American Fascism

WHAT IT WOULD LOOK LIKE

A SPECIAL REPORT

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Tracy Rosenthal
Rent Control Now!
How Joe Biden can help fix the nation’s chronic housing problem—and win the 2024 election
Charlie Dulik

Wars Inc.
Weapons contractors are raking in billions from America’s support for Israel and Ukraine. It’s time to rein them in.
Indigo Olivier

Never Forget

Flock of Lies
What the spoof conspiracy theory Birds Aren’t Real tells us about misinformation
Ian Beacock

Survival Skills
The climate crisis is already changing parenting.
Anna Louie Sussman

The Plot Against Venezuela
How catastrophic U.S. foreign policy boosted corporate profits
Raina Lipsitz

The Temptations of Prehistory
Can study of the deep past answer fundamental questions about humanity?
Udi Greenberg

Into the Abyss
The quiet eco-horror of Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s Evil Does Not Exist
Adam Nayman

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The Sympathizer is a spy thriller of rare political and stylistic sophistication.
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Rent Control Now!

How Joe Biden can help fix the nation’s chronic housing problem—and win the 2024 election

By Charlie Dulik
Illustration by Pete Reynolds

ONE OF THE Biden administration’s most consequential housing policies is one practically nobody is talking about. It hasn’t been mentioned on the campaign trail, on social media, or by the White House, or even at all, outside of a dense Department of Housing and Urban Development press release and one brief quote in The Washington Post.

Even with little fanfare, the implementation of a 10 percent cap on rent increases for the 2.6 million apartments receiving funding from the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, or LIHTC, represents a significant development in federal housing policy. Though far too high, the cap amounts to an embrace of rent control and—crucially—the president’s ability to advance it.

On housing, President Joe Biden has announced measures to target bad actors, increase supply, and boost new home-ownership—policies with merit, but ones lacking the speed and scope to alleviate the rental crises faced by a massive chunk of Americans. For that, he must continue in the spirit of the LIHTC rent cap and go even bolder: fighting outright for rent control.

Rents are up over 20 percent since Biden took office. Renters comprise just over a third of all Americans, and more than half of those households (upward of 22 million) are now rent-burdened, meaning they pay over 30 percent of their income toward rent and...
Utilities, according to the most recent data from the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, over 20 percent of renter households report severe rent burden, paying over 50 percent of their income in rent. Only 30 percent of renters say they can easily meet their housing costs, only slightly more than the 22 percent who report skipping meals in order to make their monthly payments. Meanwhile, homelessness is at an all-time high and evictions are surging. Rent, along with gas prices, accounted for over half of the increase in inflation just this March.

The persistence of high housing costs likely contributes to the mysterious “vibecession”—the gap between the economy’s relative strength (with low unemployment and high growth) and its weak public perception. A February survey from Redfin showed that housing affordability made nearly two-thirds of both homeowners and renters feel negatively about the economy, while 53 percent of Americans say housing affordability is shaping their electoral choice in November.

It’s no coincidence that the crisis most acutely hits the electoral demographics that Biden is struggling the most to win—nonwhite and young voters. Over 50 percent of Black and Hispanic renters suffer rent burdens, and, according to research from Zillow, 52 percent of Gen Z and 57 percent of millennial renters believe they would need to hit the lottery to be able to buy a home.

In response, the administration has sought to brand housing policy as “a key pillar of Bidenomics.” Recent speeches and media hits have highlighted the issue, and this year’s State of the Union broke new ground by directly addressing renters. Beyond messaging, the president has also pushed a number of small-scale housing programs.

In May 2022, the administration released a Housing Supply Action Plan, an assortment of no-cost new construction incentives. Seven months later, his administration turned to more immediate tenant issues, announcing a Blueprint for a Renters Bill of Rights, an assortment of no-cost new construction incentives. Seven months later, his administration turned to more immediate tenant issues, announcing a Blueprint for a Renters Bill of Rights, a nonbinding list of policy recommendations for local governments.

Last July, the administration announced concrete steps to ensure “all renters have an opportunity to address incorrect tenant screening reports,” and that they “are given fair notice in advance of eviction.” He also vowed his administration would fight rental “junk fees” and “crack down on big corporations” that price-fix rents, like RealPage, a software company that uses algorithms to coordinate mass-scale rent hikes. Most

significant, limited as it may be, is of course the LIHTC rent cap, made official on April 1.

“It’s the first time that this administration, or any in recent history, has considered using a federal subsidy to introduce an annual rent cap,” said Tara Raghuveer, director of the National Tenant Union Federation and founder of KC Tenants, the citywide tenant union in Kansas City, Missouri. Due to the high cap, “It’s a partial win, but it is a materially significant one.”

Together the administration’s policies are positive steps. They also don’t do nearly enough to tame the rental crisis. Regulations like addressing unfair tenant screening practices and cracking down on algorithmic price-fixing are good but limited and fail to attack the core of the rental issue. “Of course, we want to look at bad actors, but we also can’t just assume that the only bad actors are ones that are using AI. There are plenty of landlords out there and property management systems who are egregiously increasing rents unrelated to RealPage,” said Tram Hoang, senior associate with national research group PolicyLink.

The country desperately needs more rental units priced for low-income tenants—the National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates the country is currently short 7.3 million affordable and available rental homes—but even if Biden’s proposed incentives for new construction passed Congress, it would be years until they make an impact. Even a supply-side success story like Minneapolis, which after incentivizing new construction has seen rent increases slow, only saw results after several years of construction, and mostly for the higher end of the market.

Home-buying assistance, meanwhile, suffers from a scope issue. Relatively meager tax credits may help some first-time buyers enter into the most popular version of housing cost control to ever exist: the 30-year mortgage. Good for them, but the tens of millions who remain renters need and deserve equally stable housing.

More than any other policy, the administration’s LIHTC rent cap points toward the possibility of immediate relief. Hoang sees the administration’s steps to cap rents in LIHTC buildings as a “sign of the Biden administration recognizing its power and using that power to regulate rents.” The logic of “we can regulate rents in buildings that get federal tax credits” can easily be extended.

The Biden administration can immediately extend that logic to the Federal Housing Finance Agency, or FHFA, which oversees Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the

TRAGEDY

In late June, in an interview with the Financial Times, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that Western-style liberalism is “obsolete.” He was, of course, dancing on the grave of the ideology, which has been at the center of Western political and economic leadership since the end of World War II. When asked about Putin’s comments, however, Donald Trump interpreted it a different way. “It’s so sad to look at what’s happening in San Francisco and a couple of other cities which are run by an extraordinary group of liberal people,” he said. “I don’t know what they’re thinking.” No one even wears flowers in their hair anymore.

FARCE

A day after Putin’s Financial Times interview appeared in print, Trump and the Russian dictator met at the G20 summit in Osaka, Japan. During a brief interaction, the two leaders joked about Russian interference in the 2016 election and bonded over their shared hatred of journalists. “Get rid of them,” Trump said to Putin, who has overseen a brutal crackdown on the free press. Dozens of journalists, including the intrepid investigative reporter Anna Politkovskaya, have been murdered in Russia since Putin came to power in 1999. “Fake news is a great term, isn’t it?” Trump said. “You don’t have this problem in Russia, but we do.”
government-sponsored enterprises that do $150 billion worth of business with landlords a year.

“Many landlords’ business models are contingent on rent hikes: They’re overleveraged. They can’t pay down their mortgages unless they raise the rent and/or evict current residents,” said Raghuveer. “In many ways, Fannie and Freddie enable and encourage some of the worst practices in the real estate market. We want to see a uniform set of regulations, including rent caps, attached to Fannie and Freddie financing. If you benefit from federally backed financing, you should be subject to those terms.”

Whereas LIHTC covers 2.6 million apartments, the FHFA covers loans to over 12 million units, nearly a quarter of the country’s total rental housing stock. In a public comment period that closed last July, thousands of tenants along with 17 senators urged the FHFA to institute a 3 percent cap on these units. With the administration embracing immediate and retroactive caps on all LIHTC buildings, there is no excuse not to expand control to all federally financed landlords.

Conditioning FHFA loans would have a far-reaching impact. It is, crucially, something Biden can immediately implement unilaterally. And rent control works, now. It creates immediate stability and affordability with unrivaled speed and scale. It’s also cost effective—while it requires an administrative apparatus, it would be far cheaper than other proposals. Despite the protestations of Milton Friedman acolytes who famously denigrate it as “the fastest way to destroy a city, other than bombing,” studies have shown that rent control does not decrease housing production, as HUD noted in its LIHTC rent cap announcement, nor is it the chief cause of rent hikes in unregulated apartments.

“There are a lot of parallels to the minimum wage narrative—the majority of economists opposed it, and since then we’ve had an empirical revolution, the data now shows how minimum wage works,” Hoang explained. In evidence of that changing orthodoxy, more than 30 economists signed a letter to the FHFA backing rent control.

While a legislative push for national rent control (like Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s A Place to Prosper Act) would be dead on arrival in Congress, a “messaging bill” could have legitimizing effects for local campaigns. Appointing a strong tenant advocate as HUD secretary could lead to bolder action on rent control and tenants’ rights. Most tangibly, an executive branch push for the policy, perhaps similar to the small, nonlegislative incentives promised to municipalities in the Housing Supply Action Plan, weak as they are, could have concrete effects—boosting ongoing rent control campaigns in 15 states, including key electoral targets like Arizona, Nevada, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, all of which Biden won in 2020 by under 3 percent.

“Anything that’s being proposed in Congress right now does have an impact,” Hoang said. “There’s a feedback loop with these local and state campaigns and the federal government. [Federal action] gives credibility.”

Rent control is popular, too—a national poll in 2019 saw 58 percent of voters in favor, 17 percent against—and that’s before the Covid-supercharged spike in rent burden. The policy has even been backed by labor—like the powerful Culinary Union in Nevada—and also has racked up recent wins in purplish states like Maine and Minnesota, with similar
efforts clearing the Colorado legislature. To win reelection, Biden desperately needs young voters and people of color to turn out in huge numbers, particularly in major cities in swing states like Michigan and Pennsylvania.

Voters like Teresa Diaz, a 67-year-old part-time medical research assistant in Detroit, whose out-of-state landlord proposed jacking up her rent nearly 30 percent, will help decide the 2024 election. Unable to afford moving costs and legally unprotected due to Michigan’s ban on rent control, she was able to negotiate it down to an increase of about 12 percent, but high housing costs are causing financial stress and contributing to her delayed retirement. Though Diaz plans to vote for Biden, even a small drop among tenants like her could jeopardize his success in the state.

Of course, the power of the real estate lobby is, as Biden might quip, “not a joke.” The National Association of Realtors alone spent $134 million on lobbying in 2022 and 2023. Sparking their ire in an election year could create internecine conflict within a party home to both big landlords and precarious tenants and is likely the reason the administration has stayed relatively quiet about the LIHTC rent cap thus far. But avoiding that conflict could be worse. “People are hurting, and some of their deepest pain is around rent. People need relief that they can feel when they pay their monthly bills. In an election year, this matters a lot,” said Raghuveer. “For too long, the real estate lobby has dominated every aspect of policymaking, buying the outcomes that maximize their profits.”

By embracing rent control, the president can portray himself as someone fighting for America’s working class in yet another battle against corporate greed. Even starker economic contrast with Donald Trump, the country’s most famous landlord, wouldn’t hurt either. And he wouldn’t be the first president to take this action. FDR and Harry Truman oversaw national rent control for much of the 1940s. Even Richard Nixon, facing high inflation and an unpopular, brutal proxy war, once implemented broad price controls, including a brief national rent freeze through the Cost of Living Council, or CLC, a now-defunct body headed at the time by Donald Rumsfeld.

Even contemporary critics credited it as a popular maneuver that helped tame inflation. As a conservative appointee (and critic) of the CLC wrote, “[Nixon] had dramatically turned the nation’s pessimism into short-term optimism, which established an image of action,” and after Nixon’s 1972 reelection, his opponent, Senator George McGovern, even said these controls were a significant reason why Nixon was “unbeatable.”

Ultimately, the concentrated power of private landlords over tenants creates a permanent state of insecurity that can only be truly alleviated by deep investments in alternative housing models, like that of Vienna, where over two-thirds of the population live in high-quality affordable public housing. Biden should look to recent proposals to increase supply of social housing, a model already successful and popular just outside D.C. But for immediate, widespread, effective policy, and savvy electoral politics, Biden now must heed the calls of organized tenants across the country, and turn to a tried, true, and popular policy: rent control.

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“The storming of the Capitol, the prosecution of Donald Trump, and the battle over abortion. Can America end its ongoing war with itself?” —The Washington Post
LAST FALL, PRESIDENT Joe Biden began using a phrase first deployed by Franklin D. Roosevelt a year before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. In a 1940 radio address, Roosevelt deemed the United States the “arsenal of democracy”: At the time, the United States wasn’t yet sending troops to Europe to repel the Nazis, but its industrial capacity was key to the fight against fascism. In February, while calling on Congress to pass a $95 billion military aid package for Israel, Ukraine, and Taiwan, Biden insisted that it was necessary to reaffirm the nation’s role as the “arsenal of democracy.” When the Senate approved the aid package in April, Biden insisted it was good foreign and domestic policy. “While this bill sends military equipment to Ukraine,” he said in February, “it spends the money right here in the United States of America in places like Arizona, where the Patriot missiles are built; and Alabama, where the Javelin missiles are built; and Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Texas, where artillery shells are made.”

As it sold the legislation to skeptics in the House, the Biden administration pushed a familiar narrative: Military spending, which takes up more than half of the federal discretionary budget, helps boost the economy. His administration has even distributed a map showing which states benefit from weapons shipments to Ukraine. But a huge portion of the $95 billion aid package, which was signed by Biden on April 24, will end up benefiting a handful of enormous arms manufacturers who spend millions lobbying Congress to ensure that federal military spending continues to flow. As Biden pushes Congress to send more weapons to Ukraine and Israel, calls for greater oversight and accountability into an industry that has become synonymous with waste, fraud, and corruption have grown louder.

Beginning in February, Senator Bernie Sanders has been leading the call to reinstate the World War II-era Truman Committee to investigate war profiteering and put an end to “corporate welfare.” A bipartisan congressional committee could, according to Sanders, “rein in defense contractors, closely oversee military contracts, and take back excessive payments.” He has made the Stinger missile the centerpiece in his case for more oversight.

Within the first 48 hours of Russia’s invasion, the missile became “the star of the show,” according to one executive at Raytheon. These missiles had been out of production for two decades, yet the United States has sent roughly 2,000 anti-aircraft Stingers from its stockpiles to Ukraine over the last two years. While one missile cost $25,000 in 1991, it costs taxpayers $400,000 to build today. Raytheon, now RTX Corporation, is its sole producer and stands to gain hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue as it ramps up Stinger production.

“These are companies that have one client, and that’s the U.S. government,” said Matt Duss, executive vice president of the Center for International Policy and a former foreign policy adviser to Sanders. “The enormous amount of money they’re extracting from taxpayers is a way into what needs to be a broader discussion about the dominance of our political system by wealthy interests.”

The Pentagon has failed six consecutive audits and has been unable to account for over half of its assets, yet Biden in December signed a defense bill of nearly a trillion dollars. But relatively little of this money is finding its way to workers—nor, for that matter, is it being spent on weapons production. Last year, the Defense Department released the first comprehensive review of contract financing since 1985 and found that cash paid to shareholders in dividends and stock buybacks was up 73 percent compared to the previous decade. At the same time, the industry has seen a steady decline in investments in research, development, or productive capacity. This is due, in part, to extreme consolidation in the industry. In the last 30 years, the number of the Pentagon’s prime contractors has shrunk from 51 companies to just five. The Defense Department’s own reports have said that this consolidation poses a risk to national security. In March, Senator Elizabeth Warren and members of the Senate Armed Services Committee echoed these concerns in a letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, urging him to reform the industry’s mergers and acquisitions practices.

Wars Inc.

Weapons contractors are raking in billions from America’s support for Israel and Ukraine. It’s time to rein them in.

By Indigo Olivier

Illustration by Katie Martin
Austin is also an embodiment of the challenges that progressive lawmakers face in making substantive changes. Prior to assuming his role, Austin served as a board member for Raytheon, which also employed his predecessor, Mark Esper, as a weapons lobbyist. At least a dozen lawmakers “own stock or have some other direct financial investment in the defense industry,” according to the Project on Government Oversight. A 2022 report found that members of the Armed Services Committee traded more stocks than those of any other congressional committee.

The potential conflicts of interest posed by those who oversee defense policy and their investments in the defense industry further undermine the public’s faith in Congress, which now stands at the lowest it’s been since 2015.

In February, Representative Rashida Tlaib introduced a bill called the Stop Politicians Profiting From War Act to prohibit members of Congress or their spouses from owning or trading defense stocks, practices that raise urgent questions about the motivations behind legislative decision-making and budgetary priorities. “The American people deserve representatives who vote in the best interest of our country and our families, not their stock portfolios,” Tlaib said.

However, efforts to constrain defense contractors and address conflicts of interest within Congress have faced formidable obstacles in the past. Defense spending is embedded in nearly every congressional district and is guarded by a powerful lobby that has often successfully resisted even minor reforms.

Previous attempts to introduce transparency and meaningfully reduce military spending have so far been unable to pass Congress. Efforts to address war profiteering in the wake of America’s invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq went nowhere, even when pushed by moderate Democrats. But there are signs that the consensus on defense spending is breaking down.

Amid growing disillusionment with America’s role in Ukraine and Israel, public opinion reflects a bipartisan desire to address unchecked defense spending. A recent survey from Data for Progress found that an 80 percent majority of likely voters believe increases to the defense budget should be conditioned on the Pentagon’s ability to pass an audit. Several polls have found that an overwhelming majority support a ban on stock trading for members of Congress.

As Biden navigates these turbulent political waters, his administration’s ability to pivot from the rhetoric of democratic arsena to tangible, equitable economic benefits will be critical. Public disapproval of Biden’s handling of foreign policy and the economy underscores the imperative to reassess budget priorities, rebuild trust in Congress, and present a vision of a government that prioritizes the welfare of the country over the interests of private companies. Biden would do well to listen to the oft-repeated advice handed down to him from his father: “Don’t tell me what you value. Show me your budget, and I’ll tell you what you value.”

Indigo Olivier is a reporter-researcher at The New Republic.

In 2023, Senator Warren reintroduced the Stop Price Gouging the Military Act with bipartisan support, following a CBS investigation that found “contractors overcharge the Pentagon on almost everything.” The bill addresses loopholes in the acquisition process, ties financial incentives to performance, and increases transparency in pricing. Debates over defense spending have also emerged in recent years during budget negotiations.

Even without congressional support, the president has a significant amount of authority to direct his Cabinet to address issues of waste and abuse. Biden campaigned on ending the “forever wars” but is instead facing criticism for perpetuating the same patterns of opaque defense spending and circumvention of congressional oversight that characterized previous administrations.

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WHAT

American fascism

WOULD LOOK LIKE
“NO, NO,” SOME ADMONISH: “Don’t get carried away. Sure, Donald Trump is dangerous, perhaps uniquely so. But ... fascist? The need to label him a fascist says more about the labeler than about Trump.” This argument has sprung from certain quarters of the right, which was to be expected, but it has also sprouted from the left, where a point of view has arisen that the “hysterical” invocation of the F-word is as much a danger as Trump.

We have trouble seeing the hysteria. We chose the image on the cover of this issue for a precise reason: that anyone transported back to 1932 Germany could very, very easily have explained away Herr Hitler’s excesses and been persuaded that his critics were going overboard. After all, he spent 1932 campaigning, negotiating, doing interviews—being a mostly normal politician. But he and his people vowed all along that they would use the tools of democracy to destroy it, and it was only after he was given power that Germany saw his movement’s full face.

Today, we at The New Republic think we can spend this election year in one of two ways. We can spend it debating whether Trump meets the nine or 17 points that define fascism. Or we can spend it saying, “He’s damn close enough, and we’d better fight.” We unreservedly choose the latter course. And so we have assembled herein some of our leading intellectual historians of fascism; a member of the fourth estate who learned firsthand what the Trump lash feels like; a leading expert on civil-military relations; a great Guatemalan American novelist with a deep understanding of immigrants’ lives; one of our most incisive cultural critics; and a man with all-too-real experience in living under a notorious authoritarian regime. The scenarios they describe are certainly grim. We dare you to say, after reading these pieces, that they are impossible.—Michael Tomasky

Illustrations by Jeffrey Smith
Politics and Government

THE PERMANENT COUNTERREVOLUTION

By Ruth Ben-Ghiat

“DOES FASCISM INTEND to restore state authority or subvert it? Is it order or disorder? Can you be conservatives and subversives at the same time?” Six months before the March on Rome in October 1922, when Benito Mussolini was the head of the Fascist Party and its decentralized militia movement, he isolated the contradictions at the heart of fascism that remain fundamental to authoritarianism today.

During his 21 years in power, 18 of them as dictator, Il Duce framed fascism as a revolution of reaction against the left, against liberal democracy, and against any group that threatened the survival of white Christian civilization. Carrying out a violent destabilization of society in the name of a return to social order and national tradition, fascism pioneered the autocratic formula in use today of disenfranchising and repressing the many to allow the few to exploit the workforce, women’s bodies, the environment, and the economy.

Trumpism is in this tradition. It started in 2015 as a movement fueled by conservative alarm and white rural rage at a multiracial and progressive America. It continued as an authoritarian presidency envisioned as “a shock to the system” that unleashed waves of hate crimes against nonwhites and non-Christians. It culminated in the January 6 assault on the Capitol, which was a counterrevolutionary operation in the spirit of fascism. Its goal in deploying violence was not just to keep Donald Trump in office, but to prevent the representatives of social and racial progress from taking power.

PROJECT 2025 AS COUNTERREVOLUTION

THE FASCISTS BELIEVED that you have to destroy to create, and this is what a second Trump administration would do. Project 2025 is a plan for an authoritarian takeover of the United States that goes by a deceptively neutral name. It preserves Trumpism’s original radical intent in its goals to “[d]ismantle the administrative state” and “decentralize and privatize as much as possible,” allowing the American people to “live freely.” “[T]he Trump administration, with the best of intentions, simply got a slow start,” Heritage Foundation head Kevin Roberts told The New York Times in January. “And Heritage and our allies in Project 2025 believe that must never be repeated.” The solution to this “slow start”—code for the restraints imposed by operating in a democracy—is counterrevolution.

The plan promises the abolition of the Department of Education and other federal agencies. The intent here is to destroy the legal and governance cultures of liberal democracy and create new bureaucratic structures, staffed by new politically vetted cadres, to support autocratic rule. So new agencies could appear to manage parents’ and family rights, Christian affairs, and other pillars of the new order. The Department of Health and Human Services is poised to have a central role in governance, given the priorities Trumpism places on policing sexuality, weaponizing motherhood, persecuting transgender people and LGBTQ communities, and criminalizing abortion.

During Trump’s presidency, far-right Roman Catholic attorney Roger Severino headed the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Health and Human Services, transforming it into an office that prioritized the protection of the rights of white Christians and the “natural family.” During his tenure, the department banned the use of the words “fetus” and “transgender” in government communications and made other moves long embraced by evangelical Christians and their far-right allies in politics. In the future, this office could be elevated into an autonomous entity. Appropriating civil rights for white Christians furthers the Trumpist goal of delegitimizing the cause of racial equality while also making Christian nationalism a core value of domestic policy. Doing away with the separation of church and state is the goal of many architects of Trumpism, from Project 2025 contributor Russ Vought to far-right proselytizer Michael Flynn, who uses the idea of “spiritual war” as counterrevolutionary fuel.

Even if the Department of Education is abolished, some other entity would appear to take its place, since it is unlikely that the task of undoing liberal democratic models of pedagogy would be left entirely to individual states. Not everyone will be able to homeschool their children—the preferred extremist option, since it removes children from exposure to the multifaith and multiracial environments of public schools. It is not so far-fetched to imagine the special Bible Trump has been hawking, which includes the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Pledge of Allegiance, as a required text in a Christian nationalist curriculum.

Mussolini kicked off his counterrevolutionary police state in the 1920s with new “public security” laws that justified the arrest of anyone deemed a security threat—meaning anyone who opposed fascism from a liberal democratic or leftist point of view. Trump’s assertion a century later that “people within our country” pose “the greatest threat” to the United States, and his desire to “root [them] out,” could translate into counterterror and counterinsurgency operations. These would require a recasting or expansion of existing federal and state security agencies—for example, if the National Guard is federalized or the promised mass deportations of undocumented immigrants come into being.

The counterrevolution will be televised. Given Trump’s repeated threats to carry out “retribution” against his enemies, expect prompt and showy announcements of trials and investigations.
of the political opposition, members of the January 6 Select Committee, and anyone who sought to hold him accountable. “He’ll start throwing people in jail, and I’d be at the top of that list,” said Gen. Mark Milley, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—a man not given to hyperbole, who understands how autocrats operate.

THE LEADER CULT AND PERSONALIST RULE

AUTHORITARIANISM IS A political system in which the executive branch of government is able to exercise disproportionate or total power over the legislature and the judiciary. This gives the leader the ability to minimize or abolish restrictions on his behavior and also avoid accountability for his corrupt and violent actions. Maintaining that culture of impunity is why strongmen go after the press, prosecutors, opposition politicians, and judges, all of whom can expose their crimes or send them to jail, and why their personality cults present them as victims of “witch hunts” meant to stop them from saving the nation. Project 2025 takes an openly autocratic stance in asserting an “existential need for aggressive use of the vast powers of the executive branch” in America, as though the nation would fail if the democratic system, which is built on checks to presidential authority, were to continue.

Trump has worked hard since 2015 to condition the public to see the strongman brand of leadership as the only choice for America. To that end, he has repeatedly sung the praises of authoritarians around the world. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is a muse of Trump, the GOP, and the Heritage Foundation for his success at a brand of authoritarian governance that Trump’s first administration introduced to America and his second administration would seek to consolidate: personalist rule.

Personalist leaders organize government institutions around their self-preservation. Their private interests and needs shape party politics, legislative action, and national policy, just as their relationships with foreign autocrats influence foreign affairs. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who served as the translator of Vladimir Putin’s views and desires in Europe for a decade, was able to personalize Italy’s foreign policy. He excluded Italian diplomats from meetings with Putin, allowing only his private translator-envoy, Valentino Valentini, to be present. An Italian parliamentary investigation later revealed that Berlusconi would have received a kickback from the profits of a planned Italy-and-Russia-built South Stream pipeline.

Trump holds a similarly proprietary vision of governance, which is why classified national security documents ended up in the bathroom of his private residence in Florida. Like most autocrats, Trump sees holding public office as a means of personal enrichment. That is why he spent one-third of his time between 2017 and the end of 2019 visiting Trump-branded properties. Such self-dealing would likely expand massively in a second administration, given his boasts on the campaign trail about receiving...
more than $7 million from China and other foreign governments for “doing services” while he was president.

**THE INNER SANCTUM AND THE PARTY**

A STAPLE OF authoritarian governance is the inner sanctum: a small circle of insiders, who often include sons-in-law and other relatives, who keep the leader’s secrets, conspire in his corruption, and prevent any criticism from reaching his ears. This informal cabinet often includes people the leader has known for years. Putin’s inner circle includes people he has known since his St. Petersburg days. Berlusconi’s was helmed by Marcello Dell’Utri, a senator in his party who was in charge of his advertising firm, Pubbitalia, and served as his liaison to Opus Dei and to the Mafia.

