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THE NEW REPUBLIC

December 2023

THE RED STATE BRAIN DRAIN

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The End of the Line?

New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation primary may be the best chance to stop Donald Trump, but none of his challengers seem up to the task.

By Walter Shapiro

Illustration by Laura Salafia

NO OTHER EVENT on the political calendar boasts the storied history of the New Hampshire primary: antiwar crusader Eugene McCarthy stunning Lyndon Johnson in 1968 with an epic showing; Ronald Reagan stealing a line from an old Spencer Tracy movie in 1980 as he shouted, "I paid for this microphone"; and Bill Clinton promising voters in 1992 that, if they rescued his scandal-plagued campaign, he would remember them "until the last dog dies."

New Hampshire may again be in the crosshairs of history on the night of January 23, as the returns rush in from the first-in-the-nation Republican primary. The Granite State will provide an answer to one of the most pivotal questions ever facing American democracy: Can Donald Trump be stopped in his drive for his third GOP nomination?

If Trump sweeps the January 15 Iowa caucuses and then romps in the New Hampshire primary eight days later (the date is still unofficial), the GOP race would be effectively over. With the Republican primary calendar filled with winner-take-all states in March and beyond, the dwindling chances of derailing the Mar-a-Lago megalomaniac would depend on either the legal system or divine intervention palsying the hands of Trump supporters as they fill out their ballots. The importance of this year's New Hampshire GOP primary

transcends symbolism and history. The reason: The verdict from the Granite State will dominate media storylines for a full month, given the long pause between its primary and South Carolina's the following month.

With its GOP primary open to independent voters, New Hampshire is the last best hope of Never Trump Republicans. This is Horatius at the bridge. In fact, New Hampshire is Horatius and the bridge all rolled into one.

New Hampshire has never been a true Trump bastion. Vying with Massachusetts as the most secular state in the union, New Hampshire lacks the evangelical conservatives whose Faustian bargain with Trump has defined Republican politics since 2016. Trump did win the 2016 New Hampshire primary, but with just a bit over one-third of the vote. With its educated electorate—more than 40 percent of voters have four-year college degrees—New Hampshire is a swing state that has been tilting blue for years: Democrats have captured the state in the last five presidential elections. In 2020, Joe Biden won the state by 59,000 votes. Then in 2022, Trumpian clones got wiped out as Democratic incumbents easily retained a Senate seat and two House seats.

Yes, polls do show Trump pulling in more than 40 percent of the New Hampshire primary vote. But parsing the numbers from two mid-September surveys (CBS News and CNN) leads to the conclusion that only about one-quarter of the Republican primary electorate is unequivocally committed to the oft-indicted former president. Moreover, New Hampshire is a difficult state to accurately poll, since primary voters are constantly changing their minds. A 2019 paper on the primary by New Hampshire pollsters David Moore and Andrew Smith pointed out, "typically, leading up to the election anywhere between half and three quarters of voters are still trying to decide whom to choose." After Nikki Haley spoke in mid-October in Rochester, I met the quintessential New Hampshire primary voter: Kathy Morin, a retired hairdresser. When I asked Morin if she was committed to Haley, she replied, "I'm sold. Maybe."

There are enough "maybes" in New Hampshire to hand Trump a stinging defeat on January 23. At least, that's the theory.

I HAVE COVERED every New Hampshire primary since I arrived in 1980 tracking a candidate named George Bush—no middle initials were needed in those days—who was out to prove that he was "up for the Eighties." Returning to the Granite State in mid-October of this year, I felt for the first time ever that the primary was being conducted in slow motion. Instead of neighbors proudly proclaiming their political allegiance, the only lawn signs visible across the state were for municipal candidates in the November local elections. I was not alone in noting the political torpor. Tom Rath, a Concord attorney whose primary history dates back to his youthful support for Nelson Rockefeller in 1964, told me, "I've never seen a New Hampshire primary where there's been so little movement." Over lunch, Chris Galdieri, a political science professor at Saint Anselm College in Manchester, cracked, "I feel like I'm watching a high school production of a presidential primary."

Nikki Haley and Ron DeSantis are the two candidates who, based on polls and finances (including Super PACs), appear to have the staying power to challenge Trump in New Hampshire. With his anti-Trump fervor, Chris Christie is also betting on the Granite State. But Christie, who finished sixth in the 2016 New Hampshire primary, is saddled with a near-fatal disapproval rating of more than 65 percent in the CNN poll of the state. Yet watching Haley and DeSantis on their mid-October swings through the state highlighted that they, too, have serious problems. More than their predictable right-wing ideology, more than their timorous refusal to engage with Trump unless pressed, both candidates were guilty of the cardinal sin in politics—being boring.

Haley, as ambassador to the United Nations under Trump, is perceived as the only major Republican challenger with foreign policy heft. *The New York Times* even declared in a recent page one print headline, "HALEY'S STRONG SUPPORT OF ISRAEL COULD BE CRUCIAL TO CAMPAIGN." But in New Hampshire, less than a week after Hamas's October 7 assault on Israel, Haley bizarrely refused to emphasize the Middle East as a major campaign theme. It was far less a political decision and far more the unwillingness of a fledgling candidate to jigger with the structure of her stump speech. Haley, it seems, suffers from the same malady that made Marco Rubio a laughingstock in the 2016 Republican primaries: She is so wedded to her uninspiring talking points that she clings to them like a security blanket.

Speaking to a mostly gray-haired crowd of about 150 at an American Legion hall in Rochester, Haley talked for 21 long minutes before she ever mentioned Israel. Instead, voters heard the former South Carolina governor rail against $7.4 billion in Republican-sponsored earmarks in Congress, as if they mattered at a

JABIN BOTSFORD/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY

NEVER FORGET

A brief look back at the chaos of Donald Trump's White House at this time five years ago.

TRAGEDY

On December 19, Donald Trump abruptly announced that he would be withdrawing 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria. "We have won against ISIS," Mr. Trump declared in a video posted on Twitter. "Our boys, our young women, our men—they're all coming back, and they're coming back now." American troops wouldn't ultimately leave for nearly a year, but as soon as they did, Turkish bombardments and assaults against the Kurds, who had been aiding America's fight against the Islamic State in Syria, began. Within months, hundreds had been killed and more than 100,000 were forced to flee their homes.

FARCE

On December 11, Trump and Vice President Mike Pence gathered with Democratic leaders Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi and a bevy of television cameras. Their goal was ostensibly to hash out an agreement to keep the government open. It quickly devolved into a fiasco. "I don't think we should have a debate in front of the press," Pelosi said, apparently forgetting that a big, televised dustup was *exactly* what Trump wanted. It didn't work. Trump eventually caved, giving up money for his precious border wall—and alienating right-wing allies—to reopen the government after the longest shutdown in U.S. history.

FASCIST

Authoritarians are often thin-skinned and ridiculous. On the morning of Sunday, December 16, Trump took to Twitter to demand an investigation into a long-running comedy program. "A REAL scandal is the one sided coverage ... of networks like NBC & Democrat spin machines like Saturday Night Live," he tweeted. "It is all nothing less than unfair news coverage and Dem commercials. Should be tested in courts, can't be legal? Only defame & belittle! Collusion?" TNR

time of a $1.7 trillion deficit. They were treated to the riveting tale of her epic battle in the South Carolina legislature to demand recorded votes on pay raises. And the audience even applauded when Haley declared—invoking an extreme niche issue—"Let's put vocational classes back in our high schools."

When she finally got there, Haley's words on Israel were fierce, but she had buried the lede. She invoked her 2017 visit to Israel, when she toured a captured tunnel built by Hamas under the border with Gaza. And she used that experience to say flatly, "They don't value life. But they know that the Israelis do." Then she went on to frame the geopolitical struggle in religious terms: "I've always believed that no one can destroy what God has blessed. God has blessed Israel."

In later appearances at a candidate forum in Exeter sponsored by Gannett newspapers and at a state Republican Party event in Nashua, Haley moved up her Israel material. But only slightly. At both events, Republicans heard Haley target earmarks and extol vocational education long before she commented on the news that was dominating the headlines.

If Haley was too inflexible as a candidate, then DeSantis erred in the other direction by coming across as a political changeling. The flailing Florida governor—making his first trip to New Hampshire in nearly two months as part of an overhyped campaign "reboot"—spoke to more than 200 business types at a venerable preprimary event called "Politics and Eggs" at Saint Anselm College.

Instead of the war-on-woke warrior, DeSantis came across as a shorter, less handsome version of Mitt Romney running in 2012 on his record as a "severely conservative" governor of Massachusetts. But try as he might to be a "Happy Warrior," DeSantis 2.0 still struggled to make a human connection in a speech that aroused scant applause.

The silence was deafening as DeSantis boasted, "The results we've been able to produce are second to none. We've run massive budget surpluses every year I've been governor. We have paid down almost 25 percent of the state's total outstanding debt." I could go on quoting DeSantis, but I might fall asleep at the computer keyboard.

That was DeSantis as kindly Dr. Jekyll. Three hours later, at the Republican Party's First in the Nation Leadership Summit in Nashua, DeSantis went full Mr. Hyde. In a speech that H.L. Mencken in another era might have mocked as "boob bait," DeSantis declared to cheers, "People like Fauci need to be brought to justice." Predictably, DeSantis ran through his greatest-hits album, bragging about "eliminating critical race theory" from Florida schools and boasting, "We stood up to the most powerful company in the history of the state of Florida, Disney, to say that we are not going to let the sexualization of our curriculum happen, particularly in elementary school."

Candidates routinely make different pitches to different audiences. But rarely are the changes in tone this extreme in a single day. These abrupt rhetorical shifts may help explain why authenticity is almost as much of a problem for DeSantis as likability.

Part of the problem in defining the race in New Hampshire is that both Haley and DeSantis, unless specifically questioned, treat Trump as He Who Must Not Be Named. While Trump in his cruelty does have a certain resemblance to Lord Voldemort, the leading contenders are carrying the Harry Potter cosplay to ridiculous extremes. Haley, for example, in Rochester never mentioned the name of the president who appointed her as U.N. ambassador.

At "Politics and Eggs," DeSantis was asked whether the 2020 election was stolen. The Florida governor has, in the past, reluctantly admitted that Biden was duly elected. This time—even though there were few Sidney Powell–style conspiracy theorists in the business crowd—DeSantis went full maybe, assailing Trump's competence as an election denier. "If that is true," DeSantis said, reveling in the conditional tense, "he was the sitting president of the United States and let that happen to him. I would never let that happen."

WHO SAID IT?

Ned Flanders or Mike Johnson

Mike Johnson, the Louisiana representative who became speaker of the House in late October, and Ned Flanders, the "diddly"-spewing neighbor of the Simpson family, have a lot in common. Both share a deep, committed religiosity. Both have glasses. Above all, both are world-historically dull: Their idea of a raucous Saturday night is one spent playing Bible-themed board games. They're not mirror images, of course: Flanders is ultimately sweet; Johnson is an election-denying theocrat. But they do sound an awful lot alike.

1. **"I've always been nice to people. I don't drink or dance or swear."**
2. **"When you break up the nuclear family, when you tell a generation of people that life has no value, no meaning, that it's expendable, then you do wind up with school shooters."**
3. **"Bless the grocer for this wonderful meat, the middleman who jacked up the price, and let's not forget the humane but determined boys at the slaughterhouse."**
4. **"The Ark Encounter is one way to bring people to this recognition of the truth, that what we read in the Bible are actual historical events."**
5. **"When you tear down the taboos, the doors open up for everything. That's the danger."**
6. **"Some credit the fall of Rome to not only the deprivation of the society and the loss of morals but also to the rampant homosexual behavior that was condoned by the society."**
7. **"Spend less time on your back and more time on your knees."**
8. **"[My wife] spent the last couple of weeks on her knees in prayer to the Lord. And, um, she's a little worn out."**
9. **"I've done everything the Bible says. Even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff."**

Answers: 1. Flanders 2. Johnson 3. Flanders 4. Johnson 5. Johnson 6. Johnson 7. Flanders 8. Johnson 9. Flanders

FROM LEFT: FOX/PHOTOFEST; KENNY HOLSTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

During his lengthy convoluted answer, DeSantis only once dared to utter Trump's name.

Instead, Haley and DeSantis communicate by code, as if they were dissidents trying to get a political message past the censors in a totalitarian country. In Nashua, at the GOP's so-called Leadership Summit, the 51-year-old Haley declared, "To win the majority of Americans, you're gonna have to have a new generation of conservative leader. You gotta leave the negativity and the baggage and the headlines of the past and move forward." DeSantis is fond of talking about a president who can serve two full terms "to get the job done." The 77-year-old Trump, of course, could only serve one more term—assuming he would abide by the Constitution.

Haley and DeSantis somehow believe that they can successfully get through the primaries without enraging the Former Guy or his most ardent supporters. In fact, they recently seem more interested in going after each other—shades of Jeb Bush and Rubio squabbling in 2016 as Trump burned through the primaries. Confronted with an unavoidable direct question about Trump at the town hall in Exeter, Haley first gushed, "Donald Trump was the right president at the right time," before she had the moxie to add, "But I don't think he's the right president now." Haley's problems with Trump are not ideological, however. She quickly stressed, "I agree with a lot of his policies." Somehow Haley wants Republicans to believe that she is the only bulwark against the most dreaded outcome: "President Kamala Harris."

What gives outsize importance to New Hampshire's primary is a quirk in the political calendar: There will be no major Republican contests between New Hampshire and the February 24 South Carolina primary. (To be technical, there will be Republican caucuses in Nevada on February 8, but the state party has so rigged things for Trump that the preordained outcome will probably be discounted.)

Political handicappers should mind the gap. A New Hampshire victory for Haley, DeSantis, or even a surprise candidate would spark nonstop speculation that maybe, just maybe, Trump is finally yesterday's man. But for that to happen, the candidates must be brave enough to confront Trump directly. Haley and DeSantis should realize that the history of the New Hampshire primary was not forged by timorous candidates spouting vaporous platitudes about new generations of leadership and serving two full terms in the White House. TNR

Walter Shapiro *is a staff writer at* The New Republic.

SCREEN GRAB FROM THE CLUB FOR GROWTH

Fight Club

The Club for Growth is taking on Donald Trump—and getting pummeled.

By Alex Shephard

IN THE LATE SPRING, the Club for Growth, the conservative organization that has spent more than two decades excommunicating any Republican it deems insufficiently committed to the sacred cause of cutting taxes and starving the welfare state, began airing ads aimed at taking down Donald Trump. That his signature—and arguably only—legislative achievement during his four years in office was a massive corporate tax cut hardly seemed to matter. Never a doctrinaire supply-sider—and now campaigning against several Republicans whose primary focus was slashing spending and taxes to the rich—Trump was simultaneously committing multiple cardinal sins: advocating for tariffs and, most egregious of all, promising to protect Social Security. (To be fair, Trump has also backed and campaigned for several candidates who want tax and spending cuts and could hardly be considered fiscal doves. Additionally, the Trump administration proposed cutting Social Security in his 2021 budget.)

"The Trump plan for Social Security is no practice swing," the ad reads over footage of Trump swinging a golf club. "His plan—same as Joe Biden's—would club seniors with automatic benefit cuts, 23 percent in 10 years or less, putting your retirement in a rough spot." It's a short, tricksy ad: It never mentions that the Club for Growth has been a leading proponent of cuts to Social Security since its inception in 1999.

Over the summer, Win It Back, a political action committee tied to the Club for Growth, spent millions airing this and more than 40 other anti-Trump ads in Iowa and South Carolina. It didn't work. In September, the Club for Growth's president, David McIntosh, acknowledged to donors that "all attempts to undermine his conservative credentials on specific issues were ineffective." It was a stunning admission and an unsurprising one at the same time. It was also one that revealed just how much influence the Club for Growth—and, by extension, the anti-tax, anti-spending wing that has dominated the conservative movement for more than four decades—has lost.

The relationship between Trump and the Club for Growth was fraught from the beginning. In 2016, the conservative group also spent heavily on ads that were highly critical of the presidential candidate's record on trade, taxes, and bailouts. "There's nothing conservative about supporting socialized single-payer health care," went one ad the group ran. "There's nothing

conservative about giving money to the Clintons. There's nothing conservative about Donald Trump." The Club for Growth backed Ted Cruz—its first-ever presidential endorsement. When his campaign crashed and burned, the group sat out the rest of the election. This was hardly surprising, given the group's single-minded, pugilistic nature: Founded in 1999, it had long exerted influence over the GOP by force, spending heavily to push out any Republican who did not commit to drastic cuts to taxes and spending. The group was centered around pushing out moderate Republicans and replacing them with draconian fiscal conservatives.

Trump's hostile takeover of the Republican Party was, in some ways, a culmination of that mission, a reflection of just how far-right the Republican Party had become. But Trump also outflanked them. Closely aligned with the arsonists of the hard-right House Freedom Caucus, the Club for Growth was the epitome of the GOP's anti-establishment establishment, harnessing populism to push policies that benefited corporations and the wealthy. Now, the Tea Party-aligned group was passé: Donald Trump represented a newer, harder-edged, and more chaotic alternative.

As happened with many conservative and establishment groups, the Club for Growth made peace with Trump after his surprise election in 2016. And, as with many conservative and establishment groups, the Club for Growth was hoping to play Henry Higgins to the new president's Eliza Doolittle. "David viewed his partnership with Trump as a way to help steer the Trump team to more conservative, free-market candidates," Marc Short, an aide to Vice President Mike Pence and close ally of the Club for Growth, told *The Washington Post* shortly before the 2022 midterms.

The subsequent alliance was beneficial to both parties. The Club for Growth helped push for Trump's massive, multitrillion-dollar tax cut, a quintessential supply-side, "trickle down" bit of legislation that lowered the corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 21 percent. (Six years after that bill was signed into law, its spoils have hardly trickled down; indeed, many corporations used the subsequent windfall not to invest but to buy back stock.) Trump, meanwhile, got a pugilistic, deep-pocketed group willing to spend millions to back far-right candidates. Trump's advocacy for tariffs and his trade war with China—the Club for Growth has opposed protectionist policies for years—hardly mattered. This was, in many ways, characteristic of the "if you can't beat him, join him" approach taken by many conservative groups: The Club for Growth saw Trump's status as a political neophyte as an opportunity to influence him.

The alliance between the two began to crack during the 2022 midterms, however. During those elections, the Club for Growth and Trump found themselves on the opposite end of several successive primaries, backing rival candidates in Pennsylvania and Ohio. When the Club for Growth refused to follow Trump's lead after he endorsed J.D. Vance in Ohio, the former president was furious, ordering an aide to text McIntosh "go fuck yourself."

Once again, economic policies were at the center of the feud, particularly over tax and entitlement cuts and tariffs. But it also represented a larger rift between Trump and conservative groups that had brokered shaky truces with him in 2016. Then, Trump desperately needed outside help to staff and run a presidency he was ill-equipped and ill-prepared to manage; he also needed to broker alliances with groups on the right to help withstand the ferocious opposition his presidency would receive from Democrats. Once in office, however, Trump frequently clashed with establishment figures inside and outside his administration and chafed against their attempts to manage him. Preparing for a 2024 presidential run, he has surrounded himself with loyalists and lackeys who are bent on forming an administration built entirely around Trump's own bleak vision for the country.

Ads emphasizing Trump's deviations from conservative orthodoxy and his indictments have actually made the former president more popular among GOP voters.

In contrast to 2016, Trump's hold on the Republican Party now seems secure. With

SPOT THE FAKE RIGHT-WING BOOK TITLE

HOWARD SCHNAPP/GETTY

Answer: *Long Island Railroaded*

a massive lead in nearly every state and national poll of GOP voters, he doesn't have to bend the knee to anyone. Those who attempted to manipulate the former president have become targets. "David got pretty swept up in all the stuff. He got in pretty deep," one source with close ties to the club told the *Post* last year. "Maybe he thought he was playing Trump. There's a chance he thought he was smarter than Trump. It obviously didn't work."

For decades, the Club for Growth had used its massive financial clout—it spent $150 million in the 2020 and 2022 elections—to exert influence over the Republican Party. In 2023, the money is still there. To be fair, congressional Republicans—thanks in part to that spending—are as committed to its mission of cutting spending and entitlements as ever. And yet, the club's influence has significantly waned. Immigration and cultural issues have surpassed government spending as the causes du jour of the GOP. The relationship between Trump and McIntosh—and by extension the Club for Growth—seems to be broken beyond repair. Should Trump reenter the White House in January of 2025, he will almost certainly have a new set of economic advisers and an old set of priorities, many of which are at odds with those the club has advocated since its inception.

The Club for Growth was once at the forefront of the Republican Party's emphasis on rigid adherence to dogma over electability. It still is, pushing candidates with extremist economic beliefs in races across the country. It has, similarly, backed Governor Ron DeSantis—once a Tea Party Republican in Congress—over Trump in the 2024 primary. In the aftermath of Trump's election, the GOP's apathy toward electability remains, but the dogma has changed. What's more, the club's efforts to break Trump's hold on the Republican Party have actually backfired: Ads emphasizing Trump's deviations from conservative orthodoxy and his indictments have made the former president more popular among GOP voters.

In September, having spent millions on ads aiming to damage the former president's standing among GOP voters, McIntosh, who also heads Win It Back, admitted the effort had failed catastrophically. "Even when you show video to Republican primary voters—with complete context—of President Trump saying something otherwise objectionable to primary voters, they find a way to rationalize and dismiss it," McIntosh wrote in a memo to donors.

"Every traditional post-production ad attacking President Trump either backfired or produced no impact on his ballot support and favorability," he continued. "This includes ads that primarily feature video of him saying liberal or stupid comments from his own mouth."

To some extent, the Club for Growth's diminishing influence reflects its hubris: the belief that its money and power made it untouchable; the belief that it could help control a candidate as chaotic and megalomaniacal as Trump. But it also shows the waning influence of supply-side economics within the Republican Party itself. TNR

Alex Shephard *is a staff writer and editor at* The New Republic.

God's House

Mike Johnson, the newest speaker of the House, insists that Christians are a persecuted minority.

By Melissa Gira Grant

Illustration by Kelsey Dake

"CHRIST CALLS US to be 'wise as serpents and harmless as doves,'" wrote Mike Johnson on a Creationist website in 2017. Johnson, who became speaker of the House in October, was counseling his fellow Christians on how to live in a new and "hostile world," as he put it, where the Supreme Court had just recently recognized the right of same-sex couples to marry. He positioned himself and fellow believers as members of a persecuted minority, who would need to present themselves carefully if they were going to prevail.

Johnson is no harmless dove or wise serpent. He is a man who has been steadily accruing political and religious power, largely outside the limelight, for years. When he assumed the speakership of the House of Representatives in October, it seemed to be despite the fact that or perhaps precisely because he had effectively assumed the guise he once advised fellow Christians to take: a nice guy, one who knows how to make shrewd moves with an air of absolute innocence. Now, even as he stands second in line to the presidency, Johnson hopes to retain the role of the righteously persecuted.

Mike Johnson did not come out of nowhere—unless the political workings of the Christian right are in some "nowhere" zone, as can seem the case with much political reporting. The journalist Sarah Posner recently wrote that she first encountered Johnson back in 2007. "At the time, Johnson insisted to me that Christians were the ones facing discrimination," recalled Posner. He was then an attorney working for Alliance Defending Freedom, the Christian right law project that would go on to successive Supreme Court victories, most notably rolling back abortion rights in the *Dobbs* decision and undermining LGBTQ rights in the (purported) same-sex wedding website case *303 Creative*. Like Johnson himself, ADF has flown relatively below the political radar, even though it openly states that its mission is to use the power of the judiciary to bring about its biblical worldview. This worldview involves outlawing abortion, criminalizing queer sex, and eliminating trans people.

At the time Posner interviewed Johnson, he was one of the public faces of ADF (then called Alliance Defense Fund), penning lines on its behalf like, "Experts project that homosexual marriage is the dark harbinger of chaos and sexual anarchy that could doom even the strongest republic." He insisted that "[r]adical homosexual advocacy groups … desperate for liberal judges" pose a threat to the "entire democratic system." For ADF and for Johnson, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in the United States were not threatened by the Christian right; rather, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people were the ones threatening Christians. For Christians to defend themselves and to defeat gay people, Johnson proposed passing constitutional amendments that would essentially outlaw same-sex marriage. At the time, this was a popular project, with amendments passing in 11 states in one election in 2004. That came to an eventual end with the 2015 *Obergefell* decision, but by then the notion that rights for LGBTQ people posed an existential threat to American Christians had taken root. It would continue to be ADF's signature thesis, inverting the oppressor and the oppressed.

It would be comforting to look at this argument, alleging Christians in the United States are victims of discrimination and persecution who are owed protection by the state, and see it merely as a ploy, a way of gaming the legal system. But Johnson appears to sincerely believe it. After seven years of the MAGA movement, and opposition to it too often confined to fact-checking and prosecuting its cast of out-of-touch extremists, untalented grifters, and shameless con men, Johnson appears to have scrambled the playbook—because he does seem to really believe in something more than his own self-advancement. "So which is he: an anti-democratic politician and an insurrectionist, or a mild-mannered Christian?" the religion scholar Matthew D. Taylor asked rhetorically shortly after Johnson was elected speaker. "Part of the problem is that we have come to imagine that a person cannot be both at the same time."

Kristin Kobes Du Mez is a historian of the Christian right (and a Christian herself). "He is incredibly standard in terms of being a right-wing, white evangelical Christian nationalist," she remarked to *Politico* after Johnson's win. "Freedom for them means freedom to obey God's law, not freedom to do what you want." Thus, she continued, Johnson's "commitment is not to democracy." Rather, "he seems to be saying he's committed to minority rule, if that's what it takes to ensure that we stay on the Christian foundation that the founders have set up."

Johnson's election denialism and his anti-LGBTQ politics emerge from the same ideological commitments.

Five years before he attempted to overturn the 2020 election, Johnson joined the Louisiana House of Representatives without needing a single vote, after no one ran against him for a vacant seat in 2015. At the time of his winning the seat by default, Johnson was also still serving as counsel for Christian right projects, such as Freedom Guard. At Freedom Guard, Johnson won a court case on behalf of the Creationist group he would go on to write for, awarding tax incentives to a "Noah's Ark" tourist attraction that was an "extension" of the group's "ministry." Again, Johnson worked to paint Christians as a victimized group. The resulting victory, said Johnson, set a "precedent" that the "First Amendment does not allow Christian organizations to be treated like second-class citizens merely because of what they believe."

As a state legislator, one of Johnson's big moves was to pass legislation meant to undermine marriage equality—then nationally protected—in Louisiana. In his attempt to

win support for the legislation, according to reporting from John Stanton at *Gambit*, Johnson cited what he called "specific examples" of clergy members and religious groups being "prosecuted, fined, [and] punished" for refusing to perform weddings for same-sex couples. As Stanton showed, there have been no such instances of prosecutions, fines, or punishment. How far of a leap is it from fake prosecutions to fake electors? The distance is considerably narrowed if you believe God wills you to go there.

Johnson's election denialism and his anti-LGBTQ politics emerge from the same ideological commitments. After all, if under democracy white Christians are being "replaced"—by immigrants, by Muslims, by trans kids, by drag queens, by a whole litany of scapegoats—perhaps the only way to save the United States and white Christians is to end democracy. Democracy leads to abortions and gay sex. Democracy means that the candidate ordained by God can maybe lose an election.

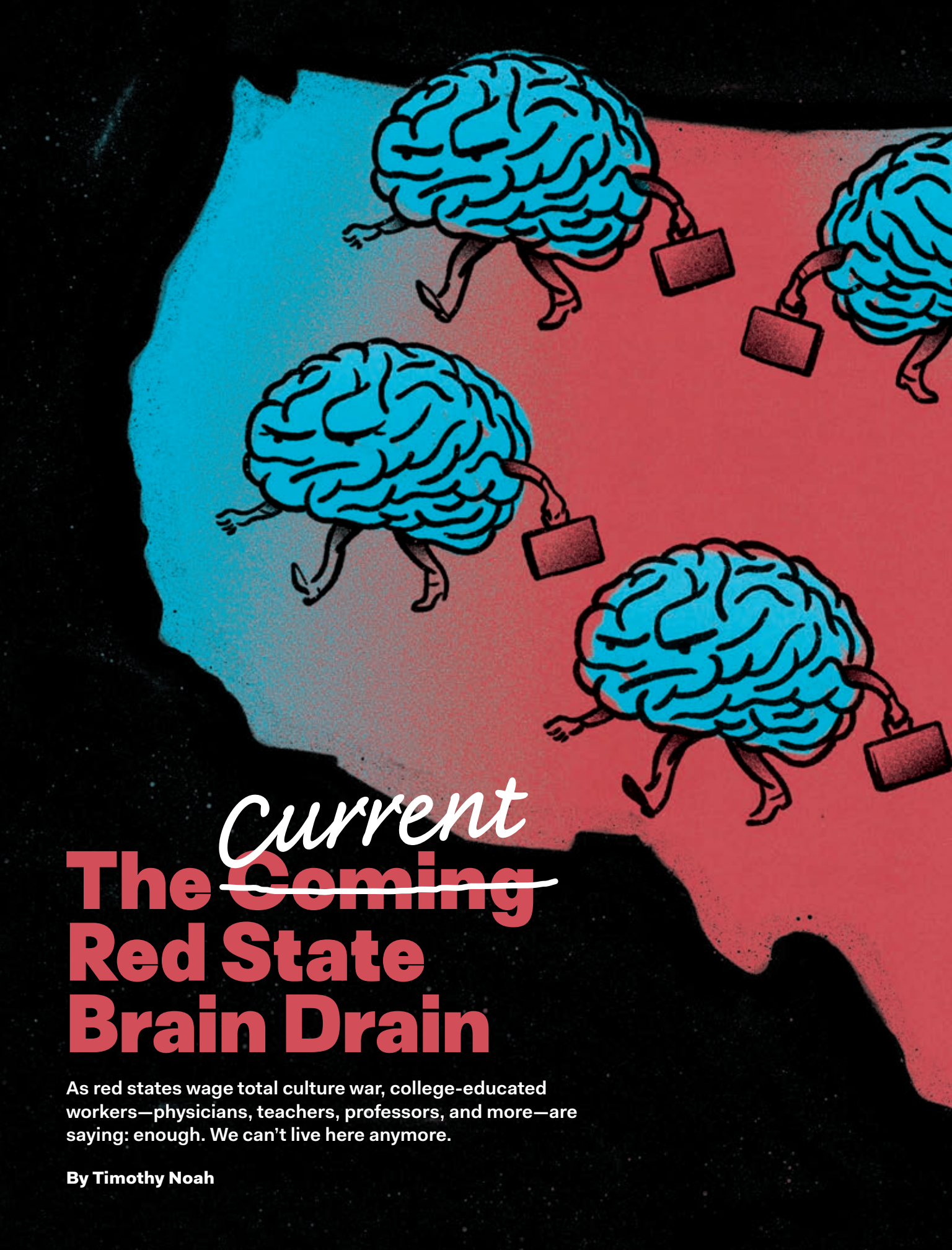
When Johnson states, as he did on an episode of his podcast (which he recently deleted from his personal website), that he voted to reject the electoral count in the 2020 presidential election, it was because "slates of electors were produced by a clearly unconstitutional process, period." They were not. But when all that "constitutional" means is "what I believe God orders to be," who's to say—that is what Johnson is offering. Of the violence at the Capitol on January 6, which was meant to bolster the action of Johnson and others, Johnson has said, "The violence never changed the plain and straightforward text of the Constitution itself, and our obligation to adhere to it." That suggests the possibility the rioters and objectors were all following the will of God, and that, for Johnson, the violence wasn't so far from God's will after all.

