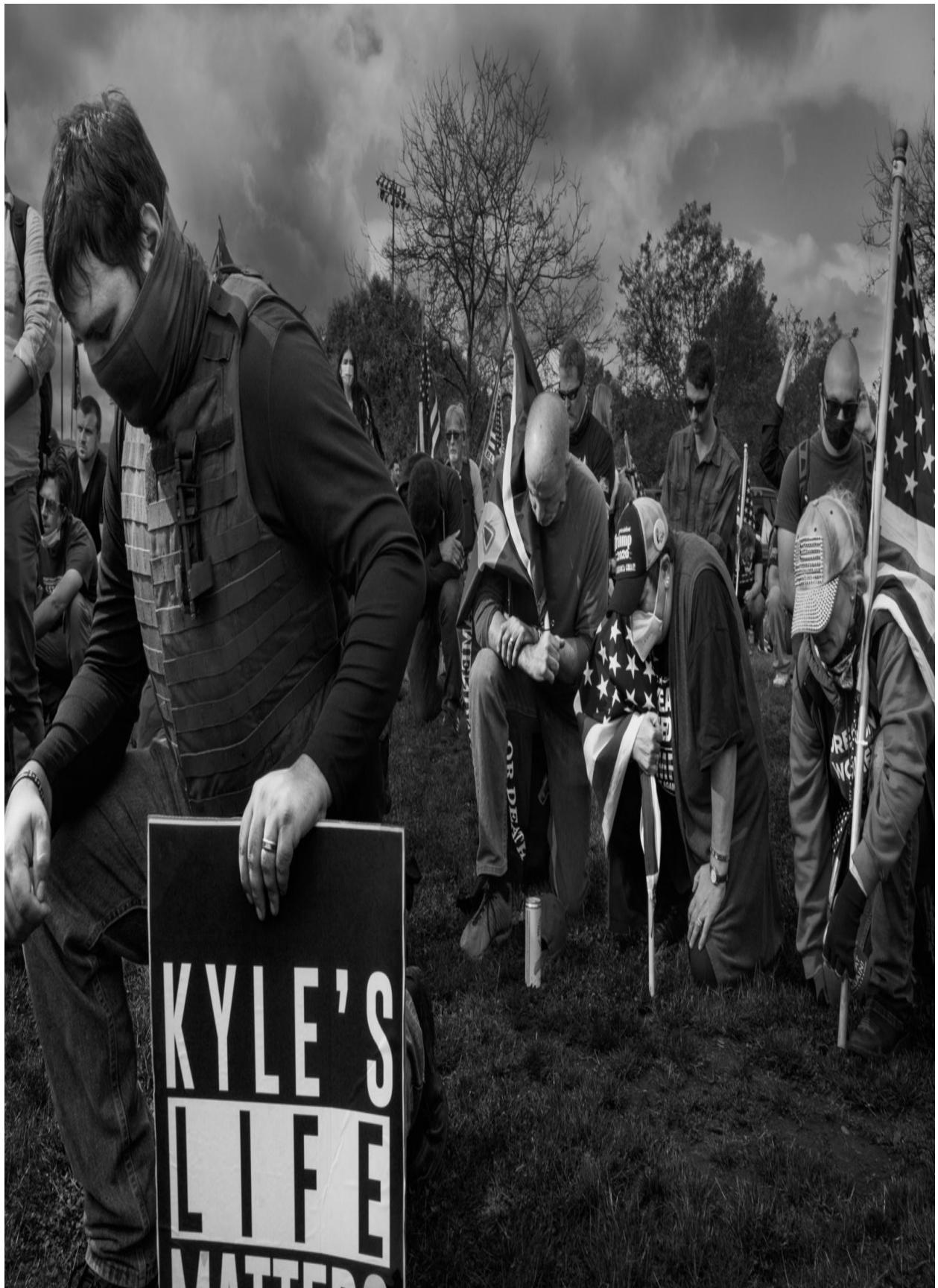
“Where is it going?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you where. All I know is that the longer we stay out here the better off we are.”

There is no other city in America where a Black man can march on behalf of victims of police violence seven nights a week and be surrounded by devoted allies. After half a century as an organizer, Ford appreciated the immense difficulty of movement-building. Logistical obstacles and internal discord inevitably sapped momentum. When Ford planned demonstrations for the Panthers, so much effort went into preparations that people were exhausted by the time they gathered. The resilience of the Portland protests was rare, and, in his view, isolated moments of ugliness hardly mattered. The direct actions brought leftists together, reinforcing their solidarity; for Ford and others, that was reason enough not to stop. The few times I mentioned detractors, Ford replied, “The dogs bark, but the caravan moves on.”

Throughout history, disparate factions have become allies in the name of antifascism, and, in America, white radicals and Black liberation movements have often found common cause. Fifty years ago, Ford travelled to Oakland, California, to work security at the United Front Against Fascism, a conference organized by the Black Panthers and attended by thousands of Communists, feminists, labor organizers, and other militant leftists—the majority of them white. Mic Crenshaw, the former Baldie, is also a vocal advocate of “broad coalition work, to create a critical mass of people who can fight together.” The

Black experience of oppression is unique, but Crenshaw believes that it should be understood as symptomatic of a system that hurts other groups as well, including the white working class. “There has to be self-interest,” he said, speaking about white allies.



A Portland rally organized by the Proud Boys, which the F.B.I. classifies as an “extremist group with ties to white nationalism.” Photograph by Philip Montgomery for The New Yorker

As the sun set on September 5th, more than a thousand demonstrators gathered on the gently sloping greens of Ventura Park, in East Portland, to mark the hundredth consecutive day of protests. Lines formed at tents and tables where middle-aged supporters distributed free first-aid supplies, helmets, respirators, goggles, and earplugs. There were umbrellas for blocking less lethal munitions and traffic cones for snuffing tear-gas cannisters—tricks learned from [Hong Kong activists](#). Two women pulled a wagon loaded with tall shields constructed from fifty-five-gallon plastic drums.

An African-American man with a keffiyeh draped over his head stepped onto a small stage. Mac Smiff, a thirty-nine-year-old hip-hop journalist with an instinct for rhetorical propulsion, was a frequent and favorite speaker at the protests. “I don’t care if you’re Proud Boy or Patriot Prayer, and I sure don’t give a fuck if you’re a cop or a fed—you’re all the same people,” he told the crowd. “They have different jobs and different roles in *their revolution*.”

When I met with him later, Smiff told me that, before 2020, he’d never participated in antifascist counter-protests in Portland. “I watched them on the news,” he said. “It had nothing to do with us. At the time, we were, like, ‘That’s the racist white people fighting against the not-racist white people—sounds like a good fight to be had.’ ” Then, on August 22nd, more than a hundred Trump supporters, including Proud Boys, assembled outside the Justice Center for their first major rally in Portland since George Floyd’s death. The theme: “Back the Blue.” Rose City Antifa and PopMob organized a counter-protest. Smiff and his wife, Ri, joined the antifascists. The two sides furiously attacked each other with fists, bats, and bear repellent. Ri, a nurse and volunteer medic, treated more than two dozen people for injuries. The rapid-response team stood by until the Trump supporters retreated. Then an unlawful assembly was declared, and the antifascists were driven from the area with batons and impact munitions.

“It was jarring,” Smiff said of the police intervention. “They were openly taking the side of a hate group.”

Rose City Antifa and PopMob allege that the Portland Police Bureau, which is eighty per cent white, has long tolerated crimes by far-right groups while cracking down on leftist demonstrators. (The police spokesperson denied this, saying that all lawbreakers, “no matter their political alignments,” were subject to arrest.)

At Joey Gibson's Trump Free Speech Rally, in 2017, a militia member helped officers handcuff and detain an antifascist counter-protester. At a rally the following year, officers discovered four Patriot Prayer supporters on a roof with rifles, but made no arrests. In 2019, the Portland Police Bureau falsely tweeted that antifascists had thrown "milkshakes" filled with quick-drying cement at Patriot Prayer marchers. The story became a viral right-wing meme used to impugn antifascists. Sophie, of Rose City Antifa, said that this apparent track record of bias helped catalyze Portland's movement to defund the police when Floyd was killed: "There was already a lot of resentment toward the police because of the very clear way that they treated left-wing protesters as the enemy and right-wing protesters as their friends."

At the same time, activists do not necessarily decry the Portland Police Bureau as an egregious outlier: in their view, it is simply executing the core function of American law enforcement by aligning with white supremacists. For many protesters, the deployment of militarized federal agents to Portland confirmed this. In September, *The Nation* [reported](#) that agents had used classified cell-phone-cloning technology to spy on protester communications, and the Attorney General, William Barr, has since encouraged prosecutors to consider charging violent protesters with sedition.

Trump, meanwhile, has vowed to designate Antifa as a terrorist organization. The only right-wing group for which he has made a similar pledge is the K.K.K. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, during the Trump Administration right-wing terrorists have carried out about a hundred and forty attacks, left-wing terrorists a dozen. [An assessment](#) released by the Department of Homeland Security on October 6th predicted that, in the foreseeable future, white supremacists "will remain the most persistent and lethal threat" to the U.S. Nevertheless, in the first Presidential debate, Trump said, "Almost everything I see is from the left wing." Technically, this may have been true. A former head of intelligence for the Department of Homeland Security (and a Republican) recently filed a whistle-blower complaint alleging that he faced pressure to downplay the danger of white supremacists and to emphasize that of leftists.

Five days after Michael Reinoehl killed Aaron Danielson, in Portland, he [appeared on Vice News](#), from an undisclosed location, and admitted responsibility, claiming self-defense. Trump tweeted, "Everybody knows who this thug is," and exhorted law enforcement to "do your job, and do it fast." That

afternoon, near Olympia, Washington, a fugitive task force led by U.S. marshals opened fire on Reinoehl while he sat in a parked car, and then again as he stumbled into the street. Roughly thirty rounds were fired. A gun was found in Reinoehl's pocket. Multiple witnesses [have said](#) that the officers neither identified themselves nor attempted to detain Reinoehl. (At a recent campaign rally, Trump said, "They didn't *want* to arrest him.") After Reinoehl died, Attorney General Barr declared, "The streets of our cities are safer with this violent agitator removed." Trump added, "That's the way it has to be. There has to be retribution."

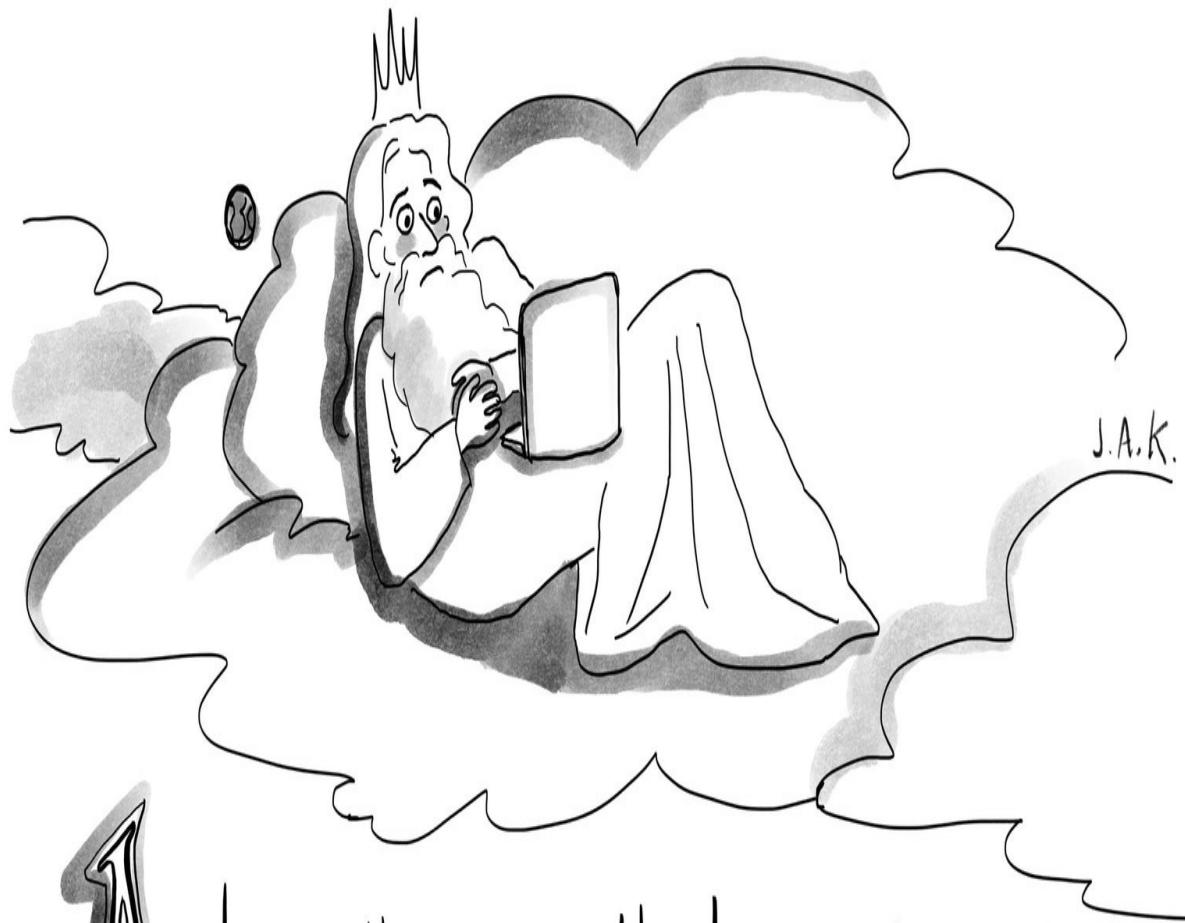
On August 25th, armed citizens travelled to [Kenosha, Wisconsin](#), where rioting had erupted after a white police officer shot a Black man seven times in the back. During altercations, Kyle Rittenhouse, a seventeen-year-old who'd come to Kenosha from Illinois, killed two people with an assault rifle. He then carried his rifle past police officers while someone yelled, "That dude just shot them!" Though Rittenhouse was later charged with homicide, Trump has defended his actions, and NBC News has [reported](#) that Department of Homeland Security officials were directed to make public comments sympathetic to Rittenhouse. (Rittenhouse acted in self-defense, his lawyer says.)

For antifascists, the Reinoehl case is an example of state-sanctioned murder, and the Rittenhouse case shows how extrajudicial killing can be outsourced to civilians. Morgan, the Rose City Antifa member, said, "That's what to me is uniquely terrifying about this moment. It feels like these far-right groups have basically been given the go-ahead to step in and commit this extralegal violence where the police cannot, but want to."

Some leftists compare the President's demonization of dissent to the anti-Communist fervor of the mid-twentieth century. Certainly, the right-wing culture of paranoia that he tirelessly fosters can look like mass delusion. In an August interview with Fox News, Trump spoke of an airplane "almost completely loaded with thugs, wearing these dark uniforms, black uniforms, with gear and this and that," which he linked to "people that are in the dark shadows" who "control" Joe Biden. The baseless claim echoed the baroque anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of the cult group [QAnon](#), which has gained surprising traction among Republicans, in part thanks to Trump's tacit approval of it. A week after the President's plane remarks, wildfires rampaged across Oregon, forcing more than forty thousand people to evacuate and killing nine. Smoke filled Portland's skies, and activists suspended demonstrations, turning to relief

efforts. While some protesters set up a donation point outside a shopping mall, and others delivered supplies to rural shelters, QAnon promoted a false rumor that antifascists had started the fires.

Across Oregon, 911 calls inquiring about Antifa arsonists flooded dispatch services, and checkpoints manned by armed citizens slowed evacuation efforts. During a public Zoom conference, a captain in the Clackamas County Sheriff's Office related accounts of "suspected Antifa" members felling telephone poles "in the hopes of starting further fires." The sheriff soon repudiated these reports, but not before a Clackamas County deputy was captured on video telling a local resident, "Antifa motherfuckers are out causing hell." In a separate video, the deputy warned people that if they killed miscreants they could be charged with murder; however, he advised, if "you throw a fucking knife in their hand *after* you shoot them, that's on you." (The deputy was placed on leave and is under investigation.) Several law-enforcement agencies, including the F.B.I., beseeched citizens to stop spreading the false Antifa stories. But at a rally Trump insisted, "They have to pay a price for the damage and the horror that they've caused." Some critics noted that, in 2018, Trump pardoned Dwight and Steven Hammond—Oregon ranchers who had been convicted of igniting fires on federally managed land.



And on the seventh day God tried
to relax, but He didn't have the
healthiest work/life boundaries,
so he distractingly watched a few
old episodes of "30 Rock" with
a Google Doc called "MORE Earth
Ideas" open in another tab.

One day, at the protester-run donation point, I met Gary Floyd, a longtime activist who had just returned from Mill City, an hour south of Portland. Floyd is in the process of registering an official Black Lives Matter chapter in Oregon, and he had filled his trunk with food and water, intending to help evacuees and thereby show them that the organization was nothing to be feared. Outside Mill City, he parked and opened his trunk. Although Floyd has been involved in activism since the [Rodney King riots](#), in 1992, the hate that he encountered took him aback. “I was told to get the fuck out of town and called the N-word four or five times,” he told me. “People were passing by and yelling out their windows at me.”

After Mac Smiff, the hip-hop journalist, finished his speech at the Ventura Park rally on September 5th, an African-American woman took the stage. Protesters would be marching to the Portland Police Bureau’s East Precinct house, she announced. In an arch tone, she reminded the crowd, “We celebrate a diversity of tactics.”

I’d heard variations of the phrase repeatedly in Portland. The maxim was first codified by demonstrators at the 2008 Republican National Convention, in St. Paul, Minnesota: to maintain cohesion among sometimes fractious activists, they urged acceptance of all styles of protest. Effie Baum, the PopMob co-founder, told me, “One of the tools of the state is getting us to create that dichotomy between ‘good protesters’ and ‘bad protesters.’” Another popular chant at direct actions was “No bad protesters in a revolution.” The vandalism that I witnessed in Portland was perpetrated by a very small minority, but even fewer people attempted to intervene, and those who did were often disparaged as “peace police.” The result was that the most extreme acts generally set the tone of the demonstrations—a tangible marker of the movement’s ideological drift.

The rapid-response team blocked the road to the precinct house. Near the front of the march, I found Rico De Vera, the engineering student, live-streaming with his cell phone. As we greeted each other, a Molotov cocktail was hurled from the rear and exploded a few feet away, just shy of the officers. Flames splashed protesters, and a man’s leg caught on fire. While medics tended to him, two more Molotov cocktails exploded between us and the officers, who discharged tear gas, stun grenades, and impact munitions, scattering the march. A helicopter hovered overhead. People stumbled into side streets, coughing and retching.

I lost De Vera in the melee but caught up with him a few hours later, on a commercial boulevard. He and another man, a thirty-five-year-old African-American named Jay Knight, were arguing with a white protester in black bloc. De Vera and Knight were angry about the Molotov cocktails; the white protester defended their use.

"If you guys keep playing war games, there's gonna be an actual war," De Vera said. "They're looking for a reason. No one here is prepared for what real war is like. Everyone here will be fucked, and people of color will be especially fucked."

Knight added, "Molotov cocktails make this side look worse than the cops. It makes people who were on the fence dismiss all of this as criminality."

The white man muttered something inaudible and walked off. Knight shook his head. "They all use the same argument—'Oh, a Black person called for a diversity of tactics.' " Later, Knight told me, "This needs to stop. It's become a mockery. When you have Trump using this to be reelected, it's, like, 'O.K., guys, wake up.' But they don't care."

Respect for a diversity of tactics was always intended to strengthen militant activists, not sway moderates. The liberal position that violence and vandalism are undemocratic rings hollow to radical leftists for the same reason that appeals to free speech do: from their perspective, we don't live in a real democracy, and our speech isn't truly free. In "Antifa," Mark Bray points out that millions of incarcerated Americans have been silenced and disenfranchised, and that prison abolitionists want to eliminate "this black hole of rightlessness." Anarchists, furthermore, "aim to construct a classless, post-capitalist society that would eradicate significant discrepancies in our ability to make our speech meaningful." However fanciful this may sound, it's what many antifascists are fighting for, which informs how they fight.

After leaving Knight and De Vera, I followed another group into a neighborhood where a man and a woman peered out from their second-story bedroom window.

"Get away from our cars!" the woman snapped.

Protesters loitered in their driveway. Insults were exchanged. "We're *Democrats*, you fucking jerks!" the woman said.

The protesters laughed and moved on.



The resilience of the Portland protests is rare, and, in one veteran organizer's view, isolated moments of ugliness hardly matter. The direct actions bring leftists together, reinforcing their solidarity. Photograph by Philip Montgomery for The New Yorker

That afternoon, Joey Gibson and hundreds of Patriot Prayer supporters had held a memorial service for Aaron Danielson in a Vancouver park. Speakers remembered Danielson as a “unifier” with “a huge heart”—“the first guy to buy you a drink if you were having a bad day.” I met a friend of Danielson’s there: a middle-aged man in a Patriot Prayer T-shirt, carrying a longboard and a sidearm. An online-meme creator and “info warrior,” he told me that Antifa answered to George Soros, who collaborated with China, which controlled the United Nations, which had created *COVID-19* to lead Americans “lockstep into a one-world global-medical tyranny.” He said of Danielson’s death, “We’re a hornet’s nest, and we’ve been kicked. We need to be feared. A central message that we’ve portrayed over and over again is: They must respect us.”

Nonetheless, when Gibson took the stage, he implored the audience not to seek revenge: “I don’t want to see one person going to Portland and committing acts of violence.” The press had shown up, and Gibson seemed eager to cast himself and Patriot Prayer as irreproachably virtuous. He spoke passionately about resisting hate and about the importance of forgiveness. Though he didn’t mention the abuse he had endured the night that Danielson was killed, he pointedly extolled the courageous faith of Jesus, who had “walked straight into death.” Describing Patriot Prayer supporters as embattled victims in a society antagonistic to their existence, Gibson expressed a paradoxical sentiment common among heavily armed Christians: “I’m sick and tired of living a life of fear.”