Trump’s inner sanctum included Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner, who had offices in the White House and earned up to $640 million in outside income during Trump’s presidency. In a future administration, fewer federal agencies would mean a smaller presidential Cabinet of congressionally confirmed officials and a larger role for die-hard loyalists. Extremists whom Trump pardoned in 2020 and 2021 for their crimes on his behalf, from Flynn to Steve Bannon, could return to positions of influence, as the guides of the counterrevolution for secular and religious constituencies. Some MAGA loyalists are already auditioning for Cabinet jobs. Richard Grenell, who is visiting foreign leaders as Trump’s “envoy,” has advised clients in Iran and China and has close ties to pro-Orbán circles in Hungary—his PR firm worked for a Hungarian government–funded nonprofit (a fact he failed to disclose while serving as Trump’s acting director of national intelligence).

For the personalist ruler, the party exists to defend, avenge, and enrich him. The GOP has filled these roles in conspiring to help Trump overthrow the government, and in elevating Trump’s personal legal and financial struggles to the forefront of party business. So it should be no surprise that daughter-in-law Lara Trump has been tasked with optimizing the Republican National Committee for the ends of personalist rule. The RNC has long been a Trump tool: It continued to pay Trump’s legal expenses long after he left office. Now Lara Trump has vowed that “every single penny” of RNC money will be spent on getting her father-in-law back into office. Soon the RNC could well become Trump’s private bank, bereft of any political purpose, and then its transformation into an autocratic instrument will be complete.

**THE CIVIL SERVICE**

EVERY COUNTERREVOLUTION needs disciplined cadres. Project 2025 is readying a civilian army of bureaucrats to transform U.S. government. During Mussolini’s regime, policymakers and ideologues debated how to form a new political elite inculcated with fascist values. Orbán has his Mathias Corvinus Collegium Brussels, founded in 2022 to train far-right thinkers and managers for Hungary and Europe. Trumpism has its little-known Presidential Administration Academy, which aims to groom “Political Appointees to Be Ready on Day One”—when the cascade of counterrevolutionary executive orders will presumably commence. The academy’s civil servant training is in “Conservative Governance,” but the intent of vanquishing the ideal of an apolitical civil service and jump-starting the counterrevolution by firing thousands of nonloyalists hews to the history of fascism.

Trump’s presidency provides precedent for the many ways to drive civil servants out. Creating hostile workplaces for critics, and hiring scores of zealots and bullies—Sean Lawler, Trump’s chief of protocol, carried a horsewhip around to intimidate co-workers—Trumpism achieved a passive purge that saw over 79,000 civil servants retire or leave their jobs in his first nine months. In 2018, retired Ambassador Nancy McEldowney compared this process to a “hostile takeover and occupation.” In 2024, it looks like a rehearsal for a counterrevolutionary cleanse of anyone still attached to liberal democratic ethics and norms.

AMERICANS MAY BELIEVE that all this sounds fantastical. Yet the strongman’s special talent is to bring the unthinkable into being. People around the world and throughout history have been caught by surprise at their methods and the scale at which they operate. Bannon, Roberts, Stephen Miller, and other American incarnations of fascism are convinced that counterrevolution leading to autocracy is the only path to political survival for the far right, given the unpopularity of their positions (especially on abortion) and their leader’s boatload of legal troubles. This is why Project 2025 declares that that there is an “existential need” to make “aggressive” use of executive power. The alternative could be defeat.

Mussolini understood that situation well. In 1923, when he was still prime minister of a democracy, he mused about the problem of having one’s destiny decided by the whims of an electorate. “Consent is as changeable as the sands of the seashore,” he wrote, noting there was only one way to deal with “discontented people” who might vote you out: “You prevent it by means of force; by employing this force with surrounding the mass with force; by employing this force without pity when it is necessary to do so.” Less than two years later, Il Duce announced the start of dictatorship in Italy, ending the right of the population to express its political will.

From the noisy crowds with MAGA hats that fill Trump’s rallies to the quiet fanatics in suits such as Miller and Roberts to a party leader who announces he will act as a dictator on “day one” of his administration, Trumpism is what fascism looks like in twenty-first-century America. If Trump returns to the White House, get ready for a new round of “shocks to the system.” Authoritarians often tell us what they are going to do, and Trump, the GOP, and the political operators of Project 2025 are open about their plans to occupy power and carry out a counterrevolution designed to keep them there indefinitely. TNI

Ruth Ben-Ghiat is a professor of history and Italian studies at New York University and author of Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present.
The Law

By Federico Finchelstein and Emmanuel Guerisoli

LAST DECEMBER, when asked if he would abuse power if reelected president, Donald Trump said, "except for day one." In short, if we are to believe Trump's own words, the constitutional order as we know it will be subverted from the moment he takes office. Of course, there are many unknowns here, starting with the capacity of Trumpists to implement what they have already told us they plan to do. But Trump and his people have all but told us that, in a second Trump term, the United States might approach a fascist form of government under the leadership of a messianic personality.

There is no fascism without dictatorship. This form of permanent power is emblematic of the fascist worldview. The primary aim of fascism is to destroy democracy from within, in order to create a modern dictatorship from above. Fascists propose a totalitarian state in which plurality and civil society would be silenced, and there would be few distinctions between the public and the private, or between the state and its citizens. Fascist regimes shut down the independent press and destroy the rule of law. Would all these actions be part of the promised one-day dictatorship? Would an American dictatorship look like the past experiences of Nazism and Italian fascism? History doesn't repeat itself that neatly, but one thing is certain: If Trump wins and decides to try his one-day dictatorship, the president will also become a lawgiver, replacing legality with dictatorship, the president will also be—a lawgiver, replacing legality with dictatorship.

The “Day One” Dictatorship

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A second Trump presidency could represent an all-out assault on the rule of law. How might this play out? In past fascist regimes, the destruction of the rule of law has required two steps. First, its suspension, through state of emergency declarations or delegations of legislative power (a legislature transferring its law-making power to the executive). Second, its violent subversion, by transforming the juridical and political orders via the erosion of the principles of separation of powers and checks and balances that prevent constitutional democratic regimes from becoming authoritarian. Both Mussolini and Hitler transferred parliament’s representation of the people, and therefore the power to make laws, to the executive. Il Duce and the Führer became the legal embodiments of the people. Consequently, their wills were the sole legitimate expressions of the nations’ laws. The executive’s prerogative, rooted in arbitrariness, discretionality, and violence, replaced the normative legal order based on the rule of law and proceduralism.

Trump will not have the similar institutional mechanisms that allowed Hitler or Mussolini to install dictatorships and personify the law. From the get-go, Hitler made use of constitutional emergency powers to suspend civil rights and arrest members of opposition parties, then forcing the Reichstag to authorize an Enabling Act decree providing the executive with full legislative powers. Similarly, Mussolini, after orchestrating a coup attempt, bullied the Parliament into procuring the legislative delegation of plenary powers to reorganize the institutional and juridical orders, gradually leading to the installation of a totalitarian regime.

In U.S. constitutional law, the principle of separation of powers limits delegated legislation to acts of Congress that authorize an executive branch agency to promulgate a set of regulations. In principle, this should prevent the emergence of a Trumpist totalitarian dictatorship in the short term, because the nondelegation constitutional doctrine prohibits Congress from transferring tout court its essential legislative functions to the executive. However, a range of legal paths could be perverted to make an authoritarian government possible.

On day one, for example, Trump could make use of the discretionary powers available to the executive branch for dictatorial purposes. He could direct the FBI and the Department of Justice to target his political rivals through investigations and indictments based on vague accusations such as instigation of violence, defamation, being an agent of a foreign power, corruption, or subversive activities. Possible targets might include not just Joe Biden or members of his family but private businesses, media companies, civil society organizations, and universities. To ensure the enactment of executive orders and agency directives, Trump will have to purge the federal government of civil servants who might refuse, question, or delay them.

In short, Trump could set the stage for transforming a normative, procedural federal administration into one ruled by discretionality and personal prerogative. The repopulating of the state’s bureaucracies with loyalists or parallel party structures was used in the past by Mussolini and Hitler as well as Juan Perón in Argentina and Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. Today, the tactic is employed...
recently during the war on terror, but Trump’s abuse could be the first step to subvert the rule of law, legitimize a fascist regime, and erode civil liberties.

Finally, there are two other extremist ways for a Trumpist dictatorship to happen here: the Insurrection Act, and martial law. Already in 2020, Trump entertained using the Insurrection Act, a vaguely worded eighteenth-century relic, during the Black Live Matters protests, being stopped only by Secretary of Defense Mark Esper. This time—and we can probably assume that, with Trump in office, there will be no shortage of protests—Trump might not be discouraged. He could deploy the armed forces to assist local law enforcement to quell civil unrest or to use the military against any conspiracy that opposes or obstructs the execution of laws in the United States. Imagine now, just as in 2017, thousands of people are protesting at international airports against a new travel ban; Trump then triggers a national emergency and authorizes the National

Emergency powers are a related area of concern. In the past, emergency powers were triggered by previous fascist leaders to start dismantling the rule of law. Today in the United States, there are around 148 statutory powers that can become available to the president when a national emergency is declared. Emergencies can be declared in an arbitrary way because what constitutes an emergency is not defined by law, potentially allowing Trump to invoke any reason to justify one. These provisions automatically enhance the executive’s prerogative during emergencies and limit the scope of judicial review. Trump could legally use them to start subverting the rule of law in a permanent way. For example, the Communications Act of 1934 would allow Trump to shut down wireless communication, including the internet, in case of national emergency. Emergency powers would allow him to restrict domestic transportation, freeze banking assets, and block financial transactions, or even surveil political enemies. Emergency powers have been previously abused in U.S. history, most recently during the war on terror, but Trump’s abuse could be the first step to subvert the rule of law, legitimize a fascist regime, and erode civil liberties.

A TRUMPIST REGIME could also pursue an expansive, autocratic, and discretionary interpretation of the executive’s presidential powers. Article 2 of the Constitution exclusively vests executive power in the president. Therefore, Trump could in theory place the entirety of the executive branch under direct presidential control, eliminating the relative autonomy of Cabinet departments such as the Department of Justice or the Pentagon. In addition, and less obviously, there are numerous federal agencies that fall within the executive branch but enjoy some insulation from direct presidential control—the Federal Reserve, the Federal Communications Commission, the Federal Trade Commission, and many others. Imagine these and other agencies as instruments of one man’s discretionary or arbitrary power.

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Guard to intervene and restore order, on the grounds that states or cities are unable or unwilling to enforce the law or public order has been lost. Or consider sanctuary cities obstructing ICE agents from carrying out mass deportations; Trump triggers the Insurrection Act, deploying the military in the streets of New York, San Francisco, or Chicago. In the 1950s and ’60s, Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy deployed troops to desegregate schools in the South. Trump, on the other hand, could deputize National Guards in red states for the arrest of immigrants in blue states and sanctuary cities. Strikingly, the Supreme Court ruled in 1827 that the president alone determines the justification for invoking the Insurrection Act, preventing any judicial review on its determination, though the military’s actions remain under judicial oversight. And if the armed forces refuse his orders? Trump could follow Hitler’s and Mussolini’s examples and militarize several right-wing militias, particularly after he pardons January 6 “hostages.”

Lastly, Trump could try to replace civilian authorities, including the judiciary, with military ones by imposing martial law. For example, Trump could conceivably proclaim an emergency at the southern border and set up military tribunals to arrest and deport migrants. He could justify such a decision on national security grounds related to terrorism or illicit trafficking. He could designate Mexican cartels as foreign terrorist organizations and their suspected members as unlawful enemy combatants under military jurisdiction, and, in a repeat of Guantánamo, detain them indefinitely while subjecting them to torture, with a Supreme Court that might not stop him as it did Bush. It would be up to the Supreme Court to rule that the president had exceeded executive authority. Fascist history teaches us that a successful imposition of martial law or state of siege directed against citizens perceived as external enemies can later be used to deal with society at large.

**ALL THESE CONSIDERATIONS** have not even taken into account the possibility of the Republican Party winning majorities this November in both chambers of Congress. That would be a worst-case scenario that could accelerate, and cement, a Trumpist dictatorship. With congressional majorities, as is the case with mini-Trump Nayib Bukele in El Salvador or Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela (a dictator, albeit not a fascist one), Trump could push for constitutional amendments that could go from allowing for indefinite reelection to limiting access to citizenship rights. We would then rely on the judiciary to prevent a fascist takeover. But many federal judges were appointed by Trump, and a new term gives him the chance to shape the judicial system to his own image by flooding it with even more far-right and hyper-conservative appointees.

If implemented, all these acts would create extralegal domains that belong to the dictatorial convictions of the MAGA movement but not U.S. society as a whole. In this context, ideology will prevail over legality. As the German Jewish legal expert Ernst Fraenkel argued in 1941 regarding the Nazi assault on the legal system, the totalitarian state in Germany was twofold: both a “normative state” and a “prerogative state.” In practice, this meant that political considerations were more important than the written law. The latter only functioned normally when the Nazis did not care about the legal matter at hand. In other words, the legal theory of dictatorship aimed to make a distinction between political and nonpolitical acts. The instruments of dictatorship took precedence over the traditional judicial bodies in the case of the former, while to the latter, the old legal state still applied.

In this totalitarian context, increasingly more dimensions of society came under the regime’s discretionary power, and the rule of law was increasingly diminished. A combination of arbitrariness and efficiency in legal matters was successful in veiling the illegal “true face” of the Nazi dictatorship. Fraenkel stressed how a patina of legality promoted the legend that German fascists had accomplished a “legal revolution.” However, their dictatorship was not founded on valid laws. As Fraenkel explained, “Endowed with all the powers required by a state of siege, the National-Socialists were able to transform the constitutional and temporary dictatorship (intended to restore public order) into an unconstitutional and permanent dictatorship and to provide the framework of the National-Socialist state with unlimited powers.”

This is why declaring a temporary dictatorial government can easily lead to a more permanent one. Trump’s claim of ultra-brief dictatorial powers can easily morph into indefinite ones.

Fascist dictators were not dictatorial heads of normal states. They unleashed illegal forms of extreme repression and terror that radically turned their political systems into unlimited, irreversible dictatorships. This change was made in the name of the one who incarnated the movement and its national revolution. This is why the Nazis claimed that the highest law in Germany was not the command of the dictator but his will. The legality of the old system was in total contradiction with the new legitimacy of the fascist leader.

If Donald Trump becomes president, on January 20, 2025—the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, of all dates—the United States might have a dictator only for that day. But this might be enough to turn the democratic world upside down.

To be sure, we have presented a nightmarish scenario—one in which Trump turns the law upside down by turning legality against itself. But this does not need to happen. It can be averted by the voters. But even if Trump wins, we would expect that his authoritarian drive could be blocked by the separation of powers and the strong institutional framework of the U.S. constitutional architecture. And yet, the danger of a Trumpist dictatorship cannot be ignored. Sadly, the U.S. legal system is not foolproof against being turned into a dictatorial regime. No president has tried this radical subversion of the law before. Trump is the first wannabe fascist leader with a real chance to do so. *In*


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**TRUMP COULD MAKE USE OF THE DISCRETIONARY POWERS AVAILABLE TO THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH TO DIRECT THE FBI AND THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE TO TARGET HIS POLITICAL RIVALS AS WELL AS PRIVATE BUSINESSES AND MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS.**

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Features
By Jason Stanley

**UNDER ITS AUTOCRATIC** Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Hungary introduced in early 2020 a new National Core Curriculum. The curriculum presents Hungarian literature as the literature of ethnic Hungarian populations, even those living outside of the borders of the state of Hungary after the Treaty of Trianon created present-day Hungary in 1920, sowing national resentment similar to that in post–World War I Germany after the Treaty of Versailles led to the loss of German land and colonies. The course includes thematic studies of topics like the Treaty of Trianon in Hungarian literature.

Besides evoking nostalgia and resentful longing for a “Greater Hungary,” it pointedly excludes the work of Imre Kertész, Hungary’s only Nobel Prize winner for literature, surrendering a national point of pride in order to erase the contributions of a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust. And it adds to the core curriculum Ferenc Herczeg, a minor right-wing nationalist playwright who was celebrated and praised by Miklós Horthy, the World War II Hungarian leader who brought about an alliance between Hungary and Nazi Germany. Previous revisions of the core curriculum in prior Orbán administrations had already elevated similar minor writers into the pantheon on an obvious political basis, such as József Nyírő, a member of Parliament for the fascist Hungarian Arrow Cross Party, who harbored a passionate hatred of Jews. The new curriculum presents far-right Hungarian nationalist leaders of the past as heroes.

The revamping doesn’t end there. In May 2022, Orbán reorganized his administration to place education under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior, which is responsible for maintaining order through law enforcement. A few months later—shortly after declaring that Hungary would not become a “mixed-race” country—Orbán was featured as a main speaker at the Conservative Political Action Conference, or CPAC, in Dallas, where he was greeted by American conservatives with a standing ovation. In March 2024, Orbán visited the Heritage Foundation for a private event. The next day, he was fêted by Donald Trump at Mar-a-Lago.

Viktor Orbán is a darling of today’s GOP. But Americans do not need to look abroad to find their own versions of educational authoritarianism. Toni Morrison, like Imre Kertész, is a Nobel Prize winner in literature. *Beloved*, Morrison’s most famous novel, concerns the horrors of slavery. It became the subject of controversy in Virginia, an infamous slave state from its Colonial days until the Civil War; parents targeted the book as obscene. In 2016, the Virginia state legislature passed what colloquially came to be called the “*Beloved* bill.” It would have allowed parents to request that any material they deemed to have sexually explicit content be replaced by other material. As in Hungary, the bill would have effectively removed the book from any required curriculum in Virginia. Virginia’s governor at the time, Democrat Terry McAuliffe, vetoed the bill. But in Virginia’s gubernatorial election of 2021, McAuliffe went down to defeat by Republican Glenn Youngkin, who ran on a platform of “parents’ rights,” such as the right to have their children not be exposed to books that might make them uncomfortable.

Like Kertész in Hungary, Morrison in the United States is a member of a national minority whose work reminds others of that group’s painful journey through the nation’s history. This kind of work is uncomfortable for many readers. Those who seek to view the nation’s past through rose-colored glasses, diminishing or erasing its national sins, whether for the sake of self-aggrandizement or something else, will have strong negative reactions.

**TODAY’S GOP IS** laser-focused on education, trying to frighten parents about supposed “Marxist indoctrination” in schools and universities (a common tactic in today’s fascist international; see Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro). As a sign of the topic’s importance, the GOP campaign against schools and universities was central in Trump’s 2020 election bid. In a speech at an event called the White House Conference on American History, Trump declared:

> Students in our universities are inundated with critical race theory. This is a Marxist doctrine holding that America is a wicked and racist nation, that even young children are complicit in oppression, and that our entire society must be radically transformed. Critical race theory is being forced into our children’s schools, it’s being imposed into workplace trainings, and it’s being deployed to rip apart friends, neighbors, and families.

The tactic of painting all of one’s political opponents as Marxists and communists, and claiming that they dominate the institutions, is a hallmark of the classic European fascist regimes of the mid–twentieth century. Today, it is employed as a justification to fire teachers and professors and replace them with loyalists and ultranationalists. Even a democratic nation’s greatest universities are not immune from being destroyed by this strategy,
as one can see in India today. Now and in the past, schools and universities are and have been central targets of fascism. Attacks on education, including political works deemed obscene, are, to use a cliché, canaries in the fascist coal mine.

Education in a liberal democracy introduces students to the diverse perspectives through a nation’s history, in order for people to foster a kind of empathy and understanding for one another; what my father in his work called civic compassion. Democracy is a system where we let ourselves be affected by our fellow citizens’ perspectives. Cutting students off from exposure to the perspectives of their neighbors therefore preempts democracy. Such erasures are more conducive to an education for authoritarianism, where an autocratic leader can more easily set groups against one another, relying on mutual estrangement and mutual misunderstanding. “Parents’ rights” is an expression used to cover for an illiberal public culture. Using the language of rights and freedoms to erase oppressed groups’ perspectives is a familiar vocabulary trick from America’s past (“states’ rights”).

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, a graduate of Yale and Harvard universities, has specifically targeted schools and colleges, denouncing the supposed “indoctrination” of Florida’s students. The state legislature and Department of Education have brought in Hillsdale College, an institution in Michigan, to advise on Florida’s K-12 curriculum.

Hillsdale advertises itself as providing a “classical education” and a nonideological counterpart to current educational practices. In assessing this claim, it is instructive to turn to Hillsdale College’s website, which lists the online courses offered by the institution. Among offerings like Introduction to Aristotle’s Ethics: How to Lead a Good Life, The History of Classical Music: Pythagoras Through Beethoven, and Introduction to Western Philosophy, Hillsdale offers courses with titles like The American Left: From Liberalism to Despotism and American Citizenship and Its Decline, whose message is that “wokeness” is an existential threat to the United States. The message of these course offerings is clear: From the perspective of the classical tradition, progressivism is tyranny. One wonders if Hillsdale’s Introduction to Western Philosophy mentions that it was Plato who recommended, well before Marx, that children be removed from their families to be raised by the state (and that homosexual relationships between teachers and their students were regarded as quite normal in the era the curriculum regards as “classical”).

In 2023, Florida, Oklahoma, and Montana approved the use of videos from the conservative media group PragerU as educational material for their schools. In its video A Short History of Slavery, far-right commentator Candace Owens declares, “White people were the first to formally put an end to slavery,” adding that “white men led the world in putting an end to the abhorrent practice [of slavery].” Owens’s remarks entirely erase the history of Haiti, whose slave revolution resulted in its leader, Toussaint Louverture, ending slavery decades before Britain did, let alone the United States. Owens also returns the teaching of the Civil War to a period before W.E.B. Du Bois’s magisterial 1935 work, Black Reconstruction. In that era, the major contributions of Black people to the Union’s victory in the Civil War (both as soldiers and as rebellious enslaved people behind enemy lines) were entirely erased, and Black Americans were represented as passive recipients of the gift of freedom.

Looking at these course offerings, one might reasonably object to the claim that Hillsdale College and PragerU are freeing schools from indoctrination.

The American Association of University Professors’ report on “Political Interference and Academic Freedom in Florida’s Public Higher Education System,” published in December 2023, describes the effects of DeSantis’s targeting of universities, including the state takeover of an outstanding public liberal arts school, the New College of Florida. It begins with a quote from LeRoy Pernell, a law professor at Florida A&M, which reflects the general tenor of the extensive report and, more generally, the sense of despair under a regime of educational authoritarianism:

What we are witnessing in Florida is an intellectual reign of terror. There is a tremendous sense of dread right now, not just among faculty; it’s tangible among students and staff as well. People are intellectually and physically scared. We are being named an enemy of the State. The events at Jacksonville too, feel real, and people feel it could happen to them.

The raft of laws restricting teaching, entailing everything from disciplinary sanctions to threats of job loss, has also hit K-12 teachers incredibly hard. The laws have created significant fear around teaching topics in U.S. history, especially Black history. In general, the laws have created a climate of fear and intimidation surrounding discussion of problems with the old hegemonies of race, class, and gender.

Bringing educators under gradually more and more intrusive laws restricting their freedom creates a general climate of fear and intimidation. When such laws target anyone who challenges the greatness of a nation, or its heroes, it’s not a positive sign for democracy.

Trump has made it abundantly clear that a far-right attack on education will be central to his new administration from its beginning, promising to “sign a new executive order to cut federal funding for any school pushing critical race theory, transgender insanity, and other inappropriate racial, sexual, or political content on our children” on day one of his administration. Eliminating the Department of Education is a goal of Project 2025, along with many other changes that would dramatically reduce the federal government’s ability to intervene on potential civil rights violations. The honest teaching of Black history and protections for LGBTQ youth will be illegal in K-12 education. The American university system is the crown jewel of the world’s higher education system. As far as it is possible, a Trump-led federal government will seek to transform it radically at all levels, with Hillsdale College as its model. The intent is the burying of any civic compassion in the educational system.  

Jason Stanley is a professor of philosophy at Yale and author of the forthcoming Erasing History: How Fascists Rewrite the Past to Control the Future.
The Media

By Brian Stelter

**THE CRACKDOWN COULD BEGIN** with a security breach at the Northwest Gate of the White House.

Imagine, on the day of Donald Trump’s inauguration, a raucous protest by left-wing groups on the streets north of Lafayette Park. The blocks surrounding the White House are cordoned off with layer after layer of fencing, due to the unrest in major cities following Trump’s reelection, but a few dozen very motivated activists barrel through the park, all the way across the inauguration parade route along the park’s southern edge, and inside the White House perimeter. Weapons are drawn, emergency plans are activated, and Trump is rushed to a deep underground bunker. Order is restored within minutes, but not before the break-in is shown live around the world, since all the major networks have live camera positions on the North Lawn. Online sleuths notice that a few of the protesters appear to be wearing press credentials. (They’re fakes, it turns out.) And in one stray live shot that gets clipped and decontextualized and shared all across pro-MAGA social media, a CBS correspondent gives a water bottle to a man screaming in agony after being pepper-sprayed. That’s all it takes for a narrative to take root on the right: “The media is complicit. They’re in on it. THEY are trying to assassinate OUR president.”

Trump feels humiliated and attacked on what is supposed to be his most triumphant day. He and his aides want what he famously promised: “Retribution.” Knowing that the Northwest Gate is a key access point for journalists, a White House aide starts a rumor that the assailants were aided by CNN and CBS News crews. Trump, who is glued to the live coverage, grunts to his chief of staff, “Get them off my lawn.” Members of his inner circle, so fed up with years of accountability journalism, and so deluded into thinking that Trump’s way is the only way, see a chance to go further and squeeze independent media off the airwaves. “Get out,” they say. “Get out of our way.”

The security breach becomes a pretext for a project that’s been on the minds of MAGA leaders for years. After all, Steve Bannon’s 2018 promise to “flood the zone with shit” was just the beginning. Trump’s “enemy of the people” proclamation gave permission to his fans to go further—to delegitimize and dehumanize journalists and make “alternative facts” the only facts. For the coup plotters of 2020, one lesson of Trump’s loss was that Trump needed to exert more control over the media in order to prevail. He needed to own the media; ergo, Truth Social, which emerged in the aftermath of January 6. The far right’s memory-holing of the attack, minimization of the violence, and rebranding of rioters as “hostages” were successful tests of MAGA media’s reality-rewriting capabilities.

Trump’s violent rhetoric emboldened his devotees. During the Biden years, pro-Trump trolls daydreamed that, once back in power, they would imprison journalists and crush opponents, and they were welcomed to say so on Elon Musk’s X. As an ex-CNN anchor, I saw it in my mentions when maga diehards fantasized about having me locked up at Guantánamo Bay: “Gitmo is in your future.” “You filthy nazi traitor demokkkrats belong in gitmo.” “All of you deserve to be jailed.”

Anonymous threats were accompanied by brash promises by Trump loyalists. “We will go out and find the conspirators not just in government, but in the media,” former Defense Department official Kash Patel told Bannon in 2023. “We’re going to come after you,” Patel proclaimed, “whether it’s criminally or civilly.” Bannon, overjoyed, said, “We’re absolutely dead serious.”