"FOR CHRISTIAN NATIONALISTS, this is God's country," as Du Mez said. To them, "all authority comes through God," meaning in turn that "the only legitimate use of that authority is to further God's plan for this country." Therefore, "any of their political enemies are illegitimate in a sense, and those enemies' power is illegitimate, and they need to be stripped of that power."

The same day that Mike Johnson declared his ascension to the speakership as God raising him up, the House was also holding a hearing on "global religious persecution." Representative Maxwell Frost, a Democrat from Florida and a Christian, used the hearing to speak to the threat posed by Christian nationalism, which he defined in part as "a form of religious extremism making its way into our policies and undermining our democracy." He asked one expert witness, in what could be a summary of Johnson's political accomplishments so far, "Have you noticed a coordinated attempt in America to co-opt the right of religious freedom to try and justify stripping rights away from people?" Frost later warned, "This threat to democracy has made its way to Congress," a threat that his colleagues had just empowered with the speaker's gavel.

The verse that follows the one Johnson quoted to Christians in a "hostile world" back in 2015 is a little too apt. "Beware of men," reads Matthew 10:17, "for they will hand you over to the courts and flog you in their synagogues." It's a warning about the dangers posed by people in power. Johnson is now undeniably one of them. TNR

Melissa Gira Grant *is a staff writer at* The New Republic.



The ~~Coming~~ *Current* Red State Brain Drain

As red states wage total culture war, college-educated workers—physicians, teachers, professors, and more—are saying: enough. We can't live here anymore.

By Timothy Noah

Illustrations by Alex Nabaum

On Memorial Day weekend in 2022, Kate Arnold and her wife, Caroline Flint, flew from Oklahoma City to Cabo San Lucas for a little R&R. They had five kids, the youngest of them five-year-old twin girls, and demanding jobs as obstetrician-gynecologists. The stresses of all this were mounting. That they were a gay married couple living in a red, socially conservative state was the least of it. Caroline was born in Tulsa, spent much of her childhood in Oklahoma, and was educated at the University of Oklahoma. She cast her first presidential vote for George W. Bush. Kate, the more political of the two, was from Northern California and a lifelong Democrat. But her mother was born in Oklahoma City, and she felt at home there; she'd even given some thought to running for the state legislature.

Kate and Caroline flew down with the twins and their 16-year-old daughter. It says a lot about Kate Arnold that she adopted the three older children while she was attending medical school; the birth mother, whom Kate befriended while volunteering at a home for teenage mothers, was an addict who lost custody.

Arriving in Cabo, Kate and Caroline realized that it had been a very long time—too long— since their last date night. So one evening they ordered the kids room service and went off by themselves to a Taco Night theme dinner. "We sat outside with the little colored flags," Kate recalled, "and they gave us blankets because it was cold and windy. We hadn't been sitting for very long when I started saying I wasn't happy."

A little more than one week earlier, a disturbed high school student named Salvador Ramos had entered Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, with an AR-15 rifle and killed 19 children and two adults, injuring 17 more. It was the deadliest school shooting since the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012, and it happened just one state over as Kate and Caroline's two youngest were about to start school. Two more mass shootings occurred in Oklahoma while they were in Cabo. A man named Michael Louis gunned down, with an AR-15, two doctors, a receptionist, and a patient at the Tulsa offices of his orthopedic surgeon because he was angry that his recent back surgery left him in pain. Then a man named Skyler Buckner killed one person and injured seven others at a Memorial Day festival in Taft, Oklahoma. States with permissive gun laws have a higher rate of mass shootings, and Oklahoma, with some of the most permissive gun laws in the country, has 45 percent more gun deaths per capita than the national average—higher even than in Texas.

That was one reason Kate wasn't happy.

Another reason was that the state legislature was trying to limit access to contraceptives. In March, the state Senate had voted to require parental consent before a minor could take contraceptives. Kate was chair of the Oklahoma chapter of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and she'd lobbied against this change. (The bill later died in the state House of Representatives.)

"You're just gonna get my nine-year-old birth control without my knowledge?" one state legislator said to her.

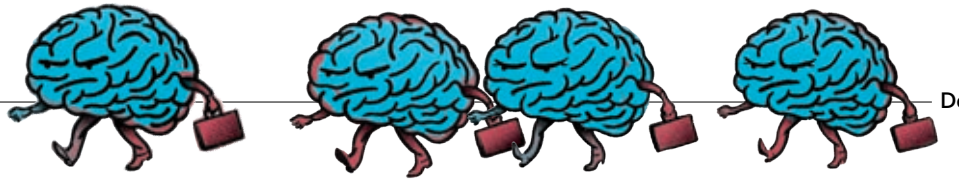
"How does your nine-year-old need birth control?" Kate answered. "And yes, if she needs birth control … what's worse than her coming home pregnant?"

Caroline had reasons to be unhappy, too. One year earlier, Oklahoma's governor had signed a law barring public schools and charter schools from teaching that "an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex." School boards interpreted this as an invitation to ban any book that touched on race or gender. Among the books targeted in Oklahoma, according to the free-speech organization PEN America, were *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, A Raisin in the Sun, To Kill a Mockingbird,* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. "Books are my thing," Caroline told me. She couldn't abide the idea that "books would be censored."

Also, Caroline's hospital wouldn't let her perform gender-affirming surgery. The procedure was legal in Oklahoma, but this was a Baptist hospital, and fairly conservative. "I would do surgeries," Caroline said, "like hysterectomies for patients who are transitioning. And I'd have to have another indication to do it.... I'd have to say, 'Oh, they also have pain,'" or find some other reason.

Kate was director of women's health at a large, federally funded nonprofit health center serving low-income patients. It was, she told me, "A job that I loved." But five months before their Cabo dinner, Kate published an op-ed at a nonprofit Oklahoma news site criticizing state felony prosecutions of women who miscarried after taking drugs during pregnancy. "Anytime you criminalize drug use in pregnancy," Kate explained to me, the addicts stop going to the hospital, "and you have worse and worse outcomes."

After the op-ed appeared, somebody phoned Kate's health center to complain. After that, Kate's superiors effectively barred her from making public statements about anything. That irked Kate until her boss explained why: The FBI had contacted the health center to alert them to threats of violence "just for providing birth control." Did I mention that Oklahoma allows anybody over the age of 21 to carry a loaded firearm in public, open or concealed, without a license?



THE LAST STRAW FOR the couple was *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. That windy June night in Cabo, the Supreme Court was still a few weeks away from overturning *Roe v. Wade* and allowing states to ban abortion. But it was no mystery what the decision would say, because one month earlier a draft had leaked to *Politico*. The Oklahoma legislature had already passed several trigger laws whose cumulative effect was to bar doctors from performing abortions starting at the point of conception, punishable by up to 10 years in prison (later reduced to five).

Kate and Caroline didn't perform abortions themselves; they referred patients to Planned Parenthood. Or rather, they had done so until an Oklahoma law barred them from doing even that. That law would later be ruled unconstitutional, but ambiguities in the Oklahoma abortion ban's exception for protecting the life of the mother make it potentially dangerous to treat any patient experiencing difficulty during pregnancy.

"When we left dinner that night," Kate recalled, "we knew we needed to leave Oklahoma. We were both in a bit of shock as we walked back to our room. I said I was sorry, and that I didn't know I had been thinking all of that till we finally had a minute. Caroline jokingly called me the worst date ever."

For a day, they thought about moving to New Zealand, but they didn't want to be that far from their parents, and besides, Kate and Caroline love this country, despite all its flaws; July Fourth is Kate's favorite holiday. They thought about Northern California, but vetoed that because Caroline doesn't like cold summer nights. That left Washington, D.C., a place Kate had enjoyed living in while attending medical school at Georgetown. They arrived this past May, settling into a blue bungalow on a quiet, leafy street near the Maryland border.

Kate Arnold and Caroline Flint are two bright, energetic, professionally trained, and public-spirited women whom Washington is happy to welcome—they both quickly found jobs—even though it doesn't particularly need them. The places that need Kate and Caroline are Oklahoma and Mississippi and Idaho and various other conservative states where similar stories are playing out daily. These two fortyish doctors have joined an out-migration of young professionals—accelerated by the culture wars of recent years and pushed to warp speed by *Dobbs*—that's known as the Red State Brain Drain.

Republican-dominated states are pushing out young professionals by enacting extremist conservative policies. Abortion restrictions are the most sweeping example, but state laws restricting everything from academic tenure to transgender health care to the teaching of "divisive concepts" about race are making these states uncongenial to knowledge workers.

The precise effect of all this on the brain drain is hard to tease out from migration statistics because the *Dobbs* decision is still fairly new, and because red states were bleeding college graduates even before the culture war heated up. The only red state that brings in more college graduates than it sends elsewhere is Texas. But the evidence is everywhere that hard-right social policies in red states are making this dynamic worse.

The number of applications for ob-gyn residencies is down more than 10 percent in states that have banned abortion since *Dobbs*. Forty-eight teachers in Hernando County, Florida, fed up with "Don't Say Gay" and other new laws restricting what they can teach, resigned or retired at the end of the last school year. A North Carolina law confining transgender people to bathrooms in accordance with what it said on their birth certificate was projected, before it was repealed, to cost that state $3.76 billion in business investment, including the loss of a planned global operations center for PayPal in Charlotte. A survey of college faculty in four red states (Texas, Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina) about political interference in higher education found a falloff in the number of job candidates for faculty positions, and 67 percent of the respondents said they would not recommend their state to colleagues as a place to work. Indeed, nearly one-third said they were actively considering employment elsewhere.

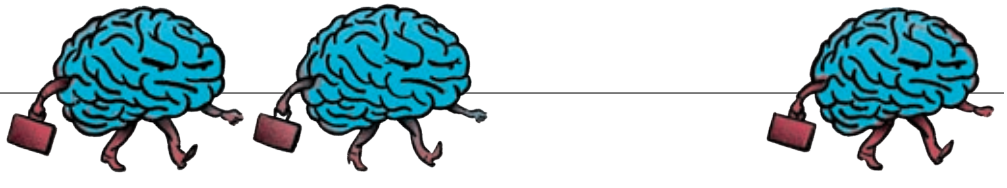
In Oklahoma, Kate and Caroline belonged to a book group. They read "serious depressing books," Kate said, like *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond and *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver. The book group had six people in it. Now it's down to three, because another woman in the group moved to Washington state after Oklahoma banned transgender care for minors in May. Kate and Caroline named three additional friends who also left Oklahoma recently for political reasons.

THE PHRASE "culture war" entered the academic lexicon in 1991 with publication of *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* by James Davison Hunter, a sociologist at the University of Virginia. Hunter saw the culture wars of the late twentieth century as a continuation of American Protestants' virulent anti-Catholicism and antisemitism during the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth. Where once a Protestant majority demonized rival faiths, today a shrinking cohort of orthodox adherents to all three faiths demonizes progressive rationalists and pluralists. And, just as a century ago politicians gleefully exploited such animosity, they do so today. At the 1992 Republican convention, Pat Buchanan borrowed Hunter's phrase and turned it into a political truncheon. "My friends," Buchanan said,

> this election is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe, and what we stand for as Americans. There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War.

Buchanan's us-versus-them philippic set the tone for congressional Republicans' hyper-partisan opposition to Presidents Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and now Joe Biden. It also inspired the snarling us-them rhetoric of former President Donald Trump and the various Trump imitators challenging him for the 2024 presidential nomination.

The culture war moved slowly into state politics, because, at first, Republicans didn't have much of a foothold there. From 1971 to 1994, Democrats held most governorships. That flipped in 1995,



and for the next dozen years, Republicans held the majority of governorships. But Republican governors still couldn't advance the culture-war agenda, because state legislatures remained dominated by Democrats.

That changed with the 2010 election. In a historic realignment largely unrecognized at the time, the GOP won a majority of governorships *and* legislative chambers. Today, Republicans control a 52 percent majority of governorships and a 57 percent majority of state legislative bodies, and in 22 states Republicans enjoy a "trifecta," meaning they control the governorship and both legislative chambers (or, in the case of Nebraska, a unicameral legislature). At the time *Dobbs* was handed down, Republicans enjoyed even greater reach, with trifectas in 23 states.

The very last restraint on Republicans waging full-scale culture war—the presence of college graduates under the GOP tent—was removed by the 2016 presidential election. College graduates have always tended to be fairly liberal on social issues, but until the 1990s they were pretty reliably Republican, because college grads made more money and didn't want to pay higher taxes. Even Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic presidential nominee caricatured by Republicans as an "egghead," won only about 30 percent of college graduates in 1956. The Democrats' egghead share crept up after that, but it wasn't until 1992 that a Democrat, Bill Clinton, won the college vote (with a 43 percent plurality in a three-way race). Four years later, Clinton lost it to Bob Dole, and for the next two decades Joe College seesawed from one party to another. As recently as 2012, Mitt Romney eked out a 51 percent majority of college graduates.

But with the arrival of Donald Trump, college graduates left the Republican fold for the foreseeable future. Trump dropped the Republican share to 44 percent in 2016 and 43 percent in 2020. If Trump wins the nomination in 2024, the GOP's share of college voters could drop below 40, and I don't see any of Trump's challengers for the Republican nomination doing much better. It isn't clear they even want to, because today's GOP sees college graduates as the enemy.

The heaviest artillery is trained on abortion rights. After *Dobbs*, wholesale abortion bans took effect in 14 states: Alabama, Arkansas, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia. All but Kentucky and Louisiana are trifecta states. In a fifteenth state, Wisconsin, uncertainty about how to interpret an 1849 statute concerning violence against a pregnant woman put abortions on hold for one year until an appeals court ruled that the statute did not apply to abortions.

Let's call these hard-core abortion-ban states the Dobbs Fourteen. In 2020, more than 113,000 abortions were performed in the Dobbs Fourteen, according to the nonprofit Guttmacher Institute. During the first six months of 2023, that number fell to nearly zero; in Texas, for instance, about 20 women qualified for that state's very narrowly drawn exemptions.

The Dobbs Fourteen made it nearly impossible to get an abortion, as intended. But they simultaneously made it much more difficult for a pregnant woman to give birth, because abortion bans drove ob-gyns like Kate Arnold and Caroline Flint away.

It was hard enough for red states to hold onto their ob-gyns even before *Dobbs*. A little more than one-third of all counties nationwide are "maternity care deserts," typically in rural areas, with no hospitals or birthing centers that offer obstetric care and no individual obstetric providers (not even midwives), according to the March of Dimes. This data was collected before the Supreme Court overturned *Roe*. But even then, those states with the most restrictive abortion laws invested the least in maternal care, affirming former Representative Barney Frank's memorable complaint that for conservatives "life begins at conception and ends at birth."

Maternity care deserts are typically in rural areas, not all of which impose strict abortion restrictions. But they're much more common in states that imposed abortion restrictions after *Dobbs*, representing 39 percent of all counties in those states, compared to 25 percent in states that imposed no abortion restrictions. Texas has, after California, the highest GDP of any state. Yet 46.5 percent of its counties are maternity care deserts; for some women, the nearest birthing hospital is a 70-minute drive from their home. In some states, including Oklahoma and Mississippi, the majority of counties are maternity care deserts.

WHERE RESOURCES ARE inadequate for giving birth, infant mortality tends to be high. Among the Dobbs Fourteen, all but Idaho, North Dakota, and Texas have infant-mortality rates higher than the (shockingly high) national average of 5.42 deaths per 1,000 births. In some of these states, infant mortality is substantially higher. In Mississippi, it's 9.39 deaths per 1,000 births. In Oklahoma, it's 7.13 deaths per 1,000 births.

It hardly surprised me when Kate, comparing their houses in Oklahoma City and Washington, said their Washington bungalow was "half the size for double the cost." But the two physicians also took substantial cuts in pay—not quite 50 percent for Caroline, and about 25 percent for Kate. How could that be? If Washington's cost of living is higher, shouldn't salaries be higher, too? For most occupations, yes. But ob-gyn salaries, Kate and Caroline explained to me, vary dramatically according to local demand. Washington has plenty of ob-gyns; the nation's capital is too urban and too

After the op-ed appeared, somebody phoned Kate's health center to complain. After that, Kate's superiors effectively barred her from making public statements about anything. Kate's boss explained why: The FBI had alerted the center to threats of violence "just for providing birth control."

geographically small to be a maternity care desert. Oklahoma, on the other hand, suffers a desperate shortage of ob-gyns, and therefore must pay top dollar.

Mississippi is the poorest state in the country. But the average base salary for an ob-gyn at Wayne General Hospital in Waynesboro, Mississippi, is $350,000. (I take this and the salary figures that follow from the workforce data company Glassdoor, because the Bureau of Labor Statistics' information is one year out of date.) Compare Waynesboro's largesse to the average base salary for an ob-gyn at ClearMD Health Center in Manhattan: $275,000, or 21 percent less. (Even that's a little high for New York City, where, according to Glassdoor, average ob-gyn pay is $243,000.) In Oklahoma City, average base salary for an ob-gyn at CompHealth Physician Obstetrics and Gynecology is $325,000. In Fort Smith, Arkansas, average base salary for an ob-gyn at CompHealth Physician Obstetrics and Gynecology is $312,500. Meanwhile, average base pay for an ob-gyn in Los Angeles is $235,000.

Throwing money at ob-gyns helps red states manage the problem, but it doesn't fix it. One Mississippi-based ob-gyn told the nonprofit news site Mississippi Today in September that the metropolitan area around Meridian (pop. 33,816) has six obstetric providers; as recently as five years ago, it had 12 or 13.

THE MILKEN EDUCATOR AWARD bestows $25,000 each year on early- to mid-career elementary and secondary schoolteachers and administrators who further "excellence in education." The prize is bankrolled by Michael Milken, the 1980s junk-bond king turned philanthropist who, yes, served two years in prison for securities fraud and was later pardoned by Trump. Notwithstanding that colorful backstory, the Milken Educator Award is quite prestigious, and winners always get fussed over in their home states. The 60 honorees chosen in April 2022 included Tyler Hallstedt, a 35-year-old man who taught eighth grade American history in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee (pop. 42,548), a suburb 20 miles east of Nashville.

Tyler was handed the prize at a school assembly by Tennessee Governor Bill Lee, a Republican. "We have some of the best schools in America in this state," the governor told the crowd. "We have some of the best teachers in America in this state. And you have one of the best teachers in America in this school."

Accepting his award, Tyler was a little subdued. "Teaching is a difficult job right now," he said. "The reason I continue to do it is the relationships with my students are genuinely important to me.... Knowing that I get to see them grow and show them that I genuinely care about them, that's what overrides the difficult and sometimes unfair parts of being a teacher."

He could have said more, because at that point Tyler was pretty fed up with the state's education policies. One month earlier, Lee had signed into law a bill requiring school districts to maintain lists of all teaching materials made available to students, to make these available on the school's website, and to establish "a procedure to periodically review the library collection at each school to ensure that [it] contains materials appropriate for the age and maturity levels of the students who may access the materials." Among the books subsequently removed from school curricula was Art Spiegelman's *Maus*.

"I literally turned my bookshelf around," Tyler told me, so that the books faced the wall. That was his silent protest. He kept the backward-facing bookshelf in his classroom all year.

For Tyler, the final straw was a dustup over a video he showed his class a few months after he collected his prize. The video was about the seventeenth-century English settlement in Jamestown, Virginia. It was hosted by John Green, author of the 2012 young adult novel *The Fault in Our Stars*. Green has engaged in some leftish activism, but the video, the third in a series called *Crash Course U.S. History*, isn't notably didactic. It is, however, irreverent and funny in a manner intended to appeal to adolescents, and if you look closely you can see, on the back of Green's laptop, a sticker that says THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS. The words are borrowed from Woody Guthrie, who, feeling patriotic one day about America's war against Hitler and Tojo, painted them onto his guitar; factory workers producing war materiel had scribbled these same words onto their lathes. Tyler received an email from a father complaining that the sticker, which you can barely see, was a call for violence. A nonmetaphorical way to use a laptop (or guitar) to kill a fascist does not spring readily to mind, but that wasn't really the point, Tyler explained to me. "He just doesn't like John Green." Green's sticker had previously drawn criticism from a Republican state legislator in New Hampshire, and Green's 2005 young adult novel, *Looking for Alaska*, had been targeted by Moms for Liberty, an influential hard-right group that's active in book-banning campaigns.

As a result of that single complaint, Tyler's school barred him from showing his students any videos in the *Crash Course* series, even though he'd been using them for years. Eventually, the school backed down and permitted Tyler to show some of (but not all) the *Crash Course* videos; however, the damage was done. "It showed me that just one angry parent has a heckler's veto," Tyler said.

Tyler talked to his wife, Delana, and his adult stepson about seeking greener pastures. Delana was a teacher, too. She wasn't particularly eager to move. But she understood what they were up against, and, at the end of the school year, all three moved to Tyler's native Michigan, where he took up a post teaching seventh graders in Petoskey, a small resort town on Little Traverse Bay.

As much as Republicans may scorn Joe (and Jane) College, they need them to deliver their babies, to teach their children, to pay taxes, and to provide a host of other services that only people with undergraduate or graduate degrees are able to provide.

He got a 35 percent raise, too. "I could tolerate the pay," he told me, "but the culture wars are what finally convinced me. Things are so much better here."

Since January 2021, 18 states have imposed restrictions on how teachers may address the subjects of race and gender, according to *Education Week*'s Sarah Schwartz. These include most of the Dobbs Fourteen and a few add-ons, including Florida and New Hampshire. According to a 2022 study by the RAND Corporation, legislative action not only accelerated after 2021 but also became more repressive, extending beyond the classroom to restrict professional development plans for teachers. Let's call these teacher-harassing states the Morrison Eighteen, in honor of the late Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, whose *The Bluest Eye* is number three with a bullet on the American Library Association's 2022 list of books most frequently targeted for removal. (The 1970 novel ranked eighth in 2021 and ninth in 2020.)

Taking a tour of the Morrison Eighteen, we find Texas teachers quitting at a rate that's 25 percent above the national average. In Tennessee, the vacancy rate for all public schools is 5.5 percent, compared to a national average of 4 percent. South Carolina has teacher shortages in 17 subject areas this school year, more than any other state.

But Governor Ron DeSantis's Florida is the undisputed champ. A 2022 study led by Tuan D. Nguyen of Kansas State University found that Florida had the most teacher vacancies in the country, followed by Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama (all Morrison Eighteen states). Florida also logged the highest number of underqualified teachers.

The availability of state-level data is spotty, but teacher shortages in the Morrison Eighteen states would appear to be getting worse. According to Nguyen's website, Florida's teacher vacancies increased 35 percent in the school year after his study was published. Plugging in calculations from the Florida Education Association, teacher vacancies rose another 15 percent in the current school year. In Texas, the number of teacher vacancies more than doubled in the year after Nguyen's study, and in South Carolina they increased 57 percent. (In fairness, this isn't happening in all 18 states: Teacher shortages declined in Alabama and Mississippi.)

The culture-war capital of the United States is Tallahassee, Florida, thanks to DeSantis and his (thus far, frustrated) ambition to win the Republican nomination for president. Don't Say Gay? Check. Don't Say Race? Check. Pee Where Your Birth Certificate Says? Check. No Kids at Drag Shows? Check. No Preferred Pronouns in Class? Check. Go Ahead and Stuff a Permitless Glock Down Your Britches? Check. Florida also limited abortions to the first six weeks, but six weeks wasn't quite reactionary enough to include Florida among the Dobbs Fourteen.

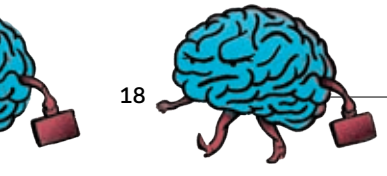
Frustration boiled over in Florida's Hernando County last May, when hundreds of people showed up at a school board meeting to protest that a fifth-grade teacher named Jenna Barbee was put under investigation for showing her students *Strange World*, an animated Disney adventure film from 2022. Barbee's offense was that one of the characters happened to be gay. "No one is teaching your kids to be gay," a teacher named Alyssa Marano said at the meeting. "Sometimes, they just are gay. I have math to teach. I literally don't have time to teach your kids to be gay." After the meeting, 49 teachers, including Marano and Barbee, either quit or retired en masse.

Florida is also a recognized national leader in the harassment of college and university professors. Working with his majority-Republican legislature, DeSantis prohibited Florida's public institutions of higher learning from maintaining diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI, programs; he effectively ended tenure at public universities by requiring post-tenure reviews every five years; and he seized control of New College, a well-regarded public institution in Sarasota, abolishing, through a handpicked board of trustees, its gender-studies program, pushing out the school president, denying tenure to five faculty members on political grounds, and abolishing gender-neutral bathrooms.

Amid this tumult, Hampshire College, in Amherst, Massachusetts, offered a place to any New College student who wished to transfer, at the same price they were paying the state of Florida. About 12 percent of the New College students applied for transfer, and in the end roughly three dozen students departed sunny Tampa Bay for the chilly Berkshires. About 40 faculty members left with them, and *U.S. News & World Report* dropped New College's ranking from 76 to 100.

An August survey sponsored by the American Association of University Professors demonstrated low morale among faculty in the Morrison Eighteen states of Florida, Georgia, and Texas. But nowhere was morale worse than in Florida, where 47 percent said they were seeking positions in another state. "I'm a professor," one Floridian who called himself "Brodman_area11" posted on Reddit in late September. "My university is like watching all the rats escape from the sinking ship. My department alone has lost two pediatricians, and we can't seem to be able to recruit any qualified replacements. It's going to be a diaspora."

And good riddance to them, Florida Republicans would likely say. But that fails to recognize how important university communities, public and private, are in creating and sustaining a state's economic growth. "The college," Karin Fischer noted in a recent report by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* titled *College as a Public Good*, "has become the one institution that remains in cities and rural regions alike long after the factory shuts down



or the corporate headquarters pulls up stakes." A college isn't an easy thing to move. And although colleges sometimes go out of business, it doesn't happen a lot. Of the nation's 3,600 nonprofit institutions of higher learning, only about five to 12 close each year. We lose more factories than that every day.

Consider Rochester, New York. For more than 100 years, Rochester was a company town, and the company was Kodak. Around the time of Kodak's 1992 centennial, the company employed 60,000 people, nearly all of them in Rochester, which meant more than one in 10 people working in the Rochester metropolitan area worked at Kodak. When you included indirect employment, Kodak drove perhaps one-quarter of Rochester's economy. Then came digital photography and bankruptcy. The company is still around, but today its Rochester payroll is approximately 1,300 employees.

Rochester is still a thriving company town, but now the company is the University of Rochester. The university employs 31,000 people, which means more than one in 15 people working in the Rochester metropolitan area work for the university, and that doesn't even count the economic impact of its 12,000 students. The most recent unemployment figure for Rochester's metropolitan area was 3.2 percent in September. That was lower than the national average and the average in New York state.

AT THIS POINT IN the discussion, someone is bound to ask: If red states are so awful, why are so many people moving there? It's true. Between 2020 and 2022, the five states with the biggest net population growth were all red: Idaho, Montana, Florida, Utah, and South Carolina. The two biggest net population losers, meanwhile, were blue states: New York and Illinois. I just got done telling you what terrible places Oklahoma and Tennessee have become to live in. But Oklahoma and Tennessee are two of the fastest-growing states in the country. How can that be?

Part of the answer is that not many of us move at all, so broad migration patterns are not so consequential as you might think. The big migration story is that Americans have grown steadily less geographically mobile for most of the past century. As the Berkeley sociologist Claude S. Fischer pointed out two decades ago, the idea of the United States as a rootless nation, promoted by writers as varied as Vance Packard and Joan Didion, is simply wrong—a fantasy derived from the historical memory of westward expansion during the nineteenth century. Today, even immigrants tend to stay put once they arrive in the United States. During the past decade, the percentage of the entire population that moved from one state to another in any given year never rose above 2.5 percent, not even during the Covid pandemic. Even movement from one county in a given state to another is about half what it was before 1990.

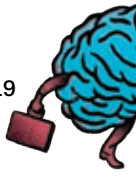
When Americans do move, the motivating factor is typically pursuit of cheaper housing. In a country where decades can go by with no appreciable rise in real median income, it makes sense that if you're going to move, it's best to go where it's cheaper to live. Red states almost always offer a lower cost of living. If the climate's warm, as it is in many red states, so much the better. Conservatives like to argue that people move to red states because the taxes are lower, and it's true, they are. But that confuses correlation with cause. In places where the cost of living is low, taxes tend to be low, too. The high-tax states are the more prosperous (invariably blue) ones where it's more expensive to live.

But there's an exception to the American reluctance to migrate: Joe (and Jane) College. College-educated people move a lot, especially when they're young. Among single people, the U.S. Census Bureau found, nearly 23 percent of all college-degree holders moved to a different state between 1995 and 2000, compared to less than 10 percent of those without a college degree. Among married people, nearly 19 percent of college-degree holders moved, compared to less than 10 percent of those without a college degree. More recent data shows that, between 2001 and 2016, college graduates ages 22 to 24 were twice as likely to move to a different state as were people lacking a college degree.

The larger population may prefer to move—on those rare occasions when it does move—to a red state, but the college-educated minority, which moves much more frequently, prefers relocating to a blue state. There are 10 states that import more college graduates than they export, and all of them except Texas are blue. (I'm counting Georgia, which is one of the 10, as a blue state because it went for Joe Biden in 2020.) Indeed, the three states logging the largest net population losses overall—New York, California, and Illinois—are simultaneously logging the largest net gains of college graduates. It's a sad sign that our prosperous places are less able than in the past—or perhaps less willing—to make room for less-prosperous migrants in search of economic opportunity. But that's the reality.

Meanwhile, with the sole exception of Texas, red states are bleeding college graduates. It's happening even in relatively prosperous Florida. And much as Republicans may scorn Joe (and Jane) College, they need them to deliver their babies, to teach their children, to pay taxes—college grads pay more than twice as much in taxes—and to provide a host of other services that only people with undergraduate or graduate degrees are able to provide. Red states should be welcoming Kate and Caroline and Tyler and Delana. Instead, they're driving them away, and that's already costing them dearly. TNR

Timothy Noah *is a staff writer at* The New Republic.