Later, Rose City Antifa [published a photograph](#), taken at the memorial, showing Gibson with his arm around Chester Doles, a former Imperial Wizard in the K.K.K. Doles went to prison in 1993 for assaulting a Black man, and was arrested again in 2016 for his involvement in a bar fight in Georgia between skinheads and an interracial couple. He recently started a pro-Trump group called American Patriots USA, which, according to Ace, the Rose City Antifa member, “appears to use Patriot Prayer as a template for organizing in Georgia with a similar base.” Ace added that white supremacists like Doles have learned “how to project an image of quote-unquote patriotism while pedalling an extremely hateful ideology.” (In an e-mail, Gibson said of the photograph, “I took pictures with over 50 people that day. I have no idea who he is.”)

After the service ended, a few dozen Proud Boys lingered on the edge of the

park, most of them wearing the organization's signature black-and-yellow Fred Perry polo shirts. (Fred Perry recently denounced the Proud Boys and discontinued production of the polos in North America.) When I approached the group, I was greeted by a man with long graying hair and a thick white goatee, who held the hand of a woman about half his height. "*PROUD BOY*" was tattooed on his forearm, and he wore a gun on his hip.

His name was David Machado, and he was a sixty-one-year-old Air Force veteran, a retired flight engineer, and one of the first members of the Vancouver Proud Boys. He wanted me to know that he and his wife, Carie, were children of Mexican immigrants. Machado had become involved with Patriot Prayer in 2016 because, like Gibson, he'd felt persecuted for his political and religious beliefs. "If you're for Trump now, you're a white supremacist," he said, incredulous. "We have Mexican kids, Mexican families. It's just not right."

"My husband shouldn't have to tell me that if he's not with me I can't wear my Trump gear," Carie said.

Machado had served as Gibson's personal security detail at Portland rallies. He'd been hospitalized twice for injuries sustained from antifascists. Activists had posted photographs of him around his neighborhood, on posters that called him a Nazi. Now he never left his house unarmed. "I'm on their hit list," he said.

While Machado and I spoke, the other Proud Boys left and headed to a nearby bar. Machado nervously scanned the park. "I don't wanna be out here all by myself," he told me. It was broad daylight. A couple pushed a stroller across the grass.

But Machado's concern later proved reasonable. At the bar, a man began filming Machado and his friends with his cell phone. "He was trying to dox us," Machado said. After a bouncer made him leave, the man ran over a Proud Boy in the parking lot, fracturing his skull and rupturing his eardrum. The man was eventually arrested and charged with a felony hit-and-run. Although he wasn't a member of Rose City Antifa, he had shared a social-media post advocating violence against racists.

A GoFundMe page was set up to cover the victim's medical expenses. Gavin McInnes, the Proud Boys founder, who has since distanced himself from the group, contributed a thousand dollars. In the comments section, he wrote, "War."

The night after Gary Floyd, the Black Lives Matter activist, was shouted at by racists near Mill City, he discussed the impending election with protesters outside a juvenile-detention center in Portland. “It’s going to go one way or the other,” Floyd told them. “Trump gets reëlected, and we are all terrorists—or he don’t get reëlected, and we have ourselves a race war.”

Trump has been openly laying the groundwork to contest the results of the election, and there is widespread concern that he will call upon his supporters to reject them, too. “The only way we’re going to lose this election is if the election is rigged,” he has said. “We can’t let that happen.” During [the first debate](#), Trump wouldn’t commit to discouraging his supporters from engaging in violence while mail-in ballots are counted. When Chris Wallace, the moderator, pressed him to ask white supremacists, specifically, to “stand down,” Trump responded, “What do you want to call them? Give me a name.” Biden brought up the Proud Boys, and Trump answered, “The Proud Boys? Stand back and stand by. But I’ll tell you what, I’ll tell you what. Somebody’s gotta do something about Antifa and the left.”

The Proud Boys were ecstatic. One prominent leader wrote on Parler, “Trump basically said to go fuck them up! This makes me so happy.” Within hours, “Standing By” had become a new Proud Boys mantra, and T-shirts with the phrase were available online.

On September 26th, the Proud Boys came to Portland for a rally against “domestic terrorism,” planned after Aaron Danielson’s death. Organizers expected thousands of attendees from across the country. Governor Kate Brown declared a state of emergency, and a U.S. marshal federally deputized members of the rapid-response team, meaning that, in some circumstances, people accused of attacking them could face enhanced penalties.

The rally turned out to be lacklustre, with a couple of hundred Proud Boys drinking beer in a muddy field. After chants of “Fuck Antifa,” most of the men kneeled while a minister entreated God to “reveal your purpose to the Proud Boys—use us to lift up this city!” Following the prayer, the crowd emitted a communal grunt of “Uhuru!,” the Swahili word for “freedom,” which Proud Boys have co-opted as a satirical battle cry. Speakers blared an electric-guitar solo of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and a number of Proud Boys, instead of placing their hands over their hearts, held up the “O.K.” sign—a white-power signal. (Some people claim to use the gesture ironically, to inflame liberal

sensitivities.) “America, bitch!” someone bellowed. A few Proud Boys sported patches that said “RWDS”—Right Wing Death Squad—and one man wore a T-shirt that featured a portrait of Kyle Rittenhouse framed by the words “*THE TREE OF LIBERTY MUST BE REPLENISHED FROM TIME TO TIME WITH THE BLOOD OF COMMIES.*”

A welder named Shane, with a bushy red beard and a holstered Beretta, told me that he had driven down from Spokane, Washington, the previous night. Each front pocket of his blue jeans contained a loaded magazine, and in his rear pocket was a copy of the Constitution. Shane had taken part in the August 22nd brawl, when Mac and Ri Smiff joined the militants from Rose City Antifa. “When you have an ideology that is completely antithetical to Western culture and our traditions, we can’t let that go on,” he explained. “It’s a cancer eating away at the soul of America.”

Though Trump’s exaggeration of the threat posed by Antifa is likely a cynical ploy to scare up votes, Proud Boys like Shane and David Machado seem sincerely and deeply worried about Antifa. I asked Shane if he thought that the protesters in Portland represented a significant danger.

“Hundred per cent,” he said. “They fundamentally want to change everything about America.”

It occurred to me that most of the antifascists I met in Portland would readily agree with Shane’s assessment.

After this conversation, I went to Peninsula Park, where hundreds of the people Shane feared listened to Mic Crenshaw compare their fight to his own, three decades earlier, in Minneapolis. Later that night, many of the protesters headed to the Justice Center. The Proud Boys had left Portland without coming downtown, and there was a sense of triumph and relief. Black activists delivered speeches to a peaceful audience; I saw no vandalism. Yet, at some point, the rapid-response team, freshly deputized as federal marshals, arrived with a large contingent of state troopers in riot gear. They stormed the park, assaulting and arresting people. Half a dozen officers dog-piled on a woman, wrenching her arms behind her back. A seventy-three-year-old photographer was thrown to the ground; a journalist was shoved into a tree. Someone was maced at point-blank range. The show of force felt more intense than anything I’d seen in the past month. On this hundred-and-twenty-first day, it could have been a form of

desperation—or of vengeance. ♦

Race, Policing, and Black Lives Matter Protests

- The [death of George Floyd](#), in context.
- The civil-rights lawyer [Bryan Stevenson](#) examines the frustration and despair behind the protests.
- Who, David Remnick asks, is the true agitator behind the [racial unrest](#)?
- A sociologist examines the so-called [pillars of whiteness](#) that prevent white Americans from confronting racism.
- The Black Lives Matter co-founder Opal Tometi on what it would mean to [defund police departments](#), and what comes next.
- The quest to transform the United States [cannot be limited](#) to challenging its brutal police.

Making Do Dept.

- **Our Plexiglass-Panelled Dining Future**

[November 2, 2020 Issue](#)

Our Plexiglass-Panelled Dining Future

The designer David Rockwell's DineOut NYC program aims to help restaurants safely lure back customers, with construction plans for special booths which anyone can download for free.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

October 26, 2020

The first time the architect and designer David Rockwell and the restaurateur Melba Wilson worked together was in 1996. Wilson, along with the restaurateur Drew Nieporent and Robert De Niro, was hoping to reopen Minton's Playhouse, a jazz club in the former Cecil Hotel, on West 118th Street. Minton's was the birthplace of bebop; a fire closed it in 1974. They asked Rockwell, who is known for his work on restaurants, hotels, and theatre productions, to bring the space back to life. He designed the set for a splashy fund-raiser, at which such musicians as Etta James, Lionel Hampton, and Roy Ayers performed. "David blew it out of the park," Wilson said the other day. She and Rockwell were seated in a plywood booth—painted a tropical-melon hue, under a canopy supported by ivy-covered poles—that had been installed in a parking spot outside Wilson's soul-food restaurant, Melba's, on West 114th Street.



Rockwell had designed the booth, too: it was a prototype for a pro-bono project, which was launched in April, called DineOut NYC, to equip restaurants with safe outdoor dining areas. The project started at Melba's, in part because Wilson is the president of the NYC Hospitality Alliance, a partner in DineOut NYC, which has been funded largely by private donors and corporate sponsors. The "outdoor dining system," which is modular, and incorporates plexiglass panels and telescopically extending planters, has been installed downtown, on Mott Street, and in Jackson Heights and the South Bronx. Anyone can download the construction plans, for free, from the DineOut NYC Web site. Rockwell said, "When we opened this up, we had a woman come over who was so—"

"She was in tears!" Wilson interjected. "This woman walks up with her daughter, and her daughter is looking around like 'Oh, my God, Mom, this is so beautiful.' And the woman comes over to the table—it was me, David, and someone from the Mayor's office—and she starts crying. She goes, 'Oh, my God, Melba, we never see anything like this up in Harlem. This only happens downtown.' "

Rockwell, whose long wavy hair gives him a zip that belies his sixty-four years, wore a dark T-shirt and a surgical mask. He had returned to Melba's with a team—including a mechanical engineer, whose mask was connected by tube to a portable HEPA filter hanging around his neck. Bent over blueprints, they were gearing up for the next phase of DineOut NYC: indoor dining, which, as of October 1st, restaurants are permitted to offer if they limit capacity to twenty-five per cent and follow a set of guidelines. At Melba's, Rockwell planned to go above and beyond them. Plexiglass partitions, built by an out-of-work scenic shop, would separate indoor tables. "That protects you from horizontal air movement, which is in some ways the most problematic," he said. The H.V.A.C. system would be fine-tuned, and portable HEPA filters would be installed on the floor. Melba's floor-to-ceiling windows would be left open at all times. A host stand, with a plexiglass shield, an umbrella, and an L.E.D. lamp, would sit on the sidewalk, so that no one eating outdoors would have to enter the premises.

Rockwell talked about other aspects of restaurant design that will forever be altered by the pandemic. "Sanitary stations can no longer be hidden," he said. "The fact that there are not enough bathrooms in a restaurant—it's going to be interesting seeing sanitation becoming part of what people lead with." He continued, "Another thing that's going to change in the restaurant world is rent

structures, so that restaurants aren't squeezing out four to five per cent and taking all the risk." Wilson nodded vigorously. Outdoor dining had brought in a little more than fifty per cent of the revenue of a normal summer for her. At twenty-five per cent capacity, indoor dining won't make up the difference.

Before she opened Melba's, in 2005, Wilson—who says that she was "born, bred, and buttered" in Harlem—worked in restaurants such as Sylvia's (its founder, Sylvia Woods, was her aunt) and Windows on the World. For years, she saved money by stuffing stray bills under her mattress, as her mother had done. One day, she was shocked to realize that she'd amassed more than three hundred thousand dollars. "I was, like, Oh, my God, suppose somebody robs me? But that's how I opened up," she said. "It was important for me, being born and raised in this community, to provide the change that I wanted to see. This was one of the most notorious drug blocks in Harlem."

It was time for fried chicken. Rockwell demurred—he had dinner plans—but, after a final walk-through of the dining room, he emerged holding a sweet-potato pie. ♦

Musical Events

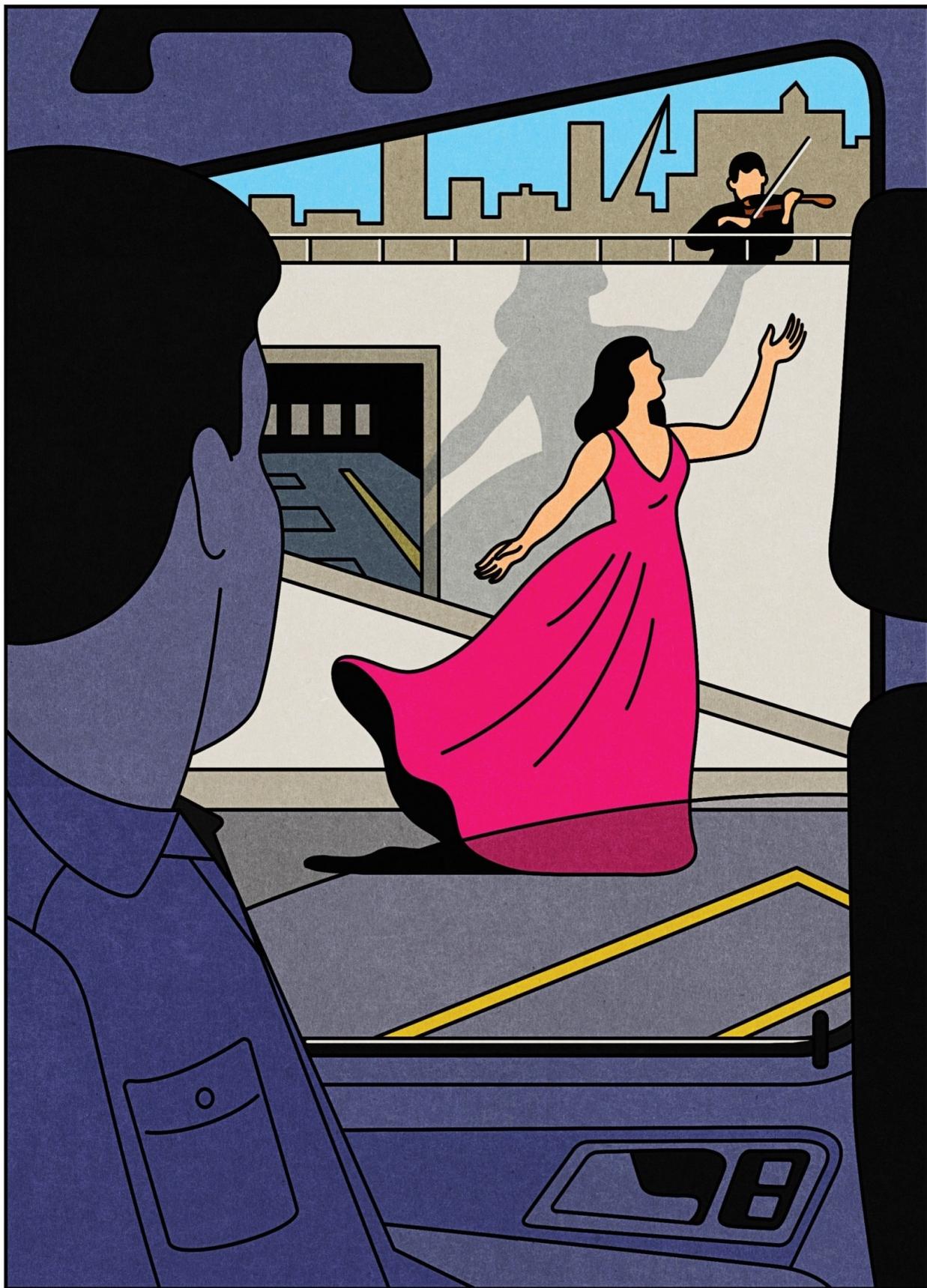
- Wagner's "Götterdämmerung," in a Detroit Parking Garage

Wagner’s “Götterdämmerung,” in a Detroit Parking Garage

In Yuval Sharon’s immersive production, audience members drive up the ramps, listening to audio piped into their car radios.

By [Alex Ross](#)

October 26, 2020



In the psychogeography of modern life, parking garages are sites of anxiety and subtle terror. The doctor's appointment is minutes away, and yet you are still frantically circling. The space you find is so tortuously narrow that it could have been designed only in consultation with auto-body shops. Afterward, desperation rises as you wander acres of concrete, listening for your faintly beeping vehicle. The lighting is sepulchral, the air dank. Few soothing scenes in movies are set in garages: shady deals are done, witnesses are offed, Deep Throat speaks.

It made sense, then, that [Yuval Sharon](#), the new artistic director of Michigan Opera Theatre, chose a Detroit parking garage as the impromptu set for an abridged production of "Götterdämmerung." The final installment of [Wagner](#)'s "Ring" cycle ostensibly addresses the twilight of the gods, but no gods appear onstage: according to the libretto, we glimpse them only in the far distance, at the climax, as fire consumes Valhalla. Instead, the opera is dominated by a compromised array of human beings, who move through a darkening, decaying world. In the prologue, we are told that Wotan, the chief of the gods, fatally wounded the World Ash Tree when he tore a branch from it to make his spear of power. The death of the tree stands in for the ruination of the earth by capitalism and industrialization. A multistory parking garage is as good a spot as any for the Wagnerian apocalypse.

The site was chosen out of pandemic-era necessity. When Michigan Opera Theatre began looking for a way to present socially distanced performances, it smartly reached out to Sharon, who, as the leader of the Los Angeles company the Industry, has made his name staging opera in unusual settings: warehouses, parks, city streets, limousines, train stations. Lyric Opera of Chicago became a partner in the Detroit production, and will host it in the spring. Some of the costumes and props were borrowed from Lyric Opera's "Ring" cycle, which was on the verge of a full presentation when the shutdown began.

The basic scheme of Sharon's "Götterdämmerung"—retitled "Twilight: Gods"—recalls that of the Industry's 2015 project "[Hopscotch](#)," in which limousines conveyed audience members to locations around Los Angeles. In Detroit, convoys of eight cars drove up the ramps of the Detroit Opera House garage, allowing passengers to witness scenes on six levels; each day of the run, the process was repeated twelve times. The performers were miked, and the audio was piped into the cars on dedicated FM stations.

“Götterdämmerung” usually lasts six hours, including intermissions. Sharon’s version, which used chamber-sized arrangements by Edward Windels and incorporated several prerecorded Wagner-based pieces by Lewis Pesacov, lasted just over an hour. The sequence included the Valkyrie Waltraute’s narration of the gods in decline; the magnificently menacing dialogue between the half-human Hagen and his dwarf father, Alberich, as they plot to seize the ring of power; the hero Siegfried’s exchange with the Rhinemaidens, who plead for the return of the ring; Siegfried’s death at Hagen’s hands; and the final monologue of the banished Valkyrie Brünnhilde, who rides onto Siegfried’s pyre with the ring, thereby redeeming the world.

The task of summarizing the plot fell to the Detroit-born poet, historian, and activist Marsha Music. She assumed the guise of the earth mother Erda, who appears in earlier stages of the “Ring” but not in “Götterdämmerung.” Music’s condensation of the story was elegant, sly, and at times politically pointed. Before the finale, she put the fall of the gods in contemporary terms: “To [pandemic](#) and plague, the world has succumbed / The end of days—it now has come / Jealousy, envy and skies fire red / And discarding and lying and defiling the bed / And courting then ghosting and boldfaced lies / And bragging and boasting, and making hearts cry.”

With accompaniments ranging from a single player to an ensemble of nine, the grandiose thunder of “Götterdämmerung” was absent, but the performance had considerable musical impact nonetheless—underscoring [Nietzsche](#)’s counterintuitive, half-sardonic remark that Wagner was “our greatest *miniaturist* in music.” During Waltraute’s monologue, a solo cello conveyed much of the spacious sorrow of the drama. The Hagen-Alberich scene, a festival of abyssal timbres, featured a superbly clammy trio of electric bass, bass clarinet, and accordion. A quintet of violin, harp, marimba, and vibraphones evoked the shimmering waters of the Rhine. Pesacov contributed some moody, Kraftwerk-like fantasias on Wagnerian material and an unexpectedly funky version of Siegfried’s Funeral Music—adding a taste of Motown to the mix.

Similar economy and ingenuity governed the scenic elements, which were designed by Jason H. Thompson and Kaitlyn Pietras. A blue drop cloth was rolled out for the Rhine; Alberich and Hagen sat in armchairs or glared at each other through chicken-wire fencing, which was built into the grim décor of the garage. As you drove up one ramp, you saw black-clad figures scrawling the names of some deceased “Ring” characters—Siegmund, Sieglinde, Hunding,

Mime—in chalk on the walls. The ultimate coup was Brünnhilde’s entrance in the passenger seat of a Ford Mustang—a locally manufactured steed that took the place of the horse Grane. Guides held up a sign reading “Follow the Mustang”; the spectators drove up onto the rooftop level, where Brünnhilde got out of her vehicle and sang her closing monologue amid an assemblage of burned-out cars, with the Detroit skyline looming in the background.

For opera-starved audiences who have endured months of glitchy live streams, the greatest joy of “[Twilight: Gods](#)” was the chance to hear first-rate singers live. Christine Goerke, in the role of Brünnhilde, summoned all the vocal heft and emotional force that she has brought to conventional stage outings, and she showed an extra glint of glee as she jumped into the Mustang to ride onto the metaphorical pyre. Morris Robinson and Donnie Ray Albert contributed nuances of familial resentment to their secure characterizations of Hagen and Alberich. Catherine Martin, Avery Boettcher, Olivia Johnson, and Kaswanna Kanyinda gave lyric warmth to Waltraute and the Rhinemaidens. Sean Panikkar, a onetime lyric tenor whose voice has lately taken on commanding power and weight, proved thrilling in his brief appearance as Siegfried: I only wish that the abridgment had given him more to do.

Singers of color were in the majority in the cast of “Twilight: Gods,” which made me think about the project’s political resonance. Marsha Music’s narration pitched the piece against Trumpian politics, and the imminent Presidential election shadowed videotaped messages that were played in an outdoor lot before the show: [Gretchen Whitmer](#), the governor of Michigan, who was recently the target of a failed right-wing terrorist plot, praised Sharon for “reimagining the boundaries of opera.” The idea of attaching Wagner to a progressive agenda may seem strange at first glance. The composer was, after all, [a ferocious racist](#) who became a symbol of Nazi propaganda. On the other hand, leftists from George Bernard Shaw to Vsevolod Meyerhold saw Wagner as a kindred spirit, and several major African-American intellectuals—W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Shirley Graham, Ralph Ellison, and Langston Hughes—took inspiration from his music. Whatever the outcome of the eternal debate over Wagner, Sharon has every right to yoke the malleable allegory of the “Ring” to the demands of the hour.