**IMAGINE THAT THE** new administration uses the Northwest Gate incursion as a pretext to impose severe restrictions. Most reporters are banned from entering the White House grounds, per new Secret Service rules that cite threats to the president’s life. As Truth Social fills up with memes equating journalists with “terrorists,” networks are given 24 hours to remove their equipment. Aides claim that reporters will be able to ask questions via Zoom at virtual press conferences, but Trump refused to hold daily briefings during his first term in office, and the Zoom sessions never materialize.

Media outlets file First Amendment lawsuits seeking a return to pre-Trump II norms, but the government’s claims about security threats take precedence, and the bans remain in place. Press corps norms—like traveling with the president—melt away. Trump
begins to take trips without any notice to the public at all. Several reporters who resort to staking out Andrews Air Force Base and watching for Air Force One takeoffs are arrested for trespassing.

Fox and Newsmax are allowed on the White House grounds, so officials can claim that “real” news is still represented. Fox says it will provide the other networks with live video of all presidential events and remarks. While workers revert the former press briefing room to the indoor pool it was decades ago, Trump rewards Fox with interviews and promotions—at one point doubling the Murdoch family’s market cap in a matter of weeks—and even the hosts who are most tempted to dissent are kept in check by the sudden windfall. And they know that, for the maga faithful, Newsmax is always one remote click away; they learned that the hard way in 2020. So they toe the line, touting specious rumors about enemies within, about writers feeding “resistance” tips to foreign governments, about treasonous reporters aiding the protesters on Inauguration Day. “Remember when THEY tried to kill Trump?” becomes a rallying cry on the right, even though it didn’t happen.

Fact-checks about what did happen only embolden Trump’s fans to fight harder for punishment of the imagined co-conspirators. CBS says the doxing of its phone and computer networks becomes so intense that the newsroom can barely function for hours at a time. One night, the evening newscast starts 10 minutes late due to server glitches. A Trump spokesman is quoted calling this a “good start,” meaning the country would be better off with no evening newscast at all. Two days later, in a “swatting” incident, a caller to 911 claims there is a violent intruder inside the home of a top CBS anchor. Police arrive en masse, and, amid the chaos, an officer accidentally shoots the anchor’s wife, seriously injuring her. The same maga-heads on social media downplay the violence by digging up the victim’s past tweets praising Hillary Clinton; some even parrot the Trump spokesman and call the injury “a good start.”

Inspired by Trump’s words in the bunker on Inauguration Day, “get out” becomes shorthand for a groundswell of anti-media sentiment, mirroring the Trump administration’s militarized mass deportations of migrants. “If you journalists don’t love our America,” they say, “get out.” At the federal level, Trump appointees pull the levers of government to implement the president’s wishes. IRS agents commence audits of top newsroom editors. (The editors find that it’s almost impossible to prove the audits are retaliatory.) DOJ attorneys consider Espionage Act charges against adversarial reporters. FCC commissioners open probes into the conduct of broadcast station owners who don’t follow the Trump line. Republican lawmakers, themselves intimidated by the voters who are calling reporters “terrorists,” prepare a
media accreditation law that would reward outlets that maintain close ties to the government. Third-party groups flood the courts with libel lawsuits against news outlets. Judges will eventually throw out most of the suits, but each case costs time and money to fight, and the twofold intent is to make the newsrooms bleed financially, and to frighten others from pursuing the same types of stories.

The actions at the state and local level are even more disturbing. Newsrooms in Trump strongholds notice a sharp uptick in threats and harassment. Outside a pro-Trump rally in Florida, a local TV reporter is badly beaten by a group of men wearing MAGA merch, and the police response is so sluggish that observers assume they let it happen. Near a migrant detention facility in Texas, a freelance reporter is struck and killed by a security officer in an Immigration and Customs Enforcement vehicle. Was it an accident or an attack? No one knows for sure. Trump responds to the two incidents by saying the reporters “should have told the truth.” And so a new test is born. “Just tell the truth!” Some news agencies, either to appeal to pro-Trump subscribers or to fend off the goons who beat up reporters with impunity, put the word “TRUTH” in their homepage banners and marketing materials. NewsNation rebrands as “just the truth.” Breitbart claims to be “the only truth.”

This happens at the same time that Target stores install extra-large American flags (while hiding Black History Month merchandise), and Disney theme parks promote “American pride days” (while curtailing gay pride events), and Meta’s apps add a “free speech” tab (while algorithmically de-emphasizing the anti-Trump protest content that has been deemed a national security threat). Some CEOs don’t fall in line, but many do, including the heads of several major media outlets. Safety is the rationale. “The country is changing,” they say. “We need to protect you.” Some journalists feel compelled to move out of their homes. Others adopt pen names and write anonymously. Still others spearhead to find new lines of work. Television shows critical of Trump are canceled. Risky assignments are nixed. Dissidents speak out on their own blogs and livestreams, but they struggle to reach a mass audience. The Committee to Protect Journalists points out that Google search results consistently rank far-right smears of independent journalists above the journalists’ actual work. Every day brings a new episode of violence or surveillance.

Outcry over the retaliatory actions is shouted down with the “fake news” smears that were popularized when Trump took office the first time. Either it’s not really happening, or, if it is, it’s justified—that’s the message on Fox. Many Americans feel that they’ve heard it all before, and they are just plain exhausted. They don’t want to have to care anymore. Trump promises they don’t have to: Trust me, he says, and don’t worry about the news or fight about politics with neighbors. “Unity” is what he purports to offer, and many take the deal. United in ignorance, they mindlessly scroll TikTok and Instagram as First Amendment rights are curtailed. They knew who they were voting for, right?

**TWO DAYS AFTER** Trump’s first and so far only inauguration, in January 2017, I was privately berated by White House press secretary Sean Spicer for questioning his crowd size lies. A couple of hours later, while hosting CNN’s Reliable Sources, I asked the following questions: “Do Trump’s allies want to silence skeptics in the media? Destroy the press? Or maybe support an alternative press that presents an alternative reality that’s more favorable?”

We now know the answers. We know exactly what they want. Journalists who worked in repressive regimes recognized it, in many cases, before American journalists did. I’ll never forget an interview I conducted on CNN, one week after crowd-size-gate, with Mahir Zeynalov, an analyst and journalist living in Turkey who was smeared, sued, and deported by the Turkish government in 2014 after reporting on a corruption investigation.

“Whenever I look at what President Trump and his team are doing here in the United States, I’m like, wait a second. I have seen this movie before. It’s all familiar to us,” Zeynalov told me. “And I’m not talking about a country like Iran or China, where autocrats are crushing or strangulating the media. I’m talking about Turkey, a country that was somewhat democratic a decade ago, with a somewhat independent media, and is now turning into a state where at least one journalist is being put behind bars—since last summer, on average—every day.”

He continued: “And if there’s anyone who is saying that this cannot happen here in the United States, they are significantly underestimating how leaders, including in democratic countries, can undermine media freedom, and, with that, democracy.”

Hungary is the best example in Europe. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s coalition government has undermined media freedom and created “a climate of fear and intimidation.” Human Rights Watch wrote in a scathing report earlier this year. “Independent media outlets have closed, or changed ownership and turned pro-government overnight.”

So imagine that, in 2024, a popular but financially imperiled media company is offered a carrot and stick by a Trump confidant: Take the carrot and offload the company’s news division or accept the stick of government regulation that will drive the share price down. Imagine that someone like Musk emerges as an eager buyer. If the board doesn’t give in, they’re portrayed as siding with the “terrorists.” What will the directors do?

Maybe you think I’m overdoing it, and maybe I am. Maybe there will be no precipitating incident, no crackdown, no threat to America’s First Amendment tradition. But at a moment when the country desperately needs government oversight to stop generative AI from obliterating the media business and government support to salvage what remains of the local news economy, Trump is offering none of the above. Instead, he is vowing to investigate media outlets that challenge him. His fans have been primed for revenge and for freedom from fact. If the chill descends in 2025, no one can claim to be surprised. 

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Brian Stelter, a former anchor of CNN’s Reliable Sources, is the author of three books, most recently Network of Lies.
Although the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the nation’s highest-ranked military leader, the chairman’s role is advisory in nature and comes with no power to issue commands to combatant forces. The other members of the joint staff—the Army chief of staff, the chief of naval operations, and so on—similarly lack that power, which resides instead in the 11 unified combatant commands (U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, and so on). Only the commander of U.S. Northern Command, or NORTHCOM, has the authority to order federal troops into action domestically, but, even then, combatant commanders can’t issue such orders on their own initiative; the orders must come from the secretary of defense, who would be serving at the pleasure of the president who was refusing to step down. (National Guard troops are under the authority of state governors, unless federalized, but in such a case the secretary of defense would similarly be part of the chain of command.)

Despite the utter implausibility of my tablemate’s assertion, some variant of this notion has, in the years since then, become a recurring—and bizarre—liberal fantasy: the idea that the U.S. military will somehow save us from Donald Trump. It’s bizarre because, at least since Vietnam, liberals have been understandably skeptical of using U.S. military power to promote democracy—if democracy cannot be won through the ballot box, it is unlikely to be secured with bullets. But even leaving such considerations aside, it’s fantasy because the idea that the military will serve as an effective bulwark against autocracy is premised on deep misunderstandings about how the military operates.

And if he did, the military would never let that happen.”

My tablemate’s cheery claim rested on multiple erroneous assumptions. For one thing, the U.S. military has no role in overseeing elections or ensuring that other institutions or actors respect their results. Even if “the military”—a vast, sprawling, and far from homogeneous enterprise consisting of roughly 1.3 million active-duty service members and more than 750,000 reservists and National Guard troops—believed an incumbent president had lost a bid for reelection, there’s simply no legal or organizational mechanism for the military to force out a recalcitrant lame-duck president who refused to leave office.

Who would give such a command, and to whom? Although the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the nation’s highest-ranked military leader, the chairman’s role is advisory in nature and comes with no power to issue commands to combatant forces. The other members of the joint staff—the Army chief of staff, the chief of naval operations, and so on—similarly lack that power, which resides instead in the 11 unified combatant commands (U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, and so on). Only the commander of U.S. Northern Command, or NORTHCOM, has the authority to order federal troops into action domestically, but, even then, combatant commanders can’t issue such orders on their own initiative; the orders must come from the secretary of defense, who would be serving at the pleasure of the president who was refusing to step down. (National Guard troops are under the authority of state governors, unless federalized, but in such a case the secretary of defense would similarly be part of the chain of command.)

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IT’S TRUE, of course, that Trump did try to stay in office after losing the 2020 election, and clear statements by military leaders at the time denouncing the January 6 insurrection and reminding U.S. troops of their constitutional duties likely played some role in ensuring Trump’s eventual sulky departure. And no question, American democracy will likely be in need of rescue if Trump is reelected. If he makes his way back to the White House, Trump will do his best to turn the United States into a corrupt, kleptocratic autocracy.

During his first term, Trump appointed relatively institutionally minded figures to senior roles in his administration. Rex Tillerson, John Kelly, Jim Mattis, Mark Esper, Dan Coats, and the like were hardly starry-eyed liberals, but they shared a broad commitment to traditional norms of democratic governance and the rule of law, and they reined in some of Trump’s most egregious excesses. Thwarted, Trump
soon replaced them with less experienced but more compliant officials—but his capacity to turn federal power to his own ends was limited both by his new inner circle’s lack of experience and by his own chaotic personality.

Things will almost certainly be different in a second Trump administration. Trump himself is no less chaotic—if anything, the numerous pending criminal investigations against him have amped up his narcissistic rage. But he’s no fool, and he has learned from his early mistakes. If he gets a second bite at the apple, Trump will come into office with a cadre of seasoned political operatives, handpicked for their personal fealty, and a detailed plan. He has made no secret of his autocratic intentions.

Trump’s plans with respect to the civilian executive branch have received much coverage. He has openly declared his desire to purge the career civil service—and society more broadly—of those he views as ideologically suspect (“the communists, Marxists, fascists, and the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country”). He has similarly declared his intent to use the tools of executive power to seek retribution against those he views as his enemies—a vast and ever-expanding group that now includes everyone from journalists and elected officials to prominent first-term Trump officials such as retired Gen. Mark Milley.

His plans for uniformed personnel have received far less scrutiny, but controlling the military is a major part of Trump’s vision for his second term. While he has expressed only contempt for military personnel naïve enough to believe in selfless service, referring to those who had lost their lives as “losers” and “suckers,” Trump is fond of military pomp and circumstance, and fonder still of power. He has signaled his desire to use the U.S. military to suppress domestic protest and aid in mass roundups, detentions, and deportations of undocumented immigrants, whom he views as “animals.” He reportedly hopes to use missiles and military troops against cartels inside Mexico and has, at times, openly flirted with the idea of using nuclear weapons against North Korea and Iran.

While few of these ideas are likely to garner support from military leaders, no one should count on the military to “save” us from Trump’s efforts to refashion the United States in his own dark, chaotic image. Trump is keenly aware of the unique regard in which Americans continue to hold the military. This makes the military both a tempting tool and a frequent target of his ire. Disappointed during his first term by the failure of those he called “my generals” to offer him blind obedience and adulation, Trump has vowed to make the military knuckle under in a second term.

For the most part, he will have the legal tools to do so. He can request the retirement of flag and general officers who show signs of independence, for instance, and dismiss those who don’t take the hint. And he can make fealty to his agenda a condition of advancement for senior officers. This is already a core plank in the Heritage Foundation’s blueprint for a second Trump presidency, which is widely viewed as having Trump’s stamp of approval. It promises the White House will “rigorously review all general and flag officer promotions” to ensure that those with ideologically unacceptable views on “climate change, critical race theory, manufactured extremism, and other polarizing policies” will not be selected for leadership positions. Weeding out those with concerns about “manufactured extremism” is code for purging the military of officers who have spoken out against white nationalist organizations or condemned the January 6 insurrectionists.

Sensible military personnel will read the writing on the wall: Unless you want your career to come to an abrupt end, compliance is best. The U.S. military is, by design, a compliant institution, deeply acculturated to abide by principles of civilian control. While military personnel take an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States, they also have a legal obligation to follow orders, at risk of court martial.

This is, generally speaking, a good thing: No one who cares about democracy should wish for a military that’s prone to ignoring lawful orders from their elected commander in chief. True, military personnel also have a duty not to obey unlawful orders, but this should not give us much comfort; manifestly unlawful orders are vanishingly rare. If a president ordered troops to open fire on an unarmed civilian, in so many words, the military response would be a robust “No, sir!” But even the most dubious and morally bankrupt presidential directives tend to come cloaked in the language of legality. (Instead of “shoot that unarmed civilian,” imagine a different command: “Based on classified intelligence, I have determined that this individual is engaged in direct hostilities against the United States, poses an imminent threat, and is therefore a lawful target, and I order you to neutralize that threat.”)

Think back to the presidency of George W. Bush. Although the legal prohibition against torture was crystal clear, and techniques such as waterboarding have long been considered a form of torture by U.S. courts, Bush administration lawyers argued that if waterboarding was employed solely as a means of gaining information, without a primary intention to cause severe pain, it didn’t count as torture. Several senior military lawyers raised objections when the Bush administration directed that such “enhanced interrogation” be used against detained terror suspects, but the military rebellion, such as it was, was limited to a few strongly worded memos. No senior officers resigned, and the military did what it is designed to do: It defaulted to obedience, despite widespread misgivings among senior officers.

**EVEN WITHOUT THE** specter of a president bent on retribution, the vast majority of military personnel will err on the side of obedience if there is even the slightest uncertainty about whether a particular presidential directive is unlawful. And if the senior officers most inclined to object have already been demoted or dismissed, it is implausible that Trump’s orders will face widespread military resistance.

No one should kid themselves about the degree of legal latitude President Trump would enjoy. Bush administration lawyers had to turn themselves into pretzels to argue that torture wasn’t really torture. But most of Trump’s stated plans won’t even require lawyerly contortions. Historically, there’s been a strong norm against domestic use of the military to suppress protest or engage in law enforcement activities, and some legal safeguards exist. But under the Insurrection Act, the president can employ the military domestically in response to rebellion or insurrection, or when “any part or class of [a state’s] people is deprived of a right, privilege, immunity, or protection named in the Constitution,” or when an act of rebellion or violence “opposes or obstructs the execution” of the law.

The Supreme Court has historically interpreted this as giving the president complete discretion to decide what kind
of activity justifies domestic use of the military. “The authority to decide whether the exigency has arisen belongs exclusively to the President,” opined the court in Martin v. Mott in 1827. If Trump invokes the Insurrection Act and deploys military personnel domestically to quell protests or round up immigrants, there will be plenty of unhappy military personnel—but they are unlikely to have any basis on which to claim such deployments are unlawful.

And when it comes to military action outside the United States, the news is worse. Notwithstanding Congress’s constitutional powers and legislation such as the War Powers Act, successive presidents have enjoyed a virtually unconstrained ability to use military force beyond our borders. There would be plenty of military unhappiness if Trump directed attacks on Mexican soil or the use of tactical nuclear weapons, but it’s unlikely military leaders would have any lawful basis to object.

Military leaders who dislike the orders they receive sometimes engage in the time-honored Pentagon tradition of stonewalling and slow-rolling, looking for ways to quietly thwart the objectives of their civilian masters while maintaining a facade of compliance. But if President Trump uses his power to fire or demote insufficiently loyal general officers, as he says he will, even this dubious avenue of military resistance will likely be closed off.

This leaves the last and most desperate of liberal fantasies: some sort of straightforward, organized military resistance against an autocratic President Trump. It’s a wildly unlikely prospect, given deeply internalized norms of civilian control, and it’s also organizationally almost unimaginable, given the dispersed nature of U.S. military power and the military’s complex command structure. More to the point, it’s a terrible idea. Anyone who finds such a prospect appealing should be careful what they wish for: Studies of military coups suggest that even coups carried out against brutal regimes to restore democracy rarely have happy results and often end up increasing, rather than decreasing, the level of state violence.

In other words: If a society finds itself relying on the military to “save” democracy, there’s probably little left to save. ❧

Rosa Brooks is a law professor at Georgetown, a former senior Defense Department official, and the author of How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything.

By Francisco Goldman

“WELCOME TO THE nightmare in my brain,” said Heather Axford, director of Central American Legal Assistance, when I asked to interview her about a possible second Trump administration’s impact on immigration issues. CALA was founded in 1986, in response to the wave of refugees fleeing the Salvadoran civil war, by Anne Pilsbury—she retired as director in 2023, but remains as senior attorney—and Sister Peggy Walsh, a nun, and operates from the basement and a small office of the Transfiguration Church in an ungentrified pocket of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, at the edge of a Hasidic neighborhood. I first met Axford in 2009, when she was a recent graduate of University of Virginia Law School and had been at CALA for one year. She had a radiant, energetic presence then and still does.

Stephen Miller, Trump’s key immigration adviser, has vowed that Trump is planning such an enormously ambitious and “spectacular immigration crackdown” should he return to power that “the immigration legal activists won’t know what’s happening.”

But Axford knows what is coming if Trump is reelected. She won’t be surprised by any of it. But that’s what fills her with apprehension and sorrow. Axford’s immigration attorney work has overlapped with four presidencies, from George W. Bush to Joe Biden. “The shift from Obama to Trump was the most dramatic,” she said. Axford, who also teaches a class in refugee and asylum law at New York Law School, recalled how, starting in January 2017, every class began with a recounting of the previous week’s changes to immigration laws and norms. “Things that you took for granted,” she said, “that you didn’t realize were just norms. For example, prosecutorial discretion. In immigration court, the prosecutors, like all prosecutors, are supposed to have prosecutorial discretion. That means you don’t go to the mat on every single case just because. Your job isn’t to deport everyone in front of you, it’s to enforce the law as the law stands. If you look at someone, and they are clearly eligible for a form of relief, you don’t have to fight that. The first thing that happened in January ’17 is that that ended. There was no more room to negotiate. The marching orders were to fight every case, to oppose every granting of asylum.”

The new immigration policies, and changes, put forward during the last Trump administration, policies that—even though many were subsequently blocked or tied up in the courts—Trump and Miller have promised to bring back and expand in a second
Trump term, include the following, and it’s a grim list: the travel ban that targeted even potential tourists from seven countries, most of which were majority Muslim; the termination of DACA, the popular Dream Act, offering protections and rights to young people brought to the United States as children; the ending of Temporary Protected Status, for migrants from unsafe countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, and Haiti, many of whom have been residing in the United States, working, starting families and businesses, paying taxes, for at least 20 years now; the “Remain in Mexico” policy, which denied people who have passed credible fear interviews the right to await the processing of their asylum claims here; the Covid-era closing of the border to asylum claims, the reinstating of which a new Trump administration would supposedly justify by arguing that migrants bring other infectious diseases; the denial of Fourth Amendment rights to undocumented migrants, encouraging Immigration and Customs Enforcement and other agencies to make warrantless arrests in private homes and carry out workplace raids; and the infamous child separation policies, which Trump has refused to disavow.

**LET’S START WITH** the border. The press has especially focused on Trump’s promise to round up undocumented immigrants in the United States, 10 million or more, and to place them in vast, militarized detention camps near the border, most likely in Texas, to await, without any due process, their deportations. Such an assault on normative human and legal rights is bound, of course, to be contested in the courts. But the Supreme and lower courts are expected to be far more favorable to Trump this time around.

Much of the U.S. side of the border, then, would become a militarized landscape with bleakly sanitized detention camp warehouses and hiding from outside view the suffering of millions of adults and children removed from their homes to be sent back to countries many no longer know at all. Families will be divided, with U.S.-born children often left behind. Just as during the last Trump administration, some deportees will meet violent deaths at the hands of the same organized, criminal forces they or their parents originally fled. “Remain in Mexico” having been ruled illegal by Mexican courts, it’s harder to exactly foresee what awaits there. But, as before, migrants may mass in border cities with conditions like those of refugee camps. Denied access to asylum, the desperate families and children will seek out ever more dangerous crossings. Already, record numbers of dead migrants are being found in remote parts of West Texas and New Mexico. As president, Trump spoke admiringly of Israel’s separation walls and proposed that U.S. troops shoot migrants in the legs “to slow them down.” Perhaps now courts will bow to his wishes.

“It took them a while to figure things out,” said Axford of that first Trump term. “It won’t take them a while the next time around.” The Trump administration’s legal entanglements did little to blunt its assault on the right to asylum. U.S. asylum law is narrowly defined: It is limited to those with legitimate fears of violence resulting from persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political stance or opinion. Yet those laws undergird the perception of the United States as a country of refuge for those in flight from such potentially lethal persecutions, and as an upholder of our national obligations under international human rights law. In the landmark *INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca* case of 1987, the Supreme Court ruled that even “a 10 percent chance of being shot, tortured, or otherwise persecuted” should be enough to be granted asylum. Under Trump, asylum law began to undergo something like a macabre heart transplant: the replacing of a still beating heart with a cadaverous one.

“By 2020, we had completely shut down access to the U.S. asylum system,” Stephen Miller boasted during a November 14, 2023, interview on *The Charlie Kirk Show.* “Everybody was being expelled, without any ability to apply for asylum in the United States. We were able to build that architecture under President Trump’s leadership.”

The specifics of how asylum laws came to be swiftly undone outside of legislative acts or the jurisdiction of higher federal courts, as Axford explained it, were a surprise to me. She cited cases of domestic violence as an example. “Case law in this country allowed for grants of asylum to those who have survived severe domestic violence and who could show that there is no place in their country where they can be safe, and that they can’t rely on their own government,” said Axford. “It’s hard to prove, but domestic violence in these circumstances can be a basis for asylum, which with women from Central America is very important, because they are often bringing exactly that.” Before Trump, the U.S. Board of Immigration Appeals had recognized severe domestic violence as a basis for asylum. But U.S. attorneys general have broad unilateral powers in this area, and in June 2018, Attorney General Jefferson Sessions used this power in a case involving a Salvadoran woman to end this practice. The change extended to victims of gang and cartel violence, sexual abuse, child abuse, and LGBTQ cases. “ Overnight, a case I had that was a straightforward grantable claim suddenly was not,” Axford said. In 2021, Attorney General Merrick Garland restored the old law. In 2022, said Axford, her client was granted asylum, and, in court, the government deferred.

“If you stand to be killed simply because of who your family members are, because your dad pissed off the wrong people, that’s the basis for asylum. It’s hard to imagine a more obvious social group than the family,” said Axford. It was a known practice of gangs to eliminate the families of their enemies. But in 2019, Attorney General William Barr decided that the law only applied to “famous families … only being from a family well-known or important in the country could be the basis for asylum.”

Decisions by attorneys general can be easily overturned by their successors. But if those decisions can be codified and published as new regulations, overturning them becomes a lot harder. The Trump Justice Department, Axford said, “began publishing the new regulations that immigration attorneys called “The Death to Asylum Regulations.”” Organizations sued, those regulations were enjoined, and the laws couldn’t be enforced until the lawsuits concluded. “Biden came in, and they walked away from those regulations. But they’ve been written. They’re just sitting there. I think about those all the time.” In a second Trump administration, “the courts won’t necessarily save us from that.”

**FOR THE LAST** 20 years, I’ve been visiting New Bedford, Massachusetts, to research the novel that I am now writing. New Bedford is the country’s number one fishing port in terms of profits. It is now mostly Central Americans, especially Mayas from Guatemala, who staff the port’s fish processing houses. Many first fled to New Bedford as refugees from the wars of Central America, wars in which many, many more civilians were slain than com-
batants, and in which most of those civilians were murdered by U.S.-backed militaries. Many young women I’ve interviewed and gotten to know in New Bedford first worked in the so-called fish houses at ages as young as 14, and some, working night shifts, still managed to go to high school. A few even went on to college; some already have daughters and sons in college. Working in fish houses is the classic job that nobody but immigrants, having no other choice, are willing to take, yet the health of New Bedford’s commercial fishing—driven economy partly depends on them. Many of those women, I’ve learned over the years, fled sexual abuse from gangs or aberrant family members; many, so rightly, were granted asylum. At the Community Economic Development Center, or CEDC, co-founded by Corinn Williams, which has been providing support of all kinds to New Bedford immigrants for over 20 years, springtime is when the offices are swamped every day, even Saturdays, by immigrants needing help filing their tax returns. On one wall, photographs have been displayed of new immigrant homeowners and the houses they’ve purchased. Across the street, the Centro Comunitario de Trabajadores, a worker center led by Adrian Ventura, a Guatemalan Maya who was a war refugee, has organized fish plant employees, among others, on behalf of workers’ rights regardless of immigration status. Most recently, the center won protections against deportation and got work permits for fish plant workers who’d been subjected to workplace abuses, a development Corinn Williams told me she’s seeing reflected this year in immigrants’ tax filings.