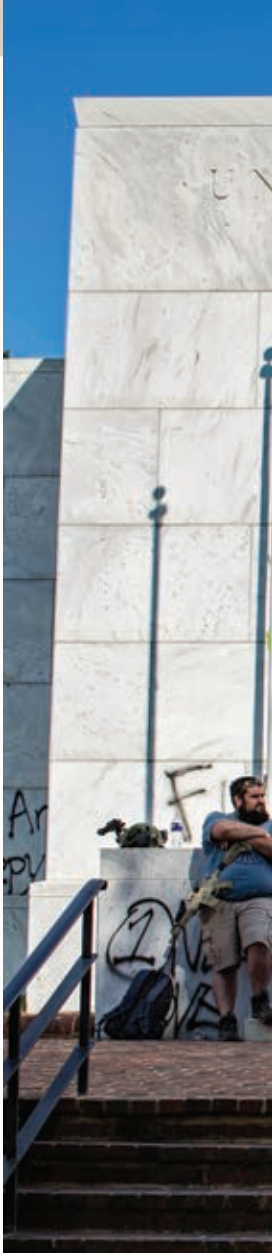
But They're Just the *Nicest* Ladies

You can call the United Daughters of the Confederacy a lot of things. Anachronistic. Blinkered. Dwindling. And yes—so very polite. But racist? Why, some of their best friends....

By Anna Venarchik

Photographs by Brian Palmer

Ginger R. Stephens (center), a Virginia leader of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, joined other celebrants at a 2018 commemoration of Jefferson Davis's birthday.



The first thing I noticed about the monument to Southern women is that its Confederate flag flew upside down. One of the flagpole's ropes had snapped so that the Stars and Bars fluttered in the breeze as the Bars and Stars. I had driven seven hours from Manhattan to see the memorial, a squat marble building that looms over a tree-lined boulevard in Richmond, Virginia. The rebel nation's former capital has contended with its legacy by removing all Confederate statues from city property. But I know this monument was recently polished. From the sidewalk, I could see the cotton bolls and ribbons etched into the bronze double doors. I could see engraved across the marble front: UNITED DAUGHTERS OF THE CONFEDERACY.

I had called the headquarters, and would continue to call, asking for a tour, something the women once offered to the public upon request. Now, a KEEP OUT sign positioned near a UDC placard clarifies what passersby should know about the organization. "So many people in Richmond walk by and see this big marble building," one local would tell me, adding that it's beautiful. "But they're not allowed to see what's actually inside."

The women were friendly on the phone but stuck to a demurring script: They needed to ask someone who needed to ask someone else—they would call me back. They never called me back, confirming what their signs stated clearly: The UDC wanted me to Keep Out.

I traveled to Richmond with no promise that I would tour the building, but that was OK. After all, memorials are meant to point us past marble and to the living world. I didn't need to enter the building to know the country's most infamous Confederate heritage group. And I didn't need to see their flag to know that the organization itself is hanging by its last thread.

★★★

After Charlottesville's deadly Unite the Right rally in 2017, the country turned its scrutinizing eye to Confederate statues, landing its gaze on those who built them: the UDC. But rather than reckon with their past work, the Daughters, as *The Washington Post* wrote, were "stunningly silent" when contacted for comment. Nine days after Charlottesville, a statement denouncing white supremacy and defending Confederates appeared on the UDC's website. Rare exceptions notwithstanding, the statement functions as their final word.

Though its statues punctuated the landscape of my childhood in Alabama, I didn't learn about the UDC until 2021, when I began researching scholarships for journalism school. I discovered that as the progeny of Confederates, I'm the type the Daughters like to support. The more I read about the UDC, the more I realized how much talking the organization did a century ago, talking that shaped Southern culture as I know it. And despite the current reticence, it appears the UDC still wants to influence people like me.

I wasn't surprised to encounter the organization's stunning silence when I reached out, introducing myself as a fellow Southerner interested in writing about the group. I was surprised to find a chapter of Confederate Daughters in New York, though. These women were delighted to find an Alabamian in the city; I was stunned to find Confederates in Manhattan. When the chapter president sent me a membership application, I iterated that I wanted to write about the organization. She replied that I should write for the UDC's magazine.

When I considered my adulthood outside of Alabama—one spent realizing how insidiously white supremacist ideas permeate my native culture, spent deconstructing ideas constructed by entities like the UDC—I felt compelled, one white Southern woman to another, to take a closer look at the UDC. It didn't sit right that they would go silent when the national conversation changed. And with an application in my inbox, and the prodding of my journalism professors, there seemed to be another way to get to know them.

Meetings began with the Pledge of Allegiance and a salute to the Confederate flag. "Dixie" was skipped because singing in unison over Zoom was tricky. The chapter boasted 500 members a century ago, I was told, but an average of seven women now attended. They were sweet and welcoming, and their conversations regularly turned to two things: the cost of preserving their

In May 2020, this was the scene at the United Daughters of the Confederacy's headquarters in Richmond the morning after protests over the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. Molotov cocktails had sailed through the windows of the building, which was burned, vandalized, and defaced.

memorial building and their public image. Considering their refusal to speak with journalists, I found it ironic when a woman leaned into her square to say, "They all think we're white supremacists"—the identity of "they" wasn't specified—"but they don't want to bother to find out."

When speaking with experts for this article, I noticed an assumption that the organization no longer meets. This is not the case. I gathered with Daughters in October 2021, when the chapter convened in Manhattan for wine, cheese, and a lecture on Confederate diversity. Two weeks later, I flew to a seaside resort in Myrtle Beach for the national convention. By the end of the event, attended by 300 Daughters from across the country, the "Look away! Look away!" refrain of "Dixie" remained stuck in my head.

After the convention, I lost touch with the UDC. But when my graduate work became an opportunity to write for this magazine, I decided to properly reach out as a journalist to Margaret, a leader with the New York chapter. Margaret, who I would guess is a young septuagenarian, has been in the UDC most of her life. I decided to change her name for this article.

Over Zoom, I confirmed that I was now reporting for *The New Republic*. I planned to write about the UDC's memorial building, one of Richmond's last Confederate monuments, and whom it memorialized. Since I had spent time with the Daughters, I hoped they would break their silence with me, and I was stunned when Margaret responded enthusiastically about sitting for an interview: "I am interested in people understanding that the organization is a forward-looking organization." Her cat crawled across her lap, and she wiggled its tail toward the screen. The meeting ended with smiles, but when she followed up, it was to let me know she'd changed her mind. She hoped, without explanation, I would

An array of pins and medals has been created for or awarded by the UDC. The one in the middle features the profile of Winnie Davis, Jefferson Davis's daughter.

understand. Other UDC leaders replied to my subsequent emails with a "respectfully decline," or with silence.

When Margaret said the UDC is forward-looking, I told her I looked forward to learning how. I had a lot of questions, and I was disappointed the Daughters wouldn't give me the chance to ask. Maybe they'd change their minds by the time I got to Richmond. Either way, by now, I had already heard the UDC speak.

★★★

"The time has come when the South, the true home of the Anglo-Saxon race, which has stood for *truth* and *honesty* and *righteousness* in the past, should come back to the faith and principles for which their forefathers stood." This 1925 call to make Dixie Confederate again came from Mildred Lewis Rutherford, a prominent historian general of the UDC. A decade prior, a Daughter published *The Ku Klux Klan, or Invisible Empire*, a children's textbook that exonerated the Klan. The "heroes" protected white women from "ignorant and vicious negroes" who "considered freedom synonymous with equality" and only wanted "to marry a white wife." The UDC pledged to disseminate the book to schools and libraries.

These texts are excellent primers of the Lost Cause, a successful, and dangerous, rebranding campaign. The ideology claims the Confederacy fought patriotically for states' rights, not the right to own Black people as property. It claims the South was the real victim of the war, and that enslaved people appreciated bondage. The belief system disentangled the causes and effects of postwar inequities; it ensured that white supremacy continued to organize the South's social hierarchy with or without the slave system. Myths supplanted fact in the mind of the white South; heritage became history. This was largely thanks to the Daughters.

Founded in 1894, the UDC devoted itself to caring for veterans and vindicating the Confederacy, as historian Karen Cox chronicles in *Dixie's Daughters*. As offspring of the South's antebellum patriarchy, the Daughters coped with defeat by refusing to remember their forefathers as anything other than noble and just. Chapters proliferated across the South, and Daughters built statues to be "signposts for the future," as Cox told me, and advocated for textbooks to teach the Lost Cause. UDC influence subsided after World War I, when membership peaked at 100,000, but America's race-related conflicts of the twenty-first century demonstrate that the Daughters achieved their ultimate goal. By swaying how children understand the past, they built "living monuments" to the Confederacy. "A lot of the things the UDC did," Caroline Janney, a Civil War historian at the University of Virginia, told me, "we're still living with today."

On a Monday afternoon in November 1957, the Daughters convened in Richmond. According to a 1994 UDC magazine, the day remains the second most important in UDC history, the first being the day the organization formed. At the site of the former R.E. Lee Camp Soldiers' Home, with a high school orchestra performing and more than 700 in attendance, the Daughters debuted their marble headquarters. Just two months after President Eisenhower signed a Civil Rights Act into law—the first of its kind since Reconstruction—the UDC dedicated its building to the Women of the Confederacy.

The memorial also signifies the comfortable position the UDC once held in the Old Dominion. The Daughters settled in the former Confederate capital after Governor William Tuck, who spent his governorship fighting civil rights laws, offered the land. Virginia's General Assembly approved the offer in 1950 and tacked on $10,000 toward construction fees. The deed, however, included stipulations: If the UDC doesn't use the property for five years, it reverts to the Commonwealth. The UDC cannot sell the building, because the state controls the land; the group cannot move it, because it's marble. If they ever couldn't pay for upkeep, they would have to abandon the memorial.

PINS FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR MUSEUM, RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

"The good thing about this company is that they're all African American," a former UDC president general said of the security company that guards the group's Richmond headquarters. "And these men *love* us. We couldn't have paid for the P.R. these fellas have done for us."

Within the walls made of white-veined Georgia marble, the headquarters features libraries, archives, and offices for members' work. As much as the building is a memorial to wartime women, it's also a monument to the Daughters themselves. They wrote in the building's 2008 application to the National Register of Historic Places that it was designed to "resemble a mausoleum," a fitting choice for an organization preoccupied with the dead. The application also includes a more ominous detail: The Daughters iterated that the building should be fireproofed.

The decades brought civil rights to Richmond, and the marble continued to shimmer in the sun. Then in 2015, the white walls were graffitied; four years later, the street was renamed for hometown hero Arthur Ashe. The Memorial to the Women of the Confederacy is now on a boulevard that honors the first Black man to win Wimbledon. But it wasn't until 2020 that the UDC arrived at its third most important date: In the early hours of May 31, Molotov cocktails sailed through its windows. Outrage over the murder of George Floyd had reached Richmond, and the reckonings were aimed at symbols of Confederate glory. By morning, the UDC's library was smoldering. In messages that circulated on Facebook, the president general wrote that the office manager watched the attack remotely through security cameras. If she hadn't called 911, the blaze could have consumed the building. Another Daughter chronicled arriving to the aftermath in a 2023 UDC magazine. She detailed that the fire chief salvaged artifacts as the women waited outside. "I asked him if the 31st Virginia Flag had survived," she wrote, referring to (as UDC documents suggest) Stonewall Jackson's flag. "He came back out and shook his head." The charred, graffitied building would be saved, but the night proved the memorial was not, in fact, fireproof.

In the succeeding weeks, Mayor Levar Stoney, the youngest person ever to hold the title in Richmond, ordered the removal of all Confederate statues from city property. When the last statue, of General A.P. Hill, was lowered in December 2022, Stoney said it marked "the last stand for the Lost Cause in our city."

When I visited Richmond, I met with Stoney and asked about the statement, considering the UDC's presence in town. As a nonprofit, it's free to exist, he said. "But this is a divorce between the city of Richmond and the Lost Cause," he added, "and when you have a divorce, the other person is still able to live their life, but you are making the claim that this is the end."

Stoney isn't the only official looking to sever ties with the Lost Cause. In 2022, General Assembly Minority Leader Don Scott, a Democrat, learned that alongside churches and hospitals, the UDC's Virginia Division and General Organization receive a special tax exemption on real estate. He told me he was "disgusted" that the government would subsidize a "historically racist organization," even if the organization no longer sells or purchases much real estate. In January, he proposed a bill to remove the exemption, which failed, he said, after Speaker of the House of Delegates Todd Gilbert, a Republican, "pocketed" the bill so it wasn't brought to a vote. Gilbert didn't respond to requests for comment; perhaps the UDC still has some allies in power. Regardless, Scott said he'd reintroduce the bill. "The fact that they still exist is tough to deal with," he told me. "If you go to Germany, there's no 'Daughters of the Nazis.'"

★★★

When I attended the 2021 convention in Myrtle Beach, I learned that comparisons like Scott's, which are made routinely (but usually to the KKK) strike a nerve. Amid the convention's pin sales and auction—stocked with a "Make Dixie Great Again" hat and *Gone With the Wind* curios—the Daughters traded anecdotes of being accused of racism for their affiliation with the group. "But I will tell you," the historian general said during a workshop. "I don't have a racist bone in my body."

Rather than examine why comparisons like Scott's are made, the Daughters seem convinced that anyone who doesn't like them just doesn't know who they are. Current president general Jinny Widowski wrote in a January UDC magazine that the media "is certainly not respectful or fair" and is to blame for widespread misunderstanding of the organization and, by proxy, for the attack on the building. I emailed Widowski, inviting her to speak for this article. I told her I wanted to be fair. She never replied.

"Just the nicest ladies" is how the Daughters see themselves. They often used such phrases while discussing their charity projects. Divisions annually report how many hours of volunteer work they complete: in 2021, over 12,000 hours in Florida, over 180,000 in Texas. But their use of the phrase also suggests how they define "racist": someone who feels animosity toward Black people, who wishes to see communities of color suffer. And "white supremacy" is associated with violence, not societal conditions. By holding to these definitions, the Daughters maintain confusion as to why such terms are applied to them. They don't feel these things; they're just nice ladies.

I spoke with a former member of the UDC's brother group, the Sons of Confederate Veterans (he requested anonymity), who cautioned me against generalizing the organization, which isn't a monolith. He worked with Daughters in Richmond for years and said some divisions are more genteel, others more "hardcore." Some Daughters want to save statues—especially in North Carolina—others just like to hang out with friends. And some were formerly members of the Children of the Confederacy, the auxiliary organization where youth learn "true" history. In 2021,

the youngest member was added at only 45 minutes old, so I found it ironic—and disturbing—when one Daughter told me she sympathized when descendants of the enslaved are offended by Confederate statues. But she added that it's important to make sure such people understand the true narrative: "You can tell them that they have been lied to all their life."

One ubiquitous trait across the organization, as membership requires, is Confederate ancestry. When I chatted with women, my eyes drifted to the red ribbons fastened to their chests. They were plastered with tiny brooches, or insignia pins. Daughters collect pins to commemorate how many decades they've been members or to honor their heroes like Stonewall Jackson and the UDC founders. This sartorial hallmark also serves a purpose: It venerates the ancestors. Thin gold bars, like little tombstones, are engraved with the names of their forefathers. Daughters often trace their lineages to many Confederates, commemorating each with a bar, their ribbons functioning like little cemeteries.

During a formal evening when the women dressed in shimmering gowns, I was asked to stand before the convention. They wanted to applaud me for being a "prospective member." Rising from my seat in a thrifted frock, I was struck by more than mortification: I was struck by how badly the UDC wants new members. I saw a surprising number of Gen Xers in Myrtle Beach, but the Daughters, as is widely assumed, are mostly older. The organization, which reported 564 chapters in 32 states and D.C. in the 2021 minutes book, is therefore shrinking. During one business session, the president general at the time acknowledged that many women quit "when the George Floyd happened." Her own chapter in Alabama lost 29 members. "From what I've heard ever since I joined the UDC," she said to the convention, "is that when we get under 14,000 is when we're gonna really have a problem." At the time, the organization reported 14,241 members. Though some chapters reported adding new Daughters, I wonder, two years later, if the organization has now crossed that defining threshold.

★★★

As I hung around Richmond waiting for the Daughters to return my call about touring the building, I visited other institutions complicit in propagating the Lost Cause. They were happy to speak.

In a brick row house down the street from the White House of the Confederacy, a statue of the former president is spotlighted—lying on its back. After Jefferson Davis was pulled to the ground in 2020, the Valentine, a museum that presents Richmond's history, was delighted to welcome him home. "A rope was tied around his waist and attached to a sedan," Christina Vida, the curator of general collections, told me with a grin, "and he was pulled off his pedestal." Vida has neat brown hair that swished at her shoulders as she circled the fallen Confederate on temporary display in the gallery. She pointed to his broken arm, flattened face, and coat of Pepto-Bismol pink paint. She said that of all Confederates doused in 2020, this remarkable pink was found only on Davis. She quite liked it.

The Valentine traces its roots to Edward Valentine, a member of an aristocratic family in antebellum Richmond. Valentine spent the war studying art in Europe, and was depicting Confederates before the final shots were even fired. He was "helping to define the visual imagery of the Lost Cause," Vida told me, by fashioning generals as godlike. Rather than historical renderings, the imagery of Richmond's Confederates could be better likened to propaganda. Valentine sculpted Davis, and the statue, funded by the UDC, debuted in 1907.

For years, the Valentine had been trying to bring Davis off Monument Avenue. The opportunity came in 2017, when Stoney established the Monument Avenue Commission, a collection of historians, museum professionals, and City Council members tasked with considering the future of Richmond's Confederates. The commission found that even where Richmonders disagreed on how to change Monument Avenue, a majority agreed change was needed. Most decisively, the commission recommended Davis be removed. "Of all the statues, this one is most unabashedly Lost Cause in its design and sentiment," the commissioners wrote in their final report. Besides, Davis wasn't even from Virginia.

Stoney told me regulations protecting war memorials complicated implementing the recommendations, and he reallocated funds for next steps when the pandemic hit. But after George Floyd's murder, especially once a rope affixed Davis to an accelerating sedan, the recommendations were no longer applicable.

There's a lacquer on Davis's wounds—a smashed nose, a chipped thumb—to preserve the damage. Tufts of a tissue noose still stick to his neck. When I asked Vida what she thought about the fact that he returned like this, she told me she's thrilled. In this condition, he doesn't need placards contextualizing the Lost Cause: He's a new monument altogether. Atop a pedestal, Davis's outstretched arm once commanded authority. From the ground, he's reaching for a helping hand that no one seems to be offering.

★★★

Church Hill is gentrifying, folks around Richmond told me. The neighborhood is up the road from Shockoe Bottom, where an African burial ground and jail used to be, on the James River. It was in a café on the hill that I met Julian Hayter, a history professor at the University of Richmond. He had tattoos on his arm for places he's lived: Seattle and Los Angeles. But his predecessors came from Virginia. "Most African Americans are from the South, right?" he said, sipping a Topo Chico. He was referring to the fact that most African Americans can trace their ancestry to those who were enslaved. The largest slave port on the East Coast was down the hill in Shockoe.

Hayter served on the Monument Avenue Commission, and when I asked about the commission's only public forum, which 500 people attended, his eyes narrowed: "Oh, it was a fucking disaster." The opportunity for discourse devolved into a shouting match. During the gathering, Hayter noticed the UDC's past efforts at work: Boomers parroted Lost Cause textbooks. I knew firsthand what these textbooks were like. While antiquing in Alabama last summer, I found a tattered green textbook: *Know Alabama*. The book—dated 1961 with revisions in 1965, and assigned to students through at least 1973—teaches students that slavery was one of the "happiest way[s] of life in the South." It includes illustrations and immersive dialogue with "Mammy," who gladly cooks "you" breakfast. AL.com, which won a Pulitzer in 2023 for its commentary on Alabama's whitewashed history, reported in 2022 that the UDC vetted the textbook. When I brought it home, my mom recognized it from her fourth-grade history class.

"The UDC was actually pretty smart," Hayter said. Not only did the group commit the sin of commission through its statues

The statue of Jefferson Davis that once sat atop a pillar on Monument Avenue in Richmond was defaced and toppled in June 2020. It is now on view at the Valentine, a Richmond museum.

and textbooks, he explained; it was also "motivated by the sin of omission: just simply not talking about certain facets of history."

I later drove down to Shockoe and saw the parking lots and overpass that cut through sites where Africans were auctioned and buried. I also toured Jackson Ward, a historically Black neighborhood that once earned the monikers "Black Wall Street" and "Harlem of the South." In the 1950s, the city split and devastated the neighborhood with a freeway. Six lanes of interstate now run where Black families lived and worked.

Looking at Richmond's landscape, you wouldn't know it hosted the East Coast's biggest slave port, or that the newly emancipated swiftly established a vibrant community. Instead, you saw Confederate power.

But the landscape is still changing: Independent efforts to memorialize this overlooked history are getting a boost. In 2022, the Mellon Foundation granted the JXN Project, a nonprofit devoted to historic preservation in Jackson Ward, $1.5 million; the foundation also granted Richmond $11 million to build a cultural learning center about the slave trade in Shockoe.

"But that's heritage," Hayter told me at the café. "It's looking away from a particular history and venerating another at the expense of historical truth."

"Well, that's the irony of 'Dixie,'" I replied, thinking of the consequences of practicing the song. "The lyrics tell you to look away."

★★★

Outside the memorial to Confederate women, a bronze horse is mid-stride. The horseman turns in the saddle to gaze over the treetops. He's wearing a hoodie, and Nikes grip the stirrups. The rider is a young Black man.

The statue, *Rumors of War*, was unveiled at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in 2019. Michael Taylor, the chief curator at the VMFA, told me Kehinde Wiley, an artist best known for his portrait of Barack Obama, proposed the design after seeing Monument Avenue. Wiley's rider strikes the same pose as the statue of General J.E.B. Stuart, infamous for leading Confederates to ruin at Gettysburg. Taylor acknowledged that once Stuart came down in 2020, some complained that *Rumors* became redundant. He disagrees. Either way, I noticed the horse is charging the UDC's headquarters.

Since they dodged my requests for a tour, I was surprised when the Daughters fulfilled my order for UDC magazines. A secretary told me she would leave them with a guard.

Whenever I passed the building, I noticed a man sitting by a side door in a folding chair. After the 2020 fire, the UDC began funding round-the-clock security. Even though the expense has drained their coffers, members see a silver lining. "The good thing about this company is that they're all African American," the 2021 president general said during a business session in Myrtle Beach. "And these men *love* us," she said, adding: "We couldn't have paid for the P.R. these fellas have done for us."

Through the paradox of her statements (that the men are, in fact, paid), I noted a refrain of the Lost Cause: that perceived loyalty of Black Americans proves Confederates weren't white supremacist—even if the nation was founded on, as Vice President Alexander Stephens declared in his 1861 "Cornerstone Speech," "the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man."

I wondered how beneficial the guards were for "public relations," considering the building's Google reviews. A slew of recent single-star posts by alleged VMFA visitors complained of confrontations. "Add a fence if your security guards are to scream at anyone who even glances in the building's direction," one read. A VMFA security worker told me he regularly witnessed such interactions, adding, "There are only ever Black men who work that job." He elaborated with an uncanny choice of language: "It's part of creating, I don't know, some kind of public-relations image."

When I approached the building, the guard was nice. He wore a casual, black uniform with what looked like a gun on his hip. After handing off my magazines, he was willing to chat. He wasn't from Virginia. He came down from New York for the job. And I was surprised at how quick he was to agree: He's happy to be P.R. "When I tell people the name of the building, they think, *Oh, racists,*" he said. "But it's not like that now." I asked if he believed that, as a Black man, his presence helped the group's image. "Exactly," he replied, adding that it's not something people expect. "But there's a Black woman that works in there," he continued, gesturing to the door. "So they should take a look at that."

It feels unfair to single out the Black woman in the building, so I haven't used her real name. But as the guard suggested, this Daughter deserves a closer look. As a researcher, Lisa is one of few UDC employees, but one of multiple Black members—allegedly.

Rumors of War **is a work by Kehinde Wiley depicting a young Black man. It stands next door to the United Daughters of the Confederacy headquarters. The pose is identical to that of an old statue of J.E.B. Stuart.**

While Daughters often mention that not all members are white, they claim they can't actually provide numbers because the application doesn't ask for a woman's race. In Myrtle Beach, Lisa was the only Black Daughter I saw. But, like the guard, members regularly point to her as evidence that the organization isn't racist.

I chatted with Lisa in Myrtle Beach, and she told me, with a laugh, "Antifa posted on Facebook that I have Stockholm syndrome." When I emailed her about speaking for this article, she declined. I asked again when I called the building. She was nice, but she declined.

★★★

When I parked outside St. Paul's Episcopal Church, I realized just how short Jefferson Davis's walk was from the Confederate White House. He was in the sanctuary when he received word on April 2, 1865, that the Confederates were vacating their capital. St. Paul's survived the fire they set to the city while retreating, but as Richmond reconstructed—both its buildings and its understanding of the war—the church got a fresh coat of Lost Cause paint, too.

Anne Hayes, a member at St. Paul's, met me in the church lobby and led me to an upstairs closet. Tables lined the walls, laden with Confederate imagery: altar cushions embroidered with flags, brass pew markers designating where Lee and Davis sat, and plaques exalting the Confederate first family. These icons were displayed in the sanctuary throughout the past century.

"I keep finding things like Confederate flags around the church," Hayes said, pointing to a flagpole. She found one particular flag after climbing over a stack of chairs in an acolyte closet. "It was purchased the same day the Southern Manifesto was issued." The purchase indicated St. Paul's support of the manifesto, a document published by segregationist congressmen in 1956 to protest *Brown v. Board of Education*. My ears pricked up when she added that the church's first Confederate flag was a gift from the UDC. I hadn't expected to learn about the Daughters at St. Paul's. The organization also helped install the Confederate icons in the sanctuary, Hayes told me. "Hang on," she muttered, as she pulled open the drawer of a filing cabinet.

After the 2015 white supremacist massacre of nine Black parishioners in Charleston, St. Paul's felt compelled to respond. The church established the History and Reconciliation Initiative, an effort to catalog, research, and contemplate its complicity in perpetuating Lost Cause myths. A display board about the initiative was among the plaques in the closet. Across the top, it read: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU LOOK AGAIN? Or: What happens when you no longer look away?

St. Paul's decided to begin removing Confederate imagery in 2015. Though some parishioners weren't happy with the decision, the church ultimately found that more people began visiting and attending. But before the last icon came down, new memorials went up. Amid the demonstrations of 2020, the clergy discovered GEORGE FLOYD and I CAN'T BREATHE spray-painted on the steps. Church leaders decided to remove the remaining Confederate icons, but to leave the paint. In a statement, the rector explained: "Considering the years-long conversations St. Paul's has had about memorial plaques, how could I not see these names as memorials?" The church decided that meditating on these images, rather than Confederates, better aligned with its mission.

Hayes emerged from the filing cabinet with a manila folder. UDC was penciled on the tab. The contents documented the church's relationship with the organization. There were yellowing records: a 1930 register noting that St. Paul's hosted the UDC for Lee's birthday; a 1970 bulletin welcoming the Daughters sitting in Davis's pew. But among them, I saw printed emails dated this

century. In 2006, a clergyman told a UDC representative that it was an honor hosting the group. Since St. Paul's is nicknamed "The Cathedral of the Confederacy," he wrote, "it is particularly appropriate that you should have your memorial service here." Hayes noted that the clergyman welcomed everyone, but added that the UDC's routine memorial services soon came to an end.

"I'm a Southerner—you can hear from my accent," the Reverend Wallace Adams-Riley said when we later spoke on the phone. Adams-Riley became rector at St. Paul's in 2008. He's now the senior chaplain at a prep school in South Carolina. He descends from 11 Confederate soldiers. "It wasn't as though I'm just some person coming in from the wild blue yonder with no investment in these questions and tensions," he told me.

Adams-Riley said he felt uneasy about hosting the UDC's services when he joined St. Paul's. He recognized that some people may only associate the Daughters with honoring ancestors, but the group reminds others of historic racism. "One option would have been to just lop it off," he told me, and tell the Daughters they were no longer welcome. But when they reached out in 2014, Adams-Riley took a different approach. He replied that St. Paul's would host their service under one condition: UDC leaders needed to meet with parishioners and clergy for a dialogue. They wanted to discuss mission and values. No matter what came of the conversation, St. Paul's would host them at least once more. "We didn't know what they were gonna say," he told me. "We were very happy to have them agree readily." The Daughters confirmed they would be in touch to schedule the meeting.

Then weeks passed, and "more weeks went by." Then the facilities manager approached Adams-Riley about a curious situation. The UDC contacted her about logistics for its service: But wasn't there supposed to be a dialogue? Adams-Riley realized the Daughters seemed to be trying to dodge the conversation. When he called to remind them of the agreement, "the whole thing just sort of withered away," and the UDC found another facility. As far as Adams-Riley knows, that was the end of the historic relationship. "In that whole, shall we say, 'subculture,' there's no place like St. Paul's," he said. He speculated that losing the relationship was heartbreaking for the UDC. He had anticipated the conversation with hope; St. Paul's was genuine in its desire for dialogue. It felt promising when the UDC expressed its initial interest in dialogue, he told me. He was disappointed. It all sounded familiar.

"And when I say 'pitiful'...," he paused, trying to interpret how the UDC handled the incident. "There's this sense of *grandness* from their perspective about what they're doing," he continued, "and that did not feel grand."

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I'm accustomed to the UDC's rebuffs, but I found it striking that the group refused St. Paul's, a neighbor rather than a journalist. I asked Caroline Janney, the Civil War historian, why she thinks groups like the UDC resist self-examination, or refuse to engage those who want to take a closer look at who they are. "Maybe it's self-preservation?" she speculated. "Then you have to admit all those warts." During our conversation, she pointed me to a scrapbook crafted by a Confederate society in the 1930s. The book pairs newspaper clippings about the Scottsboro trials with updates about the UDC, which at the time was campaigning *against* a proposed peace memorial that would feature Lee with General Ulysses S. Grant. The Daughters didn't like Grant. "They talked about how Grant was responsible for 'letting loose the hordes of Black people on the South,'" Janney explained. The scrapbook suggested the nine boys in Scottsboro proved the Daughters right. The UDC's campaign, Janney said, "was absolutely as blatantly white supremacist as you can get."

Maybe it's self-preservation. Maybe heritage—ignoring one history to fixate on another—is bliss. Maybe they're so practiced at confusing Confederate history with the Lost Cause that Daughters can't see their own history clearly. In their official online statement, their "final word" on the country's reckoning with the Confederacy, the president general states: "Our members are the ones who, like our statues, have stayed quietly in the background, never engaging in public controversy." I asked Karen Cox, the UDC expert, about the claim. She agreed it doesn't add up. "If they understood the history of their organization, some of these things that they say," she said, "they wouldn't say." Janney added that looking away from the full scope of history isn't exclusive to the UDC: It's an American problem, one the country still has. When we look away from who we are, we can't right wrongs. Fixating on what nice ladies we are doesn't get us anywhere, especially when the fixation is blinding.