“Götterdämmerung” ends with a gloriously vague vision of a better future, in the form of a stately melody that unfurls slowly in the violins. Audience members heard this music as they descended the garage ramps. The sound design for

“Twilight: Gods,” which was supervised by the composer Mark Grey, functioned perfectly throughout, but by intention the radio signal grew weak in those final moments: bursts of static obscured Wagner’s promise of redemption. I tried not to hear it as an omen. ♦

On Television

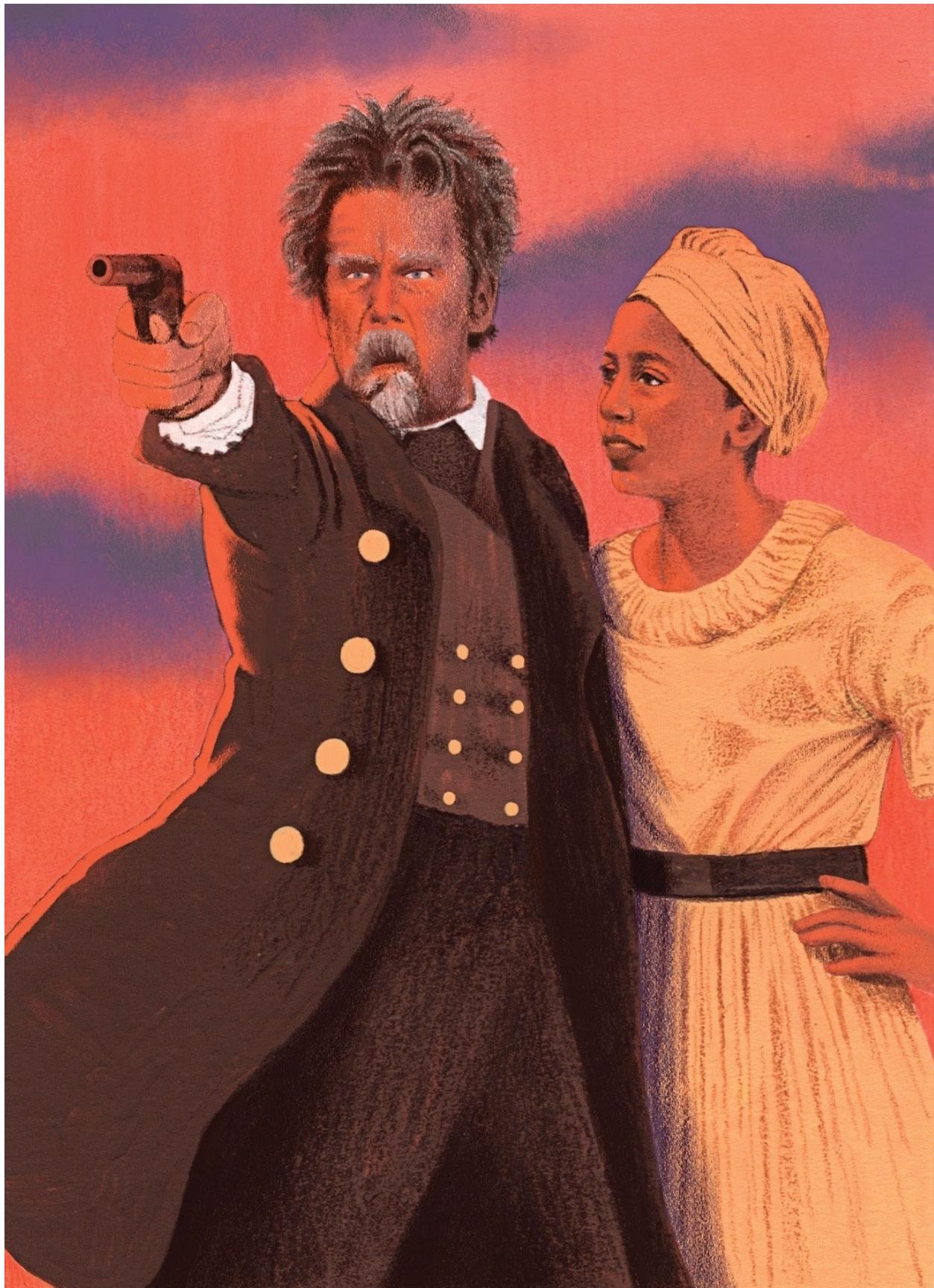
- **The Mischievous Irreverence of “The Good Lord Bird”**

The Mischievous Irreverence of “The Good Lord Bird”

Showtime’s miniseries about the militant abolitionist John Brown has no time for hagiography.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

October 26, 2020



Mercifully, the new Showtime miniseries “The Good Lord Bird,” a reimagining of the militant abolitionist John Brown’s doomed ride to Harpers Ferry, is not “woke.” Instead, it has an impish spirit of contrivance that is largely missing from contemporary antebellum historical fictions. Among its finest moments of cultural sacrilege is a sex farce starring [Frederick Douglass](#), whom Brown ([Ethan Hawke](#)) insists on calling “the King of the Negroes.” Douglass, in a canny bit of casting, is played by Daveed Diggs, who originated the roles of Thomas Jefferson and the Marquis de Lafayette in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Broadway phenomenon, “[Hamilton](#),” a retelling of American history that marked the apex of Obama-era artistic liberal agitprop. “The Good Lord Bird,” though, is not concerned with supplanting the mess and the mystery of history with upbeat coherence. Diggs’s Douglass is a playboy dandy flushed with Cognac, nesting on a couch at his Rochester mansion between his Black wife, Anna, and his German mistress, Ottilie.

Credit for the series’ mischief is due to [James McBride](#), whose 2013 novel of the same name has been adapted with deep, sometimes stubborn fidelity by Mark Richard and Hawke, who are both, along with McBride, executive producers on the show. The novel is an idiosyncratic critique of history-making, an account of the prelude to emancipation told from the point of view of an eccentric, elderly man who likes to wear dresses. Henry (the Onion) Shackleford, born into slavery, recounts how, as a child, he came under the wing of the “old coot” John Brown and his ragtag army as they planned to take over a strategic U.S. military arsenal to hasten the holy war on the peculiar institution. McBride’s fictive Black witness allows him to rewrite Brown’s final, righteous exertions as tragicomedy.

The show is narrated by a young Henry (played by the newcomer Joshua Caleb Johnson), who, in the opening episode, launches into what sounds like a tall tale. In Osawatomie, Kansas, in 1858, a white stranger comes to his father for a shave. Henry, wearing a sack, sits at the stranger’s feet, shining his shoes. The stranger and Henry’s father bond over the good word, as the stranger recites Biblical passages with increasing fervor and starts to loudly preach the gospel of abolition. When Henry’s master arrives, and hears the stranger, he balks, asking the stranger to pledge his fidelity to the cause of slavery. The stranger—who is revealed to be John Brown—refuses, and opens fire. In the chaos, Henry’s father is accidentally killed, and Brown, as he flees, scoops up our narrator, pronouncing the child freed. But Brown has misheard Henry’s name and

mistaken his sack for a dress; he calls him Henrietta.

Our narrator, a quippy angel of history, trails the “nigger-stealing” Brown and his troops as they provoke violent skirmishes with slaveholders, rich and poor, dumb and heralded, across the West and the East, and finally, fatefully, in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. In this picaresque tale, the dyad of Huck Finn and Nigger Jim is warped. To Henry, freedom is, at first, too new to compute—and, besides, isn’t traipsing around the backlands of Kansas with a bearded white man and his motley company just another kind of bondage? Master fed him well and didn’t beat him much. Brown is inscrutable to Henrietta (or Little Onion, the nickname the child earns after eating the strange man’s good-luck charm). With Brown, Henry cannot live according to his “true nature,” as he puts it; bereft of identity and of family, he wordlessly accepts a new dress that Brown gives him, living as the girl Brown mistakes him for. “Much of colored life was an act,” Henry says. “And the Negroes that did what they was told and kept their mouth shut lived the longest.”

“The Good Lord Bird” makes a sly joke of the Christian notion of prophetic vision: so enraged is Brown by the enslavement of his Black brothers and sisters that he cannot see that his new daughter is a son. No measure of good intention, or of spilled blood, can bridge the distance between the white ally and his Black comrades. This can be to the Negro’s benefit. Act like the white man’s idea of the nigger and you can cheat death. “Everybody got to make a speech about the Negro, except the Negro,” Henry observes while watching one of Brown’s thunderous addresses to a group of white abolitionists in the Northeast. The cluelessness of white people fuels many gags in the series. Every Black person Henry encounters—the freemen and the enslaved who reluctantly join Brown’s camp, the historical figures such as Douglass and Harriet Tubman—immediately notices his lie. These are the characters who furnish and expand his world view. As Tubman (Zainab Jah) teaches him, “slavery has made a fool out of a lot of folks.”

“The Good Lord Bird” roots for Brown, but it has no patience for hagiography. Hawke’s is a folklorically outsized interpretation of the man who, as the Kansas muralist John Steuart Curry once wrote, “went about wreaking good on humanity.” At one moment, he is a holy-roller Rambo, drawing twin pistols from their holsters; at the next, he is a long-winded preacher, comically protracting his prayers. Certain skitlike scenes are thrillingly reminiscent of Monty Python; the series is like a cross between “Masterpiece Theatre” and a particularly elaborate

episode of “[Drunk History](#).¹” Hawke alternately stars and recedes into the background, as “The Good Lord Bird” swings nimbly from pulpy proto-Western to surreal, somewhat anachronistic social satire. Henry’s skewering of the self-satisfied white abolitionist crowd doubles as a critique of the contemporary white ally. Frederick Douglass serves as a crucible in which stereotypes about the noble race man are burnt.

The comedy of “The Good Lord Bird” is bawdy and dry, but the show is bighearted. Some of the most affecting moments draw on the dynamic between Brown, whose perspective on the world is ferociously fixed, and Henry, who is just trying to survive and, if possible, have a little fun. It takes a while for Henry to sign on to Brown’s freedom project. In Episode 2, scared off by the fanaticism of Brown’s army, Henry runs away and takes a job at a brothel, where he becomes a bit of a drunk. Still dressed as a girl, he crosses paths with Sibonia (the excellent Crystal Lee Brown), an enslaved woman who is feigning insanity in order to carry out an insurrectionist plot, and Pie (Natasha Marc), a light-skinned prostitute who sells Sibonia out. Pie’s brutal betrayal and Sibonia’s unshakable selflessness provide a lesson that Brown could never have taught him.

The show’s characterization of Brown would be a good topic for a white-studies class. As his band approaches Virginia, Brown grows more zealous. Far from descending into madness, he rises into a blazing, all-encompassing, possibly suicidal lucidity. Comforting Henry the night before he is hanged, Brown declares, “I am the luckiest man in the world.” To approach death is to make progress; only annihilation will precipitate the great war. Brown fails and dies so that others may fail and die after him—perhaps ad infinitum. Brown’s was never a hero’s journey, and, in this series, Brown is not the white savior, because the white savior does not exist in Henry’s imagination. “He ain’t gon’ save us,” a Black porter says to his master. “He’s tryna save you.” ♦

Poems

- “[The Old Land](#)”
- “[The Great Beauty](#)”

[November 2, 2020 Issue](#)

The Old Land

By [Aleksandar Hemon](#)

October 26, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

In the old land,
People perished not from hunger
But from gorging on lust and liver.

Birds flew backward, thoughts swarmed
Against foreheads. Grass vined up stakes,
Sprouted out of the eyes of the impaled.

In the old land,
The mountains were seasonally flattened,
Carved and rolled up like woven prayer mats.

The sky was shallow and piebald in the fall,
Striped and shiny when it rained or snowed,
So splendidorous we'd go blind, lose our minds.

In the old land,
Homes were made of honeycomb and straw,
Cars ran on blood, melted pennies, bones.

Streets zigzagged like startled antelopes.
Life and death were simple and whole,
No need for explanation, let alone hope.

In the old land,
Love was meant for strangers and their dogs,
Yowling, licking wounds, sore lymph nodes.

We were living our long lives at home,
Until we sank and resurfaced in this void,
Different skins, goggled eyes, nowhere to go.

Just to be as we were, we had to destroy
All the wrong distant lands, the many
Scared elsewhere, banging at our doors.

[November 2, 2020 Issue](#)

The Great Beauty

By [Toi Derricotte](#)

October 26, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

In the movie, flamingos migrate over Rome and rest overnight on the terrace of Jep Gambardella, so that,

in the rose light of dawn, he walks out to find his saintly old guest, Sister Maria, meditating among a flamboyance—

a hundred stand on pink stilt-like legs with roseate plumes and beaks sturdy as lobster crackers. Some rest on one leg

or sit with legs tucked under them; some halfheartedly peck at stone—as if they might find bread crumbs from last night's party.

But all are quiet. “I know all their Christian names,” she brags under her breath to no one, or perhaps to God.

•

I never received such tidings from the universe, but Saturday on my walk, checking my Fitbit again (3,000 for an old lady is good), I heard wing beats and cooing, and then, almost under my arm, one flew up nearly brushing my hand—as if intentional—then twenty, thirty coming from behind, as if they were pouring out of my back. I couldn't tell how many would arrive, a hundred resting on the branches of a tree, and some flying up to a balustrade, sitting in a long row stolid as judges. Why can't I take evidence seriously? I (who half believe in God) spoke playfully—not even remembering I had watched Sister Maria's flamingos two nights

before—“What are *you* doing here?,” as if they were old friends or a bunch of my kids showing up out of nowhere. I watched for a while and when they just sat there, turning their heads, I went on with my walk—another 1,500 steps to go. By the time I was almost home, I had persuaded myself: it was only pigeons; perhaps hungry. But then they came back, from all around, as if they were rising up out of the ground, as if they were being made right before me, all the sounding wings, air whipping and breaking, their gray-and-pink presences as if convincing me.

Pop Music

- **Grouptherapy Embodies a New Model of Cultural Versatility**

Grouptherapy Embodies a New Model of Cultural Versatility

Formed as a reaction to the commercialization of creative energy, the collective project is refreshingly effortful.

By [Carrie Battan](#)

October 26, 2020



In every era of entertainment, performers have been described as “triple threats,” signifying that they can excel beyond their chosen creative field. Everyone wants the license to sing, dance, act, and more. It’s a term that has, in previous decades, been easy to deride—the absurd claim of a performer who dared to dabble outside of her native universe. Now, though, it merely describes the table stakes for many young artists in a media-saturated landscape. Between albums, they might consider launching a diaristic podcast, as the ukulele-playing bedroom-pop queen mxmtoon did, earlier this year. Trapped at home during a global pandemic, you might start a cooking show, as Selena Gomez did, with her new series, “Selena + Chef,” on [HBO Max](#). And then there is the laundry list of pop stars who have partnered with apparel companies and assumed titles such as “brand ambassador” or “creative director.” Versatility no longer indicates a lack of focus or conjures the notion of “selling out”; it is now a matter of creative and financial survival. Pinballing among mediums can yield delightful or unexpected new material, but too often there’s a hollow excess to it, producing the kind of content whose sole purpose is to maximize exposure.

One of the more exceptional cases of cultural lane-hopping is Grouptherapy, a new pop-music project born from the fatigue and disappointment that its members experienced as multi-hyphenate child entertainers. Jadagrace Michiko Gordy-Nash, Tyrel J. Williams, and Coy Stewart—whose stage names are Jadagrace, TJW, and KOI—are all in their early twenties, but they perform with a degree of earned disillusionment, as if they had already lived many lives. In some sense, they have. By the time Jadagrace, the group’s acrobatic vocal talent, was in middle school, she had already been through a rigorous dance academy, appeared in a “Terminator” film, and signed a major-label record deal. She was mentored by Motown Records’ Berry Gordy from a young age, and released a series of campy, heavily produced singles. These were an attempt to bottle talent and manufacture conventional pop at a moment when the music industry was beginning to capitulate to the forces of algorithms and online virality. KOI, the group’s hyperverbal and professorial rapper, was a child actor, who appeared on networks like Nickelodeon and TBS. In the music world, he might be better recognized as the star of the music video for the socially conscious rapper Logic’s hit song about suicide, “1-800-273-8255,” in which he plays Don Cheadle’s depressive son. TJW, the group’s sombre and resolute rapper, came up as an actor through Disney’s talent pipeline.

This type of path, via familiar institutions and formats, has become increasingly

outmoded. Many charismatic Hollywood kids who might previously have started out auditioning for television shows or record labels have chosen to leapfrog conventional entertainment mediums altogether, producing snappy, often comical D.I.Y. videos on social media. It's become such a common endeavor that a new establishment is forming: Los Angeles is experiencing a boom in content-creator collectives, giant groups of aspiring or already successful social-media stars. Many of these collectives, like the nineteen-member Hype House, live in rented mansions with plenty of mirrors, cultivating new ideas and social dynamics to broadcast on [TikTok](#) and YouTube.

Grouptherapy represents a departure from both the old Hollywood model and the new guard of social-media creatorship. In 2019, after crossing paths at parties and auditions, the group's members began to make music individually and together. In the eyes of Grouptherapy, pop music provides a refuge from the financial stressors and the structural limitations of Hollywood. It also presents an opportunity to reclaim ownership of their own talents. On "there goes the neighborhood"—a new collection of songs that the members have described as a "mixtape," even though it has much of the polish and meticulousness of a major studio album—Grouptherapy examines the condition of being in the Hollywood machine while feeling underpaid and unfulfilled. "I must reflect on my passions, deflect all the bad things," Jadagrace sings on "watercolor," a whispering and sensuous R. & B. song with a drip-drop beat. KOI leads the group in the album's more militant and defiant moments, like "blackout"—a rumbling song with a refrain more reminiscent of an activist march than a radio banger. It's a song about being creatively undersold, but it's also a rejection of the materialist tropes that come with success. "I don't want nothing when I'm rich," he announces. "I don't have a single rock on my neck or wrist." Eventually, the beat cuts out and he begins to speak, as if at a lectern. "I'm sick of flexing, can I vent?" he asks. "I just sold a show and still ain't made a fuckin' cent. That don't make no sense."



"Sweetheart, I think we should break out."

In theory, Grouptherapy was formed as a reaction to the commercialization and professionalization of creative energy. (“Suit and ties on my line / Had to decline / Click!” KOI says on a track called “yessir.”) But though their music is thornier than, say, the outrageously saccharine music of Jadagrace’s earlier career, Grouptherapy has not shaken the ethos of its members’ formal training. Their stage-readiness, honed over many years, is what distinguishes them from all the other young musicians expressing such familiar forms of disillusionment. “there goes the neighborhood” has a frothy musical theatricality to it, with a structure and a buoyancy that suggest each song is ready for its accompanying choreography. While so many of their peers in today’s mainstream favor a kind of studied disaffectedness, Grouptherapy rejects—whether intentionally or not—any kind of glib cool.

This can make the project feel gimmicky in its wholesome eagerness, like a teenage movie soundtrack or a church-choir act. There’s enough pitch-perfect harmonizing to make a college a-cappella group envious. But the album is also refreshing in its effortfulness. The anthemic sweetness of the centerpiece, “raise it up,” harkens to the late-nineties and early-two-thousands heyday of pop and R. & B. girl groups. (The music video features a trio of female dancers in cheerleading outfits, seemingly a nod to the film “Bring It On.”) It’s a triumphant pop do-over from Jadagrace, who handles both the buttery chorus and the nimble rap verses. On the surface, a chorus of “Raise it up” seems like an energetic party cry, but a close listen reveals a message about self-worth and restitution: “My shit comes with benefits you cannot afford / You done made me have to raise it up.”

Aesthetically, “there goes the neighborhood” is nostalgic for a pre-streaming era of pop. In those days, pop groups were often formed by labels through auditions and molded for stardom by a select group of powerful people. (The record executive [Lou Pearlman](#), for example, developed a model that he applied successfully to a handful of groups, including ’NSync and the Backstreet Boys, before he was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for running a Ponzi scheme.) But this is precisely the system that Grouptherapy wants to reject. They’re a little late: outside of indie rock and the K-pop industrial complex, groups are unfashionable entities. This is probably why, on the album, the members of Grouptherapy refer to themselves as an “art collective.” Grouptherapy, for now, is fully independent, a quality that is vanishingly rare. They’re self-funded and without a record deal. (Their principal connection to the

mainstream is through their executive producer, a Chicago songwriter and producer named Dee Lilly, who's worked with acts like Big Sean and Snoh Alegra.) It's a form of freedom that allows them to record such polished pop as a matter of choice, rather than out of obligation. ♦

An earlier version of the photo caption misstated Dee Lilly's title.