In New Bedford, the best-paid employment by far, especially for young men, is on the fishing boats. “The finest kind,” as commercial fishermen are known there, until recently were made up mainly of Portuguese fishermen, immigrants, sons, grandsons, and those from other immigrant groups. Heroin, opioids, and now fentanyl addictions among fishermen have had a devastating and demoralizing effect on the fleet over the last two decades. So have the decline in fish stocks, other ecologically caused problems, the burdensome regulations these have occasioned, and perceptions of a threatened future for New England commercial fishing in general. I’ve heard many stories about fish captains who, at first reluctantly, hired young Guatemalans—many from remote mountain communities and who’d never even seen the ocean—to work on their boats, only to find themselves impressed by how quickly and adeptly those young men adapted to the brutally hard and dangerous work. Now Mexicans and Central Americans comprise an ever-growing part of the fishing fleet. They are paid the same as white crewmates. One fishing boat captain told me about how terrible it was, back in the times of Trump and ICE’s earlier Operation Return to Sender, when agents sometimes lurked on the docks, waiting for fishing boats to come in.

I thought of New Bedford’s Central American community amid the spate of recent stories about a Congressional Budget Office assessment that recent immigrants are the cause of the current economy’s relatively robust state. The CBO even estimates that the surge in immigration will help bolster the U.S. economy by $7 trillion over the next decade.

But Stephen Miller claims: “Mass deportation will be a labor-market disruption celebrated by American workers, who will now be offered higher wages with better benefits to fill these jobs.” Who are these workers he foresees flooding into fish processing houses, clamoring to work 12-hour shifts some weeks—other weeks, there might be no work at all—and standing on their feet in those cold, wet, icy, malodorous workplaces, cutting fish, weighing and packing scallops, prying open clams, holding crab legs one at a time up to suction machines? And how well will they work, and for what wages? How will that affect seafood prices?

When I hear Trump rousing his followers at his rallies with his anti-immigrant slurs, talking about immigrants “poisoning” the country’s blood, calling them animals, and so on, my blood boils, too, but with something like the opposite of the xenophobic and racist euphoria so many of his followers exult in. The exact opposite of euphoria is also a violent feeling. But I do give thanks that my Mexican wife and I are raising our two daughters in Mexico and not in the United States. I don’t know how I would be able to control myself, were my daughters to hear a U.S. president referring to them as animals, and worse. I think of the young children in New Bedford who are regularly exposed to such hatred, and my heart literally contracts and aches.

As I listened to Stephen Miller on The Charlie Kirk Show, his voice reminded me of a tense little finch skittering forward while plucking at a very long line of tiny seeds. Describing Trump’s plans to implement “the largest deportation operation since Eisenhower” and his Operation Wetback, Miller said, “Just imagine the logistics involved in getting illegal aliens back to Pakistan, Cambodia, and, yes, Mexico, the Northern Triangle, Brazil, South America, Panama, China, all throughout the Middle East, and so on and so forth, all throughout the continent of Africa. It is an undertaking every bit as significant, and every bit as daring and ambitious, for example, as building the Panama Canal. It is a great undertaking.”

His insipid little seed-plucking finch voice—“Pakistan, Cambodia, and, yes, Mexico...”—only grew excited when he snarled, “Fake stories, fake families, fake asylum claims! That all stops now!”

Miller has promised a surge of ICE workplace raids such as the one that occurred in New Bedford in 2007 at a sweatshop-type factory. That led to about 150 mostly Guatemalan women being deported, separating over 100 children from at least one parent, mostly mothers, some who were breastfeeding. New Bedford’s community rebounded from that initial trauma. “Guatemalans are made of iron,” said Ventura. “They survived the war; they will survive Trump. He’s not a Putin. We’ll defend our rights.”

Francisco Goldman’s most recent novel is Monkey Boy, a Pulitzer Prize finalist.
TO SPECULATE ON what the future of American culture might look like in a second Trump presidency, we must consider the past: the formative New York and educational years of Donald Trump himself. By a curious turn of fate, the young Donald and I share a birthplace and, generally speaking, an education at the same institutions of higher learning. I can’t pretend to know the influence our common background has on his attitude toward the arts, but I can make some informed guesses by contrasting Trump’s journey to my own. To understand Trump and the cues his base takes from him, we need to see him as the anti–New York New Yorker: intellectually incurious and leery of the crowded streets of the crown city of cosmopolitan difference in a nation that mythologizes rural communities of sameness.
Trump, a Protestant by birth if not interest, ecumenically began his college career in 1964 at Fordham University, a Jesuit institution in the Bronx. Nine years later, when I—a fellow Queens native, but one from a more “aspirational” working-class neighborhood than Trump’s own—entered Fordham as an undergraduate, theology was still a required course along with English, philosophy, and history; in short, the traditional humanities core. The Jesuits, after all, are the intellectuals of the Roman Catholic Church. I thrilled to professors who guided me through the profound pleasures of canonical writing.

The two years that Trump spent as a student at Fordham would have been the years when he would have had to fulfill most of those required courses in the humanities and theology, yet, despite his claim that the Bible is his “favorite book,” nothing from his brief encounter with the Great Works of Western Civilization seems to have stuck with him. His word-salad-spinner speeches are occasions where you might expect a random canonical character like Huck Finn or Hamlet (What a loser!) to surface, or maybe even a swaggering line from some jingoistic poem like Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” But young Trump seems to have passed, unenriched, through the very courses we misty liberal arts types still insist can be transformative through the very courses we misty liberal arts types still insist can be transformative.

In my time at Fordham, I lived on campus in the upper Bronx, a long subway ride away from my parents’ walk-up in Queens. Trump lived at home in Jamaica Estates while he attended Fordham, ensuring that his brush with the cultural and ethnic differences found north of Yankee Stadium would be as minimal as possible. His feet were firmly planted in the world of “getting and spending” that defined the real estate empire of his father, Fred. In 1966, Trump left Fordham behind, transferring to the purportedly higher academic altitudes of the University of Pennsylvania. An Ivy League degree promised more bang for the buck. Trump majored in economics at Wharton—the university’s business school—in preparation to walk into the career in real estate his father had set up for him. Once again, I followed Trump, broadly speaking, to the same institution of higher learning. We were separated by almost a decade, as well as by class background, and by avocation—I arrived at Penn on fellowship as a graduate student in English (What a loser!), a career very much not set up for me by my skeptical, indeed baffled, parents.

The thing about the University of Pennsylvania in those years, though, is that it was sort of like the Queens of the Ivy League. Just as the borough of Queens is adjacent to Manhattan and gazes with wonder and resentment at its skyline and all the power and beauty it represents, Penn, back in Trump’s time there and into my own, was routinely demoted to the ranks of a “mere” public university. As late as 2011, when the Joe Paterno scandal broke at Penn State, Maureen Dowd, among other commentators, referred to Penn State as “Penn.” For a long time, the University of Pennsylvania bookstore sold T-shirts that read NOT PENN STATE—a kind of rueful in-joke. The school’s nervousness about its Ivy League positionality won’t be completely banished until “The University That Benjamin Franklin Founded” obtains his papers ... from Yale.

**TRUMP WOULD SEE** nothing funny about my recollections of Penn during its period of “soft Eclipse” (Thank you, Emily Dickinson). Irony is a mainstay of English departments, not self-absorbed blowhards. He is a rolling spitball of status anxieties, an outer-borough kid who ended up at what was, at the time, the last-place Ivy. That’s why he’s so insistent about his own superiority. Only pursuits that turn a profit, accrue power, and fortify his anxious narcissism catch his notice. He loves the city’s attention, but he hates his gullible audience. Romantic Manhattan skyline gazers like Alfred Kazin and Pete Hamill—and their fictional counterparts Francie Nolan and Nick Carraway—yearned for the soaring promise of Manhattan, including its cultural riches. Trump, however, matured into someone who sought not to admire beauty, but to assess and conquer it, staining New York City’s buildings with his “Kilroy was here” mark wherever he could before leaving New York in a huff.

In the Trumpian presidential sequel, it will be his ardent fans who will be energized by his passive disdain and his nasty buffoonish-ness toward anything that seems fragile and feminized. (Read: the arts.)

As for specific policy, who knows? Trump doesn’t care about culture—as opposed to celebrity. In his first term, he couldn’t be bothered to attend even ceremonial nods to the arts like the annual Kennedy Center Honors event. So he might subcontract out that area by appointing a dedicated culture warrior theorist like the writer Christopher Rufo to a high government position. Rufo’s goal is to create a right-wing counter-hegemony to dissipate the alleged entrenched power of post-’60s racial-and-gender-justice-and-equality activism within higher education. But Rufo has actual, strongly held beliefs about universities, and, as we have seen, universities do not interest Trump. Rufo might annoy him. So, Trump might not even bother to empower anybody on the Cultural Contempt beat. He might just spout off about whatever loser left-wing actor pisses him off.

But, for fun, let’s try something. I read a fair amount of nineteenth-century travel literature during my time at Penn: Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward, William Morris’s News From Nowhere, Mark Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, and, the most haunting one of them all, H.G. Wells’s The Time Machine. In the Gradgrind educational theories Trump and his followers adhere to, that reading was a waste—why imagine other times when there is money to be made right now? But perhaps those tales can be put to use as models for our own brief trip into the future. Morris, a medievalist, relies on “dream vision” structure to present his tour of England, circa 2090. Let’s do the same. Close your eyes, Dear Readers, and awaken in the near future of, let’s say, the autumn of 2027, when President Trump, three years again in power, has made some changes:

**Walking around the Imperial City ...** we reach 400 Seventh Street SW, former headquarters of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The building, called Constitution Center, was once a gleaming marvel with sculptures and an interior garden, but dirt now smears the windows of ground floor tenants: a nail salon and a Hooters. (The restaurant chain was struggling before President Trump graciously patronized one in Tampa and gave a grinning thumbs-up to the, uh, wings.) In 2025, with the help of a Republican Congress, Trump’s budget, zeroing out funding for the NEA, the NEH, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, finally was approved. (He’d tried to level...
those agencies during his first administration, but those efforts were beaten back four consecutive times.)

Around the country, the emphasis is on minimizing public funding for what old-timers sentimentally call “the life of the mind.” The plug is pulled on poetry festivals, “One Book, One City” reading celebrations, artist and musician residencies. Shakespeare troupes cease visiting high schools in rural communities; jazz musicians no longer perform at community centers. Although quite a few ordinary citizens object because they enjoy this stuff, an offhanded Trumpian riff—“Who needs this bullshit? Does anybody still care about THE LATE, UNGREAT William Shakespeare? His ratings are in the toilet”—inspires even larger local budget cuts for the arts. Trump even makes a few bucks peddling WHO NEEDS THIS BULLSHIT? mugs and T-shirts, featuring a slashed picture of the Bard. National Public Radio and PBS soldier on, but without federal funding, local affiliate NPR stations can no longer afford to buy the national programs—crucially, the news programs. The larger cities are mostly spared. The big money donors, both Republican and Democratic, keep the high-end cultural monuments of urban life—opera companies, symphonies, flagship museums—afloat. (Remember whose name adorns one of the three grand facades of Lincoln Center—not Soros, but Koch.) However, given the depressed national mood and state of the economy in the wake of the 2024 election (when Trump, once again, failed to win the popular vote), listener donations to NPR are down some 35 percent. The same is true for PBS, which has fallen back on weekend Judi Dench marathons and 24-hour loops of James Taylor in concert at Tanglewood alternating with Simon and Garfunkel’s triumphant restoration in Central Park to fill the time vacated by PBS NewsHour, whose reporting is too expensive to sustain.

Over the next few days, we leave downtown Washington and explore the larger DMV area to confirm a rumor we’ve heard: The independent bookstores in Washington, as in other urban areas, are flourishing! Where once there were only about 20 in the city and surrounding suburbs, in 2027 that number balloons to 67. Washingtonians are readers, and the area’s independent bookstores are unionized sites of resistance in a surrounding sea of MAGA “abstainers,” as those Americans are called who have taken the pledge, administered in the first year of his second administration by President Trump on Fox News, to “not read more than two books a year—one of them the ‘God Bless the USA’ Bible, the other The Art of the Deal.” Some 40 percent of new literary fiction published since 2025 consists of dystopian fantasy or narratives that are in some way “oppositional” and are distributed through social media as much as by the old-line mainstream publishers. These oppositional texts and art fuel self-funded underground classes, alternative galleries, and ubiquitous reading groups—an undercurrent of insistent thinking.

University teachers do not fare well. With the ongoing adjunctification of the humanities professoriat—there are no full-time academic positions in literature, history, or philosophy—the few remaining scholars and critics are herded into liberal arts theme parks, maintained as profit-making tourist destinations by the universities. Nostalgia seekers watch academics “in costume” (i.e., badly dressed) wander around muttering odd bits of Pope or Yeats or else having staged “problematizings” of postmodern theory that, for some reason, small children find very funny, sitting enthralled listening to quotations from Judith Butler, much to the relief of their exhausted parents.

Meanwhile, in the heartland, Trump’s followers, like him fearful and enraged by the urban mélangé, control public library boards and keep a close eye on new releases, marshaling arguments at the ready to challenge them from reaching library shelves. Even before Trump’s second inauguration, book challenges and bannings skyrocketed and their targets expanded.

Public book bannings are now performed; thousands of Trumpists travel for miles to hold rallies, featuring tailgate parties and enormous caricatured visuals of canceled writers and their book covers. It’s become standard procedure to challenge queer coming-of-age stories aimed at the YA audience, but now even “classics” like Peter Pan (Peter’s pansexuality) and Black Beauty (shames white readers) are nixed.

Most book bannings and challenges continue to arise from the right; but many books are being quietly disappeared from college syllabi and libraries, as liberals and leftists, the closest to each other on the political spectrum, can’t always agree that it’s better to fight Trump than to hate each other. It’s simply too emotionally draining to defend novels like Lolita or “monster” authors like Norman Mailer in these anxious times.

As the critic Dwight Macdonald anticipated more than 60 years ago in his classic essay “Masscult and Midcult,” there is no “common culture” anymore in the United States. People gather in online chat groups composed of the like-minded; stream shows on their home screens and listen through their earbuds; read books—if they do read books—and talk about them with friends who share their tastes and opinions. These niches and subcultures in a continental-size nation permit a sense of normality—there are geographical and mental spaces in which to hide. But that is, in large part, because Trump and his more sophisticated political-media operatives prefer manufactured outrage directed at the cultural “garbage” served to the most aggrieved activists more than they do difficult legal efforts to outright proscribe texts and artistic events. It is a private, nervous, self-monitoring country, but it’s also a nation as ridiculous as it is ominous. Trump embodies, in Philip Roth’s famous description, the “indigenous American berserk,” but the children giggling at the professors arguing about Saussure keep things from descending into the deepest darkness.

We take our leave of America in 2027, with a scene under the Florida sun of the anti-urbanist, the “escape from New York” New Yorker contentedly chewing on his Big Mac before cheating at another round of golf. Myself, I’ll still take Manhattan. And Queens, too.  

Maureen Corrigan, who is the book critic for the NPR program Fresh Air, is a professor of English at Georgetown University.
“WOULD YOU DESCRIBE the Iranian regime as ‘Islamo-fascist’?”

I hesitated before responding. The term was a favorite of the neoconservatives at the time, which was a year after Operation Iraqi Freedom began. It was a way of ginning up a possible new U.S. military adventure in Iran. But the question was from my former professor, a man I liked and respected, Ira Katznelson. Not a neocon. I had dropped by while visiting New York after living for a few years in Iran, and I knew he wanted my honest opinion.

I quickly ran a fascism checklist. Political power concentrated in a single (clerical) supreme leader—check. A single universalist and imperialistic political ideology brooking no heterodoxy or dissent—check. A police state using paramilitaries and vigilante groups to enforce a moral and social order—check. The forced integration of societal institutions into the state—courts, parties, media, professional associations, etc., reminiscent of Nazi Gleichschaltung. And most important of all, the self-righteous use of violence and coercion against opponents and dissidents—check. The leading scholar of Islamic Iran, Säid Arjomand, had compared the Islamic Republic of Iran to religious versions of fascism in Romania or Brazil. Arguably, Iran is more like Mussolini’s small-f fascism than the genocidal big-F Germany variety.

So I told Ira yes, it’s a plausible descriptor. But if it was a warning, I didn’t heed it. I could have remained in New York, where I had lived two decades of my adult life. Instead, I returned to Iran, country of my birth, which I had left as a child. I believed fervently I might help make Iran less fascist, and as I worked toward that goal, I built a life, with a wife and a daughter. Then I was imprisoned as a dissident in 2009. I was one of the Iranian American hostages freed in a landmark diplomatic exchange as part of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. This event opened the path for my wife, daughter, and me to relocate to the United States, though it also imposed the sobering condition that I must accept permanent exile from Iran.

By Kian Tajbakhsh

“A COWED NORMALITY

Daily Life

REFERENCE PHOTOS: WIN MCNAMEE/GETTY (TRUMP); GETTY CREATIVE
found myself in a country that in many ways I didn’t recognize, and I found new reasons to worry about illiberal politics. On the left, the Black Lives Matter movement spoke a language that was entirely new to me; the more extreme articulations of anti-Americanism sounded uncomfortably close to the grievances of my former Islamist jailers. I had hoped to leave the world of ideologies, sometimes strident and self-righteous and making claims wildly disconnected from empirical reality, behind me in Tehran.

And on the right, oh boy. I was shocked by statements I never expected to hear in a Western democracy. I couldn’t believe my ears as candidate Donald Trump’s rhetoric trashed basic democratic norms. Fighting for those same norms had led to my imprisonment in Iran. And then in 2020 and 2021, Trump’s actions seeking to overturn the election turned rhetoric to horrifying action.

The danger signs have only intensified. Trump’s popularity debunks the “Republicans want Trumpism without Trump” explanation, showing instead a powerful cult following. Trump’s pledge to pardon the January 6 “hostages” exposes his endorsement of political violence.

Seeing the continuation of many terrifying possibilities, I find myself contemplating a hard question, one I asked myself often of Ismaili-fascist Iran, and that we may be forced to ask next January, to ask of Trump’s America: How do so many endure life under such an obviously oppressive regime?

History shows most people manage to live under such conditions. By all accounts, even in Nazi Germany, for most of the population not officially persecuted, everyday life could be quite normal, even if many knew about the concentration camps. Iranians know that their country discriminates legally against religious minorities and women as second-class citizens and rejects in principle political and ideological pluralism, and a large number would likely prefer it were different, but most do not think or talk much about it.

Of course there are exceptions, like the young women and men who protested forced veiling in Iran’s first feminist uprising in 2022 and won a fragile victory, although the shift was minor and thousands of the protesters were imprisoned or killed. But many Iranians live full personal and professional and rich social lives; even many women who, if they conform to the mandatory veil in public, are free to serve as doctors, engineers, academics, managers, sports champions, business owners, and even politicians.

I believe there are many reasons for this. First, everyday life is much more important for most people on the planet than ideas or political principles or even politics. Most people would prefer to live under a system they can trust, to be free from arbitrary arrest, and to feel proud to be a member of that system. But most people also want to be left alone to focus on family and children—which is hard enough—and live in an environment that enables that. In my experience, streets and public spaces in Tehran are clean and safe and orderly—much more than, say, New York City, where I live. Comparing the two makes me cringe.

Paradoxically, the regime’s traditionalistic conservatism leads it to uphold two institutions that thwart its own totalitarian reach but support a positive everyday life: the family and private property. Traditional Islamic jurisprudence includes strong private protections. Homeownership is common in Iran, and personal wealth is protected and consumed in ways that the regime finds hard to control. In these homes, there is generally refuge. The norms of the Islamic regime highly value maintaining the traditional family, so the government does not interfere in families. Certainly, patriarchal norms are far from ideal, and the government’s hands-off approach no doubt exacerbates the serious problems of domestic violence, especially in poorer and less educated households. But, by the same token, the government cannot force those who reject the Islamist lifestyle to practice the norms; strong, cohesive extended families and nearby support systems provide a private parallel universe in which the politicized ideological norms of the regime can be violated. At home, every message haranguing the populace to adhere to the regime’s Islamist patriarchal and political values can be ignored. The regime’s indoctrination in schools and workplaces can be neutralized in the home, and individuals can, as Vaclav Havel put it, “live in truth.”

Iran also has achieved a relatively high standard of living via significant government programs and subsidies for basics, including education, health care, and fuel. There are plenty of government jobs for the secular elite and middle-class professionals that offer job security, perks, and, thanks to large revenues from oil and gas exports, low taxes. This fact probably explains most of the toleration of the quasi-totalitarian political system and discriminatory social system.

Iran is indeed a police state, in that security services operate with near impunity. But there is an absence of the pervasive sense of terror and surveillance that was present in, say, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Stalin’s Russia, or East Germany with its Stasi. I am not sure how the regime achieves this, but it does. The vast majority go about their daily lives in a kind of cowed normality. There is a Persian genius of displaying grace under pressure, cultivated over the decades.

COWED NORMALITY, to be sure, is not an appealing state. But Americans concerned about rising authoritarianism in our own country may have reason to hope that it, rather than something worse, could be the fate of many, and we are already becoming accustomed to it.

Contemplating this future, I think of my conversation with Katznelson—and a strange moment just before my release from Iran, in my last interrogation. “When do you think the United States will collapse?” my interrogator asked, completely seriously. I laughed inside at his wishful thinking even as I feared that a wrong answer might cost me my imminent freedom. I tried to give an answer that would appease him but not sound like a lie, and I suppose I must have succeeded.

I said to him, as I believed then and still do now, that American society suffers serious fractures, but it’s not going to collapse anytime soon and will probably remain the preeminent superpower for at least the next century. But perhaps my interrogator would rejoice to know that, only a few years after we last spoke, I would be reading How Democracies Die, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt’s book about the Trump administration, and shuddering with recognition. (He would certainly also be amazed and delighted by the discord resulting from the often ugly and intolerant pro-Palestine protests on U.S. college campuses, including recent ones at Columbia, where I teach.) In the mid-1970s, the Iranian middle class could not have imagined that their modernizing, prosperous country could fall under the total control of a medieval clerical dictatorship. And this unimaginable system is still
going strong almost half a century later. Perhaps the Iranian intelligence services were following the apparent polarization and the fracturing of the United States in 2016, and perhaps they were on to something. But because I’ve seen and lived under a quasi-totalitarian regime, I hold a high bar in contemplating the dangers facing America. A few mob riots, dirty tricks around elections, and intemperate rhetoric are bad, but they are not the genuine article.

Still, America is the only country I have left. My heart sinks as I think of living in another authoritarian state. For me, the question of the so-called Muslim ban is an intimate one, as Trump’s policy sharply reduced the number of immigrant visas to Iranians (and to those in several other Muslim majority countries). Trump has said he wishes to reinstitute and even expand it if reelected. It’s a worry, because my extended family in Iran and in the United States includes observant Muslims. My wife and daughter traveled to Iran a number of times during the ban, and they experienced no hassles on returning into the United States, because they are dual U.S.-Iran nationals. But the family reunification application for my sister-in-law and her family to come to the United States has been in process for almost 20 years, with still some years to go; Trump’s travel ban exacerbated an already broken and backlogged system. And the next iteration might be worse, creating an atmosphere of hostility that would certainly impact us and whole swathes of vulnerable migrants from Muslim countries wishing to apply to enter the United States either as immigrants, refugees, students, or tourists.

More broadly, it would also affect U.S. standing in the world, inflaming Muslim sentiments at home and abroad, harming the cause of Western liberalization throughout the Middle East. Trump’s bluster and demagoguery, painting America as a victim of free-riding scofflaws, are often so misinformed and myopic, and so denigrating of the achievements of the post-1945 liberal international order, that I fear a return to the tensions that preceded and precipitated the horrors of World War II. Under U.S. leadership, cooperation between countries has brought an unprecedented level of peace and prosperity to the people all over the world and an ability to tackle global problems that countries will find it hard to do alone. Losing that is both devastating and dangerous.

Daily life for me and my family would be lived under the shadow of the unraveling of the achievements of global cooperation, freedom of travel, and international solidarity. We are seeing the reemergence of Cold War frontiers. If Iran joins Russia, China, and North Korea in some Eur(Asian) bloc behind a new wall, my child’s and my students’ world will shrink and be a less rich place to grow. These gears are already in motion, and Trumpian foreign policy could make it worse. Even if Trump’s bluster has in some cases acted as the necessary bromide to shake up rigid, inefficient systems—nudging NATO countries to increase their defense spending and the real achievement of the Abraham Accords, or bringing necessary attention to China and to the southern border—Team Trump’s threats to the Western world order might very well reduce rather than increase security and prosperity of the American homeland.

Many Americans lack several of the advantages that help Iranians be more resilient in the face of their dictatorship. One is safe and calm neighborhoods where everyday life unfolds. I’m not that happy with the consequences of the progressive urban agenda in cities like New York for ordinary middle-class people like me. From my vantage, daily life is generally less affordable, less clean, less efficient, less safe, less orderly, and altogether less pleasant in New York City than in Tehran—so much so that fully half the population wishes to leave.

But there is a frighteningly imaginable scenario of things getting even worse in America. The chasm between the world views of left and right during the first Trump administration, especially in summer 2020, has not closed. Ronald Brownstein at The Atlantic has argued that Trump’s promised policies toward “blue cities and states could create the greatest threat to the nation’s cohesion since the Civil War.” Trump might seek to use federal authority, including military forces such as the National Guard, to deport millions of undocumented migrants, round up homeless people, fight crime, or quell protests—in short, to make war on Blue America. There could be actual standoffs between local police and National Guardsmen.

Former Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter’s prediction of “chaos, confusion,” and “massive demonstrations” in the face of such attacks is plausible. As an urbanist, I fear the urban “doom loop” of ever faster declining and failing cities, greater crime and disorder, and loss of services for cities that are recovering. It would scar cities and American society for years to come. Daily life in struggling cities would become harder. I would leave New York, and many others would, too, and an important part of American life would atrophy.

Those with money will retreat even more into their private residences, workplaces, and cars, exacerbating social divides. Many Americans lack Iran’s advantage in a strong and large familial and community support system. A Trump protectionist economic agenda would likely slow down economic growth and opportunity, and the many losers in the economy would suffer. America’s labor market, though more flexible and efficient, offers fewer employment protections compared to Iran’s rigid and inefficient government-dominated economy. The country’s population will polarize even more into very rich and very poor. I hate to give any theoretical pleasure to the intelligence officer who asked me when I thought the United States would collapse. But here I am contemplating unfathomable future scenarios. If the worst comes to be, and democratic liberalism begins to fray in America, daily life will always go on, as it did under the worst regimes in history. But ultimately, I fear, in daily life Americans are not going to be as resilient to fascism as Iranians are, for all the reasons I spelled out. We’re going to live through it, but it’s going to be harder on us.

Yet, in the contrast I’ve drawn lies an ironic twist: The very resilience of Iranians—or any people—living under authoritarian rule inadvertently nourishes the regime’s longevity. Conversely, the lower tolerance of Americans suggests a dual-edged fate: a quicker uprising in the face of tyranny, or, should the malevolent forces prevail, an arduous struggle to endure. This is the profound insight that Czeslaw Milosz recognized in the human condition under tyranny: It is not the keen intellect that ignites rebellion, but the visceral revulsion of those who can stomach it no more.

Kian Tajbakhsh, a presidential fellow at Columbia University’s Committee on Global Thought and adjunct professor at its School of International and Public Affairs, teaches international relations and has written Creating Local Democracy in Iran: State Building and the Politics of Decentralization.
As Grants Pass, Oregon—and the nation—await a Supreme Court ruling on just how far cities can police the homeless, a volunteer mayor and her unhoused constituents try to weather the backlash.