When I flip through my UDC magazines, I recognize faces from Myrtle Beach in the glossy photos. The Daughters are smiling, draped in pins engraved with the names of Confederate ancestors. As I skim these pages, a 1965 essay by James Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," comes to mind. I think he articulated how to understand the UDC best, and most literally, when he wrote: "People who imagine that history flatters them (as it does, indeed, since they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world. This is the place in which it seems to me, most white Americans find themselves. Impaled."

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The day I left Richmond, I walked back by the UDC's headquarters. A NO TRESPASSING sign lay on the grass. Tape appeared stuck to the wire legs poking out of the grass: a repair that did not hold. Because of the property deed stipulations, the Daughters are stuck in their marble behemoth, a building they cannot sell or move and refuse to let go of. I recognized the guard sitting in the shade of a tree, in the shadow of the dreadlocked rider atop a charging horse. A special varnish was applied to the marble after the 2020 attack to make graffiti easier to remove. The windows were fortified, too. The UDC may not speak, but these modifications suggest members do hear rumors of war.

Jefferson Davis and St. Paul's aren't the only memorials in Richmond to emerge from the crucible of 2020 refashioned. The monument to the Confederate monument makers likewise better symbolizes who the Daughters now are. From the sidewalk, I see a mausoleum for a dying organization, a fortress for impaled butterflies who refuse to see or change themselves, even as their city changes without them. When I Zoomed with Margaret last summer, when she initially expressed enthusiasm about this article, I asked her about the headquarters. She smiled, and to my surprise, noted that good can come from the bad. After the fire, she said, the building looks better than ever. TNR

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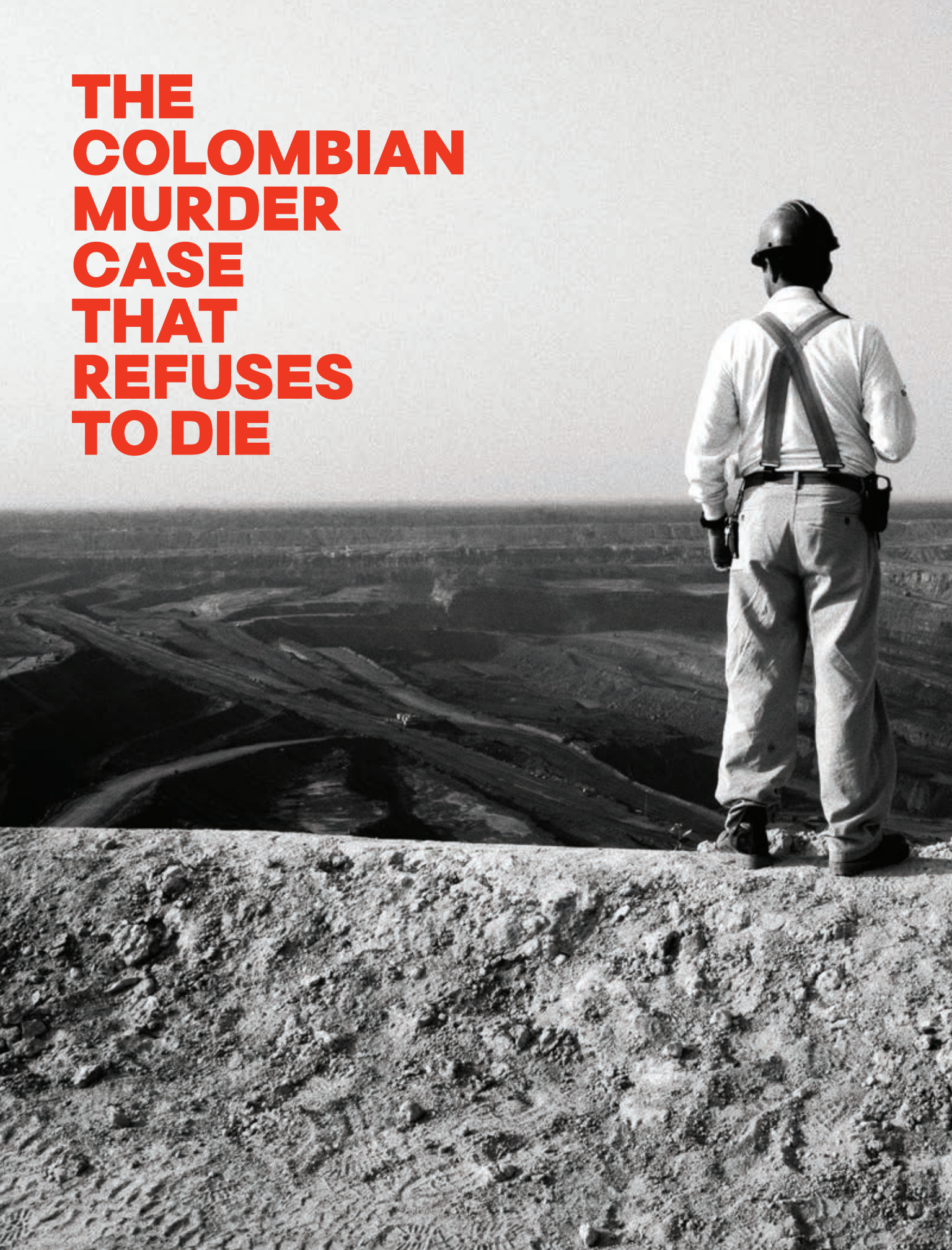
THE COLOMBIAN MURDER CASE THAT REFUSES TO DIE



Twenty-two years ago, three union leaders for mine workers employed by an American company were killed. The murders have gone unsolved. But a key witness flipped, and now the government is prosecuting two senior company executives for financing the paramilitary group responsible for the killings. Colombians—and other U.S. multinationals—are watching closely.

By Ken Silverstein and Joshua Collins

Photographs by Stephen Ferry

The open-pit Pribbenow coal mine in northeastern Colombia is operated by Alabama-based Drummond Co.

Three enormous open-pit mines owned by Drummond Co. in northern Colombia dwarf the nearby town of La Loma, which sprang up after the U.S. company began extracting coal in 1995 and has grown to some 10,000 residents. Life in La Loma revolves around the mines. Packed company buses flood the town every 12 hours, at the 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. shift changes. After workers who have just completed their shifts empty out, the buses fill right back up with fresh replacements waiting to be taken to the mines to begin theirs.

Alabama-based Drummond has earned billions from its local operations, and most of the surrounding area in Cesar province has paved roads, a result of the development the mining industry has brought to the region. Near La Loma's idyllic town square, which boasts a colonial-style church and half a dozen restaurants, a health clinic has erected a plaque thanking the company for the contributions that made even rudimentary medical care possible.

On a brutally hot, dry morning in September, dust filled the air with every breeze as a Drummond guard patrolled the area around El Descanso, the largest of the company's mines, just north of town. He walked slowly along a railroad line that transports coal from Drummond's mines to a coastal port it owns on the Caribbean Sea 120 miles away. The guard was friendly and casual, but when a *New Republic* reporter raised his camera to take a photo of a passing railcar, he waved and shouted warnings to stop.

His concern over a reporter snapping a photograph of the train line may seem overly dramatic, but it was understandable given the backstory. In 2001, three union leaders representing workers at the mines were assassinated by marauding thugs. Their murders have never been fully solved more than two decades later. The quiet scene on that September day belied the violent events that unfolded at the time, when the army and allied right-wing paramilitaries largely controlled Cesar province during the peak of Colombia's 52-year civil war. Much of the violence and "social cleansings" they committed took place in towns that lay along the tracks.

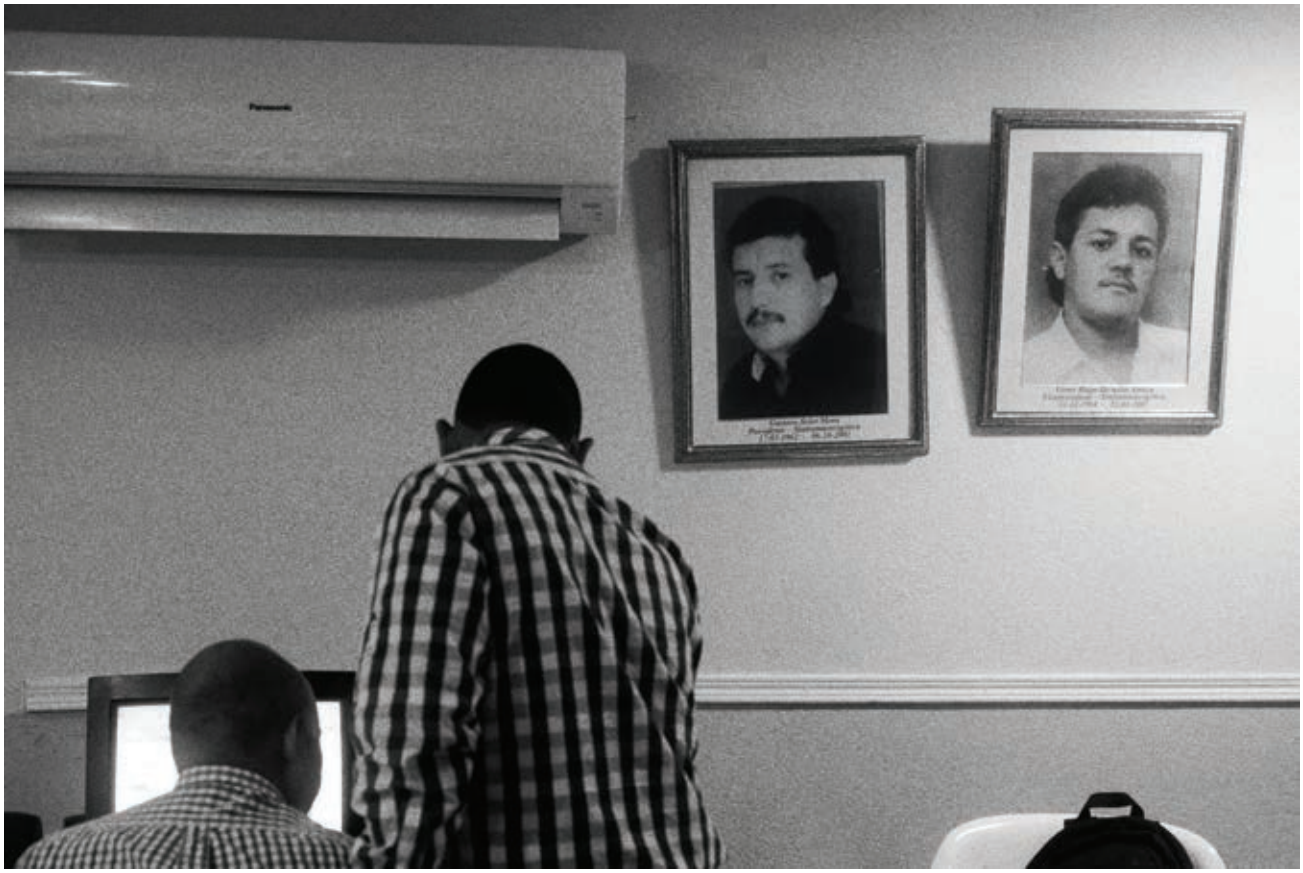
The cast of characters in the sordid tale of murder, political intrigue, and backdoor deals could have been plucked directly from Hollywood casting: the heir of a billionaire Alabama family, paramilitary commanders with nicknames like "Triple Zero" and "Jorge 40," narco-traffickers with historic ties to Pablo Escobar, Colombian military officers, leftist guerrilla leaders, embattled trade unionists, and—at the absolute heart of the tale—a CIA spy turned corporate mercenary whom Drummond hired to run its security operations a few years after the agency pushed him out for supporting the Contras in Nicaragua, an activity that at the time was barred by the Boland Amendment, during the Iran-Contra scandal.

Important evidence continues to come to light about the murders of the labor leaders, the subjects of a lengthy, often delayed investigation in Colombia that recently picked up steam. The focus of the probe is unraveling the bloody events that took place on the afternoon of March 12, 2001, when armed men in pickup trucks stopped a bus carrying Drummond workers home after their long shift in the mines. The men belonged to a unit of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, the country's most notorious right-wing paramilitary group, commonly known as the AUC. After boarding the bus, they began searching passengers one by one, claiming they were looking for an illegal weapon.

But witnesses say the paramilitary fighters were interested only in two men, Valmore Locarno and Victor Orcasita, the president and vice president of Sintramienergética, the mining union that represented Drummond workers. Locarno was pulled aside immediately after being identified and shot in the head by one of the armed men, who dumped his lifeless body on the side of the road. The squad from the AUC took Orcasita with them. The following day, his body was discovered a few kilometers away; his corpse showed signs he'd been tortured before being executed.

Seven months later, AUC members stopped a bus that Gustavo Soler, who succeeded Locarno as union president, was taking home from his office. Soler, who had been receiving threats to

STEPHEN FERRY/REDUX



The offices of the Sintramienergética miners union in Colombia. The portraits on the wall are of assassinated union leaders Gustavo Soler and Victor Orcasita.

his life, had told his family that they needed to pack up their belongings so they could leave for a safer location after he got home. He never made it. When Soler stepped forward after his name was called by a paramilitary soldier, he was abducted and disappeared. He was later found under a pile of banana leaves with two bullet holes in his head.

The murders of the union officials have been investigated several times in Colombia and the United States, and allegations surrounding the events have been heard in court on a few occasions. However, the plot that led to the killings has never been fully disentangled.

In an unexpected development earlier this year, Colombia's federal prosecutor's office announced that two senior executives at Drummond Ltd., Drummond Co.'s subsidiary in the country, would be prosecuted for allegedly financing the AUC. The Drummond executives are accused of secretly paying the AUC to protect the company's operations from leftist guerrillas, even as the paramilitary group killed tens of thousands of people as it rampaged across the country. The government's indictment of the Drummond executives describes the company's alleged collaboration with the AUC—which the State Department put on its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations months after the first two union leaders were assassinated—as having resulted in corporate financing of a paramilitary group, which the prosecutor's office has classified as a "crime against humanity."

Drummond's ties to the AUC are also being scrutinized by an independent special court set up to investigate crimes committed during the civil war, which ended in 2016, by government security forces, paramilitaries, guerrillas, and third parties—including national and multinational corporations. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace, known as the JEP, its Spanish acronym, has heard testimony from some former Drummond contractors and paramilitary leaders who charge that the AUC killed the union leaders at the request of the company's most senior executives in Colombia and the United States.

Drummond denies any wrongdoing and says the evidence against it was fabricated by "a cartel of false witnesses" who were paid by lawyers representing the victims' families. In 2007, a jury in Alabama absolved the company of responsibility for the murders. The ruling was appealed, but a judge upheld the jury's verdict.

The investigations by Colombia's federal prosecutor and the JEP cite a wealth of new evidence that appears to implicate Drummond in the murders, and lawyers in the Alabama case have compiled much more. During many months of reporting, *The New Republic* reviewed reams of court records and other documents,

On the rare occasions the government challenged the company, it did so timidly. Ten years ago, a barge operated by Drummond shipwrecked near Colombia's greatest wetland and caused enormous environmental damage. The company agreed to pay a $3.5 million fine, a paltry amount set against its profits.

including material that has never been made public, and uncovered additional important information relevant to the case.

It remains to be seen whether the JEP investigation and the upcoming trial of Drummond executives will end with the company being exonerated once again or—as lawyers and supporters of the victims' families hope—with the first criminal convictions of a foreign multinational's corporate officers for getting into bed with Colombia's murderous paramilitary thugs. For its part, Drummond hopes the case will finally be forgotten, but in La Loma and the surrounding region, memories of the murders are always lurking just beneath the surface.

The company railroad weighs heavily in the chain of events that led to the murders of the three union leaders in 2001. It's a day Drummond has been trying to erase for the past two decades, so it was no surprise that the guard was unhappy with the journalist as he prepared to photograph such a powerful reminder of what took place. The guard relaxed when he saw the journalist lower his camera and apologized as he approached. "We're a little strict about security," he said with a laugh.

Drummond Sets Up Shop

WHEN DRUMMOND'S MINING operations finally opened for business in 1995 after a decade of investment and planning, they were set up in a particularly violent region during a civil war that is estimated to have killed nearly half a million people and displaced more than seven million more. The civil war began officially in 1964, with the founding of what became the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, a leftist rebel group. By the mid-1990s, the FARC had grown into the largest irregular armed group in the country and actively targeted large companies it viewed as key allies of the government.

"Paracos," as the right wing-paramilitary groups are usually called in Colombia, emerged in the early 1980s when they were created by drug cartels in Medellín that had grown tired of extortion and kidnapping attempts by the FARC and wanted their own informal army to fight the guerrillas. But they quickly expanded, with financial support from landowners, business elites, and even politicians. In 1994, the government unveiled a program called "Convivir," which legalized the right-wing "self-defense" groups and provided them with funding from the state and business groups. Although intended in theory to exclude illegal preexisting paramilitaries, in practice lines of legality were often blurred. The paramilitaries were incorporated into the army's war against the guerrillas and attacked the FARC's family members and civilian supporters, along with anyone else they suspected of having leftist political views. The AUC, a coalition of "self-defense" groups, became the largest of Colombia's paramilitaries.

Drummond's operations almost immediately became a target of the FARC, and the company's security situation worsened when it opened the mine-to-port railroad line in 1996. The guerrillas regularly bombed the train tracks and in one incident kidnapped a train crew, Pablo Urrutia, Drummond Ltd.'s vice president of public affairs and communications, told *The New Republic*.

Ivan Otero, a lawyer who represented families of victims in the civil cases against Drummond in the United States with Terry Collingsworth of Washington-based International Rights Advocates, called the train track bombings "economically devastating for Drummond." If the attacks continued, he said during a phone interview from his home in Valledupar, the company's access to its maritime port would be cut off, and it wouldn't be able to fulfill major foreign export contracts.

Drummond officials and local politicians and business leaders in Cesar viewed the Sintramienergética union as a hotbed of FARC "militants." Francisco Ramirez Cuellar, the former president of a union federation and a lawyer who assisted Otero and Collingsworth, believes Drummond turned to the AUC in response. "For Drummond and other big foreign mining companies in Colombia, repression and violence against unions is a standard part of the business model, because it helps them make more money," he said. "It's easy to get away with when the government doesn't care about workers, which is usual in Colombia."

The Murders

"ALABAMA COAL GIANT IS SUED OVER 3 KILLINGS IN COLOMBIA," ran the headline above a *New York Times* story on March 22, 2002. The lawsuit, which Collingsworth and Otero entered in federal court in Alabama on behalf of Sintramienergética and the families of Locarno, Orcasita, and Soler, was brought under the Alien Tort Statute, which they argued allows foreign citizens to seek civil damages in the United States for violations of international law. Union leaders and families of the dead asserted that Drummond executives "signaled paramilitary gunmen" that they wanted the three labor leaders killed, the story said. In Birmingham, where the Drummond family was "business royalty," reaction to the lawsuit had been "disbelief."

In 2007, a jury acquitted Drummond, and the next year the ruling was affirmed on appeal. A year later, the children of the slain men filed a similar lawsuit, which was dismissed in 2012. In 2011, Drummond filed a defamation lawsuit against Collingsworth and his law firm, and in 2015, the company filed a RICO

Combatants of the Catatumbo Bloc of the AUC paramilitary group took part in a 2004 demobilization ceremony.

lawsuit accusing Collingsworth, Otero, and several of their legal associates of criminally paying alleged witnesses to falsely implicate the company. "The defendants paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to these criminals, among other illegal inducements, in order to procure this 'testimony,'" the latter lawsuit stated. The company discovered large payments had been made to a number of key witnesses shortly before they reversed their prior statements that exonerated Drummond of involvement in the assassination of the union leaders. Judge David Proctor, who had dismissed a second suit filed against Drummond by the victims' families, issued an order that backed the company, writing, "There is (at least) probable cause to believe that Collingsworth … engaged in witness bribery and suborning perjury."

Collingsworth and Otero countersued, saying Drummond was seeking to damage their reputations as part of an effort to cover up the company's crimes in Colombia. They filed a new lawsuit on behalf of relatives of the murdered unionists as well. Regarding Drummond's allegations of bribery, Collingsworth acknowledges making payments but says there was nothing improper about them, and that they were made to help witnesses pay their legal bills or went to family members of witnesses so they could be provided safe haven to protect them from potential retaliation by paramilitaries. "The AUC … is known to torture its victims and kill them in front of their parents or children," he stated in an interview. "I'm proud of what we did." He argued that it was hard to get a fair hearing from a court in Drummond's home state of Alabama, and that Judge Proctor—who prior to his appointment by George W. Bush had cofounded a management-side employment law firm—was hostile to the plaintiffs from the outset.

The Colombian federal prosecutor's office examined the bribery allegations and dismissed them. The indictment of the Drummond executives states that the payments the company classified as corrupt did not affect "the veracity of the statements" made by any witnesses, which had been independently verified by "copious testimonial, documentary and accounting evidence." Furthermore, the indictment pointedly noted, witnesses against the company who received no help from Collingsworth and Otero for their legal fees or families also asserted that Drummond had financed the AUC.

Drummond's lawsuit against Collingsworth and Otero and the pair's countersuit are still pending, but there's no telling when—or if—either will reach trial.

Drummond appeared to be even more bulletproof in Colombia, where lax mining laws have long worked to foreign companies' advantage. Drummond has received a range of investment incentives that allowed it to rack up massive profits from its Colombian operations. On the rare occasions the government challenged the



"Jorge 40" (left), former leader of the Northern Bloc unit of the AUC paramilitary group; (center, from left) former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe, longtime Drummond Co. president Garry Drummond (now deceased), and ex-Drummond Ltd. official Augusto Jimenez; James Adkins (right), onetime CIA agent who was hired to head Drummond Ltd.'s security apparatus.

company, it did so timidly. Ten years ago, a barge operated by Drummond shipwrecked near Colombia's greatest wetland and caused enormous environmental damage after it spilled tons of coal into the Caribbean. The company agreed to pay a $3.5 million fine, a paltry amount set against its profits.

In Colombia, meanwhile, the wheels of justice were not entirely halted. Between 2009 and 2013, three people were found guilty and sentenced to decades in prison for their roles in the murders of Orcasita and Locarno. Paramilitary commander Oscar José Ospino Pacheco, alias "Tolemaida," ran the assassination squads; Jairo Jesus Charris Castro, a former AUC member who worked for the private security company Drummond hired to protect its facilities, helped plan it and, according to his own testimony, was given a kill list to deliver to Tolemaida; and Jaime Blanco Maya, a contractor who ran the company canteen, helped organize the murders. Blanco Maya and Charris Castro implicated Drummond—Tolemaida denied the company was involved—but the company's culpability wasn't weighed in court. The judges who sentenced Charris Castro and Blanco Maya both urged Colombia's federal prosecutor to investigate Drummond's role in the killings, but the requests led nowhere.

Finally, Some Movement

THEN, IN OCTOBER 2018, Drummond's legal situation grew slightly more precarious when a new federal prosecutor announced an investigation into the assassinations. The following year, Blanco Maya began cooperating with the JEP, hoping to have his prison sentence reduced. He had close ties to the AUC. He had been friends since childhood with Alfredo Araujo, a Drummond community liaison officer, and with a man named Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, better known as "Jorge 40," who commanded the AUC's Northern Bloc unit. Jorge 40 would be a particularly problematic character for Drummond to be associated with. His unit is believed to be responsible for hundreds of murders, as well as a number of massacres.

In recent years, a stream of additional evidence pointing toward Drummond's involvement in the murders has emerged. In 2020, the Colombian federal prosecutor's office indicted Drummond Ltd.'s current president, José Miguel Linares, and his predecessor, Augusto Jimenez, who ran the company's local operations between 1990 and 2012, alleging they engaged in a conspiracy to illegally fund and promote the AUC. An appeal bogged down the process, and it was only on May 31 that the federal prosecutor released a statement decreeing it would proceed with the prosecution, saying there is "abundant proof" the two Drummond executives conspired to finance the AUC. Prosecutors cited new evidence, including accounting statements from Drummond that showed the company paid Blanco Maya millions of dollars to run the canteen at its mines, which reinforced his testimony.

Other new information has been supplied by witnesses who testified before the JEP. Charris Castro told the court this year that the murders were directly ordered by company president Garry Drummond and several other company executives. He further alleged that Drummond established a direct relationship with the AUC, and that retired Colombian army generals and colonels on its payroll participated in the meetings where the murders were planned.

In mid-May, the JEP heard from Salvatore Mancuso, the AUC's former leader, who had been extradited to the United States in 2008 to face drug trafficking charges and remains in U.S. custody. Mancuso offered damning testimony against Drummond Co., saying he could confirm that it was one of a number of U.S. companies that secretly financed the AUC; the list included Chiquita, Coca-Cola, and Dole. The companies have previously denied the accusation. In its indictment of the Drummond executives for the killings of the union leaders, the prosecutor's office referred to systematic attacks by the AUC against the civilian population in Cesar province, including 3,382 victims—primarily social leaders in peasant villages—who were murdered, disappeared, kidnapped, or subjected to other types of violence. The AUC displaced tens of thousands and destroyed entire villages.

"The story in Colombia is the struggle for land; it goes back for hundreds of years," Gonzalo Guillén Jiménez, a prominent journalist who has written about the Drummond case and made a documentary about coal mining in Colombia, said during an interview at his apartment in Bogotá. "It's why there are indigenous people starving on the streets of Bogotá, but any talk of agrarian reform to benefit campesinos sparks talk of war."

STEPHEN FERRY/REDUX; DRUMMOND WATCH WEBSITE/FACING SOUTH/THE INSTITUTE FOR SOUTHERN STUDIES; EL ESPECTADOR

Drummond's Power

THE CULTURE OF La Loma is flavored with Caribbean touches, though it lies far from the sea. In the evenings, vallenato—Colombian folk music that heavily features the accordion—blasts from bars filled with workers downing bottles of beer and loudly singing along. In the mornings, bakeries fill with men carrying the helmets and wearing the uniforms of Drummond and other mining companies they work for. After drinking coffee and chatting amiably with friends, they board company buses to head to the mines for their shifts.

Drummond is the largest coal exporter in Colombia and has about 5,300 people on its permanent payroll and twice that number working as independent contractors, Drummond's Pablo Urrutia told *The New Republic*. The company indirectly generates employment for another 55,000 people, who provide goods and services related to its mining operations, such as transportation, food supply, and shops that cater to miners and their families.

On a recent afternoon in September, Eduardo Sale sipped coffee at a small corner shop before heading out to a Drummond mine to begin the night shift, which he prefers. "Temperatures in the mine during the day can easily reach 50 degrees," he said, which equates to about 122 degrees Fahrenheit. "I have had enough of that." Sale earns $2,500 a month, a generous salary in a country where nearly half the labor force receives the minimum monthly wage of $325. "The pay is good," he said. "This town wouldn't exist if it weren't for Drummond."

Drummond's economic sway in the local region has created a variety of challenges that have made investigating a case against the company difficult. Witnesses and their families have "received threats against their lives ... and been shunned in the communities where they live," stated Otero, Collingsworth's legal partner, who was careful to note the threats were made by former paramilitary fighters and criminals, not the coal company.

Drummond has built up so much economic and political power across Colombia that, in the eyes of lawyers for plaintiffs and supporters of the murdered union leaders, it has corrupted the judicial system. The company also hired former Colombian Attorney General Jaime Bernal Cuéllar as a defense lawyer, putting him in a good spot to pressure his former office—which oversees the federal prosecutor—to derail the current case. "The influence they have on the levers of power is enormous," Otero said. But, he added, "this new case is moving quickly, and the evidence is overwhelming. Many of the families, for the first time in decades, have hope."

The Mysterious Mr. Adkins

THE MAN DRUMMOND HIRED to run its entire security apparatus in Colombia was James Adkins, whom company officials met while attending a conference on terrorism in Miami. Adkins worked for a private security firm at the time but happily accepted Drummond's offer to become its chief security officer. He moved to Cesar province in 1995. Adkins had the right profile for the job, though his past was not free of red flags that would have steered some companies away from employing him. Back in 1967, he joined the CIA and was sent to Laos after being trained in paramilitary operations. Adkins established a base near the border with North Vietnam and advised the CIA-organized "Secret Army" of Hmong tribesmen that fought on the U.S. side in the Vietnam War. He then moved over to the agency's Western Hemisphere Division and served in the Dominican Republic and Panama before being transferred to Chile following the 1973 CIA-backed coup that overthrew President Salvador Allende and brought General Augusto Pinochet to power.

Adkins was subsequently transferred to Central America and during the mid-1980s was sent to Honduras to help run the Reagan administration's covert wars against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and support for anti-Communist regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala. In 1987, he was pushed out of the CIA after Lawrence Walsh was appointed special counsel to lead the official probe into the Iran-Contra affair. In his final report, Walsh concluded that Adkins approved illegal weapons shipments to anti-Sandinista Contra rebels and lied to investigators about his actions.

None of this bothered Drummond. In fact, as Adkins said during a deposition taken years later for the Alabama court case, when he told company officials and a group of other security managers at the Miami conference about the circumstances of his departure from the CIA, they gave him a "standing ovation." Adkins sent a stream of security reports to Drummond officials after his arrival in Cesar. In a September 1995 memo, he sent the encouraging news that army and paramilitary operations had been highly successful, noting that an AUC unit had kept guerrillas "at bay in an area that is critical to our railroad operations." Narco-traffickers had also impeded rebel activity, Adkins wrote, but he added emphatically, "Make no mistake ... it is the heavy military presence along the coast that has kept the guerrillas from making an appearance along the National Highway near our port since last March."

Neither Adkins nor anyone from Drummond ever met with or financed the AUC, the company and the former CIA officer have maintained. Furthermore, Adkins had no direct knowledge of the paramilitary's role in the murder of the labor leaders or that it was attacking union members or civilians. Drummond has pointed to a 1995 memo Adkins sent to a corporate executive saying the company should resist pressure from a Colombian military commander to provide financial support for Convivir, the 1994 plan that legalized right-wing "self-defense" groups. "Such a program will bring with it egregious human rights violations that preclude Drummond from ever participating," he wrote. "We are better advised to keep our heads down and keep producing coal."

However, Adkins's and the company's accounts have been contradicted by witnesses directly involved in events. Charris Castro, who was convicted in 2009 for playing a key role in the murders, told a U.S. court that he worked with El Tigre, the nom de guerre of an AUC commander, and Adkins to strengthen the AUC and help ensure the "successful security" of Drummond's operations, and alleged that Garry Drummond asked that the AUC be brought in to "counteract or neutralize the activity and presence of the guerrilla." That included, Charris Castro charged, sending financial support from the company to Jorge 40's Northern Bloc around the same time it was committing "selective massacres" of civilians.

Charris Castro alleged in 2012 that Tolemaida, his ex-confederate who ran the assassination squads, assigned a fellow AUC commander called Adinael to carry out the murders of Locarno and Orcasita. On the day they were killed, he said, a retired military

The message on this wall outside a Drummond mine reads, "Security is here. Live in security, too!"

officer who worked for Adkins in Drummond's security department contacted Adinael to tell him Orcasita and Locarno had finished their shifts, and Adkins got Charris Castro to confirm Adinael had the information.