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Goop Coronavirus Guide](#)

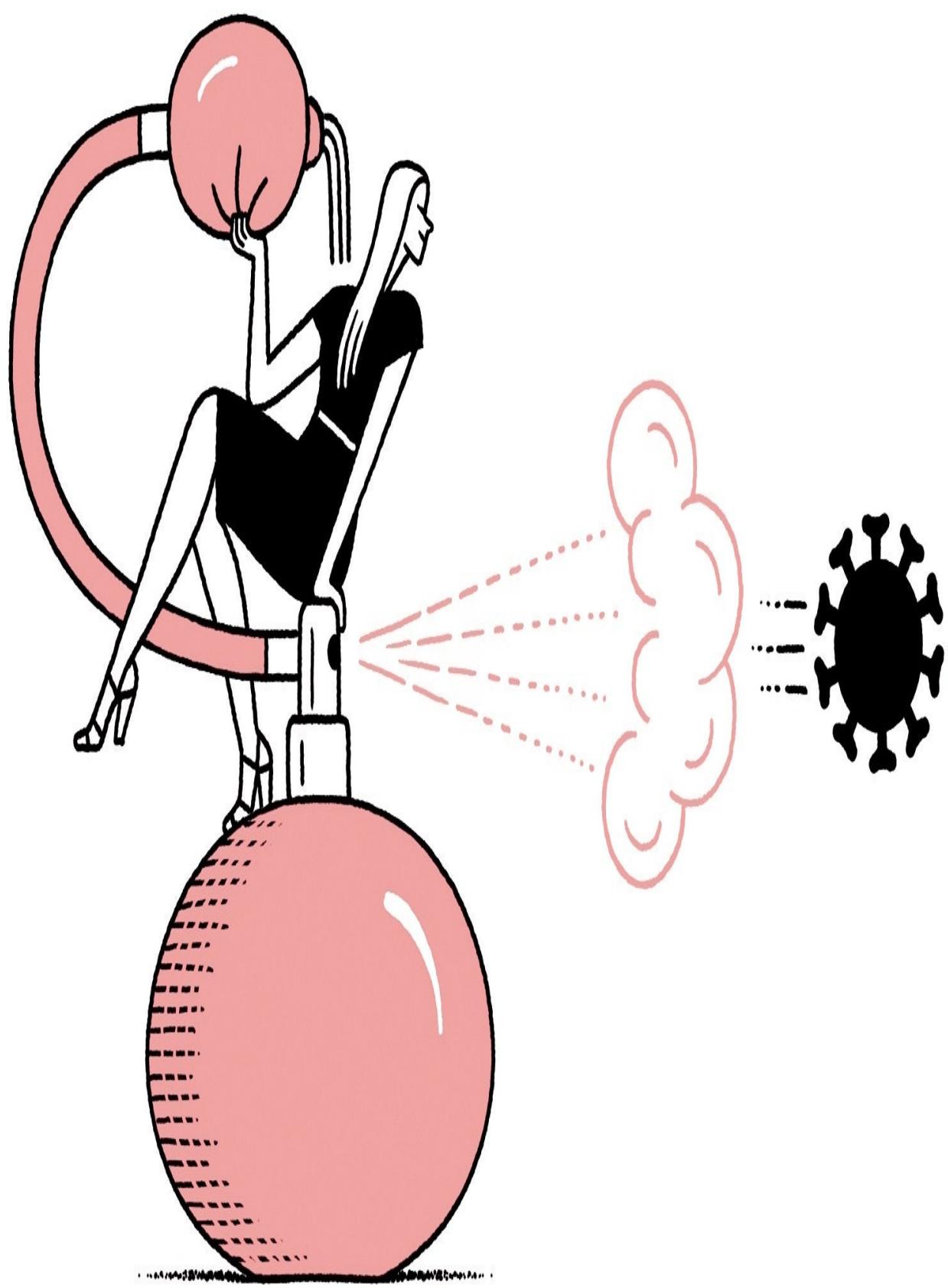
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Goop Coronavirus Guide

What would Gwyneth do? If you want to be the belle of the plague, how about a Birkin lambskin face mask or a champagne bidet?

By [Megan Amram](#)

October 26, 2020



Hello, all! Your pal Gwyneth Paltrow here! Welcome to another issue of Goop. As you know, the world is in turmoil. But *COVID-19* is a great equalizer. Young or old, rich or poor, we are all the same: rich, staying in a fifteen-thousand-square-foot home, remembering the time we starred in “Contagion.” As you adjust to your new life, we at Goop are with you every step of the way. Here’s our guide to quarantine essentials.

ORGANIC HAND SOAP (\$170): If you’re anything like me, you use your hands all the time. Whether it’s weaving a lilac menstrual shawl or handing your child off to a nanny, your hands take the lead, and you need to protect them. Normal soap can be really irritating to hands that have never touched a large door or buckled an overall. Our Goop bar soap is made in a gentle oval shape so that you don’t cut the paper-thin skin of your hand on the sharp edges of a rectangle. Give that virus a piece of your mind like the badass mommy you are!

ALL-NATURAL DISINFECTING CLEANER (\$390): We all know that we’re supposed to bleach our second kitchen’s tarragon forks twice a day, but bleach can be super harsh. This cleaner, made from purified H₂O, rose hips, and saffron threads, is an all-natural alternative that’s light and fragrant and kills almost some of germs! Safe to use on prosciutto desks, wheat-free necklaces, and birthing tongs. Life hack: to increase germ-fighting power, just add a dash of this disinfectant to a gallon of bleach!

FIRST-RESPONDERS GRATITUDE TIARA (\$1,875): It’s not easy to stand out from the crowd when you’re poking your head out the window, but this headwear will make you the belle of the plague. Our tiara, encrusted with rubies, diamonds, and blood diamonds, will make you feel feminine *and* brave every night as you clap from your Central Park-adjacent balcony for the selfless first responders!

CLAPPING PHONOGRAPH (\$2,700): Quarantine can be stressful, especially if you’re cooped up with little ones. (I mean bills under fifty.) You might not even have time to clap for the first responders if you’re busy teaching your daughter to embroider #girlboss on the maid. This clapping phonograph is weather resistant and plays a ton of really awesome celebrity-clapping tracks—just set it on your veranda and let it do your gratitude for you! Throw on Lizzo’s clapping to get your groove on while you’re waiting for the nurses to do their freakin’ jobs!

BIRKIN LAMBSKIN FACE MASK (\$120,000): The C.D.C. recommends wearing a mask and standing six feet away from others. But that doesn't mean you have to stand six years behind the current fashion! This non-reusable face mask is made from a lamb's mouth that has been expertly detoothed and molded to a human woman's natural curves. Nearly three full lamb faces go into each mask. The lambskin's natural oils will help keep your lips and philtrum as perfectly smooth as your yoni. And the best part? There is a hole in the middle, so you can show off your perfect lip color! MWAH!

MOTHER-OF-PEARL TEAR JAR (\$470): Let's face it—this corona stuff is sad! Let it out, girlfriend! This trinket jar is lined with mother-of-pearl harvested from bivalves that were mommies, so you know they care. Collect your daily tear in it and watch the colors shimmer. The tears will keep, so you can reuse them any day when you're not quite "feeling" it. Also great for storing earrings or doubloons.

TUTOR VACUUM SEAL (\$29,140): Feel overwhelmed that your child's tutor can't teach during lockdown? This easy-to-use vacuum seal will keep your little darling's holistic-math teacher (only free-range variables!) germ-free so that she can keep coming to your house without risking your family's health! Comes in three sizes: small, medium, and SAT.

CHAMPAGNE BIDET (\$6,705): Toilet paper is still scarce, and everyone is looking for an eco-friendly way to cope. This bidet uses whatever you have lying around—champagne, California sparkling wine, whatever! My booty is so cultured now, it can tell the difference between a 2013 and a 2017 pinot gris!

OPEC MEMBERSHIP (\$25,000,900-\$50,001,700): The cost of oil has fallen so low that OPEC is actually considering individual membership! Available for either single membership (\$25,000,900) or dual membership for couples (\$50,001,700—save a hundred dollars!). Buy one for yourself, or gift it to your mom for Mother's Day. Now that's what I call essential oil!

COVID-19 VACCINE (\$4,000,000,000): As we "splurgers" know, a vaccine already exists for people who can afford it. Included in the cost is a private stay at the U.S. naval base on Guam to have the shot administered and the injection site covered with a bandage made from the Shroud of Turin. Truly the gift to get the girl who has everything—especially COVID-19! ♦

More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

Sketchbook

- [A Very Covfefe Crossword](#)

[November 2, 2020 Issue](#)

Crossword

By [Barry Blitt](#)

October 26, 2020

Suburban Mom Dept.

- [Laura Dern Plays a Depressed Suburban Housewife in a New Photo Memoir](#)

[November 2, 2020 Issue](#)

Laura Dern Plays a Depressed Suburban Housewife in a New Photo Memoir

When the photographer Jona Frank wanted someone to depict her depressed, pie-baking mother in her book about growing up bored in New Jersey, she asked her L.A. best mom friend.

By [Dana Goodyear](#)

October 26, 2020

At a rally in Pennsylvania recently, Donald Trump beseeched the voting bloc he's most afraid of losing. "Suburban women, will you please like me?" he said. "I saved your damn neighborhood." Picture the endangered suburbs in Trump's mind: homogeneous and as white as the milk you dip your after-school snickerdoodle in. The mothers, home. The fathers, not. You're seeing Cherry Hill, New Jersey, circa 1966, when Jona Frank was born. Frank is a photographer, based in Santa Monica, who has taken pictures of skaters, boxers, rodeo kids, and evangelical youth. This fall, Monacelli Press will publish "Cherry Hill," a book of autobiographical essays and photographs by Frank that re-create a girlhood spent waiting all day for the mailman.



Laura Dern and Jona Frank Illustration by João Fazenda

“There was this feeling of *Nothing happened here*,” she said. “I wanted to show the inside of suburbia. Everyone has their trash cans lined up outside, but what’s really going on inside?”

Frank’s mother, a homemaker who hid her depression, prescribed rigid Catholicism and strict gender roles, insisting on Holly Hobbie wallpaper in her daughter’s room and baking impeccable pies. To play her mother in the photos, Frank cast her best mom friend, Laura Dern. The other day, Frank and Dern sat six feet apart in Dern’s living room, and talked over Zoom with a reporter a few miles away. Dern had on a striped sweater and black-framed glasses; one hand rested on Baby, a husky rescue who had just had surgery. Frank, who has sharp brown eyes, wore a pink gingham mask. She had brought a plate of Mexican-wedding cookies. “Let’s be clear: when Jona bakes, Laura shows up,” Dern said. “And when Laura’s on location she may text Jona and say, ‘Can you please drop cookies to Ellery?’ ” Ellery, Dern’s son, is nineteen, and is best friends with Frank’s son, Lucien.



Photograph by Jona Frank / Courtesy the Monacelli Press

“I have been away, working,” Dern said. (Her next movie is “Jurassic World: Dominion.” Frank’s husband is the cinematographer and second-unit director.) “The last time we saw each other . . .”

“We did one really weird 7 A.M. Whole Foods run at the start of quarantine,” Frank said. “And we did a couple of drop-offs. I did give Laura a Zoom lesson about making a cobbler.”

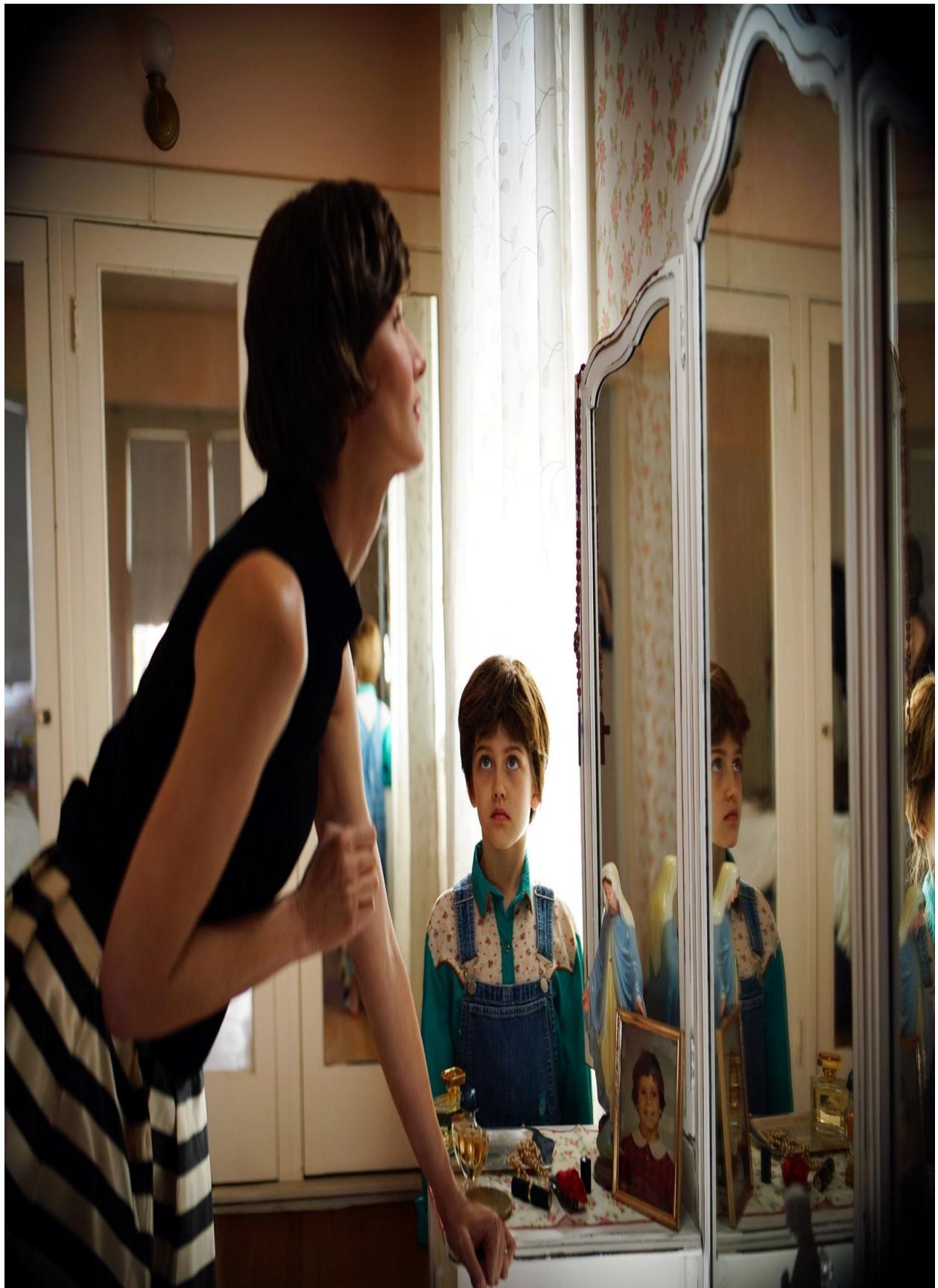
“I’m rocking that cobbler now,” Dern said.



Photograph by Jona Frank / Courtesy the Monacelli Press

In the book, Frank documents her family's quiet implosion: her mother, deteriorating, would silently retreat to her room, in a pink robe, and emerge, pockets full of Kleenex; her beloved older brother, who hid his sexuality, had a psychotic breakdown. Frank grew to fear the telephone—heavy, black, wall-mounted—which always seemed to ring with catastrophic news. In one image, an actress playing Frank as a teen-ager, wearing white Stan Smiths and rolled red jeans, has a black phone attached to her back, like baggage.

Talking about mothering their own kids through the tender passages of adolescence, Dern and Frank traded memories. “If we’re trying to be authentic and present in our failings and our efforts as parents, the story of our own childhood comes up,” Dern said. She was raised in Hollywood. Her parents, Bruce Dern and Diane Ladd, are actors.



Photograph by Jona Frank / Courtesy the Monacelli Press

“This is a very different childhood from yours,” Frank said. “I didn’t grow up going to Martin Scorsese’s set, eating ice cream with my mom.”

Frank, who in the past has used a four-by-five camera, shot the book using an anamorphic lens designed for filmmaking. The detail is exquisite, sometimes excruciating: the bleeding edge of peeled apple skin as the mother, her face tight, makes yet another pie. Physically, Dern, who is lanky and blond, doesn’t resemble Frank’s mother. Still, “she was my mother,” Frank said. She turned to Dern: “The last image in the book, how you purse your lips, that’s my mother, and it still haunts me.”



Photograph by Jona Frank / Courtesy the Monacelli Press

Dern has been on a streak of playing mothers: Renata Klein, a protective mom and Silicon Valley executive in “Big Little Lies”; a divorce-attorney power mom in Noah Baumbach’s “Marriage Story”; Marmee, in Greta Gerwig’s “Little Women.” “I’m reëvaluating the many faces of motherhood,” she said, and recounted how a journalist asked her, “Why do you think you’re playing these powerful-in-business moms suddenly?” “I’m, like, Because until about four years ago, there weren’t any of these roles!” Making “Cherry Hill,” she said, reminded her of her film “Blue Velvet”: “These things that seem perfect, everything should feel great, but nothing is fun.”

“That was the confusion—suburbia provided safety and comfort to me, but it was also killing my spirit,” Frank said. “To my mother, that world was enough. To me, it was, like, No, this is very repetitive, very stifling, and I have to get out of that box.” Frank’s parents never left New Jersey. Her mother, who is ninety-two, lives an hour away from Cherry Hill. The book is a record of Frank’s escape.



Photograph by Jona Frank / Courtesy the Monacelli Press

Dern was thinking about Ellery, who had just left home for New York, where he is a freshman at Parsons. “I’ve got to put the cobbler recipe in Ellery’s cookbook for college,” she said. ♦

Tables for Two

- [Pandemic Essentials of All Kinds, at Hunky Dory](#)

[November 2, 2020 Issue](#)

Pandemic Essentials of All Kinds, at Hunky Dory

The Crown Heights bar and restaurant, which offers bottled cocktails to go and seasonal dishes like a duck-and-apple sandwich, hosts everything from clambakes to movie nights to political postcard drives.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

October 23, 2020



In August, about a year and a half after Claire Sprouse opened her Crown Heights bar and restaurant, Hunky Dory, she added a line to the proverbial shingle out front: “Approved Postal Provider of Stamps.” It’s just one of many ways the purview of the place has recently expanded. For a while, it contracted: immediately after the dining room was forced to shutter, in March, and Sprouse had to furlough her staff, Hunky Dory was reduced to a pushcart, which she used to deliver cocktails—including the Dolly Parton-inspired Smoky Mountain Song Bird (mezcal, turmeric, Madeira wine, and lemon juice)—to displaced barflies in the neighborhood.



The set menu for the Sunday clambake included Old Bay-dusted fries, a tart vinegar-based coleslaw, and plenty of melted butter. Photograph by Makeda Sandford for The New Yorker

During the summer, Hunky, as Sprouse affectionately refers to it, became an incubator of sorts. She'd given up on the cart (it was wreaking havoc on her back), but she was still selling drinks, along with some pantry items, including fried-chicken seasoning, for pickup. "As it became more apparent that we needed to have food," she explained, "I started looking toward my network of chefs who depend on catering and pop-ups. It was, like, I have this whole space. You can use it! It will help me sell drinks." Hunky played host to, among others, a roving Cambodian dinner series called Kreung, and to Yellow Rose, a Tex-Mex pop-up whose menu featured beef-chili Frito pies.



The clams themselves were steamed with mussels, potatoes, bacon, and celery, and finished with charred corn and fresh herbs. Photograph by Makeda Sandford for The New Yorker

By July, Sprouse had figured out how to reintroduce Hunk's own food, for pickup, delivery, or seat-yourself outdoor dining. This month, she turned the dining room into a general store, selling everything from sustainable toilet paper to single-origin, heirloom spices from Diaspora Co. Much of her success in staying open, she pointed out, has been a matter of luck. Hunk is on a heavily trafficked corner, and its windows open onto the street, making it easy to order without going inside. Her landlord agreed to let her use the empty lot next door as a patio, and she had already been planning to add a store, albeit in another location.



As the weather cools, Sprouse plans to add tents and heaters to the patio. Photograph by Makeda Sandford for The New Yorker

But Sprouse is also, clearly, quick on her feet. Hunk's new food menu—a streamlined selection of the kind of eclectic all-day dishes available pre-pandemic—is optimized to be as satisfying ordered in as it is eaten on the patio. I thrilled to a delivery, the other night, of the “pile o' veggies and dip,” a rainbow-hued array of steamed purple sweet potato, caramelized cabbage, and crunchy carrot, all seasoned with Aleppo pepper, and a thick whorl of red-lentil purée. The “autumn sando”—shredded duck leg, sliced apple, celery root, and horseradish piled onto focaccia—seemed to actually benefit from time in transit, the meat’s rich juices settling into the pillow pockets of the bread. My Mangoni (mango brandy, aperitivo, sweet vermouth) came in a charming plastic bottle plastered with a “PLEASE RECYCLE ME” sticker.

On the patio, the vibe is as festive as a carnival. Sprouse still hosts pop-ups most Wednesdays. She bought both a movie projector and a popcorn machine, the smell of which, she said, “is evoking a lot of strong emotions in people.” In October, she held weekly clambakes, featuring bacon-and-celery-strewn shellfish and Old Bay-dusted French fries, and borrowed a cider press. Soon she’ll add tents, heaters, and a “blanket club”: regulars can buy warm throws to cozy under while sipping hot toddies and store them inside between visits, like beer mugs on the wall at a taproom.



Soft-serve flavors rotate with the season, from sweet corn (with an optional Frito topping) in the summer to pumpkin (with an optional drizzle of spiced toffee sauce) in the fall. Photograph by Makeda Sandford for The New Yorker

The stamps inspired her to host evenings for writing postcards to swing voters; in general, she does not shy from politics. In July, she switched to a new gratuity-free payment model. Recently, on Instagram, she posted a breakdown of what cold, rainy weather did to her sales one Friday night: it put her more than a thousand dollars in the red. “If you can, please support restaurants,” she wrote. “If you can’t, please contact your senator and ask them to pass the Heroes Act now, which includes restaurant relief and so much more. Be kind to all workers. Wear a mask. Vote.” (*Snacks and food \$5-\$25.*) ♦

The Political Scene

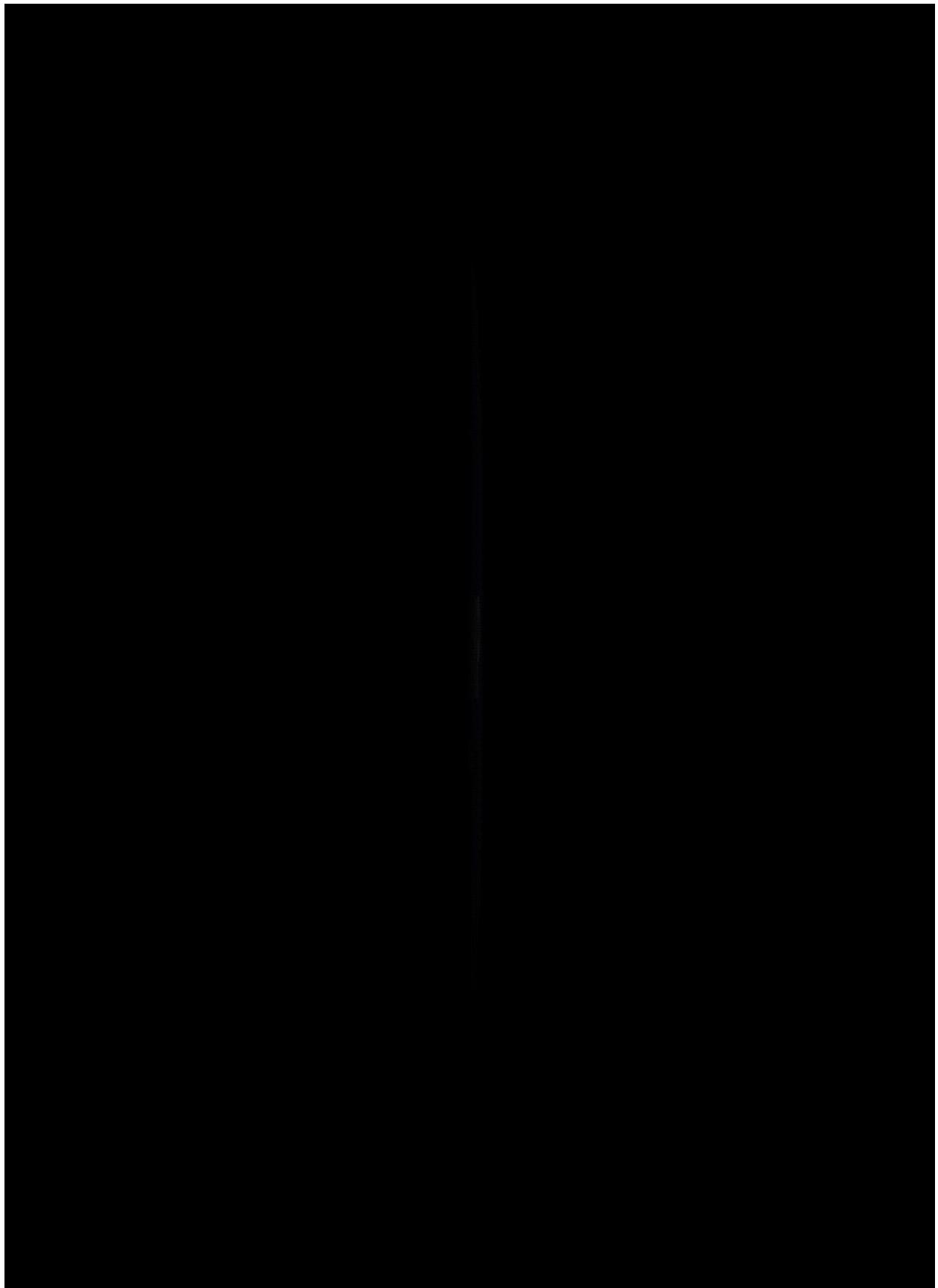
- [The Republican Identity Crisis After Trump](#)

The Republican Identity Crisis After Trump

This Presidency poses stark questions about the ideological future of both parties.