By Tracy Rosenthal

Photographs by Jordan Gale
ON JULY 24, 2018, Debra Blake was banished from every park in Grants Pass, Oregon. She added the exclusion order to a growing pile of violations—for sleeping, sitting, camping, and trespassing, a mix of civil and criminal charges that accrued late fees, bench warrants, and jail stints, wrecked her credit and job prospects, and made her a known entity to police. At 59, Blake had lived in Grants Pass for almost 15 years, seven without a home. She didn’t qualify for a bed in the town’s only shelter, and there was no place she could legally rest outdoors. “It seemed like everywhere she camped she would get tickets,” a friend of hers told me. “Every night. Everywhere. Anytime the cops caught her, she was in the wrong place.”

In fall 2018, Blake sued the city for violating her constitutional rights. Friends described her to me as “motherly,” “selfless,” and “a force to be reckoned with.” By then, Blake owed the city $4,000 in fines. “I am afraid at all times in Grants Pass that I could be arrested, ticketed, and prosecuted for sleeping outside or for covering myself with a blanket to stay warm,” she testified in the lawsuit. She wasn’t alone. “I have met dozens, if not hundreds, of homeless people in Grants Pass,” she said. “They have all had similar experiences.” In September 2019, her debt cresting $5,000, Blake was banished from the parks a second time. She sought refuge beyond city limits, in places she feared were “not physically safe … far from food and other services.”

Banishment of unhoused people was the point, her class-action suit argued. Ahead of the tourist season in spring 2013, officials had held a roundtable on the city’s “vagrancy problems.” Meeting minutes rehearse now-standard talking points in our national homelessness crisis. A councilman explained the utility of punishment: “Until the pain of staying the same outweighs the pain of changing, people will not change.” The deputy police chief suggested a “sobering center” that would house people in “a jail cell with steel doors.” Other officials urged banning food distribution (“If you stop feeding them, then they will stop coming”) and posting “zero tolerance” signs at all entrances to the city. Grants Pass redesigned its municipal code to incorporate these ideas. “The point,” one councilman said, was “to make it uncomfortable enough for them in our city so they will want to move on down the road.”

Blake won her case. As Ed Johnson, Blake’s lawyer at the Oregon Law Center, told me, Grants Pass had managed to design a “set of ordinances that made it illegal to survive on every inch of public land 24 hours a day.” In 2020, the Oregon District Court ruled that the imposed fees were excessive, that exclusion orders violated due process, and that blanket criminalization consti-
tuted cruel and unusual punishment against those “engaging in the unavoidable, biological, life-sustaining acts of sleeping and resting.” Blake passed away before she could see the results: an injunction that allows homeless people to rest in Grants Pass parks for 24 hours at a time, as long as there is nowhere else for them to go. Her friend said it felt as if unhoused people “didn’t have to hide anymore.”

But the city appealed—all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Gripped by a right-wing supermajority, that court has already restricted abortion, undermined the Environmental Protection Agency, curtailed affirmative action, and voided pandemic eviction moratoriums. Last fall, a flood of official briefs urged the court to take up the case. Their authors included business improvement and sheriffs’ associations, archconservative think tanks like the Goldwater Institute, the liberal cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles, and California Governor Gavin Newsom, a Democrat.

Now a town of fewer than 40,000 people may get to rewrite the scripts of homelessness policy for the entire United States. When the court rules, likely in late June, unhoused people could lose the Eighth Amendment as a bulwark against widespread criminalization and encampment sweeps. But Grants Pass’s current practices, even under the injunction, suggest cruelty is rarely unusual. The embattled Oregon town is a microcosm of the drama now playing out among politicians, their constituents, and the fast-growing number of people who live in public space. In this bipartisan production, homelessness is portrayed as something police can deter and rehabilitation can
cure. Homelessness policies that fail drive electoral success, and politicians can claim an empty sidewalk—and an unsolved crisis—as a political victory.

GRANTS PASS’S MAYOR, Sara Bristol, often wears an expression of amused exasperation. The day we met, she’d tried to dispel a Facebook rumor that nonprofit warming shelters would house undocumented immigrants. She often finds herself disputing the claim that homeless people in town are outsiders. Born in Grants Pass, not registered with either party, Bristol was elected just as the injunction settled into place, turning new clusters of tents—on green spaces abutting the Rogue River, on muddy dirt by the ball fields, on the grass strip of a road median—into Bristolvilles. In fall 2023, a group of residents campaigned for her recall, gathering signatures under signs that read TAKE BACK OUR PARKS. Bristol maintained her mandate.

Like all members of City Council, Bristol is an unpaid volunteer. Early this March, I rode shotgun in her SUV, which beeped for an oil change. She took detours to point out tents and camper vans, two back-to-back hills she sped down for thrills as a teen, and a mural on D Street, a scene of downtown painted by her father, who also served as the city’s mayor: Her father’s likeness steps out of a movie theater; her uncle walks his dog.

Residents of Grants Pass call its single six-story structure “Tall Building.” Since the timber industry collapsed in the 1980s, real estate and tourism have helped revive the economy. Travelers seek the Rogue River, which cuts the city in half. Californians cash in their property values and fund their retirement in the city. Restored brick facades along the 18 square blocks of historic downtown lure passersby to tapas restaurants and antique shops. Over the last 20 years, Grants Pass nearly doubled in size. Almost a third of renters spend more than half their income on rent. The most recent “Point in Time” count logged more than 500 homeless people, a number that the count’s coordinator said was certainly an underestimation, conducted at the height of winter, when people seek shelter anywhere they can find it. Many don’t want to be found.

The city is an odd estuary of lawn-sign liberals and flag-flying conservatives. During the 2020 uprisings against police violence, an open-carry guard convened at the 140-foot American flag on Union Avenue, patrolling the roof of the local Baskin-Robbins. The county boasts the lowest property taxes in the state and hosts two secessionist movements: the State of Jefferson, which aims to save red, rural southern Oregon and Northern California from the grip of blue urban centers, and the Greater Idaho movement.

Jeromie Wharregard, an unhoused resident of Grants Pass, walks through the town’s historic district.
Features
June 2024

AWS TARGETING THE homeless have surged alongside homelessness itself: The number of bans on camping, resting, standing around, and asking for money all just about doubled between 2006 and 2019. But some laws have been overturned by the courts. Lawyers leveraged the First Amendment to protect panhandling and handing out food; the Fourth and Fourteenth Amendments to prevent belongings from getting destroyed in sweeps. The United States Constitution, Shayla Myers of the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles said, "provides that last line of defense" for unhoused people's civil liberties.

In September 2018, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit issued a landmark ruling governing the Western United States, where more than half of all unsheltered homeless people in the country reside. The court determined in *Martin v. Boise* that criminalizing the "involuntary … unavoidable consequence of being homeless," sleeping in public, when there was no "adequate" alternative place to go, violated the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. The district court and appellate court rulings against the city of Grants Pass built on this foundation. (After Debra Blake's death, the case was named *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson* for another unhoused plaintiff, Gloria Johnson.) The city's ordinances had attempted to distinguish the necessity "sleeping" from voluntary "camping," the latter signaled by the presence of anything that would separate a person from the elements, including a tent, a bedroll, cardboard, or a blanket. But staying warm and dry, the courts said, was as necessary as rest. The town's use of civil rather than criminal penalties could not evade the amendment either.

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Led by counselor Theane Evangelis, Los Angeles law firm Gibson Dunn represented Grants Pass in its Supreme Court appeal. The firm has also defended Chevron against a class-action pollution suit and the corporation behind the Dakota Access...
Homelessness policies that fail drive electoral success, and politicians can claim an empty sidewalk—and an unsolved crisis—as a political victory.

Pipeline. In 2000, it argued the Supreme Court case that would deny a Florida recount, securing the White House for George W. Bush. In 2010, it convinced the court to approve unlimited private campaign spending in Citizens United.

Theane Evangelis wrote in an email to me that Eighth Amendment rulings “are harming the very people they purport to protect.” A white paper Evangelis co-wrote expands on this view: Camping bans are “decades-old, ordinary, municipal laws” that prevent the spread of encampments, incubators of deadly diseases and drug use that victimize unhoused people and threaten surrounding residents and businesses. The paper also highlights the “axiomatic” function of anti-homeless laws as deterrence: Like laws against every other criminal activity, the threat of punishment dissuades people from living on the streets. Eighth Amendment rulings, by contrast, are an invitation tantamount to “a constitutional right to camp in public.”

But even under the rulings, the authors observed, cities are free to issue time, manner, and place restrictions on people sleeping or camping in public space. And the rulings have “no effect on laws prohibiting drug dealing, violent criminal activity, and conduct that poses environmental and health hazards.”

For Republicans, battles over homelessness have strategic as well as regulatory utility. They reinforce the party’s ethos of personal responsibility, win new recruits, and agitate its base. Pundits and politicians launder their racism by fomenting disgust at a seemingly race-neutral category, “the homeless,” in which Black people are vastly overrepresented. Fox News and X grifters exploit videos of encampments as evidence of the failures of liberal governance. At a February press conference, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis announced a new camping ban. On his podium, a sign read DON’T ALLOW FLORIDA TO BECOME SAN FRANCISCO.

But there is often little daylight between Democrats and Republicans in their efforts to engineer cities as sundown towns. It wasn’t Idaho where unhoused people first called on the Eighth Amendment to protect themselves from criminalization; that distinction was California’s. In a 2007 settlement, the court struck down 41.18, Los Angeles’s “sit-lie” law, a ban on sitting, sleeping, lying, and storing property in public. San Francisco now boasts 24 unique anti-homeless laws. Recent reports show unhoused people account for a disproportionate number of arrests, even in liberal strongholds: one in six in L.A., and one in two in Portland.

Liberal politicians appease their housed constituents by empowering them to personally order encampment sweeps. Alongside Amazon packages, DoorDash dinners, and movies on HBO, residents can now expect policing on demand. In this model, UCLA assistant professor of sociology Chris Herring said, constituent emails and 311 calls drive police enforcement. In 2017, complaints from San Francisco residents directed police to address “homeless concerns” nearly 100,000 times. In 2020, San Francisco Mayor London Breed texted the police chief to clear specific people in her line of sight. “Man sleeping on bench on Hayes st near gough,” one text declared. “Can someone come ASAP. I’m in the area having lunch.”

Liberal cities met Martin not as an opportunity to diversify their efforts to house people, but to creatively remove them within the confines of the law. In 2021, Los Angeles updated its sit-lie law with exclusion zones—around parks, schools, libraries, underpasses, and shelters—which effectively if not technically blanket the city. Other cities responded to Martin’s demand that unhoused people need “alternative” places to sleep before they can be ticketed or arrested by codifying it into a cold calculus of beds versus tents. Both San Diego and Las Vegas now issue misdemeanors for camping if shelter space exists. “The right to shelter must be paired with the obligation to use it,” Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg has said. In other words, unhoused people must accept shelter at the penalty of fines or imprisonment.

Democrats have their own rhetoric of deterrence, a “tough love” imbrication of coercion and care. Criminalization, San Francisco explains in its brief in the Grants Pass case, is essential “to encourage individuals … to accept services.” This model fastens the stick of policing to the carrot of shelter and rehabilitation. Punishment helps unhoused people make a choice that ultimately serves them. One sociologist termed this approach “therapeutic policing.”

But research shows that criminalization perpetuates rather than discourages homelessness, disqualifying unhoused people from the support they need, including federal housing benefits. A criminal record and credit scores wrecked by civil debt mean fewer employers or landlords willing to give them a chance. In the short term, arrests and sweeps interrupt the efforts of service providers. Unhoused people lose medication, critical documents, survival gear, and fragile support networks, losses that compound the physical and emotional toll of living outdoors.

When voters demand action on homelessness, sweeps are a useful but temporary fix; politicians keen to show progress on the issue resort to shuffling the problem around. In two years, according to L.A.’s own data, 81 percent of encampments reemerged after “sit-lie” enforcement. In Seattle, exclusion orders ultimately failed to prevent people from living in parks. In one San Francisco study, most of the 350 homeless people interviewed said sweeps pushed them just a few blocks away.

When sweeps fail, politicians blame the courts. In August 2023, Mayor Breed joined a protest on the steps of the Ninth Circuit Court, decrying a recent injunction, which found that the city would sweep, cite, and arrest unhoused people when no alternative shelter existed to offer them; the wait list for its shelters was 1,000 people long. Standing in front of a sign that read DON’T RYUN...
I council meeting in June 2023, the city introduced further rules for illegal camping with 24 hours' notice. In a nearly five-hour round black jeans, kept the door flap around him like a shawl. The sun was only just breaking up the chill. Night's temperatures had dropped into the 20s, and the morning rows, issuing notices to pack up and move. The "Public Notice of Illegal Camp
removal" 72 hours after issuance.
removes the freedom "to enforce the will" of its voters. Los Angeles asked whether a count of all homeless individuals is required every day before it can enforce its laws. (The city has three times more unhoused people than shelter beds.) Shayla Myers called these bids disingenuous, even dangerous: No court has blocked anything besides blanket restrictions, cities have ample room to say where unhoused people can be, and the Supreme Court is in a frenzy of "overturning rights."

California's Governor Newsom sent his own plea that the court take the case, admitting it was a "hell of a statement for a progressive Democrat." His final, neutral brief insists that he does not support the criminalization of homelessness. But his warning that lower courts have erected a "roadblock" that "hamstring[s]" cities echoes Grants Pass's own suit, which uses the same words; Grants Pass's attorney, who says they've "tied the hands" of officials; and the dissenting Ninth Circuit judge, who wrote that while Martin "handcuffed local jurisdictions," Grants Pass "places them in a straitjacket."

IM IN THE CYCLICAL HELL that everyone else is in," John Babb told me. That morning, his and every other tent in Baker Park had been orange-tagged. Around 7 a.m., Grants Pass police made their twice-weekly rounds, issuing notices to pack up and move. The "Public Notice of Illegal Camping," printed on 8 x 10 orange copy paper, instructs recipients, "Your campsite is subject to involuntary removal" 72 hours after issuance.

A "compulsive rule follower," Babb had situated his tent strategically: a dozen feet away from the banks of the Rogue River, far enough from Department of Transportation property under the bridge and the two "buffer zones" surrounding the paths on either side of him. I sat on a thick navy blue poster board rolled out in front of his tent. Babb, in a waffle-knit long sleeve and narrow black jeans, kept the door flap around him like a shawl. The night's temperatures had dropped into the 20s, and the morning sun was only just breaking up the chill.

Despite her detractors' accusations of leniency, Mayor Bristol has overseen a crackdown on encampments. Forcing houseless people to relocate, Bristol said, "helps make it so that people don't have a sense of permanency, like they own that square of the park. Even under the injunction, the city can issue tickets for illegal camping with 24 hours' notice. In a nearly five-hour council meeting in June 2023, the city introduced further rules. It prohibited "scattering rubbish," using propane heaters, and public needle exchanges (which can halve the spread of HIV and hepatitis C); it established "buffer zones" around walkways and pavilions; and it limited park users to taking up a total spatial footprint of eight feet by eight feet. Police had made rounds sizing up tents to inform the decision: "Six by eight looked OK to me," the chief explained. "Ten by 10 did not look OK to me." Most violations earn a ticket for $295—$537 if left unpaid. During public comment, one resident argued: "Rights aren't given; they're earned with responsibilities. Everybody has to earn their rights."

Two police officers, Tim Artoff and Jason McGinnis, make up Grants Pass's Community Response Team, dedicated to enforcing the city's ordinances at its parks. (Neither the officers nor the police chief responded to interview requests.) Babb went to high school with Artoff, whom Babb remembers with a mullet and acne. Every unhoused person I talked to knew both officers by name. The entire Grants Pass police force has fewer than 60 officers; about six are on patrol at a time. In short, a full third of the city's resources for public safety—itself almost a third of the city's budget—are directed to policing its unhoused residents.

Babb had just passed his two-year anniversary of living outside. When he lost both his parents, whom he called his "best friends," he couldn't remain in the house they shared. Then the city impounded his car, and he went from "cushy homeless" to living outdoors. Without the care of his mother, he had to face the challenge of "learning to adult" at 52. Babb was ambivalent about standing out in the community as "an English major," an "Eskimo," and gay. People "go out of their way to paint everyone with the same brush, like, 'Well, they just don't want to work. They're useless drug addicts,'" he said. For the resources to stand up for himself, he sometimes turned to Debra Blake's memory.

"With every fiber of my being, I know that I'm not going to be in this circumstance forever," he said. But life outdoors puts up roadblocks to getting out: "It's a vicious cycle... It kind of compounds and compounds." He has lost four IDs. Moving wears down his gear and triggers his arthritis. His phone charger had been soaked through in a recent storm—not that he could find somewhere to plug it in. The city's ordinances, even under the injunction, erect their own obstacles. "Two tickets. That's all I make in a year."

That morning, Babb had walked the half-mile to Riverside Park, where a host of volunteers and nonprofits deliver the city's only services, providing wound care and distributing groceries, gloves, and naloxone. The city itself has restricted access to electricity, trash cans, bathrooms, and running water at its parks. Asked about the specifics of "scattering rubbish" violations, Artoff once said, "I don't know it by heart.... It includes garbage and other items of personal property"—a slippage between trash and houseless people's belongings. Of the relentless cycle of sweeps, one person told me, "The cops run them around like they're goddamn farm animals." People have to pick up everything they own and move it between the only places they are allowed to be—one pen to another.
It gets preference for federal grants. But no level of government has built anywhere near enough permanent housing to keep pace with the growing number of houseless people.

Donald Trump hastened a backlash. In 2019, his Council of Economic Advisers disparaged federal focus on permanent housing and local leniency toward “use of tents.” That year, Trump put Robert Marbut in charge of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness; Marbut had founded a San Antonio super-shelter fit for 1,500, where residents who fail to pass a drug test or perform chores must sleep in a fenced area outdoors. Marbut has said he favored “Housing Fourth.”

Cutting swiftly between shots of unhoused people in distress, a video by the Cicero Institute and PragerU warns that cities with rising homeless populations “have one policy in common: Housing First.” It makes the case that homelessness “is not a poverty problem…. The root of the problem is mental illness and addiction.” Rejecting, in Lonsdale’s words, “the Marxist idea that American capitalism causes homelessness,” conservatives insist that criminalization and mandatory treatment will promote personal accountability and get people off the streets. In *San Francisco: Why Progressives Ruin Cities*, Michael Shellenberger proposed fusing police, mental health, and addiction treatment into a superagency called “Cal-Psych.”

**Criminalizing Homelessness** is an increasingly organized effort on the right. In 2021, Joe Lonsdale, a co-founder of the Palantir data analysis company, bankrolled a camping ban in Austin. He helped establish the Cicero Institute to take that campaign national. Already passed, introduced, or adapted in 12 states, Cicero’s template legislation bans camping statewide—at the penalty of a $5,000 fine and a month in prison—and redirects all but 10 percent of homelessness funding from permanent to temporary housing, with mandatory drug treatment. One policy director summarized the strategy as “treatment first, not Housing First.”

Ironically, the right is seeking to undo a framework popularized under George W. Bush. Before Bush, federal policies prioritized short-term shelter, offering permanent housing as a reward for sobriety and employment. Housing First promised the opposite: unconditional, permanent housing with voluntary mental health and substance care. Appeasing fiscal and humanitarian concerns and once enjoying bipartisan support, Housing First has been shown to use public resources efficiently—housing people costs less than repeatedly incarcerating and hospitalizing them—and to keep people housed over the long term. The framework has been adopted widely. It’s the official policy of the state of California and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

At Morrison Park, John Babb shares a book on the Alaska wilderness that belonged to his late father, who was from that state. Babb brings the book everywhere he camps.
If elected president, Trump has promised to ban camping nationwide—a promise the Grants Pass ruling may help him keep. “The homeless have no right to turn every park and sidewalk into a place for them to squat and do drugs,” he warned in a 2023 campaign ad. Trump said he would erect sanctioned tent cities, with “doctors, psychiatrists, social workers, and drug rehab specialists,” where unhoused people “can be relocated and their problems identified.”

Nationally, unhoused people with such problems are in the minority: 21 percent struggle with a serious mental illness; 16 percent with substance abuse. Studies reflect that forced treatment doesn’t stop drug use. Nor does drug treatment treat homelessness. Of almost 200,000 homeless people who entered substance treatment, one study demonstrated, nearly 70 percent remained homeless afterward. Treatment programs will also prove difficult to expand; they already face critical staff shortages.

Democrats may be turning toward treatment, too—a process augured by Gavin Newsom’s career. As San Francisco supervisor, Newsom implemented the “Care Not Cash” program, which redirected money from residents’ welfare checks into shelter beds. ("I take your cash, and I buy drugs,” a montage of men confessed in an ad for the measure.) As governor, Newsom loosened standards for conservatorship and initiated “CARE Courts,” which empower judges to commit people into treatment involuntarily. This year, Newsom’s “Treatment Not Tents” eked out a victory at the ballot: $6 billion to fund inpatient treatment facilities. “California’s homelessness crisis really goes back to the closure of state mental hospitals,” he told voters. (Shellenberger has accused Newsom of “co-opting” his imagined Cal-Psych.)

Homelessness is “a social issue, a political issue, a political economic issue, and not one of personal characteristics or personal problems,” said Don Mitchell, a professor of cultural geography at Sweden’s Uppsala University. A focus on mental health and addiction issues both stigmatizes homelessness and neutralizes its indictment of the status quo: It takes nearly four full-time, minimum wage jobs to afford the typical two-bedroom rent. While municipalities increasingly rely on real estate speculation for revenue, homeowners on inflating property values for retirements, and tenants on doubling up or starving to pay the rent, homelessness grows. Homelessness itself serves as deterrence, “a warning for the rest of us,” Mitchell said, punishment for the crime of failing to work hard enough to pay for a home.

In an email to me, a spokesperson for the governor wrote that beyond prioritizing those “sadly left untreated,” Newsom has invested in new housing programs and vastly increased homelessness funding. This is true: One thing liberals don’t
concede is their commitment of public resources to the problem. But, as a report of three years of California’s progress on homelessness shows, about half of the $5.5 billion that the state spent on housing went to subsidies for private developments. Most of that housing is for people making 80 percent of area median income or less; in L.A., that’s $77,700 a year. Sanctioned encampments are a stark example of local spending priorities. San Francisco’s cost $5,100 per tent, per month—almost double the typical rent.

M

EGAN ROLLED A folding mattress down the footpath toward the edge of Riverside Park, high-vis yellow jacket and eyebrow ring reflecting the midday sun. Her frequent pauses as she talked suggested both composure and exhaustion. The day before, Officer Artoff had handed her a ticket and an exclusion order from Baker Park, violation of which was punishable by a $1,250 fine and up to a month in jail. She had to gather everything she had in the freezing rain and rebuild.

When the million-acre Alameda fire destroyed more than 2,500 homes, Megan’s camper was displaced. Then it was stolen. She moved to Grants Pass in her car, which the city soon impounded for expired tags. “They took my safety, putting me out here,” she said. Suddenly, she was a single woman with no door to lock at night. To dry rain-soaked clothes, find hot food, and connect to resources, she had to walk or wait for the bus. She was forced to rely on other people’s schedules, “everybody else instead of myself.” The exhaustion and stress exacerbated her addiction. “I’m sorry, but you think that now I really am not wanting to get high for the energy to do it all?” she said. “It’s impossible out here.”

David Peery, who served as class representative of unhoused people in a suit against the city of Miami, locates unhoused people’s struggles with addiction in the experience of living outdoors: They turn to substances when it’s too cold or uncomfortable to sleep, for help staying awake when there’s no place to rest, or to address pain when they can’t access medical care. Without stable housing, they look for the predictability of a hit. Recently, concerns about unhoused people’s drug use fueled a backlash against a 2020 Oregon state measure that had decriminalized possession of small amounts of illicit drugs. Accused of enabling addiction and encouraging public disorder, the measure now sits on the governor’s desk for repeal.

The concerns echo in Grants Pass. The Sobering Center that the city planned in its vagrancy roundtable opened its doors in 2016. The facility consists of 12 locked rooms, where people can stay for up to 24 hours. Almost half of its nightly inhabitants are placed there by the police. The town’s only shelter, the Gospel Rescue Mission, has a zero-tolerance approach: sobriety from drugs, alcohol, even nicotine; residents have to quit smoking to qualify for one of the 138 beds. The “pray-to-stay” facility’s 29 rules also include attending church services that follow the dictates of the “Apostles’ Creed,” not interacting with members of the opposite sex, and presenting oneself in line with one’s “birth gender.” (I am personally out on three counts.) Residents must work 40 hours a week at the mission and can’t look for a job elsewhere. Executive director Brian Bouteller defends his shelter’s strict rules and advocates stricter enforcement at parks. In a recent video, he describes people living in the parks as “can and won’t”: They can leave homelessness but won’t, because they are receiving “free needles,” meals, and medical care.

According to the courts, only “low-barrier” shelters, which don’t require employment or sobriety, count as “adequate” alternatives to sleeping outdoors. (“I read the lawsuit,” Bristol said.) Grants Pass’s one low-barrier facility, Foundry Village, opened in 2021. It was paid for and constructed by volunteers. Doug Walker, a bald and bespectacled retired developer who chairs the city’s Housing Advisory Committee, helped locate the land, raise the funds, and build the site. I interviewed Walker at his home, where I was greeted with the classic yard sign, WE BELIEVE BLACK LIVES MATTER, NO HUMAN IS ILLEGAL, LOVE IS LOVE…. “I wouldn’t say I am super passionate about homeless people,” Walker told me. “I agree with the idea of taking back our parks. But we still have to find a place for these people to be. They’re still human beings.”

Walker’s four-person group found a parcel of land a few blocks from the Gospel Rescue Mission and paid the $70,000 to buy it themselves. “The city didn’t have to do a damn thing other than be difficult,” Walker said. The group constructed 17 bedrooms of duplex sheds, with shared bathrooms and kitchens, using a tiny-home village in nearby Medford as a model. Walker stressed the importance of management at the facility. Residents “have to learn to cooperate and function in society … and that does not work if you just give somebody a place.” The problem, he said, is what’s waiting for residents on the other side. They “address their issues and they’re ready to move to an apartment or move somewhere. But there is no somewhere. There are no apartments…. There’s no place for them to go.”

The injunction made Grants Pass’s ability to move people dependent on places to put them. Like Walker, Mayor Bristol described low-barrier shelter capacity in expedient rather than humanitarian terms: It creates “a place where people can go that is not the parks, so that we can have clean, safe parks again.” In 2022, when the city received almost a million dollars from the state’s Department of Administrative Services, Bristol campaigned to open a sanctioned encampment in Grants Pass. She was impressed by Medford’s “clean and orderly” facility. Medford police even supported the place. She related the idea to a quote from Martin Luther King Jr.: “You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.” But other officials bristled. Dwayne Yunker, a Republican real estate broker who serves on both City Council and the state legislature, joined the mission’s Bouteller in a conversation entitled “Low Barrier = Low Safety.” (Yunker has also suggested that the city privatize all its parks, so police will be free to remove people.) Fearful for their safety and their home values, locals resisted each site proposed. “There’s always a school or a day care or a playground,” Walker said. “It’s always near people.” They almost had a deal with one prospective landowner, who pulled out when the community intervened.