The Man Who Flipped

BLANCO MAYA, WHO HAD his 37-year sentence reduced by two-thirds for his cooperation with the JEP, was released from prison in 2021 and is now in a witness protection program and lives outside of Bogotá with his family. Two round-the-clock armed guards provided by the JEP were present during a March interview over a lunch of chicken, rice, and plantains washed down with beer.

Adkins recruited him to run Drummond's canteen for company workers after they met at a food supply operation he ran for employees of Odebrecht, a Brazilian construction company that was working on the mine-to-port railroad, Blanco Maya said. "It was a difficult moment for Drummond," Blanco Maya recounted of the period. "The railroad hadn't opened, and Drummond was using trucks, which were easy for the guerrillas to attack."

Colombian military units were stationed at mines, the port, and other Drummond facilities. Its security department gathered information about guerrilla operations in the area and provided it to army officials.

Drummond had a number of retired Colombian military officers directly on the payroll. General Rafael Peña Rios had been trained at the Pentagon's notorious School of the Americas. In a 1988 interview with the newspaper *El Tiempo,* he bemoaned the fact that the army didn't have complete control of Colombia, flatly asserted that the military should be a force of repression, and equated political opposition with guerrilla warfare. Lieutenant Colonel Julian Villate, another School of the Americas alumnus, was hired to oversee security operations at Drummond's port. He had previously run Operation Dragon, a program that plotted the execution of more than 150 union leaders, human rights activists, and opposition political figures. Drummond hired Villate in 2005, the year after Operation Dragon was first exposed. In 2007, then-senator Gustavo Petro, who had been a leader in an effort to expose atrocities carried out by paramilitaries and the group's ties to top government officials, told the media that the prosecutor's office had revealed to him that Villate, who still worked for Drummond, was at the center of a plot to assassinate him. Drummond called the allegations "politically motivated." Petro is now Colombia's first leftist leader, winning the presidency during an election in June.

The JEP heard from Salvatore Mancuso, the AUC's former leader, who had been extradited to the United States in 2008. Mancuso offered damning testimony against Drummond, saying he could confirm that it was one of a number of U.S. companies that secretly financed the AUC on a list that included Chiquita, Coca-Cola, and Dole.

Blanco Maya charged in our interview that Adkins picked up the money used in the initial payments he delivered to the AUC from Drummond's Alabama headquarters and brought it back to Colombia in cash increments of $10,000. As this arrangement wasn't very efficient, Adkins came up with the scheme for Blanco Maya to submit inflated invoices to Drummond and use the difference to pay the paramilitary group. Blanco Maya said in a 2011 written declaration that he delivered the cash directly to El Tigre, the AUC commander, at regularly scheduled meetings at a restaurant in an obscure rural area.

According to Blanco Maya, Adkins had the authority to operate as a "free agent," but he didn't do anything without the blessing of Drummond's CEO. Adkins flew to Alabama after hatching the fake invoice scheme to go over the plan with Garry Drummond, and he signed off on it, Blanco Maya said during lunch. "The only person who told him what to do was Garry," he said, "but whatever Adkins knew, Garry knew, too."

Drummond has denied any involvement in the murders in court and public statements. When asked to comment on the current case in Colombia, a Drummond official who spoke to *The New Republic* stated they are prohibited from commenting on ongoing legal processes.

The New Republic was unable to reach Adkins, who is around 90 years old, but a close relative said he had been extremely ill for years and was unable to speak. Two other sources who know him confirmed he was in extremely poor health. During his deposition in the Alabama case and in past public statements, Adkins has vigorously denied playing any role in the assassination of the union leaders or having any knowledge of it.

Finally, the Trial May Be Coming

THE FEDERAL PROSECUTOR'S office hasn't announced a trial date for the two Drummond executives, but it's expected to begin this year or early next, unless the company can find a way to delay it. The murdered union officials' supporters in Colombia are already worried about the possibility; in February, a number of groups monitoring the situation sent a letter to the prosecutor's office accusing it of stalling and demanded that the prosecution move forward.

Whether any Drummond executives in the United States will face a judicial reckoning is impossible to know. The company's longtime president, Garry Drummond, died in 2016. In December 2022, the prosecutor's office notified the Justice Department that it was investigating Adkins for aggravated conspiracy and aggravated homicide, and it wanted to conduct a virtual interview with him on January 17. A Justice Department official replied that the agency would not be able "to facilitate the requested interview," and Adkins did not contact the prosecutor to schedule one. His poor health would likely have precluded that, but even if he were not ill, it's virtually inconceivable that Adkins would voluntarily submit to questioning in the case or that the U.S. government would compel a former CIA officer to provide testimony about his alleged involvement in crimes committed overseas. The prosecutor's office still wants to interview him, however, and has issued an arrest order for Adkins, according to an October 19 story in the Bogotá newspaper *El Espectador*.

When the Justice Department charged Chiquita with financing paramilitaries during the civil war in Colombia back in the mid-2000s, the company argued that its payments to the AUC were made under duress and amounted to extortion. The Justice Department didn't buy it, and in 2007 Chiquita pleaded guilty to "engaging in transactions with a specially designated global terrorist" and paid a $25 million fine.

Other U.S. multinationals exposed for having supported the AUC have made the same argument about having paid only under threat. But simply arguing that payment was demanded of it does not automatically exempt a company from liability, according to Kelsey Jost-Creegan, supervising attorney at Columbia Law School, who has studied the ties between foreign multinationals and paramilitaries in Colombia. "These companies choose to operate in regions where they know armed actors hold power, often using third parties to facilitate and provide legal distance from the consequences of their actions," she said.

The Drummond case is potentially far more important than any that have come before. If it indeed moves forward, the Colombian federal prosecutor's case against the Drummond executives would mark the first time that Drummond corporate officials have been brought to trial on criminal charges.

Joris van de Sandt of PAX, a Dutch peace organization that has researched the Drummond case for more than a decade, notes that corporations have often exacerbated armed conflict and facilitated war crimes, but they're rarely held accountable. "There's a lot of evidence against Drummond, and if it's proven true in court, the company and its executives need to be held accountable and serve as an example and deterrent to other multinationals, especially in an age when private companies have become so huge and politically powerful," he said. "It would also be important for victims and their families, who have the right to truth, justice, and reparations." TNR

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THE CITY THAT JUST MIGHT DECIDE THE 2024 ELECTION

Milwaukee, a city with a sizable Black population in a crucial swing state, should provide the voting margin next year that puts the Democrats over the top. But while it's a stretch to say Donald Trump has a lot of fans there, people aren't as put off by him as white liberals would hope.

By Dan Simmons

ON THIS AUGUST DAY, extreme heat and Republicans have invaded Milwaukee. It's 96 degrees at noon, and feels 10 degrees warmer as the sun bakes the asphalt on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive. Downtown, TV people are sweating through their suits doing live shots outside the Milwaukee Bucks' basketball arena, which will host the GOP's kickoff presidential debate later tonight. It's a rehearsal of sorts for next summer, when the GOP will return to the city for the Republican National Convention. The convention likely will be different from today, in that Donald Trump, assuming he remains out of prison, may actually attend.

About a mile uptown, 65 activists, nearly all of them Black and most of them young, pile off a coach bus on MLK Drive. Within minutes, they occupy about four adjoining offices on the second floor of a beautifully restored old brick building in Milwaukee's historic Bronzeville neighborhood. They're running on adrenaline and caffeine after a full day in transit, most of them from Florida and Missouri. They're sitting on the carpeted floor, preparing snack packs heavy on Doritos and Sun Chips, water bottles and bags of ice. Smartphones are ringing. Scripts are being passed around. They're changing into the red FIGHT FOR $15 shirts they'll wear to protest the Republican debate.

"I want them to hear our voice and let them know that workers need to be heard, and that we deserve a fair living wage and the right to be treated equally," says Jamelia Fairley, 28. She works at McDonald's in Sanford, Florida.

Right now, they're definitely being heard downstairs at Black and White Barbershop. Every time a bag of ice thuds against the floor, causing a ruckus below, the barbers respond by yelling fruitlessly at their upstairs neighbors. It's just one of the political juxtapositions of the day. Another one: Beside an elevated interstate highway that bisects downtown, a large billboard paid for by the Biden campaign shows Dark Brandon peering down

Photographs by Kevin J. Miyazaki

A team from Black Leaders Organizing for Communities canvassed Milwaukee's Franklin Heights neighborhood in November 2023.

at drivers with his red laser eyes, touting his measure cutting prescription costs. A bus, wrapped in a U.S. flag and a JOE GOTTA GO slogan, happens to drive by the billboard. It's in town for the debate as part of a national effort to mobilize Black voters to switch to the GOP.

The JOE GOTTA GO bus may want to visit the barbers. Inside Black and White, the AC is on, and the sun streams in through large windows that front the shop. The Little League World Series plays on the TV. The dozen young men, all of them Black, make lunch plans. Here, we're sitting in what today is ground zero of the national political conversation. The barbers' conversation may delight GOP strategists.

Nathan Gaines is 43 years old and a barber here. He's wearing a gray camo-patterned Black Lives Matter tank top and black And1 shorts. Gaines has lived in Milwaukee most of his life, save for a three-year tour in the Army, when the ex–combat engineer was stationed in Missouri and Georgia. When he was in his twenties, the presence of Barack Obama on the presidential ballot sparked a political awakening.

"I just feel like it's a privilege to be able to vote," he says. "You know, we didn't always have that opportunity. There are a lot of folks that fought, bled, and died for that privilege."

Gaines has always voted Democratic, but doesn't really identify with either major party and has lost enthusiasm with each passing cycle. "They'll do all the campaigning and all the fancy talk," he says of politicians. "Once they get elected, they throw [Black voters] to the wayside."

At this point in the conversation, his tone shifts. And maybe it's not too surprising. The GOP now operates a field office just down the street from the barbershop, in the heart of deeply Democratic Bronzeville. They do outreach via ads on Black radio. They're making an effort. It's possible some of the themes have percolated up through the community. Would he consider switching sides—from Joe Biden to Trump—this time?

"If [they're] the two candidates, I'm going Republican," he says. "Ain't that crazy, ain't that wild? But yeah, I am."

He says he knows Donald Trump isn't perfect and probably is racist.

"But all of them are," he says of politicians. "Biden is, too. He had something to do with the crime bill, and it was a lot of folks being locked up."

He likes Trump's muscular posture on dealing with migrants who entered the country illegally, and his pro-business stances.

"I call him Big T," he says. "You know, that's Big T, and we gotta get some order around here.... I don't know if he can come and fix everything. But I think he can put us back on the right track."

Jay Whisenten, 33, later chimes in. He's part owner and a barber at Black and White.

"I felt that a lot of things that he says is garbage," he says of Trump. "I'm not necessarily going to agree with everything that he does."

But for Whisenten, the difference between the two leading candidates comes in the checks: From his perspective, Trump delivered stimulus checks during the Covid-19 shutdowns that kept people's heads above water. The barbershop got Paycheck Protection Program funds to keep paying employees, according to federal data. Biden, conversely, tried but was ultimately blocked by the Trump-heavy Supreme Court from enacting student loan debt relief. Whisenten still owes about $10,000 in loans from trade school. He understands that Biden tried but had the measure blocked. He will vote in 2024 but remains undecided on which candidate.

Are Gaines and Whisenten just two barbers with an independent streak, or canaries in the coal mine for Democratic fortunes in 2024? They matter due to the lopsided support among Black Americans for Democrats, historically and recently: Biden won 92 percent of the Black vote nationally, including 87 percent of Black male voters, in 2020. Any erosion in that support can play an outsize role, because we're in Wisconsin, home to the nation's most coveted 10 electoral votes.

"You're talking about a state that between 10,000 and 20,000 votes could decide who will become the next president of the United States," says Leonard Steinhorn, professor of political communication and history at American University. "That's a big deal."

"It is among the most swing states out there," says Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster who was one of two lead pollsters for the Biden campaign in 2020. "That's a big reason why it matters so much."

MILWAUKEE, THE STATE'S largest city and the only one where minorities are a majority, will be central to that battle. The state's voting trends mirror the nation's: Exurbs and rural counties have swung heavily toward Trump and the GOP, while suburbs have trended much, much bluer, and cities have remained blue. Madison, the state capital, which is mostly white and relatively wealthy, continues to vote in bigger numbers and in bigger percentages for Democrats. Milwaukee, the other traditional urban power center, has seen turnout decline, especially in majority Black wards, and stagnant Democratic margins.

"These elections can be decided by a critical small handful of voters," says Mayor Cavalier Johnson, who in 2022 became the first Black mayor elected to lead Milwaukee. "The city of Milwaukee has the capacity to make a difference in elections. So we encourage people to lift up their voice."

Johnson makes the remarks at City Hall while kicking off a week of voter education events a full 13 months before the 2024 election. Although the city's voting push is nonpartisan, the moves come at a time of uneasiness among Democrats. Black voters in Milwaukee have turned out for elections for generations, powering Democratic victories. They stood in eternal lines during the early days of Covid-19 and helped elect a state Supreme Court justice who later cast a decisive vote in a 4–3 decision against Trump's efforts to overturn the election results in Wisconsin. That Supreme Court election, by some measures, saved democracy itself in the state and perhaps the nation. But turnout declines have been a reality across the city, and they've been most pronounced in majority Black wards on the North Side. A robust effort has already materialized to engage these voters, listen to their concerns, and frame the 2024 race in terms that will inspire their confidence and votes.

"The opportunity to do lasting, meaningful work was something that was pretty important to me, and, you know, to [address] frustrations that everybody had with turnout for the last few cycles," says Mandela Barnes, a North Side native who was elected the state's first Black lieutenant governor in 2018 and narrowly lost his bid for U.S. Senate to incumbent Republican Ron Johnson

KEVIN J. MIYAZAKI/REDUX FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

in 2022. "I never feel like I'm in a position where I can blame anybody or point fingers because they didn't show up. It's like, all right, well, what do we need to do differently?"

Barnes has returned to political organizing as president of Power to the Polls Wisconsin, a nonprofit aimed at outreach and advocacy for minority voters in and around Milwaukee. It's part of a robust effort to reach the city's nonvoters, an effort that has been joined by the GOP.

"You can rest assured at their convention they'll put up in prime time as many African Americans as they can to neutralize the bigotry that many of [Trump's] comments and statements have reflected," Steinhorn says.

IN CONVERSATIONS WITH around 20 randomly chosen Black voters on Milwaukee's North Side, I find most aren't willing to go as far as Gaines, the barber, and vote for Trump. But they're also not as predictably put off by Trump and his long history of fueling flames of racial animus.

"I wouldn't say I would vote for Trump, but I will vote for someone that's kind of like Trump," says William Robbins Jr. He's 64 and has done security for Bethel Baptist Church for the past two decades. Robbins's father, William Robbins Sr., served as pastor for 24 years before retiring in January at age 83. Robbins Jr. has voted in every election throughout his adult life, always for Democrats. This election, he says, is the first where he's considering switching. He's rooting for Vivek Ramaswamy to get the GOP nomination.

Missing in action is enthusiasm for Biden or the Democrats, particularly among young Black men. This matches the malaise found in national polls.

The administration's significant efforts to appeal to Black voters—from having Kamala Harris, the nation's first Black vice president; to appointing Ketanji Brown Jackson, the nation's first Black woman Supreme Court justice; to making Juneteenth a federal holiday; to temporarily making Covid-19 tests, vaccines, and treatments widely available; to infusing billions of dollars into infrastructure projects (in Milwaukee, significant investment will flow into finally replacing the city's aging lead pipes); to economic lifelines including a proposed expansion of the child tax credit and efforts to provide emergency assistance to renters—haven't seemed to resonate, at least so far.

"If I have to," is how Akai Coit, 43, answers when asked if Biden will get his vote. Coit has lived in Milwaukee most of his life. He runs his own business selling arts and crafts he creates via laser cutting. He voted for Biden half-heartedly in 2020 and says he'll do so again in 2024, mostly because he's better than the alternative.

"Before it was kind of sort of implied that he had a dictator type of mentality," he says of Trump. "Now that's pretty much guaranteed."

Jay Whisenten (left), a barber and the part owner of Milwaukee's Black and White Barbershop, remains undecided about who he will vote for in the presidential election. Barber Nathan Gaines is leaning Republican.

BLACK PEOPLE MAKE UP about 40 percent of Milwaukee's population, in a state where they account for only 6.6 percent of the population. It's the largest municipality in Wisconsin and the only one that's majority minority. In 2012, about 77 percent of eligible voters in majority Black wards in Milwaukee voted in the presidential election, which delivered a second term to Barack Obama, far outpacing the statewide number, 70 percent, and other parts of Milwaukee. In majority white wards, 68 percent of adults voted, while 46 percent turned out in majority Latino wards, according to data pulled by John Johnson, a political scientist at Marquette University. Turnout in Black wards dropped significantly in subsequent elections, to 61 percent in 2016 and 58 percent in 2020, according to Johnson. In majority white city wards, it was a different story: The 68 percent of 2012 largely held steady, at 63 percent in 2016 and 65 percent in 2020. Those numbers played a role in Trump's victory in the state in 2016. It

"He's not perfect," Angela Lang, the founder and executive director of the Milwaukee advocacy group Black Leaders Organizing for Communities, said of President Biden. "But, in my opinion, he's a hell of a lot better than Trump."

Mandela Barnes, the former lieutenant governor and U.S. Senate candidate, is now president of the voting rights group Power to the Polls Wisconsin, which focuses on voter turnout.

shocked many but continued what had been a resurgent era for Republicans in the state.

Plenty of theories can explain the erosion in Black voting participation in recent election cycles. The first and most obvious is that participation spiked perhaps unnaturally for Obama's two elections. He had an unusual charisma, and, as the nation's first Black president, he had historical appeal. Second, Milwaukee's central city got disproportionately bruised first by the foreclosure crisis, resulting in a significant takeover of the housing stock by out-of-state investors, and then by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic-era inflation spikes have hit especially hard in areas that were already downtrodden, even though the unemployment rate is relatively low. Third, the decade of declining voter turnout came when Republicans ruled state government and the powerful state Supreme Court, which resulted in measures requiring voter IDs at the polls and dramatically restricting use of early voting at drop boxes. Critics say the measures specifically target Milwaukee, which has the high rates of poverty and housing instability chronicled in the bestselling book *Evicted,* making voters there less able to keep up with frequent changes in voting requirements, or comply with them. Robert Spindell, a GOP activist who's one of the six members of the bipartisan Wisconsin Elections Commission, said the quiet part out loud in an email to supporters, first reported by columnist Bruce Murphy at urbanmilwaukee.com, about the 2022 midterm elections. He boasted about GOP efforts resulting in "37,000 less votes than [were] cast in the 2018 election with the major reduction happening in the overwhelming Black and Hispanic areas." He credited the turnout drop to a "well thought out multi-faceted plan" including radio ads, GOP election judges, poll watchers, and lawyers.

In 1996, Wisconsin ranked fourth in the nation for ease of voting, according to the Cost of Voting Index. By 2022, the state dropped to 47th on the same list.

The lawmakers also redrew state legislative maps that have locked in GOP control even when the party severely lags Democrats in overall vote share. A Democrat, or Democratic-aligned candidate in nonpartisan contests, has won 15 out of the last 19 statewide races. Two major exceptions to that trend: Trump's win over Hillary Clinton in 2016, and Ron Johnson's win over Mandela Barnes in the U.S. Senate race in 2022. The change in Democratic fortunes owes much credit to a robust fundraising and on-the-ground organizing operation overseen by Ben Wikler, the Democratic Party of Wisconsin chairman since 2019. But, despite the Democratic boom at the statewide level, both houses of the state legislature and six of the state's eight U.S. House seats remain in GOP hands.

Johnson, the Marquette political scientist and data guru, doesn't fully buy any of those arguments, citing instead growing apathy toward the Democratic Party.

"Maybe a party that does extremely well among urban professionals in Madison is just going to struggle among low-education,

low-income urban dwellers in Milwaukee," he says. "That's a tough coalition."

It's hard to overstate the importance of Milwaukee. Democrats can't afford even a slow erosion, much less a mass exodus, of Black voters. The state's winning margins in presidential races have been microscopically small—Trump won by about 22,000 votes, Biden by about 20,000 votes. It's like a game of football where both teams are perpetually at each other's 1-yard line. Any player's small miscue—a right tackle misses a block, a defensive end fails to seal the edge—can spell defeat.

"These are going to be turnout elections, meaning the name of the game in these states is really who can excite and enthuse not just people to vote, but people to get other people to vote," says Julian Zelizer, professor of history and public affairs at Princeton University. "And this is an important constituency. And, you know, I think a lot of Democrats are worried that the enthusiasm is just not there."

The Reverend Greg Lewis has run Souls to the Polls, a voter-outreach nonprofit framed around church-based organizing in the Black community, for more than a decade. He hears the pessimism and agrees with other Black Americans fed up with the system. But he ultimately believes the turnout operation of his group—every voter is assigned to register and turn out three other voters—will triumph.

"White folks are totally divided, and minorities make the difference in Wisconsin voting, and that's just a fact," he says.

Milwaukee's outsize role is a big reason why the Democrats chose the city for their national convention in 2020—it largely didn't happen due to pandemic shutdowns—and then Republicans followed suit for 2024.

"I feel like this [year] is different," says Angela Lang, founder and executive director of Black Leaders Organizing for Communities, or BLOC, an advocacy group in Milwaukee. "Some voters are aware that how Milwaukee goes can go the rest of the state [when it comes to turnout]. And with Wisconsin being such a swing state, it's like the epicenter could really just be in Milwaukee."

AT THE FRONT OF the line, Rosie Redmon waits on the sidewalk outside the red brick walls of Riverside University High School in her wheelchair, pushed by her grandson, Deshawn Hudson. She clutches her purse with hands covered in surgical gloves. A white face mask covers her mouth and nose.

"I sleep in my mask," the 79-year-old says. "People laugh at me. But I take this seriously."

Redmon arrived at the school around 5:30 a.m., about an hour before sunrise. It's one of just five polling sites open across Milwaukee. In a regular election, the city has about 180 polling sites. But this one is happening in April 2020, during the first surge of the Covid-19 pandemic. Other states postponed their elections, but state GOP leaders, backed by a state Supreme Court that was GOP-friendly at the time, overruled Democratic Governor Tony Evers's efforts to postpone Wisconsin's. The on-again, off-again messages left city officials extremely short on poll workers, causing them to consolidate into just five sites. Redmon had to get a ride across town from her grandson.

"I'm a voter," she explains, a tone of defiance in her voice. "I do not miss voting."

By the time the site opens, late, at about 7:20 a.m., the line behind Redmon stretches about eight blocks, around the side of the school and snaking into adjacent Riverside Park. John Carter stands at the end of it. A coyote briefly appears on a nearby hillside, doing its usual rounds, since there haven't been people outside for weeks. Carter, a 71-year-old retired bus driver, traveled almost five miles, instead of his usual blocks-long walk to the polls. The length of the line surprised him, especially this early.

"This is what the Republicans in Madison wanted," he says with a sigh. But he's not leaving.

"I don't have anything going on today," he says. "I got to wait. I got to cast my vote. Except the legs do get tired. I'm an old man."

All day, the five polling sites in Milwaukee have similar lines. A thunderstorm passes in the afternoon. Voters remain, undeterred. The day became known as the "This Is Ridiculous" election, thanks to a photo of a young woman standing in line holding that handwritten sign. The photo, taken by a *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* intern, quickly went viral and generated national news coverage. All that waiting, and national attention, brought surprising benefits. Seeing the oppressive voting situation inspired a surge of poll workers. In the general election in November 2020, Milwaukee opened 173 polling sites, nearly back to pre-pandemic levels. Biden returned the state into Democratic hands, restoring a key piece of the so-called Blue Wall of industrial Midwestern states.

When Trump sued to invalidate the results of the 2020 Wisconsin election, the case was decided narrowly, with four state Supreme Court justices voting against and three for. The "This Is Ridiculous" election produced one key tangible victory, for liberal Supreme Court Justice Jill Karofsky. If that race went the other way, Trump likely would have won his case at the state Supreme Court, launching a constitutional crisis. The voters who waited in those lines may not have realized that democracy and the fate of voting itself was on the line. Ultimately, it was.

"Looking at the heartrending photos and TV footage—voters lined up in the rain, in the midst of an explosive pandemic—to cast ballots in overcrowded precincts in Milwaukee was both a reminder of the lengths that the GOP is willing to go to suppress the vote in Milwaukee and also of the resilience and tenacity of Black voters in Milwaukee who refuse to be disenfranchised," says Wikler, the state Democratic Party chairman.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA stands at the presidential lectern wearing a button-up blue shirt, gray striped tie, and youthful look. Behind him are red steel structures made at Master Lock, stamped with a black MADE IN THE U.S.A. label.

"I'm actually here today because this company has been making the most of a huge opportunity that exists right now to bring jobs and manufacturing back to the United States of America," he tells the crowd of Master Lock employees in front of him. They applaud loudly. The United Auto Workers members keep cheering other lines.

"Too many factories where people thought they'd retire suddenly left town," he says. "Too many jobs that provided a decent living got shipped overseas."

Obama is at this nearly century-old factory on the North Side of Milwaukee a couple of weeks after his State of the Union speech in 2012. He touts his administration's efforts to save the automobile industry; worker-friendly tax cuts; and financial incentives

for companies such as Master Lock that keep production, and workers, in the United States.

The history laid out by Obama has been lived by Don Johnson. He started his first factory job right out of high school at age 19 at AC Delco Electronics, a division of General Motors. He went to work at what turned out to be his last factory job, from ages 59 to 62, as a machine operator at Master Lock. Both jobs paid well, backed by a strong union, and both companies provided steady middle-class incomes to generations of Milwaukee families in the central city. Manufacturers, and all those jobs, were a major reason that Black Americans flocked to the city in the middle part of the twentieth century, most of them fleeing the Jim Crow South. About 9,000 Black people lived in Milwaukee in 1940. By 1970, that number ballooned to about 105,000, according to Census figures. The largest manufacturing employer, A.O. Smith, built automobile frames at its North Side factory.

Both of Johnson's factory jobs ended the same way: with his departure due to the company downsizing or closing, sending those jobs to be done cheaper abroad. The same fate met most of Milwaukee's manufacturers. A.O. Smith, for example, finally shut down all operations in 2005 after decades of downsizing.

"The reason that North Side Milwaukee looks like it looks, with abandoned buildings and a lot of vacant commercial space … A.O. Smith started doing what everybody else did. They started making those automobile frames down in Mexico," he says. "When they shut down [in Milwaukee], those jobs never got replaced."

Master Lock's announcement of its planned closure in March 2024 hit the North Side particularly hard. The company's sprawling plant has occupied a significant patch of the North Side for more than a century. Johnson said the great majority of his colleagues on the factory floor were also Black. In the decades of industrial decline in Milwaukee, Master Lock remained in the city, offering a steady income—Johnson made $17 an hour on the third shift, with almost unlimited overtime available—and solid benefits.

Today, 11 years after Obama's visit, the company continues to thrive, earning record revenue of $860 million in 2022. It still operates three shifts around the clock and employs more than 400 people. Johnson took a job there during a forced hiatus from truck driving, which he's done for decades. While he was very happy at Master Lock, he noticed two things: Parts were increasingly being shipped to Mexico, and machines that were decades old weren't being updated or replaced. Company officials have offered few details on why they will shut down the factory in 2024, despite pressure from the union and elected officials.

"They were one of the last stable employers right in the inner city, on the bus line," Johnson says. "So if you got a job there, you had no problem getting to work."

AS JOHNSON HAS seen the area's economy suffer and evolve, he's also noticed a resulting political shift.

"It is not necessarily guaranteed that Democrats are going to keep getting the minority vote like they've been doing traditionally," he says. "You're starting to get a lot of African Americans looking Republican."

People in his generation latched firmly onto the Democrats.

"Because of the civil rights era in the '50s and the '60s, the Democrats won over the African American minority community for years," he says. "So out of tradition, that's what everybody did.… If they were Democrat, that's who they voted for. Well, now people are starting to pay attention to the issues and not the party."

Johnson says Milwaukee is also somewhat the victim of its own success in terms of politics and race. When he was a young adult, he dreamed of a day when Black leaders would run for political office, and win. That used to be a rarity. Today, Milwaukee is a shining example of Black political representation. The city elected Mayor Cavalier Johnson in 2022. The Milwaukee County executive, David Crowley, also is the first Black person elected to the job. The police chief, county sheriff, and superintendent of schools also are Black.

"All of the people in positions of power that we fought for back in the day to make a difference are all there now," he says. "And it hasn't changed a damn thing in the Black community. Crime ratio high, unemployment ratio high, you name it."

It should be noted that most of the Black officials have assumed their current roles only recently, without the requisite time for any policy changes to bear fruit.

Don Johnson is by no means on the Trump train. He views the former president's alleged theft of classified documents as disqualifying.

"Had it been anyone else, they'd be in prison by now," he says.

But he's lived the changes in his community, and knows Democrats have a challenge winning over his children's generation—he has a son in his thirties who works at an auto parts store and a daughter in her twenties who works at a VA hospital—as they did his.

MANDELA BARNES WON the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate in 2022, and lost in the general election to incumbent Republican Ron Johnson by just under 27,000 votes, around a 1 percentage point margin. The loss left Barnes, 37, at a crossroads, out of elected office and with plenty of options. Ultimately he chose to dig right back into the political game as president of Power to the Polls.

The group was successful in its outreach to Black voters during spring's state Supreme Court race, the most expensive judicial race in U.S. history, which resulted in the addition of another liberal-aligned justice, Janet Protasiewicz, to the bench. Power to the Polls had 175 ambassadors on the ground as part of a $1 million effort. Barnes says the coming general election will dwarf that, with plans for an $8 million field campaign.

Barnes says the abortion issue resonated in a big way in the group's organizing for the Supreme Court race. After the *Dobbs* decision, Wisconsin reverted to an 1849 law that was widely viewed as banning abortion in almost all cases. A state judge's ruling in summer 2023 cleared the way for abortions to resume in Wisconsin, but a more definitive decision on the issue will ultimately be made by the state's Supreme Court. Barnes found that the faith community, influential with Black voters, sided with abortion rights.

"[I] often hear pastors in the inner city, more than a lot of people would imagine, talking about the need for this access to exist," he says.

Power to the Polls joins an existing organizing infrastructure in Milwaukee. Angela Lang's BLOC has been around for five years. Greg Lewis's Souls to the Polls, which is affiliated with Barnes's group, has been in the field since 2013. They're different groups, but they share the goal of electing Democrats with a playbook heavy on year-round conversations and events hosted by community members.

"You're starting to get a lot of African Americans looking Republican," said Don Johnson, a former factory worker in Milwaukee.

"We don't just show up because we want to talk to you about elections," Lang says, mentioning a back-to-school event sponsored by BLOC. "And so being able to break through some of that transactional parachuting in and then leaving, people are like, 'Oh, you're still here; oh, you're still asking me about my issues. You're telling me about these things.' And I think that's been really valuable."