By [Nicholas Lemann](#)

October 23, 2020



The last weekend in August, 2001, two weeks before the attacks of 9/11, President George W. Bush travelled with his wife, Laura, and an entourage of government officials to a steel mill outside Pittsburgh. He worked the tables at a picnic for members of the United Steelworkers union and their families. I was there as a reporter, and I recall standing just a few feet away from the President on that hot day, listening to him make small talk with the factory workers and watching the sweat soak through his checkered shirt. After the picnic, he ascended a temporary stage and gave a speech promising a “level playing field” for American steel. A few months later, he instituted a tariff on steel imports.

A President serves as the chief executive of the federal government, but he is also the functional head of his political party. Bush was at the steel mill more as Republican-in-Chief than as head of state. Though he couldn’t have imagined that Donald Trump, whom he is known to despise, would become President, Bush was trying out a populist turn in Republicanism as he attempted to persuade Democratic blue-collar workers in the Rust Belt to leave their party. Bush’s family was solidly anti-tariff; his father had been denied a second term in 1992 partly because two maverick challengers, Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot, both anti-free-trade nationalists, had roughed him up enough for Bill Clinton to be able to win the Presidential election, with forty-three per cent of the popular vote. Bush, by making protectionist gestures, was now departing from the tradition of his father and grandfather. (In the 2004 election, he flipped three counties in western Pennsylvania that he had lost in 2000, and came close to carrying the state.)

If you have Presidential ambitions, you have to think about a collection of policies and stances that could enable you to win by bringing together various groups across the country. Candidates have a number of options about which policies to include. Bush’s enthusiasm for steel tariffs didn’t last long—he had rescinded them by the next year. So what was in his collection?

Shortly after Bush’s victory against John Kerry, he made a swaggering appearance before the press, announcing, “I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it.” He did this by making two big bets on the future of the Republican Party, both of which went spectacularly awry. The first was a relatively permissive immigration policy. He believed that Republicans could appeal to Latinos, the country’s fastest-growing minority group. The first flight of ads that Bush ran as a Presidential candidate, in Iowa in

2000, included radio spots in Spanish—"artifacts from a lost civilization," one of his media consultants called them. In 2004, he got about forty per cent of the Latino vote. Second, he proposed to begin privatizing Social Security—making it similar to an account that people could invest in the stock market, as they did with their I.R.A.s. This was meant to persuade middle-class Americans to think of themselves as members of the "investor class," as Republicans liked to say, rather than as grateful beneficiaries of the Democratic Party. The initiative on immigration set off a furious rebellion from the Republican right; the Social Security proposal enraged both Democrats and Republicans. There went Bush's political capital.

The failure of the war in Iraq and Bush's insufficient response to Hurricane Katrina made him deeply unpopular, but the Bush dynasty retained enough of its mystique for Jeb Bush to enter the 2016 Presidential race as the heavy Republican favorite. He aimed to be friendlier than his brother had been both to the markets and to Latino voters. (His Spanish is better than George W.'s, and his wife is Latina.) Most of the other Republican candidates had similar positions, but Donald Trump made precisely opposite bets. He flung around flamboyantly offensive racial stereotypes about minorities, especially Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants. He defended Social Security. He resurrected the Buchanan-Perot position on trade, which both parties had rejected for decades. On foreign policy, he was an aggressive isolationist, hostile to the country's elaborately maintained system of alliances. He attacked big business more often than any Republican candidate in memory. And even if you believe that, because of Russian meddling and the peculiarity of the Electoral College, his victory in the 2016 Presidential election was not truly legitimate, there is no question that he beat Jeb Bush, Scott Walker, Marco Rubio, Chris Christie, Ted Cruz, John Kasich, and the other aspirants to the Republican nomination.



SFA Warren

"They're unspookable this year."
Cartoon by Sofia Warren

Trump will not be President forever—he may be in the role for only a few more months. It's hard to imagine that the Republican Party could come close to replicating him with another Presidential candidate, unless it's Donald Trump, Jr. But is there a future in Trumpism? This is a live question for both parties. The major political development of the past decade, all over the world, has been a series of reactions against economic insecurity and inequality powerful enough to blow apart the boundaries of conventional politics. On the right, this can be seen in the regimes of Jair Bolsonaro, in Brazil; Narendra Modi, in India; Viktor Orbán, in Hungary; and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in Turkey. There are new nativist and nationalist parties across Western Europe, and movements like the ones that produced Brexit, in Britain, and the *gilets jaunes*, in France. An ambitious Republican can't ignore Trumpism. Nor can an ambitious Democrat: the Democratic Party has also failed to address the deep economic discontent in this country. But is it possible to address it without opening a Pandora's box of virulent rage and racism? Lisa McGirr, a historian at Harvard who often writes about conservatism, told me, "The component of both parties that did not grapple with the insecurity of many Americans—that created the opportunity for exclusionary politics. It's not Trump. It's an opportunity that Trump seized."

The Republican Party has long had a significant nativist, isolationist element. In the Party's collective memory, this faction was kept in check by "fusionism," a grand entente between this element and the Party's business establishment. The best-known promoter of fusionism is the late William F. Buckley, Jr., the theatrically patrician founder of *National Review* and an all-around conservative celebrity. Buckley tried to keep anti-Semites and conspiracy theorists out of the conservative movement, but he was not a standard Chamber of Commerce Republican. His first book attacked liberal universities, his second defended Joseph McCarthy, and in 1957, when Dwight Eisenhower was sending federal troops to integrate Little Rock Central High School, he wrote an article titled "**WHY THE SOUTH MUST PREVAIL.**" Buckley helped define American conservatism as a movement that supported free-market economics and internationalism and welcomed serious intellectuals, including former Communists such as James Burnham, Frank Meyer, and Whittaker Chambers.

Fusionism brought these views together into what seemed for a long time, at least from the outside, to be a relatively workable political coalition. Philip Zelikow, a veteran Republican foreign-policy official and one of hundreds of

prominent members of the Party who vigorously opposed Trump in 2016, said, “World War II, followed by nearly World War III, brought the United States into an unprecedented world role. And a vocal minority didn’t accept it. They don’t like foreigners. They think they’re playing us for suckers. There were a lot of Pearl Harbor and Yalta conspiracy theories that we’ve forgotten about. This group concentrates overwhelmingly in the Republican Party.” For a long time, it was kept in check. Now, in Zelikow’s view, it has grown in prominence and become less deferential to the business wing of the Republican establishment, and is “close to being the most influential element in the Party.”

The Cold War made fusionism possible. In the name of helping capitalism defeat Communism, the movement allied Republicans who adored McCarthy with those who despised him, on the basis of a shared commitment to an aggressive American military stance and a super-empowerment of private business. But the isolationist impulse has deep roots in American political culture. It was clearly present during the red scare after the First World War, the repudiation of Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations, and the passage of the 1924 law that severely restricted immigration. As Zelikow put it, “The isolationists believed the U.S. should be bristling with weapons. Foreigners are a viral pathology. The whole point is to keep foreigners away from us.” These attitudes were consistent with a high-alarm version of internationalism that focussed on the Soviet threat. Buckley-style conservatism went from being regularly dismissed as irrelevant, a creed whose following didn’t extend far beyond the small circulation of a political magazine, to being the core principle of Ronald Reagan’s Presidency.

In 1976, Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, was the first born-again Christian to be elected President. But, soon afterward, the group that had helped power his rise became a substantial and reliably Republican voting bloc. As the nation as a whole became more secular, the Christian right grew in strength and in numbers. Beginning with the Moral Majority, in the late seventies, evangelical groups became aggressively political, fuelled by contributions from churchgoers and from rich political donors. Evangelical leaders have embraced opposition to abortion, previously mainly a Catholic concern, as a primary cause. On a parallel track during Reagan’s rise, the business wing of the Republican Party was creating a powerful network of media outlets, think tanks, and lobbying organizations. They were all interested in such libertarian causes as tax cuts and deregulation. In hindsight, the partnership between evangelicals and libertarians wasn’t a natural one, but for a long time it held together in the interest of the

Republican Party. Today, more than eighty million Americans say they are evangelicals—including George W. Bush, who in 1985 was born again.

The threat of Communism faded with the end of the Cold War, and, as inequality and globalization increased, many voters in both parties felt left behind. One of the pre-Trump signs of this trend among Republicans was the sudden emergence of the Tea Party, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and Barack Obama's Inauguration. According to Glenn Hubbard, an economist who chaired the White House Council of Economic Advisers under Bush and was a Presidential-campaign adviser for Mitt Romney, in 2012, and Jeb Bush, in 2016, "There have been tectonic shifts with globalization and technological change. Economics 101 says, 'It all works out. The gains compensate for the losses.' But they didn't. And élites didn't care—including the Democratic élites. Most people aren't going to be entrepreneurs. That's the economic problem. Also, there are cultural factors." Hubbard started taking Trump seriously in early 2016, when his younger brother, the country musician Gregg Hubbard, told him that his fans loved Trump. Erick Erickson, a radio host who is one of the leading figures in the evangelical wing of the conservative movement, has the same sense of a broken link between the Republican Party's religious base and its business élite. "The Party today is more populist than conservative," he told me. "It's the populism of a growing percentage of Americans who feel shut out. It's younger, blue-collar voters—a coalition of grievance. They're not conservative or liberal. They have grievances against the élite." Karl Rove, Bush's chief strategist, agreed with this assessment: "In 2016, people wanted somebody to throw a brick through a plate-glass window."

In American politics, white nativism and racism tend to rise in conjunction with economic distress. Quite often, liberal economic reforms have been achieved at the price of compromises with politicians who were anything but liberal on race. The greatest triumph of liberalism in American history, the New Deal, entailed a bargain with the segregationist South in which the Jim Crow system remained firmly in place. In the twenty-first century, rising economic discontent among working-class whites has often caused them to lash out at people from other groups. Albert Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Louisville, and a leader of the religious wing of the conservative movement, told me, "There's an anxiety. A world is being demolished before your eyes. It's an instinct that things aren't going as they should. The world is coming apart. Somebody has to say no."

Trump's Republican opponents in 2016, who had been living in a world created by the Republican donor class, didn't see that the Republican coalition had been shattered. After Obama defeated Mitt Romney in the 2012 election, Reince Priebus, then the head of the Republican National Committee (who later followed the familiar trajectory from Never Trumper to Trump enabler to Trump exile), commissioned an inquiry to find out what had gone wrong. The resulting report, known in Republican circles as "the autopsy," noted a significant decline in the Latino vote for Republican Presidential candidates since the George W. Bush high-water mark, in 2004, and urgently called on the Party to reaffirm its identity as pro-market, government-skeptical, and ethnically and culturally inclusive. Romney would have carried Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada if he had replicated Bush's share of the Latino vote. The Republican establishment, and most of the 2016 Republican Presidential field, accepted the autopsy as revealed truth.

This left an opening for Trump to ignore a series of supposedly inviolable Republican bromides. He didn't talk about the need for limited government or for balancing the federal budget. He didn't talk about the United States as the guarantor of freedom worldwide. He didn't extoll free trade. He didn't court the Koch brothers. He did not sign the no-new-tax pledge that the conservative organizer Grover Norquist has been imposing on Republican Presidential aspirants for decades. A new book, "Never Trump," by two political scientists, Robert Saldin and Steven Teles, asserts that Trump was opposed by more officials in his own Party (the Never Trumpers of their title) than any Presidential nominee in recent American history. Nonetheless, he got more votes in the Republican primary than any Presidential candidate ever has. Newt Gingrich, the former House Speaker, who in the nineties laid some of the groundwork for Trump's rise by establishing hot-blooded attack as the dominant Republican leadership style, told me, "He won because he's a dramatically better politician than anybody believed. A substantial part of the country felt demeaned. Talked down to." Gingrich, who was among the first prominent Republican politicians to endorse Trump, has written two glowing books about the "great comeback" that the President's agenda represents.



ADT

"She may have won the funky-brooch battle, but she hasn't won the funky-brooch war."
Cartoon by Adam Douglas Thompson

Diane Feldman is a retired pollster who specialized in getting Democrats elected in swing states. In 2018, she worked on the successful campaigns of Senators Sherrod Brown, of Ohio, and Tammy Baldwin, of Wisconsin, two years after Trump carried both states. During that election cycle, she conducted a series of focus groups with people who had voted for Obama in 2012 and Trump in 2016. “Here was a choice that was really different,” she said. “They knew him from ‘The Apprentice.’ They thought he’d get things done. And he’s more interesting than the other candidates. That matters more and more. They’re anti-government, anti-élite. Élite means coastal attitudes: ‘They think they’re better than us, they’re P.C., they’re virtue-signallers.’ ‘He doesn’t come across as one of those people who think they’re better than us and are screwing us.’ ‘They lecture us.’ ‘They don’t even go to church.’ ‘They’re in charge, and they’re ripping us off.’ It is a core difference on what has been happening for the past twenty years.”

Trump’s key insight in 2016 was that the Republican establishment could be ignored, and his primary campaign pitched only to the Republican base, which no longer believed in the free-market gospel, if it ever had. There would be no penalty for violating any ironclad rule of traditional Republicanism. Mike Murphy, a veteran Republican consultant who was affiliated with Jeb Bush in 2016, said, “Trump was a perfect grievance candidate, at a time when Republican voters wanted to blow up the system. I did Arnold Schwarzenegger—he was what Hollywood people call a ‘pre-awareness title.’ People thought Trump was all over the place on Republican-base issues like guns and abortion, and that would do him in. But he hit this note of resentment. He was ‘politically incorrect’—critical of Obama in crude terms. There was definitely a racial subtext.” He went on, “He was very George Wallace. And then there was the strongman thing: Juan Perón in an orange fright wig. He spoke to a fifty-two-year-old shoe salesman in a dying mall in Parma, Ohio. He has those voters in his head.” Charles Kesler, a conservative political scientist and the editor of the *Claremont Review of Books*, one of a small number of Trump-sympathetic intellectual journals, said much the same thing: “It’s a confession of the disrepair of the Republican Party that he won that race. He shouldn’t have won that race. It revealed the inner hollowness of the Party.”

Nobody pretends that President Trump pores over detailed policy briefs. By all accounts from reporters and from Administration defectors, what you see

(tweets, rallies, enmities, palace intrigue) is what you get. Even though Republicans controlled the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the White House for two years, Trump failed to achieve his most loudly voiced campaign promises from 2016, such as building that big, beautiful wall and making Mexico pay for it, getting Congress to repeal the Affordable Care Act, and undertaking a major infrastructure-building program. He is running for a second term without having produced any formal platform. What he did accomplish is a surprisingly conventional Republican program: substantial tax cuts, a vast rollback of federal regulations, large increases in military spending, and the elevation to the federal bench of more than two hundred judges with lifetime tenure, including, most likely, three avowedly conservative Supreme Court Justices.

Trump signed into law a cut in the corporate tax rate from thirty-five per cent to twenty-one per cent—far lower than what Reagan was able to get. Glenn Hubbard said, “Jeb would have given you the tax cut. I know because I wrote it. Trump just doubled it.” In 2017, Julius Krein, an up-and-coming conservative intellectual and a former Trump supporter, founded a magazine called *American Affairs*. He told me, regarding Trump’s economic accomplishments, “Laugh if you want, but he ran on an ambitious agenda, which ran counter to the entire consensus. And in office he did almost nothing for anyone aligned with the 2016 campaign. The donors are driving the bus.” Trump’s racially charged rhetoric has remained constant from his first campaign through his time in office, but, in policy, foreign affairs is the one area where the Trump of the campaign and the Trump of the White House are truly aligned. His hostility toward alliances and treaties has led him to withdraw from the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal. He has enacted punitive restrictions on immigration. He constantly attacks *NATO* and other international organizations.

The best explanation I’ve heard for the difference between Trump as a candidate and Trump as the President goes back to fusionism. Governing requires filling thousands of jobs at the highest levels of the federal government with people who know what they’re doing, and also having shovel-ready policies in dozens of specific areas. Trump and most of his closest aides had no government experience and no developed policies. Reagan was elected sixteen years after Barry Goldwater’s forty-four-state defeat, in 1964. The conservative movement had used that time to develop a governing infrastructure. As Reagan took office, the Heritage Foundation (established in 1973) released the thousand-page “Mandate for Leadership,” which included hundreds of detailed suggestions for

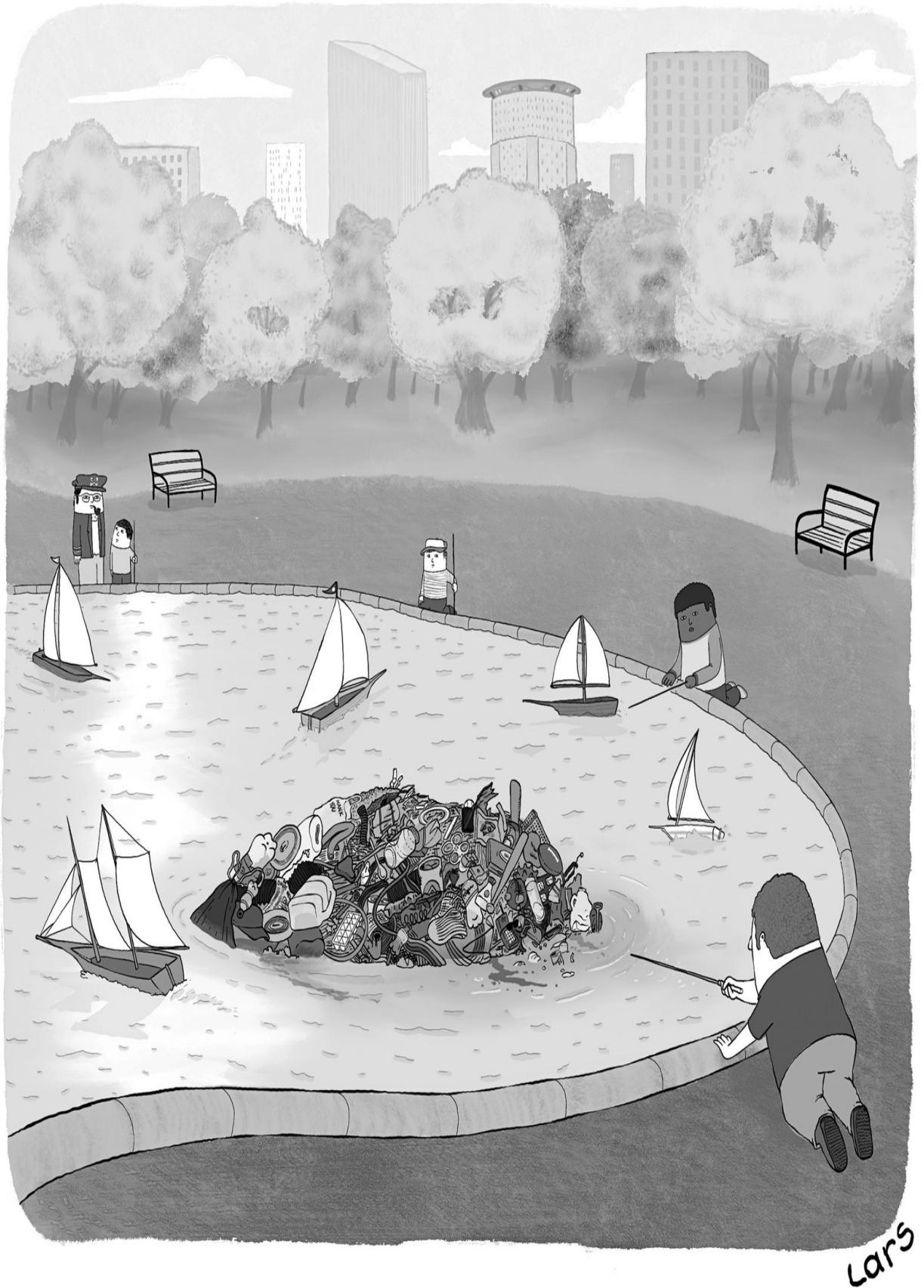
conservative policies that Reagan could enact.

There was no manual like that detailing the program Trump ran on, and no economic-policy experts ready to enact it. “This was a case where the dog caught the car,” Oren Cass, a young conservative activist and thinker who dislikes both Trump and the Republican establishment, told me. Trump’s motley crew included people like Stephen Bannon, Corey Lewandowski, and Paul Manafort, who hadn’t previously worked in government, or even had leading roles in prominent Republican campaigns. Stuart Stevens, Romney’s senior strategist in 2012 and a Never Trumper, told me, “These are evil people. They don’t have a sense of right and wrong. The people Trump attracts—these are damaged people. These are weird, damaged people. They are using Trump to work out their personal issues.”