When a local treatment agency, OnTrack, submitted a proposal, it won the funds—“the only pot of money that we had to start a campground or a shelter,” Bristol said. OnTrack’s pretreatment facility will host 12 individuals while they wait for longer-term residential treatment placements. “This is not a come-and-go facility,” its engineer clarified: no drugs, no visitors, and a curfew from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.

A few weeks back, Megan asked Officer Artoff to help her to get into rehab. He said he’d let her stay at Baker Park as long as she agreed.
Liberal politicians appease their housed constituents by empowering them to personally order encampment sweeps. Alongside Amazon packages, DoorDash dinners, and movies on HBO, residents can now expect policing on demand.

Her caseworker even complimented Megan as a “great advocate” for herself. She was thrilled when they found her a spot. But it was in Jackson County. “Two things that I asked for was a rehab that allowed me to smoke,” she explained. “And then to not have anything to do with Jackson County.” The personal crises of her past all stemmed from that place, she said: “I just didn’t want to have to be there and have to face it…. I felt like I was totally set up for failure.” She refused the bed. Artoff banished her from the park. “They want to help us get out of here, but they just made it two days behind for me,” she said, pointing to her scattered belongings.

The Eighth Amendment defense of unhoused people is shaped by two Supreme Court cases about addiction. On the one side is 1962’s Robinson v. California, which recognized addiction as an involuntary “status or condition, not an act,” and determined that being an addict could not in and of itself be a crime. That idea, the court said, was as cruel and unusual as jailing someone for having a cold. On the other is 1968’s Powell v. Texas, which authorized laws against addiction-related conduct, including public intoxication and drug possession. More than 50 years of jurisprudence rest on what’s known as this status-versus-conduct divide. “You don’t arrest people simply because of who they are, rather than what they do,” David Peery warned. “You continue that path of dehumanization … you end up with a fascist society.”

Courts have ruled that total bans on sleeping in public when no alternatives exist are unconstitutional because they effectively make the involuntary status of homelessness a crime. But that defense—and the Eighth Amendment’s protection of any status at all—is in jeopardy now. On April 22, Evangelis argued before the Supreme Court that Eighth Amendment prohibitions against “cruel and unusual punishment” merely prevent specific penalties: Cities regularly issue tickets and put people in prison; the amendment could be used, she implied, only if they put homeless people in the stocks. Conservative justices suggested that status was too slippery a slope. Justice John Roberts asked twice if “being a bank robber” counted as a status; Justice Samuel Alito wondered about kleptomanics and pedophiles.

Evangelis also argued that sleeping in public is voluntary conduct that cities should have the right to criminalize. She highlighted empty beds at the rescue mission and described an unhoused plaintiff who did not want to subject herself to its rules. A camping ban, Evangelis said, would serve as an “incentive” for people to accept whatever was available. Alito said he suspected people often found themselves homeless because of voluntary “life choices,” such as refusing antipsychotics or rehab. The United States Justice Department’s intervention at the proceedings in part supported this view: It argued that cities should be allowed to fine or arrest unhoused people based on an “individualized determination” of their personal circumstances.

Ignoring the systemic math of tattered social safety nets, stagnant wages, and rising rents, politicians often frame homelessness as an individual choice, even a “lifestyle.” Homeless people are deemed “service resistant” when they choose a tent over a space indoors, even when that space is temporary or separates them from their community or belongings. UCLA’s Chris Herring pointed to the seemingly logical decision people regularly make in San Francisco: They decline one night in a congregate shelter because they’d have to give up the survival gear they’d surely need for the next one. “The governing narrative,” Peery says, reflects a profound distrust of the personal agency of the poor. Homeless people “made bad choices,” the story goes, “so we need to get the police to force them into making better choices.”

Behavioral modification is as old as the poorhouse, where residents were forced to break rocks to earn a shelter bed. I often fear the future of homelessness policy may look like a regression into that past. Palantir co-founder Joe Lonsdale speaks wistfully of the terms “vagrants, bums, tramps.” London Breed just won mandatory drug treatment for welfare recipients, a policy revived from the Reagan years. Gavin Newsom is bent on reopening the asylums, shuttered slowly after John F. Kennedy’s term. Housing First’s right-wing detractors exploit a 1950s playbook of assaults on public housing.

The right often sees a threat in liberal policy that liberals have no plans to deliver. At its most expansive, Housing First could do what public housing promised, ensuring no one went without a home. But local opposition, chronic underfunding, and eligibility requirements that invite only the most visibly homeless indoors have reduced Housing First, Uppsala’s Don Mitchell said, to yet another “treatment program,” treating the visible symptoms of homelessness rather than the disease. What is languishing may not be unhoused people in public space, but a sense of political possibility, constrained by the effort it takes just to stop things from getting worse.

Helen Cruz’s wrinkles are often set off with sparkly eye shadow. Not quite five-foot-two, half Mexican, Cruz has a pissed-off predilection for reading “the little fine print at the bottom of the pages.” She’s lived in Grants Pass since she was four. Now a caretaker of a local church, Cruz recycles bottles and cans for gas money to make near-daily rounds of the parks. She hands out food and clothes and tries to stay in touch. Sweeps put her in the same position as service providers. “If you can’t find the solution, then don’t be the problem,” she said.
Cruz met Justin Wallace while both were living just out of town, on a hillside owned by the Bureau of Land Management known as Devil’s Slide. She couldn’t make rent, despite two cleaning jobs; he struggled to get back on his feet after a divorce and time in prison. The two moved to Morrison Park, walking distance to the low-income housing complex where Wallace’s sister lives.

In winter 2022, police offered Cruz and Wallace a spot at Foundry Village. To accept, the couple would have had to share a cell-size shed and give up one of their dogs—all for a temporary stop with no guarantees for the future. They refused. “As soon as we didn’t accept Foundry Village or get rid of the dog,” Cruz said, “all hell broke loose: ticket after ticket after ticket.” Police impounded her car and issued violations for things they’d ignored before. Sometimes, Wallace would collapse the tent around him and hide inside for the day, so he didn’t have to deal with the harassment.

On June 2, 2022, Cruz and Wallace were each cited for illegal camping and banished from Morrison Park. Two tickets in the same park in the same year qualify you for a park exclusion for 30 days. But the couple had appealed their first “scattering rubbish” tickets to the Oregon circuit court: They had kept their trash tied up neatly outside their tent. They thought they deserved their day in court to see if those tickets would stand; perhaps they wouldn’t qualify for the exclusions. So they appealed the orders, which the city handles directly. Cruz handwrote the appeals on ruled composition paper.

The City Council held two special meetings to adjudicate. The vaulted-ceiling council chambers served as a courtroom. The council members served as judges. The city attorney at the time, Augustus Ogu, represented the city and police. Officers Artoff and McGinnis stood as witnesses. “It’s a public meeting, we’re on television,” Mayor Bristol recalled. “It creates this kind of bizarre show.” I watched the recording on YouTube. Cruz’s pink bra straps were the only flash of color among the blues, grays, and beiges of the chambers and its inhabitants. Public defenders representing the couple brought up the ongoing appeals and asked for time to dispute individual tickets. The city refused.

“We continually hear that the city is under injunction,” Ogu said in his closing arguments. “That isn’t some sort of silver bullet.” The idea that “the city should be held to a standard, to a T,” but unhoused people wouldn’t, he said, was “fundamentally unfair.” Cruz and Wallace were still awaiting a date in circuit court, but the punishment arrived before the confirmation of a crime. The City Council voted unanimously to uphold the orders to banish the couple. Mayor Bristol signed them into effect.

Flock of Lies

What the spoof conspiracy theory Birds Aren’t Real tells us about misinformation

By Ian Beacock

BIRD PROPAGANDA IS everywhere, once you’re trained to recognize it. Since the Cold War, children have eaten their breakfast cereals with Toucan Sam and spent their after-school hours learning at Big Bird’s oversize feet. Television has streamed into our homes and onto our smartphones under the strutting sign of NBC’s rainbow peacock. Penguins gaze out at us from our bookshelves. Eagles, the government insists, are patriotic symbols of strength and freedom. Duolingo uses an earnest but irritating green owl to engineer our digital behavior and shame us into learning rudimentary Portuguese.

As you catch your breath from this unnerving revelation, you should also know that there is a growing movement online determined to reveal the truth: that none of this is benign, none of it accidental. That Americans are being birdwashed into docility and obedience.

Calling itself Birds Aren’t Real, this group of primarily Gen Z truthers swaps memes and infographics on social media (the official accounts boast more than 800,000 followers on TikTok and 400,000 on Instagram), challenges the powers that be with combative media appearances, and holds rallies across the country. They explain that the U.S. government secretly ran a “mass bird genocide” starting in the late 1950s, replacing the real avian population with sophisticated surveillance-drone look-alikes. Bird-watching now goes both ways.

If ever you’ve feared that the internet has become less weird, this should ease your mind. Birds Aren’t Real had its first dose of major mainstream attention in late 2021, thanks to a surreal New York Times feature by Taylor Lorenz. Now, the group’s two leaders, Peter McIndoe and Connor Gaydos, have published their manifesto in book form. Over nearly 300 pages, they reveal how the bird genocide plot was hatched by notorious CIA director Allen Dulles—when he wasn’t spearheading the MK-Ultra mind-control program. Using stolen documents and confidential transcripts, they also show the complicity of presidents from Eisenhower to Biden. Alongside this revisionist American history, the book offers a field guide for recognizing bird-drones in the “wild” as well as instructions for resistance. There’s also a word search (AVICIDE, CIA KILLED JFK).

Know one last thing: It’s not real. Birds Aren’t Real is an elaborate and successful prank. Everyone is in character, from McIndoe and Gaydos down to the TikTokers going off on Thanksgiving (a suspiciously bird-centric holiday) in the comments. Every document in the book is total fiction. I’d even go so far as to say that birds are probably real, after all. But none of this should imply that what the bird truthers are up to isn’t serious or helpful. Our dragon-ridden age needs its wise fools.

Cosplaying the paranoid fringe, Birds Aren’t Real delivers a knowing satire of American conspiratorial thinking in the century of QAnon. Beneath the collegiate humor, however, lies a profound grasp of conspiracism’s psychic appeal, and a valuable provocation. How to best fight false claims and conspiracies online is currently the subject of fierce debate among social and computer scientists, policymakers, even the Supreme Court. (McIndoe has called his faux movement an “experiment in misinformation.”) The rest of us wonder how we can bring our family members and fellow citizens back to reason, dampening the influence of what Richard Hofstadter, some 60 years ago, termed the “angry minds” of American politics. Could it be, as a consequential election looms and violent online fantasies spray into real life, that we are going about it all entirely the wrong way?

NEARLY ONE IN five Americans believes, according to a recent poll, that Taylor Swift is an asset of the deep state, her celebrity manufactured by a Pentagon “psyop” meant to help Joe Biden win reelection. This is only the latest conspiratorial spasm from a right-wing media ecosystem that has fully embraced the QAnon creed. The book of QAnon tells us that the government is controlled by a global cabal of satanic pedophiles—mostly elites in Hollywood, finance, and the Democratic Party—who traffic in and molest children for sport, and that Donald Trump has been anointed by God to save the children and punish the powerful. Whether they identify as QAnon supporters or not, millions of Americans believe this to be true, and see themselves as heroic soldiers in a Manichaean struggle of absolute good over fathomless evil.

Against this backdrop, Birds Aren’t Real feels downright old-fashioned, more chemtrails than adrenochrome. For all its baroque social media lunacy, it is paranoid but not violent. It doesn’t ask its followers to murder anyone. (This is a feature that sets QAnon apart from its quainter predecessors.) In many other ways, however, Birds Aren’t Real is the perfect conspiracy theory, built on an astute understanding of how they work and what makes them so compelling. Four qualities are particularly important.

Birds Aren’t Real offers, first of all, a “theory of everything”—a way for people to make sense of the world’s complexity and contradictions, to tie up all the loose ends. The group can explain the JFK assassination (murdered by a hummingbird...
Cold War running a range of secret operations. calmly pack your things in the middle of the night. People with birds at home are advised “to do insane and illegal things.” It’s widespread despair that has made the psychic bargain promised by conspiracies so compelling. As McIndoe has explained, “a lot of people feel like they’re the victims in this tragic story of themselves as the main character. I don’t feel purpose. I don’t have identity. I don’t have people that love me.” By embracing conspiracism, however, “you reposition yourself” from “the victim to the hero.” What the bird truthers understand so well is that paranoiac misinformation cults make people feel not powerless or vulnerable, but valuable. Needed.

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his “whole understanding of the world,” and the comforting knowledge that he was not alone in trusting science or seeing the president as human. Finally, he belonged.

He started Birds Aren’t Real by accident in early 2017, while in Memphis. At a women’s march organized to protest Trump’s inauguration, he dashed the infamous three words on a poster as a joke. Someone recorded it and posted it online, the clip went viral among teens in the South, and McIndoe left school to focus on his newfound fake movement. He stepped into character as the group’s public information officer, drawing on his memories of conspiratorial Arkansas. “I used the same cadence, logic, and arguments as those I grew up around,” he observed in a 2023 TED talk, “just with a different theory swapped in.”

 Teens and twentysomethings, like McIndoe and the bird truthers, are frequently chastised by policymakers and academics for failing the test of online misinformation—singled out for being apathetic about current events or insufficiently critical of the claims and content they consume. The broader critique is that Gen Zers are, like the millennials before them, too much in their phones, too online, too detached from reality to be fine critical thinkers and good citizens. In fact, young people are more sophisticated and savvy than this grave portrait indicates. But their reactions to this torrent of digital detritus may look unfamiliar or even nihilistic to those of us raised in a slightly more orderly and manageable world.

The explicit purpose of Birds Aren’t Real, McIndoe told The New York Times in 2021, is about “holding a mirror to America in the internet age.” He and his peers have grown up in a world of dopamine hits and deepfakes and endless scrolling, where what happens on social media is just as real as what happens offline. Bird truthing is both satire and a kind of generational catharsis, a therapeutic reaction to the sense of being trapped on platforms that reinforce our worst instincts and watching serious adults descend into madness. Like real conspiracies, Birds Aren’t Real offers people agency in a world fallen to pieces. One organizer has called it “fighting lunacy with lunacy.” McIndoe has evocatively described his performance-art project as building “an igloo in a snowstorm”—creating “shelter out of the same type of material that’s causing the chaos” and providing a space for people to “safely process misinformation” rather than succumbing to it.

OVER THE PAST 10 years, it’s become clear that online misinformation (to say nothing of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns) is capable of undoing our shared reality and tipping public life into disarray—from Trumpian lies to QAnon to the Covid infodemic. How to fix it is less obvious. One paradigm puts the onus on government to force social media companies to remove false information from their platforms, or make algorithms less likely to amplify conspiracies. The Supreme Court will soon tell us how directly the government can be involved in content moderation (a ruling is imminent in Murthy v. Missouri), but the failure of government agencies to meaningfully regulate Big Tech firms in the United States means that most experts are focused instead on getting individual people wiser to fake news.
What’s appealing about Birds Aren’t Real and QAnon isn’t the promise of truth so much as the feeling of community.

Misinformation experts are currently working out three different approaches. The oldest and most familiar is information literacy. This field focuses on arming citizens with the critical thinking skills they need to identify false or poorly sourced claims, overheated rhetoric, or opinions playing as facts. People are inclined to be rational, in this view, but need the right education and training in order to do so.

More recently, behavioral psychologists have investigated ways of nudging people into thinking more about accuracy and their own biases when consuming information on social media. (Recall how then-Twitter introduced a feature in 2020 that invited users to read articles before resharing them.) This mode assumes that human beings are mostly irrational, but can be tricked into overcoming their own cognitive flaws.

The most novel and promising approach, however, is known as prebunking. Pioneered by Cambridge social psychologist Sander van der Linden, this mode pulls from the metaphor of virality to suggest that people can be inoculated against misinformation. Studies have found that exposing people in controlled ways to false claims can help them acquire “psychological immunity” to misinformation when they confront it next.

Although these modes make different assumptions about human psychology, they have a common understanding of the problem and a shared vision of what success will look like. For the most part, researchers are focused on the interaction between an individual person and a single piece of (mis)information—the moment of critical judgment. And they agree that strengthening people’s rational faculties is the solution, whether we get there through skills education or gentle misdirection or both, by hook or by crook.

As thoughtful as these interventions are, it’s hard not to wonder if they are commensurate with the problem we face—if they reflect the world as it is, in full. One immediate wrinkle is that most people’s experiences with information are not solo but rather intensely social.

In a study I co-wrote last year, for instance, we learned first of all that Gen Zers tend to digest information together with others: in group chats with family and friends, on Redsits and Discord servers, and in the comments sections beneath TikTok and YouTube videos. The value of that information is often social, too. All of us (but especially young people) metabolize information about the world not just because we want to seek the truth, but to know who we are and what we believe in relation to those around us. What this means is that people are often familiar with anti-misinformation tactics, particularly in a classroom or professional setting, but may choose not to deploy them in their daily lives.

Indeed, there’s reason to doubt that greater rationality and more critical thinking will get us back to the world of shared reality we’ve lost. The sociologist and Internet researcher Francesca Tripodi has brilliantly shown that religious conservatives who believe in false claims and conspiracies consume a wide variety of news sources and apply close critical habits of textual analysis to what they read—tactics recommended by academic experts. Purveyors of Covid misinformation, too, as MIT professor Crystal Lee and her co-authors have revealed, are using data visualization tools and the trappings of scientific analysis to lead people away from mainstream public health. QAnon itself is the twisted embodiment of this tendency, a cult movement built by citizen-researchers (known as “bakers”) who are doing nothing more than “just asking questions.” As Richard Hofstadter had it in the mid-1960s, facing the conspiratorial Goldwaterian right, the “paranoid mind” is “nothing if not scholarly in technique.” Rationality’s greatest weakness, perhaps, is that it is a procedure more than a commitment. Teaching people critical thinking and rational argument is the easy part; the less comfortable and more difficult work involves creating social and political consensus, establishing (and defending) the shared values that reason is meant to serve.

McIndoe and his Dadaist troupe of bird truthers are raising this deeper and more troubling challenge, inviting us to wonder if the crusade against misinformation—focusing on truth and accuracy and critical reasoning—hasn’t somehow missed the point. What’s appealing about Birds Aren’t Real and QAnon, McIndoe has suggested, isn’t the promise of truth so much as the feeling of community. “We have to consider that conspiracy theorists are not just joining these groups for no reason,” he argued last year. “They’re getting rewards out of these, things that we are all looking for.” Identity, purpose, meaning, a sense of agency and recognition and solidarity. The rise of conspiracism and misinformation is not a crisis of belief, observe the bird truthers, but belonging.

As the philosopher and historian Justin Smith-Ruu has written, “it is irrational to seek to eliminate irrationality.” We’re determined to do it anyhow. This is the founding fiction of modern liberalism as well as its tragic flaw. We know that human beings are not rational in reality, but wouldn’t it be better if they were? In every national election cycle since the explosion of the Tea Party, Democratic leaders and voters alike have found this to be the most natural and comfortable response to the extreme right. It’s satisfying to believe that the right-wing “fever” will eventually break, that being the adults in the room is enough, that being a good citizen means erasing our feelings and returning to a lost era of rational deliberation. But it’s all a mirage, and not a helpful one. In fact, we have always been, as DeLillo had it, “fragile creatures surrounded by a world of hostile facts,” doing our level best to reason together about what we feel most strongly.

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IN THE SUMMER of 2020, fires swallowed up huge swaths of the Western United States. Entire landscapes dissolved into an unearthly glow of orange and yellow. Skies over Oregon and California simmered a sickly tangerine. Wildfires roared through China, India, Bolivia, Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, and Greece. Australia’s bushfire season left 25 million acres destroyed after lasting six full months. Flames crawled along the edge of the Arctic, burning throughout Siberia.

That September, Jade Sasser was on a Zoom call with her colleagues when one of them mentioned evacuating. Sasser, an associate professor of gender and sexuality studies at the University of California, Riverside, lives in Pasadena. She had smelled smoke in the air that morning and noticed a light dusting of ash on her car after a quick trip to the grocery store. But her colleague’s comment caught her off guard. As she began packing for her own evacuation, her panicked thoughts turned to her research, at the intersection of climate and reproduction: “What would I do if I had children to take care of? Would my worry and fear overwhelm me? How would I parent through this crisis?”

The question of whether to have children amid a deepening climate crisis has been fodder for endless essays and op-eds, books and newsletters; the New York Times columnist and podcaster Ezra Klein has said it’s his listeners’ most popular query. Such discussions have tended to focus on a future child’s carbon footprint, or the morality of bringing a child into the world that is set to experience more frequent and more extreme weather events in the future. They often take place in the conditional tense: What would a child’s life be like if the climate crisis worsens?

Sasser’s new book, Climate Anxiety and the Kid Question, is one of a number of new books that reframe this debate. Instead of probing questions about consumption or lifestyle, they focus on communities, frequently communities of color, that are already experiencing the effects of climate change, often as just one of multiple overlapping crises that shape ideas about and approaches to parenting. These books examine the relationship between reproduction, gender, and power, and map how social and environmental injustice affects people’s bodies, in ways that are already remaking the very notion of reproductive choice. In paying attention to these often overlooked experiences, they illuminate
collective modes of surviving—and of parenting—in the face of environmental and other existential threats.

**SASSER’S DOUBT ABOUT** the wisdom of having children long predated the smoke in the air and the flames at her heels. “As a Black woman, I see hope for the future as a tricky thing,” she writes. “I’ve always been deeply ambivalent about the possibility of parenting a Black child in a country where racism shapes access to such basic rights as health care, education, and the ability to come away from a police encounter alive.” Sasser had been pondering the safety of her future children, informed by a daily sense of dread, well before the skies in her neighborhood swirled with ash.

“You would think that race and inequality would come up at some point in the research on the kid question,” Sasser observes. Unfortunately, she continues, “They don’t. Much of the research about climate emotions—a lot of it focused on ‘eco-anxiety’—focuses on the experiences of young, white, middle-class people.” Many polls and surveys don’t ask about race; those that do are frequently dominated by white respondents who often have college degrees. Sasser cites one Canadian survey that was 83 percent white, another of Americans that was 88 percent white and 93 percent college-educated, and another from New Zealand in which 21 out of 24 young people interviewed were white.

In one of the few polls that did break down its respondents by race, Sasser noticed, Black and Hispanic young people were one and a half to two times more likely to say that climate change was a reason they weren’t having children. In the summer of 2021, she launched her own national poll of 2,521 people aged 22 to 35—roughly half of the respondents were people of color and half were white. They had to have at least a high school diploma and believe that climate change is real. The results were nuanced. Interestingly, respondents of color were significantly more likely than white respondents to report optimism and hope with respect to climate change, and significantly less likely to report feeling angry, resentful, powerless, or numb. But they were far more likely to choose one particular negative emotion: traumatized. Most respondents from all backgrounds said that the number of kids they would have in the absence of climate change would not change from the number they wanted now. But, of those who said they would have more kids if it weren’t for climate change, twice as many were people of color. “So it was clear: race is a key factor in climate-driven reproductive anxiety and is shaping some young people’s plans to have fewer children. But why?”

Sasser offers three possible, and complementary, explanations: One is that people of color already feel unsafe in the United States, having suffered the cumulative harms of racism and colonialism. Climate change and fossil-fuel extraction subjects communities of color—in places such as historically redlined neighborhoods with vastly fewer trees than their rich counterparts, or Louisiana’s “Cancer Alley,” or urban drilling zones—to additional toxins, heat exposure, and air pollution, which affect their feelings about creating families. Second, surveys show people of color are more concerned about climate change, per se. And third, this level of concern appears higher partly because of the contrast with the attitudes of white people, who report greater faith in institutions and society to protect them, which makes them “less reproducively anxious than they should be.”

A loss of that faith in society is one reason Victoria, a 23-year-old daughter of Ghanaian immigrants who lives in inland California, hesitates to have children. In her area, “the diesel trucks on the road and intense heat collide to create some of the worst air quality in the country,” Sasser writes. Victoria tells Sasser that her dream of having as many as four children may be stymied by “environmental chaos.” For Victoria, racism and discrimination, and the accompanying difficulties with access to health care and quality education, are potent enough challenges even before getting to climate change. “It isn’t self-hatred, I love being Black, but the things I’ve gone through... I wouldn’t wish it on other children,” she says.

Martina, a 27-year-old Black public school teacher in Baltimore, wants to have a child, but wonders “whether she would be able to manage children from a mental health perspective.” When she walks outside in unseasonably hot weather, she tells Sasser, “I can already see how the climate affects my emotions, and I could see how that could get worse as climate change gets worse.” And indeed, when Sasser looks at her survey data, as well as other research and polls on this, she sees an unaddressed mental health crisis among young people of color. “This anxiety is layered on top of structural and systemic inequalities, fears and concerns that future children will endure discrimination, injustice, and an increasingly unlivable planet,” she writes, “and that their parents will not have the ability to buffer that and protect their children.”

Sasser places these decisions in a tradition of what she calls “reproductive resistance,” citing examples of enslaved Black women using plants as contraceptives and abortifacients to resist forced breeding, groups like the Jane Collective performing abortions outside of the medical system, and feminists and environmentalists in the 1960s who connected population with sustainability. Reproductive resistance is distinct, in Sasser’s analysis, from “reproductive refusal,” a more recent phenomenon of...
women safely and intentionally forgoing parenthood thanks to modern contraception. It frames reproductive decisions as “an active way of fighting back against the undesirable conditions shaping pregnancy, birth, and parenting.”

WHEN REPRODUCTIVE RESISTANCE forms the basis of a visible political movement, things can get messy. Two prominent examples, both led by young women who captured global headlines in 2019, show how readily such “reproductive resistance in public,” as Sasser calls it, can be co-opted, or at least willfully misunderstood. Less than a year after a release of the 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change special report warning of the dire consequences of exceeding 1.5 degrees warming by 2030, then 18-year-old Canadian climate organizer Emma Lim and some of her friends launched a small campaign called #NoFutureNoChildren, inviting people to join them in signing an online petition: “I pledge to not have children until I am sure my government will ensure a safe future for them.”

Lim, who had worked as a nanny and always wanted children, hoped to spark an intergenerational conversation by holding her parents’ would-be grandchildren hostage to political demands: more action to address climate change, now. The U.K.-based BirthStrike movement aimed to bring together reproductive-age people to discuss their anxieties about having children; founded by the musician and climate activist Blythe Pepino, it was another social media campaign that started as a Tumblr page and grew to include an active Facebook page. Lim’s advocacy was “predicated on refusing to keep distressing climate emotions, and their impacts on reproductive questions, private,” Sasser writes, and BirthStrike’s goal was to show how society’s prioritization of economic growth over a habitable planet was “affecting the human ability and desire to give birth,” according to its statement. Yet neither movement lasted more than 18 months. In part, this was because media coverage misinterpreted both movements as anti-natalist; in BirthStrike’s case, its Facebook page was subject to frequent postings by eco-fascists and neo-Malthusians who wanted the group to take a position against population growth, which ran counter to the movement’s core ethos.