The message in 2024 will again be complicated by an imperfect messenger in Biden, who's dogged by questions about his age and about past verbal stumbles when he's talked about race. He once said that Black Americans "ain't Black" if they consider voting for Trump. African Americans also remember Biden's support, when he was a U.S. senator, of the 1994 crime bill. Wisconsin has the highest rate of Black incarceration in the nation, with one of every 36 Black Americans locked up, according to the Sentencing Project. Lang says Biden wasn't her first choice, but he has given her plenty to win her support for reelection. She mentions him calling out white supremacy in his inaugural address, his support of the stalled George Floyd criminal justice reform bill, his focus on reducing gun violence, and his support for abortion rights.

"He's not perfect," she says of the president. "But, in my opinion, he's a hell of a lot better than Trump."

BY THE 2022 MIDTERMS, Riverside University High School is a different place on Election Day. Gone are the eternal lines of the "This Is Ridiculous" election in spring 2020. It's back to being a regular polling place. A new kind of line has emerged in the gymnasium, painted in the orange-and-black school colors and with its Tiger mascot: They're first-time voters, almost all of them from one of the nearby colleges.

"We were a lot busier than we expected to be today," says the polls' chief inspector, Bill Christianson. "I would say a lot more students and people in their early twenties turned out."

Adam Elizondo is representative. While he was on break from his night shift at a submarine sandwich restaurant, his mother, Cristina, drove him to Riverside to register—the state allows same-day registration with an approved form of voter ID—and he cast his first-ever ballot before polls closed.

"I've been told from a very young age that it's important to vote," says Elizondo, a graduate of a Milwaukee public school who's now in college at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "I feel like it's important. Everyone should have a say in who controls what we're doing."

In the midterms, Wisconsin led the nation in youth turnout percentage. Wikler, the state Democratic Party chair, told *The New York Times* that registrations for the 35-and-under crowd surged 20 percent from the 2018 midterms to the 2022 midterms. The state party targeted college campuses more aggressively starting in 2019. State Republicans have helped their cause by opposing abortion rights, marijuana legalization, and gun control, among other issues that young voters consistently rank highly.

Milwaukee is a college town, though not known as such to many outside the state; there are eight colleges within city limits and 11 in the region that host about 100,000 students. The city has a potential to play a major role in the youth surge. Lewis's Souls to the Polls plans to hire an ambassador just for college campuses. The organizer will focus on Milwaukee Area Technical College, whose 28,000 students are more representative of the city's demographics than other colleges, both racially and economically.

"The young people vote is critical," Lewis says. "In this upcoming election, you know, we've got to make it our business to really go after that vote."

Winning the youth vote, and matching or exceeding the numbers of the 2022 midterms, could be critical. Or will it be a resurgence among Black voters that proves decisive? Or something else? A year out from a critical election when democracy itself again will be on the ballot, the questions far outnumber the answers in the state with a little bit of everything, and where every election is a game of inches. TNR

Dan Simmons *lives near Milwaukee with his wife, daughter, and Scramble the greyhound.*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY EVANGELINE GALLAGHER

The Cracked Foundation

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt explained *How Democracies Die*. But the problems went deeper than they thought.

By Sam Rosenfeld

EIGHT YEARS ON from Donald Trump's descent down the escalator, the democratic doom boom in American commentary shows little sign of dissipating. "Democratic backsliding," a term originating in comparative political science, is in the popular lexicon. The existence of a democratic "crisis" in the United States is now presumed across a wide swath of political takes (mine included). The January 6 insurrection marked an explosive denouement to Trump's shambolic tenure, while the partisan response to it only seemed to confirm that a system-threatening genie had been let out of the bottle. And in a break from the normal patterns of punditry, academic scholars of democracy speak in more alarmed and perfervid terms than popular commentators. "This is no ordinary moment," but one of "great peril and risk," says one recent academic petition; "the crisis of American democracy is upon us," states another.

But because democracy as a concept contains multitudes, so its crises are manifold. The erosion of protections against individual liberties and minority rights is one kind of democratic breakdown; the fettering of majority rule is a different one; government paralysis, still another. The populism of charismatic strongmen *and* the unaccountable rule of plutocrats are both recognizable problems of our age—but are they the same problem? Which one is ours? Even as the chorus of alarm has grown louder over the years, the diagnoses of the problem at hand have multiplied, shifted, and often grown muddled together.

Step back to take in the whole of democratic crisis talk in the Trump era—or at least the discourse from everyone outside of MAGA world—and one can sketch out a broad analytical shift. An initial focus on the shocking breakthrough of authoritarian populism in a system once considered immune to it has given way, over time, to a reengagement with the more grinding institutional realities that have undermined the functioning of actually existing democracy in the United States for centuries. Tired: "American democracy is on the brink." Wired: "American democracy has barely ever been tried." Two successive books co-written by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt are particularly instructive in tracing out that arc of change in diagnosis.

In the first panicked wave of Trump-era releases, Levitsky and Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die*, published in early 2018, stood out as the Cadillac of democratic doom lit: pedigreed, sober-minded, and crystalline in its synthesis of scholarship on democratic erosion. Both are scholars of comparative political science at Harvard—Levitsky a Latin Americanist, Ziblatt a Europeanist—and the authors' approach embodied the core theme of the first wave: *It could happen here.* The United States had no special immunity to the dynamics that undermine democratic functioning and, with Trump, had joined the world in its shared democratic discontents. But the book also bore some of the imprint of the first wave's Trump-centric immediacy, rooting the current crisis in relatively recent history and emphasizing above all else the importance of elite norms that policed boundaries and stabilized political competition. The prescriptive upshot of the book was thus both small-*c* conservative in its restorationism and more than a bit fuzzy—dependent on exhorting the GOP to get its house in order.

Six years, three election cycles, two impeachments, and one insurrection later, Levitsky and Ziblatt are back on the crisis beat with a new book—and they've (largely) pivoted crises. *Tyranny of the Minority* swaps out *How Democracies Die*'s focus on woolly norms and the dangers of personalist demagogues for a thoroughgoing and hard-edged critique of "the core institutions of our own democracy." The Constitution, deemed in *How Democracies Die* an imperfect yet "brilliant document," now takes center stage as a strangler of majority rule and handmaiden to reaction, amplifying the power of the country's "authoritarian minority." The Biden presidency, in this view, offers some reprieve but no restoration, because "the conditions that gave rise to the Trump presidency—a radicalized party empowered by a pre-democratic Constitution—remain in place."

Levitsky and Ziblatt still make comparisons with other countries to marvelous effect, thickening their arguments in a gumbo of historical and contemporary examples from Brazil, Hungary, Argentina, Thailand, Italy, Chile, Germany, South Korea, and countless other states. But they also dig far deeper than before into America's own violently authoritarian past, and the way that America's uniquely veto-laden and counter-majoritarian rules of the game have buttressed that violence. It makes for an inversion. If *How Democracies Die* cried with alarm that the United States was not in fact exceptional and was just as vulnerable to lapsing into basket-casery as any other country, *Tyranny of the Minority* sounds a different warning: Our institutions really are exceptional in their aversion to majority rule, and they mark our pathway to doom.

The path back out of that doom, however, is strewn with land mines. An institutional critique demands institutional reform, and Levitsky and Ziblatt cap off their excellent book with a worthy wish list. Yet they still worry about the kind of partisan norm-breaking that had taken center stage in *How Democracies Die*. That presents a dilemma: Because one party benefits systematically from the system's democratic deficits, democratizing reform unavoidably entails its own kind of partisan hardball.

And since there's no taking the politics out of political reform, there's no real prospect for changing the system without intensifying the very polarized party conflict that's currently destabilizing that system. Democracy is fragile, yes. But at the same time, to paraphrase an old muckraker's adage: Democracy ain't beanbag.

THE SHOCK OF the new, rather than the burdens of the old, preoccupied analysts in the immediate wake of Trump's election. A populist authoritarian had captured one of America's two major parties and won the presidency. To some, it reflected a growing disaffection with democracy in the mass electorate, a phenomenon captured in the title of Yascha Mounk's 2018 book, *The People vs. Democracy.* But Levitsky and Ziblatt saw in the populist threat less a story of *popular* dysfunction than one of elite malpractice and irresponsibility. Trump's ascendance, they argued in *How Democracies Die*, was the symptom of a disease affecting the whole Republican Party. Certain institutional changes, like the rise of direct primaries to determine party nominations, came in for some scrutiny, but the authors' central argument focused on the importance of informal tenets that guide political behavior. Over many years, they argued, an increasingly demographically homogeneous party, pushed toward the extremes by well-heeled donors and activists, had come gradually to abandon a set of norms essential to keeping political conflict within accepted bounds and stabilizing democratic self-rule.

Two norms in particular were pivotal. *Mutual toleration* entailed "recognizing that our political rivals are decent, patriotic, law-abiding citizens" and thus accepting their legitimacy as power-seeking actors in the system. And *forbearance* required deliberately restraining oneself from maximizing the exercise of institutional power so as not to destabilize the system as a whole. The modern GOP, increasingly prone to demonizing its opponents and ever more ruthless in the deployment of escalatory hardball for power, had discarded both of those codes of conduct, eroded its own capacity to police internal boundaries against extremism, and so forged a path to power for the man on the escalator.

The range of comparative cases the writers brought to bear on this story of norms and their unmaking sets *How Democracies Die* apart. It conveyed, with a scholarly depth rarely seen in tomes popular enough for airport bookstores, the insight that democratic self-rule has no equilibrium, no end point of consolidation. Rather, as a game requiring all players to serve simultaneously as competitors, referees, and rulemakers, it is shot through with potential negative feedback loops and escalatory logic that threaten its own unraveling. The task of keeping democracy alive is thus an active and endless one—a continuous commitment, as political scientist David Bateman has put it, to "an ongoing, indeed Sisyphean, recalibration."

How Democracies Die's preoccupation with norms and their vulnerability to erosion had its downsides, however. Informal tenets of behavior have blurry lines, and it was not always clear where the distinction between healthy, zealous political disagreement and destabilizing conflict should be drawn. Still less clear was what to do, as a matter of prescription, when one side of the conflict had jettisoned their fealty to democratic norms, given that those norms' very value depended on a shared commitment to upholding them. Finally, the focus on stability collapsed distinctions among different political norms, lending *How Democracies Die* a sometimes gauzy depiction of U.S. political history and practice.

Levitsky and Ziblatt described countermajoritarian practices in the U.S. Senate, such as individual holds and legislative filibusters, as "essential checks and balances, serving as both a source of protection for minority parties and a constraint on potentially overreaching presidents," even as they went on to note their vulnerability to abuse. They deemed "dangerous" Franklin Roosevelt's proposal to expand the Supreme Court to break its anti–New Deal majority and tut-tutted his third and fourth terms in office as a violation of the norm of forbearance. In turn, they categorized Congress's rejection of the court plan and the later passage of the Twenty-second Amendment formalizing the two-term limit on presidents—a fetter on popular democracy enacted in a postwar moment of conservative dominance—as admirable examples of democratic guardrails being reinforced. And, looking ahead into the coming Trump era, they worried about "a dangerous spiral" that Democrats might perpetuate by losing sight of the better, norm-loving angels of their nature and playing hardball in the opposition.

But stability and democracy are not synonyms. As Levitsky and Ziblatt themselves took pains to acknowledge, the historical peak of the American system's stability—the exceptionally depolarized mid-twentieth century—emerged as the by-product of political arrangements that entrenched racial apartheid in the South and excluded civil rights from national political contestation. But they never quite wrestled with the implication of that paradox, namely that the task of securing and expanding democracy might require its own kind of norm erosion.

WHERE ARE WE six years later? Levitsky and Ziblatt open their new book, *Tyranny of the Minority*, declaring that Trump's "assault on American democracy was worse than anything we anticipated in 2017" and taking little comfort in his reelection defeat as a signal of the system's hardiness. The book's first half extends the basic theme of *How Democracies Die,* detailing the GOP's degeneration into a political apparatus permeated by extremists and gripped by apocalypticism over their opponents' taking power. "Once parties learn to lose," they write, "then democracy can take root." In unlearning that norm of mutual toleration, Republicans have upended the political system. Their increasing pursuit of electoral manipulation (through efforts like gerrymandering), suppression (through onerous voting laws), and subversion (through harassing or co-opting the vote-counters of the system) amounts to democratic backsliding via "lawfare," or the exercise of authoritarian power politics via legal and legislative hardball rather than overt violence.

When such efforts tipped over into open insurrection on January 6, 2021, moreover, the perpetrators and their avowed advocates could count on a much wider swath of party

Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point
by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt
Crown,
384 pp., $28.99

actors committed to deflection, evasion, and the kind of "anti-anti" arguments that avoided criticizing their own side without openly supporting unlawful or authoritarian actions. The late political scientist Juan Linz had called such careerist enablers of democratic backsliding "semi-loyal" democrats, and Levitsky and Ziblatt see those actors—who "do not oppose democracy out of deep-seated principle but are merely indifferent to it"—pervading modern, mainstream Republicanism.

In their behavior during and after January 6, Republicans invited disturbing comparisons to the French conservatives who tolerated, and eventually came to justify, a fascist-tinged riot in front of Parliament on *February* 6, 1934. And they stood in damning contrast to the Spanish conservatives who closed ranks with other mainstream political forces to condemn an attempted coup in 1981; to the opposition Peronists in Argentina who forcefully decried a regional power seizure by ideologically sympathetic military officers in 1987; and even to the political allies of Brazil's heinous former president, Jair Bolsonaro, who earlier this year swiftly disavowed demonstrators' storming of the national capital to protest alleged electoral fraud against their candidate, and then acquiesced to Bolsonaro's effective political marginalization going forward. When a modern American party acts in ways that eerily echo the interwar European right while making Bolsonaristas seem like responsible democrats in comparison, there's reason to panic.

Beyond panicking, though, what can be done? Levitsky and Ziblatt's wide-ranging global tour of democratic breakdowns and buttresses, of semi-loyal snakes and heroic regime protectors, documents the who's and how's of democratic resilience in action more than it explains how countries can *inculcate* democratic norms and the temperance of hardball when such tenets begin to lose their hold. "A political science fixated on norms," Jedediah Purdy wrote skeptically back in 2018, "fits easily with a political ethics based on virtue"—and therein lies the problem. We've seen what finger-wagging and calls for political courage have garnered in the contemporary GOP: a trickle of martyrs in the Liz Cheney mold, and, all around them, the sound of semi-loyal silence.

Just when it seems that Levitsky and Ziblatt's argument might hit a cul-de-sac, however, they pivot. The second half of the book shifts focus sharply from *actors* to *rules*—from anti-democratic political behavior among movements, parties, and office seekers to the array of countermajoritarian features baked into the American constitutional order.

The American political process is stamped by the preoccupations of eighteenth-century political thought—most notably, fears of popular democracy.

WITH THEIR NEW focus on institutions, Levitsky and Ziblatt tap into a tradition of critical constitutionalism that reaches back to the Progressive era. ("The Constitution was not meant to hold the government back to the time of horses and wagons," declared a university president named Woodrow Wilson in 1908.) That approach has seen a twenty-first-century revival in works like Robert Dahl's *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?*, Sanford Levinson's *Our Undemocratic Constitution*, and 2014's magisterial *A Different Democracy*, by a team of comparativist political scientists. But if they're hardly venturing into uncharted territory, Levitsky and Ziblatt distinguish themselves by the clarity and scope of their account. For a one-stop-shop foray into the problem of America's outlier status among democratic systems and the challenges of reform, *Tyranny of the Minority* cannot be beat.

So what's so wrong with U.S. constitutional democracy? One might say that it was cursed by success. The Constitution has survived centuries of epochal change and existential conflict, lending the country bragging rights for operating under the world's oldest continuing formal government charter. The downside of that endurance is that the American political process remains at once stamped by the preoccupations of eighteenth-century political thought—most notably, fears of popular democracy, of the potential tyranny of majorities, and of the prospect of regular and entrenched political conflict—and distinctly untouched by institutional innovations and normative developments that came later.

Famously, the U.S. political system fragments power. Federalism retains some sovereign and many shared powers for subnational governments at the state level. National power is separated among three coequal branches. The legislative branch itself is divided into two coequal chambers, with the upper house imposing supermajority requirements for most lawmaking. (The Senate filibuster, to be clear, stems not from the Constitution but from the chamber's own internal rules.) The power of veto—of single-handedly blocking any law from passage—is enjoyed not only by each legislative chamber and the president but also by a Supreme Court wielding a maximalist version of absolute and unappealable judicial review. The policymaking process in the United States is a fiendish obstacle course laced with booby traps—and, as a result, the U.S. government is characterized by a uniquely strong status quo bias and, during periods of polarized conflict, severe gridlock and brittleness.

Perhaps less famously, the oldest democracy in the world also distorts and dilutes the electoral voice of popular majorities. The same legislative chamber fettered by a steep supermajority requirement for lawmaking is also one of the most egregiously malapportioned legislative bodies on Earth, by dint of a principle of equal representation of states that severely overrepresents the (disproportionately white and rural) residents of smaller states. The Constitution's system for presidential selection, meanwhile, entails indirect election through an Electoral College that can—and how!—elevate popular-vote losers

to the White House. Finally, those same federal judges enjoying the supreme authority to strike down any laws they see fit garner their lifetime tenures in office through no electoral process whatsoever.

Going back yet one more step in the democratic process reveals that even the exercise of the franchise itself is vulnerable under a Constitution that includes *no* explicit affirmation of individual citizens' right to vote (only specific prohibitions on the denial of suffrage based on particular criteria). In the absence of such a positive right, the Constitution's delegation to state governments of the actual administration of elections—including voting laws, election certification, and legislative district line-drawing—amounts to a kind of permission slip for state-level efforts at electoral repression and subversion.

Throw all of this together and you have something special. The encrusted, interlocking institutions of the American constitutional order leave voting rights vulnerable, misrepresent voters in the electoral system, *and* hinder majoritarian governance. Other longstanding democracies include some or other of the key features that contribute to these democratic shortfalls. Literally no other country besides the United States boasts them all. American exceptionalism is real.

Part of the reason this exceptionalism is so entrenched is that the same countermajoritarian features of the Constitution *also* characterize its own prescribed process for changing them. Requiring the vote of two-thirds of both houses of Congress followed by three-fourths of all state legislatures for any change to be enacted, the U.S. Constitution imposes the most challenging amendment process of any such charter in the world. There are other reasons, rooted in matters of historical timing, social structure, and political economy, that help to explain why all the other countries now making up the club of "longstanding democracies" evolved their way into more fully democratic systems than did the United States. But the sheer difficulty of the formal amendment process is key.

One by one, over the course of more than a century, democratic states around the world passed constitutional reforms that equalized representation across urban and rural areas; disempowered or abolished outright their malapportioned upper houses; shed their filibusterlike countermajoritarian legislative rules and Electoral College–esque institutions of indirect election; expanded suffrage rights down the class ladder and across gender lines (while forestalling the imposition of myriad de facto barriers to voting); and either adopted from the outset or switched over to electoral systems featuring multimember districts and proportional representation, rather than the older first-past-the-post model retained in Great Britain and many of her progeny. (Among the many other virtues of proportional representation systems, which produce stable multiparty competition: They are generally immune to the political gerrymandering we know so well, which depends on the manipulation of majorities in districts with single representatives.) The one area that has trended in a counter-majoritarian direction in the rest of the world over time has been the proliferation of systems of judicial review since 1945, though term limits and mandatory retirement provisions for judges have generally accompanied the spread.

And then there's the United States. Following its precocious adoption of universal suffrage for all white men regardless of property in the antebellum period, the United States extended the suffrage via constitutional reform only fitfully, in the Reconstruction-era Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and in the adoption of female suffrage a half-century later. A few major reforms like the direct election of senators and the federal income tax managed to sneak in as well. But the basic apparatus of government has remained intact, and—aside from an amendment on congressional pay first proposed in 1789 but only ratified in 1992—the country has seen no formal constitutional change for five decades and counting. When the last new constitutional amendment passed Congress in 1971, giving 18-year-olds the vote, Ed Sullivan was still on the air and Sean Connery was still James Bond.

During the last reformist moment of the 1960s and early 1970s, whose ferment rocked all major U.S. institutions public and private, activists came tantalizingly close to breaching the constitutional wall—only to be thwarted yet again by all-American counter-majoritarianism. In 1969, a constitutional amendment to abolish the Electoral College garnered widespread popular support and the endorsement of both parties' leaders (including President Nixon). It managed to pass the House by a vote of *338 to 70*. It then succumbed to a Senate filibuster, organized by Alabama Senator James Allen.

Both the lopsided numbers in favor of the reform and the fact that the now extinct species of conservative Southern Democrats helped to kill it hint at why the prospects of constitutional reform have collapsed since then. The great sorting-out of the parties by ideology, geography, and educational attainment has not only made such lopsided bipartisan votes inherently hard to come by as a general matter.

It has also made one party—the whiter and more rural GOP—the sole beneficiary of each of the Constitution's key anti-democratic features. (As Levitsky and Ziblatt explain, "the Constitution's small-state bias, which became a *rural* bias in the twentieth century, has become a *partisan* bias in the twenty-first century.") The evolution of the party system has ensured that Republicans stand to lose from democratizing constitutional reforms while Democrats stand to gain—and, unsurprisingly, opinion on reform has polarized in turn.

SO FAR, SO BAD. But what does any of this have to do with Donald Trump, gonzo extremism, and insurrection? In Levitsky and Ziblatt's formulation, the old, quotidian crisis of institutionalized minority rule bolsters and intensifies the new, headline-grabbing crisis of populist authoritarianism. The GOP's radicalization has drivers both external to the party and internal: The shifting coalitional dynamics of race and the political economy of the Second Gilded Age have boosted extreme tendencies at the same time that the party has lost its capacity to structure and contain the right's political activity. But in the standard democratic model, electoral incentives push against such extremism. The threat of vote loss should incline office-seeking parties to moderate their positions. As the GOP's coalition has evolved demographically to become the exclusive beneficiary of the Constitution's key undemocratic electoral features, however, that electoral incentive has correspondingly attenuated.

The Republican Party has lost the popular vote in every presidential election since 1992, with the single exception of 2004—yet has actually occupied the White House for 12 of those 31 years. If as few as 45,000 votes in three states had shifted from Joe Biden to Trump in 2020, then Trump would have won reelection despite losing the popular vote by seven million people. The GOP's small-state-heavy coalition in the Senate represents a distinct minority of American voters. Even in the more representative U.S. House, the GOP has managed to gain a majority of seats in years when they lost the popular vote: In 2012, for example, Democrats got over a million more votes in the congressional elections but won only 201 House seats compared to the Republicans' 234.

With this "electoral crutch" buoying the party's prospects, internal voices making strategic arguments about moderation can be more easily ignored or shouted down. And so, as the authors put it, "Republicans became the beneficiaries of a certain kind of 'constitutional protectionism'—institutions that dull the incentive to compete." Indeed, while the authors warn that "American democracy can only survive with a Republican Party that is capable of winning national majorities," by the 2020 election it was remarkably clear that no one, Republicans included, seemed seriously even to consider the prospect of Trump winning the popular vote. (Arguably the last conscious and self-confident vision for building a Republican electoral majority came during the era of George W. Bush and Karl Rove—and then went down in a hubristic blaze of policy failure at home and abroad.)

As the party as a whole has grown pessimistic about forging a majoritarian electoral project, and in turn ever more committed to pressing its minoritarian constitutional advantages, an all-purpose dismissal of democracy talk has come to the fore—captured well in the conservative quip, as annoying as it is ubiquitous, that "we're a republic, not a democracy." The creeping dismissiveness of democracy as an ethos is of a piece with the "postliberal" turn among elite conservative intellectuals, some of whom flirt openly with anti-democratic positions. And it can serve as something of a permission slip for GOP elites to tolerate, and rationalize through anti-anti argumentation, the more violent and disruptive efforts of authoritarian actors at the base. Thus does the *a*democratic outlook of a party cushioned electorally by old political institutions serve to aid and abet the *anti*-democratic politics of the MAGA hard core.

The connection between minoritarian constitutions and reactionary-populist power is not an American quirk. "Counter-majoritarian institutions that thwart electoral and legislative majorities are often associated with authoritarianism, not liberal democracy," Levitsky and Ziblatt insist, pointing to cases like the Chilean constitution under Pinochet and the system of civilian rule imposed by the Thai military after its 2014 coup. The rule of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz Party in Hungary offers a more pointed parallel. Though Fidesz in 2010, unlike Trump's GOP in 2016, did manage to win a clear electoral majority,

The Horse of Loch nan Uamh Viaduct
Fort William to Mallaig

by Tarn MacArthur

Traveling north through the north we make our way
anachronistically, under the auspices of nostalgia
and steam, the occasional sun a cloud-diffused gold
spread thin on the hills as the lamplight of history.
We've taken leave, here along this loch-hewn coast
to reaffirm the need to know in situ what we knew
from home. These coursing tracks can take us there
not take us back. Past bloodless sands. That cairn
cast from local stone as something near-forgettable.
It's how things go. No meaning meaning what we
hoped. While now we're told that somewhere deep
beneath our seats entombed in concrete for a century
lies the body of a horse. And on its back all futures
soon unfold. A tunnel of darkness swallows us whole.

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the distortions of the country's plurality electoral system translated the party's 53 percent popular vote margin into a two-thirds parliamentary majority that year. And in turn, that majority enabled Orbán to gerrymander parliamentary districts further in favor of his party's disproportionately rural supporters, ensuring that, in 2014, Fidesz would retain two-thirds of parliamentary seats while only garnering 45 percent of the popular vote.

With Levitsky and Ziblatt's institutional turn comes a better differentiated and thus more persuasive argument about norms. The twin pillars of liberal democracy are collective self-rule and civil liberties; the first is a majoritarian principle, while the second entails a counter-majoritarian commitment to protecting individual and minority rights. (Majorities must also be constrained when it comes to setting and enforcing the rules of democratic decision-making themselves.) But the first pillar means that "not all counter-majoritarian institutions strengthen democracy," and that two domains in particular "must always remain within the reach of majorities: elections and legislative decision making." Guided by these standards, the authors jettison even their partial earlier defenses of institutions like the filibuster, while casting a colder eye than before on the courts. (FDR's court-packing plan, denounced as dangerous in their last book, is described more gently in this one as a democratic response to the court's inherently problematic wielding of a counter-majoritarian power that binds future generations.) Because stability is not the end goal, the norms that shore up the political system are hardly all that matter to keep democracy alive. "Democracy is more than majority rule," they insist, "but without majority rule there is no democracy."

WHATEVER ELSE ONE might say about Levitsky and Ziblatt's prescriptions in *Tyranny of the Minority,* they are hardly vague and fuzzy. Notably, they have largely backed off from *How Democracies Die*'s advocacy of a pan-ideological grand coalition in defense of democracy, which they now deem in tension with democracy's very raison d'être of generating choice and competition for electorates. (They also see it as likely to be self-defeating, since it would reinforce narratives of elite collusion.) The only thing that will break the grip of the GOP alliance between anti-democratic and semi-loyal forces is a major change in political incentives wrought by sweeping, formal constitutional change—and so the authors go there.

In the name of jettisoning the system's counter-majoritarian vestiges, they advocate such modest reforms as the end of equal representation of states in the Senate; abolition of the Electoral College; cloture reform to eliminate the Senate filibuster; sweeping new voting rights legislation under the aegis of a new constitutional amendment affirming a positive right to vote; and term limits and regularized appointment schedules for Supreme Court justices. Having documented in gory detail the nightmarish difficulty of enacting constitutional change under the U.S. amendment process (the reform of which is *also* on their prescriptive wish list), Levitsky and Ziblatt acknowledge the steep odds that such an undertaking faces. But they insist on the importance of putting constitutional change back into mainstream discussion, to prevent "non-reform" from becoming "a self-fulfilling prophecy," and they call for a sustained social movement to bolster the work of "advocates, organizers, public thinkers, and opinion makers" on behalf of a democratizing agenda.

One actor they conspicuously do not include among their prescribed agents powering a reform movement for small-*d* democracy is the big-*D* Democratic Party. Indeed, for all the ambition of their reform agenda and the newfound edge in their analysis, Levitsky and Ziblatt remain world-weary comparativists as well as writers inclined to frame their arguments for pro-democracy readers of varying political stripes. And so they still cast a cold eye on partisan hardball as a force in democratic politics.

But hardball is in the eye of the beholder. Back in 2018, another political scientist, David Faris, wrote a short tome calling for many of the same democratizing institutional reforms that Levitsky and Ziblatt now advocate. (The one major difference was that Faris also supported court-packing.) But Faris conceived of his audience as progressives smarting from 2016 and in need of an invigorating shake of the lapels to rediscover their nerve and beat Republicans at their own game. He gave his scrappy book the unsubtle title *It's Time to Fight Dirty*—and for his troubles got singled out by Levitsky and Ziblatt in *How Democracies Die* as an example of the kind of escalatory tit-for-tat they thought Democrats needed to avoid. And even as the authors have now come around on the institutional prescriptions, they insist on describing them in systemic rather than partisan terms—as democratizing reforms rather than procedural means to power. But of course they are both. And of course Republicans know that, too—and can be expected to respond in kind.

Hardball politics can be ennobled politics. The epochal feat of democratization that was institutionalized in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and in a wave of legislation passed by congressional Republicans in the early years after the Civil War amounted to its own kind of partisan hardball, carried out at the point of a gun. Republicans motivated variously by stirring moral conviction and raw partisan fear (as they anticipated the defeated Confederate states gaining readmission to the Union with bolstered numbers in Congress, thanks to the end of the 3/5 compromise) pursued a crash course in interracial political mobilization and party-building, bending the constitutional system to their will in the process. In a space of a few years, they impeached and nearly removed a president, shrank and then re-enlarged the size of the Supreme Court to control the political makeup of its majority, gained effective control of the military to put the defeated Confederacy under continued occupation, and amended the Constitution to advance a revolutionary experiment in interracial democracy. At the apex of their ambitions (soon to be attenuated in the face of violent Democratic resistance), Republicans of the Civil War era embodied the emancipatory possibilities of parties as agents of change, and of political self-interest as a motor for democratic breakthrough.

None of that leaves us with any easy prescriptive lessons—only, perhaps, the reminder that political parties, as the one and only institution capable of mediating between social forces and state power through popular mobilization and ordered conflict, remain *the* pivotal actors in any solution to the current crises we might arrive at. At their best, parties simultaneously lend vitality and force to popular self-government while also inculcating the very norms that make self-rule sustainable. The fact that, falling short of those dual functions, they have so often proved accessories to democracies' demise only underscores the point: Everywhere, and always, parties are how democracies live. TNR

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ILLUSTRATION BY JOAN YANG

GETTY (X3)

The Cultural Conspiracy

Christopher Rufo's crusade against critical race theory—and his plan for "counterrevolution"

By Moira Weigel

AS RECENTLY AS 2019, the right rarely spoke of critical race theory. A furor erupted in the Southern Baptist Convention in June that year, when conservatives fiercely opposed its incorporation into church teachings. A year later, Fox News ramped up its use of the term as it covered the mass uprisings in June 2020 that followed the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Before then, mentions of the term were scant: Media Cloud, a searchable database of digitized U.S. news sources, shows that the phrase "critical race theory" appeared in few news stories between January 2016 and January 2020. Until September 2020, it typically appeared in no more than 10 per month.