Yet the establishment’s governing machinery was still running apace, so there were plenty of appointees and policies available from congressional staffs, think tanks, and lobbying organizations—all funded by the Republican donor class. The establishment is set up to supply the Presidential officials who supervise the career civil servants (also known by Trumpists as “the deep state”) in federal agencies. A few distinctively Trump appointees—Stephen Miller, on immigration, and Jared Kushner, on the Middle East—pushed through policies that no traditional Republican would have put into place. Otherwise, appointees without previous connections to Trump but with deep connections to the Party’s libertarian wing have put in place an enhanced version of the standard Republican program.

The result has been an odd mix of traditional Republican policies and Trumpian rhetorical flourishes. It’s hard to tell whether Trump believed in what his Administration was doing or if he was merely focussed on how to square it with his personal branding strategy. Cliff Sims, a White House aide who left in 2018, is the author of “Team of Vipers,” arguably the most revealing of the half-dozen tell-all Administration memoirs. In the book, Sims describes a scene from 2017, in which Trump is on the phone with Paul Ryan and Kevin Brady, the Republican members of Congress who were primarily responsible for the tax-cut plan. Trump says, “I think I’ve got a great name for this bill—it’s going to be really cool. We need to call it ‘The Cut Cut Cut Act,’ because this is a tax cut. When people hear the name, that’s what we want people to know.” (The bill became law under the name Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.)

It's also hard to tell whether Trump is truly an economic nationalist or merely a crony capitalist. He railed against TikTok, a Chinese-owned company, demanding that it sell its U.S. division, but then approved a deal that would permit Chinese control to continue and would also benefit two American companies, Walmart and Oracle, the latter of which has a major Trump contributor as a top executive. The Administration's misadventures in Ukraine appear to have involved attempts to get the head of Naftogaz, the national gas company there, replaced by someone who would agree to import liquefied natural gas from the United States. Whatever is really going on, it's clear that Trump in office is far less economically populist than he claimed to be while he was campaigning for his first term.



Lars

Trump's judge-selection machinery depends on the Federalist Society, which for nearly forty years has maintained a pipeline for judges with a shared intellectual doctrine. The Federalist Society, which is far more Reaganite than Trumpian, is intently focussed on business-friendly jurisprudence. Liberals have been largely concerned with the threats to the Affordable Care Act, to Roe v. Wade, and to same-sex marriage, but whatever happens next on those issues will certainly be accompanied by a wave of decisions favorable to the business wing of the Republican Party. As Grover Norquist says, "The Supreme Court is not all about sex, it's all about property rights." Amy Coney Barrett would be the sixth member of the Supreme Court with ties to the Federalist Society.

Although Trump's campaign didn't emphasize traditional Republican-base issues like guns and abortion, it built strong ties to the base's major political organizations. That has paid off for Trump, who got about eighty per cent of the white-evangelical vote in 2016. Members of the religious right don't always mingle comfortably with corporate executives at social events, and establishment Republicans have sometimes made them feel that they are slightly embarrassing. "Evangelicals used to get a pat on the head and sent away. Trump brought them in," Erick Erickson, the radio host, who did not support Trump in 2016, said. "I still think character counts. Half the days I think I'll hold my nose and vote for him. If he can't be faithful to three wives, how can he be faithful to us? I cannot vote for a pro-abortion candidate. I am not excited about 2020 at all."

As Trump has outsourced economic policy to the establishment, he has outsourced social policy to the evangelicals. Years before he launched his Presidential campaign, some instinct led him to create an alliance with the religious wing of the Republican Party. Nearly twenty years ago, he formed a public relationship with Paula White, a popular televangelist who preaches the "prosperity Gospel," and who has said that she guided Trump toward active Christianity. Since at least 2011, Trump has been appearing at the American Conservative Union's annual Conservative Political Action Conference, a large gathering of activists from the Party base. In 2016 and 2017, Trump released lists of potential Supreme Court Justices, all of them demonstrably acceptable to both wings of the Republican Party, the evangelicals and the libertarians, and then made appointments only from those lists. (He released a second-term list this year.) He selected Mike Pence, an evangelical Christian who had strong support from the Koch brothers and from other major Republican donors, as his Vice-President. As President, Trump has issued a number of executive orders

that evangelicals approve of, such as one that rescinded a provision of the Affordable Care Act which required health-care providers to offer birth control. “He actually did what he said he’d do,” Albert Mohler told me. “It’s the oddest thing.”

Leaders of organizations with strong connections to the Republican base have found themselves being courted by Trump. Norquist may have failed to get Trump to sign his no-tax pledge during the campaign, but he still feels attended to. “I’d run into him, and he’d say, ‘You like my tax cut? You like my tax cut?’ ” he said. “He flipped on abortion. He came down hard on the Second Amendment.” (Trump has said he had a permit to carry a concealed weapon.) Norquist told me that the day after Trump appointed Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court he invited a group of conservatives to the White House, including Norquist, Paula White, and the leaders of the N.R.A., the Federalist Society, and the National Right to Life organization. “He said, ‘Grover likes me because I cut taxes.’ He didn’t say, ‘I like Grover.’ He said, ‘Grover likes me.’ Usually, you want the President to like you.”

Steven Hayward, a well-connected conservative who has written the two-volume history “The Age of Reagan,” told me, “The biggest surprise about Trump is that he has turned out to govern as a conservative, even more than Reagan did. When George W. Bush withdrew from the Kyoto accords, he sent a letter. When Trump withdrew from the Paris accords, he had a big announcement in the Rose Garden. And he doesn’t know Friedrich Hayek from Salma Hayek. He sold out —to us!”

This is likely to be Trump’s last campaign. In talking to dozens of conservatives over the past few months, I didn’t find anybody who likes or admires him in any conventional way. The Republican officeholders who opposed his nomination but don’t stand up to him are displaying either party loyalty or fear: he remains extraordinarily popular with Republican voters, especially in red states, and he is so vengeful that to displease him is to risk political death. Jeff Sessions experienced this firsthand during his run, earlier this year, for the Republican Senate nomination in Alabama. Sessions had a long, successful history in politics in Alabama and in the Senate, and a record of Trump-like views on immigration. He incurred Trump’s wrath when, as Attorney General, he recused himself from any investigations into Russian interference in the 2016 election, which led to the appointment of Robert Mueller as the special counsel. For months, Trump relentlessly mocked and attacked Sessions on Twitter before

firing him, in November, 2018. This year, he endorsed Sessions's Republican opponent, Tommy Tuberville, a former football coach making his first run for political office. Trump tweeted that Tuberville was "a REAL LEADER." Sessions lost the primary.

Senator Lindsey Graham, who during the 2016 primary season declared that Trump was "not fit to be President of the United States," quickly became one of his most abject loyalists, expecting that the President's support would guarantee his reëlection to the Senate in 2020. "Lindsey was scared of being primaried," a veteran South Carolina Republican consultant told me. "Republicans in South Carolina didn't like him—but he's getting cheered by Republicans now." Graham's strategy may have worked with Republicans in his home state, but he is paying a price for it. His Democratic opponent, Jaime Harrison, who has raised more money in one quarter than any previous candidate for the Senate, has drawn close to Graham in some polls.

Donald Trump is far too bizarre to be precisely replicable as a model for the generic Republican of the future. That raises the question of where the Republican Party will go after he leaves office. The jockeying for the 2024 Republican nomination is already well under way. Did Trump's ascension represent a significant change in the Party's orientation, and, if so, will the change be temporary or lasting?

Among the Republicans I spoke to, some of whom will vote for Trump and some of whom won't, there are three competing predictions about the future of the Party over the coming years. Let's call them the Remnant, Restoration, and Reversal scenarios.



CNITY

"So nobody's talkin', eh? Well, let's see what they have to say down at forensics."
Cartoon by Tom Chitty

Most of the 2016 Republican Presidential candidates accepted the post-2012-autopsy argument that the Party, with its overwhelming lack of appeal to nonwhite voters, was in a demographic death spiral. Trump ran a campaign that seemed designed to appeal only to whites—indeed, only to whites who didn’t like nonwhites. That worked well in the Republican primaries, and well enough in the general election for Trump to eke out a victory that would have been impossible without the Electoral College system. He also did slightly better with minority voters than Romney had, though minority turnout was significantly lower than it had been in the two elections when Barack Obama was the Democratic nominee.

Could somebody else use the Trump playbook to win a Presidential election? Those who believe in the Remnant scenario think so. It would require extremely high motivation among Trump’s base—mainly exurban or rural, actively religious, and not highly educated—along with a strong appeal to affluent whites, continued modest inroads with minority voters, and a low turnout among Democrats. If a politician were able to tap into the deep antipathy toward “élites” in the Trump heartland, he could compensate, at least in part, for the demographic decline of white voters. In the years between the elections of 1996 and 2016, the Democratic Party lost its voting majority in about a thousand of the three thousand counties in the United States—none in major population centers. Trump carried eighty-four per cent of the counties.

Stalwart Trump fans talk about a looming liberal takeover of all aspects of American life, including religious life, and a domination of the middle of the country by sophisticated, prosperous, snobbish, ruthless people. The ur-text for this viewpoint is “The Flight 93 Election,” an essay published in the *Claremont Review of Books* in 2016. Its author, Michael Anton, who worked briefly at the National Security Council in the Trump Administration, has just published a book called “The Stakes: America at the Point of No Return,” in which he warns that “red America might quietly—at first spontaneously, but later perhaps through more explicit cooperation—start to make federal operations on their turf more difficult.”

The Remnant strategy entails relentless attacks. It rests on the idea of an outpowered cohort of traditional Americans who see themselves as courageously defending their values. The obvious candidate to carry out a high Trumpist

strategy in 2024 would be Donald Trump, Jr., who is an active speaker in Trump-admiring circles and in the past two years has published two books that excoriate liberals. Several other potential Republican candidates, most notably Senators Tom Cotton, of Arkansas, and Josh Hawley, of Missouri, have demonstrated that they see Trump's success as instructive. Between them, Cotton and Hawley have two degrees from Harvard, one from Yale, and one from Stanford, but both have been steadily propounding populist and nationalist themes. The forty-year-old Hawley, who is only two years into his first term and is the youngest member of the Senate, is a relentless Twitter user, frequently targeting China, Silicon Valley, and liberals who are hostile to religion. Like Trump in 2016, he almost never argues for less government, and often calls for programs to help working people. In the summer of 2019, he gave a speech at the National Conservatism Conference denouncing "a powerful upper class and their cosmopolitan priorities," which, he implied, had gained control of both parties. There is also Tucker Carlson, of Fox News, who, like Trump in 2016, has no political experience and a large television audience. He offers up ferocious attacks on élites almost nightly. Charles Kesler told me that, no matter who wins, the Claremont Institute, which publishes the *Claremont Review of Books*, is going to start a Washington branch after the election, to devise Trumpian policies: socially conservative, economically nationalist.

Under the Restoration scenario, if Trump loses, Republicans, as if waking from a bad dream, could recapture their essential identity for the past hundred years as the party of business. They could revive a Reagan-like optimistic rhetoric of freedom and enterprise; resume an internationalist, alliance-oriented foreign policy; and embrace, at least notionally, diversity and immigration. One veteran Republican campaigner with Restorationist leanings says that, if Trump wins, "it'll blow up the Republican Party. In the 2022 election, we'll have an epic disaster—a wipeout of epic proportions." Instead of Trumpism, "economic growth with an emphasis on character, and treating the Democrats as opponents and not as the enemy, is a way forward for the Party." Many Never Trumpers would feel comfortable again in a Restorationist Republican Party. Restoration could entail a conventionally positioned Presidential candidate, such as Mike Pence or Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of State, if it's possible for them to shake off their close association with Trump. But the most discussed Restorationist candidate is Nikki Haley, the former governor of South Carolina and a former U.N. ambassador. Haley is the child of immigrants from India (one a professor at Voorhees College, a historically Black college, the other a schoolteacher who started a successful business selling clothing and accessories from around the

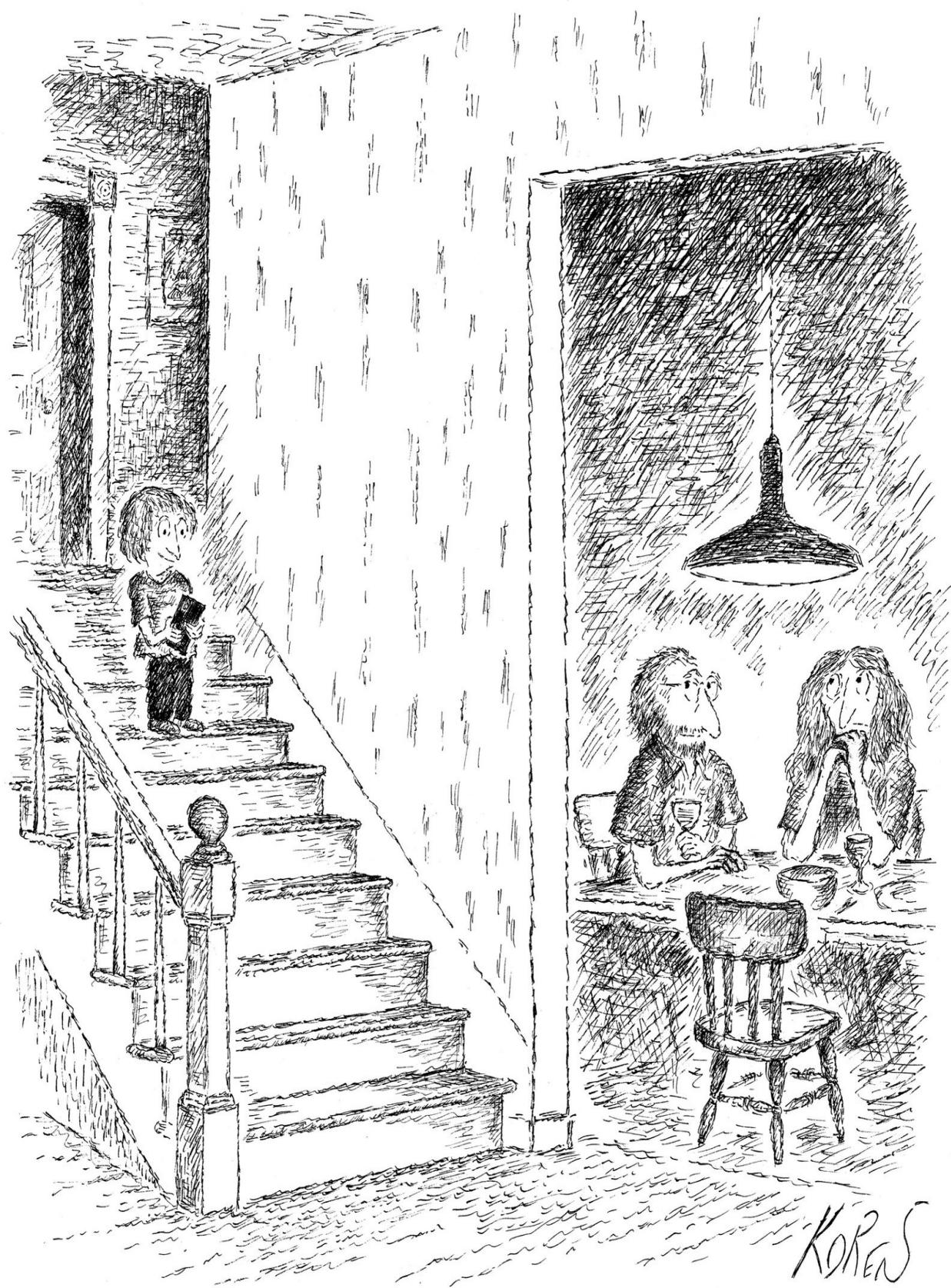
world) and the sister of a military veteran. She achieved the rare feat of serving in the Trump Administration without either going full Trumpist or falling out with the President. She left, evidently on good terms with Trump, shortly after it emerged that she had accepted rides on private planes from businessmen in South Carolina. She was given a starring role at Trump's renomination convention, this past August.

Some Republicans who are vociferously pro-Trump sound, in conversations about the Party's future, more like Restorationists who regard him as a temporary jolt of shock therapy. During the 2016 campaign, Hugh Hewitt, a conservative radio star, hosted Trump on his show sixteen times. He applauds Trump's tax cuts and his increases in the military budget. Hewitt, who was sitting in front of a poster-size photograph of Abraham Lincoln when we spoke over Zoom, told me, "Trump introduced a combativeness and aggressiveness on the Republican side. We played by country-club rules. They didn't. There's a certain roughness to him. He was cruel occasionally. He wakes up ready to fight every day, and you don't need to fight every day. After Trump, the Party will revert to the norm."

Karl Rove, George W. Bush's chief strategist, also struck a Restorationist note. One of Rove's recent projects was a book about William McKinley, the twenty-fifth President. He regards McKinley, who defeated a populist opponent, William Jennings Bryan, in the 1896 Presidential election, as the first modern Republican politician. Rove doesn't see populism, or division, as a winning stance for the Republicans. "Biden has the better hand in this election," he told me, meaning that Biden could be running—to use one of Bush's favorite terms—as the uniter. But, according to Rove, Biden "won't play it." Rove offered up an impromptu speech that he thought Biden should have made about the unrest in Portland: "The murder of George Floyd tears at every beating heart in America. But nothing justifies the violence we see on the streets of Portland."

The Reversal scenario, though perhaps the least plausible, is the most threatening to the Democratic Party. The parties would essentially switch the roles they have had for the past century: the Republicans would replace the Democrats as the party of the people, the one with a greater emphasis on progressive economic policies for ordinary families. Some Reversalists have praised Elizabeth Warren; criticizing Wall Street and free trade is pretty much a membership requirement. Michael Podhorzer, who works at the A.F.L.-C.I.O., sent me a chart he had made that showed the vote in congressional districts,

ranked by median income, from 1960 to today. For most of that time, districts in the bottom forty per cent of income were far more likely to vote Democratic. But by 2010 the lines had crossed—perhaps because of the financial crisis and the Great Recession, perhaps because of the Presidency of Barack Obama—and today poorer districts are far more likely to vote Republican and richer districts are far more likely to vote Democratic. The ten richest congressional districts in the country, and forty-four of the richest fifty, are represented by Democrats. The French economist Thomas Piketty has produced a chart showing that for highly educated voters, who were once mainly Republican, the lines started crossing back in 1968. In 2016, Trump carried non-college-educated whites by thirty-six points, and Hillary Clinton carried college-educated whites by seventeen points. Could Republicans become the working-class party, and Democrats the party of the prosperous? That would bode well for Republicans because, especially in a time of rising inequality, there aren't enough prosperous people to make up a reliable voting majority.



KOREN S

"Descend seven stairs. At the foot of the staircase, go straight three feet. Turn left at the door. Go straight two feet. Make a sharp left turn, where you will reach your final destination—your chair at the dinner table."
Cartoon by Edward Koren

The Democratic Party appears confident that it has the abiding loyalty of minority voters at all income and education levels, and that it dominates the metropolitan areas where a growing majority of Americans live. The coming majority-minority, decreasingly rural country will be naturally Democratic over the long term. But there are holes in this argument. Because minorities are younger than whites and are also less likely to be U.S. citizens, the electorate could remain white-majority for decades. Richard Alba, a sociologist who has written a book called "The Great Demographic Illusion," which challenges the idea of a rapidly arriving majority-minority America, estimates that in 2060, which is as far into the future as the Census Bureau projects, the electorate will still be fifty-five per cent white. (It was seventy-three per cent white in 2018). And minority voters—especially Latinos, who will be the largest group of minority voters in the 2020 election—may not remain as loyally Democratic as they have been in recent elections, especially if the Republican Party has a leader who doesn't race-bait. Black and Latino Democratic voters are substantially less likely to identify as liberal than white Democratic voters are. They are also more likely to be actively religious, and to pursue Republican-leaning careers such as military service and law enforcement.

What's more, the practical definitions of who's white and who's a minority are fluid. During the past hundred years, many Americans who weren't originally considered white, including the descendants of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, were assimilated into whiteness. In the future, others who aren't now considered white may do so, too. Latinos have a high intermarriage rate—close to fifty per cent for the college educated—and twenty per cent of U.S.-born Latinos have a non-Hispanic white parent. Latinos are also increasingly likely to live in integrated neighborhoods. Reversalists dream of many Latino voters going Republican because they have become uncomfortable with the prevailing political stance (more liberal on social issues, less liberal on economic issues) among college-educated white Democratic voters. In the 2020 primary season, Bernie Sanders easily defeated Biden in California and Nevada because he did far better among Latino voters, who presumably preferred his farther-left economic program, elements of which the Reversalists would like to appropriate for themselves, without using the term socialism.

Black voters are far more loyal to the Democratic Party, and more likely to emphasize racism as a significant problem in their lives, but Trump has made

some inroads, especially with younger Black men. Terrance Woodbury, a leading pollster, said, “This has been pretty concerning to me. Trump is picking up among young voters of color. He has a thirty-three-per-cent approval rating among Black men under fifty. Since Obama left, Black men have dropped in their Democratic support. Why? What is it?” He mentioned the Trump campaign’s Super Bowl ad featuring a Black woman whose prison sentence had been commuted by Trump, and a Trump advertising campaign on Facebook, which aired last December and went unanswered by Biden until August, touting the First Step Act, a criminal-justice measure that he signed in 2018. Woodbury went on, “I asked a focus group, ‘How could you consider supporting Donald Trump, who’s blatantly racist?’ One young man said, ‘I don’t care. They’re all racist. At least he tells me what he is.’ Something about the transparency of the vitriol is trust-inducing to them.”

The Reversalists believe that the Democrats’ embrace of market economics, and their establishment of a powerful business wing of the Democratic Party, especially in Silicon Valley and on Wall Street, during the Clinton and Obama Administrations, has left them vulnerable to an attack from a new, socially conservative and economically liberal strain of Republicanism. Reversalists oppose the Republican donor class. Several have abandoned donor-funded libertarian and neoconservative think tanks like Cato and the American Enterprise Institute, disillusioned with the Party’s indifference to the concerns of middle-class and working-class voters. Oren Cass, one of the leading Reversalists, has founded an organization called American Compass, which is trying to formulate policies that would appeal to members of the base of both parties. “What we’re talking about is actual conservatism,” he told me. “What we have called ‘conservatism’ just outsourced economic policy thinking away from conservatives to a small niche group of libertarians.” Culturally, Reversalists present themselves as champions of provincialism, faith, and work, but they aim to promote these things through unusually interventionist (at least for Republicans, and for centrist Democrats since the nineties) economic policies. Steven Hayward, who calls himself a reluctant Trump supporter, said, “It’s amazing to me the number of conservatives who are talking about, essentially, Walter Mondale’s industrial policy from 1984. The right and the left suddenly agree. Reagan was very popular with younger voters. Younger people then had come of age seeing government failure. Now young people have come of age seeing market failure.”