Beyond the misreading and co-option by malign actors, there are other obvious limits to some of these tactics, including, most painfully, missing out on a wanted child. Given the scope and scale of the climate crisis, solving it is a burden no one individual should shoulder. As climate activists Josephine Ferorelli and Meghan Elizabeth Kallman often point out, the logical end point of an analysis that links human numbers to climate change is to kill yourself. (They don’t say this sniffily; people in the climate movement have committed suicide in despair.) “Reducing one’s personal carbon footprint has become a classic dead-end dilemma that obscures rather than exposes the real problem, and the real solutions,” they write in The Conceivable Future: Planning Families and Taking Action in the Age of Climate Change.

In 2014, Ferorelli and Kallman founded Conceivable Future, a series of informal conversations about children and climate change. Although neither of the founders has ever publicly discussed their own reproductive plans, press coverage of their activism so frequently bore headlines something like “MEET THE WOMEN WHO’RE CHOOSING NOT TO START FAMILIES BECAUSE OF CLIMATE CHANGE” that, as with the BirthStrike and #NoFutureNoChildren movements, the misunderstanding of their message seemed almost deliberate. In reality, their gatherings begin with a simple, open-ended question: “How is climate change shaping your reproductive life?” The goal is to help people process their emotions with others who share their concerns, and then to spur them to action: About half of the book gives guidance on how to get involved, meaningfully and sustainably, with climate activism. “We do not use our reproductive capacities as political ends,” they write. “Rather, those capacities are an entry point to understanding our experiences, building relationships, and gearing up for greater action.”

This distinction is important. Ferorelli and Kallman note that when political movements put sex or reproduction at their center, there is a danger of editing “our identities down to our reproductive and/or sexual capacities”—which reinforces gender binaries, discourages men from participating in protest, and often relies on influencing men in power rather than exercising power autonomously. “It’s a power move—but a complicated one,” they observe.

The sex strike dates to at least 411 BCE and the first performance of the Greek play Lysistrata, which depicted a woman organizing her peers to withhold sex in order to compel their husbands to bring the Peloponnesian War to an end. Kallman and Ferorelli also cite the women of the Iroquois Nation, who used sex to exercise veto power over whether the tribe went to war; the Liberian women whose sex strike in 2002 helped end a 14-year civil war the following year; and the 2006 sex strike waged by wives and girlfriends of gang members in Pereira, Colombia. By withholding sex in the name of peace, these actions represent a powerful subversion of the common relationship between sex and armed conflict, in which rape is used as a weapon of war.

Then there are the movements centered on women’s identities as mothers: Argentina’s Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the Vietnam-era Another Mother for Peace, Mothers Against Drunk Driving. More recently, the authors observe, the centrality of motherhood has given way to a focus on life, and women’s role in “giving, sustaining, and defending” it. The women-founded and -led #BlackLivesMatter movement, they note, “emphasizes creating the conditions for life, in the face of the state-led violence that threatens it.” All these movements are, at their heart, about bodily autonomy: about the right to make one’s own reproductive and sexual choices, and the ability to live free from violence, whether at the hands of the state or one’s fellow citizens.

CLIMATE CHANGE, THOUGH, has already come for our bodies. Air pollution kills millions a year. People have perished by the hundreds and thousands in typhoons, hurricanes, and floods. Nor does climate change merely inflict death; it profoundly alters our capacity for creating life. Ferorelli and Kallman highlight an often overlooked aspect of the climate-change reproduction question, namely, the way that heat, toxins, and other damage we’ve visited on our surroundings now impair our reproductive health.

Yudith Nieto, a 34-year-old climate activist, artist, and translator, got involved with organizing to fight the Keystone XL Pipeline. Nieto’s family left their farmland in San Luis Potosí, Mexico, to work in the United States. Living in East End, one of Houston’s most polluted neighborhoods, Nieto saw how her family suffered from the carcinogens and chemicals she could smell in the air. Her cousins had asthma, she tells Kallman and Ferorelli, and her aunts
had “issues in their reproductive organs, reproductive issues, their children being born early, and having children with mental health and development issues.” Nieto’s testimony makes clear that while, for some, climate change has made the choice to have children more psychologically fraught, for others, climate change, acting on the body, may be taking that choice away.

The authors catalog myriad harms. Living near a fracking site is associated with higher risk of preterm birth. Spikes in air pollution are linked to spontaneous pregnancy loss. Endocrine-disrupting chemicals such as bisphenol A, or BPA, phthalates, and perfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, have affected sperm counts on six out of seven continents, with one large meta study finding a 50 percent drop between 1973 and 2018. A 10-degree Fahrenheit temperature rise increases the risk of stillbirth by 104 percent. A growing stretch of the Southern United States is becoming friendly territory for Zika-infected mosquitoes. And while some of these threats may seem indiscriminate—heat and pollution affect large geographical areas at one time—people’s ability to cope varies vastly according to the resources at their disposal.

The novelist and essayist Emily Raboteau’s Lessons for Survival: Mothering Against “the Apocalypse” also traces how social and environmental strains leave their marks on the body. As she processes the election of Donald Trump, the cry of #MeToo, and Brett Kavanaugh’s confirmation to the Supreme Court, she is beset by “brain fog, tension headaches, jaw pain,” and more. Millions of women were enraged, and she observes how her own body and the bodies of women close to her bore the symptoms of their fury.

We grew fibroids. Nobody knew why more Black and brown women were afflicted at a higher rate.... Our uterine linings began appearing in unexpected parts of our bodies, including our brains. Endometriosis. Prolapse. Fibromyalgia. Some of us dissociated. Some of us had panic attacks. The level of cortisol in our bloodstream grew toxic. They removed the uterus of my friend.

Raboteau was already familiar with how injustice manifests in illness. In her community in Upper Manhattan, at the nexus of three major highways, one-third of the mostly Black and brown children (including her own sons) have asthma. Few families have the means to move. The wider Harlem neighborhood “has a childhood asthma hospitalization rate six times the national and three times the citywide average,” she writes, noting Black Americans’ higher exposure to air pollution from burning fossil fuels. “I am the mother of Black children in America,” she continues; these children are, damnedly, canaries in the coal mine.

ALL THREE BOOKS highlight the responses of people and communities who are intimidated acquainted with making a way out of no way; often, but not exclusively, these are mothers. Sasser calls this capacity “reproductive resilience,” encompassing “everyday acts that build the tools, strategies, and community support necessary to survive and thrive in the midst of deeply challenging—seemingly impossible—circumstances.” As she notes, “women of color are called upon to do this all the time,” as are other families navigating “racism, poverty, homophobia, and other forms of oppression and marginalization.”

Sasser and Ferorelli and Kallman also pay explicit homage to the reproductive justice movement, a body of thought and activism that emerged in the mid-1990s, crafted by Black women who did not see their lives or needs reflected in the mainstream, white-led reproductive rights movement. In response to legacies of forced birth, forced sterilization, environmental racism, and state violence, reproductive justice activists demanded the human right to have children, to not have children, and to nurture their children in a safe and healthy environment.

Sasser offers numerous examples of reproductive resilience in action. Lydia, a white high school teacher in her late twenties from Paradise, California, has refocused her classroom efforts from college preparedness to creating meaningful relationships with her students after their families lost everything in the town’s 2018 fire. Monica arrived in the United States with her family as a child, fleeing the Bosnian War; her commitment to having a family is born of “a deep desire to see something remain.” Carla, a Mexican American woman in her early twenties, wonders if her partner will be able to teach their child spearfishing; the thought has compelled her to scale up her anti-capitalist climate organizing. For all families, genetic and chosen, reproductive resilience will require “the new ‘talk.’” Black parents have always had “the talk” with their children about how to stay safe in a racist society; parents from all backgrounds must now help their children process what they are learning about climate change.

Raboteau’s essay collection could be construed as a book-length, kaleidoscopic “the talk,” in the vein of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s Between the World and Me and climate organizer Daniel Sherrrell’s Warmth. It encompasses both the traditional talk about racism and the new one about the climate emergency that already forms the backdrop to daily life. Seeking guidance on how to live and parent in the face of multiple crises, she embarks on a series of journeys, venturing into a borderless land of reproductive resilience. Her peregrinations take her on a tour of the future that many climate-conscious parents fear: broiling urban neighborhoods with too much blacktop and too few trees; Palestinian villages where, in 2016, residents got by on around 20 liters of water a day, a fraction of the 100 liters per person recommended by the World Health Organization; Alakanuk, Alaska, where Yup’ik elders recall vanished days of abundant fish and seals, their traditional foodstuffs.

The people living in these difficult circumstances offer, for Raboteau, models of resilience in the face of hardship; they move her with small acts of generosity and empathy. Ahmad, a water technician who works for a nonprofit that brings solar and wind power to isolated Palestinian villages, notices she is dehydrated and produces a peach for her; she bonds with a Palestinian feminist who received a version of “the talk” in her own childhood. Her friend Luz, who lost all her belongings in Hurricane Sandy, including a large and cherished library, moves into an RV she names Langston and becomes the world’s most appealing prepper. She tells Raboteau to make sure she always brings food and water with her in case she gets stuck underground on the subway, and advises her on what to have in her go bag (“Tuna packets. Nuts. Mini flashlight. Compact charger. Medical supplies. Change of clothes. Water. Filter. Knife...”) for when a natural disaster strikes.

COMMUNITY AND CREATIVITY, all three books conclude, are crucial to facing the climate catastrophe. Raboteau finds them in the creative spirit of the climate art projects she visits around New York City, and in the activists in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park, who plan to transition local workers...
into green jobs and provide cooperatively owned renewable energy sources to residents. “Art is exactly what we need, and so much more of it,” Sasser writes, noting that art and political activism are not so distinct. Satirical shows like *The North Pole*, documentaries like *Katrina Babies*, and mainstream movies like *Don’t Look Up* all “create a collective experience and evoke shared emotions,” while demonstrations and walkouts are not too dissimilar from performance art. (She does not comment on climate activists’ splashing famous works of art with soup.) Ferorelli and Kallman advise the reader to “see yourself in beloved community” and use the most vivid parts of imagination to picture a better world. “I want to see the stars in Boston and New York City,” one woman told Kallman after a talk at Northeastern University, a response that gave Kallman chills. From where I sit in Manhattan’s Chinatown, where the stars have long been hidden by smog and light pollution, such a goal falls somewhere between the poetic and the preposterous. But it also reflects an appropriate scale of ambition: the kind of forceful vision that will be necessary to finding a path through adversity together, guided by grace and grounded in care.

Anna Louie Sussman is a journalist covering gender and reproduction, and a 2024 Alicia Patterson Fellow.

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*Boyle County Snake*

by David Cazden

In Danville’s quiescent morning my neighbor knocked—
“Hello, Ebony from next door, I found a snake and if my husband ever knows he’ll sell our place and move away.”
I wanted to help
so I took my snow shovel into summer, and Ebony and I went behind the house. Wild, new grass—
tough contractor’s mesh on a fledgling lawn
where I found a five foot snake beneath the nets.
Now I knew, in Boyle county, snake eyes slit like vertical blinds meant venom, days of pain, that round eyes reflect only our own fear and the faintest rinds of sky.
So I made five shovel stabs just to break the mesh and lift the net away.

I cradled the serpent on the shovel, its mouth opening as if to speak,
body coiling in memory’s thickets.
I carried it to a field of copper grasses that seemed to stretch forever behind our homes.
I hoped it would survive—
thin as a thread of moonlight in the rippling fields.
Walking home,
my morning returned with that stillborn silence only small towns have.
Late afternoon clouds plumed in, unfolding like a spell.
Rains knocked our town, fattening rings in trees, washing everything—loose grass, slivered scales and all the poison we imagined not the shame we felt, putting plastic on the lawns, trapping whatever clings beside us on the ground.

David Cazden’s latest book of poetry is *The Lost Animals*. 
The Plot Against Venezuela

How catastrophic U.S. foreign policy boosted corporate profits

WHO WAS THE leader of Venezuela from 2019 to 2022? To officials in Washington and much of the American press, Juan Guaidó—a little-known figure with the backing of U.S. officials under Donald Trump and Joe Biden and tepid support in Venezuela—was the country’s legitimate president during that time. Shortly after Venezuela’s longtime president Hugo Chávez’s successor, Nicolás Maduro, was sworn in for a second term in 2019, Guaidó improbably declared himself the rightful leader of Venezuela. To skeptical journalists and observers, he was a punch line. “Juan Guaidó has been declared the rightful leader of Iowa,” tweeted New Republic climate reporter Kate Aronoff on February 3, 2020, referring to then presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg’s decision to claim victory in the Iowa caucuses before any of the vote had been reported.

By 2022, then House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, addressing the U.S.-hosted Ninth Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles, appeared not to remember Guaidó when a reporter asked her why “the person that you recognize as the democratic leader in Venezuela” was not in attendance. In January 2023,
Axios reported that, although White House and State Department spokespersons declined to say directly whether Washington still recognized Guaidó, a senior State Department official had confirmed that the United States no longer considered him the country’s leader.

For those with no connection to or expertise on Venezuela, it can be difficult to independently assess what’s happening there. Whether you consider Maduro the country’s elected leader and Guaidó a U.S.-backed puppet or agree with Vice President Mike Pence’s 2019 assertion that Maduro is a “dictator with no legitimate claim to power” depends on which news sources, officials, and journalists you trust. In 2019, The Washington Post reported, “The United States, Brazil, Colombia, Germany, Canada and nearly four dozen other countries recognize Guaidó as the legitimate leader of Venezuela,” adding, “Russia and China, however, continue to back President Nicolás Maduro, who is widely accused of preventing free and fair elections.” Yet, according to an interactive map of “Degrees of Diplomatic Recognition of Guaidó and Maduro,” published on the Venezuelan Politics and Human Rights site in 2020, “While 57 countries have recognized Juan Guaidó since January 2019, many countries in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia—that is, most countries—‘have quietly continued normal relations with Maduro diplomats in spite of the political crisis.’ That list included “major world democracies such as Mexico and India, neither of which have recognized Guaidó as rightful president of Venezuela.”

In her book, Corporate Coup: Venezuela and the End of US Empire, Anya Parampil rejects what she considers the Western imperial line on Venezuela. Parampil pushes back on the dominant narrative that Venezuela’s problems in recent years result from the corruption and mismanagement of its left-wing government. In her view, foreign governments working in collaboration with foreign business interests are to blame for most of the country’s woes; her thesis is that “corporate conglomerates and their government collaborators in Washington and London have worked to install a puppet regime in Caracas by any means necessary.”

Corporate Coup covers a lot of ground. It moves fluidly from the rise of Chávez, Chavismo, and Maduro to the farcical semi-rise and precipitous fall of Guaidó; U.S. sanctions regimes targeting Venezuela; propaganda wars; and the efforts of foreign corporations to extract wealth from Venezuela via sophisticated legal maneuvering. Parampil, who goes out of her way to defend Chávez and Maduro, is not an impartial narrator. Her book is a gripping and well-documented account of American interference in Venezuelan politics, but it also reveals how often reporting from and on Venezuela is run through a partisan filter. There is little consensus, and curious readers must piece together fragmented and sharply opposing views of the country and its complexities to get a fuller picture of both Venezuelan politics and U.S. policy.

CHÁVEZ WAS ELECTED Venezuela’s president in 1998 and served until he died of cancer in 2013, with the exception of two days in 2002 when he was ousted in a short-lived, U.S.-backed coup. Maduro, who once suggested the CIA had orchestrated Chávez’s death (unlikely, according to major media outlets, but not impossible, given the CIA’s record), was then elected. Washington had an antagonistic relationship with both men. Chávez called George W. Bush “the devil” while addressing the United Nations; Bush administration officials suggested the popular and democratically elected Chávez was a dangerous autocrat.

Relations didn’t improve much in the Obama years. Barack Obama signed an initial set of U.S. sanctions against Venezuela in 2014, kicking off a crisis that has driven around one-quarter of the country’s 2014 population to leave in recent years. In the last 10 years, the United States has crippled Venezuela’s oil sector; frozen government bank accounts; placed limits on the country’s ability to issue new debt; and seized fuel from countries attempting to come to Venezuela’s aid. This triggered hyperinflation and led to shortages of food (oil, butter, meat, milk, rice, and coffee) and other necessities, such as toilet paper and medicine. America’s stated reason for imposing sanctions was to discipline Maduro for cracking down on anti-government riots. And according to an executive order Obama issued in March 2015, Venezuela posed an “unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security” of the United States—a strange claim at odds with Obama’s own assertion, one month later, that his administration did not believe that “Venezuela poses a threat to the United States, nor does the United States threaten the Venezuelan government.”

Trump expanded America’s “economic war” on Venezuela: In 2018 and 2019, he imposed more stringent rounds of sanctions targeting individuals, companies, and countries doing business with Venezuela, as well as the Maduro government’s assets in the United States. The Biden administration has continued to impose some sanctions while considerably easing others on Venezuela’s oil sector, authorizing the country to produce and export oil to chosen markets without limitation for a six-month period if certain conditions are met. (In Washington’s view, they haven’t been; the Biden administration recently revoked a previously issued license authorizing transactions with Venezuela’s state-owned gold mining company and warned that it would reimpose sanctions on the country’s oil sector in April unless Maduro permits what the United States is characterizing as free and fair elections.)

Skeptics like Parampil believe the sanctions were meant not only to harm Venezuela’s economy, but to prevent its left-wing government from functioning and punish those who support it. The fact that Washington did not stop at sanctions lends credence to this view; when U.S. officials failed to dislodge Maduro via economic pressure, they tried to gin up support for Guaidó. And in 2020, a former U.S. Special Forces soldier-turned-private security contractor led Operation Gideon, a poorly conceived attempt to overthrow Maduro that left Maduro in power, eight of those who participated in the operation dead, and dozens captured and jailed.

Corporate Coup proposes an additional motive for the hostilities initiated under Obama: to smooth the way for British and North American companies to swoop in and “rob Venezuela of its most prized international asset”: Citgo Petroleum, the U.S.-based private subsidiary of Venezuela’s state-owned oil company.

BEGINNING IN 2011, a Canadian mining company called Crystallex engaged in a legal battle with the Venezuelan government over the Las Cristinas gold mine. Crystallex had signed a contract in 2002 to develop the mine. But during the financial crisis of 2008, the Venezuelan government moved to expropriate the mine, and it canceled the contract entirely in 2011. As a result, Crystallex took the government to court. The Washington, D.C.–based International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes tribunal, which administers most international investment cases, is an officially independent entity affiliated with...
Corporation Coup

by Jesse Nathan

The smell of fish frying, the veil of frier smoke
fluttering over rooftops by the time the sun goes down
Water a green blue would dream
and all of it firmly in the realm of the ordinary
Sudden memory of a school of fish
appearing that morning around your legs, intuitive movement
The little child tearing off down the beach like a bobcat
All of it
a little anti-hell
(if you weren't among the beach beds by the bar
packed as tight as a city of the dead)


June 2024
A democratic foreign policy is undoubtedly possible, but it will require Americans in particular to do more work and less wish-casting.
OUR PREHISTORIC ANCESTORS never went away. This is what Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari argued in his international blockbuster *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2015), which claimed to uncover our species’ most important characteristics. In Harari’s telling, our brains were shaped in the era of hunter-gatherers and showed little change thereafter. The emergence of language, social hierarchies, and new technologies did little to update who we are: assemblies of raw impulses that always seek food and comfort. As he put it, “we may be living in high-rise apartments with over-stuffed refrigerators, but our DNA still thinks we are in the savannah.”

Harari, however, also claimed that liberal capitalism was an important breakthrough in this history, since it dramatically eased the tension between our innate desires and social limitations. Unlike previous creeds, which expected people to overcome their urges, consumer culture made gratification into a virtue. Harari went so far as to claim that Silicon Valley and its army of venture capitalists were in the process of replacing all national hatreds with consumer-driven virtual communities. As he proclaimed in a passage that reads like Mark Zuckerberg’s fever dream, a “new global empire” of corporations “effectively enforces world peace.”

Others have argued that prehistoric times point to very different lessons. Rather than explaining our base desires, our predecessors were models for anti-capitalist emancipation. This was the claim of the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber (a celebrity since his participation in the Occupy Wall Street movement) and archaeologist David Wengrow, who co-wrote the bestselling *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021). Drawing on a wide range of archaeological findings, the two declared that ancient humans often lived without social hierarchies and without the inequalities of private property. Even as they cultivated complex agriculture and engaged in commerce, they maintained proto-anarchist sensitivities by distributing power and wealth among themselves. For Graeber and Wengrow, this evidence showed that our capitalist present was not in line with human nature, as Harari believed. It in fact represented a betrayal of early liberties, and had to be corrected by returning to anarchism.

With such diametrically opposed claims, it may seem that these books share little beyond pretentious titles. But as historian Stefanos Geroulanos reveals in his original
and exciting new book, *The Invention of Prehistory: Empire, Violence, and Our Obsession With Human Origins*, both are part of the same intellectual tradition: the ambitious desire of European and North American thinkers to transform humanity by reconstructing its deep past. Geroulanos charts the history of this effort, which began in the late eighteenth century, with a dazzling survey of countless anthropologists, scientists, and artists. By studying bones, art in caves, or nomad tribes, these thinkers believed they could answer humanity’s fundamental questions: Are we cruel or compassionate? Monogamous or polygamous? Are there “natural” ways to organize our families, religious rites, or social institutions? The answers they offered varied enormously and often led to bitter disputes. What they all shared, and what they left for us, was the belief that prehistory is the key to understanding ourselves.

In Geroulanos’s powerful telling, this history matters because it shows that an obsession with the deep past can be extremely dangerous. Rather than an intellectual exercise or scientific study, it was born from the oppressive world of modern racism and colonialism. What is more, that legacy continues to poison prehistory today, *Sapiens* and *The Dawn of Everything* included. It perpetuates violent and narcissistic stories that prohibit self-reflection. Yet among the many stories that Geroulanos brings to life in his book, readers can also find some examples to the contrary. Can prehistory, despite its dark origins, also occasionally offer some hope?

**BEFORE THE MODERN ERA**, Europeans had little conception of prehistory as we know it. Their legends and narratives about the past, most prominently the Bible, went back in time only a few thousand years, and assumed that early humans were not dramatically different from later ones. To be sure, the encounter with the Americas’ native inhabitants, who could not be fitted into the biblical story, led many to question the old stories’ accuracy. It also led to new dichotomies: Some writers in the seventeenth century began to argue that there was a difference between “civilization,” where humans followed strict rules and documented their past, and the “state of nature,” which knew no laws and no recorded history. But in a Europe that was still ravaged by religious conflicts, the gap between the two initially did not seem particularly wide. The political theorist Thomas Hobbes claimed in 1651 that the best example for chaos and lawlessness was his home country of England, which only recently had emerged from a devastating civil war.

In Geroulanos’s telling, two things came together to spark a new understanding of the human past. The first was the Enlightenment’s belief in progress. For figures like philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, humans were naturally endowed with the capacity for self-improvement and critical observation. This was something they were born with as children, and which society corrupted; the goal was to craft social and political institutions that would allow them to preserve these qualities. Such understanding of individual lives was then projected onto humanity, which Enlightenment thinkers began to describe as a child that grows from innocence (the past) through confusion (the present) into self-emancipation (the future). Reflecting on the time before society was a way to explain why clericalism and monachism, which legitimized themselves by claiming to represent tradition, were a recent deviation from human nature. Rousseau was the most prominent example for this intellectual move. As he proclaimed in *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), people before civilization were happier and freer than in his time. Animated by the belief in science, Enlightenment thinkers inaugurated new ways to study this mysterious period. They systematically studied languages and ancient texts that until then enjoyed little attention.

The second and more important force behind the turn to prehistory was the radical expansion of European colonialism. As part of their justification for new conquests, many white Europeans and their counterparts in North America insisted that Asians, Africans, and Indigenous Americans lived in an earlier mode of existence. They may have breathed the same air and drank the same water, but they represented an earlier and “primitive” stage of development, which allegedly lacked culture and self-control. The Enlightenment’s love of tripartite schemas proved especially convenient for this purpose, as many thinkers utilized them to divide humanity into three distinct stages. The French biologist Georges Cuvier represented a widespread trend when he categorized all humans as either the “savage” who had no rules, the “barbarian” whose lives were governed by tradition, and the “civilized” who embraced rationality and self-improvement. In this intellectual universe, the study of prehistory was a way to classify Indigenous enemies and explain why they were destined to be superseded by “advanced” races. As the British banker and archaeologist John Lubbock explained in 1870, the value of prehistory was its service to “an empire such as ours.”

The confluence of these two innovations led to an explosion of writing on prehistorical times. By studying early humans (who were now allegedly accessible in the form of Indigenous people), scholars believed they could illuminate what qualities are rooted in our human nature and which ones we acquire by living in civilization. This ambition went hand in hand with a profoundly new understanding of time. To explain why they were so different from their subjugated victims, Europeans and North Americans also began to argue that colonial subjects belonged to a much more ancient period, one that went far longer than biblical stories. In the 1830s, for example, the Danish archaeologist Christian Jürgensen Thomsen claimed that humanity evolved through three long eras: stone, bronze, and iron ages. Each lasted a long period of time and entailed a slow and gradual adoption of new technologies. A few decades later, Charles Darwin extended time ever further back. In *On the Origin of Species* (1859), he suggested that humans emerged from processes that unfolded over millions of years. The belief in deep time was so widespread that it even extended to the days before men and women. Paleontologists maintained that the giant bones and fossils they found...
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belonged not to griffins or giants, as some imagined, but to massive and frightening creatures that from 1842 became known as dinosaurs.

WHILE THE DISCIPLINE of prehistory evolved and changed over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Geroulanos claims that it remained mired in racist and colonial mindsets. Scholars excavated the past to justify the present, especially the racial hierarchies and taxonomies that they crafted. Historians and social scientists, for example, pored over religious texts and archaeological findings to explain why Jews, Roma, or Muslims were inherently “foreign” to the West’s allegedly homogeneous racial makeup. The British-German writer Houston Stewart Chamberlain warned in 1889 that history was an eternal struggle between European civilization and the “Semitic flood” that sought to overrun it. The Nazis seamlessly built on this tradition when they sought to “restore” the lost world of ancient times, which in their minds was defined by strict racial boundaries. They spent considerable energy mapping humanity’s different origins, which they then used to justify their harrowing campaigns of sterilization, war, and genocide. As The Invention of Prehistory shows, racist anxieties continued to animate writers also in the era of decolonization. The American Robert Ardrey, for example, warned that African liberation movements were the vanguard of a race war that would send the world back to the “state of nature.” His bestselling African Genesis (1961) then went on to popularize the theory that human society emerged from “killer apes” that conquered the world.

Another obsession that reflected prehistory’s disturbing concerns was its grim fascination with violence. Novels and scholarly journals overflowed with murder and mutilation, depicting prehistoric humans as inherently aggressive. In Geroulanos’s telling, this was a reflection of colonial anxieties: Because Europeans and North Americans believed that Indigenous and “primitive” people were governed by violent impulses, they assumed this was true also for their predecessors in the deep past. For many commentators, however, the atavistic drive to destroy continued to shape humans even after they matured into civilization. H. Rider Haggard, the popular adventure author of the colonialist novel King Solomon’s Mines (1885), mused that civilization was just a “veneer” that hid our stubborn “savagery.” Sigmund Freud, who was fascinated with prehistory, was the most articulate figure to make this point. In Totem and Taboo (1913), he claimed that civilization emerged after early humans felt guilt over an act of murder. For Freud, prehistory showed that laws and morality could never eradicate violent impulses, even in modern societies. “Prehistoric man,” he ruefully concluded, “is still our contemporary.”