But that month, the conservative activist and journalist Christopher Rufo helped catapult critical race theory to the center of national conversation. On September 1, Rufo appeared on *Tucker Carlson Tonight*. From a studio in Seattle, Rufo told Carlson about his ongoing research, which purported to show that "critical race theory has pervaded every institution in the federal government," becoming "the default ideology of the federal bureaucracy" as

it seeped into training materials used at the Treasury Department, the FBI, and Sandia National Laboratories. He called on Donald Trump to issue an executive order abolishing CRT from federal agencies. Three weeks later, Trump did issue Executive Order No. 13950, taking aim at "blame-focused diversity training."

Mentions of critical race theory were climbing up. The number of stories that used the term rapidly rose in 2021, from 139 in the month of January to 158 in February, 350 in March, 381 in April, and then 1,199 in May, 2,769 in June, and 2,200 in July. All told, between January 2020 and January 2023, CRT appeared in nearly 25,000 stories. And though critical race theory previously had a specific meaning—it referred to a framework developed by legal academics to explain the role of ostensibly "color-blind" laws and institutions in perpetuating racism—to the right it came to encompass a grab bag of other notions and initiatives. Elementary school lessons on U.S. history, deans of diversity and inclusion at elite universities, socially responsible investing—all, Rufo and others alleged, were expressions of CRT.

In interviews, Rufo has described his interest in the subject as a matter of expediency. In 2021, Rufo told *The New Yorker* that the term "critical race theory" was a "promising political weapon" for conservatives. "'Critical race theory' is the perfect villain," he told reporter Benjamin Wallace-Wells. "Its connotations are all negative to most middle-class Americans ... the phrase 'critical race theory' connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American."

For someone so avowedly opportunistic, Rufo has taken some time to get his book out. Meanwhile, Fox News hosts Mark Levin and Pete Hegseth, evangelical minister Voddie Baucham, and academic hoaxer-turned-pundit James Lindsay have already published books attacking CRT that collectively sold well over one million copies. And by the end of 2022, federal, state, and local legislative and governing bodies had introduced 563 anti-CRT measures, almost half of which have been enacted or adopted.

Rufo tries to distinguish *America's Cultural Revolution* by expanding its purview. While stressing his credentials as an originator of the anti-CRT panic, he also insists that CRT is about much more than CRT. Early on, Rufo promises to show "the campaign to embed critical race theory in American life was only one facet of the radical Left's 'long march through the institutions.'" He traces the left's purported schemes to impose a "hideous" form of social control, from Herbert Marcuse's youth in Weimar Germany, to Mao Zedong's Long March to the caves of Yannan, to Angela Davis's travels in the USSR. But the interest of the book does not lie in this scattershot history. Its main interest is as an exemplar of a popular genre on the right: the adversarial intellectual history animated by envy, as well as antipathy.

Rufo's book exemplifies a popular genre on the right: the adversarial intellectual history animated by envy, as well as antipathy.

WHEN RUFO TOLD *The New Yorker* that the term "critical race theory" was an expedient enemy for conservatives, he noted the negative connotations that "most middle-class Americans" would associate with each of its component parts. These connotations have accrued for decades. In particular, they build on a long-standing conservative fixation on the school of thought known as critical theory—or, as its enemies often call it, "cultural Marxism."

The term "cultural Marxism" echoes propaganda about "cultural" and "Judeo-bolshevism" that dates back to Nazi Germany. But contemporary narratives about the dangers of critical theory coalesced in right-wing think tanks in the 1990s. By the turn of the millennium, conservative writers had consolidated the following story: After World War I, when the Western European working classes failed to follow their Russian counterparts into revolution, Marxists in the West fell into disarray. A group of primarily Jewish intellectuals gathered around the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany, in the 1920s to plot a comeback. What they came up with was a plan to attack capitalism by criticizing its culture. In the 1930s, when the Nazis came to power, members of the Frankfurt School fled to the United States, where they infiltrated government and academic institutions. After World War II, those who remained continued to undermine the country from within, by promoting anti-American philosophies like "political correctness" and disciplines like ethnic and women's studies.

From the mid-1990s onward, William S. Lind, a writer at the paleoconservative Free Congress Foundation, spread this account through a series of speeches, publications, and even a documentary film. In 2004, Lind published a book that included a compendium of cultural Marxist "profiles" with entries for Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Theodor Adorno. Versions of this pamphlet have circulated ever since, most recently through an edition self-published on Amazon in 2019. Other conservative pundits frequently offered the same narrative. Patrick J. Buchanan followed it closely in his 2002 bestseller, *The Death of the West*, and Breitbart founder Andrew Breitbart echoed it in his autobiography, *Righteous Indignation*, in 2011. Breitbart alum Michael Walsh did, too, in his 2015 book, *The Devil's Pleasure Palace*.

For decades, claims about cultural Marxism ran in the background of more mainstream debates about multiculturalism and "political correctness" (which Lind defined in his pamphlet as synonyms), while also appealing to violent extremists. In 2011, when Anders Behring Breivik murdered 69 people, including 33 children, at a summer camp in Norway, he released a 1,500-page manifesto that began with a verbatim copy of Lind's profiles and an argument about how cultural Marxism drove the "Islamic colonization" of Europe. (Breivik blended these with near quotations from Unabomber Ted Kaczynski's

1995 manifesto against technology and "leftism.") Subsequent terrorists have cited Breivik as a strong influence. Brenton Harrison Tarrant, who killed 51 worshippers at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019, wrote in his manifesto that he "took true inspiration from Knight Justiciar Breivik." Payton Gendron, the white supremacist who killed 10 Black shoppers at a Tops Friendly Market in Buffalo, New York, in May 2022, scrawled Breivik's name and the title of his manifesto, *2083*, on the assault weapon he used.

AMERICA'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION picks up where Lind's, Buchanan's, and Breitbart's accounts of cultural Marxism left off. The book opens by drawing a direct connection between the summers of 1968 and 2020. The United States in 1968, Rufo writes, "endured a long season of student uprisings, urban riots, and revolutionary violence that has provided the template for everything that followed." The effects did not manifest all at once but accrued over a long and stealthy process, culminating in 2020. A "new revolution patiently built itself in the shadows and then, after the death of George Floyd in the spring of 2020, exploded onto the American scene," he writes. "Over the subsequent decades, the cultural revolution that began in 1968 transformed, almost invisibly, into a structural revolution that changed everything."

Rufo unfolds his history of how the "critical theory of society conquered institution after institution" across four sections: Revolution, Race, Education, and Power. Each focuses on one of four "prophets of the revolution": the German political theorist Herbert Marcuse, the philosopher and activist Angela Davis, Brazilian philosopher of education Paulo Freire, and professor and civil rights lawyer Derrick Bell, whom Rufo credits with establishing the disciplines of critical theory, critical praxis, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory, respectively.

To Marcuse, Rufo attributes two core ideas. The first is that, following World War II, it became more advantageous for activists to focus on "racial conflict" instead of "class conflict," as they built an alliance between radical intellectuals and a new, racialized *lumpenproletariat*. The second is that, during the same era, radicals discovered that their most expedient way to power was to achieve "bureaucratic capture": that is, by taking over the administration of elite educational, media, and government institutions and making those institutions serve their special interests.

Rufo does acknowledge that the phrase "long march through the institutions," some version of which appears 31 times in this book, originated not with Marcuse but with the German sociologist and activist Rudi Dutschke. He goes on nevertheless to describe how Marcuse's "descendants" came to constitute a new elite of "intellectuals, bureaucrats, experts, activists, and social engineers." "All of them," he remarks condescendingly, were "lesser minds than their master." Rufo describes each of his other three "prophets" as having developed variations on Marcuse's themes. Of Angela Davis, we hear, "Marcuse theorized about the black revolution. Davis embodied it." Paulo Freire was "explicitly neo-Marxist" and initiated the "long march" of neo-Marxist ideas through public school bureaucracy, in accordance with Marcuse's plan. After claiming that Derrick Bell only received job offers from multiple law schools because they were "feeling pressure to recruit racial minorities on to the faculty," Rufo declares that "the elements of critical race theory are, in fact, a near-perfect transposition of race onto the basic structures of Marxist theory."

The effect of these thinkers on society, Rufo argues, "was almost invisible." The way their followers set about reshaping major institutions "was so gradual, so bureaucratic, it went nearly unnoticed." But the results, he believes, have been extraordinary, with "a new ideological regime" dominating "the university, the media, the state, the corporation," and through them enacting "the top-down management of private life."

In universities, Rufo writes, his prophets inspired an explosion of administrators, who came to control the ideology of these institutions "from all angles," by dictating decisions about hiring, funding, and tenure as well as admissions, designating funds for affinity spaces, and mandating diversity training for both students and employees. (A chestnut, for readers of conservative bestsellers: Rufo gives an important new supporting role to Marcuse's third wife, Erica Sherover-Marcuse, who in the 1980s "designed a series of training programs that became the prototype for university [diversity, equity, and inclusion] programs nationwide," with workshops on "'institutionalized racism,' 'internalized oppression,' and 'being an effective ally.'")

Rufo allows that, by the time Marcuse had immigrated to the United States, the New Deal had already "established the federal government as the great shaper of American life." But, he says, critical theorists transformed the state into "the primary vehicle of revolution," enforcing left-wing codes of speech and behavior and turning grant-making agencies like the National Endowment for the Arts and even the National Science Foundation into a "patronage machine for left-wing activism."

The "long march through the media," Rufo continues, "can be represented in miniature through the conquest of the *New York Times*." Citing a "veteran reporter, who requested anonymity out of fear of reprisals," Rufo claims that, since the Great Recession, a "faction of younger, ideologically driven employees" have seized control of the paper and used it to embed a set of "ideological phrases" like "systemic racism" or "police brutality" into the "public mind through the force of repetition."

It is a source of particular outrage for Rufo that even "the corporation is no longer the domain of the conservative establishment"—that during the 2020 uprisings "the CEOs of the great companies announced themselves not on the side of 'law and order,' as they had in the 1960s, but on the side of the protestors and rioters." Rufo mocks the donations that many large companies pledged to "racial equity," as well as their public statements of solidarity—like McDonald's declaring that George Floyd was "one of us" and JPMorgan Chase chief executive Jamie Dimon kneeling in protest of the national anthem. Alternately dismissing these as cynical attempts to stave off bad PR and discrimination lawsuits and lamenting the abandonment of the profit motive, Rufo likens corporate philanthropy to "protection payments"—with companies desperately giving money to keep "frivolous discrimination lawsuits" and left-wing outrage at bay.

America's Cultural Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything
by Christopher F. Rufo
Broadside Books,
352 pp., $32.00

THE MOST GENEROUS thing one could say about this history, as history, is that it is confused. Rufo struggles to establish clear links between his four main thinkers, despite positioning them as part of a single conspiracy. He can directly tie Marcuse to Davis, who studied with Marcuse at Brandeis and, later, the University of California San Diego. Other connections, however, are flimsy. Rufo notes that when Freire arrived at Harvard's School of Education in the fall of 1969, Derrick Bell was at Harvard Law School, only a few blocks away. But he offers no evidence that Freire and Bell ever met.

For the most part, Rufo relies on juxtaposition to imply connection and causality. One chapter opens with an anecdote about Joseph Stalin toasting a group of artists gathered at Maxim Gorky's house as "engineers of the human soul." Following this vignette, Rufo immediately asserts that "The Marxists in the West, such as Paulo Freire, held the same philosophy." Rufo makes no stronger attempt to substantiate the association, despite having just leaped from the USSR in 1932 to Brazil in the 1960s.

It is not worth pointing out every one of Rufo's misreadings of critical theory or critical race theory, not only because to do so is to fall into the trap of appearing like precisely the kind of scolding and divisive elite that he would say I am—but because Rufo does not appear to care. Rufo repeatedly avows that the particulars of the ideas that he is describing and the actual words their authors use *do not matter*. CRT's prophets, he believes, concealed their real ambitions in the "linguistic shell" of "codes" and "euphemisms." Rufo promises to "pierce through the shell" of their language and "describe its essence" so that his readers can "begin … seeing … with clear eyes." This project creates ample room for reinterpretation and broad generalizations, which he justifies with phrases like "in other words."

As his religious diction suggests, Rufo's project here isn't to trace an intellectual tradition through history; instead, he treats critical race theory as a shape-shifting, almost supernatural phenomenon that takes hold of people down the ages. He casts Black Lives Matter as a "reincarnation" of the Black Panthers. Protesters of 2020 are "unconsciously following" the teachings of Angela Davis; Davis herself has "put her faith in Black Lives Matter." Of the relationship between contemporary social movements and Third World liberation movements of the 1960s: "The dream is still the same dream."

The secular genre that is capacious enough to make these kinds of claims and accommodate these kinds of contradictions is the conspiracy theory. Like all successful conspiracy theories, Rufo's story contains elements of truth. It is true that radical intellectuals have sought to change the world through their writing and teaching. It is true that a small number of elite universities educate much of the ruling class, who learn to think and speak in certain ways there, as it is true that the number of administrators at those institutions has exploded since the 1960s, and that they, like most bureaucrats, tend to perpetuate and aggrandize their roles. It *is* hypocritical for corporations and banks to publicly declare that Black Lives Matter, while continuing to exploit Black workers or borrowers or lobby Republicans for tax cuts.

What is not true is that the wide range of social changes that Rufo describes is the achievement of a single, nefarious plot. Nor is it clear, even to him, that these changes constitute a real "revolution." Rufo's criticism of corporate hypocrisy points toward a contradiction at the heart of his book. Its title and many individual passages suggest that the critical theorists and critical race

To Worship

by Myronn Hardy

On Canal Street our prayer

mats are slung over our shoulders.

We're silent in our stroll the sunlight

holding us in spheres ephemeral safety.

Who protects us from this safe land?

Who kneels with us as bombs

plunge everywhere?

It's Friday in the mosque.

We're kneeling

as others drink wine.

As others

decide who we

are who

will kneel for us?

Myronn Hardy *is the author, most recently, of* Aurora Americana: Poems.

theorists under discussion have radically transformed society. But elsewhere, Rufo suggests that they have, in fact, changed very little.

"The multinational corporation has a tremendous capacity for folding the contradictions into its own machinery," Rufo writes. "The result, of course, is critical theory as farce: The ideology of the revolution passed through the human resources department." Of Black liberation, he asserts, "In one sense, the movement has achieved its goals.... The goal of substantive equality, however, has remained elusive. The black radicals might have captured the institutions, but they have not yet overturned the basic structures of society."

Rufo expresses scorn for leftists. It seems clear that for him certain kinds of people cannot make legitimate political claims—not through words and not through action. It seems equally clear that certain kinds of political change cannot take place—not really, because human nature is fixed under certain constraints, even if Rufo stops short of saying that those "constraints" include hierarchies of race and gender. The "invisible revolution," therefore, can only be a cynical one. Instead of transforming society, "critical theories," Rufo asserts, became "the new language of access." The revolution, as he depicts it, is not so much a revolution as a slightly new set of people taking charge of the same old institutions.

IN 2016, BEFORE QAnon took off and conspiracy theories became hot research topics, the political theorist Robyn Marasco published an essay on what she called "conspiratorial reason." Scholars should attend more closely to the pleasures and satisfactions of paranoia, and not just the negative feelings it involved, Marasco argued. The conspiracy theorist believes that a strong, even omnipotent, enemy is acting everywhere. Amid social crisis and government dysfunction, Marasco proposed, the fantasy that the state could function that effectively was a source of comfort as well as outrage to those who bought it. "Conspiracy theorizing," she wrote, "is a love affair with power that poses as its critique." It follows that, by saying what he says about his enemies, the conspiracy theorist tells us what he wants.

Throughout *America's Cultural Revolution*, Rufo heightens the stakes of the intellectual and institutional history that he is recounting by connecting it to scenes of violence—perpetrated by actors as various as the Black Panther Party and Weather Underground, the FBI and the Brazilian armed forces, and middle schoolers and high schoolers who joined protests in Portland and Seattle, whom he disparages as "child soldiers." But, really, the terrain Rufo wants to fight for is bureaucracy. Conflicting attitudes to bureaucracy pervade *America's Cultural Revolution*. On the one hand, Rufo condemns the left's conquest of institutions in the strongest terms. "Shedding the trappings of political extremism and symbolic excess," he writes, leftists became "more powerful than ever."

Rufo compares contemporary BLM activists to the Black Panthers and Black Liberation Army, writing that "they didn't need to engage in the messy business of stalking and assassinating NYPD detectives. Instead they could publish reports, replete with color-coded statistical illustrations, that demanded society-wide changes." Of Derrick Bell, Rufo writes that he "wanted to bring the fight out of the streets and into the faculty lounge." Rufo continues, "Bell was not a Huey Newton–style revolutionary, but something more dangerous: an institutional player who understood how to use the politics of race to manipulate the bureaucracy." He and his students "did not want to assemble bombs and set them off in the US Capitol or assassinate police officers. They wanted to create a theoretical basis for undermining the American regime as a whole."

Still, on the other hand, a strong current of admiration runs through these descriptions. Angela Davis, Rufo writes, was "shrewd." "She understood that to change a nation's metaphors is to have enormous power over its future." Derrick Bell was "brilliant"; he pulled off a "stunning coup" by creating a "stew of critical theory, postmodernism, black nationalism, and Marxist ideology" and training a cohort of elite "student-activists-cum-critical-race theorists" to make it the "default ideology" of the major institutions that shape American life. Black Lives Matter activists "perfected the technique" of shifting public opinion. For all that Rufo disparages his prophets, he accepts what he says is their theory of social change. Rufo believes a long march through institutions does effect revolution, that creating linguistic codes in elite institutions does enable "once-radical ideas" to achieve "intellectual mass." His condemnation expresses envy—and a conviction that he can adopt the tactics of his enemy.

He is doing just that. Rufo was recently appointed as a trustee of New College of Florida. The public liberal arts school in Sarasota has become a focus of national attention since Governor Ron DeSantis overhauled its board of trustees in January, replacing them with political allies—four of whom, including Rufo, were conservative activists from outside the state. The new board summarily fired New College president Patricia Okker, replacing her with Richard Corcoran, a longtime associate of DeSantis and former speaker of the Florida House of Representatives.

The new board proceeded to deny tenure to five professors who had already won approval from their faculties and the previous administration; in July, the school's interim provost reported that 36 professors had departed over the past year. Rufo publicly crowed that the new board was "shutting down low-performing, ideologically captured academic departments and hiring new faculty," and that "the student body will be recomposed over time: Some current students will self-select out, others will graduate; we'll recruit new students who are mission-aligned."

In another sign that Rufo is not averse to using the power of the state where it serves him, he brought criminal charges against a former New College student whom he accused of spitting at him during a protest in May. (Rufo later dropped the charges. The student disputes his version of events.) The student, like many others, has since left Sarasota—transferring, under an agreement, to finish their degree at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts.

How much does Rufo really abhor the top-down reshaping of public life? In the conclusion to *America's Cultural Revolution*, Rufo describes the America he hopes his counterrevolution will bring: a "patchwork republic," where "the common citizen will have the space for inhabiting and passing down his own virtues, sentiments, and beliefs, free from the imposition of values from above." But it is clear that to get to this neo-Jeffersonian vision, Rufo thinks it will be necessary to follow the path of Lenin—to seize the commanding heights of culture, education, and government. For all his denunciation of the long march through the institutions, the desire that Rufo cannot quite name is the desire to carry out a takeover of bureaucracies from the right—and call it revolution. TNR

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Shedding the Mystique

Betty Friedan's unfinished business

By Hermione Hoby

WHAT PRODS OUR feminist foremothers into the light of reappraisal? The condition of women in the world is a changing state of affairs, except of course, depressingly, in all the ways it isn't. Accordingly, the relevance of any departed feminist thinker to the present moment takes one of two forms. First, she's to be resurrected because the injustice she once delineated has been substantially overcome; we can beatify her for having slain the dragon of this or that historical inequality. In other words, we find in her a sort of relevance of irrelevance.

Second, and conversely, her claim to our attention could be based on the persistence of some particular problem. Sexual violence? Unequal pay? Or, perhaps most urgently, the assault on reproductive rights? As last year's *Dobbs* decision demonstrated, when it comes to justice, the arc of history sometimes bends right back on itself. "Relevance," in this second realm of persistent problems, often proceeds from twinned, faulty assumptions: that the only reason a person might be induced to revisit feminist thought from the '60s or '70s is for the way it speaks directly and digestibly to the now; and that the point of the exercise is only to confirm, in impotent resignation, that little has changed, things remain terrible, and we need so-and-so "now more than ever"! In this way, things collapse into gynopessimism—which holds that nothing can really alter the fundamentally subordinate status of women.

These questions—why revive her in particular, and why now?—are especially acute when it comes to a new biography of a much-biographized figure. The activist and writer Betty Friedan—who remains famous for her 1963 bestseller, *The Feminine Mystique*, and is frequently described as the mother of second-wave feminism—is often discussed in terms of the first form of relevance. Friedan is canon; she must be kept classic. Her book established a vocabulary that allowed women to articulate their own dissatisfactions: Friedan was a midcentury, middle-class, married American mother of three children; these features of her life ought to have indicated her happiness, or, to use the clarion word tolling through *The Feminine Mystique*, her "fulfillment." Instead, Friedan had been led down a dead end into well-appointed misery. This was "the problem that has no name" or *had* no name until indicted as the supposedly ennobling "mystique."

Rachel Shteir's new biography, *Betty Friedan: Magnificent Disrupter*, draws its subtitle from a speech House Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi gave in 2006, not long after Friedan's death, lionizing her and a handful of other recently deceased figures as "magnificent disrupters." "Disrupter" carries Silicon Valley associations of self-congratulatory CEOs; paired with "magnificent," it seems to partake in the kind of heroine worship that stems from an awkward American truth: that it's easier to put Ruth Bader Ginsburg's face on a pin than to dismantle the injustice of the Supreme Court as institution.

Shteir's account does not seem particularly concerned with how enduring Friedan's diagnosis remains. The author is more interested in her subject's experiences and how they shaped her approach to the world, which is a particularly appropriate mode for Friedan: "Everything I know," she once declared, "has come from my own experience." Feminism must always navigate between the predicament of females as second-class citizens (in other words, their legal status) and the less definable but acutely felt experience of being oppressed not so much by laws as by norms, expectations, attitudes. *The Feminine Mystique* is more concerned with the latter. Women are more legally emancipated than in 1963. The question is how far short of true freedom emancipation still falls.

DAVID MONTGOMERY/GETTY

BETTYE NAOMI GOLDSTEIN was born in 1921, in Peoria, Illinois, the first child of Harry and Miriam. By the time they'd had another daughter and the main event of the longed-for son, Betty's parents were beginning to find their eldest's braininess worrisome. They learned, Shteir writes in her conscientiously researched book, "that to control Betty, they had to threaten to take away her books." Her father forbade her from checking out volumes from the library because the sight of her shlepping a pile of them up the hill was "unladylike." Such censure did its damage. Later, she'd write: "I was that girl with all the As and I wanted boys worse than anything.... With all that brilliance, I saw myself becoming the old maid college teacher."

At a tender age, female intellectual achievement seemed to her incompatible with heterosexual love. It took time for Friedan to acquire the fundamental second-wave insight, that her experience was by no means shameful or anomalous, but instead a symptom of the organization of society. Meanwhile, there is a clear premonition of the radical woman author-to-be in the image of the scrappy schoolgirl who instigated "the 'Baddy Baddy' Club"—whose agitations included "a series of protests against a substitute teacher by dropping books on the floor and coughing en masse." Young Friedan disrupted, in other words, unmagnificently. Later, this baddy baddy would find worthier subjects for organized protest.

Friedan rampaged through Marx and Freud at Smith College and excelled, not yet aware that the point of the institution, as it saw itself, was to prepare young women for breeding, not thinking. Upon her graduation summa cum laude with a major in psychology, a college administrator told her mother: "Betty has the most outstanding record of any student ever matriculated at Smith." After graduation, she abandoned a prestigious psychology fellowship at Berkeley because she was in love (as she later recalled) with an intellectually inferior man who warned her, "You can take that fellowship, but you know I'll never get one like it. You know what it will do to us..." The depression that followed this decision only dissipated after she began working as a labor journalist in New York. By the mid-1950s, mother to three small children, in a periodically violent (mostly him, sometimes her) marriage (to some other jerk, not the Berkeley guy), Friedan was working sporadically as a writer for women's magazines. As such, she was less attuned to the capital-labor relation and more attuned to a different social problem, the male-female relation.

At a 15-year college reunion, she issued her classmates a questionnaire about their achievements and satisfactions, or lack thereof. The questions were arrestingly frank, the women's answers even more so, hinting at an epidemic of malaise. Galvanized, Friedan began amassing accounts from the class of people to which she belonged, the one assumed to be the nation's most contented: white, suburban, middle-class housewives. These accounts form the bedrock of *The Feminine Mystique*'s first and last chapters and helped, as futurist Alvin Toffler proclaimed upon the book's publication, to pull "the trigger on history."

Someone identified as "a Nebraska housewife with three children" who "has a Ph.D. in anthropology" provides the most painful account of domestic grind in the book. Her testimonial begins in a tone of striving ingratiation: "A film made of any typical morning in my house would look like an old Marx Brothers comedy." She then runs us through her day's harried, mindless tasks, admitting that none are "really necessary or important." Even more than the content, it's the false cheer and effortful wit ("by noon I'm ready for a padded cell") that communicate the writer's rare and desperate excitement at being tasked with something other than housework.

The "mystique" of Friedan's famous title could do with some demystifying. It refers to the notion, both gauzy and entrenched, that woman is a special sort of being, precious and to be protected from the world, which is the preserve of men. The prime argument of the book, which encompasses social science, history, and psychology, is that when kept in the prison of this mystique—in the thwarted, infantilized state of mere helpmeet, living only through her husband and children—a woman cannot be fulfilled. "Fulfillment" is hard to quantify. So often in the book it seems like a euphemism for power. Were all the wage-laboring husbands slogging off to clock in and out at offices or factories fulfilled? The postwar United States was not exactly built in utopian service to half its population and the realization of their creative, spiritual, and intellectual potential either. Later, Friedan would acknowledge that, though men had more power, they were perhaps "as damaged by the iron mask of machismo as women were by the feminine mystique." To broaden her aperture to analyze the economic conditions of gender relations would have made for a more nuanced book, but would perhaps have diluted the potency of her polemic.

The book's purview doesn't extend much beyond the lives of white, middle-class American women—her Smith classmates and people like them. Later, as founder and head of the National Organization for Women, or NOW, Friedan sought, energetically if imperfectly, to include Black and working-class women in the struggle for equality. In 1990, acknowledging the book's demographic narrowness, Friedan explained that she did not include Black women because her editor advised her "she was already taking too much on."

Betty Friedan: Magnificent Disrupter
by Rachel Shteir
Yale University Press,
384 pp., $27.00

ONE QUESTION SHTEIR'S book provokes is by what metrics we might judge feminist gains. In 1998, reflecting on the paradigm of her 1963 bestseller, Friedan described the situation of women as "defined by her relationship to a man and children—wife, mother, housekeeper, sex object, server of needs, never a person defining herself by her own actions in society." All of which now sounds mercifully quaint—if not yet extinct.

Still, we're now a sufficient distance from the figure of the unhappy housewife for her to have become more fetish than fact. Her appearances in mainstream American fictions have enshrined her as Valium-popping, vacuuming kitsch: She is Betty Draper with her pearls and ennui, or, more recently, Florence Pugh with her sundress and existential dread. Indeed, these days, the word "housewives" is more often preceded by the world "real" and refers to a global television franchise worth billions, whose stars, confusingly,

are mostly women with jobs. ("I view it as a great feminist tableau," *Real Housewives* producer Andy Cohen told *The New Yorker* earlier this year. Which is his view, but this is anybody's fact: "I'm in charge of the edit. The women of 'Housewives' are not in charge of their edit.")

Attitudinal changes do not necessarily come in harmonious lockstep with more tangible gains. As Susan Sontag wrote in 1973's "THE THIRD WORLD OF WOMEN," "... liberation means *power*—or it hardly means anything at all," and one concrete marker of power is law. Running through Shteir's book are the travails of the Equal Rights Amendment, the prime legal battleground of Friedan's life. Initially proposed in 1923, it sought to enshrine equality by ending legal distinctions between men and women in employment, divorce, and property. It had languished in Congress for nearly five decades when NOW, formed in 1966, took up the cause, lobbying elected officials for support and later making the case for ratification in writing and in the streets. The ERA's archenemy was conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly, at whom Friedan notoriously lost her cool in a 1973 debate. A decade later, Friedan characterized her readiness to anger "as a rejection of her mother's assimilated *politesse*. 'She was so unctuous on the telephone—"my dear sweet darling"—...the next thing she would say is "that bitch." As a result, I virtually say "you bitch" on the phone.'" Friedan actually, not virtually, called Schlafly a "witch" in their televised contretemps, which Shteir characterizes as "the public battle of the mothers."

Friedan's use of "witch" pales in comparison with two of the prime gaffes of her career. They've ossified into phrases that make it easy to damn her. First are the words she used to describe the domestic prison American women found themselves in: "comfortable concentration camp." Women aspiring merely to be housewives were "in as much danger as the millions who walked to their own death in the concentration camps—and the millions more who refused to believe that the concentration camps existed." It doesn't take a genius to point out that, between the death of selfhood entailed by a metaphorical prison and the nonmetaphorical deaths meted out by Nazis in real prisons, the former is preferable. Incidentally, Friedan's analogy echoes one used on the eve of World War II. In 1938, Pearl S. Buck (who that same year became the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize in literature) wrote: "An intelligent, energetic, educated woman cannot be kept in four walls—even satin-lined, diamond-studded walls—without discovering sooner or later that they are still a prison cell." The *problem that had no name* had already been named; it's just the public wasn't ready to hear it.

In 1969, four years before the American Psychological Association removed "homosexuality" from its list of mental illnesses, Friedan's hostility toward lesbians who wanted to make their identity central to NOW prompted a second notorious utterance—"the lavender menace." In a subsequent effort to politically (if not morally) justify this, she told Simone de Beauvoir: "The attempt to make political ideology out of sexual preference, out of lesbianism, has diverted energies from the political mainstream and hindered the political momentum of the women's movement." De Beauvoir (here, you can almost see a cocked, Gallic eyebrow) counters, "Well of that I'm not so sure." There followed (as memorialized in Friedan's *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women's Movement*) a prickly if polite conversation between two women struggling not to find each other strange creatures.