It can be a little surreal talking to Reversalists—are you at a seminar at the high-

theory, market-skeptical Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen, in Vienna, or with a group of Republican Party strategists? People in this camp talk about the failures of “neoliberalism,” “financialization,” and “market fundamentalism,” and condemn “zombie Reaganism.” A manifesto of the Reversalists, and of young conservatives generally, is the 2018 book “Why Liberalism Failed,” by Patrick Deneen, a political-science professor at Notre Dame, which carries a back-cover endorsement from Barack Obama and extolls such writers as Robert B. Reich, Wendell Berry, Christopher Lasch, and Robert Putnam, none of whom is considered conservative.

The favored Presidential candidate for 2024 among the Reversalists is Senator Marco Rubio, of Florida, one of the promising Republicans whom Trump vanquished in 2016. In 2018, Rubio hired Mike Needham, a former employee of an organization affiliated with the Heritage Foundation who had converted to Reversalism, as his chief of staff. Needham is on the board of American Compass. Rubio has recently been making speeches that call for “common-good capitalism,” which would entail a strong government role in managing the economy and would attempt to attract religious and minority voters. Rubio has also been strongly critical of China, so much so that he has been banned from traveling there. This has the potential of alienating the business wing of the Party, which regards China as an important trading partner. Rubio gave a speech last year accusing “policy élites across the political spectrum” of ignoring the “growing threat” that China represents. Nikki Haley recently gave a speech that didn’t name Rubio but clearly had him in mind as one of a new species of Republican critics of capitalism, who “differ from the socialists only in degree.”

When I spoke with Rubio a few weeks ago, I asked him to explain what he meant by common-good capitalism. “It begins with the understanding that the market is a means to an end, not the end itself,” he said. “The purpose of the economy is to serve people. It’s possible to have an economy that’s performing well in the macro sense, but its benefits are distributed in a way that do not benefit the common good.” Rubio told me that this position came together when he was running for President, as he visited communities outside Florida which were less vibrant than they had been a generation ago, and were now hollowed out. “We thought people would be out of work when the factory leaves, but a new job would replace the old one,” he said. But, he went on, “it doesn’t work that way in real life. What ends up happening is that additional job isn’t created. And the people who are left without a job aren’t going to be able to make that transition. Interacting with that, hearing those stories—it’s something you have

to grapple with.”

I asked him what could be done. “It’s tough,” he said. “We have a twenty-five-year orthodoxy in the Republican Party centered around market fundamentalism. Sometimes the most efficient outcome isn’t the best one for the country. Right now, we live in a very binary age, where you’re either one thing or you’re the other. Some people want to call it socialism—which I abhor. Or, if it isn’t socialism, the other side wants to call it market fundamentalism. America needs to take a hard look at its future.” Trump, he said, “has certainly revealed these fracture points. His election caused everybody to go back and ask, ‘Why? Why did people who were not part of the Republican Party decide to vote for him?’ ” He said that the next step was to build the intellectual base for this kind of work: “This is not a four-year project. This is a generational goal. And it could lead to a new political coalition.”

What would the new coalition be? For the past twenty years, Rubio said, the left has argued that coalitions tend to form around race, gender, and ethnicity: “I lived in a minority community. I don’t think we’d wake up in the morning and the first thing we’d realize is ‘I’m a Hispanic.’ The first thing that comes to mind for people every single day is not your ethnicity, it’s the fact that you’re a husband or a wife, a father or a mother, an employee, a volunteer or a coach—somebody who has a role to play.” He continued, “They want to have a job that allows them to have children, to raise that family in a safe neighborhood, with a house that’s safe, that the kids get to go to school, and that, when the time comes, lets them retire. You can find that identity in every community in America.”

He said he recoiled a bit at the tendency to “judge the well-being of the economy by how the stock market is performing. For the past six months, the stock market has had some really good days—and that in no way aligns with what everybody else in the country is going through. It is possible to have a roaring stock market, and you have millions of people who aren’t just unemployed, they may be permanently unemployed.” He talked about the inevitable disruptions caused by technological change: “And then it takes policy a decade, two decades, to adjust. In the interim, there’s resentment, anger, displacement—all sorts of social consequences. We are now seeing another wave of technological advancement, combined with globalization,” accelerated by the pandemic. “It’s going to produce new coalitions that don’t look like the ones we’re used to.”

Many Democrats will surely see this vision of the future of the Republican Party as fanciful. Isn't the Party controlled by ferociously right-wing billionaires? Aren't Republican-base voters irredeemable white supremacists who have been bamboozled by Fox News and televangelists? But the Democrats' coalition is no less unnatural than the Republicans'. A political system with only two parties produces parties with internal contradictions. The five most valuable corporations in America are all West Coast tech companies—enemy territory, in today's Republican rhetoric. The head of the country's biggest bank, Jamie Dimon, of JPMorgan Chase, is a Democrat and a Trump critic. There was a stir in Republican circles in 2018, when a conservative journalist eavesdropped, on an Amtrak train, on a long phone conversation that Representative Jerry Nadler, of the Upper West Side, was having. Nadler complained that Democrats were attracting voters who were like the old Rockefeller Republicans—liberal on social issues, conservative on economics. That's who lives in a lot of the wealthy older suburbs—formerly Republican areas that are now Democratic. And the Democrats' minority voters differ enough on measures such as income, education, ideology, and religion that some of them could potentially be tempted to join a Republican Party that wasn't headed by Trump.

Trump has already changed the Republican Party. Its most hawkish element—hawkish in the Iraq War sense—has gone underground, if it still exists. The same goes for publicly stated Republican skepticism about Social Security and Medicare. One must be hostile to China, and skeptical, to some degree, of free trade. Especially since the arrival of the pandemic, it's hard to find a true libertarian in the Party—at least among those who have to run for office. In the future, according to Donald Critchlow, a historian of conservatism who teaches at Arizona State University, "the advantage would go to a candidate who is Trump without the Trump caricature. An old-fashioned Chamber of Commerce candidate would not do well. We're in a new situation, in both parties. Everything's up for grabs." A senior Republican staffer who has Reversalist sympathies says, "Trump isn't good at a twenty-first-century policy agenda," but that work can go on without him. "If he loses, we'll have a massive argument in the Republican Party. Some will say, 'He's a black swan.' To me, the lesson is: he correctly diagnosed what was going on. Let's apply that to conservative economic policy. To me, what's up for grabs is the working-class vote. Not just working-class white—working-class. Does what the President tapped into have to be racial? Can it be about what neoliberalism has done to the country?"

Trump's genius is to command attention, including the attention of people who

dislike him. That makes it tempting to think that, when he's gone, everything he stands for will go with him. It probably won't; elements of Trumpism will likely be with us for a long time. Which elements, taking what form, in the possession of which party? Such questions will be just as pressing after Trump as they are now. ♦

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The Theatre

- [Experiments in Audio Theatre, Radical and Retro](#)

Experiments in Audio Theatre, Radical and Retro

“A Thousand Ways” and “Shipwreck” suggest a vast realm of possibility available to playwrights making new work in the COVID era.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

October 26, 2020



“Look with thine ears,” Lear tells poor blind Gloucester, and that is exactly what the rest of us should do now we know that the majority of New York theatres will not open their doors until, at the most optimistic guesstimate, the middle of next year. Zoom fatigue set in months ago, but audio is stepping into the breach to take us places that glazed screen-gazing can’t. The eyes tend toward the literal, while what we only hear can bloom, the way a novel does, in the privacy of the mind, as is the case with two new productions—one radical, one retro—that use audio to light a path forward for performance in the *COVID* era and beyond.

“A Thousand Ways” (produced by the Brooklyn-based ArKtype) was created by the duo Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone, who go by the moniker 600 Highwaymen and are known for devising inventive, sincere theatre of a kind that makes urbane audiences fatted on cynicism feel wonder afresh. In “This Great Country,” from 2012, seventeen performers, some experienced, some green, acted out scenes from “Death of a Salesman,” transforming that classic into something rich and strange; “Employee of the Year,” staged in 2014, had five girls under the age of eleven tell the story of one woman’s adulthood. Browde and Silverstone, who are partners in life as well as in theatre, insist that they hate audience participation, which is a little like Elmer Fudd saying that he hates hunting wabbits. “The Fever,” which premiered in New York in 2017, is described, by its creators, as “a public convergence,” and involves much communal writhing and laying on of hands; people who attended the show describe it as if they had gone to an ordinary church service and left speaking in tongues.

The term “experimental” tends to signal an ambition to flaunt difficulty and occlude meaning, but 600 Highwaymen’s experiments with theatrical form are distinctly generous. That is the case with “A Thousand Ways,” which takes a simple premise and turns it into magic. The piece is designed to be staged, ultimately, in three parts, the latter of which will involve physical encounters, safety permitting. Part 1 is being rolled out virtually, by fourteen theatres around the globe, from Toronto to Dublin to Singapore. It consists of an hour-long phone call between two strangers, mediated by a friendly female-sounding robot. I participated in a performance “at” Williams College, where my ticket confirmation came with instructions reminiscent of those you’d receive when pledging a secret society or delivering a ransom. At the stroke of eight, I was to call a number and be introduced to my partner; I should be in “a quiet,

interruption-free indoor space,” with a fully charged phone. (In fact, I used a landline. Have you heard of them? They’re fantastic—no news alerts, and you can’t lose hours of your life to Instagram.) And there my partner was—a male voice, nameless, as I was to him. We were asked, by the robot, to say hello, and then to decide which of us would be Person A and which Person B. This accomplished, we were prompted to describe, in simple, specific terms, aspects of the rooms we were in, and to put our hands on our cheeks, grounding ourselves in the physical.

It’s amazing what a voice conveys, and what it doesn’t. Person A, I decided right away, was a retiree who’d figured he might as well try something new. Wrong! Prompted by the robot, my partner revealed that he was born in 1988. I, meanwhile, was asked merely to say if I was alive then; he would never know that I was only a year older than he was. The deliberately asymmetrical titration of information is integral to the mystery and pleasure of “A Thousand Ways.” It eliminates the polite “and you?” reflex. How novel, and relaxing, to give up conversational control—to feel interest without needing to perform it for the sake of social lubrication, to abandon the instinct to convince or entertain. I learned that my partner was gay and proud of it (“I do, in a very positive way, have limp wrists,” he said, when asked to describe a physical mannerism), and that he was a painter. He learned that my ancestors, whom I was asked to describe in three words, were poor Ashkenazi Jews. He found out that I have never shot a gun, and that I know how to train a dog. (Well, sort of.) The robot asked A to tell me if he had inherited money; she asked me to describe a quality from childhood that I wished I could recover. What we were doing was dancing, using only our voices, learning each other’s rhythms as the steps were called, the random and the banal grapevining with the profound.

There was a story, of a sort, woven through all this choreographed talk. The robot asked us to imagine that we were in a car that had broken down in a desert; by the end, we were camping together by a fire under the stars, disaster averted. Something here touched on the twee. Nonetheless, when the Person A in my own life walked through the door and accidentally destroyed my desert by turning on the lights, I waved him wildly out. I wanted to stay on that frequency, with that stranger, until we were severed by the robot’s brusque “goodbye,” leaving me with that best and rarest of feelings—wanting more.

This fall, the Public planned to mount Anne Washburn’s “Shipwreck: A History Play About 2017.” Since that became impossible, the theatre, along with

Washington, D.C.,'s Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, has now produced it as a radio play. Adapted and directed by Saheem Ali, who also directed the Public's successful audio production of "Richard II" over the summer, it is available for download on podcast platforms. The format works beautifully, and suggests a vast realm of possibility available to playwrights making new work. What could you do if you didn't have to worry about the cost and the complication of a physical production, if simply reading out stage directions, with the help of some minimal, evocative sound design, could put your audience wherever you wanted it to be?

What works less well is Washburn's play itself, which was written in the year it is set, and has the quality of a time capsule opened too soon. It could be revived in twenty years, if audiences want to remember what a certain subset of comfortable liberals sounded like as they tried to make sense of the first moments of the Trump Presidency, but otherwise it might be best left in the ground.

It is spring. James Comey has just testified in front of the Senate Intelligence Committee. A group of New York City friends in middle age have gathered at the upstate farmhouse recently bought by Jools and Richard (Sue Jean Kim and Richard Topol). Trump is the non-stop subject. Allie (Brooke Bloom) is furious that her friends seem to have accepted the scuttling of Merrick Garland's Supreme Court nomination; Luis (Raúl Esparza), a lawyer who emigrated from El Salvador as a child, is attracted to the chaos surrounding Trump in a Faustian sort of way, but the significance of his origins in Trump's America is left oddly unexplored.

Washburn has a good ear for ripped-from-the-op-ed-page outrage. The play hints at the impotence of a politics that is rooted in norms rather than in ideas, and enacts, with minimal critique, the liberals' wheel-spinning obsession with the minutiae of a bankrupt political reality that is rotting the country but not directly affecting their own lives. What Washburn doesn't do is make any of this matter much. The characters are generic, interchangeable city types, saying the familiar MSNBC things; the personal, which should ground the political, is alluded to, then dropped. In an aside that fascinates before it fizzles, a white farmer (Bruce McKenzie) tells us about adopting a boy from Kenya, though the son has been cut from this production. There are two ineffective fantasias, one a dull imagining of the notorious private dinner between Trump (Bill Camp, sounding like Frasier Crane) and Comey (Joe Morton), the other a baffling confrontation

over the Iraq War between a weirdly statesmanlike Trump and a clownish George W. Bush (Philip James Brannon). Trump will be a subject long after he is —*Inshallah*—out of power. What is said about him onstage will matter only if it can tell us something about ourselves. ♦

U.S. Journal

- [**Are Asian Americans the Last Undecided Voters?**](#)

Are Asian Americans the Last Undecided Voters?

The political interests of such a diverse population can be hard to target, but several groups think they've found a way.

By [Hua Hsu](#)

October 26, 2020



On a Thursday afternoon in early May, Governor Gavin Newsom briefed reporters on California's progress in containing COVID-19, advising residents that they would have to wait a while longer for some businesses to reopen. "This whole thing started, in the state of California—the first community spread—in a nail salon," he said. "I just want to remind everybody of that."

There are some eleven thousand nail salons in California, about eighty per cent of which are owned and staffed by Vietnamese Americans. For many of them, Newsom's announcement came as a surprise. Janet Nguyen, a former state senator who is running for the Assembly as a Republican, tried to find out if the spread really had been traced to a nail salon. The following day, having found no evidence to support the claim, she and a group of Vietnamese American business owners and community leaders condemned Newsom for making "reckless comments."

"It was almost like 'I need a scapegoat,'" she told me over Zoom from her kitchen, in Fountain Valley, an Orange County suburb. Every Vietnamese American, she continued, knows someone who's worked in a nail salon. (Her mother worked in one, as did the mother of her Democratic opponent for the Assembly seat, Diedre Thu-Ha Nguyen.) "You're going to blame *us* for the spread of coronavirus in the state of California? It was very offensive. You just put a dagger and a target on every Vietnamese American's back." Janet Nguyen wondered if Newsom had made the comment knowing that many Vietnamese Americans were unlikely to support him. The community leans Republican, and it is concentrated in Orange County, a conservative stronghold within a liberal state. For decades, Democrats saw the region as an electoral lost cause.

Political scientists tend to believe that newcomers to communities fashion their identities according to what they find when they get there. If you arrive without strong allegiances, you may figure out a way to align your views with those of the people in power. The first wave of Vietnamese Americans who moved to Orange County settled in Westminster, in the late nineteen-seventies, not long after so-called "suburban warriors" had turned the area into a locus of grassroots conservatism. Many of the new arrivals were refugees, who supported themselves by opening small businesses, and they identified with Republicans' free-market ethos. In addition, Saigon had recently fallen, and their hatred of Communism often made them distrustful of liberal politics.

“We are very, very anti-Communist,” Nguyen said. “Diehard.” She was born in Saigon in 1976, and her family came to California in 1981. “We value what America has given us. We can live how we want to. In Vietnam, you weren’t allowed to do that.” (In 2017, when Nguyen was in the State Senate, she criticized the late California senator Tom Hayden for being a Communist sympathizer, and was forcibly removed from the chamber for speaking out of turn.)

The children of Vietnamese refugees in Westminster spread into surrounding cities such as Garden Grove, Santa Ana, Fountain Valley, and Huntington Beach. There are now roughly half a million Vietnamese Americans in California. Even as “Little Saigon” drifted from its beginnings along Westminster’s Bolsa Avenue, the community retained a sense of intimacy. Nguyen called it “the hub where Vietnamese Americans across the country look to for political answers, for political waves, for economic answers. Whatever has been done in Orange County—can it be replicated for Houston or Seattle?”

In early June, Nguyen launched a petition to immediately open all nail salons. The state allowed them to reopen later that month, weeks after barbershops, restaurants, and hair salons had been given the go-ahead. But many businesses closed again in mid-July, owing to a statewide spike in *COVID-19* infections. By the time nail salons were allowed to open again, with guidelines that were impossible for many of them to follow, Newsom, citing privacy concerns, still hadn’t provided proof that the outbreak had started in these businesses. In Nguyen’s mind, there was a clear lesson. “We’re not a community that’s large enough politically,” she said. “We’re getting involved politically, but we’re not there in terms of being donors. The governor sees us . . .” She paused. “He doesn’t even see us.”

Vietnamese Americans in California have grown accustomed to seeking support from other people in the Vietnamese diaspora, rather than from Sacramento. But Nguyen recalled her time in the State Senate, when she worked with other Asian Americans, some of them Democrats, on issues relevant to their broader community. If they all someday realized their collective power, she said, they could become “a force.”



"I'd like to see the 'amazing' Spider-Man eat two hundred times his body weight in milkweed leaves."
Cartoon by Matilda Borgström

Since 2000, the Asian American population in the U.S. has grown by more than seventy per cent, to about twenty million. The group now makes up six per cent of the total population. During this time, the number of eligible Asian American voters has doubled. At this rate, according to the Pew Research Center, by 2055 Asian Americans will be the country's largest immigrant group. It isn't merely the speed of this growth that interests researchers and party strategists; it's where it is happening. Natalie Masuoka, a political scientist at U.C.L.A., told me that Asian settlement in the past few decades has been "the reverse of what we saw historically. Rather than these traditional destinations"—ethnic enclaves, such as Chinatowns, in large cities like San Francisco and New York—"the growth of Asian America really is in the suburbs." Asian Americans are moving to Arizona, Nevada, and North Carolina—the states with the fastest-growing populations. The number of Asian American residents in Florida and Pennsylvania has grown by more than eighty per cent since 2010. South Asians are one of the fastest-growing demographics in Texas, where estimates show that the number of eligible Asian American voters rose by at least forty per cent between 2012 and 2018. In parts of the state with a high density of Asian American residents, votes cast in primary elections doubled between 2016 and 2020.

Most important, Asian Americans tend not to identify strongly with either of the major parties: nearly two in five Asian American voters aren't registered as either a Democrat or a Republican. They are the mythical "undecided voters"—or, in these rigidly partisan times, they remain persuadable.

Even Orange County is feeling the effects. Years ago, Nguyen's rise in local politics offered hope for Republicans looking to expand their base. But the fact that she is currently running for the Assembly, having lost her bid for reelection to the State Senate, in 2018, makes her story instructive for Democrats, too.

You can claim heritage from any of twenty-plus nations, speak any of about as many languages, trace your roots in America back hundreds of years or just a few months, and still find room under the umbrella of the Asian American identity. The community's diversity reflects the fact that "Asia" describes a region with roughly sixty per cent of the world's population. The median income of Asian American households is around ninety-eight thousand dollars—nearly thirty thousand dollars more than the American median. Yet eight of the nineteen

largest Asian groups have higher poverty rates than the national average. Their histories in the U.S. vary widely. Nearly three-quarters of the Japanese American population was born here—the highest percentage among Asian groups. In contrast, one of the fastest-growing groups is Bhutanese Americans, more than ninety per cent of whom are foreign-born.

Slights like the one Nguyen perceived from Newsom have been common for Asians throughout their time in the U.S. It's possible that being scapegoated might constitute one of the community's few shared experiences. When Asian laborers first settled in America, in the nineteenth century, they were barred from voting or testifying in court. There were limitations on where they could live and on the protections they could demand. In Chinatowns, leaders often organized mutual-aid societies—not to participate in electoral politics but to protect their communities from politics' effects.

In the twentieth century, more Asian immigrants and refugees arrived, and civil rights were extended to a broader swath of Americans. The first Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Indian Americans were elected to national public office in the nineteen-fifties, often in places with established immigrant communities, such as California and Hawaii. The term “Asian American” was coined in the late sixties by a collective of college students and activists, in a desire for political solidarity among immigrant groups with divergent histories. The category resonates most for the people who embrace it, paradoxes and all. But it's been difficult to leverage this identity in electoral politics, which relies on groups that appear unitary and easy to appeal to. Both major parties have failed to forge a strong relationship with Asian Americans as a whole, because they often seem too socially and linguistically fractured to effectively target. If you play to Taiwanese Americans by standing up to China, you risk losing newer immigrants from the mainland. Expressions of Christian faith might appeal to Korean American churchgoers but could put off Hindus and Muslims from India and Pakistan. Perhaps because of this, Asian American turnout lags behind that of whites and African-Americans; a highly educated Asian American immigrant is less likely to vote than a white person with the same socioeconomic background.

Even in recent years, as Asian Americans have risen to governorships and Cabinet appointments, political mobilization has mostly come from within the community. Studies show that Asian American political preferences are frequently shaped by family members, with the younger generation, who are

politicized outside the home, essentially translating the political process for their parents and grandparents. The first major voter-registration drive of Asian Americans began in 1996, when a coalition of nineteen community organizations formed the National Asian Pacific American Voter Registration Campaign. Around this time, a former Delaware politician named S. B. Woo started the 80-20 Initiative, which was largely a response to the “Donorgate” scandal, in which allegations that China was buying political influence resulted in Asian Americans feeling as though the Democratic Party was distancing itself from anyone with an Asian name. Woo believed that his organization could consolidate eighty per cent of Asian Americans into a single voting bloc, which would pledge to support candidates who took on issues relevant to the Asian American community, such as discrimination and representation. The idea never caught on nationally, and the group now pursues causes related to self-empowerment and education.