For Geroulanos, this unsavory history explains why we should resist the allure of prehistory, whether in Harari’s liberal version or Graeber and Wengrow’s anarchist take. Contemporary writers may renounce racism and violence, but they still use the past as a mirror for their own concerns. Even worse, sweeping narratives that go from the stone age to our times perpetuate the colonialist belief that all human history culminates with us. As Geroulanos puts it, our culture fetishizes stories of origins because they allow us to “admire our grandeur.” This equation of ourselves with “humanity” in fact ironically leads us to depict those who do not fit our narratives as not fully human. “Humanity still bleeds,” he despairs, because we still so often think of our enemies as imprisoned in “a supposedly savage past” from which only war could provide rescue.

The Invention of Prehistory therefore ends with an impassionate call for radical modesty. It is time for us to admit that we simply do not know the deep past and cannot comprehend the “ecstasies and feelings and terrors” that our predecessors experienced. This recognition will then allow us to root advocacy for solidarity and equality on firmer grounds. Rather than far-reaching narratives that point to one key quality as the essence of humanity, we should accept our history for what it is: an amalgamation of disparate and diverse developments that led to very different modes of existence. It is telling that one of the few figures that Geroulanos praises is the radical feminist Juliet Mitchell, who in the 1970s claimed that ancient history could never offer a model for modern-day liberation. If the past was overwhelmingly patriarchal, this meant that a free society would have to be imagined from scratch.

AS THE DIFFERENT messages of Sapiens and The Dawn of Everything demonstrate, Geroulanos is right to describe prehistory as a Rorschach test onto which the present’s concerns are projected. But what his book does not consider as much as it should is whether this malleability can also serve creative and less narcissistic goals. This possibility is hinted at in the chapter that tells the story of the “tool-maker” school, a group of scientists who offered a decisively anti-racist and peaceful origins theory. The British paleontologist Kenneth Oakley maintained that humanity’s defining feature was its capacity to develop tools. Toolmaking was also an inherently collaborative act: Making bowls or clothes, Oakley mused in Man the Tool-Maker (1949), required cooperation, which in turn enabled humans to together forge rites and culture. Oakley and others were therefore dissatisfied with the theory of “natural selection” and especially the racist reduction of humans to their biological “essence.” Human existence, they claimed,
was a story of continuous exchange, in which different groups borrowed from one another, transformed themselves, and discovered new possibilities. It was also not inherently violent. The paleontologist-anthropologist couple Louis and Mary Leakey claimed that early knives were originally designed for making food.

An even more radical vision of prehistory, which Geroulanos charts in a different chapter, emerged in the unlikely world of Roman Catholicism. It was crafted by the French Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who spent the 1920s and 1930s digging in Zhoukoudian, China, where paleontologists believed they had discovered the bones of the first humanlike hominid (known at the time as the “Peking Man” and now cataloged as Homo erectus). In a stream of idiosyncratic texts, Teilhard claimed that all matters, both physical and spiritual, were equal parts of God’s cosmic unity. No element or creature was superior to another: Humans, fish, and clouds were linked in one destiny. In Teilhard’s telling, this meant that humanity’s emergence in prehistoric times (against the church’s formal position, he accepted evolution theory) was but a passing stage in the world’s broader progression. Rather than being God’s chosen species, who could mindlessly plunder the globe’s resources, humans had to put their unique ability to think and speak in the service of their surroundings. Teilhard optimistically prophesied that humanity would ultimately be superseded when all existence would converge in what he called “the Omega point.” At that stage, all creatures would achieve a mystical unity with God and overcome their limitations.

All of this is abstract and fantastical, but Teilhard’s ideas resonated with readers who hoped to create a more just and equal world. Many thinkers, politicians, and activists found in his narratives of humanity’s genesis a way to imagine new solidarities (and they subverted the Vatican’s ban on his works by printing and circulating them privately). As historian Sarah Shortall has recently shown, the most important of those was Léopold Sédar Senghor, the anti-colonial and anti-racist poet who rose to become Senegal’s first elected president. Senghor, who was also a devout Catholic, claimed that Teilhard’s work offered a new horizon beyond racism and exploitation. It explained how humanity’s deep past could lead it toward “a new humanism,” in which “all races” and “all nations” lived as equals. More recently, with the onslaught of climate change, environmentalists have drawn on Teilhard to articulate a vision of a sustainable future. For them, his narration of humanity’s origins explains what we owe the world around us. Rather than a separate species, we can understand ourselves as equal members in a vast and diverse biosphere.

Prehistory, in short, may have served ghastly causes, but it also holds surprisingly egalitarian functions. At least for some, it offered a powerful tool to challenge stifling hierarchies and reimagine new realities. A recurring theme in The Invention of Prehistory is humans’ endless capacity to take old stories and invest them with strange and unexpected meanings. It is an inspiring quality, whether we share it with our ancient predecessors or not.

Emily Jungmin Yoon is the author of Find Me as the Creature I Am, forthcoming from Alfred A. Knopf in October 2024.

**Evolution**

*by Emily Jungmin Yoon*

I look for uncomplicated peace in ocean and sand,
afraid of the kind of candor you draw
from me, my cowardly deep-sea regime.

With easy honesty I make utterances ugly and necessary
to my being, a kind of nakedness I never attempted
in the privacy of myself.

Looking at your back darkened by the sun
faithfully pouring into the water in front of us,

I think desire is the wrong word
and love too plain, devotion too sacred.

My whole life, I think, I will use for describing you.

What do I know outside of words, which despite their history
and combinations are too few and short for this life.

I don’t know if I want heaven,
but I know I want to be

where you go—
in sand, water, every possible animal form.

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The quiet eco-horror of Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s *Evil Does Not Exist*  

By Adam Nayman

IN 2019, THE South Korean auteur Bong Joon-ho remarked that the Oscars was a “very local” festival, before sweeping the proceedings in 2020 with his ferocious social thriller *Parasite*. It was a cutting joke on Hollywood solipsism that evidently drew blood from the thin skins of the academy’s more progressive wing; since Bong’s comments, five foreign-language films have been nominated for Best Picture, including *The Zone of Interest and Anatomy of a Fall* earlier this year. For those keeping score at home, that’s as many as in the 1980s, ’90s, and 2000s put together.

The unlikeliest of these contenders—and also arguably the most beguiling—was probably Japanese director Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s *Drive My Car*, a three-hour drama that stormed the ceremony in 2022, propelled by a mix of savvy independent marketing, consensus critical acclaim, and old-fashioned word of mouth. Not that the movie was a traditional conversation piece: In a moment where most successful “transnational” cinema either embraces showy exoticism or genuflects to Western sensibilities, Hamaguchi’s stately, Chekhov-inflected meditation on the relationship between life, language, and art—centered on a theater troupe mounting an experimental, multilingual production of *Uncle Vanya* on the outskirts of Hiroshima—seemed an odd candidate for mainstream popularity, much less canonicalization. Still, something about the film’s gentle, metaphysical drift touched a nerve. By setting his film on a site haunted by unimaginable loss, Hamaguchi threw the shadow of history over his intimate study of individual grief; a coda filmed explicitly during the Covid-19 pandemic suggested the unlikeliest of these contenders—also arguably the most beguiling—even if Hamaguchi’s woods in Mizubiki, a village a few hours outside of Tokyo, are not overtly threatening, there’s something ominous about the frozen beauty on display, a feeling of just how easily these ancient rhythms—both of the landscape and of Hamaguchi himself—could be disrupted, and what would be lost in the process.

To the extent that *Evil Does Not Exist* has a plot, it’s centered on elemental disruption: Early in the film, Mizubiki’s residents attend a meeting on an impending—and potentially lucrative—land development deal with a company called Playmode. The latter’s proposal is to transform the forest into a bucolic tourist trap catering to an incoming cohort of “glamper”—i.e., city folk looking for Instagrammably rustic, cost-effective excursions into the boonies. ("Glamorous camping" is a real phenomenon that experienced a worldwide boom during Covid; high-end resorts can be found in Poland, Iceland, and India.) “Your valuable input will be considered,” promises one of the underlings charged with converting the locals to Playmode’s cause during a town hall meeting—a patronizing promise that boomerangs back on its owner once it becomes clear that the company’s proposal hasn’t been thought through. Skepticism hardens into defiance: One resident’s weary, wary observation that “water flows downhill” mocks the concept of trickle-down economics as surely as it points toward the potential (and devastating) pollution that will flow to the locals.

No less than the ensemble rehearsal scenes in *Drive My Car*, the town hall meeting in *Evil Does Not Exist* is a miniature masterpiece of staging, camera direction, and ensemble action; following the ambi-ent, dialogue-free lyricism of the opening passages, Hamaguchi shoots the summit, with its orderly but still head-spinning cast of characters, towards a potentially lucrative—land development deal with a company called Playmode.

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*Evil Does Not Exist* tells the story of an isolated community banding together to protect its way of life from invasion and commodification, and makes a study of not only the power of such existential threats, but the fragility of our defense mechanisms. Though one could argue that the film, with its elliptical tone and structure, is uncharacterizable, there is a sense in which it is a horror movie, albeit one whose scares are more atmospheric than visual, and also one without monsters. The title alludes to this absence, though its reassurances nevertheless come to ring hollow as the true nature of the material becomes clear. And Nature is the operative word: If *Evil Does Not Exist* is indeed a work of horror filmmaking, it is, more specifically, a work of eco-horror, except that, instead of allegorizing (or spectacularizing) the end of the world as we know it, it subsumes it into a story whose smallness is at once decisive and deceptive.

**IN HAMAGUCHI’S HANDS**, the old environmentalist saw “think global, act local” cut two ways, both as a spur to activism and a rueful acknowledgment of some greater, more existential futility. It outlines plausible acts of resistance to the impending climate crisis, only to hint that they’re not nearly enough; without indulging in any dystopian imagery, the movie is apocalyptic around the edges. Hamaguchi’s sense of control is evident from the get-go: it is a horror movie, albeit one whose scares are more atmospheric than visual, and also one without monsters. The title alludes to this absence, though its reassurances nevertheless come to ring hollow as the true nature of the material becomes clear. And Nature is the operative word: If *Evil Does Not Exist* is indeed a work of horror filmmaking, it is, more specifically, a work of eco-horror, except that, instead of allegorizing (or spectacularizing) the end of the world as we know it, it subsumes it into a story whose smallness is at once decisive and deceptive.

Meanwhile, the one human figure on display, Takumi (Hitoshi Omika), mostly keeps his eyes down as he chops firewood and collects spring water—tasks that we observe at an unobtrusive remove. His posture befits the mix of modesty and competence he displays as the area’s designated handyman, and yet for all his evident mastery, Takumi operates on a slightly uneasy frequency; something about him is pressurized, pent-up, and not even his after-school walks through the snow with his daughter Hana (Ryo Nishikawa) seem to puncture his evident preoccupation. Even if Hamaguchi’s woods in Mizubiki, a village a few hours outside of Tokyo, are not overtly threatening, there’s something ominous about the frozen beauty on display, a feeling of just how easily these ancient rhythms—both of the landscape and of Hamaguchi himself—could be disrupted, and what would be lost in the process.

No less than the ensemble rehearsal scenes in *Drive My Car*, the town hall meeting in *Evil Does Not Exist* is a miniature masterpiece of staging, camera direction, and ensemble action; following the ambient, dialogue-free lyricism of the opening passages, Hamaguchi shoots the summit, with its orderly but still head-spinning cacophony of viewpoints and voices, with the attentive intimacy of a great documentarian. The exchanges are funny and rousing, reminiscent in places of *An Enemy of the People*, which Hamaguchi denies was any
sort of influence (“I did see a similarity once I read it,” he told Interview magazine, acknowledging a kinship with Ibsen’s style). “Balance is key,” Takumi says, staring a hole through the Playmode reps and their forlorn little PowerPoint presentation; the image of them squirming behind their MacBook is supremely satisfying.

In another movie, the sequence could serve as a climax, or even a happy ending—a hymn to the tight-knit bonds of community holding fast in the face of late-capitalist raiders. But Hamaguchi isn’t interested in ever-after or easy answers, and the film continues with the narrative point of view (and sympathy) suddenly shifted to the demoralized Playmode reps as they head back to Tokyo for a debrief about their defeat. Takahashi (Ryuji Kosaka) and Mayazumi (Ayaka Shibutani) aren’t bad people, necessarily; nor are they oblivious to their roles as cogs within a machine. As they talk through their situation—and their personal lives—they develop from punch lines to fully dimensional protagonists; in an ironic and endearing twist, Takahashi finds himself charmed by small-town life and even considers relocating to Mizubiki permanently. Meanwhile, we find ourselves in the rare and slightly unsettling position of watching a movie whose immediate direction—and underlying meaning—both suddenly feel uncertain.

**SUCH SHAPE-SHIFTING IS** Hamaguchi’s stock-in-trade: More than maybe any other working director, he possesses the skills—and sensibility—to engineer intricate storytelling structures and then dismantle them from within. The strange but real exhilaration of *Drive My Car* derived from how it deftly repeated certain visual and verbal motifs—like the elongated, hypnotic dialogue scenes set in the titular red Saab 900—only to eventually send its characters (and their desires) in new directions, while 2021’s excellent *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy* unfolds as a trilogy whose chapters overlap at unexpected angles.

The knowledge that *Evil Does Not Exist* was originally conceived as a 30-minute short film accompanying a suite of electronic music by singer-songwriter Eiko Ishibashi makes sense both in terms of the script’s unconventional arrangement and the way the film’s score—by turns atonal and melodic, skeletal and layered—seems not only to be commenting on but also to be dictating the action, especially in the homestretch, in which both the characters and their surrounding environment appear to be vibrating with anticipation.

It’s impossible to properly analyze—or levy judgment on—*Evil Does Not Exist* without saying something about its final act; the challenge in doing so is less a matter of spoiler alerts than trying to understand what, exactly, is going on. The confusion is entirely purposeful: The flip side to Hamaguchi’s unfussy stylistic sophistication is a fondness for enigmas that may trace back to his film school tutelage under the contemporary Japanese master Kiyoshi Kurosawa, whose thrillers derive suspense—and genuine terror—from their own inscrutability.

When Kurosawa is at his best, as in serial-killer saga *Cure* or the ghost-in-the-machine creep-out of *Pulse*, he punctuates his air-tight narratives with question marks, which could make his former student’s bewildering coda here an homage, or evidence of some unconscious influence.

Either way, the closing moments of *Evil Does Not Exist* have the uncanny abruptness of a nightmare; there’s a terrible swiftness to the action that makes us feel as if we must be missing something, or that some kind of definitive explanation will be forthcoming. That it isn’t can be taken as a statement of intent—and integrity—by a filmmaker willing to follow an extraordinary global breakthrough with a movie that ultimately keeps its audience at a measured, sinister distance. No matter how we react to Hamaguchi’s finale, he has us right where he wants us.

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Double Lives

The Sympathizer is a spy thriller of rare political and stylistic sophistication.

By Phillip Maciak

CRITICS LOVED HBO’S Watchmen. Damon Lindelof’s 2019 miniseries may have divided audiences with its intense violence, byzantine intertextuality, and narrative complexity, but critics across the spectrum were seemingly united in their praise for the audacious adaptation and expansion of Alan Moore and David Gibbons’s canonical graphic novel. The book offered up an influential critique of the superhero genre, explicitly noting its fascistic tendencies, its indulgence in authoritarian fantasy; Lindelof’s miniseries took that critique and ran with it, transforming Moore’s story of an alternate-universe United States run by anti-heroic superheroes into an epic serial about the deep roots of white supremacy in the United States, from the 1921 Tulsa race massacre to the menacing specter of present-day traffic stops.

Despite its immediate acclaim, the series has had an ambivalent afterlife. Its unsparing depiction of a masked police force poisoned by racism and corruption was lauded in 2019, but, after a global pandemic and the George Floyd protest movement, truth proved to be even stranger than Watchmen’s fiction. And, for all its attentiveness to the complicated histories of racial violence in the United States, it is notably less attentive to the complicated history of America’s involvement in Vietnam. In the world of Watchmen, the titular superheroes help the United States to “win” the Vietnam War and subsequently annex Vietnam as the fifty-first state. As many critics have noted, the show skims over the sociopolitical ramifications of this sliding door only then to saddle a Vietnamese character as the show’s ultimate villain. As the novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen wrote at the time, in reference to Watchmen’s protagonist, “Her urgent awareness of white supremacy is not matched by equal awareness about American imperialism—or, it seems, any awareness at all.”

HBO’s new miniseries The Sympathizer shares Watchmen’s high degree of difficulty and playful hand with heavy themes, but it’s also the series-length take on American imperialism that Nguyen wished for back in 2019. That’s largely because the series is based on Nguyen’s own Pulitzer Prize–winning novel about the Vietnam War, a text that’s savvy about American racial politics in its own right but also witheringly insightful about the way that America’s proxy conflict in Asia wreaked havoc on the generation who lived through it. Adapted by legendary South Korean filmmaker Park Chan-wook, The Sympathizer is both a corrective and a luxury, a series with an urgent political perspective and the kind of stylistic verve we rarely get to see on television.

THE SYMPATHIZER IS the story of the Captain (Hoa Xuande)—he remains unnamed in the novel—a North Vietnamese spy embedded in the South Vietnamese military. In the months before the end of the war, he is serving as the personal assistant to the General (Toan Le), a pompous, paranoid, corrupt South Vietnamese muckety-muck. The Captain lives like a servant in the General’s mansion, constantly belittled by him, but also entrusted with lethal and life-altering duties that he both revels and relishes. In one early scene, we watch the Captain sort through a long list of staff members, choosing which ones will be granted seats on the CIA plane that will evacuate the General from Vietnam to U.S. territory. He’s clearly repulsed by the task and the sheer gross fact that the General has chosen to delegate it, but he also clearly takes some pleasure in meting out bureaucratic vengeance on a group of people he judges...
to be criminals. After the fall of Saigon, the Captain escapes on the CIA plane, and—still under instructions from his Communist handler and childhood best friend—plans to report back on potential threats from the South Vietnamese government in exile.

That government, though, exists mostly as a set of reflexively honored hierarchies and social pressures in the United States. While the early scenes in Vietnam are affecting and visually striking, life in Los Angeles is stranger. The General gives orders—or at least he hints at them—and his former lackeys race to comply. But, even as these commands sometimes lead to fatal results, they transpire as a kind of playacting. In one post-exile episode, the General pressures the Captain to kill a colleague who’s believed to be a spy. The General is petulant and pathetic, but to acknowledge that, to act accordingly, would be to give up the game. As the Captain brings himself to land the final blow, there’s a look in his eyes that asks, seriously? Are we really doing this? How far must he go to pretend that nothing has changed, that the stakes are still the same, that those stakes exist at all?

That life in California is at least partially a facade is part and parcel of Nguyen’s insight. As new arrivals in the United States, stripped of their former stature, these immigrants adopt the customs of their new home—even its more xenophobic flourishes—in order to rebuild. They start small businesses, ally themselves with local conservative politicians, pledge fealty to their General and the homeland he represents, while striking out on their own in the strip malls of L.A. The Captain’s efforts both to take part in and undercut this burgeoning community draw out its foundational contradictions. The child of a Vietnamese woman and a French priest, he’s an outcast in his community despite his central role in that community’s functioning. His fluency in English and familiarity with American customs—he spent time as an exchange student at Occidental College—make him both an asset and a pariah. He’s devastated not to have spent time as an exchange student at Occidental,

I recently wrote, for this magazine, about the epidemic of stylelessness on TV. On one hand, there’s the paint-by-numbers aesthetic of “prestige TV” that gussies up otherwise middling fare in cinematic costume; but, on the other, there’s the “Netﬂix look” of series designed, for budgetary reasons, to adhere to the same dark, lifeless boilerplate. I argued that, when streamers and networks produce series without distinctive visual points of view, they sacrifice the sense of authorship that makes great TV great. The Sympathizer is as direct an answer to that lament as I could have imagined. You want style, it seems to ask. Well, here you go.

While Nguyen is the author of the story upon which this series is based, Park Chan-wook is without a doubt this series’ author. Every moment of every episode—in particular, the first three, which he directed himself—appears handcrafted with layers of visual meaning, some grim, some ecstatic. When you see the spinning dial of a rotary phone graphic-match into a spinning car tire, or a political prisoner interrogated on the empty stage of a cinema with the projector blasting naked light on her face as the Captain looks on, or two characters talking espionage strategy while a fight scene straight out of Blake Edwards transpires in the background, you might be tempted to describe what Park is doing as “showy.” But the overall effect is a series that feels alive, frame by frame. If the Captain is too cool, his show is suffused with a kind of dark zaniness that allows us to sense, scene-by-scene, the high-wire he walks. Every step could be a pratfall or a land mine, a bit or a disaster.

I’ve saved mention of what is Park’s perhaps most ostentatious stylistic choice for last. If you’ve seen any publicity material for this show, you will have seen an overload of Robert Downey Jr.—who plays five separate roles across the seven episodes of this miniseries. Downey is the perfect actor to undertake such an act: Wily and oily, ingratiating and grotesque, he is able to transform five different ways while retaining an essence of himself in each role. Despite the quality of his performance, his casting is essentially a rueful structural joke. It’s not just that Downey plays so many different characters; he plays essentially every major white character in the series, including the Captain’s CIA contact in Vietnam, the college professor who sponsors him, and the filmmaker who offers him a job. Some of these characters mentor the Captain, and some of them grow to love him, in a way, but they all exploit him. American imperialism is brutally powerful, whether its institutional arm is the U.S. government, the academy, or Hollywood, but it is not at all subtle. In each of its forms, imperialism bears the same face.

The Sympathizer can occasionally be confusing at a plot level, and, to its credit, it’s uninterested in hand-holding the viewer. But, between a plot that’s both labyrinthine and free associative, a structure that’s picturesque in its jumping from place to place, and a protagonist who’s always a bit of a mystery, the show risks a kind of coldness. There are moments of extraordinary emotional resonance alongside moments of sterility, even a few where the piling of meta-textual joke on top of meta-textual joke gets to be too much. But, then again, whenever Park is behind the camera, there’s a vibrancy and an intelligence at work in each visual and sonic choice that make the series constantly watchable. There’s a confidence and a care with this show that feel refreshing. Imagine being surprised at what a shot in a television series looks like; imagine becoming enamored with how a show told its story, not just the story itself; imagine falling for a style. The Sympathizer moves and shakes its way through seven circles of American imperial ruin, swirling into oblivion. TN

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How Is This Happening?

The media’s failure, and the Democrats’ job

With democracy itself on the line, the 2024 election will almost certainly be the nation’s most consequential since 1860. It will also be the weirdest. There are two fundamental facts about this campaign that do not appear to be making much of an impact on what, at least today, seems to be close to a majority of the electorate. The first and more obvious one is that few people in history have ever been less qualified to hold a position of any responsibility, much less the most powerful position in the world, than Donald Trump. If elected, he will certainly deploy that power to destroy virtually everything Americans have historically held dear about the nation’s democratic traditions.

The second, less obvious, but no less objective fact is that Joe Biden has been a remarkably good president. Not everything has worked out, and one can certainly disagree with many of his decisions. His embrace of Bibi Netanyahu has clearly had disastrous consequences for Israel, Gaza, the United States, and likely for his own reelection prospects. But in terms of the way presidents are traditionally measured, Biden has been a smash.

The U.S. economy is the envy of the world. Yes, inflation is higher than one would like, but jobs are plentiful, and so are raises for the people in them; wages are rising faster than inflation, as it happens. Violent crime is way down. Infrastructure investments are way up since 2020. Student loans are being forgiven. The labor movement is rebounding. We are leading the world in defending democracy in Ukraine. And yet, the danger of a Trump takeover remains as high as ever.

Consider just a few of Trump’s qualities that quite recently would have disqualified him in the eyes of all responsible voices in the discourse. I have no room to do justice to even a fraction, so I’ll have to stick to just keywords: insurrectionist; election denier; pathological liar; corrupt; racist; antisemite; (digital) rapist; serial adulterer; Islamophobe; con man; tax cheat; patsy to dictator; wannabe dictator; isolationist; bully; psychopathically narcissist; sociopath; almost certainly medically demented.

We all know I could go on. (I haven’t even mentioned the Democrats’ single best issue: Trump’s proud boast that he was able to “kill Roe v. Wade.”)

So, what gives? Have roughly half of Americans of voting age lost their minds? Is Joe Biden really this bad a candidate? How is all this possible?

Multiple phenomena are at work, but the two most important are these: First is the fact that members of the mainstream media whose job it is to both inform and contextualize the nation’s politics have lost their nerve. Terrified of accusations of being “out of touch” at best and “liberally biased” at worst, they have abdicated any responsibility to render even the most fundamental judgments of what is and isn’t true when it comes to Trump. His lies and those of his representatives are repeated verbatim without challenge, much less correction. “Fact-check” columns after the fact do little to undo the damage of the original lies, threats, and plainly absurd statements Trump makes literally by the minute. What’s more, they routinely clean up his statements for him, making him appear far more rational and reasonable than he is, ignoring his consistently mangled syntax and nonsensical assertions (as well as his frequent confusion about who is president and who he is running against).

This mainstream media fear is the product of nearly a half-century of Republicans “working the refs,” complaining that liberal elites cannot understand or give fair coverage to the millions of Americans holding conservative views. Ben Bradlee by and large endorsed this view back when Ronald Reagan won his 1980 landslide, and it became part and parcel of mainstream journalistic practice with Trump’s surprise 2016 victory.

As William Greider, then a top editor at The Washington Post, noted, Reagan’s electoral success had been “quite traumatic for the press, editors, and reporters ... because it seemed to confirm the message of the critics that the press was out of touch with the rest of the country.” He added, “It was a sense of ‘My God, they’ve elected this guy who nine months ago we thought was a hopeless clown.... [T]here’s something going on here, and we don’t understand, and we don’t want to get in the way.” Bradlee, Greider’s boss, later observed a post-Watergate “return to deference” in the media, attributing this to “a subconscious feeling ... that we were dealing with someone this time who really, really, really disapproved of us, disliked us, distrusted us, and that we ought not give him any opportunities to see he was right.”

Second in importance is the Democrats’ combination of an embarrassment of riches in terms of issues and inability to focus on the few—say, three of them—that would convince those famous swing voters that the choice between Trump and Biden is really no choice at all. Biden is a highly skilled politician with mainstream views who makes mistakes and has lost a step or two to age, yes, but who has proved himself extremely competent in office. He leads a party that is, yes, divided over Israel and Gaza but united in support of the rule of law, the norms of democracy, and the value of consensus. Trump and many of his followers are the kinds of people one routinely meets in a prison psych ward.

What Biden and company must find a way to do is to herd those Democratic cats into repeating a single set of mantras that force the mainstream media to focus on the fundamental sorts of future each man offers: the imperfect versus the apocalyptic. Three issues, tops: abortion and two more. Hammer them home and many of his followers are the kinds of people one routinely meets in a prison psych ward.

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