OSTENSIBLY, THE BIG bad daddy of *The Feminine Mystique* is Freud—whom Friedan takes to task for his "sexual solipsism," that is to say, the way in which he draws supposedly universal sexual truths from his own, circumscribed impressions. Friedan disdained his notion of "penis envy," the idea that little girls, upon discovering their lack of dangling genitals, feel themselves "castrated." Behavior that he believed to be biological was, as Friedan observes, "often a cultural reaction"—in other words, "one sees simply that Victorian culture gave women many reasons to envy men." It was, however, mommies, not daddies, who most exercised Friedan. Were it not for her difficult relationship with Miriam, Friedan believed she may not have written her revolutionary book; as a young woman, she was "determined [to] find the feminine fulfillment which had eluded my mother."

Fraught mother-daughter relationships are hardly unique to any one historical moment, but Friedan junior had come of age at a time of energetic Mommy-blaming. In 1943, Philip Wylie published the hysterical *Generation of Vipers*, decrying the destroying mothers who'd plunged his once great nation into a matriarchy in which "the women of America raped the men." But even beyond these sorts of libidinally misogynistic excesses, "mother" was a dirty word. Friedan was ambivalent, if not downright grumpy, about being called the "mother" of the movement. "Sometimes," she grouses in 1976's *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women's Movement*, "I feel like a mother with a million children all crying 'help!'" Parsing the matrophobia that simmers through *The Feminine Mystique*, Shteir writes: "Although [Friedan] never says so, this impulse toward matricide might have been more acute among Jewish women." An extraordinary statement! On which the author does not elaborate.

What an attitudinal shift we've gone through. I like to envision what Friedan might have made of the term "mother" as reimagined via queer culture and now used predominantly of cis-het white women who exude self-possession and hauteur. Cate Blanchett is Mother, Sarah Michelle Gellar is Mother, Toni Collette is Mother. Now, it seems less like we want to kill mommy than have her dom us.

As for *actual* mothers, a miasma of sentimentality blurs a clutch of shameful American truths. Consider the appallingly high maternal mortality rate of Black women, or the crippling cost of childcare, or the sexism of a medical establishment in which postnatal depression, for example, is under-researched and routinely dismissed. *Barbie*, which will fix none of this and shouldn't have to, is a movie I've now seen twice. The line that elicited the loudest sniffles in the dark each time is also the only line I hated: "We mothers stand still," murmurs a misty Ruth Handler (Rhea Perlman), creator of the doll, "so our daughters can look back to see how far they've come." Which smacks of precisely the kind of sentimentalizing "feminine" abnegation that Friedan and her successors have so righteously crusaded against.

What about a world in which none of us have to stand still? "When their mothers' fulfillment makes girls sure they want to be women...," Friedan prophesies on the penultimate page of *The Feminine Mystique*, "they can stretch and stretch until their own efforts will tell them who they are." Which prompts one more question—what about a world in which noting how far we've come is one way of seeing how far we have to go? TNR

Hermione Hoby *is author most recently of the novel* Virtue.

Night Terrors

Dream Scenario is a surreal plunge into our addled collective unconscious.

By Adam Nayman

WHEN AMERICA CLOSES its eyes at night, it sees Nicolas Cage. That's the neo-surrealist premise of Kristoffer Borgli's much-hyped new comedy, *Dream Scenario*, which gamely attempts to excavate its leading man's enduring mystique without treading into the vanity-production territory of last year's flop, *The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent*. Whereas that faux-clever film cast Cage as an idealized version of himself—a monumentally successful Hollywood star playing a personal and professional game of chicken with self-parody—here Cage appears as a meek college biology instructor whose face is inexplicably being beamed into the dreams and nightmares of friends and strangers alike.

Not that these are star turns: When it comes to the astral plane, Cage's character—a tenured biology professor named Paul Matthews—is a supporting player. "You're just *there*," recalls one dreamer of Paul's nocturnal cameo. As more and more people report seeing him, the question of what he's actually doing (or not) comes to matter less than the sheer volume of his appearances. It's a strange but workable

ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHAN BARTLETT

PHOTO REFERENCE: ZOEY KANG/A24

metaphor for viral celebrity—a state in which exposure is indivisible from importance—and a promising jumping-off point for a shivery state of the union about our anxious, addled collective unconscious.

These ideas were also present, albeit in a slightly different configuration, in Borgli's acclaimed, Oslo-set 2022 debut, *Sick of Myself*, about a young couple whose mutual desire to act out in public results in a violent and increasingly abject game of one-upmanship. Like his fellow Scandinavian provocateur Ruben Östlund, who won a pair of Palmes d'Or for *The Square* (2017) and *Triangle of Sadness* (2022), Borgli is trying to draw a bead on the inherently performative nature of modern life: to examine the yearning for recognition and its consequences, especially in the unblinking gaze of a social mediascape that's apt to bestow overbearing attention on a whim, and in the absence of anything approaching real artistic or philosophical accomplishment. The difference is that where Östlund favors broad, bombastic metaphors—like, say, a sinking luxury cruise liner becoming flooded with chunky sewage while its drunken captain quotes from *The Communist Manifesto*—Borgli likes to keep his meanings elusive, like fragments salvaged from the foggy depths of REM sleep.

AS *DREAM SCENARIO* opens, Paul is trying, in his own way, to stand up for himself: He's negotiating with a former colleague to give him credit on a paper that he believes is actively pilfering his own years of research (something about the communal habits of ants, which indicates how deeply he's dug into his own small, subterranean obsessions). It's really only at the behest of his wife, Janet (Julianne Nicholson), that Paul, who's seemingly a perfectly adequate domestic partner—and loved, if not exactly doted on, by his two teenage daughters—tries to assert himself. The unspoken implication is that Janet yearns for her husband to get his groove (or whatever he used to have) back, and yet she's the one weirded out when he achieves a kind of omnipresence.

She is uneasy when people in their circle start reporting that they've been meeting Paul on the astral plane—usually as an incongruous bystander in whatever else they're fantasizing about. All this new attention has imbued her husband with a swagger that effectively upends his nebbishy personality, turning him from a wallflower to a conversation piece, and maybe also a honeypot for female admirers drawn to his new aura (Exhibit A: a previously estranged and now quietly flirtatious ex-girlfriend).

At first, Paul handles his notoriety about as well as can be expected, modestly downplaying his role in what commentators try to frame as an anomalous psychic phenomenon. After all, it's not like he's appearing to people as a prophet or a guru—just a figure in a series of interior landscapes. The problems begin when he's approached by Trent (Michael Cera), the callow CEO of an advertising firm. Trent wants him to become the front man for a series of commercials designed to be viewed with eyes wide shut—a scheme straight out of *Inception* for monetizing the unconscious.

At this point in his career, Cage has played pretty much every character type—and archetype—imaginable, and only rarely by disappearing into his roles: Whether he's a romantic lead or an action hero; leaving Las Vegas or honeymooning there; a good cop or a bad lieutenant; supervillain or vampire (x2); an ambulance driver or a *Ghost Rider*, he's typically conspicuous as a *National Treasure*, and even a little shameless in deploying an acting style he famously called "nouveau shamanism" (which is, even for seasoned admirers, increasingly indivisible from shtick). The clever trick of his performance in *Dream Scenario*—which, for the record, is his best in a long while—is that, for maybe the first time ever, he makes himself *vague*, as if melding with the drably grayscale cinematography by Benjamin Loeb (the film was shot in Toronto, standing in for an anonymous U.S. college town; the images have an *achieved* sort of ugliness). Bleary-eyed and balding above a steel wool beard that

Pompeii

by Sylvie Baumgartel

A volcano buried Pompeii alive.
The rooves gave way.
The people breathed
In toxic gas and ash.
The lava covered them
Like thick, orange blood.
Lava from the center of the earth.
It came up to be revealed.

We can see exactly what
The bodies looked like.
Exactly how they were frozen
By the temper of the earth.
Fear, sleep, terror,
Resignation, pain.
Some clutched each other for comfort.
A man's brain was turned to glass.
The preservation of Pompeii
Is because of its violence.
That's how and why we know it.

Sylvie Baumgartel *is the author of two books of poetry,* Song of Songs *and* Pink.

almost mocks his professorial vocation, Paul never quite comes into focus, even as his presence is supernaturally amplified in every direction. When Trent tries to market him as "the most interesting person in the world," he instinctively rejects the appellation. For all his confusion over what's happening to him—and why—he doesn't see himself as remarkable.

Dream Scenario starts to change from gentle fable to caustic commentary when its protagonist is tempted into sharing his constituents' awe at his personage—a shift that leads straight toward delusions of grandeur. The highlight—if it can be called that—is an extended, cringe-inducing quasi-seduction scene at the hands of a young advertising specialist (Dylan Gelula) who's invited Paul to her apartment out of an irrepressible urge to render her dreams of him real; the sequence's myriad and troubling subtexts about sex, power, and exploitation ripen that much more when you consider how many years a beloved A-lister like Cage has spent as somebody's (and, more likely, a lot of people's) obscure object of desire. Watching Paul let himself be manipulated into a flesh-and-blood-fetish doll is troubling, especially once he starts to get off on it.

It's telling that Borgli's producer for *Dream Scenario* is the enterprising horror specialist Ari Aster. His 2023 *Beau Is Afraid* cultivates a similar patch of thematic terrain, with Joaquin Phoenix starring as a middle-aged wreck navigating the shoals of his own paranoia; done up in shlubby, shuffling sad-sack drag, Phoenix even resembles Cage. The prevailing tone in *Dream Scenario* is the same lurking, ambient dread that defined Aster's spooky breakthrough, *Hereditary* (2018), and Borgli isn't above exploding the tension with a jump scare (or three, or four). This is especially true in the long middle section, after Paul's cameos in people's dreams start turning malevolent (possibly in sync with his newly minted narcissism). Once his role goes from resembling *Where's Waldo?* to something more like *A Nightmare on Elm Street*—stalking, terrorizing, and even murdering folks in their sleep—he begins to experience the dark side of being a household face.

It's here that Borgli's script—so surefooted in the early passages—starts to wobble, sacrificing satirical coherence on the altar of easy jokes. For instance, it's funny when Trent tells Paul that he needs to lean into his newly sinister persona and maybe arrange a YouTube summit with Jordan Peterson, but it's hard to say how we're supposed to reconcile his essentially existential plight with that of a spotlight-hungry conservative ideologue, or to know whether the film is suggesting that, given a long enough timeline, every cultural hero eventually mutates into a villain—a thesis that's no more profound for being so familiar.

Of course, cogency and absurdity don't always have to go together: Some movies get better when they stop making sense. Still, if you compare Borgli's project to one of its more obvious influences, Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999), there's an important difference in approach: One of the best things about Jonze's film is its prodigious sense of detachment, the way it greets every one of screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's sweaty, spiritual-slash-science-fictional convolutions with a mild, hilarious shrug. (The same calculus applies in 2002's *Adaptation*, in which Cage was brilliant in a dual role as sibling screenwriters with different but ultimately complementary ideas about dramaturgy.) As a writer, Borgli has some of Kaufman's crazed, insinuating imagination, as well as a gift for whipping up bits of physical and psychic abjection, but his direction doesn't hold the line. There's a fine line between balancing—or even deftly blurring—multiple tones and failing to maintain one, and the palpable drag in *Dream Scenario*'s homestretch suggests that its maker can't quite get on the right side of it. The final scenes, in particular, feel misjudged, shrinking the film's dimensions to the contours of a *Saturday Night Live* sketch before a final stab at melancholy that seems to belong to another—and more sentimental—movie entirely.

Cogency and absurdity don't always have to go together: Some movies get better when they stop making sense.

THESE FLAWS ARE real, and yet there's still something about *Dream Scenario* that resonates—a feeling for our contemporary, Milkshake-ducked zeitgeist that ultimately gives its allegory about the fleeting nature of fame a bit of staying power. Having been reduced to pariah status, Paul submits to a good-faith exercise in cognitive therapy where he's invited to stare down his students, who have expressed reservations about taking his classes; the idea is that the longer they look at him, the more they'll come to recognize that his waking incarnation can't hurt them.

For a couple of tense, pressurized minutes—a small eternity—Borgli cuts between Cage, exiled in deep focus to the back of the screen, and close-ups of the twentysomething kids, whose bad vibes are memorably etched by a troupe of young actors. The split-second in which the fear seems to metastasize and go viral within the school gymnasium is the moment where *Dream Scenario* most seems to be getting at something, however inchoate, about our deep-seated need to circle the wagons against a common enemy—and how closely those impulses are related to the ones underlying exaltation and worship.

The point of the scene seems to be that we have nothing to fear but fear itself—and also that we can always use a placeholder for those terrors. Paul has arbitrarily been a feature of both nightmares and dreams. By this logic, it stands to reason that no potential avatar for our hopes is officially more authentic than the others. In other words: We could surely do worse, as a society, and as a species, than integrating Nicolas Cage into our circadian rhythms. But could we really do much better? TNR

Adam Nayman *is a critic and lecturer based in Toronto. He is the author of books on the Coen brothers, Paul Thomas Anderson, and David Fincher.*

Fully Remote

A Murder at the End of the World and the lure of isolation TV

By Phillip Maciak

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S PLAY *The Mousetrap* opened in London's West End in November of 1952. The play is an archetypal Christie mystery: A group of intimates and strangers, gathered in an isolated location, react to a recent shocking murder, all while a keen-witted detective tries to figure out which of them is the culprit. It's a timeless setup for a reason. The pressure-cooker atmosphere—the close-quarters psychological combat, the small resentments and simmering tensions, even the physical discomfort of sharing space for that long—turns ordinary murder mysteries into devilish social experiments. *The Mousetrap*, in part because of this recipe, had the longest opening run of any play in history. For nearly 70 years, it ran uninterrupted, breaking off only when the Covid-19 pandemic shut down theaters in 2020.

It's ironic that *The Mousetrap*, the ultimate lockdown drama, couldn't withstand the lockdown itself—especially since isolated, ensemble-cast murder mysteries like it have had a minor renaissance in the pandemic era. Mike White's *The White Lotus*, a study of wealthy tourists going mad on vacation, became a surprise hit in 2021. The second installment of Kenneth Branagh's actual Agatha Christie franchise, *Death on the Nile*, was a streaming sensation in 2022 (and has been quickly followed up this year by *A Haunting in Venice*). Rian Johnson offered his own spin on an Agatha Christie mystery in 2022's arch *Glass Onion*. Since 2020, M. Night Shyamalan has released two separate films with ensemble casts trapped in life-or-death puzzles at isolated holiday destinations.

None of these works is *about* Covid in a straightforward way. Rather, they are pandemic dramas in the sense that they offer an uncanny mirror image of the lockdown experience. The claustrophobic security of the quarantine "pod," the unsettling rise of "surveillance" testing, the very idea of other people as potential vectors of death to be eyed suspiciously—the pandemic era lent eerie specificity and depth to the conventional outlines of the *Mousetrap* plot. These narratives appear newly perceptive about a world transformed socially, culturally, and economically by an invisible, omnipresent threat.

This month, FX releases its own *Mousetrap*. *A Murder at the End of the World*, if you can believe it, features a group of intimates and strangers, gathered in an isolated location, reacting to a recent shocking murder, all while a keen-witted detective tries to figure out which of them is the culprit. It is, in many ways, a familiar pressure cooker. It also happens to be, so far, the best work of isolation TV I've yet seen, an epic of pandemic-era dreams and compromises.

ZAL BATMANGLIJ AND Brit Marling's difficult, delirious two-season Netflix series *The OA* was one of the unheralded masterpieces of streaming television. At once a kidnapping thriller, a metaphysical heist serial, and a cult melodrama, the show played with the space afforded by streaming, stretching run times and hopping across genres with revelatory ease. *A Murder at the End of the World*, the first show Batmanglij and Marling have made since *The OA*'s cancellation, is rather more conventionally structured in comparison, though it displays the same beguiling mix of philosophical earnestness and tender wit.

The series begins with hacker and amateur detective Darby Hart (*The Crown*'s Emma Corrin) at a bookstore reading for her debut true-crime book, *The Silver Doe*. That opening reading sets up two timelines that *A Murder* will alternate between every episode. The first tells the story of her book: In her late teens, Hart stumbles upon a series of interconnected Jane Doe murders—her father is a coroner and trained her in the family business of forensic crime scene investigation. She then begins to put the pieces together alongside Bill (Harris Dickinson), another young, punky amateur detective, whom she meets online. The two eventually fall in love, but the psychic strain of the investigation drives them apart just as they appear to solve the mystery. What precisely becomes of those lovestruck kids—their relationship, but also that teenage feeling that animates their gumshoe adventures—is itself one of the show's slowly unraveling mysteries.

The other half of the show takes place in the present. In this timeline, Darby has replaced her high school bangs with an edgy pink pixie cut and her childhood farmhouse with a postindustrial loft apartment. Her book has caught the eye of an

CHRISTOPHER SAUNDERS/FX

Elon Musk–style tech billionaire named Andy Ronson (Clive Owen) and his wife, Lee Anderson (Marling). They invite her to a kind of pop-up think-tank retreat with a handful of artists, scientists, financiers, and inventors in a remote, UFO-shaped private hotel in the glaciers of Iceland. They have also invited Bill—who is now a successful Banksy-like conceptual artist going by the name Fangs. The twists come fast and free after that reveal. There are tense, telling looks between guests; stumbled-upon scenes of secret strife; and, of course, a couple of unfathomable murders.

As Darby works to figure out what's going on in Iceland, the show intercuts her youthful exploits with Bill on the trail of those lost Jane Does. There is real romance and chemistry between Corrin and Dickinson, and the show wisely spends lots of time with their courtship in flashback. What could easily have been shortened to a few repeated scenes of the couple tousling or falling asleep on a gingham picnic blanket becomes a full-fledged parallel plot, with shades of Terrence Malick's *Badlands*. It's to Batmanglij and Marling's credit that they don't abandon that romance to the intrigues of the Icelandic noir, and it's to the spellbinding Corrin's credit that they can play so many different versions and eras of the same character, Darby's sharp eyes hardening but not dulling over time.

The whole thing plays out as a *True Detective* in the style of *Michael Clayton*—a prestige whodunit fused with a startling comedy about the nearly occult style of corporate rot. The characters often speak with ethereal poetry, as if they're mediums channeling spirit voices from beyond the veil. Lee, for instance, telling Darby that the hotel's security cameras are wireless, and thus hackable, says, "Footage of every door's camera is flying invisibly through the air, through your body, through my body right now." The slicing modern lines, grisly crime scenes, and snow-slicked plains of this series might tempt some to see an icy void at its core, but Batmanglij and Marling are romantics. Their Icelandic sublime is animated by terror and awe, ghastly magic and wonder in every sheer cliff and Wi-Fi router.

VIEWED AS A pandemic drama, *A Murder at the End of the World* is more than its depictions of isolation, surveillance, paranoia, and FaceTime. One of the show's repeated emphases is on the space and imaginative freedom that isolation can bring. One of the retreat-goers asks, in a moment of TED talk profundity, "when we have the space to contemplate the radical future of humanity, where will that take us?" The show's dark, disappointed answer is that it often brings us up against our own limitations. Instead of liberating ourselves of the norms that govern our minds and imaginations, we work to stabilize and reinforce them. Without spoiling, it's fair to say that when we eventually see Ronson's vision of "the radical future of humanity," it looks a lot like humanity's extractive, exploitative, VC-funded present.

The show is filled with case studies in the danger and allure of capitulation and compromise. Lee was once a rogue hacker, now playing trophy wife for a bloviating billionaire; an acclaimed young filmmaker who's a guest at the hotel sells his soul to collaborate with AI on his latest script; even Darby seems uncharacteristically impressed by Ronson's wizardly tricks at first. In fact, one of the show's funniest, knottiest bits is Darby's budding partnership with Ronson's generative AI Ray, who's accessible via voice command in nearly every scene. They have a sort of gothic meet-cute in Darby's cavernous loft that ends with Ray delivering a genuinely sweet, disarming monologue about Lisa Simpson. By the third episode, Ray is Watson to Darby's Sherlock, a confidant who provides her with a bottomless source of information and an invaluable sounding board in a lonely place. It's enough to make us forget that Ray is everywhere, with everyone, part and parcel of whatever evil Darby's trying to uncover.

That easy slide into complacency and credulity—even for our unflappable kid sleuth—is at the heart of whatever pandemic-era profundity this show has to offer. *A Murder at the End of the World* isn't merely a restaging of our lockdown dramas, it's a sometimes laughably broad, sometimes surgical dissection of the squandered social opportunities of the Covid era.

Rachel Greenwald Smith wrote, in her 2021 book, *On Compromise*, "The pandemic is revolutionary, even if it is brutally so. It makes the impossible possible." For a few months there, a society built around a spirit of mutual care and responsibility seemed possible. Yet this radical vision of the future collapsed as soon as it could, swallowed up by the uncompromising demand for "essential" workers, the fatigue of all that earnestly performed empathy, and the sucking maw of conspiracy. Ronson's insistence on continuing his hollow Ideas Festival—and the group's ready compliance with that, even after a member of the party is murdered—is all the pandemic allegory the show needs. Who ever let a little death get in the way of an in-person meeting or a new way to make money?

IT'S HARD, IT seems, to make art that responds to cataclysmic world events in real time. Many of the most direct attempts to represent the strange rituals and anxieties of the pandemic fell flat. The long-running series that didn't ignore the pandemic tended to their Covid storylines with the same commitment of people who wore masks under their noses; numerous films and series tried to utilize the Zoom grid to thudding effect; a handful of horror filmmakers used the pandemic as a way to contrive new slasher scenarios. But, by and large, nothing transcendent has come out of these quickie attempts to represent the upheaval of recent years.

Some of the best, most searching and even cathartic works of art about contemporary cataclysms—Spike Lee's 2002 *25th Hour* and Claire Messud's 2006 novel, *The Emperor's Children*, come to mind—render those events obliquely, or even not at all. *The White Lotus* and Hercule Poirot and Benoit Blanc, for all their frivolity, told us more about the social experience of the pandemic than any number of Very Special Episodes about ventilators or anti-vaxxers.

These series are not just distant shadow plays of our anxieties. Streaming TV is a medium we live with intimately, paced to the rhythms of our days; the things we choose to watch and the way we choose to watch them are expressive, not in a creative way, but in an almost confessional one. In the mousetrap or at the end of the world, anyone can be guilty, everyone can be guilty. There's beauty and terror, and there are meetings, long hikes, video calls, and PowerPoint presentations and human beings delivering food at your door in the cold. The bodies keep piling up anyway, and we ask ourselves: "Whodunit?" TNR

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Res Publica
by Win McCormack

The Netanyahu Betrayal

How he subverts Israel's best aspirations

This column was created in order to promulgate civic republicanism, a political philosophy originating in ancient Athens and Rome. The philosophy calls for individuals to look out for the general interest of their community, or polity, beyond their own individual concerns. An alternative term for the philosophy is communitarianism, and its first major exponent was Aristotle, who viewed the city-state, or polis, of Athens as an extension of the family.

Political scientist Daniel Elazar thinks the basic values of civic republicanism have been embedded in Jewish political culture since ancient times. Elazar points to the Torah's principal requirements for a viable Jewish polity: It must be just, and pursue justice as an end in itself; it must provide succor to the less fortunate members of society; and it must be based on the consent of the governed, requiring their active participation in the governing process. Elazar compares Jews to the Swiss, who, he says, also "have emphasized individual liberty within the community, not apart from it." And in an article entitled "JEWISH REPUBLICANISM," which explores the underlying political philosophy of David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding leader, Israeli academic Nir Kedar offers a somewhat different take on the relation between individual liberty and communal solidarity. In early times, he notes, republicanism emphasized the absolute necessity for strong, cohesive communities if humans were to subsist and thrive; but after the emergence of philosophical liberalism in the seventeenth century, with its heavy focus on individual freedom, the role of the res publica needed to be reconceptualized. It was David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding father, he says, who proposed *mamlakhtiyut,* or "civic consciousness," as the mechanism for integrating the two polarities. Ben-Gurion (himself a socialist) told the organizers of the socialist kibbutzim, "The kibbutz will succeed only if it … always thinks of the individual in the kibbutz … his uniqueness and individuality."

I write all this preparatory to examining two key parts of the career of Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu, raising the question of the degree of his commitment to the creed of republicanism that Elazar and Kedar believe so fundamental to a deeply rooted Jewish political culture. The Israeli police began an investigation of Netanyahu and his political associates in 2016, and he was officially indicted in 2019 for breach of trust, bribery, and fraud. His trial commenced in May 2020, with witness testimony starting in April 2021. The prosecutor listed 333 witnesses, and a number of the prime minister's associates agreed to testify against him. The criminal trial is still in progress, with Bibi facing a total of three criminal cases alleging corruption. His plan for weakening the power of the judiciary is believed to stem in part from the possibility that the Israeli Supreme Court might rule on the charges against him, but also from the fact that his right-wing extremist followers and cabinet members find the court too liberal. His campaign to weaken the judiciary led to a series of street protests ever growing in size and frequency; many members of the military were especially incensed, and some reservists were threatening not to show up for duty if the judicial reforms passed, leaving the country more vulnerable to mayhem than it would otherwise have been when Hamas launched its October 7 attack.

Now let's take a look at Bibi's entry into the Israeli political sphere in the second half of the 1990s, keeping in mind that he entered as a member of the Likud Party, which descended from the Irgun, a quasi-terrorist organization that operated in Palestine prior to the creation of Israel. In 1991, at a conference in Madrid, a peace process had been set in motion and was proceeding apace, achieving along the way the properly renowned Oslo Accords. In 1995, serious efforts at economic cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian entrepreneurs got underway, and Israelis began looking forward to gambling in Jericho when the casino under construction there opened for business. However, there were also people on both sides who fervently didn't want this reconciliation, including Israel's right-wing and religious zealots. The 1995 elections were impending, and Likud was running Netanyahu against Yitzhak Rabin, a distinguished Israeli general who had set the peace process in motion and pushed it this far, but who was now labeled a traitor by fundamentalist rabbis. Chilean writer Daniel Matamala has described Netanyahu as leading a march "staged as a funeral procession for the prime minister, complete with a hanging rope and a coffin." As Rabin was leaving a Tel Aviv peace rally several months later, ultranationalist Yigal Amir shot him dead. The BBC called this "the most successful assassination in history."

Shimon Peres succeeded Rabin as the Labor Party's candidate for prime minister, and seemed a cinch to win, until—you guessed it—Hamas attacked Israel in the months leading up to the election, terrifying the Israeli public into voting for Bibi. His margin of victory was thin, and Ehud Barak, another distinguished Israeli general, displaced him in the following election. In 2000, before he left office, President Bill Clinton worked feverishly to persuade Barak and Yasir Arafat to sign on to a peace agreement negotiated by envoy Dennis Ross. Barak quickly assented, but Arafat dithered and subsequently launched the second intifada. Bibi returned to the position of prime minister in 2009, and has been in power on and off ever since.

What conclusions should we draw from all this? First, those who say a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is impossible are likely wrong, since it has come close to happening twice before (thrice if you wish to count the rejected U.N. offer of a state to Palestinians in 1947). Second, Bibi Netanyahu is a scoundrel, whose actions in this sphere have been deleterious to his nation's true interests. He is as far as a person can get from the republicanism Daniel Elazar says is immanent in Jewish political culture. TNR

ABIR SULTAN/POOL/AFP/GETTY

THE NEW REPUBLIC

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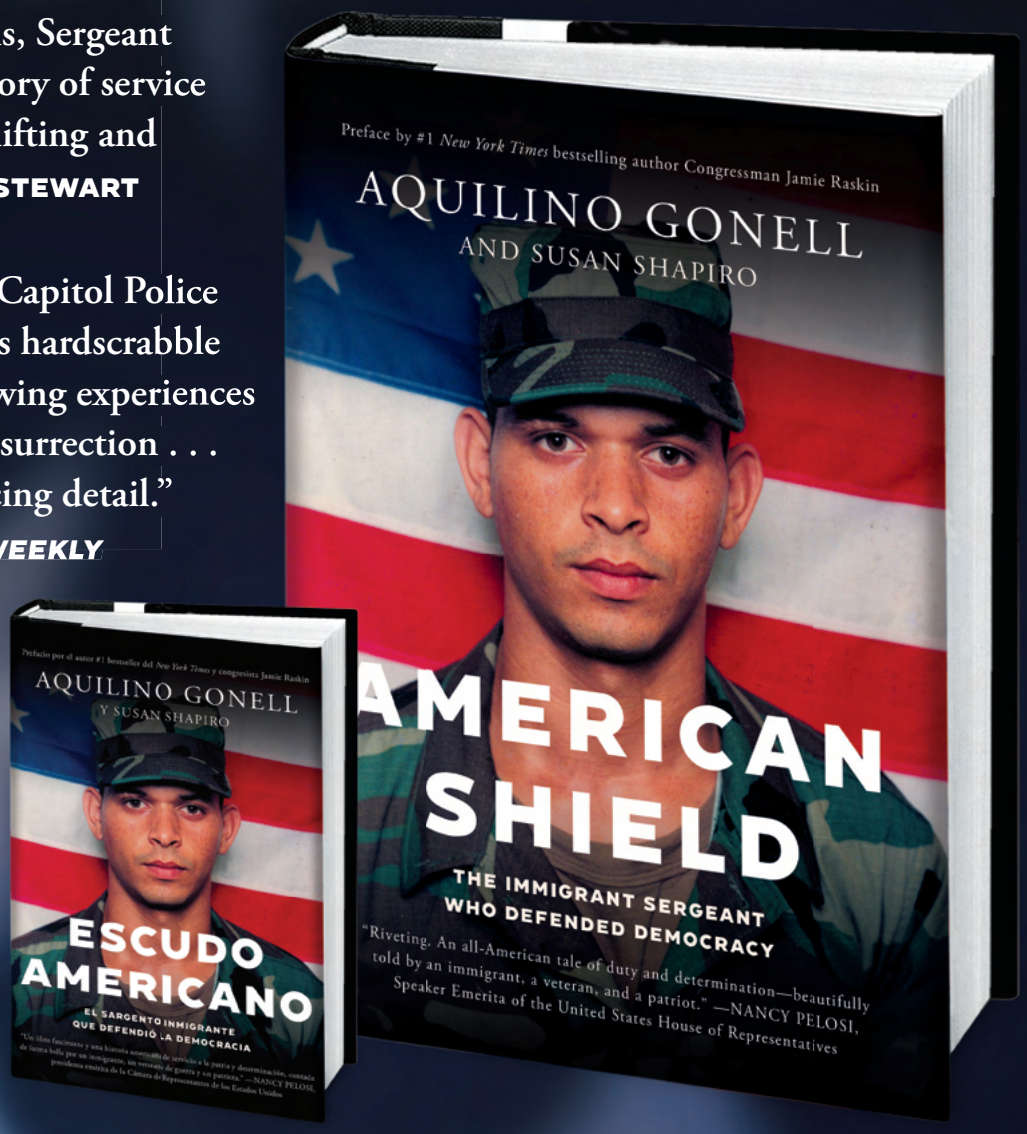

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