For decades, articles about Asian Americans and politics have described the community as one of untapped potential. In the eighties and nineties, Asian Americans were believed to be drawn to the Republican Party, owing to their fiscal conservatism and opposition to Communism. Nowadays, studies show that they tend to favor the Democratic Party, despite growing pockets of conservatism among newer immigrants from China and India. (Vietnamese Americans, among whom registered Republicans outnumber Democrats, remain a notable outlier.)

These broader preferences aren’t always manifested when it comes time to vote. In 2014, exit polls showed that fifty per cent of Asian Americans voted for a Republican House candidate, and forty-nine per cent for a Democratic one. A recent study from A.A.P.I. Data, a publisher of demographic data and policy research on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, showed that sixteen per cent of prospective voters in the 2020 Presidential race were still undecided. (Or, as often happens in immigrant communities, they were unwilling to reveal their preference to pollsters.) A 2018 survey indicated that half had never been contacted by either party. Even the unlikely rise of Andrew Yang, who was arguably more popular outside the Asian American community than within it, seemed to have little immediate effect on either party’s engagement efforts.

This summer, I spoke with Randall Avila, the executive director of the Orange County Republican Party, about the Party’s efforts to attract minorities. “I don’t necessarily consider the Asian American community a minority population

here,” he said. There are some 1.75 million registered voters in Orange County, and, he explained, “you’re looking at about three hundred and forty-four thousand who have registered to vote who identify in one way or another as an Asian American.”

Avila said that Republicans in Orange County had been “ahead of the curve” in recognizing the potential power of this electorate. In 1992, Tony Lam was elected to the Westminster City Council as a Republican, becoming the first Vietnamese-born person to be elected to office in the U.S. The first Thai American elected official was Gorpat Henry Charoen, who won a seat on the La Palma City Council in 2006. The following year, he became the first mayor of Thai descent in the U.S. “We are at every single national naturalization ceremony in Orange County,” Avila told me. The Republicans bring materials in Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese, and volunteers who speak those languages.

Avila, who is thirty, began volunteering for the Party when he was thirteen, after he met a Republican leader who spoke at his school. Nguyen’s life in politics began under similar circumstances. In the mid-nineties, she was an undergraduate at the University of California, Irvine, planning to be an obstetrician. She took a politics class in order to satisfy a course requirement. She also hoped that the instructor, who served on the county Board of Supervisors, would write her a letter of recommendation for medical school. But she became interested in the role of politics in the Vietnamese community, especially at the local level, and switched pursuits. Her father found this decision odd. We escaped one government to come here, he said. Why would you now want to be part of another one? “Whether we like it or not,” she explained, “it influences our lives.”

Nguyen ran for the Board of Supervisors in 2007, and faced some friction from local Republicans—“Not my time, not my place,” she said she was told. She faced opposition from Vietnamese Americans, too: she didn’t speak their language fluently and was married to a white man. She defended herself on a Vietnamese-language radio show. “If I were to run for county supervisor in Vietnam, I wouldn’t even vote for myself, because I can’t help you,” she said. “But I’m not. I’m running in this country.” She said that Vietnamese Americans needed someone with her knowledge and experience, who could forcefully articulate their concerns.

Nguyen defeated her opponent, Hoa Van Tran, by three votes, becoming the first

Asian American to serve as a supervisor in Orange County. She grew more invested in her Vietnamese roots, and took lessons with a tutor to master the language. In 2014, after seven years on the Board of Supervisors, she was elected to the State Senate, becoming the highest-ranking Vietnamese American woman in the country.

At the time, it seemed possible that Asian Americans from Orange County might be the future of the Republican Party. That year, Ling Ling Chang and Young Kim were elected to the Assembly. Nationally, more than thirty Asian American Republicans were elected to state or local office, and Party strategists hoped that these politicians could be groomed for higher positions in the years to follow. “Republicans can’t hit home runs with Asian American voters until we have a team of candidates ready to take the field,” Shawn Steel, a prominent Party activist based in Orange County, wrote that fall. His wife, Michelle, who is Korean American, was one of three Asian Americans elected to the five-person Board of Supervisors. “Republicans wisely shifted this cycle to building a bench.”

The election of Donald Trump, with his passion for reducing the world to simple dichotomies, accelerated some political realignments that were already under way. The Asian American population in Orange County grew by forty-one per cent between 2000 and 2010. Whites lost their majority, and the district got younger and moved left. In 2016, three heavily Asian American congressional districts supported Hillary Clinton, but they also reëlected their Republican representatives.

In 2018, Democrats decided to aggressively pursue these seats. It was one of the first midterm elections in which the Party systematically targeted Asian American voters, with voter-registration campaigns and ads in multiple Asian languages. Trump’s divisive rhetoric contributed to high turnout in some communities that often don’t vote in large numbers. All the region’s contested seats went to Democrats. In the State Senate, Nguyen lost by one point. Avila called the races “a shock to the system.”



“They said it couldn’t be done—I made a friend as an adult!”
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

The Thirty-ninth Congressional District, which includes parts of Orange and Los Angeles Counties, showed what could happen if you invested in the Asian American community, even if your candidate was not Asian American. The district is more or less evenly split among whites, Asians, and Latinos. Gil Cisneros, a Navy veteran, a former Republican, and a philanthropist best known for having won the Mega Millions jackpot, in 2010, challenged Young Kim, the Korean American State Assembly member and the chosen successor of Ed Royce, a Republican who had served in the House for twenty-five years.

Cisneros relied heavily on Nic Jordan, one of the only Asian American campaign managers working for a Democrat in a major congressional race that year. Cisneros and Jordan took the diversity within the Asian American community seriously. Chinese-speaking staffers reached out to voters on the social-media apps WeChat and Line. Korean speakers were dispatched to KakaoTalk, a platform popular in the Korean diaspora. Materials relating Cisneros’s experience as a Latino, and the opportunities that his philanthropic efforts had provided to other immigrants, were translated into Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Tagalog.

“The 39th District is one of the most diverse districts in the country, and Asian Americans played a huge role in deciding the 2018 election,” Cisneros told me in an e-mail. “I met voters where they were and turned out people who had never voted before.” He brought staffers fluent in various languages with him while canvassing. Allen Chen, who headed Asian American and Pacific Islander outreach for Cisneros, told me, “We just had to make sure that we were making as welcoming of an environment as we could.” The campaign’s approach required trusting its young staff. Chen began working for the campaign just three days after he graduated from college.

Cisneros defeated Kim by 3.2 points. “These have just been previously ignored communities that haven’t seen the same type of investments that other communities across the country have seen in terms of engaging politically and organizing them,” Chen said. “All of a sudden, if you come in with these resources, you can get a huge bang for your buck if you just work with them instead of working against them.”

That November, in Texas, Sri Preston Kulkarni was hoping for a similar upset.

Kulkarni grew up in Houston, and during a career in the Foreign Service he lived in Iraq, Israel, Russia, and Taiwan. In 2017, he was serving as a diplomat in Jamaica when the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville unfolded. He told me that, as he waited to hear how Trump would respond, local Jamaicans asked him, “Is this what America is like right now?”

Kulkarni resigned and moved home to run as a Democrat for Congress, in the Twenty-second District, against the incumbent, a Republican named Pete Olson. Most people assumed that Kulkarni, who is Indian American, had no chance. Each cycle, the two major parties identify winnable races and direct their resources toward them. For Democrats, Kulkarni’s race wasn’t estimated to be in the top ninety in the country. As recently as 2014, Olson had won by almost thirty-five points. The district had previously sent Ron Paul and Tom DeLay to Washington, and DeLay had helped gerrymander it to insure a two-to-one majority of Republicans.

But immigration had changed the district, which is the fastest growing in the country. The possibility of Texas becoming a blue state hinges on large, diverse suburban districts like this one. A quarter of its residents are immigrants, but Kulkarni recalls being told that it was pointless to target them, especially those in the Asian community, “because they don’t vote.”

Kulkarni, who is forty-two, was a linguistics major in college, and he is fluent in Chinese, Hebrew, Hindi, Russian, and Spanish. He can say hello in a dozen more languages. He comes across as someone who would do well staying at a hostel. According to data collected during his campaign, seventy-two per cent of the Asian Americans whom Kulkarni’s operatives contacted had never previously been approached by the major parties.

When we first spoke, in early August, Kulkarni paused at one point, then said, “What is an Asian, right?” We agreed that the category smooths over the histories and experiences of people from dozens of countries. As he learned about all his district’s micro-communities, he realized that they were already well organized. “Once you start to map out the social networks, there’s this huge upward potential,” he explained. There is nothing innate that links these different groups. But the nature of immigration policy has created interpersonal connections that most political organizers overlook. Immigrants often come to the U.S. through links to family and friends, leading to networks in which one enthusiastic supporter is capable of reaching dozens of others. From the outside,

these networks might seem clannish or impossible to penetrate. But Kulkarni's campaign staffers recruited volunteers fluent in sixteen languages, and tried to draw on existing relationships to slowly expand their base. They trained supporters to organize their own families, cultural associations, churches, or temples.

During the race, Olson described Kulkarni as "an Indo-American who's a carpetbagger." But Kulkarni's mother is white, with such deep roots in the region that Kulkarni claims Sam Houston as an ancestor. He lost by less than five points, a closer margin than anyone had predicted.

Last year, Olson announced that he would retire in 2020; Kulkarni and the Fort Bend County sheriff, Troy Nehls, are competing for the seat. This time, national Democratic Party organizations are putting considerable resources into Kulkarni's campaign. (Chen, who helped oversee Cisneros's campaign, is now Kulkarni's campaign manager.) In July, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee released digital ads for Kulkarni in Hindi and Chinese—a first for the D.C.C.C. The next month, A.A.P.I. Victory Fund, a major political-action committee devoted to Asian American mobilization, announced that the Texas suburbs would be one of its fund-raising priorities. Kulkarni said that other campaigns call him for insight into his relational-organizing model: "They'll ask us, 'Is this proprietary?' Of course not. I want people to copy what we're doing in Texas Twenty-two all over America."

In North Texas, suburban Asian Americans could also help flip the Twenty-fourth District, where they make up fifteen per cent of the population, and where a Democratic newcomer, Candace Valenzuela, is running a strong campaign. "Texas is in play now," Darwin Pham, who leads outreach to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, said gleefully.

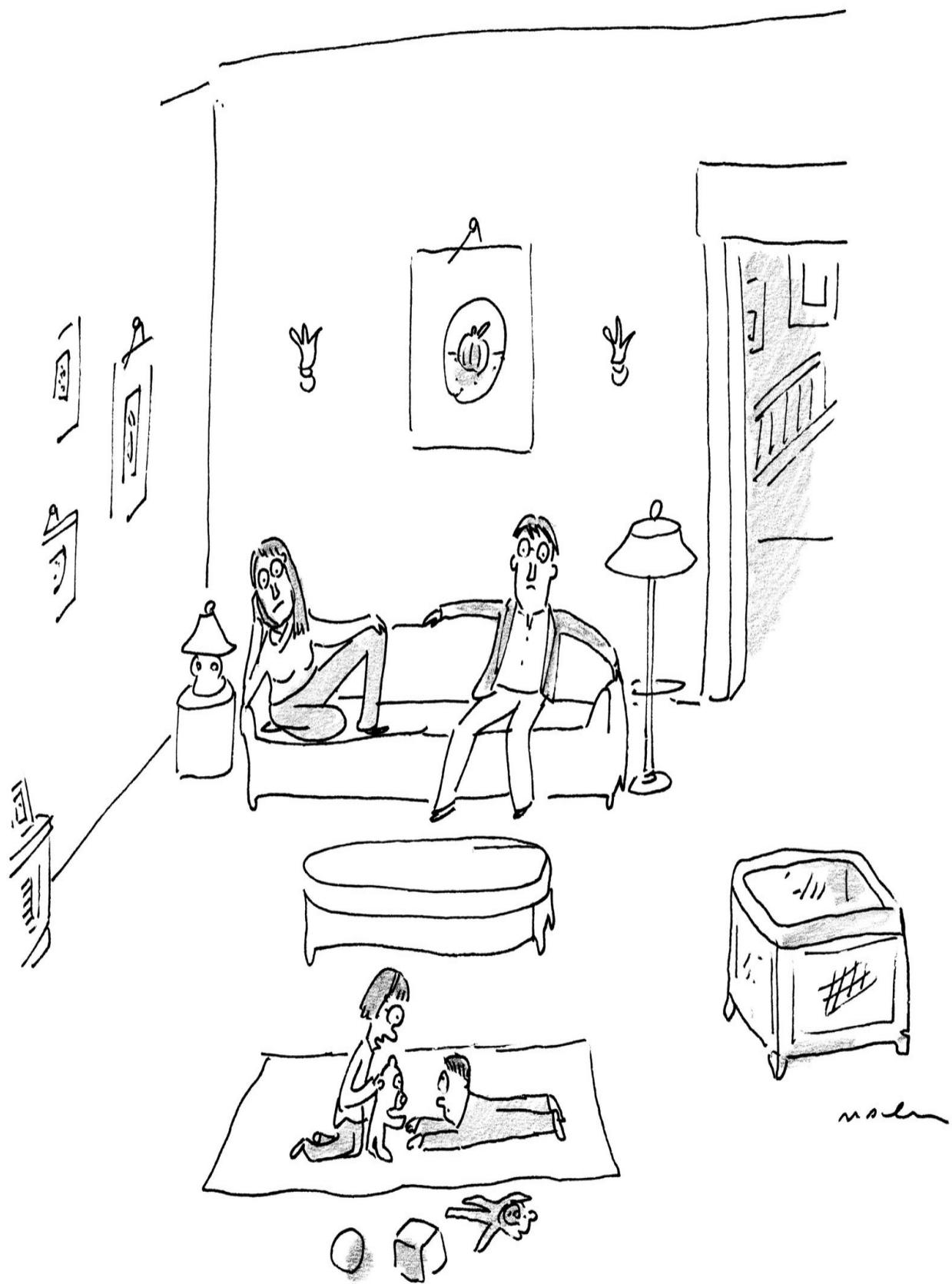
Karthick Ramakrishnan, a professor of public policy and political science at the University of California, Riverside, and the head of A.A.P.I. Data, told me that people have traditionally thought of Asian Americans in terms of "dim sum rather than samosas." People from East Asia—China, Japan, Korea—have been more recognized. But the increase in the Asian American population, especially in places like Texas, has largely been fuelled by immigrants from India and Pakistan. Some of the rising stars of the Democratic Party, such as Representatives Pramila Jayapal and Raja Krishnamoorthi, who were both born

in India, are progressives who won in places that aren't majority minority. In recent years, the highest-profile politicians of Indian descent had been Republicans such as Nikki Haley and Bobby Jindal. But many think that the spotlight on Kamala Harris, whose mother emigrated from India, will draw more South Asians to the Democratic Party.

Ramakrishnan said that the next census will likely show that Indian Americans outnumber Chinese Americans. "That'll be a major moment of reckoning for the Asian American community," he said.

A few weeks later, during the Democratic National Convention, I spoke with Kulkarni again. He was between campaign events, which were being conducted entirely on Zoom. He was trying to be positive about the lack of in-person events; his campaign had found that playing music as people entered the "room" helped ease any awkwardness. He seemed ebullient and unfazed, even when his mother walked in during our interview. "My mom is living with me," he said, laughing. "It's a very Asian thing." Kulkarni was eager to hear Harris's speech later that week. But critics of the Democratic Convention felt that too much airtime had been given to remorseful testimonials from Republicans. Instead, they said, the Convention should have worked on attracting new voters, as Kulkarni was doing.

Earlier this year, a research team at U.C.L.A. looked at participation among Latino and Asian American voters during the 2020 primaries. They noticed strong support for Bernie Sanders's candidacy among Latino voters, owing in part to relational organizing within the community. Sanders supporters were proselytizing to friends, family, and people in their immediate orbit, who then felt accountable to one another in their shared enthusiasm for Sanders. The report concluded that it made more sense for parties to expand their base by investing in voter registration and outreach to minority groups rather than to try to persuade people on the other side. It was probably more cost-efficient, too.



"They pay the bills, but you and I basically run the place."
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

I asked Kulkarni if he was worried about whether the first-time voters crucial to his success would show up in November. In the 2020 primaries, Sanders had difficulty translating the enthusiasm for his candidacy into votes. Neither Kulkarni nor Nehls had a clear advantage in the polls. Kulkarni said that the polls didn't capture the extent of his supporter network. His campaign's approach to relational organizing meant that, months earlier, it had moved away from the traditional door-knocking model. Instead, his supporters were using apps to send out reminders to friends, family members, and neighbors. Kulkarni hoped that those voters would feel obliged to people they knew and be glad not to be badgered by volunteers they had never met. "It goes from being an electoral campaign to being a community-organizing project," he said. "And our goal is to be the largest community-organizing project you've ever seen."

Political campaigns are about more than the candidate. Participation requires the creation of an infrastructure that guarantees your community remains close to power. Neil Makhija, the executive director of Impact, an Indian American advocacy group and *PAC*, talked excitedly about the connections that were being forged this year. The announcement of Harris as Joe Biden's running mate had brought a lot of attention to Impact, a group with which she had a long-standing relationship. Success wasn't just about fund-raising or voting—Impact was building a network of influencers and power brokers, people who could move strategically between campaigns, *PACs*, and policy shops. Both Elizabeth Warren's and Bernie Sanders's 2020 Presidential campaigns were managed by Asian Americans. Makhija felt that a critical mass was forming. His father had grown up sorting spools of thread in a factory, Makhija said, and, decades later, he could give his father a tour of the White House.

Among Asian Americans on the left, there was a sense of the optimism that participation in American politics requires—an optimism that both felt disconnected to the summer of 2020 and looked far beyond it. Visibility and growing influence invariably put stress on the coherence of the community. The killing of George Floyd, for example, exacerbated divisions along lines of class and nationality. A Hmong police officer, Tou Thao, was involved in Floyd's death. Debate within the Hmong community, which is largely working class and predominantly refugee, often takes place on radio programs and on nationwide teleconference calls, where strangers phone in and talk about issues important to them. Conversations during the summer were wary, and often explosive. Yang

Sao Xiong, a professor of social work and Asian American studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who studies Hmong American political participation, observed that Hmong Americans sometimes have an “uneasy” relationship to the broader category of Asian American. Their higher rates of poverty are often invoked as a “negative test case” to disprove the model-minority myth, he explained, “and that’s the only time they enter into the Asian American conversation.” In this case, other Asian Americans were particularly aggressive in disavowing Thao. “You can’t just erase these real lived experiences and expect groups to come together,” Xiong said. “They do come together, but it takes a lot of work.”

Given this friction, the fact that Asian Americans across the political spectrum can offer their success stories as quintessentially American, regardless of how far right or left they are, speaks to the malleability of Asian American identity. Many political organizers even believe that understanding Asian Americans could function as a test case for figuring out what forms of messaging work on suburban swing voters—a model minority of a different sort.

In mid-September, I spoke with Cliff Li, the head of the National Committee of Asian American Republicans, based in Washington, D.C. Li came to the United States in 1990, a year after witnessing the events of Tiananmen Square. He worked as a computer engineer, and was instantly drawn to conservative ideals: “personal merit, family values, working hard, deregulation.”

Li, who splits his time between Florida and Virginia, had an upbeat, almost mellifluous quality to his voice as he talked about his deep affection for America —how it represented the perfect intersection of conservative and Asian values. He had worked with the Republican Party for years, participating in various leadership trainings and organizing Asian Americans throughout the country. He was the chair of the Asian American outreach team for Florida’s governor, Ron DeSantis, and served on a Trump-campaign advisory committee with Elaine Chao, the Transportation Secretary. The establishment of the National Committee, in 2016, formalized the work he’d been doing at the grassroots level, connecting scattered pockets of newer immigrants, energized by issues like affirmative action, to the Republican Party. He felt that the Asian American conservative movement was on the verge of something major. It was organizing itself throughout the country on social media. Li believed that this was much more effective than the traditional approach of simply robocalling Asian Americans three months before an election.

Last year, Li was embarrassed when it was reported that one of his volunteers, Cindy Yang, was leveraging her political connections to sell access to Trump to Chinese businessmen and politicians. (Yang has denied any wrongdoing.)

But the past few months have been defined by a more profound crisis. Trump's rhetoric was fracturing relationships between the U.S. and China, and Asian Americans were beginning to feel a "pinch," as Li described it. He kept returning to Trump's treatment of *COVID-19*, and his continued reference to "the China virus." "It's not funny," he said, his voice cracking. "This has consequences." His seven-year-old daughter had been bullied at school by classmates who spread rumors that she had the virus. It had led him to scrutinize what he called "the hidden identity politics" of the right. Members of his party would always prefer a white man from Ohio. He had begun to feel that they "were not very well informed" about the commitment someone like him had made to the conservative movement. "We are not Chinese," he protested. "We are Chinese Americans."

Among the Republicans' Young Guns, the designation that the National Republican Congressional Committee gives its most promising candidates, two are Korean Americans from Orange County: Young Kim, who is hoping to win a rematch against Gil Cisneros, and Michelle Steel. Li was hopeful that they would win in November, but the rest of America, he explained, was not like California. The Party was overlooking Asian votes in places such as Florida and Pennsylvania.

A few days after Li and I spoke, the Trump Administration moved to ban WeChat, where most of his strongest Asian American supporters organized their communities. I asked Li whether the National Committee of Asian American Republicans had a position on the Presidential race. "Frankly, we are sitting out on this one," he said. The group would not endorse Trump or put any work into national campaigning and outreach. "This year is very difficult for our organization, or myself, to come and say, with confidence, 'You're Asian American—vote on the Republican side.' "

Last week, Li told me that the committee was debating whether to endorse Biden. He would be voting for the Democrat, even though he disagreed with a lot of his positions. Li still considered himself a staunch conservative, but he told me that he wanted to sound an alarm to Republicans. "On the ground, there is so much doubt," he said. "On November 3rd, you will see what I'm talking

about.” ♦

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